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JACK CHENG

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THE MANY MASKS OF ANDY ZHOU

Jack Cheng

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DIAL BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

**THE MANY
MASKS OF
ANDY
ZHOU**

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CONTENT NOTE:

This story touches on topics including bullying,
racism, trichotillomania (hair-pulling compulsion),
parental death, and anorexia.

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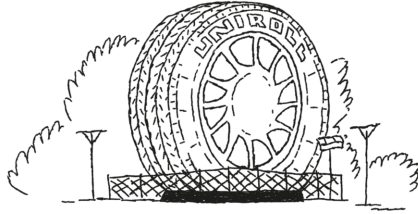
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For my grandparents

SEPTEMBER



LIKE AN ANT, PROBABLY

“Andy, *did you hear me?*” Baba’s eyes flick up in the rear-view mirror. He switches to English. “You always look like thinking. What you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I say, and stare out the window again. A motorcycle zooms by at full speed, weaving in and out of the freeway traffic.

Baba flips back to Shanghainese. “*I was saying, you know how difficult these past years have been for Hao Bu and Ah Dia. You have to help them, okay?*”

“Help them with what?”

“*With whatever they need,*” says Mama from the front passenger seat. “*It’s a different lifestyle here. Let’s make their stay comfortable for them.*”

Baba nods. “Ever since your ah dia little boy, his dream visit America. We have show he and Hao Bu best American time.” Baba’s eyebrows go up in the mirror.

“Xiaolei, you can make sign with they name! Have airport name sign for Hao Bu and Ah Dia see!”

“Don’t people only do that for strangers?”

“Andy, *come*,” my dad says in his don’t-argue-with-me voice. “*Be a good grandson, okay?*”

Mama twists around and hands me her tablet. I open the drawing app, which still has my doodle from the last time Cindy and I hung out. I clear the screen.

“*Let’s wait until they’re settled first*,” says Baba, picking up their conversation from before.

“*You think they’ll agree?*”

“*Ma might. But Ba—you know that older generation. They don’t really trust doctors.*”

“*You’re going to miss the exit.*”

Baba clicks on the turn signal. “*We’ll take it step by step.*”

I look up from the blank screen.

“Mama, Baba, I don’t know Hao Bu and Ah Dia’s names.”

We pull into International Arrivals. Lines of cars are waiting already, parking lights red in the echoey underpass. My dad and I go through the spinning glass doors while my mom waits in the car—that way we don’t get a ticket.

“*Ma, where are you!*” Baba’s shouting into his phone. His voice gets deeper and louder when he’s on it, like he’s making up for the tiny microphone holes. “*We’re just outside the baggage claim!*” he says. “*Send me a WeChat when you get this!*”

We find an open spot along the metal guard rail. I aim the tablet toward the sliding doors at the end, which have big red stickers saying DO NOT ENTER. It's mostly other Chinese families here, but there are also drivers in suits and ties, holding up their own tablets and signs. Back in the car, Mama wrote out my grandparents' names so I could draw them bigger on the screen, and Baba told me how to pronounce them. I recognize my own last name, *Zhou*, but I've already forgotten the rest.

"Andy," says Baba. "*Go ask when they're coming out.*" He points toward a guard sitting by the sliding doors. She's scrolling through something on her phone.

"They'll probably be out soon," I say.

"*Go ask.*"

"Can't you just check the app?"

"*Go. Your English is better than mine,*" says Baba. "*Quickly.*"

I hand him the tablet and duck under the rail, just as the doors at the end slide open. Out comes a businesswoman with a roller bag, her suit jacket draped over the handle. Behind her is a group of maybe college students with duffels and white sneakers, and wireless headphones around their necks. One of them has bleached blond hair—almost silver. He looks like a K-pop star.

"Andy," says Baba behind me. He points at the guard again. I go up and try to get her attention.

"Excuse me," I say, but it's so soft, she doesn't hear me. I try again, a little louder—"*Excuse me?*"—and

wave my hand. The guard looks up from her phone.

“I was wondering, um . . .”

She points at the sign on the doors. “You’re not allowed—”

“Okay, thanks!”

I retreat back to Baba.

“She said to wait,” I tell him.

While we do, Baba goes into a story he loves, about the time he picked Mama and me up from this same airport. My dad came to Metro Detroit a few months before we did, so he could find a place for us to live, and get a car, and a job, and all his books for engineering school.

“I come with Lang Uncle pick you up,” says Baba. “I waiting and waiting but you and Mama no come out. I think, what the heck! Then I go up one escalate”—he points to the escalators behind us—“and when I go up, I see you and Mama come down other escalate same time!”

I know the rest: Mama’s carrying four-year-old me in her arms, and I’m reaching out for him, calling, “Baba! Baba!” As we’re about to pass in opposite directions, she hands me over the railings, into *his* arms. When my dad tells the story, I can picture it all so clearly. But the only thing I actually remember is the split second I was dangling in the air between them. The feeling I was going to fall.

“Ma! Ba!” my dad suddenly shouts. He stands on his tip-toes and waves. I get a flash of worry. After all this time,

am I even going to recognize my own grandparents?

But there they are, just like in our video chats—my grandma: chubby with silver curls, wearing a plain brown cardigan and pushing a cart stuffed with heavy luggage. Next to her is my much-skinnier grandpa, in a red wheelchair with a cane across his lap, being pushed by an airport worker.

Baba ducks under the rail. He rushes over so fast, I'm still frozen on the other side, holding my tablet with my grandparents' names. The ones I can't read.

Baba grabs the luggage cart from Hao Bu. He shouts over his shoulder, "Andy! *What are you doing? Come help!*"

I go under the rail.

"*Wah, Xiaolei, you're getting taller,*" Hao Bu says when she sees me. "*Do you remember your hao bu? How come you're so skinny? What have you been feeding him?*" She says this last thing to my dad, then turns back to me. "*Hao Bu's going to cook delicious food for you, okay?*"

I'm not ready for all her questions. I just manage a polite "*Thank you, Hao Bu.*"

"*Where's his mother?*" asks Hao Bu. "*Is it just you two?*"

"*She's in the car waiting,*" says Baba. "*Look, old man, your grandson made you a sign!*"

I greet Ah Dia. Up close he seems tense and stiff, like he's clenching every muscle in his body. I show him the tablet and he blinks at me through his thick rectangular glasses. Chinese people don't really hug, but it feels too formal to shake his hand. So I end up just awkwardly

patting him on the shoulder. Like he's a horse.

Ah Dia tips his cane down and grabs the wheelchair arm. He starts to get up.

"Ba! Stay seated!" my dad says, rushing over.

"I can walk," says Ah Dia.

"Old man, your son told you to stay seated!" says Hao Bu.

"I can do it myself!"

Ah Dia's trying to stand, but Baba and Hao Bu want him to sit. The airport worker backs away from the wheelchair, confused about the yelling. But this same thing happens when my parents are with their Shanghainese friends. They'll all talk louder and louder until they're basically shouting. It's like a snowball rolling downhill and turning into an avalanche.

Back outside, my family avalanche-talks some more—Mama too—about how to fit my grandparents' bags in the trunk. While everyone is debating the perfect luggage arrangement, I help Ah Dia into the front passenger seat. I lock the wheelchair wheels, and reach out my hand so he has something to hold on to. He grabs it, then shifts his weight to my shoulder. His palms are meatier than I expect. His grip is surprisingly strong.

"Watch your head," I tell him. But when he doesn't react, I think for a bit and finally come up with a few words in Shanghainese: "Dang xin. Nong dou." *Careful. Your head.*

Ah Dia puts one hand on the top of the car door, ducks

in slowly, then turns and bends, and finally lands in the front seat with a plop. A couple of years ago he slipped going down the stairs at their house in Shanghai. He hurt his spine really bad. Baba wanted us all to fly back to China, but flights were expensive, and I had school. So my mom and I stayed in Michigan.

“Turn it on its side!” says Hao Bu.

“No no, stand it upright!” shouts Mama.

“Uhyo, I got it!” says Baba.

I help Ah Dia click in his seat belt. Before I shut the door again, I say, *“Careful. Your hands.”*

It turns out that the luggage doesn’t all fit in our trunk. Mama and I end up with a roller bag each across our laps, while Hao Bu sits on my other side, her big purse across her own lap. By the time we’re on the freeway, I’m suddenly exhausted.

But at least the avalanche stopped. As we go past billboards and warehouses, and a blue steel bridge, my dad asks my grandparents—in a normal voice—about their flight and airline food, and our relatives in China. Hao Bu does most of the talking, while Ah Dia answers in short *aos* and *mms*. I watch him fiddle with the AC vents, then open and close the glove compartment.

Hao Bu nudges my elbow. *“Here, little buddy. For you.”* She smiles and hands me a pair of silvery snack bags—airline pretzels.

I say thanks and open one. The pretzels are salty and crunchy and good. I put the other in my pocket, careful not to let it get crushed by the luggage in my lap. I know Cindy's going to like them because they're the mini kind, and she collects things that are just a little bit smaller than normal. Like, two-thirds the size. The first time we saw those eight-ounce cans of Faygo Red Pop, she pretty much lost her mind.

"Xiaolei," Hao Bu starts, then says my American name in a sing-songy voice. "Aaandy . . . *how are your studies?*"

"*His grades are okay,*" Baba answers for me. "*He always gets a few wrong on his tests. Always ninety-two, ninety-three. Never one hundred.*"

I move a little in my seat, but the luggage presses me down.

"*What year is he in now?*"

"*Going into sixth,*" says Mama. "*School starts next week.*"

Hao Bu turns to me again. There's a mischievous grin on her face. "*Xiaolei, did you know? When your ah dia was in school, he was a huge troublemaker. He hardly did his homework—most of our teachers hated him!*"

"Your ah dia, he just play ah play ah play," says Baba. "He huge playboy!" I know what Baba's getting at, but I don't think that's the right word for it.

Mama chuckles. Hao Bu smiles and shakes her head.

I watch Ah Dia again, riding quietly in the front passenger seat. I follow his eyes out the window to the trees and billboards flicking by, to the giant model car tire on the side of the freeway, the one that's so big that if you stood right under it, you'd probably feel like an ant.



SUPER SAIYAN

Cindy's standing over me when I wake up the next morning.

Or more like, when *she* wakes me up. She's shaking my shoulder, calling my name. I yawn and rub my eyes.

"Why are you here so early?" I ask.

"It's already past noon, dummy."

"It is?"

She nods and looks around the living room, like she doesn't understand why I'm sleeping on our pull-out sofa bed. Our dads went to college together, and when we were in second grade, our families started renting two floors of the same house. It's called a duplex. The Shens have their own entrance upstairs from the backyard, but there's a door between their stairs and our kitchen that we leave unlocked.

I sit up. "My grandparents are sleeping in my room," I explain.

“I heard you come in yesterday,” says Cindy. “Are they still . . .” She looks toward the hallway to the bedrooms.

“I think so. My mom said they have jet lag.”

Her voice gets quieter. “I can’t believe your parents would make you give up your room. I’d be so mad.”

Should I be mad? I didn’t think of it like that. Hao Bu and Ah Dia are living with us for six months, and Mama and Baba said we should give them my room so they can be more comfortable. Maybe I also stayed up too late watching TV last night.

Cindy nudges me with her knee. “Our parents went to Costco. Now’s our chance.” She smirks and holds up a bulging plastic grocery bag.

“What’s that?”

“See for yourself.”

I scoot to the edge of the sofa bed and peel off the blanket. Cindy shrieks and one-eighty spins away from me. Her ponytail almost slaps me in the face.

“*Andy*. Get *dressed* first.”

I look down. Oops—I’m in my underwear!

“You might as well just put on your swim trunks,” she says, her back to me still. She starts toward the bathroom.

“I’ll go set everything up.”

“Set what up?”

It’s like a miniature city: bottles and boxes, tubes and tubs. Cindy shakes the grocery bag and a flat brush with black bristles clacks onto the tile floor.

“What . . . is all this?” I pick up a bottle with a drawing on it of a purple fox. The pointy ears kind of make it look like the purple demon emoji. I get a weird shiver.

“Andy. We went over this,” Cindy says. She grabs the bottle out of my hand and replaces it with her phone. A Korean girl is talking into the camera. The title underneath the video says BLEACHING ASIAN HAIR: THE RIGHT WAY.

Now I remember. Cindy wanted me to help bleach hers. I just didn’t realize she’d be able to get everything so quickly. How does she even have the money to pay for all this?

“Thuy helped me out,” she says.

Cindy always knows what I’m thinking, sometimes even before I do.

She perks up. “I forgot something. Hey, are you watching the video or what?”

I go back to the video. The girl is explaining the different steps, talking about how to mix the bleach paste. Mama started dyeing her hair last year too, after she found three gray hairs in a row and freaked out. But she dyes it dark, and the stuff she uses is only one box, not a bajillion bottles like this.

Cindy gets back as I’m finishing the video. She’s changed into her purple bathing suit. Is she . . . trying to match the shampoo bottle? She hands me a pair of big rubber cleaning gloves and an empty tofu container.

“Shouldn’t we at least wait till our parents are home?” I ask. “My mom can help, she—” I stop. Maybe Mama doesn’t want people to know she dyes her hair.

“Andy.” Cindy gives me a look that says *The whole point is to do it when they’re not home*. She climbs in the bathtub and unties her ponytail, then reties everything into four sections like in the video. I breathe out. I guess we’re really doing this.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I trust you.”

That’s why Cindy’s my best friend. She has enough confidence for the both of us.

I put on the gloves and find the bleach powder. I scoop it into the tofu container, then look for the other ingredients. Most of the bottles are almost empty, and I have to turn them upside down and shake to get the stuff inside to the opening. The ones I don’t recognize, I just skip. It’s probably better to follow the video’s directions.

The last bottle is the big one that says VOLUME DEVELOPER 30. When I squeeze a glop into the tofu container, the opening makes a soft fart sound. I giggle and Cindy rolls her eyes. Then I take the brush and start mixing. It reminds me of mixing paint colors in art class, or the time Cindy and I made slime. Except this stuff is more goopy and smells like bathroom cleaner.

“Ready when you are,” says Cindy, looking over her shoulder.

I take a lock of Cindy’s hair in my hand. Even through the gloves, her hair feels soft and silky, not thick and

wiry like mine. It's also the first time, I realize, that I've touched her hair.

"What are you waiting for?" she asks.

"Nothing." I'm glad Cindy's facing away from me, because I think my cheeks just turned red. I brush on the goop, starting with the ends, not the roots, like in the video. A little bit at a time. It's oddly satisfying, smoothing out the goop, watching her hair absorb it. I finish one section and start on the next. Meanwhile, Cindy sits super still and quiet, with her eyes closed, almost like she's praying.

"Andy, you're always so helpful," she says in a soft voice. "You really care about other people."

I feel a little dizzy when she says this, but it's probably just the bleach fumes.

I finish all four sections. There's still a little bit of goop left. We wrap Cindy's head in a plastic grocery bag like in the video, and as we do, I can already see the color changing. Cindy starts the timer on her phone and I take off the gloves. My hands are all clammy from wearing them.

"Okay, your turn," says Cindy.

"Wait. What do you mean *my* turn?"

She starts putting on the gloves. "Andy, we're going into sixth grade. We're going into *middle school*. This is our chance to make a statement."

"A statement?"

I know about middle school. Locker combinations and bells that ring every fifty minutes. Clubs and sports

and school dances and health class, and a bunch of different teachers, instead of just one main one. And eighth graders. I don't know why anyone would want to make a statement in front of eighth graders.

"That's right, a statement." Cindy nods. "Besides, I think you'd look pretty cool with Super Saiyan hair."

I do think it'd be pretty cool to have hair like Goku from *Dragon Ball Z*. I could even wear my orange Turtle School shirt the first day! But then I remember: eighth graders.

"Is it me or is it kind of stuffy in here?" I reach for the door.

Cindy cuts me off. She turns on the vent fan instead. "Better?"

I look at our reflections in the mirror, Cindy with her bag-head, me with hopefully not a future bag-head. We used to be the same size, but ever since her growth spurt, she's gotten both taller and heavier than me.

"What if I, um, did something else?" I suggest. "Something not as . . . drastic? Maybe I can grow a mustache."

Cindy tilts her head. "Too . . . time-consuming," she says.

"I haven't even hit puberty," I point out.

She looks at me like, *I am not amused*. But when I start cracking up, she can't help giggling too.

Then she gets all serious again.

"Andy, *please?*" she says. "Do this with me? I mean, haven't you ever wished you could be a different person? Like, a better version of yourself? It's going to be a

bigger school, with mostly kids we don't know and who don't know us. This is our one shot."

I want to say that we'd have another shot in high school. And then again when we start college. But Cindy's eyes look big and shiny, like she actually might cry. I glance at the tofu container, and at the plastic bag around Cindy's head, and then I remember the K-pop guy I saw at the airport, with the silver-blond hair. I picture him pointing at me and winking, his teeth sparkling like diamonds, saying: *You too can have cool hair like me!*

A word pops out: "Fine."

Cindy breaks into a smile so big, you wouldn't even know she was almost crying a second ago. I climb in the tub and crouch, facing the wall like she did, while Cindy mixes up more bleach goop. I notice that some of the grout between the tiles is a little pink and dirty. Baba scrubbed the whole bathroom the other day to get ready for Hao Bu and Ah Dia, even though Mama's usually the one who cleans. He must've missed a spot.

There's a fart noise. I look over my shoulder. "Is, um, everything okay?"

"It's fine, don't worry." Cindy's shaking and squeezing the Volume Developer bottle but it's only making more fart sounds. Nothing's really coming out.

"If there isn't any left, then—"

"We're okay. I'll use more of this other stuff. Turn around."

"But the video said—"

“Turn around.”

I breathe out and face the wall again. I close my eyes. After a while, I feel Cindy put the first bit of goop in my hair—there’s no going back now. A minute later, my scalp starts tingling. A slimy glop falls on my shoulder.

“Oops!” says Cindy. She wipes it with her glove, but that just leaves a bigger wet smear. The tingling gets more intense.

“Is it supposed to burn like this?”

“That’s how you know it’s working. Keep still.”

I squeeze my eyes closed even tighter. I try to imagine the two of us showing up on our first day with Super Saiyan hair. I think about all the books and shows that I’ve read and seen, about kids with big goals like saving their family’s house from getting bulldozed by the bank, or defeating the evil wizard who killed their parents, or taming the nine-tailed demon fox inside of them to become the greatest Hokage in the history of the Leaf Village. It’s like Cindy said—they have to be better versions of themselves in order to get what they want.

But what if you’ve never thought about what you want?

I sniff a couple times, and I can’t smell the bleach fumes anymore. Either the vent sucked them all up, or I got used to them, and something bugs me about both those possibilities.

We wait. Back in the living room, Cindy flops on her belly on the sofa bed and starts scrolling through dance

challenges. I curl up in the side chair and doodle in one of my new school notebooks. We always hang out down here in the summer because it's cooler on the first floor. Last year, all we did was watch *Demon Slayer* and *My Roommate Is a Cat*, and eat those Asian freezer pops from 88 Mart—the ones that look like two sausage links. It was the best.

"I can't believe summer's already over," Cindy says, still looking at her phone. "It felt even shorter than last year."

"Do you think it's just going to keep feeling that way?" I ask. "The older we are, I mean."

"It's only going to get worse." Cindy nods. "The Chinese kids at that international high school . . . did you know their parents make them go take summer classes for college credit?"

"Who told you that?"

"Trevor Lang went this year." Cindy shrugs. "I heard my mom talking about it with Liu Niang Niang. You know, ChinaNet."

All the moms know everything going on with the other Chinese families through a combination of WeChat, shouty phone calls, and showing up unannounced at each other's houses. It's like their very own Chinese gossip internet.

Cindy giggles at something on her phone. I go back to my drawing. I try to sketch Cindy's feet, but it's hard because her toes are curling back and forth. It's more

of a doodle, anyway. I'm not like the really artistic kids who draw dragons or their own made-up superheroes. The stuff I draw is usually right in front of me.

Cindy pops up before I can finish. "Found one!" she says, then immediately covers her mouth. She glances toward the bedrooms. We listen for signs that we woke up my grandparents, but there's just the hum of the window AC.

I close my notebook and slide next to Cindy. She shows me the dance challenge on her phone. I watch the video loop a few times, and the people in it are moving so fast. Too fast.

"Um . . . you're gonna have to show me," I tell her. "Slowly."

"No no, it's easy!" She giggles. Then she breaks the dance down at half the speed: "See? All you do is rowboat, rowboat, windshield wipers . . . then pull-up, pull-up, airplane, spin!"

Cindy's like one of those people who has perfect pitch, who can play any song after hearing it once. Except instead of for music it's for dancing.

She stands her phone against the TV and we practice a few times until I get the hang of it. Then she hits record in the app. I mess up at the end and spin the wrong way, but Cindy doesn't seem to mind. We play it back and try not to laugh too loud. The dance looks even funnier with our plastic bag heads.

I remember something. "Hold on," I tell her. I go into

my shorts pockets from yesterday and pull out the mini pretzels. When she sees them, Cindy's eyes get wide and sparkly like an anime character. She snatches the bag right out of my hand.

"Andy, you're the best!" she says, in her happiest, most excited quiet voice. She gives me a big hug, our plastic bag heads crinkling together.

The timer goes off. I follow Cindy back to the bathroom, and watch from the hallway while she peels the bag off and checks her hair in the mirror. The goop is completely absorbed. Even the ends are a rich yellow blond. I think it worked!

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I notice the light change. I hear faint voices, car doors closing. I look toward the kitchen just in time to see Cindy's dad come in through the back, carrying two frozen ducks.

And he sees me. Wearing a plastic bag on my head.

I turn toward Cindy. She's sifting through the shampoo bottles. "I'm gonna shower upstairs," she says.

"Um . . ."

"I'll bring it back when I'm done. You have twenty more minutes for yours. Do you want my phone for the timer?"

I point at the kitchen.

"Well, do you or not?"

I keep pointing. Now Cindy's mom's standing in the doorway too. There's a confused look on both her

parents' faces. It's only then that Cindy comes into the hallway to see what I'm pointing at.

And everything goes crazy.

Her parents start yelling in Shanghainese at a million words a minute. Her dad stomps into our kitchen, carrying the frozen ducks under his arms like footballs, the vein in his forehead bulging. He almost corners Cindy by the fridge, but she slips around him and darts upstairs, crying, hugging the purple fox shampoo to her chest.

Doors slam. More yelling. Hao Bu comes out of the bedroom, her eyes half-open and her hair messy from sleep. "*What's all the commotion?*" she asks. At the same time, Mama and Baba burst in through the front door with *our* groceries.

Baba looks left and right. "Andy, what happen! Everything okay?!"

Mama points. "*How come there's a plastic bag on your head?*"

I open my mouth to explain, but no words come out. My chest swells. My face goes numb. I lead them into the bathroom and wave at the mess of bottles and tubs and bleach goop. Water swooshes through the pipes upstairs, and this sets me off. I start crying too.

Baba and Mama look at each other. Then Baba goes back into the kitchen. Mama sits me down on the toilet lid, with Hao Bu watching from the doorway, and turns on the shower. She adjusts the faucet handle, making

sure the water's not too hot or cold. Then she unties the plastic bag around my head.

"Xiaolei, come," she says. "Let's wash that out."

I rub my eyes and climb into the bathtub. It's then that I notice, reflected in the tub's faucet, my new hair—the new me.

And I'm—

Oh.



IT'S... DIFFERENT

Labor Day passes. Tuesday comes too soon.

It's different than I imagined—seeing all these kids in school, in the same place at once. It's not that I didn't know they'd be here. It's more like I forgot to picture everyone *moving*. Walking down the hallways in twos and threes, hugging friends they haven't seen all summer, clustered in groups around their new lockers, talking and laughing.

“Ohmigod you look *so* different!” Annie Zhang's telling Cindy.

“You did such a good job!” Thuy Pham adds, holding up a strand of Cindy's bleached blond hair.

From the way Cindy's glowing, you can't even tell that she and her parents yelled at each other all weekend. Or that they took away her phone.

“Andy helped,” she says. “We bleached his hair too!”

I step out a little from behind Cindy. “Mine didn’t come out as good,” I tell them. I wore my Detroit Tigers cap this morning but made it two steps past the front entrance before the vice principal told me hats aren’t allowed.

“It’s not *that* bad,” says Cindy.

Annie and Thuy look at my hair. My blotchy, orange-and-black hair. My definitely not-blond hair. Thuy is literally biting her tongue. I think I see Annie’s eye twitch.

“It’th nyth,” says Thuy.

“It’s . . . different?” says Annie.

A locker slams down the hall. A kid in a gray hoodie yells, “Watch it!” and scrambles to pick his notebooks up off the floor.

Then the start bell rings, a long, crackly tone that feels too loud. Everyone hurries to class, Cindy and me included. I walk next to her and keep tight to the wall. I’m kind of glad she’s a little bigger than me now. Thank god we have homeroom and first-period science together.

Hazel Heights Middle School is shaped like two big pizza boxes, overlapping at the corners.

In the middle of the overlap, there’s a glassed-in courtyard with ferns and grasses and purple wildflowers, and a single skinny tree with full green leaves, just starting to turn orange-pink. There’s even an old wooden bench. It all looks calm and peaceful—the exact opposite of the hallways around it.

Science is a few doors down from the courtyard.

When we walk in, the teacher, Mr. Nagy, has us stand by the tall lab counters along the edges of the room. Rows of two-person tables run up and down the middle, and posters of cells and animal kingdoms and evaporation hang on the walls. Up by the long lab counter in front, I spot a lower table with aquariums and terrariums on it. I think I see a newt.

Mr. Nagy calls us up one by one for attendance, and to give us our books and seat assignments. He's going alphabetical, so I know I'm last. When he gets to my name, his mouth starts to twist, but then he stops. "I'm not even going to attempt to pronounce this," he says.

I go up and tell him, "Call me Andy."

"Ah, that's much easier," he chuckles. "Andy it is."

I get a weird tingle across my scalp, almost like a Miles Morales spider-sense. Mr. Nagy hands me a textbook that says LIFE SCIENCES. I hurry to my seat in the back right corner, one row behind Cindy and this short red-headed kid, Kevin Walsh. When I walk by, Cindy presses her lips into a line, like she's saying *Just ignore it*.

My table partner isn't here today. At least I get some space to myself. It feels safer back here, in the corner. I dig out my notebook and the planner they gave us in homeroom. Maybe I'll get lucky and every class will have alphabetical seating.

Mr. Nagy's partway into his introduction when there's a loud knock at the door. A tall Middle Eastern kid in a gray hoodie comes in with a hall pass.

“Jameel Zebrai,” says Mr. Nagy, reading his name off the pass. “Good of you to join us.” He hands the kid one of the last textbooks and nods toward my table. “You’re next to Andy.”

“It’s Zebari,” Jameel tells Mr. Nagy. We briefly make eye contact. It’s the same kid from the hallway this morning—the one whose stuff spilled all over the floor.

When Jameel sits down, I can almost feel the air change around me. His textbook lands on the table with a loud *slap*. I don’t know if he did it on purpose, and Mr. Nagy glances our way like he’s also wondering. I start drawing in my planner, mostly just to have something to do.

But as class goes on, something about Jameel makes me keep looking over. He’s so tall and lanky that he barely fits into the seat. First he’s staring at the terrariums at the front of the room. Then he’s slouched back in his chair, twirling his pencil. I notice that, above his upper lip, he has a very faint mustache.

We make eye contact again. I look away too late.

“Quit staring,” he says.

“I’m not.”

“Whatchu drawing?”

I cover my planner.

Jameel points at my orange-and-black hair. “What are you, half leprechaun?”

“No.”

Kevin, the redheaded kid, looks over his shoulder, then quickly turns back. Jameel snorts. It’s almost

impressive how he can make fun of both of us with a single word. And scary.

After a while I feel a sharp poke on my elbow. I ignore it, but for some reason, Jameel keeps at it, keeps poking me with the metal end of his pencil. The eraser is already missing. There are already chew marks on the sides. It gets so annoying that I make the mistake of saying, a little too loudly, “*Stop.*”

Cindy looks over her shoulder. Mr. Nagy clears his throat. “Mr. Zebari, is there a problem back there?”

“Why you asking me? I didn’t say nothing.”

“Is there a problem?” Mr. Nagy repeats.

“No problem,” Jameel grumbles.

Inside me, a little alarm is going off.

I don’t see Cindy again until lunch. And the only other class we have together is seventh-period honors math. So I’m with her at the start, middle, and end of school, like the buns on a Big Mac. In between, I’m on my own.

Somehow I make it through the rest of the morning. Random seventh or eighth graders laugh and say “nice hair” in the hallways, but I find out that if I use water to keep it flattened, you can’t see the blotchiness as much. In language arts we have *reverse*-alphabetical seating, and kids snicker when it’s my turn to say something interesting that happened over the summer. But in social studies, the attention is more on Jason Shaheen, who keeps asking Mx. Adler about

Eastern Europe, and keeps asking it in a Dracula voice.

While we wait in the lunch line, Cindy tells me about her own morning: “Sarika Shah stayed the summer with her relatives in New Jersey, and they took the train into New York City, isn’t that cool? And this new girl Molly, she’s doing symphony band too and—oh! I heard when Mx. Adler’s in a grumpy mood they’ll make the whole class write essays . . .”

I remember what Cindy said about starting middle school and making a statement. We both made statements all right, just very different ones.

“Andy, you have your iceman stare again.”

“Huh? Oh—sorry.” Cindy and I watched this video one time about cave-people that got frozen in ice. She said I have the same blank look in my face when I’m day-dreaming.

“I talked to Thuy,” she says. “She can get extra bleach stuff, but she has to wait till her parents’ salon uses more bottles first. How much money do you have saved up?”

“I don’t know, six dollars maybe? How much does she want?”

“More than that.” Cindy sighs. “I wish we got allowances like American kids.”

“We get red envelope money.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the same. And Lunar New Year isn’t till January.”

We pick up our pizza squares and apple slices. We spot Annie and Thuy and some other kids from our elemen-

tary school at one of the tables. I scan the cafeteria for Jameel, but I don't see him. I do, however, get a whiff of a bright, flowery orange smell: a group of four girls, probably eighth graders, walking our way. They're all tall and thin and wearing yoga pants and carrying fancy metal water bottles. The girl in front, a Black girl with tight curls of pastel-pink hair, is holding a stack of flyers and a roll of tape.

From the way Cindy's staring, I can tell she's noticed them too. When the tall girls pass us, the pink-haired one glances at Cindy and says, "I like your hair."

"Thanks," says Cindy, not missing a beat. "I like yours too."

"Thank you! Here, take one—" The girl hands Cindy a flyer. "Hope to see you there!"

We watch the tall girls tape a couple more flyers up on the wall, then float off into the hallways. We both look down at the paper in Cindy's hand. It says, in big bold letters at the top:

MOVEMENT

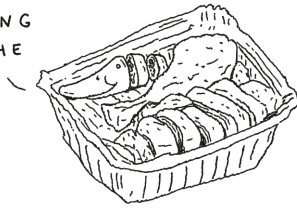
Underneath that, it says:

HHMS DANCE COMPANY
Informational meeting!
Auditorium this Friday @ Lunch!
#hhmsmove #bethere

Cindy stares at me with her mouth open a little, like she almost can't believe it. I remember a word I had to look up when reading a book once: *incredulous*. She's incredulous. Then her face changes, as if she's noticing something for the first time.

“Why's your hair wet?”

I GOT A
SPLITTING
HEADACHE



DUCK BRAINS & DEMENTORS

When I get home that afternoon, I pass out on the sofa bed and don't wake up until it's already dark, and dinner's almost over.

Baba and Hao Bu are at the table, drinking tea and talking. Baba's also picking at the to-go boxes Mama brought back from 88 Mart. It's one of our usual dinners, when Mama and Baba are too tired to cook. Except this time there's an extra foil container of roast duck.

I sit down and start filling the empty plate in front of me.

"You're finally awake?" Baba chuckles. *"Did you have a tiring first day? Or do you have jet lag too?"*

I shrug. I don't really feel like talking. Mama brings me a steaming bowl of rice.

"I came out and he was fast asleep," says Hao Bu. She chopsticks a couple duck pieces into the dipping sauce,

then puts them on my mound of white rice. I immediately move them onto the plate.

“Xiaolei, you don’t want it with your rice?”

I shake my head.

“He doesn’t like when the different foods mix,” explains Mama.

“I always tell him that’s the best part,” says Baba. *“When all the flavors mix!”*

Except Baba takes it to the extreme. He’ll stir everything up into one big mush, until you can’t even tell the difference from one bite to the next. I like to keep each food in its own section.

Baba shakes his head and chuckles again. He nods toward the bedrooms, where I guess Ah Dia is still sleeping. *“Once Ba’s over his jet lag, we can make an appointment for him,”* he tells Hao Bu. *“The doctors here are the best in the world. One of my classmates, this Indian guy, his brother’s a surgeon—”*

“Uhyo, don’t bother. As long as the old man moves around a bit, walks outside, it’ll be enough.”

“One look at his face and you can tell he’s in pain—”

“You don’t need to worry.”

Mama chimes in: *“Ma, this is a great place to go for walks. The air’s clean. Michigan’s best in the fall.”*

“That’s right!” says Baba. *“This weekend in our backyard, we’ll cook some Western food with the Shens. We use BBQ grill!”*

“BBQ grill?” asks Hao Bu.

“Hot dog, hambao!”

“Aiya, how are you so excited now about BBQ grill?”
laughs Mama. *“You’ve only used that thing twice since we got it!”*

“Corn on cob!” says Baba.

“It’s probably all rusted by now!”

“Shish kabob!”

If my mom was the kind of person who rolled her eyes, she’d roll her eyes right now.

“Xiaoyin, make a list,” says Baba. *“We’ll go to Costco!”*

“We can put jumbo shrimp on the shish kabob!” says Mama, suddenly excited too. My parents will really look for any excuse to go to Costco.

“Ma, didn’t one open in Shanghai!” asks Baba, his voice still avalanche-y.

“That’s right! I haven’t been yet. It’s always so busy! Is it good?”

“We’ll take you and Ba there! Then we have BBQ grill!”

“Free sample!” says Mama.

Hao Bu sees that I’ve finished my roast duck pieces, and gets me another—the head. Except I block the plate with my chopsticks.

“Xiaolei, you don’t want to eat the brains?” asks Hao Bu.

“What’s the matter, you love the brains,” says Baba. *“We saved the head just for you!”*

“I remember, even when you were little, you always wanted the brains,” says Hao Bu.

I shake my head.

“Give it to me, Ma,” says Baba. *“I’ll eat it.”*

* * *

It feels kind of nice to not talk at dinner. It feels so nice that I decide to keep doing it the next day. Cindy mentions on our walk to school how quiet I seem, even for me, but she doesn't bring it up again.

Over the next week, I realize that the best way to deal with Jameel and the others is to ignore them. When Paul Castiglione comes out of the stall in the boys' bathroom and says, "Hey Andy, who barfed on your head?" . . . *ignore*.

When Mx. Adler calls on me in social studies and Aiden Abrams fake-coughs "Carrot-top!" . . . *crossed-arms emoji*.

They're like Dementors: If you hold your breath and stay very still and quiet, they stop noticing you're there. Act like you're invisible and pretty soon you will be.

It's tougher with Jameel, though. Mainly because I have to sit next to him in science. So I try to focus instead on Mr. Nagy's lessons about plant and animal cells.

"Yo Irish!"

Chloroplasts.

"You have Lucky Charms for breakfast again?"

Mitochondria.

"Is it St. Patty's Day already?"

Nuclear membrane.

After a while, even Jameel starts getting bored. I think I'll just never say another unnecessary word for the rest of middle school.

* * *

Friday. Lunch period. Cindy made me promise to go with her to the info meeting for the dance club thing.

On our way to the auditorium, she tells me everything she's already found out about the tall girls—how the pink-haired girl's name is Viola, and she and Mai are both eighth graders, but the other girl Alexandra's in seventh, and Thuy knows Mai through—

I open my mouth to ask “How did you find all this out?” But instead I make a sound between a cough and a croak.

“Bless you,” she says.

“Um, thanks?” I think the last time I talked was two days ago.

We turn the corner and walk toward the glass courtyard. Lunch bags are flopping around, lockers are closing left and right, but something about the courtyard catches my eye. The sun's really shining down today, and mixed in with the tree's peachy pink leaves are round red fruits, almost like raspberries. I spot a little bird by the trunk with one of the fruits in its beak.

Then: a loud laugh. Down the hallway, Jameel's hanging around Paul and Aiden's lockers—three Dementors in a row. And we're going to walk right past them.

I try to slow down so that Cindy blocks their view.

“Yo Irish!”

Too late.

Jameel splits off from the others and starts walking

next to us. I pretend I don't hear him, and at first Cindy doesn't realize he's talking to me. But then he steps in front of us. He holds out a pen and points to his open palm. "Draw a map of it for me," he says.

"You're in our way," Cindy tells him.

"I'm just tryna get your boy to show me where he hides it."

"What are you even talking about? Hides what?"

Jameel says the next bit extra loud, looking over at Paul and Aiden. "The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!"

The others burst out laughing.

"*Endoplasmic reticulum*," I say under my breath.

"What'd you say?" asks Jameel.

I stare straight ahead. *I am not the droid you're looking for.*

"Yo, did you just Force Wave me?"

"Leave us alone," says Cindy, rolling her eyes.

"LeAvE uS AlOne," he says, in that SpongeBob meme voice.

Cindy shakes her head and pushes by Jameel. I follow, laughter cackling behind us.

By the time we get to the auditorium, everything's tingly, like my spider-sense went so haywire that it short-circuited my whole body. I picture a robot version of me in a scrapyard, my head, middle, and limbs all scattered in different places.

“Don’t pay attention to those jerks,” says Cindy, shaking her head. “Twenty years from now, when we’re both famous dancers, they’ll be delivering pizzas for a living.”

I hope Cindy knows that I’m not going to be a famous dancer like she is. I also want to ask her what’s wrong with delivering pizzas, because both our dads delivered food part-time when we first moved here. But I’m still too tingly to talk.

She walks into the auditorium ahead of me.

Wait—

Do I really have to wait twenty years before it gets better?

MY
PRECIOUSSS



MOVEMENT

Viola and the tall girls are on the stage goofing around when we walk in, recording each other on their phones. I watch one of them—Alexandra, I think—bend backwards, plant her hands, and kick her feet up into a perfect handstand, then gracefully lower herself down.

I turn to Cindy like, *Did you just see that?* But she's already heading for the stage.

I follow her up the side steps, past the dozen or so other kids scattered in the front rows, chatting away like they already know each other. Once I get on stage, I pretend like I'm looking around so I'm not just awkwardly standing there while Cindy talks to the tall girls.

First I check out the curtain fabric. It's very thick and velvety—definitely high quality. Then I notice a couple of big wooden panels covered in paint-splattered cloths.

I peek under one cloth: It's a row of houses that all look the same.

From backstage, I watch a few more kids trickle into the auditorium. I recognize Lucy Eugenides, who has big glasses and jean overalls and is in my honors math class, and Arj Patel, who I have language arts with. Jason Shaheen, the Dracula kid, is also here. I didn't think he was the dancing type, but then again neither am I.

Cindy and the tall girls burst out laughing about something. If Cindy has a superpower, this is it: She can meet kids who are complete strangers and two minutes later, it's like they're old friends. Meanwhile, here I am creeping in the shadows.

"Andy Zhou?"

I jump.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you!"

I turn around. It's our elementary school art teacher Mrs. Ocampo. She's carrying a cardboard box full of tattered books.

"Andy, I thought that was you! How are you? You must be surprised to see me."

I nod. Then it clicks. The elementary school is right up the block, so it makes sense that Mrs. Ocampo would be the art teacher here too.

"How was your summer?" she asks. "Did you go anywhere exciting?"

"It was okay. We didn't go anywhere."

"I like what you did with your hair!"

“Oh. Thanks,” I say. I’m pretty sure she’s just being nice.

The colorful stage lights dim and brighten. While Mrs. Ocampo’s head is turned, I slip away. Cindy and the tall girls slide off the stage into the front row, and I hurry down the side steps, into a seat next to Cindy.

After a while, Mrs. Ocampo comes out with another teacher, and it’s someone else I know.

“Welcome to Movement. I’m Mx. Adler. My pronouns are they/them.”

Under the lights, Mx. Adler’s pale skin and straight silver hair are a mix of blues, golds, and purples. I remember seeing the flyer for the informational meeting taped next to the board in social studies. I glance at Cindy but she doesn’t seem surprised at all. Was I the only one who didn’t know Mx. Adler was in charge of Movement?

“Each February,” they go on, “our dance company puts on a show for the families at Hazel Heights Middle. Last year it was *A Wrinkle in Time*. This year we will be adapting *Lord of the Flies*.”

Someone raises their hand.

“Yes, in front.”

“Can I be Frodo?”

“That’s *Lord of the RINGS*,” says someone else. “*Lord of the Flies* is the one where the boys crash-land on an island. But instead of trying to get rescued they fight each other and burn the island down.”

“Spoilers! We’re reading it this year!”

“You know if it was a bunch of girls they’d have figured out how to get rescued in no time,” says Viola.

Cindy laughs.

“What about *Hamilton*? Maybe we can do *Hamilton*?”

“Vith Aaron Burr, ah ah ah!” says Jason in his Dracula voice.

Everyone stares.

“This year’s program has been decided,” Mx. Adler says firmly. “Some of you already know Mrs. Ocampo. She will be overseeing our student-run crew. That’s set decoration, costumes, lighting. But make no mistake: This will be very much *your* production. I expect you to take ownership of it. And Mai, you are correct. Mrs. Hu is graciously lending us her classroom copies until then.”

Mrs. Ocampo hands half a stack of papers to Viola, the other half to Alexandra, and they go around passing them out. Cindy’s eyes get that sparkly anime look again. But when I see the dates and times for auditions, the rehearsals every week, the permission form at the bottom . . .

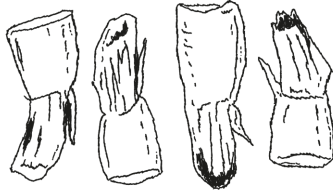
If we get picked as dancers, I’ll be up on that stage, under those lights, in front of the school—the *whole* school. I imagine coming out for the first time and seeing Jameel, Paul, and Aiden in the audience pointing and laughing, which makes me mess up and trip Cindy, who knocks into the tall girls, who then topple over one by one like dominoes!

This is way different from Cindy and me doing dance challenges at home.

Mx. Adler says something and everyone's suddenly getting up to sign out copies of the books. They're breaking off into groups too—the tall girls with Mx. Adler, a handful of others with Mrs. Ocampo.

Cindy goes with the tall girls. I want to follow, but it's like someone did a *Naruto* shadow-paralysis on me. I flatten my hair to my head, and my fingers land on a single strand in the back that feels longer than the others. I barely pull and it comes right out.

It's bright orange.



HOT DOGS & HAMBAGS

That Sunday, my dad makes his whole “BBQ grill” plan with Cindy’s family happen in the backyard.

It’s funny, Baba’s never been that into American culture, but now that Hao Bu and Ah Dia are here, all of a sudden he’s Mr. Red White and Blue. He’s even wearing a chef’s hat and apron, except they’re both from when he worked part-time at Benihana—even though he’s not Japanese. I watch him scrape a small piece of burnt onion off the grill, juggle it between two metal spatulas, and flip it into the divot in his hat.

“*See, Xiaoyin, the BBQ grill works perfectly fine!*” Baba calls toward the kitchen. “*There wasn’t much rust at all!*”

Next to me and Hao Bu at the patio table, Ah Dia’s nodding off to sleep, then catching himself, then nodding off again. Like Jameel in science the other day.

“*Ma, one of these weekends, when the weather’s nice,*

we'll take you and Ba to garage sale," says Baba.

"Garage?" asks Hao Bu.

"Garage sale," Cindy's dad repeats. He sits down next to us and grabs a handful of melon seeds. He cracks open a few and spits the empty shells on the cement patio. *"These Americans, let me tell you—they're always getting rid of their old stuff. They'll hold these big sales. Or sometimes they'll just put it on the curb, throw it away!"*

"You'll love it, Ma!" says Baba. *"That's how I got this BBQ grill. That's how we got Xiaolei's sofa bed! Guess how much it was."*

"How much?"

"Forty bucks US! That's like three-hundred RMB! They asked for one-fifty but I bargained them down."

"Wah, that cheap?"

"Aiya, Ma, don't encourage him too much," says Mama. She and Cindy's mom come out carrying trays piled with raw shish kabobs. *"He doesn't want to throw anything away. You haven't seen our basement yet, Ma. It's full of old stuff he got at garage sale. Half of it's broken!"*

"It's all perfectly good stuff! Easily fixed!"

"What have you fixed so far?"

"Who wants the first hambao!"

Baba serves the first burger to Ah Dia. *"Take a bite, old man,"* says Hao Bu, shaking him awake and sticking the burger in front of his face. *"It's an authentic American hambao. How do you like it? Does it taste like McDonald's?"*

Ah Dia opens his eyes and takes a bite, then gets to chewing. Baba gives the next burger to me. It's a little dry. I squirt more ketchup on the patty, and when Ah Dia sees me do it, he points to the bottle. So I add ketchup to his too.

Cindy's dad studies his own burger, turning the paper plate in his hands. "*I never saw what the fuss is, even back home,*" he says. He spits out the last of his seed shells and takes a bite. "*Let me tell you, I'd rather have a pork bun. Chinese food is the best food in the world. You have sweet, salty, spicy, sour . . . all kinds of flavors.*"

"*Are you eating white bread again?*" Cindy's mom scolds. "*You have to watch your diabetes—that stuff is all sugar! Wrap it in lettuce!*"

"*Try the hot dog!*" Baba tells Ah Dia. He moves the dogs onto a plate to make room on the grill for kabobs. "*You can get burgers in China, but you can't get hot dog!*"

"*Look, you can't even tell what the meat is,*" says Cindy's dad. "Hot dog like bad version of Poland sausage. Right, Andy? American pizza just bad version of Italy pizza. Even hamburger, is come from Hamburg, Germany. Real hamburger probably better!"

A tiny tomato chunk flies out of his mouth when he says this.

I nod to be polite. Cindy's dad takes another bite of his now-lettuce-wrapped burger, even though he doesn't like it, because Chinese people hate wasting food. Then he calls toward the upstairs window. "Cindy, *come down*

here! Zhou Jiu Jiu made BBQ grill, how come you're being so rude?"

"I'll get her," I tell him.

The grown-ups' voices muffle as I go up the back stairs. The steps creak a little under the thin brown carpet. The main door at the top is open, but the door to Cindy's room is closed. Just as I'm about to knock, I stop for some reason. I find another long hair on the back of my head and pull: orange.

"Andy, is that you?"

"It's me," I answer. I guess she heard me come up the stairs.

Cindy opens the door and hurries back to something on her computer. I notice the bag of mini pretzels on the wall shelf, in between her eight-ounce Red Pop and Eliza, the taxidermy baby squirrel we found on someone's curb.

The printer on Cindy's desk clicks and clacks. It spits out two pages and she hands me one of them. The paper is still warm. It's a permission slip for . . .

"Math Olympiad? What's Math Olympiad? You want to do that too?"

"Look at the bottom—the tear-off part." She points at the signature form. There's something familiar about it. In fact, it looks just like the form for dance—

Oh.

“Our parents are never gonna let us join Movement,” she says.

I spot the real permission form on Cindy’s desk and compare the two. They look exactly alike. But wouldn’t it be easier just to forge her parents’ signatures? Also, I still have to tell her how, like, I don’t really want to dance in front of the whole school.

What comes out is: “Why do I need to get *my* parents to sign the Math Olympiad one too? Can’t they just sign the real one?”

“Because. If my parents find out I’m in Math Olympiad and you’re not, they’re gonna wonder. You know, ChinaNet.”

This is getting out of control. I have to tell her. “So I was thinking, what if—”

“They ask about what we do in Math Olympiad?”

That wasn’t where I was going but okay. I nod.

“Easy. We take these quizzes. Like, math riddles. It’s a competition.”

“People actually do that?”

“It’s a real thing. Look it up.”

Cindy gets a pen from the pouch on her desk. She heads for the door.

“Wait,” I tell her.

“What?”

Our eyes meet. Outside it’s golden hour, and the orangey-pink sun comes through the window behind

Cindy, lighting up the edges of her hair. She's literally glowing. This must be what she was talking about that day we bleached it. She's found her big thing, that better version of herself—the person she's meant to be. What kind of best friend would keep her from being that person?

“Never mind,” I say.

Cindy squints at me for a second, like she suspects something. But then she shrugs and goes ahead. Our parents' avalanche voices float up from the back patio. I smell the sizzling shish kabobs on the smoky charcoal grill.

“Don't forget your form!” Cindy reminds me from the stairwell.

I pluck another hair: black.

Our dads sign our permission forms without even asking what happens at Math Olympiad. I eat some corn and a shish kabob—but only after I pull all the things off the skewer and sort each into its own pile. Ah Dia seems to really like the hot dogs. Hao Bu cuts them into little pieces to make it less messy for him to eat.

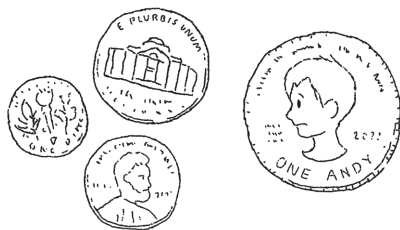
That night, after the mosquitoes drive us all back inside, I take out the fake permission form and stare at it again. Maybe it won't be so bad. Maybe I'll get some small role where I can stay in the background and not move—like a tree or a rock or something.

I pull two more hairs, both black, and doodle at the kitchen island while my parents clean up. Baba's shak-

ing the trash from his tall chef's hat into the garbage bin, and Mama's trying to fit the buns and uncooked hot dogs into the freezer.

"Aiya, there's no more room," she says. "We need a second fridge."

Baba shrugs. *"Maybe we can find one at a garage sale."*



CANADIAN QUARTERS

It's the second week of school—only thirty-seven to go, according to my planner. And it's weird, but . . . I think I've memorized Jameel's schedule.

Third period, he comes out of the boys' locker room after gym, down the hall from my social studies classroom. So I take the long way around. At lunch, he'll clown around with Paul and Aiden, but sometimes he's at a different table with a bunch of Chaldean kids, including Dracula Jason. Other times I won't see him at all—probably because he got detention.

I guess that's the thing with Dementors: You have to learn their every move before they learn yours.

And even then you have to stay on guard.

Like Tuesday after school, when I'm supposed to meet Cindy to walk her to symphony band, I almost run into Jameel by the drinking fountain. He's trying to talk to

this popular girl, Lily Danielopoulos, who's trying not to get talked to. I duck around the corner and wait. He shouldn't be there much longer because he usually gets a ride home.

"Andy Zhou!"

I jump.

"Sorry! I keep doing that!" It's Mrs. Ocampo again, standing in the doorway to the art studio.

"That's okay," I tell her.

"I meant to talk to you more at the info meeting," she says. Her tote bag's overflowing with colorful scraps of fabric. "Are you planning to audition this week? I didn't realize you were a dancer too!"

I nod. Then shake my head. There's an awkward silence, like she's waiting for me to say more. I remember the permission slip. I dig inside my backpack until I find it.

When Mrs. Ocampo sees the form, she makes a funny face. Uh-oh, she knows it's fake! The jig is up! But then she flips the sheet over—to my doodles from the barbecue.

"Ignore those," I tell her.

"Are these shrimp tails?" she asks.

I nod.

"I really like your line work," she says. "It has a lot of character."

"Thanks." She's probably just being nice again, because that's what teachers are supposed to do.

"Would you like to keep this?" Mrs. Ocampo asks. "I can photocopy it."

“You can have it,” I tell her.

“Are you sure? Are you taking art with me this year?”

“I am. Next semester.” I glance around the corner: Jameel’s gone. When I turn back again, I see Mrs. Ocampo looking back and forth between me and the hallway.

“Um, I have to meet my friend and stuff,” I tell her. I hurry out of there.

As I walk away, I hear her call after me: “See you at auditions, Andy!”

“Where were you?” Cindy asks. “I waited.”

I catch her just as she’s heading into symphony band. “Sorry. I was turning in my permission slip,” I tell her. “For Movement.” Not that I really planned that.

“Oh, great!” She beams. “Let’s practice after school tomorrow.” She waves at me, then takes her violin case into the music room. I stand at the doorway for a second and watch her say hi to some of her band friends. Cindy has so many friends—Dance Friends and Band Friends, Lunch Friends and Class Friends. But I guess it’s nice to be her *best* friend. Her Everywhere Friend.

By the time I step outside, the buses have already left, and the school feels emptier. Calmer. I put on my Tigers cap and pull it down toward my eyes. Some kids walk ahead of me, while others get into vans and SUVs. The cross-country team is in the middle of the soccer field, stretching in their shorts and T-shirts. And even from this far away, I can hear the clatter of Cindy and every-

one in symphony band, warming up their instruments.

It's my first time walking home alone this year. Cindy's a fast walker, so by myself I can take my time. Along the streets are trees with leaves as big as my face, and dangling seeds that look like long green beans. The sky's super clear, but there's a cool wind. It's not quite fall yet, but summer's definitely over.

Around the next block, I pass our old elementary school. The beige brick building already seems smaller than I remember. A kid in Mrs. Antonioni's room looks out the window at me and the other walkers, maybe wondering what middle school's like. Last year Cindy and I were sitting on their side of the glass.

And now I know what it's like.

The kids ahead of me turn onto side streets and go into their houses. By the time I'm a couple blocks from home, I'm the only one left—no one in front and no one behind.

A memory bubbles up. In fourth grade, I saw this repair guy fixing the vending machine in our cafeteria. While the machine's cover was open, he told me how it worked—how coins went down the rails and got read by magnets and tiny lights and sorted into their right places—the quarters with the quarters, the dimes with the dimes. How it could tell if you put in something that was the wrong size or weight, even if by a little.

Then he dug a Canadian quarter out of his pocket. He dropped it into the machine, and I watched it roll down

the rails, past all the different coin holes without so much as a hiccup, and clack into the return slot, rejected.

The house feels different as soon as I walk in. My bed's folded back up into a sofa, and the window's open, the curtains billowing a little in the breeze. I hear the clatter of bowls and dishes—Hao Bu must be up and about. Then I remember what Baba said about jet lag, how it's worse flying west to east, how having jet lag is like having the flu: "You feel tired and tired and tired, and then one day you suddenly not tired anymore!"

In the kitchen, all the cabinet doors are open. Hao Bu's standing on a chair, rummaging through a cupboard.

She looks over her shoulder. "*Eh? Xiaolei, you're back? Do you have any homework?*"

"I'm back." I nod. "*I have a little bit of math.*" I actually have social studies too, and also science. For science we have to color in drawings of plant and animal cells and label all the parts. But I don't know how to say that in Chinese.

Hao Bu digs through the cabinets again. I take off my backpack and collapse onto the sofa. My eyes fall on the copy of *Lord of the Flies* Cindy checked out for me, waiting to be finished. But for some reason, I don't feel like finishing. I pull a hair: black.

"*Where's the dried seaweed?*" I hear Hao Bu mumbling to herself. "*And there's no oyster sauce? How could they be out of oyster sauce?*"

"*Hao Bu, do you need something?*" I ask.

“Xiaolei, tell me, where’s the grocery store? Hao Bu has to buy some things.”

If Baba were here, he’d probably say, “Let’s go to Costco!” But Hao Bu’s looking for Chinese groceries, and we get those from 88 Mart, where Mama works. That’s on the other side of the freeway, though, and I don’t want my grandma to get lost or hit by a truck.

“I’ll go with you,” I tell her. *“We can walk there.”*

“Can you go with me? That’d be best.”

The toilet flushes. Ah Dia’s awake too. Hao Bu steps down from the chair and goes into the bathroom to help him.

“Old man, we’re going to get groceries!” I hear her say. *“You want to come with us? Your grandson says we can walk there.”*

“You go,” says Ah Dia.

She turns off the light behind them as they come out. *“Old man, you have to get some exercise. You can’t use your jet lag as an excuse anymore. We’re going for a walk later, okay?”*

“Okay, okay.”

“Hao Bu will get some money,” she tells me, and disappears into the bedroom.

Something about having all the cabinet doors open makes me nervous, so I go and shut them one by one. In the living room, Ah Dia makes like he’s going to sit down on the sofa. I go over to help but he waves me away. I turn on the TV, so he doesn’t get bored while we’re gone,

and I hand him the remote for the Xiaomi box. Mama and Baba use that to stream their Chinese shows.

Ah Dia looks over the top of his glasses at the buttons. Then he points the remote at the TV and starts clicking around. From the way he's going through the menus, it looks like he already knows how to work it.

"Xiaolei, how much money should we bring?" Hao Bu's back. She's holding a tattered envelope bulging with hundred-dollar bills. There must be at least two thousand bucks in there—I didn't realize my grandparents were rich! Then I remember how Baba sends them money every few months, so maybe it's from that.

On our way out, I notice Ah Dia sitting very still in front of the TV. I get a weird vision of his body as a stone statue, with moss all over. But then it goes away, and I just see the scene from a Chinese drama, reflected in his glasses.