

THE VOLUNTEER

The boy stood on his tiptoes so he could see over the counter at the nurses' station. When the charge nurse saw him, she stopped writing and smiled warmly.

"Good morning," she said.

"Hi," he said, still straining to see. "Anything I can help with today?"

"Why yes, as a matter of fact," the charge nurse said. "Room 124, Mrs. Applebaum."

The boy beamed. He was always so delighted to hear that someone needed his help.

"I'll go see her," he said, skipping down the hallway, his sneakers squeaking on the tile. The charge nurse watched him go, still smiling, shaking her head in amazement.

Room 124 was eerily silent. Most rooms had the TV on, but not this one. The boy heard nothing except Mrs. Applebaum's slow breathing and the quiet *beep, beep, beep* of the machine monitoring her vital signs. Was she asleep? He wasn't sure. He closed the door behind him, just in case.

Mrs. Applebaum wasn't sleeping, just resting her eyes. When she opened them, she saw a small boy sitting on the edge of her bed, grinning at her.

She frowned—in surprise, not displeasure. "Do I know you?" she asked, her voice cracking with dehydration.

He gave her a lopsided, gap-toothed grin. "No," he said. "I'm here to talk with you for a while, if that's okay. I volunteer here sometimes."

"Aren't you a little young for a volunteer?" said Mrs. Applebaum.

"How old do you think I am?"

She looked him over a moment. "I'd say... nine or ten."

He shook his head. "Nope, I'm older than that."

"What's your name?"

"You can call me Jack."

What a funny little boy, Mrs. Applebaum thought. "My grandson's name is Jack." She smiled at him. It was a tired smile. She always felt so very tired these days.

"How old is your grandson?" the boy asked, crossing his legs as he turned to face her.

“My Jack is... no longer with us. He was about your age when he...” She couldn’t say the word.

The boy seemed to catch on. “Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry.” His smile flipped into a sad frown.

“It’s alright, dear, it was a long time ago. Come to think of it, you even look like him.”

Again, the frown flipped. He was smiling again. “So he *was* handsome. I thought so.”

Mrs. Applebaum laughed, causing the wires and clips and tubes all over her to shake and rattle. The boy couldn’t help but smile and laugh with her. Her laugh sounded like autumn leaves crinkling.

“What sort of volunteer work do you do around here, Jack? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“I just visit with patients who haven’t had any visitors for a while. It must get awfully lonely in a place like this.”

“That it does,” she said, doing her best to keep her smile intact. Truth be told, the loneliness was agonizing at times, but he didn’t need to know that. She liked his smile much better than his frown.

“Would you like to play a game? Maybe cards or checkers? I know most of the games the old people like to play,” the boy asked.

Again, she laughed. He’d said it without disrespect or mockery. To him, she must look older than the pyramids. “Not just now, dear, but thank you. I’m so very tired.” She was even more tired than usual. With each word she spoke, she felt a little sleepier.

“Do you wanna play the wish game?” he asked.

She opened her eyes. She must have closed them without realizing it. “What’s that, dear?”

“It’s pretty simple. We just take turns saying what we’d wish for, if we could have anything.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

The boy grinned again. “It’s a good way to get to know each other a little better, since we don’t have a lot of time. You go first.”

Mrs. Applebaum thought for a moment. It was getting hard to focus. “I wish

I had a hot meal cooked in my own kitchen instead of the slop they serve here.”

The boy was quick on the draw with his wish, like an old-west gunfighter. “I wish I had unlimited ice cream, and that I would never get sick from eating too much.”

“That sounds like two wishes,” Mrs. Applebaum said, eyeing him suspiciously.

He huffed and crossed his arms. “I think it’s perfectly reasonable to combine them.”

“I wish they’d mute this machine, with its infernal beeping,” she said, gesturing weakly at it.

“I wish I could have a dog, I’ve never had one.”

Mrs. Applebaum closed her eyes. She fell silent for a long time. When she finally spoke again, her voice was hardly a whisper. “I wish I could see my family again.” The boy didn’t answer. When she opened her eyes, he was smiling at her again. He seemed unable to resist poking his tongue into the gap where one of his adult teeth hadn’t come in yet—he’d done it several times.

“I wished that you’d get your last wish,” he said.

“You’re a nice boy,” she said, “spending your time with grumpy old ladies on a Saturday.”

It was Thursday, but he didn’t point that out.

“I think you will,” he said, placing his small, unblemished hand on top of her larger, wrinkled one.

“Will what, dear?”

“See your family again.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek. “Thank you, Jack, for coming to see me,” she whispered. “It’s been so long since anyone came to see me.”

“You look sleepy, Mrs. Applebaum. You can take a nap if you want.”

“Yes, that sounds nice,” she mumbled. “Will you stay a bit longer?”

“I sure will,” he said. He sounded farther away, but he was still holding her hand. She tried to open her eyes to look at him, but her eyelids were so heavy.

* * *

The charge nurse and the doctor watched from the doorway as Mrs.

Applebaum closed her eyes, a thin smile on her face. Her breathing became even slower. The boy sat motionless on her bed, holding her hand, rubbing the back of it with his thumb.

The steady *beep, beep, beep* of the machine changed, becoming a single, long, steady tone.

The nurse and the doctor stepped into the room, quietly, respectfully. The nurse set Mrs. Applebaum's chart on the side table. At the top of the orange paper stapled to the front, "DO NOT RESUSCITATE" was printed in big, blocky letters. The nurse pressed a button to silence the machine.

The boy turned to face the nurse. "She's a nice lady," he said.

"Yes, she is," the nurse said. "Thank you, Jack."

The boy frowned. "Who's Jack?"

The nurse smiled sadly. "Same time tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Sure thing!"

With that, the boy became translucent, the harsh fluorescent lights shining through him. A moment later, he was gone.

"We're lucky to have him," the doctor said.

"The luckiest in the world," the nurse agreed.