

First off, this story has not been edited by anyone but me (and I suck at self-editing), but I finished it too late to send off to my trusty editors. Sorry! Second, the story isn't necessarily set in any specific era, but I drew a lot from *The Mysterious Code*, which was written in 1961, so I think in my head that's when the events of this story took place (especially since the Cultural Revolution in China began in 1966 and having it take place before this story would have changed a lot of the tenants of the story). I have emulated the speech patterns set forth in the original version of *The Mysterious Code* for Oto Hakaito and for my introduced character. I realize that the spoken English would likely be much more refined were it set in the modern era, but—as always—I prefer to be as true to canon as I possibly can when I write these characters—while still exploring my own take, natch. ;)

This is a Jixemitri Circle Writing Event #13 (Whatcha Cookin', Good Lookin'?) entry and clocks in at 3,498 words.

The Bridge *by Dana*

Suddenly, standing at that bus stop, Di Lynch decided that she had had enough. She couldn't bear the thought of returning to the luxurious but cold mansion—only to be greeted by her family's prim and proper butler rather than her mother.

Di had thought that her family's sudden good fortune would be a windfall for the family. It had been exciting to move from their cramped apartment in the village of Sleepyside-on-Hudson to their new sprawling home with its many rooms that overlooked sloping lawns and gorgeous landscaping. When she had first moved there less than a year before, Di had envisioned parties with her classmates, lots of family time spent on the enclosed veranda, and sleepovers with her best friend, Trixie.

None of that had materialized. Instead, Di felt as though she was suffocating under the weight of her father's newfound wealth. Her two younger sets of twin brothers and sisters, whom she used to love to spend time with after school, were now cared for by nannies and nurses, who always seemed cross when Di interrupted their schedule, wanting to play with the twinnies. As a result, the thirteen-year-old now hardly ever saw her brothers and sisters.

None of the classmates who had frequently dropped by the Lynch apartment in the village had ever come to visit. And the one time that Di had invited Trixie to the mansion, Harrison had wrecked everything, hovering with his stupid silver tray and ridiculous lace doily. Trixie had been as polite as she was capable of being, but Di could tell that the sandy-haired girl had wished she'd just gone home to Crabapple Farm and enjoyed Moms' homemade cookies with a glass of ice cold milk.

Di certainly had wished that herself many times since moving to the "estate." It was always so fun to visit Crabapple Farm, where she and Trixie had played with abandon while Trixie's brother Mart always seemed to be in the foreground. Trixie hated it when Mart hung around, but Di kind of liked it. He was cute in a know-it-all kind of way that Diana happened to find endearing.

No matter what Di had wished, though, it hadn't mattered. Trixie had never come to visit again, and those sleepovers Diana had imagined were gone as if in a puff of smoke.

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As Diana stood at the bus stop with her fellow Sleepyside Junior-Senior High students, who were all so comfortably dressed while she stood there in a lavender frock worthy of a high-society party, she knew that she had to get out of there. No way was she boarding that bus and going “home.”

Before she knew what was happening, the black-haired beauty found that her legs were carrying her away from her classmates, away from the bus, and toward the heart of the village. She knew it’d be okay. Her days of needing to get home to help care for the twinnies were gone. Her father was in the city, earning more of that hateful money. It was Thursday, so her mother was attending the local Jaycees meeting—doing her newly found civic duty, apparently.

No one would miss her.

That may have been what hurt Di most of all. If she hadn’t returned home after school before her father had become rich, not only would her mother have noticed instantly, the twins would have been in full-out mutiny, clamoring for their older sister.

All that’s changed now, Di thought bitterly as she made her way toward the main street of the village, with its quaint shops, stately bank, converted train car diner, grand old department store, and inviting town square. *I doubt that anybody will even notice that I didn’t come home.*

Lost in her depressed thoughts, soon the raven-hair teen found herself among the shoppers strolling along the sidewalk of Main Street. Di slowed her pace, deciding that she would enjoy a leisurely afternoon of window shopping. As she ambled along, her violet eyes took in all of the leather jackets in the window of Brown’s Store and marveled at the sparkling jewels displayed at both Morton’s and Nordin’s jewelry shops. Looking at the pretty frocks adorning mannequins in the windows of Teen Town and the Young Flair shop just depressed her further, though.

As she paused, looking through the glass, she remembered a time when she had admired the stylish outfits displayed in these windows. Back then, her family couldn’t have afforded any of them, so she would dream of one day being able to wear the lovely dresses instead of the plain, homemade clothes she wore to school each day.

These days, her father could probably walk into both teen clothing stores and buy the whole lot of dresses for her, but that held no pleasure for Diana now. She had dozens of pretty dresses hanging in her closet at the mansion—and she was absolutely miserable wearing them.

Diana Lynch would trade every last pretty dress on Earth to have her family back the way it used to be.

As she moved past the clothing stores, she found herself being offered a piece of fruit by a smiling Asian man. She stopped, startled for a moment at the display of kindness.

“Tasty fruit for a pretty girl?” the man said, still holding out a slice of juicy yellow fruit that Di did not recognize.

Normally, Di would have politely declined the fruit, offered by a stranger, but she was intrigued and found herself accepting the strange produce and popping it into her mouth—a little defiantly, she had to admit.

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As the fruit hit her tongue, her eyes widened at the strange, delicious taste. It was somewhat like a cross between a peach, an orange, and a pineapple but with another flavor that she couldn't quite identify. She liked it a lot, though. The Asian man's smile widened at her reaction.

"Thank you," Di said. "That's wonderful. What is it?"

"Mango. Nice Asian fruit. Sometimes I miss my old country, so my brother and I grow a few fruits and vegetables from home."

"Where is home?" Diana asked.

"Japan. I am Oto Hakaito," he said with a small bow. "My brother Kasyo and I are vegetable gardeners."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Hakaito," Di said as she returned the bow out of some sort of polite instinct. "My name is Diana Lynch."

"Lynch? We sell fruits and vegetables to your cook. You live in pretty house by river?"

Di nodded, a shadow passing across her face at the mention of the Lynch mansion. "Yes, we live there now. We used to live in a small apartment right here on Main Street."

"Very nice. Very nice house you have now."

"Yes, it is nice," Di said uncertainly.

Oto Hakaito seemed to sense the young teen's reticence in complimenting her own house.

"You do not like your new house?"

Di thought for a moment. "The house is very pretty," she finally conceded. "But it's so big. I feel like I never see my family anymore. Especially my brothers and sisters."

Oto nodded seriously. "That is sad. I miss my father in Tokyo. You should not miss your family when you live in same house."

Diana smiled. "You're right, Mr. Hakaito. Maybe if I brought some of your wonderful fruit home, I could get my sisters' and brothers' nurses to let me share it with them, and we could have a fun time together."

Oto smiled and nodded. "That sounds like good plan, Miss Diana. I show you nice fruits," he said as he beckoned Di inside the small produce shop, which smelled of a delightful combination of sweetness and earthiness.

"I'd love to bring them home some fruit from your country," the teen requested, following behind the man.

"Right now, I have three wonderful fruits from Asia you should try with your brothers and sisters," Oto said as he headed to the back of the store and selected fruits that looked very exotic to Diana's young, American eyes.

"Mango, papaya, and guava," Oto announced, handing a sack to Diana. "You come back and let Oto know how you and brothers and sisters like them."

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Diana smiled and nodded, feeling happier than she had in a long time. Not only had she made a friend, but she had something to look forward to. She couldn't wait to share the unusual fruits with Larry, Terry, Emma, and Ella—to finally spend some time with her beloved siblings while also exploring something new. Something new and tasty. After unsuccessfully trying to pay for the fruit—Oto insisted that it was a gift, and Di didn't want to risk offending him by insisting on giving him money—Di headed for the front door of the shop, holding her bag of fruit as if it was a sack of gold.

Just before she reached the door, an Asian woman approached her, also carrying a sack.

"Hello, miss," she said in accented English. "I didn't mean to listen, but I couldn't help hearing you talk with Oto—Mr. Hakaito."

The black-haired teen looked at the woman expectantly, not sure what was coming next. Had she made some cultural *faux pas*? The woman continued, "You seemed sad at first, but then I saw how happy the fruit has made you. My name is Lian Ji. I would like to help you bring happiness to your big house, too."

Diana, amazed at the kindness that she was being shown by not one but two strangers that day, felt a warmth blossomed inside of her as she smiled at the woman. "My name is Diana Lynch," she said, even though she figured that the woman had heard her introduction to Mr. Hakaito. "You are very kind, Mrs. Ji."

"Please, call me Lian," the woman said. "You say you lived in apartment on Main Street? I moved into one with my husband almost a year ago. Small, but very cozy feeling. You would like to visit? I'll teach you how to cook with some of Oto's and Kasyo's wonderful vegetables, a yummy Chinese dish you'll love." As she mentioned the Hakaito brothers' produce, she rattled the large sack that she was holding. "Then, you go home and teach your brothers and sisters, yes?"

Di hesitated for only a moment. She knew that she shouldn't go wandering off with strangers, and despite her maudlin thoughts as she had set out on this impromptu journey, she knew that if she didn't come home, she actually would be missed. But the woman's face was so eager and inviting, and Diana really did want to continue this unique culinary adventure that she had accidentally found herself on, so she heard herself agreeing to accompany this woman.

Diana was gratified to see the look of pleasure on Lian's face as the two headed down Main Street in the direction of the brown brick, three-story apartment building in which the Lynches used to live. When they arrived at the door to Lian's apartment, Di somehow wasn't surprised to see that it was the very apartment that she had once lived in. It provided a perfect symmetry to the day.

As the teenager stepped into her old abode, she noticed the changes that had been made. The walls, instead of being decorated with colorful pictures done by Diana throughout elementary school, held family photographs and watercolors of nature scenes marked with Chinese characters. The living room furniture—the same worn couch and chairs that Di had known—were draped with lovely silk tapestries embroidered with cranes and peacocks rather than the cozy afghans that had covered them under the Lynches' tenure. The apartment, which had

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once smelled of familiar comfort food, now smelled of exotic smells that Di didn't recognize, but were an amalgamation of garlic and soy sauce and sesame oil.

As she looked around, Diana let the memories of this place wash over her, and instead of being sad about what was no more, she embraced the memories, happily reliving them for a few moments. She returned from her reverie and looked toward Lian, who was studying her. "You live here? Landlord said big family move out before us."

Di nodded. "This is my old apartment. I love what you've done with it. It always seemed so boring when I lived here, but it's so pretty and exotic now."

Lian laughed a tinkling laugh and beckoned Diana to follow her into the kitchen. "I find America exotic. This is all boring stuff from China to me!"

Diana chuckled at this, thinking how funny it was that something mundane and regular to one person could be so unique and fascinating to someone else.

As Lian unpacked her grocery bag, Di washed her hands. It felt like old times, bustling around the kitchen—like when she had helped her mother fix dinner for their family of seven. It was comfortable and familiar, and Di slipped into the feeling like slipping into a comfy pair of old but beloved slippers.

The black-haired beauty stood by and watched as the older woman took different vegetables out of the bag and placed them on the scarred counter. Some were familiar, like peas and carrots, but a couple Diana didn't recognize. She thought of the mango that she had tried—and had loved—and couldn't wait to try these other new delights.

Before they began cooking, Lian turned to her young protégé. "Should you call home and tell them you'll be late?"

Diana nodded gratefully, and after she had left a message with Harrison, she was ready to begin her lesson.

"I am going to teach you to make fried rice," Lian Ji said. "It is wonderful because you can make it with whatever you have in your kitchen, but there are secrets to making it just right." She grinned conspiratorially at Di and whispered, "I teach you those secrets."

Di grinned, absolutely adoring her new friend in that moment.

Lian crossed the tiny kitchen to the refrigerator and brought out a bowl of prepared rice. "The first secret is that rice must be day old. Otherwise you have mushy mess!" She made a distasteful face, causing Di to giggle. "Freshly made rice is too wet for good fried rice. Let your rice sit for a day in the refrigerator. You be happy you did!"

Di nodded solemnly at the advice as if she had just been told the secret of the universe.

"The second secret is that you need high heat. You must wait until the pan is very hot before you add anything. The third secret is that you cook everything by itself. You want to taste all your different flavors, not just one flavor. Can you remember these three secrets?"

"I can," Di promised. "Thank you for sharing them with me."

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Lian smiled. "You're welcome," she said as she opened a cupboard and took down what looked like a large silver bowl. "This is a wok. It is very common cooking pot in China. But you can use big pan to make your fried rice for big family." She set the wok down on the gas burner and turned the flame up as high as it would go.

"While wok heats up, we prepare everything," she said, crossing back over to the refrigerator, bringing out another bowl. "Today, we make the rice with chicken. My favorite fried rice is with shrimp. My father was a fisherman, so my mother make shrimp fried rice a lot."

"Where in China did you grow up?" Di asked as Lian set the bowl on the counter and drew a wooden cutting board and long knife from the very same drawer that Di's mom had kept her cutlery.

"You hear of Shanghai? Biggest city in China?" At Di's nod, the woman continued, "I grew up on island by Shanghai, Shengshan Island. Big fishing village."

"Living on an island sounds fun," Di said.

"It was, but I had big dreams! I moved to Shanghai, I went to school to learn as much as I could. I met wonderful man." She grinned and leaned in toward Di, as if once again imparting a secret, and said in a stage whisper, "I married him!" Diana laughed as the woman continued, "A very smart man. He go to school a lot longer than me. He came here to teach Chinese history and religion at one of the universities in New York City."

"That's so interesting!" Di blurted.

Lian nodded. "I enjoy being here with him, and I fall in love with Sleepyside. We will be sad to leave."

"You have to leave?" Di's face immediately reddened as she realized that she had practically wailed her question.

Lian, however, didn't seem to mind. As a matter of fact, she looked very touched, and Di relaxed. The older woman turned away from the bowl of cut-up chicken pieces to face Di fully. She laid a gentle hand on the young girl's cheek. "My husband and I have to go back to China in few weeks, but you and I will stay friends. We will write. You will be..." She hesitated. "You will be my young friend."

Di couldn't have known that Lian and her husband had desperately wanted children when they were younger but had been unable to have them. Lian wanted to tell the young woman—who was clearly floundering and in need of the mother whom she had known in that crowded apartment on Main street—what she was feeling, but she couldn't find the words. What she had wanted to say was that this Irish pixie, this girl with the unusual violet eyes filled with longing and so much love to give, this lovely young woman with whom the older woman seemed to have an instant connection, had managed to fill a void in her that she thought that she had gotten over years before. Lian wanted to tell Diana that she felt like the daughter that she had always wanted, however silly that may have sounded.

But she had no words, neither in English or in her native tongue, so she simply gazed at the girl, hoping that would be enough.

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As Di returned the gaze, blinking back tears, she nodded. "Yes, I would like that. I will be your...young friend."

Lian gave Di's cheek one last pat and then returned to business, surreptitiously giving her eyes a quick swipe.

"I already cut up chicken before I went to see what vegetables Oto and Kasyo had today. I love their shop because they always grow a few fruits and vegetables from home on their truck farm. Today, they had daikon and bok choy." As she spoke, she waved her delicate hand toward the two vegetables that Di had not recognized. "Now, we chop vegetables!"

The moment had passed, but the bond was there. As Diana and Lian diced carrots, shelled peas, julienned daikon, and chopped bok choy, they shared stories. Lian loved hearing about Di's younger siblings, as she herself had grown up in a large family, and Di loved hearing about life in a quiet Chinese fishing village far from the unrest on the mainland. Young or old, Chinese or American, close to home or far away, all of these differences melted away, and a bridge was formed as two heads of shiny black hair bent over the counter and the stove while the unlikely pair worked together to create their culinary masterpiece.

When the lesson was finally over, and the two had devoured their jointly created *pièces de résistance*, and they had exchanged addresses with promises to write, and Di knew that she could delay going home no more, the young teen stood at the doorway of her old apartment and hugged the Asian woman tightly.

"Thank you," she said after the embrace had ended. "You did bring me the happiness you promised."

Lian beamed at the girl. "You bring me happiness, too, my young friend. I wish we meet sooner, but we will always be friends."

"You'll come back and visit?" Di asked pleadingly.

"I hope so. If I do, you are first to know!"

The two laughed, either because of or despite the fact that they both knew, deep down, that this was the last time that they would ever see each other. It didn't matter. They had built a bridge together, had formed a unique bond, and would carry each other in their memories forever. *That was what mattered.*

"*Zhù nǐ zǐ qì dōng lái,*" Lian said. "It means that I wish you have a 'lucky air' come to your house from the east. Bring happiness and good luck."

As the woman said it, Di felt an indescribable peace settle over her, and she had a bone-deep knowledge that a "lucky air" from the east would soon sweep through her house and bring happiness. Little did she know just who that lucky air would be.