

Shape of My Heart

by Renata Anqa

The warning bell rang as my high school students kept trickling into my classroom. As always, I stood by the door watching them approach, so I can gauge their mood by observing their faces and the way they walk. Are they in a group engaged in a lively discussion? Or walking alone slowly with their earphones in as they keep their gaze upon a wave of students whose pace they follow as they go to their next period?

Exchanging "Good Mornings", "Buenos días", "Holas", smiles, and 'cool' fist bumps (yeah, my boys were cool like that!), and glancing at the classroom as they all settle in their seats, my attention quickly shifts toward Sandra among a very few students who are hurriedly catching up with the major wave in the now almost empty hallway, walking alone slowly toward me, with her head down and face hidden by her long stringy hair.

The main bell rang, yet her pace didn't pick up, as though she didn't hear it, or its significance as a marker of the beginning of the period didn't even matter at all. To get her attention so I can take a look at her eyes, I attempted to make a conversation. "Buenos días. Tú eres tarde hoy," (You are late today) I said gently in my beginner Spanish to this recent newcomer, an unaccompanied minor from Central



America, who had no family here and lived with an assigned guardian. My greeting was met with silence.

Instead of eye contact or a spoken response, I found myself in Sandra's tight embrace. As I hugged her I felt her body shake, and as the main bell silenced, I heard her sobbing aloud. We stood frozen in that moment for what felt like a lifetime. "¿Qué pasa?" (What's wrong?), I asked. Looking down at her shoes she's been wearing every day since she started school, she uttered in a broken voice, "Ms.... Tengo hambre." (I am hungry.)

As thousands of thoughts and memories flashed through my mind, I signaled my Teacher's Assistant to come over and asked her to take Sandra to the cafeteria, and then to her guidance counselor. As they walked away, with my emotions running high, I looked down and realized that my shirt was soaking wet as though tears from my heart broke a dam I worked so hard to build ever since I was a civil war refugee hungry on the streets of a first-world country whose language I didn't know, and couldn't express my lonely broken heart that just wouldn't stop crying.

Then, acutely becoming aware of my surroundings, I looked up at the classroom filled with 24 unaccompanied minors from Central America looking at me looking at the heart-shaped wet spot on my shirt in a deafening silence.