

“Questions Without Answers”

He arrived a curiosity to our American eyes.

I avoided him, too, at first. Why? I myself don't have an answer. Maybe it's because we all have that unnamable fear of the new, of the unfamiliar, of the foreign. Maybe we all have that instinct to try to avoid it at all costs, no matter how curious we may be. Because it's *foreign*.

And *he* was certainly foreign.

I had tried to become accepting, if that was possible amongst the students of Thomas Jefferson Middle School. I don't think anyone else tried. I regret that I didn't try harder.

Two weeks after the start of the school year, Ms. Callihan brought an unfamiliar face up to the front of the room. The short, slim, and dark-haired boy was quite captivated by his shoes and wouldn't stop staring at them. “Class, listen up, this is our new student who'll be joining us today. His name is Andrei.” The room fell into a chorus of whispers, giggles, and exasperated groans. I forgot which corner of Europe or Asia or Eurasia Ms. Callihan said he was from, but Andrei evidently did not speak a word of English. The boy dared, for one moment, to look away from his shoes, only to be met by the glare of Axel, the most popular boy in the seventh grade, who always made sure he could be seen. Now, he seemed to be making sure that Andrei learned his place. Although I sat in the back, I could tell this by the way Andrei quickly looked away and resumed to contemplate his shoes.

I sat down in the last row, last desk in math. When I turned to reach my for my bookbag - there stood Andrei, staring at me hesitantly, as if wanting to ask, “May I sit next to you?” I looked around. The neighboring chair was the only empty seat available. I pulled it out and

patted the seat. "Sit," I answered, and without a word, Andrei sat down. Twenty minutes, thirty minutes... I was at the verge of falling asleep from teacher's droning. "Perfect cubes.... lay eggs.... on square roots.... and proportional relationships!" It had sounded like a foreign language from the beginning, a language forever incomprehensible to me... Nodding, nearly asleep, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I whipped around. It was Andrei! He glared at me, as if trying to say, "Wake up!" I stole a glance at his notebook laying on the desk in front of him, and I was shocked at what I saw. Instead of the notes on the board, I saw algebraic number theory. I rubbed my eyes and looked again.

The advanced equations and insane numerals were still there.

That was something of a revelation...

I feared lunch, for that was when the "popular" folks would be unleashed.

But lunch eventually came, as usual. I sat alone, at my empty table in the back of the lunch room, trying to plug my ears of the giggles, squeals, shouts, and curses coming from the middle tables, packed with mean girls and their football jock boyfriends. I had learned through experience that you didn't want to be near them. Andrei soon arrived, and gazed around the cafeteria helplessly, as though left alone in the middle of a deserted island. I cringed inside to overhear the words:

"Is that the new kid you told me about? The mute one?"

"Yeah, I don't know what's wrong with him. I think he's retarded." Laughter exploded.

Darlene, the meanest of the popular girls and Axel's girlfriend, added:

"Whatever he is, I can *tell* he's hopeless!" Another wave of laughter. I could feel my hands clench into fists under the scuffed table. *I know them. I know them. This isn't good.* I thanked God that Andrei couldn't understand the loud remark that came thundering out of Axel's mouth.

Another howl. Andrei's frightened gaze reminded me of a person trapped in a haunted house who had their mouth taped shut so they couldn't scream, no matter how afraid they were...

He sat at the end of my empty table adjacent to me, barely missing Axel, who had purposely stuck his leg out in the middle of the aisle, thirsting to see him fall.

They sleep not, except they have done mischief;

And their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall.

For they eat the bread of wickedness,

And drink the wine of violence.

-Proverbs 4:16-17

"Aw, pooooor Katie!" cried Kirsten, Darlene's best buddy and most devoted worshipper. "She has to sit near a retard! I hope *she* doesn't catch the virus from him!" By now, the whole cafeteria was roaring; they found so much pleasure in ridiculing Andrei. Facing the wall, he had scrunched up in a ball on his seat. He didn't utter a single sound. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I tried to force them down. "Retard, retard, RETARD!" The attack continued.

They are looking for trouble, I thought, and they won't sleep until they've found it...

The next week, it didn't get much better.

Andrei now knew some English, and greeted our homeroom teacher, in a near whisper, "Good morning, Miss Kelihen." And she, suppressing giggles, would smile brightly and answer with pathetically feigned enthusiasm, "Good *morning*, Andrei!!" Andrei walked about the halls from class to class either in manner the of a ghost, pushed, knocked aside, or not even glanced at, or in the manner of a leper, forever being pursued by whispers, stares, sneers, and giggles. It was as though he were a walking porcupine, everyone swerving away from him to avoid being stabbed

by his quills. He grew paler each day, some days he arrived with red and swollen eyes, I even thought he was losing weight; he became almost emaciated. He never came out at recess, and I heard Nathanael say that he found him hiding in the boys' bathroom. He had heard sobs and unintelligible whispers. Once he heard the sobbing voice whimper "Why?" Whenever spoken to, Andrei's eyes widened, I could tell he felt he was being attacked by each word flung his way, each one hit like a bullet to the chest, a mallet to the brain. Each question was an interrogation, each sentence was a death threat.

One bleak Monday in early November, different air seemed to blow through the school. No, the stench of armpits remained in the air, but rather, news was spreading through the popular crowd. I was surprised when I was approached by Axel, Darlene, and Kirsten in the hallway and informed:

"Guess what, Katie? Tell her, Kiki!"

Kirsten began, "We're going to ask Andrei to sit with us at lunch today."

Bang.

I asked if they were serious.

"Oh yes, we will! We want you to come, too! Maybe he's not such a retard after all!"

My heart suddenly lit up with the light of one thousand suns. I could not believe my ears! Had I heard correctly? *Acceptance has come to Jefferson Middle School!*, I thought joyously.

Axel turned to Kirsten. "Yeah... maybe he's *not*..." he added with a sly smile.

I was not at lunch that day, for I was picked up early. I could only hope that Andrei and the popular kids had finally opened up to each other. I could only hope that the attempt at friendship was a real one.

When I came back the next day, Andrei was not at school. Bad thoughts, bitter thoughts, thoughts I didn't want to think, whirled through my head. I remembered what Nathanael had said, about the sobs in a language other than English, the wail of "*Why?*" I remembered the cruel laughter that Andrei was greeted with wherever he went, the dirty looks that persecuted his own terrified gaze. It all came back to me.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. There was no Andrei. Then another Monday, Tuesday... I was waiting. There was no Andrei. And I knew exactly whose fault it was.

Now *I* needed to know: "*Why?*" That one simple question needed an answer.

At lunch, I decided to get the answer. I approached Axel, Darlene, and Kirsten as they went to throw out their trays.

I began quietly. "I see Andrei has not come to school for a week."

"Yeah, the poor idiot! I wonder why?" That was Darlene's philosophy.

I wonder why. "You know why. You know perfectly well why."

"What are you talking about? The bastard just decided not to come." That was Axel's testimony.

"Think! Just think! What could have happened to him? Who could have done it to him? What could have been *said* to him, that would make him give up all hope? That would make him just... just *quit?*"

"Don't know, don't care." That was one excuse. The other: "Got no idea *what* you're talking about."

I asked the same thing each day after that. Each day I got the same reply.

I am still waiting for an answer.