

VANESSA UNMUTED



Gilda



Vanessa



Oscar

Vanessa Chin was a little grumpy and sleepy. She had just finished eating lunch with her parents and younger brother, Jordan. She didn't want to log back onto Zoom for the final session of her school day. It was the second day back in her 5th grade class after a boring winter break.

She had begged her parents to let her visit her best friend Gilda Flores. "Please, please, please," Vanessa pleaded. "We'll wear masks the whole time."

But her mother told her, "Sorry, sweetie. COVID is spreading like wildfire. You can't visit Gilda yet. But you can play in the backyard or living room with Jordan."

Vanessa didn't want to play with her brother. He was two years younger than her. He'd rather play Roblox on his computer. She wanted to scroll through Instagram or build something on Minecraft with Gilda. Unlike some of her other classmates, Vanessa had her own computer and good Internet connection, so she spent a lot of time playing Minecraft with Gilda. That made the days during the three-week school break bearable.

Vanessa was disappointed that her G-Ma and Papa – her mother's parents – didn't throw their big New Year's Day party as they did every year. She missed filling her plate with her grandmother's creamy macaroni and cheese, crispy catfish, fluffy cornbread, and smoky black-eyed peas. She especially liked her G-Ma's sweet potato pie.

Vanessa missed her Papa's bear hugs. She missed walking around her grandparents' Leimert Park neighborhood with her Uncle Dwayne. He would tell her stories about when he and Vanessa's mother were growing up.

Remembering her grandparents' New Year's Day celebrations made Vanessa smile. Her smile widened when she remembered something else. In a few weeks, her grandparents on her father's side would celebrate the Lunar New Year. Before COVID, they celebrated by going with her family to a busy restaurant in Rosemead where they met up with Vanessa's grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins for a huge dinner. They sat at big round tables. Waiters wearing white shirts and black vests set gigantic platters of food in the center of each table. Large steamed fish, thick chewy noodles, salty chicken, and her favorite, dumplings filled with shrimp.



Grandpa and Grandma Chin always seemed to be laughing during those dinners. Their eyes crinkled in big grins. In the middle of dinner, Grandpa Chin tapped a fork on his glass to get his family's attention.

"I'm a very lucky man. I have a wonderful family. Thank you for celebrating the new year with me," he said, looking at his children and grandchildren seated around four tables. He lifted his glass and made a toast. "May the new year be healthy and prosperous for us all. Happy New Year."

Vanessa would clink her glass filled with lemon-lime soda against her parents' and brother's glasses. "Happy New Year!" they shouted to each other.

They would have to skip the fancy dinner this year because of COVID. But last night on a Zoom call, her grandparents told Vanessa and Jordan to look for red envelopes in the mail. That excited Vanessa. She knew those envelopes would be filled with money. What would she do with her New Year's money this time?

Vanessa was starting to think about what she would buy with her New Year's money when she heard her teacher, Mrs. Garabedian, say, "Vanessa, please turn on your video." Mrs. Garabedian was checking who was in the Zoom classroom after lunch.

Mrs. Garabedian shared her computer screen and showed the class an electronic book. It was called *Horton Hears a Who!* On the cover was an illustration of an elephant looking surprised. Mrs. Garabedian explained that she would read the book aloud this afternoon. She would finish reading the book the next day, when the class would split into

groups to talk about it. She shared her screen and started reading.



Soon after Mrs. Garabedian started reading, Vanessa received a text from her classmate Oscar Martin.

Oscar wrote: “Look at this Instagram post.”

Vanessa clicked on the link. An image popped up on her phone. It was a photo someone had taken of her smiling on the school playground a year earlier. But over her picture, someone had drawn buck teeth and slanted lines for eyes. The caption read: “COVID Chin. I hope she gets the Kung Flu.”



Below the photo she saw that several of her classmates had commented.

“Yuck! Is she infected?”

“Eww. Gross.”

“She needs to go back to where she came from. Take the Chinese virus with you.”

“This is a good one, Oscar,” one of her classmates had written.

Vanessa was confused. She had known Oscar since the first grade when they were in the same class. They said “hi” to each other on the playground, and sometimes he joined in Minecraft games with her. But this school year, they hadn’t seen each other in person because of COVID. The Instagram account was called “covidchin.” Could Oscar have put it up?

Vanessa texted back, “What is this?”

Oscar replied, “Your last name’s Chin. That’s a Chinese name. It’s because of Chinese like you that people are getting sick and dying with COVID.”

Vanessa felt her stomach tighten and her face get hot. She wrote back: “I don’t have COVID and no one in my family does.”

Oscar responded quickly: “You’re Chinese. Chinese brought the virus here.”

Vanessa didn’t know what to say or do. She had heard that COVID started in China. But she had never been to China. Her father and grandparents had never been to China. Vanessa’s father had once explained that her great-great grandparents had come to the United States from China. That was a long, long time ago.



Vanessa couldn't concentrate on what Mrs. Garabedian was reading. She was glad when the school day ended. Just before leaving the Zoom school room, Vanessa's phone pinged. Her heart raced. It might be another text from Oscar. She was relieved when she saw a message from her best friend Gilda.

Gilda wrote: "Want to play Minecraft or Roblox in a few minutes?"

Vanessa usually played video games with Gilda after school, but she didn't feel like playing this afternoon. She wrote back to Gilda, "No, I have to help my mom do something."

Vanessa lay down on her bed, stared at the ceiling, and twirled her wavy black hair. She wondered, "Did Oscar create the Instagram account against me? Why would he do that? Why would my classmates blame me for COVID? Aren't they my friends?"

Vanessa got sadder and angrier the more she thought about the Instagram post.

Vanessa wasn't hungry at dinner. She pushed the spaghetti around her plate more than she ate it. Vanessa helped her parents clear the table while Jordan finished his dessert.

"You didn't eat much, honey. Are you OK?" Vanessa's mother asked her as she loaded the dishwasher.

Vanessa told her parents about the Instagram post. Her mother and father looked at her sadly. Vanessa's dad rubbed the back of her head and steered her to the living room. "Let's talk," he said. "You come, too," her father said to Jordan.

Vanessa sat between her parents on the couch. "We're glad that you told us about the post and what Oscar wrote and how it made you feel. It was very, very wrong for someone to put up that post and for Oscar to blame you," her father said. "It's not Chinese people's fault that the virus started there. It's no one's fault. But some people want to place blame, even if it's not fair."



Vanessa's father continued. "When I was a little kid, I overheard my parents talk with an uncle and aunt about a man named Vincent Chin. My ears perked up because I heard our last name, Chin. I thought he might be a relative. My uncle said that Vincent Chin had been beaten to death. I remember feeling scared and confused because I didn't understand why Vincent Chin died. It wasn't until I was in college that I learned that Vincent Chin was killed in Detroit by two auto workers who thought he was Japanese. They blamed Japan for losing their jobs because Japanese car companies were successful. That's why they attacked Vincent Chin. I realized then that even though my family had been in America for five generations, people still saw Asian Americans like me as foreign. There have been other times when people have blamed Asian Americans for things they didn't do."

Vanessa thought about Vincent Chin and how the auto workers blamed him for something he had nothing to do with.

Rubbing Vanessa's back, her mother said, "I know it's hard, honey, when people judge you because of your skin color. When I was in middle school, police here in L.A. severely beat up a Black man named Rodney King. Even though the beating was videotaped, the police officers weren't punished. At that time, your Uncle Dwayne was about your age. My parents sat us down and told us we had to be extra careful whenever we saw police officers because they would assume we were up to no good. Dwayne and I knew that wasn't fair, but we took their advice."

Vanessa remembered walking to the store with her gentle and kind Uncle Dwayne and noticing women approaching them clutch their purses to their sides and look suspiciously at him.

"Is what happened to George Floyd like what happened to Rodney King?" Vanessa asked. Her parents nodded. "But after George Floyd died, many people of all races and ages protested his killing. That's different from the reaction to what happened to Rodney King," Vanessa's mother explained.

"Since you're Black and Asian, you'll meet people like Oscar who can't see beyond your skin color," Vanessa's father added. He looked at both Vanessa and her brother. Then he looked at Vanessa and asked, "Would you like us to talk with Mrs. Garabedian about the Instagram post and what's happening with Oscar?"



Vanessa thought about it and shook her head. “Not yet,” she said. I’ll let you know if I do.” Vanessa’s mom and dad hugged her. “We’re here if you want to talk,” said Vanessa’s dad.

Vanessa felt nervous but also excited about what her parents told her. She wanted to talk with Gilda.

After telling Gilda about the Instagram post and what Oscar wrote, Gilda said, “Wait a minute. I’m going to look for that post.” Vanessa waited. After a while Gilda said, “I wrote a comment that the post was messed up, that you’re my best friend, and that you don’t have COVID.”

“Thanks,” Vanessa said, relieved that someone was defending her. “Do you think Oscar put up that post?”

“Maybe,” answered Gilda. “When I transferred to our school two years ago, he called me ‘Dora the Explorer.’”

“Why would he do that?” Vanessa asked.

“Who knows?” Gilda said. “I guess it’s because Dora the Explorer is Latina like me, even though I look nothing like Dora.

“So what did you do?” Vanessa asked

“I told Oscar that my name is Gilda, not Dora, and to call me by my name. He never called me Dora again,” Gilda explained.

“That was brave,” said Vanessa.

“I was just mad. My parents always tell my brothers and me to stand up for ourselves. My mother told me that when she was in high school, she protested against a law that would have made her teachers report that she was undocumented. And my dad told me that when he was in college, he marched with thousands of other people in downtown L.A. for immigrants, even though his family had lived in California for generations.”

The next afternoon, Mrs. Garabedian finished reading *Horton Hears a Who!* She then said, “OK. Now I’m going to put you all in breakout rooms. I want each of you to talk about what Horton means when he says that ‘A person is a person no matter how small.’”

Vanessa was happy to see Gilda’s face pop up on her screen. Her classmate Sam joined the group. Then her heart sank when she saw Oscar’s face.

“Oh no. Why do I have to be in the same group as Vanessa? I don’t want to get COVID,” Oscar groaned.

“Why do you think you’ll get COVID from her?” Gilda asked

“Because she’s Chinese. COVID is from China.”

“That’s messed up, Oscar,” Gilda said. Vanessa’s not from China. She’s American like all of us. She doesn’t have COVID.”

“My grandmother got COVID and had to go to the hospital,” Oscar shared. My dad said she got it because Chinese people shop at the store where my grandma worked. He said COVID is from China and that Chinese need to go back to where they came from.”



“Vanessa is from L.A., like you and me Oscar. How is your grandma? Is she out of the hospital?”

“She died,” Oscar said.

“That is so sad, Oscar,” said Gilda. “But it’s not Vanessa’s fault. It’s not her family’s fault. It’s not Chinese people’s fault. It’s not anyone’s fault.”

Oscar turned off his video and didn’t say anything for the rest of the small group session.

After school, Vanessa texted Gilda: “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“Hey, we’re best friends, right? That’s what best friends do,” Gilda texted back with a happy face emoji.

While eating breakfast the next morning, Vanessa’s dad said, “Guess what? Tomorrow, we’re all going to Koreatown for a march against anti-Asian hate.” Vanessa was excited. She had never been to a demonstration before. She had only seen pictures and videos of protests on television and online.

“Can I invite Gilda?” Vanessa excitedly asked her parents.

“Of course,” her mother responded.

After breakfast, Vanessa texted Gilda: “Tomorrow me and my family are going to Koreatown for a protest against anti-Asian hate. Want to come?”

Gilda immediately texted back: “Yes! Can I ask my family to go, too?”

Vanessa texted back: “Yes!”

The next morning, Vanessa and her family met Gilda and her family on a street corner in Koreatown. Vanessa and Gilda hadn’t seen each other in person for months. They hugged each other tightly. Vanessa’s father fist-bumped Gilda’s father.



The night before, Vanessa and her family made signs to carry at the march. Vanessa's said "We Belong Here. #StopAsianHate." Gilda and her family brought signs, too. Gilda's read "Love, Unity, Solidarity."

"Wait a minute, girls," Vanessa's mother said. She took her phone from her backpack and asked Vanessa and Gilda to pose with their signs. Vanessa asked her mom to text her the photo.

Vanessa and Gilda walked with hundreds of other protestors carrying signs and chanting through their masks, "Enough is enough."

Before dinner that night, Vanessa heard her phone ping. It was a text from Gilda: "Look at your Instagram account."

Vanessa tapped the icon and saw the picture she had posted from the rally. Underneath she saw several of her classmates had liked it, including Oscar. He commented, "Cool you did this."

While she was on Instagram, she checked for the account she thought Oscar had created, the one that blamed her for COVID. It was gone.

The following school day, Mrs. Garabedian told Vanessa's class to continue talking about *Horton Hears a Who!* She put students into the same Zoom breakout rooms that they had been in a few days earlier.

Vanessa saw the faces of Gilda, Sam, and Oscar pop up on her computer screen. "Thanks for liking my Instagram post, Oscar," Vanessa said.

"Sure," Oscar replied.

"What post are you talking about?" Sam asked.

"On Saturday morning, Gilda and I marched in a demonstration against anti-Asian hate," Vanessa explained.



“It was AWESOME!” Gilda added.

Vanessa felt butterflies in her stomach because she was a little nervous about what she was about to ask Oscar. But she went ahead and asked. “Oscar, last week you blamed me for COVID. But you liked my Instagram post. Why?”

Oscar thought for a moment, and then he said, “On Saturday, I met my grandpa at the cemetery where my grandma is buried. My parents went to get water for the flowers we brought. I told my grandpa that my dad said my grandma got COVID from Chinese people.”

Vanessa had been to a cemetery only once. It was like a park but without a playground. Metal and polished stone markers were in the grass with the names of people who were buried underneath. She pictured Oscar standing with his grandfather in front of a marker for Oscar’s grandmother.

Oscar continued, “My grandpa said that my grandma would be sad and disappointed about what my dad said because she loved all kinds of people. When more Chinese people started shopping at the grocery store she worked at in Montebello, she learned how to say ‘hello,’ ‘goodbye,’ and ‘thank you’ in Chinese. She could say those words in four different languages.”

Vanessa felt sad for Oscar. She thought about how much she loved all of her grandparents and how upset she would be if any of them died.

“Then my grandpa told me the same thing that you did, Gilda,” Oscar explained. “He said that it was no one’s fault that my grandma died. He said that if we’re going to get through COVID, we have to help each other, not be mad at each other.”

“I’m so sad about your grandma dying,” Vanessa told Oscar.

“I’m sorry for blaming you,” Oscar said to Vanessa.

Vanessa lifted both of her hands with the “thumbs up” signal. She saw the “thumbs up” emoji pop up on Gilda’s Zoom image.

Right then, Vanessa knew what she would do with the money in the red envelope that had been sitting on her dresser. She would buy Gilda some Minecoins to thank her for sticking up for her. And she would invite Oscar to join her and Gilda in their Minecraft server.

They could then all build something together.

THE END.

Reflection Questions

- How does your family celebrate New Year's Day?
- How does this story make you feel? Explain your reasoning.
- What resonated with you from the story?
- What is the most important point you got from the story?
- One word summary – what one word might you use to summarize the story?
- What would you do if someone called you a name that made you sad?
- Who would you talk to when you have a conflict at school? Describe how you would share your conflict.
- How do you usually resolve conflicts online (e.g., social Media posts, zoom breakout rooms) and/or in-person?
- Write a comment for Vanessa's Social Media post, "Enough is Enough."
- If you were to write a different ending to the story, what might that be?
- Why did Oscar blame Vanessa for the Coronavirus? Is that a form of bias? Defend your claim.
- Imagine that this story was written from Oscar's point of view. What insights do you think we might learn from his experience? Explain your reasoning.
- Have you been unfairly blamed for something because of your race, gender, religion, and/or sexual orientation? If so, describe the incident and how you managed it. What kind of support did you get and/or would you have wanted?
- What does it mean to be an ally to a person/group who is being unfairly attacked because of their race, gender, religion, and/or sexual orientation?
- How did Vanessa and Gilda make their voices heard? What issues would motivate you to make your voice heard?



Gilda



Vanessa



Oscar