

## **Lucky Bamboo**

By Angelica Frude, Richard Montgomery High School

We have kept Lucky Bamboo in our home for as long as I can remember. An assortment of singular stalks and elaborate bundles of the plant adorn our shelves and tables, carefully positioned in simple glass vases of white pebbles and water. Each holder invisibly suspends its bamboo like a museum's precious jade stone on display, as if any distraction or disturbance would ruin its balance and beauty. As our other potted plants would come and go, blooming and wilting throughout the seasons, the bamboo always stood sturdily, unmoving, opulently green in their places.

At the age of 3 or 4, when I was still learning to form sentences, I asked my father what the different plants were. They resembled the big trees outside, except they were miniaturized, their trunks were green instead of brown, their bark was smooth, and they were split into little segments—as if a tiny lumberjack had climbed up each one with his tiny axe, hacking at the stalks in regular intervals as he ascended. Unlike other plants in the home, no flowers ever bloomed from the elegant forest-green stalks, and their leaves were sleek and lance-shaped. Their vases held no soil, only clear water and small round pebbles. Why were some of them straight and some of them curly? Why were some of them bound together with bright red ribbons in criss-cross patterns, like a little girl's pigtail braids, and others stacked like tiered cakes? My father taught me that they were bamboo plants, and a very special species of bamboo. They were called Lucky Bamboo, growing in certain shapes and positioned in certain spots around our home as a part of feng shui—an art of balance and harmony in our Chinese culture. There was unique meaning in each arrangement. He said that a single stalk was called the Lucky Log, representing growth and strength. Three bamboo stalks or tiers meant happiness, long life and prosperity. Red ribbons tied to some of them meant additional stability and balance in the elements of life. They were all beautiful. From that day on, I was fascinated by the plants and the culture in my home, always excited to learn more from my family.

I entered preschool later that same year, discovering a place that existed outside of home full of people to learn from other than my family. For the first time, I met other children. My first best friend's name was Eliza. We both loved to draw, sharing Crayola crayons and a large pad of easel paper during art time every day to scribble ourselves in our favorite imaginary landscapes. Her stick figure stood with a head of golden blond curls on each of our made-up planets. My stick figure had my wavy black hair. She colored the eyes of hers with a light brown. I used a dark, dark brown for the eyes of my own. I noticed that we had many classmates with the same blond hair and light eyes as Eliza, and if not for our names scrawled in the corner of every picture we drew, Eliza's stick figure could have easily been mistaken for a number of other blond girls in the class. I did not notice that no one in the class looked like me, had the same dark hair or dark eyes as I did until the day we all played a game to learn how to sort. Different categories were called out one after another, and at one point, we had to sort ourselves by eye

color. Two groups quickly formed for brown eyes and blue eyes. As I followed Eliza to the brown-eyed group, she turned back at me and laughed.

“What? Your eyes aren’t brown, they’re black! My mom said Asian people have black eyes because they’re so dark. They look different and small and aren’t brown like American eyes. Like when we draw! Your stick person doesn't have the same eyes as my stick person.”

I laughed too because I felt foolish for not knowing my own eye color and stayed where I was. Once everyone else had moved to either one of the brown or blue-eyed groups, a new category was called. I had been the only one standing alone.

The next week it was my turn to bring something in for show and tell. I pondered the question of what to present to my first ever peers, from whom I felt a strange sense of separation after the sorting game. This was my opportunity to be included! Remembering how impressive our Lucky Bamboo plants were, full of secret meanings and special messages, I begged my father to let me bring one to school. Although a little displeased that our home’s feng shui would be thrown off, he, at last, allowed me to take one single, straight stalk of bamboo, transferred from its simple yet dignified fragile glass vase to a plastic Chinese takeout soup container.

Standing 4 feet tall and clutching my soup container where the plant floated around, I beamed at my criss-cross applesauced classmates as I told them about the meanings of the Lucky Bamboo in my culture—only to be met with disinterest. Their wandering eyes and half-stifled yawns told me that they were bored. I was puzzled to see some even turn away while I was speaking, fidgeting with their fingers or tugging at fibers that stuck out from the rug beneath them as if anything else in the room was more interesting than my presentation. Maybe I was not very good at explaining, or my bamboo was simply not pretty or cool-looking enough. I remember how no one spoke a word after I stopped talking, not even when the teacher asked if anyone had any questions. *Weren’t they supposed to react? Weren’t they supposed to care?* It was only after my audience’s half-hearted applause and when everyone got up to go to the snack tables when I heard a boy say to another boy, “I thought the bamboos were invasive! Inva-sive. That’s what my dad said. He uses these huge scissor thingies to cut the bamboo in our backyard every single month because he says they are invasive. He said it’s a big problem.”

“What’s invasive?” asked the second boy.

“It means that it doesn’t belong and it is like an invader. So the bamboo is an invader.”

“Like Space Invaders?”

“What’s Space Invaders?”

They toddled off.

It turned out that the type of bamboo he had been referring to, which grew in the ground, really was an invasive species like the boy said, but it was not the same species as the Lucky Bamboo. Despite this, I was only a small child at the time and saw the two as the same thing. All of the Lucky Bamboo's beauty and cultural significance to me was overshadowed by what I heard that day. "It's a big problem." "It doesn't belong and it is like an invader." I did not know what Space Invaders was either, but it sounded like it meant "aliens," and aliens were scary-looking, weird and ugly.

My experiences of isolation in preschool caused a seed of awareness to sprout in my mind. As the years passed by, I increasingly recognized how I was different from other kids because of my race, just like how bamboo was different from other plants, and I only hated it. I never could forget the show and tell comments from the preschool boys as I experienced being left out of discussions, activities and friend groups, gradually feeling more and more out of place among my classmates as an Asian girl in a predominantly white elementary school. As we grew up, Eliza found other friends she liked better, who were more like her. We no longer drew pictures together—our made-up planets abandoned forever for the realities of life. Five years after preschool I would hear her call me a racial slur behind my back. I came to truly believe that I was an invader to my school, and at one point, even an invader to America, like an alien plant which did not belong with the other flowers and trees. My small "black" eyes were not like the brown and blue eyes which would dart toward me in judgment for having an accent and bringing noodle soup in takeout containers to lunch. Lucky Bamboo lost meaning to me for many years as I judged it the same—scary-looking sickly-green stalks with strange thin leaves unlike normal plants, weird and ugly.

Only after relearning to love my culture, a decade after preschool, do I realize the severity of the trauma which children like me face. No one should ever feel invasive to their own home, ever learn to label themselves as an inferior, malicious problem plant all because of how they look. My people and culture are not invasive. I am proud to embrace myself and proud to finally find strength and beauty in our sturdy thriving Lucky Bamboo once again.