

HEIDI KIM

To Herself

Miss Allison looked around, beaming quietly. The school year had finally settled down. It was hard for them to adjust to being in school all day, of course, except for the ones (poor things) who were used to being in daycare all day. Still, two crying fits, one temper tantrum, one upset stomach, and one would-be small bully later, the children had settled down to the routine. She had sorted them all into their correct reading and math groups and used the naughty rug for the first time.

Something was slightly off, however, when the morning rituals started. Her eye fell on one little girl whose ruffled skirt was twitching with child energy. Already a noticeably good child, a smart child with clean fingernails, her mouth didn't seem to be moving during the Pledge. Miss Allison frowned.

The next day, she maneuvered herself to stand where she could get a good look at the little girl's face during the Pledge. Sure enough, the child was standing properly, hand on heart, lips not moving.

Miss Allison called the child over to her desk quietly during the reading period and asked her if she was having trouble remembering the Pledge. She pointed out the large poster, a bright yellow square shining catti-corner from the flag over the door and asked the child to read it to her. The child said nothing.

"Can you see the blackboard clearly?" she asked.

"Yes," said the child. "Read me the names on the board." Names written in sprawling, shaky six-year-old handwriting. "John, Becky, Guadalupe..."

"If you can read those, you can certainly read the

Pledge,” said Miss Allison. The child sat silent, but the corners of her mouth deepened.

The next morning, Miss Allison called her up to the front of the room and asked her to lead the Pledge. Unfortunately, the class of twenty relatively well-trained six-year-olds thwarted her plan by chorusing together, “I pledge allegiance...” the moment the child put her hand on her heart. It faltered a little as their leader was so obviously saying nothing, but there were enough loud, cheerful, oblivious or uncaring children to carry it through to the end.

That was on a Friday. Miss Allison had plenty of time over the weekend to think about this little problem child. She was still being a very well-behaved child, whose only problem was talking with her friends during class.

On Monday, Miss Allison left the child alone during the Pledge but kept an eye on her all day. She was a cute little child, obviously well cared for from her tidy stiff dark braids to her Hello Kitty pencilbox. It was a rainy day, and her shiny little rubber boots had a pink duck quacking on the top of each boot. At lunch, Miss Allison strolled behind her seat and peered down at the child’s meal, which consisted of an unexceptionable little sandwich on a wheat or multigrain bread, juice box, and fruit cup. At recess, she ran around from playing Chinese checkers to drawing with a green Crayola to reading a book with the usual amount of childhood attention deficit, no more and no less, giggling with her friends and ignoring the unhappy little girl in the corner, who was shunned because she was (Miss Allison had to admit) noticeably smelly.

During her reading group, which was the most advanced one, the child read her passage and answered questions serenely, apparently unconscious that she was condemning herself by demonstrating a clear ability to read words just as tricky as “indivisible.”

As if out of sheer malice, when the child came up for her math group and Miss Allison asked her to divide 7 by 2, the child said primly in her clear little voice, “Odd numbers are indivisible by two.”

It was after school on Monday that Miss Allison called the child’s mother to ask for a parent-teacher conference.

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The mother had seemed pleasant enough on the phone, asking if it was an urgent matter. When Miss Allison said no, she said that Wednesday after school would be fine with her; she could come to the school and drive her daughter home with her after the conference.

Matters started off on the wrong foot when Miss Allison failed to entirely hide her surprise when a beautifully dressed Asian woman walked in at 3:40pm and announced herself as the child's mother. The child ran straight to her mommy and hugged her, who kissed her and told her to do her homework while she had a nice little talk with Miss Allison.

Miss Allison tried to regain her footing by saying what a lovely, talented child they had, and what a pleasure it was to teach her. The mother listened, smiling politely, and thanked her without agreeing or gushing. Encouraged, Miss Allison lost no time in laying out the problem.

"I'm sure she's able to remember it, but even if not, we have it hanging up for the students. It can't be her reading, and I don't think it's her eyesight."

"I see," said the mother placidly.

Miss Allison waited for more, but nothing was forthcoming.

"*Could* it be her eyesight?" she asked doubtfully.

"No, I'm sure it's not. We just had a family trip to the eye doctor because her father needed glasses."

"Well then," said Miss Allison.

But nothing again.

"She's a very good reader," she prompted.

"Oh yes, very."

"But she doesn't read the Pledge."

The mother didn't exactly shrug, but Miss Allison got that feeling. Desperate, she threw down the gauntlet.

"She *has* to say the Pledge. All the children do. It's how we start the day," Miss Allison said.

The mother's eyebrows raised, ever so slightly.

FICTION

Just as the silence was stretching out long enough for Miss Allison to feel that she had to launch into a speech, the mother said, “Why?”

A slight pause, during which Miss Allison marshalled her forces.

“The Pledge teaches them respect for their country and their country’s flag,” she said, taking on a slightly combative tone.

“Naturally,” the mother agreed amiably.

Another slight pause while the tension de-escalated.

“So she *has* to say it,” repeated Miss Allison.

“Why?”

“Why?” repeated Miss Allison.

Perhaps sensing a dangerous note in Miss Allison’s tone, the mother finally decided to offer a full sentence. “Is she being disrespectful?”

“Well—” Miss Allison hesitated.

“Talking? Disturbing the other children? Wandering around?”

“Well, no,” Miss Allison had to admit.

“What does she do during the Pledge?”

“She stands,” Miss Allison admitted grudgingly.

She puts her hand on her heart and looks at the flag. She just won’t say anything.”

“Maybe she’s saying it to herself.”

Miss Allison stared at this ridiculous statement. “She has to say it *out loud*,” she explained slowly.

The mother made a “hmm” kind of noise.

“I’m a little bit stumped,” she said, not angrily. “What exactly is the issue? Is it a law, or a school rule?”

Miss Allison was safe here. “It’s certainly a rule of the *classroom*,” she said. “And the students need to learn to respect their teacher’s authority.”

“Of course they do,” the mother responded. “Did you explain to her that it’s a rule?”

“No...”

The mother looked amazed. “Why on earth not? Wouldn’t that be the first thing you’d do?”

“Not in this situation,” Miss Allison said.

“But why not? Have you punished her for not saying it?”

“No...”

“I don’t understand,” she said, still with one eyebrow raised.

“There are certain cases...” Miss Allison ground out. “Where... students,” or in the case of six-year-olds, their parents, she thought, “have some... *religious* objection to the Pledge. I don’t want...” she corrected herself, “*we* don’t want to infringe on anyone’s beliefs.”

“I see,” said the mother. “But in that case, why call me?”

“I wanted to talk to you to make sure that there weren’t some family...convictions... at work here,” Miss Allison explained glibly.

She laughed, just a little bit but enough to make Miss Allison stop hating her short sentences and start hating her. “I see. You want to know if it’s child stubbornness or an act of political resistance so you know if you can punish her or not?”

She raised her voice slightly, turning around. “Sweetheart!”

The child looked up from her worksheet, showcasing her pointed chin above the formica shine of the desk. “Mommy?”

“Come here, sweetheart. Mommy wants to ask you a couple of questions.”

Unhesitatingly, the child trotted over and stood close to her mother, who put her arm around her. “Sweetie, Miss Allison wants to know why you don’t say the Pledge of Allegiance with the other children.”

It was clear whose daughter she was. Without seeming to move, the child definitely burrowed deeper into her mother’s side.

“Sweetie,” her mother said firmly. “Miss Allison deserves an answer to her question. Answer your teacher.”

Miss Allison was pleased, though a little alarmed at the word ‘deserves.’

Pause.

“I don’t wanna,” the child said.

“Why not?”

The child shook her head, her little braids whipping around and almost dislodging a plastic ladybug barrette. Her mother reclipped it, almost reflexively. “Why not?” she repeated.

The child visibly thought about it. “I don’t like it,” she announced.

“Uh hunh,” said the mother, understandingly. “And what don’t you like about it?”

Miss Allison could have screamed with exasperation, having not taught first grade long enough to have all exasperation beaten out of her yet.

The child thought some more, twisting one foot around. “I don’t like the beat,” she offered.

Her mother tilted her head slowly, with only a small twitch at the corner of her mouth. “Oh I see,” she said. “An aesthetic objection.”

The child looked at her mother. “What’s ess-thetic?”

“Artistic, sweetie. Anything to do with art, like music or books, and the way that they’re made. More or less.”

The child thought about this, rocking back and forth within her mother’s arm. Her mother rubbed her back and said, “Go back to your desk for a little while longer. I’ll call you when we’re done.”

The mother turned and faced the teacher, raising a neatly groomed eyebrow interrogatively.

“She needs to say it,” Miss Allison said.

“An aesthetic objection isn’t good enough?”

Miss Allison couldn’t tell if the woman was joking or not.

“I can’t accept excuses that involve not liking something—it would be a slippery slope to students not doing math because they didn’t like it, or not working with other children because they didn’t like them...”

“All right,” said the mother, pushing back her hair.

“So you’ll speak to your daughter, then?”

“Me? I could, but I don’t see why you would want me to enforce your rules when you haven’t even told her that they exist.”

Miss Allison stared at the poised woman, but could hardly disagree with this point of view. She realized with a sudden wrench of her intestines that she already disliked this strange, slender child, with her artistic fancies and her silent stubbornness.

Stringing together some kind of sentence about speaking to the child the next morning after the Pledge, Miss Allison rose from the tiny chairs around the big group table. The mother called the child and the grownups went through their smiles and thanks and handshakes while the little girl got her bookbag and Dora lunchbox.

After they left, Miss Allison went to her desk and started to collect together the pile of worksheets she would stamp with stars and smiley faces in front of the television that night. A flash of color against the gray landscape caught her eye, drawing her to the window.

The mother had just snapped open an umbrella rimmed with red roses against the raindrops that were starting to fall. She said something to her daughter, who darted out from under the umbrella, batting at drops, and started to laugh. The mother held her hand out to catch a raindrop and began to laugh as well. Dancing her way through the parking lot, the child spun around and around, braids flying, little mouth open in a huge, soundless laugh.

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