

Timothy Downey

Bullfight On the Mountain

I wouldn't exactly call it lying, but I didn't always tell Mom and especially not Dad everything about the adventures I had with my brother and friends on "The Mountain". It often seems, though, that parents somehow know what their children have been up to or that there is more to the tale than the telling.

My father was a SMGT (senior master sergeant) with the Strategic Air Command's B-52 Bomber Wing assigned to Lajes Field on the Portuguese island of Terceda. Dad was responsible for the maintenance of planes that carried atomic weapons. He had learned to be a stern disciplinarian and brooked no misbehavior on the flight line or at home. There was no fooling him either. He just seemed to know, to sense, when something was not quite right and could spot the smallest detail out of place.

Terceda island is part of the Azóres Islands, a stopover in the Atlantic Ocean on the way to Europe. The wonderful, warm Mediterranean climate is perfect for the semi-tropical rain forest, lush green banana groves and dense yellow bamboo stalks that made up the background for many of our adventures.

I was ten years old and my best friend was a red-headed, freckled-faced ball of energy named Mike Means. My parents used to say, "That boy is incorrigible." And I would always reply,

under my breath, "No he's not, Mikey'll do anything, he don't need no encouragement at all."

That summer morning my older brother Richard, Mikey, and I climbed over the three-foot white washed stucco wall in the backyard and headed up the mountain where we spent almost every day pretending to be pirates or Indians or soldiers. We didn't have TV's or CD's or even playgrounds to occupy us. To tell the truth, we had more fun inventing stuff to do and wanted to be far away from home when we did it.

Into the banana grove we plunged, pushing aside the broad green leaves and turning left when we reached the tiny brown footpath that would lead us into the deep shadows of the hardwood trees. Zigzagging through the brush we headed for Sliding Rock; a 30 foot long piece of ink black shale we used as a slide and where we hid our homemade wooden spears. All around the rock grew young saplings that kept us in good supply of weapons and which we also used to pull ourselves up past the slippery slope of shale and into the next layer of vegetation, a thick swaying jungle of bamboo. There were no trails there. You just had to fight your way through, banging the stalks aside. We always went this way to keep anyone from following us. On the other side, the last obstacle from the top was a pile of large boulders; ones too large for building stone fences the farmers favored to border their fields. Once on top, the mountain became

a plateau. Flat enough to farm and graze cattle. The fields are all enclosed in solid walls of rock piled 6 feet high and 3 feet wide. On the other side of that first wall was our greatest thrill and worst nightmare, El Toro Negro! We had come to fight the bull.

As we began to scale the hard rock face of the fence, Mikey exclaimed, "It's my turn to go first!" We would become his banderillos, distracting the bull, while Mikey charged from the side and stabbed him with his spear. This would make Toro Negro very angry and we would run for our lives to reach the wall before he trampled us. But when we clambered atop the fence and looked for our target, all we saw was the farmer who owned the bull. He was cutting down weeds with a sharp, curved sickle.

"Noooo!" yelled Mike. He had really worked himself up for this during our climb. When the farmer turned and saw us he knew that it had been *'those gringo boys'* who had been bothering his livestock. When he raised his blade and came toward us, my brother said, "Let's get the hell out of here!" But Mikey, whose face now glowed as red as his hair, stood there on that fence, slowly pulled back his spear arm, and let fly. Our spears were blunted from hitting trees and sticking into the ground, but when his struck that farmer on his thigh, you could hear his scream two miles away. And now, the chase was really on.

We hit the ground running for our lives with the farmer right behind. Swinging that gleaming weapon of steel, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Eu estou indo cortar fora suas cabeças (I am going to cut off your heads)!" If we could just reach the bamboo we would be safe; just a few more yards. But there was no quit in that Portagee and we heard him hit the stalks five seconds after we did. He was strong and he was plowing his way through. Smaller, we slipped between the golden shoots and gained some distance on him. However, we knew that when we got to the big trees, he was going to catch us. Richard panted, "Listen, head for Sliding Rock, it's our only chance!" Suddenly, we were out of the bamboo and speeding through the woods down the brushy mountainside.

That farmer was quick, had grown up on this mountain, and he was only spitting distance away now. But this race would be won on something other than a fast pair of feet.

There it was straight ahead, looking like an oil slick in a sea of green. My brother yelled, "Remember, stay in the middle and turn right at the bottom." One by one we threw out our feet and landed on our backsides, arms tucked in close. Like sleds on ice we flew down that rock and leaned right at the bottom so we would leave the rock at the footpath. When that farmer hit the slick surface his feet slid back and he came down headfirst; no way to stop. We could hear him as he kept on going, crashing

into the bushes and small trees at the bottom, but we never looked back.

When I walked into the back door at home I finally started to feel safe. Instead, I ran smack dab into my Dad. One look at his face and I knew I was in trouble. He must have heard the farmer screaming. He put his hand on my shoulder and said "I know what you have been doing." He slowly turned me around and grabbed a pocket that was half ripped off the seat of my jeans. "You've been sliding down that darn rock again, haven't you?" "Tell me!" he demanded.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Yes Dad." Like I told you, I wouldn't exactly call it lying.....