

white American dress. Ly said she would be a doctor in Vietnam. Khoa said he would be a criminal, but when nobody laughed, he changed his future career to fireman.

Grace and Wátat pulled the shades, turned off the lights, and turned on the video. We got to see a movie of *The Lotus Seed*, which began with a poem.

*Nothing that grows in a pond
Surpasses the beauty of a lotus flower,
With its green leaves and silky yellow styles
Amidst milky white petals.
Though mired in mud, its silky yellow styles,
Its milky white petals and green leaves
Do not smell of mud.*

—ANONYMOUS

In the film, women in traditional gowns sell flowers along the Perfume River in Hue. But the hero is a young girl who tells the story of the lotus. All of the kids were spellbound, but especially Khoa, Mai, Ly, and Trinh. The lotus seed could survive cold and fire, last a hundred years, and still grow all over the world. The lotus was a good symbol for Ly. She had been through so much, in so much metaphorical mud, and yet, she was emerging clean and beautiful.

Khoa loudly said, "When this movie ends, I will explain everything to you." Mai said, "I come from a town like that one." Twice Khoa shouted out, "I know her." Once Ly said, "That is my friend." For the first time all year, Trinh's eyes were sparkly and her face shone.

I thought how rarely Trinh saw a face like hers on TV, how rarely the hero of any story was a ten-year-old Vietnamese girl. This was too bad since many girls like Ly and Trinh were heroes and deserved to be recognized. Also, it helped all girls to see

themselves reflected in that great mirror of life, the television. Being represented signaled the girls that their story mattered. As I watched Trinh become animated, I realized how badly she needed to hear that message.

We need to hear refugee stories; they are more interesting and hopeful than many of the stories we do hear. We Americans watch more movies about space aliens and serial killers than we do about Vietnamese children. But today Trinh blossomed. She spoke for the first time in class. She said, "That little girl looked like me."

As the children left, I handed out "lisi," the special red-and-gold packets with dollar bills. Grace was smiling. I was temporarily cured of my seasonal affective disorder.

February 16, 2000

Before all the kids arrived, Grace talked about Abdul. She was thinking of getting a translator for a meeting with his parents. She wanted to ask how Abdul was at home and if he was different since the family had been bombed crossing the mountains.

As we talked, Abdul arrived wearing a new blue-and-white-checkered shirt. With his creamy skin and big liquid eyes, his appearance was perfect but his psyche had been damaged. The pathology of the world had injured this boy. How different the Gulf War must have looked to Abdul than it had to me.

In fact, all the historical events these kids had experienced seem different to me now. I am much more aware now that many Vietnamese paid a terrible price for being our friends during what they call the American War. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia seem much sadder now that I know children from those countries. Now, every war has a human face. Nothing is abstract and faraway anymore.

Ly raced into the room and handed me a beautiful handmade valentine that said "I love Miss Mary." I almost wept.

This week the spelling words were about feelings. Grace read them out: "Happy," "sad," "mad," "surprised," and "scared." The word "sad" triggered Pavel to bring up the rat's death. Deena said quickly, "We are happy to have a new rat." Fatima said, "I was scared to fly to America."

I asked about anger. Abdul said, "I'm mad at my father for shouting at me." Grace and I exchanged looks. Ignazio said, "I am mad when we don't have enough to eat." Mai said, "I am mad when my father doesn't come home from work."

Grace read a book entitled, *What Would You Do?* The first question was, "What would you do if you went home from school and were locked out?" Khoah joked he would pee in the bushes. Deena said, "I would be scared and sad." Ly said, "I would pray for my mother to return." Pavel said, "I would break in."

This led to another animated round of robbery stories. The kids thought that in America all robbers were African Americans. Grace worked to dispel this myth, but there was a big issue here. Fatima said she had seen blacks stab people on television, and Abdul said his parents were afraid of blacks and wouldn't go out at night for fear black people would rob them. This fear came mostly from watching television and movies where so often African Americans are portrayed as criminals.

Grace explained 911 and also what to do if your parents are not home after school—look for a Neighborhood Watch house sign in a window, go to that house, and call the police. The kids were clearly skeptical. Many came from countries where the police were associated with violence against ordinary people.

We moved back to "sad." Deena felt sad in Bosnia when-

ever she heard gunfire. Mai said, "I felt sad when my mother died." Grace hugged her and said, "I am glad you told us that." Khoah said, "I would feel sad if a dog barfed on me." Everyone laughed.

Pavel said, "I am sad when kids pick on me." That led to a discussion of bullies and prejudice, which all of the kids had experienced. It was hard to sort out which were usual school bully stories and which were stories of prejudice. These kids, like the African Americans they feared, were sometimes unfairly pegged as having a host of undesirable qualities.

Grace talked about prejudice, about how it came from fear and ignorance and about how it could hurt people's feelings. She asked the class to promise her they wouldn't be prejudiced and hurtful of others. They solemnly nodded.

She said that if the kids were picked on, they should tell a teacher. Abdul made his fists like boxing gloves and said, "I would fight the bullies." All of the boys loudly agreed. Ly said, "I don't think a teacher could help." Silently, I had to agree with Ly.

Khoah said that he had bad dreams after he stayed up watching horror movies with his brothers. I wished his brothers were a little more protective of him. Better role modeling at home could make a big difference. Pavel and Ignazio also had been frightened by "bad movies." The kids interrupted each other with stories of scary things. I thought of Adrienne Rich's line, "That which cannot be spoken becomes unspeakable." Better to speak here where the kids had Grace, myself, and the pets to calm them down afterward.

Grace handed out paper and crayons and asked the kids to draw pictures of bad dreams they'd had. Trinh drew a picture of a car following her home from school. Ignazio drew a picture

of big dogs chasing him and wrote, "A dog chased me." Then he said to Grace, "That's me. I have a gun." Grace said, "I hope it's a tranquilizer gun."

Mai drew a house fire with her baby brother and stepmother on the second floor looking out a window and she and her father standing outside. After all his statements about having no fear, Abdul could think of nothing to draw. I reflected on the irony that he'd been bombed and seen his brother freeze to death. Yet, he insisted he had no fear. Walat, who had been quiet during the discussion, drew a picture of airplanes with bombs dropping from their bellies. I wondered if he, like Abdul, had been bombed.

Khoa, the best artist in the class, drew himself in bed with two ghosts and a glittery disco ball above him. He drew himself sleeping with a sword by his side. He said, "I'm not scared. I boogie with the ghosts." Then he danced salaciously for the benefit of us all.

Grace looked through the drawings then said, "Before you go today, I think we should draw a happy picture." All the students spent a few minutes drawing something that made them smile.

March 15, 2000

It was a gorgeous spring morning. The sycamore hadn't yet leafed out, but soon it would. Fatima waved her cast-free arm at me. Ly came over to hug me and she kept hugging me. Khoa asked me to sit by him. Much to my surprise, Trinh smiled at me. She must have had a wild bout of spring fever.

I asked Abdul how he was. He said proudly that he was working on pipes in the boys' bathroom. He said, "I don't have time to come to class. I should be helping Mr. Trvdy."

Grace whispered about the conference with Abdul's mother,

who had come with a translator. The mother was pregnant, due in May. Grace told her that Abdul wasn't ready to pass into the next grade. The mother told Grace that in the old country kids were beaten if they didn't learn and she recommended that the school whip Abdul. When Grace explained that we don't do that in America, the mother hadn't been pleased.

When the mother talked about the war, she broke into sobs. When Grace gently asked if Abdul had experienced any toxic chemicals, his mother beat her breasts and tried to run out of the room. Grace apologized for upsetting her and told her about Abdul's work with the maintenance man. The mother asked if the school was working her son instead of teaching him. As Grace told me this story, she rolled her eyes.

That morning Grace explained about St. Patrick's Day and reminded the kids to wear green. Mai had heard that if they didn't wear green they would be pinched. Deena had heard that boys chased the girls and kissed them. These rumors led to whispers and worried looks. Grace said that she didn't think they would get pinched or kissed, but to wear green just to be safe. The scared looks reminded me just how vulnerable these kids were. Everything here was new, and until they experienced events, they had no way to know they were safe.

Grace gave the kids the assignment of unscrambling their spelling words. Abdul asked for my help. Even though we spoke very little, I was starting to feel a connection with him. I would be hard-pressed to explain why. It was something about the way he smiled at me, a more connected smile. Together we finished ahead of some of the others.

He lifted his paper high above his head and announced loudly that he was finished. It was the first time all year he had truly completed work early. Grace made him an award that was covered with ribbons and stars and said, "To Abdul, for paying

attention in class and doing his work." Abdul held the award up for all to see. In fact, he held his award all morning.

Trinh worked slowly and twice Deena leaned over to help her. Ly wore new glasses today. They made her look more serious; still, when she saw me looking at her, she broke into her usual grin. Neither Ignazio nor Pavel finished their work. Abdul lorded his finished piece over them. Khoa gave up halfway through and poked at Pavel. Pavel almost punched him, but then he just made a joke and looked away. Grace said, "Thank you, Pavel, for using your head not your fists." Fatima, Trinh, and Deena worked together and soon had their papers done perfectly. Abdul bragged to Walat, "I got a hundred on that paper."

Class ended with the kids inviting me to the St. Patrick's Day party. I suspected they wanted a protector in the event they were attacked by kissing or pinching kids.

As the class left, Grace told me sadly that Sycamore had "lost points" because the students didn't score well on standardized tests. Resources would be cut and they'd lose their media specialist and their music and art staff. Grace said that she'd have to teach to the tests which she hated to do, especially with these kids who needed practical knowledge, socialization, and help with trauma.

May 3, 2000

It was a beautiful spring day. Today the sycamore had lime green leaves rustling against its gold-and-white-streaked trunk. As I walked into school, I thought, where has the year gone? How could it have disappeared so quickly?

Class began with our flower ceremony for those we loved who were gone. The kids had brought locally blooming flowers—lilacs, daffodils, tulips, jonquils, and forsythia. Everyone

had someone they wanted to remember and Grace asked each child to say what they liked about that person. Then they could put the flowers in a communal vase.

Deena said, "My uncles carried me whenever we went to the market." Mai said, "My mother would be happy I have a Big Sister." Trinh said, "My parents took good care of me." Ignazio said, "My grandmother made great tamales and dulces." Khoa said first, "My grandfathers had lots of girlfriends with big boobies." Grace frowned at him and he changed his story: "My grandfathers worked hard so that we could have rice to eat."

Abdul's eyes were faraway and when it came time for him to put his lilac in the vase he plopped it in without saying anything. He spilled some water from the vase. Grace put her arm on his shoulder and said, "That flower was for your brother. I am sure he was a good boy like you."

Afterward the class was silent. Pavel was reading a book about a steam shovel. Abdul noticed this and bragged to no one in particular that he could drive a steam shovel. Ignazio was wearing an Outback Steakhouse T-shirt. I wondered if he'd actually been there or if this shirt showed up in a Goodwill barrel. Ignazio's English was only marginally better, but only Abdul would be held back in the same classes next year. Even Trinh would move forward, thanks mainly to Deena's tutoring.

To celebrate Cinco de Mayo, Grace read about Mexico. Ignazio interrupted her constantly to say that his family celebrated with a fiesta. When she finished the book, Grace located Mexico for the students on her big wall map. Ignazio described the delicious food—pineapple, ceviche, and enchiladas.

Abdul began pounding on his desk. Walat said loudly, "Excuse me, Abdul," and he stopped.

Grace asked Ignazio to tell about Cinco de Mayo. Before he could begin, Khoa asked in a way that made kissing sound naughty, "Do you kiss your girlfriend on that day?" Ignazio ignored him and said that in Mexico the boys play basketball and light firecrackers. The grown-ups have a dance at night. Khoa shouted, "Do you dance dirty with girls?" Ignazio looked at the floor, embarrassed.

Grace asked Ignazio to teach the kids a few Spanish words. Ignazio wrote the word for "cow" in Spanish, and Grace asked about this word in Vietnamese and Arabic. Everyone was eager to share information about their cultures of origin. They liked knowing things the teacher and the other kids didn't know. As I said good-bye, Ignazio shouted, "Adios, Señora Maria."

May 23, 2000

My last day I walked past the sycamore, with its crown of new green leaves, and entered the school. I brought all the students pencils as good-bye gifts. As I passed them out, I said, "If you see me on the street, come over and give me a hug." Even Trinh smiled.

The class had prepared me cards. Ly's was ornate with heartfelt statements of feeling: "You help us. We love you." Khoa's card said, "Marry me." Mai gave me a card covered with flowers that said, "I hope you will come back next year." I asked if she would see Amy over the summer. Mai nodded happily and I thought how much difference a college student had made in the life of this child.

Khoa was still a troublemaker. Trinh wore the same clothes, but with Deena's help she had crawled a little ways out of her shell. Fatima's English was much better and she had learned to read. Deena was more confident now. Helping her own family

and Trinh had given her courage and maturity. Still, I worried about all the school Deena missed while she translated for her family. I remembered a line I'd read: "No one gets ahead in America without leaving people behind." Deena wasn't leaving anyone behind, even fish and rats.

Today Ly again said to me, "You are so beautiful." I believe that she really thought this. There had been some kind of deep, almost mystical, connection between us, as if we recognized each other's souls.

Grace announced three more days of school. She showed the kids the peonies she had picked and taught them to spell *peony*. Ly said they looked like lotuses. Yes, I thought, Ly is the lotus of the class, the truly strong and resilient one.

The kids looked nervous and uncertain about the long summer ahead. Some would move. Many would spend the summer in cheap day-care programs or at home alone, latchkey kids with few of the advantages of middle-class kids. No tennis camps or family vacations for them. A few, like Ignazio, might get to visit relatives in their home countries. A few would go to the community action program's day camp. As Grace read a story about summer, I realized how important school was to these kids. It's where they play, see their friends and teachers, get food and clothes.

Grace explained about sunburns, suntan lotion, and Lyme disease. Then she told the kids about city soccer, baseball leagues, and swimming lessons. She warned them to be careful around water. Grace suggested swimming lessons and the summer reading program at the library.

Then Grace handed out a word puzzler based on summer words. Abdul asked for my help and I sat down beside him. He told me he had helped paint some of the pipes in the basement

of the school. As we worked together, I remembered our first meeting, how he had turned away from me so that he wouldn't have to work with me.

Khoa drew a picture of surfers and bragged that he had surfed in Vietnam. Abdul worried that somebody in the class might drown in the summer. Grace changed the subject and told them she would bring some seashells to school tomorrow. Abdul whispered to himself, "I'll take them from her. I'll steal those seashells."

I realized he was trying to tell me he was upset I was leaving. I hugged him and said, "Don't worry. I will see you again, Abdul."

Grace handed out papers with seashells on them. The kids were to count and color them and sort them by kind. Most of the kids liked sorting and classifying. We graphed the seashells. I helped Pavel, who had some trouble getting organized. I told him I hoped he could go fishing this summer.

Deena carefully put a sticker tattoo of an American flag on my arm. She used her own spit to wet it and pressed it warmly against my skin. When Fatima whined, "Why can't you come tomorrow?" I regretfully announced my last day.

Grace picked up on the anxiety and sadness and suggested singing some songs. We started with, "On the first day of summer my true love gave to me a robin in a maple tree," and sang on through two ducks, three bees a buzzing, four watermelons and more. I watched each face as Grace led them in song. Most of the faces were so open and sincere that it broke my heart.

Deena belted out the words. Trinh was quiet, but she smiled at me twice. She seemed less wooden today, more comfortable with herself and with the other kids. Mai was better, too. She no longer scratched herself, and she talked more posi-

tively about her stepmother and baby brother. She was reaching out for love, and her family and Amy were reaching back. Khoa was still mouthy and unkempt, but he had learned English. Since he started in the behavior-disordered class, he was less impulsive and more subdued. Eventually Khoa would fit into the school system better, but I'd miss the Curious George of our group.

I wanted to believe that all was not lost with Abdul, that given enough time and love, someone could connect with him and he could be a mainstream student and a healthy person. Mr. Trvdy and I had made some progress. Maybe together, next year, we could love him into relationships with us and with other Americans.

Ly had blossomed. She had a big smile and her hand was always up with answers. She was wise, loving, and confident—a Willa Cather heroine. It speaks well for our species that we can produce a Ly now and then.

Walat had come to us strong and he was leaving strong. I had great respect for his inner strength. He also had an intact family and parents who were rapidly becoming bicultural. Pavel was struggling with his academics, but he was happy socially. His parents were loving but not particularly sensible. I wished they had a good cultural broker.

Deena was that strange mix of strong and vulnerable that kids sometimes are. She had healed herself by healing others. Ignazio was no mental giant, but his English was improving. If only his parents could be home evenings.

To say good-bye, Mai gave me a shy wave. Ignazio handed me a root-beer lollipop. Abdul didn't hug me, but he stood almost on top of me. I hugged him and said, "I will miss you, Abdul."