

Cache

When I was eight years old and my brother Nathan was five, my parents had been caught up in the trend of “health food.” In addition to my mother baking her own whole-wheat bread, distilling our own water, and growing alfalfa sprouts in jars on the kitchen’s window-sill, sugar was zealously cut out of the family diet. “White poison” was what my mother called it, and it served as the perfect analogy to sin. It might taste great, but once ingested, it would ruin and decay your body from the inside out. Yes, sin and sugar – society’s downfalls.

So my brother and I knew there was no sense in asking for a Coke from the soda machine in the back of the produce section of Foodland. While mom was home with the baby, Dad had taken Nathan and me to do the grocery shopping. And as Dad methodically picked over the produce, my brother and I ventured to the back corner of the store, next to the swinging doors marked “employees only.” After hoisting my brother up to sip sweaty-tasting water from the drinking fountain, we lustily pushed all the buttons on the Coke machine, praying for a miracle. Just as we were about to go back to join Dad, Nathan gasped, “Wait!”

I turned to see him squat down near the wall next to the Coke machine, and pick up a dime. He raised it up as a trophy, grinning like some sort of maniacal villain. Within seconds we were both flat on our stomachs, pressing our cheeks to the floor to see if there was any sign of more coinage.

“Boys! Get your hands out from under there! That’s filthy!” My dad was only a few feet down the aisle, trying to select the fullest head of cabbage from the bunch.

“Just a sec!”

“Jason,” this use of my name was not part of the demand, but was rather a concession of time. It indicated that he had not yet armed himself with a logical reason why my brother and I should not be lying face down on the floor of Foodland, our arms seemingly buried underneath a soda machine. The first time he said my name was only to establish that he had placed a request. The second time would indicate more of a warning. The third use of my name would be accompanied by a repeat of the request, punctuated with a “now.” Anything after that would risk a spanking.

Just as he was about to call me again, my arm swept the dozen or so coins that my fingers had been grouping together, out from under the machine. As he saw this, the breath that was about to sternly deliver my name again turned into an “oh!” of wonderment. Nathan and I plucked the dusty money off the cold linoleum quickly, our stomachs tinged with a guilty glee.

“Can we keep them?” Nathan chirped, before I could warn him to keep quiet. I wasn’t convinced that this was a legal operation, and that if we were spotted by a Foodland official, we might be made to surrender our bounty to the rightful owners.

“Sure. You found them.” Amused, my father laughed to himself, turning his attention back to cabbage.

“Finders keepers!” my brother grinned at me as if we’d just won some sport.

But I had been infected with greed, and was too focused on the dark and dusty horizon beneath the Coke machine to share my brother’s joy. Not just yet. There were more coins under there. How had this trove gone undiscovered? The world was full of greedy little boys like us, especially in this particular neighborhood. Adult arms would not have fit under here. Adults never get this close to the ground anyway. But clumsy kid fingers cramming coins into that slot, dropping one or two each time... Had none of them stooped to pick them up?

There’s a clause to the natural law of gravity that mandates anything dropped at a soda machine bounce or roll underneath it. Coins, G.I. Joes, hot wheels, or anything else of value were certain to be lost under these red and blue behemoths, beaming their logos proudly, taunting my brother and me. “You’re not allowed my caffienated, sugary goodness!” the buzzing implied. “And now I’ve taken your toy!” This machine, however, was an anomaly, stilted just slightly so that little boy arms could reach and retrieve. Nathan and I spent at least fifteen minutes reaping the rewards of our discovery, collecting about seven dollars in change.