

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

When did you first witness cruelty?

I Can't Believe They Did That

“Did you say anything to them?” my father asked.

That night we camped next to Elk Lake. The campground was primitive. No electricity, two portable toilets. A black cast iron pitcher pump you could draw well water with. Facing the lake, a wide shack missing the front wall served as a shelter. Inside it a couple sat on lawn chairs, smoking cigarettes. They drank from brown long neck beer bottles. Their camp was right next to the shack. It seemed like they had taken possession of it. They got there first. The shack was theirs.

From the bluff we camped on, the grounds sloped down to the lake and ended abruptly at the water's edge. There was no beach. Two boys, barefoot and shirtless, wearing just shorts, were down by the water. They were feeding the gulls.

It was cold for late summer. My mother handed out sweatshirts. “The color of that water,” she said, “I've never seen anything like it.”

“Deep lake,” my dad said. “We'll come back here and fish trout someday.”

My brother and I watched the two boys. They were older than us, high school age, tan and wiry. One had his hair cut short in a butch cut; the other had thick wavy black hair. We watched while they tossed bits of food in the water. The gulls swarmed and brawled over which one got it. After a few seconds one of the gulls would take flight, rise up into the air over the lake, and then suddenly stop in midair and drop into the water. They didn't land. They fell, like they were shot.

When we walked down to the water near them, the bigger of the two boys said, “Whatta you two midgets want?” He was holding a jar of something.

“There goes!” The other boy cackled and pointed. A gull flew straight up, paused in midair, and dropped in the lake.

My brother pointed at what the boy was holding. “What is that stuff?”

The boy shoved a hand through his thick black hair and told us to get lost.

Walking back up the hill, I wondered if the gulls were dead. Were they killing them? The image of those birds stopping in midflight was both funny and terrifying. Birds weren't supposed to do that. Boys weren't supposed to do that.

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

When we told our parents about it, my father said, “Did you say anything to them?”