

JOHN FLYNN

THE FOUR-CENT TIP

Sure, sure, you shrimps go out there and get dirty with work. Best education there is. Learn the value of a buck. Least you got choices. We didn't have that luxury. Your Aunt Helen started at eleven as a maid. I started at the same age. It was wartime. I held two jobs and gave your Nana every cent of take-home. Helen did the same.

On Saturdays, I humped it as a box boy at Shreve Crump and Low. Got my first glimpse of world-class travelers. They strolled in through Park Square after shopping at Bonwit Teller next door, staying in suites at the Park Plaza Hotel.

I boxed up bone china from England, Hummel figurines, and all types of gold and silver. Shreve's didn't deal in cosmetic jewelry or junk, no, they had a first-floor watch department, a diamond department, and a glass counter that sparkled from a mile away. Up on the second floor, you could buy lamps, fifty-six pieces of dinnerware boxed, Beleek or Waterford crystal, creamers, candy dishes, silver or gold on crystal. A teacup would set you back \$7.50, which at that time was a day's salary for some.

They had a ship made of crystal that sold for hundreds of dollars, and I used to stare at that thing and let it take me away. It was all fantastic. Jewelers and watchmakers on staff, and a department of artists that designed window displays. On the fourth floor, they fixed and polished merchandise with buffers and grinders and vats of cleaning acid.

Me, I worked for Frankie Stockinger on the third floor where the boxing operation took place. A whole floor of shelved boxes, spools of twine, string, tape, all sorts of fine labels, and a crew of boys zipping around with razors and big shears.

As much as I loved Shreve's, I cut my dog teeth as a newsboy hawking for corner men: Baker Baker, Red Golman, and Eugee Cohen. Those tough old birds all boasted they owned a corner of Boston. Took me a little sweat to learn what that really meant.

I'd finish at Dearborn School at two p.m. and Red Golman would pick me up with other tenement boys, allowing us to save a nickel by not riding the T. Red lived in Brookline, and he'd bring us all home afterwards. I'd get my papers from him at a stand near Pray's and the C. Crawford Holidige store on West Street.

Baker Baker, a smarmy cigar-chewing pug with thick glasses, controlled the corner near the Brigham's Ice Cream just up the hill from the Arlington T stop. All these corner men knew each other. Baker Baker and Eugee shared racks and stacks of magazines and kept their trunks loaded with them as they rode around in sedans. To me, this seemed extra special, having your own ride in the big city.

My pal Cott Delahunt worked for them, too. Cott was a giant, one of five boys and four Delahunt girls. That Delahunt clan was like family to me, since my Ma and

Pa worked all the time and Helen wasn't home much. I spent as much time in Cott's room as I did in my own.

As newsies, Cott and I met the Beantown commute and its working folk head-on. They craved headlines so they could keep up with the war. People pulled together, it seemed, in a way I haven't seen since. They worried together, too, and they mourned, so don't let anyone tell you those war years were a picnic. Far from it.

I laugh thinking about Eugee Cohen, always a sad look on his face as if he'd been beaten up too many times and was burdened by doubt and history. Coarse and shrewd, Eugee taught me up to his level. It was from him that I first heard phrases like anti-Semitism, Fascism, and what he called the Jewish question.

He'd bark at me in his gruff voice, "Mikey Shea, you're all right for a small fry. I know you think I'm just another Jew, just like I think you're a Mick runt, but neither of us don't need to make a big deal about it. I'm your boss, but we can get along. We're Americans, right? Together, right?"

He'd go on and on like this as if he needed my innocent approval. Of course, he was right. I needed work. He needed runts like me. If the war kept going, it wouldn't be long before I'd be shipped off. I dreamed about fighting evil as I read "Mandrake the Magician" each day in the funny pages.

I shadowed Eugee and soaked up what he told me. He'd take me with him to Locke-Ober's Cafe for lunch with the suits. He'd sidle up to the bar, apron on, his hands covered in newspaper ink. In the summer, he'd wipe his forehead, just like I did, and his sweat would blend with the ink and leave a big smear. He wouldn't let it bug him. He'd hobnob with those suits, wanting them to know Eugee Cohen got dirty for a living. He'd down a few but never paid. A suit was always willing to spot sly old Eugee a scotch and soda.

That apron was his uniform, made of heavy material like canvas, and he stashed everything in there—change, counting pad, pliers, a knife, and always a handful of root beer candies that he'd give to his newsboys.

At four a.m., which was cold as hell five months out of the year, Eugee loaded delivery trucks for *The Herald* and *The Traveler*. In the afternoon, I'd help him sell *The Globe*, *The Herald*, *The American*, *The Monitor*, *The Traveler*, *Life*, *Look*, *Collier's*, *Time*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Those were the standard ten each day. There were others, but never fewer than these ten.

Three years, I took my lumps as a newsy and wore that apron with pride. It always bulged with change. Papers cost three cents each. If I sold three different papers to the same customer I'd make a penny tip on a dime. I'd sell one for a nickel, usually *The Globe*, and I'd make a two-cent tip. It was best to sell two different papers for six cents because the dime usually wasn't asked to be changed. I lived for my four-cent tips.

Baker Baker introduced me to a coin merchant in one of the buildings on Tremont where I delivered. The merchant asked me to dump my apron on his counter. This became routine. He'd sort through my take and weed out the collectible coins. It was warm up there on the fourth floor in his shop that overlooked the green grass of the Public Gardens. In summer, I'd sit and watch the swan boats and sometimes he'd

give me a tonic to drink. If he found something rare, he'd pay me a little for it. I was company for him, but I didn't hang around long. I had my papers to get out.

Like Eugee, Baker Baker was a squat and hairy old bull, and he had the gift of gab. He had family in Europe and he'd interpret the headlines and teach me about the issues over there and how we had to support our allies. He, too, would mingle with suits and scrape up tips on the stock market and the horses at Suffolk Downs. He'd pull the rolled papers out of his apron and make change just as quickly as he made small talk with Beacon Hill lawyers and politicians as they filed out of the T.

"Mikey," he'd say, "it's all about flow when you're hawking the standard ten."

On mornings when Red or Eugee didn't pick me up, I'd get off the trolley near High Street at the bottom near South Station. Thousands of people would come down that street going to and from work. There was an island there and a Nedick's that sold orange juice where I could usually cadge a freebie in exchange for one paper.

I'd start at four a.m. and pick up wire-wrapped bundles of fifty papers each. A newsy had to keep wire-cutters handy. The truck would roar by, slow down, never really stop, and a thug would dump the bundles of papers on the island. I'd run across High Street, pick up the bundles, cut that wire and start shouting. These were morning editions. There were evening ones, too. While I picked up my bundles, commuters streamed out of South Station. I kept my papers rolled and organized, screamed those headlines, and in the winter made change with gloves on.

Boston had four dailies: *The Globe*, *Traveler*, *Herald*, and *American*. Some bought all four each day. I learned who they were. I worked left hand and right, pulled from one stack, kept another under my arm. I made change, barked headlines, and knew my customers. I saw them coming, and I'd have my bundle of four ready, wouldn't miss a beat as they hustled past me to work, got their rolled news, paid me in coin and left a tip. Without income tax, it was a decent wage for a shrimp like me. I'm not exaggerating when I say that including the evening editions, I sold close to a thousand copies each day.

I kept boxing at Shreve's on Saturdays. Nobody worked on Sunday. Weeknights, if Pa was home when I'd get there, he'd call me Moneybags. He didn't care that I missed school and homework. We needed the bread, all of which Ma managed with care. After supper, I'd lie on the living room floor and lose myself in front of our upright Emerson. I can still smell that wood and those hot tubes behind the lighted dial. I'd drift off, eyes closed to "The Fat Man" and "The Whistler."

The radio stayed on, and Ma tuned into "Walter Winchell," "Amos 'n' Andy," and "Burns and Allen." I'd park at the kitchen table and separate my coins. We had no pre-made rolls. I'd lay a stack of fifty pennies crosswise over a sheet of brown paper and roll 'em up. I'd stack a hundred dimes and two-hundred nickels the same way. Since we couldn't afford tape, I'd fold the paper at the ends.

I knew it was getting late when "Opus One" came on and Pa hummed an old melody and danced a little as he came out of his bedroom in a silk smoking jacket. He'd sit in his wicker chair and listen to Sherm Feller, the deejay, doing his "Club Mid-

night” show. “Opus One” was Fuller’s theme song. By this time, Ma and Helen were asleep, and neither liked that I stayed up so late. It was a miracle I didn’t flunk out of school. I hardly showed up there, and when I did I was too tired to stay alert. Your Nana chided Pa about this, but he shrugged it off.

Three-thirty always came early. Skinny and gawky in my tweed hat and apron, I’d ride the trackless trolley with a bundle of rolled coins on my lap, all wrapped together with twine. I’d pretend it was a cake. I’d switch to the T. Riding alone from Roxbury to downtown, I would’ve been an easy mark, but no one ever bothered me.

Red Golman had bought a new car, a Graham, and stopped picking us up at the tenements. On days when Ma demanded I attend school, I’d meet Red in the afternoon in front of the Park Street Church. Even without morning deliveries, I worked every weekday because Red, like Eugee and Baker Baker, complained about being short-handed as more boys shipped off to France and the Pacific theater. Three of Cott’s brothers had been gone a year. Only one came back.

I convinced your Nana to let me work Saturday nights. Between ten and eleven, I’d ride the T to Newspaper Row in front of what we called the Boston Post building on Washington Street. Written in chalk on blackboards nailed to the building, the Sunday headlines, known as teasers, urged people to buy. They’d walk down Washington after seeing a show, maybe on their way to the Parker House or Chinatown for a meal, and they’d get their Sunday paper on Saturday night.

The Sunday paper was a huge deal. Remember, no TV yet, only radio, and it didn’t give the details the paper was known for. I’d hawk it on Washington where Winter meets Summer Street. This area always bustled. I’d finish at three on Sunday morning and then bolt to the Newspaperman’s Mass at Saint James Church on the South End. A long walk, but I got there on time if I took Washington all the way. The T didn’t run at that hour, still doesn’t, so I had to hustle. That Mass was always crowded. The Catholics who worked for the paper, and they were legion, went to Communion grateful that the Sunday, at last, had been put to bed.

Wiped out, I’d stagger home around six. By one in the afternoon, I’d jaunt back out again, joining Pa at a *matinée*. My grades at Dearborn dropped below passing, so your Nana yanked me and sent me to Saint Patrick’s where I studied under Sister Superior. Those nuns were beastly and strict, but whatever I learned from books came from them.

When your Nana broke her leg, she phoned Saint Pat’s asking that I be excused. I worked like a dog while she stayed laid-up, until one frigid day I collapsed on the corner of Park and Tremont. Not only dehydrated, I had scarlet fever to boot. Admitted to City Hospital on Northampton, my apron bulged full of coins, as always. They took it away, and I forgot about it once the injection kicked in.

A day later, Red Golman called Pa and offered to pick him up, along with Ma, and drive them in his Graham to visit me. I’ll never forget Red’s teeth, crummy after a lifetime of unfiltered Old Golds. How he smelled of pickled eggs when he bore down on me with a sneering grin. “Mikey Shea, how’s my best newsboy doing? Eugee and Baker Baker send their regards. We need you back, Kid.”

I moaned, still weak and partly sedated. “Is that Red? Hi, Red. Where am I?”

“Where are you?” Red winked at Pa. He sucked his teeth, leaned over and keened his eyes at me. “Where’s my money?”

This marked the end of my newsboy days. From that point on, when Red’s name came up, Ma would tsk-tsk and shake her head. Pa would smolder, mumbling, “That no good s.o.b. You weren’t even awake yet.”

Just as well. The price had jumped to a nickel for each of the four dailies. It meant no gravy, no tip advantage for a newsy. The nickel, dime, and fifteen cents would go straight to the corner man. Today, they’d call it cost cutting.

In a way, I’m grateful to Red. He schooled me in what it meant to own a corner.