

Author's Note

This summer, my family and I attended Medomak Family Camp near Washington, Maine, to present a series of workshops on family storytelling. Kids of all ages, including parents, attended our workshops, where we created stories together drawing on our experiences that day in camp.

I especially had fun creating stories with the younger children. Their imaginations are boundless, and they're always ready for a good story. This month, I'll be posting some of the stories the kids and I made up.

Here's a tale we created after my fellow storytellers, ages 4, 5, and 6, said they wanted a story about a moose, a bear, a beaver, a deer, a fox, a loon, a chipmunk, and a skunk. What better way to celebrate the animals of Maine than with a party!

The Animal Party

Our story begins with a crisis.

All kids know what their favorite breakfast at summer camp is. Pancakes with chocolate chips!

Tuesday morning is chocolate chip pancake day. Many of the children woke early that morning in tummy-rumbling anticipation of breakfast, unable to get back to sleep. They tossed and turned in their beds, waiting an eternity for the ringing of the breakfast bell.

Meanwhile, the kitchen staff readied the ingredients for this most special of breakfasts. Eggs, flour, milk, butter, and syrup were carefully laid out in preparation. But when Andrew, the head chef, opened the cupboard to retrieve the most important ingredient, he could find no bags of chocolate chips. He could have sworn he had bought several bags the day before!

The poor children had to eat their pancakes without chocolate chips that morning. What a bummer! At least they could look forward to everyone's favorite lunch at camp . . . grilled cheese sandwiches!

When the lunch bell clanged at midday, the children stampeded into the dining hall, beaming with anticipation of the special lunch to follow. Grilled sandwiches filled with the golden gooey-ness of New England cheddar. Yummm!

But their joy was dashed when Andrew announced that he couldn't find the cheese either. "I'm sure I put two rounds of cheese in the refrigerator only yesterday," he announced. "But now they're gone."

Poor children. Only bread and water for lunch.

Meanwhile, Holly, the camp director, could only shake her head. "This has never happened before. How suspicious!"

Fortunately, the children's disappointment was lessened by the knowledge that Tuesday night was pizza night at camp. Pizza with mozzarella. Pizza with sausage. And everyone's favorite, pizza with pepperoni!

That evening, Andrew made the pizza dough to great fanfare from the kids. He let them roll the dough and gave them turns tossing the pizzas into the air. Andrew even let them brush the tasty tomato sauce onto the faces of the pies.

But when it came time to dress the pizzas with slices of cheese, pepperoni, and sausage, tragedy struck a third time that day. The meat and cheese drawer in the refrigerator was empty. "This time I'm sure I bought the mozzarella, pepperoni, and sausage for tonight," Andrew said to the campers. "Someone must have stolen all our pizza toppings."

Everyone looked around the dining hall at each other. Could one of the other campers have stolen the goodies? Was there a thief in their midst?

"Hold on one second," said Holly. "Let's not jump to any conclusions. Maybe the food was just misplaced. And if there is a thief, maybe it's someone from one of the other camps nearby. I have an idea how we can find out for sure."

That night, Holly, her husband George, and all the camp counselors went on a stakeout. They hid in the bushes around the dining hall, armed only with flashlights and whistles. Luckily, a full moon brightened the grounds, making it impossible for any intruder to escape their watch.

Around midnight, they heard a twig snap in the woods by the nature center. Then the sound of dry leaves crunching underfoot. Holly and her counselors strained their eyes to see. Was it the campers from across the lake? Or just a hungry dad from their own camp?

Then, in the moonlight, the culprit appeared. Or rather the culprits. Out from the woods stepped a large, antlered bull moose. Followed by a bear, a fox, a loon, a deer, a beaver, a chipmunk, and a skunk. Each pranced, waddled, lumbered, or tippy-toed in a straight line toward the dining hall.

All the camp counselors stared with mouths open. As they watched, the bear stretched out his paw and deftly unlatched the lock to the dining hall door. He held the door open for all the animals to enter, one by one. All except the moose, whose antlers were too wide for him to walk through the door. Once inside, the animals pilfered anything edible, taking bacon, bread, cheese, fruit, cakes, pies, even the next morning's granola cereal. As quickly as they had come, the animals – laden with their goodies – formed a line and headed back to the woods.

This was too much for the counselors. Never before had they seen such a brazen group of backwoods critters. Holly blew her whistle and all the counselors shined their flashlights on the burglars, freezing them in their tracks. "We've got 'em now," shouted Holly to her posse of counselors.

The counselors moved in from every direction, hoping to put the cuffs on the animals and retrieve the goods. But there was one thing the counselors hadn't counted on. The animals were a lot smarter than the counselors thought.

Upon seeing the humans approach, the loon sang out one of its mournful calls. The other animals instantly formed a circle, with their snouts facing outward toward the counselors and their bottoms facing inward. All the animals were in the circle, except for one in the middle that the counselors couldn't see.

Undeterred, the counselors kept approaching. What were the animals up to? Were they going to charge? Surrender? Or just make more trouble?

As Holly, George, and the other counselors tightened their circle, the animals opened theirs. The moose, bear, deer, fox, loon, chipmunk, and beaver moved aside to reveal – in the center of their circle – none other than the skunk. Or rather, the backside of the skunk, facing directly at Holly and George.

Holly, George, and the other counselors stopped. Was the skunk bluffing? Or was he serious? When the skunk raised his tail, they had their answer.

As powerful as a fire house, the little skunk gave all the counselors a good squirt of stinky musk. The counselors ran off in all directions. It would take two tomato juice baths, three saunas, and twelve soapy showers to get most of the stink off.

While the counselors spent most of the night in the showers, the animals celebrated the success of their raid in the nearby woods. They danced around a forest clearing under the moonlight, hooting, hollering, and howling. All the while they sampled the yummy treats they had liberated from the kitchen. The loon snacked on sardines, while the bear and the moose made quick work of several cartons of blueberries. The fox gobbled up the bacon, while the beaver, the deer, and the skunk helped themselves to bunches of carrots and tart apples. The chipmunk had the granola all to herself. It was a great night in the woods for an animal party.