

A Lender Be (A Cautionary Tale)

by Jeff Osgood

IT TAKES ABOUT THREE MINUTES for me to realize I'm not prepared. The six-person tent needs to go up and the light is fading and the rain's about to move back in. It's only my second go-round with this tent and the first was in our backyard in broad daylight where the stakes slid into the ground as easy as a straw into a milkshake. Now, under the dripping pines just outside Sand Dunes National Park with the wife and kids watching anxiously from our van, it's a different game. The stakes barely puncture the gritty granite ground and the black loops and hooks on the tent are disappearing before my eyes.

"Here, give this a try," Chris says, handing me a rubber mallet. "Let me move this lantern and give you some better light." Chris's camp is set. His kids are warm and dry in their tent, scribbling away on coloring books.

The mallet knocks the stakes home and the white light from the kerosene lamp is bright enough to perform surgery. The tent goes up and Brenda quickly fills it with sleep pads, bags, and our four kids.

"Thanks," I say to Chris, returning the mallet, "that came in handy."

"Oh, yeah," he says, "got to have one of these."

And thus begins a weekend of borrowing.

Chris and his wife Kate are masters of family camping. They've got the gear, know all the good campsites, and their four children are perfectly accustomed to life in a tent.

Brenda and I are new to the family camping circuit. We've both done our fair share of camping, most of it out of a backpack and not a car trunk.

There's an unspoken rule when it comes to backpacking. It's something along the lines that Polonius foolishly speaks to his departing son, Laertes in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." Outside of food, each camper is chiefly in



charge of packing in their own gear. It's all part of that American self-reliance thing.

Family camping is another gig altogether. Campsites become base camps, built to stand for several days. The picnic table is draped with a festive tablecloth, there's a knee-high stack of firewood, and a clothesline strung between trees. With a car or a van as a pack mule, things come along that have no place in a backpack: coolers, lawn chairs, air mattresses. It's a giant leap from what I'm used to and adaptation comes slowly.

Thank goodness Chris and Kate are willing to share. At first, I'm shown how my traditional camping stuff doesn't cut it in the family circle. They've got the French press coffee maker to usurp my instant granules. Their two-burner camp stove is twice as good as my single-burner. Kate's square skillet fits perfectly on the right-angled range. My pan is a round peg in the wrong hole.

Then there's the stuff I didn't even think to bring. Their tent has a door mat outside to wipe off dirty kid feet and they use a broom to sweep out what makes it through. Chris erects a shade tent to cover the dining area.

Halfway through the second day it's starting to get to me. It's not envy. It's a feeling of inadequacy. I'm no Jeremiah Johnson, but I do pride myself on my skill and knowledge of the outdoors. All this borrowing and lack of preparedness is giving me a complex. I'm

the dad, damn it! I'm supposed to have this down and be showing my kids how this camping thing is done.

That evening, as the campfire burns down to coals, Chris produces the last straw—a two-pronged, telescoping marshmallow roasting fork. No need for me to find a stick. I plug up a self-scathing rant with a s'more.

Before our next trip with Chris and Kate, I vow not to borrow anything. I will be ready this time. Show my family camping chops. I take it up another notch: not only will I not actively borrow, I will lend. I will have something on hand that they need!

In preparation I go on a shopping spree. I load up a cart with a plastic egg suitcase, two air mattresses, a collapsible water jug, and, of course, a pair of those over-engineered marshmallow forks. At home I dig up some bug-repelling incense, put a fresh edge on my hatchet, and pack up some homemade beeswax fire-starters.

THE WEEKEND COMES and we join Chris and Kate's family at an ideal spot outside of Gunnison. There's plenty of pine shade, a playground down the gravel road, and the nights are still cool enough to keep the bugs away. It's a good time. Yet, I stand at the ready, prepared at a moment's notice to whip out a pocketknife if something needs cutting. I carry an extra tent stake in my pocket in case the wind picks up and something needs to be secured. But by Sunday, the only thing I've been able to lend out is a salt shaker when Kate momentarily misplaces her own.

Blast it all. I'm fated to be a borrower.

The kids could care less. All eight meld together in play, thoughtlessly using each other's chairs, crayons, books, food. They're thrilled to be away from home, exploring, and staying up past bedtime to watch the campfire light show. Mostly they're thrilled to be together.

Leave it to the simplicity of children to put things into perspective. Watching them coalesce sets me straight. Family camping isn't about self-reliance and who's more prepared. And it's definitely not about the gear. This experience is about gathering, sharing, and co-existing.


That's when Chris tries to start his van. All he gets with the turn of the key is a morbid clicking. His kids have been in and out of the vehicle too much, leaving doors open and interior lights on. The battery is dead.

I do my best to stifle a smirk as I pull jumper cables out of my trunk. Within a minute, their engine roars back to life.

Chris thanks me and leaves his van to idle.

"Not a problem," I say, coiling the cables. "What's mine is yours. And vice versa."

Jeff Osgood writes from his home in Longmont, Colorado where he also keeps bees and children.

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