

Author's Note

This summer, my family and I were invited to Medomak Family Camp near Washington, Maine, to present a series of storytelling workshops. I gave workshops to both kids and parents, teaching them how to start a storytelling tradition in their own families. We had fun creating spontaneous stories together, drawing on experiences that happened that week in camp.

On Wednesdays at camp, families are free to take a day off to explore the sights and scenery of Maine. The next day back at camp, in my workshop for seven, eight, and nine year olds, we made up the following story about our adventures during everyone's day off. It was a big hit that night at evening campfire!

What's In Your Chowder?

On Wednesdays at family summer camp in Maine, families take a day off from camp to go sightseeing. One Wednesday, four families of eight parents and twelve kids teamed up to tour together. They picked blueberries, explored old lighthouses, played in tidal pools, and bought all sorts of cheesy, fun souvenirs. No wonder they call Maine “vacation land!”

By lunch time, everyone was starving. They tumbled into a well known chowder house (pronounced “chowdah” in the local accent), rubbing their hands in anticipation of fresh fish, chowder, lobsters, mussels and clams. Being such a large group, the parents sat together at one table. The kids – Morgan, Max, Scarlett, Lauren, Sidney, Sarah, Eleanor, Ali, Grace, Hannah, Audrey and Sammy – sat around their own.

When the parents asked the kids what they wanted to eat, all they heard in response was hot dogs, chicken fingers, cheeseburgers, and pizza. Nothing but kid food. How disappointing, especially when Maine has so much fresh seafood and produce to offer.

One of the parents said, “We’re not buying you the same foods here that we can get for you back home. You’re going to try something different.”

“That’s right,” said another parent. “How about big bowls of seafood chowder? Now that’s a real Maine lunch.”

The kids looked glum. Grace asked, “What’s in it?”

“You’ll see,” said her mom. “Let it be a surprise. It’ll be good to try something new.”

Once the food orders were placed, the parents went back to their table and had a merry old time. The waiters brought the parents red drinks with celery sticks poking out. The parents told the kids the drinks were “Shirley Temples.” The kids didn’t know what Shirley Temples were, but they sure seemed to make their parents happy.

When the chowder bowls arrived, they looked worse to the kids than they had feared. The children poked at the chowder with their spoons.

“Mom, it looks weird,” said Scarlett.

“Taste it,” Scarlett’s mom replied. “You might like it.”

The children next tried sniffing it. “Yuck,” cried Sammy. “It smells fishy.”

“It’s supposed to smell that way,” said Sammy’s dad. “The chowder’s made up of potatoes and all sorts of yummy things from the ocean.”

“What kind of things?” asked Max.

His mother paused. “Well, fish for one. And maybe some lobster and clams.”

“Ughh,” the kids said with disdain. “We’re not eating that.”

“Oh yes, you are,” said the parents.

“Oh no, we’re not,” replied the kids.

“Would each of you just try it? One bite won’t hurt you.”

The kids stared back into their bowls and gulped. With shaking hands, they picked up their spoons and prepared themselves for the worst.

At that moment, Lauren saw something move in her bowl. “Did you see that?” she asked Ali, who was sitting next to her.

“Yeah,” said Ali. “Something moved in my bowl too.”

All the kids stared into their bowls.

Eleanor yelled, “There’s something swimming in my bowl. I think it had a claw.”

Everyone rushed over to Eleanor’s bowl for a closer look. Sure enough, something splashed the surface.

“Mom, Dad,” called several kids at once. “There’s something swimming in our chowder.”

The parents were annoyed. “Stop whining about your chowder. Sit down this minute and eat.”

“But Mom . . .”

“Not another word. Eat your lunch.”

The kids looked at one another with trepidation.

Hannah told Sarah, “Stick your spoon into the bowl. Maybe you can fish ‘it’ out.”

With spoon in hand, Sarah stretched out her arm toward the bowl. Shielding her face with one hand, she gingerly stuck the spoon into the bowl and stirred.

The kids gasped. A tiny, baby lobster jumped onto Sarah’s spoon, and splashed chowder at her with its claw.

“Aaaah!” screamed the kids as they rushed over to their parents’ table. “There are live lobsters in our chowder.”

The parents glared at the kids. “We’ve had enough of this. No more excuses. Sit down and eat. You’ve got one more chance, or else.”

The kids knew that look all too well. They returned to their table and glumly stared at their bowls. As soon as the parents looked away, the baby lobsters surfaced and squirted them with chowder broth. One lobster even sprang from the bowl and pinched Sidney on the nose.

Chaos broke out. Kids squealed. Glasses and bowls tumbled over. Silverware clanged to the floor. The entire restaurant became silent. All the other customers glared at the parents who had brought such unruly children inside.

Of course, just as soon as everyone looked the kids’ way, the lobsters dropped back into their bowls, or hid underneath napkins and plates. The parents remained unconvinced when the kids begged them to believe their story.

“We’re leaving,” said one parent sternly. “Just stay in your seats until we can pay the bill.”

“We can’t take you anywhere,” said another. “If you’re not going to eat good food here, then no smores for you at campfire tonight.”

Another parent chimed in. “Maybe two nights without smores will teach you all a good lesson!”

The children sat dejectedly in their chairs. Smore were their favorite treats in the world. How unfair! Why did they have to give up smores just because their parents wouldn’t believe them?

Audrey had an idea. “There’s only one way to convince our parents about the baby lobsters.”

“Waitress,” she called. “May we have some big plastic bags to take home with us? We don’t want to let a drop of this delicious chowder go to waste.”

“Certainly,” said the perplexed waitress.

“And one more favor?” Audrey smiled sweetly. “Can you punch some holes in the top of the bags for us?”

The waitress thought this a strange request, but she was willing to do anything to speed the kids and their parents on their way.

When the waitress returned with the plastic bags, Audrey passed them around to the other kids. “You know what to do.”

All the children searched the table and their bowls for those pesky lobsters. Having been unjustly punished, the kids showed new courage and resolve in hunting down the little monsters that had gotten them into trouble.

Once all the lobsters had been rounded up and placed in plastic bags, Morgan asked, “What do we do with them now?” Audrey and Sammy told the other kids to gather around. In whispered tones, they discussed their plan. For the first time since lunch began, all the kids smiled.

That night at campfire, the children showed an unusual interest in going to bed early. “Mom, I’m tired,” said Grace. “It’s been a long day. May we please go to bed now?” The other kids took the cue, yawning and stretching. “Yeah, Mom and Dad, let’s turn in early tonight.”

The parents were pleased but a little dumbfounded. Their children had never, *ever* asked to go to bed early before. One parent rationalized, “They did have a long day, after all.” Another was more skeptical. “Maybe it’s because they couldn’t have smores tonight!”

As they had planned, the kids went into action as soon as the lights in camp went out. In each cabin, the children pulled their plastic bags out from their knapsacks, pillows, or from under their beds. As their parents snored happily, the children crawled or tippy-toed to their parents’ beds. They gingerly lifted the sheets and blankets, took out the lobsters, and placed them near the feet of their parents. Then they scooted back into their beds, trying their best not to giggle.

One minute passed, then five. Just when the kids thought nothing would happen, they heard a chain reaction of screams all over the camp.

“Something’s got my toe!” yelled one parent.

“Ouch,” cried another. “Get it off me,” screamed a third.

Lights switched on in all the cabins and across the camp. Parents ran screaming from their cabins, calling for help. The kids laughed.

The commotion attracted the attention of Holly and George, the camp directors, who came dashing over from their cabin. “What in the blazes is going on here? We’ve never heard such a racket before.”

“Something’s been biting us in our beds,” said one mom. A dad added, “I was bitten too. I think it was a little lobster!”

Holly shook her head. “Come now. Lobsters don’t live in the woods of Maine.”

“Honest,” said the other parents. “We saw little lobsters in our beds.”

Holly admonished the parents. “I think you all have had one too many Shirley Temples this evening. If the kids can’t have smores tomorrow, then no more Shirley Temples for you. Now please go back to bed. We have a big day tomorrow.” Holly and George returned to their cabin, shaking their heads and muttering “lobsters?!”

Everyone shuffled back to bed. The parents never did get much sleep that night. The kids had no trouble falling asleep. All slept soundly with smiles on their faces.

Note to readers: *no real lobsters were harmed in the creation of this story!*