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I Used to Wish I Was Mabel

“Pumpkin Spice Latte for Mabel?”

In one smooth motion, she pushes back her chair and stands up, her delicate curls swaying as she walks to the register. She locks eye contact with the barista and smiles as she picks up her steaming drink. Walking steadily, Mabel returns to her overcrowded table of teenage girls and instantly rejoins the conversation.

I sip my oat milk Caramel Macchiato to the sound of the girls’ laughter. My gaze shifts to the register every few seconds, partly because I want to judge the unnecessarily complicated drinks people are ordering, and partly because I don’t want the group of girls to notice me observing them.

I watch as the girl across from Mabel taps her foot under the table, steady at first but then more rapidly. While Mabel talks, this girl fidgets – with the bracelet tightly wrapped around her wrist, with the strand of hair falling over her eyes, with the zipper of her jacket. She looks attentively to whoever’s speaking, a soft smile never leaving her face. Under the table, she taps her phone every few minutes, only to turn it back off seconds later – she’s checking the time. Every once in a while, she opens her mouth as if to say something, but someone else chimes in before she has the chance.

Mabel makes eye contact with everyone as she talks and laughs with her whole body. She tilts her head back and says something that makes the group laugh even harder. She speaks in long anecdotes and takes up space. She uses her hands to make open gestures and her feet are planted firmly on the ground. Mabel doesn’t fidget.

I am not Mabel. I am not Mabel because I usually sit across from her.

I’m not Mabel because over summer break, I got dinner with my friends and didn’t say more than a sentence the whole time. The words cramped in my lungs and refused to let go. After too many minutes of silence, I felt like I could no longer offer a brief response to anything as it would draw unwanted attention. Being there felt like I was in a graded discussion – instead of academic pressure weighing over my head, it was the thought that I’d lose a spot at the next dinner table if I didn’t prove the value of my presence. I quieted my own nervousness by fixating on those around me. Hannah, to my right, started crunching the ice left in her empty drink. Amelia, across from me, was picking at the leftover vegetables on her plate. Everyone there was hiding something too.

I’m not Mabel because at new student orientation, I knelt on the concrete to give up my chair to someone with a lost expression on their face – the result of endless rows of packed tables. I can’t help but notice the way people squirm or pick at their scabs or bite their nails. I watch people and make inferences about them so I can feel less alone and better understand them.