

BIG ED AND LITTLE JOHN

From the time my younger brother John was old enough to walk, I enjoyed the great pleasure of womping his little ass. Being almost five years older, my advanced physique and superior mental powers gave me the bearing of some ancient, fearsome god. I was like a combination of Godzilla and Albert Einstein. My brother, on the other hand, was like Topo Gigio, the pathetic, little Italian mouse puppet who, for some unfathomable reason, became something of a national phenomenon on the Ed Sullivan Show. In either case, my advantage was enormous and made it virtually impossible for my brother to compete with me. Every game we played was weighted in my favor by a factor of roughly 3,000 to 1, and in the great tradition of countless older brothers before me, I exploited the situation with a sense of absolute entitlement and unending glee.

To his credit, my brother never backed down, refusing to acknowledge that I had any advantage. "I'll kill you really dead," he'd defiantly shout, "and I don't care if it's in front of Mom either!" These statements, filled as they were with a kind of pathetic bravado, only served to increase my amusement. But they consumed his little soul and gave him the both the proper blend of courage and stupidity to keep coming back for more. It was, as they say, a win-win situation.

In order to enhance my persona, I took on a different name during The Games. I anointed myself Big Ed, although I have no recollection of where that name came from. I may have been inspired by Mr. Ed, the famous talking horse and protagonist of one of my favorites shows on television. Perhaps it was Mr. Ed's superior intelligence and formidable physical prowess that led me to adopt his nomenclature. Who knows? It will probably remain one of the great mysteries of my life.

My brother became Little John, far less mysterious but nevertheless an accurate description of reality and one that cemented his lower class status in our hierarchy. Being Little John gave him energy, blessed him with that particular brand ofchutzpa that comes with being the perennial underdog, and gave him a certain charm that Big Ed sought to destroy. Both names lent an air of chivalry and play-acting to the drama of our competition, elevating our stature and lending a bit of allure to our gladiatorial combat.

Armed thusly, we took to the arena, brothers in arms, locked in a sibling rivalry of the first order.

We invented many games, my brother and I, all freewheeling affairs involving full frontal collisions and the suspension of all brain activity. The Sock Game, for example, was a simple version of bedroom basketball, requiring the player on offense to shoot a pair of rolled up socks through a particular lampshade placed in a corner of our bedroom. As there was a limited amount of floor space, scoring usually involved jumping on top of one of our twin beds to gain a height advantage, leaping across to the other bed, and hurling the sock ball through the lampshade.

All the games were a variation of the same idea: two boys, one ball, one goal. The rules were few, as in none; and the outcome was harsh: you played until someone gave up. Since there was no referee, the player on defense was free to maul the shooter using any technique he wished. Straight forward attempts to block the shot always gave way to tackling, and then tackling gave way to ancient techniques perfected by the World Wrestling Federation: the pulling of hair, the scratching of skin, the grabbing of the scrotum, etcetera. Every game began with a rush of excitement and ended in tears commensurate with some kind of physical injury. On those special occasions when blood was spilled, my mother would usually have to intervene, at which point my brother and I would suddenly turn on her, claiming that we were “having lots of fun”.

It was impossible for my mother to be reasonable during these moments, as she was busy re-inserting my brother’s limbs into their correct sockets or applying pressure to whatever orifice was gushing blood. She would always make us swear to discontinue whatever we were doing, finally leaving the room while muttering some prayer in Spanish to the Virgin Mary to help her get through life. “Ava Maria Purrissima”, we could hear her plead, “dame alguna esperanza para vivir” which, whatever it actually meant, sounded like “please, Holy Mother, let me kill my children.”

To appease her, my brother and I would take a pause from our gaming, the length of which was determined by the intensity of our mothers tirade, or, as we called it, “going mental in Espanola”. When she was safely out of earshot we’d begin again, the competition finally ending with my brother crying “uncle”, his limp form lying in an exhausted heap on the floor. “I’m

not through with you yet,” he would hoarsely cry. To which I would always reply “I sure hope not”.

The Games went on for years in this fashion. In historical terms, it was one of the great dynasties of all time, rivaling those of the Boston Celtics, the New York Yankees, and the Roman Empire. “In any discussion of greatness” I would constantly tell my brother, “you have to first talk about Big Ed”. His response to this comment changed over the years. When he was younger he would say things like “Oh, yeah, smarty pants, you don’t know anything!” As he got older his tone changed, beginning with “I don’t want to hear about Big Ed” to the more direct “Fuck Big Ed”. It was always great fun for me to hear these comments, as they expressed his descent into frustration and despair.

The constant winning brought a swagger to my gait, which at one point provoked my father to ask if I was “holding a fat-ass chicken between your legs or what?” I immediately tightened my strides, but my inner smile was as bright as ever. Nothing could stop me. My unbridled power was similar to that of Yahweh, the terrifying god of the Old Testament, whose idea of toying with an opponent was to hurl a plague of locusts down upon them. I went away to college, secure in the knowledge that Big Ed’s domination would last forever.

During my first three months at college, however, my brother grew eight inches and put on about 40 pounds. I have no idea if this was due to some monstrous regimen he concocted or if it was simply a quirk of biological destiny. In either case, upon my return home for the Thanksgiving holidays, Little John emerged from his room as Much Bigger John, recently discovered cousin of King Kong. “Wanna play, Ed?” he smiled, noticing my barely concealed alarm at his newfound physical presence. And where was the respect? He called me “Ed” now, not “Big Ed”. With a slight nod of the head, I accepted the challenge. I would have to outsmart him.

Within ten minutes of a ferociously played game of medicine ball football, Big Ed’s reign as undisputed champion of the universe came to a sudden and shocking end. Much Bigger John smashed into him with brutal force, pushed him back, rolled over him, and knocked him on his keister. With every shove came an exultant cry, with every crunch a grunt of primal satisfaction. From jumping to tackling to biting, Big Ed was overmatched in every phase of the game. My brothers’ joy was, as they say, unalloyed. As

the years of frustration gave way to his long sought moment of triumph, he began to laugh. “Big Ed is dead!” he giggled. “Big Ed is no more!”

I abruptly conceded defeat. Unlike those athletes who hang around long past their prime to remind everyone how far they have fallen, I cut my losses and announced Big Ed’s immediate retirement. Any more defeats would only result in tarnishing all that Ed had accomplished. History would have to be re-written, complete with asterisks and a lingering sense of disappointment. If Big Ed came to an ignominious end, it would spell disaster for generations of older siblings.

To my astonishment, my brother concurred. For some strange reason, he refrained from indulging in his victory. To be sure, he enjoyed his moment in the sun. But he did not, as I expected, use his newly found strength to mock or scorn me. I expected him to embark on a Big Ed smear campaign, hiring people with bullhorns to shout vulgar slogans or to put cat shit in Big Ed’s shoes. He did nothing of the kind. Like the slave who loves his master, like the alcoholic who loves his bartender, like the younger brother who has to live with his older brother, he decided to take the high road.

Before too long, I came to understand that his behavior was less influenced by some dormant chivalric impulse than the simple but arresting fact that he needed to remain Little John: that his entire personality was built around being the underdog, the guy who nobody expected to succeed but who would end up on top in the end. As far as he was concerned, the greater the mythology surrounding Big Ed, the better it was for him. Just as David defeated Goliath, he had beaten Big Ed, and in doing so, insured his own share of immortality. He took that attitude into his adult life where he met many versions of Big Ed and, true to form, always had the last laugh.

Some forty years later, my brother and I refer to the time when I would kick his little hiney as “the glory days”. Like the survivors of a great war, we have invisible tattoos on our chests that read: “we will never forget”. Our competitive spirit is still there, although our games have now been relegated to very subtle, private affairs. We’ll be sizing up the last meatball on my mothers antipasto plate, for example, and we’ll make eye contact. Suddenly, at the same time, we’ll have a mutual flashback. “Big Ed” I think, as I look into his eyes. “Little John” he stares back, and for an instant we are smashing into that lampshade in the bedroom or throwing each other into the car door that served so well as second base. The game is on, and

this time it's all about who gets the last meatball. We raise our forks in high salute, begin to laugh, and make for the ball. But unlike the past, the end result is of little consequence. The important point is that we have registered the moment within each other's consciousness, that we have honored history, that we respect the blood that was spilt that led up to the taking of this meatball. No one else sees what is going on, although sometimes my mother starts to pray in Spanish, which leads me to think that she knows more than she is saying.