

"THE TREE"

By Ariela Szwarc

1 EXT. CITY - MORNING

The sun rises over a large unnamed city. Smog and dirt fill the air. Cars line the streets in traffic. Factory chimneys pump smoke and other mechanical sounds and construction is heard. There is not a single bird in the sky.

2 INT. APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

ELI, 12, a short boy with reddish curly hair, sits by the window in his kitchen and watches the sunrise. He quietly munches on a piece of toast smothered in jam.

The radio is heard playing in the background.

RADIO (VO)

...warning residents of a large oil spill on the corner of 8th and 40th that has made its way into the Ozart River. Heavy delays can be expected this morning...

Eli is drawing a picture of what appears to be a large forest with colorful flowers, birds, rivers, and a big sun.

RADIO (VO) (CONT'D)

...officials are in the final stages of mapping out official new waste zones in the city for dumping. With current ones overflowing, they say land will have to be cleared to make room...

Eli's MOM, 46, and DAD, 48, come into the kitchen, dressed for work. They look tired and emotionless. They move in a way that is routine and fast paced. Almost like robots. They grab their coats.

MOM

(muttering)

We'll be home late tonight. There's leftovers in the fridge.

Eli does not lift his head or respond. It is inferred he got the message.

His parents leave without a hug, a kiss, or a word goodbye.

Eli finishes his toast and cleans up the table. A few minutes go by and there is a small knock at the door. Eli goes to open it, already knowing who it is. Eli's best friend,

PAISLEY, 12, stands in the hallway. She is tall with two long, messy braids and is wearing an old baseball cap. There is curiosity and wonder in her eyes. She stands confidently and with purpose.

PAISLEY
(jokingly)
Is the coast clear?

ELI
(laughing)
They left a little while ago. You make it sound like they hate you.

PAISLEY
(walking inside)
Your mom hates how I dress. Plus they both have this dead look in their eyes all the time. I can't stand it. Here.

Paisley pulls an apple out of her bag and offers it to Eli. He happily accepts and takes a big bite.

PAISLEY (CONT'D)
(motioning to table)
What'cha drawing?

ELI
It's called the Amazon Rainforest. Ms. Russo talked about it yesterday. I don't know what it looks like, but the way she described it...I've never heard of a place with so many trees...

Paisley is quiet. She admires the drawing and smiles.

PAISLEY
I have to show you something.

ELI
Something good?

PAISLEY
Very good. Come on.

Eli finishes the apple, core and all, and throws on his sneakers. The two best friends head out.

3 EXT. CITY - CONTINUOUS

Eli and Paisley playfully run through the city streets. They

laugh, talk, and tease.

No trees or greenery of any kind can be seen in the city. There is garbage everywhere. Dirt and debris is kicked up from the concrete where Eli and Paisley walk.

The pair reaches the edge of the city. Paisley keeps walking, but Eli hesitates.

ELI
I'm not allowed outside of the
city...I'll get in trouble...

Paisley grabs Eli's hand and squeezes it, reassuringly.

PAISLEY
Just a bit farther. Past the hills. I
promise.

4 EXT. HILLS - CONTINUOUS

Eli and Paisley begin to climb and maneuver their way over a few steep hills. Paisley suddenly comes to a halt at the top. She forces Eli to stop.

PAISLEY
Shhhh....listen.

Eli looks around, puzzled. The only thing that can be heard is the wind and the distant sound of car horns and engines.

Then, a chirp.

Paisley smiles.

PAISLEY (CONT'D)
Look.

She points below them to a fairly large tree growing near the rocky hills. It looks healthy and strong. Its bright green leaves shake as a gentle breeze passes through. Two birds fly into the tree, loudly chirping. They can be seen building a nest near the top.

Eli is overjoyed. He begins to laugh and Paisley beams at him.

ELI
How did you fi-

Paisley lets out a horrified gasp. She puts a hand over Eli's

mouth and forces them both to crouch down.

A construction crew arrives with trucks and an excavator. The loud engine overpowers the sound of the chirping birds who have frantically flown away. They park at the base of the tree and immediately begin setting up construction tape. One worker goes up to the tree and spray paints a big neon "X" on the trunk.

Eli and Paisley stare at the scene unfolding below them, too shocked and heartbroken to move. Paisley turns to Eli, tears forming in her eyes.

PAISLEY

We have to do something.

ELI

Paisley...

PAISLEY

We have to.

ELI

They already found it.

PAISLEY

There's still time.

She grabs Eli and locks eyes with him.

PAISLEY (CONT'D)

We can't let them do anything to it.

Eli is silent. He looks up at Paisley and nods. They begin to climb down the hill back to the city.

5 EXT. CITY - CONTINUOUS

Eli and Paisley rush home. They are locked in intense conversation.

PAISLEY

We'll make signs to put in front of
the tree. We'll sleep there overnight.
They can't cut it down if we're there.

They arrive at the apartment building and their conversation turns into a whisper as they ride the elevator up to their floor.

ELI
What if we get into trouble? What if
this doesn't work?

They stand by the door of Eli's apartment.

PAISLEY
(bitterly)
We have to fight this, Eli. If you
care like I do, meet me after dark
outside of the building when everyone
is asleep.

Paisley storms off.

6 INT. APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Eli slowly walks into his bedroom, still in a daze from what he just saw. He plops onto his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Suddenly, a small chirp. Eli lifts his head and looks to his window. What appears to be one of the birds from earlier sits on his windowsill. It looks at Eli, lets out another chirp, then flies away. Eli watches it go, smiling. He jumps out of bed, grabs posterboard and markets, and gets to work. He moves with determination.

7 EXT. CITY - NIGHT

A storm is brewing outside. A light rain is falling and thunder can be heard. The streets are empty except for Paisley standing underneath a streetlight. She has her hoodie up and clutches her posters against her chest to shield them from the rain.

The door to the building opens and Eli walks out, carrying his signs. They smile at each other, nod, and head out into the night.

The rain gradually picks up. Now, a strong wind. Eli and Paisley make their way to the edge of the city.

8 EXT. HILLS - CONTINUOUS

The pair begins to climb, careful not to slip. It is getting worse. Lightning flashes.

9 EXT. TREE - CONTINUOUS

Eli and Paisley, visibly struggling, finally get to the tree. The storm is now dangerously violent with strong wind, sheets

of rain, and some flooding. Thunder booms. Lightning strikes. It is nearly impossible to see or hear anything.

PAISLEY
(shouting)
Over here!

Paisley feels around for Eli's hand and they both move through the rain, fully drenched and shaking. They find the construction tape the workers set up earlier, thrashing in the wind.

PAISLEY (CONT'D)
(shouting)
Try to get the tape off! I'm gonna try
to put some signs up!

Paisley disappears into the storm. Eli manages to pull off part of the tape. A large crack of thunder. Eli, worried, shouts out for Paisley.

ELI
Paisley!? Paisley!?

He pauses, waiting for a response. Nothing.

Eli is about to shout again when he hears a high-pitched scream that can only be Paisley's.

ELI (CONT'D)
(frantically)
Paisley! I'm coming!

Eli runs blindly through the storm. He trips. Mud splatters. Paisley scream again. She's close.

Eli gets up and continues to fumble around. He finally comes to a deep manmade trench in the ground.

Lightning flashes, illuminating the excavator they saw earlier. Eli makes out Paisley at the bottom of the trench. She is covered in mud and struggling to climb and breathe. Water and mud pour into the trench like a river.

Eli panics. He tries to find something to help pull Paisley out, but there is nothing and she is too far down. Paisley starts to sink deeper, barely staying afloat now.

ELI (CONT'D)
(crying)
Help! Help! Somebody! Please!

A small flashing light appears in the distance, growing bigger and bigger. Men's muffled voices are heard.

Eli runs toward the light and sees a few of the construction workers from earlier with a flashlight.

ELI (CONT'D)

(sobbing)

My friend. She's down there. She can't get out.

Eli points to the trench. A few workers rush to it while the rest comfort Eli.

The workers peer into the trench. They jolt up, horrified. They look at each other with their hands over their mouths. Eli screams and breaks away, trying to look into the trench. The workers hold him back. Eli collapses, sobbing uncontrollably as the storm carries on.

10 INT. APARTMENT - YEARS LATER

The sun rises over the city. Eli opens his eyes. He sits up in bed, stretches, then gets ready. He looks the same, just a bit taller with longer hair and a more mature face.

11 EX. CITY - CONTINUOUS

The city is much more colorful and brighter. Less smog and dirt fill the streets and air. There's grass and flowers growing. Birds are chirping. Eli makes his way to the edge of the city.

12 EXT. TREE - CONTINUOUS

The tree still stands where it always was. The space around it has transformed into a large field with other trees growing everywhere. There are gardens, families having picnics, children playing, and other life all around.

Eli climbs the tree. He pulls out a new drawing from his backpack. It is the tree with a smiling Paisley sitting high up in the branches. He colors in her two braids.

Eli takes out an apple and eats it, watching other people in the field and the last few moments of sunrise.

A small chirp. Eli turns to see two birds hopping around in the tree. He whistled back. They tweet excitedly and fly off into the sky.

END.