

HAPA GIRL: A Memoir

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Prologue

When we first moved to South Dakota, we could stop traffic just by walking down the sidewalk, my mother and father in front, my brother and me trailing behind. Cars and pickups slowed, sometimes in both lanes, and the passengers turned to stare out their windows. Our town was small: just five thousand residents and five thousand students. Apart from the university, there wasn't much to it except tiny family-owned shops, a funeral home, a combination steakhouse-bowling alley, and nine bars.

In the beginning, the stares made my parents laugh. "Now I know what it's like to be famous!" my mother exclaimed, throwing a hand on her hip, another behind her head, starlet-fashion. My brother and I giggled. My father smiled and took her by the arm. He may have nuzzled her neck, he may have kissed her shoulder. "Why shouldn't they stare?" he said. "They think Catherine Deneuve has come to town!"

In those days, when they were still young, my father liked to call my mother by movie-star names. Deneuve, Angie Dickinson, Barbara Bain. All the sexy blondes.

At first, I thought people stared because we were from New Jersey. In a town this small, I figured, they must have known we were strangers. I didn't know then, when I was twelve, that they were staring because they'd never seen a Chinese man with a white woman before, and a blonde woman at that. I didn't know they thought we were brazen, flaunting our family in public. It was 1979, and we had imagined that the segregated past was just that, past. Later, it wouldn't seem so funny. The stares made me feel as though I'd forgotten to put my clothes on. I could feel their gaze rub across my skin. After men started driving by our house to shoot, after our dogs were killed, it wasn't funny at all. By then, my father had stopped calling my mother by

movie star names. And my mother had stopped making jokes.

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