

Basketball

“Do you eat dogs?”

The air reverberated with the staggered *thud-thud* of a flaccid pair of basketballs wrestling in a game of Knockout. Boone’s question, though, spoken with a nonchalant air and a smirk, shot across the court with more alacrity than the cheers and jeers of fourth graders milling about the sidelines.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I stepped up to the free throw line and shot. The ball made a high arc in the air, licked the backboard, and rolled off. Behind me, I heard a *whoosh* as Boone reared and his basketball plunged through the net. I was out. I hugged my arms and moved off the court.

“What about cats? I hear the Chinese eat cats, too,” Boone called after me.

All eyes were drawn to me like iron shavings to a magnet. I shook my head and stood and watched as Boone got in the back of the line and, with nimble flicks of his wrist, sank shot after shot before the kid in front of him could react until Boone was the only person standing in the center of the court. Like little robotic mice, we scurried into a single file behind the free throw line, and the game started over. Boone seemed to ride the air as he made his first throw and took his place behind me.

He stuck up his pinky finger before my nose. “Doesn’t this mean the same thing in Chinese as this?” he said, extending his hangnail-encrusted middle finger.

“No—I don’t know.” My hands clenched into fists by their own accord. I wanted to run off the basketball court—to free myself from the rusty, shoe-scuffed concrete—onto the adjacent effervescent green lawn, but I was rooted. Boone’s glowering smirk and middle finger, a sign of oppression half an inch from my face, held me in place.

I wish I could tell my ten-year-old self that Boone was just a scrawny eleven-year-old boy slapping around a basketball—because at the time he seemed like a towering, buck-toothed, blue-eyed monster. Boone, it seemed, had the power to change my life with a gesture or a question uttered in his thick-tongued voice. I wish I knew then that the only power Boone had over me was what I had given him.

I gave over power to many people before I learned how to be proud. At first, the questions were curious ones, but I treated them all as if they harbored an underlying accusation: *You don't belong here*. During lunch, I poured out the contents of my Rubbermaid or Ziploc containers—something goopy over rice—into the trashcan and told my mom to pack me sandwiches instead.

“Can you say something in Chinese?” countless kids asked me. I declined them all, but that still didn't stop some of them from singing “*ching chong chang ching ching chong*” with a clown-lipped grin.

I remember one time a former friend was speaking faux Chinese to me as we walked to class. After her Asian-lady-in-a-nail-salon impersonation, she threw back her head, sending her blonde hair in waves down her back like a tapestry of unraveled gold threads, and laughed, expecting me to do the same. So I did. That traitorous laugh rushed through my windpipe like wind howling through the mouth of a cave, and when the last of it escaped, I felt emptier than ever before.

Self-confidence came to me in false starts, busted knees, and shaky steps. At first, I went grudgingly with my mom to informal Chinese classes with the daughter and son of Mrs. Liu, a family friend who owned a Chinese restaurant. I made slapdash efforts during lessons to complete the assignments. For the longest time, I felt having to learn Chinese—and being Chinese—was a curse. It was the speck that refused uniformity in my small world; it wouldn't

have bothered me that I was different if people like Boone didn't point it out. More and more, it disturbed me when I looked into the mirror as I washed my hands in the elementary school bathroom and saw that all the other girls seemed as if they were snickering at my reflection behind their pale hands.

But, gradually, I accepted the girl in the mirror. Gradually, I saw beauty in my mother and Mrs. Liu: in the way my mother's pin straight black hair, when she tied it out of her face with a rubber band, shaped to the nape of her neck and Mrs. Liu's stuck out like a hedgehog's spine; in the way my mother served steamed rice, hot from the cooker, and ladled cabbage soup into etched porcelain bowls from my father's hometown of *Nanjing* with gentle precision; in the way my mother's fingers arched as they pinched together the shell of a dumpling; in the way she said, "There's nothing you can do about being Chinese—you might as well be proud."

It's almost strange how a few years can dilute the sharpness of scathing words and wipe away doubt. The other day, I was walking to school with David Yang, a friend from Hong Kong, and we passed a yard with a yapping Labrador.

"There's our dinner," David joked and began to appraise the dog as if it were a T-bone steak.

I laughed. The phrase tasted like a fresh green grape, acidic but familiar in its caress of the tongue. Suddenly, I realized Boone-like insults had become something almost comforting, things I welcomed like old friends. I didn't accept them with a bowed head anymore—I had risen above them.

I found solace in those insults because they were another part of my identity. They were like the weapons of a nation I had conquered, and now they rested under my belt, demilitarized and pacified.

The girl stuck to the basketball court had unglued her feet and stepped off. She cocooned herself and emerged with gossamer wings. The boy slapping around the deflated ball had forced her to feel shame and embarrassment, but he had also taught her how to feel pride. And she was grateful for him for that.