

Big, Big World

It begins with you.

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Our story starts in the year 2002. You had just turned 25 years old. You were young and so beautiful (you still are) that you were often mistaken as the actress Joey Wong by passersby. It's late September, and the leaves are starting to fall. They crunch beneath your black boots and luggage bags as you walk toward the airport terminal. The wind tangles itself through your hair and blows past your jacket. The air is cold, filled with pollution and thick smoke. You cannot see the sun.

This is the last time in the next 11 years you will stand in front of the Beijing International Airport.

This is your first time out of the country.

This will soon be the first time you set foot on American soil.

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I was born and raised in the United States. The first time I visited China was at the age of one. Since then, China has been a memory seen only during summer break and through photographs sent on WeChat by relatives. From what I can remember, China is a memory that tastes like hot spicy noodles that burn your eyes and convenience store bubble gum wrapped in colorful papers bought with spare change. China is a memory of skyscrapers, nighttime taxis, fizzy orange drinks in glass bottles, and scrawny stray cats. China is a memory of family and unfamiliarity.

Throughout the school year, I stood across a great divide, not only through distance; the Pacific Ocean, but also through one of culture and an aching longing as I watched my cousins waving, celebrating 六一儿童节 (International Children's Day) and 端午节 (The Dragon Boat Festival) in pictures, frozen moments of happiness. I always felt a hinge of sadness when Grandma showed me the photos. The feeling often came with an aftertaste of bittersweetness.

I never stayed in China for more than 3 months at a time. I never got to see the 梅花 (plum blossoms) make its peek through the harsh winters, dusted in thick snow, the only time when these beloved flowers bloomed. I never got to watch the fireworks and lanterns light up the night sky on Chinese New Year, or the orange leaves start to fall in autumn. I missed so many things in the country my parents had known as home for most of their lives.

Summer always ended too soon, abruptly. I would cry when our relatives drove us to the airport. I remember the airport sign: *The Beijing International Airport*, the one you stood in a long time ago. I wondered what you thought when you were there, which floor tiles you stepped on, which terminal, elevator you took. Did you look behind?

I'll miss you, my cousin told me.

You could come with me, I begged.

Take care. Come back soon! We'll be waiting for you, my great-aunts would say as we would hug and then they would wave and wipe their tears when the security doors would shut, separating us into two different worlds again. I'd look down, as so they wouldn't see how sad I was.

I realized that you never came back.

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You arrived in America with some carefully saved money and two bags of clothing with living necessities. Dad picked you up at the airport. You rented out an apartment near the university you were attending.

America was a place full of promises. A place with the chance of a better future. For Dad and I, and eventually, for you.

So you left a high-paying, easygoing job back home and took a 17-hour plane flight to the US. You planned to stay.

When Dad's plane landed in the US a year before, it was late August. That meant that he missed the 9/11 bombing by a matter of days.

Dad came to live the American Dream. You came for him.

You celebrated New Year's by sharing a pack of instant ramen with Dad and watching the fireworks in the starlit sky from the window of your apartment complex with a broken heater. You spent only \$7 a week on groceries, collected coupons, and worked nights at a local grocery store after studying at graduate school. Dad had received his doctorate and was looking for a job.

The money ran out very quickly. The rent would soon be due.

But then as both fate and luck would have it, Dad got his first job in time. You were so happy for him, you just couldn't believe it.

You had made it.

But something had changed.

In those sleepless nights when you were counting change for impatient customers who cursed under their breath because *I'm running late, hurry up* and when the unpaid utility bills started to cover the kitchen counter, you had slowly begun to lose hope. Life wasn't supposed to be hard like this. Life wasn't supposed to be like this if you studied hard in school and received excellent marks on tests, that's what you were told as a kid. And you did everything everyone asked of you, you studied when most of your classmates were asleep, you practiced writing Chinese characters in stacks of notebooks until your entire hand was covered in smeared black ink that took weeks of soap to rub off. You once walked up seven flights of stairs for three weeks with a broken tailbone because of a fall you took when roller skating. Grandma was insistent that you were fine, so you never went to see a doctor. You put on a brave face and toughed it out.

You did everything people asked, but did you end up where you wanted to?

In America, you had to learn to drive, to speak a foreign language you heard only in syllables during grade school. Some people laughed at your pronunciation. Others would look away, feeling sorry for you.

You later told me, "I was never considered very smart, but I was always willing to work hard and get back up. Always. That's how I did it."

Starting over was scary, hard. You had fallen out of touch with many friends and lost privileges when you moved to America. In the end, you had completely changed, hardened by the condescending laughs of people when they heard you struggle to read an American dish at a restaurant, weathered by the constant need of saving money in the bank in case of an accident. You were only an empty shell of the bright, strong-willed girl you used to be.

The American Dream was supposed to mean you could do anything in America, but it also meant that America could destroy your dreams.

But because you never gave up, I am here today. For that, I am eternally grateful.

America took away so many things from you, only to give them to me.

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You used to tell me about your time in China when you'd picked me up from daycare.

I was four, riding on the booster seat in your car. I remember it was a silver Honda, we eventually sold it for a newer car. I never really paid attention to what you were saying, instead, I played with Hermit, my stuffed animal frog, squealing with delight when you'd turn the radio on.

I was always waiting for that one song:

I'm a big big girl

In a big big world

It's not a big big thing

If you leave me

I never knew the title, nor anything other than the chorus of the song, and it would be many years later before I would remember it again and search for it online.

It was called "Big Big World", by Emilia, written in the year 1998.

When I clicked on the Youtube video, a wave of nostalgia hit me. It was just like 10 years ago, just the two of us, me with my loud off-key singing, you laughing, driving to the nearest H.E.B to pick up groceries and extra batteries for the TV remote.

It was when I was listening and watching that old music video that I realized something strange; China never had H.E.Bs. And I didn't know if there were Chinese pop song radios. And when you left, they put your life in a box with fraying edges, whittled you into photographs with bent corners, and shoved what was left of you under a bed to gather dust.

When you left, China never had you anymore.

I love China, but in a different way from America.

China is family, but America is home.

America is you.

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Early December. 2016. I was in fourth grade, when I wanted to be an actress. Before that, I had wanted to be the President of the United States. I remember you telling me how ridiculous that was, so I eventually dropped the idea.

But I figured that if I could make it into Hollywood, then I could meet famous people like Tom Hanks and wear extremely high heels on the red carpet with my hair done and then wink coquettishly at the paparazzi with cameras. As a nine year old, a flimsy, half-thought-out plan that involved unrealistic fame and a lavish lifestyle seemed completely and absolutely brilliant and ingenuine. I told you about my idea while we were lying sprawled on the couch together after I came home from chess class. It was below freezing outside, and ice rain streaked across the window. But in the safety of our house, I felt warm and content.

Mom, I want to be an actress when I grow up.

Immediately after I said that, I could tell that there was something wrong. You stopped smiling, and sat up.

That was the first time I realized most people would give up almost anything for financial stability and a sense of security, because that meant a chance to live in a nice house when it was cold outside, a chance to celebrate the holidays with family, a chance to be safe. But at nine, I had built a belief system centered around chasing dreams and following passions, thinking that nothing safe was worth the drive. It became a sacred religion that I worshiped, held on to preciously, believing it was made to last; *do what you love*. And now, I watched as the walls of my cathedral started to crack, while I sat inside, praying.

A job as an actress wasn't going to cut it. *Too unstable. Why not be a businesswoman instead?*

I don't want to be a businesswoman. *I thought America is a place where you could do anything you wanted.*

"You know, I wanted to be an actress too, when I was young. But it's very hard. You have to have resources. You have to be very lucky. Very pretty. Our family does not have that."

I blink, once, twice, rapidly. The ceiling of my cathedral starts to shake, now threatening to fall.

I guess what I had thought about being an actress was too "American", and something like Hollywood and fame was not supposed to be for an average Chinese girl, whose skin is too accented and whose smile is too loopsided for the posh and upperclass.

"America has many things, but not a place for who you want to be."

You sounded small, like I imagined you to be so many years ago; thin, tired, eating lukewarm ramen on New Year's Day.

You also sounded sorry, broken. Maybe it was because someone took that dream away from you too, just like you were doing to me.

Maybe fate was already written out, because you were right. Who would want me for anything anyways?

"You're beautiful, 亲爱的, my love, but not pretty enough to be famous."

Maybe it was because you also knew what it felt like to want something that couldn't ever be yours.

I stared out the window without really seeing anything.

“You need to have more commitments. Tell me you will make AIME, tell me you will do it.” The palm of your hand slams against the hardwood table, a canyon runs through the crevices between your furrowed brows.

“I can't. I can't make promises I can't keep. I can't do that.”

We're sitting at the kitchen table, an argument rising between the tension that plays tug of war between us.

You sit back and shake your head. Your lips press together in a thin line, and your eyes turn distant; a layer of frost covers you. I look down, at my lap. I have made you upset, disappointed; all of a sudden, I am reminded of my failed dream of being an actress from the similar look on your face years before. I remember the broken cathedral with the cracked walls and the things you had told me. The image of the building flashes in my head; everything comes back when you start talking again.

“This is exactly what I'm talking about. Exactly what I just said. No commitments. You are setting yourself up for failure.” You draw out the words in a slow hiss, “别人都行, 你怎么就做不到呢? 为什么?” *If everyone else can do it, why can't you?*

Why?

For a long time after that, the same question will still pound in my head, over and over, begging for a sufficient answer. Ringing, echoing, repeating. Again, and again, I will not know how to respond.

Why can't you? Why, why, why?

Each word becomes another fracture in my cathedral, another wound to the place I've known as home for so many years.

Right now, 4 words lodge in my throat. *I'm not good enough.*

“I don't know.”

I'm not good enough.

You stand up and turn for the door. “You never know.” Your voice is on the verge of anger, a volcano about to erupt.

“I'm not good enough.” I blurt out. “I'm sorry.”

The volcano explodes, lava gushing, spilling out from the sides, flooding into my cathedral's nave, smashing the arabesque mural glass windows and coating the pillars. The sound of the destruction is loud, ear splitting.

“Sorry?”, you repeat, a bitter laugh escaping through your words. “Sorry for what? I didn't raise you to be sorry. I raised you to work hard. I raised you to be better than good. Until you make AIME, you don't get to be sorry, you haven't earned the right to be sorry!”

And so, because I apologized for not being good enough, for not being able to promise you a spot in AIME, you took away chess, and you took away writing. And as you put it: until you can do what is asked of you, you will not do what you love to do. Until you can do what is asked of you, you do not deserve to feel sorry for yourself. *Do you understand?*

Your words are the violent winter wind, howling, blowing through the hollow, now fragile, obliterated building of what used to be a safe haven to me. Scraps of wood and metal fly away with the breeze.

Maybe all dreams are only made up of wood and scrapes of skin and broken glass. Maybe dreams can truly be gone.

Yes, I do.

Good. The door slams behind you.

With it, the building caves in, and crumbles.

It is December again. The year is 2021. Covid has been around for about an year, coating everyone's lives with plastic layers of distance and the burning smell of Clorox disinfection wipes I have now gotten used to.

Five years have passed since I have let go of my dream of being an actress. Everything about my life is the same, the same friends, the same style of converse shoes and basketball shorts, even the Yamaha I play is still next to the window where I used to watch the spring showers.

Everything about my life is the same, yet since then, I have changed. Henry David Thoreau once said, "things do not change; we change." Maybe that's true. I think of myself changing the way you did when you came to America.

Some people say I have learned to become more realistic, others that it's a shame I have stopped dreaming and believing in things the way I used to. I tell them it's called growing up.

"年年岁岁花相似，岁岁年年人不同. Flowers see the change in seasons, people change with the seasons", you said to me once, when we were sitting by the lake, watching the violets start to bloom, the flocks of butterflies migrate north, covering the azure blue sky in a maze of shifting colors.

I still remember the summers we shared, filled with the scent of Coppertone sunscreen and salty ocean air, the sun pounding down on us, drips of sticky caramel ice cream running down the back of my tiny hands, sweat beads glistening at the nape of my neck.

I remember autumn, the new back to school supplies, a view of forest pines scraping against the yellow sky, a piano solo contest, and Grandma's soft handknit sweaters.

I remember winter, icicles encasing brown leaves, candy canes neatly wrapped in boxes, Christmas stockings by our old fireplace, holiday lights illuminating late November and flickering until mid January, and dribbling basketballs in the February cold.

And I remember spring; April showers, a strawberry cake decked with puffs of whipped cream on my birthday, allergies that kept me awake until morning wrestled its way past my curtains, and orchestra performances in concert halls.

If life were a piano concert, I'd see you in the audience clapping for me.

Now, I think back to all the memories we have made, both sweet and painful. Maybe that's what makes you so special. Maybe you are why I see in so many vivid shades of emotion. Maybe that's why I write. Maybe that is why I am here today.

Someone once told me that caring is the hardest way in which to live, but you have lived like that, and so have I. Time, for us, had been spent in the closets of the past, where we lick at the tastes of faded memories and bloody bruises. But time has also been a friend, a friend of stinging antiseptic that taught me to stand up through tears and dust myself off.

In short, I learned to live on.

Mom:

I'm a big, big girl now
I know it's a big big world
But maybe it is
Time to let me go

*But I do feel
I will
Miss you much
Miss you much*

The story ends with us.