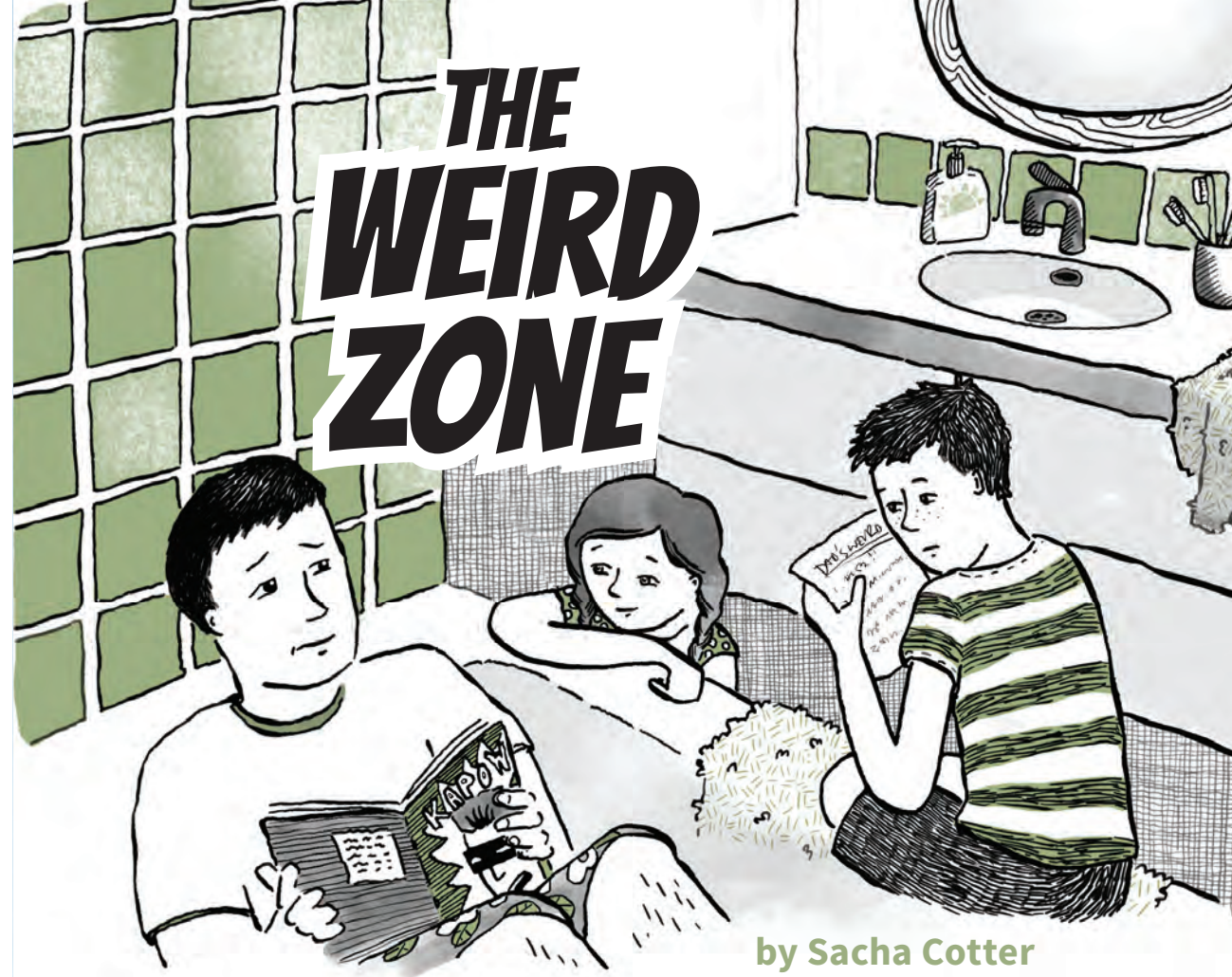


THE WEIRD ZONE



by Sacha Cotter

It's Boxing Day – the day we always leave to go camping – and Dad's being weird. We find him in the bathroom, reading a comic in the bath.

“Dad! What are you doing? We need to hit the road!” I say.

He looks at us, eyes all squinty, like he has no idea what we're talking about.

“Our camping trip ...,” says Kahurangi.

“Oh, right,” Dad says. “I forgot.” He's trying to play it cool, a tricky thing to pull off when you're lying fully clothed in a bath.

I'm tired and hot from packing the car ... without his help. I've had enough.

“Dad, you're acting weird.”

“Really weird,” Kahurangi adds.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Dad says.

So Kahurangi pulls out the list.

We've been tracking Dad's weirdness for months. It started with his idea that we stay at home and build a fort from cushions instead of camping. This was followed by the intense brow sweat he'd get whenever we brought up the holiday. And the time Kahurangi caught him burning a catalogue from an outdoors shop. It's all there.

I decide to go with something recent. "When we asked you to get the tents, you didn't."

Dad slides down in the bath. "In my defence," he says, "I couldn't find them."

"Dad! The tents have lived on the same shelf for years."

"Well, your mum always did all that. You know I'm not practical."

This is true. Also true that it's our first summer holiday since Mum moved in with Dave. Dad's still finding his feet. Even so, our list is long.

"And you haven't even looked at the camping gear," says Kahurangi.

Another fact. We've had it laid out on the garage floor for a week. Air beds, pump, sleeping bags, gas cooker, chiller – the works.

"Now that's a bit of an exaggeration."

"Dad! We had takeaways six nights in a row so you could avoid getting food from the garage freezer." For a second, it looks like Dad might say something important. He opens his mouth, but the words aren't there.

"Anyone would think you didn't want to come," Kahurangi adds sadly.

That gets him. Dad scrambles out of the bath and hugs us tight. It's the least-weird thing he's done all week. "Come on, kids," he says. "Let's get out of here. It's Boxing Day!"



The campground's heaving. It smells of lunchtime barbecues and sea air. I can't wait for a sausage and a swim – but first, we need to set up camp. We have an awesome spot, right by the beach.

In our family, we have a tradition: kids in one tent, parents in another. Kids' zone. Parents' zone. Kahurangi and I always fill ours with games and flippers and basically as much mess as we like. We don't have to tidy up. Putting up the tent – and eventually taking it back down – is our only job. We could do it in our sleep! In fifteen minutes flat, we're standing back, admiring our handy work.

“Nice one,” I say. “Let’s load her up, then we’re done!”

But Kahurangi doesn’t go for our gear. He’s distracted. It’s Dad, of course. He’s back in the car, windows up even though it’s sweltering. Weirdness seems to be peaking. Clearly something’s upsetting him ... but what?

“We come here every year,” Kahurangi says. “He’s never acted like this before.”

Then I have a thought. “Kahurangi, can you remember Dad ever putting up the tent?” I start to laugh.

“It was usually Mum,” he says. “Why? What’s so funny?”

“Come on,” I say. “I think I know what this is about.” I whack the car window with my hand. Bang, bang, bang. Reluctantly, Dad rolls it down. “It’s OK, Dad,” I say. “We can help!”

“You can?”

“You can’t put up a tent, can you?”

Dad’s cheeks blush, which is an achievement considering he’s already parboiled in the stinking-hot car.

“Why didn’t you just tell us?” Kahurangi says. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about!”

“Come on,” I say. “We’ll do it together.”



The big tent’s finally up. Turns out it’s not that much harder than putting up a small one, with some help from the nice people in the caravan next door. We’ve had a swim. Our bellies are full of chips and battered oysters. We’ve played spotlight with the kids next door. It’s time for bed. Dad does a big, noisy dad-yawn, the kind that gives you a fright if you don’t see it coming. Keeping up with us kids has worn him out. But he doesn’t budge, just looks at the big orange parents’ tent and sighs.

Thoughts of my cosy sleeping bag and the lullaby of the waves make my eyes heavy, but not so heavy that I don’t notice that sigh. The weight of it. Something’s still not right with Dad. This time, I’m getting to the bottom of things. No more mystery. No more weird lists. It’s time for a proper talk.

“Dad,” I say. “What’s wrong? Really?”

He sags like a tent in the rain.

“It’s done now, Dad. The tent’s up,” Kahurangi says. “And we can take it down. You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

“Get a big sleep,” I say. “You’ll feel better in the morning.” This is what Dad always says to us, only now he’s shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, kids. I’ve been acting pretty weird lately.”

We nod vigorously. It makes Dad smile.

“It’s just that ... well ... we used to do this trip with your mum. You know that. It’s a family tradition. And yes, she did put up the tent. I’m not practical.” We nod again. “It’s different this year. It’ll be the first time I sleep by myself. It’s meant to be the parents’ tent. I guess I’m lonely.”

We hug Dad tight. Tight enough to feel his heartbeat.

“I should’ve been more honest, but I didn’t want to spoil things. Plus I really do hate putting up tents!” Dad grins. “And your mum’s so good at it!” We laugh, but when we stop, I’m back to thinking about Dad being lonely. Nobody should feel like that on a camping trip.

I look at the big orange tent and the small red tent and realise a solution’s staring me in the face. We’ve always had a parents’ zone and a kids’ zone – so what? I know as much as anyone that things change. Feelings change, families change – and so can traditions. “There’s plenty of room in our tent, Dad,” I say.

Kahurangi’s eyes light up. “Yeah, heaps of room,” he says.

Dad smiles. It’s the first time he’s heard the word tent without breaking into a sweat. Progress.

“Are you sure?” he asks. “What about the kids’ zone?”

“We were thinking about changing that anyway, weren’t we, Kahurangi?” I say. “It’s not very inclusive.”

Kahurangi gets my drift. “Yup. Sure were,” he says. “We might rename it the weird zone. A place where all family members are welcome.”

“Sounds like I’ll fit right in!” Dad says.

“One other thing,” I add. I think I might as well ... seeing as we’ve got the upper hand. “Don’t ask us to tidy up.”

“Got it,” Dad says. “Some traditions shouldn’t change, right?”



illustrations by Kirsten Slade

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by Sacha Cotter

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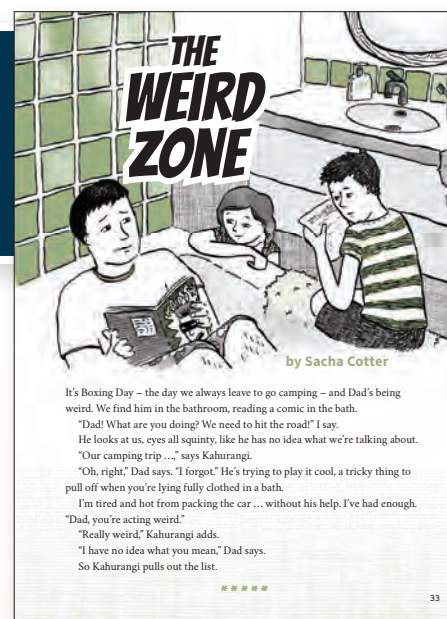
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