

Seeing Red

Above all, my first impression of her was her lips. The rest of her face was completely free of make-up, but every day, without fail, her lips were painted in a thick and glossy bright red.

I met her on the first day of class. I was on exchange at a Chinese university, and she walked into the classroom a little late. There were still a few empty seats, including one next to me. She chose that seat, and thereafter, it became hers. We saw each other every day in the classroom.

Her Chinese was so good that it made me hate being in the same level. There were five levels of Chinese class, and we were second from the top – quite an advanced class, I guess. But the only reason I could think that we were in the same class was because the placement test was writing-only. As my Chinese reading and writing were far better than my speaking and listening, to my ears, her Chinese sounded much smoother and more natural – I was jealous.

It turned out that she was of Chinese descent. She also had a Chinese name, but she preferred using her Spanish one. She was a bit of a mystery. Despite coming to class late every day, she always had her lips perfectly painted.

Anyway, one day, our teacher, who usually only wore very drab clothing, came in a puffy sky-blue cardigan. My favorite color. I couldn't help but say, "Wow, that looks really good on you." Taking my seat, my red-lipped friend said something in Chinese that sounded harsh, but I didn't understand. I asked her to write it down, and looked it up in the dictionary: 'Sycophant,' was the result. After class, I confronted her.

"What did you mean?" I asked her, this time a bit harsh myself.

"Well, you are, right? No one would compliment *that* cardigan! You don't really think it looks good, right? And, the exams are coming."

I was aghast. "It's normal to me to compliment someone's clothing. I *did* think it looked good."

She was silent for a moment, then said, "If you really thought it looked good, I'm sorry."

But I began to doubt myself. Had I really just been trying to score points with the teacher? Either way, this red-lipped girl interested me. I invited her to lunch. Anyway, towards the end of our meal in the cafeteria, she began ripping her napkin into small pieces, and dropping them on the floor. I asked her what she was doing, and her response floored me:

"The food was satisfying, and look!" she pointed to the waiting staff, who looked slightly bored standing against the wall, "I'm making work for them," she said, "if everyone stingily cleans their plates, and is as tidy as you, they won't have a job!" This led to a fight, and not our last.

One night, a while later, she rolled into my room, very drunk. She had forgotten the key to her own door, and wanted to stay – I was okay with this, but because she smelled so much of alcohol, I told her to go and use the toothpaste in my bathroom. I'd expected her to use her finger, or something, but I was shocked, and a bit disgusted, when she walked out of the bathroom with my toothbrush in her mouth. She saw the look on my face and got angry in turn.

"What!?" she asked, loudly, "We're friends, right? I can't even use your toothbrush!?"

Were we friends? I wasn't sure then, and I'm still not sure now. We spent a lot of time together, but I think we were both just curious about how odd the other was.

Anyway, we shared a few more experiences together, but also grew apart due to several more fights. Eventually, my exchange period ended, and I was to leave China. The last time I happened to see her, her lips were still painted red.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

- 1. The narrator said she placed in a high-level Chinese class because of the placement test. Why do you think this is?**

Answer: Because she comes from a Chinese-character (漢字) using background.

Hints/Clues: Although this in itself is not explicit in the text, several cultural clues that will become relevant in later questions suggest at least an east-Asian background of the narrator, and the fact that she herself reflects ‘the only reason I could think that we were in the same class was because of the written placement test,’ suggests that the narrator herself feels she had a ‘written’ advantage.

2. Where was the ‘red-lipped girl’ from?

Answer: Spain, or potentially South America.

Hints/Clues: There is only one explicit hint – ‘she was of Chinese descent. She also had a Chinese name, but she preferred using her Spanish one.’ Having a Spanish name would suggest she was of Spanish (Spain) origin. Given the prevalence of the language in the South Americas, it is possible she is of that origin, too. (Also, an interesting discussion point is the ‘red-lipped girls’ consistent lateness – stereotypes should certainly be avoided, but intercultural perceptions of ‘promptness’ or ‘tardiness’ are certainly worthwhile).

3. The word ‘sycophant’ appeared in the passage as a pejorative. What do you think it means?

Answer: A description in either English or Japanese is acceptable (suck-up, ゴマすり, etc).

Hints/Clues: The ‘red-lipped girl’ gave the following reasons for labelling the narrator a sycophant: ‘No one would really compliment *that* cardigan! You don’t really think it looks good right? And, the exams are coming.’ This suggests that the narrator sought to gain favor from the teacher through compliments, and the word ‘sycophant,’ thus describes such behavior.

4. The title, ‘seeing red’ has a double meaning. What is the double meaning in this context?

Answer: ‘Red lipstick,’ and ‘getting angry.’

Hints/Clues: The narrator makes constant reference to the ‘red-lipped girl’s’ lipstick – in fact, she is not even given a name. Also, they have several fights, primarily beginning from the narrator’s anger – to ‘see red’ is an idiomatic expression for intense anger in English.

5. The ‘red-lipped girl’ apologized for calling the narrator a ‘sycophant.’ Yet, later, she got angry about the incident using the toothbrush. Why do you think this is?

Answer: (answers will likely vary considerably – well-reasoned answers should be given credit).

Hints/Clues: Within the passage itself, during the ‘sycophant’ incident, the narrator directly addresses the ‘red-lipped girl.’ In the later incident, the ‘red-lipped girl’ appears to get angry at the expression on the narrator’s face, suggesting the narrator did not verbally express her displeasure, but rather might have come across as ‘passive-aggressive.’ (Although, and this can become relevant for the final discussion question, the ‘red-lipped girl’ seems to have assumed that the two were friends, but this declaration of friendship was clearly non-verbal, given the narrator’s doubt – ‘Were we friends? I’m not sure. We spent a lot of time together, but I think we were both just curious about how odd the other was’).

6. The narrator and the ‘red-lipped girl’ seemed to have had several fights. Who, if either of them, was ‘right,’ and why do you think so?

Answer: (answers will vary – this question should not be credited for points, but should rather be a discussion topic – one point of discussion could be the expression ‘clean [their] plates,’ which does not literally mean ‘washing plates,’ but rather not leaving any food remaining. Why might the ‘red-lipped girl’ have been put off by that?).