

I had just turned 10, when people moved into the house next door. Our yards only separated by a dirty white picket fence.

I watched the family, hidden in a nearby tree, as they unpacked their things. I knew I shouldn't spy, and my parents would punish me if she found out. But I was a kid, and my curiosity got the best of me. As I watched I noticed a boy, who looked approximately my age enter the house. I was so excited, I cheered, nearly falling out of the tree.

Amy and Sarah had stopped playing with me when I was 8. Apparently I was too much of a boy, whatever that meant. Plus my closest playmates were the Parker boys, twins two years older than I. They lived a 30 minute walk away, unbearable on some days. Plus I really didn't like them much. So, more often than not, I was alone. But a friend next door would change that.

I shuffled down the tree and ran home, knowing that my mother would want to welcome the new family to the neighborhood. I wanted to meet them.

Around 20 minutes later my mother, my sisters and I were talking the short walk next door. My mother carrying a basket of vegetables from the garden. A housewarming gift she called it. It seemed strange to me, to give people vegetables as a gift. But if I questioned it like I normally would, she may not have let me go along.

When we arrived, Sarah knocked and quickly a woman answered. She was young, blue eyed with blonde hair. As well as being visibly exhausted.

"Hello, I'm Mary Dawson, and these are Amy, Sarah and Samuel" my mother said formally, handing her the basket "We live down the road, and wanted to welcome you to the community,"

The woman smiled. "Thank you, I'm Elizabeth," She pointed to us, her voice firm "But you 3 better address me as Mrs. Elwin,"

"Yes, Ma'am," my sisters and I replied in unison.

A man walked up to Mrs. Elwin, dark haired, and tired as well. Her husband.

"Robert, this is Mary and her children. They wanted to welcome us to the community," Elizabeth explained to Robert.

“Oh, well thank you,” He said. “We will stop by some time. I apologize, but we really need to unpack,”

“Do you have kids?” I blurted out as he was about to shut the door. I knew they did, but I couldn't say that of course. My mother shot me a look for what she thought was rude, but said nothing.

Both of their faces hardened, this was obviously this topic was avoided. Mr. Elwin sighed deeply. “We have a boy. Thomas. Sadly he's an imbecile. It would be best for you normal kids to stay away from him,” with that he said an uncomfortable “Goodbye,” and shut the door.

As we walked home I knew my mother was furious, offending the new neighbors. Just waiting for the moment when we got inside. Or even worse, when my father got home. His punishments were always worse than hers. But I didn't worry about that. I was just sad that I wouldn't have a playmate.

Over the next weeks I nearly forgot about Thomas. Making the trek to the parker place, when I was tired of playing on my own or reading. That was until I saw him of course.

I was outside on our homemade swing, when I noticed him. He sat in his yard, near the fence. Only feet away from me. Yet he seemed completely oblivious. Like many times before, my curiosity took over.

I crept up to the fence and examined him first. He looked normal, other than the filth that consumed him. His hair, his skin, his clothes all covered in dirt and stains. Almost like he never changed or bathed. But with his parents being well groomed, it was strange to me that he wasn't. People who could afford to bathe and keep clean, made their children do the same. My parents certainly did, despite my constant protests. But this boy appeared to be wild, almost like he could have been raised by animals.

I said “Hello,” quietly and cautiously, remembering what Mr. Elwin said; we have a boy. Thomas. Sadly he's an imbecile. It would be best for you normal kids to stay away from him.

I had no idea what imbecile meant, but it didn't sound good.

Thomas looked as if he didn't hear me. Tapping two palm sized, weathered stones together. I figured maybe if I talked louder he would respond.

"I'm Samuel," I said.

Still he didn't acknowledge me, he just kept tapping the stones.

I sat down across from him and held out my hand, thinking maybe he just couldn't hear. He ignored it of course. So I continued with the questioning.

I asked simple things like, "What do you think of your new house? What's your family like? What's your favorite color?" and when he didn't reply, I answered the question myself.

I didn't understand at the time, that even if he wanted to answer he couldn't. But I kept up with the questions. Talking to him was more interesting than sitting on a swing alone. And during the hour I sat with him, he never even looked up. But in his own way, he did respond.

If I brought up his house or family, the pace of the stones grew. Almost as if he was agitated. If I talked about school or something as simple as how nice the day was, the pace slowed dramatically. As if he was at peace.

He began sitting by the fence every day, from about 2:30 until 4:30 in afternoon. And I sat with him. It became a part of my daily routine, talking to Thomas. Though I did enjoy running wild, climbing trees really just being like any other young boy. It was nice having some that I could just talk to.

I was also hoping I could fix him. Make him like and other by talking to him. But whether or not that happened, I didn't care. I considered him a friend, whether he spoke or not.

One day as Thomas walked away, my father came out side. He had a look of concern on his face. "I'm not sure you should be hanging around with him,"

"Why?" I asked innocently. "He's nice,"

He ran his hand through his dark hair. "He's not right, he won't even talk to you. You should be playing or something,"

I shrugged and walked into the house. I still didn't understand all these comments, not right, an imbecile. Even though he didn't talk, we still had conversations. So I continued to meet Thomas by the gate, despite my father's protest.

One day stands out more than any other. I sat down by the fence and said “Hello Thomas,”

He replied with a quick and mumbled “Hi,” his eyes still watching the ground.

“What did you say?” I asked, in complete shock.

Eight months I had gone out there every day. Even when school started I would rush home to talk to him. And all this time he haven’t said a word to me.

He ignored my question, and tapped the stones.

That was the first time I heard a word come out of his mouth. I’m not sure why he said it. Or even if he was talking to me or himself. But I would like to think it was almost like a goodbye.

The next day I went out to the fence and he wasn’t there. I figured maybe something had come up, or his family had to go somewhere. So I shrugged it off and decided I would go back tomorrow. I figured he would be there, like he was every other day. And I would talk, and maybe he would say a word or two as well, but would mostly listen.

But when I went back there the next day there was still no sign of him. I sat by the gate waiting, when my father came outside. He sat down next me, and for a while we watched the empty field behind the gate.

“Thomas didn’t come today, or yesterday,” I said.

“He’s not going to be coming anymore,” my father replied. His voice sounded sympathetic, but I could hear the relief.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because his parents are having a baby. They can’t be worrying about him and a baby at the same time. It’s better this way,”

I held back tears, as I asked my father “Where did they send him?”

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “To a place where he should have been all along. He’ll be fine Samuel,”

“Sure,” I mumbled then walked inside, knowing I would never see Thomas again.

65 years later, and I still remember him. In the months I knew Thomas, he made me rethink how I treated people who were different. Eventually this effected how I raised my own children to treat others. With his near silence Thomas changed my life, and I can only hope I changed his with my words.