

A Quiet Rage  
By Jamie Hu

I'm always tired of the boyfriend talk. My mom gets a glint in her eyes when she wheedles it into a conversation: *mei-ah, you wouldn't need to cook or drive or die alone if you had a boyfriend.* It's a hidden jab to catch my attention, and even though I'm aware that she does it for her own amusement or out of some long-ingrained habit, I let it get to me anyway.

She's allowed to be angry, my mom. She leads our family like dynamite: bright, powerful, and dependable, with a side of unpredictable explosions. She doesn't like to admit it, but she's a bit of a short fuse, which makes our house a firestorm when she and my brother, who inherited her flame, get into arguments. My mom's rage is the kind that relies on volume: in her case, furious strings of high-octave Mandarin punctuated with her fists. My brother often accuses her of screaming at him, but she just says she's talking loudly. She doesn't recognize her force, the way she bruises the air. I've become numb to that kind of anger because that's just how she is. We all get our rages, and my mom's are just loud.

So it's all the more terrifying when they're not. It's still worse when the four of us are all sitting in the same car, breathing the same stale but electrified air that my brother has zapped with his high school debate experience and love for ethics, philosophy, and unnecessarily long arguments. Once he's off, stopping him is like trying to seal a leak blasting through a hundred different holes. I've pressed myself against the door to try to dodge the flood, but our Toyota Prius just isn't big enough.

"If you don't approve of your friend's marriage, hypothetically—" My brother is arguing with my dad, sweeping his hands through the air in great arcs. "—then it's your responsibility to show your disapproval. Your job as a friend is to make sure that they don't end up miserable. What if their partner beats them? What if there's rape? Or it's just not a good match? Wouldn't it be on you if bad things went down?"

"Not your problem," my dad responds. "Not your life. They're your friend and you should respect their decisions."

"Even if the person is a legit threat?" my brother presses. "What if they have a gun?"

Just then something in my mom snaps. Like me, she hasn't really been part of the conversation, but unlike me, something about my brother's response lights her fuse. Even with my head against the window and my ears on the whir of the AC, I can't escape this one.

"Your boyfriend can't be pro-gun," she tells me over the head of her seat and the roar of the freeway. "If he has a gun and he likes guns and he wants people to have guns, then you can't have him. You can marry anyone you want, but no pro-gun."

She says it with impeccable calm. She doesn't slam the dashboard or whip through the air with her fist. Her voice doesn't rise a note. But I feel it thrum in her tone: this low, burning hatred that clutches the word "pro-gun" like a vise. She's thought about this anger and carried it in her chest, nurturing it and holding it tight. This kind of anger isn't her usual kind, the loud kind that explodes; it's been simmering inside of her as true anger does.

We haven't even seen all of it. She's sitting there in the front seat raving about how America is corrupt and sideways and doesn't know how to punish its criminals, and I can feel that she has more. She snaps that the true criminals sit perfectly safe in their living rooms and smoke cigarettes and champion for easier deaths, and insists that Taiwan is so much better because you can't kill so many people on a subway with a single knife, and I'm nodding and agreeing even though she can't see me sitting taut with a knot in my stomach because I'm only half-listening.

The other half of me has focused on the word "boyfriend." As always, I tuck the word into a pocket in the back of my brain, a simmering basket of mild irritation that grows less and less mild the fuller it gets.

I'm not angry about it, though.

I'm not allowed to be.

How can I, in a situation like this?

Many years ago, a woman was shot dead in front of my elementary school. Her daughter—a smiley girl with springy brown curls—was in my brother's third grade class. She didn't come to school after that, and about a week later, my brother told us that she'd moved away. I remember her name because my mom still mentions her sometimes in this sad and angry tone of voice. My brother's friend. She thinks of all of our classmates as our friends. She remembers them all in various shades of nostalgia.

I want gun control just as much as she does.

I hate that people keep dying.

I hate that we have these conversations on a clock, every one closer to home.

I hate that three people knifed in a subway is not the worst of our crimes.

I hate that my brother's classmate lost her mother, and that she's off living somewhere far from us with a hole in her chest that will never fill up again.

I hate that my mom has to remember that and hears it, still.

But I also hate that she doesn't hear *me*. I hate that she's carried this anger in her chest for so long and remembered and ruminated on it, and that she rails at America for not changing when she has done the same to me. I hate that I keep telling her that I don't want it, I don't want it, I don't want it, and she dismisses me. I hate that she says I'll grow out of it. I hate that she says I need to meet the right person, that after Prince Charming drops into my life I'll change my mind about everything. I hate that she insists that one day I'll want a family so much that sexual attraction—or, in my case, my lack thereof—won't even matter. I hate that she doesn't listen. I hate that she keeps burying it under more important issues so that I have no choice but to throw another small violence into the basket in my chest and close the vise around my own throat.

In no world does my comfort in my identity supersede the lives of those that guns fell every day. I don't deny that our society is crippled, wounded from the inside out, and that a bandaid on my ego won't fix anything. I certainly wouldn't marry Prince Charming if he valued his crown machine gun more than me. My mother is entitled to that brand of rage.

But it sure would be nice to be entitled to mine. They call us invisible, one of the invisible orientations, but they didn't tell me that I wouldn't be heard. They didn't warn me that I would scream into the void until I gave up because in the end being believed wasn't as important as dealing with real problems. They didn't say that people would laugh, not out of derision, but because they thought I lied to myself. They didn't say that I wouldn't be able to defend myself because no one would ever think to give me the chance.

I say that I'm tired of the boyfriend talk, but I'm really tired of *their* boyfriend talk. I'm tired of having to bear it as they grab my arm and brand me into a good girl, a good wife. I'm tired of being talked over, of having my mother's ideas and my family's ideas and those distant relatives whom I've met maybe once or twice's ideas heaped onto me like if they bury me deep enough I might—if they're lucky—not be able to climb out. I'm tired of always being the one to bend over, all the while listening to their claims that I'm the one being obstinate and causing trouble, when they're the ones pointing me towards the gun.

I wouldn't do it. But some would. There's a thin line between wouldn't and would if, and some walk a thinner, more precarious thread than I do. Most people spurn the chance to listen, refusing to hear the difference until it's too late.

I wish my mom would listen. I wish she would pay attention to what she can't see. I wish she would let me fill in the gaps and accept my words as they are, for once.

I wish we all would.