

Storm on the Mountain

by
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1

Fight to the Finish!

The two circled, looking for an opportunity to swat, pinch, or shove the other to the ground. As they sought their opponent's weaknesses, their eyes flashed with fire and determination; this was a fight to the finish!

Suddenly the larger boy charged, grabbing his foe below the waist and roughly slamming him to the ground, leaving his enemy's head just inches from an active anthill. He pinned the smaller boy's wrists firmly to the forest floor. There would be no escape.

Then the larger youth made a mistake: he decided it was time for his adversary to eat grass. He let go of one of his opponent's wrists in order to grasp a handful of the unsavory meal.

That was just the opening the smaller figure needed. With unbelievable quickness he jerked himself upward and flipped his foe over, so that *now* the larger challenger was pinned to the ground, his head actually *in* the anthill! Suddenly, the restrained boy's eyes enlarged, filled with panic. The pesky creatures were working their way up his face, making a beeline for his nostrils!



So amused was Evan with Mica's apprehension, that he began to laugh and lost his grip on Mica's wrists. Instantly Mica jumped up, blowing his nose and wiping his face.

Soon both eleven-year-old boys were rolling on the ground, bellowing with laughter.

Evan and Mica had been wrestling each other since they were two years old; it was one of their most fun things to do. This “fight to the finish” had taken place hundreds of times over the years.

This particular fight was in Doc’s forest, not too far from their favorite place, The Rock, which was a huge, flat, triangular boulder that extended out into Hickory Creek.

“I gotcha, gotcha good!” said Evan to Mica.

“So you did,” responded his best friend. “I shouldn’t have let go of your wrist to feed you grass. It always surprises me how quickly you can get yourself loose and flip me over.”

Mica continued, “You know, when school starts, you should try out for the middle school wrestling team. I don’t think anyone could pin you!”

“Well, maybe . . . ,” responded Evan. In truth, Mica was touching on a sensitive subject. The two boys had just finished a summer football camp for rising sixth graders. Mica’s father, the football coach at Neelam County High, had been the camp director, and several of the high school players had assisted. That included Marcus, Mica’s older brother, who was an outstanding member of the high school football team.

Mica was unquestionably the best athlete in camp. His nickname was “Lightning,” and it fit him well. No other boy, including Evan, could run faster, jump higher, or catch the ball better than Mica Habber. Evan, on the other hand, was just average—in both size

and ability. He was far from the worst player among the sixth graders, but he was also a long way from being among the elite athletes.

One evening after camp, Evan had been honest with Mica: “I’m just not very good. I don’t know if I’ll even be able to make the middle school team. You, on the other hand, will be the star.”

Mica had tried to bolster the confidence of his friend: “Evan, don’t think that way. I just got my growth spurt a little before you. When your body matures, you’ll be my match. But whatever happens, it will never change our friendship.”

Suddenly Evan’s musing was interrupted. A black and white Border collie bounded up the lane. He pounced onto both boys with dripping creek-water paws and bathed their ears with slobbery slurps.

“Boone! Enough already!” exclaimed Mica, protectively wrapping his arms around his head.

“Yeah! Sit . . . heel . . . or something!” chuckled Evan, drying his ears with his shirttail.

With a playful yap, the dog sat back on his haunches and stared at his master and sparring buddy. His wagging tail spoke expressively: “What’s next?”

The boys jumped to their feet and headed to The Rock. There, as they often did, they lay stomach down on the sun-drenched, stony surface and stretched their necks until their noses all but touched the rapidly coursing creek that flowed down from the Great

Smoky Mountains National Park. The two-foot deep stream was swollen from yesterday's rain on the mountain peaks.

"See anything?" asked Evan, cupping his hands around his eyes to remove the glare of sunlight.

"Water bugs . . . minnows," answered Mica. "Wouldn't it be something if we saw trout in this creek?"

"You bet! Hey, there goes our frog!" shouted Evan, sitting up and pointing toward a mound of rocks downstream. Just at that moment, a plump, long-legged, olive-green bullfrog hopped onto the highest rock. He faced his audience, swelled his throat, and proudly croaked out his robust song.

"Good old Ugly Muggly!" said Mica. "Too bad Charu isn't here to see her froggy pal."

"You know it!" said Evan. "We could catch Muggly and *make* Charu give him another big kiss!"

The boys were having a good laugh at Charu's expense when suddenly someone leaped out of the creek and drenched Evan with a bucketful of cold mountain water! Before the boys could figure out what was happening, Charu refilled her bucket and gave Mica the same icy shower!

"So," asserted Charu, who had managed to sneak up on the boys and hear what they were saying, "you think you can *make* me kiss Ugly Muggly? Let me remind you both that the first time I kissed that homely frog, it was my own free choice—though I was doing it to impress you. You don't *force* me to do anything! Do you two get it, or do you need another soaking to tame your male egos?"





Together the boys shouted, “We get it! We get it!”

Then all three burst-out laughing. The reminder had been communicated by Charu:

“You will treat me as an equal, or pay the price!”



2

A Stick, Two Cousins, and a Grand Uncle

Amused and unruffled, Charu sat down on The Rock near Boone and the boys. “I’m lovin’ this spot!” she said, wrapping her arms around her knees. “Cool shade, sparkling water—our mountain paradise!”

“Especially now that Moose’s stinky hog manure is all gone,” added Evan. “Of course, that’s thanks to hours of cruel rock-scrubbing by us, no less. Ugh!”

“Speaking of Moose . . . ,” said Mica, pausing to see if Evan and Charu wanted the latest information on their community bully.

“Go on,” said Evan, instantly curious.

“What’s he done now?” Charu asked.

“Plenty!” asserted Mica. “Charu, you know my brother Marcus is working for your parents at their Hickory Creek Market. Well, yesterday while Marcus was loading the delivery truck, two all-terrain vehicles roared into the parking lot, screeching and skidding dangerously near parked cars. And who should one of them be? None other than our dear Bruce, ‘The Moose,’ Meckel!”

“My dad is totally fed up with his antics!” declared Charu. “He says Moose takes far too many chances. Dad has confronted him more than once, but every time Moose whines, ‘Sorry,’ and slinks off with a smirk to do it again.



“Dad even spoke to Mr. Meckel, Moose’s father, about it.” Mr. Meckel was also the kid’s school bus driver.

Charu continued: “Mr. Meckel said, ‘Moose is a good boy. All kids have ups and downs; time will take care of that. Don’t be too hard on him.’ Apparently nothing was said to Moose because his behavior didn’t change!”

“You haven’t heard the worst,” said Mica, returning to his account. “The person on the other ATV was Moose’s older cousin ‘Rusty Rhino’ from Detroit, Michigan. He’s staying with the Meckels for a week or more. It seems his parents dropped him and his new four-wheeler off on their way south. Marcus says for us to look out. Rhino is older, bigger, and probably meaner than Moose.”

“Sour pickles!” grumbled Evan, throwing a handful of rocks into the creek.

“Evan,” said Charu, “speaking of visitors to Hickory Creek Cove, I’m excited about meeting your uncle. What did you call him? ‘Nunk’?”

“Yes,” responded Evan. “Everyone calls him Nunk. He’s really my grand uncle, I guess. Nunk is my grandpa Doc’s younger brother. His given name is Nahum Habakkuk Mace. Can you imagine a name like that? When he was little, he couldn’t even say ‘Nahum,’ let alone ‘Habakkuk.’ So he babbled it all out as ‘Nunk.’ Well, that was the name that stuck, and that’s what he prefers to be called.”

Evan added, “He never married and treats my sister Esther and me like his own grandchildren.”

“I love it when Uncle Nunk comes!” exclaimed Mica. “He’s cool! A rough and wily mountain man! You’ll love him, Charu. He’s one of a kind. We’re in for some awesome adventures with him. I can’t wait!”

Charu questioned: “Didn’t you say that Nunk is going to take us camping?”

“For sure!” said Evan. “Nunk is planning to take us kids on a three-day camping trip in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We’ll have a blast!”

“It will be fun,” observed Charu. “I just hope the weather settles. We’ve had so much rain and so many bad storms. I haven’t spent much time sleeping in a tent, and I’d really prefer to be dry and safe. Isabella is even more apprehensive than I am.”

Together Evan and Mica asked, “Who’s Isabella?”

“Come on, guys!” said Charu. “I told you weeks ago that my cousin, Isabella, is coming from Milwaukee to spend ten days with me. She’s our age and has never been to the mountains before.”

Charu knitted her brow. “Isabella’s family, and I love her; but I admit that I’m concerned about her visit. She’s strictly a city girl. She has spent zero time in the country or traipsing through the woods. In our phone conversations and emails she sounds worried.”

“Do you mean,” asked Mica, “that Isabella might not enjoy roughing it with us, or camping and hiking in the mountains?”

“Exactly,” said Charu. “When Bella and I lived near each other in Milwaukee, we did all sorts of city things together. So, she wasn’t happy at all when my parents moved us south this spring. Here in East Tennessee, my life has changed. Isabella knows all about you two and our friendship, and she’s really wondering if she will fit in. She almost cancelled her visit, but finally decided to come.”

“If Isabella can’t cut it,” asserted Evan impatiently, “she can just stay inside and watch television!”

“That is my greatest fear!” said Charu. “Then I’ll have to stay inside and keep Bella entertained!”

For the first time the boys realized what an uncomfortable stretch lay ahead. Charu had become their friend. Doing all those things with Uncle Nunk wouldn’t be nearly as much fun without her.

Mica grinned and broke the tension: “Charu, with our noble guidance, you have become a true mountain girl who is worthy of our company!”

“Correct,” laughed Evan. “And we will just have to work our magic on Isabella, as we have on you.”

Immediately the boys saw fire in Charu's eyes, and they knew they had said too much.

Charu exclaimed, "Where's that rusty old bucket I found? You fellas still haven't learned your lesson!"

"We have! We have!" cried both boys.

Mica tried a more conciliatory approach: "How about we show Isabella what we do around here? She's bound to enjoy it. After all, what's not to like?"

"Well, there's Moose," said Charu quite honestly.

"That's an understatement," said Mica. "I'll bet Moose and Rhino are thinking up all the mean and despicable things they can do."

"You got that right," said Evan. "There isn't anything Moose would enjoy more than ruining our summer—especially if he can show off for his older cousin!"

"True," said Charu, frowning and laughing at the same time. "How perfectly awful that their visits overlap! It'll be challenging enough for Bella to adjust without those two brutes making things worse!"

"At least," continued Evan, "we'll have Uncle Nunk here to help keep Moose and Rhino in check."

To everyone, that was an intriguing thought.

The three friends and Boone trekked upstream along the creek bank, wading in and out of the water, examining rocks, and looking for critters. For a while, the threats of Moose and Rhino seemed far away and unimportant.

After a mile or so, they paused to rest on a fallen log.

“Ev, do you have THE STICK with you today?” asked Charu.

“Yep, I don’t go anywhere without it,” said Evan, reaching into his deepest pocket and pulling out an ordinary looking forked stick.

“Isn’t it strange how that thing found you, then actually followed you around and hung in front of your nose ‘til you accepted it?” said Mica.

“Sure is,” Evan responded. “Sometimes I lay awake at night trying to figure it out, but there’s no way I can explain all the amazing things that harmless looking twig has done.”

“Me, neither,” said Charu. “I mean, who can explain a stick that becomes a flashlight, or a glow stick, or a spring-rod? Or how it followed Evan’s wishes to flip Moose on the ear or wallop a robber?”

“And there’s the mysterious fact that it obeys Evan’s wishes and no one else’s,” added Mica.



“That’s true,” said Evan, “and I’m still sorry about that. I can’t even explain why it returns to me when I throw it, or why sometimes it hovers in the air for me to grab and other times it slides into my pocket all on its own.”

“At least,” said Charu, “from what I can tell, its true purpose is to do good. Even if the mystery of it is beyond our understanding, I say let’s be glad we have it! Who knows what circumstances we might face?”

“But still keep it *secret*,” cautioned Evan. “All our visitors in Hickory Creek Cove might test our pledge to keep the stick’s existence between the three of us.”

“Definitely top-secret!” said Mica.

“My lips are sealed!” asserted Charu.



3

Terrible Turtle Troubles

After exploring upstream as far as Habber Creek, Evan, Mica, and Charu turned back and retraced their course. Boone led the way. At The Rock, the kids veered north and walked home via the old farm lane. This gravel roadway was the only cleared route through the southern section of Doc's forest. Once they emerged from the tree-lined passage, the three split up and headed for their respective homes.

Mica Habber thought his route was the best, an easterly shortcut across Doc's pasture, leading right past Chestnut Pond with its mysterious water plants and animals. He could skirt the pond, spot a few fat frogs, and still be within his parents' stricture that said, "No activity at the pond without an adult present."

Charu, if she were in a mind to go directly home, walked straight north, following the farm lane to its end where it met McBride



Mill Road. Her family's new house stood just across the street. However, if time allowed, Charu loved to stop and visit with Evan's grandparents—whom the kids called Doc and Gran. Doc was a retired veterinarian and always had an assortment of animals around.

For Evan, reaching his house was a simple matter of turning left and cutting through his grandfather's apple orchard. It was just as he and Boone passed the family garage and entered the backyard gate that he reached for his phone to call Gramps. He wanted to find out if he'd heard from Uncle Nunk. But the cell phone was not in his pocket. Hastily, Evan searched every compartment in his cargo shorts. No phone.

"Shucks!" he muttered, and even as he spoke, he knew exactly where he had left it.

"Stay, Boone!" said Evan, gently scratching him behind the ears. "I'll be right back." The dog whimpered and looked longingly at his master, but obeyed.

Quickly Evan whirled about and headed out the gate, remembering he had laid the phone safely on The Rock before he'd jumped into Hickory Creek. That new phone had cost him all of his savings for the last six months. It should be right where he left it. He supposed an animal could knock it off into the creek or carry it away in its mouth, but neither was likely. Anxiously, Evan broke into a run.

Halfway down the old farm lane, he heard rolling rumbles in the near distance. Roaches and rats! He recognized that deafening roar. It was Moose's four-wheeler, revved to its limit. Evan groaned . . . his phone! If Moose saw it first, he'd crush it or toss it into the creek just for fun!

When Evan had almost reached Hickory Creek, he realized that he was hearing the noise of *two separate engines*—must be both Moose and Rhino. Phooey! He quickly took cover.

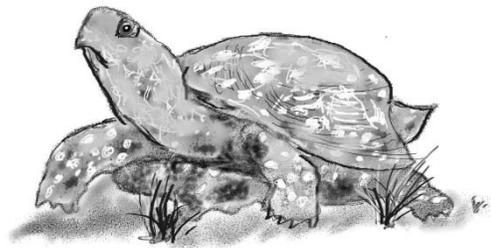
What Evan saw “raised his dander,” as Gramps would say. Moose and his brawny cousin were bumping and crashing their ATVs right down the middle of Hickory Creek, dislodging rocks, tearing out vegetation, tossing up mud from the creek bed. The older boy, Rhino, led the wild ride, obviously reveling in the destructive power of his mean-looking machine. Finally, laughing and shouting, the teens propelled their four-wheelers up the bank, all the while mutilating and deforming the ground with their deep-cutting tires. They thundered to a stop just short of The Rock.

Evan’s blood boiled. He couldn’t believe the audacity of those two. Just a couple of weeks ago Moose had been expressly ordered by Evan’s grandfather, Doc Mace, not to ride his all-terrain vehicle on Mace land without permission. As usual, Moose did what he wanted, ignoring the fact that he was on private property and carelessly carving up the land and the creek. If those brutes saw his cell phone, it was a goner for sure.

As Evan watched, Moose dismounted and pulled something from his pocket. “Got another!” he boasted, holding his hand aloft for his cousin to see. “Catch!” With that, Moose hurled the object forward, too fast for the other teen to grab.

The thing, slightly bigger than a baseball, flew past Rhino, thudded to the ground, and rolled toward Evan. Quickly he drew back into the trees, but not before he saw that the object was a box turtle. Stunned, it lay motionless.

“Yo, Rhino! You lost that catchin’ reflex you’re always braggin’ about?” taunted Moose.



“You wish!” grunted the older boy, springing to the ground, scooping up the turtle, and heaving it over his shoulder toward Moose. It ricocheted off Moose’s forehead and bounced back into the waiting hands of Rhino.

“So easy, my man!” Rhino scoffed, as he carelessly tossed the turtle back. Moose crammed it into his pocket.

Evan groaned.

“Showoff!” grumbled Moose sourly, as he mounted his quad bike.

“Some got it!” boomed the bigger fellow, thrusting his fists into the air. “Older . . . faster . . . stronger! That’s ‘The Rhino’!”

“Huh! You’re only fourteen, Rusty Rhino,” grumbled Moose. “One year older ain’t much!”

“It’s enough,” guffawed his cousin. “And, man, you’re so lucky! I’m here for two whole weeks to learn you some stuff ‘bout bein’ tough!”

In his hiding place, Evan rolled his eyes. Two weeks? Double shucks! Why hadn’t Moose gone to visit Rhino at *his home* rather than bringing his burly, loud-mouthed cousin to Hickory Creek Cove?

“Whatever,” grunted Moose. “Hey, let’s get a move on! We gotta’ paint these turtles and give old Drip, Drop, and Flip Flop (his disparaging names for Evan, Mica, and Charu) some shocking neon orange and green turtles in their precious creek! Those three are so dumb,” he said with a raucous chuckle. “They’ll think it’s a new species!”

“Right, Cuz! Let’s roll!” said his cohort. “And, don’t forget, we have a treehouse to *rearrange!*”

Moose laughed maliciously, “Oh, yeah! I’m rememberin’ that shocker-gift for my little twerpy friends!” With that, the boisterous teenagers revved their engines, spun in dirt-ravaging circles, and roared on up the creek bank on the edge of Doc’s forest.

Evan breathed a sigh of relief. The two bullies had been so preoccupied that they had not noticed his new cell phone, laying in plain sight on The Rock.

“Wait a minute!” thought Evan. “Did he say ‘*rearrange a treehouse*’?” He knew of only one, and it belonged to Mica, Charu, and himself! “Grrrr!” he growled.

That gruesome twosome had also indicated they were going to “paint turtles.”

Evan pondered, “*Is there something I can do about that?*”