

Sharing Stories with Children

by Susan Micari

Moon Orchid and the Skeleton Girl

WHEN I FIRST MET Moon Orchid she was an emaciated Taiwanese immigrant child of eight living in a shelter for homeless women and children in Hell's Kitchen, New York. She wore tattered clothes and plastic white patent-leather shoes that were too small for her. Her mother was concerned that her daughter wasn't learning in school. But she was overwhelmed, angry, and exhausted by her homelessness and couldn't spare time to attend to her oldest daughter's needs.

Moon read on a first- to second-grade level. I knew her as a child who had learned to play word games with me in English and who loved puns and jokes. Most of the time, though, her language skills appeared frozen. Her early stories written were either word for word imitations of stories she could read, or drawings of frightening monsters. But poor reading was only part of her trouble. Moon was unable to eat the shelter food. Although it was nutritious and well prepared, the cook reported to me that Moon just wouldn't eat and made a big deal of turning up her nose at anything but dessert. Moon's mother seemed unwilling to pay attention to her daughter's plea for attention over the food issue, and allowed her to eat or not eat as she would. Moon's mother had two other children who were also jumping out of their skins in the noisy, chaotic environment of the shelter, and she would just hunch over her plate and concentrate on eating her own meal.

I would often visit Moon at her after-school program and noted that she didn't eat the meal that the program provided the children in the afternoons either. Though she was exhorted to take food from the cart as it passed her table, she often refused or took a little rice and played with it.

She was terribly thin. Her need for control of some aspect of her life in this manner was painful to see. I assumed it was a drama about lack of nurture, and that this food strike was a way she could make a silent plea for help. She was a withdrawn, unassuming child who did not seek or get attention from her teachers. The other children regarded her as a pariah, they scorned her for her listlessness and her ragged clothes. She had no friends, she said, except me, and she was afraid that I would leave her. She longed for a friend who would not hit her, as she was hit at home, and who would be kind to her, as the school children were not.

Yet, when Moon came to my house for our weekly reading lessons, she would devour food ravenously. She would stand in front of my refrigerator and moan, "I'm hungry." I provided her with chicken, fruit, cookies—anything I had on hand—and she would eat it all ferociously, even to the point of gnawing the chicken bone. Once full, her anger would blaze out at her mother's neglect, at her father for abandoning her, at the world for ignoring her. She would scream at me

in a voice that sounded unearthly. Perhaps it was her imitation of the cacophonous adult voices she heard all around her, or perhaps it was her mother's scolding voice that came out of her.

On the night I adapted the story I called *The Skeleton Girl* for her and told it to her, Halloween was approaching. Moon was afraid of her mother's anger, which had been vented on her little sister shortly before we met that evening. Moon drew pictures of a screaming yellow thing/monster shouting from the middle of a spider's web. I was exhausted by the pain she was begging me to witness. And so, because none of the books I asked her to read that night comforted her, I told her the story of a girl who abandons life to become a skeleton, and who is rescued by true friendship by someone who is not afraid of her bare bones. The original folktale is Inuit and comes from the Canadian Arctic Circle. It was shared with me by one of my adult students, a German man who had traveled in Canada. I presented it to Moon that night, holding her on my lap, offering her the hope in the story because she needed hope that night most of all. At the end of the story she seemed at peace, and wrote her first poem called *The Flower* which spoke of the beauty of reading, loving, and giving flowers. She gave this poem to me. Thereafter, she asked me to tell the story of *The Skeleton Girl* many times.

That was four years ago. Now Moon is in the seventh grade. Though she seems much recovered of her experience of homelessness, Moon cannot remember anything about the two years she spent in the shelter. She eats. She is a physically robust child, even chubby. Her mother is still temperamental but tries hard to see that her daughter does well in school. Moon has trouble in English and social studies, and reading is still not her favorite thing. But we are working on it together. And I hope things will improve once she passes out of the crisis of confidence that plagues adolescent girls. She is still reticent and silent; she doesn't fight for attention the way other children do. She sees a psychotherapist who works with her every week on finding her voice.

Sometimes, finding the right story for a child to think and wonder about helps free her imagination to create a solution to the life problems she is facing. *The Skeleton Girl* wasn't the only story that attracted Moon but it was the one that offered the idea that the solution to her crisis might be found by taking the risk of returning love to the one who can accept you as you are. I think it also speaks to the torment of depression, and to the idea that by going to the bottom of the sea, and losing everything, you will not lose yourself. The power to rebuild your life from the bones out lies within.

The Skeleton Girl (after *The Magic Drum*)

Once upon a time an old married couple had a daughter who would not marry. Many hunters from far distances had come to win her hand but she turned them all away. Until one day, two brothers, alike and tall of stature and strong as bears came to see her. They did nothing out of the ordinary, so her parents were amazed when she became attracted to them. She invited them inside her igloo

and fed them, and as they stood up to leave the hut, she followed them out. Once at the door, these two men put on the form of white bears, for they were bear spirits. They seized the girl, and dragged her away from her home, over the ice and snow until they came to a hole in the ice and down they dove with her. She screamed in terror, "no, no, NO," but down, down into the ocean they went until finally far, far below a blue ice floe, they left her and went to the surface again through a crevice.

Now, all alone, this girl began to sink. She sank down to the bottom of the ocean, and when she hit bottom, she looked around her, "hmmm!" One part of the ocean was black and the other part behind her was light. So she reasoned, "I'll go walking toward the light, and then I'll find my way up somehow." And so she went walking through the wonders of the under-sea. As she walked, little sea animals approached her from all sides, and they began to tear off bits of her flesh and skin. Gradually, they ate every bit of her skin. She became a skeleton. And as a skeleton still she walked, her bones open to the water. She walked and walked until finally, above her head, she saw bright light. A hole in the ice materialized, and up, up, up to the surface she swam and came out of the hole and climbed onto the snow.

This Inuit girl sat down and began to weep. "Look at me! What have I done to deserve this? I'm a Skeleton. How can I ever see people again?" So she built a little igloo that was so small it fit in the palm of her hand, and lay down next to it. But before she slept, a vision of her parents came to her mind and she saw the people who had raised and loved her, and whose life she had despised. And she thought to herself, "If only I could have those things that my parents have." And she went to sleep, but as she woke the next day what should appear but a large igloo just like the one her parents had, and a meat storage platform just like the one she had at home. And lying there was a caribou, freshly killed. She took it, she dried the skin and made herself some robes and a sleeping bag, cured the meat, and thus she was provided for. And every night before she went to sleep she would think of what things she needed and the next day there they'd be when she awoke.

Well, she had everything she needed but company, until finally one day some hunters were coming across the ice looking for seals. She saw them and stood up, and she ran toward them, her bones clanking all the way. She had forgotten herself! She ran toward them to greet them, "Come! Let me visit with you!" "Ahhhh!" they said when they saw her. They ran. "A walking skeleton! A spirit!" Ah, they were terrified. She sat down and said, "It is because I am a skeleton. Everyone is afraid of me." She wept in despair. Those hunters were running for their lives. They ran all the way back to their village and ran into their igloo and there was their father, an old, old man, too old to hunt. Their father said, "My sons, what's the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost." And they said, "Father, we have seen a skeleton with women's robes on. We were terrified and ran away." He said, "I will go out and greet this skeleton. I am an old man. It doesn't matter if I live or die. I would like to see this person." So, the next day the old man walked over the ice and came to the igloo where Skeleton Girl was

sitting by herself. She didn't move or try to startle him. She only sat there and welcomed him inside. He came in and they were together. Then they went to sleep. And the next morning in the darkness, Skeleton Girl said, "Old man, make me a drum. A very small drum. Make me a drum so that I may make some music and dance." The old man set about immediately to satisfy her. He made her a beautiful, precious, tiny drum. She took it and blew out the lights of the stone lamps in her beautiful igloo, beat it and began to dance. She beat it and beat it, and as she did it grew larger and larger in her hands. And the beat that she called up was the rhythm of the world. It was magic. When she lit the lamps again, who should be standing there but a beautiful maiden, all her flesh voluptuous and restored. The old man said, "Hello!" But she said to him, "Turn out the light again. I'm going to dance for you some more." He did, he blew out the lamp. She asked him in the dark, "Are you all right like that?" And he said, "I am." So she began to dance again, and when she lit the lamps, behold, he was a young, young hunter with black glossy hair, and skin as smooth as a seal's. Truly, he was wonderful to look upon. They left the igloo and walked to the old man's village. When they walked into the village, the young sons said, "Have you seen our father? He left the village yesterday and we don't know what's become of him. He didn't come back." And this handsome, shining man said, "I'm your father. You see, I was an old, old man, useless and near death. And this girl was forsaken, a living death. but we found the rhythm of the great drum and here we are, man and wife."

Susan Micari is a graduate of Bank Street College of Education and a learning specialist with the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School. This piece is about one of her experiences teaching children in a homeless shelter. Whereas psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim seek to identify universal themes and functions for particular fairy tales, Susan Micari's experiences are interesting to us because they speak not about the universal themes in folktales, but about finding just the right story for a child on the right occasion.