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Paint it Red

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Abstract

Family is complicated. It's even more complicated if you're Oliver—a teenage boy fresh out of high school—and you add restrictive gender norms and a search for self into the mix. In the simplest terms, all Oliver wanted was to paint his nails. Sure, there were other things in life he wanted, like the latest video game, cool shoes, a new camera, a college degree, a sense of purpose. But the one thing that he'd wanted, in the back of his mind since he was eight years old, was to paint his nails bright red and walk out into the sunshine for everyone to see.

But that's not what boys do.

Paint it Red

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Family is complicated. It's even more complicated if you're Oliver--a teenage boy fresh out of high school--and you add restrictive gender norms and a search for self into the mix. In the simplest terms, all Oliver wanted was to paint his nails. Sure, there were other things in life he wanted, like the latest video game, cool shoes, a new camera, a college degree, a sense of purpose. But the one thing that he'd wanted, in the back of his mind since he was eight years old, was to paint his nails bright red and walk out into the sunshine for everyone to see. But that's not what boys do.

The scarlet scarf flew up into the air, the thin, gauzy material suspended gently in the air for just a moment before floating back down into Wei's arms. She whipped the scarf upwards once more, holding onto one end, and it streamed upwards and struck the eye like lightning, a bolt of red against the pale blue sky. The camera shutter clicked. Perfect.

It was exactly the picture he'd wanted, Oliver thought to himself as he lowered the camera from his face and examined the shot. His model and best friend, Wei, looked absolutely striking. Her long black hair and bright red scarf were a sharp contrast to the seemingly endless field of tall brown grass she stood in. This was why this park was such a great place to take portraits. People were a special kind of beautiful when you set them against the backdrop of the heatstruck brown life of the park and let the early summer sun peeking through the clouds illuminate their features gently.

Though he was only eighteen himself, he'd taken countless senior photos here of his fellow students. He'd made decent money from it too. He remembered showing his mom the check from his first photography job and smiling and smiling until his cheeks hurt. His mom had hugged him so tightly that she lifted him and spun him around, even though he was way too big for her to be doing that still.

"You're really gonna make it, little face," she'd said affectionately after she put him down, using that old nickname he kind of hated. "When you were little you always hated having your picture taken. I should have known it was because you were meant to be behind the camera instead."

He had grinned at her smugly. "And you thought it was a waste of money when Auntie bought me that camera five years ago!" he said sassily. His mom's concern had been understandable, since he was a reckless and energetic kid with little patience for sitting still. But when he first got that camera he had spent hours and hours just wandering around the neighborhood finding things to take pictures of. He hadn't stopped taking pictures since then.

"And I've never been happier to be proved wrong," his mom said.

He smiled at the memory, then looked up at Wei. She wrapped the scarf around her shoulders and looked over at him, eyebrows raised in a silent question. Did you get it? He smiled and raised the camera once more and she waved her long rose colored fake nails at him and winked. He snapped a picture at the perfect time, mid-wink.

"You got it, right?" Wei asked, aloud this time, walking over to him. She reached up and took the camera strap off his neck, taking the camera right out of his hands and peering at the small screen. He nodded happily and handed over the camera readily.

"Dude," she said. "The scarf picture looks so good. Any fancy photography person who sees these pics would be like 'wow, hired. I'll pay you 80,000 dollars to put your photos in my gallery,'" she says, putting on airs of snobbiness for her imitation.

Oliver laughed and shook his head. "Thanks, I mean that's basically the goal. But somehow I don't think it works like that."

“That’s exactly the goal. That’s like, the dream,” she said matter of factly. Then she clicked over to the next picture and was distracted. “Oh my god, I look amazing in that one,” she said with a laugh, pointing to the winking picture he’d just taken.

He looked over her shoulder easily, being almost a full head taller than her. “Eh, I’ve seen better,” he said with a false air of dismissal.

She looked up at him skeptically, half smiling. “As if.” She lifted the camera to her face and pointing it right at his.

He wrinkled his nose, the camera lens little more than six inches away from his face. “Wei, you do not know how to take pictures,” he said, stepping away from the camera.

“How hard can it be? You just press the button.” With that, she began struggling to press the button, but her fake nails--which she just got yesterday--seriously limited her dexterity. “Shit, I can’t press the button,” she complained, furrowing her brows in concentration as she lowered the camera from her face and held it awkwardly in order to press the button with the pad of her finger and avoid her rather dangerous nails. He heard a click, and she grinned triumphantly. “Got it!”

“Yeah, I’m sure that was a beautiful picture of the ground,” he said sarcastically.

“Hey, at least I got the button.”

“Your parents will be so proud,” he deadpanned.

She glared at him, handing him back the camera. “Fine, you can have this back. I need really good pictures of me with these nails for Instagram in case I never get them again because they’re impossible to do anything with,” she said grumpily.

“Why did you get them in the first place?” Oliver asked.

“Because they’re pretty,” she said like it was obvious. He rolled his eyes. “It’s part of being a girl. We do ridiculous things to ourselves so that we can feel like the works of art that we are,” she said, serious but also posing dramatically, as though she were a goddess in an old painting.

“But why the nails?” he asked persistently, wanting an answer to the question he’d had since she first showed up at his house waving those nails in his face.

“I can’t explain it, Ollie. It’s like, you have to be a girl to get it. There’s just something about having long painted nails that makes everything you do a little more magical. Like, I may not be able to press the button on your camera or text very functionally, but everything I hold looks so gorgeous in my hands because of these things,” she said, wiggling her fingers. “They’re just so pretty and extra.”

He looked down at his own short bare nails and remembered, just for a second, the look of bright purple polish adorning his nails and gleaming in the light. He remembered his shaky eight year old hands painting his aunt’s nails vibrant red, and he remembered feeling just the way Wei had described: magical. He’d had to focus so hard, trying to paint her nails just right, and when he finished they were terribly messy. But he didn’t know that then. He thought they looked wonderful, shining red--his favorite color--and glinting in the summer sunlight. Then she painted his nails, in easy, precise brushstrokes. She adorned his thumb nails with tiny white flowers, and though he was terrible at staying still, filled with the endless energy of a little boy, he felt that these flowers were so important that he must stay perfectly still until their completion. He had never felt anything like beautiful in his entire short life up until that day.

He had told his aunt that he wanted to have painted nails every day of his life. She told him that he could. Then he went home, and his dad told him that he could not. Normally, when Oliver did something wrong, his dad would scold him, take away a toy or make him sit in the corner. That night though, he did none of those things. He just looked at his son’s hands with a look Oliver had never seen from him before but recognized immediately: disgust.

After all, boys don’t have painted nails. Sure, some men like drag queens or gay men did, and that was fine for them, but it wasn’t for Oliver. He knew that now. He’d never brought up this kind of thing with anyone before, and he never planned to. Some things just weren’t worth sharing. He felt a pinprick of pain in his finger and winced, suddenly realizing that he’d been absently picking at his nails while he thought and his nails had slipped and dug into his cuticles. Wei looked up from the

camera and at him curiously, wondering at his sudden lengthy silence.

“Sorry,” he said, bringing himself to the present. “C’mon, we need some new scenery, let’s get you by some trees or something.” The pair walked out of the grassy field they were standing in and down the dirt path a ways, quiet for a rare moment.

“So, listen,” Wei began after a minute or two, eyes sparkling familiarly. He paused, already guessing what she was going to say.

“Oh no,” Oliver responded immediately. “Whatever favor you want from me, ask someone else.”

“Why?” she whined. “It’s not like you have anything better to do.” Oliver wrinkled his nose at that comment. She was right, he didn’t have anything better to do, but she didn’t have to call him out like that. “Please, my mom is making me help with her friends’ kids’ birthday party and I don’t want to be the only teenager in a sea of judgy Chinese moms and little girls on sugar high. Come with me.”

“As enticing as you make it sound, I’d rather not,” he said, turning and walking down the dirt path they were standing on. He pointed to a nearby tree and she obligingly walked over and leaned on it.

“You have to though,” she said, posing absently.

“Why?” The camera shutter clicked.

“Um ...” Wei floundered for a second, searching for a reason. “Because I’m your friend and you love me and I let you use me to practice taking portraits all the time? Oh! And last week I let you use me to practice taking action shots even though you know I hate moving,” she said triumphantly. Oliver sighed. He always gave in to Wei, ever since they met in first grade and she for some strange reason decided that they were going to be best friends. He didn’t want a friend that was a girl, because girls were boring and didn’t like playing soccer. But Wei had been persistent in her offers of friendship, and Oliver gave in quickly. Within two weeks of knowing her, Oliver couldn’t imagine life without her.

“Fine. When is it?” Oliver asked, tone full of resignation. Wei’s pouting face immediately turned into a sunny smile. He took another picture.

“This Saturday, starts at 1pm, and we’re in charge of a painting activity. Also I already told my mom you’re coming so you can’t say no or else you’ll disappoint her and nobody can survive the Disappointed Face of Mama Xiu,” Wei spit out her sentences quickly, as if skimming through them would make Oliver less likely to take issue with them.

“Wei!” Oliver protested. She just continued smiling at him.

“C’mon, Ollie, it will be fun, I promise. Let’s finish up this photoshoot and then I’ll buy you lunch—as long as it’s under \$12 because I’m a broke ho.”

He smiled reluctantly at that. “Fine, but when you’re a rich doctor in ten years I’ll be expecting you to take me out to fancier places than the local McDonald’s.”

“Ooh, you mean like IHOP?” she joked excitedly. “You got it!”

Oliver shook his head and raised the camera once more, trying to hide his amused smile.

Two days later, he found himself sitting next to Wei at a small table in a stranger’s backyard. The yard was quite large, with a literal white picket fence surrounding it and flowers in planters spanning the entire circumference of the yard. Mama Xiu stood with a cluster of parents gathered in the shade of the awning covering the patio, looking on benevolently as their children ran around the yard kicking no less than four soccer balls at once. Oliver and Wei sat under a tree a little off to the side, surrounded by little girls and a large box of nail polish.

“I did not think this was what you meant by ‘painting activity,’” Oliver complained.

“Don’t worry, Ollie, it’s not hard. We’re just gonna paint their nails. You don’t have to do anything fancy, they’ll just ruin it within five minutes anyways. If they want fancy stuff, refer them to me.” She pulled a handful of bottles out of the box. “We got sparkly, glow in the dark, and standard. Just ask them what they want and do it. Easy-peasy,” she said brusquely.

He nodded, picking up a bottle of red nail polish absently. His dad was supposed to call him today, he remembered. He hoped his dad would call a little early so

he could get out of this party as soon as possible. Then again, his dad was never early.

Oliver set down the nail polish as a little girl walked over to them, smiling shyly.

“Hi,” Wei said sweetly, her entire manner changing immediately. “You’re the birthday girl, right?” The little girl nodded. “Great! Do you want me to do your nails?”

“Yes, please,” the girl said happily. Wei continued talking to her cheerily, helping her pick out a bottle of hot pink nail polish. When the girl sat in the chair across from Wei, Oliver noticed the little boy who had been standing behind her. He looked about six, with big brown eyes and an oversized red T-shirt. His small chubby hands were clasped in front of his chest, and upon closer inspection Oliver realized he was holding a small dinosaur toy and fidgeting restlessly with it, his little index finger running over the dinosaur’s spine over and over again.

“Hi,” Oliver said as gently as he could. He was not good with kids. He glanced over at Wei, slightly panicked. The little girl looked over at them and saw the two boys awkwardly facing off.

“Xi, why don’t you get your nails painted?” the girl suggested. Both boys looked at her oddly, as if they’d never heard such a thing before.

“Good idea,” Wei said. “Ollie, will you paint his nails? We don’t want him to feel left out.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Oliver said. This seemed like a bad idea. Boys aren’t supposed to get their nails painted, and certainly not by other guys who were probably terrible at it. The boy, Xi, sat down across from him. They were quiet for a moment, then Oliver realized he was supposed to talk. “Uh, what color do you want?” The little boy looked at the colors for only a moment.

“Red,” he said decisively. Oliver picked up the red nail polish he’d been holding earlier and opened it. He had no idea what he was doing. Why on Earth had Wei enlisted his help in nail painting? What kind of guy knew how to paint nails? No normal dude had probably ever painted nails in his life, and Oliver hadn’t tried since he was eight. Xi put his toy dinosaur in his pocket and held out his hands, and Oliver automatically took one to hold steady while he painted. Like muscle memory, he knew exactly what to do. He painted Xi’s nails carefully, hands

unsteady but absolutely certain. He tried to focus on his work and not think about what might happen after he finished. He knew Xi’s parents were here, and he still vividly remembered his own father’s reaction when he came home with painted nails all those years ago.

“What’s on your hands?” His dad had asked, as though he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Nail polish,” Oliver answered cautiously, immediately put on edge by his dad’s expression.

“Nuh uh. No way. I can’t believe that aunt of yours put this shit on you. Is she trying to make my son a fucking fairy?”

Oliver actually thought fairies were pretty cool at the time, but the way his dad said the word made it sound entirely different. Like it was something to be ashamed of. Like Oliver was something to be ashamed of. His dad’s discomfort bubbled under his skin, veiled by the thinnest layer of composure. He was not an angry man, but he was not a calm one either. At eight years old, Oliver knew this already. Now was the time to tread lightly. “You will go take that shit off right now, you hear me? You’re a man, Oliver, not a little girl, and you are sure as hell going to act like it.”

“Okay,” Oliver said quietly. His dad looked at him for a long moment, then softened.

“You don’t like that stuff anyways, your aunt is just putting ideas in your head.” He squatted down to Oliver’s level and grinned slightly. “I mean, you’re my little man, right? You’re so much like me already, so active and strong, and you’ve got your soccer and your karate—and you’ve got that little girlfriend of yours. I know you’re gonna be a real man someday, Oliver. But you need to understand that real men don’t wear nail polish, or makeup, or dresses, or any of that shit.” Oliver nodded. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t be both a real man and a polish wearing fairy at the same time, but what he did understand was that his dad wouldn’t be mad at him if he didn’t have painted nails. So it was as simple as that. He never painted his own nails or anyone else’s again. Until today.

It was the work of a few minutes, but when he let go of Xi’s hand and capped the bottle, it felt like he had been absorbed in his work for far longer.

“All done,” Oliver said. Then he noticed a slender older man who Oliver assumed to be Xi’s father looking at them. The man began to walk over. Oliver’s heart stopped in his chest, unspeakably nervous. He should have known better than to paint this boy’s nails. Why had he done that? No father could possibly be okay with seeing his son getting his nails painted like a girl or something. Oliver resolved to speak up, tell the dad it was his idea and not Xi’s fault. He’d rather the blame fall on him than on this innocent little boy who didn’t know any better.

“Xi, what are you doing?” the dad asked when he reached them, brow furrowed. Oliver opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. The words stuck in his throat, as he looked up from his seat at this man towering over him with a question demanding to be answered. He felt like a little kid again. Xi looked down at his nails, then up at his dad, his face breaking into a giant smile, holding up his hands for his dad to see.

“Look!” he said cheerfully. Oliver reached for the nail polish remover automatically, knowing what’s coming. Only, maybe he didn’t. The dad’s face broke into a matching smile to his son’s, and Oliver’s hand froze in mid-air.

“Wow, that looks amazing! And it’s in my favorite color!” the dad exclaimed enthusiastically, bending down to Xi’s level and taking his hands to admire them. Oliver was unspeakably relieved and surprised. The dad scooped up his little boy by the waist, gently indicating to his son hold to his hands above his head so as not to mess up his nails. “Let’s go show your mama, okay? She’ll think it’s beautiful,” he said to Xi. “Thank you,” he added to Oliver kindly before turning and walking away with Xi.

Oliver watched them go, father and son chatting happily, red nails glinting in the sun. It would’ve been a beautiful picture, he thought absently, father and son smiling in the sunlight, heads leaning into each other as they walked away. It was the kind of love Oliver always wanted to capture in his photos. Unconditional. He knew he should be relieved that the father was so accepting, but the relief sat uneasily in his chest. He closed his eyes, unable to explain why relief felt more like jealousy. Unable to explain why he suddenly felt so hollow.

Then the next little girl in line came and sat in the chair across from him, distracting him with her animated chatter and demands of a different color of nail polish on

each nail. For the rest of the afternoon he painted nails and did crafts with Wei and a herd of little girls, and had no time to think about the encounter with Xi and his father.

When the party was over, Mama Xiu gathered them into her little Honda to drive them back to her house, where Oliver was going to stay the night. Wei sat shotgun, chatting enthusiastically with her mom, while Oliver sat in the backseat, looking out the window and not really listening. Then he heard Xi’s name and tuned in.

“Don’t you think it was odd, that Xi got his nails painted?” Mama Xiu asked Wei.

“I mean, not really?” Wei said. “Just because most boys don’t get their nails painted doesn’t mean he can’t if he wants to.”

“I suppose. So odd, boys these days,” she responded, shaking her head in confusion. “Now some like boys, some like boys and girls, some wear makeup but still like girls, and there are all these names I can’t remember for all the things,” she continued. Wei laughed.

“You’re so old, Mama. It’s not that weird.”

“It is pretty weird. But that’s okay,” Mama Xiu decided. “Too much same is boring.” Oliver smiled a little bit. He absently reached into his pocket to check his phone for messages. It was 4:12. No notifications.

His dad was supposed to call at 4:00 so that they could talk right after the party and before his dad had to go get dinner with his new girlfriend. Every time Oliver was late for a phone call, he never heard the end of it. There was nothing his dad hated more than being ignored, especially by Oliver, who had always been his most faithful fan. But it was 4:12 and his dad hadn’t even texted and the worst part was Oliver wasn’t surprised at all. He hated how he’d gotten so used to being let down.

Under normal circumstances, Oliver wouldn’t be too bothered by his dad’s lack of a call. Sure, he’d be upset because he missed a chance to talk to his dad, but he was never angry with him. He was a little angry now. He thought that the least his dad could do was pick up the phone and call him on time. Kids like Xi got dads that lived with them, dads that supported their choices no matter what, dads that called when they said they would and never missed soccer games because they were

“busy” playing the latest videogame, dads that asked about their photography every once in a while. Why didn’t Oliver get a dad like that?

“We’re here, Ollie,” Wei said, hopping out of the car. It was then that Oliver realized that the car had come to a stop in Wei’s driveway, and he’d spent the entire ride to her house working himself up over nothing. It was just one missed phone call.

He grabbed his backpack and got out of the car and followed Wei and Mama Xiu into the house, still trying to mentally talk himself out of being upset. It wasn’t working. He knew if he told his dad he was upset his dad would say that he was sorry. He also knew that his dad would call him a pussy for getting all upset about a phone call in the first place. Somehow that thought didn’t help.

The three of them took off their shoes in the entryway and Mama Xiu headed into the kitchen without another word, already busy with her next task of the day. Wei turned to Oliver.

“C’mon. Let’s go upstairs and we can work on editing your pictures from the shoot on Thursday.” Wei was already walking up the stairs as she spoke, knowing he would follow.

He nodded and followed her up the stairs and into her cramped bedroom. Her family home was large, drafty, and sparsely but eccentrically decorated. Wei’s room was the exact opposite of the rest of the house. It was fairly large, but it was also positively stuffed with stuff. Her walls were a collage of posters, pictures (mostly taken by Oliver), drawings from friends, and pencil sketches of a variety of anatomically accurate skeletons, specific joints and muscles, and cell structures that Wei did herself throughout the years. Her bed was a huge fixture in the middle of the room, with clothes and a mound of blankets atop it. Surrounding it were no fewer than two space heaters, three rugs of conflicting patterns, and Christmas lights strung on every possible surface. Wei danced through the clutter of her room, dodging different piles of clothes, art supplies, and books in her mission to get to the desk tucked in the corner of her room by a large window. She sat at her desk, and Oliver pulled over the cushy chair next to it so he could sit as well.

She opened up her laptop and began looking over the pictures he had shared with her from the shoot with the scarf. She and Oliver looked through them, slowly picking out the best ones.

It was when Oliver checked his phone for the fifth time in the hour that Wei finally closed her laptop and turned to look at him. He could tell by the look on her face that she knew. He’d warned her earlier that he’d probably have to step out to talk to his dad at 4pm, and four had come and gone with no call.

“He didn’t call, did he?” Wei asked. She phrased it like a question, but she already knew the answer.

“No, it’s no big deal,” he started to say.

“Bullshit,” she interrupted. “I know when something’s going on in that funny head of yours.”

“I’ve just been thinking,” he said slowly.

“Ah, a dangerous game.”

He smiled a little at that. “Do you ever feel like—I dunno. Like no matter what you do, you’re disappointing people. Like you can’t do what you want to do because there are so many people who are expecting you to do all this other stuff. Only you can’t do it all. Because you’re just one person and sometimes you don’t want to do any of it. I don’t know. That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Yes it does. What do you want to do, Ollie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

Oliver sighed, deep in thought. He was quiet for a long moment, random thoughts and memories flicking through his head. “Did you know that my dad used to smoke?”

“No,” Wei said hesitantly, clearly wondering where he was going with this.

“Yeah,” Oliver said thoughtfully. “The day I was born, he quit. Because of me.” He remembered his mom telling him the story, how his dad had come into the hospital room and held Oliver in his arms. How that very day he vowed to never smoke again, abandoning his favorite

vice in a single instant, all for the love of a little boy with chubby hands and bright green eyes. “I was the first grandchild in my family, the one they put all their hopes and dreams on. I made everyone so happy just by being alive. I don’t do that so much anymore. Dad thinks photography is a waste of time. He doesn’t think I should be going to school for it.”

“Well, your dad is wrong,” Wei said firmly. “Just because you love him doesn’t mean he’s right about everything. And it doesn’t mean that he gets to control what you do with your life either. Besides, your mom and your aunt support your photography enough to make up for anyone else,” she added.

Oliver smiled a little bit.

“What got you thinking about all this?” Wei asked.

“Uh, nothing. It’s dumb,” he said quickly.

Wei narrowed her eyes at him. “Tell me.” It wasn’t a request.

“Just—you know how I painted Xi’s nails today?”

Wei nodded patiently.

“My aunt painted my nails too, when I was eight. My dad, uh, didn’t react well.”

Wei tensed, clearly thinking the worst.

“No, nothing extreme,” Oliver said quickly. “He just said a bunch of stuff about what ‘real men’ should do and how I shouldn’t be painting my nails and acting like a girl. And I believed him. I still do, I guess. But—seeing Xi and his dad today—it made me wonder if maybe my dad was wrong. And why does he get to decide what I do and don’t do anyways? He’s not even here. He couldn’t even be bothered to call me today. And if he’s wrong about this, what else is he wrong about?”

“You’re right, he shouldn’t get to decide,” Wei said, impassioned. “I can’t believe you never told me about all that.”

“I thought it was just a stupid childish thing at the time. But I dunno, it’s stuck with me this long. So maybe it’s not so stupid.”

“I know what we need to do,” Wei said, that familiar glimmer in her eye. “C’mon,” she said, standing and grabbing his hand to pull him up with her. She pulled him out of her room and down the hall to the bathroom. “Mama!” she called loudly as she marched herself and Oliver into the bathroom. Mama Xiu came up the stairs and peeked her head into the bathroom.

“What you want?”

Wei rifled through the top drawer of the bathroom counter and pulled out a plastic bag full of nail polish. “I need you to paint Ollie’s nails,” she said with a smile. Both Oliver and Mama Xiu looked at her in surprise. “I can’t do it because of my fake nails. I did an absolute shit job on those kids today and I think Ollie deserves better.”

“We really don’t need to do this—” Oliver started to say.

“I think we do,” Wei said, gently cutting him off. “It’s time for some teenage rebellion. Just because your dad doesn’t like it doesn’t mean you can’t do it anyways. If it makes you happy, it’s okay. Besides, Mama says it’s okay, so that’s a different kind of parental permission. Right, Mama?” Wei said, directing her attention at her mom. Mama Xiu didn’t look back at her daughter. Her eyes were focused on Oliver.

“You want your nails painted?” Mama Xiu asked, looking intently at him. “Not what Wei wants. Do you want?”

Oliver looked at her for a long moment, at this stern, loving woman who was like another parent to him. Did he want? He thought about his aunt holding his hand as she painted his short nails purple, about sitting painfully still just so he could feel beautiful for the few hours he wore the polish. He thought about red nail polish glinting in the sunlight, and what a beautiful picture it would make. He wondered if the version of Oliver who wore red nail polish was the one he would finally like a picture of. He nodded. Slowly.

“Yes,” he said.

Wei and Mama Xiu smiled matching smiles, cheeks and eyes crinkling with the force of their joy.

“Okay then,” Mama Xiu said, all business. “To the kitchen.”

The three of them walked down the hallway and down the stairs to the kitchen. Oliver loved this kitchen. It was by no means fancy, with outdated brown cabinetry, an oven more often used as storage than for its intended purpose, a fridge cluttered with family pictures either taken by Oliver or featuring him, and countertops that somehow never looked quite clean in spite of Mama Xiu's constant scrubbing. Nevertheless, it was the centerpiece of the house, where he and Wei spent most of their time gathered around the kitchen peninsula eating and conversing.

Mama Xiu sat across from him at the peninsula, while Wei sat next to him, one arm thrown across his shoulders.

"What color?" Mama Xiu asked.

"Red," Oliver said immediately.

"Ah," she replied with a smile. "Red is good color. Means good fortune and happiness."

Oliver grinned. "I know."

Mama Xiu dug through the bag until she found the red nail polish. She uncapped the bottle and took one of Oliver's hands. "Ready?" she asked.

"Definitely."

And with that, she began painting.

Oliver had forgotten what it felt like, the sensation of getting your nails painted. He could barely feel the gentle brushstrokes except for a slight chill at the points at which the paint edged past his cuticles and onto his fingers. It smelled absolutely terrible, but wonderful at the same time, like the way the summer sun simultaneously warmed his bones and burned his skin—an inexplicable opposition.

He looked down at his hands, watching as one by one, his short, plain fingernails were transformed. They shone in the bright light of the kitchen, beautiful and bold. He couldn't believe he was doing this. He was eighteen years old and so afraid of standing out, of being rejected, of being judged. And yet here he was with his nails painted red, unapologetically beautiful, just like he always wanted to be.

He thought of how his dad would react and winced. He didn't need to worry about that, he reminded himself. He was his own person. Then he thought of how his aunt would react and smiled. He remembered how she always had her nails painted scarlet, with red lipstick on to match. She'd had people tell her that such a bright red was bold for lips so small, and she'd promptly flipped those people off and put on an even brighter red lipstick.

"I think I look great in red, so that's what I'm gonna wear," she had told a nine year old Oliver who witnessed this exchange. "If it was up to me, I'd paint everything I possibly could red. Including you," she said, poking his nose playfully. "You'd look good in red lipstick too, little face." He giggled and shook his head.

"Boys don't wear lipstick, silly," he'd said happily.

She gave him this look he didn't understand at the time, almost a little sad. "They can though. They can wear anything they want."

He looked at her, big green eyes wide with wonder. It was a revelation, of sorts, for him to hear. He didn't believe her—having learned a different view of the world from his father—but just the wonder of hearing someone say such a thing with such conviction was wild enough.

He was starting to believe her now. Maybe boys really could wear anything they wanted.

Mama Xiu drew him back into the present with a gentle pat to his hands. She had finished. She capped the bottle and sat back in her seat with a satisfied smile.

"Beautiful," she said kindly.

"We gotta document this," Wei said. She jumped out of her seat, pulling her phone from her pocket. She stopped a couple feet away and raised her phone. "Smile," she said, preparing to take a picture.

Oliver and Mama Xiu leaned in and smiled, and Mama Xiu took his hands and lifted them towards the camera, showing off the nail polish, which was a shock of red against his pale skin.

"Got it," Wei said. She came and sat back down next to Oliver, showing him the picture with a grin. Oliver stared at it for a long moment. His blazing smile was a shock of

happiness against the backdrop of the dull brown cabinetry.

“It’s amazing,” he said quietly.

He couldn’t believe how much love there was in one picture, in the lean of their heads together and the way Mama Xiu held his hands up with so much pride. It was the perfect picture, containing all the love and happiness he saw when he wanted to take a picture of Xi and his father earlier. He looked at his own face in the picture, and for once he didn’t dislike what he saw. His entire being seemed illuminated, gleaming in the golden summer sunlight pouring through the kitchen window. His eyes shone almost as brightly as his nails, ordinarily pale green but almost golden hued in the sun and crinkled in the corners from his wide smile. He had forgotten how big and bright his own smile could be. He had forgotten what it felt like to be truly beautiful. Now he remembered, and he knew he wouldn’t forget again.