Kathryn Ma, from All That Work and Still No Boys
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For Sale By Owner

A sign has appeared in our front yard, *For Sale By Owner,* white letters on stiff red cardboard, tacked to a wooden pole and hammered into the grass by my father. He has written our telephone number into the blank space on the bottom of the sign, and the whole appearance of it—the wobbly sign, the careful black numbers, the clear plastic sheeting stapled by my mother so autumn rains won't run the ink—has a whiff of shame about it. There's nothing to be ashamed of though. I don't know why I feel embarrassed. We're going to California. My father has got a promotion. Our ticket up and out—that's what my parents say behind closed doors.

I like the place we live in, a small town out the Philadelphia Main Line. It's the early sixties, something is stirring, but our little neighborhood hasn't been touched. From the road, we look no different from all the other families around us. Our house is red brick with black shutters. The driveway runs straight, with a basketball hoop for my older brother and me. Yew bushes line the path to our front door. We have a red metal flag to raise and lower on our mailbox. I'm ten; my name is Charley. My family is Chinese—there's no way around that—but we've been welcome here all the same.

I have a pack of friends; they're all envious. They want to be going to California. It seems a joke, that we're moving to Los Angeles. To palm trees and Hollywood and Disneyland. They punch me for that, roll me in the dirt. We scrabble for handholds, trip the ones just getting to their feet. When we come up for air, we laugh at Wally Mitchell, who has weeds in his red hair that make him look like a farmer. Farmer Mitchell, we start to call him. It makes him mad, so we link arms and chant that at him all the way down the block. It's his turn today, but tomorrow it will be somebody else's. The gang keeps track; nobody is the victim for long. I belong here, I know it, and my parents are wrong to think that we're better than this.

Once, only once, did something bad happen. It wasn't scary, only unpleasant. It might have been one of my gang who did it, or one of my brother's friends—he's sixteen. We had a little statue that came with the house; he stood at the end of our driveway. A riding jockey, with a red cap and striped pants, lifting a lantern in his curled hand. It was hard to tell if he was a boy or a man. My father didn't like it, said it wasn't meant for an ordinary neighborhood, a cramped little house like ours, but my mother wouldn't let him remove it. I'll give him a coat of paint then, said my father, and he painted the hands, the grinning face, the feet bright white, with a brand-new can of paint he bought at the hardware store. And the very next day, someone painted slanty eyes across the whitened face of our happy jockey.

Okay, said my mother, her own eyes narrowed. Take it to the junkyard. She hurried back into the house.

It was only a joke, my brother and I protested. We found it funny, because our friends thought it so, but our father's silence as he loaded the little statue into the trunk of the Pontiac shut

down our explanations. It was our parents who couldn't see the humor. We knew nobody meant us any harm.

In fact, it's their fault. They go out of their way to be different. My mother, especially, makes it a point. She sends my father to the city—sometimes Philadelphia, sometimes New York—to Chinatown to buy ingredients. She cooks for two days—eggrolls, wontons, mein noodles—Peter and I eat as fast as we can sneak it. Then she and my father put up the green card table and the red one and invite everybody in. My father pours the drinks; the neighbors stuff their mouths full. Wives sing my mother's name across the crowded room. Their husbands put their arms around her waist. She flaps her hands, turns their compliments away. It feels like a circus, the noisy house, the people all clapping, and my parents like performers doing their tricks onstage.

A sign has gone up in my classroom, too. My teacher, Mr. Franklin, has covered the big black-rimmed IBM clock with a poster that says "TIME PASSES. WILL YOU?" So we can't see how long till recess or lunch or the end of the day. Mr. Franklin is a Negro. My mother isn't happy about that.

But I can't take my eyes off Mr. Franklin. He's a big man, with broad shoulders and large hands that are very pink on one side. His fingernails are clean and smooth. He wears a gray suit or a brown one, with a skinny tie and a silver tie clip. The tie clip looks like my father's, except it's plain where my father's is marked with a symbol which he told me means that he's an educated man.

Mr. Franklin does things different. He doesn't ask anyone can he change the rules. He lets me read anything I want to read, and he whips any boy who makes a ruckus. I don't spare the rod, he told us right off the bat. What's that, spare the rod, only Eddie Andrews knew, whose mother is a Baptist. On the playground, Eddie told us that we better look out for a beating.

All the other teachers at Pennwood Elementary are women. Mr. Franklin can do what he wants.

The first time one of us gets a whipping, I see it happen from well out of the way. Gregory Smith is goofing off near the windows, and Mr. Franklin grabs him by the shirt collar and hauls him to

the boys' bathroom. No warning—he just grabs him and goes. He has Gregory in one hand and a yardstick in the other. They come back ten minutes later. I'm back in my seat by now, and the whole class is quiet. Gregory wipes his eyes and his nose and sits right down. Mr. Franklin leans the yardstick up against the chalkboard; one end is broken off. We find it on the bathroom floor at recess.

Gregory tells his parents, but they don't show up at school, because Gregory's father uses his belt on his children. And the next day, Mr. Franklin hauls somebody else to the bathroom, Buddy Flintock, who's a Negro too. Buddy breaks the other end of the yardstick. So now we all know that Mr. Franklin plays fair.

"I hereby give my permission for Charley Wu to take any book he wants out of the library," says the note I keep in my desk. It's signed by Mr. Franklin. The librarian works her mouth the first time she reads it. She pinches her lips like she's tasting something awful. I open the books to get her to stamp them. John Steinbeck, Samuel Clemens. She says that Mr. Franklin hasn't got any right. It's she who runs the library, not some fifth-grade teacher. "Fifth grade"—I think she means something else. She stamps the books anyway. She's afraid if she doesn't, he'll come through those doors himself.

Why doesn't my mother like Mr. Franklin? It's not me who's getting the beatings. My father doesn't listen to her when she complains. Charley is learning, is all he says. My brother asks, does he play the radio when he's in there during recess? I go back into the classroom one day to check. Yes, I tell my brother, he plays it loud. Hillbilly music. It's just a joke I'm telling. Mr. Franklin was in there grading papers.

Twenty-three five is how much our house costs. The number puzzles me. I don't know where the zeros are supposed to go. I hear my mother telling Mrs. Dalton, our neighbor, Twenty-three five. I think we should have an agent, but Robert insists on doing it himself.

There will be other Chinese people in Los Angeles, says Peter. We're in the woods, searching for box turtles next to the creek. Aunt Betty is there, for one.

Who cares, I say. None of our friends will be there.

Mother cares. Father cares too.

They're stupid, I tell him. They make a big deal out of nothing.

Twenty-two seven, my mother tells my father. Or get the agent; he'll sell it fast enough.

Be patient, says my father. It just went on the market.

Betty has found a ranch house she wants us to come out and see.

My father says, I can do it by myself. We'll need a new car to drive all the way west.

Now I feel bad, hoping nobody wants to buy it. If there were a buyer, my mother would leave my father alone.

He does things for Peter and me. Twice a month, he takes us to the city to do what rich people do. We go hear an orchestra, or see a boring play—no music, just talking—or watch people dance, or listen to the piano.

I wish he'd stop trying to make us better.

I've got tickets for this Saturday, he says. Only three tickets, because they cost a lot of money. Mother seems happy that she doesn't have to go. It's the ballet again, to see some Russians. I can't stay home though my gang is asking.

We hurry from Penn Station to the bus to the street. There's no time for dinner; he lets us get a sandwich from the Automat, which we love, and a huge piece of lemon meringue pie, which jiggles on the plate like a wagging pet. I am tired before the ballet begins. My father leans forward; Peter and I sag back. The people dance on and on and on, mostly girls in stiff skirts waving their arms up and down. Once in a while, a man jumps out and carries a girl around. We're way up in the balcony, and it's hot. I sleep before intermission.

He's up next, says Father, checking his program. He's bought me a Coca-Cola so I can't say that I want to go home.

Rudolf something-Russian. He tells me again, but as soon as he says it, I can't remember the name.

Mr. Rudolf dances, and everybody roars. He jumps a lot. He spins. I sleep near the end; my father has to wake me. It's past midnight when we get home, but my mother has left the lights on so the whole house is blazing. She argues when my father tells her not to waste money. What's a few dollars next to my personal safety? It's the only way I can get to sleep. Mrs. Dalton told me that just two blocks over, a house was robbed and all the lamps broken. People from the city, says my mother with meaning. This neighborhood is changing. We've got to get out.

Here is how my mother and Mr. Franklin meet.

I don't want to move, I burst out one day, to Mr. Franklin, in the classroom during recess. He lets me come in for extra math work when I want. My parents say we have to go to California. I like it here, but they won't listen.

You're moving?

I nod.

He looks at me for a while. Maybe he's sorry I'm leaving? Only Wally Mitchell is better than me at math. Then Mr. Franklin takes a big breath and looks back down at his work. Got to go with the folks, he says. He's telling me to be manly. Got to go where the work is. He looks up again. Your dad get a new job?

I nod. I look at his broad chest and settle my shoulders an inch.

What about your house? he asks.

I guess it's for sale, I say.

How much are they asking?

I don't know what it means, but twenty-three five, I say.

He thinks about that for a moment.

How many bedrooms?

Two, and a den. And a kitchen with a window and a living room for parties. And a yard, I say, because now I see a way to do something nice for Mr. Franklin, who's the best teacher I've ever had, and for my father, who has promised my mother that he can sell the house by himself.

Two bedrooms.

And a den. You should come see it.

I might just do that.

You could come this weekend.

He writes down our address, and then he tells me it's his turn to pick somebody to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. He's talking about the all-school assembly. Everybody gathered in the gym, and one kid up on stage all by himself with the flag. I show him how straight I can stand with my hand on my heart. You lead us on Monday then, says Mr. Franklin. I race out the door, looking for Peter. I mean to tell him about Monday, the all-school assembly, and that Mr. Franklin might buy our house, but when I get out of the schoolyard, the gang is waiting, and we decide to ride our bikes to the highway culvert, where we play half-crouched in the dirt and water, daring each other to crawl all the way to the end. I don't remember Mr. Franklin until it's too late.

My mother is giving Mrs. Dalton a cup of tea when Mr. Franklin rings our doorbell.

Charley, see who it is.

It's my teacher! My voice squeaks, I'm so excited. He's in my house! He's just as big—even bigger—than at school. He has his gray suit on. His tie is knotted tightly; his hat is in his hands.

I don't understand, says my mother to Mr. Franklin. Mrs. Dalton is sitting very still. Is Charley having a problem with his schoolwork?

He wants to look at our house! I shout. Maybe he wants to buy it. He needs a house; he's new at school this year.

My mother's eyes dart to Mrs. Dalton's. Something passes through the air.

Charley is a great salesman, says Mr. Franklin. The house sounds pretty good for my family and me. We have a little baby and we're looking for a nice house in a neighborhood close to school.

My mouth hinges open. I think of Mr. Franklin as one person only.

I'm sorry, says my mother. She's smiling at him. She never smiles so big.

The house is not on the market.

I hear Mrs. Dalton's teacup set back in its saucer.

I see, says Mr. Franklin. He lifts his hat like he's pointing it at her.

Father hasn't taken the sign down, I protest. I've just figured out that she means, it's not for sale.

Charley was mistaken, says my mother, still smiling. I'm sorry you bothered to come all this way.

His hat wavers. His eyes are hard. I'm standing in the middle, and I feel a thick muscle, like a serpent, twist between them, like a rope come to life with a jerk at either end.

He leaves quickly after that. And my mother and Mrs. Dalton collapse in their chairs and shriek.

All the next day I worry should I speak. Tell my father what happened or approach Mr. Franklin. It's Sunday, and we go to church, and Mother serves a good Sunday supper, but I am troubled and cannot eat.

Can I have your pie, says Peter. And my father helps clean up, then goes to his den to listen to his records. I listen for a while too, standing outside the door. I listen longer in the hallway than I do in the concert hall. Better not to mention Mr. Franklin's visit. All my father wants—I'm beginning to understand—all Father wants is a glimpse of beauty.

And on Monday morning, I don't find time to speak to Mr. Franklin, and anyway, what words would come. It's raining, the bus is late, and I need to get my hair combed down before it's time for assembly. Mr. Franklin leads us into the gym. There is the flag on its pole at the side of the stage. All the other classes crowd in, the first-graders, looking like babies, and the sixth-graders, shoving us hard as they roll to their seats. The student band gathers at the steps to the stage. Principal Melton tests the mike, the older boys mocking him by bobbing their heads like chickens. He nods to Mr. Franklin. I try again to flatten my hair, and just as I start to get up from where I'm sitting, Mr. Franklin calls Wally Mitchell to lead the Pledge.

Farmer Mitchell. His red hair sticking up like a nasty finger shoved in my face. I fix my eyes on Mr. Franklin; he has his hand over his heart and his lips are moving. He checks on the class to make sure we're saying it too. When his gaze hits me, I search his face for a reason. I know the reason but anyway I search. He shows me nothing. I would rather see him angry. When the whole school sits, I stay on my feet, glaring at Mr. Franklin until Mitchell returns to his seat.

The grown-ups, they've given me no choice. I pick a fight on our way back to the classroom. Not with Wally Mitchell—that would be childish, and besides, he's my friend. I am being manly now, like Mr. Franklin wanted. I go after Buddy Flintock, one of the Negro boys, one of three. His friends jump in as soon as I trip Buddy. Hands flail, feet are kicking. Head aimed low, I picture myself with horns. Then I feel the grip on my button-down collar, know Mr. Franklin is dragging me away.

The boys' bathroom smells of cold cement and cigarettes. No one is in there but Mr. Franklin and me. Drop your trousers, he commands: the order shocks me. None of the boys beaten before me have admitted to the rest of us that the whip was laid across their flesh. I hear the whistle of the rod as it travels to my body. One, two, three strokes upon me. After the first, I give up and cry. The stick doesn't break, which is all the more shaming, because I know that Mr. Franklin isn't beating me very hard.

My mother finds the welts though I try to hide them. She's come into my room without knocking; never mind that on my last birthday I hung a sign to keep her out. Her loud cries bring my father rushing. They all examine me: Mother, Father, Peter, crowding in. I see my mother trembling in her rage. She demands an explanation. I have a choice to make between my mother and Mr. Franklin, with Father waiting to hear what I have to say.

I could have blamed it on the black boys, as my mother expected. Or the Negro teacher who made us lower our pants to give us those beatings he liked a little too well. I could have sent up the cry and alarm throughout the neighborhood, and with the right story, Mr. Franklin would have been gone.

I chose the other: to tell what Mother had done. I knew she had acted wrongly, and Father, I was certain, would know it too. Maybe I thought, mistakenly, that Father would help me out of my shame and confusion, or thought I would repay her for treating me still like a child. What I remember now is that I told the story simply, and that my mother suffered conscience enough to listen.

But Father failed me, as fathers eventually must. He turned his back on me and spoke only to Mother. A stream of Chinese, much too fast for Peter and me. What little I caught was all about money. The house and the agent and the price that had to drop. Not a word in there about Mr. Franklin or Charley. He ended by throwing his arm down by his side, the most violent thing I've ever seen from my father, and stalking outside to yank the sign up out of the grass. Within a day, another sign; no price named, just the agent. Within a week, the house sold and the movers hired. My father never praised me for knowing right from wrong. Silence was his currency, the value of one's actions never acknowledged or declared. How many years of silences yet to come! When I said good-bye to Mr. Franklin, I couldn't get the words "I'm sorry" out of my tender mouth.

But in the silence, always an intimation. And there is this, that I remember. We are living in Los Angeles some months later. The streets of Watts are burning; the blacks have risen to speak with fire this time. My mother is fearful, fairly crouched in her bedroom, all the lights turned off because now she feels safer unidentified, in the dark. We are miles away, but the fires are spreading. Peter has been told not to drive anywhere but straight home. Once in a while a siren passes, and my mother cowers, hand over her heart. I see my father standing in the front doorway. Close the door, my mother is pleading. He turns on the porchlight to signal his attention. He seems to be listening to a distant din. And his face glows in the yellow light, with a rapture I saw take him the night Nureyev danced.