

Many stories start with the age old phrase, "*once upon a time..*" And I suppose I could start this story that way, but I'm going to tell you right from the get-go that this is a true story that happened many years ago to my family. We still talk about it from time to time, we've dubbed a family legend that is hard to believe. An epic tale. A devil of a tale, you might say, but now I'm getting ahead of myself...

It all started many years ago with the idea of a large family gathering that was a bit family reunion, hidden behind the name of family camping. After months of talking about it, a date was set to pack up and trek off into the bush {wilderness} and bunker down for a weekend away from civilisation, responsibilities, the internet, and what we suspected would be our sanity.

Preparing for 4 people, the small size of my own family, to go camping isn't too difficult, but each family was asked to provide certain items to help make the weekend run smoother and that meant supplying enough quantities to spread amongst 23 or more people. Still, the lure of spending a weekend away kept our little family motivated to do our share of the work, and then, because we are either downright crazy or incredibly excited, we decided to show up a day earlier and enjoy the quiet lull of nature with our own small gang, a tag-along, and a slide show.... Yes, a good old fashioned slide show.

I can hear you, Dear Reader, asking, "Why the slide show?" My mother-in-law, affectionately known amongst our family as Nana, and I'm sure you could call her that too and she wouldn't mind a bit, was feeling very nostalgic that year, and she wanted to put on a slide show for all the grandchildren, her own children, and their spouses. So, we helped her pack up all the needed items, loaded them into our car along with the food, bedding, a few games, and set off for the hour long journey to the back of beyond.

We had been to this remote location before in other such adventures that became an annual tradition for my husband's family for many years, yet each time we made the long drive out I often felt that a time arose in the endless eternity of driving where I was either utterly lost or had completely forgotten where I was going. I was never alone, for Nana would often interject with helpful tips like, "I do believe you passed the turn-off some time ago, but I didn't want to tell you."

Or my husband assuring us both we were still on the correct path and should, “proceed forward until I indicate it’s time to turn, trust me!” This would of course evoke a heated conversation while the two backseat drivers tried to decide who was right. I chose to go with the guy holding the map.

Onward I drove, much to the scowling look on my own face, and Nana beside me desperately calling out things she thought might be familiar landmarks. And, perhaps they were, but after a while each tree looks the same, each fence post a curiosity in the middle of nowhere, and when the well paved road becomes dirt with pitted holes in it you begin to wonder why you decided to make the journey in the first place, and maybe, just maybe taking your car straight to the mechanic for new shocks.

My husband was right, of course, and we did make it to our destination. The kids were eager to get out and stretch their legs, some of us were intent on using the facilities and refilling our water bottles. A quick exploration of the immediate area is always done to decide what, if anything, has changed.

The thing is, while we camped, we did not generally do so in tents.... I mean, there was that *one* year where my family *did* use a tent and the weather dipped lower than low and we had to break ice off our tent one dark morning to rush a child to the bathroom. That particular year there were not enough blankets in our tent to keep us warm, and no matter how closely we huddled together and dragged the dog into our sleeping bags for extra warmth we simply had to concede that we were freezing.

Most years, however, we slept in the bunkhouse. There are 3, to be exact, on the property, but in general we all hunkered down in one communal bunk house that was located just above the bathrooms. It was a long climb up, and upon entering the large room there were groups of bunks all sectioned off by curtains. Each family claimed such an area, sometimes bunking together in order to have enough room for the extra family who showed up. Nana always took the communal area which has a lower bunk in it, for she didn’t want to wake anyone if she needed a cuppa in the middle of the night. Of course, we often teased her that it wasn’t the cuppa that kept us awake, it was the window rattling snoring that she is well known for amongst her family.

The camp also offered us an indoor kitchen with a large gas stove, a deep sink with running water one was instructed never to drink, a phone for emergencies or to call out collect if you wished. There was a fridge that often needed to be turned on, and if packed just right could hold the contents of most of the food for the weekend. There was, of course, a few dishes, but not many which is why we often brought our own. A large walk in pantry, that we equally never used, leaving our staples inside of the now empty eskies {coolers} lest any critters found the urge to roam at night.

There was also one large table in the middle of the room, which made entering the kitchen a slow process as you'd have to walk all the way around the table in order to access the larger common room. Yet, it was practical too, as it takes many hands to feed a crowd, and we could all gather around the table to pitch in. Or, when loaded down with meal offerings the large quantity of family could circle around it filling their plates and exiting to the common room making the filling of plates less chaotic and time consuming.

The common room was one long room with a door to the outside at the far end, and a doorway to the kitchen at the other. It was often stocked with chairs stacked up neatly on one wall, and long tables that were available to set up if needed. A fireplace sat in the front left corner to warm the entire place, and a large wooden table at the other end housed the games that each family brought for the weekend. Historical photos of the logging process that once happened in the area adorn the walls and making for interesting conversational pieces.

That particular year, after stretching our legs and burning off a little steam, we set about unloading the car, some trekking up to the bunk rooms to claim our traditional front left corner room and deposit sleeping bags, pillows, and clothes. Others carried food, cooking supplies, and dishes inside and unpacked them. The smallest amongst us stocked the bathrooms with soap and toilet paper ready for further use when needed.

Once all of these preparations were done, a hasty meal of sandwiches and lemonade was prepared and we retreated outside to the scattered picnic tables to enjoy our meal. A tablecloth was spread out, food was put down, and then we debated the difference between ravens and crows. Next we set about discussing what the bird, too far overhead to be certain,

was. Then we debated our evening plans: a meal and the infamous slide show. When the food was devoured some explored while others lazed in the sun and read. It was, to be honest, an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon.

We are beach dwellers, which means as I'm sure you've guessed, that we come from the coast. This means we are often first to see the sun in the morning as it peeks it's sleepy yellow and pink head over the horizon, and last to see it's purple and red hues as it sinks back to bed. We are use to seeing the sun up well before six am, and not seeing it set until nine pm or even later in the summer. Adjusting to being inland is always interesting as the sun sets much sooner, and so we found ourselves with dusk quickly upon us after lazing an entire afternoon away.

We made our way indoors to begin the preparation of the evening meal. My husband had decided to bring supplies for his infamous "Bacon Pasta", a recipe he once found in a magazine and decided it looked simple enough to make. Nana busied herself setting up the slide show, and I hopped between both, and the children as needed. As my husband trimmed the rind off the bacon he asked where the dog was so he could feed the trimmings to him.

I poked my head out the kitchen doorway and gave a sharp whistle for the dog. We no longer live in the country and that means a smaller play yard for our Buster. He'd taken it well, for the most part, but he lived it up royally when we were on this annual trip taking moments when he felt the family was safe to poke his head off in the nearby forest and have a glimpse of what the wilds were up to.

He came running, not necessarily because of my whistle, but far more likely because I followed up the whistle with the call of, "Bacon!" In fairness, we often wondered why we never named the dog bacon, because if a whistle didn't bring him running that one simple word certainly did.

He came flying around the side of the bunk house and up under the small roofed carport area before arriving at the kitchen door. Yet, as he lifted a front paw to enter, he paused, his fur rose along his spine and he backed away growling. We were mystified.

We adopted our black and white mixed breed pup from the local dog's home. We don't know much about his past, but in all his years with us he'd never growled. Oh he'd barked once, at a cow. Another time at a neighbour, which caused us much concern because Buster was often quiet and laid back. He didn't bother to bark at the postman, or delivery men, or people who came knocking on our door hoping for a donation. He was, in all fairness, the quietest dog I have ever encountered.

So it was with slight confusion in the hustle and bustle of the moment that I picked up the bacon rinds and threw them out the door. The dog gave them a quick snuffle, ate them, and then sat down blocking the entrance/exit to the kitchen doorway. In my haste to be in many places at once I left him to it and retreated to the common room to help the children set the table, and ask Nana if her slide show was ready. (She wanted to give it a test run on us that evening.)

As I entered the common room I heard the dog whine. Now that is a sound we are all familiar with, it's generally his whimper of, "Get in line so I can herd you in lovely little lines and protect you from all the scary cats and water fowl that may be lurking nearby.." I chuckled and suggested he join us, but he didn't budge.

The boys and I spread a tablecloth over the table, spread out plates and forks, pulled out water we'd brought with us, and placed a salad on the table. When the large pot of pasta and brick of cheese arrived at the table we all sat down to indulge in the goodness that had been prepared. There was plenty of chatter around the table about what we'd be viewing in the slide show, and once our meal was finished it began.

We enjoyed looking at pictures as they flashed on the wall. The boys were full of questions: "Where is this one from Nana?" "Is Daddy in this one?" "Who is that woman, is that you?" And she, just as delighted, answered all the questions.

Somewhere between a slide of a very grumpy relative and a random large tree in which Nana was certain a cockatoo was in, or perhaps a koala. Time had left her uncertain of which, and she decided to go have a closer look. This of course elicited laughter from the boys, for as Nana drew closer to the wall the slide was now upon her back making it difficult for her to

see. Since Nana didn't mind their giggles or their attempts at shadow puppets, I decided to take the dirty dishes to the kitchen and fetch the special desert I'd brought along for the evening.

My husband joined me as we quickly washed up the few plates and forks, and as he went to empty the trash he noticed that the dog was still sitting at the door. Buster refused to join my husband in trash duty that evening, and stood growling when my husband reentered the kitchen. We became absolutely mystified and decided something was most certainly wrong.

I confess, I suspect a rat lurking in the pantry which is why I walked on the other side of the kitchen all night. But my husband pointed out that the dog wouldn't just stand there growling over a rat, he'd give chase. So, we did the only thing we could think of, and we dropped to the floor to have a look around.

It was not a particularly clear floor, covered in the dirt and dust that is everywhere outside and had been tracked in all day. Not to mention we'd have the outside door in the common room and the kitchen open and with the slight breeze it had brought in a few stray leaves, more dust, and a few stray lizards.

Yet, as we sunk to the floor I quickly found myself staring in the face of a Tasmanian Devil. I might have been just as surprised as the furry little fiend was because neither of us moved, my husband spotted it seconds later. There sat the largest Tassie Devil we'd ever seen, being at least as big as our dog, sitting as proud as punch under a stack of chairs in the Common Room.

And there, mere inches from its snuffy little nose was Nana's small feet as she continued to debate why Grandpa had taken a picture of that tree. As we looked up at her, she had her fingers drawn through her short grey hair, a sign of frustration, and was mumbling, "I can't be sure, but I'm almost certain it was a whie cockatoo, yes perhaps this, no.. that's not it at all. I wished we'd labeled it."

I stood up, leaned through the small window by the sink that overlooked the table the boys were at and said, "Boys, on the table now. Pull your legs and feet all the way up, and sit as

still as you can.” They didn’t hesitate, perhaps it was the sound of my voice, for our youngest has always been the, “but why..” child much to our frustration.

It was my husband who said, “Mum, I need you to back away from the wall you are at. Go to the other side of the room, sit down in the first chair you come to, and lift your legs off the floor.”

Unfortunately, Nana was still oblivious to all of us as her hunt for the answer to the photo continued. “Mum! Can you hear me?”

She turned then, an annoyed scowl on her face, “Of course I can *hear* you, I’m not deaf! I’m not moving until I find the bird though.”

“Mum, don’t panic, but there is a large devil at your feet. You need to back away slowly and sit down in a chair. Lift up your feet if you can.”

There was a moment of hesitation as she stood staring at us wondering if, perhaps, it was just a ridiculous prank. I won’t lie, we weren’t above pranks during this camp trip, or any other family gathering, but our pranks are far less dramatic. Perhaps that same thought occurred to her in that moment, as she quickly turned and shuffled across the room and found a chair to climb into.

We’d closed the far outside door at the start of supper to avoid having dust blown into our meal of pasta, and we couldn’t remember if it was locked or not. I offered to go through the room and find out, but my husband suggested I get the key from beside the phone, go the long way, and if the door was locked see if the key would unlock that door as well.

Buster, now seeing that we were being reasonable humans, didn’t hesitate to follow me around the other side of the building where we managed to unlock the door, and prop it open with a chair before quickly retreating back to the kitchen.

We found two large push brooms to arm ourselves with, and I stood blocking the kitchen entrance while my husband used his broom to shoo the devil out from under the chair and

urge it to exit the building.

As it turned out, Mr Devil {or she, we didn't get that intimately acquainted if I can be honest..} was very eager to exit the building, but it preferred not to make a scene. It stood up, stretched, and began to make its way under all the stacks of chairs that lined that long room. Upon coming to the end of the stacks it darted towards the door, paused, turned around for a moment and paused to eat someone's apple core. Yes, an actual apple core.

The breath we were holding as it had turned back was exhaled as we watched it swallow it rather quickly, and then.. Now I must prepare you for what I am about to say for it is utterly unbelievable, but I have four other witnesses who can attest to this very story. That crazy Tasmanian devil paused again, snatched up Nana's skein of yellow embroidery thread and bounded out the door, down the three cement steps and dashed into the forest. There it paused staring at us.

Perhaps he too wanted to know if Nana would ever find the mysterious bird in the photo. Perhaps it wondered what was for dinner. Perhaps it was letting Buster know that it was leaving on it's own terms. Whatever it's reason for pausing is, we will never know, for the moment we grabbed up a camera to snatch a photo, it turned tail and ran off into the forest.

And, in a moment of absolute insanity, I gave chase! My husband shouting after me, "Are you insane, come back!" and me shouting back, "No, he stole your Mum's embroidery cotton!" I didn't get far, for remember, the sun sets sooner inland, and while my sanity may have been lost for a moment, it returned quickly and I retreated back up the path.

Dessert was consumed over our own retelling of the situation, treating the dog to a rasher or two of bacon for his warnings, being sure the exterior doors were closed, and snapping a few photos of the large foot prints that were left behind.

That evening, as we tucked kids into bed our youngest commented that, "I wasn't really scared you know, but my insides sure were shaking!"

"Mine too," his older brother told him, "except I really was scared!"



And as we turned out the light Nana's voice floated in from the other side of the curtain, "I just wish the blasted thing hadn't run off with my cotton! How am I suppose to finish that project now!"



This story unfolded in 2010, the fifth year of our glorious family weekend getaways. We no longer hold those getaways as children have grown up, moved away, some even have children of their own now.

Life has changed a fair amount since that frightful evening, but the story has lived on in our home{s} over the years. I started writing this story on October 21, 2020. I was sitting out on our patio attempting to distract myself from the hubbub of three men cooking in my kitchen, and more importantly that our beloved Buster was laying beside me on his bed... dying.

Like all good things, they must eventually come to an end, but losing a furry friend who came into our lives at just the right moment is difficult. Our sweet Buster entered our lives six months after my family moved across the world. I often joke that if we'd moved any further, we'd have been heading back again.

Our youngest son was very into dogs at the time and desperately wanted a dalmatian. We'd read 101 Dalmations to him, and his big dream was to own his very own dalmation and name her Perdita. When we finally conceded that our country home could use a furry friend, and that it would really make our children's day, we bustled them off to the local dog shelter.

As a teen I'd requested a dog in need of a home one year for my birthday. That small request led my family to eventually volunteer for a local humane society. It was a drastically underfunded adventure that survived on many bake sales, donations, and the generosity of local vets who slashed their prices drastically in order to help society. Over the years that my family worked with the organization we watched many dogs go to their furever homes, and

many who did not.

When my own little family decided we wanted to welcome a dog into it, I couldn't help but suggest we check with the local Dog's Home. As it turned out, they did have a dalmatian, but she was a runaway named Jewel and not up for adoption. We ended up with a dog that the vet had dubbed a staffy/x mix.

On October 22, 2020 we said our final goodbyes to our beloved Buster, and that evening through the tears we managed an occasional bit of laughter as we retold our favourite "Buster Stories".

As my husband said in his own farewell speech, "He was the worst guard dog ever.." and he truly was, as he was often distracted by any form of water fowl, cats, and rabbits! Yet, on that one day in October of 2010, he was, without a doubt the best guard dog we could have ever asked for.

*The Reluctant Author.*