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Masquerade

The building on the hill was a sturdy brick fortress, so severe that even the weeds growing from the cracks in the pavement jutted up with military fervour. One would almost think it was a prison, rather than a school. Perhaps it was a kind of prison, in a way, with parents hurrying toward the gated entrance in a determination that matched a warden's measured stride. 'SUMMIT SCHOOL,' announced the sign nailed above the gate. In a few steps, I would pass under that formidable archway. Mama's voice floated back to me, carried in the brisk wind. *Cover your knees. Keep your eyes wide open.* I smoothed my skirt over my knobby patellas. Could they really tell?

I walked with my head down, as though a view of the floor would lend me a veil of anonymity. *Anonymity*, Baba had taught me, *is proportionate to safety*. A pair of red leather high heels appeared out of the corner of my eye; a commotion was taking place, blocking the hallway.

The high-heeled woman wrinkled her nose, as though detecting a thin odor.

"You're on the wrong side."

I flinched, then realized she was speaking to the family of four in front of me.

"I'm sorry?" the father leaned forward calmly, the creases in his suit deeper than the lines of consternation forming on his forehead.

"You're on the wrong side," the woman said loudly, as though

the repetition would offer clarity. When they failed to move, she pointed toward the door.

“We don’t take your folk here.”

There were two schools in Milford. Summit was the school on the hill. Bentley was the decrepit building behind it, separated by a rusted fence. Those denied entry to Summit went to Bentley. People who weren’t white enough were sent there. It was an unspoken rule that everyone except the people at Bentley seemed to know about.

“But I thought we enrolled here just last week,” the mother interjected. She turned and caught my eye, smiling placidly in reassurance. “And besides, there’s still plenty of room, right?”

“You are being an affrontment to the learning environment,” the woman interrupted quickly, “Kindly remove yourselves before I call administration.”

“Come now,” the father said, placing a protective hand on each of his children’s backs. “We’ll try the other school.” He steered them firmly out the door, his head held high. The mother gathered up her skirts in a fist and whirled after him, but not before casting a contemptuous glance behind her. To the woman, to me, or to the crowd of spectators that had formed? I couldn’t tell. But I could see the turmoil reflected in her dark brown eyes, flashing with anger and resentment. Anger at the fact that the course of her life was inexplicably intertwined with the permanent mask of her skin. Resentment at the fact that this type of encounter was one she was accustomed to.

I crept forward cautiously. The high-heeled woman was evidently there to weed out people that didn’t belong in Summit’s pristine halls. The door to my classroom was within sight, a beacon of false security. The woman’s beady eye latched on to me and she thrust out her arm, hindering my progress.

“Where are your parents?”

The question made my stomach lurch, but I recited quickly: “They’re both at work.” In reality, they hadn’t come because they didn’t want to jeopardize my chances.

Her eyes scanned the registration papers I had crumpled in my hand. “Mrs Johnson’s class. Down the hall, door to the right. Class starts in ten minutes.”

My sigh of relief was hidden, yet immense; an ocean's undercurrent.

Mrs Johnson stood at the helm of the classroom, wielding her ruler with brusque authority. She directed each student to their seat with a swing of her metal instrument, then set to work attacking the chalkboard. Puffs of white dust tricked to the floor with each aggressive swipe of her wrist.

A quick glance around the room told me I already stood out in my shapeless canvas skirt and worn blouse, with the sleeves rolled up so they wouldn't droop down to my knees. I studied the other girls and noted with jealousy their brand-new stockings and the way their hair was smoothed back and held into place with clips that matched their pinafores.

Cut that out, Meiyong. I imagined Baba reprimanding me. *It's impractical. How are you supposed to work properly dressed like that? I didn't come to America to have you act like those entitled children.* What was he doing now? Most likely up to his elbows in car grease, a torque wrench tucked under his arm as he slaved away until the sun vanished from the horizon. A wave of shame crashed over me, as I pictured the fathers of the girls in front of me, how they had walked their daughters to school and kissed them goodbye. They probably went to the pictures on Sundays, too. *Oh Baba, why couldn't you be more like them?*

Mrs Johnson began taking roll, and to my horror read every name aloud in a crisp voice. Each student responded, an echoing chorus from a sea of white faces.

"Ashley?"

"Present!" called out a girl with blonde pigtails.

"Gregory?"

"Here."

And so on, until: "Meiyong?"

Silence. The boy behind me snorted, and a flush spread across my cheeks.

"Meiyong?"

"Here." I raised my hand, my voice barely audible. "But I go by May."

“What kind of a name is that?” I heard behind me.

“Not an American one, that’s for sure.”

“Why wasn’t she sent to Bentley?”

The racket continued until Mrs Johnson had her share of amusement. *Bang!* She struck the nearest desk with the flat of her ruler, and everyone jumped. “Class, I will not tolerate this kind of disruption.” Nevertheless, she looked at me curiously, as though I were an animal she was trying to determine the species of. “Meiying—May—is a member of our class. I expect that no one will question the administration’s decision to place her here.”

Roll call continued, but several glances were thrown my way. *So much for anonymity.*

“Open your books to page four,” Mrs Johnson instructed once she’d finished attendance. “We will be starting with the colonization of America. William, please begin.”

“Before Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas, people occupying the land lived in untamed and primitive ways...”

“Where are you from, May-yong?” a voice hissed at me. I glanced over to find a girl—Ashley, her name was—leaning across the aisle, her hand planted firmly on my desk. Our skin tones were nearly indistinguishable, and that reassured me. I did belong here, I decided.

“My name is May. I was born here,” I said, not understanding what she meant.

She gestured at my face. “When did you have your accident?”

I touched my cheeks. Were they still red? “What do you mean?”

“Your face. It’s so broad and flat it looks like you ran into a wall.”

“... and once the pilgrims landed safely from their voyage, their arrival was celebrated with a large feast...”

I turned my attention to the reading. A large diagram on the side showed the natives and settlers, gathered around bushels of food. The textbook had described the dinner as a welcoming, but the natives were huddled around their chief, withdrawn like they were foreigners in their own land. The chief gripped his staff, bracing for some unseeable future.

I unpacked my lunch, feeling the scrutinous gaze of my classmates. The sweet smell of soy sauce streamed out when I lifted the lid. Ha

cheung. Nai wong bao carefully wrapped in bamboo leaf. I could feel the gasp of repulsion behind me at the globby alien food on my plate.

I forced a smile. "My mom must've packed me the wrong thing by mistake." I stood up and scraped it into the trash can.

My stomach grumbled, perhaps annoyed at my obstinance. I watched wistfully as the others produced their neat lunch tins and milk cartons. If only I could trade places with one of them, chatting absentmindedly and munching on peanut butter sandwiches. Oblivious to the history that had secured them a seat here, and not on the other side of the fence.

But I couldn't see myself as 'one of them'. Perhaps I was more like a peanut butter sandwich instead. Light on the outside and a dark mess on the inside, that somehow sealed the whiteness together. Still, it was the appearance that mattered, wasn't it? Peanut butter sandwiches did not belong in Bentley.

"Why were you ignoring me in class?" demanded a huffy voice. I looked up in surprise to see Ashley, surrounded by a group of her friends. They looked like the drawing of the natives in the textbook, only with bleached skin and complacent expressions. When I didn't respond, she pushed: "How did you get into Summit?"

I thought of the woman in the hallway, and how her eyes had shouted in defiance. Her children were probably eating lunch at Bentley now, on tables scarred with graffiti and slurs. That school could offer them nothing. But maybe there wasn't anything for me here. Why had I gotten by, when they were caught behind that mesh barrier? Did I really belong here, even if you couldn't see the spread of peanut butter from the outside?

"Hello? Can you speak English?" Ashley's face loomed close to mine.

I felt my mouth twist into something between a grimace and a smile, and the rigidity of the morning's ordeal cracked slightly. "I guess I make a good sandwich."

Mama was busy at the stove, stirring a pot thick with jook. The smell of it filled the apartment, already cramped with stuffy sofas and brushstroke paintings. Hearing my entrance, my mother

turned and smiled, her eyes creasing. And for that smile I hated her, hated the face and the eyes and the room that was so clearly not American. The shelves of foreign food and the draperies and carpets of foreign cloth. I had a sudden urge to throw the steaming jook out the window, which was propped open with a small Buddhist statue. Siddhartha wouldn't mind—he was probably sick of those wrinkled mandarins people always left him. Maybe he'd also wished for a peanut butter sandwich. White bread with the crusts cut off.

I guess I was standing there for a while, thinking about Siddhartha and his eating habits because suddenly Mama wrapped her arms around me.

“What's wrong, Meiyong?”

“Don't call me that,” I muttered, burying my head into her qipao.

“Meiyong is a beautiful name,” she insisted. “It belonged to your grandmother. Now, aren't you going to tell me about your day?”

“Mama,” I said, faltering, “Are you sure I should be at Summit? Everyone thinks I should've been sent to Bentley, even my teacher—not that she said it, but—”

“Nonsense. You have a beautiful white face.” She lifted up my chin, cupping it with her hands.

The little resolve I had built cascaded down, and I began to cry. Tears shuddered out of my eyes, dripping crookedly across skin that, more and more, resembled a mask.