

You and Me

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Sometimes it feels like I'm floating. Wandering. Trying to find a place that feels like home. But nowhere feels like home—your dad and I don't belong here in America or back in China. He is the only home I have. So, we wander life and all its ups and downs together. We float together.

There was rarely a time in my life when dinner happened without all three of us present. Sometimes, he would get off work late or an accident would happen that backs up the highway for hours, and every hour he didn't show up, you would have me call him once again and take the phone to voice your displeasure about the food getting cold even though you knew it was fruitless. Sometimes, it was your turn to have the unplanned hold-up, and he would sit to my right at the dinner table, silent, grumbling now and then, but refusing to start eating.

This time, it was just you and me sitting across from each other in a booth at Bonefish Grill, bread and olive oil between us. You loved bread a lot, but we rarely have it at home. I was eighteen, and you were pushing twenty-five years of a not-so-happy marriage that had whittled you into a woman you didn't recognize, no matter how many times a day you tell yourself to "be happy." But here you were in front of me, happily dipping chunks of bread in olive oil. This was the first time you walked out of the house. Even if all hell broke loose, all three of us would still have to come together every night for dinner and chew through the tension and hostility. But you left this time, and I thought this was how divorces began.

"We're leaving," you said to me as I came home, sweaty from running.

I didn't give Dad a single word or look as I passed him in the kitchen making dinner for three. If I avoided having to explain to him what was going on, he wouldn't be hurt. But really, I was protecting myself.

"You're leaving? Dinner's almost ready."

He knew what was going on.

I'm sorry. I struggled to find my voice.

"We'll be back soon. It's okay."

Say something else. Look at him. Say something else.

I smiled awkwardly and left, and he continued to make dinner for three, knowing that he would be eating alone.

From the start, I knew things weren't quite right. You would think that when you're five, life knows to keep a beautiful veil over your eyes. The hushed yelling during nights when I should

have been long asleep didn't mean much to me. Neither did my toy horse that suddenly had a missing leg. The veil wasn't there anymore.

As I entered my teens, I would try to find periodicity in the fighting. To brace myself, make myself as invisible and agreeable as possible, to avoid making things worse for two worn-out, war-torn parents. The month between Thanksgiving and Christmas was usually rough. July, right before ninth grade, was tense too. Then, maybe every month, every other week, multiple times a week. Every family vacation. I stopped trying to keep track and went on alert at all times.

Then, there were the life-shattering, explosive fights. Not the usual bickering and door slamming, but the ones that dig into the misery of living the life of a foreigner and a failure of the American Dream. Ones that leave dents on the dinner table, tableware missing, wailing, screaming, a million shards of glass across the kitchen tiles, making you wonder with guilty hope, *Will this be the one that ends it all?* The ones that happen when you least expect them to, so now every time you hear raised voices and loud sounds in the house, you hit pause on everything you're doing and perk up your ears. Then, your mind empties itself and like a spy, you feel your heartbeat more than usual as you gently tiptoe to the top of the staircase and listen.

The only thing that matters at that moment is hearing and knowing everything. Sometimes, you'll hear the two people you love most in the world hurl unthinkable insults at each other. Are these the same people who can still love you unconditionally? The shrapnel of their bitter words land on you too, but you have to train your mind to dissociate and stop trying to make sense of it all because the pain would be too much.

But sometimes, it's a false alarm. Those were loud sounds of laughter, not anger. And then you go back to what you were doing before, wondering how you got such pessimistic reflexes.

Dad doesn't talk much. He could be the most complex, enigmatic man. After watching *A Beautiful Mind* in my eighth-grade geometry class, I would imagine my father, also a mathematician, to be John Nash, an unheard, underappreciated genius. Nearly every shelf and table in the house is filled with his 5-inch-thick books. A whole row of Javas, random letters and symbols like C++, PHP, Unix, XHTML that seemed extraterrestrial to a little girl who idolized her father as the smartest person alive.

But really, we both know that Dad is a simple man. The kind who, if he saw a \$20 bill on the ground, would walk right past it. He minds his own business. The kind who neither lives to work nor works to live. Any spare time he gets, you're guaranteed to find him working on his vegetable garden in our backyard or pulling weeds out of the front lawn or doing miscellaneous handyman tasks around the house. Anything, even if it barely serves a purpose. He doesn't have many friends as a result. I think he doesn't care to have friends. *You care about those patches of grass and dirt more than you care about your wife and daughter*, you say to him.

But Dad doesn't talk much. You could scold him, insult him, scream at him, and he'll take it without a word, looking down at the floor in silence, a slight grimace of discomfort. He is silent

because I am there. So it's easy to project my best impressions onto him. A farming mathematician turned computer scientist who studied his way out of family poverty, who maintains an iron facade against the harsh words you throw at him, who tell me that things will be okay when I start crying. How could you not, at the very least, allow him to mind his own business? I defend him, silently, because he doesn't. And you know that. *You and your father are the same*, you'd tell me whenever I disappointed you the same way Dad does. So, I find myself turning a blind eye to his bursts of intense rage. The table slamming, plate shattering, shouting that sounds like he might pop a vein that all happens when I've excused myself from the scene and you've pushed him over the edge and he is unable to sit in silence anymore.

But you talk to me. Annoyed, thrilled, sorrowful, resolute, you tell me everything I know about you and Dad, the happy times but mostly the hardships, and how things got to the way they are now. How full of regret and loneliness you are. You pour out your grievances and ask me to back you up the next time you and Dad fight. I just listen. "Mms" and "yeahs" and head nods, I'm unsure if it's worse to be too affirmative or too oppositional. It's an awkward, unwanted position. A judge, I consider myself, and a mediocre one at that. Countless years of experience and I still struggle to know what to say in the heat of the moment, when to say it, how to say it, whose side to be on, whether it was even my place to take a stance. There shouldn't be sides to this.

That's why I loved being away from home. Playdates were always at the other's place, every summer since seventh grade, and I found ways to stay on campus through breaks. As much as I wanted to make things better, I couldn't keep playing the adult. I wasn't a good judge. I didn't have solutions, and I didn't know if I would ever be able to make you happy. This feeling of powerlessness was frustrating. *It's not my responsibility*, I'd tell myself to feel a little better about my absence. But more so, the powerlessness was heartbreaking. I went into every reunion hoping for things to be different from how I left them, for our family to be more "normal," and every reunion would be, almost melodramatically, mirthful for a good 24 hours before old habits and patterns presented themselves, and I'd find myself hiding at the top of the staircase, feeling like a child all over again.

The day you and I took off, I was so sure that the end would begin at that Bonefish Grill booth, and I made a proposal for divorce, a proposal of my own desperation.

Tears streamed down your face. You couldn't even answer.

He is the only home I have.

You took me back to 1968, a run-down part of the city of Xihu (西湖). When Dad was two years old, his mother passed away, alone, separated from her two sons after my grandfather sent her away when an earlier child had died of meningitis a few years prior. Dad only knew stepmothers, one after another, and a stern, absent father.

To 1985, when you and Dad first started dating. He bought you a bottle of perfume. 100 yuan: that was nearly a month's salary back then.

To 2003, St. Joseph, Missouri. When you and Dad worked hard enough to finally move out of a run-down apartment full of thrown-out furniture and neighbors who would call the police on us when I was being a noisy toddler and into a house with a beautiful, seemingly endless stretch of green that sloped toward the horizon behind us.

To 2007, Kansas City, Kansas. When Dad lost his job, and you, well into another round of unemployment, held his head in your arms and cried.

To 2012, Memphis, Tennessee. When you broke the C5 and C6 bones of your cervical vertebrae. Dad was by your side as first responders flooded in, crying for the first and only time I've ever seen in my life, "What am I going to do?"

He is the only home I have.

The American Dream, it was never yours to begin with. It's one you've scrubbed bathroom stalls for, studied through motherhood for, bounced back after relentless cycles of unemployment and depression for, gave up the chance to have a seamless language and cultural connection with your child for. It's one you keep trying to embrace wholeheartedly, but in doing so, you realize that your life is less and less like the one you left behind, so you find yourself in no-man's-land, a stranger to both countries and cultures.

I remember your American Dream whenever you and I erupt into fights of our own. Whenever you tell me I'm exactly like Dad and my judicial composure deteriorates under the lashings of your tongue that are usually reserved for him. Those are the moments that shove a mirror in front of my face and show me, to my horror and guilt, that I can be just like you and Dad. It makes Mother's Day a conflicting time for me. The supportive, empowering, nurturing mother figure that sons and daughters around the world celebrate every second Sunday of May, that we all want as our own narrative—it's not quite like that with you and me. I try to fit you into that mold time and time again, forgetting that you make your own molds.

You and me and Dad, we don't fit together in the most beautiful, admirable, functional way. And we don't have to. We don't have to spend Mother's Day making breakfast in bed or perfect a great-great-great's family recipe or go on morning hikes together and grab coffee and donuts afterwards. We don't have to eat mooncakes during the Moon Festival, fold dumplings and *baozi* during the holidays, or engage in the hubbub when Lunar New Year rolls around. We don't even have to be happy and pleasant and affectionate with each other every day.

You and me and Dad, we swim against the current of normality a bit more than one would like to. So what? Life isn't lost on us. We've created our own stamps of meaning to big and small moments we call "life." Pouring you a glass of wine before every dinner, making fun of Dad emptying out a bag of peanuts after every single meal, going on post-meal "digestive" walks together, the three of us, eating dinner around a small glass table on our back porch with the great blue sky, white clouds, swaying green trees above us, embracing us as everything relaxes into a peach, then purple. Chirping crickets and cicadas in chorus, smoky aroma and blinks of light from the neighbors, Dad's already gone in the house to clean up the dishes.

It's you and me now, dark bodies cloaked under the night sky, drifting and floating into invisibility with the weight of a peaceful darkness holding us tight. You can still feel me and I still feel you. We'll be alright.