

Eating Crow At Thanksgiving

by Bill Vossler

Most people give thanks every fourth Thursday in November for jobs, health, family, friends, food—the good things of life. So do I, except I lengthen my list with one most unusual personal experience: The time my mother caught me stealing...

The lobby of the Auto Inn Hotel in Wishek seemed pitch black when I came in from the bright sunlight. I stripped off my gloves, blew on my hands and fumbled my way to the counter where I knew the hotel owner sat. My overshoe buckles clicked and my newspaper bag hampered my movements.

"You're back?" she asked. "Do you need to collect more money from me?"

I shook my head and slid a coin on the counter. "What's this?" she asked.

"Your change. You overpaid me."

She squinted at it. "A penny? You're returning a penny? In this weather?"

"You paid me too much. It's yours."

I turned and walked out, into the slicing wind.

Of such incidents are reputations made. When I was an 11-year-old

paperboy in Wishek, I gained a reputation for honesty, in great part because of this incident.

An undeserved reputation, I might add.

But let's be honest about my honesty: I wasn't honest because I felt in my heart that honesty was right; I was "honest" because I was afraid not be.

Children are not born with honest bones. Quite the contrary. The little devils will steal everything not glued down in their quest for gratification. If they want something, they take it, until they're taught differently; which is often a slow, methodical and painful process.

My first theft was from my baby-sitter. Mom was hospitalized. Mrs. Wagner inherited the unenviable task of sitting in her home with three boys under five years of age.

One day she offered me an ammonia cookie. The first bite melted in my mouth. I had to have more! When she left the room, I slid open the bread drawer and appropriated three, four, five of the cookies. I pushed them into my mouth with the heels of my hands,

snarfing them down, in cookie heaven and sneaked back for more.

My next big theft was from my stepdad. On Saturday evenings he emptied his pockets onto the writing desk—truck and house keys, nail clipper, change—while he took a bath. One night, Mom went to wash dishes. I looked around, then grabbed a couple of shiny quarters off the writing desk and dropped them in my pocket.

Of course Walter missed them. I paid the price of his anger and disappointment. But the only lesson I learned was, don't steal from him.

My big lesson on honesty came during Thanksgiving about four years later, when I was 11.

The day before Thanksgiving, uptown streets were bustling with last-minute shoppers, swathed in parkas like bulky bears. Mom, her hand on my shoulder all the way, and I, warm-eyed and happy, walked to Herr Mercantile to buy a few Thanksgiving groceries.

I was glowing in the light of Mom's attention. The smell of turkey and smoked sausage filled the air. We pushed the cart past the Cheerios and Wheaties, beyond Quaker's rolled oats, by cans of Campbell's vegetable soup, into the aisle with cake sprinkles.

I'd first eaten those silver, BB-like candies off a piece of cake at a birthday party. As soon as my friend Tom went to the bathroom, I ate them off his piece, too, gouging out hunks of goeey frosting, much to his dismay. His cake was cratered like the moon.

In the store, Mom walked ahead of me, pulling products off the shelves—tins of Borden's condensed milk, cans of cranberry sauce. I spotted a bottle of cake sprinkles. I grabbed the bottle,



hearing the pleasant sound of the little balls clinking against the glass.

Mom told me to bring the cart. I weighed the cool bottle in the palm of my hand, glanced at Mom, hesitated, then shoved it in the parka pocket alongside my gloves. I felt warm and vibrantly alert—alive—as I pushed the grocery cart to her side. And pleased, I felt pleased.

Mom gazed at me in a peculiar way, which I interpreted as comprehension. She knew me well. Too well. Once years before when she went away for a few days, she warned me not to run around in the gymnasium after lunch. Of course, I did. Later she said, “Why did you run in the gym when I told you not to?” I was dumbstruck. How did she know?

Now, in Herr Mercantile Store, I sweated as she moved toward me. She felt my forehead, her thumb trailing down between my eyes. “You’re flushed. Are you feeling OK?”

“I’m alright.”

“You’re sweating. Unzip your parka.”

We waited at the checkout. Finally Mom signed the credit slip. The bagboy filled our bag.

I zipped my jacket and pulled out my gloves. They resisted. I began to jerk. The command sped, irreversibly, from my brain to my hand. In that fractured millisecond, I knew I had erred. Grievously.

The bottle of cake sprinkles leaped out of my pocket, screaming, “Help! Help! Look! Look!” Heads swiveled. Eyes opened wide. Mouths dropped. The eyes of all the people in the entire world were fixed on me.

My face flamed. The bottle clacked against the edge of the counter, clattering the balls against the glass (the self-same sound which had so recently evoked so much pleasure, and now brought so much dread), flipped over in the

air and shattered on the floor, a miniature volcano that erupted silver balls that scattered underfoot, everywhere, beneath cart wheels and shoes, amidst boxes and sacks, rolling, spreading—a great gray tide of them, engulfing all—until they finally stopped still, like my heart.

Mom stared at me with horror. “What are those?” she demanded. She picked up a couple. “What were they doing in your pocket?”



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She blinked, comprehension dawning, her face contorted.

In a low voice she said something to the checkout woman, who nodded, and then to Baldy Herr, the owner of the store, who also nodded. While Thanksgiving foot traffic poured around me, I swept up the shards of glass (by the look on Mom’s face, they could as well have been pieces of her heart), picked up every ball and paid for the bottle of cake sprinkles. I didn’t know this was merely partial restitution.

On the walk home, I tried to engage her in conversation. Her eyes stared stonily ahead. She wouldn’t answer. I concentrated on missing the cracks in the sidewalk.

The next day was Thanksgiving. I crawled out of bed and up the stairs, hoping for a smile from Mom. She was silent, her eyes puffy.

I offered to wax the kitchen floor, sweep the basement, carry out the garbage, wanting to restore myself in her favor. She accepted my offers with nods, or grunts, far from the communion I hoped we’d achieve again.

Late that Thanksgiving afternoon, Mom sat me on the bench behind the table, facing the door. She made her longest speech since the incident. “You can’t read, play games or anything else. Just sit there,” she said.

A few minutes later came the first knock. One aunt and uncle and their kids walked through the door. Mom was animated, though sad. After the greetings, Mom turned to me. “Billy stole from Herr’s yesterday,” she said.

A lance of pain thrust through my heart. I could not withdraw it. I hung my head to hide my hot tears.

For what seemed like a week, I sat at the kitchen table as boatloads of relatives came in. With each new family, Mom looked at me and said, “Billy stole from the store yesterday.”

My cousins grinned, whispering. My aunts and uncles clucked, shaking their heads. Mom looked disappointed and sad.

Finally, the day ended. With a wail I fled down the stairs to my room. Etched in my consciousness were the messages from Mom. *No son of mine steals. A son of mine is honest.*

That was why I brought back the penny to the Auto Inn Hotel. That was why I took the honest road during those formative years, until I was old enough to choose honesty, to discover that it is a virtue, and worthy and sometimes painful. □

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