

The Wonder of Walmart
By Chloe Maher

Harmony parked her car in front of the restaurant, turned the car off, and sat. The peace of being alone in her quiet car was just what she needed. She needed to prepare herself for today. It was not a big or important day in her life. In fact, it was exactly the same as the day before. She had repeated the same ritual every day prior. Just as she felt ready, her co-worker, Doyle, pulled into the parking lot and parked a few spots away. Her heart sped up and she felt short of breath despite not moving. She knew she needed to calm down. However, no matter how much she told herself to calm down, she couldn't quite do it. This was just a job. She was in no danger and was honestly quite mad at her body for reacting this way. Why couldn't she just be a normal person who went to work and didn't overthink everything?

She opened the car door and put one foot out. She tried to see out of the corner of her eye what Doyle was doing. She knew she needed to acknowledge him, but she herself did not want to be acknowledged. Finally, she turned and uttered a shy "hello" to which Doyle nodded in response. Oh god, how had the most basic word in the English language failed her? Consciously, she knew that this encounter was not awkward; It was perfectly ordinary. However, her anxiety kept replaying the five second encounter over and over again in her brain pointing out every way she had somehow managed to mess up. Even when someone knows they are overthinking something, there is no way to stop overthinking, so Harmony was at the mercy of her brain.

They opened the restaurant and both went in. She wanted to say something, anything, just to break the silence. No words came to her. There was 19 years of education inside her brain, but none of that wanted to present itself. "Think!" she thought. Telling her brain to think surprisingly did nothing to actually make it think. She went straight to work because that couldn't possibly be a wrong response. At least if they were busy she could avoid the torture of talking.

The shift went by like every other shift. Harmony quietly did her job. She wasn't sure if she'd spoken more than five words to her co-workers throughout her five hour shift. Before she was allowed to clock out, she had one more task; taking out the trash. One massive black bag in hand, she pushed the back door open and stepped into the tiny, poorly lit parking lot in the back. Most people didn't know that there were parking spots back there, so it was almost always empty. However, today, there was a pickup truck. Three teenagers sat in the bed of the truck. All of them were laughing and appeared to be having the best time of their life. At first, Harmony assumed that were up to no good. However, as she peered further, she noticed a stack of Uno cards.

Just as she was about to turn around and leave, one of the girls noticed her. "Hey you!" she exclaimed and Harmony flinched. The tone of her words were harsh, but she flashed a smile at her, and with that, Harmony somehow knew she could trust them. "Wanna play a round?" the girl asked. Uno is her favorite game, but social interactions are quite the opposite. She knew what she wanted, but she didn't know if she had the courage to do it. However, when she was in the presence of these people, she felt less nervous. For once, the idea of talking to new people didn't stress her out as much. She wasn't sure if it was the Uno or that she liked the way they made her feel, but either way, she ended up nodding yes and telling them she'd come back after she clocked out. She had an urge to just leave before she decided to go back out, but something motivated her to go through with this.

The pickup truck was old, and not exactly a beauty, but that didn't matter to Harmony. She climbed up into the bed anyway. One by one, they introduced themselves. The girl who had originally called her out had blonde hair and blue eyes. She was quite tall and said that her name was Eva. There was another girl named Sam sitting next to Harmony who had naturally tan skin and brown hair. The person across the circle from Harmony was an Asian boy named Noah. Eva

dealt seven cards to each person, and they began to play. They laughed and talked and played for some time. Harmony felt more accepted and alive than she had ever felt in her life.

When the last game ended, Eva proposed the idea of an adventure to the group. At once, Harmony felt awkward again. Was she invited? Was she supposed to leave? Were they tired of her being around? These questions banged and smashed around Harmony's head as her heart rate started to pick up again. Noah noticed her dilemma and laughed. "You can come too if you'd like." He said with a chuckle while the rest of the group nodded in agreement. This "adventure" they were going on could be anything. She was beyond nervous, but she'd made it this far, she might as well go along.

Within minutes, they were on the road. It should have been a fun ride, but Harmony was panicking. Where were they going? Was she going to be kidnapped? What if what they were going to do was illegal? However, within 10 minutes they were pulling into the parking lot of Walmart. At least now she knew where they were. The four of them spilled out of the car and barged through the doors, not so subtly announcing their arrival. "So, what are you guys here for?" asked Harmony. They laughed and Eva responded, "Literally nothing, we just like to walk around and have fun." and that is exactly what they did. For an hour, they just paced the aisles, picking up fun items, playing around, and pointing out everything they thought was funny. At one point, they even made a stuffed animal fort in one of the aisles. It should not have been fun, it was merely a Walmart, a Walmart Harmony had been in easily twenty times in her life, but it was one of the best nights of her life. Nothing she did felt awkward. She felt as if she could be herself, and no one would judge it. Sometimes, it doesn't matter what you're doing, but who you're doing it with.

The next day, Harmony had work again. She pulled into the lot and parked in the same spot as yesterday. She turned her car off and expected the anxiety to kick in again. Much to her surprise, her heartbeat and breathing remained steady. She went to open the restaurant and said hello to

Doyle, just like yesterday. She still felt like this interaction was awkward, but she didn't really care. Suddenly, she realized what was different about herself. Doyle's opinion of her didn't matter anymore. He could think she was the weirdest person he's ever had to work with, but that didn't change herself. She was still the same, valid person, regardless of what he saw. Somehow, it had taken her sixteen years to learn that her validity wasn't determined by the way others viewed her. She could already feel a new level of confidence surrounding her like a bubble. No one could pop her bubble anymore.