

*Opening a Door*

*A true story by Tess McMillan - Age 12*

I walked the long uphill from the Parroquia to the orphanage, each step seeming to take me farther and farther away. After what felt like forever, I arrived at a door that was intricately carved with the Virgin Mary. Below her was a cradle with a small baby, Jesus, tightly swaddled in a thin blanket. Around her were thin vines with tiny flowers that snaked up the sides of the double doors. The doorbell was very high up. So high, in fact, that I had to stretch and step on my tippy toes to reach it. The doorbell rang. It was a deep, echoing ring that bounced back and forth on the walls within.

I was spending the summer with my family in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. San Miguel is a lovely colonial city, high in the mountains, with lots of lively people, delicious food, and stunning sights. I was attending a school to improve my Spanish for the school year ahead. My teacher, Senora Denise, mentioned that an orphanage called the Casa Hogar Don Bosco Orphanage for Girls was just around the corner from the school, and would provide a great opportunity for practicing Spanish.

I was slightly afraid that if the girls were miserable that I wouldn't be able to bear it. I was a little afraid that they would be lonely and abused. I imagined the abandoned, frightened eyes of a confused and neglected child, constantly under the orders of a "Mrs. Hannigan." I was afraid it was going to make me sad and that I would never be able to leave.

A girl with long black shiny hair, very tight skinny jeans, and a pink jacket, who appeared to be in her early teens, answered the door. "Quienes estan usted aqui para?" she asked. I tried to introduce myself as best as I could with my wobbly Spanish. "Yo necesita chicas, por favor." She must have understood what I was saying because she said in the best English she could muster, "In the back." She gestured, and I followed.

I ignored my timidity and slowly pulled on a smile. The girls were in the back. They were playing with large balls and skipping rope. The "back" was a portion of black stone that connected the bathrooms, kitchen, the nuns' living quarters, and the washing room. The front door opened onto an outdoor walkway that led to this play space. I hurried to introduce myself, but the girls were one step ahead of me. They all dropped what they were doing and ran over to flatten me in a monster communal hug. They were shouting things in Spanish that I could hardly understand. They pulled, pushed, made me play jump rope, and pass the ball. I thought their high-pitched voices would surely deafen me for life, but surprisingly enough, my ears are still in good condition.

There were about twenty-five to thirty girls living in the orphanage. Ranging from ages four to fifteen, all of them seemed to be waiting for a life to call their own. They were playful, but tough. Sweet, but demanding. All of them still seemed to be full of love and hope, despite the devastation and the deep hurt of losing their parents.

I couldn't stay away. Every day when I returned, the girls would jump up and down with giddiness, asking in Spanish if I wanted to pass the ball back and forth.

Each day when I arrived at 4:00 pm on the dot, their smiles made me feel like I was actually doing something. Not just a regular something like brushing your teeth, or walking your dog, or even helping your brother with his homework. That kind of connection made me feel love, compassion, and happiness, stronger than I ever have before, without sharing language or a history. I felt love, compassion, and happiness in those smiles. I felt true friendship.

The last day before left to return to my regular life, I was sad enough that I almost thought that I might not go to see the girls so I wouldn't have to face the probable tears and possible broken hearts that would await me when I told them I was leaving. But I knew they would never forgive me if I didn't say goodbye. I baked brownie bites, and climbed the hill one last time, trying hard to choke back tears. When I told them I was leaving the next day, the room was dead silent. I wanted to speak better Spanish so that I could tell them that they were the most beautiful girls I had ever met, and the kindest ones too. Although their voices spoke no words, their faces said it all. Even though we tried to play jump rope, it didn't have the heart that it did when we played it the other days. When I left, we quietly hugged, and they slid on emotionless faces.

Those girls taught me a lesson. They were kind to me even though we could not share stories, and even though they knew I would leave someday. Their hearts held stories of sadness and loss that I could never know, but were still big enough to open up to someone they knew would be leaving them. My heart is bigger now for having known them. Hopefully I will see them again someday. I hope they will always remember me, for I will never forget them.