\*Dave Eggers

When I was a kid in the suburbs of Chicago, adventure meant Quetico Provincial Park, up on the border of Minnesota and Canada. The name implies that the place was small, but Quetico is a million acre nature preserve, so big you could go days and days without seeing another soul.

We would go on camping trips up there, weeks of canoeing and portaging, seeing bears and moose and deer, sleeping under star-soaked skies. The park was isolated and so pristine that you could actually drink the water straight from the lakes. But I won't be going back to Quetico anytime soon. Not after what happened to a girl name Francis Brandywine.

Francis was 17 at the time, black haired and with a reckless nature, determined always to leave the well-trod path, to break new ground and be alone. A few years ago, Francis was up in Quetico with her family. They were in a remote part of the park, camped on the shore of one of the deeper lakes, a lonely body of water carved millions of years ago by a passing glacier. The deep part of this particular lake was rumored to be about 300 feet.

One night, after her family went to bed, Francis took the row boat out, planning to find a quiet spot in the middle of the lake, lay on the bench of the boat, look up at the sky, and maybe write in her journal.

So she left the shore, rowed for about 20 minutes, and when she felt satisfied that she was over the lake's deepest spot, she lay down on the bench and looked up at the night sky. The stars were very bright, and the aurora borealis was shimmering like a neon lasso. She was feeling very peaceful.

Then she heard something strange. It was like a knock. Clop, clop. She sat up, guessing that the boat had drifted to shore and run aground. But she looked around the boat, and she was still a half mile from shore. She leaned over the side to see if she'd hit anything, but she saw nothing-- no log, no rocks. She lay back down.

She told herself it could be any number of things, a fish, a turtle, a stick that had drifted under the boat. She relaxed again and soon fell into a contented reverie. She had just closed her eyes when she heard another knock. This time it was louder, a crisp plop, plop, plop, like the sound of someone knocking hard on a wooden door, except this knocking was coming from the bottom of the boat.

Now she was scared. She leaned over the side again. It had to be an animal. But what kind of animal would knock like that, three quick, loud knocks in rapid succession? Her mouth went dry. She held onto each side of the boat, and now she could only wait to see if it happened again. The silence stretched out. A few minutes passed, and just as she began to think she'd imagined it all, the knocks came again, but this time louder. Bam, bam, bam.

She had to leave. She lunged for the oars. She got them in place and began rowing. The water was very calm, so she should've made quick progress. But after rowing feverishly, she looked around, and she realized that she wasn't moving at all. Something was keeping her exactly where she was.

Again she tried rowing, she rowed and rowed on the verge of tears, but she went nowhere. She stopped. She was exhausted. Her heavy breathing filled the air. She cried. She sobbed. But soon she calmed herself again, and the boat was silent again, for 10 minutes, then 20.

Again, she tricked herself into thinking she'd imagined it all. But just like before, just when she was beginning to get a grip on herself, the knocking came again, this time as loud as a bass drum. Boom, boom, boom. The floorboards of the boat shook with each knock. Now she was so shaken she started making questionable decisions. The first was to lower one of the oars into the black water, trying to feel if there was some land mass, even some creature she could touch. As soon as the oar broke the water's surface, though, she felt a strong, silent tug at the other end, and the oar was pulled under.

She screamed, she jumped back, and now she had no options. All she could do was sit, and hope, and wait-- wait for the morning to come, wait for whatever was going to happen to happen. The knocking went on through the night. She passed the time writing in her notebook, and it's only because of this notebook that we know what happened that night. Frances can't tell us. She was never seen again.

The boat was found on shore the next day, empty but for the journal. On those pages were her frantic jottings, all written in her distinctive handwriting, all but the last page. When the journal was found, that page was still wet, and on it were four words, looking as if they'd been written quickly, with a muddy finger. They said, "I did knock first."

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\*Jeanne Darst

Stink Tooth was born with a baby tooth with no adult tooth underneath it, and the baby tooth had never fallen out. It was rotting and dead, and her five sisters began calling her Stink Tooth. Soon her mother and father called her that, and then everyone in their town did, as well. No one ever talked about seeing a dentist and pulling it. You carry on. Even though something is decaying right under your nose, you carry on.

At 44, she did the only thing she'd ever done, bus tables at Rouge a Levres sur un Couchon-- lipstick on a pig-- the French bistro in town in Superior, Wisconsin. She'd never gotten a raise. She'd seen other bus people promoted to waiter, but she definitely did not want to be a waiter. The waiters were all French, not a single one here legally. If you were legal, you didn't stick around Superior.

She didn't have enough to live on. She ate off plates when she got them into the kitchen. Sure, everyone did that, all the young illegal bus boys. But she also didn't have enough booze and cigarettes. And often, when she ran out of cigarettes, she would just shut off the lights and go to sleep. She needed a raise.

She got to the restaurant and found Blouson, the owner. "Sir, I need a raise," she said. Blouson ignored this.

"Why don't you learn French, Stink Tooth? You've worked here so long."

"I don't like to learn new things. It makes you vulnerable in my opinion."

"Well, that in itself is very French. You're lazy. You love to nap, no? Your skill set is general, hazy, like a smoky room, not sure what is what, who is where. You do speak French, very well, just not the language. C'est sa. You understand what we French call the gout de maleur, the taste for misery. You love to suffer."

"Perhaps, sir, but I'd still like a raise."

Suddenly, shouting and cackles were heard out on the street, and a crew of 11 pirates from 17th century Hispaniola broke down the door of Rouge a Levres sur un Couchon, brandishing swords, breaking tables, and smashing windows. Stink Tooth took note of the marauders' filthy faces and hands, their period-perfect, tattered, billowy shirts, as they burned chairs and flung centerpieces everywhere. "I'm never getting out of here tonight."

They yelled that they were looking for the famous treasure of Leopold the Sullen of Spain. Stink Tooth ignored them, walking back and forth to the kitchen to get a broom to clean up the broken windows, and then back again because she forgot her dustpan. They demanded to know who was in charge of the restaurant. Blouson yelled, "I am in charge. This is my restaurant." The pirates ignored him, surveying the place and surmising that Stink Tooth was clearly in charge, as she was the most manly, masculine creature in the joint.

They held up and pointed to their crinkly yellowed map, which said the Sullen treasure was buried under the restaurant. They told Stink Tooth that, as the leader of the restaurant, he-- they called her he-- needed to get all the customers out, so that they could burn the place to the ground to dig for the treasure. "Burn this place to the ground?" Stink Tooth said, "I've wanted to burn this place to the ground for most of my adult life. Matches are in the hostess podium."

They began lighting torches when their leader, Captain Treadwell, yelled, "Stop! Stop! Why, I ask you all, is he so eager to torch the place? He's already gotten to the booty. The treasure is clearly somewhere else." One of the captain's men grabbed Blouson by the hair and dragged him across the floor to where Stink Tooth was standing. He threatened to cut off Blouson's head if Stink Tooth didn't tell them where he had relocated the treasure. Stink Tooth walked through the swinging kitchen doors and came back and handed the pirate a knife. "It's an Oxo," she said, "better grip than what you've got there."

Captain Treadwell, feeling that decapitation wasn't impressing Stink Tooth, glared. "Stink Tooth, you will tell us where that Sullen treasure is, or we will cut off the arms of all your customers," Treadwell said.

"That sounds like an awful lot of work, if you ask me," Stink Tooth said.

Treadwell ordered the pirates to begin. "Anywhere in particular you'd like me to start, Stink Tooth?"

"Yeah, actually, table 12 by the front door. Real plate cleaner, that one. Has never so much left a few frites for me to take home in all the years I've worked here. Why don't you start with him? His name's Ted Turk." One of the pirates dragged Ted Turk over to Stink Tooth and put a large blade at his arm.

"Hey there, Ted."

"Hey, Stink Tooth."

"Crazy day."

"Oh god, yeah," said Ted.

"They're going to cut off your arms, Ted."

"That's what they're saying, isn't it?"

Captain Treadwell screamed for both of them to put a lid on it. He considered a new plan, since maiming and killing others wasn't working with her.

"People are always wanting to do things," Stink Tooth said to Ted. "Do, do, do. This is glamorous? Doing things? This is any way to live? Striving, sweating, searching? Treadwell, you think anyone's going to remember you for all this effort? OK, yes, slaughtering, maiming, pillaging, all real calorie burners, I'll give you that. But come on. It's also just pointless. This is silly, boys, really. All this exertion's a bit embarrassing. It's so obvious and empty. At the end of the work day, you're drunk and alone and hating the world, just like me. The same results can be had with no effort at all."

The pirates look at each other, wipe the sweat from their eyes, and rub their lower backs, finally lowering their swords. They head out the front door, one battered pirate releasing his parrot into the night sky over Lake Superior.

Captain Treadwell called back to her from the door. "I can pull that tooth for you, lassie."

"Sorry, Captain," she said, "this tooth is who I am."

The customers emerge from under tables and the bathroom. One by one they pat her on the back and shake her hand, thanking her for saving them, no one getting too close to her. These people have known her her whole life. They know not to get too close. Stink Tooth looks at Blouson.

"I'm sorry, Stink Tooth. No raise. Non."

--

Cristin Milioti

Heaven only knows why Uncle Cornelius agreed to let my twin brother Kirby and me come for a visit in his rambling townhouse, when he was so busy working to perfect his latest secret invention. It's not like we didn't have other relatives willing to take us in whenever our parents absconded to the Orient for a spell, which was often.

Of the half dozen eccentric uncles and aunts charged with looking after us, Uncle Cornelius was the most absent-minded. He was also the only one who didn't have a Merchant Marine, a robot, or a Chinaman for a servant. So it was hardly a surprise that he neglected to lock the door to the third floor room, the one that he'd instructed us never to enter.

It was a rainy morning, and we were sick of playing cribbage, so we tiptoed down the hall to visit the secret room, which, as we soon discovered, was a butler's pantry filled with an elaborate assortment of wires and glass knobs.

"By god," Kirby declared, "it's a time machine."

This was a lucky guess on Kirby's part. For all anyone knew, the butler's pantry could have been a portal into another dimension, except that alternate realities were definitely more Great Aunt Emily in specialty, whereas a time machine just seemed so Uncle Cornelius, who was presently hurrying down the hall in his asbestos bathrobe.

"Children, don't touch anything," he cried. "Well, except for that giant lever over there that's making a sort of electrical humming noise," he added. "Try that."

Kirby couldn't wait. "Hikey pikey!" he exclaimed as he reached for the switch. "Let's go."

"Wait," called Uncle Cornelius. He reached inside one of the pantry cabinets and drew out a fistful of silverware. "Take one of these bouillon spoons," he cried. "Put it in your pocket, and whatever you do, don't leave the--" but just then, Kirby pulled the switch, there was a flash of cerulean light, and before we knew it, we were all standing in a primordial swamp watching massive brontosauri swim by.

"Hot zig!" cried Kirby. "Just like we read in geology class."

"The scientists are right about dinosaurs," proclaimed Uncle Cornelius. "At last we have proof. And proof that my invention works." He swatted at a passing pterodactyl with one of his slippers. "Enough of this place. Grasp your spoons, children. Let's return to good old 1949 where we belong."

My bouillon spoon began to tingle in my hand, sort of like a joy buzzer, and before I knew it, we were back in the pantry. After that first trip to prehistoric times, we had several time travel journeys a day. Except, it was hard to tell what a day was anymore, since our time travels never lasted more than a few seconds in the present, which meant Kirby and Uncle Cornelius and I would have breakfast and then spend two weeks in, say, the Acadian empire, then we'd return to the hot toast that we'd put in the toaster before we left, which we'd eat while Uncle Cornelius quizzed us about the Mesopotamian's invention of irrigation systems.

All the same, I began to savor the little moments in between our journeys. I craved the sheer ordinariness of the ordinary day that was interrupted again and again by adventure. I began to wonder if I could travel just a day or two into the recent past so that I could visit myself and convince that version of myself to travel with Kirby and my uncle, while I remained in the present and read Trixie Belden.

Plus, I just wasn't sure if we should be playing with the space-time continuum like it was Kirby's chemistry set or something. But whenever I brought up time dilation and special relativity, Uncle Cornelius would say, "Do you want to see how little girls who ask too many questions grow up? You'll spend the 1960s as a spinster if you don't zip that lip, young lady."

It wasn't until I found a note under my pillow that said, "I'm not coming back," written in my own handwriting, that I knew I had to do something. Or rather, that I had already done something in a future where I clearly had more nerve. And so while Kirby and Uncle Cornelius were in the kitchen, buttering their 74th piece of toast of the morning, I said goodbye to Fibber McGee, the passenger pigeon we had brought back from the 19th century, and left my note on my bed along with my bouillon spoon. And then I went into the butler's pantry one last time to steal a moment for myself.

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John Conlee

May 11, 2010. We're in an open jeep from Ashgabat to Derweze, me and some of the boys from the lodge. The road looks like someone dragged his boot through the desert and went, "Hope this works."

Hubert's wearing a hospital mask. Orville's throwing up. I feel the sand all up in my drawers and think, so this is Turkmenistan. Our guide, Weppa, stands up every few seconds, throws out his arms, and says, "All lands are squalid before you, the desert." His complexion's like beef jerky, though he seems nice enough.

Last year at this time, we were fishing the Newark Bay right by the airport. Trouble was, Orville got his thyroid trashed from PCBs in the crab, and Hubert caught something in the lungs, maybe from all the jet fuel. So their doctors said, "Go heal in a warm dry place." There was an ad up at the lodge, something about immortal fire and men needed to put it out. Some of the other boys had already signed up and come this way. The ad said, Success full of doubt. Lunch provided.

"Ship of the desert," says Weppa as we stop for a camel in our path. We're going to the hell gate. In 1971, some geologists were drilling for gas when their rig sank into a hole the size of two jumbo jets. Their thinking then was toxic fumes leeching into the air, and something like, oh god, what have we done? The geologists decided to set it on fire. 40 years later, it's still on fire.

Last week, Hubert asked if it was like a barbecue pit, like one of those Hawaiian meat caves, and I said, "Sure, it's just like that." None of us has any firefighting experience, but I did some reading on the plane.

We pick up a guy from Yerbent. He's wearing a mop of tinsel, it looks like. "Nomad," says Weppa, by way of introduction.

The nomad says, "Watching the crater, you will be courting hot, red flame of magnificent eternity in hell."

It says in my travel guide the way to put out a natural gas fire is to drill into the coal and flood it with water and slurry, smother it with nitrogen foam. I figure all this stuff's at the site, but for good measure, we all have mini-foamers in our packs. The sun has gone down, so there's light visible in the distance. In fact, the whole sky's lit up for miles, like a city.

Orville says, "Maybe they got running water, and Dramamine, and a hospital nurse."

Weppa shakes his head. "No city," he says, standing up. "Hell hole. All men bow before you, hell hole." Me and the boys stare at the light come up from the Earth like a lampshade upside down. It glows more gold than red, maybe what Fort Knox is with the dome blown off. But as we get closer and park, and all three of us start walking towards the crater, the size of a football field, the crater calling out to us like those ladies who seem nice but then not so much, my face gets blasted with the heat, and we're still yards away.

The crater's not roped off-- the cordon kept melting, I bet-- so you can walk right up to the edge, and what you see is damnation itself. A 200 foot drop, flames snapping at the stars, and a sound like death, hot and close in your ear, whispering hello.

I don't see any equipment to put out this fire. What I do see are Weppa and the nomad struggling with Orville and Hubert, saying something about the president of Turkmenistan wanting to close the hole, but no way are they letting anyone close the hole. The torment of man is in that hole. It should probably stay in that hole. Do not tinker with the design of the hole.

Weppa nudges me forward. The nomad is yelling, "There are bones in the hole!" The implication being, see what happens to American mens from lodge who come to vanquish our hole? This explains why Edwin and Francis and Charles didn't come back.

They've got us headed for a plank that juts over the mouth of the crater. The plank is fire resistant, I guess. I'm 67 with a bum hip, so it's not like I'm thinking, run. And anyway, come up at Dune, nomadic shepherds on camel and an army from Yerbent. We are surrounded. I look at the boys. I go for my mini-foamer and take aim at our captors.

The boys do the same, and when I let out the cry we use at the lodge to announce dinner, they know what it means. It means, destiny awaits. Shoot. And we do. The camels are out of there in no time. The nomad talks tough, but he's out of there too. Back in the jeep, I tell the boys, there really is no point to what we're doing here. Snuff out the torment of man in one place, it'll just rise up someplace else.

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\*Neil Gaiman

I told my wife that I was going to write about adventures, and she laughed without stopping for two minutes. I timed her. She laughed from 11:09 until 11:11. "Are you going to tell them," she said when she pulled herself together and more or less stopped laughing, "about how you call every trip to the store an adventure?" I told her that I wasn't, that I was going to write something rich, and true, and wonderful for the radio.

There would be aliens in it, and prehistoric monsters, Aztecs and vampires, crazed scientists and their beautiful daughters. It would contain, somewhere in its 700 words, spies and swordsmen, oracles and barbarians, ghosts, a dancing bear, wise women, werewolves, foot-long carnivorous centipedes, and quite possibly some illicit sex.

She still laughed. I don't think she believed me. And she's right. I get it from my parents, I'm afraid. In my family, adventure tended to be used to mean any minor mishap we survived, or even any break from routine, except by my mother, who still uses it to mean what she did that morning.

I suspect that my father, who loved G. K. Chesterton's essays, had encountered Chesterton's aphorism that an inconvenience is only an adventure looked at the wrong way, and an adventure only an inconvenience wrongly considered, and he took it to heart. So any inconvenience, any problem, any struggle of a personal nature, any of these things in my family would be described as an adventure.

Let's admit it. Real adventures are the sorts of things most of us would just as soon avoid. I wouldn't know what to do if I were on a plane that crashed into an Amazonian dinosaur valley, or a Fumanchu unleashed his centipedes of doom in my general direction. Probably I'd die, quickly and fairly horribly. A character in one of my novels, Tristan Thorn, put this better than I or any of my family members ever managed to. "Adventures were all very well in their place," he thought, "but there's a lot to be said for regular meals and freedom from pain."