

1000 - 2000 words memoir

Growing up in a diverse Australia

Entries open at 9am August 15, 2020 and close at 6pm on September 15, 2020.

"Good storytelling, original storytelling means you bring something new to the conversation and to the table. If you've grown up feeling different and being an outsider, some might see that as a disadvantage but for storytelling, I reckon it is an advantage." Make your story rich in anecdotes, quotes, description and dialogue.

Chinese Counterfeit

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Each 'hya!' slices through the air as I skulk out from the shadows of the stage to strike a stylish silhouette. I wildly swing prop knives in the air, like I'm hitting an invisible drum kit, creating the required *ambience* before I start my scene. The end result probably looks more like I'm shooing away wasps from a picnic but come on, it's theatre.

It's one of the highlights of the year for us - the middle school play performed in the sprawling, open quad - and this year we've traveled to the Wild West. As a typical 12 year old, runty Chinese kid with a mouth full of metal and circular, thin glasses, known more for his academic ability than anything remotely physical, it's an honour to be included.

A chance to perform in front of a crowd is at once terrifying, exciting and nerve-wracking - like butterflies in your stomach, but using hammers on your insides. You sweat, you feel like you need to pee right before, during *and* after your performance, and you're petrified you'll forget your lines on stage. But when you're performing, it's just so damn FUN.

As I strike a menacing pose on stage, I spy my parents beaming on the first night of the play. They're expectantly watching me through a video camera lens, capturing the footage of their eldest son taking advantage of opportunities they never had. My sister sits in the crowd with them, having run lines endlessly with her brother, and as the cool air draws out goosebumps from my skin, I push away the pressure of living up to the expectation of being the exceptional brother she sees me as.

A big breath. The spotlight snaps on, and shines straight at me -

"Crouching tiger, hidden dragon! Hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Can you tell I had a role written just for me? It's not that common, y'know. Think about Hollywood stars - actors have to be *exceptional* to get a role custom-written for them. In *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino wrote a role specifically for the incredibly talented Christoph Waltz - the ingenious dentist-turned-bounty-hunter Dr. Schultz. This role embraced his unique

ability to be affable and ruthless, and the combination of role and character helped Waltz smoothly construct an Oscar-winning performance.

In my case, it was a character written by our history-teacher-turned-screenwriter as part of the play - a Chinese street food vendor moonlighting as a kung fu master, here to save the day as evil rears its ugly head.

Unfortunately, the character's name has been lost to the depths of a disorganised mind. I secretly hope that it was something cool and mysterious like 'The Stranger', slipping into town like the Man With No Name - a lone wolf haunted by past demons. Deep down though, I know it was something like 'Lee' or 'Chan'.

But to get a *custom-written* role like that; oh - what a thrill!

The day the roles were announced, those same hammer-wielding butterflies were back - the cause of my nervous, jittery shakes on the way to school. I had already pessimistically made my peace with being just another background cowboy in a gang, practicing the perfect finger-guns in the mirror at home, just in case.

I mean, what kind of Chinese guy would be in the Wild West?

Instead, I saw my name high up on the announcement sheet, by itself. The director, handing out fresh, green-paged scripts, called out my name and shoved one into my hands.

"You were so great in auditions - we had to write this role just to fit you perfectly. Do us proud!" He flashed a smile and turned quickly to call up the next person.

"Thanks," I squeaked, hot and cold sensations flushing across my body as my dazed mind processed the news. Clutching the script, hammers pounding away, I scrambled back to my locker to scan through my scenes before school started.

A bubbly, ecstatic feeling started to build, and simmer, as I read through the performance. At the back of my mind, a thought kept tickling my brain - after going through the (not at all) grueling process of auditions (for a middle school play), someone had thought my unique set of skills necessitated a custom-written role...

A kung fu master. A solo scene. A **star**.

It's something we all secretly hope we'll experience some time in our life - being **seen**. Somebody recognises your strengths, appreciates them, and has the power to elevate you to the status of Someone Special. None of the other Asians at school were as unique or would stand out as much as me - the secret Chinese kung fu master who got his own mighty

monologues, and was helping to vanquish evil in the land. I was important to the plot, I was a key member of the cast...

I was special.

That's what I got to say about myself. I'm special. I'm unique. I got a role written just for me, and I'm being recognised for my talent and hard work. I had practiced lines until the patterns lined my throat, I overcame my harsh performance anxiety, I crushed the audition - hell, I could **act**.

Time to knuckle down and get that Oscar.

"From the shadows of the Orient, I lie in wait and bide my time before I STRIKE! Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

Like any Asian career breaking into the Western entertainment world, one bumps up against the bamboo ceiling. When I said I get to 'save the day', what I actually meant was getting one scene introducing my character with cliché, pan-Asian phrases, evoking a feeling of Oriental mystery and charm, and then another where I foil the villain's plans...only to have the hero, a tall white cowboy, *actually* capture him and deliver the triumphant monologue with a winning smile, while I get relegated to being a security guard.

For the little Chinese boy, they were able to rustle up a rice paddy hat, a blue silk-ish looking robe, and a black tunic. The curved knives, used in a previous performance of *Sinbad*, had been intricately painted with vaguely Arabian patterns. The cherry on top of this mess of a sundae were my actual, Harry-Potter-like round glasses.

Yikes.

But I didn't care about how wild the costume was, because I looked *intimidating* for once in my life. Clutching these lethal-looking knives and striking aggressive kung fu poses, I was worlds away from the nerdy, sensitive, oft-bullied kid I'd become. Just like all the films Dad and I used to watch off burnt DVDs purchased from sketchy-looking Hong Kong stores, I was living my dream of embodying Bruce Lee - a Chinese action hero superstar that was well-spoken, clever, and stood up for justice. I would be the one to lay traps, to unravel the villain's dastardly plot, and use kung fu to fight against evil!

If only I could have finished the embodiment with rippling muscles and abs...

As you'd expect, I knocked it out of the fuckin' PARK. Perfect performances, night one, night two, night three. The rapturous applause for my scenes screamed success, and the accompanying bouts of laughter rang proudly in my ears.

They would have extended the season, y'know, but you gotta leave 'em wanting more.

That's show business, baby.

"I have trained my body and mind to be the ultimate master of kung fu, and cut you into slivers with a single blow. Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

...And yet, standing on stage in the cool air each night, rice paddy hat awkwardly sliding down my head, I feel like an imposter. I'm dressed up in a confusing imitation of what my parents were able to escape - the grueling, back-breaking work in the fields and factories of China, contrasted with luxurious silken robes - to pantomime a ridiculous combination of Asian stereotypes. Glancing at my parents while on stage in this outrageously garish outfit, I feel a trickle of second-hand embarrassment for myself.

Am I seeing pride in their eyes? Or shame?

Every cheesy, overtly Asian reference draws peals of laughter from the crowd, and as the waves of amusement lazily roll towards the stage, I can't help but wish I was a bit taller, or a bit stronger, or have a bit more of a commanding presence. I mean, are you paying attention? I'm the Chinese butt of the joke!

What I *actually* want is to give them the **best** of what it means to be Chinese. I want to be like Bruce Lee, kick down the doors of a Japanese dojo, and proclaim that '中國人不是東亞病夫!' (Chinese people are not sick men!). I feel like a cheap imitation, a weak follow-up to all the progress that Bruce was able to make in the world. I'm a formulaic Chinese character saying lines that Chinese people would never say, and acting in ways that Chinese people would never act.

I was just another Chinese counterfeit.

I wish I could have shaken off that feeling, and act as if it didn't matter. I mean...even if the role was well-intentioned, it was just so...rubbish. It didn't represent us. It sold a fake story, rather than true humanity, and reduced my heritage into a handful of recognizable "Chinese" phrases. It was just so phony.

But as the child of a first-generation Chinese-Australian family, I knew how important it was not to fuck it up - we wanted to fit in, and to do that, we had to either sit down, or stand out.

If that meant using lazy stereotypes to portray my culture, so be it. No matter how fake or full of cliches the role was, I had been chosen because I was talented, and I'd put all my efforts into making the most of the situation.

Hell, I could **act**, right?

But as I launch into my final monologue before engaging the mastermind behind the conspiracies and mysteries of the town, another insidious thought seeps in through the cracks -

Was I actually the special, talented actor I thought I was? Or was I chosen because I was Chinese, someone to make sure the impersonation was more than a passing resemblance?

It sits there at the back of my mind - a small papercut that stings every time it's touched, widening slowly, kept in check only by the bandaged delusions of 'I'm special', 'I'm unique', 'I'm talented'...

Better not to think about it too much. It's my time to shine.

"Get ready, foul demon, for I will vanquish you with kung fu! HYA! HYA! HYAAAA!"

It's time for curtain call, and as we've rehearsed so many times, I get my own spotlight. Five seconds in the limelight, showing off my knife skills to an outrageously complimentary crowd, and throwing in a few more 'HYA's to really get them going - truly, an Oscar worthy performance.

I remember the feeling, even all these years later...the adoration of a glorious audience, the euphoric rush as I was hugged and kissed by my family after the show, and the joy I saw on my parent's faces for their son being celebrated and included by his Australian peers in opportunities that they never had.

Like I said, most Asian careers bump up against the bamboo ceiling. And though I hadn't been able to smash through it this time around, I'd like to think I had cracked it open just a little bit, in my own little part of the world.

The knowledge that my sister had seen someone like herself on stage - her brother! - and maybe inspiring her to take her own steps to break through...well, doesn't that just make it all worthwhile?

Who cares if I have to don a paddy hat and say some crassly-written lines? This Chinese counterfeit got to be a **star**.

Of course, next year I had two lines as Pirate No. 5 in *Peter Pan*.

That's show business, baby!

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

DRAFTS BELOW

V4: Chinese Counterfeit

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Each '*hya!*' slices through the air as I skulk out from the silky shadows of the stage to strike a stylish silhouette. With all my pent-up nervousness, I wildly swing prop knives in the air, as if I'm a kung fu master, creating some *ambience* before I start my scene. The end result probably looks more like I'm shooing away wasps from a picnic but come on, it's theatre.

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A chance to perform in front of a crowd is at once terrifying, exciting and nerve-wracking - like butterflies in your stomach, but using hammers on your insides. I loved the freedom of acting like someone else for a small amount of time, using my performance to whisk people away to another world - a form of escapism from my academic studies, I guess. Being able to access these opportunities was a product of my parent's sacrifice to get us into private schools; only now do I realise why all our clothes were from Target, on sale, why we stocked up on counterfeit DVDs when we holidayed in Hong Kong, and why my phone was always three generations older than all my friends.

As I strike a menacing pose on stage, I spy my parents beaming on the first night of the play, expectantly watching me through a video camera lens, capturing the footage of their eldest son taking advantage of opportunities they were never able to. My sister sits in the crowd with them, having run lines endlessly with her brother, and as the cool air draws out goosebumps from my skin, I push away the pressure of living up to the expectation of being the exceptional brother she sees me as.

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Unfortunately, the character's name has been lost to the depths of time and my disorganised mind. I secretly hope that it was something cool and mysterious like 'The Stranger', slipping into town like the Man With No Name - a lone wolf haunted by past demons. Deep down though, I know it was something like 'Lee' or 'Chan'. Typical.

But to get a role like that; oh - how it made me feel!

The day the roles were announced, those same hammer-wielding butterflies were back - the cause of my nervous, jittery shakes on the way to school. I had already pessimistically made my peace with being just another background cowboy in a gang, practicing the perfect finger-guns in the mirror at home, just in case.

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"Thanks," I squeaked, hot and cold sensations flushing across my body as my mind processed the news. Clutching the script, hammers pounding away inside, I scrambled back to my locker to scan through my scenes before school started.

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A kung fu master. A solo scene. A **star**.

It's something we all secretly hope we'll be recognised for some time in our life - the moment you're **seen**. Somebody recognises your strengths, appreciates them, and elevates you to the status of Someone Special. None of the other Asians at school were as unique or would stand out as much as me - the secret Chinese kung fu master who got his own mighty monologues, and was helping to vanquish evil in the land. I was important to the plot, I was a key member of the cast...

I was special.

That's what I got to say about myself. I'm special. I'm unique. I got a role written just for me, and I'm being recognised for my talent and hard work - I beat them all! I practiced those lines until the patterns lined my throat, I overcame my harsh performance anxiety, I crushed the audition - hell, I could **act**.

Was an Oscar on the cards for me, too?

"From the shadows of the Orient, I lie in wait and bide my time before I STRIKE! Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

Like any Chinese career breaking into the Western entertainment world, one bumps up against the bamboo ceiling. When I said I get to 'save the day', what I actually meant was getting one scene introducing my character with cliché pan-Asian phrases, evoking a feeling of Oriental mystery and charm, and then another where I ambush the villain (dressed in black), chasing him around town, foiling his plans...only to have the hero, a tall white cowboy (dressed in white), *actually* capture him and deliver the triumphant monologue with a winning smile, while I get relegated to being a security guard.

For the little Chinese boy, they were able to rustle up a rice paddy hat, a blue silk-ish looking robe, and a black tunic. The curved knives, used in a previous performance of *Sinbad*, were sourced from a prop basket and had been intricately painted with vaguely Arabian patterns. The cherry on top of this whole mess of a sundae were my actual, Harry-Potter-like round glasses.

A confusing, yet unquestionably *Asian* character, wouldn't you agree?

But I didn't care about how wild the costume was, because I looked *intimidating* for once in my life. Clutching these lethal-looking knives, striking intimidating kung fu poses, looking like an all around badass, I was worlds away from the nerdy, sensitive, oft-bullied kid I'd become. I was finally living my dream of embodying Bruce Lee, just like all the films Dad and I used to watch off burnt DVDs from sketchy-looking Hong Kong stores - a Chinese action hero superstar that was well-spoken, clever, and stood up for justice. My character was going to be the one to lay traps, unravel the mysteries behind the evil machinations in the small Midwestern town we were supposedly in, and use kung fu for good!

If only I could have finished the embodiment with rippling muscles and abs...

And just as you'd expect, I knocked it out of the fuckin' PARK. Perfect performances, night one, night two, night three. The rapturous applause for my scenes screamed my success, and the accompanying bouts of laughter echoed it. They would have extended the season, y'know, but you gotta leave 'em wanting more.

That's show business, baby!

"I have trained my body and mind to be the ultimate master of kung fu, and cut you into slivers with a single blow. Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

...And yet, standing on stage in the cool air each night, rice paddy hat awkwardly sliding down my head, I feel like an imposter. I'm dressed up in a confusing imitation of what my parents were able to escape - the grueling, back-breaking work in the fields and factories of China, but also luxurious silken robes - to pantomime a ridiculous combination of Asian stereotypes. Glancing at my parents while on stage in this outrageously garish outfit, I feel just a trickle of second-hand embarrassment for myself. As I attempt to show off the best imitation of 'expert' knife skills picked up from Chinese movies, I'm hoping what is reflected in their eyes is pride, not shame.

Every cheesy, overtly Asian reference draws peals of laughter from the crowd, and as the waves of amusement roll towards the stage, I can't help but wish I was a bit taller, or a bit stronger, or have a bit more of a commanding presence. This portrayal makes me stick out like a sore thumb and others me in a way I had not often experienced - being reduced to the Chinese butt of the joke.

I want to give them the **best** of what it means to be Chinese. I want to be like Bruce Lee, kick down the doors of a Japanese dojo, and proclaim that '中國人不是東亞病夫!' (Chinese people are not sick men!). Instead, I feel like a cheap imitation, a weak follow-up to all the progress that Bruce was able to make in the world. I'm a formulaic Chinese character saying lines that Chinese people would never say, and acting in ways that Chinese people would never act.

But like those DVD's, I was just another Chinese counterfeit.

I wish I could have shaken off that feeling, and act as if it didn't matter. I mean...this role was such a joke - even if it was well-intentioned, it was just so...rubbish. It didn't represent us. It sold a fake story, rather than true humanity - a way to keep the bamboo ceiling in place. But as the child of a first-generation Chinese-Australian family, I knew how important it was not to fuck it up - we wanted to fit in, and to do that, we had to either sit down, or stand out. If that meant using lazy stereotypes to portray my culture, so be it.

Ultimately, I chose to stand out and excel with what I was given. No matter how fake or full of cliches the role was, I had been chosen because I was talented, and I'd put all my efforts into making the most of the situation.

But even as I launch into my final monologue before engaging the mastermind behind the conspiracies and mysteries of the town, another insidious thought seeps in through the cracks - was I actually the special, talented actor I thought I was? Or was I chosen because I was Chinese, someone to make sure the impersonation was more than a passing resemblance?

It sits there at the back of my mind - a small papercut that stings every time it's touched, widening slowly, kept in check only by the bandaged delusions of 'I'm special. I'm unique.'

Better not to think about it too much. It's my time to shine.

"Get ready, foul demon, for I will vanquish you with kung fu! HYA! HYA! HYAAAA!"

It's time for the curtain call, and as we've rehearsed so many times, I get my own spotlight. Five seconds in the limelight, again showing off my knife skills to an outrageously complimentary crowd and casting all doubts to the wind as I see my proud family looking up at me from the audience.

I remember the feeling, even all these years later...the adoration of a glorious audience, and the euphoric rush as I was hugged and kissed by my family after the show. I searched my parent's faces to see if there was any indication that they were ashamed of the portrayal they had just seen on stage...but all I saw was joy for their son being celebrated by a ravenous crowd, and being included in opportunities that they never had.

Time heals all wounds, but the scar tissue remains. Only years later, struggling to come to terms with this role, did I realise that I *had* embodied Bruce Lee, just not in the way I thought. I had been focussed on who he was on screen - the action hero fighting for justice in a cruel, evil world - and only learnt over time how incredibly conscious he was about his role in the Western world. He fought hard to be the type of representation he wanted to see on screen and made sure he wasn't showing a white-washed, counterfeit version of Chinese culture to the world. Through relentless passion for his art, he worked hard to stand out, and transcended the typical Chinese villain for Hollywood, instead becoming a role model for all those fighting for justice across the world. He wrote his own way to the top, obliterating the bamboo ceiling in the process, and forging a path ahead for the rest of us.

And while I hadn't been able to break through in the same way at the time, I'd like to think I had cracked it open just a little bit, in my own little part of the world. The knowledge that my sister had seen someone like herself on stage - her brother! - and maybe inspiring her to take her own steps to break through that ceiling...well, doesn't that just make it all worthwhile?

Who cares if I have to don a paddy hat and say some crassly-written lines? This Chinese counterfeit got to be a **star**.

Of course, next year I had two lines as Pirate No. 5 in *Peter Pan*.

That's show business, baby.

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

V3: Chinese Counterfeit

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Each '*hya!*' slices through the air as I skulk out from the dusky shadows of the stage to strike a foreboding silhouette. With all my pent-up nervousness, I wildly swing prop knives in the air, as if I'm a kung fu master, to start creating some *ambiance* before I start my scene. The end result probably looks more like I'm shooing away wasps from a picnic but come on, it's theatre - use your imagination.

It's one of the highlights of the year for us - the middle school play performed in the sprawling, open quad - and this year we've traveled to the Wild West. As a typical 12 year old, runty Chinese kid with a mouth full of metal and nerdy-looking glasses known more for his academic ability than anything remotely physical, it's an honour to be included.

A chance to perform in front of a crowd is at once terrifying, exciting and nerve-wracking - like butterflies in your stomach, but they're using hammers on your insides. I loved the freedom of acting like someone else for a small amount of time, whisking people away to another world with your performance - a form of escapism from my academic studies, I guess. Being able to get these opportunities was a function of my parent's sacrifice to get us into private schools; only now do I realise why all our clothes were from Target, on sale, why we stocked up on counterfeit DVDs while in Hong Kong, and why my phone was always three generations older than all my friends.

As I strike a menacing pose on stage, I spy my proud parents beaming on the first night of the play, expectantly watching me through a video camera lens, capturing the footage of their eldest son taking advantage of opportunities they were never able to. My sister sits in the crowd with them, having run lines endlessly with her brother, and as the cool air draws out goosebumps from my skin, I push away the pressure of living up to the expectation of being the exceptional brother she sees me as.

A big breath. The spotlight shines straight at me.

ACTION!

"Crouching tiger, hidden dragon! Hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Can you tell I had a role written just for me? It's not that common, you know. Think about Hollywood stars - actors have to be *exceptional* to get a role custom-written for them. In *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino wrote a role specifically for the incredibly talented Christoph

Waltz, creating the ingenious dentist-turned-bounty-hunter Dr. Schultz, playing exactly to his unique ability to be affable and ruthless. It even helped to snag him an Oscar!

In my case, it was a character written by our history-teacher-turned-screenwriter as part of the play - an Asian street food vendor moonlighting as a kung fu master, here to save the day as evil rears its ugly head. I'm sure it was written for my unique ability to be...uh...vulnerable yet menacing.

Look, it's no Dr Schultz, but it sounds pretty fun, right?

The character's name has been lost to the depths of time and a disorganised mind. I secretly hope that it was something cool and mysterious like 'The Stranger', slipping into town like the Man With No Name - a lone wolf haunted by past demons. Deep down though, I know it was something like 'Lee' or 'Chan'. Typical.

But oh - how it made me feel! It was the bubbly, ecstatic feeling of someone thinking you would be perfect for a role with your unique set of skills after going through the (not at all) grueling process of auditions (for a middle school play). What an incredible opportunity for a 12 year old boy on the cusp of choosing his future career!

It's something we all secretly hope we'll be recognised for some time in our life - the moment you're **seen**. Somebody recognises your strengths, appreciates them, and elevates you to the status of Someone Special. I mean, look, none of the other Asians at school were as unique or would stand out as much as me - the secret Asian kung fu master who got his own solo scenes, and was helping to vanquish evil in the land. I was important to the plot, I was a key member of the cast...

I was special.

That's what I got to say about myself. I'm special. I'm unique. I got a role written just for me, something that none of the other Asians who tried out got. I'm being recognised for my talent, my hard work - I beat them all! I practiced the lines until the patterns lined my throat, I overcame the performance anxiety, I killed the audition - hell, I could **act**.

Unfortunately, still no Oscar...

"From the shadows of the Orient, I lie in wait and bide my time before I STRIKE! Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

Like any Chinese career breaking into the Western entertainment world, one bumps up against the bamboo ceiling. When I said I got to 'save the day', what I actually meant was getting one scene introducing my character with cliché Asian phrases, evoking a feeling of Oriental mystery and charm, and then another where I ambush the villain, dressed in black, chasing him around

town, foiling his plans...only to have the hero, a tall white cowboy dressed in white, *actually* save the day while I get relegated to being a security guard.

For the little Asian boy, they were able to rustle up a rice paddy hat, a blue silk-ish looking robe, and a black tunic (is there a checklist in theatre for this kind of outfit? I feel like every prop basket in the world has a rice paddy hat and a silk robe to make sure you know that *this person is Chinese*). The curved knives were sourced from a prop basket, intricately painted and designed with vaguely Arabian patterns, used in a previous performance of *Sinbad*. The cherry on top of this whole mess of a sundae were my actual, Harry-Potter-like round glasses.

Maybe I wouldn't be the one to break through the ceiling...

But I didn't care about any of that, because I looked *intimidating* for once in my life. Clutching these lethal-looking knives, striking intimidating kung fu poses, looking like an all around badass - it was worlds away from the nerdy, sensitive, oft-bullied kid I'd become. I was finally living my dream of embodying Bruce Lee, just like all the films Dad and I used to watch off burnt DVDs - a Chinese action hero superstar that was well-spoken, clever, and stood up for justice. My character was going to be the one to lay traps, unravel the mysteries behind the evil machinations in the small Midwestern town we were supposedly in, and use kung fu for good! If only I could have finished the embodiment with rippling muscles and abs...

Anyway, just as you'd expect, I knocked it out of the fuckin' PARK. Perfect performances, night one, night two, night three. They would have extended the season, y'know, but you gotta leave 'em wanting more.

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"I have trained my body and mind to be the ultimate master of kung fu, and cut you into slivers with a single blow. Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

And yet, standing on stage in the cool air each night, rice paddy hat awkwardly sliding down my head, I feel like an imposter. I'm dressed up in a confusing imitation of what my parents were able to escape - the grueling, back-breaking work in the fields and factories of China, but also luxurious silken robes (?) - to pantomime a ridiculous combination of Asian stereotypes. Standing in front of them in such a garish outfit generates just a trickle of second-hand embarrassment, but as I attempt to show off the best imitation of 'expert' knife skills picked up from Chinese movies, I'm hoping what I see on their faces is pride, not shame.

Every cheesy, overtly Asian reference draws peals of laughter from the crowd, and as the waves of amusement roll towards the stage, I can't help but wish I was a bit taller, or a bit stronger, or have a bit more of a commanding presence. I want to give them the best of what it means to be Chinese. I want to be like Bruce Lee, kick down the doors of a Japanese dojo, and proclaim that '中國人不是東亞病夫!' Instead, I feel like a cheap imitation, a weak follow-up to all the progress

that Bruce was able to make in the world. I'm a formulaic Chinese character saying lines that Chinese people would never say, and acting in ways that Chinese people would never act.

I don't *want* to be another Chinese counterfeit. I want to be the real deal.

I wish I could have shaken off that feeling, and just act as if it didn't matter. I mean...this role was such a joke - even if it was well-intentioned, it was just so...rubbish. It didn't represent us. It sold a fake story, rather than true humanity; a way to keep the bamboo ceiling in place. But, as the child of a first-generation Chinese-Australian family, I knew how important it was not to fuck it up - we wanted to fit in, and to do that, we had to either sit down, or stand out.

So I chose to stand out and excel with what I was given. No matter how fake or full of cliches the role was, I had been chosen because I was talented, and I'd put all my efforts into making the most of the situation.

But as I launch into my final monologue before engaging the mastermind behind the conspiracies and mysteries of the town, another insidious thought seeps in through the cracks - was I actually the special, talented actor I thought I was? Or was I chosen because I was Asian, someone to make sure the impersonation was more than a passing resemblance?

It sits there at the back of my mind - a small papercut that stings every time it's touched, widening slowly, kept in check only by the bandaged delusions of 'I'm special. I'm unique.'

Better not to think about it too much. It's my time to shine.

"Get ready, foul demon, for I will vanquish you with kung fu!"

It's time for the curtain call, and as we've rehearsed so many times, I get my own spotlight. Five seconds in the limelight, again showing off my knife skills to an outrageously complimentary crowd and casting all doubts to the wind as I see my proud family looking up at me from the audience.

I remember the feeling, even all these years later...the adoration of a glorious audience, and the euphoric rush as I was hugged and kissed by my family after the show. I searched my parent's faces to see if there was any indication that they were ashamed of the portrayal they had just seen on stage...but all I saw was joy for their son fitting in, and being included in opportunities that they never had.

And of course, absolutely smashing it.

Time heals all wounds, but the scar tissue remains. Only years later, struggling to come to terms with this role, did I realise that I *had* embodied Bruce Lee, just not in the way I thought. I had been focussed on who he was on screen - the action hero fighting for justice in a cruel, evil

world - and only learnt over time how incredibly conscious he was about his role in the Western world. He fought hard to be the type of representation he wanted to see on screen and made sure he wasn't showing a white-washed, counterfeit version of Chinese culture to the world. Through relentless passion for his art, he worked hard to stand out, and transcended the typical Chinese villain for Hollywood, instead becoming a role model all across the world. He wrote his own way to the top, obliterating through the bamboo ceiling in the process, and forging a path ahead for the rest of us.

And while I hadn't been able to break through in the same way at the time, I'd like to think I had cracked it open just a little bit, in my own little part of the world. The knowledge that my sister had seen someone like herself on stage - her brother! - and maybe inspiring her to take her own steps to break through that ceiling...well, doesn't that just make it all worthwhile?

Who cares if I have to don a paddy hat and say some crassly-written lines? This Chinese counterfeit got to be a **star**.

Of course, next year I had two lines as Pirate No. 5 in *Peter Pan*.

That's show business, baby.

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

V2: Chinese Counterfeit

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

I flail these cardboard knives in a triangle pattern in the air on a dark, cool night. I'm 12 years old, a short, runty Asian kid with a mouth full of metal, one of the only Asians at an elite private school that my parents have scrimped, scraped and saved to give us the best opportunity for education that they could in a strange new land.

It's one of the highlights of the year - the school play performed in the sprawling, open quad - and this year we've traveled to the Wild West. Last year, I played the starring role of the mischievous Puck in our retelling of *A Kidsummer's Night Dream* (not a typo), and after setting the bar high, you'd be expecting great things from me here, too.

On stage, I spy my proud parents beaming on the first night of the play, expectantly watching me through a video camera lens, capturing the footage of their eldest son taking advantage of opportunities they were never able to. My sister sits in the crowd with them, having run lines endlessly with her brother, and as the cool air draws out goosebumps from my skin, I push away the pressure of living up to the expectation of being the exceptional brother she sees me as.

A big breath. The curtain rises. Lights... and... ACTION!

"Crouching tiger, hidden dragon! Hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

Like any Asian career in entertainment, one bumps up against the bamboo ceiling. In my case, it was taking a role as an Asian kung fu fighter moonlighting as a food vendor, here to save the day as evil rears its ugly head, written specifically for me in mind! It's no Puck, but at least a fun role, right?

Actors have to be *exceptional* to get a role custom-written for them. In the critically-acclaimed *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino wrote a role specifically for the incredibly talented Christoph Waltz, creating the ingenious dentist-turned-bounty-hunter Dr. Schultz, playing exactly to his strengths, a unique ability to be affable and ruthless, snagging him an Oscar.

In my case, it was this Asian character written by a history teacher as part of the play. The name has been lost to the depths of time and a disorganised mind, though I secretly hope that it was something cool and mysterious like 'The Stranger', slipping into town like the Man With No Name - a lone wolf haunted by past demons.

Pfft - more likely, it was 'Lee' or 'Chan'.

But oh - how it made me feel! The bubbly, ecstatic feeling of someone thinking you would be perfect for the role with your unique set of skills after going through the (not at all) grueling process of auditioning (for a middle school play)...well, it was incredible for a 12 year old boy on the verge of choosing his path in life. It's probably what actors dream of all the time - it's being **seen**. None of the other Asians were as unique or would stand-out as much as me, the secret Asian kung fu master who got his own solo scenes, and was helping to vanquish evil in the land...

...I was special.

That's what I got to say about myself. I'm special. I'm unique. I'm so much more talented as an actor than anyone of the other Asians who tried out, and I'm being recognised for it. I practiced the lines until the patterns lined my throat, I overcame the performance anxiety of a sheltered upbringing, I killed the audition - hell, I was able to **act**.

Unfortunately, I still haven't got my Oscar...

"From the shadows of the Orient, I lie in wait and bide my time before I STRIKE! Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

Oh - the bamboo ceiling? Right, well, when I said I get to 'save the day', what I actually meant was getting one scene introducing my character with cliché Asian phrases, evoking a feeling of Oriental mystery and charm, and then another where I ambush the evil man dressed in black, chasing him around town, foiling his plans...only to have the tall white cowboy, dressed in white, save the day while I get relegated to being a security guard.

Maybe I'm not the one to break through the ceiling...

For the little Asian boy, they were able to rustle up a rice paddy hat, a blue silk-ish looking robe, and a black tunic (is there a checklist in theatre for this kind of outfit? I feel like every prop basket in the world has a rice paddy hat and a silk robe to make sure you know that *this person is Asian*). The curved knives were sourced from a prop basket, made from a previous performance of *Sinbad*, intricately painted and designed with vaguely Arabian patterns, and I finished the outfit with my actual, round-like-Harry-Potter glasses.

I didn't care about any of that because I looked *menacing* for once in my life. Clutching these lethal-looking knives, striking intimidating kung fu poses, looking like an all around badass - it was world's away from the nerdy, sensitive, often-bullied kid I'd become. I was finally living my dream of being like Bruce Lee in all the films Dad and I used to watch - an Chinese action hero superstar (minus the rippling muscles and abs, unfortunately).

As you'd expect, I nailed the role. Perfect performances, night one, night two, night three. They would have extended the season but you gotta leave 'em wanting more. That's show business, baby!

"I have trained my body and mind to be the ultimate master of kung fu, and cut you down into slivers with a single blow. Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

And yet, standing on stage in the cool night air, with my rice paddy hat slowly sinking down my head, obscuring my vision of an already faceless audience, I feel like an impostor. I'm dressed up in a confusing imitation of what my parents were able to escape - the grueling, back-breaking work in the fields and factories of China, but also luxurious silken robes (?) - to pantomime a ridiculous combination of Asian stereotypes. Standing in front of them in such a garish outfit generates just a trickle of second-hand embarrassment, but as I attempt to show off the best imitation of expert knife skills picked up from Chinese movies, I'm hoping what I see on their faces is pride, not shame.

Every cheesy, overtly Asian reference draws peals of laughter from the crowd, and as the waves of amusement roll towards the stage, I can't help but wish I was a bit taller, or a bit stronger, or have a bit more of a commanding presence. I want to give them the best of what it means to be Chinese. I want to be like Bruce Lee, kick down the doors of a Japanese dojo, and proclaim that '中國人不是東亞病夫!'

I don't want to be a weak imitation, I want to be the real deal.

And as I launch into my final monologue before engaging the mastermind behind the conspiracies and mysteries of the town, an insidious thought seeps in through the cracks - was I actually the special, talented actor I thought I was? Or was I chosen because I was Asian, someone to make sure the impersonation was more than a passing resemblance?

It sits there at the back of my mind - a small papercut that stings every time it's touched, widening slowly, kept in check only by the bandaged delusions of 'I'm special. I'm unique.'

Better not to think about it too much. It's my time to shine.

"Get ready, foul demon, for I will vanquish you with kung fu!"

It's time for the curtain call, and as we've rehearsed so many times, I get my own spotlight. 5 seconds in the limelight, again showing off my knife skills to an outrageously complimentary crowd and casting all doubts to the wind as I see my proud family looking up at me from the audience.

I remember the feeling, even all these years later...the adoration of a glorious audience, and the euphoric rush as I was hugged and kissed by my family after the show. I'd done the Asian race

proud, I'd done my family proud, I'd done myself proud. I had lived my dream as a Bruce Lee action hero, and I was so happy with how I'd stood up for my heritage that the thoughts of being a phony just...fizzled away. Who cares if I have to don a paddy hat and say some crassly-written lines? I got a role written uniquely for me, I drew the best laughs of the night, and I got to be a **star**.

That's a feeling no-one can take away from you...well, for a week, anyway. Call it two.

Of course, next year I had two lines as Pirate No. 5 in *Peter Pan*.

That's show business, baby.

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

V1: They're trying to include us

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

I flail these cardboard knives in the air on a dark, cool night. I'm 12 years old, a short, runty Asian kid with a mouth full of metal, one of the only Asians at an elite private school that my parents have scrimped, scraped and saved to give us the best opportunity for education that they could in a strange new land.

It's one of the highlights of the year - the school play - and this year is a Wild West theme. Last year, I played the starring role of the mischievous Puck in our retelling of *A Kidsummer's Night Dream* (no, that's not a typo), and after such a breakout role, you'd be expecting great things from me here, too.

On stage, I can spy my proud parents beaming on the first night of the play, expectantly watching me through a video camera lens, capturing the footage of their eldest son taking advantage of opportunities they were never able to. My sister sits in the crowd with them, having run lines endlessly with her brother, and cool air draws out goosebumps from my skin as I try to live up to the expectation of being the exceptional brother she sees me as.

Par for the course, really.

But just like any Asian career in entertainment, one bumps up against the bamboo ceiling. In my case, it was taking a role as an Asian kung fu fighter moonlighting as a food vendor, here to save the day as evil rears its ugly head, written specifically for me in mind! It's no Nick Young from *Crazy Rich Asians*, but can't say I didn't get a fun role, right?

"Crouching tiger, hidden dragon! Hya, hya, hya, HYA!"

The thing about the role was that, well, people have to be *exceptional* to get a role custom-written for them. The incredibly talented Christoph Waltz, for example, had the role of Dr. Schultz written *specifically* for him by Quentin Tarantino in *Django Unchained* - a role written with his unique skills in mind, and ultimately snagging him an Oscar.

For me, it was this Asian character, whose name has been lost to the depths of time. I secretly hope that it was something cool and mysterious like 'The Stranger', but more likely it was 'Lee' or 'Chan'. No matter though - the amount of joy from having someone think you would be perfect for the role with your unique set of skills...it's incredible. It's being **seen**. None of the other Asians were as unique or would stand-out as much in the play.

I was special.

That's what I got to say about myself. I'm special. I'm unique. I'm so much more talented as an actor than anyone of the other Asians, and I'm being recognised for it. It's because I worked hard, I paid my dues, I was able to **act**.

Lights... and... action!

"From the shadows of the Orient, I lie in wait and bide my time before I STRIKE! Hya hya hya hya HYA!"

Oh - the bamboo ceiling? Right, well, when I said I get to 'save the day', what I actually meant was getting one scene introducing my character with stereotypical Asian phrases, evoking a feeling of Oriental mystery and charm, and then another where I ambush the evil man, chasing him around town, foiling his plans...only to have the tall white man save the day.

For the little Asian boy, they were able to rustle up a rice paddy hat, a blue silk-ish looking robe, and a black tunic. The curved knives were sourced from a prop basket, made from a previous performance of *Sinbad*, intricately painted and designed. Is there a checklist in theatre for this? I feel like every prop basket in the world has a rice paddy hat to make sure you know that *this person is Asian*.

I didn't care about any of that because, well, I looked menacing for once in my life. Clutching these lethal-looking knives, striking intimidating kung fu poses, looking like an all around badass as a sensitive, often-bullied kid...it meant a lot to me - I was finally living my dream of being like Bruce Lee in all the films Dad and I used to watch (minus the rippling muscles and abs, unfortunately).

I absolutely killed the role. Perfect performances, night one, night two, night three. They would have extended the season but you gotta leave 'em wanting more. That's show business, baby!

"I have trained my body and mind to be the ultimate master of kung fu, and cut you down into slivers with a single blow. Hya hya hya HYA!"

It's 2020, right? The Year of Hindsight? And looking back on this time recently, I was initially horrified. How could no-one see how not okay this was? The terribly gauche costuming, the stereotypically Asian lines, the characterisation...I'm happy that I at least wasn't asked to use some sort of Asian accenting with the role, because, well, I can't actually do one.

And my initial reaction was to be horrified because it was an utterly racist role. Asians aren't all kung fu fighters, or food vendors. We can be lawyers, doctors and engineers too! (Potentially too progressive for the Wild West, I grant you). Our lives have nuance and subtlety, failures and successes; we're not all wearing rice-paddy hats and wielding knives - we're ordinary people with our own hopes and dreams who just want to fit into the society of a new world we've joined, not be seen as just a stereotype.

I mean...was I actually talented? Or was I just chosen because I was Asian, someone to fill a diversity quota?

I talked to Mum about this. About being a Chinese person in Australia, and “oh my gosh, look how racist this role was!”

She paused, contemplatively, and then said “They’re just trying to connect. They’re trying to include us.”

“Hey pardner, can you help us catch this guy?”

What does it mean to live as an immigrant in multicultural Australia? I was born here, but my parents taught me that keeping your head down, working hard, not complaining - that was the way to get ahead in life. Treat others with respect, and they’ll treat you in kind. Oh, and also make sure you don’t wash your hair on Chinese New Year otherwise you’ll wash away all your luck!

As I grew older, I became more aware of the ways that we could be treated and discriminated against in the community - the racism, the fear, the oppression. It was sickening when I heard about these incidents, and I was incensed at how disrespectful it was.

But with my mother’s words, I had to reflect (it’s part of that filial piety we get programmed with from a young age). What was actual racism? And what was I actually feeling when I saw something like this? Was I overreacting?

I wasn’t being disrespected. I wasn’t being oppressed. I was being given an opportunity.

What a first world problem to have.

Middle school teachers who have to become playwrights are already going above and beyond the call of duty to create something fun. Perhaps...they were trying their hardest to fit an enthusiastic young Asian boy who had a knack for acting somewhere in the play. It’s in the Wild West for heaven’s sake - how many Asians were even around? Not having grown up in a world where they knew much about Chinese traditions or customs, they probably wrote what they knew - films of kung fu fighters and bad-ass choreography that they could get a young Asian boy interested in.

And boy did it work!

“Get ready, foul demon, for I will vanquish you with kung fu!”

I remember the feeling, even all these years later. I was on top of the world. I was living my dream as a Bruce Lee action superstar, and I was so happy to be recognised that I didn't really notice or care about how racist the role might or mightn't be. Who cares if I have to don a paddy hat and say some crassly-written lines? I get a role written uniquely for me, I draw the best laughs of the night, and I get to be a **star**.

That's a feeling no-one can take away from you. Even if it's just for a small moment in time.

Next year, I had two lines as Pirate No. 5 in *Peter Pan*.

Asians can have their dreams crushed too.

"Hya, hya, hya, hya, HYA!"