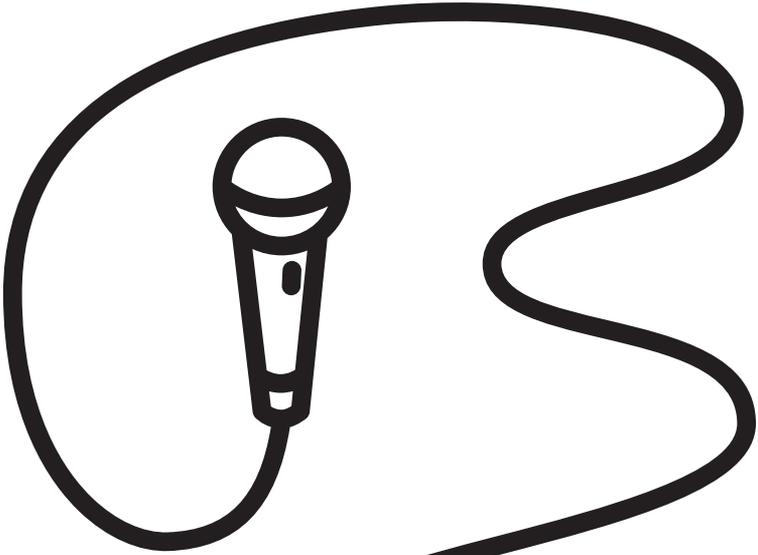


HAZARD STAR



Jon Chan Simpson



CHINKSTAR

Jon Chan Simpson

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*For Mom and Dad.
I owe you guys pretty much everything.*

1

The Text

In the dead grass and dusk we waited. Stretched out on the hoods of our parents' cars we sipped warm beer and contemplated synching the radios, turning up the top-40 braintrash to drown out our disappointment. Not a good look if the man of the night actually managed to show – if he fixed the tire on his dropkit honda, say, or slayed that final ho, or just sobered up enough to remember that this was supposed to be his grand fucking finale as a smalltown superstar.

Everything was about to change. In less than forty-eight hours, guy'd be taking the stage in Van City, owning an audience meant for some all-hype-no-talent new-money rapper, spitting next-level truths that'd have A&RS scrapping for him coast to coast. He'd ink some paper and drop an album that the world didn't even know it had been waiting for. All with game and swag to spare.

This was the edge, the almost there, and we knew it.

But we'd been waiting a long-ass time, to where it was feeling like any other Friday night of a Red Deer summer. Mosquitoes were getting secondhand-fucked on the whisky in our systems, kamikaze looping and crashing – from our spot just past the semicircle of cars, Ali and I watched as the deep crowd of fans started doing likewise. Some of the eager ones who'd timed their drunk-peak for an hour and a half ago were already burning out in puddles of Mom's turkey meatloaf.

Still, they had hope. To the kids gathered out there in the bush somewhere between Township Road 382 and the United States of MTV, this man was god. Chi-rhyme, nip-hop, zippaflow, slanty, jaunedell, rice-rap, chinksta: all planets in a system revolving around its rising son, King Kwong, my brother.

Spoke for itself, but me and him were nothing alike. We'd taken opposite life trajectories: I was a fat kid, stretched and got skinny – he was skinny, flexed and got phat. Under the clothes and tattoos, through the talk, walk and ballgrabbing, you could maybe confuse us – same brown eyes as Mom. But that's it.

Dickface understood how important this bushparty was. Had to. Even I got it, decided to haul my ass out to that lost patch of dirt when most times I did everything I could to avoid the dude's crapmosphere. This wasn't easy considering your average Red Deer highschooler knew more about King Kwong than global warming or Obama, learning about America's first black president guy only after googling the Great Ape's lyrics. Teachers capitalized, got traction couching lessons in Kwongland, like *A lincoln full of haters doing X km/h down Ross Street is trying to skip getting popped by our boy Killa Kwong, whose nitro civic does Y km/h and lead from his tec spits at 900 m/s ...*

It was whatever, though, and Mr. Parker knew it – you didn't need math to work the oil rigs. But what got me was that no one ever asked if I minded seeing my family name up there on the board, outlined in chalk, if it fuckin killed me that everything these days seemed to trickle down to me via my asshole brother.

Had tons of reasons to stay home, and bullshit was a big one, no doubt. Rosaline Grey was another.

Like a pantheress. Chances were good Ros was somewhere in the crowd, selling maybe, maybe an eye out for the one guy she couldn't have, or who couldn't have her, more like. The no-game halfchi with the one friend, loaner van and nothing-to-do Friday who she liked to watch squirm, and I was squirming.

Ros's brother wasn't exactly supportive of our being in like, had dangled me off the roof of the gym for getting caught on the wrong end of her smile. That was seventh grade – it had been non-stop torture for five years since: hallway shovings and hot chili facials in the caf and bathroom cornerings that went the other side of creepy, even by coke-raging alphamale cowboy standards. Girl was going to get me killed, I was sure, but how could I stay home? She was hot to

make me sweat and cool to where it scared me – way past a dime. Add those freckles and a kid never had a chance. I didn't know which way I'd run when I finally spotted her.

'Yeah, man,' Ali said, 'I don't think guy's coming.' He stood up from the hood, balancing an empty on his forehead and shuffling around in the dust.

'It's part of the show, just to get people pumped. He'll be here.'

'I doubts.' The bottle dropped and hit the dirt. Ali stooped to get and set it up again. 'Think he pissed out or something?'

'Car trouble. Ho trouble. Too much shine-mush. Who knows.'

'You don't care?'

'Zero.'

But it was weird he'd miss this. Kwong never passed on a chance to be the centre of attention. I forced beer between my teeth and watched the ground soak it up.

'You hear? Another track of his made it live today,' Ali said. 'Rush hour this time. Big Brett's sister smuggled it on air and got canned for it.'

I'd caught the tail end of the song on the radio coming home from school – his first hit single, 'Yellow Is the Day.' I imagined Mom's mahjong friends in their flappy pastel blouses wiggin out in their sedans, bobbing heads like post-dunk ballers and approximating gang signs with their hands as they took on the flow of *the Hong Kong King of the Bling Bling*. They'd say he was a *bad boy!*, over pu-erh in the parlour or whatever, but they'd hint some affection when they did. Kwong was pro at working their materno-asiatic softspot for just that tiniest bit of mischief.

Ali was on a good run with the bottle.

'Sucks for her,' I said, guessing it must have.

'Yeah. She was cheering and flashing the news cams as these dudes in trenchcoats hauled her out of the radio station. They blurred out her boobs in the report, though, nazis. You could still tell they're pretty sweet.'

Ali curved his hands into d-cups, eyes still up in the sky.

'Maybe the Feds Guantánamo'd his ass. Or the churchladies finally had him clipped.' His hands turned into cocked nines and started blasting.

I downed my drink, then dropped the bottle into the box of empties with a clatter, maybe more of a smash.

‘Hey, you know I’m kidding.’

I tossed a fresh beer at his open stomach, watched him fumble and catch it with a grunt. He kept balancing the empty.

‘Whatever. Guy deserves what’s coming anyway.’

‘Check me,’ Ali said, still rock-solid with the bottle. ‘Cirque du soleil, kid.’

A few hundred had gathered around the plywood stage stacked high with lifeless sound gear, united by a single belief. I scanned their faces, listened as chants for my brother rose and faded, lived and died out there in the weeds. A lot of us would graduate next month. After that there was a black hole where some kind of life was supposed to fit. For the first time since Ali swooped in and monkeybar drop-kicked our kindergarten archnemesis, I had no clue where the two of us were headed. In this armpit, a few months of cheap beer and boredom could turn into a few years, no problem. Throw in some blue coveralls and turn up the yeehaw, and I could be a Neck, like the two dropouts mashing skoal against their company ram near the far side of the stage, grimy and alone and waiting for the booze to get to work. The creeper vibe they were putting out might not matter to the right chick, especially five drinks deep. Grizzly-ass humps made me cringe – I wondered what they were doing at an all-Ape show.

Watched them for a sec and wondered if they were converts; they had that relaxed set to their shoulders, and with just two they weren’t about to start something. There was some crossover between the scenes, but few had the balls to walk the Ape–Roughneck divide. Like our guidance counsellor once told me, when it comes to gangs, you pick a side and hope the motherfuckers go for it. He was talking about a different set of thugs, of course, drawing on his pen time down in Bowden. His philosophy wasn’t an exact fit, but you could see how his situation hadn’t been so different from your regular Red Deer kid’s – just a different kind of prison, really.

By nine-thirty the sun had pretty much disappeared. The glow that came off the hazy half-moon gave just enough light for people to pile some wood and wizz some zippo, set shit aflame. Seemed like the party was going ahead anyway. Though the emcee of honour was a near-definite no-show, those kids didn't need a reason to let loose.

'Whatup whatup. Red Deer, what it do?' Ape sporting a sideways jays cap had grabbed the mic, his voice echoing off the clumps of poplar behind us. 'Looks like our boy got lost or something, so in the meantime we got all this gear out here just getting old and shit, so we were thinking about putting on a show. Now, I know y'all came out to see the man tonight ...' Here the crowd exploded in agreement – the mere mention of his existence set them off, brought them back to life. 'But,' said the emcee, 'you know the Ape kru's down to represent.'

This might've been a tougher sell an hour ago, but the pack was ready for some rhymes. A cheer went up from the beatbunnies who, though at first disappointed with the Chink King's disappearing act, were now throwing their braless bodies at members of his entourage instead. Insanity's a bad look on most chicks, but it's amazing what a modded schoolgirl outfit can do – all missing buttons and strategic neon plaid touches, a Kwongirl was lightyears from your everyday downhome-and-county dame. Common was them clung to his blasé ass wherever whenever, back of the school, back of the limo, back of his mind – somehow he never seemed to appreciate all that tryhard Harajuku hotness. How far I could get playing the brother card was something I wondered from time to time, something I'd never know without a little more game and a lot less conscience. I was pretty much guaranteed to die a virgin, especially considering that the love of my young life was a walking deathtrap. I thought about that, kept my eyes open for any sign of her, focusing hard on my peripherals. Ros liked to play the angles.

The DJ started spinning and the crowd went nuts, crushing tight to the stage. To honour their absent leader and the afternoon's successful radio hijacking, there was only one beat they could drop. Another

Ape with a schicked dome and aviators lifted the mic off the stand, started pacing the stage and bouncing to the beat:

*Hey yo,
here comes somethin ... ha ... you ain't never seen before.
All right ... check it out ...
Original East Side, fuckas!*

*We arrived with a bang on this continent, wantin it,
ghost-face muthafuckas was hauntin it, flauntin it,
so we moved they mountains
with handfuls of chemical,
glycerin in our skin n we was ready to blow.
Cause them euro-boys never could work up the sack,
smith & wesson, slave wages, built they railroad track,
but times is different now in the land of setting sun –
step back and watch as West gets re-won.*

*You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
I'm King Kwong and I'm fuckin here to stay.
You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
Black was the night, but Yellow is the day.*

Hard to describe in words the vibe that shimmered in the air, the energy that rose from that young nation. It was more of a feeling that burned in your ears and glowed in your palms, that filled you up and coated your insides like robitussin, only this shit tasted pure like it was killing you in a good way. No doubt that patch of earth would've gone nuclear if Kwong had been up there. Strange, then, that I was having issues getting into it – I was probably the only one.

Even the lower-Fairview wanna-baller with a busted leg waved a crutch now and then, leaning like a C-boy into his this-is-why-I'm-hot face. Ali said to put down the haterade and tried to chest me into the group of honeys he was working, but I locked my fingers into

the van's leather car-bra and wouldn't be moved. Wasn't long before he gave up, and I didn't blame him. He shook his head and weeded through the crowd back to his sweet spot.

I got all introspective watching the flow, knowing this to be a kind of survival technique commonly used by moody boners at parties who've had too few coolers to cut their shit loose and who also, on some level, feel better about their boner selves and boner situations by constructing fortresses of boner solitude. I didn't really think of myself as one of those self-pitying douches – I was truly convinced you could get some great thinking done in that middle sort of twilight drunk.

I took a sec to meditate. On my brother and his dope future. Tonight's vitality spread to a million fans, London, Buckingham Palace, a benefit concert for long-toed salamanders with Paul McCartney and fuckin Bono, three of them singing 'Let It Be,' the chinksta remix. A few stops to make still between here and there, sure, but on second thought Kwong was never one for process – maybe he was just skipping the in-between, all these kids, this scrapwood stage in the bush under the pitch prairie sky. Maybe he'd ascended already without saying a word.

*You know they sayin it's a white man's world and that rap
be black music,
but like a fine oolong I be here to infuse it
full of that Asian flavour, I take my Cris with green tea.
This ain't no year of the Ape, it's a dynasty!
MUTHAFUCKA!*

*You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
I'm King Kwong and I'm fuckin here to stay.
You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
Black was the night, but Yellow is the day.*

And what did my parents think of their little siu mai turned rapper, all grown-up and taking over the world? Mom could do without the

swearing, I knew, and Dad claimed not to appreciate the drug references, though I was pretty sure both of them had cursed and chronic-kicked their brains out growing up in sixties Montréal. No way they were as sweet and old as they looked, Dad falling asleep everywhere with his mouth open and his drugstore magnifiers low on his nose, Mom reading Canadian fashion mags and meandering Asian-granny-style around the neighbourhood, shuffling in button-up fleece, hands clasped behind her back. Some part of the hustle they'd passed on to their eldest could still be seen in the way they roadragged together, tearing strips off bad drivers with the windows rolled up, or when they snuck a dance in the kitchen, waiting for the oil to get hot. Some part of Kwong in both of them.

*I'm the Hong Kong king of the bling bling.
Straight from Stanley I be laughin at you bitches outta Sing Sing –
actin all hard like you's a real gangbanger,
three months upstate and early out for good behaviour?
Now the facts is clear, I'm here, I'm takin over, so bend over ...
I put my gat in yo face, I take the keys to your rover. [WHAT!?!]
So all you mahfuckin puppies better bow down, and kowtow to
yo new don.
Whack pittas dipped in soy sauce is what I like to snack on.*

*You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
I'm King Kwong and I'm fuckin here to stay.
You ain't never ever ever heard this flow –
Black was the night, but Yellow is the day.*

*I'm the muthafuckin chink,
I'm the muthafuckin ...*

*I'm the muthafuckin chink,
I'm the muthafuckin ...*

*I'm the muthafuckin chink,
I'm the muthafuckin ...*

*I'm the muthafuckin chink in your armour,
bad bitch charmer ...*

The beat faded seamlessly into another, so velvet smooth, and after two more beer and a mystery cup shoved at me by some future frat-boy lifer, I started letting go. The fact that it wasn't my brother up there reciting that shit might've made it easier. I let myself at last be dragged off the ass-warmed patch on the hood of the van into the life of the dancing mass. For a minute, I was in.

Sound expands over the prairies, summer nights especially. Like the day's heat in the quack grass rising to mix with the chill makes shit carry or something, pick your noise, and for chinksta in particular it's the perfect conductor.

Having been bushpartyers themselves in some era gone by, a lot of cops turned a blind powertripping eye to that sacred part of growing up country. When the faint melody of jaggy guitar and underage drinking tapped on their screen doors in the night, they might even let it in. Recline and recall the scent of jerrycans, malt liquor and strawberry bodyspray. Peep the bonfires and charred beer cans of their youth.

But their memories didn't include Kwong or the ApeRising – the new beat gutburned them like kung pao reflux. The constant sight of it – in the 7-eleven curb crews and stripmall fashion spots and in the invincible Ape-paint sprayed citywide, trademark of his Chi-ness – straight-up bamboo slivers to their retinas. So while many a po that night settled for an extra knuckle of jack and an infomercial to help them better lament the shit out of kids these days, one cop, whose dog had just left and had taken the girlfriend with him, swapped his glass of bourbon for a walnut-trim shotgun full of blanks and the keys to the old crown vic.

We should've seen it coming, should've noticed the dust kicked up by his cruiser a half-mile off or seen him trying to g.i. joe his way through the bush in cowboy boots that clicked against the prairie tile. Should've known that not everyone was ready for the fever, not even close. But we were a set and a half in and the shine-mush was going around, which meant there was no turning back on the party.

Someone had unloaded a bag about ten minutes back; watch for a sec and you'd know who was munching. The kick rippled through the crowd – posture, neck and eye movement was all suddenly smooth as Markerville ice cream. It was the shed hooch that made it pop, triple-distilled and added at some secret phase of its processing. Shit was proprietary – only the Necks knew how it was done, and the product never moved without an in-house dealer. For a night like this they'd send their best, their most convincing, down-to-the-bone. Situation had Ros gassed all over it.

'She's there,' said Ali, pointing through the pulsing sea of teens. 'Shit, son.'

Spotted her no prob despite her size – it was the way she moved through the masses, her grace in slinging narcotics, folded bills weaving through her fingers and spreading like painted fans. She grooved. An apex predator set on taking a neck.

I took a deep breath and a pull on mystery cup two, trying not to wince at the synthetic cherryiness. I stared a second too long.

Gang leader's little sis and retail goddess to boot, Ros was trained to sense a lingering eye. She caught mine and smiled and started picking her way over.

I grabbed Ali by the sleeve.

'You're still here?' he asked.

As she slipped closer, turning down customers left and right, I figured it out. Those sober Necks by the truck weren't here to get smashed and hit on cheerleaders, and they sure as shit weren't here for the lyrics. They'd been sent to watch Ros and relieve her of hassles. Hassles like me.

And like that, Ros was gone. In her place were a pair of linebacker rejects beelining to cave in my shit.

I grabbed Ali's sleeve harder and tried to pull his ass out of there, but dude was too skunked to make the escape I required.

We had a contingency for such situations that allowed one to forego the bro code where life and/or virginity loss were at stake, so long as the bro in question was in no mortal danger himself. I was pretty sure this qualified. They wouldn't *kill* Ali if they caught him, would they?

The moment of hesitation could've cost me my top row of teeth, and my mom a set of un-fucked-up grad photos. As I turned to bust out of there, I near bodychecked Ros, who stood blocking my route to safety.

'At least one Kwong boy made it tonight,' she said. 'What's up, Run?' She made a face at Ali over my shoulder, then came back to me.

If I looked her too long in the eyes I would fall for her fast, as I always did, would completely forget that in less than ten seconds two sets of meat hooks would clamp down and buckle me, and string me up for dog food.

I stole some eye time, then looked away.

'You don't seem too worried that I'm about to get murdered.' I motioned over my shoulder in the direction of her bodyguards – who'd disappeared. I panicked, scanning like a mof while trying to prepare for a fist out of nowhere. I hated getting punched, and though it'd been a while since I'd taken one, I could do without the re-up.

'We have a little time,' she said. 'Probably not much, but I wanted to talk. Hey –' she waved a hand in my face – 'can you forget them for a sec?'

'No,' I said.

She grinned, tonguing the point of her canine. We'd been here before – this was our place, how we did. Her getting off on watching me sweat, me getting off on seeing her happy, and neither of us digging to the bottom of our thing. The game would end one day, and I wondered if today was it.

‘I waded through that bog of ass-pinching morons to come say hey, so don’t even think about bailing on me.’

‘Nobody would pinch you. They know you’d jiu-jitsu the shit out of them if they tried.’

She seemed happy enough with my read on things, didn’t mind getting caught in her little lie. She touched my elbow and I shuddered.

‘They’re looking at us, kid,’ she said, eyes still on me. ‘Probably wondering why I came over here to talk to your dumb ass after walking past all of them.’ She shoved a mittful of bills into her pocket.

I played into it. ‘Why did you?’

‘A real reason this time.’ She played back. The look on my face must’ve said I was doubtful. Necks were closing in. She’d have to hook me or I’d be gone. ‘I got this text from someone –’

‘A text?’

‘Yeah, just listen.’

‘About me?’

‘No, well ... It was a few days ago, and it might’ve been about your brother –’

‘Like a fanboy stunt or something?’

‘Just shutthefuckup!’ She bit it out quick – I was suprised to see her flustered. She tried to pull the words back, cutely curling the corners of her mouth. ‘It said he wouldn’t make it tonight, said something about him disappearing. But the thing is, I don’t know how –’

A flash of blue shot out in my direction, and something grazed my face. I mistook it for a fist in coveralls, and was gone before the party-edition wonderbra of some free-boobin chick hit the ground. I left Ros straining forward on the tips of her toes as I deked past and hightailed it into the scrub – she was shouting my name but I didn’t stop. If I didn’t look back I could pretend she was encouraging me to go faster.

Officer Nutjob almost made it – big ups to the guy and his logrolling skills for not getting trampled by the psychokid flying through the darkness. Another few minutes of snakecrawling and he’d’ve been

at the stage, set to jump up and chuck norris the turntables before turning towards the sea of stunned teens, dropping low into shotgun stance and blasting off GET SOME! GET SOME! The boom of the blanks scattering kids like flies off a turd GET SOME! and the track stuck on a scratch loop, cut up by the warcries of a wannabe vet and the shit-yourself click of the shotgun's slide action. He might've had his say, turned the clock back for a night to the more simple Red Deer he thought he understood.

Instead I near punted him in the face. Hot thunder blasted my calf and I felt my lungs pop, then I was in the dirt. Sound of the shotgun must've kicked up the crowd, shouts and screams and growling engines, but all I could hear was the squeal of dying brain cells. Peering up through the strobe of headlights in dust, I might've seen two meathead shadows haul a raging pantheress to a truck. Tough to tell while being cuffed, a denim-clad knee in the back of your neck.

Up against the hard prairie I felt my nose recede impossibly further into my face.

'Did I get you, you little puke? Hey, fuck-o?' He was shouting – probably his second or third try with the question.

'Yes, sir.' I chewed dirt.

'It's all over, kid. Move and I'll light you like a birthday cake.' A set of stubby knuckles pressed against my ear. 'Fact: this just became the worst night of your life.'

Just then his weight shifted and I wiggled to see why. He was looking at something.

A single shadow shuffled towards us with its hands in the air.

'Bro code,' it called out, 'bro code.'