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He was an old guy, standing on the boardwalk, a cane and a brown paper bag in one hand and a fishing rod in the other.

“Catch anything?” I asked.

“Naw, nothing much to catch here,” he said. He looked sad.

“My boat is in that slip over there,” I said; “you want to come out with me?”

“Sure,” he said. “My name is Al,” he called to me as he walked along behind me. I stopped and shook his hand.

“Sam,” I said.

He stood about six feet tall, was dark complexioned and had a goatee.

I stepped into the boat and offered him my hand as he boarded. We rode out to my favorite spot on the lake, baited our lines and casted out. We didn’t say much for a while.

“Got kids?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “You?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My daughter brought me out here; she’s worried about me. I had heart surgery, and she wants me to live with her. She’s out looking for a place for us right now.” After a moment he added, “Got two sons too. One of them is two hundred and eighty-nine pounds, and the other has a heart of gold. I’d like you to meet him some time.”

“Yeah, I’d like to,” I said.

“You married?” He asked.

“Yes,” I said, “for twenty-four years now. Your wife pass?”

No,” he said. “I came home from work one day after thirty-five years with her, and she said she didn’t want to live with me anymore.”

“Wow, that’s pretty tough,” I said.

“I’m better off,” he said. We were quiet for a while.

“Can I have one of your cold drinks?” he asked. I looked at the bag he was pointing to by his feet and then I remembered he had the bag in his hand that held the cane as he boarded the boat.

“Uh, sure, but those are yours.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” he said and smiled. “Sometimes I forget things,” he said.

“Me too,” I said.

After a while, he said, “You have kids?”

“Nope,” I said.

“I have three,” he said. “Two sons and a daughter.” Remembering that he had just told me that information, I looked at him to see if he was joking.

We talked about the coming election and the problems the future generations would face because of greed, and we talked about music and how much we both preferred Stevie Wonder to rap.

“Can I have one of your sandwiches? He asked, pointing to the bag at his feet.

“That’s yours, Al,” I said.

“Aw, that’s right; you want half?” he asked. I shook my head.

We fished for a couple of hours, and I was ready to head back.

“Shall we try another time?” I asked.

“Sure, tomorrow’s good for me, but you’re the captain, he said.

As we approached the boat dock, I saw a flurry of activity. A security officer and a small crowd of people were milling around the dock, and I wondered what was wrong. As I tied my boat in my slip, the security officer came to my boat.

“Man, we were worried about you, Al. Your family has been frantic; nobody knew where you were.”

Al stepped out of the boat and waited for me.

“Thanks man,” he said. “If ever you need my help with anything, you let me know.”

“Thank you Al; I enjoyed it too.”

The security guard came to my boat again after Al left.

“His family was really worried about him,” he said. “He has dementia, and they didn’t know what to think. I’m sure glad he was with you.”

The next day, I showed up at the dock to keep my promise about taking Al out, but he wasn’t there. I walked over to the front office and asked the girl at the desk which site he was at, and she told me that they had left the previous evening.

Then she handed me a package with an envelope attached to it. I read the note that was in the envelope:



*Dear Sam,*

*Thanks for a day I won’t soon forget. You can never guess how important your kindness to this stranger has been. Please accept this gift. I’ll never use it again, and though it’s only a token of how much I appreciate your friendship, I’m comforted to know you’ll value it more than anyone else I can think of.*

*Your Friend,*

*Al*

I opened the package slowly, wishing I could have told him that I enjoyed his company too, and inside the box there was one of the most beautiful fishing rods I’d ever seen. It was in two parts, and it was made of hickory. In the same box was a very unusual and vintage reel of the finest quality. There was also an assortment of very rare and expensive lures and miscellaneous fishing gear.

Months later I received a phone call from Al’s daughter informing me that Al had passed in his sleep the night before. He had inquired at the front desk of the marina what my contact information was weeks prior to his passing. She said he had spoken often of our brief encounter that morning and that she would be forever grateful for the joy I had brought to her dad through that one kindness.

Now, as I reflect on that one morning and that one encounter, I realize that we never know how these moments that we sometimes view as so ordinary can impact forever the people we meet. It was Al’s gratitude for what was for me a simple shared experience of something we both enjoyed, that helped me see how much there is to be grateful for.