

Tongue-Tied: The Sound of Friendship

It was the first day of school. I was walking down the hallway. I looked at everyone with envy. They were all talking, laughing, telling their friends how they had spent their summer holidays, lost in a world so alien to me.

What was I doing? I was just staring at all of them and trying to blend in, unnoticed. A girl came over, sauntering her way over to me. She eyed me and as if scanning me, ran her eyes from top-to-bottom, taking note of every detail.

“Sup! What’s your name? I’m Rachel by the way.”

She held out her hand for me to shake, and I did. She waited for a few seconds, then her smile turned into a forced one.

“Are you going to tell me your name or not?”

Her raised eyebrows, her hands on her hips, suddenly she looked very irritated with me. I tried to open my mouth and force out words, but nothing came, as usual. She looked at me like I was the weirdest creature she had ever come across. I looked up and prayed to God that she would understand sign language. My parents had taught me sign language when I was 5 years old. I had been home-schooled my whole life. I did gestures with my hands. When I finished, I looked at her with hopeful eyes. How wonderful would it be if I had a friend! Then I would have someone else other than my parents to talk to. We would play, we would dance, and I would tell her about all the books I have read, we would have so much fun! My smile fell as I looked at her and saw her holding her stomach and laughing hard at me.

“What were you doing? You looked hilarious!”

She said in between her laughs. Other people were now looking our way. Others who had seen me making signs with my hands, were also laughing now. They all thought I was weird! First day of school and I have already become the school clown!

The bell rang, signalling the start of first period. I ran to my class. Tears of shame blurring my view, I was trying hard to control my tears from rolling down. My breath started to hitch, and whimpers sneaked out. I ran my hand across my eyes. Now, I could at least see what was in front of me. I looked at the timetable in my hand and opened the door of my class.

A throng of students stared back at me. I was late! The teacher berated me, I put my head down and just walked towards the seat which my teacher had assigned to me. I noticed a few students who I had seen in the hallway laughing at me. They were whispering to other people while looking at me and snickering. I knew what they were whispering about – the weird new girl who makes freaky signs with her hands.

When the class ended, I was sure everyone knew about me. They all thought that I am too shy or scared to talk, but they don't know that is not the case. I am mute. I cannot speak. Unlike many others in this world. I am the odd one, the one who is tongue – tied. I spent the whole day in the school, just keeping my head down and going through my classes.

The bell rang and I walked to the bus stop to wait for my bus to arrive. I stood there and noticed a few people around me. They were all talking with their friends. Some hissing, some laughing while some talking so loudly that their voice could be heard from miles. I sighed and gripped the strap of my bag. After waiting for a few minutes, the bus arrived. I boarded the bus and started walking and searching for a vacant seat. The ones at the front were always occupied by the elementary school kids, so that the teacher who sat at the front could take care of them. I knew I could not sit at the back as those seats were preoccupied by the high school kids and that too the popular and cool ones. I thought I'd sit in the middle section if I were to ever find an unoccupied seat. I sighed inwardly in my head at how my day was turning from bad to worse. Everyone had someone sitting next to them, and the ones who did not, just covered the seat with their hands and said,

“Sorry. I am waiting for my friend to arrive.”

As if, I did not understand what they meant by that. What they meant but didn't have the guts to say was,

“You are so weird, I'd never sit with someone like you!”

The moment I thought that I'd have to sit with the elementary school kids, I saw a hand tapping the seat next to them. I looked up and found the face of a girl who wore an expression so kind. The girl with black hair and olive eyes. I sat next to her, and she just smiled at me.

“Hi! I am Kiera.”

She extended her arm, and I shook it. She looked at me and waited for me to answer back, but I just shook my head and looked down. I thought - why to make a fool of myself again.

“Oh, I see. You are the same girl who Rachel talked to, right?”

I bobbed my head up and down. She made some signs with her hands, and I quickly understood them. I grinned happily. Joy over flooded me. To finally meet someone who could understand me and that too of my age! She said in signs –

“What is your name? I am Kiera.”

I did the motions with my hands as well.

“Nice to meet you, Kiera. My name is Elise. I am so happy that you know sign language!”

Kiera smirked in response.

I got perplexed as to why Kiera knew sign language in the first place? So I asked her in sign language.

“I am curious, why did you learn sign language?”

“My mom is also mute, like you. Since as long as I can remember, I have seen my father talk to my mother like this. So, I also learnt it along the way.”

“Okay. Though, if you are comfortable in speaking more, then it’s okay. My ears work just fine.”

I did the gestures with a smile.

“Okay. It is better for me, this way only.”

She said in her voice now. I noticed that her voice was very sweet.

After that, the conversation continued and I gained a best friend for life that day.

She is next to me even now, after 30 years. We went through middle school, high school, and life, together. I had my ups and downs in life, but she was always there to give me a shoulder to rely on, to shed my tears on. Though, even we had our little disagreements, but I believe that there is no force yet made that could pull us apart. My tongue might be tied but my friend has unlocked her heart for me and created the best sound, the SOUND OF FRIENDSHIP.

Penned By

Navyaa H Uppal