

Questions Asked Kindly

By Manon Roberts

3rd Place in the 18-25 Age Category

Everyone notices her differences before they notice the person she is.

She is young, but she doesn't look like most women her age. She is severely underweight and visibly frail, with a thin nasal feeding tube running across her cheek. It is difficult to hide that she is seriously unwell.

She lives with gastroparesis, a condition that makes it difficult for her stomach to process food normally. Her feeding tube provides the nutrition her body needs.

She has become accustomed to people's reactions.

The staring.

The quick glances.

The whispered conversations.

The people who look away, unsure whether acknowledging her difference would be rude.

Then, one day, a little girl notices her.

The child looks at the tube, then at the young woman's thin frame. She isn't frightened or disgusted. She is simply curious about something she has never seen before.

Her mother notices her staring.

She could tell her daughter to look away. Instead, she crouches beside her and gently says:

"If you'd like to know, you can ask her politely."

The little girl hesitates before approaching.

"Excuse me," she asks softly, "what is that tube for?"

The young woman smiles.

"It helps me get the nutrition my body needs because I'm unwell."

The girl thinks for a moment.

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," she replies honestly. "But it helps me."

The child nods.

"Does it stay there all the time?"

The young woman explains as much as she feels comfortable sharing. Her mother listens quietly, reminding her daughter to be respectful and to accept whatever the young woman chooses to tell her.

There is no embarrassment. No pity. No awkward attempt to hurry the conversation along.

Just curiosity, kindness and respect.

The interaction lasts only a few minutes, but it stays with the young woman long afterwards.

She spends so much time feeling like people see her illness before they see her. Yet this child looked at something unfamiliar and, rather than being told to look away, was taught how to ask politely.

It reminds her that empathy isn't necessarily about understanding exactly what another person is going through. Most people could never fully understand what it is like to live in her body.

Empathy can be much simpler.

It can mean being curious without being intrusive.

Asking politely instead of assuming.

Listening without judging.

And allowing someone to decide how much of their story they want to share.

The little girl may have forgotten the conversation soon afterwards.

The young woman didn't.

Because that mother showed her daughter that difference doesn't have to create distance. A visible disability doesn't have to become something uncomfortable that people pretend not to see.

Sometimes, empathy is simply being brave enough to ask, kind enough to listen, and respectful enough to let someone tell their story in their own way.

Difference isn't something we need to fear, ignore, hide or look away from.

Sometimes, all it needs is a little kindness.