

Zazou's silence

Zazou had always been the type to be quiet. Not the kind that makes peers and teachers smile, but the kind that made her completely unnoticed and invisible. On her first day walking into an American classroom, a couple of months after the earthquake turned her village to scraps, she carried no backpack— only a heart full of memories and locked lips.

Her peers didn't know how to approach her or what to do with her. Whenever people spoke fast, her eyes would nervously wander, projecting a lost and anxious look. Her hands trembled whenever someone laughed too loudly. And for that, they just let her be.

At lunch, Zazou had only sat by herself. Every.single.day. She took out the sandwich her aunt had packed for her and stared at it blankly, reminiscing on how her mother used to hum as she made her beans and rice back home. But her home was gone, and so was her mother. What remained was the cold hum of the buzzing cafeteria, with a silence that appeared to grow more oppressive as the days went by.

One Monday, the silence finally broke.

A girl named Amara, whose family had come from Syria years earlier, walked in front of Zazou's table. Then stopped.

“Would you maybe wanna sit with me?” She asked, her voice so soft, as if uncertain she even had the right to ask. Zazou blinked. No utterance of a word. She nodded.

That small act—one question, seven words—began to change everything.

As time passed, Zazou had begun to speak. At first, in short words. Then, in awkward and clumsy sentences. Amara listened to her with patience, smiling, nodding, and never being too quick to correct. At first, it was just the two of them. But soon after, others began joining in. Whenever someone mocked Zazou’s accent, Amara stood up for her, saying, “It’s actually her third language. And how many do you speak?”

Zazou began to bring her drawings to school— bright, colorful pictures of her village, her mother’s cozy kitchen, and the orange tree she once climbed as a child. Her teacher displayed one on the classroom wall. A fellow classmate soon asked if she could teach them how to draw like that. Zazou beamed with pride.

Months later, the once quiet cafeteria buzzed with laughter, and Zazou’s voice was officially a part of the chorus.

She launched a project with her teacher called “Stories from Our Home,” where students were invited to share a piece of their culture that included music, food, art, and even traditions. Zazou

was up first to present. As she stood up before the class, she spoke about her village, her loss, and her dreams. She ended with a sentence that stayed with everyone:

“Kindness was the only language I understood when I had no words of my own”

The entire class stood up and applauded. Her teacher wiped the tears from her eyes. Even the students who mocked and ignored her before approached her to say, “I am glad that you told your story.”

Zazou never forgot about Haiti. It lived on in her, her drawings, and her smile. But she also carried something even deeper: the lesson that kindness doesn't need its own form of translation. That a simple invitation— like offering up a seat at lunch— can build a bridge. That a kind gesture, or even just asking, “Would you like to sit with me?” can cut through silence, sorrow, and grief, creating a safe space for something fresh to grow.