



Golden Junior High

Chapter 9

Fritz

Fall, 1961

Boys, my cousin Fritz was like the older brother I never had. He taught me how to cuss, chew, and spit. He had a wide variety of off-color remarks, which I adopted as soon as I heard them. These words served me well when trading insults with my friends; they always wondered where I came up with such novel phrases. And, as you have read, he made a practice of saving me from threats of all kinds. He was always there when I needed him, my guardian angel. Here's what happened.

Mike and I were standing on the second and highest tier of the grounds at Golden Junior High. The school sat at the top of two grass-covered terraces rising from 10th Street. Just behind us, a grand stair led to the main entrance. It was the first day of seventh grade and our first day at Golden Junior High. We had just finished lunch and Mike was tossing a large, over-ripe orange up and down in his right hand. A large crowd had gathered in front of the school to enjoy a few minutes in the sun before afternoon classes began.

As Mike and I looked toward 10th Street, a very loud motorcycle ridden by a very large boy with long, greasy hair wearing a black leather jacket, jeans, and engineer boots came to a stop several car lengths from the traffic light where 10th met Washington Avenue. He raced the engine producing an obnoxious racket, obviously trying to impress the junior-high crowd. He was Max, a high school junior with a tough-kid reputation. Max had spent some time at the Lookout Mountain School for Boys, the state reform school for wayward youth on the south side of town, for crimes including assault and battery and grand theft auto. He was always in trouble.

“Do you think I can hit him?” Mike asked, tossing the orange. Mike pitched for his Little League team and had a good arm.

“What are you thinking? That's Max! Are you crazy?” I replied. Max was known to carry a switchblade.

“Yeah, but the wind is at my back and that will help.”

And with that, as if he was on a pitcher's mound, Mike took a full wind-up and let the orange fly. He started the orange a little to the left and it appeared that he would miss the intended target, but a gust of wind caught the fruit and pushed it right. Splat! The orange smashed into Max's shoulder and exploded, spraying juice and orange parts all over Max, his jacket, and his motorcycle. Max cursed loudly, “What the hell?” could be heard over the rumbling.

“What have you done?” I screamed, as Max surveyed the crowd looking for the orange thrower.

“It was low, I wanted to hit him in the head. Should have thrown a little higher,” Mike explained calmly, going through his throwing motion again in hopes of improvement.

Seeing Mike going through the motion, Max immediately knew we were the culprits. Max hurriedly parked his cycle at the curb and rushed up the tiered lawn, swearing and threatening. “You’re dead, you little shits!” By now, the crowd, who had witnessed the throw, was aware that Max was on his way to kill Mike. Mostly eighth and ninth graders, they crowded around Mike and me. They were hoping to see two seventh graders beaten to a pulp.

Mike was a tough kid and he stood his ground waiting for Max to arrive. I would have run, but the crowd was packed too tightly behind me. I had no choice but to stand with Mike.

Max reached us and grabbed Mike by the front of his shirt. Just as he pulled his hand back to throw a punch, Max was lifted into the air and thrown nearly to 10th Street. He landed on his back a few feet from his motorcycle.

I couldn’t believe it! We were saved! What had happened?

I looked around and there was my cousin Fritz. He and Mike’s brother Butch had been watching the potential whipping from the main school entrance at the top of the stairs. As Max rushed up the tiered lawn, they had raced down the steps to intercept him. One on each side, they grabbed his jacket and launched him into the air. Max was so intent on Mike and me that he never saw them coming.

“Stay away from these two, Max! I hear you so much as touch them and I’ll beat you like a drum!”

Max picked himself up and gave the crowd the finger with both hands. He brushed the dust from his jacket, started his motorcycle, revved the engine loudly, then killed it when the light changed. The crowd laughed and shouted taunts. Max screamed some threats, swore revenge, and then roared away.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Fritz incredulously. Fritz was in high school and I couldn’t understand what he was doing at the junior high.

“Butch and I were delivering some materials for Mrs. Davis’ art class.” The high school sent leftover materials to the junior high and Fritz was the delivery boy.

Boys, Here's What Happened

“Lucky for you, Chop. Ol’ Max was pissed and he was looking to do some damage. Better be careful. I might not always be here.”

Fritz wasn’t always so tough. My earliest memory of him is when he was fifteen and I was eleven. He had his arms around my Dad and was sobbing; he was trying to say something, but it wouldn’t come out. He couldn’t catch his breath.

Fritz’ dad had just died of a heart attack and we were the first relatives on the scene. His mom, my Auntie Boots was my Dad’s sister. We arrived to find Paul, Mike, and Fritz sitting on the curb in front of their house. An ambulance was in the drive and flashing red lights filled the night sky. A gurney rolled out of the house with a sheet over the body. Fritz looked up, saw my Dad and ran to him, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face in Dad’s chest. I didn’t think he would ever let go.

From then on, Dad tried his best to be there when Fritz needed a father figure, but growing up as the youngest of four kids without a father was tough on Fritz. Unlike his brother Paul, he didn’t play sports. Fritz could not tolerate screaming coaches. Unlike his other brother Mike, he wasn’t good student. But he excelled in auto mechanics and wood shop. His car was always the fastest, and he could make anything in shop class, including a coffee table, end tables, and a bureau for his mom. He even did pretty well in the school musical, appropriately cast as Earthquake McGoon in Lil’ Abner.

Like every high-school student, Fritz had to pass English to graduate. Never the scholar, he found himself in a class of low-achieving students with discipline problems. The administration thought Mr. Nelson — a young 6’4” hulk — could keep order in the tough class. Mr. Nelson presided over the class with a ruler in his hand — a flat wooden stick with a sharp metal edge. Whenever someone got out of line talking and disrupting the class, Mr. Nelson regained order by smacking the offender’s hand with the edge of the ruler, producing severe pain, and in some cases, drawing blood.

Fritz, never one to be restrained by authority even if it carried a ruler, spoke to a classmate at the wrong time. Mr. Nelson snuck up on Fritz and smacked him on the hand with the edge of the ruler, producing a deep cut in a finger that bled profusely. Fritz reacted without thinking. He stood up from his desk and slugged Mr. Nelson hard in the stomach. Mr. Nelson crumpled to the floor, gasping for air. With his bleeding finger in his mouth, Fritz marched out of the school and headed home, where he waited for the police.

Auntie Boots called Dad to help deal with the situation. It took some negotiating, but Dad eventually convinced the police and the school administration that slugging Mr. Nelson was a reaction to the severe pain inflicted by the teacher and his ruler. It wasn't premeditated; it was self-defense. And, Dad questioned, are teachers allowed to inflict serious injury on a student merely for talking out of place? Mr. Nelson gave up his ruler and declined to press charges. Fritz was suspended for several weeks, time he spent sneaking into the school shop after hours to work on his mother's furniture.

That wasn't the only time Dad bailed Fritz out. There were a series of traffic violations, including a charge of reckless driving that came when Fritz drove off the twisting road that led up Lookout Mountain. He was trying to set a record for driving from the monument at the bottom of the mountain to Sam's, the beer joint at the top. Halfway up, Fritz lost control and crashed through a barrier. His Ford Falcon convertible was totaled when it flipped and rolled down the steep side of the mountain, finally coming to rest several hundred feet below the road. Miraculously, Fritz walked away with a few scratches.

Somehow, Fritz managed to graduate and went to work in his brother Mike's gas station on Washington Avenue. A few years later, when I was in high school, I worked Sundays in Mike's station, not for money, but so I could put my car on the lift and do lube jobs and oil changes when things were slow. Fritz and I took turns filling up cars, washing windshields, and checking air pressure in tires.

He always had a can of snuff (finely ground chewing tobacco) in his back pocket, and those cans wore a circle in his jeans.

"What's in the can?" I asked one time.

"Skoal," he replied. "Want to try some?"

"Sure," I answered, not at all sure. I knew that Skoal was a brand of snuff, but I had heard that it could make you sick. While I trusted Fritz, I knew he was older and more adventurous than me.

He walked into the office, opened a drawer in the desk, and pulled out a bottle of peppermint schnapps. He opened the Skoal and poured the schnapps over the shredded tobacco. "This makes it taste better."

He took a pinch of Skoal from the can, pulled out his lower lip with his other hand, and deposited the Skoal between the lip and gum. "That's how you do it. Give it a try," he offered pushing the can in my direction. He spat a brown vile liquid into a coke bottle. "Don't swallow," he warned.

Boys, Here's What Happened

I put a pinch between my lip and gum, just as Fritz has instructed. The flavor of peppermint schnapps exploded in my mouth, then the taste of tobacco took over. I couldn't help it; I swallowed. In a second, the gas station office was spinning. I staggered to a chair and sat down, everything going round and round. I knew I was going to be sick and looked desperately for something to puke into. Fritz shoved a trashcan between my legs. I heaved and heaved.

Later, when the office stopped spinning and I was making a shaky recovery, Fritz came back to the office. "You wimp! You chew like a little girl," he admonished. "I told you not to swallow. And while you sat in here hugging that trashcan, I had to take your turn three times. You owe me." Then, after a few minutes more, he looked closely at me, put a hand on my shoulder, and asked, "You OK?"