

Flying Dreams

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It was another Friday afternoon. Reddish gold rays from the setting sun fluttered against the darkening walls of my room. Some danced upon the half-folded red paper heart that sat on the corner of my table. Whenever I think of home, my folded heart entangles and disentangles itself to fly back there using the power of dreams and memories.

Last night, I dreamed that I went back home. With the agility of a bird, I flew up the high walls of the apartment building— 13, 14, 15. With every floor, my excitement soared. At last, I arrived in front of the door I hastily left on the day my parents drove me to the airport. I waved hello to my parents, but they, surprisingly, were not that happy.

“Why do you come home?” they asked. “It isn’t necessary.”

Nevertheless, I could not hide my happiness in rushing into my room to sleep next to the bright, wooden bookshelves enclosing my bed.

I woke up, and for a moment could not understand why I was in a dark dorm room with grey walls. The bed was too high with iron bars that prevented me from falling hard on the ground.

Waking up to reality meant waking up to another fleeting day of schedules. It meant trying to finish my morning routines in thirty minutes and breakfast in five so that I can catch a seat in the front of my Macroeconomics class and jot down notes with a sore hand. It meant gobbling up one or two bites of a grilled chicken piece before rushing to a room with row after row of black computers – astronomy lab. Most importantly, it meant fumbling on and on with some mundane work while I yearned to watch the sunset, yearned to watch the sky change back to the universe’s original darkness.

These were the times when my longing for home was the strongest, remembering the moments I could have slowly savored. Instead, I had hastily hovered past them in childish hopes to leave home for adventures. Back then, I spent hours daydreaming in my little room at home, allowing my imagination to soar to the exotic places I saw in books, movies, dioramas, and video games. I made myself a silent promise that I would explore all of them in real life. It was under those expectations that I decided to adventure around the world, starting in America where so many of my novels took place.

Yet, in reality, America meant the never-ending struggle of life like the rolling rock of Sisyphus. It meant the occasional microaggression as I walked along the unfamiliar paths and the tug of war against the clock as I tried to finish showering before someone else needed to use the bathroom. In this respect, nostalgia was an

escape, letting my imagination fly to an alternate life that I knew would be more comfortable than the one I am led now. Exotic adventures are no longer in my mind, and I only hope to return home. I imagined myself sitting in my little room at home, with evening streaks of golden rays shining on the yellowed paperback pages of the book in my hands. The last glow of the setting sun danced upon my bookshelf and the diorama of a little city before my room at home darkened.

My mind went back to the last moment I spent in my homeland. Or rather above it. The plane's large metallic wing hovered above the city. The land below was dotted by the golden lights of cars and skyscrapers. Under the humming turbines and the dim bluish lights on the cabin ceiling, a soothing song was playing through my earphones. For a long time, I was certain that I could return home in the same way this summer. I disregarded my mother's admonition from the other side of the video chat, saying that I should stay at school during the summer due to the ever-worsening pandemic. I persisted in believing that I could be at home again.

It was only that Friday morning when I realized – with another round of persuasion from my mother and father – the real implication of “flying back”. It meant entering a world of Covid test after Covid test and quarantine after quarantine. Furthermore, it meant resting my head on a cold metallic bench at the airport and praying to whomever above that my overpriced ticket would not be canceled by the word “positive” showing up.

“I really don't want you to come home this summer,” said my mother. Sitting beside my father on the living room sofa, her rational and soothing voice filled my ears. Sometimes I wonder if my mother felt sad or emotionally unstable like I did. But she would never show that. Mother was always so encouraging, to the extent that I felt ashamed of complaining.

Mother told me that they just came back from another mandatory Covid test. “Everything is different now; unlike the days you were at home. Then you could even fly to other cities, but now you couldn't even leave your district.”

It was then that I finally understood the true meaning of nostalgia – it was never just the missing of home, but also the missing of a time that is gone forever.

I took a walk around the edge of campus. Music of the latest style blasted from a loudspeaker. Around me, flowers – pink and white – bloom upon brown branches and green grass. Above my head, a white crescent moon hung on a blue sky like a broken fossil – a half-forgotten piece of relic from last night's dreams. It was a beautiful day, but I saw it as disappointing. To me, life is like the cheap Conklin Glider pen I bought from an online thrift store. Judging by its thin, alternating red stripes, I admired its beauty and thought it was a steal. It was when I examined it closely that I saw all the crooked edges in its finish. The gold plating on its central band was thin – so thin that

it would peel off with a touch and reveal the grey steel underneath.

But despite the disappointments, was this not what I had been hoping for? To set sail on my own in an unfamiliar world? Ever since I was small, I dreamed of flying, expanding my arms and imagining them as wings. Running around in the little community garden near my father's workplace towards the direction the wind blew the strongest, I believed that it would take me off like an airplane. So many times in my childhood, I would stare at the marshmallow-like clouds floating around in a light blue sky, imagining what it would feel like to stand on one of them and travel very, very far. There were many reasons behind my choice of pursuing my studies in a foreign country – different educational methods, different perspectives. But, most importantly, it was one step towards my simple dream of flying to a faraway destination while enduring the strong winds blowing at me.

My mind went back to the plane flight again, on which I exchanged goodbyes with my motherland to begin a life of adventures. The mild humming of the turbines gradually drowned the soothing tone of the song ringing in my earphones, playing its beginning stanza. I could never forget the lyrics as they rose to a crescendo, about a man's will as he sailed across the ocean in pursuit of his mind's freedom, about his almost stubborn persistence to walk his own way, to sing his own song despite all the obstruction the world has given to him. I thought about all those who have come before me. With their methods of communication confined to a cheaply built fountain pen, their thoughts of home attached only to a universal crescent moon, wouldn't their homesickness be even stronger? Yet, they all endured it, for there is always the yearning in a young soul to wander around the world, to pursue a flower hidden in the valley whose colors are not seen back home.

I picked up the pen I believed to be junk after I locked the door of my dorm room, and, for the first time, dipped it in ink. I began to appreciate the nib's smoothness as it glided on the page, the tines opening and closing at the force of my hand. It had so many rough edges, but it was able to churn out the lyrics of a new song.

As much as I could feel regretful about the passing of time, the past is the past, and I have to move forward. I began to accept that I could not return home and tried to see the new potential in the life I had chosen – like last weekend. That night, I explored the city of Nashville with my friends. On the side of the road, a young woman held a guitar and sang about her aspirations while two passersby offered her to smoke. Across the road, a group of men with tattooed arms hollered and cheered at some inside joke between them. In front of me, my friend who likes movies filmed everything, explaining to me that all of these would be made into fast motion, just like the fleetingness of time in our memories.

I leaned back against a grey chair that I could not call my own. Somehow, I felt like I was a boy who tried smoking for the first time. The fumes were so bitter and hard that he would choke, yet he urged his mouth to reach the cigarette butt again and

again, for he believed that this was the way for him to grow up and be an adult.

Of course, I would never smoke. But sitting in my dorm that afternoon, I did what I so often did in primary school, rolling a piece of waste paper into a tube to inhale and puff air filtered by paper fibers. In my illusions, I saw a trace of thin, spidery smoke escaping the mouth of the faux cigarette. It landed back on the boy running around on the lawns of the small community garden, imagining himself to be flying again.