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**Literacy in Love**

 When I think of literacy, I immediately think of reading and writing. Recently, however, that mental definition has begun to grow. Slowly, I’ve come to see literacy as something, anything, which you understand well and can apply to your daily life. For some, it’s music. Others are literate in politics. Some people’s literacy is simply in their ability to read the people around them and act accordingly. Everybody has at least one. For some, it is not something you spend your life studying, it’s simply something you come to know. I was one of those kinds people. My literacy is not something that can be studied or tested for. It is not even something I realized I was learning. It came to me in the most beautiful way and has not left me since. My literacy changed my life before I knew it even existed. My literacy is love.
          At age sixteen I took my first trip to an orphanage called Zanmi Beni, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The children there were a mix of disabled and able-bodied children. The horrible earthquake that struck in 2010 orphaned some, while others were victims of horrendous poverty and neglect. My first trip was a blur. I had been out of the country many times before but had never experienced such a rich culture as Haiti. It was beautiful enough to call me back that Christmas. Since then, I have been back twice more.
         My life until this point has never been considered “easy”. At 4 years old my father was in a plane accident and paralyzed from the neck down. At 5, my niece was diagnosed and passed away from cancer in a three-week period. My family was a wreck. My mother spent all of the money we had to care for my father. My parents divorced, my sister and her family were in shambles, and my mother and I made our first move from my childhood home to our house in the country. After that, we moved about once a year, as my mother looked for work. And the sad story continues on from there. I came out of it feeling like an outsider to the rest of the world. For all that I had learned from my upbringing, the ability to adapt and find joy in difficult circumstances, I also felt mistrustful and frightened in many ways.
            In Haiti, however, I felt something changing. The fear I’d held onto for so long began to fade, but I didn’t understand why. This was the beginning of my literacy. A new understanding of my world and the world around me was beginning to reveal itself to me. Finally, during my second trip to Haiti, something changed.
            I was sitting under a canopy of mango trees, in the late afternoon, talking to two of the children. One was Ti-Jo (Joseph Junior), an 11-year-old little boy. The other was Johann, a 17-year-old girl. Johann was sitting on a bench with me, facing me, while Ti-Jo sat on the ground between us. I had been working with the mothers and the children to gather their stories, and Johann and Ti-Jo were two I’d saved for last. They were two people I was especially close to, and I wanted them to tell me their stories when they were ready.
            We were having casual conversation, and then Ti-Jo began talking. In his extremely broken English he said, “Do you know how I look like this?” He was referring to his eyes, which were crossed. I said I did not. He smiled, but his gaze became haunted. He said, “When the earth quaked, I was with my family. The house fell on me. It was dark and I thought I was gone.” He paused, momentarily, to gauge my reaction, then continued, saying, “After a long time, I saw light. People got me and took me here.”
            He stopped talking and stared up at the trees for a moment. Johann filled in the details of his story that he couldn’t translate himself. She told me he was trapped under the rubble of his house, with his family’s bodies, for three days. When they found him, he thought he was dead, which he almost was. He was hit in the head by the rubble during the earthquake, and his eyes had been crossed since. Now, he was Zamni Beni.
            I sat there, thinking. This was the same little boy who had smiles at every part of the day. The same boy who stole a pencil, a rarity in Haiti, and sold it for a candy bar because it was the last day of classes and he believed no one would want it anymore. The same boy who changed my computer into Haitian Creole, and then wouldn’t change it back, just to scare me. I couldn’t believe it.
            After a minute, Johann began telling her own story. She is the oldest child in a family of three. Her younger brother, Easman, and their little sister, Shiella, are also at the orphanage. Their mother died of AIDS when Johann was 14. The earthquake killed their father, and left them homeless. For a month, they lived like wild dogs, eating bugs, stealing, drinking water that flowed down the dirt streets, digging through trash, and sleeping in abandoned fields with no light for miles, since central power is not something found in most of Haiti. They fought, sometimes literally, to stay alive.
            One day, they stumbled into a field on another blistering afternoon. Only, this field was a special one. It was the backyard to Zamni Beni. They were taken in, fed, and had been there ever since.
            When Johann finished her story, it was around 8pm, and the children were called to get ready for bed. As the rest of my evening continued, I felt their stories weighing on my mind. Every mental image of their past haunted me. It seemed almost unreal that those smiling happy children could have been through all of that. I felt so much empathy for these people I so dearly loved. Before I knew it, I found myself sitting on the wooden fence surrounding the dirt soccer field, crying.
            I felt ashamed. What right had I to cry for them? Me, a girl who’s always had food and water and a place to sleep. Me, who hadn’t gone through anything close to what these two children had. How could I cry when they had not only survived it, but also lived happy lives.
            It was in this particular state, tears and all, that Johann found me. I couldn’t even look at her. But I couldn’t stop crying either. Finally, she turned my head to hers and smiled, laughed even, and said, “Katie, it’s alright. We’re happy now. We have each other. We love each other. Everything else doesn’t matter anymore.”
            Those words, simple as they were, taught me more than a lifetime of classes ever could. Something switched in my head, and I realized just how blind I had been. I had had my fair share of trials throughout my life, but I had held onto them. I’d clung to them, and in the meantime had convinced myself that I was living my life happily. But I was wrong. These children, the same one who had lived through hell, *they* were the truly happy ones. They took their pain and accepted it. They didn’t bury it, or try to forget it. Nor did they let it control them. They accepted their past, and they began a new day. More importantly, they didn’t let the fear of losing those they loved keep them from living anew. Their losses taught them just how precious and selfless love could truly be.
         I didn’t learn all of this immediately, and I certainly didn’t realize it on my own. I watched it happen for two weeks. I went home, lived my life. And then when I returned, I watched it again. Every time I visited, I learned more of what a real love looks like. My definition of love began to change. I realized my first thought of love being between a guy and a girl was far from correct. I saw that love, a true love, was one that placed someone before yourself. It is a love that you trust. One that heals you, inspires you, and makes you comfortable in your own skin. This love is limitless – it can be romantic, but it can be between a child and a caretaker, a brother and a sister, or even strangers. This is the love referred to in Bibles and other religious texts. This is the love that changes things, big things, in this world.
            It took four years to understand this, and I still cannot vocalize it clearly to anyone. I’ve come to realize it’s something that cannot be explained, only felt. People say I sound like a lunatic or a dreamer if I try to explain why I spend all of my free time in Haiti with the heat and dirt, or why I want to spend my life helping children who live on the streets. Even in this paper, as I write this, there is more I want to say to make someone understand, but I do not have the words. What I do know is that my literacy in love is true. I watched this love do the impossible, in other people’s lives, and now in mine.