

**She Painted Over It**  
**by Milly Leong**  
**Homeschooled**

“Who’s the artist?” the woman asks, picking up a print on my stall. It’s one of my favourites, the one with native birds arranged in a heart. Her eyes are misted over, remembering something.

She’s wearing a jacket that might have been blue once.

“I am!” I say proudly. “I hand drew them all myself.”

She blinks. “Really? Your art teacher must be good. I wish my daughter had stuck with art. But she dropped it the moment grades started to matter.”

Here we go. Another lecture about the virtues of school.

“Yeah, my mum is incredible. But I learnt to draw by practising until I’m happy.” I watch as realisation dawns in her eyes.

“You’re homeschooled? So, you’re not getting a real education? You just... do this?”

She says “real education” like I’ve been raised by wolves with crayons.

Then she seems to realise that she was being rude, and says quickly, “No offence, I just meant... you know, not formal.”

I’ve heard that before. From my dad. From friends’ parents. From just about everyone who doesn’t know me.

“Unschooling, really,” I correct patiently. “This is basically my schooling.”

Her face scrunches. “So, you don’t have a curriculum or... anything? What about maths?”

“Maths?” I grin. “I use it more than I want to, trust me. Giving people change counts.”

She doesn’t laugh.

“My daughter,” she says faintly, “would have been in Year Nine. She had to write essays on Dickens. She said it was boring. But, well, she needed the marks.”

“Cool,” I say. “I read *David Copperfield* last year. We spent weeks trying to talk like Uriah Heep.”

She looks confused for half a second, but then carries on.

“My daughter wanted to be an artist,” she murmurs, almost to herself. She runs her thumb along the edge of the print, not looking at me. “She used to draw on the walls. I painted over them.”

A pause. Then, quietly, “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t.”

Her mouth tightens, but her voice is softer now. “I hope you know what you’re missing.”

That one lands.

Am I missing something? Maybe.

But every time I try to imagine it—the halls, the bells, the cliques, the rules—I feel like I can’t breathe.

Still... I wonder what it’s like to be one of them. To be accepted. To belong.

I look down at my money box. It’s full. And I can’t stop thinking about the monarch butterflies I want to draw next, and how I’ll get them to feel like they’re about to fly off the page.

I look at her. “Maybe I am missing something,” I say.

She nods, a little too fast.

I look her in the eye. “Maybe we both are.”

She goes quiet, her hands still on the print. Then, slowly, she sets it down.

And walks away like someone who’s just remembered a dream they can’t get back to.