

The Camping Trip

By A. C. Zito

“They’re going to like you! They really will!” But I had to ask her. I’ve heard stories about him from her other boyfriends. But who knows; they might’ve just been trying to pull my leg! Yeah, that’s it, they’re just jealous! I’m the one with the school’s prettiest girl, and they all messed up in some way by cheating on her or treating her like crap... but still... I had to ask:

“But your dad...” she flinched when I said this. She kept quiet as they walked up the steps to her *gigantic* mansion. I mean... she had it made! She turned me to where I was facing her and fixed my collar.

“You’re going to do great! Don’t let him scare you. He’s only a dad. Dads like to scare their daughters’ boyfriends. It’s *human nature!* Just remember to *be* confident, *don’t* let him try to intimidate you, and most importantly... remember... this is *most* important over *anything and everything*... just be yourself!” She looked up at me, and I looked down at her. We smiled at each other and then she strained her neck pushing her lips up towards my face which I graciously accepted. I lowered my head down and felt my lips get closer and closer and...

Ahheemm We quickly unlocked arms and jumped forward to where we were facing her parents. Her father was holding the door open staring me down. His eyes penetrated their way into the back of my skull. I felt my legs waiver and my knees give way. My body felt like it had turned to a gelatin. Like I already knew her dad was the predator and I the prey already being turned into his dessert.

“*Stick out your hand!*” she whispered into my ear. I felt from the tone of her voice that she was snapping at me, nudging me with her elbow and everything. But I couldn’t help it. I felt frozen in place from how scary her dad made me feel. But then I got up the nerve. I stuck out my hand and croaked out:

“Hi! My name is Jeremy! Jeremy Calloway; I’m in your daughter’s French class.” My hand stayed hanging loosely in the air while her dad kept his gaze fixed right into the center of my soul. I let it hang their awkwardly for ten seconds at most until her mom said:

“*Enchantée!* Jeremy; that’s a lovely name! Your mother must be very proud of you for having such lovely manners!” I couldn’t help but blush. She was a delight!

“Jeremy, this is my mom, Christina, and my dad-“

“Wallace,” he interrupted her. He stopped staring at me and directed his view to Halle.

“Halle, darling; don’t ever call your mother by her first name. It’s rude. She’s your mother. You introduce her as Mrs. Batcher and me, Mr. Batcher. That’s what your *other* friends call us. You should’ve just said, ‘*These are my parents,*’ and the boy would’ve just called us Mr. and Mrs. Batcher and that would have been that. But you didn’t have to make it so complicated, now did you?”

“But I?” Halle tried to reply but Mr. Batcher was already looking at me again.

"I don't mean to be rude, son, but Jeremy... what's your problem? Are you a nerd? You look like you should be at *Math Camp* right this very moment, not hanging out with a *girl!* Save high school girls for the captain of the football team and the kid who already owns a motorcycle and will let his girlfriend wear his leather jacket." He looked me up and down. "You don't look like *either* of those types of *fellas* now do *ya*, boy? Now, where exactly did you say you picked up my daughter? Were you two trying out for some school play and you both didn't get the lead roles for *Romeo and Juliet*? And out of each of your self-pity you both decided *this* little thing you both got going on right now would be fun?" Mr. Batcher took out two oven mitts from behind his back pocket, sticking them both on, ending his rant with: "Just leave your silly high school games at the door and you two can come inside when you both are ready to know what exactly your walking into because this isn't *French class, Peter Pan and Wendy!*"

"AND THIS ISN'T SOME MOVIE SCRIPT, DAD! THIS MY LIFE! SO STOP ACTING LIKE YOU CAN MAKE UP LINES TO TRY AND IMPRESS MY NEW BOYFRIEND!" Halle screamed this out at her dad who screamed back:

"AND SINCE WHEN DID YOU HAVE ANOTHER *BOYFRIEND?*" Lowering his voice, "Now excuse me, but I have the baked potatoes to take out of the oven." Turning to me, "Jeremy, go watch the steaks for me. They're on the grill. Do you know where the back porch is?"

Once I got to the back porch and looked inside the grill, there were no steaks to be found. No, instead were maybe eight or nine burgers. They looked about done so I brought them inside only to have Mr. Batcher angrily snatch the plate from my hands, yelling:

"Did you even *see* the cheese?" He was out the door before I could even think to stutter at my own insolence. I *couldn't* mess this up! Halle was the girl of my dreams, and I wanted her to be mine! And if that meant sucking up to her father like a fat pig sucking on an apple during the holidays, then so be it!

He came back in with the cheese melted onto the burgers. I didn't even *like* cheese. But it didn't matter. I had to *act* like I liked it so Mr. Batcher would approve of me so one day when Halle and I are in our late twenties and I thought it was the right time, I could ask Mr. Batcher for his blessing so I could propose to the coolest, prettiest girl in high school, and she would say yes and then we'd live happily ever after and my life would be so perfect and all the guys that are on the wrestling team wouldn't shove me into lockers anymore. And maybe I'd be one of the cool kids. Just maybe... it would be a long shot but who knows!

"Can you go get the pierogis, young man?" he asked. I was about to ask what a pierogi is, but I thought it wasn't the wisest choice so I went outside and started scavenging the yard.

"So has he actually helped you get a better grade in French?" Halle shrugged to her mom.

"It was just a dare because Molly said that she *actually* went to a homeless shelter and was bragging about it getting all the other girls jealous so I thought I could do some charity work too and show Molly that she isn't *all that!*" Her mom nodded approvingly.

"I wouldn't *dare* go to a homeless shelter or even *think* about bringing some nerd to prom coming up. I mean... does your boyfriend, *Troy*, even know?" Halle shrugged and skimmed through all of her pictures on *Instagram*.

"I mean... our pictures together are still up on my *Insta* but for all he knows, he'll *probs* have to bring Gretchen and just hope I don't get jealous!" Halle's mom looked taken aback by this.

"He *wouldn't* bring his ex, would he?" Halle didn't respond. Instead, she found a cute picture of her and Troy and said:

"Ooooooh, *mom*, look at this one of us! Don't we look so cute!" Her mom nodded, replying:

"So cute! But do you know what would look even cuter? You and him while you both are all *prommed* out!" Halle sighed at this.

"Yeah, I *know!* I'm just going to have to wait until next year until we have our *fabulous* prom pictures!" Halle's mom looked at her disapprovingly.

"But he'll be in *college*, Halle! What if he's too busy doing college football stuff? You might have to bring *Jeremy* again." Halle shuddered at the thought. They both looked out the window as Jeremy scoped the perimeters of their backyard possibly looking for something.

"What is he even *doing?*" Halle asked her mom. She shrugged, frowning at the scene.

I gave up! I didn't find *anything* with a label on it that said *pierogis* so I took out my phone and looked it up; it's food! A potato dish wrapped in a layer of something... bread? A type of grain? It looked appetizing, I quickly realized, as I skimmed the pictures. It made my mouth water.

I went over to the grill and opened it up... but I didn't see the potato dish anywhere! All I saw was a thing of tin-foil that was possibly steaming. But I knew it had to be the potato dish! I picked it up. It was so hot! I quickly played hot potato with it all the way into the house where I threw it on the counter. Mr. Batcher looked at me long and hard before he finally shook his head at me. It was going to take a lot to make him like me. I didn't know if I had it in me to keep this up.

He looked inside the tin-foil, staring disapprovingly at the potato dish.

"They're not done." He said as he dusted off his hands and looked back at me...

"*Uh-uuhhhh!*" I began to start picking it up, ready for the game of hot potato to begin once again before he held out his and said:

"NO! I'll just put it on the stove, '*Chef Ramsey.*' We don't have all day to have them keep sitting there." I sighed, relieved. "Go start making your burger." I nodded, feeling kind of hungry. Mr. Batcher already had tomatoes, lettuce, onions, and multiple condiments all placed out. I just didn't know where to start. I decided to start with the tomato. I grabbed a dinner knife and began trying to cut at the tomato, but I felt two beady eyes locked on me. I had to look at him to see what the matter was.

“OH MY GOD!” he blurted out. I could see the disgust on his face as he took the knife from my hand and threw it on the ground.

Clang-cling-cling-clang he waited for the silence to come before he picked back up where he left off:

“DO I LOOK LIKE I’M GOING TO SIT AROUND AND WATCH AS YOU TRY TO CUT A TOMATO WITH A *KITCHEN KNIFE*?” He slid out a steak knife from its compartment and swung it over to where the end was facing where my chin met with my neck.

“Mr. Batcher?” I asked, feeling a warm pee sliding down my left leg.

“STEAK KNIFE! STEAK KNIFE, STEAK KNIFE, *STEAK KNIFE!*” I nodded and looked over as Halle and her mom came into view. They both stood in the doorway not paying much attention to the knife two inches from my neck.

“I’m going to the mall.” Halle remarked.

“But what about *dinner*?” Mr. Batcher snapped back, still holding the knife to my neck. Halle shrugged and left.

“It was nice to have you over, Jeremy! Come back anytime you want, I hope you had a lovely dinner.” Mrs. Batcher smiled at me and disappeared from view as well.

Mr. Batcher stared at the empty doorway for up to two minutes after they had left. I only stared at him, the whole time thinking about how I was *actually* in *Halle Batcher’s* kitchen. The prettiest girl in school; the cutest girl in school; the coolest girl! I was the luckiest guy in the whole wide world! All I had to do now was put up with her *crazy* father which I’ve heard on television is something *every* boyfriend has to deal with. And I believed in myself. It was tough... but for Halle Batcher? Anything! I’d give her a double rainbow and all my *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* action figures!

“So I’ll see you when I pick up Halle for prom next week?” I asked even though it was more of a statement than a question. He shook his head.

“ROGER!” He yelled out.

“I’M NOT READY YET!” came a voice from somewhere distant inside the massive mansion. Mr. Batcher nodded at this. He then looked at me.

“Troy... go grab your backpacking gear. We leave in a few minutes.” I stared at him dumbfounded. Why did he call me Halle’s ex-boyfriend? And ready for what? Who was Roger? Backpacking gear?” Before I could think any further about this, a younger boy came downstairs, possibly a sophomore or freshman. But he looked at me, confused.

“I always thought Troy would be more muscular and... *athletic-looking*...” Mr. Batcher looked me up and down and nodded to his son.

“Me too.” He said. Then facing me, “Troy... this is my son, Roger; he’ll be going backpacking with us.” Roger threw me one of the backpacks he had in his hands, saying:

“Halle told me to go ahead and pack you this since it was your first time. There are some better clothes and some hiking shoes for you to change into.” I stared at the big, clunky thing. It was so heavy; I let it drop to the ground as soon as Roger turned around and headed back into another room.

“I need to let my parents know.” I informed Mr. Batcher. But he wasn’t paying any attention. He was too busy on the phone, talking to someone in another language. I was intrigued by how it sounded like nothing I’ve ever heard before. Almost like he was *making up* a language.

We took a helicopter from their home and were brought to a private jet where we then took off. I had told my parents we were going to some woods nearby, but it seemed more like we were headed to a completely different country. The private jet landed at another airport where we then hopped on another helicopter. At times I fell asleep. But when I *was* awake I couldn’t ever understand what Mr. Batcher and Roger were saying. They were always speaking a completely different language. A language I had never even heard of before. And if it wasn’t for Mr. Batcher being an adult and all I would have actually thought they were speaking gibberish to each other.

“Wake up,” I woke up to see Mr. Batcher and Roger standing over me. They both carried sinister smiles to go with their two faces. I felt myself letting a steady stream slide down my legs once more.

“You think you can date Halle and treat her like crap? But Troy, we have different plans for you!” Roger nodded to his father.

“Where are we?” I asked, rubbing my eyes. Roger stood up upon me saying this. He pointed towards a glint of light in the distance.

“That’s the town of Boone, North Carolina. Have you ever heard of it?” I shook my head. But maybe I have...

“When did we leave California?” they didn’t answer. They stood facing the town in the distance. It was nighttime. I never thought I would ever find myself in what seemed to be the Appalachian Mountains.

“But how do you *know*?” Roger asked his father. Mr. Batcher shook his head, saying:

“I don’t,” Roger then turned back to me and said:

“This is your trail. You hike to that town. It’s been abandoned for years, but an old woman still lives there somewhere in one of the downtown buildings that still stands, and the building isn’t fully dilapidated yet.” I look at the two of them, stunned.

“Why are you two abandoning me?” neither of them answered. Instead, they both looked out at where the light glowed and began talking to each other in their language I couldn’t understand.

They brought me down to where the trail started and pushed me out. They both laughed as they said to each other:

"Gibberish, gibberish, gibberish. Gibberish." The other one replied:

"Gibberish, gibberish, gibberish. Gibberish, gibberish." I stared at the two of them, stunned as they rose higher and higher until they took off and disappeared from view.

What did that mean? So they weren't actually speaking an actual language the entire time? But why were they messing with my mind? Why did they leave me here? Leave me in the darkness?

The trail stood before me. How was I supposed to head off into the darkness without any light? But I took out my phone and saw it had a little bit of battery on it. I turned the flashlight on, put my backpack on and headed towards the trail's entrance.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp I was soon surrounded by woods and the deeper I went, the more unsure I felt about being inside an area filled with nothing but trees and wildlife... and me. I was all alone. After the first hour of what seemed like I was walking aimlessly it finally began to sink in.

"They deserted me," I finally whispered to myself. I didn't even correct them that I wasn't Troy. I'm pretty sure Troy cheated on Halle with some girl named Gretchen. Is that why they deserted me? They thought I cheated on Halle?

I turned back around and started walking the other way back towards where they dropped me off. It was all just a joke, I bet. All but a prank. They were going to be waiting at the spot where they dropped me off in the helicopter and all would be fine.

I picked up my pace. I knew I had to hurry up and get back before my phone died. Otherwise, how *else* was I going to see? But it was too late... the light shut off, and I looked down just in time to see my phone go dark on me.

"NO!" I screamed out into the darkness.

No a voice whispered back to me. I look around. But it's no use. I can't see anything.

"Hello?" I say. But I whisper it as I feel my feet turn the other way and begin heading back towards where I was initially walking. I pick up my pace as I hear someone walking behind me.

It's not this way; it's that way a voice says behind me. Another voice says:

No, it's that way the voice comes from behind me as well. I begin running as I hear footsteps pick up from behind me. I quickly take off the backpack and head off in a sprint as I hear whispers from alongside me where the trail meets the woods.

Then I come to it. It must've been a town abandoned over hundreds of years ago. But as I look at the lamps, I realize their lights are on. But dim. Very dim. So dim that I feel like any minute now they plan to burn out and leave me in total darkness.

“Hello?” I call out. The darkness that comes with the town leaves me terrified beyond belief. But as I look into the darkness that is the trail, the town seems more enticing.

I come to a river where I see an older woman washing plates and utensils and clothes. She looks up at me and frowns:

“Troy?” she says to me, “Honey, it’s not safe to be out here at night. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby. Go back inside, baby.” I back away as she keeps repeating those four words. I start walking down what used to be a street. A rat scurries past me. The older woman appears once more, coming out from a patch of woods and chases after it. She catches it and takes a bite out of its back as it squeals out in a wretched scream. She then notices me and looks at me with sorrowful eyes.

“Troy?” she says, “It’s not safe to be out here when it’s dark. Go back inside, honey. Go back inside. Go back inside, honey. Go back inside.” She keeps repeating this to me as blood drips down from her mouth. I back away and then turn around and begin sprinting from her as I hear her still repeating those same awful words. I head off towards where more buildings are grouped together and look around seeing words spray-painted on every wall:

R.I.P

TROY

I come to a main field where I scream out for someone to help me. Just someone. Only one person. I look everywhere. Someone has to *save me*.

“*Come inside, Troy.*” I try to turn around but my neck already has an arm locked around it making it so I can’t breathe. I feel the older woman dragging me up into the tree. The leaves smother me as I try to flee from their grasp. “Troy, baby.” She whispers to me, “Come inside, Troy, it’s not safe outside in the dark. Come inside, Troy. Come inside, Troy.”

“TROY, TROY, TROY! WAKE UP!” I pull the covers off me and look around at my dorm room. My roommate looks at me, concerned. “TROY!” he says a fourth time, “You’re going to be late to class! Mr. Batcher’s going to be furious!” I thank him, get dressed, and head out. I look back at my hall and for a second I see my name possibly scribbled on it. My name... with R.I.P. written above it.