

**Honorable Mention – Short Story**

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*Life Gives You Lemons*

## Life Gives You Lemons

Ms. Roak had a habit of zipping snacks and food into Nelle's backpack at school. Since her mom died, Nelle's dad worked longer hours and often left the little girl on her own. Ms. Roak, the new fourth grade teacher, was eager to put her education and compassion to use in the classroom, and Nelle caught her eye right away. It was clear to Ms. Roak that the small child—much smaller than the other children—was hungry, and she liked the little girl's spirit. Most weeks, Ms. Roak would put baked goods and other snacks into Nelle's bag, but this week her lemon tree produced an abundance of fruit. When Nelle unzipped her backpack, she found five bright, citrusy lemons with a note that said "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade, Ms. Roak." Without understanding the idiom, Nelle took the note literally. She figured that she could rustle up enough change to buy some sugar and then she could set up her very own lemonade stand.

Once home, Nelle opened her closet door and dug through the toys, shoes, clothing, and unidentifiable objects that often seem to collect in a child's closet floor. Her mother, when she was alive, never threw anything away, and remnants of her mother's nesting habits still filled the house. Every cabinet overflowed with empty jelly jars, extra clothing buttons, and knick-knacks that might come in handy someday. Despite the little tchotchkes reminding Nelle of her mom, what she missed most were the smells—especially the smell of muffins. The tradition of Muffin Mondays stretched itself as deep as Nelle's memories rooted. As a toddler, Nelle helped stir the batter, but each year as the candles on her birthday cake increased, so too did her muffin tasks. Nelle measured, mixed, and scooped as her mom encouraged the little aproned sous chef. As she searched through the closet, she let her mind wander through her memories.

*Nelle loved the way the ingredients swirled together to create the batter. Everytime her mother turned away from her, Nelle would dip her finger in the bowl and sample the smooth batter. She loved banana walnut muffins! Lemon poppyseed was in the regular rotation too, because that was her dad's favorite. While waiting for the muffins to bake, Nelle popped the plastic bubble in the middle of the TROUBLE board hoping to roll a six so she could send her mom's yellow piece back to its starting position.*

The glass jar with a pig on the label brought her thoughts back to the task at hand. Nelle pulled out her savings as she caught the leftover tangy scent of the barbeque sauce that once filled the container. She counted three dollar bills and her eyebrows drew intensely together as she calculated a few various coins totalling thirty-seven cents. That should be enough!

It was almost sunset, but that mattered little because Nelle's dad rarely came home before bedtime, especially on Fridays. Tucking the dollars into her jacket pocket, the small child started walking the half mile to the Bud's Corner Store. As she walked, Nelle's thoughts drifted back to the scent of muffins and the memories echoed through the empty spaces in her heart left by her mother's absence.

Bud was not known for his kindness or patience towards children, but his store was the closest place for the resourceful child to get food. Since her father was often too busy or too sad to get groceries, Nelle made the pilgrimage to Bud's Corner Store as often as she had money. Sometimes her father would leave change on random surfaces when he came home, and Nelle stashed the coins until she had enough for a pickle or a cheese stick— those were her favorites.

As Nelle pushed the door open, she winced at the familiar ding which alerted Bud to her presence in the store. Looking at the price tag on the sugar, she quickly did the math in her head.

Three dollars would definitely cover a bag of sugar and she would have seventy-five cents leftover—enough for a pickle!

Bud was busy with a customer. He held the man's ten dollar bill up to the light and then set it on the counter as he uncapped the black counterfeit detection marker next to the register, as was his custom for every bill larger than a five. He then stuffed it in the drawer, made change and turned his attention to Nelle. Bud interrupted her calculations, "What are you standing there for, girl? Hiding between the aisles like that, and quiet too. I've been around long enough to know when a kid is too quiet that means trouble. You ain't stealing from me, are you, girl?"

Nelle silently shook her head no as she carried the bag of sugar to the counter.

"A bag of sugar, what does a kid need a bag of sugar for?" Bud scoffed.

Nelle inaudibly replied, "Lemonade."

"Speak up, girl!"

Nelle drew a deep breath before replying, "A lemonade stand."

Bud callously ignored the young child's response and announced her total \$2.25. Nelle reached into her pocket for the three dollar bills, but her fingers went straight through the fabric. Her dollars must have fallen out of the hole in her pocket.

"Well, girl, don't you have money?" asked Bud

"I... I... my pocket..."

Bud snatched the sugar bag and told her "Don't come back until you got enough money to buy it. What do ya think I'm running some sort of food pantry here? Huh? Go on, git!"

Nelle raced out of the store. The sun had almost set and the money could be anywhere in the half mile between her and home. She started walking and her eyes darted over the path she so often took. The sky was turning into the color of blue jeans as the sun dipped below the

horizon, and on the sidewalk in front of the church softball field Nelle spotted the crumpled bills. She ran to pick them up and held tight to them. What luck, she thought. If there was any wind she would have never found them.

The front door dinged again and Bud frowned at his repeat customer. She put her three dollars on the counter without saying a word. Bud slid the sugar across the counter to her. She hadn't even been gone long enough for him to put the merchandise back on the shelf. When Nelle pocketed her change, she made sure to use her pants pocket this time. She walked home in the dark imagining what she might get her dad with her lemonade stand earnings.

Nelle woke from the kind of excited sleep children have before a birthday party or a school field trip. She wondered all night when the sun might come up so she could start her new small business. Searching the dusty cabinets for supplies, the nine year-old remembered how things used to be.

*Nelle's dad woke up earlier than the rest of the family and started a pot of coffee. Nelle sat on the kitchen counter ready with the chocolate chips or blueberries as her dad bustled around making pancakes. Nelle's mom shuffled into the kitchen in need of caffeine, her dad announced that the fee for a cup o' joe was one dance. Nelle's giggle mixed with the music as her dad swayed around the kitchen with his sleepy bride.*

Nowadays, the kitchen was rarely used. Fast food bags and folded beer cans littered the counters. Nelle climbed onto a chair and found the glass juicer that her mom used to use with oranges at breakfast. She twisted her lemons on the juicer, stirred the lemon juice into some water and sugar, and tasted her final product. After nestling the plastic lid onto the pitcher she went into the front yard and rearranged the weathered patio furniture into a storefront, using duct tape to hold her menu in place. She sat with her lemonade waiting for her first customer.

Nelle lived in a neighborhood where, apart from the residents, few people trafficked. Two kids on bikes rolled up to Nelle's lemonade stand where the blue marker announced "Lemonade for Sale; \$0.50 each." They rode away promising to return with \$1. When they pedaled up again, Nelle realized she forgot cups! She asked them to wait as she grabbed as many empty jelly jars as she could find in her mother's cupboard. She filled two jars with her sweet product and traded her neighbors for \$1. Her first sale made her chest swell with pride. As she tucked her first dollar into the repurposed bbq jar, she focused on the math; if she sold three more jars of lemonade, she would see profits.

Her customer base, predominantly made up of kids on bikes and old men out for their daily stroll, enjoyed jars of lemonade throughout the morning and early afternoon. Between each customer, Nelle checked her jar inventory, adjusted her sign, and thought about what she would get her dad for his birthday with her profits. He had been so sad since her mom died. When he was home, which was not often, he barely spoke to her, and they rarely ate together. He mostly just sat and stared at the TV while he drank beer. His birthday was Thursday and if she sold enough lemonade, she could get him something and maybe that would make him feel better. Her mom always made a big deal of birthdays. She would bake a cake and fill balloons. She even had a silly birthday chant that was kinda dorky but everyone secretly loved.

Nelle remembered her dad's last birthday—the birthday before the accident.

*Hearing the familiar sound of her parent's favorite song filling the house, Nelle plodded into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. On this special day, Nelle's mom woke up early in full on birthday mode. Her parents danced in the kitchen surrounded by streamers and balloons. "There's my other girl!" her father announced as he scooped her into a hug.*

*Sandwiched between her mom and dad, Nelle got swept up in the birthday excitement. Nelle's mom winked at Nelle who joined her in the birthday chant.*

*After breakfast, as was tradition on her dad's birthday, Nelle's mom packed a picnic and they all loaded the car to go to the lake. While Nelle splashed around in the water and made sandcastles, her dad baited hooks and threw out lines while her mom read the latest New York Times best-seller. On the way home, when they stopped for gas, Nelle and her mom picked one silly fishing souvenir for Nelle to give her dad as a birthday gift. Nelle presented the gift to her dad and each time he responded, "It's just what I've always wanted, Nelle!" And she was sure he didn't really mean it, but all three of them loved the tradition of the birthday ritual.*

Nelle's thoughts drifted back as another customer approached her stand.

"Can you break a twenty?" The man asked. She had carefully counted every dollar bill and quarter in her jar after each sale.

Nelly responded, "I only have \$18."

The man looked at her small jar of money. "I guess just give me the \$18 and an extra big glass of lemonade."

"Really?! Thank you, sir!" Nelle couldn't believe it. A twenty dollar bill was worth 40 pickles-if her math was right. Picking her biggest jelly jar, she filled it to the brim with lemonade. She carefully counted out his change while the man sat casually on the worn lawn chair and sipped and waited. He pocketed the change and gave her the twenty.

"You have a nice little shop here, bet the rent's not bad, huh?" The man kidded.

Nelle giggled as he continued. "Well, I like to support local businesses when I can." He placed the glass back on the table, and tucked one dollar into the make-shift tip jar. "My daughter set up a stand like this when she was your age." He thanked the elated, small business owner before

driving away. Nelle held the twenty dollar bill carefully. She could not remember a time when she held a twenty dollar bill of her own before.

Nelle dismantled her lemonade stand and put the chairs and side table back on the porch. She poured the last bit of lemonade into a jar for herself and took pride in the day's work.

Twenty-one dollars! She wished she could show her mom.

Nelle kept the twenty dollar bill in the BBQ jar for three days. She cleaned out her closet and bedroom while she babysat her earnings, never wanting to let it out of her sight. On Wednesday, Nelle zipped her money in her pocket. She planned to walk home from school and stop by Bud's Corner Store to get her father's birthday present which she would set out for him in the morning, just like her mom would have done.

A woman walked into the store and held the door open for Nelle to slip in behind her. Nelle was grateful for the customers in line keeping Bud busy so she could look around without his crotchety glare. Looking over the souvenirs Nelle spotted the perfect gift for her dad. Wall decor—shaped like a fish with hooks attached to it to hang keys on—would be a perfect gift because he was always misplacing his keys. At \$18.99, she could afford to purchase it for her dad.

Nelle walked to the register where Bud was busy helping another customer purchase a dainty, sage green and white box of Virginia Slims. When it was her turn, Nelle put the fish on the counter. Bud scoffed and calculated her total while she proudly unzipped her pocket to reveal her twenty dollar bill; Nelle handed the money to Bud. Out of habit, he marked her bill with the counterfeit pen before tucking it into the till. Nelle could hardly see over the counter, but within seconds the tan colored ink turned into a black x. Bud tore the bill in two pieces as he shouted at Nelle.



“Counterfeit? Who do you think you are?” Nelle stood frozen, stunned. “Get out of here, girl. Don’t come back.” Bud continued to shout at the child until well after the girl left the store in tears.

THE END.