

Lill Loore Creative 3

He knew his father could never directly ask him for help – though that wasn't because of the recent loss of his father's speaking ability. His father would think of it as an act of humiliation, as if asking for help would make him less of a man.

Before, it had always been his mother who took care of his father: helping him change out of his dirty clothes into fresher ones – not new, but fresher – clothes she had spent hours washing in a deep bucket behind their two-bedroom house. She would wet his back with an old towel, and spoon-feed him breakfast, lunch and dinner, though the amount of food his body could manage was never enough, not even for a single recommended portion. All the while, the father lay unmovingly in the rock-hard bed, and he – their son – spent most of his days at school.

When his mother was still alive, she never asked for her son's help either, even though she herself fought the same sickness as her husband. She knew her son wouldn't have minded helping, in fact he would have gladly helped lessen his mother's burdens. But mother was sure. She was strict in her decision that all of her son's time, attention and commitment must go toward studying and gaining as much knowledge as was granted upon him. And the son took up that duty with pride. He understood how much it meant not only for his mother, but for his whole family, even their most distant relatives – that he had the chance of receiving real education. The education which none of his family members ever had the privilege of. He was not to let that go to waste. He was to attend the small village school every day and bring pride to his family – to be a representative of them now, and in the future.

That was the plan. And everything truly did seem to be going according to it – the boy was getting perfect grades; he was smarter and more hardworking than any of his classmates, and even the harshest teachers at the school had a soft spot for the immaculate young boy.

That was all until the night his mother laid down her soul. The sickness killed her – that and the exhaustion. Now the young boy of pre-teen age was left alone with his father. A father who never even rose from the bed, a father who never spoke. A human who wasn't really alive, only existed. And from thereafter the boy was obligated to take care of him, to tend to him every day and night.

It's to be said the boy loved his father, he truly did. He hadn't quite forgotten the distant memories of laughing with his father as they played outside in the burning sun, and as they playfully agitated the boy's mother with their boyish behaviour and jokes. He hadn't forgotten about the man his ever-loving father had been before the sickness took over: devoured him whole, and left behind only a shell. He adored his father and never would have thought of leaving him alone, to fade away in sickness and die.

But was that really enough reason for the young boy to leave school and throw away the rare chance of education he had been given? He only had a few years left of middle school and then he could move on to high school – a bigger school. And after that, who knew, maybe he could even be accepted into college. To think of all the amazing opportunities that awaited him when actually finishing college. Then, with a great job, he could finally leave poverty behind and start a new life of freedom.

But that would mean leaving his father behind. Then the inevitable death of his father would follow – for there was no one to care for him when he needed it the most. And if, in the end, in his glory, the boy had to stand all alone – was it really worth it?

And so the boy took his new place beside the low bedding of his father with pride. He washed and fed him, and day after day, held hours-long, one-sided conversations with his father – with pride. He sometimes imagined what his father would say in response to his long monologues; sometimes he thought he could see a small smile fighting its way onto his father's sunken face, though more often than not that was only the figment of his own imagination. That also was okay with him. It had to be.

During those everyday rants the little boy talked about anything and everything. At first, if only to escape the choking silence of being utterly alone with his nonverbal father, he started talking about the change of the seasons happening outside, with the dim daylight peaking in from the small round window of the otherwise dark little room. Later, as the weeks rolled by and the boy grew more comfortable, maybe even beginning to get slightly bored, he started reminiscing aloud about the things he had last learnt at school: the many history lessons spent on trying to remember as many important dates of wars and names of significant 'heroes' in said wars. He reminisced about the language lessons: English and French. He even attempted to remember the latest learned vocabulary words – what were the many synonyms of the word 'magnificent' again?

Time and time again the boy forgot something, then tried his best to remember that something and failed. In desperation he pushed his brain to remember, but it didn't. Those were the times the boy got upset – truly upset. He was disturbed by losing the knowledge he had worked so

hard to once gain. Knowledge that had cost so much. Those were also the times he grew angry – angry at the fact he'd had to leave school at all, and angry at the sickness that had taken hold of his father. But even in all his anger, the boy never turned his distress against his father.

It didn't take the boy long until he started to miss studying – the art of observing new information. He craved to know new things. His father's condition hadn't gotten any better nor any worse. It was stable. Everything was stable. The weather outside the window had stopped changing, the season was stable: the temperature crisp and the air rainy. The little boy's mind was stable. It wasn't improving like it used to. It also wasn't particularly degrading, yet. The boy wanted to keep that from happening. He wanted to keep improving his mind, to strengthen it. It wasn't the school he wanted; it was knowledge itself. His brain was itching.

They didn't have any electronics at their home – no one did in this village. Nor did they own many books – merely a few, and those he had reread time and time again almost to the point of complete memorization. He couldn't even keep his schoolbooks after leaving. He was left with nothing, and so the little boy was deeply dissatisfied. The school was far from home – back when he still attended daily, it took him up to an hour to reach the school, and that only if the weather was kind. Now, with the heavy rain and start of the stormy part of the year, the journey would take even longer. The thought of visiting the school to ask the nice teachers and the staff to lend some books was doomed as failure. The little boy couldn't possibly leave his father alone for the many hours this trip would take him. He could not risk the chance of his father's condition worsening while he was away. There had to be another way to get access to knowledge. He would have to think of something else.

And so he thought – thought for hours, for days even, and couldn't come up with any other solution. He sat on the small, cold stone porch outside the front door of the house, losing hope. He had almost accepted the fact that he would just have to get over it – he couldn't leave his father now, so he had to forget about his foolish desire.

Sighing deeply, the little boy stood up and wiped the dirt off his trousers. As he walked around to the back, where there was their small vegetable garden, he noticed a strange woman – a young one – coming steadily toward him. The boy hadn't ever seen her face before. She definitely didn't look like she was from here. The woman continued walking until she was right before the young boy. They greeted each other – the woman first, then the boy. She had the look of intent in her eyes.

"I've just recently moved here and it's hard for me to grow my own harvest due to my busy schedule. With your catch, however," she said, eyeing the looping fruits and vegetable heads behind the little boy's fragile body, "you seem to have the luck. Or maybe it's on your talents. Either way I would like to make you a proposal. I will pay you greatly for a small portion of your harvest. What do you say?"

But the boy wasn't as excited about the offer as one might expect him to be. The truth was, he would find no use for the money the woman promised him. And that's what he told her:

"It is a kind offer indeed. But miss, the money is of little importance to me at this time. My father, whom I am to tend to at present, is sick, but with a sickness that has no cure. We live solely off this small field and its yield. Although you, miss, are correct – right now we really have been blessed with the catch and have more than needed for the two of us."

A deeper understanding of the boy's situation seemed to cross the woman's face. She brought her focus down to meet the tender aged boy's tired eyes. "In that case I am sure we can find something other than money that I could repay you with. Though, looking at you now, young mister, you seem to carry this burden with you. I feel it's different from the one already mentioned." The kind woman rested the carrier bag she'd been holding on the ground and crouched beside the boy. This way, the younger one was mere centimeters taller than the woman. "May I ask you what is the cause of such sorrow?"

And because the boy couldn't think of a reason to refuse, and because he really was burdened by his feelings, he explained to the woman his trouble – the itch in his brain.

The little boy talked and talked. At one point, he felt his throat begin to go dry from the fast pace of his talking and the absence of pauses for air. Maybe it was because he'd truly needed to get his thoughts out, or maybe it was because of how long it had been since the last time he had talked about something and received a real response – a facial response. He could see a genuine smile – a big one, reaching both her ears – appear on the teacher's face as the boy continued his rant. Though there was nothing joyful about his story, something in it brought her happiness. And that something became clear when the woman finally cut into the boy's ramble and said:

"I'm a teacher — a new teacher at the nearby school. Presumably the one from which you had to leave."

When the teacher then said how she shall grant all the knowledge the boy had been craving for in exchange for a small pot of corn and some carrots, then finally could the smile on the little boy's face match the one on hers.

And later, much later, when the young boy had grown up to be a man, when he had indeed gained the knowledge the woman had promised him, and by the time his father – thanks to the son's daily care – had gotten back his health, his voice and his laughter, the boy did go to high school, and he did finish college. But he did so with the people he loved most: his father, and the teacher, close beside him.