

Brian, Lisa And The Robinsons

by J.A. Pak

Sometimes you're searching for a family and you don't even know it. Sometimes a family finds you. Like in the packet of photographs Brian found on the floor of a bus. He had to read into them, make up his mind about who was who but this had all been set up for him from almost infancy and there was very little puzzling to be done. Mother hugging daughter hugging baby hugging son hugging husband hugging dog. Brother and sister and dog. Baby and dog. Husband and son playing basketball. Husband and son fighting over last hotdog. Grandma with baby in arms. Three generations of happiness.

Brian was a boy who collected things. So it was natural for him to keep the bulging packet of pictures. He liked order, and if there had been anything to indicate ownership, Brian would have done his best to place the packet back where it belonged. Now, they were his.

At home he looked at the pictures again. He arranged them and rearranged them. The boy was around his age, eleven. His sister looked eight. The baby about a year old. There were thirty-six pictures. He tacked each one up on his wall, row by row, half an inch apart. Each picture was like a window, and very soon, without trying very hard, he could see inside the window and got to know the family very well.

Robinson was their name.

Tim was his best friend. His sister Sara could be a real pain. But she was sweet, really. The baby, Mickey, and the dog, Honey. She was a Labrador mix. Brian loved playing at Tim's house because

Brian didn't have his own dog. And Tim's mom, Judy, was at home all the time, taking care of them. There were always cookies baking in the oven. Tim's dad, George, had converted the basement into a playroom for his model railroad. Sometimes Brian would spend the night and Tim, him, his dad, would spend the entire night making things, tiny trees, traffic signs, rail stations, even people. It was addictive, watching the trains run. They could go up to one mile per hour. Which when you converted it into miniature world time, was wicked speed.

"The Victorians thought people would blow up if they went any faster than a horse could run," Mr. Robinson said. "And now, look at where we are, boys, look at where we are."

Mrs. Robinson came down with a plateful of sandwiches, reminding them they hadn't eaten for hours and how incredibly hungry they were.

"I'll go get the milk," Mrs. Robinson said, running back up.

"I'll come and help," Brian volunteered.

"How sweet of you, Brian," Mrs. Robinson said. They went up to the kitchen together, where Mrs. Robinson got a large pitcher of ice-cold milk from the refrigerator. "Here, you can carry this and I'll bring the glasses. And let's not forget the peanut butter cookies!"

It was a sunny house and a sunny family. They took all their vacations together, dog included. The parents would never think of eating out without the kids. They even felt bad about leaving the dog behind. The Robinsons had such an innocent idea of family, Brian didn't tell them that at home he was often dropped off with some paid cousins while his parents went off to Hawaii or Las Vegas. That his dad had an annual ski trip with his old college buddies and his mom liked to go away for weekends alone—"to

unwind from life". He spent every summer vacation at a camp, and he knew his parents privately called his three-month absence "Liberation." As he grew older, Brian understood how tongue-in-cheek everything at home was. His parents were known to be very funny, very witty. Great party-givers. And of course he became an important part of the verbal volleys, quick and swift, admired by his parents.

Once—and he couldn't remember the circumstances—Brian repeated something his parents always said: "It's better to be admired than loved."

"Do you really think so, Brian?" Mrs. Robinson said, distressed. She had big tears in her eyes and she had to leave the room. Brian thought a great deal about what he'd said, why it had hurt Mrs. Robinson so. He was very careful about what he said from then on. He wouldn't hurt Mrs. Robinson for anything in the world. Mr. Robinson had explained that Mrs. Robinson had a "great, big heart" which made her feel things more. So they were all very careful.

The Robinsons lived two blocks east of Brian. Brian's house straddled the school district line. It put him on the opposite side of the Robinson's so he didn't go to the same school as Tim. It was a great lament between the two boys. Brian had friends at his school but they all lived so far away from him. Brian took the bus home alone. It put him just outside of things, enough to see how the others got closer while he was left inch by inch behind.

One day, there was a new girl at school. She lived across the street from Brian. After an awkward few weeks, they got to talking on the bus. They started doing homework together, either at her house or his. Which meant they talked a lot and watched TV a lot, usually until it was close to the time a parent might come home.

Her name was Lisa and she didn't have any brothers or sisters

either. So he introduced her to the Robinsons.

"That's Judy. She stays at home now to take care of the kids, but she's really a teacher. She used to teach the fourth grade."

"She seems really nice," Lisa observed.

"Oh, she is! Really nice. You'll like her."

"The baby's so cute."

"Their grandma lives with them. Grandpa Joe died two years ago. That's when Grandma Phyllis moved in with them. She's really nice too. Judy's probably going to go back to work soon. Because Grandma Phyllis is there now."

"She should stay at home until the baby's older," Lisa advised.

"She probably will," Brian thought. "She's always saying her children are her first priority."

"Tim's our age?"

"This was taken right after Sara had one of her cavities filled. That's why she's got her hand on her face like that. Her birthday's real soon. Tim's birthday, there was a big party at Smithoon's. It was great."

Lisa ended up going to the Robinsons' as much as Brian. She spent most of her time with Judy and Sara. Sometimes she told Brian things he never would have known about the Robinsons because of the things Judy or Sara told her. One summer day, the Robinsons took them on a trip to the mountains. They spent the day swimming in the cold lake, eating barbecued hotdogs, playing volleyball, all the things that made a summer day perfect.

The next day Lisa confessed that she and Tim had kissed behind a tree when no one else was looking. Brian felt betrayed and wouldn't speak to Lisa again.

"I'm sorry," Lisa said. "I won't do it again."

"Doesn't matter," Brian dismissed. "You've ruined everything."

He left Lisa crying.

She moved away soon after. Something terrible had happened. Her father had shot her mother, and then himself. Lisa had moved away to live with her grandma.

Lisa's mother had been having an affair. Her father had found out and went insane. Brian slowly learned all this growing up. It was because they were Russian and Russians were volatile. But Brian shrugged his shoulders whenever he heard these things. It was a life-long regret that he had left Lisa crying. If he could only go back and change things.

One day, when he was seventeen, he was at a party and he ran into Lisa. She was quite pretty now, with long brown hair and hazel eyes. They sat outside, away from everyone and talked like they used to do.

"What do you think you'll do when you're all grown up?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I don't know, either," she laughed.

She had long pale legs that looked grown up already in her high wooden heels.

"How are the Robinsons?" she asked.

"Good. Judy's a principle of a high school now. George isn't a stockbroker anymore. He never liked it. He's got enough money now to do what he's always wanted to do, anyway. He's writing a novel. A political thriller. It's not half bad. He got me and Tim to read it, to see what we think. Grandma Phyllis died. A couple of years ago. Emphysema. Which was really weird 'cause she never smoked or anything. But she used to be a waitress, you know, before all the no-smoking laws, so they think that might be it. But cancer's so weird. You never know, do you?"

"How's Tim?"

"Pretty much the same. Maybe you should come and visit."

"I'd like to."

"You have my number?"

"Is it the same?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I've got to go now."

He didn't see her again until many years later. He was eating dinner alone at a restaurant, sitting at the long bar; so was she. She was very happy to see him, although they'd waited several minutes before approaching, trying to make sure there was a shared recognition before opening up.

Her hair was short now. But she was still very thin, maybe even thinner. It worried him.

"So, how have you been?" he asked.

"Can't complain. How about you?"

"Good. What are you up to?"

"Well, I'm a photographer now," she said, smiling. "Family pictures. I have a studio at a mall. What about you?"

"I help operate a chain of restaurants."

"Which chain?"

"Sizzling Jack Steaks? That's part of our chain. And Margarita Mex. Not terribly glamorous or exciting. Are you married now? Family? Kids?" He didn't want to probe, disturb things that were probably better left still.

"Was married. For ten years. Didn't work out. No kids. And you?"

"I've never had the time to think about marriage. Or kids."

"Do you want to get married?"

"Me? I think that's all a little too late for me now."

"We're only in our forties," she laughed. "We still have half our lives. Maybe more."

"I guess you're right. Like they say, if the right woman comes along."

"You make things very hard for yourself, don't you? And the Robinsons? How are the Robinsons?"

"Oh, very well. Tim's working at NASA. Turned out he's some kind of genius at mathematics. Found out at Harvard. He's married, to a marvelous, marvelous woman. She's a musician. A cellist. And they have three amazing, gorgeous children, two girls and a boy."

"I used to have a tremendous crush on him in grade school."

"I remember that well. Didn't I catch the two of you kissing?"

"You were so angry at us."

"Well, you know how it is, messing with the status quo."

"Forgive me?"

"Long forgotten."

Lisa started digging around in her purse. She had a diary and some pictures.

"Look."

She showed him a picture of a couple. Lisa and a man. A man who looked like Tim.

"It's a picture of my ex."

"You married Tim," Brian said, amazed.

"Well, someone I hoped would be Tim. Someone I tried to make into Tim. I never should have gotten mixed up with the Robinsons. Or you, for that matter. Perfection really screws you up."

"My apologies."

"I did want to have children," she suddenly confessed. "I really did. But I was afraid—of screwing everything up. Of things happening. So what is everyone else up to?"

"Judy and George are retired. They're fostering children now. George's novels didn't go so well, but he's been writing children's books on trains and they're doing very well. Sara works for an organization that focuses on environmental issues. Her husband's an activist too. They have twins, Jack and Jeremy. Both very gifted pianists. And Mick—he likes to go by Michael now—he's in New York, writing for magazines. Would you...would you like to see pictures?"

"Yes."

They drove to Brian's apartment. He'd added considerably to the collection. Volumes and volumes of albums.

"They look as happy as ever," Lisa said. "I'm so glad. I was so afraid, but look, they look so healthy and happy. Every single one of the Robinsons."

"I like to think we were their first foster children."

"I guess we were."

"So we're part Robinson."

"I guess we are," she said, astonished. "Should we take some pictures? Of us?"

That weekend, Brian came to Lisa's studio.

"These aren't our first pictures," Lisa said, after she'd spent several hours getting the right shots.

"Aren't they?"

"I found this."

Lisa showed Brian a picture of the two of them when they'd been eleven. She had no idea who had taken them, but they looked happy. Just like the Robinsons.

