Night of the Aurora

It's an adventure if you don't know what the outcome will be.

I remember a day many years ago when my son and I got lost in the Upper Peninsula. Not lost exactly, turned around. Not even turned around, to be honest. If we had looked at a map we would have known exactly where we were. But we didn't have a map. That was the point. Where the portage trail idled beneath a canopy of maples, I leaned our canoe in the crotch of a tree and stepped from beneath it to rest.

"Looks like we're lost now," I said.

"Goody," Aaron said, and grinned.

He was eleven years old and hungry for adventure. He wanted to travel to new places, get face-to-face with wild country, and catch enough fish and gather enough berries to create the illusion that we were surviving by our wits. This was not true wilderness, but he didn't know that. To him it was as wild as Borneo.

We made camp on a island and set out to explore. We fished awhile, then carried the canoe over a trail that linked to other, smaller lakes. On the first day we saw two parties of canoeists, both on their way out. After that we had the place to ourselves.

The more adventures we had, the more Aaron wanted. We paddled and fished so many hours every day that it was always dark when we returned to camp. We would build a fire and cook something simple, then eat in silence. The nights were clear, the starlight reflecting off the lake. Even after being on the water fourteen hours and so tired that he was nearly incoherent, Aaron wanted to go back out on the lake and cast.

Late one night I stirred the coals with a stick and watched sparks spiral toward the sky.

"Look," I said.

Above the trees to the north were lights. They appeared to be beams from distant spotlights, but as we watched they grew brighter and began to climb the sky, always in motion, swaying like silk curtains in a breeze. They climbed until they were nearly straight overhead, then spread rays in all directions and changed from white to pink, then to green and blue and red – luminous watercolors swiped across the stars.

Gradually the colors faded and the lights shrank to the horizon. By then Aaron could hardly keep his eyes open. I walked him to the tent and helped him into his sleeping bag.

Such a modest adventure, yet it will stay with me for life. Of course life itself is the main adventure, as any veteran of the game can tell you. Stepping into the world on an ordinary day is adventure enough, but when you take the next step -- to a lake, say, beneath a night sky, in company with a child -- who knows what the outcome will be?

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