

December 12, 2021

Dear Ko Moon-Young,

The first book I read from you was *The Boy Who Fed on Nightmares*. Honestly, I didn't think much about your children's book when I first saw it. The ever "grown-up" teen, I pegged it as the typical fairy-tale with the stereotypical happy ending. How wrong I was after I read it. Your story shocked me. It challenged what I thought to be a typical fairy tale. I never imagined how a children's story could be so dark yet so honest. It made me see that not all stories must be beautiful to be meaningful.

My favorite quote from you was this, "Hurtful, painful memories. Memories of deep regrets. Memories of hurting others and being hurt. Memories of being abandoned. Only those with such memories buried in their hearts can become stronger, more passionate, and emotionally flexible. Only those can attain happiness. So don't forget any of it. Remember it all and overcome it. If you don't overcome it, you'll always be a kid whose soul never grows." When I read that, I nearly cried. I felt comforted; I felt safe; above all, I felt like I could breathe. How many times have I wished there was no pain in my life? The times I had to bite back tears and smile when I didn't mean it, or to say, "I'm fine," when all I wanted was to cry, "Help me."

I still remember an event that happened when I was five. I had to go to school very early that chilly October morning. It was cold and quiet, and I was alone. Unfortunately, the breakfast in my stomach was not nearly as peaceful as I was. I ended up vomiting on myself on the bench outside of my Kindergarten class. I remember sitting there watching as students slowly streamed off the buses and into the hallways. I sat there in my tears and my soiled clothes, quietly reaching out to students whispering, "Help me." No one looked my way, and no one bothered to help me. It has been twelve years, yet I still remember.

I am not nearly as helpless now as I was then, but it still hurts. It hurts when I think about the secret smiles my friends share as they laugh with each other with words that I'm not privy to, or when they seem to light up when talking to other people instead of me when I'm right in front of them. They don't treat me like this often, and they probably never realized that it hurt me. I know they never meant it to be intentional, but sometimes I think and still remember.

I believe that's why they say experience is our best teacher. If you've experienced it, you can understand how to best approach it when seeing it through the eyes of others. No matter how hard we want to forget, we simply can't because it has become who we are, but it doesn't mean that we will stay hurt forever. We grow and become better people for it.

Your story meant so much to me. I never realized how my bad memories could be so much more than just "bad memories." Because of them, I have good memories: the time my friends and I won second place at a school club event. Or when my classmates laughed as we watched our math teacher frantically use her enormous decorative vases to catch the rain leaking

from a hole in her ceiling. These events, and more, make every painful memory worth it because those events have led me to who I am today.

Most importantly, I learned that ugly truths can be beautiful too. Your story didn't have the typical happy ending, which surprised me considering that it was a fairy-tale. But later on, I remembered the stories I read from the Brothers Grimm. The shock I felt when I learned that *Disney* had romanticized and changed these stories for a happy, marketable ending. The messiest stories are often the most honest ones, and I appreciated that you stayed true to that. No life is wholly beautiful, but we can find the beauty out of it. It made me question why every children's story seems to have a happy ending? And whether I could challenge that too - write a children's story not meant to be perfect but "ugly" in all its beautiful honesty.

One day, I hope to be as brave as you and show that not all endings have to be perfect to be happy because life isn't about comfort and pleasure. It is about seeking out the ugliness in life and calling it beautiful.

Sincerely,
Sophia Pham