

■ Nighttime Visitors

By the time we had finished eating, it was already getting dark. That's when we started to see small, dark shapes looping and fluttering above our heads—bats! Dad said the bats were our friends because they were snatching mosquitoes from the air. Still, they were a little spooky!

■ The bats were not our only visitors. About 9 meters (30 ft) away, we saw a skunk! We stayed at a safe distance, but we were able to get a closer look at it through our binoculars. It was tearing up a rotten log and eating the insects from under the bark. Skunks have a good sense of smell, but they can't see too well. They're not aggressive, so we knew that if we didn't bother this one, it wouldn't spray us.

■ Skunks are omnivores.



They eat everything—including the food in hikers' backpacks! Bears are omnivores, too. The park ranger had warned us to be sure to hang our backpacks from the trees, at least 3 meters (10 ft) from the ground. Otherwise, bears, skunks, or other animals might break into them and eat our food. We tied a rope from one tree to another about 5 meters (16 ft) away. Then we hung our backpacks from the middle of the rope.

■ After we had finished all of our preparations for the night, we sat around the campfire, and Dad told us a story. The last coals of our campfire died, and it began to rain, so we all turned in for the night. I curled up inside my warm sleeping bag, cozy and dry, and listened to the peaceful sound of raindrops on the tent.

■ Later that night, I woke up with a start. The rain had stopped. Outside our tent, there was a rustling in the leaves. It got closer and closer.

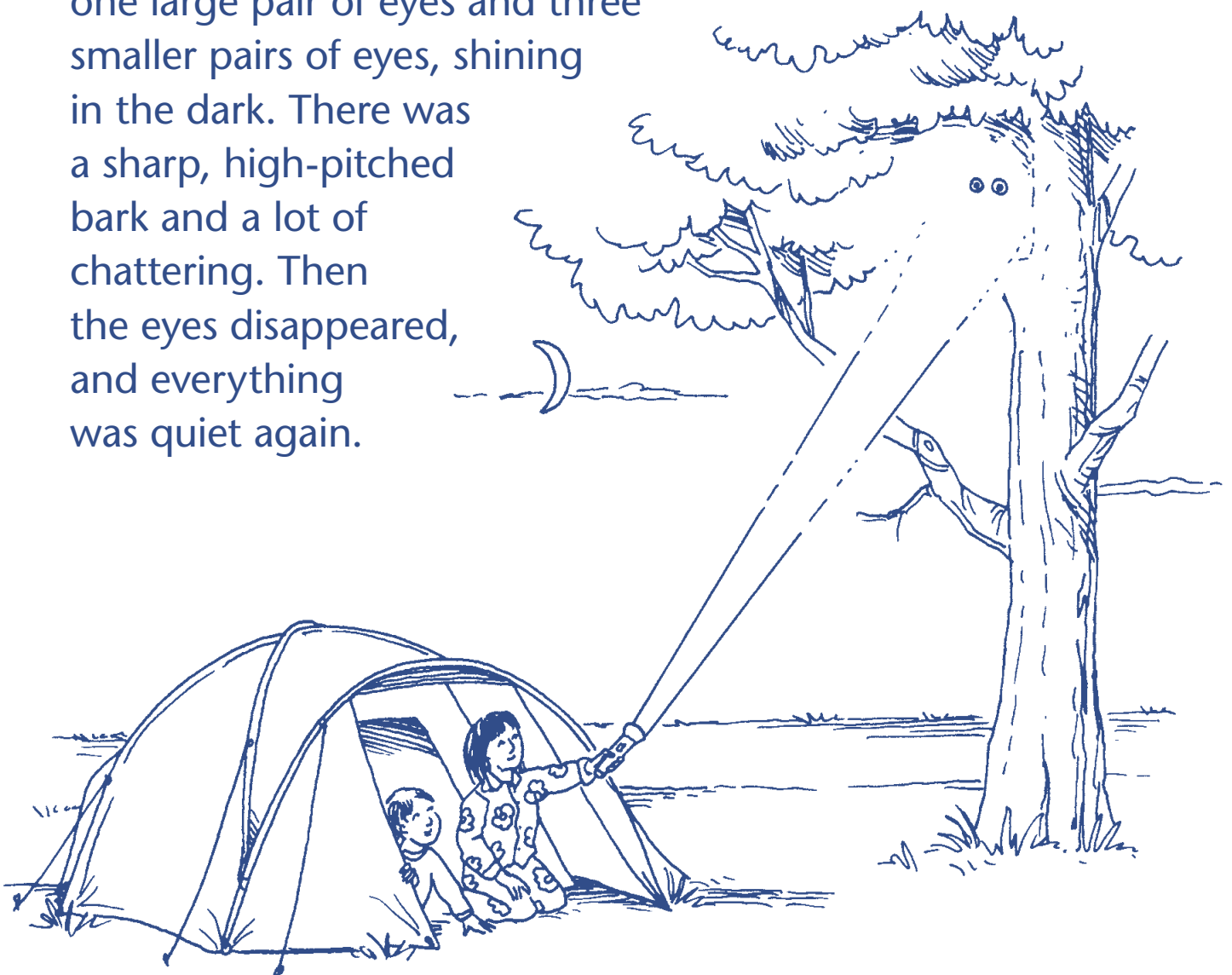
■ “What’s that?” Tim whispered.

■ “It’s probably just a little animal, maybe a mouse, looking for some food,” I said, as calmly as I could.

■ Then we heard someone or something calling in an eerie voice, “Whoooo! Whoooo! Whooooo!” There was a whoosh and a pitiful cry. Then it was dead quiet again.

|| I grabbed a flashlight and aimed the beam into the trees, where the eerie sounds seemed to have come from. We got quite a fright when we saw two huge, shining eyes staring back at us! Our screams woke Mom and Dad. I shone the flashlight toward the trees again to show them what we had seen, but nothing was there. Dad told us that we were letting our imaginations run away with us.

|| We had other night visitors. I heard twigs snapping and a high-pitched chirring sound. Then something started splashing in the stream. It was definitely a lot larger than a mouse! I shone my flashlight toward the stream and saw one large pair of eyes and three smaller pairs of eyes, shining in the dark. There was a sharp, high-pitched bark and a lot of chattering. Then the eyes disappeared, and everything was quiet again.



By that time I was really tired and thought I could sleep through almost anything. Wrong! I don't think anyone could have slept through what happened next. First, there was a lot of growling, hissing, and barking. Then there was a scream that lasted for at least 30 seconds. We were all scared out of our wits! I decided right then that I was going to get to the bottom of this. As soon as it was daylight, I was going to find out who or what the night prowler had been.

Solving the Mystery

We woke at dawn and ate a light breakfast. Then I began looking for clues. The rain had left the ground muddy. Any animals that were around during the night should have left tracks. Sure enough, I found lots of tracks by the stream. Some looked like the handprints of tiny humans. Some were large—about 5 to 7 centimeters (2 to 3 in.) long, and others were smaller—only about 2 centimeters (1 in.) long. There were also pieces of crayfish near the stream.

I found animal tracks.

