The Big Monkey of Monkey Mountain

By Michael DeCarolis

"What's the word for that?" he asked.

I looked at my son but listened to the storm outside the kitchen window. "Thunder? You're six years old; you know that."

"Dad, I'm seven. Of course, I know thunder. I mean before that." There was a flash of white, followed by another rumble. "That!"

"Lightning?"

"Daaad. You know what I'm talking about." I didn't. "What do we call the silence between the lightning and the thunder?"

You wouldn't believe that I've met fairy folk in Ireland or a ghost in China, that I've held my friend feet-dangling over death on a snowmelt waterfall in Alaska, or that I've known a desert hermit who speaks to angels, a geriatric exorcised as a youth, and an Australian with an alien skeleton in the trunk of her car.

But you might believe Monkey Mountain, even though I couldn't tell you its proper name or even show it to you on a map.

My son learned quickly that it rains every day in southern Thailand, you just can't say when. Since we had a dry morning, I asked his aunt to take us to a place she'd shown me many years before.

"We can't. Nobody goes to Monkey Mountain anymore." When I asked what changed, she simply answered: "The monkeys."

After a bit of needling, she took us on the next dry day. We arrived at the abandoned temple under a grey sky, with bunches of splotchy bananas in the truckbed. Before the engine shut off, they were already rolling in like storm clouds: dozens of monkeys scrambled over the temple roof, wrapped their arms around the columns, and slid down like pirates on the mast of a galleon.

"Always have two bananas," I'd told my son as we drove, "one in each hand. If a monkey stops in front of you, hand it a banana. I'll hold the big bunch and give you a new banana when your hand is empty. If you ever feel overwhelmed, toss your bananas away and the monkeys will chase them—but you can't tease the monkeys. This is serious."

Before we opened the doors, monkeys sat atop the truck's roof and climbed the tires. They scrambled when the doors opened then slammed shut, but began to close in on us again before we even set foot on the steeply ascending trail up to the top of the hill. They were adorable, coming up to my then-five-year-old's knee. But they were many.

Jungle green walled us in like the looming waves of a parted sea waiting for a vengeful God to release judgment, and as we climbed, an army pursued us. I told my son about Thailand's epic poem, *The Ramakien*, and how the many-armed Hanuman led his simian army against hordes of demons in defense of his king. In between Hanuman's feats of magic and strength, I reminded him: "Banana."

Along the way, we saw monkeys squabbling, we saw mothers with their babies, we saw the scarred and sick; the small always giving way to the big. By the time we reached the top, my son and I both understood why nobody went to Monkey Mountain anymore.

Since my first visit, the monkeys had grown bolder. More aggressive. Louder. So, when silence abruptly replaced the jungle chatter, I felt like a small ship in the eye of a large storm.

The monkeys scattered, leaving us alone in a flat courtyard that had once been the site of saffron-clad Buddhist monks deep in meditation. That silence may have been liberating. This was ominous.

From the unkempt growth that lapped in on the clearing, an animal stepped forward on four hands. He could have been Hanuman himself—white-haired, grim-faced, heavy-muscled. As in the tales of old, he could conquer demons, lift mountains, devour the sun. My son froze as he approached. Hanuman sat before him, but if he'd stood on his hind legs, he'd be taller than the boy. He locked eyes.

"Give him a banana."

My son did as he was supposed to, but Hanuman did not. He ate the banana without breaking his stare.

"Give him your other banana." No change in the general. I slid my son another banana and told him to throw it to the side. Hanuman didn't budge.

This was the flash, and in my mind an eternity of dreadful possibilities passed before the thunder. The moment waiting for disaster.

"Oooh!" I yelled, guttural and inhuman. I raised my arms above my head and stomped my foot. I stepped toward the monkey-god and did it again. "Oooh! Ooooh!"

Hanuman balked, stepped back, and retreated.

"That was weird," my son laughed. "Why wouldn't he leave?"

I didn't say what I'd imagined in the moment between the lightning and the thunder. "He must've thought you were just a big banana, with that yellow shirt on," I laughed back. "I had to be the big monkey, scare him away just like he scared the others."

My son still remembers the time I was the Big Monkey of Monkey Mountain with laughter.