

★ *The Day Saida Arrived* ★

The day Saida arrived, it seemed to me that she had lost all her words.

So, I tried to look for them in every **nook** **cranny** **corner** **drawer** **seam** to see if, between them and me, we might get rid of her tears and throw away her silence.



The day Saida arrived, I searched **under the tables**, the blackboard and the desks.

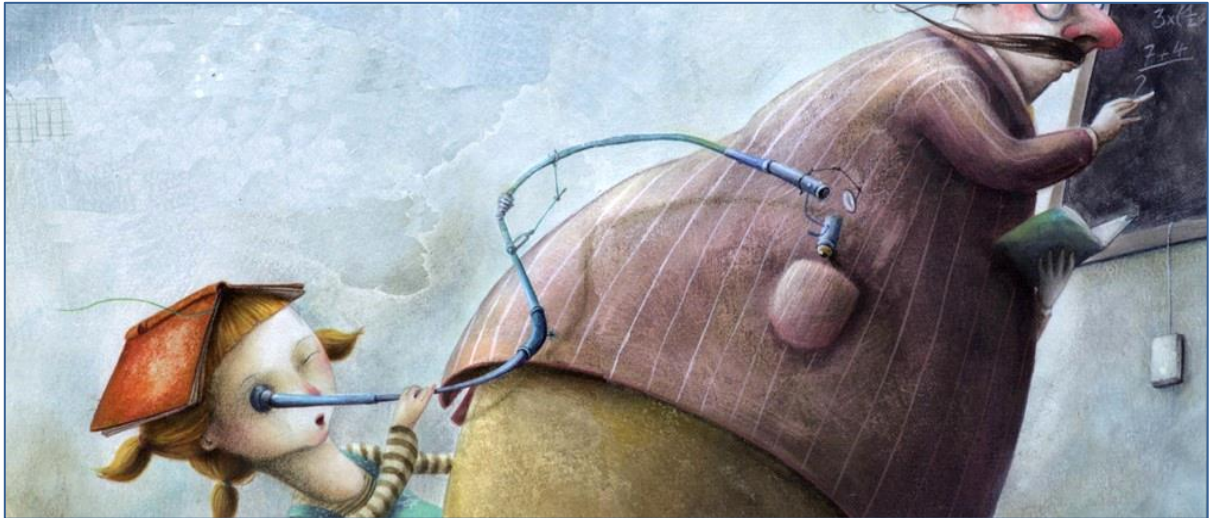
I looked through the **notebooks** and between the **colored pencils**.

Under the cushions and beneath the book jackets.

Inside the pockets of all the coats.

Between the curtains, the hands of the clock, and the letters of the stories.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find any of Saida's words. When she looked at me with her large amber eyes, I thought I saw questions and sadness inside her.



The day Saida arrived, I knew I would always be her friend.

With a finger, I drew a welcome for her, warm and soft, like long scarves and fluffy pillows. She drew a smile on me like a crescent moon.

After, I kept looking for her words, to see if between us, the words and me, we might untie her laughter, and her voice.



The day Saida arrived, I looked and looked again beneath the park benches.

In the hollows of trees.

In all the trash cans, swing sets, and fountains.

Even inside the mouths of statues...



But I didn't find even a trace of Saida's words. Just some banana peels, candy wrappers, the crusts of a sandwich, and an earthworm. So, I painted a hug for her, and she, drying some tears that were just as salty as my own, drew a camel for me where some paint had flaked away.

The day Saida arrived, Mama spoke to me of a land of bazaars and archways, and of colorful tiles. With her finger, she pointed out Saida's country on the round globe of the world.

MO-ROC-CO, I could read... and I saw that it was right beside the sea.



The day Saida arrived, Papa explained to me that my friend surely hadn't lost her words, but perhaps she didn't want to bring them out because they were different from the words we used here.

"In Morocco," he said, "yours wouldn't work either."

That's how I found out that in Saida's country they speak a language called **Arabic**.

It was the night of the day Saida arrived, as I drew hand shadows of camels and palm trees on the wall of my room, that I decided to help Saida learn our words, and to ask her to teach me her own. That way, when *I* travel to Morocco someday...

That's how, thanks to Saida and her arrival, she and I learned a world of new words. She pointed to things with her small hands, and I pronounced their names, writing them out on the blackboard, in the sandbox at recess, with notebooks and colored pencils.

Then I repeated them slowly so that the sounds would become rooted in her memory and on her lips.

Saida translated them into her language full of *B* sounds and drew them with those letters that sometimes looked like flowers and other times like insects. Then she repeated them slowly so that the sounds would become rooted in my memory and on my lips.

I liked her letters. I also thought it was fun that things were read

end. the from starting



That's how Saida and I found words of every **shape**, **sound** and **size**...

Some appeared every morning like a greeting or a good breakfast. Others were carried off by the wind, and we never saw them again. There were some that, forgotten under the snow or the frost, came back with the return of good weather and the thaw.



And we knew that in all languages, there are words as warm as breath, and others cold as metal. Words that bring together and words that separate. Words that can hurt and words that awaken laughter. Words that tickle when they are spoken and others that, when we hear them, feel like a hug.



Some days Saida and I painted them in different colors and watched them taking flight like birds or butterflies. Other days we spread them on the grass so that they could bathe in the light of the sun, the moon or the stars. There were afternoons when we made piles of them and let ourselves fall into them.

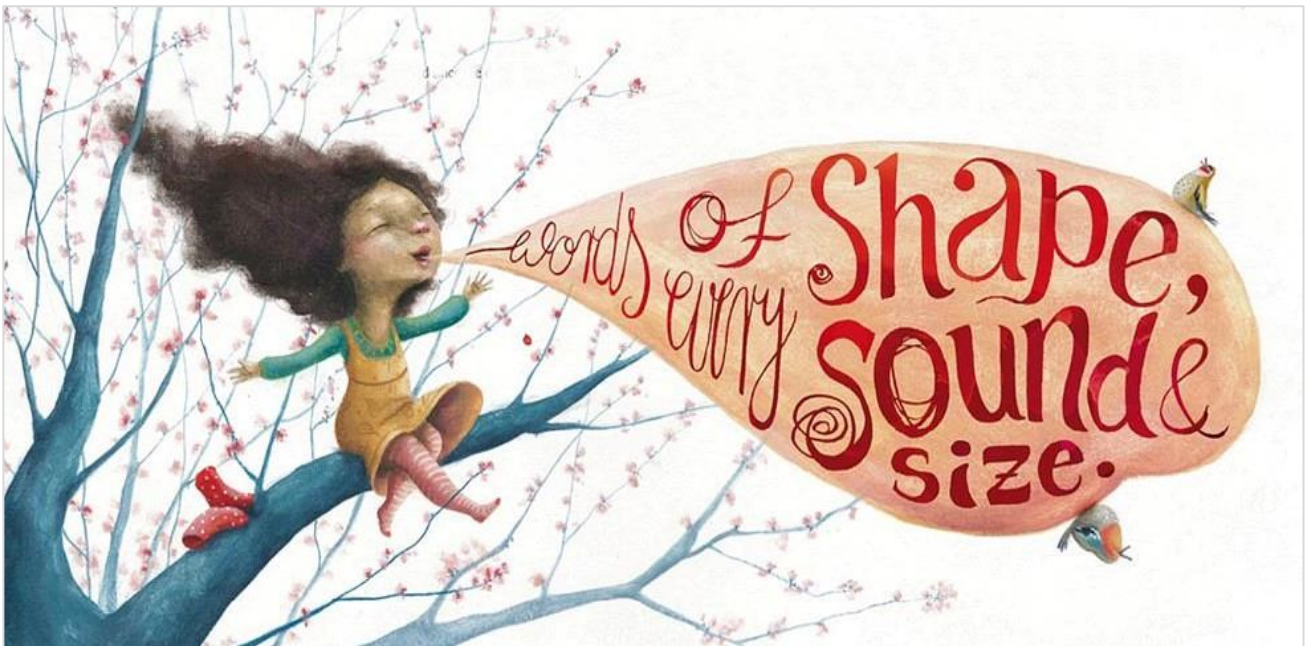
Saida laughed when she got muddled up between a *P* and a *B*. And I coughed when a *Q* got stuck in my throat. Then she offered me an almond and honey sweet to wash it down and I thrilled her taste buds with a piece of carrot cake.



Some time has passed since the day Saida arrived.

Now flowers paint the sidewalks, and the almond trees are so white it looks like they're covered with snow.

Now every morning Saida uncovers her voice and her laughter, and from her mouth come words of every **shape**, **sound** and **size**.



I still find it funny when my tongue gets in a tangle trying to roll my *Rs*. She still laughs when her *Es* sound like *Is*.

Then Saida recites for me a poem by Jacqueline Woodson, and after, I offer her a story set in the medina of Marrakesh.

Then we go to her house to eat couscous. At mine, we have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

One day, Saida and I will travel to her land of spices and camels. On our way to Africa, we'll keep watch for more words, to see if, together, we can learn all the ones that unleash laughter, voice, and friendship.

And on that day, Saida and I will happily throw overboard unwelcome words like **B O R D E R**.

