

Say Hello Anyway

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The old man took his usual seat in his weathered rocking chair on the front porch. He always had a glass of sweet tea on the tray table beside his chair, and a chewed up old pipe hanging from his frowning lips. He slowly rocked back and forth, as he watched the world go on all around him. He never bothered anyone, and no one took the time to bother him.

Jake never could understand how old people can sit still for so long. The old man was sitting in his chair when he left for school, and then he would be there when Jake came home. "Does he ever have to use the bathroom?" Jake wondered.

Jake liked the old man's house. It looked a lot like a gingerbread house, like the ones he decorates at Christmas time. Only the old man's house had lots of flowers all around it. Bright and colorful flowers all around the yard. "That must be what he does when I'm at school! He works with his flowers!" It was kind of fun, trying to unravel the mystery behind the old man across the street.

"Jake! Time to eat! Come in and wash up!" Jake's mother called him to come inside for dinner.

"Mom, do you know the old man across the street?" Jake asked as he sat down at the table.

"I don't really know him, but I believe his name is Mr. Simmons. Why?"

Jake said, "I was just wondering 'cause he's always sitting on his front porch all by himself."

"Well, that's probably how he likes it. Don't bother him, Jake." Mom said as she placed potatoes on Jake's plate.

Wanting more information, Jake asked, "Does he have family nearby? Is he married? Does he work with his flowers during the day?"

"Jake! We don't know the answers to any of your questions! All we know is his name. Now eat, before your food gets cold!" Jake's dad said sternly.

"Okay...but do you think..."

"Jake!" both parents said in unison.

Jake looked down at his plate and took a bite of his fried chicken. He decided he needed to know more about Mr. Simmons, so he would just have to find out for himself.

The next day, as Jake left for school, Jake decided he would test the old man, to see what he would do if he were to say 'hello'. As Jake left his yard and turned down the sidewalk toward school, he looked over at Mr. Simmons, smiled and waved. "Good morning!" Jake called.

The old man stopped rocking for a moment and looked around. He thought the boy had called out to him, but no one ever speaks to him, so he continued rocking.

Jake shrugged his shoulders, and continued on his way to school. At lunch he was asking his friends if they knew old Mr. Simmons. "He's a mean old man!" Johnny said. "Yeah, he hates everybody and doesn't talk to anyone!" said Greg.

Jake listened to what his friends were saying, but something told him they might be wrong about Mr. Simmons. After school, as he drew closer to his house, Jake saw the old man in his usual place. Jake

was never afraid of asking questions, and this was important, so he crossed over toward Mr. Simmons' yard.

Jake stood on the sidewalk in front of Mr. Simmons' house. The old man was peering at him through his squinting blue eyes when Jake smiled, waved and said, "Hello! My name is Jake!" Before the old man could say anything, Jake was walking toward him, then skipped up the porch steps. Jake extended his right hand like he had seen his father do when meeting someone new. "How ya doin?" Jake smiled.

The old man looked up at this funny little boy, having no choice but to extend his hand to Jake. "Fine, I guess. What do you want?"

Jake giggled and said, "Nothin! I just wanted to say hello. We're neighbors, aren't we?"

The old man looked up and down at this little stranger, and then back up to his smiling face. He was trying to measure him up, because no one ever took the time to speak with him. He knew what the neighborhood kids were saying about him, but he could see this young man may be different.

Pulling the pipe from his lips, the old man smiled and said, "The name is Simmons. Pleased to meet you."