

# Trading Mystery

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When nine-year-old Joseph and thirteen-year-old Lily arrived in Nebraska after their first long trip by train in 1898, they were in for a surprise. Someone else was coming back to Chicago with them when they returned home—a stranger. He was part of their family, but Joseph and Lily had never met him. Everyone called him Uncle Boots, and he seemed almost a hundred years old. He was moving into their house! Joseph and Lily did not like the idea.

“He’s not even nice,” Lily sulked to Joseph while her parents helped to pack Uncle Boots’s belongings. He was the grumpiest man they had ever met. “I bet we’ll have to work harder at home to take care of him,” Lily complained.

“It’s not fair,” Joseph pouted. The news almost took away his excitement about riding the train—almost. The ride home was still a thrill, even though they had to be quiet so they

wouldn’t disturb Uncle Boots. “Why is he coming to live with us?” Lily asked their mother.

“He lived in Chicago for a long time, and he wants to spend what time he has left in the place he considers his home. He lived in Chicago before it was a city,” Mother explained.

“I don’t understand who he is,” Joseph whispered, glancing at Uncle Boots, who snored loudly by the window.

“He’s my uncle, and one of Chicago’s first citizens. When I was little I loved to hear his stories. Some of our furniture actually belongs to Uncle Boots,” Mother said. “That dusty old safe in the back room is his.”

“The one we can’t open because we don’t have the key?” Joseph asked. Their mother nodded. Uncle Boots snorted loudly and stirred as if he might wake up. Mother shushed the

children, and they thought silently about the new addition to their family for the rest of the ride.

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When they arrived in Chicago, Uncle Boots stood leaning on his cane, looking around at the busy city streets. He shook his head and didn't say a word. Lily and Joseph glanced at each other, nervous about bringing Uncle Boots home. He wasn't very friendly. "I bet he's called Boots because he used to kick people," Joseph whispered to Lily. She giggled and told her brother to shush.

Over the next few days, the more Joseph and Lily watched Uncle Boots, the more mysterious he seemed. He spent hours every day just watching out the window, shaking his head every time the "L" train rumbled past. He

spent hours more scratching words into a small book, squinting down at the pages. He hung a framed picture cut out of a book on the wall.

Joseph was curious. The picture showed an American Indian man looking sideways, wearing a silver earring and red paint under his eye. Joseph read the words under the picture, "Me-Te-A, a Potawatomie Chief." Finally, Joseph got up his courage and asked, "Excuse me. Who is that man?"

"Who is that man? A man who got raw deal in my opinion," Uncle Boots grumbled as he settled in for his nap. Joseph didn't know what a raw deal was, and he wished Uncle Boots were a little friendlier.

The most mysterious thing of all, Joseph and Lily thought, was how Uncle Boots would shuffle into the back room and shut the door. If they listened carefully, they could hear him

opening the old metal safe that had been there, locked and collecting dust, for as long as they could remember.

“Lily,” Joseph whispered one day, when his curiosity had gotten the better of him, “I think we should see what he does with that safe.” Lily agreed, and they began to plan.

The next morning after their chores, Lily winked at Joseph and Joseph winked at Lily. One at a time, they snuck into the back room and hid in the dark, musty closet, keeping the door open just enough to see a sliver of the room, and the safe, through the crack. They waited and waited. Then they waited some more.

Finally, they heard Uncle Boots’ shuffling footsteps coming closer and closer. Joseph and Lily watched as Uncle Boots took a big metal key from his vest pocket and slid it into the lock on

top of the safe. Lily grabbed her brother’s hand. Uncle Boots used all his strength to open the safe’s heavy iron door and began to rummage around inside. Joseph and Lily couldn’t quite see, until Uncle Boots pulled something out and set it on the floor. The dull metal caught the light and Joseph and Lily could see clearly. Lily gasped, and Joseph covered her mouth with his hand. An ax! Why would Uncle Boots keep an ax in the safe? But that wasn’t all. The next thing Uncle Boots took out was even worse: an old gun. Joseph and Lily were afraid. Lily grabbed Joseph’s hand even more tightly, and Joseph trembled. They stayed as quiet as they could. They didn’t want to get caught, not with Uncle Boots there with an ax and a gun!

After a few minutes, Uncle Boots packed everything away and shut and locked the safe.

He shuffled out of the room and shut the door. Even though they wanted to run far away, Joseph and Lily stayed in the closet until they thought it was safe to leave, one at a time, their hearts still racing.

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A few minutes later as planned, Joseph and Lily met on the corner down the street. They didn't know what to do. How could they tell their parents that Uncle Boots was dangerous?

"I think we should tell Mother right away," Lily said, her voice quivering. "But she seems to like Uncle Boots," Joseph said, pausing to wait for an "L" train to rumble noisily past above their heads. He felt so distracted by the situation that the train, for once, was the last thing on his mind. "Maybe we should tell Grandpa instead. He'll

know what to do," Joseph suggested. Lily thought for a minute and then agreed.

Joseph and Lily ran back home and snuck in past Uncle Boots, who was snoring in a chair in the parlor, his book and pen on his lap. They found Grandpa in the kitchen. "You two look like you're up to something," Grandpa said, smiling.

Lily started to explain: "Well, we've been figuring things out, and we thought..." Joseph couldn't hold it in anymore. "Uncle Boots is up to no good!" he exclaimed.

Grandpa was surprised. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Well," Lily jumped in, "he is doing all kinds of strange things, he's not nice, and he has weapons in the safe!"

"Weapons!" Grandpa exclaimed.

"Yes, a gun and an ax, and we think he's dangerous," Joseph whispered.

Grandpa chuckled. “Uncle Boots is many things, but dangerous is not one of them,” he said.

“But he’s got a gun in the safe!” Lily exclaimed.

“Those things are from when Uncle Boots was young,” Grandpa answered. “His father was a fur trader, and that gun is from the wild early days before Chicago was a city.”

“What about the ax?” Lily asked, not sure whether to believe her grandfather.

“It’s probably a tomahawk, one that the traders gave to American Indians. All the things in there, even the safe, are from the fur trading years. Uncle Boots has a long history here, and he is trying to write the story of his life. That’s why he’s always writing. He’s an odd man, but harmless. We can learn a lot from him,”

Grandpa said.

Joseph still wasn’t sure. “Isn’t he called Uncle Boots because he’s not nice?” Grandpa looked skeptical. “He kicked people with his boots!” Joseph said, quite certain of himself.

Grandpa burst into a laugh. “He doesn’t seem friendly, I know,” Grandpa offered. “He’s been called Boots since he was a young man. He has always worried about fairness, and he used to say ‘You shouldn’t judge until you’ve walked in another man’s boots.’ It became a nickname and it stuck.”

Joseph and Lily thought about that for a little while. “I guess maybe we shouldn’t have judged him,” Lily shrugged.

“Maybe we should get to know him better, since he’s going to be living here and all.” Joseph agreed, although he still thought Uncle

Boots was strange.

The next day, Lily and Joseph saw Grandpa talking with Uncle Boots in the parlor. After a few laughs, Grandpa called Lily and Joseph in. Uncle Boots was smiling. The children couldn't believe it. Uncle Boots never smiled. "I thought we'd all go downtown tomorrow and Uncle Boots could tell you about what Chicago was like when he first moved here," Grandpa explained.

Uncle Boots nodded. "I was about your age when I came here the first time," he said, nodding at Joseph. The children felt shy. They figured that Grandpa told Uncle Boots what they thought of him.

"And today, I thought Uncle Boots could show you a little bit of his memoirs—the book he is writing," Grandpa explained.

"You can read a little bit yourselves while I

take my nap," Uncle Boots said, handing Lily the small bound book he was always writing in. The children and their grandfather took the book to the kitchen while Uncle Boots dozed off in the rocking chair. Grandpa read the first few paragraphs of Uncle Boots' scratchy handwriting out loud.

"I was nothing but a slight nine-year-old lad when I moved to Chicago in 1820, the young son of a daring trader for the American Fur Company. Our journey from Vermont was long, but great opportunities awaited us. Of that we were certain."

"We sailed across Lake Michigan from the Mackinac post in a brigade of boats with soldiers and other traders; a twenty day journey to Fort Dearborn. As we approached, I remember the pop of the signal gun announcing our arrival.

"Fort Dearborn!" Joseph said. "Uncle

Boots was there? I heard about it in school.”

Grandpa kept reading. “The first thing we did was meet up with Jean Baptiste Beaubien, my father’s boss and the manager of the fur trade here. After hearing from him about the tasks we faced, we visited John Kinzie at his house, the former residence of DuSable. I never had the chance to know DuSable, Chicago’s first pioneer settler. He was a trader born in Haiti. He and his Potawatami wife built a farm here in 1779. Unfortunately, I never met the man, as he was long gone by the time of my arrival.”

“Wait a minute, Grandpa,” Lily said. “What did they trade? What did Uncle Boots do for fun? I want to ask him!”

“I know!” Joseph agreed. “I want to know that it was like at the fort. Can we wake him up and find out?”

Grandpa chuckled. “Not scared of him anymore, are you? We should let him sleep. You can ask him tomorrow when we go downtown.”

Joseph and Lily sighed; they’d have to wait to find out.

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The next day, the family made their way downtown to near where the river met Lake Michigan. “Like I said, I moved here in 1820, when I was nine. We came from Vermont. My father worked for the American Fur Company,” Uncle Boots spoke over the din of Michigan Avenue as horse carts clattered over the Rush Street bridge and trains rumbled in and out of the nearby rail yard. “The city looks nothing like it did

then. There wasn't much here. The fort was right there," he said, pointing to the south bank of the river. "Across the river near the factory, that's where the Kinzie house stood." Joseph and Lily were surprised.

"It wasn't busy like it is now?" Lily asked.

Uncle Boots laughed, "Busy! There were just small clusters of buildings near the mouth of the river and at Wolf Point. Fort Dearborn had a wooden wall outside and barracks, a store, and an area where the soldiers could march inside."

"Why did you and your Papa come to Chicago when there was nothing here?" Joseph was a city kid unfamiliar with the idea of so much empty land.

"My papa worked with the American Fur Company. They sent people to trade with American Indians for fur pelts. Tribes like the Potawatomi caught beavers and foxes and

traded the skins for things they didn't have."

"What were the fur pelts used for?" Joseph asked.

"Oh, men in Europe and big cities in the East wanted fancy top hats made of fur. Most of the fur pelts were used to make fine hats and other clothes," Uncle Boots continued. "When we came, there weren't many settler kids here. My mother died when I was small, and papa brought me when he took the fur company job. He thought it would be an adventure; it was. It was after the massacre at the fort during the 1812 war, and some people were afraid of the tribes. But we made friends with the Potawatomi. We lived over at Wolf Point with other settlers, and I used to play with the American Indian boys. Some of them became my very best friends."

"Is the man in the picture one of your

friends?” Joseph asked, “The one who got a raw deal?”

“Ah, Me-Te-A. He was a good man and a good friend. He was a bit older than I, and when he grew up he became the chief. The Potawatomi tried to keep peace between tribes and settlers. The U.S. government wanted more and more of the tribes’ land. Me-Te-A went to Washington to get an agreement with the government about the land, but treaties did not help the American Indians. In 1833, the government took the tribes’ land and they ended up having to move away without getting much in return. We lost track of each other when they moved west, but I never forgot him.”

“So you kept his picture,” Joseph said softly.

Uncle Boots nodded. “I’ve seen lots of

changes in my time, and some I didn’t feel good about. But here is the city we built, once before the Great Fire and again after it. I stayed to help rebuild, but then I wanted a change, so Omaha it was.” Uncle Boots looked around again at the busy streets and river.

“So why did you come back now?” Joseph asked.

“I wanted to see this place again in my old age...to see how it has changed and to write my story with all this history around me,” Uncle Boots explained.

Lily, patiently waiting to ask her question, finally piped up, “Uncle Boots, why didn’t you just give the tribes money for the pelts?”

“That’s a good question,” he said. “It wasn’t like today, with lots of stores around. There wasn’t anyplace to buy things or anything

to buy! So instead, we traded.”

“Like that gun you have!” Joseph exclaimed, realizing as soon as his sister glared at him that he had told their secret.

Uncle Boots laughed, “So you’ve been spying on me, have you? Let’s just go on home and I’ll show you some of those things you’re so curious about.”

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Back at home, Uncle Boots, Lily, Joseph, and Grandpa went into the back room to the old safe. As Uncle Boots fumbled for his key, Lily asked why he had the safe. “This old box was from the American Fur Company. Those were wild days at Wolf Point in old Chicago. We kept pelts, money; all kinds of things in safes like these so people couldn’t steal. After the fur trade

died out, Papa and I ended up keeping one. My friend Me-Te-A gave me some things that his family had from years of trading in exchange for things they needed for their journey,” Uncle Boots explained as Grandpa helped him push open the heavy door. Inside, Lily and Joseph spotted the gun and piles of other things too.

“Did you use the gun to protect yourself?” Joseph asked.

Uncle Boots took it out and showed the children its markings. “This was the American Fur Company’s logo—three foxes,” Uncle Boots explained. “The ‘JA’ stood for Jacob Astor, the company’s founder. We used these guns to hunt and traded them for pelts. We’d trade a gun like this for about 20 beaver pelts, perhaps, but the amount changed depending on the exact situation.”

“Did traders always trade with guns?” Lily

asked.

“Not always,” Uncle Boots explained. “Let me give you the whole story. The American Fur Company was one of the last trading companies in the area. It was an American company, and they didn’t start trading in this area until after the War of 1812.”

“Who traded before?” Joseph wondered.

“It started with the French,” Uncle Boots said. He rummaged in the safe and pulled out the tomahawk head and a small box. “They came in around 1690 after Marquette and Joliet, the first European explorers to this area. The Potawatomi came then, too. They were originally from Michigan and were big trappers. The French traded here for a long time. They traded many things, the most common being iron tools like this tomahawk head.” He handed the piece

of heavy metal to Joseph. “And these,” he continued, opening the small box and showing them brightly colored glass beads. “The tribes used beads like money and for decoration.”

“Did the American traders come after the French?” Lily asked, eager to see more from the safe.

“No, the British came next,” Uncle Boots said.

“What did they trade?” Joseph asked.

“Well, more of the same, but also silver.”

Uncle Boots dug into the safe again, pulling out a bag of metal that jingled. He first showed them a handful of small jewelry; a round silver pin with a design of hearts and some pretty, dangly earrings. “They also used some trade items to show that they were partners with a tribe,” Uncle Boots said, pulling out a metal cross with a

symbol on it and an arm band made of silver.

“When did the Americans start?” Joseph wondered.

“After the War of 1812, the British finally left the area.” Uncle Boots explained, “Then the Potawatomi began to make partnerships with trading companies like the American Fur Company. The company had posts all around the Great Lakes. Kinzie and Colonel Beaubien worked for the Chicago post. We gave the American Indians guns and manufactured goods for pelts and dried fish that we sold in the east. It kept going until the 1830s—but by then so many animals had been trapped that there weren’t that many left. Fur-lined hats weren’t as popular either. Besides, most of the tribes had been forced off the land. Then everything began to change fast!”

“How?” both children asked. They had

been wrong about Uncle Boots. There was so much to learn about Chicago!

“Everyone started to buy up land, and by 1837 Chicago was a city. Everything was growing and changing. People started keeping animals, starting the stockyard. The trains came. In a few years, I could hardly recognize the place. Then there was the Great Fire. Flames everywhere, people running and screaming, everything destroyed.”

“Tell us more!” Joseph begged.

The old man laughed as he began to pack up his safe. “I think that’s enough for today. I’ve got to get back to my writing,” he said. “But don’t worry, I’ll tell you more tomorrow.”

Joseph and Lily couldn’t wait.