

MVP*

***Magellan Voyage Project**

Douglas Evans

pictures by
John Shelley



Part I

North America

“Home is where the battle lies.”

Madam, I'm Adam. I'm twelve years, three months, and twenty-four days old. But this story starts on my birthday, May 1, when I turned twelve. On that day my life changed.

I was sitting outside the After-School Club, surfing the Internet on a school laptop, when I heard footsteps behind me. Turning, I found a short, pudgy man with a flabby neck standing there. He had black hair and wore a black turban with a huge black jewel set in the middle. The rest of his outfit was black as well—black pants, a black silk shirt, and a black cape draped over his shoulders.

“Who wears a cape nowadays?” I asked myself. “Other than magicians, superheroes, and Dracula, I mean.”

The After-School Club building was one of those trailer classrooms at the edge of the playground. I stayed there every day until my mother, who worked at the middle school, could pick me up. On my birthday, Mom was running late. I was the only student left, the only witness to this odd visitor.

The man was all nods and grins as he sat at the picnic table. He stared at me with inky black eyes that never blinked. His large neck gave him two chins, the top one rimmed with a thin black beard.

“Happy birthday, Adam Story,” he began. His English accent reminded me of actors on educational TV. “It’s certainly good to meet you at last. Today, the day you turn twelve, we have certain important issues, certain urgent topics, to discuss. This is an historic day, Adam Story. That’s for certain.”

Usually I avoided talking to strangers, and this man sure seemed strange. Without a word I began poking the keys on the laptop.



The man reached inside his cape. His hand came out cradling a long, slender animal with a pointed face. Its fur matched the color of a dry playground. The creature’s pinpoint eyes ogled me like its master’s. Its wide mouth held a slip of paper, a school visitor pass.

“Is that a weasel?” I asked.

The man stroked the creature. “Certainly not. Meet Marco Polo, my mongoose. He’s showing you that we’re official visitors at your school. Your principal was certain you’d be out here.”

The mongoose turned, scurried up the man’s arm, and sat on his right shoulder. Its dot eyes never left me.

“Who are you? What do you want?” I asked, fearing that the man was another school counselor eager to know why I never spoke in class, why I never joined in playground games, or why I spent so much time alone at the classroom computer.

Except that this man didn’t look like a school district employee.

The visitor snapped his fingers. The mongoose sprang off his shoulder and dove into the cape pocket, then reappeared with a business card in its mouth. The card showed a logo of a wooden sailing ship with the letters “MVP” printed across it and some words underneath:



The look on my face betrayed my doubt.

“Yes, Adam Story,” the man said. “As certain as homework, I’m a real prince.”

“Why does it say you’re XL, extra large?”

“I’m Prince Oh the fortieth. I come from a long line of royalty, an ancient dynasty that ruled over the kingdom of Babababad.”

“Babababad? There’s no such place,” I said, convinced from my web surfing that I knew all one hundred ninety-six countries and kingdoms in the world.

“To be certain, my domain no longer exists,” the prince said. “Many centuries ago, a cruel conqueror, Gunter the Hunter, captured Babababad and made it part of his empire. Two centuries later, a European power invaded the empire and turned Babababad into a colony. Three centuries after that, an evil dictator took over the colony, and a century hence, civil wars split it into twenty small republics. Throughout the twentieth century Babababad continued to shrink from takeovers and land deals, until one day a crew simply paved it over for a parking lot. Indeed, Adam Story, although my kingdom cannot be found on certain maps, you can be certain that my royal title has been passed down to me through forty generations.”

I reread the business card. In October my fifth-grade class had learned about Ferdinand Magellan, the explorer who led the first fleet of ships that circled the world. But what did Ferdinand have to do with a prince showing up at my school?

“What’s the Magellan Voyage Project?” I asked.

The man folded his hands on the tabletop. He wore three silver rings bearing gems as big as the one on his turban.

“For the past year I’ve traveled the world on behalf of a certain organization called LORD, the League of Royalty without Domains,” he began. “I’ve searched the earth for a certain twelve-year-old boy or girl to join my project, the MVP. I’ve investigated thousands of youths on every continent. The ideal candidate is someone who has excellent knowledge of the world, someone who is brave but not foolhardy, cunning but not cruel, and cuts a unique path without wandering too far. Most important, Adam Story, I’ve searched for a twelve-year-old who can stand being alone without being lonely. I’m certain that I’ve finally found a youth who fits that description. You, Adam Story. You are the certain twelve-year old.”

I screwed up my face again. “Certain about what?” I asked. “How do you know anything about me?”

Prince Oh turned his head. He appeared to share a knowing nod with the mongoose on his shoulder.

“For many months, MVP has monitored your computer activity, Adam Story,” he said. “We know about the geography and travel web sites you visited. We accessed your library use, and know that every book you checked out was an adventure story. We viewed the list of DVDs you rented and magazines you bought. From the school computer we learned that your mother is employed as a cook in the middle school cafeteria. That’s why you can

attend schools in this upper-class suburb, even though you live in another town, one where the schools aren't so good. We also know that your grades at this school are outstanding, but you've had a tough time making friends."

"What of it?" I said. "You have no right to hack into my life."

Marco Polo left the prince's shoulder, scurried around his turban, and perched on the other side.

"I'm here to offer you a challenge, Adam Story—an MVP birthday challenge, if you will," Prince Oh said, his black eyes sparkling. "We know you long for travel and yearn for adventure. Well, Adam, my challenge is one of the greatest travel adventures ever offered to a twelve-year-old boy. That's for certain."

A challenge? I had no idea what this prince wanted me to do. Read a bunch of books? Run a race? Participate in one of the dumb "a-thon" fundraisers my school had about once a month?

Prince Oh reached into his cape pocket and took out a PDA, a portable digital assistant, one of those handheld gadgets. He pressed some tiny buttons and said,

"Check your computer, Adam."

I looked down. A page from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* appeared on the laptop screen. The entry began:



Story, Adam (born May 1, 1992, Concord, CA).

“How’d you do that?” I asked.

“Read on,” the prince said.

Story, Adam (born May 1, 1992, Concord, CA). Famous world traveler and adventurer. At age twelve Adam became the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe by land and sea only and without adult accompaniment.

I let out a snort of laughter. “What gives?”

“The challenge, Adam Story,” Prince Oh said, pressing more buttons. “History is full of certain individuals who met a certain challenge and became famous for a certain trip. Sally Ride is remembered for her first journey in space. Charles Lindbergh became famous for one flight across the Atlantic Ocean, and every fifth grader learns how Lewis and Clark hiked to the Pacific Ocean one time.”

Now the laptop showed the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The date was August 24 of this year, more than three months into the future. A newspaper headline read:

BOY, 12, YOUNGEST TO CIRCLE WORLD ALONE
Completes Circumnavigation in 40 Days

I shook my head, convinced that this man was a loony.

“Here is the MVP birthday challenge, Adam,” Prince Oh said. He sounded very official. “The Magellan Voyage Project challenges you, Adam Story, to travel around the

world, without an adult escort, using surface transportation only.”

“Right,” I said.

“In addition, we challenge you to do it in forty days or less.”

I shook my head again. “Come on. Isn’t that impossible?”

The mongoose turned a circle on the prince’s shoulder.

“Adam Story, today you’re twelve years old. If you succeed in this endeavor, you will be the youngest human ever to do so. You will be famous worldwide. That’s for certain. Everyone from Alaska to Australia, from Argentina to Afghanistan, will certainly know about your fabulous feat.”

I stared at the laptop. Neither man nor mongoose moved.

“But the world is over twenty-six thousand miles around!” I exclaimed. “I’ve been no farther from home than Disneyland, and that’s, like, four hundred miles from here. Mom and I drove down Interstate 5, spent six hours in the Magic Kingdom, and came straight home. That’s it. I know nothing about trains or ships or whatever transportation is needed to cross continents and oceans. Besides, I don’t have any money.”

The man reached into his pocket again. He withdrew a blue cell phone and a GPS unit, also blue.

“MVP will supply you with all the money you need,” he said. “My staff has worked out a complete bus, train,

and ship schedule for you. Wherever you need to spend a night, you'll stay at a first-class hotel. Whenever you need assistance, you can press the letters M-V-P on this phone and an MVP guide will answer. It's a satellite phone that will work anywhere on earth with certainty. Furthermore, if ever you wish to quit the challenge, MVP will provide you with the quickest and safest transport home to San Francisco. That's for certain."

Prince Oh held up the other blue gadget. "You will also be carrying this GPS tracking unit. Do you know how it works?"

I nodded. I knew a lot about the Global Positioning System. Our government sent twenty-four GPS satellites into space and positioned them around the world. With a GPS unit, sailors on the ocean, pilots in the air, and hikers in the mountains can tell their exact location. I glanced at the LCD screen on the GPS that Prince Oh held.

"Right now, we're sitting at 37 degrees, 51 minutes latitude, 122 degrees, 11 minutes longitude," I recited. "And 182 meters altitude."

Prince Oh nodded. "When you carry this device, Adam Story, your location will be transmitted to MVP headquarters. We can trace you, meter by meter, anywhere you are, land or sea, with certainty."

"So what about my mom?" I asked. Not that I was considering actually going on this goofy trip. I was just curious. "Mom's not about to let me traipse across Europe and Asia by myself. She gets nervous when I walk to the mall alone."

“Your mother has scheduled three back-to-back camp sessions for you this summer,” Prince Oh said.

“Oh, right,” I said, remembering. “Two weeks at soccer camp, two weeks at wilderness camp, followed by twelve days at Y camp. Sounds like torture. It’s as if my mom is trying to get rid of me all summer. That’s forty days of camp!”

Prince Oh consulted his PDA. “The first camp session begins on July 14,” he said. “If you begin your journey on that day, you’ll return home on the last day of camp. MVP will make sure the camps never miss you. Your mother won’t know about the grand detour until you’re famous and rich.”

“Rich?” I asked.

Prince Oh grinned, spreading out his two chins. “Certainly,” he said. “I haven’t mentioned the prize yet, Adam Story. If you become the first twelve-year-old to travel around the world, solo, crossing land and sea only, *and* you do it within the forty-day limit, MVP will reward you with four million dollars. That’s for certain.”

360. That’s the number of our third-floor apartment. Number 360 has two small bedrooms, one moldy bathroom, and a dingy living room next to a narrow kitchen with a dripping sink and greasy walls. The front windows look out onto a parking lot. The rear of a restaurant screens sunlight from coming through the back ones. The apartment bakes in the summer, but with the restaurant smoke in the air, we rarely open the windows.

When I arrived home that day, I grabbed my large atlas, a birthday gift from Mom at breakfast. I dropped it on the living room floor and flopped it open to the world map. Displaying the world this way, on shiny double pages with crisscrossing longitude and latitude lines, made it appear small. I searched for the shortest route from the left side of the map to the right.

Placing my finger on San Francisco, I slid it across the United States until it poked New York City. From there, several routes were possible. You could cross the Atlantic, cut through Europe to Turkey, then cross some of the “stan” countries all the way to China. Or you could sail into the Mediterranean Sea, through the Suez Canal, and on to India. I studied the map some more. Maybe cutting through Africa would be faster. Or how about the northern route over Scandinavia and Russia?

My finger landed on the east coast of Asia. It made a beeline across the Pacific Ocean to California.

“That’s it!” I said. “Little sweat to become world-famous and four million dollars richer.”

But what was I thinking? Did I really intend to ditch summer camp and take a forty-day trip around the world? No way. I get nervous riding BART to San Francisco by myself.

“Birthday boy, quit playing with your maps and come peel potatoes,” Mom called from the kitchen. She was cooking fish fingers. For dinner we tend to have the same dishes she served middle school students for



lunch that day, lots of turkey à la king, sloppy joes, corn puppies, and meat loaf surprise.

After we ate, Mom brought out a chocolate cake she'd baked at work.

"Sorry we couldn't have done more for your birthday, Adam," she said. "Money's tight, as always. I'll need to work again this summer for the cleaning service."

"The atlas and the cake are great, Mom," I said.

The cleaning service was my mother's name for going into the huge houses of my classmates to scrub their floors and squeegee their windows. The other fifth graders already looked at me as some sort of charity case, on account of Mom's job and me being able to attend their fancy school. The cleaning job made things worse.

"At least you'll have a good summer at camp, Adam," Mom said. "I want you to make friends, join in the games, and stop being such a loner. We're lucky the school district gave you grants to attend camp."

Although I never said so, the thought of camp depressed me. Being stuck with cabin mates, swimming buddies, and craft partners, and having to participate in team games, dining hall sing-alongs, and group campfires, was not my idea of fun.

I lay in bed that night, restless. Even with the window closed, whiffs of grilling steaks and frying fish filtered in from the restaurant out back.

My mind filled with thoughts of adventure. One moment I was sailing in a schooner across the seven

seas. Next, I was riding in a Land Rover, searching for rhinos on the African savanna. I dreamed of hiking in the Himalayas, exploring tropical islands, skiing down snowy glaciers, and gorging on cream-filled éclairs in French cafés.

The blast of a car horn brought me back to my small, crummy world.

“No, this moldy apartment is my whole domain,” I said, before drifting off to sleep. “The only way I’ll ever explore the world is through the World Wide Web on a school computer. Happy twelfth birthday to me, Adam Story. This is the way life is, and this is the way it will always be.”

Here is a list of places I visited on the Internet that I wished to visit for real someday:

1. Pyramids of Giza, Egypt
(I want to climb the highest one)
2. Great Wall of China (I want to walk along the top)
3. Nile River (longest river on earth)
4. Amazon River (second-longest river on earth)
5. Grand Canyon (I want to hike to the bottom)
6. Mount Rushmore
7. Mount Everest, Nepal (highest mountain on earth)
8. The Matterhorn
(the real one in Switzerland, not Disneyland)
9. Mount Fuji, Japan (looks cool)
10. White House, Washington, DC

11. Empire State Building, NYC
(the movie *King Kong* is great!)
12. Taipei 101 building
(1,667 feet, world's tallest skyscraper)
13. Sears Tower, Chicago
(tallest building in United States)
14. Taj Mahal, India
15. South Pole
16. North Pole
17. Yellowstone National Park (see Old Faithful erupt)
18. Masai Mara Game Reserve, Kenya
19. Machu Picchu, Peru
(ancient city in Andes Mountains)
20. Eiffel Tower, Paris
21. Disney World, Disneyland Paris, Tokyo, and Hong Kong (I've been to Disneyland, California)
22. Las Vegas (looks weird)
23. Venice, Italy
24. Jerusalem
25. Prime meridian, England (I want to stand on it)
26. The equator (I want to stand on it)
27. Niagara Falls, NY (looks cool)
28. Victoria Falls, Africa (world's tallest waterfall)
29. Major League Baseball stadiums
(I want to see every one)
30. The International Space Station (who knows?)

May passed quickly. School was a total bore. Fifth-grade social studies covers American history, starting in September with Christopher Columbus. By mid-

May we hadn't yet reached the Civil War, so our teacher crammed all the stuff about slavery, the Confederacy, and the Gettysburg Address into a few weeks.

"Funny how American kids can get through fifth grade and know nothing about what happened after 1865," I told my teacher. "And they know even less about the rest of the world."

She gave me her look.

One day in After-School Club, just for fun, I planned an imaginary circle-the-earth journey on a laptop. All the train and ship timetables were available on the Net. I pretended to be a billionaire, so cost didn't matter. Here's my list:

1. San Francisco to Chicago (Amtrak train):	2½ days
2. Chicago to New York (Amtrak train):	1½ days
3. New York to France (cruise ship):	7 days
4. France to Moscow (train):	2½ days
5. Moscow to Pacific (Trans-Siberian Railway):	8 days
6. Asia to San Francisco (ship):	15 days
	<hr/>
	Total: 36½ days

"Only thirty-six and a half days to circle the world!" I said. "If the weather is good, if the trains are on time, if a war doesn't break out, I could make it home long before the forty-day deadline."

Throughout the first weeks of June, Prince Oh and the MVP challenge rarely left my mind. Then one morning my teacher called me to her desk.

"A visitor asked about you yesterday," she said.

I froze. “Was he wearing a black turban and cape?”

“No, he wore a green suit. He said he was from the school district office and he left a late birthday gift for you. He said you’ll need it for a trip you’re taking this summer.”



My teacher handed me a blue backpack. It was the best kind, with an interior frame and lots of outside pockets. Inside one of the pockets I found a card bearing a single word:

ADVENTURE

“The pack must be for my summer camps,” I told my teacher.

But I knew it wasn’t. It came from the MVP producer.

A month later, on July 14, I used the backpack to pack for soccer camp. The camp bus was leaving at noon from my school parking lot. My mother would drive me there on the way to her cleaning job. When we arrived, dads and moms were hugging their sons and daughters good-bye. Behind them, a yellow school bus belched black diesel fumes.

“Love you,” Mom said, kissing me on the forehead. “Don’t forget, you promised to e-mail me every other day from camp.”

I left the car, lugging the blue backpack. With all the people around the bus, I decided to sit at the After-

School Club picnic table until it was time to leave. A surprise awaited me there. On the table lay the blue cell phone and GPS unit from MVP. As I approached, the phone began to chirp.

I sat down at the picnic table. Prince Oh was on the cell phone when I answered it.

“Good show, Adam Story. You certainly made a bold decision.”

“What decision?” I asked.

“A certain MVP challenge,” said the prince. “You’re about to travel around the world, Adam Story, that’s for certain.”

“How do you know I’m not going to camp to make lanyards all summer?” I said.

Prince Oh replied with one word: “Adventure.”

Adventure. That word had been ringing in my head since my birthday. I had even looked it up in the dictionary:

ad·ven·ture noun: *an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks.*

Sure, the prize money would be great for Mom and me. Sure, fame would win me some respect from my classmates. But the thought of adventure—that was what tempted me to take up MVP’s offer.

“Anyway, they’re expecting me on the camp bus,” I said into the phone.

“MVP will handle the details,” said the prince.

I looked toward the parking lot. A man wearing green shorts and a green T-shirt was talking to the bus driver.

“So what if I did go on this trip?” I asked. “How would I start?”

“First, walk to the BART station. Take the train into San Francisco and alight at the Embarcadero stop. Follow the signs to the Greyhound bus terminal. Be certain to call MVP when you get there. Did you receive the blue backpack?”

“Sure. Thanks,” I said.

“And I take it you’re wearing the baggy blue jeans you usually wear for school and play.”

“Sure. And I have on a white T-shirt, if that matters,” I said. “But I left my apartment thinking I was going to camp. I didn’t bring much money.”

“As I explained, Adam Story, MVP will finance your entire trip, as long as you continue around the world,” Prince Oh said. “Reach under the picnic table.”

I placed my hand beneath the tabletop. My fingers met wads of gum, gobs of jelly, and other gross stuff before finding it, a small Baggie duct-taped to the wood. I yanked it off and checked the contents: a passport and two blue plastic cards.

“Your passport contains the visas you’ll need to enter certain countries,” Prince Oh explained. “One plastic card is an ATM card. It will work at any automated teller machine in the world. You may withdraw three hundred dollars’ worth of local currency daily for spending



money. The PIN code is 3-2-7-8-4. That spells EARTH. The second card is an MVP credit card. This card has no spending limit.”

“Ka-ching!” I said. I had never imagined having that much money. Taking the journey seemed easy. Was I really going to do it? Why not?

“During the summer the playground bell continues to ring at your school,” Prince Oh went on. “The twelve o’clock lunch bell is your start signal. MVP has worked out a transportation schedule that you must be certain to keep if you’re to complete the world tour in forty days. My staff has drawn up the safest route for you, one that avoids countries at war, regions experiencing outbreaks of contagious disease, and sea routes prone to tropical storms.”

I panicked. Storms? Disease? War? And what about crime? And terrorists?

Prince Oh must have seen the expression on my face. “Be certain to follow MVP’s chosen route and you’ll be safe, Adam Story,” he assured me. “Today is July 14. To win the MVP prize money, you must be back at that picnic table on August 23 before the noonday bell rings.”

“But what if I get sick?” I asked. “What if the police stop me? What if I miss a connection? What if I lose the blue cards?”

This time, the reply was a dial tone.

I dropped the phone and the GPS unit into an outside pocket of my backpack. The cards went into my wallet.

When I stood, something rattled in my pants pockets.

Poker chips. Throughout fifth grade, my teacher gave us a poker chip each time we did something “positive” in class, like cleaning our desks or lining up without talking. We could cash the chips in for free time, stickers, stuff like that. At the end of the year two dozen poker chips remained in my pockets. Now the chips, along with something we had learned in social studies, gave me an idea. Pioneers had carved their names on rocks and trees along the Oregon Trail so people in the future would know they had been there. Why not announce my own presence?

“Twenty-four free-time poker chips are in my pockets,” I said to myself. “And there are twenty-four time zones. I’ll leave one chip in each zone. Proof that Adam Story was there.”

The first poker chip I pulled out of my jeans was white. I stuck it to the gum on the underside of the picnic table.

“One for Pacific Daylight Time,” I announced.

In the parking lot, campers were climbing onto the bus. Mothers and fathers still stood there, waving good-bye and blowing kisses. The man in green had left.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiing!

The playground bell gave me a jolt. I hoisted the blue backpack onto my shoulders. Pressing a tiny button on my black digital watch, I set the time to the ring.

12:00 noon.

“OK, I’m off to circle the world,” I said. “See you all in forty days!”