



## **A Five & Dime Christmas**

Whenever I come home I like to make the drive in the neighborhoods I used to live in – and I suppose it’s the first one that still holds the most in memory for me.

Grant to John, John to North, a turn east to North and the top of the hill and down then to Auburn; up Grant again, down Court Street, and finally up the last hill to Church Street.

O. Henry said there was a story in everything. What is the story in these memories?

Well, not long after it happened my Boylan High Facebook friends were giving the shout-out that the Titans had won the state football championship in their division – two years running for the school. Great news.

I spent some of the money from my first job here in this building, the Kress Store. A proud chain of stores once upon a time, “five-and-dime” department stores, operating from 1896 until 1981. Samuel H. Kress opened the first one – a “stationery and notions” store in Pennsylvania – and the chain of stores followed in 1896. They were a familiar sight on Main Streets all over America – known for the fine architecture of the buildings. Mr. Kress wanted his stores to be works of public art, wanted them to contribute something distinct to cityscapes everywhere – I’ve been in a lot of towns since the mid 1990s and occasionally there one will be...usually one of the Art Deco Kress stores that New York architects designed and were built between 1929 and 1944. This one went up in 1937 – on the site of the old Orpheum Theatre, a vaudeville house here on Rockford’s Main Street. Harpo Marx wrote in his autobiography that the brothers got their famous nicknames right here – though this is disputed some, as Galesburg claims the same distinction – but I like to believe a Rockford stage hand was dealing a hand of poker somewhere upstage there, off the alley, and put them out to Groucho, Chico, Zeppo, and Harpo. But that building came down for this one – sleek and modern, a lavish use of terracotta ornament, fine woods, a bright atmosphere for an endless array of items for sale and much to encourage customers to linger and enjoy themselves – like retiring rooms and brass and marble soda fountains – like the great movie houses of the day, like the Coronado up the street, these were popular destinations during hard economic times.

All around the country the Kress buildings have seen a resurgence of reuse. A lot of them are on the historic register of protected landmarks. Fort Worth, Texas, Greensboro, North Carolina, Memphis, Nashville, New Orleans – office spaces and residences now. For 59 years in Hollywood, the Kress Store was the flagship Frederick’s of Hollywood boutique.

Of course one became a theater and you're sitting in it.

What would I have made of that fact back in 1964, when I was earning my first money with a job that I was doing, and spending it at Christmastime right here? That I'd be doing a future job in drama, and telling stories, on a stage right here. Once it was a bonanza of great five-and-dime gifts if you had nickels and dimes to spend, of course, and once most of the drama I knew was happening in the North End, on the streets around St. Peter's School and Church, where I delivered papers every morning for about two years before I rose in life and got a job stocking the frozen foods cases at a new grocery store on North Main.

My days began before dawn in my family's first Rockford home on Grant Ave. The pile of papers would be on the curb, waiting for rubber bands and a place in the over-the-shoulder sack – on good days. Rain was an enemy. As were dogs. There were much the same occupational hazards as the mailmen faced – but without the pension.

North Avenue to King Street and then east on Auburn, up Grant to Summer, a cut over to Court Street and King again to Auburn once more and then up the big hill on Church Street to St. Peter's Church and School, which claimed me for 8<sup>th</sup> grade that year – and church of course.

97 papers. 74 Morning Stars, 11 Wall Street Journals – mostly sprinkled up and down North where the bigger houses and the better lawn lived. 10 Chicago Tribunes. And 2 Chicago Americans. I used to pore over the various papers save the Wall Street Journal, mostly composed of phone book gray listings of stocks and averages. The Star held interest for me because of local sports and the Trib for the Chicago teams. But the American was wildly entertaining. I learned later that the paper had a long Chicago tradition of making up good stories when there weren't good enough stories in the actual news.

This is the route I wanted. It was away from my own neighborhood, north a few blocks. But I wanted it because the houses were a little bit bigger, a little bit better up there. I wanted it because I'd learned from the Grant Street back alley gang that if you had a paper route with more than 60 or 70 papers to deliver and in a good neighborhood – you could clean up at Christmas time. That's right. I was planning to make my first killing in what I foresaw as a lifetime of financial success with the Christmas calendar

“Oh, yeah, the Christmas calendar,” said Mike Fitzgerald. A cousin of his used to have the coveted route I landed. He lived on Garrison Street at the long end of the Grant Alley and had appointed himself as the voice-of-experience our alley gang. “The Morning Star gives you this calendar to hand out; they do it every year. People put it up on their walls or wherever.” He showed me the one Mrs. Fitzgerald had up in their kitchen – it was almost the size of a standard size sheet of paper, laminated pressed board, with a picture of the regal Chief Blackhawk sculpture in the state park on river south of town– looking north to Wisconsin as if to say “Maybe we ought to go back there.”

“So, how does it work?” I asked Fitzgerald. “I put these in the paper and they leave me the dough?”

“No, no,” said Fitz. “You got to work for it. You hand ‘em out in person. They tell you to do it on your last collection night before December 25th. But my cousin Frank always did better my making a special trip – that way you score some real green. They’re not just topping off the newspaper bill. What do you get when you collect, 90 cents right? You want them to top that off to a buck for a calendar like this? No, you go with the Frank Fitzgerald method on this. Go the next night with the calendar. Don’t forget, you’ve got some rich people up there in those streets, especially on North.

“Oh,” I thought to myself, nodding to Fitz. “This is good. Yeah, especially on North Ave. That’s where the Wall Street Journals go.” I thanked Fitz for this insider’s tip and looked at our own calendar when I got home that night. It was September. Three months to payday. I thought now the thing to do was the pave the way to payday by creating a friendly, charming maybe even debonair way with all the customers. I saw them other Thursday night when I came to collect; I had the power to do this!

I started the route every morning before sunrise on North. The lords of the manors on that street liked to get the news early. But I had to rush it to get to Grant, Court, and Church before 7 because a lot of the readers on those streets punched in on their jobs early. In good weather I had rigged a bike with a basket in order to peddle through my daily rounds and exercise my shortstop’s arm with flings from the sidewalks...30 to 40 feet on North. Only 15 feet by the time I got to Grant, Court, and Church. “Size of lawn is your barometer on size of bank account,” uttered the oracle Fitzgerald. “Frank Schier, who lived just across the alley from us on Court agreed. “If they hire you to mow their lawn they are good for a fiver at Christmas.”

So it came to pass than on every other Thursday, collection night on the route, I did my best to ingratiate myself with the customers. North Avenue to King Street Auburn to Grant, down Court to Auburn again and up the big hill on Church to end at St. Pete’s. It was a long task as it was – 97 papers, though there were roughly 85 customers since most of the Wall Streeters and a few of the Tribs doubled up with the Star – always necessitating a stop of the bike and a toss from the plant position at the curb or from the walk. On collection night – and we were coached to collect at the dinner hour for maximum chances of “collect success” – I had about 60 doors to knock or bells to ring over two nights so I’d start on Thursday but use Friday as well. A good dozen of my customers were pre-payers and I never saw them. And half of these were on North so Fitzgerald said I would never see them. “Oh, tough touches there,” said Fitzgerald. “Right,” said Shier. “Behind closed doors ‘cause they know all about the Christmas calendar.”

I started at 6 and usually got done by 8:00 or so and finished the next night by catching the folks who weren’t home Thursday and covering part of Court and all of Church Street then. I began my charm routine in earnest, starting with the aristocrats on North and adjusting what I assure you was a fundamentally shy and insecure kid into an outgoing

and friendly fellow who would do anything to be certain you got your Morning Star, Tribune, Wall Street Journal or Chicago American just as you wanted it. By 6:30 A.M. no problem – though this proved frightfully difficult to fulfill as time went on - guaranteed on the porch and away from the open air, but of course, though this meant careful throws to keep from curving errantly into the bushes or from one-bouncing loudly into aluminum screen or storm doors. No rolled up papers and no rubber bands? Certainly sir, though this meant space lost in the carrier bag, all kinds of weight distribution issues across the front of the bike, and time lost in walking the flat and unrolled paper up to the door, and slipping it inside the storm or under the mat, all with the personal regards of your friendly carrier – anything to get in good graces before the December calendar distribution night...that was the goal. That was when my ship was going to come in. I would, to use the old Dale Carnegie phrase, win friends and influence people! Our carrier manager used to toss this bromide at us at the occasional carrier meeting down at the News Tower. They used it to induce us to go out and sell more subscriptions, once tossing in a trip to Riverview in Chicago as motivation. I believed him. It never occurred to me then to doubt it, or to wonder why Mr. Rivera, a rail-thin, nervous, chain-smoking guy who scowled a lot and punctuated almost everything he said with a humorless little rat-a-tat “Heh- heh” didn’t take his own advice on this, but I had my own notion then of what later became a mantra for the avalanche of seminars and how-to-succeed manuals in the decades to come – it was about *relationships*. My alley philosophers agreed. “It’s who they think you are,” opined Frank Schier. “That’s right,” said Fitz, “It’s just like dating or something.”

So I went to work. It was easier in September and early October when the weather was warm and most of my customers were in a better mood. For what my imagination had identified as the upper income group on North I was conservative, calm, observant. I would comment on the news, for instance, with only barest knowledge of what I was talking about, with things like, “Fascinating concept, don’t you think, for this tax levy for the Water Department’s proposed new pumping station off Morgan Street?” or, “Interesting, isn’t it, the way Congress debated the District of Columbia’s appropriations bill so long when we all know how necessary our nation’s capital is or should be?” Blank looks of puzzlement normally greeted these learned observations of mine, and once I was almost engaged in a fierce tax debate until saved by the Mrs. of the house calling her riled up hubby back to the dinner table. At the cul de sac at the top of the North Avenue slope I always aimed to arrive before dinner. A banker and his family lived third house in from the through street and their daughter Yvette sometimes answered the door. Yvette was a high school sophomore, blonde, blue-eyed, a vision behind diaphanous front curtains as she walked provocatively to the door after I had run their – yes – three-tone chimes. “Ding, dong, ding.”

“Oh, Yvette Swenson,” Frank Schier gurgled with his voice low and his eyebrows arching and then jumping up and down like a St. Vitus Day Dance on fast forward, “Oh, Yvette,” he’d purr again and nod up and down as if he had some secret information that would unlock for me the mystery of women, the mystery that every fourteen year old kid struggled mightily to fathom and solve, “Oh, Yvette Swenson” he’d then sigh, in a last exhalation of some secret blissful knowledge that only he possessed. “You’ve to play it

cool with a Swedish girl, and then, well..." and there Frank would leave his wisdom hanging tantalizingly in the air, walked away casually, with the air of a world-weary but romantically experienced Grant Avenue alley Casanova, puffing on the cigarette he'd filched from somewhere, looking over his shoulder with a nod for emphasis, like Bogart in Casablanca.

The door opened and there was Yvette. "Yes?" she always said, the hint of a smile, a look of possibility. I shifted weight from left to right. Smiled with casual interest, my heart pumping wildly within my breast but keeping my outer élan, and said, "Come to collect?" I flashed my ticket hole-puncher to confirm my official status. At that point her older brother no doubt used to guys like me always showed up at the door and took over the transaction. Yvette sauntered away. The view of her going was just about as spectacular as the one of her arriving.

So it went. I kept trying to make friends and influence people all that fall and into the early winter...a season that comes to northern Illinois a lot sooner than the calendar proclaims it. On Auburn Street lived the manager of Comay's Jewelry Store that used to occupy the corner just across the street, at State and Main. He was famous I knew him from television commercials wherein he held up glittering diamond necklaces and intimated that the path to Nirvana was paved with such stones as these. One night he came to the door with a cocktail in hand, Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" playing in the background, and a small group of chattering friends perched happily around the crackers and cheese in the front room of their rather small apartment on the second floor of a terraced row of the same.

"Ah, yes" I said, putting on what I presumed to be my best Park Avenue character, gleaned from Cary Grant late night movies, "we're having people over at our place as well." Of course, those "people" were Fitzgerald and Schier sitting on a pile of old magazines or a couple of empty crates in our garage off the alley, reading Spiderman comic books and trading insights on the nature of man.

On Court Street there lived a Mrs. Gardiner who wore a lot of make-up, tended to hold a cocktail glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other when she answered the door, and regularly filled me with her insights into the scandalous social life of the city. "You ever been to the Club?" she would say, meaning the Country Club, of course, one eyebrow arching with provocative knowledge, promising personal bits of valuable inside information that few could know, coming from bitter experience, I guessed.

"Well, Mrs. Gardiner..." I started.

"You can call me Mona, if you like."

"Well, Mona," I continued, only thinking of my possible Christmas tip score just a few weeks hence. "I intend to as soon as my time permits."

“Hm,” she nodded again, her expression changing again and doing things I would not see again in my life until I saw Ann Bancroft’s performance as Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* a few years later. “A regular Peyton Place.” And the door closed slowly, the latch catching like the final period on a hanging phrase of lost love.

I talked sports on Grant Street, fashion on Church, and nonsensically about books on Court Street to a lawyer who hadn’t read James Joyce either. On the same street, only a few doors down, I mentioned Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” with favor and got a five minute lecture from a bona fide John Birch Society member whose was cleaning a rifle while making his political points.

“You can skip that house when it comes to the Christmas calendar,” said Mike Fitzgerald. “If you want to make friends you better not talk politics.” It was wisest thing he ever said to me.

December came. An early snowstorm blew in and completely negated the use of my bike for deliveries. When it accumulated that Sunday morning – the worst day of the paper route week for me and especially at Christmastime with all the extra weight of advertising to haul around I solved it by employing an old-fashioned baby buggy – the kind with big wheels and arcing bonnet that I salvaged out of the back corner of our Grant Avenue garage. This thing cut through drifts better than any sled ever could. But as I pushed the buggy up the big Church Street hill early that Sunday, several seriously concerned parishioners stopped to question the sanity of pushing a baby around in a blizzard. Some asked if I was lost. And one lady, looking for my eyes within my wraps, muffler, and woolen cap, asked, “Are you the mother?”

Another snow then threatened to doom me. On the last Thursday before the holiday I made my usual collection rounds – and caught some curiosity from folks who knew what the Christmas calendar routine was all about and wondered perhaps, why I wasn’t putting the touch on them. Several went ahead and tipped me anyway – and just as Fitz had predicted, they tended to top off the buck forty they owed with another sixty cents. I was grateful, but I thought – “Wow, Fitzgerald was right. A financial wizard!” My plan was to return to the route the next night with the calendar – though I’d have to just slip it into the mailboxes of the customers that had already left me their newspaper carrier Christmas tips.

I was already on edge before the Friday night plan could go into effect. Bad weather was in the forecast but what really made me nervous was the downsize job Rockford Newspapers had done on the calendar. No longer a decent size for the wall, management at the Tower had shrunk the calendar to a 5x7 card, not laminated, dominated by a clip art picture of a snowy hill in idyllic Scandinavia, and large ad from Warshawsky’s Muffler Shop wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. You needed a magnifying glass to see the calendar itself.

I showed it to Schier. “That’ll sure pull down a lotta bucks,” he grinned, his sarcasm cutting the December chill in the alley. “That paper is a joke,” and he sauntered away, muttering what he would do if her were in charge of such enterprises.

But then the snow hit. It was bad enough in the early morning and I needed the baby buggy to negotiate the treacherous hills on North, Grant, Court Street, and Church. But then I got home and the city closed all the schools and then Diocese followed suit with the Catholic schools so while I welcomed not having to catch the bus for Boylan I grieved the possible loss of my Christmas calendar distribution plan. It had to be that night! It had to be Friday. Saturday was Christmas Eve and that would be too late for scoring the big kill.

“You can’t go out in this,” said my Mother. “Stay home. Put the calendars in the papers tomorrow, that’s the best you can do.”

“Mom,” I said. “I can do it, please.”

Fitzgerald was with me. He always loved to stop by the house when he knew my mother was making her Christmas cookies.

“He’s a man with a mission, Mrs. Sullivan.”

Put in those heroic terms, she shook her head and walked away, saying, “You dress warmly, then!”

That night I wrapped myself up in the same Russian peasant garb that I usually employed when pushing the buggy around. There was a foot of snow on the ground and an icy rain had followed it, glazing over the top of all that white with a hard sheen of a treacherous gleam. People looked astonished to see me. They poked their heads out their doors, looked up and down the abandoned streets, and called back to others in the house, usual with words like “Mabel, you won’t believe what’s standing at the front door.” It seemed to work in my favor. I started getting ones and then a few fives. I reversed myself on the order of my calls, starting on Church rather than North, planning to end up on rich folks’ row at the end of my epic quest. I got a quarter from the John Bircher, as well as a pamphlet entitled *The Society and Why It Is Us or Them*. Mona Gardiner opened her door, a little tipsy it seemed, and offered me a set of the works of Mark Twain in lieu of the fact that she had no cash on hand. The manager of Comay’s gave me a silver dollar while his wife offered a sip from something they called a “Tom and Jerry.” Nat King Cole was singing from their record player about “Silver Bells” in the city while the Tom and Jerry concoction made its way to my tingling tummy. “Wow,” I thought. “Cosmopolitans.”

Yvette Swenson came to her door at the cul-de-sac near North Avenue, looking absolutely spectacular in a red party dress that invited my fevered speculation on her future life as a Scandinavian goddess and the Swenson’s were good for a five spot over

the objections of the brother who never seemed to like me, and probably read me like a book every time my eyes fell upon his sister's beauty.

At last I hit North Avenue itself. The ice was terrible and I was picking myself up from the ground more often than stepping up to doorways. Most of the fabled and mostly invisible people of rich folks row were gone it seemed, or perhaps asleep, as it was rather late by now. But a few came through with the average of a dollar – while the second house from John Street – a house that took three of the four papers that I carried – proved a bitter disappointment. The Rockefeller than lived here took my calendar, looked at it with disdain, and said, “How much do you think this is worth?”

I told the truth. “Probably a nickel.”

“Here,” he said. And handed me that.

At home on Grant Avenue, not far from Whitman Street, I unwound myself from all four scarves, the overcoat, three sweaters and the woolen cap. I sat down at the table and pulled the catch from my jeans pocket. I still remember the feeling of that large roll of cash, folded over once, as I held in my hand. Here it was, the lure that turned the world on its axis day after day. “Wow” breathed my astonished brothers and sisters around me. None of us had ever seen that much money, available to the touch, at one time.

There was 85 dollars – most of it in ones, a few fives, three silver dollars, a fair amount of quarters, a couple of dimes – and a nickel.

Fitzgerald and Schier were there too, eager to see the final tally.

“Don't spend it all in one place,” Fitz said, patting me on the back.

Well, I didn't, exactly. Sixty of it went to open a savings account at First Federal Savings and Loan where it remained, with modest sums added to it, until I started college four years later. A bit more stayed with me for a couple of records I wanted, and a book or two. But the rest came here, to the Kress five and dime, where there were things that cost a little more than that. It was Christmas Eve, and I bought a Jane Austen novel for my sister Peg just back there, and a few good looking notepads with real covers on them for my brothers Tom, Bob, and Tim. There was a doll I found for my sister Julie in an aisle to the left, just over there, and my little sister Kate – only two years old then – got a teddy bear that she seemed to like an awful lot when she hugged it on her way to sleep Christmas night. I can't remember what I got for my brother Dan – but whatever it was it clearly must have had an unusual effect on him.

It cleared for Christmas night, a wintry bluish moonlit night with the smoke from chimneys all up and down Grant Avenue telling little tales to the eternal sky. That was long time ago. But I cannot forget it.

End.

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