

One Dark Camping Trip - Minna, Year 5, NSW

My eyes fluttered open as the car took a sharp turn and skidded. Shrubs grew everywhere and the big, long mossy roots crept onto the road, jolting the car. My sister, Amanda, fell forward in her booster seat. Her Peppa Pig sippy cup rolled to the floor. She sat up and groaned. As we drove down the rutted road, the wet dirt jumped around.

“Look!” Amanda screeched.

Mum jumped and Dad jolted the car.

“Huh?” My brother Colton murmured.

He shoved my other brother, Luke, and Luke’s eyes shot open.

“At what?” I asked.

“That!” She pointed at an old sign. It read in faint cursive: Honeydew Valley Campsite. Everyone cheered as the car pulled up at a small cabin labelled ‘Reception’.

Amanda threw open the car door. As the sunlight hit my face, the thick stench of sweaty palms and bare feet was slapped by the crisp air. Luke shoved me out of the way and bolted to the cabin, where Mum and Dad were having an argument. I crept out of the car and started to look around. The blades of grass were as thin as thread, and the clouds were puffy like cotton candy. But then Mum shoved me towards the car again.

“Catrina Selena Philbert, you will get in this car at once!”

When my mother used my full name, I knew she was going to blow her top. Eight hours of driving can do that to a person.

My mum crammed my legs inside the car and slammed the door. But in the click of a finger, we were at our campsite.

Through the window, I could see Dad’s oldest brother, Uncle Darren, near the campfire. He was fiddling with a bottle opener. We double parked against his white Subaru and my dad flung the car door open and said, “What’s up?”

Amanda ran to Uncle Darren and jumped up and wrapped her small flimsy arms around him.

“Hey, kiddo!” he laughed, ruffling her hair.

I stepped out of the car, feet sinking into the pillow-top dirt, and looked around. It wasn't long before Uncle Darren's triplets followed, bombarding me and sprinting to Luke and Colton.

"Hey guys!" Luke said cheerfully.

Soon a black Toyota pulled up. My cousin Missy jumped out.

Next, Haley stepped out of the car, then ran over and hugged me. Soon afterwards, everyone stepped out: Aunty Natalie, Uncle Charles and Oliver. Aunt Julie came over. But I was waiting for one more person. Soon enough, there she was, shaking her blonde waves and lip-syncing to Sabrina Carpenter.

"Cally!" she squealed.

"Aunty Susie!" I smiled back.

Then Dad came over.

"Let's get started," he said, picking up a tent mallet.

Finally, the last tent screeched into place. I plodded towards my tent, then tossed my duffle bag inside. The tent was old: the hooks were bent and rusted, but it held up. Missy, Amanda and Haley trudged through the door. I unrolled my sleeping bag. It was a last-minute rental. I gagged. Haley plopped down on her mattress beside me.

Outside, Dad was laughing with Uncle Charles. The mums and Susie were unfolding crusty chairs and cringing at salon gossip. The kids dragged out a rusty folding table and rummaged through bags, pulling out king-size marshmallows and old candy. Then the party started. My feet were heavy and all I wanted to do was collapse in my sleeping bag, but I had to go with everyone else. Aunt Susie pulled out an old loudspeaker and got everyone moving, while I was passed around like pass the parcel. Finally, I stumbled behind a tent and collapsed on the dirt. I tried to get up, but my limbs weighed me down. My eyelids felt heavy and before I could stop it, I was asleep.

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The squawk of a crow startled me. It was morning.

I was sprawled out on the dirt behind my tent. I got up and jogged out from behind the tent but tripped on a burnt marshmallow stick and skidded to the ground, thumping my head on a rock, sending dirt flying up into the air.

I peered inside my tent to see if Haley, Amanda or Missy had heard. I felt dizzy. I could make out four empty beds. Amanda had probably had a nightmare and cried to Mum and Dad and was now sound asleep in their tent. Haley and Missy were probably on a walk with their dad.

I looked around. Empty beer bottles and scrunched up cans were spread around the site. I saw drops of something dark and red crawling towards the woods. I heard the faint sound of Amanda calling my name, but then it stopped. *Had I imagined that?*

I shrugged and sprinted to Mum and Dad's tent. I heaved the rusted zip down, but when I stepped inside, I took in a sharp breath.

No one was there.

I started to scream. I ran out of the tent, towards the trees. Long wet branches poked and punctured me.

“Cal! Caal!” I heard my sister screech.

I ran harder, rivers flowing down my cheeks. I stopped dead in a large clearing.

The blood drained from my body. A man was leaning over Amanda. He held a knife to her neck. She was tied in rope, lying on the ground. She looked frail, her face pale. The man turned around. He was scrawny and had a long scar across his face. I screamed and scrambled from the clearing, but the man ran after me.

Suddenly the man wasn't my only fear. I stopped at the edge of the river, standing dead-still as a saltwater crocodile crawled out of the water towards me. My heart was beating in my ears. I could hear the man's heavy footsteps, but I couldn't move. The man lifted his hand, then gave me a shove backwards.

“I'll get—” he started saying, but before he could finish, I turned and sprang towards the path and ran. For what felt like hours, all I could feel was the heaviness of my legs, pebbles flying at me and the loud roar of my breath. I felt like I could collapse at any moment. Finally, I emerged into an open space, gasping for breath.

A cave stood before me, its old crumbling walls telling a story. I started limping into the cave, then stopped. A musty black tarp was hung up with string. It was creased. I shoved it aside, stepping onto a path behind it.

Suddenly, I heard a loud whirring sound. The walls started to shake. I ran ahead into the darkness. Dirt came tumbling down. My heart was racing. A large rock came hurtling towards me. I was knocked to the ground.

After the dust settled, I stood up, stumbling into blackness, feeling around. I made my way further into the cave, I looked back. I could no longer see the light from the opening of the cave behind me, just pitch black, like a starless night.

What was I thinking? Coming in here was the most stupid thing I've ever done.

The whirring grew deafening, and a huge gust of wind came blowing towards me. A light turned on ahead of me. I tried to reach it, but the wind was so strong it was like swimming against a current. I took a few more steps, turned a corner, and then I finally saw it. My eyes welled up and my mouth opened.

It was a large helicopter. The door opened. Tears ran down my cheeks.

“Cal!” Mum and Dad cried.

I ran to them. Colton, Luke, Amanda, my cousins and Aunt Susie came out too. They all hugged me.

“You’re all scratched up,” my mum laughed through her tears.

She was right. There were cuts on my limbs and blood and dirt everywhere. My body ached. But I was with my family, so I didn’t care.

Someone else got out of the helicopter. The click of this person’s boots was different. The scrawny figure. The scar on his face. I was ready to run, but dad held me back.

The scar-faced man came towards me. He was holding something up. As he got closer, I saw it was a badge that read ‘Camp police’. My cheeks burned.

But why had he been holding a knife to Amanda’s throat?

As if he could read my mind, the scar-faced man said: “Your sister got caught in an old fox trap, so I cut her out. That’s when you saw me.”

Mum added: “You had fallen asleep behind the tent, and we couldn’t find you. There was a crocodile on the loose, so we all had to leave.”

I squeezed Mum.

“Let’s take a photo!” Amanda squealed.

It was the last thing I wanted to do. But as I bunched up with all my cousins, I had the feeling I would remember this photo for years to come.