

## **RITE OF PASSAGE**

### **Richard Paul Jones**



I turned in my uniform the same day the moving van came. It was almost the end of June and the weather had turned hot and muggy. I got on my trusty bicycle and peddled down to Smitty's house. "Here's my uniform," I said. "Mom washed it and sewed up that torn place, so you can give it to the new kid. Good luck; I hope you guys win the city championship." Smitty and I had started the Aviators baseball team in Dayton Ohio that summer so we could play on a real team, with uniforms and umpires and all the other things that make you feel like you've graduated from playing in the cow pasture. And now my family was moving to the far northern reaches of Minnesota and I had to leave the team and all my friends behind. With that farewell and a wave, my bike went on the moving van and I headed off to a new life 1,000 miles away, in a new state with a different culture. For a fifteen year old boy, the promise of adventure far outweighs any sentimental concerns.

Moose River, Minnesota is located two hundred miles north of Minneapolis and smack dab in the middle of the Chippewa National Forest. The winters are very cold and the snow keeps piling up until it's waist deep by the time the spring thaw rolls around. Sometimes the temperature doesn't get above zero for a week or more and twenty or thirty below is not uncommon. In the winter it is already dark when the school day ends but in summer the evenings seem endless. Scandinavian and Finnish immigrants were the first Europeans to settle this part of Minnesota because it looked and felt like home and lumberjack work could be had for the asking.

When my parents bought the two-story, twenty-eight room hotel in Moose River, it marked the beginning of my passage from the carefree joys of childhood to the inquisitive adventures of teenage life in America. One day I was a fifteen year old kid cavorting around our Dayton neighborhood on my bicycle; and a few miraculous days later, there I was, a thousand miles away, riding around in a car loaded with pulsating teenagers – half of whom were girls.

Back in Dayton, girls did not play a very important role in the lives of my childhood buddies and me. Of course thinking about girls, staring wide-eyed at girls, and talking about girls was quite another matter. As I recall, these titillating activities occupied something like 80-90% of my waking hours and all of my dreams.

During my last school year in Dayton I came face-to-face with a girl on only two occasions. First, a girl named Margie cornered me at a party and taught me the rudiments of kissing. All these years later, I still remember exactly how soft and inviting her lips felt as they pressed eagerly against mine. I was still in a daze until the other kids started laughing and pointing at my lipstick-smearred face. Not long before we moved, I took a girl named Anita downtown on the bus to see a movie, which I guess you could call my first 'date'. I kissed Anita goodnight just like Margie had taught me, and then I walked two blocks to my house and spent the night dreaming about all the things I really didn't understand.

The traditional rite of passage that our Hebrew friends call Bar Mitzvah is celebrated in Moose River under the guise of a weenie roast – at least it worked that way for me. The morning after our earthly belongings were unloaded and moved into our cramped apartment in the hotel, the bright sun and cloudless sky beckoned me to the thrill of discovery. I hopped on my familiar old bicycle and set out to explore the town. Three blocks away I passed a saw mill and learned first hand that it was the source of the pungent smell that helped to define our new hometown. I proceeded to survey the limits of the south end of Moose River and returned home a half hour later, consumed with my newfound knowledge. I think that was the last time my bike was out of the garage until we sold it the next year.

A day or two later, a local boy named Wayne came into the hotel lobby and said he heard that a teenage boy had moved in and he would like to show the newcomer around. My father summoned me, and away Wayne and I went to the local teenage hangout, the Arrowhead Café, and into the fascinating new world that was to become my life.

The next thing I knew, I was invited to a weenie roast hosted by two girls, named Pat and Rita, whom I had met on my whirlwind tour with my new friend Wayne. The neighborhood looked familiar and it gave me a comfortable feeling when I realized that I had peddled past both of our hosts' homes on my earlier cycling exploration.

It was August by then, and the evenings were starting to get chilly. In northern Minnesota, the first killing frost arrives before the end of August and soon thereafter the leaves begin their glorious annual display of colors. When I arrived in Rita's back yard that evening, I was confronted by a dozen or so smiling teenagers – I think. I'm not really sure, because nothing fully registered with me after the second girl I met. She was a slim, dark-haired cheerleader named Elaine who had an entrancing smile, a vivacious personality, and dancing eyes. She captured my heart instantly, and at that very moment I eagerly left all the innocent pursuits of childhood in my wake,

There were other parties that summer, and I spent every possible minute with Elaine – sitting close and holding hands. I cleverly snaked my arm around her shoulders at the movies and later I inhaled the seductive aroma of her cologne when we squeezed into a booth full of teenagers at the Arrowhead Café. Then we walked hand-in-hand to her house and the glorious evening ended when I put my arms around her and our lips met with a gentle kiss – just the way Margie had taught me back in my boyhood world.

School started in September. Two months later I went out for basketball and made the starting team. I loved playing basketball and it was an unforgettable thrill every time we dribbled out onto the floor and the crowd leaped to their feet and cheered at the top of their lungs. And there, jumping and shouting with the other cheerleaders was Elaine – with the dancing eyes. We won some and lost some that year, but the best part was the dances after our home games. That was when Elaine and I moved together to the romantic music and I got to hold her close and fill my senses with all the wonderful feminine things about her.

One day a letter came in the mail from Smitty. The Aviators had won the city championship, beating our fiercest rival decisively in the finals. The thought raced thru my mind that I was happy for Smitty and the team, but it just didn't seem all that important to me any more. Boyhood and the Aviators were fading rapidly in my rear view mirror.

Elaine's family moved to Colorado the next year and our lives continued down separate paths. I only saw her once after that, but they say you never forget your first love. Several years ago I saw a picture of Elaine and three other girls taken back in those exhilarating days of discovery. I didn't notice who the other girls were but my heart skipped a beat when I saw those dancing eyes.

[Editor's Note: This enjoyable story is a sequel to this author's previously posted story entitled "Summer of the Aviators". Both stories describe the experience of growing up in America, and the changes in priorities that take place in a boy's life with time.]