

Speak English!

Breathe in. Breathe out.

In through the mouth, out through the mouth.

I had many nosebleeds as a kindergartener, but this was my first in-class one. Standing by the teacher, I pinched my nose with a tissue-sheathed grip.

“Does anyone want to take Grace to the nurse?” the teacher asked. Or something along those lines—I hadn’t learned English yet, but I was a good guesser.

Itching my heel with my sneaker, I squirmed before what seemed like a mushroom field of blonde and brunette heads. It felt like an auction.

I was a piece no one wanted. Maybe nobody raised their hand because the Chinese girl didn’t need help—*or wait, is she Korean?*

Either way, I was funny, but I never meant to be. I was only funny because you could say anything to me and I would just blink. Sometimes I would even nod. In reality, I knew some English—a few licks of it. Enough to peel *Speak English!* from the glares of the boys at recess, to pluck *Speak English!* from the confetti of giggles who always followed me down the hallway and into class. I was a hummingbird caught in a nest of wind chimes—except instead of the wind’s music, I heard the music of English and laughter.

Back in those days, I was gold. Soft and easily dented, but solid enough to resist turning to glittery dust. I smiled with my classmates’ laughter because I always smiled whenever I saw anyone else smile.

Sometimes, I wondered if my classmates didn’t even *want* me to speak English. What jokes would be left, what music?

Everyone liked to be around the Asian girl, but never with her.

Even in my gory tissue-flowered panic, I remembered a few names in the classroom. Including Elizabeth—I knew Elizabeth because she was the only Black girl. Elizabeth was quiet, elegant, and a little bit shy. She never laughed at me.

When Elizabeth shuffled over to me and reached out to take my hand, I accepted it numbly. My clammy hands grasped her small, cold fingers. They were slender and so smooth that, especially in memory, they felt airbrushed. They reminded me of feathers.

The hallway lights flickered on when we stepped out of the classroom. We passed wooden locker cubbies, strolling through an aisle of Spider-Man and Sleeping Beauty backpacks. Around us, glaciers of soiled January snow thawed off of boots and into puddles. The hallway was silent except for my mouth breathing.

In through the mouth, out through the mouth.

As we turned the corner, Elizabeth reached over, arm arching over my head. She pinched down on my bulbous nose. For a moment, we were both squeezing my nose. Then, my hand flopped down to my side. She stared firmly into the distance while I stared at her. Finally, her gaze flicked onto me. A smile peeked out. It was small, but it radiated warmth.

I suddenly wanted to cry. Cry because nosebleeds always made me cry. Cry because I didn't know what to say—or because I knew exactly what to say but just didn't know how.

Thank you, Elizabeth—for pinching my nose even though you knew you'd get your fingers dirty. For accepting me. For being unafraid of judgment, unafraid of laughing wind chimes. For showing me that love exists in the classroom.

But I didn't say anything. I didn't even cry. Under layers of Kleenex, I smiled softly—a smile that I soon had to bite my lip down on to keep from shooting up to my cheeks. At some point, I gave up and grinned silly for the rest of our walk.

Once we arrived, the nurse swabbed my nostrils with thick Vaseline. *Jelly that heals you when you're hurt.* Sitting on the plush leather chair, I giggled as I swished my legs. I laughed because the cotton swab tickled—but really, I couldn't stop laughing because my heart was swelling from the blossoms of a new friendship.

Friends hold hands. Amazing friends even pinch your bloody nose! They will do the right thing even if no one else volunteers. Even if you're caught in a nest of wind chimes, and you're soft and easily dented, and you can't *Speak English!*

The next day, something unexpected happened: I actually *looked forward* to going to school. I looked forward to seeing Elizabeth. I looked forward to making more friends. Maybe next time someone had a bloody nose—or a skinned knee or a paper cut in their heart—I would be the one to take their hand. I looked forward to offering kindness of my own. To, hopefully, one day, inspire a new friend like Elizabeth had inspired me.

Now, I know English. I recognize the music for what it was—but I also recognize the quiet strength of warmth, acceptance, and selflessness.