

In my old age, I am having fun dreaming up these short stories, mostly for my own enjoyment but perhaps for others too. I have paddled on the Moisie River and its headwaters at least half a dozen times, so I can make good use of that experience in my story.

Mystery on the Moisie

After having skipped most of my previous Amherst High School Class of 1948 reunions, I decided to attend my twentieth at the prompting of my high school buddy Clark Curtis. He had tracked me down and suggested it as a good time and place to meet. I was looking forward to renewing our good friendship. He said he also had something he was eager to share with me, which roused my curiosity.

I thought I might find myself feeling like a stranger at the reunion, and so it was, for no sooner did I enter the banquet hall of the Riverside in Hadley than I was warmly approached by a presumed classmate I didn't recognize, who grasped my hand and said, "Hi Stew, great to see you! How've you been?"

So I smiled back and uttered something pleasant in return, all the while wondering who he was. Soon I found myself milling around the hall full of mostly strangers, looking for Clark of course. I saw that we were now using nametags, but not everyone wore one. I had the impression that most of those who attended still lived nearby and knew each other, perhaps assuming the rest of us from far away to do so also. Thanks in part to the tags, I began to recognize some old friends among my classmates. So what is there to talk about? Here is a typical exchange:

"Do you know what has become of Bruce so-and-so?"

"Don't know."

"How about Don?"

"Oh, he died."

"Well how about Bob?"

"Believe he moved away."

And so it goes. Don't get me wrong. I really do enjoy reunions. As things progressed, we gradually got beyond this exchange of trivia, and I also got over the shock of seeing so many classmates who looked nearly old enough to be my parents. I wondered why it was that some were unrecognizable, at least by me, while others I easily recognized, apparently so little changed after all these years. I have this theory that the change in countenance may be at least partly explained by the toll taken by the many tribulations in their journey through life, or for the few lucky ones by the lack thereof. So there I was, coming to my twentieth and expecting little more than an evening of socializing, which was fine by me. But oh what an evening it would turn out to be.

I spotted Clark as soon as he came into the hall. We had been pals all through high school, and even before that in Boy Scouts. He and I had many interests in common, especially hiking and camping. Yet in some ways we were opposites, for unlike me, he was socially outgoing and made friends easily. I believe he was our class president in our senior year. I also considered Clark to be one of the brighter guys in our class. He had gone on to Harvard Law School, and I gather his professional career had something to do with banking and finance, oh so different from my haphazard journey through life.

Clark likewise spotted me and came briskly over to greet me. After the usual brief exchange of pleasantries, I asked him if he was still working. He said he was now self-employed, mostly as an occasional investigator of insurance fraud. As to be expected, our conversation soon turned to news of classmates, about which of course he was much better informed than I, especially in identifying those present. At one point I asked, "But Clark, who's that old woman over there, and what's she doing here?"

"Why that's Kitty Gibson. Surely you remember her."

"Oh of course I remember. She was the beauty queen of our class. But are you sure that's Kitty? Hard to imagine. Whatever happened to her?"

"They say she's had a tough life. Divorced once or twice, plus other failed relationships I guess. Problems with alcohol, and a son lost to drugs, among other things. I guess it shows."

The other side of the picture is the gals who become even more attractive as they age. There were a few attending that I wanted to ask Clark about, but before I had a chance, we were seated at a large table with other classmates and their spouses or friends, some of whom I remembered vaguely, and I thought it more polite to spread the talk around the table. Of course much of the conversation revolved around news of other classmates or incidents from the past. Ah, what memories. There was one classmate I was particularly interested in, so when her name did not come up I asked around the table, "Anyone know what has become of Ellie Riendeau?"

Clark immediately answered, "Interesting you should ask, because I have been in touch with Ellie just recently. I'll explain later."

I thought it rather strange for Clark to be so reticent that way about Ellie, but I let it pass until we were on our way out, when I reminded him, for I had grown ever more curious during the dinner. You see, we both had a crush on Ellie in our senior year, as did one or two other guys. I would describe Ellie as rather plain looking and also a bit short, ah but such a warm personality and sweet smile, and perhaps something even more that is hard to pinpoint. But Clark dated her, while I was too shy for anything like that.

Clark told me he was staying right there at the hotel and insisted on my coming up to his room for a chat, which of course I accepted. So up we went together, and soon we were comfortably seated and doing what might be called catching up. He had married a classmate whom I remembered slightly, but she had died recently of cancer and he was now living alone in Hartford. Again I reminded Clark that I was curious what he had to report about Ellie, little realizing what I was getting myself into. Here is how the rest of our meeting went:

"Well, Stew, I don't suppose you would remember, but the last time we met, you told me you were planning to write a book about your canoeing adventures in the North Country. Now I think you might be able to help me with a case I'm working on. You see, I have been taking on some work involving estate finance fraud."

"But Clark, I don't see where that could have anything to do with me."

"I'm coming to that."

Here I must explain something. I like Clark. As I already said, we have been friends from way back. But he is trained as a lawyer. He almost never answers any of my questions straightaway, but instead manages to eventually work his way around to them by some crooked path. (Oops, sorry, perhaps I should not have used that word.) So I let him continue, not that I had much choice. Finally, since the hour was getting late, at least

by my standards, I interrupted Clark to say I was getting tired and was having trouble concentrating. At that, Clark reached over to pick up some papers and handed them to me.

“Take a look through these when you're wide awake. Then let's get together tomorrow for lunch and have a chat about them. Oh by the way, regarding your question about Ellie, you will find her mentioned in these papers. Remember how popular she was? She could have chosen any regular guy like you or me for a partner, but wait till you see who she ended up with. For a quick answer to your question now, after high school Ellie went to nursing school, and after that she spent several years as a volunteer with some international aid foundation traveling all over the world but mostly Africa. But then around 1960 she settled down in Boston and met Boris. You will see.”

I spent some time the next morning going through Clark's papers, trying to absorb every detail. On the first page was a note thanking me for my help, evidently in anticipation. Here I will try to summarize the gist of Clark's notes, which were obviously written with me in mind:

Boris Magursky was the son of immigrants and grew up in Brockton. Some of his family worked as laborers in the shoe industry and his father did landscape work. Since Russian was spoken in his home, as a child Boris spoke broken English and was not up to grade in reading or writing. Consequently he was held back a year in school. He had a large muscular build, and being held back a year made him dominate physically even more over his classmates. As you might expect, in high school he excelled in football but little else, and often got into trouble. Boris's football coach took an interest in him and somehow managed for Boris to attend a boy's summer canoe camp in Ontario, which did wonders for him. He went on to graduate from high school with a good record. After being drafted into the U.S. Army and spending two years in Korea, he went to Northeastern, where he majored in business. Upon graduation, after moving about a bit, in 1960 Boris settled down with Beacon Trust in Boston as a financial manager of estates. It was there he met Ellie, who worked in the same building, and a year later they became engaged.

(So now at last I see how Ellie comes into the picture, which I was already beginning to suspect.)

But then something went terribly wrong when one day in June, 1962, Clark got a call from the president of Beacon asking for his help. About one million dollars was discovered missing from a large estate managed by Boris, but he was nowhere to be found, for he and Ellie had left a few weeks earlier on their honeymoon. It was also discovered that evidently over a period of months Boris had managed to convert all or most of it into \$100 bills. Immediately an investigation was launched involving the State Police, the FBI, and even Canadian authorities, for it was determined they had crossed the border in Boris's Honda on July 15, 1962. Clark's assignment was to find Boris, plus of course the missing money. He took the case mostly because he thought it might be fun, and being semi-retired he was looking for something interesting like that to do.

Clark went to Canada to investigate, and here is what he believes happened: Evidently Boris, with his canoe camp experience in the Canadian bush, hatched up a scheme to elude the law. They would hide the canoe and most of their things in the bush,

and make their way back to Sept-Iles and their car by hitching a ride on an ore train, while making it look like they had both become lost and perished in the wilderness.

In Sept-Iles they rented a canoe and had it delivered to the QNS&L station, then took the train north to Lac DeMille to begin their canoe trip through the lakes and down the Moisie River. Part way along, they had a slight mishap and capsized, getting everything soaked. Ellie, being a strong swimmer managed to rescue both Boris and most of their stuff. Alas, in drying things out, she found a bundle of about \$10,000 cash that Boris had hidden away in the bottom of his pack. When Ellie demanded to know what was going on, Boris confessed to her only that he had done something improper and that they ought to go into seclusion for a while in Canada. The Canadian idea might not have upset Ellie so much because her family background was partly French-Canadian, and she had even considered moving back. But the unlawful aspect came as a complete shock to her, and even worse was his keeping it secret, while still not explaining to her satisfaction all the details. As for Boris's fake disappearing scheme, Ellie would have no part of it, and besides, by the 1960s there was probably too much canoe travel in the Canadian bush to pull off anything like that.

I was appalled just reading Clark's report. I can imagine how this might break up most relationships, even on a honeymoon, or perhaps *especially* on one. But then, what is one to do in the middle of a wilderness canoe trip? There is also Ellie's character to consider, always kind hearted and caring even in the face of adversity. Of course I am also wondering how Clark learned all these details.

At this point in Clark's notes the mysterious Joe Fargus enters the picture. He was hired by the Cabot Family, the victims of this crime, to locate their missing money. Thus, he and Clark combined forces, but only for a while. Fargus too had been to Canada doing some research on the case, but came up with some details quite different from Clark's. According to the Fargus version, Ellie was in on the scheme of deception and seclusion from the start. According to him, partway down the Moisie, Boris and Ellie stage an accident in which their canoe is badly damage and most of their luggage lost in the raging rapids, including presumably all of the cash. And how does Fargus explain how they could manage to carry so much money in their eighteen-foot canoe? No problem. According to him, one million in \$100 bills weighs only about 25 pounds, which Clark checked and found to be correct, believe it or not. With the hoard of cash presumably lost in the rapids, Fargus thought he had done his part and he billed the Cabot family for his expenses and time, by a generous amount we can assume.

That is as far as I got in Clark's notes before we met the next day. The first thing I asked Clark was: "How come you know all those details about their misadventures on the Moisie River?"

Again Clark launched into a long story as he continued: "I figured you would ask. I got them straight from Ellie. After about a year of investigation, mostly searching for Boris, I finally dropped it as I had other things to do. But I never gave up completely, and every so often I would do a search in the Internet for his uncommon name. Then a few months ago I got lucky when his obituary popped up in the Brocton Enterprise. It's a long story. Their canoe adventure on the Moisie actually went without incident except for the minor capsized and resulting confrontation. After the canoe trip, using some forged documents and new names, the new Mr. and Mrs. Jones took up residence in Toronto.

Boris worked as a landscape gardener and Ellie in a nursing home. They scraped by well enough until Boris came down with Lymphoma. But then his dementia added to their woes. They never were Canadian citizens and had no health benefits, so Ellie had to quit work to care for him. When he died last year, Ellie figured it was no longer necessary to hide their identity, so she sent a notice of his death to the Brockton Enterprise. And guess what, up pops Boris's name on my computer search. With that, I had no trouble locating Ellie. I went to Toronto a couple months ago and visited with her. So that is how I know all these details. She never knew about the million dollars but suspected something of that sort, especially after finding a key to a safe deposit box labeled First Tremont in Boston that Boris had kept hidden from her all those years. When I told her all I knew about the case, she told me, if ever the missing money were to be found, to arrange for all of it to be returned to the Cabot family, or if that could not be done, donated to charity. She is coming here in a couple weeks and bringing that key with her. I assume you will want to see her."

"And now, Stew, we come to Fargus and see how he fits into the picture. For a while, he and I cooperated in our work on the case, but after I learned more about him I distanced myself. He has a reputation for doing unscrupulous things, sometimes getting himself in trouble with the law. I think his original scheme was to try locating the money and perhaps receive a reward for finding it. When that did not work, he considered blackmailing her with the fake story about the mishap on the Moisie to see if she could be forced to cooperate in prying loose the money, if only he could find her, which he recently did at the same time I did."

"But Clark, how could he ever think anyone would believe such a crazy story?"

"Yes, I know Stew. But don't try to figure out that nut. He even came up with a photo of the horrendous rapids where the phony mishap took place, and here it is."

Clark handed me the photo.

"But look, Clark, a battered canoe down on the rocks and a row of *oak* trees along the bank. This photo was not taken on the Moisie. Now if only we had a close up of the canoe."

With that, Clark reached over and handed me a second photo showing the wrecked canoe in detail. One glance was enough, and I told Clark, "That is an eighteen-foot Grumman canoe that has been hammered to smithereens. When an aluminum canoe swamps in rapids and is damaged, it is always by wrapping around rocks, but never battered in like that. Clearly a fake. And besides, if it was a rental canoe, how was that loss resolved? Did Fargus come up with any fake records?"

"Yes, I thought of that too. But I'm sure he would say it was so long ago, all records are lost. But now, Stew, we come to the good part. A meeting has been arranged for next month to take place at First Tremont. Fargus will be there, and Ellie will be too with her key. Unknown to Fargus, I will be there, and you too I hope, also a bank officer, probably a policeman, and possibly one or two others such as a photographer from *The Globe*. I have already gathered enough evidence to put Fargus on the spot, but thanks to your help we have made the case solid."

Two weeks later the meeting took place as planned. Clark and I were there when Ellie arrived. Immediately upon entering she said "Hi Stewart," and rushed across the

room to give me a hug, probably the best hug I have ever had. After all these years she looked great.

No time was wasted. Ellie produced the key, handed it to the bank officer, and the box was opened. Evidently Fargus was expecting hundred dollar bills to come tumbling out, but of course the safe was nearly empty. Boris had long ago stopped paying rent, so after three years the bank had opened it and held the money in trust for three more years, after which it went into Massachusetts Unclaimed Property. Presumably, after some legal details, it could now be returned to the rightful owners.

The safe was not quite empty, as inside were a pair of handcuffs planted there by Clark. Probably Fargus was expecting them to be placed on Ellie, but instead the police officer handcuffed Fargus. It was done just for fun, while the Globe photographer got some shots, and then they were removed. Fargus was not charged with any crimes, but he did lose his license to practice in the Commonwealth, and that seemed fair enough.

All the while I had been trying to make eye contact with Ellie. She looked great. But I noticed she kept her eye on Clark most of the time and I figured something was going on. The meeting did not last long. On the way out, I followed a proper distance behind Clark and Ellie, just close enough so I could overhear. I heard Ellie say to Clark, "Shall we go to your place or mine?"