Red

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“WHAT’LL we do?” “We could go down and tear up the fruit stands on State Street,” said Morey. “We haven’t bothered Luigi and those other Dagos for a couple months.”

“Naw, we’d better leave them alone. The cops came pretty fast last time; besides, I don’t feel like eating apples.” “You’re right,” said Morey. “We’d better think of something else to do.”

It was the middle of the afternoon in crowded downtown Chicago. The elevated train rattled and banged overhead, shaking up a cloud of soot which dropped slowly to the red brick street. A fat lady spilled a bag of groceries in the center of the crosswalk, and the horns blared madly as she clumsily scooped them up in front of the line of impatient cars. A gust of wind from Lake Michigan stirred up the soot again, and it settled just in time for another elevated train to come along.

“Hey, Morey, let’s go over to Red’s magazine stand. He might have some new stories today.”

Morey Stein, Angelo Rappa and I shoved our way through the crowd, going just fast enough to push and pass from behind. It was great sport to force people off the sidewalk into the street. Morey kept ahead, and we followed. In some blocks we would be in the relatively bright, smoky sunlight. At Van Buren street we stopped in front of Minskey’s theater.

“Ya know, Angelo, we’re going to have to check this act soon. I hear they got the good girls this time.”

“You’re right, Morey. Maybe sometime when we’ve got nothing to do.”

Van Buren was a dark side street lined with pawn
shops and Jewish clothing stores. The doors of the shops opened up right on the sidewalk, and they were reinforced by heavy metal bars, making the place look like one large jail. Greasy little men stood in the doorways rubbing their hands and talking to everybody that came by. This was the scene of our many shoplifting adventures. In fact, probably every article of Morey's clothing was stolen from someone along this street.

“Hey, look. Red's talking to a copper. I wonder if he's in trouble again?”

“Naw, he's too smart to get in trouble again,” said Angelo.

“You're right,” Morey agreed. “He's probably taking bets from the cop.”

Red was known by everybody for blocks, which is quite a reputation in Chicago. He even had a wider reputation among the kids. Selling magazines was just a front for book-making, pimping, and peddling dirty stories. It was common practice for our gang to come and tell him all about our experiences. He would sit on his throne behind the magazine rack and laugh at all the stories of rolling drunks in dark alleys, throwing bricks through department store windows, and fixed card games at the train depot. To get his approval of our actions was an important goal. He would spread the word to the guys from different parts of the city that we were first-rate hooligans. This raised our prestige in the teenage underworld.

“Hey, Red, what's new?”

“Not much, fellas. Just been keeping to my business,” said Red. “Ain't you fellas got nothing to do?”

His chalky white, pock-marked face cracked into a grin. It was as though he realized we had nothing to do, and that any little suggestion from him would solve the problem. He led us.

“Let's cut cards for dimes, fellas.”

“Ya,” said Morey, “that'll give us something to do.”

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