

**The Revenge
of the E – I – E – I – Ohs
by Bill Russo**

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Published by CCA Media, Cape Cod

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**THE REVENGE
OF THE
E-I-E-I-OHS**



BY BILL RUSSO

With the strong Cape Cod sun high overhead, two young boys with dark curly hair, sat on the front porch of the ancient Pleasant Lake General store, sipping birch beer from glass bottles. Dreamily, through slitted eyes, they glanced across the street, watching the gentle waves lap the shores of the lake and discussed all things summer.

The chatter was of fishing, swimming, bicycling, camping, and girls. Carmine, at 12, had two years on his brother Lucca, and thus was the expert in all such matters, especially since he was the better fisherman, the superior swimmer, and had actually kissed a girl. As the brothers reclined on the high-backed wooden bench on the left side of the entrance to the store, they laughed happily with no thought of the next school year. It was two months off and the tourist season was just beginning in the usually quiet town of Harwich.

“I wish we had brought our bikes,” Lucca said as they watched hundreds of bicyclists passing before them on the Cape Cod Bike Trail, which claimed the route once paved with the wooden ties and rails of the Cape Cod Central Railroad. As of 2017 the bike trail runs almost half the length of Cape Cod from Dennis nearly into Wellfleet. An expansion is underway with the eventual hope of the trail running the entire 64 miles from the start of the island at Bourne to the ‘end of the earth’ at Provincetown.

“We got plenty of time,” Carmine counseled, “We can bring our bikes tomorrow. The bike trail isn’t going to go away between now and then!”



To their left, on the bench on the right side of the store's entrance sat a spry old man, also drinking birch beer from a glass bottle. His slick, bald head was covered by a wide brimmed black fedora with a white band. Very dark sunglasses with thick black frames shielded his eyes. The black shorts and colorful Hawaiian shirt he wore gave him a much younger look than was expected of a man in his 90s.

He looked over at the boys, his great grandsons, and recalled a time some eight decades prior, when as a young boy of ten he sat on the very same porch with his pal Rocco Accomando. The "Rock" was the fastest and strongest of all the fifth graders in Harwich and being his best friend came in mighty handy when the native Cape Cod boys decided to.....

"Hey G-Pop, can we go swimming now?" shouted Lucca, interrupting the old man's daydream.

"We can do anything we want fellas," smiled G-Pop. "It's summer, we're young, our time is our own, and we've got our whole lives ahead of us. Where do you want to go?"

There being three lakes within a mile of each other in East Harwich, they had plenty of choices.

"Well G-Pop, said 12 year old Carmine, I want to go to Jimmy Catfish Beach. I love that old tree that fell into the pond. We can walk on it to deep water and jump off it just as if it was a pier."



Photo copyright Bill Russo 2014 - from 'Jimmy Catfish', the prequel to 'Swamp Tales'.

"It's too scary Carmine," offered Lucca tentatively. "G-Pop told us about Jimmy Catfish and the man-eating catfish that live in that part of the water. I don't want to go anywhere near there."

"They're not there anymore Lucca," G-Pop said soothingly. "That all happened long ago. There's no more saw-toothed fish in the lake and almost nobody even knows about Jimmy Catfish except for you guys."

"That may be so but I still want to go to Seymour Pond. It's the best swimming place on all of Cape Cod," said Lucca.

"You're right about that son, and that's a secret that most of the tourists don't know. Millions of people come to Cape Cod for the saltwater beaches and they have no idea that right here in Harwich we've got Pleasant Lake, Long Pond, and Seymour Pond – the best fresh water lakes in the whole United States and we got them practically all to ourselves."

"I'm okay with Seymour Pond. We'll go to Jimmy Catfish beach some other time," said Carmine obligingly.

The three Fortunato males drained the last of their birch beer and returned the glass bottles to the store. They picked up their rolled up towels, held together by short lengths of rope, slung them over their shoulders and started off on foot for Seymour Pond. The twenty minute walk gave G-Pop just enough time to tell one of his stories of long ago Cape Cod.

"Your Dad will be along in four or five hours to pick us up. He knows that if we aren't at the store we'll be at one of the three lakes. We've got plenty of time for a great day. If you're in the mood, I'll tell you a story while we're walking - one that I've never told before."

"Let's hear it," both boys exclaimed. They loved their great grandfather and his stories. As a matter of fact the boys felt that somehow, in many ways he was the same age as them, though he was nearly ten times older.

"This tale starts back there on the porch of the Pleasant Lake General Store. It hasn't changed much since that morning some 80 years ago when my pal Rocco Accomando and I were sitting on the benches just like the three of us were today. And just like we did today, Rock and I were drinking birch beer.

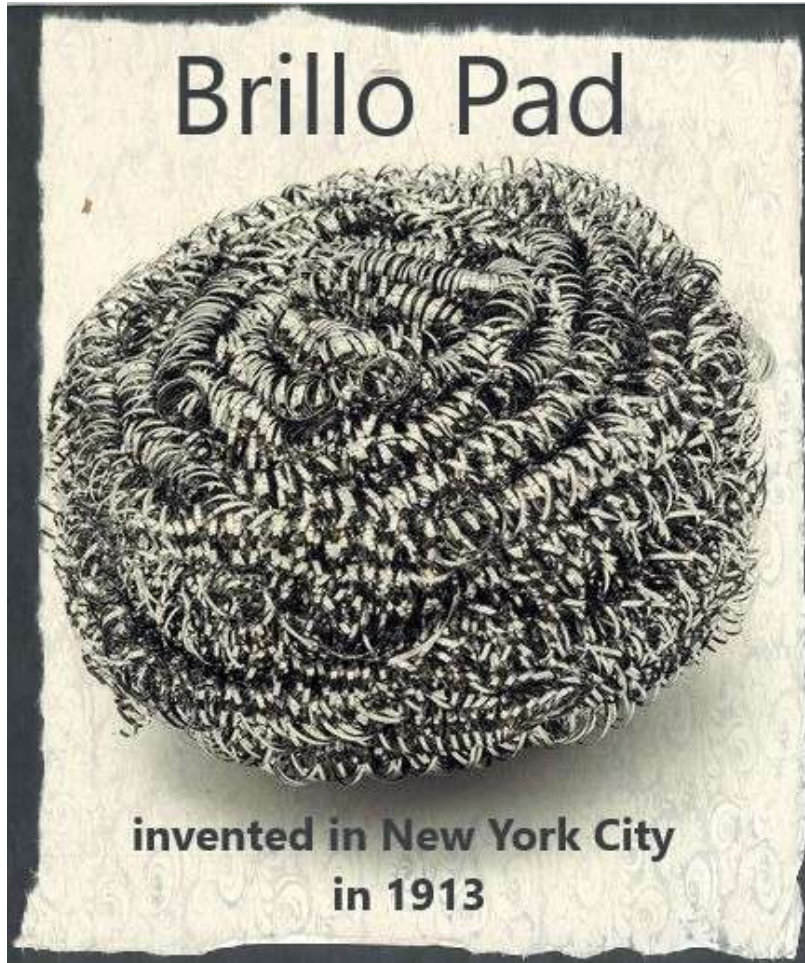
I guess the only real difference between now and that day back in 1935 is the trains. The bike trail that we ride on used to be the home of the Cape Cod Central Railroad. Every town in Cape Cod had a railroad station and the trains ran every hour all day long and most of the night. You could get a train in Harwich and ride the rails all the way to California. Course you'd have to change trains at Bourne, then again at Boston or New York before you finally got to Los Angeles.



Pleasant Lake RR Crossing in 1935

Rock and I had the bad luck to be kids during the 'Great Depression', a period of widespread poverty in the United States. We had it double tough because we were the children of immigrants. My folks, and Rock's too, came from Italy around 1910 and even during good times we weren't popular with some of the native Cape Codders.

Rock and I were the regular targets of the other kids at school. They called us 'Brillo heads' because of our dark curly hair. You guys probably don't know what 'Brillo' is. It's a scouring pad for cleaning pots and pans, made from curly strings of shaved steel wool.



We didn't much like being called Brillo heads, but we really hated it when they called us the 'Ohs' or when they starting singing the "E-I-E-I-O" song.

Every day was pretty much the same. When we walked in the school yard they'd start on us....

"Look here come the 'Ohs' - Accomando and Fortunato. Hey "Ohs, where are the E boys and the I boys?"

They called us the E-I-E-I-Os and made up a song about it using the melody of 'Old McDonald had a Farm'. They changed the words to.....

"All Italians should go home

E-I-E-I-O

Cause they smell like fish and garlic

E-I-E-I-O

All Italians please go back to Rome

E-I-E-I-O

And get out of Cape Cod real quick!

E-I-E-I-O!"

They called us the E-I-E-I-Os because almost all Italian names end in E, I, O, or sometimes A; like Amare, Gallanti, Russo, or Coppola. The native Cape Codders all had names like Crosby, Nickerson, Hatch, or Standish.

Because of this situation the Italian people lived in separate neighborhoods from the Cape Codders. Most everybody was a fisherman or earned their living selling things to fishermen. On the boats, our people had the lowest jobs. There were no rich sea captains among us. Our dads had to take the riskiest and worst paying jobs on the ships.

In Harwich we didn't have it quite as bad as people in some of the other towns, but still it was pretty rough. My only friend was Rock. He and I were the only Italians in our grade. We were best friends all through school.

Mr. Josiah Nickerson owned the Pleasant Lake General Store at the time and he was always good to Rock and me. He gave us jobs to do for him and he paid us fair wages for ten year old boys. We'd stack wood, help him unload stock, and sometimes make deliveries. He also helped us start a little business that allowed both of us keep our families fed after our fathers were lost at sea during a fierce storm.

We assembled a little stock of novelties and fruit from Mr. Nickerson and sold the items to the passengers on the train. Boarding at Pleasant Lake, we walked through the passenger cars selling apples, pears, newspapers, and even decks of cards and such. Luckily for us some of the train conductors were related to the legendary Italian boxing champ Primo Carnera and they allowed us to conduct our business.

At a time when the average man was five foot five inches tall and about 140 pounds, Primo was six foot seven and weighed almost three hundred! He was one of the most feared boxing champs in history. Primo spent much of the summer of 1935 rejuvenating himself on Cape Cod after losing a title fight to Joe Louis in June. During that season when Primo was in mid Cape Cod, there was a lot less 'E-I-E-I-O bashing' than usual; and Rock and I did pretty well with our little train vending enterprise.

Like I said, Rock and I were making out pretty good that season, what with all the goodwill created by having the great boxing king staying in our town. One Friday in July we loaded up our packs with extra supplies because we were pretty sure the Provincetown run was going to be jammed full of tourists. The train pulled into the Pleasant Lake Station at exactly 4:15 p.m. for a one minute stop.

"Hey Meo, nobody's getting off," worried Rock. He always called me Meo (pronounced Mayo) cause my real name's a mouthful to say - it's Bartolomeo.

“Don’t worry Rock. The train is full of tourists going to Provincetown. There are some big art shows and such this weekend. They probably haven’t had anything to eat or drink since leaving Boston. When we get on the train and tell ‘em there’s 13 more stops and 45 minutes to go before Provincetown, we’ll most likely sell everything we’ve got.”

We boarded Cape Cod Combination One and opened up our packs. I started off our spiel as soon as the train began moving on towards Brewster, the next station.....

“Hey folks try some of our wares, we got apples, bananas and pears. For two cents you can get a pickle, or try a slice of pie for a nickel?”

Well Carmine and Lucca, let me tell you those tourists couldn’t reach in their pockets fast enough. They were buying up our stock of goods so fast it looked like we’d be sold out before we got halfway to the end of the line. As the combination steamed into Wellfleet we had no idea that things were about to turn much worse.

Stationmaster Zip Willard was waiting on the platform. He greeted the conductor who quickly tossed him a few bundles of newspapers. The conductor hopped down the three steps from the train to the platform.

“Hello Zip, here’s the mail,” he said, handing the station-master a sack full of letters and postcards.”

“Thanks and here’s the Wellfleet outgoing mail,” Zip said, tossing a small parcel to the conductor. “Have you got any seats left on the train?”

“It’s standing room only. All three passenger cars are fully occupied this run Zip.”

“Well there’s only seven more stops to the end of the line, so I guess the young fella waiting for the train won’t mind standing up for a half hour or so.”

As the conductor yelled “All Aboard. Next stop, South Truro”, a tall, rugged looking teenager emerged from the Wellfleet waiting room and walked casually up the stairs and into the passenger car where Rock and I were selling our goods.

“Look who’s getting on the train Meo!”

“I see him. It’s Reggie Nickerson, the nephew of the owner of the Pleasant Lake General Store.”

“Just ignore him,” Rock said. “Business as usual. There’s only a handful of stops left to Provincetown.”

“Just to be safe,” I suggested, “Let’s go to another car.”

“But we haven’t finished working this one yet Meo. Let’s do the last few rows.”

We started walking to the half dozen sets of seats at the end of the first passenger car when Nickerson came at us. We were ten years old with a combined weight of about 150 pounds. He was 18 and

already over five ten and probably 180. Even Rock, as tough as he was for a ten year old, was intimidated.

“Gimme some of my uncle’s food,” said Nickerson, reaching into my pack and grabbing handfuls of candy and fruit, which he stuffed into his pockets.

“The price for what you just took is one dollar,” I told him. “Pay up now or I’ll go to the conductor.”

In answer the tall, sandy haired Nickerson unleashed his right hand and smashed a backhander across my face. I saw stars and barely heard Rock let out a war cry as he leaped on the bigger boy’s back. Rock managed to get a choke hold on Nickerson.

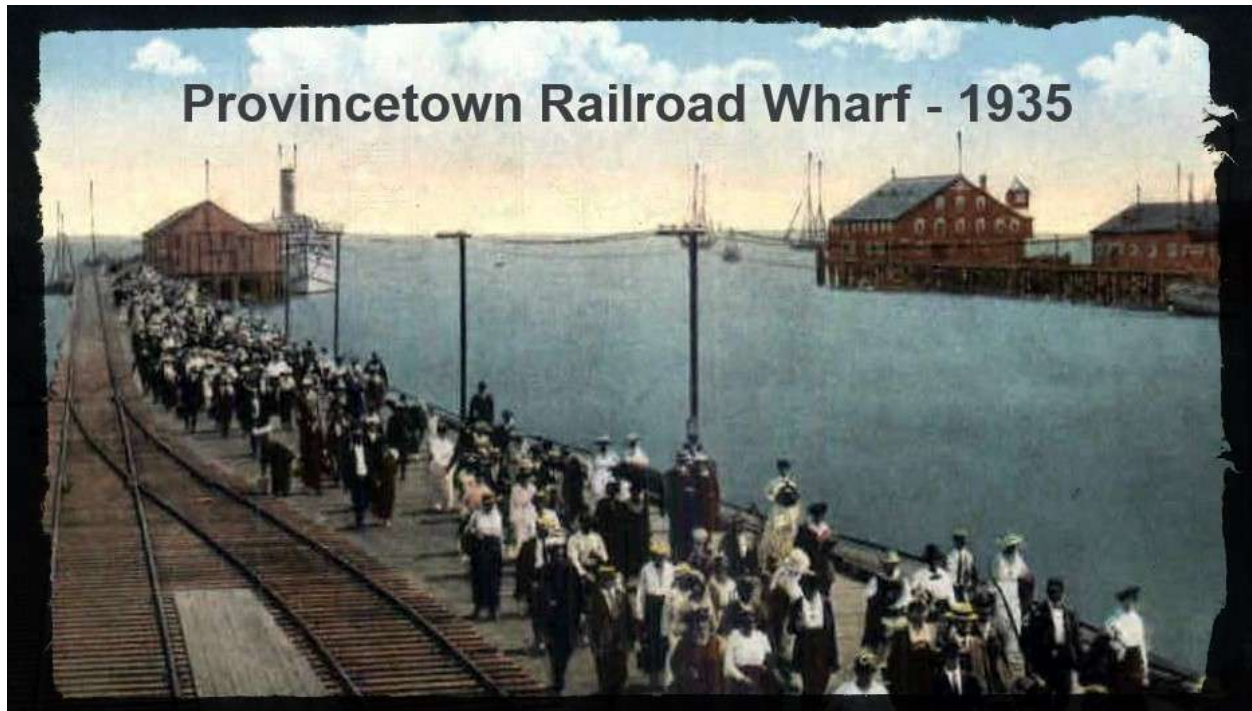
When my head cleared I realized that Nickerson had bunched his fists together and was smashing them behind him trying to break Rock’s ribs. Rock was bravely hanging on despite the pounding he was taking.

Dropping my pack, I dove for Nickerson’s ankles. When I connected he fell forward like a sack of potatoes and both Rock and I started boxing his ears. We raged on, totally out of control, beating him senseless. We probably would have killed him if the passengers hadn’t dragged us off.

The conductor soon arrived and questioned us and the passengers. Everyone who saw what happened agreed that Nickerson started the trouble. We figured we were in the clear, but when Nickerson got off the train a few stops later, through bloody lips he vowed that he’d pay us back a hundred times over for what we did to him.

We continued vending our merchandise and were completely sold out by the time we pulled into the South Truro Station. We lounged in the baggage car for the next four stops to the end of the line, courtesy of the conductor, Mr. Giovanni Mancini. Lying on sacks of mail we dozed off, waking up as we heard Mr. Mancini shout...

“Provincetown Wharf. Last stop everybody, Provincetown Wharf. Everybody off, end of the line!”



Rock and I ran towards the fishing boats moored at the end of the long wooden pier. We bought a quantity of quahogs, fluke, and oysters. Packing our purchases in ice, we took them back to Pleasant Lake to sell them to Mr. Nickerson and make a nice little extra profit for the day.

“Hey Meo,” Rock wondered, “Maybe Mr. Nickerson won’t want to do business with us anymore after what we did to his nephew.”

“I hadn’t thought about that Rock. Well, if he’s mad at us we’ll just take the train to Chatham and sell our stuff to Chatham Fish and Chips. They’ll be happy to have it.”

We got on the next run back towards the Upper Cape and by the time the train arrived at Pleasant Lake we were more than a little nervous about seeing Mr. Nickerson and having to tell him what happened.

Luckily for us the conductor, Mr. Mancini, had called Mr. Nickerson on the telephone and told him what happened. He explained that the brawl wasn’t our fault and Mr. Nickerson said we could still do business with him. He bought all of the fresh seafood that we had got at the P-town Pier. He warned us however, to steer clear of his nephew.

“Why don’t you boys switch your business from Provincetown to Hyannis for a while,” he suggested.

“We’ve done pretty well going to P-town,” Rock replied “I’m not sure we could make any money going in the other direction.”

“Hyannis is the capital of Cape Cod fellas,” Mr. Nickerson explained. “It has thousands of tourists and also has by far the largest year-round population on the whole peninsula.”

“To tell the truth, we’ve only been to Hyannis a couple times,” I admitted. “It seems like a big city.”

“There’s another thing to consider,” said the storekeeper. “The reason my nephew got on the train in Wellfleet is that he has a girlfriend there. So if you keep working the Eastbound Route you’re very likely to have another run-in with Reggie. There’s much less chance of encountering him if you’re on the Western Route. You’ll sell your goods just as well going through Dennis, Yarmouth, and Hyannis as you did on the P-town run.”

“You’re probably right,” I admitted. “And the trip is shorter too. We can get off the train in Hyannis and do some sidewalk selling while we’re waiting for the next train back to Harwich.”

So that’s what we did. Over the next few weeks we made more money than we ever had. Between Pleasant Lake and downtown Hyannis, there were two Harwich stops, two stations in Dennis, one in Yarmouth, and two more in Hyannis. The run to Hyannis was just a little over a half hour and the trains were almost always full.

“Hey Rock we’re going to have to figure a way to carry more stuff, we’re sold out already and we still got three stops to go,” I said after one of our best days – a Saturday at the end of July.

“We were able to give our Moms \$15.00 each this week. That’s more than a lot of grown men make!”

“That’s the truth,” Rock agreed, “and we’ve even got five bucks left over for ourselves. Since we’ve sold all our stock, why don’t we spend some time in Hyannis before we go back home?”

“Okay, what do you want to do?”

“I want to see the docks. I want to walk down Main Street. I’d like to sit down in one of those outdoor cafes and order a giant breakfast with eggs, toast, fried spuds, and slabs of ham. And I want to have a steaming cup of coffee!”

“Coffee? We’re ten years old Rock! Coffee? Do you think they’d sell us some?”

“Course they will Meo. It ain’t illegal for us to have coffee. We’re businessmen now. And businessmen drink coffee don’t they?”

“You’re right Rock. Let’s go to Main Street for Ham and Eggs and coffee!”



Cape Cod's biggest village, Hyannis (Circa 1930s)

Passing a dozen trendy sidewalk cafes on Main Street, we headed instead for the 'Five and Ten Cent Store' lunch counter. We had heard about the fabulous offerings at Woolworth's but had never before eaten there.

"Hey look at what's playing across the street at the Center Theater," Rock said as we arrived at the 'Five and Ten'.

"Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi together in the same picture!" I said. "The movie is called the Raven, written by Edgar Allen Poe."

"The first show is at two p.m., about an hour from now. It's too late for breakfast. Let's have lunch at Woolworth's and then take in the show."

Walking into the department store, our senses were stimulated by a thousand scents. As we headed toward the lunch room in the back of the building we first passed by the nut counter. Three huge glass cases were crammed full of trays of walnuts, pecans, peanuts, almonds and cashews. Counter top heating units kept the nuts toasty warm. The aroma of the steaming hot cashews was so delicious we almost forgot about having lunch.

Next we passed the perfume counter where an elderly woman with a painted face was spritzing an assortment of perfumes on her arms, face, neck, and just about everywhere else. One after another she picked up a bottle, sprayed some in the air and sniffed like a hound dog as the droplets fell to the

counter. If she approved of the smell, she'd spray some on her arm or wrist and sniff it a few more times. Rock and I rushed past that counter because the odor/aroma almost made us pass out.

Next was the toy counter. There's nothing like the smell of new toys to ten year old boys! We looked longingly at the selection.

"Hey Rock check this out. It's a wind up plane. You just twist the elastic band a couple dozen times and set the plane down. It takes off right from the ground! It's only 59 cents."

"Look at this wind up train set; an engine, a caboose, a coal car, and three passenger cars plus 50 feet of track for only \$2.89," said Rock. "They sure got some great toys here Meo, but I'm starving. Let's eat."

We went directly to the back of the building and took seats at the lunch counter. Everything on the menu looked so delicious it was hard to make a choice.

"Why don't you boys try the special," the middle aged, red-haired waitress suggested after she got impatient at our inability to make a selection.

"What is the special?" we asked.

"You will love it. Today's feature is Cubed Minute Steak, Hot Gravy, Sliced Buttered Beets, French Fried Potatoes, a drink, and a Hot Cloverleaf Roll with Butter."

"How much is all that going to cost?" I wondered.

"Twenty five cents," she told us.

"Okay, make it two specials please," Rock announced. "For our drink we will each have a cup of coffee with cream and sugar on the side."

"Listen honey, I think you're a little young for java," she protested.

"Well our money is pretty old m'am" I declared. "So just bring us the two specials and the coffee."

She gave us a kind of a funny look but when she saw me take a dollar from a plump little roll of cash, she probably figured we'd be good for a decent tip so she went off to put in our orders.

"Here's your lunch boys, enjoy it," she smiled, when she returned a few minutes later with steaming platters of steak, potatoes and all the fixings.

"I'll be right back with your coffee men," she said as she set down our plates.



Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store Lunch Counter - 1930s. Our waitress is on the far left.

Rock and I attacked that lunch like a couple of sharks in a feeding frenzy. We polished it off in about three minutes and gulped our coffee down just as fast.

"Care for another cup of coffee gentlemen?" the waitress asked.

"Yes m'am," I replied. "It was very good."

"I'm not m'am you guys," she said, brushing back a swath of red curls that had fallen over her eyes. "I'm Jane. But I like you two, so you can call me Janie," she said with a smile.

She was an older woman, perhaps thirty, but she had a girlish charm which was not lost on Rock and me. We began chatting with her as we drank our second coffee.

"Is this your first time in the big city?"

"No it's not, Janie," Rock replied. "We've been here a couple of times but we've never had the chance to look the town over before."

"We have a business," I added proudly.

"You do?" she asked, her green eyes widening into saucers, impressed that two ten year olds could actually be businessmen.

"We're train vendors. We have a line of food and novelties that we sell on the Provincetown train," I told her.

"Well not anymore," Rock corrected me. "We used to work between Harwich and P-town. But we decided to change our operation to the West-bound route. So now we work between Harwich and Hyannis."

"Janie," Rock said, "You've been nice to us and we like you. Can we ask you for some advice?"

"Sure guys, I've been around the block once or twice. Are you having girl troubles?"

"No Janie," I countered, "It's nothing like that. As you noticed, we're pretty young, but since both of us have no fathers we have to take care of our Moms. That's why we're in the selling business."

"And we think we'll do even better if we look a little older," Rock added. "Have you got any ideas on how we could do that?"

"Do what?" Janie questioned.

"Look older," we said in unison.

"Oh. Sure boys. Buy yourselves a couple of business suits. Get a couple of those new Fedora hats with colorful hatbands and feathers tucked into them. That will make you look like teenagers."

"Where can you buy those suits and hats?" I asked.

"Well you can get them brand new at Puritan Clothing but the suit alone will cost more than sixteen bucks and the hats could go as high as three or four. Have you got that kind of dough?"

"Not really," Rock said. "We gave our moms 15 dollars this week so we only have about nine dollars left over."

"Left over? That's the answer! Go to Left-over Main. You can get what you need for under a fin!"

"What's Left-over Main?" I questioned.

"It's the place where used things end up. Used cars, used clothing, and used people. It's a dreary quarter mile at the far end of Main Street where half the shops are thrift stores and consignment shops and the other half are seedy bars and flop-houses. Go to 'Nifty Thrifty'. They'll have some useable suits for you for a dollar or two."

"I just have one more question," I said.

"What is it honey?" Janie asked.

"What's a fin?"

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