

CANDY
by
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He stood up in the garden where he was thinning carrots and shaded his eyes with his hand when he heard his father drive into the yard in the wheezy old Whippet. He wiped his hands against the bib of his overalls, pressing his fingers against the watch pocket to make sure the carefully folded picture of Ken Maynard was still there. A breeze shook the leaves of the poplar tree on the lawn. It blew coolly against the damp spot on his shirt where the overall straps crossed and his shoulder blades protruded like two pieces of broken dinner plate.

Over the leaf rustle the boy could hear the bold biddy talk of the hens from their fenced-in yard. He was suddenly stricken with a feeling of remorse that made a knot form in his stomach.

"Chores," his father constantly reminded him, "chores is what I expect from you, Vernon. Nothing much, but you've got to help out. I expect you to do the things set out for you without me or your ma hounding you."

He had forgotten to gather the eggs that morning, and the first thing his father asked each night when he came home from the mill was "How many eggs today, Vernon?"

Not to be able to answer the question he knew was coming, pointing up as it did his failing his father — a worse crime in the boy's mind than anything heinous he could dream up — rooted him between the carrots and beans as if his shoes were nailed to the ground. Usually he ran up to the car when his father drove in, volunteering to carry his father's lunch box to the house.

He passed his hands over his face again, as if to show that the sun in his eyes prevented him from seeing who was at the wheel of the mouse brown old car.

The boy hated gathering eggs. He was afraid of the hens when they were squatting in the cubbyhole nests, glaring out with beady eyes from a position of security, sworded beaks ready to strike and draw blood from the backs of his hands. He disliked the wet warm feel of a newly laid egg, and was especially repulsed by a soft-shelled egg. Sometimes he would talk to a hen several minutes, trying to coax her into leaving the nest so he could check the box for eggs. Other times, angry both with the hen and himself, he would reach in quickly and grab a handful of feathers, usually a wing, and pull her from the nest squawking and thrashing in protest. When this happened his mother asked about the ruckus in the henhouse.

Once he exhausted his patience. One of the Rhode Island Reds squatted in the laying box in what seemed to him a threatening manner. He yanked her from the nest while the rest of the chickens flew in raucous fright against the cobwebbed window and rafters, and scurried out the runway door. The wings of one beat against the boy's face. After the dust settled and the noise abated, he noticed the evicted hen on the floor in the same stance she had held in the nest. He was about to urge her out the small door into the yard when he noticed something protruding beneath her tail feathers. He watched, fascinated and horrified, as she squeezed out an egg. He nudged her with the toe of his shoe and she fell over on one wing, seeming to be in narcosis.

The laying of an egg took on a new dimension in his mind, one that thereafter colored his thinking about chickens and put an end to violent ejections from the nesting boxes. It was weeks before his mother could get him to eat eggs in any form.

His father got out of the car, lunch box in hand, and walked toward the boy standing in the garden. He was a big man. His large hands and bony wrists hung down below the cuffs of his coarse gray work shirt which was sweat-stained and stuck to his massive chest. The boy noticed how the sole of his father's shoe — repaired with a piece of discarded leather belt from the mill — was loose and flapped as the man crossed the lawn.

"Papa, I forgot the eggs," the boy called out before his father reached the garden.

The man stopped. "Well, you better be about it," he said. "I'll help you."

They gathered the eggs in the man's cloth cap, Vernon watching the casual way his father reached under the two hens on the nests and ignored the protests of the occupants.

"See there, Vernon. There's two broken eggs because you didn't gather them this morning."

They walked slowly back to the house, the late afternoon sun warm on the backs, the boy shrunken within himself about the broken eggs, his father silent. Vernon was old enough to read and quiet enough to listen, and the depression was as much a force to him as it was to his parents. He understood that in another time, another place, two eggs might be as nothing, but in 1931 they could fill out a dozen. There were city men in the mill, weavers who made more money than his father when there was work for anybody, who would pay twenty-five cents for a dozen eggs.

When they reached the lunch box where Gavin Dean had left it beside a plum tree at the edge of the garden, Vernon looked at his father.

"Pick it up, son. My hands are full."

To Vernon's surprise the box was heavier than usual. He carried it gingerly, the makeshift handle of electrician's wire cutting into his hand.

"Didn't you eat your lunch, Papa?" he asked. "Didn't you drink your coffee?"

"Sure I did," his father said.

When they reached the back door Vernon could no longer restrain the question.

"What's in it?"

"Well now, after supper we'll just see."

All during supper Vernon could not take his eyes from the lunch box. It sat on the shelf above the squat iron pitcher pump, catching a ray of sunshine through the kitchen window. The box, its tin sides worn smooth of any paint, was imbued by the light with a mystery and glamour out of keeping with its battered condition.

After the last of the fried potatoes, leftover cold pork, green beans and homemade bread, Gavin Dean took the lunch box from the shelf and set it on the table.

"Esther, did you ever see a boy with more fidgets than this one?" he said.

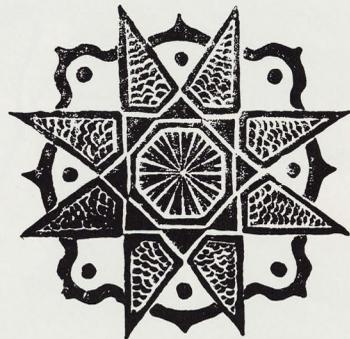
"Well, I hope you don't disappoint him when you open that box." She paused. "He has been working real hard in the garden." She swept up some crumbs with her hands into a little pile at the edge of the table, making delicate and graceful passes across the oilcloth in a sibilant whisper of sound.

She stopped to tuck a stray wisp of brown hair behind an ear, then both she and the boy sat motionless while his father slowly pulled down the catches and opened the lid.

The box was packed to overflowing with candy. There were chocolate bars, nut bars, packages of mint wafers, caramel rolls, pre-cut fudge bars and cream bars, and bars with strange sounding names the boy could not read — ones which he would not have recognized even if he could have made words out of the large letters printed in glowing colors across the wrappers. There were thin bars and thick ones; some had almonds (he could make out that word), and some were plain chocolate.

The boy could not remember when he last had candy of any kind, to say nothing of an entire candy bar. There were times when a penny came his way to be spent the next time in town for two Mary-Janes or one root beer barrel. He could not recall ever seeing that much candy in one place other than in the glass case of the Rockville candy store.

"Gavin — why so much? A candy bar for Vernon . . . a special occasion, but this — where did you get it?" Esther Dean clasped her hands in her lap. "Oh Gavin, you know how close things are. There's hardly any kerosene for the stove."



The three of them sat looking at the lunch box. The father took the bars out and lined them up across the table, his big hands and powerful fingers pushing the candy into precise rows. He was smiling.

"One nickel," he said. "That's all it cost me. One nickel. There's a new candy machine they put into the warehouse a week ago, and one of the boxcar gang told me it ain't working right. 'Damned thing,' he told me, 'sometimes you get two bars, then like as not you won't get any.' Esther, I put in one nickel, and it was like opening the floodgate in a dam. The candy poured out."

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He got up and went to the cupboard where he opened doors and lifted things out, peering behind pitchers and dishes, moving a bag of sugar and other kitchen staples until he found a box containing a couple of candies. These he put back on the shelf.

Before he put the candy into the box he turned to the boy.

"Your Ma's right, Vernon. The garden does look nice. Take a bar of candy — any one you want, and I'm not so mad about the eggs. Just so you don't forget them tomorrow."

At last the boy reached out and took a package made up of seven gumdrops — seven sugar coated chunks of the rainbow lined up in a little dark brown tray turned up at the edges, the pieces exposed to tantalize through the cellophane wrapper. Seven pieces, the boy thought, ought to last and last if a person is very careful to eat one only if he can't stand just looking any more.

"Esther, you too," said Gavin Dean. "Have a candy bar."

She sat upright and stiff in her chair, her hands still tightly entwined and nearly lost in the folds of her apron.

"No, no. I don't think so."

The father looked at her across the table.

"I think I better do the dishes." She got up from the table, crossing quickly to the stove for the kettle heating there.

"Come on, Esther. I want you to have some candy, too, before I put it away."

The boy, the gumdrops untouched before him, sensed an urgency in his father's voice, a plea in tone discordant with his father's physical stature and his usual head of the house manner. Vernon felt that something was wrong but he was unable to determine what it was. He wanted to urge his mother to take a candy bar. He tried to think of something to say to his father to cut the terrible tension which blanketed the room.

He ran his thumbnail along the side of the cellophane wrapper and freed the gumdrops. He held the package out to his father who silently took a piece. When his mother returned to the table for the silverware, she too accepted the proffered candy and the three of them stood there like strangers.

Vernon popped a piece of candy into his mouth. His father turned to place the candy-filled box in the cupboard. His mother went back to the sink, and the boy saw her make a motion as if to place the candy in her mouth, but she slipped it into her apron pocket.

The boy thought about the four remaining pieces of candy on his dresser as he lay in bed that night. One piece a day. No need to give his mother and father any more, not with a whole box of candy in the kitchen. That meant his package would last until Friday. He fell asleep with his tongue finding one last morsel of spearmint gumdrop between two back teeth.

It wasn't until he had filled the water pail in the kitchen from the well on Friday afternoon, after the last gumdrop was gone, that he found the courage to ask his mother when his father might bring out more candy.

He wasn't very surprised when she told him that his father had taken the rest of the candy back to the mill to be put back into the machine.

The boy stood silently staring out the window, watching robins after worms on the lawn. He avoided looking at his mother's face. Over faint burblings of supper cooking on the stove he could hear the ticking of the mantle clock in the next room.

He went to the table, sat down and took out of his pocket the picture of Ken Maynard which he had cut from an old magazine his father had picked up in the mill weeks before. He smoothed the folds which had made a crease down the center of the cowboy's high crowned white hat and across his face. Maybe some day they could see a Ken Maynard movie, he thought. When he heard the old Whippet pull into the driveway he placed the picture beside his father's plate.

Vernon ran across the yard shouting to his father as the screen door slammed behind him.

"Papa," he shouted. "We got nine eggs today. Nine of them!"



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