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31 cents

Robbieana Leung
Pepperdine University

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31 cents

Robbieana Leung

She had long dark hair, like mine.

Her eyes were almond shaped, like mine.

She reached the height of my heart, but her eyes pierced straight into mine.

“Just ignore it, Robbie, just ignore it,” my Semester at Sea friend commanded me. “It’s a trick, she knows you are rich, so she just wants to target you. There are plenty of other tourists around who she can ask for money. Ignore her. Walk on.”

Darting my eyes, pretending to check out the shoes in the store across from me, I tried to avoid the little girl’s gaze. Her palm, lightly cradling a lime green single stick of Wrigley’s Gum, lingered in the air without moving, outstretched to Andie, Sara and me. It stayed there for a couple minutes, as she followed us. *Still gazing, always gazing.* My face shunned hers, but by the crease of my eyelid, I could still see her. Finally, she walked away. Her outstretched hands were reaching towards another couple long before they, too, began to look away.

Tightly grasping the shirt that purchased, Andie exhaled deeply as we walked to the end of the night market. “That was the worst feeling in the world...” She trailed off, only to fume a couple seconds later. “I can’t believe I bought that shirt for six dollars! I know I could have gotten it for four! I’m so mad!” Her words sparked dejavu for the sixth time.

I uttered a cheap, pitying “aww”, too distracted and consumed with the memory of the little child, who looked as young as eight years old. *If you feel so strongly about walking away, why are you still standing here? Why not do something? Go back, find her...*

“I know that everyone says adults purposely plant kids on the streets to sell tourists candy, because they can better extract pity. It might be a set up, but you can’t deny that she is poor and could use the money.” I tried to argue, hoping to counter their cruel words with justice.

Andie and Sara immediately protested. “But if you buy candy from her, then you are only encouraging her to sell candy on the streets for the rest of her life. Anyway, there are plenty of other richer tourists they can target. Do you even like gum?” Their words were not new; in fact, I could have predicted them. I was reprimanded by French tourists for giving money in Mekong Delta, when a little beggar came up to us. I was instructed by my roommate not to donate, as she had done when a two year old in India tried to sell her candy. *How can that not move you to throw away your checklist?* Every encounter with poverty echoed with short utterances of pity, over and over again. That’s all the children received. Pity. None of us had given anything else.

My heart began to ache. *Maybe I was a sap, falling into the little girl’s trap...*

But how could I stand there, in a market, spending money like air, without giving anything, not even a little sum, to the girl? I was torn – a part of me knew that if I gave her money, my actions would encourage her to sell more candy, but the majority of me did not buy into the argument that by refusing to give her money she would realize the ineffectiveness of begging and pursue another, more positive direction. I was certain that she would continue to beg. But I didn’t care about the money. I wanted her to experience an ounce of compassion from these hypocritical tourists, if only in the brevity of eyes meeting and hands touching.

What’s a dollar anyway? 16,000 Vietnamese dong. Or, 16,045 dong to my shopping buddies. A seventh of minimum wage in the US. good meal and a drink for two people in Vietnam. Any attempt to justify could not deny that we were rich Americans, regardless if we had fifty dollars to our name. In Vietnam, even fifty dollars was close to one million dong.

“I have to give her a dollar.” I turned to rush back down the market, hoping to find her. Before I ran off, I fumbled to find a dollar. Sara suddenly interjected.

“Here, I have some change. Take 5,000 dong. A dollar is too much.”

“Really?” The syllables hastily escaped my mouth on its own accord, while my mind was frantically searching for the little girl.

“Yes. Definitely.”

Without thinking, I snatched the 5,000 dong and hurriedly retraced my invisible tracks. The only image engraved in my mind was the little girl, about eight years old, with dark black hair like mine and eyes that peered into mine, and hands that reached towards me. *She could have been my little sister, or Andie’s or Sara’s. She looks enough the part, sharing the same eyes as us. She probably is someone’s sister. Someone’s daughter...a loved one.* Running through the streets, my eyes darted right and left. Colorful shirts and purses and shoes blurred as I ran past, shot with curious and confused stares from Vietnamese vendors. Theirs did not pierce my eyes though, theirs merely blurred into the background as I adroitly dashed by.

I saw a group of ten American kids standing in a circle, chatting. They were more people from Semester at Sea. Between their hips, I distinguished a petite figure with outstretched hands trying to squeeze into the circle. I dug my sandals into the concrete. Her bare feet swiftly laced between the students, asking – but not begging – with her eyes for them to buy candy. Standing five feet away, I watched each blonde and brown head look down at the child then shake. Some gave a sympathetic smile – the kind I was so used to seeing and giving, but the kind the girl must have known by heart. I slowly approached the immobile girl, who was standing by a SAS student, holding her hand out. The student had broken eye contact, intentionally ignoring the Vietnamese girl. I understood – it is easier to breathe freely when you try to not see, because then they become invisible. The beloved was still offering gum so persistently that she was unaware that I was now hovering over her. I tapped her soft red t-shirt – once, twice, and then she turned.

The big brown orbs shone as they peered into my own. She did not turn with her arm outstretched; it was by her side now, in a somewhat defeated stance. Silently and questioningly, she waited until I made my objective clear. I handed her the 5,000 dong, and she reached into the little box, and held her hand out to me, unsmiling and quietly. Inside her fist was the neon green package. I gave her a soft smile, caught off guard by the intensity of her deafening eyes. Then I walked away, and slowly broke into a jog back to the end of the street to meet my friends.

Her eyes...big and brown. Unspeaking yet yelling. I was moved beyond words at the still serenity of understanding something so incomprehensible. They did not well up with tears and scream “thank you!” The SAS student had offered an approving smile. I could almost hear the “awww” beneath the curves of her upturned red lips. But there was none from the tiny girl. And I was glad – I wasn’t there to do charity or express pity. I did not want to be the “Western” heroine to “save” some “poor, Asian girl.” I did not want to donate as a repentant payment to erase guilt.

Her unsmiling eyes spoke confusion. They spoke relief. They spoke of stillness. They spoke of “so what now?” Of a moment we shared that would transcend time and form an everlasting imprint on my mind, yet would not shatter hers in the same way. I was just another person in her everyday life; someone happened to help her get lucky. Tomorrow, when she will return to the market to sell candy, Monday would quickly collide into Friday, as the days of the week blur into months and finally years, and I would be soon forgotten.

Yet, the little girl was not just another ordinary person in my everyday life. What was compellingly whispered through those spheres echoed the voices of all the invisible children placed in her situation, and reaffirmed my calling to be proactive about things that provoke me. I did not want to be a person who walked into Vietnam and walked out, temporarily moved by an experience. I wanted to be fueled by this experience so strongly that I would never forget, and would vow to use my resources to provide opportunities for more children of similar circumstances who are robbed their childhood and quite possibly, their future, too.

I knew not to put her in a box, and label her as the poor, unsmiling beggar who had nothing to her name but a pack of gum. Perhaps she wasn’t even that poor, despite being barefoot and covered in dirt. If I had played a game with her or been silly, she could have smiled, maybe even laughed, thus breaking the stereotype. She was a child, after all. But in that moment of staring into the ocean of brown, I stood captured by an unforgiving truth that sparks the birth of stereotypes. Even if she played and laughed at home, this was what she had to face every night. She was an adult with innocent, youthful eyes, marked with strain. She was a child that experienced so much of life, making her older than the amount of years she had lived. I still cannot place a word to what I saw through her eyes; it was as if a prism had shone through the

brown and showed me a million hues of her life – so many, conflicting and battling shades of light that I continue to remain perplexed and astounded.

What I had experienced was more than 5000 dong's worth.