

Puppet on a String by Harold William Thorpe

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The Eleventh Commandment

Author's Note

Mother told how she and Ruby outsmarted their older brother when he brought good chocolate candy home. She wrote, “At the pool hall, Mort would play the punch boards and win boxes of candy—good chocolate candy. He would bring them home and wouldn’t give us girls even one piece. Rather, he would hide them in every conceivable place, like trouser legs hanging in the closet, between the mattresses, behind dressers—any place he thought we might not look. But somehow his sisters would find them. And were they good. And was he angry!”

Because I didn’t include a brother in the O’Shaughnessy stories, I recast these events with Ruby and Catherine pursuing their sister Sharon’s candy. Ruby convinced Catherine to help by explaining God’s Eleventh Commandment. But saving their sister from Hell wasn’t as easy as they thought it’d be.

Ruby tried to convince me the Bible had an Eleventh Commandment. I was half-convinced, but I hope God wasn’t looking when we did what that commandment suggested.

Before we left Ashley Springs, Sharon began seeing Ed Meadows, a farm boy who lived along Military Ridge, outside Logan Junction. And Ed continued to visit Sharon after we moved to our Wisconsin River farm. We all liked Ed. Dad said he was thoughtful and had a good head on his shoulders. Ruby and I liked him because he brought good chocolates and ice cream for Sharon. But Sharon wasn’t very generous. She did her best to hide them from her two younger sisters. But when it came to guile, Sharon was no match for Ruby.

One time, though, I thought Sharon outdid her clever sister. We just couldn’t find that candy. I thought we should ask Sharon to be generous, shame her into sharing. But that was far

too simplistic for Ruby. Why, Ruby even convinced me that the Commandments required Sharon to share with her sisters, and that justified our larceny. I'd studied those Commandments all my young life, and I'd not seen any such thing. But Ruby said it was so.

I was twelve years old, and I knew the Third Commandment. "Thou shall not steal" was drilled into me from a very young age, first at home and then in Sunday school. Ruby helped me practice my catechism, but she had her own interpretation. "God expects sisters to share," she said. "It's the Eleventh Commandment. God just didn't have room for it on the stone. We'd be saving Sharon by taking her candy."

I didn't remember that in the Bible, but if Ruby said so, then maybe it was true. When Ed brought Sharon a five-pound box of chocolates for her birthday, and Sharon didn't offer any to her sisters, Ruby repeated the Eleventh Commandment and said, "She'll burn in Hell for sure if we don't help her out."

I definitely didn't want my sister to go to Hell, so I followed Ruby to search Sharon's room. To my disappointment, and Ruby's frustration, we couldn't find the chocolates anywhere. I began to think that Sharon might have hidden them outside.

"She wouldn't do that," Ruby said. "She'd not chance that Dad or Petr might find them or an animal getting them. They've got to be here somewhere."

We continued to search—under the bed, in the closet, behind the dressers—but we couldn't find those chocolates.

Ruby said, "Let's think like a detective. What did Sharon do after Ed gave her the candy?"

"She and Ed went to the back parlor. I remember Mom telling them they couldn't shut the doors."

“Okay, let’s go downstairs and check the back parlor. Maybe she hid them there.”

But we didn’t find the candy.

After searching for half an hour, at our wit’s end, we sat for a while.

“Let’s see,” Ruby said. “We looked behind the divan, under the big chair, and on top of the corner cabinet. Where else could they be?”

“Maybe there’s a loose floor board,” I said. “That’s where bandits hide their loot.”

“No, they stow it in a hollow tree, or dig a hole or something,” Ruby said.

“Well, there’s no tree in here,” I proclaimed as I tapped my toe across the floor. Finding no loose boards, I sat on the cedar chest and fumed.

“We’re going about this wrong,” Ruby said. “Let’s watch Sharon closely. She’ll go to the candy sooner or later. We can follow her and find it.”

That night after supper, far too early for bed, Sharon slipped up the stairs. Ruby and I waited a few moments, and were about to follow, when mother called, “Girls, I need help stretching this quilt on the rack. Please give me a hand. The ladies are coming over tomorrow to sew.”

Foiled, I thought, just when we were on the trail. Maybe God wasn’t so intent on this commandment after all. Ruby gave me a knowing look and nodded in Sharon’s direction, but I knew we’d have to help mother. There’d be no chocolates for Ruby and me tonight.

The next night, Sharon left us again, this time excusing herself from the Chinese checker game we were playing. Mom and Dad didn’t seem to think this strange, but I knew my sister had evil intentions. We’d have to act soon if we were going to save her from fire and brimstone.

After Sharon returned, she and Mother set to boiling potatoes for the next morning's cold fries. Ruby and I excused ourselves, saying we were tired and wanted to be well-rested for the long day of field work tomorrow.

When we got to the top, Ruby said, "You stand watch here by the stairs, and I'll search Sharon's room again. It has to be there someplace."

Twenty minutes passed before Ruby re-entered the hall. "I can't find those chocolates anyplace," she said. "I looked through her drawers, for a loose board under the carpet, even outside the window, but I couldn't find them."

We continued to search for half an hour but it looked as if Sharon had outsmarted us this time.

Several days passed, during which Sharon continued to climb the stairs more than usual; but try as we might, we couldn't find her loot.

For Ruby, it became an obsession. "I don't care if the box is empty. It's up there someplace, and I'm going to find it if it's the last thing I ever do."

Finally, we caught a break. While we were in the field helping Dad harvest beans, I stepped into a gopher hole and twisted my ankle.

"Help her back home, and soak her foot in Epsom salts," Dad told Ruby. "It doesn't seem too bad, but she should stay off it for a couple days."

Ruby helped me into the house and sat me on a chair while she pumped water, heated it on the cook stove, and searched for the Epsom salts. My ankle hurt like Billy blue blazes, and I wished that Mother was here to help, but she'd gone to tend to old Mrs. Angstrom, who was down with the gout.

"I wonder where Sharon is." I said. "I thought she'd be getting supper ready by now."

Ruby continued to look for the Epsom salts while the water heated. “I think I’ll get you upstairs to your bed so you can keep that ankle elevated,” she said as she wiggled under my arm and helped me off the chair.

When we reached the top of the back stairs, I heard footsteps down the hall. To my surprise, I saw Sharon rush from our room and down the front stairs. She didn’t see us.

“That’s strange,” Ruby said. “Why was she in our room?”

Ruby helped me down the hall, into our room, and onto my bed. She elevated my foot with two pillows and left, saying, “I’ll bring the water as soon as it’s hot. Keep that foot up.”

Upon returning, she helped me sit on the bed’s edge, and I eased my foot towards the water. “Is it too hot?” she said. “I don’t want to burn you.”

Ruby could be considerate when she took a mind to it. I tested the water before plunging my foot to the bottom. “It’s hot, but not too hot. Feels good.”

Ruby sat next to me but said nothing for a while.

“I’ve been thinking,” she finally said. “Why was Sharon in our room? I thought I’d see her downstairs when I got there, but she didn’t come into the kitchen. Something’s rotten in Denmark, Cathy.”

I raised my foot from the water. “Gets kinda hot after a while. What do you mean, Ruby?”

“Why would Sharon be in our room? She never comes into our room. You don’t suppose she hid the candy in here, do you?”

I eased my foot back into the water. “How sneaky of her,” I said. “She wouldn’t be that tricky, would she? Not Sharon.”

Ruby searched around the room but found nothing. “If she did hide it in here and we found it, wouldn’t that be convenient?”

“That’d be too easy for us. I don’t think she’d hide it here.”

“Maybe, but think how long we’ve looked without finding it. Maybe she’s really being clever about it. If we hadn’t seen her leave, we’d never have thought it was here. Let’s keep searching.”

I withdrew my foot and began to stand.

“Not you,” Ruby said. “You soak that ankle. I’ll look.”

Ruby searched while I thought about places it might be, but after half an hour of soaking, thinking, and searching, we were no closer to the candy—or so I thought. It wasn’t until Ruby reached into the back of our closet and vigorously separated our winter clothes that we got a break.

“I heard something,” Ruby said. “Did you hear it?”

Ruby shook the clothes again, and the noise was loud and clear. She pushed the pants and blouses on the lower hanger aside and traced the sound upward, up to where winter shirts and jackets hung from the top hangers. Ruby pushed a coat aside, and a big box fell to the floor. “Eureka!” she shouted. “That devious sister of ours never thought we’d look through our winter clothes, not here in our own room. I think we’re about to save her from Hell and damnation.”

Ruby and I each enjoyed a chocolate-covered cherry.

“Boy, Ed sure is generous,” Ruby said as she savored her fruit-filled candy. “He buys the best. No wonder Sharon keeps it to herself.”

“We better not take more, not now anyway,” I said. “You know what Cousin Gusta told us that Texans say about greedy people?”

“What?”

“Pigs get fed, hogs get slaughtered.”

Without a word of protest, Ruby gently lifted the two empty wrappers and rearranged the candies that were left in the box. My headstrong sister accepted Gusta’s advice, even from a thousand miles away.

That night, my ankle felt some better, so I limped down to dinner. I didn’t dare look Sharon in the eye for fear my face would reveal my guilt. Then I remembered what Ruby said about doing God’s will, so I felt a little better—but not much.

Sharon didn’t notice the missing candy right away.

Several days passed, and Ruby and I continued God’s work, but I still felt guilty. As the box emptied, we became adept at camouflaging our larceny, moving and stretching wrappers.

I knew if we continued our thieving ways we’d be found out, but I couldn’t stop. I thought about Eve whenever I secretly munched on the chocolate.

The day of reckoning arrived with a screech and an accusation. “Mama!” Sharon screamed. “Ruby and Catherine have been stealing my chocolates!”

I was sure we were in big trouble now, but I underestimated Ruby’s cunning. When Ruby said, “It’s not our fault, Mama,” I supposed she’d tell Mother about the Eleventh Commandment. Instead, she said, “We thought that Sharon wanted to share her chocolates because she left them in our room. Catherine and I talked about it and agreed that if we had chocolates we’d give some to her, so we figured that’s what she wanted. She’s always been a generous sister.” Then she turned to Sharon, and with a smile so wicked I cringed said, “Thank you, Sharon. They sure were good.”

Sharon turned as red as the cherries inside her candy, but she didn’t utter a word.

I couldn't wait to write Cousin Gusta about Ruby's cunning. I knew she'd appreciate the cleverness of her most ardent protégé.

