

## Flower Talk

*Dedicated to the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Waterdown, Ontario*

“As-salamu alaykum,” Sister Paula and I greeted our Syrian refugee guests, Lina and her daughter. They had just landed in Toronto, on the other side of their world. “Flowers,” I said to Lina, passing her pink carnations; “Lamb,” handing a soft toy to the child.

The interpreter helped Lina through her first words. “Maritza, six years. I am grateful – real roof, not tent. I am grateful – enough food, child grow strong, good school. I am grateful no more bombs.”

After a few days, Sister Paula suggested to me, “Sister Danielle, perhaps Lina can help you in the infirmary. A nurse in Damascus, she can begin with basic duties. She knows English from books but hasn’t had much chance to speak it.”

“Yes, Sister, I like to help,” responded Lina.

“Of course, come with me,” I replied, taking the stairs to the infirmary. My parents had been boat people from Vietnam. Like them on arrival, she must feel afloat among grief, shock, and tender waves of hope.

Lina moved gently, smoothing sheets, polishing eyeglasses, holding drinks to cracked lips, adjusting bedside music. Her patients trusted her. Misunderstandings melted into smiles and giggles on both sides. It wouldn’t take long, I thought – soon I could help her certify as a nurse in Ontario.

Meanwhile, Sister Paula tried to engage little Maritza, who stood stiff, head down, silent. Nothing worked – kitchen visits for a treat from the chef, outdoor walks, children’s songs, puzzles. At noon Lina said, “My little Maritza never speak – not since father let go her hand, fall dead in shooting.”

When Sister Paula was called away to a meeting, Maritza followed another nun. Sister Jane stopped to don a sun hat and glasses. She offered oversized sunglasses and an even bigger hat to Maritza. An old wooden door let them into the convent’s scented garden.

Next day and the next, Maritza put on her disguise, trailing Sister Jane into the garden. She was quick to recognize weeds, keen to uproot them. A small red wheelbarrow became hers, filled again and again. She learned to direct the spray hose plant by plant.

“I know it’s *hard* for you to go *slowly*, Maritza”, said Sister Jane one morning, “but if you are *good*, you can help me take *flowers* to the nuns.”

“Fff-lowers?”

“Let’s cut mums today – *mums*. We’ll put one of each colour in these little vases - *red*, *purple*, *yellow*, and *white*.”

“Red, white, ...”, repeated Maritza.

“Yes, here is *red*, *white*,” Sister Jane emphasized, placing each flower. “Now here is *purple*, *yellow*.”

When Sister Jane pushed her rolling cart into our infirmary that afternoon, Maritza skipped by her side. Like a shy angel, Maritza presented a vase to each nun lying in bed, announcing, “Fff-lowers ...!”

Nearing the far door, Maritza tossed off her sunglasses and almost dropped the last vase. In a piping voice, she held out the flowers to her mother with a stream of Arabic, which we all understood.