

The Graduation of Eddie Calibresi

Passing from sixth grade to seventh grade, from elementary school to junior high school, was a monumental event of the highest order for Eddie Calibresi and me. Gone were our wanton days of team-frogging fourth grade boys like Brady O'Neil, and stealing kisses in the darkened recesses of a coat closet from the exotic looking Debbie Simmons and her best friend, Bonnie Rankin. It meant fewer high-speed chases on our bikes or skateboards, flying over the bridge at Bogg's Creek or making kamikaze passes at old lady Young as she swept her sidewalk in the early morning light.

The boys were no longer boys, we thought; we were men now. We had to act like men, we had to talk like men and we certainly had to treat our women like men do, all of which neither of us had even the smallest inkling as to how to accomplish. Eddie and I were confident we looked the part—sneaking cigarettes behind the gym after lunch or in the boys' bathroom, swelling our chests up like Arnold Schwarzenegger for the girls and spitting—but we sure didn't feel the part; at least, I didn't.

Eddie did have his advantages, though. Where I was a blonde of better than average build and resources, Eddie was of Italian descent and, at thirteen, already tall, dark and muscular, with jet-black hair he would gel and comb straight back on his head. Every day he would wear blue-jeans and a pure white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up high on his shoulders. It was the bad boy image he was cultivating, he said, and the girls, it seemed, couldn't get enough.

“Hey! I got an idea,” Eddie said one day between classes while we pushed through to our lockers.

I tried to avoid answering. A bright kid, Eddie was always getting ideas and they usually involved money—mine. Stopping, I spun the combination on my locker and looked over at him.

“What is it this time, Calibresi?” I said flatly, trying not to sound the least bit encouraging or, by default, promotional.

“Come on, Malone,” he said, throwing his history book in his locker and taking out his algebra book. “You haven't even heard my idea and already you're torching me.”

“You have that effect on me, Eddie,” I said. “I'm surprised. You usually wait 'til Monday before you hit on me for my allowance.”

“Well, this won't cost you a thing,” Eddie said with a sly grin.

The bell started ringing and we ran in opposite directions. Mr. Hawkins, the assistant principal, was standing at the end of the hallway, shooting daggers at the two of us.

“We'll talk about it after school, Jazz!” Eddie yelled over his shoulder. “At Haskins!”

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That afternoon, on the #29 bus Eddie and I rode home from school, the Law brothers—Garret and George—got into a heated argument with Cory Anderson over seating arrangements. The rear seats that framed the emergency exit were prime perches, and the two brothers invariably wanted to occupy them, bullying whoever had got there first into relinquishing their spot.

But the small and feisty Cory was not about to give up his seat, not for anyone. Paul Jenkins, the old guy that drove our bus, yelled at them, demanding they sit down and shut-up; to no avail. They were still arguing when we reached our stop at Haskins Hardware store.

“Get out here, you little prick!” Garret Law yelled. “I'm gonna beat your ass!”

First off the bus, he and George waited while Cory followed Eddie and me down the bus stairs and out on the pavement in front of Haskins' gas pumps. The two ninth graders—George, by ascension, Garret, by retention—had dropped their backpacks on the concrete and were dancing around like boxers, loosening up for the big match.

“Not if I can help it!” Cory jeered.

The fifteen year-old sprite was having none of their business. He took off like a shot, laughing and hooting, knowing they would never catch him, having been the winner of the city's annual 15k race in his age group two years in a row.

Standing to one side and watching the frustration grow on George's and Garret's face, Eddie and I tried hard not to snicker. It wasn't often we got to see a little guy deflating the big guys.

“Let's go check out my idea,” Eddie said.

“Cool,” I replied, following him around the corner to the store's entrance.

Entering the interior of Haskins' Hardware—in what were to become daily excursions—Eddie whispered that it was like walking into the haunted house at the county fair. Fascinated and not knowing where to look first, I had to agree: no matter where you turned, something hooked your eye, beckoning with some kind of mystery.

Trays and boxes and drawers and pails and shelves and rows and walls and columns of stuff and more stuff. More varieties, shapes and sizes of bolts, nuts, screws, nails and brads than I had ever imagined possible. The largest collection, I surmised, of hoes, shovels, spades, rakes, pitch forks, trowels and other gardening tools known to man, some too foreign to even identify, all gathered in this one place for our joyous perusal.

Tackle; my god. I never realized there were so many different hooks and lures and rods and spinners and reels and sizes of test line available solely for the sport of reeling in fish. Eddie's eyes sparkled like a Christmas tree; I was getting a headache just trying to take it all in, and I was beginning to understand why my dad spent some of his time off in places like this, rather than neighborhood bars. It was a real man's paradise, a refuge for hen-pecked husbands and a place where guys could talk unabashedly, where the possibilities for awe-struck boys like us were endless.

Eddie was an addict, I could tell, doing nothing more than running his hands over the top of the various goods, handling things, smelling. I was fast becoming one myself and I knew it was time to get out and suck some air.

“How come you never told me about that place?” I asked Eddie as we unlocked our bikes and began pedaling toward home.

“I didn't want to spoil the surprise,” Eddie said. “Check this out, my man.”