

The Good Things In Life

by
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Mr Pike was old fashioned courteous. He liked the etiquette of being properly dressed for all occasions, opening doors for ladies, having the correct conversation for the correct situation. He was a charmer with a clear conscience and a good heart. He was well into his eighties now but every weekday he would dress himself in a suit and tie and amble off on his errands. Monday, Wednesday and Thursday he went to the community centre for some civilized chat and dominoes. Tuesday he did his shopping and paperwork. Friday he helped out at the church with anything they might need of him. And at the weekends he cooked up a great big pot of curry goat and rice and peas and received visitors. They always came. Dropped in as if out of the sky. People he was very close to and people he hadn't seen for years. Everyone knew they could drop in on Mr Pike and have a very nice time indeed.

One Saturday Mr Pike had the pot cooking and was informally dressed in an open necked shirt. He liked informality at the weekends. He laughingly called it 'letting his hair down'. He laughed hard because he had very little hair left now. The doorbell rang and off he went to welcome the first visitor. There at the door stood Sister George from the church. She had never visited him before so he was a little surprised to see her now.

'Sister, Sister! What an honour. Come in, come in,' beamed Mr Pike. Sister George did as asked.

'Mornin' Missa Pike,' she sang, her voice had a lovely sing-song tune to it. She was Trinidadian. 'I hope you don't mind me bringing a young friend with me.'

At that moment Mr Pike saw a sulky looking Asian boy of about twelve sloping around behind Sister George.

'This is Sundeep,' said Sister George, 'he lives in the flats across the way.'

'Come in, come in,' said Mr Pike, 'can I take your coats?' And so the weekend began.

It didn't take Mr Pike long to realise that Sundeep was not a happy soul. He was rather rude, and extremely sullen.

'What kind of things do you like to do young man?' Mr Pike asked.

'Nothin'' answered Sundeep barely looking up.

'You like football?' asked Mr Pike.

'No,' mumbled the boy.

'Music. You must like music. My grandson burns my ears off with his drum and...what is it?'

'Bass,' said Sundeep with a sullen smirk.

This boy tired him out and they'd only been here for ten minutes. They didn't stay long but when they were leaving Sister George sent Sundeep on ahead.

'Can I have a word Missa Pike?' she asked.

'With great pleasure,' said Mr Pike with a small bow.

'The boy is unhappy. His parents they...they are troubled people. I met Sundeep at

work.’ She paused.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what line of work you are in Sister,’ said Mr Pike.

‘Social work, Missa Pike. The things I see, it would break your heart’.

Mr Pike nodded knowing that her tone carried a lot of experience.

‘I was thinking the boy needed a role model, a mentor, someone to show him the good things in life,’ continued Sister George.

‘Sounds like a good idea Sister,’ agreed Mr Pike.

There was a pause while Sister George fixed Mr Pike with a patient stare.

‘Me?!’ said Mr Pike genuinely shocked. ‘What would I say to him? I’ve never done anything like that before. Besides there are sixty years between us if not more’.

‘Exactly,’ said Sister George, ‘You are a good man Mr Pike, everyone knows that.

You live your life as you wish to and you treat no one worse than yourself. You could help him.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mr Pike, doubtful.

‘Neither do I,’ said Sister George, ‘but he’s only twelve and he’s worth a shot wouldn’t you say?’

Mr Pike couldn’t disagree. And so it was decided, Sundeep would visit Mr Pike a couple of times a week, starting Monday.

Monday was a disaster. Mr Pike cancelled his trip to the community centre thinking the boy would be very bored with all the old folks.

‘Tell me a little about yourself, Sundeep,’ said Mr Pike when the boy turned up in a grubby sweatshirt and torn trousers.

Sundeep said nothing.

‘I want to get to know you,’ he continued.

Sundeep glared at him.

I tell you a bit about me, you fancy that?’ he asked desperate to communicate with this child in some way. Sundeep didn’t respond. So he told him all about growing up in Jamaica, about coming over on the boat in the forties when he was a young man. About going to work in a factory where he was the only coloured man in the place and the celebrity he gained from just being different. He talked about his job in the vegetable trade and the advancements that were made because of him. He told him of his kids, his dear wife and his grandchildren. Sundeep said nothing but Mr Pike could tell that he was listening. ‘What do you think of that then?’ asked Mr Pike smiling at his memories.

‘S’boring!’ said Sundeep rudely.

Mr Pike was exhausted when Sundeep left, all that misery, all that rudeness, what a way to live. He was actually glad the boy had gone.

Mr Pike continued seeing Sundeep every week. He didn’t feel he made much progress

but he had promised Sister George he would try and Sundeep kept turning up so they continued. But after a month Mr Pike was getting very frustrated. He decided that he would take Sundeep to the community centre for once and at least he could have a little fun while the boy sulked.

‘Clarence!’ called Mr Lloyd, ‘Haven’t seen you here for ages!’

‘Been looking out for a young man,’ said Mr Pike with a big grin, as he pointed to Sundeep.

‘Hello young fellow,’ said Mr Lloyd. Sundeep said nothing. ‘Not a talker then?’

Sundeep said nothing.

‘Sit here’ said Mr Pike getting the boy a chair. Sundeep sat down. Then Mr Pike and Mr Lloyd carried on as usual chatting and laughing their way through a very friendly but competitive game of dominoes.

On the way back to Mr Pike’s flat, as they waited at the bus stop, Sundeep finally spoke. It was the first time he had volunteered anything.

‘How long you know Mr Lloyd?’

‘About two years I suppose. Why d’you ask?’ said Mr Pike.

‘My dad doesn’t behave like that with anyone.’

‘What do you mean son?’ asked Mr Pike knowing from his clenched fists that this was costing the boy a lot.

‘All that laughing and chatting like you actually enjoyed each other’s company. All those stories and stuff...’ Sundeep stopped.

‘Did you like it?’ asked Mr Pike.

Sundeep nodded. He kept his head down to hide the tears in his eyes but Mr Pike could see.

‘We’ll go next time you come as well. Maybe I can teach you dominoes. Would you like that?’ asked Mr Pike.

Sundeep nodded, his head still down.

Mr Pike’s heart felt heavy. It was wrong that such a small boy should have to be so angry just to get through the day. He understood now that it was just a way to protect himself and to deal with the disappointment in his life. Tentatively Mr Pike put a big arm around the boy’s shoulders as they waited for the bus. He felt Sundeep shuffle up closer and lean into the hug. He was a kid. He needed people to listen to him that was all. When the bus came they both got up from the bench.

‘You can trust me you know,’ said Mr Pike.

‘Yeah,’ said Sundeep, and with that they got onto the bus and everything was different for them both.