



Penguin  
Random House  
PENGUIN YOUNG READERS

Dear Reader,

Being a kid of immigrants in America pretty much guarantees you a split personality. My parents came from Korea; they've always thought of themselves as Koreans living in America, never as Americans. I grew up caught between their Korean world inside the home and the diverse American world outside, resulting in a deeply contradictory state of being like the one that forms the core of Frank's character. Like lots of immigrant kids, Frank faces a big dramatic question:

Where do you belong when you're split in two?

This question is what makes this book you're holding the most personal story I've ever written. Because like Frank, I've spent a lot of time struggling to find my place as a hybrid being in a world that seems to insist on hard categories.

Many elements of this book borrow from my own life experiences. Some are funny and thought-provoking. Others—you'll know which parts—literally hurt my heart to write. But they contain truths, and therefore demand exploration. Like the scenes that deal with the fact that Frank's parents, like lots of Americans—like lots of *people*—are racist.

Frank runs the emotional gamut as he finds himself stretched between worlds: sadness and anger, yes, but also love and joy. While Frank's story isn't a memoir, it speaks to my own story; it's led to many an inspired conversation. I hope it does the same for you, too.

David Yoon

February 2019





## ATTENTION READER

Please note that this is not a finished book.

A bound galley is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to change, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this galley, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you,  
G. P. Putnam's Sons

## UNCORRECTED PROOF

Coming in September 2019 from G. P. Putnam's Sons  
*an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC*  
PenguinTeen.com

September • Fiction • 5 ½ x 8 ¼ • 432 pages  
Ages 14 and up • Grades 9 and up







# FRANKLY IN LOVE







# FRANKLY IN LOVE

David Yoon

**putnam**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS





G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2019 by David Yoon.

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission.

You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue  
to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Yoon, David, author.

Title: Frankly in love / David Yoon.

Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [2019]

Summary: "High school senior Frank Li takes a risk to go after a girl his parents would never approve of, but his plans will leave him wondering if he ever really understood love—or himself—at all"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018046718 | ISBN 9781984812209 (hardcover)

| ISBN 9781984812216 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Friendship—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. | Korean Americans—Fiction. | Racism—Fiction. | High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. |

Family life—California—Fiction. | California—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.Y637 Fr 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018046718>

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 9781984812209

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Marikka Tamura. Text set in Melior Com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.







*For Nicki & Penny & Mom & Dad, all together*







## contents

before we begin

the fall season of senior year of the  
high school period of early human life

chapter 1:	lake girlfriend	1
chapter 2:	metaphor incoming	11
chapter 3:	more better	23
chapter 4:	just bad enough	32
chapter 5:	plane crash	44
chapter 6:	dying	51
chapter 7:	planet frank	60
chapter 8:	i propose to joy	70
chapter 9:	total perfect mind control	82
	frank li in love	89
chapter 10:	old new loves	91
chapter 11:	gem swapping	104





chapter 12:	illuminating	114
chapter 13:	thank you booleet	130
chapter 14:	more true	148
chapter 15:	alone together	160
	shake the world upside down and see what sticks	171
chapter 16:	wait-and-see mode	173
chapter 17:	maybe it's different	184
chapter 18:	black black sheep	193
chapter 19:	hey internet what are	201
chapter 20:	born stuck	203
chapter 21:	lime-green nebula	219
chapter 22:	fire day	237
chapter 23:	you eating melon	247
chapter 24:	the same school	257
chapter 25:	the best fart	272





chapter 26:	the bad joke	281
chapter 27:	we are okay	295
	you own-your-way you must be going	311
chapter 28:	hi irony	313
chapter 29:	thins & fats	326
chapter 30:	a land called hanna li	338
chapter 31:	oobleck	345
chapter 32:	alpha & omega	361
chapter 33:	asshole light	367
chapter 34:	if you say so	376
chapter 35:	champagne from champagne	382
chapter 36:	life is but a dream	389
chapter 37:	fire hazard low	395
	after we end	401







## before we begin

Well, I have two names.

That's what I say when people ask me what my middle name is. I say:

*Well, I have two names.*

My first name is Frank Li. Mom-n-Dad gave me that name mostly with the character count in mind.

No, really: F+R+A+N+K+L+I contains seven characters, and seven is a lucky number in America.

*Frank* is my American name, meaning it's my name-name.

My second name is Sung-Min Li, and it's my Korean name, and it follows similar numerological cosmology:

S+U+N+G+M+I+N+L+I contains nine characters, and nine is a lucky number in Korea. Nobody calls me Sung-Min, not even Mom-n-Dad. They just call me Frank.

So I don't have a middle name. Instead, I have two names.

Anyway: I guess having both lucky numbers seven and nine is supposed to make me some kind of bridge between cultures or some shit.

America, this is Korea, Korea, this is America.

Everyone good? Can I go do my thing now?

Good.









the fall season

of the senior year

of the high school period

of early human life







## chapter 1

## lake girlfriend

Senior year is begun.

*Is begun* sounds cooler than the more normal *has begun*, because if you say it right, you sound like a lone surviving knight delivering dire news to a weary king on the brink of defeat, his limp hand raking his face with dread. *The final breach is begun, your grace. The downfall of House Li is begun.*

I'm the king in that scenario, by the way, raking my face with dread.

For senior year is begun.

Sometimes I look way back to six months ago, during the halcyon days of junior year. How we pranced in the meadows after taking the PSAT: a practice run of the SAT, which in Playa Mesa, in California, in the United States of America, is widely used to gauge whether an early human is fit for entrance into an institution of higher learning.





But the PSAT?

*A mere trial*, we juniors sang. *What counts not for shit, your grace!*

How we lazed in the sunlight, sharing jokes about that one reading comprehension passage about the experiment testing whether dogs found it easier to tip a bin (easier) for food or pull a rope (trickier). Based on the passage and results in Figure 4, were the dogs

- A) more likely to solve the rope task than the bin task?
- B) more frustrated by the rope task than the bin task?
- C) more likely to resent their human caregivers for  
being presented with such absurd tasks to begin with,  
I mean, just give us the food in a damn dog bowl like  
normal people?
- Or
- D) more likely to rake a paw over their face with dread?

The answer was D.

For come Score Day, I discovered I got a total of 1400 points out of a possible 1520, the 96th percentile. This earned me plenty of robust, spontaneous high fives from my friends, but to me they sounded like palms—*ptt ptt ptt*—slapping the sealed door of a crypt.

The target was 1500.

When I told Mom-n-Dad, they stared at me with pity and disbelief, like I was a little dead sparrow in the park. And Mom actually said this, for real:

*Don't worry, we still love you.*





Mom has said the words *I love you* exactly two times in my life. Once for the 1400, and another time when she called after her mother's funeral in Korea when I was ten. Hanna and I didn't go. Dad was at The Store; he didn't go either.

In retrospect, it's weird we didn't all go.

Secretly, in retrospect: I'm glad I didn't go. I met my grandma only once, when I was six. She spoke no English, me no Korean.

So in retro-retrospect, maybe it's not so weird that we didn't all go.

Dad has said the words *I love you* exactly zero times in my life.

Let's go back to that PSAT score.

As a leading indicator, a bellwether, augury, harbinger, and many other words from the now-useless PSAT vocabulary study guide, a score of 1500 would mean I would probably kick the real SAT's ass high enough to gain the attention of The Harvard, which is the Number One Top School in Whole of United States, according to Mom-n-Dad.

A 1400 means I'll probably only ess-ay-tee just high enough to get into the University of California at Berkeley, which in Mom-n-Dad's mind is a sad consolation prize compared with The Harvard. And sometimes, just for a nanosecond, their brainlock actually has me thinking:

*Berkeley sucks.*

My big sister, Hanna, coined the term *brainlock*, which is like a headlock but for your mind. Hanna lives in Boston near the other Berkeley, the Berklee School of Music.

Berklee is my real dream school. But Mom-n-Dad have





already nixed that notion. *Music? How you making money?  
How you eating?*

Hanna's two names are Hanna Li (character count: seven) and Ji-Young Li (nine). Dad named Hanna Li after Honali, from a popular 1960s marijuana anthem disguised as a children's song, "Puff (The Magic Dragon)." The song had found its way into high-school English classes in Seoul in the 1970s. Dad has never smoked pot in his life. He had no idea what he was singing.

Hanna is the oldest; Hanna did everything right. Mom-n-Dad told her to study hard, so she got straight As. They told her to go to The Harvard, so she did, and graduated with honors. She moved on to Harvard Law School, and graduated with a leap big enough to catapult her above assistants her same age at Eastern Edge Consulting downtown, which specializes in negotiating ridiculous patents for billion-dollar tech companies. She's even dabbling in venture capital now from her home office high atop Beacon Hill. Weekdays, she wears very expensive pantsuits; weekends, sensible (but still very expensive) dresses. Someone should put her on the cover of a business travel magazine or something.

But then Hanna did the one wrong thing. She fell in love.

Falling in love isn't bad by itself. But when it's with a black boy, it's big enough to cancel out everything she did right her whole life. This boy gave Hanna a ring, which Mom-n-Dad have not seen and might never.

In another family perhaps on another planet, this brown boy would be brought home for summer vacation to meet the





family, and we would all try out his name in the open air:  
*Miles Lane.*

But we're on this planet, and Mom-n-Dad are Mom-n-Dad, so there will be no Hanna this summer. I miss her. But I understand why she won't come home. Even though it does mean I'll be left high and dry without someone to make fun of the world with.

The last time she came home was a Thanksgiving holiday two years ago. She was at a Gathering. It was the Changs' turn to host. I'm not sure why she did what she did that night. *So I have this boy now*, she said. *And he is The One.*

And she held out her phone with a photo of Miles to Mom-n-Dad and everyone. It was like she cast a Silence spell on the room. No one said shit.

After a long minute, the phone turned itself off.

Mom-n-Dad went to the front door, put on their shoes, and waited with eyes averted for us to join them. We left without a word of explanation—none was needed—and the next morning Hanna vanished onto a flight back to Boston, four days early. A year later, after six or seven Hanna-free Gatherings, Ella Chang dared utter the word *disowned*.

And life went on. Mom-n-Dad no longer talked about Hanna. They acted like she moved to a foreign country with no modern forms of communication. Whenever I brought her up, they would literally—literally—avert their eyes and fall silent until I gave up. After a while, I did.

So did Hanna. Her text message responses fell from every day to every other day, then every week, and so on. This is





how disownment happens. It's not like some final sentence declared during some family tribunal. Disownment is a gradual kind of neglect. Since Mom-n-Dad gave up on Hanna, Hanna decided to give up as well. I get that.

But I never gave up on her. I still haven't.

It's a scary thing to watch someone you love vanish from sight.

I talk a lot about Hanna with Q. Q is what I call my top chap, and I am his.

I'm forever grateful for Q's patience with me, because I can't imagine it makes Q feel all that good to hear how Mom-n-Dad rejected a boy with the same skin color as his.

Q's full name is Q Lee. He Lee and me Li. Like two brothers from Korean and African-American mothers. His parents, Mr. and Ms. Lee, are normal people who seem forever astonished that they gave birth to such a meganerd of a son. Q has a twin sister named Evon who is so smoking hot I can barely look at her. You say Evon Lee like *heavenly*.

Q's Q doesn't stand for anything; it's just Q. Q decided to rename himself a couple months ago on his eighteenth birthday. He was originally born as Will. Will Lee.

*Show us your willy, Will Lee*, they would say.

Good choice on the name change, Q.

Like most nerds, Q and I spend our time watching obscure movies, playing video games, deconstructing the various absurdities of reality, and so on. We hardly ever talk about girls, for lack of material. Neither of us has dated anyone. The farthest I have ventured out into girl waters is when I accidentally kissed Gina Iforget during a game of spin-the-







ballpoint-pen in junior high. It was supposed to be on the cheek, and both Gina and I missed and touched each other's lips instead. Ooo-ooo-ooo.

The only time and place we even obliquely approach the subject of girl is when we happen to find ourselves sitting on the shore of Lake Girlfriend.

Lake Girlfriend is at Westchester Mall. Westchester Mall is the biggest mall in Orange County. For some reason, they leave all their doors open well past midnight, long after the stores have all shut. The mall becomes a beautifully empty, serenely apocalyptic space that no one in all of Southern California seems to know about.

Only two security guards patrol all seventy gleaming acres of the deserted mall. Their names are Camille and Oscar. They know me and Q and understand that no, we are not dating; we are just two guys with strange ideas of how to pass the time.

Lake Girlfriend is a fountain in Westchester Mall's Crystal Atrium by the Nordstrom anchor store. It is a low polished structure formed from simple modernist angles. It bears a fancy brass plaque that says DO NOT DRINK—RECLAIMED WATER. Above, nameless jazz infuses the cavernous faceted space with echoey arpeggios.

I call it Lake Girlfriend because maybe if I give it enough confessions and offerings, a girl will rise from its shimmering surface and offer me her hand.

Q and I sit tailor-style on a stone ledge the color of chocolate by this fountain. We watch the water bubble up from an octagonal top pool, push through a stone comb, and descend





staggered steps to a pool floor sequined throughout with glimmering coins.

I reach into my army-surplus rucksack and take out my Tascam, a sweet little device no bigger than a TV remote, and record the sound: low, rich syrup layered with pink noise and the occasional pwip of large bubbles. Practically a complete riff unto itself. I click the recorder off and stash it away so that Q and I can begin.

“Ideal traits in a woman,” I say. “You go first.”

Q rests his chin atop his fists. “Speaks at least two other languages.”

“And?” I say.

“Can play the oboe at a professional level,” says Q.

“Q,” I say.

“Ivy League professor by day, ballet renegade by night.”

“I’m assuming this list isn’t based in reality,” I say.

“A guy can dream, right?” says Q.

It’s a little hard to hear him over the white noise of Lake Girlfriend, and I think that’s the thing about this place that makes it easy to talk about things like ideal girls. It’s like talking out loud to ourselves, but in front of each other.

“Your turn,” says Q.

I think. A hundred faces scroll through my mind, all pretty in their own way. A thousand combinations of possibilities. Everyone has loveliness inside if you look carefully. Lots of the world is like this. One time I halved an onion and discovered its rings had squashed one by one to form a perfect heart shape at the core. One time—

“Frank?” says Q. “You gotta move your mouth to speak.”





“Wull,” I say. “I mean.”

Q looks at me, waiting.

“Basically I guess she has to be kind, is most important.”

Q raises his eyebrows. “So no meanies. Got it.”

“And she should make me laugh,” I say.

“Any other vital criteria?” says Q.

I think. Anything else—hobbies, musical tastes, fashion sense—doesn’t seem to matter that much. So I just shake my head no.

Q gives the fountain a shrug. “That’s super romantic, like in the most basic sense.”

“Basically,” I say.

We both stare at the fountain for a moment. Then I mark the end of our visit to Lake Girlfriend with the ritual digging into my front jeans pocket for sacred coins, one for me, one for Q. Q tosses his in with a fart sound. I give mine a squeeze and flip it into the water, ploop. The coins are added to the submerged pile of random wishes: good grades, job promotions, lottery dreams, and, above all, love.

No one comes rising out of the shimmering water.

Q doesn’t know it, but I’ve secretly left out one criterion for my ideal woman. It’s one I’d rather not say aloud, even though it’s the one I worry about the most.

My ideal woman should probably be Korean-American.

It’s not strictly necessary. I could care less. But it would make things easier.

I’ve toed the dating waters only twice before, and each time something has held me back from diving in. A paralysis. I think it comes from not knowing which would be worse:





dating a girl my parents hated or dating a girl my parents loved. Being ostracized or being micromanaged.

Then I consider how Korean-Americans make up only 1 percent of everyone in the Republic of California, out of which 12 percent are girls my age, which would result in a dating pool with only one girl every three square miles. Filter out the ones who are taken, the ones I wouldn't get along with, and—worse—add in the Ideal Woman criteria, and the pool gets even smaller. Lake Girlfriend shrinks down to a thimble.

So I shelve the notion of an ideal girl for now. I realize I've been shelving the idea for years.

“A guy can dream,” says Q.

“A guy can dream,” I say.





## chapter 2

# metaphor incoming

Mom-n-Dad's store also has two names, like me and Hanna.

Its official name is Fiesta Hoy Market, which I won't even bother to translate because goddamn, what a stupid name. Its second name is simply The Store. The Store is its name-name.

Mom-n-Dad work at The Store every day, from morning to evening, on weekends, holidays, New Year's Day, 365 days out of every year without a single vacation for as long as me and Hanna have been alive.

Mom-n-Dad inherited The Store from an older Korean couple of that first wave who came over in the sixties. No written contracts or anything. Just an introduction from a good friend, then tea, then dinners, and finally many deep bows, culminating in warm, two-handed handshakes. They wanted to make sure The Store was kept in good hands. Good, Korean hands.

The Store is an hour-long drive from the dystopian





perfection of my suburban home of Playa Mesa. It's in a poor, sun-crumbled part of Southern California largely populated by Mexican- and African-Americans. A world away.

The poor customers give Mom-n-Dad food stamps, which become money, which becomes college tuition for me.

It's the latest version of the American dream.

I hope the next version of the American dream doesn't involve gouging people for food stamps.

I'm at The Store now. I'm leaning against the counter. Its varnish is worn in the middle like a tree ring, showing the history of every transaction that's ever been slid across its surface: candy and beer and diapers and milk and beer and ice cream and beer and beer.

"At the airport," I once explained to Q, "they hand out title deeds by ethnicity. So the Greeks get diners, the Chinese get laundromats, and the Koreans get liquor stores."

"So *that's* how America works," said Q, taking a deeply ironic bite of his burrito.

It's hot in the store. I'm wearing a Hardfloor tee shirt perforated with moth holes in cool black, to match my cool-black utility shorts. Not all blacks are the same. There is warm black and brown black and purple black. My wristbands are a rainbow of blacks. All garments above the ankles must be black. Shoes can be anything, however. Like my caution-yellow sneakers.

Dad refuses to turn on the air-conditioning, because the only things affected by the heat are the chocolate-based candies, and he's already stashed those in the walk-in cooler.

Meanwhile, I'm sweating. I watch a trio of flies trace an





endless series of right angles in midair with a nonstop zimzim sound. I snap a photo and post it with the caption: *Flies are the only creature named after their main mode of mobility.*

It makes no sense that I'm helping Mom-n-Dad at The Store. My whole life they've never let me have a job.

"Study hard, become doctor maybe," Dad would say.

"Or a famous newscaster," Mom would say.

I still don't get that last one.

Anyway: I'm at The Store only one day a week, on Sundays, and only to work the register—no lifting, sorting, cleaning, tagging, or dealing with vendors. Mom's home resting from her morning shift, leaving me and Dad alone for his turn. I suspect all this is Mom's ploy to get me to bond with Dad in my last year before I head off to college. Spend father-n-son time. Engage in deep conversation.

Dad straps on a weight belt and muscles a hand truck loaded with boxes of malt liquor. He looks a bit like a Hobbit, stocky and strong and thick legged, with a box cutter on his belt instead of a velvet sachet of precious coins. He has all his hair still, even in his late forties. To think, he earned a bachelor's degree in Seoul and wound up here. I wonder how many immigrants there are like him, working a blue-collar job while secretly owning a white-collar degree.

He slams his way out of the dark howling maw of the walk-in cooler.

"You eat," he says.

"Okay, Dad," I say.

"You go taco. Next door. Money, here."

He hands me a twenty.





“Okay, Dad.”

I say *Okay, Dad* a lot to Dad. It doesn’t get much deeper than that for the most part. For the most part, it can’t. Dad’s English isn’t great, and my Korean is almost nonexistent. I grew up on video games and indie films, and Dad grew up on I-don’t-know-what.

I used to ask him about his childhood. Or about basic things, like how he was able to afford a luxury like college. He grew up poor, after all, poorer than poor. Both my parents did, before Korea’s economic supernova in the late eighties. Dad said he would go fishing for river crabs when food ran low. Lots of people in the sticks did.

“Tiny crabby, they all crawling inside my net,” he told me. “All crawling crawling crawling over each other, they stepping on each other face, try to get on top.”

“Okay,” I said.

“That’s Korea,” he said.

When I asked him what that meant, he just closed the conversation with:

“Anyway America better. Better you going college here, learn English. More opportunity.”

That’s his checkmate move for most conversations, even ones that start out innocently enough like, *How come we never kept up with speaking Korean in the house?* or *Why do old Korean dudes worship Chivas Regal?*

So for the most part, he and I have made a habit of leaving things at *Okay, Dad*.

“Okay, Dad,” I say.







I grab my phone and step into the even hotter heat outside. Corrido music is bombarding the empty parking lot from the carnicería next door. The music is meant to convey festivity, to entice customers inside. It's not working.

¡Party Today!

Buzz-buzz. It's Q.

*Pip pip, old chap, let's go up to LA. It's free museum night. Bunch of us are going.*

*Deepest regrets, old bean, I say. Got a Gathering.*

*I shall miss your companionship, fine sir, says Q.*

*And I yours, my good man.*

Q knows what I mean when I say *Gathering*.

I'm talking about a gathering of five families, which sounds like a mafia thing but really is just Mom-n-Dad's friends getting together for a rotating house dinner.

It's an event that's simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary: ordinary in that hey, it's just dinner, but extraordinary in that all five couples met at university in Seoul, became friends, moved to Southern California together to start new lives, and have managed to see each other and their families every month literally for decades.

The day ends. Dad changes shirts, trading his shop owner persona for a more Gathering-appropriate one: a new heather-gray polo that exudes success and prosperity. We lock up, turn out the lights. Then we drive forty minutes to the Kims'.

It's the Kim family's turn to host the Gathering this time, and they've gone all out: a Brazilian barbecue carving station manned by real Brazilians drilling everyone on the word of





the night (*chu•rra•sca•ri•a*), plus a wine-tasting station, plus a seventy-inch television in the great room with brand-new VR headsets for the little kids to play ocean explorer with.

It all screams: *We're doing great in America. How about you?*

Included in these totems of success are the children themselves, especially us older kids. We were all born pretty much at the same time. We're all in the same year in school. We are talked and talked about, like minor celebrities. *So-and-so made academic pentathlon team captain. So-and-so got valedictorian.*

Being a totem is a tiresome role, and so we hide away in the game room or wherever while outside the littler kids run amok and the adults get drunk and sing twenty-year-old Korean pop songs that none of us understand. In this way we have gradually formed the strangest of friendships:

- We only sit together like this for four hours once a month.
- We never leave the room during this time, except for food.
- We never hang out outside the Gatherings.

The Gatherings are a world unto themselves. Each one is a version of Korea forever trapped in a bubble of amber—the early-nineties Korea that Mom-n-Dad and the rest of their friends brought over to the States years ago after the bubble burst. Meanwhile, the Koreans in Korea have moved on, be-





come more affluent, more savvy. Meanwhile, just outside the Kims' front door, American kids are dance-gaming to K-pop on their big-screens.

But inside the Gathering, time freezes for a few hours. We children are here only because of our parents, after all. Would we normally hang out otherwise? Probably not. But we can't exactly sit around ignoring each other, because that would be boring. So we jibber-jabber and philosophize until it's time to leave. Then we are released back into the reality awaiting us outside the Gathering, where time unfreezes and resumes.

I call us the Limbos.

Every month I dread going to these awkward reunions with the Limbos, to wait out time in between worlds. But every month I'm also reminded that most of the Limbos are actually pretty cool.

Like John Lim (character count: seven), who made his own game that's selling pretty well on the app store.

Or Ella Chang (nine), who shreds at the cello.

Or Andrew Kim (nine), who cowrote a pretty popular book with his YouTube partner.

I used to think the character count in our names was a weird Korean thing.

But it wasn't a weird Korean thing. It was just weird.

I think the type of person who is willing to live in a totally different country is also willing to make up their own weird traditions. Weird makes weird.

Weird also makes for incredibly lucky lives for us kids, and for that I'm always grateful. For real.





At tonight's Gathering the Limbos are holed up in Andrew's room, playing a multiplayer brawler game.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," they say.

There's John Lim steering his controller in the air, as if that will help anything. There's Andrew Kim, hissing with effort. There's Ella Chang, calmly kicking everyone's ass from behind her horn rims.

"Wanna play?" drawls Ella.

"In a sec."

One of the Limbos is missing. I wander around the house until I find her: Joy Song, sitting alone among big Lego bricks in the pastel room of Andrew Kim's little sister.

Joy Song (character count: seven), second name Yu-Jin Song (nine).

When we were five, six, seven, Joy and I used to sneak the crispy bits off the barbecue table before it was time to eat. We used to stand on our chairs, hold noodles as high as we could, and lower them into each other's open mouths below. We used to put blades of grass down each other's pants, until one day I caught a glimpse of her front and understood that it was now time to be afraid of girls. I've been afraid ever since.

Now Joy Song sits in the corner smelling her upper lip. She glances up at me—*oh, it's just Frank*—and keeps her upper lip curled. It adds an edge of defiance to a face otherwise made up of simple ovalettes. She returns to what she was doing: arranging the Lego bricks in a line.

She's also listening to music through her tiny phone speakers. It sounds like bugs shouting.





“Isn’t that just the best way to listen to music?” I say. “Really respects the artistic intent of the musicians.”

“Hi, Frank,” says Joy, joylessly.

“How you been?”

“Oh, not much,” she says, answering some other question in her head.

I sit at the pile of Lego and feel like I’m ten. “You wanna build something?”

“It’s just that the solid ones are ABS plastic, and the clear pieces are polycarbonate.”

“Oh-kay.” I notice that Joy has changed her hair. On the outside it’s the usual ink-brown shell, but the inside layer has been dyed a lime green that’s visible only in flashes.

She runs her hand through her hair—green flash—and stops, holding her head sideways. Lost in thought. “You can’t 3D-print ABS or polycarbonate. At least I can’t. I don’t have the requisite tech.”

She releases her hair, and the green layer becomes hidden again.

Me and Joy both go to Palomino High. Our classes never intersect. No one outside the Limbos knows we’re Gathering friends. When we pass in the hallways, we just kind of look at each other and move along.

Now that I think about it, why *don’t* we Limbos hang out outside Gatherings?

“Let’s make a tower,” she says.

We fall into an old habit: building a four-by-four tower with the colors ascending in spectral ROYGBIV order. Chk, chk, brick by brick. We do this for a long time, in silence.





The noise of the party phase-shifts, and I look up to see my mom peering in from the doorway. She doesn't have to say anything. All she has to do is look at me, then at Joy, and smile this corny tilted smile.

After Mom vanishes, Joy rolls her eyes hard and groans to the heavens.

"Joy, will you marry me so that House Li and House Song may finally be joined as one?" I say.

"Shut the fuck up," she says, and throws a Lego at me.

She's got a bizarre laugh, kind of like a herd of squirrels.

"God, I'm so screwed," she says finally.

"What's going on?"

"Wu—you know Wu."

Of course I know Wu. Wu is Chinese-American, third gen. Wu is six two, 190 pounds of fighting muscle; a hawk-eyed warrior prince somehow lost in the American high school wilderness. A single glance from him frequently makes girls walk face-first into their lockers.

Wu is 99 percent likely to go to the University of Southern California, which is in Los Angeles. His dad went to USC. His mom went to USC. They have USC license-plate frames on their cars. They still go to the football games.

I once saw Wu and Joy making out between a pair of columns, and the sight of her ovalette jaw moving with his angular one produced that paralyzing mixture of revulsion and fascination you get when you're seeing something you know must surely exist but never thought you'd see with your own eyes.





Q thinks Joy is gorgeous. As a non-Gathering friend, Q is allowed to think that.

Wu's full name is Wu Tang.

Yep.

Joy continues. "Wu's all, *I want to meet your parents*. I'm all, *no*, but he keeps insisting. We had this big fight."

To understand why this is an issue, it's helpful to know that basically every country in Asia has historically hated on every other country in Asia. Koreans hated Chinese, and Chinese hated Koreans, and have forever. Also Chinese hated Japanese hated Koreans hated Thais hated Vietnamese and so on. They all have histories of invading and being invaded by one another. You know how European countries talk shit all the time about each other? Same thing.

"That's stressful," I say with a frown.

Joy and I are up to green bricks now. I hold one up and notice it's the same color as the green hiding in her hair.

"I don't just have boy problems," says Joy. "I have Chinese boy problems."

Koreans hating Chinese hating Koreans hating blablabla.

"Racists," I say.

Joy just nods. She knows I'm talking about her mom-n-dad.

I know this is the point where one of us should say some-damn-thing about Hanna. But what is there to say?

There's plenty to say. But I've said it over and over and over, so many times that I don't have to even actually say it anymore. Now I'm just super tired of saying it.

*Our parents are racist. I wish things were different. I miss*





*Hanna. I wish things were different. Our parents are racist. I miss Hanna.*

Chk, chk. We build until we reach the violet bricks. There's a bunch of white and black and brown bricks left over.

"What should we do with these?" I say. "They don't fit into the rainbow spectrum."

This is a ridiculous and obvious metaphor, and Joy smacks my forehead to point it out.

"Metaphor incoming, doosh," she says.

Then we just kind of stare at each other.

"Fuckin' parents, man," I say.







## chapter 3

## more better

Mom's driving me and Dad back home from the party. It's a long way from Diamond Ranch back to Playa Mesa. The neighborhoods start all Korean, then go Mexican, then Chinese, then black, then back to Mexican, then finally white.

Playa Mesa is in white.

We're only at the first Mexican when Dad quietly throws up into an empty to-go cup.

"Eigh," says Mom. "You drink too much, Daddy."

"I'm okay," says Dad.

"Eigh," says Mom, and rolls down all the windows.

Dad seals the lid on the soda cup and leans back with his eyes closed. The straw is still sticking out of the top. It's like Satan created a drink daring all to take a sip.

The fresh air helps with the smell.

"You don't drink like Daddy, okay?" Mom says to me through the rearview mirror.





“Okay, Mom,” I say.

“One time, one man, he drink all night, drink too too much? He sleep, he throw up, he choking in his sleep? He die.”

I’ve heard this story before. “That sucks.”

“Really don’t drink, okay?”

“You got nothing to worry about, Mom.”

And she really doesn’t. I’ve had about two drinks my entire life, and I didn’t bother finishing them. Same thing with top chap Q, Q’s sister, Evon, or any of my other friends. We’re all sober kids, all in the same Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and therefore do not get invited to parties and their concomitant opportunities to imbibe. We wouldn’t drink even if we did.

We are APs, or Apeys for short. We do not go to *keggers* or *ragers*. Instead of parties, we find empty parking structures and hold midnight table reads of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. We pile into my car, a teenaged front-wheel-drive Consta with manual windows, and drive halfway to Las Vegas just to see a meteor shower and get a good look at Orion’s scabbard in the flawless black desert sky. To be clear, we never actually continue on to Vegas. Whatever happens in Vegas, whatever in Vegas, who cares. We turn the car around and head home and wonder about life outside Earth, and whether we’ll ever encounter aliens or they’re just ignoring us because we’re still so embarrassingly primitive, or if the Fermi paradox is true and we really are the only intelligent beings in the entire universe.





Traffic is super light—just a stream of lights rocketing along at eighty-five miles per hour—and already we’re up to Chinese. Dad points it out.

“This all Chinese now,” he says. “Used to be Mexican, now totally Chinese. They take over whole this area. Look, signs say HONG FU XIAN blablabla, ha ha ha.”

“Chang-chong-ching-chong?” says Mom, laughing too.

“You guys,” I say.

“They eating everything,” says Dad. “Piggy ear, piggy tail, chicken feet, everything they eating.”

I facepalm, but with my knee. Koreans eat quote-weird-end-quote stuff too: sea cucumbers, live octopus, acorn jelly, all of it delicious. White people, black people, Indian, Jamaican, Mexican, *people*-people eat weird, delicious stuff.

I want to say all of this, but I find I can’t. It’ll just get me nowhere. My parents are just stuck on thinking Koreans are special.

“Ching-chong-chang-chang?” says Mom again.

Dad laughs, steadying his to-go drink from hell, and for a second I can imagine them before they had me and Hanna. It’s a paradoxically sweet vignette. Mom-n-Dad warmly muttering to each other in Korean, most of which I can’t understand, except for the startling appearance of the word *jjangkkae*, which means *chink*.

If I were like any other normal teenager, I would lose myself in my fartphone (that’s what Q says instead of *smartphone*, because all we’re doing is farting around on social media anyway), giving out crappy likes on the crappy feeds, maybe





crafting beats if I felt like being creative. But then I would only get carsick. So all I can do is be present and in the racist moment.

“You guys are so racist,” I say instead.

I’m so used to them being racist that I can’t even bother arguing with them anymore. It’s like commanding the wind to alter direction. *You are aware that non-Koreans populated the United States of America before you came here, right?* I used to say. *You’re aware that Korea is this tiny country, and the world is full of people you know little about, right?*

Arguing with Mom-n-Dad is pointless, because the wind will blow wherever it wants according to its own infuriating wind-logic. Only the insane would keep trying to change them. Especially when they end things with their *just-joking* defense. Like now:

“No racist,” says Mom, wounded. “We just joking.”

“Joy Song has a boyfriend and he’s third-gen Chinese,” I say.

I of course say no such thing. Saying that would instantly make Joy’s life hell once her mom got the call from my mom, and my mom is always making calls. Then Joy would build a drone in her garage and order it to dice me up with lasers in my sleep.

But part of me itches to do it anyway. Because this is America, and because I want to force the issue. *Did you know, I would say, that Korean-Americans make up only 0.5 percent of the entire population? Did you think about that before you came here? Did you think you could avoid the other 99.5 percent of the country for very long?*

I don’t say any of this. Instead, I talk about Q.





“What if Q was Chinese? Would you be all *ching-chong* in front of him?”

“No,” says Mom. She looks almost insulted.

“So just behind his back.”

“No, Frank.”

“Do you call Q geomdungi behind his back?”

“Frank, aigu!” Mom’s glaring at me through the rearview mirror’s slash of light.

Geomdungi means the n-word.

“Q is okay,” says Dad. His eyes are still closed. It looks like he’s talking and sleeping at the same time. He sounds reasonable and soothing, even when he’s drunk. “Q like family. I like Q.”

Dad says this despite the fact that Q has only ever hung out at my house a handful of times in all the years we’ve known each other. There is a secret to why this is.

The secret is in the smiles. Mom-n-Dad, all smiles, and Q, too. Everyone smiling, pretending the specter of Hanna is not right there before us. By Mom-n-Dad’s internal wind-logic, Q is fine—Q is a friend, Q is a boy. There is no family name at stake here.

But still, I’m afraid Mom-n-Dad would possibly say or do something carelessly hurtful to my most top chap. So the few times Q’s been over, I’ve kept things simple and quick: say hi to Mom-n-Dad, smile-smile-smile right up the staircase, and head straight into my room for shitty old video games on my shitty old system. Eventually I just found myself hanging out at his house all the time. It’s easier than all those smiles.

Q first pointed out the smiles a long time ago. He was an-





gry. I was angry too. Who wouldn't be? We sat all night with our anger, discussing it, shaping it, until it became a kind of energy shield defending us. I vowed to protect Q from any harm my parents could potentially dish out. I ranted out a fiery apology, going on and on until Q finally stopped me with an arm hug to say *You didn't pick your parents, and neither did I.*

That's what Q tells me whenever my parents say something ludicrous: *I didn't pick your parents to be my best friend in the whole world.*

The car is quiet but for the whistling wind. For a second I think the issue has been successfully forced, copious science has been dropped, minds have been quietly blown, we are all one human race, this is the United States of America, I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted.

But then Dad keeps going.

Dad keeps dream-talking.

"Q is so-called *honorary white*. You know *honorary white*?"

"No he's not," I say, but Dad just keeps on going.

"Daddy, sleep," says Mom.

But Dad does not sleep. "Black people always no money they having. Always doing crime, gang, whatever. Make too many baby. That's black people."

"Dad, Jesus, that's not true," I say. All I can do is shake my head. This sort of drunken rambling is familiar territory for me. I find a painted line on the highway and follow it as it dips and rises and splits into two. We change lanes and the tires do two fast, sharp drumrolls.

But then Mom sits up. "It is," she says. "I wondering, why





black people behaving like that? Our customers? So many, they behaving like that. Ninety-eight percent.”

Mom likes to make up fake statistics. So does Dad. It’s annoying as hell.

I snarl at the window. “So, slavery, decades of systematic racist policy, and the poverty it created don’t have anything to do with anything.”

“1992,” says Mom, “we coming to United States, only we have three hundred dollar. That’s it. We stay friends’ house almost two year. Dr. and Mrs. Choi. Only we eating ramyun and kimchi rice two year.”

*That’s not the same thing*, I think. I don’t bother listening to the rest.

Mom-n-Dad are like this big ice wall of ignorance, and I’m just a lone soldier with a sword. I just kind of give up. I find myself missing Hanna big-time. She used to argue all righteous with Mom-n-Dad all the time, like the lawyer she eventually became. She wouldn’t back down a single millimeter, not for shit. She would take the argument all the way to the limit, and then just hold it there. Like:

*Where does Korean-ness begin and end?*

*What about kids born from Chinese or Japanese occupiers? What about those comfort women? Should their Korean cards be canceled?*

*Don’t you think you should have to live in Korea to be fully Korean?*

*Don’t you think you should have to be fluent in Korean to be fully Korean?*

*Why’d you come to this country if you’re so Korean?*





*And what about me and Frank?*

I used to think she was brave, but now I wonder if being brave is worth it. The brave go first into battle. But that makes them the first to go down, too.

I wait for the car to get quiet again before saying:

“What if I dated someone black?” I want to add *like Hanna*, but don’t.

“Frank, stop it,” says Mom, and gets a grave look, like *That’s not funny*. She glances at Dad. Dad is asleep. His to-go cup is tipping. She puts it in the center cup holder, which somehow makes it even more disgusting.

“What about white?” I say.

“No,” says Mom.

“So only Korean.”

Mom sighs. “Why, you have white girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Don’t do it, okay?” says Mom. “Anyway. Big eyes is better. Nice eyes.”

Mom is obsessed with girls having big eyes. Joy’s mom is obsessed with girls having big eyes. Same with the parents of the other Limbos. We tried figuring out why once at a Gathering. Someone said it must have something to do with a bunch of round-eye American soldiers saving them from civil war, which led to a close examination of the size of General MacArthur’s eyes, which pivoted to theories about big-eyed characters in Japanese anime, which devolved into a big Lego-throwing debate about which was better, Japanese manga or Korean mahnwa.





“You marry Korean girl,” says Mom. “Make everything easier.”

I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. “Easier for you.” I want to add, *I could care less if she were Korean*, but we’ve beat this horse before and it’s an incredibly durable creature.

“Not just us,” says Mom. She’s indignant. “Easier for everybody. Korean girl, we gathering with her parents, we speak Korean together. More comfortable, more better. We eating Korean food all together, going to Korean church together, more better.”

“So, more better for you.”

“No,” says Mom, louder. “You will understand when you have baby. Okay: pretend you have mix baby, okay? People say, ‘Oh, what nationality this baby?’ Too headache for baby. For you too! Where baby belong? You think about baby.”

So I think about baby. Not my baby, but specifically the future baby of Hanna and Miles. I’ve seen *mixed* babies before, and like all babies ever born, they’re adorable. Who could be so cruel as to reject a *mixed* baby?

What the hell am I talking about? I hate that word, *mixed*. Just a couple generations ago people called French-Russian babies *mixed*. Now those babies are just called *white*. This word *mixed* is just brainlock messing with my head.

I give up. “Okay, Mom.”

“Anyway,” says Mom, calm again. “I know lot of nice girls.”

I massage my temples. I’ve reached the end of the discussion, where there’s nothing left to do but say *Okay, Mom*.

“Okay, Mom,” I say.



## chapter 4

## just bad enough

I don't really like calculus.

But Calculus class? That's a different story.

Calculus class takes place at the ungodly hour of seven o'clock, before the rest of humanity is even conscious. It's unreasonable. Mr. Soft knows this. That's why he has a box of coffee ready, and a dozen donuts, two for each of us.

Mr. Soft has the lights dimmed. He has quiet jazz playing on a sweet vintage boombox. Mr. Soft is one of the gentlest human beings I know.

Mr. Soft's full name is Berry Soft.

"You want a little something special this morning, Frank?" says Mr. Berry Soft, very softly. "I brought my espresso machine today. More than happy to make you a cappuccino."

Our desks are arranged in a rough circle, with Mr. Soft tailor-sitting atop a stool, his glowing face underlit by an antique overhead projector literally from the year 1969 that he





likes to draw on with wet-erase pens. No laptops, no phones. Just concepts and principles and long-hand problem solving.

“Just look for the stuff in common between the nominators and denominators,” says Mr. Soft, drawing by hand. “See what cancels out. Chop chop, flip these guys here, chop, and we’re left with the answer.”

“What is the answer?” says Brit Means, who sits next to me.

“I mean, it’s thirteen over five,” says Mr. Soft. “But that doesn’t really matter. What matters is the process.”

Brit Means glows in the light of his wisdom. “The process,” she says. Then I realize she is nodding at me through narrowed eyes. I nod back without quite knowing what we’re nodding about.

Like most of the other Apey boys I find Brit Means a little weird and a little intense, and can’t help but be fascinated by her. She walks the halls like a time traveler noticing small differences created by minute shifts in quantum chaos. She can sometimes seem like a beautiful foreign exchange student from a country no one’s ever seen.

Once, I found myself sharing the shade of a tree with her on a hot day just after school. I was waiting for Q; she was waiting for her ride home.

“Most human structures are made out of wood,” she said to the tree. “Wood is trees is plants. Human clothes are cotton: plants again. We live in nature every day without realizing it. We live *inside* plants.”

“Huh,” I said, secretly marveling at a sudden acute impulse to kiss her.





Back in Calculus, Q passes the box of donuts around. Brit leans over to choose one, drawing close enough for me to smell the shampoo in her wet hair.

Next to her sit Amelie Shim, Naima Gupta, and Paul Olmo, always in that order.

“So I’m supposed to give you turkeys a test for the suits,” says Mr. Soft. “What questions do you want on it?”

We all think. It’s so early.

“Just email me, okay?” says Mr. Soft. He’s so soothing. “You’re all getting As anyway. I hate this grading bullshit.” Even his swears are soothing.

“Thanks, Mr. Soft,” says Q.

“We all know we’re doing the work here, right?”

We have an assignment to calculate the volume of solids formed by rotating area formulas around axes. Nothing too crazy. But Mr. Soft wants to make things interesting by having us sketch the resulting volumes on paper, in charcoal, by hand.

“To really get a sense of how the volumes feel,” he says.

It’s a pair assignment. Paul Olmo leans over to Q and whispers something. Q nods.

“Me and Paul are gonna do our volumes in clay,” Q announces.

“Nerds,” I say.

Q just looks at me like *So?*

It’s Paul’s turn with Q, since I got to partner with him for the last assignment. We rotate among us three to ensure equal friend time. Before I can wonder who I should pair up with, Brit Means speaks.





“Frank, will you be my partner?”

“Thanks you,” I find myself saying.

Thanks you?

The bell rings. I see Q looking perhaps as astonished as me—Brit always partners with Amelie—and he offers me a covert fist bump. I naturally mistake the fist bump for a high five, and the whole thing becomes this strange gearshift pantomime: the awkward greeting ritual of male nerds everywhere.

• • •

Playa Mesa is a giant pyramid-shaped peninsula set at the edge of the Pacific; Brit Means’s house is on the side opposite from mine on that pyramid.

We sit at her hulking dining table and start our assignment. Brit’s mom designed the table; Brit’s dad built it. Atop the table sit garlic pita chips in a wooden bowl, which Brit’s dad carved himself. The table sits in the bulb of a large, curvaceous kitchen, which Brit’s mom designed and Brit’s dad built. Brit’s parents are architects. They habitually design and build stuff—big, ornate, well-constructed stuff—like no big deal.

In walk her mom-n-dad, both in matching hoodie sweats, matching lambskin slippers, holding matching mugs of tea. They are of identical small stature and seem to have come from the same lat and long within Europe many stout generations ago, and remind me of kindly druids from a video game I used to play.

“We’ll be upstairs,” says Brit’s mom, and then smiles this





tilted corny smile. It's the same tilted corny smile my mom gave to me and Joy at the last Gathering.

What is happening?

"Nice to meet you, Frank," says Brit's dad.

They vanish upstairs in unison.

Brit and I sit alone.

Brit regards me for a moment, like you would a favorite painting in a museum, and speaks suddenly: "You take the odd ones, I'll take the evens."

She means the assignment. She tucks her hair behind her ear and flicks her Zeichner Profi 5.0 mm mechanical pencil, effortlessly performing Around-the-Worlds, Weaves, See-Saws, regular Sassys, and Ultra Sassys.

More like Ultra Sexys.

I try to eat my lower lip. Then I remember the first Rule of Being a Person: no auto-cannibalism. I eat a garlic pita chip instead. So does Brit. We compulsively reach for more, munching and munching, and of course our hands touch in the bowl. We both draw back as if the chips were electrified.

"Sorry," she says.

"Me too," I say.

"Huh?" says Brit.

"I don't know," I say.

For some reason, this makes Brit smile this smile that says:  
*But I do.*

"Wanna get through this stuff?" she says.

"Right," I say.

Solving the problems is the easy part. It's the sketching





that takes time. Brit puts some music on her phone, but then switches to a proper wireless speaker.

“I hate listening on tiny speakers,” she says, seconds before I can, and my heart does a triple jump.

Once I recover, I get started on the work. I sketch small—less surface area to cover—and finish fast. Brit picks up on my tactic and sketches small, too. Our pencil leads scritch and scratch. She elbows me.

“You’re such a cheater.”

“I’m still doing the assignment,” I say. “I’m just being efficient about it.”

“Done,” she says.

We retract our leads and set our pencils down.

“Yours look good,” I say.

“Yours look good too,” she says, gazing at me.

Dear lord Flying Spaghetti Monster in Pastafarian heaven. I think Brit Means is flirting with me.

“What do you wanna do now?” I say.

“I don’t know, what do you want to do?”

She sits closer. Now is the moment in the teen movie where I sweep the homework to the floor and kiss her. But like I said, my kissing track record is exactly one item long, and was an accident.

I’m pretty sure Brit’s kissing track record is as short as mine. But she must be ready. Right? Why else would she be sitting so close? Is that how this works?

I have no idea how anything works. I have no idea what is happening. I stare back into her eternal ancient gray eyes





looking all ancient and gray and eternal into mine and find that they are also inscrutable. I could be totally wrong. It could be that Brit's just the strange type of girl who likes to sit close and stare and say nothing.

"Forgot my glasses," says a voice, and we look up just in time to see Brit's dad's robe swishing around a corner and away.

"Let's go outside," says Brit, suddenly standing. "There's something I want to show you."

• • •

We step out into a night full of crickets on loop. Like most of Playa Vista, there is only one streetlamp for miles. Outside that single icy cone of light is the pure impenetrable darkness of the new moon sky, with only the stars and the glint of many parked cars visible.

"What's with all the cars?" I say.

"Someone's having a big house party. I'm pretty sure it's Armenian independence day." Brit hops and crouches, inspecting the cars. She moves like a long-haired imp.

"Look," she says, and cracks open one of the cars.

"Brit," I say, laughing.

"They're never locked," she says, opening it farther. "I find it so revealing about people's biases. People just assume certain things about certain neighborhoods. They wouldn't leave their doors unlocked like this over in Delgado Beach."

"Well, Playa Mesa is freakishly safe, after all."

"If we did a study, we would find a correlation between







unlocked cars and neighborhood income levels, I bet you a million bucks.”

“Ha ha,” I say, but stop short. Because to my horror, Brit has ducked her head inside the car and is now emerging with a tin of mints. She pops one in her mouth. She tosses me a mint, too.

“Have one,” she says.

“You’re insane,” I say, and laugh, and look around.

But I eat the mint.

Brit carefully closes the door, then latches it shut with a bump of her hip. “People keep the artifacts of their lives in their cars. Makes me feel like an archaeologist. A car-chaeologist.”

“We’re gonna get busted.”

“Frankly, Frank Li, you’re being paranoid,” says Brit, with mock sass. “Anyway, even if we do get busted all I have to do is be all, *Oh-em-gee, I’m so drunk, anyway you should really lock your car, bye!*”

Brit has switched to California Valley Girl Patois with no effort, and it makes me twitch a little.

In Language class Ms. Chit would called this *code switching*. It’s like switching accents, but at a more micro level.

The idea is that you don’t speak the same way with your friends (California English Casual) that you do with a teacher (California English Formal), or a girl (California English Sing-song), or your immigrant parents (California English Exasperated). You change how you talk to best adapt to whoever you’re talking to. But it’s not just about adaptation, as Ms. Chit





explained. People can code switch to confuse others, express dominance or submission, or disguise themselves.

I've always thought I'm pretty good at code switching. But the way Brit does it is true mastery. It's like watching her become a different person entirely. It makes me wonder what other codes she can speak.

"This one . . . No, there's a blinking light on the dash," she says. "This one, maybe."

She pops the door open: "Aha."

"I am jacking cars with Brit Means," I say.

"Tell me, though: is it jacking if they're unlocked?" she says.

"How long has this been a hobby of yours?"

"Only a couple months. I've found alcohol, cash, just cash lying out in the open. An old instant camera. It's crazy."

"Wait, are you keeping this stuff?"

Brit unearths something. "Look. High-fidelity compact discs. Who listens to CDs?"

She flings one at me and I fumble to catch it like a Frisbee. It's all in Armenian.

"Dude, put this back," I say. I wipe the disc clean of my fingerprints, just in case the FBI gets called to investigate, and start to fling it back to her when she quickly hits the car's lock button and slams the door shut.

"Too late," she says, giggling. "You're stuck with that."

"I already said you're insane, right?" I say, and slip the disc into my back pocket.

"And to answer your question, no, I don't take the stuff. I just redistribute it to other cars."





“That’s hilarious. It’s like a metaphor for something.”

“For what?”

I think for a moment. Metaphor not incoming.

Is this bad? Sure. It’s just a little bad. To be sure, it’s nothing compared with what other kids are doing, like failing out or getting pregnant or arrested or, in the case of Deckland Ayers, drunk-racing his brand-new Q2S sport coupe into a pole and failing out in the most permanent and tragic way.

But for Apeys, it’s just bad enough.

And I love it.

“Hey, a minivan,” I say. “A trove of treasures.”

The minivan is the same as Q’s mom’s, so I know it has sliding doors on both sides. I guide Brit to the minivan’s shadow, quell her sputtering giggles by squashing her cheeks with both hands, and then try the handle with practiced familiarity.

Click, whoosh.

Inside the van are toddler seats and stuffed animals and spilled puffed crackers and so on. I guide her in and can feel every sinew of the small of her back with my open hand. And together, we slowly slide the door shut behind us. The silence is absolute and ringing. I can hear her every breath. I can hear the brush of her fingertips on my shorts.

“It smells kinda good in here,” she says.

And it does, because here we are, crushing toasted Os beneath our knees. Releasing their stale aroma. The space we are in is small and new and secret, and no one else in the world knows about it because no one else in the world is here but us two.





Brit is waiting. Brit is *nervous*. As nervous as me.

I find our mutual nervousness strangely comforting. It makes something in my heart loosen its grip and let go.

I pull her in and our mouths fit perfectly.

This is really happening to me. I am kissing Brit Means.

And, I realize, this is really happening to Brit Means, too.

Has she been planning this? How long has she liked me? To think, we've been friends all through high school, and this—this kiss—has been waiting in plain sight the whole time.

“Hi,” I say, breathing.

“Hi,” she says.

Her gray eyes are dilated wide to see in the night. We kiss deeper this time, and I don't care that she can now taste the garlic pita in my mouth because I can now taste it in hers, too. The silence focuses in. Every shift in our bodies crushing another piece of toasted cereal. The fierce breathing through nostrils flared wide. It takes me forever to realize the dome light has come on.

The light is on inside the van.

Someone has clicked a key fob remote. Someone close by, getting closer by the second.

We spring apart and duck.

“Oh shit,” says Brit. Her eyes have tightened.

I'm still gasping for air. “Okay. Uh. I think we should probably go.”

In the far distance, voices.

“I think you're probably right,” she says, and snorts.

Brit Means snorts!





I pull the door handle and slowly slide it open. We slink out into the street. As quietly as I can, I slide the door shut, but it needs one good shove to latch closed. Usually I can get Q's mom's van to shut with barely a sound. But I guess it must be my heart dropping beats or the fact that my arms feel like they're in zero-g, because the best I can manage is a crisp, clearly audible *chunk*.

"Ei," says a voice. "Inch dzhokhk yek anum?"

"Go go go," I hiss.

"Sorry, can't understand you," yells Brit.

We sprint into the darkness, leaving a trail of giggles behind us.

Just bad enough.

But so good.





## chapter 5

## plane crash

I'm in class the next morning, struggling to keep my eyes forward. I know Brit is too. I can feel it. We are like two horse statues facing the same direction.

Horse statues?

Q's eyes rally between Brit and me. I smile back with derp teeth. He knows something is up.

*What the hell is up with your stupid face?* say his eyebrows.

"Frank and Brit, nice work with the volumes," says Mr. Soft. "Could you draw a little tinier next time?"

I am barely listening. I like hearing him say *Frank and Brit* like that. Like we're officially *Frank-n-Brit. Frankenbrit.*

Brit smiles. She glances at me and bites her thumb, breaking the first Rule of Being a Person.

"Q and Paul, you turkeys ready?" says Mr. Soft.

Q gives me a parting eyeroll, gets into character, and stands. "Yes."





He and Paul approach a lumpy cloth spread on a table and lift it to reveal six grapefruit-sized geometric forms done in KlayKreate.

“Behold,” says Q. “The new Platonics.”

For the first time in my short life, I want Calculus to never end. But it does, and after we leave the classroom I find myself doing something I never normally do: walk and text.

*Meet me behind the greenhouse at lunch?*

My phone buzzes back.

*Okay,* says Brit, with a little purple heart.

The day passes. AP Bio, AP English Lit, and finally my favorite, CompSci Music, where I get some serious time hammering out live beats on the flashing Dotpad made up of the samples I recorded at Lake Girlfriend. I think about the coins in the water there.

Thank you, Lake Girlfriend.

Physical performance is the future of electronic dance music, I believe. As good as my timing is, I am still human and therefore prone to being off by a few milliseconds here and there, which is why performed music will always have a warmth and intuition that perfectly sequencing computers can’t match. Next I want to try making electronic dance music with acoustic instruments, in a band with other people, no amplification. Call it *chamber step*, maybe.

I’ve got the room nodding their heads. I’ve got Ms. Nobuyuki nodding her head.

But I feel phantom buzzes in my back pocket the whole time. It takes all my effort to stay focused until the final measure of the song.





Class ends and finallyfinallyfinally it's lunch. Just gotta check in with Q before going off on my own.

I find Q waiting for me by the elephant tree: this big melted biomass of spiny leaves and branches oozing its way out of a rectangle in the concrete. Apparently it's not a tree, but a giant yucca evolving along its own isolated vector.

Q's already got his miniature hero figurines—a tiny wizard, elf, and paladin—standing in delta formation on a lunch table. His dice are lined up and waiting: a four-sided pyramid, a cube, an octahedron, dodecahedron, and finally the twenty-sided icosahedron. Paul Olmo's sitting next to Q with his graph paper, ready to start mapping dungeons and marking the locations of dragons.

"Hey," I say. "Just wanted to let you know I gotta go meet someone, so."

Q dims his eyes. "Oh my god."

"What?" says Paul. Paul Olmo looks exactly like his elven archer figurine.

"We'll pick up the campaign tomorrow," I say. I mean the Dungeons & Dragons game. "Sorry."

"My god," says Q.

I just nod. Yes, Q. Yes.

Q rises and hugs me like a father sending his son off to college.

"I'll see you guys later," I say.

"Oh my god," shouts Q.

"What happened?" shouts Paul.

I leave.

I walk the glossy hallways like an adventurer discovering a







cave full of crystals. Past the teachers' lounge exuding coffee and microwave food. Through a seldom-used back door leading into the seldom-seen teachers' section of the parking lot, at the end of which stands the almost-never-visited greenhouse.

I'm halfway across the parking lot, when I realize I've left my lunch in my locker.

Whatever.

Because behind the greenhouse, among the hoes and wheelbarrows and bags of soil, there she sits. On a large up-turned pot, like a magical creature. Just smiling now at my arrival. Hair blowing in the wind like a ribbon in water.

I glance behind me. No one there. I take a sidestep and put the greenhouse between me and the rest of the world.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," says Brit Means.

"Hey."

"Hey."

She stands. She takes a step toward me.

And we just kiss.

Everything falls silent. The birds stop singing. The wind stops. Blades of grass release their bend and straighten in the motionless air. A flap of corrugated metal pauses its squeaking as a courtesy.

I long to feel those little muscles in the small of her back—and so I do, and I can't believe I am allowed to do this. Even more unbelievable: *she* feels *mine*, too. As if she's been longing, too.

When we stop for air, the wind around us resumes. The grass relaxes.





“Are you sure we won’t get caught back here?” she whispers.

“If we did, I guess that would make things official.”

“Last night didn’t make things official?”

“I guess it did, huh,” I say.

“Pretty sure we’re official.”

“You said *we*.”

“That’s right.”

And we kiss some more. The sun, ignored, sprints around the earth and hurries back to its original position, just to see if it can sneak in a whole revolution without us noticing.

We don’t notice a thing.

I’m torn between wanting to kiss and wanting to stare at her face, so I decide to stare at her face for a minute. I can see myself actually reflected in her eyes, tiny bulbous Frank Li twins, and my gaze bounces back and forth between them. In the even tinier reflections of the eyes of those two reflected Frank Lis are in turn reflected two tiny Brit Means, and so on and so on infinity plus one.

“Whoa,” says a girl’s voice.

We freeze, as if freezing will make us somehow invisible.

Brit dares a glance to the side. “Oh, Joy.”

I turn, and there’s Joy Song standing there with a face like a lemur. She is tethered to a powerfully tracksuited Wu Tang, who gives me a chiseled smile like *Nice, bro*.

We should spring apart, but I’m thrilled to find that Brit doesn’t move an inch; we stand there with both hands clasped, like defiant dancers interrupted.





“Hey,” I say to Joy.

“Awkward,” sings Joy after a moment, and finally we can all laugh a little.

“Is this like your guys’ spot or something?” I say.

“It’s all good,” says Wu Tang. Everything he says he turns into a little dance move. “We got other spots. Like the roof.” He does this little pointing maneuver.

“Oh, word?” I say.

“Wurd.” Point.

“But Joy didn’t want to get her new skirt dirty.” He says it all stupid like *durr-tay*.

Wu Tang is so stupid that he loops it all the way around until stupid starts to seem kinda cool.

“Aha,” I say.

“Okay, well,” says Joy, and turns to leave.

Brit’s hands are getting sweaty in mine. I can feel my body cooling. I can feel the wind moving in the gap between us. The moment’s been cut short.

Joy mutters to herself. “Guess I’m not the only one with a problem.” She winces at her own words.

“Okay, bye,” I say loudly. I need Joy to go away, even though I know she’s right.

Brit Means is white.

“Problem?” says Brit. She’s irked, and she has every right to be. But how am I supposed to explain what the word *problem* means here? Where do I even begin? *Chinese boy problems*? Me and Joy’s conversation at the last Gathering—hell, every conversation I’ve ever had at Gatherings—seems so divorced





from reality that it's like we speak a different kind of English there, one that doesn't translate to this dimensional plane. So I just say:

"It's nothing, I'll tell you later."

"Big eyes, though," mumbles Joy, and again winces at herself.

"Huh?" says Brit.

"Oh my god, shut up," I tell Joy. I say it in my five-, six-, seven-year-old voice.

"I'll shut up," says Joy.

The air has changed. No doubt about it. It no longer feels quite like I'm here with Brit and Joy's here with Wu. Right now it's feeling strangely like *I'm* here with *Joy*, and we've each brought our respective *problems* along.

Right now it feels like planes of reality crashing together. I have my reality, which Joy has never been a part of. Joy has hers, and I've never seen it either, aside from little glimpses of her closed room when it's the Songs' turn to host a Gathering. And there is the entirely separate reality of the Gatherings themselves, plowing right through the middle of everything like an armada of icebreaker ships.

Joy gives me a sad look: *You know I'm right, Frank.*

My eyes drop to her shoes: *You are, Joy.*

A buzzer bell razzes the silence. It's like a signal for all of us to stop holding hands. So we do, and the two couples now become four people standing apart.

