

The One Match Campfire: Part 1

The road turned sharply leading into the campground from the highway.

“If that’s what they call this strip of broken asphalt storage,” Joe grumbled under his breath.

It had been a long, hot drive from home and he was glad they had decided to stop early in the afternoon. Lake Winnawachee was still two hundred miles away. He was in a bad enough mood already. The sharp turn brought him out of his thoughts and he became aware of the surprisingly large number of campers of all types at this seemingly out-of-the-way campground. Then he remembered why he was there.

“I guess this must be the only place between here and there for a lot of people tonight,” he muttered to June as they drove through the camp looking for the tent spaces.

“Well, at least it’s clean.” His wife was anxious to find something positive to inject into what had been a very trying drive from home. She couldn’t figure out what was bothering Joe but she certainly wished he would let it go and start enjoying their vacation. She wondered if it might be his work, but it was so unlike him to bring those problems home. “Maybe it’s something I did,” she pondered, and she began to feel as bad as Joe.

“Lookit all the Winnebagoes!” screamed Jerry from the back seat. At least it sounded like a scream to Joe. Of course, in the mood he was in, every sound the kid made sounded like a scream.

He shouted back, “Be quiet! How can I even think with all your racket? I’m trying to find our damn campsite.”

Jerry, with the resilience blessed upon children, quietly settled back to wonder about the Winnebagoes and where they came from and who was in them. To him, every travel trailer and motorhome had been a “Winnebago” ever since his uncle had rolled up to visit them in his. The boy thought about the salesman who was getting all the commissions on these “Winnebago” sales. And in the funny way the world works, Joe was, at that same moment, trying to estimate the commission on the opulent-looking BlueBird motorhome at the end of the trailer spaces where the tent camping began. It was not uncommon for Jerry and Joe to think and talk about commissions. Jerry was the second-most valuable member of his Cub Scout Troop. Naturally Mr. Biggs the Scoutmaster was first, but Jerry was second because he could sell, and he constantly sold for his Troop. Every year since he’d joined two years ago, he’d led his Troop with the most sales in the district in everything from pancake breakfasts to Jamboree tickets.

Jerry had acquired his interest in sales when his dad got his first sales job after he got out of the military, and this was his opportunity to demonstrate his pride in his father. Joe, too, felt pride in his son’s remarkable sales ability and secretly wished that it would rub off on him.

“I wonder if parents can inherit traits from their children?” he had often asked himself when he considered little Jerry’s natural prowess at selling. In his smaller moods, he would dismiss his son’s accomplishments by rationalizing the low dollar volume of his sales, or the buyers’ sympathy for the kids, or even their high energy level. But in his heart he knew the kid had a special talent he had little hope of matching.

Normally this was a source of great pride for Joe. Today, however, was another story. Joe was feeling low. He knew his failure as a salesman was the only reason they were going to have to spend a week's vacation camping on Lake Winnawachee. As he looked around at the motorhomes and trailers, he thought how happy June would be if they could travel in such style.

The campground was in an open setting and the circle of trailers and motorhomes provided the best shelter available, so Joe chose one of the tent sites close to the circle. Before long the camp was ready and, absorbed in the preparations, Joe had forgotten his anger at himself. So when June in her typically gregarious way invited him to take a tour of the campground, he accepted. He was a naturally upbeat person and was tired of being angry. Three years as a salesperson, even if not a very effective one, had instilled the habit of smiling and being outwardly cheerful. He was glad for the excuse to be happy and charming again.

Surveying their surroundings, they found themselves in the midst of a very strange collection of rolling hardware. At one end was the BlueBird that had caught Joe's eye earlier. Next to that was a real Winnebago, flanked on the far side by a Dolphin. The low hanging branches of the sycamore trees prevented him from identifying the makes of the other coaches and trailers. He turned his gaze back to the Winnebago.

'Jerry will like that', he said to himself. He realized that the big W-I-N-N-E-B-A-G-O printed on the side would make it even harder to convince the youngster that "Winnebago" was only one of many brand names. He turned around to see that it was already to late; the boy had noticed the coach and his brain was busy confirming the equation of "Winnebago" with "rolling residence."

June, meanwhile, was already striking up a conversation with the people in the dilapidated "fiftyish" travel trailer across the road from their tent. It looked as though it had been built by some siding salesman as a rolling display of his products. The woman appeared to be in her forties with long, oily hair of an indeterminate brown, hanging loosely about her face and shoulders. As Joe approached, a stout, burly man emerged from the trailer. He was unshaven and unshowered and seemed to be enjoying this opportunity to "rough it" on his vacation.

"Hi, the name's George." He extended his large paw forward as he walked, making it clear that you either accepted his handshake or stood to be impaled on this enormous piece of meat.

"About an eight on the Richter scale, I'd imagine," Joe thought as he readied himself for the impact. The crush, however, was less than he'd expected. The size of the man's hand prevented it from closing too tightly and Joe was able to release his grip and pull his hand away after only a few jarring pumps from George's massive arms. The fellow seemed friendly enough, he just didn't know his own strength. Or when to back off. After a few minutes of George's deluge of stories, unsolicited opinions and rhetorical questions, Joe was anxious to continue his walk. It looked like June felt the same way. George's wife Peggy appeared to be equally verbose, and Joe wondered how either of them ever got a word in edgewise.

June's conversation with Peggy had been bizarre, to say the least. The mainstay of Peggy's opinions seemed to be her belief that parks ought to cater to trailers and motorhomes and forget tent campers. June could hardly believe her ears. The woman was obviously completely oblivious to their tent across the road. She acted out of place in a campground, as though she would be more comfortable in a Palm Springs health spa than out here in the rough and wild of nature. June was glad to get Joe's signal.

She reminded him that it was time to check on Jerry. The boy was easy to find, out by the Winnebago engrossed in a conversation with a spry, grey-haired, older gentleman. By their gestures, they must have been discussing the motorhome. As Joe and June approached, they noticed that the old man was doing the listening while Jerry did the talking. This caused a twinge of embarrassment in Joe, who scolded, "C'mon now Jerry, give the guy a break. I'm sure he didn't come out camping to hear you talk about Winnebagoes."

"No! He's no bother at all. I love his mind, he's got these motorhomes figured out," the old man countered. He extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Charlie Keane. I'm glad I met your boy here, I'm getting quite a lesson in motorhomes. That's one sharp kid there!"

Joe beamed. June swelled. And everybody took an instant liking to Charlie Keane.

"This must be your Winnebago," Joe conjectured rather safely.

"No, That's my BlueBird behind us." replied Charlie.

Joe was transfixed. So here was the owner of that magnificent motorhome. In his mind, he had imagined the owner of this rolling palace to be a rock singer or movie star. Charlie didn't fit either image. Whatever he was, he obviously enjoyed his little luxuries.

"My wife Mary is inside and I'm sure she has a cookie or something for this little fellow," Charlie chuckled congenially. "And I've got a couple of cold ones if the two of you would like to sit and visit awhile?"

Joe and June had both decided to like Charlie, and they followed him into the BlueBird. It was like no motorhome they'd ever seen, more like a mansion with an airplane cockpit up front. Noting their interest, he guided them through the plush living room to the stateroom in the rear. 'Does one say 'aft' in situations like this?' June mused as she quietly gaped at the splendor of space available in this coach devoted to the living needs of one couple. Between the living room and the stateroom were a dining area, a kitchen, a full bathroom with shower and tub and, because Charlie and Mary never had children, a salon instead of a second bedroom.

June allowed herself to look closely at this coach. "That's because she knows that she doesn't stand a gnat's chance of having one for herself," thought Joe, watching her survey the stateroom. No matter what she did, he saw her actions as a reflection of his failure. But things seemed different somehow. He remembered his resolution to be stronger at selling. He didn't know how, but he was going to do things differently, he was going after results now and maybe toys such as this coach would be within his reach.

Jerry's request for a second cookie brought him out of his thoughts and Joe reminded his son that they would be having dinner soon. "No more cookies before dinner," he mandated. Upon the mention of dinner, Mary spoke up to offer June use of her ample kitchen. June was frankly pleased with the opportunity to adjust to wilderness living one step at a time and accepted her offer. "Perhaps I can find a way to repay her kindness with a little extra cleaning up after both our dinners," she thought.

Mary, for her part, was quite pleased to have the company of younger people for a change. Too frequently, these campgrounds were populated with a "bunch of old fogies," she'd say to Charlie. She had also seen June's reaction after talking to Peggy across the road. Having had the "opportunity" to exchange a few words with Peggy earlier in the day, Mary had some idea of the kind of impression she might have made on June. Knowing that Peggy had probably been rude, she wanted to be

nice.

As preparations were being made for the evening meal, it had become one dinner. Then, the people from the Winnebago rode up on their bicycles. They had ridden to a nearby store in search of marshmallows to roast on a fire that evening. They introduced themselves as Sam and Emily. A delightful couple; it seemed that they were involved with Charlie in a real estate deal further north, where they had been headed when they stopped here for the night. 'Now there's an interesting caravan of rolling real estate looking for real estate,' mused Joe as he imagined the two great motorhomes speeding down the highway.

Jerry became quite excited by the prospect of roasting marshmallows that evening, so Sam and Emily invited the group to join them. In the whirlwind of excitement plans were laid for a large group campfire in the clearing across the road that evening. Charlie took it on himself to invite George and Peggy. Not everyone was thrilled with the idea, but Charlie, with a twinkle in his eye, countered that he was sure there was at least *some* good in them and that in the course of the evening they might even find it.

The invitation was accepted and the campfire was scheduled to begin after dinner. As had been their custom throughout the trip, Sam and Emily ate with Charlie and Mary. The combination of the two older couples and the young family made for a lively supper. It was obvious that the older couples enjoyed Jerry's presence. Joe and June, on the other hand, were very reserved and self-conscious about their son's acting up and speaking out for attention.

"That's some boy you have there," one of them would say and both Joe and June would simultaneously beam with joy and shrink in shame as they realized what a "show-off" Jerry was being. The older couples recognized Jerry's behavior for what it was but were somewhat flattered that Jerry would work so hard to please them. Sam and Emily had children in their late twenties and were looking forward to becoming grandparents. In anticipation, they competed with Charlie and Mary for "spoiling" rights.

Jerry loved getting the group's attention for his stories and observations, and he soon found that stories of his salesmanship received the best response of all. Soon the group was involved in an animated discussion of selling and sales approaches. As it turned out, Charlie owned a couple of businesses and Sam and Emily were semi-retired real estate salespeople. Everyone in the group had an interest in the conversation; even June and Mary, experienced by virtue of their years of association with their husbands' careers, were quite vocal in their opinions regarding selling and sales tactics.

The conversation continued through dinner and the cleanup afterwards, and was still going when the couple from the Dolphin, Jack and Evelyn, joined them. The main area of discussion was the concept of "pressure selling." Although everybody agreed that pressure was undesirable, there were a lot of differing opinions about what constituted "pressure."

"Say we have a very unique piece of property for sale and a highly qualified prospect," postulated Emily. "Would it be 'pressure' to stress the uniqueness of the property and the risk that it might be sold if the buyer hesitates?" The non-salespeople had assumed the role of judge on these issues and the conversation had become quite lively by the time George and Peggy arrived.

The One Match Campfire: Part Two

The debate was going full tilt when Charlie and Jerry returned from their walk around the campground. The group had come to the agreement that honesty was the answer to the issue of “pressure” in the hypothetical real estate situation. It was okay to mention a real competing prospective buyer, they decided, but an agent “would lose credibility by routinely stressing the chance of a property being bought out from under a prospective buyer while he “thought it over.” Jerry brought up the story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf and everyone agreed that that represented an excellent example.

As the discussion continued, it became clear that the topic that interested everyone most had to do with how to close a sale. Some people had opinions; the rest, like Joe, just had questions. George, who turned out to be a pot and pan salesman, was a strong proponent of the “Drop.” His system involved setting the price artificially high, then offering a large discount to act today.

“But you’re the one who told Emily she had to tell the truth about ‘potential buyers’. Isn’t this the same thing? Telling them that the price is higher than it really is?” June could be counted on to take issue with anything George said. He just rubbed her the wrong way. He seemed “sleazy,” even though he was surprisingly more honest than she had initially expected. During their earlier discussion he had been very insistent about not making any direct statements that weren’t true. He was not above painting rosy pictures and omitting important points, however, and June chose to keep the challenges coming.

Another surprise from George was his good-natured attitude toward June’s “digs.” Although she was always truthful, her candor would frequently embarrass Joe.

‘Fortunately,’ Joe thought, ‘I won’t ever have to face these people again. Not that I care, it’s just that ...June.... does she have to get so damn personal?’

George didn’t seem a bit bothered and answered June in a very straightforward manner. His goal was always to make a sale and if it helped customers to “believe something in a certain way,” George was there to help them do that. As long as he didn’t have to directly lie to the people.

“It’s a free country. I can charge anything I want to for my cookware. And I can sell it for any price I want to, even if I lose money!” George drove the point home with a firm nod of his head, letting everyone know that he meant it. They also suspected that to challenge this might result in being put in a position to have to buy some pots and pans at “below dealer cost” so George could prove his point.

George’s suggestion about discounting to close the sale was not particularly well received. Many of the salespeople in the group felt that “drop closes” diminished a seller’s credibility. And the “free market” argument did nothing to persuade those who weren’t in sales that raising the price, for the purpose of “discounting” it later, was ethical.

During their walk, Jerry had told Charlie about the upcoming Scout Jamboree and a contest that Jerry wanted to enter. Actually, Jerry had told Charlie a lot of things, details that would probably have mortified June and Joe if they had heard their son's discussion of their private lives. Charlie wasn't interested in any of that. What did interest him was the contest. The One Match Campfire Contest. The goal is to gather the materials and start a fire under a strand of twine stretched one foot above the ground. The contestants were allowed only one match, Jerry explained, and the first contestant to build a fire that burned through the twine would win.

The previous year, this had been the contest that determined the overall winner of the Jamboree. Jerry had decided that he was going to help his troop this year by winning the One Match Campfire contest. Charlie liked the winner's spirit in Jerry and wanted to show him what he knew about woodsmanship. Since the group was looking forward to a campfire after dinner anyhow, Charlie volunteered to demonstrate his one-match technique for Jerry. Several of the others had suggestions for Jerry. With a glint in his eye, George urged Jerry to hide some lighter fluid up his sleeve and pour it on the wood when no one would be looking. This confirmed June's suspicions about George and she decided to stop feeling bad about the hard time she had given him.

Evelyn confessed that without her log lighter, she would never know how to get a fire going in her fireplace.

At this, Jack chimed in, "You won't even touch that log lighter. Without me, you would never know how to get a fire going in your fireplace."

"Is that an offer?" Evelyn purred as she snuggled closer to Jack. Although the night was approaching and the air had cooled noticeably, Jack's face flushed with embarrassment at his wife's innuendo. Charlie, taking all of this in, rose to gather the wood for the evening's fire and demonstration.

Leaving the adults to their discussion, Charlie and Jerry went into the forest. Charlie began his lesson by asking Jerry how he'd gone about building his fire the previous year and how he'd fared in the competition.

"I didn't have any trouble getting it started, but the tinder burned out before I could get any larger wood to start. My tinder was gone before I burned through the rope," Jerry lamented.

"I think I know what caused that," Charlie told him. "Let's start by gathering some of that tinder like you used before."

"Why? It don't work. That's why I lost last year."

"You didn't 'lose,' you just found a way that doesn't work." corrected Charlie.

"If it doesn't work, why are we trying it again?" challenged Jerry.

"It lit, didn't it? Who's doing the teaching around here anyway? Get some tinder!" Charlie barked with a twinkle in his eye. Jerry, seeing the game, snapped to attention and began to gather handfuls of dry grass.

"Wait! What are you doing? We just want to get a little wood burning, not feed a cow." Charlie had been searching for larger pieces of wood and had wandered off for a few minutes. Upon his return, Jerry had piled up enough grass to fill a bushel basket.

Charlie instructed Jerry on how to sort through the grass. Some of the blades were drier than others and Charlie wanted to carry only the driest grass back to camp. Jerry learned to quickly identify the best fire-starting grass by its color and feel. He even noticed that it had a crisper sound when he grabbed it.

"This will make good tinder," Charlie assured when Jerry brought him the finished pile. Around Charlie lay the remnants of a large branch of a very old, dead

tree. Charlie paused to point out to Jerry that in the contest, he will need to hurry. The dead branch contained wood of all sizes, was very dry and would be easy to ignite.

“A foot off the ground, huh?” Charlie pondered as he looked at the pieces of the branch laying all around him. He then selected a piece about the girth and length of his arm. “This should do it,” he said, and the two headed back to camp with their prize.

“Is this all that we’re going to need?” asked Jerry.

“For the contest part. We’ll need to come back for some larger logs for this evening’s campfire,” Charlie answered, then pointed to two hefty logs lying some twenty feet or so away. “Remember where we are, those two logs right there look like good prospects.”

“What, are they going to buy something?” punned Jerry on mention of the word “prospect.” The conversation turned to selling again and the walk back to camp seemed short as Charlie explained to Jerry about “qualified” prospects.

Talk at camp continued on sales and marketing and Joe’s dependence upon his company to advertise locally and to distribute well-known, heavily advertised products.

“Without those leads I wouldn’t know where to start” Joe confessed. “When a company needs a piece of equipment, they know that we’re there and they call us. The trouble is, when business slows down, they stop calling, no matter how much we advertise. But how else could we do it?”

“Have you ever heard of ‘cold-calling’?” quipped Evelyn. She didn’t know what a “furnished” lead was. “This guy has it made!” she thought. She had always had to canvas for her leads and couldn’t imagine making only sales calls every day.

“We haven’t had nearly as much success with leads that were given to us by our broker, volunteered Emily. “We really prefer to find people whose interest we can spark. That way, they won’t have talked to a bunch of other agents and have strange ideas that have to be cleared up.”

“That’s what I like about referrals. They believe more of what you say because they haven’t been what I call ‘polluted’ by the other copier salesmen,” Evelyn joined in. “Some of the things these beginners will say to make a sale.... “

Joe wondered to himself, ‘Would it be worth it? Spend a little time visiting some of my old customers... and their neighbors... and their friends ...and suppliers.... and their customers. Hm, maybe she’s got something there.’

“In my business, I can’t wait for someone to come to me. I go after them,” offered George.

“I’ll bet,” June mused silently, not forgetting his earlier suggestion to Jerry. “Then how do they get rid of you?” she asked aloud.

“By buying!” George retorted. He wasn’t going to let her get to him, in fact he was quietly tossing around the idea of challenging himself to sell her a set of MiracleWare, his most expensive line.

Joe stepped in at that point “So do I. Actually, I pass out lots of literature and every so often I find someone looking. We are the lowest cost, so I can usually make the sale.”

“What about making them want it?” asked Sam. “That’s what salesmanship is all about. No offense, ma’am. Actually, I think that the best salespeople are women, like Emily. There just isn’t a ‘neuter’ word for it.”

“Speaking of which, how’s that fire going there, woodsmen?” called June, her brief surge of panic fading as she remembered that Jerry had gone off with Charlie.

She had lost track of him momentarily, but when her “parental radar” responded she looked across the road to see that Jerry and Charlie were setting up to build the campfire.

“Great, Mom. We were just gonna go back and get some ‘prospects’ to put on the fire.” answered Jerry.

“That’s what I mean!” roared George, overly amused at Jerry’s unintended pun. “Put their feet to the fire. Sweat ‘em til they buy. Ha ha ha.”

“We ought to get Charlie in on this conversation. He’s the best damn salesman that I’ve ever seen. Smooth as silk.” added Sam. “Hey, Charlie, help us out. These ‘kids’ need some sales advice.”

“I’ve got my hands full with this ‘kid’ right here. We’re going to get this fire going with one match and I’m showing him the right way to do it. Hang on, I’ll be with you as soon as we’re done,” replied Charlie as he turned to catch up with Jerry. He took a few steps, paused, and turned back to the group, rubbing his jaw. “But you know,” he added, “now that I think about it, the process isn’t much different—you’ve got to do everything right every step of the way. Maybe you guys ought to pay some attention here!” He turned again, striding off after the boy.

The One Match Campfire: Part 3

“Hey, that’s just like the string they use at the Jamboree. Where’d you find that?” squealed Jerry as he returned to the campfire area. Sam had strung a twine between two trees so that it crossed over the firepit one foot above the ground.

“That’s ‘binder’s twine’, Jerry. Every good woodsman has some with him when he goes camping. You can use it to lash logs together to make things like ladders, sheds, rafts... why, I even heard tell one time of a guy who was marooned in the desert with just some binder’s twine. When he came across the skeleton of a horse, why, he just lashed those bones together and rode that beast right out...”

“Now you stop telling tall tales, Sam. No telling what this young man might really believe,” scolded Emily.

“Aw, he’s too smart to fall for any of Sam’s stories. Mine, on the other hand...” Charlie gave a soft chuckle. “Come on boy, these people are getting cold. We’ve got a fire to light.”

“Look, we’ve got almost enough grass to reach the string. So if we make it into a big pile and light it at the top, will it burn the string?” asked Jerry.

“Let’s think it through,” replied Charlie, “what’s it take to make a fire?”

“Air, fuel and heat. We learned that in school.”

Charlie continued his questions, “Well, it’s packed loose enough, so there’s plenty of air. The one and only match provides the heat. Where’s the fuel going to come from?”

“From the grass.” answered Jerry.

Charlie persisted with his questioning. “If we light the top of the grass, then as it burns, where’s the replacement fuel going to come from?”

“From the bottom.”

“And where’s the string?” continued Charlie.

“At the top...” answered Jerry as his eyes lit up and the reason for Charlie’s questions became clear to him. “And if the fire burns down, it won’t have enough time to burn the string!”

“Right. The way to build this fire is from the ground up. Adding just the right kind of fuel as you go. Keep it real hot and let plenty of air in,” counseled Charlie.

“So we want to light it right here,” said Jerry as he prepared to light the pile of dry grass.

“No! No! Not yet. You’ve got to get prepared first. Preparation is the key to the one match campfire.” Charlie was just in time to stop Jerry from lighting the match. “We’ve got some preparation to do first.”

He picked up the dead branch that they had hauled in earlier and instructed Jerry to start breaking off the smaller branches. and sort them into piles based upon size. As Jerry did this, Charlie and Sam brought the larger pieces closer to the firepit.

“Are we going to use those?” Jerry asked in wide-eyed awe as he stared at the logs.

“No. We won’t need these to burn through that twine, but we’ll need them for the marshmallow roast later,” answered Charlie, knowing that would get a reaction out of the boy. “You finished sorting those branches yet?”

“How are we going to make this like a real contest, Charlie?” Jerry queried. There was room in the campfire area to build several fires. He cried out to his mother, “Hey Mom, you can use some of the grass and sticks and we’ll have a race!”

“Thanks Honey, but I’ll just watch you” she replied.

“Tell you what,” said Charlie, “let’s have old George try his lighter fluid trick and you can race him.”

“That’s no fair! How could I stand a chance?”

“Trust me,” said Charlie with a wink of his eye. He made the offer to George.

“Are you kidding?” exclaimed George. “This is too easy. Do I have to wear a blindfold or anything?” He burst into laughter.

“I’ll bet he beats you!” injected June. Now he was really ticking her off. Before she realized what she was saying, she added, “and if he doesn’t, I’ll clean that filthy pigsty you call a trailer!”

“I’ll admit that Peg’s no good as a housekeeper, so I’ll take you up on that,” he retorted, hastening to add, “...and if he wins, I’ll give you a top-of-the-line, \$995.00 set of MiracleWare.” (Actually, that was the “asking” price, everybody got the 40% “discount” for buying today, but these things cost him \$300.00! Of course he was sure he would win this little contest, so he wasn’t worried).

Jerry was worried. He had overheard his mother’s bet and had no idea how he could possibly win against the fat man with the lighter fluid. He gulped. Then he glanced up at Charlie, who looked like he was going to bust out laughing. ‘How can you laugh?’ he thought, looking at the twinkle in Charlie’s eyes. ‘It’ll take my mom all night to clean that trailer’.

“Well, I hope you’ve got those pots and pans with you,” Charlie quipped to George, “...cause you’re in for a big surprise.”

George and Jerry looked at Charlie in amazement. ‘What kind of trick does he have up his sleeve?’ they each asked in silence.

“Go ahead, George, get your lighter fluid. We’ll get things ready here. C’mon Jerry.” They squatted down by the beginnings of their campfire and began to go over their inventory. “Pick out the driest pieces from each size and get them right up next to the grass. We want them close by when we need them. When the fire reaches the right point, there’ll be no time to spare.”

Jerry had already developed a “feel” for the wood, just as he had done with the dry grass. He knew almost before he touched a piece whether it would be dry enough or not. The color of the bark... its texture... signs of splitting and peeling... all of these things became clues that he read instantaneously. Simply scanning the piles before him, he knew which twigs to try first.

George approached with his lighter fluid and set his eyes on one of the logs that Sam and Charlie had dragged in. “I think I’ll try this one. Looks like it ought to burn real good,” he leered. Charlie wasn’t impressed.

“Go ahead, you can use that log if you want to. How much of that “juice” are you planning on using?” joked Charlie. “Wouldn’t want you to set us all on fire.”

“How much do you figure the kid could hide at this ‘Jamboree?’” George asked in all earnestness. “A cup... cup and a half?”

“Forget that, George. How much do you want to use?” insisted Charlie.

“Well, that’d be enough for me.” he said, displaying an old tin cup. “A cup... cup and a half.”

Sam appointed himself “Official Contest Starter” and provided two of his special “yuppie” matches that he had purchased from one of those “outdoor” stores that you find in suburban shopping malls. He had always wanted to use one of these “sure-light” survival matches and now he had the best excuse ever.

“Alright, gentlemen. Here are your matches. You each get only one. Are you ready?” he paused to let them each nod their assent. “You know the rules. The first person whose fire burns through the string, wins. Got it?” They nodded again.

At this point, even the women, who had begun to dismiss this “contest” as some demented example of male-bonding, took interest. Especially Peggy, who until now had been very silent, almost moody. Rather than taking offense at George’s remark about her housekeeping, she actually began to perk up after that. At first, everyone assumed that Peggy was looking forward to George winning, so that she could get her trailer cleaned. But as preparations progressed, it became clear that she was rooting for Jerry. She wanted to see George lose, even though that didn’t seem likely to happen.

Charlie’s confidence was beginning to get to George. ‘What makes this guy think that kid has a chance?’ he was asking himself. Charlie was busily working around the campfire area, setting the larger logs into a semicircle so that everyone could sit in close to watch the event. As he did this he was giving last-minute instructions to Jerry about what to watch for and what steps to take. It seemed to Jerry that what Charlie was telling him he kind of already knew. But this was going to take some time! All George had to do was dump the fluid on his log and light a match.

“Trust me, Jerry. You’ll beat him. That set of pots and pans is almost in your mom’s kitchen now,” Charlie assured. He had a way of saying things with such sincerity and conviction that Jerry would probably have believed anything he said. The rest of the group was becoming unsettled by Charlie’s confidence in Jerry. What had started as a lesson in woodsmanship had become a sporting event with a thousand dollar prize at stake.

With the matches passed out, Sam raised the starting flag, a red bandana that Mary had contributed. “Everybody ready?” he asked.

“Wait a minute,” stalled George, “who am I competing against here, Charlie or the kid?”

“Why, ‘the kid’, of course. Why... are you worried?” taunted Charlie, his eyes wide in mock amazement. “You don’t mind if I continue to coach him a little, do you? After all, that is the point of this exercise, isn’t it? And you are positive that

your way is the best way, aren't you?"

George was on the ropes and he knew it. He had to say yes to Charlie's interrogation, but he didn't like it. Having no other choice and the certainty that he would win, George looked at Sam and answered, "Ready."

Looking first to Charlie and then to his Dad, Jerry nodded to Sam, indicating that he, too, was ready.

The flag dropped and the contest was on. Jerry struck his match first and started the grass burning while George measured out his cup of lighter fluid. As the grass swiftly took flame, Jerry carefully added the smallest twigs. He was beginning to see progress and his confidence had risen when he heard the "Whoosh" of George's log catching fire. The flames immediately singed the twine above George's log and all Jerry could do was wait for the twigs to burn hotter before adding larger pieces. All he had licking the twine was smoke, and the twine above George's fire was already black.

However, Jerry noticed one thing. The flames from George's log were ebbing, they didn't leap as high as they had when they started. The flames from Jerry's fire, on the other hand, were getting larger. Although not black yet, the stray fibers on the outside of the twine had begun to singe and curl inward. Jerry began to add even larger pieces to the small fire. Each time, the flames would die down and almost disappear, only to come back to life even stronger as the fire took hold.

It had now become a race between birth and death. As George's fire faded, the group wondered whether it would produce enough heat to burn through the badly charred twine before the rapidly growing inferno that Jerry was building overtook it. It could not. The once blazing log was now just a slightly charred, sooty, smelly stub. The fluid had burned away without igniting the wood.

A roar leapt from the crowd as the twine above Jerry's fire ignited. All it had to do now was burn through. Jerry continued to add wood to his fire although it made no difference to the contest— he had won, and he was stunned. Thinking back, it wasn't really that close. It had seemed like it was, but there was never much chance that the lighter fluid alone would light that log.

"Now you've got a real 'war story' to tell, son" proclaimed a beaming, proud Joe.

"And you don't even have to exaggerate!" exclaimed Charlie. "You won fair-and-square and against-the-odds. That's hero stuff. Just remember: Do every step, every time. By being thorough, you are sure to achieve your objective more often than average simply by virtue of being the only one who didn't miss anything. Plus, by being thorough, you constantly reinforce your basic skills. Read your wood and keep your fire hot."