

West Palm Graffiti



Where were we in '63?

Thomas Jerome O'Hara

Mostly humorous trip through transitional 1960's SE Florida adolescent culture.

WEST PALM GRAFFITI: Where Were We In '63?

by Thomas O'Hara

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Thomas Jerome O'Hara

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INTRODUCTION

Family, friends, neighbors, cops, demographic emergence, fledgling integration, attacks by bullies, attacking bullies back, twelfth floor water balloons, coconut launchers, nail launchers, Cohiba cigars, starter pistols and root beer balloons at the movies, fuse delayed explosives, wilderness and wildfire, getting chased, getting caught, convenience store bullets, rifles, getting paid to race rental cars, crime, combat, the 1960s.

The O'Hara brothers and their companions took for granted vast freedom, abundance, and security that would be inconceivable by today's standards. Their childhood circumstance was possibly the best that the world had ever seen or will ever see again. That there were too many kids wandering the neighborhood to keep track of didn't matter. Nobody in their neighborhood went hungry. They all lived in nice homes and had cool things. Moms were there for them all day. Nobody locked doors. Bikes were left out in the yard night or day when not in use. Drugs were medicine you bought at the pharmacy. What was porno? Kids fought and stayed friends. Pranks weren't crimes. Most of them actually liked to read. They were taught their country was the greatest in history. They knew we were the good guys.

West Palm Beach was a fledgling southeast Florida metro set in a seaside tropical paradise where people still rode horses through some parts of town. The phone book was less than a half-inch thick, including the yellow pages. Wilderness was everywhere, from the beaches, between the coastal towns, and on into the state. Duck hunters' early morning gunshots would echo across downtown from nearby Clear Lake. Seeing livestock was the rule, not the exception. Most cars had tail fins and most airliners had propellers. There were four TV stations and AM radio. With cell phones, internet, and video games decades into the future, few kids were overweight.

It was a place where kids could survive naïve innocence; the set of a family television show with a twist. Activities and adventures were usually borne of handy resources mixed with bored ingenuity.

Recreational spontaneity spawned from good and not so good ideas that were quickly implemented. Official consequences of being found out or detained had not at all achieved the severity of current standards of punishment. Capture by the police sometimes led to threats of arrest or brief detention, but kids weren't charged with a crime just because they had pulled a prank. They were turned over to and disciplined by the ultimate authorities: their parents or guardians. Then they were free to go back to friends and siblings where a new adventure modified for disciplinary compliance would inevitably hatch.

The baby boom years following World War II were gone before anybody knew it and they'll fade into the forgotten past with each passing decade. Nonetheless, remembering the wonderful uniqueness of that brief window from a childhood perspective compels an abject contrast to the societal evolution that flowed from that era through subsequent decades. On the one hand, youngsters living in paradise had it made and thought that all the world had it made too. Yet there existed a parallel demographic just outside their utopia that was coming into focus as its inhabitants probed the edges of relief. The boundary was just down the street, but it was beginning to blur for good.

West Palm Graffiti is a mostly happy, sometimes violent fictional journey through the southeast Florida culture of a vanished transitional era, depicting memories of improbable events and attitudes from that time and at that place through a perspective limited by adolescence, mobility, and demographics.

1963 - YOUR HUBCAP CAME OFF!

Mike Posey lived with his aunt and uncle in a quaint prairie style home on 28th Street in the Northwood neighborhood in West Palm Beach. The easygoing lad was a little stockier and blonder than most of his buddies, but what he lacked in stature was compensated by his tough athletic ability and ready sense of humor. One of eight siblings, Mike had been adopted separately by his Uncle Johnny and Aunt Ginny O'Rourke after his parents were killed in a car accident seven years earlier.

Johnny O'Rourke was one of the most colorful characters ever to grace any neighborhood in Palm Beach County. The big son of Irish immigrants was born in 1899 and proud of it. During World War I, he was likely the only soldier to survive the damage inflicted by an explosive German "dum dum" bullet and had a basketball sized crater where most of his left ribs had been to prove it. He smoked illegal Cuban cigars more often than not, drank a bottle of bourbon a day, chewed tobacco, and had a dozen spittoons strategically placed around the house. He was also a very successful professional gambler and convicted ex-bookie. At age sixty-four, he still had thirty-one years left in him.

By 1963 gambling laws were taken seriously in Florida, so by order of the court, there was no telephone in the O'Rourke household and never would be. Nonetheless, smoky poker games were scheduled and played on Johnny's gabled front porch around a centerpiece of high denominations. Uncle Johnny folded his hand.

"I'm done," he declared in his trademark gravelly baritone. "Anyone for a beer or something?"

He stepped from the porch into the spittoon lined hallway and collided with his cigar laden nephew, almost making the boy lose his grip on all those Cubans. Johnny's patience with Mike only extended to his contraband.

"Gawd dammit, Mike! Get back here!"

The steady pound of Mike's retreating bare feet down the wide hall suddenly had a metallic plink on one side ... thump ... plink ... thump ... plink ... as his right foot wedged into one of the gold cuspidors like a shoe, sloshing its syrupy brown contents along the corridor.

"Son of a BITCH, Mike!! You're cleaning up that goddam spittoon juice!!"

Thump ... plink ... thump ... plink ... thump ... plink faded in the distance through the sound of the back screen door twanging to a slam.

A block north of Mike's house, Patrick O'Hara lay listening through receding slumber to a mockingbird's favorite repertoire of songs drifting in through the window screen. The end of seventh grade was still a few weeks away, but today was Saturday. He stretched the sleep out of his skinny bones frame and adjusted his position in the comfy bed. For this little while, with the prospect of another glorious day at hand, he had entered a universe of his own. Time had been suspended to a degree that made him forget that the charm cast by the mockingbird would not last.

Pat and his younger brother Tommy were the two middle siblings of ten and as such were witness to almost all sibling events from one end of the family to the other. Although more academically inclined and less impulsive than his innovative sibling, Pat was no less willing to engage in spontaneous recreation born of such impulsive innovation. Whether during the regular school year or during summer school, Tommy viewed academia as simply another platform for entertainment.

Pat heard his dad approaching their room and got his mental notepad ready as he took another stretch. Tommy was still snoring.

"Hi boys." Dr. Bernard O'Hara prioritized family and practically spoiled his ten kids, so he was determined to make the work ethic plainly understood and amply rewarded. The thirty-seven year old pediatrician had already established himself as one the best diagnosticians in the state and one of the most humane. No person in

need was turned away from his practice because of genuine inability to pay.

“Today I want you to move everything out of the garage, sweep it out and put everything back a little better organized. As soon as you’re done, the rest of the day is yours.” Then he was gone. ²

By now Tommy had half opened his puffy eyes and was trying to synchronize them out of the slumber. For the next while, neither brother spoke. They were both back on the edge of that parallel birdsong universe, listening as a more distant mockingbird struck up a conversation with the original crooner.

Every block in their semi-affluent Northwood neighborhood was dissected and T-boned by narrow flora lined asphalt service alleys. Commercial vehicles did everything through the middle of each block. They collected garbage and yard trash, made deliveries, and serviced the utilities running above and below the alleys. Many residents’ came and went through these service lanes because their garage doors faced the alleys behind their homes.

And for neighborhood juveniles, the alleys were avenues to opportunity, adventure, invisibility, and escape.

Mike Posey took an extended pull on the Cuban in his teeth as he contemplated the stubborn tan stain around his bare right foot and ankle. Then he looked over the brand new chrome covered steel hubcap that had popped off somebody’s new Buick and rolled to the side of the road.

Mike extinguished the cigar and put it in his shirt pocket. He emerged from the end of the 28th Street service alley onto the sidewalk along Spruce Avenue and turned north to walk the half block up to O’Hara’s house. He chuckled as he remembered the pictures Tommy took last week of a fat man running towards his camera.

“Hey, Mike. Where’d you find the Buick hubcap?” Pat asked.

“You guys want cigars?” ³

“Not right here in our front yard, man!” Tommy pulled out a book of matches.

A few minutes later they were strolling in the alley that T-boned the other end of the block and ran parallel to U S 1 behind the Pool Motel. Pat studied his Cuban cigar before flicking an ashy cylinder onto the asphalt. "Hey, Tommy? Didn't you get another roll of film when you developed the fat guy pictures?"

His brother watched the thin puff slowly drifting from his pursed lips. "Yeah ... so?"

"Let's take some pictures then."

"Of what?"

"Let me see that hubcap, Mike." Pat stuck the cigar in his teeth and Mike handed him the hubcap.

"Watch." Pat rolled the clattering chrome disc down the alley, pulled the cigar, and yelled, "Your hubcap came off!"

Jason Stanley felt good. After a brief but hugely successful tenure as head coach of the Palm Beach High School football team that culminated in a class 5A state title, the six foot six twenty-nine year old had been offered and accepted an assistant coach's position at his alma mater up state. One of the quickest players in his day, Jason had been an All American guard for the University of Florida. Now just a short eight years after graduating, he had been signed to a dream job with limitless potential.

He knew he would do well and as he drove his big Buick Wildcat up Spruce Avenue, Jason couldn't help dreaming about raising a family in a neighborhood like this one. Jason turned off his car's air conditioner and leaned on the switches to all four electric windows. He wanted to smell and hear this neighborhood as he passed through it.

"Okay, here comes a car, Mike. Remember, wait 'til he starts to slow down."

The three boys had held trials rolling that Buick hubcap before awarding the honor to Mike. They were poised at the Spruce Avenue end of the alley a half block south of the 30th Street stop sign. Tommy peered further south through an opening in the big hedge at the end of

their long front yard. He could see cars approaching almost two blocks away from his position.

“Get ready.”

The driver began his deceleration at three-fourths block from the stop sign. Mike tightened the reigns on his urge to make the pitch too soon. The slowing sedan passed the alley and as he bowled the disc, his eyes widened. The car was actually a Buick! The hubcap rolled with a tinny ring before sounding the wavy claxon of a settling coin.

“Hey, hey, mister! Your hubcap came off!!” Mike scurried to the street and held the hubcap’s Buick emblem towards the emerging driver. Tommy checked his viewfinder behind the hedge.

Uh oh. Even that large Buick Wildcat car looked too small for the massive and muscular driver emerging from it. Mike exhaled fearfully, but the plan was to get chased and get pictures. He stuck to their plan.

The sudden unmistakable roll of a hubcap snapped the coach out of his trance and he heard a boy yelling something about his hubcap. Jason had rolled to a stop and stepped out of the Buick to thank the kid holding up his hubcap when the youngster suddenly turned and scurried around a hedge into a service alley with it.

“HEY, KID!! Why you little...!”

He began to sprint after his hubcap and glimpsed a second culprit briefly poke his head around the hedge. A few seconds later, the surprised man stood alone fifty feet up the alley.

“What the ... now where’d they go?”

Tommy poked around the hedge for his first shot ... click ... and decided it would be his last! How could such a big man move that fast?! Mike seemed to be steering his way up the alley ahead holding that hubcap with both hands. Pat had already vaporized somewhere. His own sprint seemed hopeless as the heaving stomp of pursuit was about to round the hedge and sight Tommy down the alley. He dove under a thick canopy of stringy orange love vines draped like a blanket over a small tree on the edge of the alley. Ominous stomping ran up

the alley and slowed to a stop just outside the curtain. *Crap*. The man wasn't even panting. Tommy didn't even have the luxury of breathing.

"What the ... now where'd they go?" the big voice quietly boomed to itself. Its feet shuffled forward like rowboats to moor a few yards up the alley. Suddenly, an exhilarating thought got Tommy to wondering how noisy his camera's shutter would be. He already had one shot of this Goliath running towards him that would impress anybody. But what if he could shoot this beast up close? Right here through the vines. *Mmmm ... too risky*. Then he heard a car go by on Spruce and decided to use the next car's noise for cover. With Goliath looking up the alley, Tommy gingerly parted the curtain for his shot.

Crap! Only one kind of critter could invade his clothes in such numbers and not begin stinging. Tommy ignored the big roaches. This shot was too important. Where the heck was that next car?! Those roaches annoyed like Lilliputians while the only Brobdingnagian in Florida stalked him four feet away! Then he heard Mike calling him in the distance. Jason shuffled ahead six feet to listen and Tommy could wait no longer. *Click!* The big man spun to the sound and Tommy rolled out the other side of the orange canopy. He broke into a sprint and tripped over a tangled garden hose thirty feet away.

Tommy looked back in a panic as the growling orange mass became animated. "I'll get ... ahhh ... aaah!" As the animation became more agitated, the long dead tree supporting the heavy blanket of vines snapped. "Roaches ... ROACHES! SHIT!" The canopy collapsed into a dancing mass of panic.

Tommy brushed roaches from his hair and stared for a moment before remembering his camera. Arms protruded from the mass as it stumbled in his direction just before the scowling big jawed face of a lumberjack emerged near the top of the monster and gazed stupidly into the camera. *Click*.

"Wha ... are you KIDDING ME?!!" Jason Stanley was shedding his orange robes quickly so Tommy had to suspend his survival instinct to complete the mission. Those massive arms tore the cocoon off wide shoulders down to a narrow waist. *Time to go!* Tommy turned to run and tripped over the hose again just as the vines slipped to Jason's ankles. He looked back as the big man sprinted three tangled

steps and went down like a roped rodeo calf. Hilarity overcame fear. *Click.*

The crackle of a police radio distracted Tommy as a big hand snagged his shirt back before he could run. He looked into an insanely wide-eyed face framed in crazy hair. They were both crawling with roaches.

“It’s been fun, but let’s go, kid. The cops are waiting.”

The camera! Goliath hadn’t mentioned it yet, but when he did those shots would be lost! His captor was focused on the two police units looking over his abandoned Buick Wildcat, its driver side door open with the engine running. Tommy discreetly let the camera drop into a dense stand of jasmine as he was escorted by.

“I saw two boys, I tell you! This one and the one who showed me one of my hubcaps.” Stanley had untucked his shirt to shake out any remnant roaches.

Officer Jim Stone had been relieved that his discovery of the abandoned Buick had only led to this prank. “Yes, sir, but that doesn’t explain how all four of your hubcaps are still on this vehicle.”

“The other kid must’ve put it back while I was in the alley!” The policemen looked doubtful. Jason suddenly looked at Tommy. “By the way ... where’s that camera? He took pictures of me chasing him, officer!”

Until this moment, Tommy had contritely stood flicking off straggling roaches in silence, neither denying nor admitting anything. But this revelation required action as both police officers now focused on the boy! Those shots had to be saved!

Just say anything!

“Well ...” he paused. “Well, my friend and me found a hubcap and thought it would be funny to fool somebody with it. But we didn’t expect ...”

“Found it?!” Goliath glared. “Your friend showed me one of my own Buick hubcaps, kid! I know what I saw!”

"It was a coincidence!" Tommy checked the cops' faces with a stolen glance. Were they trying not to laugh? He watched a roach crawl over his shoes.

Stone decided this incident was not a priority. He intervened before the big victim could rant on. "What is your name, son?"

"Tommy O'Hara, sir."

"Where do you live?"

"I live right there." Everybody glanced towards the ornately pillared two-story Mediterranean home across its big lawn. *Good*. The conversation was moving further away from the camera and those precious shots! "My mom's home," he offered.

"Well, Tommy, I'm afraid we're going to have to go home with you for a minute and go over this with your mom. Who's the other boy?"

Mike and Pat had worked their way back to the crime scene and were hiding in a ficus hedge less than twenty feet away, waiting for their friend's answer along with everybody else. They still had the Buick hubcap.

"Well ... I haven't known him very long ..."

"You stated earlier that he's your friend, son."

Oh no. Tommy was no rat and this might get bad. He could feel Goliath's glare, as the pleasant chirps of a pair of nearby cardinals did nothing to ease the tension. Tommy watched a squirrel bark mockingly from the trunk of an ancient oak tree. Was that how squirrels laughed?

"That's just an expression."

"Just an expression," Officer Stone repeated. "Tommy, your friend was an accomplice. We believe you know his name."

Suddenly the three adults turned to look at something.

"That's the other one! He has the hubcap! See? What'd I tell you!?" Then Jason Stanley noticed Pat. "I don't know who that other kid is."

At thirty-six years of age, Dorothy O'Hara was too attractive, youthful, and patient to be the mother of her ten children. Her eleventh child would show up in just under a year, after which she would

remain too attractive, youthful, and patient to be the mother of her eleven children.

She put the finishing touches on a small sandwich and turned towards her youngest daughter. "Here you go, Nancy."

Paul held up his glass. "Can I have more milk, Mom?"

"What do you say, Paul?"

"Pleeeese!"

Alice Smith walked into the kitchen for lunch and sat with the children. Happily married and raising two children of her own, the full time housekeeper had slipped into the role of second mom to the O'Hara children over the years.

"Alice, have you seen Tommy and Pat?"

"No ma'am. Not since a few hours ago. They was with their friend Mike."

"Well, I told them to be home by ..." The doorbell chimed and Alice stood to answer it.

"I'll get it, Alice."

Mrs. O'Hara saw a group of people through the curtain lace before pulling the door open. Tommy, Pat, and Mike stood in front of two policemen and a large disheveled young man. Her eyes fell to the shiny Buick hubcap in Pat's hands.

"How are you today, Mrs. O'Hara? My name is Officer Stone."

Two weeks later, the three friends had served their sentences and met their neighbor, Greg Bosnick, at the end of a different alley. After seeing the snapshots, the young pharmacist had laughed and gifted Tommy a new roll of film, so he had his camera with him.

"Okay, here comes a car, Greg. Remember, wait 'til he starts to slow down."



O'HARA RESIDENCE 1963

GREEN MANGOS

Ronnie Harpin took another crunchy bite out of the green Hayden mango as he strolled down the sidewalk along Spruce Avenue. Harpin was taller than most boys, good looking, intelligent, and honest, but not very well dressed. One of nine siblings, he was being raised by a loving set of hard working parents in a little shotgun house on 19th street in the not so pleasant, twenty square block, Pleasant City enclave. Like the other boys in their neighborhood, he had acquired a taste for green mangos, but not because he preferred the unripe flavor to the sweet taste of a ripened mango. And unlike his neighbors along their stretch of Spruce Avenue, Ronnie felt reasonably safe looking for mangos up here in the Northwood neighborhood.

“Darn it, Harpin!”

Ronnie sprinted forward a few paces before recognizing Patrick O’Hara’s voice. He turned to face O’Hara and his friend Pete Flood, his crunching jaw too occupied to utter a word. Flood was an only child. His blue eyes were set in handsomely chiseled Irish features under his thick crop of jet black hair. Exceptionally strong for his size, he was quick and tough enough to merit the right of way from even the worst bullies in Northwood.

“Get your own mangos! These aren’t ready yet! How can you guys eat them green anyway? They taste crappy that way.”

“Cain I keep these at least?” Ronnie shrugged to indicate his armloads of the stiff green fruit.

“Well, heck! You might as well now. They’re already picked! You going to eat those too?”

“Yeah. Most our mangos are done ate off our trees already. That’s why we got to hurry up and pick ‘em green. They ain’t enough and everybody wants ‘em. My mama can cook these here.”

Pete Flood was irritated. “So you come up here and steal ours?”

Harpin lifted his chin to point towards the nearest fruit burdened mango tree. “Half that fruit you’ll eat, some you can sell, but a lot ends

up full o'flies on the grass down here. I know it 'cause I seen it. I come to git some cause I knowed ya'll wouldn't really mind none."

Pete pressed on. "We don't care about you, but what if everybody else comes up here to take mangos? You guys are right down Spruce."

Ronnie Harpin had to laugh out loud. "Say *what*?!! Ain't nobody else comin' cross Northwood Road 'cept me, an' I ain't goin' no further than 29th Street right here. We can get in trouble comin' over here!"

Pat frowned at Pete as he spoke to Ronnie. "Come on, Harpin. Don't pick any more green mangos. Wait 'til they're ready in a couple weeks, then call me up and we'll make sure you got some ripe ones."

"Thanks, man, but you know we ain't got no phone."

"*Somebody* in your neighborhood does. Just call from their house."

"Yeah. Good. Thanks. Mama's gonna be glad." Harpin turned and broke into a lanky trot through leafy shade down Spruce.

As they watched him shrink into the distance, Pete asked, "He's got your phone number?"

"My dad's his doctor."

"Oh, yeah." ⁴

ALLEY OOP

Tommy watched the gleaming sport fishing yacht split the Lake Worth Lagoon like a plow dragging briny furrows as it sped past Currie Park towards the ocean. He turned his back to the seawall at the sound of footsteps to face the two smirking boys he least wanted to see.

“Well look who came to play in the park this morning, Morgan.”

“Too bad he doesn’t have anybody to play with, Jimmy. But don’t worry, we can solve that problem, can’t we?”

Unless you were Pete Flood or one of the Bonade brothers, a run in with Morgan Jansen and Jimmy Downs was dreadful. Though not as massive as his buddy, Jimmy could be every bit as cruel to anybody smaller than he was. Like all bullies, they mistook their size for courage and were bravest when reinforced by each other. Being caught alone or outnumbered by former victims was a risk they had imposed upon themselves and one neither bully would take.

Tommy stared past the bullies and waved. “Hey, Pete! I’m over here!”

Morgan and Jimmy dropped their smirks and spun away from Tommy in time to see him sprint between them towards an imaginary Pete Flood.

“Wha ... you die for that, O’Hara!!”

Tommy had eight yards on the pursuit, but the thugs had longer legs and a few seconds later, a laughing Morgan was kneeling on his shoulders and feeding him dirt while Jimmy yanked his scalp until he saw stars.

“Think you’re funny now, funny man?!” Jimmy guffawed and spit into his hands several times. He rubbed it into the dark sand covering Tommy’s face. Then they dragged O’Hara to his feet and Jansen stomped on his left foot. Tommy grunted in pain and hobbled away without looking back, hoping the hilarious bullies were through with him. Forty feet later, Morgan horse collared him back to the ground and Jimmy grabbed ahold of his right foot.

“Come on, Morgan. Let’s sweep up the park!”

“Good idea!” Morgan chuckled. He took up O’Hara’s aching left foot and squeezed it hard. Tommy wanted to yell, but the scent of Jimmy’s saliva on his face had hardened his resolve not to give these goons the pleasure. He was blinded by pain, sand, and spit.

Jimmy held up his hand as if signaling a cavalry platoon. “Forwarrd ... yo-ooooo!!”

The worst thing Tommy remembered about being dragged around the park was the painful bumping over ficus tree surface roots. As his imagination wandered, Tommy wondered how long it would take the bullies to discover the joy of dragging him over pavement. Five minutes later, they had missed that opportunity, kicked him a few times, and left him scraped, bruised, filthy, and bleeding in the remote south end of Currie Park.

Tinker watched the friendly creature and his two friends move away through broken sunlight down the verdant service alley. Then she discreetly sprinted to a new position up a heavily fruited calamondin tree next to the O’Haras’ garage off the alley, panicking a pair of flying creatures in the process.

Watching remnant feathers weave their way downward through the foliage, the little cat’s attention suddenly shifted to distant but increasingly louder barking coming from behind the friendly creature and his two companions. Suddenly two of them began hollering a lot of noises and sprinting right at her calamondin tree, while the third one humped the pedals to speed away down the alley. Tinker was about to jump to the ground when she saw the fearsome beast.

“Hurry up and climb, Bosnick!!” Pat O’Hara shot a quick glance at the big snarling Dalmatian bearing down on him and realized he was out of time. He spotted a sturdy lower branch, crouched with his arms back, and sprang upward, catching it with both hands. He swung his legs upward above his grip just ahead of the dog’s angry jaws and rode its raucous barks to a higher part of the tree where Greg was already helping himself to one of the juicy little oranges.

Pat stared wide-eyed at the over-sized angry Dalmatian for a moment before turning to glower at Greg. “So you sit here eating instead of pulling me up?!”

Greg answered with an assessment of the fruit. “These are good this year.”

Patch stood with his forepaws on the trunk and barked savagely up the little tree for several minutes.

Pat scanned the edges of the foliage and spotted what he had hoped to see. “There’s a branch that reaches the garage roof!”

“Tinker! Come on girl. It’s okay.”

Pat spun to see Bosnick climbing slowly towards a nearly invisible fluff of green-eyed gray. Greg held the dilated stare of his panicked pet for a second, then put the cat under one arm.

“I’ll go first with my cat. Let me by.”

O’Hara climbed to a different limb then moved to follow his friend. Tinker had almost relaxed when Patch resumed his furious snarling. Her reaction was instantaneous.

“Oww! Tinker! I can’t move! Let go!” Intense points of pain shot from Greg’s face and forearms just before Tinker’s rear claws found his hip.

CRACK!

Pat O’Hara watched in horror as the limb suddenly snapped and its occupants rode it into the low shrubs below. The startled dog hesitated just long enough for Tinker to hitch a ride on his face.

“Howrl! Howrl! Howrl! Howrl! ...” Greg sat up just in time to hear Patch’s cries of agony fade into the distance. The startled boys could only watch as Tinker rode the Dalmatian’s big head back up the alley like a rodeo rider. Greg was panic stricken. “TINKER!!”

Pat dropped out of the tree to the fruit littered ground. “Get up, Greg! We have to go get her!” Greg watched his friend sprint away with stunned relief for a second before springing off behind him.

“Pat ... look! Grab one of these!” The two by two inch pickets lying on the alley were the length of baseball bats and the boys each snatched one up on the run.

Patch had lost ground shaking Tinker loose and was still howling like crazy less than fifty feet ahead. His excruciating gaze shifted from

the dangerous little cat in front of him to the two snarling armed creatures running towards him and he decided it was time to bug out quick.

"Hi, boys. Can I have my pickets back?" Their neighbor, Chip Poker had been working on his fence when the boys had snatched his pickets. He smiled at their stuttering response.

"Oh ... ah ... hi Mr. Poker! Ah ... yeah, sure! We just borrowed them for a minute!" Pat handed both pickets to Poker.

"Don't worry none, guys. I seen what happened and was about to pick one up myself when that hound run off. Looks like you'd best lug baseball bats around here for now."

"Thanks Mr. Poker."

Two blocks south Morgan Jansen was chased across his back yard by his mother's fading voice.

"Morr-gaan! Where are you? You still haven't ..." was the last he heard before rounding their car barn and pushing through red ixora blooms into the weed pocked alley. His comrade in arms, Jimmy Downs was waiting where the north-south alley intersected the end of the east-west lane.

"Let's go, Morg. Your bike's at my house."

"What're we doing?"

"Alley hunting. There's a good trash pile a few blocks up around 31st Street. Maybe we can find something good."

"Yeah."

Greg Bosnick's cat scratched countenance rattled into the shade broken sunlight cascading onto the O'Haras' stretch of the alley.

"There's a big new junk pile in the alley before 31st street."

"Hey, where's your dog stick?" Pat O'Hara asked from the saddle as he leaned against a palm tree astride his bike.

"I have a bike. Where's *your* stick?"

"I can get away too."

They turned at the sound of Tommy O'Hara gliding around the corner. "What's going on?"

Tommy lifted an ancient Kodak box camera from his newspaper basket. "Look at this. I found it in the trash behind 28th Street yesterday. Move over there by Pat, Greg." Greg walked his bike over to the palm tree and stood by Pat.

"Now hold still." Tommy lifted the viewfinder to his eye to center his subjects and as he took the shot, he saw somebody trot across the alley behind them. Then he rushed for his bike. "Here comes Patch!"

Pat and Greg spun just as the big canine spotted them from a hopelessly close distance of sixty feet. Greg had to move in Patch's direction before Pat would even be able to push his bike off the palm tree. He pumped hard right at the surprised animal.

"Yaahhh! Git home, dog!"

Patch was angry and lunged towards the attacking creature before catching a scent that intensified the fresh pain around his face. *It's one of those creatures!* He detected a new scent blending with the first one. *There's another one behind him!* Patch instantly sprinted off through the deep green shade of the massive banyan canopy covering the O'Haras' back yard and on across 29th Street to disappear behind the Jamersons' house.

The three boys stood silently entranced by the dog's retreat as he disappeared around their neighbor's house. Tommy broke the trance.

"How'd you know he'd run, Greg?"

"I was just pissed ... I didn't."

Ten minutes later the boys had prepared for trouble and regrouped. They were armed with four foot lengths of broom handle, hanger slingshots, and ammo. The thin makeshift quarterstaffs were wedged through the seat spring at one end, which pushed them against the handlebars at the other. They could be quickly put into action with a grip and a lift to free up the weapon. The hanger slingshot was an ingenious lightweight weapon that rivaled the bulky wooden slingshot in both accuracy and power and had largely replaced the traditional design for its ease of fabrication and concealment. Once its fabrication was understood, the only materials needed were a wire coat hanger, eight to ten rubber bands, and a patch of inner tube rubber for its

center sling. Because its springy wire fork could be squeezed to fit inside a pants pocket, the coat hanger slingshot was also the perfect concealed weapon.

"Let's go check out that pile by 31st." Bosnick led the O'Haras to a trash pile between the massive trunk of a wide Australian pine tree and a thick stand of cactus, where they dismounted and tore through the potential trove.

Pat snatched the speaker out of a cracked and warped old radio just as Tommy moved towards it. "Dibs!"

Greg was puzzled. "Why'd you grab *that*?"

"Magnet."

"We've got company." Pat and Greg glanced up at Tommy before following his gaze southward down the alley.

There was no time to mount up. Jansen and Downs were already close enough to begin braking by the time Pat tossed the speaker into his newspaper basket. Still sore from the ten minutes of the slapping, pounding torture the two bullies had administered in a secluded corner of Currie Park, Tommy O'Hara saw that the opportunity he had been fuming for had arrived. He rested his hand on the makeshift baton wedged along his bike's frame and exchanged knowing glances with the others. As always, Morgan and Jimmy grew more impressive and fearsome as they drew nearer.

"Well, well, well. Hey, guys. How're you feeling, O'Hara?" Downs smirked mirthlessly through Morgan's ominous chuckling. The nearest of the three, Tommy held an impassive poker face as he closed his grip around the maple broom handle and said nothing.

"What's in the basket, O'Hara?" Jansen sneered. "You find us a camera?" When Tommy remained stoic, Morgan exchanged a puzzled glance with the other bully. Wind softly hissed above through the huge Australian pine during the next moment. Then the big boys mistook O'Hara's somber reaction for fear, dismounted, and lumbered toward him.

Uh oh. Tommy tapped the brakes on his rage to maintain his calm. Morgan and Jimmy were so big their shadows seemed to spread over him like the start of a solar eclipse as they approached. Jimmy's next statement was fateful.

“We’ll just borrow that camera before we use you to sweep up the alley ... oooffff!! ...” Downs thought he had been run through as Tommy drove the thin staff into his midsection before swinging it at Morgan.

“Why you skinny ... aayee ...” Morgan was quick enough to suddenly catch and grip the stick. Tommy was sickened with terror. “I’m gonna beat you into ... OOwww!!

Greg and Pat had yanked their sticks and were raining vicious blows on Jansen, who had to let go just as Downs executed an ill timed lunge directly into Tommy’s whipping broomstick. Downs had led with the bridge of his nose and the resulting blow reduced him to a kneeling, moaning bundle of starry pain.

Seeing he was alone, Morgan retreated, sprinting past their two bikes, and stopped a half block down the alley. He could only watch helplessly as the victors knocked his bike to the pavement before heaving it into the nasty cactus patch next to the trash pile. Downs was still on his knees cradling his face when they tossed his bike atop Jansen’s.

Jansen hurled a threat down the shady lane ...“We’ll get you for this!”... and was stunned by Tommy’s ominous answer.

“Shut up, loser! We’ll get *you* for this!!”

As they passed Jimmy, Greg gave him a light tap on the head with his stick.

“*Nooo!* Don’t hit me any more!!”

Jansen listened to the jubilation fade into the distance for a minute then walked back and kicked his companion.

“Get up, stupid! We have to get our bikes.”

Guy Bonade lifted the loosely packed paper grocery bag of house garbage out of the flip top trash bucket at the back of the kitchen. Shoving the twanging screen door to the spring’s limit with his foot, he dropped it crunching into one of the steel cans outside the door and replaced the lid. He hated taking out the kitchen garbage as much as any other kid and today it was also his turn to lug the family’s four galvanized cylinders all the way out to the alley for pick up the next

morning. Guy lived in a 1920's two story Mediterranean style home with five blonde-cropped, blue eyed brothers and one sister. Like his siblings, he was very personable unless provoked by mistreatment to him or anybody he happened to like. Gifted with quickness and inexplicable strength for their size, Bonades had delivered hard lessons on occasion to local provocateurs and bullies, who had long since granted them a perpetual right of way. His older brother Andy strolled around the corner of the stuccoed house right into Guy's request for assistance.

"Hey, Andy? Help me take these to the alley."

Andy grinned and shook his head. "No way, man. Today's your turn."

"Come on, Andy. These are extra heavy today!"

"And extra smelly too, Guy. You can handle it."

"They'll be heavy and smelly next time too, when it's your turn. Dad's still knocking plaster off that room where the roof leaked. I'll help you next time! We can do it ten times faster if we each grab a handle."

Andy took a moment to consider Guy's offer and decided he made sense on all points. "How do I know you'll help me when it's my turn?"

"Are you kidding! You'll kick my ass if I welch!"

"You're right. I *will* kick your ass. Okay, Guy, I'll take this handle. Let's go."

A block north, Pete Flood stood on the flat roof of his garage and scooped roof gravel ammo into his pocket for his hanger slingshot. The corner of the old building was wedged into the "T" intersection of the 33rd Street alley with only a weedy three feet to spare on either side. He glanced over the side of the roof's low parapet at the sound of crunching tires and watched the Smith's Ford station wagon round the corner below.

"Petey! You get down off that garage right now!" His mom glared at him from a second floor window across the fenced in yard. Like a

lot of garages in the old neighborhood, the Flood's garage was a separate two car barn.

"Okay, Mom." Pete had reached the roof from the alley by climbing up a mass of sour grape vines growing up the wall, but the way down the other side was much easier. He walked across the roof to a small ficus tree on the yard side, hooked his arm around a rubbery three inch limb, and stepped into space. Two seconds later he arrived at terra firma, released the limb, and watched it snap up to roof level.

His mother was in his face when Pete turned around. Colleen Flood had recently separated from her husband and was effectively raising Pete as a single working mom.

"I've already warned you, Petey! That old roof is rotten and one of these days somebody'll fall right through it!" She put her hands on his shoulders and calmly passed sentence. "But now you are going to think about that before it happens. You sit yourself down at the dining room table for a half hour and listen to the clock tick."

"Yes, Mom." Pete Flood walked inside and took a seat alone at the table. He was thinking about everything *but* that old roof when his big Rottweiler hound roamed over and put her head under Pete's dangling hand. Pete massaged her around the ears.

"Hey there, Beastie girl! You come to keep me company?"

"No she's not," his mom answered for Beastie. "Beastie, Beastie! Go on outside. Good girl." She ushered the dog out then started into the kitchen. "You have twenty-six minutes to go," she announced without turning around as she left the room.

"Ooww! Give me a hand with this, Jimmy!"

"Why should I? You didn't help me puw *my* bike off that cactus! Besides, I'm still puwwing bwistles out of my arms." Jimmy sounded like he was holding his nose.

Morgan backed off the cactus and gave Downs the most sincere looking face he could muster. "Come on, man," he said with a calmness he didn't feel. "Don't you want to catch those O'Haras? They're getting away! If you help me, we can get right out of here."

Jimmy yanked another ivory thorn out of his arm before gingerly testing the pain in his nose. After a few seconds, he lifted his gaze to meet Morgan's. Tommy's wayward blow had left Downs with a new face. Beneath two black eyes, the bridge of his nose had disappeared under massive greenish swelling that seemed to push his eyes a little further apart. He stayed slack jawed in order to breathe. It took more than Morgan had to keep a straight face, so he stared at his shoes.

"Yeah. I guess you're wight, but let's puw it out with something so I don't get poked any mowa. My face is kiwing me enough as it is."

A few minutes later they were underway. Downs face was so tender that even the air blowing on it seemed to hurt. He wanted to ice it, but that would have to wait until after he got even with Tommy O'Hara. Of course, the idea that he and Morgan had brought this pain upon themselves never occurred to either bully. They rode a block north and rounded the corner into the verdant lane that their adversaries had disappeared into earlier.

"Okay. Hold still."

Tommy lifted the box camera and steadied its viewfinder on his two smiling friends. As he snapped the photo, Tommy noticed movement back up the alley and lowered the camera for a better look.

"Time to go, you guys!" His feet hit the pedals before the urgent announcement had cleared his lips.

Greg and Pat didn't figure they had time to look back and instantly humped their wheels for all they were worth.

Pat called to Tommy's back, "Same guys?"

"Same guys! Right behind you!" He glanced over his shoulder. "They're catching Greg!"

Greg heard Tommy and yanked his small quarterstaff just as Jimmy and Morgan pulled alongside him.

Jimmy's call to Morgan was nasal. "Look out Mowgan ... Oh, CWAP!"

Greg thrust the sturdy broomstick into the spokes of Morgan's front wheel and let go.

“Jimmy ... What?!” Morgan only realized what was happening as the stick raked into the ringing wire spokes and locked up the front wheel of his bike, violently catapulting him from his mount and hurling him sideways into four fully packed garbage cans.

Guy and Andy froze at their kitchen door and exchanged glances. “What the hell was *that*, Andy?!”

Jimmy Downs heard the metallic thunk, the clattering bicycle, and mixed crashing noises ending with the wavy ring of settling lids. He slowed to a stop and had to chuckle at the debacle behind him. Then he started back towards his companion, not out of loyalty to Morgan, but because Jimmy did not want to be outnumbered three to one when he caught up with the O’Haras and Bosnick.

Morgan Jansen was basted with greasy smelly refuse under a fine coating of plaster dust mixed with the pink tabebuia tree petals littering the alley. His knee and elbow were killing him. Suddenly realizing where he was and whose garbage he had scattered, Morgan painfully forced himself up to his hands and knees before stumbling through banged up agony towards his escape vehicle twenty feet ahead. As he mounted his bike, he was vaguely aware that his friend was gliding back towards him when Downs suddenly braked into a one hundred eighty degree skidding turn and humped off in the other direction.

Morgan’s blood ran cold when he heard resolute panting riding sprinting footsteps closing the distance behind him. A strong hand suddenly grabbed his belt line and yanked him backwards off the saddle. Despite his panic, Morgan’s mind remained momentarily focused on the bizarre sight of his empty bicycle leaving him behind to briefly gain on Jimmy, who had stopped a safe distance away.

From Jimmy’s position at the end of the alley, Morgan looked like he had been raked off his seat by a clothesline before being roughly hauled to his feet by the two considerably smaller Bonade brothers. How could boys no bigger than the O’Haras yank a big guy like Jansen around and then shove him back into those garbage cans like that?

Andy suddenly spun towards Jimmy. "You better get back here, Downs, or we'll kick Morgan's ass!"

Forget that crap. Tommy O'Hara'll have to wait for another day. Jimmy put his feet to the pedals and disappeared around the corner.

Three minutes later, Pat and Greg rolled around the same corner. They stopped to chat with the Bonades and watch Morgan clean up the garbage. Greg came clean.

"Sorry about your trash cans. Morgan and Jimmy were about to catch me and I needed to slow them down."

"See! I told you it was Greg ..."

"Shut up and keep cleaning, Morgan!" Guy commanded.

Andy was frowning at Greg, who quickly added, "I'll help clean it up, Andy."

Patrick O'Hara had glided alongside the fat tabebuia trunk and remained mounted against it with his arms folded. Oblivious to the incessant shower of pink blossoms that floated past him like large snowflakes, he was faintly aware of nearby squirrel chatter falling like laughter on the prostrate bully cleaning garbage in front of him. Pat knew that there was a slim chance that the Bonades might order him and Greg to join their adversary, but after several moments, Andy delivered the verdict he had expected.

Andy broke into a grin. "Hell, Greg. We thought Jansen just happened to crash into our garbage cans. We'd've never believed Morgan's story about you, but now it makes sense and this is their fault."

"What the hell happened to Jimmy's face?" Guy asked with a chuckle. "He looks like somebody else now."

Pat finally spoke up. "My brother had to defend himself."

"Yeah, sure! They hit us with those sticks and ..."

Guy lunged at Morgan. "Shut up and get to work!" he snapped.

Andy had yanked Pat's hardwood baton from his bike's frame and was looking it over. "Good idea around here." Greg walked a little ways back and retrieved his stick from the alley.

"We got them with us because of a mean dog roaming around our street," Pat stated flatly.

“Looks like that dog accidentally did you guys a favor this time,” Guy observed. “How come Tommy didn’t come back with you guys?”

“He went to Flood’s house.”

“Good place to go with Jimmy running around loose.”

“Tommy figures Downs’ll go home to put ice on his face anyhow.”

“Oh you poor thing! Now keep this on your face and lay still. We’re going to the doctor for an x-ray in case something’s broken.” Clara Downs still couldn’t understand exactly how her son had fallen off his bike and smacked face first into a fire hydrant like that. He looked so awful she wanted to cry. *Will he ever look the same?*

“Thanks, Mom.” Jimmy wasn’t too concerned about his mother’s worry. The effect of the icepack riding his face was somewhat ambiguous. The cold dulled one kind of pain while the weight and touch of the pack exacerbated another. He had not wanted to admit being vanquished by a skinny runt like Tommy O’Hara. The fire hydrant fabrication had occurred to him the way so many other stories had over the years. Jimmy derived a little comfort imagining various scenarios where he would successfully exact vengeance upon Tommy O’Hara ... and his companions too ... for good measure.

Morgan was going to be pissed, but he’d get over it. After all, they would *really* need each other in this crazy neighborhood after what happened. How were they supposed to be nice if the other kids kept fighting back? It was getting to the point where they *had* to pick on the other kids to keep them in line!

Gawd my face hurts!

Wait ‘til I get my hands on Downs. I’m going to rearrange his face ... again!

Six blocks north, Morgan wheeled his crippled bike down the sidewalk along Spruce Avenue.

But first I’m going to need his help with the O’Haras ... and that Bosnick.

Ever the cautious minded kid, Greg had calculated the odds that the humiliated bully would try to get even as soon as the Bonades finished with him. Then he had begun to let the air out of Morgan's front tire. Morgan had spun menacingly towards the hissing, but Andy's casual observation had checked Morgan's vicious instincts. "Good idea, Greg. I'd let the air out of both tires if I were you."

Now Morgan found himself afoot and as he listened to the rubbery scrunching of the flats, it occurred to him that the shortest route home would take him right between Bosnick's and O'Hara's houses. *Crap!* Those skinny runts had just proven themselves a danger ... and they had big brothers too! As he realized that his best option would make his walk home over twice as far, the aches in his banged up knee and elbow began to compliment the stinging scrapes he had sustained in the crash.

Being fairly intuitive for a bully, Morgan considered the ramifications of the day's disaster as he paused to rest against a fat coconut tree. Of course, word of this defeat would spread far and wide and most likely already had. Now that his vulnerability was demonstrable, he would really have to be careful not to get caught alone by his former victims, who would be much more likely now to move around Northwood in armed groups. Well, two could play at this game ... but not if he alienated Downs. Morgan would just have to forget about his companion's dismal performance over the last few hours. If he alienated Jimmy now, Morgan Jansen could only survive this neighborhood by ... what? ... being nice? No, that's out of the question. He'd just have to get over it.

"Where's your fishing stuff?" Greg and Pat straddled their mounts behind newspaper baskets holding tackle boxes and bait. They gripped the fishing poles just ahead of the spinner reels, holding them against the grips of the handlebars. Although a week had passed without running into bad dogs or bullies, their stubby hardwood quarterstaves were still wedged at the ready along the crossbars of their bike frames.

“You guys go ahead.” Tommy scanned Turk’s cap bushes. He pulled off one of the red flowers and sucked the drops of sugary sap through its base. “Flood’s coming with us. We’ll meet you there.”

“Good enough.”

He watched them roll off towards the Rybovich Boatworks for a moment then stepped into the garage. Five minutes later, Tommy was pedaling into the Flood’s front yard.

“Mom! I’m going fishing!” Pete turned away from the front door towards Tommy. “She’s not here. Give me a couple minutes to get my stuff.” He slapped his baseball cap over his thick black crop and left Tommy standing at the foot of the stoop. As he laid his bike and fishing gear on the grass, Tommy heard several empty garbage cans crash and roll in the alley that ran along the side of the property. He stepped around the corner to investigate. Three galvanized containers, their lids scattered about, lay in the middle of the sunny alley back by Flood’s garage. One of the receptacles was just rolling to a halt when he reached the alley.

Tommy was tentative. There was no sign of who might have knocked those cans around with such force. Realizing that no animal would’ve pushed all three of them over like this, he hesitated for several moments before looking in all directions and heading back to his bike to retrieve his broomstick quarterstaff.

Jimmy Downs was just about to risk attacking him in Pete Flood’s front yard when Tommy stepped back into the alley and strolled right past his hiding place behind a thorny limeberry hedge. Seeing that Tommy was now armed, Downs was glad that Jansen was at the other end of their ambush, waiting just past Flood’s garage. A week had passed since he had been fitted with a special plastic mask to protect the painful, delicate fracture across the bridge of his nose and now was his best chance to avenge his suffering. The second Tommy paused near the garbage cans, he and Morgan would step into the open and have him surrounded. With any luck, they would have a couple of long minutes to exact their vengeance upon him before Pete or any other rescuer arrived.

Tommy stopped at the foot of the vine draped wall of Flood’s car barn to check out the mystery.

“Well, well, well. Look who’s here all alone.”

Morgan had stepped around the corner of the garage and stood hands on hips fifteen feet away. O’Hara instantly and viciously hurled his stubby broomstick like a spear and threw himself scrambling up the vines. His lucky chuck caught the surprised bully in the solar plexus and Morgan sank to his knees like an evangelist. Believing the running footsteps behind him were Pete’s, Tommy paused, giving Jimmy just enough time to lunge onto the vines and grab his back pants pocket. Tommy desperately kicked backwards, catching a stunned Downs in the forehead just above his mask. Jimmy went rubbery at the close call and nearly fainted, his limp body letting go of all but Tommy’s pocket, which tore away, leaving Jimmy in a free fall to the sandy asphalt. Tommy cleared the garage parapet just as the two goons came off their hands and knees and began climbing.

Tommy began to run towards escape across the flimsy surface to the ficus tree on the other side when the crunching roof gravel voiced opportunity. He returned to the parapet and began pelting his pursuit with handfuls of the tiny rocks.

“Damn it, O’Hara! Now we’re going to throw your ass off the roof!”

Tommy was pumped up and felt ecstatic. He couldn’t resist taunting his predators until the last instant before capture, knowing he could safely ride the rubbery ficus limb on the other side of the roof to the ground and sprint into Pete’s house. He waited atop the far parapet, his arm hooked over the small branch, and watched his oversized adversaries stand up on the roof and ride their cruel smirks in his direction.

Morgan hurled the first oath. “Now we’ll fix your shit, O’Hara!”

Jimmy was slugging his right fist into his left palm when the roof fulfilled Mrs. Flood’s prophecy and both bullies disappeared hollering and crashing onto whatever was stored inside the garage below. Tommy stood stunned for a moment, trying to comprehend what he had just seen.

“Just leave them there, Tommy. Mom’ll let them out when she finds them.” Pete was standing on the ground with his fishing gear looking up at Tommy. “Well. Come on. Let’s go.”

The two fishermen ignored the pounding, the pleas to be let out, and the threats coming through the padlocked garage doors, and rode off to a good day's fishing.

Colleen Flood stepped out through the kitchen into the breezy back yard, lugging a wicker basket full of bed sheets towards the clothesline. It was a perfect, bright day to hang out the laundry and after setting the basket down, Colleen paused to savor the moment. Several baritone blasts of a ship entering the nearby Port of Palm Beach sent her imagination wandering to the Bahama Islands just offshore. Enchanting chirps of a million cicadas permeated her consciousness, holding her in a trance that was suddenly vaporized by bumping noises and muffled voices coming from inside the garage!

Colleen dropped what she was doing, hurried into the kitchen, and bolted the door. After locking the front door, she moved quickly to the telephone next to the stairs and dialed zero.

"Operator."

"Hello, operator. I have some people prowling in my garage. Please send the police ... and hurry!"

"Yes, ma'am, right away. What is your address please?"

Four minutes later, the first of three brown and tan cruisers rushed to a stop out front. Sergeant Billy Carr hurried across the front yard and heaved his muscular frame atop the stoop with a single bound just as the other cherry tops arrived at the curb behind him.

"Mrs. Flood? I'm Sergeant Carr and these are Officers Patterson and Huntoon."

"Thank you for getting here quickly. The gate to the back is locked. We'll have to cut through the house."

Carr turned and addressed Huntoon, who began to move as the order was given. "Head around the side and cover the alley."

Colleen led the two officers to the back yard and pointed towards the now silent car barn doors.

Carr noted the padlocked doors and asked, "Does the garage have any windows, ma'am?"

"No, officer."

Whoever they were, they had become locked in somehow. "If you would, please fetch the key to the padlock and wait over here."

Sergeant Carr sent Patterson to his left with a nod, and then checked Huntoon's position before calling through the door.

"This is the police department. Identify yourselves." His command was met with silence at first. Then adolescent male bickering under breath drifted around the padlock. He and Patterson exchanged glances and Carr repeated his order.

"Okay, boys. We know you're in there. Identify yourselves right now or things will become a lot worse."

The muffled response was laced with desperation. "Don't shoot us! Don't shoot! We can't get out!"

The three policemen looked at each other across silent, close mouthed laughter. Sergeant Carr took a moment too long to gain his composure and a second voice burst out, "We're not robbers or anything! We fell through the roof! We have our hands up, officer!"

The humorous aspect suddenly evaporated. "Anybody hurt?"

"No, sir. We're both okay."

Only two kids in there. Carr turned when he heard Colleen approach with the key. "One of the boys says they fell through the roof."

Colleen went gray. She whispered through her fingers. "Oh dear Lord!" Then she called to the doors, "Petey? Are you okay?"

"Yes, ma'am, we're okay, but Pete's not here. We're his friends. We were playing on the roof and it caved in."

Carr put the small key into the lock. He gestured that Colleen move back, then called through the doors. "Okay, guys. Put your hands on top of your head and keep them there. We're going to open the doors now."

Twenty minutes later the four fishermen rolled onto 33rd Street with a typical catch from the Rybovich Boatworks' docks, hauling enough snapper to feed eight people dinner.

“Let’s clean these at my house ...” Pete fell silent at the sight of the brawny cop standing with his mom next to the tan and brown cherry top. Morgan and Jimmy were in the back seat.

Mrs. Flood spotted her son. “Petey? Oh, hello boys. Wow! Looks like another good day fishing! This is Officer Carr.”

The four boys had stopped and Pete greeted the sergeant respectfully. “Hello, sir.”

Ever anxious around consummate authority, Bosnick and the O’Haras put their feet to the pedals and Tommy announced that they had to get on home. Carr’s command held them like reins.

“Hold on just a minute, guys. We have to sort a few things out, then you can go. Okay?”

The four riders dismounted without a word and waited. Billy Carr had decided that his passengers had been up to no good and was anxious to wrap things up here before hauling the culprits to their homes. He put pencil to pad and started with Pete. “Do you recognize these individuals, son?”

“I’ve seen them around the neighborhood,” Pete stated flatly.

“Are they your friends?”

“These guys? No, sir.”

“Oh, come on, Pete! You know ...”

Carr shot the bullies an ominous glare. “I ordered you boys not to say a word! Now don’t make things worse!” He turned back to Pete. “So they’re just acquaintances?”

“What?”

“I mean you run into them around the neighborhood, but don’t hang around with them.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, they try to avoid me.”

“What?”

“I mean we’re not friends is all, but they’re not robbers or anything.”

Carr pressed for more information. “Why do you think they were on top of your garage?”

Pete bent down slightly to peer into the cruiser. “They’re always doing dumb stuff.” Then he looked Sergeant Carr in the eyes. “That’s all it was.”

Pete had just confirmed the veteran cop's hunch that his two passengers were big trouble for the other kids. Flood's confidence also strengthened the perplexing notion that he was too tough for these guys to handle in spite of his smaller size. He looked at Greg and the O'Hara brothers for a second and decided they had something to do with that protective mask gracing the Downs boy's face just below the nasty bruise on his forehead.

"Okay, you three can go now." He turned to Pete. "You don't know any more about this incident?"

"This is the first time I've seen these guys in almost two weeks, sir."

"Thanks for your help. Your mom has agreed to keep their bikes out back until they can come back for them." Carr pushed the cruiser door closed in Morgan's face. Jimmy craned around his companion, looking like a serial killer in his prescription mask.

Pete waited for Sergeant Carr to turn towards the police car before lifting his right hand as if to take an oath and then waving goodbye to the prisoners with four fingers.

A week later, Pete Flood rolled out of the alley at the end of his block and turned south onto Spruce Avenue. Strong aroma of buttermilk wafted from the riot of white brush like melaleuca blooms coming to life around the neighborhood. From the corner of 33rd Street, he spotted two boys down Spruce near O'Haras' house and his pace towards a thick stand of peach hibiscus became deliberate. Pete dismounted, leaned into the flora, and quickly retrieved the signaling device stored there. He carried the two foot length of steel plumbing pipe over to the iron grated storm drain at the curb, gave it three ringing whacks and waited. Two seconds later, one of the boys waved his arm before trotting a ways and leaning into the street gutter.

Bosnick's holler reached only faintly. "I'm with Mike! Come on over!"

"What're you guys doing?!" Pete yelled into the grate.

"Nothing!"

“Okay!” He swung into the saddle and was about to pedal south when the O’Haras raced by his position. Pat rode his big brother Bernie’s Raleigh three speed English racer. He led Tommy by forty feet and laughed as he widened his lead on the slower bike. Pete watched as Pat turned around to taunt his brother and wondered if he would look forward in time to react to the car parked fifty feet ahead.

“Haw haw! Nothing beats this English ...” Whomp!!

The Raleigh instantly stopped at the parked car. Pat skipped off the rounded upper edge of the sedan’s rear window, somersaulted over the roof, and came to rest seated on the hood. Tommy skidded to a stop next to his woozy brother, his expression of concern riding unbridled hilarity. “Ha ha ha ha ... you okay? Ha ha ... that looked sooo funny! Ha ha haahhh!”

The brothers heard Flood laughing before they saw him riding up. “That was better than a circus stunt! Hah haahhh!”

Pat groaned as he slid to the street and hobbled back to the Raleigh. “I think my ribs and knees are broken ... oh shit!” He frowned as he lifted Bernie’s bike to the choking guffaws of his companions. “Bernie’s going to kill me.”

The bike’s front wheel was so bent that it wouldn’t roll or even move through the fork that held it. The fork itself had bent so far back towards the bike’s frame that the bent front wheel would catch the frame if steering was attempted. Now that the front wheel would not roll or steer, the only way to move the bike was to lift the front wheel off the pavement and roll it ahead on its rear wheel. Pat lifted the front wheel and started the three block trek home.

Tommy rolled back and controlled his hilarity long enough to offer help. “Go ahead, Pete. We’ll catch up.”

Greg was the first to greet Pete when he arrived at 29th Street.

“Check out these pictures Tommy took with the old camera he found.”

“Oh man. Patch is coming up behind Pat and you. What ended up happening?”

“Just a minute. Here’s another one like that. You can just see Jimmy on his bike in the background. Morgan’s behind him ... hard to see. They were about to chase us past Bonade’s.”

“How’d you get these pictures?”

“It was just lucky.”

“You seen the bullies? Their bikes are still at my house.”

“I heard they’re in big trouble after the cops took them home.”

Mike walked over and changed the subject. “Here comes Tommy and Pat.”

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