

Speaking Hearts

Young six-year-old Luke took a seat on the yellow square on the rainbow carpet, his small sweaty hands folded neatly in his lap. He had short, jet-black hair, big innocent eyes, and was missing his two front teeth. His smile was so incredibly wholesome, it would make one's heart melt. A group of girls was busy chattering about their favorite Disney princesses, and the two boys beside him, Matayus and Nicholas, were laughing like maniacs, while taking turns tickling each other.

"Alright boys and girls, please quiet down," Ms. Linda, the mild-tempered teacher, said in a sweet voice.

All 22 pairs of eyes turned immediately toward her. Ms. Linda was the type of teacher who never raised her voice. She possessed the rare gift of having every single kindergartener adore her. She understood what it was like to be completely overwhelmed by an unfamiliar environment. Throughout her childhood, she was constantly moving schools because her father was a nurse, assigned shifts in various hospitals across the nation. Accustomed to receiving stares from her classmates, she never seemed to be making any new friends.

Ms. Linda zigzagged through the forest of young seedlings, handing each a bright red story booklet. Luke flipped through the crisp pages of the book. He gasped at the sight of the strikingly vivid images of a chocolate wonderland on the front page. He traced his finger over each detail, in awe.

As Ms. Linda read aloud, Luke's eyes widened at the lifelike illustrations on each page. The lush green grass was brimming with daisies and dandelions, which seemed as though they were dancing to the rhythm of Ms. Linda's voice. The golden, shimmery sun winked at Luke, as he turned his attention to the luscious, creamy, cocoa, cascade of chocolate milk gushing into a pool of pure indulgence. Luke closed his eyes and envisioned himself swimming backstroke in this sweet fantasy. He didn't care much for the writing in the story; he'd rather become lost in the pictures.

The teacher set down the thin book gently and gazed lovingly at her students.

"What was your favorite part of the story?" she asked.

Luke shot up a hand. He took a deep breath.

"I weally wike aw the pictuwe," he said, saliva trickling out of his mouth and down his chin.

A perplexed Ms. Linda asked Luke to repeat his sentence.

"I weally wike aw the pictuwe," he said once again.

Ms. Linda quickly nodded, pretending to understand him, and then half-smiled.

"That boy sounds like he should be in preschool," snickered Lisa and Nicole.

Luke tried to force his face into a smile, but his eyes welled with tears. He had been dealing with this unclear speech problem for two years since he was four. As a baby, he had a hard time breathing and breastfeeding. However, the issue was not identified until recently, when he had his tonsils and the piece

of tissue connecting the bottom of his tongue to the floor of his mouth surgically cut. Although improving, he still had a slight slur in his speech, which now acted as a communication barrier.

Luke carelessly swung his backpack onto the hardwood floor while his puppy, Teddy, bolted towards the door. He greeted Luke with wet kisses as he untied his shoelaces.

Cuddly and affectionate, Teddy was the most lovable puppy anyone could ask for. His massive, childlike eyes resembled Luke's, and his pale white fur felt silky and velvety. With Teddy cradled in his arms, Luke hurdled onto the brown leather couch, where his *Gong Gong*, or grandpa, was sitting upright with a metallic red, mini radio in his palm.

"Gong Gong, letsh pway shcool! I'm the teachah an you and Teddy awe the shtuden, sinsh my English izh betteh than youwzh," Luke said playfully.

"Okay, okay! I'll go get the whiteboard! You can get the chairs," exclaimed Gong Gong.

Even with his frail, skinny arms, Luke managed to lug two plastic stools downstairs. He motioned for Gong Gong to sit on the red stool and lightly placed Teddy on the other.

Luke unscrewed the cap of an Expo marker, and began to write words on the whiteboard. His loopy letters were written neatly and meticulously.

I have a dog named Teddy.

He does not like cats.

I am sailing on a boat.

I gave my teacher a flower.

One by one, Luke enunciated each sentence, as if he were the teacher. He would glance at his grandpa, who would transmit two thumbs up and a beaming smile his way. Luke always felt his confidence increase amid Gong Gong's encouragement.

Out of the blue, a thundering voice echoed down the hall.

"Luke! What did Ms. Martha tell you? Huh? You need to remember to pronounce your r's *clearly*. It's not a 'w' sound! It's arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr," Luke's mother shrieked, obviously agitated.

Luke placed his hands over his ears, so that the sound was muffled.

"I can't hear you," said Luke in a sing-songy voice, as he pranced around the room.

He didn't want to hear his mother's criticism. He could not fathom why she couldn't be patient with him, *for once*.

Gong Gong stood up from his three-legged stool and lumbered towards Luke. He draped his arm around Luke's bony shoulders and knelt down on his knees so that he was the same height as Luke.

"It's ok. We'll work together," he whispered consolingly.

Two dimples the shape of jellybeans formed on the sides of Luke's cheeks, relieved that Gong Gong still had the willingness to help him. Luke's own mother had already given up on him. She had swum out into the great, vast sea, leaving Luke stranded on an island, with only one other person: Gong Gong. But he would help Luke. He would act as a sailboat, maneuvering Luke through the choppy waves and the wild storms, ultimately reaching a place where he felt like he blended in with everyone else.

Time passed, and their mutual compassion for each other surged as Luke and Gong Gong spent their afternoons together. Gong Gong had the idea to make flashcards to practice words with different ending sounds, and on the back of the card, Luke would sketch an image depicting that particular word. Each day, they set a goal to master pronouncing three flashcard words. Three words turned into six, which turned into nine, and over time, Luke's slurred speech had improved significantly! He could pronounce his r's and s's correctly. His mother's glares and frowns bloomed into bundles of joy. His classmates at school no longer shot weird looks at him. He finally felt *normal*.

It was now day 36. Luke's eyes were glued to the flashcard, as he completed his cartoon drawing. Meanwhile, Gong Gong was walking gingerly down the hallway with a stack of all the flashcards they had designed together. He slid his right foot forward, but the rest of his body seemed to remain immobile. The immense pressure placed on his left side caused his leg to collapse to the floor. Like a domino effect, each part of his body succumbed to gravity, as he faltered downward only to lie motionless on the cold, stone ground.

His eyes flickered on and off like a light switch, and he witnessed his daughter and dear grandson hovering above him, fearful of what had just happened. The next couple of days passed like a blur before his eyes. All he could remember was a series of medical exams, with the two people he loved most by his side.

His daughter was cooking up a storm in the kitchen, dashing from the stove to the countertop and back to the stove. Luke scurried over beside his mother and handed her the black, hard-cased phone.

"Mama, someone is calling you."

She pressed the circular green button and swiped right.

"Hello. Am I speaking to the daughter of Mr. Yan?"

"Yes," she replied.

"This is Dr. Wilson from the ANC Hospital. We would like to find a time to share the test results with you, regarding Mr. Yan."

"Sure. Do the results show that he has ALS, as you suspected?" she asked, her hand trembling in fear.

"Yes..... I'm afraid so."

She stared in silence, flipping through all the articles she'd gathered about ALS. She had spent hours researching ALS. She had gone multiple sleepless nights just thinking about possibly losing her father. It hadn't hit her until now that her worst fears were becoming reality. In denial, she ran her long, slender fingers through her thinning hair.

This disease would cause the nerve cells in her father's spinal cord and brain to progressively degenerate. First, he would lose the ability to speak and succumb to eventual paralysis.

Luke's mother felt as if she were falling off the edge of the universe into a black hole. She was being sucked away into a place of hopelessness and despair— a place where she had no control. Luke clenched onto his mother's hand. He recalled the time Gong Gong helped him when he had trouble speaking. Gong Gong never gave up hope, even when there seemed to be none. Although the loss of speech would be inevitable, they could still make an effort to preserve Gong Gong's communication capabilities.

A flaming, crackling fire ignited in Luke. He would use this opportunity, while Gong Gong could still talk, to record him saying various phrases, so that Gong Gong could still have a way of orally communicating. In the future, Luke would be able to replay these messages and cherish them with all his heart.

Luke tiptoed over to where Gong Gong sat despairingly and delicately laid his left hand on his grandpa's shoulder.

"It's ok. We'll work together," intoned the warm-hearted grandson.