
ESOL VOICES

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ESOL Voices is prepared by the students of English for Speakers of Other Languages at **Monroe Community College**, Rochester, New York, under the supervision of Suzanne El Rayess. This collection of articles presents the personal experiences and ideas of ESOL students in their own words. It also presents their ability to write. We hope you will find it interesting. We are thankful to the students and teachers who put their great efforts to make it complete and successful.

We wish you success and happiness.

The Staff



The Scariest Night Ever

By *Alia Hussain*

Early one morning, I heard my mom saying, “Oh God, I hope everything will go safely.” When I asked her, “What happened?” she told me, “This morning, when I was about to make breakfast tea, the milk for the tea I used was spoiled. And, spoiled milk is not a good thing to start a day with, as our ancestors believe. Something strange will happen.” I said to my mom, “Don’t worry; everything will be fine. It is just an old tradition; nothing will happen.” My mom was upset the whole day. She was worrying about more than just milk. My brother had gone to Lahore, a city two hours away from Gujrat, to get money from my dad’s friend who had returned to Pakistan to visit. Since my dad moved to America fourteen years ago, he had sent us seven million rupees.

It was a hot summer, with the sun burning in the sky. Everyone seemed so quiet while my mom’s eyes were stuck on the door. When would my brother be home? When he reached home around nine p.m., my mom was excited to see him and she hugged him. We were happy that he was home safely with the money.

We were eating and cheering when my favorite uncle came to our home as he did every night. He was happy to see us but this night his face was different. He wanted to say something but he could not probably because he didn’t want to upset and depress us. Finally, he told my mom why he had come. He said, “I am here to warn you all about what I saw last night at my house. There were some thieves in my home to steal my money.”

There was lot of crime in the summer

because there were lots of farms around our little town. Thieves could easily steal and then hide themselves before they got caught.

My mom said, “Don’t worry, everything will be okay, *inshallah*,” (God willing). My mom is a self-confident woman. She lived away from her husband for fourteen years and supported four kids without him. She knew that her brother was a coward, so she didn’t listen to what he said. She was, though, still afraid of what was happening. In addition, our money was not in the bank. She knew that something was going to happen because of the spoiled milk. But she didn’t want to let anyone know that she was struggling with herself.

My uncle warned us to sleep in our rooms instead of on the flat roof. Since these were hot summer days, neighbors all over the neighborhood would sleep on the roof so they could communicate during the night with each other. If one needed help, they could reach each other in time.

After warning us, my uncle left. His words scared me; also, my mom’s spoiled milk was on my mind the whole day. I was quiet, wondering that if something happened that night what would it be? My mom asked me, “What’s wrong?” She could easily tell my face was different from what it usually was. I said, “No, everything is fine.” She repeated, “Alia nothing will happen. Your uncle is a coward.”

Finally, after eating well we went upstairs to sleep on the roof. My whole family went to sleep happily, often saying good night to the whole neighborhood from the roof. But we all were a little afraid about what would happen.

I was sleeping in the middle with

my mom on a *charpai*, a bed with four legs which could easily be moved from one place to another. Night was gloomy, horrifying and so quiet! The temperature dropped and the hours passed. Everyone was in his or her early morning dreams already, but how could I sleep after my uncle’s words? I was scared inside of my heart. Night was passing by slowly. Around 2:00 a.m. quietness surrounded me and the only thing which I could barely hear were my heartbeats.

Suddenly, I heard someone walking somewhere, but where? I didn’t know. I was curious, My eyes rolled first up to the third floor and then down to the first floor, but nothing seemed to appear. I was again free from turmoil for another hour. Steps of someone walking stopped. I thought the thieves had left and would not come again. An hour later I heard the steps moving again. This time the steps were not of one person. It seemed like two or three people were coming toward me. I was so scared my throat was dry.

When I looked at the third floor I was shocked and started sweating. I saw two men in black outfits with some red marks. I could barely see their eyes, which were red and were the only things uncovered. Looking at those red marks, I could easily tell that they had killed someone before coming to our home. I was shaking and felt weak. My heart started pounding louder and louder. I tried to stop it by pushing it with my hand. I wanted to be calm again because if the thieves saw me awake and shaking they would kill me.

I was sleeping with my mom and our *charpai* was between my brother and my other two sisters. I was closer to my brother than to my sisters. I turned to my mom’s side, hugged her tightly and covered my face with the blanket. She said in a sleepy voice, “My sweetie,

sleep!” But, how could I sleep now after seeing those men? After a few minutes I came out from under the blanket because I was curious about what they would do next. I saw they were going downstairs to the first floor where our money was! Since the stairs were near my brother’s bed, the robbers were close to me. I was terrified.

Slowly, they went downstairs. From the roof, I could see the whole first floor and the third roof. I could see where they were going and what they were doing. They went to the room where the money was and tried to open the lock. I was scared to death. They tried to unlock the door. But they had no success in opening it. I was happy that they wouldn’t be able to open the door and go inside my room. They whispered for a while. Then one came upstairs and headed toward me. I thought maybe they had found out that I was watching them. My whole body was ice cold. I had no idea what to do. I closed my eyes, and visualized where the person was going from hearing his steps.

He came up to my *charpai* and sat up on the head side. I was praying to God to help us because I thought he was going to put a bomb under our beds. After a half hour, I reopened my eyes to see them opening the door with the keys. What shocked me was that they knew where we always put our keys when we slept, under my mom’s pillow. Who were they? There must have been someone who knew everything about our family.

I had to do something, but what? Should I scream? No, I wouldn’t because they would kill my family and me if I did. Should I wake my family up? But how would I do this? What would they do when they got up? Should I go behind them and see what they were going to do downstairs? I decided to get out of my bed and chase them. But as soon as

I pulled my legs out of my blanket, I saw a man on the third floor watching us. I tried to scream, but my voice disappeared. I lay back again on my bed and took my hand out of my blanket to reach my brother. I shook him and made him wake up.

My brother had a gun with him and he would know how to deal with those thieves. I also made my mom wake by saying, “I need water.” When they both got up, I pointed toward the third floor. When the lookout saw my family was getting up now, he called to the other thieves, but he was too late. As soon as my brother woke up, he took his gun out and started firing toward the man upstairs on the third floor. The man upstairs got one bullet in his chest and he fell on his back. The other two men, who were downstairs searching for money, came out of the room and started shooting towards my brother. When they saw that the man upstairs was not there, they ran also. While my brother and the thieves were shooting at each other, one bullet scratched my brother’s hip.

By this time, my whole neighborhood was at my house. The police came also. We all went downstairs and saw whether our money was safe. It was fine; the thieves had been unable to find it because it was under the bed. After the police arrived we went upstairs along with the police and the neighbors to check the dead body. The thief, who was still alive, started shooting at the officer. The police shot the man, and he was dead. We couldn’t believe that the man who had just got killed was my cousin, the son of my favorite uncle, the one who had come to warn us earlier that evening.

When my uncle and their families came crying, he told us how he had known that his son was going to attack us to get money. The police took the dead body and we took our brother to

the doctor. The doctor put a plastic cover on my brother’s hip, gave him medicine and said, “Let him rest when he goes back home now.” We all went home and since then we have slept in our rooms instead of upstairs on the roof.

I didn’t know families could kill their own families for money. This was the scariest moment of my life and an unacceptable experience. I still see that night in my mind, like a mirror’s reflection. When I told everyone that I had watched the thieves the whole night, they said I was brave.

Alia Hussain’s plans are to become a pharmacist.

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The Day I Overcame My Fear

By Nelya Lomakina

“You’re going to have brain damage,” a voice came from the side, and then someone burst with laughter. I continued banging my head with a heavy book. I wasn’t able to see who had spoken to me, because I was squatting on my heels and my long hair was all over my face. After a dozen times hitting my head, I stopped and listened: silence. Catching my breath and lifting my head up, I saw my brother-in-law, Alex, sitting on the bench and dying of laughter. “It’s only one innocent bee, not a hawk,” he said. “I know,” I responded, tears filling my eyes. I started to cry because I was scared of this “innocent” thing.

It was the first summer after I was married. My husband wasn’t home for weeks because of an illness. It was hard enough. Now this. How am I going to take care of all of this? A huge bee farm which I hated. Before we got married, I knew my husband had a bee farm. What

I didn't know is that it was in the fields behind his house.

Summer was here, and so was honey. At this time of the year bees are working hard, and are very strong as a family. Guard bees at the beehive entrance watch for intruders; bees build wax cells. Bees cuddle, keeping baby bees warm and safe; working bees bring honey. Only drones don't do any work. Life is very active in the beehive. Most importantly, it is time to bifurcate. After the battle between two queens, one of them will leave with half of the family, looking for a new home.

After helping me carry empty beehives into the middle of the yard, Alex left in a hurry to take care of his own farm. He reminded me to watch over for a "stoke" of bees — "a couple of them will look for a new home today."

So I went to the barn to start a smoking pipe. I heard my mother-in-law calling my name; she wasn't able to walk, so very often she would sit on the porch reading or knitting. As I came closer, I heard the loud, hammering, penetrating noise of bees flying around. I froze; I felt every single hair on my head rise up. Mortified with fear, I wasn't able to move.

"Don't be afraid. They are not going to hurt you," my mother-in-law said in her quiet, soft voice. "They will calm down in the next thirty minutes or so." Thirty minutes! I didn't even have my mask on. "I'm going to die-- that's it," I thought.

My husband's words came to my mind: "Never run! Don't move your arms around, and cover your face with your hands if you don't have a mask on. Most importantly do not come too close to the bees if you're wearing perfume." I felt the pressure and power of the thousands of bees surrounding me.

Their constantly moving chaos didn't let me make any movements. A couple of them got into my hair and tried to get out. Dozens were crawling on my clothes, some on my face and around my eyes. I couldn't cover my face with my hands because of the bees all over me.

"They won't hurt you, not today," I heard the same voice again. I believed her, maybe because she was old and wise, or because she lived all her life there on that farm and knew much more about bees than me.

"Come closer to me now and stay here; they will leave you." Trembling and afraid to make a wrong move, I started moving towards the porch. I felt much safer standing next to this little old woman who was watching for the hundredth time how these little creatures were starting a new life.

Soon there was no more humming and disturbance, only a big lump of bees hanging off the cherry tree. "They just found a beehive under the lump; they will find their way in," she said, and started reading her newspaper again.

That morning was the last time I banged my head trying to kill a bee. That afternoon I made my peace with them. For the next eight years I got stung hundreds and hundreds of times and never accused them for being aggressive. After that experience, I never feared them again. They are innocent. That evening, however, my husband, got stung on his forehead, so both of his eyes were swollen, and I was the last one to laugh.

Nelya Lomakina is from Ukraine.

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The Dinka

By William Kuol

Dinka is one of the major tribes in southern Sudan. Many Dinka people live by the Nile River. Since the coming of the Arabs and Europeans, there has been a big change in Dinka tradition.

In the late 1930's, Christianity was not in existence in Dinka. People used to worship idols. Animals like cows, goats, and pigs were given to God to make him happy so he could protect people from the danger of attack, diseases, and hunger. Animals were slaughtered for a god who was believed to be responsible for the cause of famine, sickness, and external attack.

When the missionaries came to Sudan, they changed the religion of the Dinka. They took many children to the missionary schools. The missionaries ordained some of these people as pastors to help them in spreading the word of the living God in the villages. They moved from village to village, burning idols, baptizing people, and praying for the sick. As a result, many people became Christians.

Now in Dinka, ninety per cent are Christians. To be baptized as Christians, they picked the names of the saints, apostles, and prophets from the Bible, such as John, Samuel, Paul, and so forth. This is still being practiced even today and by doing so, the past religious tradition is fading away very slowly. The denominations that are here in the US have reached the territory of the Dinka. The common ones are Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Seventh Day Adventist.

The coming of the new religion brought about literacy. During the time of the missionaries, many children were taken to missionary schools. Among

these children were Daniel Deng, who translated the English Bible of the New Testament into Dinak language so that everybody could understand the word of God clearly and Nathaniel Garang, who is now the bishop of southern Sudan.

Before the coming of civilization, polygamy was very, very common. People who were wealthy could marry as many wives as they wanted. The concept behind this was to have many children. In those days, many children were considered a blessing. Many children and wives were also regarded as a source of labor. This is what they said: "The more children and wives you have, the wealthier you are." In addition, those who had more wealth and many wives and children were respected in society. They were the ones to be elected as leaders of the community. For that reason, everyone tried his best to become rich.

When people became civilized, they gradually lost that tradition because it was not necessary since many people had learned how to read and write. People were now respected according to the level of education they had reached. Having many children could also be a burden. Imagine if someone had three wives and fifteen children in this modern society, it could be more than a problem because it is that person's responsibility to feed, educate, and keep them healthy.

You might be wondering how these wives and children got along with one another in the same family. In the past, among the Dinka, the man was to be the boss of the family. He put certain rules that each member had to follow. He made sure that each rule had to be appropriate; otherwise, he could be punished by the clan. On the other hand, all the wives had to be submissive. It was a rule that the wife had to obey her husband. Anyone seen to be stubborn

was expelled and no one would marry her again. She became the laughing stock of the community.

Handling the children was not very hard. If a child was seen to be a problem to the family, everyone in the community was given permission to whip that child. If a child was a good runner and always tried to escape punishment, he or she could be denounced to the people in the village to be pursued by anyone and caned thoroughly. The older kids in the family were also authorized to punish their younger brothers or sisters whenever they became mischievous.

You might think it was brutal to physically punish the children that way, but that was the only way they used to handle so many children in the family.

Now that polygamy is not being practiced very much in Dinka, some of the old ways of managing the families are diminishing. The rules, like beating the children by anyone in the community, are not as common as before. Women are not given very strict rules to follow any more either.

In Dinka today, the way of dressing is also totally different from how they used to dress ninety years ago. Due to a lack of technology, the Dinka people used the skins of animals as garments. They made the skin soft until it became just like clothes.

In those olden days people survived on wild fruits and vegetables, milk, meat, and grains such as corn and sorghum. Those kinds of food are still eaten today.

Despite all the changes in Dinka tradition, Dinka people did not abandon everything in their culture. They value their culture very much. Women did not stop obeying their husbands because of the modern culture. They also did not

throw away the system whereby certain jobs are assigned to certain people. It is still a rule in Dinka culture that men do not cook; only the women cook for the family! The only things that they changed were the ones that did not go together with becoming civilized.

William Kuol would like to work in the field of medicine.

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Survival

By William Kuol

Have you ever been in a situation where you almost died? It is hard to forget my scary journey from Ethiopia to Sudan. It is still fresh in my memory. I find it again when something similar happens, like the terror of September 11. It just reminded me about that horrific journey I took in escaping the dangers of terrorism in Ethiopia.

When we settled in Ethiopia as refugees after having fled from the terror of the civil war in Sudan, there seemed to be no thoughts of misfortunes since we were now in the hands of the United Nations. We could move freely from one city to another, forgetting there was a big conflict between the Eritrean and Ethiopian government as the Eritreans rebelled and fought for their freedom.

One afternoon in May 1991, there was breaking news that the rebels had captured the Ethiopian headquarters. What a tragedy! This was not only a fear for Ethiopians but also for us. It was said that they were heading for Gambela, just a few miles away.

The night after the news was a terrifying one. Many people could hardly

eat after hearing the rebels would come at any time. People packed their stuff to get ready to escape. We, the Sudanese refugees, thought it was a good idea to get out of Ethiopia because it was going to be a battlefield. At night we all left, walking in the same direction. No one had a clue of our destination.

In that trek, life was critical because there was no rain in that season. Both grass and trees were so dry that they smelled like fire. The beautiful green vegetation had turned yellow which was not promising to the eyes of the weary and hopeless refugees who were wandering in the forest like sheep that did not have a shepherd. The sky was as clear as a blank computer screen. There was not a single grain of clouds. Everyone gazed at the sky, praying quietly so that God could send rain to save our huge population. I guess the number of people on our journey was more than ten thousand. Hundreds remained in the bushes because they were too weak to walk. It was really tragic to see how people just lay down under the trees.

As we continued walking, the trees that we went through were green. "There must be a river around this place," David shouted. "How do you know?" I asked. "Look how green these trees are," he said, pointing to a gigantic bamboo tree. No sooner had we passed the trees than we saw two white buildings on a hill. My weak legs and body became active again. To our amazement, there were not just those two buildings, but hundreds of them behind the hill. Not far from that village was a big river called Gilo.

The first thing we wanted was water, then food. As soon as we got into the village, we ran into the river like African summer animals that had never had water for months. We all threw ourselves into the water and refused to come out, as if we were fish. One silly mistake I

made was to fill myself with water. It was not really funny to see how big my stomach was. I lay on the shore like a crocodile that had feasted on thousands of fish. My friend David, who was older than me, did not leave. He waited for me until I vomited. After throwing up, I became just as fresh as before, except for the weakness from that long journey and my hunger.

People in that village were very friendly. They gave a lot of food to many of us. They even provided us with shelters. David and I went with a good, sympathetic old man who had a big house and a farm. At his house, he gave us food and a place to sleep. Despite the fact that I was tired, I did not sleep a wink. I kept worrying what would become of us if the village were to be attacked.

In the middle of the night, I wanted to go to the bathroom, but was scared because it was located a couple of feet away from the sleeping house. Inside, I peered through the little window that was facing the river. This made me become even more afraid. It seemed as if the rebels would appear from the river. When I finished, I tiptoed back to my room and continued to stay awake.

At the crack of dawn, I took a look at the river again. The mango tree on the bank was swaying, but there was no wind. I crept slowly closer to the window to see exactly what it was. Before I put my eyes at the window, I heard the sound of something like a thunderstorm. I thought something huge had fallen into the very house in which I was. I began to check myself, thinking that I was hurt. Fortunately, I was okay. Within minutes, many buildings were on fire and people were running into the river to escape. It was the only way because on the other side there was a hill. It was obvious that the rebels had attacked.

After a short while, the river was full of people and surprisingly, only a few of them made it to the other side! It was so congested which made it difficult for the people to swim. Those who didn't know how held on to those who did. In that situation, people just died, even the best swimmers.

I was hiding behind a tree on the river bank, but it was not safe. When I saw some people running along the river, away from the village, I quickly followed them. I was so afraid. My heart was beating rapidly. I thought it was going to be the end of my life.

Among those I joined, there were some who did not know how to swim. "I have an idea," said one. "What is it?" we all asked breathlessly. He ran towards a long fancy rope and hauled it to the shore. We tied the rope across the river and one by one we reached the other side.

When the attack occurred, people had run in all different directions. Some had run into the forest and others had tried to cross the river. It took days for us to find one another. I kept asking people where my friend David was, but no one seemed to know. I searched and searched but to no avail. I joined those who were able to walk with tears in my eyes. Losing David was more than a sorrow to me.

With God's help, we finally found ourselves in Pachalla, a Sudanese town at the border of Sudan and Ethiopia. I never knew I would survive such a horrible situation. It was just like going "from the frying pan into the fire!"

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The Impact on My Heart

By Edward Cen

“Suki!” When I hear this name, it brings back many bittersweet memories. Five years ago, I had an appointment with my good friend to go out for some drinks. I was almost late. When I strolled into the café, I saw my friend sitting with a girl that I had never seen before. She was beautiful and very impressive. It was magic that I knew Suki would be my girlfriend. We began to date.

On our first date we went to the zoo. The weather was so nice. The sky was blue like the sea and so clear that you couldn't see the end. When we saw a panda walking lazily by, we couldn't help taking pictures. There are about three hundred pandas in the world and they are so rare that they are protected. Along the panda area, we walked to Tiger Mountain. As soon as we arrived, we heard a fierce growl. What a vicious animal! I saw the tiger swimming in the water. He was an excellent swimmer, and he was strong enough to kill a man easily with his sharp teeth. We enjoyed our date. When I looked in her eyes, I was more than attracted to this girl. I had fallen in love with her.

I courted her. I sent her roses and waited for her in the street in front of her house. After she saw me, she was surprised and so impressed that she promised to be my girlfriend. I remember that day well. I was so excited that I couldn't sleep.

Then something terrible happened. One day I had something urgent to do for my work, and I forgot to tell her how much I loved her. Instead, I just said good-bye. When I called her the next day, she didn't answer the phone, and she would not return my calls. I

was confused. I couldn't believe that the more I phoned her, the worse my position became. I was sleepless all the time and couldn't concentrate on my job. A lot of thoughts and memories filled my mind. I was totally miserable, and I was brooding all the time. It is said that love not only makes you happy, but also makes you upset. It's true.

Three months later I still was miserable. I reflected on how I got to this point. A short time ago I was a happy guy without a care in the world. Now I spent all my time brooding. Men always care about big things like wars and work and football games. Women care about the tiny things, like how deep is your love. Hmmm? Maybe that's important too.

So what did I learn from my experience? I learned that it's sometimes hard to get along with someone you love no matter how hard you try. I learned that the most important thing in a relationship is to endure and respect each other. I learned that love isn't always rational and sometimes it stays for just a short time; and, I've learned that if you have lost your love, you shouldn't be sad. You should be happy to have had a beautiful experience. After all, love is a part of nature. Sometimes it's like a river, powerful and without end. Sometimes it's like a rare flower that blooms and fades in a single day.

There is an ancient Taoist text which speaks of love and wisdom and life. It is many thousands of years old and reads in part, “Looked at, it cannot be seen. Listened to, it cannot be heard. Held, it cannot be touched. These depthless things evade definition, and blend into a single mystery.” The monk that wrote that passage probably didn't even have a girlfriend, but I must admit love is like that. It is as elusive as the air. It can't be held in a clenched fist, but when the fist is released, and the hand is open, it holds

the air of the whole world. Likewise, when the heart is open, it holds the love of the whole world.

So, I have moved on. There will be other girls who are more sensitive, more loving and appreciative. Well, that's what my friends tell me! I haven't found her yet, but my true love is out there somewhere. Perhaps she is busy preparing for an international beauty contest or maybe she has just won the State Lottery and is depositing millions of dollars at the bank. She'll find me somehow. I've learned that you shouldn't look for love. Love will find you...eventually. I just hope it's before I get too old. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I have learned that there is great truth in the American saying, “women – can't live with them – can't live without them!”

Edward Chen comes from China. He is majoring in International Business.

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Hell of a Trip

By Mohamed Fekhari

Ali Jamal, thirty years old, lives in Brussels, Belgium. He is married and has a boy, five years old and a girl, seven months old.

“Everything started after I got my bachelor's in biology and chemistry back in 1994 at the University of Hassan in Casablanca, Morocco. I was so excited. I thought now I could get a real job and help my poor family who had supported me step by step till I got this precious diploma.”

Ali started to look for a job everywhere. First he had lots of energy, jumping from one city to another, seeking a job. It didn't bother him as long as he could make his parents proud. “Two months,

three weeks and five days that I spent looking for the job of my dreams. Result: nothing.”

He felt so embarrassed and ashamed of staying at his parents’ house after getting his diploma. “But my dad told me something unforgettable, ‘Listen son. You are always welcome here. This is your house. Life is hard. You did what you could and Allah will take care of the rest.’” He couldn’t hold himself; he started crying.

The next day Ali decided that there was a way to achieve his dream and that was to get out of the country. “I tried to get my travel job permission, laborer visa, and foreign contract. I applied for a green card and did everything that I could to get a chance to find the job that I wanted out there. Unfortunately, nothing. It seemed like my roots were deep in this ground and I couldn’t get away.” While seeking his way out at the Italian embassy, after trying the US, Spanish, French and German, he met a man who told him that there was a way. “It is illegal, but it’s worth a try. It will cost you \$1,000.” They were going to go to the north to a city called Tangier, about eight miles from Spain, and cross the sea in a dingy.

Ali decided to go. His lifetime chance had come and he wouldn’t let it disappear. Two days later, he got up at midnight, got his book bag with some food in it, took the money that he had saved to buy a small car and got ready.

“I took the train from Casablanca to Tangier. I got there four hours later. The man I had met at the Italian embassy was waiting for me. We walked about four miles toward the northern beach. Once we got there, I was shocked!”

Twenty other people were waiting. “Are we all going to cross the sea in this dingy?” Ali asked. Another man

answered, “Oh yes, buddy. That’s what it is!” A third man, short and heavyset, came in. They called him “Captain.” He was the man who was going to guide them during the cruise of all nightmares.

Everyone jumped into the boat and the captain and his friend pushed the dingy till it got into the water. Then the captain jumped in.

“We were crowded. Boys and girls, young and old, all were looking at each other and praying. It reminded me of when a few people were rescued in the movie, the *Titanic*.

“I felt the water; it was freezing. I saw a beautiful reflection of the moon drawn over the surface of the water and a clear sky. I was afraid. Rocks were everywhere and the pharos’s light almost caught us. I hoped we weren’t going to get caught. We still had two hours to go. It was so quiet; you could only hear the wooden dingy floating over the water.

“An hour and a half passed. We were almost there. Suddenly we saw a big cruiser coming towards us. I yelled out, ‘I thought that we were going to be safe, no big boats. You took our money and you want to kill us. It wasn’t planned like that!’

“‘Shut up! Your money wouldn’t do anything for me if I was dead, stupid!’ the captain screamed. The boat came closer as we tried to get away. It was too late and the boat smashed into our tiny dingy. But I jumped in the water before they hit.

“I was scared. I swam toward a light that I saw; I didn’t look behind me. I didn’t stop swimming till I felt the sand touching my knees. I was the only one there, but at least I got there. I prayed to God and thanked Him for helping to

get there alive.”

The amazing thing was that there were no coast guards, probably because it was Christmas Eve. Ali got across the forest next to the beach and to the city of Almeida in Spain, a beautiful city with big buildings and lots of green spaces. There were few people in the streets.

“I got hungry, so I decided to go eat in a restaurant. The food in my bag was gone. At least I still had money on me. I kept looking for food when suddenly I saw a couple of men surrounding a lady in a corner between cars in a parking lot. She was a good looking blonde. It seemed from her clothes that she was a classic and probably had enough money to afford nice things.

“I grabbed a medium size rock, got a little closer and then hit one of them on the head. The guy fell down. ‘He’s dead. Oh my God,’ I exclaimed. His friend ran, after seeing that. I don’t know why I did it. The lady grabbed me by my hand and we took off. We jumped into her car one block away and drove away.

“She started to thank me, talking in Spanish, but I told her I didn’t speak Spanish. When she knew that I was from Morocco, she started talking to me in French. I felt so much better. She told me that she was from Belgium and was trying to go to spend Christmas Eve with her grandma who lived in Ameida. But after what had happened, she decided not to stay there. She would just call and wish her a happy holiday.

“Sally and I started to know each other more and more till we liked each other. I told her my story and how and why I ended up there. When she asked me if I could stay with her in Belgium, there was no reason to refuse.

“We stayed together and then got married. I got my paper work and my

legal status done. Now I work in a euro-laboratory of biology in Brussels. I made my Moroccan family move here with me because I have a better and bigger place. I am so happy I achieved my dream, thank God!

“It might sound to you like a movie or a happy ending, but this really happened to me. Life can hide a lot of surprises for everyone!”

Mohamed Fekhari also comes from Morocco.

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Too Many Legs or No Legs At All

By Eui K Kim

“I caught a fish. Look at this, Mom!” My son was shouting at me. He stood straight up with his fishing pole in his hands. A small yellow perch at the end of fishing pole was trying get off the hook. My son’s face was covered with a smile. This was when he was about 5 years old. Ever since this fishing experience, he is still in love with fishing. A couple of hours later, I couldn’t see him clearly because it was getting late and dark. I told him to pack up the fishing equipment so we could return to our house, but he wouldn’t listen to me because he was so excited with fishing. He caught a fish each time he threw the line into the water. He was using worms as bait, but he wouldn’t touch them. When he had to put the worm on the fishing hook, he used a forcep and a knife. He thought the worms were too ugly and gross to touch. When I saw this, I was reminded of when I was a little girl.

When I was seven years old, my whole family went to a family retreat on an island with my sister’s friends. I was very excited about this trip because

of my older sister’s friends, who were very nice and affectionate to me. We packed clothing and food to prepare for the trip. From the harbor, we rode a boat to get to the island. One hour later, we arrived at the beautiful island. We got out of the boat, and hopped onto a bus to the camping ground in the mountain range. Once we got to the place, we had to diligently wait to get our rooms assigned. My grandparents sat under the shade of an enormous pine tree, which must have been at least one hundred years old. That day was a very hot day, and I was very tired because I couldn’t sleep well during the night with the excitement of the trip. For this reason, I wanted to sit down in the shade like my grandfather did. I found a small, but cute pine tree nearby. I sat in the shade and relaxed.

I was so excited and so happy to be there. The island was beautiful and it was surrounded by the clear blue ocean. There also was a peaceful, sandy beach. After a while, I felt an irritating, itchy, crawly feeling on my neck. I ignored the feeling in the beginning, but it wouldn’t stop. Eventually I turned my head down and I saw hairy and ugly brown caterpillars on my neck. I screamed out loud and started to shake my body to get them off me. There were at least one hundred. I thought I was having a nightmare. When I looked at the little pine tree that I was sitting under, I saw it was covered with thousands of caterpillars. My grandmother heard my screams, rushed toward me and brushed the ugly caterpillars off, but I was still crying. A rash started to spread on my neck and the rest of my upper body. When I returned from the trip, I had to visit the doctor’s office, and he gave me medication to help with the itching and rashes. It would have been a much better trip if I had not had the horrible experience with the caterpillars, but I did have a fun time with my family on the island.

Another time, many years ago, we went fishing with my sister’s family. One day, I noticed that my nephew was playing with something instead of fishing. I was very curious and looked at him carefully. I was shocked; I screamed. He was playing with the maggots that my husband had bought for bait, and he looked so happy playing with them! He placed these maggots on his palm. He touched their bodies and pinched them softly. It was so gross that I almost vomited.

Even now, I am still afraid of insects with too many legs, or no legs at all. One day, my son showed me a small bottle of liquor with a maggot in it from Mexico, and I screamed. Also, when I go fishing with my family, I just look at the bait because I don’t want to touch worms or maggots. Sometimes, my son makes fun of me. On rainy days, I hate to go outside because there are too many worms on the ground. I look at my feet and walk carefully to keep from stepping on slimy, gooey worms or night crawlers. Sometimes I see caterpillars on a tree or on a picnic table when I go to a park for a picnic. They remind me of the horrible experience I had at the island when I was young. Ever since that incident with the caterpillars, I have a phobia of too many legged insects, such as caterpillars.

Eui Kim comes from Korea.

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The Call of the Sea

By Monique Rethore

Casablanca, a well-known seaport on the Atlantic Ocean was the cradle of my early age. My childhood is full of memories of the sea: the salty taste on my skin after a beach day, the music of the backwash, the sharp calls of the seagulls, the smell of the spray, the itchy sand where it was so delightful to bury our bodies. However, my most treasured memory is the scene of white sails on dark-blue waves. Books about sailors had always nourished my imagination. As a result, I dreamed to make my debut as a skipper.

Ten years ago, with my husband for a guide, I experienced the excitement of sailing. For my initiation, the wind was really shifting. In a few seconds, the boat puffed under the push of the wind. The craft listed side to side. The flood of the actions flashed past. Orders were fired at me like a breaker. I felt as if my head was going to burst. On the sliding deck, I was like an elephant in a china shop. My skin blistered from the salt. My muscles were aching all over. The enraged sea blinded me, bursting my eyes. What a relief, when we were safe and sound and the sailboat was mooring in the quayside!

How could I be stopped by such a failure? It was a matter of honor. I couldn't lose face in front of my husband. Like sharks have to keep swimming or die, I had to face my fears. Last summer, I renewed the experience and registered myself in a nautical school for a week session. Defying my husband with bravery was pretentious, but braving Poseidon, the god of the sea, was insanity. How could I put myself in a such risky situation? You are allowed to consider my act as a foolish, unconscious decision, which it was. So I did enroll! Unfortunately, it was too late to pull back.

My husband recognized the awkwardness of my situation. To

comfort me, he told me, "Don't worry! You are risking nothing at all! If the boat makes its turn in the water and you fall in the sea, you know it's just water! Besides, you swim like a fish. You are a strong girl who is not afraid of any monsters, aren't you?" I glared at him. The thought of meters of water around me, full of seaweed winding round my legs like snakes or jellyfish with their perfidious thread biting my skin like the sting of a wasp, gave me the shivers. Swallowing my disgust, I started the sailing lessons.

The first morning at the briefing, it was explained to the crew how to handle sailing, to get the boat under way, to rig the sails, and so on. My cheeks were brightly colored with excitement. While I was listening to the last instructions, all my fears vanished. My sailor companions and I stood on the beach close to the Catamarans - light boats, with two floats, a large sail without a boom, a jib and an open deck. A thirteen-year-old boy was my partner. He stared at me shyly and whispered in a soft murmur, "I have never sailed before. I feel rather worried, don't you?" The sight of his weakness moved me to pity. He touched my maternal instinct. Like a hen with her chicks, I felt responsible for him. With a steady voice, I answered, "Everything will be fine. We are going to have a lot of fun. We are going to make it!" Deep inside of me, I wasn't so sure, but I instantly began to rig the sails to show him I was qualified for the ride. He seemed to believe in my duplicity and started to help me. By tacit agreement, I was the helmsman and he was the crew. When the sailboat was ready, we launched it and put our life jackets on.

The departure is always a crucial moment. All your senses are awakened. You have to catch the wind, make the last adjustments, be sure everything is done correctly: engage the keel of the rudder when the water is deep enough, and set a course out of the way of the

others. Before we had time to blink, our sailboat was gliding on the waves and water was rushing alongside. Marc, my young partner, shouted with joy, "We did it! We did it!" For a while, we tacked side by side. Suddenly, the wind started to pick up. The mast pointed toward the sea. The boat flew over the water. Large swells crashed against the deck. White plumes swirled around the hull, blinding us. Could it be the end of my dreams? It wasn't. As if by magic, I was possessed with sailing skills. That day, I felt I could do anything.

The next days, my legs were covered in bruises. I had calluses on my palms. The sand rubbing on my skin burnt my bottom. I had the face of an old sailor with his sun lines. Nonetheless, it was enlivening. In a proud voice, with a defiant look, I could say to my husband, "I did it! I did it!" Never give up was the masterly lesson. You learn by your mistakes. Each failure is a step towards the next success. You have to believe in yourself; nobody will do it for you. The Call of the Sea gave me an understanding of the infinity of our possibilities.

Monique Rethore comes from France where she was an elementary teacher.

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Growing Up Before Your Eyes

By Dace Roba

Smells like Clorox mixed with food. People in white scrubs in the hallway. There is the reception desk. "Would you tell me which room is Laimonis'?" I asked the girl behind the counter. "109," she muttered. Slowly, I walk there.

My dad had been lying in a bed for a week. He was feeling sick. His temperature was over 40 C. His eyes

were getting more and more red. My mom was worried about him, but he didn't want to go to the hospital. Every day he became sicker and sicker. Finally, he was taken to the hospital.

But I could not recognize him. That powerful strong man I knew had changed so quickly into a weak, hopeless human being. It was sad to see his eyes so deep in his face; his legs were skinnier than mine. No medicine could help him. Nothing was curing him. They transferred him from one hospital to another. They tried everything from blood transfusions to antibiotic treatment and oxygen tents. Doctors didn't know what was happening with him. He was like a candle that was slowly burning out. He didn't like it that I was visiting him in the hospital. He told me not to come any more. He thought then he was dying.

I was just 18, finishing high school. I couldn't believe that this was happening to my family. The visits became harder and harder for me. I didn't talk much about it with my mother.

The last day of school came closer and closer. I wished that my dad could be at my graduation party. It did not seem real.

Graduation day came. I was wearing the white blouse and white skirt that my mom gave me, but I didn't go to my graduation party. I went to visit my dad. That day I was closest to him, like I had never been before. We had so many things to talk about, remembering my childhood and what we did together.

My dad still remembers that day as the day that I gave him strength and hope to recover from his illness. It took him a long time to recover and be my real dad, the one I remembered, strong like a bear and healthy like a horse, with a good sense of humor and a hundred

good stories to tell.

Every time that I am speaking with my dad on the phone he reminds me about the time we spent together. It is a precious memory for both of us, like a close friend I looked up to while I was growing up. I feel kindhearted, deeply-rooted feelings for my dad. Even though the oceans keep us apart, he is always in my heart.

Dace Roba is from Latvia. She is studying Dental Assisting.

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What Is Waiting for Me?

By Derya Erturk

In my mind I am still hearing my mother's voice and my friends. They are yelling behind me, "Take care of yourself; don't forget us!" I missed them from that point. I couldn't think of anything else. I just knew I had to be strong.

It had all started with my cousin. Three years ago she filled out an application for the visa lottery, and she won. Soon she had her green card. I wanted the same thing, so I filled out an application, and I won too. When I won, however, I wasn't happy because I had never lived alone in my life.

It was my last night in my house and with my whole family. I was to get ready to go to another country. Everyone was really emotional, crying and crying. When I went to my room, my mother came behind me. She looked at me for a long time. "Please take care of yourself. Don't forget me. I want to look at you one last time. I want to sleep with you tonight," she said, crying. When I went out from my room everybody had come

to say good-bye to me. We talked for a long time together, my friends, cousins, sisters had all brought me presents. This was our tradition, for anybody when they went somewhere. When the visitors left, my own family and I were left alone in our house. We started to talk about me, and they gave me some advice.

When everybody had gone to sleep except my mother and me, then my mother wanted to talk with me, about my life. "If you have a hard time and cannot do anything by yourself, just come back." And I agreed. After that we slept together and cried. In the morning, after breakfast, we took my suitcases and went to the airport. My friends were there with a surprise for me, flowers and a gift. I said goodbye to everyone, kissing and hugging them. They were crying, but my mother wasn't, because she had promised me she wouldn't. Then, she gave me a gift for good luck, a blue amulet.

In the plane, I started to cry, because it was my first flight and first trip to another country. What would I do by myself? How could I live without my family and friends? I had to try. Always my whole family and friends were telling me, "You will do it. You are a strong girl." I wasn't sure because I was feeling lonely.

Other passengers were asking me where I would be going, what I would do there, if I had somebody there. I answered, "Yes, I have a cousin." I was too confused because I had not seen America before. Excited and worried, I asked myself many questions, too. "When I get to the airport if I can't find my cousin what am I going to do? If I don't like living in America or if I miss my mother too much, what am I going to do? How can I live without my family?"

When I arrived, I saw her. My cousin

hugged me and started to cry. I think she was happy because I was near her; now she and I were together. I looked around me; everybody was speaking a different language and I could not understand anything. Every single thing was different. Everything was new for me.

Now I have a new life, new friends, a new language and a good future.

Derya Erturk comes from Turkey. Her major is Interior Design.

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My First Day in America *By Karina Butenko*

Nobody could sleep well that night. Trying not to disturb Yevgeniy, my son, I left his bedroom and went to my mom's bedroom. The light was on; I was sure she wasn't sleeping. My mom smiled at me, but her eyes were full of tears. She was not only my mom, but also my best friend, and these were the last couple of hours that we could spend together. It was our last night in our lovely city. It was the last night in our home.

I thought about my life here, my parents and my friends. In this city and this country I had lived all my life. Here I had experienced all my grief, my first love and the birth of my son. What could be waiting for me ahead? Where could I find new friends? With these thoughts I dozed.

In the morning we needed go to the airport. It was a very nice warm day of late fall. All my friends came to the airport to say "goodbye." In the airplane I was thinking about the people who I was leaving behind and my new life in the new country.

Our route was Lvov - Varshava - New York. When we flew over New York City, the view from the airplane was fabulous. There were millions of lights; it was such a beautiful picture. I couldn't pry my eyes from the window.

Our plane arrived in Kennedy airport in New York City. Hundreds of people were walking hurriedly in all different directions. This huge airport looked like a big and nice city. We had two hours until our next flight to Rochester.

My son and I walked around. Everything was very interesting for us because it was our first taste of American life. All the people around us spoke a language which I had studied many years ago at my school. But I remembered just a few phrases from that time. I was feeling terrible.

We stopped near a small cafe and a friendly boy who worked there asked me, "May I help you?" But I was silent, because I couldn't understand anything from his words. I just said, "No, thank you" and was trying to go from this place when my son said to me in Russian, "Mom, please. I want an ice cream." I tried to tell him, "Zhenya, I'm sorry. I don't know how to say it in English." I saw that he began to be sad. I thought, "How can I explain what I want? How will he understand me?"

It was a very funny and awkward situation. I decided to buy Coca Cola for my son, because in all languages these words mean the same.

This situation happened almost three years ago. During these years I began to speak and understand English. My son's English is much better than mine. But this warm November day in 1991 I will remember all my life because then I really understood how important it is to know several languages.

Karina Butenko is from Ukraine.

Thingyan: An Unforgettable Tragedy *By Soe Soe Ei*

"BOOM!" I hear the sound of some kind of explosion. I see cars stopping, police cars and an ambulance. When I hear this sound and see an accident, a memory from my past fills my head and I feel like something is grabbing my heart. Robert Benchley once said, "Drinking makes such fools of people." In my imagination, I also hear the sound of happiness, the sound of water dousing. The bright sun is shining with a golden color to compete with the beautiful yellow clothes of women and girls, and a breeze is running and kissing everyone on their cheeks. It's the time of Thingyan!

Do you know what "Thingyan" is? "Thingyan" means "moving from one year to another." If someone catches you by surprise while you are on your way down the street and douses you with a bowl full of water, what will be your response? But, between kindred souls of strangers, water throwing is taken as a natural process at Thingyan, a water festival enjoyed by one and all, to celebrate Myanmar's Traditional four day New Year Festival. During Thingyan, you get doused, drenched to the skin, all your body, even in the nostrils, ears, and eyes. You just come out laughing.

At Thingyan it is the custom to pour water on each other amidst much music, song, dance and laughter. The water washes away old sins and misfortunes and starts one on a fresh road to happiness and prosperity. Young people their pay respects to their parents, and elders, or help to bathe and shampoo the aged with loving-kindness.

It was 6 a.m. April 16, 1996, in my native country, Myanmar. It was an unusual time for me to wake up, but I was tremendously excited to celebrate the last day of the water festival because the next day, the New Year, would arrive. My mother was telling me not to stay out for the whole day because I might get sick from wearing wet clothes. Also some people would drive carelessly then; therefore, my parents were worried about their kids, especially during those days. "Mom, today is the last day of my favorite holidays. You know that I have got to play and stay with my friends. I won't get sick. I will take care of myself. Don't worry," I added, and I continued to listen to *Thingyan* traditional songs on the television. My mom whispered, "Oh... What a wonderful day! The day is filled with beauty."

Even though it was just 6 o'clock, I heard people's shouts to get together to celebrate the whole day long, their cheers for the entertainers, voices of those getting ready from the food donation stations and water-play stations. I changed into my casual clothes, and I shouted for my brother to prepare quickly. About half an hour later, my friend's car had arrived to pick us up. I never understood the consequences of over-happiness. During the holiday season, men especially wanted to drink because they wanted to play with the water the whole day; alcohol might give them some warmth. People often didn't think about anything but fun.

While we were going around the city, we heard an explosion. It was like a hydrogen bomb had been exploded. The tragedy occurred not so far from our car. When I gazed at the accident, I couldn't believe my eyes. Bloody bodies of young women and men had fallen from their cars. Two cars had smashed into each other and most of the passengers had been injured. I was so frightened by the scene. Both cars were destroyed.

Suddenly, I saw an ambulance, police cars, and some firefighters as well. One of the police said, "Let's hurry before anything happens. They all will be all right. They all just have some cuts and broken bones. Just a few are unconscious. The *Thingyan* committee had warned all the citizens not to get drunk, not to drive fast during this holiday season. So, take this tragedy as a lesson and learn from it." After that, they told us to move on along the road. The tragedy was awful. Tears automatically spilled from my wide eyes, like water coming out of the pipes during our water festival.

That day was the most terrifying day for me. I had never thought something like this would happen in front of me to me. The tragedy saddened me for years. *Thingyan*, our water festival, is meant to be the happiest time, when we leave behind the dirt from the past year. Playing with water means to purify one's mind and spirit. *Thingyan* welcomes the New Year and it is absolutely not to cause injury to another person. I learned a lot from that moment. I hope nothing like this will ever happen to me in my life again.

Soe Soe Ei is interested in chemical engineering and also medicine.

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Distorted Picture *By Stanislav Makiyenko*

For me the 1990's were my teenage years and the time when I began to wonder about other parts of the world. Russian television showed images of USA as a nation of body-builders who drove big cars and loved to lie in the sun. In school we learned mostly about the USA economy, as a symbol of success for the world. This contrast between the US economic success and my country's

difficulties made me blue. I thought, "Why are we not so successful?"

If you had asked me two years ago, "What is your idea of America?" I would have said, "a place which is full of happy families." I thought all American families had yards full of green grass, mothers and fathers who watched their children laughing, and playing in gardens surrounded by white picket fences.

The young husband watches from the driveway as he shines the family car, and the wife watches from the porch, where she relaxes in her wicker chair with a glass of lemonade. I thought of America as a place where dreams come true. A big house, a family, a car, and of course a wonderful job by which you earn these treasures.

Two years ago I arrived in America and discovered how much of this dream becomes a reality for the majority of Americans. As an immigrant to this country, I had high expectations.

My first shock was the lack of physical fitness of most people I saw. I noticed how little people walked from place to place. Even short trips to the store were made in the car. My second shock was the casual fashion which people chose for everyday wear. My third and fourth shocks came from the cars and the houses. Where were the mansions? Where were the Ferrari's and Rolls Royce's? Altogether, I was disappointed by the reality which greeted me. American people lived in modest houses, drove uninteresting vehicles, dressed without concern for style, and worked very hard for small amounts of money.

I was surprised to learn that my fantasy about America was the same as many - maybe most - Americans. The easy life is an unrealized dream

of many people. The few Americans who find huge success through sports, entertainment, or commerce are really few.

Stanislav Makiyenko comes from Ukraine. He would like to study law.

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A White Lady

By

Rolando L. Rivera-Maldonado

“So ugly!” I said. “Are you sure I will have something really beautiful and exciting from this tiny, wrinkled leaf?”

I was six years old when my mother gave me that weird, dry leaf. A year before I had received from her a colorful gift as a reward for my good job dusting furniture and helping out at home: a small flowerpot with four delicate, velvety burgundy flowers and a couple of buds. Its wavy petals caught my mind and my mother knew it. Now, a year later, she wanted to challenge my perception a little more about how to take care of this new “pet.”

Very early in the morning we went out together. I put my coat on because of the weather. It was chilly and foggy for a summer day in Puerto Rico. Walking among dry leaves, I saw a pot behind an avocado tree. The pot looked light, but it wasn't.

“What do you think you will need if you want to plant your new pet in this clay pot?” she asked. I stayed silent. “What am I going to do with this chunk of leaf, or...pet? It looks more like a thing than a leaf or a pet. Is she getting goofy or am I not getting it?” I asked myself.

“Well mom, if this thing is a pet as you are telling me, and at the same time it is a plant, I will need soil for my plant, and water for my pet,” I said. “You are right, my son,” she whispered to me. I put aside the leaves close to the avocado tree and with a small shovel I took some soil. I poured the soil into the clay pot until it got full. I planted the wrinkled leaf into it and watered my tiny pet. “You need to water your plant at least one a week and never allow it to get dry.” This advice gave me the clue to be successful in my journey.

I went to see my plant every single day for a whole year. I was in awe, looking at how my little plant was growing and becoming plump and green. After a few months I saw that some new leaves were hanging out from my pot.

Then, one day, the miracle. “Mom! Look at this.” My mother came out and I showed her a huge bud with a white-pinky color. It was shaped like a big long zucchini, but very light. “You have to stay awake through this night if you want to see your white lady.”

I followed her words, and an amazing, gorgeous white flower one foot wide was opening in front of my eyes. “It looks like an angel. A white lady wearing a delicate bridal gown, getting married at church,” I thought in that moment.

Because of the darkness, I took a flashlight and when the light touched my flower I saw the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen. Silky petals and a golden center. Its smell, sweet and delicious, filled up the air all around.

After a while I got very tired and went to sleep. Early in the morning I jumped from my bed, went to see my beautiful pet and...I almost died. I felt a sharp pain squeezing my chest when I couldn't see my white flower. “Mom!!!” I shouted out. “She is dead. What happened? The

flower now looks like a wet napkin,” I said.

“Yes, Rolandito,” as my mother used to call me, “she only lasts six hours, but don't worry about it. Just wait! You will know why I am telling this to you.”

She was really right. Today, almost twenty-five years after, I can tell you that I have seen the same picture every summer. Sometimes I have been delighted and pleased with two hundred flowers at the same night, and at the same time.

I have learned you will find beauty, with patience as your first step, if you know where to look and how to wait.

Rolando L. Rivera-Maldonado, from Puerto Rico, has a degree in Electrical Engineering.

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The Warrior

By *Usman Majoka*

Entering a traditional room furnished with medals and trophies and some old Pakistani furniture, I saw a big old black and white picture of my grandfather's friend, Akram, standing with his aircraft. He came in as I was staring at his great picture. “I crashed three Indian aircrafts with this F-86 in 1965,” he told me. Akram is about seventy-two years old, and his son has been in United States for almost twenty-five years, so he came here fifteen years ago. He was a squadron leader in the Pakistani Air Force. He participated in the wars of 1965 and 1971 between Pakistan and India.

Akram was born in 1930 in a small village near New Delhi, India. “In 1947, when Pakistan and India got their independence from the British,

like other Muslims, we also moved to Pakistan. My father was a small farmer in India, and when we came to Pakistan the government gave us a small piece of land so we could survive in a new place. My twin brother and I helped our father on the farm. Now I went to school for the first time when I was sixteen years old. Before the independence of Pakistan, once, while I was working in a field with my father, a birdlike thing went past us very fast, making a thunderous noise. I got scared and asked my father what it was. He told me that it was a British aircraft. From that day I wondered how that thing was flying.”

In 1953 Akram attempted to join the Pakistan Air Force, but they didn't let him in because he was not wealthy enough to pay them for the first three years. (After these three years, they did pay you to be in the air force.) Akram worked hard to make money and three years later he tried again. This time he got accepted. He worked so hard to make his dream come true. In 1966, after the war, he was promoted to squadron leader. He retired in 1978. “I'm very proud of the work I did for my country in wars and in all crucial times,” he said.

“How did the war start?” I asked. “On September 6th, 3:00 a.m. without a formal declaration of war, Indians crossed the border of West Pakistan and attacked Lahore, but the Pakistani army was ready for anything. They fought very bravely and overwhelmed the Indians. A big battle of tanks started at the border of Sialkot, Punjab, but we didn't have so many tanks so our brave soldiers tied bombs around themselves and lay down under the tanks, giving their lives for their country.

“Indians were better compared to Pakistan. They had a better army and they had advanced weapons of war, but they didn't have self-confidence, and

they were afraid to die. In Pakistan we were always ready to die for our country and we had lots of self-confidence. That's why we crushed them.

“The Pakistani Air Force played a very important role in that war. We had almost fifty aircrafts and most of them were F-86's. On the other hand, Indians had more than one hundred fifty, and they had hunters. But still we got more than thirty Indian planes down and captured three with pilots. There are so many things that I can tell you about that war. I'd like to share just a few of them.

“A very brave pilot named Alam destroyed three Indian aircrafts in just seven seconds.” I was very surprised when I heard that. Akram told me, “One of his best friends went on a mission alone and he got interrupted by a formation of four Indian aircrafts. They chased him and he almost ran out of fuel. There was an Indian air base nearby so he decided to crash into the Indian planes. He gave his life, crashing into the two Indian aircrafts.

“On September 6th, squadron leader, Sarfaraz Ahmad, who was a very good friend and a great leader, led a formation of three F-86 aircrafts on a strike against Halwara airfield, and I was with him. After crossing the Indian border, our leader had been warned about a large number of enemy interceptors, but he continued his mission. On the way back, our formation was interrupted by ten Indian hunter aircrafts. The squadron leader got one down in the first few seconds but after that his guns jammed, so I told him, ‘Go back. We'll take care of them,’ but he refused and ordered me to take over as leader. He continued the engagement with the enemy. The end for him was never in doubt. He chose to ignore it and in the process, his aircraft was shot down. He was killed, but not without his action enabling us to shoot

down three more hunter aircrafts. After that the Indians ran away and we went back, but we had lost a good friend.

“That's me, on my right. There's my friend, the squadron leader Sarfaraz, and on my left is my twin brother.” Akram showed me a picture. “Whenever I think of those days, my eyes get full of tears for my best friends who lost their lives in that war, but when I think that they gave their lives to save our country, I am very proud.”

Usman Majoka also comes from Pakistan. His interest is science.

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