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My Last Teaching Day

Aisa Softi?

It was December 1992, the last day before winter break. I entered the school where I had been a teacher and principal for 15 years with nothing on my mind but the coming day, my students, and the lesson I would teach. Murisa, custodian and my dear friend, changed my mood in an instant. Her look of worry and fear told me that today would be a very different last day than I had anticipated. The next ten minutes told me that all my tomorrows would be different as well.

“Aisa, let’s go upstairs, I have important news for you,” Murisa whispered. I followed her as she walked quickly up the stairs to the second floor, passed the library and stopped beside a window looking down on a bleak school garden.

“Listen to me carefully,” she said. “Today is the last day of work for you, Belkisa, Mirsada, Hikmeta, and me. This morning the principal Branko Lazarevic wrote on the board in the teacher’s break room: ‘Anyone who does not have a husband, son, or brother in the Serbian army cannot keep their job in this school anymore.’

“But it is worse than that,” she said, standing closer to me and whispered, “When I brought coffee to the teachers’ break room I heard a group of teachers mentioning your name. I waited a little bit, pretending to clean the table, to see if I could figure out what was going on. Mr. Milosh Smolic, defense teacher, asked why you were still teaching here. He said if nobody kicked you out of the school he would do it with his rifle. Yes, he said with his rifle. I heard it with my own ears.” Murisa held her cup between her nervous hands and drank a sip of tea, her eyes communicating the fear that had taken hold of her. She took a few more sips, looking and listening carefully to all the sounds around us and waited for me to respond.

I was speechless, shocked.

“I’m scared for you,” Murisa continued. “I know that you live with your teenage son and old mother-in-law. You don’t have any protection, any source of strength to lean on.”

“Thank you, Murisa, but don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine,” my words mixed with the sounds of her steps as she walked down. I couldn’t move. Silence accompanied me and I prayed:

Dear God, why is all of this happening to me? Is my entire journey Your test, or Your punishment? If it is Your test, please guide me to pass it and to earn Your satisfaction. If it is Your punishment, show me what I did wrong. Help me to find a way to correct it. Are you accepting my prayers? I am struggling now in this world. What can I do without a job? How can my son, my mother-in-law

and I live without any money? Dear Lord, accept my prayers, help me find a good path, and help us survive. Amen.

I stood up and walked slowly toward the teachers' break room. My hands were suddenly ice cold and I hold my purse tightly to steady their shaking. I entered the room, greeted the people there, and took my regular place close to the door. The room was full and eerily silent; my colleagues averting their eyes, unwilling to meet my gaze. Are they afraid of me or their conscience? I asked myself. *Did they suddenly "discover my sins" and now make a shield to hide behind? Why change now? We worked together for 15 years. Is it a sin to be a Muslim? Don't they know my character? What could they find wrong? Where are my friends? How could they justify their action? Where is this going?*

The bell broke the silence. The teachers walked out of the room. I raised my head in the empty room, grabbed my students' book, and walked toward the board. The sentence that Murisa informed me of was there. Even though I already knew every word, I read it again.

Looking at the words I felt the tension build in me. I sat down, trying to wish the sentence away as if it were a bad dream, but the words "cannot keep their job in this school anymore" were flashing in my mind. *It is true*, I thought. Today is my last day of work. *What should I do? Should I go home right now? Should I go to the classroom and teach my students? Can I teach them today? Is my voice strong enough? Does my brain work? Is the principal still in the school? Should I find him and talk? Is there anybody to help? Anybody?*

I gathered my strength, stood up, and walked toward my classroom. I felt as though my heart's pumping was loud enough to disturbed the silence in the school. My students were unusually quiet when I entered my classroom, and with trembling hands, I wrote the topic on the board. I looked at the topic sentence I had written, but it blurred in my mind with fateful sentence on the board in the teachers' room. I looked at my students hoping that their positive energy would inspire me and give me the strength to lead the class like I had for 23 years of entire my teaching career. For the first time, I couldn't speak. All 25 pairs of eyes looked at me, puzzled. I loved those eyes, but I couldn't stand their confused gaze. I turned to the board to concentrate on the topic and my swelled eyes blinked several times to protect tears from coming out. Finally, I created a sentence in my mind, faced the students, but instead of words, a volcano of sadness erupted and I couldn't stop the hot flow of tears. I covered my face with my hands, opened the classroom door, and fled into the hallway.

I sat on the bench under the students' coats, supported my head with my hands and sobbed uncontrollably. Two students came and sat one on each side of me. One of them said softly, "Mrs. Softic, what happened? How can we help?"

"Today is my last working day. I didn't want to share it with you, but I couldn't control myself. I am sorry. I will come to the class soon," I said willing my voice to be calm.

"We want to help. What can we do?" the other student asked.

"Thank you very much, but you cannot help. Your support and understanding is helping me enough," I said and looked at their sad eyes. I stood up, wiped my face, and walked to the class.

"I am sorry. I tried not to show my emotion but it is very hard for me today. I love teaching, I love having you as students, and I love being in this school," I said and my voice became shaky again.

My eyes filled with tears. I waited for a minute and explained the sentence from the teachers' break room and its meaning for my life. All classroom became huge beehive. Several students raised their hands.

"Mrs. Softic, we should go to the military building and protest there," said Babic.

"We are going to protest in front of the school! We are not coming back to the school without you, Mrs. Softic" said Nikolic.

"Yes, yes," the whole classroom echoed.

"Thank you, but I don't want any protests. I want you to continue your education. Gathering useful knowledge is your imperative. Knowledge is wealth that nobody can take from you. You are seniors and the college entrance exam is ahead of you. I wish you success in your personal and professional life," I said from bottom of my heart and closed the classroom door the last time in Bosnia.

Outside, a few yards from the school, thousands of Bosnian refugees were twisting along the "Brotherhood and Unity Bridge" which had connected Bosnia and Croatia, in a huge line creating the biggest and ugliest snake on the Earth. Older people were standing on the river shore on Bosnian side waving with their shaky, wrinkled hands and drying their tears with the other, as they had called their grandchildren's names. "Hassan, Hussein, Fatima, Amra, Leila, Said, Yusuf, Ibrahim.....don't forget Nana, don't forget Grandpa, don't forget Bosnia." The wind had muffled their words and wrapped them in the river waves.

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