

Jim Ross

With the Best of Company

“You’ll love it, Dad,” my daughter Emily tells me. “They call Binghamton ‘the carousel capital of the world.’”

Emily knows I have a soft spot for old carousels. When I was a kid, Nunley’s Carousel was five minutes from our house. From 1912 through 1939, going by “Murphy’s Carousel,” it had been located in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, where my dad rode it for a nickel. Carved by Brooklyn’s Stein and Goldstein, Murphy’s moved out onto “the island” in 1940, to Baldwin, where it became the featured attraction at Nunley’s, a family-owned amusement park. Growing up in the 1950s meant that on Sunday afternoons there was a decent chance we’d go ride Nunley’s Carousel for a dime.

I always got an outer jumper. Every time around, my right palm thwacked against the ring-dispensing arm and came away with another steel ring. The prospect of grabbing the only brass ring and scoring a free ride injected adrenaline into the experience, so did the sheer look of the horses. *The New York Times* observed, “The horses were carved in Coney Island style, which eschewed the look of docile ponies and prancing fillies and produced much more muscular, ferocious creatures with bared teeth and heads often lifted in motion.”

As each ride wound down, an attendant brought out a basket. Still in motion, we tried to toss our steel rings into the basket. Some inevitably went flying. If I was really lucky, after a ride, I got cotton candy, too. Of course, life was simpler then, people expected less, and merry-go-rounds mattered.

When Emily was little, Nunley’s Carousel was her first. Closer to home in Maryland, she adopted a Philadelphia-made Dentzel carousel located in Glen Echo Park, five minutes from the house where my wife Ginger grew up. As a child in the 1980s, Emily anticipated riding the Glen Echo Carousel every summer weekend for a quarter, often after we walked as a family along the C&O Canal. Of course, life was still pretty simple then. In 2011, Emily even arranged to hold her engagement party at a restaurant adjacent to Glen Echo, so afterward attendees could walk over to *her* Dentzel carousel and ride until closing time.

Nunley’s was seized and purchased by the State in 1995 to prevent it being broken up and sold piecemeal. For the next fourteen years, it was held in storage. Several years into its storage, in 2001,

Billy Joel released “Waltz No. 1: The Nunley’s Carousel Waltz.” Joel grew up nearby, was a regular Sunday rider at Nunley’s, and advocated for its restoration and new home. Finally, it was restored, reopening in 2009 in Garden City, a town near Baldwin. After Nunley’s reopened, Joel recorded a version of this tune on keyboards with Wurlitzer-like instrumentation so it could be played at Nunley’s. This jewel of my childhood has forty-one horses three abreast, two chariots, a stand-still lion, and a working brass ring machine. To ride the fully-restored Nunley’s while listening to its Wurlitzer will set you back two bucks.

The Glen Echo Carousel has operated at a single location since 1921. After the park closed in 1968, the carousel was purchased in 1970 by the U.S. Park Service, which undertook a complete restoration of the animals, the frame on which it operates, and the Wurlitzer organ to their original condition, cosmetically and functionally. Carved in the menagerie or Noah’s ark style, this 1921 carousel with 1926 Wurlitzer features thirty-eight horses three abreast, two chariots, four rabbits, four ostriches, and a lion, tiger, giraffe, and prancing deer. Its functioning ring dispenser is no longer used for safety reasons. Emily gets to the Glen Echo Carousel now and then with her three preschoolers, who at the time we contemplated a trip to Binghamton had ridden three old wooden carousels in DC metro, plus at least four elsewhere, and didn’t regard any as more *their* carousel than another. Like Nunley’s, the Glen Echo Carousel costs two bucks a ride.



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“So how many carousels have they got in Binghamton?” I ask.

“Six,” Emily says. “No place else on earth can claim having six working hand-carved carousels. You know there are only 150 still operating in North America? My kids’ll want to spend a whole day riding every carousel, over and over.”

“That’ll rack up a chunk of change,” I say.

“No, it won’t.”

“How so?” I ask.

“They’re all free.”

“No way!”

“They’ve always been free. For almost a hundred years, nobody’s had to pay a cent to ride.”

“That sounds incompatible with capitalism.”

“It’s called *welfare* capitalism,” says Emily. “The owner of the big shoe company there believed in giving employees benefits. One of the benefits he believed would bring people joy was riding one of his carousels. Often, they were built adjacent to his shoe factories.”

“They old?” I ask.

“Built between 1920 and 1934, about as old as Nunley’s and



Glen Echo.”

We agree to stop at Binghamton for a night. That’s quickly changed to two so the little ones—Mikey, age three, and Ben and Bella, age four—can dedicate the middle day to riding carousels to their hearts’ content. Emily’s plan is to visit the carousels outside of Binghamton first then circle back, ending with two in the heart of town. That means we’ll start with the three thirty-six-horse, three abreast carousels and then visit the three with sixty or seventy-two horses, arranged four abreast.

“I’ve never seen a four-abreast carousel,” I say.

“They’re rare,” says Emily.

I’d never been to Binghamton, but we had skirted it in the summer of 1963 when I was sixteen and with my parents and two younger brothers drove to Scott’s Oquaga Lake House, northwest of Binghamton. Scott’s, which opened in 1869, offered “vacationing as they did in an earlier era.” Our time there was the last family vacation the five of us took together. A couple of years later, I left for college. Thereafter, whenever I returned home, I was considered a visitor. Our trip to Binghamton was like returning to a place I missed out on in 1963.

Because the annual spedic festival and balloon launch are happening while we’re in Binghamton, we anticipate crowds and lines at the carousels. We find no crowds, no lines, and the kids don’t even have to dismount, exit, and re-enter to keep riding. All the carousels had been crafted in the “County Fair Style” by Allan Herschell of North Tonawanda, New York. This style means that horses are less ornate, comparable to those traveled around to county fairs.

The first thirty-six-animal carousel includes a couple of dogs and pigs as well as saddlebags featuring a lion’s mane. The second, where the kids don’t want to leave, has magnificent, original panels. The third is closed for renovations, but we stop so Emily can take pictures. After that, we go to the biggest and most exquisitely carved carousel, with seventy-two horses and the original painted panels. I don’t want to leave. We then circle back to Binghamton to sprawling Recreation Park, whose sixty-horse carousel is accompanied by a Wurlitzer. Nobody wants to leave. Last, we drive to the zoo, where many of the carousel’s animals have been removed for restoration, are draped “do not ride,” or can be ridden despite missing half of their paint.

As we drive around, Emily, Ginger, and I talk intermittently about George F. Johnson, the factory foreman who had been promoted to co-owner, but in talking with workers called himself their co-worker. Believing that looking out for the welfare of one’s employees promoted

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loyalty, Johnson pioneered the forty-hour work week; instituted a profit-sharing program; built homes for his employees and took losses in financing their purchases; built and staffed healthcare facilities for employees and their families; gave free shoes to children of employees; and built libraries, food markets, and recreation facilities.

Union organizer Samuel Gompers visited the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company but not to agitate. He came to become familiar with Johnson's concept of The Square Deal because the company gave employees benefits exceeding what Gompers had ever succeeded in negotiating for a union. The Square Deal set the standard for what Gompers sought. One picture of George F., as he was called, shows him with FDR; another, with Babe Ruth. "Did The Square Deal give



FDR the idea of the Fair Deal?" I wondered out loud. In 1920 the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company had 20,000 employees; after ramping up to make Army shoes in World War II, it peaked at over 40,000.

After everyone heads back to the car after our fifth carousel in Recreation Park, I linger. Many of the songs the Wurlitzer plays are ones my dad used to sing in the car when we took long rides to visit relatives. He never stopped singing on those rides. I'm not consciously thinking about him when I suddenly realize I can hear his voice, and,

of course, he's singing. I don't mean that I vaguely recall what he once sounded like. I mean, I hear him as plain as day, as if he's driving the car, and I'm sitting alongside him in the front seat.

When I get back to the car, I say, "My dad visited me. I could hear his voice."

Ginger asks, "What was he singing?"

Emily says, "He didn't say he was singing."

"But he was," I say, nodding.

"So what was he singing?" Ginger repeats.

"I wonder who's kissing her now."

I wasn't entirely surprised. We knew we were making a trip back in time. Still, Dad had been gone for twenty years. I hadn't allowed for the possibility of *hearing* familiar voices. I don't *do* that.

Later that night after dinner, Emily calls me and Ginger over to her room. "I want to show you something."

"What?" I ask.

"Season 1, Episode 5."

"Of what?"

"*The Twilight Zone*. Sit. Watch. It's called 'Walking Distance.'"

A beleaguered thirty-six-year-old ad agency exec, Martin Sloan, stops for gas near Homewood. He grew up there but hasn't been back in almost twenty years. He decides to leave his car for an oil change and lube. He's got the time so he walks the mile and a half into town. To his surprise, it looks just the way he remembers. When he stops at an ice cream parlor, he's puzzled that an ice cream soda costs only ten cents. He walks to a place reminiscent of Recreation Park, where I lingered. He sees an eleven-year-old boy carving his name on the bandstand, walks over, and recognizes this as himself, Marty. His presence frightens the boy. Martin follows Marty home, sees his own parents as they looked in 1934, and they chase him off.

We soon see Martin again in the same park. He sees Marty on one of the carousel horses, jumps on, and again frightens the boy, who runs, as Martin yells after him: "Marty, I don't want to hurt you, son. I just want to tell you something. Martin! Please. Let me talk to you."

Seeking to escape, Marty jumps off. His leg gets trapped beneath the carousel. We hear his scream as we see grown-up Martin writhe in pain while grabbing his leg. When he sees Marty carried off, his leg mangled, Martin looks horror struck.

The next we see Martin, he's standing by a deserted carousel. In almost total darkness, alone, he gently says: "I only wanted to tell you this is the wonderful time for you. Don't let any of it go by without . . . without enjoying it. There won't be any more merry-go-rounds. No

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more cotton candy. No more band concerts . . . God help me, that's all I wanted to tell you."

After nightfall, we again see Martin by the carousel, alone, seated this time, with one leg extended stiffly in front of him. At the sound of his father's footfalls, Martin looks up. His father says: "I thought you'd want to know the boy will be all right. He may limp some the doctor says, but he'll be all right."

His father then produces the wallet Martin dropped earlier when they chased him away. He acknowledges that the driver's license expires in 1960, over twenty-five years away, and the paper money bears years that haven't occurred yet. Martin asks his father whether he now understands who he is.

His father answers, "Yes, I know. I know who you are and I know you've come from a long ways from here. A long ways and . . . and a long time. I don't know why or how—do you?"

After Martin shakes his head, his father says, "But you know other things, don't you, Martin? Things that will happen." We can intimate that Serling is alluding to the horrors of Nazi Germany and World War II. After Martin responds, "Yes, I do," his father asks whether Martin knows when his parents will die. Martin says yes; his father says he doesn't want to know when or how. "It must always be a mystery."

Then, putting his hand on Martin's shoulder, the father says, "You have to leave here. There's no room for you . . . and there's no place. Do you understand?" When Martin asks, "Why not?" his father answers, "I guess because we only get one chance. Maybe there's only one summer to a customer. The little boy . . . the one I know. The one who belongs here. This is his summer, Martin. Just as it was yours one time. Don't make him share it."

After Martin steps down from the carousel, his father asks, "Is it so bad where you are?"

Martin answers, "I thought so . . . I had to come back to get on a merry-go-round and listen to a band concert and eat cotton candy. I had to stop and breathe and close my eyes and smell and listen." The father says, "Maybe we all want that," and then tells Martin, "When you go back maybe you'll find that there are merry-go-rounds and band concerts where you are. Maybe you haven't looked in the right place. You've been looking behind you, Martin. Try looking ahead." In parting, Martin says, "Goodbye, Dad," and his father reciprocates, "Goodbye, son."

The lights go on, the merry-go-round creaks as it starts to turn, and Martin jumps on as it takes off. When we see him again, he's walking stiffly, and when he stops at the same soda fountain it's been remodeled in chrome and leather, the jukebox is blasting rock

and roll, and ice cream sodas cost thirty-five cents. The soda jerk asks whether he got his bum leg in the war. Martin explains, no, he fell off the carousel. The soda jerk says they condemned it years ago and tore it down, adding, “A little late for you.” Martin replies, “Very late for me.”

In the closing narration, we hear Rod Serling’s eerily-soothing voice: “[P]erhaps there’ll be an occasion . . . when he’ll . . . hear the voices and the laughter of the people and the places of his past. And perhaps across his mind there’ll flit a little errant wish, that a man might . . . never outgrow the parks and the merry-go-rounds of his youth. And he’ll smile then too, because he’ll know it *is* just . . . some laughing ghosts that cross a man’s mind.”



It’s clear: Recreation Park, where I lingered and heard my dad sing, provided the model for the park, carousel and bandstand in “Walking Distance,” released in 1959, when *Twilight Zone* was still a

hot new show.

The next day, before leaving town, we stop again at Recreation Park. Emily and I walk over to the bandstand. We find not Marty Sloan's but Rod Serling's named carved there. To prevent defacement, it's been protected.

"How can that be?" I ask.

Emily answers, "Rod Serling grew up seven blocks from here. This is the park where *he* walked as a kid, that was *his* bandstand, and this was *his* carousel."

"But how'd my dad manage to find Rod Serling's carousel?"

"Some people, like you and me, never outgrow merry-go-rounds and cotton candy," says Emily. "We imagine, we wish, we still lived in that moment. By expressing that wish, some people go back to certain places to hear voices from the past, the laughing ghosts, or your father singing along with a Wurlitzer organ. Isn't that what he said?"

"You saying, I was in the Twilight Zone?"

Emily answers, "If so, with the best of company."

Almost a year later, in the midst of the pandemic, Ginger starts having falls, breaks an ankle, then loses sensation over most of her body. If she doesn't have surgery to remove a tumor compressing her spinal cord, she's on her way to becoming a quadriplegic and might never regain sensation. Hospitalization and rehab would last twenty-one days.

Without explanation, our son Alex moves a box of old letters to the family room where Ginger and I will live after she comes home. After a week, I start brushing through the letters. I come across one from a local girl I met at Scott's in the summer of 1963 when JFK was still President and *Twilight Zone* was in first runs. She had taken a pickle boat across the lake for a square dance. We hit it off. She returned the next night so we could watch a new movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had forgotten her name and might have forgotten meeting her, except five months later, two weeks after JFK's assassination, she wrote me a letter at my high school, which my homeroom teacher presented to me publicly.

Seeing the letter again after fifty-seven years, I decide, I'm going to find her. The letter gives me her name: Carole. For school reunions, I'd developed a knack for finding people long lost. Turns out, finding Carole is effortless because she still uses her maiden name and lives in Binghamton. I write her at the Binghamton address, enclosing a copy of her 1963 letter and envelope. A month later, I receive a handwritten reply, slanted distinctly uphill. She says this was her seventh try.



I learn that Carole had grown up in Rod Serling's old neighborhood, three blocks from the Recreation Park carousel. She grew up thinking of it as *her* carousel. Her dad knew George F. As Mayor of Binghamton from 1950 through 1958, he orchestrated Binghamton's transition from the shoe industry to a technology-oriented base, centered around IBM. After Carole married, she returned to the neighborhood where she grew up. Her boys considered the Recreation Park carousel to be *their* carousel.

I find old news clippings that Carole's dad stood up to New York's Governor Dewey on immigration reform and to President Eisenhower on failure to support the revolutionaries in 1956 Hungary. Carole says she never met Serling—a graduate of Binghamton High School—but her friend's father used to meet up with him regularly while fishing and drinking on separate boats. Serling not only smoked and drank coffee like a fiend, says Carole, he also drank like one. That put enormous stress on his heart, which is why he died at fifty, still at his peak. "His daughter Anne wrote a biography about him. You might like it."

Carole reveals that they spiffed up Scott's for Season Two of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, a TV series that starts in 1958 and is on trajectory to end in 1963. She also reports that in summer 2019, while Emily led us on the carousel tour of Binghamton, Scott's celebrated 150 years of operation by the same family. Carole laments that, in January 2020, Scott's announced it could no longer make ends meet and would not be opening in 2020 for season 151. As far as I can tell, Scott's is still searching for a buyer.

For Carole, as for many of us of a certain age, the halcyon days—the ones we *imagine* going back to—were the 1950s and early 1960s. The early 1960s are also widely viewed as "the days of Camelot." JFK's assassination was considered "the end of innocence," although in hindsight it was one of several, and the ends of innocence keep coming.

Having been raised in a great house suitable for the mayor of a prosperous, industrial city, Carole now lives in a small apartment nestled among repurposed old factories. "I experience the ole factory effect—all day, every day, I smell potato chips," Carole laughs. "A hundred years ago, I'd've been inhaling toxic tannery stench."

With the pandemic still raging, we wonder, "Will we ever travel again?"

Emily insists we return to Binghamton: "Remember, one carousel was closed for renovation."

Bella asks, "Can I ride my favorite horse?"

Mikey snorts, "I want to ride the pig."

Ginger cries, “I’ll never get up on a horse again.”
Ben comes to the rescue, “Grammy, I’ll ride the chariot with
you. Will we still wear masks?”



The carousels pictured on pages 105 and 106 are located in Maryland. The carousels pictured on pages 108, 111, 113, and 115 are all in the Binghamton area.

