

WATERMELON MEN

By John S. Halbert

Late Summer, 1960:

"You think we'll need rubber boots while we're down there?" My friend "Biff" thumbed through the list of things we planned to take with us on the camping trip.

I shook my head and went on rummaging around in my backpack. "I can't find the box of waterproof matches." I straightened-up and dropped the knapsack onto the carport steps. "We used all the water purification tablets, too."

Biff shrugged. "Guess we'd better go back to the surplus store and get some supplies . . . we'll be gone several days and we need more stuff."

It was late summer, and the two of us had decided to go camping before school started for the tenth grade. This time, we would go down into the national forest to "rough-it" for a few days. Our parents had approved of the venture provided we stayed close to farmhouses at the edge of the preserve in case of an emergency. We had agreed---with our fingers crossed behind us. What good, we reasoned, was a camping trip if we were right next to civilization? Both of us were sure we could take care of ourselves against whatever might happen.

Leaning our bicycles against the front of the Army Surplus Store, we stepped inside and were greeted by the heavy masculine smell of leather and canvas. "Well, look who's here!" The man behind the counter recognized us from the year before "Ready for another camping trip?"

"We're going to the woods, again!"

Biff and I moved off, looking for the matches and the purification tablets and some other items on our list.

"Check-out the machetes!" the man went called out, "you'll need them to fight all those wild bears down there!"

Of course, we were not expecting to meet any such animals on this trip, but since they used the big blades in jungle movies, we could be just like real explorers! The two of us picked out a pair of them, along with a couple of shovels, the tablets, the matches and some other things, paid for the items, then biked back to Biff's house.

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That afternoon, his dad drove us forty miles to the south and let us out on an isolated dirt road. Looking down the lonely lane we spotted an official-looking sign that read, "National Forest." The older man pointed at the chimney and roofline of an old farmhouse poking over the nearby tree-tops. "Stay close to that house!" he told us, with a stern look. My friend and I glanced at each other and nodded. Once more, our fingers were crossed behind our backs.

As soon as he had driven out of sight, we pulled on our backpacks and made our way into a field of tall stiff grass. Right away, the new machetes proved their worth as the going was tough and slow. An hour later, puffing and perspiring in the afternoon heat and humidity, the two of us reached the edge of the woods and pushed-on into the canopied forest. After a while, we came

upon a seventy-foot-wide creek and made a turn to the right. For some time, we stepped upstream along its narrow, grassy bank.

Just as the last rays of the day's sun were catching the treetops, we trudged into a small clearing. My friend flung his pack to the ground and looked at the inviting stream. "How about a swim?" We stripped off our sweaty clothes and plunged in. Afterwards, dressed in clean, dry jeans and T-shirts, we pulled out cans of tuna and some dried fruit. By the light of our lantern, we arranged our bedrolls and with the new shovels ditched the edge of the tent for drainage, in case it should rain, just like they had taught us to do in the Scouts.

I was just drifting off to sleep when Biff nudged me. "What was *that*?" he whispered. A few seconds later, there came a snapping sound that seemed very near the tent. Both of us sat up in our sleeping bags, hearts pounding. *Something* or *somebody* was out there, and close to us! I peeped out the front flap, but saw nothing in the dim starlight. There came another rustling in the nearby undergrowth, then a scratching sound like something brushing up against a tree-trunk. "You think somebody's spying on us?"

I groped for my flashlight. Biff grabbed my arm. "No---wait! Let's not give ourselves away!"

There was the crackling again, louder than before, and the rushing-air sound of heavy breathing. Even though it was a hot night, chills ran up and down my spine. I was glad we had hung our packs from a tree-limb, high off the ground. Then came a throaty grunt from the direction of where we had draped our gear, and a swishing sound like a leafy tree limb thrashing back and forth.

There was another growl, followed by snapping steps that sounded as if they were going away from us. We held our breaths, as the noises of the intruder became fainter and fainter. Finally, there was only the nighttime chatter of insects and the gurgling of the nearby stream.

We held a quick, whispered war-council---should we break camp, or stay put until daylight? If we left now, where would we go? We didn't even know for sure where we were! We didn't have a map, and we needed directions. Both of us cocked our ears for some time, but there were no more threatening noises. After more talk, we decided to stay where we were and head upstream as soon as there was light. Inside the dark, stuffy space we finally dropped off to sleep.

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"John! John!" From somewhere, a foggy-sounding voice was calling my name. "Come out here, quick!" Pushing aside the tent flap, I crawled outside and looked about. Over by the trees, Biff was pointing at the ground. "Look at this!" he called out, excitedly, "bear tracks!" Sure enough, around the tree where we had hung our packs were the unmistakable impressions in the soft earth where leaves and sod had been torn up and scattered about.

Frowning, my friend got down on his hands and knees. "There were two of them," he said, outlining the paw-prints with his fingertips, "one was smaller than the other."

"A mother bear and her cub!"

"I read somewhere that mother bears are very protective of their cubs."

There were more paw-prints along the stream bank in the direction from which we had come the afternoon before. Beaten-down tracks led into the woods.

"They were following us!"

"That's the way they went when they left!"

I was looking at a nearby tree limb. "This is what they wanted . . . the packs."

Although both bags were still slung from the lowest branch, their bottoms were scratched and scarred from where the intruders had obviously tried to pull them down.

"I guess the packs were just out of their reach."

I dropped mine down and looked it over. The buckles and straps were still intact. "We would have been in a real fix if they had ruined them and left us out here with no supplies!"

Biff gave a nervous laugh. "Maybe they weren't very experienced."

I remembered that we had talked and joked with the proprietor of the surplus store. about machetes and bears. At the time, the idea of needing the big blades for protection seemed pretty far-fetched. Now, I was not so sure "I'm for getting out of here, right away . . . they might come back with reinforcements!"

The other boy looked around, nodding. "Good idea."

Deciding to skip breakfast, in a hurry the two of us folded-away the two-part tent into the backpacks and crammed everything else into the side-pockets.

Biff held up a big slab of bacon. "What say we leave some bait," he said, "maybe they'll come back and we can see who they were." He stepped over to the space underneath where the packs had hung from the tree limb and set it atop one of the paw-prints in the dirt. Leaving the chunk of meat on the ground, we headed out along the creek-bank.

After trooping upstream about a mile, the ground began to rise and the creek became a shallow, stony rapid. Before long, we came into another small clearing where we could look back toward where we had been. "Hand me your binoculars," I said to Biff, "I want to check on something."

The boy pulled his spyglasses out of a knapsack pocket. Far away in the distance, shimmering in the sunshine, stood the field of tall grass we had cut our way through with the machetes the previous afternoon, along with the nearby old farmhouse. A thin column of smoke drifted upward from its stone chimney. Slowly, I panned the glasses back along the silvery, ribbon-like stream beside which we had hiked, finally spotting the tiny open area where we had camped overnight. I gazed down into the distant clearing and whistled. "Just as I thought . . ." I passed the binoculars to my friend. "See for yourself."

He adjusted the lenses and looked down into the valley. "Wow!" Biff burst out, his jaw dropping. "Good thing we left there when we did!" he gasped, transfixed by what he was seeing. An adult black bear and a half-grown cub were furiously tearing the slab of bacon into shreds and gulping it down.

Taking another look, as I watched, the larger bear angrily pawed the ground, scattering the underbrush where we had pitched our tent. Observing the violent scene in the clearing, it was unsettling to think that we had actually lain there all night with those creatures close by.

At length, I returned the glasses to Biff. The boy shook his head as he took in the beastly mayhem taking place at our former campsite. "We were lucky to get out of there in one piece!" he burst out. We both knew that if the bear had ripped into our tent it would have been all over for both of us---no unprotected human could have stood up to an attack by a mother black bear protecting her cub. Biff dropped the binoculars back into his pack, and in sobered silence we resumed our upstream hike along the bank.

At mid-morning, the two of us stopped for a rest-break. Biff sat on a mossy-rock and pulled some Vienna sausages from his backpack and handed me a can. As we ate, we watched fish swimming upstream in the rapids, their silver flanks catching the sun-drenched spray. "Kind of makes you wish we had brought fishing rods---we could have fish for supper."

"At least we have plenty of other food to last us for several days."

We buried our trash and moved on upstream. After a while we topped another rise and stopped again. Gazing through the binoculars, looking about, I spotted a square-shaped wooden structure thrusting above the treetops, a half-mile back from the stream. "I see a lookout tower over there in the woods."

"Let's go check it out."

The two of us struck-out through the underbrush in its direction. Because of the overhead tangle of limbs and leaves, there was only a sparse growth of grass and occasional moss and ferns on the shaded ground, so the going was cool and easy. At length, we came to a rutted, single-lane gravel road that soon led us to a pickup truck parked at the bottom of the wooden watchtower's legs. "Forestry Service," Biff read aloud the sign on the vehicle's door. Between the thick, bolted-together risers and braces, a rustic set of planked steps zig-zagged upward to the bottom of the weathered lookout cabin.

He leaned back and cupped his hands. "Hello! Anybody up there?"

A moment later, a young-looking man in a khaki uniform came out onto the deck and looked over the edge of the handrail at us. "Who are you?" the forest ranger shouted down.

"We're hiking in the woods, and saw the tower! "Do you mind if we come up there? I've never seen one of these up-close!"

The officer hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Okay . . . leave your packs at the bottom of the steps and come on up---"

At the top of the stairs, the young fellow introduced himself, and we told him who we were. He ushered us into a cubicle with picture windows on all four sides. The space was jammed with electronics, visual range-finders, and plotting boards. A panoramic view of treetops went out for miles in every direction. "We keep a lookout for anything unusual, in addition to fires," the officer went on, "one time we even spotted an airplane that had crashed in the woods not far from here."

My friend and I were awed by the view and impressed by the instruments about the place. On a square, elbow-height table in the center of the space was an elevation map of the area with the tower in the middle. Overlaid scales measured distances and directions in degrees from this particular location. The ranger told us there were towers every few miles apart in the forest, and if they sighted a plume of smoke, all of them could work together by radio to plot the location of the fire.

"You stay up here all the time? Where do you sleep?"

The ranger chuckled. "We stay up here for days at a time, and sleep whenever we can, on a cot."

I asked the obvious question. "Where is the bathroom?"

The fellow laughed again. "We have a 'little house' down in the clearing," he said, "and since no one else is usually here, we take a shower when we go home every few days!" He patted his pressed uniform. "I just got here this morning, so I'm fine for now!"

Just then, a machine in the corner started making a clattering sound and the ranger stepped over to it. "This is the 'teletype' . . . it prints-out information we need from a short-wave radio that's tuned to the state headquarters." He stopped talking and read what was coming off the printer. "Hmm. Looks like some bad weather's on the way---you guys going to be in these woods for a while?"

Biff glanced at me. "A few more days . . . is there going to be a storm?"

The fellow tore off the sheet of paper. "The weather bureau says some big thunderstorms could come through tonight. Maybe some high winds, too." He scanned down to the bottom of

the page. "If you're going to be out there, I would advise you to take cover as best as you can."

"Maybe we should get going, then."

Biff and I shook hands with the forester and clambered back down the gangly stairsteps to the ground and gathered our backpacks.

As we left the clearing, we looked up and waved to the ranger on his lofty perch.

"Watch out for bears!" he called down to us.

"We've already had our share of bears!"

The two of us resumed our trek upstream. Here and there we came across evidence of animals having been in the area recently, but didn't see any actual wildlife except a deer drinking at the bank and an eagle that flew low across the treetops in the late afternoon. By sunset, we had gone several more miles. At length, we came to a small open field a short distance back from the water at the base of a low cliff, where we decided to set-up our camp.

As I was unrolling the tent onto the ground, Biff called to me from the base of the bluff. "Look at this!" He was smiling and pointing at a spot on the ground. "Here's our water supply!" Sure enough, a steady little stream was gurgling out between some rocks. "A spring!" Now, we wouldn't have to use our purification tablets on the uncertain creek water; what was coming out of the ground was already as pure as it could be.

Biff looked up at the orange-sunset sky. "The lookout-tower guy said there would be storms, tonight---maybe we'd better pitch the tent under the bluff."

We found a grassy spot not far from the wellspring and raised the tent just beyond the edge of an overhang with a trench in the topsoil around the base of the tent; a trick we'd learned in the Scouts. The ground that sloped toward the creek would divert rainwater away from us.

The sun was behind the trees when I pulled the last tent-rope tight around its peg. Faced with the probability of a stormy night, we battened-down our campsite until we were satisfied we were ready for whatever nature might throw at us.

With the packs shoved back against the outward-"V"-shaped rear wall of the tent and our bedrolls unfurled length-wise in the tiny shelter, it was a tight squeeze. Biff hung the lantern on the inside of the front tent-pole and in the woodsy twilight we sat cross-legged for a dinner of canned fish and bread, along with water from the spring. My friend pulled out a deck of playing cards and we matched wits for about an hour.

All at once a brilliant flash of light burst through the front tent flap, followed by a rumble. *Thunder!* Startled, I pushed back the canvas cover and looked out. Another flash outlined the tree-trunks at the edge of the clearing. Biff and I scrambled out and looked up. More lightning shot through the trees over the low bluff above us; at the same time, the peals of thunder were becoming louder. Ominous-looking low clouds, backlit by the lightning, scudded overhead. As we stood there, a sudden gust of wind set the trees swaying to-and-fro. The tent became nervous, tugging against the ropes and stakes in the back-and-forth air currents.

"Let's make sure the lines are tight!" Biff tossed a hammer at me that I grabbed in midair. In a hurry, the two of us pulled on all the connections and drove the stakes deeper into the ground, as every second, the approaching storm gathered strength..

A dazzling flash, much brighter than the others, seared the forest beyond the top of the bluff. A shower of sparks cascaded down through the tree limbs; at the same time a noise beyond all description blasted our eardrums.

Biff and I dove into the tent. Just as we were buttoning the flap, there came an earsplitting *CRASH!* and the ground shook. Outside, huge, sloppy raindrops began pelting the tent's sloping sides; our lantern rocked back and forth at its post on the front tent pole, flickering fitfully as the

wind and the rain shook our straining shelter.

As we watched, a silver sheen of moisture formed on the underside of the heavy green "drill-canvas" that glistened in the yellow lamplight. "Don't touch it---that's what makes it waterproof!" I shouted, over the noise, "if we break the bead, it'll start dripping on us!" There was no sign of water at the bottom of the tent walls---the canvas's outside trenches so far were keeping out the water.

Then came an earsplitting report, and a loud splintering, cracking sound. The ground vibrated; the tent trembled. There was a rushing, whizzing noise just outside and a sound like a broad, heavy object slapping mud. Biff gasped. "Something fell on the ground, outside!"

The lantern blinked, its bouncing flame, projecting weird reflections on the inside of the shuddering tent. There was another blinding flash through the thick canvas, followed at once by a blast of thunder. A pressure wave dished the middle of the tent downward about an inch, then released its grip. Big drops of water hopped from the underside of the juddering canvas onto us. Even as our ears were still ringing, there came a cracking, splintering sound and the ground shook. We looked at each other, wide-eyed. "The whole forest is falling!"

The noise, the rain, the lightning and the wind went on for some minutes while we cowered in our flimsy shelter.

Then the rain slacked and the lightning and thunder began to trail off. In another fifteen minutes the storm seemed to be moving away from us.

Biff unhooked the lantern and we splashed out onto the soggy grass to see what had happened. The upper end of a three-foot diameter tree trunk, split down the middle, was on the ground about thirty feet from the tent, its leafy limbs splayed toward the creek-bank; the trunk elevated back over the top edge of the low cliff above us. "So *that* was the big noise we heard!" my friend croaked. He swung the lantern back-and-forth, its wavering lamplight showing how close we had come to being flattened by the enormous tree. I pointed my flashlight upward along the twenty-foot-high bluff and could see that other trees were down in the woods above us. The leafy limbs of a big knotty-oak dangled over the edge of the precipice, directly above the spring that still gurgled on, its cheerful, steady stream of water flowing down toward the mushy creekbank.

Off in the distance, intermittent lightning still flashed, along with low rumbles of thunder.

Biff looked up at the sky where stars were already starting to return. "That was a real hum-dinger!"

"Let's get some sleep!"

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Sunlight streamed through the narrow crack in the front of the tent. I raised up and tossed the canvas flap aside. Outside sagged the big fallen tree, its split trunk and bent limbs sprawled helplessly in the soggy soil near the tent. Picking my way through debris from the winds of the night before, I slushed across the rain-soaked campsite. Water was still rolling off the edge of the bluff down newly-formed gullies to the creek. Out in the roaring waterway, limbs and all kinds of floating objects, both natural and man-made, were riding downstream in the swift current .

"Hey!" came a voice from the tent, "where are you?"

"Over here!" I called out, slogging through the boggy underbrush back toward Biff. "Been doing a little exploring."

My friend handed me an opened can of tuna and some crackers. "We'll need lots of

energy---this could be a long day." He and I had another cross-legged meal with water from the spring.

I pulled a tiny transistor radio out of my pack. "I almost forgot I brought this thing along. . . . maybe there's something on the news about the storm."

I turned the dial and a man's flat, featureless voice squawked from the tiny speaker. "*Hellew, fewks,*" the announcer said, in his unsophisticated speaking-style, "*dis is da nudes at ta top of da howah.*"

Biff and I looked at each other and snickered. "That fellow is not in the big city!"

The "de-nasal" newsman said the storm had caused a lot of damage in the region, particularly in the national forest. We could have told him that. He went on with more news, but there was nothing else of special interest to us. "*And dat's the nudes, t'anks fer listenin',*" the fellow finished. Grinning, I switched off the little radio.

Since we didn't want to pack a damp tent, Biff suggested that we scout around the area while the canvas dried in the sunshine.

The two of us retraced our route back downstream for a short distance, then zig-zagged up the cliff-face, using rock outcroppings as handholds to grip our way to the top. Standing at the edge, Biff shook his head. "Sure was a good idea to pitch the tent close to bottom of the cliff!"

I stared, appalled, at where, almost directly above the tent, the wind had ripped the enormous trunk out of the ground and flung it headlong over the edge, limbs and all, just missing us, finally coming to a rest with its base lodged precariously back up at the top of the cliff.

Where we had originally planned to set-up the tent was now covered by a tree trunk weighing many tons. There was a peculiar smell in the air like ozone and freshly-cut wood

Behind us, gaps in the forest testified where many more trees had been wrenched to the ground. The two of us sloshed around, gaping at the amazing sights.

After a while, we returned to the campground, where the tent was now nearly dry. By the time we had gulped down a quick lunch of Vienna sausages and tinned biscuits, the canvas was crisp enough to fold into our backpacks. We topped-off our canteens from the spring, and with a last look around our little camp where so much had happened, the two of us headed upstream.

The going was a stumbling exercise in slipping and sliding, as we had to pick our way over scattered tree debris and around big puddles of standing water. Our shoes kept getting stuck in the mucky, sucking mud, making the pace even slower in spots. After about a mile, the creek bank improved, becoming mostly flat shale-stone that made walking much easier.

In the late afternoon, we came to a fence; evidently the boundary of the national forest. On the other side of the barrier was a clearing, with a brook running down the middle of it toward the creek. The open area looked inviting, so we climbed over the rustic wooden rails and set up camp.

"Let's build a campfire," Biff suggested, "we deserve some good, hot food after last night!"

While he went off in search of firewood, I cleared-out some underbrush in front of the tent and arranged a circular pattern of rocks in the scout fashion. As a final touch, I topped it with an improvised "A-frame" of branches for cooking over the fire.

Biff came back with an armload of wood, and using the waterproof matches, before long there was a good fire going in our makeshift fireplace. We dug around in our packs and came up with cans of beef and corn, and soon a stew was cooking in a pot hanging over the fire.

"Ah, this is the life!" Biff smiled, settling back on his backpack in front of the tent. "It sure beats battling bears and storms!"

As we ate, the sun disappeared through the forest, its last rays shining on the treetops across

the way. "You know something?" my friend said, "I hadn't noticed it while we were walking, but I believe the creek made a big turn, today."

I looked up at the purplish sky unfolding before us and realized he was right: the night before, the sun had set in front of us and now it was going down practically toward the rear of the tent. Every night our shelter had faced the water, so the stream *had* almost doubled back on itself.

"Wonder where the creek starts?" Biff surveyed the stream that was now only about half as wide as when we had started. "We must be getting close to its headwater."

"Maybe we'll soon find out."

By the light of the fire, we washed our dishes in the nearby little stream and arranged our belongings inside the tent. "Rather homey, I'd say," Biff yawned, surveying our comfy campsite.

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A "*CLUMP!*" woke me out of a sound sleep. My eyes flew open---what was *that*? The gray light of dawn was filtering through the crack in the front tent flap. All at once, '*something*' heavy pushed the edge of the tent canvas down onto the ground directly in front of my nose. "*What the---*?" Then came a rushing sound like a large-scale exhalation.

Wide-eyed, not breathing, I peeked out of the tent. On the ground in front of the pole was a *hoof* connected to the leg of a large animal! I looked up to see the smooth, veiny underside of an udder, its teats poking straight down at me! A few feet away, a white-faced heifer, solemnly chewing its cud, turned to stare at me.

"Biff!" I shook my slumbering friend. "Wake up! There are cows all around us!"

He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "What---?"

I stuck my head out the flap and looked around. "We're in a cow pasture! There are cows all over the place!"

A low-pitched animal rumble came from behind the tent. Raising up I looked around and was stupefied to see a hulking black bull about thirty feet away glowering at me! As I gaped, he lowered his head and pointed his horns directly at the tent.

My heart was hammering. "Biff, I don't like this!"

The boy looked around the other side and gasped. The bull pawed the ground and snorted.

"Let's get out of here!"

Biff bounded out of the tent. "Your shirt!" He pointed at me. "Your red T-shirt!" The bull had spotted it and was loping toward us. Then I remembered that *bulls supposedly go after red objects!*

Arms pumping, both of us vaulted over the nearby fence. An instant later, the bull's horns smacked into the top two wooden fence-rows with a loud "crunch!" The barrier shuddered, but held. The enraged giant made a couple of more lunges, then started circling near the fence, his bleary eyes never leaving us.

"It's your red shirt he's after," Biff said. I yanked it off and threw it as far as I could over the fence. The animal caught it with its horns and tossed it into the air, bellowing. He lowered his face and scrambled the hapless garment into the ground until it became a tattered rag.

The snorting fellow again looked across the fence at us.

"This could go on all day!" Biff groaned.

Just then, we heard a droning sound that became louder. A small yellow airplane shot over the clearing at treetop height, banked sharply and turned back in our direction. The bull looked up, startled. The other cows began to shuffle back toward the edge of the woods.

With a strident roar, the airplane swooped back over the campsite. The bull shook his head and dropped the mutilated shirt. To our surprise, he turned and started running toward the trees. Again, the yellow plane zoomed down at the clearing, pulling up just over the treetops. Wagging its wings, the aircraft flew off.

For what seemed like a long time, we could hear crashing and thrashing noises in the underbrush as the frightened animal ran farther from us. The cows, who had started it all, were huddled under the trees at the far end of the field, looking bewildered.

"Where did that airplane *come* from? He just about saved our lives!"

"Probably the Forest Service checking on our campfire."

"Guess you're right---we sent up a lot of smoke, last night." A thin plume of gray still drifted upward from the remains of the fire.

"How come there are cows around here?" .

"When we came over the fence, yesterday, I guess we went outside the national forest . . . this is probably somebody's farm."

Both of us climbed back over the wooden slats, all the while keeping a wary eye on the cows---but they looked like they were too unsettled to move toward us. In a hurry we pulled down the tent and stuffed it into our backpacks, crammed our belongings into the knapsacks; dug a hole and buried our trash. Finally, we shoveled dirt onto the remains of the fire, and with a last look-around, the two of us clambered back over the fence.

"Man, that was some deal!" Biff burst out. As we trooped along, we laughed and joked about what had happened. "Bet that old bull was surprised to see the airplane flying at him!"

"I was surprised to see the airplane flying at him!"

After a while, we stopped for a bankside breakfast of canned Vienna sausages and water from our canteens. My friend eyed one of the little weiners and popped it into his mouth. "Whoever invented these was a genius!"

Food-fortified, once more we headed on upstream. The farther along we went, the more narrow the stream seemed to become, as we were evidently nearing the headwaters. By mid-afternoon, the creek that had been a vigorous cataract when we started our trek, was now only a lazy flow a few feet wide. At length, it split off into several quiet little brooks, each of which snaked up and away into the woods. "Looks like this is the end of it," Biff said.

"Let's cross-over to the other side and go back downstream."

We hop-scotched across the rocky ford and began to re-trace the waterway. We found the footing to be easier on the opposite bank than it had been on the original side, and the two of us had walked several miles by the time the slanting sun began to filter through the trees.

When we came to a flat, open space, my friend slung his pack to the ground. "I'm tired," he said, sitting down on a fallen tree trunk, "what with battling that bull and all that walking, today, I'm ready to crash." He looked around and took a deep breath. "Let's set up the tent and hit the sack early."

By the time we had downed a stewpot dinner, night had fallen.

I was almost asleep when I felt something like a feather go across my face. "There was something on my face!" I thought. Groping for the flashlight, I shined its beam around the inside of the tent---and gasped. An outsized long-legged *spider* was standing on my bed-roll! Grabbing a shoe, I whacked at the creature---and missed. The angular '*arachnid*' fled off to the corner of the tent and disappeared underneath it. Biff moaned in his sleep and turned over. I cast the light around the tent and saw *three more big spiders* crawling up the inside of the slanting tent wall! Wide-eyed, I confronted two more on Biff's bed-roll, just below his chin, and a pair sidling

through, just inside the front tent flap! I shined the flashlight out through the front opening and sucked-in my breath. The grassy ground outside in front of the tent was literally covered by a heaving army of enormous spiders!

"Spiders!" I rocked Biff's shoulder. "Wake up! There are spiders all over the place!"

"Lemme alone . . . I'm tired."

This was not the time to be delicate. I jerked his shoulder again---harder, this time---prompting the spiders on his bedroll to scoot off toward the edge of the tent. The three others on the canvas-wall turned and looked at us, their tiny, beady eyes catching the light of my flash with horrid red reflections. A pair prancing through the cracks of the front flap stopped and stared at me.

"Get up! We've got problems!"

My friend sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Look! There are spiders all over the place!"

The probing flashlight beam outlined more of the creatures. I shot the light out through the flap-opening again and my eyes went wider. The seething mass of spiders covering the ground was now even bigger than when I had looked out a minute before.

"Great Scott!" Biff gasped, "light the lantern!"

I fumbled around in the pack---all the while keeping my eyes on the leggy interlopers---in a moment the familiar yellow glow of the kerosene lantern lit up the inside of the tent. What we saw, in the fullness of the lamplight, were far more of the spiders than we had seen with the flashlight! Spiders were crawling everywhere---up the inside of the tent and on the backpacks at our feet. More spiders were climbing up the tent poles, and on our bedrolls. The creatures were everywhere.

"How in the---?" Biff's question hung in the hot, humid night air. He was looking hard at one of the spiders. "I believe these are 'daddy longlegs', he said, shine your flash around and let's see." When I aimed the beam back and forth, Biff let out a long breath. "We're in luck---these spiders aren't poisonous."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure . . . we had a lesson one time in biology class about spiders and I remember they said 'daddy longlegs' can't bite humans. They look awful, but they won't hurt anybody."

"But I don't want spiders crawling all over us!"

"I have some repellent in the pack . . . let's run these guys out of the tent and sprinkle the stuff around the edge---that'll keep them away." Biff pulled out a little bottle "Bought it at the surplus store. The man told me we'd probably need it down here in the forest!"

"He surely was right."

We shooed all the spiders out through the bottom of the tent, then Biff ran a thin line of the smelly liquid down the inside of the slanting walls and across the front flap. "There! We'll be okay the rest of the night."

Now wide-awake, the two of us sat up for a while playing cards, all the time keeping a wary eye-out for the leggy intruders, but no more of the unwelcome guests came to visit.

* * *

The sounds of someone whistling and a fragrant sizzle brought me awake. I looked out the tent flap and saw sausages cooking in a pan over the fire. "About time you came to," Biff turned to me, grinning, "big night with spiders?"

"Don't remind me!" I said, pulling on my shoes. "By the way, have you seen any of them this morning?"

"Not a one---I guess they only come out at night, or whatever."

"It was like a bad dream."

In a few minutes, we had the gear loaded in our backpacks and the fire put out. Then the two of us struck-out again along the grassy creek-bank.

We had gone only a short distance downstream when we passed by the clearing on the opposite side where we had ridden-out the big storm the other night. Gazing over at the twisted, fallen trees on the other bank brought shudders to both of us.

"Look how close that big one came to landing on top of us---wow!"

From our vantage point across the creek it was obvious how fortunate it had been that we had pitched the tent close-under the bluff. Huge trees back in the woods on this of the creek were also blown-down.

As the day wore on, we passed by one-by-one the familiar landmarks of a few days earlier, and at mid-afternoon we came opposite the clearing where we had encountered the bears. The two of us stopped and stared for some time at the ravaged campsite across the way. "Kinda creepy, ain't it?" Biff offered.

"Hope those bears *stay* over there!"

As Biff's dad was supposed to pick us up the afternoon of the next day, we pressed-on downstream. About the time the sun was dropping below the treetops, we came to the opposite bank from where we had started along the stream that first afternoon of our hike. The two of us stepped across the shallow shale bottom back to the original side and hiked down the creek to just beyond where we had entered the forest and made camp for the night.

While I cleared a space for the fire and arranged the stone circle, Biff set off into the woods to find kindling and firewood. Just as I had finished lashing the overhead frame for the stewpot, Biff came back into the little clearing with a big grin on his face. "You'll never guess what I found on the other side of a fence back there," he said, plopping an armload of short branches onto the ground. My friend laughed out loud. "A patch of watermelons about a hundred yards from here!"

"Watermelons?"

Biff pointed at the deep woods. "Will we ever have dessert, tonight! Let's go get one right now . . . before it gets dark . . . we can have it after supper!"

I followed him into the thicket behind the tent. After slogging through the underbrush, we came to a rise and a wooden fence. "Look at that!" he pointed. Sure enough, sprawled about on the ground behind the fence, were dozens of big green watermelons in cultivated rows.

"This is not a watermelon 'patch'---it's a watermelon 'field'!"

Biff was already climbing over the fence. "Let's get a big one and take it back!" He pulled out his camping knife and cut the stem of the nearest one. The two of us lugged the heavy melon across the furrows and hauled it over the top of the wooden fence.

After a concoction of "impromptu stew", as Biff called it, my friend took his machete and sliced into the watermelon. "Holy cow!" he burst out, as the two halves fell apart, "its yellow!" Sure enough, instead of the usual red, the inside of this watermelon was bright yellow in color.

"I've never seen a yellow watermelon . . . I wonder what it tastes like---"

Biff wasn't wasting any time. He took a big slice out of the middle and bit into the juicy piece. "Hmm," he swallowed, "it tastes just like a regular red watermelon!" The boy scooped out the rest of the seedless center of one half and downed it, slurping. "Now, *this* is the life!" he

smiled, leaning back against his backpack.

I reached for my machete and helped myself to the glistening yellow middle of the other half. "It really does taste like a red watermelon!"

Biff was again tackling the insides of the big juicy fruit. "Great watermelon!" he swallowed, wiping his chin with the back of his hand, "let's go get another one!"

"Thought you'd never ask!" We headed back toward the woods. Over the next hour, we downed the sweet insides of a half-dozen of the yellow melons until we sat back, our insides nearly bursting.

"You know, we can play a practical joke on whoever grew these things," Biff winked, "let's put the watermelons back together with sticks and set them back out in the field just like we found them!"

I snickered. "Can you imagine a farmer picking up watermelons and they all fall apart with sticks!"

In the morning, after helping ourselves to another watermelon-laced for breakfast, we put all the halves back together with short twigs and carried the booty back to the field, re-connecting the stems onto the rinds. Even from close-up, one could not tell they had ever been touched.

The deed done, we climbed back over the fence and surveyed our handiwork. Out in the hot sun, the watermelon patch looked just like it had before we had arrived.

Biff glanced at his watch. "We better take-down the camp and pack-up," he said, "my dad is supposed to be here sometime in the early afternoon."

A half-hour later, as my friend was picking up his backpack, he hesitated. "I have a hunch," he said, "let's go back to the field . . . something tells me there may be some excitement."

We stashed our packs behind a big tree. Creeping back into the woods, the two of us approached the field from a roundabout direction. At a slight rise, we dropped down and crawled through the underbrush up to the fence. Pushing aside a leafy, low-lying shrub we peered out under the bottom wooden slat. Nearby, off to one side of the field was the back of an old house. Gray smoke curled out of its stone chimney. "Omigosh!" Biff gasped, "it's that farmhouse we saw when we got out of my dad's car the other day!"

Just then, we heard voices. Moments later, from down the hill, a half-dozen people, laughing and talking, trudged up the slope toward the watermelon patch. "Here they are!" a young boy shouted, pointing and running toward the watermelons on the ground.

"I told you we had a lot of watermelons for you!" an older man in overalls called up to him, "take as many as you want!"

By now, we could see that the group also included a middle-aged woman, along with several more youngsters who came into sight, squealing with excitement.

Biff let the branch in front of us slowly drop back into its original position. "Let's get out of here!" he mouthed, motioning.

"Wait!" I whispered, pulling the branch back just a little. "I want to see this!"

We held our breaths and watched. The farmer reached down and lifted one of the biggest watermelons.

"*What th---*?" he let out in a surprised-sounding voice. Half of a watermelon was in his arms; little sticks poking out around the edges of the rind. The other half was dumped at his feet. The owner's overalls were wet in front around his midsection. There was a look of confusion on his face.

A boy lifted another watermelon half with stick-pins in it. "Here's another one!" he shouted. In turn, the others picked up watermelons, all of which fell apart and thumped onto the plowed

furrows at their feet. *"What's going on here?"* the farmer thundered.

Biff started to squirm backward from our hidden vantage-point. I turned and crawled after him. From behind us, a chorus of agitated voices sounded through the woods as we crept our way back through the underbrush. Along the way, we retrieved our stashed backpacks and pushed along in a hurry through the tall grass back out to the gravelly pike.

Since we knew it would be foolhardy to be seen by any of the locals at this point, we concealed ourselves in some thick brush where we could view the road but would be hidden from prying eyes.

We sat there, sweating in our humid hideaway, for about an hour, when a familiar car drove by. Biff leaped out and waved. In a few seconds, his dad had backed-up to where we were.

"Get in, boys!" the affable man called to us, "it's time to get back to civilization!"

We stuffed the backpacks into the trunk and scrambled inside. As we rode along, the two of us told the man about some of the things that had happened on the camping trip, leaving out certain parts we preferred to keep to ourselves.

The driver turned on the radio. "Let's get some news," he said.

A familiar voice came out of the speaker. *"Hellew, fewks---"*