

# Cows? Haven't seen one of those in years, man.

*12 Personal Essays by ACES Students*

SPRING 2013

*We are happy to welcome you to our second (now “annual”) ACES e-book.*

*Among many other things, ACES is essentially a community of writers and this is a nice opportunity for us to share our students’ work with the rest of the campus. While we are featuring just 12 of our freshman writers, the entire cohort has been exceptional and it was incredibly difficult to choose only 12 pieces to include in this eBook.*

*Within this collection, you'll find the writers narrating and describing a wide range of experiences. You'll find yourself leaving Cairo in a 1987 Volkswagon Gulf to travel to a chapel of the possessed, mingling with fake mourners at a funeral in Port-au-Prince, attending a Persian New Year's Party in Ireland and settling into a surprisingly serene refugee camp in Mustang, Nepal. This spectrum of knowledge and adventure is testament to one of the great strengths of the ACES program: our students bring incredibly diverse experiences to the table and they are very pleased to share them with you here.*

*Thank you,*

*The ACES Staff  
St. Joseph's College, Brooklyn  
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## *One More Drop of Milk*

by Juan Cerda

On December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, my mother and I arrived in New York City for the first time. Traditionally, Dominicans are known for their uncontrollable desire to fly across the sea. And now it was finally our turn. I remember how excited we were. My mom wanted to bring the entire country with her inside of her bag. But that was impossible, so we packed up some of our most important possessions and left everything else behind. I went for a last walk through the grassy fields of our farm and realized I would never have the chance to work there again. I felt as if my life was splitting in two. Tears almost slipped down my cheeks. But, at the same time, I couldn't wait to leave.

I was incredibly excited about seeing my cousin in the United States, who I hadn't seen in about four years. The last time I saw him was on my fourteenth birthday. He used to like visiting us in the summer, but after a while, he seemed to forget us. We no longer received phone calls from him and he even stopped sending us presents for Christmas. I wasn't sure what the cause of this change was, but I speculated that maybe he didn't want to work on a dairy farm anymore. However, an immense desire for reunion and a mixture of other emotions began rising in my heart. I was really eager to see him again, and I knew I would hug him, in spite of our having not been in contact for so long.

I had seen fantastic pictures of New York City and also heard positive comments about the school system. Now, it was time to live the dream. The plane finally landed at JFK, where my cousin told us he would pick us up. We

sat in the waiting area. My eyes were very active, looking all around for Walter until I found him. "Mom, look," I said, as I turned to my mother. We walked towards the customs barricade. As I looked him over carefully, I saw that he had clearly gained weight and had a wider figure. We took our bags and walked outside of the customs barricade to meet him. His face reflected long hours of work. "Long time, boy," he said. He embraced my mom and showed a smile. "Come on, the taxi is waiting for us."

A few days later, on New Year's Eve, we gathered at my cousin's apartment to celebrate. Walter had invited my aunt and his best friend. The TV was on and I was sitting on the floor, as I had done all of my life, but I noticed that my cousin was looking at us in a strange way and I knew something was bothering his sweet heart. I inched closer to him and began to ask him some questions. "So, tell me, why didn't you fly back for vacation this summer? I was really eager to see you." I looked into his black eyes, waiting for a response. "I decided to stay, you know. I wanted to spend some time at the beach here." He stood up and stretched. "What?" I replied, with emotion. "You could have come to the river with us, like the old times, remember?" He said nothing. I turned around and continued watching TV. *What is wrong with him?* I thought, as I tried to make myself feel better. Suddenly my cousin turned on some music. It was a very weird rhythm, with a barrage of words that were unknown to me. The TV was still on; my aunt and my mom were watching some forgettable show. Suddenly, mama changed the channel and screamed my name, her big mouth stretching wide. "There it is, Juan, I've finally found a channel where you can see

some cows!” I was astonished. My eyes were riveted to the screen for a second and then I stood up. “Look at that, Walter,” I said to him in a high tone. “Cows? Haven’t seen one of those in years, man,” he murmured as he touched the back of his head. “Come on, mom, who wants to see cows?” I then grumbled, feeling as if someone had stuck a needle into my skin, forcing me to blurt out the words. I just felt that if I had said something else, I would have looked like a *campesino*: a dumb and old-fashioned person. “What’s the sports channel, cousin?” I said, trying to negotiate the scene. Mama looked down. She was confused because she knew how much I loved cows. I couldn’t believe I had spoken to her like that. Although the cows I saw on the TV were cleaner and cuter than those I had milked daily in the DR, I had decided that farming was not my thing anymore. Or, at least it should not be. My cousin didn’t answer. His face hadn’t changed since I had first seen him in the airport. It was still rigid and strange. “Oh man, look what an easy life farmers live!” he said. He definitely had the wrong concept about the job, but it clearly showed how little he had liked that line of work. My cousin had taken some college classes, and that had changed him. Science changes everything. It makes people lose their faith. I just couldn’t believe it had changed my cousin. It seemed as if he had forgotten all he had learned. It seemed as if he had discovered a different, better world.

As the New Year entered its first week, my cousin went to the toyshop at some point and bought a large plastic cow. I never understood his motivation. I remember that he placed the cow in the middle of his room. It was a cute, black cow and I spent hours wondering why he might have acquired it. About two

weeks later, I had almost forgotten about it until something even stranger happened. He bought a donkey and threw out the cow. I felt as if part of my happiness had gone with it. Eventually, I just moved on.

Within a few months, my cousin had changed his job and moved to a new apartment. We still communicated, but not so often. After he left, I realized I was not ashamed of my past, which can't be changed. I am still the farmer of the family. My mom later asked me why I had denied what I loved the most, but I never answered her; I never apologized for my words of disgust. Today, I understand that we cannot hide our passions. Maybe we can hide them from others, but not from ourselves. Also, I learned that although my passions may not change, those of other people can. My cousin's definitely had, and I am living today with other changes. New knowledge and self-exploration are allowing me to have a different view of society and the world. And now that I am in college, and have had the opportunity to know the city better, I am walking through life differently.

## *Bed Talks and Ballyhoo in 402*

by Lina Chen

My life turned another page when I entered a new school: The Chang Le Fifth High School. I think it was fate that brought me there. I made a lot of new friends, but what made me happiest was the honor of joining room 402 of the women's dormitory. Now this was a place full of warm and sincere friendship. Recalling those days, for me, is like drinking a cup of coffee: even when I have finished it, the fragrance is still in my mind.

The campus was constructed in 1970 and is located in the southern city of Fujian, on a bustling street. Our campus looks big and very grand. As you go through the campus entrance, there are two thick brick pillars which rise to form a magnificent giant archway. The pillars hold photos of teachers and students; their faces bloom with happiness, making the campus vibrant. Down the slope of the hill, on the way to the school itself, you can see beautiful pine trees lining the roads, and many kinds of flowers in the grass, such as lilies, lotuses, roses, marigolds, jasmine and champak. Tall buildings stand in an orderly line as you progress downward to the center of the campus. You then reach the school playground, where major events are held. When you stand there, the campus buildings encircle you. Going forward, you are greeted by a row of low, brick cottages, which house the faculty offices. If you go left, you encounter a long two-story classroom building with shiny yellow walls. If you turn to the right, you'll find a magnificent red-brown, six-story stone classroom building. From outside

the classroom building, you can hear the cheerful voices of children drifting out of the windows, as they recite their acquired knowledge.

Our dormitory building is located at the heart of the school, which means you need to take a very long avenue to reach it. However, along this road you can find the most interesting scenery: both sides of the road are lined with 80-year-old *poplar* trees. They stand trim and neat, at attention, and give off the impression of two rows of persevering soldiers. In addition, there is a row of grocery stores a few meters away from the dormitory building, offering a variety of goods for students to purchase, including school supplies, household items, and all kinds of snacks.

As you reach the women's dormitory building, the first thing you see is a bright and spacious hall, flanked by brick stairs. If you take the stairs up the left side, to the fourth floor, turn right and walk a few steps, you can find my old dorm room, which was the penultimate door on the hallway. It bore a golden plaque featuring three numbers in red: a "4", a "0", a "2". Yes, this was my bedroom, but I shared it with three roommates. If you had entered the room back then, the first thing that would have caught your eye would have been the neatly arranged desks and armchairs in the center of the space. On both sides of the room stood four bunk beds, with our green quilts folded in squares, but still large enough to cover and hang down the sides of the beds. There were animal dolls on each bed. Most of them were silly, funny and lovely. Looking around the room, you would find Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, a duckling, a baby panda, a little hedgehog, and three silly bears standing on top of each other like acrobats; the

whole room resembled a zoo. Over each bed, white cotton curtains hung in the windows. Moreover, wind chimes were popular in our bedroom. Once you climbed into bed, you would hear the sound of these jingling bells. Our dorm room gave me a sense of being home. It was a warm and comfortable place to retreat to after a day of lessons.

Looking at this room, you would realize that it has a really healthy environment, with its clean floors and fresh air. The open window lets in the “taste” of grass and floral scents that fill your nostrils, refreshing your senses and making you feel alive. Dorm life itself was also interesting. For example, my bed was diagonally opposite the bathroom, where the four of us lined up to shower every night. The girls who were waiting outside always grew impatient and began to yell in tones of both mirth and indignation. This nightly ritual was very lively, to say the least. Also, to the west side of the room was the balcony, and very often someone was playing a broken guitar there, or singing terrible songs all weekend. I cannot leave out our “bed talks.” I still remember how, on most nights, four of us squeezed ourselves into the most uncomfortable postures on one small bed to discuss everything about school life. It was our favorite and *only* way to end the day.

Looking back, there was always something unpleasant to discuss during these bed talks as well. It was the first, but also the last time, in the early days, that I quarreled with one of my roommates. This was at the beginning of the school year when we were unfamiliar with each other. The problem was that I was listening to music while she was sleeping. She argued that I made a lot of

noise and ruined her dreams. I said nothing, but I knew that she was angry at me. Later on, I apologized to her, and she accepted it readily. Little by little, we became best friends, and the people in our school called us “a good twosome.” We concluded that in all future bed talks we would remember that our responsibility to each other as roommates was very important, and we decided we would admit any mistakes we made and say “sorry” to each other, tackling any problems as soon as possible.

Looking back, I'm thankful that my roommates were such nice people. They were very neat and responsible. We cleaned our room every day. We shared our duties and maintained a good environment for studying, so we could work smoothly with each other in every regard. I'm glad that during that time, we built such good friendships. I knew, even then, that this precious time would never return, and because of that, I cherished every moment I spent there. It was only one semester, but it produced some of my greatest memories.

## *The Funeral Artist (or “Who Are You?”)*

by Bernick Occidas

I attended my first funeral at the age of eleven in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Unfortunately, it was for my grandmother, with whom I had had a very special bond. Attending her funeral was a very emotional moment for me, since I was learning how to deal with the pain, loneliness, and emptiness that accompany the loss of someone who was such a formative force in my life. I wasn't at the service long before I realized that I was facing my sadness alone.

The majority of the people present, who were related to our family in some way, didn't know my grandmother personally; therefore, I did not have anybody to talk or relate to. Worse yet, I couldn't even commiserate with my own father. My dad, who used to smoke when I was younger, but quit when I was ten, turned into a stranger that day, missing most of the ceremony while smoking outside. My mom did not really understand my grief since her relationship with my grandmother was always gladiatorial. My aunt, whom I hadn't seen in the last ten years, looked as if she was losing her mind, walking up and down the aisles of the church, touching and talking to my grandmother's dead body. She seemed nothing like the practical, sarcastic, and outgoing woman I knew and loved. Even though it was a difficult day, I had no choice but to stay away from those I had hoped would support me.

Suddenly, during the mass, someone that we did not even know started to scream uncontrollably and roll on the floor. My family and I were crying, but

neither my dad nor my aunt was rolling on the floor, bawling hysterically. This unknown attendee was yelling, crying, and pulling at her short black hair, held in a messy ponytail. The way she yanked her long black dress up along her body made her look more affected by the death of my grandmother than the rest of us. My family and I did not know what to do or how to react since she was a complete stranger to us. We began to wonder where she had come from and how she knew the deceased, since nobody around knew her or had invited her.

Bob, a robust young friend of my dad's, tried to steady her, but he couldn't. She was screaming, jumping, spinning around. She dropped herself to the floor, and walked on her knees. Her puffy red eyes revealed extreme fatigue and sadness. Shockingly, at the end of the mass, she stopped crying almost immediately. She positioned herself outside of the church to smoke a cigarette. She smiled and shook hands with some of my family's friends as they exited the church. When everybody was heading into the reception at my parent's house, she was the first one there. She was already sitting comfortably on a chair when I arrived, holding a plate full of cookies and cake in one hand and her drink in the other. Nobody questioned her, or asked her who she was. Everybody was too immersed in their own thoughts to investigate. They kept on eating and talking about their sadness, paying little attention to her.

Only a month after my grandmother's funeral, I attended another funeral to support my friend, Rosie, who had lost both of her parents. My friend's family wanted the funeral to be private and reserved. They sent personal invitations to relatives and close friends only. Rosie asked me to come because we were very

good friends. Everybody in attendance wore either black or navy blue mourning clothes. It was a rainy day, so the doors of the church were closed and the lights were on inside. The church had that funerary smell: a mixture of perfume, sweat, and formaldehyde. The walls, benches, and statues in the church looked dry and empty. The artificial flowers, used by the church for every funeral service, stood around the coffins like wooden props, making the atmosphere even gloomier. I wanted to leave. Being there made me think about my grandmother's funeral, and how she was nothing like the silent body that laid in the coffin at the altar. I wanted to cry. My friend sensed my discomfort and took my hand. We were all quietly reflecting on our loss when all of a sudden, we heard a strident scream coming from the back of the church. We all turned to see a woman rolling on the floor.

Since Rosie's parents' funeral was taking place at the same church as my grandmother's, I thought that it had to be the same lady who had attended my grandmother's funeral. Surprisingly, it was someone else. This woman was unknown to Rosie as well. She was a young, short, skinny lady wearing a white dress and a black vest, screaming her lungs out. The lady was shrieking so loudly that we could not even hear the priest. In my mind, I already knew that by the end of the ceremony, she would be composed and ready to eat. As I suspected, a half an hour later, she was all smiles. She followed everybody to the reception and promptly filled her plate with food. She even audaciously announced how sorry she was about losing her two best friends (meaning Rosie's parents), and how much she was going to miss them. Once again,

everybody was so immersed in their own grief that nobody thought about asking her who in the world she was.

Rosie felt the same loneliness that I'd felt during my grandmother's funeral, not only because of everyone's absorption in their own ways of coping, but also because of the distance she felt from those she should have been able to turn to. She too was ignored by her aunt, the only relative present. Her aunt had come to Haiti to arrange her brother and sister-in-law's funeral. Most importantly, she now had to take care of Rosie, which meant that Rosie had to move to the U.S. to live with her aunt. During the ceremony, Rosie's aunt was totally cold and distant. I never saw her cry during the ceremony. She was chewing gum and texting the whole time, as if she were at a party instead of a funeral.

A year later, after both of these events, I attended a classmate's funeral. Her parents invited only classmates and relatives. Strangely, the same lady who was going crazy at my grandmother's funeral was there. I was not expecting to see her again, since the funeral was held at a different church. When I recognized her, I told my classmate's mother to pay close attention to her. The mother then whispered something to a young man, probably my classmate's brother John, and they both grinned. I had no clue what they said, but I had a feeling that, this time, the lady was going to get caught. As usual, she was the first one who started to grieve; she started to wail, shout, and cry. When she started to roll on the floor, John said to another man: "Hey! Let's undress her and throw some water on her to see if she'll calm down." The lady got up in less than

five seconds and replied: “The hell you want to undress me for?” After this scene, the lady realized that she had humiliated herself. She left, mumbling inaudibly, and crying for real. She understood that she wouldn’t be able to blend in at any other funerals. Since that day, nobody has ever seen or heard of her. I’m guessing she left town the same day.

Unlike my relatives and Rosie’s, my classmate’s family didn’t fall apart in the face of a difficult time. They didn’t turn into strangers ignoring each other or living in their own world during the funeral, but rather supported each other during a time of great pain. In fact, the strong bond between my classmate’s family members actually allowed them to come together during the ceremony and root out the con artist in their midst.

## *New Year's Eve at the Zakeri's Residence*

by Seyed Ali Noori

As soon as I walked through the glass entranceway into the house, I started to doubt the fact that I had accepted an invitation. Morteza had been on my back for a long time and I had continued to reject his invitation, because I thought it was a not-so-smart move to spend time at the Zakeri's. My friendship with Morteza didn't have a very long history, and, in all actuality, Morteza and I were fairly different people. However, being the only two Iranians in our school in Ireland meant that we could speak Persian freely without anybody understanding us, and this had allowed a special bond to form between us. The story of our families, though, was very different. There were friendly and well-mannered interactions between the two, but one could almost feel the tension beneath the surface when our dads were in the same room (although I'm not entirely sure that Morteza could see it.) It was nobody's fault, I believed. Our fathers were just living in two opposite worlds; it would have been strange if they had suddenly become best friends.

I couldn't stop wondering why I had accepted his invitation this time, especially since it wasn't one of those normal "Hey, you wanna come over?" situations. Instead, it was the Persian New Year's Eve, which is very important to Iranians and is typically spent with family, and family only. I guess it was the horrific thought of spending New Year's Eve in my cold and lonely room, about 3,500 miles from my parents' new residence in Atlanta, that made me join the

Zakeris that evening. In an attempt to suppress my predictions of a disastrous night, I followed Morteza to the living room. I immediately liked the house and its décor. Even the general plan of the house reminded me of Iran. The living room was completely separated from the kitchen, for example. It gave me the feeling that I was in a typical warm, cozy and hospitable Iranian home. It didn't have the coldness of air-conditioned Irish houses. I sat sheepishly on the edge of the couch and waited for Morteza to bring the tray filled with fresh juice and Iranian sweets and nuts, some of which were nowhere to be found in Ireland. Mrs. Zakeri had put this together for us. I couldn't help but smile bitterly. It'd been more than a year since the last time I was in such an atmosphere. Since, at the time, I was not anticipating any opportunity to return to Iran soon, I was starting to forget my own lifestyle. However, just when I was about to get comfortable and sit back, I heard footsteps from behind.

It was Morteza's Dad, Mr. Zakeri. Out of respect for the typical Iranian father and household head, when he entered the living room, I stood. I shook his hand and offered a miserable attempt to produce my most sincere smile. He started with the usual, "Hi. How are you?" and "How's your father doing?" Recalling whatever I knew about manners, and keeping my pathetic smile intact, I murmured the usual: "Oh, I'm very well, thanks! Thanks for having me over. He's doing great; he says hi to you." Then Mr. Zakeri invited me to have a seat and offered to refill my drink, but I politely declined. A few awkward minutes later, when Mrs. Zakeri joined us for a couple of minutes for the routine greetings, the moment that I was fearfully expecting came. Mr. Zakeri put on a smile and

casually asked: “Now, son, which is better, America or Ireland?” This was the type of question that I’d been facing a lot after I had spent ten days in the U.S. with my parents, who had recently moved there from Ireland. The answer to that question was not a difficult one. It was not hidden to anyone who knew me even a little that I hated living in Ireland and could not wait to leave! The United States, on the other hand, was my personal promised land for whatever reason. I guess it’s an Iranian thing; we’re just attracted to the US. Perhaps it’s the history of successful Iranian-Americans that supports this idea of the US as “the land of opportunities.” Or maybe it was that I disliked Ireland so much that no matter how good or bad the U.S. was, I’d prefer it to Ireland. Anyhow I was not confused about what my answer to that question was; I just didn’t feel that I should put my opinion out in the open.

The very fact that Mr. Zakeri was a high-ranking official in the Iranian Embassy in Dublin and my father, by contrast, had been forced to leave the country because of his human rights work, had turned this seemingly simple question into a nightmare. I felt that his affiliation with the Iranian Government probably meant that he expected me to think of America as the “Great Satan,” which was far from my own belief. Thankfully, Mrs. Zakeri jumped in to help, “Oh, of course the United States is better. It’s the *United States* after all,” offering the standard knee-jerk Iranian view of the U.S. I tried to ignore my racing heart, laughing it off and murmuring in a broken voice: “I really don’t know what to say; each country has its own beauty” – and feeling strange that I had said something so vague. I guess I’m just not an expert in talking myself out of these types of

situations. In any case, I was sure that I would spend the rest of the evening overanalyzing this encounter.

The rest of the evening was quiet and relatively drama-free. Morteza, intentionally or not, eventually saved me from the *hell* that was *that living room* and we went up to his room, where his older brother joined us later. The three of us had a great time talking, listening to music and playing video games—very typical of a small group of Iranian guys— until we heard Mr. Zakeri knocking on the door: “Dinner is ready.” Thank God, Morteza, his brother, Ali, and I got to dine in a separate downstairs room from Mr. and Mrs. Zakeri and their little daughter. I could only imagine how awkward that long meal would have been. I also couldn’t ignore the fact that Mrs. Zakeri had done an amazing job preparing a very Persian New Year’s Eve dinner, consisting of salmon and a variety of different types of rice, accompanied by a wide range of desserts and salads that take a huge amount of time and a great deal of talent to make.

A few minutes after dinner when we left the living room and went back upstairs, Mr. Zakeri showed up and advised us to go to bed, as we had classes early the next day. Morteza protested that it was New Year’s and that he deserved the day off. Mr. Zakeri mentioned that we had our final national exams coming in a few months and stressed that skipping school was not a good idea. The argument went on for a while, during which I just sat there awkwardly and tried to stay out of it. I thought to myself that my father and I would never squabble like that in front of my friends; as a matter of fact we rarely argued! Unsurprisingly Mr. Zakeri was the winner and less than an hour later we were

getting ready to go to bed. That's when I went to my bag and noticed that the very expensive box of Belgian chocolate that I'd bought to bring as a gift was still there. I must have been so anxious that I forgot to give it to my hosts. It was certainly too late now. So, I trudged over to the bed they'd readied for me. What I got was far from a good night's sleep, not because I wasn't exhausted or that Morteza was snoring on the other side of the room, but because I'd never been so lonely on New Year's Eve.

The next morning we got up and went down for breakfast. I had absolutely no appetite. Mrs. Zakeri made me a couple of sandwiches, accompanied by more Iranian sweets, and then insisted that I put them in my bag to eat later. I thought that accepting them was my only and easiest option. At that point, I brought out the box of chocolates and gave it to Mrs. Zakeri and thanked her for the great dinner and everything.

Morteza and I left for school in silence. As soon as I got off the bus in front of school, I wished him good luck and went the other way. About twenty minutes later, I was in my bed, in my own room. After all, my parents were thousands of miles away and I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't use my freedom to take the day off. And those two sandwiches, which turned out to be delicious, saved me the trouble of having to buy lunch when I woke up later that afternoon.

*Lights, Camera, Action, Panic*

by Afroza Sultana

As I got out of the car and walked into the lavish banquet hall, I saw a banner that read HAPPY 25<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY TO NAZMAN AND SHABAB. The aroma of the spices in the delicious biryani Bengali dishes and everyone's fragrant perfumes, along with the classic Bollywood music, stirred a festive feeling inside of me. I was overjoyed to see every family member, cousin and friend— some of them for the first time in many years. The big double doors full of meticulous woodwork had looked grand and now the people inside having such a good time made everything look even better. Before I entered the main room, I stopped and stood at the front for a moment and thought to myself: *this was the day... May 24<sup>th</sup>... that these two souls came together through a holy bond called marriage... and it was 25 years ago.* As I thought this, I was even more eager to congratulate my aunt and uncle and show them the dance performance which my cousins and I had worked very hard to choreograph. While the dance might not be perfect, not unlike my aunt and uncle's twenty-five years of marriage, there was a lot of joy in putting it together.

As I moved forward, I was dazzled by the royal scene. It was a bright sunny day, and some sunlight was visible through the thick burgundy drapes. Everyone was dressed in their best outfits. The sparkling color patterns in so many combinations were astonishing to behold. I looked down at my simple, red and white *salwar kameez* and wondered if I was underdressed. Slightly

confused and a little self-conscious, I wandered on until I encountered my “crew”: my three cousins Tanya, Tajna and Tamanna. We flashed each other smiles that acknowledged that the day we had prepared so much for was here. We had gone shopping for this event together, selecting everything we would need, down to the matching shoes, jewelry and makeup for the performance. My cousins would perform a Bollywood dance for my uncle and aunt that I had helped choreograph. Standing around now was becoming a bit nerve wracking because all I wanted was to deliver a perfect performance. Everything from the food to the decorations to the entertainment was going exactly the way my aunt and uncle wanted it to go, and I did not want to ruin their perfect day.

My parents and two brothers and sisters were floating through the crowd, greeting everyone and having a blast. The excitement kept building as we saw one family member after another. I congratulated my aunt and uncle with a big hug. They looked like a newlywed couple. The expressions on their faces were priceless and they looked like the happiest people on earth. I was happy for them, but the only thing on my mind was the performance. However, as I drifted around and began to reconnect with relatives, I felt a sense of comfort. Everyone was having fun: dancing, taking pictures and capturing the moment. The food table near the stage was loaded with traditional Bengali delicacies such as tandoori chicken, samosa, naan, kebabs, salad, rice, and different types of fish. Both this food table and the entire banquet were decorated with red and white roses, representing nothing but perfection, and this worried me. I knew that

everyone would remember this event for the rest of their lives but would our performance hold any place in their memory?

The bittersweet moment finally came. Everyone was anticipating what we had in store. Tanya, Tajna and Tamanna were ready, on stage, in their long, flowing, floral- print skirts and white V-neck t-shirts, which complimented their beautiful figures. *They* looked like angels but there was fear in *me*. I was scared they would mess up or the audience would bemoan something that I had helped choreograph. I finally pressed play on the sound system, and, as it played “...dola re, dola re,” a Bollywood classic, everyone started cheering, which only made my nervousness grow. I was completely swept up in the music. Even though I wasn’t performing, I caught myself moving around as I observed my cousins’ slim, exotic bodies starting to move as well. They moved lightly at first, as if the wind were touching them. But as the tempo picked up, they moved faster and faster. They dangled their hands up and down, rattling all of the bangles on their arms. Their hips moved from left to right and around. The anklets on their shifting feet made soft, tinkling sounds that reminded me of traditional Bengali *mujra* dances. I was completely blown away and so was the rest of the audience. The music changed from one song to another on the mixed tape we had created. Even the lyrics mirrored the growing excitement, and my cousins kept moving like goddesses. I was having fun and so were they, which thrilled the audience. The smile on my aunt’s face glowed like the sun and the astonishment on my uncle’s face was outrageous, which gave me some hint that

we were getting somewhere. We were entertaining people. I was a bit surprised and glad that all of our hard work was paying off.

The seven and a half minute performance felt as if it wasn't real. After it was over, I felt like pinching myself to see if it was the night before and I was still dreaming about it. The overwhelming support in the applause from the crowd made it even harder for me to believe. My cousins strode towards me, sweaty and tired, as if they had been running on a treadmill for hours. They were exhausted, but the pleasure in achieving something great overpowered their fatigue. They ran to me then, like kindergarteners dashing to their parents after school, saying, "I think we did okay". I nodded and embraced them, feeling a warm sense of victory. That was when I realized that nothing is one hundred percent perfect. My cousins did miss a few steps here and there, and the volume of our music had been too low at times. But some flaws can be ignored through the love of those experiencing something special. I realized that my expectations were very high. But we tried our best, considering the fact that none of us are real dancers. Ultimately, what we ended up with was the "perfect" gift to my aunt and uncle.

My aunt and uncle came to us and said "Good job girls. We're impressed." This gave us confidence and made me feel good inside. Our goal had been to show them how much we appreciate having them in our lives and achieving that goal made us proud. We gave each other high fives and continued enjoying the event, insecurity-free!

*My Native Soil!*

by Tenzin Yingsal

In the early nineteen eighties, a little over twenty years after the Chinese occupation, my parents fled Tibet and settled in a refugee camp in Mustang, Nepal. This is where I was born and raised until I was ten. The image of the camp and its environs is still clear in my mind. The camp entrance appears across a thin and unstable bridge, after which you walk for several minutes before you can see the camp. On the east side of the camp, flowing from beneath a steep and dramatic mountain waterfall, is an extremely long, narrow, incredibly clear river, so clean that we could see the pebbles beneath the water. I used to wash my clothes and dishes there, in the chilly, clear water. I also used to bathe with my friends there. On the edge of the river is a big refreshing forest that features a range of different types of trees, including the *Pinus wallichiana*. We would collect and store the pine cones that fell there and use them to stock the fire in the winter. After school, my friends and I would go there with a long, thick rope that we would tie from one tree to another, then sit and swing on it, going way up high. On the west side of the camp, you can find many horses, cows, goats and sheep. There are also barns and farms outside the camp. We harvested apples, peaches, apricots, potatoes, beans, and all sorts of nutritious, organic food. The nearby slopes are steep and rugged, and I often used to climb there. There's also a very small lake outside the camp where I used to go with

my friends during school breaks to watch them swim in the deep water. I usually just got in and stayed on the shore, splashing, since I couldn't swim.

Inside the camp, each family had a house that was more like a studio, which the family would divide into separate rooms. The houses were assigned by sponsors, such as the Red Cross, and ultimately that structure became the family's permanent property. Each house had only one floor and some families covered their roofs with blue corrugated steel so that the runoff from rain or snow would not drip inside the house. The houses were arranged symmetrically: the dwellings aligned in rows — four long rows in total — with fifteen to twenty houses in each row. One row of houses faced the other row, with a narrow path between the yards. Some families had chicken coups and dog houses made of mud in their yard. My house was in the second row, facing my aunt's house. There was a crevice between my house and the house next to us. Since there weren't any lights on after dark, I used to fear treading through this frightening airshaft, especially on gloomy nights. However, on mornings when there was no school, I used to play tag and congies (a dice game) with my friends in front of this cleft.

There were about two hundred and fifty people in the camp at most times. The people became very close to one another and formed strong bonds. Normally, the children would go to other people's houses to eat and play and then return to their own homes in the late evening, without anyone worrying about their safety. Also, there was no dangerous traffic or public transit, such as cars or buses. Since the whole camp was so small, we could reach any destination within it easily on foot. I used to walk to school and would get there

within five minutes. The parents either worked on nearby farms or had stores outside the camp where they sold jewelry. These places were about a thirty minute walk from home. When we had to go to a farther destination outside the camp, we rode horses.

I'd like to think that my house was one of a kind. To me, it was beautiful. Beyond the allotted initial space, my family was allowed to construct another long room as an addition, even before I was born. Tibetans call that kind of room a *chokang*, which is more of a religious room where the family decorates their Buddha statues and hangs His Holiness the Dalai Lama's picture on the wall, along with images of the other *lamas*. Chokangs are also where families invite the monks to pray and hold blessings. I loved the furniture in the chokang because of the profound architectural details and color combinations; the tables had painted borders of brown and other colors, but the predominant color of the tables, as well as the windows, was green. Even though the Chokangs are more of a religious room, my family also kept non-spiritual objects there. Most importantly, though, in the chokang, every object was linked to me. There was a perfume bottle that was empty, but the bottle was so beautiful and the scent was so invigorating that I always kept it in my drawer in the chokang. I remember that there was a photograph of my father on one of the tabletops. Since he was in the United States, I used to look at that picture all the time, even though I can't really remember what I was thinking about during those moments. That picture gave me the sense that he was there with us.

When I woke up late on school days at the camp, my aunt would ring a miniature bell, which made a birdlike sound. Even though this bell also didn't have any religious affiliation, it was a treasured object of beauty. I can still hear its gentle, awakening sound. I've built up so many memories around the chokang that I still look back today and grin. For instance, one day my uncle, who lived in another village, came to our house and gave me a certain light-textured, sweet cookie that every child there loves. While I was happily running with it towards the chokang, I fell and the cookie dropped and shattered into pieces. I immediately burst into tears. That cookie and my fall are very significant to me, because when I think of that moment, I'm reminded of my grandmother, who passed away when I was a kid. I can't remember having spent much time with her, but at the instant when I fell, my face was turned toward the ground and, then, when I tilted my face upward, I saw her kind face very clearly. I recall that she was knitting something.

On Tibetan New Year, in February, we always repainted the chokang and decorated the room for the New Year to bring good luck, and also, because people would visit us. I can still picture the low beds covered with beautiful carpets, the small-surfaced, yet tall tables, the old, unique material boxes we put fabrics, precious objects and colorful, soft blankets in, as well as the clean, large wooden wardrobes that I love and wish I could have brought to New York.

The other room in the house was also a long room, which included both the kitchen and the living room. Like the chokang, this living room/kitchen area also meant a lot to me. I loved the necessities of the kitchen: the steel pans,

cups, and glasses. We didn't have gas, so we cooked in a fireplace. Since the fire was on the left end of the kitchen, we lit an additional fire in winter, for extra heat. I loved wiping the wooden floor every single day because I wanted to keep the place clean and welcoming. Seeing a small dirty footstep was nearly unbearable to me. I apparently once told my mother, "I don't like when people come to our house and make a big mess." She also said that I loved taking care of the house because I was attached to every single object. I wanted to keep it all safe.

The main object in the living room was the television. Every weekday night, we watched Indian soap operas; perhaps that's how I learned Hindi. People would come to our living room to watch these shows. During that time, not all the families in the camp had a television, so people would come to our house. Sometimes we would have dinner together. Guests would sit on the floor and on the beds, which were located on opposite sides of the room. On normal days, I remember my brother would always sit on the bed on the left side and I would sometimes sit next to him. My mother liked sitting on a wooden chair that was about two feet high, since it was easier for her to get to the kitchen from there. On the floor between the kitchen and the living room, we had a very long, thin wooden box where we kept the apples during the off season, to prevent them from getting rotten.

Outside, my family had a big yard. In the center, the grass outlined a two foot square area, where my brother planted small yellow flowers when he came home from boarding school for winter break. There was also a long metal tap

where I used to wash dishes and clothes, but I preferred going to the river, since all my friends went there. When we were not in school, my cousins and friends would come over and play in our yard.

My house and the refugee camp in Mustang is surely one of the places I will never forget. I have built so many memories around this beautiful, rejuvenating place and its wonderful people. It has been seven years since I came to New York, but I still keep in touch with the people at the refugee camp through the magic of technology: Facebook, email and even phone calls. I hope to go back there one day to revisit my childhood home and see what changes have taken place and what remains.

## *The Reunion of Brotherhood*

by Ryan Kuang

On December 27, 2011, the sky was so dark; it was as if someone had put a blanket over the earth and the stars were just lights peeking through little holes eaten away by insects. In front of me, in that darkness, was a huge traditional Chinese restaurant, all lit up. I was standing next to a big heart shaped wedding poster outlined by ninety-nine tiny light bulbs. The sentence on the poster read: “Congratulations to Vincent Kuang & Selina Chen.” At that moment, my lips curved up into a little crescent moon. I was very excited, and my heart began to beat fast. From this rush of adrenaline, I felt like I would stumble all over my words when I finally spoke to my brother. My thought process went blank. What would I say to him? Painful tears pushed out of my eyes. We hadn’t seen each other in seven years, and I would have to go back to New York immediately after the wedding. I carefully fixed my tie and swept my hair back into place. I ran up to the hall with feelings of joy and excitement, at the same time hoping to cover the sadness of having to leave so soon afterwards.

In front of the hall, I heard a piano playing “The Wedding March.” I saw family, friends, and guests standing up, facing the musician. Everyone was dressed so neatly; not a single wrinkle was to be found in their clothes, as if they were crisp sheets of loose-leaf paper. The scents from the pinned carnation and rose corsages made me feel like I was in a small garden. The fragrance would linger in the hall for hours. While the groom and bride walked down the red

carpet, friends and relatives were blessing them with smiles for eternal happiness. The gentlemen in the crowd put their hands on their loved ones, friends, or children, while the ladies wiped away their tears and hugged the people around them.

After the ceremony, my brother and sister-in-law slowly visited every table. My brother started clinking his glass of champagne with everyone else's in appreciation. He looked perfect in his white suit and tie. My sister-in-law was next to him in a bright white wedding dress, with beautiful red roses nestled in her hair. Both my brother and sister-in-law's sparkling smiles were full of joy and happiness. At this moment I truly saw my brother. I remember how we used to have fun with each other when we were kids, playing poker, volleyball, and watching black and white TV together. We had always competed with each other; whoever finished eating last had to buy the other a soda. But now, we were all grown up, and alcohol was the new competition between us.

I squeezed through the guests, over to my brother. Hugging him tightly and talking with the speed of a machine gun firing, I said, "It's been seven years since you moved to Canada, I miss you so much. Congratulations to you, brother, for you are finally getting a green card, and also for the wedding tonight. I am so happy for you. I wish I could stay with my kindly old brother longer, but unfortunately, I need to fly back to New York tonight." I saw a smile, and then tears dropped from the corners of his eyes. I could tell from his face that he was happy that his little brother had grown up so much in these seven years and looked more mature. My sister-in-law then put her hands on our shoulders and

gave us a grinning hint to hold our tears. We obliged, not wanting to cause sadness for the family there, and to enjoy our time together.

Once we collected ourselves, I realized how my brother's appearance had changed. His hair had gone from black to grey in just a short while. He was only twenty-six years old, but small wrinkles were spreading across his face. The lines in his forehead and the bags under his eyes came out instantly whenever he started talking, especially when he laughed. His crow's feet were the deepest wrinkles, alluding to his happy life. The changes I noticed in him were not just in his facial features, but in the size of his wrists as well — they were as big as apples now. This became clear when he raised his hand to drink. The guests that my brother was drinking with had complimented him on his wrists, smiling with admiration at their Herculean quality. I scowled and thought, "The size of his wrists does not indicate that he is a muscle man!" I knew it was because he had become a chef in Canada, lifting huge pans to toss food while cooking every day. His dream when he moved to Canada had been to go to school, but because of limited English, and financial difficulties, his only option was to become a chef, so that he could stay there and make a life with his future wife. His wrists were swollen from strain, not muscular from exercise.

His right hand was shaking a bit while he held two big whiskies. I saw his face suddenly shift from a state of mirth to a wince. Seven years of working as a chef were catching up to him, and the muscular wrist everyone was admiring had actually become a great source of physical discomfort. But he held his pain back and smiled at the guests as though nothing was bothering him. Even though his

body had suffered in the only job he was able to get in Canada, my brother still had the positive, upbeat personality I had always admired him for. I could see his strength and perseverance in his smile, and in the way that he kept his financial and future planning problems to himself (so as not to worry those around him.) Today, he has made a place for himself and his wife in another country where they are now citizens.

I walked to the wine table, grabbed a glass of red wine, and gulped it all down in one swig. My whole body became warm; my head felt like it was burning. The sound of every conversation, of every laugh in the room suddenly became so clear. Suddenly I felt a heavy, friendly presence behind me. "Thank you so much bro," my brother said. "I will never forget about today because we haven't seen each other for many years, and we finally get to meet again at this special event." He gently placed his hand on my shoulder, as if he was afraid to hurt me. I moved my hand to rest upon his. I wish he had gripped my shoulder harder so that I could hold on to that feeling forever, or at least until the day we meet again.

## *First Choice*

by Ishika Nair

The dinner table was set. The whole family was home for a relative's wedding. My grandfather was sitting at the head of the table, with my grandmother at the other end. I was somewhere in between them, sitting next to my older "cousin brother," Advait. I knew it was a big day for him; he was going to tell the family about his acceptance to a college in the United States for his graduate studies. The nervousness on his face was evident. I nudged him and asked him to tell everyone the news before the food appeared, but my uncle started talking to my grandfather about the family business and Advait lost his first chance to make the announcement. The house help brought out the platters of food and placed them on the table. I continued to try and get Advait to tell the family, but soon we were half way through dinner and my cousin still hadn't mustered up the courage. Knowing how conservative our family is, he had applied to the college without telling anyone but his parents. I was losing patience because I wanted to know how the family would react to this; I too had applied to a college in the States and was waiting for my acceptance letter. I told him that if he didn't tell them soon, I would. He slapped my thigh under the table and asked me to keep my mouth shut. His face was so tense; I thought he would break down at any minute. I told him "Look, you have to tell them eventually. I don't see how killing yourself on the inside will help make your decision. Just tell them and we will deal with the consequences. You *do* know that you haven't

committed a crime.” He just looked at me, smiled, and said “Isha, it is easier said than done.”

There was pin drop silence in the room after dinner. I couldn't handle it anymore, so I asked him, “Advait, what are you planning on doing post-graduation?” I could see the focus of the entire family shift to our conversation. I knew he was not very happy with my question, but I think he also knew that there was no better way to bring it up. His voice cracked as he mumbled, “The University of Cincinnati just sent my acceptance letter for a Master's degree in chemical engineering.” My face lit up and my eyes scanned the room to read the expressions on my relatives' faces. No one said a word; everyone was waiting for my grandfather to react before they did. Grandfather asked him if that was what he *really* wanted to do and Advait slowly nodded “yes” in reply. My grandfather then looked at my uncle and asked him about the finances of the matter, and Advait then told them about the scholarship. My grandfather then looked at his grandson with a grin on his face; everyone could see that he was proud. He gestured to Advait to hug him. My grandmother immediately smiled and with great joy and went to get her wallet. After returning and blessing him, she handed him 500 rupees for his achievement. Everyone in the family rejoiced and congratulated him. My family's positive reaction to his achievement gave me a sense of confidence; now I knew that they wouldn't stop me from going abroad too.

That night I was in my room thinking: it wasn't long before that I had been sitting under the light of my desk lamp filling out my application for St. Joseph's

College in New York, with Advait sitting by my side helping me. He had stopped me when I made mistakes and yelled at me when I acted stupid. I spent the next few hours after the big family dinner contemplating the things I would do if I got rejected. The next morning I woke up knowing it would be a long day. There were people running around, getting things done for the wedding. The men were getting the lighting, seating and music arrangements in order. The women were at the beauty salon getting their makeup done. I went with them, but I was still lost in my own thoughts. When I arrived back at home, I quickly changed into my *lehengacholi*, a traditional Indian dress consisting of a long flowing skirt and a heavily embroidered bodice. It is tradition that unmarried girls wear *lehenga's* while the married women wear *sarees*. My cousin looked beautiful in all the jewelry and the bright red wedding *lehenga*, the red color signifying prosperity and youth. The *dupatta* was draped over her head like a veil to signify respect for God and her elders. We were all rushing to get to the marriage venue on time, as it was considered disrespectful for the girl's side of the family to arrive late.

I was disoriented the entire day, and mother kept nagging me about how I was doing everything wrong. Frustration was building up in me, and I really just needed to let it out somehow. I didn't enjoy the wedding; I just wanted to go home. When we got home, the house help handed me a letter with the college letterhead on it. Advait knew something was going on with me and followed me into my room. He shut the door and begged me, "Open it and let's see!" I had tears in my eyes from fear of the consequences of an acceptance letter. He

snatched the letter from me and opened it. “You have been accepted dummy, get excited.”

At the dinner table that night, without wasting any time, I told the entire family about my acceptance. They all looked at me with shock. It seemed as though lightning had struck them all at once. My grandfather looked at me as if I had committed a great mistake for which forgiveness was not an option. He asked my father if he was aware of my whereabouts and intentions and my father nodded and tried to convince him that my ambitions were worthy. He even told my grandfather that he had been the one encouraging me to apply. My grandfather’s anger peaked as he yelled, “But she is a girl! Why would you want to send her abroad for her education?” I could not believe what I had just heard and my eyes filled with tears for the second time that evening. I was the youngest and most loved in my family: there had never been a time when I had asked for something and not received it. My grandfather’s disapproval of the one thing I had dreamt of for years really hurt me. I wasn’t going to let go of my dreams so easily. I asked my grandfather for an explanation of his objections. Everyone looked at me in terror. Questioning your elders in my country is considered a sign of disrespect, but I didn’t know how else to react to what I had just heard. My dreams were falling apart, and I couldn’t let that happen.

I used to hear stories from my mother about how her brother worked his way into the United States of America, and I always looked up to him for it. In India, being able to go to the U.S. on a scholarship like my uncle had received was a rare and great achievement. Everybody was very proud of him, and my

cousins and I saw him as a role model. I soon realized that all of the successful people in my family were men. I wanted to change that. Even though I grew up in a family with such skewed values, my parents had always given me the confidence and support to dream big. My mother had always told me, “There will be many hurdles between you and your goals, sweetie, but never let them get you down. Stand up for yourself and you will get past them.” Back then, I didn’t realize why she had said that, but that wedding night at the dinner table, I realized that not everything you wish for comes to you on a silver platter. You need to fight for what you truly want.

Later that night, my mother walked into my room and apologized for what had happened and admitted that she was partly responsible for it. She told me that maybe my studying abroad was too much to ask for. At that very moment, I stopped her and said, “Mom, I have realized what I really want. Please don’t stop me.” She looked at me with a smile: “My little girl has really grown up.” At that instant, my dad entered the room and told me that he didn’t care about what the others had said about my announcement. He said that he would make it happen for me, but I knew that inside he was hurt that he had to defy his father to fulfill my dreams. I could only appear cheerful as he and my mother left me alone in my room.

The next morning, before the family assembled for the *pooja*, I went to my grandparents room and asked my grandfather with great respect why he thought I shouldn’t go to New York. He looked at me for a minute and said, “Are you sure

this is what you want?" I looked at him with tears in my eyes and nodded. He said he would think about it, and I left the room.

Later, I was sitting on the porch reading a book, when Advait came to me and said, "Isha, if you just sit like this, their decision is not going to change." I looked at him, and in a very blunt voice, responded: "But what do you expect me to do? I already spoke to grandfather this morning; he didn't really seem too keen on knowing what was important to me." He looked at me, surprised. Then he gave me a disgusted look and replied sarcastically, "Then you can just sit and allow them to dream for you. Congratulations. I hope you enjoy living the rest of your life in regret." This got me thinking: I didn't want my family to direct my life, and I wanted to stand on my own two feet.

I knew that I probably wouldn't be able to convince my grandfather without convincing my grandmother first. Even though my grandfather was the one to make the major decisions in the house, he would never do or say anything to upset my grandmother. So, I realized that the key to convincing my grandfather was getting grandmother on board, since she was the only one who could influence his decision. I went to my grandmother and spoke to her about my dreams. She understood me, but I also knew that somewhere deep down, even she knew that my grandfather wouldn't agree. Even so, I could see my happiness reflected in her eyes when she saw my determination. For the first time ever, though, I could sense that she feared being turned down by her husband. I knew that even though she didn't seem very convinced, she wanted to help me through this. She agreed to talk to my grandfather about it.

That night after dinner, my family gathered in the living room. I entered and very politely asked them for five minutes of their time. I told them how I aspired to study abroad and that, even though I might have made a mistake by not telling them all before applying, I wanted their approval before I went. When I sat my family down and laid out my future plans, I assured them that I would be home again in four years. It was clear that my uncles and aunts were impressed with my awareness of how serious this decision was. However, my grandfather's face remained expressionless. This bothered me, but at this point, all I could do was hope they understood.

I yearned I would get that kind of understanding from my grandfather soon. That night at the dinner table, my grandfather was awfully quiet and my father inquired as to what was wrong. He grinned and said, "I have made my decision; Ishika will be going to the US for her studies." All that my grandfather repeated that night was, "It is not my right to take away what brings happiness to our little princess." Everybody laughed and congratulated me.

When I think about this incident, I realize how important it is for values and ideals to change with time. People in oppressive cultures must realize that men are no more capable at achieving greatness than women. Incidents like this inspire me to do something to make a mark on the world. This was the story of how I stood up for myself, to fulfill my dream. If every woman does the same, the world will be a different place. All it takes is a little courage, the courage to dream big.

## *The Holy Priest*

by Maria Sedrak

One sunny Saturday morning, when I was thirteen, my mother came into my room and woke me, so we could get ready to go on a trip. “Mom, where are we going?” I asked her. She told me that we were going to my great grandfather’s hometown, El- Mania, with my uncle and my grandparents. “Why?” I asked her. “So we can go to the holy church, to see the holy priest there,” she said. “Aren’t they all holy priests?” I asked. “Just come and you will see,” my mother said, leaving the room. I was both curious and excited to see my grandparents.

After we got dressed, we went downstairs and found my grandparents waiting in my grandfather’s 1987 red Volkswagen Golf II. My cousins and my aunt were with my uncle in his dark blue van. It took us five hours to drive from Cairo, to El- Mania, a farming town. When we finally arrived and drove through the town, I noticed that everything there was very different from where we came. They had small houses made of ash and mud and no tall buildings; there were a lot of trees, and endless corn plants and golden wheat fields. The sky was clear and baby blue, unlike the grayish blue Cairo sky. Cows, sheep, donkeys, and horses were loose in the street, and the local children were playing with them as if they were dolls or small racing cars. I was surprised at how the people lived so naturally with the animals and the trees, not to mention all the insects and the mosquitoes that flew into the house from the fields. In the city we lived next to factories, along with the suffocating smoke and smells that they produce. We

were accustomed to honking cars, and the din of the constant traffic. In the city, there were fewer trees and green space for the eye and the psyche to absorb. On the farm, though, there was this comfort I felt. Everything was effortless and natural, but I was still scared of the roaming animals.

“We are here” my grandfather announced, even though I had already taken it all in. I looked out of the car window, and took a deep breath of the fresh farm air. I saw an ancient, enormous, sophisticated church on top of a small hill. There was a big brown wooden cross at the peak of the church’s roof. Massive, ancient fig trees, beautiful red, purple, and white tulips and radiant golden sunflowers surrounded the church. There was a huge, rusty yellow bell in the church tower. I was expecting to hear its peaceful tolls, but instead I heard an ugly, earsplitting, painful scream. I became scared and clenched my mother’s arm. “Don’t be afraid,” she said, getting out of the car. When I looked in the direction of the sound, I saw a big crowd waiting in an unorganized line. The look on the people’s faces showed that whatever they were waiting for was a lifeline, something that would help them survive. I saw an old priest with a long white beard; he was wearing the black uniform priests wear in Egypt, with a big black wooden cross hanging from his neck. He was standing in front of the crowd, yelling prayers at a person struggling on the floor. “What is he doing?” I asked my mother. “He is kicking evil spirits’ butts,” she said, smiling. I got the feeling that she was trying make what I was witnessing easier, but she wasn’t helping because now I was horrified. People were crying loud enough to startle the cows on the street. I couldn’t understand why they were shouting; they were in church,

a place of safety, where God changes everything for the better. “Why would there be pain in such a peaceful and natural place?” I wondered.

I stood far away, watching people scream and roll all over the ground, dirt from the soggy ground on themselves, cursing at God and his church. They were yelling at the priest violently: “You and your God can’t help me!” They were yelling other words that I couldn’t understand. I asked my mother why they were saying such things. My mother made it clear to me that evil spirits possessed these people. I asked her why we had brought my grandmother here; she wasn’t possessed, and she never acted like these people. “We are here so she can visit the holy priest, and ask him to pray for her and for all of us,” my mother explained. I saw the people who were “possessed” writhing on the ground, while their crying loved ones tried to pick them up and calm them, but those who were possessed were beyond control. They would randomly hit and kick their loved ones, just so they could get free and run away from the church. When I looked at the possessed people, they looked evil and wasted. As they screamed and cursed, their hair was mussed and in total disarray. Their outfits were black and baggy and hung loosely on their bodies. Their clothes were completely filthy and disgusting. The priest was tending to each possessed individual separately, praying and asking the evil spirit questions, such as “What do you want?” or “Why did you choose this person?” Meanwhile, he sprinkled holy water all over the possessed person’s body. The recipients, however, kept shouting and squealing in anguish and sorrow.

My cousins and I were too scared to watch. It was our turn to see the priest, but only adults were allowed to go into the crowd, so my aunt took my cousins and me away. We stood next to a cornfield, near a small gray barn that looked like it was made of clay. It was full of cows and sheep. Finally, when I thought I was safe, loud agonizing screams again emerged from the crowd, causing the animals in the barn to run around each other madly. I was terrified, and when my cousins asked my aunt why the animals were acting this way, she said, "Maybe the evil spirit has left the possessed people and taken the animals instead." After hearing her response we became even more apprehensive. "Don't be scared. Have faith in God that he will protect you, because evil spirits possess weak people who don't have faith", my aunt said. I started begging God in my head to scare the evil spirits away, and asked him to protect me.

After this long and disturbing day, we went home tired and scared. The trip back home was odd; everyone in the car was quiet. My cousins and I were still shocked from what we had seen; it was hard taking everything in, especially at this young age. We were hesitant, but we learned that we must have faith in God; he would protect us and help us against these evil spirits. We went to El-Mania to support my grandmother, but we all got something personal out of the trip as well. I learned that your family is the only thing you can't lose. They will stand by you and support you in your misery, no matter what you do to them. Even the possessed people I saw that day had their families and loved ones with them after all the pain and humiliation they had been put through. All of that day, I was wondering why my mother would allow me to be in an environment where

such violent actions were happening. Then I understood. She wanted me to see these startling events and learn how important it is to be strong in my faith and believe that God can protect me anytime I am in need.

## *Generation Fire*

by Charley Velasquez

I woke up and all I could see were the sun's rays coming through the window, sparkling in the middle of my room. As I looked to my right, I saw my suitcase ready and packed. I dragged myself out of bed and forced myself to get ready. My mother called me downstairs and told me it was time to go. I grabbed my luggage and left with no sort of expectations about this trip to Pennsylvania. When I got to the church and said goodbye to my mother, all I could see were the smiles and excitement of the people around me. Everyone seemed to glow with happiness. Why didn't I feel happy or any sort of excitement at all? I looked in the rear view mirror of the car and saw sadness all over my face. I started to wonder why I chose to go on this trip in the first place.

I sat down inside of the church next to my close friends who were drowning in their excitement and couldn't sit still. As we waited for the chaperones to give us orders and instructions for the trip, all of my friends talked about their high expectations and how they had been waiting for this day for months now. My legs were shaking from my impatience—for the first time in my life, the thought of happiness annoyed me—and the sound of laughter made me angry. Finally, the chaperones gave us orders to board the buses. Even though I sat down surrounded by my closest friends, I felt alone. The bus proceeded and as we moved forward, I felt hopeless. I drifted away into the view outside the window. At first, all I could see were tall buildings and a grey polluted sky, but as

the bus proceeded, I began to see mountains. The light from the sky shone through the clear water in the river, whose surface reflected the beautiful green mountains. My feelings started to change. I felt comfort, love and excitement. It was almost as if my spirit was jumping inside of me. Even though I had no idea of what to expect, my spirit already knew the purpose behind this trip.

Suddenly, I began to hear a mix of voices that shouted: “Generation Fire, we are ready!” I was clueless as to why we were being called this. It was not until later that I realized fire is a symbol of strength. Once the bus stopped moving, I knew that we had arrived. I slowly got up and walked towards the exit of the bus. I got off and saw a big green field with a tremendous edifice made out of glass. The chaperones guided us through an extended hallway and I realized that we were being taken into a chapel. As I walked inside, I saw a big golden cross in the middle of the white wall, a white and black piano to the left, and a dark brown pulpit in the middle. The reflections of light cast from the surface of the cross reminded me of the sun rising over a crystal sea. I could neither focus nor pay attention to the instructions the chaperones gave us before sending us to our rooms. I did not want to leave the chapel; I wanted to stare at the cross all day. Sadly, time kept marching and the time to go to our rooms arrived.

Later in the afternoon, the chaperones announced that there would be a conference in the chapel with two youth pastors. A rush of adrenaline ran through my body. My legs trembled, my heart skipped a beat, and my mind delighted at the simple thought of returning to the chapel. The conference lasted

for about five hours, but I could barely focus on the lesson. All that mattered to me was the cross hanging on the wall. After staring at it for hours, I realized how often I let present circumstances compel me to dwell on my problems and forget the importance of hope. Being able to take this time in the silence of my own mind, I realized that faith is about having confidence and assurance about the dreams and goals that I hope to achieve. A negative frame of mind only keeps me from moving forward. Like an arrow, faith guides me towards the target's center of hope. If I don't have hope, that arrow has absolutely nothing to aim for; however, as I keep hoping, that arrow will have a larger target to hit. I learned not to allow setbacks and failures to become the focus of my life. As I focus on what I want to achieve, the hope that I have will provide the necessary strength to continue persevering and pushing forward. As I keep a positive attitude of faith and expectancy, challenges will become easier. No matter how long I have been fighting for my blessings, I know that sooner or later my season of harvest will come.

The hope within me to emerge from the darkness of my own thoughts and perceptions of what goes on around me, just like sunshine in a grey sky after a storm, helped me to shake off the negativity I embarked on this trip with. The fire inside of me was sparked and fueled me to persevere and push through some difficult times. Many obstacles might be placed on my path that could extinguish this fire, but the hope I have to accomplish my goals and be the person I want to be provides me with the energy I need to accomplish my dreams.

## *On My Way Home*

by Shulin Mei

Everything was brand new for me and my life had changed from the moment I stepped off the airplane. A gentle breeze caressed my face and my hair. A sign said: "Hi, Welcome to America". It was a wonderful day, and as the sun shone down on my face, the blue sky looked like a clear sea with cotton clouds, and held my gaze. Many different races of people approached. I was like a vulnerable child searching for suddenly lost parents. I was so confused and thought, "Will I be able to adapt to life in New York?" I kept questioning myself. Then I took a deep breath and said: "My long journey starts now, I hope everything goes well."

After almost sixteen hours spent on the plane, it was as if someone pressed a reset button on my life. This was the first time I had to face the uncertainties of a complex and new environment. On the way home, my family and I faced our first problem: transportation. We handled our luggage, down a steep, crowded staircase to the underground subway station, bumping into people on the way. We didn't know which side of the train platform we needed to be on to go in the right direction. Even though I had a map, the names of the streets and areas, such as Sutphin Blvd., Archer Ave., Jackson Heights, and Roosevelt Ave, were so strange to me, because these were the last names of famous Americans I didn't know. We were like Chinese explorers studying a map that pointed west and east all at once. All around us people in the subway station bustled by,

looking us up and down. I was embarrassed and looked at my clothes to see if there was anything dirty on them catching their attention. However, there was nothing wrong with my outfit. At that moment, one lady approached us. I thought she was an angel with a halo when she gave us the directions that we needed and helped us out. I took a deep breath, smoothed my breathing out and relaxed. Within an hour we arrived at our new home in Jackson Heights.

As new immigrants, my family and I had to adapt to the lifestyle of the United States. Thankfully, my uncle who had lived in Queens for ten years drove us around our neighborhood and helped us learn the streets, as well as the subway stations that I needed to use to get to school. When I held the subway map, it seemed taller than me; crisscrossed with lines like ribbons across all five boroughs. The different colored lines — red, blue, purple, yellow and brown — and the thickly dotted stations, which seemed to be greater in number than the stars in the sky, made me dizzy.

For the first two days, my uncle drove me to school. On the second day, I had to go home by myself. It was also my first time taking the bus by myself in New York City, and I quickly learned that it was totally different from the subway. That day, I stayed after school and talked about my studies with my counselor. When I got out of school, the sun had set and the sky turned dark earlier than usual. I still saw some students joking and playing with their friends, but I was standing alone and quiet beside the bus stop sign. As I waited for the bus, I remembered my uncle had told me that I only had to stay on it for about fifteen minutes before transferring to the subway. As the bus approached the station, I

saw that the fare for a trip was \$2.25, so I took out two dollars and a quarter from my wallet, and I attempted to jam it into the meter on the bus. When the bus driver covered the slot with his hand, and added gruffly, "coins only please," I was incredibly embarrassed. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough change, so I asked a woman with curly brown hair who was seated right behind the driver if she could help. She was my lifesaver, as she was able to exchange my dollars for quarters, while also making me feel better. As I then looked from left to right, I saw how everyone was lined up on the blue seats as orderly as students in a classroom, and all eyes were on me. The bus stopped for a while, and as I rustled around with the change, I saw some of them stare at me; some of them looked pointedly at their watches, and the people behind me shifted uncomfortably on the steps. I felt their impatience, and tried to avoid their jostling. I urgently stuffed all the coins into the meter and scuttled to the back of the bus where I hid in a corner and listened for an announcement calling out the place where I was going to get off.

As more and more people piled into the bus, I started to feel like ham in a sandwich. I held onto the strap handle and my school bag tightly, and shifted with the bus in motion. Things started to become confusing when I noticed that the bus didn't stop at every stop. Instead, it only stopped when people pressed the button and the "stop requested" sign glowed. In China, the bus stops were always announced clearly, so I was not accustomed to this situation. I looked at my watch frequently and the second hand passed even faster than the blade of a fan: 5 minutes, 10 minutes.... suddenly 15 minutes had elapsed. The sky turned

darker and darker, over streets which were growing stranger and stranger to me. Fearing that I'd been on the bus for too long, I decided to get off.

There was nobody on the street, and the snowy winter night was eerily quiet. I was as perplexed and bewildered as a child lost in the forest, and I began to wander aimlessly. The only thing I knew was that I needed to find 74<sup>th</sup> Street, but unlike on the subway, I didn't have a map to guide me. The night became colder and colder, and I soon felt frozen, even though I wore a down sweater and had a scarf around my neck. I shrank into myself and blew into my hands to warm them up. The sugar powder snow fell quietly through the darkness and landed on my hands and the street, disappearing immediately upon contact. I looked through a window at a family getting together to have dinner. I just wanted to be home as soon as possible. Suddenly, I saw the 74<sup>th</sup> Street sign hanging in the middle of an intersection, like a beacon to guide me home. Eventually, I transferred to the subway and was on my way. The trip from school to home should have taken about a half hour. On this night, it took nearly three hours, because I had gotten lost so many times.

On that journey home, when I had only been in New York for a few days, I knew just a few English words to ask native New Yorkers for assistance. When I spoke to them, based on my understanding of their responses, I managed to develop a new level of knowledge. Now, every time I take the bus, the memories of that first trip fill my head. As I slowly transition from an outsider to someone who knows her way around New York City, I realize that none of this is very

easy. Even now, I still have to “find my way” in new situations, beyond transportation, into the depths of the native culture.

## *The Knife, and What It Taught Me*

by Jannatul Rahman

We were all watching television when there was a knock on the door. After staring at each other for at least thirty seconds, I decided to get up and open it. To my surprise, it was our neighbor from the first floor, who we called “the downstairs lady” because we did not know what else to call her. I greeted her and invited her inside. Although I had a smile on my face, my heart was pounding. *Why was she here?*

I went to my room while my parents were talking to “the lady.” She stayed for about thirty minutes, then went back downstairs. As soon as she left, I ran to my parents to find out the reason for her visit. My father said we would all find out at the dinner table. The look on his face didn’t provide any hint as to whether I should be excited or not. When we finally sat down and my mother was serving us chicken *tikka* and rice, my father started to speak. The “downstairs lady” has invited us for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. My brother and I gave each other our famous raised-eyebrows look. I didn’t speak at all. “Someone needs to go to show respect to the family that invited us,” my father said. This always happens. He works at night, so naturally, he couldn’t go. And Mom is sick, so *that* was out of the question. Saju, my six-year old brother, could not go without my parents. So, in order to be respectful and nice neighbors, I was chosen to go. I, refused to go, however, unless someone else joined me. Besides, I wondered what I would do there all alone. We had only just moved

into this house during the first week of November and I didn't know any of the people who lived down there. But, the real and perhaps most influential reason for my refusal was that I did not know how to celebrate Thanksgiving. We had never celebrated Thanksgiving in Bangladesh. I only knew about the holiday because my class had discussed it in Social Studies, and I might have drawn a few seasonal turkeys in art class by tracing my hand on paper.

Although my father had been living in New York City for seventeen years, my mother, brother and I had moved to the United States only nine months before the “downstairs lady” knocked on our door with her invitation. We didn't even speak enough English to carry on a conversation with her family. However, making such arguments to my parents would not get me anywhere. I would have to attend the meal no matter what. So, I decided to be optimistic, and after trying on several salwar kameez, I decided to wear a red one with light blue flowers and lime green leaves. I chose a pair of small green earrings to wear with it and a charm bracelet that my father had given to me for my birthday. I braided my hair loosely and asked my mother if I looked good. She nodded her head while breastfeeding my one month old brother, who I kissed, before heading down. It was already past seven. Half way down the staircase, I worried about my appearance and started to debate nervously with myself as to whether I should really be going to the dinner. Would they actually like me and the way I was dressed? I don't wear tops or jeans. What if they make fun of my clothes after I leave the dinner? Thousands of questions circled in my head.

Finally, I decided to knock on their door very lightly. A little girl, probably eight years old, opened it. The smile on her face made me feel comfortable. She welcomed me inside the house and showed me the way to the dinner table. I followed her like a baby. *Here comes the big moment*, I thought to myself. When I walked into the dining room, there were four people sitting at the dinner table: the downstairs lady, her husband, and their two daughters. The lady told me to sit down in one of the empty chairs. The little girl sat right next to me.

They all started to talk among themselves, and as they did this, I began to notice the differences in our clothes. I was wearing a knee length dress with a scarf around my neck and long, loose pants while they wore full sleeved t-shirts with skinny jeans. Upon seeing this, my discomfort level went up. I kept on tucking my dress up more towards my thighs in an effort to make it look more like what they were wearing. I didn't know what else to focus my mind on. Suddenly, the oldest daughter, Selina, started to speak to me. I found out that she went to City College in Manhattan. We talked about school while we waited for dinner to be served. Although she seemed friendly, she still was a total stranger to me. I didn't know if I should talk to her freely or maintain some distance. Confusion surrounded me. What if I said something and it did not come out the way I meant it? Soon it was time to eat dinner. As I looked around the table, there were all of these "Thanksgiving" dishes that I was seeing for the first time. There was macaroni and cheese, lasagna, grilled chicken, clams and, most importantly, the turkey. It took me a while to learn the names of these things afterwards. The platters were passed between us and we served ourselves. As I put these

various types of food in my mouth, I felt the different flavors on my tongue. My taste buds tingled. However, I was afraid of the turkey. With all my heart, I prayed for someone else to serve the turkey. When I saw everyone carving out their own turkey slices, I knew I was in trouble. I didn't know how to cut the meat, but I decided to give it a try.

Using Selina's method of carving as my reference point, I held the bird with the serving fork and cut it. It was not working. I felt everyone's eyes on me and became very anxious. I tried to cut it again and failed. I decided to give it a third and final try; this time with all the force in my body. Within a flash of a second, the knife flew out of my hand and landed on the floor. I was so embarrassed that I couldn't even look up. I felt very unfit in this American family. I didn't belong at that dinner table. Frozen in time, I didn't know what to do. But soon I realized that no one was paying attention to me, so I decided to pick up the knife with a nervous smile and give it another try. This time when I tried to cut the meat, the downstairs lady began to understand my problem. When she told Selina to help me cut the turkey, I thanked God and the downstairs lady for taking care of me.

Now when I think about that dinner table, it brings a smile to my face. I was so nervous, but the experience actually taught me how to open myself up to people I do not know. After that day, Selina became one of my closest friends. Now I do not hesitate to go to their place. The incident with the knife gave me the confidence to know that I can adapt to my surroundings. From that day on, she was not the "downstairs lady" anymore; she became my aunty. I knew that

in this diverse country I would have to face situations where I might not fit in, and could no longer give into my impulse to run to my room. I would have to try to understand other people and their cultures while still being myself.

*THE END*