Introducing Mortimer Gustafson
In
One Fateful Day

A Short Story by Sandra L. Bell

One Fateful Day

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Chapter 1

The Younger Brother

Mortimer Gustafson wasn't always a scaredy-cat. He became the victim of a brotherly prank.

Mort was 10 years old and the youngest in his family. He had one brother, Felix, who was two years older. Mort's cousins lived a few doors down. Axel was thirteen and Milo was the same age as Felix. Felix, Axel and Milo hung around together all the time. But they found Mort to be too young to hang with them and felt he was a pest. Mort adored his brother and cousins and always wanted to be included in their games and adventures. The older boys had other ideas. They would play tricks on Mort in an effort to exclude him from their play.

One day his cousins came by to pick up Felix and head to the ball park for a game of baseball. Hearing them, Mort came running into the kitchen. "I'll come too! I can play baseball!" "You're too little, you're just a pipsqueak!" Felix explodes, "Why do you always want to follow us. Go find kids your own age!"

“Felix!” Mrs. Gustafson raised her voice. “Why can’t your brother go along with you? You need more than three players to get a game going.” Felix protested, “We have kids our own age to make up the teams. “Mort will just get in the way!” Mrs. Gustafson insisted, “Felix! Take your brother and I am not asking you, I’m telling you!’

Felix, Axel and Milo exchanged exasperated looks. “Oh, for the love of Pete! C’mon Mort!” Felix groaned.

The older boys headed out the door while Mort ran back to his room to get his baseball glove. He flew out the door running after them.

They arrived at the park and were greeted by the other players. Everyone immediately started complaining about Mort being too young to be included in their game. Felix explained, “My mother forced us to bring him. It was either he comes or I don’t get to play.” Felix was their star pitcher and everybody wanted him in the game. They resentfully agreed to let Mort play. “Let’s try him on first base,” Felix ordered. “We’ll put Axel in right field to cover him.” Everyone took their positions and the game began.

Not long into the game a batter hit to first base. Mort went for it but tripped over the base and missed the

ball. Axel ran in and grabbed the ball and threw it to first base but the batter was safe. “Mort! You numbskull! Stay on your feet!” Felix barked.

Again, the next play came to Mort. Mort was bent down tying his shoelace as the ball whizzed past him. This time Axel was not able to get to it and the ball went deep into the outfield resulting in the batter getting onto second base. Felix exploded, “Mort! For crying out loud! Pay attention! They’ve now got batters on second and third base because of you!”

Felix put his hand up to stop the game and he strolled over to Mort. Axel joined them. “Let’s try him on second base.” Axel agreed. The second baseman and Mort switched places.

Play had just resumed when a ground ball rocketed toward Mort. Mort lowered his glove and tried to stop it but it bounced and smacked him right in the shin. Mort fell to the ground holding his leg as the ball sat at second base. “Mort, you doofus! Throw the ball to home! Throw the doggone ball! Oh, for the love of Pete!” groaned Felix. By the time Mort threw the ball, both batters had crossed home plate.

Felix called another time out. This time they moved Mort to left field. Their infield handled the next few balls and they now had two players out. Mort had

become bored and sat down in the outfield. Then, suddenly, the batter clocked the ball to left field. The ball rolled right past Mort. By the time he got to his feet, chased down the ball and threw it to home, the batter had crossed the plate – a home run. Now, the whole team was yelling at Mort. Mort was close to tears. He slammed his glove to the ground and stomped off the field, heading for home.

Mort's mom greeted him when he came in the door and she could tell by his red eyes and flushed face that something was wrong. He explained how he had messed up and the disastrous outcome all because Felix let him play. His mom tried to encourage him and told him he would get better the more he played. "Hey, I have an idea," she suggested. "I used to play on a girl's baseball team and I still have my glove. How about we go outside and practice throwing to each other?" Mort perked up. "Really? That would be awesome!"

Chapter 2

A Very Bad Plan

The next morning Felix was watching out the kitchen window for Axel and Milo to come to pick him up to go to the ball park. He wanted to dash out before Mort could see them. As they were walking up the path, Felix opened the door and quietly tip-toed out. He clicked the door shut and turned to make a quick getaway. He did not anticipate that his mom would be sitting on the porch outside the kitchen door. "Going somewhere, Felix?" she quizzed with a smile. She shifted her gaze to Axel and Milo. "And a jolly good morning to you, boys!"

Mort heard them on the porch and rushed out to see them. "Felix, wait till you see. I'm really good at baseball now. Mom pitched to me for a full hour last night and I know I will play a lot better today." Axel and Milo froze on the spot. They had always been a little scared of their aunt. She had a way of staring right into their minds.

Felix groaned. "Mort, we gave you a chance yesterday and you stunk! You gotta have kids your own age to play with." Their mom interrupted, "Felix, I want you to give Mort a few tries. He

worked really hard last night and I saw an improvement."

"For the love of Pete!" Felix blurted out. "We organized a game against Bulldog Sweeney. The losers have to buy the other team milkshakes. We want to clobber Bulldog's team, Ma! He is such a loud mouth. Why can't you see it from our point. We want to win! We don't want any squirts on our team to drag us down!"

Mrs. Gustafson had her mind made up. "Felix, either Mort plays a few more games or you're grounded. "Not fair!" Felix blows a gasket! Axel and Milo were looking down at their shoes, shaking their heads! Felix and his mom engaged in a stare down which she ultimately won. Felix surrendered. "Can we at least have some privacy to discuss our strategy? Their mom eyed Felix, Axel and Milo, then got up to go inside. "C'mon Mort. Let's leave them to their game plan."

A little while later, Felix came in and told Mort to go outside and have Axel fill him in on the lineup for today's game. "I won't let you down, Felix," Mort mumbled as he headed outside. Felix looked around and then went to the kitchen counter and made a couple of sandwiches, grabbed some juice boxes from the fridge and threw them into a brown paper bag. He then rushed upstairs to his room to

get a few snacks, ran back down and headed out the door.

On their way to the ball field, Felix said they were going to take a shortcut through the woods. This particular path had an old, abandoned shed. It had been there for years.

As they approached the shed, Felix, Axel and Milo grabbed Mort and shoved him into the shed. Felix threw the brown paper bag in before they slammed the door and put the latch in place. "Felix, Felix, what are you doing? Let me out of here! Are you crazy?" Mort screamed.

"Mort, listen to me," Felix tried to calm Mort down. "You're going to be fine. You just need to stay here until we win the game and put Bulldog in his place once and for all. I've made your favorite peanut butter and jam sandwiches and put some juice boxes in the bag. I even put a bag of your favorite jelly beans in there for you to munch on and a few of my comic books that you're always wanting to borrow. I'll be back to get you before you know it." Mort was crying and pleaded with his brother, "Don't leave me here, Felix. I promise I won't bug you again to play. Just don't leave me here!"

Felix, Axel and Milo formed a circle and were trying to decide if they should go through with their plan.

Felix was starting to have second thoughts. Axel convinced him that they would only be gone a couple of hours. Felix agreed and the three ran off hearing Mort's screams as they fled.

The shed was musty with light coming in from windows above near the ceiling. The lower windows were boarded shut. Mort tried to remove the boards but they were nailed in place.

He finally settled on the floor and ate a sandwich, had some juice and then some of the jellybeans. There was enough light coming in so he could read the comics.

He dozed off but woke to a large clap of thunder. Mort hated thunder and lightning. The wind had picked up. Sheet lightning had begun with loud cracks of thunder following. Mort ran to the door and tried to force it open but it would not budge. There was a three-legged stool in the corner which he used to try and smash the window boards which resulted in breaking the stool. The wind was getting stronger and the thunder and lightning were constant.

Mort was frantic as a cold sweat enveloped him. With the next crack of thunder and lightning, Mort ran and cowered in the corner. Every time the lightning streaked across the sky shadows seemed to

be lurking in the corners. He sat down, put his head into his knees and sobbed.

Chapter 3

A Scaredy-Cat is Born

Meanwhile, Felix's team won the baseball game. Bulldog proved true to his word and they headed to the Milkshake Hut, forgetting all about Mort. The thunderstorm started so they decided to hole up at The Hut until it passed. A few milkshakes later, when the storm had passed, Felix, Alex and Milo headed for home.

Felix invited his cousins in to continue celebrating their win. Felix's mom congratulated the boys and looked around for Mort. "Where's Mort and how did he do?" Felix, Axel and Milo all gasped. Seeing the alarm on their faces, his mom demanded, "Felix! Where is your brother?" "Holy Kamoley!" Felix panics. "I'm in big trouble." His mom moved closer and glared down at them. Her voice was like steel. "Where is Mort?" Felix blurted out what they had done with Mort.

Mrs. Gustafson cringed. "*Are you out of your minds?"* she bellowed. "Take me to him at once!"

They arrived at the shed and all was quiet. "Mort," his mom called out. "Everything is ok. I'm here now." Felix and Axel removed the latch and opened

the door. Mort was still huddled in the corner. His mom ran over and embraced him. "Are you alright, sweetheart?" Mort was not alright. He had been scared out of his mind. But he wasn't about to let his captors see that. He stood up trying to act tough even though his eyes were red. "I'm fine, Ma." "Let's get you home, shall we?" She put her arm around Mort and guided him to the door. Felix, Axel and Milo were sheepishly standing by the door. Mrs. Gustafson glared at them. "I'll deal with the three of you when we get home." Felix gulped, knowing there would be severe consequences.

Felix got sent to his room with only a crust of bread and some water. He was also grounded for a month. Mrs. Gustafson doesn't like to tattle on people, so she decided to deal with Axel and Milo on her own and not involve their parents. For the next month, they were to come to the house every morning and do all of Mort's chores. In addition, along with Felix, they had to complete two big projects, paint the fence and pull all the crabgrass from the front and back lawns. They accepted their punishment without protesting, feeling genuinely sorry for what they had done to Mort.

Later that night, Felix came into Mort's room and tried to make things right with him. "Mort, if you like, I would be happy to start and coach a baseball team with kids your own age. Axel and Milo would

also like to help." "I don't really think baseball is my gig, Felix, but thanks for offering." Mort was quiet and looked sad. "I really am sorry, Mort. In my excitement to beat Bulldog I just really didn't think things through. And I never should have just forgotten about you. Can you forgive me?" "Yeah, I forgive you," Mort said with a half smile. "Thanks, Mort. You really are the bigger brother. I promise I'll make it up to you somehow. Good night." Felix went back to his room.

Mrs. Gustafson came in to say goodnight. "Are you sure you are alright, Mort? Were you afraid in the storm? It was a bad one." "I'm ok, Ma. The whole thing was upsetting. I never should have tried to force myself on to Felix's team. Everything just went from bad to worse after that. But I guess I found out that I could survive a bad thunder storm on my own. That has to be worth something. And what I did learn is that I don't like baseball. That's Felix's thing not mine." His mom replied, "Well, there is still a lot of summer to go." She knew that the day's events had shaken him a little and was trying to think of something that would boost his confidence.

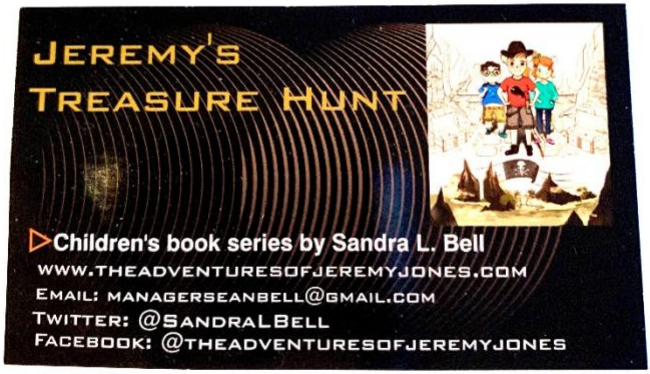
"There are many activities that you might want to try. What do you think of trying taekwondo?" "What is taekwondo?" Mort asked. She was glad to see he was interested. "It is a martial art that teaches

many different life skills. Would you like to give that a try?" "I'll think about it, Ma."

Mrs. Gustafson examined Mort's soulful expression. She was worried being locked up during the storm had affected him in some way. "Mort, if you are nervous or scared about anything you know you can talk to me, right?" "I'm fine, Ma. You don't need to worry about me." She stroked his head. "Ok, then. But you know where I am. Good night, son." "Good night, Ma." Mort paused and then asked, "But could you keep my door open and the bathroom light on for the night?"

And that was the day that Mortimer Gustafson became somewhat of a scaredy cat.

The End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