

By Shishi Stan

The Jerome Robbins Memorial Award: Creative Writing - Short Story

As the sun set and the day decided to turn to night, the river looked up at the heavens and with almost sheer admiration stole all of the sky's colors. The only sound in the silent night was the slow and steady movement of the color filled water. But, in the near distance another sound began to compete with the river: a young boy's laughter. The sound began to overtake the water's, as the laughter of a young woman joined the chorus. In the world, there are many sounds, but if you chose to listen to the right ones then you might just be swept away down the river towards a small, old, brown bench that sits overlooking the sky-like water. There are many benches, but if you have an eye for nuance, then you will notice that this bench is very different from its counterparts; it sits between two identical young trees. There's nothing particularly special about these twins, but if you have a heart that can receive a story then perhaps you will notice that these trees tell their own. Or maybe you'll be caught by the frame that they create; a lonely brown bench overlooking the water, and taking full advantage of the view, a young black woman and her young son. You have followed the river down and now you see the picture that some are to blind to understand; a mother and son laughing, likely about something quite insignificant to the common person, but to the soul, as genuine as anything. And so tis' the place where the story begins: in a picture frame between two twin trees, on a lonely old bench, overlooking the glorious ever-changing flow of the river. A photograph best captured by the soul.

He sits outside the closed door, knowing that closed doors are never a good sign. He's scared, but he is very much trying to hold his courage together, if not for him, then for her. This is far more than a child should ever be faced with, and yet, this is life, and life is far more than any of us should ever be faced with.

At this moment there is seemingly nothing more interesting in the world than the floor, as that's all the boy stares at. However, his interest is diverted as the closed door behind him opens and a doctor walks out from behind it. The tall doctor bends down and sits on a knee, facing the young boy. What happens next is obvious, and the young boy knows it, but he holds his courage together, if not for him, then for her.

"Tyreece, do you think you want to come in", the doctor asks.

No response is necessary, the boy knew the answer to this question the moment he arrived at the hospital. He nods at the doctor, who is doing a little worse than the boy at holding his courage together.

Together, they walk through the door, to see a beautiful young woman lying in a white bed.

The young boy stands motionless by the door, not able to believe how beautiful one could look before death. But, maybe these moments are the ones closest to heaven and the boy always did believe angels to be beautiful beings.

With a smile bigger than sickness, she reaches her hand out to her son.

"Baby. Come give momma a hug"

The boy approaches her slowly, but when he reaches her he can't help but quickly wrap himself in her arms. Suddenly, courage seems worthless, and he begins to let go of his tight hold over his emotions. He wraps his head in her warm arms and with all the anger, resentment, loneliness, and confusion in him, he begins to cry. His tears roll onto his mother's arms.

She picks up his chin and looks into his dark eyes. "Are you scared?", she asks.

"Yes momma"

"What's there to be afraid of?"

"Being alone"

At this, she smiles.

"Alone? You won't be alone"

"Where will you be?"

She considers this for a moment

"I'll tell you what. Whenever you're feeling lonely, you go to that bench we always picnic at. And look out at the water. And whenever you feel that you're alone, know that that's where I'll be. Swimming with the flow of the river."

To the sound of the river, he wraps his head in her arms again and then looks up at her. She weakly wipes away his tears.

He takes a moment to catch his breath. With that breath, he builds up his courage, and then with all the energy left in him he asks, "Promise?"

And with as much certainty as one could ever have, she answers simply, "Always".

A slim beam of sunlight peaks through the window curtains, lighting up the intertwined bodies as they lay in a deep slumber. Peace, tranquility, and the warm feeling of her smooth skin on his is all he could ever ask for. But, the beautiful, still silence is broken by a sudden harsh ringing. He slowly lets go of her warmth and reaches for the clock, picks it up and peaks at it: 8:00 am. Pushing off the bed, he sits up with a still-half-a-sleep yawn. She rolls over and looks at him,

"5 more minutes"

"I gotta go"

"You always gotta go"

She sits up; her blond hair rolls down her bare arms, messy, and yet, completely perfect. Even half asleep, she is nothing but beautiful. And, with one last attempt, she gives him a sparkling smile, which to his credit, he resists for a moment...but as usual, the desire for warmth pulls him back into her arms.

"You win. 5 more minutes"

The river sparkles gold as the sun looks down onto the day, and what a beautiful day it is. Two middle-aged twin trees sit by the river enjoying the light, between them an old brown bench sits, and on the bench, Tyreece takes in the warmth. In hand, a sketchbook, and on the blank white page, he brings a beautiful woman to life. Her light skin and sparkling eyes. He shadows in her lips that he has become quite accustomed to, and a little birthmark right above them that only he seems to notice. He works on her golden hair which rolls gently down her neck. She is a beauty.

A short burst of wind flies through the air. Tyreece senses the motion and closes his eyes. He lets the swift wind wrap him in a blanket and serve him a steaming hot cocoa on a snowy day. He is always left in amazement at how the winds have such a voice that can bring one quickly back to a past that feels so long ago.

The voice goes back to the past in which it came from, and Tyreece slowly opens his eyes back to the present. He smiles and thanks the earth for another little gift to help

him push through until the darkness of the night and the comfort of her heart beating on his. He looks back at her sparkling eyes staring at him from the blank white page. But, with a sudden realization, Tyreece looks over to see a middle-aged Chinese man sitting next to him, staring out at the view. The man has dark black hair with odd streaks of gray climbing through it, and a clean face that looks as pure as the day he was born; as if this face has never been touched by the misery life has to offer. He senses Tyreece's gaze, and he returns it with a perfectly pleasant smile which catches Tyreece off guard.

"Whats up", Tyreece asks suddenly.

The little man smiles again at Tyreece and returns the apparent 'hello' with a slight nod of his head. He then looks back out at the river. Tyreece, reverts back to the woman, continuing to fill in her rolling hair.

The man's attention is suddenly captured by the woman; he points at the picture and in a heavy accent, "Pretty"

It's not exactly the norm to allow another man to comment on your woman, but Tyreece can't help but smile at the little man.

"Yea, she is." He says, looking down and smiling at her eyes.

Sensing the love in the air, the man can't hold back from continuing the discussion, and in broken English, he asks, "Love her?"

Tyreece chuckles at this.

"Well, you're damn straight...To be honest with you, I don't really know what it means to love"

They go back to silence, letting the sounds of the river take over. Tyreece can't help but like this odd man.

"You married?"

The man looks at him with a small, clearly not understanding, smile. Tyreece tries again: "Married. Do you have a wife?"

Same response. He tries again: "Love. You love a woman?"

The little man's smile breaks; now he understands. Then the small smile reforms, but with a slightly different story behind it, almost like that light that was just there is now hiding behind a cloud of darkness. And he answers simply with a wave of his hand: "Long time ago".

They go back to quiet. A different energy sits between the two trees now. Tyreece wonders: perhaps life's misery hides in many forms. He looks back at the man and extends his hand. The little man smiles, the light returning, and reaches for the hand.

"Tyreece. That's my name. Tyreece"

"Jiahao"

"Jiho?"

The man tries again, very slowly: "Ji-a-ha-o"

"Maybe we'll just stick with Ji"

Ji likes this and he shows it by answering with a smile and a nice big nod. And so, they go back to listening to the sounds of the river, but now there most definitely is an unmistakably different feeling that rests on that bench, between those trees, overlooking that river. A feeling that hasn't rested there for a long time.

Tomorrow secretly sneaks by as a new day stands under the sun. Brighter than the day before, the river flows with pure gold. The two twins sit by the river enjoying the

warmth, between them an old brown bench sits, and on the bench, Tyreece takes in the view of the flowing gold river. In hand, a sketchbook, and on the blank white page, he brings a beautiful woman to life. Her dark skin and bright loving eyes. He shadows in her dark cheeks, the same ones that he used to kiss, and he begins to draw her golden smile. He works on her dark hair that caresses her neck. She is as beautiful as he remembers her to be.

Noticing the new presence sitting next to him, Tyreece lets a small smile escape him.

“How you doin’ Ji?”

Ji answers with a big smile. Now noticing the woman, Ji points at her. “Pretty,” he says

“She sure is” Tyreece responds

Ji smiles at this, and then prepares for another comment: “Love?”, he asks.

Tyreece smiles down at the woman, and with as much certainty as one could ever have, he answers simply, “Always”

“You marry her?” Ji asks

“Shit Ji. No. That’s my momma.”

Ji contemplates this for a moment.

“Mommy?”

“Yea, that’s her”

“Very young”, Ji notes

“She kinda always stays the same age...she not really here no more”

“Where?”

“Where is she...with the river”

Ji looks out at the river. He understands, and needs no more explanation, but Tyreece provides one anyways, if not for Ji, then maybe for himself. “It was just me and her for as long as I could remember. And until I was 8, I was just fine with that; she was all I really needed. Ya know? She did everything for me. She made it her mission to make me happy, to hide me from the dark side of the earth.”

Tyreece rubs his watery eyes and chuckles a little at how easy it is for him to fall back in time. Ji listens intently to Tyreece, but Tyreece knows that he doesn't understand just about anything being said, and yet, Tyreece continues on. “But you know, you can't hide from life forever, eventually, life catches up to everyone. And when I was 8, that’s when it found us. Life took her away from me.”

Tyreece looks down at the woman staring up at him. “You know, I like drawing her every now and then so that I don't forget what she looks like. I think that’s what always scared me the most, forgetting.”

Ji says nothing, Tyreece notices but continues on anyway. “We used to come here all the time. This was her favorite place, and so she told me that this river, is where she’ll stay”

Tyreece wipes away a few stray tears and looks up at Ji, who has an expression of intent listening.

“You probably don't understand a damn word I just said”

Ji smiles at this; he probably didn't.

They go back to silence, letting the warmth of the river swallow them both up.

After those fateful days, it was clear to Tyreece that this old, lonely, worn-out bench would have a new companion. And, so as the sun would rise carrying with it a new day, Tyreece and Ji would sit between those two twin trees, on that old brown bench, looking out at that ever-flowing river. Each day the same: the two would attempt to communicate for a bit, and then revert to simply sharing each other's company. Now, if you've been fortunate enough to follow the river's current far enough away from the madness of life, then you would see that clearly there was a new energy that rested on that bench, one that to the common man would be quite difficult to describe. But if you are the kind of person that can see the picture, then, surely, there wouldn't be a doubt in your mind that this bench was slowly coming back together, that the trees were becoming younger, and that perhaps, even the river was beginning to reverse its course. Relationship, a curious thing, difficult to understand why it's necessary in one's life, after all a man may be stronger if he can focus solely on himself, but there is no question that it is a part of what makes us human, that we live to feel the warmth of another living being, even if only for a moment.

A slim beam of moonlight peaks through the window curtains, lighting up the empty bed. The weak light sneaks out the door and shines itself on the beautiful picture leaving.

She hurries towards the door, tears in her eyes. Tyreece rushes to her and grabs her wrist begging her to please go back into the sketchbook he made for her.

"I can't do this Reece."

"Please! Please! Don't leave"

"You're not here! Why should I be"

"I'm here! I'm here! I'm here!"

He lets go of her wrist. She stares at him for a long moment trying to understand where this man is.

"You're here as much as she is"

And with that, she storms out of the room, closing the door behind her, leaving the lonely man with nothing but his blank white page.

The sky mocks Tyreece, as the clouds hide the sun behind their thick walls. Unable to feel the warmth of the river, he sits broken between the two trees, on the old brown bench looking out at the seemingly silent river. He stares down motionlessly at his sketchbook; he tries to feel her warmth.

Suddenly, something builds up in Tyreece, and he throws the book away from him, unable to look at those eyes any longer. He puts his head in his hands and closes his eyes praying that something, anything, will hold him from falling into the darkness.

Feeling a new presence on the bench, Tyreece looks up to see Ji sitting next to him, and in hand, the sketchbook. But, it's opened to a new page; no longer does he see her sparkling eyes, instead, his mother's golden eyes stare up at him.

"What do you want Ji?", he asks, barely holding himself together.

Ji says nothing. He simply stares at Tyreece with a loving concern.

Tyreece can't bear to look at the little man's eyes; he begins to unravel.

"What do you want? What the hell do you want?", he screams at the man

Ji says nothing, he just looks down at the picture. Tyreece angrily grabs the sketchbook from Ji's little hands and tosses it away. No longer suppressing his emotions, he looks Ji in the eyes, and with all the anger, resentment, loneliness, and confusion left in him, Tyreece lets his darkness out. "What do you want from me? You here to mock me? Hm? Why the fuck are you here? WHY ARE YOU HERE?" And with a quick feeling of guilt that builds in him, Tyreece, puts his head back into his hands, unable to look at his friend.

But, Ji doesn't react to this; he simply looks out at the river and takes in a deep breath. With that breadth, he builds his own courage. Ji reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out his wallet. Tyreece notices the new movements and peaks over at the little man. Ji opens his wallet, pulls out a single photograph and holds it out to Tyreece with a small, painful, smile.

Tyreece takes the photo, and looks at a young Chinese boy, of about 8, sitting with a big golden smile that looks as if he has never seen how cruel life could be.

Ji looks at the photo, still, a small smile glued to his face, and says in his best English possible, "Chuan. His name. Chuan"

"Who is he?", Tyreece asks, praying that the answer in the back of his mind is the farthest thing from the truth

"My son", Ji responds

"Where is he?"

Almost with an answer, a ray of sunlight breaks through the clouds and lights the river up golden. Ji smiles at this change and as he looks out at the extraordinary view, he responds simply, "with the river".

And so tis' the place where the story begins: in a picture frame between two twin trees, on a lonely old bench, overlooking the glorious ever-changing flow of the river, where two unlikely friends wait by that river, day after day, together.