



Small kindnesses are everywhere, once you start looking—just like rainbows during the Covid-19 crisis.

Good Read

A Want for Nothing

IN HER LONGTIME NEIGHBORHOOD, J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN WAS THRILLED TO DISCOVER A NETWORK OF FRIENDLY STRANGERS GIVING THINGS AWAY FOR FREE.

ONE MORNING IN THE SPRING OF 2019, I visited my local Facebook group for Brooklyn moms and started to scroll. This had become a ritual. My son was almost 2 at the time. My daughter was 4 months old. First thing each day, bleary-eyed, I drank coffee and read posts about teething and sleep training and playgroups and private schools—a mix of helpful, encouraging advice and eye-roll-inducing privileged-people problems.

My feelings about the page reflected my ambivalence toward the neighborhood itself most days. I've lived in this part of New



York for two decades. I love the vibrancy, the walkability, the beautiful brownstones and the interesting people. But increasingly, I've resented the fact that my husband and I will never be able to afford to buy a home here. There are more Wall Street types on our block each year, fewer artists and creatives. Mom-and-pop shops have been replaced by bank branches or forced to close because of rent hikes, their storefronts left vacant. A lot of the quirkiness and heart seems to have gone out of the place.

City living can sometimes feel anonymous, lonely. But on that spring day, I read a post in my Facebook moms group asking for donations for a teenage mother in our community. A commenter told the woman who posted to try cross-posting in the local Buy Nothing group. I'd never heard of it, and, always willing to waste a bit more time on social media, I clicked over to check it out.

I learned that my neighborhood Buy Nothing group is part of the Buy Nothing Project, which was founded by two friends on Bainbridge Island, Washington, in 2013. There are now thousands of Buy Nothing groups around the world, with more than a million members.

The group's mission was stated on the Facebook page as follows: "We offer members a way to give and receive, share, lend, and express gratitude through a worldwide network of micro-local gift economies in which the true wealth is the web of connections formed between people who are real-life neighbors. Post anything you'd like to give away, lend, or share in this Buy Nothing community group. Ask for anything you'd like to receive for free or borrow."

I hit Join Group and was asked for my address. A few hours later, I was in. People were offering gently used toys, jewelry, furniture, books, puzzles, food items that were close to expiring or that they just didn't like enough to keep. There were requests too, and most had been fulfilled.

The first things I received from the group: a ride-on car, miniature bowling set, and toy truck for my son, all of which had already made the rounds of the group but still had plenty of life in them. The car and the bowling set were left out for me on a front porch; the truck was in a plastic bag, hanging from a door knocker. It felt a bit like a scavenger hunt, walking the familiar streets to retrieve these gifts, and each time I passed the homes where I'd gotten them in the coming weeks, I couldn't help smiling.

The first things I offered the group: a Robert Mueller devotional candle, which got me an invite to a weekly civics club meeting at our local ice cream parlor. And baby gear, lots of it, often for the expectant young woman mentioned in the Facebook post that had led me to Buy Nothing in the first place. The soon-to-be-born baby's grandmother came to collect it. We stood on my stoop and talked about how nervous she was for her son and his girlfriend. She told me they were having a girl. I told her that we should stay in touch, that whenever my daughter outgrew her clothing and toys, I would pass them along to her.

A couple of weeks later, the day before my husband's birthday, a woman posted an oversize "Happy Birthday" banner with a *Star Wars* motif, left over from a party she'd thrown for her son the previous weekend. It wasn't something I would ever buy, but my husband, like all middle-aged men, loves *Star Wars*, and I thought he'd get a kick out of it. I told her I'd pick it up while walking the dog that morning.

There is a complex of beautiful red brick buildings at the edge of our neighborhood, taller than all the others, with black wrought-iron porches and turrets. Visitors enter through high, locked gates leading into a central courtyard that cannot be seen from the street. I've always been curious about those buildings. It turned out the woman with the *Star Wars* banner lived in one.

It was a glorious, blue-sky day. I held my dog's leash in one hand and my coffee in the other. When we got buzzed in, the sight took my breath away: an expanse of green, green grass, dotted here and there with small, flowering trees. A treasure just a few blocks from my home that I'd never seen before. It was a simple thing, but it made my day.

That spring and summer, there were occasional Buy Nothing gatherings: a plant-clipping exchange, a potluck dinner. I gave and received in equal measure, packing up toys and clothes and books and so many other things. A mold that could press a monster face into a piece of toast. Eleven disposable fire hats. A Snoogle pregnancy pillow. Several tubes of peppermint foot cream I'd been persuaded to buy at a friend's Mary Kay party. For every item I didn't want, there was an individual eager to have it.

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Sometimes the interest in an item was overwhelming. Sometimes there were people in serious need of essentials. It made me realize what should have been obvious all along: Yes, there are people in my neighborhood with far greater resources than us, but there are also people with far, far less. We're lucky to be in the middle.

Part of the purpose of Buy Nothing is to keep items in rotation, instead of having them end up in a landfill. It's environmental sustainability in action. I've already passed all the toys and the *Star Wars* banner on to others. I let go of things easily now, knowing that they will be loved by someone else, and that there is always an abundance to be had. Being in this group has made me fall back in love with the place where I live. Getting to know my neighbors, pooling our resources, feels like an antidote to the greed and selfishness that too often tend to dominate modern life.

Buy Nothing lets you try things out that you otherwise probably wouldn't. Last August, my husband had the idea of bringing a plastic snow toboggan on vacation to Maine, as a means of hauling beach gear. We didn't have a plastic snow toboggan, or the room to store one, but a request on Buy Nothing to borrow one was met within minutes. The owner's only stipulation was that we take pictures and report back, because she might like to try it herself. I'll confess I was slightly mortified watching my husband load up that toboggan in the beach parking lot. But when we reached the sand and he effortlessly pulled it, heaped with chairs and pails and shovels and umbrellas, strangers actually cheered. I immediately texted photos to the toboggan's owner, and we wrote back and forth a bit, reveling in this small victory.

Much of the time, the group reminds me why I wanted to live in a place like New York to begin with: because it's full of creative, passionate, problem-solving oddballs.

In December, a man named Taylor posted the following: "Tomorrow (Sunday) I'll be going around the neighborhood snagging plastic bags out of trees with my homemade telescoping Snatchelator. Got a specific bag that's driving you nuts? Tell me where it is in a comment, and I'll do my best! About 28 feet is as high as I can reach."

He got 63 responses. Most people provided specific addresses and descriptions of the bags that were annoying them. Others offered praise. One person wanted to know what the Snatchelator was made of, and Taylor explained that it was an eight-foot telescoping pole from Lowe's with a paint roller hook at the end, around which he'd wrapped "a couple of mangled wire hangers to better snag the bags."

I regularly exchange text messages and photos with the grandmother who came to my door a year ago to collect gear for her granddaughter. Every couple of months, she comes over and I give her a big bag of baby clothes and books and toys. When I buy clothing for my daughter, or receive a clothing gift for her, I always imagine her wearing it, and I imagine this other beautiful baby wearing it too.

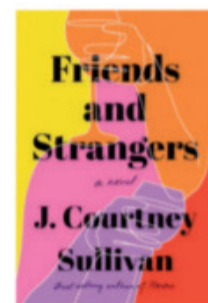
When the coronavirus descended on the city, the members of Buy Nothing sprang into action, donating their monthly subway passes to essential employees, offering gloves and masks and the use of apartments for medical workers who needed to go into quarantine away from their own families.

After hearing that children in Italy were hanging rainbows in their windows for others to see, a member of my Buy Nothing group suggested we do the same. And then she made a shareable map, where people could post addresses where they'd placed rainbows, making them easier to spot. The map is now in use all over the world.

I made a rainbow with my children one morning. The thing that's gotten me through the darkest parts of this dark time is looking out our window and, every so often, seeing a neighbor pointing up with a smile.

When Covid-19 was at its peak in New York, my Buy Nothing group put a stop to the exchange of items beyond those that would serve essential workers. It was seen as too dangerous to show up at one another's doors, or hand over objects on which the virus might live. The city came to a standstill, and that sense of interconnectedness with one's neighbors seemed to vanish with all the rest of it. New Yorkers are used to sharing space, bumping up against strangers. What we're not used to is keeping our distance.

But the numbers are on the decline, at least for now. Signs of normality are beginning to emerge. On the Buy Nothing page today, there is a set of dining chairs and a beautiful table. The promise that someday soon, we will gather again.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Courtney Sullivan is the best-selling author of five novels. Her latest, *Friends and Strangers*, was published in June.