

She Saw Red (wc = 4000)

Tyranee's pig tails stuck straight out of the sides of her head as if they were the wings of a humming bird in flight; her brown, seven-year-old brow glistened in the summer midday sun. Her walk had been long and hot, so she was relieved to have finally arrived at Rosa Parks Elementary School. As she looked both ways, crossed the street and took her last steps towards her destination, she peered up at the clock in front of the brick school building and noticed that the little hand was between the 11 and the 12 and the big hand was on the 9. That meant she had arrived early to the Inglewood Summer School Camp program. Tyranee knew the doors would open when the little hand was on the 12 and the big hand was on the 6.

Sweaty but self satisfied, Tyranee untied her sky blue sweat jacket from around her waist, spread it out on the grass, and sat cross-legged on the lawn underneath the shade of the sycamore tree in front of the multi-purpose room entrance. She took off her red, blue, and yellow Keds and white socks, wiggled her toes, and mused about how *The Red Balloon* ends as all the other balloons in Paris float over to the little French boy, Pascal, and take him on a cluster balloon ride over the city. Tyranee opened up her Fat Albert lunch box and took out her remaining apple. She wiped her hands on her denim Capri shorts and wiped the apple against the red balloon embroidered on the blue t-shirt she was wearing. Before taking the first bite, she held it up so that it looked like a red balloon against the sky.

It was Friday, movie day at the Rosa Parks After School Program, and Tyranee was going to see *The Red Balloon*. She hadn't seen it for a while, but today she was going to see red. She was making sure of that.

After last Friday's movie, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, Miss Ebony stood up in front of the big screen next to Troy, the projector guy, and made the announcement, "Next week, the Friday movie will be *The Red Balloon*. The movie will start at 12:45, so get here on time." Troy was lean and tall and dark like fudge while Miss Ebony was plump, freckled and light like chocolate milk. To Tyranee, when Miss Ebony stood next to Troy, they looked like the Black version of Jack Sprat and his wife.

Mention of the movie took Tyranee's mind to a different place. Immediately Tyranee heard French music in her head, she could see the other kids milling around the long, chrome cafeteria tables and plastic chairs. Their mouths moved but she could hear no words spoken. All other sounds faded out and Tyranee could only hear the sounds of the children's small shoes clicking on the wooden floors. She looked up at the fluorescent lights hanging from the high ceiling and started to think about the little French boy who finds a large helium-filled red balloon while on his way to school one morning.

Like all the other kids who were bussed from Rosa Parks Elementary School to Daniel Freeman Elementary School and back, Tyranee always missed the first part of all the activities and the first part of the Friday movies. She and the other late kids had to quietly tip toe in the dark to sit in the back; there was never any more popcorn left. Ordinarily, Tyranee didn't mind missing the beginning of the movie on Fridays, but this was *The Red Balloon* – her favorite movie – so she raised her hand but spoke out before Miss Ebony could even call on her.

“We ride the bus from Daniel Freeman to here – not just me, but a bunch of us. We never get here to see the beginning of the movie – it’s not fair. By the time we get here, *The Red Balloon* will be over!” Tyranee pleaded and whined, “Can’t you wait ‘til we get here to show the movie!?!” She tried to reason with Miss B’shara the bus lady, whose long braids draped over her shoulders and who always wore a long skirt that fanned out and shaped her like a Hershey’s chocolate kiss. Tyranee liked Miss Ebony, Troy and Miss B’shara even though, like the adults in *The Red Balloon*, it seemed that everyone here tried to contain her; their words usually pointing to what not to do.

What would Pascal do? Tyranee silently asked herself as she remembered the expression on the little boy’s face, his blond bangs hanging like a curtain just above his large gray eyes. He seemed about the same age as Tyranee and he knew his way around Paris and enough to get along. When he found the red balloon, Pascal had something to take care of, a friend with a mind of its own. Pascal’s problem: how to keep his new friend safe.

Tyranee thought all weekend and realized she had to have a mind of her own. She could not get help from the bus driver, her teachers or the other children. No, she would not ask Mommy nor did she think of telling anyone else. When her mom came to pick her up that Friday, Tyranee had already decided she would go somehow; by Monday, she figured out how.

Tyranee’s problem: the movie was to start when the little hand was on the 12 and the big hand on 9 and she got out of summer school when the little hand was on the 12 and the big hand was on the 6. Then she had to ride the school bus from Daniel Freeman Elementary School to the Rosa Parks Elementary School and Community Center so she

and the other kids always arrived late. If she took the school bus from Daniel Freeman to the community center, she would arrive when the little hand was on the 1 and the big hand was on the 12 and therefore miss the movie. Tyranee's solution: leave school early – like during recess – and walk from Daniel Freeman to Rosa Parks.

After all, how hard could it be? Mommy made breakfast, packed Tyranee's lunch and left for work in the morning before Tyranee left for school. Tyranee knew that when *Sesame Street* ended, it was time for her to leave the house. Each morning, she locked the front door as she left and placed the key under the flower pot on the front porch. She had to walk about 20 minutes from her home, the white second house from the corner of Overhill Drive and 64th Street, to Rosa Parks Elementary School. There, she would get on the school bus taking kids to Daniel Freeman Elementary School right across the street from the big reddish-brown circular building with white columns that Daddy called The Fabulous Forum.

During the summer, she went to school in the morning, 8:30 am – 12:30 pm, and took the bus back to the afternoon Children's Summer Camp at Rosa Parks Elementary School. Monday through Thursday, the kids would do arts or crafts or play games or learn a song or dance. Friday was movie day. Summer Camp went from 12:30 noon to 5:00 pm and Mommy would come every day after work to pick up Tyranee.

Monday, Tyranee started paying attention to the bus route so that she could leave Daniel Freeman during recess and walk back to Rosa Parks. She watched silently for 4 days, noting land marks and street signs, where the bus made its turns. When she got on the bus, Tyranee made sure that she sat in a window seat in the front of the bus, switching sides on different days. She gazed out the bus window as it left Rosa Parks

Elementary School. The bus left the school drive way and turned right, drove along the south side of the school and then a block later, the bus turned left onto a 3-lane boulevard where the cars went whizzing by big windowed stores. She heard no French music, only the sounds of rushing busses and cars, angry horns blowing, and police sirens from time to time. She noticed that she never saw anybody walking down this street. After passing a large intersection, the street slimmed down to 2 lanes and the bus passed houses with small yards and no driveways. A few minutes later, the bus made another left at a street that began with an M-, drove over a freeway and passed an assortment of shops separated by a brick church. The bus turned right at The Fabulous Forum. Tyranee gazed out of the left side of the bus at the expansive parking lot which looked like a concrete checkerboard with only one giant red checker.

Then she turned to observe Daniel Freeman Elementary School which was on her right. Tyranee could see that wall that surrounded the playground inclined on the outside of the perimeter. The bus turned right again, passed the fenced playground, and came to a stop at the front of the school. The children were dropped off right in front of the main entrance of the ivory building with burgundy trim. When the bus stopped, the children got up from their seats, walked groggily off the bus up the walkway, passed the flag pole and through the school's large burgundy double front doors. Tyranee was not groggy. Her silent but wide opened eyes noticed that the brown tile floors creaked, but that she could still walk down the hallway without anyone noticing. She followed the other boys and girls who turned right and walked down to the end of the corridor to the classroom. She placed her lunchbox in one of the cubby holes just outside the front of the classroom just like the other kids.

Her teacher, Mr. Smith, stood right outside of the classroom door greeting the students as they filed in. As Tyranee walked into class, her eyes took in the faded yellow walls, bulletin boards with student art, one door at each end of the row of countertops and windows in the back of classroom. Mr. Smith had propped open the back doors releasing students to the communal patio area. Inside the classroom, there were 4 sets of 3 tables, cabinets with supplies, shelves with student projects. Tyranee walked over to the “Book Nook,” the classroom’s carpeted library in the back, in order to pick out a story to read.

Tyranee was one of 20 kids in Mr. Smith’s class of second graders. Mr. Smith, always smiling and able to show the happy side of any situation, reminded Tyranee of Mr. Bob from *Sesame Street*. In the morning, he read from a story book while the students all sat around him cross-legged on the carpet. As the rest of the students listened to Mr. Smith, Tyranee gazed out the classroom window, remembering that Pascal seemed always looking up and out. She wondered what it would be like to have her own red balloon and imagined playing with it like Pascal plays with his new found toy when he realized the balloon has a mind and will of its own. She remembered the red balloon following Pascal wherever he went, at times hovering outside his bedroom window because Pascal’s grandmother wouldn’t allow it in the apartment.

Tyranee looked up at the clock when the recess bell rang and saw the little hand was on the 10 and the big hand was on the 6. On the way out to the playground, Tony and Vince grabbed their lunch bag or box from their class cubbyhole so that they could trade chips for cookies. Several of the others borrowed the supervising teacher’s big red bouncy ball so they could play dodge ball. Tyranee played tetherball and hopscotch by

herself. After a few minutes, she walked over to the side gate and peered out of the fencing that surrounded the school. Pacing along the fenced perimeter of the playground, she saw that if a person crouched down and walked along the outside, other people on the inside could not see them.

After recess, the teacher showed the class a few maps and the children worked on their “Where am I?” project. Monday, they drew a map of their classroom marking a star on their desk. Tuesday, they colored a map of their school. Wednesday, they drew themselves on a map of the neighborhood. Thursday, they were given a state map and told to make a star on Inglewood. Friday, they were going to see where they lived on the globe.

Tyranee noticed that at dismissal, the students did not depart from the front gate to get on the bus; instead they all marched out of the side of the building and out the side gate onto the bus. The gate was normally closed but not locked – as she discovered during Tuesday’s recess. Observing the afternoon ride back from Daniel Freeman to Rosa Parks, Tyranee found that the way home was different and much more interesting. As soon as all of the children were on the bus, it started and made a u-turn to pass The Forum. Then it turned left onto the street that began with an M- and ambled past a series of houses followed by a strip of shops and office buildings. A few blocks later, the bus turned right at the big church with a bell in the steeple onto a much smaller, tree lined street and slowly moseyed down a narrow road with brick shops. Some minutes later, the bus would run out of shops and come to another row of houses, making a left back down 63rd Place, arriving at Rosa Parks Elementary School shortly afterwards. In fact, it was an easier route.

Friday finally came and Tyranee rode the bus from Rosa Parks to Daniel Freeman as usual. When the recess bell rang, Tyranee walked out of the classroom along with the other children and went into the girls' bathroom where she waited for the voices of the other kids to fade away. She counted 60 mississippis. A few minutes later when it sounded as if the kids had all gone out, she came out of the bathroom and calmly grabbed her Fat Albert lunchbox from its cubby hole in the hallway. She walked out of the side gate, closed it behind her, rounded the corner, and stooped down so that she could not be seen as she passed the ivory painted bungalows and the playground on the other side of the fence. At first, she had to crouch low and almost crawl. But as the wall got higher and higher, Tyranee scuttled like a crab, low but fast without being seen.

From Daniel Freeman, Tyranee passed a couple of office buildings up Prairie Avenue where she crossed the street. She turned left and walked down the street that began with an M- passing a garage with a sign of a car, a squat brown building with a picture of a big tooth, a place where people were doing laundry, a restaurant with a big yellow chicken sign and a white painted building with a sign of a house. When she reached the church with the bell in the steeple, which was on the corner of Market Street, Tyranee made the right hand turn onto the much smaller, tree lined road that had shops with big windows with wigs, racks of women's dresses, books, music posters, bicycles, as well as radios and televisions.

Tyranee stopped at the first shop to gaze in the window at the row of ladies' wigs – red, blonde, and brunette, long and straight, short and curly – covering white styrofoam heads. As soon as she spotted the reflection of the red balloon on her shirt, she thought about how the red balloon follows Pascal. As they wander through the

streets of Paris, adults glance inquisitively and children stare enviously. At one point, the balloon inserts itself into Pascal's schoolroom, causing pandemonium among the other students. The ruckus alerted the principal. Livid, he gives Pascal detention until school is over. At another point in their wandering, Pascal and his balloon stumble upon a little girl with a blue balloon that also seems to have a mind of its own. The sad part of the story happens when Pascal and the balloon encounter a gang of bullies who, jealous of Pascal's balloon, soon trash his new friend.

Suddenly, Tyranee peeked up and noticed that a young woman who was standing behind a counter inside the store had been glaring at her and now swiftly approaching her. But she scurried away before the lady could say anything to her. Just past the store next door with shelves and shelves of bottles, there was an alleyway entrance. She ducked into the alleyway and turned to see if the lady was still looking for her, Tyranee noticed a foul odor like burning rubber.

She turned to see two glassy eyed boys leaning against a trashcan with a can of paint and a brown paper bag. One was wearing jeans that were too baggy; the other was wearing jeans that were too tight. They were both wearing hoodies that drooped over their faces. One boy shook the can and sprayed it into a paper bag. The other boy snatched the bag and inhaled deeply.

"Whatchoo looking at?" The boy with the spray can lunged at her and Tyranee darted away. Seeing that neither the lady from the wig shop nor the boys in the alley came after her, Tyranee continued her trek. When her heart settled down, her stomach started to growl, so Tyranee sat down on a wooden bench next to a bus stop to eat half of her sandwich. She removed the red cup on top of her thermos and poured a cup of

Kool-Aid. Even though the day was getting hot, she decided she would save the rest for the end of her journey.

As Tyranee was putting away her last half sandwich from her lunchbox, she spied a ragged homeless man digging through a dumpster on the side of the cafe. When she offered it to him, the homeless man snarled back at her, waved her away with one hand and continued to dig through the dumpster with the other hand. Tyranee sat back down and watched the homeless man come up with a soggy bagel which he held up like a prize. Her mouth fell open when he brushed it off and ate it. Aghast, Tyranee turned away and began walking again, passing a loud speaker blaring jazz in front of an outdoor café.

She counted the shops as she passed one after the other: the one with racks and racks of clothing in plastic wrap, the large store with radios, televisions, and phones.... One store had a sign with a cigarette right next to a restaurant with a picture of a fish. There was a yellow shop with a woman arranging flowers behind black shuttered windows and a blue shop with a man in a tie sitting at a desk. All together she counted 20 stores and shops. Tyranee knew that she needed to continue to walk down this street until all of the shops faded out and the row of houses began.

Now Tyranee sat recalling her plans and mission and remembered how the film ends as the other balloons in Paris come to Pascal's aid and take him on a cluster balloon ride over the city. As she held up the apple so that it looked like a red balloon against the sky, Tyranee began to hear the wail of sirens. She wiped her hands on her shirt after she finished eating the apple. Then she stood up, shook her jacket out and threw away

the apple core. Tyranee thought nothing of the approaching red lights of the police car swerving into the school's loading zone. The squad car parked right in front of her. An officer jumped out and swung the back passenger door open.

“Tyranee!” her mother shrieked as tears emerged and began streaming down her face. The large brown woman in a red dress frantically ran over, bent down and squeezed Tyranee tight, scooping her in her arms as she stumbled back a step and carrying her to the police car. Red faced, Mom could only ask redundant questions, “Are you okay? What happened? How did you get here? We have to get you back to the school!”

“But wait! Where are we going – I want to stay! The movie hasn't even started yet! Why can't I stay?” Tyranee struggled to find the right words as she tried to pull away and run to the door of the multi-purpose room. But it was too late, her mom crammed Tyranee into the backseat of the squad car and the officers proceeded to drive them back to Daniel Freeman Elementary School where the principal and teacher were waiting. Tyranee stared out of the back seat of the police car watching her journey untravel. Dark clouds of disappointment brewed in her brain producing a torrent of tears. She caught a glimpse of the school bus from Daniel Freeman drive by. She became jealous of the other boys and girls who would get to watch the movie.

The square headed police barked questions at Tyranee in the car: “How did you get here? Who brought you? Why did you come here?” Tyranee could see him scowling like a bulldog in the rearview mirror. But she was too choked up to answer. He could see that his sharp tone scared her, so he stopped questioning her and began complaining under his breath.

“Turn around, Tyranee! The police man is talking to you!” Mom’s relief faded and she became infuriated with her daughter. Mom pulled Tyranee away from the window and turned her daughter around so that she faced forward. “We have to take you back to the school. You left and nobody knew where you were off to. Everyone was so worried about you!”

The realization that she was not going to see the movie overcame Tyranee. Big emptiness weighed down her little heart causing her to slump back down in the seat. Sobbing and sucking in air, Tyranee continued to bargain, “But I’m okay, nobody hurt me, can’t you see? Now can I go back?”

“No, you must go back and apologize to your teacher for making everyone worry and causing this trouble!” Mom pounded the door on her side rather than hit her daughter.

Tyranee buried her face against her mom’s stomach, “I just wanted to see *The Red Balloon*. All I wanted was to watch the movie. If I waited until the end of school to take the school bus, I wouldn’t get to see it. So I left at recess and walked.”

The officer who was driving said, “*The Red Balloon*? I remember that movie. Little girl, this is Inglewood, not Paris. You could have been snatched up, run over by a car, shot, bullied. Your lunchbox could have been stolen or your eyes or kidneys or even worse... *The Red Balloon* was a movie and this is reality.”

When they arrived at Daniel Freeman, the police and mom explained to the principal and the teacher, who were waiting in the big office in the front. They seemed more relieved than angry. Tyranee stomped away in a huff.

Mr. Smith put on his gentlest voice when he explained to Tyranee, “When you didn’t come back from recess, I began to worry. I called your mom, and then I called the police to find you.”

Tyranee looked past Mr. Smith rather than at him. She purposely ignored his conciliatory efforts. Through tears streaming down her face, Tyranee made her apology. Devastated that she had missed her favorite movie, all Tyranee could see was red.