

*Tommy*

*By Thea Stuart*

I waited, bouncing on the balls of my tennis-shoed feet, as the grey minivan slowed to a stop, gravel crunching under its wheels. Still clutching my *Welcome to Camp!* sign with vibrant bubble letters popping in the Alabaman sun, I beamed as the family pushed open the car doors. Last out came a tuft of blond hair, warm brown eyes, and a doll face.

“Hi, Tommy!” I said with an extra-bright smile. “I’m Thea.”

Tommy looked up nervously with those perfect eyes, mumbled something that resembled a hello, and went to hide behind his mother’s legs. My grin faltered for a second before pulling itself back into place. We were going to be best friends, I reminded myself. Tommy was my assignment, my charge, my six-year-old buddy for my volunteer week at camp. The previous year, camp was the absolute high of my summer, and I felt confident that this year would be its equal.

The camp, created for people with disabilities and their families, provided a let-your-shoulders-down sort of space many campers rarely encountered. I had seen the way families came to camp with exhaustion framing their faces, their guards up. Tommy’s family, with four active sons, including Tommy’s brother with Down syndrome, limped into camp. But I had also seen the difference from Monday to Friday, how campers left with renewed energy. I knew Tommy’s family would depart with the same strength.

My mental landscape already brimmed with ideas for my week with Tommy. We would have water gun fights and play games in Aspen Hall and roast marshmallows on the back patio. I was going to show Tommy the best week of his life, and by Friday, he would be smiling ear-to-ear, toothy grin on glorious display.

The *smiling ear-to-ear* plan did not materialize that night as volunteers walked through rotating stations with their camper families. Cotton candy, temporary tattoos, a popcorn stand—perfect for a six-year-old and his three brothers. But the evening ended with Tommy in tears, exhausted from the trip. We said our goodbyes early.

That night, from my creaking bunk bed, I told my cabinmates about Tommy, discouragement leaking through my words.

“He doesn’t even want to be here,” I sighed, picking at a loose thread on my sleeping bag. “His family took a trip to Arches National Park earlier this summer, and when his mom asked him what his favorite part was, he said ‘Nothing.’ *Nothing.*”

Stewing in my bunk, I decided Tommy’s lack of enthusiasm would only make me more resolute. I convinced myself that Tommy could still have the greatest week with me. I was better than any dumb Arch, anyway. He just felt tired and overwhelmed. Tomorrow would be better, I told myself.

The following morning, I met Tommy and his family at breakfast. I greeted him with a cheery wave, pulled out a seat next to him, and sat down to a meal of bagels and questionably-colored sausage.

“How’d you sleep, Tommy?” I said, reaching for the jam.

“Okay.” He kept his eyes trained on his plate, then pulled an object from his lap, carefully placing it on his empty plate. It was a stuffed hedgehog, roughly the size of a grapefruit.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Prickles,” he answered with a percussive *p*.

Prickles. Fitting. The hedgehog looked, to phrase it diplomatically, well-loved. He had pockets of lumpy stuffing, the sort of texture only explained by years of use and begrudging laundry runs, and a button nose that had begun to peel on the left side.

After breakfast, Tommy, Prickles, and I met our group underneath our squad flag, then walked to our first camp rotation: the bubble machine. This was no ordinary machine. Set up on Billy's Green, an open grassy field, bubbles poured out from the machine and into the air at an unnatural speed. A giant tower of bubbles stood eight feet high at some peaks, and bubble clusters broke off and drifted into the perfectly clear blue sky.

I thought the bubbles looked incredible.

Tommy did not share my opinion.

He stood near a cluster of pine trees, donning swim trunks and Crocs, and stared at the bubbled children some forty feet away. Then he looked down at his feet and began to kick a pine cone.

So he feels nervous, I thought. That wasn't terribly surprising. I imagined that some children might feel a bit timid when it came to bubble towers three times their height. I kindly asked him if he wanted to go play in the bubbles. He declined the offer.

A couple minutes later, I asked again. No. Katie, our squad leader, asked if we were coming over. Nope. In a last ditch attempt, I asked him if he just wanted to *touch* some of the bubbles. Nuh-uh.

I wrung my sweaty hands, a pit growing in my stomach. We were supposed to be having the best time. Why weren't we having the best time? I was sticky and I wanted bubbles. Tommy had chosen pine cones.

Twenty minutes into our half-hour-long station, as Tommy continued his pine cone business under an evergreen, I felt sweat trickle down my back. The rest of our group shrieked with laughter as they tore through the bubbles, shaped elaborate bubbly sculptures, and mixed bubbles in their hair. The straps of my swimsuit, hidden under shorts and a T-shirt, began digging into my shoulder blades. I glanced over at Tommy, who had accidentally kicked his pine cone too far into the trees to retrieve it.

I nearly asked about the bubbles again, the question on the tip of my tongue, but I paused, looking down at another pine cone near my feet. Giving up on my bubble dreams, I sent the pine cone towards Tommy's small shoes.

Tommy glanced up at me in surprise, a whisper of a smile on his face, and kicked it back.

The bubbles suddenly seemed less important.

Tommy, as I learned throughout our week together, did not like to be pushed. He did not want a cheerleader, a peppy babysitter, or an event coordinator. Perhaps living in a house of constant action gave him a desire for peace alone with Prickles, something camp did not offer. As I slowly began to release my death grip on the control I thought I had, my attention naturally channeled towards what he needed, not what I *thought* he needed.

The epiphany I experienced at the bubble station did not change Tommy. He took Prickles with us to every station, he refused to dip a single toe into the pool, and he always sprinted to his mother and father the minute we reached parent pick-up.

But that content grin made regular appearances the rest of the week. He let me hold Prickles when he needed both hands for an activity. He taught me how to play his favorite card game.

I am confident that I learned much more from that six-year-old than he ever could have learned from me. Tommy taught me that I am not owed the approval of everyone I meet. My plan is not always the best plan, despite my black belt in white-knuckling. I make a better compatriot than a rescuer.

I will return to camp this coming summer still armed with confetti, bubble letters, and a smile. But I will also be on the lookout for the unlikely but inspired pairing of pinecones and stuffed hedgehogs.