

Motherland

You're going to be honest with them, you don't like where you come from.

And that isn't to say you don't like thousands of years of culture, or you have a personal thing against Communism, it's more like nosebleeds every morning from the heat, smog suffocating the sidewalks and the smells creeping up from the sewage cracks, waiting to strangle you. It's more like air conditioning is an eighth wonder of the world when you're on the other side of the hemisphere, your organs slowly rotting away with a bloody piece of tissue paper shoved up your nose. It's the *rat-a-tat* of the men in hard hats drilling away at some God-forsaken corner of a street, fixing an unfixable city, permeating beneath shut windows.

China is 13 hours away (translation: 6 and a half movies, courtesy of Continental Airlines). Conditions are different, hardships are harder – but your body is still the same white-washed shit across the Atlantic Ocean.

You don't associate the motherland with rice paddies and quaint villages and boys carrying sticks with water buckets on their backs; it's more like a yell across moving traffic, like a shove in a crowded room. Skyscrapers, stoplights, students riding to school on bicycles, waiting in line to buy eggs for like four hours because your aunt claims there's a super special sale going on that can only happen Sundays, 4 pm at the Shandong Market. Snapshots – it's about the Mao Ze Dong statue your cousin likes to make fun of (“look, his arm is out – he's directing traffic), people screaming at you in a store in Shanghai for walking too slow, eating noodles at midnight because you've just arrived from the airport and you can't speak Chinese but you nod and point to your stomach and that's the universal language for “yeah, give me some of that.” Simple things. Little things. It's not all bad.

But it's also being a mute in a place you're supposed to know like the back of your hand. You know roughly 3 words in Chinese – “yes,” “food,” and the classic head nod. You know the one, that polite one where you up/down your head like an automated pulley, your eyes hopefully eager and bright, attempting to convey words you don't even understand yourself. It's enough, sometimes. It's enough when your uncle laughs with his yellowing teeth and cigar breath, when your aunt nods and offers you more *zong zi* because really, you're too skinny and you need to eat more if you ever want to do anything with your life.

It's not enough when your grandmother looks into your eyes and holds it there, because that's enough time to trace the crinkles around the outskirts of her temples and the sunkenness right below her lower lashes, a peek of her years blooming across her face. She says something. You say nothing. Maybe it's because you don't know the fucking language, you idiot. You *ben ren*.

It's not enough when your grandpa smokes his last cigarette from the pack and looks outside the deck window wistfully, like he's the Great Gatsby or something, and looks back at you, the noise of some game show blaring in the backdrop. “This is home,” he says to you. “This is where your father lived, and this is where you live, too. In here.” He taps his chest once.

But in your mind, you're going, do I really? And you think about America and about Applebee's and Abraham Lincoln and cafeteria lunches and the Pledge of Allegiance and you look down at where you are, your feet on bamboo mats and the clamor of voices around you like white noise in a tidal wave of misunderstanding. You kind of want to cry, not because you love America so much or because you hate China so much, but because things are a certain way and you feel like you cannot change them. Someone else says something to you, some unidentifiable relative from your mom's side. You do the head nod.

Your aunt is pretty badass. In fact, both are – the one who’s the Editor-in-Chief of a food magazine and the one who wears black leather and drives a motorcycle. One cooks like a fucking Top Chef and the other pulls off red lipstick better than Heidi Klum. They both don’t mind that you have the language skills of a socially inept Chinese three-year-old and they like your quietness, even if it’s more out of inability than personality.

Well, anyway. You remember this one time you’re there. In the middle of Weifang, on your dad’s side (home of the famous Weifang kites! You typically bring home a dozen home even though they’re clogging up your antiques drawer and your friends are tired of getting them as souvenirs), 10 pm and all the streetlights come out to say hello. You’re in the back of your aunt’s motorcycle, holding on to dear life, the wind flipping ripples through your hair as you pass by building after building, the sides of your peripheral vision blurring.

You understand enough to hear her laugh and say, “You don’t have to hold on so tight.” But you’re like, five years old. You can’t help it. You’re like an overgrown baby; you’ve been so pampered. People in America and China alike think your hands are fat and soft and she doesn’t say much, is she dumb? But for awhile there, in that enclave between speed and stillness, you loosen your grip a little and there’s a moment of silence. The humidity whips your face, and you’re lost in the moment of the feeling of feeling – the cars around you, the air-polluted sky, dotting purple smears around the corners of your world, for just that second. For just that breath.

Your cousin’s two years older, prettier, taller, and quick-witted, sharper than the knives your mom always tries to smuggle out of China (“they make them so much better here, I’m telling you”). She laughs when you try to write Chinese characters. “That is *so* not the way you

write ‘big,’” she giggles, her fingers tracing your misshapen squiggles. You glance at her neatly completed English homework. She asks you for help on one question. You don’t even know how to do it.

But she’s nice to you. Your other cousins on your dad’s side kind of just leave you alone because you don’t really talk and you look kind of weird and you drag your mother around as a translator everywhere you go. But not Tian Tian, nah, she’s bigger than that. She teaches you finger games and Cat’s Cradle and plays jacks with you while you and her are waiting for your moms at the salon down the streets of Jinan. You feel bad because she’s kind of babysitting you and there’s no way around that.

Once in a while, though, you feel connected, like when she whispers things in your ear that you can only decipher half of and you can feel her chocolate breath shimmying down your spine, her smile in her voice. And one day, seriously, she tells you,

“I’m going to America one day.”

You look at her, and her shiny A pluses and her ribbons and her gold stars, but more than that, you feel the heartbeat kicking you when she says “America,” and you look into her eyes and you see something there. You know something’s there. You want to say a lot of things, your tongue bursting with potential, stars in your mouth and longing lodged in your throat.

You nod.