

THE LITTLE GIRL ON THE STEP



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Every morning on their way to school Julio and Marta pass a very poor area where people put up temporary huts and live the best they can. Some time ago they began to see the same little sad girl sitting on a certain step each morning. She was neatly dressed but never seemed well. When Julio and Marta tried to talk to her she would just mumble a few words that they could not understand.

St first Julio and Marta jokingly referred to her as “Little Misery” But soon because of the trusting way that her face lit up when she saw them they began to ask themselves “What is such a young child

doing here alone?” , “Who looks after her?” “Why is she unhappy?” and “Can we help?”

Slowly they discovered the little girl’s story. Her name was Safi. Her father was killed in the civil war. Her mother, Mina, lost many members of her own family too in the fighting. Left on her own Mina came to the city to find work so that she could support Safi. She finally got a job but has to work all day and much of the night. She still earns very little.

There is no one to look after Safi. An overworked neighbour tries to keep an eye on her but can not really give her much attention. She cannot talk well because she has no practice. She looks unwell because she eats badly. Mina, no more than a girl herself , does the best she can for her daughter, but she is always tired, sometimes does not know what to do and has no one to ask

People are not very welcoming to them. Mina is a foreigner and speaks the local language badly. One neighbour, an old fellow, Mr. Petrami, who used to work in a government office is particularly outspoken. “What is this brat doing around here?” he says when he sees Safi.

“She’ll poison the water with her sour face and all that crying”.



Julio and Marta do not agree. They consult their uncle who is a schoolteacher. “Is there some way we can help Safi?” they ask.

“You can certainly try,” he answers. “If she had more good food to eat she would feel better. And you can help make sure she does well at school if you start now, before she gets there. I’ll give you some ideas - bright children like you won’t need many - and then you can carry on. But be sure you speak with her mother first.

Mina is scared and distrustful at first. She is afraid that someone will take Safi away and the little girl is all she has. When Julio and Marta say that they want to help, Mina finds it hard to believe because of the way that people have treated her so far. But finally they convince her that they are on her side. Mina is happy. Perhaps, with their help she can make life a little better for Safi.

First, working all together they try to do something about food. Safi has been eating mostly bread and sweet tea . Sometimes Mina would prepare rice or Cassava with a peppery sauce. Julio and Marta, (with some advice from their uncle and auntie) explain to Mina that for the same amount of money she can buy oil, vegetables, nuts and beans for the rice. And fruit is not expensive, particularly at the end of the day at the market. Sometimes Julio and Marta bring a piece of fruit as a treat for Safi.

Best of all, Safi now has friends she can talk to and play with. Julio and Marta tell her the names of all the things they see as they go together to the market. .They listen carefully to her questions and answer.. when they can . Sometimes Safi asks them about things they do now know. Then they say “HmMMM, we don’t know, Safi, but we will try to find out for you. Safi’s speech gets better very day. Julio and Marta learn new thing too.

Marta and Julio make all sorts of toys and games for Safi. Most of the toys cost nothing because they are made out of things that can be found around the house or outside – scraps of wood or cardboard , spools, matchboxes, seeds and pebbles.. Marta’s mother has a sewing machine and Marta is sometimes given small pieces of cloth cut off as she finishes her dressmaking. Julio knows a shopkeeper who can sometimes give him old boxes and packing material. Marta and Julio enjoy the time they spend with Safi. They find that she is really bright, funny and creative.

Mr. Petrami does not approve. “Why are you always feeding that child? When I was a boy children eat at meal times, after the

adults had finished! ..And teaching the child games! Haven't you anything better to do? Julio and Marta have some fun imitating Mr, Petrami, but never when he can see them.

One evening Mr. Patrami has too much to drink. Coming home he bumps into things and staggers over the road. Safi is sitting on her step, waiting for Julio and Marta. She watches Mr. Petrami and wonders what he is doing. Just as a big lorry comes near he starts to walk right into its path. Safi jumps up and runs after him crying "*Trami*". She catches hold of his shirt tail. He turns round and falls backward into the mud, but he is out of the way of the lorry. Other neighbours rush up and drag him off the road. Mr. Petrami falls asleep. When he comes to Julio and Marta tell him how the little girl saved his life. "What was the little brat doing on the road," is his reply. "Now when I was a boy".

Soon it is time for Safi to go to school. The school is free but there are many other charges – for a uniform, shoes, building fund and books. It is more than Mina can possibly afford. Julio and Marta get a little bucket and take up a collection from the neighbours explaining the situation to them. Everyone contributes what they can but it is still far too little. Mr Petrami is the last they approach.

"When I was a boy we didn't go around with a bucket like beggars. Look how little you have got". Then to Julio and Marta's horror, he takes all the money out of the bucket and puts it into his own pocket. "I'm taking this to buy her books," he growls as he walks away. "And you can forget all the other charges, I've paid them".

“And so he has,” says a voice behind them. It is the headmistress of the school. “He says he will do the same every year, and he will. I’ve known the old fellow for a long time now. He’ll groan and he’ll grumble but he will never go back on his word.

When Safi gets to schools she learns to read within a few months. The headmistress says she is the best reader in the class.

“The books must be too easy,” grumbles Mr. Petrami. “Now when I was a boy”.....

NOTES FOR THE TEACHER

About the story

Sadly very few school Health Education programmes emphasise the value of other children helping to play with younger ones, make toys for them and talking with them. Yet it is one of the greatest and least controversial tasks children can do for one another.

It is emphasised in two stories in this section and detailed help is available from Child-to-Child centres who have used the techniques both in schools and refugee camps. The plight of single mothers who have no time to look after children (because they have to work to feed them) is also little appreciated. Other children in a neighbourhood have a vital part to play here,

Activities

This story is particularly suitable as an exercise for reading and comprehension followed by discussion. The character of Mr. Petrami needs also to be discussed.

Exercises for older children in making apparatus for reading and number teaching are valuable in teaching measurement and coordination skills in both mathematics and craft teaching. Cardboard and off-cuts of wood and polystyrene can often be obtained free from local businesses.

Source Child-to-Child and ICCB, *Listening for Health* (Geneva/ London 1997) Story retold by Patricia Smyke from an original by Hugh Hawes (slightly adapted)