

writing belittling comments on the bathroom wall which we named “BBC” (Bathroom Blackboard Communication). Despite his attempts to maintain composure, Ali eventually stopped coming to school but the townwide rumors continued.

Even as an adult, one would break down when faced with things like this, and I was hurt because there was nothing I could do. I wasn’t big enough to stand up to anyone, and I wasn’t an adult either. So, I felt lost and, in more pain, when Ali announced that he wasn’t coming to school anymore. I felt like I had lost my best friend and sometimes even felt at fault because maybe if I had tried to do something, Ali would still come to school. I lost my lunch mate.

Fortunately, Ali’s father was able to convince him to come back to school again. I think he was giving Ali a pep talk about being brave. So, Ali came back to school, and I was excited to have him back. We had lunch together, bonding sweet memories.

It was short lived!

After our lunch break, we both ran into the bathroom to pee but as soon as we entered, I felt the gloom in the air even before I saw Ali’s face. The hair on the back of my neck stood, I swallowed hard and quickly tried to stand in front of Ali to block his view, but he slowly pushed me and read what was written on the walls: “10 ½” written on the BBC (Bathroom Blackboard Communication).

Ali ran out of the bathroom, but I didn’t run after him. My throat constricted and tightened. The bow raised. My eyes were filled with tears, I always told myself that I was a strong man, and men don’t cry but the tears fell freely on my face. My best friend was heartbroken and so was I.

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When the news about what happened to Ali spread across the town, the topic became a discussion among the elders. The town’s response varied, with blame shifting to his mother in different narratives. Adults speculated on the origin of his condition, dividing opinions

between Eastern and Western medical practices or unfounded claims about his mother’s character.

Ali’s absence left a void and school wasn’t the same without Ali. After a semester, these incidents were almost forgotten, even though it was a big deal at the beginning of the school year.

After the normal activities of the morning assembly, the headmaster came out and stood in front of us. He had an announcement to make: “Henceforth Ali is number 10 because he has only 10 fingers.” the headmaster bellowed. The assembly went silent for a few seconds, but a big smile spread across my face in excitement.

The headmaster, empathizing with Ali’s news, declared him “Number 10”. The school rallied behind him, and Ali proudly embraced his new identity and wiggled his fingers proudly showing off. I was happy for him, and Ali made sure that he reminded everyone that he was number 10. He explained to me that his uncle- a surgeon by profession- had removed the extra half-finger successfully.

The resolution brought satisfaction, and Ali’s story became intertwined with what would eventually be my chosen profession. As a medical doctor, revisiting his story, there were so many possibilities for his deformity. Reflecting on his journey, I recognized my past ignorance and the vast knowledge acquired over time.

As you get older, you learn so much more, and you realize the more you know, one finds out that there is so more that one does not know. Be compassionate and learn from the ideas and beliefs of fellow beings, and thus you can hope to break the barriers of belief.

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