

I WANT TO GO HOME

GORDON KORMAN

Cover by Trevor Keen

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CABIN 13

The early summer sunshine streamed down over Camp Algonkian Island. The trim on the twenty-two cabins was brightly painted, the excellent athletic fields had been freshly mowed, and an assortment of boats of all sizes bobbed in readiness at the dock. The campers would begin arriving right after lunch. Everything was prepared for the opening of the camp's thirty-first season.

A shaft of light came through the window of the camp office, shining directly upon the solemn portrait of Elias Warden, the camp founder, and glaring off the glass. The present camp director, Arthur Warden, grandson of Elias, sat at his desk, checking the final preparations for the new

camp year. There was a record enrolment for this first month, he noted with satisfaction. How lovely that would look on the bank statement!

He noticed a letter on the corner of his desk, opened it, and examined the contents.

Dear Mr. Warden, it read, we are writing this letter in regard to our son, Rudy Miller, who is registered at your camp for the first month. We thought that perhaps you and your counsellors should be forewarned. Rudy is an exceptional but difficult boy. You may have considerable problems getting him adjusted to camp life. He is something of a loner, and does not always get on well with other boys. In addition, he insists that he does not want to go to camp. However, we are sending him to Algonkian Island on the advice of his school guidance department. They feel that he must be placed in a social atmosphere where he will be exposed to all sorts of people, an atmosphere of hearty physical activity mixed with healthy comradeship.

Mr. Warden looked up. "What an excellent description of camp," he said aloud.

When Rudy arrives, the letter went on, it is very likely that he will have a rather negative attitude. It is our sincere hope that you and your staff will be patient with him. Please inform us if you have any problems.

Sincerely yours, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Miller.

Mr. Warden snorted loudly. “Problems! There is no such thing as a problem boy — only problem parents. All cats love meat, and all boys love camp. That’s the way it was in the days of my grandfather — that’s the way it is now. This boy is about to have the best summer of his life!” He got up from his desk, strode out onto his front porch, and looked out over the compound, still holding the letter.

A group of tall, strong young men, dressed alike in white Algonkian uniforms, were moving about putting the finishing touches on the grounds in preparation for the arrival of their charges.

Frank, the head counsellor, loped over to Mr. Warden’s cottage. “Good morning, sir. We’re all set here. Are there any last minute problems we should know about?”

Mr. Warden glanced briefly toward the letter in his hand, crumpled it up, and tossed it into the nearest trash container. “Never any problems at Algonkian Island. Just routine, my boy, just routine.”

He turned away and walked briskly back into his office. By the time he was again seated at his desk, Rudy Miller had completely vanished from his mind.

* * *

The large silver motor launch chugged loudly up to the island dock and scraped against the old tires that covered the wood. The driver skilfully threw a rope around a post and secured the boat.

He turned to his nine young passengers. “Well, we’re here, kids. Camp Algonkian Island. Everybody out.”

There was scrambling and happy chatter as eight of the

boys heaved themselves and their luggage out of the launch. Once on the dock they scattered, heading for the assorted small buildings on the island. There were welcoming shouts as boys already there ran to greet the new arrivals.

The driver glanced at the lone passenger still seated at the rear of the launch. “Hey, what are you, asleep or something? We’re here.”

“So I see,” the dark-haired boy observed glumly. He did not move.

“Well?” prompted the driver. “Aren’t you getting out?”

“No,” said the boy blandly. “I’m hoping you won’t notice me so I can hitch a ride back to civilization.”

“Aw, c’mon,” kidded the driver. “You’re going to have a great time here.”

“I doubt it,” said the boy, heaving his duffle bag onto the dock and climbing out after it. “But thanks for the thought.”

Rudy Miller watched regretfully as the motor launch pulled away from the dock and headed for the mainland. There went his last link with the outside world. Like it or not — and he did not like it — Camp Algonkian Island was home for the next month.

“You’ll love it, dear,” his mother had assured him at the bus station earlier that day. “The sports facilities are the best available. And there will be so many other boys your own age to play with.”

Well, the latter was certainly true, at least. He had come up on the bus and over on the launch with eight others, and there were hundreds more swarming all over what he could see of the island, every one obviously delighted to be here.

Rudy abandoned all attempts to understand such an attitude. He was here thanks to the school guidance department. Thanks, but no thanks. Guidance should stick to timetabling and stay out of other people's heads!

An athletic young man with a clipboard loped up and grinned into Rudy's face. "Ah, here you are, the ninth guy from the launch. You must be Miller."

Rudy nodded noncommittally.

"Hi. I'm Dave, the swimming coach. You're in Cabin 13, right over there." He indicated the row of small, wood-frame buildings which lined the camp's central compound.

"Thirteen," repeated Rudy softly. "Marvellous."

"You're new here, eh?" said Dave brightly. "This is your first summer at Algonkian?"

Rudy nodded. "And hopefully my last."

Dave stared at him momentarily, then went on. "I'm making up my life-saving class. What level of swimming are you at?"

Rudy thought carefully. "What comes before tadpole?"

"Before tadpole?" the instructor repeated. "Non-swimmer . . . oh, well, we'll have you swimming soon enough. By the time this month is over you'll be a regular ocean-going vessel."

"I doubt it," said Rudy calmly. He slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and walked across the compound along one of the many well-worn paths, this one leading to Cabin 13.

Standing in the doorway was another athletic-looking young man, dressed like Dave in an Algonkian T-shirt, shorts, white socks and track shoes, and sporting a whistle around his neck. On his face was Dave's elaborate grin.

Rudy looked back at Dave and then again at the counsellor of Cabin 13. A clone, he decided. There were two of them.

“Hi, there!” the clone greeted him with a hearty slap on the back. “I’m Chip, your bunk counsellor. What’s your name?”

“Just put me down as Anonymous,” said Rudy.

Undaunted, Chip glanced at the tag on the duffle bag. “Rudy Miller. Welcome aboard, Miller. You’re the first to arrive. You’ve got the pick of the bunks.”

Rudy stepped inside and looked around with distaste.

There were three double-decker bunk beds in a line on each side of the room, and a small private bedroom at the front, just inside the door. Rudy went into the private room and sat down on the bed.

“I’ll have this one,” he decided.

“Oh, no,” said Chip seriously. “This is the counsellor’s room. I sleep here. But you can have your pick of all the others.”

“Not much privacy out there,” Rudy remarked mildly.

“Hey, you don’t need privacy! We’re all going to be one big happy family, and we’re going to have lots of fun!”

Rudy glared at him, shook his head resignedly, and walked out of the small room. Once again he surveyed the bunks, and selecting the lower bed in one of the far corners, stuffed his duffle underneath and threw himself down on the thin mattress.

“That’s right,” Chip said approvingly. “You just make yourself comfortable. I’m going to stand outside and greet the rest of the guys.” He stepped out the front door.

Rudy looked around thoughtfully. Soon the other bunks would be occupied and the room would be burgeoning with bodies. He stood up and pulled the sheets off the bunk directly above him. Then, stuffing the ends in under the upper mattress, he let the sheets fall to the floor, completely draping his own bed off from the rest of the room. He crawled inside, dragging his duffle bag with him. Behind the sheet there was a flurry of activity. Then a hand appeared and affixed a neatly lettered sign to the drape by means of a sticky Band-Aid. It read: DO NOT DISTURB.

Ah, he thought, lying down in seclusion, *privacy*. Pulling a portable music player out of the duffle, he placed headphones in his ears and set the volume to max.

* * *

Mike Webster trudged slowly along the pathway to Cabin 13, his new suitcase dragging at his hand and his guitar slung over his bony shoulder. The sun was too hot. He felt as though his pale skin was burning already. Camp, he reflected, was everything he had expected it to be — big, strange, isolated and generally rotten. If this was his parents' idea of a reward for getting top marks in school, he thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't flunked. That probably would have meant the rack. As it was, he had been banished to this island camp for a whole month. Four weeks of nothing but sports! What a depressing thought!

From inside the cabin he could hear excited chatter. Grimly, he entered. Several boys were gathered at the rear, surrounding a bunk which was shut off from the rest of the room by drapes.

“Don’t tell me,” blurted Mike. “We’re quarantined with mumps!”

One of the boys turned to face him. “No, it’s probably just a nut.”

“Probably?” asked Mike. “Don’t you know?”

“I’m not poking around in there,” said another boy. “Look at the sign.”

Mike read the sign. “Is there anybody in there?”

“Who knows?” shrugged a tall boy. “My bunk is up front. Why should I worry about it?”

With a sinking heart, Mike looked around. All the bunks were occupied except — except for the one right above the mysterious nut. Zonked again. Camp was getting worse by the minute. Cautiously he climbed up the small wooden ladder and looked at his bed.

“Hey, there are no sheets up here!”

“Tough,” came a muffled voice from below.

“There *is* someone in there,” whispered one of the boys.

“Are those my sheets?” Mike demanded of the hidden presence.

“They came from up there,” said the voice.

“Well, this is where I have to sleep!” shouted Mike.

Chip came bounding into the cabin. “What’s going on in here? What’s all the yelling about?” He stopped short at the sight of the draped bunk. “Miller, is that you in there?” He ripped the sheets down, revealing Rudy and his headphones.

Rudy turned off his music. “I just wanted a little privacy,” he said quietly.

“Nobody comes to camp for privacy,” said Chip brightly.

“Only because they can’t get any,” Rudy replied. He turned over and switched his music back on. “Wake me up in a month.”

Chip stared at him for a moment and then turned to Mike. “Hi. I didn’t catch you on the way in. What’s your name?”

“Mike Webster,” Mike replied without much enthusiasm.

“Welcome aboard. I’m Chip, your counsellor.” He gestured to the rest of the boys. “Obviously Miller’s a little homesick,” he said in a low voice. “We’ll all have to do our best to make him feel at home.”

“He’s a nut,” said Harold Greene, a short blond boy. “Why did our cabin have to get stuck with a nut?”

“Knock it off!” said Chip. “He’s just homesick. He’ll come around once we get into the activities. Here, Webster, I’ll help you make up your bunk.”

* * *

The boys from Cabin 13, sweaty and tired from playing baseball, came laughing and shouting into their cabin to change for dinner.

“Well, we lost,” said Chip brightly, “but we had more fun than they did.”

“Sure,” laughed someone. “They’re exhausted from all that base-running!”

“Wow!” exclaimed Harold Greene, pulling off his sweat socks. “Thirty-seven to nothing!”

“A no-hitter,” moaned Adam Willis, a tall boy with red hair.

“That was some sacrifice bunt you hit, Webster,” exclaimed Chip with forced enthusiasm. “Too bad there was

nobody on base or we would really have showed them something!”

Mike smiled thinly. “Thanks.” He had always hated baseball. His “bunt” had been the result of the hardest swing he could manage.

“Congratulations,” muttered a low voice sarcastically.

Everybody turned. They had forgotten Rudy, who was still lying on his bunk listening to his music.

“Ah, Miller,” said Chip brightly. “We missed you out there. You’ll play next time.”

“I doubt it,” said Rudy softly. “I don’t play baseball.”

“Well,” said Chip, still smiling, “dinner’s in ten minutes.”

“You *do* eat, don’t you?” put in Harold.

Rudy cast him a withering glare.

* * *

The mess hall was crowded and noisy. Rudy had tried to find a secluded spot to eat his dinner, but there was no such thing. Each cabin had its own table with its own clone to watch over things. There wasn’t even any elbow room. He had been directed to carry his tray to table 13 — that number again! — and now he found himself sitting on a hard bench right next to Mike Webster.

“Hi,” said Mike timidly.

Rudy acknowledged this greeting with a curt nod, then shook his head and took a bite of his dinner. He chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and put down his fork.

He said, “What is this material?”

“It’s beef stew,” mumbled Chip, his mouth full to overflowing. “Isn’t it great?”

“No,” said Rudy flatly.

“Oh, well, you just don’t have much of an appetite because you didn’t play baseball,” the counsellor explained. “Isn’t it delicious, Webster?”

Mike looked sadly at his plate. “Yeah, great,” he muttered. He had not even ventured to taste it yet. Maybe it was true that a person could fast for almost a month at a time.

Rudy stood up and lifted his plate. “Since you like it so much,” he said mildly, “have mine.” He delicately scraped all his stew onto Mike’s plate.

“Miller, leave the table!” ordered Chip.

“Certainly,” said Rudy. He climbed over the bench and walked out of the mess hall.

“What a nut!” exclaimed Harold.

“Yeah,” agreed Joey Peters, a small, dark-haired boy. “Why did we get stuck with him?”

“He’s just homesick,” Chip maintained. “He’ll come around as soon as he realizes the fun he’s missing. Just let him be.”

“I’m not going near him,” Harold promised. “He’s a nut!”

* * *

“Okay, lights out,” announced Chip. “Because it’s the first night and you’re all excited, you don’t have to go right to sleep. I’ll be at a counsellors’ meeting for an hour or so. Just keep it down to a low roar.” He left.

Instantly the boys began chattering amongst themselves. Mike Webster climbed up to his bunk and lay down, trying not to think of real food. He felt a kick from below.

“Do you have to hang there like that?” asked Rudy in annoyance.

Mike sat up, pulled his guitar out of its case, and began to strum absently.

“Oh no,” groaned Rudy’s voice. “Music.”

“What’s wrong with music?” Mike demanded.

“With music, nothing; with *that*, plenty.”

“It’s a free country!”

“I wish it was,” sighed Rudy. He rolled over resignedly and went to sleep.