

The Wheelchair Race

“MOVE OVER!”

“Shove it!”

Two wheelchairs speeding down the sidewalk near Crocktown’s Town Square, nearly out of control. Neither would yield.

One is battery-powered, a tough Tesla array of lithium ion laptop batteries strapped beneath the seat. The other sports a hefty 900cc two-cylinder internal combustion engine running on ethanol biofuel that coughs and farts, trailing clouds of acrid smoke.

Strictly speaking, Crocktown’s weekly wheelchair race is against the town rules but nobody ever observes them anyway. They also ban wave boards, skateboards, ripsticks, roller skates, smoking, drinking, loud music, card games, gambling of any kind and cursing. Bureaucrats love to stop folks from having fun, all over the world. In Crocktown, as usual, they’re a day late and a dollar short

“Go green, asshole!”

“Suck power, retard!”

Running neck-and-neck now. A few fans line both sides of the sidewalk, cheering them on.

“Throttle it, Howie! Let him eat smoke.”

“Come on, Vern! Show him a little butt crack.”

Some clutch wads of dollar bills in their fists. Money changes hands fast, keeping pace with the hurtling chairs. As soon as one grabs a six-inch lead, the other surges forward to close the gap.

Lagging behind is a local cop on a Segway, the two-wheel scooter that never caught on due to its high price. It also never caught on in small towns anywhere in the country because it proved to be so popular with gays.

The local cop, called Vinny, has little red-and-blue lights flashing on his handlebars. He’s waving his ticket book with one hand and shouting at the speeding racers but he can’t quite catch up with the turbocharged chairs.

Crocktown’s Segway has a tiny third wheel attached in the front, for balance, with a pair of shock absorbers to compensate for the

scooter's five inadequate (and expensive) on-board solid-state gyroscopes with their redundant sensors and microprocessors.

Vinny's doing all of 5-mph, slow enough to flip forward to a clean ticket with his left hand and pull out a ballpoint pen with his right. But the speeding chairs have left him behind.

Vernon, with the Tesla array, feels his blood pressure spike. He knows he's about to lose again. Digging into a side pocket, he pulls out a foot-long metal ruler. What he wants to do next is against the rules too, but he's got no choice. There's too much money riding on this weekly race, some of which winds up greasing the bureaucrats' palms so they can keep doing this.

With the ruler in his left hand, Vernon jams it sideways through Howard's wheel spokes. It immediately flies out, hits his armrest and ricochets off Howard's helmet, causing him to veer off. The momentary distraction is just enough for Vernon to eke out a win.

The meager crowd cheers as he crosses the finish line, ahead by a yard. Howard shuts his engine down and swings a fist at Vernon's shoulder. He misses by a lot.

"Cocksucker! Who d'you think you are, Ben Hur?"

"I won, get over it. Ditch that old smokestack."

A few fans surge forward to pull them apart. It takes a while, slowed by crutches and walkers if not by age. But they finally manage to separate the riders and put a little space between them.

The guys do this every Friday. Always a different pair in the chairs to be sure, but the competitive spirit is alive and well for the town's seniors, most of whom are searching for something, anything, that can attach jumper cables to their fading lives.

Crocktown, New Jersey, is a bellwether, the legendary canary in the demographic mine shaft that presages the nation's future. It's a small town, maybe 10,000 at most. But the largest cohort among them is marching steadily past 65. And many of them have chosen to retire in Crocktown's famed continuing care center, Twilight Ridge, known far and wide as New Jersey's finest.

Baby Boomers, getting older, marching to the drumbeat of Father Time, those bourgeois bohemians known as BoBos.

A generation ago they were at their peak, forty-something, slicing-and-dicing virtually every professional sphere imaginable.

Now they're retired, living off their 401(k)s and trying somehow to find ways to stay mentally and physically active since mainstream society has rendered them obsolete and useless.

Time expired. Game over. Past their sell-by dates.

Downsized, right-sized, unSanforized employees replaced by factory robots, fast computers and online services. At least the Crocktown crowd has turned down the temptation to become snowbirds in Florida, the state whose average age is somewhere between 78 and deceased. Never mind. Aging boomers are still the fastest-growing contingent in the entire country.

More than 10,000 Americans are turning 65 every day now, a pace that will continue inexorably through 2029. What else are they going to do, call Dr. Kevorkian? Not anymore. Nearly 78 million boomers born between 1946 and 1964 have branded American culture every decade ever since – the “make love, not war” generation of the sixties, the anti-Vietnam protestors of the seventies, suburban bourgeois bohemians of the eighties, the dot.com bubble-makers, borrowers and spenders of the nineties.

But now, tossed onto the trash heap of society, they're grasping at straws. Bankrupting Social Security, bleeding Medicare and bringing new stock market highs to the makers of hearing aids, rolling walkers and wheelchairs. Not to mention the ubiquitous meds – Cozaar for blood pressure, Lipitor for cholesterol, Celebrex for joint pain. And the king of them all, Viagra, which has given a billion-dollar meaning to the old expression “floor-to-ceiling.”

And once the Boomers are done looting the federal government for all their politically protected entitlements, they could make the Great Recession of '08 look like a summer weekend at the shore.

Cuppa Spotta

THE GUYS PULL A FEW CHAIRS around a window table at their favorite coffee shop. Crocktown, like every other burg in the world with at least one intersection, sports a gaggle of them. The most popular is Cuppa Spotta; it sits catty-cornered from the town hall.

Like all coffee shops, popular music blares through the sound system, a testament to the average age of the customers. It's the only audible noise. Everybody sits either staring at their smart phones or mesmerized by their laptops, earbud implants stuffed in every ear. Nobody's reading. Even couples are separated by invisible digital walls, silent, inoculated from personal interaction, inundated by pop music and insulated from conversation.

Two outsized posters hang on the far wall. One is a cartoon with a businessman at his desk, on the phone, eyeing his calendar. "How about never?" the caption says. "Does never work for you?"

The other is a huge caricature of an American flag. Above it the words, "Back-to-back." And below, "World War Champions."

Vernon Harris and Howard Dorchester exchange a bro hug and sit down. Vern leans his cane in a corner and limps to his chair.

"That was pretty cool, the ruler," Howie says, smiling like the Cheshire cat. "But that could've injured one of us. Remember, the first rule of chair racing is, do no harm."

Vern shifts uncomfortably and tries to cross his legs, but the undersized chair and his creeping arthritis won't let him.

"I thought about wood," he says. "But it might've splintered, taken us both out." He laughs at the thought. "Still, the Jewish slave saves the Centurion again!"

Hector Martínez, a townie, brings the coffees and joins them.

"You got to think of a new twist, guys. Gets lame, same f-fuckin' routine Friday afternoons."

Howie takes a sip of decaf sugarless latté and winces. It's hot.

“So what you got in mind, Hector?” He winks at Vern.

“Yeah, well, I’m just sayin’. You guys race the damn chairs same way every time, decidin’ beforehand who’s gonna win. I know you got to keep the p-pinheads off your backs so you can bend some of their chickenshit rules, but come on. If a wheelchair’s the only ride you got, then every sidewalk starts to look like a f-fuckin’ racetrack.”

“And why not?” Howie blows softly on the steaming foam. “Competition built this country from nothin’ into the richest goldmine on the planet. You want to mess with that?”

Vern swirls his cup of toffee-nut flavored caramel mocha, shifting in his chair again.

“No, Hector’s right,” he says. “Concept of racing’s good. Fine, I get that. But we ought to mix it up once in a while.”

Hector nods. “See what I’m sayin’?”

Howie frowns. “Yeah, so? What’s your idea, Vern?”

“I don’t know, maybe a foot race but on crutches next time. Strap an ankle behind one thigh and hop down the block.”

“Kinda like a sack race at a kid’s picnic.”

“Yeah, okay, but make it more challenging.”

“Like how?”

“Maybe with blindfolds?”

“And barefooted.”

“Yeah. And bare-ass naked from the waist down.”

“No way. F-fuckin’ pinheads charge you an arm and a leg, you try somethin’ like that.”

“I dunno,” Vern says. “At our age? You gotta be kidding.”

A barista strolls out from behind the counter. A young woman, maybe late-college or grad school, sporting ear studs, a nose plug, a bioplast labret lower lip ring and a double-helix pin through her tongue. She’s wearing a pair of faded Levi’s and a bright red T-shirt.

Instead of the quotidian I ♥ NY emblazoned across the front, hers reads I  NJ.

“Sup, guys?” *What’s up?* Her tongue stud clicks against her lip ring, making a sound like gargling with marbles.

“What’d you say, Sharon? Can’t hear through all that hardware.”

Once again, slowly. “D’any y’all need anything?” *Innythang.*

Vern gives her a wink. "I'm good, thanks."

Howie frowns. "What's a young Southron like you doing way up north in New Jersey anyway?"

Sharon blushes. "Boyfriend." *Boyyfreyun*. Winks back at Vernon.

Hector laughs.

"Uh-huh. I s'pose he's showin' you a good time down there where the s-sun don't shine."

She blushes again, this time with a hint of anger. "Uh-uh," she says, slipping a thumb behind her Sansabelt waistline. When she pulls it down an inch or two, they catch a sliver of pubes tinted green with a tat overlay that reads, "Don't step on the grass."

Hector shakes his head.

"You gotta do more 'n that, kid," he says, "you want to keep his d-dipstick outta your honey pot. Otherwise he's no better than a pet dog. At least dogs can lick their own f-fuckin' balls."

"Hey!" A customer at the next table leans toward them. "You mind keepin' the swears down?"

Vern shows him a pair of palms. "He's got Tourette's," he says. "Give him a break."

"Oh, yeah? Why doesn't he give us a break?"

Vern nudges his friend. "Give it a rest, Hector."

"Yeah, but h-hell, you know I can't help it."

"You can try. Your eyes say you want to give her a ride. Well, you can back off. Sharon's spoken for."

The Southern belle shrugs and shuffles back to the counter as the three of them watch her hips gyrate, with obvious pleasure.

"You'd like some of that now, wouldn't you Hector?" Vern says. "C'mon, be honest."

"Is the P-PM of Israel Jewish?" Hector asks rhetorically, eyes wide, glued to Sharon's derriere. "And me with no Viagra!"

Vern laughs. "Hector, trust me. With her you don't need Viagra."

Howie nods. "I think Vern knows whereof he speaks."

Hector eyes them both quizzically. "Huh? You g-gettin' some of that? At your age? Dream on."

Vern leans in. "Gets back to me, I'll deny it. Name's Sharon Blackwell. From Charleston. Up here working on her master's. Boyfriend was a finance major at The Citadel, she studied physical

therapy at Trinity Tech. He works on Wall Street, puts in an 80-hour week while she holds down a couple part-time jobs, makin' coffee here and doin' PT and waitin' tables up at the Ridge."

"Uh-huh." Hector, his eyes still glued, nods. "So how the hell you know all this?"

Howie leans in now. "Didn't Vern never talk to you about the many advantages of continuing care?"

Los tres amigos swap ideas awhile, basking in the rays of an angled autumn afternoon sun slicing through the oversized square single-pane double-hung window by the sidewalk.

Vinny the cop parks his three-wheel Segway outside, comes in and ambles toward them like John Wayne. He glides to their table and thumbs out a ticket.

"You guys were doin' at least 15 in a 10 zone out there," he says, not looking up. "Not to mention violation of local ordinance 23(b)(2) – drivin' on a sidewalk. If you was kids, I'd kick your ass."

Howie eyes his nametag.

"You must be a rookie, Officer Vincent," he says.

Vinny, still writing, never looks up. "Nobody calls me Vincent," he says. "Not even my old lady."

Vern shrugs. "Yeah, well, have a word with Chief Murphy, Vinny. He'll set you straight."

Howie reaches into a pocket, starts to pull out some cash. Vern stops him, then pulls the half-written ticket out of Vinny's book, tears it up and stuffs it in a pocket.

"You could do the taxpayers of this town a little good, you know?" Vern says. "Flag down those morons who drive in the rain with their wipers off. Or all the idiots yakkin' on their handhelds. As an attorney, I can tell you they're both against state law."

It's Vinny's turn to shrug. "Are they now? Can't catch 'em if I'm ridin' a damn tricycle."

"Can't catch us either," Howie adds.

"Almost did."

"You did not, officer," Vern says. "You stopped in for a fresh brew. How about a marigold-flavored caramel latté? On us."

He looks up and waves. "Hey, Sharon?"

Crocktown

CROCKTOWN IS A SMALL BURG IN NEW JERSEY'S Morris County, right smack in the heart of the state. As of the 2010 Federal census, the tiny town's entire population was a mere 9,845.

Crocktown's aboriginal settlers were the Lenape Indians, sometimes called the Delaware. They lived off the land. Crop rotation changed with the four seasons, with the variable nature of the climate and to preserve the fertility of the area's rich soil. Their fishing and hunting territories were wide-ranging and similarly divided among the three clans of their matrilineal culture in this abundant Eastern Woodland environment.

Trade with the natives for food and furs was conducted primarily by the Dutch during the long period of colonization of New Netherlands. Although the European principle of land ownership was not recognized by the Lenape, Dutch West India Company policy required colonists to purchase the land that they settled. But this colony was different. Trading relationships were established here, not settlements, because the Lenape were not willing to sell.

Morris County was founded in 1739, named for Colonel Lewis Morris. He was a descendant of the King's Lords and Proprietors and the state's first governor. With the Treaty of Easton in 1758, the Lenape were forced to vacate their lands in colonial New Jersey and to move west and north. So the Lenape leaders allied themselves with the colonists during the American Revolution in hopes of regaining former lands, a hope that was never realized.

Crocktown is the namesake of Artemis Crock, a local colonial era hero. The Native Americans called the village *Lenni Lenape*, which means "Real People" in the Lenape dialect. In honor of Artemis Crock's prowess they nicknamed him *Munsee Lapowinsa*, which loosely translated means Morning Wood. He had singlehandedly managed to deflower 1,351 Indian maidens among the Lenape Tribe's three clans.

A small tribe, the Lenape were shoved out of New Jersey in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. Because of their tribal

tradition of eating root tubers like monkey nuts, goober peas and spud nuts, the Lenape never got along very well with other Indian tribes in the northeast – the Mohicans, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga or Seneca, later combining to form the Iroquois Nation – primarily because they practiced a unique tribal tradition called early-morning crepitation.

When a Lenape brave awakened each day with Morning Wood and went to do his tribal Sit-and-Tuck for a pee, he would often crap on his own nuts in a Spurt of Loud Farts, frightening away local game and rendering the air unbreathable for a spell. So the Lenape were forced to keep moving farther and farther north until, like so many other unwanted natives in the Colonies, they found a friendlier and more receptive home in benign but cold Canada.

Artemis Crock was the inspiration for two of the 20th-century's most popular cartoonists, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, both natives of New Jersey. In the 1950s they created *The Funky Phantom*, a weekly animated cartoon series that became wildly popular in their home state, more popular even than the Flintstones, Yogi Bear or Scooby-Doo.

To escape a storm, it was said, Crock had famously entered an old house where the longcase clock showed the wrong time. When Artemis set the clock to midnight, it released two ghosts: a Revolutionary War phantom named Jonathan Wellington Muddlemore and his black cat, Boo.

The phantoms frightened a pair of British Redcoats who wound up inside the clock during the War but then never managed to get out and eventually died inside. Artemis Crock “buried” his phantoms in the local cemetery while smoking a favorite Lenape psychedelic hallucinogen called *yopo peyote* that, according to posthumous notes in his personal diary, persuaded him that he would eventually return in the early 21st century as the most rotund and obese governor in New Jersey's history, a politician with a bent propensity toward sloth and perspicacity but a well-deserved reputation for no-nonsense straight talk with constituents in the venerable Lenape tradition.

Crocktown's historical architecture is protected by local statute today. The traditional half-timber Tudor houses on Main Street

surround the Town Square and house the local bank, a small library, a deli, a liquor store, two jewelry stores, a copy shop, a bakery, a pizza parlor and the Crocktown Inn, a small hostelry left over from the colonial era when it was built right in the center of the King's Road facing the Town Square. There's a little post office too, with three windows: by tradition, two of them are always closed and only one is ever staffed, creating long lines every day that prompt nary a moomph from Crocktownies.

At one corner of the Town Square is a bronze sign that says, "No Smoking anywhere in Crocktown. PL-2006. Helping to make New Jersey the nation's first smoke-free state."

There are no fast food franchises in Crocktown either, like McDonalds or Burger King or Wendy's, because they detract from the town's historic ambience, though the town fathers made an exception for Duncan's Diner and coffee shops like Starbucks.

In fact, Crocktown has the highest concentration of coffee shops in the state of New Jersey. There are 25 of them in the entire town, which works out to about one for every 400 residents.

There's the local favorite, Cuppa Spotta, plus Gulp 'n Go, Pit Stop, Butt Stop, Coffee World, Elsewhere, Sip 'n Pee, Strada, Volta, Café Caffeine, High Octane Coffee, Bobo's, Aesop's Tables, Bean & Gone, Bean Me Up, Bean Around the World, Bean There, Brew Haha, the Brews Brothers, He Brews, Café Jitters, Trembling Cup, the Mud Puddle, the Daily Grind, Permanent Addiction and Home of the Rising Bun. So Crocktown is wired. Today, according to the federal Department of Health and Human Services, it may be the most highly caffeinated town in America.

Cadwalader Park in Crocktown's Town Square was named for Thomas Cadwalader. He lived in Crocktown when he became Chief Burgess in 1746. The square itself was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who also created Central Park in New York. Townsfolk decided to keep the name even after it was revealed in his estate papers that Glue-Fingered Tommy, as he was popularly known, had a reputation for thievery and stamp-tax evasion.

At the opposite corner of the Town Square is another bronze sign that says, "Designated Farting Zone. PL-2000. Helping to make New Jersey the nation's first fart-free workplace."

The Crocktown of today is 83.3% white, 6.2% Hispanic, 5.1% black, 3.3% Asian and 2.1% Other. Most of New Jersey's blacks live in what the federal Department of Commerce calls Distressed Urban Areas like Newark, Trenton and Camden. They have virtually no interaction with the suburbs except for Crocktown drive-throughs on the occasional weekend for white pussy, numbers rackets and harder-to-find prescription drugs.

New Jersey currently harbors more than 600 small towns and municipalities like Crocktown. The only credible reason for this, taxpayers believe, is to consistently jack up local property taxes so the state can generate greater employment opportunities for municipal government workers who belong to the same public union. As a result, New Jersey has become one of the most expensive places to live in the entire country today, second only to Connecticut and its outsized population of hedge fund managers and billionaire bankers.

New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the union too: more than 8 million people now find themselves shoehorned into a craggy nook between the megacities of New York and Philadelphia. As Philly's famous resident Ben Franklin himself liked to say, "New Jersey is but a barrel tapped at both ends."

The Garden State has no mass transit to speak of either, anywhere within its narrow borders. As a result, its residents have no choice but to drive.

And so it was that New Jersey's citizens came early-on to coin what has become America's most popular (and despised) one-word postwar idiom:

Gridlock.