

Discovering magic of a firefly's glow, and life, in Iowa City

The fireflies on Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean ride radiate a constant glow. They hover just outside the loading platform where, as I child, I would crane my neck to watch them while our boat sailed toward pirate battles and buried treasure until the soft glow was lost behind the wall of a massive stone tunnel. They were my favorite part of the ride, the only fireflies I had ever seen — until last month.

Orientation for the Iowa Summer Writer's Festival had ended after dark. I'd planned on rushing to my



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Guest Opinion

room to start some homework, but as I walked past Hubbard Park toward the Iowa House Hotel, something caught my eye. A flash of vibrant green over the lawn, then another, more yellow, near a bush. I stopped walking and focused on the area where the flashes had appeared,

unsure of what I had seen.

For a few moments, I looked at nothing but an expanse of darkness. Then, one by one, across the open space, they appeared. Floating lights flashing on and off with no warning or indication of where and when the next one would come. The park lawn sparkled as if in preparation for some great magical event — the appearance of a pirate ship or a castle, perhaps.

I put my bags on the ground and knelt down beside them, grinning from ear to ear. The night was warm

and a full moon rose from behind the Old Capitol building. The air came alive, a constantly moving constellation, right before my eyes. As I knelt on the ground, awestruck by nature's ability to produce her own special effects, people hurried past. Some of them glanced my way, no doubt wondering why I was on the ground, but not one of them stopped to watch.

I wanted to run onto the grass from one flash to another until I held one of the amazing creatures in my hands.

But I was self-conscious.

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What would people think of a grown woman gallivanting across the lawn after an insect? A flickering green light flew in front of my face. It was too close to let

go. I leapt up and chased it across the lawn. Just before the firefly flew out of reach, I made one last grab and cupped my hands around the glow. Caught it!

I felt a tickling between my palms and opened them to reveal a plain looking brown bug with a tiny light bulb pulsing beneath him. A greenish glow illuminated my hand for a moment, and then the firefly spread its wings and flew off into the night.

I watched it go and then sat down on the lawn to watch the magic show again. I tried to guess where

the next flash of light would come from but almost always got it wrong.

If only they would stay lit longer, I thought, or permanently like the ones at Disneyland, now that would be something. But then it occurred to me that part of the magic of a firefly's glow is its impermanence. Like some of life's most touching moments, they materialize for a brief instant and then are gone.

Reach Colleen Paeff, a freelance writer from Los Angeles recently in town for the Iowa Summer Writing Festival, at colwarp@earthlink.net.