

Your Next Door Neighbor

I never knew what the word “normal” meant until that one summer day.

I was leaving the house as usual, pulling on my blue sneakers and shoving my phone into my pocket. I needed a break.

In our leadership class, the teacher had announced that we would have to write an essay about how to change the world. How we would do it and why.

And it had me at a complete standstill. I mean, changing the world? I could barely fathom what that meant, much less dream about how to go about doing so.

The worst thing was, I seemed to be the only one suffering from the problem. Everyone else in my class knew what to do.

“I’ll help save the animals and keep pollution out of the sea!”

“I’ll donate to homeless shelters!”

“I’ll help people in need!”

All of the topics others had chosen sounded pretty good to me, and if I was a different person, I might’ve just copied one of theirs. But never had a problem bamboozled me as much as this one had. I wanted to get to the bottom of it by myself.

My brother followed me to the door, staring forlornly out at the blue skies. He started to head out after me, but my mother reached out for his shoulder and yanked him back.

I stared, unsure of what to do. “Does he want to come with me?”

My brother squealed in delight, and I leaned down to his height and patted his head. “I can handle him, don’t worry,” I assured my worried looking mother. “Besides, I don’t even remember the last time he went out.”

A strange look flickered in my mother’s dark eyes. It was a mix of acceptance and sadness with tinges of regret.

I stopped, but my brother was already careening out the door. I laughed and caught his upper arm, helping him putting his shoes on and threading his arms through the sleeves. His fingers caught at the ends and he shrieked in discomfort.

“One second, one second,” I grumbled, tucking his fingers through. He calmed down and started to bounce out of my grip, running to the park like he had known the route all his life. I glanced back at my mother, who just stared at him as he disappeared down the street, out of view.

When I didn’t move, she frowned. “Go, go!”

She shut the door with a slam.

I jumped off the porch and followed my brother to the park. He tripped over his sneakers multiple times, stumbling forward in an attempt to go faster. I caught up to him easily and helped him up. He broke away from my grasp and kept running. I ignored the twinge of hurt that sparked inside my chest and went after him again.

He stopped suddenly at the entrance to the park, and my heart dropped. Of course.

There was a large group of boys, mostly highschoolers and middle schoolers. A gaggle of girls sat on the low, sloping hill at the back of the park watching (and some helping) the boys set up a large volleyball net.

I reached out for my brother, but he was already off like a shot, grinning as he headed for the net. When he got there, he stuck his fingers through the slots, feeling the rope.

The boys looked at each other, confused. I knew who they were, of course. I had lived in the same community with them all my life.

Maddox looked around, his eyes eventually meeting mine. "Is this yours?"

I blinked in surprise at the way he said "this". As if my brother was some object that I owned.

“He’s my *brother*.” I emphasized the word brother as I grabbed his hand and tugged him towards the monkeybars. Maddox just shrugged and turned back to his game. My brother struggled against my grip, looking up at me forlornly.

I glanced down at him, trying to decide what to do.

“Don’t you want to go on the slides?” I said in my happy voice, pointing at the slide. I could feel eyes flicking my direction, cold stares glancing at my back. A shiver crawled down my spine, and I tugged my shirt down self-consciously.

It would have been easier if I could have just snapped, “What are you looking at?” It would have been easier if I said something.

But I kept my gaze strictly on my brother as he pulled against my grip again. He sunk down to the ground, and I let go in surprise. He immediately ran back to the net, this time going straight through it. The foundations crumpled and the pegs, so carefully woven into the ground, dragged across the grass. He laughed on the other side, effectively tied up in the net like a herring caught on a line.

Horror spiked in my veins and I hurried forward, untangling his gangly legs and arms as the kids stared in shock at the fallen net.

“Sorry, so sorry,” I apologized, hefting him up.

Maddox rolled his eyes. “What’s wrong with your brother?”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

His eyes narrowed. “Like, does he have a disease or something?”

I had the sudden urge to cover my brother’s ears as he looked up. I knew he couldn’t understand what Maddox was saying, but...

“It’s not a disease,” I mumbled, hating how quiet my voice was. “He’s got autism.”

Maddox just shrugged. “Just get him out of the net.”

Shame burned the tips of my ears as he collapsed to the ground again with a wail of laughter. “He wants to be on the ground,” I tried to explain. “He’s got these sensory problems-”

“Get him out.”

Maddox’s voice was icy. I could almost feel the icicles hanging off his sentence.

Everyone was staring at me now. Some glances were disinterested, some angry, but some...some...pitying.

They pitied me.

After all, I was just the one stuck with the disabled kid. I was the one that had to take care of him. I was the one that had to “pretend” to be kind.

A slimy feeling worked its way into my skull and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

It's not true! I wanted to scream, but my voice seemed to be drifting into my ribcage. *He's my brother! I want to hang out with him!*

But the more I screamed, the more I seemed to drown, my voice muffled by the roar in my ears. I could hear kids screaming to mimic my brother, could hear them laughing and jeering.

The thin lines of tension that had been stringing me together snapped, and I jerked my head forward, riding a tail of pure anger and defiance.

“You know what?” My voice was sugary sweet, anger lining the edges. “You. All of you. You’re no better than him.”

It was silent for a second, and I got to my feet, adrenaline powering me as I glared at the lot of them, my gaze sweeping around, twin beams of fury radiating from my eyes, challenging anyone to say anything.

No one spoke up, for once. I had the stage, and it was time to seize it.

I had been silent all my life.

This was my chance.

Say something. For Luka.

Luka. That was his name. Not my brother. Not just some throwaway object.

“Why doesn’t he get to play with you, huh? Why can’t he play with the other kids? Why does he have to hide when you can be yourselves?”

Nobody said a word, all staring at me.

“And the one, the one time I take him out, the one opportunity he gets to see the world, the world he will grow up in, he’s forced to deal with...what? You lot?”

My voice breaks slightly and a tear slips from my glassy eyes. I quickly dry my cheeks with a swipe of my hand. I didn’t have time to grieve over my lost childhood.

Maddox looks stunned for a second, and one of his friends cuts in. “Look girl, I know you’re mad and all, but he isn’t our problem. We were having a great time until you showed up.”

“I know, I know, and I’m not asking you to play with him or entertain him or anything, but...” I sucked in a deep breath, trying to cool down. “But making fun of him is wrong, especially when he doesn’t understand what you’re saying. You guys all work with these kids every day! Haven’t you learned anything? You do all this volunteer work, help people in need, and you still can’t find any compassion in you?”

The friend nodded a little passively and retreated behind Maddox, who still looked stunned.

“I...I didn’t mean...” he started to stutter out.

“Save it,” I snapped, “for someone who cares. Be better.”

And with that, I grabbed my brother’s hand and walked back home.

That night, lying in bed by myself, nobody around me but the cold night sky and the cool breeze wafting through my window, I cried. I sobbed into my pillow, getting all of my emotions out in one upheaval of sadness for what I had left behind. What I had missed.

That morning, when I woke up, I swore it would never happen again. I felt more awake than I ever had that day. Like the fog in my eyes had finally cleared and I could see the world for its ugly, disgusting, but so, so real self.

That morning I grew up. That morning I realized that there was only one way to change the world. By working together. By cooperating. By embracing who we are.

And to get to that step, we needed to accept. We needed to empathize, not pity, not feel bad for, but empathize with those suffering and help them get stronger.

I finished my essay with a flourish, twirling around in my desk chair as I clicked submit.

My brother entered my room, collapsing on the bed with his Ipad in hand. I wrestled it out of his grip as he whined and tugged on the other end.

“What do you say we go to the park?” I suggested.

My brother clapped his hands and skipped down the stairs, slipping on his shoes and blasting out the front door.

I glanced back once more at our house before following after him, into the bright sunlight.