The Easy Way Out

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Abstract

"Some of us were nuts before we were taken to that prison camp."...
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"SOME of us were nuts before we were taken to that prison camp." Ray shrugged. "The rest of us got that way fast." His eyes weren't laughing even though the laughing lines were there at the corners and about his mouth. "Now take this old guy Daum. He was crazy even before he was captured. Ya know what that guy kept with him all the time?"

I shook my head mutely.

Ray started to laugh so hard I thought I might never hear this story. Finally he said, "That guy was so damned bats it wasn't even funny. Under his bunk he kept a big book—sorta like a log book—and every page was covered with pictures. There was one of a particular 1,400 foot stretch of barbed wire with a figure beneath it—so many million barbs." Ray's face looked drawn. "And there was one labeled, 'South wall of third latrine.' He always picked the south side of everything—it's warmer there." He laughed again, too loudly. "Daum had counted every single one of those bricks. What a character!"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "He doesn't sound so crazy to me." I could see Ray's face stiffen and then, somewhat as a cloud passes over the sun, his slow smile returned.

"Well, he was quite an electrician. He wired up a metal box some way so that when a mouse came near it, the door of the trap would close. He caught thousands of mice those three winters we were there." His eyes looked past me, then slid back again.

"The funniest damned thing of all, though. He'd gotten ahold of some burlap bags and dyed 'em black. Daum could argue the German guards out of anything. And then ya know what he did? He used those bags to make tuxedo coats and every morning early six of the guys would put them on and hold court session for the mice!"

It was funny, but somehow I couldn't laugh.

"Every morning the same thing. Old Daum would stand up in front of the court and say, 'I pronounce this mouse guilty. Penalty, electrocution!' And then he'd take his Bible in hand."

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The jury would suddenly become the pallbearers and then—oh, God!—they'd have a funeral. And as if that weren't enough, he'd bribe the Germans for flowers and every day each coffin had a fresh flower!” Ray's laughter drowned the rest of his words.

The gray strands in his dark hair seemed curiously out of place. “It's good he was young,” I thought, “that he tried to see no more deeply. He doesn't know that, in a way, Daum was—lucky.”

“Yes, sir,” Ray was saying, “some of us were crazy when we went in. The rest . . .”

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Grandma

Anna Mae Mattice

Hi, MARGIE. C'mon over and play jacks with me. Mom said we had to play outside this morning. You can be first.

Gee, Margie, you should'a heard the fuss at our house last night. I guess it really all started day before yesterday when Gram came to visit. From California.

Gee, is she funny! Well, I don't care if she is my own Grandma. You know what? She's got a thing she calls a tambourine—it looks like a little drum, and it's got things that jingle all around the edge. She keeps shaking it, and singing, like it was music, only it doesn't sound so good to me. And I never heard any of the songs before. I asked her what one was, and she said it's a song of salvation. And then she said she'd pray for the salvation of my wicked soul, and asked me if I wasn't scared I wouldn't get to go to Heaven. Are you scared, Margie? I don't feel very wicked. Do you?

And another thing—she always wears a black dress. I looked in her suitcase, but she doesn't have any other color dress with her. I'd get awfully tired of black, wouldn't you? But she says, “Vanity is sin.” Do you think so, Margie? That's what the fight was about, sort of. A dress, anyway.

No, it wasn't that kind of a fight, but gee! Everybody was mad at everybody else. Except me, I wasn't mad at anybody.