

§ 1. I started as a paperboy when I was 11. The route covered the richest neighbourhood in town filled with grand mansions. This sounded like a desirable post, when it was presented to me by the route manager, Mr McTivity, but of course mansions have the longest driveways and widest lawns, so it took many minutes to deliver each paper. And papers weighed a ton back then.

§ 2. During my route, I would devote a good length of time to asking myself "what if" — what I would do if I could make myself invisible or if I could hypnotise everyone in the world. Then I might move on to consider unanswerable questions. How do migrating birds know which bird to follow? And how could we be sure that we all saw the same colours?

§ 3. In those days, I was hardly worried by the problems of the real world, so the combination of long walks, fresh air and being alone on my route let me slip easily into my own private thoughts and fantasies. But there was a price to pay for my absent-mindedness. I would suddenly realise that I couldn't remember any of the last 47 houses I had visited. I didn't know if I had left a paper, or instead just walked up to the door, stood for a moment like a mechanical robot and turned round and walked away again. It is not easy to describe the sense of self-disappointment that comes with reaching the end of your route and finding that there are sixteen undelivered papers in your bag and you don't have the least idea to whom they should have gone. Mr McTivity **would not be amused** if he found out. There was only one way to find the solution to this. So I spent much of my early years first walking an enormous newspaper route and then revisiting large parts of it — sometimes twice!

§ 4. As if delivering papers seven days a week weren't enough, you also had to collect the subscription (*подписка*) money. There wasn't a more unpleasant task than this. But in particular, the moment that filled me with dread was collecting from Mrs Vandermeister. Mrs Vandermeister was 70 years old, possibly 80. She was very small, forgetful and practically deaf.

§ 5. Getting money from her was a nightmare, if I rang the doorbell at 15-second intervals for an hour and 10 minutes, eventually she would realise someone was at the door. "Now who the heck is that?" she would shout to herself, and begin the long process of getting from her chair to the front door, which was just twenty-five feet away. When eventually she came to the door, it would take an extra half-hour to convince her that I was not a murderer. When she finally opened the door, she was always alarmed to find me standing there. "Oh, Billy, you **gave me a start!**" she'd say. "It's nice of you to pop by." After I reminded her why I was there, there would be another long pause while she went off to find her purse. She would return half an hour later to ask how much again. There would be another detour to kitchen, and finally the announcement that she didn't have that much cash and I'd have to call again another time.

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The writer was often disappointed when he got to the end of his route because he

- 1) couldn't find the right addresses to deliver all his papers.
- 2) realised he had forgotten to deliver a number of papers.
- 3) would have to tell Mr McTivity about his undelivered papers.