

I Love You Man! The Wonders of Camp Xanadu

By Samuel Isaac Grondahl

Tap, tap, tap! Tap, tap, tap! This was the signal that Ari and I had agreed upon. Fumbling to find a flashlight, I grabbed my cell phone instead. I used the windowsill as a foothold as I climbed down from the top bunk, helped Ari up, and made my way toward the bathroom, the backlit cell phone screen barely illuminating the hand that held it. With my eyes open, I slipped back into the dream, but kept moving forward. It was one of those dreams that come in the early morning when the line between physical reality and the mind's surreal musings blurs, a fugue moment of astonishing insight.

My mind elaborated on a fragment of memory that I clearly retained but was accessing now for the first time: I was making my way to the front of the bus, tripping over small, sneakered feet that jutted out like jagged rocks on an unfriendly shore. "See you tomorrow," I murmured to my classmates, most of whom I had known since kindergarten.

Each day on the bus, Brandon sat in the very front seat just behind the driver. I never spoke to him. Neither did anybody else. Brandon looked odd, with a large, round face and strangely shaped eyes, and a tongue that usually flopped out of his mouth and over his lip. I don't remember ever hearing him talk. I don't think we picked on him, but we did shun him. He was different and remained apart.

I awoke to a tap on my shoulder. My mind's store of creative stories had run dry, for this was the last memory that I had of Brandon. I try to imagine his life, his daily routine, but quickly abandon the thoughts as a torrent of pity floods my conscious. I pity myself for what I had passed by: the laughs, the lessons, the experiences, the friendship.

Other campers were beginning to stir as I regained focus. I helped Ari to his wheelchair and parted the sea of suitcases, clothes, and shoes strewn across the floor, making a path. Camp Xanadu was a magical place, but I was no Moses. One of the wheels of Ari's chair had gotten stuck on a pile of shirts. He got a rolling start and plowed through them, braking on the right wheel at just the right time to turn smoothly through the bathroom door.

Ari has severe cerebral palsy that renders his legs largely useless and his mind heavily impaired. Only his strong upper body is fully functional. During his 30 summers at camp, a record of longevity, he had become a legend; by now all of the counselors were familiar with his oddly endearing mannerisms. "Big baby coming man," he said with a grin. I knew what he meant and smiled back. Ari flexed his biceps in a body-builder pose before grasping the custom steel bars and straining himself onto

the toilet seat. I thought about where my \$52,000 per year college tuition had led me and smiled again. Enlightenment comes in the most unexpected ways.

“Hey,” Ari said adjusting his pillow, now comfortably back in bed, “I love you man.”

I knew that, given how his mind worked, Ari would forget my name by morning, if he had not done so already. But with even greater certainty, I knew that his words were true and that the words were forever.

“I love you too, man.”

Bio: I am a (rising) junior Economics major at Yale. My parents live in Saratoga Springs, NY, where I spend my summers. I plan to attend medical school after college.