

my discussion to one classroom at one school, which I'll call Sycamore Elementary School.

The class actually had twenty-five kids, too many for one teacher. Grace was an excellent teacher, but there wasn't enough of her to go around. Many kids who were eager to work couldn't get the help they needed. For this story I chose to describe only ten of the kids. I picked both kids whose parents were doing a good job making choices in America and kids whose parents were choosing all the wrong things. And I picked kids who varied in resilience and overall adjustment to America.

#### SYCAMORE SCHOOL

*The number one thing is to care for children.*

#### CLASS ROSTER:

Abdul	Ignazio	Ly	Trinh	Deena
Pavel	Khoa	Mai	Walat	Fatima

September 6, 1999

Sycamore Elementary School is a three-story redbrick building just off a busy street that is lined with a McDonald's, Arab and Mexican markets, liquor stores, pawnshops, and a Vietnamese karaoke bar. The houses around the school are small, close together, and dilapidated. Police cars cruise the area. Unemployed men stand on the corners and in the alleys. The school was built for the children of Czechs and Germans, but it now welcomes students of all colors and ethnic groups.

Walking in the first day, I admired a sycamore tree with its sheltering white branches and big greeny gold leaves. There is something about the shape of a sycamore that reminds me of embracing arms. On the playground, a Latino boy scored in a vigorous soccer game and his team shouted and high-fived each

other. Soccer is the universal solvent in Lincoln—Vietnamese, Mexican, Haitian, Romanian, and Serbian kids all like soccer.

Inside the school, a boy who looked like a biker's kid, wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt, watched a girl with dreadlocks twirl in circles, singing to herself. A teacher listened to an Arabic-speaking mother in a hijab. The mother was surrounded by her four wide-eyed kids, the youngest of whom clung to her skirt. The teacher imitated talking on a phone, then she wrote down a phone number and handed it to the mother.

I walked past a sign that said YOU HAVE ONLY ONE CHANCE TO HAVE A CHILDHOOD. I examined pictures of houses from all over the world—a Thai houseboat, Panamanian hutches, a Somali camp—and a display of macaroni-and-cereal necklaces, some of which had been nibbled on.

I signed in at the front office and a third grader named Judy Running Wolf escorted me to a portable classroom, a trailer outside the main building beside the clothing and food distribution center. My new class was a ragtag group, dressed in Salvation Army clothes, with an amazing array of bad haircuts. Most of them looked between eight and eleven, although some might have been small twelve-year-olds.

They were holding Village Inn menus and practicing how to order. The kids giggled and pointed at the glossy pictures of cheeseburgers and blueberry pie. In a dozen languages they discussed the pictures as if they were rare objets d'art. These kids came from many religious traditions and had food taboos and preferences. Some kids don't eat lettuce. Others didn't like milk. But today several ordered pretend hamburgers and boasted they had eaten before at McDonald's. Others ordered the most expensive dishes on the menu and bragged about how much it cost.

Their teacher watched them converse. Grace was a pretty woman in her late thirties. She didn't miss much and nothing rattled her. She spoke softly, laughed easily, and kept the room reasonably calm without making threats. As the kids ordered pretend meals, she told me a little about each of them.

Grace's biggest worry was Abdul, a beautiful kid with nut-colored skin and deep dimples. He was an Iraqi boy who had watched his younger brother freeze to death in the snow when his family walked barefoot across mountains into Turkey. Possibly he was brain damaged from gas attacks during the Gulf War. Abdul rarely did his work and he didn't seem to connect with anyone. Other teachers thought he should be in special education classes, but Grace wanted to give him a chance to adjust. She said many of the ELL kids look like special education kids at first, but then they adapted.

Pavel sat beside Abdul. He was a big awkward kid from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) with tangled blond hair and his shirt half tucked in. Grace said he was much indulged by his parents. Pavel was good-natured, but restless and lazy. He preferred playing with Nibbles the rat to doing his studies.

Ignazio was a good-hearted Mexican boy whose parents worked long hours at a sugar beet refinery. Nobody at home seemed able to help him with his studies. He was lovable and well behaved, but not very focused. Grace worried that Ignazio might be picked on because he was chubby and innocent.

Khoa was skinny and wore tight polyester pants that didn't reach his ankles. He wore a torn Star Wars T-shirt and his shiny hair badly needed a wash and a cut. He was clowning and hamming it up, making everyone laugh at his outrageous order of four hamburgers and three malts. Grace said his family had experienced great trauma getting to this country from Vietnam. In Lincoln, he lived in a rough neighborhood and his older brother

had been in trouble with the law. Khoa was a fan of violent video games and twice Grace had confiscated nunchaks from him. Still, she felt he was essentially a good person.

Beside Khoa sat three Vietnamese girls. Grace said, "I put them beside Khoa because he can make them laugh."

Ly was a Vietnamese girl from a big hardworking family. Her parents were strict and Ly had extremely good manners. Her schoolwork was consistently A-plus.

Mai was a small angry-looking girl on the edge of the group. She had lost her mother when she was three, just before she and her father came to America. Her father had remarried and Mai lived with her father, stepmother, and new baby brother. Mai was troubled and had few ways to deal with her troubles. She scratched her arms or pulled her hair when she was upset.

Beside Mai, Trinh stared at her glossy menu. Grace said, "Trinh will not answer questions. I haven't heard her speak yet." Her parents had drowned crossing from Vietnam into Thailand. She lived with her grandparents, who had told Grace that Trinh spoke occasionally at home.

Walat was a handsome, self-contained, and competent boy from Iraq. His family was part of the close community of Kurds. His dad had been an engineer in Kurdistan and, even without credentials, he had found related work in America. Walat's mother was able to stay at home, study English, and help the kids with their homework.

As Grace told me about Deena's life, the small blond-haired girl ordered an imaginary ice-cream sundae. She had seen her grandparents and uncles killed in Bosnia, then she and her parents had been herded into an internment camp. Her mother was depressed and her father was incapacitated by stress. Solid, energetic, and intelligent, Deena spoke the best English in her family and was often kept out of school to translate.

Next to Deena, Fatima held up her menu and, like Deena, she ordered a pretend ice-cream sundae. Fatima was a Kurdish girl who'd been burned on her face and arms when Iraqis bombed her village. Grace told me that her scars had caused her some trouble at school. Some ELL kids came from cultures where deformed people are shunned. These kids did not want to hold her hand. "In America," Grace had explained, "We treat all people with respect." Fatima's father could not work, and her mother supported the family of five by working at a food-processing factory. Grace said, "Fatima can wear me out asking for validation."

Grace tapped on her desk and the kids stopped ordering food and looked up. She introduced me as "Miss Mary" and the kids stared at me with interest. Ly smiled. Khoa loudly declared that I looked old, very old. He kept saying this and finally I said to him, "Yes, I could be your grandmother." After that, he stopped.

Grace picked the name of a helper out of a hat. Today it was Fatima, whose job it would be to feed Nibbles and distribute supplies. Grace had the class look at a calendar and take turns saying, "It's Tuesday, September 6, 1999." She asked what kind of weather it was. "Clear," shouted Khoa, and Grace smacked a yellow plastic sun on the calendar board.

As Fatima, Deena, and Ly worked at their spelling, Khoa talked about poop and eating boogers. He looked like he needed everything—a bath, a good meal, a full night's sleep, and lap time with a patient adult. He watched me as closely as I watched him, and he winked whenever our eyes met.

Pavel twisted in his seat as if he were being tortured, broke his pencil, and wrinkled and smeared his papers. But like Khoa, he somehow managed to be disruptive and sociable at the same time. Together they gave the class a certain energy that wasn't all bad.

Grace went over the spelling words: "father," "mother," and "uncle." Then she began a discussion of what people needed to do at home. She wrote down phrases on the board such as "sew clothes," "mow yard," "cook food," "change baby's diapers." When she said this, Khoa shouted out, "Change the diapers or the baby will get a stinky butt." He laughed uproariously at his own joke. Grace cleared her throat and asked what else should families do at home.

Ignazio shouted, "Buy food." Deena said, "The number one thing is to care for the children." Ignazio elaborated, "Without food you might die." Fatima said, "Buy clothes. Without clothes you can't go outside." Mai said, "Take care of the baby."

Grace asked what chores were not so important to do. Pavel shouted out, "It's not important to pay the bills." Grace said gently, "In America that is pretty important."

Grace asked the class to write a story about a family who forgets to do some jobs. I pulled my little chair up by Abdul. He bristled and turned away as if he were allergic to me. However, for the first time that day, he did some work. He hunched away from me, working on his assignment so that I wouldn't stay with him. Grimly, I reflected that I was helping him, but it wasn't much fun. When he finished, I checked his work. Then I turned to Pavel who had been waiting impatiently for help. He was a big teddy bear of a kid. He wrote, "Good dads take their sons fishing."

I asked him if he liked to fish and his eyes brightened. Strudly, I said maybe the class could go fishing sometime. Pavel was riveted by the suggestion. He asked, "Tomorrow? Where? How would we get there? Could I bring my own pole?"

I realized what I had done and tried to put the rabbit back in the hat, but, of course, I failed. Other kids also got excited. We never finished the spelling words.

It was time to go. Fatima picked up papers and pencils. I helped Ignazio with the broken zipper on his coat. Ly flashed me a smile and said, "I'll see you next Monday, Miss Mary." Trinh and Deena slipped out, but Fatima waved shyly at me. I gave Abdul a hug, but he shrugged it off. Pavel had one last fishing question and I smiled sheepishly at Grace, remarking, "I've created a monster." As Khoa dashed out the door with his shoelaces untied, he asked me, "Will you come back tomorrow?"

As I watched Mai walk across the yard into the main school building, I thought about her complex situation. I wanted to help her with her feelings about her baby brother, her step-mother, and even about her mother's death. She was raised in a culture that teaches the suppression of negative emotions. It was unlikely she knew what to do with her troubled feelings.

Her scratches were a call for help. I recommended that Grace do all she could to feature Mai in class, to give her some power and visibility. I suggested a Big Sister from the YWCA so that she could have one person who cared just for her.

These children had many complicated needs, including the need to heal from great sadness. Some dealt with the sadness by withdrawing, others by clinging. Trinh, Deena, Mai, and Abdul needed therapists, but they all came from places where mental problems are unacceptable. Many students came from cultures where creative expression in children isn't valued. Yet, they had great needs to understand and share their experiences. Group storytelling would be great, and art and music therapy might work because children don't need verbal skills for them. Play and laughter are therapeutic. I had never been around kids who loved to laugh as much as ELL kids.

The ELL kids needed help with self-definition. I wanted to put their birthdays on the calendar and take their pictures. I wanted to identify what each child did best. Question games

might help. What was their favorite food? What games did they like? What was the scariest thing they ever did? The bravest thing? What was their earliest memory?

With ELL classes, I really understood the value of classrooms small enough that each child could be given individual attention. The kids were at very different developmental and acculturation levels. Some kids were precocious from war experiences but had missed kid experiences. Some children cared for younger siblings, cleaned and cooked, or even did factory piece-work at home. A few had no play in their lives.

There were differences in intelligence, motivation to learn, energy, confidence, and likability. There were differences in the amount of trauma the kids had experienced and in the amount of family and community support they received in America. They all had much in common—they were strangers in a strange land, eager to be accepted. They liked games, music, puppets, and cookies. And they had a thousand needs. Compared to American kids, they tended to be better behaved, more respectful of adults, and less spoiled. Grace said the longer they were in America the more likely they were to act up.

It helped me to remember that these kids had simple needs as well as complicated ones, needs to be hugged, helped with spelling words, smiled at, and read to. Even small acts of kindness made a difference.

I had been in class three hours and was ready for a nap. How do teachers do this five days a week, eight hours a day?

September 22, 1999

I approached Sycamore on a crisp morning, with the sky blue, the leaves red and gold, and the light hitting the sycamore just right and turning its trunk silvery. When I walked into the classroom, Khoa jumped up and hugged me in an exaggerated,

self-mocking way. He was both affectionate and embarrassed to be seeking affection. Pavel shouted out that there would be a fishing trip next week. I looked at Grace and she shrugged. I apologized, and she said, "Don't feel bad. The kids are really excited about this."

Ly plopped on my lap. Today she wore a Yun-Yum T-shirt and faded bell-bottom jeans. She weighed about forty pounds and reminded me of a hummingbird, light as air, but pure energy. She had a cough and twice I offered her cough drops from my purse. I invited Mai to join us and I read them a Laura Ingalls Wilder story. Ly snuggled in. Mai sat stiffly, but she listened carefully to my voice.

Today Walat was student helper. As he handed out paper and pencils, Grace wrote tool words—"hammer," "nail," "sissors," "screwdriver"—on the board. Walat looked at pictures of these tools with great interest.

Abdul and Pavel scuffled over a pencil. Pavel wore a green sweat suit from Goodwill that left a few inches of skin between his shirt and pants. Instead of watching the board, Pavel doodled and scratched his stomach. I moved over and sat between him and Abdul.

Trinh looked exactly as she had last week, with the same outfit and the same inscrutable expression. Beside her, Deena leafed through a picture book on animals of the jungle. Twice Deena tried to show Trinh a picture and start a talk, but Trinh ignored her.

Whenever Grace asked a question, Fatima raised her hand with ready, but not always right, answers. Fatima and Deena were both from Muslim families, but they were being raised quite differently. Fatima's family was more traditional. She wore long flowery dresses and a head scarf. Deena dressed in a sweat suit and wore her hair in a ponytail.

Ignazio wandered in late. The ELL students were often tardy and Grace was casual about time. She permitted table talk and interruptions in the lessons for side discussions. She limited her discipline to a soft "Let's use our quiet voices now."

Deena and Fatima argued about a book. Grace stayed out of it until Fatima called Deena stupid, then she said, "In this class we are kind to each other." Ly, who had been watching anxiously, smiled to herself.

Abdul had his head on the desk and wasn't even pretending to work. I sat by him and gently prodded him into picking up his pencil. His body language shouted, "Go away," but I persisted.

Grace asked the students to write a letter to members of a sorority to thank them for a fund-raising project for the school. She wrote a simple letter on the board as an example. Walat and Ly followed the format exactly and soon had good letters ready. Pavel's letter was covered with smudges and cross outs: "Thank you for caring about our school. We want you to stay our friends." Deena's letter was neatly written and flowery: "Thank you with all of my heart for your great efforts. I wish you long lives and many great times."

Abdul and I labored over his letter with me doing most of the work. But when it was time to sign his name, Abdul suggested that we sign it, "From one of the kids who learns the best, Abdul."

Mai struggled with handwriting, spelling, and even the sentiment. I had the feeling she had heard few words of thanks herself. But when she finished, I praised her work. She shyly told me she had a Big Sister now, a young woman named Amy who came over Saturday afternoons. Next week Amy was taking her to the park. Mai spoke of Amy as if she were a fairy godmother.

Grace demonstrated simple tools: a lever, a pulley, and an inclined plane. While she talked, the kids passed around Nibbles, a docile black-and-white rat. Except for Trinh, all of the kids appeared to love Nibbles. As Deena whispered and stroked Nibbles, she seemed to relax a little and her blue eyes softened.

We sang "Farmer in the Dell" and used the tool names. Then Grace led the class in a patriotic song, "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," which many sang as "Columbus Jump in the Ocean." Still, it was a rousing version that had us all clapping at the end.

I had read of children in a refugee camp in Angola who were singing and dancing as a way to learn their lessons and heal from the trauma of war. I wished we could do more teaching in song.

#### September 29, 1999—*The Fishing Trip*

It was a good day for the trip—blue sky, seventy degrees, and still. Pavel ran up to me when I walked into the classroom. He had a pole and a brand-new tackle box filled with lures and a can of government corn labeled for distribution to low-income people. But that corn was for the fish—his mother had packed him a Big Mac and candies. Khoa was jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box. Deena in her red cape with her blond curls looked like Little Red Riding Hood. She asked if we could bring Nibbles along. Grace said, "No, I'm sorry."

Ignazio unzipped his jacket and slipped Nibbles in by his stomach, but Grace gently lifted Nibbles out and put him away. Fatima held up her arms and said, "Carry me." Grace said, "Our arms are full of equipment." We marched everyone to the special vans and drove to Holmes Lake.

At the lake parking lot, we passed out poles. While I baired hooks, Grace gave instructions on casting and reeling. Abdul,

Ignazio, and Walat had fished before, but Trinh, Ly, and Deena watched what was clearly a new lesson. Pavel proudly prepared his pole, while Khoa cast blithely at the picnic table. Mai hung back, but I took her hand and helped her select a fishing spot. Before he began, Pavel ate his Big Mac; "For energy," he said.

With much shouting and bragging about skills, the other kids spread out along the shore. It was a nice tableau—red and gold trees, silver water, and happy children. Trinh cast once then set her pole down and stared across the lake. Deena's red coat shone against the blue water. She walked over to Trinh and asked her if she needed help. Trinh shook her head no, but Deena stayed beside her anyway. Ly danced along the shore, pirouetting from rock to rock.

Mai found some broken glass and scratched at her arm. I went over and took the glass away. I said, "It isn't good for you to hurt yourself when you do not know what to do."

Ignazio tossed his line, snagging, then ripping, then snagging again. Soon I was retrying a hook for him, untangling other lines, rebaiting hooks, and then, miracle of miracles, taking off a fish. Ignazio shouted out, "*Gracias a Dios!*" and held up his five-inch catfish for all to see. Just then Walat caught a little sun perch, which he expertly took off himself. I took his picture holding his fish up. Then he gently put it in our bucket.

Pavel was upset that Walat and Ignazio had caught the first fish and he positioned himself in their area. Meanwhile, Khoa cast his entire pole into the water and jumped in after it. By the time we got him out of the water he was soaked and had lost a shoe and his pole. But he had achieved what he wanted, which was to steal the show from Walat, who had now caught a second fish.

With what sounded like Russian cursing, Pavel redoubled his efforts. Fatima grew discouraged and sat down on a pile of

rocks. Soon Deena and Trinh joined her, and the girls watched a green caterpillar crawl across the grass. Fatima wanted to pick it up, but Deena said firmly, "Leave her alone."

Meanwhile, Abdul had also quit fishing but he noticed that Ignazio's line was all tangled up and he worked to unravel the bird nest of tackle. For the first time since I'd met him he seemed interested in something. Walat caught another perch and then Ly pulled in a small bass. She danced around with her fish, looking like happiness personified.

Watching kids fish was a good way to learn about them. Some like Walat and Ly were patient and methodical; others like Pavel and Khoá couldn't settle down. Ignazio was enthusiastic but clumsy. Trinh and Fatima were indifferent to the sport, while Deena, an animal rights activist in the making, kept asking Grace if the fishes' mouths were hurt by the hooks.

With her pole still in the water, Mai wandered off alone. She sat under a willow tree, her hands folded in her lap. The natural world is a great healer and her body looked more relaxed.

Soon we had twenty perch and the small catfish—Walat caught seven, while Pavel hadn't caught any. Pavel's frustration had built, making him a less and less competent fisherman. He wouldn't stay in one spot but ran to wherever anyone else had caught a fish and wrestled for their place. Then, when nothing happened, he would try a new piece of tackle or eat his candies.

Meanwhile, Abdul fixed Fatima's pole and untangled Ly's line. He messed with Ignazio's broken reel. I wondered if we could find him a shop project or even let him follow the maintenance staff around.

Ignazio held a fish up to his lips and kissed it, talking to it as if it were a little pet. Then Deena and Walat released all the fish. As they swam away, Deena asked, "Will they live?"

Grace got out Five Alive and Goldfish. The kids liked those

little cracker fish, but they didn't like the bees that gathered around the juice. Sill, Pavel and Ignazio managed to drink three cups of juice each and then needed a bathroom.

Abdul bragged to no one in particular, "I fixed three poles and I'd fix Khoá's, too, if we could find it." Khoá shouted unapologetically, "My pole lives with the fishes now."

Walat, Ly, and Deena gathered and stacked the poles. All the kids looked happy today, the way people do when they are lucky enough to be outdoors in beautiful weather. I thought how rich our country is, and yet we are all inside toiling on gorgeous days. It is hard on everyone, but especially on children.

We took more pictures, passed out the rest of the Goldfish, and then, alas, headed for the vans. Pavel said, "If we could just stay a while longer, I could catch a big fish." I didn't say, "We'll come back soon."

October 14, 1999

It was a blue-sky day and the leaves were turning on the sycamore. There is something about a crisp fall morning, walking into a school, the voices of children, the smell of sunshine on leaves, that brings back my own childhood. I could see Beaver City Elementary, smell the chalk and the cereal breath of my classmates.

I'd been sick for a week. And several of the students had colored get-well cards for me. Khoá was an origami master and his card was large and elaborate. Ly had written, "Miss Mary, you are so nice. I missed you." Deena had drawn fish and flowers and written, "Please get well, Miss Mary." But Mai wouldn't look at me, and Pavel asked accusingly, "Were you really sick?"

These kids had said too many good-byes and they didn't like feeling abandoned, even for a few days. I made a point to stare

loudly that I was healthy now and would be returning regularly. I passed around pictures of our fishing trip. Pavel asked if he could keep the one of him with his new tackle box. I handed it to him but reflected that Pavel always wanted more attention, more food, and more time with Nibbles. Many of the kids were like him, filled with needs of every kind. Yet there were also kids like Trinh who appeared to want nothing from any of us. Today Trinh moved like a duck on water, movement without motion, gliding.

I watched Mai draw her baby brother, then beside his crib, she drew a giant red Stop sign. I asked her if she had gone to the children's museum with Amy and she nodded. "Amy is good," she said soberly.

While Grace gave a spelling test, Abdul fooled with two video games—Nitro and War Zone. Grace said, "Put them away or I will have to keep them." She whispered to me, "I wish we could ban these games. Yesterday I confiscated Mayhem and Deadly Arts from Khoa. These kids have enough problems without violent role models."

As if to demonstrate her concerns, at just that moment, Abdul and Pavel got into a scuffle. Grace sent both boys to quiet corners to think about their behavior. She said to me, "It's been a rough morning. Khoa was teased on the playground about his purple pants. Ignazio was called a wetback." She sighed. "Many of these kids come from war zones where violence is the first thing people do when they are upset. I want them to learn they have choices."

She called the boys together and talked to them. "Pavel, what else could you have done when Abdul took your backpack?"

Pavel said, "I could have asked him, 'What do you need, buddy?'" Grace hugged him and laughed. "That's right."

Deena wrote her numbers along one side of the paper and

diligently began to spell out words. Ly and Walat did the same. Ignazio, who had some egg yolk on his shirt, kept rubbing his eyes, and I suspected he had stayed up late to see his parents.

Amazingly, Abdul asked for my help and I went to sit by him. With me almost doing his work, we completed the spelling test. He never looked at me, but he smiled when I helped him, and afterward, he showed his paper to the other students.

Deena asked me to feel her forehead. She was hot and said her head hurt. Grace wrote out a slip and sent her to the nurse. She told me that Deena had been stressed lately. Twice this last week Deena had stayed home to translate for her mother's medical appointments.

Khoa handed me a drawing that said, "I like you. Do you like cats?" The words were enclosed in a heart surrounded by small drawings of cats and of me. He'd given me big eyes, a big smile, and very curly hair. I smiled to think that might be how he saw me.

Today's work was a unit on grooming. Fatima wore a long silky pink dress covered with red roses. She had blue nail polish on her fingers and toes. Trinh almost never took off her jacket. Today Ly wore a white corduroy dress with a faux leopard-skin collar and Mary Jane shoes with white lacy socks. Khoa and Pavel looked like they should exchange clothes. Pavel's T-shirt didn't cover his round belly while Khoa wore a Big Red T-shirt that looked like a blanket on him. Only Walat was always carefully groomed in new Kmart clothes.

Ignazio had protruding teeth and Fatima's teeth were very crooked. I wondered if their parents would be able to afford orthodontists later. Many of the kids had bad breath and I wondered if they came from countries without toothbrushes.

Grace explained that Americans brush their teeth two times a day and that we take showers daily. The kids were amazed by