

The Avenger

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Some childhood memories stay with you forever. The incident that prompted the writing of "The Avenger" changed my life. Perhaps, as you enjoy this amusing anecdote, you will remember some childhood memories of your own.

Brian was the first to get one. Patti would be next. Brian and Patti were always first to get everything new. They were the 'perfect couple'. *God I hated it.* I didn't hate them. Nobody hated Brian and Patti. How could you hate the 'perfect couple'? What I hated was that they always got the hottest, newest stuff almost before you knew it was the hottest, newest stuff. It was like they had a 'hot stuff' detector. And, more than that, they always got the money to get the 'hot stuff'. This was fourth grade. No more kid stuff. This was for real.

Just last week Brian showed-up wearing this new shirt. It was white. It looked like a doctor shirt. It had a collar sort of like a priest might wear but it had two rows of buttons. It even had two pockets like where doctors might carry their stethoscope and stuff. I think his dad was a doctor, anyway. Sure enough, the very next day Patti had one just like it. Can you believe it; she was teasing him from across the room during Math. She unbuttoned the two top buttons and pulled it down revealing her milky-white shoulder. Her sly smile was intimidating but her eyes were teasing. *God she was hot!* He's not the only one she was teasing. I think Mrs. Fisher was teaching long division.

It's been that way all year. Sometimes it was new sneakers. Sometimes it was a new pen or 'trapper keeper' notebook. My dad was a preacher. "Billy, money doesn't grow on trees, you know." Being the baby of the family, I never saw anything but hand-me-downs. Yah, they were always clean. Mom could sew and patch them up but still by the time they got through all four other kids they were hardly in fashion.

Today, it was *The Avenger Cap Pistol*. It wasn't just a cap gun. It was an automatic. It was just the right size to fit in a nine-year old's hand. It wasn't plastic. It was the shiniest steel with a black handle. I didn't know how it worked, but from what I could see, when you pulled the trigger, the hammer came back to strike the cap. The other thing I couldn't figure out was it was automatic. I don't know what kind of caps it used. At recess, Brian was showing his buddies and he shot four times as fast as he could pull the trigger. I've never seen any cap pistol that worked so smooth. After four shots he stuck it in his pocket before Mrs. Fisher got there to see what caused all the ruckus. I heard him say he got it across the street at the Rexall Drug Store. I just knew that if she didn't already have one, Patti would have one by tomorrow. I don't think I could take any more of this.

I wasn't one of Brian's buddies. I was a new kid in town. You know, if you're a P.K. (Preacher's Kid) you moved every two or three years, ready or not. Fulton Elementary was my third elementary school. Tell the truth, I didn't really have any

buddies. I walked to school with my brother. He was in sixth grade and had his own buddies. Mom made him walk to school with me anyway. I don't know why but he always had buddies. He even liked girls.

We never complained out loud about all the stuff that we really wanted. Mom would have understood but Dad wouldn't hear it. "Be thankful for all we have," Dad would say, "we have good food, clean clothes, and a roof over our heads, what more do we need?"

"An Avenger Cap Pistol!" I wanted to say, but I knew better.

That was the longest day at school. Social Studies, Reading, and Spelling were all after lunch. Usually I would pay attention at school. That was my secret to success. If I listened and wrote stuff down while the other kids were clowning around, I never had to study and most of the time I got A's or B's. It seemed natural to me. The other kids were clowning around because they could. If you don't have buddies, it was easy to pay attention in class. I was getting really good at this. Not today. All I could think about was that shiny Avenger Cap Pistol in Brian's pocket. It must cost five dollars.

My allowance was twenty-five cents a week. Maybe I had a dollar or two in my bank but mom would kill me if I broke it open. My brother was smart; he had the kind of bank you could open without breaking it. My sister had a way of 'finding' money when she needed it. I guess all that came with getting older. Lunch cost forty cents a day. If I didn't eat lunch for two weeks I could almost make it with what I had at home. But I still had the problem of getting the money out of my bank.

I couldn't wait two weeks. Anybody who was anybody in the fourth grade at Fulton Elementary would surely have the Avenger Cap Pistol by tomorrow. Tomorrow at recess, anybody who was anybody at Fulton Elementary School would surely be playing spy or bank robbers, all with their shiny new Avenger Cap Pistols. I Billy Brewer wasn't going to be the odd man out this time. I knew what I had to do and I had all afternoon to plan my plan.

When you're a P.K., you've always got this good thing, bad thing going on in your head. *'To sin or not to sin?'* You would hear it every Sunday when your dad was in the pulpit. You would hear it every Wednesday night at Family Night Services. You would hear it during the week when Dad is practicing his sermon in the other room. Sometimes I even heard it in my sleep.

I was always messing up. I got away with a lot of stuff being the baby of the family and all. *God I hated being the baby of the family!* Didn't they realize I was nine years old? But still, it did have its privileges. I think mom and dad had seen and done everything with the four before me. I couldn't come up with anything that hadn't already been done. My brother was always saying how I got away with murder. None of the other kids could have done the stuff I've done and lived to talk about it. I don't know, but I always felt I was mom's favorite. Of course, I think we all thought that. But dad, that's another story. I think dad was tired of being a dad by the time I came around. He'd seen it all. He'd done it all. Now he just wanted to be a grown-up preacher and let mom take care of the baby of the family. I know he loved me and stuff, but man was he strict!

Still, I knew what I had to do. I knew I couldn't get caught. Failure was not an option. Life as I knew it would cease if I got busted. How could a preacher face his congregation when everybody knew his kid was a thief? I couldn't do that to dad. The only answer was not to get busted. I played it over in my mind a million times that afternoon.

I knew Mr. Franklin, the pharmacist, would be watching us kids after school. He always did. Probably twenty or thirty kids would blast into his store two minutes after the three o'clock bell rang. Most wanted penny or nickel candy. Lots of us would crowd into the toy aisle to see what was new. Mr. Franklin and Mrs. Fisher had eyes in the back and sides and front of their heads. They saw everything. They knew what you were thinking. Still, I knew what I had to do. I had never done anything like this before. I had to be on top of my game today. 'Stealth' was the word we'd learned in science class last week. It meant being invisible. Mr. Franklin knew me. Mom was always having me pick up prescriptions at the Rexall. With five kids in the family, somebody was always sick and needed medicine. Today, I'd have to be invisible. Thirty kids in that store and I'd have to be invisible. I knew they'd have plenty of Avenger Cap Pistols. I knew they were the newest thing. Nobody else had one yet, except for Brian. Mr. Franklin would probably sell out of Avenger Cap Pistols tonight, by the time the other kids got home and got their money.

At last. The bell rang. Social Studies, Reading, and Spelling. What did we cover? My notebook was open, but nothing was written down. I had drawn an Avenger Cap Pistol as best I could remember it from recess. I was out the door, down the hallway, down the stairs and outside before the bell quit ringing. I'd never done that before. I even had to wait for the safety guard to get to the corner before crossing Fulton Street.

'Slow down', I told myself. I couldn't be the first one in the store. I had to wait for the other kids. The weather was turning nippy as it always did in Toledo in October. Mom had told me to wear a sweatshirt. I didn't. I should have. It might make my task a little easier. A bulky sweatshirt might help conceal the goods. No time for that now. I knew what I had to do. I had my plan. I even remembered one of dad's lessons. He called it the Seven P's. "Prior proper planning prevents pretty poor performance." I huddled out of the chilly wind against the side of the Drug Store waiting for the hoard of unruly kids to begin their assault on Fulton Rexall Drug Store.

I counted. After fifteen kids pushed through the door, it was my turn. I jumped in line in front of some second or third grader. I was bigger than he was. From behind the Prescription Counter, Mr. Franklin had a clear sight of both the candy rack and the toy rack. Six other kids were mulling around the toy counter. I had wanted more. When you have to be invisible, stealthy, the more kids, the better. My timing had to be perfect. I couldn't look behind me to checkout Mr. Franklin. Only once. I knew from TV shows if I looked more than that, I would be too obvious. If I waited too long, kids would start drifting away. Not many would have money to buy toys.

There on the peg-board display were two rows of Avenger Cap Pistols. Wow! Some had black handles. Some had white. I couldn't be too fussy but I wanted black. Just like Brian's. I was sure that Patti would buy the white one. *Hurry, don't let the other kids get away. I had to move fast.* One look over my left shoulder and sure

enough, Mr. Franklin was on guard duty but he was watching some fifth graders at the candy counter. I was sure of it. I cautiously removed the black-handled Avenger Cap Pistol from the display and studied the package. Sure enough, it came with fifteen rounds of 'Greenie Stickem' Caps'. I noticed you could buy extra ammo for fifty-nine cents. Another one hundred rounds. That would have to wait until tomorrow.

God I wanted to look over my shoulder one more time for good measure! I had rehearsed this a million times during Social Studies, Spelling and Reading. I knew what I had to do. I could not chance another look. Stealthfully, I slipped the package into the waste of my pants. It was too big to fit in my pocket. My hand in my pocket would keep it from falling down my pants and down my leg. Now, slowly I eased away from the toy counter. I was sure Mr. Franklin could hear my heart beating. I had a serious look on my face. Concerned I might forget what mom had sent me for. I'd better pick-up some candy or gum. I had a dime in my pocket so I picked-up a pack of baseball cards and studied the package as I waited for the fifth grader to pay for his candy bar.

"Will that be all?" The lady at the cash register asked as I plunked down my dime.

"Yes ma'am" I stuttered as I planned my retreat.

About ten steps to the door surrounded by other kids. Carefully holding my Avenger Cap Pistol in place I confidently imagined the walk home. I could open the package and try it but I'd have to save most of the 'Greenie Stickem' Caps' for tomorrow at recess. I'd have to throw the package away after I read all the good stuff and figured-out how to load it. Then I could conceal the weapon in my pocket when I got home. I had done it. Three steps, two steps, my hand was on the door.

Someone had my shoulder. Who could it be? Was my life about to end?

"William." It was Mr. Franklin.

My head went down like I was awaiting the guillotine to fall.

"Come with me." He didn't need to say that because he had a death grip on my shoulder. I followed him behind the Prescription Counter into a small office.

I don't know who saw me. I didn't care. I was sure my life was over. I couldn't talk. I couldn't look Mr. Franklin in the eyes. My head weighted about two tons right then.

"Hand it over, William." There was no joking in his voice.

"I, ah, I don't know how it got there, sir." I mumbled as I pulled the black-handled Avenger Cap Pistol out of the waste of my pants and handed it over to him. I didn't stop to think how really stupid that sounded.

"Write down your name and phone number." He demanded as he slid a pencil a note pad in front of me. I knew he knew my name and I knew he had our phone number. No sense trying to lie about it now. My hand was so shaky I could hardly read my own scratching. My eyes were burning so badly they felt like acid was in them. When I couldn't hold them back any longer it was like Niagara Falls had broken loose. I was afraid I was going to puke. That would just make things worse.

"I . . . I'm sorry Mr. Franklin. I've never done this before." It's hard to talk when you're crying uncontrollably.

“I know that William. But you know I’ve got to call your mom.” He really was nice considering what I’d just done. “Go straight home.”

He walked me to the door. For the first time I looked him in the eyes and repeated my apology.

It was seven blocks from Fulton Rexall Drug Store to 2218 Putnam Street. I’d walked it every day for over two months. It took twenty minutes. My brother was nowhere around.

My eyes settled on the telephone wires. I was sure I could see Mr. Franklin’s call to mom if I just watched the telephone wires all the way home. I started running. I never took my eyes off the telephone wires. I crossed Bancroft Street. Then Evergreen. Then Winthrop. Then Batavia. Seven houses, six, five, four, three, two, then I was home.

All the way home I lived and relived the nightmare. Mr. Franklin would have called mom. Mom would be really disappointed in her ‘little man’. She wouldn’t hit me or anything. She’d send me to my room. “Young man, think about what you’ve done while you’re waiting for your father to get home.” As if I could think about anything else other than what particular form of execution dad would have in mind?

As I burst through the kitchen door I nearly tackled mom who was in her apron working on dinner. I wrapped my arms around her so tight I was sure she’d snap in two. I guess I’d never stopped bawling all the way home but I still had plenty left.

“I’m sorry mamma. I’m so sorry!” I was slobbering all over her apron as she guided me to the chair so she could sit down. “I’ll never do it again mamma. I’m so sorry. Please don’t hate me mamma.”

She had this dazed, confused look on her face. “What are you talking about, Billy?”