

“Razor sharp.” —Time

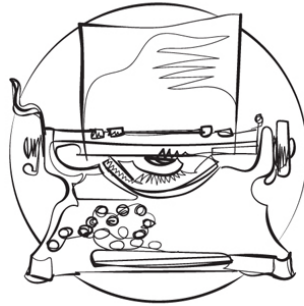


YELLOWFACE

R. F. KUANG

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Yellowface



A Novel

R. F. Kuang



WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Eric and Janette

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One

THE NIGHT I WATCH ATHENA LIU DIE, WE'RE CELEBRATING HER TV deal with Netflix.

Off the bat, for this story to make sense, you should know two things about Athena:

First, she has everything: a multibook deal straight out of college at a major publishing house, an MFA from the one writing workshop everyone's heard of, a résumé of prestigious artist residencies, and a history of awards nominations longer than my grocery list. At twenty-seven, she's published three novels, each one a successively bigger hit. For Athena, the Netflix deal was not a life-changing event, just another feather in her cap, one of the side perks of the road to literary stardom she's been hurtling down since graduation.

Second, perhaps as a consequence of the first, she has almost no friends. Writers our age—young, ambitious up-and-comers just this side of thirty—tend to run in packs. You'll find evidence of cliques all over social media—writers gushing over excerpts of one another's unpublished manuscripts (LOSING MY HEAD OVER THIS WIP!), squealing over cover reveals (THIS IS SO GORGEOUS I WILL DIE!!!), and posting selfies of group hangs at literary meet-ups across the globe. But Athena's Instagram photos feature no one else. She regularly tweets career updates and quirky jokes to her seventy thousand

followers, but she rarely @s other people. She doesn't name-drop, doesn't blurb or recommend her colleagues' books, and doesn't publicly rub shoulders in that ostentatious, desperate way early career writers do. In the entire time I've known her, I've never heard her reference any close friends but me.

I used to think that she was simply aloof. Athena is so stupidly, ridiculously successful that it makes sense she wouldn't want to mingle with mere mortals. Athena, presumably, chats exclusively with blue check holders and fellow bestselling authors who can entertain her with their rarefied observations on modern society. Athena doesn't have time to make friends with proletarians.

But in recent years, I've developed another theory, which is that everyone else finds her as unbearable as I do. It's hard, after all, to be friends with someone who outshines you at every turn. Probably no one else can stand Athena because they can't stand constantly failing to measure up to her. Probably I'm here because I'm just that pathetic.

So that night it's only Athena and me at a loud, overpriced rooftop bar in Georgetown. She's flinging back cocktails like she has a duty to prove she's having a good time, and I'm drinking to dull the bitch in me that wishes she were dead.

ATHENA AND I ONLY BECAME FRIENDS BY CIRCUMSTANCE. WE LIVED on the same floor at Yale our freshman year, and because we've both known we wanted to be writers since we were sentient, we ended up in all the same undergraduate writing seminars. We both published short stories in the same literary magazines early on in our careers and, a few years after graduation, moved to the same city—Athena for a prestigious fellowship at Georgetown, whose faculty, according to rumor, were so impressed by a guest lecture she gave at American University that its English department inaugurated a creative writing post just for her, and I because my mother's cousin owned a condo in Rosslyn that she would rent to me for the cost of

utilities if I remembered to water her plants. We'd never experienced anything like kindred spirit recognition, or some deep, bonding trauma—we were just always in the same place, doing the same things, so it was convenient to be friendly.

But although we started out in the same place—Professor Natalia Gaines's Introduction to Short Fiction—our careers spiraled in wildly different directions after graduation.

I wrote my first novel in a fit of inspiration during a year spent bored out of my skull working for Teach for America. I'd come home after work every day to meticulously draft the story I'd wanted to tell since my childhood: a richly detailed and subtly magical coming-of-age story about grief, loss, and sisterhood titled *Over the Sycamore*. After I'd queried nearly fifty literary agents without luck, the book was picked up by a small press named Evermore during an open call for submissions. The advance seemed like an absurd amount of money to me at the time—ten thousand dollars up front, with royalties to come once I'd earned out—but that was before I learned Athena had gotten six figures for her debut novel at Penguin Random House.

Evermore folded three months before my book went to print. My rights reverted back to me. Miraculously, my literary agent—who had signed me after Evermore's initial offer—resold the rights to one of the Big Five publishing houses for a twenty-thousand-dollar advance—a “nice deal,” read the Publishers Marketplace announcement. It seemed like I had finally Made It, that all my dreams of fame and success were about to come true, until my launch day drew closer, and my first print run was reduced from ten thousand to five thousand copies, my six-city book tour was reduced to three stops in the DMV area, and the promised quotes from famous writers failed to materialize. I never got a second printing. I sold two, maybe three thousand copies total. My editor was fired during one of those publishing squeezes that happen every time the economy dips, and I got passed along to some guy named Garrett who has so far shown so little interest in supporting the novel that I often wonder whether he's forgotten about me entirely.

But that's par for the course, everyone told me. Everyone has a shitty debut experience. Publishers are Just Like That. It's always chaos in New York, all the editors and publicists are overworked and underpaid, and balls get dropped all the time. The grass is never greener on the other side. Every author hates their imprint. There are no Cinderella stories—just hard work, tenacity, and repeat attempts at the golden ticket.

So why, then, do some people rocket to stardom on their first try? Six months before Athena's debut novel came out, she got a big, sexy photo spread in a widely read publishing magazine under the title "Publishing's Newest Prodigy Is Here to Tell the AAPI Stories We Need." She sold foreign rights in thirty different territories. Her debut launched amidst a fanfare of critical acclaim in venues like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, and it occupied top spots on every bestseller list for weeks. The awards circuit the following year was a foregone conclusion. Athena's debut—*Voice and Echo*, about a Chinese American girl who can summon the ghosts of all the deceased women in her family—was one of those rare novels that perfectly straddled the line between speculative and commercial fiction, so she accrued nominations for the Booker, Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards, two of which she won. And that was only three years ago. She's published two more books since, and the critical consensus is that she's only gotten better and better.

It's not that Athena isn't talented. She's a fucking *good* writer—I've read all her work, and I'm not too jealous to acknowledge good writing when I see it. But Athena's star power is so obviously not about the writing. It's about *her*. Athena Liu is, simply put, so fucking cool. Even her name—Athena Ling En Liu—is cool; well done, Mr. and Mrs. Liu, to choose a perfect combination of the classical and exotic. Born in Hong Kong, raised between Sydney and New York, educated in British boarding schools that gave her a posh, unplaceable foreign accent; tall and razor-thin, graceful in the way all former ballet dancers are, porcelain pale and possessed of these massive, long-lashed brown eyes that make her look like a Chinese Anne Hathaway (that's not racist for me to say—Athena once posted a selfie of her and

“Annie” from some red carpet event, their four enormous doe eyes squeezed side by side, captioned simply, Twins!).

She’s unbelievable. She’s literally unbelievable.

So of course Athena gets every good thing, because that’s how this industry works. Publishing picks a winner—someone attractive enough, someone cool and young and, oh, we’re all thinking it, let’s just say it, “diverse” enough—and lavishes all its money and resources on them. It’s so fucking arbitrary. Or perhaps not arbitrary, but it hinges on factors that have nothing to do with the strength of one’s prose. Athena—a beautiful, Yale-educated, international, ambiguously queer woman of color—has been chosen by the Powers That Be. Meanwhile, I’m just brown-eyed, brown-haired June Hayward, from Philly—and no matter how hard I work, or how well I write, I’ll never be Athena Liu.

I’d expected her to skyrocket out of my orbit by now. But the friendly texts keep coming—how’s writing going today? hitting that word count target? good luck with your deadline!—as do the invitations: happy hour margaritas at El Centro, brunch at Zaytinya, a poetry slam on U Street. We have one of those skin-deep friendships where you manage to spend a lot of time together without really getting to know the other person. I still don’t know if she has any siblings. She’s never asked me about my boyfriends. But we keep hanging out, because it’s so convenient that we’re both in DC, and because it’s hard to make new friends the older you get.

I’m honestly not sure why Athena likes me. She always hugs me when she sees me. She likes my social media posts at least twice a week. We get drinks at least every other month, and most of the time it’s by her invitation. But I’ve no clue what I have to offer her—I don’t possess anywhere near the clout, the popularity, or the connections to make the time she spends with me worthwhile.

Deep down, I’ve always suspected Athena likes my company precisely because I can’t rival her. I understand her world, but I’m not a threat, and her achievements are so far out of my reach that she doesn’t feel bad

squealing to my face about her wins. Don't we all want a friend who won't ever challenge our superiority, because they already know it's a lost cause? Don't we all need someone we can treat as a punching bag?

"IT CAN'T BE ALL THAT BAD," SAYS ATHENA. "I'M SURE THEY JUST mean they're pushing the paperback off a few months."

"It's not delayed," I say. "It's canceled. Brett told me they just . . . couldn't see a place for it in their printing schedule."

She pats my shoulder. "Oh, don't worry. You get more royalties off hardcovers anyways! Silver linings, right?"

Bold of you to assume I'm getting royalties at all. I don't say that out loud. If you tell Athena off for being tactless, she gets overly, exaggeratedly apologetic, and that's harder to put up with than just swallowing my irritation.

We're at the Graham's rooftop bar, sitting on a loveseat facing the sunset. Athena is guzzling her second whisky sour, and I'm on my third glass of pinot noir. We've wandered onto the tired subject of my troubles with my publisher, which I deeply regret, because everything Athena thinks is comfort or advice always only comes off as rubbing it in.

"I don't want to piss Garrett off," I say. "Well, honestly, I think he's just looking forward to rejecting the option so they can be done with me."

"Oh, don't sell yourself short," says Athena. "He acquired your debut, didn't he?"

"He didn't, though," I say. I have to remind Athena this every single time. She has a goldfish's memory when it comes to my problems—it takes two or three repetitions for anything to stick. "The editor who did got fired, and the buck passed to him, and every time we talk about it, it feels like he's just going through the motions."

"Well, then fuck him," Athena says cheerfully. "Another round?"

The drinks are stupidly expensive at this place, but it's okay because Athena's buying. Athena always buys; at this point, I've stopped offering. I

don't think Athena's ever really grasped the concepts of "expensive" and "inexpensive." She went from Yale to a fully funded master's degree to hundreds of thousands of dollars in her bank account. Once, when I told her that entry-level publishing jobs in New York only make about thirty-five thousand dollars a year, she blinked at me and asked, "Is that a lot?"

"I'd love a malbec," I say. It's nineteen dollars a glass.

"Got it, babe." Athena gets up and saunters toward the bar. The bartender smiles at her and she exclaims in surprise, hands flying to mouth like she's Shirley Temple. It seems that one of the gentlemen at the counter has sent her a glass of champagne. "Yes, we *are* celebrating." Her dainty, delighted laughter floats over the music. "But can I get one for my friend as well? On me?"

No one's out here sending me champagne. But this is typical. Athena gets showered by attention every time we go out—if not by eager readers who want a selfie and an autograph, then by men and women alike who find her ravishing. Me, I'm invisible.

"So." Athena settles back down beside me and hands me my glass. "Do you want to hear about the Netflix meeting? Oh my God, Junie, it was insane. I met the guy who produced *Tiger King*. *Tiger King*!"

Be happy for her, I tell myself. Just be happy for her, and let her have this night.

People always describe jealousy as this sharp, green, venomous thing. Unfounded, vinegary, mean-spirited. But I've found that jealousy, to writers, feels more like fear. Jealousy is the spike in my heart rate when I glimpse news of Athena's success on Twitter—another book contract, awards nominations, special editions, foreign rights deals. Jealousy is constantly comparing myself to her and coming up short; is panicking that I'm not writing well enough or fast enough, that *I* am not, and never will be, enough. Jealousy means that even just learning that Athena's signing a six-figure option deal with Netflix means that I'll be derailed for days, unable to focus on my own work, mired by shame and self-disgust every time I see one of her books in a bookstore display.

Every writer I know feels this way about someone else. Writing is such a solitary activity. You have no assurance that what you're creating has any value, and any indication that you're behind in the rat race sends you spiraling into the pits of despair. *Keep your eyes on your own paper*, they say. But that's hard to do when everyone else's papers are flapping constantly in your face.

Though I feel the vicious kind of jealousy, too, watching Athena talk about how much she adores *her* editor, a literary powerhouse named Marlena Ng who "plucked me from obscurity" and who "just really understands what I'm trying to do on a craft level, you know?" I stare at Athena's brown eyes, framed by those ridiculously large lashes that make her resemble a Disney forest animal, and I wonder, *What is it like to be you?* What is it like to be so impossibly perfect, to have every good thing in the world? And maybe it's the cocktails, or my overactive writer's imagination, but I feel this hot coiling in my stomach, a bizarre urge to stick my fingers in her berry-red-painted mouth and rip her face apart, to neatly peel her skin off her body like an orange and zip it up over myself.

"And it's like, she just *gets* me, like she's having sex with my words. Like, mind sex." Athena giggles, then scrunches her nose up adorably. I suppress the impulse to poke it. "You ever think of the revision process as like, having sex with your editor? Like you're making a great big literary baby?"

She's drunk, I realize. Two and a half drinks in, and she's smashed; she's already forgotten once again that I, in fact, hate my editor.

Athena doesn't know how to hold her alcohol. I learned this a week into freshman year, at some senior's house party in East Rock, at which I held her hair as she vomited into the toilet bowl. She has fancy taste; she loves to show off everything she knows about scotch (she only calls it "whisky," and sometimes "whisky from the Highlands"), but she's barely had anything and her cheeks are already bright red, her sentences rambling. Athena loves to get drunk, and drunk Athena is always self-aggrandizing and dramatic.

I first noticed this behavior at San Diego Comic-Con. We were clustered around a big table in the hotel bar and she was laughing too loudly, cheeks

bright red while the guys sitting beside her, one of whom would soon be outed on Twitter as a serial sex pest, stared eagerly at her chest. “Oh my God,” she kept saying. “I’m not ready for this. It’s all going to blow up in my face. I’m not ready. Do you think they hate me? Do you think everyone secretly hates me, and no one will tell me? Would *you* tell me if you hated me?”

“No, no,” the men assured her, petting her hands. “No one could ever hate you.”

I used to think this act was a ploy for attention, but she’s also like this when it’s only the two of us. She gets so vulnerable. She starts sounding like she’s going to burst into tears, or like she’s bravely revealing secrets she’s told no one else before. It’s hard to watch. There’s something desperate about it, and I don’t know what frightens me more—that she’s manipulative enough to pull off such an act, or that everything she’s saying might be true.

For all the blaring music and bass vibrations, the Graham feels dead—unsurprising; it’s a Wednesday night. Two men come up to try to give Athena their numbers, and she waves them off. We’re the only women in the place. The rooftop feels quiet and claustrophobic in a way that’s frightening, so we finish our drinks and leave. I think, with some relief, that this will be the end of it—but then Athena invites me over to her apartment, a short Lyft ride away, near Dupont Circle.

“Come on,” she insists. “I have some amazing whisky saved, precisely for this moment—you have to come try it.”

I’m tired, and I’m not having that much fun—jealousy feels worse when you’re drunk—but I’m curious to see her apartment, so I say yes.

It’s really fucking nice. I knew Athena was rich—bestseller royalties do count for something—but I hadn’t processed *how* rich until we step into the ninth-floor, two-bedroom unit where she lives alone—one room for sleeping, one room for writing—with tall ceilings, gleaming hardwood floors, floor-to-ceiling windows, and a balcony that wraps around the corner. She’s decorated it in that ubiquitous, Instagram-famous style that screams minimalist but bougie: sleek wooden furniture, sparsely designed

bookshelves, and clean, monochrome carpets. Even the plants look expensive. A humidifier hisses beneath her calatheas.

“So then, whisky? Or something lighter?” Athena points to the wine fridge. She has a fucking wine fridge. “Riesling? Or I have this *lovely* sauvignon blanc, unless you want to stick to red—”

“Whisky,” I say, because the only way to get through the rest of this night is to get as drunk as possible.

“Neat, on the rocks, or old-fashioned?”

I have no clue how to drink whisky. “Um, whatever you’re having.”

“Old-fashioned, then.” She darts into her kitchen. Moments later, I hear cupboards opening, dishes clanging. Who knew old-fashionedes were such a hassle?

“I have this beautiful eighteen-year WhistlePig,” she calls out. “It’s so smooth, like toffee and black pepper mixed together—just wait, you’ll see.”

“Sure,” I call back. “Sounds great.”

She’s taking a while, and I really have to pee, so I wander around the living room searching for the bathroom. I wonder what I’ll find in there. Maybe a fancy aromatherapy diffuser. Maybe a basket of jade vagina rocks.

I notice then that the door to her writing office is wide open. It’s a gorgeous space; I can’t help but take a peek. I recognize it from her Instagram posts—her “creativity palace,” she calls it. She has a huge mahogany desk with curved legs beneath a window framed by Victorian-style lacy curtains, atop which sits her prized black typewriter.

Right. Athena uses a typewriter. No Word backups, no Google Docs, no Scrivener: just scribbles in Moleskine notebooks that become outlines on sticky notes that become fully formed drafts on her Remington. It forces her to focus on the sentence level, or so she claims. (She’s given this interview response so many times I’ve nearly memorized it.) Otherwise, she digests entire paragraphs at a time, and she loses the trees for the forest.

Honestly. Who talks like that? Who *thinks* like that?

They make these ugly and overpriced electronic typewriters, for authors who can’t string together more than a paragraph without losing focus and

hopping over to Twitter. But Athena hates those; she uses a *vintage* typewriter, a clunky thing that requires her to buy special ink ribbons and thick, sturdy pages for her manuscripts. “I just can’t write on a screen,” she’s told me. “I have to see it printed. Something about the reassuring solidity of the word. It feels permanent, like everything I compose has weight. It ties me down; it clarifies my thoughts and forces me to be specific.”

I wander farther into the office, because I’m exactly drunk enough to forget that this is bad manners. There’s a sheet of paper still in the carriage, upon which are written just two words: *THE END*. Sitting next to the typewriter is a stack of pages nearly a foot tall.

Athena materializes by my side, a glass in either hand. “Oh, that’s the World War One project. It’s finally done.”

Athena is famously cagey about her projects until they’re finished. No beta readers. No interviews, no sharing snippets on social media. Even her agents and editors don’t get to see so much as an outline until she’s finished the whole thing. “It has to gestate inside me until it’s viable,” she told me once. “If I expose it to the world before it’s fully formed, it dies.” (I’m shocked no one has called her out for this grotesque metaphor, but I guess anything’s okay if Athena says it.) The only things she’s revealed over the past two years are that this novel has something to do with twentieth-century military history, and that it’s a “big artistic challenge” for her.

“Shit,” I say. “Congrats.”

“Typed up the last page this morning,” she chirps. “No one’s read it yet.”

“Not even your agent?”

She snorts. “Jared pushes paper and signs checks.”

“It’s so long.” I wander closer to the desk, reach for the first page, then immediately withdraw my hand. Stupid, drunk—I can’t just go around touching things.

But instead of snapping at me, Athena nods her permission. “What do you think?”

“You want me to read it?”

“Well, I guess, not all of it, right now.” She laughs. “It’s *very* long. I’m just—I’m just so glad it’s finished. Doesn’t this stack look pretty? It’s hefty. It . . . carries significance.”

She’s rambling; she’s as drunk as I am, but I know exactly what she means. This book is huge, in more ways than one. It’s the sort of book that leaves a mark.

My fingers hover over the stack. “Can I . . . ?”

“Sure, sure . . .” She nods enthusiastically. “I have to get used to it being out there. I have to give birth.”

What a bizarre, persistent metaphor. I know reading the pages will only fuel my jealousy, but I can’t help myself. I pick a stack of ten or fifteen pages off the top and skim through them.

Holy God, they’re good.

I’m not great at reading when I’m tipsy, and my eyes keep sliding to the end of every paragraph, but even from a sloppy once-over, I can tell this book is going to dazzle. The writing is tight, assured. There are none of the juvenile slipups of her debut work. Her voice has matured and sharpened. Every description, every turn of phrase—it all sings.

It’s better than anything I could write, perhaps in this lifetime.

“You like it?” she asks.

She’s nervous. Her eyes are wide, almost scared; she’s fiddling with her necklace as she watches me. How often does she put on this act? How forcefully do people shower her with praise when she does?

It’s petty, but I don’t want to give that validation to her. Her game works with adoring reviewers and fans; it won’t with me.

“I don’t know,” I say flatly. “I can’t really read drunk.”

She looks crestfallen, but only for a moment. I watch her hastily plaster on a smile. “Right, duh, that was stupid, of course you don’t want to . . .” She blinks at her glass, then at me, and then at her living room. “Well, then do you want to just . . . hang?”

So here’s me, just hanging with Athena Liu.

When she's hammered, it turns out, she's shockingly banal. She doesn't quiz me about Heidegger, or Arendt, or the half-dozen philosophers she loves to name-drop in interviews. She doesn't go off about what a good time she had guest modeling for Prada this one time in Paris (which was completely by accident; the director just saw her sitting outside a café and asked her to step in). We cackle about celebrities. We both profess that the latest twink with puppy-dog eyes in fact does nothing for us, but that Cate Blanchett can step on us, always. She compliments my style. She asks where I got my shoes, my brooch, my earrings. She marvels at my skill at thrifting—"I still get half my stuff from Talbots, I'm such an old lady." I make her laugh with stories about my students, a procession of pimply, dull-eyed kids who could waltz into a lower tier Ivy on their parents' legacy connections if they could only score two hundred points higher on the SAT, and how their ghostwritten college essays are all an exercise in inventing some personal hardship when it's clear they've never experienced any. We trade stories about bad dates, about people we knew from undergrad, about how we've somehow hooked up with the same two guys from Princeton.

We end up sprawled on her couch, laughing so hard our ribs ache. I didn't realize it was possible to have so much fun with Athena. I've never been so *myself* with her. We've known each other for over nine years now, but I've always been so guarded in her presence—in part because I'm nervous she'll realize I'm not half as brilliant or interesting as she thinks, and in part because of what happened freshman year.

But tonight, for the first time in a long time, I don't feel like I have to filter every word I say. I'm not struggling to impress Athena Fucking Liu. I'm just hanging with Athena.

"We should do this more," she keeps saying. "Junie, honestly, how have we never done this before?"

"I don't know," I say, and then, in an attempt to be deep, "Maybe we were afraid of how much we'd like each other."

It's a stupid thing to say, and not remotely true, but this apparently delights her.