

AURORA

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My eyes drooped like heavy sandbags, making it difficult to focus on the tiny woman at the front of the room. She was going on and on about some equation or another, I wasn't really sure. All I knew was that time was going by way too slowly.

"And remember to plug x here," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Every semester, someone forgets to plug x here—"

I stopped listening, ducking my head to hide a yawn. Dear God. I started scribbling 'bored' over and over again on my notebook, wondering why out of all the places in the world that I could be, I was there. Health insurance, I answered in my scribbles. Health insurance, health insurance, health insurance.

I dropped my pen in exasperation. Around me, the rest of the students were jotting every little thing Professor... I squinted at the woman. What was her name? I gave my head a little shake. Whatever. They were jotting down every little thing Professor Whatever wrote.

"Okay then," she said after the longest ten minutes of my life. "That's it for today." I scooped up my bag and slid everything on my desk into it. "Please pick up your tests before you—"

I was out of the room before she could even finish. God. I covered a yawn with the back of my hand. That was a waste of time. I brushed by the hallway full of college students, pushing the exit door open, and skipping down the steps headed straight to the bus stop.

I plopped myself on the empty bench, putting my black backpack on my lap.

"Another day finished," I murmured, absently watching the cars zoom by. On the other side of the street, people walked around the neighborhood park. Aurora. A pretty name for an ugly park. It was a good size plot, with palm trees and uh... regular trees. They even had an oak tree tossed in the middle of it, right next to the dirtiest looking pond you'd ever seen. The trees themselves might have been nice if they weren't all tagged and carved up. The cement walkway might of been a pleasant little thinking route, if it weren't covered up in duck and geese droppings, probably squirrel too. But that was just the way things were.

"Hey, hey, isn't she in our class?"

I glanced at the person from the side of my eyes. Two girls were walking by with bright Greek letters on their shirts, hair pulled back in pony-tails.

"Yeah, the low-life," the curly haired one answered. "She's just a waste of space. Someone who needed the class could've been in her seat."

"Mmhmm." I turned my eyes back to the park. "All she does is sleep."

They both laughed and continued on by, and I bit my lip before whispering, "Low-life, 'ey?" I dropped my gaze to my beat up chucks. I guess I kinda was. I mean, apparently we were in the same class, and the only reason I knew they were talking about me was because I was the only person out there. I probably was a "waste of space."

I chuckled. "God, did I make a complete one-eighty." Those girls would probably poop themselves if they ever found out I had been the ASB president at my high school. Not only that, but the photo editor for our school paper, the president of a humanity club, the co-president of an art club, and a straight 'A' student to boot. My professors, whoever they were, would probably laugh.

I chuckled again, but it cracked, and

I felt my eyes begin to burn. "Stupid allergies..." My chest felt tight. What happened? I folded my arms over my backpack and lowered my head on it. Where did that super optimistic and outgoing person go? What happened to the girl who never quit and always went "above and beyond."

Something brushed against my legs and I opened my eyes. Wha...? It touched me again, and I tossed my bag next to me, pulling my legs up on the bench to see a reddish-brown wiener dog grinning up at me on wheels.

It gave a little bark, standing up on its hind legs, tongue lolling. And that's when I noticed it was missing a right leg; the reason for the wheels.

"Uh..." I reached over and patted its head. "Good doggy?"

It started licking my hand and I smiled, dropping my feet back on the sidewalk and scratching behind its ears. "You are a good doggy, aren't you?" "Flops!"

The dog toppled over onto its front paws and rolled away. I stood up and watched him scurry over to his master, a homeless lady?

She grinned at me, her pale face streaked with dirt. "Sorry, was he bothering you?" She was dressed in pale blue sweats, with a pink t-shirt, and a light purple spaghetti-strap dress pulled over them. She wore a tan shawl about her shoulders, and a beach hat with a pink cloth tied around it. Behind her were two carts tied together full of bags of cans and cartons that towered well over the carts' sides, and behind that was a smaller roller basket with what looked like folded clothes, blankets, and other stuff. I suddenly wanted to take a picture.

I shook my head. "No, not at all." I was taken aback by the cheerful aura she seemed to be admitting, by the pure, almost childlike glee her smile seemed to have. There was something about it that was rare, that majority of the people never seemed to experience. It was almost unnatural. Even the way the sun hit her seemed to only soften her features, instead of harden like most people. "He's a nice dog."

She bent over, rubbing his head affectionately. "He is, isn't he?"

I felt awkward, but by the way she smiled I knew I was the only one. I didn't know what else to say, or do, but fate made the decision for me, and the bus pulled up.

"Well, I gotta go." I picked up my backpack with a little hesitation. "Take care." And I hopped onto the bus, dumping my change into the meter, and taking the first available seat in the middle. It started to pull away, and I looked out the window, catching the homeless woman's eyes. She gave a big wave, and my lips tugged up in a once familiar expression, and I waved back until I couldn't see her anymore.

I straightened in my seat. There was a pang I felt throughout my body. A question that stabbed at something deep within me: How did she become so happy?

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I didn't have class the next day, and my mom gave me a ride to and from school when I did, and the next thing I knew, it was the weekend. When Monday came again, I really didn't think there was any chance I'd ever see the homeless woman again, but for some reason I took my SLR camera with me anyways. I wanted to

ask her how she could smile like she did? How she could be so happy when there was so much wrong in the world? When there were so many stupid rules in society that shouldn't be there?

Why I thought she would know the answers to everything I had been thinking about since graduation, I didn't know. I just did... and I feared that I had missed my chance.

The morning bus was packed, in it you had various age groups heading off to different schools, work, or just all around shopping. I stood in between a burger flipper and some student I assumed was in middle school.

I examined the others, the elderly couple who always dressed in wrinkle-free clothes, and held hands like they were newlyweds. The middle-aged people who were closer to sixty than fifty, dressed in retail uniforms, instead of relaxing on a beach somewhere enjoying retirement. I shifted my gaze to the young teenage mother, then the people who retained thick accents from their homelands... the small child riding the bus to school without supervision. The girl at the back of the bus who never spoke, and always had her hood pulled up, occasionally limping or bearing bruises on her face.

The bus bounced over a pothole, and no one so much as blinked an eyelid. I looked down at everyone's worn shoes. And who am I? I wondered. Where did I fit in in all this?

The girls' laughter from the previous week rang in my head, reminding me. The low-life. I smiled sadly.

"1572 Mory Road," the robotic voice announced over the speakers, and I reached over and pulled the cord.

I sat through two hours of philosophy and another three of media and society, when finally I was allowed to make a break for the bus stop. It took me all of eight minutes to power walk my way through campus and to the stop. When I arrived there was already a group of people waiting, but I gave them

little more than a passing glance.

I frowned. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Why my shoulders slumped when I saw no sign of the homeless woman or Flops.

The bus pulled up and I watched as they boarded, lingering behind. What had I been expecting? The doors closed.

That she and her three-legged dog would magically appear like my very own fairy godmothers and make everything better?

The bus drove away.

I collapsed on the bench with my backpack. How pathetic, I thought bitterly. How pathetic was I that I needed a homeless woman to answer questions more educated people couldn't?

Two more buses went by when I finally decided I had wasted enough time and would get on the next one. I waited fifteen minutes before it came, and I reluctantly shouldered my bag and got on, reaching into my pocket for change when I saw it. I straightened instantly at the flash of reddish-brown darting through the trees on the other side of the window.

"Well?" the bus driver demanded, and I looked at the people on the bus, taking in their weary and resigned expressions. "Hello? Are you getting on or not?"

I looked back at the driver. "No, sorry." And ran off the bus, sprinting around it and into the street, not bothering to go to a light. Not caring about the traffic.

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My heart was thumping, and my hope surged. I hadn't missed it! I ran into the park.

"Floppy!"

I stumbled to a halt, spotting the woman and her carts deeper in the park, a bunch of pigeons at her feet. I couldn't tell from the distance, but I imagined she wore the radiant smile I remembered. I started forward, but paused, taking my camera out from my backpack first. A part of me felt like a stalker, the other part didn't care. I wanted, no needed my questions answered. To catch the utter joy and sincerity of the woman's smile.

I kept to the trees, approaching as silently as I could. The closer I got, the clearer her words became.

"Where the hell did you go, you stupid mutt?!"

I jerked to a stop.

"Traitor!" My hope wavered. "Deserter!"

I felt like the world had been turned upside down, and it took a couple of seconds for me to realize I should hide. Where was the blissful smile? Where were my answers? I peeked around the tree with my camera. This wasn't the woman I remembered. I looked at the carts, the cans and cartons gone.

"Fool! Fool!" she bellowed. "You're all fools!" She started stomping her feet, scaring the pigeons into flight, and I no longer cared. I took a series of pictures, catching the scene's fluttering movements. The flying pigeons, the feathers, the snarled expression the woman wore, the dilated eyes. She scarcely resembled the woman I had met, she appeared older. Through the lens I took in everything. The dry skin, the crow's feet, the ratty hair sticking out from under the hat. It was all there.

"Floppy! Floppy!"

The dog finally made an appearance, rolling over to her with a low whine, that tugged at me.

"There you are." The anger disappeared from her face and she knelt down, hugging the dog close. I caught that too. "Don't leave! Don't leave me again!" She started weeping, and I collected the tears.

I stood for some time, just watching before starting back to the bus stop. When I got there, I sat down. I knew what I was missing. What had changed about me. The homeless woman had answered my questions through snarls and tears, and it was the same answer had she given it to me through a carefree grin.

I smiled.

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