

**THE  
HARLEM  
CHARADE**

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**H**arlem, with its stately brownstones, honking horns, and bustling street life, passed in a blur as Jin Yi sprinted the entire ten blocks from school to her grandparents' bodega. Her student council meeting had run long, and now she was late. Her friend Rose, who was meeting her at the store to work on their history class project, would be arriving any minute.

Breathless, Jin flung open the heavy front door and rushed inside, where she promptly whacked her knee on the corner of a large box, which was nearly blocking the store's entrance. *Ow, ow, ow!*

"Pretty sure this is a fire code violation!" she yelled to no one in particular.

Normally, the store was neat and orderly. Halmoni could tell if just one can was out of place on the shelf. Jin's grandmother had eyes like an eagle. One Wednesday a month, though, on inventory night, the place turned into a labyrinth of boxes and crates full of new merchandise.



*Argh!* It was Wednesday. She had completely forgotten about inventory night when she'd invited Rose over to study, and now it was too late to cancel. Jin eyed the stacks of canned vegetables, cereal boxes, and other items waiting to be shelved or stored. Several of her family members usually showed up to help out, but even with the extra hands, she knew they would be here until midnight putting all this stuff away.

Jin sighed as she limped toward the back of the store, her knee still throbbing like crazy. She bent to rub it and nearly toppled over when her aunt, Ye-Eun, who worked in the store some afternoons, suddenly emerged from one of the aisles.

"Careful there, kiddo." She smiled, reaching for Jin's arm to steady her.

"I'm okay," Jin blushed. "I just didn't see you there," she muttered.

"Hard to see anything with all this stuff everywhere. But we'll get it cleared out tonight." She ruffled Jin's shoulder-length black hair. "Oh, and by the way, it's kimchi day!" she announced with a mischievous wink as she breezed out the door. The word *kimchi* was still hanging in the air when Jin smelled it—the undeniable and overpowering spicy odor of fermented cabbage, hot peppers, and fish sauce. On

kimchi days, Halmoni lugged large Tupperware containers full of kimchi that she had made days ago at their apartment to the bodega so they could jar it and sell it in the store. Halmoni was pretty famous for her kimchi. It always flew off the shelves, so they were constantly filling jars with the stuff—at least it seemed that way to Jin.

“Ah, Jinnie, you finally here.” Halmoni’s curly black hair, frizzy from years of home perms, popped up from behind the front counter. “Come help with kimchi.”

“My friend Rose is coming over to do homework, remember? Can I help you with the kimchi later? And, Halmoni, can we, um, keep the lid closed tight on the Tupperware for now? I love your kimchi, but I’m not sure Rose has ever tried it before . . .”

Halmoni took a big whiff from the kimchi-filled Tupperware in front of her. “Anybody don’t like kimchi, don’t need to come to my store.” She tossed her head back proudly. “But okay, we do kimchi later. Go and greet Harabeoji now.” She shooed Jin away.

“Thanks, Halmoni,” Jin said, walking toward the back of the store. She dumped her bag in the storeroom, then poked her head into the tiny office where her grandfather worked. “Hey, Harabeoji! How are you?”

Harabeoji grunted but didn't look up from the papers on his desk. Jin figured he must be doing paperwork for the store, which always made him grumpy. She headed back out front, just as Rose walked through the door.

"Over here!" Jin waved. "Watch out for the boxes," she said as she pushed aside a small stack to clear a path. "It's inventory night."

"I'm used to it. Now that my parents' divorce is official and they've sold our apartment, it's box city at my house, too." Rose shrugged.

"I'm really sorry about your parents." Jin gave Rose a sympathetic smile. "Do you know where you're going to move?"

"Not yet. My mom is looking for a new apartment for us. It must be cool to have your own bodega," Rose changed the subject as she looked around the small store. "Do you get to eat all the chips and the candy bars you want?"

"Not really. My grandparents are pretty strict about junk food. But I'm sure it'll be okay with them if we eat some today." Jin grinned and grabbed a couple of bags of chips from the display near the counter, then led the way to the back room.

As she and Rose passed his office, Harabeoji, who had fallen asleep in his chair, let out a loud

wheeze. “Don’t mind my grandfather. His snore is worse than his bite,” Jin joked, and ducked beneath the clothesline that stretched across the back room, where Halmoni hung her clean aprons, store clothes, and cleaning rags to dry. Jin led Rose to the small table, where she and her grandparents sometimes ate dinner when they were working late at the store. “By the way, hope you don’t mind the TV on in the background. Halmoni and Harabeoji like to watch the news.” Jin turned down the volume knob on the small old-fashioned television perched on a shelf behind the table.

“No problemo.” Rose said, already pulling books out of her bag. “So what are you going to do for your American history project?”

Jin shrugged. Their teacher, Ms. Weir, had assigned a research paper about a historical event or unique quality that had influenced the character of their neighborhood. The paper was worth nearly half of the entire grade for the class. Jin still hadn’t figured out her topic, and she was starting to worry. She lived in Harlem, one of the most famous neighborhoods in New York City, in the entire country even. Why was coming up with one good idea so hard?

“I’m tossing around a couple of ideas,” Jin said. “I could research the contributions of Korean

immigrants like my grandparents, who came to Harlem in the 1960s. Or maybe the Harlem Renaissance? When we studied it in class, I wanted to learn more about the African American writers, musicians, and painters who put Harlem on the map as the place to be for art and culture. But I don't know." Jin sighed. "I just wish Ms. Weir had been a little more specific." She took her schoolwork very seriously and liked her assignments to be clear.

"I think not being specific is kind of the point," Rose said. "Both of your ideas sound awesome. You just have to pick the one that's most interesting to you. I'm going to do my project on Harlem fashion." She flailed her hands in the air excitedly. "I'll track the hottest Harlem styles from the past to the present." Rose pulled out her phone. "And speaking of fashion, check out the new winter collection that I'm designing for Noodles." Noodles was Rose's adorable black-and-tan pug. She loved that dog just as much as she loved clothing. Rose leaned over so that Jin could see the picture of Noodles in a puffy neon green dog-sized coat with matching scarf and hat on the screen.

"Awww. He's so cute!" Jin cooed as Rose rapidly swiped through more photos.

"Oh, and this is from the summer collection." She paused at a picture of Noodles in an old-fashioned



one-piece striped bathing suit with a swim cap. “We never go to the beach, but he can wear it to splash around in the fountain at the dog park . . .”

“Mmmm-hmm.” Jin’s eyes wandered to the television as Rose continued to gush about Noodles. There was a news story on about a local community garden.

“Hey, that’s not far from here.” Jin turned up the volume as images of the garden flashed across the screen.

*“Buried treasure in Harlem? Quite possibly. Yesterday, seven-year-old Harlem resident, Jarvis Monroe, may just have discovered a hidden masterpiece at the Zora Neale Hurston Community Garden,”* said a reporter, on location in front of the garden. The camera cut to a grungy-looking kid holding a toy sand shovel and pail.

*“It was right over there.”* Jarvis pointed. *“I was visiting my grandma. She lives across the street.”* He nodded toward an apartment building in the background. *“She told me not to dig in the garden, but I did it anyway and that’s where I found the painting.”* The camera zoomed in on a patch of dirt beneath a wooden bench. The reporter asked him to describe what he had found. *“It looked kinda like a rolled-up tube, like the one that’s in the middle of a roll of paper towels.*