

As Told By ...

Of Ducks and Ponies

By Jack Lindy

Walter and I are sitting at our regular table at Lindy's. Walter is chain-smoking Lucky Strikes and carryin' on about how such-and-such a Broadway star is beddin' down with this other guy's wife, and how Mussolini is makin all this noise in Europe. I am on my third martini, eyein' the blond across from us with the shapely legs, when we over-hear this guy buttin in line.

This tall fellow with fedora hat in hand says to the head-waiter like this, "Mr. Miller, sir, this sure is a swell restaurant; I've heard the cheesecake is a special recipe." I've come from a lo-o-ong way away to be with y'all. My wife and I are from Tennessee, and that's one long car ride, roads bein' what they are, and her being pregnant. Well Lindy bein my family name, Uncle John said be sure to ask for you, Mr. Miller, and you would find us a real good table."

We see Murray clenching his jaw and expect him to yell, "Get the hell out of here Mac" yet he holds back, because the trouble-maker is gaining a large audience that is maybe sympathetic to his story and his pregnant wife.

"There's a table right over there that looks like it's clearing out for us." And this guy Lindy heads straight to the regular spot for Jack Dempsey and his girlfriend. So, Walter Winchell and I, we see this whole thing might turn ugly as Murray Miller is known for decking guys who butt in line, especially those who want Jack Dempsey's table. Well, we kind of like this Lindy fellow. We know he is lyin' through his teeth, as this restaurant's name comes from Lucky Lindy, when he flies across the Atlantic,

not from someone in his family.

So I say to him like this, "Mr. Lindy, why don't you and your wife sit down right here with us, we have a couple of extra places."

Our Southern friend quickly realizes who we are, and without skipping a beat introduces us to his wife, whom he calls "Freddie," and adds, "Call me JD."

Right away, JD is tellin us about his predicament: he has come to New York to seek support from his old friends, Bill and Milt, about a private matter that is very much on his mind. But when he confides to them at his room in the Waldorf that Freddie is pregnant again; his friends are quite the opposite of supportive.

Bill says to him like this: "The two of you are both pushing forty; this is a risk you don't need to take."

And Milt says like this: "You have three sons already; what would you want another for, doesn't even make a basketball team? And, JD, you know better than anyone about your heart, the odds of your surviving this kid's growing up are next to nil."

Well, now JD is downcast telling the story, as he is not looking for that particular response. Fortunately, Freddie saves the day saying she's hungry for some pickles. So all four decide to leave the Waldorf Astoria to go on a pickle hunt. They walk down the long corridor exchanging no words. They step onto an elevator. In the elevator there is perfect silence.

Finally, JD turns to the elevator boy, "Excuse me, young man, but do you mind if my wife and I have a baby?" Again there is silence as the elevator boy is stunned.

"No, sir, I don't mind at all."

"Congratulations sir, ma'm." says he reaching out his hand to shake JD's and then tipping his pill box hat to Freddie.

At this point in telling the story, JD bursts out in a rollicking laughter, the kind that has heads turning from the nearby tables. Well, I think the story is funny, but not as uproariously funny as JD's laughter from the ribs conveys. But soon I am

infected by its contagion, I am belly-laughing too.

Walter, who can not turn down the opportunity to use one of his aphorisms, adds “a real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.” So we laugh some more.

Soon after, Walter Winchell, crushes his half smoked cigarette, and says like this: “Ladies and Gents, I must leave you to address Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea. Pleased to meet you JD, Freddie, good luck on the pregnancy, and here’s two to one that it’s a girl.”

JD, Freddie, and I continue to converse over Freddie’s three pickles, JD’s cheesecake, and my ham sandwich. By the time JD hands out Havana cigars, Jack Dempsey and his girlfriend have come and gone from the restaurant. I learn that JD is not short on cucumbers: he is a guy from small-town Tennessee who has moved to Philadelphia and turned the depression upside down making potatoes when others are losing them. He likes the ponies, and, as it is 1937 he has just booked a cruise to Palestine after Freddie delivers and before the world blows up. They are about to move into a Norman castle in Philadelphia, and have invited Charley Goren to stay there as he completes his book on the new craze, contract bridge. In short, JD is my kind of guy. He hands me his business card, and says if I’m ever in Philadelphia I should give him a call.

Now, it’s 1942, and everything has changed. In the world of Hearst enterprises, my buddies, the bookies, gangsters and sports stars and their girlfriends are out of fashion; what’s in is war and patriots. My editor gets wind of my being a correspondent in the Great War so he has this really bad idea that I write some columns on famous Anglo-American authors and their war experiences. Since there

is a rumor that Somerset Maugham was an English spy in WW I, he becomes my first assignment.

Well Maugham, is one of those upper-crust English duck hunters, and one of his haunts when he is in the States is the large open woods outside Philadelphia. So my publisher decides I need to meet him after his duck hunt and interview him for my new piece. That's what reminds me of JD. I find his business card, and give him a call. JD will drive both of us from the duck hunt back to his place for dinner.

Somerset, bummed that he has no bird to bring for dinner, gets in the front seat. I am in the back, a little uncertain seeing that JD is my cabbie. I hear tires screeching as he tells others on the road they should look out. Suddenly he swerves into this walled fortress built of Wissahickon Schist. He shoves open the massive front door and I have to catch my breath. I am standing beneath a spiral stairway, giant chandelier overhead, looking up onto a two-story marble foyer. Steps lead to a formal dining area, where the aroma of duck à l'orange is drawing us in. But I am soon to learn this is no up tight suburban mansion.

"Freddie, we're here," JD booms, as he hangs jackets in the closet. "Guess we're a little behind schedule." (As we are two hours late.)

Turning instinctively to my right I fend off a body blow from this 200-pound flying blocking back, a saliva-spurting Saint Bernard JD calls "Happy". Next, I see a spiraling football headed directly at me; I pivot away; and a bushy-haired youth skillfully plucks the pigskin from the air beneath my ear and tucks it under his arms.

"This is my son, Bob," says JD.

"Hello sir," says the boy, changing to guest behavior within a split second.

JD winks, musses his son's mop of hair and barks for Freddie's benefit, "How many times do I have to tell you kids not to throw the football in the house."

Freddie gives us our assigned places at the table I am seated next to this five

year-old kid with curly hair and floppy ears who is JD Junior. He in turn defends the space next to his mother. Freddie is grimacing as she is stomping her foot on the floor in an unsuccessful effort to buzz her co-pilot that it is time to serve the dinner. The kid is under the table more than on his seat as he is searching to find the buzzer so his Mom can press it, but must be careful lest a large shoe destroy his hand. When he comes up for air, he notices the new set of china in front of him bought just for the occasion, and is fascinated with flying ducks on his plate. Meanwhile, Freddie is preparing a position of honor at the table to display the bird she and her cook, Mary Sample, have prepared. Finally, Mary, an ample take-no-prisoners mistress of the kitchen, hears the buzzer and ceremoniously carries in the duck.

At the other end of the table, JD casually rises, a large piece of bread tucked discreetly under his napkin. He ambles along the wall, stoking the near-by fireplace with his left hand. Before you know it he is standing innocently behind Freddie and the duck platter. Suddenly he reveals his torn bread like Eddie Stanky performing the hidden ball trick at second base. Deftly, he dips the bread into the duck gravy and drips it on Freddie who at this moment is trying to carve the bird. He pivots, dances and starts to eat the soaked bread. Most of the gravy now drips through his hand onto the Oriental rug. Freddie calls in reinforcements. Mary grabs Freddie's carving utensils, starts hollering and chases JD with her weapons over-head. In a flash we are transported from the polo grounds to a Laurel and Hardy movie.

"Mr. Lindy you better stop that; that gravy's spillin' all over this rug," Panting behind him, she yells like this: "runnin is not good for your health, nor mine neither."

JD's impish grin suddenly explodes with laughter. He slides safely into his seat at the other end of the table, his prize intact. Freddie is silent wiping the unexpected condiment from her hair, her expression being one of total exasperation. We guests, try to muffle our chuckles for Freddie's sake, but cannot help the contagion of JD's belly-laugh.

Later, I interview Somerset in JD's library. To me, the guy is a stuck-up European playboy, and if he ever spied for the Allies, I never got a hint. So I write my column, but it stinks.

The next morning the adults gather outside on the porch while a touch football game is taking shape among the teen-agers in the ample backyard. JD, still in his pajamas and robe, explains the rules the kids play by, that mostly this is touch football except they can tackle the quarterback if he doesn't throw quickly.

Seems that I must have snoozed off for a minute because the next thing I know, JD is missing from the porch and is now present among the athletes on the field. He is still dressed in his pajamas and silk robe and his lit, half-chewed Havana cigar. I see he has entered the game as quarterback. Joe Slug, a new friend does not yet know that JD is an exception to the tackle rule. On the next play Joe breaks through his block and advances on JD faster than the quarterback is ready for. JD fades to his left, losing his right slipper as he attempts a spin move; but Joe's footing is sure and JD slips. Joe lowers his head, driving into JD. A paisley silk robe, splayed male figure, and burning cigar all go hurling into the air. Time freezes with JD flying, the ball falling, and all in the game watching with disbelieving eyes; JD, suspended in midair for an eternity, falls ungracefully to the ground, a thud like thunder. Then deathly silence.

Freddie races onto the playing field, waving her referee's napkin, "Timeout! Foul! Game's over!". "You kids are going to kill my husband as she kneels by her wounded warrior ...Jack, when will you ever grow up?!"

Well, after the spirited football game I go up to my room to pack my things, as I will soon be leaving the Lindy house and making my way back to the big city. When I return, who should be on the porch looking out on the back yard but B.B. Bibsy, Philadelphia's equivalent of Nathan Detroit, right here with JD. I says hello to Bibsy as we are old friends but he has nothing to say to me, as he is busy. I hear Freddie

calling to JD from another room that she will permit no cards this afternoon; it is a family day and there will be no gambling. Well I observe Bibsy's face and he is very intent on something that is going on in the backyard, but for the life of me I cannot figure what it is. Both JD and Bibsy are very nervous, and each is fiddling with his pocket. Now all the big kids have gone off somewhere, and the only thing that is going on in the backyard is that two 5 year-old kids are running back and forth. One is Bibsy Jr. The other is JD Jr. But then I watch more closely and they are not running like children usually do; rather they are racing up and down the backyard maybe five times. So now I figure it out. JD and Bibsy are betting on each lap, and the ponies are their five-year-old kids.

Now Jack Jr. is way out in front on this lap, but it looks like he has a stitch in his stomach and he kind of lies down and rolls over, and Bibsy Jr. catches up and leans over to see what is the matter with his friend. So the whole race has stopped.

Of course Freddie, who is now outside, has no idea that it is a race as she just sees the children running around and there are no cards on the porch.

Now Bibsy Jr. is asking Jack Jr. if he is OK, but Jack Jr. is in too much pain to answer, and so Bibsy Jr. starts to cry. Now the adult Bibsy starts cursing at his kid and tells him to stop crying and start running. But Bibsy Jr. just stands there with his friend.

This is when Freddie figures the whole thing out.

She barrels onto the track like a Sherman tank heading straight at the two lame ponies and screams like this: "Now look what your gambling has done to the children!"

Now Bibsy Jr. is very much afraid of this hollering tank and so he runs away from Freddie, and by doing that he comes across the finish line... while his pitiful opponent still lies on the turf with the stitch.

And there you have it. JD loses his bet on his own kid.

I see out of the corner of my eye that JD hands over some G's to Bibsy.

And Freddie is left on the infield picking up her lame son.

When I last stumbled on the yellowed pages of Damon Runyon's descriptions of my dad, JD, it was seventy -two years after I lost the great back yard pony race, and seventy years after I last hugged him good-bye.

Today, I find his words to be a bitter-sweet reminder of a colorful bigger-than-life Dad who lived in a colorful, bigger-than life age. For me, Damon Runyon's comic-heroic prose revives those bright, crisp enduring pictures from childhood,

And his stories remind me anew, how proud I am, to be JD Jr.

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