

A Generous Thing To Do

By Bill Judge

"Don't you be sneaking off with any of those cookies." A large woman, Shirley Bee wore a white canvas apron to her knees. A mesh hairnet kept her thick grey hair out of her eyes and out of her cooking. "You leave those cookies for the poor people."

Busted, I didn't turn around. Instead I stuffed a large chocolate chip cookie into my mouth and chewed as fast as I could. After a 12 hour shift assisting a nurse as an aide at the hospital, I was starving. I dropped my empty cardboard boxes next to the cafeteria sink. When I was able to speak clearly, I said "And good morning to you too, Miss Sourly." I ducked before I said it.

"Miss Sourly? I'll Miss Sourly your young butt," She waved a clean, stainless steel serving spoon at me. She stuck it in an industrial sized pot of spaghetti sauce and stirred.

On an impulse, I snuck up behind her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Uh-uh. I smell those chocolate chips." She had a smile on her round face and Ray Charles on the radio.

"Any special runs today?"

"No, not today." She looked out to the lunch tables. "But since you're here early, you can help bag the cookies and set the tables."

"No problem." I snuck another cookie. I volunteered at the New Salem food pantry because it looked good on my resume and the pantry had good people. Easy as cake, all I had to do was run my route of Meals On Wheels to people on a list. I boxed up fifteen lunches, which meant, I had to fill a pre-defined Styrofoam container with a main dish, a side, two vegetables, and a dessert. Today, the pantry served breaded fish sticks, spaghetti, broccoli, salad and chocolate chip cookies.

Shirley kept an eye on me while I plunked a large cookie in each of approximately 100 baggies. With a total of three drivers, the mission served about 50 people through its Meals On Wheels program and another 50 dined inside.

I finished bagging the cookies and started to set the tables when Tom, another driver, came in. Tom was a retired mailman.

"Josh, my man," he fived me, laughed, and then worked alongside me. "Cardinals better get some good pitching."

"Yeah, I agree but I don't think I have the time to spare."

"Hah! Listen to the hot shot, hee, hee". Tom grinned, wrinkled around his eyes. "How's school? Almost done?"

"Another semester."

"You two better quit jawing and get the lead out of your dead butts."

"Listen at you, girl" Tom chuckled. He pointed at me, "It's Josh, all Josh."

"Hey now, leave me out of it." I wasn't getting in between them. Tom adored Shirley, and everybody knew it.

"You in it." Tom spoke to me but looked at Shirley.

"Hush you two and get moving." She threw her arms out and shushed us off with her hands.

I boxed my lunches and lugged them out to my old red Jeep Cherokee. A true gas hog but I loved it in the winter. Charley Johnson began my stops. A retired blues guitarist, he would still be playing on a stage except for the arthritis in his fingers. He had the voice and, when he played for me, he still wrung tears out of his scuffed up guitar. My feet pounded up the stone steps to his half of a red brick, two storied flat. I knocked on the door and rang the bell at the same time. Charley's hearing had faded from the years he rocked in front of an amp.

"Charley!" I called out, "it's Josh. Time for lunch." I had to knock again. One of his neighbors peeked out.

"Who's there?" I heard old Charley's muffled voice.

"Josh!" I piped up. It was getting cold. I heard Charley working at the door locks. "It's me, Charley."

The door opened a couple of feet. "Hey, hey, it's Josh." Charley had a gravelly voice even on his best days.

"Time for lunch Charley." I handed him the box.

"Come on in and set."

"I wish I could but I can't. I gotta go deliver to the other people but I'll make you my last stop some time this week, ok?" I raised my voice loud enough to hear across the street.

"Yeah. That be good." Charley held his box.

"Take care Charley."

"Yassir, you too. Thank you. It's a generous thing you do," Charley rumbled as he closed the door.

I heard the locks clicking as I hustled down the steps on my way to the next stop.

Florence Clay shuffled to the door and took the box from my hands. We didn't talk much and that was ok. She said thanks like a mouse squeaks.

Most of the elderly lived alone and welcomed a visit. But I didn't have time to dawdle. I wanted the hot part of the meal to be warm for the others. Most of them thanked me so often that it embarrassed me. I did so little. I loved them all. Except for Gloria Biermann.

What did the old writer say? "The best of times, the worst of times." I dreaded going to her home. The guy who drove the route previous to me said she was one of the last white women in the Northside neighborhood and also one of the most ornery. He wished me luck and said I'd need it. I asked why and he said wait and see.

While it was obvious that she disliked me, she had devised a few little tricks to keep me from leaving once I stopped. She'd guilt me to get her medicine from the pharmacy, bring her a hot pack, a cold pack, an afghan from the kitchen, or some anti-inflammatories from the bathroom cabinet. Always another job and never a kind word.

When I couldn't stand it any longer and I put my hand to the doorknob to leave, she always asked if I would be back. At first, I said yes out loud but that encouraged more conversation so I took to doing a nod.

As I turned onto the block to her home, I wondered what I would encounter as I stopped before her grey shake-sided house.

I ran up the steps and knocked on her door. "Miss Biermann. Lunch." I waited. And knocked again. I knew she could hear me. "Miss Biermann!" One of her cats jumped up on the inside of the front window sill and scared the heck out of me. I believed old lady Biermann bred cats and kept every single one. Her house had an awful urine-y smell and I think she tried to cover it with mothballs. The window cat purred between the yellowed lacy curtains and the glass. Its pink button nose blew a little cloud on the pane. Gritting my teeth, I rang again.

At last I heard movement at the door.

"Don't be in such a hurry."

I couldn't tell if she was talking to me or to one of her cats because the door was still closed. The wind screamed and froze my face.

"It wouldn't kill you to speak clearly."

She must have meant me. Cats can't talk but, then again, I hadn't said anything.

"Miss Biermann. It's Josh with your lunch!"

"It's about time. Don't they teach you kids anything about being punctual?"

I rolled my eyes. No use arguing through a closed door.

Finally I heard a metallic click and then another and then the doorknob turned just a little and the door jiggled but didn't open. Another jiggle. Another. "Hold on!" This time I was sure she yelled at me and not at some stray cat.

"Should I push the door?"

"Yo," she gave a muffled response.

So at the next jiggle, I gave a push and swoosh...I almost knocked her down! She tumbled backwards. All I could see was a shapeless body in a flowered house dress falling to the side. "Help! Help!" She screeched. I grabbed for her arm and, at the same time, dropped her lunch all over the porch. My heart raced. I squeezed tightly onto her arm.

"Are you trying to kill me?" She stared at me wild-eyed like I was in an insane asylum. And maybe I was.

"Sorry," I said with a big breath.

She cried when she saw her lunch. "How could you?"

How could I what? Bring her lunch every day without a word of complaint? My irritation with her itched like a bad case of poison ivy. I just wanted to get out.

"I'm sorry," I said again though disingenuous at best.

She curled her lip at me like Clint Eastwood in a granny dress.

"There's tuna in the kitchen in the closet. It was supposed to be for my cats."

I didn't move.

"There's a can opener in the drawer under the cabinet next to the closet. Can't miss it unless there's something wrong with you."

"You want me to open a can of tuna for you?"

She frowned at me. "Of course. I have to eat. I don't have a lunch now, do I?"

A thought just occurred to me. Mr. Fielder hadn't been home so I had another in the back of my jeep. "'Hold on, Miss Biermann. I have a lunch. Let me bring it to you.'" I didn't wait for her reply.

She was still standing when I returned. I handed her the box and helped her to a chair covered with a thin, old green spread and three cats. I shooed them with my hand. The thick smell of urine and cats reeked everywhere. Old newspapers and red antique coffee tins cluttered her living room. I moved some of the trash with my foot as I gently settled her in the chair.

"Here you go, Miss Biermann."

"Here I go what?"

"You're sitting." I said, confused. "Your lunch."

"You expect me to eat here."

"Well, I thought that's why you sat down."

"I sat down? You pushed me into the chair."

Oh my gosh. I shrugged. "Where do you want your lunch?"

"The kitchen?" Another crazy, goggle-eyed look. "That's where people usually eat."

"Ok." I managed to squeeze between my teeth. I put one of my hands under her elbow and helped her up. She padded into

the kitchen. I stood out of the way and that's when I noticed the back of her house dress. She was wet. Oh no, not that.

"Miss Biermann." She looked up from her lunch. How could I ask without a fight? "Did you wet your dress?"

She acted like she didn't hear me. Inured to that routine at the hospital, I ignored her resistance. Now she had stepped on my turf. I started again but with more firmness, "Miss Biermann..."

"No!" She snapped like a gator.

I almost jumped back. "Are you sure? Can I help you?" Not firm anymore, she shook the wind out of my sails.

"No. Go." She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. "You've done enough already." Miss High Almighty.

I stood there eyeing her. She sat there daring me. What could I do? I couldn't take her dress off if she didn't want me. But I had to try again.

"I'll help you."

"No." Sharp as a hunting knife.

"Well then, I guess I'll go now."

"Yeah. Good. Okay." She eyed me again.

I turned and left. I should have been relieved that she didn't find something that would keep me there.

I didn't need to return to the kitchen. I drove to my tiny apartment, showered and went to bed. I had the night shift again.

When I passed through the doors of the pantry the next day, I walked in on a conversation. Miss Shirley paid me no mind as I snatched a cookie.

"We in the hole?" Tom asked as he picked up utensils and placed them on a cart.

"Oh child, we been in the hole since I started. What I'm saying is, we can count our time in days and not years."

"What you talking? They ain't gonna close this place. Been here sixty years."

"That's what I heard."

"At least, long as I remember." Tom shook his head. "Who you heard that from?"

"Pastor Wilkins was talking with Miss Charlotte."

"And that was exactly what he say?"

"Near enough."

"They ain't gonna close it, Miss Shirley."

"Uh-uh, we'll see. Times are tough. I ain't saying we the last thing people think about when they do the Lord's will but we ain't the first neither."

Tom rolled the cart to the tables and started setting. Wrinkles cut across his forehead as he thought about what was

said. I helped him but we didn't talk. It wasn't the time to complain about an incontinent patron.

I thought about old lady Biermann while I packed the lunches into my jeep. I couldn't make Charley my last stop. Her stop would take the longest. Charley's face drooped with disappointment. I blamed the bidy.

"Miss Biermann!" I called out after I rang her bell. I also knocked on the door. This time a white and black cat darted across my shoes, onto the winter grass and then around the side of the house. "Lunch!"

Nothing. Not a darn thing. I blew on the fingers of my free hand and then rang the bell and knocked.

"Miss Biermann!" I heard the door. Something pushed against it and then I heard the click of the locks. Once again she had trouble turning the knob but after three tries, the door opened a crack.

"Lunch," I said through the slot.

She must have turned away from the door because it creaked open just a little more but no farther. I waited before I entered, just to be safe. A sandy brown tabby stuck its head through the opening. I pushed the door open and smelled the urine right away. Miss Biermann sat in her chair.

"Should I leave it in the kitchen?" But I rushed past her before she answered. When I returned to the front room, she still hadn't moved from her chair. The smell gagged me and it wasn't urine.

"Miss Biermann," I patted her hand and she opened her eyes. "Are you alright?" Her eyes were bloodshot and her unwashed grey hair hung lankly around her face. I took her pulse. It seemed ok although it was a bit weak. Her skin was cool. I looked up into her face. She smiled. Creeped me out. She must have had a bowel movement and it made her lightheaded.

I had to clean her up. I couldn't panic. With a deep breath, I gathered my wits. I couldn't do nothing but then I couldn't do anything without some kind of permission, so I punched the pantry's number. Nobody answered. Great. I tried again but no luck. I had my nursing supervisor's number and called her.

Fortunately Lucy answered. I explained my predicament. God bless her, she drove right over. By then the witch stirred and showed a little coherence.

"Come on, Miss Biermann, let's go to the bathroom." I helped her walk like I helped so many at the hospital and situated her on the toilet. The doorbell rang so I left to let Lucy, my RN, in. I led her to the bathroom.

Lucy made sure Miss Biermann braced her hands on the sink and the tub and talked calmly and slowly to her. She explained

what we were going to do. Lucy pulled down her underwear but left the clean up job to me while she added some notes to a clipboard.

I managed to get the soiled underwear off the floor with a single finger. My insides roiled.

"Miss Biermann, we need you to get down and then lean over the tub. I need to clean you up."

She understood and the maneuver was easier than I thought it would be. I looked for a wash cloth and then rinsed it in warm water. I lifted her dirty underwear into the toilet bowl. My stomach retched. I discretely pulled up the back of her dress and wretched. I held my breath for two minutes at a time and then had to pant like a dog. But I also kept wiping. I had her sit on the toilet. While Lucy checked her vitals again, I weaved my way to her bedroom to get a clean house dress and another pair of underwear. I returned to dress her and clean myself up.

Lucy completed her report. Somehow she had weaseled Miss Biermann's doctor's name and told her that she would be calling. Then Lucy left for the evening shift.

I helped the old lady to the kitchen chair next to her lunch.

"Feel better?"

She nodded but she didn't open her box. To my consternation, she appeared to drift again.

"Miss Biermann, lunch time." I tried to get her attention.

"I know that." Her color returned. She looked up at me with those old lady eyes that told me to go to blazes. I shook my head.

"You need to go to the doctor, Miss Biermann. Do you have a home nursing program?"

She nodded.

"When do they come?"

"They come."

I waited for the rest of the words but she wasn't saying. "I'm going to talk to the pantry. Ok? I need to tell them what's been going on."

"Do what you need to do."

I wrote a note and while writing I thought I heard, "and I do what I need to do."

"I'll tape this on the fridge for your home nurse. Can you make sure they see it?" I had written my name and number.

She nodded again.

I used a magnet to keep it on the fridge door. "I gotta go now."

She nodded.

I stood there just looking at her. She ignored me, like nothing ever happened, opened her lunch and began eating. I shook my head and left.

Despite feeling sick as a dog, I had to go back to the pantry to make a report. I hung my head out of my window while I drove. The cold air slapped me and cleared the smell. I swore I would never go back there. I couldn't be her nurse without her permission and it put me in a bad position. Something had to be done.

"Is Miss Charlotte in?" I asked Shirley as soon as I walked in the door. She had been talking with Tom.

"That's what I get? No 'Hi Miss Shirley?'"

"I'm sorry. I'm just upset."

"Nope. Not yet." She waited for me to speak. They both waited. Tom must have already known.

"Miss Biermann needs help."

"Yesss, we know that's right."

"I mean I can't do it."

Shirley looked at me unsympathetically. She nudged closer to Tom. "What do you mean, you can't do it? You leaving us?"

"I'm thinking about it." I set my face like granite.

"Might not matter."

"Matters to me."

"Hold on. I thought you just said you thinking about leaving. Now you saying 'matters to me'. What is it?"

"Uggh," I shook my head in frustration. "Don't do this. I just had the worst time at Miss Biermann's. She messed herself and I had to clean her up." I made a face. "The big one," I added.

"What? You think you da only one? Sugar, I been wiping behinds all my life."

"I don't mean babies," I huffed.

"Me neither sweet cheeks. I had my daddy's pap and granny live with me til the day they die."

Tom nodded in agreement.

"But," I protested.

"But nothing. You get your butt in here." She lifted a finger to make her point. "When you drive next?"

"Not for two days." I had two days off because I had classes.

"You get in here. It will be alright. We'll be lucky if we be open. So you just get in here."

When I showed up to deliver, Miss Shirley gave me a smile and put me to work. After I loaded the last of my lunches, I went in to get my coat.

"Good thing you here. This might be the last week for us."

"What do you mean?"

"They closing us this week, maybe next. Soon. Pastor Wilkins is trying to scrape some money to keep us going."

"Oh Miss Shirley." I went to give her hug.

She pulled back. "Ain't no time for tears. You just get in that car and take care of those folks."

I had to put Charley off once again and left Miss Biermann last. As I climbed the steps near the sidewalk, I could see two lunch boxes torn and scattered on her porch. I rang her bell and knocked. I called out several times but she never answered. Concerned, I jiggled her door but found it locked. I checked around back. She had a side door, just behind her backyard fence. Locked out, I could look in and saw a paneled wooden door directly in front of me and a small section of the kitchen. One of the cats padded across the linoleum. I knocked at that door but no answer. She was always home. She had no family.

I tried the back door and it too was locked. I could only see into a small porch, completely full of old newspapers, a few coffee cans, and a couple of white, chipped kitchen chairs. A cellar door was on my left with a padlock through a latch. I tried the lock anyway and had some luck. Whoever snapped the lock hadn't fully engaged it. I lifted the wooden door and stepped down to the basement door and opened it with a creak.

The basement housed papers, chairs, junk, cans and cobwebs. Her washer and dryer stood against a wall under the wooden stairs that probably rose just in front of the side door. The air tingled with mold and dust and I sneezed. I couldn't hear any movement upstairs. I called out again, "Miss Biermann," but I had no answer. I climbed the steps and opened the door. "Miss Biermann, it's Josh, Meals on Wheels". No answer.

My nose burned from a sulfurous smell. She must have had another accident. She wasn't in the kitchen and I kept saying her name. I passed through the dining room and saw the back of her head, slumped to a side, in the chair with the green throw.

Breathing through my mouth to lessen the smell, I had a bad feeling about her. "Miss Biermann."

I crossed to the front of the chair and faced her. She was stone cold dead. I didn't have to take her pulse to know but I did anyway. Dropping her wrist with a sense of rigidity, I guessed that she must have passed away over a day ago and probably more. Maybe she had died the last time I left.

She had defecated and the smell was gruesome. I called the police, waited until they came and opened the front door for the officers. It took a while to explain what I was doing in the house but the cops let me leave. In my defense, there was no foul play, not even a hint of it.

I was glad to get out of there. The air was toxic. I didn't clean her up. I figured the coroner would take care of that.

When I returned the next day, Shirley was peeling carrots.

"Hey, there's Mr. Sunshine."

"Oh, not today, Miss Shirley."

"What's the matter? Girl trouble?"

She had the biggest question mark squishing her face that I had to laugh at the irony. "No, no." I straightened up. "Miss Biermann died."

"She did? God bless her." I wondered how Miss Shirley knew the patrons when she always worked in the kitchen.

"I was there."

"When she died? That's a blessing from heaven, you know? Old folks passing and you right there to help 'em."

I didn't want to get into that. Too much like God talk.

"No, she must have died at least a day before I got there. Who else delivered her lunches?"

"I don't know. The pastor got somebody."

"He just left the boxes on the porch."

"He did no harm."

"No, I guess he didn't."

"Not like this." Shirley shoved some posters into my hands and told me put them on the doors. I flipped one around and read it. The pantry was closing, temporarily, in less than a month.

"Oh, Shirley." I stepped toward her.

"Now don't go getting all soft. We got work to do," and she returned to her cooking.

She was right. I went ahead and delivered and then stayed late with Charley Johnson. I idly wondered if Charley had any money from the records he had made.

He was popular in his time and he still sold some records. He gave me one of his old vinyls. I played it for a friend of mine. She loved the blues and his music amazed her. She actually rode with me to meet old Charley who had a new job - as a matchmaker.

A week before the pantry was due to close, I came in to do my route, and Shirley was not in the kitchen. She was always in the kitchen Tom stirred the sauce but he understood my confusion.

"She's talking with Miss Charlotte. Maybe they let us go early."

"Maybe."

Neither one of us wanted it to end like that. Especially Tom, because of because of the soft spot he had for Miss Shirley. Our hearts had hit bottom and we didn't think we'd ever look up. I leaned against a wall and watched him stir in silence.

"Tom!" Shirley came bursting through the doors with a smile on her face, her arms open and her big chest heaving. "You never guess what, Tom!"

"What's that baby?" Tom's head lifted.

"Rich!" She said with almost no breath, "we rich! Not we but the pantry. The pantry is rich, we open." She hugged Tom. Buried him really with her big bosom. When she decided she didn't want him to die with his face in her chest, she turned and smiled at me.

For some reason, I thought of Charley. Maybe he did have some money. She kept staring at me.

"What?" Bewildered and ecstatic all at the same time, I blurted, "What happened?" I couldn't wait to hear about him.

Miss Shirley ignored me and kissed Tom. When she finished kissing him, she said, "It's Miss Biermann." She heaved, unable to breathe another word.

"Miss Biermann?" I said. The old biddy, I thought.

"She had money everywhere. Even stuffed in coffee cans, Miss Charlotte say. And her will," she breathed. "Her will. She left us almost a million dollars. Can you believe it Tom? She a rich old woman."

She kissed him again. "We'll be open a hundred years." She turned a little. "Do you know why?"

She looked at me. Her deep brown eyes pierced me. "Because of you, Josh."

"Me?" It was crazy talk.

"Her will read that the young man at the pantry was the only one who ever paid attention to her." She smiled at me, "what a generous thing to do."

I had a hard time returning her smile. And her hug.

Shocked, really. I knew the way it had been between Miss Biermann and me.

In shaming me, she was her old self, sour as a lemon, and a sharp old shrew, but that day she made me change. She made me really look at myself. And the way I thought about others. That was a generous thing to do.