Fringe Men

Eleven men—legs dangling eight hundred and fifty feet above the streets of Manhattan, a hazy Central Park behind them—took a break. Most wore work boots and newsboy hats.

They were shoe-leather guys, lithe and wired-to-go in *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper,* the epochal, 1932 photograph by Charles Ebbets, Thomas Kelley, or William Leftowich (all clicked away but, remarkably, no one's sure which one actually took the shot).

The men sat on a steel beam at what came to be known as the Rockefeller Center. They were finishing the RCA building, the first of several structures comprising the whole. Next up would be the Music Hall and Center Theatre. Fourteen million cubic feet of limestone had been hauled in. It was boomtown between 48th and 51st streets. The city was growing vertically, with trend-setting art deco designs.

The man on the far right was the only one looking at the camera (suspiciously, for whatever reason), the only one who had nothing to do with the others. Thirty five, maybe. Cap tilted. Holding a bottle. You wonder if he blinked much, or smiled at the baseball scores.

If he was drinking, he was drinking alone, and he looked like he was ready to take another pull.

He's the one I look at every Sunday.

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Decades after the image appeared on the front page of the *New York Herald-Tribune,* Pat Glynn of Boston saw a framed copy in a pub in County Galway, Ireland, and froze. “That’s my old man.”

Glynn’s father was born in Shanaglish and migrated to America in 1923. Apparently, he had a wry sense of humor; there might have been water in the bottle. And that’s about all Glynn said.

Filmmakers Seán and and Eamonn Ó Cualáin tracked down Glynn, came to believe him, and more identifications: Matty O’ Shaughnessy at far left; Joseph Eckner third from left; and Joe Curtis, third from right.

Economics drove those men onto the beam in the middle of the Great Depression. Millions of people now look at that picture all over the world, said Ó Cualáin, as quoted in *IrishCentral.*

The most famous of the iron workers—though nameless to the world—was lucky to have a job (the unemployment rate was twenty five percent, but Rockefeller put a quarter million people to work, as truckers, in quarries, and on his signature building). Most likely, the workers on the beam didn’t have savings accounts, pensions, mortgages, but dozens of looky-loos on the streets below surely would have switched spots with them. Standing in line for stew and a slice of mystery spice cake will do that to you.

FDR was elected in 1932. Winston Churchill, years before becoming prime minister of England, got stood up by Hitler, who reportedly said, “What would I talk to him about?” Jack Sharkey, the “Boston Gob,” was the heavyweight boxing champion. Unemployment among Black-Americans reached fifty percent, or twice that of whites, in part because Black workers were almost always fired first.

It was a great decade for snacks. Lay's potato chips hit the market, as did Twinkies, Cheetos, and the 3 Musketeers bar. A world war was less than a decade away. In a perverse way, it would be just what struggling men and women needed: a grand purpose to shrink the indignity of poverty, somewhere else to look, somewhere to go, some purpose beyond their next paycheck or serving of slop.

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Turns out, the photo was ginned up as a PR stint. The workers routinely walked across beams above city streets, but didn't eat their lunches on them, or issue punch-lines over smokes and sandwiches a bump from their eternal falls.

Why did they agree to the shoot? Fear for their jobs? Boredom? On the far left (from the viewer's perspective), a fellow smoked. His buddy gave him a light. Moving right, the next two, turned toward each other, talked excitedly. The middle one of the next three stared at a box in his hands. Were there donuts in there? The two on either side of him cared. The next three were similar: one held what looks like a newspaper while the others leaned in to look at the headlines.

At the edge of the moment, literally, the man with the suspicious look seemed to be sizing up the cameraman. We don't know how he got where he was, how much he made, what his childhood was like, what his hobbies were, whether he was for the Yankees or Dodgers.

He's part of the picture and not part, all at once.

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In 2009, I was laid off as managing editor of a daily newspaper in Orange County and found myself unemployed for two years. Nationally, unemployment reached eleven percent.

The newspaper industry was giving way to digital platforms. Mid-sized papers such as the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* and *Burbank Leader* were slashing staff. *The Los Angeles Times* declared bankruptcy. The *Ann Arbor (Michigan) News* shut down. The *Charlotte Observer* cut staff by fifteen percent. *The Tucson Citizen,* Arizona's oldest newspaper, saw its daily circulation drop from sixty-five thousand to seventeen thousand. About one hundred and twenty papers in the U.S. shuttered in 2008-2009, according to *Paper Cuts*, a website that tracks the industry.

We Baby Boomer journalists, who'd cut our teeth in the 1990s—a time when two-thirds of adults read a newspaper every weekday—were north of forty and fifties and knew our prospects were not good.

Journalism was what we knew. The skills of the trade can, however, be applied to public relations, and that's where journalists go when things get desperate. The other option is thin papers, even newsletters.

I landed a job at a community newspaper group. I was editor of two local books, as they're called. At my disposal were a handful of freelance reporters and one page designer, but I was grateful to be working again, even if I was making less than a Del Taco window worker, with no medical benefits.

That's when the day drinking, which had started during unemployment, worsened. I was drinking from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., a fourteen-hour marinade. I tried to cut down, but as soon as I

awakened in the mornings, my feet shook and throbbed like twins throwing a tantrum. The feet, as it turns out, contain two hundred thousand nerve endings apiece, all shooting up to different parts of the body. I was suffering from alcoholic neuropathy.

It came to a head in 2016 when I got a DUI, plus felony convictions for reckless driving and hit-and-run; I'd whacked five parked cars a few blocks from my home, and fled the scene. The sentence, my lawyer said, would be at least ninety days in county jail on three felony charges.

I was lucky I hadn't killed someone. If I had, I would have been sitting in prison. The Watson Law, enacted in California in 1981, states that an intoxicated driver who causes a death can be prosecuted for second-degree murder and serve fifteen years.

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I entered a rehab facility on Monday, November 7, and spent the first night with a meth addict as my roommate. Come sun-up, I wandered into a lounge, downed a cup of coffee, and looked up at the TV. Donald Trump was president of the United States.

After rehab, I racked up AA attendance credits to get leniency from some future judge. The meetings were held at 6 a.m. in a cold, sparse building in a barrio, near a store that sold zoot suits. Most everyone drank coffee, and smoked on breaks. The old heads who had twenty and thirty-plus years of sobriety told their stories. Newbies sat against walls, rocked, fought back tears. I got acquainted with a tug boat chef who told me, "You've raised the storm jib, good on

you." After my first share, he gave me two firm pats on the knee. But we did not become friends. That was a lifelong pattern. Since grade school, I'd been a back-of-the-classroom type, trying to disguise bipolar disorder and the ticks and rituals of OCD, as if the paparazzi were watching, as if those close to me couldn't handle the truth. I shot baskets on my driveway night and day, avoiding other kids, and any possible pressures. In high school, defiance worked its way into an executive position in my department of defense. As did alcohol. I didn't attend sports banquets or dances, didn't take the SAT, didn't go to grad night.

In my young adult years, I didn't get married, have children, stay connected to friends and colleagues, didn't see a doctor for the mental ailments (body dysmorphic disorder and glossophobia having joined the party).

Have you ever wanted to migrate from yourself, but wherever you go, your same circumstance is there? Have you ever been irked not just at the outside world, but the inner one?

That cold, sparse building was where I first saw *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* and side-eyed the man with the suspicious gaze.

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Clean for sixty days, having, somehow, kept my wife and job, and motivated by more than just pain relief, I published short stories, repaired relationships, cared for my dog, made financial investments, lost thirty pounds.

The routine: Go to bed at 9:30 p.m. arise at 5 a.m., pray, meditate, make the bed, clean

up, catch up on emails, text friends ("Rise and shine, pretty boy. This ain't no scrimmage" was a favorite), edit copy, assign stories, tend to house plants, feed the cats, feed Bow and take her for a walk. Now it was the hour to do something for someone else. A common choice was sweeping my elderly neighbor's porch. Then it was on to exercise and back to editing.

All this approximated what healthy people do. The bipolar settled, for the most part, into a gray area; the anxiety, body dysmorphic, and glossophobia eased by about thirty percent; the neuropathy moved on to someone else's feet.

But ninety percent of alcoholics drink again, according to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and I joined the statistics, drinking a beer on three different occasions in 2023. My fourth drink was a glass of Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon. I considered a second pour that night at a pizzeria, but resisted. At about eleven the next morning, I thought, "Man, a glass of Caymus would be *niiice."* I thought the same thing at nine the very next morning and knew I'd better tell someone.

So here I am, sitting in a circle with sixty people of every color, creed, fashion, profession, way of carrying themselves, vibrato. On the walls are sayings from the Big Book: "Four horseman: terror, bewilderment, frustration and despair." "Our liquor was but a symptom, so we had to get down to causes and conditions." "The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement that binds us."

Lunch atop a Skyscraper still hangs on a concrete wall next to a single-toilet bathroom. The man with the bottle was Sonny Glynn. Glynn fought the Black and Tans in the War of Independence before southern Ireland gained freedom from England. Yeats described that war—and Bloody Sunday, the Easter Rising of 1916, the revolts at Ballykinler—as "all that delirium of the brave... to sweeten Ireland's wrong."

This go-round, I square up. In Sonny Glynn's day, hundreds of thousands of Irish sailed on so-called coffin ships to New York Harbor, knowing a line inspection at Ellis Island awaited. They dreaded the Trachoma Test, administered with buttonhooks that turned the eyes inside out. USPC offices were on the lookout for crusty patches under the lids, a telltale sign of the contagious disease that causes blindness. After a physical workover, migrants were quizzed on American history and civics, and given a psychological test to see if they were radical or insane.

Why did they leave their homeland, even after independence? There were jobs, but unskilled, workers earned $8.75 a day. There was work in New York City that paid twice that much, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. The most lucrative work was in mining and railroads in San Francisco (which grew from a population of 200 in 1846 to 36,000 in 1852), Stockton, and Denver.

I face the photograph for ten minutes. For all the simpatico I feel for him, Sonny Glynn's life was not my life, and vice-versa. The Great Recession was not the Great Depression. Atlanta, my birthplace, is not Shanaglish, and Coyote Hills, my neighborhood, isn't New York City. Who knows if there was whiskey or water in that bottle, and who's to say what his look meant and why, in a second, hip-hip-hooray photo, he didn't remove his cap like the others, didn't even grin, but here we are on the lord's day, a couple of fringe men, five feet and ninety two years apart, staring at each other.

Author Bio

Brady Rhoades's non-fiction has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Museum of Americana*, *Orange County Register*, *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, *biostories*, and *Black EOE Journal*. He lives with his wife and dog in Fullerton, California.