

Mr Carson's sat at his window, watching the swirling snow outside, the blinking of Christmas lights strung from the nearby houses did little to lighten the grey of the day.

Grumbling to himself he felt around for his cane and levered himself up and out of his chair, ambling slowly towards the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

"Yet another day I'm in this place. Can't even get my paper," he continued to mutter as he made his tea, frowning at how few tea bags he had left. He carefully carried the hot cup back to his spot in the living room, preparing to endure a few more mindless hours.

He set his cup down on the little side table and turned on the television, settling back down. Within minutes his eyes were drifting shut, his head drooping onto his chest.

A loud banging at the front door had him jolting awake, disorientated for a moment as he got his bearings. The knock sounded again and he forced his tired, aching body out of the chair and down the hall, cane in hand.

He leant forward and peeked through the spy hole, eyebrows raising at the sight of a smallish lad, probably no more than fourteen, shivering on his door step. His coat was threadbare and totally unsuitable for the weather, his hands were gloveless and he didn't even have a scarf. He had a shovel in his hand, no doubt stolen from one of the neighbouring sheds.

Prying the door open, but leaving the chain on, he barked, "What do you want, boy?" The boy looked up at the door, instinctively leaning towards the warmth leaking from the house.

"Shovel your path, Mr?" He held up the heavy shovel like an offering, a badge of his sincerity and despite his bad mood Mr Carson found himself nodding.

"Alright then. You do a good job, and mind you do it properly, and at the end, when I've checked, I'll pay you a fair wage."

The boy looked like he wanted to ask how much constituted a fair wage but one look at the old man's face told him just to get on with the job and be grateful for whatever he received.

The boy set to work, shovelling the snow away from the path at a phenomenal rate, the white clumps flying from the end of his shovel.

The old man sat back in his chair and reached for his tea cup as he watched the boy go about his work. He took a sip and made a face, the liquid was stone cold. Huffing and grumbling he made his way back to the kitchen and put the kettle back on the stove. As he waited for the water to boil he listened absently to the sound of the boys shovel scraping on the path outside.

“Boy will be cold,” he thought to himself as he reached for another cup and added tea bags and milk to the cups, pouring the water, adding two big spoons of sugar to the boys as an afterthought.

He set the cups on the small dining table and clumped back down the hallway, his cane thumping the floor as he walked. Pausing to pull on his coat and hat, he opened the front door and stepped out, cursing under his breath at the cold.

Looking all around he raised one bushy white eyebrow in surprise. The boy had done a bloody good job, not what he had expected at all.

“Did I do alright, Mr?” the boy asked, hope flaring in his eyes.

Grunting his approval Mr Carson beckoned the boy into the house, leading the way down the hall to the kitchen. He gestured to the tea and growled out a “you stay here” before turning on his heel and plodding his way back into the living room, he reached behind his mantle clock and pulled out his wallet, slipping it into his back pocket.

As he sat down at the table his ears caught the sound of the boys stomach rumbling. Reaching across the table he pushed the biscuit tin towards him. “Help yourself.”

The boy's eyes lit up and he quickly pulled the top off before carefully selecting one plain digestive and nibbling all around the edge, clearly trying to make it last as long as possible.

Mr Carson liked this boy, he was obviously hungry but he hadn't been greedy and he was willing to work for his money, not relying on charity like others Mr Carson had seen on the television.

“Where do you live boy?” He asked suddenly, breaking the silence of the little room. The boy looked up, startled.

“I live down the road with my mum and little sister.”

“No father?” Call him old fashioned but Mr Carson believed that a man should take responsibility for his family.

The boys eyes clouded over for a second, before his shoulders went back and his chin lifted defiantly.

“My Dad left when I was two, Jessie’s dad didn’t even stick around that long. My Mum, she does her best for us. The best she can.” The look on his face almost dared the old man to comment, to judge them. “I just wanted to earn a little to get them something for Christmas, Mum doesn’t have much spare money and never treats herself.”

Mr Carson stayed silent, deep in thought, the lad seemed good enough, protective of his mother and willing to do his fair share. Maybe he could be useful.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Jason,” he answered.

“Well, Jason, I’m not as young as I used to be and I can’t get out as much as I used to. Much as I hate to admit it, I find myself in need of a little help now and then. Not much mind, just a little fetching and carrying from the shops. You know, my paper of an evening and maybe a pint of milk now and then. If I gave you the money to fetch them for me you could earn yourself a few coppers in return. How does that strike you?”

Jason looked at him for a long time, as if he was assessing the sincerity of the offer, then finally gave a small nod.

Nodding back the old man reached into his pocket and drew out his wallet, pulling out two five pound notes. He held up one.

“This is for your work on my path, you did well, lad.” He continued quickly, not wanting the boy to feel uncomfortable by being too grateful. “And this,” he held up the other, “is for tomorrow. If you can go to the shop on the corner and fetch me my paper and a packet of tea bags and bring them back to me by tea time, you can keep the change.”

Nodding eagerly this time, Jason reached out his hand for the notes.

“Don’t let me down, lad,” he warned before handing over the money.

By half past five the next day Mr Carson was sitting in his chair watching the television, while keeping one eye on the path outside his window, telling himself that the lad had taken his money and run. Sighing to himself he got slowly out of his chair and went to put on his coat, dreading the walk up the snow covered hill.

Just as he reached for his coat a knock sounded at the door. Ignoring the relief he felt, he opened the door, grunting a greeting and motioned him through the door.

The lad deposited the newspaper and teabags on the counter in the kitchen and held out his hand to return the change.

“No, lad, that’s yours to keep.” He pulled out a ten pound note. “Any chance that tomorrow you can bring me some sugar, milk and a bag of potato’s along with the paper. Will you be able to carry all that, lad?”

Nodding the lad took the money and accepted the cup of tea the old man handed him, following him as they headed for the living room.

Jason bounded up the path to Mr Carson’s house, his new jacket slung casually over his shoulder and dug around in his pocket for his key. After the snow had cleared he had started earning his money by tending the garden and mowing the lawns, stopping in for a chat and a cool drink before he got to work. He thought back to the day 8 years ago that Mr Carson had taken pity on him and believed in him, trusting him to do the right thing.

Jason had taken to popping in even when there wasn’t work to do, finding that he liked the old mans company, enjoying listening to his stories while sharing a bag of chips from the fish and chip shop down the road.

Mr Carson had always been good to Jason, giving him gruff encouragement in whatever Jason was doing to try and better himself, helping him out with school work, exam revision and forcing him to keep trying after every rejected job application. Their relationship had slowly evolved from casual acquaintances to friends, with Mr Carson becoming almost a surrogate grandfather to the lad.

Now he had popped round to tell him all about his new job, the old mans belief had paid off.

He paused at the door, used to hearing the customary grunt of greeting coming from the living room.

“Mr Carson?” He called, standing still in the hallway, straining his ears for an answer.

Making his way slowly to the living room he breathed a sigh of relief, seeing Mr Carson asleep in his chair, the television flickering in the background. The old man often had himself a little nap in the late afternoon.

“Mr Carson, I brought your paper and a nice cake for tea,” he took a few steps closer but still received no reply. Putting his hand gently on the old man’s shoulder so as not to startle him, his hearing not what it used to be, Jason shook him gently.

Jason’s heart leapt into his throat as the old man slipped sideways in his chair, his limbs stiff, his chest still.

Hands shaking, Jason dialled the phone, speaking as calmly as possible to the operator and requesting an ambulance although he knew in his heart that he had arrived too late.

Jason watched as the curtains closed behind the coffin, listening as the last hymn began to play. It had been a lovely service but as he looked around he was struck again by how few people were there. Just his mum, Jessie, a neighbour of Mr Carson and a lady he didn’t recognize. No family at all. He sighed, the sight making him feel so sad. He knew that Mr Carson was a crotchety old man who would rather grunt than talk to you but underneath that gruff exterior beat a heart of pure gold, a man that would take a gamble on a scruffy lad that turned up at his door looking to make a quick pound.

Slowly he got up and followed his mum and sister out of the crematorium, not noticing that the lady had followed until she put her hand gently on his shoulder.

“Mr Benson?”

He nodded.

“My name is Hannah Matthews and I work for Greyson and Cooper solicitors. I’m the executer of Alfred Carson’s estate. Now you may or may not know, but Mr Carson was an only child, he never married and had no children and

so he had no legal heir. In light of this he chose to name you in his will as sole beneficiary of his estate. I appreciate this is a difficult time for you, but I would appreciate it if you could give me a call soon to discuss it"

Jason's eyes filled with tears as he realised that once again Mr Carson had thought of someone else before himself, giving him the most valuable gift of all, his trust and belief.