

Transience

For years, my mother relayed to me stories of the majestic Fragrant Hills Park. Located in the northwest corner of Beijing, China, it housed ancient temples, maple trees, and lakes smooth as glass. Yet, in my mother's eyes, the heart of the park lay in its highest peak: the Sorrowful Ghost Mountain. Folk tales claimed that even ghosts cowered in the presence of this mountain, trembling in the face of its looming figure. It was menacing and mysterious, but the reward was great for those who dared to make the climb.

When she was in elementary school, my mother's class embarked on an annual journey up this mountain. She reminisces upon those times often, reciting glorious memories of the park's fiery autumn leaves, the excited chatter of her friends, and the shimmer of the city viewed from the mountain's peak. To her, this place was a beacon of light - a paradise where nothing could go wrong. When she speaks of it now, her voice carries a sense of reverence, and I know it is still sacred to her.

Today it is August in 2014, 30 years since my mother last set foot in this park. For the first time she has brought me here with her, so I can experience the journey up the Sorrowful Ghost mountain. Elation swells in my heart: perhaps, through this adventure, I will be able to catch a glimpse into my mother's past.

The train rolls to a halt next to a sign engraved with small red script. I push my cheek against the cool window to my right, squinting to make out the words. It reads "Fragrant Hills Park", and I smile because we are finally here.

My mother sits next to me in this crowded train, legs crossed and fingers firmly wrapped around the straps of her backpack. A practiced composure rests on her face, but I can tell from the slight curve of her lips that she is as excited as I am.

"Where are the red leaves?" I tease. It has become a joke between us for me to criticize the park, and for her to fight back with its virtues.

"It's the summer, what did you expect?" she retorts, but her voice is lighthearted.

The moment I step out of the train, hot sunlight streams onto my back and I reflexively raise my hand to shield my eyes. To my right, I see rows and rows of maple trees with emerald leaves dangling off of tall white branches. These are the leaves that turn red in autumn and fall to the ground, creating the picturesque scene of my mother's memories.

My mother begins heading towards the base of the mountain, with confidence in familiarity in her strides. I scramble to catch up with her.

"Is this what you expected?" I ask. It is a genuine question, because as reluctant as I am to admit it, I have not yet felt the divine allure of this place that she treasures so greatly. It is charming but unremarkable, not at all unlike other parks I have visited.

My mother turns to look at me with both eyebrows condescendingly raised.

"Just wait until we get to the top. Then you'll see," she says, and smiles.

I follow her to the base of the trail and pause, craning my neck upwards in shock. The mountain stretches high into the sky, perhaps twice as tall as I had expected. Under this 95 degree weather, the impending trek feels daunting - certainly not one I would ordinarily feel inclined to make. Yet, my mother's enthusiasm is infectious, and my worries melt away into a tentative eagerness.

"Ready?" my mother grins at me and begins heading forward, without waiting for a response.

The first steps up the mountain are pleasant. We are surrounded by people, but they form a happy crowd that boosts my excitement.

By the time we are halfway up the mountain, my spirits have dampened considerably. I crave relief from the sweltering heat of the sun, and the crowd around me has changed from a merry background to a suffocating force. I feel trapped, so high above the ground surrounded by people in all directions.

I look to the left at my mother, who seems unperturbed by the strenuity of the hike. The excited glow in her eyes has not faded. I continue on, feeling more hopeful that my efforts would be rewarded by the dazzling sights at the peak.

Before my mother and I left the base of the mountain, we had established that we would not look down during the hike. We agreed that the scene should be a surprise - so she could see how it had changed over the last 30 years, and I could take in the legendary sight for the first time. As the trademark “incense burner” stones (the mountain is also called Incense Burner Peak) emerge into view at the top, we both increase our pace, driven by an invisible force of anticipation.

We reach the top step simultaneously, and I wearily begin searching for a place to rest. My mother, however, briskly passes me, heading towards a viewpoint. Something in the urgency of her stride makes me get up and follow her.

“Ready?” she asks. She had asked the same thing at the base of the mountain, but now, the word carries more weight - a sense of finality.

I am ready. My body buzzes with a renewed energy. I am finally about to experience the glory of this place after hearing about it for the last 10 years.

“Turn around!” I shout, and twist so I am facing the city.

It takes me 10 seconds to comprehend the view. I step back, and my breath leaves me in an exhale of shock.

Smog. It is everywhere I look. It covers the ground in a thick coat, acting as a massive veil of pollution that shields my view of the city. I squint at the ground, searching for something, anything that would link this place to the one my mother described. My eyes only find a faint glimmer of gold, perhaps the sunlight striking a temple below.

Instead of the quiet hum of nature, I hear the din of exhausted voices.

“It’s too smoggy to see,” someone says. “Let’s head back down.”

There are no powdery clouds scattered across an impossibly blue sky. There is no chorus of magpies, filling the air with their pure, musical cries. This place has drastically changed. A hollow, unsettled feeling worms its way into my heart.

The truth is that I will never revel in the paradisiacal nature of this mountain, not in the way that my mother did when she was young. That magic that she remembers so clearly has dissipated, eroded away with the passage of time.

I think back to the places I treasure: the prairie trail in Illinois filled with tall whispering grasses and fluttering cardinals' wings; the ocean shore of Oregon dotted with kelp and vibrant sea stars. In 30 years, they too might be nothing but memories, fragments of a blissful past forever imprinted within my mind.

And what of the people I love? What of the friends I fought with, laughed with, and cried with all throughout my childhood? Might they vanish from my life too? What then, is the point of establishing deep roots in places, in people, for them to get torn away?

I turn to share my newfound wisdom with my mother, but she is smiling.

"It's too bad you won't get to see it," she says, but her smile does not waver. Too bad. That's all she says.

"Aren't you disappointed?" I ask. I know she is. She must be.

"Yeah," she shrugs. "But it doesn't change the way it was, or the way I remember it. Ready to head down?"

Taken aback, I nod listlessly. I am still chewing over her words. *The way I remember it.*

It comes to me then, a bold realization that washes over my confusion.

Why spend our lives trying to chase a past that will never return? Life is meant to be lived wholly, fully, and we can only do that if we savor every moment. Time trickles by every second, every minute, but memories that we make now are forever.

This mountain has a meaning to my mother that it will never have to me. Likewise, the things, people, and places I treasure now may slip out of my life in the future. While we cannot still the passage of time, we can live our experiences to the fullest now, when they are still here, and create brilliant memories that will eternally remain within our hearts.

I follow my mom down the stairs, and try to breathe in the moment. I breathe in the smells, the sounds, the sights around me, because I know they will not last forever. This moment is now, and now is what matters the most.