

# The Volunteer

## By ReadWorks

The earthworm wriggled, the now-severed halves of its long, purple-and-red body glistening in the morning sunlight. James looked at the creature with an equal mixture of disgust and fascination. He was a little bit ashamed, as well, because it was his shovel that had killed this earthworm, by chopping it neatly in two. James was supposed to be helping build a community garden, but it seemed that even while trying to grow one thing, he managed to destroy something else.

He felt a strong hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry,” said Janelle briskly. “It’ll be fine. Earthworms can regenerate, even from a blow like that. In a few days it’ll be churning through the soil just like normal.”

James shrugged off her hand. “I wasn’t worried, it’s just a bug,” he said, with a little too much emphasis.

“Okay,” said Janelle. “Good. Then get back to shoveling, these tomatoes won’t plant themselves.”

James grumbled to himself as he plunged the shovel deep into the black soil. When he was sure Janelle had gone, he double-checked to make sure he hadn’t decapitated another worm. Janelle knew her stuff, but he still found it hard to believe an animal could survive having half of its body ripped away. This time his shovel hadn’t maimed any unsuspecting animals and James carefully placed a leafy green tomato plant into the hole, patting the soil back into place around the roots, just as Janelle had showed him.

Janelle was the head of Green Thumbs, a community nonprofit that built gardens all over the city. Before graduating, all of the students at James’s middle school were required to complete fifty hours of community service. James had scanned the list of possible volunteer opportunities, looking for something that wouldn’t be too miserable. Green Thumbs caught his eye; he liked the idea of being outside and he also liked that it was something you could do on your own. Just dig some holes, plant some vegetables, and you were home free. Now, his shoulders aching from the repetitive movement of forcing a shovel into hard ground, James was beginning to envy the kids in his class who had signed up to tutor elementary school children. They were probably sitting in some comfortable armchair, reading a picture book and stealing the little kids’ snacks.

By the end of the afternoon, James had planted a neat row of tomato seedlings in the ground.

“James,” said Janelle. “That’s good for today. The sun’s about to go down; come have some lemonade with the other volunteers.”

James shook his head. He still had a few more plants left before he was finished. "I'll come join you in a few minutes," he said. "I just want to finish this row."

Janelle smiled at his refusal. "All right," she said. "But don't wait too long or the lemonade will all be gone." She left and took the other volunteers into the building next door, where there was a gathering space for meetings and social events.

James worked alone until the sky had turned deep blue and the last rays of the sun were disappearing over the horizon. He put down the shovel and sat in the grass on the side of the garden.

"Ouch!" James heard a small, high voice exclaim.

James jumped up and looked around, but nobody was there. He sat back down, shaking his head. The heat and exercise must have really gotten to him if he was hearing voices.

"I said, 'Ouch!'" James heard the voice again, this time more insistent. He stood up slowly and looked around. There still wasn't a person in sight.

"Down here!" cried the voice. James looked down and almost fainted. It was a small person—a fully-formed adult, only this man was six inches tall.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," said James. "I've gone crazy."

"You're not crazy," said the little man. "I'm real. My name is Robert."

James stared in silence. For once, he was speechless.

"Ahem," said Robert. "At this point, a person with good manners would introduce himself as well. I may be a leprechaun, but I still deserve common courtesy."

"Um...sorry?" said James. "My name is James. Nice to meet you."

James's voice was shaky. He still thought that he might be losing his mind. He asked Robert, "Excuse me, but aren't you supposed to be in Ireland? Or at least have an Irish accent? I didn't think that we had leprechauns here in Harlem."

"Migrated just over a hundred years ago," Robert said with pride. "First of my family to come to America, and I lost my accent some time in the 1960s. But let's move on to the important matters—can't be wasting the whole night. You sir, James: I owe you a debt." Robert leaned in eagerly, watching James's reaction.

"Me? What did I do?" asked James. He had an uneasy feeling. He didn't want Robert to owe him anything.

"You saved my life, of course. Little-known fact that leprechauns are allergic to earthworms. That big one almost got me until you struck it down," explained Robert.

"Oh, you don't have to give me anything," said James. "It was just an accident."

"Oh, but I do," said Robert slowly. He reached out and grabbed James's finger. He was surprisingly strong for someone so tiny. "We leprechauns ALWAYS repay our debts. No matter what it takes." Robert stared at James in silence for a moment before continuing.

"The standard repayment is three wishes," said Robert. "Will that be acceptable to you?"

"Three wishes? For anything I want?" asked James.

"Three wishes for almost anything you want," said Robert. "No wishing for more wishes. That's cheating."

"I wish—" James began, but Robert cut him off. "Stop! Think about your wishes and use them wisely, James. Once you've made a wish, it can't be undone. Not by me, not by you, not by anyone in this city."

James thought it over. Three wishes for anything he wanted; the possibilities were endless. "Do I have to make all three wishes now?" he asked Robert.

"Not at all," Robert replied. "You have three days to make your three wishes."

"Okay, I'll just make one wish right now then," said James. "I wish—" He paused and Robert leaned forward eagerly. "I wish for my parents to get back together."

James's parents had divorced when he was two years old. His father was in a band, which meant that James only saw him when his tours passed through New York City. He was tired of only having a dad four times a year.

"It is done," said Robert.

"That's it?" James asked.

"You'll see," Robert replied and disappeared.

James decided to skip the lemonade with Janelle and the other volunteers. All he wanted was to go home, have a nice quiet dinner, and go to sleep. When he opened the door to the apartment where he lived with his mother, he heard loud voices arguing inside.

"Mom? Who's here?" he called.

His mother and father appeared in the living room. "Your father is here," his mother said with irritation. "He's decided to grace us with his presence for good this time."

When James went to bed, the argument was still going on. Okay, this wasn't exactly how he had imagined the reunion, but it seemed like Robert was real. More importantly, the wishes were real. James just wished he could shake off the nagging feeling that none of this was as simple as it seemed...