

Luisa Finds Her Ki

By Dennis Knight

I want to tell you about my friend, Luisa Garcia. She wouldn't be happy if I told you she is a little girl, but honestly, she really is. I mean, if you compare her to the size of other girls in the second grade, she is quite small. But when you get to know Luisa, you will know she is a bigger than everyone around her.

Luisa lives in Denver with her mom and big brothers. She doesn't get to see her dad very often because he works in a faraway place and he is not always able to come visit her on weekends. Sometimes on Saturday mornings her brothers' dad will come and take the boys for an outing, and she will get to go too.

But one Saturday morning in June the boys went off with their dad to play in a baseball game and Luisa was not able to go. They said she was too small. Luisa was sad, disappointed and felt, oh, so little. But after they left, her mother said, "Luisa, today will be a special day just for you and me. We are going downtown on the light rail."

First they visited the library, her favorite place, and then rode a bus that her Mom called the mall shuttle to a store that had beautiful clothes for big little girls like Luisa. Luisa tried on many things and she got a cute pink tee shirt and a new pair of blue jeans.

Her mom let her wear the tee shirt out of the store and they got on the shuttle again. When the doors opened a few blocks later, Luisa could hear drums. They were loud! Louder than any drums she had ever heard before. Luisa took her mother's hand and pulled her off the bus and up the street to see what it could be. They came to a big stage built right on the street. It was part of a big Japanese festival. There were many performers hitting and dancing around the drums, shouting their excitement and making just about the most exciting music she had ever seen or heard.

She figured out from the woman talking on the stage after the song had ended that it was something called "taiko". Now Luisa had seen drums many times before. They had some in her school and she loved the bands marching by in the big parades. But she had never seen drums like that, so large and powerful.

The taiko drummers played another song and then the announcer said they would have a workshop and some of the children could come up and hit the drums. Luisa boldly went to the front of the audience to be sure she was chosen. She was the littlest one to come forward but she didn't care.

The man they called Thomas had been playing the biggest drum on the stage. They called it the odaiko, meaning "big drum". It was taller than him and it sat on a stand so that the drum head was facing out to the audience. It was huge.

Thomas would be her teacher for the workshop. He was a strong man with wide, powerful shoulders. Luisa said, "Maybe I am too small?" He didn't answer but handed her two drumsticks.

“These are the bachi”, he said, and showed her how to hold them. “But before you may use the bachi, you must learn to stand.” He showed her how to take the stance, with her right foot to the front and her knees bent slightly. He said that would help her find her center, or her “ki”.

Then he showed her how to hit the drum hard in the middle. He called it a “don”, then a lighter hit, a ‘tsu’, and finally a hit on the edge of the drum, a “ka”. He taught her how to learn a song by saying the different parts out loud, like “don-don-don-katta-katta-tsu-tsu-katta-katta-don-don-don”, and pretty soon she was playing a song on the taiko. She was not too small, and she never wanted to stop. She had found her ki and she was the biggest little girl in Denver.

Now Thomas is her sensei, her teacher. It will take many years of work and practice, he warned her, and she must never let her schoolwork suffer, but “one day you, Luisa Garcia, will be a world champion odaiko drummer.”