

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

Suki dashed down the Normalville Elementary School hallway, excitement buzzing through her. Suki and her best friend, Nelly Know-it-All, had agreed to meet on the playground and play fairy and unicorn while they waited for Afterschool Girl Group to start.

She slammed open the school doors in a rush of happiness and spotted her friend. “Nelly! Hey!” she called out, but then stopped short. Nelly was huddled close to two girls Suki didn’t know. At Suki’s call, Nelly turned and waved.

“Suki. Hey. This is Polly,” Nelly indicated the tall girl on her left. Polly flashed a dazzling smile at Suki. “Hi there,” the new girl said, “I’m Polly Perfect.”

“Oh. Hi.” said Suki, her excitement fizzling out.

“I’m Tina Talkative,” said the red-haired girl next to Polly.

“Polly and I are going to Afterschool Girl Group now – is that what

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

you call it? Anyway, we're neighbors and best friends and I'm home-schooled – that means my mom teaches me at home – and Polly goes to Academy Day School – that's a private school – have you heard of it? Anyway, our mothers thought we could..."

Suki had stopped listening. She was watching Polly and Nelly. Their heads were bent together, whispering.

"*Muy bien!*" Nelly suddenly exclaimed. Polly laughed, and Tina smiled. Nelly turned to Suki. "It's so great. Polly and Tina speak Spanish, too. Isn't that amazing?" Suki knew that Nelly's parents were from Mexico and the whole family spoke Spanish at home. "So we're going to start a *grupo de la muchacha* – that's girl group in Spanish -- just for girls who can speak Spanish. We're having our first meeting right now."

"But," Suki said slowly, looking right at Nelly. "I don't speak Spanish."

"Yeah, I know," Nelly said a little sheepishly. "Sorry about that. You won't be able to be in our club. Anyway, we have to get started. See you later." With that, the three girls headed across the playground and crawled under the monkey bars to start their "*grupo*."

Suki stood frozen and stunned. She wanted to kick wood chips all over Polly Perfect and drag Nelly away from her. But she felt too achy to move. It was like she had been punched right in the chest. She turned her back on the girls, so they wouldn't see the tears stinging her eyes.

And then – KABOOM. The ground beneath her began to shake. Oh no, she thought. Not now! This usually happened before one

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

of their big girl group adventures. The playground was plunged into inky blackness and Suki began to shake. Then she whirled and twirled and tumbled and fell. Then everything was quiet and peaceful and still.

Suki was enveloped in thick mist. A pair of gentle hands lifted her by the shoulders. She looked up into the shining dark eyes of a beautiful woman, whose rounded chalky white face was topped with a pile of glossy black hair. The woman wore a long blue gown stitched with cherry blossoms.

“Hello Suki. Do you know who I am?” the kind voice asked.

“Yes,” said Suki. “You’re Kannon. My mother has your statue on our kitchen window.” Suki’s family was from Japan, and her mother read her all the ancient Japanese myths.

“That is right,” Kannon smiled. “And do you know why people honor me?”

“Because you’re a Bo-ddi-sat-va,” Suki pronounced the word slowly. “My mom says you’re a teacher who is so kind and loving to everyone that you’re sort of, well, magical. You teach us about compassion.”

“Yes,” Kannon said simply. “It’s hard to be kind and loving when you’re hurting, isn’t it?”

Suki pictured Nelly and Polly and nodded.

Kannon continued. “Long ago, a very wise teacher showed me the trick of how to be compassionate when your heart hurts. In fact, the lesson happened right here.” With that, Kannon waved her arm slowly in front of her, and the mists pulled back like a curtain, revealing a large outdoor area where a group of young children were

playing.

“Where are we?” asked Suki.

“Atop Mount Fuji. At the magical school for the children of the emperors and princes. Some of these children are even destined to become Bodhisattvas one day.”

The playground – if that’s what you’d call it – was tiled in glistening black squares. At the edge of the playground rose a magnificent school covered in sparkling tiles that shimmered in the afternoon sun. The mountain they stood upon was so high up, that the clouds were below them.

Suki’s attention was drawn to a clutch of six or so girls who looked to be about five years old. They were playing a complicated jumping game, like hopscotch, using hoops and small pieces of jade. Suki was trying to figure out how the game was played.

“Ah, I see one of my old teachers,” Kannon said. “Excuse me a moment.” With that, she disappeared through the school’s archway.

Suki kept watching the girls.

“You can’t even play it right,” one girl said loudly to the smallest of the group.

Another girl laughed and pointed. “She’s always so different. Why is that?”

“It’s true,” said the first girl. “She’s so small. She can’t keep up with us. Come on, let’s go see what the older girls are doing.” She turned to the little one. “Not you. You stay here.” With that, the other five girls skipped off across the black expanse, leaving the small child alone. She watched them retreat, then sunk to the ground, sitting cross-legged. Still and alone.

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

Suki walked over to her. “Hello,” Suki said quietly.

The little girl looked up. She had a beautiful bright face, and shining dark eyes. Her glistening black hair fell down her straight back. Suki sat down next to her.

“I saw what happened.” The little girl nodded silently. “I know how it feels,” Suki continued. “I know how it feels when your heart hurts. It feels all bruised and wounded and...and soft. It really hurts. I know.”

The girl nodded again. They sat in silence for a long moment. Then Suki continued slowly, thinking about each word as she said it, “I guess, though, that we have that to share, don’t we, you and I? We both got our hearts hurt. And that sort of brought us together. It connects us. So maybe now, we could be friends, do you think? We could help each other sort of make our hearts feel better.”

The girl looked into Suki’s face. Her eyes, already shining, seemed to radiate light. “Yes,” she said finally. “Yes, I do see. Thank you.”

Suki felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up into Kannon’s face.

“Oh Kannon,” Suki jumped up. “I’m so glad you’re here. I want you to meet...” Suki turned to introduce her new friend, but the girl was gone.

“Where did she go?” Suki wondered aloud. She glanced around the playground, but could not spy the little girl. “Oh no. I wanted you to meet her. And I don’t even know her name!” Suki lamented.

“Do not worry,” Kannon said. “I know her name.”

“You do?”

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

“Yes,” Kannon paused. “Her name is Kannon. That little girl was me, years ago, when I was just a child.”

Suki stared dumbstruck at Kannon. Finally she said, “I don’t get it.”

Kannon smiled. “My younger self needed a special teacher today. And because I am now, as you say, magical, I can sometimes move through time to bring my younger self the special guides she needs on the path of wisdom.”

Suki still didn’t really understand, but she plunged ahead. “Is that the teacher you went off to talk to? The teacher your younger self needed today?”

“Oh no, Suki,” Kannon laughed. “You don’t see it yet? No, Suki. You were the teacher. You were the wise one who taught me the special lesson of compassion.”

Suki could not speak.

“You taught me that when our hearts are hurt deeply, we can use our pain to reach out and touch all the others who are also in pain. In that way, we heal ourselves, and we heal others, too. You have always had this great wisdom inside you, Suki. People like you, with very soft hearts, can touch into the wisdom more easily. You see, a wounded, soft heart is a wise heart. And a wise heart always becomes a joyful heart in the end.”

With that, Kannon disappeared, and Suki found herself standing on the school’s playground once again.

She turned and saw Nelly, Polly and Tina still talking and laughing under the monkey bars. She felt the ache in her heart all over again. Wounded heart. Soft heart. But then she looked over to

PLAYGROUND OF WISDOM

the swing set, and saw Shenika Shy leaning against one of the poles, quiet and alone. Beyond her, Betsy Brooding sat on a bench, her head bent, her toes drawing circles in the dirt. Suki looked at the girls. Soft heart. Wise heart.

She called out, “Hey Shenika, want to swing with me?” The girl looked up and smiled. “Sure,” she called back, and sat in the nearest swing. Suki ran past the swing set to Betsy. “Hey Betsy, want to come swing with me and Shenika?”

Betsy looked up as if she hadn’t heard right.

“Want to?” Suki asked again.

“Okay,” Betsy replied.

The girls took the swings next to Shenika and began pumping with all their might. Soon, all three were flying into the sky and laughing.

As Suki watched Betsy and Shenika sail out in front of her, her soft, wise heart was full of joy. Soft heart. Wise heart. Joyful heart.