

## Camp

*“Climb higher, Maggie! He’s right underneath you!”*

As I heard Carla yelling at me from the ground below, I looked down. The bear was indeed right below me. In fact, he had his mouth open, and I could count his teeth. He had a lot of teeth. And I could have touched his nose with my foot. He looked hungry.

He snorted, and waved a paw in my general direction. I think he was waiting for me to make a move before he made his. I didn’t disappoint him.

As I scrambled further up the tree, I thought back on how I had gotten myself into this mess. I’m pretty sure it was all Carla’s fault.

The afternoon at camp was supposed to have been an exciting day of outdoor crafts. Something to do with pine cones, spruce needles, and many bottles of white glue. While I’m a person who usually enjoys crafty-type things, Carla wasn’t having any of it. She wanted to go exploring.

*“Exploring!?”* I retorted. *“Are you crazy? There’s snakes and bears and creepy things out there in the bush. And probably mountain lions!”*

I wasn’t too sure about the mountain lions. And I don’t think a snake has been seen in Northern Alberta outside a pet store in fifty years. But I wasn’t crazy about hiking off into the bush.

*“Come on, Maggie. It will be fun! We might see some squirrels. I think there’s a lake over there somewhere”*. She pointed vaguely a direction away from camp. *“And we can pick blueberries!”*

Carla wasn’t a good friend. In fact, I’d just met her that morning. She seemed like a nice person. Maybe a little scatterbrained ... but who was I to judge?

So I let myself get talked into it. We filled a sack with sandwiches, bottles of water, several cans of mosquito spray, and half a pie we'd found carelessly left on the kitchen serving counter.

Carla pointed out a mostly overgrown path that she's spotted earlier in the day, and we headed off.

Five minutes later we had to stop. The mosquitoes were swarming around us like they'd been starved for blood their whole lives. Like they couldn't believe their luck at finding two fresh bodies to suck the juices out of. We both waved our arms around helplessly.

*"Ack! Get the spray out ... umphh"*. I had difficulty talking, because every time I opened my mouth, several hundred mosquitoes flew into it. They were everywhere. Including up my nose.

After spraying each other thoroughly, and after several minutes of sneezing and nose-blowing and wiping the blood and dead mosquitoes off our legs, we felt ready to continue our hike.

While the camp seemed to have been on high ground, the path we were following was definitely heading downwards. And the ground was getting wetter. Creepy!

*"Uhh ... Carla? Do you know where you're going? Are we, like, heading anywhere in particular?"*

*"Of course I don't know where we're going! What would be the fun in that? We're exploring! You're not supposed to know where you're going when you're exploring! Don't you know anything?"*

Apparently I didn't. I'd never watched Dora the Explorer.

We kept walking, Carla confidently striding out front, with me bringing up the rear. Pretty soon the path disappeared, to be replaced by rather boggy undergrowth that sort of bounced when you walked on it.

By now my shoes were more than squishy. My ankles were covered in brown and green slimy things that may have once been leaves.

*“Carla ... maybe we should head a different way. It’s awfully wet ...”*

*“Don’t be a wimp, Maggie! I think I see water ahead. Let’s go!”* And with that she bounded ahead.

It wasn’t long before I was up to my ankles in muck. If this were Mississippi there’d be alligators. But no, this was Alberta. No wildlife at all, if you didn’t count the mosquitoes. And we’d yet to see a squirrel. They probably had more sense.

When I caught up to Carla she’s stopped at the edge of what looked like a very large swamp. I figured she’d decide we should change direction. Or at least stop for a while before heading back. We could eat that pie!

*“Look, Maggie ... a lake!”* Carla was jumping up and down.

I should mention that Carla is a city girl. Her idea of wilderness was probably the tall grass at the end of her yard. This was her first time at camp.

*“Carla, that looks more like a swamp. Look at all the green slime on the surface. And the smell ...”*

The body of what was trying to pass as water in front of us did indeed smell pretty bad. Probably about what my socks smelled like about now.

*“Don’t be silly. Let’s wade out a little way and see if we can spot some fish!”*

I was pretty sure that any fish in this little lake had long ago succumbed to gill cancer, and that their rotting carcasses were probably contributing to the smell that was making me giddy. But it didn’t faze Carla at all. She waded right in.

Now I want you to know that I’m not someone to follow blindly where someone else is leading. I can make up my own mind.

I could have said no.

But I gritted my teeth, trying really hard to ignore the squishy things I was stepping on under all that slime, and followed her out. How much worse could it get?

Carla was complaining. *“I can’t see anything! How are we supposed to see the fish with all this stuff floating on the water? Gross!”*

Actually I did see a fish. At least, I think it was a fish. It was floating. Upside down. It didn’t look healthy.

Eventually, by the time we were in up to our knees, Carla had had enough. *“This is no fun. Let’s go back.”* She promptly turned around and headed for solid ground, making ripples in the slime as she strode towards shore. Meekly I followed. Maybe we could have the pie now.

I was thinking rather wistfully of the pinecone candy dish I’d planned to make for my mother, when Carla, who’d already reached the edge of the water, turned to look at me.

*“Maggie, what are all those black things on your legs?”*

I looked down. Below the bottom of my shorts, both legs were covered in black slimy things that looked almost like ...

*“Leeches! My legs are covered in leeches!! Awwwrghhh!!”*

I’d never said ‘Awwwrghhh’ before. It was a new experience for me. But it sounded about right, given that my legs were indeed covered in leeches ... that I knew were, at this very moment, sucking contentedly at whatever blood the mosquitoes had left behind. I felt faint.

*“Don’t just stand there, Maggie ... pull them off! Pull them off!”*

As I sat down on a stump with my leech-covered legs extended out in front of me, I noticed that Carla wasn’t volunteering to help. In fact, she was peering out from behind a tree, staring at my legs with horror. *“Quick, Maggie, pull them off! You could die. Oh, that’s so disgusting! I think I’m going to puke!”*

Clearly Carla wasn’t going to be of much help.

I looked down again at the writhing black shapes covering my legs. I wasn't sure, but I think they'd gotten bigger in the past minute or so. How long would it take them to completely drain my body of blood, I wondered. I imagined I could feel their little razor-like teeth burrowing into my flesh.

OK, I admit it. I do have an overactive imagination. People have told me that.

I worked up the courage to grab one of the fat little things between my fingers. Did I say they looked slimy? That's because they *were* slimy. They were the epitome of sliminess. Giant black boogers filled with blood. My blood.

That made me angry. Who were they, to think they could drink my blood without asking me first? I pinched the one I was holding and yanked it off my leg.

Oww! All right, that hurt! And there was blood oozing from the spot where he's latched on; probably little tooth marks there too! But I didn't care.

In a frenzy, I grabbed and pulled the leeches off, one by one, until no more were visible anywhere on my legs. Which were now streaming with blood. I whimpered pathetically.

I had one bad moment when I wondered if any had made it up as far as the inside of my shorts. A little squirming around convinced me that I was probably leech-free. I stripped off my socks, which were rather green and soaking wet, stuffed them into the sack I'd been carrying all this time, and put my shoes back on.

As I was using a bottle of water to wash off my skin and do a second check for any hangers-on, Carla appeared beside me. I looked at her legs. Not a single leech. Not one.

*"Well, I hoped you learned your lesson"* she told me, matter-of-factly. *"Heading off into a swamp like that! What were you thinking?"*

With that, Carla headed back the way we had come. What could I do? I followed her.

After trudging along for several minutes, Carla long out of sight, I heard a commotion in the bushes ahead. Then a scream.

Hoping in a vague sort of way that she's discovered a leech under her shirt, I waited for her to appear. It didn't take long. Carla burst out of the bushes, racing past me with her arms flapping madly. As she disappeared down the path, she managed to get out a few garbled words: "*Run, Maggie! It's ... it's a BEAR!*"

I looked back at the bushes she'd just come scrambling out of. A large black head was peering out from the branches. The head snuffled at me.

What does it mean when a bear 'snuffles'? Is it a friendly greeting, as in '*Hi' fancy meeting you here*'?

Or is it more sinister, as in '*Oh good! Lunch!*'?

I wasn't waiting around to find out. I turned around and bounded after Carla, who had long since disappeared.

Unfortunately, when I turned to look behind me, the bear was bounding too. And his bounds were a lot longer than mine were!

Panicked, I looked for a tree to climb. And there was one, just a few metres off the path. I dove towards it, jumped onto the trunk, and began to climb.

Yes, I know. Bears can climb trees too. I was hoping I could climb faster than he could. Maybe he's get bored and not follow me all the way to the top. Maybe he'd slip and fall and break his collarbone. Maybe his mother had never taught him how to climb trees.

Half way up the tree, I stopped to catch my breath, and looked down. The bear was shimmying up the tree, and was right below me! There was a gleam in his eye. No mistaking now what that snuffle had meant. I was lunch.

That's when I heard Carla: "*Climb higher, Maggie! He's right underneath you!*"

So up I went. The trunk was getting thinner, and there weren't many branches left. I'd gone about as high as I could go. Preparing myself for the worst, I glanced down.

The bear was still there, about two meters below me. He was snorting. At least, I think he was snorting. Maybe he was just smacking his lips in anticipation of a good meal.

That made me think of how hungry I was. We'd never eaten the sandwiches. And the pie! Everything was still in my sack, strapped around my back. Strange how the prospect of being eaten by a bear will make you hungry ...

Wait a minute! The backpack!

I pulled the sack around to my front ... no easy task when you're clinging to a tree for all you're worth. I was hoping to find something to throw. I managed to reach into the sack and pull out the pair of socks. Green, wet, slimy socks.

I tossed them down at the bear.

They landed on his face. He didn't seem too pleased about that as he twitched his head and snorted again ... probably in disgust this time. With a flick of his head, the socks disappeared below. He growled.

I reached into the sack again. My fingers wrapped around a large plastic container ... the pie! I pried off the lid.

Now I should mention that this wasn't your ordinary everyday pie. It was an incredibly delicious Saskatoon berry pie, created lovingly by one of the camp cooks who was undoubtedly a culinary genius. I'd had a piece of it the previous evening, and I'd been thinking about that pie all afternoon. I hesitated. For about one second.

I chucked it at the bear.

It landed with an audible 'plop' right on the bear's snout.

I don't know much about bears. I know their fur stands up when they're angry. I suspect they snuffle and snort when they're contemplating eating a thirteen year old girl. They show their teeth a lot.

What I was seeing on the bear's face now, looking down at him with Saskatoon berries dribbling off his nose, was undoubtedly a look of pure bear bliss.

Licking his face and rumbling contentedly, he backed down the tree, pawing more of the pie off his nose as he went. He was chortling happily and licking his large bear lips as he headed back into the bushes.

Who knew??

I looked around for Carla, but she'd disappeared. After climbing down the tree (which took a lot longer than the climb up, believe me) I headed back to where I supposed the camp should be.

I found her sitting at the craft table, happily gluing pine cones to Popsicle sticks. She greeted me with a contrite "*Well, there you are, Maggie! I was starting to get worried about you!*"

There was nothing I could say. I picked up a pine cone and started gluing.