

Lizzie Escapes



Lizzie vowed that she would not return to summer camp. The first year at camp had been intolerable. The next year had been even worse. And last year had been the absolute pits. Silently, she swore an oath to her dearly departed cat, Felinious Monk, that she would find a way out.

“Now, Sugar Plum,” her mother said, rubbing Lizzie’s back. “I know you don’t want to go back to camp, but think how much fun you’ll have. All your friends from last year will be there.”

“What friends?” asked Lizzie. “I don’t have friends at camp.”

“What about Brittany? She was so nice.”

“Mom, Brittany was my bunkmate. She didn’t choose to live with me. We had nothing in common.”

“Nothing?” Her mother winced. “But she seemed so outgoing.”

“Nothing. She hadn’t even heard of Saul Bellow.”

Her mother winced again.

Lizzie’s idea of an exciting summer was sitting in an air-conditioned library and systematically devouring a high stack of novels. She’d graduated from 7th grade two weeks

earlier and since then had been showing up at the library at a quarter to nine in the morning, fifteen minutes before it opened. As soon as the doors opened, she'd sprint to a table on the second floor, right next to the big window. It was an equal distance from the water fountain and the fiction section. For the next eight hours, she'd sit at the table and read. It was heavenly.

"I heard the camp added knitting as a new activity this year," her mother said. "And archery."

Lizzie frowned. "Aren't kids supposed to stay away from weapons?"

"Archery is a sport, dear."

"Sure," said Lizzie. "So is bowling. And croquet. And baseball."

Her mother sighed.

As they drove to the camp, Lizzie sat in the front seat, staring out the window. Her suitcase was sitting in the back seat. She'd packed it last night, but her mother had had a flaming fit when she discovered Lizzie hadn't packed any clothes. Lizzie had tried to argue that a pair of flip-flops and the collected novels of Henry James were all you really needed for three weeks in upstate New York, but her mom wasn't having it and had made her re-pack.

"Sweetie, look," her mom said, giving Lizzie a pleading expression. "I love that you're such a little bookworm. I do. I really do. But being outside and making friends with people your own age is really important, too."

"Why?" asked Lizzie.

"Because it makes you well-adjusted and happy."

"Camp is forced labor. You know last year they made us weave baskets? I weaved a basket, and now where is it? The camp director probably sold it for poker money."

"Mr. Scottadino did not sell your basket for poker money," said Lizzie's mom, absently checking her makeup in the rearview mirror. "It's sitting on top of my dresser and it's

beautiful.”

“Yeah, well.”

As they pulled up to the camp entrance, Lizzie strained her mind for last-minute strategies that could free her. In a panic, she briefly considered faking a severe illness, but figured that if it were severe enough to force her mother to pull her out of camp, then it would be severe enough to keep her home from the library. This wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, but the thought of spending all day with her mom was enough to make her retch.

As her mother pulled to a stop, she turned to look at Lizzie. Lizzie saw her mother’s forehead had the little lines it got when she was worried.

“Promise me you’ll make a friend,” her mother said.

“Mom...”

“Please? Promise me.” Her mother looked suddenly quite sad. Lizzie worried she might start crying.

“OK,” Lizzie sighed. “I’ll make a friend.”

“I love you, Sugar Plum.”

“I know.”

As Lizzie dragged her luggage to the camp’s main lodge, she started creating an imaginary friend that she could tell her mother about in three weeks, when she came to pick her up. She had to think up a whole character in her head, someone whom she knew everything about—what she looked liked, what she dressed like, what she acted like. If her mother asked her any question about her imaginary friend, she’d be able to answer. She might even start planting seeds by dropping her imaginary friend’s name in the letter the camp would make her write and send home next week. And then, when her mom came to pick her up, she’d just tell her that her imaginary friend had left a day early, to travel with her family to do aid work in Africa. Her mom would like that. It was perfect.

The camp director, Mr. Scottadino, stepped out of the lodge.

“Hello, Lizzie. And hello, Ms. Lockwood. Nice to see you again.”

“And nice to see you again, Mr. Scottadino,” said her mother, blushing. “Lizzie, say hi to Mr. Scottadino.”

Lizzie shrugged.

“Lizzie, it’s wonderful to have you back,” said Mr. Scottadino.

Lizzie was already lost in thought. She needed to make her imaginary new friend someone her mother could actually imagine her being friends with, but also someone her mother would like. She’d have to be a bookworm, like her, but have other interests too—interests that could, in her mother’s words, “broaden” her. Maybe she liked knitting? No, she would never be friends with someone who knits.

Lizzie hugged her mother goodbye. Her mother blew her a kiss.

“Have fun, Sugar Plum.”

Mr. Scottadino picked up her suitcase and walked her to her cabin.

“Now, I remember how much you like to read,” Mr. Scottadino said as they walked. “So, I was wondering if you might do a special job for me this summer.”

Lizzie cocked an eye at the camp director. “What kind of job?”

“I want you to be the camp librarian.”

Lizzie stopped in her tracks. “The camp has a library?”

“It’s brand new. One of our former campers died and left us his library in his will. It’s quite a collection — classics, nonfiction, and a lot of contemporary authors too. He was 80 when he died, but he tried hard to keep up with the hot new talent. Do you think you could sort it?”

Lizzie began hyperventilating. “I can do that.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Scottadino smiled. “Let me lead you to it.”

Mr. Scottadino, still carrying Lizzie's bag, led her to a small building behind the dining room. He opened the door.

"Now, you can arrange them anyway you like, but — oh, hello, Jenny. I didn't know you were in here."

Lizzie walked through the doorway to find several heaping columns of books and, at their bottom, a girl her age. The girl was wearing glasses and a baseball jersey and reading a well-thumbed copy of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*.

"Hey Mr. Scottadino," said Jenny. She turned to Lizzie. "What's your name?"

"Lizzie."

"Do you like Don DeLillo?" Jenny asked.

For a moment, Lizzie was too surprised to speak. Then she gathered herself. "I like early DeLillo."

"Me too. The early novels are funnier than the big, long, serious ones." She held up *Underworld*. "But this one has some good parts."

Lizzie sat down next to Jenny.

"Do you want to help me sort these?" she asked quietly.