



The 13th Day  
of Christmas



JASON F. WRIGHT





To the original Traveling Elf,  
Willard Samuel Wright

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# 1

## Marva

Marva Ferguson draped a wet yellow apron over the clothesline that ran along the side of her home. In curly cursive, a screen-printed message on the front of the apron boasted: *If life gives you lemons, throw them through the candy shop window and grab some taffy.*

It was just one of more than 150 aprons in the collection that hung ten deep on pegs and hooks around Marva's kitchen, pantry, and sunroom. She wore aprons while cooking, cleaning, and doing the laundry, and often changed them during the course of the day to suit her mood. It was hard to pick a favorite when she wore most of them only a few times each year, but this particular apron was a contender.

Marva knew she was probably the last person in the town of Woodbrook who still used a clothesline. Once, when local

newspaper columnist Rusty Cleveland of *The Woodbrook Weekly* knocked on her front door asking to do a profile on her as part of a weekly *Know Your Neighbors* series, Marva agreed on the condition he help her hang the morning's load. Rusty had such a good time, he'd stopped by every couple of months since to check on the widow and work the clothesline. He'd even donated a few aprons to her collection.

She enjoyed Rusty's company and was grateful for his visits. She also appreciated the occasional drop-ins from the circle of widow friends she'd made at various volunteer gigs around town. But they surely didn't make up for the mornings when her husband, John, used to hang clothes with her. He'd been gone thirty-three years, but she still saw him in the next row, smiling over a pair of overalls or damp dishtowels.

John and Marva had an unusual history with laundry. When they were young, John joked with his pals that the first time he saw Marva, she was taking her clothes off. When their jaws dropped, he finished the joke. "Off the clothesline—get your minds outta the gutter!"

It was true.

She'd first laid eyes on him in 1946 while clipping a sand-colored beach towel to a clothesline in the backyard of her parents' home. The eighteen-year-old young man with bad hearing and a World War II deferment had been cutting her neighbor's lawn all morning, pushing a mower over the same patch of scratchy grass over and over like a perfectionist barber corraling a cowlick.

But the drunken snail's pace had nothing to do with lawn care. He just wanted to sneak peeks at Marva and admire the tall, sixteen-year-old with fire-red hair and a matching personality. He finally found the courage to introduce himself, but instead of the more formal introduction called for in 1940s America, he chose to pop up from behind a bedsheet with clothespins pinned to his ears and nose.

How could she not love the boy?

They were married five years later and spent many hours at the clothesline together until the second of two heart attacks took him in 1978. In the years since, she'd had plenty of suitors and had even been to dinner, the movies, or square dancing with a gentleman or two, but she never seriously considered remarrying. In her stubbornness, she determined that no other man's clothes were worth washing besides John Ferguson's. And there certainly were no other men she wanted to hang clothes with in the virgin morning air.

She told friends that even before she met him, there was only John.

When they were married, there was only John.

Now that he waited in heaven, there would be only John. And she was sure he would still want to do laundry with her.

Marva loved living life by hand, but it's not as if she'd never tried using a dryer. In 1961, John was inspired by outgoing First Lady and pink devotee Mamie Eisenhower and surprised his wife with a Frigidaire Pink Custom Imperial Washer Dryer set for their ten-year anniversary. She liked it just fine, and

it saved time as advertised, but she missed the moments the couple spent in the yard peering at one another between cotton dress shirts and sundresses. The first time the dryer needed repair, Marva told John not to bother.

“I can live with the washer, John. It gets clothes cleaner than I ever could on the old board. But no dryer can get the clothes any cleaner on the line than God Himself. Plus, I think He makes them smell better.”

John didn't argue.



Marva breathed in the morning air and admired her two lines of clothes, sheets, towels, and the lemon apron she'd chosen for the day. September had soaked up the southern humidity, and Marva thought the air had an unusual, tasty crispness to it, like a long, salted pretzel rod snapped in half.

She dove her hands into the pockets of her apron that read *(Insert Funny Apronism Here)*. A few children played in the field that separated her house from the 27 Homes trailer park. She watched them for a long time as they played tag and built an obstacle course from old plastic trash cans and worn truck tires. She hoped when the sun gave up for the day, they'd each get a full meal and fall asleep with full bellies. She knew some would; some wouldn't.

Even after seeing generations of children come and go from the neighborhood, even though she'd looked hundreds of kids in the eyes as they bounced by her on their pogo sticks or rolled

past on roller skates, she still wished each one were the grandchild she never had from the son who'd preceded her husband to heaven too early.

She watched until the kids in the field disappeared from view, and soon their distant laughter and shouts slipped away, too.

The trailer park hadn't always been named 27 Homes. When John and Marva sold the land to the town of Woodbrook, the planning commission proposed a low-income trailer park with twenty-one mobile homes on larger-than-average lots. The homes would go first to families with children, then the disabled, then veterans, then the elderly. The town billed the mini-development as a path to homeownership for those in need of a boost. It was a model Woodbrook hoped the surrounding county and other nearby cities and towns would adopt.

It didn't take long before Woodbrook squeezed in three more trailers and renamed it 24 Homes, complete with a new sign. Then, in 2001, they renamed it again, adding three nice double-wide trailers close to the entrance off the rural highway.

When the third sign went up, the town manager finally had the foresight to design the numbers so they could easily be removed if the mobile home park grew yet again.

Marva wondered what her husband would think of the neighborhood today. The place had been maintained for a decade, and the families worked hard to convey the impression that their trailers were not just temporary housing but permanent,

comfortable homes. Yet, of late, many of the lots had taken ill. Most of the homes had faded siding; some were missing it entirely. A few homes still had nicely manicured lawns, but the majority of her neighbors had let their yards grow into jungles of weeds and broken swing sets.

She assumed the best in people though, and chose to believe the struggling families simply didn't have the energy to provide for their loved ones *and* care for the small plots of earth around them that they didn't even own.

She thought because the town owned the homes, residents certainly couldn't be expected to invest much in them. Once upon a time, she'd heard that 27 Homes had a waiting list. Now she wondered how many people thought of it more like a prison than a path to homeownership. Because the sputtering economy and job market had played no favorites, she'd heard that out-of-work tenants were often behind and negotiating to stay another month, then another and another.

Marva often said that selling the land was the smartest thing John had ever done, though he'd had his doubts. The deal allowed the Fergusons to stay on a large parcel at the northeast corner of the trailer park at the end of the main drive. Their home, once hidden like a juicy Southern secret in a grove of box elder trees, was now partially visible from a busy two-lane, east-west road that cut the county in half.

Still, more than three decades after his death, Marva was grateful to live in the only home they'd shared together and to know she'd likely die in it too, just as John had. John's decision

to give up a portion of their land and privacy had become her nest egg when he left the world seven years before the law of averages and medical spreadsheets said he would.

The town had originally designed an entrance to the neighborhood that was large and inviting, with fat azalea bushes on either side and the 21, then 24, then 27 Homes sign framed by hydrangeas. The road in was straight and wide with plenty of room for bicycles, Big Wheels, and minivans. After fifty yards of mobile homes on both sides of the road, a short stem shot to the left with six more homes, three on each side of the street. Another handful of homes sat back on the main straight road before the street took a sweeping round right and dead-ended at Marva's private driveway.

Locals said the neighborhood resembled a fishhook and over time referred to the three sections as if they were parts of a real hook. The long main street in was called the shank, the short dead-end street was the barb, and the bend was the big turn that held another six trailers and led to the Fergusons' home.

Those in the trailers nearest the entrance rarely saw Marva anyplace except in her Mazda Miata as she zipped in and out. Though the town had agreed to cut and pave a separate entrance through the trees for the Fergusons to access their property, there had been so many excuses through the years that Marva and John had finally given up the fight. Plus, with John gone at the age of fifty, not long after the town closed the deal for the land and trailers began appearing, Marva found she

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didn't mind driving past the mobile homes and the children who occupied them.

Even though they rarely spoke to her, and more than one child had been caught hanging from her clothesline or stealing aprons for a laugh, their simple presence in her daily universe reminded her that she was not alone.

## 2

### A Girl Named Charlee

Hey, Charlee Chew, have I ever told you the story about the monkey named Mason who jumped from the back of an airplane with a banana-shaped parachute?”

Charlee loved that her father’s bedtime stories always began with a question. “You’ve told me lots of stories about Mason,” she giggled her answer. “But not that one.”

Mason had survived buckets of wild adventures at the hands of Thomas Alexander’s colorful storytelling. He had defeated ninjas using lasagna noodles, built a riverboat from orange peels, and ran successfully for president of Monkeymerica. In one of Charlee’s favorites, Mason went hunting in the jungle with a bamboo marshmallow shooter that only shot the extra plump kind used for making s’mores.

There were some nights, if Charlee got to bed on time,

when her father would tell a second Mason story with even more delicious monkey hijinks than the first. Charlee's mother said that her husband enjoyed telling the tales so much, he'd wind up telling them to an empty room when his daughter was grown and gone.

Charlee remembered the first night the color of the stories began to change. She'd been surprised when her father revealed that Mason's family was moving. Mason's monkey dad had lost his business and needed to find a different job in a different town. As he unfolded the tale, Charlee thought Mason's voice sounded a lot like her dad's. Soon many of the stories sounded a lot like his, too.

Mason's dad lost his business.

Mason's older brother needed to try a new school.

An angry chimpanzee from the bank was coming to take their house, and they had to find a smaller one.

Charlee watched her dad's eyes as he told the stories until they drifted away from hers and all she could see was the side of his tired face. It was wrinkled and leathery and looked like the purse her mother bought on vacation in Mexico. Charlee's dad had deep lines in his neck that got a little bit deeper and a little bit longer with every new story.

Then, one night, he was just too tired to stay for a story. He apologized, kissed her on the forehead, and looked at her much longer than usual. Charlee took her small hands and ran her fingers along the edge of his face and pinched his chin with both her thumbs. She thought he might smile, but he didn't. It

only made him look away again, and she noticed that the lines on his neck were starting to look like frowns.

She thought nobody should have that many frowns.

Charlee soon noticed that when the stories went away, boxes began to appear in their place. Boxes of a hundred shapes and sizes started filling up and were stacked in big box towers in every corner of the house. Charlee's mother wrote in fat, black marker on the side:

*Charlee's Clothes*

*Zach's Books*

*Dad's Files*

*Mom's Journals*

One night after the box towers started, Charlee's dad entered her room when he thought she was already asleep. He took a stuffed monkey that still had the stiff paper price tag clipped to it and snuggled it next to her. He lifted her arm and squeezed the monkey underneath her left elbow.

She wanted to open her eyes and surprise him, to say thank you and give him a kiss before he could shut the door and let the room fall back into darkness. But even a child can tell when a mother or father is feeling sad.

He quietly offered that he'd bought the monkey weeks earlier and was going to give it to her for Christmas. But he'd decided Charlee might like it early to help get ready for their trip and fresh start.

When her father shut the door, Charlee flipped on the

lamp next to her bed and sat up to meet her new friend. He had long arms and longer legs that were well out of proportion with the rest of his body. He also had Oreo-sized eyes and a huge white smile that made her smile back because she knew his teeth were bigger than the teeth of any real monkey in the wild.

She hugged him tight, turned off the lamp, and for a long time wondered what to name her new monkey friend. But since she knew everyone assumed she'd name him Mason, she named him Melvin, instead.

"You deserve a fresh start, too," she whispered.



Less than one month later, Charlee was turned around in the clunky family minivan and hanging on to her seat's headrest, watching her old home in her old life become smaller and smaller. She watched until it was hidden under a smudge on the rear window. It felt like her entire life had been reduced to a speck so small it was hidden by dirt.

Before they crossed the county line, Charlee and Melvin were already tired of their brother Zach's grumbling from the third-row backseat. Zach rotated through a dozen complaints: "Why do we have to move so far away? Why did you sell my bike? I paid for part of that, you know. How much further do we have to go? I hated that stupid school anyway."

Zach and Charlee's mother, Emily, muted her son with threats of stopping the car, selling his two remaining possessions

of value—an Xbox and an iPod—and making him start his new school immediately without the week off she'd promised the kids could have in order to settle in to their new life.

Charlee stared at the U-Haul her father drove ahead of them in traffic. She wished she could have sat beside him instead of by her pouty brother. When they finally passed a sign that read *Welcome to Woodbrook—America's Friendliest Small Town*, Zach announced from the back of the van, "More like Welcome to Dumbbrook—America's Dumbest and Dinkiest Small Town."

Charlee told Melvin not to listen to her grouchy brother, and she covered the monkey's ears with his own long arms and hands. Then she looked out the window at the different trees, different road signs, and different neighborhoods and wondered if her little own life would be better, or just different like the scenery.

The longer she looked and the faster her mother drove, the more the strange sights outside her window began to merge and blur. The people on the street looked wet, stuck inside clouds so thick she couldn't tell if they were people anymore. It reminded her of diving underwater for coins at the old community pool and looking up at her dad's fuzzy figure standing on the edge.

"Mom, I have a headache," she said. "Can we stop?"

"Sorry, Charlee, we're not that far now. Dad's just stopping to pick up the keys. We'll be there soon. I promise."

Charlee took Melvin's furry hands and rubbed her own head with them. After another few minutes of navigating

Woodbrook's unfamiliar streets, Charlee's stomach began to churn, and she again asked to take a break.

"Please, Mom? I feel sick. Car sick."

"Quit being a baby," Zach shot from the backseat, and Charlee wondered how her brother had heard her through his earbuds and the screaming he called music.

"We're almost there. I know it's been a long drive, Charlee, but we're almost there. Maybe take your glasses off."

Charlee did and then closed her eyes, using Melvin as a pillow against the van window. Her mind slid from worry to worry like a smooth metal piece on a board game. Would the kids on their street be nice? Next space. Would she make new friends? Another space. She'd never changed schools before. Back two. Would she really make new friends? Skip three. Would her teachers treat her strangely? Would they speak too loudly or too slowly as if she came from some other country and spoke some other language? Would people find out her brother was kicked out of school? Would her dad's new job work out? Would their new house be big enough for everyone?

She opened her eyes and studied her reflection in the window. Her hair was black and straight and threatened to once again tickle her shoulders. Charlee had had much longer hair a few months earlier, but her mother cut it short at the beginning of the summer, and Charlee thought the cut made her look like a boy. She couldn't be sure whether that was her own opinion, or her mind parroting what other children had said too loudly when they didn't care if she overheard them.

Plus, Charlee didn't like boys yet, so why would she want to look like one? She was thankful that even though her hair had not yet completely recovered after the long summer, she was starting to look like a young lady again in the mirror.

Charlee's tired eyes were dark, too, but more warm chocolate brown than black. Her father called the color *Hershey's Kiss* and even wrote it that way on whatever school forms or paperwork required eye color identification. She'd worn cherry-red framed glasses for almost a year, but lately they gave her headaches. Her mother promised that once they were on their feet in their new place, they'd update the prescription.

It was only mid-afternoon, but her eyelids soon collapsed under the heavy weight of child-worry. In her dreams, she saw Zach knocking over moving-box towers in their old home and their mother following behind setting them back up.

Charlee didn't wake until Zach leaned forward and bopped her head with an empty Gatorade bottle. "We're there."

She sat up and rubbed her eyes, clearing the fog just in time to see her dad in the U-Haul take a wide left turn from the main road onto what looked like a neighborhood street. They followed him, and she noticed a wooden sign surrounded by overgrown bushes:

"Welcome to 27 Homes."



# 3

## Welcome Home

**D**ad, you said it was a manufactured home, not some trashy trailer.”

“Zachary—” his mother snapped.

“It’s okay.” Thomas took a step toward his son in the front yard of their new mobile home. “I should have prepared you better.” He put a hand on Zach’s shoulder.

“You think?” Zach said before dropping his shoulder from underneath his father’s touch.

“We’ll make the best of it—that’s what we do, right, gang?” Thomas wasn’t sure he believed it himself, but it was what he’d been repeating in his mind for hours while he was alone in the bouncy cab of the rented truck.

“That’s right,” Emily tried. “We’ll make an adventure from this. It’s a brand-new start for everyone.”



“In that?” Zach said, gesturing with both hands, palms up, toward the double-wide trailer, as if wanting to lift it from its concrete slab foundation and make it taller.

“It will become what we make of it,” Thomas said, but he knew instantly it was a cliché Zach would dismiss. “It’s a clean slate, son. I know it’s not a house with a big yard and a game room. But it’s all we can afford right now. Honestly, Zach, we’re lucky to even have it. My new boss pulled strings to get us this home—”

“Trailer,” Zach interrupted.

“It’s a trailer now,” Emily said, “but when we get inside, we’ll make it ours. We’ll make it a home.”

“And soon, if everything goes well, we’ll find a bigger place,” Thomas said. “We’ll even let you help pick it out. How about that?”

“Right.” Zach didn’t say the word; he breathed it. Then he put his earbuds back in and walked toward the trailer.

“He’ll be fine,” Thomas said, and repeated it, more for himself than his wife. He manufactured a smile and asked Charlee to gather her things from the van. She disappeared into the van to repack her backpack.

Thomas nodded toward the U-Haul and silently invited his wife to follow.

“What do you think?” he asked as they leaned against the passenger’s door of the truck’s cab.

“It’s about what I expected.”

Thomas rested his arm on the large rearview mirror that was covered in bugs and dirt. “And that is?”

“Just what I expected. Just that. No better, no worse. It’s what it looked like in the pictures you texted me.”

“Huh. I hoped it would outperform those cruddy pictures, actually.”

“It doesn’t, if I’m being honest. But I can’t say I had high hopes, either. I knew what we were getting into.”

Thomas sighed and tried to fill his lungs with fresh, Saturday, anything-is-possible air. “I know it’s not exactly like the website promised either.”

“No, not exactly.”

“But it’s something.”

“Yep, it’s something all right.” Thomas knew Emily meant it to be funny, but as actors in a scene neither wanted to be in, the line had an uncomfortable edge.

Emily took a beat, crossed her arms, and took her own deep breath. “It has potential, I suppose.”

“Potential.”

“Sure. Potential to be better than it is right now.”

Thomas wondered if she was still referring to the new home or to something bigger. “I can live with that.”

“It’s going to be hard, you know,” Emily said with her eyes fixed on Zach rummaging around an overturned trash barrel.

“I know.”

They watched Zach throw gravel, one rock at a time, at a

tire-lined flowerbed. The pebbles bounced off and scattered in every direction without order or pattern.

“Do you think he’ll make it?” Thomas asked without looking away from him.

“I hope so.”

Zach stopped long enough to fiddle with his iPod and then resumed pelting the tire, seemingly amused by the dull sounds and unpredictability of the ricochet.

“Sometimes I think he’s just a typical teenage boy, like all his friends. But some days I think it’s worse. Like he really needs help, you know?” Emily looked at her husband and waited for agreement.

“He’s just a normal kid, Em.”

Emily gathered and tucked a disobedient rope of hair behind her ear. “Not all kids get suspended, let alone kicked out of school.”

“Maybe not, but maybe this is exactly what he needs. Even if he doesn’t know it. A chance to start over.”

They were both still looking in Zach’s direction, but neither really saw him anymore.

Thomas was remembering the first signs of trouble. They received a phone call reporting that Zach had teased a Hispanic student to tears during English class. The next call came a few weeks later, which led to a three-day suspension. Zach had made fun of a student for crying during P.E. and pushed another boy for trying to defend him. The pushing counted as a second offense, and combined with his original transgression

meant the county's "Three Strikes, Three Days" bullying policy went into effect.

Zach survived the second semester, at least without any formal punishment, and had a long summer to think about how much more difficult high school would be. But before the new school year's waxy smell had faded from the gymnasium, before anyone had forgotten their locker combination or gotten a report card, Thomas and Emily received another phone call. Zach was suspended for soaking another student's biology textbook in a lab sink overnight.

Zach came home from school angry and stayed that way for days. When he wasn't grouching at his parents, he was so locked into his video games the house could have collapsed around him and he wouldn't have noticed until the power went out.

A week later, Thomas's one-man construction company had finally caved to a year of pressure and gone bankrupt. Calls for kitchen renovations and backyard decks were so rare he got more wrong number calls than new clients. Soon letters and voicemails from the bank came more frequently, as did calls from collections agents, the IRS, and the insurance provider. Thomas had angry suppliers, at least three customers with unfinished jobs, and one subcontractor threatening more than a lawsuit.

The misfortune collected over their heads like a violent weather system and wiped the Alexanders from the map. They'd

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been lifted from the community they'd loved and dropped in the town of Woodbrook—America's Friendliest Small Town.

Thomas looked at his watch and groaned. "We're late. We gotta get the truck back, or we pay another day."

Emily called to Zach and Charlee, who were now exploring the side yard and remnants of what looked like a garden. "Time to work, kids."

Thomas pulled the trailer keys from his pocket and held them out for Emily. "Welcome home?"

"Yes." She took the keys and steeled herself. "Welcome home."

# 4

## Someone Always Sees You

Charlee sat on a rotting railroad tie and picked at weeds that fought for life through narrow black holes. They'd been in 27 Homes a week and she'd only met a few other children.

On Monday, a girl offered her a cigarette that she claimed to have stolen from the outside pocket of her uncle's fishing waders.

On Wednesday, a younger girl so shy she couldn't utter a word besides her first name approached Charlee. Filled with joy at having a conversation with someone besides her cranky brother, Charlee overreacted with a hundred questions; the girl turned around and slugged away.

"Nice meeting you," Charlee called out from behind, but she wasn't really sure if it qualified as a meeting or not.

On Thursday, a boy Zach's age noticed Charlee's white-and-pink Reebok's and asked if she was rich. When she didn't

answer right away, he said, “That’s what I thought, new girl,” and sauntered off.

Charlee’s mother kept her promise to give the kids a full week off before starting school. Her dad began work the Monday after they arrived, and Charlee hadn’t seen him much since. He was gone when she woke up, and he didn’t walk back in the door until almost bedtime. She didn’t know exactly where he was working, just that a man picked him up every day and they drove to a warehouse where they picked up big sheets of rock and hung them in houses other people were building.

She’d asked for a story the night before when he poked his dusty head in her room at bedtime. He promised that when they were settled—“really, finally settled”—Mason’s adventures would return.

After a week, Charlee thought she knew the neighborhood layout like she’d lived there forever. The trailers closest to the main road were the nicest, she’d noticed, and the people who lived in them drove the nicer cars that made less noise and spat less smoke when they drove by. *Their trailers also seem much wider*, she thought, and she imagined they must have looked like mini-palaces inside. The trailers by hers were just okay, not bad, and definitely nicer on the outside than the six that sat on the short dead-end road with the ugly dirt and gravel mountain at the end with grass growing from it. She’d seen kids playing King of the Hill there, and she watched from the road’s entrance, standing bravely in the middle of the street, hoping

they'd see her and invite her to watch or be a judge or a referee, but they hadn't.

The older people lived in the trailers along the big bend in the main road and they were friendlier. Three ladies at one of the trailers sat on a wooden deck a foot off the ground with no railings and rocked all day in the kind of rockers Charlee had seen at Cracker Barrel. They waved when she walked by, no matter how many times she'd passed by and no matter how much time had ticked by since her last appearance in their eye line.

Charlee spun around on the railroad tie and began plucking long dandelions from the ground. When she'd picked every one within reach, she stood and picked another nearby patch clean. Soon the bouquet was too big for her hand. She sorted through it, tossing the limp, fading ones to the ground and placing the longest and brightest dandelions in a line atop the railroad tie. The moment reminded her of her Grannie Alexander's funeral two summers earlier and, for just a second, she felt like an awkward mourner all over again.

She sat back down and remade her bouquet. Her mother had gone "to fill out applications," she'd said before she left. Zach was inside playing video games and hogging the only television they still owned. It was really a computer monitor, but her dad had found a way to watch television on it. He said that the previous family had paid for too many months on accident so the Alexanders would be getting free cable, whatever that meant.

Her father was working a different job. Her mom called it a side-job and said he would be working a lot of those on the weekends for a while. Charlee wished she had a side-job for him, too.

Charlee looked across the wide field behind their trailer and saw a sea of dandelions she figured would take a whole month to pick. The field grass was bushy and thick in spots and bald in others and looked like her old elementary school principal's head. On the far edge of the field, she noticed the woman with the sports car and the big house at the end of the street was outside at her clothesline.

She'd seen the woman before and waved at her whenever she drove by their trailer on her way out of the neighborhood. Charlee had asked her mother for permission to knock on her door and say hello, but her mom said no.

“Charlee Alexander, you do not, under any circumstances, have permission to knock on her door or any other door in this neighborhood. I worry enough that you walk up and down the road.”

Charlee picked another handful of dandelions and inched toward the edge of their backyard until she found a perfectly flat tree stump. The podium made her look a foot taller and feel at least ten feet more important. She lifted the bouquet above her head, and with her other hand, she took off her glasses and put them over her heart. She closed her eyes and imagined herself winning a beauty pageant or an Olympic gold medal.

The early October weekend breeze stiffened, and she put

her glasses back on. When she could focus again, she saw that the old woman across the field had stopped to watch her. And though Charlee couldn't hear her, it looked like she was clapping.

She hopped off the award's podium and waved to the woman. The woman waved back in an exaggerated circle and Charlee waved again. The woman also waved her arm again, but this time the greeting turned into an invitation, and she seemed to be calling Charlee over.

Charlee jogged to her trailer and looked in a back window to the living room. Zach was exactly where he'd been an hour ago, sitting on a beanbag held together with duct tape and cradling an Xbox controller in his lap. She could have asked him for permission to cross the field, but lately Zach's favorite saying had become "Quit bothering me."

So she didn't.

She turned away from the window and crossed back through the yard toward the field. She stepped over a fallen fence that had been on the ground for so long, she thought parts of it looked stuck in the ground, as if the earth had gotten sick of supporting it and swallowed up the railings out of spite.

She began crossing the field, pausing to pick only the longest of the dandelions and adding them to her second bouquet. When she found one fuller than another, she tossed the imperfect flower aside and replaced it. Charlee promised herself that no matter what, when she got to the woman's yard, she

would obey her mother and not knock on the woman's door if she went inside.

She prayed the woman wasn't thirsty or tired.

The clothesline woman had gone back to pulling clothes and setting them in a plastic basket. By the time Charlee reached the edge of the woman's own lawn, marked, she assumed, by big red stones that lay flat with the grass, the woman had nearly emptied the line.

Charlee stood on a stone and smiled at her. She was close enough now to read the woman's apron: *Make yourself at home! Please start with the dishes.*

Charlee smiled even bigger.

The woman smiled back.

"My name is Charlee Alexander."

"Hello, Charlee Alexander. My name is Marva Ferguson."

Charlee took a step forward. "Most people just call me Charlee."

Marva smiled again. "And most people call me Miss Marva."

Charlee took two more steps. "I like that."

"Me, too." Miss Marva took the wooden clothespins she'd been collecting in her apron and began pinning them back onto the thin rope line. Miss Marva held several out toward Charlee. "Would you like to help?"

Charlee nodded, set her bouquet down on one of the stones, and finished her slow approach. She arrived at Miss

Marva's side, took the pins from her, and pinched one onto the line.

"Have you ever done this before, Charlee?"

"No, ma'am. We've never had a clothesliner before."

Miss Marva giggled. "My. That's a shame, isn't it then."

"We've always had a dryer. Until now. We don't have a dryer anymore."

"You don't?" Miss Marva handed Charlee another handful of pins and motioned to the second of the three lines.

"We did have one. At our old house. We sold it at the yard sale."

"I see."

"Mom took our clothes to a laundry place last night. She said they had dryers there so we wouldn't need one of our own."

"Your mother sounds very smart," Miss Marva said.

"She's super smart."

The two new friends remained quiet a moment, and Charlee didn't notice that Miss Marva was removing pins already on the line with one hand, putting them in one pocket, transferring them to the other, and handing them to Charlee to replace on the line.

"How long have you been in Woodbrook?"

"Exactly one week. We moved in last Saturday."

"I see."

"Do you have kids?" Charlee asked after another short pause.

"I do. I have one. A son."

“Does he live here?”

Miss Marva grinned. “No, I’m afraid not. He lives there.” She looked up to the sky and then back to meet Charlee’s eyes.

“Heaven,” Charlee said.

“That’s right. You’re super smart, too.”

“Thank you. And I’m very, very sorry, Miss Marva.”

“He’s been there a long time, so don’t you worry.”

When Miss Marva moved to the third line, Charlee darted back to the row of red stones and reassembled the dandelion bouquet. She appeared in front of Miss Marva and extended the flowers. “These are for you—for your son.”

Miss Marva dropped the remaining pins in one of her apron pockets and took the dandelions. Her voice cracked when she tried to speak, so instead she put the bouquet to her nose and inhaled deeply. Then she tried again. “They’re just . . .” She smelled them once more. “They’re just beautiful.”

Charlee smiled and admired her work. *Miss Marva is right*, she thought. *They are beautiful.*

A comfortable quiet lasted several minutes as Miss Marva retrieved an oversized clothespin from one of the other lines and used it to bind her bouquet of dandelions. Charlee watched with curiosity as Miss Marva disappeared into the back door of her home and returned a minute later without the flowers.

Miss Marva and Charlee spent half an hour making a game of spacing the pins at exact intervals across all three lines. They chatted about Zach and the Alexanders’ move to Woodbrook,

and Miss Marva explained the letter J fishhook design of the neighborhood.

“So that’s your home there?” Miss Marva pointed. “So you’re on the main road in. That’s the shank; that’s what people here say. And the side road with the trailers and the dirt pile? That’s the barb—you know, like on a fishing hook.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I live here all by myself on the point. On the end of the hook.”

Charlee couldn’t wait to share the fishing map with her parents that night, and she hoped more than ever that her father would be home before bedtime.

Charlee shared what she’d learned about her neighbors so far, which wasn’t much, and Miss Marva told her to be extra kind to the three ladies in the trailer on the bend in the hook.

“Two of them are quite sick,” she said. “They don’t have a lot of waves left in them.”

Charlee confessed that she was feeling lonely in the neighborhood, and that despite her efforts, she felt as if the other kids didn’t even see her.

“You shouldn’t feel that way,” Miss Marva said. “I’m sure they saw you.”

Charlee shrugged, and, like a tank low on fuel, they both seemed to tire, sputter, and run out of things to say and clothespins to rearrange.

“You want to know a secret before you go?” Miss Marva leaned down.

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“Sure!”

Miss Marva cupped her mouth with both hands and whispered in Charlee’s ear. “Are you ready?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Someone *always* sees you.”