

"Hey, watch it!" the old fat lady with the bright flower dress screamed at us as we flew down the aisle between washing machines.

"Sorry!" my sister yelled back while pushing the laundry cart even faster.

From inside the cart, I laughed and shouted, "Faster, faster!"

"You asked for it!" My sister grinned wickedly and shoved the cart as hard as she could.

The cart's tiny wheels clattered on the tile floor and it began to shake violently. I knew I was seconds away from slamming into the vending machines so I did the only thing a seven year old could do in my situation; I screamed like a little girl.

Just then, my mom pushing a cart full of laundry, stepped directly in my path. She looked up and saw me coming. She jumped back just as I crashed into her cart.

The two carts tipped over with a loud crash. Clean clothes, detergent, laundry softener, and a dazed boy spilled across the floor. I started to get up, but my mom's voice made me freeze.

"PJ Smalley, what in the world do you think you're doing?" I could tell from her tone that I was in more trouble than I'd seen for at least a month, so I activated my little brother defense mechanism.

"Mom! Jodie put me in the basket and wouldn't let me out and then she pushed me and I crashed and my leg hurts!" Tears streamed down my bright red face as I cried for all I was worth. I held my leg in both hands and rocked back and forth.

"Jodie Ann Smalley!" My mom yelled.

It was moments like these that made me glad I didn't have a middle name; it was always worse when mom used your middle name.

Jodie's head poked out from behind a washing machine at the other end of the laundromat. My mom spotted her and shouted, "Come here, now!"

Jodie winced. She walked slowly towards us, trying to look as innocent as possible. As she got closer she gave me a look that let me know I would never see my eighth birthday. "What, Mom?" she asked sweetly.

"Why did you push your brother in the cart?" Mom's voice had that dangerous fire and ice edge to it.

Jodie glared at me again. "We were just playing, Mom. We're bored; we've been here forever!"

"I was almost done and now I have to wash and dry all these again!" The floor and once clean clothes around me were covered in powder soap and liquid laundry softener.

Jodie and I both groaned in dismay.

"Jodie, help me pick these up! PJ, you go find Domenic; you know you're not supposed to leave your brother alone!" she commanded.

"It's okay, Mom, he's over by the bench picking gum off the bottom." I said helpfully.

My mom's eyes flared even brighter with anger, "Go stop him!"

I jumped up and scurried away, completely forgetting about my "hurt leg." As I passed the lady in the flower dress she showed her ugly yellow teeth in a smile and sneered, "You're lucky she doesn't give you a spanking like you deserve."

I stuck my tongue out at her. Her gasp of shock made me smile.

I found Domenic just where we had left him, lying on the dirty sticky floor, prying at a piece of ancient green gum with his little three-year-old's fingers.

"Come on, Skid, Mom says you have to get up." I said in my fake nice voice.

He looked up at me and stuck out his tongue. I wondered where he had learned that. I grabbed him around the middle and struggled to drag him onto the bench. He screamed and whined, but I finally got him seated and kept a firm grip on the back of his overalls.

A minute later, my mom marched my sister over to the bench and planted her roughly beside us.

"Now, I want you three to stay here. Don't move!" she said firmly.

"But mom!" my sister and I whined at the same time, "We're bored!"

"Can't we go outside?" Jodie asked.

"No! Last time you broke a light with a rock!" she snapped.

"Can I have another quarter to play the video game?" I begged.

"I already gave you a quarter and now, because of you two, I have to run two extra loads of laundry. I barely have enough money." She bent down and looked us both straight in the eyes, "You will sit here QUIETLY until I'm done. If you move a foot, you will not be happy when your dad gets here!"

Jodie and I both swallowed nervously.

My mom gave us one last meaningful look and turned, muttering to herself and looking up at the ceiling.

As soon as she had turned the corner, Jodie punched me in the arm.

"Ow! What was that for?" I whined.

"Jodie stuck me in the cart and wouldn't let me out." She said in a high-pitched whiny voice.

"Oh, right." I said as I rubbed my arm.

Domenic realized I had let go and jumped off the bench and started picking at the gum again. Jodie watched him for a while before turning to look out the window. I sat staring at the arcade games in the corner.

One was a dumb airplane game that was impossible to beat. The other was an awesome fighting game where you killed monsters and collected treasure. When you killed enough monsters your guy could turn into a cool wolf or dragon that breathes fire. I watched the same demo game and list of high-scores a dozen times. The longer I watched, the more I wanted to play.

My mom had given me a quarter to play it when we got there, but Jodie had kept bugging me while I was playing. She kept trying to tell me what to do and it messed me up. I died before I even got to turn into a wolf.

After watching the demo-game so many times, I thought I knew how to beat the first level if I could just try one more time.

I sighed.

Just then, Jodie shouted, "PJ, look!"

I turned around to find her lying stretched out face down on the bench. She was looking through the wooden boards into the metal box that acted as the base of the bench.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Here, look." she said and scooted out of the way.

I laid down on the bench and squinted into the shadowy box. At first, all I saw were gum wrappers, receipts, and other garbage. But then, I saw it; a quarter. And then I saw another one and another one. There must have been at least three dollars in change down there!

I looked up at my sister. She had the same Christmas-morning-glow in her eyes that I felt.

"How do we get them out?" I asked breathlessly.

"We need a hanger." she said.

I could tell she had a brilliant plan already worked out.

"But we're not supposed to leave the bench." I said.

"Don't worry, if Mom checks on us, I'll tell her you had to go to the bathroom." she said.

"Why do I have to go?" I asked suspiciously.

"Because Mom will think I'm up to something if I'm gone and you're a terrible liar." she said.

I opened my mouth to argue, but realized she was right; I always got caught when I tried to lie about stuff. And besides, I suddenly realized that I really did have to go to the bathroom.

"OK, I'll be right back." I shot a quick glance towards my mom's washing machines and then slid off the bench. Domenic yelped when I stepped on his leg. Jodie quickly quieted him and gave me a "get-going wave."

I tried to walk like a kid who really had to pee, which wasn't that hard since I really did. In fact, by the time I made it to the bathroom I was moving pretty quickly.

When I came out, I suddenly realized that Jodie hadn't told me where I should get the hanger. I almost went back to ask her, but I knew our time was running out.

I looked around and saw a big pile of hangers sitting next to the fat lady in the flower dress. She was folding a load of towels and her back was turned to me. I looked around to make sure no one was looking and walked quickly towards her before I could chicken-out.

I hid behind a laundry cart; her giant backside was only a few feet away. I swallowed hard and crept silently towards the hangers. I hesitated for a moment and carefully grabbed the top one. It jingled as I tried to untangle it from the pile. My heart pounded in my chest. Finally, it came free. Just as I was about to turn and scamper away, the flower-lady began to turn around.

Years of sneaky-kid training from my sister kicked in. I dropped the hanger and kicked it behind me as hard as I could. I could hear it skitter across the floor and bounce off the far wall.

"Excuse me," I said in my most innocent voice.

She jumped and squealed like a pig. I had to fight not to smile.

"What, what do you want?" she said breathlessly.

"I, uh... I'm sorry we almost ran into you with the cart." I said while looking at the floor. "And, sorry I stuck my tongue out at you."

I risked a quick glance up at her. She was smiling smugly.

"That's more like it." she said.

I didn't wait to see if she had anything else to say. I turned and walked away like I was heading back to my mom to get yelled at some more. At the end of the row of

washers, I stepped on the hanger and slid it along as I walked. As soon as I was sure the lady couldn't see me anymore, I picked up the hanger and ran back to the bench.

"What took you so long?" Jodie asked.

"I had to go to the bathroom." I said as I handed her the hanger.

She rolled her eyes and began to bend it.

"So, now what?" I asked.

"Now," she said, "we need something sticky to put on the end of this to get the quarters out."

She bent down to look under the bench and said, "How's it going Dom?"

"It's good." he said.

A moment later he popped up with a gigantic wad of pinkish grey bubblegum.

"Perfect!" Jodie said. She took the gum and stuck it on the end of the bent metal hanger.

"How did you get him to give you his gum without crying?" I asked in amazement.

"Easy, I promised we would buy him some fresh gum from the vending machine." She said. She was touching the end of the gum with her finger to test its stickiness.

"Hm, it's not sticky enough. Someone needs to chew it."

She looked at me and smiled.

"Oh no, don't look at me. I never chew ABC gum." I said.

Jodie raised her eyebrows and looked at me doubtfully.

"Well, I don't chew it anymore." I said sheepishly. "And I'm not chewing that."

There was a moment of silence. Then, we both turned to Domenic.

"Hey, bro." Jodie said. "Could you chew this for us, please?"

He was obviously confused. In his short three years of life he had learned that it was usually a bad thing when we were nice to him. He looked at both of our bright smiling faces and then at the gum. He shrugged and said, "Ok."

He grabbed the wad of gum and stuffed it in his mouth.

"Just don't swallow it, ok?" Jodie said.

He nodded as his little jaws worked on the petrified gum. His face turned bright red as he struggled with each chomp down. We watched anxiously. After a minute, the gum began to soften up, he started chewing faster and a smile appeared on his face.

"Great!" I said.

"Keep it up!" Jodie encouraged.

He looked up at us, pride and happiness plain on his face. He wasn't used to this kind of admiration from his older siblings. He chewed furiously, grinning all the while.

"I think that's enough." Jodie said. "Now spit it out."

Domenic stopped chewing. He was completely baffled. "Why?" he asked. It was hard for him to talk with the huge wad of gum in his mouth.

Jodie sighed and shook her head. "We need it to get the money out, remember? We'll get the money and then we can buy more gum from the machines." She pointed to the vending machines and I nodded helpfully.

He chewed the gum slowly as he thought about this.

Jodie held her hand in front of his mouth and smiled encouragingly. He stopped chewing, tipped his head forward, paused,... then spit the blob and a lot of slobber into her hand.

"Ah, gross!" she said. "Thanks a lot, Skid."

I laughed at her until she gave me a mean look.

She split the gum in half and carefully shaped a piece on the end of the hanger. She pushed me out of the way and kneeled down next to the bench. Slowly she lowered the hanger down into the grimy nasty pit. I hovered over her shoulder, my heart pounding.

"Stop breathing on my neck!" she grunted. "Back up, you're blocking my light."

I moved back, but a second later I was hovering again. I held my breath as she worked the hanger carefully towards a shiny quarter on top of an empty chip bag. It was an easy, clean shot. She lined it up and gently pressed the gum down on the coin. She paused and then lifted it up slowly. The coin stuck to the gum!

"Yes!" I shouted.

Jodie flinched in surprise, she jerked the hanger and knocked off the quarter.

"You dork!" she yelled.

I was already cowering with my hand over my mouth four feet outside of her punching range. She glared at me and then turned back to the bench.

She twisted and turned her head, looking for another quarter. For a moment I thought all was lost.

"Ah ha." she said. "Found one." She gave me a warning glare to stay away.

Once again she lowered the hanger carefully. I couldn't see the end of it or the coin, but I watched intently. She pressed down, waited and then slowly lifted it up. She smiled as she slowly raised the hanger. Little by little, she pulled our treasure up.

Then she stopped. She sat motionless for ages.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"The quarter's too big; it won't fit between the boards." she squeaked.

"What do we do?" I asked in a panic.

"Come over here, carefully." she said. "Reach down there with your fingers and grab it off the end. Don't drop it!"

I scooted over to crouch beside her. I looked through the space between the boards and saw the coin hanging an inch away.

I slowly reached out my hand; it was shaking.

"I can't do this." I sobbed.

"Come on, you've got to." she said.

I swallowed. Slowly I reached one finger of each hand down on either side of the hanger. Carefully, I squeezed the coin.

Jodie slowly tilted her hanger away from us and the coin turned in my grip. A little more and we could pull it out.

"Okay, the gum is probably going to let go if I twist any more. So it's all you." She said. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"One, two,..."

"What in the world are you kids doing?" my dad asked from right behind us.

We both jumped and spun around. Behind us, I heard the quarter fall back to the bottom of the box with a dull plop.

"Hey, Dad." We both stammered.

"We didn't see you." I said stupidly.

"I can see that." he said with his normal grin. "What's going on?"

Jodie and I looked at each other. I shrugged.

Jodie sighed and told him about the quarters and our plan to try and get them out. Then we both waited, not daring to breathe.

My dad scratched his chin. "Hmmm, I see." He said. "Well, it seems to me that there should be an easier way."

Jodie and I both let out the breath we had been holding.

My dad crouched down beside us and examined the bench.

"Yep, just as I thought. There're only a couple bolts holding the top on to the base. I could go get a socket and ratchet and have that off in ten seconds." He stood up and dusted himself off. "I'll be right back. Domenic, stop eating other people's gum, it'll make you sick."

He turned and walked back to the parking lot. Jodie and I looked at each other before shouting with excitement and giving high-fives.

Just like he said, my dad came back with some tools and a garbage bag and ten seconds later he had the top off the bench.

The pimple-faced kid who worked at the laundromat gave my dad a curious look. "Kids dropped something." My dad said with a wink only we could see.

We started picking coins out of the mixture of garbage, candy, and spilled soda, but my dad said, "No, no, just grab it all; we can sort through it later. Besides, we can at least clean out the garbage for them while we take the money."

We nodded and started scooping the sticky mess as quickly as we could into the bag.

In less than five minutes we had both sides of the bench cleaned out and the top reattached.

By this time, my mom had come over to see what was going on. We explained to her how we had tried to get the quarter ourselves and she smiled and shook her head.

"At least you weren't breaking anything." she said.

My mom, dad, and sister carried the laundry out to the car. I dragged the heavy garbage bag of treasure.

"From what I could see, there's got to be at least twenty dollars worth of quarters in there." My dad said. "Makes sense, if you think about it; people get change for the machines then sit on the bench. Some of the quarters fall out and they never notice."

Jodie and I grinned like the world's richest pirates as we discussed how we were going to clean the money and then spend it. I couldn't remember a better day.

"Hold on a minute," my mom said, "where did you get the hanger?"

I swallowed and looked to Jodie for help.