

BORROWING COURAGE

Camp sounded like a horrible idea. My parents forced me to go, and I didn't want to with all my heart. They kept telling me how much fun I would have, but I wasn't buying it. It sounded like literally *everything* terrible: new people, large groups, and no one I know. Still, my parents insisted that it would really help me! I tried to explain to them, "It won't help my social anxiety! It'll only make it worse!!" It's called *social* anxiety for a reason! My anxiety causes me to not talk much around new people, and it causes me to be constantly scared that everyone is judging me. If you dropped me in a crowded party, I would probably (figuratively) die, or at least pass out, but that didn't stop them from sending me away.

The drive there, admittedly, was beautiful. My dad drove up the winding dirt roads in his white car (a huge mistake— it looked like a brown car by the end of the drive), with me sitting in the back seat. I gaped at the shimmering lakes in the morning light. The pine trees were just enchanting, and the forest glistened with yesterday's rainstorm. It was hard to believe that I was staring at them through a small car window. Even so, I still wasn't looking forward to camp, no matter how beautiful it may be.

After a while, we passed a wooden, rundown sign. It said "CAMP GREEN LAKE: 1 MILE" in bold, green letters. Paint was chipping off it. My stomach churned. I had forgotten all about where we were actually going.

"Are you okay, Blaire?" Dad asked. He could tell I wasn't feeling well.

"...Yeah," I lied in a mumble. I didn't have the heart to tell him how I really felt.

The road eventually led to a small parking lot surrounded by the forest. We seemed to have arrived. In front of the parking lot was a dense patch of trees with a small opening that looked like a doorway. Dad found a parking spot and I slid out of the car carrying my blue duffel bag. The immediate, intense smell of pine trees almost knocked me out. I mean sure, I live near pine trees, but not a whole *forest* of them.

I looked up to notice a white table situated near the edge of the parking lot. There was a paper sign taped on the table that said, "REGISTER HERE" in red marker. I pointed it out to my dad and we started walking towards it. The closer we got, the more cluttered the desk seemed. It was covered in tangled lanyards that looked like vines, suffocating the poor table. Sitting at the table were 2 people who looked like camp counselors. They might have been about 20.

"Hi there! I'm Sophia," The woman bubbled, her long blonde hair almost too bright for my eyes. "Are you checking in for Camp Green Lake?"

We were, so my dad took some time to register. They asked him what my name was, how old I was, stuff like that. The man jotted down the answers. They seemed like questions I should've answered, but I just looked down at my feet and hoped that they wouldn't notice me. Eventually, the

two people (whose names turned out to be Sophia and Terry) led us towards the opening in the trees. I lagged behind. I heard their chatter up ahead.

“Wow, this is beautiful!”

“Right? Over there is the cabin where Blaire will be staying...”

I caught up with them and peered through the “doorway” in the trees. I gawked. It was breathtaking! We seemed to be in the back of the camp, but I could see rows of cabins with towering pine trees everywhere you looked, and the glittering lake out in the distance, everything framing the sun. Maybe it was just me, I mean, I don’t go places very often... But I could tell by how the others stood there in awe that it really *was* impressive.

Sophia returned to the desk, while Terry led us to my cabin. There were 6 cabins, one in the back, two in the next row, and three in the front facing the water. In between them was a pathway that brought us up to the waterfront. The camp was bustling with parents saying goodbye to their children, and kids who had got there early that were running around and playing games. They looked much happier than I felt. I tried to stay calm. My heart was beating faster than some of the kids were sprinting. I took a deep breath, one of the kinds my therapist told me about. *In and out, slowly*. It helped a little, but I still did not like any of this one bit.

My cabin was in the front row, labeled CABIN 68, and the farthest on the right. It was on the very edge of the forest, so its side was covered in trees. Cabin 68’s external appearance was quite underwhelming to me, as it seemed entirely made out of wood, some of it rotting and covered in leaves. It looked like some gnomes had started building it and just gave up.

I soon realized that Terry was talking. “...So with that, you’re all checked in and ready!” His curly ponytail bobbed as he talked. It was impressive. “Sir, the exit’s where you came in. I’ll leave you guys to it!”

Dad nodded. “Thank you!”

“Oh– also,” Terry added, “tonight all the campers will gather for a campfire at 7:00! Have a great day!”

As Terry walked away, I began to hyperventilate.

Don’t leave me here!

A campfire?!?

I can’t do this!

Everyone's gonna hate me! I thought to myself, not daring to say it aloud. My freaking out just made me freak out more.

Everyone's staring at me.

It's weird that Dad is still here. Everyone thinks I'm weird.

“Hey, Blaire, Blaire! It’s okay. You’re okay. You can do this.” Dad reassured me while he grasped my hand. “I need to leave now. But you’re okay. You can call me.” He dug around in his pocket and pulled out a shiny, black rock.

“If you ever feel like you’re having a panic attack, just hold this rock and we’ll be right there with you.” He placed the rock in my hands.

I stared at the rock for a moment. I gazed deep into its mesmerizing shine. It was comforting, and just looking at it made me know that I would be okay.

Dad hugged me hard. “I need to go now. But I love you. Mom and I are here for you. Just take some of our courage when you need it.”

Courage...

“I love you.” I muttered quietly. “See you soon.”

About an hour after Dad left, I was in the middle of unpacking. The inside of the cabin was fairly small. Practically everything was made of wood, except for the bathroom, beds, and colorful lights strung across the top of the room. It was almost soothing...*almost*.

I got lost in my own thoughts for a while. I began to dread the campfire like it was going to be a natural disaster. I went on autopilot folding my clothes.

Suddenly, I heard the door open with a creak. I froze. All my clothes were strewn across the floor. I don’t want anyone to see this!! I struggled to push everything into a pile which I stood in front of. From the doorway, two camp counselors and 4 girls emerged. They were all chatting loudly. One of the counselors caught sight of me. I squeezed the rock dad had given me in my pocket.

“Hi there!” She said cheerfully.

I forced an awkward smile and nodded, terrified.

The 4 young girls also saw me. I heard multiple different greetings at once. They all began to crowd around me, smiling and chirping questions like four little chipmunks from the woods.

“Hi!!”

“What’s your name?”

“Hey, we’re bunk buddies!”

“Is that all your clothes behind you..?”

My head spun. All the attention was focused on me and I couldn’t take it. There would be no end to it, because they were essentially my family for two weeks. I kept relentlessly reminding myself of the Campfire tonight at 7:00. It pounded in my head like a drum. All their eyes felt like tiny little spiders crawling up and down my skin... and at the same time, they felt like giant rocks crushing me. My head felt fuzzy and I thought that I might pass out. So I pushed through the crowd, and I ran. To the only place that seemed safe.

The forest.

I sprinted through the woods, desperate to get away. Tears flooded my vision. Twigs scraped my legs mercilessly. I heard people calling after me. I couldn’t take it anymore. My panic attack just made everything worse, and I freaked out more by the second. It wasn’t their fault. I just couldn’t handle a simple introduction. I was furious at myself. I felt bad for freaking out. Those thoughts just inflated my anxiety.

Suddenly, I ran into a small clearing with two benches and a fire pit. It was almost magical. I sighed and finally stopped running. I shakily walked over to a bench and slumped down in it. I started quietly crying. Today was going wrong in every way. I missed my mom and dad. I had nobody to talk to. And worst of all, all anyone at camp is thinking about right now is me.

I wish I’d never left the car.

I sat there for a long time, surrounded by the sounds of birds chirping and people talking out in the distance. To my surprise, I heard something new.

“Hey,” said a voice.

I looked up with a start. Across from me on the other bench was an athletic looking girl, about my age with blazing red hair and crisp green eyes. It looked like she may have been crying.

“...Hi...” I replied, in almost a whisper. I hadn’t noticed her before. How long had she been there? I was crying so much... She must think I’m so dumb!

“Are you okay?”

The question hit hard. I teared up. “Not really... You?” I muttered.

“I can’t say I feel much better than you. It’s just.. Well, it sounds dumb... But I just freaked out when I saw all the people here and so I ran. Plus, I’m dreading the campfire. So many new people... They’ll all be looking at me and...” The girl put her head in her hands.

“...Judging you?” I asked tentatively.

The girl perked up. “Um... Yeah. How’d you know?”

“I feel the same way.” I answered.

“Oh.” The girl paused and smiled slightly. “My name is Kendall, by the way. I’m in Cabin 68.”

“My name’s Blaire... I’m also in Cabin 68.” I paused. “Nice to meet you.”

We sat there for a second, looking at each other and trying to figure out what to do next.

“You know, they’ll find us eventually.” Kendall sighed.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

I thought for a moment. “What if we went to the campfire together?”

“What?” Kendall seemed taken aback.

“I mean... If we did, maybe things wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Oh...” Kendall thought for a second. She then smiled a small smile. “That sounds fun!”

I stood up. “Let’s head back.” I reached in my pocket for the rock that dad gave me. I held it out to her. “If you ever feel like you just *can’t* anymore... Just hold this rock and you can borrow some of my courage.”

Kendall smiled and stood up. “Thanks, Blaire.”

Together, we walked back to the camp. I could feel the needles scraping me, and the bugs biting, but none of that mattered.

...*Maybe*... I thought to myself. *Just maybe, camp might not be so bad.*