

Lunch with a Mongoose -

Misadventures of Childhood

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There are so many others I would like to thank, but it would fill the pages of another book. Thank you all.

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Chapter One – The Beginnings

The night was cold; bone chilling cold that came out of Northern Canada. The wind whistling through the trees sent shivers down my spine as I sat trying to concentrate on the book that I was reading. It was no use. I looked out the window. It was inky black, with snow swirling about; all but obliterating the surrounding country side. I realized then that I didn't have much more time on this earth.

Looking back into my childhood, I tried in vain to find a purpose for my being where I was. I was born to good parents; kind, loving, and charitable. My Mother was a wonderful woman of slight stature. I inherited my body structure from her. My father was a military man, so we traveled a lot. I really didn't have many close friends until I met Randy.

Lovable Randy was cheerful, bright, and always eager for fun. He had a ruddy complexion from constant exposure to the sun, wind and weather. He was an outdoors sort of person. His sandy hair was always an unruly tangle. Randy was a perpetual motion machine. I think the only time I ever saw him completely still was when we visited the old hospital.

Hey! Mike!" yelled Randy. "Let's go over to the hospital and see if we can find some old bones or something."

"Oh, go on with you," I yelled back. "They closed that place up years ago."

"Well, let's see anyway."

"Oh, all right."

Off we went on our journey into the unknown. Little did we know then that we were in for the shock of our short lives. The World War II hospital was located in a large field, set back from the road. It was barely visible to passers-by, so we thought we would be pretty safe. Surrounded by chain-link fencing with barbed wire on the top, it was like an impenetrable fortress. We walked around and around the grounds, searching for an opening big enough that we could crawl through.

"Over here!" Randy finally shouted. He had found a small hole in the fence. It looked as though someone had been using it as an entrance at night.

We wriggled through the hole. Now that we were on the inside the grounds, we had to find a way into the hospital building. Again searching for an entry way, we snuck silently around the building. It was my turn for luck this time. I found a broken window leading into the basement.

"This must be where they get in at night," I said.

"Let's go!" Randy replied eagerly.

"Well, I don't know." I was usually more cautious than he.

Finally Randy talked me into it. Lowering ourselves through the window was very easy. Someone was using this building as a shelter to escape the warm tropical nights. Boxes were stacked neatly in a stair step fashion, leading to the window. We eased down, not knowing what we would find. The basement was littered with all sorts of debris. It looked like a disaster area. Remains of many dinners, hastily eaten, were strewn all over the floor. Apparently the people who lived here didn't care too much about sanitation. The stench was overpowering. The smell was of rotting wood and stale urine and rotten garbage. It was musty, damp and mildewed. All we wanted was to get out of there.

We had come looking for adventure only to find that we were too scared to do much of anything. There were stairs leading to the first floor. Up the stairs we climbed.

At the top of the stairs, we heard the sound. THUMP! Something fell on the floor above us.

"What was that?" Randy asked.

"I don't know and I don't want to find out."

"Don't be such a chicken. Come on, let's see what it was."

I knew that it was pointless to argue with him. I figured that I had better stay close by in case Randy got into trouble. We started to look for a way to get to the second floor. We didn't see any stairs. The noise from above became even more mysterious. Still wondering around, we finally found an unlocked door. Wait! This door was locked the last time we checked it. The hinges creaked as the door slowly opened. We peered into the darkness inside. Nothing looked unusual. Slowly, we went into the room. At the opposite side of the room was another door that had no knob. It looked like a closet or possibly a secret passage. The room was empty. It looked too clean for a room that had not been used for many years. That should have warned us to leave. As we continued to explore, Randy tried to open the other door. It swung inward and revealed another set of stairs leading to a third floor. It was so dark in there; we could only see two or three steps. Did we dare to go up or not?

Randy started up the stairs. Rarely did he quit something he had started. He was always looking for an adventure. I didn't want to be left behind, I followed him closely. At the top of the stairs was another door, this one opened easily. It opened into a hallway almost as dark as the stairwell. It was really spooky not knowing what we would find next. This floor looked like one of the ones that had been used for patient rooms. We looked into several of them and found nothing.

Then we came to some larger rooms. They were tiled on the floor, walls, and ceiling. They must have been the operating rooms. We opened the last door with a lot of difficulty. It was if something was blocking the door. What was that over in the middle of the room? It was a pool of red, sticky liquid. It was fresh! It was blood!

"WOW! Let's get out of here!" yelled Randy.

"I'm right behind you!"

We took off out of that room so fast it was as if we were flying. We ran stumbling down the stairs. All we wanted to do was get out of there. Rounding the corner at full speed, we ran smack dab into him. He reached out one huge hand and caught Randy. He caught me with the other one. We knew we were goners now.

"Whoa, there. Where do you think you two are going?" he asked.

"We just want to get out of here."

"What are you doing here in the first place?" he asked.

"Just looking around. We didn't do anything."

"Yea! We didn't hurt anyone."

"Now boys, why do you say that? No one said you hurt anyone."

"Because of the blood."

"What blood?"

"The blood in that room."

"Oh, that. It's just blood from a mongoose I just killed for lunch. "

By this time we were able to calm down enough to take a first look at our captor. He was a harmless looking old man with a kind face. He was huge! He stood at least 6'8" and must have weighed 350 pounds. His hands looked like they were used to doing hard work.

Strong and callused, they looked as though they could break a person in two. He was dressed in ragged, soiled clothes. He needed a shave, a haircut and a bath but his eyes sparkled with humor. We knew that he was-going to be our friend. His name was Sam.

Sam started living in the hospital several years ago. He heard us and thought we were the authorities coming to throw him out. We had disturbed his preparations for lunch.

"How would you boys like to join me for lunch?"

I thought, still a little nervous, that we might be on the menu.

"No, I don't think so." I was not sure what to think about Sam. He seemed OK, but you never knew; he might be a killer or something.

Not Randy! He excitedly agreed, "Yea, Man, I'll stay if you're going to cook that mongoose."

I wanted to throw up!

We went back downstairs to the basement with Sam. The stench wasn't so bad this time. Sam started to fix lunch. He lit a small fire in a fireplace we hadn't seen the first time we were in the basement. He placed the freshly skinned mongoose in a skillet over the fire. Soon it was sizzling and crackling in the pan. Much to my surprise, it smelled delicious. I still wasn't sure whether I wanted any or not, but the aroma was making me hungry.

Sam rummaged around and found some potatoes and onions. He tossed them into the pan. My mouth was watering now. Sam, it seemed, was a good cook.

"Where did you learn how to cook like that?" I asked.

"It's a long story, boys. I was a cook in the Navy during World War II. I had to cook for a lot more than just three! Of course, I had a lot more to work with, too!

I remember the time we were steaming back into Pearl Harbor after a cruise. The seas were calm; almost like glass. I was on the bow watching the water stream by. A pretty sight it was too; white foam on deep blue water pushing out in a vee as the prow plowed through. It was early morning on Sunday, December 7, 1941. Out of the south came the drone of hundreds of planes. I thought it was pretty odd because I didn't think we had that many planes on the whole island.

Suddenly the planes loomed on the horizon. I knew instantly that we were in for a terrible time. The planes flew in formation. The pilot seemed to have confidence that they would completely surprise our Navy. They were right. No one thought the Japanese would ever attack the biggest United States Naval base in the Pacific. That would be suicidal. But here they were, streaking out of the blue sky; their bombs fell lazily from the bellies of their Zeroes. Bullets ripped apart metal as they slammed into the sides of the quit battleships. Smoke and flames soon filled the air. The screams of the wounded and dying pierced the morning, destroying the peace.

Suddenly a bomb exploded amidships of my ship. It broke apart and sank in an instant. Luckily, I was thrown overboard by the blast. The ship sank so quickly, there were no other survivors. I grabbed for a piece of floating debris. Oil slicks surrounded me; flames flicked at my face. I knew I had to get to shore or I would die. Bumping into broken and battered bodies of my friends and fellow sailors, I made my way to shore. Bombs and bullets still rained down around me. I don't think I have ever been as afraid as I was that day.

I finally reached the shore. I looked at the devastation around me. It was unbelievable; so much destroyed in so little time. There didn't seem as though there was anything left that wasn't damaged in some way. I had to reach a command post. I had to let someone know I was alive. I also had to fight back some way. Not knowing where else to go, I decided to head for the docks. People were running and shouting

everywhere. There was mass panic and hysteria. No one had taken charge by the time I reached Battleship Row. I stopped dead in my tracks! There was nothing left! The greatest Navy in the whole world was destroyed in just a few minutes."

"WOW! Look at the time," I broke in to Sam's great story. "Randy and I have to be going."

"Yea, I guess you're right. Sam, would it be all right if we came back some time for you to tell some more stories?"

"I suppose that would be all right. Just don't tell anybody about me."

Chapter Two -

In the sugar cane fields

I lived in the last Quonset hut on the road, across from the Enlisted Men's Club, next to the pool. It was a small, but comfortable, three bedroom house. Outside the front door were several banana trees from which I could get fresh bananas almost anytime I wanted. Out the back door was a large canyon that the Navy used as an ammunition dump. The front yard was large enough for several youngsters to play freely. The back yard was nothing more than a dirt circular driveway. Very little traffic passed the house, so the yard was not fenced. Behind the pool was a large field that gave us another place to play.

Next door lived the most fantastic nine-year old girl. She had long flowing brown hair that swirled around an oval face out of which peered robin egg blue eyes. I was also nine years old and very much in love with Elaine. We shared many wonderful moments in our fortress made from old cardboard refrigerator cartons, discussing our future together. Of course neither of us thought for a moment that we were too young to be thinking about such things. We played together for hours. Down the block and around the corner lived another of my friends. Jimmy was a small boy with a serious nature. He had a hard time finding fun in anything. His one passion was swimming. He could swim all day long and never tire. He swam. He dove. He swam again. Living in Hawaii, near a swimming pool was great for him. The one day a week the pool was closed for cleaning, Jimmy would moped around like he lost his best friend, which of course, he hadn't. I was his best friend. The four of us, Jimmy, Elaine, Randy and I would go almost everywhere together.

Surrounding the base were sugar cane fields. They were prime areas for adventuresome nine-year old kids to explore. Naturally, we

did just that. We would romp through the cane fields without worrying about the possible dangers. When the cane fields were ready to be harvested, they are burned to remove leaves and to kill rodents or spiders living in the plants. Sugar cane is also irrigated using wide, deep canals. When the water gates are opened, water gushes in a torrent into the canals, sweeping away anything that is in its path.

One day the three of us, Jimmy, Elaine and I were going about our usual business of exploring the fields. Of course, we hadn't told our parents where we were going. We were not supposed to go into the fields. Suddenly I fell into a canal with a splat! There was very little water in the canal. I was fortunate that I was not seriously hurt. Just my pride was a little shaken. Jimmy and Elaine came running to see what had happened. They shrieked with laughter when they saw me sprawled in the canal.

"Very funny," I said pouting. "I could have been killed!"

"Yea, but you weren't," Elaine giggled. "You look funny with your rear-end sticking in the air."

"SHHH! Listen! What-s that noise?" asked Jimmy.

The deafening roar of onrushing water filled our terrified ears. Someone had opened the flood gates. They didn't know that we were there. I was in big trouble. Suddenly the full force of the water hit me, knocking me down. I was washed away from Jimmy and Elaine so quickly they could do nothing but watch. They ran along the bank, screaming and yelling at me. I heard nothing except rushing water. I was bobbing up and down like a cork, gasping for breath, when something snagged my shirt. I thought I was done for this time. Whatever it was that snagged my shirt was also causing me to stay under water. Struggling to free myself, I reached behind my head. I felt a hand! A strong, firm hand had caught hold of me. I realized that he was struggling to pull me to him. I stopped wiggling. That made it easier

for him to haul me out of the water. Sputtering and spitting water, I peered through the water in my eyes, fearing whom I might see. It was Sam! He knew that the field was going to be harvested soon and had come to retrieve his mongoose traps. He heard Jimmy and Elaine and guessed that someone was in trouble. He came to my rescue. Boy! I was glad to see him!

"Now, Mike, what have you gotten yourself into this time?" Sam asked seriously.

I still hadn't recovered enough to answer, so I just sputtered.

Just then Jimmy and Elaine came running up to us. They were winded from the running and frightened so badly they couldn't answer either. They were relieved to see that I was all right.

"Do you realize what could have happened here? You could have all been drowned. Never play in the irrigation canals."

"But, Sam, we weren't playing in the canals. I slipped and fell. Before I could get out, someone opened the flood gates."

"What were you doing in the sugar cane anyway?" Sam asked.

"We were playing war and running through the fields to escape the enemy," Jimmy answered.

"War is not something that you should be playing. War is serious business with people being killed, property being destroyed, families separated."

"We know that, Sam. We didn't mean any harm. We just wanted to have some fun," Jimmy said.

Turning to Elaine, Sam asked, "Well, young lady, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Elaine was staring in wide-eyed wonder at Sam. She had not met him before this. Sam could be scary the first time you saw him. She finally came to her senses enough to say:

"Hi."

"You have to forget about Elaine," Jimmy said. "She's just a girl."

"A mighty pretty little thing though," Sam said. "Let me tell you a story about the time that I was nearly burned in the sugar cane fields.

Boy! Sam did have his stories!

"As you know, just before harvest time, they set fire to the fields. I trap mongooses and anything else I can catch for food in the fields. I heard about a harvest that was going to take place the next day, so I went out to retrieve my traps. I felt I had plenty of time because the fires were not to be set until the next day. It was hot that day. The sun blazed unmercifully down on my head. The irrigation canal looked inviting with its cool water flowing lazily along. I decided to take a dip to cool off. That was almost a fatal mistake!

"I took off my shirt and pants. No one else was around so I didn't have to worry about being properly dressed. I eased down into the refreshing water and just sat there with the water gently swirling around my chin. I must have dozed off. The next thing I knew it was extremely hot. I felt like I was in a blast furnace. There was no water around me at all. The sun was slowly roasting my skin. It is a good thing that I was used to the sun or I may have been fried alive. Someone must have closed the flood gates. "Sluggishly I climbed out of the canal and started to walk to where I had my traps set.

Suddenly I caught the scent of burning leaves. I was in real danger now. They came a day early to clear the field. The fires are set on all four sides and allowed to burn inward toward each other. That way the

fires can be controlled more easily. Since I was in the middle of this field, I knew there was no way out.

"The flames were closing in on me. I could feel the heat intensify. I had to find some way to stay alive. The irrigation canals looked inviting because they were deep and had a little water in them. I had to decide quickly. I jumped down into the canal and got as low as I could, so the water covered most of my body. There was nothing else I could do except wait.

"After what seemed like hours, the heat slowly lessened. I peered over the edge of the canal. Most of the flames were out, but the embers of the fires were still glowing in the twilight. If I tried to make it out now, I could still be burned. I made myself as comfortable as I could to wait until morning. In the morning it would be safe to leave.

"Or so I thought. A little while later, I felt the ground tremble like an earthquake. Then I heard the rumble of the cane harvesters rolling along to pick up the still smoldering cane. Pretty soon there would be workers following on foot. If they found me, I would be in trouble for trespassing, which by the way, we are doing right now. I had to make a break for it. Since it was dark by now, I didn't know which way to go. I got up and started to run. I ran blindly until I cleared the field. Once on the highway, traveling was easier but I was still shaken by almost being caught."

"Are you a criminal or something?" blurted Elaine. She regained her voice at the most inopportune time. She looked like she was ready to run.

"No, Little Darlin', I'm not a criminal or fugitive or alien. I prefer to be alone. If someone found out about me, the authorities would try to put me in a home for the old or something. I'm not ready to give up my freedom." Sam answered.

"Sam, what do you do? I mean, do you have a job or something?" I asked.

"Do you remember when I caught you and Randy at the hospital? I told you that I had been in the Navy during the war. When the war was over, I left the Navy and had several jobs. I just couldn't find one that I liked well enough to stick with it. The last job I had was in construction. I am a pretty good carpenter. The foreman didn't like the way I put up a wall and we had a fight. I beat him up pretty good. Last I heard, he was looking for me to even with me. I stay out of the way and away from people as much as I can.

It was getting pretty late by now. Jimmy, Elaine and I had to get home for dinner. We slowly walked back toward the gate. The guards at the gate let us in with no trouble because they knew us so well. I didn't know that our time together was short. When I got home, Mom told me to get ready for dinner. We sat down to eat and Dad said he had an announcement.

"As you know, we are on a base that is part of three ammunition dumps. I have been transferred to one of the other ones," he said.

Mom said, "That's wonderful! Which one are we going to?"

Dad said, "We are going to Westloch. It's part of Pearl Harbor. We will be living right on the bay."

Mom, Dad and my brother were very excited by the prospect of a new house, new friends, and fishing nearby. Supposedly this was a promotion for Dad. All I could think of was losing the friends I had here. It just wasn't fair. Why didn't they think of me and my feelings? I sat there sullenly and played with my food.

"Don't you feel well, Mike?" Mom asked.

"No, I don't. It's not fair. I don't want to go. I'll lose all my friends. I don't know anyone there."

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