

Name _____

Date _____

Wild

I was 16 when my father unequivocally decided that he would send me to wilderness camp for several months. He had threatened to do it many times before, but my mother had always managed to prevent him from actually packing me up and shipping me off. This time he was dead set on it.

My latest transgression was viewed as the last straw. In a fit of unbridled rage, I had shoved my math teacher down a flight of steps at school. He broke his arm in two places and dislocated his shoulder.

Anyway, Mr. Ford, my math teacher, had agreed not to press charges as a favor to my dad. They were friends from way back. Mr. Ford knew what was at stake. We all did.

Dad was in the middle of a tight race for sheriff in our town. This latest "Danny Thing," as my reckless behavior was now called, had all my dad's closest advisors talking.

"John, he's your son and he's a kid, but he is dragging you down," I heard Jake Hutch tell my dad through his closed office door the night after I pushed Mr. Ford. "If it appears you can't set the course for enforcement in your own home, how can you set the course for this town?"

So, off to Pisgah National Forest I went. I knew in my heart that "Wilderness Camp" was surely just a euphemism for "Torture Center." I imagined hours of untold abuse at the hands of some lumberjack-sized drill sergeant. I resolved not to be broken and to emerge from the program unchanged. I was who I was.

Nearly every day for six months, a small group of other troubled teens and I lugged our 30-pound backpacks on a trek that covered about 10 miles. We hiked in a rugged wilderness that seemed untouched by civilization. The grandeur of the sky, rock, and wilderness instilled me with a sense of deep reverence.

Our counselors were firm but kind, not the ogres I had imagined. We learned how to make a fire without matches and create a shelter with twigs, branches, and grass. We learned which plants were safe to eat out in the wild. Late into the night, we talked about our fears and hopes.

We were devoid of radios, televisions, and cell phones. I felt myself change. I was calm and often reflective, and my old, impulsive self was gone.

One morning, six months later, my dad came to pick me up. I ran to hug him and saw relief and love in his eyes.

"So what's it like being sheriff?" I asked on the ride home.

"I lost the race, Danny," he said.

I immediately knew my behavior had a lot to do with his defeat.

Dad squeezed my shoulder and brought me close. "But it doesn't matter. As long as I don't ever lose you, I'll be okay."

