

In a Pinch

By Warren Florence

“You know how much this France trip will set me back?” my dad would repeatedly ask me, every two or three days, through the tunnel of a speakerphone. Beside him I heard the mini, white kitchen TV, broken on the Fox News Channel. “He means well when he says, ‘I got it,’ but \$20 here, \$40 there and I’m down \$800 on the *last* trip. I *can’t* keep up with your brother.”

“It’s not a race, and you know the sun’s not up yet, right?”

“It’s a sweet gesture. He should save his...”

“Look, it’s France, dad. I’m going back to sleep.”

Since it was pre-light morning and my eyes were still shut, I pictured my father, as always, sitting in his half-pulled-together robe over the kitchen counter and scanning before him the “For Sale” newspaper classifieds: trailer hitches, utility buildings, a Bowflex...all circled. If it weren’t for his wife, Jan, he’d stack weeks of classifieds in the kitchen, using them as references on the state of the used goods market.

If I happened to mention to my father that I was using six-foot wooden ladders with lots of character as bookshelves, he would call at 6:30 a.m., four hours away in Greenville to say, “I didn’t find any old, junky ladders in the newspaper, but there’s a great deal on a Kenmore washing machine.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need one.”

“Just letting you know.”

Coupon and sale savvy, too, our father used to pilgrimage most mid-mornings to several area grocers for red-sticker sales, taking advantage of nearly expired meat. Once home he’d pack pork loins and fillets into the freezer. And to his credit they were always fine, once thawed and marinated with a pinch of this or

that. As we ate any dish days to months later he'd tell the story all over again, of how much he saved by itemizing every pea, noodle and egg as it went into our mouths.

“Yes, sir. I'd say, with the tea and a few slices of lemon...” His voice, forks moving through a quiche, then hitting the plate, and large swallows were the only sounds in the kitchen. “And what else... four eggs, a half-pound of ham from Win-Dixie, and extra-sharp cheddar cheese I got from the new Bi-Lo...this meal...with the electricity we used...”

It ever ended.

I witnessed on more than one occasion with a manager or check-out clerk how he squabbled for ten minutes about a coupon's worth or expiration date, about quantity limits or combining national coupons with red-sticker sales. He'd “wear ‘em down” and save up to \$17.48 on a platoon's worth of cereal boxes—named bran, too: Apple Jacks, Honey Nut Cheerios, Muslix, Raisin Bran—all pouring from a grocery buggy on the way to the car. Recognizing how clearly embarrassed I was by his behavior at times, he'd later say to me at home, “You add that up over a year's time and see what you get!”

Forget, however, the number of miles and hours he spent in his endeavor.

But if you were in a pinch and in need of tires or two-for-one restaurant meals or trustworthy repairmen, my dad had an encyclopedic knowledge of the classifieds and yellow pages, with many pages earmarked. On them were dozens of people's names he had to run through to find the right person who'd help. His or her name was circled. And over the years, to show his appreciation, I swear he may have had a Sears repairman or magistrate over for dinner.

So when I mentioned to my parents about needing, in a hurry, an updated computer for my new editing job in New York City, he stealthily found a deal, called my mother and rallied the troops. I was surprised that Christmas when (instead of aunts and uncles and grandparents throwing money in stocking

envelopes) everyone pooled together for a Compaq laptop. Dad's side of the family around the tree all witnessed me tear, my face a combination of city poverty and fatigue. After all the brow-beating and loud, long distant calls about moving to New York ("You boys are trying to move away from me," he'd scream. "Well, yeah."), he came through with something meaningful and in support of my "flightful fantasies." And after browsing through files not deleted on my new computer, and asking dad where he'd gotten it, I surmised that a major copier company employee named Mike had likely reported it stolen to his company, and in need of cash, advertised it in the newspaper. My father was the first to call Mike, at 6:45 a.m. It was certainly a deal, the latest model for \$450.

I used it constantly. I lugged it on my back through subway and airport terminals. I was mobile and efficient. Having faster technology to edit and send written pages via Acrobat and other sophisticated softwares allowed me to speak in several publishing languages. I stored my entire writing world in it. I'd become close to her/it...whatever. I mean...I didn't give it a name or anything. Though there were late nights I'd bask in the screen's glow, cruising inappropriate websites at lightning speeds.

Yep, we were a team.

More...