**A Lesson in Self-Compassion:**

**“Hey, Can I Get You a Coffee or Tea or Something?”**

One day when I was in graduate school, I was driving home one evening when I noticed that my car was overheating. Just as I arrived in front of my building, the engine stalled completely. It was 5 o’clock on a Friday evening and I was blocking the bike lane, which led to traffic being backed up behind me. Two cars sped past beeping their horns and a cyclist turned and waved his fist as he rode around me. I flipped on my hazard lights.

As I dialled for a tow-truck, the self-critical thoughts and stories started to spin: “Why didn’t I notice earlier that the car was overheating? I should have had it serviced last month. Jeez, I am such a loser”…

I heard more car horns beeping as the woman on the telephone promised that a tow truck would be there within 30 minutes. After I thanked her and hung up, the self-critical stories resumed: “I’m in the way and inconveniencing everyone around me. I bet that car is so annoyed with me. I can’t imagine how utterly incompetent I look.”

I was startled by a knock at the passenger window. A guy with a goatee and a beanie stood next to my car, and I suspected that he was going to give me a hard time for being double-parked and I knew I deserved it. Reluctantly, I lowered the window.

“Hey,” he said. “I work at the cafe right here—can I get you a coffee or tea or something?”

I stared at him, speechless, blinking through the beginnings of tears.

“We’ve also got hot chocolate and herbal teas to choose from,” he said.

He actually meant it.

“Oh,” I said. “Wow. Thank you. I’d love some chamomile tea.”

“You got it,” he said and headed back to the cafe.

I sat there, stunned. This experience did not fit into the story my inner critic had been telling. All of my self-criticism had been completely silenced by this stranger’s spontaneous impulse of kindness.

Suddenly none of this was my fault; It was just something that was happening, and I could allow it. All the stories had been just that: stories.

A few moments later he reappeared with the chamomile tea and handed it to me.

“Here you go,” he said.

“Thanks.” I pulled a couple of bills from my wallet.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he said.

I looked at him and took the tea.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Hey, I’ve been there.”

He tapped the passenger door twice as a goodbye. I put the window back up. The tea was too hot to drink, so I held the paper cup as it warmed my hands.

I let it register some more: This wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t evidence of me having done something wrong. It was just something that was happening, and it could just be that.

I thought about how the self-critical stories had flared up as soon as I found myself in a challenging situation; how automatic it was for me to think that the coffee shop guy was there to yell and criticize me, and how immediately the trance of self-judgment was broken by his act of kindness. In five minutes, he had given me a life-altering lesson in how compassion alchemizes criticism. He had no ulterior motive: he was simply being kind and generous, and he inspired me to be more kind and generous with myself.

If you struggle with self-judgment, tuck this simple phrase into your back pocket. The next time you notice that critical thoughts are present, experiment with asking your inner judge, “Hey, can I get you a coffee or tea or something?” It just might help you interrupt those all-to-familiar patterns and start creating new self-compassionate ones.