

## THE AGE OF MIRACLES

## Cheety's Story

"The road to therapy hell," my mentor had to frequently remind me, "is paved with arrogance disguised as the best of intentions." As a brilliant young psychologist, I learned to hate that quote. As a humbled old one, I learn continually about its brilliance.

Unfortunately, arrogance is not something limited to therapists. Indeed, our most defining characteristic as human beings might be our arrogance—our insane, war-inspiring belief that, like Lucy in Charles Schultz' Peanuts comics, we all know what's best for everyone. The problem, of course, is what to do when someone's definition of what's best for everyone conflicts with everyone else's.

Many believe that an awareness of human diversity and an acceptance of uniqueness might be an answer to that conflict, but others see diversity as a dirty word, and view acceptance as defeat. Boy, can I relate. I shudder when forced to think of my earlier days as a righteous Lucy, the 5-cent doctor who knew what was best for everyone. Diversity and acceptance were great by me, as long as they concerned things of which I approved.

Cheety helped to open my arrogant eyes. And whenever I hear a harp, she still does, even decades later.



The soft glimmers of winter's daylight were fast abandoning the huge empty passageways of the girls' Catholic high school. I enjoyed that time of day in that great old building. That's when the halls, well over a hundred years old, would feel lovingly haunted by the soft echoes of all the feet, voices, and dreams that once ran and stumbled, laughed and cried, triumphed and failed. It was at those special moments that the creaky, drafty, and dingy edifice felt like a tired, care-worn grandmother, smiling gently as she thought of nourishing the spirits of her charges, and never complaining about her thousand aches and pains; taking her life's joy from the bright, smiling faces, all full of tomorrow's promise.

As I stood alone in the hall savoring those thoughts, I suddenly realized that the background music to my musing was not coming from my mind. It was drifting softly, eerily down the steps from an area called the tower, an old room used only for storage of older, unused musical instruments. For a ghost, I thought, she sure plays a beautiful harp. I softly walked up the worn stairs, hoping to finally catch a glimpse of one of the spirits I was sure roamed those halls.

My ghost thought that I was her ghost. She leapt up from her seat with a sharp gasp and wide, frightened eyes. "I'm . . . sorry," we both stammered at the same time, but her words were richly tinted with a thick accent, a wonderfully warm coloring that matched her beautifully dark mahogany face. As I approached and tried to explain that she was not in any trouble, she backed into her music stand which fell and knocked a set of cymbals to the floor with an incredible crash. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, waving her arms as if trying to catch the raucous noise as it echoed up and down the stair well. "Oh, my God" she repeated. Then, just as upset, she rapped herself in the head saying, "I am so sorry. I know that I am not supposed to say 'Oh, my *God*,' that it is an affront to Christians here. The Sisters have chastised me many times, but in my native language, we say a similar thing all of the time and I . . . and I . . ." Then, she just stood and began to cry.

"*Chastised?*" I repeated to myself, "*Who is this kid?*" I saw by her nametag that she was a 9th grader, meaning that she had only been in the school a few months. Oddly, I had never seen her, and

her unusual features surely would have struck me. I tried to glean her name from her tag, but I gave up after getting to the 13th letter of only her first name. "Please," I said, "please, calm down. It's OK. I'm the one who should get detention for sneaking up on you like that. How about if we make a deal: I won't turn you in if you don't turn me in?"

Her crying slowed a bit, but she was still upset. "I . . . I also do not know," she confessed, sniffing, "if . . . if I have the permission to use this [the harp]. Sister Regina said that if I could tune it, then I could play it, but I do not think that she thought I could tune it—or play it. A harp is a most difficult instrument to tune, but I know how. So I thought that perhaps . . ." Then she reached out and stroked that ancient harp with a love that a girl might have for her old dog. "*IT-IS-FINE*," I said in a soft but exaggerated voice, "*IT-IS-OK. I PROMISE*. My name's Mike. I wish I was smart enough to pronounce yours, but I can't. I'm an American, you know—we're lousy at that stuff."

Her tear-streaked face suddenly broke into the prettiest smile you could imagine. "I told everyone here to use my, eh, um . . . nickname, which is Cheating. I have learned since that it was an unfortunate choice of nicknames. So the kids, they now call me Cheety."

That awkward meeting began a friendship that lasted through Cheety's first two years at school. Whenever she could, she would work with our counseling staff doing whatever needed to be done. She was an inexhaustible ball of energy, one that had to be spoken with very carefully. Once, a counselor named Rene who was going home looked around our large, messy area and casually complained, "This place is disgusting. We should all just take a day and clean it up." The next morning, we walked into an immaculate room, with three beautiful posters of Matisse artwork on the walls and flowers on the tables. We were stunned, all staring at each other, wondering who had lost their mind and stayed hours to clean and remodel, when everyone started to nod and say, "Cheety!"

"Michael," Rene whispered sadly to me, "do you know that her family has *no* money? But don't bother trying to pay her back. She

won't accept it." Rene was right. That morning began a "cat and mouse" game where the staff would sneak some treat, or a few dollars, or a badly needed new pair of shoes into Cheety's bag or locker. Then we'd all act amazed and innocent when she'd confront us. "It must be the Saints doing miracles," Rene would lie boldfaced, "they often do that for special students. You can't refuse a miracle, you know. That's a terrible sin." Cheety would pretend that she was angry and then always break into a huge grin. "Well," she'd say, "I would not want ever to offend a saint."

But she would always strike back. Without fail, one of our "miracles" would be followed by someone else's. Flowers, or some wonderfully exotic dish of food would magically appear in our room. After one such counter-strike, Cheety left the center almost swaggering, and calling over her shoulder, "It would appear that you were correct, Rene—the age of miracles is upon us again." Rene stood and shook her head in amazement. "Have you *ever*," she asked me, "*ever* heard a teenager use the phrase, '*the age of miracles*'?"

In fact, Cheety was extremely bright, likely bordering on genius, or perhaps beyond. The teachers were in awe of this girl, reporting that she flew through their materials, self-teaching so far in advance that they had nothing to give to her after half of a semester. "You've got to get her the special courses she needs," they'd say. But all of our letters to Cheety's parents requesting permission to test her intelligence went unacknowledged, and they had no phone. When asked about this, Cheety would shrug her shoulders and look at the floor. She was far too moral to lie to us.

Her favorite thing of all was to treat herself to sitting in the college catalogue area and reading the brochures. This she would do endlessly, devouring every page, picture, and word as if they were sacred. She loved to ask us over and over what it was like "going to university," listening with rapt attention to our stories of all that our colleges had to offer, things that *we ourselves* never really appreciated until telling them to this small girl. "Damn," another counselor said after spending an hour talking college with Cheety. "She makes me feel like an educational heathen, like I have no idea how special it was to have been able to go to college. And I pretty

much hated it. She's right—now that I think about it, it really *was* special, and I pretty much wasted it." For Cheety, we joked, college was the city of Oz. And we thought that we were her yellow brick road. I never dreamed that I would end up being that ". . . little man behind the curtain."

Towards the end of her second year, I was summoned to the principal's office. There was Cheety's father, sitting and fuming. Sister Bernice (the principal) shot me her "Look what you've done to me this time" face. "Cheety's father is very upset," she said. "He wishes to make it clear that . . ." "MISTER BRADLEY," Dad interrupted, "I do *not wish* that you should ever talk with my daughter—you or any of the counselors." "But," I tried to explain, "we're not *counseling* Cheety, she just works . . ." "I REPEAT," he almost yelled, "You are NOT to talk to *my* daughter about anything, especially about going to college." "I'm sorry sir," I apologized, "I meant no disrespect. But Cheety might be the smartest girl in this entire school. She's incredible. All of her teachers have said so. She has a great chance get a full scholarship to any of the best . . ." "WILL YOU NOT LISTEN TO ME!?" he demanded. "We, in this country, we are strangers. Things are most difficult for us. I have five children, and sending my daughter to this school is a great strain for me. I must work *two* full-time jobs to feed my family and send her to this school. This is a great privilege for her. This I do out of love for her. But it is my job to protect my family in the best way I know how, or we will all perish. My daughter is our firstborn girl. She must help to care for the other children, and then she is to marry someone of my choosing. This is our way. She *cannot* go to college. You are meddling in things that are none of your concern, that you can never understand. I *forbid* this. Am I understood?"

It felt like Cheety's entire life was resting in whatever words I could find at that moment. Like Dorothy's little man behind the curtain, I found none. And before I could, the principal rose suddenly, looked at me firmly, and shook Dad's hand saying, "You have our word. Cheety will have no contact with the counselors, and I will instruct the teachers that they are not to discuss college with her without your permission. Is that satisfactory to you?"

As we watched Dad leave, Sister Bernice turned to me to cut off my anticipated protests: "If we argue with him," she said, "he'll pull her out of school entirely and keep her home. So what would *your* choice be for her?"

The next year felt so sad to everyone in the counseling center. Feminism was sweeping the nation and one of the brightest, most talented, and energetic girls in our school was pretty much enslaved, no longer allowed to even chat with us. We'd pass in the halls and she would smile and wave her hand ever so slightly, looking around uneasily as if she might get "chastised." Often, late in the afternoon, I'd hear that haunting harp playing high in the tower, but I could only stand below and catch the sad, falling notes, like tears falling from heaven.

Whenever Cheety's name came up, the staff spoke often of rebellion, of just disobeying orders and doing . . . *what?* There seemed to be no good option short of a miracle. One of the nuns who worked with us suggested praying to the patron saint of that school, who happened to be female. One of the counselors, who was Jewish, sighed and said, "Go for it, Sister. It couldn't 'hoit,' right?"

On the first day of Cheety's last year with us, Rene rushed into the counseling center with stunning news. "Sister," she yelled, "maybe you got your miracle." Then she stood for a moment, frowned, and added, "or maybe not. Maybe Cheety has to go back to Kansas." Over the summer, Rene explained, Cheety's father had been arrested and deported on some immigration, extradition, or perhaps even criminal charge. The details were not clear, but the fact was that Dad was gone. We were caught up in ten simultaneous conversations. Was Cheety going to go back to her native country? Would Dad let his family stay here? If he did, would that change things for Cheety's future? Where was Cheety's mom? Would she let Cheety go to college?

In the midst of this chaos, in walked the real Wizard of Oz, Sister Bernice. She told what she could: Yes, Cheety's dad was gone, and likely was not coming back. Yes, Cheety's family would be staying here, at least for the school year. No, she couldn't afford the tuition for her senior year. And, best of all, yes, a donor had

been found to provide a tuition scholarship for Cheety's last year. That's when Sister Bernice, was officially dubbed "The Wizard." With The Wizard's blessing, it was decided that she and I would visit Cheety's home to see if it was possible for Dorothy to finally get her shot at Oz. With the best of intentions, I "forgot" to ask Cheety what she wanted. I suspected that she would object, not wanting to upset her parents.

Her home was on a street that had more boarded-up houses than it had trash. And it was awash in trash. Rusting cars, useless tires, and ratty furniture littered her street. The Wizard and I sat in the car, staring. "Incredible," she said, "just incredible. Let's go."

Cheety's mom opened the door carefully, holding a baby and peering from behind two chains bolting the door. She looked suspiciously at me, but smiled broadly when she saw Sister Bernice's habit and greeted us warmly. We had entered into a Third World hut. Plaster was falling from leaks in more places than it wasn't. Windows that had been broken were nailed over with boards, and out back, two dogs were snarling and barking ferociously. We were led into what was likely the best room in the house, the one with the most ceiling plaster, and we were seated to a tea service. Cheety was still at orchestra practice at school. Her other three younger siblings sat absolutely motionless and silent. I noticed that this was the cleanest squalor I had ever seen. This horror of a house was spotless.

Mom had asked a relative to act as a translator, since her English was very shaky. After passing some small talk back and forth, and sipping some wonderful tea, Sister Bernice got down to business. Cheety, she said, was brilliant and talented, and it would be a great thing for the family if she went to college, for then she could get a good job and help provide for the family, and help her siblings get through college and get great jobs, as well, for they were surely also talented.

I sat back, amazed at The Wizard. She was simply fabulous. She added that, of course, Dad would have to approve, and that might be difficult because even good men can be so stubborn and sometimes not see what is best for their families, even though they are good people. Here, Sister Bernice and Mom paused, nodded, and

smiled at me, the only male in the crowd. But, The Wizard continued, a loving mother knows when to speak up to her husband to help him become wiser.

Then she sat back and said nothing. Mom sat for the longest time saying nothing, as well. Then she poured more tea and, in English, said, "I will think." The Wizard took Mom's hands in her own and said, "And I will pray." We thanked Mom for her hospitality, and The Wizard asked for the recipe for the cookies that Mom had set out. As we got in the car, I was sure that Sister Bernice had hit a home run, and I told her so. "Mr. Bradley," she said, "there is a saying about the counting of chickens." I shut up.

But a home run she hit indeed! Mom sent in a written note asking that we do all we could to get her daughter into college. Cheety was getting her shot at Oz.

We had a small party welcoming her back to the center, and laying out our plans to start the scholarship chase. Cheety was ecstatic to see everyone, and we couldn't have been any happier ourselves. But I noticed that whenever we talked of college, Cheety's wonderful smile would dim just a bit, like a candle flickering in a breeze. I think everyone saw the same thing but no one wanted to acknowledge it, afraid of making some unseen gathering storm more real. One that might blow out a candle.

As winter broke into spring, this bunch of counselors couldn't pretend anymore. Cheety, the queen of deadlines, the first student who finished everything, was not turning in her college or scholarship applications. Then she stopped showing up at the counseling center for her shifts. Even the harp music had vanished. The staff was getting the same shrugs and floor stares when they cornered her in the halls to ask what was up. I just knew that this was about Dad.

Late one Friday, after almost everyone had left, I heard the harp again. I stood at the bottom of the stairwell trying to decide if The Wizard should handle this one. But this had to be the perfect setting to talk, in exactly the same place as we had first met, three-and-a-half years and a lifetime later. It was now or never.

I walked up the steps and promptly startled another frightened 9th grader, but it was only Cheety's shadow, not her ghost from

years prior. This was her *student*. “Cheety is teaching me to play [the harp],” this girl said happily. “She comes in early every day to show me. She wants me to take her place in the orchestra next year. The harp is so cool—hardly anyone knows how to play it anymore, and Cheety doesn’t want this to, you know, like, die out here at school. It means a lot to her. She made me promise to teach other kids, so that this, you know, keeps going on.”

I walked slowly back down the steps. This just wasn’t right. I decided that somehow I needed to confront Cheety’s father. I wrote to her mom asking how I could help convince her father to let Cheety go. Mom’s written response stunned me. It said that her husband had given his blessing for her to go to college, that it was *Cheety* who decided not to go, *against the advice of her parents*. I immediately sent a note to get Cheety out of class but the teacher wrote back saying that she did not want to come, that Cheety would explain tomorrow. The teacher signed her note with five question marks, as if to ask, “What the heck is going on?”

The next day, there was a letter for me taped to the counseling center door. As I read, I could hear Cheety’s voice saying her words in that polite, humble, dark mahogany accent:

*Dear Friend,*

*In a month, I will be leaving this school that I have come to love so very much, and I cannot bear the thought of saying goodbye to everyone who has helped me so much. Please excuse my cowardice, but my heart would break to say these words directly.*

*I am a coward in another way, too. Sister Bernice asked me to tell you earlier what I had decided, but I could not. She understood why I decided what I did, but she said that since you and the other counselors are young, that you might be disappointed. I did not want to see that.*

*I, alone, have decided to stay with my family and not go to university next year. My mother and my father have encouraged me to go, but I must stay. I know that my father was angry at you, but please understand that he is a good man who loves his*

*family. He is in great difficulty now, and he can no longer send the money for us.*

*Please picture the house where my family lives. Please think of how my mother, brother, and sisters must live. My father was correct when he first forbade me to go to university. It is my duty to help as I can. Sister Bernice has found a good job for me that might allow us to move to a better place. Besides, how could my mind flourish at university when my heart can think of nothing but my poor family, struggling alone to survive? Such a thing cannot be. Please understand. One day I know that I will honor all of you and go to university. That is my dream, and I will make it real.*

*I am also ashamed to see all of you because I have no gift that is worthy of all of the things that everyone has given to me here over the past four years. All that I have to give to this school is the music of the harp. I have arranged that this shall stay when I am gone. So please tell everyone to think of me whenever they hear the harp. That must be Cheety's gift.*

*Finally, please ask everyone to try not to talk with me. These things are most difficult, and this is my way of saying goodbye. I must stay strong like a woman and not weep like a girl. If you see me, it would greatly honor me if you would just wave without speaking. When I smile, you should know that you will all live on in my heart.*

*Your friend forever,  
Cheety*

As each counselor read that letter, most watched their own tears splash over the stains that mine had left. We just stared at each other and wondered how much our meddling had added to Cheety's terrible struggles, overwhelming her with conflicts not of her choosing. Not taking the time to learn who she truly was, and instead, pushing her to be who we wanted her to be—or perhaps needed her to be. So much so, that in the end, she could not even face us.

Our arrogance was costly, for she was a hero to all of us, and we never got the chance to tell her that directly. And we never got to thank her properly for her gifts, the first and greatest of which was to help a bunch of well-intentioned counselors become wiser, to understand that there is so much that we do not understand, and to always remember to set out a chair for our ignorance whenever we prepare to meddle in the life of another.

Her second gift was wonderful, as well. For the rest of my tenure at that school, the music of the harp lived on, and, I've been told, still plays today. And whenever the soft glimmers of a winter's sun start to surrender to the evening's gloom, I often close my eyes and listen for the haunting music of a harp, strummed softly and lovingly, deep in the bosom of a tired old school, that smiles.



Whenever I start to make those arrogant judgments we all make about kids based upon the way they talk or look or where they live, Cheety's face softly smiles over their shoulders at me. Without a word she humbles me, reminding me about the terrible dangers of adult arrogance. Her struggle taught me that no builder has ever been able to construct things like character, compassion, or wisdom in a neighborhood, no matter how rich. And that no neighborhood can kill the character, compassion, or wisdom of a person, no matter how poor—or young. She taught me how those treasures only live deep inside of hearts, hidden away from judgmental eyes, even from those that want to help.

Cheety offered another gift, a prescient one that she must have intended for us all, here and now, so many years later. In this age of terrorism, I become terrified when I hear people saying that it's "us versus them," and advocating religious and cultural hatred and fury against wonderful people like Cheety because perhaps her crazy neighbor wants to kill me. I shake my head, wondering how things might be for me if I were held accountable by America for every crazy thing that

some nut from Philadelphia does. I'm afraid that we have our share of "extremists" here, as I suspect your community might, as well, no matter where in this world you live. Some dress a lot better than others. Most kill without ever touching a weapon.

I have no idea where Cheety is today. But, having known her, I believe that she would want her story told, particularly in these times, as her gift of adolescent wisdom to us. She would want people to know that "the age of miracles" can return if we so choose. Because the best miracles are those of our own making. A pair of needed shoes, a plate of comforting food, the soothing music of a harp—these are the miracles of human kindness and compassion, the miracles of healing and understanding—brave and profound god-sends that our world so desperately needs. Priceless treasures carried lovingly in the huge heart of a small teenager named Cheety.