



Small Towne Short Stories
J. C. Penney Co. and Tiddlywinks
By Hannah Fry-Langhorne

Robert Davis, 69 years old, October 21, 2016

It was a sunny afternoon in the Plaza, a quaint section of town that most kids these days know as The Circle.

But, I remember it as my hometown: the place where I grew up, went to school and learned the meaning of an honest day's work. It was a tight-knit community built by hardworking men who'd settled in Orange County after fighting in World War II. The sweet aroma of fresh oranges hung in the air while residents made the trip into the Plaza every Saturday from their ranches to shop.

We never went to malls or superstores. At least that's how I remember it. The place is different now.

Young people scurry around staring at their phones, missing the history in the Plaza's structures and landmarks. Impatient drivers line Glassell Street hunting for now-coveted parking spaces.

When I was young, people walked and greeted each other. It had been decades since I last visited.

"Look, Grandpa!" my 5-year-old grandson Jack yelled, startling me back to reality. Jack had his nose and both palms pressed tightly against the tall glass windows of a storefront along North Glassell.

His sweaty hands smeared the glass as he dragged them down, squealing in excitement. I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and tried to buff out the fingerprints his tiny hands left behind.

I knelt down next to him and looked past the stuffed Curious George character that hung from a palm tree in the window display.

There was a teal sign hanging above the walkway: *Tiddlywinks*.

I hadn't seen that word in years. It made me smile.

"What does it mean?" Jack asked inching closer to the entrance.

"It's a popular game that I had when I was a boy," I responded. "Do you want to go inside and see what they have?"

Jack gave me an affirmative nod and I went for the door.

As I walked in the memory of the place came rushing back. I was young again and so was Orange.

* * *

April 23, 1959

It was the first day of the long-awaited J.C. Penney store opening in the Plaza. Mom couldn't wait to visit. The whole town was buzzing about the departure of Rice Jewelers from the space, but at 12 years old and with no eye for jewelry, I didn't care much about that.

The next Friday was my first school dance and mom said I needed a new sport coat for the occasion. So we braved our way into the packed store. J.C. Penney had combined two storefronts to make a one-stop department store for the town.

"Would you look at this space, Bobby!" she said. "It's going to be lovely having a department store this close to home."

With my dad out of work and my mother packing oranges to make ends meet, I knew we wouldn't be visiting the J.C. Penney very often.

I nodded, hoping silently that she would hurry up. The Ed Sullivan Show was on television soon and I didn't want to miss it.

Mom began combing through sport coats, plucking them off the hangers and asking me what I thought. I gave a halfhearted response, my eyes shifting to the row of men's fedoras. That's what I needed to ask a girl to a dance—a swanky hat like they wore in the movies.

I walked up to the counter and grabbed a black one with a feather tucked into the side and tried it on. It slumped down over my ears completely covering my messy brown hair.

"Hey there, son!" The booming voice startled me. I looked up but could only see the blackness of the inside of the hat.

The man pulled it off my head, exposing my eyes to the florescent department store lighting. The man was extraordinarily tall to me—more than 6-feet-tall at least—with broad shoulders that reminded me of a steel statue. I'd never seen anyone that tall.

"It looks good on ya," he said with a wide grin and a wink. "It's a little big."

He paused, flicking his finger over the feather at the top of the hat and placed it back on my head. He grabbed a smaller hat without a feather and compared the sizes.

A saleswoman rushed over when she saw the man mulling over the two fedoras. "Both are very handsome choices, Mr. Nelson. What occasion are we shopping for?"

"Thank you, Dorothy. But, I told you just call me Russell. I'm helping this young man here pick out a new cap. I think this one will do just fine," he said, holding up a gray felt fedora.

Dorothy blushed and nodded in agreement.

Russell was handsome and a former college football player. He was older now, and known for building much of Orange County.

I would find out years later that Russell Nelson and his development business partner Charles Casserly settled in Orange County after the World War II and built 1500 homes in Orange, Anaheim, Fullerton and Santa Ana.

Russell also purchased several buildings in Old Towne Orange. In 1957, he bought the commercial buildings at 129 and 131 North Glassell Street where the J. C. Penney operated from 1959 to 1968 before it moved to what is now The Outlets at Orange.

Before J. C. Penney had transformed the space into one large storefront, the two spaces were distinct buildings. From the 1920s through the 1940s, a series of jewelry stores occupied the building at 129 North Glassell Street.

The 131 North Glassell Street storefront was for years a Western Auto Store, managed by a local man named Jack Lampert. The store sold everything from auto parts to clothing.

Russell put the hat back on my head. The smaller, gray hat fit perfectly just above my ears. I checked myself out in the mirror on the display case and caught a glimpse of the \$5 price tag. It would be too steep a price for my mother who made a modest wage filling wooden crates with oranges at the packinghouse on Cypress Street.

"Thank you, sir. But I don't have the money to buy it right now," I told him sheepishly, averting my gaze downward in embarrassment.

The man smiled and opened his leather billfold. He motioned to the sales woman behind the counter and handed her five, one-dollar bills.

It was an act of generosity that I would remember forever.

I stood there unable to speak until the man tipped his own hat and headed back out the door.

My mother complimented the hat when she walked back over to me, giving me a kiss on the cheek, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be keeping it. My father, an out of work newspaperman, had firm rules about accepting such generous gifts.

The next day, I rode my bike back to the store without my mother to find the man and say thank you but give back the hat.

When I arrived, I saw two boys a little older than me sitting on the curb next to a stack of boxes playing a game of Tiddlywinks. The younger boy wiped sweat from his brow and took a long swig from a glass coke bottle.

I must have been gawking for quite a while because one of them called me over and asked my name. He told me his was Steve. In truth, I wanted to ask them if I could play. I didn't have my own Tiddlywinks set at home and could only play at friends' houses.

"I'm Robert Davis. Bobby for short. I was here yesterday," I said.

Steve's brother, Glen, shot a wink, a small circular disk, into the pot while he was distracted, letting out a triumphant holler.

The concept of Tiddlywinks is fairly simple: you shoot disks, called winks, into a small cup using another circular game piece to launch them in the air by pressing on the side. You can throw off your opponent by launching your winks on top of theirs.

"Well Bobby, are you just going to stand there or are you going to help us haul this stuff upstairs to the top floor," Steve said somewhat annoyed.

I looked at the boxes and back at Glen who raised his eyebrows at me, as if challenging me to say no.

I grabbed the bottom of the one of the boxes—they were heavy—and motioned for them to lead the way. We chatted until Steve asked about my hat. I explained the story and described the stranger who had bought it for me.

When we got back down to Glassell Street, Russell Nelson was towering over the game, looking concerned at all the pieces strewn on the sidewalk. His face softened when he saw me, still wearing the fedora.

"Well, you're back again," Russell said.

"Yes, sir, I wanted to say thank you, but I can't accept the hat. It's just too much and my father always told me not to accept handouts. I have to work for the things I want in life."

I blushed as I removed the hat and started to hand it back.

Russell nodded as if he understood.

"You're father sounds like a fine man." He paused and looked at the two boys who had retreated to their spot on the curb. There were stacks of equipment that still needed to be hauled upstairs for safekeeping but the boys didn't seem to be in a rush.

"How about you keep the hat and you do some work for me? My boys need some help carrying all this equipment to the upstairs of my building. If you do that, I'd say we're fair and square."

I nodded in agreement, placed the hat back on my head and went to work.

* * *

October 21, 2016

I was jolted out of my memories again by Jack rushing over to the wooden train set up on a small table, knocking a stuffed animal off the display case.

He immediately began pushing the train cars around, belting out "*choo choo*" as he chugged them along.

A friendly woman approached Jack with a smile encouraging him to play. She said her name was Jeanie Viveros and she owned the store with her husband, Gil. She lit up when she spoke about her two children and her desire to build a fun and welcoming business in Old Towne.

Jeanie and Gil, who moved to Orange 15 years ago, had always wanted to open their own business. They decided a toy store would be the perfect fit for the Plaza. Four years ago, they saw the space at 129 North Glassell Street was for rent and decided to take the plunge and finally open Tiddlywinks.

The classic board games, Raggedy Ann dolls and Little Golden Books sitting neatly on the shelves reminded me of a time when play was simple.

When I was a boy, flashing lights from battery-powered games and tablets were futuristic. The best toys were something you built yourself.

Despite all the superstores like Target and Amazon being so popular, Jeanie said there is still something unique about shopping at your local toy store.

"I know just what you mean," I told her.

Jack wandered over to the board game section of the store and grabbed the Tiddlywinks box, running over to me with his arms completely outstretched. I knew what was coming.

"Can we get it?" he asked jutting his lip out like his mother did when she was young.

I ran my fingers over the front of the box and nodded yes. But first, I had to tell him a story.

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Looking northeast toward businesses on the east side of the 100 block of North Glassell Street in Orange, California, around 1970. Visible are Youngster Shoppe, J.C. Penney Co., Orange Camera, Sherman Williams Paint Store, Orange Cleaners, Fikes Burgers. Four automobiles, second from the right a 1970 Datsun 1200 coupe, are parked along North Glassell Street. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.