

## **The Hero Within**

by Cynthia Arauz

The sun warmed my face, giving my pale complexion a tint of pink as if it had been pinched. My feet moved swiftly beneath me. I was on my way to school. Fear had started to build up inside of me as if I were a geyser ready to burst. I knew what waited ahead for me at school, but I just let my feet carry me forward.

I had been very sick the last two years. Grave's disease had taken over my life, just as alcohol takes over an alcoholic. This disease ate away at my immune system, reeking terror on my physical being and leaving it feeling and looking like a train wreck. Thanks to this disease, my once light coco skin now held a pale, volcanic ash-like color. My sickly body held a mere fifty pounds, which is way under the average weight for an eight-year old. The hair on my head, once flowing like a long river of chestnuts, now was short and thin, and sometimes fell to the floor like rain drops. Eyes that used to be small and a beautiful brown now were a dull coffee color, so enlarged that they looked as if they were going to pop out my head. Worst of all was a large scar, laid upon my neck, which looked like someone had cut me with a knife.

I had learned to live with these life changes to my body, but other people had not always been so accepting. Even though I was now ten, these symptoms still plagued my body. So on this beautiful, enchanted day, I headed for school and steeled myself for the day's events. I was used to the daily taunts and teasing from my fellow peers, but two girls in particular could always get to me. No matter how high I built up my armor-like protection, those two girls could always break through as if they were trained burglars.

Kim, the feisty leader of the two, made people at school fear her piercing brown eyes and quick, insulting tongue. She walked with confidence, as if she owned the school. Anyone in their right mind would not dare stand up to her, in fear that they might be slain as if they were the dragon and she the slayer. Gracie, on the other hand, was quite different from her counter part. She followed Kim but never led the militia. Gracie was very beautiful. Black, shining ringlets framed her heart-shaped face. Boys bent over backwards for her attention, but only with Kim's blessing. When Gracie and Kim walked together, Gracie always trailed a few steps behind with her head held down, as if somewhere deep inside she was like some of the kids she helped to terrorize. On command, though, she would join Kim in the insults and pain she spread. As I entered the school that beautiful day, they were right there inside the school, as if they had been waiting for me all morning.

Kim stood with her arms crossed over her chest like she was a secret service agent. Her eyes were fixed on me as if she was the hunter and I was the deer frozen helpless in her sights. She leaned very slowly over to Gracie, whispering something in her ear. Then, with wild, impish eyes, Gracie started to approach me. At that moment, I thought that I should run, scream, or do something besides stand there. Instead, I just stood with my feet super glued to the floor. When Gracie was face to face with me, she sternly spat out, leaving hot drops of hate on my face, " Kim wants to see you, now!" I did not know what to do. Head down and a few steps behind, I followed Gracie as she always followed Kim.

As we approached Kim, I knew this was going to be a very dark day for me. Kim's eyes scanned me up and down, and a look of disgust came over her face. Hate filled her eyes as if she were the devil himself. Her mouth opened with the words, "So what do we have here?" I tried to stutter out a response, but only unrecognizable sounds escaped my quivering lips. This brought them both so much pleasure, seeing me fear them. Then they both let out shrilling, witch-like laughs that sent shivers through my already trembling body.

My mind kept shouting out signals to be as still as possible and this would be over soon, but little did I know this was just the beginning. With a megaphone-like sound, Kim started shouting, "Hey everybody, look! It's Frankenstein!" Gracie added her two cents in by yelling, "It's the freak! Frankenstein!" As those hate filled messages echoed through the school, Kim and Gracie started pushing and punching me with all their strength. My body started to ache from the blows, and red marks began to form all over me. My ears burned like they were on fire from the hateful shouting. Warm, salty tears poured freely from my eyes. Fellow classmates became bystanders of this degradation, and some started to join in with the prayer-like chants. My shame and embarrassment stung me like a bee, and I was praying for it all to end. A moment later, my prayers were finally answered when a teacher broke in to the middle of the commotion. I didn't even wait to hear what she said. I just let my feet carry me from that spot with jackrabbit speed, and I did not stop until I reached home and the safety of my mother's arms.

I let my mother cuddled me like an infant for what seemed like hours. Once enough time had passed and my tears began to dry up, I repeated in detail the terror that had occurred earlier that day. As I told my story, I could see my mother's heart literally break in two. Tears welled up in her beautiful, caring, blue eyes. A clown-like frown showed on her lips. After my account of the story was complete, she put my small, frail-like hands into hers. With an angel-like sigh, she told me that not everyone was good or nice. Some people miss the true beauty of a person because they look for what they can see. She told me the true beauty of a person is what lies within us; in the love we give ourselves, and most of all, the love we give to others. At that moment, I knew what she meant.

As I have gone through life, I have met many victims like myself. When I see these victims on the streets, at school, and at other such places, and observe the stares and hear the snickers they receive, I just stop. I hold my head up high. Then I give them an extra big smile, a friendly "Hello," or lend a helping hand. In my own way, I let them know I am just like them.

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