

Finding a Voice in the Noise

Maya used to believe that silence was her safest shield. She had learned to blend into the background, rarely speaking more than a few words at a time.

When she arrived at River and Reach children's home, she expected to be just another case file in a crowded room.

The grown-ups and children here had a different approach. Here everyone's perspective held weight. "Your experience is your experience".

During the weekly house meetings, grown-ups and children ensured that Maya's quiet nods were acknowledged just as much as the louder requests of the older teens.

One evening, Sarah, a grown-up, noticed Maya tapping her fingers rhythmically on the kitchen counter. Instead of telling her to sit still, Sarah joined in, first echoing Maya's rhythm then adding a little bit extra, then Maya echoed and added her bit. It went on for minutes, both smiling, concentrating, listening closely. Other people put their head round the door frame but didn't go into the kitchen. Maya nodded and Sarah too then the 'drumming' got quieter slower. A gathered silence caught everyone. Then cheers and smiles and whoops. Sarah and Maya high fived then carried on doing the dishes, one washing, one drying.

The following days Maya heard, found, and made rhythms and melodies wherever she went. She found 5 glasses in the kitchen, all had a different amount of water in them, and when she tapped them they made a different notes, more water higher, less water lower.

At the table Sarah absentmindedly ran her finger over the glass rim, and it made a noise. Maya did the same, and they both sat for a while with the sound.

She asked to go over the level crossing in the car 5 times at different speeds.

She listened to the air conditioning units at the shops "all making a rhythm, the world talks if you listen to it."

Sarah brought an old wooden box and attached a broom handle to it, then some twine, thick string. She asked Maya to hold the broomstick till the twine was tight. "Now, flick it." It boomed! Maya beamed. She did it again. "Now loosen and tighten". It made tunes.

The afternoon was spent booming and beaming.

In the evening Sarah asked if Maya played any musical instrument. On being told

'No' she asked if she wanted to try playing an instrument. The next week, a ukelele and an acoustic guitar were found 'not doing anything' in the home's recreation room. Maya flicked, she now knew it as plucked, a string, and smiled at making the sound.

The next day Sarah and Maya were sitting together, patiently learning basic chords together. They had Youtube helping them as they helped each other figure their fingers in ways they had never been figured before.

When they could both play some chords they began singing too.

It was this way, through music, that Maya found the words she had spent years hiding from. She found she could say things in songs she didn't at other times.

By the end of the year, she was talking freely, even at noisy mealtimes.

There's a coda (look it up if you don't know!) to this story as Spring was coming on. Maya had got really good with all the chords. She knew all the chords, and her vocabulary was immense, "a loquacious lexicon" as she toothily smiled and explained.

Then one day she didn't play anything at all. The guitar was untouched. As it was for days. Maya too was unspoken, uncommunicative. Everyone looked at each other, mouthing "What's up?" to be met with a sensitive shrug.

Mary didn't really know how to get Maya to open up. She found Maya sitting in her room looking at her guitar.

'Well...?' asked Mary.

"It's like falling out with your best friend. You like what they do but you know there's more, but they don't and can't.

" Help me out here Maya"

" Well I like her, love her even, and all the things she can do. But it's not enough."

"How?"

"There's no boom "

"Got it. I think I know the answer. What's missing. Let me make a call."

A while later a small young woman appeared at the front door. Maya opened it.

"Hi, I'm here to see Mary". Mary was right behind Maya.

"Come in and bring Bertha with you." The young woman picked up the thin long suitcase.

"This is Lal. She's brought something you might like to hear."

Maya looked quizzical. Not see, but hear.

Lal opened the case in the recreation room. She took out something long that looked like a guitar but with only 4 and fatter strings. She'd brought a little loudspeaker too.

"It's a bass guitar". She wrapped the strap around Maya. "It's heavier than you think". It was heavy, and long. "So plug her in" she handed Maya a lead with a plug either end.

The loudspeaker hummed.

Maya looked at Mary. 'Now flick it'.

The boom was as big as Maya's smile.

The booms went on for a long while, then got tuneful as Lal helped Maya get to know notes and tunes. The repetition of some bass riffs became the sound of the home for a while. Grown-ups worried another child would take up the drums, or trumpet, but if they did they would go with it. (Later the home did start their own band, gigging around too).

Later in the year Maya got to play a double bass. It boomed, and it jiggled her body as she played it. "It's like a part of you. It connects my mind and body to yours, to everyone's."

Mary, Marcus, and Maya were sitting around. Mary was quietly noodling on the guitar. Maya was softly picking bass. Marcus was drumming knees and cushions.

Maya looked up, "I love the way you have to cradle the guitar on your knees or in your arms, like a baby. The bass is more grown up; you have to be in control of its weight and power. But I love the double bass because it's so big and resonant, every note is like exploring a new land. Sometimes I wish I could just climb inside it."