

SMALL CRIMINALS AT LARGE

Here's a crime story for *America's Least Wanted*. It's late summer and the day's still hot. It's perfect ice cream weather. I'm remembering this tale of crime and punishment because I hear the ice cream truck passing by again, playing its endless loop of "Turkey in the Straw." I reflect that most of the truck's patrons have probably never seen a living turkey *or* a bale of straw. Hard to imagine naming a song "Turkey in the Straw" anymore. A more contemporary title might be "Abandoned Exercise Bike on the Curb Waiting for the Metal Pick-Up Truck."

My Aunt Bea lived directly across the street from us during my childhood. She was wealthy and had bought the house almost instantly when she'd visited us. She was a loud, vibrant character: funny, impatient, a lover of all things theatrical. Her name was Beatrice, and she liked to call herself: "Beat-Your-Ass." Many people have passed through my life, but her presence remains photographically clear: loud in my ears and eyes—an actor demanding our full attention—played against a soundtrack of Fats Waller's "Your Feet Too Big."

The refrigerator in her kitchen on Norwood Drive was oversized. Our refrigerator across the street was still the tiny one with rounded edges that came with our snug little tract house. The freezer compartment of her refrigerator was capacious enough to hold an entire three-gallon tub of ice cream—or so it seemed to my seven-year-old eyes. My best friend in those days was my next-door neighbor David Shaw. We'd moved to our house when I was two—pulling into the driveway on day-one is the first memory I have—and David and I practically ran into each other's arms. We remained profound friends—and all summer long (before air conditioners were common) we spent at his dining room table copying out comic book pictures of Huckleberry Hound with tracing paper, crayons, and Silly Putty. The kitchen radio played "Big Bad John," "The Boll-Weevil Song," "Theme from *Exodus*," and The Four Preps singing "Calcutta." I actually remember singing along:

*I've kissed the girls of Naples,
I've kissed them in Patee,
But ladies of Calcutta,
Do something to me.*

What on earth could this song have meant to a seven-year-old living in North Jersey? I couldn't have told you where Calcutta was. I *still* can't tell you exactly, although I have it on good authority that *the ladies of Calcutta will steal your heart away....*

One summer weekend Bea and her family were away; the house was empty. Bea had given me a key to the side door to water her plants, which I dutifully did, and returned home. But later that afternoon, David and I, two restless pre-delinquents, decided to sneak in for illicit sundaes.

I had to stand on Bea's kitchen chair to reach the freezer door, but I pulled it open, and for the next half hour we ransacked the place for bowls, chocolate sprinkles, chocolate syrup, whipped cream. It was only when we'd filled ourselves with three sundaes each that we were suddenly swept with the enormous guilt over what we'd done. We fled out the side door—leaving it half-open.

Bea returned the next day, a Sunday, and mid-afternoon the phone rang in our kitchen. My mother picked it up. "It's your Aunt Bea. She wants to talk to you. Go right over there."

The walk across the street must have been no longer than 100 steps. Shame was rising in my throat. Tears threatened the edges of my eyes. She ushered me in through the side door. The kitchen cabinets were all open, the drawers were pulled out. A tub of melted ice cream sat on the kitchen table. This was, apparently, the way we'd left the place.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said. "Look at this! I've been robbed! There's been a break-in. The thieves took ice cream! I called you over because I thought you could help me catch the criminals. You know everybody on the street. Who do you think could have done this?"

Standing there in her kitchen in my seersucker shirt and camp shorts with the zippered pockets, I was unable to speak.

"You have to help me," she said. "This is a serious crime. Did you see anyone? Any suspicious characters?"

I shook my head. I returned to my house and seriously considered running away....I'd take the bowl of fruit from the refrigerator, put it in the brook in Tamaques Park to keep it cool, and spend the rest of my life in the woods....

My mother had been watching David and I closely all afternoon as we sat in the backyard. Finally, an hour before dinner, my mother called Bea. "Bobby and David just admitted they did it. They'll pay you back for the damage."

David and I slow-marched over there unescorted. The obstruction in my throat had now swelled to the size of a softball. I couldn't breathe. We stood before Bea in the kitchen: the cabinets were still open, the drawers still pulled out, ice cream bowls still stuck to the table.

“I hear you have something to say to me?” said Bea.

I couldn't have spoken if my life depended on it. A terrible silence, and then David (true hero that he was) spoke three words. *We did it.*

Our reprimand from Bea was merciful and gentle. We were told never to do it again. We were left alone to clean up the kitchen. Bea took away my side door key. I don't think she ever returned it.

“Turkey in the Straw” plays outside, and it re-evokes that terrible afternoon. *I've been robbed! Who do you think could have done this?* I think, now, it was the first time that real guilt laid its heavy hand on my shoulders. And, truthfully, I'm not sure it's ever fully let go.