



Junyang Zheng Junyang Zheng

A recollection of the past.

The Old House

It's a cold winter morning, and my parents woke me up bright and early. The clock reads 8:30 am. I was sleepy and exhausted, complaining nonstop as my parents dragged me to their car. We drove on seemingly for ages, and I fell asleep again on the backseat of my parents' Toyota. When I woke up, the sun was shining brightly in my face. My parents got out of the car, and picked me up from the back. We walked for a while, until an old, broken down house came into sight. It was a small Chinese mansion, spanning a little over one acre of land with two stone lion statues guarding a small flight of stairs leading up to the door.

Our family used to live there, said my dad. It was ours for generations, until we couldn't afford to maintain it anymore. Your great grandfather was a gambler, and an opium addict. Don't be like him when you grow up. Be better.

He turned me around, and looked me in the face.

Work hard, son. Never take anything for granted. Remember that. There is no magical formula in this life, you just need to work hard. You can follow your passion, but first make sure your passion can pay the bills. Be a doctor, yes? Or a lawyer. One or the other.

The Beautiful Game

The first trip was magical. How could I forget? I stood in line with awe gazing at the magnificent stadium before my eyes. The Camp Nou at Barcelona, Spain, home of FC Barcelona. We took our seats, and listened to the noise. The atmosphere was incredible, with sound waves rocking the arena. *Wow, they are louder than me.* The players walked onto the pitch, and the stadium began to sing. *What's that language?* The ball is kicked, and the game begins. *I can't see the ball. Why is it so small?* Goals scored, tackles made, red cards given. The pitch below descended into madness, players rushed in, shoving and pushing. *Let's see a fight!* A spectacular dribble through the midfield, and a composed finish. *GOOOOAAAALLLL.* The stadium erupts. Fans jumping out of their seats in manic celebrations. Among them, feeling the adrenaline rush and the scintillating tingle in his spine, a seven year old felt himself falling in love with the beautiful game.

One Cold Night

It was a cold and rainy night sometime in February. I was staying the night at my grandparents' place, tucked into my bed, trying to warm up. I turn and turn, trying to sleep. I considered calling my mom, but decided against it since I was a big boy now. Instead, I focused on the commotion outside. My mom and aunt were arguing in the living room. Few minutes later, my grandparents and my dad joined in. The argument is in full crescendo. I heard a glass bowl smash on the

floor. I heard a door slammed shut. I heard someone crying. I dug my head into my pillow, and told myself to go to sleep.

America?

It was the first time I ever left the country. The summer I turned eight, my parents decided to take me on a vacation to Saipan. I looked it up on a map, and was thoroughly unimpressed. It's so small that it took me ages to locate it on the vintage globe in our living room. Frankly, I was scared to leave the country. My teacher at school told me that strange people with different skin colors live in these foreign lands, and I wasn't eager to meet any of them anytime soon. I keep imagining on the flight there what these people look like. In my mind, I tried to picture my face in a paler shade, creating odd and discombobulated projections that kept me awake for hours on end. Finally, the captain announced our arrival in Chinese, and then in an odd sounding language that sounded like a stream of gibberish from two year old babies. As I walked past the terminal, I turned to my mom and pointed at a woman standing at the end of the tunnel.

Is she a human?

Don't point your finger. Yes, she's white.

Why is her hair red?

She is borned with those. She's a ginger.

What's a ginger?

Her.

Why is her nose so sharp?

It's genetics.

Why are her eyes green?

It's genetics.

Is that a human?

Yes. He's black.

Is that a tan?

No. It's his natural skin color.

Why is his hair longer than the woman?

I don't know. I guess it's an American thing.

Why do they look so different?

Because they are Americans.

What's an American?

These people.

Huh.

As we left the airport and got in a cab to go to our hotel room, my eyes scanned the surroundings desperately for someone that looked like me. They found nothing. I felt like I had come to another planet, light years away from Earth, surrounded by these strange aliens with red hair and dark skin. Take me back to my spaceship Captain Kirk, I want to go home.

Fear

Fear. I had never felt something quite like it in my life. It was the second day in our trip to Saipan, and my family and I went for a swim on the beach. I knew how to swim, so after a while, my parents decided to get me a surfboard and venture into deeper water. Up to that point, I was completely undaunted by the sight of endless waves stretching towards the horizon, and enjoyed the splash of water on my body as my dad dragged the surfboard I lay on steadily forward. It was a relaxing afternoon, and my parents and I were laughing in the sun, joyfully playing with the waves as it pushed back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. It was almost hypnotic.

My mom decided to go back onshore, leaving me and my dad floating on the water with our eyes closed, enjoying the day and the sun on our faces. I lay faced down on the little board, thinking about nothing, almost asleep. Then, suddenly, the sun disappeared from my view. My eyes snapped open, only to find myself surrounded by a wave of flashing green water. I was upside down, and struggling to fight against the current pushing against my body from all directions. There is water in my eyes. There is water in my nose. There is water in my ears. There is water everywhere. I felt totally out of control, with desperation and a numbing fear slowly taking over my body. I have never felt more powerless in my life, utterly incapable of control. Strangely, in some ways, the chaos also felt soothing. After I acknowledged the forfeit of control over myself, I felt a strange sense of relief, an uplift of responsibility. Darkness beckons, and I was ready to let the waves take me. *It's so easy... why fight the inevitable?...it's just sleep...and I'm so exhausted...Is it really so bad to let go?* Then, suddenly, I felt a strong hand on my shoulder, and I was lifted out of the water and into the air by my dad's arms. I looked up, shaking and still in shock, at the sun above, and whispered a word of thanks. God, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, whoever is up there, thank you. Thank you for this gift of life. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The Shop on Seventh Street

Across the street from my old apartment back in China, there was a little shop right around the corner between my street and 7th street. Ever since I was little, I would go into the little shop everyday after school for their signature apple pie and yogurt. The shop is small and full of items ranging from fly swatters to small pieces of furniture, all of which are available for cheap but are sold in questionable conditions at best. The fly swatters break in one swing, and the rotating chair gets its gears stuck whenever you try to spin.

Over time, through my frequent visits, I became acquainted with the store owner. Initially, I was hesitant to make contact as he has a distinctively foreign accent and I had heard rumors around the neighborhood that he was an escapee from a prison camp in Tibet. One day, while waiting in line to pay for my food, I noticed a beautiful antique chess board next to the cranky old register. It's clean, polished, and in better condition than virtually every other item in the store. The pieces on the board were eloquent and detailed, each piece treated with an attentive, almost loving care. As I walked towards the register to pay for my food, I pointed to the chess board and made some inquiries about its price. *It's a gift from my father*, said the man, in a thick and foreign accent, *do you have a million Yen? Because I will sell it to you if you have a million Yen. No? That's what I thought.* Disappointed, I began to walk away when I heard him call out. *Hey kid, do you know how to play?* After admitting that I had no idea, he sat down across the register and laid out the pieces. *This*, he said as he points to a tall and slim piece with a cross on top, *is a king. He can move one space in any direction, but if he dies, you lose. Understand? Now this is, this is a queen...*

Santa

I hope santa gets me a dog this year

I don't think he will.

Why not?

Because Santa isn't real.

What?

...

Ah damn it.

The White Room

The hospital waiting room was white and cold, its walls plain and undecorated. In the room next door, I can hear my grandpa coughing violently. I leaned deeper into the embrace of my mom.

"It's going to be alright honey. Grandpa will be alright."

She sounded like she was still struggling to convince herself.

Another wave of violent coughs. Silence.

I looked up at my mom. There were tears in her eyes.

The door opened, and a doctor walked out. My entire family stood up quickly, anxious and nervous.

“He will be fine.”

Thank god. Amen and alleluia. Thank you, god. Once again. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

February 15th, 2017

They are all here. All the aunts and uncles and cousins in our family gathered around us in the airport. I sat on the black suitcase my parents were carrying with them to the plane, trying to distract myself from the outpour of emotions around me. I just wanted to get moving. I looked over to my dad, who sat awkwardly on a chair talking to my grandparents, looking part sad and part uncomfortable at being the center of so much attention. We moved past the gate. Past the terminal. Into the plane. The 13 hour flight was long and slow, and I spent the entire flight rewatching Pacific Rim on the little TV screens on the back of the seats. I slept. I woke up. We are here. I looked out the window of the plane and saw a giant red white and blue flag.

The date is February 15th, 2017.

We are in America.

I went back to sleep.

My Name

In Chinese my name, Junyang Zheng, means many things. Zheng is my family name, passed on from generation to generation, originating in central China during the Zhou dynasty thousands of years ago. My given name was made up of two letters-Jun and Yang. Jun, which has a princely and royal connotation in Chinese, was picked by my parents to represent their hopes for me to be successful in life. The second letter, Yang, has the double meaning of both sheep and sunshine. My parents chose this letter as they wanted me to be bright and extroverted like the sun but also humble and down to earth like a sheep so I don't get over myself. The name was carefully chosen, with the letters embedded in the symbolic traditions of Chinese culture, and represented my parents' hopes for me and my future.

In English my name, June Yan Zing, is a jumbo of complicated sounds and noises that require a small pause before it is said out loud. People avoided saying it as much as possible, treating my name like a foreign disease that needs to be isolated and left to die. Conversations are usually opened with awkward pronunciations and an even more awkward period of me trying my best to



correct them. I felt trapped by my own name, labeled at the get-go as an outsider, and condemned to a life of a loner. Eventually, I decided enough is enough and asked my parents if I could change my name to something that could be pronounced more easily. I was in a rush to fit in, so I put very little thought on what name I should choose. I opened my computer, and searched up “popular names in America” on google and settled on the 7th name on the list. (7 is my favorite number)

The next day, when my teacher called out my new name effortlessly for the first time, I got up, stood tall, and felt like an American. Whatever that means.

Why Not Me?

How does he do it? So effortless, so simple. I wish I could be like him. We have the same grandparents, why are we so different? Charming, smart, quick with a joke. Am I forever doomed to live under a shadow? Do I hate him? My own flesh and blood?

Billy Joel

Imagine trying to talk with a towel stuffed down your throat, and chains holding your vocal cords in place- that's what talking with a stutter is like sometimes. I don't know how it happened—it just did, and became something I had to live with. For the first few years, I was resentful. *Why not others? Why me? Why can't I speak? Is it really too much to ask?*

My stutters only got worse after I came to America. I was already struggling with words in my mother tongue, so learning English was an uphill struggle. I was struggling to pronounce all five vowels, and any word over three syllables is basically a lost cause. My ESL teacher had a strong southern accent, the program I used had an english accent, and everyone else had their own unique accents. It's hard to describe just how weird and complicated learning English as a non native speaker is, and for the first two years I felt more lost in America then Alice ever did in wonderland. Then, when 6th grade rolled around, my savior arrived. Billy Joel. I became immersed in his music, and would sing his lyrics out loud in my room, in the car, or in school when there is no one around. There is just something about his voice that draws me in, like a mermaid about to pounce on a hopeless pirate. I didn't understand much of his lyrics, but the melody and rhythm more than made up for it. His lyrics turned to practice for my dysfunctional vocal cords, and my stuttering gradually improved with each song I discovered and each album I grew fond of. So thank you, Billy, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you. You are magnificent. Iconic. Simply breathtaking.

Alabama

A loud bang woke up all of us. Outside, the windows of our car are shattered to pieces. We were visiting a cousin or an uncle or something down south in Alabama, who also rushed out of the house looking only mildly concerned. On the side of the car, the letters “CCP scum” were written in red.

“Should we report it to the cops?” Asked my dad.

“Too much trouble. It’s just the one window.”

There was a brief silence as they silently examined the damage.

“You got tools?”

“Yeah just around the back.”

Later that day, I walked into my parent’s room in the middle of a full blown argument. I stood in the doorway, patiently waiting for one of them to notice me. It was my mom, who immediately stopped arguing and went over to ruffle my hair.

“Hey honey...can’t sleep?”

“Why did somebody break our car window today?”

A brief exchange of looks occurred between my mom and dad. Eventually, my dad kneeled down beside me.

“Some people don’t want us here, son. They wanted us to stay in China.”

“Why didn’t we?”

“Huh?”

“Why did we leave?”

There was a long pause as for a brief moment, he looked extremely thoughtful.

Eventually, he responded with a sigh.

“At this point, kid, I don’t even know.”

Confession

I have a confession to make. Part of me enjoyed the lockdown. My friends and their families are pretty close to ours, so sometimes a few of them would come over once a month and we would play video games together. (Nothing that violated covid restrictions though). School is canceled. Homeworks can be turned in a couple of weeks late, which basically means no homework everyday. I can stay up late and decide not to log in to online classes whenever I want. When school reopened, and I’m stuck trying to relearn materials I missed during the covid years, part of me longed for the peace and quiet of the pandemic.

Something Quite Beautiful

Perfection and beauty. I had never seen anything quite like it. Her hair falls perfectly on her shoulders, the bangs covering her forehead a screen of beauty. Eyes sparkling with laughter, she walks with joy in her step. Out of this world. Utter perfection, but utterly beyond my reach. Silky white skin with a kind and caring soul. The face of an angel. I dream that she's mine. That she laughs because of me, that she is happy because of me. I dreamt that she admires me from afar, and that our conversation brightens her day. But then I wake up, all alone, laying in my bed, staring at the ceiling of my room.

Damn.

Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness... But it's better than drinkin' alone.

The Mirror

It's Christmas eve. People are still quietly coming into the church as the choir sings *Amazing Grace* in the background. Suddenly, in the little church surrounded by a mass of talking people, I felt a surprisingly tingle of loneliness deep inside. I got up and went to the bathroom, politely murmuring "Merry Christmas" to everyone I saw along the way. I stared into the mirror, and took a minute to look at my reflection. Behind me, a giant American flag hangs on the wall. Then, nostalgia comes crushing in. A flood of memories entered my mind. *How did I get here? What happened?* I still remember the apartment I used to live in China, now look at me. Dressed in a blue suit with red tie and hair gel on my head. I remember tip-toeing over the edge of the sink to see myself in the mirror when I was a kid, and now the sink doesn't even reach my hip. Suddenly, a novel we read in English class comes to mind. It's a memoir about an immigrant family like the million others out there. New culture, no english, difficult, difficult, difficult. Now I experienced some of that, obviously, but it's not nearly as bad as those memoirs made out to be. Maybe it's because I'm a child. A child that didn't know much of what's going on. Or maybe I was just lucky. As the commotion outside died down and the pastor began to talk over the loud sound systems, I suddenly felt grateful. I don't know what would have happened if I had stayed in China. I don't know if I will be happier, sadder, or more successful. I have all these dreams for my life, and I don't know if I will ever be able to achieve them. I don't know if I will end up being something special, or just another ordinary guy living life. But for the moment, that really doesn't matter. I don't want to know. Personally, I think I had it easy. I have never starved, I'm in a loving family, and I have a roof above my head every night. Maybe I could be better off, but what I have now isn't so bad. In fact, it's perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Life's too short to waste a second.