



ALEXANDRA ROWAN FOUNDATION VOICES OF TOMORROW SCHOLARSHIP WINNER: ZURI SCALES, FICTION

Sunlight poured over the stroller, warming the small blanket around the baby. Lila held it tightly as she pushed down the sidewalk, groceries stacked in the basket below. Each step felt heavy and deliberate, as if she was carrying more than just the infant. Her classes seemed distant now, with textbooks gathering dust on the shelf. She shifted the baby in her arms and looked up past a woman rushing toward a café. The woman wore a sharp blazer, and her heels clicked against the pavement. Her hair was pulled back neatly, and she held papers under one arm. Lila blinked. There was something in the woman's eyes—determination? Familiarity? But the street separated them, and the moment faded away.

The other Lila walked through the glass doors of the office she had dreamed about for years, a badge clipped neatly to her blazer. She took a deep breath, straightened her blazer, and watched a colleague wheel a cart of coffee past. In the reflection, she saw a mother with a stroller, moving slowly and focused. Their eyes met briefly in the mirrored glass, sparking a sense of recognition that she couldn't quite place. Then it disappeared as they moved in their own worlds. One carried responsibility that shaped every second of her day, while the other carried ambition, deadlines, and the thrilling taste of independence.

Back in the apartment, the first Lila sang softly to the baby, her lullabies clashing with her ringing phone. A notification for a missed lecture blinked on her cracked screen, but she left it alone. Her life felt full, overwhelming, beautiful, and exhausting. She rocked the stroller, thinking about a future she never asked for but had to navigate. She imagined tiny hands in hers during each heartbreak and joy.

Meanwhile, the other Lila typed quickly at her computer, crafting a presentation that could help her land the promotion she had pursued for years. Her apartment smelled faintly of takeout. The walls were lined with motivational posters and unopened novels. She paused at the window, looking down at the street, and spotted the mother again, pushing the stroller, focused and alive to a different rhythm. She shook her head, laughing softly at how strange it was to feel both envy and admiration at the same time.

Then she sat on the edge of the bathroom, legs pressed together, laughing nervously. Her friend leaned against the doorframe, holding the test. Lila flipped it over. Negative. A wave of relief washed over her, lifting the weight of possibility. The parallel lives of the two Lilas she'd glimpsed, each full of consequences, sacrifices, and choices, collapsed back into a single reality. She would live her life on her own terms, her dreams secure, her freedom hers alone.

Her friend grinned. "Well," she said, nudging Lila, "looks like the universe gave you the choice."

Lila exhaled, closed her eyes, and let out a small laugh. Choice, freedom, control. In that moment, she understood everything she needed to: life was complicated, but her path was her own.

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