

Chapter 14

The middle-aged man sitting by the end-table with the coffee stains suddenly stood up, glanced around the station, and strode out the door. He'd been so quiet for so long I'd nearly forgotten his presence. I sat for a moment wondering what could have been so important that he'd waited in a police station for over an hour on a Saturday night, but then so unimportant that he could just get up and leave. I glanced at my watch. It was now 4:26 a.m. Perhaps he'd decided to go get his own cup of coffee and he'd be back. But his departure was so abrupt, and his stride so determined, it felt like he wouldn't be returning. My eyes connected with the woman across from me and we both shrugged.

I looked across the room at the police officer behind the partition. Another one down, his expression seemed to imply. Just two more to go. The woman across from me pulled a pair of earbuds from her purse and settled in to listen to some music. She wasn't going anywhere, she seemed to be saying, to anyone who was looking. I heard the faint, but unmistakable, strains of Lauryn Hill's *Nothing Even Matters*. In the relative quiet of the station I picked up more of her playlist, Black Sheep, Drake, Sa-Roc. It was comforting. It drew me back to the homeless shelter Miles and I used to volunteer at when he was in middle school; similar

songs would play in the kitchen there while I washed dishes and Miles played with the other children his age in the main room.

It wasn't long after Miles started sixth grade that we started volunteering. He'd been coming home from his first year of middle school complaining about all of the things he didn't have that the other kids did: game boxes, sports jerseys, expensive shoes. At first I tried sitting Miles down and explaining to him what a budget was and what we could and couldn't afford. I wanted him to understand where I was coming from when I said no. I also wanted to turn his perspective around by expressing the belief that being different was not bad, that it meant you were unique and special. Experiences were opportunities, I told him, and having to work to earn things meant that they were more valued.

I couldn't convince Miles, however. He listened to me, and nodded, but he just wanted to fit in. If his classmates played 2K, he wanted to play 2K. If his friends were wearing Nike Airs, he wanted Nike Airs. A quadcopter drone with remote control? A blue and black one please.

By middle school the big fashion trend amongst the boys in the neighborhood were the named sports jerseys, whether it was Brady, Mahomes, Messi, Maroon, or Antetokounmpo, the kids in the neighborhood had them all and Miles wanted some too. The problem was that we couldn't afford genuine NFL, NBA, or FIFA jerseys. I tried buying knock-offs from an online store in China, but the kids could tell the fakes right away. Disappointed, Miles would ask for other things, like the motorized scooter Josh had, or the PlayStation Carson had. I explained to Miles a number of times that we couldn't afford such things, but he seemed constitutionally unable to digest the meaning of a limited budget, and just asked for the coveted items again weeks later.

I hated saying no to Miles. I wanted him to feel that he belonged in the neighborhood, but it was hard when Miles constantly compared himself to the wealthier kids around us and always found us wanting. Our home couldn't compete, and every playdate or birthday party was a bargain with the devil where I was glad of the social interaction and the friends I thought he was making, but where I also knew Miles would return to our

apartment begging for whatever item we didn't have, I couldn't afford, and he didn't need.

"Hunter has an Xbox," Miles told me one day as I picked him up from school. I was starting to hate hearing that kid's name.

"And you have a Switch," I replied.

"Yes. But I want an Xbox."

"What do you need two gaming consoles for?" I asked, unlocking the car doors. "You can only play one at a time."

Miles rolled his eyes, and the sun glinted off the car roof as we got inside. "The Xbox and the Switch have different games. Plus, the new Xbox comes with a Fortnite Ultimate Pass, so it's totally worth it. You get a new skin every month, and..."

I looked around the car. Did I leave my purse at work again? I was so pathologically forgetful it was ridiculous. Nate used to say that I was really very smart, but not very bright at all. That had always been funny, until it got repetitive.

"...so you agree," Miles concluded, as I gave up and started the car and we pulled into traffic.

"Agree to what?"

"Were you listening to me at all? A new Xbox."

"A new Xbox?"

"Yes. It makes sense. Here's why..."

I tried listening to my son, but I was too tired. And I was embarrassed to admit I'd blanked on everything he'd said a minute before.

"Ok," I said.

"Ok?" Miles was too eager for more words.

I nodded, knowing full well it was a bad idea.

He's a good kid, I reasoned to myself two weeks later when the credit card bill arrived and I realized I couldn't pay it. I didn't want to take the Xbox back, but I stared at my bill and finally had to admit that something had to change. I needed to make Miles more aware of budgetary limits. I needed to make him realize that it was ok not to have things, that there were

people, most people in fact, who didn't have multiple gaming consoles.

I picked my son up from school the following Friday and instead of driving straight home, we went to McDonalds. Miles loved McDonalds, though he was aging out of the happy meals and had begun supersizing regular orders and actually finishing all of the fries that came with it.

We sat down in a sticky orange booth and Miles pulled the tray of food towards him. He began stuffing handfuls of fries into his mouth between extra-large bites of hamburger. There was something so satisfying, as a mother, about watching your child consume a large meal.

I took a bite of my own hamburger and told Miles we were going to do something different that evening.

“Mmmm?”

“We're going to volunteer. At a shelter.”

Miles swallowed his food. “A shelter?”

“It's a place where people go if they need somewhere to sleep for the night. So they don't have to sleep outside,” I added.

Miles tilted his head to the side. “Outside? Where would you sleep outside?”

My son was very pragmatic and always wanted practical answers to things. “On a park bench. Or, or on the sidewalk, like that homeless person we came across downtown once, do you remember that?”

Miles thought about it, but couldn't recall the incident.

“That's ok, it was years ago, when you were younger.”

Miles took a sip of his drink. “Why would anyone sleep outside though?”

“If you don't have a home. If you've lost your home, say.”

I could tell that Miles was now wondering how a person lost their home.

“The point is, there are people less fortunate than us. There are people that could use a little help. Heck, *everyone* can use a little help in their life at some point. But tonight, we're going to go help other people out for a bit.”

Miles nodded and finished the last of his hamburger.

A few minutes later we were driving to a homeless shelter in downtown St. Louis. It was a family shelter, for mothers (primarily) and their young kids, and as I'd hoped, there were children there about Miles' own age. He was hesitant at first, taking tentative steps into the building and not touching anything. For a minute I was afraid my son would act the snob, and complain about the dinginess of the place, but my fears were allayed when a kid around his own age came up to Miles and invited him to play. Together they explored the tub of donated toys. A few minutes later they were racing cars and setting up battlefields of brown and green plastic soldiers.

I went to the kitchen and washed dishes for about an hour, and when I returned to the main room my son was still playing. I sat at a table between a pair of mothers that were also watching the children and their games.

"Which one's yours?" I asked the woman on my right. She pointed to a boy in a Ninja Turtles shirt, but said nothing. The woman on my left pointed out her children, and then we were all quiet. We watched the boys play, and for the first time in a long time, if I looked away, when I returned my gaze to the group of children it took me a minute to discern which one was my own son. I was so used to his being the only Black child in a crowd, and it being so easy to just glance over and spot him when I needed to, that I had to smile now that it took me a second to find him.

I became aware that the lady on my left was watching me out of the corner of her eye. "Did you bring that boy?" she asked.

I nodded, unable to keep the pride from my voice, "Yes, that's my son."

"Hmphf," she grunted, and I felt uneasy.

The words of that long-ago article came back to me, telling me that I had no right to adopt a Black child, telling me that I would be a bad mother to an African American boy, telling me that I had no idea how to raise a young Black man right. I looked down at the table top and realized only then that I'd been expecting some sort confirmation from the other women around

the table, or dare I say, even praise. I always got it so easily from the crowds of white mothers, the sympathetic head nod, or the *sotto voce* whisper about what a great thing I'd done, adopting an *unwanted child*. But in the shelter all I got was suspicion. I realized they were probably thinking that I was one of those idealistic, naïve, annoying white women who presume to think they're saving the world. I worried they were shaking their heads in sorrow for my son, who was going to grow up soft and unprepared for the realities of this world.

I wanted to say something. I desperately searched for the right phrase or anecdote that would prove I was ok; that *I*, at least, if not all those other white mothers, knew what I was doing. But of course, there was no perfect phrase or anecdote. Of course, I didn't have any idea what I was doing. And so I sat there, and none of us said a thing.

Eventually, a more talkative mother joined the table and got something of a conversation going. She was kind and inclusive, asking all of us questions about our children. I appreciated her bringing me into the conversation, but when I got up to go to the bathroom, I couldn't help but assume that she tore into me along with the rest of the mothers.

I decided not to let my unease stop us from returning to the shelter. Every three weeks, on a Friday after school, I'd pick Miles up, listen to him complain about math or spelling while he simultaneously inhaled hamburgers and french fries, and then together we headed over to the shelter for the rest of the evening. I think Miles even started looking forward to the visits, the shelter a place where he inevitably found a posse of playmates for any new game he could invent. He found the group of brothers he'd always wanted, like Michael Jackson had.

About three months into our volunteering, on the drive home to our apartment in the dusk of an early evening, Miles asked an uncomfortable question. Miles had a habit of asking important, embarrassing, or otherwise significant questions while we were driving in the car. I don't know what it was about sitting in the backseat of a moving vehicle and gazing out the window

that inspired him, but I'd look up through my rear-view mirror while singing along to *Man in the Mirror* and he'd suddenly glance at me and ask, "How are babies made?" or "How'd your mom die?" or "Is daddy ever coming back?"

The first time he did this I'd searched for a convenient place to pull over and stop the car, so I could turn around and look him in the eye while I explained how a man brought the seed, and a woman brought the egg, and together they made a baby. But I soon found that Miles preferred it if I kept driving. He liked the *inability* of my being able to face him while I answered these tough questions.

"Why is everyone there Black?" he asked me that day as the streetlights flicked repetitively through the windshield. The question hit like a punch to the gut and I suddenly felt very, very sad, both because he'd asked a perfectly good question with no good answer, but also because I hadn't even thought to address the issue before we started volunteering. Of course he was going to notice the huge color disparity of the shelter, as opposed to his school. Of course he was going to wonder why things were that way. But where did I begin trying to explain it? How does one make institutional racism explicable to an eleven-year-old child?

I tried to make eye contact with Miles through the rear-view mirror, but his head was turned, and he was gazing out the window while he waited for my answer. I wished I could see what the world had in store for him. I wished I could prepare him for where he'd end up in twenty years, in a hospital as a respected doctor tending to patients, or, in a hospital on a gurney bleeding from a gunshot wound. Either way, would he understand what was happening, and why? Or would he be filled with an accumulated, unexpressed, irrepressible anger and confusion over the vagaries of life? Whatever happened, would I be able to help him with it?

I opened my mouth and gave Miles a long, rambling answer to his important question that included a history of slavery and a primer on the basics of American capitalism. I reminded him that life was unfair, and that some people were born with more opportunity than others. I talked to him for the whole car ride home, and when we entered our apartment, I told him he

could ask me any questions he wanted. He looked at me then, paused, and asked if he could forego his homework and play Fortnite for the rest of the evening. I sighed, nodded, and let him go.

The hardest thing about being a parent, I thought then as I'd thought many times before, wasn't the expense of having a child, or the time involved in raising a child, or the arguments, discipline, and hours of incomprehensible math homework, it was the worrying and doing your best but having absolutely no idea if what you were doing was good enough. It was being responsible for the tough decisions, but never knowing if you made the right calls. There was no answer key you could flip through, that told you that yes, moving had been the right change to make. Or no, volunteering at the shelter wasn't really a good idea. There was no way to ever really know if you were doing things right.