

# MUD BOY

A Children's Story  
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# MUD BOY

It was a hot mid-summer day when Alfredo, Ling, Running Bear, and Zachary asked their mother if they could go swimming in the pond over on the Morgan farm. They were best friends in addition to being "brothers." "Brothers" is in quotes because these four boys had been adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Martin Jenkins. Each had had a different biological mother and father who were unable to keep them, while the Jenkins, who always dreamed of having four sons, decided they would adopt the four boys.



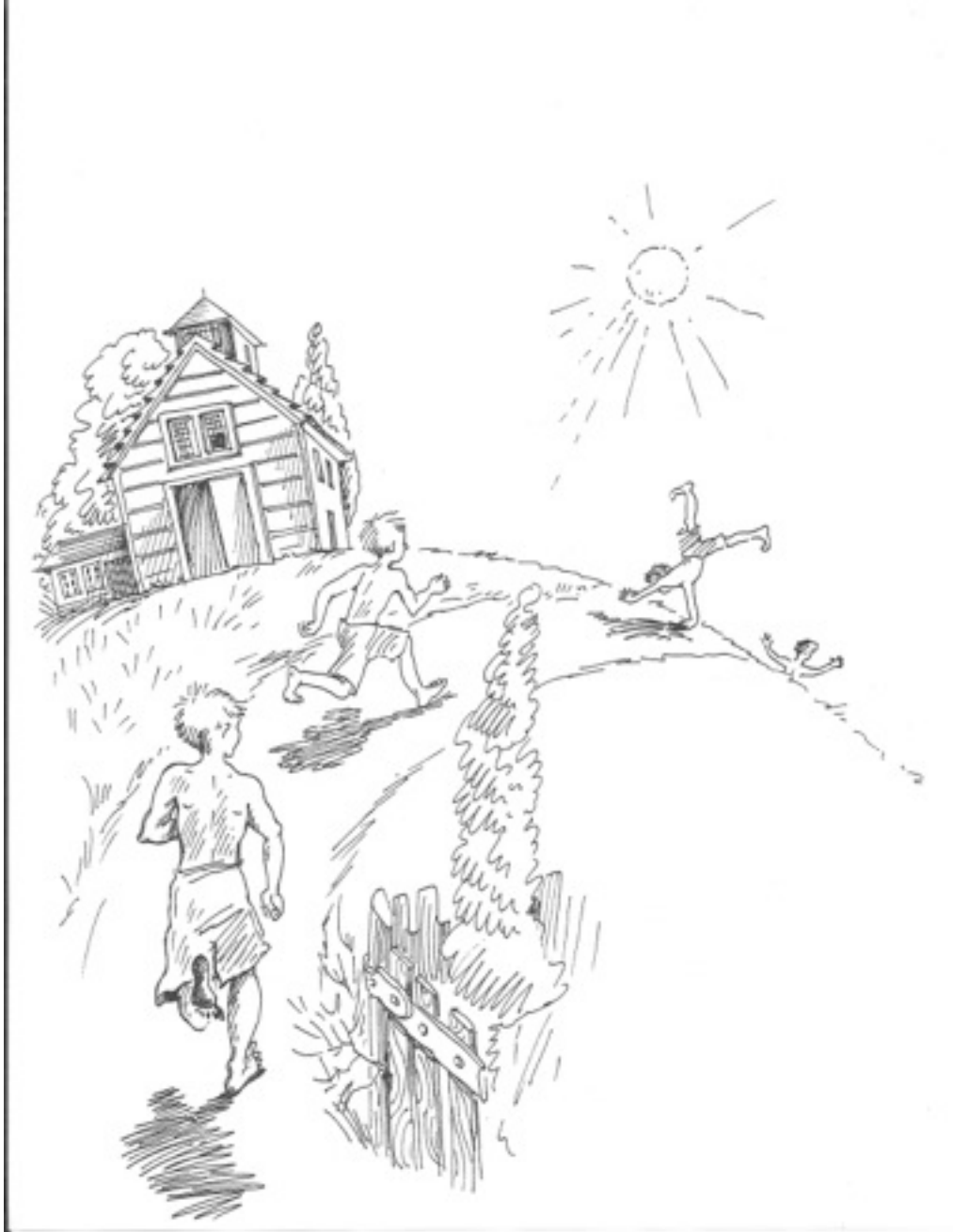
Each boy had some things in common: they had the Jenkins as their legal parents, each boy was thirteen years old, they had hair, and arms, and two legs, and they were the same height. But they were also different: they had different facial features, different hair color, and different smiles. Alfredo had a wide grin, Ling's black eyes lit up when he smiled, Running Bear's smile showed a row of perfect teeth, and Zachary had a cute set of dimples.

The boys had learned to swim earlier in the summer and had joined the Dolphins swim team. But the season was over two weeks ago and they had been busy helping their new father build a deck on the back of the house. The weather had been hot and dry and there had been no rain to cool the boys off as they worked under a blazing sun.

A playful swim in the Morgan's pond, without the pressure of competing, would be a great break.

Donna, their new mother, reminded them to follow Dolphin swimming rules: "Always swim with a buddy, appoint a lifeguard, and don't horse around."

The boys put on their swim suits, went out of the house, and, putting arms across shoulders, went trooping across the yard, down the lane, over the line fence, up the Morgan's hill pasture, and down to the pond.



Their feet had been toughened from six weeks of a mostly barefoot summer spent working in the vegetable garden, playing ball in the side yard, playing "adventure" in their hide-away along the creek toward the east of their property, and helping their father build the deck. The deck project had started as soon as the Dolphin season was over so the boys could help with the construction. There hadn't been time to take an afternoon off from construction during the past two weeks. They had finished that project yesterday and were now free to spend the day cooling off in the pond.

But when they reached the pond, they were surprised and disappointed to find that the water had all but dried up and there was nothing left but a big mud puddle in the center surrounded by cakes of mud!

"Confound," said Zachary, who could swim like a fish and was the first one to reach the pond because he was so eager to jump in. "Confound," he said again. "I've been looking forward to swimming for the last two weeks."

Alfredo, who was always good-natured, was not so easily disappointed and made a game of stepping across the great slabs of mud that had cracked out like geometric tiles as the mud dried along the edge of the pond. When he reached the softer part, toward the center, his big toe sank into the goopy mud and he held it up, a big red toe, for the other boys to see.

"Hey, Running Bear! Look at my big toe," he shouted gleefully. This, he thought, could be as much fun as a swim. He stuck his toe back into the mud, stirred it around, and then dipped his entire foot into it; presto, he had on a red boot! Ling soon joined him and before you could say, "Jumping Jimminy," both boys were marching from slab to slab in their new red boots.

Running Bear added the next idea as he invented mud gloves, one for each hand. The other three boys fell in line behind him as they stepped in cadence across the mud cakes, each one pretending to play a different instrument. Mud was soon soiling their faces from playing too high a note on the "trombone" or getting too close to the gloved fingers dancing over the make believe "piccolo." Alfredo, who was playing the "drum," got mud all over his stomach.

"You look like three clowns", said Ling who had taken the lead as drum major and was going backward in-step so that he could watch his band.

"And so do you," said Zachary as he smeared mud on Ling's face making a big, wide grin and then added big circles around his black eyes.

"Look at *me*," said Running Bear, as he made three mud balls and began juggling them, a feat he had been practicing while waiting for supper each day. Then he threw a mudball toward Alfredo as he hollered, "Catch!" Alfredo caught the mudball but also got splattered with mud across his chest.

I don't remember whose idea it was to play "wheelbarrow." Two boys held the legs of two others while they walked on their hands through the mud. It was hard for the "driver" to hold onto muddy "boots" and hard for the "wheelbarrow" to stay on the cakes. When the "driver" went too fast, the "wheelbarrows" missed and got stuck in the mud. They were getting pretty well covered with mud.

Want to play tag?" asked Running Bear.

"Sure," chimed in the others, "and you're it!"

They played tag using the dock as base, darting this way and that over the slabs, slogging through the mud in the middle, taking turns being "it" and finally, after getting completely covered with mud, collapsing at the edge of the pond, looking every bit like statues sculpted by some sculptor, one who must have loved boys.

It was then that the boys realized that there were five statues instead of four. But, since they were covered with mud, you couldn't tell one from the other.

"Who are you?" asked one boy of the one next to him. "I'm Mr. America," he said, posing with biceps flexed in a classic bodybuilding pose. "And," in a very deep and masculine voice he asked of another figure, "who are you?"

"I'm a runner," said the figure as he crouched as if ready for a 100 yard dash.

"I'm a quarterback," said another as he took a running pose, mid-flight, with a make believe football tucked under his arm.

"And I'm a gorilla," said the fourth as he stood up, let his arms hang loose, and thrust out his lower jaw.

The last boy assumed the third position of a ballet dancer, with head carried high over his shoulders and arms in an artistic curve. "I'm a dancer," he declared.

"I'll guess that you are Zachary," said Mr. America as he sauntered over to the gorilla. The gorilla nodded his head in affirmation.

"No! I'm Zachary," said the sprinter, "Who are you?" he said while turning to the quarterback next to him.

"Al-fre-do," he intoned, but the giggles in between the syllables belied the truth of this.

"Who are you," asked the football player of the boy in the pose of a ballet dancer.

"I'm Hungry," he said, with a degree of honesty.

"So are we," replied the other four. "We're hungry, we're hungry," they chanted in chorus.

It honestly was supper time. The sun was almost brushing the branches of the large sycamore tree on the fenceline beyond the pond as they trooped off single file towards home.

They came in sight of the house calling, in chorus, "Mom, Mom! Come and see us. Come and see!"

Can you imagine how Donna, their mother, looked when she saw her muddy sons? She put hands on hips and tossed her long hair which was the color of bright red clay and opened her mouth. "Wha...", she began to say. Then she threw her hands up in the air and turned her face up toward the heavens with her long hair hanging down to her waist, opened her mouth again and said, "Wha..." But that's all that would come out.

"We're hungry," they all said in unison.

"Yes," said Donna, "we'll eat as soon as your father comes home. But first, you boys must get cleaned up. Why, I can't even tell who is who!"

"We can't either", said the boys.

The boys, as they made a chorus line putting arms on shoulders again and dancing first to the left and then to the right, chanted, "We are hungry, we are hungry."

It was then that Donna noticed that there were five characters in the chorus line. "Who is your friend?" she asked.

"We are great American statues," the boys said as they went into their poses. "And we don't know who is who," said Mr. American in his very deepest voice.

Donna went to the corner of the house for the hose, closed the nozzle, and then opened the tap. The hose swelled under the pressure of the water. She approached the boys, took Mr. America with a firm grip on his slippery arm and began to hose him off.

It was soon apparent that this was probably Zachary's blond hair, or could it be that this was the impostor? No, it really was Zachary because there he was, dimples and all, when his mother got the last of the mud off. Donna told him how glad she was to see that she hadn't lost him, gave him a hug, a towel, and then sent him over by the sandbox to towel down while she latched onto another character.

As Donna hosed off the sprinter, the boys' father, Martin, drove up and was able to witness the reappearance of Alfredo, with his brown hair now hanging down wet over

his forehead. As Alfredo joined Zachary, Donna tackled the football player. "No touchdown for you this time," she said as a spray of water softened the mud. Then she adjusted the nozzle and the stream of water exposed Running Bear's green and blue swim trunks. A squirt here and a squirt there completed the clean-up job and Running Bear was able to take his place by the sandbox. All stood by quietly as Donna selected one of the remaining two figures. You could tell it was Ling as soon as the mud was washed from his closed eyes and he opened them.

"We don't know who the fifth one is," explained Alfredo to his father. "We went to the Morgan pond for a swim and he just appeared!"

"We'll soon know who he is," said Martin

But as Donna hosed off the mud, there was just more mud, and hose as she would, he appeared to be a solid mud boy.

"He's a mud boy, Mom!" Alfredo exclaimed. Martin began to help Donna try to clean the boy off, but with no success, Ling said,

"He really is a mud boy, isn't he?"

"Can he stay for supper?" asked Zachary.

"Can he. Can he?" asked the other boys.

"Please!" said Running Bear.

Martin and Donna had a conference right there on the lawn while Running Bear went and turned off the water.

"He can stay for supper," said Martin.

"But we'll have to have a picnic, outside on the new deck," said Donna.

"Hooray, hooray, hooray, hooray!" shouted all four sons.

"Hooray!" shouted Mud Boy, loudest of all.

The boys helped set up the picnic table, carried chairs, set the table, poured lemonade, and carried out the food. Mud Boy helped except that he stayed outside the house so as not to track mud into the kitchen.

They had Southern fried chicken and a big pot of well-seasoned green beans; crispy salad made with spinach, lettuce, radishes, and green onions from their own garden; home baked bread with strawberry jam made from their own strawberries; and fresh apple pie, made from the last of the apples from the big Juneapple tree by the kitchen door. Mud Boy enjoyed everything and was a polite guest. He told Donna that food had never tasted so good!

Mud Boy was not able to answer Martin's questions about his background. Everything seemed new to him and he couldn't recall much beyond the past two hours.

Still, he was a pleasant conversationalist, laughed at the jokes the boys began telling, and even had a few of his own.

"Do you know what a psycho-ceramic is?" he asked.

Not even Martin could figure that one out.

"Its a crackpot!" Mud Boy exclaimed with considerable glee.

When Ling asked his father if Mud Boy could spend the night, Martin readily agreed but told the boys that they would have to help set up a tent in the yard, line up four sleeping bags, and blow up an air mattress for Mud Boy. After the tent was assembled, the boys played kick-the-can until dark, a game like hide-and-seek which Martin's father had taught them when he came to meet his new grandsons last May. After dark, Donna and Martin came out to say prayers before the boys crawled into their beds. Then, the boys talked and talked late into the night, finally drifting off to sleep about midnight.

Boys wake up early when they are camping out; the birds begin singing while it is still dark and are off looking for their own breakfast well before sunup. The mocking bird, pretending to be a robin, a bob-white, a hermit thrush, and a red-winged black bird, in succession, woke the sleeping boys. Ling, Alfredo, Running Bear, and Zachary heard the birds and began to whisper, "Are you awake? Let's see if Mud Boy is awake."

Running Bear was the first one to crawl out of the tent to check on Mud Boy. But, he wasn't there-- not on the air mattress, not by the picnic table, not at the sandbox! Where could he be? Running Bear was joined by the other boys and they all hunted for Mud Boy. He wasn't in any of the hiding places he had used when they were playing kick-the-can. Alfredo went into the house and wakened their father.

Martin dressed quickly, pulling on his boots and tying them when they were only half-laced. He made a quick search around the "campsite" and was calling quietly for mud boy so as not to wake the neighbors. Then Martin discovered a pair of muddy footprints across the yard. He quietly called to Donna through the open bedroom window and told her that he and the boys were going to follow the tracks.

It was not difficult to follow the muddy prints across the yard. The gravel of the lane left enough of a trail to follow. But, about halfway down the lane they lost the trail. Martin told the boys they would have to work together as a team with two on one side of the driveway, two on the other and Martin continuing to examine the gravel further down the lane. Zachary and Ling found fresh prints to the left of the lane on the path which led across the field to the fence. There the boys found mud on each of the rails where Mud Boy's feet had climbed the fence, and two handprints where he had held onto the top rail. It was easier to follow the footprints up the hill and on down to the Morgan pond. There the footprints led straight to the middle of the pond and stopped.



"Hello! Mud Boy, are you there? Please come back," the boys called. But there was no answer.

"Hello, hello," called Martin. But still there was no answer.

While they were calling it began to rain, washing the prints away and filling up the cracks in the mud. Martin and his boys finally had to give up the search and head home.

The pond eventually filled and the boys wonder if and when they will ever see their friend again. They never did see him that summer although they were able to go swimming in the pond several times before the cooler weather of fall, homework, and school activities put an end to the swimming season.

"Even so," said Zachary, "I'm glad we met him!"

2590 words

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