

Be Nice to Josephine

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According to Charlie Mitchell there were fifty-two holidays in every year. There was Saturday, and Saturday, and Saturday, and Saturday, and so on, for fifty-two times.

It was baseball that turned Saturdays into holidays. Every Saturday, unless it was raining or snowing, Charlie and all his friends met at the school playground and played baseball from breakfast to lunch, and from lunch to dinner.

Today was one of Charlie's holidays—Saturday, and the sun was shining.

He was eating breakfast when the phone rang. He could hear his mother answering it in the hall. She sounded excited and happy. When she came back to the kitchen, she had her I've-got-to-hurry look.

Sure enough. "I've got to hurry," she said. "A cousin I haven't seen since I was a little girl is passing through town. She's going to spend the day with us." stop

"That's nice," said Charlie.

"She'll be here in an hour," said his mother, looking at the clock. "I've got a lot to do." She began clearing the dishes off the table.



Charlie could tell it wasn't any use asking for more pancakes. I might as well go now, he thought. He picked up his bat and glove and was almost at the door when his mother said, "I'll need your help today, Charlie."

Charlie looked longingly at the door. But, after all, it was early yet. And, after all, she was his mother. "OK," he said. "What can I do? Sweep the porch? Run to the store? Mow the lawn?"

"No," she said. "Nothing like that. I need you to help me entertain. Ellen is bringing her little girl along, and I want you to be nice to Josephine."

"*JOSEPHINE? A girl?* And *I* have to be nice to her? All day? Why? Why? Why?"

"Because blood is thicker than water," said his mother.

"What does that mean?" Charlie asked.

"It mean families are important," said his mother. "It means you have to be nice to Josephine. Now run upstairs and put on a clean shirt and think of something that Josephine would like to do."

"I *know* what she'd like to do," said Charlie. "She'll want to play dolls or have a tea party or dress up. Girls, ugh! Josephine, double ugh!" She'll probably even be pretty, he thought with disgust. Ugh, ugh, triple ugh! His whole holiday was ruined.

Then an even worse thought struck him. What if the gang, especially that loudmouth, Howard, saw him playing with a *girl*? He'd be ruined. He'd never hear the last of it.

I'll have to hide her, Charlie decided. But where could you hide anything as big as a girl?

I'll take her on a picnic, he thought. That's what I'll do. He thought about picnics for a minute. He thought about food. He thought about girls. Then he began to grin.

"I'll bet she's never been on a picnic like *this* before. We might even go fishing," he said to himself.

He went upstairs, almost cheerfully, to change his shirt.

He was in the kitchen making sandwiches when the company arrived.

"So this is Josephine!" said his mother.

Charlie stuck his head around the corner. Thank goodness I was wrong about one thing, anyway, he thought. You certainly can't call her pretty. At least not until she gets some more teeth. All her important teeth in the front were missing.

"Where's Charlie?" asked Josephine.

"Coming!" said Charlie. He grabbed up the lunch bag and went into the living room to meet his cousins.

"Charlie's taking Josephine on a picnic," his mother explained.

"Oh, good!" said Josephine, with a toothless grin.

"How sweet!" said Cousin Ellen.

"Be sure to be back in time for dinner," Charlie's mother called after them as they went out the back door.

She didn't have to tell me *that*, Charlie thought. I certainly don't plan to spend any more time with Josephine than I have to.

He got two fishing poles and a tackle box out of the garage and gave them to Josephine to carry.



"Let's pretend we're explorers," he said.

"OK," Josephine agreed.

The shortest way to the creek was right past the schoolyard and over the hill. But who's in a hurry? Charlie thought. We'll take the long way.

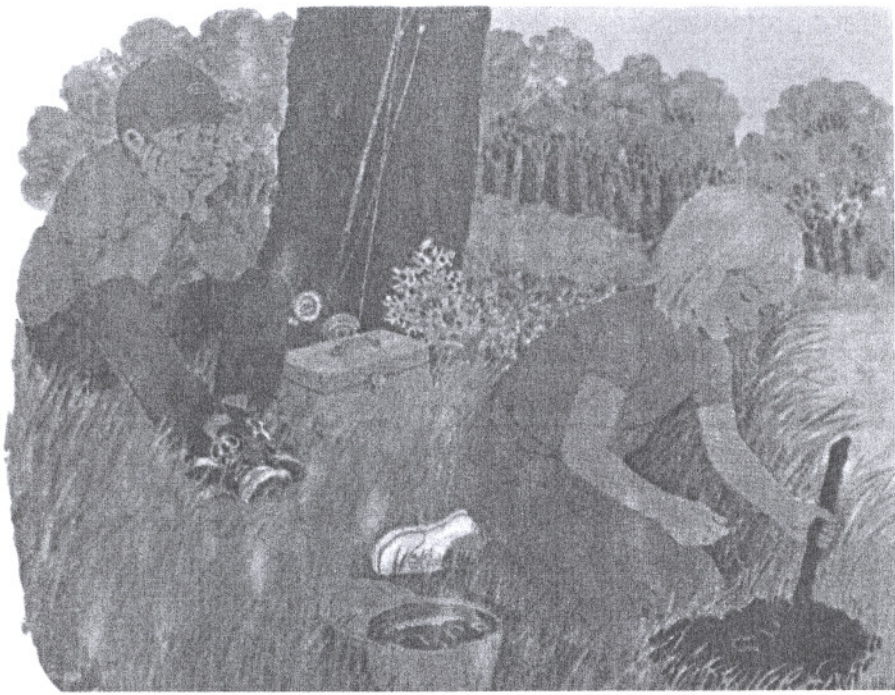
They sneaked down the alley and across a vacant lot, staying close to the bushes.

"So the fierce animals won't see us," Charlie explained.

Especially a bunch of fierce baseball players, he thought, like Toby, Spider, Winkie, and most of all, that loudmouth, Howard.

Josephine trotted along behind him. Charlie wondered when she was going to start giggling and asking questions and acting silly like a girl. Then he certainly couldn't be blamed if he forgot to be nice to Josephine for a minute and told her how she was ruining his holiday when he could be playing baseball. He wished she'd hurry up and start acting like a stupid girl.

She was quiet. She was as quiet as a boy.



"Don't you want to know where we're going?" Charlie demanded.

"We're going on a picnic, aren't we?" said Josephine.

"Yeah. That's right," said Charlie.

The creek was in sight now. "We're going fishing too," Charlie said.

Stop



"That's what I thought," said Josephine as she set the tackle box and poles down carefully on the bank. "Can I dig the worms?"

Charlie stared at her. "I was just about to ask you to do that," he muttered. "Do you really like worms?"

"Well, actually," said Josephine, "I like snakes better. But worms will do."

Then she went right to work. She found a sharp stick to dig with, took her hat off, filled it with loose, damp dirt, and began to look for earthworms. Charlie just watched her. He couldn't think of a thing to say. So far his picnic wasn't turning out at all the way he had planned.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather be playing dolls?" he asked.

"No, I wouldn't," said Josephine as she dropped a fat night crawler into her hat. "But if you want to, I will."

"Forget it," mumbled Charlie. She was getting him all mixed up.

Josephine went on digging worms. Charlie watched for a while, then decided he might as well help her.

The sun was high overhead now, and Charlie was getting hungry. "Let's stop for lunch," he said.

They washed their muddy hands in the creek and sat down under a willow tree. Charlie opened the lunch bag. He took out a ham sandwich for himself and handed the other sandwich to Josephine.

"What is it?" she asked.

Charlie squirmed a little. "Peanut butter and mustard," he said.

"I've never had that before," said Josephine.

Charlie weakened. "You can have the ham if you'd rather," he offered.

"No," said Josephine. "I've had ham lots of times. This will be different. Did you make it especially for me?"

"Yeah," said Charlie. "I sure did."

"You're nice," said Josephine.

For some reason he didn't quite understand, Charlie decided not to give her the rotten apple.

"Let's fish," he said.



They sat on the bank and dangled their bare feet in the creek and watched their lines for a bite. Josephine could bait her own hook, and she knew enough not to shriek and yell and scare the fish away.

She's not too bad for a girl, Charlie thought. If I *have* to spend a whole day with a girl, it might as well be Josephine. He decided that when she got some teeth, she probably wouldn't be so ugly after all. Not pretty enough to be disgusting, but not too ugly either.

"Do you ever play baseball?" Josephine asked.

"Sometimes," said Charlie, who hadn't missed a Saturday game in two years.

"Most boys I know would rather play baseball than go fishing with a girl," said Josephine.

"Oh well," said Charlie, "a person ought to do something different now and then."

It wasn't what he had planned to say at all. But there was something peaceful about the cool, green woods and the sunshine that sifted down through the leaves and the sound of the creek lapping against a log. There were worse ways to spend a holiday than going fishing, Charlie decided. He put another worm on his hook and settled down on the creek bank in the shade of the willow tree.

Blue jays screamed in the treetops. Frogs croaked on the hollow log. The sun sank lower and lower.

"Good grief!" Charlie said, looking at the sun. "See how late it's getting? We'll have to hurry to get home in time for dinner."

They dumped the dirt out of Josephine's hat, took the hooks off their lines and put them away in the tackle box, gathered up the empty lunch bag, and started for home.

Charlie carried everything.

"Want me to carry something?" Josephine asked.

"Naw," said Charlie gruffly. "It's my turn."

"We're going home a different way," Josephine noticed.

"Yeah," said Charlie. "We'd better go the short way, or we'll be late for dinner. I'll show you where I go to school."

Josephine trotted along beside him. As they got closer to the school ground, they could hear voices. The ball game was still going on. There they were—Toby, Spider, Winkie, and that loudmouth, Howard.

"Hey, there's Charlie!" shouted Winkie. "Where've you been all day, Charlie?"

"Who's your girl, Charlie?" yelled Howard.

"She's not a girl," said Charlie. "She's my cousin, Josephine."

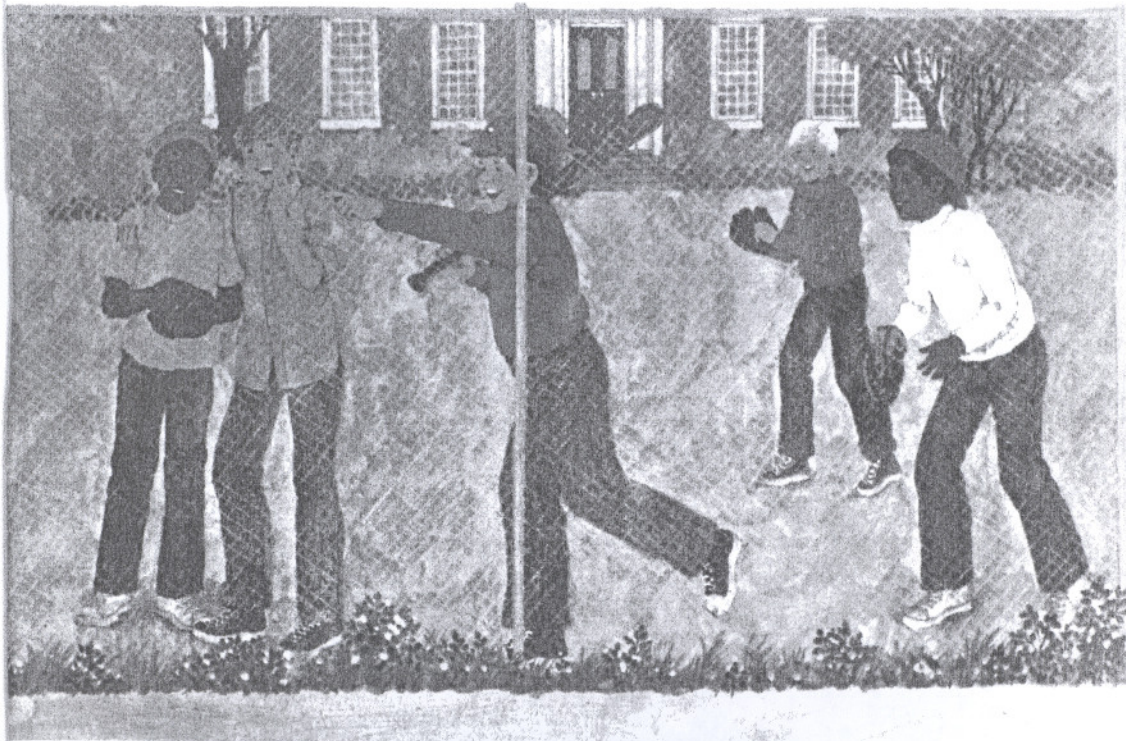
"You missed all the fun," said Howard. "Did you have to spend the whole day with her?"



Honestly, thought Charlie, some boys didn't have any manners at *all*! He glanced down at Josephine. She looked kind of little. She even looked like she was about to cry.

Somebody had better be nice to Josephine, fast.

He heard himself saying another unexpected thing. "No, I didn't *have* to spend the day with her. I *wanted* to. She's my cousin. Didn't anybody ever tell you that blood is thicker than water?"



That loudmouth, Howard, looked puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"It means families are important," said Charlie. "Come on, Josephine. Let's go home."

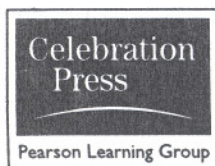
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