

They discovered the first one in the cupboard. They studied it closely.

“Dirty and stained becomes nice and clean.

Wash it and dry it in a machine.

Where am I?”

Thirteen year old Rebecca was on a clue hunt with her six year old brother, Jimmy. Their parents had set it up for them. They were told that there was a surprise at the end.

“The bathtub?,” Jimmy asked hesitantly.

Rebecca laughed.

“No, it's the laundry room,” she said.

They found the next clue in one of their mother's shirts.

“Nice and cool

All the time.

Draw some pictures,

Play puppets, make rhymes,” Rebecca read aloud.

Jimmy started jumping up and down excitedly.

“The basement!”

They eventually found the last clue. It read:

No air conditioner,

But still lots of fun.

Nice, shady temperature

With much room to run.

Jimmy looked at Rebecca, but Rebecca looked at their dad, confused .

“What?”

Dad looked at them with a big smile on his face.

“You can't figure it out?,” he teased.

Jimmy and Rebecca shook their heads.

“We're going camping tomorrow! We're staying for three days,” said Dad.

Jimmy immediately jumped and hugged Mom and Dad. Rebecca was excited too. She was ready for some time away from the city. She liked the smell of the forest.

“You'd better go pack,” Mom said.

Rebecca put her necessities in her suitcase and her laptop, iPod, and cell phone in a bag. Even though she was ready to be away from the city, she couldn't imagine a week without her electronics. She took them, literally, everywhere.

The next morning, Rebecca awoke to her cell phone alarm. She rubbed her eyes, ate her breakfast, and got ready to go. Everyone piled into the car and drove away.

Rebecca soon got bored of just looking at the scenery outside. She wanted to listen to her iPod . She looked into the trunk but couldn't find her bag. She had left it! She couldn't ask her parents to turn back; they'd be frustrated. How could she make it a whole week without her stuff?!

When they arrived at the camping spot, Rebecca awakened from a long nap. She immediately smelled the sweet smell of pine. But something was wrong. Mom saw her confused frown as she looked around at the huge forest.

“What's wrong, Rebecca?,” she asked.

Rebecca looked at her.

“Where's the picnic tables and restrooms? There's always some at a campground.”

Mom laughed.

“Who said we were at a campground?”

Rebecca was scared, now. She desperately tried to find an excuse to not stay there.

“Um... isn't this illegal?”

“Not here; at other places, it would be,” Mom replied.

Oh, no! None of my electronics, and no place to take a decent shower, Rebecca thought.

Rebecca dazedly followed her parents to find a place to set up the tent. Jimmy skipped ahead, pointing out “perfect” places to put the tent on. They were all extra lumpy. Eventually the right spot was found.

Unfortunately, this spot was next to a small creek. None of them had gone to the bathroom for about two hours, and hearing the running water was a little too much for Jimmy.

“Dad, where's the bathroom?,” he panted.

“Right there.”

Dad turned, and pointed to the nearest bush. A big, excited grin spread across Jimmy's face. He eagerly ran over to Rebecca.

“Hey, Rebecca, did you hear that?,” he asked.

“I'm thrilled, Jimmy,” she replied sarcastically.

Mom and Dad set up the tent, and everyone got settled. Jimmy was very excited and almost tore down the tent, so Mom slathered him with sunscreen and bug spray and sent him outside to explore. She and Dad went out to start supper.

“Will you play with me, Rebecca?,” Jimmy asked hopefully.

“No. I don't feel like it.”

Jimmy walked away sadly. Rebecca never went outside anymore, and Jimmy was really hoping that she would, since it was vacation. He really admired his big sister. But she had no desire to go outside; who knew when she would get a real shower again? But there wasn't much to do inside either.

Then she remembered that her mom had signed her up for the summer reading program at the library... but, she hadn't brought any books. She dug through her parent's stuff and found a book that her dad was reading. It was some kind of biography on India's history, and Rebecca soon tired of it.

After forcing herself to read the entire first page, Dad called everyone to supper. She crawled out of the tent just as Jimmy came out of the woods. He was dripping and he smelled like outside and pond scum, but he had a huge smile on his face. After Dad prayed over the food, Jimmy told everyone about what he had discovered.

“I saw a *big* tree!,” he exclaimed, “It was this big:”

He stretched his little arms as high as they would go, and stood on tip-toes. His face was very serious as he tried to make himself taller. He finally gave up, and just settled for about three feet.

“And then, I saw a birdie! But it wasn't as big as that tree. Then, I saw pokies, (pine needles) buzzers, (mosquitoes) and worms. Then I slipped and I fell down in the dirt.”

He saw Mom's worried look, and quickly assured her,

“Don't worry, Mommy. I took a bath in the water.”

Rebecca listened to all this while eating her hot dog. It sounded quite boring and disgusting.

After supper Rebecca helped clean up. Mom and Dad wanted to watch the sunset, and Jimmy wanted to explore some more. Rebecca went back in the tent.

She searched more thoroughly and found a book that her mom was reading about how to eat healthy. It was slightly more interesting than Dad's book.

A couple of hours later, the call came for s'mores. Jimmy had three before Dad said to stop. Afterwards, they sat around the campfire while Jimmy told them more stories of his discoveries. More pokies, buzzers, and a cricket. That cricket had been a very good play-mate, apparently.

Dad put out the fire while Mom and Rebecca gathered up all the s'more stuff. Then they all went into the tent and laid out the sleeping bags. They got their pajamas on, and Mom handed out toothbrushes and toothpaste to Rebecca and Jimmy. They went outside to brush their teeth.

It was slightly cold, and Jimmy started shivering in his little dinosaur pajamas, but he still had a

big smile on his face. It was quite an adventure for a six year old to go camping for the first time. There was so many things to find and play with.

That got Rebecca to thinking. She remembered when *she* had first gone camping, before Jimmy was born. She had been about the same age as Jimmy. She poured water onto the dirt to make mud, and played in it until she was covered.

The next day she had tried to climb a tree, but wasn't tall enough, so she looked for pretty rocks. Then she found a frog, and took it back to the camp. She learned that Mom didn't appreciate having "Froggy" sleep with her.

Rebecca had cried when they left the campground. She had wished they could stay forever. It was so much fun to play in the forest.

Now she realized, as she lay in her sleeping bag with the rocks poking her back, that those days were gone. She no longer wanted to play outside, get dirty, or touch things like frogs and bugs. All she wanted to do was stay inside, play on her computer, text, or listen to her iPod.

Rebecca wondered what could have changed. She kind of missed life as a little kid. She missed having Dad play with her, but whenever Dad asked if she wanted to go play at the playground with him, Mom, and Jimmy, she would always be too busy. Email is such a heavy responsibility, you know.

She missed wanting to get dirty and being okay with having to squish and pick up flies that came around the house. She missed it, not only because of the disappointed looks her mom gave her whenever she didn't want to play games with them, but she also felt like a part of her was missing.

She never played with anyone, and her skin was much more pale than Jimmy's, Dad's, or even Mom's. Any outing that they would have, like a picnic, or just a play day, she would bring her electronics. She'd sit in the shade, go on the internet, text, or listen to her iPod and swat whatever mosquitoes came her way for several hours. Then they'd go home and she'd do the same thing. It was the same every day.

Rebecca was shocked at how monotonous and boring her life was. All of a sudden she felt trapped inside an endless world of technology, helpless and scared. All her life was about was the newest pieces of technology that came along. She didn't even spend time with God anymore.

That's what's been missing, she realized.

Rebecca felt a sudden tug at her heart. She gently pulled herself out of her sleeping bag, put on her tennis shoes and coat, and quietly unzipped the tent flap to go outside.

Rebecca got down on her knees without caring that she got dirt on her pajamas. She began to pray.

"God," she whispered, "I'm sorry. I haven't spent time with You, like I should have. Please forgive me; my whole life is a mess."

She began crying silently. Who was *she* to ask for forgiveness. She hadn't spent time with God for months; she didn't even pay attention in church. But then she stopped crying. She sat quietly and listened; she was sure she heard something. A few crickets sang, and the wind blew through the pines. The whole forest was peaceful, quiet, and still. Then came the small whisper,

"You're forgiven. You are loved. You are Mine."

Love, peace, and forgiveness came over Rebecca as she knelt there. She felt light as air as the burden washed away. She stood up and took a deep breath. It felt like her heart would burst with all of the joy she felt. She crawled in the tent and went back to sleep, happier than she had ever been.

Rebecca awoke as Mom and Dad went outside to start breakfast. Jimmy was snoring, still tired from yesterday's explorations. Rebecca was excited. She planned to surprise Jimmy by spending the whole day with him. They were going to play in the mud, look for crickets, and do whatever Jimmy wanted to do.

She hurriedly dressed and went out. The dirt was wet from the dew, and the pine smell was

strong. Dad looked up as Rebecca came over to them.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he said.

“Good morning, Dad. Good morning, Mom.”

She hesitated, a little nervous to apologize.

“Um, Mom, Dad, I’m sorry that I haven’t spent much time with you lately. I spent too much time with my electronics.”

She looked at Mom, who looked back at her and said,

“That’s okay, honey. We forgive you.”

“Yeah,” Dad agreed.

Mom gave Rebecca a warm, soft hug. Rebecca had just pulled away when she felt herself lifted off the ground, and nearly suffocated. She realized what was happening, just in time to squeeze out a small, forced,

“Uncle!”

It was her dad’s famous “Uncle Hug”. He would squeeze as hard as he could until the victim said “uncle”.

Rebecca went and woke up Jimmy. He dressed, and they went outside for breakfast.

“Are you going to explore some more today?,” Mom asked Jimmy.

“No,” he replied disappointedly.

“Why not?”

“I get lonely. Rebecca won’t play with me.”

Rebecca looked at her little brother. He looked like he was about to cry. Rebecca decided to tell him her surprise.

“Jimmy, I wish you would go exploring.”

“Why?”

“Because if you didn’t, *I* would be lonely. I want to go exploring with you.”

Jimmy looked at Rebecca. His face lit up with excitement. He jumped up from the blanket they were sitting on and tackled Rebecca with the biggest hug he could give.

Rebecca and Jimmy brushed their teeth and went out on their adventure. They played mud war (in which both became very muddy), they found crickets (after which Jimmy put one down Rebecca’s shirt), and Rebecca helped Jimmy climb that *big* tree (after which she climbed up and told Jimmy stories). After supper, Rebecca spent some quiet time with God while Mom and Dad watched the sunset again, and Jimmy played with several ladybugs he had found.

The next day the whole family played in the creek and explored farther than Rebecca and Jimmy had gone before. The day after that, they packed up and went home.

As they left the camping spot, Rebecca felt more alive and happy than she had for months. Knowing that she was a good sister to Jimmy, a good daughter to her parents, and a good friend to God filled her with a sense of peace. Knowing that she had a ton of fun was also quite fulfilling.

Rebecca realized that she didn’t need her electronics to have a good time at all. She just needed to get out, play, read, spend time with God, or just sit and daydream. She wrote a poem about it when they got home:

Remember, not too long ago, when once there was no Wii.

You rolled down hills, played in mud, and slid down slides for free.

Now, there’s iPods, a dollar a song; not much is free, these days.

We’d rather play with gadgets than family, in this electronic age.

So take some time this summer, I say,

To be with your family, and just to play!

Leave your computer and your cell phone

And play outside till you’re tired to the bone.

Walking your dog does not really count.
Play fetch with it, chase it, tire it out.
Get outside, smell the fresh air,
Ride your bike or rip-stick... if you dare.
Record your shows, if it means a lot.
Save movies for weekends, play outside, get hot.
You're never "too cool" to have outside fun,
So play outside lots; summer's begun!