

The Good Deed

by Marion Dane Bauer

Ms. Benson was my good deed for the summer. Every girl in our scout troop was assigned someone. My friend Melody had Mr. Stengle. He is the oldest resident of the Riverview Nursing Home. He must be at least one hundred and two. He used to be a farmer, and all he ever talks about is the weather. Anne Marie got Mrs. Muhlenberg. Mrs. Muhlenberg has four children, all under five, and kind of bewildered, cocker spaniel eyes. Like maybe she didn't know how they all got there. But I was assigned Miss Benson.

Miss. Benson is old. Not cold like Mr. Stengle, but old enough. And she's blind. "Sight impaired, Heather," our scout leader said. But whether you say "sight impaired" or "blind," the truth is, Miss Benson can't see a thing.

"What do I do?" I asked. "What do I say?"

"Start with 'hello,'" our scout leader said, like that was some kind of help. Then she added, "She's a retired teacher. I'll bet she'd just love it if you'd read to her." And she was off talking to Anne Marie about diapers.

The problem was I'd never been alone with a blind person before. Come to think of it, I don't suppose I'd ever even met one. And the thought of trying to talk to Miss Benson kind of scared me. Melody and Anne Marie and I all had the same number of badges though, 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 — she sounded normal enough on the phone — then I set out to meet her.

Her place wasn't hard to find. She lived in the apartment building right next to the Piggly Wiggly, only a few blocks from my house. Which meant I got there really fast. Too fast. Then I kind of stood in front of her door, waiting, though I couldn't have said what I was waiting for. To figure out what I was going to say, I guess. After "hello," I mean. But before I even got around to knocking, the door across the hall from Miss Benson's apartment popped open and this girl I'd never seen 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 brown hair. Kind of a reddish brown. But it was a tangled mess. I'll swear she pulled it into a ponytail that morning without ever passing it by a brush. "Why are you visiting her?" she wanted to know.

It would have sounded really dumb to say, "Because I'm a Girl Scout, and she's my good deed for the summer." So I said instead, "I've come to read to her." And then I added, just in case this girl didn't know anything at all, "She's sight impaired, you know."

"No, she's not," the girl answered with a toss of that tangled hair. "I've seen her. She's blind as a bat."

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 like a herd of runaway horses maybe. Just then two little kids came hurling up to the doorway and stopped to peer out from each side of girl. I couldn't tell whether they were boys or girls or one of each. They looked kind of generic. Is that the word? 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. Their lips and chin were relatively clean, so I suppose their tongues took care of it from there. I decided maybe reading to a blind woman wasn't so bad after all and turned to knock on the door.

"Wait," the girl said. "I'll come with you."

Just like that she said it, as though she'd been invited.

And the truth was, I didn't know whether to be annoyed at her for being so pushy or relieved that I didn't have to do go in there alone. What if a good deed didn't count if you had help? But though there wasn't a reason in the world for me to do what the girl said, I found myself standing there with my hand in the air, waiting.

"Tell Mama I have gone across the hall," the girl told the two snotty nosed kids. And she stepped out and closed the door behind herself.

"Mama," I heard the kids yodel as they stampeded back into the apartment. And then was nothing left to do but to knock on Miss Benson's door.

The rest wasn't nearly as hard as I'd expected. After a moment a tall woman with curly, salt-and-pepper hair opened a door and said, "You must be Heather. Come in." I could tell she couldn't see me, because she looked right 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. And I guess she wasn't, because when the girl said, "Hi!" And followed me into the apartment Miss Benson asked right away, "Who's your friend?"

Of course I didn't have a clue who my "friend" was, but she answered, just as pert as you please, "Risa. My mom and me and my little brother's" — so they *were* boys — "just moved in across the hall."

"Welcome, Risa," Miss. Benson replied. Her voice sort of 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 or sometimes just grazing the wall. "I hope you don't mind if we go to the kitchen," she called back. "It's the cheeriest place."

The kitchen was a cherry place. The sun was all spread out across a table made out some kind of golden wood. And in the middle of the table, sweating coolness, sat a pitcher of lemonade and a big blue plate heaped with oatmeal-raisin cookies. There were glasses, too. Just two of them though.

"Mmmm, cookies," Risa said.

"Help yourselves, girls," Miss. Benson told us. "I made them for you." And it was a good thing she extended the invitation, because Risa already had one in her hand.

Miss. Benson went to the cupboard and got out another glass and began to pour a lemonade for everyone. She stopped pouring before she overflowed the glasses too, though I couldn't figure how she did it.

I expect Risa to gobble her cookie, just the way she had grabbed it off the plate without being invited, but she didn't. She just took a couple of nibbles, then tucked the rest into the pocket of her cutoffs. Can you imagine that?" An oatmeal cookie in your pocket?

"Tell me about yourselves, girls," Miss. Benson said, sitting across from us at the table, and before I could even open my mouth, Risa was off and running.

She told about her three little brothers — there was a baby I hadn't seen; he probably had snotty nose too — and about how her mom had moved to Minnesota for a better job, only Risa didn't like her mom's new job because the boss wouldn't even let her take telephone calls from her children when she was at work.

I told Ms. Benson how many badges I turned and how my parents and I had gone to Disney World over spring break. I could tell, just by the way 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.

When Miss Benson pushed the cookies toward us and said "Help yourself" again, quick as a flash, Risa took another cookie and put that one into her pocket too. I figured she must be stashing them

for the snotty-nosed brothers at home, and I was almost impressed. It was kind of nice of her, really, to think of her brothers that way. It made me wish I had a little brother or sister to take cookies home for, but if I had one, I'd teach mine how to use a tissue.

And then 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 kind of tattered, so I figured it had been around a while and was, maybe, a favorite — called *Stories That Never Grow Old*. There was a picture on the cover of a woman wearing a long dress reading a book to some children.

When I came back with the book, Risa looked at it and said low, under her breath, "Dummy. That one's for little kids."

I shrugged, like I didn't care, but still my cheeks went hot when I opened it and saw she was right. It was a lot of old timey stories like "The Engine That Could" and "Hansel and Gretel" and "Why the Bear Has a Stumpy Tail," things like that. Probably not what a grown-up, even one who used to be a teacher, would want to hear.

But then Miss. Benson asked, "What book did you get?" and when I told her, she clapped her hands and said "Perfect!" So I shot Risa a look and started to read. "'Bruin, the young brown bear, was feeling very hungry.'"

Risa leaned across the corner of the table so she could see the page too. She even 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 when I was in the first grade. As soon as I'd finished the story I knew I was right about her not being a good reader, because Miss Benson said, "Okay, Risa. Why don't you read the next one?"

While I was reading, she couldn't get close enough to the book, but suddenly she couldn't get away from it fast enough. "Oh no!" she said, pushing away from the table so hard that her chair screeched against the floor. "Anyway, you don't want to hear any more from that old thing. I'll do something else for you instead."

Miss. Benson's face was round and soft. "What do you want to do instead?" she asked, and she folded her hands in her lap, waiting.

For a moment Risa looked around, whipping that tangled ponytail back and forth like she was expecting to find an idea for something she could do hanging on the wall. Then it must have come to her, because her face lit up and she settled back in her chair. "How about," she said, "if I give you an eye bouquet."

"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 it was a wonderful idea. I wished I'd thought of something half as wonderful. Though Miss. Benson seemed to like the story I'd read well enough.

Risa thought for a few seconds, then she began. "The lilac bushes are blooming in front of the apartments."

Miss. Benson nodded. "It's been years since I've seen those old lilac bushes, but they're still there, are they?"

"Yes," Risa said. "And they're that shimmery color, halfway between silver and purple. You know what I mean?"

"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 read a little kiddy book with her lips, so I jumped in. I hadn't especially noticed the bushes she was talking about, but I'd seen lilac bushes all my life. "The

leaves are shaped like little hearts,” I said. “And they’re green.” I could see Miss. Benson was waiting for something more, so I added, kind of feebly, “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 English 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. My father” — I leaned heavily on the word since it was obvious Risa it didn’t have one of those — “told me he’d take me and my friends to the beach this weekend.”

It wasn’t a lie. Daddy was taking me and Melody and Anne-Marie to the beach, but not until Sunday afternoon. This was Saturday.

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

“I’ll be back, I promised. “I’ll come and read again on Monday.” *By myself*, I wanted to add, but I said instead, “I’ll put your book away before I go.” And I carried it back to the bedroom.

When I got to the bookshelf, I stood looking at the empty space where the book had stood. *Risa lives right across the hall*, I was thinking. *What if she decides to come back on her own? Maybe she’ll even decide to read to Miss Benson, and this is the book she’ll want, one that doesn’t have too many big words.*

And then there I was, looking around for some place to put the book where she wouldn’t find it. After all, Miss Benson herself certainly wasn’t going to be wanting to look at it again while I was gone. The wastebasket next to the bookshelf, rectangular and deep and perfectly empty, was just the right size. I slipped the book inside. It would be safe there, waiting for me.

When I got to the door, Risa was there, standing beside Miss Benson. She had to go home too, she said, though I knew she didn’t have plans for going anywhere special like the beach. But I said all the polite things you’re supposed to say to someone you’ve just met, to her and to Miss Benson too, and I left. My good deed was done for the day.

On my way out of the apartment building, I couldn’t help but notice. The blooms on a lilac bushes were crisp brown, the color of tea. So the girl was a liar, too, besides being a poor reader.

A couple of days later when I came to visit Miss. Benson again, I stopped in front of her door, half expecting Risa to pop out of the apartment across the hall. All seemed quiet over there this time except for cartoons blaring from a TV. I breathed a sigh of relief and knocked on Miss Benson’s door.

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

“I’ll get a book,” I said, after we had each eaten a cookie and sipped some cocoa, chatting about this and that. And I hurried off to Miss Benson’s bedroom to get *Stories That Never Grow Old*.

Only the book wasn’t there.

I looked in the wastebasket, of course. I even picked it up and turned it upside down and shook it, as though something as big as a book could disappear. But the wastebasket was empty. Just the way it had been the first time I come into the room. I wondered, in fact, why Miss Benson had a wastebasket at all since she didn’t seem to put anything into it.

Then I hurried to the shelf. Maybe Miss. Benson had reached a hand into the basket and found it there and put it away herself. Or maybe someone who came and cleaned for her had discovered it. Now that I’ve thought about it, a wastebasket was about the dumbest place in the world to hide a book. The space left behind when I took *Stories That Never Grow Old* out, right between two fatter books — *A Literary History of England* and *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* — 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.

Did she empty her own wastebasket? She wouldn't have been able to see what was in there. Or maybe somebody else emptied them for her and thought, seeing it there, that she meant to throw it away. My heart beat faster just thinking about the possibilities.

There was nothing else to do, so I picked out another book, a collection of poems by Robert Frost, and brought that out instead.

"I have some poems," I told Miss. Benson, and before she had a chance to say whether she was disappointed that I hadn't brought the blue book, I opened the collection and began to read.

"I'm going out to clean the pasture spring."

She settled back to listen, a small smile tipping the corners of her mouth, but though she looked perfectly happy, I couldn't get past feeling that maybe she'd rather have heard *Stories That Never Grow Old*.

I read several poems — I especially liked the one about the boy who died after cutting himself with the chainsaw; it was so sad-but I kept feeling this weight in the pit of my stomach. The blue book was gone. Miss. Benson had probably had it since she was a little kid.

I guess I quit reading without even noticing I'd stopped, because the next thing I knew Miss Benson was saying, "How about an eye bouquet now? What can you make me see?"

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 right away though, she said, "I'll give you one first." "All right," I said, though I couldn't help wondering what kind of eye bouquet of blind woman could come up with.

"Freckles," she said, "and hair the color of pulled taffy. Green eyes, a misty green like the sea." For a moment I just sat there, feeling dumb, until gradually what Miss Benson has said began to dawn. I had freckles, though I didn't like to think they were the first thing a person saw. And my hair... well, it's the color people like to call "dirty blonde," 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? (I guess that would be better than green like horses munching.) And then slowly, gradually, the truth dawned. Miss Benson had gotten her eye bouquet from...

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

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

I ignored that, about Risa's being a nice girl and about the two of us being friends, because an idea that was rising in me like dinner on a rocking boat. Risa had been in Miss Benson's apartment since the last time I'd been there. The blue book was gone from the place where I'd hidden it. Risa had taken 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... eyes like little 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, but even as I did, I was standing up. "Sor... sorry," I said, stumbling over my feet and my tongue at the same time. "I'm afraid I've got to go. I mean, there's something I've got to do. But I'll be back. Tomorrow. I promise."

Miss. Benson stood too. "Is your daddy taking you to the beach again?" she asked.

"No... no." I was backing toward the door. "Not today. He's working today. But" — I'd reached the door — "he'll probably take us again next weekend."

"That's nice." Miss Benson had followed. "Come back anytime, dear. I like having you here."

Come back anytime! She wouldn't say that when she found out her book was missing. Then she would think I was the thief. Because I was the one who'd had the book last, wasn't I? She'd never think of suspecting Risa of stealing a book, Risa who refused to read, Risa with her pretty eye bouquets. As soon as Miss Benson closed the door behind me, I stalked across the hall and knocked on Risa's door... hard. I could hear the television still, Road Runner cartoons, but no one answered. The girl was hiding from me!

I knocked again, harder, and when still no one came, I turned the handle. Surprised to find the door unlocked — some people are incredibly careless! — I opened it slowly and peeked in. Two pairs of sky blue eyes stared back at me from the couch. Without taking his thumb out of his mouth, one of the little boys mumbled, "Who're you?"

"I'm a friend of Risa's," I lied. "Is she here?"

They stared at one another and then, without answering, turns back to the TV.

"Where is Risa?" I said more loudly.

The one who had talked before pulled his thumb out of his mouth this time. "She took Andrew and went," he said. "She told us to sit right here." He gave me a warning look. "She told us not to let anybody in, and we're not supposed to talk to strangers."

I stepped closer. Who was Andrew? The baby, probably. And where was their mother? Was she going to come marching in, demand to know what I was doing in her apartment bullying her little kids? Not likely. This was Monday. She must be working. And Risa was supposed to be here taking care of the little boys. Well, so much for counting on her for anything. "When will she be back?" I demanded to know, stepping closer. "She's got something of mine."

No answer, so I move between the couch and the coyote zooming across the screen, facing down two small, dirty faced boys. And that's when I saw it. A tattered blue book lay on the couch between them, open to a picture of a cheerful train pulling up a steep hill. I snatched up the book. "Where did you get this?"

"Risa give it to us," the talker replied. The other one just leaned over until he had almost toppled onto his side, trying to peer around me to see the TV. He didn't know how to talk.

"I'll bet she did," I said. I could have burst. That buttinsky girl who thought she was so great was a thief. Just as I'd thought.

The voice came from the doorway behind me. "Miss Benson gave it to me, and I gave it to them." I whirled around to see Risa, standing there holding an arm full of baby. He was asleep with a fat cheek pressed against her shoulder. Risa looked small under his weight.

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

"We're did you find it?" I demanded to know.

"Why did you hide it?" she countered.

The question hung in the air. The instant she asked, I realized I couldn't answer. Why had I hidden the book anyway? Something about not wanting Risa to horn in on my good deed. Was that it? I tried another attack. "How come you went off and left your little brothers? Something terrible could have —"

She interrupted. "Andrew was sick. The temperature got really high. I couldn't get hold of my mom, so I went looking for a doctor." As she said it, she kind of 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 go off and leave her brothers, probably scared to walk into a strange doctor's office alone too. "Here," I said, moving toward her. "Let me take him. Is he going to be all right?"

My list of the baby away from her, I could feel how hot he was and how heavy, too.

"Yeah." She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. Had she been crying? "The doctor gave him a shot. And he called my mom too. Her boss didn't have any choice. He had to let the doctor talk to her. She's coming home real soon."

I walked over to the couch and laid the sleeping baby down beside the other two boys. His cheeks were bright red. I took a tissue out of my pocket and wiped his nose.

"I'll bet Miss Benson would have come over to watch the boys while you were looking for the doctor," I said. And for a moment we both stood there, considering the word *watch*.

Risa nodded. "I didn't think of that," she said softly. But then she lifted her chin and added, like it was what we were talking about still "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 with the movement 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 out loud to my brothers it will help me get better. Better at reading, I mean." As Risa said it, slow blush touched her cheeks, made her ears flame, even reached the roots of her hair. And that's why I knew she was telling the truth. Never in a thousand years would she have admitted that she needed help with reading except as a way of letting me know she hadn't stolen the book. "I'm going to read to her sometimes to," 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 the good deed both ways."

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

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

She looks 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 long and carefully.

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

"It doesn't," I said. "I promise."