

# IF THE SOVIETS DON'T BLOW US UP, MY GRANDMOTHERS JUST MIGHT.

David Da-Wei Horowitz has a lot on his plate. Preparing for his upcoming bar mitzvah would be enough work even if it didn't involve trying to please his Jewish and Chinese grandmothers, who argue about everything. But David just wants everyone to be happy.

That includes his friend Scott, who is determined to win their upcoming trivia tournament but doesn't like their teammate—and David's best friend—Hector. Scott and David begin digging a fallout shelter just in case this Cold War stuff with the Soviets turns south . . . but David's not so convinced he wants to spend forever in an underground bunker with Scott. Maybe it would be better if Hector and Kelli Ann came with them. But that would mean David has to figure out how to stand up for Hector and talk to Kelli Ann. Some days, surviving nuclear war feels like the least of David's problems.

Wendy Wan-Long Shang and Madelyn Rosenberg tell the story of a boy caught in the middle of cultures, of friends, and of growing up Chinese Jewish American in this hilariously witty and heartwarming coming-of-age story.



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## **The closest I ever came to being a hero was when**

our class took a field trip to McKimmon's Farm. It was the middle of November, and we'd already had a couple of frosts, which killed off a lot of the green things and which made us wonder whose idea it was to visit a farm this time of year. Spring would make more sense, when they were planting stuff. Or if the farm grew pumpkins, which it didn't. When we went, everything was dying on McKimmon's Farm, and that included the poison ivy, which Mr. McKimmon wasn't growing as a crop or anything; it was wild.

Wild, and, like I said, mostly dead. The sun was shining down hard on us, in that cloudless blue postcard way that happens in Virginia.

The teachers told a group of us to sit at the picnic tables so they could pass around seeds and dried gourds, which Mr. McKimmon actually did grow. Hector, my best friend,

squirmed between the bench and the table and ducked underneath.

“What are you doing?” I asked. The other kids were giving Hector a look.

“It’s shadier down here,” Hector said. One thing I’ll say about Hector is that he’s not afraid to be unconventional. It used to be a quality I admired, like when Hector suggested that we do everything backward for a week, or when he signed us up for correspondence classes in French because he wanted to go to the Cannes Film Festival one day. But in junior high, unconventionality was usually another word for *dork*.

“Knock it off,” I told Hector. I was pretty sure that under the transitive property of junior high social lives, whatever our group was thinking of Hector, they were going to start thinking of me. Hector popped back up.

“My little brother does that all the time,” said Kelli Ann Majors. I happened to know that Kelli Ann’s little brother was eight; it was one of the facts I had collected about her. It was also exactly what I was afraid someone would think.

“Watch this,” said Scott Dursky, who was in a couple of my classes. Under normal circumstances, I ignored Scott and his stunts. But now he was providing a distraction—the good kind. I watched him, hoping everyone else would, too, as he walked to an oak tree that had a bunch of vines attacking the trunk. They looked like tentacles. Scott grabbed one to try to get some climbing leverage, but the vine was loose and fell out of the tree while he was holding it.

Terry Sutphin stood behind him and said, "Nice try. Let me show you how it's done." Scott grabbed a different vine for a better hold. It was furry. Even from where we were sitting, I could tell it was poison ivy.

"That's poison ivy," I told Hector. "They shouldn't be touching that."

"Hey!" Hector shouted. "That's poison ivy."

"Says who?" Scott didn't let go of the vine, though you could see his grip relax slightly.

"Says David," said Hector. We walked over to the tree.

"I don't see any leaves," said Terry.

"You can get poison ivy from the vine, too," I told him. "You know: 'Hairy vine, no friend of mine?' It still contains urushiol."

"I've never heard that," Scott said, but he let go of the vine.

"He's making it up," said Terry. He patted the vine, which looked like the tail of a scruffy cat. "This is my pet, Lucky. He would never hurt me. Don't you want to meet my pet?" He reached for the closest girl, who shrieked and ran away.

"Why would I make it up?" I said. If I were going to make something up, it would be something like: studying too much for your bar mitzvah can stunt your growth, or eating only Chinese food causes premature baldness. Personally, I would like to spend less time studying Torah and more time eating pizza.

“I thought the plant had to be fresh and shiny for you to catch poison ivy,” said Kelli Ann, who was fresh and shiny herself. She ducked behind me to avoid Terry, who went to chase some other kids across the field.

“No,” I said. “Lead deaves and vines, too.” I resisted the urge to punch myself in the face. Kelli Ann had nice eyes, which made it hard for my brain to do normal things, like form words.

“Group B!” yelled Mrs. Osterberg, our science teacher. She was standing near a tractor, next to a red barn that looked as though it had been painted just for our field trip. “It’s time for your hayride.”

“Scott Dursky touched poison ivy,” said Kelli Ann. “So did Terry Sutphin.”

Mrs. Osterberg took a first aid kit out of her purse and sifted through it. There didn’t seem to be much in there besides aspirin and Band-Aids. Then she looked toward the front of the farm, about a million miles away, where there was a small public bathroom. She seemed to be calculating something in her head.

“Very well,” she said. “You can take the hayride with Group D. For now, go get those hands washed. With soap, Mr. Dursky. Lots and lots of soap. Mr. Horowitz? You go with him.”

“But—” I said.

“Go.” She turned to Hector. “Mr. Clelland, round up Mr. Sutphin and tell him to do likewise.”

Kelli Ann waved as she went off on the hayride. Scott waved back, because Scott was the kind of person who always assumed that someone was waving to him. I did a low-key kind of wave, the kind that would count if she was actually waving at me, but one I could also say was for someone else if she wasn't. It would have been nice to be on the same hayride as Kelli Ann, not that I would sit directly next to her, but maybe I would sit near her and practice not feeling nervous. Instead, I had to go with Scott to the bathroom. Even though Scott and I had gone to school with each other for a couple of years, I'd never had a real conversation with him.

"If there wasn't a bathroom," I said, "you could rub lemon juice on your skin. The acid cuts through the oil."

"Where would we get lemons around here?" asked Scott. Mr. McKimmon didn't grow those, either; Virginia had the wrong climate.

"Maybe someone packed lemonade in their lunch?" I suggested. Scott seemed impressed by my idea, which gave me another one.

"And bananas," I said. "If you were too late to do anything about the oil, the inside of a banana peel will cut down on the itching."

"How does that work?"

I thought for a minute. "Maybe some kind of oil in the peel? Banana skins are also good for shining shoes." I had done a project in fourth grade on bananas. "You can even put a banana peel on your forehead to cure headaches."

“I’ll bet that doesn’t work,” Scott said. “Though if someone standing near you had a headache, they’d probably forget about it while you were wearing your banana bandanna.”

Hector found us just as Scott finished up in the bathroom. “I told Terry to come to the bathroom, and he said he wasn’t interested in ‘doing likewise,’” announced Hector. “Even though he had to make.”

“‘Make’?” repeated Scott.

Hector’s mom hated what she called “bathroom” words, so Hector just said *make*, which, up to this point, had never bothered me.

“Take a leak,” I translated.

“He went behind the barn,” Hector said.

Scott shook his head. “That’s Terry for you.”

“Should we talk to him?” I asked. “Maybe he’ll listen, if you tell him to wash his hands.”

“He’ll probably be fine,” Scott said.

“*You* washed your hands,” Hector pointed out.

“That’s me. To me, it’s a low risk/high reward situation to wash my hands.”

“You really can get poison ivy from the vines,” I said.

“He had his chance,” said Scott. “Besides, some people don’t get poison ivy.”