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BOB SAID \$2,500.

My brothers made me do it

BY BICK TREUT

My wife wants to get rid of that old desk in the corner of the room, but it’s filled with too many memories. When I was a kid, it stood near the front door. We called it the telephone table because a big old black rotary phone sat on there. Catalogs and magazines cluttered its horizontal surfaces in July and August, but when the debris disappeared in early September, Mom didn’t even have to tell us it was the last day of summer. She’d be placing our school lunch bags there the next morning.

“Hey, churn,” Pop would say each year, trying to lift my spirits. “It’s the big day tomorrow. New teacher, new friends...” Pop’s pep-talk never worked.

The next morning, with a great deal of bravado, my brother Bob would proclaim it the worst day of the year. But this was just a diversionary tactic. In the meantime, he’d reach into our lunch bags and try to take our Ring-Dings. An all-out brawl would ensue until Mom set things straight with her Dutch Boy Paints yardstick.

The desk also reminds me of the day I got into trouble for calling the Jerry Lewis Telethon.

I was 7 or 8 years old that Labor Day weekend. The telethon pre-empted our usual Saturday morning fare of *Popeye* and the *Three Stooges* and we were bored by the guy spinning dinner plates on a long pole. Mom and Pop were still asleep after drinking too many Manhattans and playing cards into the wee hours with their bridge club.

Bob said I should call and make a donation. Bill and Bruce agreed. Being the youngest, I didn’t have much say in the matter. But I tried to push back. “I don’t want to call in,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” Bruce replied. “You’re going to call or we’ll kill you.”

Bob said making the call would be fun. “You like talking on the phone,” he explained, “and besides, Mom and Pop will make a donation anyway. You’ll just be doing them a favor.”

Bill wrote down the phone number from the screen and handed it to me. “Just tell them you’re Pop,” he said.

I asked how much Pop would donate. Without hesitation, Bob said \$2,500.

Not knowing that \$2,500 was a small fortune

(equivalent to \$15,000 today, according to Economic History Services Inc.), I agreed to do it. I went to the desk and dialed the number.

I used a low voice and when I was done, the cameras cut to Jerry Lewis himself. "Now, this is remarkable," he said, close to tears. "We could use more people like this. They're saints. We just received a very sizeable donation from a Mr. and Mrs. Walter Treut. The Treuts just called to donate the generous amount of \$2,500. God bless you, Mr. and Mrs. Treut."

The studio audience broke into a sustained applause. The band played an uplifting number.

I cheered along with the audience. "Too bad Mom and Pop missed it," I said.

But my older and somewhat wiser brothers sank deep into the couch. They couldn't believe the telethon accepted the donation from a kid. So they took it out at me. "Wait until Mom and Pop

hear about this. You're gonna get killed," Bob said.

Bob paced the TV room. Bruce called me an idiot. "What are we going to do?" he asked Bob. "We can't let Mom and Pop find out about this." The phone rang.

"Should we get it?" Bruce asked while Jerry Lewis added the \$2,500 to the telethon's grand total. Bob lifted me up off the couch and carried me toward the phone. "I don't know," Bob said, confused. "Maybe we could get Bick to say he's Pop and cancel the donation."

But before returning to the desk, Pop had answered the phone upstairs. Bob picked up the phone and we listened in. It was Mr. Booth, one of the bridge club members. "My God, Walt, that's one hell of a donation you made..." he said.

"What are you talking about?" Pop groggily interrupted.

"...on the Jerry Lewis Telethon," Mr. Booth continued. "He's still talking about you; \$2,500; wow. I didn't know you had that kind of money."

Bob placed the receiver back on the phone. We all crept back to the TV room and Bob suggested we play dumb. Bruce changed the channel. Bill pretended to be asleep.

Forty-two years later, I don't remember what happened next.

But at a recent family gathering, Bill recalled that after the dust settled, Pop phoned the telethon to clear things up. "I think he ended up donating \$25," he said. "And even that ticked him off."

No, that desk is a keeper. I'll never get rid of it. ■

Bick Treut and his memories reside in Bethlehem Township. He teaches communications at Raritan Valley Community College.

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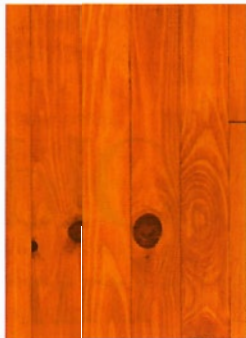
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