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### Paper Route

For almost a year I collected newspapers. I'd go after school to the grocery store, past the tired mothers and the homeless men panhandling for change. The free papers were in bundles next to the garbage cans, waiting to be collected. I'd squeeze one stack into my backpack and carry on home, sometimes stopping at the neighbors' houses to pick up their yellowing copies of the *Daily News*, *Observer*, and *Post*. At home, I'd stack the newspapers into neat piles and cover them in Saran Wrap. By the time I'd finished, they were like plastic blocks, rectangular and shiny. I measured each one with my ruler and wrote the results in my brown leather journal. Before my mother came home, I placed the newspapers in my closet and lay carefully my pastel blue blankie on top. After a few weeks the closet became full and I moved the excess newspapers under my bed and then to the basement, near the boxes of photographs and a rack of gray suits that smelled musty and old.

Through the summer I found strange exotic titles from the new neighbors who moved in down the street: *Hamodia* and *Der Yid* at 132 and *El Diario* at 148. The strange fonts and characters on the front pages intrigued me—I couldn't work out what the articles were about, not that I cared much. I only wanted to seal the newspapers up, keep them protected from the elements. Sometimes I'd take the stacks out and feel the smooth edges, occasionally resting my head on one, like a sterile pillow. The kids on my street thought I was strange for not joining them in the tire factory near the river, where they burned newspapers in large piles. They would often ask me for some of mine, but I'd refuse and wave them off.

The daily collection of newspapers forced me to hide them deeper in the basement, behind the

rusted lead pipes and a dust-covered toolbox. The stacks were so big they looked like a wall, a reflective set of bricks with minute indents and ridges. One evening after a bike ride around the neighborhood, I caught the next-door kid in the basement, tearing off the Saran Wrap and placing a dozen newspapers in his Radio Flyer.

“Put them back,” I said. “They’re mine.”

He looked frightened as I raised my fist. A wet patch appeared on his shorts. He said, “Don’t. I need them.” Soon after he took me into his backyard, to a dry patch of mud with a tree stump in the middle. Around it I saw small earthen mounds with newspapers planted in them, as though they were seedlings.

“I’ve been trying to get my climbing tree back,” he said. “My dad used to catch me when I fell.”