

A totally different slant on the Great depression inspired by real events

The Road Down Snake Hill

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Forward

There was never anything great about the Great Depression, even though many people like commentators and writers have applied that label to one of America's most humiliating and devastating times. The word "great" was looked upon as a figure of speech, a word that described the magnitude of the misery, anguish, suffering and total distress experienced by the multitudes of able-bodied men and woman who could not feed, clothe or offer shelter to their own offspring, nor themselves.

The devastation was so deeply felt as to cause many to end life in the squalor imposed on them by forces understood by few of the common people whose misery was the "greatest." Some died of actual starvation, while others just wasted away from grief and then for many others, life ended voluntarily. For *them*, there was just no way to keep on going.

I was one of the lucky ones, for whom the word "*great*" had special meanings, and those definitions were all good. Times were desperate, that is true, but in that era of despair, families regrouped, bound together by their common plight, gaining hope from the bond of blood, working together, never giving up, even in the continuing extreme anxiety that prevailed everywhere during that epoch.

When I say "great" was truly *great* for me, it is due to the people who surrounded me, who immersed me in a kind of love I had never experienced in my very young life, who led me through

those most perilous years with such carefree abandon that everything that happened to me seemed “great.” It was definitely a giant step upward, having been thrust into a lifestyle to which I had never been exposed, immeasurable upgrading in my every day environment, and a huge spiritual boost, for a child previously unwelcome by the members of his household.

Of course, I exclude the particulars of some embarrassing moments (at this time) and other events that may not have been so great at the moment they originated, along with the mitigating circumstances that came into being as a direct result of those activities. You shall discover more about such things later in these writings.

They were the “great”, those who graced my existence; people who loved unconditionally, giving everything from heart and mind, never caring if any of the good tidings were returned in any form. They just did not know how to be anything *but* great, because that was their true nature.

I arrived among them somewhat to their dismay, and probably mine too. If I had had the awareness of a more mature person then, I would be better able to remember the exact scene, but I appear to have blanked out somewhere along the way, and ultimately awoke to the realizations of my own existence and the place where I was on this earth. In my ignorance of the circumstances, I have little recollection of the exact moment of arrival in the place I would call home for the next few years.

The story of my departure from “home”, virtually being ripped (or rejected, depending on your perspective) from the bosom of my mother, was related to me many years later, along with some other tidbits of information as to my background, my ill health, an unyielding disdain for peace and quiet, and a somewhat cantankerous personality. I had actually been declared dead; yes, I said D-E-A-D, dead, at the age of three, by the very M.D. who delivered me into this world. I was also given the last rights of the Holy Catholic Church, by the priest who issued the holy

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sacrament of baptism upon my unwilling and wiggling infant body.

I actually remember looking down on the death scene, from the ceiling of that bedroom, recalling the empty bed, also seeing my father and the two gentlemen previously mentioned, standing at the foot of said bedstead, in busy discussion. I always thought my recollections to be a dream, until I was later convinced of their reality by two of my aunts, who at the time of their dissertations were totally sober. Did the fact that I was once declared dead, early in my career, carry with it any stigma that would account for some of the past indignities and disillusionments I had suffered? That is a question that still rattles around in my brain from time to time. My aunts insist it had no bearing on the way people treated me in the past. Oh, well!

In addition to the aforementioned character flaws and all the foregoing disadvantages of being alive in that moment of history, considered only as another mouth to feed in addition to being a constant source of disturbance and demanding the attention of a woman who was not inclined to motherly instincts, were all attributes which did not endear me to her in any greater degree.

Myself, and my older brother, whom I did not know at all, were on our way to becoming residents of an orphanage, a tactic practiced by many parents of that era, who were unable or unwilling to raise their own offspring. My maternal grandmother caused a huge flap over the idea of any of her grandchildren being given away for adoption, and so I, being the least desirable of the brood, was sent off to my paternal grandparents, who, due to living on a farm, were presumed better able to accommodate “one more mouth to feed,” while my older brother would henceforth reside with his maternal grandparents. And so it came to pass.

Christened Louis Eugene, but listed on my birth certificate as Eugene Louis, I was called by the nickname of “Eutchy”, pronounced You-Chee, (I may have looked somewhat like an

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emaciated Oriental then) by most and Louie by some, who still use my middle name today.

The characters and events you will encounter on the succeeding pages are real people and *mostly real* composites of people, where it best suites the story, said events having taken place during my formative years, which are now ancient history. The stories happened in a locale` I will always love, with unforgettable people I will revere for all the rest of my days and hopefully into my next life, where I will once again abide with them.

“Pierre” E. L. Renaldo

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1.

Away From Home

It's hard to remember exactly what was going on because everything seemed so confused. They were running around, lots of hustle and bustle, but there was nothing apparent to get excited about. It didn't seem like anything special was happening but everybody just kept on acting like there was a crisis, like an extraordinary event was about to take place, and then it finally struck me that it was probably a birthday or a holiday. People usually didn't act so excited for nothing.

My father handed me a paper bag, one like you get at the grocery store when you buy a lot of things and they have to put them in a bigger bag, so you didn't have to lug a lot of smaller bags around. Besides, he had always complained that the small bags were a waste of good paper, and that you had to be a circus juggler to handle everything, if you tried to carry it all out of the place at once, which was the way he liked to do it.

The bag in my hands was not heavy, and since it was half open at the top, I thought I'd take a peek to see what it was that I was supposed to be carrying out to the car. All I could make out was what looked like a bunch of wadded up clothes; I could see a couple of shoes and a few of those long stockings kids wore in

those days. The kind that went all the way up your legs and attached to a garter that was pinned to the leg of your underwear, so that when a kid was all dressed all you saw was the long stockings going all the way up a kid's legs to under his short pants. All boys wore this kind of outfit, it was like a uniform, and you were stuck with it until you got to go to the fourth grade.

That's when you graduated to knickers, which were a little longer version of the short pants with a tight cuff that came to just below the knee. Then again your legs were covered by long stockings, but not as long as the ones you wore with short pants.

You didn't have any garters pinned to your underwear either, with this get-up, but there was an elastic garter around your leg just below the knee to hold the stockings in place, where the kickers ended; the cuff of the knickers covered the garter and top of the stocking so it didn't show. I was not old enough to even go to school yet, so I had on the required type of clothing for my age. I wondered who the clothes in the bag belonged to or if they were going to be a gift to somebody on his birthday. There must have been some reason for all the excitement.

We were just heading down the front steps when a car that seemed in a big hurry pulled up to the curb in front of our house, brakes screeching, actually jumping the curb before it stopped. My Uncle Joe jumped out of the driver's side of the car, (which was a big surprise, since I knew he did not own a car,) and hurried over to my father. I could see my Aunt Marion sitting in the front seat, wiping her nose on a hankie, looking towards us. She must have had a cold, because she just kept on wiping and I could tell her nose was red, even from that distance.

Aunt Marion and Uncle Joe were my *Godparents*. That's what my Uncle Joe said one time, and when I asked somebody else what "Godparents" were, I was told they were supposed to take care of you in case your maw and paw were killed in a car wreck or something. I was afraid to ask Uncle Joe because anything more about it because he talked so loud, and it scared me when

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somebody talked really loud. That was just the way he talked. He wasn't mean to me or anything like that; it's just his loud voice that kept me from liking him much. My Aunt Marion was really nice, except she hugged and kissed *way* too often.

My uncle put his arm around my father's shoulder and began talking very fast, in hushed tones, so I could not tell what he was yakking about, and my father just kept nodding his head, not saying anything back to my uncle, just nodding. Then I heard my aunt call out,

"Please, Jimmy! Please!"

I heard my uncle say something about Father Baker's, which I knew was a big church, quite far from where we lived. It was Sunday, and we had already gone to church. I wondered if we were going to have to go again, which would be extremely unusual. I never knew anybody went to church twice in one day. Something was definitely "up" and it started to make me a little uneasy.

Then my older brother came out of the house, and that was enough to make me very nervous too, since he was hardly ever around. Why the heck was he here today? He just seemed to appear out of nowhere from time to time. I liked it better when he wasn't around because he was always porky to me, saying mean stuff and trying to get the best of me, making fun of everything I did.

"Ma said you need to go to her house before you did anything," Uncle Joe stated. "She said don't dare go down there until she talks to you. She's really serious Jimmy. Ya better get over there, right now!"

My father turned back to the house, looking up to where my mother was standing on the porch, behind my older brother.

"Ma wants us to stop there first. She just sent Joe here to tell me. What do you want me to do?"

“You go! I’m not! I heard all that before, and my mind’s been made up for a long time. I am not gonna argue with her any more!”

Then my father shrugged his shoulders and told us to get in the car. He always whacked me in the back of the head when he told me to do something. I tried to stay out of his reach for that reason, but whenever I forgot and got a little too close, I got a crack in the back of the head.

My brother bolted into the front seat ahead of me. There was room for me there too, but he snarled,

“You get in back! I’m learning how to drive, and there ain’t room for you up here. You’d just be in the way!” Then he added, “As usual!”

I never did anything to him and I couldn’t figure out why he was always so porky. He was bigger too, so I just kept my mouth shut. The snotty attitude was bad enough without getting socked.

A short time later we pulled up in front of my Grama’s house. Uncle Joe came up right behind us, and they all went in, except me. I stayed on the front porch, quickly sliding up onto a big wicker rocking chair, which I hardly ever had a chance to sit in, being as it was usually occupied by somebody. I rarely had a chance to get in a good rockin’, and this was my first opening in a long time.

I could hear my uncle above all the other voices. My brother started to cry once, and that scared me bad, but in a little while my aunt and uncle came out. They came over and Aunt Marion picked me up off the chair and hugged me. She smelled like oranges.

“We’re going for a ride, honey. Uncle Joe and me are going to take you out to the country to see your Grama, at the farm. You like it out there, doncha Eutchy? Horses and cows and chickens, and they have two dogs for you to play with. Your Grama wants you to stay with her for a while. It will be alota fun for you,

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Eutchy. Yer really gonna to have a good time. Cousin Pauly is there now too. You kids can have a ball together.”

“Why do I have to go?”

“Well, honey, it’s just that Grama wants you to stay with her for a little while. It will be like a vacation for you, with all the things there are for you to do there. It’s always so hot in the city this time of year, and there’s really nothing for you to do here. You will love it at the farm. And we all will come to see you on Sundays. Get your bag, honey. We hafta go now.”

It took a long time to get to the farm. My Grama, and my Aunt Laura greeted me warmly. There was a long discussion, in very hushed tones again, and I could tell when my Aunt Laura began to take the clothes out of the bag that I had brought with me, that I was about to become a member of a new household. The kitchen of the house was very large, and it featured the biggest stove I had ever seen. It smelled of kerosene, and I liked the fragrance. It seemed comforting. Of course my life experiences had been quite limited up to this point having spent a good bit of my existence in a sickbed.

There was also the biggest table I had ever seen, in that kitchen. The atmosphere was warm and cozy, everything felt friendly to a very bewildered child who did not understand any of what was happening. The house was huge by comparison to my limited exposure in this world, but I was relaxed and not afraid.

I got lots of hugs and kisses from my Godparents as they left, my Godmother very teary eyed, still wiping her red nose. I did not cry. Somehow I felt that my life was going to be good. I was in a place I had visited before, not often, but I recalled that I had always liked coming here. It felt like I belonged, and I would soon realize that this was the place I would rather be, than any place else on earth.

I was home.

4.

Early In The Mornings A Cowbell Is Ringing Somewhere

The very first sounds and smells of the mornings almost always happened in the same sequence. There were smells associated with those sounds, the smells not always being the same, though some of the same smells were present every morning. That might be confusing, but that is for sure how it happened just about every day. The first smell was of the kerosene stove down in the kitchen, which was preceded by the gonging of the kitchen clock. That clock had the most unusual gong I ever heard. In fact in all my life I have never heard another kitchen clock that sounded anything like the one in my Grama's kitchen.

At almost the same time as I was aware of the gonging of the kitchen clock, another sound penetrated the early morning atmosphere, and it too was different than anything I had ever heard; a bell of some kind but not like a church bell, or the bells on the streetcars in the city. It was kind of flat sounding, it did not

resound like a church bell, or the bells you heard when you were passing a factory, or school. It was flat, I can't think of any other way to describe it. Muffled would be a good description, and the kitchen clock gong was kind of muffled to, now that I think of it.

The bell sound was something my Grama was responsible for, and she did it every morning, actually several times every morning. I heard the first ringing just about the time I heard five gongs from the kitchen clock, so that meant it was five o'clock in the morning. I was just waking up but it seemed that everybody else in the house was going about the business of the day already and I was just cracking my eyes open. Ears and nose too, because it almost all hit you at once, clock, bell, and smells. It wasn't even daylight yet and the world was getting into motion. These people didn't let any grass grow under their feet. I heard my Uncle Frank say that, that's how I learned it. "We don't let any grass grow under our feet around here." That's just how he said it.

I slept in a small daybed in the upper hall of the second floor, and that's probably why I was aware of the smells and sounds that signaled the beginnings of the day in and around the household. The upper hall was quite large, there was actually another daybed or cot there in addition to the one I slept in, and there was the stairs of course, and I could see four doorways from where I lay, all of which opened into a bedroom occupied from time to time by my aunt and uncles.

They did not seem to spend much time sleeping. In fact I can never remember waking up and passing a bedroom doorway and seeing somebody in one of the beds. They were always already made up, just like nobody had ever slept in them at all. I was last to get my feet on the floor, which is another expression I heard one of my uncles quote. "Time to get your feet on the floor." That's just the way he said it

I slipped into my bib overalls and clean shirt my aunt told me to wear that day as she had instructed me to do the night before. I was anxious to get down to where my Grama was, to see what all

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the cowbell ringing was all about. I know it wasn't a fire or anything like that but I figured there was a reason for all the noise so early in the morning. It still wasn't daylight, but I bounded out the screen door, which slammed loudly behind me, something my aunt did not like me to do. I'd be reminded when I came back in, I was sure.

Grama was standing in front of the truck barn, a cowbell in her hand which she shook vigorously as I approached. "Time to get up, everybody," she announced to an unseen audience. Then repeated the message, "Time to get up, one hour 'til the truck leaves. Up, up everybody!"

Now I knew. About why she was clanging the bell, I mean, because I had never seen a cowbell before and, when she explained the simple procedure to me it all fell into place.

"I do this to wake up the pickers. First time is five o'clock, then again at five-thirty and the last call is at five minutes to six. Then the truck leaves and if you are not on it, then you don't make any money that day, unless you can walk to where we are picking. So if you want to go, be sure you get here before six. The truck does not wait, unless it's raining really hard." That was it. We walked back to the house together, and she kept her hand on my shoulder all the way. I always liked it when she touched me.

My uncles were already eating when we walked in the door. True to my hunch, Aunt Laura said, "Eutchy, don't slam the screen door!" See? I told ya. She never forgot to remind me. My Grampa was seated in his usual place, giving instructions to my uncles, about where and what they should do that day. My uncles just kept eating and nodding their heads in acknowledgement.

There was an empty chair next to Grampa, and I slid into that place knowing it was pure status to sit next to the big boss. He smiled a good morning at me and kept right on giving orders. Then he took a final sip from his coffee mug, stood, ruffled my hair and left the house. I heard the old Model-T start up and growl out the driveway, as he turned onto Plank Road and roared

away, leaving a trail of dust behind. I could tell where he went by the sounds the car made, but in this instance I had a good view out of the kitchen window of the whole scene.

After breakfast and about the time of the five-thirty bell clanging, I wandered over to the truck barn. As I entered, a tall boy turned and glared at me, then slowly walked towards me. "Hey!" That was his first word. It sounded harsh, and I turned to see who he was talking to and if it was directed at me. There was nobody behind me or next to me so I guessed he *was* talking to me.

"Yer the kid just came in from the city, ain't ya?" This time I knew he was talking to me. He did not wait for a reply, but just talked on, making a statement and asking a question at the same time. "Yer the one they call Eutchy? Or Louie? You're the one who's been ta heaven and back? Ya still look half dead ta me. Are ya sick or somethin'?" I knew right at that instant that this guy would was never going to be one of my favorite people. He was tall, over five feet, probably about twelve years old, wearing bib overalls threadbare at the knees, a badly frayed white dress shirt, the kind you wore to church on Sunday, but his was very tattered.

One of the clips that holds the shoulder straps in place seemed to be missing and so only one of them was in place, leaving the bib on his left side just folded down, giving the appearance that half his bib was missing, and the person wearing them did not give a rip. (It reminded me of a description that Mark Twain wrote about Huckleberry Finn, in one of his stories, which I did not read until many years after this incident, but I'm only putting the thought in here so you get the idea).

He had on some dirty white sneakers, and a straw hat like the pickers wore, except his hat was all coming apart, with strands of the straw hanging loose around the outer rim. It looked like it had been run over by a few trucks. He had a very large nose, which dominated all of his otherwise plain features, and he was sucking

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on a single strand of hay, with a large seed plume on the end towards me. It bobbed up and down as he talked.

“My name is Angelo, and I’m here for the summer. I think I like Louie better than Eutchy. What dumb kind of name is Eutchy anyway?” Without waiting for me to reply, he kept right on talking, or I should say, he continued his dissertation, because it was more of a speech than a conversation. I could tell by the tone of his voice that it was not going to be very pleasant for me.

“I’m gonna call ya Louie, or Lou. Yeah! I like Lou even better. So Lou, ya going ta pick with us today or are you just going to stay home and be a mama’s boy?”

I had seen a funny looking man in the movies once, named Jimmy Durante, who had a really big nose and who they used to call the “Schnozola”. Angelo reminded me of him, only younger. We would later, and always behind his back, call him “Banana Nose”. I’m sure it would have been very hazardous for a person’s health to have Angelo hear them call him Banana Nose. He was muscular, and as you may have already concluded, he had a nasty disposition, and I don’t think he would have hesitated to poke me in the eye, if the notion struck him, and if I offered any disagreement. My intuition was correct, and I later saw him pummel the daylights out of a much bigger kid when we were in town one day.

I answered with hesitation. “I’m not sure what Grama wants me to do today. I guess I’ll go to pick berries if she says okay.”

“I guess I’ll go pick berries if she says okay,” he mimicked. “Little mama’s boy is going to pick berries. Okay ya little runt. We’ll see ya later.” With that he turned and left the barn. I was hoping I would not see him again, ever, but that was not to be my fate. I hadn’t the slightest inkling that day, that I would someday respect this nasty person, and mourn his passing. He would become an American hero, a WWII ace as a Flying Tiger, with a repeat effort as an F-86 pilot in the Korean War, accounting for

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seven confirmed Mig kills until losing his life over Manchuria, in the final stages of that conflict.

Grama came to the barn for the final bell, clanking loud and long, the last call for all the pickers to board the truck and head out for a very long day's work. I have pictured my grandmother standing there, ringing the cowbell on many mornings since that day. She was the sentinel of our well being, standing guard over our existence, making sure we did not miss out on life. I reassure myself oftentimes, that early in the morning a cowbell is ringing somewhere, and I'll bet Grama is there, making all that noise. Sometimes I even think I can hear it.

21.

A Carnival Contest At the Side of a Barn Without Winning Any Cigars

Every summer brought with it a series of events and gatherings called “Fairs”. The county in which we lived was no exception and even though the Great Depression had firmly grasped America, the spirit of the people, especially those who tilled the soil was not vanquished. Their will to survive was prevalent even in times of such despair, and the urge to share miseries and expectations with others manifested themselves in these meetings that held contests, compared things produced of the earth, including livestock and fruits of the field and home.

In addition to all the displays of jams and turnips, quilts and lacey things, the fairs usually included a section set aside for the carnival; a circus-like atmosphere suggested by tents, jugglers,

clowns and hucksters of every kind of products known to mankind. There were games, every kind of game the human mind could conjure up, all of which were designed to relieve unsuspecting participants of their money. The local yokels, endearingly called “*suckers*” by the pitchmen touting the games, barked out their convincing commentary as a sure way to “*double your money*”. The carnival also featured amusement rides such as merry-go-round, Ferris wheel, and whirling conveyances designed to make little kids vomit up all the cotton candy and hot dogs they had consumed earlier.

There may have been some truth to the claim that a person could double their money, that is to say if you crossed your eyes and made yourself see double, you were as close as you’d get to having two silver dollars instead of one. Active participation by the general public assured the game operators that there was always that element in society that was impossible to convince that the hand was quicker than the eye. Slight of hand was the name of the game, and the shysters abounded in greater numbers than the honest suckers who were taken for a different kind of ride than the kiddies.

My Uncle Johnny was a very different kind of person. He looked like other people, even bearing some slight resemblance to his father, and even more so, to his brothers. Always jovial and cordial to me, I felt him to be a warm and loving relative, not breaking from the mold from which my family members seemed to have been cast. But there was an air about him that set him apart. He did not farm but was involved with the production of gasses, and the machinery that produced such elements. I heard my Grama say that Johnny was an inventor of sorts, and his mind was always thinking in levels far from the comprehension of ordinary people. In other words inventors were weirdoes. While I did not understand the term weirdo then, I did notice that just the way my uncle talked and went about everyday life set him apart.

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He was definitely different, in a nice way, and like I mentioned, warm and loving of his family and kin.

I was staying with my Aunt Mary, Junior's and Fatty Marie's mama and one of my favorite people on earth. It was a long walk from our house to their house, so every so often Aunt Laura would pack a little knapsack with clothes for me and send me to spend a few days with my cousins and Aunt Mary and Uncle Johnny. It was always a welcome break for me to have somebody "new" to play with, and my Aunt Mary made lots of goodies for us, having much more time to spend on such things. Aunt Laura had a much larger number of chores and people to tend every day than my Aunt Mary, so her family had much more attention.

It was during one of these visits that Uncle Johnny announced that we would be going to the County Fair the very next day and that my Aunt should pack a big lunch, enough to last for an entire day, as we would probably be spending a good bit of time there. He was involved in one of the displays at the "Arts and Crafts" shows and would himself be actually working at the fair, while we played. He had a job in the city, and he was going to be demonstrating something to do with refrigerators, in hopes of selling his company's products to those who could afford such things in those times of hardship.

I had never been to a fair, nor even heard of such a thing, so my first impressions were equal to a kid from Planet Earth being dropped off in a place like Flash Gordon lived, without any advance notice. It was totally astounding! I had never seen so much activity, people arriving in horse drawn wagons and cars and trucks of every description. Flags and banners and music were everywhere and people calling out announcements that shows were about to begin, and others with trays of food and trinkets, walking amidst the crowds hawking their wares.

One was walking on stilts, dressed up like "Uncle Sam" they said, with a tall stovepipe hat and he looked ten feet tall. I think I

was about to swoon, when Junior said, “common Eutchy, we’re going to get a ride on the Merry-go-Round.”

“Remember where our table is and you come back and check in with me every once in a while, so I know you are all right,” a familiar voice called. “And hang on to your money.”

Those were Aunt Mary’s instructions and that last suggestion about hanging on to your money was very sound advice. We looked at the surrounding area, noticed that Uncle Johnny’s truck was parked right next to the picnic table and there was a big letter “D” on a telephone pole, so people could find their way back to their cars and trucks. Fatty Marie was going with her mama to look at the canning displays and the quilting. All that stuff was of no interest to two rambunctious boys who wanted to go on rides and play the games of chance.

Kids got ride tickets, three for a nickel; we had our fill of getting dizzy on rides in short order. We went back to the table for lunch, all of us there but Uncle Johnny, who we never saw ‘til it was time to go home. Then we were off again to wander the “Great White Way” as the sign over the archways declared. It was a place of tents and temporary counters, where games of every description were being conducted. Junior tried to knock down some fake milk bottles by throwing baseballs at them. You could win all kinds of neat things, like stuffed animals and dolls and stuff, if you knocked down all the bottles in three throws. He lost.

We watched as a man with three half walnut shells put a split-pea under one of them and moved them rapidly around in circles to confuse the onlookers and then, if you guessed correctly which shell the pea was under, you won a prize, or got back double your money. We watched as a young man came up and put down a nickel bet and guessed correctly three times in a row, collecting three dimes in exchange for his nickels. This prompted some other observers to get into the game and claim their share of such easy money, but nobody guessed correctly. Five consecutive

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players lost, and as Junior made a move to play I cautioned him, holding his arm to keep him from advancing to the table.

“Don’t you think it’s funny that one guy wins, and then everybody else loses?”

He looked at me and said, “I was right every time. I can win, I know it.”

“Okay,” I agreed, “just one time and if you lose you quit. Agreed?”

“Yep.” He stepped up and put down a nickel. The man placed the pea under a shell and began manipulating the three shells very rapidly. When he stopped, Junior pointed to the shell farthest to his right, and the man was hesitant but turned over the shell. The pea was there and Junior picked up the dime and placed another nickel on the table. The man had a big frown on his face and seemed reluctant to play again, but then he started the movements and his maneuvering lasted much longer this time. He was sure he could confuse the young kid and get his money back. Junior pointed to the middle shell and the pea was there.

The man looked around, a few newcomers stood watching the action, but nobody seemed anxious to play. The man picked up the walnut shells and the pea, placed them in his vest pocket and made an announcement.

“Break time folks, game closed. I’ll be back in half an hour.”
Game closed!

We tried to win at a similar game played with cards. We both lost at that, and then moved on to other adventures that seemed less of a gamble, like tossing pennies onto a plate floating in a tub of water. If your penny stayed on the plate you won a little replica of the Empire State Building. We each won, and were shooed away after claiming our prizes.

And then we found the most fascinating challenge of all. It looked like something hard to do but we were enthralled. There was a device that consisted of a vertical track with a weight on it that traveled upward to a bell. It was arranged in such a manner as to hurl the weight upward with enough velocity to ring the bell, when a heavily rubber padded fulcrum was struck with a gigantic wooden mallet, which feat was rewarded with a cigar. It cost ten cents for three swings of the hammer and some very large guys were standing in line to show off their muscles. They each in turn rolled up their sleeves, spit on their hands in a show of *vivre*, then swung the mallet with all their might, and almost without exception, were embarrassed.

“Step right up, gentlemen, show the missus or your sweetheart what kind of man you are and win yourself a cigar, direct from Cuba; a one dollar value the finest cigar on earth, three swings for just one thin dime. Common boys! Step right up!” The pitchman was dressed in a shirt that looked like the American Flag and he wore one of those flattop straw hats. He had arm gaiters holding up his sleeves. He would occasionally pick up the mallet and swing it effortlessly and ring the bell every time, showing the audience how easy it was.

There was a board behind the track that was calibrated to show the amount of muscle behind every swing, the indicators were: *weakling, needs help, not bad, good try*, and up above the bell, *strong man*; the distance the weight traveled vertically measured the degree of success or failure. About one in every twenty slams of the mallet produce a very loud “ding”, and many big men walked away showing varying degrees of humiliation.

I heard a man standing next to us say; “If you hit it just right it will ring the bell. The strength of a person does not matter.” He paid the pitchman, did the hand spit and swung the mallet, nearly knocking the bell off its mountings. The pitchman quickly handed him a cigar and hustled him off, taking the dime from the next participant.

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"I wonder if I could do it?" I asked Junior. "The man who won said all you had to do was hit it a certain way and it was not a matter of strength. I think I know how he hit the rubber. You have to drop the mallet straight down, and it will ring the bell."

"Ha," was his reply. Certainly no vote of confidence from my best friend, but I was sure I knew the solution. I would love to show the crowd how strong *I* was. With all my will, I walked up and handed the pitchman a dime. He looked at me and then at the dime, shaking his head and beginning to laugh like a hyena. He was doing his best to discourage me from trying, like he knew that I knew something, and he did not want the bystanders to see a skinny little runt of a kid reveal his scam.

"Go away kid, I don't want to take your money. This game is for men." He handed me my dime.

"No! I want to try! I protested.

"Go away, *I said.*" The pitchman insisted.

"Here's my dime. I am going to try!" I could be insistent too.

"Okay kid, it's your money." He took the dime and stepped aside. I did not spit on my hands, but grasped the handle of the mallet and lifted it over my head, bringing it down with a dull thump, sending the weight up to the "weakling" mark. The audience laughed.

I stepped back and looked at the fulcrum, gauging my next swing to hit dead center. Then raising the mallet even higher than my first attempt, I just let it drop from its own weight, gravity doing the job for me. The mallet struck nearly at the center, and the weight nearly hit the bell, registering the fact that I was now in the "good try" category.

The crowd said "Ohoooo!" They were impressed. I could see the pitchman step towards me as I raised the mallet for the final swing. I did not deter, as he would have liked, but held my ground and let the hammer fall as it would, and then there was a clamor from the onlookers as the bell let off a ding, not really very loud

but the weight had made slight contact and the pitchman was furious.

“Just a freaky malfunction of the apparatus folks,” he concluded. “It doesn’t count. Not a valid ring, just a malfunction.”

“Give the kid his cigar,” called out a man standing in the crowd. “He has rung the bell fair and square. Pay up!” As the pitchman turned to see who made the catcall, a very big farmer who had tried the game earlier walked into the close proximity of the fulcrum and mallet. He stood glaring at the pitchman, and with all that muscle showing aggressively, the pitchman handed me a cigar. The people applauded, I don’t know if it was I, who was the object of their admiration or the farmer with all the muscles. Anyway I touted my cigar in the air and ran to where Junior was standing, totally in wonder.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, really meaning it.

“Me neither!” was my reply.

I gave my Uncle Johnny the cigar and he laughed all the way down from his toes when we told him the story. “I wish I could have been there,” was his comment

We talked about the Strong Man game mostly all the way home, until exhausted we fell asleep. It had been one of the most exciting days of my life, having won a cigar and a statue of the Empire State Building, besides.

The next day a brainstorm hit my cousin Junior. “You know?” he said. “I don’t see why we couldn’t make one of those Strong Man rigs ourselves. There are lots of parts in the barn that I’ll bet would work.”

The barn he was talking about was really more of a workshop, used by my Uncle Johnny to fashion whatever invention came into his head, and he was always out there working on something, wherever he was around the house. He only did a little farming,

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growing things to feed the family, and of course there was a very extensive vineyard, his pride and joy, besides his front lawn. In it he grew every variety of grape that was known in our climate, from which he made several varieties of wine.

True to Junior's suspicions, we found some things to make our own Strong Man game and set to work at the side of the barn to build our rig. My cousin was just as inventive as his father; he was very good with tools and the fashioning of just about anything that came to mind. We jointly made all kinds of contraptions together over the years, and he was exceptionally talented in that regard.

He strung a wire from a metal stake driven deep into the ground, to the overhanging eave of the barn roof, climbing a long extension ladder to accomplish the most demanding part of our project. We found a weight that fit onto the wire without much modification except a little bit of a small gauge wire. A can served as the makeshift bell at the top of the wire and a broken plank placed over a grapevine pole served as the fulcrum. After several adjustments we actually had the contraption working. Hitting down on it with a small iron sledgehammer made the weight travel up the wire where it struck the tin can, making a thud rather than a ding.

Just as we were about to begin a new venture my Uncle Johnny came over to see what we had concocted. "What have you got here boys?"

"It's a Strong Man game, like the one where Eutchy won the cigar at the fair," answered Junior.

"Mind if I give 'er a try?" he asked.

In unison, "Sure!" We were excited to see if he could make the can thunk. He lifted the sledgehammer and took a swing, sending the weight up and off the wire, and breaking the fulcrum and sending the remaining parts flying in all directions. So ended our Strong Man efforts.

We all laughed, but I think Junior was slightly miffed with his father for wrecking our game. That's when monotony set in; after all the excitement and activity of the fair for a full day, being home was truly boring. Junior suggested that we go to the outbuilding where his daddy makes his wine. We explored the facility tapping barrels and examining the vats and wine press. That's when Junior pointed to a barrel that was off by itself set aside away from the others. It was smaller than the wine barrels too. He said it contained cider. I did not know what cider was, never having even heard the word before.

"It's like fruit juice, made out of pears from our tree out back. He makes it every year. Want to try some?"

"Sure!" Why not? I thought to myself. I have never tasted anything like that, so I'll give it a shot. Junior took a metal cup off a nail where it hung next to the cider keg and filled it, taking a deep draught for himself, then handing me the half filled cup. It was cool and tart having a flavor somewhat like a pear, but not exactly. But it was good. I emptied the cup and Junior promptly refilled it, repeating the same procedure as before. I again drank the half-cup right down.

About that time my Aunt Mary called us in for lunch. Her kitchen began to spin about half-way through the meal, and I have no recollection of what we ate that day, because right about then, Junior fell off his chair, followed almost instantaneously by his best friend, me. These seemingly simple events were witnessed by my uncle as he entered the house, and we were half carried to our bedroom for an unscheduled nap that lasted all afternoon and into the early evening.

Upon waking we were summoned to join my uncle, Junior's father, in the very place where we had consumed the cider. There was a short and spirited discussion, during which neither of us uttered a word. It went like this:

"Boys," he said as we entered, "I'm sorry to have to do this, but you both need to be taught a lesson, which is: under no

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circumstances are you ever to indulge in drinking any alcoholic beverages without my knowledge and consent. Never, ever, touch anything in this room again. Do I make myself perfectly clear?” Wherewith he took off his belt and each of us in turn received three very sound whacks with that strap, doubled. They were not love pats, and the impression lasted for quite some time. Junior cried, and after holding out for a full two minutes after my strapping, I gave in and shed my tears, just so Junior wouldn’t feel bad.

Then my uncle repeated his earlier question, “Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Now I think we should stop right here in this story to clarify a misimpression, long held by the American Public. Many years before Richard Nixon was even a politician, my Uncle Johnny coined that famous expression, “*Let me make this perfectly clear*”, later plagiarized by Tricky Dickey, because my uncle said it in front of two witnesses that night, me and my cousin Junior, half a lifetime before Richard Nixon became President of the United States of America. And that my uncle coined that phrase all the way back in 1934!

There was one other important factor added to my education that night. The reason men wear belts *and* suspenders at the same time is so that when they take off the belt to be used for making their point, their pants are held up by the suspenders, thereby saving them from potential embarrassment.

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