

Seoul Brother

“Ching Chang, what you doing, man? That was an A gap blitz.”

Ching Chang?

He thought Tommy liked him. He should have been used to it. Back in Ohio, Coach Johnson called him Rice Bowl once, and Coach J. definitely liked him.

Now here he was the only white kid -- well, white and Asian-- on an all-black football team, and a name like that could stick. He didn't much like his given name either, but being called “Ching Chang” spoke of people looking at him and seeing nothing but the half of his genetic makeup that was Korean.

Hawk showed none of this resentment and returned to the huddle. He was angry with his father—again. Maybe it wasn't his father's fault he was a third generation Korean, and Chang was his family name, but saddling him with Hawking as a first name wasn't fair, and making him a minority of one on his high school football team was within his father's realm too.

Kwon Chang had a PhD in Physics and acted like naming his son after Stephen Hawking was the most natural thing in the world. Any decision he made was correct by the mere fact that it was his.

For instance, having announced to anyone who would listen that he was an egalitarian and opposed to all forms of elitism, it stood to reason he would send his only child to a public school, even if the public school for the area in which he now lived was 99 per cent African American, and his son was not. Never mind their home was in a neighborhood exclusive to faculty of the University, all of whom sent their children to private schools.

Hawk's mother had once told him, "Your father has more contradictions than a drunken politician."

Kwon Chang's credentials and his published research guaranteed him a position at nearly any university in the country. His ego and his stubbornness guaranteed that position would be short lived. Hawk had moved seven times in his seventeen years.

Coach Stallings was in the huddle.

"Chang, listen to the damn calls. When I call a blitz to the strong side A gap, I want a blitz to the strong side A gap."

At first Hawk had been pleased when he signed up for classes and discovered there were a lot of black students walking around the Benson High School campus. On his old team in Ohio, they had four black players and two of them were the best players on the team.

When he asked the guidance counselor how Benson High had done the year before in football, she had no idea. Neither did the secretary. Hawk suspected this was not a good sign. He later discovered Benson had won no more than two games a year for several years.

On the first day of practice, Hawk realized he was the only member of the football team not African American and this would not go unnoticed.

When Darren Owens, a black transfer student, had arrived to play on his team in Ohio, he had received new-kid stares compounded by the fact that he looked different from most of the student body. That was to be expected, but a new black athlete on the team is often seen as a possibility of an upgrade at one position or another. Hawk's appearance didn't seem to generate the same promise, despite the fact that that Hawk was 6'2, 220.

It was a week into practice and after he had moved up to the first string defense before anyone asked his first name.

"Hawk? Like an Indian?" Tommy asked.

"No, it's after—"

Dante Wills, the starting tailback, overheard.

"Hey, we got us a Chinaman whose momma thinks he's an Indian."

He turned to Dante who just smiled. He was going to have to develop a thicker skin.

Even his history teacher, Mr. Washington, seemed hung up on his name. He called him Hawkeye for two days before asking, "Were you named after Hawkeye in The Last of the Mohicans or Hawkeye Pierce, the guy on Mash?"

"No, my first name is Hawking after Stephen Hawking. My father is a physicist at the University."

He thought about it. "So you were named after the guy in the wheel chair?"

In that very class there was a boy named Rahatma and a girl named Shimmer, but it was Hawk's name that Mr. Washington found fascinating.

Hawk was looking forward to practice. They were having a full contact scrimmage with officials.

In the previous scrimmage, before school started, he had played well and drawn praise from the coaches, but he'd missed a tackle in the open field. Dante Wills had feinted left, then planted hard on his right foot and cut back to the left. It left Hawk grasping at air and falling on all fours. He stayed there for a second in frustration. When he got back up, Dante jogged by on his way back to the huddle and flipped the ball in Hawk's face.

He made a noise like, "Hoyahoya," that Hawk figured to be mocking either Chinese speech or an American Indian war dance. Whichever it was, it drew chuckles from a couple of players.

Back in the huddle Coach Stallings told Hawk to work at keeping his feet up under him, but added, "Dante's pretty good at that shake and bake stuff. He can make a fool out of lots of guys in the open field."

The comment was meant to salve his ego after the whiff, but the Kwon Chang part of him wanted to say, Hey, if he's so damned terrific why did you guys only win one game last year?

Hawk was determined to get redemption in this last scrimmage before the first game. They were only five plays into it when Dante caught a flare pass in the flat. Hawk read the play and was quickly in the open field with Dante. Dante tried the reverse of the same sequence of moves he had used to embarrass Hawk before. When he cut back to his right, Hawk jammed his left shoulder into Dante's rib cage and heard the, "haurumph," he was after. Dante was on his back. Hawk rolled across him on the ground and was slow to get up.

“Get off me you fucking Chinese—”

Hawk, half way up, lunged back into Dante, and then there were coaches and players pulling them apart. They were sent to separate areas of the sideline and the scrimmage continued without them.

At the end of the scrimmage, Coach Stallings called them aside.

“Here’s the deal. This team needs both of you. If you care about the team you’ll find a way to make this work. Dante, you can start by knocking off that ‘Chinaman’ crap. Weren’t you the one bitchin about those white boys at Whitman High called you nigger?”

Then he looked at Hawk.

“As for you, I know Dante made you look bad in that last scrimmage, and you’re pissed at him; but when you make a tackle, get up off the guy. You don’t get to maul him on the ground.”

In the locker room Dante walked by Hawk on his way to the shower. He said nothing, and Hawk thought maybe everything was over, but when Hawk entered the shower area Dante was smiling at him.

He said, “Hey, Ronaldo, I guess what they say about Chinese guys having little dicks is true.”

Suddenly everything in the locker room seemed like slow motion. Hawk saw at least three or four guys look between his legs. He knew the stereotype of blacks having bigger ones than whites.

Was there another that Chinese, Asians perhaps, had smaller ones than whites? He felt himself looking down at his hanging member. It looked fine. He looked at Dante.

Dante's was large, larger than Hawk's. Hawk had been in locker rooms before. He knew his own was as big as most guy's.

He felt his face turning red. There were six or seven guys in that locker room standing naked.

He could take Dante in a fight. Dante was quicker, but Hawk was bigger and stronger.

But—they were naked. Hawk didn't want to be sprawled out on that slippery floor on top of another naked guy. The others would have to pull them apart again, but this time they would all be naked.

What was better about a bigger one anyhow? Did it satisfy women more? If a guy's was larger while at rest, was it necessarily larger when it reached its full potential?

How long had it been since Dante had spoken and everyone had begun looking back and forth between Dante and Hawk and their dicks?

Hawk smiled and said, "Well, Dante, I don't know about Chinese guys, but mine gets a lot bigger when it's in action. Just ask your mom."

He knew it was stupid, but he had heard that kind of slam before. He was desperate.

The guy to Hawk's right laughed spontaneously. Then there was another awkward eternity with all of them just standing there. Then Dante smiled and there were several chuckles. When Dante finished his shower—Hawk wasn't about to leave first—Dante walked by, and Hawk was prepared for anything.

Nothing.

Hawk hadn't told his parents he was starting at middle linebacker. He wanted to make certain he could hang onto his position before telling them. Now he was assured of starting the first game.

When Hawk told them, his mother was excited. Hawk got his size from her side of the family. Two of her brothers had played football at small colleges, and one had played at Nebraska. Sandra Chang knew more about football than the average football parent.

Kwon was in a foul mood.

He barely mumbled, "Good job, son."

A few minutes later he began a monologue about his superiors at the University.

"I get so sick of these academics of limited acumen, who having ascended to their positions of authority by sheer dull inertia, want to assert their power over those who have enough creativity, energy and aptitude to actually accomplish something."

Hawk thought these strange words from a declared egalitarian with such a strong distain for "snobbery in all forms" but it was clear that any further discussion of Hawk's football "acumen" would have to wait.

Hawk went to the refrigerator for a Pepsi, and his mother asked him to bring her one as well.

He said, "Aaight."

Kwon gave a disapproving look.

Hawk hadn't meant to fall into the jargon of his classmates, but what did his father think would happen when he sent his son to a school where a good percentage of the students substituted, "aaight" for "all right"?

The next morning in first hour class Hawk offended the only other white boy in his class. George Banks liked to be called G-Bone. His pants sagged so low he frequently had to grab them to keep them from falling. He wore his cap to the side when he entered the classroom each day until Mrs. Smith made him take it off. He majored in Ebonics and

carried himself like an exaggeration of the hip hop singers on television. On the first day of class Hawk had tried to speak to him but been ignored.

On this particular morning G-Bone observed that the boy next to him, Levon Harper, had received an A on his exam.

“What’s wit you, Levon? You used to be real. Now you be carrying books like they precious and actin all white.”

Hawk laughed out loud, and then Levon laughed, then Mrs. Smith, then everyone but G-Bone.

Hawk knew the laughter was at someone else’s expense, but what made him feel good was most of the kids looked at him like he was a friend who had told a good joke.

G-Bone said, “Thas okay. I know I’m white. Go ahead now. Thas okay.”

Nicole, the girl sitting behind Hawk, asked, “Mrs. Smith, was that an example of what we talked about yesterday, irony of situation?”

This was Hawk’s first real connection with Nicole. He had wanted to talk to her for several days. How could he make this irony thing an excuse to talk to her?

Soon the class was onto another topic, and, try as he might, Hawk couldn’t, without awkwardness, turn far enough in his seat to make eye contact with her. At the end of the class, though, she did bump him and excuse herself on the way out of the room.

Lunch had been a problem for Hawk since the first day. There was one table at the back of the lunch room where three white kids ate every day. The wall jutted out over the table at an angle that made it difficult to get onto the bench. Though part of Hawk believed he should go sit with these guys to give them support, it looked like they were cowering there as far away from the rest of the student body as possible. Hawk couldn’t

bring himself to sit with them. Each day he would look for any football player who had ever spoken to him at all or find a table by himself. Nicole ate this lunch period as well, but she was always surrounded by other girls.

The day she bumped into him in class he sat by himself and looked across two tables where she was facing him. He might not have noticed her a couple of months ago. Her lips were thick, and her nose was wide. Would he have even seen her? Now he saw her clearly. Her skin was flawless. He would have given up this lunch and many more to press his thin lips onto the fleshy folds of her mouth.

Nicole was smart and confident. She caught him staring and smiled.

Wow. He had forgotten that warm feeling. He was still eating when she walked by to put her tray away.

“Hey, Changy,” said in that slow sexy sing-song way that girls can say things, “Why don’t you eat with us tomorrow?”

“I’d like that.”

He took his time finishing his lunch. It wasn’t a big deal. All she had done was suggest he sit at the lunch table with her and her friends. Maybe she just felt sorry for him. “Changy” was affectionate, though.

What would his take have been if Dante had called him “Changy”?

Later that day as he walked to his last class of the day he heard someone doing a mock Chinese talk, a high pitched nasal “Hing hong, ting tang.”

He turned around and saw Dante’s friend, Joseph, and two other boys laughing.

Hawk walked into history class, and Mr. Washington greeted him with, “An yung how shao,” and bowed slightly.

Hawk didn't speak Korean, but he knew this phrase. It was a greeting and had something to do with peace. He thought the bow at the end was something Dante or his buddies would do to make fun of him. Hawk looked around. There were only a few students there that early. A boy looked up curious about what Mr. Washington had said. A girl giggled.

Hawk looked away from Mr. Washington and said, "I don't speak gook."

He had never said the word "gook" in his life. He had heard it and hated it. Mr. Washington retreated behind his desk.

At the end of the hour Hawk considered apologizing. The man had obviously gone out of his way to learn the Korean phrase. He had been kind to Hawk from the beginning. Still an apology was so awkward, and he would have to wait until everyone left the room.

Hawk had no problems with Dante at practice that afternoon. He thought the rest of the guys were becoming friendlier, particularly the guys with him on the starting defense.

Near the end of practice Coach Stallings called Hawk aside and asked if he had any more problems with Dante.

"No, everything's cool."

That evening at home Hawk's father was quiet. This was more than rare and a little scary, but it gave Hawk a chance to talk about football and his new school.

His mother said, "Wow, Hawk, I am so glad to hear you talking like this. I thought you hated Benson High."

"Well, I didn't exactly say I liked it. How do you think it feels to be the only white kid?"

His father looked up. "You're not the only white kid. Besides I've been the only Asian in lots of situations."

"It's not the same."

Hawk's mother said, "Let's go back to what you were talking about, Hawk. You weren't talking like you hate your school. You like your English teacher, and you think your history teacher is funny. You like the coaches, and you're a starter on the football team. Now all you need is a love life," and she laughed a kind of soft, silent laugh she had perfected.

Hawk raised his eyebrows without thinking.

"Oh, so there is a love interest?"

"Not really. Just a girl who asked me to eat lunch with her tomorrow."

"I see."

"Her name is Nicole."

"What does she look like?" she asked.

"Well, she's black if that's what you're after, and she's kind of tall with perfect skin."

His father looked up then, and Hawk thought he looked pleased. Hawk supposed that Kwon would see his son dating a black girl as a demonstration of his own democratic life's view.

From his mother, "Tell us more."

This was ridiculous. He didn't even know her. They had barely spoken.

Nicole came in early before class the next day.

Hawk couldn't find any natural way to start a conversation.

He turned around and said, "Nicole, are you going to the football game Friday?"

“No, I hadn’t planned to. Why? Are you?”

“Yeah, I’m a starting linebacker.” Hawk couldn’t remember ever bragging to a girl in such an obvious way before, but he had so little opportunity to impress this girl who had suddenly begun to dominate his thoughts.

“Maybe I will go to the game.”

At lunch she was again surrounded by other girls. Hawk walked to a position where she could see him, and she asked a friend to move down so Hawk could sit.

He enjoyed the conversation but was awkward. One of Nicole’s friends asked Hawk a question he didn’t understand. He asked her to repeat it, and he still didn’t understand her. Finally, he just nodded.

As the discussion continued, Nicole’s friends were smiling too big for what was being said. He wondered if they were smiling at his clumsiness, but he hoped they were just happy because they knew Nicole liked him.

On the way to his last class Hawk passed Joseph and a couple of other guys and heard, “ping, pang, ching, chang.”

A boy who had been friendly to him in geometry class was walking the same direction. Hawk walked closer to him, “Whasup, Gerald?”

Seventh hour Hawk apologized to Mr. Washington for being rude the day before.

“Don’t worry about it, son,” with a big smile. This was a forgiving man and a friend.

Walking to the locker room, he still felt ill at ease when he walked the halls, but he was starting to like some things about Benson High. Hawk had never been at any school long enough to feel like he was completely part of the fiber of the school.

There was one more practice before their first game. Now Hawk was getting nervous. It was one thing to have the system down and be able to make plays against the guys on his team. Langley high had beaten Benson by four touchdowns the previous year. They were expected to be good again this year.

At the end of practice, Coach Stallings named the three captains for the game. As a junior and a new guy, Hawk knew he wouldn't be one of them, but he was stung a little when Dante was named a captain. Weren't captains supposed to be leaders, guys who cared about the team above all else? One of the leaders of this football team saw Hawk as something comic and strange.

Hawk had always been proud to wear his jersey to school on the day of games. At first he was happy to discover that the tradition was followed at Benson as well, but he was less certain after he arrived at school.

There was a section of the hallway on the second floor where he always felt particular discomfort walking to his second hour class. There were three or four guys who wore gang insignia and hung out there most mornings. They usually turned and stared at Hawk when he walked by unless there was an attractive girl walking alone. Then they directed their attention to her, saying nasty things and asking her to go out in the parking lot with them. Hawk had the impression they arrived around second hour and rarely stayed the entire school day.

This day when they spotted his jersey, their interest was piqued.

“Ain't that purple jersey dope?”

“Hey, Dooms, you ever see a Chinese football player? Our team already suck. Now they got a chink playing.”

“Hey, Mr. Miagi, you catch the ball with chop sticks?”

“Where you going, Jackie Chan? Show us some moves.”

Hawk knew if he turned to look at them he'd end up in a fight. He kept walking. A shy, light skinned girl that Hawk had seen the group harass before picked up her speed to draft off Hawk's problems. When she and Hawk were well past the gang bangers, she gave Hawk a quick look of commiseration or perhaps thanks.

The jersey attracted notice throughout the day: derision, curiosity, respect. He wasn't sure.

Shauntell, a girl in his fourth hour class, said, “I didn't know you played football. You're the first football player I've ever met who didn't tell you he was a football player within the first fifteen minutes of meeting him.”

She meant it as a compliment, and she didn't say he was the first Asian football player she had ever seen. Hawk didn't think they had actually met or talked. Apparently to her, they were friends or at least acquaintances, and skin pigmentation didn't seem to be a factor. Hawk decided that Shauntell was a friend.

He had a little over two hours after school let out before he had to be back for pre-game. There was nobody at his house and no food that was easy to fix. He could have driven to one of the restaurants near the University, but his pickup truck was low on gasoline. Besides, his life wasn't at the university. His life was at Benson High School.

He left his truck at school and walked two blocks to Sallyanne's Fried Chicken. His father wouldn't have approved of fried chicken as a pre-game meal, but Kwon Chang had never played any game rougher than table tennis. Talk about a cliché.

Some of the other guys were already at a table.

One of them asked, “Not eating Chinese food?” and smiled.

Hawk looked hard at him.

Tommy Hicks said, “Relax, Hawk. Come on man. We got four brothers sitting around eating fried chicken. Jason, move over and make room for Ching Chang. We gotta make sure our middle linebacker gets a good meal. We’re going to get Langley this year.”

And they did. Langley showed up minus three starters on defense, who had been suspended that day for an undisclosed infraction. Dante ran for three touchdowns, and they scored two more through the air. Langley scored only 14 points, mostly on passes.

After the game Coach Stallings told Hawk in front of the team that he had played the best game at middle linebacker he had seen in years. Later in his office he would tell Hawk that, though, his run defense had been outstanding, his pass defense had to improve.

After the post game meeting on the field, Hawk looked for his parents in the stands. Before he spotted them, he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was Nicole.

“Hey, Changy.”

God, that name sounded sweet on her lips. She congratulated him on winning and playing well. He wanted to ask her out for pizza, but he didn’t have enough money.

“If you come to next week’s game, would you like to go out for pizza afterward?”

“I’d like that.”

They looked at each other for a few seconds.

“I gotta go now, Hawk. See you Monday.”

He found his mother at the stadium steps.

“Your dad had to work late in the lab tonight. I called him and told him the score.

Was that your friend, Nicole?”

“Yeah, that’s her. We’re going out for pizza after next week’s game.”

“She sure is dark.”

“Well, yeah. Dad sure is Korean, and you sure are white.”

“Hawk, Hawk, Hawk, it was a statement like, ‘She sure is tall,’ or, ‘She sure has small feet,’ I think she looks lovely. How about if you introduce me next week after the game?”

“Sure. Did you know this is the first time we’ve beat Langley in five years. We’ve got Davis High next week. They’re not expected to be really good this year. Dad’s not going to have to work every Friday night is he?”

“No. There was something going on. He told me he would talk to me about it when he got home.”

Kwon was home when Hawk arrived. He wanted stats and details of the game.

At some point he asked about Nicole.

“Your mother said you seem to really like her.”

“I do, but we haven’t even gone out yet, Dad.”

“You’re starting to like it here aren’t you?”

Hawk wondered if his father expected him to thank him for putting him in a situation where going to school everyday was even more uncomfortable than all of the other schools where he had been the new kid. It made him angry, but he was starting to like Benson, in spite of the difficulties.

He said, “Yeah, I like some things about this place.”

Kwon didn't show any satisfaction, though, and soon went to bed by himself. Hawk and his mother popped corn and talked more about the game.

The next week was a blur. He and Nicole spent their entire lunch periods together. Then they talked on the phone at night. Most of the guys on the team began to treat Hawk like just another player. Neither Dante nor Joseph was likely to invite him over to his home, but there were too many other guys who liked Hawk for either of them to really give him a hard time.

Against Davis High School Hawk played well and improved his pass coverage according to Coach Stallings. His mother and father met Nicole and him outside the locker room, and his parents and Nicole talked while he went inside to shower.

Afterwards he took Nicole to a pizza parlor near the university. Nicole liked the pizza and hung on everything Hawk said. This was more fun than winning the game.

Saturday Hawk had to fight the urge to call Nicole and see if she wanted to go to the park or hang out somewhere. Something told him he needed to slow play this like he was the backside linebacker on a sweep away. Don't sprint over and be caught off guard by a cut back or a reverse.

Sunday Kwon Chang called his son into his office. Sandra Chang was there too.

Kwon began, "Hawk, I suspect what I am about to tell you is going to hurt you, but I don't have a choice. I am going to take a position at Hardaway College in Arizona. They recently lost the head of their physics department and want me to replace him."

Hawk was furious.

“Dad, you have no idea how tough this has been for me to adjust to this place. Just like that you want to jump for a promotion. This is bullshit. What’s it gonna be down there? Will I get to live on an Indian reservation or what?”

Hawk had never talked to his father like this. As soon as he spoke he felt more than an inkling of trepidation.

At this point, however, Hawk saw something that he had never seen before, tears on the cheek of his male parent.

There was a long silence.

“Hawk, I am truly sorry.” He paused and it was obvious that he had not intended to say what came next. “Son, the truth is I’m not leaving for a promotion. I’m leaving because I was unwise enough to say some things to some people that were in a position to get rid of me, and they did. I know I’ve let my family down.

“I’ve told your mother I’m willing to find an apartment in Arizona and commute on weekends for two years until you can graduate. I have moved you two around too often already.”

Hawk looked at his mother and knew immediately she would never consider such an arrangement. Hawk would have a few weeks left at Benson High, certainly long enough to say goodbye.

Now Sandra spoke.

“Hawk, we’re not staying. I’m not going to live away from my husband. We’ll move as soon as your father has found a nice home in Arizona. Do you understand?”

There was so much he wanted to say. He was fitting in with the team. He liked his teachers. He was starting to have friends.

Nicole. What about Nicole?

He stood up. He had spoken to his father in anger and gotten away with it just a moment before. He felt pain, but he recognized it in the faces of his parents as well.

He looked at his mother and father, and said, "Aaight."

The End