

Scamp

"I pointed out to my husband that our child is not a dog. We can't simply put him out the back door." Mrs. Courteney-Lange slid forward in the high-back chair, elbows on the headmaster's desk. "I know he's been acting up a little, but who would feed him...my son, that is?"

"Sorry, I have to laugh... you are a funny woman."

A smile glided over her face like a puff of wind on a quiet pond; and it passed just as quickly. "The two men in my life might disagree with you on that one."

Mrs. Courtenay-Lange, her husband Stark, and their eleven-year-old son lived in the restored Boney Lodge at Boney's Landing on Little Boney Lake, a few miles north of Turtle Marsh, and a beautiful one-and-a-half-hour stroll to the community's pride and joy, the Turtle Marsh Academy Boarding School. "Starky" Lange purchased the lodge when he retired from Galbraith and Turner's stock brokerage firm on Toronto's Bay Street strip. "Our heaven on earth," he had reassured his wife after showing her the completed paperwork. "And we could use a bigger place to store all our money." Her husband had it all worked out. They would hand their child over to the local boarding school and buy a classy cedar strip motorboat.

It was the wife's job to get the boy settled. The husband was busy looking at boats.

"I've never been to a boarding school before." She hesitated. "So please forgive me if I seem nosy, but I imagine that there are students who are sent - that come here - that don't work out, don't take to the sleeping over, don't react well to the discipline. Not exactly bad kids, but what my husband would describe as 'scamps'."

The headmaster's face remained expressionless. "How can I help?"

Mrs. Courteney-Lange sat back and crossed her arms. "Have you dealt with a lot of these scampy types?"

The headmaster nodded. "No... well, not hordes of scamps, by any means, but... yes, the Turtle has been the temporary home of a very few scamps over the years. However, I am sure your son will shine, thrive, and blossom into a productive member of both your family and the Turtle Marsh family."

"You said that very well."

"Thank you. I practice, and..."

"Although," she broke in, "I'm not sure that the boy needs to blossom as much as he needs to grow up, like his father... or my father... or anyone's father. Simply grow up. Regardless, we would appreciate reassurance before investing in this project."

"Project?"

"Yes, of course. My son is a project."

"Maybe I can help. There is one fellow I can tell you about," the headmaster continued. "The boy was about your son's age and left an indelible impression on the school. He was a troublesome case and considered a lost cause; he was about as bad as they get, but I will let you be the judge."

The headmaster rang the little brass bell sitting on the corner of his blotter. "Cup of tea while I give you a blast from our past?"

"That would be very nice."

"Good, we'll start with the boy's final beating."

"How many did you get?" Benson asked.

"Six," Stedman said. "But I could tell he wanted to keep going."

"What did he use?"

"The hockey stick."

"Sadistic prick." Benson pretended to spit on the polished hardwood floor. "Why couldn't he use a pool cue like everyone else.?"

"He couldn't. There's a tournament going on – they needed the sticks. Now I have to talk to Roose - apologize - be nice to him."

"Talk with the Rooster!?" Benson put a finger in his mouth like he was gagging. "Don't get too close."

Stedman grinned and started down the hall, trying to swagger like a tough guy, not an easy task with burning, beat-up, butt cheeks and watery legs. Old Grimes had put everything he had into this one – hadn't held back. Stedman graded this session 'pretty ugly' based on lots of previous experience.

He entered the first-floor Common Room and confirmed that all the tables were empty, and there was no one at the pool table. Roose was there, of course, buried in his favourite padded armchair, the large bowl of rice balls in his lap, absorbed in the current episode of *The Three Stooges*. The scene in the Common Room was a familiar sight to everyone, the lone classmate with the creepy lip-hair and ear-to-ear black warts and pink pimples, living in the black, shiny suit jacket and worn black slacks - and the TV *Stooges* shrieking at top volume.

According to the Dorm Head, the boy was going through an awkward phase. Unfortunately for Roose, his current phase was pretty gross.

Stedman preferred the Common Room on the second floor: it was bigger, brighter and didn't have Roose in it. He spent a lot of time there, shooting pool and studying the one dog-eared copy of *Fanny Hill* that circulated endlessly throughout the school like an infectious bug you wanted to catch. From this upstairs vantage in Common Room 2, the students could hear the bouts of laughter, the wacky music rising from below them. But it fooled no one – it was just Roose.

“You got sent here,” Roose said.

“I have to watch a show with you. And we’re supposed to talk... to each other.”

“So that’s my punishment. What’s yours?”

Stedman pulled up a chair beside Roose and sprawled into it. “This is a great chair. I wonder if it comes apart?”

The two students didn’t talk; only watched the TV on the table in front of them.

**Curly falls off a ladder and lands on Moe
Moe was holding the ladder
Moe is getting up slowly and finding something
to bludgeon his pal with
Larry has his upper body stuck in the washing machine
Larry is crying. Moe is snarling. Curly is running in circles and
screaming.**

Roose slid forward in his chair and whispered: “Watch this.”

**Moe tries to poke Curly in the eyes... Curly gets his hand up
just in time to block
... Moe points up... Curly looks up...
Moe pokes him in the eyes...**

“Shit, this is stupid!” Stedman said after five minutes. “Why do you watch it?”

Roose pointed at the screen and shook his head. “Maybe we just enjoy things sometimes for no reason,” he said, without turning from the TV. “Like when you hurt peoples’ feelings. Why do *you* enjoy that so much?”

Stedman ignored Roose. “I’m going to drop Chemistry.”

“You can’t; you flunk the whole year if you do.” Roose turned the TV volume up.

“Suits me if I do flunk. Then I never have to come back to this shithole.”

“Why do you hate me?”

“I hate everyone in this place.” Stedman turned the TV down. “I want out of here. I want to do something so bad that I get expelled, and my parents have to take me home and pay me to be good.”

“But you have friends here.”

Stedman got up again and jammed his seat cushion against the TV’s speaker. “They’re not friends; they just like to see what I’m going to do next; how nasty I can be.”

“You *are* very good at it.”

“You’re just an easy target, Roose. What can I say?” Stedman stopped at the door. “Enjoy your dinner tonight.”

“What?”

“Please...Roose...pay attention. You never know what’s going to happen next.”

Stedman was alone in the room. He was sitting on Roose’s bed, a small paper bag gripped in his left hand. He had lots of time to do what he wanted to do. Benson was in the library trying to not-flunk his term; Schmitt and Ramsay were in town shoplifting; and there was Roose outside in the lower field, stumbling around and messing up another field hockey practice.

He was about to stuff the wet bag in the back of Roose’s bedside table drawer when he spotted the paper, a photocopied picture on a sheet of foolscap with what looked like a short letter written below it. Stedman knew this photo; it was the school picture from the yearbook, taken on the expanse of lawn under the Great Tree. It was - but it wasn’t. The original photo, which appeared in the yearbook, showed the school population in a ragged formation in the centre of the shot, then a wide blank area beside the group of boys, and then finally a solitary figure standing, almost out of the picture, at the far left. The figure was Roose. Stedman remembered the photograph well; his roommate falling out of a picture.

“Holy shit,” Stedman said under his breath as he studied the copy from the drawer. “Talk about crashing the party.” The full meaning of what he was holding snapped into sharp focus. Roose had ripped the blank space out of the picture and rebuilt the image, he’d moved himself over, shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the boys. Roose had doctored an official school photograph and then written a note to go with it. Nicely done, Stedman had to admit.

..."Dear Mum, thanks for your letter of July 13, 1965. It was very nice of you to write me. I thought you might like to see a picture of me and my friends here at school. As you can see, there’s a ton of us and we all have a lot of fun together (like the Three Stooges sort of).

I hope father is feeling okay. I thought you said he was going to get better soon?? Gotta go, There’s something going on here and they need me.

Your son, Peter (and the gang). Sorry almost forgot...Love from me. And give father a hug okay?”

Love from me twice. (once for each of you at the school you sent me to)

PETER

Stedman heard the door open behind him.

“What’s in the bag?”

“Dog Shit,” he said.

“I’ll take that.” The shortish, roundish, breasty woman was holding a plastic garbage bag out to him. “Thanks for helping,” she said in a husky, smoker’s purr that complemented her bubblegum perfume and suited her perfectly. “You know,” she added. “I love surprises as much as the next girl... but not your kind.”

Stedman dropped his bag of dog shit into her bag.

The boys called the cleaning lady Mrs. Paddy because she sounded like what they thought an Irish Pub waitress would sound like if they ever met one. Over time, Mrs. Paddy had knowingly or unknowingly planted a wonderfully forbidden image in their raw, impressionable, hungry and inventive imaginations and Stedman wondered if the Turtle Marsh cleaning lady knew that dozens of young men were suffering sleepless nights all because of her. Mrs. Paddy was a schoolboy’s creation and Stedman figured she knew all about it.

The students’ favourite cleaner lived in a small cottage on the edge of the school property, on the fence line at the Maple Sugar Woods. Some of the older grade nines said they’d even seen the inside of the tiny building. Stedman knew they were liars; but lies or not, it didn’t hurt to feed and exercise *his* imagination.

He showed her the photocopied picture with the letter.

“Why didn’t he send it?” he asked her.

Mrs. Paddy sat down on the bed beside him. “You shouldn’t be looking at that. It’s private. Here, let me see it.”

Their legs were touching. “You’re a strange one, you are.” Her mouth smiled at him. Her eyes laughed at him. “Here you are, holding the hard evidence of another human being’s broken heart and shattered soul in the one hand, almost like you was a kind and caring person...and then there you are, little devil boy, about to stuff a heap of dog crap into the poor lad’s bedside table.”

Stedman could not look directly at Mrs. Paddy - could not speak or move. He tried to shake the trance; the image developing inside him - the cottage. Her hair was loose.

Mrs. Paddy tapped his thigh suddenly, stood up with the garbage bag in her grip and plugged in the vacuum cleaner. “My God, what am I thinking? Chattering away with a young hoodlum whilst my rent goes unpaid.” She pushed the button on the cleaner. “Move along, silly woman!” she commanded, and the Electrolux machine inhaled with a wheeze and a woof and took off around the boys’ room with the woman in tow. Mrs. Paddy was a good worker - all business - hardly ever got distracted.

Stedman left the room.

"Is that all?" Mrs. Courteney-Lange asked. "Are you done?"

"Not quite. Would you like a little more tea?"

"Delighted."

The older man in the black suit and his guest, the youngish woman in the stylish white pantsuit, fell into a thoughtful silence as they waited for the tea to come.

When the tea arrived, the headmaster resumed his tale.

Stedman disappeared from the school the day after the punishment for his treatment of Roose. Rumours abounded. The boy drowned in the pond. The boy ran away to California, last seen taking LSD pills and getting high with hippy chicks. The Secret Service took him and was conducting experiments in a lab in Northern Ontario. An insane cleaning lady locked him in her cottage, chained him to a bed. Unfortunately for its many young fans, this last theory, the love-slave version, collapsed after a routine local police visit to Mrs. Paddy's.

But all interest was not lost. The Mounties came and dragged the marsh, stirring up the rumour pot even more. The only result of all this official activity was a mass of confused turtles wandering aimlessly everywhere on the school grounds, and a mile wide swamp stench forcing all but the toughest noses inside. But all good things came to an end eight days later when the student detective community laid all its theories to rest; the heavy aroma lifted, the last police car drove away, and the turtles climbed back on their logs. A week after that, the school population had lost interest, almost entirely.

The headmaster laid his fists on the blotter, then opened them slowly and dramatically under the woman's eyes. "The boy had truly disappeared," he whispered.

"What about the family, his parents?"

"In France. At another house. No one had a clue."

"So that is the end of the story?" Mrs. Courteney-Lange rose to her feet.

The headmaster cleared his throat. "There was a rumour."

She turned. "Another rumour?"

"A sighting."

She sat back down.

The youngster came across the couple on the edge of the school grounds. They were barely on the school property, lurking off to the side on the gravel lane that accessed the event grounds. The old fellow in the wheelchair was craning his neck, pushing up on the armrests, trying to see what was captivating his companion. The woman was pointing at the pack of uniformed students on the large, groomed lawn outside a tiny church, a chapel.

He didn't so much introduce himself as present himself to the pair. "I'm Stedman, just Stedman. Nobody at this place has a first name - nobody. I don't think they were even born with them - and if they put a 'Mister' in front of your name, you really are in for it. Get out the pool cue." He followed her gaze to the gathering where it seemed to be fixed on a boy standing stiffly in the middle of the grass, far from his classmates. Stedman looked back to the woman. "You know him?"

Was the old girl about to cry?

Suddenly, a voice squawked from a loudspeaker in the field, and a hundred boys and young men burst out in cheers and whistles; the field came alive like a carnival. "Come on!" Stedman grabbed the wheelchair handles, pushed up and onto the closely cropped grass, and headed with his new friends for the only tree on the lawn; a towering Maple in full glorious leaf with a rope swing hanging from a lower branch. The swing was unoccupied but was swinging and twisting in the late summer breeze.

Stedman pushed up against him. "Are you using a fresh cream?"

Roose kept his head down. "You are supposed to be dead."

"Sorry to disappoint, I was just wondering about the cream because one of your pimples looks like it might have shrunk a little. That one!"

"Stop it!" Roose swung around, swatted the hand, and saw his parents.

The father was struggling to get out of the wheelchair, and the mother was holding out her arms. Stedman stepped to the chair and lifted the man until they stood together, the old man facing his son. "Roose, get your Mum," Stedman said. "We're moving over to the main event. Let's get in the picture."

After that ceremony, Roose became a celebrity. Some of the kids, and even a few adults, swore, the next day, that they had seen the runaway, Stedman, and Roose standing with the others at the edge of the Great Tree shadow. They were all smiles.

The headmaster ended his story and sighed. After a long minute, Mrs. Courteney-Lange broke the silence. "You have a framed photograph of the Three Stooges on your wall." It wasn't a question. "I haven't seen them for what...fifty years?"

"Signed by all three - I was a big fan - that's the original Curley."

"Who's the fellow under the Stooges?"

The headmaster turned in his chair and leaned back. "That's Jerry and his lovely wife, Sandy. Jerry was the best man at my wedding."

The woman rose from her chair and stretched. It had been a long story, and she had listened to every word from beginning to end. But now, as if waking from a dream, she entered the dark room of delicious linseed oil and turpentine air, where she gradually made out voices coming from outside, through the office walls - explosive laughter, jubilant squeals, and the wailing poetry of creative name calling. As she listened, a boy cried out, and the laughter stopped suddenly, replaced by the rush of urgent shouts and patter of running shoes thumping on freshly cut grass.

The headmaster got up and stepped to the window. "Looks like the fifth graders' soccer practice turned into a free-for-all, and young Branscombe ended up on the bottom again." He pulled the window as closed as it would go. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be. You've taken me way back - back to my school days." The smile returned. "But *our* screams could break glass." She laughed. "I hope Branscombe survives."

"He always does." He returned her smile. "He just keeps getting smaller."

Mrs. Conneley-Lange crossed the room to the rogue's wall of paintings, snapshots, photographs, important-looking documents, and serious-looking diplomas; some framed, some mounted, and some taped or stapled without any attention given to their order or position. She stopped at a crayon drawing of a brightly marked turtle on a log with a huge sun high in the brightest, bluest sky imaginable.

"That's my daughter's," the headmaster offered. "Peg is going to be a famous artist, or a construction crane operator...or a TV sports commentator." Mrs. Courtney nodded, then moved on until she ended up at the photo of the best man and his wife. She raised her hand and lightly touched the glass on the image.

"Aha," she said. "Stedman. Jerry Stedman, the lost cause."

"I'm shocked. How did you know?"

"I'm a mother." She laughed. "A mother can always tell a scamp."

The headmaster led Mrs. Conneley-Lange out through the large doors to the patio where the late afternoon sun greeted them.

They basked in the golden glow.

As the Headmaster and his guest stopped and looked out onto the playing field, the faraway sound of a mower came to them from the next valley, its lazy drone riding on the fresh evening air. "The boys are headed for the showers and a good meal." He waved expansively over the railing. The field was almost empty.

"It is very nice here, very peaceful." She held up a hand as if to touch the giant Maple towering beside the chapel where her car was parked. "And I like your story."

After a long silence, the woman spoke softly. "Peter..." she said.

The headmaster turned to her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking of my boy; his name is Peter. I think I would like to send him here, but my Peter is quite special.”

The headmaster nodded slowly.

“He is very shy. He is also at an awkward stage in his youth. I am a little afraid that Peter wouldn’t fit in, that he would be an unhappy boy.”

“I would never let that happen,” the headmaster said.

“Yes, of course, but you *must* realize...I would never forgive myself if Peter paid the price for my mistake.” She was visibly shaking, suddenly, and the headmaster reached out and took her hands in his.

“You never told me your name,” she said.

His smile grew to brighten his entire face. “My name is also Peter - Peter Roose – the all-time poster child of awkward schoolboys, but through times that I would not trade for a bankers fortune because they led me here - to this place and to this moment.” He released her hands.

“My-my...Roose, the star of the show.”

“Hardly, just Roose.”

“You seem to be a wise man, Peter Roose. Where did that come from?”

“The Stooges...their earlier work.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Courtney-Lange said. “Their formative period.”

The end