

The Empty Store

By Kimo Williams

When I was a child, my friends and I would play along the banks of a little stream near my school. The water never moved very fast and it was fun to wade in up to our knees. Some days, when the water was particularly still, I could see my reflection above the little crawfish walking along the bottom. It made me a little nervous thinking about how one of them might pinch my toes with its large claw.

After school, my friends and I would always gather up and walk home together. Most of them were bigger than me. (My mother said it was because they hit their "growth spurt" faster but I felt inside that I was different.) When I was younger, my family had taken a long journey and I remember feeling very cold and coughing a lot. The doctors told my mother that I was "consumed" with something. I didn't really understand what.

Most days, we would walk up to Tamishiro's market, hang around a bit and then go our separate ways. A few doors down from Tamishiro's was a little store with nothing on the window. I remember the floor being covered in beach mats and the walls being bare. I never thought about it much... most of the time I just went straight home.

One day, as I passed by Tamishiro's, an old man was rattling his keys trying to get into the empty store. "Must be going rain" he said, "the door only sticks when going rain". I stood there and stared at him. He got the door open and turned back to look at me. "Like come inside?" He yipped. I shrugged my shoulders. For a moment, he just looked at me like he knew what I was thinking. I gazed down at the ground and watched as my bare feet peddled me inside.

At the end of the store was a short curtain covering a doorway to a back room. Just next to it, a small desk and chair. "Go, sit", he said as he pulled open a window shade. "What kind of store is this", I asked. The man just smiled. He turned to look at me and said, "I hear you coughing all the time when you pass my door. You sick?" I didn't really know what to say..."I don't know". I mumbled. "Hmm", he said as he walked into the back room. I thought to myself, "do I know this guy?" He seemed to know me but from where?

A moment later he emerged from the curtain carrying a large box. It was about as big as the ice chest they use for crawfish down at the fish market. He sat it down on the desk and blew the dust off the top. "Kay-den. You like see inside?" he said with a spirited smile. I coughed from the dust and nodded yes.

He unlocked the lid of the box and the four sides fell open exposing an elaborate system of drawers. It sparkled in the rays of light coming from the small side

window. He looked at me and said "When I was small kid like you, one man gave me dis box. He went make me promise to keep um safe and neva let da stuff inside get dusty". I looked at him and wondered what would require a box with so much detail. Was it candy? Candy always got my attention. "Eh...you listening? He growled. I nodded yes. He reached down and opened the first drawer on the upper left and said "Dis da One".

I stood up and looked inside the small drawer and saw an odd shaped little object. "Doesn't look like candy" I thought. I pulled it out and held it in the light. Yup, I was right...it wasn't candy. "Nice rock... I guess", I uttered. "What's in the other drawers?"-- "No worry bout dat" he said as he handed me a small cloth. "Just make' um shine". After a moment of confusion, I began rubbing the green rock as the old man looked on. "No, like dis". He said as he took the rock and cloth from me. "Make em go up and down same way as da lines in da rock", he criticized. I tried it again, this time paying attention to the detail. After a minute or two I looked up for his approval. The old man stood there just gazing at my hands like he was daydreaming. When he finally looked me in the eyes he said, "time to go. Come back tomorrow same time." I put the rock back in the drawer and headed for the door. I didn't understand what had just happened. But I noticed it was now raining.

Over the next few months, I made it a point to hang around Tamishiro's market until I saw the old man walk to the door. Each day I would polish the stones starting at the top left drawer and working my way down. Some got shiny. Some just sort of stayed the same. The old man would show me how the grain of each rock was a little different. He taught me how to feel it with my fingers if I couldn't see it with my eyes. Most of the time he would just sit and watch and we would both shine rocks together. He never really said much. I figured it was because he wasn't a local. Maybe he just needed a friend.

I remember on the last day of school, my friends asked me if I wanted to go hang out by the stream. I thought about how much fun it would be to dip my feet into the cool water and chase the crawfish. I looked at their faces and realized how different we had all become. They didn't seem as big as they used to. I gave them a wave and said I'd stop by after I finished my rocks. As usual, they just yelled "whatever" as I headed off for the store.

When I came around the corner from Tamishiro's that day, I noticed some men working on the empty store. As I got closer I saw the beach mats had been taken up and store shelves were already inside. The walls were covered with new paint and the little curtain to the back room was gone. Had the old man started a new business? I wondered. I stood there frozen while peering through the dirty glass. Suddenly I felt a hand touch my back. I took a deep breath and turned quickly to find a paint-stained workman. "I was told to give you this" he said

evenly. He heaved a large box into my arms and walked away. "Thanks" I muttered as I looked around. Oddly, it seemed, I was completely alone. I sat the heavy box down and opened the top. As I did the four walls fell open and I was reminded of that first day I sat in the dark store. Atop the box was a small piece of colored paper folded up like a rose. I carefully opened the delicate creases and smoothed it out in front of me.

The note read:

Please take care of this box and all its contents.

Remember to polish them daily and to pay attention to the grain.

When the time is right, show them to others who need polishing.

Although the note wasn't signed, I knew who it was from. I reached down and gently slid open the drawer at the top left. To my delight, there inside was my favorite candy.