

THE SUMMER GRIEVANCES

BY

PAUL CORRIGAN

PROLOGUE

ONE SNOWY MARCH afternoon my father had a massive and fatal heart attack. No matter how often you thought of the inevitability of a parent's passing, or tried to prepare for it, when the actual event occurs it's still like being cold cocked by a backstreet brawler. Dad's death seemed to knock me out of orbit and send me spinning in a whole different direction. I had passed my fiftieth birthday by then. I knew I couldn't just coast to retirement, pension or no pension. I had to try something else, something different from what I had been doing. So I resigned as a high school English teacher and answered an ad for an instructor in a wilderness therapy program for young women struggling with depression, substance abuse and oppositional defiance.

I remember my interview with Field Director Randy Pinto, a solidly built man in his late thirties with dark eyes and wiry, pitch black hair tied in a pony tail. Randy shook my hand in front of the program field house and invited me into his office -- a cozy space bursting with Geological Survey maps, framed Ansel Adams prints, a Penobscot ceremonial drum and a sheathed Hudson Bay axe. When Randy found out, as he flipped through my resume, that we'd been whitewater raft guides in the summer for rival companies, he was delighted. I'd left the river a full five years before he'd signed on, but the rapids with names like Bone Crusher, Exterminator and Big Mama lived once again in our imaginations as we swapped stories of our glorious, madcap days running rivers. We both agreed that as supercharged with adrenaline and wild laughs that the business

had been, it did get old after a fashion. You could only take so many boatloads of screaming pleasure seekers through the rapids before you realized that most of your interactions were all-too-fleeting and merely skin deep.

Randy pointed out that the best raft guides made their guests want to return to the river year after year, that they waited on them during the cookouts, which he called the shore dinners, and made affable conversation over beers at the end of the day; but in the emotional growth business, if we did our jobs well the young ladies would take with them the skills they needed not to have to return to the program. “It’s the difference between teaching someone to fish versus plopping a plate of filet of sole down in front of them,” Randy said.

Neat paraphrase of a popular parable, I thought.

Once Randy began explaining my duties, I knew I had the job. I was glad like anyone whose worth is validated by the promise of employment. But there were vague misgivings. If getting hired was as easy as waltzing into the Field Director’s office with a resume in hand, I wondered about the turnover rate in this line of work. A part of me felt like the stock character in a Western, the poor unwary soul who gets the tin star pinned to his chest before the old sheriff is even cold in his Boot Hill grave.

I believed I was up to the challenge. I would be working with teens – a familiar animal after all. There had been many things to like about my job as an English teacher. Cranky as adolescents could be, I enjoyed their passion and playfulness, their energy and creative spunk. But being indoors, beneath the glare of tubular lighting, where time got doled out in increments punctuated by the buzzing of electric bells, there were days when I felt as pent up as my fidgety students. If not for Dad’s passing I probably would have

gone on living with this feeling – following the same curriculum year after year, teaching the same novels, the same poems. At best, my abiding love of literature would continue to deepen, my understanding and appreciation of the written word would ripen -- I would continue to watch the children of students I had taught years before file into my classroom every September with a feeling of sad and exquisite sweetness. Ah, the palpable rewards of the high school English teacher in a small Maine town.

But there was no second guessing my decision. Besides, if I got nostalgic for the classroom I could take solace in the thought that I would still be an educator. Only my teaching would now take place in the woods. The wilderness was in my blood. I'd picked up the scent as a kid at the family cabin on a remote lake -- not a vacation home you drove to, but a primitive rough-hewn camp reached by a three mile trail. It was a breath-taking spot! Wind-sculpted pines towered above a granite shoreline lapped by lake water. Mount Katahdin's serrated ridgeline rose to the north like a chunk of Montana set down in the Maine Woods. In that prelapsarian refuge I learned how to fly fish and deer hunt from my father and inherited his love of wild places. Now the backcountry would be my classroom.

The emotional growth part of the job, however, left me scratching my head. During my teacher days, when it came to understanding the adolescent female, I had rarely ventured out of the shallow end of the pool. In the classroom it had been of little interest to me that girls tended to express themselves with subtlety and indirection, through knowing smiles and rolling eyes, while boys strutted and postured, laying physical claim to the space around them with their confident arm swinging body language. In the hustle-bustle of High School English I let such crucial details slide. Now

there was ground to cover if ever I was to push my emotional IQ out of the two digit range when it came to a girl's interior life.

As I leaned back in my chair in Randy's cluttered office and stretched my legs, he gave me a thumb nail sketch of what could go wrong on a backcountry trip with adolescent clients. "You never can tell on these overnights, Paul," he said. "You may need to circle up for an impromptu group with the girls at every turn in the trail, every bend in the river. There's always gonna be some niggling little thing that'll fray the fabric of backcountry society, if you don't coax your clients to talk about it and get it out in the open. You've gotta do whatever it takes to head off any trouble brewing in paradise." Randy smiled frankly as he said this.

I could almost hear the stubborn denials and the peevish wrangling, and picture the accusatory stare one girl might give another. The girls would be gathered in a circle along a hiking trail in a sun dappled pine grove or on a gravel beach at river's edge. The instructors would be sitting cross-legged nearby, giving the girls their full attention as each young lady expressed her grievances. One instructor would ask questions in a soothing tone, coaxing a girl to give voice to the "whys" beneath her anger, her sadness. But mostly the instructors would be listening, listening to the litany of accusations, the spleen and rancor, with a benevolent patience, as the clients gradually de-escalated and their heated exchanges faded into the vast stillness of the forest. I doubted I possessed such saintly qualities.

"Outbursts recollected in tranquility," was the phrase I finally used, riffing, to describe these impromptu debriefs that would take place when conflict arose out in the Maine woods.

“Yeah! You got it, man!” Randy seemed to like the phrase.

“We try, as much as possible, to let the wilderness push a girl’s buttons,” Randy went on. “If a girl refuses to hike or paddle, or isn’t timely doing her chores, the group will be walking the trail by headlamp, or canoeing by moonlight. Leaving personal gear out in the rain means wearing wet clothes the next day. A client’s decisions can spell the difference between comfortable backcountry living and the canoe or hiking trip from hell.”

I had a secret I wasn’t ready to share with Randy. In my classroom I was never very keen on heart-to-hearts with angry kids. The personal baggage students brought to school got in the way of my desire to teach literature. With essays to correct, lessons to plan, poetry and novels to read, I gave repeat offenders who disrupted class fair warning then shipped them off to the principal’s office. Let her deal with them. Now, it became apparent - where I’d left off with a pissed-off kid outdoor therapy began. And it seemed to be built around wilderness consequences as a means of getting kids to think about their actions.

And the Maine woods could be notorious for such consequences. During my first nine months as a wilderness instructor heavy wind would arise and pin us down on islands for days in canoe season. We’d be constantly tormented by hoards of black flies. In hiking season weeklong rains would make a cascading stream of the Appalachian Trail and cause river crossings to be downright dangerous. In winter off-the-chart wind chills with hypothermia and frostbite became very real dangers. Cautionary tales alone never got a girl to take care of herself and her gear; she had to meet the wilderness on its own terms, to stare squarely into its unforgiving eyes.

Throughout those early days as a wilderness instructor, I felt like an apprentice trying to puzzle out the nuances of girl-speak. It wasn't easy sorting out a teen's emotional baggage (instead of shipping her off to the principal's office.) I had to sharpen my listening skills – to sit quietly around a fire as a girl untangled the threads of a painful story, waiting for the moment to ask the tough question in a compassionate voice. “Keep asking the question a girl doesn't want to hear,” Filene, the program's head therapist kept telling me, “that's how you hold her feet over the fire.”

But I was relieved to discover that my English teacher background wasn't all bad news. The girls came to recognize me as one of those adults whose classrooms they had sat in daily before they were sent to the program. This set them oddly at ease. Even if their high school days had been utterly miserable, many would express a nostalgic longing for that world of squeaking desks and dusty chalkboards that had been full of predictability and boredom, but now must have seemed like a lost Eden that they had regretfully forsaken.

The girls, in turn, struggled mightily to understand what learning to build a fire, to paddle a canoe down a rapid or to snowshoe through deep winter drifts had to do with getting well. Some were able to make the metaphorical leap and apply the confidence gained in the wilderness to their lives when they left the program. Others left you wondering if those thin filaments of understanding would ever weave delicate root systems within their consciousness. Ultimately, at the end of the day, I concluded that it was the bond between instructors and girls that really did the healing. We, as field staff, hiked and paddled alongside our clients through all kinds of terrain and weather, and could lay claim to a genuine relationship with them. The girls saw that we were in the

trenches every day beside them and grew to trust us, to value our woods knowledge and life experience. This simple fact reassured many a young lady in her hour of need that she had entered a soul-resting place where healing was not only possible but near at hand, close enough to touch and see with her own eyes.

THE SUMMER GRIEVANCES begins nine months into my unofficial apprenticeship as a wilderness instructor, shortly after I accepted Field Director Randy Pinto's offer to become a Senior Instructor. He felt, and the staff therapists apparently concurred, that I had the right combination of "hard" and "soft" skills to lead a team of girls and instructors. Randy had seen how much of a kick I got out of showing girls the hard skills such as building fires or tying effective knots, or having them lead hikes through the trail-less woods with map and compass. As to the soft skills, let's just say I was still making progress getting clients to talk about their bulimia or their drug use or their depressive episodes.

So I blithely jumped on the offer of Senior Instructor. I knew others were gunning for the position and I liked being singled out for the job. While the pay increase didn't amount to much, it seemed amusing to me the way the human ego still yearned to claw its way up the hierarchical cliff. No harm in my modest ambition, I thought. But the management piece of Senior Instructor, along with the periodic separation from my wife while I was out in the woods, would wind up bedeviling me. With its new challenges came new stresses. I reacted by drinking more on my days off, guzzling stiff scotches and gulping martinis clouded with aromatic bitters, topping them off with amber tinted micro brews. Not enough to qualify me as a major league lush, but it was surprising how much I

could put away in a civilized cocktail hour, then cut myself off at the stroke of seven, and think I was in control.

Shortly after this upturn in my drinking, I experienced a couple scary episodes of atrial fibrillation during my customary bouts of rigorous exercise. The cardiologist who ordered the stress test while I was hooked up to a monitor said I had an athlete's heart but should cut back on the sauce, lay off the caffeine, listen to my body. The loss of synchronicity in that wondrous muscle that had always served me well had been a wake up call. I remember all too vividly that verge-of-blackening-out sensation that occurred when my heart valves simply fluttered rather than ka-thumped vigorously one fateful morning, as I ascended a long hill on skis after partying with my wife in Quebec City the night before. I took the Doc's advice and have not had a problem since – knock wood.

Helping me look after the 6 to 8 girls assigned to my team were two other instructors. Eve, with a degree in adolescent counseling, was tall and sturdy, with straight dark shoulder length hair, dark eyes, a turned up nose. Her years sailing on the Maine coast made her comfortable in a canoe and she was a tireless hiker. Joel was in his mid-thirties, of medium height with thick sandy hair and a heavy sun burnished brow. He had fought forest fires in Montana and Idaho and had bossed a crew that constructed hiking trails in the Sierras. Joel was strong and energetic with an infectious laugh and a cajoling way with the girls. His three-legged mixed breed dog Zoë accompanied us on our trips. Zoë was a hit with the young ladies as she bounded along on two hind legs and one front leg, having no trouble keeping up with us on firm ground or crusty snow. Zoë was never without an attentive girl stroking her rich sandy brown fur.

Eve, Joel and I were Mainers born and bred. Our personalities blended well on the trail and on the water as we backpacked, canoed, and snowshoed our way through the Maine woods, traveling in the old nomadic manner of Native Americans and early trappers. Our steadfastness in the face of foul weather and challenging terrain helped bolster the girls' confidence in overcoming adversity. Eve particularly had good instincts for this kind of work. She saw through a girl's ruses and denials and could take a young lady kindly but firmly to task. I depended on her to run team-building activities and trouble shoot special topics on self esteem, communication with parents, and sexual orientation during nightly therapy groups. As for Joel, he had his own soft skill set. More than once I had seen him quell the wrath of a strong-willed client with a kind of manic, good-natured banter.

“Ah, c'mon girl, you're better than that! What do you say you and Uncle Joel go sit on that log while you take a chill pill and count to ten?” As if on cue Zoë would skip over on three legs, tilt her head and look up at the girl with moist brown eyes and toothy puppy grin. It was hard for a girl to remain angry with a three legged dog staring up at her.

When Eve, Joel and I functioned as an effective triad, I was reminded of a metaphor that came straight from the rural Maine landscape. We were like the three-legged stool built for the irregular plank flooring of the milking barn – sturdy and not the least bit tipsy. This was as good a visual as came to my mind. I used the image often until both Eve and Joel could hear it coming and just rolled their eyes.

My team leadership style, usually democratic and low-keyed, avoided a few pitfalls, at least. Back during my early days with the program, I had landed on a team that seemed to be doing it all wrong. Evening groups were open ended, repetitive, going deep into the night with no discernable shape, no predictable arc. The girls wouldn't get to bed till after one and would roll out of their sleeping bags midmorning and not be packed up and on the water or the trail till 10:00 or 11:00 AM. Meal times would vary and if a therapist wanted to conduct a group, lunch could wait till mid afternoon. Having no consistent times for eating and sleeping seemed to keep girls and instructors in a constant low-grade fractious state, which I was told was conducive for clients to make headway with their issues.

On our team we would be judicious about pushing the girls' limits too often. Sure, effective therapy often ensued using this tension-ridden approach. Tempers snapped, girls blurted out feelings bottled up inside, talking about their anger, their frustration and loneliness. We figured once during an eight day shift seemed about right to employ this method. Our team also dialed back the day. We were in our tents asleep not long after the late summer twilight had faded and were up while the dew was still on the grass. We ate at the same time every day with few exceptions. Evening groups went on as long as participants were dealing effectively with their material and were shut down when girls got tired and started spinning their wheels and getting repetitive.

Eve, Joel and I lasted for nearly 14 months – the longest any team had stayed together. Of course, we had our differences. But we worked through them and cooperated with each other. Once in a while other instructors swapped out with us during vacations

and family commitments. But the complexion of our team remained constant. Through the seasons we forged our own unique identity.

In the opening chapter the reader will meet Joanna, a petite, freckled red head diagnosed with depression - the first of seven stories about the girls. Joanna spent most of a summer paddling the spruce fringed rivers and the sparkling, loon-haunted lakes of eastern Maine. She was an adoptee and while her parents encouraged her to write and visit her birth-mom who was welcoming and receptive, she did not pursue the relationship beyond their initial written exchange. She talked about their letters and the one brief meeting with sad indifference. We wondered why she wasn't more curious about the woman who brought her into the world.

Joanna carried around a secret. She spent much of the summer working up the courage to reveal what she was hiding. It took her quite a while to realize that her teammates, especially her friend Darcy, were in her corner. She was afraid they might judge her. This fear ate away at her for a long time before she was ready to let go of it. Joanna's story, and the story of the other girls in *The Summer Grievances*, is also the narrative of our struggles, failures and triumphs as a team.

Set in all four seasons in northern Maine with its great contrasts in weather, this book chronicles our nomadic wanderings as we snowshoe, hike and canoe over an ever changing landscape. The repetitive motions of these ancient modes of travel, as intrinsic as the rhythms of our beating hearts, are as restorative to us as to the girls we usher through that land of lakes, mountains and pointed firs. Those rhythms are like a soothing balm sinking deep inside us as we face the challenges of the wilderness together.



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From the upcoming book *The Summer Grievances*