

The Mushy Mustard Mountain

Wendell Wiggins

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Chapter 1

Frederick P. Fahnestock was twelve years old at the beginning of this story. He was a smart young boy, usually called Freddie, curious about everything, especially rockets, lasers, computers and water guns. He had a younger sister, Persephone, who could most often be seen on her knees with her nose to the ground. Percy, as they called her, liked growing things—plants, insects, worms, spiders, rodents—anything that was alive.

The P. in Freddie's name stood for Prometheus, the Greek human/god who gave fire to humans. Some of the kids at school said it was for potato because Freddie liked potatoes so much, or it was for pucker because Freddie puckered his lips absent-mindedly when he was thinking hard, which was quite often. So when he gave his name to anyone, Freddie usually left out the P.

One sunny summer morning Freddie woke up and stared at the ceiling for a while as he usually did. Then he sat up on his bed as he usually did and looked out the window as usual. The usual stopped there because of what Freddie saw outside his window. It wasn't right up against the window; it was maybe a mile away. But it was big enough to block almost everything else he usually saw. It was a huge, bright yellow, cone shaped mountain. Huge.

It was right in the middle of Farmer Wiggins corn field. Well, not much of the corn could be seen and even a fence or two were covered by the yellow cone. Freddie went to the window and pushed up the sash to see the whole scene as best he could. All around the base of the mountain everything seemed to be just as it always was. Nothing else was unusual. Oh, except right at the very top of the yellow cone was a bright red disk. It was light red, shiny, and exactly round.

Freddie ran down the stairs to the kitchen where he found his mother.

“Mom, did you look out the window?” His mother looked up from the sink, out the window and across the back yard.

“Looks familiar to me,” she said.

“No! Not that window,” Freddie yelled. “Look out the other side of the house. Come up and look out my window!”

Freddie and his mother climbed the stairs and Freddie pulled her into his bedroom and to the window.

“There,” he said. “Look at that.”

And she did. For quite a while. She shook her head from side to side and puckered her lips just like Freddie often did. Finally, she said, “Holy smokes. It’s a huge yellow mountain. Looks like maybe a volcano of some kind.”

“What’s that red thing on the top?”

Her lips puckered again. “I don’t know,” she slowly said.

“Can we use your telescope?” Freddie asked.

Freddie’s mother had worked as an astronomer before she retired to be Freddie’s and Percy’s mother. She had studied stars, especially the stars that were as far away from Earth as anybody could see. She still liked to look at the stars on cold, clear nights using the Celestron eight-inch telescope that Freddie’s father had given his mother when Freddie was born. Sometimes Freddie and Percy would stay at their Aunt Jesse’s house and Freddie’s mother, his father, and Mom’s best friend, Sally, would go camping up in the mountains where it was dark, and the stars shone clearly. They really didn’t need even a tent since they stayed up all night looking at a list of objects that Freddie’s mom had made.

“Pull out the window screen,” his mother ordered as she headed out the door.

She returned soon with the black leather case that stored her telescope and the heavy tripod on which it mounted. She put the case down, unfolded the tripod, and pulled out the telescope. When the telescope was in place she studied the other items in the case and eventually pulled out a black and chrome colored tube that Freddie already knew was the inverting eyepiece that showed things right-side up. He also knew that his mother always looked at the sky with other eyepieces that showed things upside down. Nobody can tell whether a star is rightside up or not, so who cares.

Mom looked through the telescope for a while, turning knobs and tightening screws. Then she straightened up and said, “You’re gonna like this.”

Freddie adjusted the eyepiece so he could see the mountain and its red peak clearly. His mouth did not pucker as usual: his lower jaw just fell down.

“It’s a lollipop!” he yelled. “And it’s a Leyden lollipop! I can see the name moulded into the center just like always.”

He readjusted the focus of the telescope and squinted into the eyepiece. “At the bottom! I can see at the bottom it says Strawberry! My favorite.”

“I knew you were going to like it,” said his mother.

“How big is it?” Freddie asked.

“Let me look again,” his mother said. “Get me your school calculator”

She looked for about half a minute, then took the calculator from Freddie and punched a few keys. “It's about three feet across,” she said. “That's one really honkin' big lollipop.”

“It took a few minutes to wake up Percy, and for them all to dress. Then they piled into the old Saab station wagon and drove to farmer Wiggins' corn field.

Chapter 2

There was a huge traffic jam at the Wiggins farm: lots of people—maybe over a hundred—just staring at the huge yellow mountain, TV crews and news reporters wandering around to talk to anyone who showed up, and a few policemen directing traffic and generally keeping order and trying to protect what was left of farmer Wiggins' corn.

Several people who knew Freddie's mom came up and asked her what it was. They thought that being a scientist maybe gave her insight into this strange event.

“I don't know,” was always the first thing she answered. “It looks like a volcano of some kind.”

When Farmer Wiggins saw Mom, he motioned for her to come into the field. She tapped the nearest policeman on the shoulder and pointed to the waving Farmer Wiggins. “May I go in?” she asked. The policeman helped Freddie, Percy and their mom under the fence, and they walked along the already worn path to where Farmer Wiggins stood at the base of the mountain.

“Hey, Suzanne, hey, Freddie, Percy. Look at this big mess. What is it, Suzanne?”

“I don't know,” Freddie's Mom, who had just changed into her alter ego as a normal adult instead of just Freddie's and Percy's mom, said again. “It must be a volcano of some sort that broke though the ground overnight.”

“French's,” said Farmer Wiggins.

“What?” asked Suzanne.

“French's,” said Farmer Wiggins again. “It's French's mustard. I'd recognize that taste anywhere. And the color too. Nothing else in the world is that yellow! Take a taste.”

Suzanne put the tip of one little finger against the yellow stuff and tasted. Percy knelt down and peered at where the yellow stuff touched the normal dirt. She watched a few ants that seemed to be as puzzled as were the people but were busily collecting the tasty, yellow paste and carting it off to their home. Freddie stuck two fingers deep into the mountain and wiggled them around. He pulled the fingers out and studied them. He slung his fingers hard enough to make the stuff on his fingers splash against the side of the mountain. Then he stuck his whole right hand into the mountain and pulled it back dripping with the mushy yellow stuff. Finally he lifted his hand to his tongue and tasted.

“Yup, it's mustard,” he said. Then looking up at Farmer Wiggins with a really big grin, he said, “You're gonna need a lot of hot dogs!”

NASA showed up, the FBI, the State Department of Agriculture, and just about every government agency in the country showed up one after the other. Finally Freddie's mom grabbed Percy and Freddie by the arms and announced it was time to go home before the crowd got so big they couldn't get out of it. Freddie protested.

“Mom, we can't go. I've got to get the lollipop.”

As he heard himself say that, it occurred to him that it wasn't his lollipop. The lollipop would belong to Farmer Wiggins. He pulled away from his mom just enough to tug on Farmer Wiggins shirt sleeve.

“Mr. Wiggins, may I have the lollipop?”

“What lollipop?” replied the farmer.

“The one on top of the mountain. Please, please.”

Farmer Wiggins looked up and shaded his eyes. “The red thing up there. That's a lollipop?”

“Yes. We looked through Mom's telescope this morning. We could see. It's a Leyden Strawberry lollipop.”

Suzanne smiled at the strange look on the farmer's face and added, “Yes. It says *Leyden* and *Strawberry* right on the side just like every Leyden lollipop you've ever seen. But this one, it's three feet across.”

This new information caused all the government people to swarm around Suzanne and flood her with questions. Finally she slowly backed away from all of them and pulled the kids with her. Outside the field, word had spread that this lady, Ms. Suzanne Fahnstock, knew about the red thing on top. Again she was mobbed by the TV and newspaper people. She agreed to one interview for all the cameras.

“I don't know,” she began and ran through the whole story yet again. She told how they had used a telescope to look at the red cap on the mountain and how Farmer Wiggins had granted ownership of the lollipop to Freddie, so he was pulled before the camera and told his story along with lots of emphasis on how good Leyden lollipops are, how to lick them for the best taste, and why strawberry was by far the best flavor. Finally they all pulled away and managed to get home.

Chapter 3

Freddie and his mom were all over the TV that evening. Every local news program and all the network news programs featured the mysterious yellow mountain and showed Freddie and Mom giving their interview. Their friends called to congratulate them for being on TV. The whole family was enjoying their fame. The phone rang nearly continuously with offers of more interviews. The French's mustard company wanted to make a commercial in which Freddie and Percy would eat hotdogs covered in French's mustard.

But Freddie's dad noticed that he was not as happy and talkative as he might have been.

“What's the matter, Freddie?” he asked. “Don't you like being famous?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” was all that Freddie replied. His father continued to look at him. After a long time with some serious puckering of his lips, Freddie spilled what was bothering him.

“I can't get to the lollipop. The mustard is too soft. If I tried to climb the mountain, I'd just sink in. Yuck. How can I get to the lollipop? I had one idea. Could you fly a helicopter over the mountain and grab it?”

Freddie's father had studied forestry in college, but instead of finding a job in forestry, he wanted something a bit more adventurous while he was young. He joined the U.S. Air Force and worked as a pilot of one of the huge tanker airplanes that refuels fighter planes in midair until he and Suzanne wanted children in their family. He went back to forestry but with a big extra responsibility added to what he had expected to do when he studied forestry in college. When a forest fire broke out, he would fly a tanker airplane to drop water and flame retardant on the fire.

“Freddie, you know I don't fly helicopters,” he replied to Freddie's question. “Besides, if anybody flew a helicopter over the mountain, the air forced down from the rotating blades would splash the mustard all over and probably completely bury the lollipop.”

Very late, long after Freddie's regular bed time, he climbed into bed and tried to go to sleep. It took a while, but he did sleep soundly because he was so tired.

He slept so soundly that he dreamed about the mountain and his lollipop, and he dreamed about how he could get his lollipop. He jumped out of bed as soon as he woke and ran downstairs.

“Mom, I think I know how to do it.”

Mom didn't have to ask, “Do what?” She knew very well that Freddie had only one problem on his mind. “Tell me,” she said.

“You know the cold stuff you used to show me when we visited your friends at the Physics and Astronomy department? Liquid nitrogen, I think it was. You showed me how it could freeze a banana.”

“Yes,” Mom replied.

“If I can get a lot of it, I could use a fire hose to spray it on the mountain. I could freeze it hard, and then I could run up the mountain and get my lollipop.”

Mom thought a while before she said, “That's a great idea. I'm sure that it would freeze the mustard. But a fire hose and the water pump that supplies it are designed to handle water and handle it only at about normal temperatures. I'm pretty sure that the pump and the hose would freeze. I'm sorry, Freddie.”

Freddie's face fell and he looked very, very sad.

“Oh, Freddie, I will buy you a whole box full of lollipops. Would that help?”

Freddie shook his head no. The sad look lasted a while longer and then his mouth slowly began to pucker.

“Could Dad drop liquid nitrogen from his fire-fighting airplane?”

Mom looked genuinely surprised. She started to say something a couple of times but stopped short. After a long time, she said, “Why Freddie, that's a very clever idea. You'll have to ask him. Even if he thinks it would work, the Forestry Service might not let him use the airplane to do such an unusual thing. It's a very long shot.”

They called Freddie's father at work and arranged to meet him at lunch time.

Freddie couldn't even think about eating. As soon as he and Mom entered the cafeteria at Dad's office building, Freddie launched his idea. Dad sat down at one of the tables and listened intently. When Freddie finished, Dad looked up at Mom. She smiled and said simply, “Will it work?”

They discussed whether the tank could hold liquid nitrogen. They discussed whether the dumping mechanism would work at such cold temperatures. With Freddie's Mom's physics expertise and his Dad's flying expertise they very seriously covered all the obstacles. Because the airplane that Freddie's father flew was very modern and built by a company that also built many devices to use in space flight, they thought it would work. It would work.

The really big, difficult problem was to get everything together. The Forestry Service had to agree that they could use the airplane. Someone had to cover the cost of the liquid nitrogen. Someone had to supply money for aviation fuel. A copilot had to agree to fly with Dad. Many, many other approvals and agreements had to be made. It would take a long time.

But they didn't have a long time. The weather had been very cool, dry and sunny so far, but in two days the forecast was for rain. Everyone knew what rain would do. It would wash away the mountain. It would melt the lollipop. Several experts suggested it would do even more destructive things. They had only two days.

Mom, Dad, and Freddie sat sadly at the cafeteria table. No one had even thought of eating. They kept thinking of even more arrangements and approvals that would have to be negotiated. They came back over and over to the money they would need. The meeting ended when Dad said, “Let me make a phone call. I have just one idea that might work.”

He wouldn't say what his idea was.

As soon as he returned to his office, he typed a search command into his desktop computer. As soon as he found the phone number he wanted, he called Jim Landers. Although he had not talked to Jim for several years, he was greeted warmly as an old friend. Freddie's dad had worked for Colonel Jim Landers while he was in the Air Force. Colonel Landers had since become General Landers, Head of the Air Force Logistics Command.

“Willis Fahnstock, you old horse!” bellowed General Landers. “I hear that you fly a fire-fighting tanker now. That must keep you on your toes pretty well. How's Suzanne?”

They exchanged bits of information about their families and careers for a while. Then Willis got to his point.

“Jim, I suppose you've heard about the strange mustard mountain.”

“Sure have, Willis. Man, that's really weird. Oh yeah, that's out where you live isn't it?”

“Yes, it is. And have you heard about the lollipop and the little kid who wants to get the lollipop?”

“Yeah,” General Landers replied. “You know the kid?”

“Indeed I do. He's my son.”

General Landers laughed so hard he seemed to move the phone away from his mouth after a while.

“Your son? Might know that kid would have his father's sense for getting in the spotlight. Just like the time you took the movie crew along for a refueling run.”

The conversation went on for about forty five minutes. At first, General Landers liked Freddie's idea to air drop liquid nitrogen on the mountain, but said there was nothing he could do to help. As the conversation went on and Willis mentioned how they had at most two days to arrange an unheard-of operation, General Landers began to appreciate Freddie's innovative idea even more and wished to help one of the best pilots he had ever had and a very good friend.

The conversation changed to an action plan when General Landers said, “Willis, here's what I can do. Air Force Generals likely have less authority than you think, so I can't directly solve any of your problems. But I can call on the Air Education and Training Command. They are always looking for good publicity to help recruiting, and your boy seems to have already generated lots of publicity. Maybe they will want to pull a few strings at the Pentagon and cut through your red tape. I'll give it a shot.”

Meanwhile, Freddie's mom had pulled a few strings of her own. She had agreed to a few more interviews. She and Freddie would be on the Today show. They would explain Freddie's idea to get the lollipop. She called the Leyden Lollipop Company and offered that Freddie would do a tasteful advertisement for them if they could help. They called back in thirty minutes and offered to pay for the liquid nitrogen and the aviation fuel.

Driven by everyone's desire to be a part of Freddie's marvelous idea, the problems were solved one by one as the night passed. Freddie awoke early the next morning with his Mom gently ticking his ribs.

“You get to try,” she said. “All the problems are worked out. The Forestry Service, the Pentagon, the Leyden Lollipop Company, the AirFridge Company, and even the President of the United States have stepped in to make sure everything works together. It happens tomorrow morning. You have to get up

and get ready!”

They were busy all day. A representative of the Air Force showed up and fitted Freddie with a jumpsuit, gloves, and shoes and even a helmet that would protect him from the cold, frozen mountain. All the paraphernalia carried the official U.S. Air Force insignia. Freddie and his mom planned how he would climb and how he would carry the lollipop. By dinner time everything was ready.

Freddie didn't sleep much that night. He kept getting up to ask his Mom and Dad some question that had just popped into his mind. Even after they were in bed, his mind kept running. When he did go to sleep, he dreamed that he was skating on a pond made of Leyden Strawberry candy. Morning came at last.

Chapter 4

Freddie's dad had been gone over an hour when Freddie woke up. Freddie, Percy, and Mom ate a quick breakfast. Then Percy helped Freddie get into the jumpsuit, shoes and helmet while Mom handled some last minute details on the phone.

They drove to the airfield where Dad's plane would be filled with the liquid nitrogen. A large tank truck labeled *AirFridge* and *Danger: Liquid Nitrogen* was parked outside the plane hangar. Inside the hangar, workmen were changing the fill valve from the one that handled water to a different kind that would hook up to the liquid nitrogen truck. Dad was dressed in his Forest Service jumpsuit, and lots of TV cameras surrounded all the work.

Freddie and Mom again were mobbed by the TV people and they patiently answered the questions. The interviews ended as a tractor began to pull the tanker plane out of the hanger to where the tanker truck waited. A big hose was connected from the truck to the airplane *Fill* valve and most of the workers and Dad walked away from the plane to a safe place to watch. When the valves were opened, the hose immediately began to collect a layer of frost and white fog streamed down from the hose and from open doors on the underside of the airplane. It took about thirty minutes before all the cold liquid was piped into the airplane. The truck disconnected, stowed its hose and drove away.

Freddie's Dad came over to his family and they all exchanged good luck wishes and be-safe cautions. Freddie, Percy, and Mom stayed on the runway until the tanker plane engines roared up to full power, rumbled down the runway and lifted gracefully into the sky. A trail of the white fog came from under the airplane and each wisp of it lasted about fifteen seconds until it evaporated.

Then Freddie, Percy and Mom ran to their old Saab and headed off to the Wiggins farm. At the farm were the now familiar TV cameras and paraphernalia. Mom said they had time for only one quick interview. When it was finished, they went to the Wiggins back yard and sat down with Farmer Wiggins and his wife on their deck. Farmer Wiggins had mowed a path from the backyard in a straight line to the bottom of the mountain. The well rehearsed plan was for Freddie to wait on the deck until the liquid nitrogen had been dropped and ran down the sides of the mountain and the fog had cleared. Then he would run to and up the mountain and retrieve the lollipop.

It took the heavily loaded tanker plane about twenty minutes to climb up to the best altitude and line up

to fly directly over the mountain. Percy was the first to see it. The plane came from the west so that the morning sun reflected off the shiny silver fuselage. No clouds were anywhere to be seen. It was just a tiny silver speck when Percy saw it, but all of them immediately stood up and leaned on the deck railing.

It seemed forever, but in fact, it was less than two minutes before the airplane neared the mountain. The whine of the turboprop engines grew louder; they could see the Forest Service logo on the wings, and then two doors on the bottom of the fuselage swung open.

Just a few seconds more and an enormous, huge, gigantic, stupendous cloud of fog dropped from the plane and cascaded down toward the mountain. The fog covered the whole mountain and the sky above it so that nobody actually saw the liquid nitrogen hit the mountain.

Mom moved behind Freddie and said in a low but clear voice, “Be careful, Freddie. Don't take any chances. If anything seems wrong, get down as fast as you can. I love you.”

The fog came down the mountain slowly in whirling clouds. Some of the fog came as far as the Wiggins' back yard. Freddie waited and Mom kept her hands firmly on his shoulders. She bent down and checked the chin strap of his helmet.

It was Percy who first yelled, “Go, Freddie, go, go!” Then all the people on the deck, all the TV crews and the entire crowd of watchers joined in with, “Go Freddie, Go!”

He did. He jumped down the deck steps and ran as fast as the jumpsuit allowed straight to the mountain. He paused just a second at the base of the mountain and put one foot up on the mustard. It was frozen hard!

Now he began to run up the mountain but made much slower progress because the mountain was very steep. Mom had estimated the height of the mountain with her telescope to be about 500 feet high. That is as far as one and a half football fields. Several government agencies had also made similar estimates.

Freddie never stopped climbing, but he got slower and slower as he tired out. He kept his head down watching where his feet landed most of the time, but every ten seconds or so, he lifted his head to see how much farther to the giant red lollipop. Then he was there: at his lollipop. He reached out and grabbed the wooden stick that held it.

He had to take several deep breaths before he could try to pick it up. It appeared just to be stuck down into the mustard. With both hands wrapped around the wooden stick—nearly as big as a fence post—he tugged and tugged at it. It didn't budge. The stick was frozen into the mustard. Nobody had thought about that happening.

He pulled and pulled, and it wouldn't budge. He looked back down the mountain to where his mom watched. When he turned his head to her she lifted one arm in the air and twirled it around her head. Freddie understood.

He grabbed the stick again and tried to twist it. No movement.

And then he felt a sickening feeling followed by panic. He looked down at his feet. Already both his boots were half covered in mustard. The mustard was melting. Melting! Oh no!

He had only one last try. He wrapped his arms around the stick, grabbed the lollipop with both hands and twisted and pulled with all his strength. It came loose all at once. It just popped out of its hole in the mustard. The quick pop of the lollipop made him lose his footing and balance. The lollipop fell away from him. He made one last leap at the lollipop and fell away with it.

Freddie landed right on top of the red disc and grabbed its edges. The now melting mustard acted as soft snow and the lollipop disc acted as a sled. Faster and faster Freddie rode the lollipop sled down the mountain. When he came to the bottom, the sled continued out into the cornfield with corn stalks flying in all directions until he came to rest, still holding on to the lollipop.

Chapter 5

The weather forecasters were right. Beginning on the night after Freddie had rescued his lollipop, it began to rain. It rained pretty hard for nearly three days. After the rain stopped the mountain was gone.

Freddie and his family were interviewed on as many TV shows as they would agree to. Even the President invited them to come to the White House. His aides had collected many of the TV recordings of the whole Mushy Mustard Mountain episode into a thirty minute film. The President and Freddie's family watched it, laughed, and the family answered all the President's questions.

Slowly the TV people lost interest in the Mushy Mustard Mountain story and moved on to new stories. Life returned to more or less normal for Freddie and his family.

It turned out that the lollipop weighed one hundred and fifteen pounds. Freddie couldn't lift it by himself. Freddie's Dad made a wooden stand to hold the lollipop standing upright in Freddie's bedroom. When he went to bed each night, he could see the bright red lollipop standing by the window. The glow of his nightlight illuminated the words, *Leyden* and *Strawberry*. Mom made an ironclad rule about eating the lollipop: Freddie was allowed to take twenty licks of the lollipop every night after dinner and before he brushed his teeth. No other licking or other means of eating the lollipop was allowed.

On Percy's twelfth birthday Freddie allowed her to take twenty licks of it.

As Freddie grew older, the lollipop grew smaller. By the time he turned sixteen the words had been licked away. Not long after his eighteenth birthday, Freddie licked the last sweet tastes from the wooden stick, loaded his bags into the old Saab, now his car, and drove away to study Physics at MIT.

The End.