

Nickels and Dimes

Cousin Patrick had a nose for other people's money. He was the sort of fellow who would help you spend your allowance whether you asked him to or not. One time for example, just to get rid of the two of us, our parents gave us each a quarter, and suggested that we go off and spend it at a hot dog stand that was down the street and around the corner from the tiny white house where Patrick's parents were engaged in raising seven kids and a dog named Cindy. We took off for the hot dog stand with Patrick holding the money, because he was six -- I was only five and, as he explained, I might lose mine.

When we arrived, we ordered our hot dogs and sodas, and Patrick was so polite during the transaction (he was positively unctuous) that Mr. Bronson, the owner of the hotdog stand, gave us the meals for free.

I could tell right away that this act of generosity on the part of Mr. Bronson was in some way troubling to Patrick. We loaded up on condiments and, as we were selecting our sodas out of the cooler, Patrick whispered that our meals would be more complete if we had french fries to go with our hotdogs. We couldn't have ordered the french fries in the beginning because that would have cost us each an additional ten cents, and we couldn't order them now because it might seem ungrateful. But there was a competing hotdog stand

located just across the street. So we carefully moved out of the line of sight of the first hotdog stand, crossed the street, and ordered our french fries from the competitor. We carried our meals to a nearby park, and as we ate, I raised the issue of the remaining 30 cents. By my reckoning, Patrick owed me 15 cents, but he didn't see it that way.

“You got 35 cents worth of food, right? For just a quarter, right?”

I agreed, and I even felt a twinge of guilt for being so selfish. Furthermore, I promised not to tell our parents about the extra 30 cents. I was even somewhat relieved that Patrick didn't ask me to pay him for the french fries.

Now Patrick was of a good Irish Catholic family, so when it came time to go to school, he was placed under the tutelage of the Sisters of the Sacred Fire. And it appeared at first that these good ladies were having a very beneficial effect on him. I remember distinctly his first communion day. Patrick was dressed in a white suit with short pants and a white shirt and white shoes, walking in procession with other children similarly decked out. They were carrying little prayer books and rosaries to symbolize the purity of their tiny hearts and souls. I was standing with my parents admiring the children, and as Patrick walked past he winked at me and made a furtive obscene gesture. I was

too young to know the meaning of the signal, and even to this day I am not certain of its exact meaning, but I did know that doing that on your first communion day was in very poor form. So when Sister Mary Crepenza swooped in and yanked Patrick unceremoniously out of the line, I was quite sure that her plan was not to move him to a more honored spot up front. It turns out, I learned later, that she took him directly to the sacristy where the priest was dressing up in his best white silks for the mass. She required Cousin Patrick to confess his sin right there and then. The priest, unused to such rude interruptions, offered Patrick swift but certain absolution, with a penance of three Hail Marys to be said on the fly. Patrick was returned to the line, pure of soul once more, and received his first communion without further fuss.

Gambling with cousin Patrick was something to be undertaken with great caution. I'm not suggesting that he was entirely without scruples, but such scruples as he had were buried beneath a virtually impenetrable pile of self-interest. I had learned this fact in the card games we played, like War and Rummy. Patrick more often than not came up with the very card he needed at some critical juncture just in time to skin me out of my meager allowance. It was simply incredible how lucky Patrick was, and the older I got the more literally incredible it became. So, by age ten, I had learned not to be taken in by his offer to teach me a new card or dice game.

One weekend I was invited to stay overnight with my cousins, and when I arrived at their house, I was told that Patrick was across the street in a field with a bunch of other boys. So I walked over to see what they might be up to. It turned out they were gambling.

There was a row of pigeons resting on a bare branch of a big old leafless tree. They were betting on which pigeon would sit on the branch the longest in the face of an attack by the boys. Patrick was betting on the fattest of the pigeons. When the boys ran at the tree shouting and waving sticks, although Patrick's pigeon shook his wings and looked like it was about to take to flight, it refused to budge, settling back down on the branch. The other birds flew off, and then they returned, Patrick collected the money, and the betting would recommence. This went on for several rounds, Patrick winning every time. One of the boys had the temerity to suggest that Patrick should bet on a different bird next time, but Patrick explained that his sense of loyalty to a bird that had done so well by him precluded betting on competing birds.

The boys lost interest in the game or ran out of money and moved on to other mischief. By the time Aunt Maggie called us to come in for dinner all the other boys had gone home, but the bird was still sitting there. So Patrick climbed the tree and cut the string that was holding that poor pigeon to the branch, releasing him back into nature. He was a veritable Jane Goodall.

Gambling was not Patrick's only source of income in those days. The automobiles of that time, at least of the vintage driven by our fathers, had starter buttons on the floor that operated independently of the key. One day as we were playing, Patrick discovered that by pressing down on the starter button with the car in gear, you could move it up or down the gravel driveway, depending on whether the gear was first or reverse. Initially, Patrick was content for the two of us to sneak out into the car at night and take one of these short rides. Patrick would do the driving of course. But eventually, he had bragged enough about his driving skills that the other boys in the neighborhood wanted to drive as well. The price was set at 5 cents a round trip, just for a ride. Driving cost an extra nickel.

This lasted until one afternoon when there was a family picnic going on in the back yard. One of the guest drivers got careless and backed Patrick's father's 1930-something Plymouth into the drainage ditch between the yard and the street. Patrick and I quietly exited the scene and rejoined the family, while the other boys ran off. A short time later Uncle Jim was heard to say it was the damndest thing how his car had rolled down the driveway and into the ditch. He had always thought the driveway was flat. He and my father were out there on their hands and knees, with their faces pressed to the gravel, eyeing that driveway up and down, considering whether it might actually have a bit of a

slant to it. Patrick and I joined them and got down on our hands and knees as well. We were of the opinion that there was a definite, although slight, tilt toward the street.

About this time, Patrick and I learned, by quietly hanging around out of sight when our parents were talking, that our mothers' Uncle Killian had a very bad and shocking disease called "shiftless." It seemed that Uncle Killian had been involved with a wantonly wicked lady and had been watching very dirty movies, besides. My father said that penicillin would probably cure the disease, but Aunt Maggie said that she hoped his "you-know-what" would fall off first. Patrick and I weren't able to determine precisely how Uncle Killian had caught this scourge (probably by kissing this woman or touching her private parts -- that was our guess), but we were pretty sure that we knew what Uncle Killian's "you-know-what" was.

Our mothers had three uncles, Killian, Dillon, and Michael, each of whom had managed to outlive his wife, or wives as the case may be. The three uncles, all long retired, and now widowed, moved in under the roof of their father (our great grandfather) in a large old Victorian style house that, like the neighborhood in which it was situated, had seen far better days. Our grandmother kept house for her father and these uncles who were her brothers. Great grandfather (well into his 90's) lived mostly under the tight control of this daughter. She limited

the number of cigars he could smoke in a day, and permitted him only one shot of whiskey (“a wee touch of the spirit”) per adult male guest who might come to visit. The uncles were another matter. They smoked, drank, and caroused with no restraint. They were even rumored to be showing their dirty movies, the very thought of which horrified our mothers, to their 96-year old father, with some unnamed harmful effect.

Patrick and I didn't often voluntarily go to our great grandfather's house, but the possibility that there were dirty movies in the house did peak our interest. So, one Saturday morning we arranged to take a city bus into town to visit. When we arrived, as luck would have it, our uncles were all out at the bar around the corner. Our grandmother was baking bread for the week ahead and she suggested that we should go visit with our great grandfather in the living room. Just as we had hoped, Grandpa was dozing, so Patrick and I quietly headed upstairs to the most fascinating room in the house, the room from which our uncles ran a bookie operation. It was a large, spare room with several tables and several telephones, pads, pencils, a filing cabinet and, of all things, a movie projector and a small screen. This would be the place, we agreed.

After a bit of a search we found a wicker laundry basket in the closet, and under the towel that was on the top we found a stack of eight millimeter films in boxes labeled: “*The Bare Truth*,” “*A-Breast of the Times*,” and the like. In spite

of my fear of detection and concern that our own you-know-whats might fall off, Patrick loaded the projector and started the first of the movies while I propped a chair under the doorknob. We watched two of the movies, which were not very long – one of them twice, and then put them back into the closet, and returned to the living room. We woke Grandpa from his nap to tell him how much we had enjoyed the visit. Our grandmother sent us home with a loaf of warm bread for each of our mothers. She kissed us goodbye and asked us to “please come back more often.”

And we did.

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