

The University of Texas at Austin

Reimagining Allyship: A Love Letter

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PART I: Dear Juliet Marković; Love, Suzy

“Alright, Ollie – truth or dare?” Henry says.

“Dare.”

“Rate Juliet Marković on a scale of 1-10 of attractiveness.”

“10. Easy. Give me another.”

“Ok, rate Suzy Mendoza.”

They don’t think I can hear; they think I’m sleeping a seat behind them on the bus ride home from our field trip to the Art Institute of Chicago. But I’m not asleep. I just get car sick, so I’m resting my eyes while I wait for us to get back to school.

“Hmm...” Ollie thinks carefully.

I can tell by his tone that I’m not as easy to rate as Juliet Marković. That’s because Juliet Marković is a no-brainer; she’s the prettiest girl in 6th grade. Also, she’s white (but I didn’t have to say that because I already said she’s the prettiest girl in 6th grade so that already implies that she’s white).

The first time I saw her was in the P.E. girl's locker room. She was wearing mascara and had tied her Old Orchard Junior High shirt into a crop top. Whoa. Mascara and a crop top. This girl is mature. My mom, who has her own thoughts on mature girls, would never let me wear that. I know this because of the car ride home from the winter orchestra concert.

“Did you see the Villanuevas’ daughter?” she asked as I sat in the backseat, eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror. “Her dress was so... *slutty.*”

She spit out the word with such disgust – as if it was laced with poison, lethal enough to barely escape her lips. It was the same disgust she expressed towards skimpy bikinis in the girl’s section of Old Navy. A disgust that I, in a desperate attempt for approval, pacified by exclusively wearing surfer shirts and swim trunks from the boy’s section of Old Navy.

I wore this prescribed boyishness with a sense of pride. It became my brand – the tomboyish, short, asexual, pre-pubescent, Asian, class clown.

Because who needs beauty when you can be funny? Funny can get you attention, too.

Juliet Marković and I never talked, but I took the liberty of staring at her from afar. Somehow she always had a tan – the type of olive-toned tan that you get from going on vacation to Montenegro every summer, not the type of tan that you’re born with. Melanin *I* was born with. It’s a type of tan that white girls try to bake on with browning lotion and Filipinas try to bleach off with whitening soap. The type that only looks good on girls like Juliet Marković, and not girls like me.

Ollie comes to a decision.

“I’d give her like a 3– wait, I was being generous. Maybe a 2,” Ollie answers.

I feel the laden sting of his words as I sink into my seat. Part of me wants to unbuckle my seatbelt and give him a piece of my mind. Part of me also wants to go home and sob. But in this moment, I do not cry. I do not give him a piece of my mind. I stay quiet. I’m compliant because, at 12 years old, I know he’s right. I look nothing like Juliet Marković. I am ugly.

PART II: Dear Suzy; Love, Boy

I am sixteen years old, sitting crisscrossed on the floor of my bedroom. In my hands rests an unopened love letter, its contents humming with potential energy. Leaning against my bed frame, I carefully trace the words written on the envelope.

To Suzy Mendoza.

My heart melts at the letters written in loopy, inky cursive – so much so that a giddy squeal escapes me.

It is in this moment that I feel like a Teenage Girl. A real ingénue – unpolished, on the precipice of a life unfolding. In my hands rests the pin that could explode my future wide open. And as the letter hums, so do I.

I open the envelope, and the humming stops.

“I love your hands,” the note reads. “They’re so small, like a baby’s. Your voice is so cute, too. It reminds me of a child’s.” I read that line again.

This is a little weird, I think. Feels pedoph– wait, no. This is sweet. This is love. This is what it feels like to be loved.

Learning faulty definitions of love when we are quite young makes it difficult to be loving as we grow older.

I keep reading.

“I’ve always had a *thing* for Asians. I especially love it when you wear that plaid skirt.” My eyes hang on those cursive words.

‘I’ve always had a thing for Asians?’ I’m confused. I thought boys never wanted me because I was Asian. Now they want me because I’m Asian?

I keep reading.

“If I were to kidnap you, instead of using a blindfold, I would use string to cover your eyes because they’re so small.”

This time I wince. I don’t want to keep reading. I close the letter.

Racist love is used to describe the model minority’s subjugation as a beloved object of white America.

I am sixteen, but in my mind I am twelve, sitting at the back of a bus, feeling as though the strings tying me to the Earth are gossamer thin. In my hands rests an opened love letter, its contents now humming in my mind, a film replaying behind my eyes.

He likes me because I’m Asian.

My heart, three times heavier now, dangles by a thread. I decide that this weighted feeling must be love.

The next day, when I see the boy at school, I thank him for the note. He responds with a sheepish yet self-righteous, “You’re welcome,” almost as if he understands the power his cursive letters held; as if his written words,

virtuous and catalytic, were the only lesson I needed to teach me that I was beautiful. To him, the letter is charity work.

I date him for five months. In those five months, I do not complain about his pedophilic infantilization. I do not bring up his Lotus Blossom Asian girl fantasy. I do not berate him for his perverted and racist kidnapping hypothetical. I'm compliant because, at sixteen years old, I believe that male attention (of any kind) is worth my gratitude. I am appreciative of being desired because the feeling of being pretty is a rare one. It ebbs and flows with love letters and catcalls, fading after each serotonin boost. The feeling that lingers is one of ache. A seed that is planted within the embryos of Asian women – one that grows when we are deprived of childhood love, and one that blooms when we crave attention in our partners. This plant finds its roots in adolescence when we are prescribed boyishness, tagged as unwanted, and classified as *other*. Then, when it blooms, that exact *otherness* is what makes us special. We become the antithesis to the norm; the exotic alternative to white women.

For years, I will continue to convince myself that this type of white male attention equates to love – that fetishization is one step up from undesirability.

The love letter, its loopy, inky cursive now smudged with dried tears, sits neatly tucked in the closet of my childhood bedroom, serving as a reminder of that ejection. At sixteen, when I opened the envelope, I pulled a pin, triggering a bomb that exploded me into otherness.

PART III: Dear Ma; Love, Suzy

I am 11 years old and I hate shopping.

I hate shopping because it means Mama and I have to spend the whole day together, and by the end of it, we're usually mad at each other. Usually, it's because she makes a small jab at me as we're talking and sifting through the racks at TJ Maxx – something stupid like "*Tumigil ka* (enough already)! You need to stop complaining!" Then I murmur a few words (something totally innocent) under my breath, she snaps and storms off to the car, and we ride in silence on the way back home. It's like this every time.

That's why Papa is my favorite. He never gets mad at me, and he's more fun than Mama. Sometimes, when Mama goes off on her tangents about how we "treat her like a maid" and how she "never gets any respect," Papa and I look at each with the *here she goes again* face. I laugh a lot more with Papa because Mama is always stressed out and sad. I wish she would just calm down.

Often father and daughter look down on mother (woman) together. They exchange meaningful glances when she misses a point. They agree that she is not bright as they are, cannot reason as they do. This collusion does not save the daughter from the mother's fate.

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I am 17 years old and I love shopping.

I love shopping because my mom spoils me when 1) she knows she's done something wrong or 2) wants to get closer to me. A few weeks ago, after my mom told me she "wished she had aborted me," she bought me wide-leg jeans from Urban Outfitters. Before that, I was kicked out of the house for disagreeing with her about politics. The debacle ended with a new pair of Dr. Martens from Nordstrom Rack.

Too many of us need to cling to a notion of love that either makes abuse acceptable or at least makes it seem that whatever happened was not that bad.

Part of me wishes she knew how to say the words "I'm sorry" or "I love you," but the other part of me knows that words of affirmation have never been our thing. Her *I love yous* never came in the form of *I love yous*, but in the form of action: sliced fruit at my bedside and freshly baked Bibingka. My mom shows her love through gifts: a new necklace from *Madewell*, a floral blouse from *Anthropologie*, a pair of shoes from *J Crew*. Plus, I don't mind the new wardrobe.

Learning faulty definitions of love when we are quite young makes it difficult to be loving as we grow older.

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I am 18 years old and I miss shopping.

I miss shopping because it reminds me of my mom. Now that I'm in college and don't see her as much, I think about my mom a lot. I try to remember the stories she would tell me of her time at university in the Philippines – stories she would tell me in the car on our way to TJ Maxx. As I comb through memories, I try to imagine her at my age – a studious kid, determined to get out of Navotas. A girl determined to get her family out of poverty and make it big. As I take notes in lectures, I picture my own mom, diligently creating cell biology reviews in handwriting that looks just like mine – reviews that would later be copied and distributed by her professor to the rest of the class to be used as exemplary studying material. These imaginations remind me that there was a time when she wasn't my mother.

I think about her hopes and dreams. Dreams to make her own money; dreams to marry a prince. I think about how she fell in love with my father's charisma, and how she was willing to risk it all for him because of how she loves so fiercely. I think about her trauma, and how she immigrated to America to escape that trauma; about how that trauma followed her and continues to follow her in the form of bipolar depression. I think about how that trauma was passed down from her own mother, and how it is passed on to me. I think about her mental health, and how I woefully misunderstood her manic episodes as a kid. I think about how she left her entire country to come to America to give my brother and me a better life; about how unimaginable that pain could have been, to be uprooted from everything you know, only to be placed in a land where they call you “chink.” I think about how ungrateful I was. I think about how special our shopping trips must have been for her; about how desperate she was to form that mother-daughter connection, a connection she never had with her own mother. I think about how her *I love yous* come in the form of action, never verbal confirmation; about how her *I'm sorrys* come in the form of gifts, never spoken apologies. I think about how I spent the majority of my life trying to avoid becoming my mother, only to realize that I could never come close to surpassing her. And I think about how heartbroken she must feel when her American daughter goes, “could you repeat that – but in English this time?”

Works Cited

*Note: The body of this essay follows the citation style modeled by Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts*, but I have chosen to include traditional citations in MLA (8th edition) format for reference.

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