1982

Out of Sight, Out of...

Dale Grover

Lake Shore High School
'Twas a rather large and dominating aged oak tree that stuck one of its gnarled feet in front of the boy. The boy was a rather small and shy boy who dutifully tripped over the out-stretched root that had seemingly shot out in the previously clear path.

The root recovered quickly and went about its business of being a root to the somber green shadows above, and the boy went about his business of being a rather small, shy boy, who had become bored and tired of taking yet another hike.

Not that he hadn't pleaded, but his begging went unheeded. Camp was good for boys, so he had been supplied with two large suitcases, a towering sleeping-bag, and a brand new pocket-knife. The object of his attention, the knife was in his hands until boarding the bus, then hidden deep in a pocket. He was unceremoniously shuffled off to camp on a stormy Saturday morning, not at all the sunny beginning the camp brochure had assured.

The smooth dirt trail turned off suddenly to the left and wound its way down to a narrow and nearly stagnant creek at the bottom of the ravine. Beneath his feet, the boy could sense the rocks and roots laid bare to the sky by hordes of shuffling campers in years past. He wondered how many boys had hiked this path just as bored. But only to himself did he wonder.

Little in his expression told the world how much he disliked the hike and wished it would end.

"Watch out for the turn here, and go slowly down the ravine. There's lots of trees to grab a hold of, and a rope along the right-hand side if you need it." The leader's heavy boots started their march again but soon paused as he began sliding down to the left. The boy could hear shouts and laughter as the rest of the group began sliding down the steep slope. Voices yelled from dark trees and greedy leaves of the woods for the group to wait up, but they were light yells and laughed echoing through the trees.

No further trees held roots out in his way; soon he found himself at the steep turn. Here he brushed against a sign, the metal plate covered with punch-marks that snagged a moment on his shirt. "Probably," he murmured, "another silly flower that may be here, or maybe it isn't, and it really doesn't matter." His expression remained the same, his thoughts cringing at the world. The boy, with a final sigh, stepped to the edge...

And disappeared.

No one behind him noticed the empty path.

"Hey Tim--you're down here soon. I thought you were at the back of the group."

There was no answer from the boy.

"Well, that was pretty fast. I didn't even see you coming down. Just watch coming down hills like that too fast. We wouldn't want to lose you. Hey Bob--" the leader shifted his attention, granting freedom for the boy,
"there's a good hand hold up a little from your left hand. A little higher. That's it. Good." He paused--where had his surprising charge gone? "Oh well, at least he's participating a little. And not wandering back to camp--how he ever finds his way back, even with the trails marked beats me," he mumbled softly to himself, watching the boys come scrambling down the path. The careless words carried to the rough tree behind which Tim sat.

It felt like yesterday and a hundred days before, he reflected. One moment he was one place, then the next, another. Like snapping one's fingers. Like a sudden flash of lightening, but without the thunder. Silent. Swift. And for all the times it had happened, in the back of mind always dwelt the thought that maybe next time, or the time after, he wouldn't come back. Not back to his room, or the campsite, or anywhere he knew.

"It's a big shock to children his age," the hospital doctor had reported to his parents. "Some deal with it realistically, others may seek explanations elsewhere, but you needn't worry too much. Eventually they adapt. That's the strength of children--they can accept things we can't imagine just because they never have learned otherwise. I doubt he'll keep up his fantasy story of wishes coming true once he's adjusted more fully." The words had been surprisingly clear to the small figure listening at the office door.


Which was true. And, truthfully, he really had not wanted to meet the doctor preparing to leave the office. Which was why, when the office had disgorged his parents and the bespectacled doctor, the long doorless hallway was void of any boy, small or otherwise.

The boy sharing his hospital room hadn't heard Tim come in.

The last of the group descended the hill and Tim fell in at the back of the noisy line.
The tent was hot and smelled of insect repellent. Even so, he took his time changing into his swimsuit. He didn't enjoy swimming--not in this lake and not this summer. He was especially perturbed at being forced to partake in the swim across the lake, a weekly event at the camp.

"You're a good swimmer--one of the best here. We'll have a row-boat out in front of you the entire way, just waiting with a pole in case you get tired. But you won't--it's just a little ways across the lake and back. In fact, if you like, you can just swim across the lake once and ride back in the rowboat. But we'd really like for you to at least try swimming across once..." Not quite a question, this last.

He hadn't been given a chance to reply, really. They had given him a row-boat number without any more discussion. He walked back to his tent to get changed. It was like another hike, and he disliked it.

"Hey, Tim, let's go! They're ready down at the water front!" the leader yelled. Tim purposely slowed his pace, carefully tying each shoe, and slipping the shiny-new pocket knife into the pocket of his suit. The air was cooler outside, but the sun beat warmly on his face as he sauntered after the shuffling of his leader's feet.

"Boat thirteen. Boat thirteen. Rower, get in your boat, row out to the first buoy with the swimmer hanging onto the stern--repeat, the stern--then,
swimmer, start swimming behind the boat. Rower, remember to keep your swimmer
in sight at all times. Don't let him out of your sight for a moment. Swimmer,
stay close to the boat." The waterfront director sounded like a barker, repeating
the same thing to each swimmer and rower, over and over each time for the
thirty boats.

"Boat 24. Boat 24. Rower, get into your boat, row out. ..." Boat 26
was his. He spread his towel on the wide grassy area smudged with the cold
shadows of willows and piled his shoes on one corner. He had picked a spot
near one of the larger willows, just a few feet off the path running feet had
dug across the grass. He hefted the pocket knife for a moment in a small hand,
weighing the possession carefully, deciding its fate during the ordeal. On the
far side of his tree, he found a natural hollow in the trunk large enough for
the shining knife and there committed it.

He was on his way to the sand beach when the barker began, in a voice that
grew to sound more and more like "get your tickets here, ladies and gentlemen.
See the fat lady. See the human pin-cushion. Boat 26. Boat 26." The boy
walked down to the shore and slowly waded out, his expression unchanging though
the water was cool. His belly-button was on the verge of getting wet when he
finally sank down and followed the voice of the rower to the rough wooden stern
of the rowboat.

"Feeling good, Tim? Think you can make it? I wish I could try, but they
don't have enough boats for any of the staff to go too. Maybe tomorrow though."

Tim's legs trailed in the water, tracing a small wake inside the boat's
larger wake. He didn't answer.

"Well, hope you make it. If you feel tired or anything, just say something
and I'll bring you in, okay?"

No answer.

"Hey, here's the buoy. You can start now."

His dislike of this activity was mounting by the moment. He pushed off
from the boat, which scarcely moved at his push. A chance wave slapped the side
of the boat; Tim swam toward the sound.

The waves ushered the air into a slow breeze, catching the air in cupped
hands, sending it on to rustle the trees. The sun looked hard on the lake,
warmed the rowers, toasting the swimmers who swam on their backs. A butterfly
wafted crazily across the waves but did not enter the worlds of the rowers and
the splashing bodies plodding along behind.

"Hey! Quite splashing me! You did that on purpose! Hey! Stop!"

Tim's ears picked up the conflict as he came up for air, and he slowed in
the water to listen. A few more words were spoken as the conflict grew into
an open battle between several of the boats. The splashing of water was accom-
panied by the yells of cold water on warm, sun-soaked bodies.

The remnants of splashes danced above Tim's head, falling like rain from
a clear blue cloud.

The "rain" annoyed him. More than the tiresome swim, the endless hikes,
the bland food, or anything else. Though wet, he found the uninvited water a
hostile thing, found himself wishing it were all over and he'd never have to
go to camp again.

He dunked his head down and, with an emphatic kick, wished summer was over.

The moonlight danced a slow ballet on the rolling hills of the lake, but
it was a cold light, and Tim didn't feel it. He didn't know how long he had
swum, kicking the water behind him into insane fountains, sculptures that lasted
for a few startled moments. He headed back to the ringing sound of the metal
flag pole, a sharp, irregular pinging in the shallow breeze of the night.
Fear never entered him; it stood back and watched the boy swim to the beach as if such things were commonplace, though to be watched and marvelled at just the same. His swim was relaxed; that the lake was silent, that the multitude of yells were suddenly gone, seemed unnoticed to the boy swimming up and down slow waves, waves that shouldn't have been, that couldn't be, in a lake that size. The waves were there, just the same, and carried the boy just a little faster to the beach. The lake was waiting for that.

If it made sense that the lake should be silent and the warmth of the sun gone, when his foot touched the sandy beach, it no longer made sense to the boy. Fear shook an ancient fist at him though he didn't see it. Questions ignored their implications, and presented him with only childish thoughts poking at his small mind.

A single thought weighed most heavily on the boy--the knife. The lake smiled at this, the trees whispered and passed along this marvelous thing, as the boy felt his way to the tree lodging his treasure.

The shiny flag pole was a brown rusted tree, its rope far from useable in its deterioration. The dock was no longer the brilliant white it had been. Layers of paint wood were gone, leaving the dock a haphazard collection of weathered wood stabbing into the lake. The moonlight shone down on the main lodge, high upon the hill overlooking the waterfront. It smiled upon the lake, gaping eyes where windows once had been, teeth ragged or missing, vines and bushes a cancer of its foundation.

In the moonlight that touched him not he made his way in a straight line from the beach to the hill, searching for the tree. His tree. Flowers winked at him from a field of long grasses and small trees. He tripped on a knot of weeds, but continued the search. At last he found the old tree, its bark rotting and veined by thick vines. On the far side he searched for the hold, and finding it, searched the interior. Through the twigs and unidentifiables, he felt for the metal of the knife.

A few moments passed the lake, the lodge on the hill, the trees, the weeds, the waves, the moon, the boy. Finally, his fingers found a cold rough something. Its surface was rough, but it felt heavy in his hands, and he explored the shape with wet fingers as if for the first time.

The boy handled the rusting knife in the moonlight for a few unsure seconds before finding the familiar braille initials of his name.