



## THE LITTLE EMPRESS OF CHINA

A PITCHER OF calamansi juice was sitting on the kitchen counter. It had ice cubes in it and a few calamansi halves floating near the surface. The calamansi was fresh, plucked from the squat tree that grew next to the clothesline. Jessa never liked calamansi juice. She found it painfully sour, unless mixed with sugar—a lot of sugar, which her mother said would one day rot her teeth and give her diabetes.

From the kitchen window, Jessa saw the van coming up the driveway. It was the silver van that took Nikki to school every morning. Unlike Jessa, Nikki was very fond of calamansi juice. She liked her calamansi juice on the sour side though, with just a few teaspoons of sugar. She drank one glass every morning before going to school and another glass in the afternoon as soon as she got home.

Nikki usually arrived a few hours after Jessa. Her school was farther away and had longer classes. “A complete bore!” Nikki would complain. She and her friends would just pass around notes during class, but not when their teacher happened to be one of the nuns. Nikki said that the nuns at her school were all cranky and liked punishing students for fun.

Unlike Nikki’s school, the school that Jessa attended was just a fifteen-minute walk away. Their classes were often clipped short, with their teachers not seeming to care a whole lot about teaching. Jessa didn’t even know the names of half her teachers.

The van pulled into the garage and rumbled to a stop. It didn’t take too long for Nikki to push open the kitchen door, swinging her lunch box as she walked in. She saw the calamansi juice on the counter and went straight for it. She downed her entire glass in four large gulps.



Jessa took two spoonfuls of sugar and dumped them into her glass. She mixed vigorously, wanting to make sure that the sugar was thoroughly dissolved. Then she added another spoonful for good measure.

“So,” Nikki said, beaming at Jessa as she put down her glass, “all my classmates liked my show-and-tell. Ms. Perez even said that she liked it, too.”

Jessa nodded. Her glass gave off merry tinkles as she continued mixing.

“Sure, everybody already knew it was a rose. So I told them that it was a China rose that mama took from a palace in China.”

“Did she really get them from China?” Jessa asked.

“Of course,” Nikki answered. “Where else would China roses come from?”

Jessa was about to take a sip of her calamansi juice when Mang Rudy pushed open the door. He was dragging Nikki’s stroller behind him. In his free hand, he held a small plastic pot from which sprouted a leafy stem. Near the tip of the stem was a pink rose, recently emerged from its bud. Its color was soft and powdery, closer to white than it was to red. “Elegant” was the word that came to Jessa’s mind. Their class had just learned that word in their English lesson the other week.

Mang Rudy parked Nikki’s stroller by the dining table before making his way to the veranda. Nikki ran after him, and Jessa ran after Nikki. Her glass of calamansi juice remained on the kitchen counter.

In the veranda, Mang Rudy returned the pot to its proper place on the bench. There was a line of plastic pots on the bench, six of them in total, all containing rose cuttings that have just started to grow.

From the veranda, one could see the entire garden. It was a grassy lawn fringed with a green wall of bamboo. A pebbled path ran from the veranda to a gazebo that stood somewhere in the middle of the garden. Partly shaded by the gazebo’s roof was the bush from which the rose cuttings had come from. The bush was now taller than Jessa, and even taller than Nikki. For the past few weeks, the China roses around the gazebo were all in full bloom.

Nikki made her way down the path, with Jessa following behind her. There was a question that Jessa had wanted to ask her friend. “Did you also tell them about . . . you-know-who?”

“I did,” Nikki said with a smile.

“Okay,” Jessa replied. She didn’t know how to feel about her friend’s answer.



Nikki walked up to the rose bush and examined one of the larger roses. She brought her face close to the rose and took a whiff of its fragrance. She moved to another rose, and then to another.

“And what did they say about it?” Jessa prodded.

“They were amazed!” Nikki answered. “They kept asking me questions, all the way until dismissal. I bet we’ll be talking about it for a very long time.”

Jessa stood there with her shoulders slightly slumped. Eventually, she managed a grin. That was Nikki—bright, engaging, and a natural magnet for people’s attention. It was no surprise that she had lots of friends at school. Jessa sometimes wondered why people needed so many friends when just one friend would probably be enough.

As Nikki examined some of the roses, Jessa leaned into the bush and drew her face to the rose that was closest to her. She closed her eyes and inhaled its fragrance. The scent of roses always made her think of soft things, like a cozy blanket on a chilly night. She thought of this as she inhaled the rose’s scent.

“She’s in this one,” Jessa announced after a pause. She held the rose by its stem.

Nikki drew close to the rose that Jessa was holding.

“But she’s still asleep,” Jessa added. “Maybe she’ll be awake tonight.”

Nikki narrowed her eyes and peered into the rose. She smiled, as if agreeing with what Jessa had just said. Then she turned and marched back into the house.

Nikki would change into her house clothes and watch some TV before doing her homework. Then it would be time for dinner. She skipped her way through the living room and then up the stairs to her bedroom. Jessa stood at the foot of the stairs and watched her friend prance off. She stood there for a moment, feeling a little bit lightheaded.

“Jessa,” her mother called from the kitchen. “You still have some calamansi juice.”

Jessa walked back into the kitchen. She had almost forgotten about the glass on the kitchen counter. She took a sip from it and winced. No matter how much sugar she added, calamansi juice always tasted sour.

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Jessa could still remember the time she discovered it. It was a chilly, moonless night with the sky dark with clouds. She had pulled her blanket





all the way up to her chin and tucked it all around the length of her body like a cozy cocoon. It was about a year ago, and the rose bush by the gazebo wasn't as tall as it was today.

Her mama was fast asleep when Jessa crawled out of bed. She was awakened by a dream—or maybe a star—that had come to perch on her window sill. The star was tiny, about the size of a bird, and it glowed yellow in the darkness. With its arms—because stars do have arms—it seemed to be signaling to something or someone out in the garden. To Jessa, the star looked like a policeman directing traffic.

Jessa undid her cocoon blanket and propped herself up in bed. The star looked straight at her. With one of its stubby arms, it signaled for her to be quiet. Even if the star didn't have a face, Jessa somehow knew that it had given her a knowing wink. Then the star motioned for her to look outside the window. She raised her eyes to the level of the window sill to see what was going on.

Were they stars, too? In the garden, orbs of lights were descending from the sky and landing just a few steps from her window. When the lights touched the ground though, Jessa saw that they were not lights at all but pairs of men and women dressed in silken robes. The women had ornate headpieces, and the men had long, black beards. They were dressed in red and carried all sorts of trinkets. Some had elaborate boxes, while others carried large porcelain vases. Some were even tugging gilded cages that contained all sorts of strange animals—peacocks, parrots, and beautiful birds that looked like fire. The pairs of men and women glowed like stars but walked and moved like they were regular people. They appeared to be moving somewhere, toward something, and the tiny star on Jessa's windowsill looked like it was directing the entire show.

Wary not to wake her mother, Jessa opened the door and slipped out into the garden. Outside, the lights formed a procession that curved around the garden and ended up behind the gazebo. Jessa made her way to the wall of bamboo. She inched her way through the stalks of bamboo until she found a spot where she could get a clear view of the gazebo. The pairs of men and women all stopped before the rose bush. There, they laid their gifts down on the grass. With much ceremony, they knelt and bowed their heads three times, with their foreheads touching the ground. Then just as strangely as they arrived, the handsome pairs burst into tiny flecks of starlight and drifted away on the night breeze.





Jessa attempted to count the number of people—or stars—that knelt before the rose bush, but the parade moved quickly, and it was difficult to keep track of anything.

When the last of the pairs had disappeared, the garden was once again dark and quiet, just as it had always been on nights when the moon was nowhere to be seen. But a golden light appeared to glow from somewhere in the rose bush. When she was sure that she was alone, Jessa emerged from behind the stalks of bamboo. She approached the rose bush to take a closer look. The light was coming from the largest rose.

Despite its brightness, the light didn't hurt Jessa's eyes. As she drew closer, she realized that she could see clearly into the light and into the center of the rose. There, nestled in a bed of soft petals, was the Little Empress of China. Her black hair was adorned with tiny pearls, and she wore a long yellow robe. She was reclining on a puff of pink petals as she stretched out her arms and gave out a yawn. She must have been the size of Jessa's pinky. When she stopped yawning, the Little Empress noticed Jessa peering at her. She peered at Jessa, too. Then the Little Empress of China smiled and waved hello.

That night, Jessa discovered a new friend in the rose bush. She couldn't wait to introduce her to Nikki. Now, there would be three of them.

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"She hops from one rose to another," Jessa told Nikki one afternoon. "I think she likes the bigger roses because they are fluffier. They're a lot easier for her to sleep in."

"Why does she sleep so much?" Nikki asked. "It's no fun playing with a fairy that's always asleep."

"I guess being the empress of China is tiring work."

"I think it would be fun being the empress of China—or being the empress of anything. You get a lot of gifts, and everybody has to do what you tell them to do."

Since that moonless night about a year ago, the gazebo had become Jessa and Nikki's favorite place in the world. Nikki brought some of her toys to the gazebo, as well as some books and pillows. The two friends would eat there, play there, and nap there. When they felt like it, they would study and do their homework there, too.



When the Little Empress of China was not sleeping, she would be tiptoeing on the leaves of the rose bush, accosting a caterpillar or a worm. Sometimes, she would climb to the highest branch of the rose bush and hop onto the gazebo's roof. She didn't like the birds turning the roof of the gazebo into a toilet. Her feet would make shuffling noises on the roof whenever she shoed away the birds. To Jessa and Nikki, her footsteps sounded like rain.

On days when she was bored, the Little Empress would climb down from the rose bush and play with the crickets. She would race with them in the grass, but the crickets would always win. When she tired of racing with the crickets, she would scramble onto the gazebo's wooden deck and play with Jessa and Nikki instead. She would hide in their shoes, or in their hair, or in the tiny oven that was part of a kitchen play set. She also liked to sit on the pages of the book that either Jessa or Nikki was reading. When they dozed off, face flat on the open book, the Little Empress of China would tug at their hair to wake them up.

The two friends enjoyed the company of the Little Empress of China. Despite her chronic sleepiness, her friendship opened up a world of wonders. The gazebo in the garden was no longer a gazebo but a golden pagoda, eight tiers high, with silk curtains, rosewood furniture, and a vast collection of jade trinkets. The pagoda was at the center of a lake, which was the center of a courtyard, which was the center of a palace with massive red walls and yellow tiled roofs. There were servants in the palace, and musicians, too. The palace gardens burst with roses of every color, and above them flew great white clouds that curled like the breath of dragons.

"We should never tell anybody about this place," Nikki said one afternoon.

"Of course," Jessa replied, sounding like Nikki was stating the obvious. It would just be a secret between friends—she, Nikki, and the Little Empress of China.

But Nikki wasn't good at keeping secrets.

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A week later, Jessa came home excited about her science homework. Their teacher told them to bring a flower to school. It had to be a special flower, which they would have to talk about at length in front of the



class. It was just like the show-and-tell assignment Nikki had about a week ago.

The cuttings that Nikki had brought to school now sprouted a new bud. There were two roses in the pot, the larger one looking fuller and fuller as the days went by. Jessa planned to bring that same pot to school for her science homework. She would tell her classmates that the rose was not any ordinary rose but a China rose. She would also tell them that the rose was grown from cuttings taken from a rose bush that grew in the garden. Then just as Nikki did, she would also tell them all about the Little Empress of China. After all, this was no longer a secret Jessa needed to keep.

But Jessa had another secret. It was a secret she shared with nobody but herself. The secret started as a black seed of doubt buried somewhere in her mind. She tried to prevent it from growing because it was turning into a frightening, thorny thing, but grow it did. For a long time now, Jessa suspected that Nikki had never really seen the Little Empress of China. The more she gave it thought, the more this seemed to be the case.

Nikki was a thoroughly likable person. Jessa noticed this whenever Nikki brought her classmates over to the house. With them, she was fun-loving and slightly naughty. She was oftentimes the instigator of all the misbehaving. But with her, Nikki was kind. She lent Jessa her toys, her books, her pencils and pens, and she even gave Jessa some of the clothes she had already outgrown. She always listened to Jessa whenever Jessa had a story to tell, even if the story didn't seem to interest her at all. Nikki had always been a kind to Jessa, and that was all she ever was. She was even kind enough to play along.

Jessa opened her notebook and wrote an outline of what she would say in front of the class. She even drew a diagram of the rose, with the Little Empress of China sleeping among its petals. She would tell her classmates about how the gazebo in the garden was not a gazebo but a golden pagoda in the middle of a lake. She would tell them about the palace, all its gardens and courtyards, and how she and the Little Empress of China played through all its halls. Then she would tell her classmates that the Little Empress of China only showed herself to people she liked. She would also tell them that she knew of some people who only pretended to see the Little Empress of China, and that these people were nothing more than fake friends. She would end by cautioning her classmates that



fake friends were horrible, because they would take your most precious secret and share it with the world.

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Jessa woke up early the following day. She was an early riser, since her mother was always up before the crack of dawn. Mornings were the busiest part of her mother's day.

After bathing and combing her hair, Jessa donned her school uniform and slipped on her leather shoes. She walked to the veranda and picked up the pot of rose cuttings. She put it inside a plastic bag so it would be easy for her to carry to school. She brought the pot to the kitchen and set it down next to the kitchen counter.

Her mother was bent over the stove with a towel draped across her nape. She was frying some rice in the pan. The rice hissed as she tossed it about with salt and chopped garlic. "What's that?" came her mother's voice as she looked over her shoulder.

"One of the roses," Jessa said, "for show-and-tell."

"What?" her mother asked as she retrieved another pan and placed it on the burner.

"It's for my assignment," Jessa answered.

"Why are you bringing the roses?" her mother pressed as she cracked an egg.

"Our teacher said we needed to bring a flower to school, and that the flower had to be a special one."

Her mother paused and heaved a sigh. She turned to Jessa, pointing the spatula in her direction "Those are expensive," she stressed. "You will just ruin them. And then what will they say?"

Jessa dropped her gaze. The egg popped and sizzled in the pan. "But Nikki brought one to school last week, and it was okay."

"Because she's Nikki," her mother said. Jessa could feel the sharp edge of her mother's voice.

Jessa's mother pulled out a plastic plate and dumped some rice onto it. She took the egg and slid it onto the mound of rice. She placed the plate in front of Jessa with a clatter. "Eat," she commanded. "I have a lot of things to do."

Jessa went quiet. She didn't feel like eating.

Her mother retrieved a pack of bacon from the freezer. Nikki's parents



liked eating bacon for breakfast. They said that they would have an early day at the office, so breakfast had to be prepared earlier than usual.

“What will I bring to school then?” Jessa asked.

“I don’t know,” her mother replied, raising her hands. With her shoulder, she shoved open the kitchen door and stepped outside.

Jessa stared at her breakfast. It was the same breakfast she had every single morning. One egg and a meager helping of rice.

It didn’t take too long for her mother to return with a plastic basin containing a few handfuls of calamansi she had yanked from the tree near the clothesline. They were for Nikki’s calamansi juice. She dropped the basin on the kitchen counter next to Jessa’s food.

As Jessa sat there, she looked at the rose by her feet. It stood full and bright, with its face turned toward her. The rose looked beautiful—elegant—but somehow, so impossibly distant. Jessa felt like she was about to cry.

The pieces of calamansi that her mother had pulled from the tree were mostly green, with a few yellow ones here and there. There were wayward leaves in the basin as well, and a few tiny white blossoms.

“There,” Jessa’s mother said as she unwrapped the bacon and put it in the microwave for defrosting. “Aren’t those flowers?” She stood by the microwave, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

Jessa looked at her mother—her old mother who appeared more and more tired with each day that passed. Jessa loved her mother but never considered her beautiful. She had thick arms and a pair of rough hands that went about their daily tasks in rough ways. Ever since she could remember, her mother always seemed to be cross about something. Jessa couldn’t say for sure what it was, but she had a feeling it was her.

From the plastic basin, Jessa fished out a small calamansi flower. She pinched it by the stem. How tiny the flower was, and how plain. The flower reminded her of nothing but the sour acidity of its fruit. She took the flower and slipped it into the front pocket of her uniform. It was so tiny that it felt weightless, like it was nothing at all.

Jessa took her time as she walked to school that morning. A lot of things were going through her mind. She no longer wanted to do her show-and-tell. When her turn to speak came, she said that the calamansi flower she had brought to school was taken from a tree that grew next to the clothesline where her mother hung laundry to dry.

She returned that afternoon with her shoes caked in dust. Nikki wasn’t



home yet. It would take a while for Mang Rudy to fetch her from school. As Jessa made her way to her room, she felt a kind of sadness she had never felt before. She sat on her cot and stayed there until it was dark outside. There was no need for her to go into the garden because she already knew it. The China roses were empty, and the Little Empress of China was no more.

Jessa wasn't even sure if she had ever really been there.