

KATIE'S FIRST CAMPOUT

On Friday, April 14th, Katie camped out for the first time. We had a tent set up in the back corner of the yard under the pecan trees and folding chairs around our outdoor fireplace – nice fire, burning mostly scraps of 2 by 4's leftover from the building of our place at Pleasant Grove Campground. The night was beautiful – mostly clear, a little on the cool side, quiet – nearly perfect. Katie had a great time. She helped with the tent, helped to gather leaves and twigs to get the fire started, helped the fire burn, and talked almost incessantly about whatever she was doing at the moment. It was nothing short of wonderful for me. I had anticipated that evening for almost five years – well, really for 25 years – ever since I began to want a child and to dream of the things I would do with a child if I had one.

Camping was very high on that list. You see, I've loved camping all of my life, and even though it had been a few years since I'd been on any kind of camping trip, my fondness for camping had never failed. I guess perhaps I'd just been waiting for a new partner, and here she was – not scared, not whining, just enjoying it for the experience like I always did. And we sat up late – probably 'till well after nine o'clock, which is a long time for a four year old in a lawn chair – and the later it got, the cooler it got. Katie reacted well. She first got a blanket from the tent to wrap around herself – that was OK for a while. Then later she came and snuggled in my lap, and I wrapped the blanket around both of us. At that moment, all the cosmic lines of force running through the universe came into perfect alignment. Almost in a whisper Katie said, "Look at the stars, Daddy. They are sooo beautiful." Seconds later she was asleep.

She made no sound as I zipped her into her sleeping bag, closed the tent door flap, and then returned to my chair to follow her advice – to look at the stars. You know, I've been sitting around campfires and looking at the stars for what will soon be fifty years, and that's only the beginning of a beginning. My ancestors have done the same thing throughout recorded history, and very likely much longer than that. They've watched the stars from the river banks and mountain tops of every nation on earth. And they've camped beside battlefields with every general from Saul to Caesar to Douglas McArthur, and some of them have spent the night praying that the daylight and the battle would never come. They named the stars and charted their movements. They drew pictures in the night sky – pictures we now call the constellations – and they learned to mark the seasons by the position of those pictures. They watched the stars, and they waited. They waited for meteor showers and for eclipses, and for the sun to rise on Easter Sunday. They waited for babies to be born and for parents to die, and sometimes they waited just to sober up a bit, so that they could go inside without falling over the furniture. My ancestors followed mountain trails and wagon trains, caravans and caribou, and wherever they were when the sun went down, there they made their camps, built their fires, and watched the stars.

There is a wonderful little movie from a few years back called "The Bridges of Madison County" – a very popular little movie based on a very popular little book – that happened to star two of my favorite actors, Merle Streep and Clint Eastwood. Eastwood played a

world traveller, while Streep was a farmer's wife. As they raised their brandy glasses after their first dinner together, Eastwood's character, Robert Kinkaid made a toast "to ancient evenings and distant music." April 14th was one of those ancient evenings, and I could hear the distant music. It was the sound of a lone fiddle playing within a circle of wagons somewhere out on the prairie. It was the sound of the drums and chanting of the plains Indians as they prepared themselves for the next day's hunt. It was a harmonica being played in a muddy encampment somewhere near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. And it was the sound of my own transistor radio, straining with all of its 9-volt might, to pull in WGN from far away Chicago for three kids not that much older than Katie, who sat huddled around a campfire talking about the stars. Yes I heard the music, and when I said good-night to Katie that night, it was not to her alone, but to all of our brothers and sisters who ever laid down beside the campfire on those ancient evenings and looked up in awesome wonder at the stars.

"You're right, Sweetheart. They are sooo beautiful."

Dean Greene
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