Saving a Seat for Joseph

MARIA RUSSELL

After class, I walk up to Joseph; it is then I realize that everyday he stays a little after the bell rings. I touch him on the arm of his puffy blue jacket and thank him for being so honest. That sounds insignificant, I think. So I tell him what I really mean.

Thirty-five chairs—one empty. This is my classroom. Every day in the first weeks of school, I place the students, like onions, on a cutting board. I slowly peel away the skins they grow to protect themselves from the outside world. I am human to them, and they glance their humanity in my direction every now and then—which is all I ask. I know them: their peculiarities, bruised romances, driving records, work habits, warped fashion sense, hobbies. We have morphed into a cohesive clump that advances in the name of education. This is learning.

Weeks into the term, the door opens. Blue Puffy Coat walks in and hands me his transfer paper: Joseph Smith, student #435800, English transfer grade D-. (Oh, great!) I resent the fact that he is crowding my already crowded classroom. He smiles that uneasy “I’m the new kid” smile. I ignore it and tell him to sit in the empty chair... back there... next to Just Got Her Tongue Pierced. I resume educating. He is my stepchild student, dispatched to the background because he didn’t start from “Go.”

I see him out of the corner of my eye making conversation with Just Got Her Tongue Pierced, and I look at him, daring him to interact more. Two weeks pass, as does part two of To Kill A Mockingbird.

There he sits where I left him, like a forgotten puppy.

As we read, I become the novel’s protagonist. I am Atticus la femme, condemning injustice, trouncing societal bias, and postulating about the existence of a world without boundaries. Joseph fails the final. After all, he came in at the start of part two. Still, I am disturbed that I somehow let him down.

Every day he wears the same puffy blue jacket. At times when I look at him, his parceled 2.5 minutes, he reminds me of puppies passersby view in a pet store window. That is Joseph’s face. He has sad eyes, the ones teachers learn to recognize. Eyes that have seen heartache and sadness; eyes that measure happiness by the spoonful, always mindful to save some for later.

I put him near the front of the class. I begin to pay attention, and so does he. We start a new piece of literature: A Raisin in the Sun.
I talk about dreams and hanging on to them. I talk about dreams and how important they are and what true dreams are. Students talk about the statement "a dream come true." We read poetry: Langston Hughes, Gary Soto, and Pablo Neruda. We talk about the dreams of a mother, a father, a child. I give them an assignment: "Write five things that you dream for yourself; bring them in tomorrow."

**The Day the Assignment Is Due**

"Take out your papers where your dreams are written. Look at them closely. Consider them carefully and ... select one. The most important one."

This is a risky assignment. Yet, it has always worked. Because dreams are ethereal, they can crumble when someone laughs or ridicules. I emphasize the cruelty of shattering someone's dream for the future. When I am sufficiently certain we are all unmasked, we begin to reveal our individual dreams.

Brian says he hopes to be a good father to his future children. (He is struggling with whether or not to give up his child for adoption; being a teenage father is killing him.) The room is quiet. Cynthia wants to be an English teacher. (She is beautiful, misses two to three days of school a week to care for her younger brothers and sisters, and still manages to hang on to a solid B.) They are all listening. Jameson wants to be drug free. (This is a battle he has fought before.) No one laughs. Heather wants to have a happy marriage. They smile. Another happy marriage. "To never know divorce," says one. Faces wince, heads nod, and eyes look down. Many know this heartache. "To find my one true love," utters another. And then there's Joseph. The room is quiet. The stillness pays homage to the purity of their willingness to be open and honest.

Joseph hesitates, contemplating the enormity of his dream. He only has one line written on his notecard: "I want to know what it's like to have a mother and a father and to have a place to call home. I've never had that." Lightning-bolt words burn my ears and brand my heart. The electricity of his words sucks all the oxygen out of the room. No one breathes. The student called "teacher" swallows hard. I am raw from Joseph's whipping of innocent sincerity. My eyes sting. Everyone else's words after that, although worthy of merit, swirl like feathers around the dove perched in the middle of the classroom. A dove whose name is Joseph.

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I explain to him that he was the teacher that day. I ask him if he realizes how many people he impacted with his truthfulness. I ask him if he felt the pause in the room after he spoke. "Yes," he responds and looks down, spooning a little into his happiness-for-later jar. I explain that the pause was everyone committing to memory something important, something they want to remember, something they have to remember.

Joseph passes the final on *Raisin*. He participates in groups. He is accepted and respected. He still lingers after the bell rings every day. He comes to say good-bye on the last day of school.

My lesson? I learned that I, too, like an onion, need to peel away my own protective layers. I justify that layers exist for survival. As much as they protect me as a teacher, they insulate me. They make me inflex-