

The Right Thing

There was a thunderclap and hidden behind the dark clouds was an echo:

May Chuine Sugihara (Sempo) and Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg be remembered for blessings!

“Tuesday’s a lucky day,” Mikey tells Pete.

Pete finishes gutting the walleye at the cleaning station beside the dam. He looks up.

“Says who?”

“Well, me for one. I caught the walleye so you get to clean it. I’d call that lucky for starters.”

Pete rinses the fillets. “Fine. Give me the plastic bag and we’ll put them on ice back at the campsite. It’s already 5. Hope Oskar’s not too late for supper.”

Mikey laughs. “We’ll be lucky if he gets here before 8! ‘OK’ Oskar can’t ever seem to say no when someone asks for help. It’s how he got his nickname in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I didn’t forget. But this is on his bucket list so I was hoping he’d try to make a couple of exceptions, say no for once or twice. How long a drive is it from St. Paul?”

“About 2 1/2 hours. I told him it’s easy: Interstate 35 north to 48 which becomes 77 in Wisconsin. Then 53 north to Gordon. *OK*, you go west from Gordon on Y into the sun. It’s a couple of miles to the park. And don’t daydream looking out over the St. Croix flowage. It’s beautiful, that’s for sure, but save it for later. We’ll be waiting on supper.”

“Think it’ll work?”

“Doubt it. But I threw in that if he gets here by 4 we’d take him out and fish for walleyes. That’s another thing on his wish list. He was supposed to leave after lunch.”

Mikey opens their cooler and Pete lays the fillets to the side of the blue camp ice.

“So why’d we go fishing?”

“Maybe catching walleyes is on my bucket list too?”

“Mikey, you don’t have a wish list.”

Mikey raises an eyebrow. “But if I did, maybe catching a walleye would be on it.”

Pete snorts. “Yeah, well, if you say so. May as well drive to the overlook on Y and wait there. That’s one hell of a vista, as if an artist painted in just the right combination of little islands and trees.”

The two friends drive to the edge of the overlook. The sun’s low in the west and skims rays across the St. Croix Flowage.

After a while Mikey remarks, “Wind’s kicking up whitecaps. Glad we went fishing earlier.”

“Yeah, good thing. Should be calm in the morning. Perfect for running the St. Croix. We’ll drop the canoes off at the dam and then run the shuttle with *OK*.”

“Where do you want to take out?”

“Depends. Sometime less is more. We’ll ask *OK* in the morning. There’re lots of nice rapids. From what he told me, he can handle them in his solo. I went over the river maps from the Palzer guide with him last week. When I mentioned the exposed rocks – you remember, the ones that look like they could have been a malachite front on a skyscraper from a prior civilization that was destroyed, his eyes lit up. I’d suggest taking out at Louis Park where Beaver Creek enters the river. It gives us an easier shuttle. County T’s right there.”

They sit on the hood of their SUV watching the sun slowly set over the flowage.

Pete asks. “Should we call him, see if he’s left?”

Mikey replies. “Not necessary. He’s already on the way, crossed the St. Croix, coming into Danbury as we speak. Should be here in less than an hour.”

“What should we do about supper?”

“He’ll be hungry. We can start the fire. I’ll wrap the small red potatoes and onions. We’ll use the cast iron skillet for the fish, some butter and herbs. Slow cook. Put it on the embers it ten minutes before he gets here. I’ll tent it with aluminum foil for another five. Basic gourmet campfire fare. Told me he missed that kind of thing. Did all this when he was a kid with his father. This will be perfect, trust me.”

Pete smiles. “So tell me again, what did Oskar say when you told him he won a prize for camping and fishing on the St. Croix?”

“Just what you thought. ‘OK. That’ll be great. It’s on my bucket list. It does seem kind of like a fairy tale – once upon a time Oskar won a prize...”

Pete nods. “Well, it is like a fairy tale...”

They drive back to the site. Pete starts the fire and Mikey wanders off into the woods, calling over his shoulder, “Going to get some special deadfall for the smoking. Right back.”

He comes back quietly, scares Pete, and comments on the fire. “Maybe move some of the embers to one side; I’ll toss in the potatoes and onion.”

Pete adds more wood on the side away from the picnic table. Mikey takes out two beers and passes a can to Pete. “Ah, Pete, this is the life!”

“Could say so. Be nice to get out more often. Sad there’s so little call. Well, we got *OK* for a couple of days. Ralli and Sempo were here with us for a week a couple of years back. More work, wouldn’t you think?”

“No big deal. They deserved it. We camped out on the Bois Brule with Ralli. Had fish every day. You were right. We needed salmon. Didn’t know there were so many different ways to prepare Chinook. Stone’s Bridge and all that fresh watercress! You made watercress soup. But I think it was your gravlax, though how you managed to make that up here and keep it a secret – that was to write home about!”

Pete moves more embers to the potato side of the fire. “Oh, I got my methods and Lake Superior can be used as a natural refrigerator if you know how. Did you forget the spruce tips and birch syrup I used with the trout?”

“No. And where you got the willow, I’ll never know. Well, you know how, that’s for sure. There were tears in Ralli’s eyes. Fresh dill, boiled mixed small potatoes, even sliced pickled horseradish. He said that was new for him. ‘I heard the Jews talk about it at Passover. Now I know. Thank you.’”

“Mikey, you know it’s always a pleasure to help the boss upstairs. As for the diamond willow, I got that from under my seat. Always come prepared. The *diamond* fungus was the hard part.” He looks up. There’s a quarter-moon coming up in the east, the sky is full of sparkling stars. “Speaking of which, how’s *OK* going to find our site?”

“Told him the number. Only one other campfire going. He’ll recognize the SUV. Pete, why don’t you start the fish. You’ll just have to trust me.”

Pete gets the fillets, butter and lemon from the cooler while Mikey gets the skillet from the back of the SUV, all the while humming the Beatles, “Lucy in the sky with Diamonds,” to show Pete he caught him glance up at the stars.

“Hey, Pete, think we can use some of the wild strawberries I found growing on the side of the road. And there’s cress I got below the dam.”

Pete raises an eyebrow that's lost in the shadows of the fire. "You never seem to amaze me with all your greenery."

"I do my bit, but right up there with your gravlax was the turtle dinner you made for Sempo. Lots of turtles downriver but the prep must have been major."

"You're not far from wrong. Easier on me than the turtle though. Yeah, *suppon* soup in a hot pot *nabe* dish, fresh wild ginger...glad you were able to help."

"Yeah, well, I did get a couple of barley wines from local micros and the specially aged soy sauce from Kikkoman. But the sake you made from wild rice – that was something else."

"Just needed a special yeast and some nutrients. Easy-peasy."

"But with Sempo, it wasn't the food so much as the presentation with the Zen-like quiet of these northern Wisconsin woods. We had a clean white tablecloth every night and all the fancy dishes. Catching the turtle and fish was easy. I was even able to find glass shrimp, eels, and mussels. Freshwater clams were a bit of bother but there are plenty of rivers in the neighborhood. Heck, I think Sempo was more into the contemplative walks we took on the trails, especially the one on the other side of the dam."

"You're probably right. I know he looked at peace when we left him for an afternoon on one of the little islands in the middle of the flowage. He selected it himself from the overlook. We retrieved the crayfish trap on the way back in. It was surprisingly full. Sempo bowed toward it at the bottom of the boat as if asking for permission to have them for supper. Sweet. You heard their answer, right?"

"Right. Made a special broth for them too. But I think he was most impressed by all the local vegetables and herbs you fixed along with the main courses. And he was in tears when you

gave him the signed copy of *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* by Euell Gibbons. Nice touch, Pete, thanks.”

“And thanks to you too for the formal serving and for suggesting we face the table towards the flowage. You came around from the left and your shadow from the fire was duly noted. When he got home he sent us that haiku about the meal and the server, ‘fireflies flitting...’ Kudos. But Sempo saved thousands of Jews in Lithuania, issuing transit visas. I counted the flies, we had one for each person who was able to escape and a couple extra for good luck.”

They sit silently reflecting on their past guests, listening to the soft crackling of the embers and the crickets calling to each other. Finally Mikey suggests moving the skillet off the coals. “Why don’t you tent the fish. *OK* has just started down Y. I’ll walk up to the camp road, flag him. He’s probably tired.”

Mikey reaches the campground turnoff just as headlights appear around the bend. He waves. *OK* pulls over and rolls down his window. Mikey asks about his drive up, says there’s no need to apologize for being late. “Pete just finished cooking so you’re right on time. Why don’t I ride shotgun into the campsite?”

“Sure, Mikey. I’m sorry, but my neighbor needed a ride to get some groceries and then she had a lamp that was broken. She’s 86 and that was the light by her reading chair, so, what could I say?”

When they pull up to the site Pete comes over. “Just in time, *OK*. Got a pot of water, you can splash your face, wash your hands and we’re ready to eat. Potatoes and onion right out of the fire. Walleye fillets main course. We’ll get your tent set up later or there’s plenty of room in ours for another sleeping bag.”

OK gets the water pot and goes to a grass edge to wash, commenting over his shoulder, “Gee guys, I could have found your site by the great smells. What can I do to help?”

“Sit down and enjoy. Glad you were able to help the old lady.”

The next day they run the St. Croix from below the dam to Louis Park. Pete packed a picnic lunch and they stop to eat and rest on a mid-river island. A light wind chases away the mosquitoes and deer flies. Broken clouds run past the sun. *OK* leans back against a stump. “It doesn’t get much better than this.”

The river is challenging enough and a couple of times *OK* spills from his canoe. Pete and Mikey are there to pick up his paddle and tow his canoe to an open bank. *OK* laughs. “I guess it’s been a while and I needed to cool off anyhow. Hey, check the canoe before you start dumping it. Maybe I caught a fish.”

Mikey reminds him that there’s not much room for water with all the flotation. “You know, I think we’ll be back to the campsite with plenty of time for you to go walleye fishing.” He winks at Pete. “Who knows, maybe you’ll get lucky.”

They finish the run and throw the canoes on top of the SUV.

Back at their site, Pete again congratulates *OK* on a great run. “Now grab a beer and we’ll get you set up on the dam for walleyes. I’ve got two rods already rigged. Just got to pick up the minnow bucket we’ve got tied under that willow. You can tell by the erosion that some funky current moves through there. Those minnows will only be too happy to entice a nice walleye.”

Pete gets the bucket and a beer for himself. “*OK*, you mind carrying the rods and tackle box. Stringer’s inside. We’ll get you set and then I’ll go back and get the fire and supper started. Only trust Mikey with the salad. We’re hungry, so you catch us a couple. Canned sardines are the backup – so we’re depending on you!”

Mikey smiles when Pete comes back to their site. “Got the salad going, quinoa already in the pot on the Coleman stove. I was going to chop tomatoes, peppers, parsley, romaine and whatever else I find for the quinoa – like tabouli. Maybe butterfly the walleyes and sandwich with leek and lemon slices. Wrap the fish in foil, into the fire, and after a glass of pinot grigio, voilà – things will be OK with *OK*.”

“Not bad, Mikey. I’ll make a chef out of you yet. Think I’ll give *OK* another ten minutes then go back and watch as he lands his second walleye. So, what do you think of this new policy, a little reward down here below for people doing the right thing?”

“I heard it’s a pilot program. Boss wants to see if the word will get out. *OK* has a great time. Friends ask him and he blurts out, ‘My buddies’ that’s us, ‘said it’s because I’m always helping people – something like that. We were out on the river all day and then we had some beers and wine with the walleyes I caught. It felt as if I was in heaven, you know what I mean.’ Boss hoping to encourage behavior like *OK*’s. Worth a try, I’d say.”

“Well, it’s easy, this camping and fishing. Good thing. Don’t think we could handle sex.”

“Whoa, hold on there, Pete. Nothing’s too hard. Guy and his wife having problems. He’s horny, she’s frustrated. Both doing the right thing. She could win a raffle at work. Cabin up north; professional sitting for their kids. Catered meals, that’s us. Some herbs and mushrooms do the rest.”

“I suppose. Nothing’s too hard, as you said. Now I better hustle back and watch *OK* land his second walleye.”

OK’s looking out over the flowage, his mind drifting over a full day on the river. It’s just like he remembered when he was up here with his father forty years ago. Never forgot it. Didn’t

think he'd ever get back. But he kept paddling on the lakes in town, staying in shape, hoping even more after his father died.

Pete calls out, wakes him from his reveries. "Hey, *OK*, look at your bobber!"

He looks down at the tip of his rod. The bobber is swishing in the water left and right. He pulls back and starts cranking. Fifteen minutes later Pete's got the walleye in the landing net.

"Four pounds at least, *OK*. Way to go. I'll get a pic on my phone."

OK's dancing in place. "Can't believe it. I got a two pounder half-hour ago. I never catch fish. No one will believe me at work." All of a sudden his face falls and he looks around in a panic. "Oh shit, I never got a license."

"Not to worry. We got a three-day out-of-state one for you. Knew you'd be catching a mess of fish."

"Whew, you guys are great. I can't believe it. If Dad could only see this."

Pete laughs. "Well, you never know. There's not a cloud in the sky so..."

OK joins in the laughter.

"*OK*, you caught them so I got to clean them. I think butterfly cut will be perfect. Why don't you go back to camp, take a quick swim to cool off. There's a shower by the boat launch down below. Soon as I can, I'll get the large one wrapped. Campfire baked. You'll love it. Guessing dinner should be ready in 40 minutes. Mikey's working on the salad."

Thirty minutes later they're sitting at the picnic table, a glass of pinot in their hands. *OK* sighs, "I can't believe what a great day. I really can't!"

Mikey says. "It's the righteous thing, *OK*, the righteous thing."

Pete nods. "Yup. I think the fish's ready. Mikey, if you get the plates and salad, I'll refresh our glasses."

Mikey suggests Pete and *OK* take an after-dinner walk to the lookout while he cleans up.

OK protests. "After being out all day, just up to the dam is far enough."

Pete asks if he wants company.

"Sure, if Mikey really doesn't mind doing the cleanup alone."

"It's *OK, OK.*" They're all a little tipsy and laugh. "Pete's going to tell you he had to clean the fish so...etc., etc. Not a problem."

It's fully dark by the time they return to camp and *OK* remembers he didn't set up his tent. Mikey claps his hands. "It's all done. I put it over to the side there. You'll get some of the morning sun to wake you and you'll be able to see the flowage through the left side window. Your air mat, sleeping bag and duffle with your clothes are already inside."

"Thanks, you guys are amazing. Just going to do one last stop and then brush my teeth."

The next morning Mikey has the coffee going on the Coleman by 8. He hears the cell phone ring in *OK*'s tent. Then a muttered conversation. *OK* struggles out of his tent and over to the picnic table. Mikey hands him a cup of coffee. "You all right?"

He tries to brush his hair back with the hand holding the mug. Coffee spills over his wrist and he hurries to put the cup down on the table. "Yeah, it's not me. A friend of mine at work has hit another bump in life and needs me back in the Twin Cities. I'm afraid I've got to cut our trip short. Darn. Well, maybe next year."

Pete comes out of their tent. "Sorry to hear that, *OK*. Why don't you take care of business, wash your face and things. Mikey and me will break camp for you. Get your tent and things back in your car and transfer your canoe to your top-carrier. This way you can have a quick breakfast roll with us before you have to rush off."

"Thanks. From the sound of his voice Tommy was hurting real bad."

Thirty minutes later it's hugs all around. Oskar is apologizing again. "I really wanted to spend the rest of the week with you. Best time ever and Dad was with me in my dreams. Well, I guess we can't have everything."

Pete gives him a small cooler. "I got your other walleye in here on blue ice and the rest of Mikey's quinoa tabouli. We don't need the cooler since you're going. Great catch, can't thank you enough."

"You sure?"

They laugh and say together, "We're sure." Pete continues, "Have a safe drive back and thanks for your company."

As *OK* drives up the camp road Pete remarks, "I guess we can't have everything."

Mikey starts humming, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need."

Pete mutters, "Mick Jagger, your name sake," and then in a louder voice, "we may as well break camp."