

## The Thing He Carried

Jonathan Lam carried carried his backpack and all of his supplies throughout the school day. He had pretty standard equipment: a Swiss Army backpack, a digital watch by Swatch, a Pilot G-2 pen, and an orange notebook cram-packed with school papers in between the pages that had not been ripped out.

He carried a box made by Cross built for one pen, filled to the brim with a neat array of three narrow-diameter black pens, three push-top mechanical pencils (Japanese: Pentel and LOGO), a flash-drive, a flash-drive pen, mechanical-pencil lead refills, an eraser, and two colored pens. To every object inside was taped a handmade label with the letters "JLAM" clearly inscribed in black ink. Even the box itself was labeled. The stationary inside was interlaced just tightly enough that none of it could slide around, but just loosely enough so that the container could slide out of its case with ease.

It was mostly a vainglorious piece of engineering. He had made a point to improve his handwriting this school year and not to lose a single piece of his stationary at the beginning of the school year, but these goals had faded. There were more exciting and more important initiatives that crossed his path: hackathons, college admissions, Rubik's cubing. The labeling system worked and he did manage to keep all of his writing utensils, but that was of little importance in his mind.

He carried the high expectations of an immigrant. His father had emigrated from China when he was in high school, and he was always working. He had worked in a restaurant then, taken a bargain by going to medical school, and was a busy doctor now. His mother had also immigrated to the U.S. when she was young, but at least she knew some English coming from English-ruled Hong Kong. His father had nothing when he came over. Jon would recite stories that his father would tell, of his father not knowing the difference between "interaction" and "intercourse" for a school essay; of the initial embarrassment and the subsequent, religious study of the English dictionary; of the ceaseless toil and fear that life wouldn't improve from the level of an uncared-for, unwanted migrant worker.

He certainly wasn't the only one: David Gandhi and Mohammed Ahsan and Park Jung-suk carried the same weight. They all carried the knowledge that they had a heritage to live up to, a culture of thousands of years of persisting through hardships. They carried the shame, as their immigrant parents did, of classmates mocking them by stretching out the edges of their eyes with their fingers, or asking the latest news about the last terrorist attack. Of course, there were some good-natured inquiries—for example, when Billy Condosa wanted to know what his girlfriend's Chinese tattoo really meant or when Joel Bart asked for a Chinese restaurant recommendation. Jonathan Lam had grown used to all of these requests, whether they be for good- or mal-intent, and whenever a racially-insensitive joke was thrown around, if someone realized and hushed the others with a sharp glare and apologized to him, he would smile and say that he was used to taking worse insults from his siblings. Which was true to some extent and usually extracted him from a sticky racial situation. After all, he couldn't risk losing all his family had gone through for a single punch, a single detention, a single stab in the image of the Chinese race in the eyes of the other students. He learned that sometimes it was better just to carry the shame.

Like when he had to use the bathroom during the SAT. He carried the shame of a hyperactive bladder ever since the fifth grade. But because he was among the top students of his grade, this was something he couldn't talk about. It wasn't right nor convenient to talk about grades and then the numerous trips to the bathroom. His parents had worked so hard for him to get a free education in the American schooling system, finish at the top of his class, and earn a better life like they did. They didn't pay for him to program computers into the wee hours of the night or Rubik's cube between classes or have a bathroom problem.

But on the day of that standardized test, it was all too much. The stress, the two hours before relief. He relieved himself during the test. The initial warmth turned to a clammy damp. He wanted to scream or storm out of the room, but that was not something a second-generation Asian was permitted to do. There was no one to help him. He had nothing better to do than to simply continue the test.