

## Just One

I'm sitting in the back of the car, feet propped up on the seat in front of me. As we near the bridge, my mom rolls down the window before throwing her emptied coffee cup into the river. I won't remember this moment. I won't see any significance in such a simple action.

Why would I?



I lean against the wall of the school before the day starts, just as I always have. When the warning bell rings, I turn and spit my gum over my shoulder and into the grass before yanking open the door and heading inside. I walk up the stairs to the second floor, finding my classroom on the left just as I was instructed and sitting down at an empty table close to the front.

"Ava?" I glance up at the sound of my name, taking in the teacher at his desk, scanning the room for me.

"Here," I say, waving my hand a little to get his attention. He looks towards me and smiles before moving on with the list. I recognize every name he says from my grade 9 classes except one, a new boy near the back of the room who timidly raises his hand after the teacher calls, "Kai?" His floppy black hair falls over his eyes, which stare down at the ground through his glasses. He doesn't speak for the rest of the lesson, and when I think back, he didn't even say "here" during attendance.



We all thought he didn't talk. We had no evidence to prove otherwise, until one morning, a few weeks into school. I lean against the wall, chewing gum. This time, Kai is outside too. He stands by the wall on the other side of the doors, predictably looking down. I ignore him until the warning bell rings, signalling five minutes until class and my time to head inside. Then I step forward and spit my gum, which has long since lost flavour, into the grass. I turn and walk towards the doors, only to notice that Kai's eyes are no longer trained on the floor like they usually are. Instead, he stares at me like I'm crazy. I'm surprised by the intensity of his gaze, sputtering a moment before managing, "What?" He seems to only realize then that he's been staring at me, and his cheeks flush. But then he says quietly, "You spat your gum out... on the ground."

Now I'm the one who's shocked. "So?" I snap. "It's just one piece of gum. No one cares."

I vaguely remember being told this once as a child, the first time I watched a coffee cup fly from our car. But I shake off the feeling and instead watch Kai struggle to find a response.

"It's still litter. Over one million animals die every year because of it," he counters. For such a quiet kid, I'm surprised he had the nerve to reply. But either way, I don't care what he thinks.

"Whatever, Kai," I say. Just to annoy him, I take a mint from my pocket, tossing the packaging into the wind before heading inside. As the door closes behind me, I glance over my shoulder. And I could've sworn he was crouching down, picking the wrapper up for me.



When I get home, I can't stop thinking about his expression when he saw me "litter".

"It's just *one* piece of gum," I say again. I'm not sure why I need to remind myself of this.

"*Dinnertime!*" my mom yells from downstairs. I shake myself and head down, pushing those thoughts to the back of my mind. My parents and I sit around the table and I serve myself a bowl of pasta, not blinking twice when my dad throws a few disposable utensils on the table for us to use. I knot my long, straight brown hair up out of the way before grabbing a fork and knife, feeling the familiar light weight of them in my hands.

"How was school today, honey?" my mom asks. "Make any new friends?" I've always kept to myself, and she knows it, but she still asks at least once a week.

"Same as always, mom," I say between bites.

"Hmm," she replies, clearly dissatisfied with my lack of response. But I've become distracted by the view out our dining room window – a teenage boy walking up the neighbouring driveway, holding the hand of a little girl who must be his younger sister. It takes everything in me not to groan.

"I see you've noticed the new neighbours," my dad comments. "Moved in a week ago. The son goes to your school, right?" I stab my fork into my food using more force than is probably necessary.

"I wouldn't know," I lie. But seriously, Kai is my new neighbour?

"Messy-looking house," my mom adds. I glance out the window again, taking in the bright sunlight bouncing off of the solar-panel-covered roof and the plants bursting out of window boxes. It's not what I would've pictured from Kai, really, but I can see why my parents dislike it. They're far more... materialistic. We pass through the rest of the meal in relative silence, and only after I've returned to my room do I realize I'd succeeded in not thinking about throwing out the cutlery.



At lunch the next day, I take my things outside and sit down at one of the many picnic tables dotting the schoolyard. I pull out my recently acquired math homework and a crumpled plastic bottle, setting them down on the table before starting on a problem.

"18 students helped to clean up a beach, and collected 90 pounds of litter," I read incredulously. I heave a sigh, wondering why this keeps popping up before continuing, "They were split into three groups; A, B, and C. Group A collected two times as much as B, and C collected five pounds less than A. How much litter did each group collect?" I set to work on the exercise, trying to ignore the context, and before long I've finished the package. I shove my binder back into my overstuffed backpack, zipping it up and pulling it over my shoulder. I take the last sip of my water and move to toss the bottle to the ground. It's nearly left my fingers when a hand grabs my wrist. I turn in surprise, and my eyes catch on wavy black hair and round glasses.

"*Seriously?*" I scoff. "When are you going to stop playing garbage patrol?" Kai wordlessly guides my arm to a sorting bin about a foot away. I let the bottle drop in the recycling section, shocked I'd never noticed it before. He lets go of my wrist then, stepping back and smiling faintly.

"When I stop needing to," he replies. I roll my eyes and stand up from the table.

"You *don't* need to," I snap. "I didn't ask for you to follow me around and pick up after me. Why do you care so much anyway?" He blinks and I get the feeling that I've hurt him. *It doesn't matter*, I force myself to remember, and I can't help but think, *it's just one piece of gum*. But when I study Kai's face, I can tell that nothing about this is 'just' something to him.

"My mom always loved seafood," he begins. "Oysters, lobster, shrimp, fish – you name it. She was such a healthy person..." he trails off and swallows. "Until she started experiencing pain in her stomach, and she got tired quicker, and she was losing weight.... They found out she had cancer in her liver. The doctors never knew the 'real' cause, but there were signs of chemical damage in her organs. It–it was likely because of the plastics that were in the seafood." His voice had grown so quiet I barely heard his last words. "She passed away last year because of it." I'm faintly aware of the fact that my mouth had fallen open at some point during his story, but I can't seem to remember how to close it.

"I..." I choke out. "I'm so sorry... for your loss, for everything." He smiles sadly and looks down at his feet, but this time, it's not out of shyness.

"That's alright. It's not your fault," he says. But deep down, I know it is. Not this specific case, maybe – but this time I can't push this away. My family has

been carelessly littering our whole lives. Coffee cups, candy wrappers, plastic bottles. And someone could have *died* because of it.



For the first time on my daily drive to school, I start to notice things. I notice solar panels and green space on more houses than just Kai's. I spot a few classmates going by on the sidewalk, and now that I'm really paying attention, I realize just how many fewer cars there are on the road than there used to be. I discover a community garden not far from our house, where people are picking fresh vegetables rather than buying them tucked in plastic bags like we do at the grocery store. I realize now just how hard everyone else is trying to deal with climate change – and how they can't afford having people like us.

Because more than anything, I see the litter. It's everywhere – burrowed in the grass, jammed in gutters, and drifting on the wind. It speckles the land like a flock of birds, following me everywhere. I'm suddenly overtaken by the desire to reach out of the car and whisk away each piece we pass. *How much of that is because of us? I wonder. Because of me?* When I arrive at school Kai is leaning against the wall again, the same place he was the first time he watched me litter. *It was never just one piece of gum, I realize. I was spitting it out on the ground nearly every day. And what if everyone made the same excuse as me?* I'm struck by the sudden thought – that would mean at least eight billion added pieces of litter per day. And when my mom goes to discard her coffee cup, I can't help myself.

"Wait!" I cry from the back. My mom looks up at me through the rearview mirror.

"Yes?" she asks.

"Maybe you should just... throw it out at home," I mumble. She narrows her eyes at me.

"What's the difference?" And she tosses the cup.



"Then she glares at me, says, 'What's the difference?' and throws it out anyways!" I whisper.

"Oh, don't go too hard on her," Kai mutters back. "You weren't all that different before you talked to me." I glare at him and he smirks in response. We're sitting at the back of the class, pretending to be interested in the work in front of us.

"So how do I change her mind?" I ask.

"Just... do things every day that make her see the difference. And hopefully she'll come around eventually."

"Hopefully," I agree. "And... Kai? Thank you." He smiles, and it's so different from the expression he wore on the first day of school.

"My pleasure, Ava."



That morning, I stand on tiptoes and rummage through the cabinet, eventually finding what I'm looking for hidden somewhere near the back. I stare at the warped, run down metal bottle in my hands, wondering how many plastic ones I could have replaced with it. Wondering how many animals – or people – died because I didn't. *Starting now, that changes*, I think. So when my mom walks over to me, car key and coffee cup in one hand and a plastic water bottle in the other, I say, "I think I'll take my bike today." She raises her eyebrows and holds the plastic bottle out to me. I look her straight in the eyes, show her the metal one, and say,

"Thanks, but I've already got my own."