

## Summer

Starting a new life in a different country is not easy for anyone, especially for a five year old. I was born in the United States, but lived with my dad and grandparents in China for most of my early childhood. My hometown in China meant everything to me. I knew everyone on my street, from the school children that played ball with me to the aunties and uncles who owned my favorite restaurants. Besides going to daycare, I spent most of my time playing at the park, exploring hidden gems at the town square, or riding roller coasters at the carnival nearby. It was paradise.

The beginning of summer break after kindergarten, my father told me that I was going to live with my mother in the United States. I was playing video games on my grandmother's iPad. *Ok*, I said. My father packed my luggage and was on a fifteen hour flight to New Jersey before I got the chance to say goodbyes to my family and friends.

At the airport waiting for my mother, chatters and laughter surrounded me as an electronic voice boomed in an unknown language above my ears. Besides the simple phrases I learned from the Disney books I read back in kindergarten, I could not read, write, or understand any English. I did not belong here.

After settling down with my mother, I began exploring my new neighborhood. Neat rows and columns of houses lined up along the small, vacant roads. There was no shouting in the grocery stores unlike the crowded night markets in China. The sky was clear blue, other than the thin strands of white clouds that obscured the sun's rays. It was peaceful, but it felt empty.

First grade was about to start in a few weeks. I had a lot of learning to do. I sat down at the dinner table every day sounding out each word in the picture books that my mother bought me. I learned about my greetings and farewells, the parts of speech, and the basic rules of

grammar. I also began to grasp the American culture. America was a diverse country, filled with a variety of nationalities and cultures. Unsurprisingly, my mother and I were the only Chinese family on the block. I had to adapt to the cultural habits so I would not embarrass myself in front of the American children. *Stop eating with your mouth open*, my mother said, *it's disgusting*.

The thought of school lurked around the corners, creeping up behind me each passing day. Each night I laid in bed, I slowly counted the number of days left before I had to face my doom;

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

## **Autumn**

A chilly breeze gently brushed through my silky hair as a delicate autumn leaf slowly landed on my new shoes. Squeezing my mother's hands tight, I stared at the tall brick building towering over my timid body. Already, I could feel the jitters starting to kick in. At the front of the entrance door, joyful and frightened children hugged their parents for the last time before preparing themselves for the first day of school.

As I began to blend in with the other children, I kept my head down and quietly walked through the brightly lit hallways. The floor was decorated with colorful tiles, matching the drawings and posters that stuck to the walls.

Behind my classroom's door, a small group of students gathered around the carpet floor. To my right were shelves filled with candies and books. To my left was a sink filled with cups

and dirty paint brushes. Two weathered bean bags piled on top of each other at the back of the classroom. A chain of wooden clothespins lined up against the wall below the window sills in a zigzag pattern. A cluster of backpacks filled up the space beneath the cabinet area.

Our teacher walked in right before the bell rang. Her curly, brown hair was tied up in a messy bun and her hazel eyes changed to a green hue when she stood under the sun. She wore a t-shirt that said ‘#1 teacher’ that paired nicely with her ripped jeans. Her voice was soothing but sharp when she raised her tone.

“Let’s have a great year,”

The first few days of school, I sat in the corner of the classroom. I did not raise my hands, too afraid to even ask to go to the bathroom. I did not dare to open my mouth because I was ashamed of my scrappy English. Unfortunately, I had to face the inevitable. Before the end of the first week of school, each student was put into pairs to work on a get-to-know-us project together. I was put into a pair with a girl named Laura.

“Hi,”

“Hey,”

She kept on fidgeting with her hair next to her ears while we worked in silence for the rest of class before lunch time.

I sat alone at lunch, staring deeply into the burned pizza and gooey pile of beans that laid in front of me. Disgusting. As I bit into the crust, a sudden and sharp pain shot up from my two front teeth. The pizza was rock solid. I banged it on the table hoping it would break in half. Crumbs scattered everywhere over my shirt and pants. I took a small bite of the slimy, bitter-tasting beans and went back to class hungry.

The following Monday, me and Laura exchanged glances again. She smiled at me and I smiled back at her. She was the only Chinese in the class besides me. The next day, we were put into a group project again. We talked about our hobbies. Silence.

The days drifted away slowly, but me and Laura steadily made progress. We walked back to our homes together while our mothers talked behind us. Her family offered me dinner when my mother had to stay late for work. Before Thanksgiving break, we could not stop laughing in class. It felt good to have a friend again.

## **Winter**

Everyone was looking forward to the end of January to celebrate International day. Laura and I were selected to create a poster about the countries in Western Europe. As I deepened my research, a whole new reality was introduced to me. Italians celebrate La Vigilia, which is a big feast families eat during Christmas Eve. Spaniards throw tomatoes at each other in the festival of La Tomatina. Millions of people travel to France to see the iconic Eiffel Tower, Louvre Museum, and the Arc de Triomphe.

At school, each student received their own individual passport that was stamped with a sticker from each of the countries they visited. The hallways were decorated with flags and posters, showcasing the different countries around the world. Excited, I bolted into the art studio. Inside, the room was furnished with chains of bright lights, tropical fruits, vibrant flowers, and buckets of sand. A tropical breeze candle dissipated a fresh scent throughout the room. A mom dressed in an intricately striped blue, red, and white skirt danced with the children to a salsa that was played from a loudspeaker hidden behind a bowl of fruits. After learning that the Dominican Republic was known for their luxurious beaches and all inclusive resorts, I received a pineapple scent scratch sticker and moved on to my next destination.

Before school ended, I had 21 scent scratch stickers in my passport. But, International Day was not over yet.

At night, families brought in heritage dishes from their own countries that they made at home. The food section was the highlight of the event. My tummy gurgled and growled at the sight of roast meat, stir-fried vegetables, and chocolate desserts that displayed evenly around the cafeteria. I snatched a plate and lined up at the German section. On the table laid a large plate of sliced meat smothered in a thick brown sauce.

“Would you like some Sauerbraten honey? It is roast meat marinated in a sweet, sour and savory sauce,”

I nodded an ‘ok’.

As I bit down into the slice of meat, an explosion of flavor bursted in my mouth. I could make out the various spices between my tongue; from the spicy tang of the black peppers to the herbal taste of the bay leaves. The meat was tender and juicy with a crispy crust on the outside, enhanced by the simple but tasty red cabbages and pan fried potatoes on the side. Saving enough room for dessert, I stole a slice of sweet Irish Soda bread and a slice of creamy carrot cake. I stared at my empty plate and licked off the final bits of sauce and crumbs, satisfying my taste buds for the night.

## **Spring**

There was only a week left before summer break began. I still sat in the back of the class. Our teacher handed each of us a piece of paper and asked us to write a reflection of what we learned in our first year in elementary school. *There was a lot to write about.* I glared at the alternating blue lines and traced my pencil over the thin red margins. I was proud that I survived

my first year here in the United States after leaving everything behind in China. I was able to learn a completely new language in a year. I was a new self.

On the last day of school, the school threw us a big party. Our parents were invited to come to see all the work we had accomplished this year. Above and next to the windows hung rows of the student's paintings and craftworks. Our art teacher also handed back to us our clay sculptures that we had been working on the whole year. Mine looked like a naked mole-rat. Just as the bell rang before lunch, kids sprinted out the school doors and dashed across the soccer field. Me and Laura walked back to our homes together, did our little handshake, said our goodbyes.

A mix of feelings washed over me as I dozed off into the void on my bed. *Isn't this what you wanted, for school to be finally over?* School was finally over, but I just started to build a relationship with my classmates and teachers. I had another three months to start thinking about second grade. Luckily, three months was a long time. It was too early to start counting back the days before I had to face my "doom" again. I asked my family back in China where I should go for vacation. Maybe Disneyland, or a luxury resort in Hawaii? But no matter where I go, I know I will always have a foot planted back in China.