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CBC Writing Competition

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P.S. I'm Still Alone

My mother always liked to collect lottery tickets. she used to keep this box underneath her bed, that was almost filled to the carrying capacity with tickets that were dated from the 80s' to today. She believed in luck, so I guess in her mind, keeping every lottery ticket that you've ever bought was a foolproof way to win. She believed in those things like they were God, and she was his prophet. she prayed to those flimsy pieces of paper, while rubbing on them, as if they were Rosary beads. Most of the tickets had been worn down, but she didn't care. They were her chance to a happy ending-a life without worrying about her financial situation. She could live her life to the fullest. She could be free.

But I wasn't naive. I knew that luck had nothing to do with lottery tickets, rosary beads and even a helpful prayer to the Lord every now and then. You had to make your own luck, which doesn't sound very hard to many, but it's tricky. I don't care about luck, because, really, it's just a bunch of bullshit. If I wanted luck, I'd keep a rabbit's dangling foot on a keychain or spend hours in the grass, looking for a four leaf clover. I didn't spend my time, wishing for a better tomorrow. Life is tough. People get dumped, pets get put to sleep or maybe, someone loses their job, but you can't blame that on luck. Luck has nothing to do with it. It's just a system that people believe in, to explain to others about why their lives are shitty. They don't blame themselves. They blame their bad luck, when really, life is just bad luck in general. You have to die to be happy. Maybe that's why the suicide rate is so high.

A couple of weeks ago, my mother took me to 7-11 for a Mountain Dew Slurpee, a box of Ho-Hos and, of course, a lottery ticket. "This is the one, Carmen. This is it. I can feel it in my bones," my mother said, rubbing her arm in that nervous way that she always does right before she does something risky. I don't tell her that she says the same thing every time she walks into a convince store. I just smiled and gave her my usual "You've got it, Mom. I believe in you." As she slinks towards the cashier

register, I head towards the Slurpee machine. As I'm filling up my cup, out of the corner of my eye, I could see a man sitting near the door, watching me.

He had a dirty Cubs baseball cap over his eyes, as if he was taking a nap, but his eyes were wide open, as if he was taking every sight in. He was sitting in an upright position, glazing at people as they walked past him without even a second glance. His shaggy black hair had streaks of gray in it, and his face was full of wrinkles, a different story etched in everyone of them. You could tell he was homeless, but you couldn't pity him-his face had a slight smile on it. Not any kind of smile, though. It was a proud smile, a happy smile. I was instantly jealous of it.

"Come on, Carmen. I got the ticket! This is it, darling," my mother said, nearly jumping out of her skin with excitement. We pay for our items and leave the store. As I'm walking out of the store, I turn my head and look at the man. He catches my eye and smiles. "Hold on, Mom," I call, racing over to the man, noticing that he sat up straighter as I came closer. I pulled out a handful of change, but then, I noticed that there was nowhere for me to give him the money. "Where's your cup?," I said, waving my hand around. "I don't need a cup. I don't need the money either," said the man, chuckling as he said this. "But aren't you...," I said, trailing off, embarrassed as could be. "Well, yes, I am, but I don't need the money. I would just give it back to you. I'm homeless, and while people would think the opposite of what I will say next, I'm not a charity case."

I could feel my cheeks turn red as I pushed the coins deep into my pocket. I felt as if I had been scolded, like a little child who had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar. I felt as if I had blamed the man for all of the most horrible things in the world, only to discover that it wasn't he who had done it, but his twin brother instead.

As I quickly walked back to my mother, who, surprisingly, had stood there, patiently waiting for me to finish my conversation, she looked at me directly in my eyes. "Let's go, Mom," I said, taking her

hand and pulling her along the street. "Is everything alright, Carmen?," my mother remarked, her nose wiggling not because she had to sneeze, but because she was worried. I didn't want to reply, but I also didn't want her to over think the situation and call the cops on the man because she thought he had something out of line. "Yeah, everything's fine," I said, opening or front door, kicking off my flip-flops and plopping onto the couch. My mother disappeared into her bedroom, to check her numbers. A couple of minutes later, she came back out, a clear expression of heartbreak on her face. "Not this time, my lamb," she said, sighing as she sank into her favorite chair. My father used to sit in that chair, but ever since he died from a heart attack, she's been sitting in there more and more. A couple of times, late at night, I tip toe down the stairs to get a glass of water and hear her crying, legs folded underneath her in the chair. She wears my father's University of Illinois sweatshirt and cries all night. On those nights, I don't offer words of encouragement. I don't say anything. I just walk away. What would I say? What would I even do?

We went to 7-11 quite a lot during the next few months, but I never saw the man again. While I pretended to be glad about this, secretly, I was upset. I felt as if I deserved an explanation for his rudeness, but another part of me wanted to know why he had seemed so happy. How could a homeless man be happier than me? I had a home, a loving parent and was on Honor Roll, but somehow, he was happier than I could ever be. I wanted to know his secret.

Almost a year went by without seeing the homeless man. I had grown and become a mature young girl. My mother was doing better, but she was still obsessing over lottery tickets. She actually won \$2 once, which may sound quite pathetic to you, but in her eyes, it was as good as the million dollar prize. I had forgotten all about the homeless man and the 7-11 incident, until I went to the library one day to return some books and got caught up in reading a book by Ellen Hopkins. As I went to sit in my favorite chair, I noticed that same man sitting there, wearing the same cap with the same smirk on his

face. I stood up taller and walked up to him, confidence radiating from all my pores. "You're sitting in my seat," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "Is your name on it?," he replied, flipping the page of the newspaper he was reading. I nodded as I pointed to the arm of the chair, where my initials, CJS, were placed. "I'm sorry. Enjoy your chair," he said, getting up. As I settled in, and watched the man leave, I suddenly realized that he was the man that had been so rude to me beforehand. "Hey, excuse me!" I called, running past the librarian, who shushed me as I continually called after him. He stopped and turned around to face me. "Why didn't you take my money?" I said, while panting heavily. "Because I didn't need it," he replied, turning around. "How did you survive though? Wouldn't you need some kind of financial support?" "Nope. If I wanted support, then I wouldn't have quit my job and sold my house," he said, chuckling. "But..why?" I said, wrinkling my forehead. "Because I wasn't happy. Why would I do something if I wasn't happy doing it? It's a waste of my time." "But doesn't money make you happy? Doesn't having some kind of support make you smile?" I replied. "No. If I wanted money, then I would get money. If I wanted happiness, I would get my ass off of the couch and go do something that made my life worthwhile. Everyone thinks that life is just about your possessions, but it's not. What would you like to be remembered for when you died? Your fancy car, clothes and this huge house that you would come home every day as empty as when you left? Or would you rather be proud because you figured out a cure for global warming, cancer and AIDS? People want you to believe that this stuff would make you happy, but really, it's make you conceited. It makes you vain and at the end, it makes you hate yourself, because you lived your life by the rules. Not by your own rules, but the rules that were already written for you. I couldn't do that. I just couldn't. If I had, I would have jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, there's no doubt about it." As he finished his speech, I stopped and thought about everything that he had said. And I realized that it was completely true. We said our goodbyes and I walked home.

Later that night, I again came downstairs for a glass of water, and once again I heard my mother sobbing her heart out. However, this time, I didn't walk back upstairs. I didn't turn around and ignore

her. I didn't forget it either. I walked up behind her and listened. I put a hand on her shoulder and as she looked at me with bright red eyes, I knew that I had to say something. "Mom...don't cry. Life is tough." "I know, my lamb. Would you like to know a secret? Every night, I write your father a letter, telling him how much I miss him and how much I love him. He knows all about your accomplishments and your life as well. And every night, I sign the letter the same way as the night before. 'I miss you and love you. JoAnne. P.S. I'm still lonely," she said, continuing to weep. And right after she said that, I climbed into her lap, let her cry into my sweatshirt and said the only thing I knew that would make her happier: "You'll never be alone, Mom." And I felt good, because for once, I didn't sugar coat anything. I told her the honest truth and it felt good. Life is tough, but it's easier when you don't have to face it alone.