

# UC Merced

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“Where Am I?”- a short story

by Tiffany Ching-Han Chang

*\*all names are used in a fictitious way and are no means meant to represent anyone*

I held in my hands the small leather-bound journal. The first story she wrote was the shortest and was a fitting introduction to what I have read over endless times, but to me at least, was confusing. I drew my fingers across the letters too delicately written.

Story 1:

*There was once a tree on top of a lush green hill with an entourage of waving green grass. The tree had the answer to any question posed to it. It could tell a mother when her child would be born, a shepherd where sheep should graze, or how to cure a peasant's chills. Then one day, a stranger came into town preaching that the tree was cursed. The fathers and brothers fearing for the worst, burned every inch of that hill to ashes thinking they were protecting their families. Instead, the town was left in the darkness of unanswered questions. There has been some attempt to create the light and warmth of the tree to this very day. And for the mother that is shook by the moment her child falls sick, all she can do is cry.*

Those same words leap off the page again and again as I walk through this poor excuse of a desert which was nothing like the old browned pictures I saw when I was young. There were no tiny trees or bushes, not even a tumbleweed. The fact that I could have been related to one of the sons, hurts me. The act of doing such frightening and ignorant thing like killing a wise tree should be unheard of. But it doesn't matter now because I'm far away from home, or where I came from, which was the little shrinking hill on the horizon. Or maybe it was another hill, it

could even be a mountain. I have been longing for a new home forever, but I have never really felt myself mature.

Ever since I left, I kept from others because I think I am hideous, because many hide their children when they see me. My face is slightly burnt, a blemish I cannot hide with the thickest cloak I can find. My hands are awkward and clumsy to the point that if I ever do step into a town, I always break the items handed to me. I have once even cracked the very ground I stood on, causing fear of a terrible earthquake, then I was promptly kicked out.

My only future was very clear when I stepped out of that mountain, but I am not so sure now. The memories of my home may have wanted to leave the shelter of my brain after one too many headaches. These headaches happen after you've been thrown out of towns for ten, twenty, and maybe thirty years. The aimless wandering seems to have never stopped after I learned my lesson, and therefore I could never figure out how to do what was asked of me. I sat on the sand with my thoughts as the sun went lower into the horizon. My task of finding "a partner, a companion, someone that knows how you feel", anyone at all just so I wasn't alone ... grew unfulfilled each day that passed.

The sun was going down again, marking the end to another plain day. I felt so lost in my mind and in my past. How do I actually feel about the task? Were those the exact words I was given, or have I already fabricated my own? Forget it... Who cares? All that matters now is that I have my book, food and water. Ah, my book is still there! And of course, it's real! Always when I touch the smooth yet fuzzy cover, I see the same, few memories flash in my mind. I opened the book back up, placed it on my knees and moved on to the next passage as to sooth myself before sleep.

Story 2:

*Two unnamed children were playing in a garden when one day the younger of the two children discovers a path. Hidden by years of growing bushes and fallen leaves, lined with little ghostly stones, and faces carved on them like jack-o-lanterns. The younger one dragged the older child by the heels. Both children then tell their busy parents whose fleeting eyes only look at the children's dirty shoes. Down the path the two go, holding hands as they reach a grove. But as the two run faster trying to reach the trees past the empty pasture, they end up where they started.*

*Many of these places exist in the world, but as two bored siblings (I suggest do this too fellow reader) they gave in to their imagination. A dining hall, a grand picnic with a grand king, all those childhood characters coming to life to haunt the siblings. Each night new stories emerge from the two, garrulously talking about each day's little tragedies.*

*As steadfast as parents are, they begin to worry about their two angels. The parents quickly ask for help and medicine was quickly applied to stop the fantasies, but to no effect. On one night, a parent, young and tired accidentally swallowed a pill meant for the children. The parent squirmed and writhed the finger out of the mouth, but it was too late. Distraught, the parent tried to drink lots of water to drown its effects, but they fell promptly asleep. The next morning, one of the children was missing; the parents searched then thinking their child had been succumbed to the unfound grove. The other child who was flooded with grief and also left. Neither of them were ever found again.*

*Years later, after rummaging through a closet, a person finds two baskets both bound by ivy and flaking dirt from the bottom. Amazed, the person puts the artifacts on display. Then on the night that the last living parent died, both baskets disappear from their groved display.*

Haunting. Whistling, I ponder whether or not I was real and the story implied, only others who remember me know of my existence. I was somehow on the road again, I thought of my tendency to avoid others and if I disappeared... I saw the tracks behind me disappear as well. Then I felt flame that engulfed my face and the smell of singed skin. It started to engulf my existence and everything I owned. I've seen the flame more than I ever wanted.

§

The sun was heating my cheek as I woke up, it was only a bad dream. I sat up and thought about what it all meant. The eventual fading of things that were once there could reflect anyone on this planet or desert. I guess the only solution to solving this identity crisis was to write these various thoughts in my mother's story book, taking it and chucking it into a town before I died. I was reluctant to do so because that would mean I would have to write about fires and the one that consumed my desire for contact.

The day seems far yet close, a wave that washes my face with a new expression of fear. That day I was at the edge of a small oasis and there I saw terraced homes and crops. Stealing the small dried-up carrots and peas was easy but I needed more, if I wanted to travel further. I believed my canteen had recently broke and I was quickly searching for replacements. I had to go there, no other way. I needed help. Lips chapped; I drank the small oasis dry.

It was a foolish decision.

They strung me up with thin rope barely the width of my finger. There was a lot of it though. Branches, twigs, and even wood were ripped from houses and thrown at my feet with great passion. I think passion is what fueled the fire crawling up my legs. Then drops of salvation fell on my almost crisped legs. Must have been a lot of rain for the people that tried to "cook"

me, were in fear of me being “washed” first. Soon, all that was left was black charcoal and one flame which I stomped down on. I think I still had my shoes back then, so it wasn’t as painful.

For the endless string tied around me, it took me hours to get out of. However, time and rain became my friends. When I was finally able to break one strand, the water soaking my clothes helped me slip under all the rope. A grin formed on my face when I finally fell from my bonds, I bunched up all my belongings and crawled out of the oasis. I never wanted to see that place again. On my way out, I grabbed a water tank or something and then used it as a bottle. I cupped as much water as I could before the rain stopped and when it did, I finished off the water that was dripping off my clothes. The rain made me think of what it took to pacify a fire and home.

My home was once a nice skin tent, one of many protecting us from the sun but one night, I was tempted to create the beautiful warm glow of fire myself. Only she will remember my unblemished face as she cried clear crystal tears to cool my burn.

She was also the last voice I heard when she gave me the book containing the stories, I carry. I even remember the dust settling in her eyes as well. Her last words were: *“Leave and remember to read and write in the book! I guess I’ll see you when I find you! Shame, shame. Not a motherly thing to say...”*

Something snaps, a rip too; then finally a crack. In an instant, I came back to the present, and although it was still dark, I decided to carry on, and try to leave behind the memories. I read as I walked.

Story 3:

*You can hear them laughing from a mile away, and their bottles clinking in the wind, sure to make you mad. What were they up to today? Then a sound that I was meant to hear: neighing.*

*I wanted it to end! I stepped out and went behind the fence at the end of the block where they usually met. Crouching down and hoping that I wouldn't step on the hem of my dress, I saw them dragging a colt by a rope. I followed them, making sure my shoes didn't rub against the sidewalk. The six of them; they threw the rope onto a cable line running through our town. The hooded figures took the rope and heaved the colt up, and off the safety of the concrete sidewalk. I should have stopped myself. The bellowing of the horse grew louder.*

*Why were they so cruel? We were hungry, but never this desperate. I had to leak out the enmity bottled in me. They heard me! One of the member's hoods came off. I screamed louder. I made sure to shatter the bowl of night onto the day floor.*

*“BROTHER!”*

*He faced me and took off his hood.*

*“Sister, I'm in hell!”*

After finishing the passage, I continued my walk forward and it formed my own trail through the sand, I felt a deep sense of “nothing”. I was neither happy nor hopeful, I would ever reach anywhere worth staying. That's where I'm at; hapless. Hopeless, gasping for air sometimes, I was getting more tired as the sun rose, and the mirages started to rise. Now running, just because I want to feel sweat dripping from my face to cool me. Then I feel something different: wind. The wind had to come from somewhere because the sand barely shifts. As I slowed down, what started as a zephyr picked up into somewhat of a storm. The dust at my feet stopped settling and what I was wearing was finally put in use. The sand went up in a vortex like none I have ever seen before. Maybe I stepped onto one of their traps and had been caught again. I might not be as lucky as I was before. Like a charmed serpent, the sand went up my legs and went into my nostrils which caused me to cough and pass out.

§

The devil and death itself have freed me from the trek, something had forced me to go on and saved me! Unfortunately, I was wrong, the truth was a harder pill to swallow. Those same things that destroyed my beloved home were *underneath* me. They carried me on what seemed to be a rug, similar to the ones I used to see in camp. They squabbled and shook and tossed me about. I hoped there were few of them and I could easily escape. I think it's harder to do that when you are rolled in a carpet that's wound in ties as thick as my biggest toe. Whoever did this to me knew me, and how I was a fighter and a harbinger of chaos. They were upset that they missed a victim in their massacre. They decided I needed to pay for all the years I was free from their grasp, free from the ground.

I think the first thing I thought about when I discovered that escape was impossible, was the book. I recalled that when they grabbed me, they must have grabbed my bag too. I think they took my bag off of me so I could fit in this rug. Then there was a slight change in the way those creatures walked instead of shaking me, they stopped rearranged themselves evenly while putting me in the middle and stepped in a march. I felt the blood rushing to my head while we inclined and like a log, they pushed me upright. I was a wrapped log in the middle of what seemed like a courtyard made of limestone elevated above the sand by steps. It was quiet and then seven of the creatures in shining in a light blood-red came out. Then came the oddest sequence: four of the creatures on the bottom two in the middle and one on top. They absorbed so much light from the sun, it turned dark and cold for a moment. Like the desert was on "skip" and then the sun was shining again.

They formed a "she" that was half my height and had fur with petal patterns that was different than the others, but still had eyes that increased tenfold in darkness. She was them and



they were her. She squeaked and the one creature that carried my bag came forward and dumped everything out. She picked up my book and mumbled a noise that sounded like a rusty clapper and they dropped me. I was lying face up and feeling the worst, then she climbed up the rolled-up rug and sat right at my chest, staring at me.

“Everyone you love and will ever love is gone. Yet you still persist.” Her followers continued to chant this phrase as she opened my beloved book in the most sporadic way and began reading the random passage she landed on.

“Reading” is not the right word seems to be an understatement, what happened was more like a performance to me and her subjects. Her lips did not seem to move, and her eyes kept staring to the point I had to close mine. Her voice was worse, it was inside of my head and her words were screams that made me want to grab my satchel and put my head in it. Yet I could stretch my hands upwards, my arms slowly warming up into a light carpet burn.

“Story ----:

*“Aren’t you Death? Can’t you die? What is death?”*

*And now the heavy hitter: “Am I dead?” Have you ever heard me ask others what I truly look like or me ask them where I came from? They are the ones who thought of me first before anything else, so should I be asking the questions? Why am I the end? Can I be the beginning? What’s so scary about me? Is it the uncertainty of what I would do next? I think only a few of them trust me and I think that is enough to make me feel better now and then. ---”*

This passage was a pretty sentimental choice, if you ask me. My arms were outstretched above my head, and I started tapping away at the ground. I was so happy when a piece of tile broke away from the platform, sneaking it down my shirt. As I tossed it around from hand to hand, sick of the lame routine of doing this for many years. Then I noticed something: the sun,

my tossing, how her subjects rattled from one foot to the other, and my heartbeat, all synced. At those moments I didn't care that the desert went on forever and ever. Even if the princess suddenly changed to the most erotic and seducing of passages towards me, it would only be deflected by the painful beating and drumming in my head. She continued her reading with fervor:

*“They always think I work for someone, one that guides me and shows me who to lead. That is one of the misconceptions I hate to hear and for countless times I told them I work alone. Here's one I think no one has heard: I revived the first one that died. That one was the richest, even maybe a god! Full of life and with nothing to lose so I brought that one back! The first thing the One said was, “I have taken my body and kept it and therefore some earth. I have taken life from the tree that grows above me and the creek below me. Put me in this hill and you will see the tree starting from the heart into the sky”.*

My vision came in and out, somehow, I shifted the piece to my calloused hands. It would have taken weeks for me to cut my way through the rug with a dull limestone rock, but its rough surface turned into smooth leather. I felt pure surprise. It was a sort of magic, a transformation, I was no longer holding a rock, something cool peaked out near my feet. I turned the blade around to my side, trying not to cut myself and sliced my way through the rug slowly. She was standing on top of an empty cocoon. The petal clad fiend did not even see me unseam her subjects until their heads of sentient straw clatter on the floor. The princess threw my mother's book aside and looked at it with shame. Then she turned to face me, with a taciturn look into my eyes, spread her arms wide. With the friction my sword had started to glow, powered by my frustration and fervor, and I split her in half, both sides of her slightly on fire.

Once I had wrapped all of them in their own “gift” of a rug, I gathered my possessions and threw the rug over the platform into the sand. I called upon the wind to grind the bodies away with sand and time. Then taking my new--found rapier I slammed the hilt into the center of the limestone platform in celebration. A hole appeared from under my feet and at its sides it repelled the sand, the world seemed to swirl slowly around me when I fell in.

§

I was on a throne made of calloused brown material and when I looked up, I saw the hole was fixed with the jewel of the sun. A rare color, one that I have never seen before randomly attached with the material that made my seat. I plucked one off my throne and admired its symmetry. I try to look below me and all I see is that same color. Endlessly repeated onto the floor. Then I felt something creeped up my hand with the same color, only a tad more see-through. The parts inside were pumping, tightening and releasing like my own muscles. This time I felt that whatever it was, it did not want to kill me. I watched it form a bend, straighten and crawl and crawl and crawl...