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opening extract from

Then Again, Maybe I Won't

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Chapter 1

Who says March is supposed to come in like a lion and go out like a lamb? That's a lot of bull. All it's done this March is rain. I'm sick of it.

'Hey Tony . . .' Mrs Gorsky yelled from her upstairs window.

I pretended not to hear her. I took a *Jersey Journal* out of my sack and tossed it onto her front porch. *Pow-Pow-Pow* I got you Mrs Gorsky! Now you can't scream if I don't put your paper under your doormat.

This time she banged on the top of her window while she yelled, 'Tony Miglione! I know you can hear me!'

Sure I can. So can the whole neighbourhood.

'Don't you forget to put my paper *under* my doormat!'

I didn't say anything.

'TONY . . .'

Then I turned around and looked up at the window. 'Who, me?'

'Yes . . . you!'

'But it's pouring, Mrs Gorsky,' I called.

'So? You won't melt.'

Maybe I will. Then you'll be in big trouble because my family will come looking for me and

you'll have to tell them how I melted down to nothing right on your front porch.

I walked away from Mrs Gorsky's house. She was still banging on her window. Well, let her. I didn't feel like climbing her porch steps. What's the worst thing she can do to me? Call my boss . . . that's what. So? He'll understand. There's no rule that says I've got to put the paper under her doormat. As long as it doesn't land in the bushes I'm allowed to throw it from the sidewalk. If this rain ever stops, I'll go back to doing it her way. Then she'll be satisfied.

I don't know what I'll do about my paper route next year, when I go to junior high. I don't want to give it up. But Jefferson Junior has an after-school basketball league and I want to play in it. Basketball is my favourite sport. I just wish I was taller. My brother Ralph says I'll probably sprout up at fourteen like he did. I hope I don't have to wait that long. It's important to be tall when you're playing basketball. You're that much closer to the basket. I play at the Y all day Saturday and every Sunday afternoon. Always with the same bunch of guys – Frankie Bollino, Joe Schenk, Joe Rosella and Billy Turner. We call the two Joes, Big Joe and Little Joe. Rosella's the big one.

Maybe my boss will let me deliver later in the afternoon next year. I hope so. I could get around a lot faster if I had a bike I could depend on. But all

I've got is Ralph's old one, which doesn't work most of the time. I've been thinking about buying a new bike – a ten-speed Schwinn – bright red. But my father says it's more important to put my money in the bank for college. He's saving for my education already and I don't even know what I want to be. Suppose I don't want to go to college? My father will be disappointed. He wants me to be a teacher, like Ralph. And we have a State Teachers College right here in Jersey City. That's where Ralph went and where Angie goes now. She's Ralph's wife. They live upstairs. Between the two of them you'd think they invented education.

I wonder how I'll feel going to the school where my brother teaches. Probably I won't get Ralph anyway. At least I hope I don't. It'll be bad enough when the other kids find out my brother's The Wizard of Seventh Grade Social Studies. Suppose they get ideas and ask me to fix it with Ralph for them to get good marks? What will I do then?

Wait a minute. Maybe I can say I'm no relation to Ralph Miglione, the teacher. We just happen to have the same last name. After all, Jersey City is a big place. Not everybody knows my family. Yeah . . . that's what I'll say. And I'll warn Big Joe, Little Joe, Frankie and Billy in advance. They're my best friends. They can keep a secret.

If only the rain would stop.

I can hear my mother saying when I get home,

'Why didn't you wear your rubbers? Why are they just sitting in the closet?'

Four more houses and I'll be done delivering for the day. Good . . . I'm starving. I wonder what's for supper. Grandma does all the cooking at home. She's my mother's mother and she's really a great cook. Frankie says he'd rather eat at my house than anywhere.

One thing I really like about Frankie is how he treats Grandma. He acts like there's nothing wrong with her. But Grandma can't talk anymore. She had cancer of the larynx two years ago and they had to operate and remove it. She could learn to talk again through a burping method if she was willing. But she's not willing. She moves her lips a lot, like she's talking, but no sound comes out. If she has something really important to tell us she writes it down – always in Italian, which I can't read.

Once I caught Billy and Little Joe fooling around pretending to be my grandmother. They were waving their arms and moving their lips like Grandma does. When they saw me standing there they stopped.

If I hurry I might get home before my mother. Then I can change my shoes and she won't see how wet they are.

I made it. My mother probably got hung up in traffic somewhere. That happens a lot when the

weather's bad. She works in Newark, selling underwear in Ohrbach's. I wonder what it's like watching ladies try on underwear all day? I'd really like to get a look at that!

I took off my shoes in the front hall and hung my raincoat on the hook. My feet were soaked. So were the bottoms of my pants. I sat down on the floor and peeled off my socks. One had a big hole in it. Angie came flying down the stairs then and almost crashed right into me.

'Tony . . . you're absolutely drenched!'

'I know,' I said. 'It's pouring out.'

She started back upstairs. 'I'm going to get a towel to dry off your hair.'

'I can do it myself,' I told her. Angie likes to play mother with me. Sometimes I let her and sometimes I don't. It depends on my mood. My father says Angie has fat legs. I've been looking at her legs a lot lately and I don't think they're too fat. I think they're nice. Maybe some day I'll marry a girl like Angie. Then again, maybe I won't. Maybe I'll never get married.

I went into my room, dried off and changed my clothes. Then I headed for the kitchen. Grandma was tossing a salad. 'I'm home,' I said.

Grandma smiled and offered me an olive. I really like olives. Big Joe says if you eat a lot of them you make out good with the girls when you're older. But that's not why I eat them. I liked them before I

ever heard about that. Big Joe knows plenty. He told me and Frankie about wet dreams. I wonder if I'll ever have one?

'What's for supper?' I asked Grandma.

She pointed to the oven.

'Chicken?' I asked.

Grandma shook her head.

'Lamb?'

She shook it again.

'Veal?'

Now Grandma nodded. I play this game with her every night. She likes me to guess what we're having to eat. The only way I can have a conversation with her is if I ask the questions and she answers by moving her head. As far as I know Grandma spends her time doing two things. One is, she cooks. And the other is, she walks to church every single morning. I think she's Father Pissaro's best customer.

When my mother and father got home we all sat down to supper. Ralph and Angie eat with us every night too. I don't think Angie knows how to cook.

Pop told us that starting tomorrow morning he'll be working on an office building downtown. They need a lot of rewiring done. My father's an electrician. He works for a contractor. He's even got his own truck. It says *Vic Miglione* on the door.

Under that there's a picture of a telephone book with *you saw it in the yellow pages* written across.

'Is it a big job?' my mother asked.

'Pretty big,' Pop said. 'Should last about four weeks.'

'Well, that's something,' Mom said.

I was just about finished with my veal cutlet when Ralph pushed his plate away and said, 'Angie went to the doctor today. You might as well know . . . she's pregnant.'

My mother said, 'Ralph . . . Ralph . . .' She shook her head.

My father closed his eyes.

Grandma moved her lips very fast.

Angie jumped up and ran to the bathroom.

I know I shouldn't think about Ralph and Angie the way I do. I know I shouldn't think about what you have to do to get somebody pregnant. But sometimes I just can't help it. He and Angie really do those things. Ralph admitted it. All of a sudden it was very quiet. Did they know what I was thinking? I tried a laugh and said, 'What's everybody so gloomy about? They're married!' I meant this to be a joke but nobody got it.

'Tony . . . Tony . . .' my mother said in her *Ralph . . . Ralph* voice. 'You don't understand.'

'Understand what?' I asked.

Ralph explained. 'We don't have much money,

Kid. Angie was supposed to teach for a few years to get us started. We can't afford to have a baby.'

'Oh . . .' I said.

Angie didn't stay in the bathroom long. She came back to the table and sat down. She didn't look so good but she smiled at me.

'Well, you're going to be an uncle, Tony. How does it feel?'

'Oh fine.' What was I supposed to say?

Then Angie looked at Ralph and started to cry again. My mother stood up and put an arm around her. 'It's all right, Angie. We'll help out. Don't worry.'

'How can I not worry?' Angie asked. 'You and Pop have done so much already. The apartment upstairs and our meals and . . .'

My father coughed. 'Listen Angie, you're my family. That baby is going to be my grandson . . .'

'How do you know it's a boy?' my mother asked.

'I know. That's all,' my father said.

'I'm sorry,' Angie told us. 'I wanted to teach. I really did.'

'I know . . . I know . . .' my mother said, as if repeating everything twice meant it wasn't as bad as it sounded.

'At least Angie will be able to finish college and get her degree,' Ralph said.

'That's good.' My father tried to sound happy.

'Maybe I'll give up Ohrbach's and take care of

the baby so Angie can teach anyway,' my mother said. 'Let's wait and see.'

While my mother was talking, Grandma got up and came back with her pad and pencil. She wrote a note and handed it to my mother, who translated:

We'll call him Vinnie.

Vinnie was my other brother. He was killed in Vietnam. My mother got tears in her eyes and she and Grandma touched hands.

Why does everybody think babies are such an expense? They're very small and they hardly eat anything. While I was thinking this Angie ran into the bathroom again. If you ask me she was puking.

As soon as we got up from the table my father went downstairs. He's got a workshop fixed up in the basement and that's where he spends all his free time. He invents things. I don't understand the stuff he does in his workshop so I don't go down much. Neither does Ralph. Vinnie was the one with the scientific mind. At least that's what my family is always saying.

Tonight, when I go to bed, I might think about Vinnie. I do that sometimes so I won't forget him. Or maybe I'll concentrate on getting good enough to shoot thirty baskets a minute.

In a few weeks the weather changed. It was really spring. I knew because my mother sent my winter

jacket to the cleaner. She never does that unless she's sure it's going to stay warm. She says changeable weather is sick weather and that I have to wear a winter jacket until the middle of April, like it or not. What she doesn't know is that as soon as I'm out of sight I take off my jacket and carry it around with me.

Once my father finished the job in the office building he started spending more and more time in his basement workshop. A couple of nights he asked Mom to give him a sandwich for supper and he even ate down there. My mother and Ralph are both working at extra jobs. Mom is staying at the store two nights a week and Ralph is selling shoes after school and Saturdays. Every night the family is so pooped out they fall asleep right after supper. The only good thing about this is I get to watch whatever I please on TV.

One morning in the middle of breakfast, my father came into the kitchen wearing his best suit. He was carrying a small metal box. He didn't sit down at the table. He just grabbed a cup of coffee and said goodbye.

'Where's Pop going?' I asked.

'New York,' my mother said.

'What for?'

'Eat your eggs,' my mother said.

'I am eating them,' I told her. 'What's he all dressed up like that for?'

'Finish your milk too.'

I got the point. She wasn't going to discuss it with me.

My father put on his best suit for the next three days. He left the house carrying that metal box every morning and he didn't come home until late at night.

Whatever Pop's secret was I felt pretty lousy that they didn't let me in on it. I had a few ideas of my own though.

1 My father is a secret agent. The electrician business is a front. His real spy work is done in the basement workshop. And his information is in that box.

2 My father is in trouble with the Jersey City mob. He has to testify at hearings every day. The secrets are locked in that metal box.

3 My father is sick. He has cancer, like Grandma. He has to go to New York for special treatments. His medicine is in the box.

The more I wondered about Pop the more my stomach started to hurt. Last January I had really bad stomach pains and my mother took me to the doctor. He said it was nothing – that I just shouldn't eat so much roughage. I told him I never ate roughage in my whole life. The doctor laughed

and said roughage is lettuce and celery and stuff like that. So now instead of eating salad every night I have it only once or twice a week. I still get a lot of stomach aches. But my mother says it's gas. I don't even tell her about them, anymore. I'm afraid she'll come after me with the castor oil.

At the end of my father's third day out my mother worked late and Pop met her in Newark. I was already in bed by the time they came home. I was reading *Great Basketball Heroes of our Times* and figuring if I got good enough I could get an athletic scholarship to some college and my father wouldn't need the money he was saving for my education. He could use it to pay for the baby instead.

When they came into my room to say goodnight my mother asked me to put my book away and listen carefully because she had something very important to tell me.

'What is it?' I asked.

'You see Tony . . .' she began. Then she looked at my father and said, 'Oh Vic . . . I'm just too excited. You tell him.'

I sat up in bed. This is it! He's going to tell me. At last I'll know the secret. No matter what it is, I won't break down in front of him. I'll tell him it's all right. That I know how these things can happen.

'I've made a deal, Tony,' my father said. 'That is, I think I've made a deal.'

So it's a deal, I thought. He's sold out to protect us. That's why my mother's excited.

'Are you listening, Tony?' my father asked.

'Sure Pop.'

'Well, I'll know more tomorrow when the lawyers talk.'

'What lawyers?'

'Sam Ranken, my lawyer, has to meet with the lawyer for J.W. Fullerbach Electronics,' my father said.

I asked my mother, 'What's he talking about?'

'Tony . . . Tony . . .'

Here she goes again, I thought.

'Your father's a genius! An absolute genius! Did you know that, Tony?' She gave my father a juicy kiss and kept talking. 'I always knew it . . . deep down inside I always knew!'

My father? A genius? What's she talking about now? My father's regular. 'I don't get it,' I said.

'Well, Tony . . .' my father began, loosening his tie. 'One of my ideas about electrical cartridges . . . one of the things I've been working on downstairs . . .'

I interrupted. 'You know I don't understand that stuff, Pop.'

'So listen! Maybe this time you'll understand.'

'Okay . . . I'm listening,' I said.

My father told me how he took his idea to Mr J.W. Fullerbach. And how he had to see two assistant secretaries, three regular secretaries and a vice-president before he got to see J.W. Fullerbach himself. But it was worth it because Mr Fullerbach likes the electrical cartridges – and my father – and my father's ideas – and he wants all three.

'You're going to work for him?' I asked.

'We'll see,' my father said.

'You're quitting your job with Mr Dalto?'

'We'll see.'

'Oh.'

'This means money, Tony,' my father said. 'It means Ralph and Angie won't have to worry. Can you understand that?'

'Sure, Pop. Sure I understand.' I put my head on the pillow. My mother turned out the light and kissed me on my forehead.

So my father's not a secret agent.

He's not mixed up with the mob.

And he doesn't have cancer.

But what was he talking about? One of his inventions? He really invented something that somebody wants? Is he a genius? And if he is how come it took so long to find out?

My father took the bus to New York every morning for the next week. His regular boss, Mr Dalto, called in the afternoon to find out how

Pop was feeling. That's how I knew my father had reported in sick. I didn't give him away though. I said, 'He's getting better, Mr Dalto. Thank you for calling.'

At the end of the week, when Pop came home from New York, he picked me up and swung me around. Now that's something he never does anymore. I'm much too big.

So I yelled, 'Hey, put me down!'

Then my father picked up my mother and swung *her* around, then my grandmother and Angie but not Ralph. Ralph is bigger than my father. While he was swinging us all around like that he laughed and yelled, 'We're going to be rich . . . rich!'

My mother hollered, 'Vic! Calm down. You're no kid. Think of your heart!'

So Pop made us all sit down on the couch while he stood up in front of us and told us about his deal.

J.W. Fullerbach Electronics is going to manufacture my father's electrical cartridges. And my father is going to manage the plant that's going to do the manufacturing.

'It's one of the Fullerbach plants in Queens,' my father said. 'But now, thanks to Sam Ranken, it's going to be called the Fullerbach-Miglione Engineering Corporation.'

My mother tried that out for size. 'Fullerbach-Miglione . . . Fullerbach-Miglione . . .'

And I thought, Fullerbach-Miglione?

'I get stock in Fullerbach Electronics, with options, of course . . .' my father said, doing a little dance. 'I tell you . . . *we are going to be rich*!'

I don't know anybody rich. Everybody I know is just like me. I wonder what rich is like. It probably means that Ralph and Angie can have a baby every year.

'Angie, let me kiss you!' my father said. 'If it wasn't for that baby you and Ralph are expecting, I'd never have had the guts to try out my electrical cartridges on anybody.'

'Say, Pop,' I said. 'How're you going to get from Jersey City to Queens every day?' That was the part of it I understood.

'I'm not going to, Tony,' my father said.

'You're not?'

'Nope.'

'Well then, what?' I asked.

'I'm going to get from Rosemont to Queens.'

'What's Rosemont?' I asked.

'It's a town in Long Island.'

'You're going to live there?'

'*We're* going to live there!' my father said.

'We are?' I asked.

'That's right!'

'All of us?'
'All of us!'

Goodbye Jersey City, I thought.
Goodbye basketball at the Y.
Goodbye Little Joe and Big Joe.
Goodbye Frankie and Billy.
Goodbye Jersey Journal *paper route.*

'What's the matter, Tony?' my mother asked.

'The Kid's excited,' Ralph said. 'Can't you see . . . the Kid's just so excited!'

'And why not?' my mother asked. 'How many kids have a genius for a father!'

I don't cry any more. I'm too old for that baby stuff, which is why I ran for the bathroom and locked myself in. I cried really quiet. Not like Angie who does it so loud everybody knows.