

"FINDING OURSELVES can be messy, but
Laura Gao tells her story of self-discovery with **HONEST** and
VULNERABLE BEAUTY."

—**MIKE CURATO**, Lambda Award-winning author of *Flamer*

"Through hilarious inner dialogue, video-gaming references, and
fun explainers, Gao **EFFORTLESSLY** brings readers into their world."

—**MALAKA GHARIB**, author of *I Was Their American Dream*

"*Messy Roots* is **FUNNY, INTIMATE, ABSORBING**, and
DEEPLY MOVING. What a gift to have this peek into Laura Gao's memories,
in all their sweetness and complexity."

—**BECKY ALBERTALLI**, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Kate in Waiting

"Hilarious, heartfelt, and **BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED**,
Messy Roots deserves to join the Chinese American canon right next to
Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*."

—**R. F. KUANG**, author of *The Poppy War*

"*Messy Roots* surprised me in **ALL THE BEST WAYS**.
It's a book that will stay with you for a long time to come."

—**TILLIE WALDEN**, author of *On a Sunbeam*

"*Messy Roots* is about the hardship of **IDENTITY**
and the beautiful but messy **JOURNEY TO FIND IT**."

—**AMINDER DHALIWAL**, author of *Cyclopedia Exotica*

After spending her early years in Wuhan, China, riding water buffalos and devour-
ing stinky tofu, Laura immigrates to Texas, where her hometown is as foreign as
Mars—at least until 2020, when COVID-19 makes Wuhan a household name.

In *Messy Roots*, Laura illustrates her coming-of-age as a girl who simply wants to
make the basketball team, escape Chinese school, and figure out why girls make her
heart flutter.

Insightful, original, and hilarious, toggling seamlessly between past and present,
China and America, Gao's debut is a tour de force of graphic storytelling.

Epic Reads.com

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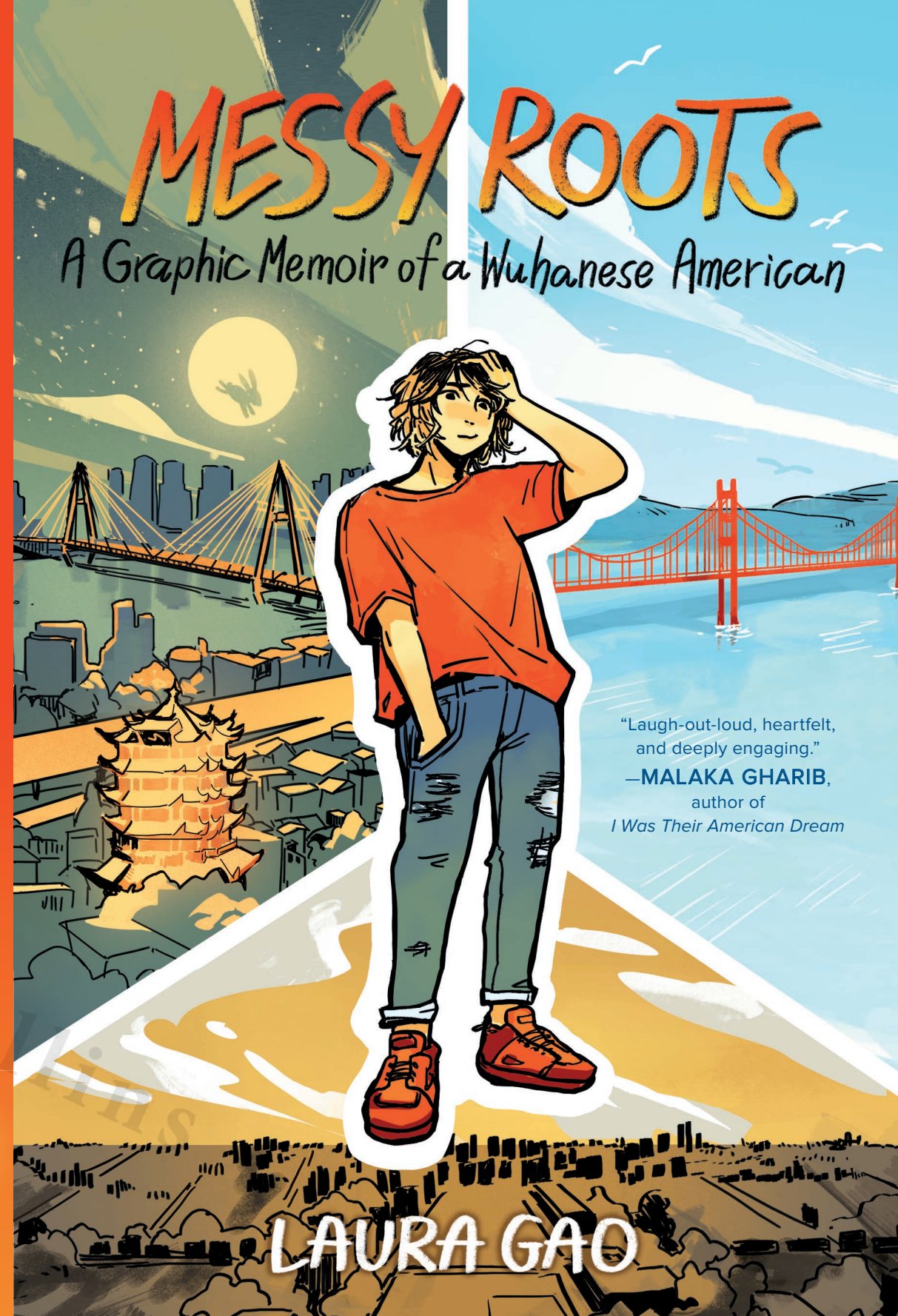
GAO

MESSY ROOTS

A Graphic Memoir of
a Wuhanese American



B+B



"Laugh-out-loud, heartfelt,
and deeply engaging."

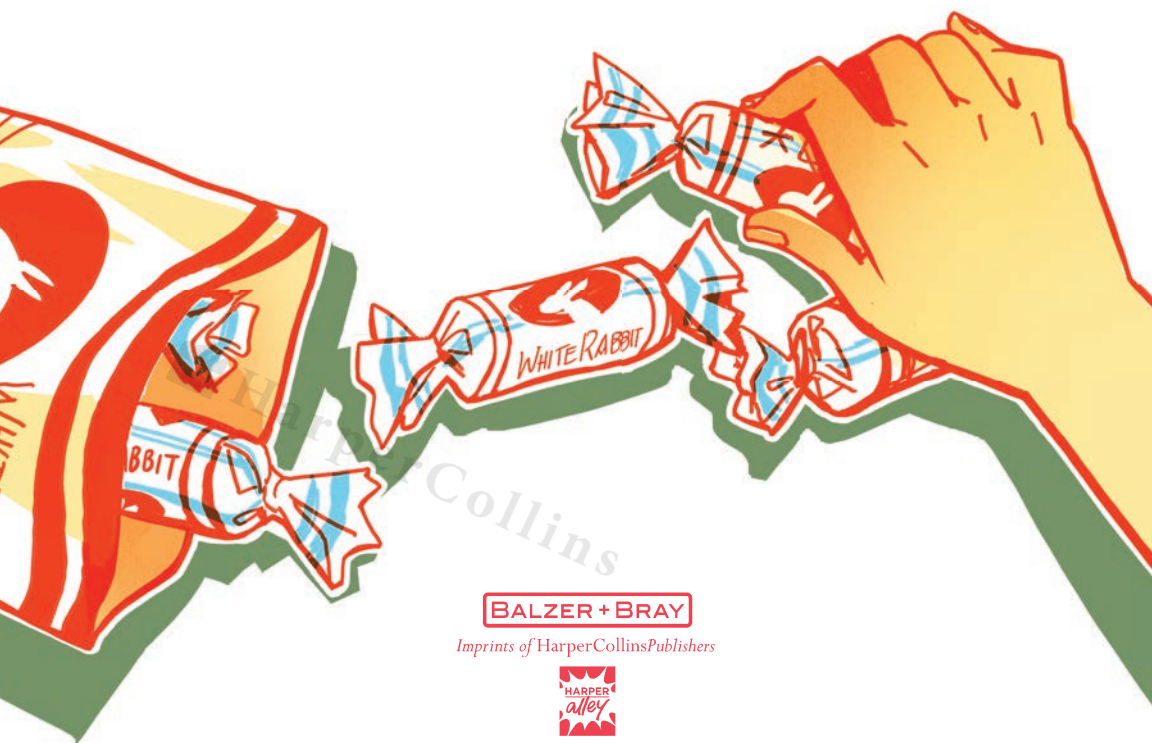
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MESSY ROOTS

A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American

LAURA GAO

with color and art assistance by Weiwei Xu



BALZER + BRAY

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This is a work of nonfiction.
Some names have been changed to protect the
privacy of the individuals involved.

To my greatest inspiration and mentor,
Ms. Alexander, for teaching me how to dream.

To Jerry, for keeping my ego in check while reviewing
this book like a true little brother.

And finally, to my parents, whom I'll always love.
I hope one day you'll read this and understand everything.

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Messy Roots: A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American

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First Edition

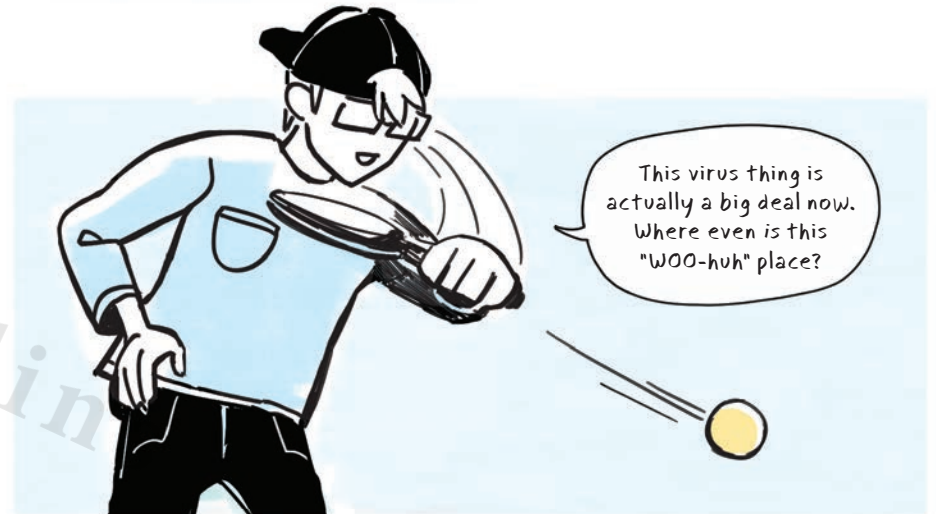


PROLOGUE

SAN FRANCISCO, JANUARY 2020,
RIGHT AFTER COVID IS DISCOVERED.

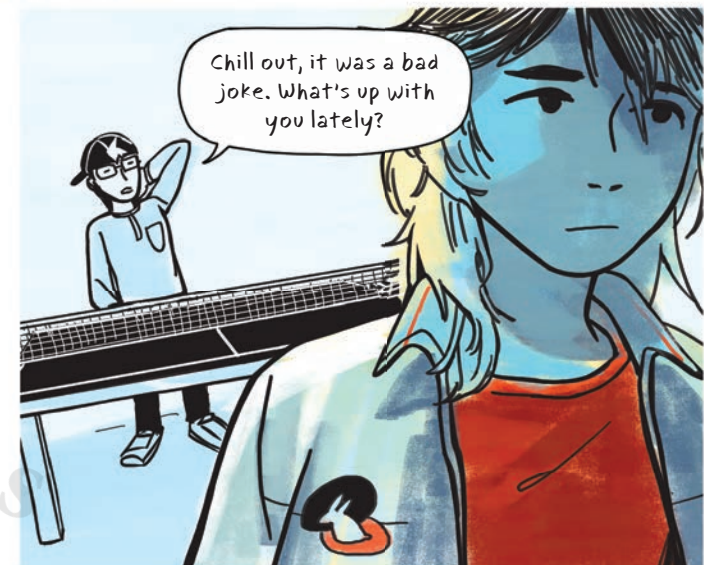
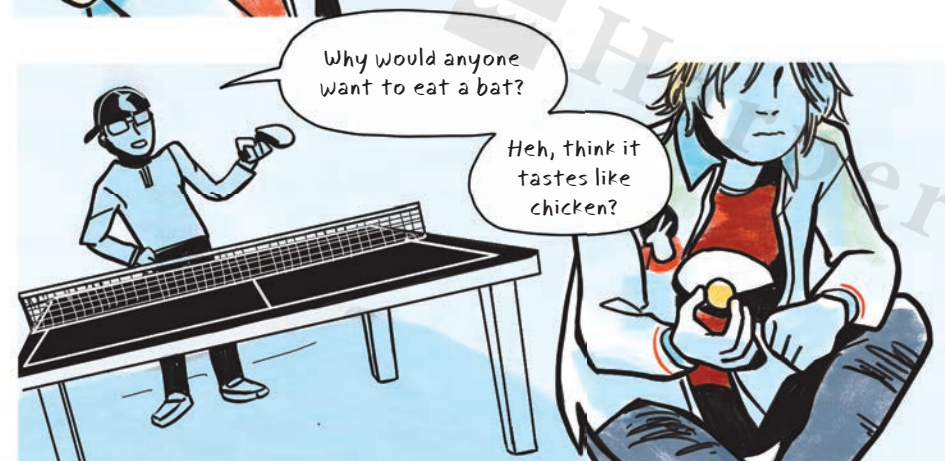
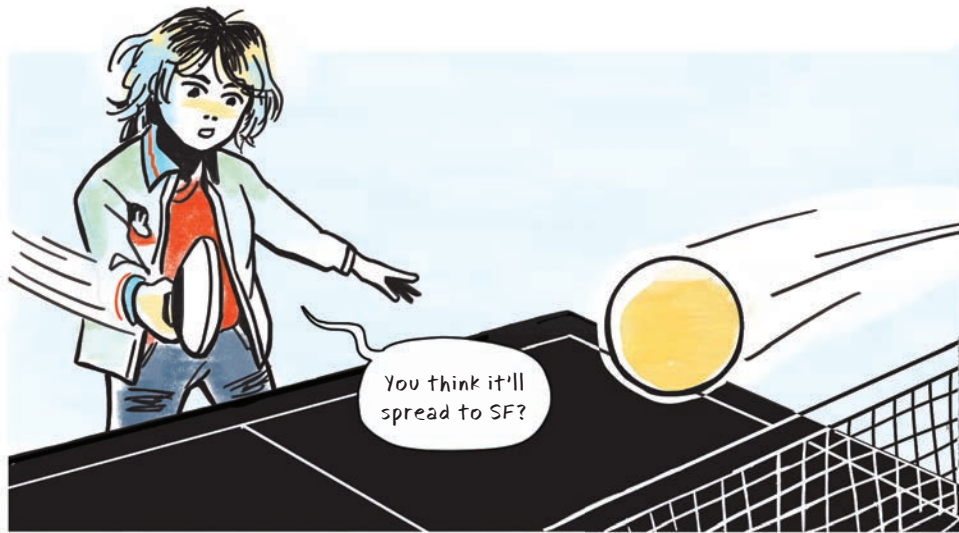


The city of Wuhan is shutting down because of coronavirus. Officials speculate it came from bats sold at wet markets. Let's take some calls for viewers' opinions.



This virus thing is actually a big deal now. Where even is this "WOO-huh" place?

HarperCollins



CHAPTER 1

The Wuhan I Knew

This is the Wuhan I knew.



Infinite rice paddies...



peaceful lilypad ponds...





...and my cousins and me, with no internet and too much energy.



我要割掉你们的耳朵!
Wǒ yào gē diào nǐmen de ěrduo!
I'M GOING TO CHOP OFF YOUR EARS!



Oh right—and our lovely grandma, Popo.

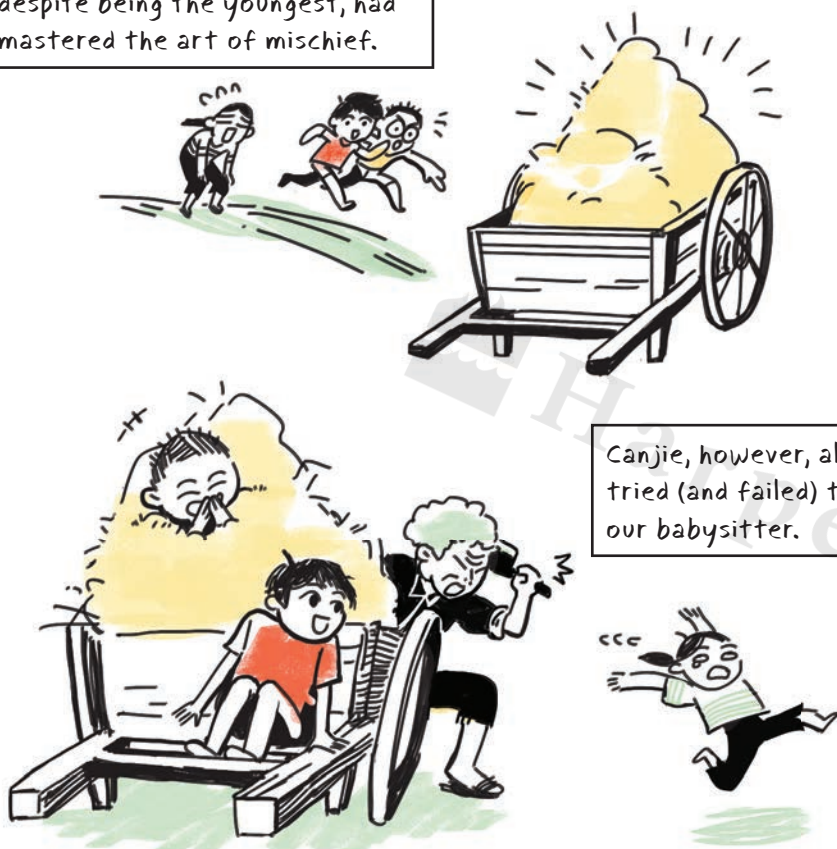
Though she never finished second grade, she had a PhD in getting kids in line.

Our grandpa, Dede, toiled in the fields during the day and enjoyed a round of mahjong with a side of báijiǔ* at night.

*báijiǔ: potent Chinese liquor that puts vodka to shame



Our ringleader was Lulu, who, despite being the youngest, had mastered the art of mischief.



Canjie, however, always tried (and failed) to be our babysitter.

When I wasn't with Popo and Dede, I hung out with my mom's side* of the family in the city. My memories there with my grandma Nainai involved less mud and more math.



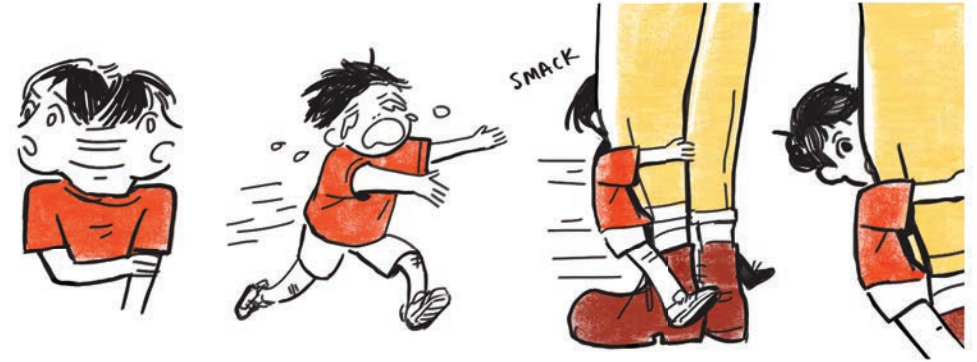
At night, she'd read my favorite Chinese folktales, like the ones about Chang'e and her guardian rabbit and Sun Wukong, the monkey king.

My grandpa Yeye was our resident master chef. His Wuhanese dishes could make Gordon Ramsay cry.



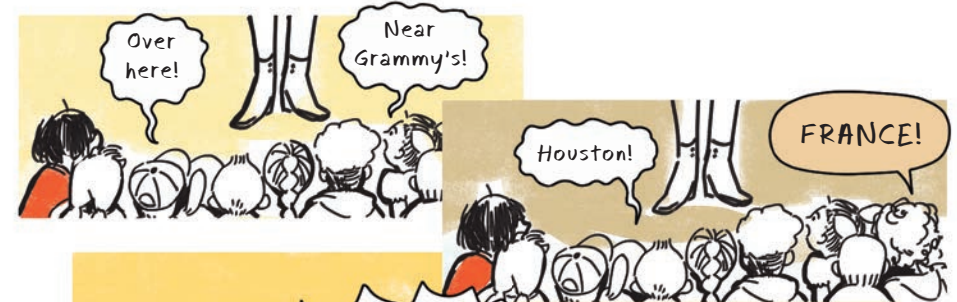
*Typically "Yeye" and "Nainai" are names for paternal grandparents, but I mixed them up early!

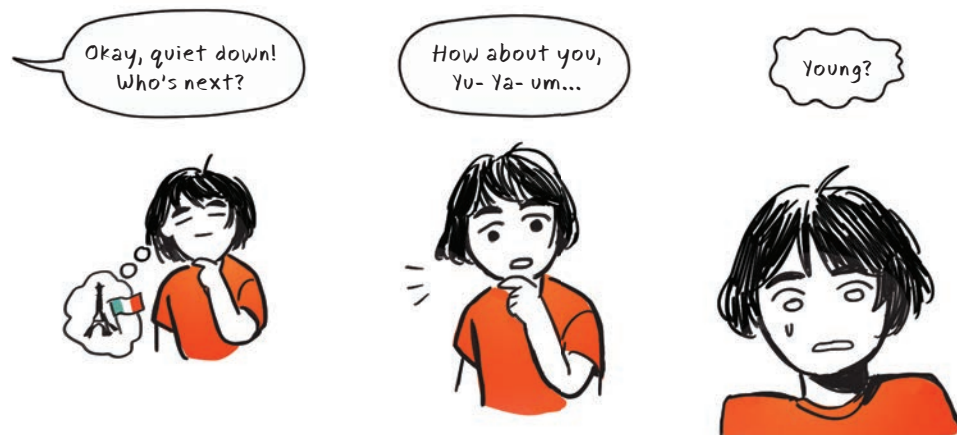
I loved going to the market with them every morning to devour all the street food.



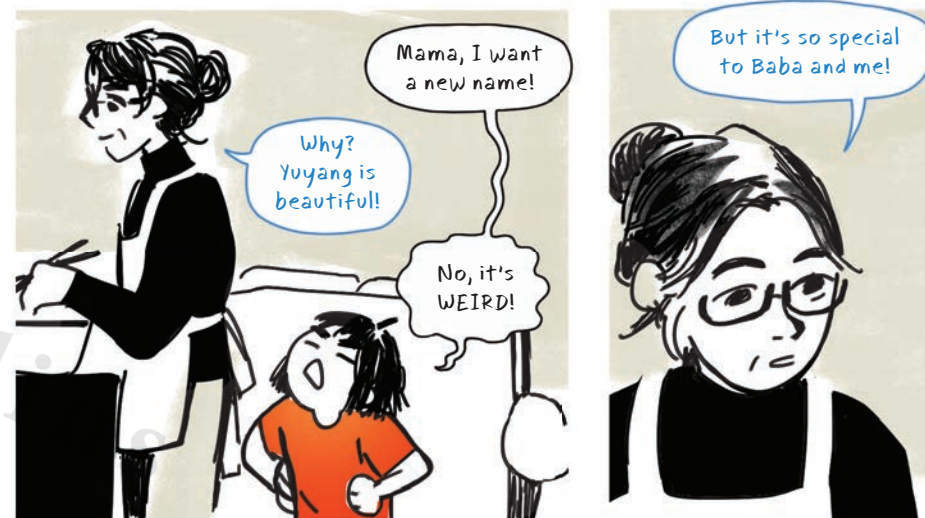
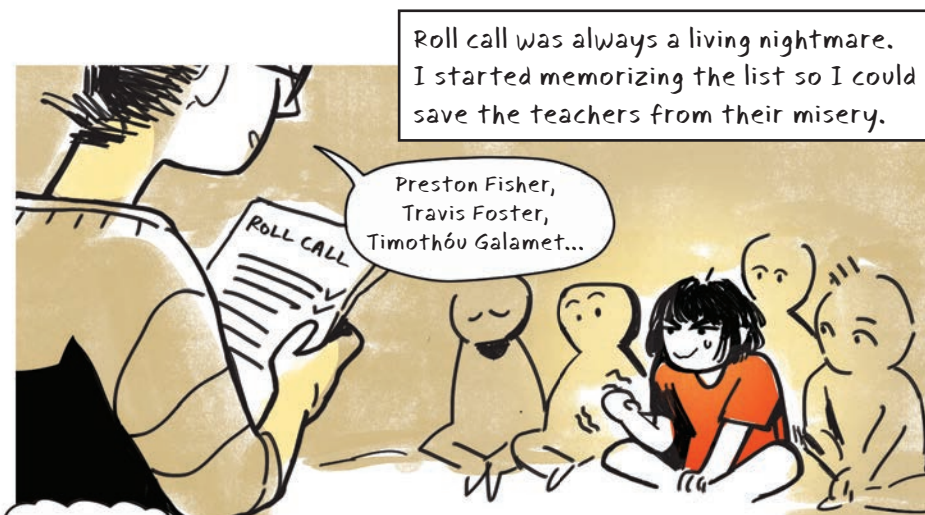


Mom and Dad never even asked if I wanted to come here. I could barely understand my classmates in pre-K. Who'd want to play with the silent kid with the weird bowl cut?





I barely knew how to pronounce "Texas," let alone call it my home. Wuhan was more foreign than Mars here. I wished we'd never moved so that I wouldn't have to explain myself.





The First Lady! Could it get more American than that?

CHAPTER 2

DISS (Deception for Immigrant Sibling Solidarity)

Rule #1:

If one of us hides something from our parents, we both hide it with our lives!

Rule #2

If one of us finds out something our parents are hiding, we must share it!

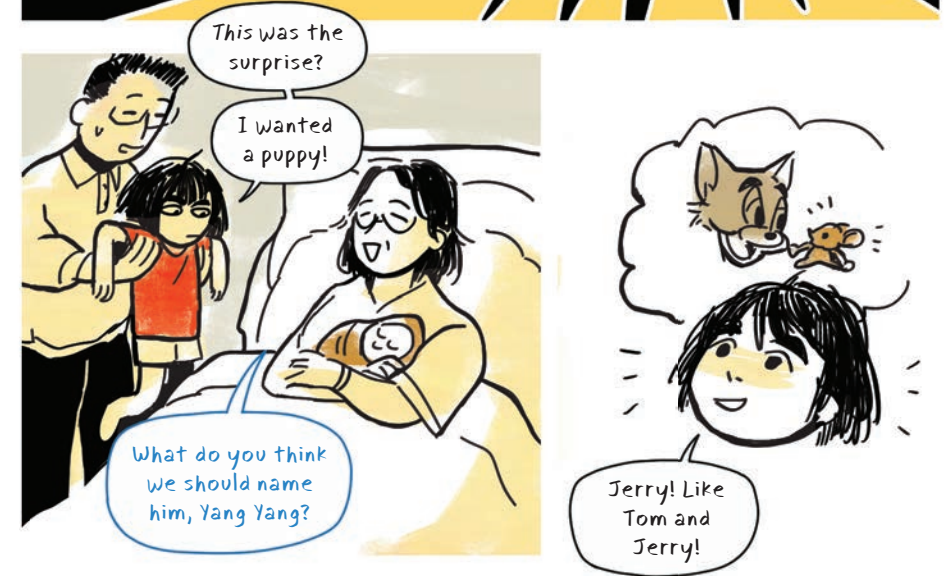
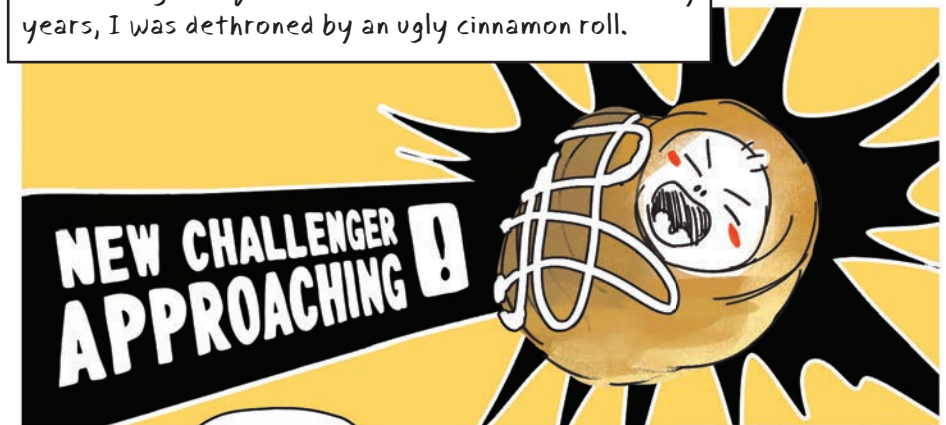
Rule #3

Snitches get stitches!

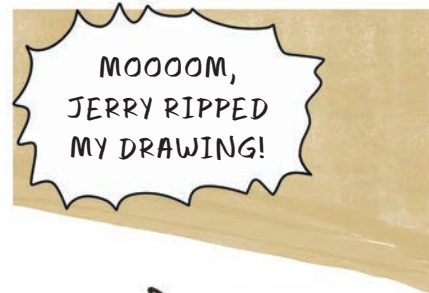
Sign here to mark
your blood oath:

LARA Jerry
CRANBERRY JUICE

After being the queen of attention for five heavenly years, I was dethroned by an ugly cinnamon roll.



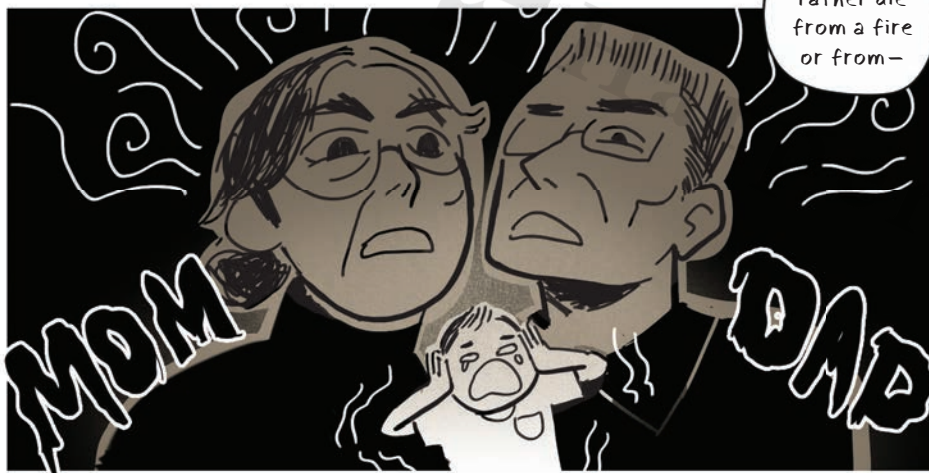
And so Jerry Gao was born that day, the first official American of the family.

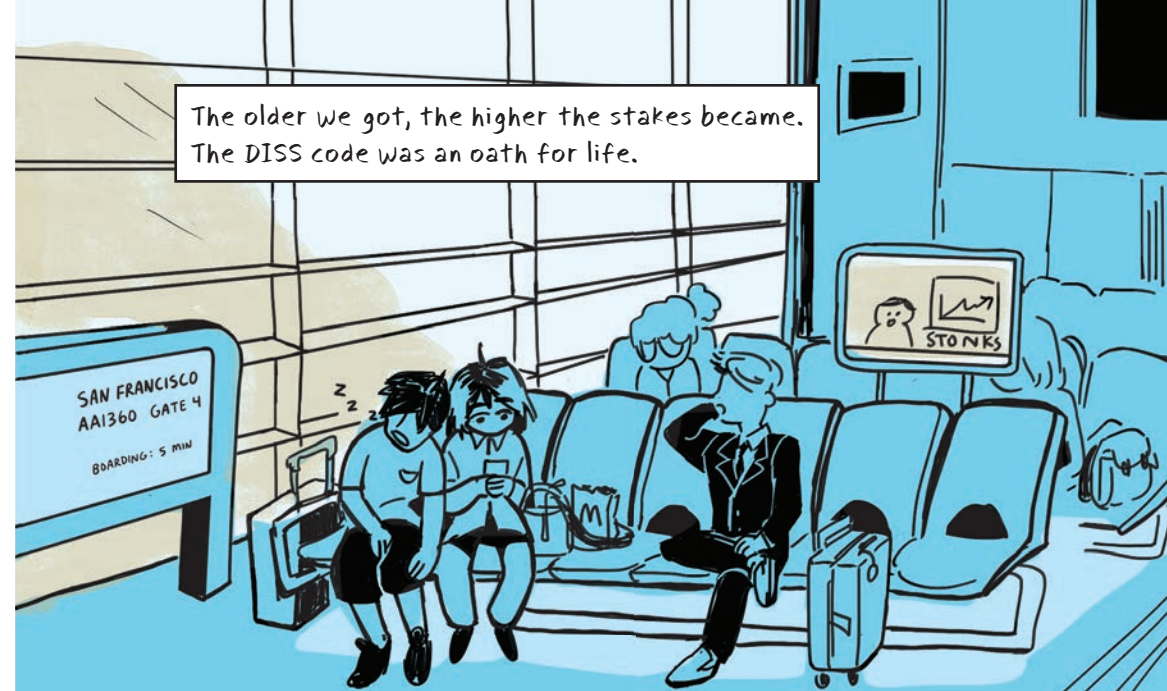
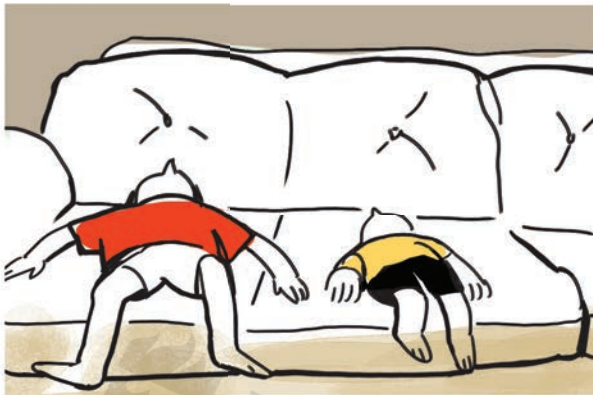
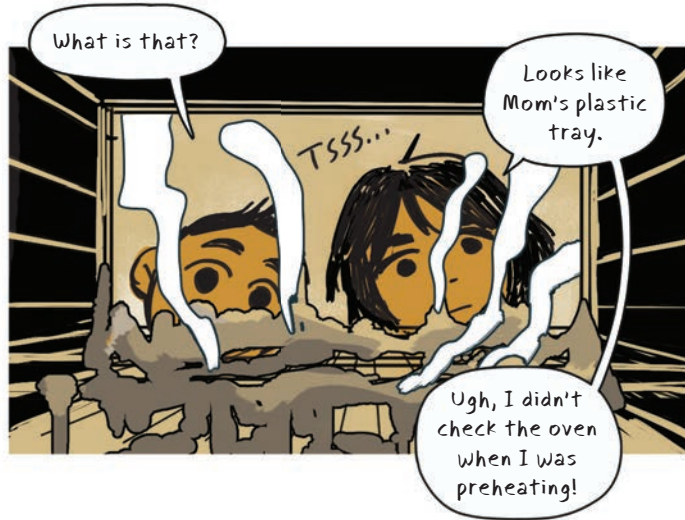


We fought daily. As the older one, I always got blamed.







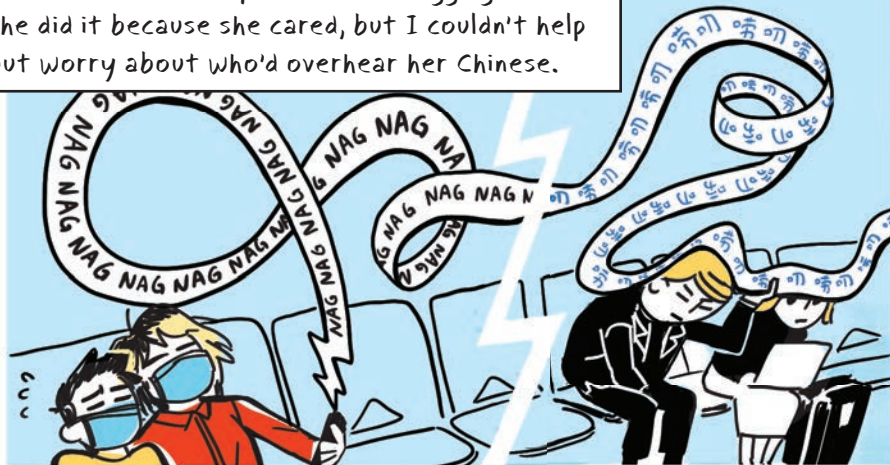


FEBRUARY 2020, AT THE RISE OF COVID.





Our mom's favorite pastime was nagging. I knew she did it because she cared, but I couldn't help but worry about who'd overhear her Chinese.



CHAPTER 3

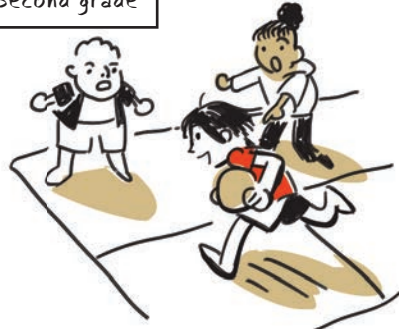
Mathlete to Athlete

Growing up, I moved to a new school every year. Once I picked up some English, making friends as the new kid in elementary school was as easy as liking the same Pokémon.

First grade



Second grade



Third grade

*Laura & andre
sitting in a tree*



Fourth grade



McCoy Elementary was where I felt most at home. My classmates were from all different backgrounds with unique passions. Together, we competed on the mathletes team and I got first place!

Nainai, look!

太棒了!
Tài bàng le!
Amazing!



It was short-lived. I moved one last time for middle school.

WELCOME BACK, COPPELL
COWBOYS & COWGIRLS!

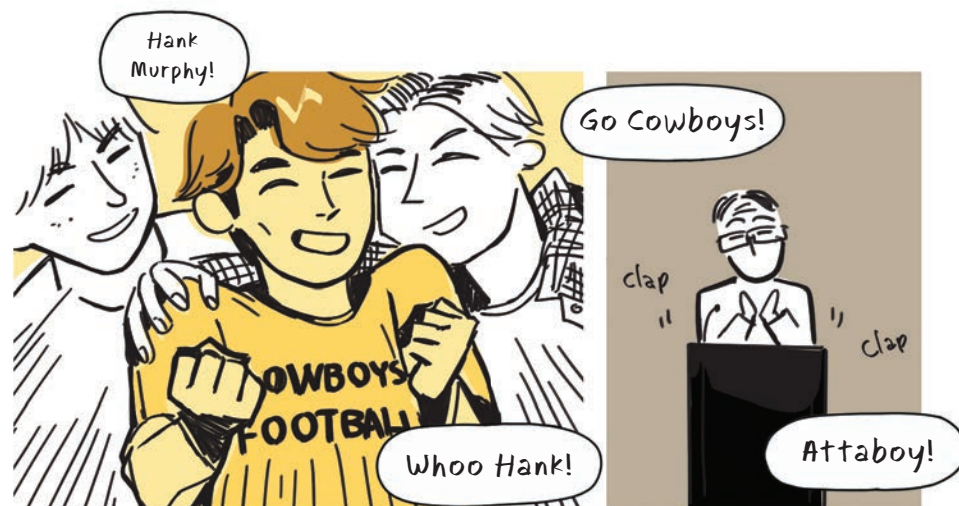
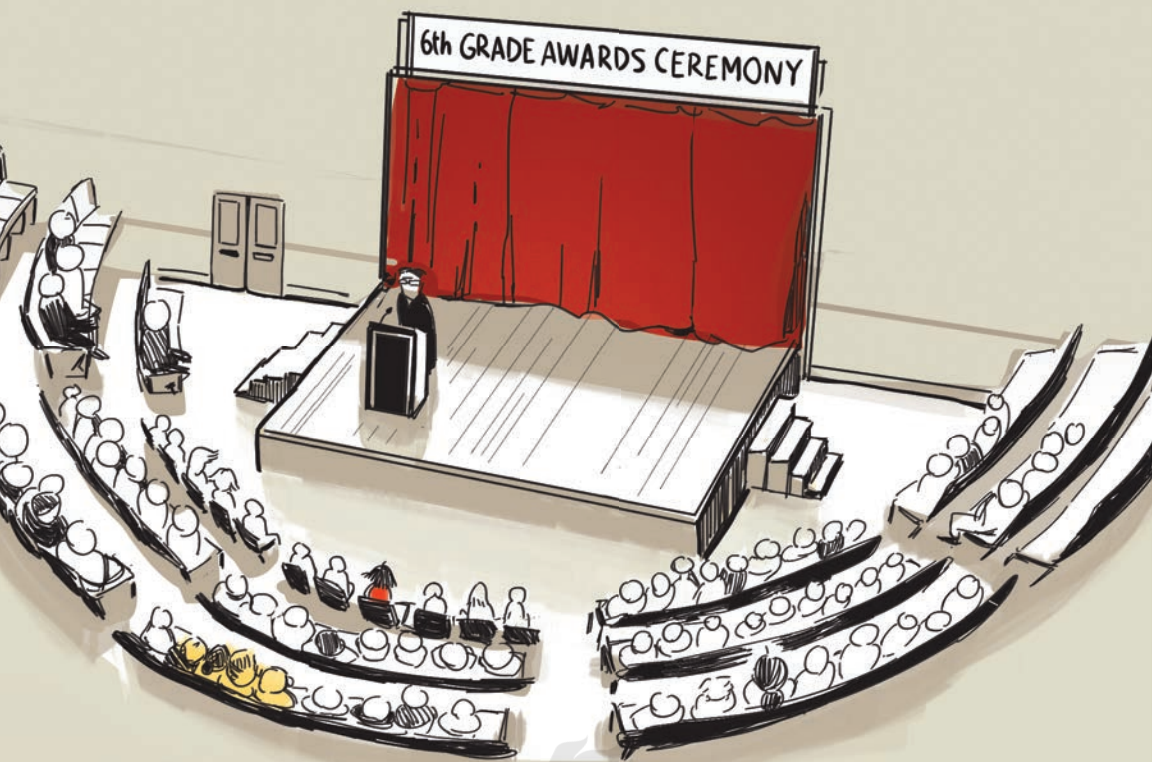
New chink
in class.

COPPELL
MIDDLE
SCHOOL

Heard she was
a mathlete!

What a
nerd.

COPPELL MIDDLE SCHOOL
NORTH AUDITORIUM.



Next category,
Math Olympiad!
Second place
goes to...







My dad and I butt heads on everything. My mom says it's because I'm stubborn like him. But he wanted us to fit in as much as I did.

That summer, my dad and I trained at the YMCA every day.



I kicked off seventh grade by trading in my TI-84 for a fresh new pair of Jordans.

You'll be matched for two on two.

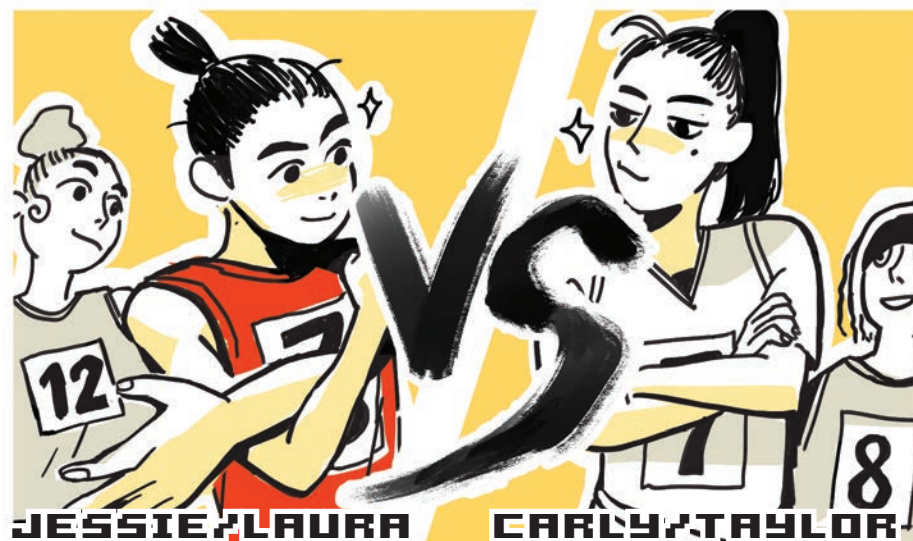


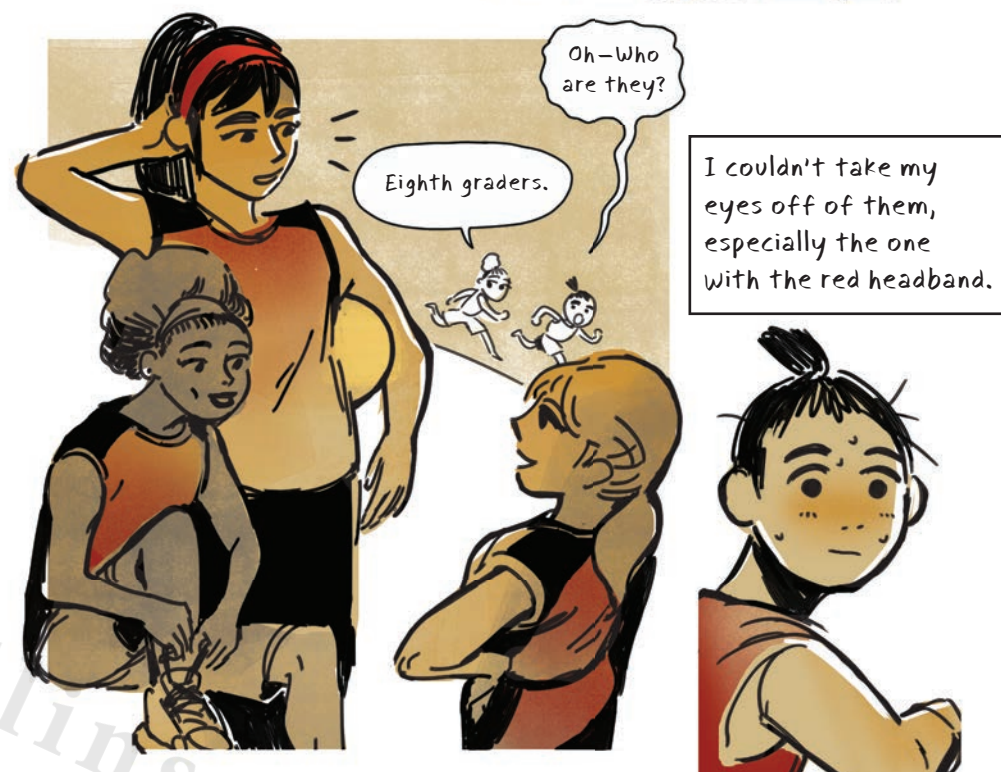
When I blow the whistle, the guards will race for the ball.



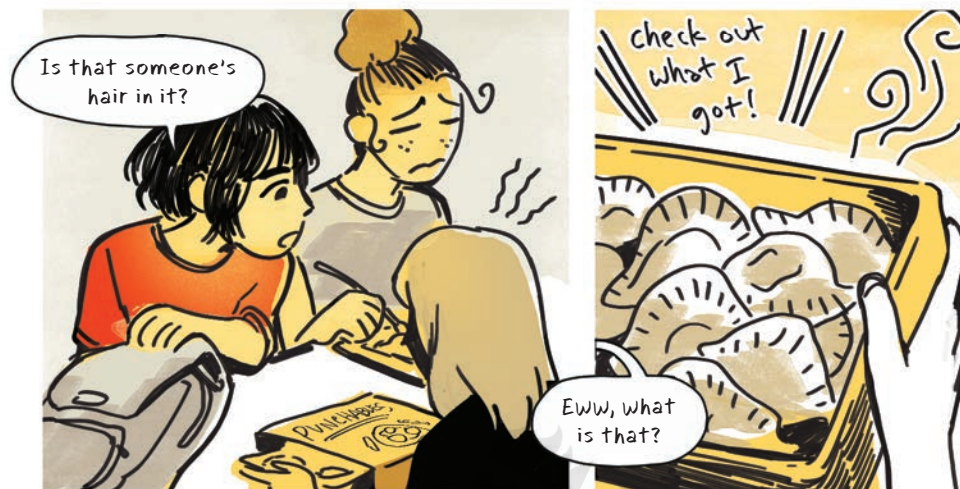
Play until someone scores. Losing team will...

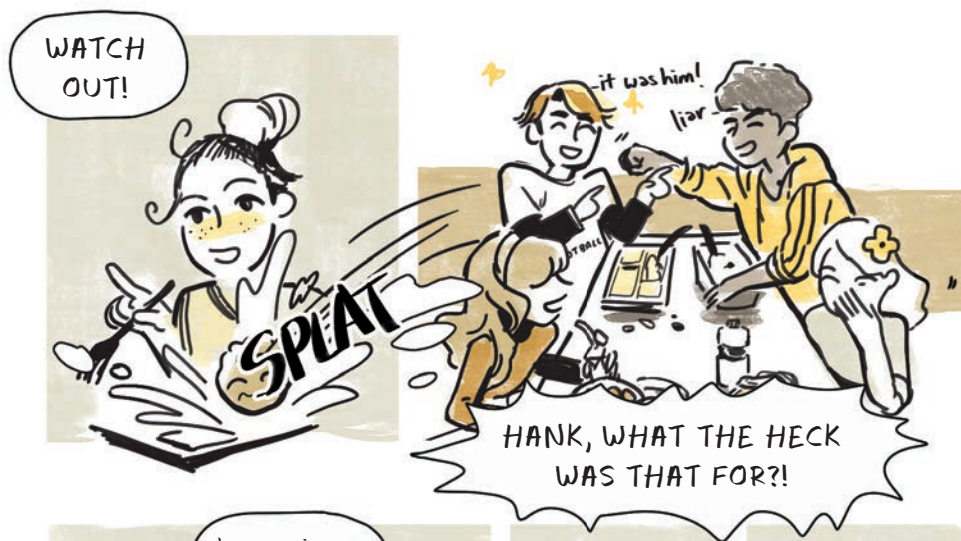
RUN LAPS





She looked so flawlessly cool.
I knew that's what I wanted to be.

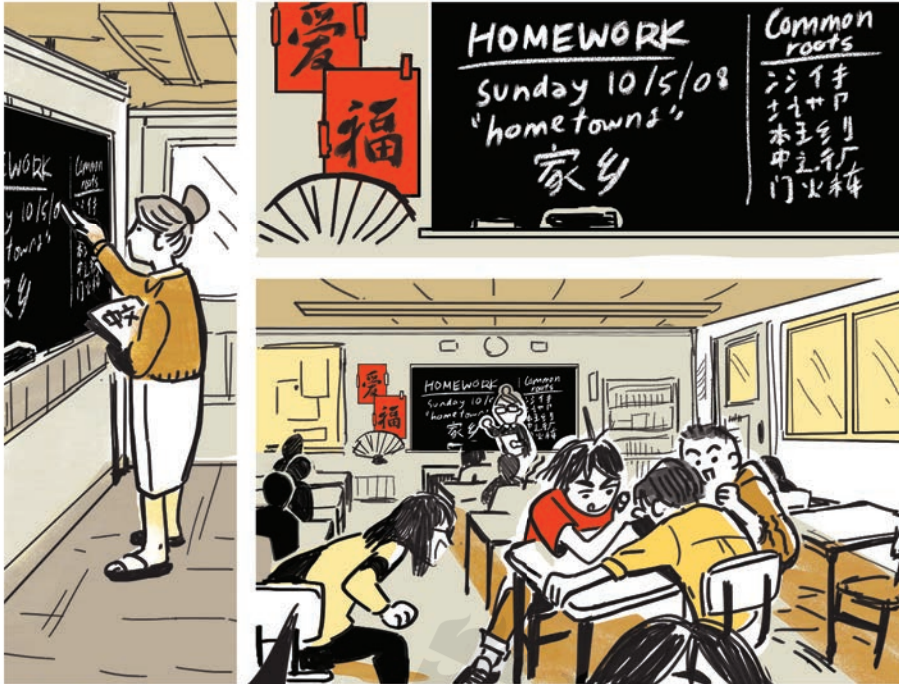


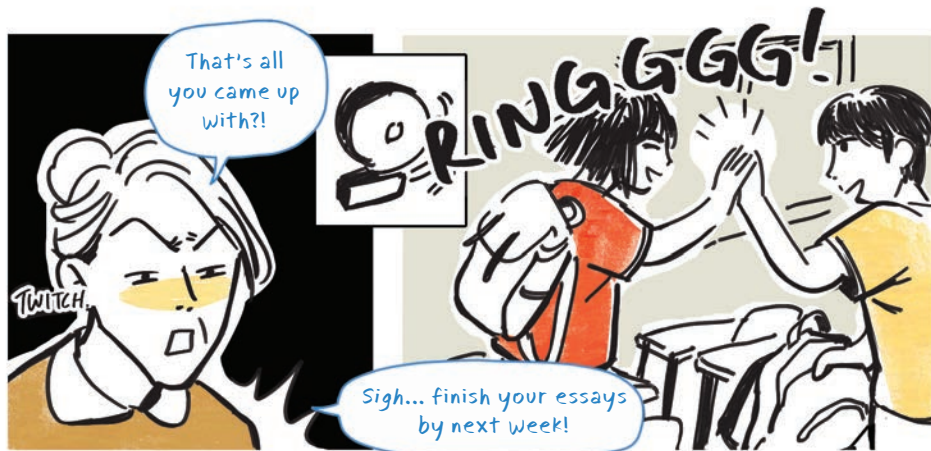


CHAPTER 4

Messy Roots and Ripped Genes

Every Sunday, I went to Chinese school to pay my heritage dues.





Everyone spoke English. Why did I have to learn one of the hardest languages in the world? Mandarin had everything from complex roots to characters that looked like chicken scratch.

I liked to imagine each word as a drawing.

Ai = love

愛

A roof hiding lovers from their nosy parents.

Tears of laughter

A warm embrace



I lost most of the Chinese I knew early on, and calls with my family in Wuhan were rare.

Hey, Nainai!
This week
I had... umm...
one sec.



BABA, HOW
DO YOU SAY
"BASKETBALL
TRYOUTS"??



Lán qiú -uhh-
saba sài!



How did
they go?

Lán qiú
xuǎn bá
sài!



I'll let you know
when I find out.



Nainai said great conversations were like exhilarating badminton matches, one's swing feeding off the energy of the other's serve.

Ours could barely make it over the net.

BEEP
BEEP



How was
Chinese class?

The same. Got
homework on
our hometowns.



Oh? Want help
from Mama
and me?

Nah, I'll just
google it.



You kids are so spoiled.
When we were learning
English at LSU, we
memorized every page of
the dictionary!

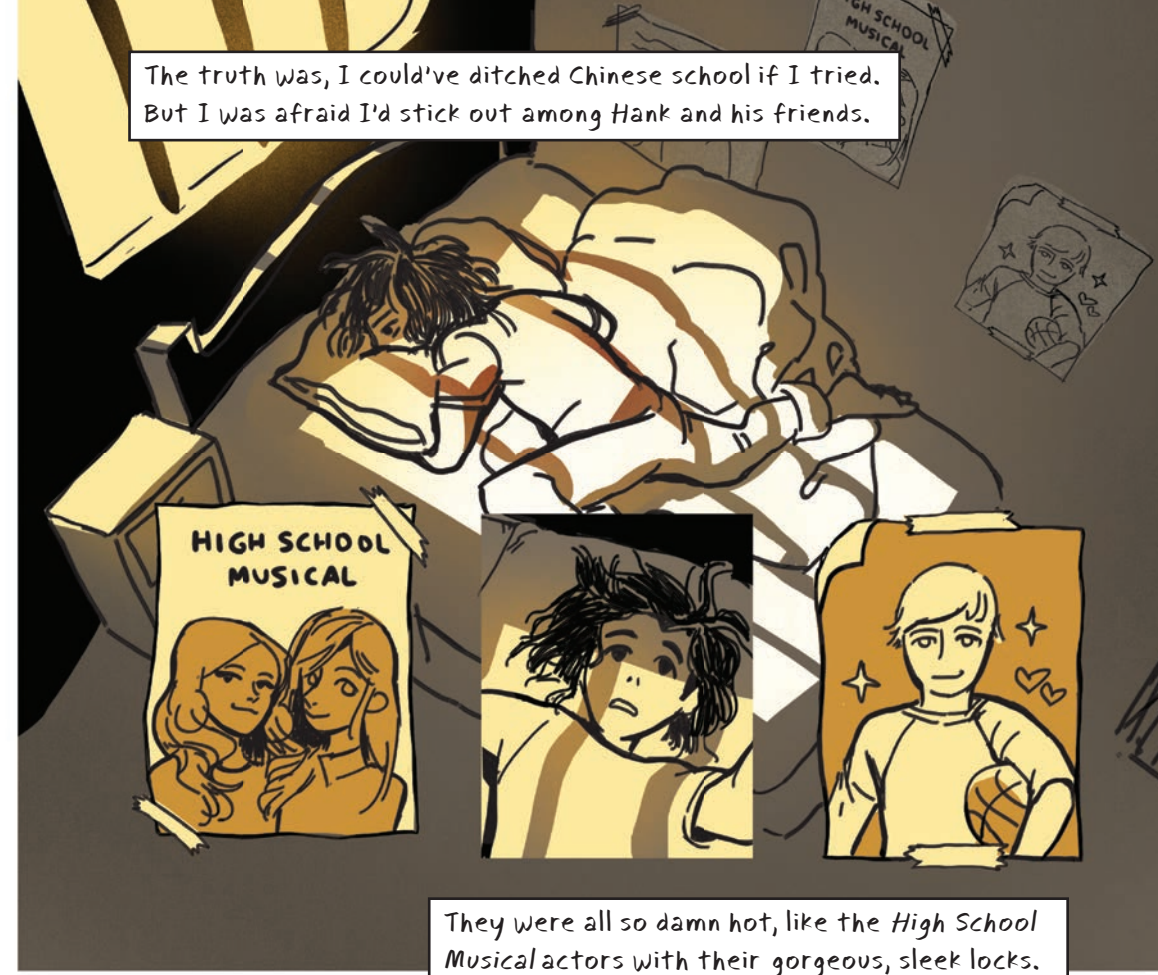
Uh-huh,
sure.



Lesson 4.
Promotions.
"Can we discuss
opportunities for
promotion?"

Can we discuss
oppo-TEN-ties
for promotion?





I tried everything from dyeing to straightening to shaving off my thick black hair.

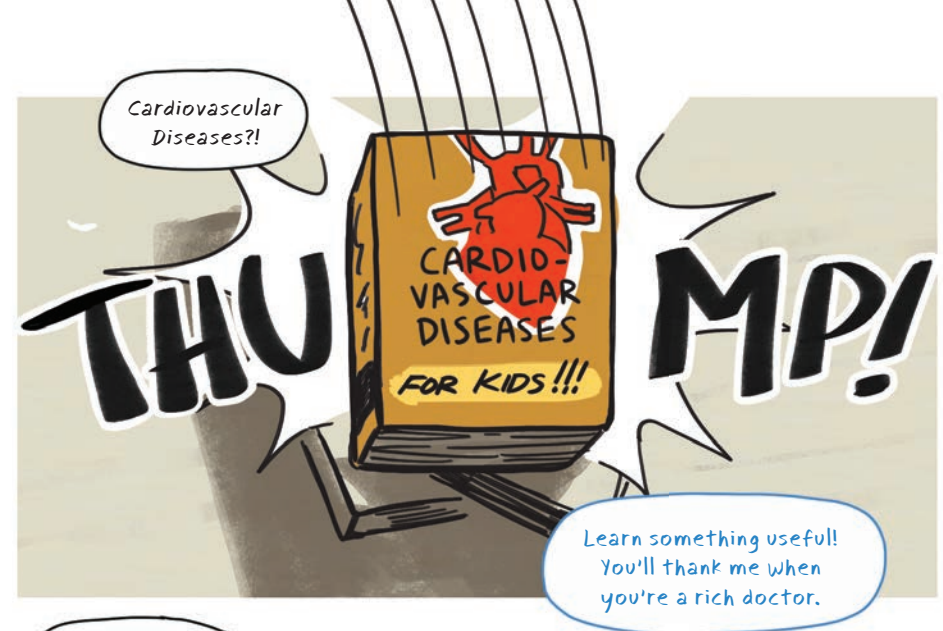


But the roots grew back even more tangled.

My mom proudly said her genes were to thank for my hair.

Frankly, the only jeans I wanted were the ripped ones on Abercrombie models, but she said, "That's what poor people wear."





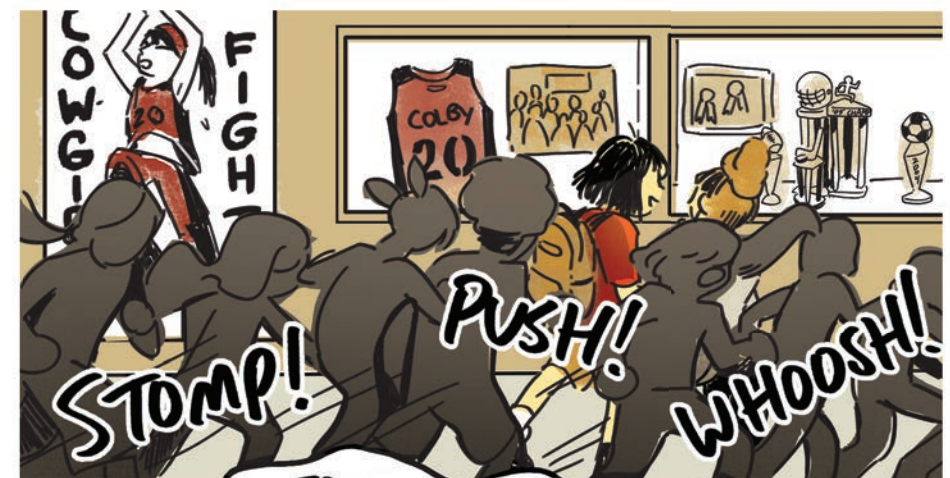
I never asked to be the oldest kid in an immigrant family just a generation removed from poverty. Popo told me stories of how people starved and had to abandon babies.



The only thing I was starving for was Hank's attention. Was I really cut out to be my ancestors' greatest hope?



THE NEXT DAY...



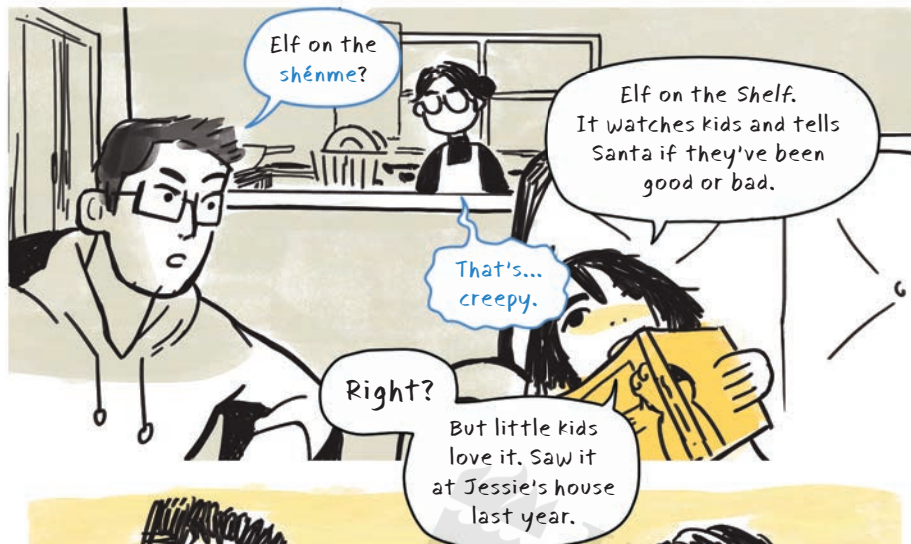


Maybe being a hotshot doctor or artist was out of the picture. But my ancestors could settle for the next Kobe, right?

CHAPTER 5 Merry Jerry Christmas

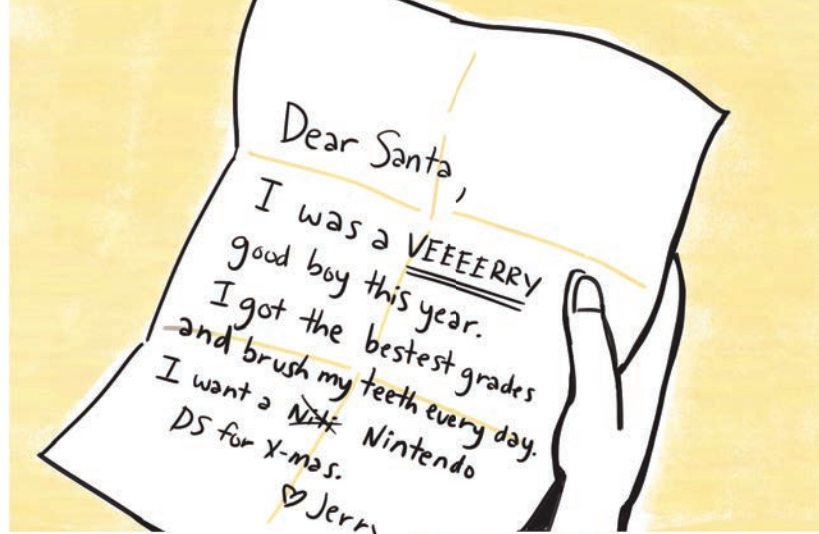


*Not real pages of the book, just from my terrible memory. Check out the real book by the amazing Gene Luen Yang though!



As the family member who had watched the most reruns of *Elf*, I was volun-told to be our family Santa. Jessie filled me in whenever I had questions. No traditions were left behind at her house.





*hóng bāo = red packets of money given to kids for Chinese New Year





This was my favorite part. Besides a few things my parents made me include, I had full creative liberty to craft whatever letter I wanted.



We got better at this Christmas thing year after year. But no matter how pretty everything looked in gold wrapping paper...





...Christmas never felt as magical as in the movies.



Ehh? Did you not press record?



I thought I did—

Do you see a blinking red dot?!



Baba, it's whatever—

Put all the presents back in their boxes and we'll redo it! This has to be perfect!

And fake it?



WE'RE SENDING THESE MEMORIES TO FAMILY!

WHAT MEMORIES?

YOU YELLING?!



I thought at least on Christmas, we'd stop fighting! Who cares if the family sees it?

They're not here and never will be!

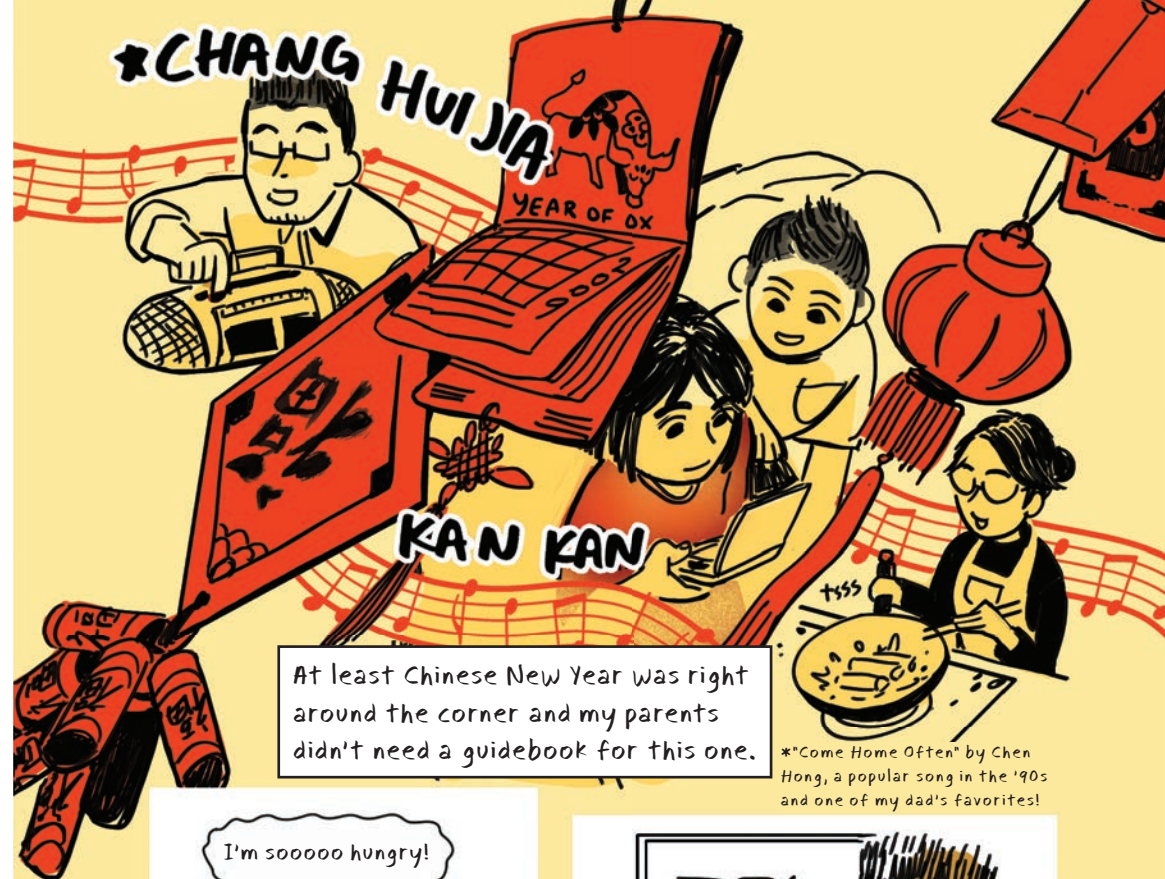
I thought I had followed every step in the recipe perfectly.



But we were always missing one key ingredient.

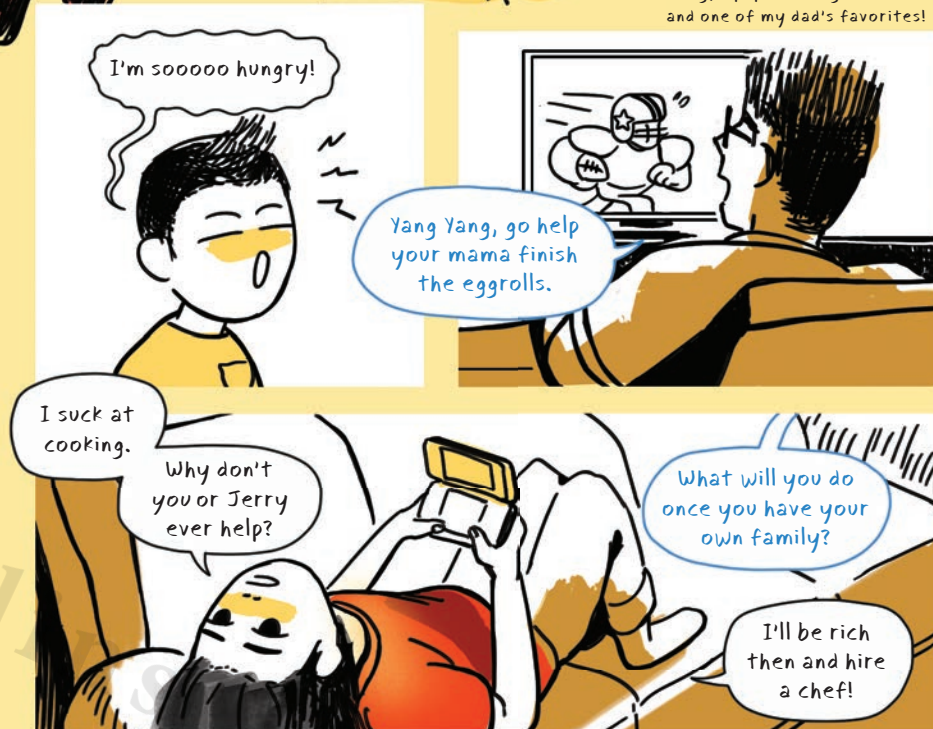


*CHANG HUI JIA



At least Chinese New Year was right around the corner and my parents didn't need a guidebook for this one.

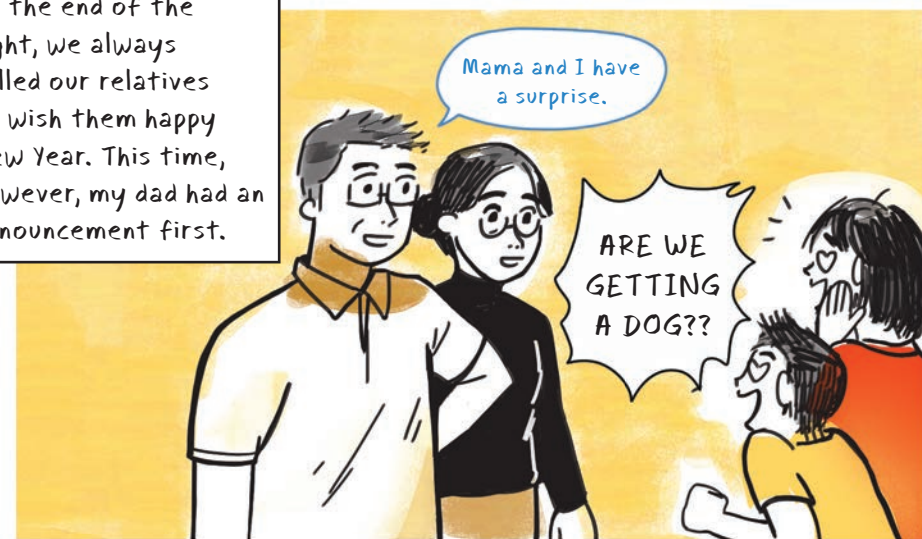
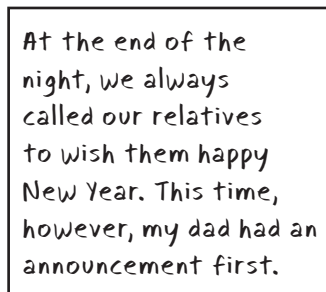
*"Come Home Often" by Chen Hong, a popular song in the '90s and one of my dad's favorites!



Besides, I'd already started one fire too many...

My mom's cooking was rivaled only by Yeye's. After moving to the U.S., she tried to replicate dishes she grew up eating with ingredients she could find here.





CHAPTER 6

The Wuhan I Knew?

My favorite Chinese folktale is Chang'e and her guardian rabbit on the moon.

Chang'e once lived on Earth with her lover, Houyi, an archer who saved humanity from burning up by shooting down nine sun spirits. For his deed, the gods gifted Houyi the elixir of immortality.



One day, to stop someone from stealing the elixir, Chang'e sacrificed herself and drank it, causing her body to fly up into the heavens. To stay close to her love, she decided to land on the moon.



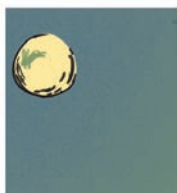
However, I preferred a different version of the story in which she drinks it to escape her suffocating home. She builds her own kingdom on the moon with a guardian rabbit beside her.



During the Mid-Autumn Festival, when the moon is the largest, you can see the rabbit watching closely from above.



Nainai felt sorry for Chang'e. How lost and isolated she must be.



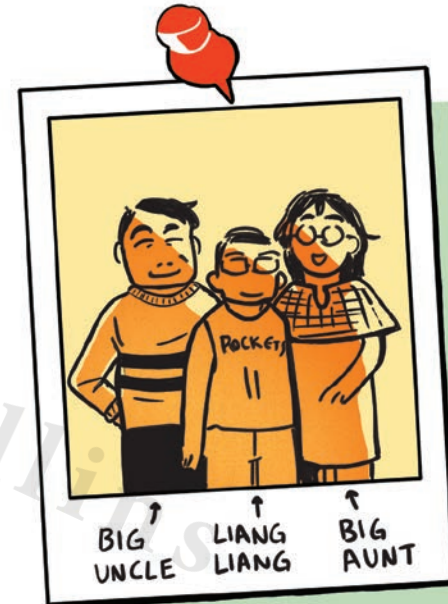
But I was jealous. How freeing to fly away and make someplace your own.

WUHAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, 2010.





MEET MOM'S SIDE





There was at least one thing that didn't need explaining: breakfast! In Wuhan, breakfast is an Olympic sport. There's even a unique verb for it in the Wuhanese dialect: 过早 *guò zǎo*! Little Uncle's family took us kids out on a street food tour.

rè gān miàn
热干面

Hot and dry noodles in sesame paste.

nuò mǐ bāo yóu tiáo
糯米包油条

Fried dough wrapped in sticky rice.

dòu pí
豆皮

Fried sticky rice and meat wrapped in bean skin.

yā bó zi
鸭脖子

Spicy duck neck, only for the bravest souls.

dòu fu nǎo
豆腐脑

Tofu pudding soup, or, as I like to call it, "tofu brains."





There were a lot of Chinese things I didn't understand.

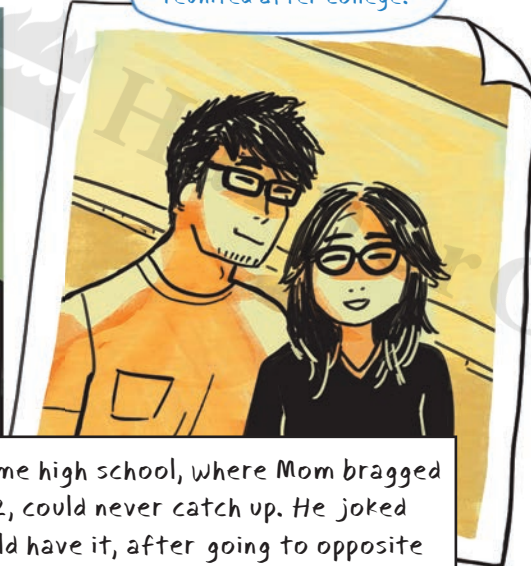
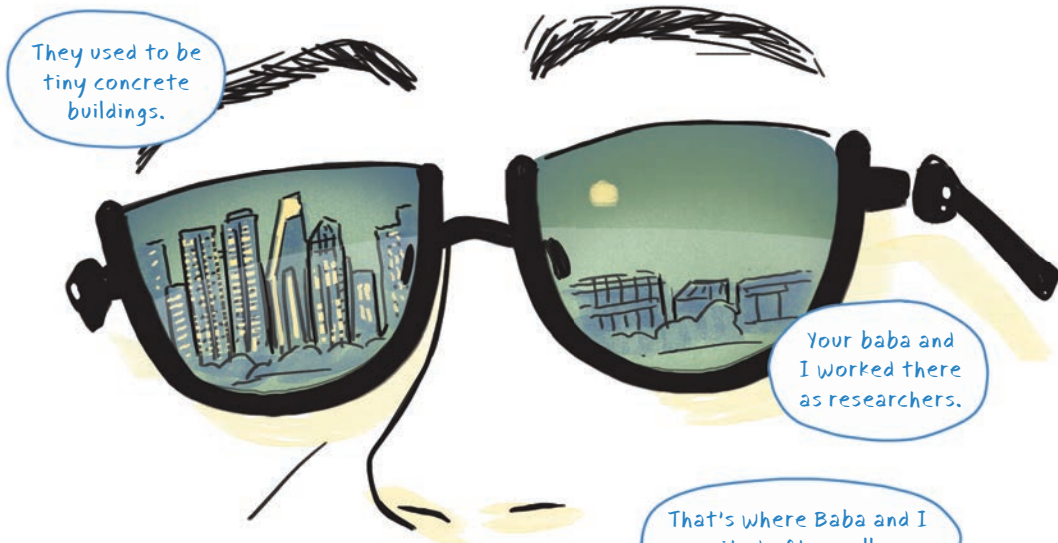


However, some things were universal.



On our last night in the city, we took a ferry down the Yangtze river. Skyscrapers and rows of illuminated bridges formed a stunning light show rivaling the stars above. My Chinese essay did not do this spectacle justice.





My parents went to the same high school, where Mom bragged she was #1 while Dad, at #2, could never catch up. He joked he let her win. As fate would have it, after going to opposite sides of China for college, they met again in Wuhan for work.

