



FIFTH PLACE RECIPIENT

Seeing Beyond the Rules

Nathan Zermeno PEORIA HIGH SCHOOL

The cafeteria smelled like warm pizza and cleaning spray that never seemed to go away. Chairs scraped, trays clattered, and laughter bounced all around. I was walking toward the milk cooler when I noticed someone at the snack rack. They looked around and quietly slipped a granola bar into their hoodie pocket. It happened so fast and almost went unnoticed. I stopped in my tracks. My stomach twisted. My parent's always said stealing was wrong no matter what. I could still hear my dad's voice, "If it's not yours, you don't touch it." I always believed that. But watching them walk away with empty hands and tired eyes made me pause.

At lunch, I saw them sitting alone. No tray, no food. Just staring at the table. I hesitated, then sat across from them. "Hey," I said softly, "are you okay?" They looked surprised and nodded, even though their eyes said otherwise. After a while, they told me their mom had lost her job and there wasn't much food at home. The granola bar wasn't about breaking rules; it was about trying to eat.

That night, I kept thinking about it. Right and wrong felt too simple. Could it really be wrong if someone was just trying to survive?

The next day, I went to the school counselor and explained what happened. I asked if there was a way to help without getting them in trouble. She listened and said she would connect their family to the free lunch program.

A week later, I saw them again, in line with everyone else, holding a tray of food. When our eyes met, they gave a small smile that said more than words could.

That moment changed how I see right and wrong. My parents taught me stealing was bad, and they were right, but that day taught me something deeper. Ethics isn't just about rules. It's about empathy. Sometimes doing the right thing isn't about stopping someone. It's about understanding them.

Since then, I have tried to carry that with me. I don't just follow rules. I think about people. I try to see why they do what they do. Doing what's right doesn't always mean following the rule. It means listening to your heart when no one else does.