

Tommy Tutone

By Dan Cardoza

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love the street smart beat in this fast moving monologue of a biracial castoff cast adrift in the wilds of Chicago. Inspired by an 80's hit parade classic, Tommy's actions have the feel of a comic strip storyboard as we watch him hip-hop from insult to brush off, deflecting his fear of a cold-hearted world by personalizing the objects in his environment: Yoda, the mailbox, even himself: 'Today I'm Tom Sawyer.' His unscripted future in a blended society is a game he already is beginning to win but neither we, nor Tommy, know at what cost. The voice is clipped, edgy and full of sass. Quote: "I should have been named Trouble, cause' from what I've been told, that's all I've been. I have other names too: Loiterer, pilferer, truant, incorrigible, God-What-Potential, stupid as ever there was.' And: 'In Chicago, if you quit moving on the street in winter, you either freeze or get robbed.'*

On the street, the word is I was conceived at Harrison Court, in the projects off East Garfield, near the rail yard. Not true, it was on the banks of Lily Pond, in Washington Park.

One of my daddies is white, my mom soul black. I'm only twelve, but I have a street name already. *Tommy Tutone*. My last name should be *867-5309/Jenny*, like the 80's one-hit wonder.

He says, "Boy, come over here. I got something you might want to see," as he slips his hands in his pant pockets.

I shout "Shut the fuck up, perv!" to the man behind the crocodile smile, and stolen CVS shades. I know about him from the other boys.

Look! That's me running away as fast as Steph Curry.

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Foster care was supposed to be Easy Peezy, after about seven homes, if my counting is right. None of my placements have lasted, even the one in the Milwaukee suburbs near the good schools. At least the police helped me move out just in time.

I should have been named 'Trouble, cause' from what I've been told, that's all I've been. I have other names too: Loiterer, pilferer, truant, incorrigible, God-What-Potential, stupid as ever there was. Some of the names get me into kids clubs. Even the Bloods and Crips have yakked my way about joining up. But they say I'm part white, the devils gang sign.

"Kid, buy something or get lost!"

"Yes sir," I say in Lou's Market, and restock the Snicker's from my back pocket.

Today my gang name is Tom Sawyer, not Tommy Tutone. I'm the rough and tumble feral child in the book. The streets are my country side, including Washington Park after dark. I just don't have a best friend like Huck Finn to explore with me. In fact I have no friends. If a tumble weed was human, it would be me.

Deep down, in my thoughts, in the place where I first started to remember, there was someone I wanted to be. Not a family member, because I only know a few, but someone on TV. I think the protagonist was almost a super hero, but not quite, at least that is what I recall or wanted him to be. He did things with his life, and traveled a lot, not just when someone gave up on him. It was like a dream, he went to college, so maybe it was the Hallmark Channel. He even had kids *one of these days*. They loved him and he loved them. In the movie, no one left or died or said go away. He and his wife even button kissed in the end. It's been so long, maybe that's the movie I made up in my head, after being afraid, when my third foster mother and father were breaking glass, and throwing furniture. I am not really sure?

"Boy, get the hell out the street," Yells a gentleman in a fine hat and a long car with shiny wheels, chalk full of fancy women.

"Do you think you own the hood?" he says all dressed in his one solid gold buck-tooth.

I don't want trouble, "My bad," I say in the way I told the dads in foster care, or to the teachers who yelled, "You're an under achiever. You have potential" Potential is worth a whole bunch of money I

read in books about the Civil War. They call it confederate. It means when you possess something, but you can't or won't use it.

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I find myself leaning against the cracked plastic sidewall of the Red Line bus stop at 47th, against a giant blonde girl selling shades of lipstick. On the other side of the plastic, I see my grandmother waiting for her uptown ride.

Her lips are moving. She seems friendly. So I swing around the see through wall, and take a seat on the opposite edge of the bench.

“Now son, why ain't you in school?” Her lips move again, this time with sound.

I wish I could call her grandma. “Alternative schedule,” I say, thinking this is what she wants to hear.

She seems friendly enough, maybe caring I think. So I scoot a bit closer to listen and talk. That's when she looks up the street, right through me, like she sees her bus. We both know it's not due for five minutes.

Then she says, “Son, ain't you got somewhere else to wait?”

That's when I realize it's not grandma, and that she never was. No matter how hard I want her to be. To make her feel safe, I stand up, place my hands in my pockets like their cold, and walk away.

I glance back over my shoulder. I say, “Have a nice day ma'am.”

Grandma shakes her head no, over and over again, likes she's mad, and then looks way up the street again for her invisible bus. As I head up the sidewalk I look down at the gum that seems to pock the sidewalk. It's been stepped on a lot.

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I venture further up the block and then rest against Yoda. That's what I call the last blue US mailbox on Garfield. I wonder if all the Yoda's left in Chicago's smell of pee. My head is a swivel. In Chicago, if you quit moving on the street in winter, you either freeze or get robbed.

As I look up South Martin Luther King, toward the Greyhound Depot, I again count the six bills in my pocket, carefully, like a new litter of puppies. I wonder *how far west the money will take me?*

I glimpse the front cover of the Chicago Sun-Times skittering down the street in the opposite direction, tumbling and scraping along in the wind like dingy crape paper. All I can read is that another boy's been shot dead.

I imagine the paper escaping or maybe just thrown away, like any bad news?

The End

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I recommend that the reader open up YouTube and play this song in the background. The song, 867-5309/Jenny, the band Tommy Tutone. Recently rediscovering this song, I again looked up the band that recorded this hit. The band, Tommy Tutone. The band had just the right kind of edge for this piece. I must say, I frequently listen to music that moves me while I write. At times, it's just the right spark.*

*Tommy Tutone is biracial and thus, why he was given the nickname Tommy Tutone. Not to simplify but Tommy's early life startles a black and white universe; where he is, he finds himself not totally comfortable in either world.*

*Tommy was conceived in a park near a pond. More than likely by a homeless couple. The park in the story is in the bad side of town. Tommy also experiences multiple Foster Care homes, where he is faced with even more difficulty, lack of acceptance and abuse. My favorite part of this story? When Tommy Tutone is at the bus stop, before leaving town. He very much wants to be*

*nurtured, and thus his interaction with the woman at the bus stop, I believe the Chicago Redline. Yet, he is only rejected again. But he's not a smart ass, he apologizes and moves on.*

*But if the reader looks closely, near the end of the story, Tommy has cash, and is getting ready to purchase a bus ticket out of his hell. I let the reader decide if he fails as an adult.*

*My take, Tommy being so resilient, only learns from his tragic roots. He then grows up smart and strong, obtaining his measure of what he decides is his American dream. Tommy is America's future, he's biracial, blended. As an adult, he and millions of other Americans will find themselves comfortable, with a rainbow of color, including Carmel.*

*Stylistic and literary influences: I grew up on Tim Robbins, James Baldwin, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Thomas Pynchon, J. D. Salinger and my man Richard Gary Brautigan. Who do I like today? Chimamanda Ngozi Achebe, Daniel Alarcon, 33, Sarah Shun-lien, Rivka Gal, Nicole Krauss and ZZ Packer.*

**BIO:** Dan Cardoza has an MS degree in Education from University of California Sacramento. He is the author of four poetry chapbooks and a new book of fiction, *Second Stories*. Recent credits include: *Adelaide, Cabinet of Heed, California Quarterly, Chiron, Cleaver, Confluence, Crossways, Entropy, Esthetic Apostle, Forrest tales, Frogmore, Foxglove, Gravel, High Shelf Press, New Flash Fiction Review, Peeking Cat, Picaroon, Poetry Northwest, Riggwelter, Runcible Spoon, Skylight 47, Spelk, Stray Branch, Synchronized Chaos, Tulpa* and *White Wall Review*.