

The Glock and I

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"I'm buying a gun tomorrow," my dad told me. I was looking in the pantry for snacks to eat out of boredom.

"Do you even know how to shoot?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, I remember now. You have that bag in the garage and you went to the shooting range last year. I remember. I didn't think you would actually buy a gun."

"You sound like you don't approve," he said.

It was true. I remembered watching the Snapchat videos of Parkland, then staying home that Friday because two boys at my high school had threatened to shoot the place up. I recalled reading news articles of dads cleaning their guns on the kitchen counter, and then accidentally firing a bullet into a family member. I knew that I would be the kind of idiot who would look down the barrel out of a sick curiosity before inadvertently pulling the trigger and blowing my face off.

"I mean, why would you need it?" I said, walking up the stairs with a sleeve of crackers.

"To protect ourselves." I could feel his eyes on the back of my head, resentful, like I wasn't taking it seriously. I mean, really—Indiana had a stay at home order. Who was going to rob a house full of people?

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Later, my mom would inform me that it was because he was afraid of people who thought that the pandemic was somehow our fault.

"You mean racists?"

"Yeah. He's really nervous."

"Of them getting violent."

It was the four of us in the house all day, every day: my mom working from home, my brother playing League of Legends in his room, me glued to my phone, reading coronavirus news and Taylor Swift thinkpieces while trying to keep up with schoolwork. My dad was the only one

without much to do, so he tended to our wilting hydrangeas, constantly made fried rice, and worried.

This became a regular sequence of events: him shouting that dinner was ready, us meandering to the kitchen table, using chopsticks to pick up stir-fried vegetables. An amateur television anchor, he would report bad news to us, with my mom occasionally chiming in.

“Younger people are going to the ICU and dying. There was a 20-year-old who died.”

“There was a 54-year-old nurse who died in Michigan today.”

“You need to exercise more. The virus affects the lungs and you can’t breathe. You need to have a strong heart, strong lungs. What did I say about 6000 steps a day? Did you do it?”

“You know what a risk factor for mortality is? Asthma.” A glare at my brother, who had the condition in childhood. “*Asthma.*”

“Guess how many cases the U.S. has today?” Every day, I would guess, and every day, I would guess too low.

I constantly stayed up to 2 a.m. mindlessly surfing the Internet, and when I went to brush my teeth before going to bed, I could see that the light in my parents’ room was still on. There they were, thinking about the virus, thinking about what other people thought of us.

I wondered if they were making too big of a deal out of it. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand the magnitude of the pandemic or that I was sneaking out at night to go party. I was trying be productive and helpful. I signed up to volunteer on a phone crisis line. I had also been planning to volunteer at a food bank before my mom told me that I couldn’t leave the house.

Instead, she asked if I was interested in volunteering to collect protective equipment and donations for local hospitals. She had joined at least three organizations composed largely of first-generation Chinese Americans, and aiming at improving civic engagement and decreasing prejudice.

“The perception of Chinese people here is pretty bad,” she said. “People think that we’re selfish, that we only care about ourselves. So we’re trying to show them that we’re not.”

I could see the thought process: *I lost my job because of the Chinese virus. You’re Chinese? It was your country that let this happen. Let’s not forget SARS or the bird flu. The pandemics always start in China; they’re China’s fault. They should be helping more with efforts to mitigate the pandemic.*

Most of the Chinese American families had kept up with the news out of Wuhan and were incredibly careful about contagion. Well before the CDC’s recommendation, they were ordering face masks and gloves from China. Even before healthcare workers reported a shortage of PPE,

their preparedness could be misconstrued as greedy stockpiling that left hospitals running short on essential supplies.

Former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang even wrote that Asian Americans needed to “show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need.” (Bullshit, I thought. No American needs to prove their Americanness. He’s literally Chinese American; he should know better.)

I was happy to help but also skeptical of change. I thought of a pitch meeting I attended for Vanderbilt’s on-campus satirical magazine, back when the total death toll for COVID-19 was below 100.

The pitched article, read out loud:

Top Ten Places On Campus To Avoid If You Don’t Want To Get Coronavirus

1. *McTyeire International House*
2. *EBI Dining Hall*
3. *Stevenson Science and Engineering Library*
4. *Ping Pong tables*

It took me until the fourth entry before I understood what everyone was laughing about. A small “What?” escaped my lips. I turned to another member of staff who was Asian. We exchanged a glance and a you-can’t-be-serious expression. She spoke up: “No, we can’t run that.”

“Why not?” the article’s author--let’s call him Liam--said.

“The only two Asian people in this room don’t approve.” She stopped short of saying, *That’s racist*, but I think that that’s what she meant.

“It’s funny though.”

“It’s not very funny to us,” she replied.

“I have two headlines,” I said, feeling a wave of pettiness surge over me. “The first one is: *Why Coronavirus Makes It Okay To Be Racist Against Asians*. Alternatively, here’s a second one: *How To Pretend That You’re Concerned About The Coronavirus When You’re Really Just Racist*.”

A few people laughed as an uncomfortable silence descended; I could feel it, a blanket of self-righteousness.

Liam turned halfway in his seat, expression mildly sheepish (or maybe incredulous that I would call him out like that?), eyes making a beeline for mine. Our eyes were brown, but his were the color of milk chocolate, while my irises were so dark that they were almost indistinguishable from my pupils.

“Was that in response to my article?”

Suddenly, the weight of the blanket turned into self-consciousness (or was it embarrassment?), the same feeling that I get thinking about my middle school days, when I obsessed over anime ninja, cosplayed edgy villains, blurted out random Japanese phrases.

“No,” I lied, acutely aware that I was the only Chinese-American person in the room. In the moment, I was glad that my eyes were so dark: they kept my expression unreadable, or maybe that was just my wishful thinking. “I just wrote it because of the circumstances.”

He turned away then, no acknowledgement, no apology. A few days later, in our organization’s GroupMe, he would send, “So can we publish my coronavirus article?” I would read the message and see that two people on staff had liked it, then close out of the app and put my phone down.

The few months that have passed since then felt like years. I had wondered if I was being ridiculous. As far as I am aware, the worst displays of prejudice against me have so far been: Caucasian kids refusing to talk to me in elementary school; a teenager rolling her eyes and scoffing, “*Chinese*,” when my brother put a basket on top of his head at a Target; and finding my locker plastered with “Made in China” stickers in eighth grade. I didn’t fight back in any of those cases; my friends told me to tell school administrators about “Made in China” and I said that it wasn’t a big deal, that I was proud of being Made in China.

Now, though, something was different. My dad had the Glock 17 and my mom felt the need to somehow *prove* that we weren’t soulless machines. Both of them wore masks and sometimes gloves when they left the house every two weeks. My mom wrung her hands for her colleagues who weren’t taking the pandemic seriously. She and I translated advice from Chinese doctors experienced in treating COVID-19 patients. We cared so, so much, yet day after day at dinner and on the Internet, I found out about new hate crimes committed against Asian Americans. Not just Chinese Americans, but also people who vaguely “looked Chinese.”

My mom sent me a link to a column in the local newspaper by a contender for our district’s House seat. It was about the coronavirus; he had proudly posted it on his Twitter account as if to brag about his achievement. I read it once, then read it again.

“Left commentators and Democratic politicians are aghast that President Donald Trump is referring to the pandemic as the ‘Wuhan Virus’ and ‘China Virus’ and repeatedly pointing to China as the source of the pandemic,” he wrote. I imagined him saying it aloud, looking me in the eye. “This pandemic reminds us that China is not a responsible global actor and will not become one. I will not forget, neither should you.”

After hearing *Top Ten Places On Campus To Avoid If You Don’t Want To Get Coronavirus*, I had released a spark of righteous fury that had quickly fizzled once confronted. This time, I nursed it from a small tinge of annoyance to a desire to prove every one of the author’s points incorrect. My friend Sophia and I began writing a column in response.

To be honest, though, I initially did it as a favor for Midwest Civic, one of the organizations that my mom is a part of. They requested someone of the “younger generation” to write it and I thought it would be something good to do. I thought that the column’s premise was misinformed but I wouldn’t have written a response had they not asked me to--I let them fan that spark into a flame.

At first I thought that it was very simple: you’re of Chinese descent, both of your parents are 100 percent ethnically Chinese, you speak and write Mandarin, you eat with chopsticks, you celebrate Chinese holidays, you even used to live in China in middle school. Of course you’re going to be uncomfortable if someone who isn’t Chinese looks you in the eye and says, “China is unequivocally bad.” That’s *you*.

By that logic, then, couldn’t someone from the “older generation” write it? My mom? Sophia’s mom? They had spent the first 25 years of their lives in China; Sophia and I hadn’t.

The answer was no.

Intuitively, I understood that although my parents and their friends were technically Asian American—they had become citizens a decade ago and had lived half their lives in the United States—other people and perhaps even they themselves considered them Chinese people with American passports. They had accents, foreign names, and sometimes made grammatical errors in their emails. Sophia and I, on the other hand, had perfect English and “American” names. They weren’t Asian American in the same way that Sophia was Asian American, or how I was Asian American.

Perhaps it would be different in New York or LA and a lot of other places, but I wouldn’t know from experience. We were smack dab in the middle of Indiana.

Maybe we were only the demographic capable of writing the column. We could utilize our greater degree of perceived Americanness. It was more acceptable for someone with a white girl name like me to push back against prejudice than for someone with an obviously Chinese name. Maybe you’d see my mom’s name in the byline and think to yourself, “Of course they’d write this. They’re Chinese, duh.” If you saw my plausibly deniable name, maybe you’d think differently, you’d hear me out because you see me as American. Maybe.

Sophia and I were bona fide Chinese Americans; our parents were also Chinese Americans but also not Chinese Americans. In some way, we were their mouthpiece. We were the bridge, a compromise because it might be more palatable to hear from someone who had the privilege to be born American than from someone who had worked for decades to become American.

“What do you want to achieve with this?” someone who helped edit the column asked me.

“Well, I think that it’s very hard to directly change someone’s mind, especially if they’re really entrenched in their beliefs,” I admitted. “But we need to show that Asian Americans are the

opposite of spineless. If someone demonstrates prejudice against us, we are going to stand up for ourselves. We aren't just going to roll over and take it."

I thought that it wasn't that deep. Columns were typically capped at around 300 words. Just write it and go, no?

We sent drafts to Midwest Civic for review and were met with many suggestions: don't give so much attention to the author because he doesn't deserve the exposure, don't imply that accusations that the Chinese government mishandled the outbreak "may be true" because that invites debates over right and wrong, don't go beyond referencing CDC or WHO guidelines because none of us are experts in medicine or politics, don't reference the fact that Chinese Americans are sending PPE from China because it's highly controversial and it might give the impression of a silo hoarded by selfish Chinese Americans.

I disagreed with some of the suggestions, but maybe we were, as my dad likes to say, *too* liberal. I thought to myself that writing what I really wanted to write might make the more moderate Asian American crowd—i.e. our parents—look bad, which I didn't want, since they were the ones who lived in Indiana year-round. So we changed it like they wanted and wrote something else.

Looking back now, I slightly regret toning it down--were we compromising the message in exchange for less controversy? Had I been afraid of getting hate mail?

Nonetheless, we still got hate for the toned-down version. Perhaps against my better judgment, on one of my late nights, I ventured online to see what people had to say. The Facebook comments section was a mess. (To be fair, the emails Sophia and I received were a little more measured.)

"Dear under 20 co-authors whose parents still cook for you....Please share with us a credible source for your claim that statistics and timelines prove Trumps usage of this language caused not just an increase BUT ANY violence toward a chinese person.....Show me. If not, you need to retract the story and apologize."

"A wholly Ignorant column obviously written by an individual with a prejudice of their own against President Trump."

"Is this a joke? Reprehensible journalism."

At the end of the day, regardless of what other people think, saying or doing something is my responsibility and hopefully better than doing nothing. People trashed me on Facebook, but I am not the one who is spit on or assaulted in broad daylight. No one has shuffled to the other end of the shopping aisle after seeing me approach, or leaned out of their cars to scream that I should go back to China where the virus came from. I haven't gone out into the "real world" in almost two months. Of course this hasn't happened.

It would be easy to take my own experience as universal and dismiss the wave of xenophobia and racism as an outlier. But I can't do that. It would be irresponsible—dare I say even morally wrong. There was the man denied gas in Martinsville, Indiana; the family stabbed and slashed at a Sam's Club in Midland, Texas; the woman on a bus in the Bronx, struck on the head with an umbrella so hard that she needed stitches. They could be us—they *are* us.

So, even in the same household, we go our own ways, trying to fight xenophobia on one front and the virus on the other. My parents will wear masks when they need to go grocery shopping, then change clothes in the garage before coming inside the house, straight to the laundry rooms to wash their garments. On walks along the trail behind our neighborhood, we will continue to swerve off of the path when other people pass by, so that we can maintain a six-foot distance from anyone outside of our household. My mom will continue volunteering for a COVID-19 testing center telephone hotline.

And my dad has his gun. That's the part that I think about most. A friend from high school told me that if we had written the article in another district, I'd have protesters in my lawn. She's right. I would never have agreed if I had lived anywhere else in Indiana. A lot of people have guns, though, I suppose, now we do too.

I still don't know where in the house the Glock is, and I don't want to know. Owning a personal sidearm is the most American you can get; nowhere else in the world would it be so acceptable to think to yourself that you really want to be able to shoot things, roll up to the store with weapons adorning the walls from ceiling to floor, and then walk out of the store toting one of those bad boys. In Indiana and many other states, you can even legally put a bullet in someone's head if you're sitting on your porch and you see them illegally intruding on your front lawn. You don't even need to explain why you thought they might be a threat. I love being American; it's one of my greatest privileges. Yet I am bothered by how casual gun ownership is, just as I question the notion that I am somehow more American than my parents' generation and therefore my viewpoints on the same topics are taken more seriously.

In some ways, though, it's so fitting that the Glock and I coexist in the same household. We're so similar; we're so *American*. I'm supposed to be defending my parents' generation from prejudice. I give them more clout—you'd listen to someone more carefully too if they had a loaded firearm in their belt.

Here's the truth: I don't think that it'll come down to the Glock, but it and I serve the same purpose, just in different ways. I'm the First Amendment—freedom of speech, baby—and the gun is the Second. I am sent forth to ask people not to be racist; clicking the safety back escalates that request into a demand. I am the first line of defense; a bullet is the last.