

Straight-A Student

Melody's parents were coming to visit. She had to postpone plans with Marilyn because of it—the two of them had wanted to try out the new burger place across campus—which irked Melody more than it should have. Marilyn understood, as always, texting an enthusiastic *Good luck!* followed by a string of smiley faces and heart emojis.

She and her parents were going to have dinner at an actual restaurant, one that wasn't one of the quick-bite eateries dotting the avenue near her dorm. "You're gonna get free food, and good food at that," her dad chuckled over the phone.

Melody grimaced. "See you soon," she said.

...

Her parents' rundown minivan squeaked and putted down the bustling street outside her dorm. It was the same one they'd owned since she was a toddler, as her dad refused to spend money on another, insisting that "they don't make them like they used to." As soon as it paused, Melody ran out and climbed into the backseat, pushing a plastic bag filled with Crispy Roll wrappers from her seat.

"We wanted to see your dorm, daughter," her mom pouted, turning from the passenger seat to look her over.

"Maybe later," Melody muttered. Maybe they'd forget by then. At the very least, she would have time to text her roommate and warn her to hide anything suspicious. Convince her to clean the room up a bit, too—save her from a headache.

Her dad grinned, showing a set of crooked yellow teeth. "Melody's too grown up now, Suo—a freshman in college! She doesn't want us in her stuff."

Rolling her eyes, her mom typed in the restaurant address into the GPS. "Come on, we've got to beat the rush hour."

...

The restaurant was packed when they arrived. An old place located in the next town over from her school, they came here every time her parents visited. The din of loud Chinese families yelling at each other over steaming, savory pots of beef noodle soup filled her ears, and she

opened her nostrils, breathed in, then back out. This was fine. Easier for her to pretend not to hear a question, if needed.

There was a tiny, ragged hole in the tablecloth, nearly hidden from view next to her knee. Melody fingered it as they sat in faux leather chairs and her parents ordered the usual: roast goose, sticky rice. Pure, traditional dishes that weren't contaminated with American flavors, as they always said.

Her mom took a sip of her tea, then set the white porcelain back in the saucer with a sharp plink that made Melody flinch. "So, daughter. How is school?"

"It's fine, Ma," Melody said. Asking was only a formality—it wasn't like her parents checked her grades incessantly, ensuring that no class ever fell below an A. And when it did, her mom always made sure to call. Melody fiddled with the table cloth, worming her pinky finger in and out of the frayed hole as she waited.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," her mom beamed. Then she slowly leaned her face towards Melody's, her narrow eyes widening in anticipation. Melody tried not to recoil. "Have you met anyone special yet?"

"Any nice Chinese boys?" her dad chortled from her left.

Her mom shot him a dirty look. "She knows what I mean, Shazi."

Sweat started to bead on Melody's hairline. She could feel it drip through her silky black hair, oozing like viscous duck fat, and she looked down and dipped one end of a chopstick into her tea, the way she used to always do as a child when her parents weren't looking. Now, her mom was staring at her so intensely that she didn't even notice.

"Well?"

To break, or not to break, Melody pondered. *Hamlet* had always been her favorite Shakespearean tragedy—such sensitive indecisiveness! Such cruel relationships! She had cried when she first finished it, in the middle of tenth grade English class.

"Um," Melody mumbled, sucking on the chopstick. "Not exactly."

"Something close? Anyone you're interested in that I could help with?"

Melody shuddered in the overly heated room. Wouldn't that be interesting, she thought and tore at the tablecloth. Her mother playing matchmaker, becoming an Asian Polonius and

meddling in her daughter's love life. What would she do, show a boy her straight-As and brag about how *she was top of her class in high school, every year?*

Her mom wasn't done. "Melody, you're in college now. You need to start looking for a man to settle down with before it's too late."

"A nice Chinese boy, remember that," her father piped in helpfully, earning another withering glare from her mom. Another *duh* eye roll.

"You've got a sharp mind. And double eyelids. There should be lots of boys who'd want to date you if you'd only look around."

The stifling restaurant air only weighed her mom's words even further, filling them like fat water balloons, and Melody felt a sudden, compelling urge to rip the tablecloth in two. In her pocket, her phone rang, and she fumbled for it, grateful for the distraction.

Marilyn is calling...

She glanced up at her parents, her mom's lips drawn in a fine line and her dad's expression twisted, as if halfway between laughter and sobs.

"Who is it?" her mom demanded.

For just a moment, Melody closed her eyes and imagined a scenario in which after she broke the news, her mom smiled and hugged her, and her dad stood grinning next to them. There'd be no denial, no resentment, no analysis of where she'd gone wrong whilst following the perfectly ordered plan laid by her parents. Then her phone rang once more and fell silent, and the cacophony of Cantonese conversations flooded back around her. Fantasy crushed.

"Daughter! Who was that?"

Melody rose, clutching her phone with pearl-white knuckles, willing her voice to steady. "My girlfriend," she said. "I need to go call her back. Talk to you afterwards!"