

The world outside looked blurred and indistinct, through that dusty window pane that mom would make me wipe down every hour or so whenever it got too dusty to see through. After all, how were the customers supposed to see the beautiful teapots if the window was so dirty? But every time I'd begrudgingly get off my creaky stool behind the shopfront window and walk around to the outside with that metal bucket, that bucket that used to be round but I'd dropped it so many times that it looked more like when the teachers during the school year would ask us to draw our family or something and I, gripping my pencil so hard that my knuckles turned white with my right hand and not the left I still naturally wanted to use, would draw a squiggly circle with long black hair, two beady eyes, I liked to draw my noses with two little spirals for each nostril, and one time the boy sitting next to me who always drew the most boring stick figures told me that that's not what noses are supposed to look like, and I cried and told the teacher he was making fun of me, and then an upwards curve for the mouth, then standing around my self-portrait, two bigger versions of myself, each with the same long black hair and spirally nose and little smiling mouth. Dad is there too, with short spiky hair and a slightly less spirally nose. I swear I never meant it on purpose but for some reason he was always standing a bit farther away from the three of us. But so the bucket that used to be nice and round but isn't anymore, I'd have to wrap my arms around it and hold it to my chest because I was still too short then to hold it by the handle or it'd drag across the ground and spill over the unfinished hardwood. Struggling to carry the big bucket of water like that and still spilling most of it on the ground and myself, I'd hobble through the front doors that would say in a robotic female voice "欢迎光临!" every time you opened it, I'd plop the bucket down on the dusty pavement spilling more water that would quickly sizzle away on the sidewalk under that dripping Southern Californian sun. Then I'd go back in—欢迎光临!—and grab the cleanest rag I could find, head back out—欢迎光临!—and get to work, turning the little bit of clear water left in the bucket a murky brown. The window would look clear enough for a while, aside from those million little scratches from the grit getting rubbed against the glass. I always hated that about cleaning the window, it was like nails on a chalkboard. Unfortunately, the world outside just hated the sight of cleanliness. All that dust and sand, as if on a mission, would immediately seek out and cling to the wet window surface so that by the time I had put everything back and was settled into my stool again staring out the window, everything was dirty again.

Mom always sat at the tea table. About half the time, the electric kettle would be going with its low rumble that gradually got louder and louder, then it went *click* and mom would pick it up and pour a new pot of tea. She had this same ritual she did every single time involving at least ten different pieces of specialized tea tools. She had explained it to me countless times but I never bothered to remember. She'd pour out three little cups, and sit there, her back straight just like how she always told me to while I lazily reclined in my stool against the drywall, cracked from my back's sweat. After a while, the tea would steep for too long and get cold, so Mom would dump the three cups and what was left in the pot and start it all over again. Rumble, rumble, *click*, one, two, three cups, silence as she watched the steam over the cups dissipate, and over again. Maybe every once in a while a white couple would come in and look around. They

might kindly refuse Mom's offer to sit down for tea or they might awkwardly accept. Either way, they'd probably feel kinda bad about walking in here and not buying anything so they would pick out a cheap porcelain coaster or a pair of bamboo chopsticks from next to the cash register and buy that before heading out.

The Chinatown branch of the library was just down the street so during my breaks, I'd put on my Dodgers cap and cover the back of my neck with the moist dirty rag to walk the dusty, lonely road lined with hubcaps and boba straws down to the library. Every weekday, the same lady was there reading a different YA fantasy than last time with a Chinese-English dictionary and two pairs of glasses. I'd wave to her and she'd look up from her book, put an LA Public Library branded bookmark in it, close it, do the same for the dictionary, and take about ten seconds to switch glasses before recognizing me and waving back, always with a big toothy grin. And I'd always smile and make my way to the shelf at the very back with all the DVDs. When I was out of sight, she would then get to work switching glasses and opening both books back again. I never questioned her about this strange habit. When I was done finding what I was looking for her, I'd bring the stack of DVD cases to her desk to have them checked out. She always tried to teach me something in Mandarin when I'd go to her to check something out, or else she'd try to get me to teach her something in English. Neither of us ever seemed to get better at either language but it seemed to make her happy to try.

Some days, most days it began to seem, Mom didn't care enough to stop me from turning on the old TV. It sat in the opposite corner sitting on top of the DVD player whose tray needed to be opened with a fork. The DVD-player-fork had a dedicated spot on top of the TV. Mom wouldn't let me turn the sound on, just in case a customer came in, so I always watched my movies with closed captions turned on. It made me very satisfied for some reason, whenever I found myself sucked into a movie, to think that at least deaf people could enjoy this movie just as much as I was. And silently enjoy those movies I did, because on that 32" 720p television screen, I could be anybody, anywhere in the whole wide world.

One of these sticky hot, faultily air-conditioned days, I was watching another movie, it must not have been very good because I don't remember it, when my best friend, and pretty much my only friend, drew a dusty smiley face on the window right in front of me. She was the closest I had to a sibling. My older sister was nine years older than me and had gone off to college already. Even when she was back with us, we hardly had anything to say to each other. I always felt that my parents liked her more than me, at least in part because her Cantonese was way better than mine so she always just seemed more intelligent and complex to them, compared to my simple sentences. She always had this air of being so responsible and independent too. I couldn't stand her. Mom would let me out sometimes when my friend came by and we could go to the schoolyard or her parents' noodle house. We would talk about anything and everything: whichever movies we had watched recently, what our families were like, all the things we wanted to do when we grew up. She wanted to be an actress. I told her that I wanted to be a painter, which was half true I guess.

Sometimes when it was too hot to play outside, or their restaurant's air-conditioner was broken and ours had just been fixed, she'd stay in our shop and we'd watch movies together, sharing the stool between the two of us. Obviously it wasn't very comfortable, we practically took turns slowly sliding off the edge, then we'd readjust and sort of push the other off so it was the other's turn to slide off gradually. I liked that about her a lot, that we could chat about anything anytime, but that we could also just enjoy each other's company in silence. We could sit there together without saying a word and it was never awkward or anything, we just had this wordless understanding of each other. And like that, we'd be pressed against each other, eyes fixed on the screen, both transformed into the same beautiful actor or actress, playing out this fantasy somewhere I imagined must've been far, far away. I didn't realize until I was much older how nearby most of those places were.

Many years went by like that. Most of the neighbouring businesses had changed owners or had lease signs up, but somehow ours had stuck around. School dragged me along year on year and I'd always be relieved when summer came so I could at least be bored at home instead of at school. We spent several summers like that, stubbornly insisting on sharing the same stool despite it getting more and more uncomfortable as we got older and grew taller.

So, it was one of these days that she came by and drew a smiley face on the window to get my attention and she came in, clearly quite excited about something. She brought a dusty piece of paper with the corners torn off up to my face.

'Look this is my chance!'

'What is it? Hold it still I can't see.'

She tried to hold it steady but I still couldn't read it because she kept jumping up and down

'It's a casting call, they're looking for people to audition!'

I grabbed the paper from her and read it closely: ACTRESSES WANTED, 16-18, EAST ASIAN, NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY. 4 PM JULY 28 CAPITAL INDEPENDENT STUDIOS.

'Huh, times sure are changing aren't they. What the hell do you think they want an inexperienced asian actress for?'

'Oh come on, it's all about diversity or whatever now. Or they probably want to do one of those ethnic coming-of-age films with an amateur cast, like *City of God* or something, but Asian.'

'You sure they won't just make you an annoying comic relief in a superhero movie?'

‘Does it look like I care? I’ll take whatever they give me, I’ll be a real actress in a real movie! Are you hearing me?’

‘Yeah, yeah, I am. And you know what, hey, I’m happy for you, there’s no way they’ll look at you and not give you a role.’

‘Oh man, I hope it’s a gangster movie, and I’m like that really hot girl that the main character is willing to go clean for.’

‘And then you get blown up by a car bomb intended for your gangster husband.’

‘Yes, yes, exactly!’

‘Alright, alright, but what if they make you do an underage sex scene with Al Pacino?’

She almost fell over backwards laughing, then she grabbed my shirt to try to catch herself but she just ended up dragging me down with her and I fell on top of her, the stool clattering to the ground. I shoved off of her laughing as well. She kept saying in between breaths ‘just you watch me, just you watch!’

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The day of the audition came. It was a sweltering day. Her dad had promised to close up early to go with her. I had my permit and was practicing for my driver’s license so he was gonna sit passenger-side and let me drive the three of us. Her mom was still sleeping upstairs. It was still around noon and the midday sun rendered the outside a barren hellscape. Occasionally a few brave souls with big garbage bags would pass by and check the trash outside for bottles and cans. As such, her parents’ restaurant was empty except for us. We ate in the kitchen though, the two of us on a stool bent over the counter slurping away at our bowls of noodles. I finished mine but I was still hungry because I hadn’t eaten breakfast so I turned on the burner and started boiling another pot. I was thinking to myself that maybe I should audition too, but I figured they probably wouldn’t take both of us. We used to be told that we looked like we could be sisters. When we were younger, teachers used to embarrass themselves when they would confuse the two of us at school. We were older now and I thought she had grown up to be much prettier than me. They’d definitely take her over me.

‘Oh shoot, it’s 3:30 already, hurry, we’re gonna be late!’

I was mid-thought when she dragged me by the arm and we bolted out the door. Her dad was already in the car waiting for us.

By the time we got to the movie studio there was already a long line of auditioners. We stepped to the back of the line. She and I had fun making jokes about the other people in line, what kind of silly roles they would play in what kind of silly movies. The line moved at a snail's pace but we kept ourselves entertained. Suddenly though, a man with a lanyard came out and called for my friend and her dad by name. Strange, I thought, maybe they were spying on us talking in line and they just liked the way she looked that much. I stayed behind to keep our spot in line in case it was something anticlimactic. The man had said something about an urgent phone call for them. It wasn't long before the two of them ran back out to me, she looked like she was holding back tears.

'Hey look, I need to go, you just stay here alright.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

'It'll be alright, just, if I'm not back by the time it gets to you, you go on and audition for me, alright? You'll do great, I know it.'

'Wait, where are you going?'

But she was already sprinting for the car where her dad was already waiting and had started the engine. The car burned rubber and tore out of the lot before her door was even fully-closed. Everybody watched with mild amusement at the scene and I found myself alone, surrounded by people that looked sorta like me but that didn't know me at all.

She didn't come back. I eventually got to the front of the line where they took my picture and had me write my name and birth date on a long list of other names and birth dates. I was directed into a room with a serious looking lady who had her arms crossed and was standing up, a young man operating a camcorder, and an older man with a clipboard and multiple file folders. The older man stared at me for a moment, then seemingly made up his mind and picked out a page from one of the folders. The lady took it and walked over to hand it to me.

'In case you're wondering, this is going to be one of those gritty coming-of-age movies with an amateur cast, kinda like *City of God*, but in LA instead of Brazil. You ever seen *City of God*? It's pretty good, you should watch it. It's like—'

'Yes ma'am, er, yes I've seen it.'

We would have found that so funny, if only she had been here with me.

'Okay good. Now the character we have in mind for you has a pretty tragic story. So imagine you're standing in front of your house and it's on fire. You're devastated. All your childhood stuffed animals, treasured letters, bookshelves, your cozy bed...'

'Um, and what am I—'

‘...your home, the place you’ve lived all your life, where your eyes were formed, it’s all up in flames now. We want you to keep that in mind when you read those lines.’

‘Oh, okay th—’

‘And what’s worse, you think it might be your fault. You remember turning the stove on before leaving but you can’t remember if you turned it off.’

‘Oh... Oh God, what have I done.’

‘That’s right, that’s the spirit. So just keep that in mind. Read the lines.’

‘Oh no...’

‘Hey, kid, are you alright?’

Everybody was looking at me with what I imagine were concerned looks on their faces. I couldn’t really see their faces because my vision went all blurry.

‘Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,’ I tried to say without choking up or sniffing.

‘Okay, well, whatever you say. Just go whenever you’re ready.’

I honestly don’t remember what I did during the audition. I think I must have at least read a few lines before breaking down. Apparently enough that they gave me the role. They let me keep the wrinkled piece of paper.

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The movie turned out to be really good, it even won a few awards. Critics liked my debut performance. They dragged me to screenings all across North America and a few in Europe. I’ve already received a few scripts for upcoming projects. In light of all this, Dad quit his office job to come to America and help us move to the Valley. My friend and her parents, luckily her mom got out and called the fire department and then the film studio before the roof collapsed, they moved to Diamond Bar to stay with relatives while they tried to afford a new place. I haven’t seen her since. I never asked them whether they knew how the fire started. She mentioned something about an electrical fault but I couldn’t tell if she was making it up.

I was invited to this social thing at somebody’s mansion in Laurel Canyon, an executive producer or something. It was late at night, a bit windy up here, and everybody had been drinking and socializing in that way that makes you feel so alone when you’re not part of it. The place had a big swimming pool and an overhanging balcony that overlooked the entire Los

Angeles Basin. Somewhere in the suburbs way out East, too far to see through the haze, my best friend was probably watching DVDs on a television in her aunt's basement. I wondered if she was watching me on that screen. Over there, just North of that cluster of dark skyscrapers that make slender silhouettes obscuring the endless rows of distant suburban stars behind them, there lay the deserted streets of Chinatown, where we used to spend every summer together.

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I hadn't been back there in what felt like an eternity, even though I knew it'd only been a couple years. The streets were just as empty as I remembered them, a shell of what once was many decades ago, then got demolished to make way for Union Station, and was never restored to its former glory. Weird that I have this nostalgia for something my parents weren't even alive to see. It's almost like it never existed at all. I poked my head into the library to check if the old lady with the dictionary was there, then I remembered it was a weekend so of course she wasn't. I passed by the Chinese-American Museum. Mom used to take me here every time they had a new exhibit and the security used to let my friend and I stay here for the air conditioning when both our own places' ACs had broken down. I stepped inside to see what they had today. I didn't bother reading the introduction and went straight to the gallery. The current exhibit seemed to be a bunch of these impressionist type paintings depicting what it was like to grow up in Chinatown. Everything was painted with confident yet vaguely suggestive strokes so that everything looked blurred and indistinct, just as one sees the world through a dusty window pane. Everything looked so strangely familiar.

I stepped slowly along the walls, there were a few other people silently doing the same. My heart sank when I stepped in front of this one painting. It was noticeably more detailed than the others, like a memory so vivid that you can remember even the smell of it. There were two young girls trying to fit on an old wooden stool. One of them was wearing a pretty flower print dress, the other was wearing a T-shirt and shorts and had a dirty towel hanging from her neck. This girl was hunched over, legs dangling from the stool, elbows on her thighs, her hands propping up her chin. She was staring straight ahead as if to look straight at the viewer through the canvas itself, clearly entranced by what she saw, transported somewhere far, far away. Or at least a forty-five minute drive, anyway. She was so focused on what she was looking at that she didn't even seem to notice the other girl there. The other girl, the one in the dress, was leaning back a bit and had her arms wrapped softly around her friend. She was smiling as she stared at the girl in the T-shirt with such a gentle expression of admiration on her face. I felt terrible for only noticing it now. I didn't need to read the museum label to know who the artist was, but I had to look, I had to know what the title read.

