

Louder than words

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I kissed my favorite stuffed animal and squeezed his fluffy body. Holding him tightly, I whispered in his ear, "Wish me luck, Peter." Tears filled my eyes, and I wiped them away with the back of my hands trying to be brave. I looked at Peter one more time remembering my last birthday. Remembering how I received him as a gift; my good luck gift for moving to America!

I walked towards the kitchen, and my mom was already there waiting for me. She noticed my teary eyes and pulled me towards her for a hug. Holding me tightly, she hummed a familiar song in my ear, and we rocked in a soothing way. She always knew how to comfort me.

I gently pulled away, and without thinking, I blurted out what was on my mind, "I don't want to go to school, Mommy. I don't know anyone."

My mom looked into my big brown eyes and said, "I know, but you'll make new friends quickly. I promise."

"No, I won't," I whined. "I don't even speak English. How will I be able to make new friends? I want to go back home where my friends are."

"This is our home now!" My mom said sharply.

Hearing those words hit me hard. I stood stunned. I thought to myself, *how could this place be my home when I don't look or talk like anyone else?* Tears filled my eyes and slowly trickled down my cheeks. My body remained frozen as I tried to comprehend my mom's words. I was starting my first day of fourth grade in America. I didn't speak English, and I was extremely shy. How would I ever make friends? I finally understood I didn't have a choice no matter what I said or did.

Seeing my reaction, my mom pulled me into her arms and embraced me. Gently, she stroked my long hair while holding me. She leaned in close and whispered, "I know you're worried about fitting in and finding new friends, but *friends are louder than words.*" She paused and said again, "You'll see, *friends are louder than words.*" She then dried the wetness off my face and kissed my forehead.

I didn't fully understand what my mom meant about *friends being louder than words*, but I felt reassured.

"Ready?" She asked.

"Ready." I hesitantly replied.

Living close by, we arrived at the school only after a few minutes. My mom squeezed my hand as our eyes fell upon the school building. There were a series of classrooms clustered together and separated

by hallways. It was not an enclosed building like I was used to at my old school. Each corridor was separated by a grade level. I liked the openness of the new school. It was different in a fun way.

My mom and I saw the fourth grade classroom at the same time. We looked at each other with a nervous smile knowing today would be the beginning of a new life in America.

With a deep breath, we followed other children my age into the classroom. A young woman about the same height as my mom with short curly brown hair and large eyeglasses greeted us at the door. She wore a dress with a floral pattern and a huge smile on her face. Looking at me, she introduced herself while shaking my mom's hand. I heard my mom saying my name. I knew she was introducing me. The teacher then bent down towards me and greeted me. I could easily see her hazel green eyes that hid behind her glasses. Even though I didn't understand her, I politely nodded and smiled back at her. Her gentle voice made me feel comfortable. I could tell she was a nice teacher.

My mom faced me, smiled with her warm eyes and gently touched my face with her hand. She kissed my forehead and told me she loved me. She reminded me to not worry. She whispered again, "Don't forget, *friends are louder than words.*" I then watched my mom slowly walk out of the classroom with a final wave.

Standing still, I listened to her fading footsteps while trying hard to hide my nervousness. I wanted to make her proud of me.

A soft hand on my shoulder awoke me from my trance. I turned around to see my new teacher trying to get my attention. She pointed to an empty seat. I nodded and walked quickly to my seat feeling the other children looking at me. I sat down and listened to my classmates talking. Their English words sounded like an army of bees humming in the air. I tried to ignore the busy noise and instead focused on the room, absorbing every inch of the four walls. The wooden desks were placed together in groups of fours, and there were many colorful posters on the bulletin boards decorating the room with a cozy feeling. Two large closets in the back of the room were open revealing the other children's backpacks and lunch bags. My eyes shifted to my classmates, and I noticed a sea of students who shared similar hair color, eyes, and skin tone. I stuck out among them with my dark chocolate brown hair and eyes and naturally tan complexion. I took a deep breath and wondered if I would be able to make friends. In that moment, I felt so alone.

Pretending to look busy, I kept my head down while organizing my new school supplies. I wanted to keep myself preoccupied to avoid eye contact even though it only fed the shyness consuming me. I didn't dare move from my seat. I wanted to be invisible.

I could feel some of the other students watching me from the corner of my eyes. I felt their piercing looks and outstretched fingers. I couldn't ignore the whispering. Even though I didn't speak their language, I could tell some of their comments were not nice. Laughter echoed in the room, and I couldn't help myself but think they were laughing at me. A boy then approached my desk and said

something to me that sounded like a question. I didn't understand him, but I politely nodded my head and smiled, just like I had with the teacher. Judging by the boy's response, it became obvious that I had answered incorrectly. He burst into laughter and walked to a couple of other kids to share what had just happened. They then began snickering in unison while glancing at my direction. My dream of finding friends vanished and my eyes quickly filled with tears.

But then, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I was expecting someone to tell me to leave because I didn't belong. I turned my head slowly. To my surprise, I saw a girl standing next to me with a big friendly smile. For a few seconds, we studied each other's faces in silence. I stared at her jet black hair, and her dark brown eyes stared back at me. She didn't look like me. She didn't look like the other students either. I was reassured by her smile. We were two lost puzzle pieces trying to fit in a pre-packaged puzzle set. I could tell she too came from another country. She too was trying to fit into her new world.

She pointed to herself and said her name, *Jennifer*. I didn't understand. Her name was unfamiliar to me. I didn't want to just smile again and nod my head, for fear of being laughed at again. But the girl continued to smile at me until I was compelled to smile back. She then took my hand gesturing for me to stand up. Holding my hand in hers, she showed me around the classroom, pointing to different parts of the room. Her words were foreign to me, but her expressions were familiar and clear. Her expressions were warm and welcoming. I didn't need words to tell me differently.

To my surprise, the girl took me to the teacher and spoke to her in a soft tone. The teacher glanced at my direction and smiled. She nodded her head yes, and I could tell she was answering a question. Before I could gather what was asked, the girl took my arm and led me to my seat. She motioned for me to sit down. I watched her walk back to her seat and gather her belongings. She carefully balanced her books and school supplies in her arms and walked back towards me. I finally understood. She had asked the teacher to move her seat next to me. I smiled, *saying* thank you for being a friend to me.

All of a sudden, my mom's voice resonated in my head: "Friends are louder than words". I finally understood what she meant. I smiled knowing she was right. True friends don't need words. They understand each other without having to speak. True friendships are deeper and louder than any spoken word. Even though I looked different from my classmates, America was now my new home.

And at that moment, I knew I would be okay. I smiled again at my new classmate, and we both giggled like old friends.

