



Kevin Sampsell

THE CAMP
P S Y C H I C

My parents put me in a summer camp when I was fourteen because they found some of my poetry and thought I was going to kill a bunch of people. When I say “found,” I mean my dad snooped through my notebook. There was a poem about living in the gutters and eating Charleston Chew candy bars and feeling pain and anger in all my being. I didn’t really know what a gutter was; I always imagined them to be basement apartments—really narrow ones with just room enough for a small, dirty mattress. The Charleston Chew was my favorite candy and I remember thinking I could live off of them if I ever had to. Each one was about a foot long and you could freeze them and break them up into little pieces. As far as pain and anger go, I think I was just going through a punk phase. It wasn’t that I felt really angry about anything, just indifferent. I used words like anger as default when I didn’t feel anything.

My dad was yelling at me in my bedroom, the evidence flopping in his angry right hand. “Are there any drugs in your room!” he demanded to know. Whenever I did anything he disapproved of, my dad instantly thought I was smoking something. “If I ever see someone selling you drugs, I’ll kill them.” My dad was small and pale and worked as a pharmacist. He had bad hair like Billy Crystal.

The next day, I heard my mom and dad looking through some pamphlets for summer camps. They were going to send me away. They thought I needed a change of scenery, was becoming too isolated. They wanted me to be part of a group for summer. They called an outdoorsman camp. It was full. They tried a tennis camp. It had been cancelled. They were told the arts & crafts retreat was good but it was too expensive. I was too old for the Catholic youth getaway. Finally, my mom found one that worked. Being a failed junior high actress herself, she thought it would be good for me to spend the next four weeks at the Walla Walla Drama Camp.



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Carlos grabbed some paper from one of his boxes and passed to swear better.

camp might actually turn out to be fun. At least I might learn how shocked and delighted by his casual swear and thinking that the out laughing. "I'm just shitting you," he said. I remember being his bad joke gain weight with a serious pause and then burst "Close," said Carlos. "It means I like to eat people." He let "Does it mean you can tell us our horoscopes?" said Steven.

at his white sneakers. Todd picked at some zits on his neck and Dodger looked down "Do you guys know what that means?" he asked finally. what this whole psychic arts business was.

No one said a thing at first because we were trying to figure out instead he said, "I'm gifted in the psychic arts."

was going to tell us that he committed a crime or something, but "There's something you guys need to know about me." I thought he and passed around a can of sausages before Carlos announced, Our first night, we played the usual getting-to-know-you games feathers and some left-over cotton candy.

named Carlos. My tentmates were Steven, a chubby twelve-year-old one camp leader per tent. The one in my tent was a college freshman Army. There were nineteen other kids and five older camp leaders, surrounding to be campers. The tents made me feel like I was in the located in a small wooded area behind a high school, the surroundings looked like the perfect place for amateur child actors

around some pens. "I want everyone to write down the name of a coin. You know—penny, dime, silver dollar, whatever. In the morning, when I wake up I'll know what you wrote on your paper." We each wrote something down. "Now fold up your paper and put it under your pillow tonight while you sleep." We did as he said. I wrote Nickel.

It took me a long time to fall asleep that first night. I kept shifting in my cot and worrying about what activities we had ahead of us. I had never been in a play and even speaking in class gave me butterflies. Images of Steve Martin with the fake arrow through his head swirled in my half-dream thoughts. The images got blurrier and blurrier until they scattered into nothing.

"Rise and shine," Carlos announced the next morning. "It's time to read your little minds."

We rubbed our eyes and sat up. I stuck my hand under my pillow to make sure my answer remained untouched. I had it folded a special way so I could see if Carlos cheated. It hadn't been unfolded. My secret was safe.

Dodger's paper was sticking out of his pillow, about ready to fall on the ground. If Carlos were going to peek at someone's answer, Dodger's would have been easiest. Carlos pointed to the dangling paper and told Dodger to hold it to his forehead. When Dodger held it up I could easily see the answer.

"A half dollar," says Carlos. "Your answer is half dollar."

"I could have told you that," I said. "You can see the answer between his fingers. He didn't even fold his paper."

Carlos waved off my comments. "His mind is just easy to read. Bigger kids have less psychic protection. It's a fact." I thought Dodger was going to tackle Carlos after that comment but he just wadded up his paper and threw it in the far garbage can.

"Okay. I'll do you next," Carlos said to me. I held my paper up to my head. It was folded in a star-shape, a trick I'd learned from my 6th grade girlfriend, Sheila (we'd gone out for three days before

worth anymore.

wished I could read my parents' minds. I wasn't sure what I was blurring past us, each little town disappearing as we sped past. I turned around and looked out the back window, the road her forehead like she was nursing a headache.

My mom closed her magazine for a second and put her hand on "I don't know."

"What kind of English is that?" he said.

My dad turned the radio down and looked back at me with a glare. Carlos had written 1-800-JERKOFF. I laughed a little, but then felt In the backseat of the car, I unfolded the paper and saw that return and smiled like a goon as he shook his hand.

he actually hated me. My dad wore our number down for him in walked over to meet them. He made a big deal about giving me his phone number, like we were going to be friends. But I'm pretty sure When my parents picked me up on the last day of camp, Carlos kicked the winning runs in. I got a merit badge for that.

the school grounds. We got beat terribly until our last game, when we played kickball against the fat camp on the other side of where I played supporting parts. My favorite part of the camp actually impressed the camp leaders with his range. I was better at exercises a scrunge, but his acting had more energy than others and he creatively dull. Todd was actually pretty impressive. He was still the best one at playing grown-ups. He was appropriately stiff and characters. Dodger never really came out of his shell but he was in psychics either. Carlos was just an actor good at playing hockey I didn't learn a lot during that camp. And I didn't start believing and pained. We never saw Steven again.

to a trailer office. Carlos watched them as they left, his eyes jealous Finally, one of the camp leaders, a ridiculously chesny girl named Nicole, pressed Steven into her green halter top, and led him away

Christmas break ruined it).

With his eyes closed, Carlos took a deep breath. "It's a small one... I see Eisenhower... your coin is a dime."

I unfolded the paper carefully. "Nice try," I said. I held up my paper. It was in all caps: NICKEL.

"Well, no psychic is perfect," he said. He quickly turned to Todd. "Let me touch your paper." Todd gave him a suspicious look. Carlos reached out and Todd let him pass his hand over the paper. His was folded in a triangle, like the shape we used for playing table football. Carlos snapped his fingers. "Susan B. Anthony dollar," he announced. Todd unfolded his paper. It said silver dollar. "My mind saw 'S' and dollar," Carlos stomped. "I guess my mind can't read your sloppy writing." Todd scoffed and shook his head before folding the paper back into the triangle.

By this time, Steven was visibly shaken by the whole scene. I thought maybe he just had to go to the bathroom but it was his face and hands that mostly spasmed as he held his paper aloft. He'd taken a pencil and blacked out one side of the paper in an effort to conceal his answer. Carlos looked him right in the eye and rubbed his chin intensely. "Steven" he whispered dramatically. "I know you wrote quarter."

Steven took a step back and his mouth started to quiver. "You're right," he said. "I wrote down quarter and then I tried to switch it to penny." He reached under his pillow and pulled out another paper, folded as small and square as a piece of gum. Carlos took it from him and unfolded it quietly and slowly. He held it up. It did, in fact, say in a nervous scrawl, quarter. Steven turned pale and started screaming. Most of the other kids and camp leaders poked their heads into our tent to see what was happening. Carlos tried to calm Steven but he wouldn't stop screaming and pointing his finger at the paper. It was the kind of scream that sounds hollow but full of terror, as if the screamer can't quite get all his breath into his throat. I imagine it's what dolphins would sound like if they screamed.