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# THE CAMP-OUT AT MINNOW LAKE

BY DIANE TORGLER

The man and woman across the way watched us curiously as we pulled in and set up camp. They were trying to carry on a conversation, but all the while they were watching us to see what kind of equipment we had and what sort of people we were.

We pitched our tent on a high spot in case it rained. Ever since the night Daddy had had to crawl out the flap and dig a ditch around the tent in the middle of a pouring rain, he had insisted that we pick a high spot.

The ground was coated with pine needles that scented the air with a fresh, clean smell. We could see patches of blue and white sky through the scraggly, twisted pine trees that bore the scars of nails and thoughtless initials. In spite of these signs of previous campers, it was a beautiful spot. The water pump was close, so we wouldn't have to be skimpy with water; the rest rooms were clean, and they even had showers. Everything was just like home.

Daddy called us to help him with the tent. While we sorted out the poles that supported the walls, he put the center piece and the four roof supporting poles in place. Then one at a time, he connected the roof poles with the wall poles and stationed one of us to hold them up. He always got mad at us though, because each connection was harder than the last one. By the time he reached the fourth, he was convinced that we were pulling the wrong way. While Joe and Juanita and Mother and I each held a pole, Daddy drew in a deep breath, braced himself with a wide stance, and heaved the last connection into place. Once we had the tent up, Joe and I took over the easier job of pounding in the stakes and trying the supporting ropes to them.

When all the heavy work was done, we sat down to a delicious meal of hamburgers and home fried potatoes and creamed corn. It

tasted so good that we couldn't eat fast enough. Nobody even bothered to talk. Mother said she could always tell when we liked what she cooked because nobody talked. After dinner we sat around the table and discussed how many miles we were getting to the gallon and how many miles we had come that day. Daddy said the important thing was that we had arrived and could spend the rest of our vacation in camp. Joe and I agreed, for we had caught a glimpse of glistening blue and sandy beach as we had driven to the tenting area.

Later on in the evening, Joe and I took a walk around the camp to see if we could find other kids our age. The family across from us had red-haired twin boys no bigger than Joe. We called to them, and they came out behind the car and talked to us for a while. But their mother saw us and announced, loud enough for us to hear, that they had things to do. I didn't think that was very nice of her, but Joe didn't seem to mind. I mentioned it to him as we pattered down the sandy path to the lake, but all he would say was that he wanted to see where we'd be swimming.

Walking along we heard the crickets start calling and off ahead the bullfrogs chime in. Finally we stood on the dark border of sand and an eerie loon's cry echoed across the silver water. The air seemed to pour off the lake, and we shivered under our woolen jackets as we walked back to the tent.

Back in camp, we listened to some unfamiliar music on the radio while we watched the moths burn their wings on the hot glass of the lantern. Daddy sat with a red plaid arm laid comfortably on Mother's shoulder and Nita, sleepy-eyed, nestled on Mother's other side. Joe whittled with his pocket knife that had seven different blades, and I made lines with a fork on the oilcloth. After a while, Daddy pointed out the Big Dipper, and not even moving our heads, Joe and I found the North Star. Watching the stars, we became aware of the static on the local station. Daddy got up to turn the radio off and decided it was time for us all to be in bed.

We moved the lantern into the tent and lowered the canvas covering on the mosquito-netting windows. Daddy snapped up the flap, and we began to undress. We always had to get undressed quickly because the night air was chilly and the pajamas from the suitcase were cold compared to our body-warmed daytime clothes. Each of us had his own place to drape his clothes on the poles across the ceiling. We almost always left our socks on because by morning the tent was steely cold. After we were ready for bed, we jumped

on the feather mattress and huddled together, yelling at the last person to hurry up so we could put the covers down. First came Daddy, then Joe, then Nita, then me, then Mother. I hated to sleep next to Nita because she like to scoot way down in the covers and that pulled them off of me. The covers overlapped, but someone always held onto them and turned. I developed my own survival method. I slept with my hand gripping the covers, and whenever anyone turned with them, I pulled back.

Invariably, Nita had to get up in the night and make the trip. This night was no exception. Joe and I growled something about letting in the cold air, and why didn't she think of it before. But she never did.

Morning came and I could hear the sounds of a crackling fire and smell the delicious, comfortable odor of coffee. I never could drink coffee, but I loved the smell of it. Then I could hear the bacon sizzling in the pan. Things smelled so much better in the air, in the cold morning air, especially that bacon. One call from Daddy—"Time to speak to the sun, kiddos"—was all I needed.

We didn't bother to put on our clothes. We just wrapped ourselves Indian-style in a blanket and hurried out to the warm fire. We toasted our front sides and then our back sides while we waited for breakfast. Pretty soon it was ready, and Daddy told us to wash up and brush our teeth or we wouldn't get any food. Joe and I did our usual finger-tip washing, avoiding the cold water as much as we could.

Right after breakfast, Joe and Nita and I decided to go swimming. We got our bathing suits on and raced over the hill toward the beach. Nita never kept up with Joe and me, and we always had to stop and tell her to come on.

As we neared the beach, we could see the blue-green water with pools of light resting in the lap of each wave. The red-haired boys were playing on the raft and we waved to them. They waved back, and then swam away from us toward their towels. I looked at Joe. He said, "What the heck," and leaped into the lake, lifting his knees as high as he could until the force of the water bore him under. I followed and the cold water closed over my head, giving me an electric feeling.

We swam out to the raft and climbed triumphantly up the rickety, wooden ladder. I took a deep breath and reached my arms over my head, throwing my chin back as far as it would go. While my lungs filled with air and the sun warmed my back, I lunged and hurled myself off the raft, yelling at the top of my voice. Joe followed right

after me, and I could feel him brush by me as he sank under. When I surfaced, I couldn't find him and the water became curiously cold. I hardly had time to grab a breath before I felt his hand on my bathing cap. I came up sputtering, and Joe pushed the palm of his hand against the water and sprayed my face, laughing all the while. I yelled and started after him, but he had a head start. We swam to the raft, putting every bit of our energy into our kicks and strokes.

Joe scrambled up the ladder, almost losing his balance, and stood at the top, leering down at me. Every time I tried to climb up, he stepped on my hands. Finally, I told him he didn't play fair, and swam nonchalantly back to shore. After a while, he got tired of playing alone and came ashore to help Nita and me build sand castles with moats and draw bridges.

"It's the most fun in the world to be buried in the sand," Joe said tactfully.

Nita looked at him. "I don't want to," she said.

"It's all right with us if you don't want to. We just thought you'd like it," I said, as Joe and I started walking toward the water.

"OK, if you promise not to bury my head," Nita said, still not sure she liked the idea.

Immediately, Joe and I glanced at each other. Nita began to howl and started running, but our legs were longer. We tackled her and brought her, protesting and kicking, back to the deeper sand. She decided that fighting wouldn't get her anywhere, so she pouted a little.

"I don't care what you do to me. You can kill me for all I care. And then you'll be sorry 'cause Mother and Daddy will send you away."

We finished burying her, and I said, "Let's run!"

Nita called, "Hey, wait for me!" But we didn't, and when she came into camp finally, she was crying. Then Mother asked us what we did to her.

"Nothing," I said.

"She's just chicken," Joe said.

"We did bury her in the sand," I admitted.

"Well, you made a lot of commotion doing it," Mother said as she turned back to the stove.

That night after dinner, Joe and I took a walk down to the pier. We went past the tent across from ours, hoping to see the red-haired boys. Instead we heard the man and woman talking.

"I think we ought to see the manager. People like that shouldn't be allowed in a respectable place," the woman said.

"Now don't be hasty. They seem like nice people," her husband answered.

"I don't care. We've been coming here for years, and I don't like to see the place go downhill. Pretty soon they'll be letting colored people in, and I suppose you'll say they're nice too. No, I think it's up to us to talk to the manager."

Joe and I hurried away quietly for fear someone would see us and think we were trying to overhear. "It doesn't matter," Joe said, but he kept kicking a stone along the road. We walked in silence the rest of the way to the pier.

The old planks groaned and swayed as we walked out over the water. The foggy mist rolled aimlessly over the sleeping water, but the night air seemed to have a rushing sound as of some far off waterfall. Now that we were out on the pier, we could hear peaceful lapping noises, and across the lake we could see the dull, red warning light marking off the shallow place. Joe stretched out on his stomach with his arms hanging over the edge. He dropped pebbles slowly. I watched him and listened to the plinking sounds as they hit, one by one. In a single movement he threw the rest of the pebbles and got up. "Let's go," he said.

"Joe, don't say anything to Daddy. Maybe they won't do anything."

"Forget it, I said," and he hurried on ahead of me. I trotted to keep up with him.

"Will you take me fishing with you tomorrow? Huh? Will you? Well, answer me," I said angrily.

"I said be quiet," he growled.

"Maybe Mother will take me into town and—"

"Are you going to shut up or do I have to—"

"Well, it isn't my fault. You act like the world came to an end. You know very well that Daddy will work it out, and it isn't my fault so what are you getting mad at me for?" I didn't want him to see me cry, but the tears spilled down my face.

He walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Quit your bawling. Somebody'll hear you. Everything will be all right."

When we got back to camp, Joe and I walked over to where Daddy was chopping wood and watched him a few minutes. "They said we were no good," he finally blurted out. "That man and woman. We heard them when we went to the pier. They're going to tell the manager to kick us out. You've got to do something."

"Take it easy, boy. Now tell me what happened."

"We went by those people's tent and we heard them talking. They said we weren't any good, and they're going to tell the manager to kick us out. That's all we heard."

Mother had stood up with her head turned towards us. Now she left the fire and walked over to us. Nita stayed behind and turned a browning marshmallow around and around over the hot coals.

"It's nothing to get excited about," Daddy said. "We'll wait and see what happens." But he picked up only a handful of chips and walked back to the fire.

"Well, aren't you going to do anything," Joe cried.

"There's nothing to do, Son." Daddy hunched over the fire as if to hide it with his body. "We'll wait and see if the manager comes over tomorrow. Some people just have narrow minds, and you can't argue with them because they just get more set in their ways. Anyway, this is a big country, and it wouldn't hurt us a bit if we left a day ahead of schedule. Now, I think it's time for all to be in bed. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Daddy and Mother stayed outside and talked quietly while the fire was dying down. Through the mosquito netting we could see the light play on their faces. Later they came to bed, but I don't think Daddy slept much because I heard him tossing during the night, and he spoke low to Joe a couple of times.

When I woke the sun was just tinting the sky, and Mother and Daddy were already outside. I heard a strange voice. Then I remembered what happened and I sat up and peeked out of the mosquito netting. The green park truck stood in the middle of the road.

"The name's Parker, Alex Parker," the man said. "You folks planning to stay long?"

"Well, we thought we'd leave fairly soon," Daddy said guardedly.

"Where ya headin'?"

"Up toward Pine Valley and the Caverns."

"Pretty country up there," the man said, smiling as though he had suggested it. "Say, the reason I stopped over. The man across the way said he thought you were from the Okechewee Reservation or thereabouts."

"That's right," Daddy said. "We live on the edge, and I teach school there."

"We had a fellow from Okechewee working here a couple of years ago. He worked on the clean up crew. Maybe you knew him." The man named Parker reached up and felt his chin, and then moved slowly toward the truck.