

Double or Nothing

by Marcie Beyatte

Wednesdays were humiliating. Third graders had to bring in twenty-five cents for class dues. If you forgot, the teacher would write your name on the board and it would stay there until you settled your debt. My family could afford the weekly quarter; the problem was prying it from my father's pocket and into my hand.

It would take me until eight o'clock each Wednesday morning to gather enough courage to fidget on the threshold of my parent's bedroom. My mother was an early riser and of no help to me. Besides, my father controlled the family finances.

He would be sitting up in bed, trying to force himself to start another day commuting downtown to a job he claimed to hate. I would catch him in his striped pajamas, staring vacantly at the wall, his thinning hair greasy from sleep. He was an accountant and, every night, when my mother asked him how his day was, he would reply: "It was a day to end all days," and then he'd collapse on his blue velvet chaise lounge and sleep until he was called to supper.

On Wednesday mornings my father would see me cowering by his bedroom door and pretend he didn't know why.

"I n-need my a-a-a-allowance," I would stammer. "Please." I'd graduated from speech class last year, yet my stutter returned whenever I was nervous.

"Allowance? What allowance?"

"You know, D-d-ad, a quarter a week? Like what we talked about?"

He would sigh and ask me to bring him his suit pants, gesturing with one hand to the top of his dresser. I'd deliver them, noting that they

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were heavy with loose change, and he'd painstakingly go through the pockets, discarding used white hankies, subway tokens, and pennies on the bed, until, finally, he held up a quarter.

"This what you want?" he'd ask, holding the coin inches above my hand.

I dreaded what was coming next, but this week, this Wednesday morning, I was determined to beat him. I'd been practicing and knew my luck was about to change.

"OK, let's make this more interesting. Double or nothing, what do you say? You can call it and walk away with fifty cents."

I stood by his bed, rooted to the carpet, and nodded my head. "Tails, tails, tails," I grimaced, repeating my internal mantra. "Let it be tails."

Then he flicked the quarter with his thumb, sending it almost to the ceiling. As it dropped into his left palm, he covered it with a loud slap of his right.

"Heads or tails?"

"Tails," I blurted out.

Tails it was! My father threw two quarters into my outstretched hand, and a voice inside my head urged me to leave, to run all the way to school and not look back.

"Let's go again," my father said, taking out a wrinkled dollar bill and flattening it on the bed beside him.

I called tails again and won.

My father handed me the dollar, adding, as I turned to flee, "I have one more opportunity for you. Double or nothing on the dollar, take it or leave it."

While the quarter was air borne, I thought about what I could buy with two dollars, heady with the possibilities: Licorice whips, jaw breakers, magic markers, Mad Magazine and money left over.

Should I stay with tails? Or maybe it was time to change to heads?

In a second, I made up my mind.

"Heads," I called, and lost.

He grabbed my dollar as I ran from the room, down the stairs and out the front door. It was four blocks to school and I made it there, red-faced and sweaty, in time for the first bell. My name would be on the board of shame, in front of the entire class, but next week, I promised myself, next week, it would be different.

