

# Smiles Etched Into Stone

*by* j. lin

We were sitting at a diner when I said to him, "I'm a duck and you're a stem." And he asked, "What does that mean?" I wanted to explain, explain everything to him. I was more than willing, but no words became relevant or coherent enough. So I kept on going, "Tomorrow I'll be a rock and you'll be a chinchilla's left paw."

He stared at me with those solemn eyes, trying to decipher. The green tablecloths were of an incredibly warm tone. A grin worked its way across my lips. I tried to block it with the glass of water.

I continued, "If I'm a duck and you're a stem, then I can peck you all the time. And the water that drips off your back will wash the grits from my webs." Then I laughed.

The child sitting nearby reared his head to glare at me. I wanted to snarl back, "You don't know what I have been through."

The child looked too healthy, too sure of himself and how much he could give and he was a mere eighteen-months. He had one fist confidently around a strip of bacon.

I wish I had known my limits. For many nights, I listened to amateurs sing with raspy sincerity the same song over and over again. I was holding on, waiting for everything in our past to sort themselves out and lead us up to a particular moment. A moment that'd make every numbing obstacle we had to go through worth it for they all led us here.

Ian and I took a walk through the aqueduct one afternoon right after a mild rain. The murky leaves kept on swinging down to pile on top of the dirt and plastic. A section of the baseball field that curved inward was filled with clear water. Birds were dipping their feet and

the tips of their wings in. The sun set them apart enhancing the ice-sharp oblivion in their eyes. I swore I heard them say "Marry me. Marry me." To whom, it didn't matter. They fluttered and I wanted to flutter with them.

Love the first time felt like an aimless wander around a dark room, stubbing one's baby toe against a sudden and unexpected wall, again and again. And in my mind, I scolded myself, why would you keep doing that you stupid, but I couldn't stop.

Ian and I met by coincidence outside of the library, almost colliding with each other on the dirty steps overflowing with pigeons. Our mutual friend was with him. Later, we grabbed coffee and I told him about how once a pigeon crapped on the arm of my jacket and I tried to convince everyone at school it was paint.

"I was such a liar those days," I said. "I don't even remember why."

"Not enough attention from your parents?" he said.

"Maybe. I lied to my mom a lot about money. I'd tell her I need new pencils but really, I'd spend a dollar or two on ding dongs and potato chips."

"You didn't like the cafeteria's sloppy joes?"

"Nor the grilled cheese. Or the apples with the worms. My mom would never get me junk food."

"Did the apples really have worms?"

"Well, no, not for certain, but they looked like there could be worms, a very real possibility."

We kept talking and before long, we were attached. We followed

each other down streets exchanging comments about the global recession, the plummeting temperature, how I was terrified of incredibly small dogs, how he loved the smell of the street carts though he would never eat a sausage on a stick from there.

Soon, I couldn't stop petting his head, smoothing the coarse hair back over his ears. And he couldn't stop feeding me little bits throughout the day, a green grape, a piece of cheese. We were like two gorillas deep inside a forest, faraway from the sound of taxis honking, the clonk of gas pipes being laid and the thuds of trees being chopped off, away from the silence of bodies cremating.

We sat on benches all over the city and talked with giddiness. We were immune, immortal, like those statues holding parchments, holding each other. The slightly wise smiles etched into stone.

Since it wasn't my first time being in love, I paid attention to walls, putting caution tape here and there. Don't step there after 2:00 pm, keep calm if there at that spot, don't be defensive, don't snap, silence is always better, and such.

During the good times, which were most times, I found myself telling him everything, things I had long forgotten and things that just suddenly pieced together. I told him, "My uncle left me. He was my father figure for years. My dad left me. He was the first. And my mom left me. She was the last, but I took that the hardest, I think. They all left, though in very different ways."

He looked very concerned afterwards. He had taken psychology for three semesters before switching to chemistry. He still had books by Freud and Jung and their interpreters and translators. Little mounds about archetypes and dreams beside my Henry James, whom I never particularly liked, but felt required to possess.

A week later over breakfast, he asked, "Who would you be most

willing to forgive?"

"My dad. He is the only one." I dipped my pancake in syrup, focusing on the mushy taste of it in my mouth.

"Not your mom?"

"The other two, they didn't have to. They could have easily made the choice not to. I don't care if they were conditioned or whatever, they didn't realize or so forth, but they didn't have to. Just one simple choice would have made such a difference to me."

We held each other afterwards drinking our orange juice. The buzzing in my right ear quieted. "I'm serious about being a writer, you know," I said.

"Are you?"

"You know how kids have these grand dreams but as they grow up, they forget about them? I don't ever want to do that. I think that'd be the most tragic thing. Just thinking about letting it go gives me this squeezed feeling in my chest. I don't want to be one of those people who gave up on a dream just because it was impossible. I refuse to."

"Okay," he said and we held hands.

"I'm so serious, so, so serious." I held his hand tightly.

During the bad times we were as silent as the looming buildings that surrounded us. The apartment felt a little darker. Our books looked dustier. The dishes in the sink seemed lonelier. The space more menacing.

The first time, I had kept pushing myself deeper and deeper because

I thought that that was it, that there was nowhere else to go, and that it would last and stretch on to accommodate me no matter how hurt I felt. I believed that I would grow to be better able to store the piercing numbing pain. I would grow and I would be a better person for it. I believed that my love for him was forever and everywhere.

I was surprised when that tie completely vanished over the course of a few nights. I began to quickly forget all my passionate declarations. I forgot the images, of long introspective letters, of brown-eyed children who resembled us equally, as passionate as dancers though quiet, fickle though more capable of sincerity than any other temperament. I forgot and that was that.

The diner was empty that last night. The winds blew hollow against the windows. We were as solemn as the wintry trees outside. He was already fading in front of me, one shade at a time, like an old keepsake, an aging art piece. We parted by a sprawling parking lot, choosing sides and leaving nothing behind. We were so far away from when I had first stood in front of him and fluttered with all of my sincerity.

I often dreamt that he'd write me this long, long letter.

A letter full of irrelevant words.

He used to listen to my heartbeat and it used to make me smile. Some time ago, I went to an eastern medicine doctor for a persistent headache. She diagnosed my pulse and told me that I was very angry and very sad. Shāng xīn.

The irony of it made me smile.

He never wrote me a letter.

These days I looked so pitiful that strangers would come up to

reassure to me on the streets. "You're beautiful and smart. What have you got to be anxious about?"

When I returned to the aqueduct, the pond was gone and so were the birds. I hoped they vanished to somewhere unreachable by human limits. I hoped that someday I could do the same. To Ian, I had wanted to say, "I'm an atom and you're space revolving. We're static, we're air, we're nothing and as result, we can be anything. Marry me. Marry me."

At home, I sat by the window and listened to the traffic, to the dull sound of streets being repaired, to coffee being slurped and footsteps heaving past, to ashes dancing. I am back, I thought. I felt as if a whole line of pillars within me were being crushed, one tier at a time. Some guy whistled a song while passing beneath my window. A familiar song. The sky was a flimsy blue and the clouds were bundled and yellow. The birds on the rooftop across the street took turns taking flight, vanishing one by one. I sat there for a long time.

