

Sarah Blanchard

Life Experience

A Visit from Mr. Robinson

The logo for Silver Arts is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The word "Silver" is in a dark grey color, and "Arts" is in a lighter grey color. A horizontal line with a textured, brush-like appearance passes through the middle of the letters.

**Artist's Name:** Sarah Blanchard  
**Title of Entry:** A Visit from Mr. Robinson  
**Category:** Literary Arts  
**Sub-Category:** Life Experiences  
Wake County Senior Games

### A Visit from Mr. Robinson

Mr. Robinson arrived at our front door one rainy evening in September, 1960, to talk with my dad about the old Gillespie barn, which had been destroyed by fire the previous weekend.

Built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Gillespie barn was once a handsome structure with a large haymow and a long shed that sheltered the horse-drawn farm implements. For nearly a century, it was an important part of Brushwood Farm, the dairy operation that my dad managed. But after the farm's owner died and everything went on the auction block in '56, the barn was abandoned. The roof leaked and the mountains of old hay bales grew moldy. The tumbledown shed became the last resting place for various pieces of forgotten equipment.

No longer used, the Gillespie barn became an unofficial neighborhood playground. In daytime, children built tunnels and forts from broken hay bales, and swung on the long ropes that hung from the rafters. At night, teenagers hiked through the woods to hold secret trysts in the barn's darkest corners.

Now it was only a smoldering heap of charred timbers, burned to the ground. Three teenage boys in the neighborhood had confessed they'd "tried to burn the bats out of the barn." Mr. Robinson's son was one of those boys.

My father invited him into the living room and offered him a seat on our saggy old sofa. Ten years old, I was much too shy to say anything more than hello, so I just shook Mr. Robinson's hand and carried his heavy gray topcoat to the kitchen, where I draped it over a chair

so it could dry from the rain, while they sat and talked. The coat smelled of good wet wool and autumn wood smoke.

Mom offered Mr. Robinson coffee. He smiled and said thank you, yes indeed. I leaned against the kitchen doorway and listened to the conversation while Mom made the coffee.

An impressively tall and broad-shouldered man, Mr. Robinson had serious sad eyes, very dark skin and close-cropped black hair, with the gray just starting at the temples. At five-eleven, he topped my father by only five inches, but his presence filled our living room. I'd never before noticed how low the ceilings were in our farmhouse.

The Robinsons had moved to our neighborhood a few years earlier. His daughter Sharon was a year ahead of me in school, and a younger boy, David, liked horses, as I did. The oldest boy, just beginning high school, had a reputation as a bit of a troublemaker, but everyone liked him and he had lots of friends. And everyone knew who Mr. Robinson was, of course. He coached the local softball and baseball teams, and he worked in the City, as an executive for the company that sold Chock Full O' Nuts coffee, my mom's favorite.

Mr. Robinson had come to make amends and apologize for his son's carelessness and poor judgment. He shook his head sadly. Everyone knew, he said, you should never, ever light a match near a hay barn. Those boys were so foolish.

Dad admitted the barn had become what the lawyers call an attractive nuisance. He was relieved to be rid of it, he said. It should've taken it down years ago. He was just glad no one was hurt and the fire department had come quickly.

Mom served coffee in her very best porcelain cups, the ones saved for holidays. The cup and saucer looked small and delicate in Mr. Robinson's hands, but he held them with an easy

grace. Just a little milk, no sugar, thank you so much. Such good coffee! And he smiled, which made my mom blush.

Mr. Robinson said he knew the barn had been owned by the farm's owner, Dr. Wood, but surely, my father might have had something stored there that had value, that he'd now lost in the fire. Perhaps the hay had been worth something?

My father acknowledged that yes, there'd been about six tons of hay in there. Dad reckoned the current price of hay was about \$22.50 a ton, so Mr. Robinson wrote a check for \$45 to cover his son's portion of the loss. He finished his coffee and shook my father's hand. I retrieved his coat and he shook my hand, also.

In Miss Madden's fifth-grade class the next day, I told my classmates about Mr. Robinson's visit to our house. I was the center of attention, especially among the boys.

"He came to your house and you didn't get an autograph? Don't you know how much a Jackie Robinson autograph is worth?"

I had to confess that I'd never thought of asking for his autograph.

One boy realized, "But you have a check with his signature! Tell your dad he should keep it and frame it! It's gonna be worth a lot of money, lots more than forty-five dollars!"

That night, I told Dad what the boys had said. He just smiled and told me that he'd already cashed the check. And keeping it, he told me, would be disrespectful. Mr. Robinson had come to us as an honorable man who wanted to make things right, and if we kept his check without cashing it, we'd be sending a message that his famous autograph was worth more than

his honorable actions. Mr. Robinson was the only parent who came forward and offered to make amends for his son's negligence in the burning of the barn. Remember that, my father said.

Also remember, he said, Mr. Robinson's name isn't Jackie. It's Jack. Look at the way a man signs his checks. That's his real name.

I never got Jack Robinson's autograph.

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