

OVERCOMING SILENCE

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Recibido: 1/9/2020; Revisado: 4/8/2021; Aceptado: 4/8/2021

An elderly man sat on a bench pondering how a simple seat could be as uncomfortable as the unnerving silence on his mind. That void was not there before, and it felt wrong.

The last memory, fresh on his mind prior to arriving at his seat, was of a disheartening room. An eerie beep and his consistent worrying thoughts kept him company. Four white walls encircled, tightened around him as he felt his lungs expel a decaying puff of air. He grasped pale blue sheets in his hand when he could barely breathe. The man peeked at the only nearby window and the green scenery beyond.

The view of the outside world full of life helped him hold on until his will and body collapsed. His surroundings turned dark, and the noise abandoned him.

Along came the silence after his aged eyes opened to admire the scenery he had peeped before. He now sat on a worn-out bench encompassed by a spirited park. A large lake stretched as far as his old-fashioned vision would permit him. Above head, a flock of birds could be heard. His gaze squinted as he tried to catch a glimpse of the flying creatures. Instead, he was met with a great tree. The leaves moved slowly against the wind making it seem as if the life around him was in slow motion.

People walked by leisurely, some accompanied, some alone. Many wandered with a small, metal piece attached to their hands. Every one of them bore different styles of hair and clothing. However, they had one thing in common. They passed with a purpose.

The passersby's upbeat demeanor frightened him. Most of all, made him swell with envy. These newfound emotions rattled him. How can they continue? Are they not afraid?

The man's frigid body tensed as he glared at a passing mother and her giggling baby. He gazed at the people around him, not understanding the mix of emotions he observed. The man perceived feelings of glee, some of regret. Others had indescribable harmony. None felt the deep melancholy he experienced.

If he were honest, he would say he did not care if he lost himself, as long as he regained what was most precious to him. However, the person that meant everything to him no longer existed. He would not be able to see her or apologize to her.

After that thought, he did not sense quiet anymore.

The silence transformed into ringing. The elder felt pangs of pain shoot down his arms and shoulders, down to his feet and up to his head. Paralyzed, he closed his eyes so that he could try to endure the aching attacks. He was slipping-

"Are you okay, sir?" a small voice sounded beside him. The elderly man opened his eyes to find a short young boy with curly black hair. He sat on the bench licking away at his vanilla ice cream.

"You looked like you were going to throw up and I wanted to help, but I didn't want vomit on my ice cream, and I didn't know what to d-"

The man puffed and tried to regain himself while gruffly asking the child, "What do you want, kid? Can't you see I'm in pain?"

The child considered the elder's question and shrugged it off. "Mom told me experiences are like a test. You know? Like the type of test you have to take in school?" the young boy stopped once again; he studied the person beside him. "Maybe this is your test. I don't know if I failed my test, but I really didn't want vomit all over my ice cream," he smiled sheepishly at the considerably taller elder who furrowed his brows disbelievingly.

The kid glanced down when he met his gaze. "You know, when I get sad about something, mom always says, 'think of life as a video game' and I love games so that makes life more fun!" the boy's face slightly lit up at the mention of his hobby.

Then, he turned toward the elder. "Maybe you just need to learn how to deal with the things that make you sad," the kid said with such carefree honesty that it made the man question how young he really was. He shook his head, dismissing the boy.

Maybe if I do not listen to him, he will go away. The youngling paused to eat more of his slowly melting delight.

“Look, as long as you don’t let the bad monsters take you, you’ll be okay. When they get close, it’s going to be hard to fight them like in my favorite video game!” the boy slightly perked up causing drops of ice cream to fall on his dark brown skin. Then, he frowned and cleaned them up against his shirt.

The man’s wrinkly eyes narrowed at the kid, and thought, what type of mother would say that nonsense to a child? “Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know, around here somewhere. I’m not worried though.”

“You should be. The world is a dangerous place. You could be kidnapped or worse.”

“But I’m here with you.”

“I could kidnap you. You don’t know me, and I don’t know you.”

“Well, I’m Axel. Now you know me,” the kid smiled at him and returned to his dessert. “What’s your name?”

“Not important. How old are you?”

“I’m 8. But next month I’ll be 9, so I’ll be a big kid!”

“Either way you’re still a child,” he scoffed out loud, not surprised. “You don’t know anything about life.”

Instantly, cold sweat ran down the man’s back. Although Axel did not show any signs of being upset, the elder worried for a moment that his words had gone too far.

The boy stayed quiet for a while, blissfully enjoying his ice cream as if he did not hear the man.

“Do you like planes?” asked Axel while taking a small glimpse at a bird flying over them before it disappeared behind a tree. Gray clouds formed overhead without warning.

Dumbfounded at the randomness of the child, the elder answered without giving the question much thought, "I've never been on one. Always been too afraid."

"Well, my mom is a pilot, pretty cool huh?" the elder rolled his eyes, nevertheless intrigued.

"Mom says that she feels as if she's guiding people to a better place," he smiled to himself. "People say my mother is very wise, but I don't think I know what that means."

Axel's words piqued the elder's interest. He was not sure when he last witnessed such a young soul look up to his mother. The scene appealed to the man.

"Your mother is very wise."

The little boy turned to him and his face lit up at the elder's words. Axel's sudden happiness made the old man grimace. "My mother is always helping people," the boy paused for a second and considered the man.

"Maybe she can help you too?" asked Axel, hoping. The elder recognized this emotion, it was one he knew but not well enough. For a moment, he thought the child was onto something. Instead, it made him think Axel was just naive. He should not have expected more of the child.

"Sorry, kid, but it's too late for me."

The silence returned, but it did not hurt him. It was a bittersweet quiet that left him perplexed. The elder peered at the fresh green grass and contemplated the little boy's words. Then, a single raindrop fell against the pavement in front of him. One after the other, drops of rain cascaded in front of the pair.

In a matter of minutes, it began pouring. The tree behind them unsuccessfully shielded them from the downpour. The leaves, before were a lime color, now displayed a dark shade of gray that cast shadows among the two opposites. Though they were soaking in the rain, they did not mind the water clinging to them.

"I despise the rain," the old man grumbled loud enough for the kid to hear. It reminded him of that terrible day when his life changed. He considered venting to the child. Even if Axel would not understand, nobody else seemed keen to hear him. Besides, the kid seemed smart, despite his age. "It reminds me of someone special I

lost.” Not being able to look him in the eye, the man turned to watch the drops patter against the lake’s surface.

Unexpectedly, Axel jumped beside him in agreement and shouted, “Something like that happened to me too. I told my mother that I hate the rain, but you want to know what she told me?”

The man nodded, not entirely paying attention to the 8-year-old. He was entranced by the rain shower in front of him.

“Well, I had this plant when I was little...” Axel paused to flick away strands of his wet hair from his forehead. The elder looked at him with a raised brow. Nonetheless, he discreetly moved strands of short gray hair from his forehead. The young boy smiled sheepishly and continued his undoubtedly peculiar tale.

“One day it was raining, just like now! And I told my mom I was worried about a plant I had outside because it would drown from all the rain!” Axel’s eyes widened, reminiscing the momentary frustration. “Mom said I couldn’t take it inside though, so I waited till’ the next day to check on my plant and it turned into a small flower! In such a short time too! Can you believe it?”

The elderly man frowned. He was almost to his limit with the child’s strange narrations when Axel’s expression turned unusually severe. The boy stared at him, his face unreadable. “I need you to answer this seriously,” the man worried for a moment, unsure if he was the reason Axel’s mood had changed. “Is my shirt all messed up?” Spots of ice cream and blobs of water covered his striped shirt.

The man coughed and covered his mouth to hide his raspy laugh while he shook his head. Axel glared playfully at the elder while he returned to his tale. “Anyway, mom told me that sometimes rain is needed to grow. Awesome, right? Then I thought that rain really isn’t that bad if it can make flowers grow.”

The elder considered this 8-year-old’s anecdotes. Slowly, a new thought brewed.

After a while, the man spoke “Her name was...” I cannot say it, it is too painful. He reminded himself of that day every moment. “She was my daughter. I fought with her before she passed in a car accident.” His daughter was his world.

Axel looked at him expectantly and offered him a small smile “But that doesn’t mean you won’t see her again, right?”

“I am afraid that if I see her, she will resent me.”

The youngling looked up at the man. “There’s only one way to find out,”

The man considered Axel’s words. For a long time, he had only known agony or anger. After spending time with the child, he noticed his chest appeared light. The silence in his mind did not make him feel incomplete. It strangely started to forge something different.

He thought back a few minutes ago to the miserable old man on a park bench all alone. It did not have to be like this. It could not end like this. His daughter would not like to see him in this state.

While Axel frowned, realizing his ice cream was now a puddle on the floor, the old man understood the message. The boy was sent by somebody. He held the hopeful thought close to him while he gripped his chest.

He did not let the bad monsters inside his mind rampage and destroy.

He did not have to suffer alone anymore.

The elder glanced at the kid whose focus changed to his ruined shirt. So, the old man got up from his seat and walked toward the rain. Once he was under the cascading rain shower, he did not let the torment surpass him.

The man felt faith in himself. He hoped that he would soon be reunited with his daughter.

Wait for me, Emily...

In the darkness, he traveled in the dim light.

Moments later, the sky cleared. The rain clouds dispersed, and the stuffy air became lighter. The kid sadly pouted at his spilled ice cream, as if forgetting about the previous conversation.

There, on a park bench, sat a boy who forgot about his melted ice cream. Instead, started observing people pass by with a big smile on his face. The lake remained steady. The trees’ bright leaves waved gently against the breeze. A dove situated itself on a branch of a tall tree. The world seemed to go on as usual.

There on a park bench sat a child. Alone.