

## *The X-Factor*

In the X-Men comics, most mutants get their powers during puberty or for the sake of plot development are triggered by an extreme catalyst. In 1972, my mother, a former prostitute during the Vietnam War, found herself pregnant in a foreign land in which she did not speak the language, with an African American husband and a new extended family. It reminds me of one of those Hollywood clips where actors are crossing a studio lot and the scenery changes from a tribal village to a New York street to the main drag of small town USA. The actors are overwhelmed as they dodge a menagerie of Roman soldiers and a chorus of giggling showgirls.

I imagine my mother, twenty-something and perplexed, being shuffled into wardrobe, stripped of her customs, primed in hair and makeup, powdered with stars and zipped into stripes and re-packaged for the American Dream. She even had a new name. According to my birth certificate, my mother's maiden name was Chong Suk An. However, it was decided her American name would be Ann. Ann McCray. I don't know whether this was an affectionate nickname or done to comfort the clumsy, Midwestern palette, but "Ann" became the pinup of my father's star-spangled dreams.

Growing up, I dreamed I was a real boy like my kindred spirit, Pinocchio—if not for social acceptance, then simply for the lederhosen. My cousins were real boys: they played in baseball leagues, threw touchdowns and collected sports cards. They had numbered uniforms and gloves that needed to be cared for and broken in. They were the boys I circled on reading comprehension tests. The ones with the toy trucks, the bats, and the balls. The truck couldn't possibly belong to Polly and Jack just didn't play with dolls. Even at the earliest age, I could tell who was supposed to do what and what role they played in society.

For most gay men, the art of the secret identity is a skill that's acquired during puberty and ineptly mastered in late adolescence. It's a little more complicated than layering blue tights underneath a white shirt so the cowl doesn't peak out. Instead, it's about

changing the cadence of one's voice, altering one's posture, and working to appear utterly unspectacular. Or straight. It's about the "right" amount of exuberance, public displays of masculinity, and a well-balanced equation of testosterone and normalcy. It's a re-socialization that turns warm blooded humans into tricks of the light. Gender-appropriate automatons.

While I valiantly tried not to overthrow balls, my mother was having her own examination. Medically speaking, mom was a mutant. I don't mean the leather-clad, provocative, X-wearing kind with eyebeams, telepathy or blue skin; she wasn't a glamorous mutant. She wasn't swathed in green fur or diamond-hard skin or accessorized with decorative horns. She heard voices; the CGI effects were all in her head.

Most days, she would stand behind the kitchen curtain, the embroidered poppies trailing her back like flames, and scream. What started as garbled curses rose to a violent lament in her throat and continued as a siren wail throughout the neighborhood. The vein in her neck would surface and quiver. I watched her argue with the moon and the branches. Maybe, I thought, her senses were infinite; maybe her awareness was so acute that when she spoke in tongues and angrily stabbed at the air, she was warning the ghosts that had followed her from Korea: Turn back, you don't belong here. Maybe, she was protecting us. When she spent her days cross-legged on the floor, catatonically rocking back and forth, maybe her mind was elsewhere—an astral projection—walking near the Young-san River. It was easier to love her in fiction because it made more sense than reality.

I barely remember a time when my mother wasn't sick, but my father swears this era exists. He speaks with unfamiliar tenderness and regret. There's a light in his eyes that makes me believe in god and science, that desire and time are nonlinear. When he remembers the texture of her hair, he's touching her hair. Instead of the metal ring of his wheel chair and the stale air of his dark apartment, one hand holds a sweating cup of beer, the other wraps around her waist as they dance at the Cincinnati Kool Jazz Festival. I don't recognize the people he describes in bellbottoms and jersey wrap dresses. He doesn't share these memories very often, as if he's afraid to give up their molecules; they had such a short window for joy.

According to the National Institute on Mental Health, two million Americans live with schizophrenia. That's about one percent of the population. Unlike the comics, there's no specific "X-gene" that marks this difference. Schizophrenia is caused by several things including abnormal genetics, the ratio of certain chemicals in the brain, and environmental circumstances.

The first time my father describes her schizophrenia, he tells the story like Stan Lee. The illness descended quickly, like a spider drunk on radiation, to change my mother's life forever. When he came home from work one day, he heard voices in the bedroom. My mother was talking to another man. When he opened the door, she was sitting on the floor by herself, rocking back and forth, no one else there.

The truth, in retrospect, was that she began unraveling slowly after I was born. In the chemical explosion of her life, I could have been the catalyst. Initially, when my father proposed, she said no. When he asked again, when she knew she was pregnant, she said yes. She said yes to the black American soldier, yes to closing her legs, yes to boarding her first plane, yes to leaving her sisters in poverty, yes to leaving her homeland, and yes to becoming Ann McCray. When I was younger, I thought maybe I was the Y that triggered her X. Postpartum-Americana-Insanity.

The second time my father describes her illness, he digs around in his memory a little more. There were always signs. When she worked at a drycleaners, the owner asked if everything was alright with Ann: sometimes she mumbled to herself. My father didn't believe him. The hair that she used to curl into Farrah Fawcett wings was now always limp and straight. She went from cover girl to no makeup and when he wanted to go out, she preferred to stay at home and sit on the floor.

Ann kept odd hours—staying up most of the night and sleeping away consecutive days. She was paranoid my father was cheating on her and searched his pockets for clues. My father didn't know what to do: his son ran like a girl, his wife was unfamiliar. This wasn't his postwar dream. I imagine it wasn't hers either. Because I never knew my mother as an adult, I can only reflect on her behavior from when I was a child. There were wild swings of emotion, rage and anxiety, followed by sedate withdrawal. Motherhood was a costume she was stuffed into and she tried her dispassionate best

to follow suit. This was her secret identity: to brush its hair, to get it dressed, to answer when it needed feeding. When I was a baby, she managed this with glazed eyes because it was simply work.

Chong Suk An had worked most of her life. She had worked for the soldiers in Korea for her family, she had moved across the world to work as a wife, she worked in a cleaners and sent money to her sister to come to America, and now she was working as a mother. Unfortunately, the older I got, the more I needed intangibles, emotional tools to navigate the schoolyard. It wasn't enough to wash, feed and clothe it. It asked questions she couldn't answer. It wanted her touch all the time. It wanted everything. When I began to read, the mothers in books never resembled my mother at home. Dick and Jane's mom never slapped a teacher or cursed their father out in another language.

As the manic behavior escalated, my father spent more and more time at work; he was a valet at Stouffer's Hotel and volunteered for extra shifts. While he sped around tight corners, I lived like a hostage counting the hours until he got home. Mom paced the kitchen and jabbed the air with knives and forks. Dishes were smashed and glasses broken. I was told to stay out of the kitchen. Your mother is sick. It was during this time that my power surfaced. I wished for super strength, invulnerability, or incredible quickness, but what I discovered would save me for years to come.

Despite being a golden skinned kid with an afro explosion of hair and freckles splattered over my face, despite having a smile that covered almost half my head, I learned how to dim. I receded into backgrounds and did not utter a word. I never knew what set my mother off, so I remained abnormally quiet. As dishes smashed and my mother howled, I adopted a crude form of meditation.

It took awhile not to flinch when there was an outbreak of mania, but I would go directly to my room. I had a dresser in which the front panel of the bottom drawer had come unhinged. It was a secret panel that could be removed to reveal several stacks of comic books. *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Batman*. *The Justice League of America*. Even though most of the books were worn and coverless, I'd sit cross legged on the floor and reread through the noise.

By this time, our identities were shot. We were not the hard-working black man, his sweet and demure "Oriental" wife with

their sassy-but-whip-smart kid. In Colerain Township, the inter-racial component had been tolerated, but nothing breaks the illusion of the American dream like your neighbor's bloodcurdling screams. We had been asked to leave the white, working class suburb because of my mother's illness. As a last resort we moved to Evanston, to a mostly black neighborhood, to a duplex across the street from my grandmother's house. In the apartment above us my Aunt Pam lived with her boyfriend. Both residences were up against a five foot cement wall that enclosed a cemetery. Ann was Johnna's momma or Dickie's wife, a.k.a. the crazy lady who lived next to the graveyard.

Here, I had a new identity. I wasn't the smart kid, I wasn't the black kid, I was the fat kid with the crazy mom. "What's your mom's name again?" my cousin would ask. "Ching-chong? Ching-chong-ching! Chop Suey!" Before I could answer, he'd run off singing to all the kids within earshot, "Johnna's mom is named Ching-Chong-Ching!" Not even Clark Kent's glasses could hide me from the shame. I remember walking home from elementary school with Sam and Randall but turning to say a quick goodbye. I didn't want them near my home. The closer a person walked to our house, the more you could hear her scream.

Usually, when a hero's identity is revealed, all hell breaks loose. Villains come out of the woodwork, loved ones are endangered, and feelings of shock and betrayal ricochet all over the place. In the case of Ann McCray, my family never discussed her in front of me.

The closest I came to acknowledging my mother's illness was during a modified game of hide and seek. I was playing with a neighborhood girl named Nicole. She would run behind my house and pretend to hide. I would find her, tag her, she would show me her breasts, and then we would run to my front porch, which was home base. Afterwards, I'd run and hide in the exact same spot, she'd tag me, I'd show her my penis, and then we'd run to my front porch, out of breath. When we finally tired of buttoning and unbuttoning our clothes and circling the building like overweight dogs in heat, we sat on my porch and talked about what it would be like to get older. In the background, my mother's shriek was coming to a boil.

"What was that?" Nicole asked as if she didn't know. She lived across the street next door to my grandmother.

“My mom.”

“Is she okay? What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know. She’s sick, I think. She just does that.”

“Johnna, that’s crazy.”

My mother’s anger filled the air. We both paused. We had one foot in the future and our ears in the present. After missing a beat, we discussed getting married. After all, we had tongue kissed and even displayed body parts. It was kind of like—we already were married. Isn’t this what straight kids dreamed of? At that age, I did what everyone thought was right but not what was right for me. With all of these “powers” of camouflage, dimming and acting straight, was I as off-center as my mother? Why couldn’t I be the slightly chubby kid with the perfectly sane mom and an earnest and hardworking dad? Belligerent screams erupted from my mother’s throat and interrupted us. But in our daydreams, Nicole and I were rich and stylish and fervently vowed to leave Cincinnati and never come back.

In addition to his wedding ring, my father wore scars and welts as a symbol of his marriage, darkened slashes about the face and neck. His back carried the tally marks of unrestrained and manic love. My mother would yell in Korean about a woman in Seoul that she suspected he had slept with, another woman he might have paid for. She’d get inches from his face spitting, cursing and grinding her teeth. She would stomp around from room to room in a tantrum of manic fury. Overwhelmed, my father would try to calm her; he would ask her to leave who she was in Korea but Chong Suk held on.

My father prided himself on being a hustler; he constantly thought his way out of different situations. However, he couldn’t maneuver his way through her illness; he couldn’t love her back to sanity. When her rage exploded and became dangerous, he couldn’t beat insanity into submission. Sometimes, she was so physical that she’d run and kick him or pound on his back as hard as she could. She was taller than my father and always had the leverage of height.

She would throw herself at him like an animal drowning in water, clawing and scratching. My mother had learned English by piecing it together through TV shows and novels but her communication skills were still rough. She was being tutored by the PTL

Club and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*; she was learning the language of prayers and criminals. She tried to express emotion without access to the right words and this left her with only her fists. The fights usually stopped when her rage subsided but sometimes father had to push her away and she would charge him again. What did she want from him? It was like a horror film in which the killer is presumed dead but gasps again to make one last sweet attempt.

Only twice do I remember my father tipping over, responding in kind with equal brutality. The first time, my mother's eye exploded in a bloom of purple and shadows. He had managed to get on top of her and he wailed at all the craziness he didn't understand. His fists were larger than the rest of his body as they smashed into her skull, the sound of bone against flesh. She began panting, exhausted. She cried something in Korean over and over again until her tongue switched to English, "O-kay. Okay. O-kay. Stop, D-wight. I Okay. Stop."

At that age, I wanted our family to match what I had read about: Dick and Jane, Mother and Father. My mother was still the second most beautiful woman next to Linda Carter and I remember feeling sorrow for my family. It wasn't a kid's shallow sadness, it was sorrow. It was a complex feeling for a seven-year-old, but sadness is something that passes quickly and sorrow contains the weight of ache. As I asked to touch her bruised face, I wanted there to be solidarity where there was none.

People with mental illness don't always elicit sympathy from their families. It's almost unfathomable to imagine a person who doesn't control their own actions. So much of the American myth involves controlling fate and mastering destiny. My father applied logic to the illogical. Ann's mind made connections that didn't exist. She spent more than one day writing pamphlets in Korean in protest of a war a thousand miles away. Despite the reality of the situation, my father still loved her. He would stop after work and bring Excedrin and Snickers bars hoping one would dull the headaches and the other would soothe the rage. He missed the woman who smiled when he brought treats from the base, the woman who marveled at orange sherbet. He liked how the tiniest bits of the world seemed new when they viewed them together.

This was not a transaction for him. What began as an exchange of currency, cash for lust and relief, transformed into

something else. If he was honest, the second time he paid to see her—he loved her. Even as she took his hand through the roads of Seoul, even as she guided him to another small bed, he knew.

Most of the heroics I loved had clear cut narratives, right vs. wrong. Good vs. evil. The heroes wore bright colors and brandished unflinching morals and the villains arched eyebrows and committed dastardly deeds. Superman vs. Lex Luthor. Batman vs. the Joker. In this scenario, there was no good or bad. There was my father surrounded by the literal debris of his marriage and my mother who literally fought her dreams coming true.

No one ever dreams of being a monster. No one ever sets about destroying the lives of their family, swatting away memories and creating havoc. To a child's eyes, my mother's transformations were like those of the emerald giant, the Incredible Hulk. In comics, scientist Bruce Banner tries to avoid anger, but finds himself in situations where there's only one response. Normally he's a good guy, and I feel sorry for him when he loses control. Other heroes I love try to stop him (Spiderman, The Fantastic Four), but empathy always lies with the monster. I wanted the identity of Ann McCray, the role of motherhood, to be enough for Chong Suk An, but something raged inside her that none of us understood. It's amazing the amount of trauma a child will put aside just for the sake of holding hands and sharing a can of grape soda.

The week my mother was committed to Longview and my father spent a night in jail is abstract to me, except in the details of the aftermath. In our apartment, anything glass was smashed to bits: dishes and flower pots. The coffee table bowed down like a wounded dog with its crippled leg. Mattresses were upended. Drawers hung down like wagging tongues; clothes were sprawled everywhere. There were puddles of knives and forks, pocketbooks and shoes. This is what small towns must have felt like after the Incredible Hulk swept through. Ours lives were an unnatural disaster.

In the aftermath, all I could help but think of was, "Hulk smash." We could no longer deny the reality of my mother's illness. My father and I cleaned up the apartment, saving what we could and dumping the rest: the pink and green curling iron, the silver ashtray and the multicolored leaflets that contained her neatest handwriting. The Korean symbols were impenetrable to my father

and I, but the tiny characters seemed precise and deceptively fragile. We stuffed the evidence of my mother's existence like fallen leaves into trash bags to be hauled to the corner and taken away. For our family, there were no more secret identities.

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