Rags to Riches to Rags, 1

by Jerry Ratch

1

Al Capone was ruling the backstreets and alleyways of Chicago during Prohibition, and we lived in a little house right next door to a speak-easy. I could peak through our curtains and see right into the bar next door when cops came in to get paid off by the owner of the joint. It was public knowledge that this was taking place, and on a regular basis.

People were getting pretty used to the sight of a squad car full of laughing, red-faced Irish cops pulling up in the front of our house, and then four or five men filing into the speak-easy with their hands out. I could plainly see the stacks of dollar bills on the little table, as the owner of the joint counted out the take for each one of the cops. The Captain, of course, getting the biggest stack. He was a big man, and the loudest. That laughter of his almost matched the zany, high-pitched laughter of my father, who had the exact same name as me, Otto Joseph. Except I was always Junior to him.

The infamous St. Valentine's Day massacre happened in a garage down the alley right behind our little house. Although, that was in 1929. My father had already been dead for a year from alcohol, and I was out working, trying to help my poor overwhelmed mother support her five children. I was fourteen then. I left school the year my dad died, to go find a job at a hair cutting school.

But there were good times too. My girlfriend, Bessie, and I were getting on famously, as they used to say. We were always together, side by side. In fact when I got my motorcycle, because I was making some real money then and I could, well, I went out and bought a sidecar for my Indian motorcycle so I could ride all over Chicago with my Bessie. She was a real dark-haired, brown-eyed

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jerry-ratch/rags-to-riches-to-rags-1--2»*
Copyright © 2013 Jerry Ratch. All rights reserved.

beauty. You oughta seen her in a bathing suit! Yowsir! She was something, all right. We were never apart, after my dad died.

See, we were so rich it didn't seem like anything could of touched us. We lived in this enormous palace, over on the north side of the city, near Evanston almost. We couldn't actually live across the border, right in Evanston, on account of we were Bohunks. That's what they used to call us back then. My father, he came out of Bohemia with my mother. And not only were we Bohunks, but my mother was a Jew, so that didn't sit too well with the Evanston people.

But then all of a sudden we were poor, on account of a worker who fell off of one of my father's roofing jobs, and he died. Well, these real nasty lawyers came and just took about everything we had, and that's how fast things like that can happen. It could happen to you, too. Things like that can happen in the blink of an eye.

And that was how we came to living back across town in the Bohemian part of the city, on the South side, over near the stockyards, where I was born, on the very same street as your mother. It was on Honore Street. Next to a speak-easy. Where the cops came every week during Prohibition. And where Al Capone ruled the streets and the alleyways and the St. Valentines fellows who were massacred, as I said.