

ASKiNG FOR A FRiEND

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Mom's late.

She's always running from one thing to the other, barely getting anything done in time. But it means I have about fifteen minutes to hang around the school until she gets here, so after the final bell rings, I stand at my locker. Wishing for the millionth time I could be small enough to step inside it until everyone leaves for the day, I try to tune it all out.

"Oh my god, why won't she text me back?" someone cries.

Laughter, squealing, and someone shouting for their friend to "Go long!" as they throw a football down the hall . . . It's too much.

My chest pounds until I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. I close my eyes and try to run through the list of things in the "toolbox" my last therapist gave me. The only thing I can think of is the breathing technique.

Inhale . . . hold . . . exhale . . . hold . . . over and over again until the noise around me is almost completely gone. Relief fills me when I open my eyes to see that most of the hallway is empty now.

I shut my locker, check the time—that was the longest three

minutes of my life—and head down the hall toward Ms. Barnes’s classroom. I figure I’ll use the extra time to talk to her about my history homework. I poke my head into her room and see that she’s with a student already. A white girl with pink-and-purple hair—Ramona Augustus.

Hovering awkwardly near the doorway, I don’t know what to do. Should I talk to Ms. Barnes tomorrow or should I wait here?

“I’ll be right with you, Eden,” Ms. Barnes says when she notices me.

I nod, hugging my binder to my chest, and step back into the hall.

A minute later, Ramona comes stomping out of the room. I open my mouth as if I’m going to say something, but nothing comes out. I catch a glimpse of hair dye on her forehead as she storms down the hallway, and I don’t think she even saw me standing there, jaw slightly agape. She turns the corner, out of sight.

“Eden?” Ms. Barnes calls out, and I jerk back.

My homework. Right. I step into her classroom and tentatively say, “I have a few questions . . .”

“Come in,” she says, waving me up to her desk. We go over my questions—I had made a list during science class—and then she surprises me by asking, “Did you want to ask these in class?”

“What—what do you mean?” I sputter.

“Well, they’re great questions. Very insightful. They

might help someone else if you ask them tomorrow in class and—”

Oh. She wants me to *participate*. I’m always getting “encouraging” comments like that on my report cards. I shift on my feet, untucking a piece of my hair from behind my ear. I wish adults understood that talking in class isn’t easy for people like me. I shake my head, hoping she’ll let it go.

“How about this,” she says. “I’d like to see you attempt to ask at least *one* of these questions tomorrow.”

“I’ll try,” I say, knowing already that it’ll be almost impossible for me. I barely manage to get my hand in the air when I have to really go to the bathroom. I’d rather hold it until the break, even if it physically hurts. Asking a question that might make me look like I don’t understand? No, thank you.

Ms. Barnes narrows her blue eyes at me, and I think she’s starting to get that no matter how hard she pushes me, I won’t be able to.

I politely excuse myself after shoving my binder into my backpack and rush out of her room as if she’ll chase me down until I agree to raise my hand in class. I know she wouldn’t, but the image is enough to have me in a near-run to the closest exit.

One look at my phone tells me that Mom won’t be here for another five minutes, so once outside, I settle on the bench closest to the drop-off/pick-up area.

“Hey!”

I blink at the sound of the voice and look over to see that the person is, indeed, talking to me. My lips part, but no response comes out.

I guess that's enough for Duke Herrera to keep talking, though.

"Can I sit here too?"

"Um, sure," I manage.

It's weird that he asked to sit down. Normally no one notices me long enough to recognize that I'm here. I've worked on multiple projects with people who ask me what my name is again. It's so embarrassing to reintroduce myself to someone I know. I always wish the world would open up and swallow me whole.

Duke is one of those kids who never acknowledges me. He's from one of the few Filipino families in our very-white, very-cisgender, very-heterosexual school, and he and I worked on a project together last month. He was kind enough to me that I thought maybe we'd become friends, but as soon as we handed our paper in, he went back to ignoring my existence. Normal people would've felt disappointed, but I was numb to the feeling. I'd thought maybe things would be different here. I shouldn't have ever gotten my hopes up.

I'm back to requesting to work alone, and sometimes it's allowed. Ms. Barnes is letting me do the history homework alone, despite most people being in groups of three. I'm

grateful . . . even if she wants me to make a fool out of myself by participating tomorrow.

We sit beside each other, not speaking, until Duke asks, “Do you need a ride home? My brother’s late, but we could drive you.”

“Um,” I hesitate. “No, that’s okay. My mom’s picking me up.”

“Okay, cool.”

I catch Duke looking at my backpack and shift it so he can’t see my buttons. Hopefully he doesn’t know what the flags mean. Most people don’t. I also hope he didn’t catch a glimpse of my pronoun button.

He breathes out slowly, rubbing his hands together. “Getting chilly, huh?”

I glance at him. We’re the only ones left hanging around, both waiting for our rides, so he’s definitely talking to me.

“Should’ve worn a sweater,” I answer, and I’m not entirely sure where it comes from.

Duke laughs. “You’re not wrong. I like yours, though.”

I look at him now to see if he’s teasing me, but he relaxes back against the bench and gives me an easy-looking smile. Like this interaction isn’t taking all his strength.

“Um. Thanks. My mom got it for me.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, cringing. *My mom got it for me?* That’s a ridiculous thing to say.

“Cool.” Duke points to his T-shirt with the logo of the Toronto Raptors on it. “My grandmother got me this shirt.”

But I don't know what to say to him, so I echo his reaction.
"Cool."

He doesn't seem to mind.

I've played this scenario out many times, talking with Duke casually as if we're friends, but it's so much harder to speak than I thought. I imagined a new school would somehow be easier, a fresh start, but it wasn't.

This school *has to* stick. I am not going to make Mom worry about her socially anxious kid anymore. She uprooted her entire life and started over for me already. Once is enough. This is a fresh start until high school next year.

I close my eyes, the cool air striking my cheeks.

The familiar honk of our old Kia Rio startles me back into reality. Mom sits in the driver's seat with a bright smile.

"Um," I say as I stand up. "Bye."

Duke looks a little surprised but smiles and waves. "See ya."

Mom leans over to open the passenger door while I walk over with my backpack hanging off one shoulder.

"Howdy, kiddo," she says in lieu of a normal greeting.

I roll my eyes. "Hi, Mom."

"Is that one of your friends?" Mom asks, craning around me to look at Duke sitting on the bench.

"Uh," I hesitate. "No."

"Oh," Mom says, looking out the window. Duke catches us

looking and waves. "Seems friendly. Who are they?"

"Um," I say, scrambling to think of what I could say. My mind is blank. *Crap*. "Sorry, I don't know why I said no. That's Duke."

"Does he need a ride home?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No, his brother's picking him up."

"Are you sure? It wouldn't be a problem," she says, pausing before putting down the window. Mom calls out to Duke, "Hi, honey, do you want a ride home?"

"Mom!" I hiss quietly.

"No, it's okay, my brother's picking me up!" he calls back.

Mom yells, "We'll just wait here until your brother comes, then!"

"Mom!" I huff. Quietly, so Duke doesn't hear me, I say, "He's fine. He doesn't need us hanging around."

"Thanks, Ms. Jones! He's just pulling in now!" Duke shouts over the wind.

Mom gives him a thumbs-up, looks back to confirm that a truck is there for Duke, and then starts to pull out of the school driveway.

"So embarrassing," I mutter.

"I couldn't just *leave* him. I wouldn't want some other parent to leave you sitting there alone."

I don't bother pointing out that I sit there alone most days she offers to pick me up because she's usually late.

"So that was Duke!"

"Um. Yeah."

"Cute kid," Mom says. "Very polite. Must make him a good friend, then, yes?"

I choke on an awkward cough. "Yeah, he is."

"So, how's my favorite kid today?" Mom asks.

"I'm your only kid," I point out.

"That you're aware of," she jokes. My eyes widen and she laughs softly. "Oh, don't worry. You're my only kid, Eden. So, tell me about your day?"

She seems to be in an awfully good mood, so I can't help but wonder why.

"It was good," I answer, shrugging. "Nothing unusual."

"Oh, c'mon, I want to know more than that!" Mom protests. "You know the deal."

I swallow, but a lump grows in my throat. When I begged her to switch schools and said a fresh start was all I needed, Mom said, *"Let's make a deal: If things aren't working out, you don't wait until they blow up to tell me. I want you to be honest about how you're doing every day, okay? Even if it's hard."*

I agreed, but then again, I would have agreed to almost anything to get out of my last school. I fidget with the hem of my burgundy sweater, panicking. I search my memory for things to tell her. "It was fine, really. Ramona re-dyed her hair last night on her own, so she still had some hair dye on her forehead. And

Tabitha got in trouble with Ms. Barnes for talking in class . . .”

Both things are true.

“And Duke hung out with us at lunch instead of his basketball bros,” I continue, my grip tightening on the hem of my sweater. “He told us a really funny story about his older brother—the one who was picking him up today.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who runs late, and that you had a friend to hang out with,” Mom says cheerfully.

“I guess, ha.” I look out the window, my mind racing. I’m desperate to switch topics. “How are you? How was work?”

“Oh! I got great news,” Mom says, grinning. “Wanna hear?”

“Mhm,” I say, partly interested, partly worried. This must be why she seems so happy today.

“I was approved for a weekend off,” Mom says, almost giddy now. She wiggles her eyebrows at me when we come to a stop at a red light. “Specifically your birthday next month.”

“Oh! That’s awesome,” I say, smiling, because any time spent with Mom is great.

It’s just us against the world, and I can’t imagine it any other way. I turn to study her profile now; her porcelain skin glimmers in the afternoon light. Her graying hair is pulled back straight into a tight ponytail as always. It’s her usual look for the twenty-four-hour diner where she works.

Not once in my twelve years have I ever seen her dress up. She tells me it’s not her thing, but I know it’s because our funds

are limited. She works hard to pay for everything, especially since my biological father isn't helping with the bills. He was some guy who made pretty promises and broke them all—at least that's what Mom says. Last I heard, he ended up in jail and asked Mom for money. She said no over and over—and I only know this because I heard half the conversation from the top of the stairs while they were on the phone.

She does *everything* for me.

And never takes weekends off.

"I thought tips are better on the weekends," I say, wondering if we can afford a weekend off from the diner. The move to Middleton wasn't cheap—I saw the credit card bills stacked up last week.

"Yes, but it's my kid's thirteenth birthday. I can't miss that," Mom says, reaching out and grabbing my hand. She squeezes it gently. "Besides, I thought I could throw you a birthday party. We can celebrate with your new friends."

I almost choke while inhaling. Pretending that my nose is itchy, I slip my hand out of hers. "Uh, yeah. Okay."

Okay? This isn't okay. This is far from okay.

But what else can I say?

"Yay! Aren't you excited?" Mom asks, grinning widely.

I plaster a smile onto my face, even if everything in me is screaming not to, and nod my head. "Yeah. Yeah, super excited."

Looking out the window, I catch my reflection in the side

mirror. The panic shows on my face, so I attempt to adjust my expression until it's calm and neutral.

Mom squeezes my knee briefly before turning down our street. "You okay, kiddo?"

"I'm fine, but, um, Mom . . . we'll probably just go to Duke's to celebrate. It's our spot, y'know?" I say, and I don't dare look over to see the disappointment on her face. "It's not a big deal, okay? I really, *really* don't want to do anything for my birthday."

"It's your *thirteenth* birthday, Eden," Mom says, and I can hear the frustration in her tone. "We've never really celebrated your birthday with your friends before."

I almost laugh—I've never had *friends* before. A friend, yes. But *friends*, no.

She continues. "I want to have a big party this time."

"Can we afford it?" I ask. I try not to make Mom feel guilty about money things, but I don't know how to get out of this any other way.

"You let me worry about that—but for your information, we can. I've been budgeting."

I wish she hadn't been.

"We'll pick up some treats and a cake from Mama's Bakery on Division Street. Order in some pizza and wings. Your friends can even stay the night—you can hang out in the living room," Mom continues. "Besides, I want to thank the kids

for being so welcoming to you. I know you haven't had the easiest time in school, but I can tell this time is different."

"I—"

But there's no way out of this. I can't tell Mom the truth, and I'm not going to win this battle. I can hear the determination and excitement in her voice. There's no way I can break her heart now.

"Okay," I hear myself say. "I'll let them know."

We pull into the driveway of our small house. Mom has to work at the diner tonight, so she drops me off with a quick hug in the front seat. Then I'm dashing into the house, up into my room, to flop onto my bed. I pull a pillow over my face.

Everything's a giant mess.

I don't know what I was thinking. That somehow I'd make it through to high school with this lie? That I could eventually say we drifted apart or something?

I should've seen this coming, but it's happening too soon. We've never made a big deal about birthdays before, so I assumed my thirteenth would be like any other.

How do I begin to tell Mom that while Ramona, Duke, and Tabitha are real people at my school . . . they're not my friends?

That I've been lying about us hanging out for the past month?

That all my stories are made up?

That I don't really have any friends at all?