

this fact. Ignazio said, "In Mexico we took a bath on Saturdays." Ly said, "You will get sick if you take baths when it is cold." Grace said, "Not really. But in the winter you must dry off very well and put on warm clothes right after your bath." Khoa asked, "Do you put on your underwear?" Everyone laughed.

The spelling words—"toothbrush," "toothpaste," "soap," "comb"—were to be used in sentences. Khoa called toothbrushes "toothbutts," and everyone laughed. Grace said, "No more nasty stuff now, Khoa." Deena returned from the nurse and I asked about her family. She whispered, "My mother wants to go back to Bosnia."

Grace showed the class health books. One about hair was entitled *Mama, Do You Love Me?* Khoa joked about flakes in hair and about Ignazio's cowllick. Fatima explained that in her country women wore veils when they went out. She said that only little girls could wear shorts. Older girls must wear dresses.

Ignazio explained that it was hard to stay clean in Mexico. Some mornings there was water and sometimes there wasn't. He said there were rats, not like Nibbles who loved to play, but rats that bit and stole the family's corn. Mai said that her mother had gotten sick in Vietnam because of dirty water. Fatima said that it was the same in Iraq, not enough water and big mean rats. For some reason this got Walat thinking of Iraq. He told the class that in Iraq his dad was rich, but his enemies had threatened to hurt them. They had to move. Abdul had been drawing dolphins. But as he listened to Walat, he switched to sharks.

Grace said the kids could draw something from their old countries. Trinh drew a river with black water. Mai drew a picture of her hut in Vietnam. In front was her mother, a stick figure, holding the hand of Mai, also a stick figure, but with a big smile.

Many refugees yearn for connection with missing or dead parents. Grace encouraged them to bring pictures of their family to school and to look at or kiss the picture whenever they felt like it. She recommended they bring an object from the missing parent. Kids are concrete thinkers and can more easily imagine a parent if they are touching something that stands for the parent.

Ly drew a plane that looked like a silver bird. She told me the villagers thought that she rode on this silver bird to her home in the clouds. She giggled, "We thought America would be in the sky."

Khoa drew a rice field with an old man in it and said, "That is my dead grandpa." Walat drew his fancy home that was burned down by his father's enemies. Pavel drew a picture of his family at a dinner table with empty plates and he said, "In Russia people had no money to buy soup." Deena drew a street filled with dead bodies.

I marveled at these kids' resilience. Many had only been here a few months. They had been starved, shot at, and terrorized, and yet here they were drawing and talking. Some seemed more mangled emotionally than others. Walat and Ly were in good shape; Ignazio and Pavel were basically comfortable with their lives. However, Khoa's constant hyperactive chatter suggested a bad case of nerves, and Trinh and Abdul seemed almost mute from the stress of living in war zones. It is not surprising that traumatized kids who don't speak much English have trouble learning. What is surprising is given their circumstances how much and how quickly most kids learn.

Grace and I talked about rituals—lighting a candle in memory of relatives who died in a war or making a toast to what one most appreciates—small acts that can have great power. I suggested a flower day in the spring when everyone could bring

flowers for the people they loved who were no longer with them.

November 4, 1999

The day was cool and cloudy, the sycamore's brown leaves blew in the wind. A few swirled to the ground. When I arrived at the classroom, Walat was drawing a map of train tracks with switching stations and overpasses. Deena looked at a book on horses as she caressed Nibbles. When she smiled at me, I noticed her two front teeth were missing. Mai read a book about a girl who ran away from home. Khoa was reading *Curious George*. Grace whispered that Khoa's oldest brother had just been arrested on drug charges. Pavel proudly showed me his Pokémon toys. His parents might walk to work and have holes in their shoes, but Pavel had the stuff he wanted from television. Ignazio looked at a book on giant cobras. He had a bandage over his eye. Grace thought it was pink eye and gave him a slip to see the nurse.

The class worked on spelling. Today Grace taught them words for winter clothes—"mittens," "boots," "caps," and "coats." Many of the kids had never lived in a cold place before and were unprepared for winter. Mai asked, "Please, Miss Grace, what is snow?"

Grace wrote the words "wind chill," "sleet," "ice," and "blizzard" on the board. Every time Ly got a word right she yelled out yes. Two months ago, Ly had been quieter, but now she was one of the most enthusiastic students.

Abdul would not do his spelling today. When I offered to help him, he turned away from me. "Abdul," I said, "I would like to be your friend." He smiled, but not at me. Progress with Abdul was like that of the frog climbing up a wall, two inches up and then one back down.

Grace led the class in a song about good grooming. To the tune of "London Bridge" the class belted out, "Here we go to wash our hands, wash our hands." To the "Hokey Pokey" song, they sang the words, "Germs are really mean. But they can't be seen. They will make you sick. Then you're gonna feel ick. Use some soap and water, Scrub your hands to get them clean, Clean's what it's all about." Khoa howled, yipped, and barked creatively instead of singing. Grace ignored him. Ignazio's stomach growled and Abdul and Pavel laughed.

Mai had her shirt on backward. I could see some scratch marks on her arm. I asked about her Big Sister, Amy. She said, "Amy has tests at her school." I said, "Don't worry, Mai, she will come back."

Ly signaled me to sit by her and watch her draw. I thought how hard it was to give these kids all the attention they needed. Indeed, as I watched today, the kids seemed wilder and all wound up. Deena and Fatima were fighting over colored markers. Trinh was zipping and unzipping her jacket. Only Walat seemed on task.

When Grace read *The Crocodile's Toothache* by Shel Silverstein, Ignazio forgot his rumbling stomach and clapped when the crocodile swallowed the dentist. Deena and Ly laughed out loud. Even smart-mouthed Khoa and dreamy Abdul listened. For a few good moments we were all together.

Then it was time to work on silent e vs. long e. Mai sighed and jabbed her pencil into her desk. Ignazio scratched his belly. Abdul didn't even pick up his pencil. Pavel crossed out a sentence and began another, his nose almost touching his pencil as he strained to write. I made a note to suggest to Grace that he get his eyes checked.

As he scribbled with his stubby pencil, Khoa hummed the "Star-Spangled Banner." I took him a new pencil and realized

that, like Grace, I was hooked on this kid. He was mouthy and coarse, but he held our hands on the way to assembly.

I was also falling for Ly with her bright smile and happy talk. I respected Deena's work with her family although she was way too young to be so burdened. Mai's palpable loneliness touched the place in my heart that remembered loneliness. They were all getting to me. I wanted to capture Abdul's attention. I wanted to elicit a look of interest from Trinh, something I vowed I would accomplish before the year was out.

November 17, 1999

When I got to class, Fatima reported that Nibbles had died the day before. Two days ago the class had noticed he had a little blood on his nose and that he wasn't moving around too much. Then yesterday when they came to school he was dead.

Deena had immediately developed a headache and had to go to the nurse for a Tylenol. Mai had pulled her own hair. Ignazio and Abdul had punched each other. Fortunately Grace had channeled their grief into a service for Nibbles. She'd allowed Pavel to run home for a special rock to bury with Nibbles and she'd put Khoa in charge of the funeral. The kids had added a candy cane and a blue crystal to his shoe-box coffin. Ignazio had said a prayer. They all had helped dig the grave in the flower garden of the school. Ly and Deena had cried. Grace had led them in a good-bye song.

The funeral had been well handled, but I could see the grief today. We had a story circle and each student shared one happy memory of Nibbles. Deena remembered one day when Nibbles slept on her lap. Ignazio remembered how much Nibbles liked bananas. Khoa made spirited comments about Nibbles's poop. Ly remembered a day she had drawn Nibbles. Walat recalled the

fun Nibbles had with his exercise wheel. Pavel said Nibbles tickled him when he crawled all over his back. Mai and Trinh refused to tell a Nibbles story, but they liked the other kids' stories. Telling stories never fails to produce good in the universe.

Grace whispered that there had been other troubles this week. Khoa was upset that his brother was in jail. Deena had missed several days of school translating for her family with the INS. On the bright side, Pavel would be getting new glasses. When the class was ready to work, Grace suggested we do family drawings.

I circled the room as the students worked on their drawings. Pavel drew his parents in their car with his brother, himself, and his sister in the backseat. He told me, "They are on their way to work and we are going to day care."

Ly drew herself surrounded by family—her mother and father were sewing and her siblings were studying. Ignazio drew himself in the middle of his extended family, which included cousins and grandparents. Fatima drew her parents and siblings giving her presents. Deena drew her mother in bed and the others watching television. Walat drew his house in Iraq with a star on top. He said, "Our house in Iraq was nicer than the one we have here."

Abdul smiled his Mona Lisa smile and drew fish with teeth and wheels where they should have had fins. Khoa's drawing was the biggest and most colorful. He had drawn his siblings around his parents with a big red heart in the center of the picture and everyone holding hands. He pointed to the tallest brother and said, "My dad hired a lawyer. We'll get his butt out of jail."

Mai drew a picture of her father, stepmother, and baby brother. I asked her why she was not in the picture, and she said,

"I am in Vietnam." I asked if she had a picture of her mother and she nodded yes. I said, "Carry that picture with you and whenever you look at it, your mother will be smiling at you." She looked at me carefully and then nodded again.

Grace explained the Thanksgiving story and suggested a game with Thanksgiving words. Normally games animate this class, but today even Ly and Khoa were low-key. When Grace called on Walat he was under the table looking for his eraser. Deena had a headache and lay her head on her desk.

Abdul and Khoa picked at each other, trying to start a fight. I remembered something Grace had told me earlier about Abdul. She had described him as not following rules. But she said, "He recently arrived from a war zone and there were no rules. No good rules anyway." She told me about a Bosnian boy whose dad had taught him, "Always attack first," which may have been a good rule in Bosnia, but it didn't work well at Sycamore School.

Grace took out a picture book and told them the story of the *Mayflower*. The pictures were from a book entitled *A Better Life*. The best students paid attention, but unfortunately, the kids who most needed to pay attention didn't. Khoa was listening a little because when Grace talked about the Pilgrims' hard times he shouted out, "Boohoo." Grace asked what was the name of their boat and Deena answered, "The *Titanic*."

Fatima was impressed with the fact that there were no bathrooms on the *Mayflower*, a fact that generated a host of raucous remarks from Khoa. Ignazio was most impressed that the Pilgrims had only cold food and not much of that.

Grace showed them pictures of the *Mayflower* landing and of the Indians helping them plant corn by burying little fish by each plant. When Grace showed a picture of Massasoit, the

Indian leader at the first Thanksgiving, Ly said, "He looks Vietnamese."

Khoa shouted with great enthusiasm, "Let's all meet at school for Thanksgiving dinner."

Pavel said, "I will go shoot rabbits for our food."

Deena said, "Please don't kill a rabbit."

Ly announced that last night someone had thrown a rock in the window of their home. Grace asked if her parents called the police and she nodded. The children discussed robbers and getting hurt. Deena, Mai, and Pavel seemed especially anxious during this discussion. Grace tried to make good things happen but the tone remained somber. We kept returning to themes of loss. Nibbles' death had cast a pall over the class. When I left, even the sycamore was in shadow.

November 24, 1999—Thanksgiving Day Celebration

The sycamore flamed in the morning light, and this morning the blazing tree made me philosophical. I wondered if this was what amazed Moses, a tree backlit by sunrise, and made him feel God spoke to him.

As I walked in, Khoa carried over a white rat with a brown head and a mark down his back. After much deliberation, the kids had named this rat Sunny, because of his happy disposition. As I patted Sunny, I noticed that the kids seemed perkier. Deena was handing out hard candies. All the others clustered around us, laughing at Sunny's movements and explaining the process of selecting this rat from the psychology lab at the university.

Pavel came up to show me his new Coke-bottle glasses, which he felt made him look smart. I thought they gave him a rather comedic, Dickensian look, but I didn't challenge his

opinion. Instead, I ruffled his hair and offered to help him finish his homework.

Mai approached me shyly and stood by my side as I helped Pavel. When I finished, she pulled out a black-and-white photo of a woman in a cotton dress in front of a flowering bush. The woman was squinting into the sun and her face looked like Mai's. I said, "You look like your mother." She hugged the picture to her chest.

Grace beckoned me to a corner of the room and told me that Khoa had been assigned to a class for behavior-disordered students for two hours each day. He was learning to be more compliant and proper in class. That was good for him and for the others, but Grace missed the old Khoa.

The school custodian, Mr. Trvdy, had agreed to let Abdul shadow him a couple hours a week. Abdul started yesterday and seemed proud of his new job. He'd told Grace, "From now on I'll be fixing up this school."

Grace reminded the class of the Thanksgiving Day story and read a book on the arrival of the Vietnamese boat people in America. Trinh listened with interest. Mai looked closely at the pictures of Vietnam and twice whispered something to Khoa. When he examined the cover to the book, Khoa said happily, "That boy was my friend in Vietnam."

A few minutes after nine, we marched to the next-door classroom. The students from the other ELL classroom had prepared a tablecloth on the floor with hand-decorated paper napkins. Grace handed every student an Indian headdress or a Pilgrim's cap. They put on their costumes and giggled at each other.

Grace led the class in songs. As they belted out the songs "The More We Get Together the Happier We'll Be" and, of course, "Over the River and through the Woods," all the rando energy became group energy.

I reflected how fitting it was that this class celebrate Thanksgiving, the refugee's holiday, the holiday that said we came to a new land and endured hardships, but we survived. The Native Americans said to the Pilgrims, "Welcome, there is room for us all. We will help you until you can take care of yourselves."

The Sycamore students' stories were unique to their places and times, yet universal to the American condition. The refugee kids had tales as harrowing as that of the Pilgrims, but now they were warm, well-fed, and safe. Of course, there was sadness and poverty in the room, but there was also the sweet glaze of hope.

With her red jacket and blond curls, Deena sang and clapped, as exuberant a Little Red Riding Hood as I'd ever seen. Ly showed me her tattoo of a dragon on her left wrist. Then she jumped on my lap and nestled in.

While Walat and Fatima passed out slices of bread and pumpkin pie, Grace served cups of chicken soup. Then she said, "Let's all go around the table and say what we are thankful for." Ignazio, his mouth full of soup, said, "Food," and everyone laughed. Trinh whispered, "My house," so quietly only a few of us heard her. Walat said, "I am thankful for books." Khoa shouted out, "Toys and pizza."

Abdul didn't want to answer, but when Grace pushed he said shyly, "My teachers." Mai said, "I am thankful for Army and my baby brother." Deena said, "For our church that gave us clothes and furniture." Fatima said, "I am thankful to the hospital that treated my burns." Pavel said, "I am thankful for Sunny." Everyone cheered. Ly said, "I am thankful for Miss Mary." I asked myself, How did I deserve this honor?

We ate the healthy soup in silence. Unlike many American children, these children don't take food for granted. They came from places where food is respected and where people had been hungry. But today's meal was more than vitamin supplements

designed to keep humans alive. Food celebrated the soul of our little community. It is our most ancient and beautiful ritual of connection.

While the kids ate, Walat took pictures with Grace's camera. Khoa, Pavel, and Ignazio got into a contest to see who could drink the most cider. The tables were cleared and the music games began, "Itsy Bitsy Spider" was first, followed by "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes," then the "Chicken Dance." Only Ignazio and Trinh didn't seem to like dancing. Trinh didn't have the energy and Ignazio just didn't like to move much.

By noon the music was Cuban music, easy to dance to any way we liked. Deena passed out temporary tattoos. Walat took photo after photo of the singers and dancers. Khoa mugged for the camera, sticking out his tongue and then his behind. Abdul twirled a hula hoop in time to the music. Mai, usually so serious, did a mean belly dance. Ly and Fatima held hands and twirled in a circle. Deena joined in on the choruses, softly, but with us. Only Trinh was in a corner watching.

It takes so little to make a party with children—a little food and permission to dance and sing. I was happier than I usually felt. The energy and the joy were infectious and I started thinking of all I was thankful for—my health, my family, my work, and finally my time with these kids who brought into my life something I hadn't had for a long time—the strong, fresh energy of childhood.

January 4, 2000

We made it into the new year with no Y2K disasters in our town. As I walked past the bare sycamore I thought that a new century had commenced and that the new century belonged to these children, not to me.

I arrived in the cold classroom to the news that Fatima had broken her arm. She had a cast covered with Snoopys and was playing Uno with Deena. It was below zero outside and Deena was wearing sandals and socks decorated with reindeer and Christmas trees. She had only her red cloak for a coat. I sat down beside the girls, watching the game and smelling their familiar garlic breath.

Pavel came over and allowed me to stroke Sunny. Ly jumped in my lap and showed me a puzzle she was working on. But when I unthinkingly asked about her holidays, she changed the subject.

Grace was worried about Deena, who had made low scores on standardized tests that require fluent English. Her parents felt she should have made a hundred percent on this test. Grace had tried to explain that no one made a hundred percent, but Deena's father felt Grace was being too easy on Deena. They had ordered Deena to her room from after school until bedtime every day for a month. Still Deena didn't seem too much the worse for wear. At least she knew her parents considered education important.

Grace said Abdul had been placed in a special education class first period and would come in at 9:00. She had fought this placement all first semester but had now acquiesced. Abdul wasn't even trying to learn to read.

Grace announced that she would be gone the next day because of a funeral. Mai twisted around in her seat and looked as if she might cry. I put my arm on her shoulder and asked, "Do you feel sad that Miss Grace will be gone tomorrow?" She nodded miserably but calmed down a bit.

Fatima asked, "Can I come with you, Miss Grace? I'll be good." Ignazio said he wouldn't come to school if Grace

couldn't be there. Walat asked me if I could come and be the teacher. Deena worried the new teacher would be mean. Grace said, "No. The substitute teacher will be kind."

Khoa arrived late. His hair was still uncut but he wore a new warm coat. He sat down quietly and participated appropriately. Only once did he speak out of turn and that was to whisper to me that his brother was home. Otherwise, he was preoccupied with whether he would get his name on the list of students who caused trouble.

Ly was more restless this morning. As she had assimilated, she'd grown louder, more assertive, and more American in her actions. Today she'd rapidly finished her seatwork and she rolled her eyes impatiently that others were so slow. Ly had blossomed into a confident, loving girl, who also could be mouthy and impatient.

Ly sat gratefully by my side, not so much listening to my reading as absorbing me. She told me her family was Buddhist and didn't get a Christmas tree. She had wanted a tree—it's understandable in a country where Christmas is on TV from October until January.

We were all happy to be back together. Even a cold room with a wheezing heater had clean paper, sharp pencils, and a teacher to suggest that the universe was a bright, well-organized place that smelled like books and chalk.

Abdul came in at 9:00. He had grown taller in the two weeks since I'd seen him. He showed me his key ring with a key to the tool room and the furnace room. He reported that he had been checking the pipes with Mr. Trvdy, "his boss." He could have been president, he was so proud.

Grace had a clear plastic globe for the lesson, and she found the countries of her students and asked them to tell about their homelands. Deena said, "Bosnia used to be a beautiful place

with many forests." "There were floods in Vietnam every year during our rainy season," Ly said. Khoa added, "There were cobras and rats in the rice fields."

Ignazio told of the flooding in Mexico near his home. He said, "The river was filled with frogs, and after the river went away, the frogs stayed in our yard." Pavel said, "It snows all winter long in Russia."

Grace asked what the big chunks of land were on the globe. The kids had various answers—"cigarettes," "islands," "cabernets." Grace was gentle with the wrong answers, "No," she said tentatively, as if the answer were almost good enough to be correct. "The right word is *continent*."

While Grace read a book with pictures on the history of the earth, Khoa played with Sunny, and Pavel pulled some toys out of his backpack. Grace had to reprimand both boys. Ignazio asked for my help and we struggled with the scrambled spelling words.

Abdul put his feet on a chair and didn't even pretend to work. I went over to sit by him and asked about his job. He said, "I like it, but they don't pay me."

Khoa's father was coming for a conference. Khoa wriggled in his seat and looked at the clock every few minutes. He showed me a report that had half happy faces and half sad faces and asked me if he had enough happy faces to stay in school. I explained that he wouldn't be kicked out of school. I said, "We want and need you at this school."

Grace decided to give the kids a pick-me-up. She taught them all twelve verses of "Hickory Dickory Dock." Ly smiled ear to ear as she sang. Mai couldn't carry a tune, but she belted it out anyway. Ignazio drummed on his desk. Not yet fully socialized, Khoa added a few nasty words here and there. Deena swayed to the music. Everyone but Abdul and Trinh sang.

Singing warmed us up. Some kids soloed, other kids didn't want to and Grace didn't make them. I remember a mean teacher who made me sing in front of the class when I was in second grade. I was so frightened when I tried to sing that nothing came out. Thank goodness, Grace was kinder. I couldn't bear to watch these kids get pushed around.

February 4, 2000

It was a gray, cold day, the kind of day that induces epidemic seasonal affective disorder. I was glad I had these kids to cheer me up. But this morning no one jumped up, as they sometimes did to shout, "Miss Mary, sit by me."

Grace looked tired. She had a bad cold and had been at the school every night with conferences. Fortunately, the class was getting ready to celebrate Tet. As students filed in, I filled red-and-gold paper envelopes with money and notes. Then I sat by Mai and Fatima and we looked at a book filled with pictures of flowers and butterflies, a good book for February.

Almost all the kids were talking; only Ly and Trinh's table was quiet. Ly was drawing ballerinas and Trinh quietly stared into space. Deena brought over Uno cards and she and Trinh began a game. Fatima still had her cast on and all the kids had written or drawn on it. By now I could recognize Ly's and Khoa's excellent art.

Mai told me her father's factory was having layoffs. As she chatted with me, I realized that we had a friendship of sorts. I liked and understood this tiny, angry girl, and she liked me, a gray-haired psychologist. It was a proud moment.

Grace read a story about Vietnam called *The Lotus Seed*. The kids listened, but afterward, they wouldn't do their seatwork. Usually, this class liked group work; they were a collective culture and floundered when they were left on their own. I won-

dered how they would change as they moved into the American system.

Abdul poked Walat and generally disrupted the class until, with a sigh, Grace wrote his name on the board. However, when I asked Abdul about his job, he said that he had earlier looked at the heater in the school's basement. Mr. Trvdy had asked him to carry the crescent wrench because he was so strong. As he told me this, he calmed down.

Ly wandered around the room, first to the bathroom, then to sharpen her pencil, and then to check on Sunny. Ignazio tilted his chair so far back that he fell over backward. Khoa laughed uproariously. Ignazio, who wasn't hurt, smiled sheepishly. Pavel farted loudly and the laughter started up again. Deena asked to go to the school nurse. Grace looked as if she would prefer to be home in bed. It was not this class's finest hour.

When all else failed, Grace encouraged stories. Khoa said, "When we flew to America we came across a great ocean." Abdul told how his family had been airlifted by helicopter from a place in the desert. Deena said they had dinner on the plane. "Very delicious. Ice and noodles."

Khoa told of Tet in Vietnam at his grandmother's house. He had burned incense sticks on a shrine to his relatives. He showed us some incense sticks. Almost all these kids carried totems of their former countries. Mai had her mother's picture. Ignazio wore a leather belt made by his uncle, and Pavel still had his favorite toys from Russia. Fatima carried a twig with one green leaf that her grandmother sent her from Iraq. Walat spoke of the Turkish delight that his family saved for special days. Deena's grandmother sent her spinach gum that she passed around.

I asked about the future. Walat announced he would be an engineer. Fatima said she would like to be a bride in a beautiful