What Did I Ever Do to You, Mother Nature?

I am married to Nature Boy. He loves the outdoors - plants, animals and basically anything that involves “getting away from it all.” As our kids approached their teen years, he decided we needed to go camping to promote family bonding. Now I love Mother Nature and all things bright and beautiful, but I’ve never been a huge fan of camping. It all sounds so romantic and inspiring: the great outdoors, sleeping under the stars and cooking over an open fire. But it also potentially involves sleeping on chigger beds (check), inadvertently piercing your butt cheek with a mesquite thorn while trying to “take care of business” (check) and getting soaked to the bone at any hour of the day or night by unexpected torrential downpours (check, check, check!). Camping was NOT on any bucket list of mine. I could think of other ways to promote family bonding, like DisneyWorld or a week at a beach resort. But Nature Boy doesn’t give up on his dreams easily, so it was inevitable that we’d end up in the wilderness at some point.

Our first family camping trip was a two-week jaunt to southern Colorado in late July of 1988. We loaded our big blue Surburban with camping gear, boxes of non-perishable foods, a couple of ice chests and four of our five progeny (the oldest escaped by landing her first job that summer and was allowed to stay home with her godmother). An incurable optimist, I decided to think positively. I researched and booked KOA’s (Kampgrounds of America) along our route because they had real bathrooms with showers, as well as small grocery stores and other amenities, depending on the location. It wasn’t “glamping,” but it wasn’t hardcore roughing it either. I planned meals, gathered information on local sights to see, highlighted maps and made sure we had plenty of film to memorialize it all. We envisioned magical moments with wildlife, telling stories around the campfire - you know, all those wonderful Kodak moments associated with camping. Mother Nature had other ideas.

I will concede that we saw amazing scenery and definitely got to do some of those “put-it-in-your-scrapbook” moments, like river rafting and panning for gold. However, one thing began to cloud my joy. I live to cook for and feed my family. I was actually looking forward to doing that in a campfire environment on propane stoves. Mother Nature was somehow pissed at that idea. From day one of our trip, it rained *every single day* at precisely the same moment: dinner time. Without fail, as soon as I cranked up the propane stove, clouds would roll in and the precipitation would fall. We would have to huddle under whatever shelter might be available at the campsite or wait it out in the tents. My lovely attempts to produce Dutch oven cornbread, campfire sloppy joes and even the simplest of campfire desserts, s’mores, were thwarted over and over. Our diet seemed to be doomed to cold cut sandwiches, bagged chips and cookies. I became increasingly aggravated and annoyed as the trip progressed. Nature Boy thought it was funny. I was not amused. But through gritted teeth, I was determined to make the best of it.

On our very last night of camping, we arrived in Carlsbad, New Mexico around 4PM under a beautifully clear turquoise-blue sky. We had been on the road most of that day, so while Nature Boy was setting up the tents, the kids immediately made for the outdoor pool and I thought, “Finally!! A clear evening - we will have a NICE hot meal at our picnic table and a lovely end to our memorable camping trip.” I lit up the stove and began prepping the campfire stew and biscuits. About five minutes into it, I heard a rumble. “No way,” I thought. I ignored it. A few minutes later, the wind picked up and I heard another very distinctive rumble, much closer. I turned around and looked to the west, where a large bank of dark, ominous clouds was rolling across the plains toward us, complete with a streak or two of lightning in the background. “NOOOOOOOOOOoooooo!!!” I moaned. No way would Mother Nature be so mean!

With a worried frown, Nature Boy barked, “Go tell the kids to get out of the pool now!” He had just finished setting up both tents and was turning off the propane stoves as I ran to the pool. By the time the kids and I made it back to the campsite, the first raindrops had begun to fall. I simply couldn’t believe my much-awaited meal was going to be ruined – again! I was so mad. I ranted to the sky while waving my arms and shaking my fists, “Why? Why? WHY? I just want to have ONE nice dinner WITHOUT RAIN!” I stomped around, trying to cover the stove and salvage what I could while crying, “What have I ever done to YOU??” The kids and Nature Boy were staring at me from one of the tents, and he finally yelled, “Get in out of the rain, silly goose! This will pass!” “NO!” I yelled. “This isn’t FAIR!!”

At that moment, a huge bolt of lightning crackled from the sky followed immediately by a deafening “BOOM!” Mother Nature took a deep breath and unleashed gusts of forty to fifty mile an hour winds, accompanied by rain that fell in sheets, punctuated with thunder and lightning that rivaled the Overture of 1812. “We need to get in the car NOW!” Nature Boy ordered. He ran and unlocked the Suburban doors while we all clambered in, soaking wet by this time. We watched as gale-force winds hammered our tents and sent the propane stove flying off the table like the witch on her bicycle in The Wizard of Oz. “Look!” shouted our oldest as someone’s tent rolled by us. “Daddy!” another offspring pointed. “There go ours!!” Sure enough, our tents had become unpegged and were rolling across the campground like beach balls on the sand. The wind and rain were so strong now that the Suburban was rocking. “Mama, I’m scared!” our youngest cried out. “I don’t want to die!” wailed our son. At that moment, the wind suddenly began to let up and we all burst out laughing. At least Mother Nature had pity on a 7-year-old!

A few minutes later, the storm magically subsided, and the sun emerged. Mother Nature yawned, stretched her arms and settled down for the evening. A gorgeous sunset full of the salmon, violet and butter yellow hues that southwest paintings are famous for was now our backdrop as we tried to make order out of the chaos. Nature Boy kept trying to cheer me up by saying things like, “See? Isn’t that a beautiful sunset? It’ll all work out, don’t worry!” I wasn’t easily comforted. Everything was drenched, our food was blown all over the KOA, plus we were going to have to figure out how to sleep that night in wet tents on soggy ground. I vacillated between laughing at the ridiculousness of it and crying in frustration.

I finally decided to make the best of it one more time. We ended up having a spaghetti dinner at the KOA diner – a splurge. We let the kids sleep in the Suburban with the seats folded down – a treat for them. Nature Boy and I made do with slightly damp sleeping bags in the also slightly damp tent. His closing remark to me as we settled in was, “See? That wasn’t so bad! When do we want to do this again?” I think he still has a scar where I hit him with the flashlight!