

The novel centers around a rowdy, fun-loving, and sometimes delinquent group of teenage boys who hang-out at a newsstand located on the corner of Spring and Lafayette Streets. (The newsstand actually did exist.) The owner of the newsstand is a blind, middle-aged man who lives vicariously through the teenagers. Blinded in his early twenties after being hit by a baseball, he is quite worldly -- his personality being well developed from having spent his youth on the rough-and-tumble streets of Arthur Avenue in the Bronx. Although he can be lovable and avuncular at times, at other times, he can lead the “newsstand crew” into mischief and petty criminality, often displaying a nasty edge somewhat like the character, "Louie," played by Danny DeVito in *Taxi*. The protagonist, "John-John," Stuyvesant Class of '63, is a very studious, somewhat nerdy teen who reluctantly begins to hang-out at the newsstand and slowly learns how to “fit in” with the tough neighborhood youths and wannabe hoods while still pursuing his goal of going on to college. In addition, the book deals with the exploits of the newsstand boys as they interact with four Catholic high school teenage girls who wrestle with their blossoming sexuality and the morals and virtues inculcated upon them by their families and the Catholic Church. It also deals with a former Neapolitan prostitute, "Serafina," who winds up living in Little Italy with her Tennessee hillbilly husband whom she married in Naples during World War II (kind of a “Jed Clampett” meets Little Italy scenario). Unfortunately, Serafina cannot escape her prostitute past.

### ***Chapter 1: Boom!***

**Blood was oozing** out of Joe Sorrentino’s head as his slumping body was being propped up inside his newsstand by one of the many teenage boys who hung-out at the stand. Joe had heard the loud boom of the gunshot at almost the same instant that the bullet lodged near his right temple. He had not seen the bullet coming. How could he? The middle-aged man was blind.

About seven minutes after the shooting, the blaring siren of an ambulance could be heard in the distance, getting increasingly louder, overpowering the unusual quiet of the neighborhood – New York’s Little Italy. It was the Saturday before the Christmas of 1963. The normal din of the neighborhood was tempered by the 15-degree fridity of the noon hour. The ambulance, which was speeding south on Lafayette Street, came into view when it passed Prince Street with its red lights flashing. It soon came to a screeching stop alongside the newsstand. Two paramedics bolted out of the red-and-white Cadillac and did their best to usher away the concerned teenagers crowding the newsstand. They quickly bandaged the wounded man’s head, noting that most of the blood was coming from a nasty gash

on his forehead, which one of the teens told them he had suffered when he fell upon his nearby metal stool right after being shot.

The paramedics carefully placed Joe on the wheel-supported stretcher. He was lapsing in and out of consciousness, barely aware of the words of encouragement offered by several of the onlookers. He was a pitiful sight to behold. His baldpate was streaked with blood. His 5'-3" frame appeared to be even smaller in contrast to the lengthy stretcher. Two visibly shaken neighborhood women made the Sign of the Cross as the stretcher was locked into place in the cavernous rear of the hearse-like ambulance. One of those women, Serafina, a former Neapolitan prostitute, was already in a numbed state when she had come upon the scene because she was in the midst of the worst week of her life since her terrifying days in war-torn Naples.

The slamming of the ambulance's rear door spurred Joe back into full consciousness, at which point the attending paramedic heard him moan, "Why me, God? Why me? Haven't you given me a big enough cross to carry, already?"

His mind then flashed back to that fateful Sunday in May 1934 when his life had suddenly veered off course, moving from a life filled with happiness and joy towards a life filled with darkness and despair. Seconds later, he fell totally out of consciousness, becoming completely oblivious to the 100-decibel siren as the ambulance hurriedly wove through the holiday traffic en route to St. Vincent's Hospital in nearby Greenwich Village.

## ***Chapter 14: Bragging***

**John-John was awakened** by the bright sunlight passing through the kitchen windows. The Memorial Day weekend was over. It had been short, but eventful for him. Now it was time to get back to school. He looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was 6:05. He knew his mother would soon be getting up to make breakfast. Rather than getting out of bed, he decided to rest for ten more minutes.

At 6:15 the alarm clock rang in the bedroom – the only bedroom in the tiny apartment. Angelina got up from bed leaving her husband to sleep until noon because he had gone to sleep at 4 a.m. after driving the night shift. She slowly worked her way from the bedroom to the kitchen. It was a short walk since the apartment had only three "railroad" rooms. As she entered the living room, she eyed

her fifteen-year-old daughter, Vivian, fast asleep on the convertible sofa. She shook her in a less-than-gentle manner, saying, "Get up...The holiday's over...Time to go to school."

When she entered the kitchen, she was happy to see that John-John was up and in the process of folding-up his rollaway bed. Although sleeping in the kitchen would seem rather strange to most Americans, especially those living in houses in Middle America, it was quite common in Little Italy and other such neighborhoods. How else could people raise families with two or more children in tiny three or four-room apartments?

John-John lingered over his breakfast of coffee, juice, a soft-boiled egg and toast. After some chitchat, he dressed and went off to school, boarding the IRT Subway at the Spring Street Station, right behind Joe's stand. He arrived at Union Square within five minutes, and after a ten-minute walk, he entered the school at the East 15<sup>th</sup> Street entrance. He walked with a bit of a swagger, buoyed by his weekend romantic escapade with Felicia. Although it had only amounted to just a few kisses and some petting, he felt that he had gone through a rite of passage.

Many of his fellow seniors had opted for light workloads, taking only those courses necessary to fulfill New York State curriculum requirements, but John-John was taking full advantage of the school's offerings by taking several electives. In addition to taking English, World History, French and Gym, he had elected Qualitative Chemical Analysis, Calculus and Advanced Mechanical Drawing.

Lunch came none too soon for John-John, who was always hungry. With lunch tray in hand, he joined his usual fourth period lunch mates: Gary Schindelheim; Stanley Mizel; Tommy Tedesco; and Bernie Goldberg.

"Hey John, how was your weekend?"

"Great, Gary."

"Where did you go?"

"Nowhere. I never left the neighborhood."

"Well, *that* doesn't sound like much of a holiday weekend."

"Well, I didn't go anywhere, but I did have a couple of hot make-out sessions with Felicia."

"Who's Felicia?" asked Tommy.

“She’s a girl from my neighborhood. Although she lives only about 50 feet from the newsstand where I hang-out, I never paid much attention to her until recently.”

“How come?” asked Gary

“Well, she’s two years younger than me. Up until recently, she had a boyish figure...flat as a board...and she acted like a tomboy. In fact, she could catch a “spaldine” as well as most guys.”

“So, one could infer that things have since changed,” remarked the erudite Stanley.

“Yes. She has developed into a cute and sexy-looking babe. It’s hard to believe how much her body has changed.”

“How’s her face?” asked Gary.

Before he could answer, Bernie, who always brought things to the lowest common denominator, chimed in: “Who cares, you can’t fuck a face!”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before, Bernie, but for the record, her face is actually quite nice. She has high cheekbones, sensuous lips, blue eyes and long, sandy-blond hair.”

“How far did you get?” inquired Gary, who loved to ask questions -- especially when it involved girls.

John-John wanted to tell the truth, but he knew the true version wouldn’t be much of a story. He wanted the guys to think of him as a stud, so he decided to exaggerate after concluding that it would do no harm to Felicia since none of the guys knew her.

“Well...she let me feel her up through her clothes...and then I managed to get my right hand into her bra and actually play with her tits...which are quite big.

“I guess you did have a great weekend, after all,” said Gary.

“Way to go, John!” added Bernie.

The Stuyvesant students were a special breed. Most were intellectually gifted; many of them were even smarter than their teachers. However, when it came to girls, most of the students were socially inept, not knowing how to interact with girls. Perhaps, this was partly due to the fact that Stuyvesant High School, at that time, was not coed; so, there was no interaction with the opposite sex; or, perhaps, most

of the Stuyvesant boys just never found time for girls because they were too busy with their studies.

At about the same time that John-John was doing his lunchtime bragging, Felicia was truly enjoying lunch at Basilica High School with her usual bevy of girlfriends. It wasn't that she found the food anymore pleasing -- it was still the same old institutional-grade slop; it was the fact that she didn't have to make-up a story about some boy she was dating. She could actually tell the truth this time.

"Did you have a nice weekend, Felicia?" asked Maria.

"Yeah...I actually had a great weekend. I had two dates with John-John."

"Oh? Where did he take you?" asked Judy.

"Well, we didn't go anywhere special...We went to Crosby Street, twice, where we made out hot and heavy...if you know what I mean."

"Goin' to Crosby Street for a make-out session is not a date in my book," interjected Angie, with a bit of attitude in her voice. "A date is when a guy takes you out to a movie, or a dinner, or someplace."

"Okay, so they weren't what *you* would call official dates, but I had a wonderful time, anyway. When John-John hugs and kisses you, you've been hugged and kissed. I love the feeling of his strong arms and chest...Do you wanna see his picture?"

"No, we saw it last week," the girls replied in unison.

Acting as if she hadn't heard them, she reached in her handbag and pulled out John-John's graduation photo.

The photo was passed around the table rather quickly. Only Maria paused to take a good look at it. She felt strangely attracted to the young man in the photo. She wondered how it would have been if she had been with him on Crosby Street. *I wish I could get a guy like him to like me.* The shy young girl had developed a bit of a crush on John-John, even though she had never met him.