A Dime in Time

It was a dirty dime, but it was a delightful surprise. I found it in the middle of the street I walk on each morning. Occasionally, I’ve found other treasures – five big Apple Snail shells near the ditch, two Great White Egret feathers, and once, a discarded three-legged plant stand in need of fresh paint. On this day, I found one old dime.

This is almost country, with no sidewalks and almost no foot traffic. I wondered for over a mile how that dime ended up in the street. I made up stories as I walked. Back home, it stirred a different story. I put on my reading glasses and checked the mint date.

1965.

That was the year we moved to the Chicago suburbs from a small Indiana town. I was eight years old. My parents hoped to move during the summer. But it was three weeks into my third-grade year when we moved into the house in Oak Lawn. My grandparents drove up from Kankakee to help unpack. I went off to settle into Mrs. Feeley’s classroom. Mom must have walked me and my older brother to the school office. From there, a long, wide hallway led to Room 19.

I had just become a third grader, but back at my old school, I understood how things worked and when things happened. I knew where my class stayed on the playground and where the nurse’s room was. I had learned how to get lunch in the cafeteria. But now at Carl A. Sward School, everything was different. Even the desks were different. There would be challenges and things to learn.

In those days, thank goodness, we lined up for recess. We lined up to go to music class. We lined up to use the restrooms. I found great comfort in line; there was always someone to follow. Once again, we started forming a line at the classroom door. There I stood, in the middle, the new student. I hid my awkwardness and uncertainty behind the kid in front of me. My straight dark hair fell past my shoulders. My bangs hung over the top of my blue horn-rimmed glasses. I was the only one in Mrs. Feeley’s class with glasses, but no one had noticed yet. Mrs. Feeley busied herself with organizing thirty fidgety eight-year-olds. I watched keenly for anything that might help me fit in.

Then, without warning, off my right side, a redheaded girl with tiny barrettes in her hair walked right up to me – so close, she startled me. This girl was shorter than me, and she had freckles. She was direct but friendly.

“I’m Erica. Do you want to come to my house after school and play?”

I wasn’t expecting that! I *did* want to play. “I have to ask my mom first,” I said timidly.

“Okay.” The line began to move.

Erica’s desk was on the other side of the classroom, so we didn’t talk during the day. I hoped she would remember her invitation. I paid close attention to Mrs. Feeley so I wouldn’t make any embarrassing moves, and I finished my first day without any problems.

When the bell rang, school was out, and we were free to play. That day, Erica *did* remember. My new friend walked with me a block and a half to my new house. Everyone inside was hustling and bustling. It was like Grandma’s house just before Thanksgiving Dinner, but it didn’t smell like her stuffed turkey. There were boxes everywhere. Grandpa gave me a hug.

I doubt I even introduced Erica. I just blurted out, “Can I go to Erica’s house and play?”

Distracted, my mom said, “Yes, of course. Just be home in time for dinner.” I’m sure she told me what time that was. I don’t remember what she and Grandma were fixing for dinner. Maybe something like meatloaf.

My mom didn’t ask Erica any questions like *Where do you live?* Or *What is your phone number?* Or even*, What’s your last name?* It is trite, but life *was* simpler then, our little world was safer.

And off we trotted. I had a friend to play with. Erica’s house was just over a block away. We walked north from my house on 49th Avenue and crossed one street. The very next street was hers – 96th Street. We would have taken the shortcut, turning into the alley, past her garage and swing set. We entered her house from the back. Her mother greeted us. She was pleasant and kind of proper. She was pretty short and had red hair too. She always made us iced tea with real tea bags.

We must have had a lot of fun that day, although I don’t remember what we played.

When the fun was over, Erica’s mother gave me directions. She repeated them and saw me out the front door. Off I went. There was only one turn – left at the corner of her block, onto 49th Avenue. And yet somehow, I missed it.

I was five houses further before I knew something wasn’t right. I was bewildered as I tried to remember how we got to her house. The sidewalk stretched forever. I looked for someone to ask for help. I looked for something familiar. There were so many red brick houses that looked alike! It seemed like the sun was starting to set. I turned in circles, just looking, within inches of panic.

I looked in the direction I had come from. Suddenly, I thought I could probably find my way back to Erica’s house! Hopeful that I could find it, I picked up my pace. I held back tears. My breath was heavy. Still, I was careful to look both ways when I got to 49th Avenue.

I looked left, then right, and something tugged at me. I thought, *this could be my street!* I thought it was. I tried to remember Erica’s mother’s directions. I tried hard. At the risk of not finding my way back to my friend’s house, I turned on 49th Avenue. I started walking past more brick homes. The more I walked, the more I thought I had it right. Then I saw Grandpa’s car parked in front of our house! I started running. It was more like jogging; I was worn out. It had been a long day for an eight-year-old.

I headed for the side door into the kitchen. Tears welled up as I approached, ready to cry out that I had gotten lost. As I burst in, Grandma was setting out dinner plates. Grandpa saw me and grinned with delight, “There’s our Shelley!”

Grandpa was the only one who called me Shelley. I always liked it. He gave me a hug as my dad came in behind me. Dad had gone to his new job that day. Mom kissed him, then called my brothers for dinner. Grandma and Grandpa joined us. Mom asked Dad how his day went. They talked like grown-ups for a bit. Then they turned to us kids, as something like peas or carrots was passed around.

My brother, Jeff, wasn’t in school yet. They asked my older brother, Mark, how his day went. His answer was short; Mark never said much. My dad turned to me, “And how was your day at school?” I didn’t want to ignore his question about school. But I had to get to the really important stuff.

“I made a friend today! I went to Erica’s house after school and played! We had fun!”

And then we ate dinner. Things weresimpler in 1965.

I just got a text from Erica, and she agrees. “Yes. Life was much simpler in third grade, and back then, that dime would have bought a candy bar at Letten’s corner store! LOL”

I texted back, “We would have shared the candy bar. 😊”