

Bingo

I.

“I just need to find myself.”

Her voice shakes almost as much as her hands as they palm at the dusty wheels, inching her wheelchair down the hallway. The blue veins webbing her frail hands throb weakly in protest.

“Thank you for helping me look”, she croaks as I push her where she wants to go—down the wrong hallway. For the 6th time.

Every Sunday, for 2 hours, I play Bingo and the piano, and help with the patients in the Memory Care Unit at the hospice by my school.

Every Sunday, for half that time, I wheel her down the halls helping her “look for herself”.

II.

Top 5 Things I Hear from Patients:

Who are you?

I need to go. My kids are waiting for me to pick them up

Binli Bala de de laa Bhweeeaaa

Sure, I’ll play Bingo

I’m lost

III.

Bingo is easy to play. We call letters and numbers as they mark their boards with dying expo markers.

Katherine Chou

She's done looking for her room, and now she sits, gripping a capped marker, gazing down the hallway again. B14. G54. I4. N18.O9. I help her cross out the squares using my uncapped marker. She's got a bingo.

I ask her what prize she wants.

She asks me what my name is.

She's pushing against the wheels of her wheelchair again, so I take off the brakes and we go back down the halls, looking at the squiggly bubble-letter names on each door, hoping for a clue, wishing for a symbol to free her from her maze.

Behind us, they've started another round of Bingo.

"Sweetie, who are you again?"

B19

My name means a lot of things. In school, it means I'm good at math. It means I play the piano, and eat rice with wooden chopsticks at lunch, and have a 5.0 GPA.

I2

In math class—

I slouch against the wall struggling to keep my head above the wave of integrals and derivatives threatening to drown me,

Struggling to stay awake.

I really don't like math.

N4

My name means a lot of things. In Mandarin, it means Ugly-Strong-Bright. My parents chose the latter two words to form my first name because they have expectations.

Katherine Chou

Nobody chose the Ugly part. I wonder where in the line of my ancestors we became blessed with that surname.

G5

In Psychology class—

We discuss the nature of kindness. Is it taught or innate? Are babies naturally nice or mean?

The class clusters into small groups of 4. Different voices flow over each other, fighting to be heard, and the volume of the classroom raises subtly, so gradually that you don't even realize it's loud until everyone's yelling.

Babies are the epitome of innocence.

Empathy is innate.

Children are--

O36

Children are brutal.

The first day of 1st grade, I raised my hand proudly when the teacher called my name during roll call, silently gloating over the fact she didn't stumble over my name like she did with Joaquin and Anais.

After school—

I carpool with a friend to a Chinese after-school program at a local community college.

When my name—my Chinese name—is called during roll call, a tsunami of laughing 1st graders stream to the front to see the roster, because

“That's not actually a name, is it?”

The only ones still sitting are me and the girl next to me.

Katherine Chou

“It’s a different word, right? It’s pronounced like that but the character is written differently, right?”

I nod. But it’s not.

B7

In Mandarin, five words share the same phonetic pronunciation. It wouldn’t matter anyways though, because none of the other 5 words pronounced “Chou” mean anything that much better than Ugly.

“You should get your last name changed to Beautiful”, the teacher jokes.

But Beautiful shares the same pronunciation as Mold, so I’m ok.

I22

“Everything you draw looks a little bit like you”

My art teacher is looking at the dog painted on my canvas.

It’s a little chubbier than the dog projected on the front board, and its nose a bit too long.

We say we’ll fix it next time.

N6

I like my dog actually, so I conveniently forgot to bring it to the next class.

We move on to painting a landscape.

My rocks are taller than they should be.

G67

The buffet by our house is a fusion of Asian and American. Nobody’s judging anyone at a buffet.

Still, I feel guilty as I picking up the French fries with my chopsticks.

I just know the old man sitting in the booth next to us is judging me behind his plate of Sichuan Ji and Zha Jiang Mien.

Katherine Chou

O12

I have a Chinese accent when I say Girl in English.

I have an American accent when I say Fish in Chinese.

For this reason, I speak fluent Chinglish.

She speaks fluent Gibberish, sprouting occasional whispers of “just need to find me” after every other “binga lingo da”.

B47

As we leave the hospice, she clings to my arm.

“Are you going out? Take me with you.”

The door is painted to camouflage with the wall so patients don’t try to leave. It’s also guarded with a 6-digit code. I can’t take her with me. She knows that too.

So, I promise her I’ll be back next Sunday. We’ll playing Bingo again. We’ll walk through the halls to look for her again.

BINGO

We’ve packed up the Bingo boards and pried the expo markers away from hands and even mouths.

It’s all locked in the cabinets, until next Sunday, of course.

The door closes behind and buzzes, leaving them locked in their world of sing-alongs and board games.

Outside those hospice walls, we play our own Bingo game—

A game of Bingo with our lives

We mark experiences and thoughts and feelings—

Pieces of us,

Katherine Chou

Chunks of prideful moments,

Wedges of humiliating instants,

Buffet plates with sashimi touching pizza.

Marks of black expo on our notional Bingo boards—

Hoping to connect it all to win the game, to figure out who we really are— before the last
chocolate chip cookie is taken—before we leave this world.