

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2012, First-Place Fiction Winner

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KINTSUGI

It didn't scream "rebel" like straddling the back of a Harley with arms around a bald guy whom I knew for sure was older than me. And there was no denying how much of a badass he actually was, it's just, that sort of ruffraffery had a tendency to make like a fondue and melt away at the sight of my very Asian mother's piercing glare through the living room curtains.

I still cringe to this day when I think about my first kiss. And how it was witnessed in all its sloppy prepubescent glory by not just the Asian parents, but the whole Asian family.

The watchful eyes of the hawk I call my mother had become something of a regular aspect of my life, and by the time I was dating this badass tattooed up biker guy in my Chinese elective class, I should've known better to have him bike me home on a bi-weekly charming Asian dinner night at home the family must adhere to. Especially if this bi-weekly dinner function is something my mother absolutely loves and worships with every piece of her charming existence. But in my defense, I legitimately thought my mother would be busy cooking in the kitchen, and that my then semi-boyfriend wouldn't catch a glimpse of the black hair at the window and tease me about it.

It also didn't lift my mood that upon my entrance through the front door, the earful of Korean nagging that included broken English words of - bad influence, motorcycle, bald (several occasions on this word), and "Who pay for coffee?"- harpooned me until I was in the shower. And it got even better when my mom told my dad all about it over dinner, which afterwards they forbade me to date another boy until I graduated university (which in entirety, is ridiculous).

So like a good little girl, I listened. And started dating a girl.

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To be fair, this sexual revelation wasn't something made up just to spite my conservative parents and blatantly homophobic slash hideously over protective older brother. Living in Canada from a young age opened my heart to a wide variety of possibilities when it came to love, and Canadian high school showed me how girls loved to make out with each other under the guise of being drunk- when they're really not- at parties to please the on looking boys- when they're really pleasing each other.

So holding a girl's hand, smelling her perfume, and feeling all the right feelings for a girl when in love, wasn't a real confusion riddled problem for me, it already made sense in my head. It also helped that my then girlfriend was smoking hot, because please. Who could hate beautiful things?

Chain of events began to snowball the first time my girlfriend drove me home.

"Stay in the car," I gave her a kiss. "*please*, and I'll see you tomorrow at school."

"Way to cut me off at your door step, might as well walk you to the door."

"No, I'm Asian, thus Asian mother, ergo Asian parents. Beautiful thought of gesture though, hold it like a butterfly so it doesn't get away."

She deadpanned while peering at my face over the squares of her glasses. "Oh my God, you're Asian?"

I let out a chortle. "Like you couldn't tell from my accent. Stay in the car. Bye."

As much as I wanted to ignore it, as soon as I shut the car door behind me to walk up to the front door, I could almost feel the eyes on my temple from the living room window.

"Who is the car? You going the dating again?" It was almost comforting, the consistency of her broken English with her nose past two borders up my business.

"No, that was just a friend, not a boy either, a girl. Okay?"

And it was like that for a while. I would hide my girlfriend, my mom would ask me about the mysterious figure in the car, and I would present some excuse to which my mom would buy. And then there was one particular incident when I took just a tad too long in the car for my mom to buy the "just friends" excuse, with her lips twitching to ask me something that would put me in a compromising position- I could feel it coming with every fiber of my being.

"Are you-"

"No," Oops. My bad, cut her off pre-maturely. Mom proceeded to narrow her eyes at me while I tried to not make eye contact.

"You don't listen the whole question."

"Well I'm sure it was ridiculous," And with that, I was flying up the stairs to hide in my room.

The straw that broke the proverbial camel's back wasn't the new telling haircut, or the decision to get a tattoo and hide the thing until it was discovered. (It was found when mom decided to walk in to the bathroom while I was blissfully unaware that I was, in fact nude, as I showered.) On the day of a special bi-weekly dinner night, she saw me give a quick but very persistent series of smooches on my girlfriend. It was also the day my mom decided to surprise visit me at school to pick me up. If you think about it, the probability of my mom just happening to be in the area, pulling up specifically at my building, and then me being in the front of the building with my girlfriend at that precise moment in a compromising position, is astronomical.

I remember the half scream, half shout ("Jessica!") call of my name (The frightening sound of my English name, the one my mom only used when she was either shocked or angry, or in this case, both), me looking back to see her with the passenger side window rolled down, and her blank expression giving away nothing.

The gasp from my girlfriend had me snap my head back towards her as she breathed out, "Is that your-?"

"Yeah, that's my."

She seemed a little afraid to let me go all alone, but I had known my mother all my life. I was her daughter, and I had this unconditional motherly bond/love going for me, she wouldn't kill me. The same couldn't be said for my girlfriend however. So I played it safe and told her to stay with my eyes, while I collected my bag from the ground to climb into the cobalt blue SUV.

She didn't say a single word from that ride back home. It wasn't like I was itching to strike up a conversation either, but the silence was so thick, I felt like I was breathing under water. I fiddled with the radio for a while, and when she slapped my hand away to turn off the radio completely, I took the hint and fiddled with my cuticles instead.

The actual evening of the dinner went well. The duck and the cod was horrifyingly delicious, it almost felt like I was having my last feast before I was thrown into the furnace to rid me of my gay glitter.

It was when my brother left the table when my mom started talking, not in English, but in Korean. And this meant terrifyingly a lot, for bi-weekly family dinner nights were sacred, and not a single bad thing should be uttered over fantastically cooked dumplings and the cod.

"I talked things over with your dad, and we think you should start dating again."

I choked on the hot corn-beard steeped tea, and while I furiously dabbed at my tea drizzle with a napkin, she continued.

"Dating boys is good life experience. I think we were too hasty in deciding on this big thing for you," I looked to the side to look at my dad, who just concentrated on the grains of rice in his bowl. "Just don't get pregnant."

"Mom.."

"You're young, you don't know what's good for you, and we all have our curiosities. You don't think I understand this, or it's the first time that I've seen this, but I know these things pass and-"

"Mom."

"You're still my baby. And my baby should date the best looking guy in campus-"

"Mom... I'm already dating."

I didn't mean to, but it felt like I had just slapped my mother across the face with the very steamed cod she had made for dinner. She frowned, and her eyes glazed over as if she was remembering what happened between me and this particular other Canadian girl hovering over me with our faces too close to each other.

"Who? Who are you dating?" Her voice cracked as she asked.

"Her name is," They both flinched. "Kim."

The chopsticks made violent clanging noises against the steel of the sink as my dad tossed his plates in. I could only remind myself to continue breathing as my mom sat with her face down and with my dad wordlessly walking up the stairs, away from us.

"Mom. I love you. I'm also not entirely straight."

She looked up to meet my eyes. The look of sheer disappointment that painted her face made my stomach churn.

"How can you tell me that you love me," She slowly shook her head as she continued, "and then break my heart?"

Her words enough killed my mojo for about two months straight. I couldn't bear the thought of spending time with my girlfriend and having a good time while my parents sat at home, rating their disapproval. I was right about them not killing me or throwing me out on my ass, but conversation at home dwindled, and food didn't taste good as before. I'm pretty sure mom's cooking skills were still fine, it was just my appetite. I really realized how much I wasn't eating when the bi-weekly dinners started tasting bland. I was worried and tired all the time, always trying to read what my family was thinking, and always checking the time while I was with Kim.

It seriously dawned on me that, while I might have been a Korean on the outside, I was still very Canadian on the inside. I might have been raised with Korean set of rules but lived by Canadian

principles. I sometimes thought it would've been easier just picking a side and being what that side required one to be, and it would be as easy as that. Then you wouldn't have the burden of really understanding both sides and then trying to make sense of what the right thing really was in certain situations.

As a Canadian, I thought that being comfortable having relationships with the same sex was something admirable, that I had lots of love to give. And if anyone had a problem with me falling in love with another girl, then it was their problem, not mine- even if that 'anyone' was my parents. But as a Korean, it was severely disrespectful to go against elders, and especially your parents. For they have lived longer and have answers to many life's questions that I haven't even encountered yet. That sort of wisdom, I was taught, and still believe, demanded respect of the highest regard. After all they have done to raise me to be who I am today, I couldn't just turn my back on them.

The next big turn of events came after a huge not-a-fight I had with Kim. She saw that I was pulling away, and that although I was having a hard time with my parents, she didn't like that fact that I wasn't sharing that with her. She had let out a rather sharp huff after the umpteenth time I had checked the phone for the clock.

"Look, do you need to go? You can just tell me if you have to go."

I was sorry, I really was. But as much as I wanted to stay and spend time with her, I knew I was walking a fine line staying out that late. I could only say "I'm sorry", while I played with her fingers.

She got up from the couch to collect my things from her kitchen table. "I said it's fine. What are you doing this Saturday? Come over and I'll make us brunch or something."

"I have to go to Vancouver with my mom," I lied.

"You went to Vancouver last weekend with your mom," She narrowed her eyes as if to say she was on to me.

"We like Vancouver."

She stared me for a long while before she let out a calm but rather alarming set of words, "Why are you spoon feeding me all this bullshit?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh Shut up. You don't have to lie about not wanting to see me. Are you trying to end things? Because if you are, you're doing a horrible job."

"Look, you don't understand-"

"Shut up twice. I know you're going through a rough patch right now, and I know how important your parents are to you, and your family. I know you're tired, and I know you don't want to explain from point A to Z on how Asian families work and how Korean ones are different from Chinese ones. But really, right now? I don't need to understand. I just want to know how you're doing without having you avoid me." I couldn't meet her eyes after her rant. I just stared at the hands on her hips, her posture rigid and defiant.

I rubbed my face with my hands, and it suddenly felt like my body was dead weight and that the sofa was going to suck me in at any moment.

"I'm just really scared."

I felt the cushions dip as she sat back down next to me.

"Of what?"

"Of things never being the same again, how our my parents and I are so ripped apart right now."

She put her arm around me to pull me in. After a few minutes of relative comfortable silence, she began, "You know, I read about this Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold joinery."

I looked up with a frown. "O..kay?"

She smiled back down as she continued on. "The idea is, the piece becomes more beautiful and valuable because it's been broken and has a history. So maybe you and your parents are sort of broken right now. But maybe you guys will come out of this more strong and beautiful, bound by this really gold, gay," She winked. "history."

I smiled, really smiled, for the first time in a very long time. Something in my chest went badump, and I let my arms wrap around her neck. "Thank you."

"Well," She spoke into my hair, "There had to be a reason you were keeping me around, right?"

"It was the sex," I admitted.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," She pulled me off the sofa, with her grip on my hand assuring. "Now go home. Talk to them. Call me."

She gave me a kiss for the road, and for luck.

When I got home, the house was dark save for the living room only lit by the large screen TV. Mom was sitting on the couch, a blanket draped over the lap. She was watching old videos of my brother and I playing at the park. The little version of my brother was whizzing past the screen on his four wheeled bicycle while mini-me trailed behind him with a pink bouncy ball.

"Mom," I plopped down next to her, and took a sip from a mug mom had in her hands.

"The boy at the my work. He very good looking. I can the giving him your phone number?" Mom met my eyes with such excitement then, thinking my braveness in closing the physical distance between her and I meant me bending to her wishes.

"Mom... No."

It was a firm decline without the harsh exasperation. My answer sent her gaze back to the television screen. I followed her line of sight to witness my first tantrum, throwing the bouncy ball at my brother for not letting me on his bike.

"I'm not that baby anymore. But I'll always be *your* baby. And the person you raised me to be," I wouldn't have known if she ever turned her back to me or not, my eyes were fixated on the screen at my mini-me's sobbing face. I was both a little embarrassed about pouring my heart out to the person who always knew what I wanted to say without me articulating them, and terrified of rejection. "I'm not any different a person today, than when I was dating a boy."

The ensuing silence was dizzying, with subsequent desire to either throw up or burst into sobs like my past self on the screen increasing by each ticking second. And then she spoke. And I really hoped that my ears would stop ringing so I could hear her better.

"That Kim," I felt her hand clasp mine and I had to suppress a shiver of relief and fatigue washing over me like a six foot wave. "seems very nice."

"She is."

We both smiled at each other, our faces softly painted and animated with the reflected colours from the television screen.

"You bring her the next dinner night?" My smile froze.

"Your dinner night? Your special bi-weekly dinner night, mom? The night when you cook delicious food ranging from oceanic vegetables to seafood?"

"I know what my dinner night is," She replied, rolling her eyes.

I gasped at the mere offhand comment she produced. "And you love your dinner nights mom, you *love* them," I always thought Mom would never pick the sacred dinner night to venture out of her safe zone, I thought that was crazy talk. I could imagine it, the awkward silence as Kim adorably tried to wield the

chopsticks while I dodge weird glares my brother shot at us and the uncomfortable throat noises dad would make at the whole predicament, the whole dinner party would be tarnished and in the anxiety of the whole situation, the cod will NOT sit well in the tummy-

Mom stood from the couch, turned off the television and pivoted to look back at me. "Not as much as I love you. Time for bed now. Up." She tugged on my hand, and then proceeded to walk me to my room upstairs. I couldn't feel my footsteps, and the whole ordeal felt like a very surreal dream.

After closing the bedroom door behind me, I squirrel dove face first into the bed, reaching for the phone tucked in my back pocket. I dialed for the now very familiar number, and felt myself get giddy with each dial tone.

And then my favorite person (after my mom) picked up.

"Hey you."

"Hi there."

"So?"

"I hope you like seafood."