

THIS CALL IS FOR YOU
by Ed Raymond
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I'm afraid of telephones.

My phobia started back in the 1950's when, at age 8, I became a newspaper carrier.

The newspaper measured my performance by customer complaints. If there was one, it would telephone me between five and seven o'clock in the evening and ask me to rectify the situation. If there were no complaints, I'd win awards presented in front of all the other carriers at the weekly meeting.

After I had gone one year without a complaint, the awards became U.S. Savings Bonds. The stakes were higher. So, I took every precaution to keep my streak going. As my time without a customer complaint increased, my dread of the unexpected, late afternoon or dinner time phone call also increased.

Evening after evening, week after week, each time the phone rang, I cowered in fear that it would be the newspaper advising me that some customer, like the difficult Mrs. Fay, had a complaint.

My unease became noticeable. If the phone jangled during the family dinner, I'd jerk my head with a start. Several times, Mom asked "Edward, what's wrong?" "Nothing," I replied while I silently prayed, "Please let the call be for Dad, my sister or, better yet, a wrong number."

My streak grew closer and closer to two years and each day I anxiously awaited for seven o'clock to pass. Then, one day, the phone pierced the silence of the twilight hours. Mom picked up the receiver, looked at me and said, "It's for you." Would the unexpected call bring news of, "your streak without a complaint is over. Kaput! No more awards for you. Start all over." I hesitantly put the receiver to my ear.

"Mrs. Fay called," the female voice told me, "she said she didn't get her paper."

The news knocked the wind out of me. I re-traced my steps that afternoon. I mentally pictured myself delivering Mrs. Fay's paper. I knew I did. I remembered placing it in her mail box. What went wrong?

I pedaled my bicycle to the newspaper office to get an extra issue. Then, I delivered the paper. Mrs. Fay was an elderly woman, known more for her dislikes than likes. She seemed icy and terse whenever I collected the paper's fee. But, today, she seemed more amiable.

"I hated to call," she said, "But, Mr. Colene, who lives across the street, said he saw you deliver my paper. Then, he told me, two boys came and took it."

As I left, I silently wondered, "Have the two bullies who sometimes harassed me while I delivered papers exacted their vengeance? Who else would take her paper?"

The next day, I reported the incident to the newspaper's circulation manager. "Get Mr. Colene to sign a statement," he told me, "and we'll dismiss the complaint." Mr. Colene, a retired gentleman who spent afternoons sitting by his living room window which looked across the street to Mrs. Fay's front porch, vouched for my delivery.

My streak stayed intact. Eventually, I achieved two years without a complaint, won a savings bond, and retired from newspaper delivery.

But, I admit, I still get a fright when a telephone rings.