

# PAPA CADO



**WHAT AN  
ORDINARY MAN  
LEARNED ON HIS  
EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY  
THROUGH LIFE**

A TRUE STORY BY  
**M.G. Crisci**

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*To Arthur,  
my hero, my role model, my friend*

## 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 life-style. In other words, I had allowed myself to be 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, “However, 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 took me only 24 months to heed her suggestion! By then, I was sick and tired of taking pills that made me lethargic and lightheaded. 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 classmates: borderline 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 homo to a preconditioned-macho 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 accused of being a great listener).

Twenty minutes later, I realized I was the luckiest man in the world. Kris had an incredible story about loss of a limb he had dealt with since birth, and Shirley has endured enough pain and suffering to drive you to atheism. Keith, who appeared healthy as a horse and strong as a bull to boot, seemed more like me. He was looking for someone to explain why he was like he was. There I go again. Value judgments! I must have diarrhea of the brain.

The final member of the group, a gray-haired man wearing gray pants, white t-shirt, white sneakers and a thick salt 'n pepper beard and glasses, sat to my right and hadn't moved a muscle. I said, "And, what about you?" He stared blankly and scowled a deeply. 20 seconds went by. He announced simply, "I'm Arthur." He also explained he told *those people* that he didn't like to speak, didn't want to speak, and didn't plan to say much anytime soon.

I figure the dude was some kind of borderline manic depressive. Or a best, merely a deeply introverted personality searching for Frued's id...or somebody else's id.

I thought to myself, thank goodness, I'm not within range of the switch blade he probably carries in his back pocket to open beer cans and slice mangoes.

Arthur paused. I decided I was going to crack this guy. After all, I had got a 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 calmly revealed. "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 *not* to die right now." He paused. "That's my story."

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—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 14 stents, 11 angioplasties, the five by-pass, two mini-strokes, the nitro patches, and numerous other cardiac procedures. I decided I wanted people to get to know Arthur. We all have so much to learn from him. I was pleased he agreed to share his amazing journey with me.

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 the way he loves.



## 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 Dad was stationed in the Coast Guard.

artment complex in Mobile, Alabama, while Dad was stationed in the Coast Guard.

Dad 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 Dad'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 Dad 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 are 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. Dad 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.

Dad whispered something in Mom's ear. I remember she started pleading gently, "Arthur, please don't." Dad'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 obviously didn't do much good. Dad 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. I'm really not sure about that; I was too busy bawling at the top of my lungs.

"Arthur, come on down," said Dad 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, Dad finally took notice. Sometime later, Mom told me Dad had left me standing there for only 30 seconds. I honestly don't think Dad 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 getting down?"

I nodded yes. "Pop, take me down, take me down." I extended my hands. Dad 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 Dad in Mobile Bay. We had a real house,  
a back yard, and a big pecan tree.*

### LIFE WAS GOOD.

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

We lived across the bay from the shrimp boats. Some Saturdays, when Dad 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 Mom would come home

and make one of Dad'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." Dad 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 he went into the nearby woods and came back with a long branch with 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.

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

The cat got James' tongue.

I handed Dad 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 noth-ing. 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 so many lemons to harvest.

## Chapter 3

# Xmas in Castleberry



*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 us 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 Dad to help. The adults would drape quilts over the line, enclosing the fireplace and the Christmas tree. The ritual made the excitement 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 taste and smell the whiskey in that cake. I also remember thinking, *How adult! Sucking down whiskey just like Mom and Dad.* 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 Dad.

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

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

"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 foot prints that went from the fireplace to the tree and back.

That evening, at the dinner table, we asked Dad and Mom how Grandma did the Santa Claus trick, since we were all present and accounted for. “I really don’t know,” said Dad. “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 exact same thing happened. Even Dad and Mom began to wonder how she did it.

Eventually we moved from Castleberry, and Grandma passed.

She died without ever telling anyone what really happened. The Mercado family still really doesn’t know if Santa really visited that house. I know we’re adults and Santa is supposed to be a myth passed on through the generations.

Every 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?*



# Epilogue No. 1

“Letters Sent”

## To Pop



Dear Pop,

It's been almost 20 years since we've communicated directly. It's cliché, but I think of you often.

While certain memories have begun to blur at the edges, others remain crystal clear. I remember the day you died like it was yesterday. You were a tower of strength, my tower of strength. I thought you were invincible. When they told me you died pushing an off-road bike up a hill, I smiled. My first thought was how could a hill ever beat my Pop?

Thankfully in our short time together, you left me value systems, endless situational roadmaps, and very clear directions.

I just wanted to let you know that your youngest son did okay. I never became the richest guy in the world, and God knows I'm not exactly Brad Pitt. You probably don't know who that is. He was voted the world's sexiest man a few years back! But I have tried to do as you showed me. I always put in an honest day's work. Nobody can ever say Big Art's son was a slacker.

I always tried to tell it like it was. Although sometimes, it might have been better if I sugar coated the truth. You know most people are not built for straight ahead. And when I could, I gave more than I could. But compared to your amazing generosity, I have been a pauper.

I'm also proud to report your youngest has laughed his way through his first 65 years. Although between the mistakes in judgment, the excesses and the health related setbacks, there have been times when I could have cried. During those darkest moments, I said to myself, what would Pop have done in this situation? Then I kicked myself in the butt and got up off the canvas. Recently, I added Parkinson's disease to my list of ailments, so I have this shake. I was self-conscious at first, now I just laugh. One day, this attractive nurse is taking my blood pressure. She didn't know about my condition. She thought I

was nervous about the reading. I said, “Naaaw, I just get shook up around pretty women.” She laughed. I stopped shaking, and that was that.

How are Mom and James? You guys really left Lori and me hanging. (That was supposed to be a joke!). In any event, I do have some important news. I hope it isn’t redundant, since I’m not sure what you hear about up there. Simply put, your son’s health is failing big time. I’ve tried to fight a good fight. There is still so much I’d like to do for Susan, Mindy and the grandkids. But I’m tired. Remember the repairs we made on that 1928 Ford? Well, multiply those by ten, and that will give you an idea of the patches and plugs the doctors have applied to this weary body.

I have this feeling, we’ll be talking face-to-face real soon. Then again, I may continue to beat all the odds. The doctors no longer call me Arthur. They call me “tough guy.” Remember when you named me that?

With Pride and Love,  
Little Art

## To Mom



Dear Mom,

The other day I was watching John Wayne in the movie, *True Grit*. It's become one of my all-times favorites. It so much reminds me of your fierce determination, your inner strength.

People used to assume I got my grit from big Art, but you and I both know, I had more of Ernestine's genes than Art's.

At first, I wondered why, with Lori and James both being older than me, you came to rely on me so much. As time went on, I realized why, and I was honored to be your "go-to son." Although, I have to tell you, from time to time I wondered

what the hell was running through your mind. I remember you naming those crazy dogs Pitzi and Chi-Chi. I could live with Pitzi, but, for goodness sake, Chi-Chi means “tits” in Spanish. What was that all about?

Then there was that mobile park you wanted to live in after Pop passed. Remember that patch of gravel in the back? I still remember the call. “Arthur, I want to change the back yard from gravel to real grass. It will brighten my day. Would you do that for me?” You knew the answer. So, there I was digging up the gravel and dragging it down the road to my truck, tilling the soil, installing sprinklers and sod. I can still remember the sweat pouring off me in the heat, but the look on your face when I finished made it all worthwhile. I still have the question you never answered. Why did you make me come back three months later and replace the grass with gravel? Was that supposed to be a personal toughness test? Or was that just you being Mom? I never said much at the time. Because Pop taught me, what Mom wants, Mom gets.

I also wanted to let you know, I’m so sorry you suffered so much during your lifetime. I never understood why God selected such a little lady to carry such a big burden. But you never whined or complained. That’s another legacy you gave me.

You know, my only regret is that night at the hospital. I still believe if I had been there, you'd still be here.

Gotta go now. Getting ready for my thirteenth heart procedure. See you soon.

Love,  
Arthur