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Bat and Ball

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Tinning a bowl near Bakersfield, California

"It's a true story. Believe me. It's my Uncle Pete's true story. [For a fact I knew Thomas had an Uncle Pete. I'd been out to East Los Angeles" Calvary Cemetery and seen Pete's pale, elaborate monument. Cemented almost chest-high on the marker was Pete's oval snapshot. In the photo, Pete wears a white suit and a Panama hat and flashes a broad smile.]

My Uncle Pete was a lucky man. He didn't live very long, but right up to the end, almost to the minute he died, he was very, very lucky. Now, he wasn't born lucky, like some are. And he didn't sweat and save to get rich like others. Things happened to him, that's all.

It was 1931 or 1932. The families were camped out at that time—when Pete got lucky—in eastern Ohio, out near Youngstown, just south of Columbiana. We used to make a lot of money in that area. In an apple orchard along Route Seven we made a big camp every year. It was around the time of the Columbiana Street Fair. The owner of that orchard was named Moore, or McIntyre. We rented space from him for about three weeks every year. Moore was one of those one-of-a-kind people; he rented out to us, to Gypsies. His neighbors didn't like it, of course.

Whenever drunken carloads of Americans came out to the camp after us, to run us off, Moore would take sides with us as often as not. He was a good man, as far as it went. We never bothered his property and we kept his place clean. We wanted to come back the next year, you see.

Anyway, it was 1931 and the camp was about finished. Our business in that place was over. The family business was done with, too. A lot of people were anxious to get over to Chicago. Some of the families, the Davidos, the Johns and some of the others, had already pulled out.

Everywhere, the cars were moving back and forth. My own family was packing up, too. We kids were wild and, in the way, as usual. Finally, my grandmother gathered us up and sent us off into the woods. „Get roots! Plants! Like these! " She ordered, and gave each of us a leaf of this and a piece of that, some tent pegs to dig with, and knives to cut with.

We set out together, playing a few kid games along the way. One we played was called lingo stamps. It was a game like jacks but without a ball. We used pebbles instead. Another game we played was called po Piko. We used a couple of sharp sticks for po Piko. Eventually I found myself alone. It was broad daylight and I wasn't afraid. I knew where I was. In fact, it was interesting. There was an old covered bridge full of spiders, and a giant rock in a meadow. And an old oak tree, very large and very strange.

I knew something was funny with that old tree. I'd been into those woods a hundred times and never seen it before. Once I got near it, I couldn't bring myself to leave. I sat under it. I walked around it. I picked at it with the knife. It got later and later. The wind came up. When the wind blew, the tree began to creak and to make words by rubbing its limbs with its leaves. Believe me, I wanted to leave. I tried to run away, but I couldn't move. Then, the tree told me its secret.

In a place a little larger than my fist, where the wood was soft and rotting, I found a small bat. This is where the tree wanted me to look. I took my neckerchief and put it against my palm. Then, carefully, I caught the bat in my fist. I was afraid it would bite me, but I was more afraid I would lose it. I didn't want to kill the bat; I might as well have killed myself, the an del pe yak halo: „May the Evil Eye not strike! " This was no normal bat, you see. This was a special bat. It had special work to do. So, I took the bat away to camp, for the tree freed me.

I ran to where the old woman was waiting. Then she killed the bat. She did it the right way. I don't claim to understand this part, but it was something my grandmother knew well. She told me that bats are lucky, if you know what to do. „If you ever find a bat,

forget everything else and bring it to me. Be careful and be quick! ‟ This is what my grandmother taught us kids. So, I did exactly as she said. But I wish I never had. My Uncle Pete, wherever you are, forgive me. You see, I was really behind all his luck: I found the bat back in 1931.

You know what? I can still feel the crazy bat in my fist! As I sit here and tell you this story, I can still feel that bat squirming in my hand. My palm sweat and the bat …, well, it was just like electricity.
The bat twitched, and my palm began to buzz and itch. It didn't bite. It just buzzed and itched. And the closer I got to the camp, the worse it got. Oh! It buzzed and it itched, but I didn't let go. I couldn't let go.

By the time I reached camp it was getting late. The people were still busy and no one noticed me standing at the edge of the meadow. No one except my grandmother. She was waiting for me across the way. She saw me and waved me over to her side of the camp. Somehow, she knew I was coming, you see. Right away she pried the bat from between my palm and fingers and turned to a little fire and a bundle of rags that lay between a few of the parked cars.

We were alone, or so I believed: the old woman, the bat and me. The poor bat looked miserable, like a drowned bird. Grandmother pressed the bat hard against the hot, black fender of my father's new Chrysler. The little bat steamed and hissed, and began to wiggle its feet. Meanwhile, the old woman fished around in her skirts with her free hand. She pulled out a six-sided fifty-dollar gold piece and sawed off the bat's head.

Then, she fished around in her skirts some more and this time brought out some paper money. Big bills. Tens and twenties.

She wrapped the corpse with the bills, over and over. Afterwards, and I was a step behind her all the way, she took a kettle of hot wax off the fire. She dabbed the wax over the money and the bat, saying, „To do this to a bat can bring much luck or much harm, ‟ and „To take a life, you must give a life. ‟ She also said the job had to be done "just right. ‟ Then she began to turn the charm over and over again in her hands, smoothing it.

As she turned and turned the ball in her palms, she spoke other words. These were words I never heard before or since. It wasn't your language and it wasn't our language. They were women's words. Old, old words. And this is where my Uncle Pete comes into the story. Pete was there with us all the time, hiding under one of the cars. He saw and heard almost everything. But not the part about the danger in the wax ball. So, after the old woman was through, she hid the charm, and Pete saw where and stole it.

Pete's wife, she was quite a bit older than both of us, broke up the wax ball. She took the money and bought liquor and cigarettes for Pete. They even bought some things for me: candy and stuff. I was too young to think much about it or to say anything. I should have said something. But it was probably too late to do anything about it anyway. I'd grabbed the bat to start with, and Pete stole it, and his wife spent the money. My life and theirs were never normal after that. The year after, down in Georgia, I fell into the campfire. [I'd seen the old scars up and down Thomas‟ arms and across his chest. Under his overall sleeves he was as much scar tissue as skin. Which scars came from the campfire accident and which from other injuries associated with his dangerous line of work, hot tinning, I could never begin to sort out.]

And that Pete! For what he did, for stealing the ball, Pete paid the highest price. His son, his baby boy, died six weeks later over in Cleveland.

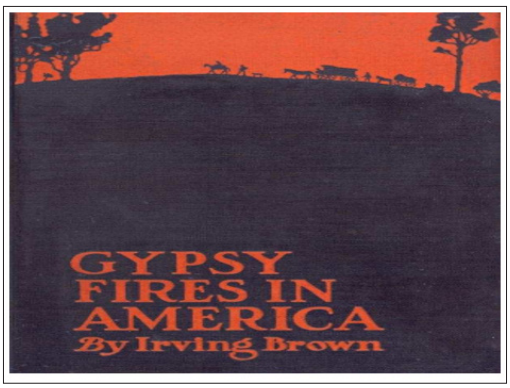
But then, after that, he was rich all of his life. He was famous for his luck. And there's no more to it. There was powerful magic in that bat charm.

It's a true story, believe me."

If you are interested in Gypsy studies, this is my recommendation for the best place to start. ~ djn~

Pete Nicholas





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