

# Uncertain Friendships

By: Franco Forleo

The crisp morning air bit into Spencer's hands as he hovered over his miniature trees.

'Almost time to bring out the old woollen gloves', he told himself.

It had been a long hot summer and there had been much rain, something the bonsai's and Spencer loved. A gift from the heavens is what Spencer always saw this to be. Of course, this also meant that his manicuring skills would be put to the test as the trees usually grew out of shape during such prolific seasons. It would be embarrassing for a man of Spencer's stature in the bonsai world, to show his trees, having broken any cardinal rules. But the rules of nature were never always fair as Spencer had grown to understand.

Snipping away at those out of place branches, trimming and shaping as he had learned from books and workshops, the excitement of autumn was running through his veins. How wonderful it was to begin seeing the naked shapes of the trees once again. Winter would eventually expose their entire nudity and it was at this time that Spencer felt free to take advantage of their vulnerability shaping them into specimens more beautiful than they had been in previous seasons. Spencer always associated this with the growing up of a child. Those raised and nourished with care, those who sculptured their bodies through exercise, ate well and developed their mental capabilities; all these went on to live long and healthy lives; just as the bonsai's did.

It was the month of April, a time of year when nature showed off her artistic flair. The leaves on the Japanese Maples were turning from green to yellow. Soon they would be transformed again and nature would colour them deep maroon. Finally they would drop to the ground, exposing their beautiful skeleton shapes. Shapes which had been invisible to admirers, whilst being dressed by star shaped foliage for an entire season. It thrilled Spencer to watch this change.

When he was a boy, Spencer would spy through his parent's boundary fence, entering the silent world of his neighbour from a distance. He had known from then, that one day he too would own as many, if not more, beautiful bonsai trees as the old man had, a man he so admired.

The sun had not yet crept over the old tall poplars at the end of the grounds, so the Japanese garden was still in shadow, but Spencer still wore his white floppy panama in anticipation, which gave him the appearance of an old Westerner.

'A Westerner in a Japanese garden, what a contradiction in terms!', he had once heard someone say, he could not remember who, but it still brought a smile to his face each morning as he systematically positioned his hat on his balding head, watching his reflection in the patio glass door, with his pride in the background .

His pipe lay on the old cast iron bench waiting for a moment of poise. Spencer looked at his watch, seven thirty; soon his tea would arrive, served with a slice of toast as always, by his loyal maid, Mavis. It was such moments, sitting and admiring his fine skills that made the hours spent in his garden so worthwhile.

It had been difficult during the years of running the old hardware store, dedicating the time needed in maintaining such a haven, but now that his son was at the helm, Spencer could dedicate all the time he wanted to his garden.

It had been three years since Pat's passing and Spencer had become used to being on his own. His life long partner of almost half a century had been taken from him in a matter of months. He had felt cheated by death and at times even selfish, wishing his own departure had preceded that of his loved one.

Yes, there were the social outings to the bonsai club which Spencer had chaired for many years, but he had also relinquished this post to much younger persons and just enjoyed sitting back and admiring his peer's creations and contributions. There had been one or two advances for companionship from widows, but Spencer preferred to be on his own, with fond memories of his beloved Pat.

He had read in one of his favourite magazines that having a pet brings comfort and joy to the lonely and not two days had past after that reading that article, when at his gate, sat a beautiful cross border collie waiting to be invited in. The homeless pooch had no collar, no identification and Spencer had advertised the beautiful long haired black dog as lost. When no reply came, he took it as a sign. Looking up into the heavens, he acknowledged his loved one, accepting her gift to him.

‘If it’s what you think I need’ he said, ‘then I will call her Twix and she will be the lady of the house.... Thank you dear!’

He now walked Twix daily, and Spencer would nod and greet fellow walkers he had come to recognise over time, whilst enjoying this new routine and his companion.

At the end of each day, Spencer and his newfound friend would sit together as the sun retired and went to do her work in other places. Sipping on a good Irish whiskey, enjoying the serenity of his surrounds, he would allow his hand to drop on Twix’s head, scratching ever so gently. She would in turn, reciprocate by wetting his wrinkled hand with her moist nose.

Back in the garden that morning, Spencer noticed the shadow growing from behind him. He knew that at any moment he would feel the warmth of the sun on his back. The trees would light up and the mist he had sprayed over the leaves would glow and sparkle in the sunlight. Spencer could almost swear that the trees would react to this and smile back at him, the olives, the conifers, the acacias and the maples. The baobabs and the crab apples and of course, not forgetting the figs, all joining in to this symphony of joy.

An unfamiliar shadow began creeping in through the shadows of the trees. A shadow Spencer recognised to be of a human figure. Following the shapes with his eyes, he slowly turned around. Squinting into the bright sunlight, he saw a boy sitting on the boundary wall.

‘Good morning sir’, the boy called out.

Spencer did not recognize this young fellow; he knew that his previous neighbours had sold their house. He had noticed the removal vans coming and going, but had not yet seen anyone; warning bells signalled a pest was about to invade, and with this, Twix let out a low toned growl.

Turning his back on the boy, ignoring him, Spencer picked up a net and began to scoop the leaves floating on the surface of the koi pond.

‘What are you doing Sir?’ insisted the boy, a sandwich in hand, taking small bites in-between his darting questions.

Spencer painstakingly placed the wet leaves into a bin, ready for the compost heap, trying to shut out the intrusion.

His thoughts meandered back to a time of his childhood. He saw himself sitting on an old crate, looking through the fence at the old man next door, taking in every move he made. Drifting even back further in time, Spencer recalled that day the man never came out. It was the day he waited and waited...but nothing happened.

The following day, he dashed to the fence, squeezing his face up against the wooden barrier to see if his anonymous friend had arrived. His heart sank to the void he saw, only the solitary trees stood like soldiers on parade, waiting to be inspected.

By the third day Spencer could see that the old man’s trees had begun to wilt and a great cloud of despair swept over him. .

He sat back and began biting his nails, a sure sign of distress.

*What should I do?* He thought.

Rushing over to the hosepipe, he turned it on, tugging at the nose to bring it as close to the fence as he possibly could. Aiming high he directing the cascade of water in the direction of the trees, his vision obscured by the fence. But the trees were too far and the pressure was not sufficient to reach and quench the thirst of the starving trees.

Running back into the house, Spencer slipped on his school blazer. He placed his cap firmly onto his head, and marched out the front gate towards his neighbour house.

Nervously he climbed the three polished steps which led up to the veranda and to the wooden-glass door. Hesitantly, he reached for the bell. Spencer had never stepped onto this property before even though he had lived next door ever since he could remember.

He looked around; the highly polished red floor reflected the green foliage from the ferns which dotted the entire circumference of the veranda.

The door finally opened, first by a tiny crack and then a little wider.

‘Yes?’ said the old lady behind the entrance.

Spencer took off his cap, nervously crunching it up between his hands.

‘Morning ma’am I’m here about the trees....’

‘The trees young man, which trees?’

‘Your husband ma’am.... he hasn’t watered the trees ma’am.’

‘Come inside son’. Said the old lady, opening the door only wide enough to allow the little man in, ‘come sit down, aren’t you the boy from next door?’

‘Yes, ma’am, Spencer’s my name... I, I kind of spy, I mean watch your husband every day with the trees and, and I have not, I mean the trees ma’am, they dying ma’am!’

‘Would you like a cup of tea son, or perhaps a juice?’

‘No thanks ma’am, I’m just worried about the trees.’

‘Son, what is your name again, Spencer I think you said?’

‘I’m Spencer, yes ma’am’ he replied anxiously.

‘Spencer, my husband died three nights ago, it was very sudden, died in his sleep, it was a heart attack. I’m afraid I haven’t given the trees much thought and don’t really know what to do with them. I hope they will not die....’

‘NO! I will not allow this to happen!’ shrieked young Spencer, not really realizing how pitched his voice had sounded.

‘I’m afraid I will have to advertise them and sell them.’ said the old lady.

‘But that may take days!’ said Spencer, ‘what then? They will die before that happens!’

The old woman looked puzzled. ‘Would you like to look after them till then Spencer?’

Spencer cocked his head like a puppy hearing an unfamiliar sound for the first time.

‘You mean it?’

Pat had always loved to listen to this story and Spencer told it often, it had become one of their dinner party tales, back in the days when they socialized.

In days gone by, Pat would sometimes sit on the old wrought iron bench keeping her man company whilst he worked and she would occasionally ask, even if she knew the answer ‘is that one of the old mans trees you are working on now? It has aged so beautifully.’

Spencer thoughts returned to the nuisance on the wall. He turned to look at him, then back into the pond, ‘go away’, he muttered.

‘Can I come and watch you work and play with your dog?’

‘NO!’ yelled Spencer. But it was too late; the boy had dropped into the garden, crushing some of the petunias Spencer had planted on the boundary so as to add some colour to the somewhat dreary wall. Twix immediately ran up to their persistent visitor, sniffing his feet and bony knees, welcoming the boys pat and rewarding him with her wet tongue.

‘Now look what you’ve done, you’ve crushed my petunias,’ shouted Spencer.

The boy stood there for a minute, looking down at the damage he had just caused.

Bending, he tried to lift the crushed trumpet shaped flowers back into their original shape. Spencer marched over with intentions of walloping him, but instead also bent down and nipped away some of the broken stems.

‘Sorry sir, I won’t do that again. Perhaps we can put some bricks down for me to jump on to if I’m to come and visit you again. You see we’ve just moved in next door. Do you have children? Its fine if you don’t’ - the boy rambled on like an old printing mill - ‘I can play with your dog or help you mow the lawn... I’m good at that, well, so my dad says!’ The boy looked up at Spencer in despair, hoping that rejection would not enter the old mans head.

‘I’m not looking for any new friends, boy, I’m quiet happy to be on my own. And no, you will not be coming here on a regular basis,’ barked Spencer.

‘Gee-whiz!’ exclaimed the boy, looking across at the Japanese garden, ‘how do you get those trees so small? They look so old, so small, just like dwarfs, just like trees in mini-land.’

Spencer placed his hands on his hips as he watched the little blighter strut across the garden like a model on a ramp, totally in awe as to what he was seeing. Twix followed suit, happy to have a visitor, eager to show him around.

Spencer could not believe the audacity of this young man. He looked up into the heavens, tilting his panama hat so that he had a clearer view of the blue April skies, expecting to see someone he knew up there. He muttered...., 'is this you're doing Pat? Do I really look as if I need company?'

Weeks had passed and the 'old friends', sat on the wrought iron bench. Breakfast was for two now as Twix sat at their feet.

'I start school tomorrow Mr. Spencer, the Easter holidays are over. I'm a little nervous as I won't know anyone there, being new and all that you know.'

'I'm sure you will make wonderful new friends Tom, think of it as a new challenge, a new chapter in your life.'

I will miss coming here in the mornings Mr. Spencer, but I will know where you are whilst I'm sitting in my new classroom and know exactly what you are doing.'

'You just think of studying hard Tom, you have learned a lot about these little trees in the short time we have had together, but its not over, there will be other school holidays and then there will be the weekends and the afternoons.'

'Do you think I can have a bonsai of my own one day Mr. Spencer?' asked Tom in-between licking the strawberry jam off the peanut butter which was spread over a slice of toast.

'I don't see why not Tom, who knows what the future holds. All that matters is the present and that two newfound friends are here together.'

The old man shifted himself closer to his new found friend and placed his arm round his shoulder. He looked up into the heavens and mumbled 'Ok dear, I concede, you were right.... Yet again!'

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