

Cooper Falls by Gregory Blount

It was a sunny June day. Russell Stewart and I were cutting through Memorial Park on our way home from the falls. As usual, I wasn't feeling very sunny myself. There were two spots up at the river where a kid could test their courage, Chicken Run and Dead Man's Bluff. Chicken Run was about ten feet over the water, and Dead Man's Bluff, at the top of the falls, was about twenty-five feet high. Russell, a freckle faced redhead, wasn't the only boy in town brave enough to run right off Dead Man's Bluff, but he was the only one who could do it blindfolded. I, on the other hand, had never progressed past Chicken Run with my eyes wide open. I would sometimes crawl out along the slippery rocks of Dead Man's Bluff, but one look into that dark green water far, far below with the roar of the falls drowning out all other sounds and I would start shaking so bad I'd have to crawl right back away from the edge. Russell was always pushing me to try things. Life was easy for him and he saw no good reason why it shouldn't be easy for me too. We were opposites, but we were also best friends.

On our way home we passed the old cannon near the gazebo in the centre of Memorial park.

Russell stopped and made an announcement, 'Ladies and gentlemen, for our final performance this afternoon we proudly present Sam Cooper, the Human Cannonball! He will astound you with his amazing 500-foot flight into this glass of water.' He held out a pretend glass of water. 'Sam, do you have any last words?'

'Russell, this is silly, come on?'

'Come on yourself! Need I remind you this is not Dead Man's Bluff, Sam. Do you have any last words?'

I knew when I was beat and announced, 'I would like to dedicate this feat to Mary-Anne McCovey the prettiest girl in the universe!'

Russell and I both had a major crush on Mary-Anne McCovey.

'Dream on,' said Russell, 'and now observe ladies and gentlemen as the fearless Human Cannonball enters the cannon. Get in the cannon Sam.'

'Come on Russell.'

'Come on yourself Sam! Need I remind you that ...'

'... this is not Dead Man's Bluff,' I finished. Okay.'

And I lowered myself into the cannon feet first.

And Russell pulled the lever.

Now one fact that neither of us was aware of at the time was that the park caretaker, Elroy Stubbs, had made no mistakes in his job these 25 years. Two days earlier, he was loading that very cannon for a 21-gun salute for Flag Day. Elroy carefully placed the charges in the cannon, '1, 2, 3,' he counted; I want you to remember that last number, 3.

At that very moment, the Mayor of Cooper Falls, a round and soft young man by the name of Junior Follows (who incidentally was up for re-election that year) ceremoniously marched out to the cannon where Elroy was working to present him with his Error-Free Certificate.

"Elroy Stubbs," the Mayor interrupted, "For 25 years of error-free service I hereby present you with this lovely certificate. I hope I can count on your vote, Elroy." Whereupon, he handed the certificate over to the astonished Elroy, shook his hand and marched back to City Hall.

Elroy folded up the certificate, shoved it into his pocket, spit, and with a puzzled look on his face, resumed loading the cannon, '3, 4, 5, 6,' etcetera.

The upshot of this was that after the ceremony was over, there was still one charge left in the cannon. And as I climbed in, and Russell pulled the lever to "pretend" fire the cannon there was an ear-shattering ... BOOM!

Several things happened very quickly at this point. The dinner plate sized circle of blue sky that I was looking at out the end of the cannon was instantly replaced by a scenic view of Cooper Falls from about 300 feet up. My body was going quite a bit faster than my brain at this point. In fact my brain was still trying to work out how I could be seeing all this from inside a cannon.

As my body exited the muzzle of the cannon there was a loud THWACK as my clothing exploded. Singed articles of clothing drifted to the ground not more than ten feet from the end of the cannon, shirt, socks, sneakers, bathing suit.

Deafened, Russell froze on the spot with his hand on the lever, his mouth hanging open, and his red hair standing straight up. Then he looked into the barrel and saw nothing but a bit of smoke. He must have thought the clothes were all that was left of me. Then he high-tailed it, screaming, across the park to the police station where he commenced to blubbing

something about shooting his friend. When it was obvious no one there understood a word he was saying, he grabbed one of the deputies, and with superhuman strength carried him kicking and screaming into the park.

By an extraordinary coincidence, three blocks away, the beautiful Mary-Anne McCovey was having a pool party. There were a dozen girls from our class sitting along the edge of her pool with their hands carefully placed on their thighs and stomachs, and so on, marking the furthest splash up to that point in the cannonball contest. Mary-Anne McCovey was standing on the diving board about to take her turn.

At about 500 feet, I felt a queasy sense of weightlessness. Time itself seemed to slow down. I began to fall.

That was when I learned something about myself that I hold dear to this very day. I did not scream hysterically, and my life did not pass before my eyes. The screamers and those whose lives pass before their eyes do not often survive the predicaments they are in. It is the people who spend this short time planning who, on occasion, survive. I found out that I was a planner.

I looked down and saw a tiny rectangle of blue in front of me. Could it possibly be a swimming pool? And could it possibly be directly in line with the cannon in Memorial Park? Was there any chance that I might land in a swimming pool? I began to move my body as I had seen stunt men in the movie serials do, head down, feet up, slow tumble to land flat on my back. But as I picked up speed, I realized that even if I was lucky enough to land in water, I had better not land flat on my back so at the last moment brought my knees up and held them in my arms ... SPLLOOSH!"

The resulting splash blew all twelve girls flat against the fence, and Mary-Anne who you will recall was on the diving board at the time found herself looking down from her neighbour's roof. I couldn't climb out of the pool on account of the new water level, and had to be rescued by Mary-Anne McCovey and her friends, which they did shortly after they rescued Mary-Anne from her neighbour's roof. I would have been out quite a bit quicker if the girls had been able to control their laughter.

Around this time, the town's three deputies were dragging Russell to jail for his own protection. And old Abraham Johansen, a farmer on the outskirts of town, who had been scanning the horizon and wishing for rain

for more than five weeks, was burning his copy of the Farmer's Almanac. He thought he heard thunder, and ventured out onto his porch. Several drops of water splashed his face. He looked up at the clear blue sky, and grumbled, 'Very funny.'

I won the cannonball contest, although the girl who was ahead at that point challenged it briefly on a technicality, and for several weeks my rear end swelled up to four times its usual size.

You see, in the end, that trip to the falls changed Russell and me forever. About a month later I went up to the falls and easily leaped off of Dead Man's Bluff.

Russell was never the same again. Although we remained friends, he never again went near the cannon in Memorial Park. He never even went near the park if he could avoid it. However every now and then down at the gas station where he works, a car backfires, and he loses about a week of his lifespan.

I was fortunate enough to marry Mary-Anne McCovey, and periodically, whenever I get too serious about things, she's kind enough to lean up close and whisper into my ear ...BOOM!

"Oh yeah, and Elroy Stubbs had to return his certificate to the Mayor."