

The Lantern Tree

Stories that help good hearts grow

by Vamsi Kandala



One hundred stories about kindness, honesty, respect, courage, and hope, written for young readers and teenagers, and for the people who read with them.

The Lantern Tree

Stories that help good hearts grow

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How this book was made

The text was drafted with the assistance of Claude, an AI assistant made by Anthropic, and was selected, arranged, and edited by Vamsi Kandala. The cover illustration was created by computer code written for this book.

Disclaimer

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The stories and the guide are meant to start conversations about character and values. They are not professional, medical, psychological, legal, or safety advice. If you are concerned about a child's wellbeing or safety, please contact a doctor, a school counselor, another qualified professional, or your local emergency services.

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Dedication

For my parents and my grandfather, whose quiet lessons in kindness and respect became the seeds of this book — and for the teachers who shaped my school years. Thank you for everything you gave so generously.

Before you begin

These stories were written to be read aloud, shared, and talked about. In each one, a character faces a small, real choice: to be patient or to hurry, to keep something or return it, to laugh along or to speak up.

None of the characters is perfect, and that is on purpose. Character is built from ordinary choices, and one of the best ways to practice choosing well is to watch someone else struggle with the choice first.

For parents and teachers: read one story at a time and stop at the questions at the end. There are no wrong answers, and the best conversations often start with “What would you have done?” The age ranges are only a guide. Younger readers will enjoy Part One, teenagers will find more complicated situations in Part Two, and Part Three is for everyone. There is a short guide for grown-ups at the back of the book, with reading tips, a list of stories by theme, and a year of family reading nights.

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Part one: Stories for younger readers

About ages 5 to 10



1

Grandpa's Slow Walk

Respecting elders, and the gift of patience

Every Saturday morning, Mira and her grandfather walked to the market together. Mira was seven, and she did everything quickly. She ate quickly, ran quickly, and talked so quickly that her words sometimes tripped over each other. Grandpa Joseph was seventy-nine. He walked with a wooden cane, one careful step at a time.

"Come on, Grandpa!" Mira would call, skipping ahead and then stopping to wait with her arms crossed. "The market will be finished before we get there!"

"The market has never finished before I arrived," said Grandpa with a smile. "It's very polite that way."

One Saturday, Mira was so busy sighing that she almost walked straight past the old fig tree at the corner. Grandpa stopped. "Look up," he said quietly.

Mira looked. Tucked between two branches was a tiny nest, and inside it were three pale blue eggs. A mother bird sat on a nearby twig, watching them both.

"I have passed this tree for forty years," Grandpa whispered. "Every spring, she comes back."

Mira had walked past that tree a hundred times and had never seen it.

At the market, Grandpa stopped at every stall. He asked Mrs. Alvarez, the fruit seller, about her husband's sore knee, and he listened to the whole answer, not just the first part. Mrs. Alvarez pressed two sweet oranges into Mira's hands. "For the girl with the fast feet," she said. Then Grandpa showed Mira how to choose a good melon: tap it gently, listen for a deep hollow sound, and smell the end where the stem used to be. Nobody had ever taught Mira that before.

On the way home, Mira noticed that she had stopped skipping ahead. She was walking beside him, matching her steps to the tap of his cane.

"Grandpa," she said, "I think when you walk slowly, you see more."

"Ah," said Grandpa Joseph. "I wondered how long it would take you."

The next Saturday, Mira was the one who said, "There's no hurry, Grandpa." And she meant it.

What this story teaches

Older people have lived through many more days than we have, and they carry knowledge that no book or screen can give us. Respecting elders means more than saying "please" and "thank you." It means being patient with their pace, listening to their whole story, and being willing to learn from them.

Think about it

1. What did Mira learn by slowing down?
2. Is there an older person in your life whose stories you have never really listened to? What could you ask them this week?
3. When do you rush past things that might matter?

2

The Umbrella at the Bus Stop

Small kindnesses that matter

It was raining so hard that the puddles had puddles. Tomás stood at the bus stop under his big red-and-yellow striped umbrella, the one his uncle had brought back from a faraway trip. It was his favorite thing in the whole world.

Beside the bus stop sign stood a girl he had seen in the school hallway but had never spoken to. Her name was Lin, and she had moved to town only two weeks before. She had no umbrella. Her jacket hood was soaked through, and she was hugging her backpack to keep it dry.

A few of the older kids glanced at her and then looked away, the way people do when they aren't sure what to do.

Tomás thought, *If I share, my shoulder will get wet.* Then he remembered his first day at swimming lessons, when he didn't know a single person and the pool had felt as big as an ocean.

He walked over and held out the umbrella. "There's room for two."

Lin blinked at him. "Are you sure?"

"It's big," said Tomás. "My uncle says it's built for a whole family."

They squeezed together under the stripes. Tomás's left shoulder got completely soaked, but by the time the bus arrived, they were laughing at how the rain sounded like drums on the umbrella. On the bus, Lin sat next to him.

The next morning, Tomás found a small paper umbrella on his desk, carefully folded from a page of notebook paper. Inside it was a note: *Thank you for the room.*

He kept it in his pencil box all year long.

What this story teaches

Kindness does not have to be big, and it does not have to be rewarded. A wet shoulder was a small price for helping someone feel welcome. Often we are the only person who notices that someone needs help, and that means we are the one who can give it.

Think about it

1. Why do you think the other kids looked away?
2. What helped Tomás decide to act?
3. What is one small thing you could share or do for someone at school this week?

3

Two Goats on a Narrow Bridge

Respect, humility, and making room

High in the mountains, a river rushed through a deep gorge, and across it lay one narrow plank bridge, wide enough for exactly one goat.

Biscuit lived on the east side of the gorge. Bumble lived on the west. One windy morning, both goats decided to cross at the very same moment. They stepped onto the bridge, walked to the middle, and met nose to nose.

"Move back," said Biscuit. "I was here first."

"I'm bigger," said Bumble. "*You* move back."

"I will not!"

"Neither will I!"

So they stood there. The bridge creaked. The wind blew. The sun climbed to the top of the sky and began to slide down the other side. On a post nearby, a wise old owl watched them with one eye open.

"You have been standing there for three hours," the owl said at last. "Nobody has crossed yet."

"He's being stubborn!" said both goats at once.

The owl chuckled. "That is exactly what he is saying about you."

Biscuit's tummy rumbled. He thought of his grandmother, who used to say, "*The wise goat makes room.*" He realized that giving way would not mean losing. It would mean the bridge was finally useful again.

Very carefully, Biscuit lowered himself and lay flat on the plank. "Step over me, friend," he said.

Bumble was so surprised that he forgot to be angry. He stepped gently over Biscuit's back, and then Biscuit stood up and crossed to the other side.

From the far end, Bumble called back, "Thank you! Tomorrow, I will be the one to lie down."

And the next day, he was.

What this story teaches

Pride makes every path harder, for everyone. Being willing to give way is not weakness. It takes strength and confidence. When we respect each other, we look for a way that works for both of us, instead of trying to be the winner.

Think about it

1. What did each goat lose by refusing to move?
2. Why was it hard for Biscuit to be the first to give way?
3. Can you remember a time you and someone else were both "stuck on the bridge"? How did it end?

4

The Purse on the Bench

Honesty when no one is watching

Kofi was nine years old, and he was walking home from school with his sister Ama when he saw a little red purse lying on the bench outside the bakery.

He opened it, only to find out who it belonged to. Inside was a thick fold of bills, more money than Kofi had ever seen, and a photograph of a smiling girl with two missing front teeth.

He looked up and down the street. Nobody was there.

“Finders keepers,” Ama whispered. “We could buy the football you want. We could get Mama new shoes.”

Kofi’s heart pounded. He really did want that football. But he kept looking at the girl in the photograph. He pictured whoever had lost the purse, patting her pockets, hurrying back along the road, hoping and hoping.

“Somebody is looking for this right now,” he said slowly. “It isn’t ours.”

They carried the purse to Mr. Mensah, the baker, who knew everyone in the neighborhood. Within minutes an old woman came hurrying down the street, out of breath, her eyes red. She was Mrs. Okafor, and she had been saving for months to pay for her granddaughter’s school books and uniform.

She held Kofi’s hands in both of hers and could hardly speak. She tried to give him some money as a reward, but Kofi shook his head. “It was yours,” he said.

“Then at least take this,” said Mr. Mensah, and he handed each of them a warm loaf of bread.

That night Kofi ate his supper and slept better than he had in weeks. “It wasn’t the bread,” he told Ama the next morning. “My heart just felt light.”

What this story teaches

Honesty means doing the right thing even when nobody would ever find out. Behind every lost thing there is a real person who needs it back. When we choose honesty, we protect other people, and we also protect our own peace of mind.

Think about it

1. What made it hard for Kofi to return the purse?
2. Why did Kofi look at the photograph before he decided?
3. What does “doing the right thing when no one is watching” mean to you?

5

Pip and the Last Berry

Sharing and generosity

Winter came early to Hollow Wood. Snow covered the nuts and seeds, and the wind whistled through the bare branches. Pip the squirrel had stored fewer acorns than he should have, because he had spent most of the summer playing.

One frosty morning, under a holly bush, Pip found a single red berry, shining like a tiny lantern. His stomach growled loudly. He opened his mouth to gobble it up, and then he heard a snuffle.

Behind a fallen log sat Nettle the mouse, thin and shivering. Next to her was Fern the hedgehog, who had slept late and could not find her food store anywhere.

Pip looked at the berry. Then he looked at the two hungry faces. The berry was hardly big enough for one, never mind three.

“What if we share it?” said Pip.

He bit the berry carefully into three small pieces. It was not nearly enough to fill anyone’s tummy. But the three friends sat close together to keep warm, and as they nibbled, they began to talk. Nettle remembered a hollow log full of beechnuts. Fern knew a sunny slope where the snow melted first and the roots were easy to dig. Pip knew where an old oak had dropped its acorns.

By evening, all three of them had enough food to last the week.

When spring came, Pip found a small green sprout growing beside the log, right where the berry seed had fallen. It grew into a thick bush, and every winter after that, it fed the whole wood.

What this story teaches

When we share, what we have does not get smaller. Sharing brings friends closer, and it often opens doors we never knew were there. One generous choice can grow into something much bigger than we could have imagined.

Think about it

1. Why do you think Pip decided to share instead of eating the berry himself?
2. What did the three friends gain besides food?
3. What is something you have that you could share with someone?

6

The Girl Who Said Sorry

Apologies, forgiveness, and fixing what we break

Anya and Dev raced each other home from school every single day, and every single day, Anya won. Dev didn't mind, because he had a much bigger plan. All week he had been building a kite with a green dragon painted on it, and on Saturday it would fly at the town festival.

On Thursday, for the very first time, Dev won the race.

Anya's face grew hot. When they reached Dev's porch, the kite was leaning against the railing, its dragon shining in the sun. Before Anya could stop herself, she gave the kite a hard push. It fell down the steps with a crack, and the wooden frame snapped in two.

Dev's face crumpled. Anya ran all the way home.

That night she couldn't eat her dinner. She told herself that Dev might think it was the wind. But the thought sat inside her like a stone in her pocket, and it got heavier every hour.

On Friday, Dev didn't say hello at school. His eyes were red. At lunch, Anya walked over to his table with shaking hands.

"Dev, I broke your kite," she said. "I did it on purpose, because I was angry that you won. That was wrong and it was mean. I'm really sorry."

Dev was quiet for a long time. "I worked so hard on it," he said.

"I know. I would like to help you fix it, or make a new one. I can bring my paints."

Dev looked at her, and then he nodded slowly. "Okay. The dragon could use a friend anyway."

They spent all of Friday afternoon and Saturday morning building two kites, one green dragon and one blue. The kites were not perfect, but both of them flew. And as Anya watched them dance above the festival, she noticed that the stone in her pocket was gone.

What this story teaches

Saying sorry is hard because it means admitting we were wrong. But hiding a mistake only makes it heavier. A real apology says what we did, does not make excuses, and offers to make things right. And forgiving someone is a generous gift too.

Think about it

1. What do you think the "stone in her pocket" stood for?
2. What made Anya's apology a good one?
3. Has someone ever forgiven you? How did it feel?

7

The Garden That Grew Slowly

Patience and steady effort

Ravi was eight years old, and he wanted a giant sunflower by his birthday. His birthday was in twelve days, so he planted seeds in a clay pot on the porch and watered them carefully.

On day one, he watered the pot. On day two, nothing happened. On day three, nothing happened again. On day four, he got so impatient that he dug up one of the seeds to check on it.

“Nothing is happening!” he told his grandmother. “These seeds are broken.”

Nani, who had been watching from her rocking chair, patted the seat beside her. “Come here, Ravi. Do you know what a seed does under the soil?”

“Nothing?”

“It does almost everything,” said Nani. “First it grows roots, down in the dark where nobody can see. A plant that hurries up into the light without strong roots falls over in the first wind. The quiet part is the most important part.”

Ravi gently pushed the seed back into the soil. From then on, he did only one thing every morning: he watered the pot and walked away.

On day nine, a tiny green curl poked through the soil. On day twelve, his birthday, there was no giant flower, only a small, wobbly seedling. Ravi tried to hide his disappointment.

“Look at it again in the summer,” said Nani, smiling.

By August, the sunflower was taller than Ravi, with a face as big as a dinner plate, turning to follow the sun. Ravi taped a note to the side of the pot. It said: *Roots first.*

What this story teaches

Almost everything worth having grows slowly, and often out of sight at first: reading well, playing an instrument, making a true friend. If we dig up our effort every time we are impatient, we never give it the chance to grow. Keep watering, and trust the roots.

Think about it

1. Why did Ravi dig up the seed on day four?
2. What is something you are growing “under the soil” right now, like a skill or a friendship?
3. What could help you stay patient with it?

8

Bo Keeps His Promise

Keeping our word

Bo the bear cub had made a promise. On Saturday morning, he would help Hedgehog carry water from the river to her garden. “Big bucket or small bucket, whatever you need,” Bo had said, pressing his paw over his heart. “I promise.”

On Saturday, Bo woke up at sunrise and stretched. He was just about to leave when he heard a voice calling from the meadow. It was Fox, who was always full of mischief and good ideas.

“Bo! The honey festival has started early at Bee Hill! There’s a giant honeycomb for whoever gets there first. Come on!”

Bo’s tummy did a happy flip. Honey was his favorite food in the whole wide world. He took two big steps toward Bee Hill, and then he stopped.

He thought of Hedgehog, standing by her garden gate on her tiny legs. He thought of her heavy bucket. Last week she had carried the water all by herself, and her garden was still thirsty.

“I can’t come,” said Bo. “I promised Hedgehog.”

“She’ll understand,” said Fox. “She can find someone else.”

“Maybe she would,” said Bo. “But I told her *I* would come.”

Fox shrugged and scampered off toward the honey. Bo turned around and trudged down to the river.

He and Hedgehog made twenty trips together, one big bucket and one small bucket at a time. By noon, the whole garden was drinking. The mint smelled fresh, and the tomato plants stood up straight.

“I thought you might not come,” said Hedgehog, wiping her forehead. “Everyone always has something more fun to do.”

“I said I would,” said Bo simply.

Hedgehog handed him a jar of her sweet blackberry jam. Later that afternoon, Fox came back with a sticky nose and a sad face. “The honeycomb was gone in five minutes,” he groaned. “I only got one lick.”

Bo laughed and opened his jar of jam. It wasn’t honey, but he decided it was the second-best thing in the world.

What this story teaches

A promise is a piece of trust that we hand to someone else. They build their plans on it. Keeping a promise when something more exciting comes along shows that our word can be counted on, and trust is built from small promises that we keep.

Think about it

1. What tempted Bo to break his promise?
2. Why did it matter so much to Hedgehog that Bo came?
3. Is there a promise you have made lately that you still need to keep?

9

Tea for Mama

Gratitude for the people who care for us

When Ruhi came home from school, the apartment was very quiet. Her mother was asleep on the sofa, still wearing her work uniform, with her shoes on and a bag of groceries beside her feet.

Most days, Ruhi would have shouted, “I’m hungry!” before she even closed the door. But today she stopped. She looked at Mama’s face. She had never noticed the little lines beside her mother’s eyes, or how tired her hands looked.

Every evening, Mama made tea for Papa when he got home. Ruhi had watched her do it a hundred times. *I could make tea for Mama*, she thought.

She was not allowed to use hot water by herself, so she tiptoed to her big brother’s door. “Arun,” she whispered, “will you help me make tea for Mama? I’ll do everything except the hot water.”

Arun looked up from his homework and grinned. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

It was not the neatest tea in the world. Ruhi spilled some sugar on the counter and put in three spoonfuls instead of one. The biscuits on the plate leaned against each other like sleepy friends. But Ruhi carried the cup to the sofa with both hands, walking very slowly so that nothing would spill.

Mama’s eyes fluttered open. She saw the cup, then Ruhi’s serious little face, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Who did this?” she asked softly.

“I did,” said Ruhi. “You do so many things for us every single day, Mama. I wanted to do one thing for you.”

Mama took a sip and tried very hard not to make a face. “This,” she said, “is the best tea I have ever had.”

After that, Ruhi and Arun made “Tea Day” every Friday. Sometimes they folded the laundry too, or set the table before anyone asked. Mama always said that the tea was too sweet, and she always drank every drop.

What this story teaches

The people who love us do many things every day that we never notice: cooking, cleaning, working, worrying. Gratitude begins when we notice. And it grows when we turn that noticing into something we do, even if it is small and a little messy. It is also wise to ask for help when a job is not safe to do alone.

Think about it

1. What made Ruhi see her mother differently that afternoon?
2. Why did Ruhi ask Arun to help, and was that a good decision?
3. What is one thing you could do this week for someone who takes care of you?

10 The Stream That Sang

Caring for the world we share

Behind Willow Lane School there was a little stream that sang. The children said so, and it was true. When the water tumbled over the round pebbles, it made a sound like a hundred tiny bells. Everyone called it the Singing Stream.

Then came a summer of picnics and windy days. A plastic bottle rolled into the water. A chip bag blew in after it. Then a shoe, a straw, and a crumpled paper cup. By September, the stream did not sing anymore. It only gurgled, tired and brown, around the litter.

“Somebody should clean it,” said Wen, kicking a stone.

Their teacher, Mr. Oyelaran, heard him. “‘Somebody’ is a funny name,” he said. “It belongs to a person who always means to help and never does. What if we were Somebody?”

The next Saturday, twelve children arrived at the stream with gloves and buckets. Some of them wrinkled their noses. Lili held her bag at arm’s length. But soon they were racing to see who could find the most, and someone discovered an entire bicycle tire, and everyone cheered.

By lunchtime, they had filled nine big bags. The pebbles were shining again. Lili painted a wooden sign and hung it by the water: *Please help keep our stream singing.*

For a few weeks, nothing seemed to happen. Then one afternoon, Wen knelt by the water and held his breath. A tiny silver fish flashed past his fingers. And beneath the sound of the wind, he heard it: the small, bright bells of the stream, singing again.

What this story teaches

Nature cannot clean up what we leave behind. When we say “somebody should,” we forget that we can be that somebody. A small group of people with gloves and buckets can change a whole place. The earth is a home that we all share, and we are all responsible for looking after it.

Think about it

1. Why did Mr. Oyelaran say that “Somebody” is a funny name?
2. What small thing could you do to care for a place near your home or school?
3. How did the children make the work fun instead of a chore?

11 The Storm in Leo's Chest

Handling big feelings

Leo had a storm inside him. It did not come often, but when it did, it came fast. His cheeks grew hot, thunder rumbled in his ears, and his hands curled into fists all by themselves.

One morning in class, Leo spent a long time building a tall tower of colored blocks. It was the tallest he had ever made. Then Marco ran past, bumped the table, and *crash*, the whole tower fell.

The storm rose in Leo's chest. He stood up. He was going to shove Marco. He could feel it in his arms. But he remembered something his grandfather had told him. "When the storm comes, don't fight the wind, Leo. Be the tree. Plant your feet, and breathe."

So Leo pressed both feet flat on the floor. He breathed in slowly, pretending to smell a flower, one, two, three, four. Then he breathed out slowly, pretending to blow out a candle. He did it three times.

The storm did not disappear. But it got smaller, and Leo could think again.

"Marco," he said in a wobbly voice, "I'm really upset. You knocked over my tower. Please say sorry."

Marco's face went red. "It was an accident," he said. "I wasn't looking. I'm sorry, Leo. Can I help you build it again?"

They built it together, and it ended up even taller than before.

That night, Leo told his grandfather about it. "The storm came," he said, "but I didn't let it drive."

His grandfather smiled and hugged him. "That is exactly right."

What this story teaches

Feeling angry is normal, and it does not make us bad. What matters is what we do next. When we pause, breathe, and use our words instead of our hands, we stay in charge of ourselves. And if a storm feels too big to handle, we can always ask a grown-up for help.

Think about it

1. What does Leo's "storm" feel like in his body?
2. What three things did Leo do to calm down?
3. What helps you when you feel a storm coming?

12 The Giant Pumpkin

Working together

In the middle of Farmer Nell's garden, a pumpkin had grown so big that it looked like a small orange house. It was ready to be picked, but it sat in the mud, far too heavy to move.

Rabbit tried first. She pushed with all her might, but her little feet slipped. "It won't budge," she panted.

Then Mole tried. He was strong in the shoulders, and he pushed until his nose turned pink. The pumpkin rocked, but only a tiny bit. "Too heavy for me," he groaned.

Turtle had been watching from inside his shell. He was the slowest of them all, but he was also the wisest. "Maybe," he said, "the trouble is that we are all trying alone."

So they made a plan. Wren, the tiny bird, flew a long vine over a high branch to make a rope. Mole used his strong claws to dig a little ramp in the mud. Rabbit, who was quick and light, ran ahead to clear away the pebbles. And Turtle stood in front and called out, "One, two, three, *push!*"

They all pulled and pushed at the same moment. The pumpkin wobbled. It rocked. Then it began to roll, slowly at first and then faster, all the way across the garden to the barn door.

Farmer Nell clapped her hands when she saw it. That evening, she baked a pumpkin pie so big that there was a slice for every animal in the garden. They all agreed it was the best pie they had ever tasted, and it tasted best because they had shared the work.

What this story teaches

Nobody is good at everything, but everybody is good at something. When we put our strengths together, we can do what none of us could do alone. Teamwork means listening to each other's ideas, doing our own part, and celebrating together.

Think about it

1. What job did each animal do?
2. Why did the pumpkin not move when each animal tried alone?
3. Can you remember a time when you and others did something hard together?

13 The Teacher Who Waited

Respecting and thanking our teachers

Deven was seven years old, and reading was hard for him. The letters on the page looked like tiny wiggling worms. When the other children read out loud, their words flowed like water. When it was Deven's turn, his face burned and his voice stuck.

He started to believe he was not smart. He started to have stomachaches on mornings when there was reading.

His teacher, Mr. Ferreira, noticed. One afternoon he said, "Deven, I have ten free minutes after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Would you like to read with me?"

Deven wanted to say no. He was embarrassed. But on Tuesday, his feet carried him to the classroom anyway.

Mr. Ferreira did not correct every mistake. He did not sigh or check his watch. He simply sat beside Deven and waited. Sometimes he read one line, and Deven read the next. Sometimes they just looked at the pictures and talked about them. Mr. Ferreira always brought a cup of tea, and it always went cold because he was so busy listening.

Week by week, the worms on the page began to look like words. One line became two lines. Two lines became a page. And one Thursday afternoon, Deven read a whole page without stopping.

Mr. Ferreira clapped so loudly that the janitor peeked in to see what was happening.

At the end of the year, Deven made a card. It showed a tall teacher with a huge cup of tea. Inside he wrote, *Thank you for waiting for me.*

Mr. Ferreira read it twice, and then he put it on his desk where he could see it all year.

What this story teaches

Teachers give us their time, patience, and care, often far beyond what they are required to do. Respecting them means listening, trying our best, and saying thank you. And it is a brave thing to accept help when something is hard for us.

Think about it

1. Why do you think Deven had stomachaches on reading days?
2. How did Mr. Ferreira make Deven feel safe?
3. Which teacher has helped you, and how could you thank them?

14 The Shadow on the Stairs

Being brave when you are scared

Mina was seven years old, and she was afraid of the stairs at night. At the top of the staircase there was a dark corner, and in that corner stood a tall, hunched shadow with long arms and a pointy hat. Every night she ran past it with her eyes squeezed shut.

One evening, Mina woke up very thirsty. Her glass was empty, and the only water was in the kitchen, at the bottom of the stairs.

She sat on the edge of her bed with her heart thumping. She remembered something her grandmother had said: “Fear is like fog, Mina. It looks solid, until you walk toward it.”

So she picked up the little flashlight from her nightstand. She took a deep breath and opened her door. One step. Then another. She held tightly to the railing.

The shadow was there, tall and hunched. Mina’s knees wobbled. But she kept walking, and when she was close enough, she turned on her flashlight.

The beam of light landed on a big brown coat and a pointy hat, hanging on a hook. It was Papa’s.

Mina laughed a shaky little laugh. Then she walked down the stairs, drank a big glass of water, and walked back up. The coat did not move at all.

The next morning, she told her grandmother everything. “I was scared the whole time,” she said.

“That is exactly what being brave means,” said her grandmother. “It is not that you are never afraid. It is that you take a step anyway.”

What this story teaches

Courage does not mean having no fear. It means taking one small step even when we are afraid. Sometimes fear is just a coat on a hook in the dark, and shining a light on it, or talking to someone we trust, can make it much smaller.

Think about it

1. What did Mina’s grandmother mean by “fear is like fog”?
2. What helped Mina take the first step?
3. What is something that scares you, and what small step could you take toward it?

15 The Blue Shovel

Standing up for someone else

In the sandbox at the park, Zoe was building a big castle with her favorite blue shovel. She had spent the whole morning digging the moat.

A bigger boy named Rex strolled over. Without saying a word, he grabbed the shovel out of her hand. "I'm using this now," he said.

Zoe's lip began to tremble. She didn't say anything. She just looked down at her empty hands.

Omar was building a tunnel nearby, and he had seen everything. His heart started to thump. Rex was much bigger than he was. But he remembered what his older sister always said: "Being brave is speaking up when something isn't fair."

Omar stood up. His voice shook, but he spoke anyway. "That's Zoe's shovel. You have to ask her first, and she can say yes or no."

"So?" said Rex, frowning.

"So we can all take turns," said Omar. "There's another shovel in the bucket."

Rex looked into the bucket. There was a red shovel at the bottom. He shrugged, dropped the blue one in the sand, and took the red.

Zoe looked up at Omar and smiled. "Thank you," she whispered.

After a while, Rex wandered back. He looked at the castle. "Um, can I add a tower?"

Zoe looked at Omar. Omar said, "Ask nicely."

"Please can I add a tower?" said Rex.

"Yes," said Zoe. And three children built the castle together.

What this story teaches

Standing up for someone can feel scary, even when it is something small. A calm voice and a fair idea can be very powerful. Often the person who was being unfair will follow when someone shows them a better way. And if a situation feels unsafe, it is always right to get a grown-up.

Think about it

1. Why do you think Zoe stayed quiet?
2. What did Omar say that helped, and what did he not say?
3. How might you help someone who is being treated unfairly?

16 The Lunchbox Fair

Respecting differences

At Maple Grove School, lunchtime was Kiran's favorite part of the day, until the Tuesday that Mia leaned over and wrinkled her nose. "What is *that*?" she asked, pointing at his lunchbox.

Kiran looked down at the golden rice and lentils his grandmother had packed. It smelled like home, like warm spices and Sunday mornings. Until that moment, he had never thought of it as strange.

"It's just my lunch," he said quietly. But when the other kids giggled, he put the lid back on and didn't eat a single bite.

Their teacher, Ms. Lopez, noticed the full lunchbox on its way home that afternoon. She thought about it all evening. The next morning, she wrote on the board: *Friday: The Lunchbox Fair! Bring a small dish from your home and be ready to tell us about it.*

On Friday, the classroom table was crowded. There were Tomás's warm tortillas, Mei's steamed buns, Aisha's sweet dates, and Jonah's macaroni and cheese. Each child stood up and told the story of their dish: who made it, and when they ate it, and why it mattered to their family.

Mia went last. She had brought peanut butter sandwiches. "My dad makes them every Saturday," she said, "and we eat them at the park." Everyone said that sounded wonderful.

Then came the tasting. Mia hesitated in front of Kiran's rice and lentils. Then she took a small spoonful, and her eyes went wide.

"This is *amazing*," she said. "What's in it?"

"Turmeric and cumin," said Kiran, glowing. "My grandmother makes it."

"I'm sorry I said that on Tuesday," said Mia. "I didn't know."

"That's okay," said Kiran. "I can ask her to make extra."

Ms. Lopez smiled at them both. "Different," she said, "doesn't mean strange."

What this story teaches

People come from many different families, cultures, and traditions. Something unfamiliar to us may be deeply special to someone else. When we meet a difference with curiosity instead of judgment, we often discover something wonderful, and we make everyone feel that they belong.

Think about it

1. How do you think Kiran felt when Mia said "What is that?"
2. How did the Lunchbox Fair change the way the children saw each other?
3. What is a food or a tradition from your family that you could share?

17 The Spilled Paint

Telling the truth about our mistakes

In art class, Noor was painting a giant sunflower. She reached across the table for the brown paint, and her elbow bumped a cup of bright yellow. It tipped, and splash! A big yellow puddle spread across the new blue rug.

Noor's heart thumped. Nobody had seen. Everyone else was at the sink washing their brushes. Quickly, she dragged a chair over the stain and sat back down.

A little later, their teacher, Ms. Hale, noticed the chair sitting in the wrong place. She moved it, and she gasped. "Does anyone know how this happened?"

The room went silent. Ms. Hale looked around, and her eyes stopped on Danny, who had been standing closest to the rug. "Danny, you were near here."

"I didn't do it!" said Danny, and his ears turned bright red.

Noor's stomach twisted into a knot. She could see that Danny was about to get in trouble for something that she had done. She wanted to stay quiet. But she couldn't let it happen.

Slowly, she raised her hand. "It was me," she whispered. "I spilled it. I'm sorry. I was scared to say."

Ms. Hale was quiet for a moment. Then she knelt down beside Noor. "Thank you for telling me the truth," she said. "I know that wasn't easy. A rug can be cleaned. I'd have been much more upset if Danny had been blamed for something he didn't do."

They scrubbed the rug together with a bucket and a sponge. The yellow faded into a pale, soft patch, like a little sun hiding in the blue. Noor looked at it, and she didn't feel heavy at all.

"Thanks for telling," Danny said to her at recess.

"Thanks for not being mad," said Noor.

What this story teaches

Everyone makes mistakes. Hiding a mistake can make things worse, and sometimes it can hurt someone else. Telling the truth takes courage, but it protects others, and it helps people trust us. A rug can be cleaned. Trust is harder to repair, and that is why the truth matters so much.

Think about it

1. Why did Noor hide the stain at first?
2. What made her finally raise her hand?
3. What would you say to someone who is afraid to tell the truth about a mistake?

18 Ollie's Wobbly Tummy

Trusting our feelings and staying safe

Ollie was seven years old, and he was waiting on the bench outside school for his mom to pick him up. His school had a rule that everybody knew by heart: *Check first, go second*. It meant that you never go anywhere with someone, or take anything from someone, without checking first with your trusted grown-up.

Ollie was swinging his legs when a man he had never seen before walked up, smiling. "Hi there!" said the man. "I've got a puppy in my car. Do you want to come and see it? Your mom said it's okay."

Ollie loved puppies more than almost anything. But at the same moment, his tummy felt wobbly, the way it felt on the tallest slide.

He remembered what his teacher, Mrs. Achebe, had told the class. "Your tummy sometimes knows things before your head does. If it goes wobbly, listen to it." He also remembered something else: his mom never sent messages through people he didn't know.

"No, thank you," said Ollie, in a loud, clear voice. "I have to check with my teacher."

"Come on," said the man. "It will only take a minute."

But Ollie was already on his feet. He walked as fast as he could to the school door, where Mrs. Achebe was standing with some of the other children. He told her everything.

Mrs. Achebe knelt down and looked him in the eyes. "Ollie, you did exactly the right thing," she said. "I'm so proud of you." She took his hand and hurried him to the office, and the grown-ups took care of everything from there.

When Ollie's mom arrived, she gave him the biggest hug of his whole life. "You will never, ever be in trouble for saying no," she said. "And you will never be in trouble for telling. Not ever."

What this story teaches

Our feelings can be a kind of alarm. If something feels wrong, we can say no, even to a grown-up, and go straight to a trusted adult. Children are never in trouble for telling. It is never their fault, and the grown-ups who love them will always want to know. Remember the rule: check first, go second.

Think about it

1. What was Ollie's tummy trying to tell him?
2. Who are the trusted grown-ups you can go to if something feels wrong?
3. Why is it okay to say "no" even when someone is being friendly?

19 The Stone for Pepper

Missing someone we love

Pepper was a small brown dog with a gray chin and one floppy ear. Anika had known her for as long as she could remember. They had shared toast crusts, secrets, and thousands of walks.

One Sunday morning, Pepper did not get up to greet her at the door. Her breathing was slow and soft. Papa carried her to the car, and Anika and Mama followed. At the animal doctor's office, the vet spoke gently. Pepper was very old and very tired, and it was time to let her go. Anika held Pepper's paw until the end.

When they got home, the house felt too quiet. Pepper's bowl was still by the door. Anika went to her room, closed the door, and cried into her pillow until her eyes felt scratchy.

After a while, Mama came in and sat on the bed. She didn't say, "Don't cry," and she didn't say, "It was only a dog." She said, "I'm sad too. I miss her already."

"Does it stop?" asked Anika.

"It gets softer," said Mama. "Not all at once. But it does. And it never disappears completely, because it's the shape of how much you loved her."

That weekend, the family planted a small rosebush in the backyard under the apple tree. Anika painted a smooth gray stone with a paw print and the word *Pepper*, and she set it at the roots.

Every evening that week, Anika sat by the stone and told Pepper about her day. On the eighth evening, she found herself smiling as she remembered how Pepper used to steal socks and hide them under the couch. At dinner, she told the sock story to Papa and Mama. They all laughed. Then they all cried a little. Then they laughed again.

Anika discovered that day that laughing and crying can sit at the same table.

What this story teaches

Feeling very sad when we lose someone we love, including a pet, is natural. Grief is love that has nowhere to go. It is okay to cry, to remember, and to talk about them. Over time, the sadness softens, and sharing memories can turn some of the pain into warmth.

Think about it

1. What did Mama say that helped Anika, and what did she not say?
2. How did Anika find a way to remember Pepper?
3. Is there someone or something you miss? What is a happy memory you could share?

20 The Gray Cloud

It is okay to feel sad

Theo woke up one Tuesday with a gray cloud over his head. It wasn't a real cloud. It was a feeling. Nothing was wrong, exactly. His pancakes were fine, the sun was shining, and his shoes were where he had left them. But everything felt heavy and dull.

At school, he didn't want to play at recess. He sat on the bench by the fence and watched the others run.

His friend Sam came over. "Do you want to play tag?"

"No," said Theo. "I have a gray cloud."

Sam looked up at the sky. "I can't see a cloud."

"It's inside," said Theo.

Sam didn't laugh. He sat down on the bench. "Do you want to tell me what it's about?"

"I don't know," said Theo. "It's not about anything."

"That's okay," said Sam. "Sometimes I get one too. My mom says clouds don't need a reason. They just need somewhere to go."

So the two of them sat quietly together and watched the real clouds drift across the real sky, and Theo felt a tiny bit lighter.

After school, he told his mother, "I had a gray cloud today." She didn't try to fix it, and she didn't say, "Cheer up." She hugged him and said, "Thank you for telling me. Let's make hot chocolate and be gray together." They sat on the couch under a big blanket and drank it slowly.

The next morning, the cloud was thinner. By the weekend, it was gone.

Theo learned that feelings are like weather. They arrive, they stay for a while, and they pass. And it is much easier to wait out the weather when someone sits beside you.

What this story teaches

All feelings are okay, including sad ones that don't seem to have a reason. It helps to give a feeling a name and to share it with someone who will listen. A friend who simply sits beside us can make a big difference. If a sad feeling lasts for many days or feels too heavy, it is important to tell a trusted grown-up.

Think about it

1. Why did Sam's response help Theo?
2. What did Theo's mother do that was helpful?
3. What could you do for a friend who tells you they are feeling down?

21 The Bird on the Windowsill

Helping wild animals the right way

Rosa was eating her breakfast when she heard a soft thud against the kitchen window. On the windowsill outside lay a small brown bird. Its eyes were half closed, and its tiny chest fluttered up and down.

Rosa's first thought was to scoop it up and bring it inside. Her hand was already reaching for the window latch. But then she remembered what her science teacher, Ms. Kim, had told the class: "Wild animals get frightened easily, and we can hurt them without meaning to. If you find one that is hurt, get a grown-up and call for help."

"Mama!" called Rosa. "Come quick!"

Mama looked through the window and spoke in a low voice. "Good thinking, Rosa. Let's not touch it yet." She looked up the number for the local wildlife rescue center and called. A kind voice explained what to do: a shoebox with air holes and a soft cloth, a warm, dark, quiet room, and no food or water.

Mama put on gloves and gently placed the bird in the box. Rosa sat outside the door of the quiet room and kept still, even though she wanted to peek every two minutes.

Within the hour, a volunteer arrived. She examined the bird and smiled. "He's just stunned," she said. "He'll probably be fine after some rest."

A week later, the volunteer called. The little bird was well and ready to go home. Rosa and her family stood in the park while the volunteer opened the box. The bird sat still for a moment. Then it burst into the air, a small brown streak, and disappeared into the trees.

Rosa watched until she couldn't see it anymore. She had learned that the kindest way to help isn't always to grab. Sometimes it is to stay calm, ask for the right help, and wait.

That evening, she taped the number of the wildlife rescue center to the refrigerator.

What this story teaches

Being kind to animals means thinking about what they need, not only what we want to do. Wild animals should be handled by trained people. If we find one that is hurt, we can stay calm and quiet, get a grown-up, and call a wildlife rescue center. Caring sometimes takes patience.

Think about it

1. Why didn't Rosa pick up the bird right away?
2. What did Mama and Rosa do to help the bird?
3. Do you know who to call in your area if you find an injured wild animal?

22 Mo and the Hungry Cat

Helping animals thoughtfully

Mo noticed the orange cat behind the apartment building on a Monday. She was very thin, and Mo could see her ribs. She was staring at his bag of crackers.

Every day after school, the cat was there. Mo felt so sorry for her. He wanted to keep her. He began secretly leaving out crackers and a saucer of milk. But the cat stayed far away, and something about it didn't feel right.

Finally, he told his father. "There's a hungry cat, and I've been giving her crackers and milk."

Dad smiled and put his hand on Mo's shoulder. "Thank you for noticing her, and for telling me. That was the right thing to do. But milk can upset a cat's tummy, and crackers won't give her what she needs. Let's find out if she belongs to someone."

They made a poster with a photo of the cat and put it on the lamppost and at the corner store. They also looked closely at the cat, and saw that she had a faded collar.

The next afternoon, an elderly neighbor named Mrs. Park knocked on their door. She was out of breath, and she held up the poster with shaking hands. "That's Marmalade," she said. "She has been missing for three weeks."

When Marmalade saw Mrs. Park, she meowed and ran straight into her arms. Mrs. Park cried, and Marmalade purred so loudly that Mo could hear it across the room.

After that, Mo visited them every Saturday. Mrs. Park let him fill Marmalade's bowl with proper cat food. He learned that helping an animal is about more than wanting to help. It means finding out what the animal really needs, involving a grown-up, and checking whether someone is already looking for them.

What this story teaches

Wanting to help an animal is a good start, but it is not enough. We also need to find out what the animal really needs, get a grown-up involved, and remember that a stray animal might be a lost pet. And having a pet is a big responsibility that takes time, care, and planning.

Think about it

1. Why did Mo tell his father, even though he had wanted to keep the cat?
2. How did the poster help?
3. Have you ever wanted to help an animal? Who could you have asked for advice?

23 The Last Box

Moving away and keeping what matters

Sami's room looked strange without his things in it. The walls were bare, the shelves were empty, and his bed was just a mattress on the floor. Tomorrow the moving truck would come, and his family would drive four hours to a brand-new town.

Sami had not wanted to go. He had lived in the yellow house on Cedar Street his whole life. His best friend Leo lived next door. Sami knew which stair creaked and which corner of the yard grew the best dandelions.

Mama came in carrying a small cardboard box. "This is the last box," she said. "It's for the things that won't fit in a suitcase. The things that matter most."

The box was empty. Sami sat and held it for a long time.

Then he began to fill it. First went a smooth gray stone from the creek. Next, a drawing of him and Leo dressed as superheroes. Then a red leaf from the maple tree. He couldn't take the pencil marks on the doorframe that showed how tall he had grown, so Mama took a photo of them, and that went in too.

That evening, Leo knocked on the door with a small package. Inside was a stack of postcards. Each one had Leo's new address for Sami written on it, with a stamp already on the corner. "You have to write back," said Leo. "All of them."

The next day, in the car, Sami cried quietly by the window. Papa looked at him in the mirror. "It's okay to be sad," he said. "You're leaving something good. That's why it hurts."

In the new house, Sami put the last box on a shelf. He set the stone on the windowsill and pinned the drawing above his bed. That night, he wrote his first postcard. *New house smells like paint. There is a creek near here. I'm still figuring it out. I miss you.*

A week later, a girl on a bike stopped in front of the house. "Hi," she said. "I'm Priya. Do you want to see the creek?"

Sami looked at the box on his shelf, and then at Priya. "Yes," he said. "I'd like that."

What this story teaches

Change can make us feel sad and excited at the same time. When something good is hard to leave, it hurts because it mattered. We can carry what matters with us, in memories and in the friendships we keep up, and still be open to the new people and places that are waiting for us.

Think about it

1. What did Sami put in his last box, and why?
2. What did Papa mean by "you're leaving something good, that's why it hurts"?
3. What is something you would put in your own last box?

24 Rafi's First Day

Starting somewhere new

Rafi's tummy felt like a jar full of buzzing bees. It was his first day at a new school. He didn't know a single person, and the building looked as big as a castle.

At the gate, he held tightly to Mama's hand. His new backpack had a tag that said *Rafi* in neat letters, and he wished he could hide behind it.

Mama knelt down. "What if you look for just one friendly face today? That's all you need."

Rafi nodded slowly. He took a deep breath and walked through the door.

His teacher, Ms. Bloom, smiled and gave him a name tag. The classroom was loud. Everyone seemed to know everyone already. Rafi sat at his desk and looked at his hands.

At snack time, a girl in red boots sat down beside him. "Want half of my orange?" she asked. "I'm Junie. I was new last year too."

Rafi felt one of the bees fly away. "I'm Rafi," he said. "Thanks."

"Do you like to draw?" asked Junie. He nodded. She led him to the drawing corner, and together they drew the whole school as a giant spaceship. Rafi drew the library as the control room. Junie drew the playground as the landing zone.

By the end of the day, the buzzing had almost stopped. Mama was waiting at the gate. "How was it?"

"Scary at first," said Rafi. "Then I found one friendly face."

The next morning, he waved to Junie from across the yard. And later that year, when a new boy arrived in class looking as nervous as a jar of bees, Rafi walked over and offered him half of his orange.

What this story teaches

New places feel scary because we don't know what to expect. Taking small steps, like looking for just one friendly face, can make it easier. And once we know how it feels to be new, we can be the kind of person who welcomes someone else.

Think about it

1. Why did Rafi feel like he had buzzing bees in his tummy?
2. How did Junie help Rafi feel welcome?
3. How can you welcome someone who is new at your school or in your neighborhood?

25 Room for One More

Sharing a friend

Lila and Jo had been best friends since they were three years old. They had a secret handshake, and a fort under the big oak tree that nobody else was allowed to enter.

One Monday, a new girl named Sunny joined their class. Jo showed her the classroom hamster. At recess, Jo and Sunny played jump rope together while Lila watched from the bench.

Something hot and prickly rose in Lila's chest. That afternoon, she said to Jo, "You can't be best friends with two people. And Sunny is boring."

Jo's face fell. "That's not nice," she said quietly, and she walked away.

Lila sat under the oak tree by herself. She felt awful. Part of her knew that she had been unkind.

That evening, she told her grandmother everything. Her grandmother listened and then said, "A heart isn't a small room with one chair, sweetheart. It's more like a house with a big table. The more you love, the more chairs appear."

Lila thought about that all night.

The next day, she walked up to Sunny. "I'm sorry I said you were boring," she said. "I was scared that Jo wouldn't be my best friend anymore. Would you like to see our fort?"

Sunny grinned. "Yes, please."

Under the oak, Lila and Jo taught Sunny the secret handshake. It got a little longer with three people. By the end of the week, the three of them had a new fort-building project, and the handshake had three parts.

That afternoon, Jo whispered, "You're always going to be my first best friend."

Lila smiled. Nobody had been replaced. There were just more chairs at the table.

What this story teaches

When a friend makes a new friend, it is natural to feel left out or a little scared. But friendship is not a pie that gets smaller when it is shared. If we have said something unkind, we can own it and say sorry. Making room for one more can make everyone's circle bigger.

Think about it

1. Why did Lila say something unkind about Sunny?
2. What did her grandmother's "big table" idea help her understand?
3. Has a friend ever made a new friend, and how did you feel about it?

26 Ben's Little Helper

Patience with brothers and sisters

Ben was nine years old, and he was building a spaceship out of colored bricks for the school fair. It had taken him a week. It had a cockpit, four engines, and a tiny ladder that folded up.

His little brother Max, who was four, watched from the doorway. "Can I help?" he asked.

"No," said Ben. "You'll break it. Go away."

Max's lower lip wobbled. He didn't say anything. He just turned around and walked slowly down the hall.

Ben went back to his spaceship, but somehow it didn't feel as much fun. The room seemed too quiet. After a while, he heard a soft *click-click* from the hallway. Max was sitting on the floor, building something out of the leftover bricks. It was a lopsided little tower with one wheel on the side.

That evening, Dad sat down beside Ben. "When I was your age," he said, "my older brother, Uncle Raj, was building a kite. I begged to help. He let me tie the very last knot. I was six years old, and I still remember it."

Ben looked at the tower in the hall. Then he looked at his spaceship. He walked over and knelt down next to Max. "Hey," he said. "Do you want to build the landing pad?"

Max's whole face lit up like a sunrise.

The landing pad was crooked. It had a bump in the middle and a very wobbly stripe. Ben took a deep breath and didn't fix it.

At the school fair, a sign stood next to the spaceship: *Built by Ben and Max*. The judge smiled when she saw the landing pad. "It's the only one that has a tiny astronaut waving," she said. Max had put him there.

Ben grinned. It turned out that the best part of the spaceship was the part he hadn't built himself.

What this story teaches

Younger brothers and sisters often look up to the older ones and want to be included. Being patient with them, and giving them a real job, is a way of showing love. Working together may not always look perfect, but it can make something even better than doing it alone.

Think about it

1. Why did Ben say no to Max at first?
2. What changed when Dad told his story about Uncle Raj?
3. How could you include a younger brother, sister, or friend in something you love?

27 The Night the Screens Slept

Being together

In Nadia's house, everyone had a screen. Mama had her phone, Papa had his laptop, Nadia's big brother had his game, and Nadia had her tablet. At dinner, they were all in the same room but in different worlds.

One stormy evening, there was a loud crack of thunder, and all the lights went out. The phones buzzed, and then the batteries began to run low. The Wi-Fi was gone.

"Now what?" groaned Nadia's brother.

Papa found a box of candles. He set them in jars around the living room, and the room glowed a warm, flickering gold. "Let's see what we can do without screens," he said.

Nadia made shadow puppets on the wall. She made a rabbit, and a dog, and a very large bird that turned out to look like a shoe. Everyone laughed. Then Mama found a deck of cards, and they played until the wind stopped shaking the windows.

Then Grandpa, who lived with them, cleared his throat. "Did I ever tell you about the giant catfish?"

"No," said Nadia. She sat close to him on the couch.

Grandpa told them about a fish so big that it pulled his fishing boat across a whole lake. The story grew more unbelievable with every sentence. Papa laughed so hard that he had to wipe his eyes. Nadia had never noticed how funny Grandpa was.

When the lights came back on at bedtime, Nadia looked around the room. Nobody had reached for a phone.

"Can we turn them off again on Friday nights?" she asked.

And from then on, every Friday was Sleepy Screens Night. There were candles, and cards, and stories. Some of them were even true.

What this story teaches

Screens are not bad, but they can pull us away from the people right next to us. When we put them down for a while, we notice each other. Time together, with good stories and laughter, is something we can give each other on purpose.

Think about it

1. What did Nadia discover about her family when the screens went off?
2. What could your family do together on a "Sleepy Screens Night"?
3. What is your favorite thing to do with other people that does not need a screen?

28 How to Say Kavi

Names, respect, and standing up for yourself

On Monday morning, the substitute teacher read out the class list. When she reached the K's, she paused and squinted. "Cave-ee?" she said.

"It's Kavi," said Kavi quietly. "KAH-vee."

Behind him, a boy named Tim snickered. "Cave-y! Like a cave!" Some of the other kids giggled. For the rest of the day, Tim called him "Caveman." Kavi felt his face burn. He felt as if he wanted to shrink until he was as small as a pebble.

At home, he told his mother about it. She didn't say "Ignore them," and she didn't say "Just laugh." She sat beside him and said, "Do you know what your name means?"

He shook his head.

"It means *poet*," she said. "Your grandfather chose it. He loved words more than anything."

Kavi was quiet for a long time. Then he stood up straighter.

The next morning, before class, Kavi walked up to Tim. His heart was pounding, but his voice came out steady. "My name is Kavi," he said. "KAH-vee. It means poet. Please say it the right way."

Tim rolled his eyes, and then he saw that Kavi wasn't going to laugh it off. "Fine," he mumbled. "Kah-vee." He tried again. "Kavi."

Their teacher, Mr. Ross, had heard. During attendance, he said, "Everyone, let's practice each other's names. It's a way of showing respect." They went around the room, saying names slowly and carefully, until everyone had gotten it right.

At recess, Tim came over. "Sorry about yesterday," he said. "It's a really cool name."

"Thanks," said Kavi. And he asked Tim how to say the name on his own school folder correctly, too.

What this story teaches

A person's name carries their family, their history, and who they are. Saying it correctly is a small way of showing respect. If someone gets our name wrong, or makes fun of it, it is okay to speak up politely and firmly, and to tell a teacher or another trusted adult if it doesn't stop.

Think about it

1. How did Kavi feel when Tim teased him about his name?
2. What helped Kavi find the courage to speak up?
3. Do you know what your own name means, or the story of how you got it?

29 The Bigger Slide

Being happy with what we have

Pia loved the little red slide in her backyard. She had slid down it a thousand times. Some days it was a rocket ship, and some days it was a river, and on rainy days it was a very slippery mountain.

Then one Saturday, her family visited a brand-new playground. In the middle of it stood a giant twisty slide, three times as tall as her own, shining silver in the sun.

Pia went down it four times. When she got home, she looked at her red slide, and something in her felt disappointed. It looked small. It looked faded. It looked *boring*.

“Can we get a bigger slide?” she asked her father.

“There isn’t room in our yard,” he said gently.

For days, Pia sulked. She stopped playing on the red slide altogether. She sat on the back step with her chin in her hands and dreamed about the silver one.

Then her little cousin Omar came to visit. He was three years old, and he wobbled across the grass as fast as his legs could go. “Slide!” he shouted. “Slide, slide, SLIDE!”

Omar climbed the red slide and zoomed down with his arms in the air. “Again!” he shrieked. He went down thirty times, giggling so hard that he got the hiccups. “Best slide EVER!” he announced.

Pia watched him. And suddenly she remembered the rocket ship, and the river, and the slippery mountain. She climbed the ladder, sat at the top, and pushed off.

It was just as fun as it had ever been. It had been fun the whole time.

The next weekend, they went back to the giant playground, and Pia loved the silver slide again. But when it was time to go home, she was happy to see the little red slide waiting in the yard.

What this story teaches

When we compare what we have to something bigger or shinier, what we already have can suddenly seem small. But wanting more can make us blind to the good things right in front of us. Looking at what we have with fresh eyes helps us feel grateful, and gratitude makes almost everything more fun.

Think about it

1. Why did Pia stop enjoying her red slide?
2. What helped her see it differently?
3. Is there something you have that you could look at with fresh eyes?

30 The Café of Magic Words

Polite words and respect

At the very end of Tilly's street, where the road curved around a tall oak, there was a little café that Tilly had never noticed before. A small sign hung over the door: *The Café of Magic Words*.

The door was closed, and there was no handle. Tilly pushed it, but it did not move.

"The door opens only for a magic word," said a voice. A tiny owl in a waiter's apron was sitting on the doorframe.

Tilly thought for a moment. "Open, door?" she tried. Nothing happened.

"Not that one," said the owl kindly.

"Please?" said Tilly. The door swung open.

Inside, the café smelled of cinnamon and warm bread. Tilly sat at a small round table. When she asked for a cake, nothing appeared. But when she said, "May I have a slice of cake, please?" a plate slid across the table with a slice of golden cake. And when she said, "Thank you," the plate glowed for a moment, and a second, smaller slice appeared beside it.

At the next table, a boy knocked over his glass. "Sorry!" he cried, and the glass mended itself with a tiny *ting*. When a customer wanted to squeeze past, she said, "Excuse me," and the crowd shifted as if they were made of water.

Tilly finished her cake, thanked the owl, and stepped out into the sunshine. When she turned around to look at the café again, it was gone. There was only the oak tree.

Tilly walked home, and she thought about it. At dinner, she said, "Could you please pass the potatoes?" Her brother passed them right away, and he even gave her the biggest one. When she said, "Thank you," he grinned.

Tilly realized then that the magic had never been in the café. It had been in the words.

What this story teaches

Polite words are small gifts. "Please," "thank you," "excuse me," and "I'm sorry" show other people that we notice them and respect them. They may not open magic doors, but they open hearts, and they make the world a friendlier place.

Think about it

1. What happened in the café when Tilly used the magic words?
2. What did Tilly discover after she left the café?
3. Which magic word could you use more often at home or at school?

31 Nico Loses the Race

Being a good sport

Nico had practiced running every day for three weeks. On Field Day, he lined up for the big race, sure that he would win. He was the fastest boy in his class.

The whistle blew. Nico ran with all his might. But just before the finish line, a boy named Sam, who had been a little behind, dashed ahead and crossed the line first, by a nose.

Nico stopped. His face crumpled. His hands curled into fists. He wanted to throw his hat on the ground and stomp all the way to the school gate.

He did stomp. He kicked the grass, and then he kicked it again. His teacher, Ms. Amara, walked over and crouched down beside him.

“It’s okay to feel disappointed,” she said. “You worked hard, and it hurts to lose. But there’s something else to think about. It’s okay to be sad. It’s not okay to be unkind.”

Nico took a shaky breath. He looked across the field at Sam, who was sitting on the grass, looking a bit lost in all the cheering.

Slowly, Nico walked over. It was one of the hardest walks of his life. “Good race,” he said. “You were really fast at the end.”

Sam looked up, surprised. “Thanks,” he said. “You made me run faster. I could hear you right behind me the whole time.”

They shook hands. Nico noticed that the sting in his chest was a little smaller than before. Cheering for someone else, he realized, helped more than sulking.

The next day at recess, he asked Sam how he ran the last part of the race. Sam showed him a trick with his arms. They practiced together for the rest of the week.

What this story teaches

A good sport does not need to win every time. Feeling disappointed is normal, but how we act when we lose shows who we are. Congratulating someone else, and learning from them, helps us grow. And winning is best when we are kind about it.

Think about it

1. What did Nico feel when he lost the race?
2. What made it hard for Nico to walk over to Sam?
3. How can you show good sportsmanship when you win?

32 The Rooster Who Thought He Woke the Sun

Humility and gratitude for others

In a little farmyard, there lived a rooster named Rufus. Every morning, before the sun came up, Rufus climbed onto the fence post and crowed as loudly as he could.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” And every morning, a moment later, the sun peeked over the hill.

Rufus was quite sure he knew why. “The sun would never dare to rise without me,” he told the hens. “I call it up every day. You’re welcome.”

The hens rolled their eyes. The ducks sighed. The old cow just chewed her cud and said nothing.

One chilly morning, Rufus woke up with a sore throat. He tried to crow, but all that came out was a squeak. Feeling terrible, he went back to sleep.

When he woke again, the sun was high in the sky. The hens were scratching in the dirt. The ducks were paddling in the pond. The cow had been milked, and the farmer had already gone to town.

Rufus stared. “But I didn’t crow!” he said. “The sun came up without me!”

The old duck waddled over. “Rufus,” she said kindly, “you have a lovely crow. It wakes us all up, and we are glad of it. But the sun would rise with you or without you.”

Rufus felt his cheeks turn hot beneath his feathers. Then, slowly, he began to laugh. “Well,” he said, “I suppose I’ve been a bit silly.”

The next morning, Rufus climbed onto the fence post again and crowed. But this time he wasn’t giving orders to the sun. He was saying good morning. And all the animals in the farmyard cheered.

What this story teaches

What we do matters, and we can be proud of our contributions. But we are not the center of everything, and the world does not depend on us alone. Humility means valuing ourselves without bragging, and appreciating everyone around us.

Think about it

1. Why did the animals get tired of Rufus?
2. What did Rufus learn when he slept late?
3. What is the difference between being proud and bragging?

33 One Cookie Now, or Two Later

Patience and self-control

Grandma set a single warm cookie on a plate in front of Theo. “You can eat this one right now,” she said, “or if you can wait until after I finish watering the garden, you’ll get two cookies instead of one.”

Theo looked at the cookie. It smelled like cinnamon and melted chocolate. His mouth watered. Waiting felt like it would take forever.

Grandma picked up her watering can and walked outside. Theo sat at the table, staring at the cookie. He picked it up. He put it down. He picked it up again and sniffed it.

Just one bite, he thought. She’ll never notice.

But then he remembered something. Last week, he had waited three whole days to open a birthday present early, and when he finally opened it on the real day, the excitement had felt twice as big. Maybe waiting made things better, not worse.

He folded his hands in his lap and looked away from the cookie. He hummed a song. He counted the flowers on the wallpaper. He tried standing on one foot. The waiting was hard, but each minute felt a little easier than the one before.

Through the window, he watched Grandma move slowly down the row of tomato plants, filling her can again and again. It felt like the longest watering in the history of gardens.

Finally, the back door creaked open. “All done,” said Grandma, and she noticed the cookie sitting untouched on the plate. Her face broke into a wide smile.

She reached into the cookie jar and placed a second warm cookie right beside the first. “You waited,” she said. “That takes real strength, you know. More than most grown-ups have.”

Theo took a bite of the first cookie, and then the second, and they were, without question, the best cookies he had ever tasted.

What this story teaches

Waiting for something better, instead of grabbing the smaller thing right away, is one of the hardest and most useful skills to practice. It doesn’t always feel good in the moment. But learning to wait, for a treat, a turn, or a goal, often makes the reward even sweeter, and it builds a kind of strength we can use for the rest of our lives.

Think about it

1. What made it hard for Theo to wait?
2. What helped him get through the waiting?
3. Can you think of a time when waiting for something made it even better?

34 The Question Jar

Curiosity and asking why

On the kitchen counter in Nia's house sat an empty glass jar with a paper label that said QUESTIONS. Whenever anyone in the family wondered about something, they wrote it on a slip of paper and dropped it in.

It had started the day Nia asked, "Why is the sky blue?" and nobody at the table actually knew the answer. Instead of saying "just because," her father wrote the question on a scrap of paper and dropped it into an empty jar. "Let's find out together on Saturday," he said.

By the next month, the jar was stuffed with questions in every kind of handwriting. *Why do cats purr? How do bridges stay up? Why does bread get moldy? Where do words come from?*

Every Saturday morning, someone reached in and pulled out one slip. The family looked it up together, or visited the library, or sometimes just tried an experiment right in the kitchen to see what would happen.

One Saturday, Nia pulled out her little brother's crumpled question: *Why do onions make you cry?* They looked it up and then, laughing, chopped an onion just to test it for themselves, and everybody's eyes streamed with tears.

Nia noticed something surprising. The questions that seemed the silliest often turned out to be the most interesting once you really dug into them. And she noticed that she had stopped being embarrassed to ask things she didn't know.

One evening, her teacher asked the class if anyone had questions about the solar system. While other students stayed quiet, worried about sounding silly, Nia's hand shot straight up. She had gotten plenty of practice not being afraid of a question.

That night, she added a new slip to the family jar: *Why do stars twinkle, but planets don't?*

"Great question," said her father, dropping it in. "Saturday, we find out."

What this story teaches

Curiosity is one of the best habits a person can build. Asking "why" or "how" is not a sign of not knowing something. It's the first step to learning almost anything. A family or classroom that welcomes questions, instead of treating them as silly, helps everyone grow braver and more curious.

Think about it

1. Why did Nia's family start the question jar?
2. How did asking questions in front of others change for Nia over time?
3. What is a question you have been wondering about lately?

35 Wheels Like Mine

Including a friend with a disability

On the first day of second grade, a new boy rolled into the classroom in a bright blue wheelchair. His name was Deshawn, and he had a sticker of a rocket ship on the side wheel.

At recess, the other kids ran off to play tag on the grass. Deshawn sat by the fence and watched. His wheels couldn't go on the bumpy grass at all.

Priya noticed him sitting alone. She walked over. "Why aren't you playing?" she asked.

"My chair gets stuck in the grass," said Deshawn. "Tag is hard for me."

Priya frowned and thought hard. Then her face lit up. "What if we played on the paved court instead? And what if being tagged means touching your wheel, not just anybody?"

Deshawn grinned. "That could work!"

They gathered the other kids on the smooth blacktop. At first it felt strange to change the rules. But once they started playing, nobody minded at all. Deshawn turned out to be excellent at quick spins and sudden stops, and he tagged three kids in a row.

"You're really fast!" said a boy named Theo, laughing as he was tagged.

By the end of recess, everyone was breathless and happy, and Deshawn had a huge smile on his face. "That was the most fun I've had at a new school," he said.

"We just needed a court instead of grass," said Priya. "The game didn't need to be exactly the same to be fun for everyone."

The next day, the teacher noticed the whole class playing together on the blacktop, and she asked if she could join.

What this story teaches

Including everyone sometimes means changing the game a little, not leaving someone out. A friend with a disability isn't asking for less fun, just a fair way to join in. When we get creative and ask what would help, we usually find that everyone enjoys the new way even more.

Think about it

1. Why couldn't Deshawn play tag the usual way?
2. What did Priya do that made a real difference?
3. Can you think of a game you could change so that everyone could play?

36 The New Baby

A new brother or sister

For six years, Mateo had been the only child in his family. Then his baby sister, Luna, was born, and everything changed. Mama was always tired. Papa was always holding the baby. And nobody seemed to notice when Mateo built the tallest block tower of his life.

One evening, Mateo knocked over his tower on purpose, just to feel something crash the way he felt inside. Nobody even looked up.

That night, he told his grandmother, “I liked it better before Luna.”

His grandmother didn’t scold him. She sat down and said, “When your Uncle Beto was born, I felt exactly the same about your mother. It’s a strange, prickly feeling, isn’t it? Like you’ve been moved to the back of the room.”

Mateo nodded, surprised that she understood.

The next morning, his mother asked if he wanted to help give Luna her bottle. He almost said no. But he sat on the couch, and his mother placed the tiny warm bundle in his arms, showing him exactly how to hold the bottle.

Luna’s tiny fingers wrapped around his thumb. She looked right at him with wide, dark eyes, as if he were the most important person in the world.

“She likes you best when you feed her,” said his mother. “Nobody can do that the way her big brother can.”

Mateo felt something warm loosen in his chest. He wasn’t being replaced. He was becoming something new: a big brother, with a job that was entirely his own.

From then on, bottle time was Mateo’s time. And when Luna was fussy, he was often the only one who could make her stop crying, just by singing the silly tower-building song he had made up himself.

What this story teaches

A new baby can bring big, confusing feelings for an older brother or sister, and those feelings are normal. Talking about them helps. And often, being given a special job with the baby, something that is truly theirs, helps an older sibling feel important instead of replaced.

Think about it

1. Why did Mateo knock over his tower?
2. What helped him feel differently about Luna?
3. If you have a younger brother or sister, what is something special that is just between you two?

37 The Borrowed Bike

Taking care of what we borrow

Deja's neighbor, Mr. Hutchins, had a bicycle with a bell shaped like a ladybug, and he let Deja borrow it whenever she wanted, as long as she brought it back by dinnertime and kept it safe.

One Saturday, she rode it to the park to show her friends. While she was showing off a wheelie, the bike skidded on some gravel and scraped hard against a low fence. A long silver scratch appeared along the frame, right through the red paint.

Deja's stomach dropped. She looked around. Nobody had seen. She could park the bike in Mr. Hutchins's garage and just not mention it.

But all the way home, she thought about how kind he had been to lend it to her, and how he trusted her to take care of it.

She knocked on his door, the bike scratch in plain view. "Mr. Hutchins," she said, her voice shaking a little, "I scratched your bike. I'm really sorry. I was doing a trick I wasn't supposed to be doing."

Mr. Hutchins looked at the scratch, and then at Deja. "Thank you for telling me," he said. "A scratch can be touched up with paint. What I care about most is that you told me the truth."

"Can I still borrow it?" asked Deja quietly.

"Of course," he said. "As long as you leave the wheelies for the skate park, where there's no gravel to worry about."

The next weekend, Deja helped Mr. Hutchins touch up the scratch with a tiny brush of red paint. When she rode the bike home that evening, right on time, the ladybug bell rang the whole way.

What this story teaches

When someone lends us something, they are trusting us to look after it. Accidents happen, and what matters most is being honest about them right away instead of hiding them. Taking good care of borrowed things, and returning them on time, is a way of showing that the trust was well placed.

Think about it

1. Why was Deja tempted to hide the scratch?
2. What did Mr. Hutchins care about most?
3. Is there something you have borrowed? How did you take care of it?

38 The Gracious Winner

Winning without bragging

In the class spelling bee, Yusuf and his best friend Callum were the last two standing. Yusuf's word was "rhythm," and he spelled it perfectly. Callum's word was "necessary," and he missed the second C.

Yusuf's first feeling was a burst of excitement. He wanted to throw his arms up and shout. He had practiced for weeks.

But then he glanced at Callum, whose shoulders had slumped, and whose eyes were fixed on the floor.

Yusuf remembered how it had felt last year, when he had lost the school chess tournament and the winner had done a loud victory dance right in front of him. It had stung for days.

So instead of cheering, Yusuf walked over to Callum. "That was such a close one," he said quietly. "Necessary is one of the trickiest words on the list. You got further than almost anyone."

Callum managed a small smile. "You've been practicing with your mom every night. I saw you."

"Want to practice together for the next one?" asked Yusuf. "I bet we could both make it further."

At the award ceremony, Yusuf accepted his certificate with a simple "thank you," and then he pointed to Callum in the crowd. "He pushed me the whole way. I wouldn't have won without a great competitor."

Callum's face lit up, and he clapped harder than anyone in the room.

That evening, Yusuf's mother asked him what his favorite part of the day was. "Winning felt great," he said. "But being a good winner felt even better."

What this story teaches

It's wonderful to win, and it's fine to feel proud. But a gracious winner notices how the other person feels, and doesn't rub the win in their face. Kind words to someone who has lost can turn a disappointing moment into a warmer one for everybody.

Think about it

1. What did Yusuf remember that helped him respond kindly?
2. What did he say to Callum instead of celebrating loudly?
3. How do you like to be treated when you lose? How could you treat others the same way?

39 Bedtime Sparks

Five gentle stories for the youngest listeners

The Moon and the Puddle

A tiny puddle in the road felt small and dull. Every night, the moon looked down and dropped a spoonful of silver light into it. The puddle began to shine. A frog hopped by and said, "You look like a lake full of stars!" The puddle felt big for the very first time. The moon just smiled. Sharing light cost her nothing at all.

Kind words are like moonlight. They cost nothing, and they make others glow.

The Little Cloud

A little cloud was afraid to let go of her rain. "If I give it all away," she thought, "I will be nothing." But below her, the flowers were thirsty. So, drop by drop, she let the rain fall. She felt lighter and softer, and the flowers lifted their faces. The next morning, the little cloud floated over the hills, full of rain again.

Giving does not make us empty. It makes room for more.

Turtle's Good Morning

Turtle said good morning to every animal in the forest, even though it took him the whole morning to get around to all of them. "You're so slow," laughed Rabbit. But by the time the sun was high, every animal in the forest had smiled because of Turtle.

A kind hello is never too slow.

The Star and the Firefly

A firefly was lost in a dark meadow, and her little light flickered with fear. High above, a star saw her and shone a little brighter, just enough to show her the way home. The star never knew that she had helped. The firefly never learned the star's name.

Even from far away, we can help someone find their way.

The Sleepy Bear's Thank-You

Before he curled up for the long winter sleep, Bear walked through the forest whispering, "Thank you." He thanked the trees for their shade, the river for the fish, and the bees for the honey. He thanked his mother for being his mother. When he finally lay down in his cave, he had never felt so warm.

Gratitude is the coziest blanket of all.

Think about it

1. Which of these little stories was your favorite, and why?
2. Who or what could you say thank you to tonight before you sleep?
3. How could you be like the moon for someone tomorrow?

Part two: Stories for teens

About ages 11 to 17



40 The Group Chat

Kindness online, and speaking up

The photo appeared at 9:47 p.m. Nora was in bed, her phone glowing in the dark. It had been posted in the class group chat, all thirty-one people. It was a picture of Elias, caught mid-stumble in gym class with his mouth wide open, and someone had added the caption *Olympic champion*.

The laughing emojis began to stack up: one, five, twelve.

Nora's thumb hovered over the screen. Elias sat next to her in history. Last week he had lent her his notes without being asked. He hadn't written anything in the chat, which meant he had probably seen it. She pictured him alone in his room, reading his own name and watching the laughter pile up. She typed *lol* and deleted it.

A message popped up: *Nora hasn't reacted. Come on, it's funny*. Her stomach dropped. She knew what it meant. If she said something, she might become the next joke.

But then she thought, *If everyone thinks that, then no one will ever say anything*.

She typed, "This isn't funny. Please delete it," and sent it before she could change her mind.

For a whole minute, nothing happened. Then someone wrote, *relax, it's a joke*. Then Priya wrote, *Actually, Nora's right. Delete it*. A moment later, Sam wrote, *Deleted*. A couple of people rolled their eyes, but the emojis stopped.

The next day at school, Elias slid into the seat next to her. He didn't look at her when he said it. "Thanks."

"I didn't really do anything."

"You did," said Elias.

When another cruel meme showed up a week later, Nora and Priya didn't argue in the chat. They took screenshots and showed them to Ms. Grant, the school counselor. Some things, they had decided, are too big to handle alone.

What this story teaches

Staying silent when someone is being hurt can feel safe, but it works like a vote for the cruelty. A screen does not make a person any less real. Often it takes just one person to speak up before others find their voice. And if the cruelty continues, telling a trusted adult is not "snitching." It is being a good friend.

Think about it

1. Why was it so hard for Nora to type that message?
2. What are some other ways to support someone who is being mocked online?
3. When is it time to bring in a trusted adult?

41 The Empty Seat

Including someone who is left out

Marcus's lunch table was the loud one, full of sports talk and jokes and someone always laughing too hard. In October, a new student named Sofia arrived from another city halfway through the term. She ate at the end of a table by the trash cans, slowly, reading a book that looked like she had read it more than once.

Marcus noticed her on Monday. He ignored it on Tuesday. By Wednesday it was bothering him.

He remembered a summer camp where he hadn't known a single person, and how long lunch had felt when everyone else seemed to belong. Then he thought about his friends. What would they say if he brought someone new over? The awkwardness alone made him want to stay in his seat.

On Thursday, he picked up his tray and walked across the cafeteria.

"Hey," he said. "We have an empty seat, if you want it."

Sofia looked up, wary. "You don't have to."

"I know," said Marcus.

The first ten minutes at the table were awkward. His friends glanced at each other. Nobody knew what to say. Then Sofia mentioned her book, and Dani sat up straight. "Wait. You've read the whole series?"

It turned out she had. She also knew a surprising amount about soccer in her old country, and by Friday she and Marcus were arguing loudly about who was the best striker in the world.

The empty seat wasn't really empty anymore.

What this story teaches

Feeling included is one of the deepest human needs, and someone usually has to go first. Making room costs a few awkward minutes. Being left out can cost someone much more. You never know whose day you are changing with one invitation.

Think about it

1. What held Marcus back for three days?
2. Why do you think Sofia said, "You don't have to"?
3. Who in your world might be sitting at the edge of the room right now?

42 The Answer Key

Integrity when the shortcut is right there

Ishaan had studied for the chemistry final for two weeks, and he was still panicking. His grade would help decide whether he got into a summer science program, and he wanted that place more than almost anything.

The night before the exam, a friend messaged him a photo. It was Mr. Delgado's answer key, which had been accidentally left on a shared drive. *Don't tell anyone*, the message said.

Ishaan stared at the screen for a long time. His stomach was tight. Nobody would know. Half the class probably had it already. He could walk into the exam and get a perfect score.

But he kept thinking about something his father often said: "A shortcut is only a shortcut if you don't care where you end up." He also thought about what a perfect grade would mean if he didn't truly understand the material. It would be a number with nothing behind it.

He deleted the photo.

The next morning, before class, he found Mr. Delgado and told him quietly that a copy of the key was going around. Mr. Delgado's face went very still. He thanked Ishaan and changed the exam.

Some of Ishaan's classmates were furious with him. He scored an 81 on the new exam, not the 95 he had imagined. That spring, he did not get into the science program.

It hurt. But by the following year, Ishaan actually understood chemistry, and other students came to him for help. When he applied again, his letter of recommendation came from Mr. Delgado, who wrote that Ishaan was "a student I would trust with anything."

What this story teaches

Integrity means your actions match your values even when nobody is watching and even when it costs you something. Doing the right thing does not always win the prize right away. But it protects something no score can: your trust in yourself, and the trust others place in you.

Think about it

1. Why did Ishaan tell the teacher instead of only deleting the photo?
2. He paid a real price for his choice. Do you think it was worth it? Why?
3. How would you feel about a grade you had not truly earned?

43 Ninety-Two Tries

Learning from failure

Priya's robot was supposed to find its own way through a maze for the regional science fair. On the first test, it drove straight into a wall. On the second, it spun in circles. By the twentieth attempt, her teammates were joking about it. By the fortieth, Priya was close to quitting.

Her teacher, Ms. Bhatt, handed her a small notebook. "Don't write 'failed,'" she said. "Write what each failure taught you."

So Priya began writing.

Try 12: The sensor gets confused by the shiny floor. Cover it with matte tape.

Try 31: The battery voltage drops during long runs. Use fresh batteries every time.

Try 58: The turns are off by four degrees. Recalibrate the motors.

Some evenings she cried a little in the lab. Her older brother asked why she didn't pick an easier project. "Because I'm getting close to finding every way it doesn't work," she told him.

On try ninety-two, the robot rolled forward, turned, turned again, and rolled straight out of the maze. It was seven o'clock in the evening, and the lab was empty. Priya didn't cheer. She just sat down on the floor and laughed until her sides hurt.

At the science fair, the judges asked more questions about her notebook than about the robot. Priya finished in third place. But she went home with ninety-one lessons and a completely different idea about failure.

What this story teaches

Failure is not the opposite of success. It is part of the road to it. Each "it didn't work" carries information, if we are willing to read it. People who keep going are often not the most talented ones. They are the ones who decided to learn from every attempt.

Think about it

1. How did the notebook change the way Priya saw her failures?
2. What is something you gave up on too early? What might a "notebook of lessons" have shown you?
3. Did Priya fail because she came in third? Why or why not?

44 The Clockmaker's Apprentice

Respect that flows between generations

Theo was fifteen when he took an after-school job at Mr. Halvorsen's little clock shop. Mr. Halvorsen was eighty-one, moved slowly, and used tools that were older than Theo's parents. Theo, who had watched dozens of repair videos online, was quite sure he knew better.

One afternoon, an antique mantel clock arrived. It had belonged to a customer's late mother.

"Don't force the mainspring," said Mr. Halvorsen. "It's tired. Wind it gently, in stages."

Theo rolled his eyes. The video he had seen said to just crank it until it caught. So he cranked.

There was a sharp metallic crack. The spring flew out, and the whole clock shuddered.

Theo froze, certain he was about to be shouted at. Instead, Mr. Halvorsen lowered himself slowly onto a stool and began to gather up the pieces.

"Fifty-eight years," he said, "and I have broken three springs. Do you know what I did after each one?"

"Fired someone?"

"I learned why."

For the next two weeks, they repaired the clock together. Theo watched how the old man's hands moved and listened to the tiny sounds the clock made. He learned to ask a question before he touched anything. Slowly, he noticed that Mr. Halvorsen's advice was not old-fashioned at all. It was full of knowledge that no video had shown him.

Theo also noticed that Mr. Halvorsen kept track of all his repairs on scraps of paper, and that he sometimes lost a customer's address. One afternoon, Theo said, "I could set up a simple system on the computer, with photos of each clock."

Mr. Halvorsen raised an eyebrow, and then he smiled. "Show me."

By the end of the summer, each of them had taught the other something.

What this story teaches

Respecting our elders means listening first, especially about the things they have spent a lifetime learning. But respect does not have to run in only one direction. The best relationships between generations are exchanges, where each person brings something the other does not have.

Think about it

1. Why did Theo ignore Mr. Halvorsen's warning?
2. How did Mr. Halvorsen respond to the mistake, and why did that matter?
3. What could you teach an older person you know? What could they teach you?

45 The Night Shift

Gratitude and the dignity of every job

When Zara's friends asked where her father worked, she said, "At the school." That was true. She simply left out that he mopped its floors from ten at night until six in the morning.

She had learned to hide it after a classmate named Brent joked that the janitor "always smells like bleach." Everyone had laughed, and Zara had laughed too. Then she had felt sick for the rest of the day.

Her father never complained. He came home each morning with his shoes worn at the heels, and sometimes he brought her funny things he had found, like a mismatched pair of gloves or a single very large sock.

The night before the winter concert, Zara stayed late at rehearsal. As she crossed the dark auditorium to leave, she saw that one light was on. Her father was kneeling near the stage, tightening a loose step with a screwdriver he had brought from home. Nobody had asked him to.

"The first graders will be on these steps tomorrow," he explained. "They'll be nervous enough. They shouldn't have to worry about a wobbly board."

Zara stood in the shadows. Every morning she walked into a warm, clean school, and she had never once thought about who made it that way. It was her father, and people like him, working while everyone else slept.

At the concert the next evening, Ms. Bell thanked "everyone who made tonight possible." Zara stood up in the audience. "And thank you to my dad, Mr. Rahman, who fixed the steps!"

There was a moment of silence, and then the whole room began to clap. Across the aisle, Brent looked down at his shoes.

What this story teaches

Every honest job that serves others has dignity. We should measure people by their character and by how they treat others, not by their title or their paycheck. Being ashamed of someone's honest work says nothing bad about them, but it says something about us. Gratitude begins with noticing the people who make our lives run.

Think about it

1. Why did Zara hide where her father worked?
2. What changed when she saw him in the auditorium?
3. Who are the people who quietly make your day possible? Have you ever thanked them?

46 Leaving the Table

The courage to say no to friends

Diego and his friends Cole, Jay, and Mateo met at the food court every Friday. The week before the middle school science fair, Cole leaned across the table with a grin.

“The gym is unlocked tonight,” he said. “They’ve set up all the displays already. Let’s go mess with them. It’ll be hilarious.”

Jay laughed. Mateo shrugged. Then all three of them turned to look at Diego.

His heart pounded. He thought about the sixth graders who had spent months on those projects. He thought about his own little sister, Lucia, whose volcano was sitting in that gym right now. Saying no might mean losing his friends. Saying yes would mean becoming someone he didn’t want to be.

“Come on,” said Cole. “Don’t be boring. It’s just a joke.”

“It isn’t a joke to the kids who built them,” said Diego. He picked up his tray. “I’m out.”

Walking home, he felt lonelier than he ever had. That night he kept checking his phone, expecting messages. None came.

On Monday, the science fair went off without a problem. At lunch, Mateo sat down beside Diego and spoke quietly. It turned out the gym had been locked after all, and none of them had gone. “I didn’t want to do it either,” Mateo admitted. “I was just waiting for someone to say something first.”

Cole stayed cold to Diego for two weeks. Then one day he shrugged and sat down at the table again, as if nothing had happened. Diego let him.

He had learned something valuable. It is easier to walk away than he had feared, and it shows who your real friends are.

What this story teaches

Courage is not always loud. Sometimes it is one quiet sentence and a chair pushed back from the table. Often other people feel the same way and are waiting for someone to go first. A true friend will respect your “no,” even if it takes them a little while to come around.

Think about it

1. Why was saying no so difficult for Diego?
2. What did Mateo’s confession tell you about peer pressure?
3. How can you prepare in advance for a moment when you might need to say no?

47 The Whisper

Words travel farther than we think

On Monday morning, Kim leaned across the lunch table and lowered her voice. “Okay, but you didn’t hear this from me. Jordan’s mom moved out. That’s why he’s been so quiet lately.”

Tara felt a strange little thrill. It was the feeling of knowing something that not everyone knew. Ana was sitting two tables away, and Tara could already imagine how her friend’s eyes would widen.

Then she looked across the cafeteria and saw Jordan, eating alone, his shoulders hunched over his tray. If it was true, he hadn’t told anyone. If it wasn’t true, it was much worse.

“Is it true?” Tara asked.

“That’s what I heard.”

“From who?”

Kim shrugged. “Everyone’s saying it.”

Tara thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think we should pass it on,” she said quietly. Kim rolled her eyes and changed the subject.

By Wednesday, the whisper had traveled through three grades, and like all whispers, it had changed. Now people were saying that Jordan’s mom had gotten into some kind of trouble. Jordan walked down the hall with his head down. People stopped talking when he passed and started again behind him.

At lunch that day, Tara picked up her tray and sat down across from him. She didn’t ask about anything. She just said, “Hey. I heard some stuff going around. I didn’t pass it on, and I’m not going to. You don’t have to talk about it. But I’m here.”

Jordan didn’t say anything for a while. Then his shoulders came down, just a little. “Some of it’s true,” he said. “My mom did move out. Everything else is made up. I just wasn’t ready for people to know.”

“That’s yours to share when you want to,” said Tara.

They ate the rest of the lunch in comfortable silence, and it was the first time all week that Jordan looked like he could breathe.

What this story teaches

Words travel faster than we can chase them, and a rumor gets bigger with every person who repeats it. Someone’s private life belongs to them, not to us. We can choose to be the place where a whisper stops, and we can be the person who sits down beside someone when everyone else is looking away.

Think about it

1. Why do you think Tara felt a “thrill” at first?
2. What might have happened if Tara had told Ana at lunch?
3. What questions could you ask yourself before you repeat something you have heard?

48 Second Chair

Being glad for other people's success

Lucas had played cello since he was seven, and for two years he had sat in first chair in the school orchestra. Then Jonah joined.

Jonah practiced for hours. At the fall auditions, he played the slow passage from the Elgar piece so beautifully that the room went quiet. When Ms. Reyes read out the seating list, Jonah's name was at the top. Lucas's was second.

Lucas smiled and said, "Congrats," but the word came out flat as a plate. All the way home, something hot twisted in his stomach.

Over the next few weeks, he noticed something about himself that he didn't like. In rehearsal, he caught himself listening for Jonah's mistakes and feeling a small, ugly flicker of happiness when he found one. He noticed that he was practicing less, because it felt pointless. Being jealous took so much energy that he had none left for music.

One afternoon, Ms. Reyes kept him behind. "I've noticed you've been quiet," she said.

Lucas admitted it all. Ms. Reyes listened, then said, "Jealousy is like a compass, Lucas. It points to what you care about. It doesn't have to tell you where to go."

That night Lucas thought about what she meant. He cared about the cello. He cared about it so much that it hurt. And underneath the jealousy, he had to admit something else: Jonah's slow passage really had been beautiful.

The next day at rehearsal, he walked over to Jonah. "That solo in the Elgar," he said. "It was amazing. How did you get that sound in the quiet part?"

Jonah looked shocked. Then he laughed with relief. "I was scared of you the whole time," he said. "You've been playing for years. I just practiced a lot."

They started practicing together on Thursdays. Lucas didn't win first chair back that year. But he played better than he ever had, and at the spring concert, when Jonah finished his solo, no one in the room clapped louder than Lucas.

What this story teaches

Envy hurts the person who carries it more than the person it is aimed at. When we can be truly glad for someone else's success, we are set free, and we may even learn from them. Someone who is better than us at something is not an enemy. They may be our best teacher.

Think about it

1. What signs showed Lucas that jealousy was taking over?
2. What did Ms. Reyes mean by "jealousy is like a compass"?
3. Think of a time you felt jealous. What was the feeling pointing to?

49 Fifty Hours

Patience, presence, and the stories of the elderly

To graduate from tenth grade, Amir needed fifty hours of community service. He picked the closest place he could find: Maple Court, a care home two blocks from his house. He expected to be bored.

On his first Tuesday, a nurse led him to a sunny room with big armchairs and asked him to sit with one of the residents. Mr. Abernathy was eighty-eight years old, with hands that shook a little and eyes as bright as marbles. When Amir walked in, Mr. Abernathy beamed at him.

“Frank! There you are!”

Amir hesitated. “I’m Amir,” he said gently.

“Amir. Good name.” Mr. Abernathy nodded firmly, as if that settled it. “Do you play chess?”

It turned out that Mr. Abernathy sometimes forgot names, but he never forgot how to play chess. He beat Amir every week. And while they played, he told stories. His favorite was about the time he had been a ship’s engineer in a terrible storm off the coast of Norway.

The first time Amir heard it, he was fascinated. The second time, he was polite. The third time, he was bored, and he glanced at the clock.

But somewhere in the middle of the third telling, Amir noticed a detail he had never heard before: the storm had started at midnight, and the crew had sung to keep from being afraid. “What did you sing?” Amir asked.

Mr. Abernathy’s face lit up like a lamp. He sang the whole song, badly and happily, and the nurse in the hallway stopped to listen.

After that, Amir stopped watching the clock. Fifty hours went by faster than he could have believed. When he finished his last official Tuesday, he walked back into the room anyway.

Mr. Abernathy looked up, and for a moment Amir could see him searching. Then his eyes went to the chessboard, and to Amir, and he smiled.

“Amir,” he said. “Your move.”

What this story teaches

Service is not really about earning hours or being thanked. It is about showing up and paying attention. Every older person carries a lifetime of stories, and listening to them is a way of honoring them. Some people may forget names, but they never forget how it feels to be treated with kindness.

Think about it

1. Why did Amir’s feelings change during the third telling of the story?
2. How did Amir show respect for Mr. Abernathy, even when he was mistaken for someone else?
3. Is there an older person whose stories you could ask to hear?

50 The Perfect Feed

Comparison, honesty, and being kind to ourselves

It was midnight, and Maya was still scrolling. Priya was on a sunlit beach, laughing. Chloe was holding a trophy the size of a small child. Dev was at a family dinner where everyone looked happy and nobody seemed to be fighting over the last dumpling.

Maya looked at her own day. She had failed an algebra quiz. She had argued with her mother about the dishes. She had eaten lunch alone in the library because she didn't feel like talking.

Everyone else has it all figured out, she thought. It's just me.

She opened a photo of herself from a friend's party, smiling in a bright yellow dress, and began to write a caption. Then she paused. She remembered that party. She had spent twenty minutes of it hiding in the bathroom, feeling like she didn't belong.

She deleted the caption and did something unusual. She sent Priya a message: *Your beach pictures are gorgeous! How was the trip really?*

The answer arrived within a minute. *Honestly? I was sick for half of it, and my brother and I fought the entire time. That picture was the one good hour.*

Maya stared at the screen, and then she started to laugh. She read the message again. Behind every bright square, there was a whole ordinary, messy day.

It didn't fix everything. But something in her chest loosened. Over the next few weeks, she started to do things differently. She posted a photo of a burnt tray of cookies and a caption that said *attempt number two*. She set herself a limit of thirty minutes of scrolling a day. And she spent the extra time doing what she had really been missing: talking to actual people.

What this story teaches

Social media shows the highlights of other people's lives, but we compare them to our own behind-the-scenes. That is never a fair contest. It helps to remember that everyone has hard days, to be honest about our own, and to be gentle with ourselves. Real connection with real people is worth far more than likes.

Think about it

1. Why did Maya feel worse the longer she scrolled?
2. What changed when Priya answered honestly?
3. What is one small change you could make to feel better about how you use your phone?

51 The Group Project

Teamwork, trust, and sharing the work

The history project was due in two weeks. Nadia's group had four people: Nadia, Ben, Carlos, and Iris. On the first day, Ben said, "Let's just split it up," and then disappeared into his phone. Carlos told jokes. Iris sat quietly, doodling in the margin of her notebook.

Nadia cared about her grade, and she felt the old urge rising: *I'll just do it all myself*. She had done it before. It had always earned her an A, and it had always left her exhausted.

So she did it again. For two weeks she researched, wrote, and built every slide. On the night before the presentation, at one in the morning, she stared at her screen, tired and resentful. Nobody had helped. And then a thought crept in, one that she didn't like: *Did I ever ask them to?*

She had taken over from the beginning. She had never asked what anyone else could do.

The next morning, she gathered the group. "I haven't been fair," she said. "I took over, and I didn't ask any of you what you're good at. Can we figure it out now?"

It turned out that Iris was an incredible designer who had been afraid her ideas would be brushed aside. Carlos, who joked around so much, was a natural speaker. And Ben, when he was given one clear task, dug up research that Nadia had never found.

They rebuilt the presentation together in two afternoons. It wasn't perfect. But Ms. Chu said afterward that it was one of the best she had seen all year.

Nadia walked out of class feeling something she hadn't felt on a group project before. She wasn't tired. She was proud of all four of them.

What this story teaches

Teamwork does not mean doing everything yourself, and it does not mean letting others do everything. It means asking people about their strengths, being honest when something isn't working, and giving everyone a real chance to contribute. Sharing a project also means sharing trust.

Think about it

1. Why did Nadia take over the whole project, and what did it cost her?
2. What changed when she asked the others what they could do?
3. How could you make space for a quiet teammate in your next group project?

52 The Audition

Courage to try, whatever the outcome

Rania had wanted to be in the school musical since sixth grade. Every year she found a reason not to try out: her voice wasn't good enough, there were too many other people, maybe next year.

This year, the sign-up sheet outside the auditorium already had forty-three names. Rania stood in front of it, holding a pen, for five whole minutes.

"What's the worst that could happen?" asked her friend Ayesha.

"I could embarrass myself."

"And what's the best?"

Rania wrote her name on line forty-four.

On audition day, her hands shook. Her voice cracked on the very first note, and every part of her wanted to run. Instead, she took a breath, started again, and sang to the end.

The cast list went up on Friday. She had been given a small part: Villager Number Three. One line. She felt her stomach sink. She had hoped for more.

But rehearsals turned out to be the best part of her year. She made new friends. She learned how a whole show was built out of hundreds of small parts. And on opening night, her one line got a laugh, and then it got a laugh the next night too.

After the last performance, the director, Mr. Harlan, stopped beside her. "Do you know how many people are afraid to walk into that room?" he said. "You did it. Come back next year and try for something bigger."

Rania realized that the audition she had almost skipped was the bravest thing she had ever done.

What this story teaches

You cannot win a role you never try out for. Being brave does not guarantee getting what we hope for, but it always gives us more than staying safe does. Fear usually shrinks once we take action, and small parts matter, both on stage and in life.

Think about it

1. What was Rania really afraid of?
2. How did she feel about her small part at first, and how did that change?
3. What is something you have been putting off because of fear?

53 The Draft Folder

Pausing before we speak

Sam's best friend Leo had told a group of kids that Sam was terrified of failing calculus. Sam had told him in private. He had trusted him.

By eleven o'clock that night, Sam was furious. He picked up his phone and began to type, and the words poured out. *You're a snake. I can't believe I trusted you. I'm done with you.* Every sentence was sharper than the last.

His thumb hovered over the send button.

He remembered something his mother often said: "Never send an angry message the same night you write it." It had always sounded annoying. But tonight he tapped *Save draft* instead, and put his phone face-down on the desk.

Sleep was hard. But by morning, the anger had cooled from boiling to simmering. He opened the draft and read it again, and he winced. Half of it was real hurt. The other half was written to wound.

He deleted the cruel half. He wrote instead: *Hey, I need to talk to you. When you told people about the calculus thing, it really hurt. I trusted you.*

Leo replied within minutes. *I'm sorry. I was trying to be funny and I didn't think. It was really dumb. Can I make it up to you?*

They talked at lunch. Trust took a while to rebuild, and it wasn't magic. But their friendship survived.

Later, Sam thought about the other version of that night, the one in which he had hit send at 11:04. He was very glad it was only a draft.

What this story teaches

Our feelings are real, and hurt deserves to be heard. But words, once sent, cannot be taken back. Waiting a little, whether that means a walk, a night's sleep, or a few slow breaths, lets us say what is true without turning it into a weapon. There is a big difference between telling someone they hurt us and attacking them.

Think about it

1. What was the difference between Sam's first message and his second?
2. Why did Sam's friendship survive?
3. What helps you cool down before you respond when you are upset?

54 Ten Minutes in the Car

Listening to parents, and being heard

That morning, Arjun and his father had argued about curfew. Arjun wanted to stay out until eleven-thirty on Saturday for a friend's birthday. His father said ten-thirty.

"You never trust me!" Arjun had shouted, and he had slammed the door.

Now his father was driving him to school, and neither of them had said a word. It was a ten-minute drive. Arjun stared out the window, rehearsing his arguments and feeling sure he was right.

Then his father spoke, quietly. "I'd like to tell you what I'm thinking. And then I'd like to hear you, all the way to the end, without interrupting. Can we do that?"

Arjun rolled his eyes, but he nodded.

"When you are out late," said his father, "I don't sleep until I hear the front door. It isn't that I don't trust you. It's that I love you, and I can't control the road, or the other drivers. That is a hard feeling to live with. So I make a rule, and I probably say it too much like an order."

Arjun was quiet for a moment. He had never thought about it that way. "It's embarrassing," he said, finally. "Being the first person to leave. I want to prove that I'm responsible."

His father listened to the whole thing without interrupting. Arjun could see that it took effort.

By the time they reached the school, they had a plan: eleven o'clock, a quick text at ten-thirty as a check-in, and a promise that Arjun could call for a ride at any hour, no questions asked.

"I'm sorry I slammed the door," said Arjun.

"I'm sorry I said it like an order," said his father.

As Arjun got out of the car, he realized that the ten minutes had been far shorter than the argument.

What this story teaches

Respecting our parents does not mean never disagreeing with them. It means listening as well as speaking, and disagreeing calmly and honestly. Parents' rules often come from love and worry. When both people feel heard, it becomes much easier to meet in the middle.

Think about it

1. What did Arjun's father say that changed how Arjun felt?
2. What made the second conversation better than the first?
3. Is there a disagreement in your life that might go better with ten quiet minutes?

55 The Other Side of the Table

Respecting people who see things differently

In debate class, Ms. Okafor assigned sides by drawing slips of paper from a hat. The topic was whether phones should be banned during lunch. Elena was sure that they should not. She drew the slip that said Yes.

“That’s so unfair,” she whispered to her partner, Marcus, a boy she had always thought of as old-fashioned. “Anyone reasonable can see that banning phones at lunch is a silly idea.”

“I actually agree with the ban,” said Marcus.

Elena felt her cheeks burn. But she had to argue the side, and she hated to lose. So she started to research. She read about kids who felt left out at lunch because everyone else was looking at screens. She interviewed a teacher who missed the noise and laughter of the old cafeteria. She talked to a student who said, quietly, that phones at lunch made her feel invisible.

The more she listened, the less she could say that everyone who disagreed with her was foolish. They had reasons. They had experiences. Some of them were reasons she had never considered.

On the day of the debate, Elena argued the side that she didn’t believe in, and she argued it well. When her opponent, Sean, stood up for the other side, she listened carefully instead of just waiting for her turn.

Afterward, Sean shook her hand. “You made me rethink a couple of things,” he said.

“You did too,” said Elena, and she meant it.

She still believed what she had believed before. But something in her had changed. The next time she disagreed with someone, she stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Instead she asked, “What makes you see it that way?”

What this story teaches

Respect does not mean agreeing. It means listening to understand, not just to answer. People who disagree with us usually have reasons and experiences behind their views. If we can explain another person’s view fairly, we become wiser, and we can disagree without contempt.

Think about it

1. Why was Elena so annoyed about her assigned side at first?
2. What did she learn from researching a view she disagreed with?
3. Is there someone whose opinion you could try to understand better?

56 The Note Under the Wiper

Owning up when nobody saw

On Saturday afternoon, Dev was practicing skateboard tricks in the cul-de-sac. He was trying a new one when the board shot out from under his feet, skidded across the pavement, and clipped the side of Mr. Kowalski's blue car. When Dev picked it up, there was a long white scratch on the door.

He looked around. The street was empty. No one had seen. He didn't see any cameras either. His heart was pounding. It would be so easy to grab the board and walk home.

So he did. But at dinner, he couldn't eat.

It's only a scratch, he told himself. But he kept thinking about Mr. Kowalski, who was retired and who washed that car every Sunday morning with a bucket and a soft cloth, humming to himself.

At nine that night, Dev sat down at his desk and wrote a note. *Dear Mr. Kowalski, I'm Dev from number 14. I scratched your car with my skateboard this afternoon. I'm very sorry. I would like to pay for the repair or help fix it. My phone number is below.*

He also told his mother, who listened and then sat with him for a while. "I'm proud of you," she said. "And I'll come with you when you talk to him."

Dev slid the note under the windshield wiper, and then he went to bed. He felt scared, but he also felt lighter than he had all day.

The next morning, there was a knock on the door. It was Mr. Kowalski, holding the note. Dev braced himself.

"Do you know how many people have left me a note over the years?" said Mr. Kowalski. "None. There's a scratch on the other door that's been there for ten years, and no one ever said a word." He smiled. "I won't take your money. But if you want to help, you can come over on Sundays and help me wash the car."

Dev did. By the end of the month, he had learned how to wax a car, and he had made a friend.

What this story teaches

Taking responsibility for a mistake when nobody saw it is one of the clearest signs of integrity. It usually costs us some courage. But the consequences of telling the truth are often smaller than the fear that comes before, and the relief and respect that follow are worth far more.

Think about it

1. Why was it so tempting for Dev to walk away?
2. What made the note different from what other people had done?
3. What is a mistake you have made that you could still make right?

57 Too Good to Be True

Trusting our instincts online

Kavya was fourteen, and she played an online game almost every evening. One night, a player called StarWolf typed, *Nice moves!* After that they chatted most nights. He praised her skills, gave her rare items in the game, and said things like *You're the only one who really gets me.* It felt good to be noticed.

Over the next few weeks, the questions began. What was her real name? What school did she go to? Was she home alone in the evenings? Then one night he wrote: *Let's talk on a private app instead. And don't tell your parents. They wouldn't understand. It can be our secret.*

Kavya's stomach twisted. The compliments had been nice, but the word "secret" felt wrong. She remembered what her health teacher had said: "Anyone who asks you to keep secrets from your parents is not a safe friend, no matter how nice they seem." And she thought about the gifts. *People don't just give you things for no reason.*

She wrote back, *I don't want to switch apps.*

The reply came quickly. *I thought we were friends. After everything I've done for you.* A cold feeling crept up her arms. That message wasn't friendship. It was pressure.

She took screenshots. She blocked him. Then she walked into the kitchen, where her mother was drying dishes, and her hands were shaking. "I need to show you something," she said. "I feel kind of dumb."

Her mother put down the towel and looked at the screen. She was quiet for a moment. "You're not dumb," she said. "You're one of the smartest people I know right now. You noticed. You said no, and you told me."

Together they reported the account to the game and talked about the warning signs. Kavya kept playing, but with new rules: no private chats with strangers, no personal information, and no secrets from her family.

What this story teaches

Trust your instincts. Anyone who asks you to keep secrets from your family, asks for personal information, or pressures you to do something is not safe, no matter how friendly they seem. Block them, save the evidence, and tell a trusted adult. You are never in trouble for telling, and the person who is at fault is the one who applied the pressure.

Think about it

1. What were the warning signs that Kavya noticed?
2. Why did Kavya feel "dumb," and why was she wrong?
3. Who are the people you could go to if something felt wrong online?

58 Showing Up

Being there for a grieving friend

When Maya's mother died in October, nobody at school knew what to say. Maya was away for two weeks. When she came back, everyone tiptoed around her.

Her friends, Ivy, Jordan, and Sasha, stood outside the classroom staring at their shoes. "What do we say?" whispered Ivy.

"I'm sorry for your loss?" said Jordan. "That sounds like something on a card."

"Maybe we should just act normal," said Sasha.

So all day, they said nothing. They smiled awkwardly and looked away. At lunch, Maya sat by herself at the end of a long table. Ivy watched her and felt sick. It wasn't that she didn't care. She was terrified of saying the wrong thing.

That evening, she asked her father, "What do you say to someone whose mom died?"

He thought for a moment. "You don't need perfect words," he said. "Say, 'I'm so sorry. I'm here.' And then really be there. Sit with her. Bring her lunch. If she wants to talk about her mother, listen. Don't be afraid of her tears. Just show up."

The next day at lunch, Ivy sat down next to Maya. "I don't know what to say," she admitted. "I'm really sorry about your mom. I'm here."

Maya's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you for saying something," she said. "Everybody's acting like it didn't happen."

They sat quietly for a while. Then Maya said, "She used to pack these terrible sandwiches with way too much mustard." She laughed, and then she cried. Ivy handed her a tissue and stayed right where she was.

Over the next few weeks, the friends took turns. They walked Maya to class. They texted her on hard days, like her mother's birthday. They sat with her without needing to talk. They didn't say "she's in a better place" or "at least she's not suffering." They just stayed.

On the last day before winter break, Maya said, "You know what helped the most? You kept coming back."

What this story teaches

When someone we care about is grieving, we don't need perfect words. We need to be present. Saying "I'm sorry, I'm here" and then really being there, on hard days as well as easy ones, is the best gift. Grief has no timetable, and it cannot be hurried or fixed, only shared.

Think about it

1. Why did Ivy and her friends avoid Maya at first?
2. What did Ivy's father advise, and why did it work?
3. How could you show up for a friend who is going through something hard?

59 The Heavy Month

Asking for help when sadness stays

Jonah couldn't say exactly when it started. Sometime in the fall, the color seemed to drain out of things. He was tired even after sleeping. The games he used to love felt like chores. He snapped at his little sister, and then he felt terrible about it. *Everyone has bad days*, he told himself. *Just push through.*

But a month went by, and then most of another. His grades slipped. He stopped answering texts. At dinner, he moved food around his plate. It felt like he was carrying a backpack full of wet sand that nobody else could see.

He thought that asking for help would mean he was weak, or that he would become a burden. So he said nothing.

One evening, his older cousin Riya, who was staying with the family that month, sat down beside him on the porch. "Hey," she said. "You've seemed off lately. I've noticed. You don't have to explain. I just want you to know I'm not going anywhere."

That small kindness cracked something open. "I don't feel like myself," Jonah said, very quietly. "It's been a long time."

Riya didn't panic or lecture. "Thank you for telling me," she said. "Let's tell your mom."

His mother listened with tears in her eyes and hugged him tightly. That week they saw the family doctor, and then a counselor named Ms. Adeyemi.

"Feeling this way isn't a weakness, and it isn't your fault," Ms. Adeyemi told him. "It's something that can be treated, just like a sprained ankle needs care."

It wasn't fast. Some weeks were better and some were worse. But he learned small things that helped: a walk every day, going to bed at the same time each night, telling someone on the hard days, and letting people help.

By spring, the color began to return. One morning he noticed the first warm day, and later that week, he caught himself laughing at a silly joke. The heavy month hadn't vanished forever. But now Jonah knew that he didn't have to carry it alone.

What this story teaches

Everyone feels sad sometimes. But if sadness lasts for weeks, or starts to get in the way of everyday life, it is important to tell a trusted adult, such as a parent, doctor, or counselor. Asking for help is a sign of strength, and help really does work. And if we notice a friend who seems off, saying "I'm here" can open a door.

Think about it

1. Why did Jonah not ask for help at first?
2. What did Riya say and do that made it easier for him to open up?
3. Who are the people you could talk to if you were feeling heavy for a long time?

60 Saturdays at the Shelter

Patience, responsibility, and what animals really need

Priya had begged for a dog for two whole years. Her parents finally said, “Show us you can be responsible first.” So she signed up to volunteer at the animal shelter every Saturday.

On her first day, Priya imagined cuddling puppies for hours. Instead, she scrubbed kennels, refilled water bowls, and folded piles of old towels. Her hands smelled like disinfectant. She was tempted to quit.

Then Ms. Torres, the shelter manager, gave her a special job. “I’d like you to work with Duke,” she said. Duke was a big gray dog who had been at the shelter for months. He spent his days at the back of his kennel and growled whenever anyone came near. Most of the volunteers had given up on him.

“He’s not mean,” Ms. Torres explained. “He was left tied outside a store. He’s scared. He needs someone patient.”

So every Saturday, Priya sat outside Duke’s kennel and read aloud. She didn’t stare at him. She tossed a treat a little closer each week. In the fifth week, he took one from her hand. In the ninth, he leaned against her leg. In the twelfth week, he wagged his tail.

Priya realized that her wish for a dog had been mostly a wish for something cute and cuddly. What a dog really needed was daily patience, cleaning up, vet visits, and walks in the rain for many years.

Two months later, an older man named Mr. Chen came to the shelter, looking for a quiet dog. Priya introduced him to Duke. Duke walked slowly up to Mr. Chen and rested his big head on his knee.

Priya cried a little. She felt half sad and half happy. On the ride home, she told her parents what had happened.

Her father glanced at her in the mirror. “Anyone who can love a dog enough to let him go to a good home,” he said, “might just be ready to keep one.”

“Not yet,” said Priya, smiling. “But I’m going back next Saturday.”

What this story teaches

Caring for animals is much more than cuddles. It means daily responsibility, patience, and sometimes letting go. Frightened animals need gentleness and time. And having a pet is a long-term commitment, so it is wise to learn what it really takes before adopting one.

Think about it

1. What surprised Priya about volunteering at the shelter?
2. What did Priya do that helped Duke trust her?
3. What do you think it takes to care for a pet well over many years?

61 The Wrong Bus

Being new, feeling lost, and asking for help

On the first day of ninth grade, Ana climbed onto Bus 14 instead of Bus 41. She didn't realize it until fifteen minutes later, when the streets outside the window looked unfamiliar and nobody around her was wearing the school colors.

Her stomach dropped. She had been nervous about high school for weeks. It was a new building with new people, and her two best friends were going to a different school. Now, on top of everything else, she was lost.

She got off at a random stop. Her phone battery was at eight percent. She felt tears rising and did her best to blink them back.

"Are you okay?" asked a girl with braids who was holding a cello case.

"I'm lost," said Ana. "I'm supposed to be at Westfield."

"Me too!" said the girl. "I'm Zola. You took the 14. You need the 41. It comes in six minutes, right across the street. I missed my own bus in my first week."

They rode together, and Zola talked about the school orchestra and the best place to sit at lunch. Finally, Ana admitted, "I've been terrified all morning."

Zola laughed. "Everyone is pretending they know where they're going. Nobody does."

They arrived ten minutes late. The lady in the office handed them a late pass with a shrug. "Happens every year," she said.

In first period, Ana thought about it. The thing she had feared most, being lost and alone, had actually happened. And she had come out of it with her first friend in the new school.

By lunch, Zola had introduced her to three more people. Ana realized that starting somewhere new means getting a little lost sometimes. And asking for help, she decided, was the map.

What this story teaches

New beginnings almost always feel scary, and nearly everyone feels a little lost at first, even if they are hiding it. Asking for help is a strength. And an unexpected detour can sometimes lead somewhere better than the route we planned.

Think about it

1. What was Ana most afraid of about high school?
2. How did Zola's honesty about her own first week help Ana?
3. When was the last time you felt lost in a new place, and what helped?

62 The Extra Chair

Making room for a changing family

When Dad announced that he was going to marry Carol, Theo said, “Great,” and went to his room.

Carol had a twelve-year-old daughter named Bea. In June, the two of them would move into the house. For years, the dinner table had held just two chairs that got used. Now there would be four.

The first dinner together was awkward. Carol had cooked something fancy. Bea stared at her plate. Theo answered every question in one word. Dad joked a little too hard.

That night, Theo lay in bed feeling angry and trying to work out why. He didn’t dislike Carol. He wasn’t against Bea. What frightened him was something else. It felt as if his family was being rearranged without anyone asking him, and he wasn’t sure where he fit in the new arrangement.

The next morning, he found his father in the kitchen. “Can we talk?” he said.

Dad put down his coffee. “Of course.”

“I don’t want to be rude to them,” said Theo. “I just don’t know where I belong.”

Dad was quiet for a moment. “You’re right that a lot is changing,” he said. “And you should have a say in how you feel about it. But you belong exactly where you always have. Nobody is replacing you.”

That Saturday, Theo noticed a robotics kit in Bea’s room and asked about it. Her face lit up. They spent the whole afternoon building a little rover that kept driving into the wall. Carol quietly left snacks outside the door and didn’t say a word about it.

Theo noticed something else. Carol always asked before touching anything of his. She wasn’t trying to be his mother. She was simply trying to be kind.

By the end of summer, the extra chair at the table wasn’t extra anymore. It was Bea’s, and Theo teased her about burning the toast. It wasn’t perfect. There were arguments, and there were awkward days. But there was also respect.

What this story teaches

A changing family can bring mixed feelings, and that is normal. It helps to talk honestly with the people we trust, to give new people time, and to respect each other’s space. Families grow not by replacing anyone, but by making room.

Think about it

1. What was Theo really afraid of?
2. How did his conversation with his father change things?
3. What could you do to help a new person feel welcome in your family or group?

63 Drifting

When friendships change

Ren and Jules had been best friends since first grade. They had shared sleepovers, inside jokes, and one very embarrassing haircut. So when things began to shift in tenth grade, Ren couldn't quite say when it started.

Jules joined the theater club and began spending afternoons with a new crowd. Ren joined robotics and started running track. The daily texts turned into weekly ones, and then into a quick "hey" now and then. At lunch, they sat at different tables.

Ren felt hurt and told herself that Jules had outgrown her. Across the room, Jules felt guilty and told herself that Ren was upset with her. Neither of them said anything, because saying something felt harder than saying nothing.

One Thursday evening, Ren took a deep breath and typed, *Hey, I miss you. Can we get pizza on Saturday?*

Jules replied in less than a minute. *YES. I've been wanting to text you for weeks.*

On Saturday, the first ten minutes were awkward. Then Ren said, "I didn't know how to tell you I felt left out."

"I thought you were mad at me," said Jules. "I felt like I had abandoned you. I didn't know how to fix it."

They talked for two hours. Neither of them was the villain. They had simply grown into different interests and different schedules, and it was nobody's fault. They agreed that they probably wouldn't be quite as close as they used to be. But they also agreed that they didn't want to lose each other.

"Some friendships," said Jules, "are like rivers. They change course, but the water still comes from the same mountain."

They decided on a monthly pizza night, no matter what. And they thanked each other, sincerely, for all the years they had shared. Ren made new friends at robotics, and Jules made some at theater. But once a month, on a Saturday, they were first-graders again.

What this story teaches

Friendships change as people change, and that is not always anyone's fault. Being honest about how we feel, instead of letting silence grow, gives a friendship its best chance. Some friendships stay very close, some shift into something looser, and all of them are worth being grateful for.

Think about it

1. Why did neither Ren nor Jules say anything for so long?
2. What made the pizza night conversation work?
3. Is there a friendship in your life that has changed? What do you want to keep from it?

64 The Kind Kind of Honest

Telling the truth with care

Mateo's band was going to play an original song at the school talent show, and on Wednesday he played it for his friend Dan. "So?" he said, grinning. "What do you think?"

Dan's stomach tightened. The truth was that the song wasn't ready. The verse was catchy, but the chorus repeated the same line three times, and the last lyric sounded like it came from a greeting card.

He could lie and say it was amazing. Or he could say it was boring and watch Mateo's face crumple. Neither felt right.

Then he remembered a time when his music teacher had given him feedback on a piece he had been proud of. She had said, "Here is what's working. Here is what could be stronger. And here is one idea." It had stung a little, but it had made the piece better, and he had never doubted that she was on his side.

"Can I be honest?" asked Dan.

"Of course," said Mateo, though his grin faltered a little.

"The melody in the verse is fantastic," said Dan. "It's been stuck in my head for an hour. The chorus feels like it's saying the same thing three times, though. What if you added a bridge, or changed that last line? I could help you try a few ideas."

Mateo was quiet for a moment. He looked disappointed. Then he let out a long breath. "Thank you for not just saying it's great," he said. "Everybody else told me that. I kind of knew something was off."

They spent the next two evenings rewriting the chorus. By Friday, the song had a new bridge and a last line that made the audience sing along.

At the talent show, Mateo's band got the biggest cheer of the night. Afterward, he found Dan. "You're coming to every rehearsal from now on," he said. "I need somebody who'll tell me the truth."

What this story teaches

Being a good friend does not mean saying only what someone wants to hear, and it does not mean being harsh. The kindest honesty names what is working, says what could be better, and offers to help. Real support sometimes means caring enough to tell the truth gently.

Think about it

1. Why was it hard for Dan to answer Mateo's question?
2. What made Dan's feedback different from a compliment or an insult?
3. How could you give honest feedback to a friend in a way that helps?

65 The Lamp Left On

Pressure, rest, and knowing your worth

The lamp on Leila's desk was still burning at two in the morning. Beside it lay a tower of flashcards, three highlighters, and a cold cup of tea. Her big exams were in two weeks. She had been sleeping four hours a night, skipping meals, and canceling plans. When her friend said, "Relax a little," she had snapped at her.

Her parents were proud of her. They talked to relatives about her dream of a scholarship. And Leila felt that if she stopped for even one evening, everything would come crashing down.

That night, at about three, her father passed the door and found her fast asleep with her cheek on a textbook and the lamp still on. He clicked it off, put a blanket over her shoulders, and left her to rest.

In the morning, he sat across from her at the kitchen table. "I saw your lamp on all night," he said. "That's the fourth night this week."

Leila bristled. "I have to. You *expect* me to."

Her father didn't argue. After a moment, he said, "I'm proud of you. That is not the same thing as expecting you to break."

He told her about his own first year at university. He had studied through the night before an exam, and he had blanked out in the middle of it. "I thought if I stopped studying, I would fail," he said. "Instead, I forgot everything I knew because I hadn't slept."

"Your worth is not a number on a page," he added. "And sleep is part of studying."

Together they made a plan. She would sleep at least seven hours. She would take a walk each day. She would study in blocks with real breaks. And if she felt overwhelmed, she would tell her teacher or her parents instead of pushing through in silence.

On the day of the exam, Leila felt calmer than she had expected. She remembered more than she thought she would. Her score was very good, though not perfect.

That night, she looked at her desk lamp. Sometimes, she realized, the best thing to do with a lamp was to turn it off.

What this story teaches

Working hard matters, but rest is part of doing well. Pressure sometimes comes from other people, and sometimes from inside ourselves. Our worth is much bigger than any grade or score. If the stress feels too big or does not ease, it is important to talk to a parent, teacher, or counselor.

Think about it

1. What was driving Leila to study all night?
2. What did her father mean by "sleep is part of studying"?
3. What helps you handle pressure at school, and who could you talk to when it feels like too much?

66 Thursday Nights

Helping at home, and being honest about it

Every Thursday night, Marcus had to look after his little sister, Tessa. Their mother worked the night shift at the hospital, and their father drove late deliveries on Thursdays. That was the arrangement. It meant that Marcus missed the Thursday open gym, the only night when his whole basketball team played pickup games.

He didn't say anything about it. He just got quieter each week. He heated up dinner, sat at the table with his arms crossed, and counted the minutes until his mother came home.

One Thursday, his mother found him in the kitchen before she left for work. "I know this is a lot," she said. "I see it on your face. I want you to know that I'm grateful, and that I don't take it for granted."

Marcus shrugged. "It's fine."

"It doesn't have to be fine," said his mother. "If you need something to change, I'd rather hear it."

That night, at bedtime, Tessa brought out a school project. It was a family tree with photos and short descriptions. Under Marcus's picture, in her neat third-grade handwriting, she had written: *Marcus: my brother. He makes pancakes for dinner and does the voices when he reads.*

Marcus stared at it for a long moment. He hadn't realized she was paying attention to those things. He hadn't known they mattered to her.

The next day, he talked to his mother. He said he didn't mind helping, but that he missed open gym. They worked out a plan. Once a month, his father would switch nights. And on some Thursdays, Marcus would take Tessa along to the gym, where the coach let her shoot baskets on the side court.

Within a month, the whole team knew Tessa by name. She was the youngest and most enthusiastic fan they had ever had.

Marcus learned two things that fall. Helping his family could be a burden, and it could also be a gift. And when something felt unfair, saying so out loud was the first step toward making it better.

What this story teaches

Helping at home can feel like a heavy responsibility, but it can also bring us closer to the people we love. It is fair to say honestly what we need, and to ask for balance. And the people we help often notice far more of what we do than we realize.

Think about it

1. Why did Marcus keep his feelings to himself for so long?
2. What did the family tree teach him?
3. What responsibilities do you have at home, and how do you feel about them?

67 The Field Trip Fund

Generosity that protects someone's dignity

The class trip to the science museum cost twenty-five dollars. Eli had been looking forward to it for weeks. When he saw Dara telling their teacher, "I don't really want to go, I'm busy that day," something in him went quiet. Dara had talked about that museum all semester.

He didn't know for sure why she had said it. But he had a guess.

Eli had thirty dollars in his pocket from his birthday, and he had been saving it for a new game. He thought about it for a while. He wanted to help, but he didn't want to embarrass her. Nobody likes to be the person others feel sorry for.

After class, he asked to talk to Ms. Cho privately. "I think Dara may not be going because of the cost," he said. "Could you let her know that there's a fund that covers trips, so anyone can go? And don't say who told you."

Ms. Cho looked at him for a moment. "There's a fund," she said. "But it's nearly empty this year."

Eli took out the bills and put twenty-five dollars into an envelope. On the outside he wrote: *For whoever needs it*. He handed it over and left before she could say thank you.

The next day, Ms. Cho quietly spoke to Dara. Nobody else knew. Dara signed the permission slip.

On the bus, Dara sat down next to Eli. "I found out there's a fund," she said. "Somebody helped, I think, and I'm really grateful."

"Huh," said Eli, looking out the window. "That's nice."

Dara grinned. "You have the worst poker face."

Eli shrugged, but he couldn't stop smiling. They spent the whole day at the museum, and he thought the game he hadn't bought would have been a lot less fun.

What this story teaches

Generosity is at its best when it protects someone's dignity. Help that is given quietly, without making the person feel small, lets them keep their pride. Noticing what others might be hiding is the first step, and sharing what we have is the second.

Think about it

1. How did Eli figure out that Dara might need help?
2. Why did he want to help without anyone knowing?
3. What is a way you could help someone without making them feel uncomfortable?

68 The Captain

Leading with humility

Cam was the captain of the soccer team. In the semifinal, they lost by one goal, 2 to 1. In the last minutes, Owen missed a penalty kick that would have tied the game.

In the locker room afterward, nobody spoke. Cam's heart was racing, and he felt an anger he had to put somewhere. He turned to Owen and said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Nice one, Owen. We lost because of you."

The room went silent. Owen's face crumpled. He grabbed his bag and left without a word.

That night, Cam couldn't sleep. He kept replaying the game in his head. And little by little, a different picture came into focus. He remembered missing three open shots himself. He remembered losing the ball in midfield right before the other team's first goal. The penalty had been one moment among many. It had not been the only reason they lost.

He realized something uncomfortable. He had blamed Owen because it was easier than looking at his own mistakes.

At practice the next day, before the coach could begin, Cam stepped forward. His voice wasn't as steady as he wanted it to be. "I owe Owen an apology, and I owe the team one," he said. "I blamed Owen for a loss that belonged to all of us, including me. I missed shots. I lost the ball. I'm sorry, Owen."

Owen stared at him. Then he slowly nodded. "Thanks," he said.

The coach let the silence sit for a moment. "A good captain," he said, "takes the blame when it's his. And he shares the credit when it isn't."

The team gathered in a huddle, and for the first time in a week, they were talking to each other. The next season, they didn't win every game. But Cam learned that a captain isn't the loudest voice on the field. A captain is the person who takes responsibility first.

What this story teaches

A true leader owns mistakes before pointing at anyone else's. When we blame others to protect ourselves, we damage trust. When we apologize openly, especially in front of the people we have wronged, we build it back. Humility makes a team, and a person, stronger.

Think about it

1. Why did Cam blame Owen?
2. What did it cost Cam to apologize in front of the whole team?
3. What makes someone a good leader, in your opinion?

69 The Diary

Privacy, trust, and worry

Nell was thirteen, and her older sister Ivy had been acting strangely for weeks. She stayed in her room. She barely ate dinner. When Nell asked if something was wrong, Ivy said, “I’m fine,” in a voice that meant the opposite.

One afternoon, Nell walked into the bedroom they used to share and saw Ivy’s diary lying open on the bed. Ivy had gone downstairs for a moment. Nell picked it up to close it, and one line jumped out at her: *I feel like nobody notices me.*

Her heart squeezed. She wanted very badly to read more. She wanted to understand what was happening. It felt almost like being a detective on a mission to help.

But her finger stayed frozen on the page. She knew that it was wrong. This was Ivy’s private place, and Ivy had trusted that nobody would come in. Reading it, even out of worry, would be a betrayal.

She closed the diary and put it back exactly where she had found it. Then she sat on the edge of the bed for a very long time.

That evening, she knocked on Ivy’s door. “I have to tell you something,” she said. “I picked up your diary this afternoon, and I saw one line before I stopped. I didn’t read any more. I’m sorry.”

Ivy’s face went hot with anger. “You looked at my private things?”

“I know,” said Nell. “I shouldn’t have picked it up. But I did stop, and I wanted to tell you the truth. I’m worried about you. I really miss you.”

Ivy’s anger crumbled, and her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you for telling me,” she said. “And for stopping.”

They talked for two hours. Ivy said that she had been feeling invisible at school, and that she hadn’t known how to say it. Nell listened without trying to fix it.

They made a pact: each other’s private things stayed private, but they would never stop talking.

What this story teaches

Everyone has a right to privacy, even from the people who love them. When we are worried about someone, the best way to help is to ask and to listen, not to look through their private things. If we make a mistake, being honest about it can repair trust.

Think about it

1. Why was it so tempting for Nell to keep reading?
2. What did she do after she stopped, and why did it matter?
3. How can you show someone you are worried without invading their privacy?

70 The Long Line

Patience and kindness toward the people who serve us

It was Saturday afternoon, and the grocery store was packed. Jordan stood behind his mother with a cart full of groceries, staring at the only line that was open. It wasn't moving.

At the front, a young cashier was scanning items very slowly. Her name tag said *Hollis*, and underneath, in smaller letters, *In Training*. She kept stopping to look at the screen, and her hands were trembling.

Jordan sighed, loudly. He checked his phone. He sighed again.

Ahead of him, a man muttered, "This is ridiculous. Doesn't anyone here know how to work a register?" Jordan saw Hollis flinch. She apologized to the customer three times in a row, and her face went pink.

Something in Jordan shifted. He remembered his own first weekend job, washing dishes at a restaurant. He had dropped a whole tray of plates on his second day. The manager had been kind about it, and he had never forgotten how much that meant.

His mother must have noticed his expression. "Everyone's doing the best they can," she said quietly.

When their turn finally came, Jordan set the first item on the belt. "Hi," he said. "Thanks for your patience with all of us. Looks like it's a busy day. How long have you been working here?"

Hollis looked up, startled. "Two days," she said, and a small smile crept onto her face.

"You're doing great," said Jordan.

Her shoulders came down, just a little. She scanned the rest of the groceries a bit faster, and she stopped apologizing.

As they were leaving, she called out, "Thank you. That really helped."

Jordan smiled all the way to the car. It had cost him nothing, and it had changed her whole afternoon.

What this story teaches

The people who serve us, in stores, restaurants, and offices, are people with feelings, and often with a hard day of their own. Patience and a kind word cost us almost nothing, but they can change someone's whole day. We never know what someone else is carrying.

Think about it

1. Why did Jordan's attitude change while he was waiting?
2. What did he say to Hollis, and what effect did it have?
3. How do you usually treat people who are serving you? Is there anything you would like to change?

71 Tuesday Tutor

Helping others learn, and learning from it

Priya was sixteen, and every Tuesday afternoon she volunteered as a tutor at the elementary school. Her first student was an eight-year-old boy named Devon. Their first session did not go well.

"I hate reading," said Devon, pushing the book across the table. "I'm stupid at it."

"You're not stupid," said Priya. "Let's just try one page."

He crossed his arms and stared out the window. Twenty minutes later, she gave up and asked what he liked to do instead.

"Dinosaurs," he muttered.

The next Tuesday, Priya arrived with a stack of dinosaur books from the library. Devon's eyes lit up. He was still slow, but when he reached the word *Tyrannosaurus*, something interesting happened. He sounded it out, letter by letter, and when he got it right, he grinned so widely that Priya laughed out loud.

Week after week, he got a little braver. He read longer words, and he stopped saying that he was stupid.

Priya noticed something surprising too. She had always struggled with math, and now she found herself explaining things to Devon in different ways until he understood. She learned to be patient. She learned to listen for what someone was confused about. She learned to explain the same idea three different ways.

And her own math grades began to climb.

At the end of the semester, Devon stood in front of his class and read a whole page about the Triceratops aloud, without stopping. Priya sat in the back, clapping until her hands stung.

"Thanks," Devon whispered to her afterward. "You didn't give up on me."

Priya thought that maybe she had learned more from him than he had from her.

What this story teaches

When we help someone learn, we often grow ourselves. Good teachers and mentors meet people where they are, find out what they care about, and believe in them until they can believe in themselves. Giving our time to someone else can change both of our lives.

Think about it

1. What did Priya do differently after the first session, and why did it work?
2. What did Priya learn about herself from tutoring?
3. Is there something you know that you could teach someone else?

72 The Sneakers

What we really need, and what we only want

Everyone on the basketball team wore the same sneakers. They were called the Aero 7s, and they cost a hundred and eighty dollars. Sam's old pair had a small hole near the toe, and the boys had started to notice.

"Dude, are those from last decade?" joked Tyler in the locker room. Everyone laughed, and Sam laughed too, though his ears burned.

He wanted those sneakers. He wanted them in a way that surprised him. His parents said that he could put money toward them, but that most of it would have to come from him. So for six weekends, Sam raked leaves, washed cars, and cleaned garages. By the end of the six weeks, he had a hundred and eighty dollars in an envelope.

On Saturday, he walked into the store and found the Aero 7s on the shelf. He picked one up. It was light and shiny, and it smelled like new rubber. Then he saw the tag. Next to them, a plain pair of shoes with good ankle support cost seventy-five dollars.

He hesitated. He tried on both. Honestly, the cheaper ones felt better on his feet.

He thought about the summer basketball camp that he had been too embarrassed to ask his parents about, because it cost a hundred dollars. He thought about how much of his life he had spent worrying about what Tyler thought.

Sam bought the plain pair. He signed up for the camp with the rest of the money.

In the fall, his teammates noticed that he was making shots that he never used to make. "What did you do this summer?" asked Tyler.

"Practiced a lot," said Sam.

Tyler glanced at Sam's shoes. "Those are actually kind of cool," he said.

Sam smiled. He hadn't needed them to be.

What this story teaches

It is natural to want what our friends have, but a brand does not make us who we are. Thinking about what we need, what we want, and what will truly help us grow leads to better choices. Belonging comes from how we treat people and what we work at, not from what we wear.

Think about it

1. Why did Sam want the sneakers so badly?
2. What made him change his mind at the store?
3. Have you ever wanted something mostly because others had it? What did you decide?

73 Not a Hugger

Respecting personal space

At every family gathering, Aunt Rosa swept in and wrapped Dev in a huge hug before he could even say hello. Dev didn't dislike his aunt. He just didn't like being hugged, especially without warning. It made his skin prickle and his shoulders go stiff.

For years, he had just gone along with it, forcing a smile while feeling uncomfortable inside.

One afternoon, his cousin Talia noticed him stiffen during one of Aunt Rosa's hugs. Later, she asked him about it privately. "You don't seem to like hugs much," she said. "That's totally okay, you know. You could just tell her."

"Isn't that rude?" asked Dev. "She's just being affectionate."

"There's a difference between being warm and ignoring what someone wants," said Talia. "You can be kind and still say what you need."

The next family dinner, when Aunt Rosa opened her arms, Dev took a breath. "Aunt Rosa, I really love seeing you," he said. "I'm just not much of a hugger. Would a high five work instead?"

Aunt Rosa blinked, surprised. Then she laughed and held up her hand. "A high five it is! Thank you for telling me. I had no idea."

From then on, their high fives became their own special greeting, and Dev looked forward to seeing her instead of dreading the hug.

Later, Dev thought about it and realized something else. His little cousin Priya sometimes shrank away when people leaned in for hugs too. This time, he was the one who asked her, gently, "Would you rather do a fist bump?"

Priya's whole face relaxed. "Yes, please," she said.

What this story teaches

Everybody has a right to decide how they want to be touched, even by people who love them. Saying so, kindly and clearly, is not rude. It is honest and respectful. And once we understand our own boundaries, we can help notice and respect other people's too.

Think about it

1. Why did Dev go along with the hugs for so long?
2. What did Talia help him understand?
3. How can you kindly let someone know what feels comfortable to you?

74 The Holiday Table

Respecting different beliefs and traditions

Farah invited her classmate Grace over during Ramadan, the month when Farah's family fasted from sunrise to sunset. At school, Grace had seen Farah quietly skip lunch for weeks and had wondered what it was about.

That evening, Grace arrived just as the sun was setting. The table was already set, but nobody was eating yet. Farah's whole family sat together, waiting.

"Why is everyone just staring at the food?" Grace whispered, confused.

"We break the fast together, the moment the sun goes down," explained Farah. "It makes the meal feel special. We think about people who don't have enough to eat, and we feel grateful."

A few minutes later, Farah's grandmother checked the time and smiled. "Now," she said. Everyone ate a date first, exactly as the family always did, and then the rest of the meal began. Grace tried a date too. She had never seen a meal start with quite so much meaning before.

"This is really different from dinner at my house," said Grace. "But I like it. It feels like everyone is really present, not just eating because it's six o'clock."

Farah smiled. "I was actually a little nervous to invite you. Some kids at school act like fasting is strange."

"It's not strange," said Grace. "It's just not something I grew up with. Thank you for showing me."

A few months later, Farah came to Grace's house for her family's holiday dinner, and it was Grace's turn to explain their traditions. Both girls agreed that dinner tasted better with a good story behind it.

What this story teaches

Different families and cultures have different beliefs, celebrations, and ways of eating together. We don't have to share a tradition to respect it and be curious about it. Being a good guest, and a good host, means asking questions with an open heart instead of judging what feels unfamiliar.

Think about it

1. Why was Grace confused when she first arrived?
2. What did Farah's explanation help Grace understand?
3. Is there a tradition from another family or culture you'd like to learn more about?

75 The Trophy Shelf

Sibling rivalry and finding your own path

In Owen's house, one whole shelf in the living room was covered with his older sister Kayla's swimming trophies. Gold and silver figures lined up in a row, each one a reminder of a race Owen had never come close to winning.

Owen swam too, on the same team. He worked just as hard as Kayla, staying late for extra laps, waking up early for practice. But he was never as fast. At every meet, people said, "You must be Kayla's brother," before they ever learned his name.

One evening, after finishing fourth in a race, Owen slammed his gym bag down in his room. "I'm quitting," he told his father. "I'm always going to be the slow one."

His father sat down on the edge of the bed. "Do you love swimming?" he asked.

"I used to," muttered Owen.

"Is that because of the water," his father asked, "or because of the shelf?"

Owen didn't answer right away. But he knew, somewhere underneath the frustration, that the water still felt like the best part of his day. It was the comparing that hurt.

The next week, Owen's coach pulled him aside. "Your underwater dolphin kick is the best on the team," she said. "Have you thought about the medley relay? It needs exactly that."

Owen threw himself into the butterfly stroke that season. He wasn't chasing Kayla's times anymore. He was chasing his own.

At the spring championship, his relay team won first place, and Owen's underwater kick off the wall was the fastest start of the whole race. That night, his father added a new trophy to the shelf, right next to Kayla's. Owen noticed that his sister was the one who cheered the loudest.

What this story teaches

It is easy to feel overshadowed by a brother or sister who is talented at something we care about too. But every person has their own strengths and their own path, and chasing someone else's trophies can make us miss our own. Finding what makes us different, not just what makes us similar, can help us love what we do again.

Think about it

1. Why did Owen want to quit swimming?
2. What question did his father ask that helped him think differently?
3. Is there something you compare yourself to a sibling or friend about? What is something that is uniquely yours?

76 The Ten Dollar Loan

Money and honesty between friends

At the fair, Priya's friend Beth realized she had left her wallet at home. "Can you spot me ten dollars?" she asked. "I'll pay you back Monday, I promise."

Priya handed it over without a second thought. Monday came and went. So did the week after that. Priya didn't want to seem petty over ten dollars, so she said nothing, but every time she saw Beth buy a snack or a new hair clip, a small resentment crept in.

By the third week, Priya had started to feel a little cold toward Beth without really knowing why, until she finally admitted to herself what was bothering her.

She thought about ignoring it forever. Ten dollars wasn't a fortune. But the silence was doing more damage to the friendship than the money ever could.

At lunch, she took a breath. "Hey, this is kind of awkward, but could you pay me back the ten dollars from the fair? No rush on my end, I just wanted to bring it up instead of feeling weird about it."

Beth's face went red. "Oh my gosh, I totally forgot. I am so sorry. That was really unfair of me." She paid Priya back the next day, with an apology note taped to the bill.

"Thanks for telling me," Beth added. "I'd rather know than have you upset with me and not understand why."

From then on, whenever one of them borrowed anything, even a pencil, they said out loud when they'd return it. It felt a little formal at first, but it also felt like respect.

What this story teaches

Money can quietly damage a friendship when it isn't talked about honestly. Speaking up about it, calmly and without accusation, protects the friendship far better than staying silent and letting resentment grow. Good friends can handle an honest, kind conversation about something owed.

Think about it

1. Why didn't Priya say anything for three weeks?
2. What happened when she finally spoke up?
3. How would you bring up a small unpaid debt with a friend?

77 Saving for the Guitar

Patience, planning, and earning what we want

The guitar in the shop window cost two hundred and forty dollars, a sunburst acoustic with steel strings that Jae had been dreaming about for months. Jae's allowance was ten dollars a week. At that rate, saving up felt impossible, almost twenty-four weeks away.

One evening, Jae almost gave up and spent the saved sixty dollars on a much cheaper toy instead, just to have something now. But something held Jae back.

Jae's older cousin Mimi, a nursing student, suggested making a simple chart: one square for every ten dollars saved, twenty-four squares in total, taped to the bedroom wall. "Watching the squares fill in makes it feel real," she said.

So Jae started. Ten dollars from allowance each week. Five more from walking the neighbor's dog on Saturdays. An unexpected fifteen dollars from a birthday card from an aunt. Slowly, square by square, the chart began to fill with color.

There were hard weeks. A friend invited Jae to a movie that would have used up an entire week's savings, and Jae almost said yes out of habit. But looking at the chart on the wall made the choice easier. Jae stayed home and watched a movie for free instead, and colored in another square that same night.

By week twenty, doubt crept in. *What if I don't like guitar after all this? What if it's a waste?* Jae talked to a music teacher at school, who let Jae borrow a school guitar for a week to try it out first. The doubt faded fast; ten minutes of playing was enough.

In week twenty-three, the last square was colored in, a whole day earlier than the chart had predicted, thanks to extra dog-walking money.

Jae walked into the shop and paid for the guitar. It felt different from something simply given, heavier somehow, and much more meaningful. That night, learning the very first chord, sore fingertips and all, felt like the beginning of something Jae had genuinely earned.

What this story teaches

Saving up for something we really want takes patience and planning, and it is a skill that gets easier with practice. Breaking a big goal into small, visible steps, and sticking with it even when something tempting comes along, makes the eventual reward feel even more meaningful. Things we work for often mean more to us than things simply handed to us.

Think about it

1. What almost made Jae give up on saving?
2. How did the chart on the wall help?
3. Is there something you are saving toward, or could start saving toward?

78 The Campfire Promise

Respecting wildlife and the outdoors

On the first night of the camping trip, Dario's troop gathered around a crackling fire, and a small family of raccoons crept to the edge of the clearing, drawn by the smell of food.

"Look how cute!" said one of the younger scouts, Milo, already reaching for a marshmallow to toss toward them.

The troop leader, Ms. Farrow, gently caught his wrist. "Don't feed them," she said. "I know it feels kind, but it isn't, not really."

Milo frowned, confused. "Why not? They're hungry."

Ms. Farrow sat down beside the fire and explained. "When wild animals get used to human food, they stop being afraid of people. They start raiding campsites and getting into trouble, and sometimes rangers have to remove them from the park entirely, for everyone's safety, including theirs. The kindest thing we can do is let them stay wild."

That night, the troop packed every scrap of food into sealed containers and hung the bags high between two trees, well out of reach. Dario helped double-check every tent and cooler.

In the morning, their campsite was undisturbed, clean and quiet, exactly as they had left it. But two campsites over, a family who hadn't packed away their food found their cooler knocked open and raided, marshmallow wrappers scattered across the dirt.

"That could have been us," said Dario, looking at the mess.

Before they left on the last day, the troop practiced something Ms. Farrow called Leave No Trace: picking up every last piece of litter, scattering the cold ashes of the fire, and smoothing the ground until their site looked exactly as wild and untouched as it had before they arrived.

Walking back down the trail with his backpack, Dario glanced back at the empty campsite and felt oddly proud. They had visited nature, and nature hadn't had to pay for it.

What this story teaches

Wild animals belong outdoors, doing what wild animals do, not depending on people for food. Respecting nature sometimes means resisting the urge to help in a way that isn't truly helpful. Leaving a place exactly as clean and untouched as we found it is one of the kindest things we can do for the wild world.

Think about it

1. Why did Ms. Farrow stop Milo from feeding the raccoons?
2. What is "Leave No Trace," and why does it matter?
3. What is one thing you could do to help protect a wild place you love?

Part three: Stories of courage and hope

For everyone



79 One Brick at a Time

Turning a big dream into a first step

Amara was twelve years old, and there was no library in her neighborhood. The nearest one was a long bus ride away, and the ticket cost more than many families could spare. Amara had read her own few books until the covers fell off. She wanted, more than anything, a library for everyone on her street.

When she told her class about her dream, a boy laughed. “You? A library needs a building and a lot of money and grown-ups.”

Amara went home quiet. That evening, her grandmother listened to the whole story while stirring a pot on the stove.

“Nobody builds a house by staring at the roof,” Nani said. “You lay one brick. Then another. What is your first brick?”

Amara thought for a moment. Then she found an old wooden crate in the garage, painted it blue, and set it by the front gate. She filled it with eleven of her own books and hung a sign that read *Take one. Leave one.*

In the first week, three books were taken and two new ones appeared. A neighbor built a small shelf to go with the crate. A teacher dropped off a whole box of paperbacks. Children began to gather at the gate after school.

Within six months, the crate had become four bookcases in an unused shed at the community garden, run by Amara and a group of volunteers, open every Saturday. Two years later, the community center gave the library a real room of its own.

Amara still begins every big idea the same way. Before she says anything else, she asks, “What is the first brick?”

What this story teaches

A big dream looks impossible only when we try to see all of it at once. Start with the smallest step that you can actually do today. People are drawn to those who begin, and small beginnings have a way of growing when others join in.

Think about it

1. Why did the boy’s comment sting, and what did Amara do with it?
2. What is a dream you have that seems too big? What could be its first brick?
3. How did other people help Amara once she had started?

80 The Last Runner

Finishing what you start

Sunil was not a fast runner, and everybody knew it, including Sunil. He was only in the 1500-meter race because his team needed a fifth runner.

For the first two laps, he kept up. Then, on the far bend of the track, his foot caught on something, and he went down hard. His knee burned. He got up, but the other runners were already far ahead, and after a while they disappeared around the curve.

By the time he came around to the start again, the stands had gone quiet. A few people were heading to the snack stand. He was last by a whole lap.

Every part of him wanted to step off the track. *Nobody would blame me*, he thought. *I'm hurt. I'm last. What's the point?*

Then he heard a voice from the stands. It was small and clear. "Keep going!"

It was Anaya, a first grader who had come to watch her big sister, cupping her hands around her mouth. Then Sunil's teammates joined in, and his coach, and a few parents. The voices got louder.

On the far bend, a girl in a different school's jersey stepped onto the track. She was the winner, who had finished minutes earlier. She jogged up next to him. "I'll run this one with you," she said, and didn't say anything else.

Sunil's knee still burned. His lungs ached. But the last lap was the loudest one of his life. When he crossed the line, the whole stadium was on its feet.

Coach Mbeki met him with a bottle of water. "You know what I saw out there?" he said. "A runner who could have stopped, and didn't."

Sunil didn't win a medal that day. But he never forgot it.

What this story teaches

Courage is not only for the people who win. It is also for those who keep going when they are hurt, when they are behind, and when nobody would blame them for stopping. And kindness can carry us further than we ever thought we could go, which is why we should be the voice that says, "Keep going."

Think about it

1. Why did Sunil want to stop, and what made him continue?
2. How did the other people at the race help him?
3. Who could you cheer for this week, even if they are not winning?

81 The Well at the Edge of the Village

Hope, teamwork, and the gift we leave to others

In a village on a dry plateau, the women and children walked three hours each way to the river to fetch water. Their feet grew tired, and the jars grew heavy, and no one thought it could be any other way.

One morning, old Yusuf picked up a shovel and began to dig in the middle of the village.

“There’s no water here,” said the elders. “The ground is too dry.”

“Perhaps,” said Yusuf. “But we will never know unless someone digs.”

So he dug. For a month he dug alone, while some people laughed and others shook their heads. Then a boy named Kito came with a basket and began to carry away the loose earth. A few days later, a woman joined them. Then there were four, then ten.

They dug for two years. The hole grew deep, and there was still no water. Some people gave up and went back to walking to the river. Yusuf’s back ached every night. He kept digging anyway.

One dawn, Kito pressed his ear against the wall of the pit and heard a faint, soft sound. *Drip*. They dug another meter. Then, at the bottom, the earth turned dark and damp, and a cool spring bubbled up around their feet.

The whole village came running. They laughed and cried, and children splashed each other with the first bucket.

That evening, a young woman asked Yusuf, “Why did you keep digging when you weren’t sure there was any water?”

Yusuf, who was now too old to carry the heavy buckets himself, looked at the well. “Someone dug the wells I have drunk from all my life,” he said. “I was only paying them back.”

Years later, the villagers carved words into the stone around the well: *Dug by those who came before, for those who come after.*

What this story teaches

Some of the best things we do are for people we may never meet. Hope is a choice we make with our hands: we begin, we keep going, and we ask others to join us. And we should be grateful to those who did hard work before us, so that we could have what we have today.

Think about it

1. Why do you think Yusuf started digging when everyone said it was impossible?
2. What helped the village finish the well?
3. What is something you enjoy today that someone else worked hard to give you?

82 The Fence Between Two Gardens

Forgiveness and the courage to make the first move

Mrs. Sato and Mr. Rossi had been neighbors for thirty years, and friends for twenty-nine of them. Then one autumn, a heavy branch from Mr. Rossi's pear tree crashed into Mrs. Sato's garden and flattened her tomato plants.

"You never trim that tree!" she said.

"You never told me it bothered you!" he said.

Neither of them apologized. By spring, Mr. Rossi had built a tall wooden fence between their gardens. Mrs. Sato planted a row of thorny bushes along her side of it. They stopped saying good morning. The silence grew as high as the fence.

But two people were unhappy about it. Mrs. Sato's granddaughter, Hana, missed Mr. Rossi's juicy pears. Mr. Rossi's grandson, Luca, missed Mrs. Sato's plum jam.

One afternoon, the children discovered a knothole in the fence, just big enough to pass something through. Hana slipped a jar of plum jam through the hole with a note that said *From Luca*. Luca slid a ripe pear back through, with a note that said *From Hana*.

Both grandparents tasted what they had been given and knew instantly who had really made it. They said nothing. But for a whole week, they thought about it.

One evening, Mr. Rossi knocked on Mrs. Sato's front door. He held his hat in his hands. "I should have trimmed that tree," he said. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Sato sighed. "And I should have talked to you calmly, instead of shouting. I'm sorry too."

The next weekend, they cut a small door into the fence and painted it bright green. The fence stayed, but the door was almost never closed.

What this story teaches

Holding a grudge builds a fence that keeps both people out of each other's gardens. Forgiveness starts when someone is brave enough to take the first step. Small, kind gestures can open doors that arguments have shut, and a friendship is worth far more than winning.

Think about it

1. Why did it take so long for Mr. Rossi and Mrs. Sato to apologize?
2. How did the children help?
3. Is there a fence in your life that could use a small green door?

83 The Heavy Suitcase

It takes strength to ask for help

Talia was twelve and very proud of doing things on her own. At the train station one afternoon, she dragged an enormous suitcase up a long flight of stairs. Every few steps she had to stop and catch her breath. Her face turned red.

A woman with a briefcase said, “Need a hand?”

“I’m fine!” said Talia.

A teenage boy in a hoodie asked the same thing. “I’m fine!” she said again.

By the time she reached the top, her arms were shaking. She let go for just a moment, and the suitcase slid two steps back down. Talia wanted to sit on the floor and cry.

On a bench nearby sat an old man with a cane, Mr. Bose, who had been watching. “Young lady,” he said kindly, “I can’t lift anything anymore, but I can tell you that there’s an elevator right around that corner.”

Talia turned. There it was, plain as day. It had been there the whole time, and she had never asked.

“Asking for help is not weakness,” said Mr. Bose. “It’s what allows other people to feel useful. I’ve been sitting on this bench for an hour wishing I could help someone. You’ve made my day.”

Talia blushed, and then she laughed. “Thank you,” she said, and this time she meant it.

The next week, she did something she had never done before. She asked a classmate for help with her math homework. And when that classmate got stuck on her essay, Talia was the one who helped.

What this story teaches

Being strong includes knowing when to ask for help. Most people are glad to give it, and letting them do so is a gift to them as much as to us. We are at our best when we help each other, sometimes by giving and sometimes by receiving.

Think about it

1. Why did Talia keep saying “I’m fine”?
2. What did Mr. Bose mean by “it lets other people feel useful”?
3. When was the last time you asked for help? How did it go?

84 The Soup on Tuesdays

Kindness that moves in a circle

When Mr. Abara lost his job at the factory one winter, his family tried to keep it a secret. They did not want anyone's pity. The rent was late, the pantry was thin, and the weeks were very long.

On the first Tuesday, they heard a soft knock, and when they opened the door, no one was there. On the step sat a pot of hot chicken soup with a loaf of bread beside it, and a note: *Made too much. Hope you can use it. A neighbor.*

The next Tuesday, there was another pot. And the Tuesday after that. They never found out who was leaving it.

Mr. Abara had always been the kind of man who gave, and he found it hard to receive. But his wife put her hand on his arm. "Sometimes," she said gently, "it's our turn to be helped. That's how a neighborhood works."

Three months later, Mr. Abara found a new job. On the day he got his first paycheck, he bought carrots, potatoes, and chicken, and he made an enormous pot of soup.

Across the street, old Mrs. Lindqvist had a broken hip, and she had not left her house in weeks. On Tuesday evening, Mr. Abara set the pot on her doorstep. He knocked, and then he ran back to the shadows like a boy playing a game. Tucked under the lid was a note: *Made too much. Hope you can use it. A neighbor.*

Word spread slowly through the street, the way good things do. Before long, someone was leaving soup for someone every Tuesday. Nobody kept track of who, and nobody minded.

Years later, Mr. Abara found out that the first pot of soup had come from Mrs. Pell at the corner house. "I got soup on my doorstep once, long ago, when I needed it," she told him. "I only passed it along."

What this story teaches

Kindness moves in a circle. Receiving help with grace is as important as giving it, because it lets a community take care of itself. When we have been helped, we can pass that kindness forward, quietly and without expecting anything in return.

Think about it

1. Why was it hard for Mr. Abara to accept help?
2. What did his wife mean by "that's how a neighborhood works"?
3. How could you pass kindness forward in your own street or school?

85 The Bakery After the Flood

Hope, rebuilding, and letting people help

One spring, the river rose over its banks and poured into the town. When the water finally went down, Mr. and Mrs. Okoye returned to their bakery. Their whole shop was covered in mud. The ovens were ruined, the flour bags were soaked, and the sign above the door hung crooked.

Mrs. Okoye sat down on an overturned bucket and cried. They had spent twenty years building that bakery. It seemed to them that it had all been washed away in a single night.

Then they heard footsteps. A neighbor stood in the doorway with a mop. Behind her were three more people with buckets, and behind them, a teenager pushing a wheelbarrow. Nobody had been asked. They had simply come.

By the end of the day, half the street was there. The hardware store owner brought boxes of supplies and said, "Pay me when you can, and if you can't, that's okay too." The school children painted a brand-new sign. A baker from the next town, Mr. Dell, who had once been their competitor, arrived with a truck. "You can use my ovens for two weeks," he said. "Bread doesn't care who bakes it."

It took three months to fix everything. There were days when Mr. Okoye was tired and discouraged. But every morning, someone was at the door with a hammer or a casserole or a kind word.

On the day the bakery reopened, the line stretched around the block. The smell of fresh bread filled the street, and Mrs. Okoye cried again, but this time it was for a different reason.

Mr. Okoye stood in the doorway and looked at the crowd. "We lost a great deal," he said. "But we didn't lose the street."

Inside, on the wall above the counter, they hung the old crooked sign next to the new one, so they would always remember.

What this story teaches

Hard times can bring out the best in a community. It is okay to grieve what has been lost, and it is also okay to accept help. Hope grows when people show up for each other, and the work of rebuilding is much lighter when it is shared.

Think about it

1. Why did Mrs. Okoye cry twice, and how were the two moments different?
2. What did Mr. Dell's offer show about kindness?
3. How could you help a neighbor or a community that had gone through a hard time?

86 The Old Blue Bicycle

Hard work, resourcefulness, and the help of neighbors

Malik was thirteen, and the town newspaper needed someone to deliver its Sunday edition. The job paid well, but there was one problem. He didn't have a bicycle.

One afternoon, he found an old blue bicycle behind the junkyard, half buried in weeds. Its tires were flat, its chain was missing, and rust had eaten most of the paint. "Take it," said the owner with a shrug, "if you can fix it."

Malik pushed it home. It took him all the way to sunset.

That night, he looked up how to fix a bicycle, and it turned out to be much harder than it looked. He got grease on his shirt, on his face, and on his mother's kitchen towel. He couldn't make the chain stay on.

The next day, an elderly neighbor named Mr. Pellegrino leaned over the fence. "You're holding the wheel wrong," he said. Then he came over, his knees creaking, and showed Malik how to thread the chain and adjust the gears. "I fixed bicycles for forty years," he said. "Nobody ever handed me my first wrench either."

Together they patched the tires and oiled every joint. The last piece was a brake cable, which cost six dollars, and Malik paid for it with his own savings. He painted the fender white to cover the worst of the rust.

On his first Sunday, he rose at five-thirty in the freezing dark. His hands went numb before he reached the third street. Some houses gave him a smile. Some gave him nothing. But at the end of the fifth block, on a porch, he found a thermos of hot cocoa and a note: *For the paperboy.*

Malik drank it right there in the cold, and he felt like the richest boy in town.

By the end of the school year, he had saved enough to buy his little sister the winter boots she needed, and a small extra for himself. And in the spring, he taught a younger boy on his street how to fix a chain.

What this story teaches

Hard work, patience, and creativity can turn very little into something valuable. There is dignity in earning what we have. And we rarely do it entirely alone. Neighbors and mentors who share what they know can make all the difference, and we can share what we learn with others in turn.

Think about it

1. What made the bicycle so hard to fix?
2. How did Mr. Pellegrino help Malik, and why did that matter?
3. What is something you would like to learn how to fix or make yourself?

87 New Words

Starting over in a new language

When Hana's family moved from Seoul to a small town, she knew only a handful of English words: hello, thank you, and bathroom. At her new school, the other students talked so fast that their words blurred together like a river she couldn't step into.

She sat silently through her first week, terrified to speak and make a mistake. At lunch, she ate alone, her stomach tight with loneliness.

One day, in art class, the teacher, Ms. Okafor, paired her with a girl named Ruthie for a project. Ruthie chattered on, and Hana understood only pieces. Finally, Hana pointed at the blue paint and said, carefully, "I like... blue."

Ruthie's whole face brightened. "Me too! Blue is my favorite!" She said it slowly, and smiled the whole time.

Bit by bit, Ruthie became Hana's translator and her friend. She taught Hana new words at lunch: "fork," "funny," "Friday." In exchange, Hana taught her a few words of Korean: *annyeong*, hello, and *gomawo*, thank you.

Some days were still hard. Hana made mistakes and blushed when other kids didn't understand her. But Ruthie never laughed at the mistakes; she just gently offered the right word and kept talking.

By winter, Hana raised her hand in class for the first time, and answered a question in English, slowly but clearly. Ms. Okafor beamed at her, and Ruthie clapped from across the room.

That spring, Hana stood in front of the class for a presentation about her old home in Seoul. Her English still had an accent, but her voice was steady and proud.

"Thank you for being patient with me," she told Ruthie afterward.

"Thank you for teaching me *gomawo*," said Ruthie. "I use it every day now."

What this story teaches

Learning a new language and a new country at the same time takes tremendous courage. A little patience and kindness from a new friend can make all the difference between loneliness and belonging. And often, the newcomer has just as much to teach us as we have to teach them.

Think about it

1. What made Hana's first weeks so hard?
2. How did Ruthie help without making Hana feel embarrassed?
3. How could you welcome someone who is still learning the language spoken around them?

88 The Community Garden

Turning an empty lot into something shared

For years, the empty lot on Birch Street had been nothing but weeds, broken glass, and an old rusted shopping cart. Kids cut through it on the way to school, but nobody stopped there.

One spring, a woman named Ms. Delgado moved into the apartment across the street and looked at the lot every morning from her window. One Saturday, she walked outside with a single shovel and began pulling weeds.

The neighbors watched from their porches, curious. A boy named Theo came over first. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Starting a garden,” said Ms. Delgado. “Want to help?”

Theo shrugged and picked up a rake. By afternoon, three more kids had joined. By the next weekend, their parents came too, bringing shovels, seeds, and an old wheelbarrow. Someone donated a stack of wood for garden beds. Someone else brought a hose.

It took the whole summer. There were setbacks: a heatwave that wilted the first seedlings, and a raccoon that dug up half a row of carrots one night. But every Saturday, more people showed up, and the lot slowly transformed.

By autumn, rows of tomatoes, beans, and sunflowers stood where the shopping cart used to rust. The neighbors built a small sign: *Birch Street Community Garden — everyone welcome.*

On a cool October evening, they held a harvest dinner right there in the garden, with long tables made from borrowed doors set on sawhorses. Ms. Delgado looked around at the food, the laughter, and the lit lanterns strung between the fence posts, and she thought that this was exactly what she had hoped for when she picked up that first shovel.

Theo, now with dirt permanently under his fingernails, turned to her. “Can we plant pumpkins next year?”

“I don’t see why not,” said Ms. Delgado, smiling. “This garden belongs to everyone who shows up.”

What this story teaches

A forgotten, neglected place can become something wonderful when people show up together, a little at a time. Hope is often not a single grand plan but many small hands working the same soil. And something shared and built together tends to be cared for by everyone.

Think about it

1. What made the neighbors start joining Ms. Delgado?
2. What difficulties did the garden face, and how did the community handle them?
3. Is there a forgotten space near you that could become something shared?

89 The Kindness Relay

How one kind act can travel a long way

On a cold Tuesday morning, a stranger paid for the coffee of the person behind her in line, a tired-looking man in a rumpled work uniform. “Pay it forward if you feel like it,” she said with a smile, and hurried off to work.

The man, surprised and touched, decided to pay for the next person’s coffee too, an elderly gentleman leaning on a cane. The gentleman, delighted, paid for the young mother behind him, juggling a toddler and a stroller. She paid for the teenager after her, who was counting out exact change for a hot chocolate before school.

The chain kept going, coffee after coffee, all through the morning. Nobody planned it. Nobody organized it. Each person simply passed along what had been given to them.

By early afternoon, the barista, a young woman named Zoe, had lost count somewhere around forty people. She began keeping a paper chain instead, adding a new link for every kindness, taping them up along the counter until it stretched clear across the shop and looped twice around the pastry case.

A local reporter heard about it and stopped by to see for herself. She interviewed customers, none of whom had known any of the others personally.

“Why did you do it?” she asked a young man in scrubs, clearly on his way to a hospital shift.

He shrugged, smiling. “Somebody was kind to me. It felt strange not to pass it on.”

By closing time, the chain had reached ninety-four coffees, all from strangers who never learned each other’s names. Zoe cut the last link, wrote *and counting* at the end, and pinned the whole paper chain to the wall, where it stayed for the rest of the year, a little reminder to everyone in line what a single cup of coffee could start.

What this story teaches

A small act of kindness rarely stays small. It moves from person to person, often among people who will never meet, and it can grow into something much bigger than the person who started it ever imagined. We don’t have to know where a kindness will travel to be the one who starts it.

Think about it

1. Why do you think so many people chose to keep the chain going?
2. What surprised you about how far a small kindness traveled?
3. What is one kindness you could start today, without expecting anything back?

90 The Lighthouse Keeper's Log

Quiet, steady dedication

For forty-one years, Mr. Alarie kept the lighthouse on Gull Point, climbing the same one hundred and twelve spiral stairs every evening to light the great lamp before dark, and climbing them again every morning to put it out.

There were birthdays he missed, and storms so fierce that the whole tower shook beneath his feet. There were quiet, uneventful nights when nothing happened at all, when no ship passed and no one would ever know whether he had climbed the stairs or stayed in bed.

He climbed them anyway. Every single night, in his careful handwriting, he wrote one line in a logbook that sat on a shelf by the door: *Lamp lit, all is well*. Forty-one years of the same short sentence, night after night after night.

His granddaughter Odette used to ask him, during her summer visits, why he bothered on the calm nights, when the sea was as smooth and quiet as glass. “No ships are even out there tonight,” she said once, hugging her knees on the stone steps.

Mr. Alarie set down his oil can and thought about it. “I don’t know which night is the one that matters,” he said. “So I treat them all as if they might be.”

One foggy October evening, long after Odette had grown up and moved away, a small fishing boat lost its bearings in the thick mist. The captain, half-frozen and exhausted, later said that the lighthouse beam, exactly where it was supposed to be, exactly on time as always, was the only thing that had guided them safely home that night.

He never learned the keeper’s name. He never needed to. The light had simply been there, the way it always was, because an old man had climbed one hundred and twelve stairs one more time.

When Mr. Alarie finally retired, Odette found forty-one years of logbooks stacked neatly on the shelf. Nearly every page said the very same thing. She realized that the sameness wasn’t boring at all. It was devotion, written out one calm and faithful night at a time.

What this story teaches

Some of the most important work in the world doesn’t look exciting from the outside. Showing up faithfully, night after night, even when it seems as if nothing is happening, can end up mattering more than we will ever know. We rarely find out which ordinary day was the one that someone else needed most.

Think about it

1. Why did Mr. Alarie climb the stairs even on calm, quiet nights?
2. What did Odette come to understand about her grandfather’s work?
3. What is something you do consistently, even when it feels like nobody notices?

91 Little Sparks

Five very short stories

The Thank-You Note

Ms. Ellery had a difficult year of teaching and started to believe she was not reaching anyone. Ten years later, a letter arrived from a former student. “You were the only adult who asked how I was doing and waited for the real answer,” it said. “I’m a nurse now.” She kept that letter in her desk for the rest of her career.

You may never see the whole effect of a small kindness, but it is still there.

The Full Cup

A young man visited a wise teacher, hoping to learn. The teacher offered him tea and kept pouring until it spilled over the rim. “Stop! The cup is full!” the young man cried. “So is your mind,” said the teacher gently, “with everything you already believe you know. Empty your cup, and there will be room to learn.”

Staying curious and humble makes room for wisdom.

The Lost Mitten

On a snowy morning, Jonah found a small red mitten lying in the road. He could have walked past. Instead, he hung it on a fence post with its fingers pointing up, where anyone searching would see it. By afternoon it was gone. He never learned whose it was, but he liked to imagine a small hand somewhere getting warm again.

Kindness does not need an audience or a thank-you.

The Pothole

For a year, a pothole on Maple Street rattled every car that drove over it. One morning it was filled with fresh gravel, and everyone assumed the town had done it. In fact it was Mr. Ling, a retired neighbor, who filled it quietly at dawn whenever it needed fixing. When he moved away, someone found his shovel leaning on a fence with a note: *Pass it on.* Someone did.

Communities are held together by people who fix things without waiting to be asked or thanked.

The Crooked Line

Mei spent weeks practicing calligraphy. On the final page, her brush slipped and left a long crooked line straight through the middle. She wanted to tear it up. Her teacher took the brush, added a few leaves and some blossoms, and the crooked line became the branch of a plum tree.

A mistake is not the end of the page. Sometimes it is the beginning of a different picture.

Think about it

1. Which of these five sparks stayed with you most? Why?
2. Have you ever done something kind that nobody knew about? How did it feel?
3. What is a mistake of yours that could become a branch on a plum tree?

92 More Little Sparks

Five more very short stories

The Last Cookie

There was one cookie left in the jar. Nia broke it in two, gave her little brother the bigger half, and said she wasn't really hungry. He looked at her for a moment, then pulled a squashed cookie out of his pocket. "I saved this for you," he said. "I was going to give it to you after dinner."

Generosity has a way of finding its way home.

The Wrong Number

Sam sent a text to his cousin the morning of her exam: *You'll do great today. Believe in yourself.* But he had typed one digit wrong. A few minutes later, a stranger replied: *I have a job interview in ten minutes, and I was about to cancel. Thank you. I needed that.*

Encouragement is never wasted. You never know who needs it most.

The Note in the Lunchbox

Every day, Arjun's father tucked a tiny note into his lunchbox: *Be brave. Be kind.* In sixth grade, Arjun felt embarrassed and asked him to stop. His father stopped without a word. A few months later, on a hard day, Arjun opened his lunchbox and found nothing but a sandwich. That evening he slipped a note into his father's coat pocket: *Thank you for the notes. Please start again.*

We often don't notice how much something means until it is gone. Say thank you while you can.

The Substitute

Mr. Haddad's class had a reputation for making substitute teachers cry. Then the new sub walked in, his hands shaking as he wrote his name on the board. It was his first day teaching after a whole other career. Priya stood up and said quietly, "Let's be nice today." The class behaved perfectly. At the end of the day, Mr. Haddad said, "You made my first day something I will always remember."

How we treat people who have no power over us shows who we really are.

The Seat on the Bus

The bus was crowded, and an elderly woman stood holding the pole, swaying with every turn. A boy in the back gave up his seat, even though his friends smirked. "It's just a seat," he mumbled, embarrassed. The woman patted his arm. "No, dear. It's a kindness."

Courtesy takes courage when other people are watching.

Think about it

1. Which of these five sparks would you like to try in real life?
2. Have you ever been thankful for something only after it was gone?
3. Who could use a word of encouragement from you today?

93 Even More Little Sparks

Five more very short stories

The Two Languages

Luis often translated for his grandmother at the pharmacy, and sometimes he felt embarrassed when other people stared. One day, the pharmacist smiled at him and said, “You speak two languages. That’s a superpower.” Luis stood a little taller, and he never felt embarrassed again.

What makes us different can be our greatest strength.

The Broken Vase

Ana broke her mother’s blue vase while playing ball indoors. She hid the pieces under her bed, and all evening her heart felt heavy. At bedtime, she crept out and confessed with tears in her eyes. Her mother hugged her tightly. “I was more worried about you than about the vase,” she said. “Thank you for telling me the truth.”

The truth is worth more than any vase.

The Late Player

Kim was always late to soccer practice, and her teammates grumbled about it. Instead of scolding her, the coach asked her why. It turned out that Kim walked her little brother to school first every morning. The team moved practice back by fifteen minutes, and Kim was never late again.

Ask before you judge. Everyone carries a story you cannot see.

The Thank-You Wave

Every morning, Mr. Osei, the bus driver, waved to the children walking to school, and almost none of them noticed. One day, Lena waved back. The next day, a few more children did. Within a month, the whole street was waving. Mr. Osei said it was the best part of his day.

A small wave can carry a lot of kindness.

The Honest Point

In the final of the school tennis tournament, Bea was down match point. Her opponent’s shot landed a hair inside the line. Nobody else saw it, and Bea could have called it out. Instead, she said, “That was in.” She lost the match. Her opponent shook her hand and said, “Thank you. That was a great game.”

A victory that costs your honesty is not worth winning.

Think about it

1. Which spark makes you think most about how you treat others?
2. Have you ever judged someone before you knew their story?
3. What small wave or kindness could you offer tomorrow?

94 Animal Sparks

Five very short stories about kindness to animals

The Turtle on the Road

On the way to school, Kenji saw a turtle slowly crossing a busy road. His mother pulled over, turned on her flashers, and checked that it was safe. Together they carried the turtle across in the direction it was heading and set it gently in the grass. It blinked at them and plodded away.

A little care, with a grown-up's help, can save a life.

The Water Bowl

During a heat wave, Mrs. Dubois put a big bowl of fresh water on her porch for any dogs or birds that passed by. By evening, she had a whole neighborhood of thirsty visitors. She refilled the bowl every day until the weather cooled.

Kindness can be as simple as a bowl of water.

The Old Dog Walk

Grandpa's old dog Rusty could only walk very slowly, and most of the neighborhood kids rushed past. Lina started walking with him after school, at his pace, stopping whenever he wanted to sniff. "He may be slow," she told Grandpa, "but he still has plenty of walks left in him."

Patience is a kind of love, and older animals deserve gentle care.

The Spider in the Bathtub

Nico found a spider in the bathtub and shouted for his dad to squish it. Instead, Dad handed him a cup and a piece of paper. "Let's move it outside." Nico's heart thumped as he slid the paper under the cup and carried it to the garden. The spider scurried off into the leaves, and Nico felt surprisingly proud.

Even the smallest creatures matter.

The Winter Feeder

When the first snow fell, Sana and her brother hung a bird feeder outside the kitchen window and filled it with seeds. For two days, nothing came. On the third morning, a tiny chickadee landed on the edge, looked at them, and took a seed. Soon there was a whole crowd of birds each morning.

In hard seasons, small gifts make a big difference.

Think about it

1. Which of these sparks could you try in real life?
2. What do animals near your home need to stay safe and healthy?
3. Who taught you to be kind to animals?

95 Sparks for New Beginnings

Five very short stories about welcome, change, and friendship

The Welcome Cookies

When a new family moved into the house next door, ten-year-old Amir baked a plate of cookies with his mother's help. He tucked a note under the plastic wrap: *I live in the yellow house. If you need anything, just ask.* The new girl next door came over the next afternoon, and by the end of the week, they were best friends.

A welcome can turn a strange house into a home.

The Postcard Club

When Mei moved across the country, she and her best friend Ada promised to send postcards to each other every week. A year later, each of them had a shoebox of fifty-two cards. They read them together during a summer visit, and it felt as if they had never been apart.

Friendship can stretch across a great many miles.

The Old Swing

On the last afternoon in his old house, Jun sat on the backyard swing one more time. He tucked a small note into a crack in the swing's post: *Thank you for all the good days.* Months later, the family who moved in wrote to say that their daughter had found the note. She had pinned it to her bedroom wall.

Goodbyes are easier when we leave them with thanks.

The Locker Trick

On the first day of school, Carlos saw a new student struggling with a jammed locker. "Kick the bottom corner," he said, and showed him the trick. The new student never forgot it. Years later, he still said that Carlos was the first person who was nice to him.

A small kindness on a first day is remembered for a very long time.

The Birthday Text

Sam remembered the birthday of an old friend he had not seen in two years. He typed, *Happy birthday! I was just thinking about our old fort.* The reply arrived in seconds: *I was thinking about it today too. I miss those days.* They started talking again that evening.

A small reach-out can keep an old friendship warm.

Think about it

1. Which of these sparks could you try this week?
2. Who is an old friend you could send a message to?
3. Who is someone new near you who could use a welcome?

96 Sparks of Everyday Courage

Five very short stories about small brave moments

The Raised Hand

Priya didn't understand fractions, and she was too shy to ask. After a whole week of pretending, she finally raised her hand. "Could you explain that again?" she asked. She heard five sighs of relief around the room. It turned out that half the class had the same question.

Your question may be everyone's question.

The Wrong Answer

When the teacher called on him, Omar wasn't sure about the answer. He took a breath and said, "I'm not sure, but here's how I'm thinking about it." His answer was wrong. The teacher smiled. "That's exactly how we find the right ones," she said.

It takes courage to be wrong out loud.

The First Note

At the piano recital, Yuki's hands were shaking so hard that she thought she might not be able to start. She stared at the keys. Then she pressed the first note. It wasn't perfect, and neither was the second. But she kept going, and when she finished, the audience clapped as if she had played every note right.

The bravest part is often starting.

The Polite No

When his friends dared him to play a prank on the new janitor, Eli shrugged and said, "No thanks, not my thing." Two other boys looked at each other. "Yeah," one of them said. "Me neither." The plan fell apart.

Saying no can give others permission to say it too.

The Small Hello

Ravi was very shy, and it took all his courage to say hello to his elderly neighbor. He did it again the next day, and the next. After a month, his neighbor invited him to go fishing. They have been fishing buddies ever since.

Courage can be as small as a single word.

Think about it

1. Which of these small brave moments could you try this week?
2. Has your question ever turned out to be everyone's question?
3. What is one small, brave thing you have done recently?

97 Sparks of Gratitude

Five very short stories about being thankful

The Thank-You Jar

Every night after dinner, each person in Zoe's family wrote down one thing they were thankful for and dropped it into a big glass jar. On New Year's Eve, they emptied the jar onto the floor and read the slips out loud, one by one. There were three hundred and sixty-five of them, and by the end, everyone was smiling.

Gratitude grows when we write it down.

The Full Plate

Tomás pushed his broccoli around his plate and complained. His grandmother put down her fork. "When I was a girl," she said, "there were days when we had only rice. We were very grateful for it." She said it without any sadness, and she ate the broccoli with a smile. Tomás looked at his plate for a long time, and then he ate every bite.

A full plate is a gift that not everyone has.

The Hand-Me-Down Coat

Mina's new winter coat had belonged to her cousin, and it was a little too big. At first she was embarrassed. Then her mother showed her the stitching at the sleeve, which Grandma had mended by hand with tiny, careful stitches. Mina put on the coat and felt warmer than she ever had.

Something can be old and still be full of love.

The Lunch Lady's Name

For two years, the students had called her "the lunch lady." One day, a boy asked her name. "It's Mrs. Alvarado," she said, and her eyes grew wet. After that, the whole line greeted her by name every morning, and she said it was the best gift she had ever received.

Knowing someone's name is the first step to thanking them.

The Morning Thanks

Every morning, the old man stepped onto his porch and said, "Thank you, sun." His granddaughter asked why. "Because it's a gift," he said, "and I never want to take it for granted." The next morning, she stood beside him and said it too.

Thanks said out loud is a habit worth passing on.

Think about it

1. Which of these sparks would you like to try at home?
2. What is one thing you are thankful for today?
3. Whose name could you learn, so that you can thank them properly?

98 Sparks of Everyday Respect

Five very short stories about boundaries, inclusion, and care

The Quiet Signal

In Priya's family, anyone could tap their own shoulder twice to mean "I need some quiet space right now," no explanation required. Her little brother used it often after school. Nobody teased him. Everyone just gave him a little room, and he always came back to the table happier for it.

Respecting a need for space is its own kind of love.

The New Ramp

The corner bakery had one small step at the door. When the owner noticed a woman in a wheelchair turn away, unable to enter, he built a little ramp that weekend. "Should have done it years ago," he said. Business, and goodwill, both grew.

Noticing who gets left out is the first step to including them.

Five Words

When a new student who spoke Portuguese joined the class, Mia learned five phrases to say hello, thank you, and welcome in his language. His face lit up the first time she used them. It took her only one lunch period to learn, and it changed his whole week.

A few words in someone's own language can say "you belong" better than any English sentence.

The Umbrella Returned

Noah borrowed his neighbor's umbrella during a sudden downpour. He returned it the next morning, dried off and folded neatly, with a small thank-you note tucked into the strap. His neighbor said it was the first borrowed umbrella that had ever come back at all.

Taking care of what isn't ours, and returning it properly, is a quiet kind of honesty.

The Recycling Habit

Kofi started rinsing out cans and sorting them into the recycling bin, just because his teacher had explained why it mattered. His little sister copied him without being asked. Within a month, the whole family had the habit, and nobody quite remembered whose idea it had first been.

A small habit, practiced consistently, can quietly spread to everyone around us.

Think about it

1. Which of these sparks could your family or classroom try?
2. Have you ever changed a habit because you saw someone else do it first?
3. Who is someone whose needs or boundaries you could pay closer attention to?

99 The Lantern Tree

Noticing kindness and passing it on

Long ago, in a valley between two mountains, the villagers became so busy that they stopped noticing one another. Days blurred into nights. Shops closed early. Neighbors passed in the street without a word, and the whole valley began to feel gray.

In the middle of the village stood an old tree that had not bloomed in years. Its branches were bare, and children used it as a place to lean their bicycles.

A girl named Suri lived in that village. She was small, and she was very observant. She noticed things that others walked right past: the baker who tucked leftover bread into travelers' bags, the boy who carried an old man's basket up the hill, the woman who said good morning to the lonely miller every single day even though he never answered.

Suri had a box of paper lanterns left over from a festival. One evening she lit a lantern and hung it on a branch of the bare tree. Then she went to the baker and said, "I saw what you did for the travelers. This lantern is for you."

The baker stared at her. Then he smiled, a little shyly, and it seemed to light up the whole shop.

The next day, the baker began to look for kindness too, and he hung a lantern for the boy with the basket. The boy hung one for the woman who greeted the miller. Soon there were lanterns for the neighbor who shoveled a stranger's path, for the child who shared her lunch, for the teacher who stayed late to help. People began to walk more slowly, looking around them, eager to notice.

Within a season, the bare old tree glowed at night with hundreds of lights. Travelers crossing the mountains saw that glow from far away and turned toward the valley, sure that somewhere in it, they would be welcomed.

When Suri was very old, the tree was so full of lanterns that no one could count them. A child asked her, "Which lantern was the first?"

Suri smiled. "I don't remember. It doesn't matter. The first one only had to be lit so that the second one could be."

What this story teaches

Goodness spreads when someone notices it and says so out loud. One person's attention can turn a gray place into a warm one. You do not have to fix the whole world. You only have to light one lantern, and let the light travel.

Think about it

1. Why did the villagers begin to change after Suri hung the first lantern?
2. Who has done something kind for you lately that you could thank?
3. If your home, school, or community had a Lantern Tree, what would be hanging on it today?

100 The Hundredth Lantern

A story about all the stories

Long after the villagers in the valley had grown old, and their children had grown old in turn, a boy named Wren climbed the hill to see the tree his great-grandmother Suri had once hung a single paper lantern on, so many years before.

By now, the tree was enormous, its branches spreading wide over the whole square, and it was so thick with lanterns that no one had ever managed to count them all. Some glowed gold, for a promise kept. Some glowed blue, for a kindness to a stranger. Some were small and plain, for the quiet, ordinary goodness that never makes the news: a shared lunch, a returned library book, a patient afternoon spent teaching someone to read.

Wren carried a single new lantern of his own, unlit, and a box of matches his grandmother had given him. “What should I light it for?” he asked her.

She smiled the way Suri used to. “Whatever you noticed today. It doesn’t have to be enormous.”

Wren thought about his morning. He had helped his little sister carry her too-heavy backpack. He had told his friend the truth about a mistake instead of hiding it. He had sat with a new student at lunch instead of leaving him alone at the end of the table. None of it had felt especially important at the time.

He lit the lantern anyway, and hung it on the lowest branch he could reach.

Standing back, he looked up at the whole enormous tree, a hundred small kindnesses glowing above him, and a hundred more he couldn’t even see, tangled somewhere deeper in the leaves. He thought about how many people, over how many years, it must have taken to fill a single tree this full.

“It doesn’t look like very much, one lantern at a time,” he said.

His grandmother looked up at the whole glowing tree with him. “No,” she agreed. “But look what one lantern at a time has become.”

Wren walked home in the dark that evening, but he didn’t need his flashlight. He could still see the glow of the tree behind him, all the way to his front door.

What this story teaches

Every story in this book has been one small lantern: a kindness, an honest choice, a patient moment, a brave first step. None of them, alone, changes the whole world. But a hundred of them, lit one at a time by a hundred different people, can light up an entire tree, and an entire life. Thank you for reading this far. Now it’s your turn to light one.

Think about it

1. Which lantern, which story in this book, will you remember longest?
2. What is one ordinary thing you did today that could be its own small lantern?
3. Whose lantern tree could you help light tomorrow?

Ten small promises

Read these together, or choose the ones that matter most to you. Character grows one small choice at a time.

1. I will listen when older people speak, and I will ask them about their lives.
2. I will say please, thank you, and sorry, and I will mean them.
3. I will tell the truth, even when it is hard.
4. I will share what I have.
5. I will make room for someone who is left out.
6. I will speak up when someone is being treated badly, and I will ask a trusted adult for help when I need it.
7. I will keep trying after I fail, and I will learn from every attempt.
8. I will respect every kind of honest work and the people who do it.
9. I will be gentle with myself and others when mistakes happen.
10. I will hang one lantern today: I will notice someone's kindness and tell them, "I saw that."

The Lantern Tree. Read it slowly, talk about it often, and pass it on.

A guide for parents and teachers

Stories teach best when children have time to think and talk about them. Here are a few ways to get the most out of this book.

How to read a story together

1. Choose a story that fits the moment. Use the theme list below to find a story about something your child is going through, or simply begin at the start.
2. Read it aloud, slowly. Pause at the moments of choice and ask, “What do you think she will do?”
3. Talk through the three questions at the end of the story. Listen more than you talk.
4. Share a short story from your own life about a time you faced a similar choice.
5. Pick one small action to try during the week, and check in a few days later.

Questions that work with any story

- What was the hardest choice in the story?
- How do you think each character was feeling?
- What would you have done, and what might have made it difficult?
- Who could the character have asked for help?
- Have you ever been in a situation like this?

A few tips

With younger children, keep it short and playful. Use different voices, and try one story at bedtime. The Bedtime Sparks and the “Little Sparks” chapters are designed for very short reading times.

With teenagers, avoid lecturing. Let them disagree, and ask what they would tell a friend in the same situation. Teens often say more when they are not being told what to think.

A few stories touch on sensitive topics, including bullying, online safety, family changes, the loss of a pet or loved one, and sadness that does not go away. Read these ahead of time, and be ready to listen if your child raises something personal. If a young person seems persistently sad, withdrawn, or hopeless, or if you are worried about their safety, please involve a doctor, school counselor, or other trusted professional promptly.

For a year-round routine, see “A year of family reading nights” after this guide: one story and one small activity for each week of a school year.

Find a story by theme

Respecting elders, family, and teachers

[Grandpa’s Slow Walk](#) · [Tea for Mama](#) · [The Teacher Who Waited](#) · [The Clockmaker’s Apprentice](#) · [Fifty Hours](#) · [Ten Minutes in the Car](#)

Family and brothers and sisters

Ben's Little Helper · Thursday Nights · Tea for Mama · Ten Minutes in the Car · The Extra Chair · The Night the Screens Slept · The Diary · The New Baby · The Trophy Shelf

Manners, empathy, and respect for others

The Café of Magic Words · The Long Line · The Diary · How to Say Kavi · The Night Shift · Not a Hugger · The Ten Dollar Loan · Sparks of Everyday Respect

Kindness and helping others

The Umbrella at the Bus Stop · Pip and the Last Berry · The Empty Seat · The Heavy Suitcase · The Soup on Tuesdays · The Lantern Tree · Showing Up · The Field Trip Fund · The Bakery After the Flood · Tuesday Tutor · The Community Garden · The Kindness Relay · The Hundredth Lantern

Kindness to animals

The Bird on the Windowsill · Mo and the Hungry Cat · Saturdays at the Shelter · Animal Sparks · The Campfire Promise

Honesty and owning our mistakes

The Purse on the Bench · The Spilled Paint · The Answer Key · The Note Under the Wiper · Even More Little Sparks · The Kind Kind of Honest · The Captain · The Borrowed Bike

Humility and good sportsmanship

The Rooster Who Thought He Woke the Sun · Nico Loses the Race · The Captain · Second Chair · Even More Little Sparks · The Gracious Winner

Apologies, forgiveness, and anger

The Girl Who Said Sorry · The Storm in Leo's Chest · The Draft Folder · The Fence Between Two Gardens

Friendship, fairness, and standing up

Two Goats on a Narrow Bridge · The Blue Shovel · The Group Chat · The Whisper · Leaving the Table

Friendship and how it changes

Room for One More · The Empty Seat · Drifting · The Kind Kind of Honest · Showing Up

Respecting differences and including everyone

The Lunchbox Fair · The Empty Seat · The Other Side of the Table · The Night Shift · How to Say Kavi · Wheels Like Mine · The Holiday Table · New Words · Sparks of Everyday Respect

Teamwork

The Giant Pumpkin · The Group Project

Self-control and patience

One Cookie Now, or Two Later · The Garden That Grew Slowly

Curiosity and lifelong learning

The Question Jar · Tuesday Tutor

Money, saving, and goals

Saving for the Guitar · The Sneakers · The Field Trip Fund

Courage, perseverance, and hope

The Garden That Grew Slowly · The Shadow on the Stairs · Ninety-Two Tries · The Audition · The Last Runner · One Brick at a Time · The Well at the Edge of the Village · Sparks of Everyday Courage · The Bakery After the Flood · The Old Blue Bicycle · The Community Garden · The Kindness Relay · The Lighthouse Keeper's Log

Change and new beginnings

The Last Box · Rafi's First Day · The Wrong Bus · The Extra Chair · Sparks for New Beginnings · New Words

Loss and sad feelings

The Stone for Pepper · The Gray Cloud · Showing Up · The Heavy Month

Balance, rest, and pressure

The Night the Screens Slept · The Lamp Left On · The Perfect Feed

Gratitude and appreciation

Tea for Mama · The Night Shift · Little Sparks · Bedtime Sparks · The Bigger Slide · The Sneakers · Sparks of Gratitude · The Hundredth Lantern

Promises and responsibility

Bo Keeps His Promise · The Stream That Sang · The Spilled Paint · Mo and the Hungry Cat · Saturdays at the Shelter

Feelings, self-worth, and comparison

Second Chair · The Perfect Feed · The Audition · The Bigger Slide · The Sneakers

Staying safe

Ollie's Wobbly Tummy · Too Good to Be True

Very short stories

Bedtime Sparks · Little Sparks · More Little Sparks · Even More Little Sparks · Animal Sparks · Sparks for New Beginnings · Sparks of Everyday Courage · Sparks of Gratitude · Sparks of Everyday Respect

Ideas to try

- A lantern a week: each week, hang a paper lantern on a string at home or in the classroom for every kindness someone noticed. Say, "I saw that."
- A promise of the week: choose one of the ten small promises at the back of the book and practice it together.
- Story swap: ask a child to retell a story in their own words, or write a new ending.
- Kindness jar: whenever someone notices a kind act, write it on a slip of paper and add it to a jar. Read them together on Friday.
- Family reading night: pick one evening a week for a story and a small activity together. The reading plan that follows gives you a full school year of ideas.

A year of family reading nights

One story and one small activity for each week of a school year: thirty-six weeks in all. Read on whichever evening suits your family, such as Sunday night or a quiet Friday after dinner. Younger children and teens can share the same story, or you can use the theme list in the guide to swap in a story from the matching part of the book. If a week gets busy, skip it. There are more stories in this book than weeks in the year, so feel free to swap in any story that fits your family's week. This plan is here to help you, not to make you feel behind.

Term one: Kindness and respect

Week	Story	Best for	Try this
1	Grandpa's Slow Walk	Younger readers	Ask an older relative or neighbor to tell you a story from their childhood, and listen to all of it.
2	The Umbrella at the Bus Stop	Younger readers	Do one small kindness for someone this week, and keep it a secret.
3	Pip and the Last Berry	Younger readers	Share something you love with someone: a snack, a game, or a favorite book.
4	The Empty Seat	Teens	Invite someone who is often on their own to join you at lunch, at a game, or on a walk.
5	Two Goats on a Narrow Bridge	Younger readers	Notice a moment when you could "make room" instead of insisting. Talk about it on Friday.
6	Tea for Mama	Younger readers	Make a drink or a snack for someone who takes care of you. Ask an adult for help with anything hot.
7	The Teacher Who Waited	Younger readers	Write a thank-you note to a teacher, coach, or mentor.
8	The Lunchbox Fair	Younger readers	Cook or share a dish from your family's traditions, and tell the story behind it.
9	The Clockmaker's Apprentice	Teens	Teach an older person something you know, and ask them to teach you something in return.

Term two: Honesty and responsibility

Week	Story	Best for	Try this
10	The Purse on the Bench	Younger readers	Talk about a time you found something that did not belong to you. What would you do now?
11	Bo Keeps His Promise	Younger readers	Each person makes one promise this week and writes it down. Check on Friday whether you kept it.
12	The Spilled Paint	Younger readers	At dinner, each person shares one mistake and what they learned from it.
13	The Answer Key	Teens	Discuss the difference between a shortcut and cheating, with real examples.
14	The Stream That Sang	Younger readers	Do a twenty-minute clean-up of a park, street, or yard together.
15	The Note Under the Wiper	Teens	Practice writing a short, honest apology note about something small.
16	The Girl Who Said Sorry	Younger readers	Practice the three parts of an apology: what I did, I am sorry, and how can I make it right.
17	The Garden That Grew Slowly	Younger readers	Plant seeds or a small plant together, and check on it every week.
18	Little Sparks	All ages	Read all five sparks and choose one to act out.

Term three: Courage, feelings, and friendship

Week	Story	Best for	Try this
19	The Shadow on the Stairs	Younger readers	Each person shares one fear and one tiny step they could take toward it.
20	The Storm in Leo's Chest	Younger readers	Practice “smell the flower, blow out the candle” breathing together for one minute.
21	The Group Chat	Teens	Agree on family rules for kind messages. Each person adds one rule.
22	The Blue Shovel	Younger readers	Role-play calm words for speaking up when something is unfair.
23	The Audition	Teens	Everyone tries something new this week, even if they might not be good at it, and reports back.
24	The Perfect Feed	Teens	Have a screen-free evening. Each person shares one real, not-perfect moment from their week.
25	Leaving the Table	Teens	Practice saying no kindly but firmly, using a few made-up situations.
26	The Gray Cloud	Younger readers	Draw the “weather” of your feelings today and talk about it.
27	Showing Up	Teens	Think of someone who could use company, and send them a note or pay them a visit.

Term four: Hope, gratitude, and teamwork

Week	Story	Best for	Try this
28	The Giant Pumpkin	Younger readers	Do a household project as a team, giving each person a job that fits their strengths.
29	Ollie's Wobbly Tummy	Younger readers	Make a family safety plan: name your trusted adults and practice the "check first, go second" rule.
30	The Bird on the Windowsill	Younger readers	Find out who to call if you find an injured wild animal, and put the number on the refrigerator.
31	The Night Shift	Teens	Thank someone whose work you rarely notice, such as a bus driver, custodian, or delivery person.
32	The Fence Between Two Gardens	All ages	Think of someone you have had a disagreement with, and brainstorm one small step toward peace.
33	The Heavy Suitcase	All ages	Each person names something they could use help with, and someone offers to help.
34	One Brick at a Time	All ages	Everyone picks a dream and writes down their "first brick."
35	The Well at the Edge of the Village	All ages	Do something now for someone in the future: plant a tree, donate books, or write a letter to yourself to open in five years.
36	The Lantern Tree	All ages	Hang paper lanterns for the kindnesses you noticed this year, and read them aloud.

About the stories

Every story in this book was written for this collection, with its own characters, settings, and wording. Many of them explore ideas that people have shared for generations, such as honesty, kindness, patience, and courage. Those ideas belong to everyone.

A few stories are new tellings of very old tales, or borrow a familiar idea from folk tradition. They are named here, with gratitude to the storytellers, known and unknown, who first passed them on:

- **Two Goats on a Narrow Bridge** retells a traditional fable, told in many cultures, about two animals who meet on a narrow bridge. The characters, setting, and details here are new.
- **The Giant Pumpkin** echoes the classic folk-tale pattern, found in many countries, of an enormous vegetable that can be moved only when everyone helps. The characters and the plan in this version are new.
- **The Rooster Who Thought He Woke the Sun** uses a familiar motif from fables and folk tales, in which a rooster believes that his crowing makes the sun rise. This version is written in new words.
- **Little Sparks** includes “The Full Cup,” a retelling of the traditional Zen story often called “A Cup of Tea,” in which a teacher pours tea into a cup that is already full. It is told here in new words.

A few other ideas in the book are common wisdom rather than anyone’s invention. The breathing exercise in “The Storm in Leo’s Chest” (smell the flower, blow out the candle) is a widely used technique with children. The “check first” rule in “Ollie’s Wobbly Tummy” reflects standard advice in child-safety education.

If a story reminds you of one you already know, that is often because good stories about people tend to rhyme. If you would like to share a source or a correction, please use the contact details on the copyright page.

About the Author

Vamsi Kandala was born and raised in Visakhapatnam, India, where he completed his engineering degree at Andhra University. He later moved to the United States, where he now lives with his family and works in the IT industry. Outside of work, he enjoys coding, reading, and following cricket and tennis, along with the occasional movie.

The Lantern Tree grew out of a memory from his own school days: a subject called Moral Science, once part of the curriculum at his school, Kotak, which he credits with shaping much of his character growing up. Noticing that this kind of subject had quietly disappeared from many school curricula over the years, he set out to gather these stories into a book, hoping they might do for other young readers what Moral Science once did for him.