

## Kathryn DiPietro

### A Tremendous Service

“What!” He throws his hands up in the air and slouches back in his chair.

“You’re telling me I can *hear* God?” His black fingers clamp the edge of his desk. He forcefully pushes his body away from his desk. The cracked blue chair leaves a mark on the classroom floor. “Man, I’ve never heard God before.”

“Well, you might not hear God’s voice with your ears. You might *hear* His words in your heart.”

He laughs. Not a sarcastic laugh. It’s a discouraged laugh. “Still,” he says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

#### RAHEED, GRADE 7

“Man, Chu-Chi, hurry up. You’ll make us miss the bus.”

Raheed, like all the others, lives on the South Side of Tucson: the impoverished part of the city. He pulls out an iPod from his red and black backpack.

The days Raheed is caught stealing are the days after he has visited his mom. His mom lived on the streets. Profession? Prostitution. The kids called her a whore. But, after surviving a bullet shot to the head, she was placed in rehab. Once Raheed wrote to me, telling me how he knows pregnant girls shouldn’t drink and do drugs. This causes ADHD, he says. “I have ADHD because that’s what my mom did. I forgive her,” he writes. I can sense his matter-of-fact tone.

Some days, Raheed can be heard throughout the halls. “That’s bullshit! I ain’t gonna do that!” He storms out of the building.

This happens after his mind has revisited the past. His past is dog-eared on the day his father got out of jail. “I’m going to have a dad. Like everyone else!” And he couldn’t focus on school, but that was okay. Raheed basked for seven days in father-and-son bonding. Then, the 8<sup>th</sup> day passed. Morning came.

The school was abuzz. Everyone had read the headlines: Raheed’s father was back in jail. For murder. Raheed didn’t come to school that day. He stayed where the fatherless belong – on the South Side.

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I can see from where I’m standing that he’s reading a book on Martin Luther King, Jr. It’s a children’s book, but at least he’s reading. I pretend not to notice. Instead, I glance at the clock. My eyes are the school bell. “Okay, class, time for math. Pack up and go to Ms. Porter’s room.”

He grabs his backpack and lingers by his cubby, waiting for the class to gossip out the door.

“Miss, look at this.” He opens the book to the page his finger has been book-marking. I see a finger-printed sweat mark. “Look at this picture.”

It is a black and white photograph taken of a crowd listening to one of King’s speeches. His finger, pressed so that the skin underneath the nail is unnaturally white, scans over to a distant face in the large crowd. “See?”

Not knowing how to respond, I stand there feeling awkward. Anxiously, he breathes in a single gasp, “He looks just like my older brother who died.”

## ADRIAN, GRADE 8

Adrian walks into his house and drops his backpack on a pile of dirty clothes. His sister is supposed to do the laundry, but she's only ten. He clears away the garbage and clutter on the seat of the sofa and sinks into the metal bar below its cushion. Bored, he calls for his little sister. "Gabriela! Wanna play video games?"

She runs into the living room, excited to hang out with her brother. He takes good care of her, and she knows it. Adrian instructs her, "Get the games from our room." Our room.

"Our room" refers to a single bedroom shared by five people. Adrian and Gabriela sleep in the same mattress, which was dragged on the floor the day Gabriela was too big to sleep with her mama. Their older sister and her daughter sleep on a bed together in the corner of the room, and their cousin, on most nights, falls asleep on a stained mattress near the window. Sometimes he invites his girlfriend in.

The desert heat turns the bedroom into a sauna during the summer. Adrian and Gabriela's sweat seep through the mattress. He can't sleep, but he also can't toss and turn. Gabriela might wake up. So Adrian lies awake, struggling through his mental nightmare.

Adrian was eight years old when they received the frantic phone call. "Mama, you gotta help me. The cops are after me. Corner store. Hurry!"

“Adrian! Quick! It’s Mauricio...” Mama’s voice was beating as quickly as her heart. “Come with me, baby. He...he’s in trouble.” Adrian was dragged by his wrist out of the house and into the car. He has no memory of his own thoughts at that time. He didn’t even stare out the window; he just stared at the glass of the window while Mama muttered prayers to our Blessed Mother.

They pulled up to the corner store just in time: Mauricio was on the roof of the store, staring down at three policemen, who were armed and ready to shoot. Mauricio was shouting.

“FUCK IT! FUCK YOU ALL!”

Adrian tried to look up at Mauricio, but he had never seen so many guns up close before. He noticed that Mama’s painful tears were as loud as Mauricio’s angry shouts.

Mauricio stopped his desperate shouts as he noticed Mama and his brother. He pressed his hand against his heart, indicating the deep-seated love he had for his brother.

Then, Adrian’s eyes fell upon a new gun in Mauricio’s hand.

One-Two-Three-Four-Five-Six. Six bangs, and Adrian watched his brother’s body fall from the roof of the South Side corner store.

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All the kids had eaten their lunches and gone outside to play. I could tell she had no intention on going outside. I wait, and she asks me, “What did you have for dinner last night, Miss?”

“Um, grilled chicken sandwich. How about you?”

“Pizza. Pepperoni.”

“Oh, yum! I would’ve traded with you, you know.” Even though I smile, I really mean it.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Well, I will be grading your tests. And I have a meeting after school.”

“No, Miss. I mean, what *fun* things are you doing tonight?”

“I don’t do fun things,” I tease. This makes her smile.

“Do you ever watch T.V.?”

“Nope, never. I don’t like T.V.” I respond immediately.

“What! *Never?*” She drops her jaw in disbelief.

“Well...okay, you’re right. I *do* watch T.V. – but only like once a month.” I can tell she is unsure of whether she ought to believe me. So I laugh, and her giggle immediately follows. “Now, don’t you want to go outside?” She shakes her head. “Why not?”

“Well, Miss, the reason I like to ask you questions is because I like to know about other people’s lives. Especially teachers, because I never lived with one so I don’t know what they do.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.” Her response impresses me.

“And...” Her gaze finds the floor.

“And what?” I urge.

“And I get lonely sometimes.”

ANGEL, GRADE 6

853-7716. 853-7716. 853-7716. Angel already had the number memorized. She had found it in her grandma's purse. But when she picks up the phone, the numbers on the dial pad intimidate her. She forces herself to carefully press each number. When she gets through the sequence, she holds the receiver up to her ear, nervously listening for it to ring.

*Brrrrring.* Then a pause. *Brrrrring.* Another horrid pause. *Brrrrri*—"Hello?" Angel lets the voice on the other line linger as he inhales.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi." The response is tired.

"How are you, Mom?" Angel persists politely.

"Oh, I'm doing fine, honey. Just fine."

"Does that mean you can come and see...um, I mean I can come see you this weekend?" Angel lets the little game raise her hopes.

"Oh, no, honey. Not this weekend. But tell me about school." Angel bites her lip. Her nose begins to tingle. She won't let herself cry. Not again.

"School is...it's good mom. I got a good grade in math." This lie did not make her feel guilty. The conversation slowly fizzled. Angel was the last one to say, "Goodbye." She didn't hang up until she heard the dial tone.

That night when Grandma came home, Angel hid herself behind the computer screen. Her grandparents got her a lap top for Christmas. Now she just needed to persuade them to get Internet...

"Angel!" Grandma had a hard time walking. Angel knew she was calling her from the blue chair in the front room. "Angel! Did you eat supper?"

Carrying her lap top into the front room, Angel shook her head behind its screen.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you!” Grandma’s voice was stern.

“Grandma? How come Mom never calls *me*? I’m her daughter, and she never calls me to see how I’m doing. She’s my mom and should call me!” Angel’s voice was too hurt for tears. But, slowly, one managed to trickle down her cheek. Others soon followed.

“Angel! I don’t want you calling her – not without my permission. You understand?” Grandma waited for acknowledgement before continuing. Angel nodded her head. She continued, “Angel, you know your mom can’t be a mom. She’s sick, Angel. All those drugs...she’s sick.”

Angel knew her mom lived in a drug haven. He never knew if she was in the house with her boyfriend and other lovers or if she had been arrested. Angel also knew her own eyes weren’t quite like the other kids’ at school. She couldn’t focus at school, either. Ever. It was her mom’s fault. Everything was her mom’s fault. Still, a phone call from the South Side didn’t mean a thing to her...she couldn’t even change for her daughter.

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Even before the students came into class, I could tell there was a different atmosphere. High spirits, respect, dignity. May Crowning.

“Good morning, Miss!”

“Good morning, Lupita. You look beautiful!” The eighth graders have the privilege of leaving their uniforms at home today and dressing up in their finest clothes: girls in their dresses and skirts, hair done up, and make-up applied (ever-so-lightly so as not to break the dress code); boys in their collared shirts – some even in ties – and all doused in a striking scent of cologne. All to honor Mary. I lean forward to give her a hug.

“Miss, I’m *ner-vous*.” She lightly stomps her feet, one at a time, to pronounce the syllables.

“Oh, Lupita! Don’t be *ner-vous*,” (I stomp my feet, too), “you’ll do a great job. I know you will. I am so proud of you.”

Children begin streaming into the hallway, making their way to their classrooms. With each student comes a flower. A flower he or she has picked from his or her own desert-garden. I watch the hallway transform into a flow of nature and smiles. Children’s smiles. Painted with purity.

At 10:00 the whole school gathers in the Church. The young voices in the choir don’t sing on key. But they sing for the King. The Church’s rustle stills as their voices touch the music... “*Oh Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today, Queen of the Angels...*”

This is Lupita’s cue. With her bouquet of white roses, she approaches the statue of Mary as though she is a bride joyfully yet silently greeting her bridegroom at the altar. Lupita graces the statue with the white bouquet. Paints her with Purity.

The choir continues... “*Bring flowers of the rarest, bring blossoms the fairest...*”

The eighth grade class follows Lupita, adorning Mary with their desert-flowers, too. And, together, the eighth graders form a tunnel, inviting the children in the lower grades to honor Mary.

One by one, all one hundred and seventy-eight children honored Mary with a flower. With a kiss of devotion. Together, the community at Santa Cruz Catholic School crowned our Blessed Mother in the Church. God's home. *Our* home: a sanctuary of love, a tremendous service of charity, a tremendous service of the Catholic Church.

MISS FORMAN, CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHER

It happened later that day.

Virginia comes up to me while all the kids are listening and says, "Miss, I don't like where I live."

"Why's that, Virginia?"

"I don't feel safe, Miss. There are shootings. And people always break into the house. I live in the bad neighborhood."

Lupita speaks, "But Virginia – you live on the South Side." Virginia nods in affirmation.

"Virginia," Stephen pipes in, "we *all* live on the South Side."

I notice the initial look of shock in Virginia's eyes. Then the understanding, then the acceptance. All in a visible moment. Stephen's words linger in the air, and the whole class awaits Virginia's response.

"Oh, yeah..." She pauses in thought. "Well, we *all* go to Santa Cruz, too." And, just like that, the class was ready to go home.

Home to the South Side. I wait for the room to be silent. “Would anyone like to close us in prayer today?” One hand shoots up quicker than all the others. I nod at Raheed.

He makes the sign of the cross and begins, “Hail Mary, full of grace...” We all join in.

Tomorrow, at 8:00 A.M., we will all come back home. Because the Church has fulfilled its mission through Santa Cruz.