

Picture to the Past

By Shelby Gai

The cabin trembles slightly as the wheels of the plane hit the runway. I grip the armrest and keep my eyes stubbornly closed, opening them only when the pilot begins to slowly taxi into the terminal. Amidst the mass of passengers scrambling to retrieve their carry-on bags, I peek through fog-smudged windows and catch my first glance of this strange, yet keenly familiar country. A whisper of wonder breezes through my lips. *Finally*, I murmur, *home at last*.

My mother arrived in America with three items that comprised her entire life in China: two suitcases and a three-year-old daughter. With a crisp fifty-dollar bill carefully placed between the pages of her Chinese passport, she searched eagerly for my father among the throes of people waiting at the airport. When she finally found him she allowed herself the simple luxury of a small smile. Her smile of trepidation, exhaustion, and hope is forever captured in the first photograph taken of us in America. It marked the end of one journey, and the start of another—a journey documented through the lens of a camera.

Pictures became the patchwork of my childhood memories. At school, I would learn about China as a country. At home, China became my country. While flurries of homework chased me through the week, weekends would find me caught in a blizzard of pictures. Photographs surrounded me like a blanket of snow, the smiles of unknown family members shining around me. At night, I would close my eyes and strain my imagination, trying to remember some conversation, some laugh that would spark my memory and transport me back to my former life in China. As the dark blur of sleep slowly descended upon me, a sigh often escaped from my lips. A sigh laced with defeat, sorrow, and yearning for a home miles away.

My parents would join me sometimes in my eager attempts to reconstruct my past. My mother, her hands red and cracking from washing dishes all day at the restaurant where she worked, would gently caress the slightly faded pictures from the days when she worked as a professor in the local university. Gazing at the young woman in the picture with long, black hair cascading down to her waist, I could barely recognize her. Sometimes I could hear the longing in her voice as she recounted stories of our time before America. On rare occasions I caught her dashing away a tear. I never asked if she missed China, if she felt that same heaviness after looking through the photo albums.

After eight long years, my parents finally saved enough money to buy two plane tickets to

China. In the end, my father would be the one to accompany back- my mother would have to wait until the next opportunity. The days leading up to my departure were fraught with anxiety and eagerness. I would constantly stare at my pictures, memorizing each face, each smile. My fingers grazed these still figures, leaving smudges across the picture. In my mind, it seemed like I was absorbing them into me, a temporary comfort until my departure date.

And today I arrived. Walking to the baggage claim area on legs still weak from sitting for four hours, peering through the bright sun with blood-shot eyes bearing the testament to last night's restless slumber, I clench my favorite picture tighter to my chest. It is a picture of my entire family taken at my first birthday celebration. It accompanied my mother to America, and now it has returned. A large group of people crowds around the exit. A large clamor arose as I walk closer.

Lulu! Lulu!

I look around, trying to see who had yelled my name. Instantly I am swept up in a tight embrace, my startled gasp muffled by a chorus of laughter and cheers.

Lulu! Aiya, ni zhong yu hui lai le!

The photograph that I had been clutching slipped out of my hand and flutters to the ground. As the person sets me down, my eyes search frantically for the prized possession lost amid a forest of legs and suitcases. The person stoops down in front of me and gently lifts my chin. I look into the eyes of my grandfather, the eyes that I had dreamed about every night back home. I smile, and he smiles back. Yes, I thought to myself, *I'm back at last.*

Zhong yu hui jia le