



Totally Embarrassing

Mum had her bum in the air, Dad was crawling about in the mud and I couldn't stand it any more.

'How did I end up with such crazy parents?' I groaned, rolling my eyes in frustration. 'No other girl in year five has to live with embarrassing weirdos. Why me?'

Mum moved out of her Downward Dog yoga pose, balanced herself on one leg and pressed her palms above her head. Her armpit hairs fluttered in the breeze.

‘Ohmmmmm ...’ she said.

‘Why can’t we use a lighter like normal people?’ I said, striking the flint for the hundredth time and failing to get a spark — again!

‘A flint is gentler on the ozone, Darcy,’ said Dad, gently tugging an earthworm from the dirt with his fingers. It kicked and squirmed in the palm of his hand.

‘Can you eat ozone?’ I said. ‘Because we’ll starve before I get this fire going.’

‘The trick is sock fluff,’ said Dad. ‘Sock fluff always gets a spark. But if you can’t wait for the lentil burgers there’s plenty of mung-bean salad and gluten-free bread in the esky.’

‘Ohmmmmm ...’ said Mum.

Things couldn’t get any worse. Or so I thought, until a car pulled into the park and, squinting through its back window was Michael, a kid from my class. If he looked over now I’d be a living joke before I could say, ‘Not



related to me'. I quickly crouched behind the barbeque, messed my hair over my face and looked about for a place to hide.

The earthy whiff of the wetland seeped into my nostrils. Of course!

'I'm going to check out the swamp,' I said, scurrying past Dad. I pushed through the reeds, slipped down the bank and slopped into ankle deep mud. Turning around, I shimmied back up the slope, just far enough to look out from behind a paperbark trunk. Dad's eyes were wide with delight.

'Off she goes exploring the natural world,' he said.

Mum was doing a happy dance. 'She's so in tune!' she cried, waving her hands in the air. 'Whoop, whoop, whoop!'

It was awful.

But my super quick thinking had worked. Michael hadn't seen me. I almost broke into my own little happy dance but was all of a sudden

distracted. A cold, slimy wetness seeped into my socks and a raspy gulp echoed from the mud puddles behind me. 'Holy croak! It's Darcy Moon!'

Holy croak

‘Well, don’t just stand there like a stunned slug. Get a wiggle on!’ The voice seemed to come from a large green frog. It glared at me from a patch of pondweed.

‘Er-excuse me?’ I stammered, looking around for someone — anyone, hiding in the rushes.

‘Holy croak, girl, we don’t have time for this.’ The voice was definitely coming from the frog. ‘My family’s been missing all night. They could be barbecued frogs’ legs by now!’

I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again. Was I hallucinating? Or was someone

playing a trick on me? Someone who knew my name?

I looked around for a hidden camera. I couldn’t see one but tried to look cool anyway, just in case I was being recorded. Casually strolling forwards, I lunged suddenly and grabbed the frog. It was slippery and cold and I could feel a tiny heart beating against my palm. Letting out a scream, I tossed it away. It landed in a writhing green heap in the mud.

‘What are you doing?’ the frog shouted at me. ‘Don’t you get it?’ Bits of slime and spit were squirting out of his mouth. ‘We are in a HURRY!’ His croak was more of a manic squeal by now and his throat sac pumped faster than a cicada’s back leg at dusk.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

A scaly brown tortoise ambled from behind a blackened log. ‘Allow me to explain,’ it said.

‘What the ...?’ I said, sitting down heavily. ‘Who the ...?’

‘My name is Wizen,’ said the tortoise. ‘I am called Wizen because I am wise and somewhat wizened.’

‘O-kaaay,’ I said. But things were definitely NOT okay.

‘This is Jumpy,’ said Wizen turning his solemn grey eyes in the direction of the talking frog. ‘He is called Jumpy because he is nervous by nature and jumps a lot.’



‘Makes sense,’ I said. But it absolutely did NOT make sense.

Wizen nodded his wrinkled head and carried on. ‘Many of the swamp frogs have been going missing. It started about a year ago. Slowly at first, then faster until now we can wait no longer. We need your help.’

‘You said she had mystical powers,’ interrupted Jumpy, squirming himself out of the mud. He glared at Wizen. ‘But she’s slower than Old Granny Snail with a blister on her foot. Tell her we need to GO!’

‘Jumpy is feeling particularly nervous today,’ said Wizen, slowly scrumphing about in the mud. ‘I know you are anxious, Jumpy,’ he said, ‘but you need to have patience ... Darcy Moon is perplexed.’

‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘I am perplexed. And how do you know my name?’

‘The Universe has chosen you as an Earth Guardian,’ said Wizen, slowly pushing his

knobbed neck out from his shell. ‘She chose you to save the frogs. Like she chose Jacques Cousteau to save the oceans. Like she chose Steve Irwin to save the crocodiles.’

‘Um,’ I said, ‘aren’t those guys both dead?’

‘The night you were born,’ he said ignoring my question, ‘there was a rare lunar eclipse. The planets were aligned.’ He lifted a webbed foot and slowly waved it in the air as if the planets were hovering in front of him. ‘When the eclipse passed,’ he continued, ‘the first ray of moonlight hit your newborn eyes and a cosmic dose of planetary magic passed to you.’

‘But I’m just a normal kid,’ I protested.

‘Earth Guardian powers can lay dormant for many years, stirred only by the callings of an animal in need.’ His neck trembled with the strain of holding up his ancient, weather beaten head. ‘The animals need you now.’

‘This is an EMERGENCY!!!’ yelled Jumpy, jumping up and down. ‘We need you *right* now!’



I gaped at the crazy scene before me. ‘I’m getting out of here,’ I said.

‘You alone can help us,’ announced Wizen. ‘We will wait for your return.’

‘Don’t bother,’ I muttered as I scrambled up the bank. I mean life was weird enough already with my parents around. I certainly

didn't need a freaked out frog and a spooky old tortoise on my back as well.

Pile of Poo

'Darcy!' cried Mum when she saw me trudging towards her. 'You look like a half-starved swamp monster.'

'Want a burger?'

 Dad dangled a crusty old sock in my face. 'I got a beaut fire started with your flint,' he said. 'All it needed was a bit of sock fluff and kaboom!'

I screwed up my nose. 'I'm not hungry. I want to go home.'

'Already?'

 asked Dad looking surprised. Then he shrugged. 'Okay. I've got all the wigglers I need for today.' Packing the leftovers into the esky, he threw the picnic rug at me and

we headed for home.

Mum and Dad didn't believe in cars. They said exhaust fumes were choking the Earth and melting the icebergs. We walked everywhere... or rode our bikes. Sometimes I wished we had a car but right then I was too stunned to think about it much. We traipsed the ten minutes across the grassland and down the bush track to the hole in our back fence.

I went through the hole first, closely followed by the esky and then Mum. She frowned at me. 'You look pale,' she said. 'I'll burn some cypress and lemon oils to get your blood flowing.'

Dad squeezed through last and gazed lovingly up at our compost pile. 'Don't get yourselves all tied up in knots,' he said, emptying his slimy collection of worms into a heap on the dirt. 'I have brought you to worm heaven,' he said. 'Be free little wigglers.'

We made our way around the compost

heap, which wasn't easy because it filled our backyard right to the edges. We had to turn sideways and shimmy along the fence single file.

I would've preferred a regular yard like other kids. You know, one that didn't steam in the heat or release the gut-churning stench of festering veggie scraps. But Dad made compost for a living. No wonder Mum was always burning oils. The pong was almost as bad as my sopping swamp sneakers.

When we finally got inside I was about to go straight to my room but paused. 'Mum,' I asked, 'what was my birth like?'

Mum beamed. 'Oh Darcy, it was the most spiritual moment of my life! We were in the garden — the compost pile wasn't as big then. It was the night of an eclipse. I wanted to see you as soon as you were born, but it was too dark. Your father had just decided to light candles when, like a miracle, the shadow passed and you were born into moonlight.' She smiled

and sighed. 'You were so beautiful,' she cooed. 'My darling baby girl. You were naked, and I was naked, and your father was nak ...'

'Okay, Mum,' I said and closed my bedroom door with a bang.

The cool crowd

As I pedalled toward Quagmire Primary the next day, I tried to convince myself nothing had changed. I mean, I still knew how to pull an awesome dust cloud skid at the bottom of our driveway, sprint the ring road around Aroona Park, speed past the rows of broccoli on Market Garden Road and reach the outskirts of sleepy Quagmire town in less than fifteen minutes. Yep. Everything was the same as usual. So, as I cruised by Quagmire's statue of a giant cabbage, I tried not to think about disappearing frogs and talking swamp creatures. But it was hard going. How could you put something

like that out of your mind? I wanted to talk to someone about it. But it sounded crazy even to me. So I didn't tell anyone. Not even my best friend, Jedda.

'G'day Darce,' yelled Jedda, waving at me from the water fountains. 'How was the rest of your weekend?'

'Boring,' I called as I spun the combination on my bike lock. I headed over to our usual spot under the peppermint tree. 'Aroona Park with my crazy parents.' Flopping down on the grass we rummaged around in our bags for food.

Jedda found a vegemite sandwich and took a bite. 'Did you see my dad there?' she said with her mouth full. 'He was doing bush tucker talks.'

I shook my head. 'No. But I saw Michael.'

Jedda's eyebrows scrunched together like a couple of grumbling caterpillars. 'You didn't hide did you?'

'Of course I did. I was with my parents.'

I prised the lid off my lunch box. 'GROSS! Leftover lentil burgers.' I shoved the squishy globs under Jedda's nose as evidence. 'See what I mean? My parents are so not normal.'

Jedda wrinkled up her nose. 'Get a grip, Darcy,' she said. 'Your mum and dad are really nice. And anyway, who cares what other people think?'

'I do,' I said, staring through my tangled hair at my disgusting lunch. I clicked the lid back on. 'I'll take this home for the worms.'

'Here comes Taylor,' said Jedda nodding in the direction of the water fountains. Taylor always said hi to us in the mornings, which was good of her because she was really popular and, in case you hadn't guessed, Jedda and I weren't. We had each other and that was enough. But everybody loved Taylor.

'Hi guys. How are you?' she piped. Her friends crowded round her like moths to a dunny light. Sometimes I wished I could be the

dunny light for once. ‘Anything good, Darcy?’ she said eyeing my lunch box.

‘Just leftovers.’

‘Want to come to the canteen with us? Skippity Chips have finally reached Quagmire. We’re all getting some.’

Jedda frowned. ‘We don’t have any mon ...’ I jabbed her in the ribs with my elbow.

‘Sure,’ I jumped to my feet and pulled Jedda up by her T-shirt. ‘I’ve got cash,’ I whispered. Jedda pulled herself free of my grip and glared at me. ‘Come on Jedda,’ I begged. ‘Please?’ I grabbed her arm and started walking toward the canteen.

‘Where did you get cash?’ said Jedda.

‘Save-a-Species fundraiser,’ I explained.

‘You’re going to use your donation money to buy Skippity Chips? Darcy Moon, won’t your mum chuck a complete wobbly?’ Jedda had to shout over all the excited chatter and rustling chip packets as we entered the canteen.

‘She won’t find out.’ I narrowed my eyes and fixed Jedda with the most intense stare I could manage.

‘Whatever,’ she shrugged. ‘As long as you buy me a packet too.’ She gave a mischievous grin. ‘Have you seen the ad yet?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘How could I when we don’t have a television?’

I hadn’t seen the Skippity Chips ad, but I had seen an article in the local newspaper about the guy who invented them. I was amazed because he went to Quagmire Primary too, except thirty years ago. And now he was a millionaire!

I finally got to the counter and ordered two packets. I felt pretty guilty handing over all the donation money. But I didn’t want to miss out. It had taken a whole year for Skippity Chips to arrive in Quagmire shops. And besides, I was starving.

I gave Jedda her packet and we ripped

them open together.

They looked like regular potato chips. Round and flat except for where they'd curled and bubbled in the hot oil. I put one in my mouth and sucked off the powdery flavouring. It bubbled and popped on my tongue like a savoury fizz bomb.

'Yum!' said Jemma. 'There's a party in my mouth!'

I swallowed the first chip down and grabbed another handful. This time I chewed them all up and swished them around my mouth before swallowing. Delicious!

Finally tipping the crumbs at the bottom of the packet into my mouth, I looked around at everyone chatting and smiling and licking their lips. For a minute it actually looked like Jemma and I were part of the cool crowd.

'What flavour do you think they are?' I asked sucking the spicy green salt off my fingers.

Jemma checked the label. 'It just says natural flavours on the packet.'

'Taste like chicken kebabs with garlic sauce to me,' said Taylor.

'Sour cream and onion?' I suggested.

'Whatever it is,' said Jemma, 'they're delicious!'

Just then I heard the clanking of the donation tin.

'Save-a-Species! Donation money this way!' called Michael as he made his way through the crowd.

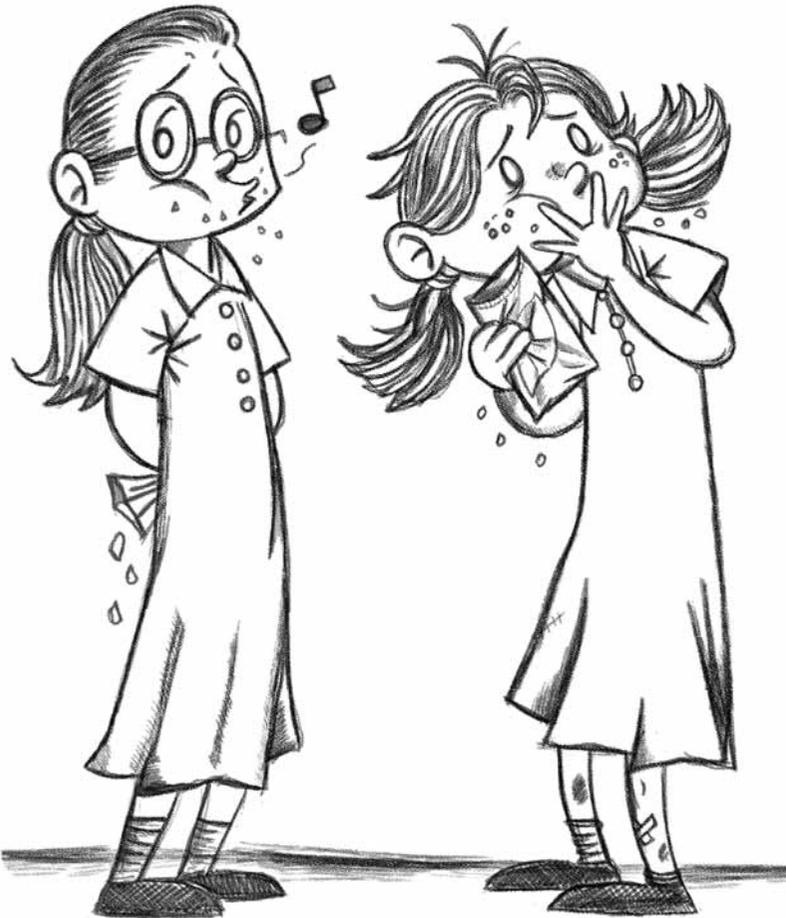
Taylor wiped her hands on a pink handkerchief. 'Here's my money,' she said dropping her coins into the tin. Everyone else grappled through their pockets.

I kept my head down, gazed into my empty chip packet and hoped Michael wouldn't notice me. But he stopped right in front of me and shook the tin in my face. 'Cough up Mooney,' he commanded.

I felt a hot lump in my chest. I wasn't sure if it was guilt or indigestion but whatever it was, I wished I hadn't eaten those chips.

'Um...I don't have any money,' I mumbled.

'What?' shouted Michael, 'No Money



Mooney!'

Michael's friends snorted. The other kids sniggered and even Taylor had a quiet giggle.

Jedda didn't laugh. She just looked at me and shrugged. 'Come on,' she said, 'let's go.' We threw our chip wrappers in the bin and walked to class.

'Now see why I hid at the park yesterday?' I said. 'My whole life is one big embarrassment after another.'

As we clattered into the classroom Jedda gave me a pitying look. Sitting down, she pulled her writing pads and



pencils out of her bag. 'You worry too much,' she said, arranging them on her desk.

You'd worry too, I thought, if you had the world's biggest crazies for parents. But another thought wasn't going away and it made having kooky parents seem kind of unimportant. Kids catching sight of my mum's hairy armpits would be bad, but kids finding out I talked to frogs and tortoises would be really, really, *really* bad!

Endangered

I had trouble concentrating in class.

In Maths, I doodled a dozen trapezoid turtles and a very cute polygon frog.

In English, I daydreamed about a school of tadpoles doing spelling tests, eager for a smiley stamp from their teacher, Mr Tortoise.

Then we had science.

'Last week we looked at ecosystems,' said Mr Bainbridge. 'We discovered all animals are linked via the food chain. We saw how small changes in habitat can have devastating effects on native animals. Who can remember some of the endangered species we looked at last week?'