

CAMP OUT!

emily cameron



GETTING READY

So there I was, seated on a small chair on the front porch one boring afternoon. “Please Dad? *Please* can we go?” I begged my father as I yanked the seeds from a bright orange pumpkin. It was almost Halloween, but I didn’t care. All I wanted was to go camping at a place called Camp Calls. I had been waiting to go there for a week. And today was Saturday, the perfect day to do it. There was a beautiful glow coming from the sun above. Its light was spread like a carpet on the ground. Children nearby were having fun playing on the playground, or play jump-rope with other kids. Some of my best friends, Jennifer and Dorothy, at school yesterday had even announced they were going camping today. Why couldn’t I spend my Saturday like all of them, instead of getting ready for Halloween?

“Well . . . I don’t know, Emily. We haven’t got the right equipment, and your mother is sick. As for your brother,” Dad said, drumming his fingers on the pumpkin, “he’s not old enough.”

“For the last time, Dad, *they can stay home!*” I yelled, throwing my hands into the air and sending bits of pumpkin seeds everywhere. “Jennifer and Dorothy said they were going camping today, *and* they’re going to Camp Calls! It’s about the most famous camping place in the *world!* We could meet them there if we go, Dad, *please!*”

“But who’s going to take care of Mom?” Dad said, now filling up a bucket of water to feed the plants. “Alex can’t do it.” Alex was my brother, who was only about two years old.

“She can take care of herself,” I said stubbornly, crossing my arms and rolling my eyes.

“How is she going to take care of Alex when she’s taking care of herself, Emily? We’re not going.” The matter had not yet ended. I was going to protest until he agreed. I knew Dad wanted to go, looking at the excited glint in his eyes.

“Dad, it’s now or next year! This is the best day in the universe to do it, pl-eze! You know you want to go, Dad, you know!” I pleaded, tossing a pumpkin seed into a bowl.

“Oh, all right. I suppose Mom can take care of herself, she’s not too sick like she can’t move,” Dad gave up.

I punched the air with my fist, letting out a howl of pleasure, and causing several kids to look in my direction curiously. “When do we get started, Dad?” I asked excitedly.

“Now, I guess,” Dad sighed, and dashed inside to get the tent and other camping equipment. I went with him. As soon as I stepped through the door, I hollered,

“Mom, we’re going camping! See you tomorrow morning! We’re going to Camp Calls! Sorry you can’t come!” But I wasn’t the least bit sorry for my mother that she couldn’t come. I was excited!

THE BORING DRIVE

After packing every last bit of equipment we could find, Dad and I hurried over to the car.

“But, Emily, we’ll need to go to the shop in Camp Calls to get more things, like the matches to light the fire,” Dad said, and I was happy to see that he was smiling.

“Why can’t we just rub the sticks together or something?” I asked curiously.

“It’s too difficult. But . . . I think that’s all we need, yeah,” Dad said brightly, trotting a little faster so I had to jog up to keep up with him.

Our family has three cars. We’ve only managed to fit two cars in the garage, so the last one had to be parked at the circle, where cars can do U-turns when they’re driving. Usually, I didn’t mind that we had to walk to the circle, but now, I was frantic about getting to Camp Calls fast enough before it closed.

Finally, we arrived at the car, which was sporty and lean. It only fits two people, so Dad drives it to work. I had to sit in the front. Luckily, I was just tall enough.

We hopped in, shutting the door behind us. Dad turned on the music, and started the car. The engine rumbled loudly, and we were off!

The car raced down the road as the evergreen trees sped by the window. I opened the window and stuck out my head. “Camp Calls!” I yelled to an innocent pedestrian walking down the street. He turned and looked at me blankly, even as we turned a corner. I laughed.

“Whoa, Dad, a million thanks for taking me to Camp Calls! Boy, this is fun!” I shouted over all the noise to Dad, who turned hastily to give me a quick smile.

Finally, we reached the freeway. A little way on, and then we’d get to Camp Calls! And possibly meet Jennifer and Dorothy! This was the best day ever!

But as we drove on, everything became less and less fun and more and more boring. Camp Calls seemed miles away. At last, I let out a loud groan.

“What’s wrong, Emmy?” Dad asked. Next to me, I saw his mustache wiggle, and I knew he was grinning.

“Well—” It felt a little embarrassing to complain to Dad now that he was taking me to the best place in the world. “Well—er—you see—it’s—well—taking—too—sort of—uh—long—to get—to—get there, you know?” I said, feel a huge wave of shame wash over me as I said it.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be there in a minute, Emily, just wait,” Dad said cheerfully, as though I had said something as simple as a polite greeting.

“Yeah—cool, great,” I said, relieved that Dad hadn’t got angry with me.

After what seemed like hours, we turned a corner and found ourselves driving on a muddy dirt road. It twisted and turned, and finally I saw a bunch of thick trees huddled together, and knew it was the Camp Calls Forest. I felt it was a little too small to be a forest, but shrugged and pushed the thought out of my mind. Two blue tents were sitting peacefully next to the forest. I hoped against hope that Jennifer or Dorothy were in one of them.

There was no parking lot. Cars were scattered everywhere on a square of green grass. Some cars were small and sporty like ours, others huge and designed for driving on sand, and one was even a bulldozer. Dad seemed to be surprised by the place too, because I heard him murmur under his breath, “Oh, my.”

But he seemed to get the idea and parked the car in a random place, shrugging to himself. Then he opened the door, got out, and opened mine, holding out his chubby hand as if I were a fancy lady with a lacy dress.

“Here we are, this is it!” he smiled, as I grabbed his hand and got out.

“I thought it would be—well—a little more fancy,” I shrugged, staring around.

The ground at Camp Calls was all made of dirt. It was wet, sopping wet. My feet sank deep into the mud. Worms slithered over my Crocs. The only “forest” there was three or two trees. There were what looked like a million stumps surrounding the trees. What had happened here?

DISCOVERING A

TENT FOREST

I rubbed my eyes, sure I was just dreaming. But after I did, the whole Camp Calls was still the same.

“What happened here, Dad?” I asked as I bent down to pull a grotesque little slug off my leg.

“I don’t know. Maybe Camp Calls has always been like this,” Dad said.

“But—but why would they plant *stumps*?” I asked. “Someone must’ve cut the trees all down, someone bad.”

“Yeah, but I brought you here to camp. No complaints, Emily. We’re not solving any mysteries, not now. Oh, right, I need to buy those matches. . . .” Dad said as he strode off, squashing about a thousand worms on the way.

I hurried after him, wondering. Maybe Camp Calls was nothing like I had expected it to be, but the trees, the *trees*, someone had to cut them all down. And the worms, why had the worms come here? Maybe the ground was just so moist; maybe they just liked it here. It was so—

SQUISH.

“Yuck!” I screamed. A slug had slithered through a hole in my Crocs and I had squashed it with my big toe. I felt the slimy blood of a slug running over my foot.

“What happened?” Dad yelled, looking down at me with worry.

“I—step—slug—so—disgusting—ew—” I managed to stammer through a shaking mouth. I hated slugs more than anything, and this felt so horrible. I was horror-struck as I watched green blood dribble out of my shoe and onto the dirt ground.

“That’s ok, honey, that happens, that happens,” Dad said, looking relieved, but still panting.

But I was not listening to him. I had just figured out why all the worms were here. As I watched the blood soak deep into the ground, a tiny sprout of a plant popped out of the soil. That was why the worms had come here, or rather had been brought here. When they died, when someone killed them, their blood would make a small sprout that would become a tree many years later, so Camp Calls could be the same again, with a beautiful forest to explore. These were special worms, whatever they were called, and I was amazed such things existed. But I pushed it out of my mind, because I had just thought of something, something we had to do to solve this mystery and get Camp Calls back to normal again, without Dad even knowing. *We had to kill the worms.*

I thought that more worms would probably live in the forest, so I grabbed Dad’s arm and pulled.

“Wha—what are you doing, Emily?” Dad asked as I heaved him closer and closer toward the three trees huddled together with huge trouble.

“I—need—to—go—pee—might—as—well—do—it—in—the—forest—because—we—will—pass—the—tents—so—I—can—see—if—Jennifer—or—Dorothy—are—in—one—of—them,” I lied.

As we passed the tents, I couldn't help slowing down to peer into them. I was hoping for Jennifer and Dorothy, but what I found in the tents was something a thousand times worse than my happy imagination—in fact, what I saw was enough to make your heart stop.

There were *trees* in the tent, more trees than I could count. Some pine, others coconut, there stood possibly two million huge trees in the doorway. But the strangest thing was they didn't seem to rip the top of the tent when they grew bigger. The tent's roof was as tall as the tallest tree was. The tent was wider and longer than you could imagine on the inside, but still normal size on the outside.

I didn't need to think. I already knew that these campers, whoever they were, had squashed the slugs and made a forest in their tent. But where were the campers? Lost? Had they already gotten out?

“Dad—Dad, I need to tell you something! See these worms? Don't—don't step on them! They'll just cause more trees to grow! I think these campers have been stuck here forever”. Dad stuttered, “What *campers?*”, and I replied “After they stepped on the worms, the trees grew really fast, I think! Remember, this is a magical place! Now I know what they mean by Camp Calls being ‘amazing’! Be—be very careful, Dad!” I warned, looking around worriedly. “We can't end up like them,” I murmured under my breath just to myself.

“What are you thinking, then? Let's get out of here!” Dad said back as he stared at the monkeys nearby hanging on a tree branch.

“No—no, we have to save these people!” I said. Jennifer or Dorothy couldn't be in here, because the campers in here had stepped on the worms and caused little sprouts without knowing, camped here for a few days, and woke up to find themselves in a jungle, I thought. Yesterday Jennifer and Dorothy had come up to me and said they would be camping *today*, and it would have taken at least three days until these trees would grow if they had stepped on the worms, and they had been at school yesterday. I knew the trees would have grown fast because Camp Calls was a magical place. “Amazing”, I knew, really did mean “amazing”, except magically.

THE TRUTH

Please, Dad?"

"No."

"It's not scary!"

"We aren't here to save people, we're here to have a good time and camp."

"But we're going to squash the worms *ourselves* when we lay down the tent and make a forest *ourselves*!"

"No."

"Please?"

"No. These people might already be dead."

"Well, you don't sound like you're sorry for them!"

"I'm not."

"Come on! Dad, *please*?"

"No, Emily, I'm sorry. I don't want to go in."

"Don't you want to be famous?"

"Yes, but I'm not a superhero."

As we argued, me urgently and Dad calmly, a few slugs slithered into the tent and the monkeys stepped on them. The plants grew at once into a bunch of tall weeds. I saw the scene out of the corner of my eye, and wondered if some worms made plants and weeds, and others made trees.

“Quickly, Dad, we have to save these people before the tent becomes too crowded!” I yelled furiously as angry tears trickled down my face. We needed to save these people, who cared who they were? Why didn’t Dad understand? Didn’t he want to become famous; didn’t he want everyone to know how much of a brilliant father he was?

“Didn’t I just say I didn’t want to be a superhero?” Dad replied calmly.

“You’re not going to be one, Dad” I screamed, glancing around at the plants popping like springs out of the ground.

“Do me a favor, Emily, and be quiet,” Dad said.

I felt so angry with Dad now that I wanted to slap him. If he didn’t want to become famous, that was ok, but he was a teacher at school, and teachers were usually kind people that were usually eager to help someone in need! “Then,” I yelled, my voice shaking with uncontrollable fury, “I’m going in myself!” And with one angry toss of my long, smooth, brown hair, I stormed off into the tent, ignoring the shocked shouts from Dad of “Emily, no, come back!”

Inside the tent the trees were thick and I could barely get through. Bees swarmed over my head, and each time I stepped on a worm a plant would pop out of the ground under my feet and lift me up into the air, so I would have to jump off.

“Emily! *Emily!* Emily, where are you?” I heard Dad’s terror-struck voice behind me, and knew I’d better hurry if I didn’t want to get caught.

I pushed floppy green plants out of my way and avoided the sulking, droopy coconut trees. I ignored the brief, searing pain every time I was cut by a thorny bush.

And then, suddenly, it happened. A pale-looking person with what looked like white eyes came out of the forest towards me.

At first, I thought it was a zombie, but knew zombies would have white, rolling eyeballs with the very last emotion before he died etched upon her face. This person, however, was looking around worriedly before she sighted me and smiled. I noticed patches of her long hair were gone.

And then, suddenly, it came to me.

“J-Jennifer?” I stammered. “How—”

“How come there are so many plants?” Jennifer asked in her normal, brisk voice. “Well, I can tell you that.” She stepped nearer to me, and I saw that she *did* have a thumb, she *did* have smooth skin, and she *did* have that smile that made me feel as though I were back home in a nice, warm bubble bath. “You see, Camp Calls isn’t *really* a forest with some tall trees, no. The reason why people say it is ‘amazing’ is because you can squish these worms and then make a cool forest in your tent. Those trees out there—someone just stepped on the worms and made them grow. Those stumps are just the beginning of a tree. Camp Calls’ trees grow from bottom to top—they don’t start out as a baby plant and grow bigger. As soon as you step on a Tree Worm a stump pops out of the ground and grows. I know, at first, I thought someone had cut all the forest trees down and they put the worms to grow it back when you stepped on them—no. I thought wrong. We all did. You were supposed to make a forest in your *tent*. That’s why Camp Calls is the most famous camping place in the world—no other camping place—or any other place—can do something like this—like where you can—sort of—do magic, like make a forest out of worm blood. Here’s a cool fact—the trees grow in less than one hour! Father told me all this,” she added, grinning at the dumb-struck look on my face.

“So—so in Camp Calls you—you need the worms to make a forest in your tent? That’s why it’s amazing?” I stammered.

“Precisely,” Jennifer said briskly.

Just then, Dorothy and Dad found us and gasped. “*Emily?*” they stuttered together.

“Emily,” I assured them, and grinned. Then I turned my full attention to Dad. “D-Dad? I’m really sorry I yelled at you. In Camp Calls, you—you were supposed to make a tent. Jennifer and Dorothy weren’t in trouble. You were right. I’m really sorry. Can you forgive me?” A tear trickled down my face.

Dad’s answer was a hug. Then he smiled at me and ruffled my hair. “I love you,” he said.

“Mr. Cameron?” Dorothy asked, twirling her shiny hair. “Do you want to stay for an hour or so to have some tea and watch the sun set?”

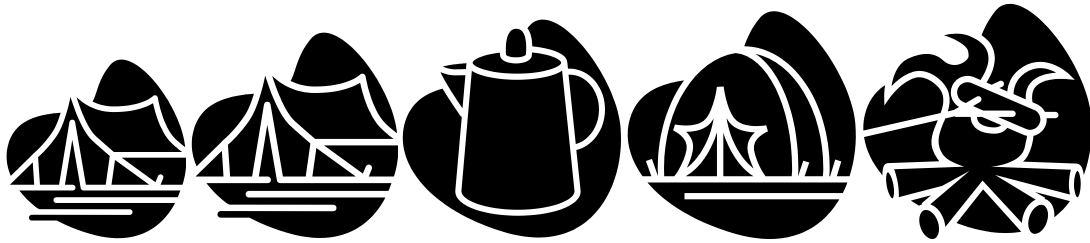
“Of course!” Dad looked excited as his watery-blue eyes sparkled.

Dorothy handed us each a mug filled with tea first, and then prepared one for themselves. “We’ll watch the sun set as we drink out tea outside.”

We set off. The way back out seemed so much shorter than it was when I was getting in.

We were just in time to see the bright, turquoise sky gleaming as the half-covered sun shone on it. Jennifer laid out a mat, and we all sat, sipping our tea as we watched the sun vanish in the dark night sky.





Emily Cameron gets worried when she finds that her favorite camping place looks as though someone has chopped it down! She wants to solve this mystery, to arrest the people here who cut all the trees down, but her idea of what's happening at the camp grounds is not really what she needs to do!

