The cost of manhood

You can't beat a system you can't understand

By Sam Bari

If my mother remembers the days of my youth as the Dark Ages, I suppose I can't fault her. I hung out with a rag-tag gang of self-styled adventurers that were akin to a band of pirates, crossed with the likes of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Despite a few shortcomings, we were always good for a tall tale or a memorable deed of daring-do. Pookie Grossberg, Chilly Mac, Kinky Boswell, and Muffin Duffy were the core of this self-styled band of would-be ruffians, but a couple of others are worthy of mention. One of them was "Louie the Lip."

His real name was Louis Hammerman, and with a name like that, he should have been the icon of ultimate coolness. You'd think he would grow up as Louie the Hammer, or The Hammer Man, but no, that was not the case. Believe me, Louie did not deserve his name. How he was born with it, was beyond my realm of comprehension.

We suspected that his parents brought home the wrong child from the hospital after he was born. His mom was beautiful and his dad was a handsome, muscular, heavy equipment operator. He was everything that Louie wasn't. And one thing that Louie wasn't, was attractive.

You see, Louie was a pudge. He couldn't beat the Pillsbury Doughboy at arm-wrestling. His only physical attribute was a mane of wavy blond hair that was a total waste on Louie. If he wore a beanie with a propeller on top, he would have looked like Tweedle-Dee wearing a Goldilocks wig.

Instead of Louie the Hammer, he earned the nickname of Louie the Lip, and with good reason.

Since Louie was a physical disaster, he had to use other assets to survive his childhood. Fortunately, he was smart, and had a gift of gab. He also had a nose for making money. Louie was especially good at talking people into helping him with his hair-brained moneymaking schemes. That's how he earned his nickname, Louie the Lip. He always gave first class lip service whenever it was needed.

If we wanted to go somewhere or buy a ridiculous toy, the Lip always came through with the finances.

The Lip was such a good schemer that he had two newspaper routes in the same neighborhood by working for two different papers. Where we lived, the competing papers were "the Community News," and "the Journal." People read one or the other. We never figured out how he did it, but the Lip worked for both papers at the same time without either finding out about the other. He collected money from every house on the route.

The whole gang had to go with him whenever he collected money or the big kids would steal it from him. But that was okay. It was worth the trouble because the Lip had another passion that made up for all his character flaws. He had the best comic book collection in the state, and he let us read them whenever we wanted.

The Lip collected the Marvel Super Heroes as well as Flash Gordon, Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and Archie comics. He had Blondie, Gasoline Alley, and Terry and the Pirates. He was the first in line for every new edition. He had comics that the rest of us never heard of, and he knew the names of the artists and writers who created them. He was the unquestioned authority on the subject.

As we grew into teenagers, the Lip's collection grew along with us. While most of us were learning to date, the Lip was making money and concentrating on his comics because getting a date was not even a consideration. Somewhere around high school graduation, the Lip decided it was time to stop being a social outcast and turn his life around, so he joined the Navy.

None of us thought he would survive boot camp, but he proved us wrong. When he came home on leave, the Lip was no longer a pudge. His shoulders were broad, his stomach was flat, and he was 30-pounds lighter. He was an overnight hit with the ladies, and we saw him in a new light. Louie the Lip made the passage into manhood and had transformed into "Louie the Hammer."

A few days after he came home, we decided to meet at his house and raid his comic book collection for old times sake. Before he left for boot camp, he had carefully packed them in boxes that he stacked in his closet. However, when he opened the door, the closet was empty. His mom had decided that since he was gone, he no longer needed his old comic books and toys, and she donated them to Goodwill Industries. Like "Louie the Lip," they were no longer a part of his life. We were devastated.

Versions of this story have happened countless times throughout history. Mothers around the world have performed this task with good intentions. It's part of that system we can't understand. Although their penchant for keeping our lives in order often leaves us baffled and frustrated, we still love them, and wish one and all — a Happy Mother's Day.

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