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Home World

“This is Little Blue. Here he is at home with Papa and Mama Blue.” A woman with frizzled, red hair holds a book open and points to a page on the right—three blue smudges in the middle of a blank white canvass. In a semi-circle in front of her, the kids sprawl on the carpet of the conference room, fifteen pairs of eyes following her hands as she flips through the pages of the book. Light seeps through the high-ceilinged windows, landing on faces burnished bronze by the Colorado sun and on splotches of skin already pink and peeling. They didn’t listen when I hollered that umpteenth time for them to put on another glob of sunscreen.

It’s August 2018. I’m staffing a two-week camp for “Third Culture Kids”—kids who grew up in cultures different from that of their parents, resulting in “third cultures” that fuse elements from the cultures of their parents and the cultures of their childhood. At this camp, all of the kids have American parents, but they’ve spent their lives in places like Kenya or Malaysia or Kazakhstan—most of them have visited far more international airports than they have U.S. states. Earlier in the week, I placed blank maps of the world in front of them and told them to fill in all the countries they had visited: red if they’d been there for a few days, blue for a few months, yellow if more than a year. They handed back maps splashed with color.

The woman with frizzled hair, the camp director, turns another page. “This is Little Yellow,” she says.

Little Blue hugs Little Yellow; they become Little Green. The younger kids gasp, their brows furrowed, when they hear how Mama and Papa Yellow and Mama and Papa Blue don’t recognize the little green blob that comes hopping back to them.

I think of how, a year ago, I was one of these kids: sitting cross-legged on that floor, having just moved with my family from China, where I was born and raised, to the U.S., where my parents had grown up. Now, sitting off to the side with the two other camp counselors, I watch sunlight dapple the kids’ faces. If I stare long enough, I might glimpse in their faces a shadow of my own.

Writer Verlyn Klinkenborg says home is “a place we can never see with a stranger’s eyes for more than a moment.” My earliest memory of making a strange place familiar comes from my 8th birthday, when I boarded a Boeing 747 with my family from Boston to Beijing. This wasn’t my first time in China—I was born in Beijing and lived with my family in the coastal city of Da Lian until 2006, when we moved to Colorado Springs. But I don’t remember much at all from the years in Da Lian, and only a little from the Springs: my mom bringing me a tuna melt, me locking my younger brother in the dark closet, my two siblings and I clambering over red rocks under the scorching sun.

In 2008, my Dad found a job teaching English at a university in Tianjin, China, a city of 15 million near Beijing. Our family of five moved into a two-floored apartment on the fourth story of a building in the apartment complex of Jiu Hua Li. This complex housed mostly retirees, who would get up when the pink horizon was just barely seeping through the crack in my curtains. Dressed in thick, drab clothing, they’d

stretch at the yellow and red exercise equipment in our complex's park and make slow, tai chi movements to music that mixed with the calls of street vendors hawking fried dough.

Our apartment was the biggest my 8-year-old self had ever lived in. It had bedrooms plastered with orange and yellow wallpaper, a stairwell draped with artificial vines that spiraled to the second floor, and an office upstairs with a Japanese tea table that was too short for a chair and too tall for sitting on the floor.

I lived in this apartment for the next seven years, the longest I've stayed in one house. To revisit those rooms is to relive my metamorphosis from a shy, awkward kid to a slightly less shy, much more awkward teenager. There's the bedroom where my brother Elliot and I squatted on the slice of floor between our queen bed and the drawers that bulged with Legos, dismembering the figures and lopping off their heads. Once we outgrew sleeping in the same bed, Elliot claimed the queen and I curled up in a tiny loft above him. I still think he made those luxurious sleeping noises just to annoy me.

Near the kitchen is the black table that carried piles of dumpling skins during Chinese Lunar New Year. I would peel off a thin circle of dough and cover both sides with flour, then wet my fingers in cold water and spread the moisture around the edge of the skin, and finally crease the two sides together to envelop a ball of pork and carrots. After the soft skin crinkled and turned golden in the frying pan, we would dip the dumplings in dark pools of soy sauce.

The beginning of the end came in 2015, when our landlord announced that she would be selling the apartment. Thankfully, we soon found another apartment in Jiu Hua Li, a minute's walk away. Over the next two weeks, we migrated from one apartment to the other, balancing boxes of books and Legos, our black dining table, my sister's guitar. The new apartment was smaller, cramped. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was living there on borrowed time. If our previous landlord could kick us out of our old apartment with such short notice, who was to say the same thing wouldn't happen here?

Actually, I ended up living there for two years, before moving permanently from China to the U.S. But the truth is, before we ever moved out of our first Jiu Hua Li apartment, I had already begun to grapple with the absence of home, a sense of feeling out of sync with Chinese culture, as if I was a smiling, plastic head stuck to the wrong torso of a Lego figure.

On the outside, I fit in easily. I had inherited my father's thick, black hair and brown complexion. But as soon as I opened my mouth, I'd give myself away. All of my family speaks English better than Mandarin—my mom grew up near Boston and my dad immigrated from Taiwan to Los Angeles as a kid—so we only spoke English in the house. Almost all of my friends spoke English as well. Any Mandarin that I did learn came from weekly tutoring lessons: sitting hunched over my desk, glaring at the wavy strokes I'd have to piece together into thousands of Chinese characters. I was tongue-tied when asked to speak Chinese regularly in public, knowing that a slight change in pronunciation could change “mother” to “horse” or “four” to “death.” The less I spoke, the less I improved, even as my older sister and younger brother raced ahead. My embarrassment over speaking Mandarin grew, and so did my sense that I was foreigner in the country where I'd spent most of my life.

I remember going to my friend Caleb's house for his birthday party during 7th grade. Unlike me, he had attended local Chinese school instead of homeschooling, which meant that he could speak Mandarin

fluently. He had also invited a group of his Chinese friends to his party. We squeezed into the couches of his living room, and Caleb's dad joined us.

"Let's all share our favorite drink and type of dog," his dad said (in Chinese).

When it was my turn, I didn't say anything for several minutes. I racked my brain to try to remember my Chinese vocabulary from hundreds of lessons, but all I could see were seven pairs of eyes blinking at me and all I could hear were muffled giggles and my thumping heart.

Finally, I turned to Caleb's dad, who is Chinese American. In English, I blurted out, "How do you say Coca Cola and golden retriever?"

My face felt scorched for the rest of the party. It wasn't that I looked stupid; it was the asking in English that I hated. In an instant, it had set me apart from the rest of them, cast me out of the inner ring, exposed me for the *wai guo ren* (literally, outside country person)—the foreigner—that I knew, deep down, was impossible to fully disguise.

I felt the same way every time I botched the words when trying to give a taxi driver directions or trying to buy papayas in the open-air market near our house. The minute I opened my mouth, they, the fruit lady and the taxi driver, saw me as a stranger—and so that is what I became. If Klinkenborg is right, and home is the essence of familiarity, then can we call a place home when we're always peering at it through a stranger's eyes?

In the summer of 2017, I left China for good. We took the 15-hour direct flight from Beijing to Boston. Along with our family's six black duffel bags, I carried with me a piece of home—the oily taste of fried dough, the sound of tai chi music in the mornings, the memory of a Japanese tea table—but only a piece.

Airports have always felt like home, in a way. Throughout our time in Tianjin (and before that), my family and I flew regularly: we booked flights every summer to visit my mom's parents in Wellesley, Massachusetts, stopping at multiple airports along the way, and we also found cheap tickets every winter to Malaysia or Thailand. To this day, I think airports give me that same warm, fuzzy feeling people talk about when reminiscing about arriving back home, except for me it doesn't come when I open the front door and get pounced on by a dog or a kid—it comes when I push a cart stacked with luggage through sliding doors and get blasted by air conditioning.

I've learned to spot my gate number on the flight information board in a matter of seconds. I know exactly which bottles and substances will pass through TSA security checks. I can tell you where to find the best airport fast food in Istanbul, or Doha, or Kuala Lumpur.

Maybe I feel at ease in airports because they're the antithesis of home. After all, there are no native languages here, no particularities, no judgements—just liminal space. All are strangers. None are outsiders. Here, without any repercussions, you can be crisscrossed by cultures, straddle two worlds.

And if home is where you experience both pain and peace, tension and laughter, then airports (and airplanes) surely fit the bill. I've had my share of airport trauma: those times when we had to sprint to

our gate, or when we realized my dad left his laptop in security or when I dropped my wallet on the plane.

But there's also the time when we were running late for our transfer flight, and the captain told the entire plane to let my tired family through. "Watch for the kid holding the soccer ball," he blared through the speaker. I gripped the ball high above my head as we marched from the back of the plane down the aisle, until we were in the airport, and I realized I was still grinning, but it didn't matter, because it felt like I had just scored a game-winning goal.

And, of course, there's the trip from Boston back to Beijing in September of 2012, when we missed one of our connecting flights and got stranded in the Seoul airport. My siblings and I burned away the hours by guiding a stick figure in a computer game called Poptropica. Finding a long row of computers, we plopped ourselves down in front of one of them. My sister Brianna commandeered the mouse, while Elliot and I hovered over her, barking out commands like two drill sergeants and ignoring the bleary-eyed looks from the man next to us hunched over online poker.

During those 36 hours, we kept time by the number of worlds we had inhabited. We tiptoed through the Greek temple of Apollo, receiving oracles from the gods. We hopped into a yellow orb, plunging into the subterranean city of Atlantis and dodging eels that grimaced at us with unblinking eyes. Still, we never dabbled too long in the unknown: "home world," with its red barn, mom-and-pop store, and lullaby-like music, was always just one click away.

In my dreams during the rest of that airport ordeal, my 12-year-old self morphed into our Poptropica character: a stick-figure with an orange afro, a toothy smile, and one eye that bulged larger than the other. As I somersaulted from world to world, the blaring of the airport announcers morphed into messages from toga-clad stick figures, and the steady rumble of planes blurred into the thunder of the gods.

If home is the place you can always go back to, then it would be my grandparents' house in Wellesley, Massachusetts. This house, the same one where Mom grew up after being born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, is where I've spent every summer as long as I can remember. It's the first place my family stayed after leaving China in 2017, and it's where I return on school break or in between college semesters. Since my family still doesn't own an actual house in the U.S., this house on Maugus Ave is the only place I know that still carries a semblance of home.

It's a pale-yellow house that squats at the top of a steep hill. There's a garden out back with rhododendrons, hydrangea, Japanese maple and evergreen shrubs, winding up to the woods and tended for decades by my ninety-three-year-old grandfather, Papa John. Usually, the house is pretty quiet, besides the rustling of the *Boston Globe* as my grandmother Doris pores through the news. Grandma Doris likes to take us down the hill to The Maugus, a breakfast diner with red leather booths. Between mouthfuls of blueberry pancakes, in her mild accent, she talks about her old dairy farm back in Northern Ireland.

Over the years, this house has taken on an aura of timelessness. Little has changed, even since my mom's days as a kid: the sixty-year old brown dressers in the twin bedroom I share with Elliot, the ancient set of silver spoons in the dining room, the moldy basement with the peeling yellow carpet.

Still, I play myself when I call this home—I've never spent more than three months here at a time, and the only contact I've made with the other kids on the street was years ago when Grandma took my sister and me over to bounce on the trampoline in the huge basement of Ryan Loughborough's mansion. And I've still kept that piece of home from China: I miss hearing the calls of street vendors when I wake up, feeling the softness of a dumpling skin, or trying to navigate a street full of cars, bicycles and Chinese swear words.

Recently, the spell of timelessness over this house has started to crack. When I came back from school a month ago, I noticed my parents had installed electric lift chairs on both staircases. Home aides now hurry throughout the house day and night, and Grandma Doris has a hard time remembering my name or where I go to school. Last Tuesday evening, her eyes widened, and her mouth hung open when she saw me, even though I had just eaten pancakes with her that morning. "I haven't seen you in years," she said.

There's that nagging feeling again—that I'm living on borrowed time.

"Where are you from?" the mother asked, her eyes interrogating me through thin-rimmed glasses.

It was August 2019, during my orientation week for Duke. My mom and I sat on a couch across from the mom and her daughter, a tall, brown-haired girl who stared at the floor and fidgeted.

Answering her question felt like picking an old scab. I shuffled through the possible answers I could give, none of them complete. "Wellesley, Massachusetts," I mumbled.

"But that's not really where we're from," my mom added. She never liked it when I tried to paper over my origins. "Chris grew up in China."

The brown-haired girl stopped fidgeting and looked up. As my face flushed, I glared at my mom. College was supposed to be a fresh start, where nobody would know or care where I had come from, a place where I could build a new home out of the ruins of all the ones I had left behind. Yet here I was, sweat from the North Carolina summer seeping into my shirt—back at the beginning. *This is Little Blue. This is Little Yellow. This is Little Green.*

It seems that when my Irish-American mother brought me into this world on April 17, 2000—squirming and screaming, my eyes pinched shut against the cold, white light of Room 206 in Beijing United Hospital—she birthed me into a realm of complicated questions and untidy answers.

When I first heard the story of *Little Blue and Little Yellow* at the TCK camp two years ago, I was struck by the rejection Little Green experiences when his Mama and Papa don't recognize him—he's banished from home, a stranger to the place he finds most familiar. It's a story that hits a little too close. In dwelling in the wombs of two worlds—taking a little blue from China, a little yellow from the U.S.—have I ended up divorcing myself from both? Perhaps that's the cost of voyaging from place to place, without settling permanently in any. You attach yourself to this world, and then to that one, and soon you realize you're unrecognizable to them all.

That, you see, is my paradox of not belonging. Home is still out of reach, not because I've had too little of it, but because I've taken in too much. I'm a man of many loyalties, unwilling to settle with the

singular attachments to place most take for granted. Calling only one place home is an essentially discriminatory act—it means infusing all other places with a touch of the foreign. Something in me revolts against that choice.

Still, there are times when I imagine myself going all the way back to my birth and arranging my life differently. I think of growing up in a single place, avoiding airports and convoluted languages and uncomfortable questions, living a plot that's uncomplicated and clean, perfect for the blank pages of a children's storybook.

Sometimes, I promise myself that the rest of my life will be that storybook. At the end of *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, the Papa and Mama colors eventually realize what happened to Little Blue and Little Yellow, and they all live happily ever after as colored blobs.

I can get a job after college, I tell myself; I can settle down, start a family. I'll build a home from scratch. I'll pick one color. I'll make the choice. Oh God, I'll even get a white picket fence. And then one day, I'll be going in the front door after work, and one of my kids will pounce on me, and she'll ask me about all of this, and I'll laugh with her, holding her tight as she giggles: "Daddy, did you really spend 36 hours in an airport?" Then, I'll smile, and I'll tell her about Poptropica and bouncing stick figures and a home world that was always just one click away.