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PAPA CADO

WHAT AN ORDINARY MAN LEARNED ON HIS EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE

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A TRUE STORY BY

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PAPA CADDO

M.G. CRISCI

A True Story



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*To Arthur,
My hero, my role model, my brother*

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Preface



I MET ARTHUR MERCADO, known to his four granddaughters as Papa Cado, some time ago, at the Scripps Hospital Healing Hearts Program in Southern California, where we both live.

Why was I there? My high-powered, self-consuming business career had left me little time for a balanced lifestyle. In other words, I had allowed myself to become a genuine candidate for a heart attack. Two years prior, I had been diagnosed with a cardiac condition called atrial fibrillation—a fancy medical term for a racing heart. While my doctor reassured me, “We don’t have any actual research on the correlation between life expectancy and atrial fib, so you’ll probably live a *relatively* normal life. However, there was a caveat, “But, you realize you are now in a different risk category.”

She also “suggested” I enroll the hospital’s heart healthy program, which she described as “an innovative, holistic approach to lifestyle

change." It only took me 24 months to heed her suggestion! By then, I was sick and tired of taking pills that made me lethargic and light-headed. I visited the program director. She took one look at my pouch, gave me the 60-second overview, took my credit card, smiled, and welcomed me. "We think you'll find the 12-week program quite comprehensive." The program curriculum included classes in Yoga, Spirituality, Stress Management, Nutrition, and Vegetarian Cooking. I was rather skeptical, to say the least.

Day 1 found me in the gym with four overweight, middle-aged men and women grunting and groaning. Day 2 was filled with stress-management support sessions—a first for me. Next thing I know, I'm sitting in a semi-circle. This gentle, soothing sounding dude named Ozzie introduced himself as "the group's facilitator." He asked us to hold hands. It seemed a little effeminate to a preconditioned-macho man like myself, but I'd already spent the \$2,800 bucks, so I put my hand out. Somebody else touched it. I looked straight ahead.

Ozzie asked how we felt. You could hear a pin drop. Since I was an accomplished public speaker, I volunteered to go first. I figured my new "best friends" might as well hear my tale of woe, so they understand how lucky they are not to have my problems.

I spoke about five minutes. Ozzie nodded. Kris, Keith, Shirley, and Arthur said nothing. After all, nobody was allowed to place value judgments—it was part of the ground rules. I thought to myself, 'good on ya.' Probably shocked the hell out of them.

They each began to recant their stories. For some strange reason, I decided to listen. (I've never been considered a great listener by anybody).

Twenty minutes later, I concluded I might be the luckiest man in the world. Kris told an incredible story about the loss of a limb he had dealt with since birth. Shirley has endured enough pain and suffering to drive you to atheism. And Keith, who appeared healthy as a horse and strong as a bull to boot, was looking for someone to explain why he was filled with rage.

The final member of the support group was a gray-haired man wearing gray pants, white t-shirt, white sneakers and a thick gray beard and glasses, sitting to my right. He hadn't moved a muscle or uttered a word. I said, "And, what about you?" He stared blankly and scowled deeply. 20 seconds of dead silence seemed like 20 minutes. Then he spoke. "I'm Arthur. I told *those people* that I don't like to talk about myself."

Even though I'm loathed to make value judgments (joke), I concluded he was borderline manic depressive or a deeply introverted personality on a quest *not* to identify.

I was also happy I was not within *swiping range* of the switch blade he surely carried in his back pocket to open beer cans and slice mangoes.

I also decided I was going to make it my job to crack this guy's shell. After all, I had *the* secret weapon—my bizarre sense of humor. (I find myself hysterically insightful, all the time).

"So, Arthur, is that all there is to that?"

He stared at me. I tried to smile. Frankly, I was a little intimidated.

"The doctors tell me I have no right to be here," he revealed calmly. "I'm sixty-three, and I've beat death twice. I love my wife (his third) and my only daughter, who I raised by myself, and my four wonderful grandchildren. I'm just doing the best I can to avoid dying right now." He paused. "And, that's my story. Satisfied?"

My arrogance melted to insignificance.

His hand began to shake. "Damn hand, never used to do that. It's that Parkinson's thing. But the good news is when it shakes I know I'm still here!"

He smiled. We all laughed. He touched the heart of everyone in that room.

Over the next twelve weeks, I learned there was much more to Arthur's story than just the 28 stents, 11 angioplasties, a five bypass, multiple mini-strokes, nitro patches, and numerous other cardiac procedures. I decided people needed to know Arthur. And, so it was that he agreed to sit day after day and reveal his hopes, dreams, wishes, and life in what I call *Arthur speak*. In the process, I learned we all have much

to learn from him. I am honored that this kind, gentle man agreed to share his extraordinary journey through life.

I'm confident you will be inspired by Arthur's simple yet elegant approach to living a dignified life. I only hope I did justice to his insights, his wisdom, and legacy.

Matthew J. Crisci

Part One

Growing Up



Chapter 1
The Wall



This is me at age 3 (little guy on the left) with big sister Lori and brother James. Notice my fancy duds.

I WAS BORN AT A YOUNG AGE....on September 8, 1944.

Like most kids that age, I don't remember much.

We lived in a modest but clean apartment complex in Mobile, Alabama, while Pop was stationed in the Coast Guard. Pop was a lot of things, including proud, generous, hard-working, and tough as nails.

He believed nobody should push you around. But there was one thing he was not. He was not affectionate. In my entire

life, he only hugged me once when I was 18 years old. But more about that later.

Anyway, my first real vivid memory of anything was *that* Sunday. Typically, Sunday was Pop's day of rest—he worked six long days a week in the Coast Guard. He made it a point to spend most of his free time with the family. This particular Sunday, Mom, and Pop took me, James, and Lori to the park a few blocks from our apartment. They had decided a picnic was in order. As you can probably imagine, my recollection of the precise details is a bit hazy, although sixty years later, some things remain crystal clear.

I was wearing a light-blue outfit with short pants, just like in the picture. We walked past a white cinder-block wall about three feet high. I looked up. To me that wall was so high, it almost touched the sky. Pop looked at me staring, and smiled. He was about to teach me my first lesson of life. I guess he knew from some earlier experience—I don't remember why or when—that I was afraid of heights.

Pop whispered something in Mom's ear. I remember she started pleading, "Arthur, please don't." Pop's full name was Arthur Gallo Mercado. He was Mexican. Mom was a purebred Caucasian named Ernestine Lily Mae, whose mother freaked out when she discovered her daughter had married a Mexican.

Mom's pleading didn't do much good. Pop was a man on a mission. Next thing I know I'm standing on the wall, and he's walking away. I began crying like a frightened three-year-old. Surprise! He started spreading a picnic cloth on the ground like nothing happened. I think Mom was afraid to say anything else although I'm not sure about that—I was too busy bawling at the top of my lungs.

“Arthur, come on down,” said Pop calmly. “Time for lunch. Mama’s made some tasty sandwiches.”

I looked at the rocky ground as the tears streamed out of my eyes. It appeared to be light years away. My knees wobbled. I became even more frightened. My hands began to shake uncontrollably. I desperately wanted to get down, but I was frozen in place.

Mercifully, after what seemed like hours, Pop finally took notice. Some time later, Mom told me Pop had left me standing there for only 30 seconds. I honestly don’t think Pop fully comprehended how prodigiously steep a four-foot wall looked to a three-year-old kid. He walked over, stared in my eyes—I’ll never forget his disappointed expression—and said, “La Voughn (I didn't become Arthur until the third grade), do you need help to get down?”

I nodded yes. “Pop, take me down, take me down.” I extended my hands. Pop held them firmly as he removed me from the wall.

Once on the ground, I started apologizing. I knew. “Pop, I’m so sorry.” My hands and body continued to quiver.

He knew I was embarrassed. But he refused to hold me in his arms or console me.

“Let’s eat. I’m starved. La Voughn, want a sandwich?”

The fear subsided. My hand stopped shaking.

“La Voughn,” he explained, as we sat on that picnic blanket, “let me tell you something. *It’s okay to be afraid. Just don’t ever let it stop you from doing what you need to do.*”

That’s the way I lived my life the next 60 years. And plan to live whatever time I have left the same way.

Chapter 2

Toasted Pecans



*Mom and Pop in Mobile Bay.
We had a real house, a backyard, and a big pecan tree.*

LIFE WAS GOOD.

When I was five, we moved into a small house off Mobile Bay. I think the name of the street was Dearborn.

We lived across the bay from the shrimp boats. Some Saturdays, when Pop got off duty, and we had a little extra money in the family jar, we would drive over to the boats and buy some of the day's catch. Then we'd come home, and Mom would make one of Pop's favorite dishes in the whole world, shrimp gumbo.

Our house had a white front porch and a small back yard, which was quite a change from our little apartment. Smack dab in the middle of the back yard was the largest pecan tree in the world! My world, that was. By late summer and early fall, the tree was full of pecans. By late fall, the leaves and pecans started to tumble down in significant numbers. Mom used to say, "Gallo, make sure you clean those leaves; don't want the children to slip and fall." Pop would take the rake, make a big pile, pecans and all, and burn the stuff until there was nothing but embers.

One day, James said to me, "Something sure smells good in that pile."

He figured it was the pecans. So James went into the nearby woods and came back with a long branch that had a fork-shaped end. He went over to the smoldering embers and carefully pulled a few pecans from the pile. "I'm guessin' the dark ones are cooked," he said.

I reached over to pick up one. My scorched finger told me the shells were hot as hell! We waited a few minutes until they were hand-friendly. James bounced one on the cement walk to crack the shell. I did likewise. Moments later, we were eating the yummiest, sweetest pecans ever.

Pop walked over with a scowl on his face. "You boys messing up my work?"

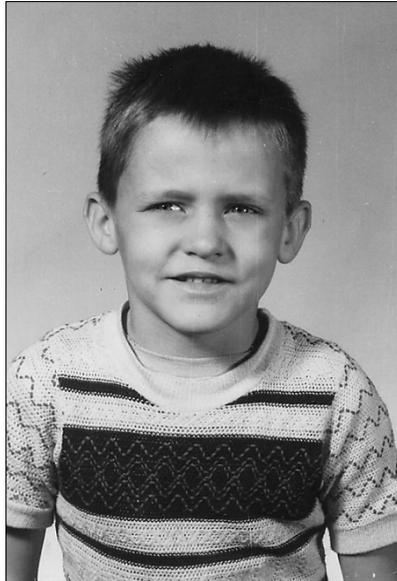
The cat got James' tongue.

I handed Pop a toasted pecan. He smelled it, and started to eat it. Then he did something out of the ordinary. He smiled. "You boys making something out of nothing. Good thing to know."

I've been *making lemonade out of life's lemons for a long, long time*. People that know me tell me I'm resilient as hell. I just wish sometimes I didn't have to harvest so many lemons.

Chapter 3

Castleberry Christmas



*Me age six,
at Grandma's annual family Christmas celebration.*

CHRISTMAS EVE AT GRANDMA'S was always a wonderful time, full of rituals and good cheer. Plus, Grandma seemed to have a knack for the dramatic.

The Christmas tree always stood in the corner of the living room, steps from the fireplace. By the time the family gathered, Grandma—"Ali B," as my sister Lori called her—had decorated the freshly-cut tree with ornaments, some made, some purchased. There was an empty stocking for each of the kids sitting under the tree.

Grandma would bring out a rope line and tie it from the window by the fireplace across the room to the door by the kitchen. She'd always got Pop to help. The adults would drape quilts over the line, enclosing the fireplace and the Christmas tree. The *hide and seek* ritual made the excitement of Christmas morning unbearable.

Next, Grandma would announce, "Time for some apple cake." We would march into the kitchen, where the most scrumptious whiskey-soaked apple cake sat on the table. From the point of view of a six-year-old, the stuff was fabulous. To this day, I can still smell and taste the whiskey in that cake. I also remember thinking, *How adult! Sucking down whiskey just like Mom and Pop.* The entire family ate, told stories, and had a jolly time in the kitchen.

This one particular Christmas, we heard the sound of footsteps on the roof, then some scuffling in the living room. "What is that racket?" asked Pop.

"I didn't hear anything," smiled Grandma.

"Well, I'm going to check it out," persisted Pop.

"Not just yet," responded Grandma.

There was dead silence.

“Now,” said Grandma.

We all returned to the living room and watched Grandma remove the quilts from around the Christmas tree. I was the first to notice a change. “Look, Grandma, the stockings are filled.” They were filled with fruits, nuts, and a huge peppermint stick.

Lori noticed the packages wrapped in different colored paper next to the tree.

James walked over to the fireplace. “Look at this,” he said, pointing to soot footprints that went from the fireplace to the tree and back.

That evening, at the dinner table, we asked Pop and Mom how Grandma did the Santa Claus trick, since we were all present and accounted for. “I don’t know,” said Pop. “Honest.”

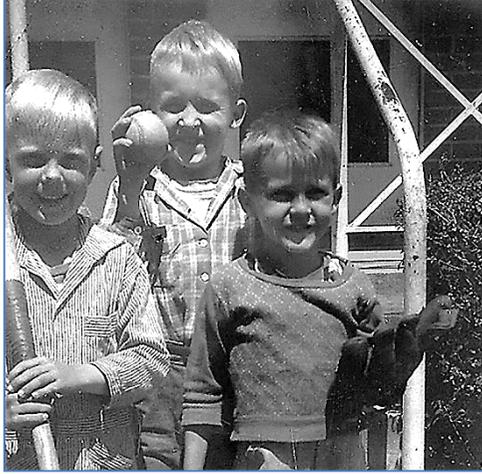
We turned to Grandma, who had just entered the room. She had a big smile on her face like she knew something. We begged and pleaded to identify “the who.” She just shook her head. During the next four Christmas Eves, the same thing happened. Even Pop and Mom began to wonder how she did it.

Eventually, we moved from Castleberry, and Grandma passed.

She died without ever telling anyone what actually happened. To this day, I wonder if Santa really visited grandma’s house. I know what you’re thinking: Santa is a fabulous myth passed on through the generations. But, just suppose...

Now and then, I remember Christmas in Castleberry, and I ask myself, *because you can't reach out and touch something, does that mean it doesn't exist?*

Chapter 4
Tough Times



*Me (front, right), James (rear), and our friend Bunky,
not long before we moved to Grandma's.*

MOVING INTO GRANDMA'S house was a treat and a disappointment. I'm now age seven. Unbeknownst to me at the time, after the Coast Guard, life got hard for Pop. He wasn't making much money selling Bibles door-to-door. So he got a job at nearby Shelly Air Force Base in civil service, whatever that was.

I surmised Pop's pay was low since before long he was looking for another job. But, there didn't appear to be much application for his Coast Guard skills in the local economy, so he and Mom decided to move to greener pastures in California—at least once they had saved enough to have a roof over our head while Pop looked for work.

Moving was more traumatic for James and me. We had made a lot of friends in school and didn't want to leave them. Bunky was our super-best-friend in the whole world. The three of us played baseball every chance we got. The day we

left for good, Bunky gave James and me a brand-new baseball he had just gotten from his father. I can still see the tears in Bunky's eyes as we drove away. For some reason, I didn't cry. It didn't seem right. Bunky was sad enough for the three of us.

I'm not sure whether Mom's mother, Grandma Alibi, volunteered, or Dad just flat out asked. All I remember is we were driving under the Tallulah Bankhead Tunnel on the way to Castleberry, Alabama. Dad turned around, in his usual stern tone and manner announced, "We're going to live with Grandma Alibi for a while, so be good."

Grandma's place was a big old, sprawling house with more bedrooms than she could ever use. The back yard seemed huge compared to our postage-stamp yard in Mobile Bay. Of course, Grandma was not exactly Jake Gatsby. The house had no gas, no electricity, and no running water. But, no matter, the back shelf of the wood stove in the kitchen always had a pot of her Louisiana specialty, red-eyed gravy and a plate of homemade biscuits there for the taking. They were absolutely deeeelicious! I can still smell the aroma and taste the crumbs as they slid out of my mouth and down my overalls.

The sink had a hand pump. Grandma used to keep a pitcher of water by the sink to prime it. That was always my job. Making sure we always had water when needed taught me responsibility.

We had two ways of taking a shower. You could go out in the back and pull a cord on a bucket. Man, was that water cold! When Pop could afford it, we went to the barbershop

in town, where for five cents a person, we could take a hot shower. That was *almost* as nice as Grandma's biscuits.

~

The back yard reminded me of a swamp. No...It was a swamp. We had alligators, copperheads, water moccasins, and a bunch of other animals I don't remember. It was great! One day, a deer had the misfortune of wandering into the yard. Grandma took out a rifle which was almost as big as her, placed it on her hip, and shot the deer flat out. We had venison steak for the next week. Every night was like a special Sunday dinner.

The best part of Grandma's house was the bedroom where James and I slept. There was a small fireplace in the corner to stay warm on even the coldest days. But the *pièce de résistance* was the featherbed. When you laid down, you were enveloped in six inches of the softest, most comfortable feathers. It was like sleeping on a cloud. When we pulled that thick comforter over us, all seemed right with the world.

Grandma taught me a lot during that year. *I learned there are no free rides in life; everybody has responsibilities. Most of all I learned that being loved unconditionally is the greatest feeling in the world.*

~

I don't remember exactly how long we lived with Grandma in Castleberry, maybe a year or two. But eventually, the time came. Dad and Mom packed our 1949 Chevy, and we headed to Los Angeles, California, right after Christmas.

Best I can remember, the year we moved I spent the third grade in three different schools. The first semester in Mobile, the second in public school in Los Angeles, and finally a little

Catholic school in L.A. It was there I officially became Arthur.