

Where Youth Grows Pale (TH: ลู่อีกฟากฝั่ง)



Author : Schvala

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Copyright contact :

Rinrada Khongpiboonkit

Tel : (+66) 82-0281404

Email : schvala.lanternnight@gmail.com

Premise :

'Let's keep this *secret* just between us, promise ?'
'Promise.'

Amidst the misery of childhood, Papai and Tiwa, two half-orphaned souls, found refuge in a magical place across the river, where all their imaginations came true.

However, the imaginary realm could not last forever. Finally, the harsh grasp of reality reached out, compelling the two to confront their own darkest pasts. As the boundary between reality and imagination blurred, they were forced to journey back through the shadow of their memories, relying on their friendship as the only guiding light in this quest to salvage the enchanting realm they cherished.

'Where Youth Grows Pale' delicately explores every aspect of childhood—a realm both intimidating and enchanting—through the lens of a magical and compelling narrative. It invites readers to embark on a journey where the mystical and the real blend together, encouraging reflection on the universal complexities of youth.

Selling points :

1. 'Where Youth Grows Pale' delicately paints an intimidating yet enchanting portrait of childhood through a magical and unreliable narrative. It also addresses critical issues affecting children, such as mental health, domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect, all seen through the eyes of children.
2. This young adult literature has the power to captivate readers of all ages—both children and adults—with its cliffhanging storyline, dramatic turning points, and imaginative setting.
3. Set in a magical and enchanting world, the story is versatile for various adaptations, including a graphic novel, picture book, webtoons, comic book, and animation.

Synopsis

The story developed around two characters, 'Papai' (TH: พระพายุ) and 'Tiwa' (TH: ทิวา), two half-orphans who crossed paths in the midst of a sparkling late summer afternoon in a backyard near a tranquil river. Tiwa and his mother were about to move in to live with Papai and her father. Initially, Papai despised Tiwa, ignoring his presence.

One day, a week after the first meeting, Papai found a mysterious sketchbook in the garden. She was mesmerized by the fantastic pictures of imaginary creatures drawn in it. After realizing that the sketchbook belonged to Tiwa, her interest in the strange boy grew. She then asked Tiwa to draw her a picture of the Old Grandfather Tree, an ancient magical tree from her imagination, who first planted his roots deep down since the very beginning of the world and would live long until the end of time, to tell stories long forgotten to any wanderers. From that moment onwards, the friendship between the two children quietly blossomed.

On that same afternoon, Tiwa felt something calling out for him from the other side of the river, which was covered with the infinite shadows of the trees. When he asked Papai what lay beyond, she proposed they cross the river together to explore. A dark, mysterious forest awaited them, where they discovered the Old Grandfather Tree from Papai's tale, exactly as Tiwa had drawn. In that astonishing moment, the tree opened its eyes, inviting them to hear its tales.

The first tale featured a lonely girl who lived by the river and a young boy who dreamed of bringing his artwork to life, which exactly mirrored the two's real stories. As the tale reached the part where the boy's pictures came to life, Tiwa's sketchbook started shaking. Then, in that brief fleeting moment, all imaginative creatures emerged alive from the sketchbook—a one-eyed giant rabbit, tree fairies, a stone giant, a phoenix—before fading away in the shadows of the trees.

But in the next moment, Papai and Tiwa found themselves waking up from that hazy dream with no trace of magic. Tiwa wondered whether all that happened was simply a feverish midday dream, but Papai was sure that the magical moment had indeed happened. Thus, the magical realm on the other side of the river became their secret kingdom.

Ever since that day, the two children would venture into the magical realm, searching for the mythical creatures in the morning and resting under the gentle shade of the Old Grandfather Tree in the late afternoon. One day, the second tale was told—the story of a timid, cowardly boy behind a sturdy wall who believed that there was a dangerous monster on the other side of the wall. Until his mother disappeared beyond the wall, the boy must make a decision: will he overcome his fear and step beyond that dreadful wall to save his mother, or will he remain cowering on this side forever? Yet, the tale suddenly stopped there without ending. The ancient tree then left a mysterious message, telling Tiwa that it was he who would finish this story.

On the same day as the second tale was told, Tina's mother discovered that the two went beyond the river, breaking the forbidden rule. She angrily threatened them that she would inform Papai's father if both went beyond the river again. Helplessly, they had to accept this ultimatum. Late that night, Tiwa thought back on his dark past, to all those dreadful nights when he and his mother had lived in fear—of those nights when Tiwa's father smashed through the door and dragged his mother away—those nights when Tiwa could do nothing but cower in fear all alone in his room while the screams and sound of something breaking echoed from the other side of the wall. Not until the night of Tiwa's 7th birthday, when Tiwa finally mustered his courage to intervene when his father was about to strike his mother for the first time.

Back to the present, days passed by in a cool, silent way as the two could not visit their magical kingdom anymore. In the end, Papai approached Tiwa, and together, they stealthily escaped when Tina's mother was not looking. Silently crossing the river and caught in the heavy rain, they sheltered in the hollow under the Old Grandfather's tree's trunk. The rain brought Papai back to the

day when her mother vanished. The Old Grandfather Tree shared the third tale—a story of a girl in a land of ghosts—lonely, untouchable, and desperate until a ghost began noticing her.

Awakening from the shared dream, Papai and Tiwa found themselves by a campfire under the gentle glow of the full moon, surrounded by mythical creatures from Tiwa's art. They were invited to join the campfire, dancing barefoot together before soaring through the night sky to the full moon.

As the campfire dimmed and mythical creatures faded, the children lay under the stars, sharing heartfelt conversations. The night lingered as if perpetual, and in that endless night they shared, the two became friends for life.

Morning arrived as a ferocious seize on Papai's arm. Papai, startled from her sleep, woke up to find her father staring down angrily at her. She was dragged home and locked in her room as a punishment. Tiwa, realizing his mother betrayed their secrets, confronted her, leading to painful words and memories—"What if Tiwa was never born?".

Papai remained locked in her isolated cage for a week. She heard the forest's call every day and night until one day it fell silent, being destroyed by the outside world. When her father entered the room to release her, the girl accused him of the destruction of her magical realm. Their confrontation turned violent before her father left the room, leaving broken remnants of anger behind.

That night, the boundary between imagination and reality blurred. Papai and Tiwa reunited in their dream and returned to their kingdom beyond the river for the last time. But amidst the encroaching fog of dreams, their paths diverged and became lost to each other. Within the fragile realm between dream and reality, the two had to face the broken past they'd been evading their entire lives.

Tiwa returned to his dreadful father's house, reverting to the 7-year-old boy who cowered in fear behind the wall, unable to do anything. But when memories of Papai flooded his mind—the stars reflecting in her dazzling eyes and her gentle words assuring him that his magic was real—he gathered his courage to step beyond that dreadful wall he once feared.

Papai, on the other hand, encountered the shadow of her mother and lost her once again. Drowning in the storm of sorrow, she struggled to break free until Tiwa's voice called out from afar beyond the endless storm. Realizing what she had sought all her life, the girl bade a solemn farewell to her mother for the final time and emerged from within the calming winds.

Reunited, the two children embraced each other. The Old Grandfather Tree welcomed and bid them farewell. Then they both soared into the night sky, leaving behind the echoes of their shared dreams and the fragments of the world between reality and imagination.

English Sample (Chapter 1-3)

I Under the Raintree

In the beginning, it was not yet a story.

But a collection of pictures, of words, of memories, hazy and swirling—moving aimlessly, scattering. To put everything together, piecing them bit by bit — that is how the story began.

Starting with the memory of the sunlight that filters through like pearls in the midsummer afternoon, somehow resembling a dream, the shadows moving, the leaves swaying, the withered blossoms gently falling, akin to drops of pink rain.

And the fleeting moments of the synchronised gaze—silent and profound.

That was when Papai found herself just awakened from daydreams— half-sitting ,half-lying on a comfortable branch of the Raintree, where she always climbed up to relax every afternoon. With one hand holding a book, the other resting on the tree trunk, she leaned slightly forward to look down to the ground and met a pair of wide startled eyes behind a large round glasses coming from a boy, who stood silently under the tree.

‘Who are you?’ As a greeting, the girl asked.

The boy seemed shaken, as if he had been plucked from a reverie. His eyes lowered, lips sealed, refusing to answer the question, as if hoping that by doing so, his figure would vanish in the sunlight, escaping Papai's gaze.

The girl descended from the tree. A few moment later, she was standing a few steps in front of the stranger boy, observing him from head to toe, as if confirming that he was a real boy, not just a shadow escaping from her daydreams.

Papai tilted her head. ‘My name is *Papai*’ said she. ‘What’s your name?’

The boy glanced up at her for a brief moment and then returned his gaze to his own toes. He spoke softly. ‘*Tiwa*’

‘*Tiwa*’ Papai repeated the name. ‘And how did you get in *here*?’

By *here*, she referred to the backyard of her house.

Tiwa lowered his face even more.

‘My mom said, from now on — we shall live together in this house.’

The sparkling sunlight of midsummer afternoon , the shadows under the Raintree, the pink blossoms gently falling, and the simple greeting, —

That was how the story began.

Ten years old — too old to be called a child, yet too young to be an adult.

Suddenly, two new members joined Papai's home without any advance notice. Her father merely introduced Tiwa and his mother without explaining anything. The girl didn't ask any questions, but that doesn't mean she didn't understand.

Since her mother ’s departure, this was the first time father brought someone else into the house.

In her heart, it felt strange and unexplainable. She didn’t feel sad nor disappointed. Actually, no matter what her father did, it was none of the girl’s concerns.

Yet something odd appeared in her mind — something covered with haziness and foggy sense, light enough to be obscured, elusive enough to slip through the fingers, yet clear enough to know that it was here, right in the midst of her heart.

Papai glanced at Tiwa, who stood silently beside his mother as if wanting to disappear, then , she wondered if he would understand it as she did.

For Papai, the house was a perpetual winter.

— where dust-covered furniture lay abandoned for years, where a banquet of flowers in the vast, once bloomed unadmired, withered into powdery dust unnoticed, where the window, left murky, barely letting the feeble steam of light passing through like a ghost.

As for her dad,— a figure absent for most of the day, and sometimes the entire night, would appear in the house on rare occasions, moving silently through the sea of furniture, pale and specter-thin as if he were a fleeting shadow, a ghostly apparition haunting the dimly lit corridors of the desolate house.

In that manner, Papai grew accompanied by a lingering shadow of loneliness that followed her every step, unaware — of course— that this shadow would continue to trail her even as she matured and stepped into the vastness of the outside world.

Yet, it was one of the many wonders of youth. In those times when the world still belonged to her in its purest form, small bubbles of happiness emerged from emptiness like magic. Papai learned to live in her own unique world, leaping and dancing through the backyard, befriending the trees she named herself, or spending entire days immersed in the tower of books in her father's library, and at times, conversing with her own shadows whenever loneliness crept in.

—Until one day, other humans in the world became nothing more than shadows, devoid of meaning and significance.

Ever since Tiwa and his mother moved in, the house changed.

Light from outside found its way to get in, the curtains were drawn wide, and the windows were cleaned until they gleamed. The thick layer of dust that once covered every inch of the household was swept away, and beautiful fresh flowers from the garden adorned the living spaces. It seemed as if the season of blossoms had finally visited the entire house.

Light also found its way to Papai's father. He became a little bit more touchable —no longer a glimpse of smoky haze that lingered in the labyrinth of furniture. Yet looking more human, with flesh, with audible sounds, and with a tangible presence.

However, for Papai, this was no longer the home she once knew.

It felt as if something within her heart had been plucked away, left only a hollow —a vast, empty hole occupied that space. When the home she grew up in for all her lifetime suddenly changed into an unfamiliar place, the girl felt like she was a stranger in her own place—becoming a speck of dust that escaped from the glimpse of memories, lingering only to await the day it would be swept away...

...As all those long-forgotten memories.

Time passed so swiftly. Before anyone realized it, Tiwa and his mother had been living in Papai's house for a week.

Apart from the greetings on the first day, Papai did not engage in anything with the new boy. She had no intention of building a relationship with the new members of the household—not even a little. Papai's world remained her own and hers only. She continued to live as she always had—immersed in the books she left unfinished, climbing trees in the backyard, wandering through the garden during the daytime, and isolating herself in her room, conversing with her own shadow at night.

Papai paid no attention to Tiwa, who sat drawing silently in another corner of the backyard, attempting to initiate a conversation with her but never gathering enough courage. Papai also remained indifferent to Tina's mother, who diligently cleaned the entire house and made it pristine. She was still unaffected even on the day her father returned home early, which never happened before, and called her down to share a dinner as if they were such a happy family.

For her, those people were nothing more than shadowy figures of spirits. Whether they were present or not, they were all the same.

Until one sparkling afternoon, with the same glittery sunlight as the day Tiwa arrived, Papai discovered something in the backyard. An old sketchbook lay amidst the overgrown grass under the Raintree, seemingly awaiting someone to find it. Papai had never seen this sketchbook before. Its old cover was pale, worn with creases, tears, and ink stains, with binding that seemed on the verge of falling apart, miraculously holding the pages together.

Papai picked up that mysterious book and climbed up to her usual spot on the branch. As she opened the sketchbook, her eyes widened with wonder.

It reveals a myriad of drawings covering every inch of pages—ranging from simple sketches to intricately shaded illustrations as if each was drawn by a skillful artist. These drawings reminded her of scenes from forgotten fairy tales, magical and enchanting beyond her imagination.

Then, the sketchbook took Papai on a journey—wandering through strange night with a giant one-eyed rabbit, venturing into a flower garden and greeting tiny fairies who emerged from the petals, drowning into the heart of the ocean to find the ancient kingdom long forgotten, wandering through a mystical forest full of human-face trees and talking animals, joining a dance around a bonfire under the moonlit sky with mythical creatures—fairies, spirits, phoenix and mores.

Papai floated, soared, and drowned herself in the imagination of the artist who created these drawings, merging with her imagination of the fantastical tale hidden behind the illustrations. When she lifted her gaze from the sketchbook, Papai felt as if she had just gone through a long adventurous journey, even though only a split second had passed.

She couldn't help but wonder who had drawn these pictures and how what kind of world was seen through that person's eyes.

Just then, a voice echoed from under the tree—soft and hesitating.

'Papai' Tiwa spoke to the girl for the first time in a week. 'Do you see my sketchbook?'

II

Beyond the River

Tiwa had a favorite sketchbook, one that he carried with him everywhere.

Similar to Papai, who had only her solitary shadow as a companion, Tiwa never had a friend as a real human before—or maybe he did, a long time ago when he still went to school, but he could remember none, and those, if they existed, may not consider him a friend anymore. Now the drawings in the sketchbook were his only companions. Wherever Tiwa went, he took that old, almost out-of-blank-space sketchbook with him. And whenever he had time, he would draw something on the remaining empty corners of the pages.

Until today, he had lost it for the first time.

The last memory he had was putting it under his pillow, as he always did every night, hoping that by doing so, the drawings would come to visit him in dreams. Maybe they did—Tiwa couldn't tell because he almost never dreamed, or even if he did, he couldn't remember his dreams at all. Yet time by time, in the fleeting moments upon waking up, he felt a lingering sense of fulfillment, as if something he had always longed for had been discovered.

And for Tiwa, that was more than enough.

But this morning, when he reached under his pillow, all he found was emptiness.

The sketchbook wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere at all.

That was why Tiwa found himself standing under the Raintree. Up above his head, on the strongest branch, was the figure of Papai leaning against the trunk, reading a book under the sunlight that filtered through the leaves as droplets fell down like speckled diamonds.

The boy gathered his courage, took a deep breath, and exhaled before speaking softly, hesitating, ‘Papai, do you see my sketchbook?’

A head with two braids tilted down, looking from Tiwa’s angle, all he could see was a silhouette against the sunlight. No words slipped out of the girl’s mouth. Tiwa swallowed his saliva, feeling his lips dry and cracked.

‘It’s not that I think you took it. It just—I’ve been lookin’ all around but couldn’t find it, so I just thought maybe—you might see it.’

‘You mean this one?’ Papai raised the sketchbook into the air.

Even though only a grey silhouette was visible, Tiwa recognized it immediately.

‘... Yes, yes, that’s it. Can I have it back?’

The girl shrugged.

For a moment, a scary thought passed through Tiwa’s mind: Papai would *never* return his precious sketchbook.

‘Well, I’m the one who found it’. The girl said, ‘So... there should be some kind of exchange, shouldn’t it?’

Tiwa couldn’t help but tumble when he heard it. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Draw me a picture.’

And then Papai started to tell him a tale.

A magical tale imbued with an ancient tree—the tree that stood strong since the beginning of the world and was destined to endure until the end of the world—planting its root deep down to the centre of the earth and spreading its branch high up to the sky, embracing the entirety of the world. This ancient tree knew everything its roots and branches touched; therefore, nothing in the world could escape its knowledge.

The ancient tree collected all the memories of the world, keeping them safe. If any wanderers, whether by chance or intention, encountered it, the tree would narrate one of the myriad stories it held, and the narrated tale would become reality, entwined with magic.

‘You draw a picture of the *Grandfather Tree* for me.’ The girl offered. ‘Then, I will return you the sketchbook. Deal?’

Tiwa accepted it without hesitation.

With just a few strokes of the pencil, as adept as a professional artist, the outline of the mystical tree appeared out of emptiness. Shortly thereafter, beneath the half-bewildered, half-miraculous earnest gaze of Papai, Tiwa created a towering tree, branches reaching into the sky, bark carved into deep grooves resembling a human face—the great solitary tree that stood magnificently at the centre of the world.

Papai’s eyes glittered like the sparkling sunlight when Tiwa handed her the completed picture of the magical tree.

‘Does this story about the tree come from the book you read?’ Tiwa glanced at the book in the girl’s hand.

‘No.’ Replied Papai. ‘The Grandfather Tree is my own friend.’

Similar to all those lonely children, who coped with the emptiness in their hearts by creating friends from their imagination, Papai had the Grandfather Tree as her own special friend for all her life—to which she secretly hoped in the deepest corner of her heart that one day she would meet such a tree, the tree that could talk to her, telling her the tales of the universe and transform them into magical realities.

So maybe that day, she wouldn’t have to be alone anymore.

Eventually possessing the beautiful drawing of her unique tree, Papai climbed back onto the branch, leaning against the tree trunk and continuing to read under the sunlight, while Tiwa sat

under the tree, drawing in his sketchbook as he always did. At that moment, the distance between the two children vanished—from opposite ends of the garden to under the same tree shade.

And thus, without any spoken words, without promises of eternal friendship, without laughter nor excited heartbeats, just with one drawing—in such a very quiet and simple manner that no one between them is aware of it,

...Their friendship started to bloom.

‘I wonder what lies on the other side?’

Tiwa asked, much like talking to himself, or maybe he didn’t utter any words, but the wind carried the echo of his thoughts to Papai.

The backyard of Papai’s house sloped down to the wide river, where the water continuously flowed in a very slow and lazy manner, reflecting the hot sun on its vaporising surface. Only occasionally does the wind blow, causing the water surface to ripple and creating sparkles under the sunlight like pearls.

On the other side of the river lay the forbidden place, which Papai’s father prohibited her from exploring. If one looked from this side, one would only see a mysterious forest containing numerous tall, nameless trees that stood densely packed—dark and impenetrable, filled with secrets hidden beneath the shadows of the trees.

Yet, at the same time, there was a strange, inviting sense about the forest. When gazing at it long enough, one might hear an alluring whisper inviting them. *Come, cross the river to this side.*

‘Wanna find out?’ Papai asked. Tiwa was startled that she could hear his thoughts.

‘Papai, I didn’t mean...’

‘Let’s cross the river and find out.’ Papai tilted her head down the Raintree and asked again. ‘What’d you say?’

‘Isn’t it that your father forbids us from crossing the river?’ Tiwa hesitated; he thought of Papai’s father. Although the man was kind to him, there were certain aspects of his character that invoked a sense of caution.

Papai just shrugged, ‘Then just don’t let him know. He’s not at home now anyway.’

Tiwa glanced towards the other side of the river. Despite it being still early afternoon, the densely packed forest cast shades so profound that almost no light could penetrate, leaving only dark and immense shadows beneath the infinite lines of the trees.

‘Then, what’d you say?’ Again, Papai asked.

The boy turned back to Papai and met the girl’s eyes. Those eyes were glittering, mixed with glimpses of bravery, mischief, and anticipation, waiting for Tiwa’s answer. It was the look he had never gotten from anyone before. For a glimpse of eyes, Tiwa felt strange—awkward and embarrassed but with an unfamiliar sense of something close to delight—the sense he hadn’t felt for a long time, the sense of being seen, and waited.

And at that moment, all rejection in the universe vanished from Tiwa’s mind.

III

The Lost Children

Papai discovered a dust-covered rowboat hidden in the neglected corner of the garage.

Upon seeing it, a rush of familiar feelings emerged. A distant memory of her father guiding the boat down the river with her and her mother flowed through her mind. Though the destination is eluded, the serene image of the gentle, rippling light dancing on the water lingered. It was more than a story, but a vivid picture, and a feeling of contentment that once made her heart tranquil, warm, and serene, A feeling nearly forgotten.

Yet, those moments were long gone. Since her mother's departure, the rowboat had been abandoned, left to decay beneath the gray dust of time, much like everything else in the house.

Together, the two children dragged that small boat to the riverbank, then started cleaning it, sweeping all the dust and cobwebs away, and checking for any leaks. Once the boat was cleaned, they pushed it into the river. Their smiles cheerfully widened and their hands clapped with joy as the boat floated.

'But, Papai...' Tiwa asked. 'Can you row a boat?'

Papai fell silent for a moment. No, she couldn't. Despite growing up by the riverside, no one had ever taught an abandoned girl like her how to row. But how hard could it be? She had seen people rowing from the backyard countless times. Just move the paddles back and forth, guiding the boat forward, right?

Papai, of course, underestimated it.

As soon as Papai stepped into the boat, she realized it wasn't as easy as it seemed. The little boat swayed unpredictably, as if it could sink at any moment. After struggling to find the right balance, she finally managed to sit at one end and extended her hand to Tiwa.

The boy swallowed his saliva.

'Come on.' Papai said. 'If you're going, then come.'

Tiwa hesitated, glancing alternatively between the old boat that was rocking back and forth on the water's surface and Papai's hand. 'You sure it's gonna be alright?'

'Can you swim?' Papai asked a question in return.

'Ah, well enough.'

'Then, what's there to worry about? C'mon.'

Again, Tiwa swallowed his saliva, before stepping clumsily onto the boat.

'Don't do that.' Papai frowned. 'If you step in like that, the boat will flip.'

Although Papai's voice carried only a hint of irritation, Tiwa, sensitive to other's feelings, was afraid Papai might get angry. So he quickly stepped onto the boat.

Yet, this action made the boat sway even more. Tiwa was frightened. He uncarefully took one step backward.

'Be careful!'

Papai only had a moment to grab Tiwa's hand, before the whole world flipped upside down.

Both of them lay on the grassy riverbank, soaked from head to toe. The world, seen through the droplet-covered eyelids, resembled a rainy day viewed through a misted window. Tiwa blinked frequently, chasing away the droplets. Papai lay beside him, equally drenched from head to toe. Closed eyes, water droplets clinging to her eyelashes, and sunlight streaming through the gaps in the leaves, casting lights and shadows on her face.

Tiwa thought it was his fault that the boat flipped. He gazed at Papai, who lay silently with closed eyes, not saying a word. He assumed that the girl must be angry, and she wouldn't play with him anymore.

'Papai, I...' *am sorry* —Tiwa was about to say that.

But before he could finish the sentence, unexpectedly, Papai burst into laughter.

Tiwa stared at her in confusion, not understanding what was so amusing.

'Papai...'

Papai continued to laugh, carefree and cheerful as if she just discovered the most amusing thing in the world. Eventually, starting softly, Tiwa smiled and gradually joined the laughter.

The echoes of their laughter filled the quiet riverbank, and for a moment, the entire world seemed to stop all its motions to listen to the laughter of the two lost children, who had just found each other in this vast and empty world.

As the laughter gradually faded away and the sky descended, Papai turned to Tiwa. Drops of water still clung to her eyelashes, and the sunlight continued to paint glimmers on her face.

‘Looks like we’re all wet now.’ The girl said, ‘Let’s go home. We can cross the river tomorrow.’

Papai widened her smile, still in a cheerful mood. Tiwa nodded, making a promise that they would meet here again tomorrow.

The following day, waiting until Papai’s father was away and Tiwa’s mother was busy with household chores, the two children met again by the riverbank, near the bushes where they hid the boat. Then their secret mission to cross the river resumed.

Tiwa, still felt scared of getting on the boat, cautiously stepped in, one foot after another. Once settled, he sat stiffly on one side, not even daring to breathe.

Papai retrieved the old paddles from beneath the boat and placed them on each side. Yesterday, after returning home, she had researched and learned the basics of rowing—all she needed to do was move both paddles, drawing them against the water to move the boat forward, then lifting them back in the air before repeating the motions all over again and again. Just like that.

But when Papai tried it herself, she realized it wasn’t as easy as she thought. The paddles were too heavy for a ten-year-old girl to lift them both, let alone drawing them against the resisting water.

‘Pai’ Tiwa said, ‘Let me help.’

‘You know how to row the boat?’

‘Well...I’ve never done it before. But I learned how to do it yesterday’ Tiwa replied in a hesitating manner.

Papai shrugged. ‘Alright, so do I.’ She handed one paddle to Tiwa. ‘Here you go.’

Tiwa took the paddle cautiously. Then they both started counting together— one two one two—along with moving the paddles. At first, their attempts were struggling; the paddles moved in whole different directions, and the boat drifted aimlessly. After several tries, they gradually found each other’s rhythm, harmonizing their movements.

One, two, one, two, one, two.

Eventually, the little boat began to drift gently away from the backyard riverbank, carrying the two children towards the mysterious land on the other side of the river.

Tiwa gazed at the infinite, shadowy lines of trees that stood profoundly in front, captivated and terrified.

‘So... what shall we do next?’

Stepping off the boat, he stood perplexed by the riverbank. In front of him, the towering trees reached into the sky, interwoven with smaller trees, casting a dense and impenetrable shadow that even the bright morning sunlight could not pass through. The ground was damp and covered with moss and small bushes. The air was filled with the rich scent of earth, mingled with the fragrance of thick leaves. This forest felt mysterious yet enigmatic, as if holding ancient secrets, untouched by any human, and destined to live through eternity.

Papai did not answer the question. But her eyes, as they peered into the forest, sparkled as if discovering something magical. Upon seeing that, Tiwa felt—as he had felt it many times—that he couldn’t understand the thoughts of this new peculiar friend.

But at that moment, a gentle breeze blew, stealing the paper containing the drawing of the Old Grandfather tree, which Papai carried along with her.

Papai was startled but quickly regained calmness. She leaped to catch it, but grasped only emptiness. Then all she could do was stand there, helplessly watching the drawing float into the sky before disappearing amidst the thick lines of trees.

‘Papai...’

Before Tiwa could finish her name, Papai swiftly stepped into the forest. Within moments, she seemed to vanish into the barely visible spaces between the trees. The rustling sound of her passage through the leaves also quickly faded away, leaving everything in profound silence.

Tiwa’s lips felt dry. There, being left alone, the forest in front appeared even more mysterious and terrifying. The boy turned his head, hoping that Papai would reappear at any moment. He felt as if the time had passed like an eternity, yet no trace was shown. At some point, Tiwa could not endure anymore.

‘Papai, wait for me.’

Tiwa bet on his trembling lips before stepping into the forest.

He thought he heard the distant footsteps walking not far ahead. The thick leaves obstructed everything from his view. Tiwa followed the sound. After a while, it seemed as though he could glimpse the white fluttering dress disappearing between two trees ahead—never knew that it was just an illusion made by the lights and shadows or that was really Papai, yet he followed it without hesitation.

‘This way, this way.’

In the midst of confusion and loss, Papai’s voice echoed from somewhere within the dense curtain of trees. Tiwa followed the sound, pushing aside the leaves in front. Suddenly, the bright sunlight broke through, so bright that he barely opened his eyes.

Until his eyes were adapted and his vision was no longer blurred by the light, Tiwa found himself in a grassy clearing in the middle of the forest. In the center, stood a magnificent giant Ficus tree. At the base of the large trunk, there was a hollow big enough for two children to sit comfortably. The branches of the tree spread out widely, creating a shaded area beneath, and no other trees could grow under this massive shadow. It seemed as if the forest had graciously cleared a space for this majestic tree.

Papai was standing in front of the Ficus tree, her eyes widening as if she were seeing something unbelievable. In her hand was an empty sheet of paper.

‘Tiwa, look at this tree.’

Tiwa approached. Then he realized why Papai was so shocked.

In the middle of the tree trunk, covered in thick, rugged bark, there was a carved face resembling an aged human—weathered, full of deep lines and wrinkles, bearing the marks of time, as if indicating that this tree had been standing here since the beginning of the world and would continue to stand still until the world’s end. The face was peacefully closed-eyed, exhaling a slow, steady breath that smelled of leaves and dry wood.

...just like the tree Tiwa drew for Papai.

And in that astonishing moment, the eyes of the ancient tree suddenly opened. It looked towards the two children, who stood frozen, not even daring to breathe. Then, with a deep, resonant voice that echoed through the entire forest, the ancient tree spoke,

Children, what brings you to this place?



English Sample ends here. If you’re interested, please contact me for more info and copyright.

Copyright contact : Rinrada Khongpiboonkit

Tel : (+66) 82-0281404

Email : schvala.lanternight@gmail.com