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SNOWBALL'S CHANCE IN HELL

BY VINCENT CHUNG



The piano and violin thing wasn't working out, and adolescent angst was paving the path for punk rock to take over my life. So my parents sent me on a ski trip with the Chinese American Youth Group.

As the bus filled to capacity, friends greeted other friends who greeted everyone but me. The seat adjacent to mine remained empty, and crossing that line from loner to loser kinda stung. Before pulling out, the bus stopped for a straggler. I immediately recognized her from my high school—she was in my biology class and hung out with all the nonconformist kids who smoked on campus. And she was totally hot.

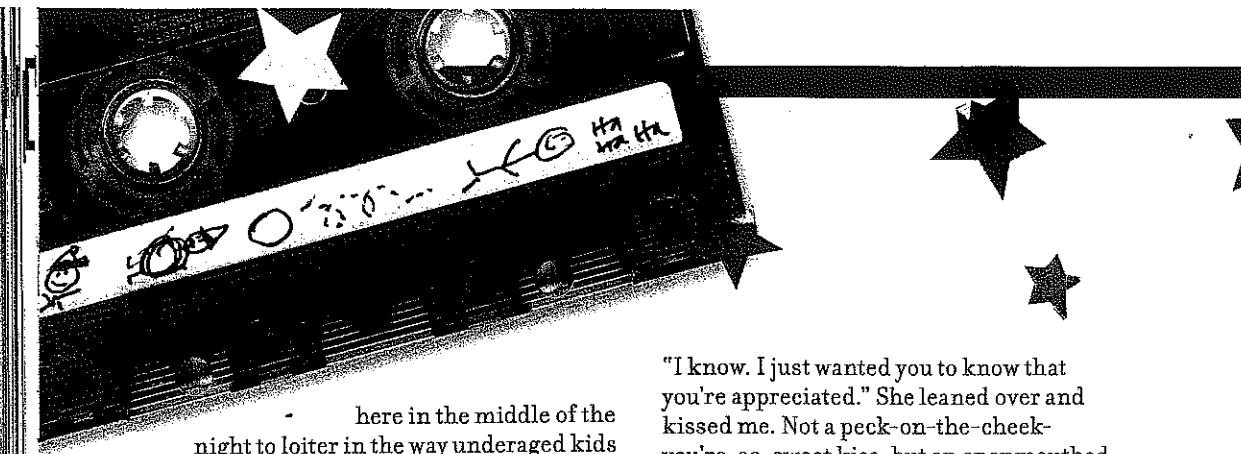
Tera and I shared polite introductions, then sat wordless as the bus pushed out of Raleigh. Being awkward and prematurely misanthropic, I was unwilling to breach the world of initiating contact with the opposite sex. An hour in, she broke the silence by asking if I wanted to listen to music. We split earbud headphones on a Walkman, autoreversing Screeching Weasel's "My Brain Hurts." After the trip, I asked to borrow it so I could make my own copy—and have an excuse to talk to her later.

Over the next four years, we went from cordial greetings to getting scolded for blabbing during class. Tera and I weren't best pals, but sharing a ton of extracurricular activities and classes together

can bring two folks pretty close. I was her "reliable" friend, the one whom she could call to get missed homework assignments or when she locked her keys in her car. Or who would let her borrow a sheet of paper because her notebook ran out, which happened every day. Although the crush was long shelved, in retrospect, the doting seemed dorkily pathetic. Color it selfless, but I was just happy to be useful.

Of course I made her a mixtape—sometime around junior year. And of course it took months for her to reciprocate. To me, receiving mixtapes isn't about discovering new music expertly mixed with sweet transitions. They simply have to encapsulate the author's personality, and the cassettes were always ideal in their imperfections. This one was Tera epitomized: a scattered collection of whimsical silliness, reeling from playful diva to fucked-up pop. She even referenced our ski trip in the artwork: her tumbling down a hill while I pointed and laughed. Listening to it, I can only imagine Tera in her messy bedroom, kicking her heels up in dance, and making noises with her mouth that sound straight out of Looney Tunes. These were her songs—well, I'm sincerely hoping they're not songs that reminded her of me.

Sometime in college, over winter break, I got a call. Tera was in town and wanted to catch up. We revisited an old stomping ground named the All Children's Playground. Back in the day, we'd come



- here in the middle of the night to loiter in the way underaged kids do. As we sat in a dark nook, a light snow started. It became one of those fleeting best-night-ever moments that frequents idealistic young people.

"I realized something over the past couple of years," Tera confessed.

"What's that?"

"You were a good friend to me. Like, really great. You were always there when I was in trouble, and I didn't realize how important you were to me until we went off to college."

I shrugged. "Well, it's not like I disappeared. I'm still in North Carolina. *You're* the one who became a Yankee."

"I know. I just wanted you to know that you're appreciated." She leaned over and kissed me. Not a peck-on-the-cheek-you're-so-sweet kiss, but an openmouthed planter followed by pawing each other like bears mauling prey. I panicked, digging for that crush I had buried under years of platonic memories—not quite processing the surreal moment.

Distance provided a challenge, with sporadic rendezvous strung out over years. Having our own myopic lives in our respective big cities, I grew emotionally detached. At times, I was a horrible friend to her. Like, really terrible. And my failure to stay in touch trivialized our long history. I forgot. She gave up. In retrospect, it was never about revisiting that high school crush, but venturing into those messy, ambiguous relationships that grown-ups embrace so immaturely.

