

GOING BANANAS

By B. J. Campbell

“I want YOU!” the poster caption commanded.

Uncle Sam, wearing his goatee and the top hat with stars on the band, had his eye on me, all right. No matter where I stood looking at the recruiting poster, his eyes followed me. The end of his pointer finger beckoned only inches from my face.

Uncle Sam might have saved his intensity for somebody else, not me. I already decided a long time ago to join up. I'd do it the minute I held the diploma that certified Robert L. Campbell's graduation from Sandpoint High. In fact, that explained my standing outside the Navy's Spokane, Washington, recruiting office just then after a sixty-mile bus ride. I came here to sign up. Being eighteen and in top physical shape, I was eager to go fight if the brewing political trouble in Korea actually boiled.

Behind a desk sat a two hundred and eighty pound mound of blue-uniformed authority wearing three pounds of military brass. He motioned to me with his cigar hand.

“Over here, kid.” He clenched the cigar again between his teeth and shuffled through the papers on the desk until he found the right form.

“So you wanna join the Navy, huh, kid?” the recruiter said in a spill. He spoke in small torrents of words, except when he dammed up his mouth with the cigar. “Good choice. Wise choice. You'll never regret it, let me tell you. Here, fill out this form and see me when you finish.” Whap. He jammed the cigar back into his mouth and squinted at me through the smoke in silence.

Gripping a stubby pencil with no eraser, I sat against the wall in a chair with one writing arm surface and filled in every space on the form.

“Here, Mister, I’m finished.”

“Good. Great. Step into that room there. Charlie’ll check your weight and blood pressure and ask you some medical stuff.” He aimed his smoldering cheroot at a door near the back, and I went.

Charlie’s examination took all of five minutes, and I, the String Bean, was back again, waiting in front of the portly Pumpkin. Charlie laid the report on the desk beside my Application, whispered something to the Pumpkin and left.

“You’re underweight, Sonny. Four pounds. Ya gotta weigh in at one-hundred and thirty minimum to qualify.” He stuffed the cigar into his doom-speaking mouth.

“I’m not done growin’ yet. I plan to grow some. After I’m in the Navy.”

“Nope. You gotta grow now, young fella, or I can’t let you in.” He sighed heavily, like it was his burden to enforce the Navy’s pesky rules all the time.

“But....”

“No buts. Go gain some weight.” He dismissed me with a flick of ashes.

I stared at him for a moment, unwilling to believe that he would let anyone’s rules stand between me and the noblest goal in this world. I looked at my bootlaces as I started toward the door.

“Kid,” said the recruiter. I turned just in time to see him lip shift the cigar to the other side of his mouth.

“Bananas.”

“What, sir?”

“Bananas. Eat bananas.”

Sure. Easy for him to say. Being able to buy bananas was about as likely for me as having three square meals in any given day. It never would happen as long as Dad was between jobs and Mom was the guardian of the almost non-existent food fund. She never bought fruit for us. That was extravagant. And for any of the eight of us to eat anything between meals was thoughtless and rude to the rest, because she was saving the food for mealtimes.

“Bob,” Mom exhaled, tightlipped. I knew it. She was going to clinch my fate by a final refusal. She and I had talked about it for ten minutes already, and it always came back to the outrageous expense for my hair-brained plan.

“Bob,” she said, “all right. You can have thirty cents.” I couldn’t believe it was happening. “That ought to buy six or eight pounds.” I began shifting into my running mode. I ran in place as she reached for the crockery jar that held the money, behind the curtain covering the orange crates that served as kitchen cabinets. She fished out three dimes, and there wasn’t much jingling of leftover change in the jar.

I was off on my banana run.

Nine miles stood between me and my bananas, but my strides covered that distance from home at Garfield Bay to Sandpoint in much less time than usual. I made my purchase and began the journey back home.

Cradling the bananas like a baby, I sprinted through my emergency short cut that I used all the time, leaping over logs and wading through brush, pressing toward home. For my banana-eating ceremony, I needed to be in my favorite spot in the woods west of the barn, just ahead.

I sat down on my log, opened the brown paper sack in a ritual of blessing, and lifted all the bananas out together in one collection, like they just came off the banana boat. Never mind that those bananas had been perfect to eat at 10:15 a.m. three days before. They were all that Safeway had in their produce department, and now they were mine. Mine.

I broke one off the bunch, peeled off the limp, yellow and black appaloosa skin, and looked for a few seconds at the soft, white delicacy before me. Tentatively, I took one bite, just to savor, and to remind myself what bananas taste like. I closed my eyes and let my tongue adjust the fruit around onto the proper taste buds, hoping bananas were plentiful in the Navy.

I remembered my true mission as quickly as I swallowed that first bite. Wide eyed and focused, I grabbed another banana, peeled it and clamped my teeth over half of it. When the half disappeared, I finished the other half and devoured eight more bananas in quick succession.

Reluctantly, but as a matter of discipline, I stashed the remaining bananas in the paper bag until I could carry out the rest of my plan—to enjoy three more as a snack before bedtime. I'd gobble all the rest just before I returned to the Navy recruiting office tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow. I barely slept at all for hearing those bananas calling me.

“Hey, Charlie,” said the Pumpkin. “The kid thinks he’s gonna make the weight requirement this trip.” And then with a wink at me, “Check for rocks in his pockets.”

The recruiter craned as Charlie adjusted the scale weights to the one hundred notch and began to tap, tap, tap the pound indicator upwards, closer and closer to the

Sufficiently Chubby one-hundred and thirty pound mark. We all leaned forward and squinted at the wavering balance.

“Looka that, will ya! Just looka that! One-thirty, right on the mark. You did it!”
He paused long enough to suspend the cigar between smiling teeth. “Bananas?”

Grinning my triumph, I nodded.

He pounded my back hard enough to knock me off the scales, but I didn’t care.
With his cigar bouncing, he spoke all that mattered.

“You’re in the Navy, Kid!”