

An Illinois Mid-autumn Afternoon's Dream

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There are supposed to be eight children with us, but when the various parents get around to counting, coming to a halt in the middle of a cornfield, there are only six. A cell-phone call brings no answer. Later we hear the missing two were so engrossed in their video game they had not heard the phone nor had they realized they had been forgotten. Their father, a gifted if occasionally absent-minded professor of viola, races back to his car and returns the 25 miles home, leaving his daughter with her grandparents. The rest of us go on, picking our way over corn stubble and through some woods to what is called a sitting log, by the Salt Fork River, where we will build a bonfire.

Our hike is part of a two-day memorial celebration honoring Joe Doob, one of the famous mathematicians of the last century. In 1935, Doob joined a group of hikers who had been meeting every Saturday since maybe 1908. Those homesick-for-New-England professors had banded together to locate all the places with hills, trees, and/or rivers within a 50-mile radius of flat-flat-flat Urbana Illinois. They sought permission from the owners to hike and build bonfires. The Greek scholar Richard Lat-

timore even wrote a poem about the hike, published in the “New Republic”. Then, women were not allowed, nor children except for boys when they became teen-agers.

One of the children with us is named Kiffer. His parents are neighbors of the family with four boys whose grandfather, the mathematician Wolfgang Hakin, joined both the math department and the hike maybe forty years ago, eventually solving the famous unsolved four-color problem. Hakin’s wife became allowed on the hike along with their children and, now, grandchildren. Hakin’s wife may even be one of the leaders, if there is a leader, there must be, or is Sam Wagstaff the leader, a computer scientist who comes over every Saturday from Purdue? (I like to think his name is a derivative of Shakespeare’s.) A leader is different from what’s called the commissar, who brings the food and collects the money. Doob was the leader, but the hike existed and continues to exist without him.

At the sitting log, the gear, kept in a duffle bag - a large coffee pot, an assortment of unbreakable cups, a couple of frying pans and plates, and some spatulas and knives - is dumped out over newspapers. That’s called setting the table. The kids love it.

After setting the table, people begin to collect wood for the bonfire. Kiffer’s dad builds a little house of dry

twigs and leaves, clearing leaves and twigs from around it, and begins the process of setting it on fire. A few go off on a hike, but most just sit around and talk and watch. A canoe with two fishermen comes into view. The kids go over to the riverbank and slide down for a closer look. I go over there too.

It is a warm and golden fall afternoon, the trees on either side of the river in the process of turning. After the canoe leaves, some of the kids decide to go swimming, stripping to their underpants, including Kiffer and his special friend who carefully takes off and folds his glasses into a shoe, the granddaughter and also one of the fathers who rolls up his pant-legs. The water is about waist-high for the children and with a few patches of green algae along the top so nobody actually swims. The glasses-boy begins to look as if he just might splash the granddaughter, who adopts a "don't even think that" stance. So he doesn't. After a while Kiffer moves off beyond them till his parents can stand it no longer and say it's time to eat.

Kiffer is the last one out. And as he comes up the bank, off to one side he catches sight of a little dog, a sort of beagle with a sweet face. Something is wrong with it; it looks swollen. Well, maybe it is dying. Kiffer asks his mother about it, who says better not touch it, it might be sick. After a while, he is persuaded to

leave the little dog to go back to what is now a good bonfire and dessert is being served. The meal, always the same, starts with dessert, pie and oranges, which need no cooking. (The pie is provided by whoever lost last Saturday's bet.) The main course is called "hiker's delight", onions and jalapeno peppers (Doob used to grow them himself) cooked and drained over the fire (the flames leap up) and cheese melted on top to spread deliciously over bread. Then small slices of steak and/or sausages are passed around.

I stay by the riverbank for a while and watch the oldest boy, maybe about ten, who did not go swimming. Instead he is working on trying to dislodge what is left of a small tree stump so it will drop into the river and, following the current, eventually join other tree stumps against a bank further down. Those stumps look as if they'd been there since the beginning of time. Finally I decide not to do anything about the dog either and the boy gives up on the tree stump. Maybe he'd just wanted a project as an excuse not to go swimming.

A gentle old-man-fishing-friend of Doob's carries a couple of aluminum chairs under a tree by the riverbank. When I eventually go over to talk with him, sitting in the other chair, out of the corner of my eye I see the little dog has somehow dragged itself near the old man and,

eyes closed, is lying there quietly. Others come and go, taking turns sitting and talking with the old man.

At the bonfire, I am introduced to Doob's oldest son. He does not look like either his father or his mother. I had not guessed who he was. He says my husband, Laurie, reminds him of his father. Laurie, from a small and conservative mid-western town and a small high school, became a mathematician. Meeting Doob had changed the course of his life.

And I talk with Kiffer's parents, first with one and then with the other because Kiffer likes to go off on adventures and one of his parents goes with him, into the woods. (Kiffer has been reading the Harry Potter books.) It begins to get dark. When Kiffer and his parents decide to leave, we decide to leave too along with a few others, though the tradition is to stay and talk into the night. Laurie is walking with a cane, not easy over corn stubble. We almost get lost when Kiffer's parents and some of the others go into a wrong cornfield. The old man, who with us is a little behind, says no, we should go to the left, along another cornfield. When we find the cars, we turn on some lights and honk. Soon Kiffer's father appears. And then so do the others. Kiffer has had more adventure than he'd bargained for. No one is quite sure, either, who else might have left the sitting log when we did, if we are

all accounted for.

The next day, the formal part of the memorial celebration took place on the top floor of a building for the university faculty. There were guests from as far as Germany. The violist played a solo Bach cello suite so that the melody on which it was based stood out clearly through the flood of notes around it, perhaps bringing us all a step closer to an understanding of Bach. I watched and listened to the violist and wondered if, or how often, Bach had forgotten one of his twenty children - or was it twenty-one?

Hakin was one of the speakers. He told about Doob's oldest son sending his father a paper that made his father a minister of a religion dedicated to Truth, which of course can never be known. As that story got around, Doob had even been asked to perform a few marriages. Hakin said this was a case of a son giving to a father.

People passed around pictures of the hike the day before. Among the pictures was one taken of the children standing in the river. They were laughing. The late-afternoon sun shining across the few soft-green algae patches, and the multi-colored trees reflected in the water, created an aura around them. I had been right there but had not quite seen - that mid-autumn afternoon's dream.