

THE ART OF
BEING
THANKFUL

Nicholas Gordon

Copyright © 2007 by Nicholas Gordon

This story may be used free for any personal or non-commercial purpose. For commercial use of this story, please contact the author at webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

THE ART OF BEING THANKFUL

"There's an art to being thankful," the saxophonist told Jeremy. "It doesn't just come naturally. It's like a melody inside you have to listen for."

Jeremy listened. "I don't hear anything," he said.

"Just keep listening," the saxophonist said, grinning his gap-toothed grin. "It's there. You'll hear it. You just got to open the door."

Jeremy opened the door. Nothing.

Not that he figured he had much to be thankful for. His father had disappeared nine months earlier, whether dead or just gone nobody knew. And after three months of not paying rent, he and his mother and two baby sisters were evicted from their apartment.

They spent their nights in a homeless shelter and their days on the street. His mother had applied for welfare and an apartment, and in the meantime Jeremy was supposed to go to a school far away from the shelter. But without an address he couldn't apply for a transit pass, and they couldn't afford the carfare, so he wound up spending his days out on the street with his mother and sisters.

It was starting to get cold.

The saxophonist put his instrument back up to his lips and started blowing riffs out into the chilly

November wind. Since it was Thanksgiving Day, there weren't many people around on the normally busy street, but the saxophonist kept on playing, perhaps mainly for himself, sending riffs skyward like smoke signals to whoever might happen by.

Jeremy wished he could play an instrument. Then maybe he could make some money and help out his mother. And maybe it would be easier to hear the melody of thankfulness within.

They moved on towards the soup kitchen where they would be served a Thanksgiving meal. A long line of poor and homeless people waited at the side entrance to the church.

"It'll be about an hour," a tall woman in jeans and a ski jacket told them as she went up and down the line. "Would you like a cup of coffee to warm you up? We have hot chocolate for the children."

Jeremy's mother nodded and off she went, returning with a young man in a suit and tie, who helped her carry out the drinks in large, steaming paper cups.

"Don't worry," she assured them. "We've got plenty of food." And she went further down the line.

About ten minutes later the young man in the suit and tie came by to collect the cups. "How you holding out?" he asked Jeremy.

"How come you're not wearing a coat?" Jeremy answered.

"You my mother?" the young man shot back with a smile. He ruffled Jeremy's hair and was gone.

"Nice people," Jeremy's mother said. She had begun to cry. She cried frequently, equally over good and bad.

"Don't cry!" Jeremy's sister Alicia demanded in a stern voice. At four she seemed to enjoy giving orders. "It's not nice to make a fuss!"

Jeremy's mother kept crying through her smile, giving Alicia a little hug, and then Sandra, too, with the other arm, just to keep things even.

Jeremy didn't need a hug because he was much older. Besides, his mother had only two arms.

When they finally edged into the warm basement of the church and snaked slowly around to an empty table, it was late afternoon and Jeremy was starving. A girl Jeremy's age, dressed in a turtleneck, jeans, and sneakers, put out the napkins and silverware as they sat down. She flashed Jeremy a smile and tossed her shoulder-length brown hair.

Jeremy wondered whether his clothes smelled.

She and what looked like her mother came back with bread and pitchers of water, and some more coffee and hot chocolate, and then with the meals – large plates heaped with turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, stringed beans, cranberry sauce, and a thin slice of pumpkin pie.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" the girl called out as she placed a plate in front of each member of the family.

Then her mother asked softly but decisively, "Will you join us in prayer?"

The homeless family and their two servants

bowed their heads as the woman said, "We thank you, Lord, for your gracious bounty and for the gift of life. Amen."

Everyone lifted their heads but Jeremy's mother, who went on, "And for the gift of giving to those in need, and the gift of receiving what is offered in kindness and love."

The girl's mother bent over and kissed Jeremy's mother on the cheek. Both were crying now. "Thank you," she said. "May God bless you."

"God has blessed me," Jeremy's mother said, indicating her three children. "And has blessed me today with this meal."

They fell quickly to eating as soon as the mother and daughter moved on, and left as soon as they had finished the pumpkin pie. The line was still long, and they didn't want to make others wait in the cold any longer than necessary.

They emerged into the now-frigid early darkness and began to make their way slowly back to the shelter, which would not reopen for another hour and a half. The sounds of the saxophone sounded louder as they neared the saxophonist's corner.

When he saw Jeremy's two little sisters, the saxophonist broke into a riff on "Sesame Street." Alicia smiled and skipped over to him, Sandra toddling behind. The saxophonist did a little dance in place as they came up to him, and the three shared a moment of unstained delight.

"You hear the music yet?" the saxophonist called over to Jeremy.

Jeremy listened. "Not yet," he said.

"Don't worry, don't worry," the saxophonist said. "You will."

And he went on sending joyous smoke signals up into the cold, dark, windy sky.