

Being Kind

By Addy Moore

Sam groaned under the weight of her backpack, plopping down on the bench next to Victoria.

“What?” Victoria asked as she brushed her long, dark hair out of her face. She didn’t look up from her phone.

“Yeah,” Sam replied, setting her lunch tray on her lap. “I was awake too long last night doing homework.”

“Me too. I’m so scared for the test.”

“What test?”

“We have a chemistry test today.”

“Oh. I’ll just wing it like I always do,” Sam replied with a new nervousness. She knew her grades were fine, but the stigma that came with tests always made her especially anxious. She nibbled a French fry and listened to Victoria ramble on about Matt, the kid who sat next to her in Spanish class.

Sam’s mind wandered to the first day of school, when she met Victoria. Neither of them had had any friends during their lunch period, so they had introduced themselves and had been sitting next to each other since. Sam wouldn’t say that Victoria was her best friend, though. She was kind to Sam, but seemed shallow and oblivious. The last few weeks, Sam had honestly dreaded sitting by her because she was tired of hearing Victoria’s daily monologue of the new guy she was dating or which of her friends was being selfish. Sam knew she should be attentive, but it was exhausting keeping up with it all.

Suddenly, Sam realized that it had grown uncomfortably quiet. Victoria had stopped talking, and her brown eyes were now staring at her inquisitively. Did she ask her a question? Sam hadn’t been paying attention, and the room was silent in anticipation.

Actually, that was incredibly strange. The entire lunchroom, normally rowdy and boisterous, was not eerily quiet. It was as if everyone had frozen in place; no one moved or said anything. People were stuck with slices of pizza halfway to their mouths or midway through telling a funny story. Sam glanced

back at Victoria and waved her hand back and forth, but it did nothing to break Victoria's unblinking gaze.

Sam got up and started walking towards the door and found that somehow, the hallway had completely changed into a large, gray room with a low ceiling and no interesting features. The linoleum floors were the same neutral shade as the walls and ceiling, and Sam found the monotony uncomfortable. She glanced behind her and found, to her dismay, that the door that led back into the cafeteria had disappeared; she was trapped.

Sam took a deep breath and was inevitably startled when a voice rang out in the room.

"Hello, Sam."

"Hello," she announced with fake confidence. She spun around, but the room was still empty. Sam wondered where the voice was coming from. "Who are you?"

"Tell me what happened with your friend, Sam." The voice was gentle, but it had a stern tone that made her feel like she was being scolded. As it spoke, the color of the room changed from gray to an iridescent yellow, which was much more pleasing to look at.

"What happened? Can I go back to lunch, please?" Sam didn't want to be interrogated, and she was still hungry.

"No, not until you tell me what happened with your friend."

"Victoria's not really my friend," Sam objected. "We just sit together."

"Sam, have you been kind to her?"

"Why are you asking all of these questions? Of course I've been nice to her. I'm a good friend." Sam couldn't believe what was happening. Why on earth was she being interrogated about a random conversation she had during lunch?

"I thought Victoria wasn't your friend."

"Well, that's not what I meant," Sam replied hastily. The walls began to turn dark red, mirroring the turmoil inside of her and how she could hear her blood thumping in her ears. She stumbled over her words. "What I meant to say was that I...I'm kind to people, and I listen to what they have to say."

“Oh, do you?” The voice had lost its tenderness. “You weren’t listening to her. You don’t even remember what she was talking about.”

Sam sat in silence for a second before acknowledging, “No, I don’t.”

“Did you even try to listen?”

“No.” Her growing discomfort was almost tangible. The room changed color a final time, now to sky blue. It did nothing to calm Sam; she was irritated by how something so simple could upset her so much, but more importantly, she was irritated with herself. Why had she been so rude to someone who hadn’t done anything wrong? Sam found herself wishing for another chance.

“Being kind to people isn’t synonymous with sitting with them at lunch. It means to be there for them through their highs and lows. It means to help them with whatever they need. It means to be empathetic. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.” Guilt gnawed at Sam’s stomach. She had approached Victoria knowing that she didn’t care. She had had no intention of listening. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t tell me that. Show Victoria that you care about her. I’ve already had a talk with her about how she often talks only of herself, so I hope that you to can become true friends someday.”

Sam realized what the voice had just said. “Wait, what?”

With a jolt, Sam was back in her seat on the bench next to Victoria. Sam realized with relief that the cafeteria was back to its usual cacophony. Victoria blinked a few times, looked around, then turned to Sam awkwardly.

“So...how was your weekend?” she asked slowly, as if it were unfamiliar to her.

“It was okay. I went to my grandparents’ house for dinner Saturday night,” Sam replied. “Thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome,” Victoria offered.

They sat in silence for several seconds before Sam inquired, “So, tell me what happened with that one guy, Keith. You know, the one on the soccer team?”

Victoria launched into a long explanation, and Sam vowed to listen each and every time.

