

Parking Lots

Stella's Tesla slid into her parking stall noiselessly. Upon getting out from her car, she was met with the open-mouthed underclassmen and her stone-faced peers, but her forward-trained eyes blurred everyone into her periphery. As she ascended the steps to her school, her discounted canvas shoes tap-tapped on the aged concrete in time with the twenty-five-dollar backpack bouncing on her tailbone. Outside of the parking lot, the only thing that set Stella apart from her peers was the diamond ring she wore around her neck.

She found Mari and three of her friends in the cafeteria, along with a couple of girls she knew only by name.

"I'm not looking forward to trig today," Mari said, as Stella sat beside her, "I don't need proof that I bombed that test."

"Awww, it's ok, Mari," Stella said, "At least you did pretty well on the quizzes."

"Yeah, but those are barely a quarter of our grade," Amber, Mari's childhood friend, interjected, "And don't worry, Mari, I'm pretty sure everybody did bad. Maybe he'll curve the grades."

"I wouldn't count on it. There's always that *one* person who gets an A and sets the curve," one of the other girls, Brie, chimed in, glancing at Stella.

Stella dropped her gaze. Mari bit her lip.

"Must be nice to ace every test without trying."

Stella's cheeks glowed scarlet and Mari's brow furrowed, but the bell's shrill ring cut down the words about to come out of her mouth. The group bade each other their good-byes and Mari walked alongside Stella to the exit.

"Don't listen to her," Mari said, "Everyone knows you actually work hard for your grades. You're probably one of the only people who doesn't cheat and still manages to get A's."

Stella smiled at her friend. "Thanks. I just don't know where people get these ideas from."

"People make up whatever they want to make themselves feel better, I guess."

"The problem is that they believe it."

The midday sun beamed down upon the parking lot, the asphalt rippling with heat. Stella placed her groceries in the trunk as if they were fiery coals, anxious to escape to the air-conditioned oasis of her car. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw an older man shuffling his way through the parking lot. His clothes clung to his body like wet seaweed, his shoes were a conglomerate of duct tape and canvas, and thin, white hairs stood upon his glistening forehead like naked trees after a forest fire. He hobbled along with a crooked, tarnished cane, balancing bags of groceries upon his twig-like arms. Without hesitation, Stella went over to him.

“Hi, sir. Do you need some help?”

“Oh, no, it’s ok. I wouldn’t want to trouble you. Thank you, though.”

The man kept limping away, teetering and tottering under the weight of his load.

Looking back longingly at her car, imploring her conscience to allow her to be satisfied with her efforts, she sighed and caught up to him.

“Please,” she said, starting to take one of the bags off his forearm, “Let me help you.”

The man looked up at her with shining eyes, blue as the cloudless sky. He studied her briefly, then conceded. They walked side by side through the aisles of melting cars, and at the end of the parking lot, he stopped.

“Thank you, but I can take it from here,” the man rasped.

“It’s ok. I don’t mind walking to a bus stop or something.”

“No, no, it’s quite alright. I live a ways away from here, and I’m sure your parents are expecting you home soon.”

“Nah, no one’s home today. Really, sir, I’m happy to help you, wherever you need to go.”

She opened her mouth to say, “We can even take my car, if you like,” but the thought of his sweat seeping into her pristine upholstery stopped her. The words were swallowed along with her shame.

The man examined her. “Look, let me be frank. I’m homeless. I live at a park three blocks from here, at the moment. I appreciate your help, but I’m sure a nice girl like you has better things to do than help an old homeless man.”

Stella’s shoulders slumped, her brow furrowing in consternation. Of course she had things to do; there were always things to do. But the thought of the man precariously meandering along in the suffocating heat, carrying half his body weight in groceries, gripped her gut with an iron fist.

“Thank you for being so considerate, sir, but I want to help you.”

The man smiled. Together, they made their way toward the park.

Since that sweltering day, Stella went to see the man every Wednesday and Saturday. His name was Fredrick, she learned, a retired veteran, displaced when a fire consumed his apartment. A widower and only child, thousands of miles away from his hometown, he had no friends or family to call upon; his only companion was a dog named Churro. He struggled to find work, spending hours of every day scouring for openings, often to no avail. Stella brought food every other week, and she was trying to convince Fredrick to also accept the clothes she brought him, but after nearly a decade of being met with nothing but tribulation, indifference, and criticism, accepting help was like tearing out handfuls of his already meager hair. So Stella took things slow.

On this particular Wednesday, Stella was waiting for Mari in the library. Mari was the only one she'd told about Fredrick, and Mari's curiosity prompted her to ask Stella for an introduction. Stella was hunched over her history textbook like a feeding flamingo, paying no heed to the people sitting down a few tables behind her, until she heard Brie's voice.

"Why are you still friends with her, Mari?" Brie sneered under her breath, "Do you get an expensive present every year or something? Has she promised you a senior trip to Bora Bora?"

"Brie, can we not talk about this? Just give me the poster."

"Look, I don't think you get it. I'm trying to help you. Stella is the most fake, irritating, worthless person I know. Waltzing around with her Tesla and diamonds, acting all humble when she really thinks she's better than everybody. You don't *have* to be friends with her."

"Excuse me, that diamond is her grandma's wedding ring. Stella bought it with her own money when her grandma lost her setting, shortly before she passed away, so you better watch what you say."

Brie rolled her eyes, "See, this is exactly what I mean. She probably got that money off her parents or something. She doesn't work hard for anything. I wouldn't doubt it if she bribes her way into Harvard at the end of the year, and the worst part is that everyone would think it's legit because she's just *naturally* smart. That girl has everything handed to her and you just won't see it."

"Brie, I'm done talking to you about this, ok? You can hate her all you want but don't tell me who I should and shouldn't be friends with."

"But you could have so many more friends if you just ditched that--"

In the heat of the conversation, Stella had turned around and stared at Brie. Her ears were burning red, white knuckles protruding from her clenched fists, tears distorting her vision. Mari turned to see Stella walking up to their table, stopping midway between Brie and Mari. Words of anger scorched the back of her throat, knives ready to be projected out of her quivering mouth, but instead she said, "Are you ready to go, Mari?"

Brie handed Mari the poster for their group project wordlessly, Mari snatching it and following Stella out of the library.

Once they were in the parking lot, Mari asked, "What did you hear?"

"Everything."

Months later, Brie's words still rampaged through Stella's thoughts. Stella now heard her name in every whisper, accompanied with "rich," "fake," "worthless." Those words echoed in her mind whenever she looked in the mirror, and then she reprimanded herself for crying. After almost a month, she started hearing the insults in her own voice.

No one knew about it but Mari, but both her parents and Fredrick refused to believe her when she said "I'm ok." One Saturday, he finally asked her.

"Stella, what's wrong? Really?"

At first, Stella said nothing, petting Churro as a diversion. But Fredrick would not give up.

“You can’t bottle your feelings forever; you’re going to poison yourself. It’s ok if you’re not ready now, but you have to get it out sometime.”

“It’s just something some girl said at school, no big deal.”

“Well, it’s clearly a big deal to you,” he said gently.

Stella sighed. The last thing she wanted was to burden Fredrick -- a man who had known real pain -- with her childish problems, but the kindness in his voice implored her to confide in him. The incessant ache in her chest begged to be remedied.

“She... she said I’m worthless. That because I’m rich and smart I don’t have any problems or work hard for anything or do anything of value. I don’t matter, I’m just a--”

Her voice caught and she hiccupped, marble-like tears marking her face. Verbalizing the thoughts that ran through her head like a hamster in a wheel made them real, and she was crushed under the weight of their reality. Stella turned away from her aged friend, trying to focus on her hand stroking Churro’s matted fur. She could feel Fredrick’s piercing eyes on her, his gaze making her want to compress into a ball and disappear. They stayed frozen like that for what felt like eons.

“I’ve lived a long time” he said finally, “And one of the most important things I’ve learned is that once you know your worth, it doesn’t matter what anyone else says. That doesn’t mean what people say won’t hurt. It just means that, when you look at yourself, you can say, ‘I’m not perfect, not everyone’s going to like me, but I’m proud of who I am and I’m going to keep becoming a better person.’”

Stella said nothing. Her gaze did not leave Churro, the steady rise and fall of his side. Even when she wasn’t looking at him, somehow, Frederick could read her thoughts.

“What’re you thinking?”

“But-” Stella sighed, “How do you know? How do you know you’re worth something when everyone seems to be saying you’re not?”

He exhaled slowly. “Well, you’re a smart girl with a bright future, helping me, an old man with no future. I have nothing to give you, and if I died tomorrow you would have nothing to show for all the hours you’ve spent helping me. But you do it anyway. I’d say that’s worth something.”

Stella looked at him. Frederick truly had nothing, nothing but the clothes he’d been wearing for the past decade, the few scraggly hairs on his head, and the scrawny dog sleeping on the floor. To everyone else, he was just another homeless man beyond hope. But to her, no sum of money could buy those words. After being told again and again that her friends were bought, not earned; that all her abilities should be credited to talent, not training; that she had never known, and never would know, pain or suffering because she could just buy happiness; that she could never take credit for climbing the ladder of success because she’d been born at the top, Stella finally believed, truly believed, that they were wrong. And it didn’t take accolades,

scholarships, or prizes to get her to realize it. All it took was a choice to help a downtrodden man carry his groceries to a strip of grass he called home.