

Lightning Camp

John W. Gilbert

The sign reminded Philip of the motel signs he saw along the state highways when he drove with his parents to visit family members in the small Missouri towns where all his older relatives lived. But this place didn't look like a motel. His mother had said it was a place "where old people stay for a while," which made it sound *kind of* like a motel, though.

His father, Todd Atherton, pulled into the parking lot of the Evergreen Nursing Home which had a green silhouette of a pine tree on its sign against a white backing. Todd parked the '72 Gran Torino one row from the front entrance. He took off his sunglasses and laid them on the brown dashboard. Philip thought his father looked very cool wearing his sunglasses. Philip didn't have any sunglasses. It was a sunny, late June day. Summer vacation had started three days ago, and Philip was still feeling the exhilaration that came with not being woken up by the *dang-dang* of his silver Big Ben alarm clock at six-thirty in the morning.

His father flicked some of his graying hair away from his forehead. "You ready? Let's go in," he said.

The doors of the two-door metallic-brown Gran Torino were huge and heavy to Philip. They could get away from a young boy. He had learned this the hard way when he had given a nasty dent to the car next to them when he and his mother had gone shopping one evening at Eagle supermarket. He was now rather paranoid when he opened the door in the crowded parking lot and held onto it with a careful and firm grip, as firm as his ten-year-old hands would allow.

They went in, walked through the lobby where there always seemed to be a news show on the television mounted high on one wall, and walked down the hall off to the left. Their shoes squeaked on the white tile floor. A male attendant wearing a beige pantsuit pushed a wheelchair towards them containing a very old, thin man in blue and white pajamas. Philip noticed there was a clear tube with some fluid in it sticking out of the slit in his pajama bottoms which connected to a clear bag hung on the back of his wheelchair, also with some fluid in it. The old man's head was lolled back, and he stared at the ceiling tiles on his way to wherever the attendant was taking him. Philip realized the man probably didn't know where he was going and maybe didn't even know where he was, period. The attendant cut a glance at Philip as they passed each other, and Philip noticed he smiled at him a little. Philip didn't like to be here but knew it was something he needed to do, to visit his uncle. He remembered visiting a different nursing home the previous year when his great-grandmother, then ninety-six, was very sick. She hadn't been there long. Philip had visited twice. The second time was more difficult. She didn't recognize him, and his father had to explain who he was. She didn't recognize Philip's mother, either.

"Who have you brought with you, Sonny? Who is that with you?" The old woman looked quickly from Philip, to his mother, Jane, and back again.

"You remember your great-grandson, Philip, don't you, Grammie? And my wife, it's my wife, Jane. You remember her?" Philip's father loudly asked. "Remember?"

"Hmm.." Grammie said, nodding and sucking her lips into and out of her mouth over toothless gums. Then she got louder and agitated, and a nurse hurried into the room.

Grammie said, "Applesauce but no apples. Where are the apples? I saw some in a tree earlier. Bring some in here! Or let me go get them..." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes clouded with anxiety and pleading. Philip thought that she looked scared—and a little crazy.

“Why don’t you let me?” Grammie said. “Tell me!” Philip remembered that Grammie was gone less than two-weeks after that visit. He understood that nursing homes were places where old people stayed for a short time before they died.

He wondered if Heather would think the nursing home was gross. Heather was a girl in his class. She had soft feathered brown hair. Philip had walked her home after school last Wednesday and they kissed while sitting on one of those long pieces of patio furniture that people recline on. It was wonderful and exciting and produced butterflies in his stomach. It was the first time he had ever kissed a girl.

He and his father walked into room 107. The door was ajar. Uncle Walter had the bed up at an angle and was watching a stock car race on television. He had the room to himself but there were three other empty beds. The window with the curtains open faced the parking lot. Philip could see their car outside.

“Walter,” his father said, “how are you doing?”

Uncle Walter turned his head slowly. He had had a stroke two weeks ago. He’d lost most of the use of his left side. On his bald pate, large liver spots shown, creating a bizarre topography.

“What a nice surprise,” Uncle Walter said, gruffly and low, but managing a smile. “C’mere, son,” he said to Philip.

Philip was a little nervous. He couldn’t help it. He smiled a little and walked over. “Hi, Uncle Walter. How are you?”

“Oh, we’re managing, Philip. Come closer,” said Uncle Walter.

Philip walked up close to the bed. Walter reached across the bed with his right hand and took Philip’s hand, squeezing it. Then he clenched and rubbed Philip’s shoulder. Philip noticed his uncle’s hand shook. Walter withdrew his hand. The effort seemed to have strained him.

“Oh, damn. Sumbitch. Whew. Look at ‘em go!,” Uncle Walter said, now looking hard at the TV screen and the cars going around the oval track.

There was a smell of old things and chemicals in the room. Or maybe it was Uncle Walter. Things dying and things preserved, simultaneously. Philip decided Heather wouldn’t like it here.

“Todd, my boy,” Uncle Walter said, looking past them and towards the door, “Do me a favor and give me a cigarette. I’ll smoke it later in the bathroom.”

Todd looked at the floor as if maybe there were a cigarette down there. “Now, Walter, you know I can’t do that.”

“Just give me one. Tuck it under the mattress here. They won’t see it.” He started to pull at the blanket covering him, distractedly. “It would be pretty nice to have one. You understand, damnit.” Uncle Walter started coughing deeply.

Todd looked back to the door, then he scratched his temple. “I just don’t think that’s a good idea, Walter.”

Walter’s face scrunched up and he looked mean and a little younger. He squeezed the blanket, bunching it up, and made a fist. “C’mon, Todd. What difference does it make? Hmm?” Walter bit his lip and spit on the other side of the bed. This surprised Philip. “What the hell, really, what the hell?” he added.

On their way out, walking down the same hall, Philip wondered why his father hadn’t just given Uncle Walter the cigarette. It seemed like it would have been a good thing to do, given the circumstances.

They drove out of Independence, Missouri, east on Highway 24 through the rolling, green countryside, got off the highway at Buckner, and headed north towards the Missouri River. They skirted the small town of Sibley and historic Fort Osage which fronted the river. Near the river, the land was flat as a pancake. Farms were fertile here, but prone to flooding in the spring. Todd turned right and drove down a dirt road to the parking area for a boat ramp. “Let’s take a look at the river, son.”

They walked down the cement ramp. Grooves had been made in it for grip. Sections of the ramp were loose and crumbling into various-sized chunks. They stood fast at the bottom of the ramp where the water lapped at the cement and the dirt shore on either side of it. The trees were few by the water’s edge, not thick like further back, and the shore-grass was a foot high. A shipping vessel, laden with containers, slowly went upstream, the truncated stack jutting from the wheelhouse pumped gray smoke into the air.

“Take a look at that, Philip. The Vernon power plant.” His father raised his arm and extended his index finger. On the other side of the river, about a third-of-a-mile away, was the enormous power plant.

“Wow,” Philip said. It was intimidating-looking, monstrous in some aspects. The cylindrical cooling towers emanated great clouds of white steam. The three narrower, towering smoke stacks spewed thick, cotton-ish gray smoke. Mountainous, black coal heaps stood on the left of it all, where conveyers reached from lower structures to much larger buildings a distance away. What made it eerie, Philip thought, was that there were so few people visible in the distance, only a few, making it appear as if the conglomerate of towers, stacks, and brutal looking buildings somehow ran themselves – though there were some trucks moving slowly around, reminding Philip of large beetles at this distance – giving the whole scene a ghostly, deserted, yet possessed, feeling.

“Damn coal. That stuff pollutes the worst of all,” his father said. “Still, I could probably get a job there. Maybe something in middle management, with my experience. If I was lucky.” His father didn’t look like he felt lucky. He stared across the river at the plant with a grimness, his jaw set tight, standing stock still, just looking. Philip looked at him, then looked across at the plant. He wondered if the steam and smoke ever stopped.

Back at Uncle Walter’s and Aunt Emily’s place, Todd and Philip walked through the porch with the daybed and into the house. It was a modest two-story clapboard, painted an austere yet shimmering off-white with gray shutters and sat atop a gentle knoll amidst several tall oaks. It was surrounded by their modest farm which was now leased out to a local man, Herbert Jaynes, to tend. Aunt Emily greeted them on her way out. She was fussing with her curly, white hair and looking for something. “You boys are late for lunch,” she said. She squeezed Todd’s arm tenderly, then reached down and lightly grabbed Philip’s ear, giving it a tug, then kissed his cheek. She shot back up and touched Todd’s forearm. “How is he today?”

“Not too bad. We mostly just watched NASCAR on TV.”

Aunt Emily looked into Todd’s eyes, then smiled a quick smile. “Okay, you boys go eat. Jane has it all ready for ya.” She walked out to the Subaru wagon with rusted side-panels and drove off down the long, gravel driveway.

“Come and get it, boys!” They heard Jane from the kitchen.

Philip's mother, Jane, dried both sides of her hands on her pineapple-print apron. Seeing his mother's smile was a happy tonic to the day for Philip, though he thought his mother also looked tired. There was sliced roast beef, cut tomatoes and lettuce from the garden for a salad, seeded rye bread, mayonnaise, and brown mustard (Todd's favorite) on the table. After lunch, Philip sat on the sofa in the living room and watched a special about Evel Knievel on Wide World of Sports—featuring Howard Cosell with his nasal drone and plastic hair—and ate an ice cream sandwich. His parents were still in the kitchen. He could hear them.

“Larry's close with one of the VP's. I'll go over there Wednesday and he can introduce me. I'll make my pitch,” his father said. Philip's father held an administrative position in the Office of Inspector General, Department of Health and Human Services, in the Kansas City office. Philip only had the vaguest idea what his father did but knew it entailed, “Checking things out,” and, being a government job, was prone to transfers. Todd was up for a transfer to Los Angeles that October, only a few months away. This part of Missouri was home to both of Philip's parents' families.

Philip knew from overhearing his parents' late-night discussions in the living room or kitchen, while he stood by his bedroom with door cracked open, that both his parents were torn about the impending transfer, though his mother was more against it.

“I'd be promoted to G-13. It probably wouldn't be for more than four years,” his father had said one night, exasperated.

“But LA? Oh, Todd. Honey, we've already been all around the south and east these last twelve years,” Jane said, “now you want to drag us all the way to California?”

The Athertons lived in a comfortable, umber-painted, ranch-style home in the Kansas City suburb of Prairie Village. They had only been there two-and-a-half years. This transfer was coming along sooner than expected. Philip didn't want to leave. He was in love with Heather. Heather smiled a lot. He loved it when she smiled at him.

“It wouldn't be a better life there. You know that,” Jane added.

“I don't relish the idea. Still, changing careers at my age? What would I do? Try to get some job with the city? Sell insurance?” Philip's father sounded annoyed and a little perplexed by these prospects.

So, Todd and his wife Jane had come to an accord that trying to stay in the area was best for the family. The process of scouting out possible jobs in the area had led him to the Vernon power plant as the most viable option. Todd's high school friend, Larry, worked there as a shift-supervisor. This fact helped narrow the job search.

After lunch, Todd strode out of the kitchen and slapped Philip on the shoulder where he still sat on the carpet watching a W.C. Fields movie on TV. “Son, come on. You grab the tent out of the car and I'll get the sleeping bags and other gear.”

Philip nodded and got up, licking the cookie part of the ice cream sandwich off of his fingers. He and his father were going camping tonight between the two walnut trees, and Philip couldn't wait.

Philip and his father walked outside. His father opened the trunk of the Gran Torino and looked at the wadded-up tent. His mouth opened a little and he slumped slightly. Philip heard him say what he knew to be bad words under his breath. The tent hadn't been cleaned or folded properly

after its last use, and his father was mad at himself about that. Mud was stuck to it, and it was wrinkled. It looked like a big, wet, wadded-up, light-blue tissue.

“Never put a tent away like that, son. If my father were still with us, he would hide me if he saw that.” He helped Philip lay it out flat on the ground then walked off to the storage room attached to the north side of the house.

Philip gave each side a good going-over with a damp rag which was a men’s old worn-out T-shirt. He carefully rinsed it and squeezed out the water from it when it got too dirty. The tent was now clean, though a little damp. He started to fold it like his father had taught him – the top part over to one side, then the whole thing twice folded length-wise and rolled up. Stuffing it back in the tent-bag was the hardest part. Philip was struggling with that, the top half of the tent coming unrolled while a few inches of it were stuck in the neck of the bag when his father returned to help him tamp and shake it in the rest of the way.

“There we go,” his father said. He looked okay now, Philip thought.

It was a bit of a makeshift camping trip. They were going to walk a half-mile into the corn field and camp between two Eastern black walnut trees which stood in the distance at the apex of the surrounding land. They were taking the tent, two sleeping bags, two folding camp stools with red canvas seats, a metallic blue, burnished Coleman kerosene lantern, and a small Igloo cooler. Philip carried the tent in a small backpack, which stood upright in it, one of the stools, and the lantern. His father had the rest of the gear in his backpack and carried the cooler, swinging it to-and-fro, periodically switching arms.

They walked most of the way in a narrow gulley which wasn’t planted, on a gentle upgrade. Rows of corn emanated on either side of them, which only grew about two feet tall this time of year. The trees rose up as they approached. Majestic old trees with wide crowns, their bent and crooked branches appearing as dark thick veins within the greenness of the leaves. There were just two of them, the trees, standing there like giants; all around was only the field, which seemed to go on almost forever from this vantage point. They had to cut across rows of corn the last twenty yards to reach the trees. Then they stood between them in an area of ground which was not planted but packed down hard from being driven over with wide tractor tires. The trees were thirty feet apart. Philip walked over to one and looked at its scraggy, scabrous bark and touched it with his open hand.

They put the gear down on the hard-packed dirt. Todd stood and looked back toward the house. From this angle, only the roof and the eaves could be seen. He had spent summers here as a child, helping out his uncle Walter around the farm and going into the woods to shoot squirrels and rabbits in his spare time.

“I don’t know what will happen to this place when Uncle Walter and Aunt Emily are gone, Philip.” He walked in a circle and kicked a stone toward one of the trees. “We could keep on renting the place out,” he said, “or sell it.”

“Are we gonna move again, Dad?” Philip said.

His father looked at him, then his head dropped forward a little.

“I don’t know, son.”

Philip had the feeling his father wasn’t telling him everything.

They put up the tent. By then it was six-thirty. To the west, over the horizon and the terminus of these fields—and other fields in other farms—dark gray clouds had amassed, pushing their way across the sky, their edges irregular, almost jagged, not soft, as one thinks of clouds. Todd stared off at them and said something under his breath again. Then he turned to his left.

“Look over there, Philip. You can see the old barn.” The old, white barn sat one-hundred yards to the right of the house. It had fallen into disrepair. Most of the white paint had peeled off, revealing termite-ridden planks underneath. From this vantage point, they could also see the shambolic roof, missing whole sections of shingles. “After your Grandpa Clark died—just one year after Grandma Mable—Uncle Walter and Aunt Emily sold all the dairy cows.” Todd sat down on one of the folding stools and patted the other one. Philip sat on it. “Once the cows were gone – this was twenty years ago – I tore up some floorboards in the back corner to see if the wood was salvageable. Underneath there, right under the floorboards, spread out under half the damn barn, were hundreds of empty whiskey bottles. Different colors, sizes, and shapes.” Todd lowered his head and shook it. “We knew Grandpa drank, sure, but not like that. Damn! Not even Grandma Mable knew, rest her soul.” Todd smiled a half-smile and laughed puffs of air out his nose. “Always got up at 5 a.m. to start his chores, though, without fail.”

“I guess he got awfully thirsty in the barn,” Philip said.

Todd turned his head to look at his son and burst out laughing so hard he nearly fell off his stool. After he calmed down, he wiped his nose. Philip was smiling ear-to-ear, happy he had made a funny joke, which he hadn’t realized was a joke.

“That’s right, son. Yeah, that’s right. Awfully thirsty out there with the cows!” Todd commenced laughing again. Philip was happy to see his father happy. Todd reached over and grabbed Philip by the back of the neck, shook him, then patted him on the back.

They used twigs and dried sticks found under the trees and some wood chips they had brought with them to make the fire. They ate hot dogs on buns with yellow mustard, relish, and baked beans cooked up on a small fire in a stainless-steel saucepan with a bent handle. They warmed the buns on a mesh splatter lid over the steam of the water so that they were warm and soft. They talked and laughed and ate and it was wonderful and delicious.

Just after it was completely dark – a little after eight – lightning started dancing over the horizon. The fields ran gently down and away from this high point at the trees. It was like sitting in a great cathedral with two massive, eighty-foot, wooden sentinels – one on either side of them. Philip’s father smoked a couple cigarettes and put the butts into a hole he dug with the heel of his boot. Only low rumbling thunder could be heard, far away. The arcs of lightening formed fleeting jagged shapes against the black night sky in hectic distortions.

“Mother nature is really putting on a show for us tonight,” Todd said.

Philip was transfixed. From this distance, it appeared that every bolt was striking the earth. He imagined towns being laid to waste, burning.

“It’s really neat, Dad,” Philip said. They continued watching for a time.

His father got up. “Let’s go to bed. If that thunder gets loud, it’ll wake us up. We’ll be okay.”

Tucked into his lightweight sleeping bag pulled up to his waist, Philip wondered what it would be like to sleep in a tent with a girl. He imagined Heather was there with him instead of his father and fell asleep.

Philip woke up and had to pee. He quietly unzipped the tent and went out barefoot in his underwear. He walked toward the tree on the right. Near it, he began to pee. Then he saw something that made him flinch and stop midstream. Behind and just to the right of the tree was what looked like a medium-sized German Shepherd, but thinner. He felt a whip-switch of tingle up his spine and drew a deep breath. He stared wide-eyed at it, and the animal stared back at him. Its eyes glowed red, like he had seen in nature shows on TV. Then it turned, trotted off, and disappeared into the blackness.

Back in the tent, it felt like a long time until he could close his eyes again. His father kept sleeping, snoring gently.

Philip woke hours later. He didn't know what time it was. He was wide awake. Then he heard it again – the low long howling cries. He lied there a minute, under the thin cover of the summer sleeping bag. There was not one, but many of them. Sometimes in unison, sometimes calling-and-answering – they would get louder, then retreat. Then louder again. Philip shook his father, who breathed deeply but was not snoring.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Dad, listen. What is that? Wolves?”

His father listened, got up on one elbow, rolled over and unzipped the fly of the tent. “Come on,” he said.

Todd climbed out of the two-man tent hunched over with Philip behind him. They both stood in their bare feet. Todd put his arm around his son's shoulders.

“Listen to that. Just listen!” His father was smiling broadly. “That's a pack of coyotes. I haven't heard that in years. That's amazing, isn't it?”

Philip nodded. The cries and the howls seemed to enter him and go through him, through his whole body, not just into his ears, as sound usually does. It sounded like they were surrounded. The cacophony came to them from various distances and locations—once down and to the left sounding far across the field, and the next coming from what sounded like the farmhouse behind them, much louder and closer.

Sometimes there were short yips. Sometimes funereal drawn-out moans. They sat down on the stools and just listened. Todd laced his fingers, put his elbows on his knees, and placed his chin atop his fingers. Philip turned his head towards the changing direction of the sounds. He wondered where they were going. He wondered where their home was.

“I thought the farmers around here had killed all of them off,” Todd said.

With no food for breakfast, they walked back to the house early. It was an overcast morning with a gusty warm wind blowing. The Eastern black walnut trees receded behind them.

“Those coyotes were really playing last night – having a good time. That electrical storm must have gotten them pretty stirred up,” Todd said, grinning. He looked happy and relaxed.

Philip was looking down, his feet shuffling, kicking up dirt. Todd turned his head and looked at him.

“What is it, son?”

“I don't want to move, Dad,” Philip said abruptly, louder than he intended to.

Todd stopped and turned toward his son. “Nothing is for sure yet, Philip.”

“My friends are here. Ed and Steve and Brad. And I love Heather,” he said. Philip felt something catch in his throat and he thought he might start to cry.

“I know,” his father said, “I know.” He nodded a couple of times, put his hand on Philip’s shoulder, and squeezed it. He looked a little downcast. Then he dropped his hand from his son’s shoulder, turned, and went on.

Philip stood frozen and watched his father walk ahead. He could feel some tears come down his face now and was glad his father wasn’t there to see that.

Then his father stopped, half-turned and looked back. “There will be other Heathers, son,” he said with care in his voice but firmly, as if this were one of those things in life that happens to people. “C’mon, now.”

“Not like this one!” Philip shouted. He stood there alone. His father walked on, further away, walking with his long strides. Philip picked up a fist-sized clod of dirt and threw it as far as he could into the corn, where it disappeared as if it had never existed.