



The MacGuffin

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Peter S. Bernard

Lifesaving

Richie and I lie down heavily on our cots in our shared tent, out of breath and needing to recuperate after dragging and carrying his massive trunk a hundred yards from the parking lot to finally hoist it onto our tent's wooden platform. The tent is one of a dozen or more scattered in an archipelago of forest clearings where our troop will be staying for the month of July at Baiting Hollow Scout Camp on Long Island Sound.

"You'd think my father would help us," Richie says, "but he wants me to get an early start on personal fitness."

"He's being a dick," I say by way of support, though Richie's formidable belly proves his dad does have a point.

"Trunk hauling is not one of the requirements for Personal Fitness," Richie says.

"You really think you're going to get the Personal Fitness merit badge this summer?"

"Why not?"

"Have you ever done a push-up?"

"Don't worry, Greg, I've been working out."

"You should do Camping instead."

"I hate camping. Anyway, you're one to talk. You'll never rescue Mel."

Richie is right. I'm going to take the Lifesaving merit badge and I'll have to rescue the assistant Scoutmaster, Mel, who weighs at least 300 pounds and will be pretending to be in a panic as if he's drowning. I've seen it past summers where the Scouts swim out to him and get dragged under.

Mr. Boo, the Scoutmaster, took Richie and me aside at the last Scout meeting and told us, in a thinly veiled threat to kick us out of the Scouts, that we had better get promoted to the rank of Star this summer. "You're the oldest First Class Scouts in the history of the troop and an embarrassment to us all. Why can't you guys be like Dan?" My older brother, Dan, is two badges shy of Eagle Scout and the first Scout in our troop in a long time to get this close.

"Your problem," Mr. Boo lectured us, "is that you get Coin Collecting and Art merit badges. Really? What about Camping or Lifesaving? What about Personal Fitness? These are what you guys should be working on." If Richie and I can earn any one of these badg-

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es we'll make Star. "Even Paul has already made Star." Mr. Boo's son Paul, known as "Little Boo," at twelve, is almost two years younger than we are.

My dad, a Scout fanatic, is beyond excited that Dan is close to Eagle and harangues him daily about how great it will be for him once he gets it. "You'll be part of a special fraternity that will open up doors for you the rest of your life." The only door that Dan wants open is the one that leads to having sex with Merrie, his latest girlfriend. Being away from her for a month will ruin the progress of his seduction.

My dad pleads with Dan. "Your younger brother is a misfit, an embarrassment to the family. It will be wonderful to have a son who's an Eagle."

I've always been a good swimmer and I'm convinced that my best hope for Star is to get Lifesaving. I'll have to rescue Mel, as well as do the strip and save where I undress in less than twenty seconds, swim out to a Scout, and drag him to shore using my shirt as a rope. My greatest fear is the requirement to recover a heavy weight from the muck at the bottom of the lake in ten feet of water. Dan convinced my dad that I'll never be able to do it and he's been telling me to take Camping instead of Lifesaving. I say to Richie, "How am I ever going to get that weight at the bottom of the lake?"

"We're both screwed," Richie says.

"You can say that again."

* * *

Later, Mr. Boo sticks his head inside the front flap of our tent. "Richie, you got your trumpet?"

"Bugle, Mr. Boo," Richie says.

"Whatever. You've got to blow 'Reveille' at six-thirty every morning."

"I know."

"Here's an alarm clock," Mr. Boo says, handing one to Richie. "Don't forget to blow."

"I won't."

"You forgot three times last summer."

"Sometimes I didn't wind it up, but this year I will."

"Remind him, Greg," Mr. Boo says, "I'm counting on you two."

After he goes, Richie says, "You see, Mr. Boo needs me. He'll never kick me out of the Scouts."

"Yeah, except you're the worst bugle player ever. It's a crime to my ears when you blow 'Reveille.'"

"I'm the only bugle player, so tough luck."

"You should face away from me when you blow that stupid thing." On more than one occasion in past summers Richie has played

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"Reveille" in my ear.

"I'll blow it outside of Mr. Boo's tent."

"Great, or even better, outside of Little Boo's tent."

"Seriously, we're like half the marching band, so how could he ever kick us out?" Richie says. Meetings start with the band marching into the gym playing Sousa. Richie plays the bugle, a Scout bangs on the bass drum, and another Scout and I play the fife. Little Boo leads us holding an American flag.

"The fife takes zero skill. I'm replaceable," I say.

"But I'm not," Richie says.

"That's a laugh. Mr. Boo covers his ears when you play."

"Bullshit."

* * *

A short while later Dan comes by and says, "How can the two of you stand each other?"

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Besides Mel, there's a new guy, Cliff, who's testing on Lifesaving. I heard that he's a dick so make sure you get Mel."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Hopefully Mel will throw the can into shallow water."

"Thanks for the encouragement, but I won't need help," I lie.

"Whatever. What are you working on Richie?" Dan asks.

"Personal Fitness."

"By what magic are you going to be able to do a push-up?"

"Don't worry, I can do push-ups. I've been working out."

"If you say so," Dan says laughing.

"What about you? Are you going to make Eagle?" Richie says.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Mr. Boo says you're going to make it," Richie says.

Dan shrugs his shoulders. Each summer he earns merit badges without visible effort. His sash is covered with their circular patches and is the envy of the other Scouts. My few badges are sewn onto the sleeve of my shirt; I don't have enough to justify a sash.

* * *

Richie and I spend the afternoon surveying the camp. A short distance away is the latrine. "That's new," I say.

"It looks the same to me."

"Duh."

We pass the shower facility with its on-again-off-again hot water and then the screened-in mess hall with its city of picnic tables. On a bulletin board is an announcement for a taxidermy class.

"I'm going to take that," I say.

"Taxidermy?"

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"Why not?"

"What are you going to stuff?"

"I don't know, whatever they usually stuff around here. A raccoon?"

"How're you going to kill a raccoon?"

"With a bow and arrow."

"All your arrows land in the grass. You've never hit the target," Richie laughs.

We follow a dirt road a quarter mile through a swamp down to the seashore where Scouts swim in the sound or go sailing. Camp tradition says that there are predators living in the swamp that feast on unsuspecting boys. Our first year at Baiting Hollow, Richie and I sprinted through the swamp every time we came or went to the Sound. Now we slowly make our way back inland to the freshwater lake where we see a few Scouts are swimming. There's a raft fifty yards offshore where the water is deeper than ten feet.

We come across Mel sitting in an Adirondack chair. He's wearing black horn-rimmed glasses, an enormous white tee-shirt, and shorts. "You two jerk offs are back again?" he says by way of greeting.

"How'd you figure that out, Mel?" I say.

"You two gonna make Star?" he says.

"This summer," Richie says, and I add, "For sure."

Mel eyes us suspiciously and I say, "I want to do Lifesaving with you."

Mel smiles, "Sure, Greg. You've heard about Cliff?"

"Yeah."

"You're smart. And what about you, Richie?"

"I'm doing Personal Fitness."

"Since when can you do a push-up?"

"Like you're one to talk."

"Back in the day I could do push-ups."

"What rank did you get to?" Richie asks.

"I was a Life Scout, and for that I had to have Personal Fitness."

"I've been working out."

"Okay, Richie, whatever you say."

Before we go, Mel tells me to read the Lifesaving manual. "At least look at the pictures."

"Sure, Mel," I say.

* * *

The next day I show up at Taxidermy, which turns out to be in a dank, windowless room in the basement of the headquarters building. On a shelf is a stuffed skunk, a large dusty bottle labeled "Formaldehyde," several small unlabeled bottles containing green and brownish liquids and containers of salt, and one labeled "Borax." Greeting me is Mr. Spencer, who in prior years has taught the Scouts

about the local fauna and flora. "Well hello, Greg," Mr. Spencer says.

"Hi," I say, looking around the room.

"You're the only one, Greg."

"Really?"

"You're the only Scout who's signed up for Taxidermy since they took away the merit badge in 1952."

"Well, if it's a problem, I don't have to do it."

"No, no, no, Greg, you'll love it. Let's do it."

"Okay. What am I going to stuff?"

"You have to get something to stuff."

"How do I do that?"

"Kill something."

"Kill something?"

"Yeah, some critter and then we'll stuff it."

"Like a snake?"

"Let's stick to mammals, they're a lot easier. Come back when you've got a carcass."

* * *

After collecting baseline data on the dozen Scouts who show up to take Personal Fitness, Mr. Wexler, the fitness counselor takes Richie aside and says, "You're the only one who can't do a push-up. And it took you more than a half an hour to walk a mile. Your sit-up, if you can call it that, was not a pretty sight."

"I've been working on push-ups."

"Great, but I need to see improvement by next week. I want to see you do a clean sit-up and a push-up. Also, you need to break the thirty-minute barrier on your walk around the oval."

"No problem, Mr. Wexler."

"Get rid of some of that stomach."

"I will."

"Run every day. I expect you to be able to run a mile, eventually."

"Sure, Mr. Wexler."

* * *

Later when I'm back in the tent, Richie is on the floor between bunks dozing. I startle him and he wakes up, grunts and tries to do a push-up.

"Did you see any movement?" Richie asks.

"A little, I think," I lie. "You almost got it."

Richie grunts a few more times and then climbs up onto his bunk.

"I got a week to do a push-up, but nothing is happening thus far."

"It'll come," I say.

"How's Taxidermy?" Richie asks.

"Mr. Spencer says I've got to kill an animal to stuff."

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"What are you going to kill?"
"I don't know. He says it should be a mammal."
"Maybe they're some rats or a mouse around here."
"I haven't seen any. Where would they be?"
"At the mess hall?"
"Good idea. I'll ask them for one."

* * *

The next morning after breakfast I go to the kitchen door and get the attention of a guy in a white apron holding a cleaver. I say, "Are you a chef?"

"What do you want?" he says threateningly.
"Do you have any rats?"

His expression darkens and I add, "I thought they might hang out around here."

He scowls and raises the cleaver.
"I just want to stuff one."

He takes a step towards me saying, "You won't be the first Scout I've served for dinner."

I turn and run away. Catching up to Richie, I say, "I'm pretty sure they don't have rats in the kitchen."

* * *

I make some effort to read the Lifesaving book, and when I think I'm more or less ready, I seek out Mel to get tested. Once again, he's planted in his Adirondack chair overlooking the lake. I sit next to him and say, "Fire away, Mel. Anything you want to know about Lifesaving?"

"So, tell me, Greg, what makes people drown?"

"They don't know how to swim."

"What else?" he says, rolling his eyes.

"An accident?"

"Good, anything else?"

I can't think of anything until Mel says, "Cramps?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, cramps, I was going to say cramps."

"You read the manual?"

"Pretty much."

"How do you figure out who needs to be saved?"

"They're screaming for help?"

"Duh."

"They're floating face down in the water?"

"Good, what else?"

"Cramps?"

Mel shakes his head. "When should you not jump into the water to save someone?"

"When I can reach them from the shore."

"Obviously. Give me a real answer."

"The water's cold or there are sharks?"

"You're going to just watch someone get eaten?"

"I suppose so. What good does it do them if I get eaten?"

Mel flips through the pages looking for something else to ask and then says, "Okay, Greg, you pass. Next week you'll have to dive for the turpentine can. Remember: it's a surface dive, not diving off the platform. Lots of Scouts can't do it."

"You throw it in, Mel, and I'll get it out."

* * *

While I'm showering that evening in the bath house, a bat enters and flies back and forth in the rafters. Someone shouts, "A bat!" and the Scouts around me flee outside. Left alone, the bat doesn't seem dangerous. I pick up a broom and, when the bat flies past me, I hit it as if it were a baseball and it sails into the wall. I find a plastic bag and put the bat carcass in it. It's a mammal.

When I get back to the tent, I hand the bag to Richie who looks in it and says, "What's that?"

"It's a bat."

"How did you get a dead bat?"

"I hit it with a broom in the shower house."

"They give you rabies?"

"It's dead now."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"It's a mammal. I'm going to take it to Mr. Spencer tomorrow."

"Stuff a bat?"

"Why not?"

"You're crazy."

* * *

The next day, when I show the bat to Mr. Spencer, he says, "Not the choice I would have made, but we can work with it."

The bat is mainly wing with a small furry body. Little bugs are crawling over the fur that Mr. Spencer shows we can remove by immersing the bat in alcohol. After we dry it, we delicately cut open the abdomen with an X-ACTO knife and clean out the insides. The skin has to be carefully prepared by covering it with a thick layer of salt. In a few days, the skin will be ready and we'll insert a cotton ball into its torso and sew it up.

* * *

I spend part of every day at the lake trying to rescue Richie. His flailing around in distress is half-hearted and I don't think it's helping

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me get enough practice of the kind I'll need to bring Mel to shore. At the same time, my diving isn't getting any better. I can barely get deep enough to see the murk surrounding the lake bottom, let alone reach the muddy floor to retrieve a weight.

Standing on the shore watching me practice, Mel says, "You're ready to dive for the can, Greg."

"I haven't gotten to the bottom yet," I say.

"Scouts who fail Lifesaving do so because they give up. They're quitters, Greg. Don't be a quitter. When you dive to get the weight or rescue me or whatever, believe that you can do it, and you'll find that you can."

"I'm not a quitter, Mel," I say, though I feel like I ought to quit.

* * *

I accompany Richie to his first check up with Mr. Wexler. On our way there he admonishes me, "Don't let me fail, Greg. Do whatever you have to do to get me to do a push-up."

"You want me to tackle Mr. Wexler to distract him?"

"Just think of something. Do something. Don't let me lie there."

After Richie does two of his borderline sit-ups Mr. Wexler says, "If I didn't see you do them with my own two eyes, I wouldn't believe it's possible. Now I want to see a push-up, Richie."

"No problem. I've been working out every day."

"I'm sure you have." If Richie has lost any weight in the past week, it is not evident.

Richie gets down on the ground in front of Mr. Wexler and gets his hands into position.

"Remember, no girl push-up with your knees on the ground," Mr. Wexler says.

"I know," Richie says, and starts to push and grunt. Nothing seems to be happening though the sounds he's making are getting more dire.

I scream suddenly, "Richie! Watch it! A spider!"

Richie suddenly pushes up onto his extended arms yelling "Where? Where?" and then jumps to his feet, slapping at his face and head.

"There's your push-up, Mr. Wexler," Richie says, doing a victory dance.

"Really? Was that a push-up?" Mr. Wexler asks.

"Definitely," I say.

"Yeah, I did a push-up," Richie says.

"Okay, Richie, I'll give it to you, but I want two push-ups next week."

"Piece of cake, Mr. Wexler."

"My mom with her walker can do a mile faster than you, Richie. You think you can race around the track in less than a half hour

today?" Mr. Wexler asks.

"I'll go with him to set the pace," I say.

"Good idea."

"C'mon, Richie."

We start out and make it through three and a half laps when Richie sprawls out on the grass. "I can't go on. Leave me to die."

"Get up, Richie. You only have half a lap to go." Mr. Wexler is freaking out in the distance. "Mr. Wexler is going to kill you if you don't finish."

Richie gets up and staggers forward. At the finish line Richie acts like he's just crossed the Sahara.

"Twenty-nine minutes, Richie, an Olympic record," Mr. Wexler says. "Next week you better break twenty-five minutes."

"Piece of cake."

* * *

Dan and Richie come to watch my retrieval of the turpentine can. As I tread water near the platform, Mel tosses the can into the lake and says, "Get it, Greg."

I swim to where the weight should be, take a deep breath and dive down. The water is murky and I don't see any trace of the can. When I come back up, I shake my head and Mel says, "You've got two more chances, Greg. Relax and just think about getting deep enough."

I once again dive under and furiously kick until I can just make out the lake bottom. I swivel around desperately looking for the can and then see its shiny glint a couple of yards away, but I'm out of breath and push myself up to the surface. Panting hard I say, "I saw it, Mel, I saw it."

"Good."

"Did he get it?" I hear Dan yelling.

Mel shakes his head and to me says, "This is your last shot, Greg. Get it."

With a better sense of where to dive, I once again swim toward the bottom and see the can directly under me. I'm not quite deep enough to reach it and, fighting buoyancy, I frantically kick and extend my arm toward the can. As my lungs run out of air my forefinger encircles the handle across the top of the can and I desperately push up towards the surface holding the can. When I break the surface, I swim toward the platform and thrust the can onto the deck. I hear Dan and Richie cheering and Mel excitedly says, "Well done, Greg, well done."

I sprawl out on the platform gazing at the sky. How in the world did I manage to do that, I wonder. I feel giddy from having proven Dan wrong, and I picture my dad congratulating me.

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* * *

A few days later my bat is ready for stuffing and Mr. Spencer shows me how to insert cotton balls into the small body and sew closed the opening in the fur. The skin is delicate and difficult to stitch. By the time I'm done, I have threads zigging and zagging over a large part of the torso like something out of Dr. Frankenstein. The wings look worn and flop down asymmetrically on a piece of cardboard holding the body. Nonetheless, I think it's cool. I leave the bat with Mr. Spencer for safe keeping. I'll surprise my parents with it when they come to fetch me on the last day of camp.

* * *

For the next week, Richie makes some attempts at running and practices the Zen of Self-Levitation in order to do a push-up. In neither case are the results impressive when he next encounters Mr. Wexler. Richie manages to do two separate push-ups, forcing Mr. Wexler to demand that he do three the following week, but without getting up in between them.

For Richie's mile walk, Mr. Wexler opens up a reclining chair and settles into it. "Go ahead and start. I'm going down for a nap. Wake me when you're done." He then starts his stopwatch and lies back and closes his eyes.

A half-hour later when Richie finishes the mile, he shakes Mr. Wexler awake, who looks at his stopwatch and says, "It's official, Richie, you're the world's slowest human being."

* * *

The time has come for me to rescue Mel. "You've done the hardest part already, Greg. This should be easy." He positions himself treading water fifty feet from shore and splashing occasionally as if he's in trouble. I run into the lake and swim out to where he is. As I get near, Mel flails his arms continuously raising up a spray. I come up behind him and put my arm around his chest so as to drag him to shore. From the moment I hold onto him I know he's not going anywhere. It's like pulling on a wooden piling. As I struggle with my side kick trying to make him budge, I suddenly have the sensation that we're both moving though I'm not sure it's the direction that I'm pulling him. Like a planchette moving on a Ouija board, Mel glides around the lake as I furiously try to propel him. Bit by bit we seem to be approaching the shore and before I know it, Mel is standing and we walk out of the lake.

"Did I do that?" I ask Mel.

"Great work, Greg," Mel winks at me.

"Thanks, Mel."

"You're a good kid, Greg, and we're going to get you to Star."

* * *

On his final exam with Mr. Wexler, Richie is unable to do a push-up and his mile run ends halfway through when he sinks to the ground and ignores Mr. Wexler's entreaties for him to finish. "You're the first Scout who actually got less fit taking Personal Fitness. You would have been wise to take Camping instead."

"I hate camping," Richie says.

Later, Richie says to me, "I flunked Personal Fitness."

"I don't want to be Star without you in the troop," I say.

* * *

Several days of thunderstorms come and go and I'm anxious to finish up the Lifesaving requirements. All that is left is the strip and save. By the time the sun returns and I can head to the lake, it's the last day before our parents come to fetch us.

With my bathing suit underneath my Scout uniform, I look around the lake for Mel but can't find him anywhere. I see Cliff and ask him where Mel is. "He had to rush off to the city to attend to a personal matter. I don't think he's coming back. What do you need?"

"Mel is supposed to test me on the strip and save. It's the last thing I need for Lifesaving."

"No problem. I'll test you," Cliff says.

I stare at Cliff unable to decide what to do. "It's now or never," Cliff says.

"Okay, great," I say.

Cliff yells at one of the young campers to swim out thirty feet from shore. He's a guy who's half my size and I'm relieved that he's small enough for me to easily drag to shore.

Cliff takes out a stopwatch from his pocket and says, "Are you ready?"

I nod my head and he says "Go."

I take off my kerchief and start unbuttoning my shirt. With Cliff staring at me I fumble on some of the buttons and when I finally get my shirt off and begin to unbuckle my pants, Cliff says, "ten seconds." Foolishly, I forgot to keep my shoelaces loose and struggle to undo them. Kicking off my last shoe, I run into the lake and swim out to the Scout and when I get near to him I toss him an end of my shirt which he grabs onto and I tow him to shore.

Pleased with my performance, I run over to Cliff and he says, "Too bad. Twenty-five seconds to undress. The requirement is twenty seconds."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"In those five seconds, a Scout could drown," Cliff says.

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I stare at Cliff in disbelief.

"My shoelaces were on tight. I forgot to keep them looser," I say.

"You can take it over again next summer," Cliff says. "I suggest you practice taking off your clothes over the winter."

"Why can't I take it again now?" I ask.

"The Scout has drowned. He's dead. In real life you don't get to take your clothes off twice," Cliff says smugly.

"You're going to fail me for five seconds?" I say.

Cliff walks away, leaving me standing speechless.

* * *

The next day my parents come to fetch Dan and me. I tell my dad, "I got screwed with Lifesaving. Mel had to leave camp and Cliff flunked me because of five extra seconds to undress."

"In other words, you're not making Star," my dad says. "So much for promises. Do you know where Dan is?"

"I'm trying to tell you..." I say, and I can see that he's not listening.

Dan appears in the distance coming toward us and my dad goes to meet him. I say to my mom, "I stuffed a bat. It's in Mr. Spencer's office. I'll have to get it."

"A bat?" my mom says.

"Yeah, I took Taxidermy and stuffed a bat."

"How nice," my mom says, making a face.

My dad practically yells at Dan, "What happened? Did you make it? Did you make it?"

Dan reaches us and rolls his eyes and says, "Oh, yeah that's nothing. I got what I needed for Eagle."

My dad is beside himself with excitement and almost gives Dan a hug. Instead he grabs his hand and shakes it vigorously.

* * *

We're ten miles outside camp heading home when I realize that I forgot to get my bat. "My bat," I say, "I left my bat at camp."

"I'm sorry, Greg," my mom says. "We have to get home. There's no time to go back."

* * *

Richie and I are planning to quit the Scouts. Just before the first meeting of the fall, I tell my dad that I'm quitting and he says, "I suppose that's better than getting kicked out. Anyway, you still have to come tonight since they're having a special ceremony to honor Dan for making Eagle."

In the room where the "band" assembles before marching in, Mr. Boo ominously tells Richie and me that he needs to speak to us later. No one seems to have heard from Mel since he left camp. With

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Little Boo in the front holding the flag, we march into the assembly. I manage to miss most of my notes on the fife and Richie plays a series of unrecognizable blasts from his bugle. We may have hell to pay later, but we thoroughly enjoy watching Dan laugh up on the podium and seeing the evil glare from Mr. Boo.