The Penny Tree

Who says money doesn’t grow on trees?

By Jack Gantos | Art by Marcos Calo

“W hat are you getting Pete for his birthday?” my older sister, Betsy, asked. Pete was my younger brother. He was going to be 5 years old, and I hadn’t gotten him a thing.

“I’m still thinking about it,” I answered, as I wedged my hand between the couch cushions.

“You are not thinking,” Betsy shot back. “You are couch fishing for change because you’re broke.”

“I’ve got plenty of cash,” I lied, my fingers desperately clawing the mysterious spaces within the couch.

“Jack, you spend all your money on yourself,” she said, reading my mind. I had just spent most of my cash on a David Ortiz baseball card.

“Aha!” I shouted, and pulled an old penny out of the crack. “Now I’ve got something for Pete.” I held the penny up for her to see. “This little penny will change his life,” I announced, without the slightest idea how it might do so. But I kept talking. “You don’t need a lot of cash to give a great gift.” I rapped my knuckles against my head. “You just need a generous imagination.”

“That’s just another way of saying you are cheap!” she said, sneering.
“Just you wait,” I snapped back. “With this one penny, I will steal the birthday gift-giving show.”

“Put your money where your mouth is,” she said. “I bet 10 bucks—that’s a thousand pennies—that my gift will be his favorite.”

“You’re on,” I replied, thinking that I did need a “generous imagination.”

After dinner, Mom brought out the birthday cake. She lit the five candles and said to Pete, “Make a wish.”

Pete’s eyes rolled up toward the ceiling as he sucked up a whole roomful of air into his lungs, then he leaned forward. The five little flames didn’t know what hit them. In a split second, there was nothing left but five vanishing trails of smoke.

“OK,” Pete announced, grinning. “I’m ready to open presents.”

Mom and Dad lifted a big box onto the table. Small hockey players skated across the wrapping paper. Pete ripped it open with one swipe and lifted the top off the box. There were a set of Rollerblades and elbow and knee pads and an orange street-hockey ball. “Awesome,” Pete shrieked, and threw his arms around Mom and Dad. “Thank you,” he said, then suddenly he turned toward Betsy. “Next,” he said.

She took him to the back window and pulled the curtain aside. I looked over Pete’s shoulder. On the lawn were a hockey net, a regulation hockey stick, and a goalie’s stick. “You are the best sister on the planet,” he said and gave her a hug.

Then he looked at me. I felt my ears turn red. The heat was on.

I suppose if I hadn’t spent all my money on my card collection, I would be giving him a hockey helmet and a pair of regulation leather hockey gloves or something that would fit the gift-giving theme. Still, I didn’t lose faith in my “generous imagination.”

“So,” Betsy cut in with her smarmy voice. “What did you get Pete?”

I reached into my shirt pocket and removed a small envelope. On the front of it, I had drawn a tree covered with tiny pennies. Under the drawing, I had written: ONE PENNY TREE SEED.

I handed it to him. He opened the metal clasp and shook out the single penny and a piece of paper with planting instructions. He looked suspiciously at the penny, then back at me. Then Mom and Dad and Betsy stared at me. They did not seem pleased with my choice of gifts.

I snatched the planting directions out of his hand. “It reads, ‘Plant in fertile soil and water six times daily until a penny tree grows.’”

“Will it actually grow?” he asked.


“Wow!” he shouted. “This is the best gift ever. When the tree grows, I’ll have enough pennies to buy an entire ice-skating rink.”
“Sure you will,” I said, with my “generous imagination” getting away from me. “You could even buy the Boston Bruins.”

Pete ran out the back door to go plant his seed.

“Jack,” Mom said. “I hope you haven’t started something you will regret. Your brother believes everything you say, so don’t you dare let him down.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s under control.”

As soon as she was out of the room, I turned to Betsy and stuck out my hand. “That will be one thousand pennies, please.”

The next morning, Pete woke before I did. When I got up, I peeked out the kitchen window. There he was, watering his seed. I smiled to myself as I poured milk on my cereal. What an incredible gift, I thought. This was definitely the smartest thing I had ever cooked up. It cost me only one free cent, and on top of it, I made a thousand more from Betsy. I felt like a genius. As I ate, I began to imagine what baseball card I’d buy next.

When Pete came in, he was excited. “I think it is growing already,” he said.

“Could be,” I replied. “Just remember, water it six times per day or else it will shrivel up and die.” I figured he’d never be able to keep up the six-times-per-day schedule, and sooner or later I’d have to announce the demise of the penny tree. And I would be blameless. It was perfect.

But the first warning I had that Pete’s “generous imagination” was bigger than mine was when he came running up to me holding the windup alarm clock in his outstretched hands.

“How many hours apart is it if I water six times per day?” he asked.

I did the math in my head. “Four,” I replied.

“Then set this for four hours from now,” he said.

I did. When I handed it back to him, he grabbed his little red chair and went outside. When I looked out the window again, he was sitting in his chair, reading a book with the alarm clock on his lap and the watering can to his side. Cute, I thought. Very cute. I should take a picture.

“Where’s Pete?” Mom asked. “We have to go to the store and exchange his Rollerblades for a different size.”

“Out back,” I said, and pointed toward the window.

She looked out. “Oh, that is precious,” she said. But then her voice grew serious. **Jack, you know your brother believes just about anything.** It would be awful of you to burst his bubble.”

“He’s a little brother,” I said. “It’s a law that older brothers have to burst the bubbles of little brothers.”

“Just don’t hurt him,” she warned me. “Or there is a parents’ law that says there might be consequences.”

That was her favorite warning: “There might be consequences.” This always got my “generous imagination” worked up. Usually I pictured myself wrapped in chains and handcuffed to a post in our spider-filled basement.
That night, the alarm went off at midnight and again at four in the morning. Each time, Pete hopped out of bed, turned on his flashlight, and ran outside to water his penny tree.

By morning, I was beginning to feel the “consequences” creeping up on me.

All the next day, Pete kept up his watering routine, and I kept my mouth shut. That night we were sitting in the living room, reading. Pete pulled out his old copy of *The Carrot Seed*. He read it over and over. “This is the greatest book ever,” he shouted. “The little boy plants a carrot seed and waters it and waters it, and even though everyone in his family says it won’t grow, he still waters it because he believes it will. **And then, boom, overnight it grows into a giant carrot.** That’s just how it is going to be with my penny tree—because I believe in it!”

I peeked over the top of my book. Mom, Dad, and Betsy were peeking up over their books too—and they were glaring at me. I smiled at them. They didn’t smile back.

Suddenly, I was beginning to feel bad about myself. Maybe I had gone too far. Maybe Pete was too delicate for my scheme.

“I’ll be right back,” I announced, and put my book down. I ran to the garage and got a garden spade. Then I went over to the neighbor’s yard and dug up a plant that sort of looked like a little tree. I replanted it where Pete had planted his seed. I sneaked back into my bedroom and got a handful of pennies and some tape, and went back outside. Quickly, I taped a few pennies on the branches. “This will make him happy,” I said to myself, “and then we can forget about the penny tree.”

The next morning, Pete woke me up by jumping up and down on my bed and shouting, “It grew! It grew! I’m rich. Come see!”

I hopped up and followed him outside. “Wow,” I said, and made my eyes get real big. “It worked.”

He bent down and held one in his hands. “Why are they held on with tape?” he asked.

“That’s not tape,” I said. “Those are penny stems.”

“Cool,” he said. Then he asked a question that I gave the wrong answer to. “If I leave them on the tree, will they grow really big, like huge penny hubcaps?”

“Oh, no!” I thought. I did it again.

Everything went downhill fast from there. And the more broke I became, the happier everyone else was. First, I had to sneak out in the middle of the night and change the pennies to nickels. And of course, Pete was
thrilled. When he saw them, he danced a little dance around the yard and announced that he would wait for them to become dimes.

Once again, I dug into my piggy bank and got dimes, and later I sneaked out to put them on the tree. The following morning, Pete went nuts. He did somersaults across the yard and drooled all over himself. Then he decided to hold out for quarters. That night, I changed the dimes to quarters.

The next day, Pete went screaming wildly around the backyard until he was so dizzy he fell over and announced he would wait for 50-cent pieces. **That night I did the changeover.** The next day, he was bonkers. I tried to get him to pluck the half-dollars off the tree, but no, he was holding out for the dollar bills. That night, I taped 10 single dollar bills all over the tree, and when I finished, I said to myself, “OK, this madness has got to stop. I started it, so I’ll finish it.”

I took a small pair of scissors and cut off all the leaves from the tree and left them scattered under the tiny branches.

The next morning, Pete and I got up together to water the tree. On the way out of the house, he said, “Maybe after the single dollar bills, there will be five-dollar bills, then tens, then twenties, then hundreds . . .”


When we arrived at the tree, Pete gasped and dropped to his knees. “It died!” he shouted. “All its leaves fell off.” He began to cry.

“But dollar bills are still left on the bare branches,” I pointed out.

“Why’d it die?” he blubbered. “I loved this tree.”

“It’s not dead,” I said, putting my arm around his shoulders. “It’s just that winter is coming. The penny tree has a short growing season. You know, like apples and pears.”

Pete wiped his eyes on his sleeve. Then he thought about what I said. He thought about it for so long that I knew I was in trouble.

“You mean it will return next summer?”

“Yes,” I said. “Of course it will.”

“That is so cool!” he shouted. “I’ll be rich all over again.”

He was ripping the dollar bills off the tree as I stood up and slowly walked back to my room. **I shook my piggy bank. It was empty.** I better start saving now, I thought. That kid’s “generous imagination” is going to cost me every cent I can get my hands on.

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**WRITE TO WIN**

What happens next summer? Write a continuation of the story. Include dialogue between Jack and Pete, plus Jack’s thoughts and actions. Send it to “Jack Contest” by February 1, 2019. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Writing Radar* by Jack Gantos. See page 2 for details.