

Shoes Off, Please

Henry Su

Shit shit shit.

What time is it? 5:53. Did I take the chicken wing dip out of the oven?... No? It doesn't matter. I'll just take it out while everyone's getting settled in.

Where is everyone? Kickoff is in... seven minutes. I should turn on the TV. It would be weird for it to be quiet in here while people are coming in. Would people notice? I would notice. I just need to fix this tablecloth - how on earth did it get this bunched up? - and turn the TV on before...

The doorbell. Shit shit shit.

Okay, it can wait. I'll just fix it while they're taking their shoes off. Breathe. Everything is perfect. You are going to have fun tonight because everything is perfect. Well, it would be if the tablecloth wasn't -

Door. Answer the door.

Mrs. Shaw! How was the drive? Oh my God, you drove all this way in all this rain, you must be exhausted. Come in, come in. By the way, I love your shoes. ... You found *those* at Goodwill? That's crazy. I can't imagine who in their right mind would donate Coach boots to a Goodwill. Yes, they totally complete your look.

By the way, would you mind taking those off before you ... No no no, I understand. There's a boot brush in the mudroom, let me go grab it for you. I have house slippers too, if you don't mind. What?... No, I won't force you, I'd just really rather you...

No. No! Don't track water in here! You're just going to step off my doormat in your Coach boots? I just mopped the tile! Oh, and the hardwood! You're going to get mud on the hardwood! Does she see how muddy her boots are? All through the hall and now the living room, and she's still yammering on about Goodwill... Christ, please don't look at the tablecloth. I should have just left the boot brush by the door, now I need to get a towel from downstairs, I can't have Mom see the floors like this... and what on God's green earth is that smell?

Is that... burning chicken wing dip?

Dear Mrs. Shaw,

I am writing this to you while picking over the leftovers of the chicken wing dip, which you so graciously avoided for the duration of our party last night. I understand and accept your aversion to my slightly carbonized take on the classic recipe, and I promise I'll try the *NYT Cooking* way next time per your suggestion.

Forgive me if I am overstepping, but your outfit was simply *marvelous* last night. It was rude of me to ask you to take off your Coach boots, and I appreciate you helping me understand how well they matched your carefully curated necklace/dress combo. I feel as if I need to explain why exactly I made such an outlandish request to you at the door, and continued to do so until you so graciously agreed to swipe your feet dismissively on the doormat in the garage on the other side of my house, so that I might spare myself the lingering shame of being a rude host.

You see, I only thought to ask my guests politely to remove their shoes at the door because that's the way it's always been in my house. My father always pestered me about taking off my shoes at the door, because my father's father would spank him as a child for wearing his dusty trainers on the linoleum, all the while telling him about how *his* father would have smacked him hard on the knuckles with a wooden switch if he ever dared to wear his outdoor slippers on the floors of their one-room hut.

In China, which is where I'm from, taking your shoes off at the door is a tradition as old as time. Though the practice really just came to be because the dirt paths of yore tended to cake your shoes in layers of mud, the practice endures through superstitions about how outdoor shoes bring in "bad luck" that get passed down through the generations (Wordie, 2019). It's really an Asian thing. In fact, Asians like me are punishing their children for this exact reason *right now*, all over the world! It's a tradition that's old enough that you can find in the yellowed pages of old books, scratchings of powder-faced geishas struggling with the straps on their wooden sandals in old-timey Japan (Inouye, 1910), just like I requested you to do with the single gilded buckle on your tall Coach boots. It's one of those odd things that we're weirdly particular about, like how I know people like you care about what brand their toothpaste is, or whether or not the guy sitting next to them at a baseball game takes his hat off during the national anthem.

I understand that it might seem a bit draconian to ask my beloved guests to discard the centerpiece of their carefully crafted outfit at the door, but you must understand that there is good reason for my concern. Studies have shown that microbes like *E. coli* and drug-resistant staph bacteria cling to shoes and contaminate floors, which can easily aerosolize into the environment as people walk around (Rashid et al., 2016). I, for one, take pride in the fact that I have flawlessly clean floors. It brings me great pain that you may never experience the ecstasy that I feel when the lacquer glistens *just right* after a thrice-over with the mop. I'd really rather not have anyone tracking *E. coli* on my floors, and, as you may recall, I even thought to provide my guests with comfortable house slippers, as I readily informed you of at the door.

But all that aside, it's really just a matter of respect when I ask you to do something as your host. You seem to be unaware that I found your disregard for my rules to be disrespectful. But, don't worry, it's not just you: there seems to be a major lack of respect in the way you and the rest of America treat people like me.

I try to be respectful of your traditions. I usually nod along when you're telling me why Crest 3D White Radiant Mint Whitening Toothpaste just does it better than all the other brands, and I try to take the hint when Brett and Brady are glaring at me from two rows down while the boy from the Kiwanis club is struggling through the first verse of the Star-Spangled Banner.

I am not afforded the same respect. By and large, other Americans dismiss Asian-Americans as exotic foreigners, no matter whether we've just arrived on a E1 Visa, or we've been here for more than a few generations. In the movies, Chinatown is a dark, smoky ghetto populated by Triads, Chinaman caricatures, and prostitutes. These portrayals color Asian immigrant enclaves as permanent "others," quintessentially urban but not quite American for all its exotic, Chinese speaking foreigners (Bidlingmaier, 2007). Thankfully, the reality of actual Chinatowns, like the one I grew up in, embodies all the best traits of long-established immigrant enclaves: a host of community resources, accessible to people who lack English proficiency; doctors, dentists, barbers, immigration lawyers, CPAs, and police officers who speak your language and are conscious of the wants, needs, preferences, and attitudes of people like you; community centers, temples, mosques, churches, and senior centers full of familiar faces from the neighborhood; and perhaps most exciting of all, the yearly night markets, dragon boat races, and Lunar New Year parades that bring the whole town out, even the small children and very old, to bask in the exulting feeling of having a place where you truly belong. From its inception, Chinatown has always been a place where Asian immigrants, regardless of social or economic status, can set down roots and work towards a vision of generational wealth and prosperity. The narrow lens that the media views Chinatown through substitutes our lived experiences for a thoroughly racialized version with little similarity to the real thing. Outsiders perceive Chinatown as what the media tells them it is, which reinforces prejudices and harmful stereotypes. For us, having our neighborhood constantly portrayed in movies and television as a lawless ghetto of grimy, slant-eyed gangsters in tank tops inevitably makes us ashamed of our own community, which normally should be a source of pride.

Here's another thing: I guarantee every Asian kid in this entire country has had a "lunchbox moment." It goes down like this: your mom packed last night's leftovers in your lunchbox, and you had the misfortune of having something particularly aromatic for dinner (in my case, it was garlicky fried rice). You peel off the top of the Tupperware, and suddenly it's all-eyes-on-you as every kid in the cafeteria recoils in disgust. This distinct moment of ostracization, where kids are made to feel like outcasts because of their cuisine, is well documented throughout Asian-American literature (Saxena, 2021). Home cooking is an inalienable part of anyone's tradition, and the idea that Asian foods are weird, and gross, and "other" is an early learned trauma for many of us. In many ways, the Asian-American experience is shaped by the trauma of assimilation and ostracization, from daily microaggressions like the lunchbox moment, to direct examples of exclusion and discrimination.

Ostracization has a very real effect on Asian-Americans, that reaches far beyond crappy 80s movies and elementary school cafeterias. Studies show that Asian-Americans are less likely to seek mental health care because of invisibility and ostracization, though clinicians found that Asian-American patients' mental health issues were often more severe than white patients (Abrams, 2019). Issues affecting Asian-Americans are largely understudied, and the few studies that do meaningful research go underfunded as grant money is directed elsewhere (Abrams, 2019). Thus, the trauma of being a member of a highly racialized group, exacerbated by negative

stereotypes assigned through the mass media and reinforced through constant reminders that to be Asian is to be foreign, often goes unresolved.

I'm really glad you read *The Joy Luck Club* in tenth grade. Really, I am. It's a great book that deals with the trauma of immigration and assimilation very well. The movie's pretty good, too. I just wish that the flash of empathy that movie inspired towards us involved some critical thought about how Asian-Americans are also, often invisibly, the victims of vicious racial violence.

The first Asians came to the United States in the 1850s, taking dangerous, poorly waged jobs in the booming mines and railroads of the West. Because newly arrived immigrants were willing to work in dangerous conditions for even lower pay than whites, they were accused of stealing white jobs (Brockell, 2021). As more immigrants from across Asia arrived in the subsequent decades, resentment of Asian-Americans grew, sporadically erupting in acts of mass violence. In 1871, seventeen Chinese men and boys were lynched in a riot in Los Angeles, the perpetrators of which walked away with no punishment; in 1885, a mob killed 28 Chinese mine workers and completely destroyed the Chinatown of Rock Springs, in the Wyoming Territory (Brockell, 2021). These acts of incredible violence were carried out to subjugate the Asian-American population, and to enforce white supremacy among disadvantaged immigrants. In an age when poor whites and Asian immigrants alike were being taken advantage of by railroad and mine conglomerates, whites chose to punish the convenient scapegoat of Chinese laborers, who were only willing to accept even lower wages and worse working conditions so that they could eke out a miserable existence on the margins of white society.

Though we thankfully no longer see neighborhoods burned to the ground and families driven en masse out of town, whites are still quick to violence against Asian-Americans in moments of hardship. Since the beginning of the pandemic, hate crimes against Asian-Americans have increased by 339% across the country (Yam, 2022). Experts have tied this spike in hate crimes, including a rise in violent incidents, to xenophobic rhetoric linking the Chinese nationality to the origins of the coronavirus (Kurtzman, 2021). The instinct to paint Asian-Americans as the scapegoat for a disease outbreak is nothing new, either: in 1900, an outbreak of bubonic plague in San Francisco was blamed on the Chinese-American community. Chinatown was barricaded by police officers, and non-whites were restricted from travel and were "subjected to home searches and property destruction by force" (Brockell, 2021). The rhetoric of a certain red-tie loving, white supremacist-moonlighting, insurrection inciting, pussy-grabbing president is, with the context of the historical record of white America's treatment of us, par for the course. I doubt that the man who christened a deadly disease the "Chinese virus" had bothered to stop for a second to see Asian-Americans as anything more than perpetual foreigners in his country; a convenient political scapegoat. Nor do I believe that the man who, inspired by the same sentiment, stalked and killed eight people, including six women of Asian descent around Atlanta, Georgia, cared very much about seeing Asian women as anything more than the object of his sexual fixation.

Just the other day, an Asian-American woman was knifed in the back by a man who followed her upstairs to her apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown (Southall et al., 2022). I suppose we're not even safe in our own neighborhoods, much less our own buildings! In a funny way, it

invokes images of those Chinese teenage boys hanging from ropes in Los Angeles's Chinatown, or the corpses strewn among the ashes of Rock Springs's Chinatown all those years ago.

So please, you must forgive me for seeing your disregard for my one tradition of keeping shoes off in my own home as a line crossed within the very last space in which I feel truly safe to be myself. I apologize for the way I reacted, but I hope it's a little more clear to you why I had such a strong trauma response. After all, it's not just you, it's really more of an America thing.

Respectfully yours,

Henry

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