Return to First Grade

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“And then there is the world of little things, seen all too seldom. Many children, perhaps because they themselves are small and closer to the ground than we, notice and delight in the small and inconspicuous . . . it is easy to share with them the beauties we usually miss because we move too hastily, seeing the whole and not its parts.”

—Rachel Carson

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

Liberty Elementary school looks like any other typical red brick, 2-story elementary school. With windows spanning the length of the building, a fenced-in playground, and the blacktop basketball courts that every elementary school seems to have, I gazed at it and felt like I was back at Point Harmony, my old elementary school, on the first day of classes. The only difference this time was that my mom wasn’t there to hold my hand.

I stood outside, adjusted my backpack, shifted my lunch bag from one sweaty hand to the other, took a deep breath and walked into the building. It even smelled like my old elementary school—that weird mixed odor of chalk dust, disinfectant, floor wax, rainy days, and little kids. Suddenly I was like Gulliver in the land of Lilliputians. Virtually every person in the hallway was at least 2 feet shorter than me. I lumbered through the masses of screaming, running, little people and found my way to Room #1. The sign outside said, “Welcome to First Grade.”

Once inside Room #1, with its tiny desks, many pictures, and colorful decorations, I met Ms. Melinda, the teacher. She looks like a first grade teacher. Her short brown hair, glasses, jumper dresses, sweet smile, and sense of humor make her picture perfect for the job. Then I was introduced to my class—to Charles, Richie, Assata, Ariel, Ashley, Mido, Reza, Demetra, Brittany, Saijit, Pinar, Demar, William, and Anna—14 boys and girls with diverse backgrounds and unique personalities and problems, as I would quickly learn.

Take Saijit, for example. She and her family emigrated from Thailand only a year ago. She hardly says a word in class, but if you can get her to start talking in a one-on-one situation, she isn’t shy at all. Initially, Saijit could only read one book—I Love you Sun, I Love you Moon. Every time she was asked to read aloud in class, that was the book she would pick to read. Every time she was asked to read aloud in class, the other children would groan. She didn’t
ask questions in class, she wouldn’t ask for help if she didn’t understand, she just kept quiet and stayed in her dream world, organizing her desk if she felt like it, drawing pictures if she felt like it, and paying attention if the mood struck her. A conversation with some of my Thai friends made me realize that in Thailand, children are discouraged from speaking in class and are expected to be silent and obedient throughout the school day. Hence Saijit’s silence. With individual attention, even her reading difficulties dissipated. It finally came down to pushing her to work harder, encouraging her to explore new books, and not giving up on her when she was having trouble. In just a few months, Saijit’s reading ability and confidence increased tremendously. Her success re-affirmed a belief that I’ve always held—small classes and individual attention can make a huge difference in the learning process of any child.

William came to Ms. Melinda’s classroom from an entirely different situation, with a very different set of problems. He lived with his granpap until just recently when his granpap became very sick. His granpap is now dying, and William has been sent to live with a mother who never really wanted him to begin with, but who is trying her best to do right by him. Still, the messages that William gets at home make it difficult for him to be the powerful, peaceful boy that Ms. Melinda wants him to be. William comes to school full of stories of the violence that he sees on TV and in his home, and doesn’t hesitate to share this unwanted knowledge with the other children. William also has the charisma and street-wisdom to make him a class leader. Children like to follow his example, whether his example is positive or negative. When he is a good mood, William is wonderful and exerts a positive influence over the other children, but when he is angry, the only way he knows of to solve his problems is through violence. This violence is reflected in a lot of the other children. Charles, for example, once said that the reason that he admires William is because “when people mess with him, he sticks up for himself.”

Then there is Mido, who came from Bulgaria, has parents who are both computer programmers, and for every practical purpose should be in third grade. Language is his only barrier. Mido is a genius—I taught him multiplication in a month, he is reading books on a level much higher than that of most of the other children, he plays chess with 5th and 6th graders, and beats them. But for all his intelligence, he lacks somewhat socially. He cannot sit still—he is constantly moving his legs, doing acrobatics, or sliding around on the floor. He has trouble interacting with the other children. He is constantly touching, poking, or hitting them, and when he isn’t picking on them, he’s ignoring them because they aren’t on his level intellectually. He doesn’t always understand the repercussions of his actions. Even after 8 months of working with him, Ms. Melinda still has trouble making him understand the consequences that he will face if he hits someone, takes someone’s toys, or calls someone names.
Return to First Grade

These are only three of the 14 children in the class and already you can see that they are an incredibly diverse group. But for all of their differences, these children all had one thing in common: they had all either been held back once, or risked failing first grade. At the start of the school year, they had been in a classroom with 25 other children, taught by an old, tired teacher who would have let them slip through the cracks yet again. The children were not learning, their behavior was outrageous, and the class was out of control. This lasted until November. Enter Ms. Melinda Baxter, fresh out of the inner-city Chicago school system, to save the day.

Shoved into the tiniest room in the school with the 14 first graders classified as having the most learning difficulties, Ms. Melinda’s innovation and creativity made it so that the 14 first graders that I met three months later in January were bright, well-behaved, and enthusiastic (with a few exceptions). Her emphasis on “personal power” made children know the importance of being powerful and peaceful—making the decision to be non-violent even when provoked. The children all had the phrase, “Hands are for helping, not for hurting,” imprinted in their minds, and would chant it whenever they saw a classmate about to react to a situation with violence. Allowing children time to dance at the end of the day, playing Bob Marley songs about love, peace, and harmony on the radio, placing African words on the wall like Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination, Ujima (cooperation), Ujamma (sharing), Nia (purpose), Kumbaa (creativity), and Imani (faith), and allowing the children to talk instead of talking at them are all unconventional techniques in the teaching world today, but the techniques were definitely working for Ms. Melinda and her students.

My job in Room #1 was to work with the four ESL students in the class (Mido, Pinar, Reza, and Saijit) on improving their conversation and writing skills. As with every other job that I’ve had, it ended up being much more than that. I was friend, basketball coach, lunch-trader, book-reader, protector, peacemaker, clown, and disciplinarian to the whole class by the end of it all. It wasn’t a difficult transition for me—my friends always tease me about my childish nature as is (very few other 20-year olds seem to enjoy swinging on swing sets, watching “Sesame Street,” and reading Curious George as much as I do), so working with first graders only really involved letting one side of my personality emerge from the hiding place that it is often forced into at college. But being able to deal with first graders on their own level is a dangerous thing—I ended up creating a situation for myself in which I was neither teacher, nor student . . . I was some weird combination of both that the children and I both had difficulty understanding.

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“Ms. Neema, do you go to school with us now?” We were standing in line in the hall, waiting to go to recess. William looked at me, and I could tell that he was laughing at me.
“Well, no, William. I go to college.” His grin grew wider, showing more of his bright white teeth. I knew that this was leading to trouble.

“But if you go to college, then why are you here at school with us?” Uh-oh... He crossed his arms and waited for my answer.

“Well... Well... I do both!”

“Oh...” William let it go at that, and walked away after one last suspicious look.

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In some senses, I wish I could have given William a straight answer. I wish I could have said either that I am only in college, or that I am only a part of his first grade class, instead of having to explain that I am attempting to do both. But the distinction is not that easy to make. Going to college keeps me intellectually stimulated—it allows me think critically about issues, read interesting books, and learn random facts that I will never use later in life. Going to first grade keeps me sane—it puts me back in touch with the people that I relate best to: children. Ms. Melinda says that she loves working children because “you can really be yourself around them.” I love working with children because in them I see the same sense of wonder about the world that I am fighting to hold on to. Being with them reminds me of why I hold this sense of wonder to begin with. My first graders have a way of looking at the world and handling situations that is still alive and fresh—not tired and jaded like the viewpoint of so many of the people that I interact with every day. They remind me of how important it is to hold on to that positive perspective, and how much easier it is to live your life if you can do so by maintaining your sense of wonder. And even during the most horrible of weeks, all it takes to make me happy is a few hours spent at Liberty with my students.

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The lunchroom was insane one day. Children were screaming, throwing food, making messes, and refusing to settle down. Mido was pouring milk into his applesauce, Ariel and Ashley wouldn’t stop giggling, Richie had put so much ketchup on his hamburger that the entire patty and bun were covered in red, and all of the children at the table were screaming at the top of their lungs. Finally I couldn’t take it any longer.

“SHUT UP!” I roared, and then immediately clapped a hand over my mouth, realizing what I had said, and hoping that I hadn’t really said it. Too late... Ashley’s hand was already up in the air, and the lunch lady was speeding over to our table. Ashley looked over at me and smirked. This was payback for all of the times that I made her hurry up in the bathroom instead of letting her goof off and tell secrets with her friends.

“What is it?” the lunch lady growled.

“She told us to shut up,” Ashley said, pointing her finger at me. The look on her chubby white face was one of pure malice. Between her evil looks and her two blonde ponytails sticking straight up in the air, I almost mistook her
for the devil at some points. Who would have ever thought it of a seven-year old? I felt my face go hot with embarrassment.

The lunch lady glanced over at me with a look of understanding. “Oh yeah?” she said. “Well, then shut up!” Ashley’s jaw dropped six inches. Inwardly I laughed.

But my reprimand, even coupled with that of the lunch lady, didn’t seem to have any effect. The decibel level remained high. Finally, the lunch lady could take it no longer.

“I want every single one of you to BE QUIET!” she yelled. “Put your heads down for the rest of the lunch period. If I hear one word out of you I’m sending you to the principal’s office!” The lunchroom quieted down immediately.

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Ariel attached herself to me very early into the semester. Initially, she was tough to talk to. She wasn’t interested in getting to know another teacher. But one day at lunch she showed me an injury, and I recognized it as a ‘strawberry’—floor burn that basketball players often get when they dive after a basketball. Once I told her that I’ve played basketball for 14 years, Ariel was my friend for life. I looked forward to seeing her at school, my tomboy with dirty blonde hair and eyes as blue as the lunchbox that she brought with her in the morning. I quickly learned that Ariel’s mouth constantly wavers between a smile and a frown. It was very rare that she would smile, and much more common for her to put her head down and cry. I made it a goal to get her laughing instead of crying as much as possible. This often led to Ms. Neema making a fool out of herself, but I didn’t mind. Ariel was reading a book once, entitled Over in the Meadow. As a child, I had heard the book in song-form, and commented on that fact out loud when I was reading with her . . . not realizing what this would lead to.

“Sing it to me, please?” she begged.

“Oh no. Uh-uh. You don’t want me to sing to you, Ariel. Really, you don’t.”

“Yes I do. I want to hear you song. Sing it please? If you don’t I’m going to be really sad.” Her mouth began to waver . . . I began to sing.
"Over in the meadow in a tree in the sun
Sat an old mother bird and her little birdie one.
‘CHIRP,’ said the mother,
‘I CHIRP,’ said the son
So they chirped and they chirped in the early morning sun . . . ”

I got no further. I was laughing, Ariel was laughing, and all of the other children were looking at us like we were crazy. But for days after that, whenever Ariel would want to tease me, she’d say, “Sing to me, please?” and then we’d both laugh.

Later in the afternoon of that same day I realized that Ariel was really having a wonderful school day. She hadn’t pouted once, not even when I couldn’t sit beside her at lunch. She was reading with Reza during book-sharing time, and unlike every other day, when she or her partner complains that the other isn’t sharing properly, both of them were having a peaceful time reading together. Halfway through book sharing time, Mrs. Martin, the principal, came in over the classroom intercom.

“Ms. Baxter?”
“Yes?”
“Could you send Ariel Corry up to the office right away, please?”
“She’ll be right there, Mrs. Martin.”

Ariel left Reza reading by himself and went up. I went back to reading with my two students, figuring that she’d just been called to the office to take a test or talk to the counselor. 10 minutes later when she came back to class crying, I knew that something very bad had happened.

She went immediately to Ms. Melinda, crawled up into her lap, and began to sob. For a few minutes none of the children really noticed, but very soon they all began to crowd around Ms. Melinda and Ariel, asking the same question over and over again:

“Ms. Melinda, what’s wrong?”
“Ariel, what’s wrong?”

Only I sat frozen in my corner, completely cognizant of what had happened even though no one had offered a word of explanation. I was transported back to elementary school, when my best friend Cara Dorsey’s dad had passed away.

Andrea Jett, the most snobbish, hated girl in our class, came back to the lockers while I was putting my coat away.

“So Neema, did you hear? Cara’s dad died last night.” The smug smile on her face that screamed, “I know something you don’t know,” enraged me. I was torn between slapping her smirking face or crying, and in the end, crying won out. I broke down and sobbed behind the lockers that day, crying for Cara and her mom liked I’d never cried for anyone before.

Sitting in Room #1 I felt the same way I had on that day when I heard that Cara’s dad had died—helpless. As Ms. Melinda began to explain that
Ariel’s mom’s best friend had just died, children began to chime in about their own experiences with death.

“My grandfather is dying, Ariel. I understand how you feel.” said William. His eyes were wide with sympathy; his laughing face was for once serious. William’s tough guy act always falls away when he starts to talk about his grandfather. This time was no exception.

“My grandfather died.”

“My grandmother died, too!”

One by one, child after child recounted a family member or close friend who had died. Only I remained silent. I wished at that point that I were seven years old. The older I get, the more difficult it gets to deal with death. I know so much more about it now . . . and it’s so much harder to talk about. I envied these children their openness. I wished to be able to talk about such a traumatic subject so honestly, knowing that it would have helped . . . but I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Shortly afterwards it was time for me to leave. I collected my belongings in silence, and slipped out before any of the children could notice. Only when I was out in the open, on the sidewalk across the street from school, did I let loose my frustrations. Once again I’d failed at helping someone. Once again I hadn’t had the right words or actions for the situation. Once again I realized that no matter how far I get in my education, there are some things I just don’t seem to be able to learn.

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The playground was especially crowded one afternoon in April. The heat was suffocating, and the sun beat down on our heads as I taught some of my students to play basketball. Kids ran circles around us, chasing each other, yelling, getting into fights, and unleashing all of their pent-up energy after a morning spent inside, trapped at desks in tiny rooms. Heat seemed to radiate out of the asphalt, come up through our shoes, and then course through our bodies. We shed coats and sweatshirts, leaving them in a heap on the ground. At some point during our game, William came over to me and tugged on my sleeve.

“Ms. Neema, would it be OK if I brought pepper spray to school and sprayed it on people?”

I looked at him, puzzled. “No, William. Why would you want to do something like that?” He didn’t respond, so I turned back to my budding basketball players. Dribble-Pass-Shoot. Dribble-Pass-Shoot. We went through the drill again and again.

A few minutes later, William was back again. “Ms. Neema, would it be OK if I brought a knife to school and raped someone?”

I felt like I was going to throw up. I just stared at him, and watched as he began to see that he had said something very wrong. Gradually I realized that maybe he didn’t know what he had said. I pulled him aside and knelt down to talk to him. Grabbing him by the shoulders, I asked, “William, do you know what rape means?”
Eyes wide and dilated, he shook his head, no.

"It means that you want to hurt someone so badly that they could die. Is that what you want, William? Is that what you meant?"

William was vehement in denying this. "I didn’t know what it meant, Ms. Neema. I just heard it at home." Over and over again he repeated those words. Finally I let him go, but only after he pinky-swore that he would never use the word again.

Shaken, I was relieved when lunchtime came around, but the relief didn’t last for long.

"If you don’t believe in Jesus, then you don’t believe in God. And if you don’t believe in God, then I hate you." I heard William all the way at the other end of the table. Now what? Just when I was getting into the groove of acting like a first-grader, and Ariel and I were about to trade lunches (her chips for my Nutri-grain bar), I was thrown back into being an adult.

William, supported by Richie and Anna, was yelling at Assata, one of three Muslim children in the class. Assata was on the verge of tears. I went to comfort her.

"Assata, don’t let them bother you. You’re allowed to believe whatever you want to believe, OK? There’s nothing wrong with you at all." I glanced over at her tormentors, making sure that they were listening. They weren’t budging. Sweet Anna, with her rumpled brown hair and tiny whispery voice, looked at Assata with eyes full of anger. She wasn’t talking about flowers, rainbows, and love shining in her heart anymore. Little, cuddly Richie, his braided hair fuzzy, his mouth bent down in a frown, made me sad. For once I couldn’t see the gaps left by missing teeth that I was used to seeing when he flashed me his beautiful smile. For once I had no desire to gather him up in a big hug and try to boost his self-esteem by telling him that he knew how to read, and that he could learn just as well as the other first graders. What had happened to these children? What was it that made them so mean?

I gave up. As soon as everyone was finished with lunch, I took the students back to class, explained the situation to Ms. Melinda, and let her take over. She first talked to William and Assata, and tried to explain to William that it was all right for people to have different religions. William was adamant.

"My granpap hates people who don’t believe in Jesus, so I hate people who don’t believe in Jesus. I can’t be her friend." He crossed his arms and gave Ms. Melinda his "Now what are you going to do?" look.

Ms. Melinda sighed. "Everyone put your books away. I think we need to have a talk."

We moved the desks back to the walls and all sat down in a big circle in the middle. Each of us chose a colored piece of construction paper from a stack that Ms. Melinda passed around, and we made a colorful collage, talked about how beautiful it was, and how boring it would be if all of the colors were the same. Ms. Melinda tried to explain that different people have different religions—she had me talk about Hinduism, Assata talked about Islam, and
William talked about Christianity. But the tension in the room remained thick. William’s eyes were hard, Richie’s mouth was set in a thin, hard line, and Assata’s face was still downcast. The other children all had worry written on their faces.

Putting the rest of the colored paper in a pile on one of the desks, Ms. Melinda directed that the rest of the afternoon would be spent on making colorful flowers to decorate the room for spring. Talk about a change in lesson plans! The children were given glue and scissors and let loose. Bob Marley started wailing on the tape player, singing about “One Love,” and slowly the tension in the room began to dissipate.

“One Love
One Heart
Let’s get together
And feel all right.”

Ms. Melinda came up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. “You can make flowers too, you know, Ms. Neema.”

“I don’t think you want to see any of the flowers that I would make,” I joked. But I wasn’t really joking . . . anyone who has seen my art knows that it doesn’t rank much higher than that of first graders in many respects. She left it at that and went on, leaving on the comment, “All right, but if you feel like joining in, go for it.”

I looked around the room. All of the children were smiling, cutting and gluing away. They complimented one another on their flowers, showed off their work, and sang and danced to the music. None of the tension present before was evident. I wondered if something about the flowers, or the music, or the activity of cutting and pasting was making the difference. I grabbed some paper, glue, and scissors and tried to find out.

* * * * *

I woke up on the morning of my last day at Liberty and could already sense a lump growing in my throat. I yanked myself out of bed and got ready quicker than I had gotten ready all semester. Even my walk to school went more quickly. Before I knew it, I was climbing the steps to Liberty, signing in at the office, and going down to class to wait for the students.

Ms. Melinda had parent-teacher conferences in the morning, so Room #1 was to have a substitute teacher . . . only the sub never came. With no sub, and another teacher wandering in and out to supervise, I realized that if I didn’t take over lessons, none of the students were going to have a productive morning. So I glanced over the lesson plans quickly, and then went at it. Punctuation, Sentence Building, and Reading Areas were the three things that I covered that morning, and the three hours that it took went by so quickly that thinking back even just a few hours later, the events were a blur in my mind. Isolated incidents stick out—Reprimanding Mido for using the word “stupid,” only to have him react by looking at me and making his funny,
I-don’t-know-what-to-do-so-I-am-going-to-be-silly face, his blue eyes wide and flashing with mischief, his cheeks puffed out to make him look goofy and forgivable. Encouraging Assata to use her imagination when asked what the curvy line drawn on the page meant, only to then hear her answer the question by saying, “The line looks like a line because it is a line.” Forcing Richie to build sentences without cheating after I caught him looking at the numbers on the back of each word instead of reading the words, figuring out their meanings, and then creating a sentence based on that. Before I knew it, the recess bell rang and we all headed out to the playground.

Even the 20 minutes on the playground were anti-climactic on my last day. There were no fights, no “Ms. Neema, William hit me,” or “Ms. Neema, Ariel won’t play with me.” I organized an impromptu game of hopscotch that attracted 15 or so children into a long, exciting hopscotch tournament, and when it was over, it was lunch time.

At lunch, the children were loud and rowdy as usual, but for some reason on that day it didn’t bother me. I was lost in thoughts as I stared at the wall clock and realized that my minutes at Liberty were ticking away quicker than I’d ever expected.

With every action I took that day, I was completely conscious of the fact that it would be my last in that setting with those children. It was like a death in one part of my life. In others, I will continue to read books, to write stories, to splash in puddles, to hang out in the children’s section of Barnes & Noble, to swing high on swings and eat lots of ice cream. But never again will I read books with Saijit, never again will I trade lunches with Ariel, never again will I joke with Mido and Reza, never again will I comfort, scold, encourage, or be with these children that have become so important to me. I’ll have the memories . . . That’s what we do when people die, don’t we? We remember them. So I’ll remember my first graders, and for a little while they’ll remember me, but we’ll never be alive to one another again.

I tried to slow down time for the last two hours—I sat with one group at book-sharing time and worked with them on reading *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, paying close attention to every word they read. The end of book-sharing time came and it was time for me to give each of the students the book that I had made for their class, full of pictures and stories all about them. I could hardly say a word about it without my voice beginning to fail me, so I ended up just saying, “Here’s the book I made for you,” and leaving it at that. For the moment, I had staved off the tears that I knew were eventually coming.

For the first time all semester, I did not interact much with the children during Discovery Choice Time—basically, an hour where they can play games, do arts and crafts, read, listen to music, whatever. Instead, I sat back and watched them, imprinting their faces, their little gestures, their voices into my mind. My mental video camera panned the room: There was Reza, his short brown hair sticking up every which way, entire face creased with happiness—mouth, eyes, forehead, everything. His dark brown eyes were
shining as he danced across the room on his short legs, arms flailing, while saying silly things in a language that he's made up—some combination of Turkish pronunciation and English words. There was Demetra, sidling up to me and crawling into my lap. Everything about Demetra is tiny—her eyes, her head, her body. Even though she is six, her size lends itself to that of a four-year-old, letting Demetra act like a four-year-old, which is convenient for her. The dark black eyes staring at me from her dark brown face contrast sharply with the bright white smile that she gives me as she sits in my lap ... even her teeth are tiny. Demetra drew a picture of me once—I had big, stark brown eyes, black hair that stuck out of my head every whichway, and two big fangs where my mouth should have been. An accurate depiction, I suppose ... There was Charles, sitting in a corner building a house out of lego-type blocks. Red-yellow-blue-green-pink-brown-white-orange-black-CRASH ... Down with the whole structure. Charles’s expression did not change. The complacent look on his face remained complacent. He didn’t cry out in frustration, he didn’t give up and move on to doing something else, he didn’t even get one wrinkle of worry on his forehead. He merely picked up the fallen blocks, and began building again. Red-yellow-blue-green-pink-brown-white-orange-black.

1:35. Almost time for gym. “Clean up, everyone! It’s time to say goodbye to Ms. Neema,” Ms. Melinda called out. In an instant, twelve children ran at me, all trying to hug me at once. The weight of twelve children, all hugging me around the legs, made me stagger. I knelt down and tried to make it an orderly process of hugging one at a time. I got no farther than hugging William, the first child who reached out to me, before I was crying. “Be good, William. I’m counting on you to be strong and powerful for me, OK? Promise?” I whispered.

“I promise,” William swore.

As each child came up and hugged me, I cried even harder. Suddenly, when I went to hug Pinar, I realized that she was crying, too ... and that William was crying, Ariel was crying, Reza was crying ... “Don’t cry,” I said through my tears. “I know I’m crying, but you shouldn’t cry.” The sight of the children crying made me cry even harder. Tears just kept falling from my eyes. I tried to stop them. I tried to shake them away, but they continued to pour out with no sign of stopping.

“Alright. Time to go to gym. Let’s go. Walk out, everybody.” Ms. Melinda herded the class out, came back, and gave me a hug.

“It’s so hard!” I said. “I knew it would be hard, but I didn’t know it could hurt so much.”

“I know,” she said, “Every time I have to say goodbye to a group of kids I cry.”

We continued to talk, and Ms. Melinda told me news that upset me even more. Reza was going to go to another school next year. William, whose family life is a mess, was transferring schools as well. “Do you remember how he asked you if he could rape someone with a knife?” Ms. Melinda asked. “It’s
because his 15-year old sister was raped that way a few months back. He kept hearing people talk about it in the house, and I guess that’s why he brought the idea to school with him.” On top of it all, Ms. Melinda is leaving Liberty. “They don’t have room for me here next year. I’ll be in another school in Pittsburgh, but I won’t be at Liberty,” she told me.

I said goodbye, signed out, and left Liberty, crying. I walked through Shadyside, past all of the ritzy boutiques, fancy restaurants, and elegant shoppers, crying. For the first time I walked down 5th Avenue without enjoying the sun or smelling the tulips, and instead came back to my dorm, crying. I couldn’t stop. My head ached, my eyes burned, my stomach was starting to hurt, and I was short of breath, but the tears wouldn’t cease. I sat in my room and wept until there were no tears left in my eyes for me to weep. And then I picked up my backpack and went to my next class. After all, as I’m so often told, “Life goes on.” Never mind that one part of my life—a part that I needed so desperately this semester—is now dead. Life goes on.

Few people understand why leaving Liberty is so hard for me. The only reason I can offer for why I am so upset about this situation, other than because I have gotten so attached to these children, is because I am leaving it unresolved. William is still disturbed because his sister has been raped. Reza, Saijit, Pinar, and Mido still need work before they are completely fluent in English. Charles still can’t read properly. Ashley and Demetra, and for that matter, most of the other children, still have self-esteem issues. Ariel still pouts to no end. And in the midst of all of this, I’m leaving them . . . and I can’t go back. I can’t change their lives for them. I know that much. But I can’t even stay in touch with them to see how they are! Some of them are going to different schools next year, and while others will still be at Liberty, each time I go back I feel like I’m prolonging the inevitable . . . some day I will have to leave for good, and it hurts more and more to say goodbye each time. For me, the children of Room #1 are permanently going to remain at the age of seven . . . even 10 years from now when they’ll be 17, in my mind they will still be seven. They’ll still look the way they do now, laugh the way they do now, and have the problems that they have now. I’ll probably never know what happens to these children as they grow up, and that is what hurts me most of all.