

The Hidden Language of Belonging

It was the summer of 2016 in Brazil, where the streets were lively with music and the sweet breeze rustled along the palm trees outside our home, carrying a familiar scent of hibiscus flowers. I was playing in the yard with my friends, lost in the joy of childhood

, when my parents called me inside. They seemed unusually tense as they said the words that would forever change my life: “We’re moving to the United States.” As I tried to grasp the weight of their words, I felt a knot tighten in my stomach and a lump in my throat blocked any response. I knew there was no changing their minds, and in that moment, nothing occupied my mind more than the thought of having to leave everything I knew behind; friends, family, and the only home I ever knew would soon become a distant memory.

A few months later, I found myself at the door of an American school, where the silence was heavy, and the classrooms echoed with unfamiliar voices and a foreign language. I gripped my mother’s hand as we walked around the school to meet my teacher. After getting lost in the maze of what I would soon be calling elementary school, we found ourselves in a third-grade classroom covered in posters and colorful ribbons, lining each wall with math problems (something familiar) and English words that I attempted to make sense of, but they remained unknown. I immediately noticed a man standing by his desk, talking to another parent. He turned towards us and warmly welcomed my mom and I to his inviting classroom. My mom, with a broken English accent, explained the *situation*, and the fact that I did not speak English yet. He responded with, “That’s perfectly fine, I’m sure she’ll learn quick.” My mom translated what he said, but his words merely brought temporary comfort. I could not help but worry about what my life was going to look like in this new place, and with each day that passed, it only seemed more real. Back home, I was top of my class, thriving in school, and before I knew it, my life restarted.

I was back to feeling like a two-year-old who knew nothing and depended on my parents for everything. Not speaking English and being unable to grasp what others were saying felt confining, as if I was being held back from everything I knew in my past life and being forced to relearn everything in my new one.

The first day of school arrived sooner than I'd hoped. I was never the girl who begged to stay home from school, as it was always the place where I could have fun with friends and learn all the unknown things that entertained my curiosity. This day, however, felt particularly different; I sensed an emptiness in my stomach as if a part of my old life had been ripped from me. I pleaded with my mom to let me stay home, and suddenly I recalled my younger self, crying while being left in a kindergarten classroom. But this time, it wasn't the feeling of being away from her that made me not want to go. It was the weight of all the sudden changes pressing down on me, and the overwhelming fear of not fitting in and adapting to my new life. My mom noticed my sadness, yet she claimed this was "for the best," and that "sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do." I was confused by what she meant, but didn't question it because I knew that my fate was inevitable.

We pulled into the school parking lot, with my heart pounding out of my chest. As I stepped out of the car, I squeezed my backpack tightly, as if it was the only piece of home I had left. My mom held my hand for the last time and smiled, trying to reassure me, but I could see the worry in her eyes. I watched her drive away and stood by the front door for a moment, as anxiety consumed me again; terrified of what people would think of me and preparing for what they might say. Eventually, I realized I could not stand there forever, so I walked inside only to see the hallway filled with unknown faces, hoping I could make a friend today.

I made my way to Mr. Castillo's class, and as soon as I walked in, heads turned, and strange glances pierced my soul. He welcomed everyone who came in and directed us to our assigned seats. I found the assigned seat rule strange, yet I followed instructions and put my bag down. Suddenly a static voice came over the intercom and said things I did not yet understand; everyone jolted up out of their chairs, placed their right hand over their chest, and began reciting unknown words while staring at the red, white and blue flags that adorned the room.

After the announcements, the teacher asked everyone to go to the front of the class and introduce themselves. Of course, not being able to understand what he was saying, I simply observed what my classmates said and tried to come up with something similar. When I realized what he asked us to do, I recalled my early years of elementary school in Brazil, where every first day, we would all gather in a circle and share the fun things we did in the summer. This was the moment I always anticipated, as bonding with my friends was my favorite part about starting school.

Suddenly, though, I was struck back into reality; everybody had gone up and the teacher called out my name, indicating I was next. I froze immediately and my legs felt glued to my seat. He repeated my name again, so I stood up and hesitantly walked to the front of the class. Words stumbled out of my mouth and in my foreign accent I muttered, "Hi, my name is Sarah... and I am from Brazil, my favorite color is-" Before I could end my sentence, giggles filled the room, and I felt the weight of their stares; all the attention was centered entirely on me, and all I wanted was to become invisible. Embarrassed, I went back to my seat, and wished the day could already be over.

Throughout the entire day, all I thought about was how I could never see myself fitting in this place, in fact, I did not belong anywhere— not in Brazil and not in this foreign country I was

forced to call home. I feared I would never be accepted for who I truly was, and here, nobody knew *me*. They merely saw me as the girl who couldn't find the right words, and a stranger who appeared out of nowhere and somehow found herself in Texas.

My day finally came to a close and as I made my way into the one-bedroom apartment which was now my “home,” I was greeted by my mother; anxious to know how my first day was. I lied, and tried to mask my disappointment, “It was great mom, I made some new friends!” I sat on the living room couch, which would later turn into my bed, staring at the ceiling, hoping the days ahead would get easier. The sounds of unfamiliar words and faces replayed in my mind, getting mixed with the warmth of home that now felt distant.

As the years went on, the apartment turned into a house; the faces changed, but certain feelings still lingered in unexpected ways. Even now, sitting in a different room, hearing a language that's no longer strange, I sometimes hear the echoes of that first day— soft, but still there, like a reminder of something quietly important.