



Stella Faces It

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Camping Trip

Our bike tires make a crunching sound in the gravel as we fly down the path toward the ocean. We're like a swarm of bees, a flock of birds, a herd of buffalo on the savanna. By "we" I mean everyone in my class. Plus our teachers, Anne-Grethe and Abu. And Samir, my best friend Rania's dad. Aaaaaand Mom. We're trading the classroom for the beach, where we'll spend the night in tents and have a campfire and all that. Right now, I feel like I'm part of the gang. Out here on the path in the woods, we're all one big group. We normally aren't.

"Owooooooooooooo!"

Isaac, who's biking in front of me, starts howling like a wolf. The other boys he's biking with join in. They really do sound like wolves.

Mom is biking behind me. I turn around for a second to see what she thinks about all this noise. I'm scared she might get mad because we're bothering the birds and animals in the forest. But to my surprise, she starts howling just like the boys, only even louder and stronger. I'm about to shrink into the tiniest beetle when I suddenly hear and see the wolf choir all around me. Everyone is joining in! I feel so warm inside that I start howling, too. We don't quiet down until we roll out of the woods and see the ocean and the beach in front of us.

We park our bikes by the outhouse. Mine is a little too big. Calling it "mine" is honestly a complete lie. I think the police would probably call it *stolen property*. And my mom is the one who stole it—or "borrowed" it, depending on how you look at it. It was just sitting there in the bike rack in the backyard for over a decade, according to her, with nothing more than a teeny tiny lock around the front tire. She cut it with a wire cutter, which is like pliers with really sharp blades. She did it after it was dark, so I guess she sort of did know that what she was doing wasn't actually okay.

“But when no one’s claimed it in over ten years, then it’s not really anybody’s, is it? Or, it’s yours now,” she said, grinning at me as she pumped the tires and greased the chain.

So now I’m standing here, with “my” stolen bike, unloading my tent and sleeping bag. We borrowed everything from BUA, which is a place where you can borrow that kind of thing. Fishing poles, too. I have no idea how many people used the sleeping bag before me. Mom washed it, but I don’t know how much that really helped. When she’s in one of those “everything’s gonna work out now” moods, she won’t listen to any objections at all. I know I wouldn’t be here now, together with everyone else, if we hadn’t borrowed/stolen all of this stuff. No one besides Mom and I know what we’ve borrowed/stolen. If someone found out, I would, if possible, become the smallest person in the world. As big as an ant, probably. I would have to move into an ant hill and become a worker ant. One that gets pine needles and stuff.

Lie No. 1

While Rania and I are setting up our tent, Mom disappears into the forest with a shovel. I know what she’s doing, I just hope she doesn’t find something *totally* crazy. A plant everyone’s allergic to that makes your face break out into a rash or something.

Isaac and his buddies are setting up their tent next to ours. Or, they’re doing the opposite, really. As soon as one of them gets a tent pole in, someone else yanks it out, and then they’re back at square one. Sofie and Ida and the other girls have already set up their tent and roll their eyes at the boys. In the end, they take over, and the boys run down to the beach.

“Stella?” Sofie asks as she shoves a tent peg into the ground.

I look up at her without responding.

“What does your mom do for work again?” she asks. “I mean, since she can come with us on this trip in the middle of the week?”

“What’d you say?” I ask, so I have time to come up with a lie.

Sofie often says stuff that makes things uncomfortable. Like if we’re watching a movie at school and someone has red hair, she’ll exclaim: “Look at the ginger! Oh my god, sooo embarrassing.”

And then she does this fake, creepy laugh.

And everyone knows she said it to be mean to the people in our class with red hair. But she still has lots of friends—or, it *seems* like everyone wants to be friends with her. Sofie is the kind of girl who goes to the salon every other week and has expensive clothes.

She repeats her question, saying it super slowly like I'm hard of hearing or something.

She doesn't ask Rania the same thing. Everyone knows that Rania's dad is a professor, and that sometimes he's even on TV to talk about professor things. Mom used to be pretty normal. She went to work and did normal things, but not anymore. I don't know any other parents who can't handle having a job.

No one wants to be friends with me except Rania. I wish more people did, but that's just how it's been ever since Mom stopped working. Besides, Rania's the only friend I need. She lives in my apartment building and we've known each other since preschool.

I look over at Rania now. She looks back at me, but then she looks away, kind of like she's saying: *It's fine if you lie, just don't drag me into it.*

"I've never really understood what she does," I say to Sofie. "But it's something with numbers."

It's not a total lie. I've often seen her sitting at the kitchen table, writing down numbers.

"Budgeting," she calls it. She makes two columns. In one column, she writes down the money that comes into her account each month. In the other one, she writes down the money that goes out of her account each month. The second one is usually a lot longer than the first. In the end, she crumples up the piece of paper and throws it on the floor. She always tells me that we don't throw things on the floor, but in the garbage can under the sink. One time, I brushed some pencil shavings on the floor, and she said: "Those aren't going to grow legs and walk across the floor and hop into the garbage can by themselves." But that's the kind of thing she says when she has the energy. Sometimes, or really pretty often, she gets migraine attacks. Then she has to take a pill and lie down in bed and can't get up until it stops. It can take one day, or sometimes even two. I'd rather she scolds me because I brush pencil shavings on the floor than lie in bed and not manage to get up.

"Is she an accountant?" Ida asks. "My neighbor is. He has his own business at home. Counts Accounting. Imagine having a last name *Counts* and being an accountant! I guess it was that or a math teacher, haha."

“Seriously?” Sofie says, raising an eyebrow at Ida like she just said the dumbest thing in the world.

I look at Ida and laugh, a little more and a little louder than I normally do. She turns away and looks around nervously before she spots a stray tent peg in the grass and picks it up. I don’t know if she was trying to save me or if she was just babbling. But I wasn’t saved, that’s for sure.

“Well? Is she?”

Sofie cocks her head and smiles.

She’s not going to give up before she gets a real answer.

“Yeah,” I reply. “She is.”

I can feel Rania’s eyes on my back. She knows my mom isn’t really an accountant. But I can trust Rania, and she doesn’t say anything. That’s usually how it goes. That she doesn’t say anything. But right now, I kind of wished she would say: “Yeah, Stella’s mom works with numbers.”

The Invitation

We’re sitting around the fire, everyone is full from dinner, and it’s starting to get dark. Suddenly, a hooded figure comes walking down the beach towards us. Everyone stares in the direction of the figure. I look around. Mom has managed to sneak off again without me noticing it. I’m pretty sure she’s the person in the hood. Some people turn around, looking nervously between the body coming toward us and at our teacher, Anne-Grethe. It’s completely silent.

“Could I possibly roast these roots on your fire?” Mom asks in a deep, dark voice.

“It’s just Stella’s mom,” I hear someone whisper.

“Yes, of course, have a seat,” Anne-Grethe says, making room for Mom next to her on the big rock.

Everyone is silent as Mom reaches for the frying pan and the bottle of oil.

“I’ve walked all the way from Nidaros,” she says. “I’m hungry and need to build up my strength to get back to Tunsberg. I’m journeying over to the Englishmen on a ship called the *Oseberg*.”

I wait for someone to start laughing. I have to press my lips together to keep myself from doing it. Why does she have to be so lame?!

“I found these,” she says, and passes around several enormous burdock plants. “Does anyone know what they’re called?”

No one says anything. She glances at me. I don’t say anything either. She takes off her hood and kind of becomes herself again, speaking with her normal voice.

“This plant is called the greater burdock. Have any of you ever gotten these burrs on your clothes?”

“My dog Bob gets them in his fur every fall. We have to cut them out, and he hates it,” Isaac says.

Mom holds up a root.

“In the Middle Ages, over a thousand years ago, greater burdocks were cultivated all over Europe, and the roots were eaten like a perfectly ordinary vegetable. In Japan, the root is still used a lot today. They call it *gobo*. If the Japanese can eat this root, we can too, can’t we?”

No one nods or says anything. Apart from Anne-Grethe:

“I’d love to try!”

“Me too,” Samir and Abu say in unison.

While she was talking, Mom chopped up some of the roots and started frying them in the pan over the fire.

What if no one besides Anne-Grethe, Samir and Abu wants to taste it? So embarrassing.

I already know what it tastes like because we’ve eaten them tons of times before. I don’t need to taste it again now.

Mom takes some salt and pepper and fries the roots until they have a crispy, golden crust. I guess I do want to have a taste after all, when I think about it. She takes a fork and pierces a tender, juicy root.

“Who’s first?” she asks, holding out the fork.

I see Sofie and Ida exchange glances. I’m not totally sure, but it looks like Sofie shakes her head, and then Ida looks down at the ground.

“Me!” Isaac exclaims.

I take a breath.

“Me, too!” the other boys in his group say simultaneously, and then suddenly everyone wants to try. Well, everyone besides me, Sofie, and Ida. Mom holds a root out to me. I accept it reluctantly.

“It’s suuuper good!” Isaac says.

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“Mmm,” I hear from others around the fire.

“Is there any more?” someone asks.

I smile, both inside and outside.

Sofie looks mad. Or like she stepped in dog poo.

Then, something totally unexpected happens:

“And while we’re all gathered here together, I’d love to invite you to Stella’s 11th birthday on June 6th,” Mom says with a smile. “Then you can have more burdock if you want!”

What? No! No way is everyone coming to my birthday! Did she forget what happened when I celebrated my birthday at the water park?! My head starts buzzing, and everything goes dark inside me, like I’m walking into a dark tunnel. I try to look at Mom in a way that’s supposed to make her understand that this is NOT okay! That she has to take back the invitation and say something like she forgot we’re going away that weekend, anything at all. She can’t just do something like this without asking me first! I’d rather pick up trash every day for a whole year than celebrate my birthday with everyone in my class. But she just smiles. I want to run away and never come back but I force myself to stay put. It would only make things worse if everyone knew how I really felt. I try to breathe, count to ten, and pinch the skin on my arm to pull myself together.

When the buzzing in my head finally quiets down, I have no idea what’s been said. Did anyone say, “Yes!!! We’re coming!”? Did anyone laugh? Sofie almost definitely laughed. I stare into the flames, even though I can feel Rania looking at me. She knows that I really just want to celebrate with her, and maybe Mom and maybe our neighbor Hillevi and her dog, Fido. But I don’t want to celebrate with anyone else. And now Mom has just invited absolutely *everyone* in my class to a birthday celebration. How could she do this? It’s in less than a month—~~just~~ 26 days, actually. The thought sends a chill down my spine. What if Mom serves something she got from the dumpster? She does that pretty often. Or worse: what if she gets a migraine and can’t make anything at all?

Lie No. 2

“A birthday party will be fun!” Isaac says as I’m heading into the tent not long after.

I’m not so sure about that, I think to myself. But I don’t say it out loud.

“I think my mom might’ve forgotten that we might be going away,” I reply.

“Oh, no!” Isaac says. “Your mom is so cool! I was already looking forward to it.”

I look at him and shrug ~~my shoulders~~ as if to say *yeah, it sucks for everyone*.

Mom comes over, and I turn away and go into the tent. I just want to go to bed without saying another word.

Isaac and Mom chat outside for a while.

“How are you doing these days, Isaac?” Mom asks.

“Good! Now, at least!” Isaac replies.

“Me, too,” Mom says. “Was there a reason in particular that things weren’t so good before?”

“I was nervous about the camping trip because I’ve never spent the night away from home,” Isaac says. “But I’m really happy that I came!”

Mom always gets people to say whatever they’re thinking without even doing anything special. At least, I don’t think she does.

“I was nervous, too,” she says. “I wasn’t sure anyone was going to want to try the burdock roots.”

The problem with tents is that you hear everything being said, both inside and outside. Didn’t they know that?

“But they were super good!” Isaac practically shouts. “Too bad there won’t be any birthday party after all, though.”

Before I can think twice, I spring out of the tent and am standing next to them, my pulse pounding in my ears.

“Yeah, because we might go to Canada,” I say quickly, without looking at Mom.

I feel her eyes on me, but I don’t turn. I can’t look at her now.

“My aunt lives there,” I continue. “We might go visit her.”

It’s not a lie that my aunt lives there. It’s just that Mom and I are not in touch with her. Plus, we’d never in a million years be able to afford to go all the way to Canada.

“Oh,” Isaac says. “Cool.”

Then he turns and heads down the path.

I slip inside the tent and into my sleeping bag and lie there with my back to Mom, who I can hear sticking her head through the opening.

“Stella? What just happened?” she whispers.

“I’m going to sleep,” I say, more loudly than I wanted to.

I can’t whisper because I’m so angry my breath won’t fit inside my chest. I try to get control, breathe in *one two three four*, out *one two three four*, and then I pretend to be asleep

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when Rania comes and lies down, I pretend to be asleep when Mom and Rania whisper about where they can brush their teeth, I pretend to be asleep when Mom comes back into the tent. And when she strokes my face lightly with a cool hand all I want to do is cry, but I just pretend to be asleep.

Only the three of us are sleeping in the tent. Rania's dad is sharing a tent with Isaac and the boys, and I'd imagined Mom, Rania, and I telling each other ghost stories all night with the flashlight we borrowed from BUA. But it probably doesn't even work anyway. I bet the batteries Mom brought are dead. That's just the way things are with Mom. Nothing's ever really totally *right*, there's always something broken or that needs fixing with tape and wire and needle and thread. She's broken, too. She can't even have a job like other, normal people. How is she supposed to throw a birthday party for my whole class? There's no way. Even the dumbest dogs in the neighborhood know that. Rania and I will need to make a plan.

I don't fall asleep until the birds start chirping late at night, or maybe it's early in the morning.