

they would make their camp.

After they reached their campsite most of the boys scattered. Probably looking for more snakes, Harriet guessed. One boy stayed, but only because he needed Harriet's help to prepare the meal. Harriet found herself remembering backcountry cooking lessons from her father. She had gone with him on his hunting trips when she was a girl. They had always cooked over a campfire, and he would have scoffed at her little backpacking stove. "New-fangled gadget!" he would have sniffed, but the rules for living in the woods were different now. Pack-and-head number two watched while Harriet pulled the stove out of her pack.

"It can be tricky to light at first. You have to warm up this little pipe here. It's the generator. Once the generator's warm, the fuel can vaporize and it burns a lot better," Harriet explained. "Run and get your matches, and you can try to get this lit."

Pack-and-head number two fingered the smooth aluminum fuel canister. "I don't have any matches," he mumbled.

Harriet almost humped, but something in the slump of the boy's shoulders stopped her. "What's your name?"

He looked at her warily. "Sterling."

"Is that what your friends call you, or just your family?"

"I dunno." Still that slump of the shoulders.

Harriet pulled some matches out of her pocket and showed Sterling how to let just enough fuel out of the canister to get the generator warmed up. After four or five minutes of fumbling, the stove burned with hot, blue flame. Harriet checked the fuel pressure, then glanced at boy's shoulders again. The slump was less noticeable now.

She leaned back on her heels and watched Sterling measure the water into the pot. As he settled the lid onto the pot, she tried again. "So, what do your friends call you?"

The feeling of success from lighting the tricky little stove had left him off-guard. "Stir-fry," he replied.

He was a skinny little kid. He looked a little mixed-up, and she supposed the name suited. "Well, Stir-fry, do you think you can handle this on your own? I need to show your buddies how to use the water purifier before it gets dark." Harriet stood up.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Just pump the fuel pressure every once in a while so the flame won't go out. There's extra water right there if you need to douse anything. I'll be down by the creek with the others."

"Miss Harriet?" She turned and paused. Stir-fry fiddled with the pot lid again.

"Miss Harriet, what do *your* friends call you?"

There was apprehension in his voice. He knew he was taking a risk. But a challenge was there too. She looked him up and down with new respect. "Well," she replied, "what do you think?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, I guess I figured you and the scoutmaster must be pretty good friends, since you said you'd take us and all." His voice trailed off.

Something stirred within Harriet. She remembered her father telling her to take her friends where the good Lord gave them to her. She let her breath out slowly.

"Well, as a matter of fact, Stir-fry..." She used the nickname deliberately, pausing for emphasis. His shoulders had lost their slump and his eyes held a

too undisciplined.

"Do you know how to find the north star?" Charley asked. By now Adam and the other two boys had wandered over to where they stood.

The north star. It had always held a kind of magic for Harriet. No matter what else happened, it was always there. She loved it for its constancy. Her father had taught her to find it at the end of the little dipper's handle, and she in turn had taught her nephews to find it spilling out of the big dipper's cup. The dippers seemed to Harriet to wheel around that star in a circle dance, sweeping the rest of the heavens with them.

"Yes," she replied, "I can find the north star."

But not, as it turned out, from their campsite. They were camped on the north side of the lake, and the bluffs that rose away from the lake behind them were high enough to blot out the stars closest to the horizon.



"This trail goes all around the lake," Adam offered. The boys had explored it while hunting for snakes in the afternoon. "Can we go around the other side and see the stars better from there? It's not steep or anything."

"Yeah," Charley added, "And in one place there's this big rock by the lake we could sit on."

Stir-fry chipped in. "The Scoutmaster said we're supposed to learn how to find it."

"Well, all right," Harriet said, with reluctant thoughts of her waiting sleeping bag. "Get your flashlights."

The trail was not difficult. It wound among the trees along the lake's shore. Harriet followed the five dim shapes and bobbing flashlights through the trees and the darkness. She reckoned they were right about at the south end of the lake when they reached Charley's rock. It was between the trail and the lake, right at the water's edge, and because it was broad and mostly flat on the top it still held some of the warmth of the sun. The boys scrambled up while Harriet followed more slowly.

One of the boys had brought his sleeping bag to spread out as a giant pillow for the six heads. With the settling of the dusk the breezes had stilled. They laid down and looked up, and it seemed the stars would fall down on top of them from sheer weight. The boys had never seen so many stars. It had been a while since Harriet had seen this many, too. The moon wasn't up yet to mimic the streetlights that let only a few of the bravest stars shine through at home in the city. "They need you, Aunt Harriet," David had said. Harriet snorted to herself. She guessed maybe she needed them just as much as they needed her. She wondered if David had stayed home on purpose just so she'd come out with the boys. Charley, standing next to her, jumped a little at her hump.

"Ma'am?" he said.

"Oh, nothing, Charley," she replied. "Just thinking about why I came."

"Is that bright one the north star?" Adam was asking, and his voice was quieter for once.

Harriet taught them how to find the north star. No, it wasn't a particularly bright star, it was special because it was lined up with the earth's axis, so it seemed to stay still while the rest of the heavens rotated around it. She taught them how to find it at the end of the little dipper's handle, and she taught them how to find it spilling out of the big dipper's cup. She named Adam's bright star, Arcturus, and then Mizar and Alcor, the twin stars in the big dipper's handle that can barely be seen as two separate stars, and she told them how the Indians used the twin stars as a way to test their children's eyesight. They found Cassiopeia the queen and Cygnus the swan, and then they counted two falling stars, one right after the other.

Harriet lost track of the time they laid on the rock and drank in the starry sky. They counted three more falling stars, five airplanes, and two satellites. Harriet found the first satellite and showed the boys how to recognize the steady track across the sky, much slower and higher than any airplane. Stir-fry found the second one. Then Charley stood up to stretch his legs.

"The stars are in the lake, Aunt Harriet," he said. He was right. The lake was so black and calm it was reflecting the stars. The stars in the lake danced and shimmered in imitation of the stately dance of their cousins in the sky. They wheeled above and skipped below, until it seemed to Harriet the whole

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twinkle she suspected

was a reflection of her own. "Actually, some of my friends do call me Aunt Harriet."

By nightfall her sense of euphoria was gone. These weren't potential friends, they were little demons in scout shirts. She could hardly wait to get out of David's shirt. It had required several pointed reminders to Adam and a lot of muttering under her breath before the boys would set up their tents. Stir-fry's meal was edible, but the dishwashing hadn't happened until after dark, and then only haphazardly. Several of Harriet's muscles kept reminding her they hadn't been used this much for several months, and would she please crawl into her tent for the night. She groaned a little at the thought of her tent. By now the boys had probably deposited at least one critter in it. She sighed and wished she had thought earlier to pin the zipper shut.

"Aunt Harriet?" It was Stir-fry and Charley.

Harriet felt her tired shoulders tense with irritation. If these boys shoved another animal in her face, they'd lose a kneecap. David never should have asked her to deal with them all. She never should have given in. She was far too old. He should have asked their parents. Young people today were much