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WINTER BEANS

Bruce Holland Rogers

Every night as I went to bed, I would tell myself that the next day would be different, that I would get up and shave and shower first thing. Then I'd wash every dish and all my dirty clothes. I'd split wood, pay bills. I'd call my kids, talk to my grandchildren.

But when I woke up, it would be to another gray sky. I'd rake out the fire, dress in yesterday's clothes to wade through the snow and search the wood pile for a few logs small enough to get the stove going again. Then I would sit close to the fire, warming. Once I was warm, I would doze. Or think. Not about anything in particular. Mostly about how things were, about the things that needed doing and weren't getting done.

One afternoon, the woman from across the street knocked on my door. I don't know her name. Used to be, neighbors moved in to stay, and we all knew each other, but now every other house is a rental. She did tell me her name once. We trade from our gardens in summer. I take her my black prince tomatoes and some cucumbers. She gives me sweet peppers and corn. She's younger than my youngest daughter, and not like my girls. She's dark.

She had cookies.

"I thank you kindly," I said, accepting the plate. I can always manage to be polite.

"You need anything?" she asked me.

I did need something, but I didn't know what it was. I told her I was fine. I could drive myself to the grocery when I had boiled the last package of spaghetti.

She was pushy then. She said, "You sure?" She looked at me, and she looked in the direction of my kitchen as if she could see it from the door.

I smiled because I wanted her to go away. I thanked her again for the cookies. When she had gone, I went back to sitting.

Later, I had cookies for dinner.

She was back the next day. I didn't want to answer the door, but if I didn't, then I'd still have her plate. Returning it would become one of the things that needed doing. I didn't ask her in. I stood in the doorway and gave the plate to her. "Thank you again," I said, and started to close the door.

"Wait! This is for you." She gave me the bottom of a milk carton filled with potting soil.

"What is it?"

"Something my kids were doing at school. It made me think of you. Keep it watered and warm."

I thanked her and closed the door. I put the carton in the kitchen, and I wondered how much she understood. *It made me think of you.* Did she think that all I needed was a reminder of spring? Because of course there were seeds in the potting soil. My own kids had sprouted beans at school a generation ago. Did she think that all I needed was the sight of something green and growing? I had houseplants. Whatever was wrong with me was more than a sprouting seed could cure.

I remembered to check the carton each morning and kept the soil moist.

Some time in here, my middle daughter called. My oldest grandson was the star of the high school baseball team. The second boy was starting to drive. They were all going to Florida in March. She asked how I was, and I said I was fine. She was a thousand miles away, and I didn't want her to worry.

One morning, the white humps of two sprouts had broken the surface of the soil. One was a little higher than the other and was pulling up the shrinking seed halves it had come from. They were indeed bean sprouts. New life. Good. But I was not transformed. These plants, if I kept them going, would grow and mature and go to seed and die. I was entirely familiar with the process. I spent most of the day by the fire. At dinner, I washed just the dirty dishes I needed, and the next day, I wore dirty clothes again.

I put the sprouts near a window.

It made me think of you.

I thought, *She is very young. There are no miracle cures.*

In fact, why had I assumed that she understood anything at all? We both gardened. She had given me a tiny garden. She hadn't meant anything by it.

I gathered up my clothes and put them near the door. Later I might go to the laundry. I might clean myself up. If I washed half of the dishes, that would be a start, right? Then I took a nap on my sofa. I managed to sleep most of the day. It was dark when I woke up. Dinner was a can of tuna.

Tomorrow would be better, I told myself.

I did not sleep well in the night. In the morning, I was too cold and too tired to chop wood. I fit some big pieces into the firebox on top of the ashes and coals. The logs only smoked at first. I would give them time. I sat with a blanket around me. The sprouts on the windowsill had opened secondary leaves. I thought I would like to look at them more closely. Perhaps today I would do half of the dishes. It would be an accomplishment to shave.

Eventually, I roused myself and went to the window. I touched the new leaves. They were so green, so perfectly shaped. I said, without knowing why or to whom I was saying it, "Thank you."

I did wash all the dishes that day. I shaved. But that was the extent of it. Spring was coming, and I was bound to feel better eventually. Eventually, I washed my clothes, started to shower every day, and got outside more and more to chop wood. Sun broke through the clouds more often. One thaw followed another. Spring rain fell.

I kept the bean plants watered. I repotted them. But they never flowered and before the garden was dry enough for me to work the soil they began to die. I was not surprised. One morning, I took the failing plants outside to add them to my compost heap. It happened to be a sunny day.