

SEVEN THIN DIMES

The buffet was a long, polished piece of furniture that perfectly matched the dining room table and chairs. It was meant to hold dishes of food that wouldn't fit on the table, I suppose, but the buffet never seemed to serve that purpose.

My grandmother stored dishes and things she rarely used in its bottom compartments. Stationary, letters, pictures, and papers were placed in its top drawers. Along its smooth, shiny surface lay a white, linen dresser scarf with what appeared to be crocheted or tatted lace along the ends. Family pictures and a few small knickknacks gracefully adorned it. They are all remembered as if through a filmy, veiled vision—a dim memory. I paid little attention to the buffet.

Unless, that is, my grandmother decided it was a special day. A day when we would be treated to one of our favorite things. A day when she would line up seven thin dimes upon the buffet. One dime apiece for Greg, Russ, Bobby, Janet, Roy, Dale, and Jimmy. One dime apiece to take to Bess 'n 'Babe's penny candy store. Each dime meant ten pieces of candy for every one of us, and the treat was as much in the choosing of that candy as in the eating of it.

Bess and Babe were elderly sisters who lived in a small, white house situated midway along the slope of steep North McDonald Street, just a few houses shy of where it intersected with my grandmother's road. They kept an apartment in the back part of the building. The front section housed a penny candy counter on the left and a deli counter on the right. We could see Bess 'n 'Babe's from Grandma's porch swing, but it was not considered good manners to ask for the money to go there. We had to wait until Grandma offered. But my grandmother was generous, so, when we children were all together in her house, invariably, those little, silver dimes would appear.

Grandma never accompanied us to Bess 'n Babe's. She would simply watch from the porch as we ran the short distance from her home to the store, dimes clutched in sweaty palms. Then, after making sure we got there safely, she retired to a nice armchair inside to take a much-needed break and await our return.

Meanwhile, my cousins and I descended on those two elderly women and their candy like wee, rabble-rousing hooligans. Unchaperoned, we stuck our hands in the briny water of the large, wooden barrel in the corner, touching the cold, slimy pickles inside without ever actually purchasing any. We agonized over each piece of candy, pointing at our choice from outside the glass case, then changing our minds, then choosing another. Only a flimsy curtain hung across the doorway between the storefront and the apartment behind it, and we were endlessly fascinated with peeking past the curtain into Bess and Babe's living room. I don't think it really interested us, we'd simply been told that peeking that way did not constitute minding our own business. We were supposed to mind our own business and respect the privacy of others; we preferred to disobey orders. Therefore, we giggled and pointed and peeked behind that curtain while we awaited our turn to choose the candy we wanted.

The display case housing that candy encompassed the entire left end of the U-shaped counter, several sections of which lifted up on small hinges to let Bess or Babe out into the customer area should they need to lock the door or sweep up—or take care of unruly children, I suppose. The case stood a few feet off the ground, and we often had to stand on tip toe to see behind the glass where row after row of candies lay, some of which I have searched for my entire adult life to no avail. There were chocolate suckers, hard tack, chewy red Swedish fish, and half dollars, SweeTarts, chocolates, bonbons, and pink-, white-, and brown-striped rectangles with a coconut taste that I loved. All along the outside of the glass were tiny smudges from the many small, round, childlike noses, lips, and fingertips that had pressed, breathed, and pointed at that glass while eyeing the wondrous display it shielded.

Regardless of how long it took, or how much indecision we suffered, eventually the moment came when we each handed over our one precious dime. We never left until the last of us had paid—we came together, and together we walked back home.

Then we would sit on Grandma's porch swing giggling and yelling, laughing and arguing, eating our Swedish fish and half dollars, our SweeTarts and chocolates, ignoring the adult admonitions not to consume all of our candy at once. If I earned a million dollars and could buy anything I desired in this world, I cannot imagine one thing I could purchase that would give me as much pleasure in my heart and soul as those seven thin dimes aligned in perfect unison upon my grandmother's buffet.