

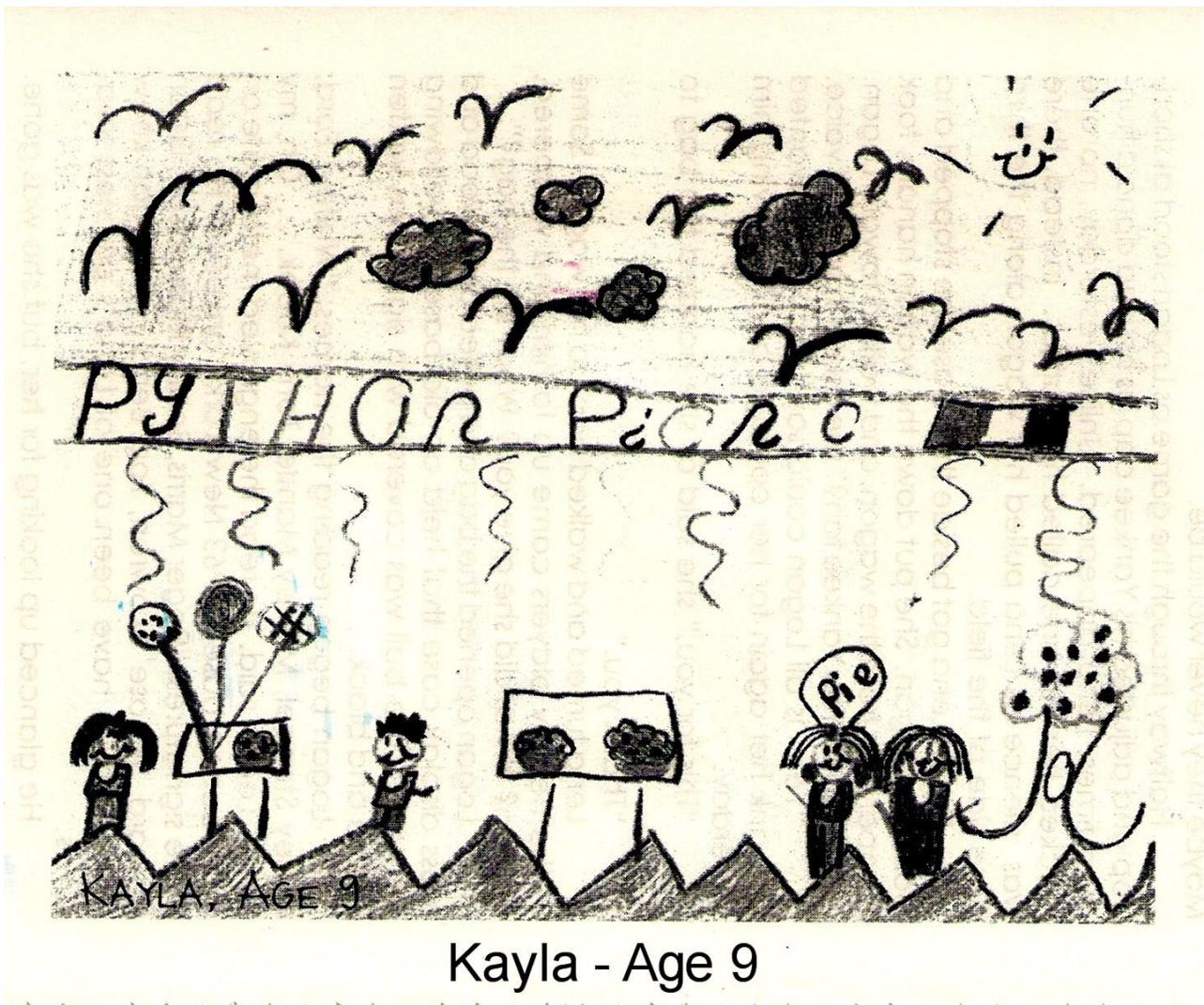
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I hope you enjoy my story.



Kayla - Age 9

"The Python Picnic"

by

TJ Fritz

Carlee sat at the kitchen table and finished writing a letter to her cousin Romee. The dishwasher was making so much racket she could hardly think.

"I hope you like your new home in Virginia," Carlee wrote. Her mind wandered until a loud clunk from the dishwasher brought her back to the letter. "School starts in three weeks," she continued. "I hope I like fourth grade."

The phone rang making it even harder for Carlee to concentrate. Her dad entered from the living room and answered the phone. As he spoke to someone over the kitchen clamor, Carlee ended the letter. "Maybe you can visit at Christmas. I miss you." She signed it, "Your cousin and best friend, Carlee." As she addressed the envelope her father hung up the phone.

"Carlotta, that was *Nonno*," her dad said. "He called to remind us about the *paisan* (PY-zon) picnic on Sunday." The dishwasher clanked again and water gushed into the sink.

"What, Dad?"

"I said, your grandpa wants us to go to the *paisan* (PY-zon) picnic this Sunday."

Because of all the racket, Carlee couldn't understand her father. "Did you say python picnic?" she asked.

"Yep, Sunday afternoon," he said over the racket. He didn't realize that Carlee had said python instead of *paisan*.

The dishwasher finally stopped and Carlee was grateful for the peace and quiet. Her dad noticed the letter on the table. "Are you writing to Romanita again?"

"Yes. Hey, Dad? How do you say 'my best friend' in Italian?"

"My best friend?" He scrunched-up his face as he thought. "*Mi manchi*," he said.

Carlee laughed. "That almost sounds like 'me monkey.'"

That night Carlee had a frightful nightmare. She pictured herself in a forest with hundreds of people standing on picnic tables. Thousands of snakes were on

the ground surrounding them. People were screaming, shoving and trying to avoid the pythons that coiled up and nipped at their feet. Suddenly, Carlee lost her balance and fell backwards into a sea of shining slithering snakes!

"Help! Help me!" Carlee screamed. Her arms lashed out in all directions as she fought off the attacking snakes and tried to climb back onto the picnic table. Bright sunlight blinded her. Powerful snakes wrapped around her and squeezed tightly.

"Carlotta! Wake up!" her father yelled. "Carlee, you're having a nightmare!"

As the bad dream faded and reality returned, Carlee realized that the blinding sun was actually her bedroom light. The squeezing snakes were her father's arms.

"Carlee, it's over. You're okay," he told her. She looked around. No snakes!

"Dad? Do we have to go to that python picnic? I hate snakes!"

"Python picnic? Where did you get that idea?" he asked.

"Tonight in the kitchen, after supper. It was kind of noisy, but isn't that what you said?"

"No, I said a *paisan* picnic."

"Oh, Carlee said, "a bison picnic." Carlee's mind was still in a fog from the nightmare and she misunderstood him again.

"There are no snakes, Carlotta," her father assured. "Do you think you can get back to sleep now?"

"Yes, but will you leave the hall light on and my door open?"

"No problem."

"And check under my bed too?"

Carlee's dad quickly peeked under her bed. "*Bene*," he said. "Except for the giant, orange alligator, everything is okay," he kidded.

"Dad?" Carlee said in a tone as if to say, "don't tease me!"

"Okay, Carlee, try to sleep," her father said and left.

A "bison picnic" Carlee thought. What's a bison?

When she got to school the next day she asked her teacher who explained that a bison was a mammal related to cattle. It had a large hump and a furry mantle over its shoulders. She said the American bison is the buffalo.

"My dad's taking me to a bison picnic on Sunday," Carlee told her teacher.

"So, I guess we're going to eat bison meat."

The teacher gave Carlee a weird look. "Are you sure you heard him correctly, Carlee?"

"I think so. I was kinda groggy at the time."

"Well, native Americans lived on buffalo meat for generations and seemed to like it. Hmm . . . let me know how your bison picnic goes."

When Carlee got home from school her father was cutting the grass. Over the loud roar of the power mower Carlee asked, "Dad, are we going to eat bison meat at that picnic on Sunday?"

"What?" He spoke loudly over the noisy engine. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Last night after my nightmare. Didn't you call it a bison picnic?" Carlee could barely hear his laugh over the loud mower.

"No, I said a *paisan* picnic. It starts with P, not B."

"Oh," Carlee said. "It's called a pies-on-picnic."

"Yes, *paisan*."

"Pies-on-picnic," Carlee repeated, still not really sure. "Will there be pies there?"

"You can count on it," he said and continued pushing the mower across the lawn.

On Sunday afternoon Carlee's dad drove them to the park where the picnic was to be held.

"Dad? Will there be a lot of people at this pies-on-picnic?"

"Last year there were more than 400."

Gosh, Carlee thought. My father is taking me to some crazy picnic with 400 strangers to eat pie.

"Will there be anything to eat besides pie?" Carlee asked.

"*Aspetta*, Carlee, I think you're still confused."

"Okay," Carlee said. "Spell 'pies on' for me."

Her dad spelled slowly, "P - A - I - S - A - N. It's an Italian word."

Still flustered, Carlee said. "Dad, please explain what a '*paisan* picnic' is."

"It's like a special family reunion," he explained. "*Nonno* and his whole family who came from the same province in Italy call themselves *paisanos*. They have a reunion every year and invite all of their children, grandchildren and friends. They come from everywhere."

So, that's a *paisan* picnic, Carlee thought. No snakes, no buffalo meat, maybe some pies, but definitely 400 strangers.

As they pulled into the entrance where the picnic was being held, Carlee saw hundreds of people. Some were playing softball, others were playing badminton, and some were tossing horseshoes. A small group of old men appeared to be bowling, but they weren't using any bowling pins.

A hundred enthusiastic people were dancing to Italian music that blared from a large open-air pavilion. Red, white and green Italian flags, streamers and balloons were hanging everywhere. A dozen people wearing red, white and green aprons were busy cooking steaks, chicken and sausage on a huge smoking barbecue pit that filled the air with the most delicious smells.

Carlee was overwhelmed by the sight. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and put her head down.

As they pulled into the parking lot her dad asked, "Hey Carlee, who's that running toward us?"

Carlee looked up and beamed. "Mi manchi!"

The End

Glossary of Italian words used in *The Python Picnic*:

| word | pronunciation | meaning |
|------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| <i>nonno</i> | (NO-no) | grandfather |
| <i>paisan</i> | (PIE-zon) | countryman, compatriot |
| <i>mi manchi</i> | (me MON-kee) | my best friend |
| <i>bene</i> | (BAY-nay) | good, okay |
| <i>aspetta</i> | (ah-SPETT-uh) | wait |