

# What Happened to the Kids

By Devina Heriyanto

Three kids did not come to my class today. One had not shown up for a week. The rest of the students noticed, but they did not think that it was worrisome. *Maybe they were just sick*, I heard one saying. *The season is changing, after all.*

I wished it were only the season that was changing.

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The next day, I started my class late because I had a meeting with a parent. Tim's parent, to be exact. He was the first one to fall to this epidemic. It was all normal: The students were at recess and playing some games while I was having my lunch. Sounds of laughter could be heard across the school and we as teachers generally loved it.

And then the scream.

"Miss! Help! Tim fell and... and... and..."

I ran, looking for the tall, sturdy kid who was the star athlete of his year. His reading was slow, sure, but we were so sure he was destined for something else.

That destiny, and whatever faith we had in Tim, was destroyed that afternoon. Tim broke one of his legs. We rushed him to the emergency unit. The whole class brought fruits and flowers after school, but we have not seen him since.

"Tim is not coming back," said his mother, a respectable woman with rather stoic expression.

"We understand Tim might need some time for his recovery and might not be able to join his class. He can always come back next year. I'd be happy to have him in my class," I suggested. Some parents thought the school and the teachers were rigid and cruel, an assumption I wanted to prove wrong.

“No,” she said. “You misunderstood me. Tim is not coming back. Not this year, not the next year. Never.”

And then she left.

Just before I entered my class, I could hear that some sort of discussion was going on. One that stopped precisely when I opened the door.

“It’s okay kids, you can tell me whatever it is you were discussing earlier,” I said, smiling.

Silence. I could see them eyeing each other, as if they were unsure who should speak first.

Finally a fist shot up in the air.

“We heard that Tim is not coming back, is it true?” asked Rose, the class captain.

“Yes, I myself just heard the news this morning.”

“Then what about Chris and Monica?”

I really did not know how to answer that question. The news about Tim confirmed my suspicion that the sickness was part of this epidemic I had heard about. One, it was rumored, nobody survived.

“I’m sure they will get back to school soon,” I said, still maintaining my smile while choking back tears.

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I first heard of the epidemic three years ago. I was on vacation with my college friends, visiting exotic regions famous for their vibrant landscape. We were drowning in excitement, wondering what we would find there.

And then the trip got cancelled. The tour guide did not give us any reason, just lackadaisically mentioned that we would visit another, nearby region instead. We did not think about it too much then. It was all the same to us: a vivid, lively, exotic destination. We had fun and stayed for the night.

That night, I could not sleep. I had always found it difficult to sleep in a new place. As I usually did, I took a walk. Just in front of our lodging, I overheard our guide talking to a local.

“It was horrible, really. It happened so fast. I myself knew just last night,” he said, “To think that I almost took them there...”

“We did not know until some of them came here. We thought they were saying nonsense. They were stressed out after all. And fragile. How can a big city get destroyed overnight? With nothing too?” the local said, “It was not until we checked it out for ourselves that we believed them.”

“What did you see?” asked our guide.

“Nothing. Only the skeletons of what the city used to be. And white. It’s all white.”

“What happened to the survivors? Can I maybe talk to them?”

A breath of hesitation, then, “I don’t think you can. They’re all dead.”

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A city dead overnight? All vibrant corals turned white, as if they were just skeletons? People dying of some mysterious disease?

I did not believe that at first. I thought they were just sharing some urban myths. Maybe the people were just careless and did not take care of the city so that it had rotted away. Or probably the local man was just telling a spooky story to discredit the other region.

Whatever. It was so insignificant that time that I quickly forgot about it.

It was just now that I made the connection.

The city certainly did not get destroyed overnight, it happened so slowly that none of us noticed the change. Now that I knew what to look for, I saw it everywhere. The corals became less vibrant, as if they were losing some essence. More and more people had difficulty walking. First it was the elders, which was not suspicious as we thought it was only due to their age. Then the kids started falling too, with fractures and broken bones and shells. Even the water tasted different.

The epidemic was not only attacking the people, it was attacking the environment too. It wasn't us or the kids who got sick, it was the ocean.

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The morning light was blinding, but it was a comforting sign that life goes on here. I had made up my mind. I had to tell everyone. Surely together we could do something. Anything.

But first I had to get up.