

Jeffrey R. Schrecongost

The Uphill Climb

“Yo-yo-ing is a sport of kings.
Frisbee is for fruitcakes.”
-- Buddy “Big Blue” Tremont, 1974

February, 1982

“You spent five hundred dollars on a yo-yo?” Linda said.

“Screw Sinatra,” Norman said, sniffing. “Bobby Darin was better. Sinatra couldn’t play guitar. Sinatra couldn’t dance.”

The Stolichnaya vodka went to work on Norman. He had placed the bottle in an ice/snow drift in the backyard the night before and was enjoying the spirit neat in a monogrammed rocks glass. The song was “Dream Lover.” He turned up the volume. Darin’s voice leapt about the Moss household. He sniffed again.

“You spent five hundred dollars on a yo-yo?” Linda repeated. “I can’t believe this shit.”

“Bobby Darin evolved. Of course, Frank had his moments, let’s be fair, but --”

“-- Would you please shut up about Bobby Darin and talk to me?”

Linda turned off the stereo.

“About what? About what? Okay, so I bought a new yo-yo. It’s what I *do*. Remember? It’s what brings money into this house. So how about being nice and climbing off my back for five minutes? Can you do that? Is that possible?”

Linda stared at Norman for a moment, shook her head, and walked down the narrow hallway to the bedroom. She slammed the door, disjuncting a photograph of her mother and father and catapulting a picture of she and Norman on their honeymoon in Hawaii. Six years ago. He was a brain surgeon then. Thirty-two years old.

The framed glass shattered on the hardwood floor.

Norman stood, sniffed, walked to the end of the hallway, and shouted at the bedroom door. “I’m a winner, Linda. I’m a hero. People depend on me. They win money betting on me. You depend on me.”

Norman waited for a response. When it came, seconds later and barely audible, Linda’s words cut him open, but cut him free.

“You’re a child,” she said. “And a fool. And you’ve gone insane. And I don’t love you anymore.”

Norman looked at the skewed picture of Linda’s parents on the wall. They smirked. He grabbed the picture, ripping its tiny nail away from the wall, and threw it at the bedroom door.

“Guess what, baby,” he said. “I’ll do it alone. I’m the best yo-yo-ist in Clarkton. You’re all jelly and no toast. You’re nothing without me.”

Then the power went out again.

Clarkton’s yo-yo tournament mania began in Buddy “Big Blue” Tremont’s garage in February, 1974. On a frigid, ugly night in Dickey’s Anchor Tavern, Tremont suggested to patrons that they join him at his place after the bar

closed to determine “who the real men” were. Clarkton was a matriarchal town, and Tremont was its only open masculinist.

Soon scores of Clarkton men began to pile into Tremont’s garage for the sort of bonding only yo-yo-ing could provide. The men had a voice now. They had a shared interest. They felt whole. Every month Tremont would hold boxer short burnings in his backyard. His wife, Phyllis, never understood him. She wondered why men couldn’t be happy just spit-roasting the wild pigs. A man’s place, she felt, should be next to the fire pit.

These clandestine yo-yo-ing nights became big business in Clarkton. Sheriff Bibesco decriminalized gambling on yo-yo matches, and the tournaments were moved to the basement of the Clarkton Moose Lodge on Melcher Road. Organizers, in a still controversial move, later borrowed money from the local Teamsters pension fund to construct a swanky, Las Vegas-style yo-yo-ing tournament hotel and casino next to K-Mart on McWaverly Avenue. They called it The Palace Club. By 1980, even some of the old-timers were proud of the yo-yo craze and the attention it had brought to Clarkton.

February, 1983

Norman Moss sat alone in the living room of his Deercreek Estates colonial-style home. He didn’t mind the silence. With Linda gone -- she’d moved back to Los Angeles -- he could better prepare for the evening’s yo-yo match. Tonight he would face Albert Cordilla, one of Clarkton’s best yo-yo-ists and Norman’s most formidable challenger, in a title match. The purse was \$25,000.

Al’s tour de force was “The Angry Mongoose” -- a bizarre move that required flicking his yo-yo from a resting position on the ground up and out some twenty feet and back again in circles from the center of the ring. He would at times even crawl his yo-yo along the faces of spectators, leaving most uninjured.

Anticipation was high for the match because of the animosity between Norman and Al -- three years ago, when Norman was still a practicing brain surgeon, he had inadvertently left a pair of tweezers at the base of Dolly Cordilla's skull after a tumor-removal. This flagrant error caused Dolly to suffer from hours-long, nocturnal hiccup attacks. She also forgot how to cook. And have sex. Norman settled with the Cordillas out of court, but Al still held a grudge.

Norman closed his eyes and envisioned his strategy for the match. He would start off modestly with "The Menacing Moss" -- a trick that required getting on his hands and knees, bouncing the yo-yo up and down his back, over his head and under his body, then standing up and finishing the routine with the yo-yo spinning on its own, hands free, at his feet and coming to rest upright.

He'd follow up with "The Mao Moss." In this unique mini-drama, Norman would place duct tape over his mouth, cotton balls in his ears, look nervously from right to left, and cautiously yo-yo in a pedestrian fashion. It was not terribly exciting, but its cerebral, sociopolitical nature would be appreciated by the crowd.

Finally, Norman's coup de grace would be "The Missing-Link Moss." He'd slip out during Al's last routine, grab his portable stereo and an audiotape of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, and slide into an Abominable Snowman costume. When Al finished, Norman would leap into the ring, growl, play the tape, and dance a cancan while working the yo-yo back and forth from right hand to left in a convoluted blur of fingers, yo-yo, and string.

Norman leaned forward, picked up his five hundred dollar, gold yo-yo from the chrome and glass coffee table, held it out at arm's length, grinned, and sniffed.

That ought to do it.

Norman Moss had largely ignored the initial yo-yo hysteria. He'd worked hard and long to become a brain surgeon, and he was satisfied. The job paid well, gave him suburban clout. His life was an elegant gallop.

But on a cool, spring evening in 1981, a Lear jet made an emergency landing at the Clarkton airport, and its passenger would change Norman's life.

As Norman completed the last leg of his nightly neighborhood jog, a lengthy, maroon limousine pulled up next to him. The driver, a toffee-complexioned brunette in her late-twenties, rolled down the tinted passenger side window and stopped the cruise-ship-on-wheels.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," Norman said, wiping the sweat from his forehead while jogging in place.

"Champagne?" the woman asked in a smoky voice.

"Champagne?" Norman said. "No thanks."

The woman popped the cork off a bottle of Dom Perignon she'd pulled from a silver ice bucket in the passenger seat and poured herself a glass of the shimmering, gold liquid. She brought the glass to her lips and sipped deliberately, never pulling her eyes off Norman. He stopped jogging in place.

"That's a shame," she said. "If you say no to champagne, you say no to life."

"Isn't that a line from *The Deer Hunter*?" Norman said. He looked back and forth. "Just one glass, I guess."

Why am I doing this?

"Hop in," she said, placing the ice bucket on the passenger side floor.

The back passenger side door opened, and a silver-haired man in a gray turtleneck sweater, shiny, black pants, and black, leather shoes leaned forward and grinned.

"Hey, kid," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Have a seat."

It can't be him.

Norman eased into the limousine and stared at the man.

“Where can a guy get some action in this town? We’re on our way to fuckin’ Chicago for a show tomorrow night -- big show, Liza, Dean -- and that big silver bird starts to pull up lame. Guy says we gotta land here. So, where’s the action?”

“There’s a nice, quiet restaurant, a steak and seafood place, just up the road,” Norman said.

“Nah, kid. I said *action*. Don’t you know who you’re talkin’ to?”

“Yes. Absolutely, Mr. Sinatra. I --”

“-- Call me Frank, jogger-boy.”

“What kind of place do you mean, exactly? There’s not much action in Clarkton, Frank.”

“I’m talkin’ about the kind of place where men like us can be men we like. Games of chance. Beautiful broads. Swingin’ jazz. Get the picture?”

“Well, there’s The Palace Club, but I don’t think they play jazz there.”

“Yes! The Palace Club. Sounds like my kind of joint.”

“It’s not what you think, Frank. It’s a yo-yo-ing club with a small casino. Mostly yo-yo-ing, though.”

“Yo-yo-ing, huh? People bet on the matches?”

“Yeah, but --”

“—Monique. Baby. To The Palace Club. Floor it.”

The limousine picked up speed, and Monique turned up the stereo volume. Bobby Darin’s “Mack the Knife.” Frank closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at Norman.

“You think Bobby Darin’s better than me, kid? Don’t bullshit me.”

“Hadn’t really thought about it, Frank. I -- ”

“-- That’s okay. Don’t be nervous. He could dance better. And I can’t play guitar. But I fuckin’ won an Oscar.

From Here to Eternity. Mother of nine bastards. That role turned my life around.”

Frank looked at Norman and grinned.

“Drink up, kid. Relax.”

Monique took the back roads at ninety-miles-an-hour and arrived at The Palace in fifteen minutes flat. She turned off the stereo.

“I’ve heard about this place, but I’ve never been inside,” Norman said. “I’m not into yo-yo-ing. I’m a brain surgeon.”

“That’s a shame, kid,” Frank said. “You been operating on other people’s brains, but you’re not using your own. You’ll be okay. I envy you in a way. It’s like having sex for the first time. You’ll wonder what the hell just happened, but you’ll wanna do it again. Then you’ll get better. Then you won’t be able to live without it. Trust me. What’s your name again, kid?”

“Norman. Norman Moss.”

“Let’s enjoy life, Norman Moss,” Frank said, opening the limousine door.

He walked up to the driver’s side window and tapped it three times with his diamond pinky ring.

Monique rolled down the window and touched her lips to Frank’s, then pulled back, making a tiny popping sound. Frank whispered something to her. Norman got out, stepped toward the club entrance, and turned around.

“Wait. I’m underdressed.”

“Don’t worry about it, Norman,” Frank said, shoulder-slapping him. “There’ll be plenty of time later to get you into some sharp duds.”

Monique sped off, waving to the two men as Norman stood with his arms outstretched. He turned, walked to the entrance with Frank, and opened the doors to his destiny.

Norman, donning his tan, suede, fringed cowboy jacket, a white, silk shirt, Levi's, and black, leather, ankle-high Beatle boots, strode into The Palace Club's main yo-yo pit.

The place was a maelstrom of psychedelic color, light, and sound. Lynyrd Skynyrd's "I Know a Little" blasted from the club's \$200,000 audio system. Hundreds of rapid-blinking, multi-colored light bulbs dangled from silver wires below the gold-domed ceiling. The match was a sellout. Eight hundred suspense junkies, degenerate gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, dope pushers, and hippies crowded the seats and aisles surrounding the pit.

Norman nodded and waved as his fans cheered him on. Al stood still in his corner, eyeing Norman as a big cat eyes its prey. The stocky, bald referee shuffled into the ring, grabbed the microphone, and introduced the two competitors.

"For the Clarkton Yo-Yo title! Three rounds!" he said in a high-pitched voice.

He called the men together in the center of the pit.

"Okay, gentlemen. Regulation yo-yos only. No grease. No repairs. If your yo-yo breaks, you forfeit the match. Keep 'em in the pit. No lewd tricks. Good luck."

Al leaned in close to Norman, his lips an inch from Norman's left ear.

"This one's for Dolly," he said.

Norman smiled, and the two men went to their respective corners. The ring announcer introduced the three judges, and the match began.

Al opened up with his signature routine, “The Angry Mongoose.” If Al jumped ahead quickly on points, Norman would be forced to complete his first routine error-free. Al’s dedication and training paid off, and when he finished, the judges awarded him thirty points -- a perfect score. Al pointed at Norman and nodded his head.

The crowd bellowed.

Norman stepped into the pit, got on his hands and knees, and executed “The Menacing Moss” flawlessly. His gold yo-yo bounced and rolled like a creature with the ability to reason. Norman finished the routine, grinning at the crowd as he dropped the yo-yo string and allowed the thing to spin and come to rest upright an inch from the tips of his boots. He bowed and picked up the yo-yo, working the crowd into an awe-lather. The judges held up their scorecards: thirty points.

Al licked sweat-drops from his upper lip. He stepped into the center of the ring and began his “Demon Drop” routine. All seemed to be going as planned -- no mistakes, high marks for creativity -- when he got tripped up by his string in the middle of the Highland Swing section. His right leg flailed in ugly desperation, further complicating matters. Al, ankles captive in a nightmare of tangled yo-yo string, fell to the floor.

The crowd moaned.

Al freed his feet, rose, and retreated to his corner. The judges were rattled. Still, points had to be deducted. Al’s score: fifteen points.

All Norman had to do now was not make a mistake.

Norman scanned the crowd, then the rubbery faces of the judges. He looked back out into the crowd and there she was. Third row on the aisle. Linda.

Can't be. Can't be her. Shit. It is her.

The referee motioned for Norman to step into the pit. He couldn’t hear the crowd. Just the voices in his head.

“This one’s for Dolly.”

“You’re a child. And a fool. And you’ve gone insane. And I don’t love you anymore.”

“Guess what, baby. I’ll do it alone.”

“That’s a shame. If you say no to champagne, you say no to life.”

“Just one glass, I guess.”

“...where men like us can be men we like.”

“This one’s for Dolly.”

Norman prepared for “The Mao Moss.” He pulled the duct tape out of the right pocket of his jacket, tore off a strip, and placed it over his mouth. He reached for two cotton balls from his left pocket and stuffed them in his ears. He looked nervously to his left and right. He put the loop on the end of the yo-yo string around his index finger and began his routine. He glanced at Linda. She shook her head, and the yo-yo slipped from Norman’s fingers.

He tried to grab it, but just missed, and the golden yo-yo bounced on the glossy, parquet floor, then broke into three pieces. The center section rolled away from its string, across the ring, and came to rest at Al’s feet.

The crowd gasped. Then silence.

Norman walked toward Al, pulling the duct tape off his mouth and the cotton balls from his ears. He sniffed.

“You win,” Norman said.

The referee bear-hugged Norman and walked him to his corner. Then he returned to center-ring and grasped the descending microphone.

“We have a forfeit! Broken yo-yo. Our new champion is Albert Cordiiiiiiiiiaaaa.”

The crowd rushed the pit and picked up Al, holding him on their shoulders in celebration. No one noticed Norman as he snuck out of the pit and out of The Palace Club. When he stepped into the freezing, pitiless Clarkton night, Linda was waiting for him. She was tan and trim and pretty.

“What’s your story?” Norman said. “Here to wish me luck?”

“Nope. Here to place a bet.”

“I choked. It happens to the best of them. At least your instincts were sound.”

“My God, you’re an idiot. I didn’t bet on *you*. I bet on Al.”

“Jesus! He was seventy-five to one! Are you stupid?”

“Obviously not.”

“Why did you come back here? Why?”

“Because Bobby Darin never won an Oscar. Frank Sinatra did.”

Norman sniffed and lit a cigarette.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said. “Gibberish, that’s what. Nothing but gibberish.”

“Is it?”

“Let’s go get a drink.”

“Goodbye, Norman,” Linda said as a valet pulled up in a glossy, white Jaguar.

“Gibberish.”

Linda handed the kid a twenty, got in, and pushed the accelerator down to the floor. The Jag’s rear tires screeched. As she drove away, she turned up the stereo volume. Echoes of Bobby Darin’s “Dream Lover” rose then reposed in the frozen air outside The Palace Club long after Linda had driven out of sight.