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POETRY • PROSE • VISUAL

Universal Language

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“Hindi! Hindi Muli. Ikaw ay hindi maaring gumawa sa akin.”

The outburst came from a small girl in the back of the room. Bushy eyebrows and plain features were framed with shoulder-length black hair. Her wide nose held a pair of cheap wire glasses and full, pale lips were parted. But her eyes! I was receiving the vilest glare I had ever witnessed, yet was clueless as to why.

It was my first day of teaching at Safe Haven, a small school in Los Angeles for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. I was doing my internship to receive my Masters in English as a Second Language. My class consisted of nine girls, their ages varying from six to eight. Up to this moment, things had gone relatively well. I knew when applying for the job that it would be a difficult one. I wasn't only facing a language barrier, but an emotional one as well. What did I know about dealing with sexually abused girls? Absolutely nothing. But I have never been afraid of a challenge, so I approached this with enthusiasm.

“Hindi ko gagawin ito ulit!” the child continued screaming. At the university, we'd been taught to “back off.” When language barriers are present, it's best to give the child some space. But this girl was not yet done. In a mad fit, she flew from her seat and shoved her desk into the row of students who sat next to her. The action didn't create any harm, only shock among her peers. They stared with wide, nervous eyes.

As a teacher, I could not ignore such a scene. I rushed over to my angry student, fearful she would do more damage and eager to calm her down. But the closer I got, the louder she screamed. She was already against the wall when I started towards her, and continued to slide along it until she trapped herself in the corner. I stopped moving, hanging back several feet so as to not crowd her.

“What's wrong, dear?” I kept my voice mild, trying to produce a non-combative environment.

“Lumayo!”

Lumayo? What did that mean? My students came from various parts of the world. This particular student was from the Philippines. I couldn't

understand a word of Filipino, but was confident that my ESL training could see me through this experience.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, inching closer to the irate girl. "I don't know what you're saying."

"Walang mga play! Walang mga play!" She screamed, sliding to the hardwood floor. This is when I should have walked away and let her have her fit without an audience. But the girl did something else: banging her fist on the rough floor, she convulsively tossed her body around, stretching her petite frame in awkward angles. The sounds coming from her mouth changed from screams in a foreign language to the guttural nonsense of a demon. I feared she was having a seizure.

I dropped to my knees next to the child's form. She began shaking uncontrollably, her breathing coming in uneven gasps. I noticed the tight jacket she was wearing and quickly unfastened the buttons, hoping to help her breathe. That's when she stopped hitting the floor and began to hit me. I was slapped and kicked amid terrified screams. My brain vaguely registered the sobs and sniffles of the other girls in the room, but theirs meshed with my own tears. Never in my comfortable, sheltered life had I confronted such pathetic misery. The girl's obvious pain flooded my heart with anxiety and pity. What was wrong with this poor child?

My attempts to restrain her were futile. It was impossible to block her blows and pin her down. She was a tiny girl, but was moving much too fast for me. I don't know what I would have done if help had not arrived. The screams brought my boss, Cheryl, rushing into the room, another of the school directors close behind her. Both women quickly pulled me away from the girl. Cheryl comforted me while the other lady ran for the child psychiatrist who worked at the school. I watched my student helplessly, tears dripping off my chin, while we waited. The child continued to scream and I could see blood on her knuckles where she scraped them against the wood floor. The psychiatrist finally arrived, and it took several of us to pin the girl down while the doctor administered a sedative.

That day felt like an eternity. My classes dragged on forever. The emotional fog suffocating me hindered any teaching ability I had. At the end of the day, my student's eyes held more questions than before we started the lesson. When I was finally done for the day, I rushed over to Cheryl's office. Knocking hesitantly on the open mahogany door, I poked my head in the room.

"Hi," I greeted. "Any word on Malaya?"

Cheryl slipped her glasses off her nose, letting them dangle on the chain around her neck. "Not yet. Come on in; have a seat."

I tentatively sat on the wooden chair, watching as Cheryl picked up the stack of papers she'd been reading and set them aside.

"What's wrong with Malaya?" I cut to the point, ignoring formal small-talk.

Cheryl gazed at the yellow pencil in her hands, twirling it around. "I don't know," she finally admitted, glancing up at me. "While she's never done very well, today was a whole new issue. I've never seen the child like that before. If she'd shown signs like that previously, I never would have put her in a classroom."

I was confused. "What is she usually like?" I asked.

"Well, Malaya has never gotten along with the other children. She refuses to participate in any games or activities with them, refuses to go outside. We've introduced her to many different activities, hoping to find something that sparks her interest." Cheryl shrugged helplessly. "She has a doll that she likes to sit with. That's about it."

I nodded in understanding. I had been discussing recess before Malaya began her screaming fit. These students had never been to an American school before. The term "recess" was as foreign to them as fried food and country music. So I talked of playgrounds, showing pictures of slides and swings, attempting to convey to students who spoke no English what the word meant.

I revealed this to Cheryl. "She was upset at the thought of going to play," I surmised.

"Or scared," Cheryl responded. "It's really not that uncommon for sexually abused children to be this full of fear."

I snorted in contempt. I couldn't help myself. "Not uncommon for a seven year old girl to be scared of a swing set?" I asked.

"The world of Safe Haven is not the real world, dear," Cheryl gently reminded me. She was right. That truth revealed itself to me each day I spent there.

I became absorbed with trying to help Malaya. I devoted all my free time to researching what I knew about her and brainstorming ways to free her from the pain she lived with. I wanted to see this little girl playing, not hiding inside herself. I pictured the victory I would someday have, playing with her on Safe Haven's small playground. I tried to spend time with her and attempted to connect, but each try was ineffective.

Malaya regressed. She constructed huge emotional barriers, not letting

anyone get close. If someone — student or staff member — approached her, she would start screaming once again.

After several weeks without progress, I felt defeated. I had poured through every schoolbook I had regarding ESL, called old teachers and classmates, sent out inquiries to organizations specializing in sexual abuse recovery. Each had marvelous strategies for their own specific fields, but none worked with Malaya. Apparently, dealing with sexual abuse and a language barrier has no documented solution. Dr. Tanya Kay Loeslie, a child psychologist I contacted, came up with a good suggestion. She told me to draw pictures with Malaya, paying close attention to what the child puts on the paper. I decided to give it a try.

I approached Malaya with blank paper and a carton of crayons. She was sitting in the den, holding a Raggedy Ann doll that was missing one eye and had stuffing protruding out its left shoulder.

“Pumunta kaagad!” she yelled angrily at me.

I had only walked a few feet into the room when the child stood and threw the doll towards me. It didn’t come close, but fell halfway between us, landing in a heap on the floor, the precarious left arm twisted behind its back.

I inched over to a plush chair on the opposite side of the room and sank into it, dumping the box of crayons out on the nearby end table.

I began drawing.

Malaya didn’t like me being there. She fled to hide behind a rocking chair. “Hindi! Hindi!”

In mechanic, detached emotion, I continued to work on my picture. She screamed, I drew. Tears gathered behind my eyes, but I blinked them back. I was solely focused on drawing, my concentration on the paper, not my student.

“Walang mga play! Walang mga play!”

Finally, I looked up. What was she saying? I had begun studying Filipino, hoping that learning Malaya’s language would help me connect with her. I was a slow learner, but by this time understood the gist of what Malaya was saying. She didn’t want to play. I scanned my brain for the Filipino word “no.”

“Hindi play. Hindi play,” I assured her. I held up my picture for her to see. “This is for you,” I said. I rose from my seat and carried the picture over to her.

“Hindi!” she yelled “no” at me.

I stopped, holding the picture out towards her. By this time I was close enough that she could touch it. She didn’t. Instead, her eyes caught sight of her doll, still lying in the middle of the floor. She fled over to the soft toy, hugging it close to her chest.

I gazed at the rejected drawing, my fingers caressing the wax image of a girl, her face framed in black hair, smiling while flying high on a swing set. Shaking my head sadly, I slipped out of the room and tossed the paper into the garbage can outside the door.

By this time, I was not only defeated, I was also angry. Emotions deeper than the lakes outside my Minnesota hometown raged in me. Back home everyone abided by the Golden Rule and pretended they were incapable of hate. I knew better now. I was more than capable. I wanted to find every man who had hurt this child and personally kill each one. There was nothing I could do to help Malaya heal, so I longed for vengeance instead.

The music room was directly across from the den. Seeing it filled me with longing. I knew just what I needed to release my fraught emotions. I slipped into the empty room and walked over to the instrument cabinet. My violin lay beneath rough and torn cases holding brass instruments and folders of sheet music. I dug it out and pried open the case.

Lifting the instrument up to the light, I studied the familiar patterns in the wood. My fingers caressed it tenderly. Without wasting another moment, I picked up my bow and proceeded to tune. I scanned my mental catalogue, searching through my music repertoire. It didn’t take me long to pick a song. I had learned the Meditation from Thais several years ago, when my Symphony Orchestra performed it during our spring concert. It was one of the most expressive works I knew. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and stretched the bow across the string. The notes meshed with time, creating a whirlwind emotional experience. Healing came when the horsehair met perlon strings vibrating against varnished wood. I played without giving a thought to the rest of the day. I let the music flow, performing at a subconscious level. I was not concerned with whether I was playing the notes on the proper string or if my tempo was lagging. And dynamics? I ignored them. I would not play this as Jules Massenet had intended, but as I felt. In fact, I could hardly claim to play it at all. I cried this song, and that tearless weeping was the most healing cry I’ve ever had.

I practiced for a couple hours before noticing her. Malaya was standing in the doorway to the room, hanging on the doorknob. The haunted, upset look had fallen from her face and instead, her wide eyes held a spark of wonder. Slowly, I lowered the violin. I was so full of emotion that my first attempt to talk failed. I cleared my throat and tried again.

“W-Would you like to touch it?” I whispered, holding the instrument out toward her.

She took baby steps toward me until she stood by my side. Hesitantly, she traced her fingers down the strings. When her fingers reached the end of the fingerboard, where powdery rosin still caked the strings, a high-pitched scratch came from the instrument. It was soft — barely noticeable — but the child jumped back in surprise. I didn't move; I let her call the shots this time.

Suddenly, she pushed the instrument back towards me. I understood that I was supposed to play. But now that I had an audience, my song selection was not so simple. What was I supposed to perform that would soothe her? Then I looked into Malaya's mournful eyes and read the sad plight of her history. The perfect song came to me. It was a pop-culture song, so the melody was simple. Boring, even. But as I figured out the notes, I grew braver. I began improvising until I had built the mournful song into the antidote for heartache that American youth had spent decades using it as. I wished I could sing and play at the same time, but then realized it would not matter, for Malaya would not understand the significance of the words. That didn't prevent my mind from singing, however.

Yesterday/ All my troubles seemed so far away/ Now it looks as though they're here to stay/ Oh, I believe in yesterday. Suddenly/ I'm not half the man I used to be/ there's a shadow hanging over me/ Oh, yesterday came suddenly...

When I reached the end of the song, I lowered the instrument and looked over at Malaya. She reached out to touch the patterns in the wood once again. I was struck with an idea. Holding the violin towards the girl, I allowed her to take the instrument. Then I gently moved her hands until she was properly holding the violin. Placing my bow in her right hand, I closed my fingers over hers and together we drew the carbon-fiber scepter across the string. As a scratchy "A" pitch sounded in the room, Malaya gave a small start. But once recovered, she looked up at me, beaming. We stood together, playing different pitches for several minutes, before I slowly moved her left hand across the fingerboard and helped her play the simplest song in all the music world. As we played the notes together, I began to sing.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star/ How I wonder what you are!/ Up above the world, so high/ Like a diamond in the sky/ Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are!"

Then I heard the most beautiful piece of music ever to cross my ears: Malaya laughed. Letting go of her fears, the child pressed her full lips into a wide grin and allowed a tiny giggle to burst forth. It was a small laugh, yet, to me, it rang throughout the room with more clarity and virtuosity than any work Beethoven, Bach or Vivaldi ever composed.

The sound brought Cheryl to the open door. Gasping, she asked. "What is Malaya doing?"

I laughed joyfully. "She's playing!"