

My unforgettable Halftown Christmas

Worrying about final exams and planning for Christmas vacation, I was kicking the soccer ball toward my dorm when she dropped from a tree and leaned forward. A skinny girl of 10 or 11 with baby fat cheeks and a toothy Irish smile, she crouched, challenging me to not just kick the ball to her, but seemingly testing my character to break stride. Then a boy dropped from the tree, younger by at least a couple years, also skinny with hair shorn in a wiffle.

They were brother and sister, Sandy and Stevie, and for the next week they showed up every afternoon to kick the ball around before I rushed off to chapel and dinner.

The day before vacation, we were kicking the ball in near darkness and Sandy twisted her ankle. She said they lived in what we at St. George's School called "Halftown," the area down the hill from the school, heading toward Newport.

Seeing that it was painful for her to walk, I piggy-backed her home, where I was shocked to see that they lived in nothing more than a converted summer shack set up on cinder blocks.

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Mom's at work," said Sandy.

There was a tray of ice in the freezer. There was only a quart of milk in the refrigerator compartment. I wrapped some ice in a thin towel and told Sandy to apply it to her ankle.

I ran two streets down to Sully's Emporium on Aquidneck Avenue and bought six club sandwiches on credit, which back then meant I'd pay Frank when I returned from vacation. I brought the sandwiches to the kids and hurried up the hill before my absence at dinner was noticed.

The next morning I boarded a chartered bus filled with boisterous classmates heading to New York City. I'd been invited to multiple parties before heading on to my family in Virginia. That night I was in Black Tie at a party on the St. Regis Roof. I told my friend, Wendy, about the kids.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. It was 1967 and the sensitivities of teenagers were getting heightened about a lot of things.

In the morning I rushed over to Madison Avenue, to the unofficial outfitters of all prep school students, a place where I assumed all my clothes had to come from, including my boxer shorts: Brooks Brothers.

I picked out two smart-looking wool coats — red for her, blue for him, of course. Then came the moment of truth: I asked the salesman if I could charge them to my parents' account. He told me to wait and left the room.

My parents were not wealthy, but understood I needed to fit in and indulged my Brooks Brothers fetish as best they could. However, this move would be going over the top and scotched if they were

contacted.

A dapper gentleman, elfin behind the frames of his large glasses appeared. He looked me over quickly, flashed an oddly familiar toothy smile and said it would be fine, glad to help and shook my hand.

"Will they be put in Brooks Brothers boxes?" I asked. Their navy blue boxes with flowing gold script that said Brooks Brothers, the B's elegantly embellished with swirling flourishes, the boxes held shut with gold ribbon were as impressive as anything that might be inside.

"Naturally," he smiled.

I had the coats sent to Sully's Emporium and phoned Frank, who said he'd deliver them.

When I returned from vacation, I went straight down the hill. The house was empty. I went next door where a man shook his head and said they'd left two days before in an old station wagon. Didn't know where they'd gone to, but the kids were wearing fine coats and for suitcases they'd used two Brooks Brothers boxes, tied up with gold ribbon for handles.

"It was a sight to behold!" said the man.

I never saw those children again. I see them every Christmas. Both statements are as true as the stars that twinkle and the love in your heart.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.