

## BEGINNINGS

His path was one that would eventually lead to unfamiliar places. He had explored some of the hills just beyond a cow pasture but not farther. It would all be new and surely exciting. There were always so many new things to see--plants, animals, trees, streams, waterfalls and much more. So many little things that become big if you take the time to look at them closely.

Leaving the pasture was always a problem. Poison oak ringed the edge thickly and he had to find a recent cow trail through it. There were only a couple of times when he had blister rashes bad; the itching became like a strange burning sensation all over his arms and legs. That was more than enough for him! At last he saw a neat, tramped tunnel. He went through it and down a long bank that tapered to a small stream. He had played in the stream often, especially when the rains caused it to swell like a small river. He had to watch his steps avoiding the stinging nettles and a muddy area caused by a spring draining from just under the edge of the pasture.

Finally he got down to the stream. By now he had his flashlight on as it was too dark to see much. After looking for a place to cross, Aaron chose one that was narrow enough for a step and a jump. The only drawback was the steep bank on the other side. Without another thought he stepped part way into the water and bounded across to the other side.

"Easy," he thought adjusting his pack. Now for the steep bank. After three or four steps something terrible happened! A small tree he was using to pull himself up with broke suddenly sending Aaron, pack and all, into the water.

Like a shot he was up again and hustled up the same bank until at the top he sat panting and shuddering in disbelief. It had happened so fast. Now he was soaked. And on top of that he'd broken and lost the flashlight. So for an hour or so Aaron sat shivering with the tarp wrapped around him waiting for the sun to rise. His mind grew heavy, too heavy for a young boy. Thoughts poured through those minutes making each feel like an hour. He knew one thing for sure--he wouldn't go back. No matter what.

With the new sun Aaron set out, trying to shake off the cold and wetness. He hoped the sun would dry him; or at least he hoped the things he didn't have a replacement for would dry. The pack was all right. Just the flashlight was gone. To cheer himself up he ate some fruit as he hiked. The first of a series of hills and ridges was before him. It looked suddenly bigger than ever.

In the beginning steps were hard; but they grew easier it seemed moment by moment, until he was at the top of the hill. He could see way back across the pasture. How small his house looked. A light was on, probably in the kitchen. His mother must be awake. In front of him and beyond were more hills and mountains that loomed higher still. Yet, towards the sun, his goal and direction, was adventure. A thrill went up his spine as he thought about how much he would certainly see and do. It was exciting to stand all alone exploring places you've never been. Maybe only a few others had ever looked from the top of this hill before him! It was wonderful to think of having the chance to be a true explorer.

He had a quick handful of nuts and dry cereal and started on his way. For a short while he followed a ridge that was mostly treeless for some reason. Soon it was down a rugged ravine full of wild berry bushes and rocks and brush. Aaron stumbled and fell several times but bravely fought his way finally to the bottom only to find another hill blocked by poison oak and a mass of brambles. Again he fought his way along.

By now his clothes were starting to dry enough that he no longer noticed the wetness. But he had to cope with scrapes and scratches along with a few rips in his pants and coat. He now felt tired and a little hungry. When he made it up the next hill he was bushed and decided to lay down and rest for a minute.

The ground felt like a calming bed to him. Clouds moved in patterns across the sky. Aaron's eyes grew heavy until he began to doze off. Just then he felt very itchy, like bugs were crawling on him.

"Yow!" he screamed and jumped up. Ants were all over him and it felt like they were biting him. He felt little stings on his legs and arms. Quickly he ran off to another patch and took off his clothes.

He shook his pants and shirt fiercely. He brushed his hair and pulled off several that were biting his neck. The rest was over. He set out again feeling tired and alone and discouraged.

A low mountain loomed ahead. Doggedly he walked and hiked and climbed and crawled along. At times he had to struggle. Other times it seemed a little fun. Nonetheless, when night came, Aaron still was very far from his goal and was bone tired. Without eating more than a few bites he fell asleep curled in his sleeping bag beneath a large tree.

Strange scratching noises suddenly woke him up in the middle of the night. Aaron peeked out of his bag only to see raccoons devouring all the food in his pack. He hollered and jumped up and chased them away; but the damage was done! The rest of the night Aaron was in and out of a restless sleep trying to protect his stuff and keep away any other marauders.

When light trickled through the tree tops Aaron checked over his pack. Everything but a few canned goods was gone. On top of that his matches were chewed up and the pack had big rips in it. It was a bad night for sure and left Aaron with a sick feeling in his stomach. He felt a sinking wave of fear hoping that more trouble wasn't hiding behind the next tree or over the next hill.

Very tired and very hungry, Aaron made out once more for the mountain top hoping to cross it to better places beyond. His footsteps were heavy and slow. By mid-day the pack was getting too heavy and uncomfortable to carry. So Aaron filled his sleeping bag and pockets with what he could and threw the pack away.

From then on he pushed himself, hardly stopping to drink water. He pushed and pushed until finally in exhaustion he made it to the top of the mountain. What he saw made him fall down and cry. On the other side were many more mountains. Some much higher than where he now stood. He wasn't sure what to do or really where to go. He just wanted his own room and his own bed at home. But now that seemed gone forever!

He wiped tears from his face and started to inch his way down to find a place to lay out his sleeping bag. Some steep and rugged places

places made him move slowly and carefully. A clump of trees below was his destination. When he was regaining confidence over his sure-footedness, something terrible happened! As he was reaching for a branch, a small rock gave way beneath his foot. Aaron lost his balance and went rolling head over heels to the bottom of the short incline to the flat. His sleeping bag went off into the shadows in another direction. Only some shrub brush stopped his tumbles, preventing maybe an even harder fall.

He sat dazed for a long time before trying to move. It was so strange. Like being in a peculiar dream and telling yourself to relax even though the dream was crazy; because you would soon wake up and it would be over- just a dream! He didn't feel hurt at all, that is until he tried to stand up. The a sharp pain hit his ankle!

"Ow," he yelled and sat down quickly. His ankle felt broken or maybe badly sprained. Whatever, it hurt a lot. He grabbed a loose branch and half crawled, half walked over to the trees. The sleeping bag had disappeared, off somewhere and it couldn't be seen. Night and the cool darkness was coming quickly. So the only thing Aaron could think of doing to keep warm was to pile together old pine needles and small branches until he was surrounded and half-covered. He chewed on some candy slowly. It was all he had left.

He had hoped to explore the mountains while making his way to where the sun rises, far away. All the troubles had caught him by surprise. Maybe he wasn't trying hard enough? Maybe he wasn't being smart enough? Maybe he would have to fight harder to make it. Maybe he could find a spring to drink from and wild berries and plants for food! But he was thirsty and hungry now, and hurting and cold and very, very tired. No one understood him! Would anyone ever? A veil of darkness like a blanket heavy with sleep fell upon him at last, blotting out temporarily the aches and fears and worries that played upon his mind, upon his emotions.