

2000 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Starstone Winner

# MUDDYING THE FONT

By Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

I COULD COMMIT the crime, I reasoned, then be washed wholly white in the baptismal water in November when I'd turn eight. By Christmas, I could celebrate the Savior's birth, clean. I was in second grade in the spring of 1953. Mrs. Putnam was strict but not unkind. She taught [tôt] us phonics [fon 'iks], and I was her best reader. She'd have me sit with the lower reading groups circled at the back of the room. And I was quick at math. Directions, though, were harder. We'd stand beside our desks in our ironed cottons, the girls with curled hair, the boys' suspenders grabbing their pants, and face whichever way she called out. I had to watch the others at first, then follow like a dragging foot. But I got the feel: the wall of windows faced north; the flag, east; the door to the classroom was south. Her oak teacher's desk, the eventual crime scene, was due north from where I sat, and, inside, a shoe box lid lay on its back in the top southwest drawer. We had one morning recess before hot lunch. The twenty-cents it took was hard-earned by my father milking Holsteins in the dark dawn winters or riding the tractor in the hellish burn of August. Once my sisters, brother and I, given a dollar to split at the school office, had lost it on the way. We had held hands and pleaded for Divine assistance. But that's another story.

Two lunch dimes could buy more than six times the candy of a redeemed soda pop bottle found by the side of the road. Because some of her students' dimes had been lost, Mrs. Putnam kept them safe, if we wished, in the shallow lid in her desk along with the daily list of names. It was an honest mistake the first time. There were genuine tears in my eyes. I had insisted I'd given her my dimes. She had said she must have forgotten; then opened her purse. Later that day, I'd felt them in my shoe and given them back the way I'd been taught. But the seedling had been watered, the jam jelled. And the Devil, within earshot, had multiplied my need.

ON TUESDAY, HOT lunch was curdled macaroni and cheese, canned spinach; there wasn't a single pop bottle to be found on the way home from school. And we had no dessert at supper. By mid-morning Wednesday, the plan was solid. I finished my addition, double-checked each problem, subtracting the bottom two numbers. All perfect. I squared my book with the northeast corner of my desk, lay my pencil and scrubbed pink eraser in the slot just inside, and waited. Smells from the lunchroom soured the room, made me nauseated, threatened my plan. I took long dry breaths. Then a rush of blood washed my face, banged my chest. I breathed in and out, in and out. The other kids closed their books; the clock toiled on the west wall. Finally Mrs. Putnam stood and tapped the vault of her desk, adjusted her brown rimmed glasses, reached for her Wednesday list. The thrill and dread, the wild green ride of impending crime—repeating the practiced words, steadying my opened hand, depositing the dimes in my shoe, the sweet cache—came together; the body and willful spirit agreed. I stood in line, pre-tasting the grape Nehi, the soft black Nibs, the Idaho Spud, felt them smooth in my throat, yet couldn't help worrying: would the holy water leech the purple and black dyes from my body, muddy the font? 🍷



MARILYN BUSHMAN-CARLTON is the author of two books of poetry, on keeping things small and *Cheat Grass* (for which she was honored as the Utah State Poetry Society's 1999 Poet of the Year). She is past winner of both a grant and prize from the Utah Arts Council and is currently seeking a publisher for a recently completed third poetry volume




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