



SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

# The Cut That Didn't Bleed

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I still remember the weight of the scissors in my hand.

It was my sophomore year, and I was in the back room of the school theater, cutting fabric for the costume crew. Behind the thick velvet curtain, I heard them laughing—again. The jokes always came in whispers, but they still reached him.

“Is he seriously wearing that?”

“Someone should tell him this isn't RuPaul's Drag Race.”

“Bro walks like a girl.”

Eli was new. He was quiet, artsy, and wore nail polish that matched his binder. I'd spoken to him a few times while pinning costumes. He was kind. Nervous. Always adjusting his sleeves.

That day, I saw what I hadn't before: the faint red lines along his forearm when his hoodie slipped up. I froze. And then I heard the sound that crushed me—his name, said like a curse, followed by a fake lisp and cackling.

Everyone laughed. Even someone I considered a friend.

I didn't say anything. I looked down, traced the edges of the scissors, and kept cutting.

That night, I couldn't sleep. The silence in that moment became louder than the laughter. I hadn't bullied him—but I hadn't protected him either.

That realization cut deeper than anything I'd seen on Eli's wrist.

The next day, I sat across from him during lunch. He didn't look up. I didn't blame him. I said:

“I heard what they said yesterday. And I should've said something. I didn't. I'm sorry.”

He blinked. Nodded. Didn't speak.

But the next day, he sat next to me.

I didn't become a superhero overnight. I still struggle to speak up. But when someone made a joke about another kid's voice in class a week later, I interrupted:

“Not funny. Try harder.”

The room went quiet. The teacher didn't even look up. But Eli did—from across the room. He smiled.

Ethics isn't always about grand gestures. Sometimes, it's the decision to stop being a bystander.

It's recognizing that silence can wound just as deeply as words. That day, I learned what kind of person I didn't want to be—and what kind I *could* be, if I chose courage over comfort.

The cut I saw on Eli's wrist didn't bleed in front of me. But it left a scar on both of us. And that scar became my turning point.

I now believe ethics is about standing between harm and the harmed—even when your voice shakes. Even when no one else stands with you.

Because the moment you *don't* say something... that's when the worst damage begins.