

THE MOTH



Martha: [00:00:12] The summer after I graduated from high school, I started working at this overnight camp. It was a catholic camp in the Pennsylvania woods, and I really wanted to win rookie of the year, my first year.

[00:00:28] This was a time when health and safety standards were really sort of open ended.

[laughter]

[00:00:36] We had all these theme weeks for Halloween weeks, the counsellors got into costumes. We filled tube socks with flour and went around just pummeling the shit out of the campers.

[laughter]

[00:00:47] For Christmas week, the local fire company came and they pumped like three feet of the foam, the toxic forever chemical foam, onto the grass for snow. 300 campers were in, it was a free for all, breaking ankles. Eyes are burning.

[laughter]

[00:01:05] So great. So, Monday morning of Olympic week, Dave, one of the 20 somethings who ran the camp, approached me. Dave was a former pro rugby player from Scotland and he used to wear his high-cut scrum shorts around camp, like basically the same coverage as a speedo. And he came up to me and said, "Martha, would you carry the torch for opening ceremonies tonight?"

[laughter]

[00:01:34] And this was a huge deal for me because I was new to camp. I really wanted to be accepted. I hadn't done anything yet where I would be in the spotlight. So, stakes were high and I was like, "Yeah, I will carry the torch." The other torch runner was Jonathan from archery. He was a really quiet, really nice priest in training-

[laughter]

[00:01:58] -because the archdiocese would sometimes send seminarians to help out for the summer. There was this other guy who came like every year for one week and he had great hair, but he was always a little bit drunk.

[laughter]

[00:02:11] So, Monday night of opening ceremonies, the entire camp, 300 kids, they process up to the colors' field. That's what we call the flagpole field. And they all have their flags of nations and their noisemakers and they line up, and I'm ready. I have my sneakers on and I go to the torch handoff spot by the basketball courts. The bullhorn sounds. *Chariots of Fire* starts playing from the speakers.

[laughter]

[00:02:34] The whole camp turns and looks at me. Jonathan from archery emerges from the woods.

[laughter]

[00:02:46] Now, when Dave said "Olympic torch," I thought paper towel tube, red and orange tissue paper glitter. Jonathan from archery was carrying a branch that had been wrapped in a rag doused in gasoline and set on fire.

[laughter]

[00:03:06] He is running toward me. The flame is like two feet wide. It's hot smoke. It's spitting sparks like a piece of furniture from Satan's living room.

[laughter]

[00:03:17] He's got a panicked look on his face. There's sweat dripping from his head. He's like, "Take it. Take it." I don't want to take this, but everything is riding on this. This is my initiation into camp. The whole camp is waiting. So, I reach through the smoke and I grab the end of the stick that is not on fire. And I think if I hold it lengthways like a tennis player doing a forearm, I'll be fine. The flame runs down the stick onto my hand. My hand is on fire. I drop the flaming stick into the hot July grass.

[laughter]

[00:03:53] Jonathan from archery does not have time for this.

[laughter]

[00:03:56] He gets a look of cold steel in his eyes like he's about to deliver a baby and he goes in. He reaches through the fire, grabs the branch and runs to the colors field like the devil is after him.

[laughter]

[00:04:08] 300 campers part like the Red Sea. He goes through up the ladder into the silver bowl at the top he drops the flaming Olympic torch, getting the glory that should have been mine while I stand frozen in the handoff spot.

[laughter]

[00:04:25] Ten minutes later Jonathan from archery and I are both in the camp infirmary and Dave is wrapping up our wounds. He's burned all the hair off of his arms. My hand is crispy. Dave says, "You were on fire and you didn't let go."

[laughter]

[00:04:48] Why did you not let go?"

[laughter]

[00:04:52] And I didn't say anything because you remember I did. Years later I asked Dave, "How did you decide who to pick for these important things like running the Olympic torch?" And he said, "Well, my job was risk and stupidity mitigation, so I tried to pick someone who wouldn't do something foolish and fuck it up."

[laughter]

[00:05:16] Well, that Summer Jonathan won, always willing to volunteer. Dave won, best legs. And I won rookie of the year. Thank you.

[cheers and applause]

[00:05:40] Keep it going.