

Don't Ever Forget

12 Personal Essays by ACES Students

SPRING 2015

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It is that time of the year again. Time for some of you to get up and read about a significant moment in your lives. You will feel butterflies in your stomach, as cliché as that sounds. Remember: all eyes will be on you. You will feel anxious, but the good kind of anxious. You will feel like a warrior feels when he goes off to battle, a battle where he or she will be victorious. How do I know this? Because that's how I felt when I shared my slice of life with St. Joseph's College last year. You will be part of the many talented writers who have come before you. Luckily, you will have something in common with them: calling ACES home.

The ACES e-book launch is a very special event for the ACES community. It is a chance for brilliant, youthful minds to make their debut as artists. Thanks to this tradition, your writing will be known, not only at ACES, but to the campus. As a contributing writer to the ACES Blog, this experience was, in fact, an incentive and an inspiration for me to become even more fascinated with writing. It could be your incentive too. As someone who comes from an immigrant background, it is a known fact to me that everyone at ACES has something to say. It doesn't matter whether you think it is good enough. What's special about this collection is that each and every one of these stories is unique, as is every individual telling one. Never forget that. Remember this: you have a voice. Use it and let us hear it.

Thank you,

Argenis Ovalles, '17

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The Secret

by Sahar Rahmani

One day, when I was four, my father called my older brother, who was eight at the time, and me, to his room. He said he needed to speak to us about something. My brother and I had no clue as to what he was about to tell us. We both immediately thought we were in trouble. Unfortunately, that was not the case. My father then told us he had received a call from my uncle who lived in my hometown of Kabul that my mother's father had passed away in a plane crash. He said not to say anything to my mother about her father's death, because she had recently had open heart surgery and was not supposed to hear anything too exciting or tragic. My brother was upset and would not speak or play with me for several days. I, on the other hand, did not react much to the news, since I was too young to feel the loss of someone not in my everyday world.

My mother had undergone surgery because her heart had contained a small hole in it ever since she was born. She had always suffered from asthma, but she never paid much attention to it; finally, she got to the point where her life was in danger. After the surgery, she was in bed for days, unable to sit up. Due

to a doctor's order telling her to keep calm while her heart healed, my mom was unaware of her father's death for eight months.

If my mom had known what had happened to her father, she would have had a very difficult time handling things. While my mother was recovering, I always saw her reading; she had a stack of books next to her bed that kept her entertained and engaged. Sometimes my mom would read out loud to my older brother and me; my brother showed interested because he understood the stories, whereas I did not. My dad and I used to go the bookstore to buy various selections for her, since she used to finish each in one or two days. When she was feeling better, she decided to go visit her family back in Kabul. Ever since we had moved to Pakistan two years before, she had not gone back to visit them, so we all decided to go. By that point, I actually thought that my dad would have told my mom about the secret, or at least allowed my brother or me to tell her, but he had warned us again not to say anything.

We could not afford to buy plane tickets, so we had to take public transportation, which meant buses only, from Islamabad all the way to Kabul. It would be a four day trip. We had only one big carry-on bag with us. It was around two in the afternoon when we left the house. We started our journey on the public bus, which was packed with families; some of them were immigrants just like us. We rode in this overly packed vehicle for eleven hours until we got to a city that I later learned was Lahore. It was around one in the morning and

there were only small, dimly lit, old cafés near the bus station. The place we chose was worn out, with three or four tables and some old chairs in one corner. The owner of the establishment was nice enough to let us spend the night there. My mom and dad did not sleep that night; they were trying to keep my brother and me as warm and comfortable as they could. We lay between my parents with my father's winter coat on top of us; our carry-on bag became our pillow.

The next morning, we were supposed to take another bus, but the buses were full, so we had no other choice but to continue our journey on foot. It was winter at the time and at one point we walked for ten freezing hours in eight inches of snow, through the mountains. It kept snowing and it remained cold; the temperature must have been around 15-25°F. My dad was carrying my brother and the bag, my mom was carrying me. I was too young to consider what my mom had just gone through back in Islamabad and how the hike was affecting her health. However, when I asked her about it recently, she told me she sometimes had trouble breathing, mostly because of the extreme weather conditions. She also said that her vision would get blurry, so we had to stop for a break every once in a while. Sometimes when my mom felt weak and dizzy, my father would carry me while my brother held my mother's hand and walked. My father now tells me that he was very worried about my mom, but the thought of her finding out about grandfather terrified him even more. There were five or six other families traveling with us. Everyone was trudging along, trying to stay

warm. I remember clearly arriving in a small city: no cars, just empty, endless streets. I recall my mom slapping me at times; she would not let me fall asleep because she was afraid I would freeze to death. The other families did the same. Our next destination was unknown because we were walking from Lahore to whichever city or town was nearest. Everyone seemed as if they were just trying to survive, scared and worried, praying as they walked, hoping to see a car, or a bus to board. It was, in fact, terrifying. The weather was getting worse and we were in the middle of nowhere, so no one knew what to expect next. And we were exhausted.

After a half day of walking, we somehow managed to find a few cafés and a grocery and spent the night in another town. I can't quite recall how we made it to Kabul. I have hazy visions of being in a crowded bus again along with several other families. My parents told me when I was older that we eventually arrived in a city called Faisalabad. They told me the weather was warmer there and there wasn't any snow. There were restaurants as well, and my parents were very relieved after a long journey of walking. I cannot remember how I felt, but according to my parents, I was satisfied. I also asked my mother if she ever let me walk by myself during the journey. She said sometimes, when she didn't feel well, a guy who was traveling with us would carry me since I couldn't walk in the snow.

I do remember entering my grandfather's house in Kabul and seeing my grandma cry. She hugged my mom tightly, uttering, finally, "Your father left us." That was how my mother found out about my grandfather's death. She started crying. I recently asked her how she felt when she found out. She said she felt devastated and numb. The fact that she was not aware of her father's death for eight months made her angry and heartbroken at the same time. After all, she was entitled to know about it. While she was sobbing, she kept on asking: "Why?" I had never seen my mother cry the way she did then and that was what hurt us all the most. I was very young, but I still remember that scene vividly. Watching my mother have a massive breakdown, I felt older than my age at that moment; it was so intense that I was almost awakened from my childhood for a while and felt guilty that I had kept my grandfather's secret from her. In fact, I had been forced to keep silent by my father, who was now also incredibly upset. His intentions had been only to keep her calm and safe, but I knew he felt terrible.

The people in town claimed that my grandfather's plane had collided with another. Others said the plane had crashed into a mountain. There were many rumors about my grandfather's death. He was well-known in town because he was a very successful pilot. He was very kind and gentle and one of the most generous people I'd ever known in my life. He would fly passengers to their destination free of charge, knowing that most people in my country were in

desperate financial need. Some people envied him but others were close friends. In truth, the actual cause of the plane crash was sabotage. When I was about ten years old, I asked my mother what had actually happened and she told me that after one year of investigation, the people who had done it had confessed. Some of the people he worked with, who my grandfather considered his friends, had disabled part of the engine leading my grandfather to lose control of the plane during his flight. I still, to this day, find this both devastating and hard to believe, but I've learned we should be very careful who we let into our lives and who we trust. I know that my brother and I trusted my father's judgment that year. He was interested in preserving lives and sparing us all pain.

Wild Reunion

By Oleksiy Bryndzey

It happened three years ago when my best friend Vitaliy and I were reunited for summer vacation in our hometown of Tysmenytsia, in the western part of Ukraine. He had been living in Italy and I in the United States, and we'd not seen each other for a year. We have been friends since first grade and were baptized at the same church, on the same day, by the same priest.

We were very lucky that we had come back at the same time. We called each other and agreed to meet in front of the 1980's-era five story concrete apartment building his family lived in. We shared our experiences about living abroad and the language barrier we had both had to overcome in our respective adopted countries. We had both changed physically as well. Vitaliy was taller than the year before, and his voice had become deeper. His whole physical appearance had grown manlier. There were some things that had stayed the same, though: in particular, our faces. Vitaliy's cheeks were still red, his lips thin, his eyes big and round and his hair dark-brown. He still liked to tell funny stories, such as the new one about how in Italy you get grocery bags for free and he,

quite surprised, had insisted on paying for them. For my own part, well, I just thought that my hair had become darker than before!

Vitaliy and I had always enjoyed playing soccer together, riding motorized scooters, and playing cards. However, we loved fishing together the most. During our first reunion day in Ukraine, we shared with joy our memories of how we used to fish on the so-called “School Lake” near our 1st through 11th grade institution where we had spent so many days. We decided to revive the tradition and met up a few days later to go fishing. Because we were fortunate enough to have returned back to our hometown at the same time, we wanted to make this outing very special, so it would stay in our memories for a long time and we would have something further to recall. Vitaliy and I made the epic decision to go fishing where we have never fished before.

We decided to go try the forest lake, but since very few people had ever gone fishing there, it did not even have a name. We therefore gave it the nickname “Mystery Lake” (in Ukrainian, “Загадкове Озеро.”) Both the oak and spruce Lost Forest and its lake were located to the north of Tysmenytsia. It was easy to get “lost” there because of the darkness and density of the woods. We knew all of this, but we were sure we’d find the lake and catch some stellar carps and perch. We decided to give it a shot.

We decided to start our trip very early in the morning. Vitaliy had a little Honda Dio scooter but we did not take it, because there were probably no paths

in the forest that cut through to the lake. Instead, we took Vitaliy's dog Jack, a creature of uncertain breed and origin, with dark-brown fur and a khaki colored tail and legs. Vitaliy's parents had found him in the street parallel to theirs. He reminded us of a German shepherd because he triangle ears and a short, thick coat, although he was much smaller than the average German shepherd. In preparation, we packed our backpacks with sandwiches of butter, cheese and ham, and folding chairs to sit on, fishing nets and our best rods. We also took some bait: boiled corn, bread mixed with oil, and worms from the soil. We thought we had more than we needed, so we were in a good mood as we entered the forest.

At first, it seemed so green and exciting, as though the oaks and spruces had made it that way. The trees were approximately as high as a two story building and there were all kinds of tiny branches scattered on the ground. Vitaliy and I decided to go straight forward from our entry point: a small gap between the trees right by the road. As we moved deeper and deeper into the woods, the forest became darker and less stimulating as the trees became thicker and closer together. At first we thought about separating to find a way to a lake but then we admitted it was a bad idea because we might get lost.

As we walked farther and farther, our trip took an unexpected turn. All we saw was giant trees, and each of them looked exactly the same. Jack quietly followed us, checking nearly every tree out by sniffing it. Suddenly, it started to

rain. I yelled, "Vitaliy...where do we hide to not get wet?" Vitaliy called back through the falling drops, "I do not know." I looked around and everything seemed to be exactly the same in all four directions. "Vitaliy, maybe we should go back and leave the forest where we entered it?" I offered. Vitaliy was confused, and fooled around with Jack unhappily. He finally said, "There is no point. We have to get to that lake, and I think we are almost there." Even though I knew we were lost, Vitaliy's response improved my mood by increasing my enthusiasm and motivation.

We decided to wait for the rain to stop or at least lessen a bit, close to a wide, old oak tree. While we were waiting for our journey to resume, we ate our ham and cheese sandwiches and Jack joined us. The rain eventually let up. We had dried out a little and the clouds slowly dispersed, bringing on a new confidence that we would finally reach the lake. Our phones had no service anyway because of all of the trees. We started joking about what our parents might do to us when we returned. We thought that they might say the same thing, which basically consisted of yelling at us. As we continued on, mosquitos began to annoy us. We were bitten almost everywhere and Jack was their victim as well. "Vitaliy did you notice the forest seemed to change in color from dark to bright?", I asked. Vitaliy agreed, and finally we saw something which resembled a trail ahead of us; we decided it was a good sign. We checked the direction on our compass and moved forward. The path became brighter and sharper as

though somebody had walked on it before. At this point, Jack was about eighty feet ahead us. He suddenly stopped and barked. We sprinted, and when we reached him, the lake was in front of us.

From the moment we saw it, we could not wait to unpack our fishing rods and catch some big pike and perch. Jack was barking happily and we were thrilled as well. We unfolded and straightened our rods. What would the fish in that lake like? Boiled corn, bread mixed with oil, or worms, we hoped, loading different bait on each of the hooks of our three rods to see which our prey would most enjoy. We cast the lines into the lake and waited patiently, sitting on our green canvas folding chairs. Jack patiently kept an eye on our active floats and lures, too. There were a lot of juniper–gold reeds along the coastline, as well as some desiccated bushes. Every footstep we took on all of the fallen branches on the ground resulted in a brittle crunch.

We waited fifteen minutes, then thirty, and then an hour had passed. Vitaliy threw some fish feed into the water, hoping that would help. All we had to do was wait and hope for a peck. After another fifteen minutes, the floats still had not moved an inch despite the occasional calm breeze. There were no waves at all. Still staring at the water, Jack lay down and took a nap. Vitaliy started a conversation about our former soccer teammates, how they had changed and what they were doing now. I started to talk about how I had become a student at a Ukrainian Catholic School in New York. Vitaliy was at a

boy's school in Italy, one that specialized in the field of electricity. As we spoke, one of fishing floats started jerking around. I stood up from the folding chair, expecting the float to move even more rapidly but nothing happened.

Suddenly we heard the crunch of a tree branch. Jack immediately hopped up and glared at one of closest bushes. We did not pay much attention, thinking that it was a squirrel or some other small animal. But the dog continued to bark and the cracking steps become more frequent. We abruptly turned and froze. About sixteen feet from us was a perplexed, dark boar glaring, and snorting tentatively. The animal was two times as large as Jack, but the dog started growling hatefully. Behind the boar were five or six piglets who looked like baby versions of their mother. My first thought was that this entire fishing trip was a stupid idea. My friend and I stood in silence. At first I wanted to calm Jack down, but fear rendered me useless. The concept of fishing became a distant memory. The silence of those two minutes seemed to spread out for hours. All the muscles in my body were tense. Vitaliy was also standing like a sculpture. I was ready to rush to the nearest tree to climb it, and I'm sure that was what in Vitaliy's mind, when the female boar grunted and dug at the ground with its hoof. I almost flinched. It seemed from my friend's face that he was frightened and screaming inside. The boar swerved to the side of us and trotted past slowly; with piglets bouncing along behind. Fortunately, Jack did not rush at any of them, but he kept barking until they were out of sight.

We stood motionless for about a minute until the wild animals had disappeared. Then, understanding each other without speaking, we briskly moved on to pack up and leave. As folded up our rods, the food on the hook was left untouched. We left the lake and quickly walked back through the forest. More or less, we knew which way to walk. Jack led the way.

As we had anticipated in the forest, when we got home, we were badly reprimanded. What was weird was that our mothers did in fact almost say the same exact thing. They complained that we had not told them what we were doing; why we had come back so late or why we had even decided to go there. We also found out that there had been no fish in that lake for 2 years. That did not really disappoint us because we'll remember fishing there forever. How lucky we were to reunite and rekindle our friendship deep in the Ukrainian forest. And how lucky we were to escape intact.

Unchangeable Changes

By Katherine Valdez

When I think about my family and my childhood, the one memory that always comes to mind is a scene where I am walking with my brother and father in the park in front of our house in San Juan de Lurigancho, Lima. Each of the two men in my life was holding one of my hands. I was a four year old girl, and could not feel more protected than being between the two of them. I never asked why my dad looked so sad and my brother looked depressed, or why my mother did not join us.

Weeks later, I started noticing that my father was around less than usual. My mother would instead take me to his job at the men's warehouse and leave me there when she had to go to pick up new clothing orders. I liked being with my dad because I missed him on the days I was not able to see him. I started seeing my father every Sunday. At first, it was just at our house. He would come and visit with us, playing cards or chess with my brother and me, but I noticed that when my father was home, my mother was not. I liked being with my dad, but I wished mom and dad were together to play with us.

After a few Sundays at home, we started going out to the mall, amusement parks or water parks. I started to look forward to the day I would see my dad. My brother did not come anymore; he did not want to. My father started taking me to a house where I would see my mother's friend and her daughters, whom I had not seen for months. I felt a little uncomfortable, but then I started liking that place. It was not until I was a little older that I realized how much it must have hurt my mom to see me enjoying my father's new family. I guess she was afraid that I liked that woman better than her. I then understood that my father had replaced us with them.

Subsequently, I stopped going to their house and preferred staying with my brother and mom. She was really strong; I never saw her complaining about anything. My mom would get mad at things going wrong, but as her calmness and patience returned, things started to get better. I would lie down on my bed and see my mother right in front of me at her sewing machine. My eyes would close, but I knew from the sound of the machine that she was still sitting there. It was my new favorite lullaby.

Every morning my mom's yell would rouse me, and sometimes I would feel sprinkles of water on my face. I knew I had struggled to wake and my mother had had to go for plan B. I used to bolt out of bed because I knew that after waking me, she would go to my brother's room and do the same to him. I

wanted to splash him myself. Running to my brother's bedside with my mom and our black Shih Tsu, Negri, was my favorite activity of the day.

My mom always managed to have our breakfast ready so that we could eat and leave. Sometimes she would tell my brother to take me to school, then give him a *nuevo sol* coin to pay for the moto taxi that would help both of us get there faster. All it meant to my brother, however, was a tip for dropping me off; for me, it was my morning run. Since I had to take three or four steps for every one of my brother's, I was better off jogging. Although I knew that this conveyance consisted of lots of sweating, I would always smile and put on my sneakers when my mom told me he was taking me to school.

Every day after school, I would look through the window and hope to see my brother turning the corner that led to my house. He was always walking fast. I would open the door and he would pass by saying: "Hola ma, hola hermanita, hola negri" and run to the bathroom. Afterwards, he would come out and talk to us about his day, as my mom did her sewing. I would look at him and ask, "Where is my punch?" He would show me his fist, moving it closer and closer to me. My mom and I would laugh, and then he would say, "Oh, you meant your *punch!*" and he would take out the candies I'd wanted in the first place. I never learned the real name of those treats, but I now know that they are not called "punch." He made that up just to give my mom and me a regular chuckle.

My brother was the closest male figure I grew up with. He was lovely and caring, but also playful. No matter how busy he was, he always had time to play with Negri and me. I no longer felt as if I did not see my father every weekend. I was lucky because I had Anthony, who was not only my brother, but also my friend. He was the only person who could understand everything about me, because he had literally experienced the exact same things I had. Little by little, I started to care less about my father, but I did not know that my indifference might conflict with the new life I was about to begin.

In January of 2008, my father decided to take me to an interview. He said that we would soon go on a trip to Disney World. I was not really *that* excited to go, but my mom told me that it was my dad's dream and convinced me. I was ten years old at that point, and I understood that my father wanted to visit the United States. I went to the interview with him in the tall, ornate office building in Surco, downtown. I noticed him looking around, checking his watch every few minutes. He looked very serious, and I realized that this was no joke. I wondered why there was this sudden change in my father. We walked towards the service window, where a kind lady was waiting for us. My dad handed her our passports. She started asking me questions, and my father had this smile on his face that was hard to believe. She stamped our passports and said, "Have a nice flight."

It was not until we got out of the United States Embassy that my father changed completely; he grinned and held my hand tighter. My dad made a few calls, and my mother told me I was my dad's lucky charm. I did not understand what the big deal was. It had seemed like an easy process. At least that's what I thought.

In April of the same year, we went to the airport. My dad was really happy, but he was very nervous as well. The woman I had not seen for a long time came with us. My dad's siblings and his mother were there too. My father departed for his flight, and we all went home. The next day, my mom gave me the phone. It was my father. He was really excited that he was in the Big Apple. He would call us all the time, more than he ever did when he was in Peru. I did not like to talk on the phone; I just wanted to hang up and play with my friends.

When December came, I did my first communion, graduated from 6th grade, and attended prom. Then, I had a flight to take. I was going to visit my father in New York and keep him company during Christmas and New Year. I will never forget the last day with my family and friends. I was upset because my mother told me I was only going for vacation, yet everyone came to say goodbye to me.

That evening, I was, in fact, a little excited to visit New York City. But I also realized that I might not see my mom or my brother for a long time. The feeling of not knowing where I was going or how long would I stay was scary

enough, but how could I go somewhere without my brother? I had few memories of being away from his protection. Of course, I was not the only one whose parents no longer understood each other, but everyone's situation has its idiosyncrasies that make it more or less painful. Yet, only my brother and I know how things were and how things became. All of that would have to stay in the past because I was now going to a new place, to grow and to become a stronger eleven year old. I walked towards the gate ramp corridor in the airport. My mother and brother hugged me very tightly, with wet eyes, and smiled.

I boarded the airplane, and saw a few other children with somber faces. Next to me, though, there was a girl I wish I knew how to find today. She had traveled many times by plane, but she was really excited about our flight to the Big Apple. I guess she realized this was not just another flight for me, because she started spreading her excitement, talking about the white cotton candy we were going to see when the airplane reached the sky. My eyes lit up as I started imagining being close to those bright clouds, but I still wished my brother was coming along to have this new experience with me. Little did I know that life with my brother had come to an end, indefinitely, and a new life with my father awaited.

Don't Ever Forget

By Akramul Haque

I disappointed my family when I told them I was not going to my brother's wedding this past summer. We are a family of five in Brooklyn but originally we are from Bangladesh, where my brother was getting married. My family agreed to leave New York at the end of May, at the same time as my Public School Athletics League (PSAL) cricket matches. I was the captain of the team, which had a very good reputation throughout the city, and our squad had been playing really well. I could not just abandon my team. Over the past four years, I had worked so hard to build a strong squad. Still, when I told my family that I wanted to stay behind to finish the season, both they and my neighbors wondered out loud if cricket was more important than a brother's wedding.

When I first came to New York City four and a half years ago, there was not much for me here. I had left most of my family behind in Bangladesh and felt like life was not going to be the same without them. For the first couple of months, I talked to my family over the phone every single day. However, as I started getting busier with school and a burgeoning personal life, I unintentionally stopped talking to them. Days became weeks, and weeks became months.

Large gaps of time went by between our phone calls. There were moments when I saw my parents talking to my other family members on the phone, but I did not ask to speak to them. This continued until I spent time with them in that summer of 2014. I truly had not realized why I'd been distant, or that I'd only been using cricket as an excuse not to go.

After a lot of talking and arguing in New York, I had finally decided to go see the rest of my family and attend the wedding. As a brother, this was a responsibility for me, an obligation to share these moments with my family. I was not going because I wanted to see the rest of them. It had been four and half years since I had seen my three sisters, three nieces and four nephews and the many other relatives. In 2010, when I arrived in New York, I only had two nieces and three nephews, but earlier this year my oldest sister gave birth to a beautiful baby boy and my youngest sister gave birth to a baby girl. It was going to be my first time meeting them. At the airport, I was reminded of the day I had left my family. I suddenly pictured all the things that had happened that day. My family was standing behind the glass doors, with tears falling from their eyes. Those memories changed my mood quickly and I just wanted to get on the plane. After I took off from JFK, I was excited and wanted the plane to fly faster so that I could see them all. It took around twenty-four hours to get to my homeland's capital city, Dhaka. As soon as I landed, however, my eagerness was tempered; I did not like the thick and dusty air that smelled of toxins. It made breathing

difficult, and standing outside made my skin feel as though it would be burned. Those first few days were such a challenge as I adjusted to what was once my native environment; I was even thinking already of returning to New York.

When I got to my village from the airport, I saw the familiar faces of my mom, dad, and my two brothers from back in Brooklyn, but I really wanted to see my sisters. Finally, I saw my middle sister, Ruma Yesmin, standing there. Her eyes were wide open and her face was full of excitement and joy. She ran toward me and gave me the biggest hug. Then there were her two beautiful children, a boy and a girl. They also came running and gave me hugs like I was the most important thing in the world. Still, I did not feel complete because my two other sisters were not there. After a few days, they arrived and the house was full of joy, happiness, love, care, dancing, and singing. I was also introduced to my newborn baby niece and nephew. The moment I saw them, my world turned upside down. There is nothing so beautiful as having those babies held close to your heart. We all played with them ecstatically for hours.

Eventually, every person in my extended family arrived to see me: my cousins, aunts, uncles and most of all my brothers-in-law. To me, my brothers-in-law are as important as real brothers. They took me along on different wedding-related shopping errands to the mall and markets and made me a responsible member of the family by assigning me tasks, such as going to relatives' houses to deliver invitations. I felt nothing but loved.

Earlier that month when I was still in New York, I had heard a few times over the phone that my family was looking for a girl for my brother to marry. Traditionally, most of the marriages in Bangladesh are arranged. So I started to help my family to search for a girl. I called the job, "Looking for Miss Right." One day, after seeing many fine candidates around Dhaka, we stumbled upon a family that we really liked. Also, my brother and the girl liked each other; an added benefit! Then there were the arrangements for the marriage itself. With all of this excitement now building toward the wedding, I thought to myself: *Is this what I almost missed out on all of those days when I was thinking I would not come?*

During the wedding events, I was introduced to new people, but also busy with the work of the wedding. I was with my sisters and their children most of the time. My niece and nephews did not want to do a single thing without me. Breakfast, lunch, shower, dinner; they even shared the same bed with me. They are all under twelve years old. Spending time with them made me realize that this is the life I was supposed to have, surrounded by the people who love me the most. Everything I did with them became the best memories of my life. I was there for only two months but in those two months, the things I learned from my sisters and their husbands made me realize where I come from and where I belong. In particular, my brothers-in-law gave me personal advice and tried to point out what is right and wrong. They told me what they see in me. I can tell

that they carry a lot of hopes for me, and are motivated to see me succeed. They told me that if I properly utilize my attitude and my personality, I could become a great person. My sisters were also there for me all the time. All the time! They showed me the love I did not get for four and half years. They gave me the care that I never realized that I was missing in New York, and they made me sure that I belonged to them. There is no better feeling.

Life is short and complicated, but defining experiences can put everything into focus. Now I know why I did not want to visit my family at first. I was separating myself and becoming an isolated person, which I realize today, but I would not have if I hadn't visited my country this year. I was busy with what New York offered me: friends, sports and parties, girls --- I thought those things were enough. But I learned that above all, you should never forget who you are and where you come from. There are going to be many changes in life, but one thing you should never do is to let go of your family. Their love is irreplaceable.

Blinding Coat with Bloodstains

By JiaHuan Lin

I was a five-year-old girl in the year 2000. I remember my age and the year clearly, because that was the year my younger brother was born, and I am five years older than him. My family had just moved from NanJing City back to my hometown of LianXing, a small village located at the foot of a hill. My father went out to deal with his business problems a lot. My mother stayed home to take care of my little brother and me. My brother was just an infant who cried in his wooden cradle, the one I used to sleep in when I was younger. The cradle rode forward and backward, helping me to fall asleep easier. I cherish the memory of that experience. A small golden bell jingled from the top of the cradle. Seeing my brother in the cradle reminded me how much I loved it.

One day in that same year, I heard some noises outside the house while I was watching cartoons on a black-and-white television. The noises disturbed me. I didn't want to leave my TV program, but I was curious. I decided to go out of the house to see what had happened. Further down the street, mother was quarreling with a woman that I didn't know. They were shouting and many bad words spilled from their mouths. It made me tense. There were a few bystanders surrounding them, whispering to each other. This part of my memory

is hazy because I don't know now what they quarreled about, nor did I then. I didn't even recognize the face of the person shouting at my mother. I just knew that I was scared of the high-pitched sounds they both made. Then, I saw my mother's face. It was red and tears fell from her eyes, down her nose, cheeks, mouth and chin. I felt like crying. I didn't know why, but the feeling was pure heartache.

My mother called to me to find some help when she saw me standing in front of the house. I was afraid. I didn't know where to go, but I began to run. I felt helpless, like a lost child in the street. I wept and mumbled, "Can someone help me? Someone hurt my mom." No one answered. Tears obstructed my view. The road, the houses, and the people in front of me in the village became fuzzy, as I was looking through a window on a rainy day. People passed by me with no signs of emotion. They ignored me and I hated them for it. Why didn't they help me? Why were they so stingy? Now, I realize that maybe they were not being mean, but maybe my anxiety and dread caused me to misunderstand them. I continued to run. Suddenly, an idea came to my mind --- the neighborhood committee! I could go there for assistance! The committee was in an office in a building on the back side of the hill. Nowadays, I don't even remember the path to the neighborhood committee, but at the time I knew the way without thinking. After I got there, I asked the staff in the building to help me.

These memories have disappeared like missing puzzle pieces, but one thing I know is that I cried for a long time.

When we ran back to my house, some policemen and a few neighbors were gathered around a police wagon. Some women in their thirties and forties stood there, gossiping about the incident. One of the women held a baby in her arms. She looked at me and turned back to talk to the other women beside her. She seemed to be gloating and laughing at me. I was becoming angry. I looked back at her with cutting, sulky eyes. I would have killed her with my glare if I could have. A few minutes later, the neighbors began to disperse. Then, I realized that my mother was not there. I couldn't find her. I had no idea where she was. No one told me anything. Then, I saw the only thing she had left: a coat with some bloodstains on it. The coat was pinkish white in color and had been washed many times, so the color was fading. The bloodstains shone bright in the bleached-out section of the coat my eyes fell upon. I knew it was my mother's garment, but where had the bloodstains come from? I panicked. I told myself that the blood couldn't be hers, that perhaps I had just scared myself. Fourteen years later, the coat stains are still very distinct in my memory. Every time I think back to this event and that coat, I shiver.

At that time, not everyone had phones, and a five year old girl like me wouldn't have known how to use the land line. I couldn't contact anyone and I

didn't have any idea who to contact anyway. What could I do? I had no idea. I walked back into the house to take care of my little brother.

Soon, night came. The people in the street started heading home to have dinner with their families. After dinner, I knew that these families would be sitting around their tables together talking about their day, their jobs, the news, the weather, the funny things that had happened, or maybe just telling. They were having fun. But where was I? I was in my bedroom with my baby brother. The house was empty and dark. I felt cold and was trembling. It could have been because the temperature decreased at night or it might have been because I was not comfortable with this new level of loneliness. I think I cried for a while, and then I fell asleep. I can't remember how I felt before I finally drifted off. I have heard that the brain chooses to forget some things. Did I really forget or did I choose to forget? I don't know.

The next day, my mother came home with a wound on her face. She looked tired. Her face was pale and her complexion looked terrible. Her eyes were red and a little swollen. She said nothing about the incident that had occurred. She was calm, but looked somehow different than usual. I didn't know what to do. Should I talk to her? But what would I say? I did nothing.

A few years later, my father went to NanJing City to develop his small business and my mom took my little brother with her to ZhangJiaJie to live with my younger aunt. They left me at my second aunt's house. I didn't understand

why they didn't take me with them and I didn't ask. However, my aunt created a white lie to comfort me. I received some information about that street incident years later from a conversation she had with my grandmother. The woman who had quarreled with my mother was a relative of my grandfather. She had been arguing with my mother about a land issue. Her grandfather and my father's grandfather were blood brothers. They had owned a piece of land, which they eventually had divided. When he died, my great-grandfather had left some sections of the land to my grandfather, and my grandfather in turn gave the disputed land to my father. My mother had taken care of this land when my father went out to handle his business. This woman said we had occupied some of her property. This was the cumbersome and burdensome world of adults to which I was being introduced.

As a nineteen year old girl now, I realize that my mother was going through a tough time in 2000. I understand why she didn't talk to me about the fight --- probably because she thought that a naive little child couldn't understand the complexity of the situation.

Each morning, I see a woman in her early forties with wrinkles around her eyes. She wakes up early in the morning to prepare breakfast for her two children. She cooks their favorite food. She buys milk and puts the milk on the table. She isn't young anymore. The wrinkles have spread across her face.

Even though the time and tide have taken away her beauty, she is still my beloved mom.

I imagine that if I could go back in time, I would have done something to comfort my mother on the day of her fight, even if I could have just hugged her. But I need to face the fact that time will not move in reverse. I can never go back to change or prevent anything that has already happened. I am not a girl with super powers. I need to continue going forward.

Divya Dham Mandir

By Davinder Kaur

Temple is one of my favorite places. I love to visit at least once a month because I can forget about all my difficulties or find solutions to them. Before coming to New York, I used to wonder whether New York had Hindu temples like those in India. I am not Hindu, but since I grew up in Delhi, which is surrounded by so many Hindu temples, I started visiting them. There are not any restrictions against Non-Hindus going into temple. I learned about the temples from one of my best friends, Neetu, a Hindu, and I initially started going to temple when I was in 5th grade. I still remember the day when I stepped into a temple for the first time. It was the month of festivals. Neetu always used to come to school wearing a small red dot, which looked so nice on her, in the middle of her forehead. One day I asked her why she had it because even I wanted to wear one and she said, "It is the symbol of blessings from God" and that she usually received it from the priest when she went to temple. I asked her if she could also take me to the temple and that was the day when I saw it all for the first time and was totally amazed by it.

In India, there are many temples and often they are located three or four blocks from each other. However, when I came to New York, I visited the “Divya Dham Mandir” temple in Woodside, Queens, which is about ten blocks away from my house. It is the biggest Hindu temple in New York, and was created by the Indian community here.

As I reached the front gate on 56th Street, I felt that the outside structure didn't seem much like a temple. In fact, it looked more like a warehouse. This is because the temples I have seen in India are always decorated with lights and flowers and most of them are made out of white marble and have domes or steeples on their roofs. I didn't see any of this outside of Divya Dham Mandir. I saw only a small, arched copper-colored gate located in the center of a non-descript, one-story building with industrial window grates. On top of the gate there was a board saying, “Welcome to Divya Dham Mandir”.

However, the moment I walked through that gate, I fell in love and was overcome by the temple's beauty. I have never seen a beautiful *mandir*, or temple, like that before. It is so huge that it will probably take any new visitor the whole day to discover and study all of the images and idols, and their history. The first thing that I saw was Shivling, the holy symbol of Hinduism. It is designed in a round elliptical shape and the whole structure is made out of black stone. It was taller than me (when I first visited, I was around fifteen and my height was just a little more than five feet, so, probably the Shivling is seven or

eight feet tall.) It was placed under a huge chamber created with Rudraksha beads. As I made a right turn, I saw an open cabinet, which had little box shelves in it to put your shoes in. At a Mandir, one must take off his or her shoes before entering the front porch. All Mandirs have a boundary you cannot cross wearing footwear. After taking off my slippers, I washed my hands and walked towards the front porch of the temple, which had a big metallic copper bell hanging from the ceiling. All devotees must ring the bell before entering or leaving the porch to mark their arrival and departure. This is always fun for me because I love the sound and also the echoes.

Divya Dham Mandir has many *murtis*, or idols, of the gods. In Hinduism, there are more than three million gods and I had never seen a temple with idols, pictures, and paintings for every one of them. But Divya Dham Mandir has all these murtis and they are painted in different colors like blue, green, red and brown and decked with artificial jewelry. It was so surprising for me to find out that there is a temple in the world that has all three millions gods' murtis and they all look so beautiful at night, glowing and shining so bright. One of my favorite murti is also the largest and it is located in the middle of the temple. It is a murti of "Ma Durga" (the godmother). It is special to me because it is designed differently than all the others, with ten arms, which symbolize her protection of devotees in all directions. She has three eyes --- the third one is located in the center of the forehead --- and they represent the moon, the sun and fire. In each

hand she is holding a different weapon, and in one hand, a lotus flower. The weapons include a “Sudarshana Chakra,” which is basically a spiked golden band that spins around her index finger, symbolizing the whole world spinning around her (she is a commander of all that is happening), a sword signifying knowledge as sharp as the blade of the sword (free from all doubts) and a bow and arrows symbolizing energy. So basically her whole image symbolizes power and divinity.

As I entered the front porch of the temple, I saw a bunch of people, all dressed in the traditional Ghagra-Choli, which is common for Gujarati people from the western coast of India. It felt like I had come to a colorful forest. I knew there was something happening in the Mandir that day because whenever there are people wearing nice, shiny clothes there, it means an event is taking place or they are celebrating some festival.

I continued walking through the Mandir, capturing images of all the incredible idols, paintings and sculptures on my camera. While looking around, I came across a place that stirred me even more, a place that I have only seen in the mountains of India. It was a cave with a narrow entrance, symbolizing the Vaishno Devi shrine (a manifestation of the mother goddess or Durga). Before you enter it, there is a bulletin board explaining the history behind the cave. It is almost fifteen feet deep. When I entered, it was dark. I ran my hands along the big stone wall. I kept walking until I saw some light coming through. Inside, I

saw three big godmother idols: Mata Kali, Mata Lakshmi, and Mata Sarasvati. Mata Kali is known as the goddess of death, the death of ego and demons. Mata Lakshmi is known as the goddess of wealth and beauty and she has four hands and stands on a lotus flower. Mata Sarasvati is known as the goddess of wisdom and knowledge. People say that getting *darshan* or blessings from these goddess is equal to the darshan of all three million gods. In the cave there is also an eternal flame that was brought specially from India on a series of boats, which took many years. The flame burns day and night and is associated with holy shrines all over India. The beautiful fragrance of sandalwood filled the cave. I prayed there and left through the exit tunnel. Some people sit there and meditate or pray for a long time. As I stepped out, I saw a giant murti of Lord Shiva. He was dressed in a Cheetah print cloth and holding a three-pronged trident, also known as *trishul*. It symbolizes his three powers: will, knowledge and action. He was shown with a snake curled around his neck and with matted hair with a crescent moon on it. Under this idol was a sign saying: Lord Shiva, the creator of the world. A few steps from there was a large hall, designed for devotees to sit in, do puja (pray) and celebrate festivals. Nearby was a small walkway to go to the priest who was standing in the front of the biggest idol of the god to get *Prasad*, or, the sacrament. The priest of the temple usually gives Prasad, which is pudding, fruits, sweets, candies or dry fruits, all of which are considered holy in this context.

While I was taking the prasad, I heard loud Gujarati music. The people I had seen when I had entered the front porch started to get together in a big circle to dance. I was kind of surprised because I had never seen anything like it back in India, so I asked the priest about it. He told me they are doing *Garba*, a typical Gujarati dance that they do on Navratri, a weeklong festival considered a holy week. Hindus cannot eat meat or fish, especially during this holy week. People from all over India who believe in Hinduism celebrate this week and dance to show the *Mata* how happy they are in her shrine.

That first day was a wonderful experience for me. I have never seen a temple as beautiful as this, and the peaceful feeling that it gives my soul keeps me going there at least once a month.

A Day In Aqol

By Abdo Mozeb

I grew up in a small village in Yemen where everyone knows each other. In the village, my friends and I used to go on wild adventures every single day. Sometimes we went down into the valley so we could enter the forest; on other occasions, we would climb the mountains. Usually, we reached home only after dark and our moms would beat us and tell us not to stay out so late, but the next day we would do it again, in spite of their scolding.

In the early morning of September 19th, 2003, my friends and I met up at the front of Alsalam, the village store. Alsalam sells groceries such as eggs, flour, and candies to the people in the village. We started to discuss where we were going to go that day. The sky was clear and the village was quiet. We finally agreed to go and play soccer at the top of Aqol Mountain. Aqol is a huge mountain covered with all sorts of different plants, including cacti, sweet lavender and curry plants. Farms growing corn and wheat fan out from the mountain. To get to the mountain you have to venture through many of these farms; we would have to sneak through these properties to get to our destination. At that time, we

were seven and eight years old, so we didn't care about trespassing, but we didn't want to be stopped by the farmers. We decided to climb the mountain from the west side where no one would see us.

At the bottom of the mountain I looked up in awe at its size. The peak seemed attached to the sky. I asked myself if we could climb to the top before noon. The side we chose to climb was very dangerous because there were slippery rocks and snakes. Ali, one of my friends, said, "We have to race to the top to see who is the best climber among us." All my friends agreed and we started the race. As ascended the mountain, we faced more huge rocks that created a wall, blocking our way. My friends and I scaled the rocks easily, like mountain goats, hopping from one rock to another, looking for the safest and easiest way to slip through the wild thicket. When we found ample passage, they sneaked through foliage, branches and rocks, making their way farther toward the mountain's peak like eager reptiles. Halfway through our race, I paused and looked down. I saw the picturesque panorama of farms and villages stretched down along below and beyond the mountain in both directions. The farms extended in the green and gold of corn and wheat that continued until it reached the neighboring mountain. The sky was bright blue, without a single cloud, and the soft, fresh wind brushed against my face. I called out to my friends to stop and take in the view, but they thought that I was trying to distract them so I could win the competition. I began lunging forward, dodging and scrambling again.

When we reached the peak of the mountain, the sun was at its highest point. It was hot and I could see the village boiling below like a mirage in the desert. We couldn't start our soccer game because of the heat, so we sat under an Amur Maple until the temperature dropped. We lay in the shade, talked and joked for a little while. When it got cooler, we played soccer for a couple of hours until the sky suddenly grew dark. We realized we were in trouble just as the sky began to burst. The rain cooled us, as it rained harder and harder. We ran to hide under the tree again but this turned out not to be a good idea because it was only good for blocking the sun's light, not the hard rain. We decided the only thing to do was to run back to the village. As we were running toward the side of the mountain, we saw a small house that looked like a nest. Quickly, we changed our plan and ran toward it to wait there until the rain stopped.

Our nest was made of old stones stacked on top of each other. There was nothing between the rocks, nothing to hold them in their place. They were just balanced on top of each other. There was no door in the stones or furniture inside. We welcomed ourselves in and, as we entered the nest, we saw a man sitting in the corner. He was in his thirties and we'd never seen him before. He was wearing a white robe and a black coat. His beard and mustache were thick, covering his entire mouth. His face was so skinny that I wondered if he had eaten any time recently. He was sitting quietly, staring straight at us with his hunting rifle next to him. We were scared and we thought to dash back outside,

but he told us to sit down, if we wanted to. We had no choice because we couldn't go outside and make much progress in the downpour. We sat near each other and we felt our own hearts beating from fright. The man started to ask us questions about who we were and what village we were from. Eventually, we answered every question he asked. The man then told us that he had known our parents for a long time. After we heard those words, our fears evaporated and we began a conversation with him.

While we were conversing, a small Arabian catsnake must have appeared from a hole between the rocks behind where we were sitting, but my friends and I didn't see it. Soon enough, the man saw it. He screamed at us, "Get out of here." We scrambled outside of the nest. When we were waiting outside, we heard two loud gunshots from inside. We guessed that the man had killed the snake, but he came running outside and went behind the structure to see where the snake had slithered off to. The creature was nowhere to be found, so the man went back inside and we followed him.

Eventually, the rain stopped and when we stepped outside again, we observed that everything was lush and we could smell the soil. We thanked the man for giving us shelter and for saving us from the venomous beast. Then we headed home.

When we reached the village, we each went to our homes terrified of what our parents might say and do to us. The next day, I met with my friends and

each of us described the punishment we had received from our parents for returning home very late and very wet. The punishments are irrelevant. Climbing mountains made us stronger, so these rebukes were like the smallest rocks along the slope. We moved right past them.

An Uncommon Meeting

By Sompohi Baya

I was raised by my mother in a small, French speaking town in Ivory Coast, West Africa. At a certain age, I knew for sure that I had a father, but I had no clue as to where he was or why he wasn't there for my sisters and me. A horrible civil war the exploded in December 2011. My mother, worrying for my future, found my father and begged him to save my life by taking me out of the country to live with him. He reluctantly accepted. I was seventeen years old.

Once here I discovered that my Father had no interest in me. He constantly beat me, starved me and treated me like his slave. I was allowed to eat only once a day and couldn't spend more than ten minutes in the bathroom each day. I had no heavy coat to protect myself from the cold when he would send me to the supermarket to buy food. He would strike me every time I mistakenly bought something that wasn't on his list. I lived in fear and pain every moment of every day. Every second spent with him was like living in Hell. And I couldn't do anything to stop him.

One day, after being beaten for almost an hour, I decided to run away. I

had nowhere to go and was living on the street. Two police officers found me on the sidewalk and asked me several questions to which I had no answers since I couldn't speak English. They took me to Covenant House, which is a shelter for "at risk" individuals under the age of 21.

Covenant House consists of two four-story buildings facing each other on 41st St in Midtown Manhattan. It appears very quiet from the outside but it was unbelievably loud indoors. A multitude of kids of different ages were living there for different reasons. Some were runaways trying to save themselves from dangerous relatives and others were there because they felt they needed a break from their everyday life for a while. The living conditions there were terrible. I had no phone to get in touch with my mother and no money to take care of myself. Last but not least, I found out soon enough that I was only allowed to stay there for a month, and no more. I was extremely afraid of going back into the cold weather outside where anything could happen to me.

I had to complete a workshop program that was mandatory for all individuals living in Covenant House. I was there from 8:00 am to 12:30 pm participating in a program, in English, of which I could not understand one word. In order for me to improve my language skills, I started reading a book that was meant to teach French to English speakers. It was not really the greatest way to learn a language, but at least I could find a few English words in its dictionary

when I needed to express myself.

A few days after my arrival in this shelter, in March, I was required to go through a series of medical exams. An appointment at the hospital was already scheduled so that I could have my records updated. Since dates are written differently in French, I got confused and showed up at the hospital at the wrong time. I quickly had to run back to my workshop program at Covenant House for an important meeting we had with volunteers coming to encourage us to go forward with life.

Once there, I met a volunteer who had no one to talk to. He was about 5 feet, 6 inches tall and was dressed all in black, with black and white sneakers. He was in his sixties and smiled and spoke smoothly and articulately to me, so that I could understand his words. He seemed nice. He started asking me questions as soon as we sat down. After he realized that I could only speak French, he tried to ease my hardship by speaking that language. He was from Winnipeg, Canada and said that he could remember his French from High School. After I explained my story to him, he was touched and wanted to help me. He gave me his wife's email address and asked me to email them to set up a time when we could meet and talk further. Too perfect to be true right? I honestly thought it was. The staff constantly warned us about malicious people hanging around the shelter. However, I said to myself that there was no harm in

writing him, so I sat down with a counselor and emailed him. He responded, asking me to meet him and his wife at a restaurant the following day. I was so nervous about meeting them that I couldn't sleep. I was petrified but also full of hope that they could guide me out of my horrible situation.

Eight hours later, the sun was up and I was ready to find my way to that restaurant. One of the staff advised me to first check each street number from 41st to 52nd, turn left, and then look for the name of the avenue that corresponded to the one in the address, and then find the number on the building. I meticulously followed her instructions and got there on time. I recognized Max, the volunteer, right away, from across the street. He was with a thin, lightskinned lady. She had short red hair with bangs. Once I arrived, we shook hands and entered the restaurant. I was glad we were meeting in a public place. I had already practiced my safety phrase in case anything unruly happened. "Help, I am in danger!" The kids at Covenant House had taught me those words.

We were settled at a table in the middle of the restaurant. I faced the street while they faced me. Sitting right next to each other, they kept on questioning me about my past, my present and my ambitions. It felt like a police interrogation. They wanted to know everything about me, even my thoughts and feelings. It was hard to talk about the horrible things I had been through, but it

was like a pain reliever at the same time. After I finished speaking about how lovely my mother had been to me my whole life, Caren stood up and walked towards me. I was overcome with fear when I saw her walking towards me in the same manner my father would when he discovered I had used his phone to call my mother in Africa. She stopped and gently squeezed herself into the seat next to me, held my hand firmly and told me that she was willing to be a good surrogate mother to me in this country, just as my mother is to me in Africa. Tears started rolling down my face. I couldn't stop myself. I am sure the other customers wondered what could be causing me so much sorrow, but I had to give the stress that had befallen me in recent months an outlet. I was so grateful to Max and Caren for trying to at least comfort me, although I had no idea what they were willing to do for me.

They helped me start the most amazing journey of my life.

Today I am a proud young African woman attending college with the ambition of becoming a pharmacist. The trip to meet Max and Caren felt like going into the wild because it was a decision that I was owning; without knowing what the outcome would be, I mustered the courage to try it. Was my decision to meet with them the right one? I think it was the best one I have ever made!

Drawing Flowers in a Punishment Room

By Lingling Liang

When I was very young, I lived in a small town in China with my grandparents. In my memories, the most distinct thing that I can recall is that we had a room that had nothing in it except for a chair. When I did something wrong, I was forced to sit in that chair until dinnertime came. For most children, it only takes being locked in a room once to stop them from doing anything “bad” again and keeps them under their parents' control. But I am not a timid child. Since the room that my grandparents had prepared for my reprogramming had light and a window, it was not dark, even at nighttime. I was never scared of being locked in that punishment room. For me it was more like a playroom or a place where I could be alone.

Even though I haven't been there in a long time, I can still see the room clearly. It was a small freestanding structure in the backyard of our house. Both the roof and the ceiling were made of earth toned terracotta tiles, with two wooden beams for support. The brick walls and the gray black cement floor were typical of traditional, old style Chinese rooms. Each year, my grandpa repainted the brick walls so they would look a little less worn.

I would also sometimes play games with other children in the punishment room when I wasn't in trouble. We would imagine it was a big house and one of us was the owner who wanted to sell it; another was the customer who came to look at or buy the house. We pretended everyone was rich and really loved the house; then we haggled over the house and everything in it.

Even more than playing with my friends, the most prominent thing that I remember about the room is that, once, I locked myself in it. It was not because the lock was broken or I locked it by accident; I shut myself in for a reason. My grandfather loves flowers; our backyard was a sea of them. In China, we believe that various flowers have specific, special meanings. In the garden, there was one particular flower called that my grandfather spent the most time caring for and loved the most. This flower was a symbol of good luck. It was bright red, with many full petals crowded around its center. Because it was so beautiful and cherished, I wanted to draw a picture of it as a gift to my grandfather. I planned to do it secretly. One day, after my grandfather left home, I brought my drawing supplies to the backyard. At first, I just sat on the ground, looking at the flower and drawing it. As time passed, I felt uncomfortable sitting on the ground this way and could not draw the flower well. So I decided to bring the plant to a table where I could sit and look more closely at it and sketch and shade the image more comfortably.

Since I knew that this was the flower that my grandfather treasured most, I moved everything carefully. I didn't think it would be a problem for me to bring a potted flower to the nearest table in the backyard. There was only one flower in the pot; it didn't look cumbersome at all. But when I picked it up, it was much heavier than I had expected. Still, I didn't want to give up; I wanted to bring it to the table. I moved carefully, step by step, paying attention to the ground to make sure that nothing was in front of me to make me stumble. Time passed slowly and I started to feel tired. But there were only a few more steps to reach my destination.

Suddenly, somebody came into the garden and yelled my name: "Lingling, where are you?" This person was my grandmother. She really scared me, and I dropped the pot. We heard a thud, and a crack. Soil spilled all over the ground, and the flower just lay there, lonely and forlorn. Grandma followed the sound and came to me. She saw the accident, and it terrified her for a moment because she knew my grandfather adored that plant. Her mouth fell open in shock. She could not believe that I had taken my grandfather's beloved flower, and injured its delicate petals. I knew that I had done something wrong or at least deeply problematic. While my grandmother was still thinking about what she could do to save the flower, I snatched up my pencils and paper and ran, locking myself into the punishment room before grandfather could come back

home.

I cannot remember what happened after my grandfather came home and saw the broken flower. I think he must have wanted to kick me out of our home and never let me back in. I cannot remember what I did after I locked myself in the room. But there is a picture hanging in the middle of our house of the special potted flower that my grandfather loved so much. I think I drew that picture after I locked myself in the room. The picture is very simple, and it doesn't even look exactly like a potted flower, but I know that I was the artist. I vaguely remember that when I gave the picture to my grandfather, he was enjoying his tea, sitting in the garden. His special potted flower was still there. When I saw the flower, I felt relieved that I hadn't killed anything.

Me, Myself and Mom

By Alcée Benjamin

I've seen and experienced things that I wish I could erase from my memories, or better yet change altogether. Life is, in some way or another, hard for many of us, but we also try to make the best of bad situations. My dad left when I was only six; in his phone calls to us, he would swear that he would return but here I am today, twelve years later, pretty much fatherless. Since my father departed, the family has struggled to keep our heads above water. My mother became the only one to care for her two growing daughters. She was the one to feed us, put clothes on our backs, shoes on our feet, pay for our education. She was everything; the very thing that kept me and my sister alive. Thinking about all the things my mom has done for us, and still does for me, brings tears to my eyes, but it also makes me bitter. I feel anger towards my father. Sure, he resented me for not being a boy and was ambivalent about having children, but he was still my dad. Yet, apart from our disadvantageous social-economical status, life was still pretty good. The earthquake changed everything, however.

I was born and raised in Haiti but, unfortunately, I couldn't stay. On January 12, 2010, an earthquake shook my country and left it in rubble; we found

ourselves in even worse conditions than we had before. Everything seemed to have stopped. There was just too much going on at once. The very air was buzzing with grief, the smell of the dead, the screams of those in pain and those lamenting the death of their lost ones. The ground was covered in dust and blood and pieces of collapsed buildings. Yes, many things were going on, but it was our *world*, in a sense, that had stopped.

I'm happy to say that I can consider myself lucky. January 12th was a school day and I usually had to wait on my sister before heading home. We always traveled home together; we had to. It was safer. The streets weren't safe and I was too young to get home alone; also Haiti is notorious for its kidnappings. As usual, I wanted to head home and my sister, being my complete opposite, wanted to stay and 'chill' with her friends. But she relented, and in one hour, we were home. That's when it happened. I heard it coming from afar. At first, I thought it was the electricity going off again, but then the earth started to shake. The house started to sway; it was ringing in my ears as my whole body vibrated with the floor. And I started running, unsteadily, but I did my best. I didn't run out of fear or panic; I ran because I knew what was happening and I knew that my best friend wasn't safe. She lived on a cliff, close to a ravine. I knew the earth would give with the impact and that her house would go down with the soil and stones. I was relieved when I got there and saw that she was safe. Everything was OK, or so I thought.

Thinking about this day or talking about it is difficult. Sure, I wasn't affected like others were. My house was still standing, my family was safe and I didn't see or experience the horrors that others did. My mom usually came home late because finding a bus in the evening was hard. But she usually came home before the stars were out. Imagine my anxiety and fear when my mom and my little brother didn't show up. I wanted to scream but seeing that my sister and cousin were crying I decided to toughen up. *I won't sob*, I told myself. *Mother will be safe. She has to be.*

No amount of optimism kept the dark thoughts and bad scenarios from seeping into my mind. What would happen if I lost the one person who couldn't be replaced? The one person who's always wanted the best for me. The one who's always pushed me to be a better person. Who would I run to when my sisters were vexing me or when nightmares plagued my dreams? Who would sit next to me when I'm watching a scary movie? Then the regrets came. I started to regret not being the A+ student she wanted me to be. I started to regret not trying hard enough in school because maybe she was right: maybe I was as smart as those kids she wanted me to emulate. Maybe I could have spent less time talking and laughing in class and more time focusing on my studies. These thoughts were pounding through my head but I didn't weep. I had to stay strong and hopeful. So I waited.

It grew dark and I watched the news on my phone. My country was a big pile of debris. The death toll was beyond imaginable numbers. We were yet again plastered on international TV because of an unfortunate happenstance. It was now 11 pm. My mom and my brother were still missing. In my head, I kept chanting: *do not cry; they will be fine*. A few minutes past twelve, there she was: covered in dust in her red business suit, helped by my brave little brother and our neighbor. That's when I started wailing, freely and shamelessly. My mother was safe. She was delirious and her blood pressure was acting up, but she was alive.

They say that when your life is about to end, you witness the happiest moments of your life. If that day had been my last, and it easily could have been, the memories I'd have seen would've been of me reading in our small living room, sitting in the chair closest to the wooden cabinet full of books, away from the noise. Or just sitting there to cry or seethe over what had been said or done to me. I would see myself sitting in the gallery, at night, avidly taking in the stories and riddles my grandpa would feed to me. I would see the dining room --- the place where all of us would huddle and just laugh and laugh into the night. There would be countless memories flashing before my eyes, each of them dear and irreplaceable. I keep those who died and those who lost their loved ones in my heart. And every day, I wake up grateful to whatever it was that kept me here in this world.

It wasn't long before I traveled to the U.S. On March 13, 2010 my plane landed on the ground that would become my new home. But something was missing; my mom was staying behind. She figured that it was too late for her to start over: she'd support us from Haiti. I remember her like it was yesterday. We were at the airport, waiting, making small talk and jokes, as usual, trying to turn something sad into something that could be taken lightly. I wanted to sob and make a scene, but my pride wouldn't let me. Or maybe I didn't want to cry because that would make my mother upset. I don't remember much from that day. Did I sit with my sister? What did I wear? I can't recall but one moment when my mom hugged me. It is forever etched into my memory. When she pulled back, she was smiling, but I saw the tears welling in her eyes. Nothing has ever hurt me more.

It is hard to live without having your mom nearby. It made me realize how much I needed her. But it could have been worst. At least I have her. At least I can still talk to her on the phone. She's roughly 1,505 miles away, but at least she's there. At least I get to see her every few months. I'm forever grateful to the heavens for not taking her away because I don't know what I would have done, and I also don't like to think about it. So long as I have her, I'm happy. She's both my mom and my dad. I don't want to sound cliché, but she's the best mom to have, ever. And as long as I have her, nothing can rattle me.

Ignite the Gunpowder

By NengJi Zhou

Soon after we moved to America, my father found a job at a supermarket called KimMen, located at 200 Canal Street in Chinatown. This huge store had three floors and sold a wide variety of everyday products, such as groceries, makeup and various herbs. My dad was promoted to manager after only one year, so I got a part time job there to work in the supermarket section on weekends. Working there helped me support myself financially, but more importantly, my dad wanted me to acquire some work experience in retail management and customer service to prepare for my future college studies in Business.

In December, a fellow KimMen employee went back to China for a vacation, so the boss wanted me to take his shifts during his absence. I was scheduled to work after school, from four to nine in the evenings, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It turned out that I had to work with colleagues other than my father since he was off on these days.

I was not happy taking over this position because I had to work with an older person who had been working in the market section for almost ten years.

His English was basically good and he had a lot of experience, but he had never been promoted to manager. Undoubtedly, this is because he acted like a fool much of the time, and what's worse, he was jealous of my father. I knew that if I had to stock shelves for him, I'd be like a deer being sized up by a wolf. Other people at KimMen also thought he was brutal; if anyone tried to make a joke or touch his head, they would feel his "bite". He, on the other hand, was the only one allowed to make fun of people in the supermarket. There was also a younger worker on my shift named Du, who was the laziest worker in this supermarket. He seemed to be the reason my boss needed me to work at night. Du loved to take a chopstick, and then just walk around with it instead of helping. He never worried about fairness, and everyone knew it, just like everyone knew that his sister was friends with our boss.

I knew about these two workers, the "cunning wolf" and Du, from other colleagues. The "wolf" was nice to Du. If anyone tried to bully Du, the "wolf" would stand up for him. And naturally, people disliked Du a lot, because he never accomplished anything. He busied himself with his lottery tickets during his work hours, just waiting for the time to pass. However, the "wolf" loved to hang out with him, and the friendship was reciprocated. In the market, people called the wolf "father" and Du "son" because they exhibited all of the characteristics of a true *duo*.

On the first day of my extra shifts, I was fairly excited and said “Hello” to my first floor department store colleague as I arrived. The second floor was my area. It was the biggest department and it contained everyday kitchen supplies, such as different varieties of tea, restaurant plates, Japanese yaki tea sets and an assortment of ramen noodles. I walked in and changed into my work clothes, which were gray and bore the words “KimMen” printed on the right side of the chest. No sooner was I dressed than the wolf spotted me and said, “Welcome, you are here. We had been waiting for you.” His voice produced a cold sweat down my back and I felt that something bad would happen. “We received a lot of products in our shipment today. Let’s do inventory and add them to the shelves,” he said, flashing his teeth in my direction. However, I did not pay him any attention; I just took my price sticker gun, and got busy.

The wolf checked the prices, counted the products, and made sure everything was satisfactory regarding the shipment. Meanwhile, I had to price the merchandise. Soon enough, I wondered where the “son” had gone since I realized I was the only one actually working on that floor. At the same time, I had to help the customers in the tea section, which was a small display in the back. Things became very busy. Then I caught sight of the “son,” squatting in the spoon section, “counting” the spoons with two in his hand! I knew he did not want to do any work so I asked his “father,” “What is Du doing?” He answered, softly, “He is working on the spoons, leave him alone.” Suddenly, it was as if a

fire rose into my throat and made me want to curse. I had been working like a donkey, answering customer questions, selling teas, and stocking the shelves. “The son” was doing nothing. All he ever did was wait for his wages to fill his pockets. When I looked at the tea area I was stocking, I saw a jar with the label **-Gunpowder -** on it. The department had possessed some gunpowder, I supposed, in case a war simply had to start. Still, I tried to calm myself. It was my first day, and I did not want to yell at anyone.

The wolf went home at six, and, the rest of the time, it was just me and “the son”. At that moment, I felt like the only employee in the whole department. All night, I was the only one who helped customers and weighed tea. I was the only one to recommend products to the customers, letting them smell the jasmine, rose and my favorite, monkey-picked black tea. Also, the customers enjoyed the tea balls that open up into beautiful flowers when you place them into a cup of boiling water. After each customer picked the teas that he or she wanted, I helped them put the tea in a bag and weighed it on the electronic scale to make sure it was the exact amount that they wanted. I was sick and tired of working (or I should say not working) with “the son,” but I did not complain.

The second day was even worse. I was doing the same tasks: sticking price labels on the products, placing yaki sets on the shelves in the Japanese teapot section. Finally, I saw our older colleague give something to his “son” to do. Even though it only involved working with a dozen or so small soy sauce

dishes, I felt a little more supported. However, I saw “the son” stoop down near me, then scurry away, rapidly, like a rat. I looked over and saw that he had left something near the other yaki sets where I’d been working. It was a little box that “the father” had given to him and told him to use to distribute something. He just put it alongside my pile and ran away. It was a box of a dozen small dishes that would have only taken a few seconds to stock. Even so, he chose to “give” it to me and split, without saying a word. I could not endure this guy anymore. His actions and his behavior had crossed a line. So I shouted at him with a thousand angry, dirty words in Cantonese: “You ^*#^*~^%#@#\$!” The gunpowder had been detonated. However, what enraged me further was that he pretended he couldn’t hear me and continued to count a small set of spoons with his chopstick instead. The “father” spoke up for him, saying “If you don’t want to do it, just put it away and we can let your father do it tomorrow.” Inside, I was roaring, but I could not do anything else. I dropped my work cloth on the floor emphatically and stepped on it, picked up my clothes and went home.

That night, I was complaining to my Dad about the despicable things they had done to me at KimMen and my Dad reported it to the boss the next day. From this work experience, I now realize that society always has these kinds of people; these “fathers” and “sons” can be found everywhere. We cannot change their minds or hearts, the only thing we can do is leave them alone and maintain a good attitude. Otherwise, we could become exactly like them. The next day,

when I went to work, the boss told me, “Now your job is just to help the customers. You don’t have to deal with *them*, let them do their work.” The acknowledgement helped me to feel better about the dynamic there and after a while, the larger fire had been extinguished.

Exercises

By Qiaoling Chen

In my memory, one thing has influenced me very deeply. Even now, I still have not forgotten this memory which taught me a life lesson. This moment happened a year ago. My “College Now” teacher in high school took out a ball and asked what color it was and we all answered “Purple.” The teacher said that what he saw was white; we all thought that was strange. Later, he explained that due to where he was standing, the ball appeared to be white because of the white light shining on the ball from above. However, we were sitting and could therefore not see the top of the sphere. What we saw was the lower half, which appeared purple. The teacher said that perspectives can vary. I realized at that moment that this lesson applied to my life as well.

When I was a child, my mother always used to wake me up early in the morning; even now, I still remember that it was always 5:30 AM. Sometimes, I didn’t want to get up so early because it was cold. I would find all kinds of excuses to try to evade my mother. Of course, the same excuses used again and again, caused my mother not to trust me. When I didn’t want to get up, she would get angry and shout at me, “Why are you so lazy? Hurry up! We have a lot to do!” Then she would lift my quilt, forcing me to rise. Even when it was

winter and snowing outside, sometimes she would tell me to go jog in the park or we would go to the supermarket to buy food to cook. At that time, it was hard for me to understand why my mother always subjected me to this regimen. I thought it was unfair that she didn't wake up my younger brother. I thought that my mother cared more about him. It depressed me.

As I grew up, I started to question my mother's actions. I decided to ask her one night at the dinner table: "Why did you wake me up so early every morning when I was a child, and XX didn't need to wake up so early? Did you feel any problem with this at all? Or were you raising me according to the patriarchal tradition, where men have more rights than women?"

My mother was shocked, and her eyes became red. She didn't know why I would ask such a question. At that moment, I felt that time had become stuck; I was getting nervous. My palms were sweating. I was thinking, "Am I wrong for asking? Is she angry?" After a few minutes, my mother said, in a serious tone, "Ling, you want to know the reason? When you were six years old, you had a serious illness. Your father and I were so worried about you. Fortunately, you recovered. I cannot describe how happy we were. But the doctor told me that you needed to enhance your immune system through greater exercise. So, I woke you up early to make you stronger. Don't you think those exercises worked?" I bowed my head, ashamed for accusing my mother.

I started to recall, then, my illness. My parents were taking care of me in the hospital. Their faces were full of sadness. I also asked my cousin XX about these events. She? told me that she remembers my mother crying a lot over my illness. At that moment, I realized that everything my mother had done had occurred with my health in mind. Just like my college prep teacher had said, perspectives can vary. I had misunderstood my mother and saddened her with my jealousy; I had felt that my brother was receiving all of her attention simply by doing nothing.

I used to think my mother was annoying. However, she just wanted to show me that she cares about me. Now I want to say that I've changed a lot since this discovery; I am beginning to understand that the ball has many colors, not just "purple". It has white, too. It simply depends on how you look at it. Turn things around to see the other side. If one thing feels unfair to you or does not make you feel good, maybe you need to take more time to figure out what is wrong with the situation and look more deeply. You will see the positive side. You will see all of the colors.

THE END