

True Act of Kindness

By John Atkinson

From my childhood, a small act of kindness has not been forgotten. In the second grade, before illiteracy became boss, I ran with the boys on the playground behind Glen Allen Elementary School. We'd play softball and time flew away like bubble gum wrappers in the wind. Before we knew it, it was time for everyone to go. On our way home, we stopped at the corner of Mountain Road and Old Washington Highway at a country store for penny candy. Old Washington Highway and Mountain Road were tiny roads a kid could jump across with three hops. The narrow roads were once unpaved wagon roads from before the Civil War. They were big names back then but little more than pathways for a school bus to follow.

I'd heard my father complain when gasoline jumped to 18 cents a gallon, that money was tight and we couldn't throw away a penny, "not one red cent." None of that money stuff made much sense to me, only Mama's well being mattered. I'd asked her for a penny so I could get candy with the rest of the boys at the country store. Most times Mama didn't have money to throw away and this particular day was one. My pockets were empty as the cookie jar at home on the shelf. Surrounded by boys who had bellied up to the candy counter ordering this and that from Mrs. Harris, who had a lot of patience, I got caught up in the moment and forgot Mama had told me that morning she didn't have a penny to spare. My playmates got what they wanted and they looked at me to see what delicious treat I would tell Mrs. Harris I wanted. But I stood frozen like on third plate ready to run for home. The other boys always had money for candy and they figured I did too. They waited longer than boys should have for me to make up my mind. I spoke, "I don't want any candy. I just stopped by to say hello to Mrs. Harris."

Everyone laughed like I'd told a bathroom joke. Mean comments were made about being a bum and they ran out the store howling that they had figured me out. I didn't pout because I knew the hardship Mama was in. A little teasing wouldn't hurt me. I'd stay put a minute or so, my playmates would be gone and I'd be on my way home to help Mama. Who needed candy anyway?

Everybody loved Mrs. Harris. She wasn't like other grownups. She always had something nice to say and smiled when you walked in the store. She didn't own the business but things like that didn't matter because more important, she knew Mama. She always asked how Mama was doing and was I helping her. After the boys were out of sight, I headed for the door, but Mrs. Harris stopped me. She said, "Johnnyboy, here's a little something for you."

I didn't know what to think when she handed me a tiny brown bag, the kind she used for penny candy. "What's this, Mrs. Harris?"

"It's for you, Johnnyboy."

"But I didn't pay for it!"

"I know. I did."

I looked inside the bag and it must have been 5 cents worth of candy. Anymore would have made me sick. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Harris!" She winked one eye and told me to run along. I wanted to show my friends I had made up my mind, that they were wrong about me being a bum, but everyone was long gone. So I sat on a concrete buttress where a drainpipe ran under Mountain Road and enjoyed the candy. Mrs. Harris had picked the very best for me, the tastiest pieces. I ate a goodly amount before I started for home. The bag was still heavy. I didn't think to scrape around in the bottom of the bag to see what was left. I just enjoyed each piece. I only knew the candy would be eaten before I reached my destination.

About calling distance to my home, I saw something shiny in the bottom of the tiny brown bag, below the few pieces of candy left. I shook the bag and it jingled.

What's this? I asked no one. Mrs. Harris had put money in by accident. Surely a mistake had been made. It was someone else's bag, not mine. I ran back to the store as fast as I could so she wouldn't get in trouble. I flew through the screen door, but as anxious as I was, I had to wait for her customers to leave before I could speak. I stood there forever when she finally looked my way.

Mrs. Harris winked at me a second time in one day. She knew why I was there. She explained what I was to do with the money, 75 cents, three, shiny new silver quarters. More money than my hands had ever held. The coins looked as big as Mama's cup saucers. Now Johnnyboy wasn't a bum. I was rich.

Mrs. Harris said for me not to order too much candy in days to come, and not to show off in front of my friends. She wanted me to stretch out the money as long as I could. Above all, I had to keep her gift, "Our little secret." Mrs. Harris knew I would give the money to Mama the minute I got home. She mentioned something about me ruining my teeth. It was the first time I remembered Mrs. Harris stuttered and blinked her eyes, a nervous tic.

From that time on she noticed me growing up, each new inch and she always held the affection for me as I did for her. The three silver quarters were a great investment. The act of kindness wasn't forgotten or unnoticed by Earth Maker. My teeth didn't have a cavity and Mrs. Harris died in her sleep, not a wrinkle in the bed covers. Oh, if I could go back and stand in front of the candy counter. It wouldn't matter if the guys were all standing around. I wouldn't order but one select piece, call it love and hand it to Mrs. Harris. I'd tell her about the fun things I'd done, the wonderful people I'd met. But then I'd mention the three quarters and the reason why I was there. She would wink at me and then I'd finish my thoughts. "Mrs. Harris, you knew very well what you were doing. You filled my soul with the everlasting treat, love. Old Johnnyboy loves you for that."