



DUELING WITH DOT

In the pictures, it seemed so easy to settle fights: just have a duel. Two swords, some fancy footwork, and a clear winner. In real life, it wasn't as simple. Especially when girls were involved.

My duel with Dot started over pineapple.

There was a factory on Eaton that canned pineapple from Cuba. Shipments of pineapple arrived at odd times, and they were always cause for celebration for us kids. Because when the workers processed the pineapple, they discarded the cores in a huge pile behind

the factory. There's nothing sweeter than a fresh pineapple core on a hot day.

I was sitting on our front porch when Pork Chop rode up on his bike.

"You hear the news?" he asked me.

"Hear what?"

"Mami is really angry!" Pork Chop exclaimed. "The Kingfish wants to ban bolita!"

That's what folks were calling Mr. Stone—the Kingfish of Key West—'cause he was so bossy.

"Why would he ban bolita?"

My best pal made a face. "Says gambling ain't good for getting tourists."

That didn't make any sense. Everybody loved to gamble, as far as I could tell. Key West's best businesses were gambling and liquor.

"Did you go by Eaton Street this morning?" I asked him.

"Pineapple ain't in yet," he said. Then he patted his back pocket. "I gotta go deliver these bolita numbers for Mami now. She don't want Mr. Stone showing up in our kitchen."

I was still sitting on the porch when lunchtime

rolled around. A couple of kids were whizzing down Frances on bikes. Dot was one of the kids. She slowed as she passed me.

“Where’s everybody going? Pineapple?” I said.

“Big marble tournament,” she said. “Why? You wanna play me?”

“‘Course not,” I said. “Keepsies don’t play girls.”

“Have it your way,” she said, and pedaled off.

The next morning, Kermit and me went to Pork Chop’s house. The gang was already there.

“Any word on the pineapple?” I asked Pork Chop.

He looked confused. “What’re you talking about?”

“When’s it coming in?”

“It came in. Right around noon yesterday.”

“What?” I demanded.

“I figured you’d heard. Every single kid in town was there.”

Realization dawned on me.

“She tricked me,” I said slowly.

“Who tricked you?” Ira asked.

“Dot! I saw her go by on her bicycle, and she swore the pineapple hadn’t come in!”

Pork Chop gave me a look. "And you believed her?"

I shook my head in dismay.

Dot had Winkied me.

Ma came home carrying two cans and a couple of brushes.

"What's that, Ma?" I asked.

"Paint from the New Dealers," she replied.

I lifted a lid. The paint was pink.

"Really, Ma?" I asked.

"Beggars can't be choosers. I wanted green, but it had all been taken."

She went inside, but I sat there on the front porch staring at the pink paint.

Then I slowly grinned.

"You gotta see it!" Pork Chop exclaimed, Ira hot on his heels.

"See what?" I asked.

"Just come!" Ira said.

Pork Chop smirked. "It's the most hilarious thing you've ever seen, brother!"

We went behind a house on Love Lane and peered into the backyard.

“Look!” Pork Chop said.

Painted on the old outhouse was:

Queen Dot's Throne

In pink paint.

There was even a pink crown.

Pork Chop chortled. “Isn’t that a riot, pal?”

“It’s a regular work of art!” Ira said.

I had to agree: the artist had talent.

Queen Dot's Throne started showing up on outhouses all around town. Nobody knew who was doing it. Rumor was that the mysterious painter struck in the dark of night, like the mysterious Shadow on the radio show.

Me and the gang were playing marbles in front of my house when Dot came storming up. She was spitting like a cat.

“I know it’s you!” she shouted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, all innocence.

"You're the one who's painting 'Queen Dot's Throne' on outhouses!"

I looked at the fellas as if shocked. "It ain't me. It's probably one of them New Dealer artists."

"It is so you! Freckles over on Pinder Lane saw you slipping out of a backyard with a paintbrush."

I held out my hands. "You see paint on these hands? Must've been someone else. I've just got a familiar face."

She shook with rage and then whirled around and marched away.

We burst out laughing.

A few days later, the gang and I were knee-deep in dirt, playing a game of marbles, when a barefoot girl with pigtails came running up to me.

"Beans Curry!" she said. "Your mama's been holler-ing for you for the last half hour."

"I didn't hear her," I said.

It was the truth.

The girl put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "Well, she said you better get your bungy down to the kraals and pick up some turtle meat on credit, or you ain't gonna have no supper."

Then she turned and ran off.

I stood up. "Guess I better go, fellas."

"Can I stay here? I don't wanna do chores," Kermit whined.

"Fine, stay. I'll pick you up after."

I ran down to the kraals as fast as my legs could carry me. When Ma hollered, you ran.

There was a little shack at the edge where you could put in your order. An older man stood behind a wooden counter.

"Hi, Mr. Thompson," I said. "Ma sent me to get some meat on credit."

"Sure thing, Beans. Give me a few minutes to butcher some meat for you."

"I'll wait outside," I told him. I kind of liked the turtles; I didn't really want to see one chopped up.

I sat near the turtle kraals, peering down into the water. The big creatures were swimming lazily, their shells appearing, then disappearing beneath the dark surface.

I felt someone push me. Before I could see who it was, I found myself flying through the air. I landed in the water and sank. When I came up, I was gasping for air, and turtles were bumping into me on every side. Now I knew how it felt to be tossed into the kraals.

Terrible.

I heard laughter and looked up. Dot was grinning down at me.

"You look like a turned turtle!" she hooted.

Standing next to her was . . . *the girl with the pigtails?*

"You!" I spit out. "Did my mother even call for me?"

She pretended to think hard for a moment, and then she looked at Dot. "Boys sure are easy to fool."

"You said it," Dot agreed.

I hated that girl.

Come to think of it, I hated both of them.



DOG DAYS

Avery had his easel set up, and he was working on another picture of a little Conch house. It was one that the New Dealers had recently given a pink paint job. This time, his picture matched real life.

“You sure like painting houses,” I told him.

Avery dabbed watery blue under the roof eaves of the house.

“Why don’t you paint something exciting?” I asked him.

“What do you suggest?”

I threw up my hands. "I don't know. How about a sword fight?"

He chuckled. "A sword fight? Does this look like a Hollywood set?"

"I bet that the whole world would want to visit Key West if there were sword fights."

His mouth twitched in amusement. "You might be onto something."

I sat there and watched him paint for a while.

"What's it like in Hollywood?" I asked.

"It's like anywhere else," he said with a shrug.

"But it must be exciting!"

"Hollywood isn't very exciting, kid. It's hard work and long hours. It's like anything else: a job."

I stared at his painting. "Do you really think Mr. Stone sending out postcards and brochures will make people come here?"

"I don't see why not. It's all about telling a good story. Just like a Hollywood picture."

"What's the story?"

He waved his paintbrush. "'Come discover a hidden gem, Key West. Where the weather is balmy, the ocean breeze sweet, and the architecture unique.' You

would have a starring role as the Charming Local Boy.”

“That sounds like a pretty boring picture to me,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes.

Then I smiled. “Say, could you get me a screen test with Warner Brothers?”

I wasn’t the only one wondering about what Mr. Stone was doing. Lots of folks were talking. And not all the talk was good.

“I hear they’re going after the dogs!” Kermit said.

“The dogs?” Pork Chop said in disbelief. “Tell it to Sweeney!”

“It’s true!” Kermit insisted. “Mr. Stone says they’re a nuisance.”

Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t seen quite as many strays around the lanes lately.

We saw the dogcatchers in action the next day. We were playing marbles in the cemetery—there were always good patches of dirt to be found there. A bunch of New Dealers had cornered a dog on Frances Street. One fella had a fisherman’s net, and the other had a small chunk of meat. He tossed the meat to the dog, who

lunged. As soon as the dog started eating, the other fella threw the net over the hound and dragged it off, yipping.

"What are you going to do about your dog?" Ira asked.

The hound in question was fast asleep on a gravestone.

I didn't know when Termite had become my dog, but he had. Or maybe I'd become his person.

Either way, I needed to keep him safe.

I tried out some more of my acting on Ma that night. I explained what was going on with the dogcatchers and asked if I could keep Termite in the house.

"Inside?" she asked dubiously.

"I'm just so lonely with Poppy gone," I told her dramatically. "Please?"

She sighed heavily.

"I suppose so," she said, shaking her head. "What's one more pest in this house?"

But bolita and dogs were just the beginning.

Mr. Stone came after us kids next.

We were on Fleming Street with a big pack of kids, playing marbles, when Mr. Stone came storming up in his Bermuda shorts.

I was just getting ready to shoot when he demanded, "What are you doing, Peas?"

"Beans," I said.

"Of course," he said. "Now, can you please answer my question: what are you doing?"

All the kids turned to me like I was the Big Cheese.

"We're playing marbles. I'm beating Too Bad here," I said.

Too Bad nodded. "He sure is! Second time this morning!"

Mr. Stone wagged his finger at us. "You children need to get out of the street."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's *dangerous*!"

"It's dangerous playing marbles?"

"You could get hit by a car!" he said.

What cars?

"Luckily, I have an excellent solution," he declared. "Follow me!"

Like the Pied Piper, he led us down streets and lanes, halfway across town.

"Here we are," he announced, stopping in front of a vacant lot.

The ground was swampy, with buzzing mosquitoes

everywhere. There was a simple wooden seesaw in the middle of the lot, and a dried-out coconut palm listed in the back.

“Isn’t this lovely?” he enthused. “Look, there’s a seesaw! Isn’t that nice?”

“Uh, I guess,” I said.

He clasped his hands. “It will make a much better impression if tourists don’t see a bunch of children running wild in the street.”

“So this is like a jail?”

“No, of course not!” Mr. Stone said with a wave. “This is called a playground.”

“A playground?” I repeated.

He said with exaggerated slowness, “It. Is. Where. Children. Play.”

I blinked at him.

He clapped his hands. “Have. Fun. Playing!”

Then he walked away.

I realized Avery was right. Mr. Stone was making a Hollywood movie called *Key West*. And he didn’t want any kids acting in the movie.

We’d just been left on the cutting-room floor.



LESSONS

It was September, and all across Key West, kids were bawling their eyes out. Because even though almost everyone had been laid off, the town still somehow managed to employ the teachers. Which meant we had to go back to school.

The grammar school was on Division Street, and my mother liked to tell us we were “going to Division Street to learn division.”

Hardy-har.

On our way to school, we saw men working. Mr.

Stone directed them as they carried a tall metal can of some kind.

"On the corner, please," he instructed them, and they put it down with a bang.

He saw me standing there. "What do you think, Peas?"

"It's Beans."

"Of course," he said. "So what do you think of the trash receptacles?"

"Huh?"

"The garbage cans," he explained. "We bought them at considerable expense. I think it will make a real difference."

He was spending money to put garbage cans around Key West? What was he gonna do next? Put gold and diamonds on outhouses?

I just shook my head.

In my opinion, it was the grown-ups who needed to go back to school.

There was a big map of the world on the wall in our schoolroom. I found myself staring at New Jersey, wondering about Poppy. It seemed very far away.

Our teacher's name was Miss Sugarapple, but there

was nothing sweet about her. She liked to give us tests. Seemed like we were having one every day.

Today it was a geography quiz.

"You have a half hour to complete this test," Miss Sugarapple told us.

Around the room, pencils started flying. But I just stared at my paper. We were supposed to write the names of countries in Europe, and I didn't even know where to begin. If she'd given us a test on the names of the lanes of Key West, I'd get an A.

There was a knock at the classroom door, and a little boy appeared.

"Principal wants to see you, Miss Sugarapple," the kid said, and our teacher followed him out.

The minute the door shut, I stood up. I might not be good at geography, but I knew where things were located.

I walked up to Miss Sugarapple's desk and borrowed a pencil to make it appear that I wasn't doing anything wrong. My eyes scanned the desk, looking for the answer sheet.

"Hurry!" Pork Chop said.

Every kid in the room had stopped what they were doing to watch me.

Finally, I found the answer sheet under a grocery list. I had started to stuff it down my pants when our teacher walked in and her eyes met mine.

My punishment was to stay after school and write *I will not steal* two hundred times on the chalkboard. In cursive.

"I hope you've learned your lesson," Miss Sugar-apple told me.

I had. The next time, I would just stick the answer sheet up my shirt.

I wasn't the only one getting into trouble at school, though.

We were doing our spelling lesson when I heard barking. Very *familiar* barking.

A while later, I was called into the principal's office. Mr. Mahon was a cranky-looking man with a bushy mustache. I didn't blame him for being cranky. I wouldn't want to work here, either.

"Follow me," he said.

Waiting outside the front door, barking his head off, was Termite.

"I understand this is your dog," Mr. Mahon said. "He's been barking outside all morning."

"Sorry," I said. "He must have got out and followed me here."

I walked Termite home and put him in the house. He was back barking at the school by lunchtime.

Termite was an even worse student than me.

Some kids would do anything to avoid going to school. They'd say they had a bellyache or their ears hurt. Kermit was fond of this trick. The kid said he felt sick nearly every other day.

The sun was up and I was already dressed and ready to go, but Kermit refused to get out of bed.

"Shake a leg," I told him. "Or we're gonna be tardy."

The lump of blankets didn't move. I knew he was just pretending to be asleep.

Termite whined.

"Maybe he's dead and we'll finally have the room to ourselves," I said to my dog as I walked over to my brother.

I yanked the blanket off Kermit.

"Get up—" I started to say, and then gasped.

He was soaking wet.

"Did you have an accident?" I asked, shaking him.

Kermit blinked up at me in confusion.

"My throat hurts," he croaked.

Kermit burned with fever. He cried, saying his throat hurt and his ankles, too. He lay in bed, drifting in and out of sleep. That's when I knew he was really sick. No kid wants to stay in bed *all* day, even to avoid school.

My mother fetched the doctor.

"Your boy's got rheumatic fever," he told her.

My mother paled. "What do I do?"

"Give him aspirin to keep his fever down. But other than that, he just needs to stay in bed and rest."

"But he'll be fine, won't he?" my mother asked.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it. If his heart is stressed, he could die," the doctor said.

"Die?" I whispered.

"Yes," he replied.

I looked in the bedroom at my brother shivering in the bed. For the first time in my life, I wished a grown-up would lie to me.



ARITHMETIC

I ended up getting my own room after all.

Not because Kermit died, but because he got better.

“Your son must stay in bed. There should be no physical exertion at all,” the doctor told my mother. “It could damage his heart.”

“For how long?” my mother asked.

“Six months at least,” he told her.

My mouth dropped open. My mother’s mouth dropped open. We could have caught a swarm of mosquitoes between us.

It turned out I could handle bad babies but I couldn’t

handle Kermit. He whined for water. He whined for me to tuck in his blanket. He whined for me to bring him some toast. Could I read him a book? And on and on and on.

Even Termite kept his distance from Kermit. I think my little brother was driving my dog nuts, too. That's when my mother decided to give Kermit Buddy's bedroom. We moved the crib into my parents' room.

Not to mention I changed my mind about what I would buy from the Sears, Roebuck catalog if I was rich. Forget accordions: I wanted a toilet!

See, Kermit wasn't allowed to go downstairs to use the outhouse because it might strain his heart. So my mother put a pot in the corner of his bedroom for him to do his business. Guess whose job it was to empty the pot? Me.

Everyone at school felt sorry for Kermit.

Miss Sugarapple paused by my desk one day.

"How is your poor brother doing, Beans?" my teacher asked me, her voice dripping with sympathy.

I shrugged.

Her voice lowered. "Is he going to live?"

"Unfortunately," I said.

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Kermit was bored from being in bed all day, so the minute I got home from school, he started hollering for me.

"Beans! Beans! Come upstairs!"

"Go on and keep him company," my mother said.

"Do I have to?" I begged.

She just looked at me. "He's your brother. He almost died. You should be happy to spend time with him."

I groaned.

"Besides, I have to run some errands. I'll take Buddy with me. I'll be back in a little bit."

But I knew my mother was lying. She was sick of Kermit, too.

When I got to Kermit's room, he was sitting up in his bed. He'd lost some weight and still looked a little pale, but his mouth worked just fine.

"What'd you do in school today, Beans? How're the fellas? Did you see that it rained right after lunchtime? Want to play cards?"

The questions poured from Kermit's mouth in a rush. It almost made me wish I was back in school. Which was saying something, considering the day I'd had.

Miss Sugarapple had handed back our arithmetic tests. I got a bad mark on mine. I don't even want to say how bad.

"If you practice more, you'll get better," she told me.

I'd been practicing arithmetic since I'd first stepped into the school, and I never got better at it. Besides, I wasn't the only one who was bad at arithmetic. President Roosevelt wasn't much of a whiz, seeing how the country was still in a depression.

Termite started barking like mad, and I looked out the window, worried that dogcatchers were coming.

But it was just the postman.

"Call off your hound, Beans!" he hollered. "I got a letter for your ma."

"Termite!" I shouted. "Quit it!"

The dog crawled under the porch.

"That dog of yours is a menace," the postman grumbled as he handed me a letter.

"He's all bark, honest," I told him.

But he just frowned and walked away.

I looked at the letter and recognized the slanted handwriting; it was from Poppy.

I opened it and read quickly.

Dear Minnie,

How is Kermit doing? I know you said the worst had passed and I shouldn't rush back home, but I feel terrible. If things change, I can always borrow money from my sister to get back.

I met with the man at the factory again, but he said he had to wait and see about hiring.

I wish I had better news, but I don't.

Hope all is well in Conch Town. I miss you and the boys more than you can know.

Love,

Your Curry husband

I might not have been good at arithmetic, but I knew that Poppy not getting work plus his not coming home would equal my mother being upset.

Better for her to wait and read good news rather than this bad news.

I went to the outhouse and did my duty. Instead of the Sears, Roebuck catalog, I used the letter. Paper was paper.

It was all scratchy on your bungy.



SHOES

Girls were confusing. They got excited about things that boys didn't. Even my mother.

She was standing in front of me, holding the dress she'd made.

"I finished it, Beans," she announced. "What do you think?"

I thought it looked like a lady's dress with some green ribbon, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

"Sure looks nice," I told her.

She wrapped it up carefully and put it in a basket.

"I'm going to deliver this to Mrs. Higgs now," she

told me. "Feed your brothers breakfast. I'll stop at the store on the way home so we can have an extra-nice treat for supper tonight."

She practically bounded outside.

We'd barely finished breakfast when Ma walked back in the front door.

"What'd you get for supper, Ma?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said, sounding defeated. "Mrs. Higgs didn't pay me."

"She didn't pay you?"

"She said the dress wasn't up to her standards. That she expected machine stitching. She said she 'won't pay for bad work,'" my mother recited, and pulled the dress out of the basket and stared at it.

Then she sat down at the table and put her face in her hands.

"All that time. For nothing," she whispered, and she sounded like her heart was broken. "I can't believe it."

But I wasn't surprised about it one bit.

It was just like a grown-up to lie.

At school, I couldn't concentrate. Everything just flew by me: the teacher's words, the numbers on the page, the letters in my reader. I had known that things were

bad, but my mother's tears had let loose something in me: fear.

So when Johnny Cakes asked me to set off the fire alarm bell again, I said yes. I felt a twinge of guilt when I thought of Cem and the other firefighters. But then I pictured my father up north in New Jersey begging for work, and the devastated look on my mother's face, and I hardened my heart. Someone had to do something.

Like Poppy said: I was the man of the house now.

I looked Johnny Cakes square in the eye. "I want more money this time."

Me and Johnny Cakes met in his office to make the plan. He had a map of Key West spread out on his desk. There were little Xs by all the fire alarm boxes around town.

"I don't want to get caught, like I nearly was before," he said, tapping the map. "You need to buy me more time."

"So what should I do?"

He stared at the map. "Set off alarms as far away from each other as possible. I have a lot to load up. And make sure none are near the route my truck will be going."

I looked across the room at the pile of coffins.

In the end, we picked four alarm boxes around town.

"I don't want to leave anything to chance," Johnny Cakes told me. "You need to do a practice run."

That's how I found myself racing through the streets of Key West, trying out the route. I skirted the alarm boxes so as not to draw attention. When I made it back to Johnny Cakes's place, he looked pleased.

"That should give me plenty of time," he said.

"Good," I said, panting.

Then he looked down at my dirty bare feet.

"Don't you have any shoes?"

"No," I said. "I can run just fine without them."

"What if you step on something? A piece of glass? I'm buying you a pair."

He was like a mother hen. The criminal version.

After Johnny Cakes bought me new shoes, I stopped by Too Bad's to play marbles. I let him win twice and left with the fire alarm key in my back pocket.

Maybe we should start calling him Too Easy.

The following night, I waited in bed until the house was quiet. Then I slipped out the back door, holding my new shoes.

Problem was, I didn't have socks. Hadn't even thought about it when Johnny Cakes bought me the shoes. But there wasn't much I could do about it now, so I just put the shoes on anyway.

I started running.

Pulling the alarms felt a little easier this time. Maybe because more was at stake than going to the pictures or buying ice cream. This Depression was bearing down on my family like a hurricane. One good wind would sweep us away. I needed to blow us in the other direction.

The first two alarms went off fine. Things got sticky when I arrived at the third one. Literally. Some stupid kid had put gum in the keyhole, and I couldn't get the key in.

I gave up and headed to the last alarm, the sound of the fire engine clanging in the background. My feet were killing me. The new shoes rubbed against my bare heels. By the time I reached Too Bad's house, it felt like someone was shoving a knife into them. I couldn't take it anymore. So I took off the shoes and threw them in the first garbage can I passed.

All I had left to do was to return the key.

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Everyone seemed to be asleep at Too Bad's house; I could hear his father snoring through an open window upstairs. It was almost louder than the fire bell. I quietly opened the front door and slipped the key back in its place.

I limped home on my bare feet.



CHASING HAINTS

Every kid in school was buzzing about what had happened the night before.

“Did you hear all the fire bells ringing last night?”
Pork Chop asked me.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” I said. “Slept like a baby!”

Which was a dumb thing to say because, in my experience, babies were lousy sleepers.

“Kids are saying it was a prank,” Ira said.

“Hey, fellas! Whatcha talking about?” a voice asked behind me.

I looked back. Too Bad was standing there. And he was wearing . . . *my shoes?*

"Where'd you get those shoes?" I asked him.

He gave a happy smile. "Found 'em in a garbage can. They're practically brand-new!"

"They look real comfortable," I said.

After school, I walked past the firehouse on my way to Johnny Cakes's place.

Cem was sitting out front, clutching a cup of leche like his life depended on it. There were dark bags under his eyes, and he was practically falling asleep where he sat.

"Cem," I said. "You okay?"

He blinked and shook his head. "I was up all night chasing haints."

"What?"

"All the fire alarms were false. Weren't any real fires."

I looked at him awkwardly. "Sorry to hear that."

Johnny Cakes, on the other hand, was grinning from ear to ear.

"Good job, kid. Nobody suspected a thing," he said when I got to his office. "But we'll probably have to come up with some other scheme for next time."

"Next time?" I asked as he counted out the money into my hand.

Johnny Cakes raised an eyebrow. "Don't you like working for me?"

Did I? Maybe the first few times I had. But now it tasted like milk after the ice in the icebox had melted: spoiled. Not that I could tell Johnny Cakes.

"I like it just fine," I lied.

My mother was doing laundry in the backyard when I got home.

"Here ya go, Ma," I said, and handed her nine dollars from my Johnny Cakes earnings. I'd kept a dollar for myself. I figured I'd earned it.

Or at least my feet had.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Mrs. Higgs paid up for the dress."

She sounded shocked. "What?"

"I went by her house and told her it wasn't fair, what she did. She gave me the money."

"I can't believe it," she said, shaking her head.

"But if I was you, I wouldn't work for her again."

"I wouldn't lift a hand for that woman if she fainted in front of me. Thank you, son," she said, and smiled.

Then she looked down at my feet.

“Good heavens. What happened to your feet?”

The lie tripped off my tongue. “I just took a tumble.”

“My poor, sweet boy,” she said.

She bandaged them up.

There was a new Shirley Temple picture playing, so I treated myself to the late show. I even got popcorn. I thought about sitting in the balcony, but decided against it because of the situation with the haint last time.

The picture was hilarious. Shirley Temple just got better and better. I found myself studying her, trying to pick up her tricks. She had a good smile, and she knew how to use it. I wondered if maybe I should start smiling more.

Nah.

When the credits started rolling, I stood, glancing up at the balcony.

I gasped.

The man with the gloves was sitting there. He was holding the cane.

Then he got up and disappeared.

I couldn't help myself. I ran through the theater and followed him as he slipped out the back door and

into a little alley. He was gone again. A moment later, I caught a glimpse of him as he reappeared from the inky shadows far ahead.

I trailed him through the dark streets. He moved pretty fast for a haint, although he favored one leg and used the cane. As we neared the cemetery, he slowed down. He stopped suddenly at Poor House Lane. Then he straightened his shoulders and turned around.

I gasped in horror when I saw his nose. In the light of the moon, it looked like it was melting off!

"Why are you following me?" he demanded in a low voice.

"You're alive!"

He made a small sound. "Do I look like I'm dead?"

"Bring Back My Hammer said you were a haint!"

He barked a laugh. "I suppose you could say I am, in a manner of speaking."

"I don't understand."

The man looked at me. "Who are your people?"

"I'm a Curry."

"I knew a girl who married a Curry boy. She was very beautiful. We were in school together. Her name was Minerva. Do you know her?"

"She's my mother," I said.

He tilted his head. "Is she still lovely?"

I nodded. This was the strangest conversation I'd ever had in my entire life.

"Why did Bring Back My Hammer lie and say you were a haint?" I asked the man.

He gave a heavy sigh and then said, "Do you know what leprosy is?"

"Like the lepers in the Bible?"

"Yes. I have leprosy. That's why I go to the late show. I can't come out during the day."

"Why not?"

"It's not safe. Especially with all these strangers in town. They'd send me to the leper hospital in Louisiana. Nobody ever comes back from that place."

"Oh," I said.

"I'm not the only one," he said. "There's a few of us in the lanes. Our families keep us hidden. Nobody really pays attention if we go out at night. Bring Back My Hammer is my cousin, so he lets me into the late shows."

I didn't know what to say after that. It seemed so . . . *sad*.

"So, uh, you like the pictures?" I asked.

"Yes!" he said, sounding excited. "I see everything that comes to the theater!"

"Say, have you seen Baby LeRoy?"

"Who hasn't? Did you know that he got a diaper endorsement?"

"Really?"

He nodded. "My sister-in-law gets me the Hollywood magazines. I just read about it."

"That baby's gonna be big!"

We stood in the shadows on Poor House Lane and talked about the pictures.

It wasn't until I was home in bed that I realized I hadn't asked him his name.



SMOKE

Ma was back to taking in laundry, which meant I was back to delivering it.

As I pulled the wagon with clean clothes down the little lanes, I found myself studying houses with new eyes. Which ones hid lepers?

But something more surprising than a leper was waiting for me when I reached Nana Philly's house: Avery.

He had his easel set up, and he was painting a picture of her house.

"Well, look who it is," he said to me.

He was dabbing some yellow paint onto his brush. I wanted to tell him he should be using red because this was where the devil lived.

"Don't you know who lives here?"

"I'm afraid not."

"This is Nana Philly's house."

"I see."

I gave him a look. "She hasn't come out and, um, *hollered* at you yet?"

He looked up from his painting. "Why would she do that?"

"Because she doesn't like people."

"Maybe she has a soft spot for artists."

"Mr. Avery, Nana Philly ain't got a soft spot for anybody. Believe me, I would know."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I'm her grandson," I explained.

Well, there was no putting it off. I took her pile of clean laundry and walked up the porch steps.

"Nana Philly," I called. "Got your laundry."

But nobody answered. Was she out?

I walked across the porch and peered in the window.

My grandmother was sprawled on the floor, her legs crumpled beneath her.

"Nana Philly!" I cried, and dropped the laundry, running into the house.

Her eyes were wide, and there was a terrible bruise on the side of her face from where she had fallen.

"Avery! Help!" I shouted.

Nana Philly's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Turned out that Nana Philly had had some kind of fit. Dr. Clarke called it a stroke. In the blink of an eye, everything had changed. An ant could run over her and she couldn't stop it.

All the cousins had been taking turns watching her. It was Ma's turn tonight. She had taken Buddy with her and left me in charge of Kermit here.

The house was quiet except for the buzzing of mosquitoes. They were thicker than ever. I had bites up and down my arms.

"Did Nana Philly say anything today?" Kermit asked.

I'd gone by to visit her this afternoon, but she hadn't seemed to know I was there.

"Nope, not one word," I said.

"Gosh. Do you think God punished her because she was so mean?"

"I think she's just old," I told my brother. But the truth was that I wondered about this myself.

The fire bell started ringing.

"Fire bell, Beans!" Kermit said.

It rang and rang and rang.

"Do you think it's a prank again?" Kermit asked.

"Stay here," I told him. "I want to see what's going on."

I went downstairs and stepped onto the porch. The night smelled like gardenia. But beneath the heady perfume, there was another faint scent. Something that tickled at my nose.

Smoke.

I followed the smell down the dark streets, and when I saw where the smoke was coming from, I felt like puking. I rubbed my eyes because I didn't want it to be true.

Smoke was pouring out of the Soldanos' place!

Mrs. Soldano was out front, shouting. I ran up to her.

"Where are the firemen?" I asked.

She looked bewildered. "They haven't come! I don't know why!"

But I did. Probably because they thought it was some rotten kid pulling a prank on them.

I took off running in my pajamas, through the dark alleys, faster than I've ever run in my life. When I reached the firehouse, I banged on the door.

Cem opened it.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, Beans?" he asked me, taking in my pajamas. Behind him, the other firemen were sitting around the table with their dominoes.

"There's a fire," I gasped. "On Ashe Street!"

They didn't get up.

One of the other men waved his hand. "Pfft. It's just a prank."

I grabbed Cem's arm. "You gotta believe me! I was just there! It's burning! The Soldanos'!"

Something in Cem's face shifted, and his eyes met mine.

"Game's over!" he barked. "Get the wagon!"

I rode with the firemen as the engine barreled down the street. The ride should have been exciting, but all I felt was sick. It was chaos when we reached Ashe

Street. Residents were screaming and crying and carrying everything they owned to the safest place: the cemetery, which had no houses and almost no trees to catch fire.

At Pork Chop's house, the Soldanos' belongings had been tossed into a pile on the street. It looked like it was everything they could rescue. Shoes and pictures and pillows. Chairs and a sofa. The kitchen table and a dresser. Pork Chop was picking things up.

"Pork Chop!" I called.

"Beans!" he shouted, and tossed a quilt into my arms. "Take it to the cemetery!"

"Gimme more!" I told him.

He gave me a pillow, his mother's knitting basket, and his father's suspenders. Arms full, we ran to the cemetery. We dumped everything and headed back for more.

Then came curtains, a rag rug, Mrs. Soldano's white slips, sheets, and a small, worn stuffed bear that I knew was my best pal's.

In no time at all, the cemetery had been transformed. It was littered with belongings: brass beds, chairs, kitchen tables, pots and pans, cribs, and piles of clothes. Even a piano had been wheeled over. The

cemetery looked as if the living had taken up residence.

That night, as firemen fought the flames, lots of people slept there.

I was the only one who wished I was dead.



HIP, HIP, HOORAY

The fire was all anybody could talk about the next day at school. Even the teachers were gossiping about it.

"Such a tragedy," Miss Sugarapple murmured to another teacher in the hallway.

But Pork Chop wasn't there to hear it. He was absent.

"Mosquitoes started the fire," Ira announced at lunchtime. A bunch of kids had gathered around, listening.

"What?" I asked.

"My pa talked to Mr. Soldano. Mrs. Soldano was

burning a bunch of rags in kerosene to clear out the mosquitoes.”

I remembered how thick they were last night.

“Guess she wasn’t paying attention and the smudge pot tipped over. Next thing they knew, the kitchen was on fire.”

Ashe Street had almost been taken out because of mosquitoes? Unbelievable.

I went by the Soldanos’ place after school.

The smell of smoke still lingered in the air. The firemen had managed to keep the fire from spreading to the houses around the Soldanos’. But Pork Chop’s place was a different story. No one would be coming to buy bolita numbers anytime soon.

The porch was badly burned, and the house’s windows had shattered. There was glass everywhere. The smell was the worst. It stuck in your nose—a horrible combination of damp and smoke, worse than any garbage pile I’d ever climbed through.

Pork Chop sat across from his house, staring at it. He looked devastated.

“You okay, palsy?” I asked him.

“The phone melted,” he said, a hollow look in his eyes.

"It did?"

He nodded.

After that day, I didn't ask if he was okay again. I already knew the answer.

Pork Chop and his family moved into his granny's house on Havana Lane. They didn't have the dough to fix their own place up.

"Mighty Mibsters challenged us again," Ira told us as we sat around Pork Chop's granny's kitchen, picking at food.

Mrs. Soldano's bollos didn't taste quite the same, for some reason. Maybe because she wasn't happy making them here under the watchful eyes of her mother-in-law. Pork Chop's granny was old and sat on a stool in a corner and stared at everyone.

This place was nothing like Mrs. Soldano's kitchen. It was quiet. No people coming and going. I missed the ringing phone most of all.

"Who cares," Pork Chop said, tugging at the collar of his shirt.

The shirt had been mended so many times that it was almost see-through. It was the only shirt he wore these days.

In school, they had taken up a collection of donated clothes for him and his family. But Pork Chop refused to wear any of them. Swore he'd rather go naked than wear some other kid's rags. He was gloomy now; he didn't have his usual snappy comebacks.

I tried to cheer things up.

"Come on, palsy. Let's play 'em," I said, forcing myself to grin. "It'll be a hoot to take their marbles."

His lips thinned. "Fine."

But it wasn't a hoot, because we played badly. Pork Chop didn't have his usual edge, and I overshot. Even Ira dragged his knuckles.

We lost. Twice.

The Keepsies were no longer on top of the marble game.

I knew it was all because of me.

The sword fell the next day at supper.

My mother turned to me and said, "Beans. You need to go down to Station Number Three."

I closed my eyes. Looked like my execution would be at the firehouse.

It was time to face the music.

As I followed my mother down the lane, I felt

like a criminal. Like Jelly. I wondered: Did they lock kids in jail? Would they let me out to come home for supper?

There was a small crowd gathered outside Fire Station No. 3 when we arrived, including Mr. and Mrs. Soldano, Pork Chop, Ira, Too Bad, and even Winky.

My humiliation was complete.

Inside the firehouse, the firemen were all standing around, looking grave. I could barely meet Cem's eyes.

"Beans," he said, stepping forward. "Thank you for coming."

My head snapped up. What was going on? Why was he thanking me instead of clapping irons on my arms?

"You are a shining example of bravery and integrity."

My mouth dropped open.

"If you had not come and fetched us, many more houses would have been lost." He paused. "You are a true hero in our community."

Then he held out a key that hung from a ribbon.

"This," he said, "is an honorary fire alarm key. May you be ever vigilant!"

I couldn't believe it. He'd just given *me* a key to the

fire alarms. All I could think was that Johnny Cakes would be thrilled.

He turned and shouted to the crowd, "Let's give Beans a *hip, hip, hooray!*"

Everyone shouted, "Hip, hip, hooray for Beans!"

Then people were congratulating me and slapping me on the back. The radio was turned up loud. Cuban music started playing, and someone brought out snacks. It was an impromptu celebration, and I was the guest of honor.

One by one, people came up to compliment me. Winky pushed his way through the crowd and slapped me on the back.

"I hear that my favorite worker saved the day!" he said. "How's it feel to be a hero?"

"'Scuse me," I said, and fought my way outside. I walked behind the firehouse.

And threw up.



HERO

All of Key West thought I was a hero.

Everywhere I went, people sang my praises. Even Miss Sugarapple was impressed. She let me lead the Pledge of Allegiance for the class and gave me thick slices of icebox cake from her own lunch.

That was just the beginning of free treats. Mrs. Albury dropped off tins of divinity. At Pepe's Café, they gave me all the Cuban ham sandwiches I could eat. And I got free ice cream for me and the whole gang at El Anon.

Me and the gang were sitting on one of the new

benches on Duval Street, having some of the cold treat.

"You need to be a hero more often, Beans," Ira said, taking a lick.

But my coconut ice cream tasted like sawdust in my mouth.

A bunch of kids walked by, and I heard them talking about me. But this time, they weren't talking about my marble skills.

"That's Beans Curry!"

One little kid broke away from the pack. He ran up to me. He couldn't have been more than five.

"Can I shake your hand?" the kid asked shyly.

"Why?" I said.

"'Cause my daddy says you're a real-life hero! He says I need to grow up just like you!"

But the worst part of it was how my mother reacted. She couldn't stop beaming.

"I'm just so proud of you, Beans!" she would say at odd moments.

If she only knew.

Then the nightmares started.

In my dreams, the air was full of smoke and the

sound of the fire bell ringing. I found myself waking up during the night and running downstairs to smell the night air. I was so tired that I walked around in a daze.

My stomach hurt. The guilt was eating away at me. I didn't know what to do and found myself walking to the most unlikely place: Nana Philly's house.

My cousin Miss Bea, a cheery older lady with silver hair, greeted me at the door.

"Why, Beans! So nice to see you!" she exclaimed.

Miss Bea had moved in and was taking care of Nana Philly. She must have been part angel to take care of the cranky old lady.

"How's she doing?" I asked.

"Oh, Philomena has her good days and her bad days. But she'll be so excited to see you!" she enthused. "She just loves her grandchildren."

Nana Philly was sitting up in a tufted chair in the parlor. It looked like she'd lost weight. She was wearing a nightgown and had a blanket tucked around her waist, and she was staring straight ahead.

At nothing.

"Beans," Miss Bea said, "I have to run down to the market. Can you sit with her for a little bit?"

"Sure," I said.

The door slammed and Miss Bea was gone, leaving me and Nana Philly all by ourselves.

"How ya feeling, Nana Philly?" I asked her.

She didn't say anything. Not that I expected her to. The doctor said she'd probably never be able to talk again.

I wished more than anything that she could yell at me. That *someone* would yell at me and tell me what a bad kid I was.

We sat there in silence. My gaze drifted to a little table with pictures. There was a photo of Ma as a young woman. She was beautiful, with a light in her eye, like she wanted to take on the world.

What would happen to that light if I came clean and told the truth? Fessed up to my part in the fire? Would she still be proud of me? Or would it make things even worse? Would people shun me? Shun the whole family? Would my family have to hide me away like a leper?

My head spun.

"I did something bad," I blurted out.

Nana Philly didn't blink.

Once I started, I couldn't seem to stop talking.

Words spilled from my mouth. "It was really bad. I didn't mean for it to happen. I was trying to help everyone."

I swallowed.

"Now I don't know what to do! I don't know if it would be worse if I told the truth or not!"

Then I covered my face with my hands, ashamed.

"What should I do? Should I tell the truth?"
I pleaded.

She blinked.

"Does that blink mean yes or no?"

She blinked again. This was frustrating.

"Blink once for yes and two for no," I said.

She stared at me for a long moment and then blinked. Twice.

Well, what did I expect? She was the meanest woman in Key West. But she was also my grandmother. I knew she loved me. Just a little.

"I have one more question," I told her.

I swear she almost rolled her eyes.

"Did you try to kill Kermit with that potion for his throat?"

She blinked.

Once.

• • •

That night, I went to the late show at the movie theater. A comedy called *The Old-Fashioned Way* was playing. It starred Baby LeRoy and W. C. Fields. The baby even got top billing.

I sat in the balcony, half hoping that the leper man would be there. Maybe I could ask his opinion on things. Because despite my visit with Nana Philly, I didn't feel any better. If anything, I felt worse.

But then someone else slipped into the seat next to mine.

Dot.

"I hear you're a hero now," she said.

I didn't answer her.

Then the picture started rolling. On the screen, W. C. Fields and Baby LeRoy were yukking it up. I should have been excited. This was my kind of picture. But all I felt was sick inside. Next to me, Dot burst out laughing. But I couldn't laugh. I didn't deserve to be happy. I didn't deserve anything. Because I wasn't a hero. I was worse than any worst grown-up.

I was the lyingest liar in the whole world.

Something burst inside of me, and silent tears started rolling down my cheeks.

“I just love that baby, don’t you?” Dot whispered to me, not looking away from the screen.

I couldn’t answer; I was too busy crying.

“He’s so funny! Isn’t he a hoot? Don’t you . . .” And then her voice trailed off as she looked at me. Her eyes widened.

“Beans,” she whispered. “You okay?”

I hated her more in that moment than any other. I wished she would just go away and let me cry in peace in the dark theater. I couldn’t take it anymore; I couldn’t breathe. I wished I could just disappear—

Then Dot’s hand slipped into mine.

And squeezed.

I held on tight until the last credit rolled.



DOOMED

A few days later, I ran into the last person in the world I wanted to see: Johnny Cakes.

I was out walking with Little Dizzy. He was asleep in the wagon, Termite waddling after us. Mrs. Albury had asked me to babysit him in return for divinity. I couldn't say no to her divinity.

Johnny Cakes was strolling down White Street toward the docks.

"There you are," he said with a grin. "I've been looking for you. I have a job."

"No, thanks."

He looked surprised. "I'll pay you double."

For a brief moment I was tempted, but then I remembered the smell of smoke.

I shook my head.

He frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. You were a good employee."

I was *too* good of an employee.

"I gotta go," I said. "The baby wakes up if I stand still too long."

"If you change your mind . . ."

"I won't," I said firmly.

I walked away.

The next day at school, just as recess was ending, a kid came running up to me, calling my name.

"Beans! Beans!"

I didn't bother to look back. The last thing I needed was some kid praising me for being a hero.

"It's your dog!" the kid shouted.

That got my attention.

I froze, then turned around. "My dog?"

"Yeah!" the kid said. "The dogcatchers just got him! He was right outside the school. I saw it with my own two eyes!"

Pork Chop asked me, "You think they'll kill him?"

Could things possibly get any worse? Wasn't it bad enough that my life was ruined? And now my dog's was, too?

That afternoon at school was the longest ever. The minute the bell rang, me and Pork Chop and Ira headed downtown to where the New Dealers had set up shop.

The office used to be a vacant storefront. Now it was buzzing with activity. There was a big sign announcing: VOLUNTEERS WANTED. I followed the sound of barking dogs to the back of the building, where cages were lined up. I saw four skinny hounds and one short, funny-looking one.

"There he is!" Ira said.

My dog barked happily.

"Termite," I said to him.

A man who had slicked-back hair and wore Bermuda shorts came around the back, carrying a bowl of water.

"'Scuse me, mister," I said. "That's my dog in there."

"Which one?" he asked.

"The short, funny-looking one. Please, can I have him back?" I pleaded.

"Well—" the man began.

Pork Chop interrupted. "Beans sure does love his dog, mister."

The man narrowed his eyes at me. "You're Beans? The kid who helped with the firemen?"

I nodded reluctantly.

The man gave me a once-over. "I heard about you. You did a good thing." He glanced at the cage. "Go on, you can take him."

As we walked down the street, I looked back at the man in Bermuda shorts.

"I'd keep him tied up or inside if I was you," he warned me.

"Thanks, mister," I said.

Maybe the New Dealers weren't so bad after all.

I still had a dime left from the Johnny Cakes money, and there was a new picture playing at the movie theater.

It was called *Little Friend* and starred a newcomer kid actress named Nova Pilbeam. She'd have to be pretty good to get anywhere with that name.

This time when I went to the balcony, the leper was there. He didn't seem all that surprised to see me. I sat right next to him. We were the only ones there.

"I hear this picture is good," he said. "Supposed to be very dramatic."

I'd heard the same thing.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Murray," he said. "What's yours?"

"Beans."

He tilted his head. "Is there a story behind that nickname?"

"From when I was a baby. Ma said every time she nursed me after she ate beans, I'd toot all night long. So she started calling me Beans."

He chuckled.

We watched the picture and, boy, was it ever dramatic. It was about a girl whose parents were getting divorced. It was sad as can be. I didn't like it one bit. Give me a comedy any day.

Afterward, me and Murray walked home together through the dark lanes. As we passed one of the little Conch houses, Murray paused, studying it.

"What color is it?" he asked me.

"What?"

"The house. I can tell it's been painted, but I can't see the color in the dark."

"The New Dealers painted it pink."

"That's an interesting choice," he said.

"You said it."

As we walked, Murray pointed out other changes the New Dealers had made. Weeds had been cut back to showcase red-blooming poinciana trees. Porches that were hidden before now looked inviting. The garbage was gone. I started to see everything with new eyes.

But it was the air that was so different—it didn't stink. Instead, it smelled of frangipani and the tangy bite of the ocean. The island's own perfume. It smelled good and fresh and alive.

That's when I knew.

I couldn't fix the damage done to the Soldanos' house. But maybe I could fix something else.

The next day after school, I went to the New Dealers' office. The same fella who had given me back Termite was manning the front desk.

"Did you lose your dog again?"

"I'm here to volunteer," I said.

"We don't take kids," the man said.

"Why not?" I asked. "I can help!"

"Sorry."

"Look, I'll do whatever you ask!" I told him desperately. "I've worked dirty jobs before. I'm not afraid of hard work."

He leaned back in his chair and studied me.

"Did you say you don't mind doing dirty jobs?"

"I'll do anything, mister. Just tell me."

I was cleaning outhouses by the end of the day.

I did every dirty job there was: I cleaned outhouses and strained bugs out of cisterns. I filled in potholes and shoveled up trash from vacant lots. I went home filthy and tired every day, but with a lighter heart.

"Were you collecting milk cans again?" my mother asked me one evening when I came home stinking like a dead animal. I'd spent the afternoon picking up trash along Duval Street. I was a big fan of garbage cans these days.

"I was helping the New Dealers," I told her.

She looked surprised. "Really?"

I nodded.

"You've always been a good boy," she said.

Not always. Not by a long shot. But maybe there was still hope.

One night after supper, I realized I had brought a shovel home from the office. When I went to take it back, the light was still on. I peeked inside.

The head lunatic himself was sitting alone at a desk.

"I'm just bringing back the shovel," I told him.

"Thank you, Peas."

"Beans," I said.

"Of course," he said distractedly. "I noticed that none of you children are using the playground."

It was the truth.

"If I can't get children to play on a playground, how am I possibly going to turn around this city?" He sounded defeated.

"It might just take a while," I told him.

"We don't have a while! It's already November. We only have a few weeks left until the opening of tourist season, and there's still so much to be done. Nobody seems to understand the gravity of the situation. If Key West is not ready for business by this tourist season, it's doomed."

"What do you mean, *doomed*?"

He put his hands on his forehead and rubbed. "They're already discussing it in Washington! It would

cost less money to close down Key West and move its citizens somewhere else than to try to save it."

I couldn't believe it.

"But they can't do that! This is our home!"

"They can and they will." He sighed heavily. "At this point, it will take a genuine miracle to save this town."



DIVINE DIVINITY

I sat on the seesaw in the empty playground.

It was squally out, the sky gray, the way it always got before a bad storm. All around town, folks went about their business, unconcerned. Nobody had any idea of the storm that was headed our way if tourists didn't show up.

I looked around the playground. Maybe I could try to get some kids to play there. Set up a marble tournament or something.

But the more I thought about it, the more I didn't see how that would help, really. Like Mr. Stone said,

there was still a lot of work to be done to get ready for the tourists.

Mr. Stone was going about it all wrong, I realized.

He didn't need us kids on this playground.

He needed *us kids*.

"You want us to do *what?*" Pork Chop asked me in bewilderment.

"We need to get kids to help out the New Dealers!"

He made a face. "You're all wet!"

"You know," Ira said, studying me, "you've been real strange since the whole fire thing. Is being a hero going to your head?"

"Come on, fellas," I said. "I'm serious. Mr. Stone told me they might close Key West down."

"Baloney! They can't close down a town," Pork Chop said with a scowl.

"They can do anything they want," I replied.

Pork Chop looked at Ira, who nodded his head.

"Fine, we'll help," Pork Chop agreed. "I still think it's a bunch of applesauce."

We spent the whole afternoon talking to kids from one side of town to the other. Most kids heard me out. But by the end of the day, all we had was one volunteer.

Too Bad.

"Ready to work, Boss!" he said with a snappy salute. Now we were really doomed.

That night, I sat in Kermit's room, keeping him company and eating Mrs. Albury's divinity. I flipped through some Hollywood magazines that Murray had let me borrow.

Kids were sure getting a lot of publicity these days. There were articles on Shirley Temple and Jackie Cooper. There was also a two-page spread of Hollywood actors modeling Bermuda shorts. Looked like they were the latest fashion after all.

Kermit picked up a piece of divinity and studied it. Then he put it down and picked up another.

"Just take one already!" I told him.

"But it's so good that it's hard to pick a piece!" Kermit said, licking his fingers. "I'd do anything for this divinity."

I looked up from my magazine. "What did you say?"

"I said I'd do anything for this divinity."

"That's it!" I said.

Maybe we didn't need a miracle to save Key West. Maybe all we needed was divinity.

• • •

I was going to bribe every kid in Key West with Mrs. Albury's divinity.

The next day, we spread the word at school. Any kid who volunteered to help Mr. Stone would get divinity. I gave out free samples to build excitement. By the end of the day, I had dozens of boys lined up and ready to work.

Then something unexpected happened.

Dot showed up. With a whole gang of girls. There must have been thirty of them.

"I hear you've got divinity," she said.

We went down to the New Dealers' office after school. The kids waited outside while I went in.

"Can I see Mr. Stone?" I asked the fella at the front desk. He was the one who had let me take Termite home. His name was Tommy, and I'd gotten to know him a little from volunteering. He was from New York City and liked to talk about it. How there were tall skyscrapers and that the city lit up at night. I kind of wanted to see it someday.

"He's in a meeting, Beans," Tommy told me.

"Tell him it's important," I said.

Tommy gave me a long look and then went into a back room. A moment later, Mr. Stone walked out, looking surprised.

“What can I do for you, Peas?”

I opened the door and pointed. Dozens and dozens of kids with bare feet and patched-up clothes stood in the street.

“What can *we* do for *you*?” I replied.

Mr. Stone put us to work.

We kids started to do everything the grown-ups were doing and more. We painted benches and fences. We pulled weeds and planted flowers.

Then there was the seaweed. Clumps of rotting, smelly seaweed littered the beach that the tourists were going to use. It attracted buzzing flies. Mr. Stone gave us kids the job of shoveling it up. Talk about dirty work.

“This is ridiculous,” Pork Chop said as we tossed a pile of seaweed into a wheelbarrow. “It’s just gonna wash back up again in the next good storm.”

But I gave him a piece of divinity, and the sweet candy melted his crankiness right away.

Word spread, and soon it felt like nearly every kid on the island was volunteering.

I broke the news to Mrs. Albury.

"We're gonna need a *lot* more divinity," I told her.

All around, there was a new energy. Folks were pitching in to transform Conch Town into a Hollywood picture. Rustic thatched-roof cabanas were built on Rest Beach. A hospitality league was formed. Fishermen were encouraged to clean up their boats to take tourists out fishing.

It was my enterprising idea to make souvenirs to sell to the tourists. I had kids collect shells, and we glued them on wooden cigar boxes that I got Johnny Cakes to donate. He wasn't all that bad for a criminal.

It seemed like everybody was trying to help.

And I do mean *everybody*.

Late one night, I saw Murray and a few other folks who looked like they had leprosy planting flowers along Duval Street.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Heard you kids were helping out," he said with a shrug. "Our fingers may be falling off, but we're not useless."

I wondered if his fingers really were falling off, but I decided not to ask.

Besides, there was no time for questions. Everyone was too busy trying to make Key West shine like a new penny. It felt like we were making a Hollywood movie. We wanted applause. We wanted good reviews. We wanted our name in lights.

Before we knew it, it was opening night for our town.

The film was in the projector. The theater went dark. The curtain was raised.

We held our breath as the picture started rolling.



OPENING NIGHT

They came in their Bermuda shorts and smart linen dresses and shiny shoes.

They strolled down Duval and filled up the rooms at the newly opened, plush Casa Marina Hotel. They ventured onto the little lanes, eager to see our island. They arrived by boat and train and automobile.

We had been invaded again.

By tourists.

“Here comes two more!” Pork Chop hissed.

A sign that said SOLDANO’s announced the little lunch

counter set under the porch in front of Pork Chop's house. The Soldanos' place had been fixed courtesy of New Dealer money. Mr. Stone thought it was important to have "local color," so I convinced him to build Mrs. Soldano a lunch counter where she could serve authentic Cuban cuisine to the tourists. And, of course, he would fix up the damage from the fire in the process.

"Hello, ma'am! Hello, sir!" I greeted the tourists. "Would you like to try some delicious Cuban cuisine?"

The lady was wearing big sunglasses, a wide hat, and a pretty striped dress. She looked like she'd stepped out of a Hollywood movie.

"Oh, darling, would you look at that?" she said to the man.

"Are you kids the welcoming committee?" he asked with a smile.

"We sure are!" Too Bad said with a grin.

"How charming," she declared. "We'd love to."

They sat down on stools and surveyed the menu.

"What do you suggest?" the man asked Mrs. Soldano.

"I just finished a batch of bollos," she said.

My best pal's mom was back to her usual self, cooking away. Of course, she still sold bolita numbers out of her kitchen. Nobody could stop bolita.

Or booze. I heard that Johnny Cakes couldn't bring in the liquor fast enough for the thirsty tourists.

Avery was busy, too.

I ran into him later that day. He had his easel set up by the ocean. His paintings, and those of the other New Dealer artists, now hung in cafés and bars all around town.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

I studied the picture he was painting: tourists in swimsuits, lounging on the beach.

"To be honest, it's not as good as your houses."

He chuckled. "I meant Key West. It seems Mr. Stone's little experiment might be working out. There sure are a lot of tourists."

"Can't walk down a lane without tripping on one," I said. "Worse than termites."

"Say, I'm going to give art lessons. Would you like to come?"

"Sure," I said. "Maybe I can give *you* some tips."

We both laughed.

It seemed our little town was becoming especially popular with the artist crowd. Murray swore that Hollywood actors were visiting Key West.

"I heard that Myrna Loy checked into the Casa Marina last night!" he told me. For a guy who only came out at night, he certainly knew what was what.

But it wasn't just actors. Painters and writers were showing up in droves. I was in the New Dealer office when one of them walked in.

"The hotel's full up," the man said. "I'm looking for accommodations."

"What's your name, mister?" I asked him.

"Robert Frost."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a poet."

"Hey, we got a writer living here," I told him. Then I lowered my voice. "He's not very good, though."

"Really?" the man asked curiously. "What's his name?"

"Ernest Hemingway."

Then someone more exciting than any Hollywood actor or fancy author arrived in Key West.

When I got home from school one afternoon, my father's shoes were sitting on the front porch.

"Poppy!" I cried when I opened the door.

He was sitting at the little kitchen table.

"Have you grown?" he asked me with a fond smile.

"Yes," I told him.

Because I had.

"Tell Beans the news," my mother said.

"I got a job," he announced.

My stomach twisted a little.

"In New Jersey?"

He shook his head. "Matecumbe Key. On the highway."

Matecumbe was a little key north of Key West.

"I'll work up there during the week and come back on the weekends," he said. "How does that sound to you?"

It sounded wonderful, like a Hollywood movie.

I half expected Shirley Temple to tap-dance through our kitchen.

Me and the gang were sitting in front of the New Dealer office with a wagon full of babies.

We had Dizzy and Clara today. Little Clara was the baby of a couple vacationing in Key West. Ma did their laundry, so I had offered to watch the baby. What was one more baby, after all?

"Say, there's gonna be a game of marbles after lunch," Ira announced.

"Who's playing?" I asked.

"Mighty Mibsters," Ira said.

"Sure," I said. "Always happy to take the Mibsters' marbles."

Pork Chop grinned at me. "You shred it, wheat!"

The Keepsies were back on top. We hadn't lost a game in weeks. Nobody could touch us.

A man in a suit and a fedora walked up to us.

"Hello there, kids," the man said. "I'm a newspaperman from New York City, here to do a feature about the Key West story."

"The Key West story?" It kind of sounded like a movie title.

"Folks are calling this place Recovery Key because you've managed to turn things around. It's heartwarming. People can't get enough of it." He looked closely at me. "What's your name?"

"Beans Curry."

"You grow up here?"

"Sure did. I'm a Key West Conch."

He gestured to the wagon of sleeping babies.

"So, you offer a babysitting service for visiting tourists?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"Beans has a way with babies!" Kermit said.

"*A way with babies. I like it!*" the newspaperman said, writing down the quote. "What a smart little businessman you are. Even mothers need a vacation."

I felt like I had been struck by lightning. That was it! It was the perfect business idea, and it had been in front of my eyes the entire time.

We would peddle babies.

"Can I snap a photo of you and your gang of kids?" the man asked us.

"Why not?" I said.

We posed in front of the New Dealer office, our feet dirty and bare for the whole world to see.

"What should I call you in the caption?" he asked.

I smiled. "The Diaper Gang."



DIAPER GANG

It was June and steamy as the inside of an automobile engine. Tourist season was over and Key West was sleepy again.

“My cousin in Ohio wrote that he saw the newspaper article you were interviewed for,” Ira said to me.

Me and Ira and Pork Chop were walking down Duval Street, pulling a wagon full of babies. We had three tykes packed tight into the wagon like sausages.

“Really?” I asked.

“He said you’re famous!” Ira nodded, his corkscrew

curls bouncing. "He wrote that every kid knows about Beans Curry and the Diaper Gang."

That sounded good to me.

"Maybe I'll get a screen test with Warner Brothers after all," I mused.

I didn't know if I would be discovered, but Key West certainly had been. The Casa Marina was already booked up for the next season. Mr. Stone and his band of merry New Dealers were planning more improvements. He wanted to put on theater shows and art gallery exhibits. He was bringing in more artists to paint murals around town and was even importing bicycles for the tourists.

The changes were apparent everywhere. More restaurants had opened. Stores, too. The lingering despair had disappeared with the piles of garbage. Everybody was happier these days.

A wailing came from the wagon.

Well, *almost* everybody was happier.

"I swear, Pudding's the worst," Pork Chop muttered, shaking his head at the squalling baby. The other two babies were fast asleep like little angels dropped from heaven.

Pudding was a bad baby. Kid never stopped crying. I blamed his mother. She always picked him up. If I'd learned anything, it was that you had to let a baby be.

Ira pointed down the street. "At least Pudding ain't as bad as him!"

Heading our way was Winky.

"Beans!" Winky called with a fake smile. "How ya doing, palsy?"

Pork Chop rolled his eyes.

"Nice day, huh, boys?" Winky said.

"Whaddya want, Winky?" I asked.

Just 'cause I pulled babies around didn't mean I was soft. In fact, I was harder than ever.

"I was just wondering if you'd be interested in working for me again."

"Nope."

"I'll give you a dime for twenty cans," he wheedled.

"Can't help you, Winky," I told him.

"You won't even have to clean the cans!" he cajoled. "I'll do that part!"

"Sorry," I replied.

Babies were big business. The Diaper Gang had a waiting list for our wagon. Every mother in town was

dying to know my secret formula for diaper rash. I even made up rules for the gang. The first rule was: no girls allowed.

I liked being my own boss. It didn't even bother me that most of the mothers paid us in homemade candy. It always tasted sweet, and it was a lot less complicated than money.

"But, Beans!" Winky pleaded.

I ignored him and turned to Pork Chop.

"Come on," I said. "We got babies."

"Pos-i-tute-ly!" Pork Chop agreed.

We left Winky standing in the dust.

We pulled the wagon past the movie theater. Murray was getting me into the late show for free these days because of his cousin. We'd seen the latest Shirley Temple picture a few nights ago. She was a genuine star now.

But some things never changed.

Mr. Stone was striding down the street in his underwear. I mean, his Bermuda shorts.

"Why, Peas! How nice to see you," Mr. Stone said.

I didn't bother to correct him anymore. I was kind of used to him calling me Peas.

"Here, take a stack of these and drop them off as you go around town," he told us, shoving a pile of brochures into my hand.

Pork Chop peered over my shoulder.

"'Hospitality Hints for the Key West Resident'?" he read.

Mr. Stone looked enthusiastic. "It's just some tips to make our little island welcoming for the tourists."

I flipped through it. The hints included *Be friendly to visitors*, *Keep Key West as quiet as possible*, and *Do not soak the tourists*.

Hmmm. Now that the city was cleaned up, Mr. Stone was apparently trying to renovate its inhabitants.

"And look," he pointed out helpfully. "It suggests that parents encourage children to play in the playground. You have been using the playground, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Stone. We use that playground every single day. From morning to night," I assured him, even though no one used it.

"That's wonderful to hear! Keep up the good work!" he said. "I mean, keep up the good *play*!"

Pudding started fussing again.

"Gotta go," I told Mr. Stone.

As we walked away, Pork Chop snorted. "Laid it on a bit thick, didn't ya?"

"Easier to just tell grown-ups what they want to hear," I said.

Because it was. I told every mother whose tot I watched that her child was the best baby in town.

"Say," Ira said. "I hear there's a new marble crew in town. They're calling themselves the Amazing Aggies."

"Amazing Aggies? That's a pretty good name," I admitted.

"They're playing the Mighty Mibsters later this morning," Ira added.

I wasn't all that concerned. The Keepsies were still the best marble crew in town. Every kid wanted to be in our gang. Not that we wanted them all.

"Hey, Beans!" Too Bad called. "You fellas need any help?"

Kid was still like a flea.

"No way, no how, Too Bad," Pork Chop said, waving him away.

I leaned down and gave the wailing Pudding a sniff. The baby had a full diaper and, boy, do I mean *full*.

"Let the kid have a try changing the diaper," I said.

Pork Chop looked at me like I was a lunatic.

"If he can change the diaper, I'll think about letting him in the gang," I explained.

Too Bad looked thrilled. "Maybe I can get a new nickname, too?"

"We'll see," I said, and slapped a clean cloth diaper in his outstretched hand.

"Show us what you got," I told him, stepping back to observe.

Too Bad laid a blanket on the ground and lifted the squalling Pudding out of the wagon. He slipped the clean diaper under the baby's bungy with one hand before removing the soiled diaper with the other. That was my trick, too. Kept the blanket clean.

But before Too Bad could continue, Pudding let out an enormous toot. Too Bad was so startled that his hand holding the soiled diaper flew out.

And landed on my chest with a wet splat.

"Too Bad!" I barked.

The kid gasped in horror. "I'm real sorry, Beans! Honest!"

I shook my head. Maybe I was the one who needed a new nickname.

Too Stupid seemed about right.

• • •

After we returned the babies to the loving arms of their mothers, I settled on the swing in the cool shade of the front porch to enjoy my candy. Poppy's shoes weren't on the porch, but it was all right. He came home most weekends.

From inside the house, a voice protested loudly.

"I don't wanna take a nap!"

These days, it wasn't Buddy who was trying to get out of naps. It was Kermit.

I heard Ma shout in frustration, "Do you want to die? Is that what you want?"

Kermit wasn't confined to his bed anymore. But the doctor insisted that he take a nap every day because of his heart.

Termite growled and I looked up. A figure was strolling up the lane.

Dot.

"Beans," she said shortly.

"Dot," I replied. "Whaddya want?"

"I thought you'd want to know that we just beat the Mighty Mibsters."

That made me sit up. "Who's 'we'?"

"Didn't you hear? I've got my own marble crew now. All girls. The Amazing Aggies."

Then she grinned.

"Just let me know when you want us to beat you boys," she said as she strolled off.

I still hated that girl.

No sooner had Dot disappeared than I heard the rumble of a car. It was an old Ford Model A, nothing like the slick Ford Model 730 Deluxe V-8 sedan. The two people getting out of it didn't resemble Bonnie and Clyde one bit: they were a middle-aged man with a pot-belly and a young girl carrying a mangy cat.

"Excuse me, son," the man called to me.

Judging by his rumpled suit, he was a salesman. He looked greasy and slick. Something about him reminded me of Winky.

"What are you selling, mister?" I asked in a bored voice.

He brightened. "Well, since you asked, I do happen to have some Hair Today back in my automobile."

"What's it do?"

"Makes your hair grow," he said, pointing to his bald head. "It's guaranteed to work in one month or your money back."

Even a baby wouldn't fall for a scam like that.

I snorted. "Guess *you* ain't a satisfied customer."

As he sputtered, I shook my head. Grown-ups were such lying liars.

But then again, kids were, too.

The important thing was to watch out for the bad lies.

And never, *ever* get Winkied.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

At the height of the Great Depression, Key West was in dire straits. The majority of the inhabitants were unemployed and on public relief. Municipal services had become sporadic, including garbage collection. The town went bankrupt.

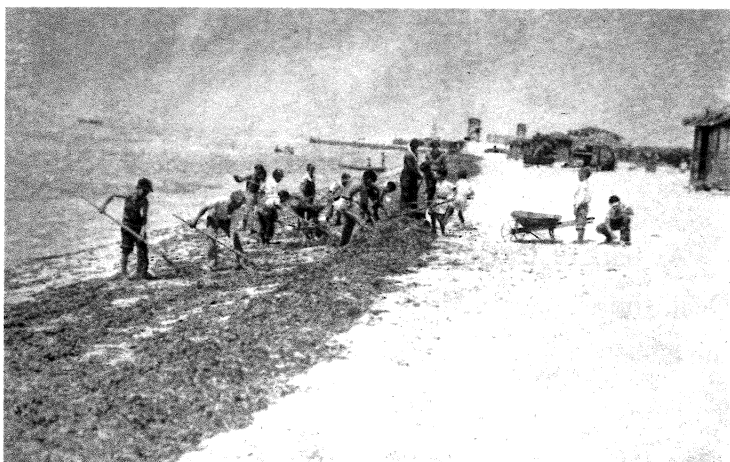


Garbage cleanup in Key West neighborhood

As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the management of the town was taken over by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The fate of Key West lay in the hands of Julius Stone, Jr., who

had been appointed as administrator. Julius Stone saw two options: to abandon the town and relocate its inhabitants or to remake it as a tourist destination—"the Bermuda of Florida," as he called it. He chose the latter.

Stone's plan was met with suspicion by many locals, but also with enthusiasm. In the end, Key West citizens volunteered thousands of hours of time to rehabilitate their island. They cleaned lots, repaired streets, built park benches, renovated houses and hotels, repaired outdated plumbing, planted palm trees and flowers, and built cabanas and playgrounds and parks. Thousands of cubic yards of garbage were collected and trucked out. Even the island's children volunteered. They pulled weeds and painted fences and shoveled up seaweed.



Children raking seaweed off the beach to beautify it

In addition to the volunteers, Julius Stone brought in artists to help advertise Key West to the world. They painted idyllic posters, brochures, and postcards of Key West to lure visitors.



Cover of brochure produced to advertise
Key West as a tourist destination

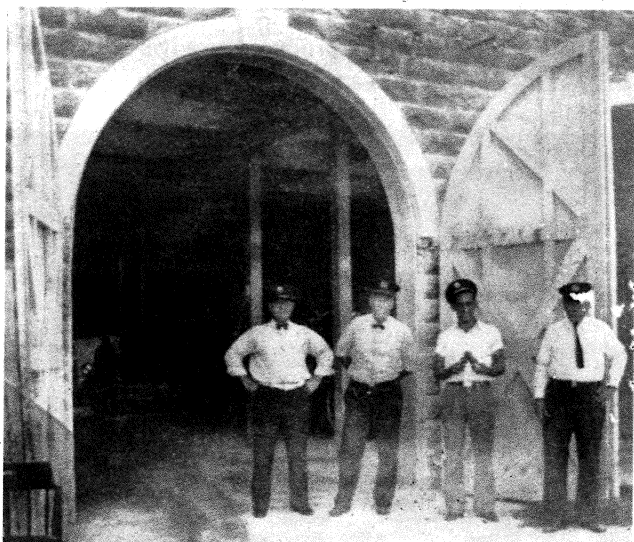


Interior painting from brochure by artist
Edward Bruce illustrating "typical Key West lane"

And it worked.

An estimated forty thousand tourists came that first winter, and the "Key West Experiment" was deemed a success. The island became a winter destination, especially for writers, including the poet Robert Frost. "Recovery Key," as it came to be known, was one of the longest-lasting success stories of the New Deal.

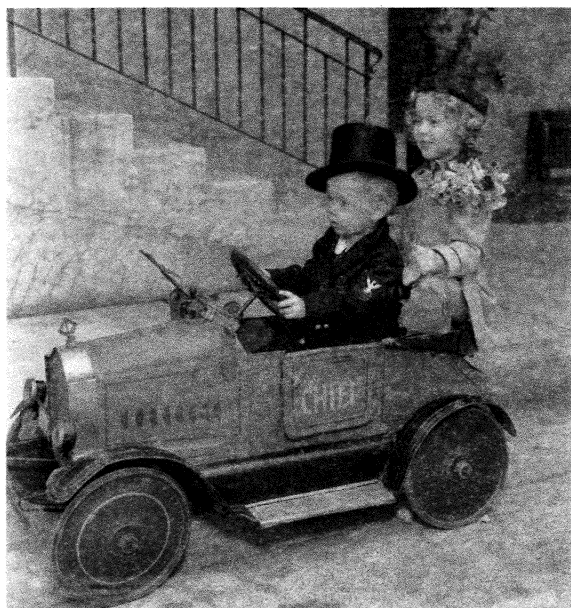
Fire was a constant fear in Key West because of its wooden houses. The fire bell in the cemetery was an alert system for firemen as well as residents. The story of people taking their belongings to the cemetery to safeguard them from a fire was related to me by a cousin.



Key West Fire Department personnel
posing in front of Fire Station No. 3

Fire Station No. 3, at the corner of Grinnell and Virginia Streets, heroically stayed open during the worst of the Great Depression, when other firehouses closed. Today, it is the Key West Firehouse Museum, and you can visit it.

Kids started to become big business in Hollywood in the 1930s. Children got studio contracts and even merchandising deals, for everything from clothing lines to toys. The most notable “baby” performer was Baby LeRoy. But without doubt, it was newcomer Shirley Temple who captured the heart of a nation.



Child stars Baby LeRoy and Shirley Temple


The story of Murray and the lepers was inspired by Dorothy Raymor, who was a reporter for the *Key West Citizen*. In her book *Key West Collection* (The Ketch & Yawl Press, 1999), she quotes a local man telling her about the lepers living in Key West:

"If you should wander into the back sections of our movie balconies at night," Earle advised, "you might spot some of the 'Night People.' Some have disfigured faces and some are crippled and have lost fingers, toes and even limbs."


I was fascinated by this tidbit. I did more research and discovered an epidemiologist's report noting that 80 percent of the cases of leprosy in Florida were in Key West—and 60 percent of those afflicted lived in a five-block area.

Finally, while Pork Chop's colorful sayings were rooted in the time period, one phrase was supplied by my daughter. It has been commonplace in our household.

As Millie likes to say when she is startled or confused . . . *What in the history of cheese?*



BEANS'S FAVORITE KID ACTORS



Matthew "Stymie" Beard, *School's Out* (1930)

Jackie Cooper, *Treasure Island* (1934)

Junior Durkin, *Huckleberry Finn* (1931)

Bobby "Wheezer" Hutchins, *Mush and Milk* (1933)

Mary Ann Jackson, *Fly My Kite* (1931)

Baby LeRoy, *The Old-Fashioned Way* (1934)

George "Spanky" McFarland, *For Pete's Sake!* (1934)

Dickie Moore, *Forgotten Babies* (1933)

Shirley Temple, *Little Miss Marker* (1934)

Jane Withers, *Bright Eyes* (1934)



PORK CHOP'S BEST SAYINGS

Baloney!

Don't go having kittens!

For the love of Pete!

Mind your own potatoes!

Pos-i-tute-ly!

Tell it to Sweeney!

What a bunch of applesauce!

What in the history of cheese?


You're all wet!

You shred it, wheat!




OFFICIAL RULES OF THE DIAPER GANG

1. No girls allowed.
2. Keep your rag clean.
3. Always duck when changing a diaper.
4. Don't tell the secret diaper-rash formula.



RESOURCES TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING



Baby LeRoy:

imdb.com/name/nm0045128/

Florida and the New Deal:

fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/depress/depress1.htm

The Great Depression:

Pascal, Janet B. *What Was the Great Depression?*

New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2015.

How to make old-fashioned divinity candy:

pastrysampler.com/Recipes/Confectionery/Chocolate_Divinity.html

Key West Firehouse Museum:

keywestfirehousemuseum.com

Shirley Temple:

Kasson, John F. *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America.*

New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.

Works Progress Administration artists in Key West:

keysarts.com/public_art/wpa.html