

Hanging Baskets

“Excuse me,” the lady in the matching skirt and jacket said. “Excuse me, can I get some help?”

Gary had watched her through his office window, her four door sedan having captured his attention because it kicked up more dust and sand from the unpaved driveway and parking lot than a vehicle half its size. He put down his pen and adjusted his glasses to get a good look at her.

She walked towards Sarah carrying what Gary thought was a calculator. She carried it like an offering, wrist bent, showing Sarah the screen. Sarah didn't hear her and continued watering the plants. She smiled and her lips moved while she sang to herself.

“Excuse me, I need your help,” the lady said. She still held the calculator screen towards Sarah.

Sarah kept on watering the plants around the outside of the centre. Inside Gary had installed a sprinkler system that worked automatically when it detected a drop in humidity or a rise in temperature. The plants were arranged in sections, by type and susceptibility, and each section was programmed differently. The plants placed around and outside the centre were designed to get the attention of travellers who stopped to stretch their legs and browse for a while.

Where Sarah and the lady stood made it difficult for him to see from where he sat, so he got up and snuck closer to the window to get a better look without appearing too sneaky. Sarah

finally noticed the lady with the calculator and asked if she could help. Gary wasn't too sure if it was calculator. It looked more like a Palm Pilot or other PDA.

Gary walked out of his office and behind the register, prepared to lend Sarah a hand if she needed it. He had two other employees, Bonnie and Imelda, but he sent them home hours ago. They were retired seniors who worked part time for Gary just so they could have something to. Their husbands worked together as groundskeepers at a golf course nearby for the same reason.

Something to fill the time, he thought.

Gary didn't even give them a schedule. He just asked them to come in around twenty hours a week and give a hand so he could take some time off or run errands for the business. He had to mail their paycheques to them sometimes because they forgot to pick them up. He wasn't sure to be honoured or insulted but he did it anyway.

Sarah had been different. She presented a professional resume and asked important questions. He hired her on the spot, telling her she could start whenever she wanted. She had thanked him and asked for a pen so she could write it all down in her journal, a small book bound in brown plastic crafted to look like leather.

"What about my schedule, Mister Seven?" she had asked.

"Uh, Monday, Wednesday and Friday from ten until six," Gary said, inventing a schedule off the top of his head. "But don't worry. I won't mind if you're late now and again."

Sarah looked at him for a moment, then jutted her head forward and tilted it a bit, like a cat trying to get a good look at a ball of yarn it's never seen before. "You don't want me to work for you?" she asked.

"No, no," he had said, and explained that he was only joking.

"Mack tells me that if he was going to tell a joke he'd say the Dali Lama walks up to a street vendor selling hot dogs and asks the guy to make him one with everything."

Gary remembered laughing and telling her that was a good one. The head jut and bob again, a move he came to associate strictly with tabby cats and Sarah, and she had gone back to making slow, scrawled notes in her notebook.

Gary learned later that Mack was her caregiver.

"She's not retarded, you know," Mack said over the phone. Mack called Gary after the interview was over and Sarah had gone home. "She's not stupid, either."

"I'm not saying she is. I just want to make sure I do right by her," Gary had explained.

"She's simple," Mack said. "Uncomplicated."

Gary had yet to meet Mack face to face but they talked on the phone once a week, making sure that Sarah was okay.

I wonder if he's plotting points on a spreadsheet, Gary often thought.

"Can you help me or not?" the lady asked again. She stood with her hip cocked and one leg forward, offering Sarah a closer look at her PDA.

Gary pretended to work behind the cash, studying the keys and making notes like he was getting ready to reprogram it.

I used to have one of those, Gary thought. My company bought it for me. If he hadn't of taken the course they offered him on how to make the most of it, he wouldn't have had a clue what to do with it.

"Excuse me," Sarah said to the lady. "I'll help you. I'll be right back, okay?" She looked at the lady, waiting for an answer. Sarah held the watering can by the handle and close to her chest.

"Yes, yes, fine. And remember, it's for a hanging basket, okay?"

Sarah nodded her head. "Yes, okay. Thank you. I'll be right back."

Gary waited for Sarah to get his attention before lifting his head. "Hunh? Oh, Sarah, I didn't see you. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Mister Seven, everything is fine. I was just watering the plants and this lady came up to me. I've never made a hanging basket before. What do I do? Do I tell her about my garden? It's a nice one. I hang it outside the window of my apartment. Can I show her the pictures? Do you think she will like them."

"I don't think she wants to see your pictures, Sarah."

"What do you think she wants, Mister Seven?"

Gary's eyebrows raised. "Did she tell you? Do you remember?"

Sarah frowned a second and said, "She wants to make a basket?"

"I think so," Gary said. "What kind of basket?"

Her eyes brightened. "A hanging basket. Is that like the kinds that we sell out front to the lazy people, Mister Seven? You say you make them for the suckers who stop by."

Gary lifted his head and looked over at the lady with the PDA. She continued to walk her fingers through the plants, touching the leaves and feeling the petals but not getting her nails anywhere near the dirt. She didn't look over to see what they were talking about.

"Just people who don't want to do all the hard work themselves," Gary said, leaning his head down and talking more softly. "It's easier. And they make a good gift. Like Mother's Day or something. You know what I'm talking about."

"Mother's Day," Sarah said. "I never thought of that." She pulled her notebook out and flipped to the front where important dates were catalogued. She found the day and frowned. "It's already passed and I don't think I bought one for Mack because if I did I would have written it

down so do you think he's mad at me? I really hope not. He's not really my mother and he's a guy but I think I should buy him a hanging basket."

"I think Mack will be fine, but there's the lady to be thinking about," Gary said and pointed to the lady and her PDA.

She had finished letting her fingers do the walking but she stood like a lazy gunfighter holding the damned thing, Gary thought. He wondered if she had a picture of what she wanted downloaded into it.

"Was she showing you pictures?" Gary asked Sarah.

"Like pictures I take when I go home?" Sarah asked. "Nothing like that. She's got a computer in her hand."

"Did her computer show you pictures?"

"No, Just an awful lot of typing. I didn't read it though. I thought it might be private." She patted the pocket that kept her journal.

"Well, she said hanging basket, didn't she? You made some of the hanging baskets out front. . . ."

"For suckers who stop by," Sarah interrupted.

"You might want to keep that to yourself, Sarah," Gary said. "But what about some of the plants you chose for them? I thought they were very pretty."

She lit up. "You did? I can make a whole bunch more just like it. I just need the baskets. I can fill all of your baskets. It would be really, really pretty Mister Seven."

"Why don't you tell it to the lady? She's been waiting a while."

"Oh, yeah," Sarah said. "Right."

Sarah showed her the plants the lady would need to make the hanging basket. Not all of them were ones that she used to make the baskets out front either, Gary noted. She learned from watching the others work.

“...And the Bacopa is very pretty two. White flowers for this one. And if you take care of it and water it two or three times a week they just about grow all over the place, which is what you want for a really, really nice hanging basket because then they don’t look like just little flowers you stuck in a pot and they go really nice with the He-lee-oh-troh-pee-um, which are purple and not white but because they’re different they’ll look really nice, a little like petunias and I know because I have petunias in my little garden at home and the purple they come out with is a really nice purple not a hard purple but I’m not sure you can call purple hard because it’s a colour and not a brick and they go nice with the, darn it, whoops, sorry I don’t swear at all except when the words get hard and I have trouble saying them but not remembering them, Cal-ah-brah-co-ah and these ones are yellow not white or purple but they all will go really nice together don’t you think? Then there’s the So-lah-nee-um and they’re white too but they climb and climb and climb which is really good for a hanging basket because it doesn’t look like you just put some little plants in a bucket...”

Gary listened to Sarah and watched the lady. She held the PDA out for Sarah to read but she ignored it. Then the lady took the stylus and started tapping on the PDA screen, not paying attention to Sarah. Sarah even walked away to grab a basket she said she thought the lady would find to be perfect for what she wanted because it wasn’t too big and it wasn’t too small and Gary smiled a little wider because he thought of Goldilocks, which was a fairy tale, a story told to children, but this all would be a great story for her to tell Mack who would be here to pick her up soon.

She changes the way you think, Gary admitted to himself.

The PDA eventually got put away. Sarah had her attention but talked too fast for the lady to take notes. She started to nod her head to what Sarah said and pointed to other plants she was interested in. Sarah started going again about why those wouldn't be so good because they're really a garden plant, and not like the garden she had outside the window of her apartment. Gary straightened himself as he watched the lady manoeuvre herself and Sarah closer to the register.

"Hello," Gary said. "Have you found everything you wanted today?"

"Yes," the lady said. "Yes I did. The young lady was very helpful, thank you."

Gary nodded at Sarah. Sarah's eyes were wide and her skin flushed but she wrung her hands and her eyes started to tear up. Then he saw her looking at the buttons of the cash register, little pink and red and blue strips of paper under clear plastic. He hadn't shown her how to use the register yet.

"Can you go outside and finish watering the plants, Sarah?" Gary asked. "I can take care of it from here."

"Thank you, Mister Seven," Sarah said. "Thank you, lady."

"My name is Olive," the lady said, holding out her hand for Sarah to shake it. Gary thought Sarah's arm was going to shake off for the force of the greeting.

Says hello like a man, Gary thought as Sarah walked away. Her ponytail swung back and forth like a kid from a tree.

Gary's finger's flashed over the keys.

"I was pissed at first," Olive said. "But I got over it."

Gary tapped the total button. "Fifteen eighty seven, all told," he said. She handed him a crisp twenty, snapping it between thumb and forefinger while looking over her shoulder at Sarah while she watered the plants out front.

"I gotta go to this thing over at my bosses place," Olive said. "Some kinda damned garden party if you can believe it. Cell phones are not allowed and all that crap. I hope he likes what I'm doing for him."

"And three thirteen is your change," he said. The register clattered out a receipt and he stapled his business card to it.

"I was in such a rush," Olive said, taking her wallet out of her purse. She dumped the loose change into a pocket inside her wallet. Gary saw a lot of credit cards in there. "And she kept on going on. But I thought, you know, there for the grace of God and all that. Made me think. It's really good, you know, thank you."

Gary shook his head and adjusted his glasses. "Beg your pardon."

"Those people," she said, pointing at Sarah. "It's really good that you give those kinda of people a job. Do you have many?"

"Excuse me?"

"I read somewhere, I don't remember where, that you get tax breaks and stuff like that for helping people like that. I think you're doing a really good thing. Did you give me your business card?"

"Yes," Gary said, nodding. "Yes, I did."

"Be seeing you," she said.

"Thanks for the warning," Gary answered.

"Pardon me?"

"It was a joke."

"Of course. Toodles."

She walked out of the centre while fumbling with her wallet and purse and stopped when she got to Sarah. She patted Sarah on the shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. Her dusty car

didn't kick up as much dust when it pulled out as when it pulled it but Sarah came in and her face was covered and her cheeks had thin tracks of light mud on it.

"Don't I work for you anymore, Mister Seven?" She asked. She held the watering can with one hand, the spigot aiming down so a slight drizzle spilled onto the floor. "Did I do something wrong with that lady? With that Olive? Did I? Did I?"

"Sarah, what's wrong?" Gary said. He came out from behind the counter and hugged her and rubbed her back while he did. "Nothing's wrong. You'll always work for me. Always. Now tell me what's wrong."

"She said it was a tip," Sarah said. He pulled out a crisp twenty that had been curled up into a tight ball in her fist. "What's a tip? Like on a pencil or something? Was she writing things down about me? Is that why she said tip?"

The sedan had pulled onto the highway and went right quickly, Gary guessed, fast enough for a cop without a radar gun to follow her for a bit to see what was up. He wondered what she would do with the business card when she got to the party. He wondered what she would tell her boss about where she got the flowers for his garden.

"I told her to give it to you," Gary said. "Because you did such a good job. Don't you want to call Mack and tell him what a good job you did? It's almost time for you to go, anyway."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "That's right. Mack'll want to know about my day and the really nice hanging basket I sold. I did sell it, didn't I Mister Seven? All by myself."

Gary nodded and let her use his office to dial Mack and remind him to pick her up. She talked for ten minutes before she remembered that she forgot to ask him to come and pick her up. Gary asked her to finish cleaning up because he wanted to talk to Mack for a minute. He wanted to tell Mack that Sarah was not anything but special, no matter what anyone else said.

<end>