

***Freeman Wallace, 1833-1916***

Freeman Wallace walked along Water Street, weathered boots making no noise against the snow-covered sidewalk. Wooden pick in hand, he speared a cardboard carton and dropped it into the basket of garbage hanging from his shoulder. This was his job: pacing the streets of Exeter, collecting trash and paper. It didn't pay much and it didn't allow him much chance to escape from poverty, but it was what he could get. So he would not complain.

A white family walked past him, and he tried to ignore the children snickering quietly. He didn't know if they were laughing at him, or laughing at any of the multitudes of things children laugh at, but he still flinched slightly.

The father kept his head held high and polished hands tucked inside warm coat pockets. His brushed hair and wrinkleless face displayed a life free of burden. He was the kind of man who was born with money and would die with money, his last dying breath supplied with privilege filled oxygen. He did not glance Freeman's way, would not even consider looking on someone so beneath him.

The peculiar thing was the son, and how he bent down to pick up a crinkled piece of newspaper and handed it to Freeman. The young boy's blue eyes stared kindly into Freeman's, holding the paper out for him to dispose of. His fingers closed around the paper; he was careful not to brush against the pale skin of the small hand, and the boy smiled.

As he dropped the balled-up garbage into his basket, he wanted to kneel down next to the boy and tell him how lucky he was. He could imagine it: descending to eye level and telling him, "Be happy with what you are given. Never take for granted the fact that your father did not have to fight in the Civil War; do not ignore the fact that your ancestors never stood in chains; remember, when you rise in the morning to face a life which does not revolve around collecting trash from curbs, that you are lucky to have the privilege of an easy life without challenge and strife."

That's what he would say.

This is what he did say: "Thank you."

Because he would not wish slavery or the life sentence of societal struggle on even his worst enemy. And he could not easily vocalize, nor expect the young boy to understand, the paradoxical nature of the way he was proud of his ancestors for fighting against enslavement or the pride that rises within him when he remembers his days in the Union. Because without that, he would not be made of the same kind of courage and noble character. His life would not signify something meaningful.

So as the father took the arm of the young boy and pulled him along, speaking in hushed tones, he wished he knew the boy's name. He saw something like hope in the boy's eyes, some kind of promise that things would get better.

Freeman smiled and continued along the path.