

MISS M

Augusto Antonio A. Aguila

DESCRIPTION

This nonfiction piece depicts a childhood experience of corporal punishment. Instead of succumbing to fear, the narrator courageously confronts his teacher, proving that, even as a child, he possessed the agency to stand up for himself.

Let me just call her Miss M, a teacher whose name continues to haunt me up to this day.

I was five years old when my grandmother and I went to Immaculate Heart of Mary College or IHMC, a Catholic school located in Quezon City. She and my mother wanted me to study there. “When you see the nuns, you greet them ‘good morning.’ When they ask you, how old you are, just tell them you’re seven, and not five. Is that clear?” my grandmother reminded me a dozen times, to make sure that I wouldn’t forget her instructions.

I just nodded my head in agreement because I was an obedient child. I didn't see the point in rebelling against the nuns, and besides, they had told me many good things about studying in a Catholic school. I was very excited to study there, since my mother went to IHMC as well. She told me that I would take piano lessons when I reached the fourth grade. "Your classmates will come from good families. The sisters are very strict. They will not tolerate any form of bullying, unlike in public schools. They take discipline very seriously!" my mother told me, and that was enough to convince me. I was ready to study at IHMC and meet my future classmates. But the unthinkable happened. I wasn't accepted because of my age. The nun who interviewed me told my grandmother that she didn't believe I was seven, that I was much younger than that. It was my first time to deal with rejection, but I understood why and I didn't complain. I wasn't one to throw tantrums when I didn't get what I wanted, but I was really disappointed. I had already fallen in love with the school building, the huge quadrangle, the numerous monkey bars located near the canteen, and the student lounge. I went home sad, but I accepted it. I knew that my mother and grandmother had better plans for me. They always did.

Ms. G, the principal at a nearby public school, was a good friend of my grandmother. Lola Josie was a very active member of the Catholic Women's League (CWL), and the organization had ties with the public school. She mentioned to Ms. G what happened to my application at IHMC. She advised Lola Josie to enroll me, for the meantime, in the school where she was the principal. She told my grandmother that they would use what they called an "eradicator" to change my birthdate, so that my records would show that I was already seven years old. Lola Josie did just that, and I was officially enrolled in a public school. But my mom told me that this was only temporary, that I would transfer to IHMC the following year when my birthdate would be reverted from 1968 to 1966.

The public school was smaller than IHMC. There were two boulders in the middle of the quadrangle, which were used by those in the higher grade levels to demonstrate daily exercises for all of us to follow. I never enjoyed outdoor physical activities, because I didn't like being exposed to the sun, sweating and feeling icky afterwards. I felt it was pointless, a waste of time. I didn't understand why the others enjoyed it. My classmates were very eager to master the exercise routines, bragging to one another that each was better at executing the silly choreography. I preferred to sit inside the classroom and read a book.

On the first day of school, right after the flag ceremony and the mandatory exercises, my classmates and I went inside the classroom and waited for the teacher. Ms. M arrived wearing a pink blouse and a gray skirt, her uniform for that day. She carried a few notebooks, a chalkbox, and a long wooden stick – a ferule – which she used as a pointer. (There were no laser pointers back then.) But everyone in the class knew that the wooden stick served some other purpose, though we never talked about it. She introduced herself to the class in a serious tone, her bony and angular face unsmiling. She said that she was our class adviser, and expected everyone to behave properly and cooperate with her at all times. I took that as a warning, or even a threat. I knew Ms. M meant business.

Ms. M was our teacher in practically all our subjects. (The only time we had a different teacher was in Art and in Physical Education.) She rarely smiled in class. Come to think of it, I don't remember her smiling at all. I told my mom and Lola Josie about my observations. After hearing what I said, my grandmother's first impulse was to donate things that the classroom needed. "Does your classroom have clean curtains? Do you have enough chalk? Do you need an extra electric fan?" My grandmother asked many similar questions to make sure that I would become the teacher's pet, and hopefully be

spared from Ms. M's wrath. Looking back, Lola Josie was probably bothered by the long wooden stick which Ms. M had brought inside the classroom.

When Ms. M was in a foul mood, she would make students stand for hours, if they failed to answer her questions, and embarrassed them by calling them names. She shouted at the class when she heard us murmuring. She would hit the blackboard hard with her ferule when she sensed that we weren't listening. She went around the classroom with her wooden stick in her hand to check if we were doing our seatwork. If she caught anyone idling, she would call the attention of the student by pulling his or her ears. I knew I wouldn't be subjected to corporal punishment because I was comfortable following rules. I always followed what the teacher said. I didn't want to get into trouble. I knew I was going to be safe.

One day, Ms. M announced that the principal would be observing the class. She gave us very clear instructions, "Sit up straight with both hands on the table, and no talking! Do you understand?" The class answered "Yes, Ms. M!" in unison.

Then came the day when the principal visited our class. We automatically stood up to greet her. She made a gesture with her hand to signal that it was all right for us to take our seats. She sat on a chair reserved for her in the back row, to see how the class was being conducted by our teacher. Ms. M wrote the instructions for our seatwork on the blackboard. We all obediently got pieces of paper and pencils from our school bags and started working on the task laid for us. "Once you're done with the seatwork, put your paper on my table," Ms. M told the class. After making the announcement, she went to the back row to sit beside the principal. The two of them talked in low tones. The principal was probably giving her observations.

While I was answering the seatwork, a boy in class stood up and placed his paper on Ms. M's table. Afterwards, he approached the wooden

cabinet, and took from inside a rag and a red tin can which contained floor wax. This wasn't part of the script, but it seemed to work for the principal looked happily surprised with what my classmate was about to do. Ms. M didn't smile, but I sensed that she was beaming with pride. I knew that my classmate would be rewarded in some way for the stunt that he had pulled off. He started scrubbing the floor while we finished answering the seatwork. He walked towards where I was seated and started applying wax on the floor. I saw him smiling while he was doing it. I never anticipated what he was going to do next. He decided to give me a good scare by pretending to apply floor wax on my face. I screamed when he placed the rag near my face. Everyone looked at us. My classmates knew that we were in big trouble. The principal looked surprised. Ms. M gave me a look that said, "You ruined everything." I was afraid about what was going to happen next. I had heard about teachers in other sections stripping naughty students up to their undies, making them the laughingstock of the class.

When the principal left, Ms. M went to the front of the classroom, and instructed us to fall in line. She shouted, "Aguila! I want you to be the last in the line!" I followed her orders. Deep inside, I knew that I didn't commit any mistake, but I had no other choice.

"All of you, open your hands!" Ms. M shouted. She took her perule from her table and hit my classmates' hands one by one. I was the last one to be punished. To my surprise and shock, she hit my hands four times. Every time she hit my hand, it felt harder than the previous blow. I wasn't only stunned. I was deeply hurt. It was the first time I learned what hatred meant.

Ms. M looked triumphant. She gloated, "Siguro naman Aguila, mag-tatanda ka na ngayon..." Before she could finish what she was going to say, I looked directly at her face and shouted, "Bakit sila isa lang? Bakit ako apat?"

Ms. M couldn't believe what she heard. She was caught by surprise, because, in front of her, a small, five-year old boy was standing up for his rights. Ms. M didn't see that coming. I didn't stop there. I knew at that moment that I had gained the upper hand. I had caught Ms. M flatfooted. "Alam mo ba 'di na ako mag-aaral dito! Ang bulok-bulok ng public school na ito! Sa mga madre na ako mag-aaral next year! Masama kang tao!" I continued.

I left the room immediately after that.

It was only when I got out of the room that my tears fell. I went to the gate to look for Ate Nympha, my yaya. I saw her talking with the other guardians. When she noticed that I was sobbing she rushed towards me. She lifted me in her arms, embraced me, and then asked me what happened. When I told her, she got very angry. She went to the security guard, demanding to be allowed to enter the school premises to confront my teacher, but the guard didn't allow her in, because it was against the rules and regulations of the school. Ate Nympha took me home and told my mother and grandmother what had happened. Naturally, they were very angry. They did not make me go to school the next day. Instead, the two of them went to see the principal to report the incident. When they got home, they said that the principal had summoned Ms. M to her office to explain. I regretted not being there to witness the confrontation. All I remember was that my mom and Lola Josie were angry for many days.

On the day that I went back to school, I had been transferred to another section, with a teacher who looked more homely and motherly.

I left that public school after one year and luckily, I got accepted by IHMC. But I have never forgotten what Ms. M did to me. The anger and hurt that I felt forty-seven years ago remains fresh up to this day. I told myself that if I ever became a teacher, I would show my students genuine kindness. I would never be like Miss M, who had left me a deep scar and had

given me my first taste of cruelty. I did not regret defending myself, even if it meant yelling at Miss M. I was actually surprised by my having been able to do it at a very young age.

I know that our paths will soon cross again, since my aunt had seen her tending a furniture store located in a nearby barangay quite recently. When this happens, I will be ready to face her. I need to see her one last time. I have not forgiven her yet.