

Double Happiness

By Johnny Tsaur

I am a liar. The worst kind. The kind of person who lies to their own parents. I actually don't believe it is a lie, per say. It was an omission of the truth. It was somewhere in the gunmetal or dolphin gray between the black and white of truth and lies.

The lie began months ago; my cousin's baby was turning one. She had married a Korean guy, and in their culture, the first birthday was bat mitzvah-esque. My entire extended family was out at a seafood restaurant, the grand dining room, buffet style. The clanking of plates and the clucking of dialects filled the room. There is a specific type of noisy in which only true Chinese restaurants own. A busyness of people buzzing, the only way to describe it was that Asians ate hard.

It was two months before the Lunar New Year, the *only* holiday on the calendars of Chinese people. Normally, it is the biggest family gathering we have all year. In fact, it is the only extended family gathering we have all year. It was about to be the Year of the Rabbit. My year. To say that my family and I had ever blended well would be another lie. My two cousins, Timothy and Justin, were both born within a month from me. Lumped together, one could see the difference in our demeanor. Neither of them had finished school, Justin worked on the import car scene, his Honda a prized possession. Timothy worked at a Chinese restaurant, one of the silent men that snuck through the clanging and clashing of porcelain plates to refill teakettles and take away empty plates at a dim sum place. They were both muscular, gym rats, fluent in mandarin, wore baggy clothes and had closely buzzed heads. The most noticeable difference between the three of us though, was that Tim and Justin had girlfriends. Well, they had visible ones. Erica and Vivian, a Vietnamese girl and a Chinese girl, were at all of our family gatherings. They had been accepted into the family, been part of the pictures taken and the memories constructed. I had never brought a girl to a family gathering, mostly because I found the whole ordeal to be too nerve wracking. That was precisely because of one fact. I had never dated an Asian girl. I had never even been close to it. It wasn't so much that I wasn't interested in them, but more the fact that they were not interested in me. The ones that I had met were seeking something else, a drive for success, perhaps, but they looked for a certain something that I lacked. They looked for a certain mythical Asian-ness that I had not been naturally born with.

"Johnny, are you bringing a girl to Chinese New Year?" My cousin inquired.

My mother appeared from the parents' table to check up on me. She spoke in Mandarin. "*Bringing a girl? Who would take him?*"

My family laughed while I tried to shrug off the lack of faith from my own mother. Something inside of me had boiled over. I said something stupid to save face. It was something my father would have done. "I am."

The table's laughter continued, slowing down to extend the conversation. Details were required. The same cousin spoke once again, "What's her name?"

The word slipped from my mouth before I could even consider the consequences. "Akiko."

My mother was shocked at the news, her slanted eyes opened and her jaw half dropped as she banged on my shoulder. She had known I had a girlfriend, but was never

interested, since they seem to come and go fairly quickly. But this was news. Akiko. That is not the name of a blonde haired, blue eyed, sugar skinned cheerleader that I had mostly been seen with. The name carried weight. I was dating one of *us*, for once.

Justin's face was wearing a smirk as he commented, "Damn dude. Did you meet her on a boat or something? Did she just get here?"

The table continued to laugh, playful teasing of family. I spoke, "She's a friend younger sister, I met her at my buddy's birthday party."

The interrogation had stopped, as a platoon of men in white shirts and black pants came with a steaming pot of shark fin soup, using a big metal spoon to add to the clanking in the restaurant. I was saved by the cavalry. The high pitch of the steel spoon clanging on porcelain bowls matched the swell of Mandarin in the restaurant to my ears. Discordant. It barely meant anything to me.

It was the afternoon of the Lunar New Year. T-minus four hours till meltdown. It meant dinner at Justin's mom's place, as it was every year. I was parked outside of Akiko's friends house where she was crashing. We were in a long distance relationship, and she had flown out specifically for the event. The convergence of my family and my girlfriend was a war fought on two fronts. She was insisting to meet my parents. My parents were insisting to meet her now that they had learned of her name. There was no avoidance now; the point of no return had passed. I was standing on the beach, watching the water slowly creep outward until it formed a giant wall of water, a tidal wave, no, a tsunami, and I stood there as I watched it consume me whole.

I was wearing a red shirt, cowboy cut and rolled up to just below my elbows, my fingers tapped against the steering wheel. I had called her to come out of her house to save time on going inside. She emerged from the front door, saying goodbye to her friends when she turned to face me with her bright smile. She was slender in every sense of the word, long necked and thin nosed, matching the rest of her face. She was wearing a leather jacket over a black and white plaid top, her jeans hugging her stick thin legs like a shed able skin as her black flats slapped against the concrete. She had a piercing in her nose, a small hoop that shined in the right angles of sunlight. Her lips were delicate, thin and painted over with a glossy finish. She smelled of Burberry, a subtle scent that passed with a rush of vanilla to my nose. When she came in my car she leaned in to kiss me, leaving the sticky sweet residue of her glossy on my lips.

I could tell she felt the twinge of tension in my face, and in reality, the fact that she wasn't nervous about meeting my family made me nervous. Her fingertips ran along my stubble face as she tilted her head to the side and whispered, "What's wrong?"

I debated in my head before it simply spilled out of my mouth. "Oh. You're not wearing red."

Her eyebrow rose as she sat in her seat, sensing my rigidity that day. Her hand reaching up to tuck her hair behind an ear. "Do you want me to go change?"

I waved a hand at her, putting my fingers through my hair before I rested my forehead on the steering wheel, looking over at her. "Would you kill me if I said yes?"

She smiled and put her hand on my shoulder, her voice going into a high pitch to induce comfort in me. "No, no, not at all."

"I'm sorry. I just had a rough morning."

Akiko continued to smile and got out of the car, walking back down the concrete pathway to the front door. God bless her for every step. I wasn't sure if it was tradition that forced me to ask her to change or maybe I was just desperate to put it all off for just a few more measly minutes.

It was ten in the morning when my father came into my bedroom. Meetings between us were rare, the fact that we seemed to be polar opposites being the main cause of that. My father was a serious man, a spectacled fellow with a salt and pepper mustache, his head balding and his body bony. He opened the door with authority, turning the knob hard. It startled me. He stood there in the doorway silent, as if I had summoned him and not the other way around. For a moment he just looked at me, his lack of facial expression expressing much more than any emotion could have. His voice finally came from beneath his straight mustache. "What are you going to do after you graduate?"

My silence is not a proper response.

"So this English degree. You can still get an MBA with it right?"

I looked up from my book to check if he was serious. I must have forgotten whom I was talking to, because he is always serious. "I suppose so."

He stood there and stared out the window from the doorway, keeping the door just half open before he looked back down at me in my bed, laying there nose deep in *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami. "Don't people who get English degrees usually go to law school?"

"Some do."

He nodded. "You know your cousin Angie's husband, what's his name?"

"Doug?"

He nodded again. "Yes. Doug. He's an investment banker on Wall Street. That's what you should go into."

I was going to graduate college with a bachelor's degree in English, more specifically, Creative Writing, in three months. My father was in the doorway trying to convince me maybe I had made the wrong decision in the guidance counselor's office two years ago.

I rolled myself over, shutting the book and setting it on my dresser. My eyes met his, his cold reactionless self, the quiet between us pushing us farther and farther apart. I spoke without thinking. "I want to be a writer. You've known that for years."

His face was stoic. However this nothing facemask he wears is different. Behind his black slanted eyes he stared at his son, pondering to himself how he could have raised a son arrogant enough to think that anyone cared what he had to say.

Akiko got back into my car a few minutes later, now wearing a plain red v-neck shirt beneath her leather jacket. My Toyota sputtered awake when I turned the key. Putting my foot on the brake and my hand towards the center median, to shift the car from park to reverse, her fingertips slipped over my knuckles and between my fingers. I looked over at her and gave her a smile in return, feeling a little better now that she was wearing the red.

Her high voice was slightly nasal, a cute spot somewhere near the spectrum of raspy. "So, where are we headed before the family dinner?"

I looked at my watch before I checked my rear view mirror to make sure nobody was coming when I pulled out of the driveway. "I figured we'd have lunch at Lemonade, then stop by Chinatown. I have to get some stuff for my grandma for tonight."

She nodded and laughed, excited about the whole ordeal. "Fun! What do you have to get her?"

I look over at her more than I should as I'm driving. I can't help it. I loved looking at her. "I need to get red envelopes. You know, for the lucky money. In my family the adults give to the kids, and the kids give a little back to the grandparents. It's a respect thing."

She nodded, fascinated about the whole ordeal.

When my grandfather died I was only seventeen and he had a traditional funeral. A week or so later, my mother and I were at his grave in Rose Hills Memorial Park. His name etched in the stone, his body cremated and planted into the Earth. My mother had purchased from Chinatown small paper bars of gold, a small car of paper, and lots of fake money with Chairman Mao's face on it. She had lit a fire in a small red pot, and was tossing in the paper bars of gold as they shriveled up in the burn, becoming a ghostly smoke that lifted up to the sky.

I looked at my mother as the open flame generated heat in the chilly afternoon air. I was skeptical of the whole thing, buying the paper bars of gold and the paper car from a store, only to be burning them now at my grandfather's gravesite. "Is this safe? Are you sure we're allowed to do this? Just have fires in a cemetery?"

My mother laughed hard. She is an emotional woman, playful and wrathful all at once. "*I don't care. I'm not going to let my father be homeless in heaven.*" She handed me a wad of the Mao bills to toss into the fire.

"Homeless in heaven? What does that even mean?" I look at the face that I had seen before, Chariman Mao, in all his glory, like the front of the building in Tiananmen Square as he overlooked the entry to the Forbidden City.

She tosses in the red paper car into the fire, and it became smoke and rose to heaven as the other things we've burned. "*You have to burn this stuff so that it goes up into heaven. Then grandpa will have money and a car there.*"

I was confused by the whole experience and threw the wad of bills into the burning pot, the paper curling into itself, Mao's face gently taking the journey into the orange California sky, up to Chinese heaven where he resides in my grandfather's afterlife wallet. I can only imagine what he's buying up there. Who's burning the paper essentials? The paper bottles of milk or cartons of orange juice? All this Mao money is just really going to a heavenly grocer, on the corner of Tranquility Boulevard and Pearly Gates Street.

We put out the fire and left right as sunset was approaching, my plain black shirt and cargo shorts smelling like the remnants of a million heaven dollars. I was sitting there in the front seat, listening to the cars speed by on the 101 freeway as we were driving home when I asked my mother. "Do you really believe that stuff? That grandpa's up there with a bunch of money and a car because we burned it?"

My mother's face was round, her eyes quite slanted, her intense peering at the freeway in front of her because she had terrible vision. I imagined she was the source of

every bad Asian woman driver story that I had ever heard. She laughed when she spoke. *"I don't know. Better safe than sorry, right?"*

My teenaged angst came over me. "I think it's stupid."

She swerved hard to avoid a car, driving just barely 60 on the freeway. *"You're going to burn stuff for me though, right?"*

I shifted my glance from the people driving passed us, all of them staring into the car and seeing what they expected. My mother. "No. It's stupid."

My mother was quiet for a moment, her emotional self boiling over, turning from the one side of the coin to the other. *"It's not stupid! It's tradition! I'm going to be homeless in heaven because I have a terrible son who doesn't understand!"*

The car swerved into the lane beside us, and the honks from the nearby traffic made my heart explode. I grabbed onto the steering wheel and forced her back into her rightful lane. I screamed at my mother for the first time in my life. "Are you crazy! You're going to kill us!"

She was fuming silent. She put both of her hands on the steering wheel. She stared forward and refused to acknowledge me. We passed by downtown when she mutters. She speaks in English to make sure I get the point. "Johnny. It's important to me. That's all that matters."

I looked at her swollen eyes, staring intently at the freeway, feeling the guilt one does when they've just burned their own mother. As if she had not done enough for me in my lifetime that I couldn't burn paper bars of gold for her. I am a teenager. I am entitled and careless. I am stupid and young. The only thing I give her is attitude. "It doesn't matter anyways. If Mao is running things in heaven, then you'll be living in a communist place. They won't let you have nice things there."

Lemonade was a café in Los Angeles on Flower St. It was a chic and fresh place to take a girl, so I figured since she had taken the trip out to Los Angeles, I would at least show her some authentic Los Angeles fluff. The logo is written in cursive across the front of the restaurant. I pulled on the silver door handle to lead Akiko through the glass door. She nodded in a soft acceptance of the casual café, everything a clean stainless steel look. The café was planned in a cafeteria style, built for picking seasonal salads out of a row and placing them onto a plastic tray. She had formed a green plate and a chocolate chip cookie beside my turkey sandwich. Standing in the line, I watched as those ahead of us approached the register, having a light chat with the man behind it, exchanging cash for the things on their tray.

Her fingers ran along the side of my waist, slipping and leaping from my hip to lock digits against my own, interlocking between, knuckles bounded as I felt the soft skin of her palm brush against mine. She leaned her head on my shoulder, leaving the green apple scent of her hair to fill my nostrils. I inhaled her sweetness.

She spoke in whispers again. "You don't have to be so nervous. Everything will go fine."

I tilted my head back to her, giving her the reassuring smile that I appreciated her calm nature. "I just want them to like you like I like you." Distance has a way of forcing you to be honest in a way that dating someone nearby does not. As if the lies forced a pair apart, words digging a crater deeply and creating more space between the two, a thing that was unaffordable when you were already counting inches.

Her face gained a Californian, Los Angeles fluff glow before she spoke. “They will.”

I turned to the man behind the register and order two lemonades, the trademark staple of the restaurant. Freshly squeezed, the whole place had a scent of that citrus extract. The man handed us two plastic cups filled with lemonade, black straws puncturing the top lid with a soft crack. I have a fondness for lemonade, how it is yellow, playful, and distinctly American. I handed them to her as I picked up the tray and we walk towards the patio where we sat and enjoyed our meal together.

My mind was stuck in the negative. I asked, “When do you leave?”

She knew the answer without missing a beat. “Sunday.”

Four days. Immediately the first thing I had to do was count the days left. The hours left. The minutes left. My mind was instantly taking account for the seconds that could be spent together. I lifted my turkey sandwich to my lips and took a bite with a firm tear of the sourdough bread. “What do you want to do while you’re here?”

She pondered, not so ready to answer as she was before. The deadline was definite, but what to spend the time on was up to us. “We could go to Disneyland.”

I leaned back to help the dry sandwich go down. I could never put mayonnaise on anything anymore; my mother had ruined the condiment for me because of her overuse of it. When my mouth was clear, my tongue swept over the outsides of my teeth to get the stuck bread out. “We should. I have a friend who can get us in. We can take a picture in front of the castle.”

She laughed with her straw against her lips, her throat swallowing the trademark lemonade. “You’re so sentimental.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “It was one suggestion.”

She picked at her green salad before she put a half bite into her mouth, then used her fork to sway at me like a professor with a pointer smacking at a chalkboard, emphasizing her point. “The first night we met you played a Bright Eyes song on the guitar.”

I sipped my lemonade, washing the remnants of turkey, tomato and sourdough clinging to my molars. “So? Isn’t that why boys play guitar? To meet girls and trick them?”

Her eyes made contact with me, truth being told, we had no room for lies. “Not many guys can sing a love song to no one in particular and sound like they mean it.”

The summer prior, I had gone to visit Taiwan with my mother. She was more interested in shopping malls and her friends than sightseeing, so I was alone for the last four days of the trip, taking the subway to see temples, museums and other tourist attractions. Over there, people’s lives were consumed with work. They work long days to go home to empty apartments, living in boxes stacked on top of one another. Marriage was en vogue, but having kids was rare. Not many people cooked homemade meals because frankly, they had nobody to really cook for. Malls were where people gathered for human interactions, a consumerist paradise, open till much past midnight. The food courts were the backbone of the malls in Asia, where men in business suits and kids in school uniforms, having just studied for ten hours straight for some test that dictated the direction of their rest of their lives were finally in a place to relax.

After eleven days of exotic Taiwanese food, ranging from octopus sausage to other seafood extremities, I was sick of it. I would have punched a man in the face for a hamburger. I strolled around the food court, overlooking the choices, noodle stands followed by rice and pork chop bars, a sushi roll place, an ice cream parlor, and then I had come across a choice that finally caught my eye.

The banner above the stand was of an animated man, triangles for eyes and a white chef's hat on, one hand holding out a peace sign while the other was waving a red white and green flag in vertical stripes, his face overlooking a drawn picture of a landmass shaped as a boot. The restaurant's name was in Mandarin, translated to one you lee noodles. I stood there in confusion at the name; I had an idea from the brightly shining banner above that it must have had something to do with Italian food from the context clues. The light bulb had turned on. One. Ee. You. Tah. Lee. Lee. Ee-Tah-Lee Mein. Italy Noodles. How clever.

I approached the teenaged girl at the register, digging into the pockets of my skinny jeans for money. Coins were more prominent there, and I had to look carefully at each one for a numerical value to see what it was worth. I could only imagine what this would look like back in California, as if a man walked into a Starbucks and was fishing into his pocket, seeing a quarter for the first time and not knowing its purpose.

I had figured out that I had money when I turned my head up back to look at the menu. It is in mandarin. Hard mandarin. The menu was written in mandarin that cannot be understood through second hand study. Each series of brush strokes attached to a number. I was sweating bullets in the line, looking to the teenaged girl, looking at the screen of her phone before she saw me and said hello.

I peered at the menu; fake reading it in hopes that she might know I need help. *"What is good here?"*

She looked over at the other teenagers working the stand before she peered back at me. *"Number one is the most popular."*

I nodded in relief. *"I will have that then."*

The girl punched some numbers into the register and told me the price, in which I had to stare at my coins once more to decipher what I owed her. I handed her the coins before she stopped me. *"Hey, you are not from around here huh? You are from America."* Her dark brown eyes were slanted, her skin a softly hinted pale yellow, like a watered down eggnog. Her hair was black, straight and tied back beneath a visor, her red polo shirt's collar coming up and over her thin neck. *"You look like you are American."*

I had been sniffed out.

She continued her inquiries. *"Are you from California? I bet you are. You dress like someone from California."*

I looked down at my clothes, a plain white v-neck shirt, loose around my torso, skinny jeans hugging low on my hips. My vans were a red slip with white laces. My sunglasses hung from the indentation in the collar of my shirt. *"I am. I am visiting with my mom."*

She nodded as she handed me a plate of noodles with red sauce on top and two meatballs on a plastic tray and a small iced barley tea. *"That is so cool. Have this tea, from Taiwan."*

I thought of my friends back home, asking me if I were excited to go back to Taiwan. Back? I was born in America. Now this girl was asking me when I went back to

America. I thanked the girl with a smile and a wave, my hands clutched onto either side of the plastic tray and walking over towards an empty bench between a married couple and a man in a business suit with headphones in. I sat down and looked at the plate. Lo Mein with tomato paste, ground beef meatballs packed too small. I realized when I got there that she had only given me chopsticks, not a fork. I picked the chopsticks up and poked around at the noodles for a moment, thin wheat noodles swimming in a red sauce that had no weight, runny and drowning over the stringy long Chinese noodles. It didn't quite look the part, didn't quite smell the part, and didn't quite taste the part, either. This is not pasta. One cannot eat pasta with a pair of green chopsticks. Just because you say you're something and you look like you're something doesn't make you authentic.

We were stuck in traffic on Broadway. My fingers tapped nervously on the steering wheel as I glanced over to my right, where Akiko was sitting. She was running her fingers over my iPod, an old model, scrolling through the name of each band, meticulously making snap judgments at each choice, asking questions about how I had heard of them, what I thought of them, if she would like them. The light turned from red to green, and I stared at the logjam ahead of me. We are snails inching along a sidewalk.

She selected "Cinder and Smoke" by Iron & Wine and it began to play over the speakers. The heavy twang of his acoustic guitar brushed against my cheeks as I glanced over at her once more, the traffic ahead clearly not needing my attention. The singer's whispered voice filled the vehicle. I watched as the sunlight grazed over her ray bans, sweeping over her narrow nose and then up against her upper lip, the soft pink crest of the brim of her mouth. Her teeth were white like china as she smiles at the familiar tune to the song, as if an old friend had walked in through the front door.

My fingers drifted over the median of the car, interlocking once more with hers as it rested in her lap. I cannot help but touch her. "You look beautiful." I wondered why I said it right after she gave me the same smile that the song had brought on, as if she had been waiting to hear those words coming from my mouth and they finally arrived, a little late to the party, but better late than never.

I wondered then why I couldn't help but tell the truth to her, when it was so obviously the opposite when it came to my family. Had I loved her more than my own flesh and blood? The truth was that I felt like I knew her better. The distance forces one to live without the necessities of touch from their other half, living a life that sustains only on doses of personality.

We arrived at Wing Hop Fung, a Chinese specialties shop, a few moments later. It was brightly lit, large jade statuettes on the walls as well as vases covered in blue brush stroke mountains. A wall of samurai swords was to my left and lunar year paper dragons hung from the ceiling. The man behind the cash register told me they were closing in thirty minutes for the celebrations.

I walked with Akiko at my side as she was glancing over at each of the red envelopes with a curious stare, as if she was taken aback by the surrounding red with the flashes of gold foil. Being a Japanese national, the whole event is foreign to her. We walked towards the wall where lucky red envelopes were tucked like Hallmark cards, each one with a different design on the front. She pulled out ones that she liked, interesting characters made of strokes and I would have to translate them.

"What about this one?"

“That says luck.”

“Too generic. What about this one?”

“That says fortune.”

“Too stereotypical. What about this one?”

“That one... says horse”

“What do you need a horse envelope for?”

“For people who were born year of the horse. My cousin’s a horse.”

“What about this one?”

She pulled out a red envelope, its gold foil front appearing like an 88 with a slash across the middle and brash squiggles across the top. I immediately recognized it when I spoke. “Double happiness. That’s like for weddings, see how it looks like two people kind of.”

She nodded and continued down the wall, stepping away from more traditional red envelopes to ones that were of a little more modern design, covered in Hello Kitty or Doraemon, her fingers pinched at a certain red envelope and pulled it from its place on the wall. “Look, it’s us.”

I stepped over toward her to look at what she was holding from behind, peering over her shoulder at the red envelope in her hand. It is a red envelope of Snoopy wearing a red silk jacket like from the Kung Fu movies with Woodstock fluttering by his black ear. Last time I had visited her, I had purchased a package of rubber wristbands that were shaped like interesting things. I had given her one, shaped like Woodstock, while I wore the one shaped like Snoopy on my wrist, a constant happy reminder that there was someone thinking of you. They weren’t quite wedding bands, but it was something.

In reality, we were more like Snoopy and Woodstock than we thought we were. Not duplicate copies, but still a match. We were a white dog and his yellow bird friend, from two different worlds, but living above the same roof.

When I was six years old, I had always wanted a dog, particularly because all of my friends had dogs. They had yellow Labradors that greeted them at the door, jack Russell terriers to wrestle with, an inherent best friend that followed behind their every footstep. I was eight years younger than my older sister, and therefore grew up mostly alone.

My mother had made a compromise, instead of bringing home a dog; she brought home a stuffed plush Snoopy from Macy’s. It had soft white fur, a red collar, black ears and a small button black nose. Its eyes were half slanted, sleepy, as they were in the Sunday comics. I had accepted the gift with open arms, and quickly fell in love with the stuffed animal, as it had become my most loyal friend, a silent listener that I would tell about my day. Who knew how much therapy she had paid for that day for that dog.

Whenever I saw Snoopy memorabilia, I would always buy it, desperately seeking the same comfort it once gave me when I was a child.

There were no more excuses to be made. We were at the front door of my cousin Justin’s mother’s house in Diamond Bar, California. I had rung the doorbell and was now waiting for the answer. A beat passed, and then another, and nobody came to the front door. I could hear the sounds of their voices through the walls, the burn of steam rising from woks, of vegetables being stir fried for their last finishing touches on the feast to be

had to celebrate the New Year. I looked over at Akiko, brushing her hair from her face, pushing it behind her ear before I softly let my lips press against her cheek, comforting her, but in reality, comforting myself. I had rung the doorbell again, and waited two more beats to which nobody responded. Perhaps the crisis had been averted, that the white noise of Chinese New Year inside was from a television, that the celebration had been cancelled this year and I wouldn't have to deal. She reached for the doorknob, turning it slightly and letting herself in. The door crept open, a living space to the left and straight ahead was the entry to the kitchen. She stepped in slowly with me behind in tow, my heart in my throat as my entire extended family was scattered around the living room and the kitchen, eyes on the door, seeing Akiko for the first time.

I was standing behind her and peering over her shoulder as my family stood silently for a moment, my cousins speaking first, announcing my arrival to the adults in the kitchen as they came out to have their first glances at the Asian girl that I had brought home, a Japanese national, one who was authentic in a way that even my cousin's girlfriends weren't. They saw her and they gawked.

They did not gawk at her distinctly American clothes, or even the nose ring she wore. No, they gawked at her rocky mountaintop snow white skin, her rounded and jade green eyes, they gawked at her platinum blonde hair, peroxide gold as it was tied back into a stray bun, bangs hanging over the side of her face, hemming her features. Akiko was more of the same, just like every other girl I had mentioned to my mother in passing. She was a white lie - my white lie. My mother was the one who broke the relative silence, welcoming her in with a hug that was for someone else, giving her an embrace that she meant to save for one of *us*.

Kelly Akiko Warren was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1990. Her father, a manager at Hewitt-Packard, was positioned in Japan with her mother and her three other siblings for four years, leaving Japan for home - Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1994. Named after the reigning princess of Japan, Kelly Warrens had adopted this nickname for most of her life. To the world on paper she was Kelly, but to her family and her friends, those that had known her intimately, she was Akiko.

I had met her three months prior to the Lunar New Year, at my best friend's birthday party in Utah, where he was living at the time. We had made an instant connection, a playful banter that lasted three days before I had gone home, only to have continued over the telephone, through small messages left to one another, continually sharing our lives with one another since the second we had met. In just a few days she had bred into my system a need to speak with her, changed my DNA in a way in which now, even with all the distance, I couldn't help but love her.

She was exactly what I was looking for, someone like me, but not exactly. More importantly, she was someone who understood the need to balance two separate lives. Much like she had Kelly and Akiko, I was broken in half. A man struggling with being unsure of how he was supposed to aggressively look forward and respect the path that lead him there.

Akiko had received my family warmly, even through the skeptical glances that they had given her. It was dinnertime, so the stress of the exposure of Akiko had been put off until after dinner. Dinner had worked much as the rest of the family set up worked.

The grandparents sat at the table, closest to the food, more conveniently placed in front of the steaming plates, displayed in family style, to be picked at on your own plate. They had deserved the honor for living a full life, perhaps even two, making the journey across the Pacific after our parents had. They were brittle people, bent spines and cotton white hair, their faces feeling the effects of eight decades of gravity as their skin slouched towards their plates. They were in the front row, the ancestral board of directors, judging each person two generations beneath them as they pleased. They played banter cards of “you’ve gained weight”, which was a bad thing, since a slender frame was more aesthetically pleasing in today’s society, immediately followed by “you’ve lost weight” to the next grandchild, which was also a bad thing, since it meant that you did not have enough to eat.

The grandchildren were first to the plate, armed with paper plates and cheap take-out wooden chopsticks. With a full life still ahead, we were the ones most needing of full nourishment. My grandmother peered at Akiko who was standing beside me, watching her with intent filled eyes as she judged her choices. Akiko, to my surprise, had won the favor of the elders for her ability to dine on the traditional foods. She picked with expertise, a delicate management of her fingers using those chopsticks, to put onto her plate one or two of everything, selecting the bold choices such as the ears and nose of the pig, the thousand year old egg, seafood that had no discernible nature, terrors from the deep caught in nets and stir fried in my mother’s wok to become delicacy. Akiko had leapfrogged me on the family ladder in less than five minutes.

My mother entered the room with a large steel pot and plastic bowls, ready to dish out her signature dish: Red Ox Tail Soup, a Taiwanese specialty. Chunks of beef floating in a dark caramel broth with a tint of red, the scent of tomato burned into the chopped medallions of ox tail. The meat was tender, and had little fat on it, seemingly melting into the stew, orange carrots seen floating about and beneath the surface, noodles absorbing the flavor and essence of the ingredients blended together. My mother had dished out the first bowl to myself, then Akiko, then to my sister and my brother-in-law.

My grandmother was standing beside me, peering over at the yellow haired girl and her grandson, still nervous about the interactions between her and my family, having to play to two sides. She reached her chopsticks up in the air, drawing my attention to her, before she tapped them loudly on the edge of my plastic bowl. She spoke in broken English, “Eat now. Long noodle, long life.”

When I was in high school, my mother was diagnosed with glaucoma, and it was a painful ordeal for her in which she almost lost her sight. She had surgery and was gone for two weeks, leaving just my father and I alone together in the house. One night after I had come home from hockey practice, my father was sitting at the stove, cooking in a big metal pot. I entered the kitchen to see him from behind, stirring at something, peeking over at the dried noodles he had on the counter beside him, picking them up and dumping them into the hot water in the pot. He heard my presence and looked at me over his shoulder, stirring in the pot for another moment before he spoke, “*Do you want any?*”

Those were the first words we had given each other in over a week, living in the same space, one being gone while the other was around, and in those rare moments in which our lives crossed, we simply crossed and nothing more. I nodded, not wanting to offend him, showing the gratitude of his efforts before I stepped closer to the pot.

The pot was filled to the brim with a brothy champagne color, not quite red enough or brown enough to be what he claimed it to be, Red Ox Tail Soup. He pulled out two bowls of his version of my mother's highest regarded creation, and it was as expected.

I took the bowl and sat at the dinner table across from him, pushing my chop sticks through the thin soup before I reached in for noodles, pinching and pulling them free from the broth to lift into my mouth. The meal was much like my father: bland and lifeless. Nothing like my mother's. We ate in silence, hoping the slurps of noodles and the gulps of his second-rate soup would say to one another what we could never announce.

After dinner, in a lethargic manner, the grandchildren occupied their designated living room space by lounging on the couches, making fun of one another as we played a card game. A friendly game just to pass the time before it was time for the lucky money. I had looked over at Akiko, her head resting on my shoulder, as she simply watched me play with my cousins. I had felt the nervous feeling I had from walking in the front door disappear, the pit of my stomach that was turning in knots relieved perhaps by my family's feast. Too full to feel sick, I glanced into the other room in which the adults were speaking, reminiscing to one another about times that had passed.

My cousin Jamie, who had married the Korean guy and now had two kids, had graduated from our room and was now accepted into the realm of "adults", having gone through the rite of passage of marriage and child bearing. I saw my father standing in the walkway between the two rooms, and the older of Jamie's two children, a little female toddler, walked up to my father. She stood there, waving her arms at him, to which he looked down and returned the stare. They simply stared at one another, no words being exchanged, for what felt like a few minutes.

My cousins began to make a ruckus about my slowing down the game, to which I looked down at my hand and played a card, not even thinking of the consequences, transfixed on the interactions between my father and Jamie's kid. I had never seen, or could even think up, even in my writer's mind, my father playing with young children. They seemed to have too much life for the stone golem, too exuberant and full of rainbows that even he could not bear it. Then I saw something that I would never forget, my father reaching towards a nearby countertop and grasping onto a piece of rock candy, before leaning down and handing it to the kid. The kid smiled and danced in her rocky unstable way, putting her hands on the candy and immediately running off to show what gains she had made to her mother.

My father and I had been playing this same game for years now, the silent staredown, first to show his hand loses, and I caught him giving this child a gesture, a quiet and subtle gesture, but a gesture none the less. In my mind, there was now suddenly proof that the tin man had a heart.

While I was in Taiwan, the first few days were dedicated to seeing family. My mother and father were high school sweethearts, having dated since they were teenagers, all through my father's mandatory military service, and were married before he left for America a year before she did.

I was in a French café, owned by one of my mother and father's best childhood friends, Guan Ping, who had no paper English name because he had never made an attempt to move to America. He was happy where he was, owned a series of restaurants, and had made a great life for himself staying in Taiwan. He was a playful and excitable man, who seemed younger than he really was, one who ate lustfully but was still wire thin, his hair was kept short, which made him look like a salt and pepper q-tip. He wore thick fashionable black horn rimmed glasses, a retro, but still a fashion forward look. He had married a younger woman, who was sitting beside him as we ate afternoon tea desserts.

On the table he had a photo book of the times before my parents had left for America, plenty of pictures of him along with them, and their other best friend. The four of them had done everything together from middle school all through when they had left for America. I had been flipping through them idly, seeing my mother in sleek black dresses, her body slender and her hair in a fashion mod look, big in the back, then curling up her midcheek as she sat on a couch beside my father, having just spent the night out dancing.

I turned to the next page, seeing my father in a brown leather jacket leaning against a motorcycle, a half smoked cigarette hanging from his lips, his mustache full and without the white strands, thick black, his hair a wavy part from the side, big and lively. He stared into the camera with a devil may care attitude, as if James Dean had stolen his gig.

I had never seen this man before, a man who could express such fired passion through a photograph, who had an aura and charisma about him that could control a frame. Guan Ping had noticed my intrigue with the photo looking over at it as he was chewing on an éclair. He spoke. "Your daddy was a cool guy back then."

I had never heard my father be mentioned as cool, couldn't even picture it in my head. I turned towards him before the words just came from my lips, "Not too cool now."

Guan Ping had laughed, knowing where I was coming from. "He wasn't always the way he is now. Even right before you were born, he was cool. He liked to play the guitar. He named you after an Eagles song."

I was skeptical, to say the least. "Which one?"

He began to hum gently, to which my mom also recognized the familiar tune, singing softly. "Johnny come lately, the new kid in town, everybody loves you, don't let them down."

It had blindsided me completely. My father, a guitar player, had named me after an emotional song. Not just any song, but a song about the dangers of hopeless romanticism. He had read a prophecy to my entire life. I turned to Guan Ping, "What happened to him?"

He shrugged and finished his éclair, bringing a napkin to his lips and dabbing at the corners, cleaning up the remnant of powdered sugar from his face before he spoke. "Must have gotten too busy raising his kids."

I suddenly felt responsible. I had murdered my father, worse, not physically, but throughout his insides. He had a duty of raising his children, to make sure they were ready for when he would be gone. Being the son, I was his most important task. I was the carrier of his name, the legacy of his single duty of his life. It hurt me deeply, not that I knew my father resented me, but suddenly knowing why. He had raised a son, intelligent

enough and certainly capable of being whatever he wanted to be, of achieving a greatness that his father never could have, and yet he throws it away, because he is too concerned with asking questions than answering them.

I imagined him standing with his friends when they were catching up, speaking about their families and their accomplishments, how he would tell them about his daughter, intelligent, capable, went to a good school and became an accountant. How she got married last year to a nice guy and is well on her way to having children. She accomplished everything he had ever asked of her.

But the friends would lean in and ask, "But what about the son?"

And so painfully, he would have nothing to say.

The time for red envelopes had come, the parents handing out the lucky money to the generation beneath them, to which they happily accepted, the Christmas for the Mandarin boy. I would go around the room as they sat in a circle, saying "Gon Chi Fa Tsai" and not knowing what it means, bowing my head to them as they handed me the lucky money in the red envelopes. Some of them chose the traditional golden foil word, while others had the cartoon character, but either way, they all gave.

I had walked over to Akiko, getting the Snoopy red envelope from her to walk up to the elders table to give back to them. I had put fifty of the three hundred dollars I received into my grandmother's envelope, and Akiko came with me up to the table of judgment. A great wall of wrinkled faces and long lives, to which they would all assure you came from their consumption of long noodles, I handed my grandmother the money to which the table of elders bowed their heads, making comments about what a good grandson I was. My grandmother's sister took a look at me, inspecting me behind her heavy thick glasses, her full lips spitting out a set of sounds to which quaked my core.

"Shan jaw." She spoke the words and nodded to the rest of the elders, the decision she had made accepted by those around her, who returned her nods with nods and grunts in agreement of their own.

Akiko had seen my struck face, to which she assumed something had been said about her, that all my nervous anticipation for this moment was not for nothing, that it was as distressing an event that I had thought it would be. Just moments before we were about to leave, we were tripping at the finish line. She looked rattled for the first time all evening, turning to me and placing her hand on my shoulder as she whispered into my ear, "What did they say?"

I shook my head, "Nothing. Let's go."

We walked toward the living room, to which Akiko had turned the corner, needing to use the bathroom before we left. She disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind herself. My father approached from behind, standing beside me as he was preparing to leave, waiting for my mother who was lagging behind. He stood there, looking far off into the distance behind his glasses, before I turned to him.

"What do you think of Akiko?"

He stood there, stoic as he always did, before he simply nodded and opened his mouth, his mustache expelling out, "She's too cute for you."

I laughed at his response, to which he shrugged and walked away. I suddenly had no problems losing the staring game with my father, the guilt in my shoulders escaped and I was free from the heavy burden. Akiko reappeared from the bathroom, pushing

some of her blonde hair out of her face before she wrapped her arms around me, feeling my heart beat against hers before we kissed.

I left the Lunar Year, the first day of the Year of the Rabbit, which was supposed to be my year, with a new start on life. My father and I had spoken, and these things were not mended in a day, but at least we were facing in the right direction.

When we entered the car, Akiko was aggressively asking me what my grandmother had said to us before we left, those last parting words in which I felt my confidence crumble at the sight of. I had attempted to curtail her forward advances to no avail.

“She called me banana.” I said, with a new understanding of the word. A slur usually given to those who were inauthentic, yellow on the outside and a white on the inside, I had taken it differently. The man who I am on the outside had finally met the man who was on the inside. I had managed a marriage between my two distant selves. I was double happiness.