

"ONCE UPON A TIME BEFORE-EVER"

DECEMBER, 1944: I know you have heard of the "here-after", but what about the "before-ever"? Well for those of you with limited imaginations, the "before-ever" is a time when you spiritually belong to your guardian angel. You know what I'm talking about! The period before you are physically born. Now considering this explanation we may begin our story.

Once upon a time in the "before-ever" somewhere up above the earth looking down on "Swampoodle" in the Earth year of 1944 AD, (no pun intended) the following is taking place: "But my Holy Angel, I don't want to be part of Philadelphia's Main Line community. It just doesn't sound proper for me to live in Bryn Mawr. I mean could you see me as the son of a wealthy attorney? Besides, these things only happen in the movies, (a pun definitely intended)."

"My child, my child", answered my guardian angel Johnny. But why have you chosen the neighborhood known as Swampoodle?"

"I'm not sure Johnny Angel, it's a mystery to me! I'm sure it has something to do with the delicious smelling odors coming from the rows of houses in this Italian-American ethnic community."

"Oh that my child is the bracirole simmering in the gravy at many of the homes, such as the Panico's house. Also, the sausage being fried with onions and peppers at the Stelacio's and the Bocutto's."

"Hey, Johnny Angel can you hear the laughter of the kids playing?"

"Yes! That game seems to be familiar to you because it's called, Baby In The Air."

"I can hear the Bells of St. Mary's Church ringing for me! As we zoom in on the church I see a young priest talking to two nuns."

"You will be seeing a lot of these people if your wish is granted to be part of this neighborhood. The priest is Fr. Busco who will soon be the pastor of this parish. The nuns are Sr. Mary Clarrissa and Mother Regis. They will be the two ladies

who introduce you to a Catholic education."

"What's happening on that street, Johnny Angel?"

"Oh that is 22nd Street! It is the main shopping area of this neighborhood. I can see so many people that were once a part of the "before-ever".

You see those two guys coming out of, "Tamburini's Shoe Store", that's Anthony and Harry Cappa. They just bought their Christmas shoes.

The one named Anthony will be nicknamed "Ziggy" and will eventually take over his father's barbershop."

"What's with the nickname?"

"It's a tradition of this neighborhood to re-name people according to their attributes." The guy walking, with the large loaf of bread under his arm, is a man called "Cat". Cat will assign many nicknames to different generations of this neighborhood's kids. There is the Saracino family walking with their brother little Pasquale who will first be called Boston Blacky's Brother-In-Law, it will then be shortened to BBBL.

Lenny, (soon to be known as "The Werewolf"), Antonacci, is holding his mothers hand as she chats with Lena Donato, who is holding her two year old son Joe. Someday Lenny will earn a Roman Catholic High letter. He will put it on his school sweater and constantly wear it, even in the cold winters without an overcoat. Olivia "Brown Eyes" Frattini is literally running down 22nd street calling out to her brother "Dicky Frat". "This is really something Johnny Angel! I am crazy about "Swampoodle". Maybe you can use your influence and get me born into this unique group of people"

"John "Sniz" Delaqua is about to enter into, "Lasalvia's Chicken Store", just as Walter "Turk" Perilli is walking out with two dead chickens one in each hand."

My eyes then shift down 21st Street to a bunch of kids wearing helmets and pads on their shoulders. The Angel is quick to say, "That's Rayburn Field" and he continues to

explain the game of football to me.

He continues, "That's Johnny "Cal" Calabrese throwing the ball to Joe "Brokenheart" Brocardi and Camillo "Chuck-A-Boot" is about to tackle him. The Angel quickly turns my attention to another area of the neighborhood. "This is 21st & Indiana Avenue where many guys will hang out. Look, there are some of the movers and shakers, Moe Bracetta, Al Perri, and Jim Antonacci. In the near future there will be other guys who will take over, Jabber, Kenurtz, Jack Larue, Rags, Nails, Bucky, and many others. The Poolroom next to the corner is now owned by Ambrose, but someday will belong to Buck-Em-Up whose nickname will come from the procreation of several sets of twins." In an instant we are now hovering over the corner of Judson & Indiana, according to the Angel. "Someday my child this will be a famous place. Its name will be shortened and known to many Philadelphia teenagers as J&I. This is were you will spend many of your childhood years with the likes of Balloons, Barbell, No-Neck, Beans, Hermit, Horn, Chang, Dego, Livin, Trigger, Squid, White-Bread, Tac, and so many others." Suddenly everything gets dark! I shout, "Johnny Angel don't leave me! You have been a good angel to me! I sure hope my wish has been granted! I didn't even get a chance to ask him what my nickname will be." I begin to see again, but not so clearly. I see all these people standing around with white gowns on and masks over their faces. This man is hitting me on my behind and it hurts, so I let out a big crying scream. The man says, "Mary it's the first boy born today at St. Vincent's hospital in Staten Island!" How can this be! I'm supposed to be in Swampoodle. Music begins to play and I hear the radio of my 57 Chevy playing the song "Johnny Angel" and the voice of my chick Pattie saying, "Aron! Aron! Please wake up the movie is done. I have to be home by midnight and it's a long way back to J&I!"