

Amelia's New Year

For TJ

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An interlude; Amelia and her mother go to Chinatown for Chinese New Year and Amelia starts to get the strange feeling that something has changed...

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Amelia held tight to her mother's hand as they walked through the bustling streets. She was almost seven, too old to be holding her parents hand (at least in her opinion) but still, she clutched on tight. Normally, her mother would be struggling to keep her in one place but even she was slightly in awe of the sights before her. Glowing paper lanterns, the smell of a thousand different foods, puppets, music and a thousand people all crushing and rushing together as the air filled with voices and laughter. She so badly wanted to run off and see everything this place had to offer but she was worried that if she did she'd never be able to find her parents again.

Despite her father's family being so seeped in tradition, Amelia had to admit she'd never felt much connection to her mothers culture. Every year they celebrated the 4th of July and Kwanzaa with her father's family. She could recite Kwanzaa songs from memory, knew their genealogy by heart and always looked forward to celebrating with her grandparents.

But other than eating the odd meal with chopsticks now and again, she didn't know much about the history or culture of her Chinese mother. To be fair, at first neither did her mother; she'd been born in America just like Amelia had and barely even spoke Chinese. But then a few years ago after a particularly festive Kwanzaa she had announced her intentions to get in touch with her roots. Now she was fluent but despite her best efforts, Amelia couldn't speak more than a few words.

Now, she may only be a child but she was bright, perceptive. That's how she knew Auntie Alex was going to marry that man David one day. She could tell true live when she saw it. She could also tell how disappointed her mother was that her daughter barely knew anything about her culture. Their culture really, Amelia honestly forgot she was half Chinese most of the time. She barely looked at all. So she was determined to show her mother she was a proud Chinese girl! Even if she had no idea how.

“Oh look dear, bao buns!” Her mother pointed to the little stall selling fluffy buns filled with pork and spring onions, Amelia’s mouth watered.

“Oh yes please! Uh....qing?” Amelia asked, trying to remember the Chinese word for please.

She wasn't sure she pronounced it correctly but her mother beamed anyway and Amelia felt pride swell in her chest, just seeing her mom so happy made her happy in return. They made their way to the stall and her mother began chatting with the little old man who owned it while Amelia waited.

She glanced around and suddenly got a strange sense of wrongness. There was something not quite right about this, more than her disconnect from her Chinese heritage. She watched as three boys her own age went running past trying to get a kite off the ground despite all the lanterns strung in the way.

She'd always been a girly girl, she hated mud and sports or running around. She liked dolls and make-up, that sort of thing. And yet she was suddenly filled with an odd sense of...what was that word her Granny used? Nostalgia? Watching those boys made her feel like maybe she had done that once even though she knew she never had. They were grubby, but nobody cared. If she ran around with dirt all over her face and knees people would judge her but boys got away with everything.

“Here dear, now let’s hurry on to meet Mei. I just know you two will get on.”

Her mother handed her a steaming bao and Amelia’s thought of nostalgia dissipated as she bit into the soft bun. It was so damn tasty, she’d never tell her Granny but she was beginning to like Chinese food even more than her cooking. They made their way through the streets toward a little restaurant here her mother had insisted on visiting. She’d been coming to ChinaTown a lot the last few years to take language and cooking classes and she was eager for Amelia to meet some of her friends.

“June!” Her mother greeted, waving to a tall, willowing Chinese woman sitting outside a red brick building.

“Rachel!” She smiled, “and this must be Amelia.”

“That’s me!” Amelia grinned with a mouthful of bao, she'd never been shy around strangers.

“Amelia.” Her mother chided, “Don’t talk with your mouth open.”

She swallowed down the food and grinned sheepishly.

“Now, where is Mei?”

“Here I am!” A little girl with dark hair in two pink pigtails jumped out from behind June and rushed forward to take Amelia’s hands.

“I’m Mei, I’m seven and one half and we are going to be friends!”

Amelia’s mother laughed.

“Looks like you’ve met your match for passion and energy, darling.”

Amelia grinned; Mei cocked her head to the side in confusion.

“You don’t look Chinese, how come you don’t look like your Mama.”

Amelia felt her cheeks burn and June began to apologise profusely.

“Just because somebody doesn’t look Chinese doesn’t mean they’re not. People from all over can be Chinese.”

“Amelia took after her father.” Her mom said, “but we are learning about Chinese culture together, aren’t we sweetie?”

Amelia nodded and Mei hung her head a little.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it.” She shuffled, “are we still gonna be friends?”

Amelia smiled, she could tell Mei hadn’t meant to be rude and she was no stranger to putting her foot in her mouth. At least that’s what her mother said.

“Best friends.” She nodded, wanting to make a good impression. “Um....Ni Hao?”

“Ooooh you speak Chinese?” Mei replied, immediately switching to the language and Amelia was lost.

She felt her cheeks flush again as her mother gently explained that Amelia was ‘still learning but she’ll get there’. Her good mood slightly tainted, they stepped into the cafe and Mei led her over to a small table in the corner that was apparently just for them.

“Don’t worry, we can speak English I don’t care! We don’t need grown ups sitting with us anymore, we’re too old for that.” Mei said primly and Amelia nodded in agreement. “Oh and I got you a present! Mama said it would make you feel welcome!”

Mei slid a thin box over to Amelia who took it excitedly and opened it. Inside was a beautiful hairpin with hanging blossoms made from glass that dangled from the end. The wood was rich red brown and the glass vibrant hues of pink and purple; it was the most beautiful thing Amelia had ever seen.

She gasped in pleasure and held it up to the light to get a better look, smiling widely. Suddenly her guts twisted. Why did she like the girly object so much? Something about liking something so feminine felt wrong all of a sudden.

Just like that, the feeling was back, that strange feeling that things weren't quite right. Being in ChinaTown, being here at all felt...wrong. Like she was in the wrong skin or something. Which was confusing because she very much liked her life the way it was. She didn't want it to be wrong or change!

“What’s wrong?” Mei asked, “did I say something wrong?”

Amelia pouted, she didn't want to come off as weird to a new friend but she was also really bad at keeping secrets. She admitted to what she had been feeling and Mei took it surprisingly seriously, nodding along with her eyes focused intently on Amelia’s face. It was almost creepy, the girl never seemed to blink. It made Amelia feel a little special, that somebody found her so interesting.

“So...you feel like maybe you’re a boy or something?” Mei asked and Amelia shook her head.

“No! No way! I’d hate to be a boy!” She pulled a face. “Boys are gross. Plus I couldn’t wear pretty earrings or dresses or anything. Or you’re present!”

“But you feel that weird sad, happy longing feeling?”

“Nostalgia yeah.” Amelia puffed up a bit at that, feeling grown up for knowing such an advanced word.

“Maybe you’re reincarnated!” Mei said with a whisper, “Mama told me about how sometimes people get born but their spirits have lived before, as other people. That’s why some people can pick up talents so quickly, ‘cause in their last life they had done all the practice!”

Amelia pulled a face again.

“So you’re saying I was a boy once? Ew.”

“Maybe.” Mei nodded, “maybe in a past life you were a boy and totally different! That’s so cool, I wish I could remember my past lives. What if I was something cool, like a princess or something? I want to remember that!”

“I don’t remember anything.” Amelia giggled, “It’s just a feeln’.”

“Still, that’s more than I have.” Mei pouted, “no fair.”

Amelia thought hard, trying to force some sort of past life memory to the surface but nothing came; the wrong feeling was fading too as their mother’s approached with more presents.

“Here, we thought you two could wear these to the parade.” Her mom smiled, handing the big red box to Amelia, “hurry up and change.”

Inside was a beautiful dress of pink and gold, with a high collar. Amelia wracked her brain trying to think of the name, it was a special Chinese dress her mom had told her about. Kipaw? Kai pow? Qipao! That was it! Not only was it beautiful and made of silk, it matched her new hairpin perfectly.

Mei was holding up a dress of her own, green and gold, with a wide smile. The two girls giggled excitedly as they changed and Amelia couldn’t help admiring herself in the mirrors on the restaurant walls. She looked so different! She could even see a little Chinese in her face and it made her feel so proud.

“Here dear, let me.” Her mom smiled, reaching down and carefully slipping the hairpin into Amelia’s thick, curly locks.

It took some fiddling, the pin was clearly not meant for her tight curls but somehow her mother made it work.

“The parade is starting!” Mei squealed, rushing forward and grabbing Amelia’s hand.

No longer frightened of the crowd, Amelia ran forward with Mei in the lead, pushing between people’s legs as they made their way to the front so they could see the great dragons and lanterns being led down the street. Amelia could see herself reflected in the mirrors and windows of the shops as they past; she looked so adorable in her qipao and hairpin!

Those same boys rushed past them, trying to find a good view point. Two of them were in traditional Chinese clothes, but they were made of matte cotton. Nothing as beautiful as her silk and embroidery, the other was just in short and a shirt. Amelia wrinkled her nose, boys' clothing was so *boring*, how could they stand it?

She watched the parade with wide eyes; that feeling of things being wrong now completely dissipated. Everything was perfect; she had her mom, a new friend and a new dress! Maybe she had been a boy in a former life but she decided she didn't care and didn't really want to remember. This life was much more fun.