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Be Different

To my bảo bảo

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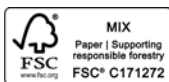
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MICHELLE QUACH

**THE
BOY
YOU
ALWAYS
WANTED**



USBORNE

ReadingZone

OLLIE

The trouble all started when I made the mistake of letting Francine Zhang see me cry.

It was two weeks ago, during fifth period AP US History, and we were all sitting in the dark. Mr Romero was showing *The Deer Hunter*, which is the kind of movie you should really warn a guy about before springing it on him, especially right before lunch. If you haven't seen it, *The Deer Hunter* is about a group of American friends who go off to fight in the Vietnam War, where they're taken prisoner and forced by their captors to play Russian roulette. Some of them survive, but the violence of it – the pointlessness of it, really – horrified me, especially when I thought about how people in my family were among those caught in the shitshow off-screen, getting bombed out by the Americans.

What really got me, though, wasn't the gore or the carnage but the coming home after it. That sense of never

being able to go back to whatever you were before. Something about that depressed the hell out of me, making my stomach twist up into my throat and, yes, goddamn it, forcing me to tear up.

I don't know what the hell was wrong with me that day. I mean, I'm not saying I have a problem with crying necessarily, but it's not something I really want to be doing in front of everybody. Still, the situation could've been totally fine, given how the lights were all out. I would've gotten away with it, easy – if it weren't for Francine.

There I was, about to wipe my eyes with the back of my jacket sleeve, when she somehow dropped her eraser, a rounded piece of rubber made to look like a California roll, and it came tumbling back towards my sneaker. She turned around to check where it went, and that's when she saw me.

For a second, neither of us moved. She blinked, her stare blank and penetrating at the same time. A sliver of afternoon light escaped from beneath the drawn shades behind us and cut across her nose. Her eyes were completely dry.

I leaned over in a hurry to retrieve her goddamn eraser, but really it was so I could swipe my arm over my face to hide the fact that I'd been low-key bawling. I handed the sushi roll to her without making eye contact, and she accepted it wordlessly before swivelling back around, the

end credits filling the projector screen and the weird space that suddenly swelled around us.

I figured that would be it, that we'd go back to barely acknowledging each other, despite the fact that I'd sat behind her for months and recently noticed that her hair, stick straight and cut off at the shoulder, smelled kind of nice, like the tea tree oil shampoo I use on my dog, Dexter.

Francine, however, was sitting very still in her seat, as if contemplating something – and then, in an abrupt about-face, she reached into her backpack and produced a travel-size packet of tissues.

Which, to my utter mortification, she offered to me.

Desperate to avoid calling more attention to this sorry situation, I did the first thing that came to mind – I took a tissue. Anything to speed up this interaction, I reasoned. *Anything.*

But as I silently blew my nose, watching Francine refasten the flap over the tissue packet and squirrel it back into her bag, I allowed that she was just trying – in her well-meaning but unnecessary way – to be helpful. When she darted a last glance at me before facing forward again, I think I must have given her one of those throwaway smiles, the kind that isn't supposed to mean anything to normal people.

The kind that, unfortunately, *did* mean something to Francine.

2 Francine

Ollie Tran has a dimple on his left cheek when he smiles, but that isn't why I'm asking him to help me with The Plan. There are lots of reasons, real ones, though some are harder to explain than others. The discussion, however, is not off to a great start.

"*The Deer Hunter*," I blurt out, because it's the first thing that comes to mind when Ollie looks at me, clearly puzzled. "I want to ask you about *The Deer Hunter*."

Ollie scrunches his eyebrows together, like I'm speaking a foreign language, and takes a step back, small enough to remain polite but big enough to say, *Can you maybe not?* We're standing in front of his locker, which, conveniently, is just a few columns over from mine. The blessing of alphabetical propinquity has always meant that wherever Ollie is, I'm never too far behind. For years, I used to swoon over this, the fact that Tran was close enough to Zhang that, sometimes, if a class was small, there could

be no one between us at all.

But it's been a while since I let myself care about that.

"What about *The Deer Hunter*?" Ollie asks, even though it seems like he'd rather not hear the answer.

"Well, I noticed it made you cry." I think back to that afternoon. "Like, kind of a lot."

Ollie's face goes pink. "I don't know if it was *a lot*."

"What's...your definition of 'a lot'?"

"Okay, I'm gonna just go." Ollie points two fingers off to the side and scoots away.

As I watch him zigzag between the sun-beaten lunch tables, nearly tripping over a hydrangea bush to hasten his escape, it occurs to me that maybe I could have approached this differently. But I hadn't talked to Ollie in so long – I had no idea what to say. We hadn't even interacted at all, really, until...*The Deer Hunter*. Still, I don't know who else to ask. I need to make The Plan happen, The Plan requires a boy, and of all the boys in my life, I've known Ollie the longest.

Our families, you see, go way back. A long time ago – a lifetime, practically – Ollie's dad grew up two doors down from my mom and her sisters. This was in Hanoi, where both our families lived for decades before the Vietnam War. If you ask any of them, they'll probably tell you they're Chinese, then turn around and speak to each other in Vietnamese. But that's how they all came to be refugees.

After the Americans left, there was another war between Vietnam and China, which meant that anyone Chinese remaining in Hanoi had to hightail it out of there. We ended up here, in the United States, which is where I was born. Ollie too. And because wàh kùh Chinese tend to find each other no matter where they go – whether in North Vietnam or Southern California – his house is only three blocks from mine. I've known him since kindergarten, and now we're both juniors at Hargis High. A history that long has to count for something, right?

Maybe not. Ollie's halfway across the quad by this point, keys already pulled from his pocket, and if I don't say something else quick, he'll disappear into the parking lot.

"Ollie, wait," I call after him, breaking into a jog. "I... just want to talk to you." My voice wavers, and I hate that it does. But a few feet away, Ollie stops.

Given how precariously this exchange has proceeded so far, I figure I'd better cut to the chase.

"My grandpa has cancer," I say. "We just found out."

The news hits the way I expect it to, clumsy and heavy, and Ollie folds a little, like I've jabbed him in the soft part of his stomach. "I'm sorry," he says in a tone I haven't heard from him in at least four years. For some reason, it makes a small ball of sadness lodge in my throat.

"It's all right," I manage, even though it's not.

Ollie traces a line with his sneaker, the toe acquiring

a black smudge that he doesn't seem to notice. "Is he gonna be okay?"

"No, I don't think so. It's pancreatic cancer." Ollie looks concerned, but I can tell he has no idea why that's significant. "It means he's going to die."

"They already know?"

"The doctors said he could have up to a couple of years, but probably more like a few months."

"Jeez, I'm sorry."

I struggle with how to follow up on this, and in the silence, Ollie starts to look like he feels bad about how far away he's standing. I want to tell him it's fine, that I don't expect a shoulder pat or anything. What I'm hoping for is not quite so conventional.

I take a deep breath. "I was wondering if you could help me with something."

Ollie hesitates, but then he says, "Sure."

I'm relieved, though that doesn't last very long before the doubt creeps in. We're finally having a somewhat real conversation, and in about fifteen seconds, he's going to think I've completely lost it. Like off-the-wall, bonkers lost it. Because I have to admit: The Plan is a little out there. But it's also the last important thing I can do for my a gūng.

"So," I begin, "you know how my grandpa doesn't have any sons?"

Ollie mulls this over like he has to dig real deep to retrieve this fact. “I guess so, yeah.”

“He doesn’t have any grandsons, either. It’s really a statistical anomaly. Like, the probability of having six daughters in a row is actually quite low if you do the math out, and the probability of that *plus—*”

Ollie cocks his head, and I realize I’m rambling. *Focus, Francine!*

“The point is, there’s no one to carry on the family name after he dies. And, well, I guess this is a big deal to him. Like, still.”

“Even now?”

“Yeah.”

“After all these years?”

I shake my head. “Yeah, I dunno.”

Ollie is dumbfounded. “He’s *how* old?”

To be fair, I had been surprised as well. A few weeks ago, Mom got a phone call from A Pòh, who spoke in a voice for once too quiet to eavesdrop on. Not, of course, that it stopped me from trying. Mom saw me hovering at the door and waved me in. I crawled into bed next to her, and she set the phone down on the comforter between us, a harsh rectangle of light in the darkening bedroom. We huddled over it as A Pòh spoke, her words brisk and matter-of-fact.

“Your father isn’t happy,” she said in Cantonese. And then, by way of explanation: “He doesn’t feel well.”

Suddenly, we heard A Gūng's voice in the distance. "Is that her?" he asked in faint Vietnamese. A Pòh handed him the phone, and he, too, switched over to Cantonese. "Have you eaten, Lāan?"

In my family, that question always comes first, even if it's four in the afternoon and you're not sure any more whether you're being asked about lunch or dinner.

"Yes, Bā, how about you?" Mom replied, because that's never not the right answer, including when you're about to learn the other person is dying of cancer.

"I'm sure your mother will start cooking soon." A Gūng shifted the receiver to his other ear. "How is my granddaughter?"

"Hóu, hóu, all good. She's right here." At this, I made an impatient gesture at the phone, and Mom cleared her throat. "But, ah, Bā, we wanted to ask...what did the doctor say exactly?"

There was a long pause. "Is Fōng listening?"

"Yes, I am," I chimed in. "Hello, A Gūng."

"Ah, Fōng, I was hoping not to worry you." He exhales. "I didn't want to discuss this with you, either, Lāan."

"But you *have* to tell us," I insisted. "We're family – we have to know everything. Right, Mom?"

She didn't answer the question, just reached over to smooth my hair. "We'd like to be able to help, Bā."

Sighing, A Gūng finally explained the bad news. As he

spoke, Mom furrowed her brow, the lines getting deeper with each small, brittle revelation.

Into the phone, however, she simply said, “Oh, Bā.”

“It’s fate.” A Gūng sounded like he was trying to persuade himself. “The time comes for every person. I only wish—”

He broke off then, and all we could make out was his slow breathing and the soft fuzz of static.

“What is it, Bā?” Mom asked.

His response shook me. “I only wish I had not been such a failure.”

“Aiyah!” A Pòh’s voice muscled through the silence. “Why must you say such ridiculous things?”

“Why else?” A Gūng sighed again. “It’s true. I have no sons.”

Mencius, the famous Chinese philosopher, supposedly once declared, “There are many unfilial acts, but the most unfilial is to have no sons.” This makes the most sense if you understand that Chinese people talk about being filial the way Americans talk about being free. Letting your family line die out, dooming yourself and your ancestors to neglect in the afterlife – because male descendants were traditionally the ones responsible for making offerings to the dead – was the worst thing you could possibly do. You brought shame not only to yourself but also to your entire family. For eternity.

I'd obviously heard all this before, and I suspected that A Gūng, being rather ancient and very much Chinese, still believed some version of it. But I'd always written it off as an old person ailment, like progressive hearing loss or the inability to set up your own cell phone. The whole idea was clearly sexist, not to mention based on an outdated conception of gender – and anyway, who even worried about the afterlife these days?

Apparently, I guess, A Gūng.

“There won't be anyone to pay respect to our ancestors when I'm gone,” he lamented. “Who will remember them? Who will take care of them?”

“We'll continue the traditions,” Mom assured him. “We'll make the offerings.”

“You know it's not the same, Lāan. Your duty is to the Zhangs now, and Fōng – well, she's never been a Huynh, has she?”

Mom shot a glance over at me, but I couldn't come up with anything helpful to say.

“What can we do about it at this point?” A Pòh interrupted. “In the old days, you could just find a family with too many sons and offer to take one off their hands.”

“How did that work?” I asked, surprised. “Would you basically adopt them?”

“Sure, if it was a child, you might in a conventional sense,” A Pòh explained. “But if the boy was older or even

a young man, the adoption could be merely honorary, like if a second son agreed to take your name in exchange for an inheritance.”

“Maybe we should’ve looked into that more,” A Gūng murmured.

A Pòh clicked her tongue. “Eh, who had the money for it?”

“Don’t worry, Bā,” Mom put in. “None of that matters now, especially in America.”

“Yes, everything is different in America,” A Gūng agreed, but his voice sounded small again. “Sometimes it’s strange to think how we ended up here, so far from home.”

Then the line went quiet, like the void that settles over the air when the power goes out.

The conversation must have continued from there, but I couldn’t get over that long stretch of emptiness. I kept thinking about it afterward, while I set the table and parcelled rice into my mouth with chopsticks, and later, while I practised four-octave scales on the piano, up and down, up and down – until, in the middle of E-flat minor, I remembered something. Years ago, A Gūng had told me he’d yearned for a piano as a kid, but only one boy in his neighbourhood, the son of a doctor, had been rich enough to afford the extravagance. Many afternoons, A Gūng would walk by their house, book bag slung over his shoulder, listening for music that he would never, not in a lifetime, learn to play.

If A Pòh had been the one to share this anecdote, it probably would've been apocryphal, the type of immigrant tale concocted to make sure I appreciated the opportunities I had. But that wasn't A Gūng's way. He treated me like I would understand things, and even though I was barely eight at the time, I could tell his story was true. I knew it especially because he came to my Christmas recital every year and sat in the front row, clapping longer and harder than anyone else. And because I sometimes found him standing at our little upright, poking out the notes to "Home, Sweet Home", the only song he'd ever asked me to teach him.

I couldn't, however, recall when A Gūng had last touched the piano. I wondered if he even remembered his old dream. Instead, he seemed too busy worrying about something that I thought he'd come to terms with long ago – this pointless preoccupation with having no male heirs. Why couldn't he have a normal dying wish, like learning to make pottery or seeing the Grand Canyon? That was the kind of stuff other nonagenarians wanted, at least in the heartwarming articles you saw online. Those stories never talked about, say, how the grandpa was a little bit sexist – even though I bet a bunch of grandpas probably were. Those stories never said what you were supposed to do if you still loved them.

I slid off the wooden bench and trudged into the

kitchen, where Dad, still in his mechanic's uniform, was putting away leftovers and Mom was washing the dishes.

"Do you think A Gūng really feels like he's a failure?" I asked, leaning against the door frame.

"No, of course not," Mom replied automatically, but the way she let the water run so long over the plate meant she was lying. She did that a lot – said things just to make me feel better. Lately, though, it was getting harder to believe her.

"Why can't he see that having no sons isn't a big deal?"

Mom shut her eyes, like I was giving her a headache. "Bǎo bǎo, this is a grown-up problem. It's not something you can fix."

"I'm not trying to fix it." I was, though.

"Your grandpa is sick." Mom ignored me and wiped her hands on a dish towel. She did that for a long time, too. "We should let him be."

"But he's *wrong*, and it's making him worse." I didn't understand why she refused to acknowledge this.

"Shouldn't we help him find some kind of peace?"

"That's not up to us, Francine." Dad spoke up for the first time. "It's a decision A Gūng has to make for himself."

"I know, but maybe we could distract him by getting him a gift or taking him on vacation or..." Even though I knew it was futile, I found myself grasping at ideas, anything that could mean we wouldn't have to sit around,

acting like hopelessness was as inevitable as death. “What about piano lessons?”

“Piano lessons?” Mom was perplexed. “Francine, A Gūng doesn’t want piano lessons.” She sighed and turned back to the sink. “You heard him. The situation’s more complicated than that.”

I slumped a bit. She was right, obviously. How were we supposed to solve a problem that only existed in A Gūng’s head?

That’s when it hit me. It wasn’t complicated at all – the solution *also* only had to exist in his head. In other words, we didn’t actually need a male heir.

We just needed to make A Gūng believe we had one.

“I know this is all super weird,” I say to Ollie now. “But I have a plan.”

Ollie looks down at me curiously, and once again, I’m a little nervous. At some point, we were the same height, but in the years since, he’s grown nearly a foot to my measly two inches. I notice, though, that he’s still got the slight under-eye bags he’s always had, and the same dark eyebrows, too.

“I’m guessing the plan involves me?” Ollie asks.

“Um, yeah.” My gaze slips to the frayed collar of his T-shirt, and I rush to ask the question before I lose my nerve. “Could you pretend to be my a gūng’s honorary male heir?”

Ollie shakes his head, like he couldn't have heard right. "Sorry...what?"

"Just for a little while," I add quickly. "Just until—" I falter as I try to say it out loud. *Just until he's gone.*

"But what do you mean by 'honorary male heir'?"

"You know, spend time with him in a grandson-esque way. Come over for tea, smile and nod at stuff he says..." As Ollie listens, his forehead begins to unknit. "And, um, tell him you'll change your last name to Huynh and look after our ancestors."

His brows squinch back together. "What?"

I explain to him what A Pòh had described, how people in the past sometimes added a boy to the family in name only. I say we'll make A Gūng believe we're going to do exactly that, so he can rest easy knowing his responsibilities to the dead will be passed on. Even though, of course, none of it will be true.

"You can't just say *you'll* do whatever he wants?" Ollie scratches the back of his ear.

"The problem is my a gūng's convinced it's got to be a boy."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

I force myself not to hesitate. "It's not about me."

Ollie is watching my face again, but he doesn't seem to find what he's looking for. "This is a little nuts, Francine," he says, fiddling with his keys.

“So you’ll think about it?”

“What? No.” He goes back to sidling away. “Look, I gotta go,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

I barrel around in front of him, a last-ditch effort. “What if I helped you with something? Anything. Whatever you need.”

“I’m good!” He throws the words over his shoulder, high-pitched and squirrely, then skedaddles towards the parking lot.

I let him go then, because contrary to popular belief, I *can* take a hint. Ollie clearly doesn’t want to talk about this right now. But I’m sure there’s a way to get him to help with The Plan – there has to be. I’ve just got to figure out how.