



the acorn people

RON JONES

day 1

Children spilled from cars and buses. It was an eerie sight. Parents carefully picked children from their perches and placed them in wheelchairs. There was an open-mouthed silence. The woods and paths of Camp Wiggin were accustomed to troops of running feet and the noise of children at play. With these wheelchair children there was only silence. It was as if the woods themselves were watching the unfolding of chairs and the lifting of bodies. All life seemed to stop. In procession, the parents wheeled their children toward awaiting counselors. I was a counselor. A target of this pilgrimage. Like everyone around me, I didn't know what to say.

Oh shit. What do you say to a parade of children who move toward you only by the energy of their parents' insistence? Who move toward you with swollen heads of gargantuan proportion. With birth scars that have left the eyes without sight or the body without arms

and legs. Children who seem drained of expression. Pulled into convulsions by unseen strings. Pallid in color and spirit. Beings without visible life. Crumpled and stuffed into wheelchairs. Covered with blankets, to ward off not the cold, but the vision of disfigurement.

The camp nurse had given us a one-day orientation about handicapped children, but to see this mass of injury stunned the brain. There were perhaps one hundred twenty children in all. They seemed old for their age. I remember the nurse saying, "Most will not live past their teen years. It is nature's way." She described the hydrocephalic children with heads that looked like melons about to burst. And the disease of multiple sclerosis, which ate away at the muscles leaving the body without energy or movement. The children who had mongoloid faces and a distant stare. Children with an epileptic chemistry, which at any moment could jerk the body into an unconscious spasm. Children living with an unexplained polio attack that would cruelly freeze their legs in place, leaving the rest of the body and mind to wonder at the reason for this paralysis. And finally the children who entered



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The thought of playing with kids, swimming all day, and taking long hikes had drawn me to this place. My illusions were quickly clouded and washed away. I wasn't about to frolic with these children. We would be lucky, I thought, if we could even take a few steps together.

Before Ron arrives at Camp Wigger, he doesn't expect to work with such severely disabled children. He has pictured an active summer filled with outdoor exploration, so when the campers arrive it almost seems like too much to bear. Until he meets the Acorn People: a group of children who teach him that inside, they are the same as any average kids, and that with encouragement, determination, and friendship, nothing is impossible.

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