

A Gift for Stan Motyka

A Special Thanksgiving Story

by Andrew Peeples

The Thanksgiving I remember best was the one when my mother put a big dose of medicine in the turkey. It wasn't put there for me or for any of my brothers and sisters; it was for a little Polish boy who was a friend of mine.

Every fall migrant Polish families came from Baltimore, Maryland, to Bluffton, South Carolina, to work in the oyster factory. While in our town from September until May, they lived near the factory in what were called the "hickey shacks."

All of the Polish children old enough to go to school either worked with their families in the factory, or stayed home and looked after their younger brothers and sisters, except Stan Motyka, who came to school for a little while and was in the third grade with me.

Stan Motyka was a robust boy with smiling blue eyes and glamorous golden hair. His drab little coat would not button down the front and his knee-breeches were quilted with patches, but nobody in the third grade cared about that.

Stan could run faster and jump higher and throw a faster ball than anybody else his age, and all of us wanted to be on Stan's side in the schoolyard games. But our teacher saw nothing attractive in Stan Motyka. She saw him only as a dirty child from the "hickey shacks." She would not even give him the dignity of his own name, choosing rather to insult him with the name of "Hickey Boy"

It was part of her plan to make him hate school and stay home, or go to work with the other Polish children at the oyster factory.

As often as she would find an excuse, she would lay her hickory switch across his back or make him stand in the corner on one foot with a dunce's cap on his head, or hurt him and humiliate him in some other way.

One time she made him stand in front of the class while she examined his scalp. "Just as I thought," she said. "You're lousy. Go home and stick your head in a bed of ashes before you infest these decent American children."

Stan Motyka endured the persecution with stoic silence. He never complained. Instead of placating the teacher, it even infuriated her all the more, and she bided her time for the day when she could forever banish the little "hickey" boy from her room. The Thursday before Thanksgiving turned out to be the day she had been waiting for.

That morning while we were having our spelling lesson, Stan was given a certain word. In his eagerness to show how rapidly he could spell it, he omitted one letter and unfortunately spelled the most vulgar word in the English language.

Someone giggled. The teacher's head snapped backward and sparks danced in her eyes. Stan Motyka blushed with shame and tried to say how sorry he was, but the teacher would have none of it. She picked up her switch and told him to remove his coat and step forward. Stan Motyka obeyed without a word of protest and everybody in the room knew that he had not meant to spell that ugly word.

The teacher had always punished Stan without mercy. This time, she beat him longer and harder than ever before. She beat him until she was exhausted. When at last she laid her switch back on the desk, every child in the room was crying, except Stan Motyka. Only his eyes were dry.

After the beating, Stan was expelled and told not to show up in the schoolyard again. From that day until the following Thursday, which was Thanksgiving and a holiday, I watched for Stan in the streets, but neither I nor any of my third grade friends laid eyes on him. I couldn't get him out of my mind. Thanksgiving morning I went to the kitchen where my mother was basting a turkey in the oven. I told her about the terrible beating the teacher had given Stan Motyka. "He hasn't been seen since," I told my mother, "and I'm afraid he's sick or something."

"Of course he's sick," my mother said, "He's very sick and he needs a big dose of medicine."

"What kind of medicine are you talking

about,” I asked. “Well I don't know what the doctors call it,” my mother replied, “but I just call it love and affection. We can put a big dose of it right here in this turkey.”

“You mean...”

“Yes I mean for you to run to Stan's house and bring him back with you for Thanksgiving dinner. And hurry up, because it's almost twelve now.”

I ran the whole half mile to the “hickey shacks.” I had never been there before because the children in our family were not allowed to go into that part of town.

But I soon found a little Polish girl who showed me where Stan Motyka lived. I ran up to the door and knocked, but nobody answered, so I pushed the door in. Stan Motyka was lying on a cot. He looked as if he had been crying ever since he left school. I asked him if his back was still sore. He didn't say anything.

I told him what my mother had sent me for. For a while he didn't seem to care whether he got

off that cot again. Then all of a sudden he sat up and his strong white teeth flashed in a smile.

“Your mother really wants me to come?” he asked as though he couldn't believe it.

“Of course she does.” I said. “Why do you think she's putting that big dose of love and affection in the turkey?”

Stan Motyka sprang up to his feet and washed his face and hands and combed his hair. In less than a minute he was out on the street and running so fast I had a hard time catching up with him.

My mother was waiting for us at the front door. She put her arms around our shoulders and escorted us to the special children's table in the dining room.

When we bowed our heads for the blessing, I saw Stan Motyka make the sign of the cross. I saw his lips moving, and I knew that in his heart he was thanking God for that big dose of love and affection my mother had put in the Thanksgiving turkey.