

Little Shits

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The summer after Zach Candleman got kicked out of his CIT year at Camp Burntshore for smoking weed—flashlights far off, they just stood in the trees, continued puffing, *fuck this camp*, his father picked him up at 2:00 in the morning—he got hired as staff at Camp Teshuvah in the Laurentian mountains. It was Craig Feldstein, that preternatural maker-of-opportunities, who had gotten him, as well as four other fellow Thornhillers, the gig; before Craig called, Zach had planned on getting a shitty job in the city, at the Promenade Mall or one of the many telemarketing companies at Steeles and Dufferin that hired teenagers, spending his nights in the basements, parks, and curling streets of suburban Thornhill. Zach had loved camp as a camper, but as a Counselor-In-Training he had gotten a first bitter taste of responsibility and had instantly hated it: why should his parents pay for him to babysit children? But then in late May, Craig set the whole Teshuvah thing in motion and Zach just went with it: a ten-minute phone interview with the camp director, and he was hired. The pay was shitty—six hundred dollars for the whole summer!—but at least he'd be making money.

After a raucous night in Montreal—cheap pitchers, strip clubs, cigarettes, dawn bagels—they drove up to the camp in Rachel Kluckski's mini-van. It was Zach, Craig, Rachel, Tamara Goldstein, Janet Janovsky, and Jeremy Mandel. Zach, Craig, and Rachel had all gotten kicked out of Burntshore that fateful night; Tamara and Janet also went to Burntshore, but made it through the entire summer only to not be hired back as first-year staff; Jeremy had never gone to camp before, and went off to a tattoo shop their night in Montreal and got a tattoo on his left arm of a skeleton in a top hat hitting a bong. Curly lines of smoke escaped from the skeleton's mouth.

They arrived at Camp Teshuvah just in time for Staff Orientation. There would be six days of pre-camp before the campers arrived. The camp was gorgeous—nestled in the mountains, snug against a sparkling lake. They weren't at the camp for more than ninety minutes when Craig handed out the mushrooms. "I don't know man, shouldn't we wait for the sun to set at least?" Zach asked. Rachel, Jeremy, Tamara, and

Janet were already chewing with exaggerated faces. Craig slapped the dried fungus into Zach's hand, put his own hand on Zach's chest. "Candleman?" he implored him. "*Candleman*. Candleman!" That was all the prodding Zach needed. He shrugged acquiescence, palmed the mushrooms into his mouth, swallowed them in a big chewless gulp, and took a slug off of Craig's Nestea.

So went the next five days. The six of them stuck together. They didn't try to make friends or meet new people. They didn't explore the camp or go swimming. They attended the mandatory workshops but they did not pay attention. What they did do was eat mushrooms, every night, multiple times a night, in ever bigger handfuls. By the second night they were timing it so just as the first peak was mellowing out the second peak was rushing in. Craig, as purveyor of the mushrooms, as architect of the summer, would guide them through the trip. Tamara and Janet would hold each other's hair as they threw up, gently tickle each other's faces once they were tripping. Janet was the DJ, constantly changing CDs, always searching for the perfect track; she had an otherworldly talent for playing the right music at the right moment: Radiohead, A Tribe Called Quest, Beethoven. Numerous times Zach would be on the verge of freaking out and, without saying anything, Janet would switch to the exact song to help ease Zach down, usually something by Neil Young or Buffy Sainte-Marie. The bong on Jeremy's tattoo smoked and gurgled as Jeremy yipped and yapped. Rachel never took her sunglasses off, would, at long intervals, say things like "we all live under the reign of the symbolic" and "now this is what I call fucking the man." Zach laughed and laughed and laughed. The bare wood of the cabin pulsed with frantic life. The trees purred as they stood under them hacking infinite butts. Time expanded and collapsed like a piece of gum being chewed in a sprinter's mouth on race day. They sat on the beds and in each other's arms for hours without speaking, riding the wormhole they had conjured through the simple group act of eating Craig's endless supply of psychedelics washed down by Craig's endless supply of Nesteas, a wormhole that was closed to everybody but the six of them, a wormhole that led to planet-atomizing sunrises that they felt in the parking-lot floors of their stomachs. Other times, Craig or Tamara would light a cigarette and conversation would spill out of them like a cauldron left on boil for too long. The days were a bright blur punctured by blissful naps, the other staff steering clear of the "Thornhillers" and their cliquy coldness.

The food was terrible; Zach barely touched it, spent the tinny mornings sick and bleary with gut rot, ready to swear off all drugs forevermore, but was always feeling better again by late evening, the setting sun throwing brilliant halos of flame over the mountains. Craig would reach out his hand and Zach, Zach would gorge.

On the fourth day of this routine Tamara was gone. She had obviously gotten kicked out, but in the mushroom haze it was as if she had simply phased out of existence. They divvied up her butts amongst themselves, tears rolling down Janet's cheeks, and soldiered on. The next day Craig had vanished as well, but they found his toolbox with the mushrooms hidden under the cabin, the flats of Nester he had left beside his bed; they continued eating the mushrooms to honour his memory, or maybe just because they were going to follow this journey, aided by the contents of Craig's toolbox, for as long as it took to get them where they were going, wherever that was. When Rachel didn't show up at the usual time, it meant the van was gone. That night, the three remaining Thornhillers made a pact: when one of us gets kicked out next, we'll all go. They sealed the pact by eating the remaining mushrooms: an extra large dose. Zach became small enough to fit into an acorn, large enough to destroy a cabin with one misplaced step. That morning, Janet got called into the camp director's office. The three of them were in a cab on the way to Montreal by that evening.

When Zach got back to his parents' house, he had barely eaten in ten days—the burgers and curly fries he had devoured at Steer Burger in Montreal left him throwing up the entirety of the train ride to Toronto—and was coming down from a week of non-stop psilocybin, weed, and cigarettes. “You look green,” his mother said, handing him a white bowl of yellow chicken broth, the first of many.

Two days after Zach's return Craig called. “Hey buddy, I heard you're back. I got us all a new gig at Camp Sumac, all you have to do is call Rinaldo, the camp director. He's desperate for staff, he was begging me to invite my friends. Me, Jeremy, and Rachel are already up here. Janet and Tamara are on their way! You in?” Zach looked around his parents' kitchen: the off-white phone attached to the wall with its meters of coiled cord, his mother's flower address book, the antique radio his father had refurbished, always tuned to CBC, the speckled ceramic bowl bought at the MOMA gift shop in New York, currently showcasing four bright lemons. There was not a single reason to say no, so Zach said yes. Yes. He was in. He spent the next two days

sleeping, eating solid food, restocking on butts and herb and candy. Memories from the Teshuvah mushroom haze began to float up: peeing behind the cabin in the early morning, three crows racing overhead, calling out in human voices. Coming back from somewhere, unknown counselors with melted faces talking to him in a language he didn't understand—French? Hebrew? The lone time they sat by the water, their last evening, the lake a staticky television screen.

Five days after leaving Teshuvah, Zach was at Camp Sumac, two-and-a-half hours north of Toronto, in the camp director, Rinaldo's, office. Zach had just arrived, his duffel bags were still on the office's porch, his father probably not even back on the highway, the Zeppelin turned up. Zach was hitting it off with Rinaldo, joking about the weather, about how Zach and his friends were really saving Rinaldo's ass. The conversation seemed to be winding down when Zach saw Craig walking by the office window. Craig made a face, pointed, came around to the door. "Hey Candleman, we were just heading out on our day off." Zach looked at Rinaldo. The camp director didn't look pleased, but shrugged his acceptance. "I expect when you're back tomorrow, you'll get right to work." Zach was already out the door.

"Whose van is this?" Zach asked as they loaded into it. The back seats had been removed, replaced with bean bag chairs. The roof scored with burn marks and dark stains.

"It's Meloni's," Rachel answered. "My car's rad died."

"She's dead," Janet concurred.

"Zed's dead, baby," Tamara said.

"Hey Candleman, you good to drive?" Craig asked, throwing the keys to Zach before he had time to answer, or wonder who—or where—Meloni was.

They had barely left the camp when butts were lit, pipes were packed, beers were cracked. Zach was topless, a lit cigarette dangling out of his mouth as he merged onto the highway, heading north. At camp for barely an hour and right back into the swing of things. What a summer. "Where are we going again?" he asked Rachel, sitting beside him, sunglasses covering half her face, everybody else lounging in the back.

"Craig's uncle's cottage. I'll direct you."

Two hours later, the sun had set and they were still driving. The van was thick with smoke. Rachel was telling Zach about the Essenes, a radical group of ancient

Jews who lived in the caves outside of Jerusalem, didn't believe in money or private property, shared everything they had, bathed communally every morning, had their own secret names for the angels that watched over them. The lilt of Rachel's voice, the dark continuous tongue of the road, Zach was drifting into a calm, warm sea.

"Get off here!" Rachel shouted suddenly.

Zach swerved onto the exit before he saw the flashing lights a hundred meters ahead of them: RIDE. Zach slammed on the brakes. The van jerked to a stop. They all stared out the windshield at the phalanx of cop cars. There was nothing they could do. "Yo, roll down those windows!" Zach accelerated, slowly approached the bumper that was awaiting them.

A cop came up to them. Zach took a deep breath.

"Where you going?"

"Uh, to a cottage."

"Your cottage?"

"No, actually. Craig's uncle's?"

The cop frowned, looked in the back window. "Whose vehicle is this?"

"Uh, Meloni's?" Zach answered, gesturing with his hand. Rachel hiccupped, tried not to laugh. Craig started to say something, but Jeremy hit him on the shoulder.

The cop told them to hold on, walked off with Zach's ID. Zach's fear was like a bad mushroom trip, all dark shadows and throbbing forebodings. Nobody spoke. The cop slowly walked back to them, handed Zach his ID, told him to have a nice evening. Zach put the car into drive, and they glided through the swinging lights. The gods of summer had spoken; they had been spared.

The next two weeks went as you'd expect. They didn't eat as many mushrooms as they did at Teshuvah, but they still spent their waking hours high and to themselves. They still didn't learn anybody's names; not even their campers knew who they were. Sumac was a sprawling, enormous camp, and it was relatively easy for six new staff to just disappear through the cracks. Zach took a cue from Rachel, stopped taking his sunglasses off. It was undeniably true that they were terrible counselors, but there seemed little to do about it now; they were in too deep, the summer pulling them along in its sedating gravitational wake. One headache morning, Zach heard one of the campers call him "that weird guy with the glasses who hangs around us all day." Janet

and Tamara stopped being best friends, and started being girlfriends. Craig continued guiding them through the nights, choosing the drugs they ingested, the sites they ingested them at, the shenanigans they participated in. One night, emerging from the woods, they saw a moose at the swim docks, drinking from the lake. Jeremy tried to pet it, the others howling with laughter as he tiptoed towards its enormous brown rump.

Somehow, they lasted nearly two weeks before the axe fell. But fall it did. Rinaldo called them all into his office, paced back and forth behind his desk as he reamed them out, his tanned hands up near his shaved head, accentuating the beats of the ancient metre of his shouting. “You little shits! Don’t you have any sense of responsibility? Of work ethic?! I gave you a chance here, and you blew it. I feel sorry for your parents.”

That was the end of Zach Candleman’s camp career. Eight years as a camper at Camp Burntshore, just over half a summer as CIT, nine days at Camp Teshuvah, two weeks at Camp Sumac, and it was over. For the rest of the summer Zach telemarketed, reading off a script to scam elderly people in Florida out of their retirement savings. Most days, he slept until three, roasted in the suburban sun, challenged himself to roll bigger and bigger joints, spent half an hour every evening watering his mother’s green, green lawn. The beginning of grade twelve, his last year of high school, loomed like a terrible mountain range. He hung out with Craig and the crew one or two more times, but it wasn’t the same; they quickly drifted apart. Zach would be in a couple other tight-knit groups like the one during his seventeenth summer, but nothing would ever compare to that sense of unity, that bond, the feeling that it was them and nobody else. No sexual tension, no in-fighting, just looking at the way the world is and saying, *fuck this, let’s get high and make up stories about the origins of the universe.*

Much later, when Zach ran into Craig at the No Frills near his parents, they hadn’t seen each other in twenty years. Zach, his wife, and their kids—all three of whom went to Camp Burntshore—were up from the city for a late fall barbecue; Zach had gone to the store to get extra hot dog buns.

“I’ve been selling real estate.” Craig handed him his card. There was no need: Zach had seen his picture all over Thornhill, on bus-stop benches, busses, lawns, the

same confident, toothy smile. Zach could see why it was a good fit, Craig leading prospective buyers through staged homes, spinning elaborate tales about the lives they would blissfully play out in these rooms. Craig was still handsome, still arrogant—at the time, Zach had been too close to him, too stoned, to notice that Craig was a huge prick, but whenever he thought through his memories it stuck out like a broken thumb—yet there was something subdued about him now, something mellowed.

“We should get together for a drink sometime,” Zach heard himself saying, not really meaning it.

“I haven’t had a drink in five years!” Craig’s face turned serious, confidential. “My twenties were pretty dark.”

“Ah. Are you in touch with anybody else from high school? I see Tamara and Janet from time to time, their girls go to Burntshore with my children.”

Craig’s face lightened; he laughed. “Remember Rachel? She married some rich Australian when she was twenty-two and lived down there til she showed up back in Toronto with her two kids and no rich Australian. She’s been writing a blog lately, it’s pretty much gone viral. She’s close to getting a book deal.”

“Good for her. I remember her as being real smart.”

They shook hands, said goodbye. “And hey Candleman,” Craig said, Zach already halfway through the automatic doors, “if you’re ever in the market for a house, look me up.”

On the way to his car, hot dog buns in hand, he passed a group of teenagers in the parking lot. They were huddled close, hollering, in their own world, taking up an outsized amount of space.

Little shits, Zach said, under his breath.