

Acceptance Day

Before the white boys found him, Jin-John Tsao was going to go to Harvard. For years, everybody in C-town had been saying he was something real and sharp and fast, a fistful of lightning, so when the acceptance letter arrived, not one sorry soul on the entire street was the least bit surprised. Even Mama, who'd grown up in a Xi'an village so isolated the villagers spoke a chopstick-clatter dialect nobody else could understand, knew that Harvard meant Jin-John was getting the hell out of here. She rolled pink lotus paste into our prettiest ceramic dish and, after affixing my I AM CHINESE button to my shirt, sent me over to the Tsaos'.

I trotted out of our house and down the sidewalk. Sky-gauze glistened like it might rain later. The string of shops—the acupuncture place where they chased demons out of your limbs; Wong's Styles where the hairdressers had special Asian trimmers (the white barbers several blocks over refused to cut our hair, said it was too coarse for their scissors); my second-best friend Annie's parents' Royal Laundry where they'd do blouses for five cents and suits for ten—bled into each other.

Some of the kids at school said Chinatown was shit, especially 9th Street, but they didn't know about how the fruit seller on the corner of Taylor sometimes gave me lollipops that soaked my lips sugar-orange, or how during the new year we'd all gather at the Yangs' and fold pork dumplings, squish-plop-pat, and the aunties and uncles would tell stories until dawn flooded our windows with pale blue light.

When I knocked on the Tsaos' door, Jin-John answered. I never knew what to call him because Mama and Baba and the other grown-ups called him Jin but he told us kids he went by John.

Seeing Jin-John made me so dizzy I forgot all the words in my head. His face was smooth and bright as oil. An emperor's chin, Mama always said. Annie said it was dumb for

me to carry a torch for a boy five years older than us, but I caught her sneaking glances at him, too, when she thought nobody was looking.

I shoved the dish of pink lotus paste into his hands. “Mama wanted to say congratulations on Harvard,” I mumbled. I didn’t know where to put my eyes so I kept ‘em down the way Mama said girls should. The heat of his gaze skimmed off my skin.

“Thanks, Cheryl,” he said, voice skinny and gold, and I ran away instead of telling him Cheryl wasn’t my name, just something my teachers came up with.

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My first-best friend was Suzy Nishimoto and her other name was Tsuki, which she said meant *moon* in Japanese. Usually Suzy had magic in her toes and leapt the furthest in hopscotch but after the attack, she hadn’t been jumping much at all. Instead, she let the shadows smudge her edges. Walked with her shoulders pinned up close like butterfly wings that someone might rip off to stop her from flying.

One Thursday morning, after Jin-John got into Harvard but before everything else, she was sitting on the blacktop as Annie and I were trying to beat our hopscotch records. Annie was teaching me how to twirl backwards while hopping so my skirt could spin out like a ballerina’s.

Two minutes in, Patricia Newman and her crowd came by, which meant we had to get off the hopscotch squares. Annie and I stepped aside, but Suzy didn’t stand up fast enough. Patricia kicked her. “What’s wrong? Don’t you speak English?”

Suzy stayed quiet, the way we all did around the white girls.

“Dirty Jap,” Patricia continued, sneering. “I bet she knew about what they were going to do,” she told the other kids gathered round. “She’s a dirty Jap spy.” Their giggles bounced off the asphalt, ricocheted between our ribs.

The metal brooch of my I AM CHINESE pin dug cold into my chest.

“Come on, Suzy,” Annie said, quiet like the saddest song. “Let’s go play marbles.”

Suzy stood up and we walked away real fast, but still we heard Patricia saying loud, “My daddy says they’re gon’ round up all the Japs and ship them back.”

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In a week, it was Jin-John who came knocking on our door. He was collecting scrap metal for the war effort, like a good American. They were going to melt down our soup cans and spare car parts to make tanks that could crunch over bone and boats that would float in blood. Mama donated an old rusty pan she used for making potstickers.

After Jin-John had left our doorstep, I found a bicycle rim I played hoop-on-a-stick with when I was smaller. I ran out to find him and his box of clinking relics.

He wasn’t at home, naw, he was still out collecting like an all-American golden boy. “I can give it to him for you, Qi-yue,” Auntie Tsao said, but I shook my head no because I wanted to be the one to see him smile like an echo and hear his warm-belly *thank you*.

So I skipped down 9th, being extra-careful not to step on the sidewalk cracks or my mama might break open. There were two people in the alley, the one between Wong’s Styles and the red room that swallowed pretty ladies with sad mascara eyes. So I shuffled past, but then I looked back and it was Jin-John suckling the swan neck of some white girl.

I dropped the hoop and the metal-on-pavement sang so loud, both of them looked up. Jin-John met me eye to eye. His gaze bloomed into mine. The world stopped breathing, but only for a split-second.

I spun on my heel and ran. Couldn’t get the image out of my head, Jin-John’s limbs entwined with hers, kissing kissing kissing like he wanted her to save him from his own skin. Jin-John, didn’t you know, no matter how many soup cans you collected in your cardboard box, the white boys would never let a chink steal what was theirs.

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Spent the next few days sulking. The idea of Jin-John with her made me feel like I was composed of edges and I couldn't figure why. Annie called me khaki wacky, but it wasn't that Jin-John was with some other girl, exactly.

Not that I had too much time to mope. Not when it felt like the whole world was against Suzy. Baba didn't ever let her come over, not even when we had a grammar project together. He said the damn Japanese flayed Nanjing raw. Knifed open young girls like me. At dinner, I listened to his stories, slid inside of his gunshot words until I knew my anger could burn Tokyo to salt and bone, but then at school I would see Suzy and her butterfly wings, and wordless promises would swell up in my throat. Maybe Japs were supposed to be made of iron and cruelty, but I couldn't imagine Suzy Nishimoto ever hurting me.

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As January unraveled, the rumors brushed up against our calves, purred silkily until we found ourselves welcoming them into our homes, where they settled into the corners of our living rooms.

There was a list and every single goddamn Jap was on it. No, someone had heard only those who had been born across the sea were on it. Actually, someone else said, only the men were on it. Or only the illegals. Or only the thieves and the spies and the thieving spies.

And what was going to happen to everyone? The President was going to stuff every single person on the list into crates, limbs folded like broken birds, and ship them back. Or they would be put on trains stretching a hundred miles long.

I pictured Suzy on a sinking boat, dark water bursting through the wood-seams: a bone-thin silhouette shuddering as waves crested higher and higher until they devoured her face. I thought of her in a country where nobody knew how to play hopscotch and everybody spoke like clattering marbles.

In the same weeks, a different set of rumors also spread through C-town. Jin-John was seen with the same white girl on at least three separate occasions. Nobody knew who she was—a student from the Jesuit school halfway across the city, some said. A preacher's starched-frocks daughter. A policeman's little sister. We muttered that Jin-John musta thought he was a real ace, getting into Harvard and now courting a blonde cookie. But we also knew that if this gossip was clawing its way through our weekend markets and mahjong games, just begging to be scratched behind the ears, the white boys would soon find out as well.

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The morning after the boys found Jin-John, it rained like a whisper. I sat outside though Mama said I'd catch my death. I liked how the raindrops kissed my cheeks tenderly.

Annie came by without an umbrella, even though she hated getting her hair wet. The breeze whipped her bangs to her forehead. "They beat John last night," she said. It took me a moment to figure she was talking about Jin-John.

Everything slowed like the air was infused with honey. "Who did?"

"Coupla cracker boys from Washington Street. Bloodied him up real bad. Mama said both his eyes are completely swollen shut. Like a newborn pup."

I imagined Jin-John all bloated, his golden skin etched with blood. Emperor chin smashed. Potential tucked away in his shirt pockets. I felt tilted and dizzy.

"Mama said they musta mistook him for a Jap," Annie continued. "He wasn't wearing his pin."

I stood up without listening to the rest and started running. Didn't know where to, but every single one of my veins stuttered with electricity.

"Hey—hey Qi-yue!" Annie yelled behind me. "Where d'you think you're going?"

As soon as she asked, I knew. "Visiting Suzy."

"You gotta be joking—"

We stuck to 9th Street and the Nishimotos stuck to 14th; the Filipinos' chattering and arguing filled up the dreams in between. Baba never let me go to Japantown because they would cleave my belly open and gouge my eyes out, but how was standing in one place much better when anybody could find and break you?

I shrugged and kept running. Feet slapping the sidewalk, go go go, don't breathe too shallow or too fast or else your sides will stitch up. After a while, Annie caught up, pink and sputtering, and we sprinted shoulder to shoulder.

J-town didn't look much different from C-town. The sky was the exact same shade of wet tin.

We knocked on Suzy's peeling-paint door. Mrs. Nishimoto answered. "You look for Tsuki?" Her face was pearly as the moon. We stared at her because we hadn't imagined a Japanese lady could be so pretty. "Tsuki?" she repeated, and we nodded wordlessly.

When she walked away from the doorway, we craned our necks and gawked at the framed paintings of sakura blossoms, the paper fan pinned to the wall, the potted lucky bamboo. Mama had the same bamboo on the kitchen windowsill, something about feng shui. When Mrs. Nishimoto came back with her daughter, we tucked our chins back and straightened our spines.

The three of us sat outside even though the steps were wet. I realized I didn't have the right words to say to Suzy. Couldn't pinpoint why I wanted to come all this way to visit her when I'd see her next Monday at school, except that I kept thinking about Jin-John being broken. How his cardboard box overflowed with clanging and jangling. His Harvard letter with the crisp red seal. But none of that mattered because Jin-John looked more like the enemy than he ever looked like them.

None of us said a peep for a few moments, and then Suzy started giggling. "You—you look like a drowned cat—with your hair like that," she said, pointing at Annie's head. Her

black hair was plastered to her forehead and cheeks, and her eyes were round and glimmering. Once Suzy pointed it out, I could see it too. She looked like an unlucky stray that got caught in a downpour. I started laughing and, after a second, Annie joined in.

Our echoes tumbled and whistled like the entire street was laughing along with us. In a few weeks, there'd be executive orders nailed to every telephone pole, and Suzy and her family would be whisked off to places unknown. And in another handful of months, Japan would raze the city where Annie's grandparents lived. Jin-John would go off to the Army instead of Harvard, desperate to prove the impossible, and two years later, he'd come back in a casket draped with the flag of a country that broke its promises to him. But right then, in the rain, we kept laughing, the sweetest birdsong nobody could ever steal from us.