

## In for a Penny

*by Marilyn Reeves*

Whether or not we admit it, every person's nature contains elements that society labels both "good" and "bad". Under the right circumstances, we are all subject to temptation, and even the best of us occasionally give in.

My Mom used to say that I had an angel sitting on one shoulder and a devil on the other. It was up to me to choose which one to heed. I was a pretty good kid, so mostly I followed the little angel, or my conscience, and was often rewarded with affection and praise. But every so often the little devil would wink at me and I would experiment with something that I knew wasn't right. The cost of those indiscretions, however, were often shame, embarrassment, punishment and guilt.

Back when I was in grade school, in the days when a dollar was a dollar, and people would actually stoop to pick up a stray penny, there was a little store, just a block from the school grounds called Brown's Grocery. It functioned as a sort of old-time 7-11, where one could purchase the odd can of beans or loaf of bread, or even a fat dill pickle soaking in a barrel of brine. But the main event for us kids, as you can well imagine, was the penny candy!

The big glass counter was filled with all sorts of sweet temptations, from licorice whips to Red Hots to those little wax bottles filled with sweet liquid. There were jaw breakers, peanut butter logs, jelly beans and bubble-gum. Dozens of different types of candy, and most of them could be had for just one cent.

One day I found a quarter lying on top of my Mother's dresser, and that little devil sitting on my left shoulder had his day. My heart banging loudly in my ears, my eyes wide with fear, I grabbed that quarter and stuck it in my pocket, intent on buying a whole bag full of that penny candy and indulging in a marathon binge. Which I did. Except, about a third of the way through the bag – whether it was from too much sugar or an overload of guilt – I started feeling a little ill. And, would you believe I threw the rest of that bag in the trash?

I'm not sure if it was the next day or the day after that, when I went to my Mother and tearfully confessed my crime. She could see that I was so miserable that no further punishment was necessary. I had learned my lesson and have never stolen another thing since ... unless you count the odd Bic pen or two that have accidentally wound up in my purse. But I've lost as many of those as I have unconsciously picked up, so that's not really stealing, is it? In cases like that, I simply tell that nagging little angel on my shoulder to hush up – it is the intent that counts, and I don't need the guilt.