

Thirty Flowers  
by Gary Corbin

My Boy Scout Troop, Troop 77 in Agawam, Massachusetts, raised funds through an annual Easter flower sale. As an incentive, any scout who sold thirty or more flowers by the appointed due date could go to summer camp for free. Otherwise the fee for camp was the gargantuan (to me) sum of thirty dollars – an amount I never seemed able to spare. But to go for free! That’s what I wanted. Just by selling thirty flowers? Piece of cake!

In my first year of scouting, I sold only a few flowers, despite my enthusiasm; I was selling in the shadow of a much more aggressive and savvy older brother who was earning his own way to camp. But the following spring I was determined to succeed. Would you like to help a scout go to summer camp? I pleaded, pitching the lilies, hyacinths, and chrysanthemums to any relative, family friend, or neighbor that I thought could spare the eight bucks. I knocked on doors, made phone calls, and pitched my wares in person. I need to go to camp, I explained; don’t you need flowers?

But it was tough going. I sold a bunch in the first few weeks, but all of my friends wanted to go to camp too, and our earnest little sales brigade soon saturated the neighborhood. We each sold some to our relatives, but most of my “warm market” – grandparents, uncles, aunts – lived several hours away – far beyond my delivery zone. Also, my parents believed I should sell the flowers myself, not depend on them – and, say, Dad’s work mates – for my thirty sales.

When the appointed day came, I tallied up my sales sheet.

Twenty-nine. One short!

I thought hard: who hadn’t I asked? There was no one. Maybe someone could buy another? Two of my sisters had just gotten married; they were broke and their husbands had

already pitched in. The neighbors had been harassed by all of us kids dozens of times; they were tapped.

So I followed the time-honored tradition of needy children everywhere. Mom, please. Please buy one more flower so I can go to camp.

I can't, she said. I've already bought all I can afford. But listen. You're only one short. They'll let you go.

No, they won't.

Sure they will. Look. Camp is thirty dollars; that's one dollar per flower. You sold twenty-nine flowers; they should let you pay the one-dollar difference and go.

A heavy lump collected in my stomach and crawled upwards, lodging in my throat as I realized my situation. My mom wasn't going to bail me out. Still, I tried once more. They won't, Mom, I know they won't. Please.

Sure they will, she said. They have to. Now, stop crying. That's not going to get that last flower sold.

Back in my bedroom I let the tears flow into my pillow. My younger brother scowled at me: What's the matter?

Stupid Boy Scouts, I said. I wanted to go to camp but now I can't.

He asked, why not? What did you do?

I didn't sell enough flowers, I said. I had to sell thirty and only sold twenty-nine.

So, he said. Why don't you buy it?

I don't have eight dollars, I said.

Crybaby, he said, and went back to his reading.

At thirteen, being called a crybaby by your eleven-year-old brother is pretty sobering