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Peppered Moth

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CONNIE SHEN

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Connie Shen is a writer from South Carolina who has grown to embrace and love her Japanese and Chinese heritage despite all of the people who told her to do otherwise. She aspires to one day be a famous essayist or novelist, but needs to graduate and learn more life skills first, like how to change a tire or make her own doctor's appointment.



Peppered Moth

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In the dream world, everything is perfect. Of course, there are still white people, but they do our nails and take care of people's kids and mow lawns for a living. God apparently made a pact with one of them and told them that they'd done so many bad things that he was going to get rid of them all immediately—ASAP, pronto, stat, in a jiffy. Apparently the guy started crying like a baby and got snot everywhere, begging him to give them another chance and that they had really messed up big time couldn't he understand how very sorry they all were? So God said, alright, alright, I'll let you all have one more pass, but things are going to be real different this time around. And it is!

Anyways, the dream world doesn't exist anywhere except for my own head (brain, noggin, thinking machine), and I know that people would get real upset if I talked about it during class, so I just keep it to myself. I do dream about it at night sometimes, but only after we've had fried pork curry and rice for dinner, and even then everyone in the dream world

looks kinda scary. My dad, who had a really fancy restaurant back in Japan but now works in a Chinese place at the mall as a chef, says it's because of the sodium and cholesterol levels. I don't really know what that means, but I like my mom's food, so whatever.

I.

The first time I had a crush on anybody was last year in the 5th grade, which was weird because by that time, all of my friends had dated at least three people if not more. They read their e-mail conversations to me, but all they ever talked about was what they ate for dinner, or how bored they both were, and all of the messages ended in "I love u"s, which was extremely disgusting and weird to me. But the boy's name was Aaron Miller, and as soon as I saw him, I knew I wouldn't mind talking to him for three hours over AIM, even if he ended up asking to see a picture of my butt or something. He had blue eyes and curly brown hair and wore old khaki pants that were way too short and wrinkly, like his family didn't own a washing machine. My mom always made me watch her do laundry on Sundays while my dad was working at the restaurant, folding grandma's extra-small floral sweaters into a neat pile before loading my grass-stained blue jeans and toothpaste-dribble t-shirts into the washing machine. While she was doing laundry, I was forced to work on my Japanese exercise books, writing *kanji* like "bird" and "flower" and reading stories for her out loud as she pulled bobby pins out of her lint-covered pink apron to pull her bangs back from her round, tired face.

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"I'm not doing it today, *Okachan*."

Every weekend, I refused to look at the books, believing that maybe, just this once, she would be cool like my white friends' parents and let me play like a normal kid on Sunday.

My mother didn't even bother to look at me before responding, her hands moving mechanically as she ironed the

creases into my father's black pants, hot steam pouring out of the iron like a tugboat.

"Okay, then. Don't."

"I'm not going to."

"That's fine, *Michiko-chan*."

I waited for her to protest, to pick me up by my arms and tie me to the kitchen table, gluing a pencil in between the webs of my fingers and pressing my hands down to the page as I screamed, a true hero to all Japanese-American kids everywhere. But that never happened. After five minutes of freedom, I would look at my mom and start feeling guilty about it all, so I would start reading the story just to make her feel better. That's the only reason, though. I knew how sad she would be if I didn't do it.

80 None of my white friends had to do anything on Sunday. My best friend, Maddie, got to sleep as late as she wanted, while I had to wake up at 7 A.M. to help my mom make breakfast for my brother and me. Maddie got to go to pop concerts, while I could only listen to classical music on the radio. Maddie's little brother was named Zach and was really skinny, while Keiji was fat and had a name that none of his teachers could pronounce. Maddie was good at math and science, while I liked to read books and couldn't figure out if a platypus was a bird or a mammal or both. Even though I felt jealous sometimes, she was still my best friend.

On Monday, after my mom dropped me off at school early, I rushed to my locker and sat there after I got all of my books out. Not that I wanted to sit on that nasty floor with gum and fingernails and dried nachos on it, but I had memorized Aaron's schedule by now to know that he had a class right beside my locker first thing in the morning. I was so excited that I felt like I was gonna pee my pants, so I made sure to clench my legs extra tight and cup the place in between while I watched the clock on the wall until it was 8 A.M.

Suddenly, I heard people coming down the hallway and knew that it was time. I jumped up so fast that my head hit the locker above me, the metal making a weird popping sound as it hit my glasses and I fell backwards, hard, onto the dirty floor again. I heard people gasping and giggling around me, one girl almost moving to help before I suddenly saw a shadow above me. *Please please please don't let it be Aaron*, I thought to myself before opening my eyes, but, of course, it was.

“Hey, Michiko.”

He was smiling, but not in a mean way, and his hand felt rough as he reached down to help me up. I tried to say something like *thanks* or *I like how short your pants are*, but all I ended up saying was,

“Haaaannnnnnn.”

Aaron looked at me for a second, confused, before nodding and walking away. I wanted to die, but before I could run into the classroom to grab a pair of safety scissors and stab my heart with it, I heard Maddie's voice behind me.

“Ohmygod, are you okay?” She grabbed my arm and started scrubbing at the dirt on it with her lint roller that she carried around in her backpack.

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“Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just really embarrassed because I fell in front of Aaron and made a really weird noise afterwards.”

“Oh, man. Well, that sucks, but I honestly don't know if you two could be together anyway.”

I stared at her, with her straight blond hair and clinking charm bracelets that hit together as she now moved to wipe dirt off of my back. Maddie had never been mean to me before, not really, unless I had eaten her chips at lunch or taken one of her gel pens without asking. So why was she saying this so calmly, as if Aaron weren't the biggest greatest love of my entire life?

“W-what makes you say that?”

“Oh, well you know.”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked.”

“Well, I don’t want you to be hurt, it’s just...”

She stopped talking for a second, looking like she suddenly didn’t want to be there with me any more. The silence made me feel guilty, as if it were my fault for making Maddie tell me the truth. Right when I was about to say that, though, she said,

“He probably won’t like you because you’re not...um...”

And that’s when it hit me. Why Aaron, the boy with curly brown hair and blue eyes and a mom who worked as a yoga instructor at the local YMCA wouldn’t be interested in someone like me, who brought weird smelling lunches to school and had brought in one of my kanji exercise books to school for show-and-tell, only to have had everyone complain that they couldn’t understand anything I had written.

“Is it because I’m Asian?”

“Well...yeah.”