

HAL WALLING

STEALING FROM STEALING

KOBY *DETESTED* THE SEDIMENT at the bottom of his apple cider. Said it was too sweet, like sour patch. Just left it there in its Dixie cup and walked off. That's a huge deal.

A huge deal to Nan, at least. *Colossal*, you could even say. I was there when she bought the nectar jug, the biggest jug, *seven dollars* worth. Plus fifty cents deposit. Had to get more nutmeg, too, and a tangerine and cloves, and an orange plastic shaker of sweet red paprika. I think that's what it was. Anyway, you don't just *detest* someone's hard work, not when it's Nan's, not *seven dollars* worth, not when Dad says she could die any old day now.

"They've been saying that for years, Matty, it's never gonna happen," Koby says. But I've seen the lumps on her head poking through like spicy raspberries. Sometimes I get thinking I should pluck them while she's asleep, and soon I'm all set, box of Kleenex at the ready, Nan in her chair, put the radio people on in case she wakes up hollering.

But then Koby busts in with his big dumb headphones and the music loud so everyone can hear, and his backpack full of stuff he probably stole from kids at school, and he asks *what the fuck*. At least that's what happened the first few times. Now he doesn't ask. Now he just sits me in the kitchen and we eat pizza pockets until Dad gets home.

If you want to know, Koby's my brother. He does junior high at Glen Ames, which is a streetcar and subway away, and I'm at Adam Beck, which is only three blocks. I get home usually a half-hour before him, depending on if I stop at the Sun Milk for candy root beer bottles.

Koby's not as popular as what he puts on. He's got friends, sure, but only cause they're scared he'll steal from them otherwise. Hockey cards, comic books, a bag of potato chips, you name it. Last year, before Koby left for junior high, I could have ratted him out for stealing Pogs at the picnic tables. I hid behind a basketball hoop, watched him slide the little milkcaps between the planks and catch them underneath. The ones where Barney's getting eaten and lit on fire. Dad doesn't like tattlers, so I never

said a word, not even to Koby, but I swiped his metal clownface slammer in exchange for keeping quiet.

Jennie from next door, who used to babysit us Tuesdays during Nan's crib game at the Bellinis', told me Koby's gonna be a fatty. I said I'd seen his nipples start jiggling like fried eggs, and she said he's at *that age* where fatties get fat. "He's resigned to his fate," is exactly what she said. I haven't told him the news, and I won't tell his girlfriend Becky either, but they go to the pool a lot and I'm sure she's noticed. I think one's even bigger than the other.

I'm in the third grade, but both my teacher and pretty Sheila say I'm *operating at an advanced level*. Sometimes they write notes for me to take home, and then Dad comes and we all go to Sheila's office for a visit. Last week they talked about a place called St. Bonaventure, which is a gifted school I could go to where I'd wear trousers and a tie, and a sweater with a crest. Dad told Sheila and Mrs. Miller he doesn't know so far, "but thank you," and then we all shook hands. "Matty is a special case," they said.

Anyway, that bag of chips I mentioned—that's Koby. All puffed up.

Nan wasn't there when Koby scoffed at the cider, and I won't tell her either, cause I don't want her feelings hurt. She made it for us to take to a pumpkin-carving at the Mead brothers', which is only at the end of our block, not a far walk or anything. She just wasn't invited. But she made the cider all the same, and that's what counts. If Koby understood, he wouldn't be such a bully.

Me, I know what hard work it was. First, in the grocery store—the fruits and veggies, the spices aisle, the soft drinks aisle—just for half a basket's worth. I had to hoist the jug off the shelf and carry it cause Nan couldn't manage. "I can't manage, Matty, will you help me?" she said, and so I did, and Koby could have, too, if she'd asked, but he wasn't there. He was at the Eatza Pizza and then the Cineplex to see *Jurassic Park*. There's not much to steal at a movie theatre, not that I know of.

When Nan and I got home, she fished the pasta pot from underneath the stove, and I climbed on a barstool, the one that's missing a shoe so you can rock back and forth all the way to the fishtank if you want. I watched her pour the nectar in, the nutmeg and black pepper and cinnamon (I think I said paprika earlier, whoops), and then the cloves and some sliced-up tangerine. The orangey pieces kept rising to the top, so she'd pin them with her wooden spoon and smush them, but they'd just float back anyway. I told her how some things will never sink, no matter what, which I'd learned in second grade.

“You can’t beat something sweet,” she said.

We took turns stirring after that, for almost an hour, until it *mulled*.

Then, at the Mead brothers’, you should have seen what a dickweed Koby was. First he carved his pumpkin all crosseyed and gave it buckteeth, which made everyone laugh, okay. But that’s not what a jack-o-lantern’s supposed to look like. It’s supposed to look *bloodcurdling*. That’s a waste of a pumpkin. Then, to top it off, he left all that cider in the bottom of his cup, made a sourface, and walked home. Didn’t even take his stupid pumpkin.

Dad told me about Nan’s *situation* when I was six, after I’d noticed her raspberries. Even then I knew enough not to ask Nan, and for that Dad thanked me. He said I showed *restraint*.

Nan is my gran on Mom’s side, but Dad treats her like she’s his mom, too. His blood parents died on the 401 when he was Koby’s age, and after that he met Mom. He tells us how they were *highschool sweethearts*, how he lived in a foster home, and how he saved all his money from the Don’s Burger to buy the Skyhawk, which was the first car ever to have *quad rectangular headlamps*. In the spring before he and Mom graduated high school, Nan and Grandpop built an extension onto their house and invited Dad to live with them. That’s where we live now, only Mom died from *lymphoma* before I can remember, and Grandpop had a heart attack in his sleep right after. Sometimes Nan asks me to look through the albums with her. “It’s your *roots*, Matty,” she says. But the pictures make her sad and I hate that so much.

Nan’s situation is like Mom’s, only Mom’s berries never ripened and she *succumbed* after a few months. Dad says Nan’s had hers for five whole years, so we have to be ready.

I don’t know what that means.

Last summer, Dad won a raffle for four passes to Canada’s Wonderland. Koby said we oughta give Nan’s to Becky, since Nan was in *no condition* for rides, but I fussed and said how Nan needs all the thrills she can get before you-know-what. I guess Koby invited Becky anyway, cause when we got to the park she was already there and they went off by themselves. Dad would’ve let me, too, if I’d wanted, but I knew how important it was to stick beside Nan.

First thing after buying some lemon Flintstones pushpops, Dad took us to a wooden coaster called the Mighty Canadian Minebuster. He said he rode it with Mom when the park first opened, and I asked if we could do it again. Nan said she’d wait by the fountain and *Ijust* passed the tallness test,

which was a cardboard Barney Rubble saying you had to be *this tall*. After we got in the train and a man with pimples buckled us in, it took us slowly up and up, and up and up and up, and that's when I told Dad I didn't wanna do it anymore. We must have been a mile high before the top came, and way up there, way in the sky, there's sign overhead saying **DO NOT STAND**, and then it bombs straight down and you forget everything you ever knew. Dad laughed the whole time while I shouted and cried and got my knees smashed by the steel seatbelt, but he held my hand, too, and put his other arm around me.

My legs felt like marmalade for the next hour, and I told Dad I didn't want to do any more rides. We bought funnel cakes instead, cause they're the best things I ever smelled, and then Dad went off alone to find the Wild Beast.

Koby and Becky came by while I was finishing Nan's cake, since she couldn't manage, and Koby said Dad had told them about the Minebuster. I must have still had tears in my eyes, cause Becky gave me a sorry look and blushed and made a noise. Koby asked if I wanted to go with him and I said thanks-but-no-thanks, but he said, "Aw come on, Matty, you can't leave on a bad note." When I argued that the funnel cakes were a pretty good note, he insisted, "You'll like the Ghoster Coaster—I promise!" and finally I said okay.

Turns out it wasn't as bad, but still I got scared silly. Even so, even on the up-up-up, I shut my eyes and bit my lips and hugged the rail. No way was I gonna hold Koby's hand.

Koby's only got caught stealing once so far, and it wasn't a real big thing. Just some pixie sticks from the Sun Milk. The owner, Frank, who's Chinese, and whose daughter Lily is in my class, let Koby go so long as he promised to tell Dad about it—which he didn't. Dad found out the next morning, when he went to buy smokes and Frank asked if Koby had said anything interesting lately.

But Dad wasn't angry. He came home after work and told us stealing was a bad habit, but that he used to steal himself—toothpaste, razors, a bag of potato chips, you name it. He said my alarm clock, the little plastic one with glow-in-the-dark hands, was stolen, and that his favourite things to steal were *ell-pees*. He'd walk through the door with his own big old stack and sneak ones off the shelves into his personal collection. After a while the store people caught on, and one day they *busted* him. The police came with handcuffs and threw him in jail, and he had to call Mom to come bail him out, but she wasn't home. So Nan came instead.

Now when I go to the Sun Milk, I always feel like Frank is watching funny from behind his counter, or staring at the big round robber mirror on the ceiling. Even though he smiles when I bring my candy to the register. Also, at school, Lily started sitting next to Kyle S. instead of me. Maybe it sounds funny, but I miss seeing her handwriting at the tops of her papers—*Lily*, all loops and swirls, and one tiny circle.

After the cider incident, I was pretty steamed. First, I had to bring both mine and Koby's pumpkins home on the handlebars of my bike, which is only a one-speed Huffy, and I almost drove off the sidewalk it was so hard to steer. Then, when I got home, Koby was in the den with Nan eating cheezwhiz crackers, none's the wiser, no big deal. And finally, to top it off, after the sun went down and we lit our jack-o-lanterns, both Nan and Dad spent five minutes laughing at the stupid crosseyed one and barely mentioned mine. "I see it, Matty," Dad said. "It's a black cat." Then Nan added, "It's sure spooky," which is good 'cause that's the point, but it wasn't a black cat at all. It was a headless horseman!

All night and through school the next day, I couldn't stop thinking about what a two-face Koby was. I should probably have just tattled, but I thought no, better, I'd make it up myself. I'd be nicer, funnier, more helpful than ever. I'd listen to all Nan's stories and bring her any album she wanted. No matter how much they made her cry.

I left as soon as the bell rang and ran right past the Sun Milk. Nan was asleep in her chair when I got home, so I plugged in the kettle, found four card-decks in the junk drawer, and fetched her crib board from on top of the piano. She'd stopped playing a few months ago when the Bellinis, twin ladies, moved to a home in Richmond Hill. I could tell how much she missed it. I set the board and cards on the TV tray, then rolled the ottoman over for myself. I stood and put my hand on her shoulder and gently shook, only her eyes didn't open. She just kept snoozing. I said her name softly, then louder, then shook again, but she wouldn't open her eyes, even when I blew on them. Her cheeks looked normal, still gold and rumped, caked with sandy blush. Her hair, too, gold as ever, and the raspberries spicy red. I shook her arm harder and still she wouldn't wake, so I reached on top of her head and put my fingers around one lump, and I pinched it, just gently, to see if I could get a firm grip, or if it would squish apart, and if it was hard enough to get a hold of, to see if I could—

“Matty!” she shrieked, her eyes popping open. “The kettle!” I back-pedaled as fast as I could, like Ricky Henderson in centre field. She patted her head and pointed to the kitchen, and I ran to unplug the kettle, little blue spark as I yanked it from the wall.

Becky came over for dinner that night, which was Nan’s famous tuna casserole, which is famous ’cause it’s got things like nachos and pickles in it. Koby and Becky gave Nan a hand, since there’s dishes she can’t lift anymore, same with the milk jug, and she has trouble doing spoons. “Shaky as Jack’s beanstalk,” she says, like when I measured the nutmeg and paprika for the cider. This time, though, she got Becky’s help. Koby mostly stood and watched, and I stayed in the den the whole time. Here and there I looked around the fish tank and saw Koby and Becky pouring oats, but mostly he didn’t do much, like I already said.

At dinner, Dad told stories about him and Mom when they were Koby’s age, and Koby got embarrassed but Dad kept going cause Becky asked him to. There was one real goodie from when Dad first got the Skyhawk, when during dinner Grandpop stole the keys and did a *rip around the block*. Even Koby laughed, and Nan scooped me more casserole like it was no big deal, like she’d no idea of anything fishy. And I thought as I chowed down: P-H-E-W.

The next day at school, Lily sat next to Kyle S. and I got stuck beside Lee The Pee, who colours on his shoes and whose breath smells like you-know-what. When the bell rang for recess, I hid in the cubbies closet at the back of class. This time I poked my head out to make sure Mrs. Miller was gone, too, and then I ducked inside and went straight for Lily’s cubby.

Her lunches are always best because she lives on top of the Sun Milk. Today she had two full-sized sour keys, five root beer bottles, and a bag of ketchup chips with the fluffy dinosaur men. I stuffed the candy down the sides of my socks, then popped the chips open and crunched up a big mouthful. I never got desserts like this, didn’t matter if Nan or Dad packed it. The rule was always *two* cookies, even ones small as Oreos. Same thing after Halloween—*two* Tootsie Rolls, *two* mini-Smarties, or *one* Coffee Crisp and *one* Tootsie Roll. I took a second monster-handful, then another, then poured the little bits down my throat and crumpled the bag. Ten minutes was almost up, so I sucked the dust off my fingers and grabbed my jacket.

When I snuck back to the main room, Mrs. Miller was at her desk. She was smiling, looking straight at me, and she cocked her head to the side and said, “Hey Matty, how’s it going?” I wasn’t sure what to say or do, but I

never do, and I don't need to, cause Mrs. Miller takes my hand and says, "Let's sort this out." Then we walk together to Sheila's, and she asks the secretary if she can phone somebody, maybe the junior high this time, and she sits me in a chair, finds me an apple and a colouring book, and that's where I *hang tight* until a half past three.