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5.12

Short Story

Anglo-Chinese School (Independent)



Anglo-Chinese School
(Independent)

A Methodist Institution
(Founded 1886)

Just Infinity

You stir the coffee in your favourite snowman-shaped mug slowly with a metal spoon. The spoon is gaining heat quickly, and you know it will burn your fingers soon, but you keep stirring. Your red pen sits snugly in the middle of an ocean of examination papers, staring placidly into your eyes. You see red lines everywhere, looping, knotting and criss-crossing on the marked papers. It reminds you of a nature documentary you've seen before.

A hunter.

A seal.

Knife.

Ice.

Blood.

You poke at the red pen and sigh. You've only completed marking a quarter of the essays. You have another three quarters left. You count sheep in your head. Every paper marked is a sheep jumping over the fence. Unlike the average farmer, you're glad the sheep are running away. You still have many sheep left. You try brainstorming ways to make the sheep that are lagging behind learn to jump higher. You give up before you begin.

You look out the window of your small room. You're poor, and you know it, but it doesn't stop you from giving in to your desires now and then. You think of your mountain bike, your gold earrings, your diamond necklace and the mug you're holding right now in your blistering hands. You smile abruptly and turn to the window.

It's raining outside. Water droplets collide with the glass violently like violent burglars with an equally violent agenda. You can't help but feel violent yourself. You look back at the blood trails on the ice, and you shudder, partly from the cold that seeps in from your air-conditioning, but partly also with ill-concealed frustration. You crumple a piece of paper and throw it into the dustbin that sits with its mouth open, hungry. It closes shut automatically. You wonder if maybe you should've added the auto-bin into the list of your splurges.

You remember the eight-year-old boy who'd bought you the red pen on your second Teachers' Day. You frown again and flip through the marked scripts.

You'd believed that most of the students would've done well. You'd believed it'd been an easy question. You'd believed nine-year olds wouldn't find it hard to talk about their first days in primary school; slightly exaggerated and fictionalised for interest.

You'd believed wrong. You can see that now.

All the papers you've marked so far bear a C-shaped stain. Your memories transport you to another time, another place.

A "C" stares back at your younger self. It's your Primary School Leaving Examination results. You've gotten a "C" in Mathematics, Science and Mother Tongue. You have a "B" in English. You know many have failed, and that you are lucky, somewhat, but you break down inside.

Your parents had aimed for a 265 and above. You look down at your certificate. The digits, "2," then another wry, "2" and finally, a laughing, "2," again. Your score: 222.

You'd worked hard. You'd gone for two tuition classes for each of your subjects, around ten classes in total, two classes every working day, and additional practice sessions with your mother on weekends. You'd believed that you'd do well. Maybe even 270. You were confident.

You'd believed wrong.

Looking now at the stacks of papers and the red lines snaking across them, you're shocked.

A teacher.

A student.

Red Pen.

Paper.

Red Ink.

You close your eyes and massage your temples slowly. You look out the window for some inspiration. The skies have cleared. It's only a slight drizzle now, and the sun is peeking out through the smothering embrace of the clouds. There's going to be a rainbow. Your stomach growls. You look up at the clock. It's 8'o clock in the morning. You've been marking for two hours without proper breakfast. You smile, delighted that you finally have an excuse to leave the house.

You walk out the door and down the street. There's a playground in the neighbourhood, next to the bakery and the hawker centre. It's a cemetery. No children, no laughter, no gossiping parents. The trees sway slightly in the wind, the only sign of life. Most are indoors, studying or playing games. Others are working to earn their keep.

You reach the bakery. It's quaint and small, but the smell of waffles and baked goods is alluring. A teenager stands behind the cash register, tapping on her phone with painted nails, bubble milk tea enveloped by the other hand. She looks up, startled when you enter but looks back down again, relieved, when she realises it's just you, not her boss. You gaze at the plethora of goods that lie facing you behind miniature see-through showrooms.

Chocolate donuts. Rainbow donuts. Caramel donuts. Cookies n' cream donuts. Honey pretzels. Chocolate pretzels. Ham n' cheese baguettes. Hotdog buns.

The donuts look relaxed and nonchalant, as if confident that you'll pick them again. You shake your head at them with a sly grin. Today, the pretzels call out to you with a special tune. You leave the bakery and walk up the stairs.

You sit down and look at your red pen once more. It seems angry with you for a change, as if it too wants to lick honey off its ink nib and feel chocolate melting in its ink chamber. You stick out your brown tongue at the pen. The pen seems to grimace.

You look down at the honey pretzel in your hands. You've already downed two chocolate ones. The shape of the pretzel is intricate, like a bow within a bow. You marvel at the patience of the baker. You've a lot to learn from this pretzel, you realise.

You pick up the pen and start reading another essay. She's started with "Once upon a time." You frown. She's been reading too many fairy tales. You scratch at the paper with your pen with the intention to tell her off, but stop halfway, with the cross only a single slanted line.

Why not start with 'Once upon a time?'

The left side of her brain: No, she can't. It's a scholastic essay, not a storybook.

The right side of her brain: Yes, she can! What is the point of teaching them to write fictional essays then, if not to increase their interests in novel writing? Are the essays written in school not springboards for their future novels?

You drop the pen. You rub your temples again and take a chunk of flesh out of the pretzel.

You decide to discuss it with the others. You fish out your phone, always on silent mode, from under your pillow and type in a single question, "Is it alright to start with 'Once upon a time,?'"

The answers are immediate. You feel like a cornered deer, arrows flying from all directions, confused as to the safest pathway.

"No! That's silly..."

"Uhm, doesn't matter I guess."

"Yeah, as long as the spelling, grammar and sentence structure is okay. As long as the story is interesting, etc. (But maybe not? Sounds a bit childish...)"

You think of your first national examination marking duty. You'd written B. Someone else, C, and yet another, A. This had happened for all the scripts, you remember. In the end, the president of the board had been the deciding factor. 'Might as well have marked all the scripts; waste of manpower,' you remember thinking.

You look back down at the honey-glazed pretzel. Your fingers are sticky now, your phone blinking and buzzing as if fighting for breath. You understand.

Fate, you think, is like honey.

You throw the phone onto your bed and head out to the toilet to wash your hands. You are relieved when the soap wins the war.

Soap, you think, is like willpower.

You look down at your hands again and sigh. The red marks have found their way there as well. Soap can't win the war this time.

Ink, you think, is like education.

You're angry at the marks. You want clean hands. Clean hands, clean brain, clear mind.

You bite your hand hard. The flesh of your palm reddens further.

You think of the honey-glazed pretzel.

You hurry back to the table. You look at the scripts that lie there like dead doves, symbols of freedom shot, flattened, plucked and disfigured. Wings clipped. Beaks removed. Eyes skewered, closed.

You search for your green pen. The pen you'd used when you were a student, some ten years ago. You find it, hiding, shy, under the cover of your clothes. You wield it proudly, marking them all again with a flourish. Not with red but with green.

Not with numbers or letters, but with pretzels.

With signs of infinity.