

Background Girl

If you were to look at Emily P., the first thing you would notice was probably nothing at all. She was, undeniably, the least noticeable out of any kid in Ms. Beck's 9th-grade class, a feat on its own. Emily seemed to barely take up any space. She was pale, with grayish-brown hair, a little tall at best, and at the end of the day, there was only one thing about her that stood out.

Every day, when she walked into class, she had a different sweet. Always homemade. So when we were assigned a project to finish at home, it was no surprise to me that she pulled a wrapped caramel on the way back. We passed the school bounds and the park. The park was almost empty, skies gray and riddled with fog.

"So we only need to finish the writing and the poster, yeah?" I was a bit apprehensive that day. After all, I had never interacted with Emily outside of class, and honestly, I had never even noticed her outside of class. Now, we had to do a project together worth way more of our grade than any single assignment had a right to be.

"Mhm." She was still chewing the caramel. I glanced at the messy wrapper, obviously prepared in a rush. My own lunches were always store-bought. Was this even part of her lunch? Where did she eat lunch? Emily noticed me eyeing the wrapper, and her eyes widened a little.

"Oh," she said, swallowing quickly. "Want one?"

"Um," I hesitated. "Sure." At this point, I was looking to avoid what was obviously going to be an awkward walk to the library, an awkward two hours of writing, and an awkward "See you later" at the end. Shyly, she reached into her bag and pulled out a caramel.

“I got these from Cami. She means well, I guess, and these are better than they look.”

The wrapper was sticky. I stopped walking and popped it into my mouth, while she continued on.

I chewed thoughtfully. “They’re pretty good, yeah.” The caramel was very good. Sweet and chewy. A passing dog barked as I savored the taste on my tongue.

“Cami, you said? Never heard of her.”

“She’s in our class.”

“Oh.” I swallowed the caramel and shoved the wrapper in my pocket.

“Cami’s great at making sweets. Not so much a good student, but then again neither am I. All B’s.” She giggled a little, leaning towards the edge of the sidewalk. We turned a corner.

“Huh. I guess I never noticed- Not to say that you’re..” I trailed off, embarrassed. Maybe it had never occurred to me how Emily did in school, or who she was friends with.

“I guess I’m not really noticeable, huh?” Finally, she stopped walking and turned to me.

“I’ll tell you, though.” She smiled. “Us invisible kids have a little more fun.”

“What?”

“I mean,” Emily looked down again, at her shoes. Mud splattered the sides of her leggings. “Nobody has ever really put that much pressure on me. I guess I’m free to do what I want. And I noticed,” She glanced away. “Sometimes you seem like you can’t do what you want, like you’re trapped a little by the spotlight or something.”

I stared at her, shocked. The fog of the day had begun to clear. Here was a girl who made straight B’s in school. Here was a girl with lollipops in her pockets and gumdrops on her tongue, sweeter and nicer than they appeared to be.

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And anyway,” Her eyes gleamed now, and she walked a little closer to me. “Nobody ever found out when I put that fake spider in Ms. Beck’s desk.”

“Wait, that was you?! That spider was huge!” She threw her head back and laughed.

“Yeah. And Kevin Li got blamed. I felt a little bad, maybe, but he’d been teasing Eloise for weeks, so he deserved it.”

The library was just up ahead. The poster was in my bag.

“Let’s work on this project, then?” I said. She turned to me, and her eyes were caramel, and she suddenly seemed to take up much more space than she ever had.

The next day in class, we didn’t say much, but I saw her turn her head to me and wink. Nobody else saw it. Emily was again swallowed by the room, falling into the background. Kevin Li got up out of his seat and started yelling, Eloise turned around in her seat and sighed. I’d never realized, but Emily was actually one of the tallest kids in class, and she seemed to sit there with an air of confidence- like she could be whatever she wanted, and no one would stop her.