

The Invisible People

I became aware of Lydia's extraordinary gift on our very first outing. Lydia had suggested we grab a cappuccino and have a mooch around the vintage shops a stone's throw from our shared student accommodation. So there we were, me on my two healthy legs and Lydia in her motorised wheelchair, moseying along Cowley Road on a warm September morning, when I discovered she sees the Invisible People.

When I say invisible, I'm not talking about ghosts or supernatural beings. Lydia's an Economics student. She's as rational as they come. What I mean is, she sees the people others don't want to see or acknowledge. The ones whose eye contact we avoid and walk past on the street. You know the ones. The homeless man sitting on the pavement outside Greggs with his faithful Alsatian. The Muslim lady selling *The Big Issue* in front of the Co-Op. The struggling artist who would gladly accept two quid for you to take one of the pencil sketches he's displayed on a tattered blanket.

Lydia sees them all. She speaks to them. Shares stories with them. Asks them about their families. Listens to them talk about their experiences. *Actually* listens with keen interest, in the same way you might listen to the Queen's Christmas message. And for those few minutes they've got Lydia's full attention, these people come to life. Eyes brighten and smiles broaden. Their posture changes. They are no longer invisible, because they know they are being seen.

'Who's the extra cappuccino for?' I asked as we were exiting the Corner Brew.

'William,' Lydia answered, as if I should know who he is.

'Who?'

'You know that guy who's always at the fountain playing Bruno Mars songs on his guitar?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'William used to be a studio musician for Oasis, if you can believe that. But then his mum got cancer, and he had to move back to some tiny, mining village in Wales to take care of her. He never got his life back on track after his mum died.'

'How sad.'

'It really is. Anyway, William loves coffee, so I bring him one now and then. And in return, he plays whatever song I ask him to. Provided it's a Beatles or John Lennon tune.'

'Why do you do it?' I asked her.

Lydia came to a full stop. 'Why do I do what?'

‘Talk to these people. Befriend them.’

She looked up at me with her round, blue-grey eyes. ‘I’ve been in a wheelchair since I was eight years old, and I noticed even back then that people rarely looked my way, because, Well, I don’t know why. Fear, maybe? Guilt? Sympathy? I didn’t want to become invisible myself, so I started smiling at and greeting everyone I met on the street. To make them see a clever, friendly girl in a wheelchair. So, to answer your question, I guess I befriend them because I know everyone wants to be seen.’