

## Returning Home

Tripping, scampering and stumbling up the walkway, I move as fast as my stubby ten-year-old legs would allow, dragging an oversized suitcase along as I rush to board the airplane with my mom. I whip around my boarding pass as I skip forward, my one-way ticket from my home in Madison to freedom in Beijing. This ticket allows my yearly summer pilgrimage I make to my nativeland. I settle into the cozy economy seat, preparing my nest for the next twelve hours. I tie myself down as the plane taxis down the runway, ready for liftoff. Immediately, signs of China starts to present themselves to me: the soothing sounds of Mandarin instructions asking me to buckle my seat belt, Chinese inflight movies, and stir-fried beef that replaces rubbery American turkey and mash.

Twelve hours later the plane lands in Peking Airport with its worn, peeling walls and a muggy atmosphere from all the cigarette smoke. Blinking my eyes to clear my sleepy haze, I notice a sea of black hair and yellow skin, hear a loud babble of Mandarin, and marvel at the distinctive Pagoda roof that covers the airport. A sense of belonging washes over me as I can finally speak my native language again instead of that nonsense gibberish that makes no grammatical sense. I can finally escape the judgment from the white kids who form cliques based on skin color and never offer to play tag with me. I can finally immerse myself with my people and my culture. I have returned to where I belonged.

Sitting in a Beijing cab, I press my face up against the rolled-down window, allowing the bright lights of the emerging city, sounds of rumbling cars and trucks, and faint smell of smoke to flood my senses. Signs advertising the comforts of China start to pop up: the familiar foods – hot pot, duck, dimsum – Chinese comedies about the Magistrate Liu who upheld the law while

others around him fell into corruption, and scale models of the Great Wall that bring back muscle aches from the memory of ascending it on that sun basked day last year. Each turn brings us closer to my grandfather's home as familiar landmarks appear: the restaurant that serves the best roast duck, the local market that sells all the meats and veggies I can dream of, and finally, the oblique hexagonal apartment building where my grandfather resides. I hop out of the cab, grab my luggage, and sprint up the stairs leading to the dark lobby before I stop to wait for my mom to catch up. The elevator whirs to life after I jam my finger onto the grimy button to summon it. The familiar lights of the elevator flicker as it hums to life, lifting us with a cough and a moan to the ninth floor.

The dim lights and soft hum of the incandescent bulb frightens me, but nevertheless I push forward, walking as fast as I physically can. A golden statue of the "Luck Cat" – welcoming us with a waving right paw – sits in front of our steel door decorated with traditional Chinese greetings, scribed on red paper. I tap the brass knocker – a golden dragon with glowing eyes and a fierce snarl – to alert my grandfather of our arrival. A rapid shuffle of footsteps and the loud bang of the door slamming open reveal my grandfather's large. I look up to his toothy smile and leap into his embrace, happily reunited with him. I follow his slightly slouched stature as he leads me to my room – a small, tight space the size of a walk-in closet, used mainly for storing the artifacts and antiques collected over my grandfather's many years. I run a hand over the polished Tai-Chi sword hanging on the wall, and a century-old tea stand balancing a Ming Dynasty vase that depicts a beautiful waterfall scene. I settle down into a small foldout bed propped next to the wall and observe my surroundings. My eyes focus on a golden bronze mirror with dragons diving in and out of the frame, clouds swirling around their bodies as they leap out towards me. I fall asleep eagerly awaiting the day to come, filled with excitement to see my

cousin, compare our chess skills, and continue our tradition of dumpling-making on our first night back.

The next morning my grandfather, tightly grasping my hand, leads me to the market. The sticky-sweet scent of soft caramel candies, the sour odors of pickled vegetables, and the savory smell of freshly marinated beef pull at my attention as I try to pick up on all the exotic aromas not found in the U.S. A toy maker a few stands down catches my attention with Klotski, a tricky Chinese block puzzle; with a flick of his finger he expertly navigates the pieces out of the maze. I step up tentatively wanting to try it out, but before I start, a loud bang startles me. I turn around to see a shop selling firecrackers. Before I can examine it, my grandfather quickly pulls me along as I try my best to take in the attractions along the way. After walking around for a while we stop to purchase some fresh vegetables and meats for dinner that night. We arrive home to my aunt and my cousin sitting in the living room. My cousin leaps into my arms, reuniting us for the first time in over a year. I drag her into my room as she recounts games she played with her friend re-enacting scenes from *Journey to the West*, our favorite Chinese tale. I moan about the mundane school life learning multiplication tables, all the hardships fitting in in the U.S., the curvy gibberish the teachers forces us to write instead of neat Chinese characters, the greasy, soggy fries they fed us in the cafeteria, and all those funny looking people with yellow hair and pale, white skin. We glow in each other's presence as we set up our Chinese chess set. I direct battle with all my chess pieces not as a ten-year-old boy, but as a Chinese general. I command each soldier into the perfect position, encircling the opposing army with a delicate strategy. Victory came to my army as we successfully capture the opposing general commanded by my cousin.

Later in the afternoon my cousin and I venture out of our den, lured by the sound of rhythmic “thwap thwap” from the chopping in the dining room. We emerge to find my mom,

aunt, and grandfather engaging in lively conversation around a table, discussing their plans for the upcoming celebration of the Dragon Boat Festival. The traditional Chinese Eight-Deity-Table, made from polished cherry wood with the figures of eight spirits carved around the edge, symbolizing unity in a family, the Eight-Deity-Table supposedly brings good luck according to Chinese myths. I scamper up to the table, seeing the rising dough, minced pork, chopped chives, diced mushrooms, minced egg, chopped shrimp, and crushed ginger and garlic. I gasp knowingly at what all these ingredients mean, however, my cousin screams it out before I could. “DUMPLINGS!!” I quickly grab a seat alongside my mother, eagerly awaiting my task in our traditional family activity: dumpling making. I attentively follow my mother’s lead, watching her knead the dough carefully, trying my best to imitate her actions. My grandfather mixes all the ingredients to form the filling, which we wrap in the thin disks my aunt meticulously rolls out from the dough to create boat-shaped dumplings. My grandfather drops the dumplings into a pot of boiling water, where they float around and crash into each other. When they start to sink, we rescue them and scoop them onto our plates. I wait patiently for everyone to gather around the table so we could enjoy our feast together. Between playing Chinese chess, skipping rope, hide-and-seek, running around the courtyard with my cousin, wandering the streets with my grandfather, and spending nights cuddling with my family watching our Chinese dramas, the summer flies by, and soon I have to return to the U.S.

I could not visit China for the next three years as my mom attended college to obtain a MBA and my dad became pre-occupied with his research and constant visits to Europe. I battle through middle school in the U.S., struggling with English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and fending off teasing classmates offering me pieces of dental floss as a blindfold. I abandon the volumes of *Journey to the West* and the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*

that fill my bookshelves for thick J.K Rowling novels, wanting to fit in with my classmates and their never-ending conversations involving Harry Potter. I seek to hide my yellow skin with name brand Nike t-shirts and my dark hair with my new Lakers cap as my “friends” at school tease me for my “chinky” appearance. My sense of displacement increases as I spend many nights alone at night crying as I begin to resent my culture. I start to think that the culture that set me apart curses me and hinders my growth. I beg my parents for a new phone so I can keep up with those in my class who have them, a laptop so I can talk to my friends on the Internet, an iPod to listen to the pop music that’s so popular in school. I no longer go home to play chess with my father; instead, I obsess constantly over *God of War* and *Assassin’s Creed*, slaying dragons, slaughtering gods, and killing kings on a flashing screen. I no longer enjoy my mom’s Chinese cooking and beg constantly for cheeseburgers and fries. I no longer write or speak my native Mandarin as I constantly “lol” and “brb” in English slang to my friends online.

My mom surprises me with the announcement that we will spend the whole summer in Beijing after my 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation. Instead of exulting, I moan at the potential thought of spending a whole summer speaking Chinese, a language which I have barely touched for years, a whole summer without talking to my friends online, a whole summer without *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*. I grudgingly pack my essentials – my portable game station, laptop, phone, and iPod – and haul my baggage lethargically along the long, dimly lit hallway leading up to the 747. My once comfy nest now traps me in a strait jacket for twelve grueling hours. Upon landing I notice with some pleasure that an arched glass ceiling now replaced the outdated Chinese style pagoda roof. I sat in the cab, this time not noticing the city, but focusing on the videogame in my hands.

The door to my grandfather's apartment remains the same. I haughtily walk by the peeling greetings, disregard the "Luck Cat" – now frozen in time with his paw stuck in half-wave – and ignore the lingering smells of stir-fried pork and the warm welcoming light given off from my grandfather's home. Upon walking in I greet my grandfather with a short embrace, one eye still glancing at the game in my hand. He leads me to my old room filled with that the same rusty sword, cracked vase and the rest of his junk. I toss and turn on the hard, cramped bed, unable to fall asleep, thinking about Cartoon Network on TV, the friends on speed dial, and cheeseburgers and fries. Waking up the next morning, I grumble and whine about the hard water, the lack of mint-flavored Colgate toothpaste, and the muggy, smoggy air. My grandfather then asks if I wish to accompany him to the market; something I used to eagerly join in on now garners only a simple headshake. Instead, I sit in my dark, isolated room the whole day, tapping buttons that move pixels across a four-inch screen. Later that day, my aunt shows up with my baby cousin; I put down my games momentarily to greet her, but immediately after, I grab her arm and jerk her carelessly into my room. I open each game I have, boasting about trophies for kill-combos and speed-runs I have earned in my countless gaming hours. She flips her hair and rolls her eyes, she shows no interest in the flashing lights in my hands. She leaves me momentarily and walks back carrying our old Chinese chess set. I fumble with the pieces while setting them up; three years have passed since I last played this game. Digging deep into my memory, I struggle to remember the characters on each chess piece, and its function in the game. Immediately, my cousin successfully captures two of my more powerful pieces as I blunder simple moves. I no longer hold the role of Chinese general, but instead I run everywhere on the field, a foreign prisoner of war avoiding capture. The game ends in a slaughter with my humiliating defeat after only a few

rounds. Angry at my loss I push the game board away, declaring the game I once loved “lame and pathetic.”

As we put away the chess pieces the familiar sounds of “thwap thwap” emanate from the kitchen. The pungent odor of sweet-smelling yeast in kneaded dough enters our nostrils, while the heaps of ingredients lying on the table in front of us creates a mural of colors. Ah yes, dumplings for dinner...how predictable. My cousin skips to her chair next to my aunt and starts to prepare the filling. I glance at my mom and spot my empty seat next to her. The Eight-Deities burn holes in me with their glares as I avert my gaze, refusing to meet their eyes. I hear the music emanating from the game in my hand and quickly choose my Greek Mythology game over the old Deities of China. I quickly turn and walk out of the kitchen back into my room to slay another dragon.

As I sit here mesmerized by the cold, unnatural light emitted from my PSP, the golden bronze mirror draws my eyes to it once again. I walk up to my grandfather’s most prized possession and stare into the golden pool of water surrounded by fierce dragons with confrontational eyes and steam pouring out of their mouths. I focus on my reflection through a thick layer of dust that has collected over the years. I see a spoiled teenager with a Lakers cap and a PSP in his hand that has forgotten his way. I reach my hand forward and wipe away the dust on the mirror and notice my facial features, my pinched, deep-brown eyes, my dark black hair, each reminding me of what I hid in an attempt to reject my Chinese culture and assimilate into that of America. The dragons on the mirror glare at me. I look down at the dragons in my hand and toss them away. I walk out of my room and asked, “Can I help?”