

Change by JON KOLB M-3

We walked often back then, those lifetime ago days of my youth. My mother would send me out into the autumn air or the chill of winter, down familiar streets, to Otto's neighborhood bread store. Inside a room filled with the perfume of freshly baked dough, the familiar lady behind the counter, always smiling, would call me Mr. Kolb as she handed me our daily bread. Next door to the bakery was the liquor store, next to it the dark neighborhood bar, both places of strange adult intrigue to my naive eyes. Across the street stood Chuck's Stop and Shop, one of three neighborhood storefront grocery stores with aisles so small no wheeled cart could have slipped down them. Here again I was waited on by an adult, often Chuck himself, who would hand me a brown-paper wrapped roast. "Cut the way your mother likes it", Chuck would say.

Almost everything a household would need was available on that walkable stretch of Oakland avenue. I could get a haircut from the grumpy barber, buy a malted milk or sports magazine from the equally grumpy owner of the corner drugstore, eat at the counter of the greasy spoon diner, or buy nails from handyman Emil at the hardware store. For the price of a box of screws, Emil, the German immigrant who ran the hardware store, would dispense nails, screws, and advice.

"No," Emil would snap, "that's not what you need. This is what you want," he'd say, as he handed you the right nail, screw or tool. "People today," Emil would announce, "they don't know what they're doing." There was an adult grassroots philosopher who had studied in the school of life behind many a door on that yesterday block.

Then life changed. A car drive away, Kohls opened a new era grocery store as big as the Ritz. The automatic doors to the store were triggered by a seeing eye device that we kids liked to spring open like a giant toy. This new palace of food and fun had everything: aisle after aisle of fruits, vegetables, meat of all kinds, some fresh, some frozen, much of it in shiny plastic wrap that sparkled under the overhead lights. Tomatoes were both redder and tougher, tepid tasting fruits of all kinds were available year round. Shopping carts that could seat a young child flew every which way and back.

This cavernous hall itself seemed like a giant toy, but for good measure, at the back of the store and up a flight of stairs, was an actual toy store. While parents shopped below, kids could try out Lincoln Logs or wind-up cars until they were retrieved and told no, it wasn't Christmas.

At checkout, you lined up in front of the brandishments in the magazine rack and eyed assorted candies dangled in front of your widened eyes. Then, instead of placing your purchases on a stationary counter, you loaded them onto a mini-conveyor belt, as though you were a hurried, harried worker on a factory assembly line. Behind the register was an adult or near adult, with the cast of workers changing from one visit to the next. No more addressing you by name, no more references to "the way you always like it". Routine smiles and a brisk, efficient process from conveyor to shopping cart hurried you out the door and ushered in the next buyer.

Before long, everything seemed to be deserting the neighborhood. As I grew older, I could walk farther, but the places of everyday life kept escaping me, moving just beyond my walking reach. Soon it was a car ride for food, for a haircut, for clothes and for hardware. Traffic increased, stores turned anonymous and similar in design. Someone, who knows who or where, was shadowing consumers, calculating the efficiency of advertisements, noting which placements on which store shelves turned over fastest. Wherever you turned, glossy, colorful shopping flyers cajoled you with siren songs of small pleasures to be purchased, new distractions to be bought.

Change had come before us, of course, had crept up and into our lives like something under cover of darkness. My grandparents, in both a small town and large, once sat on their front porches in summer, waiving to their neighbors as they passed by on an evening stroll. Large bowling leagues, service groups of men and women that once dotted storefronts on Main streets, all places where people congregated and socialized, shrank as we increasingly huddled alone in front of private screens. Was this change good? Any old man with two beers in him will tell you life was better when he was a boy. Was it? I don't think anyone was behind all of this change. Not all of it, anyway.

Parts, maybe. No Wizard of Oz crouched behind an all-pervasive curtain. So how did we get here? Did those of us living through these changes see what was happening? Should we have stopped it? Can we, should we, turn back the clock? We need to ask these questions, if it isn't too late. We need philosophers to guide us. Where are they? Will they be coming soon? Will they come in time?