

The treachery of older brothers

Oh so briefly, I had a Torpedo Runner Sled – and a \$5 note

By **Brian McLaughlin**

Each year, the eight children in my family wished for many gifts – and always received one significant one. I hold one particular childhood anecdote dear.

The Christmas when I was barely 7 I was up early, eager to open my presents – especially the long sleek gift leaning against the living room wall. I got the most important gift a young boy could ask for: a sleek, golden-pine wood, Torpedo Runner Sled, with red steel runners. The runners were as thin as the blades on CCM hockey skates. I could tell by the graphic slant of the word “Torpedo” that this sled would *move*.

Almost immediately I was dressed. Stuffed into my snowsuit and wrapped in a scarf, I ventured out to the hill behind our apartment in the north end of Saint John. Gleeful. Laughingly, whizzing and whipping down the snow-packed hill, I put my Torpedo Runner through its paces. I was *fast*.

The entire day passed like a quick breeze. The next day I was again up at the crack of dawn and out for more whipping about on the snow-packed hill. A third night came and went faster than the previous two.

On the fourth day I was walking, sled under my arm, across a small frozen pond, when suddenly my eyes did a quick drop. I couldn't believe it. There, between my feet, frozen stiff, asking to be broken free was a distinguishable, rectangular, blue note of Canadian currency – a \$5 bill.

I set about the task of mining the treasure from its frozen grave. First, I used a stick. It chipped and slipped but would not break through. It wouldn't do. Next, I found a rock: Bang, bang, smash! It didn't get me any closer to that \$5. I couldn't give up. If I didn't free it, someone else would.

I paused. I spotted the perfect object for cutting: the thin red metal runners of my Torpedo Runner. With haste I began to forcefully chip away at the ice. Eureka! The ice was surrendering in clumps and pieces.

I finally freed the \$5. It was mine! “Wow, I'm rich,” I said aloud. Excited, I ran to the front steps of my home, towing my sled behind me. My brothers were coming out the front door. “Look what I found... in the ice. Used my sled to smash it out. I'm rich! I got

\$5,” I told them gleefully. We admired it from the tight grip of my hand. Then I pushed it inside my snowsuit and zipped up tight.

But my excitement wasn't contagious. My two brothers just looked back with grins of utter surprise.

“What?” I defensively responded. “Why you look'n at me like that?”

“You used what to break it out?” asked my oldest brother, Harold, who was 11. Then 8-year-old Bruce said: “Oh, no. Look at your new sled. It's ruined. It's all broke.”

“Oh, boy. You better not let Mom or Dad see it,” Bruce said.

And Harold added: “They paid a lot of money for that sled – way more than \$5.”

Suddenly, I felt anxiety and worry. Somehow the joy of my best Christmas gift and my fast riches vanished as I looked at the broken and bent runners of my sled. “Maybe Mom won't find out about it,” I said. “I can hide it.”

I enlisted my two older brothers to help me find an isolated spot to hide my smashed Torpedo. We secured a hideaway for it in the basement of our apartment unit, behind the coal furnace. They will never find it here, I thought.

That afternoon, my siblings and I crawled into the back of my dad's station wagon and we headed to Lincoln, outside of Fredericton, to visit my grandmother.

After greetings by all, my two brothers and I rushed outside. We played and romped about: uproarious and gleeful as only small children can be. A snowman materialized from a soft and sticky landscape of freshly fallen snow. Since I was voted as the one to not need his scarf, my woolen wrap was twirled off me faster than the ‘Tasmanian Devil’ could spin-a-fit. It presented a suitable finish for Frosty.

My mom's voice beckoned us inside. It was time to eat supper.

But my sprint up the stairs was halted. My oldest brother's hand gripped my shoulder.

“What are you going to do with that \$5?” he asked. “You can't take that inside. 'Cause you know Mom will notice it when you take off your snowsuit. And she'll ask you where it come from.”

“So, I'll tell her I found it.” “And tell her you smashed your new Christmas present? Digging it out. Tell her that and she'll be really, *really* mad,” Harold said.

“You can't tell her,” said Bruce. Somehow the illogic in their story made



Courtesy Brian McLaughlin

The author, Brian McLaughlin, with the two brothers who duped him of his riches one Christmas holiday. In back, left to right, Bruce and Brian. Front row, left to right, Janet, Krista and Harold.



Courtesy Brian McLaughlin

Left to right, brothers Harold, Brian and Bruce run around together. The family station wagon is in the background.

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sense. They must know better, I thought, after all, they're older than me.

"What'll I do with it then?"

"You'll have to hide it outside," my oldest brother offered.

"Put it here under the front stairs," he said. "Right here under the first step. And you can get it later."

I pulled it from my snowsuit and placed it just underneath the stair on the frozen soil. No suspicion aroused, I bolted up the stairs for supper.

Inside a sumptuous supper was prepared. My sisters, baby brother, Mom, Dad, and Grammy were all about the dining room table dishing out servings across to one another. I sat down to eat.

Then the front door burst open and in came two damp, but larger snowsuits waving something very familiar and blue.

"Look what we found outside on the road," announced Harold, excitedly. "It's a \$5 bill."

I was frozen silent.

"Well isn't that wonderful," said my mother.

My father looked admiringly at his two little treasure hunters. My grandmother helped them out of their snowsuits. As he slipped one arm out, then the other; and then one leg out, and then the other, Harold tightly gripped that \$5 like it was a natural extension of his fingers.

I didn't know what to say.

"That's my \$5," I whispered to him in shock, as he took his place at the table beside me.

"No, we found this \$5 outside by the road, didn't we Bruce?" he whispered back.

I put on my boots, rushed out front and groped about the frozen soil. It was gone.

I looked under the stairs. Nothing.

They stole my money, I realized. I'm gonna tell Mom, I thought. But I hesitated. What if she found out about my sled? What if Harold and Bruce are right about me being in trouble for breaking the sled? I couldn't tell her.

I walked back inside. Sad. Solemn. Secretive. No longer hungry.

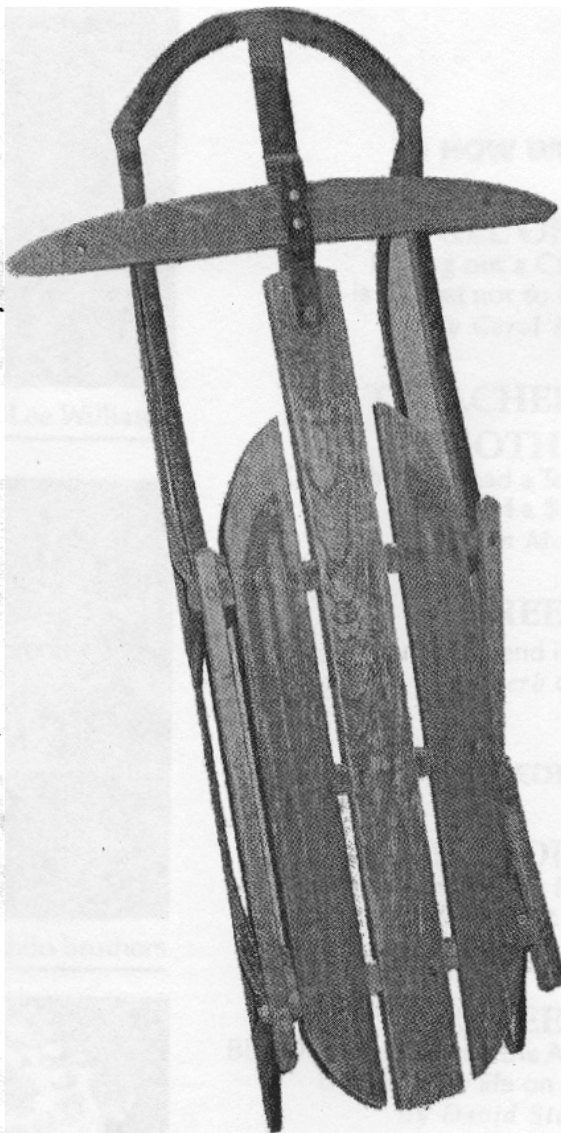
"That's my money," I whispered again to my oldest brother, resuming my seat beside him. "You stole it from under the stair, didn't you?"

"No, it's not," Harold said, convincing himself. "You left it outside. So, finders keepers, losers weepers."

"Yeah, finders keepers, losers weepers," his little shoulder parrot Bruce echoed.

Then they turned away and ignored me. I was betrayed. I wanted to cry. I wanted to confess. But, more so, I wanted to smash them. Frustrated, I simply twirled my potatoes and rolled my beats with my fork.

The rest of the evening was a blur: my



mind obsessed on the blue \$5 bill, the betrayal and my broken Torpedo sled.

Night came. We all packed in the station wagon and headed home. In the back of the wagon, I lay stretched out with the two seditious, co-conspirators. I didn't want them as my brothers. But there we were, stuck together, cramped like a can of sardines.

The drive home seemed endless.

Finally we arrived in Saint John. My brother, Harold, piped up with a peculiar suggestion for my father's ears: "Dad, would you stop at the store so me and

Bruce can get some treats with our \$5?"

In the rear-view mirror, I could see the glance and nod of my father's acknowledgement.

The divergence took us to the store known as Ricky's. It was small variety store which carried necessities for a family's day-to-day subsistence.

Inside the old smoky and dusty walls of this neighborhood relic stood an enormous glass display case which cast a spell over every child who ventured past it. Contained within was a treasure chest of sugar-infused bounty.

Behind that display counter stood shelves filled with Humpty-Dumpty potato chips and nearby stood a cooler filled with Coca-Cola in curvaceous glass bottles.

Oh, what \$5 could get in there.

I waited in the car as Dad escorted my two brothers into the store.

It was tease and torture.

After an endless shopping spree, my siblings and father returned to the car.

All the way up the front stairs of our flat my brothers carried the humongous brown paper bag, clutching it like a vital organ connecting Siamese twins.

After baths were completed and teeth brushed we three boys withdrew to our bedroom. Bruce and I shared a bunk bed. Harold was awarded the oldest boy's right of his own private island, a bed adjacent to the bunk.

Settled in the upper bunk, my brothers now mused and snickered about the rewards of their sly scheme.

I could hear the noises the bag's mysterious contents made as each item plunked onto the mattress overhead.

I concealed my anger and hurt. I wanted to cry.

I accepted the consequences of that deal - with bitterness, distrust, and disillusionment about my two older brothers.

Suddenly, I thought: "Hey, I'm entitled to some of that bounty."

Hesitantly, I inquired: "Hey, since this was my \$5 - and you know it was - can have some treats too?"

Silence from above; my request floated through empty air. I continued to lie there unable to escape the situation I was falling asleep.

Minutes passed. Then, surprisingly, my brother Bruce asked: "You OK? Bruce, you sleeping?"

"No, I can't go to sleep. Will you guys share some treats with me? Can I have some green leaves? Can I have some Dumpty chips?" I pleaded.

The bedroom quieted. A brief sum of mumbles were exchanged back and forth indicating at least my brother Bruce's conscience was wrestling with him.

Still, my oldest brother's conscience stayed AWOL. He bickered back and forth with Bruce. What? His little parrot proposing mutiny?

Then, Bruce's small hand reached down. First, offering a few potato chips. Then twice: each time releasing some sugar-speckled green-leaf candies.

But that was all!

Eventually, I succumbed to weariness. Just before I passed into slumber, the images that went through my mind were of a broken Torpedo racer, a blue \$5 note, and, of course, my two treacherous brothers.

Brian McLaughlin lives in Saint John.