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Dr. William Taylor Center Memorial Award

I can't look outside my window again. Not today. I've looked out that window every day for the past eighteen years, but I don't want to look again. That's what I always say—I won't look out again. But I always do. I don't know why. I know what I'm going to see. Sights to accompany those sounds. The sounds of disinterested cars passing by. The sounds of police sirens, heralding another act of derring-do that might just show up on the six o'clock news. The sounds of kids yelling at each other from across the street, arguing about some neighborhood business. Yes, I've heard all those sounds. I've seen all those sights. I don't need to see them again.

I look out the window as I drink my tea. Two young men pass each other in the street, each keeping his distance. They have their hands in their pockets and their faces downturned. Kids don't even smile at each other anymore.

The teacup is almost empty, and I'm debating about whether I should get up for another cup when I hear the knock. No, it's not a knock. It's someone's feeble attempt at a knock, like a shutter shifting in a shy wind. Well, if I'm going to get up to get myself a cup of tea, I might as well get that door.

"Who is it," I say. I don't really ask it. I don't really care.

The little knock comes again, and this time it's a bit more insistent. I stand on my toes and peek out of the eyehole. It's a little boy. I can tell he doesn't want to be here. He's looking at my welcome mat, rightly accusing the old dusty thing of being a liar. He doesn't know where to look. His eyes keep going from the mat to the flower pot, and then to the eyehole. He quickly looks away from the eyehole, like he knows I'm looking.

I open the door a crack, keeping the chain on. Maybe some neighborhood kids dared him to go mess with the little old lady down the street.

"What do you want." Again, not a question.

The boy mumbles something.

"Speak up, child, I can't hear you right."

"Can I rake your leaves for you?"

"No, I have people to rake my leaves. Thank you anyway. Goodbye."

The kid starts to say something, this time more insistently.

"But... but I won't charge you nothing. I just gotta rake your leaves."

"What do you mean 'you got to'?"

The boy glances up at me, his head still downturned. "I don't mean nothing, ma'am. I just gotta rake your leaves for you."

I need to get to my tea. It's already cold, I know it. "Alright, go ahead. Hey boy, do you have a rake?"

"No, ma'am."

"Go ahead and use that one at the end of the porch."

I close the door harder than I need to, but this kid spoiled my tea. He'll learn to speak up louder next time and save everybody some time.

An hour later I'm watching the six o'clock news. The city's daily litany, same as always. This and that about graffiti. This and that about someone else dead or missing. This and that about city projects that I care less about than the dying basil plant on the porch. This is worse than looking out the window.

I hear the knock again. It's more insistent this time.

"Aw, there goes that boy again." I get up and walk over to the door, passing the window.

I see the lawn all raked up nicely, and three big black trash bags are sitting on the curb. He did a good job.

I open the door. "That's real nice. You can go leave that rake back where you found it."

"Thank you."

"Hold on, boy, wait. What are you doing this for?"

He shakes his head and bites his lip. "Nothing. I'm just doing it."

I shrug my shoulders and watch him walk away. It's already getting dark. He'd better get home quickly.

The next day I don't feel so bad about looking out the window, but then I wish I hadn't. The three black trash bags are all torn up, and the leaves have been blown all over my yard. I don't know if some animals did that or if it was some poor homeless fellow looking for food or insulation. Oh well. I still have people to rake it all up.

After the schools get out, there's a knock at my door again. I haven't made my tea yet, but I'm getting my mind ready to do so. I know who it is, so I just open the door.

"Can I rake your leaves again?"

"Yes you may. And hurry up. I don't want you getting home late and making your mother anxious."

"Yes, ma'am." And he's off.

I don't watch TV this time. I watch the boy as he works. My yard isn't that big, but neither is he. He struggles to scoop up the leaves into the bags he's brought. I can tell he's never done anything like this before. When he finishes, I see him thinking about where to put the bags. If he leaves them here, he could end up raking my yard again tomorrow. He could take them home with him, but he'd have to make three trips. And what good would that do, anyway? The leaves would just end up scattered someplace else.

I open the front door and call out to him. "Son, you can just leave those bags over by the curb. I'm sure they'll be fine until the garbage truck comes around."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hey, son. Would you like some tea?" I made the tea later than usual today, and it's still nice and warm.

The boy thinks. "I can't go inside. You're a stranger."

I smile. "Well, then you can have it out here on the porch."

He thinks again. "Okay. Thank you."

The boy sits on the steps as he drinks the tea, and I sit on a chair just outside the door. He's quiet. I know he likes my tea.

"So tell me, son. Why did you rake my yard these past two days?"

The boy sips from the steaming cup. "Nothing."

"Come on, now, I know there's a reason."

He looks up at me with a touch of shame in his eyes. "Well. I don't know. My daddy wanted me to do it."

"Did you get yourself into a little trouble?"

"No, ma'am. My mama says I'm a good kid."

"Then why did your parents make you come over here and do this yard work, if it's not punishment?"

"I don't know. Maybe it is punishment, but I don't know what for. They just want me to rake your leaves after school and then come home and do my homework. I can't even play outside or nothing."

I smile. "Well, I'm sure they have a good reason. It's probably not any kind of punishment."

The boy looks into the empty teacup and hands it to me. "Thank you."

"Alright. Now you get on home, and tell your parents I said thank you, and they have a wonderful son."

"Yes, ma'am. Bye."

"Goodbye." I look at the other yards. I hope they have people to rake their lawns.

I don't see the boy again until December. It's about the time of day when the neighborhood kids get off from school. It snowed while they were in their classes. I'm sipping my tea when I hear someone in my front yard. I look out the window and see the boy shoveling my sidewalk. He brought his own shovel. I watch him for a while, and when he's done with mine, he moves on to the next sidewalk, and then the next. He's out there in the cold for almost an hour before I'm brave enough to open that window. It's so cold.

"Son? How would you like some hot chocolate?"

"That'd be fine, ma'am, after I'm done with this walk."

"Alright. It'll be ready for you."

I don't join him on the porch this time. He leaves the empty mug next to the door when he's done, and then he goes on to shovel another sidewalk. It's getting dark by the time he shoulders the shovel and walks away.

The boy shovels my sidewalk and the neighbors' a few more times that winter. Every time, he has other boys and girls with him shoveling. First it's just two others. Then there are about six of them. The third time he comes by to shovel, he has a whole gang of kids out there with him. I'm proud of him. I'm proud of all of them. And I don't even know their names.

I make hot chocolate for the ones that stick around, but they don't talk to me much. One girl informs me that her mother, after getting angry at her one afternoon, told her to go help the boy shovel the snow. Several others share similar stories. Pretty soon their stories change. It's not punishment anymore. It's just what they do. They hang out and work together. The street is filled with laughter and innocent conversation, and the air is occasionally filled with snowballs. I like this sound, and like to watch them.

I'm genuinely sad when it doesn't snow again.

I get another opportunity to hear them laughing and see them working when spring comes around. The grass has all grown out, and the boys and girls are out there mowing the lawns and pulling weeds. I serve them frosty glasses of juice. The boy asks me what kind of plant was in that flower pot on my porch.

"Oh, it was basil. It's died from the cold by now. I sure do love the smell and taste of it, but I guess I'm not much of a gardener. Nope, it's store-bought seasoning for my soup."

"Oh. Okay."

Summer comes around, and the boys and girls are out there regularly, keeping the lawns nice. It's strange that children would spend their free time doing work, but they like it. They get to hang out with each other, just like they would if they were at the park or sitting on the sidewalk. I hope they don't realize that playing is more fun.

I'm watching the news one morning when there's a knock at my door. It's a strong knock, like a judge's gavel, setting a man free. I look through the eyehole and smile when I see who it is.

"How are you doing, ma'am," he says when I open the door.

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine. It's a beautiful morning."

“Sure is. Ma’am, I was just over here to give you something.” He presents a plastic pot with a basil plant in it, growing out of dark, soft soil. The leaves are so green and shining, and the smell is so pure. It’s not like the basil that comes in plastic bottles. It’s fresh and alive and full of enthusiasm.

Just like the boy. He looks me in the eyes, and I can see him smiling.

I take the plant. “Thank you, son. That’s really nice of you. How much did this little thing cost you?”

He thinks a bit. “The seeds weren’t much, but the tools cost a lot. But we’re cool.”

“You mean you planted this?”

“Yeah, we got a garden over by my house. Me and my friends decided to start one up, and seeing as you like basil, I thought I’d grow you some.”

“Wait. Did your parents put you up to this?”

“No, ma’am, but they helped. We just thought it would be nice to have some vegetables around and stuff. We got tomatoes, cabbages, some basil, and some other kinds of things. You can come and check it out. It belongs to everybody.”

I walk outside and sit on the chair. I like this chair. I think I’ll sit out here more often, rather than staying cooped up inside.

“You’re a good boy, son. Did you tell your parents I said that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what did they say?”

“They said that’s why they made me rake your leaves and shovel your walk. They said I needed some character, and I won’t get character from playing basketball right after school all the time.”

I lean back in the chair. “You have some smart parents. I hope they know what a good boy you are.”

He looks down at his feet, but he can’t hide the smile. “Naw, I’m just like other kids.”

“Is that so? Or are other kids just like you?”

He looks confused.

“Think about it. I have never seen any children out here shoveling sidewalks or mowing lawns until you came here. I think people like what you’re doing, and they know just as well as I do how good of a kid you are. They look up to you, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He’s thinking about it. I know he’ll be thinking about it for a long time. I hope he doesn’t stop thinking about it.

“Thanks a lot for the basil. It really means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And I’ll be sure to come by and check out your garden. And maybe I can learn a few things from you kids, and even help you out.”

He smiles. “That’s would be cool.”

“Yes, it would.”

“Well, goodbye, ma’am.” He starts to walk away.

“Wait, son. What’s your name?” I ask.

He confidently answers me. I’ll remember that name. Maybe I’ll see it someday on a ballot.

I hope I do.