

THE GOOD DEED

What happens
when you do the
right thing for all
the wrong reasons?

BY MARION DANE BAUER

AS YOU READ What is a good deed?

Miss Benson was my good deed for the summer. Every girl in my scout troop was assigned someone. My friend Melody got Mr. Stengle, the oldest resident of the River Nursing Home. Anne got Mrs. Muhlenberg, who has four children, and bewildered, cocker spaniel eyes, like maybe she didn't know how they all got there.

I was assigned Miss Benson. Miss Benson is blind.

"Sight-impaired, Heather," our scout leader corrected.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"She's a retired teacher," our scout leader said. "I'll bet she'd just love it if you'd read to her."

I'd never met a blind person before. The thought of talking to Miss Benson scared me. **1 But Melody and Anne and I had the same number of badges, the most of anyone in the troop, and I wasn't about to let either of them get ahead of me.** So the next day I called Miss Benson, and then I set out to meet her.

She lived in the apartment building next to the Piggly Wiggly, a few blocks from my house. I stood in front of her door. Before I got around to knocking, the door across the hall popped open and this girl stuck her head out.

"What do you want?" she said, like it was her door I was standing in front of.

"I'm visiting Miss Benson," I told her, which was perfectly obvious.

The girl had long reddish-brown hair. **2 It was a tangled mess, like**

she pulled it into a ponytail without ever passing it by a brush.

"Why are you visiting her?" she wanted to know.

It would have sounded dumb to say, "I'm a Girl Scout, and she's my good deed for the summer." So I said, "To read to her." Then I added, "She's sight-impaired, you know."

3 Behind the girl, from inside her apartment, a whole lot of noise was going on. It sounded like the beginnings of World War III. Or a herd of runaway horses. Just then, two little kids came hurtling up to the doorway. Their hair wasn't combed either, and their noses were snotty. Great yellow gobs of stuff ran right down to the tops of their lips.

I turned to knock on the door. "I'll come with you," the girl said.

Just like that she said it, like she'd been invited. I didn't know whether to be annoyed at her for being so pushy or relieved that I didn't have to go in alone.

Did a good deed count if you had help?



1 CHARACTER

What is Heather's motivation for her "good deed"?



2 CHARACTER

What does this comment suggest about Heather?



3 TONE

What is Heather's tone as she describes the apartment?



“Tell Mama I’ve gone across the hall,” the girl told the two snotty-nosed kids.

“Mama,” the kids yodeled as they stampeded back into the apartment. And then there was nothing left to do but knock on Miss Benson’s door.

The rest wasn’t as hard as I’d expected. A tall woman with curly, salt-and-pepper hair opened the door and said, “You must be Heather. Come in.” She looked over my head like there was something interesting on the wall across the way, but her voice didn’t *sound* blind. I don’t know what I mean by that exactly, except that she didn’t sound like she was missing anything at all.

The girl said, “Hi!” and followed me right into the apartment.

“Who’s your friend?” Miss Benson asked right away.

Of course, I didn’t have a clue who my “friend” was, but the girl answered, “Risa. My mom and me and my little brothers just moved in across the hall.”

“Welcome, Risa,” Miss Benson replied. Her voice had a smile in it. “I’m glad to see you.”

Just like that she said it. I’m glad to see you! Like she could.

Miss Benson led the way, one hand trailing lightly across the furniture she passed. “I hope you don’t mind the kitchen,” she called back. “It’s the cheeriest place.” The kitchen *was* cheery. The sun was spread out across a table made out of golden wood, and in the middle sat a pitcher of lemonade and a big blue

plate heaped with oatmeal-raisin cookies. There were glasses too.

4 Just two of them.

“Help yourselves, girls,” Miss Benson told us. “I made them for you.” It was good she extended the invitation, because Risa already had a cookie in her hand.

Miss Benson went to the cupboard and got another glass and began to pour lemonade for everyone. She stopped pouring before she overflowed the glasses.

I expected Risa to gobble her cookie, but she took a few nibbles, then tucked the rest in her pocket.

“Tell me about yourselves, girls,” Miss Benson said, sitting across from us at the table, and before I could open my mouth, Risa was off and running. She told about her three little brothers—there was a baby I hadn’t seen—and how her mom had moved to Minnesota for a better job, only Risa didn’t like her mom’s job because the boss wouldn’t let her take calls from her children when she was at work.

I told Miss Benson how many badges I’d earned and how my parents and I had gone to Disney World over spring break. I could tell by how Risa looked at me that she’d never been near a place like Disney World and that she hated me for saying I’d been there. But what was I supposed to do? It was the truth.

Miss Benson pushed the cookies toward us again. Risa took another one and put it in her pocket too.

5 I figured she must be stashing them for her snotty-nosed brothers, and I was almost impressed.

It was kind of nice of her. It made me wish I had little brothers to take cookies home for, but if I did, I’d teach mine how to use a tissue.

I offered to read, so Miss Benson sent me to her bedroom to check out her bookshelf. I found a tall blue book—it looked tattered, so I figured it had been around a while and was, maybe, a favorite—called *Stories That Never Grow Old*.

When I came back with the book, Risa said under her breath, “Dummy. That one’s for little kids.” I shrugged, but my cheeks went hot when I saw she was right. It was a lot of old-timey stories like “The Little Engine That Could.”

Miss Benson asked, “What book did you get?” When I told her, she clapped her hands and said, “Perfect!” So I shot Risa a look and started to read.

Risa leaned across the table and started silently shaping the words with her mouth as I read, like she was tasting each one. I figured she must not be a very good reader, because I’d given up reading with my lips in first grade.

As soon as I’d finished, I knew I was right, because Miss Benson said, “Risa, why don’t you read the next one?” Suddenly, Risa couldn’t get away from the book fast enough. “Oh no!” she said, pushing away from the table so hard her chair screeched against the floor. “You don’t want to hear any more from that old thing. I’ll do something else for you.”

Risa looked around, whipping that tangled ponytail back and forth like

she was expecting to find an idea hanging on the wall. Then her face lit up. “An eye bouquet!” she said.

“An eye bouquet?” The way Miss Benson leaned forward you could tell she was expecting something grand.

An eye bouquet? I thought. *How dumb.*

But Risa explained. “I’ll make a picture for you with words.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Miss Benson said.

And actually, it *was* a wonderful idea. **6 I wished I’d thought of something half as wonderful.**

Risa thought for a moment, then began. “The lilac bushes are blooming in front of the building.” Miss Benson nodded. “It’s been years since I’ve seen those old lilac bushes, but they’re still there?”

“Yes,” Risa said. “And they’re that shimmery color, halfway between silver and purple.”

“Shimmery. Halfway between silver and purple.” Miss Benson nodded again. “That’s it. That’s it exactly. I can see them now.”

I couldn’t stand being bested by a girl who still reads a little-kid book with her lips, so I jumped in. I’d seen lilac bushes all my life. “The leaves are shaped like hearts,” I said. “And they’re green.” Miss Benson seemed to be waiting for more, so I added, “Green like grass.”

But that wasn’t any good, and I knew it. What could be more ordinary than “green like grass”? It’s what my teacher would call trite.

“The green of horses munching,” Risa said, offering the words up like

a gift, and Miss Benson tipped her head back and laughed out loud.

“Well,” I said, getting up so fast I had to catch my chair to keep it from tipping over. “I guess I’d better be going.”

Miss Benson stood up too. “Thank you, Heather,” she said, “for the visit. I enjoyed it very much.”

“I’ll come again on Monday,” I promised. *By myself*, I wanted to add, but I said instead, “I’ll put your book away before I go.”

When I got to the bookshelf, I stared at the space where the book had stood. *Risa lives right across the hall*, I thought. *What if she comes back on her own? Maybe she’ll read to Miss Benson, and this is the book she’ll want, one that doesn’t have big words.* I looked around for a place to hide the book. The wastebasket, rectangular and deep and perfectly empty, was just the right size. I slipped the book inside.

When I got to the door, Risa was standing beside Miss Benson. She had to go home too, she said. I said all the polite things you’re supposed to say to people you’ve just met, and I left. My good deed was done for the day. But on my way out, I noticed that the blooms on the lilac bushes were crisp brown, the color of tea. So the girl was a liar too, besides being a poor reader.

A few days later, I visited Miss Benson again. Over at Risa’s apartment, all seemed quiet except for cartoons blaring. I breathed a sigh of relief and knocked on Miss Benson’s door. 



4

INFERENCE

Why does Heather mention that there were just two glasses?



5

CHARACTER

Why does Heather say she was “almost” impressed?



6

TEXT EVIDENCE

Why does Heather wish this? How do you know?

This time the blue plate on the table held sugar cookies, creamy white, just beginning to brown at the edges.

"I'll get a book," I said, after we each ate a cookie. I hurried off to the bedroom to get *Stories That Never Grow Old*.

Only the book wasn't in the wastebasket. I hurried to the shelf. The space left behind when I took *Stories That Never Grow Old* was still there, empty, accusing.

You did it! the space said. *You lost Miss Benson's book! Probably her favorite book in all the world.*

My heart beat faster. But there was nothing to do, so I picked out a collection of poems.

"I have some poems by Robert Frost," I told Miss Benson. Before she had a chance to say anything, I began to read. She settled back to listen. Though a small smile tipped the corners of her mouth, I thought maybe she'd rather have heard *Stories That Never Grow Old*.

I read a few poems, while this weight in the pit of my stomach kept getting heavier. The next thing I knew, Miss Benson was saying, "How about an eye bouquet?"

7 Her asking took me by surprise, because I'd already proven on Saturday that eye bouquets weren't really my thing. When I didn't answer, she said, "I'll give you one first."

"All right," I said.

"Freckles," she said, "and hair the color of pulled taffy. Green eyes, a misty green like the sea."

For a moment I sat there, feeling

dumb, until what Miss Benson had said began to dawn. I had freckles. And my hair, well, it is the color people like to call "dirty blond," though I always hated that description. I keep my hair as clean as anybody's. But if you were being really nice, you could say it's the color of pulled taffy. And my eyes? Were they green like the sea?

Slowly, the truth dawned.

"Risa's been here," I said. It came out sounding like an accusation.

"She came Sunday afternoon. She's a nice girl. I'm sure the two of you are going to be great friends."

8 I ignored that, because an idea was rising in me like dinner on a rocking boat. The blue book was gone from the place where I'd hidden it. I already knew she was a liar. Now I knew she was a thief too!

"Okay," I said, "I can give you an eye bouquet. Hair . . ." I was going to say "hair that's never seen a brush," but something stopped me. Instead I said, "Hair the color of chestnuts." I paused. That was pretty good. And Risa's hair was a nice reddish brown. "And eyes . . . like bits of sky." I didn't even know I'd noticed those things about Risa—what a rich color her hair was, tangled or not, and the brilliant blue of her eyes—until I'd named them.

"Sorry," I said, standing suddenly. "I've got to go. But I'll be back. Tomorrow."

"Come back anytime, dear. I like having you here."

She wouldn't say that when she found out her book was missing.

Then she'd think *I* was the thief. She'd never suspect Risa of stealing a book—Risa who refused to read, Risa with her pretty eye bouquets.

I stalked across the hall and knocked on Risa's door. I could hear the TV, but no one answered. I knocked again, harder, and then I turned the handle. I was surprised to find the door unlocked—some people are so careless!—and I peeked in. Two pairs of sky-blue eyes stared back at me from the couch. One of the little boys mumbled, "Who're you?"

"Risa's friend," I lied. "She here?" "She took Andrew and went," said the one who had talked before. "She told us to sit right here." He gave me a warning look. "She told us not to let anybody in."

Who was Andrew? The baby? And where was their mother? This was Monday. She must be working. Risa was supposed to be taking care of these boys. Well, so much for counting on her for anything. "When will she be back?" I demanded, stepping closer. "She's got something of mine."

No answer, so I moved between the couch and the TV. And that's when I saw it: a tattered blue book on the couch, open to a picture of a cheerful train climbing a steep hill.

I snatched up the book. "Where did you get this?"

"Risa," the talker said.

"I'll bet," I replied.

"Miss Benson gave it to me, and I gave it to them." I whirled around to see Risa, holding a baby. He was

asleep, his fat cheek pressed against her shoulder. Risa seemed small.

"Miss Benson gave it to me," she said again, as though she knew I didn't believe her, "on Sunday."

"Where did you find it?" I demanded.

"Why did you hide it?" Risa countered.

The question hung in the air. Why *had* I hidden the book? Something about not wanting Risa to horn in on my good deed?

I tried another attack. "How come you went off and left your brothers? Something terrible—" She interrupted. "Andrew was sick. His temperature got really high. I couldn't get hold of my mom, so I went looking for a doctor." As she said it, she staggered like she couldn't hold up that lump of a baby for another minute.

Suddenly, I could see how scared she'd been, scared for the baby, scared to leave her brothers, probably scared to walk into some doctor's office alone.

9 "Here," I said. "Let me take him." I lifted the baby away from her, feeling how hot he was.

Risa rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. Had she been crying? "The doctor gave him a shot. He called my mom. Her boss let the doctor talk to her. She's coming home soon."

I laid the sleeping baby on the couch, took a tissue out of my pocket, and wiped his nose.

"I bet Miss Benson would have watched the boys while you were looking for the doctor," I said. For

a moment we both stood there, considering the word *watch*.

"I didn't think of that," Risa said softly. Then she lifted her chin and added, "I found her book in the wastebasket."

"Did you tell her?"

Risa tossed her head. Her pretty chestnut hair had been brushed that morning, and it flowed like a horse's tail. "Of course not. What do you take me for?"

Something deep inside my chest loosened a bit.

"Miss Benson said if I read aloud to my brothers it would help me get better." A slow blush touched her cheeks, made her ears flame, even reached the roots of her hair. I knew she was telling the truth. "I'm going to read to her sometimes too," she added.

"That's—that's really great," I stammered. And I knew it was. Really. "You'll be helping her, and she'll be helping you. A kind of a good deed both ways."

"A good deed?" Risa laughed. "Is that what you call it?"

"Risa," one of the boys interrupted, "would you read to us some more?"

She looked sideways at me, and I knew that it was me—snotty me—who'd kept her from reading out loud before. "Why don't we take turns reading to them?" I said. "That would be fun."

Risa considered my offer.

10 "Okay," she said at last. "Just so it doesn't count as a good deed."

"It doesn't," I said. "I promise." ●



7

INFERENCE

Why does Miss Benson suggest creating eye bouquets?



8

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

What a great simile! What does Heather mean?



9

CHARACTER

What has Heather come to understand about Risa's life? How do you know?

10

INTERPRETING TEXT

What does Risa mean?



Failures of Kindness

What we really want, in our hearts,
is to be less selfish.

EXCERPT FROM A GRADUATION SPEECH BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. She was small, shy. She wore blue cat's-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it.

She was mostly ignored and occasionally teased. ("Your hair taste good?"—that sort of thing.) I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she'd look after such an insult: Eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if

you know, other people).

We don't really believe these things—intellectually we know better—but we believe them viscerally, and they cause us to prioritize our own needs over the needs of others, even though what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what's actually happening in the present moment, more open, and more loving.

So: How might we DO this? ●

she was trying to disappear. After a while she'd drift away, hair strand still in her mouth. Sometimes I'd see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it.

And then—they moved. That was it. One day she was there, next day she wasn't.

End of story.

Now, why, 42 years later, am I still thinking about it? I was actually pretty nice to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes (mildly) defended her.

But still. It bothers me.

So here's something I know to be true: What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly? Those who were kindest to you, I bet. I'd say as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder.

Each of us is born with built-in confusions. These are: (1) we're central to the universe (that is, our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the only story); (2) we're separate from the universe (there's US and then, out there, all that other junk—dogs and swing sets and low-hanging clouds and,

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WRITING CONTEST

How do George Saunders's ideas about kindness apply to Heather? Explain how Heather fails to be kind as well as how she succeeds. Use text evidence. Send your essay to **GOOD DEED CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Liar & Spy* by Rebecca Stead. See page 2 for details.

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