



Chopsticks



by Grace Kang
Art by Julie Kim

text © 2021 by Grace Kang
art © 2021 by Julie Kim

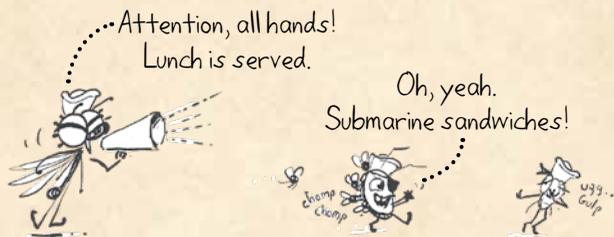
SHAY CAN NEVER hold her chopsticks properly. When she uses them, they crisscross and make an X, and sometimes she cannot quite pick up the slippery pieces of tofu. Her mother laughs.

“Jiā Jiā.” She calls Shay’s Chinese name, holding out her own chopsticks. There’s a soft noise as she clicks them together, no crisscross at all. “Zhè yàng.” *Like this.*

Shay tries, but it’s clumsy, even worse than the crisscross. She makes a face. “I don’t want to,” she says and reaches for a spoon.

“That’s cheating,” her brother says.

Shay pouts. “No, it’s not! Everyone at Abigail’s house uses spoons and forks!”



“Yes,” her father says, “but you live here. It’s traditional, Jiā Jiā.”

“I don’t want traditions,” says Shay. She’s too annoyed to see the twinkle in his eye. “I want to use a spoon.”



The next day, Shay’s mother packs noodles for her lunch. Chopsticks, too. Only chopsticks.

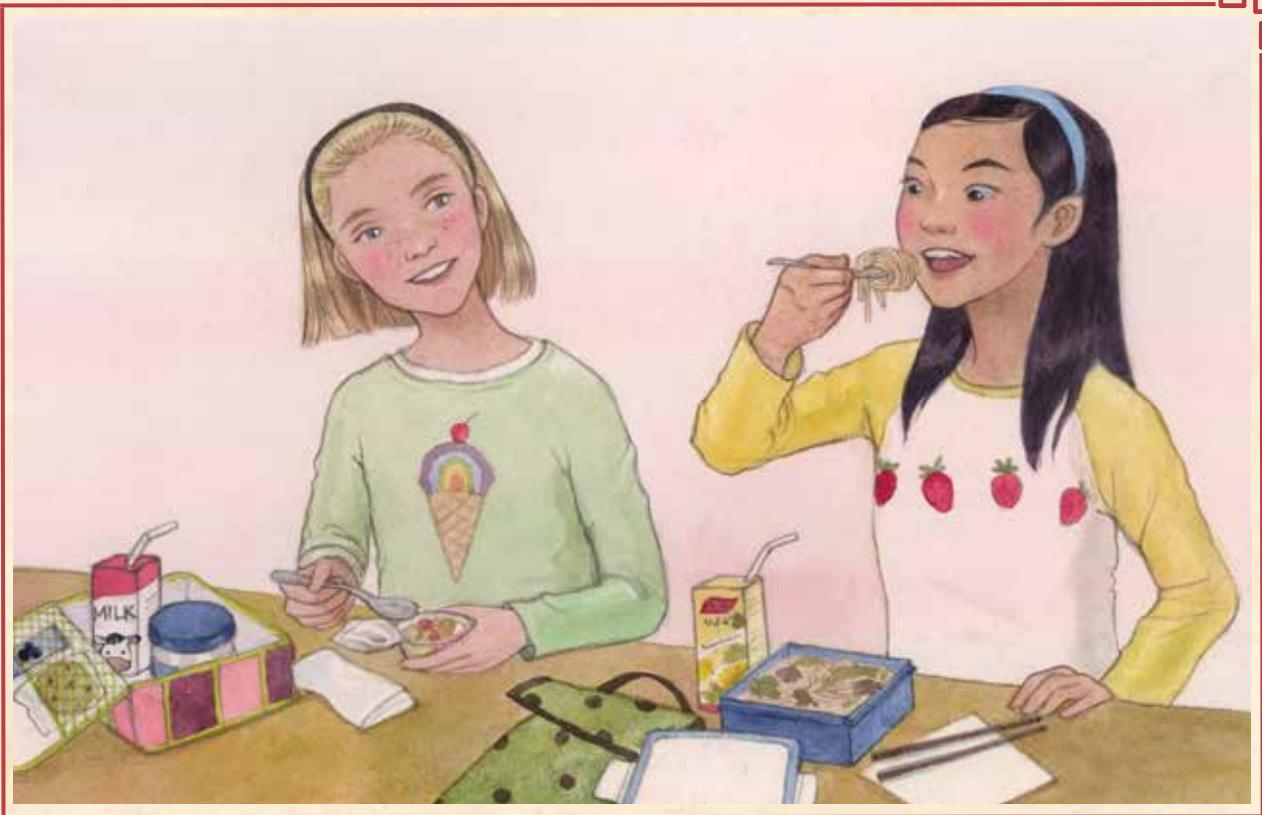
“I have an extra fork,” Abigail says. “You can borrow it if you like.”

Abigail can’t use chopsticks at all, not even the crisscross way.

But she doesn’t have to. Abigail is pretty and blond and has a last name that isn’t Chinese. Sometimes, Shay wishes she lived like Abigail. Just sometimes.

“Yes, please,” Shay says. “Thanks, Abigail!”

Shay eats her noodles like they’re spaghetti, twisting them round and round. Much, much easier.



I do hope you didn’t use any of that old, crusty peanut butter.



Absolument pas! No! I used fresh tofu — soft white blocks of food made from soybeans, often used in Asian and vegetarian cooking.





That night, Shay uses a fork again. A spoon, too.

“I don’t want to use chopsticks anymore,” she proclaims over their meal. “I can’t eat properly with them at all.”

Her mother shares a look with her father, then shrugs. “*Suí nǐ biàn,*” she says. *Up to you.*

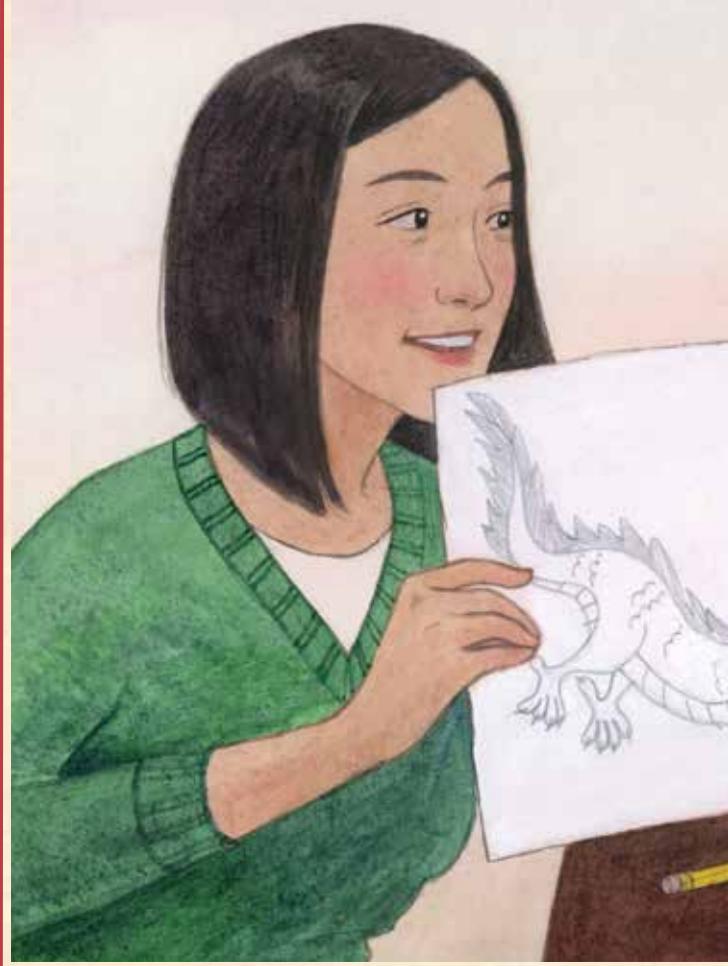
“Cheater,” her brother whispers. Shay steals a piece of duck off of his plate.



After dinner, Shay sits with her mother at the desk as she works on her homework. Sometimes, her mother will help Shay a little, but most times, she makes Shay figure it out on her own. “*Dòng dòng nǎo jīn,*” she’ll say. *Think about it.* It’s hard, but Shay does her best because she knows she can have fun afterward.

When she finishes, she pats her mother’s arm. “I’m done. I’m done. Can we draw now, Mom?”

“*Hǎo, hǎo,*” her mother says, smiling. *Alright, alright.* She takes



out some drawing supplies from the desk drawer and passes some to Shay. “*Nǐ xiǎng huà shénme?*” *What do you want to draw?*

“A dragon!” Shay exclaims. At school, her class is reading fairy tales, and her favorite characters are always the dragons. They’re big and strong, and they breathe fire.

“*Xíng,*” her mother says. OK. She picks up a pencil.

They draw quietly together, side

Excuse me! It is the captain who proclaims — announces — when lunch is served!



Go ahead, Spider. Knock yourself out.





by side. Shay draws a fire-breathing dragon, a huge lizard with big wings. Then she turns to see her mother's drawing: a snakelike creature with impressive antlers and big teeth. Shay recognizes it from the calendar that hangs in the kitchen. It's a Chinese dragon, a *lóng*.

"That's pretty, Mom!" Shay says. She likes the big teeth. "I wish *lóng* had wings, though. Then they could fly like my dragon does."

"They do fly," her mother says, in English this time. "They even swim. *Lóng* are the rulers of the skies and seas."

"Really?" Shay blinks. "That's kind of weird for a dragon."

Her mother chuckles. "The *lóng* is a dragon as I know it," she says. "And this," she points to Shay's drawing, "is a dragon as you know it. But they're both dragons. Neither is wrong."

Attention, crew of the Sea Dragon.
This is your captain. Lunch is served!!!



Must we all use a
bullhorn in a submarine?



Can't hear you. Eating!



“Oh,” says Shay. “So kind of like how I know forks, and you know chopsticks?”

“Yes, Jiā Jiā,” her mother says, laughing. “Just like that. There really is no wrong way to eat. You can use forks, or you can use chopsticks.”

“But,” Shay says, “chopsticks are so much harder than forks.”

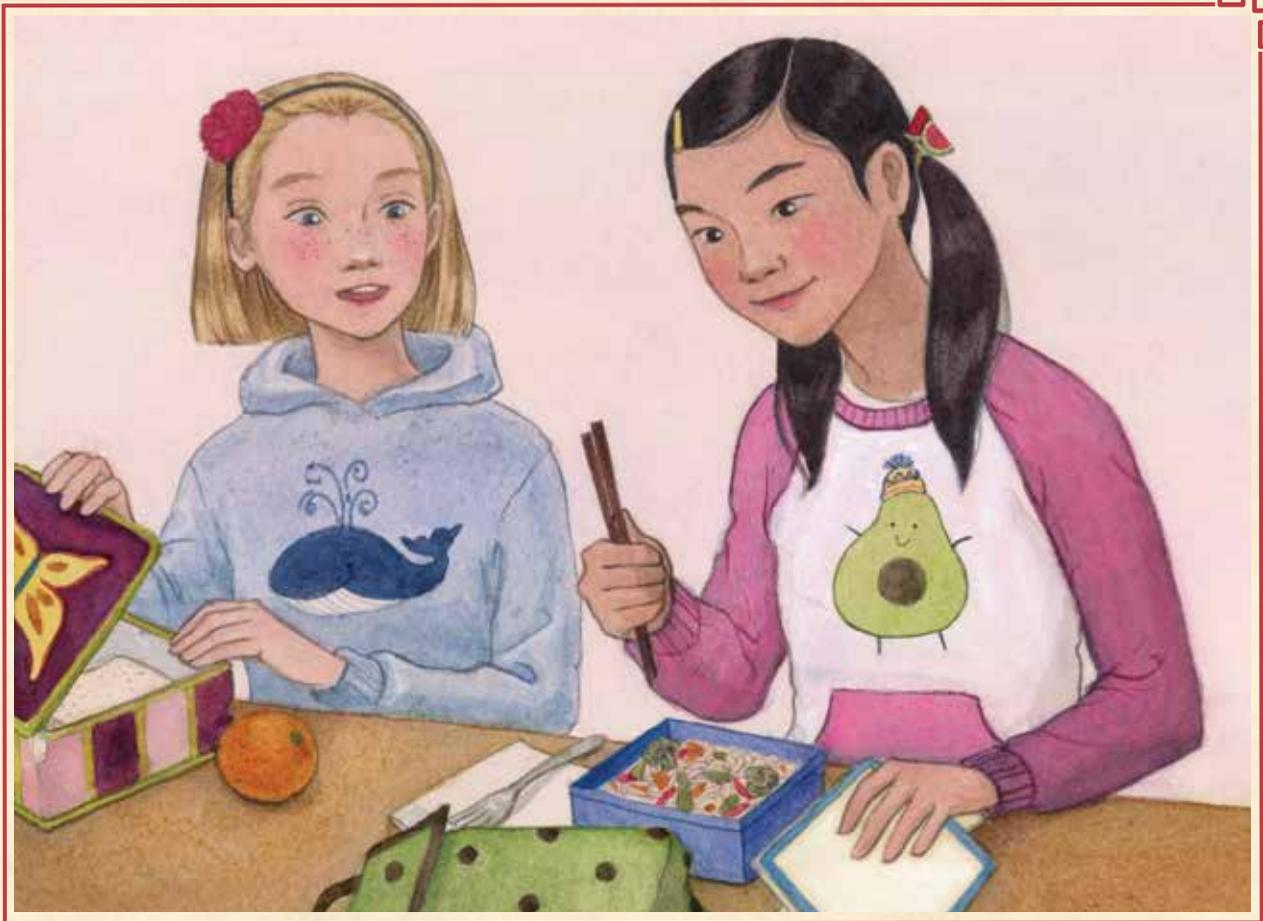
“Yes,” her mother says. “Though

they’re fun too, once you learn.”

Shay nods, thinking. The little Chinese dragon grins up at her with its big teeth.



The next day, she gets noodles again, but this time, there are both chopsticks and a fork in her lunchbox. Shay smiles and reaches for the chopsticks. 🦗



HEY!!! Who just bit me!



Midges don't eat
tofu, silly.