On the Move
An Immigrant Child’s Global Journey

Philip Jia Guo
To my mother and father, for giving me this wonderful life.
# Contents

## I 1983–1990

1. The Little Emperor 3
2. Reuniting in Switzerland 19
3. Kindergarten 29

## II 1990–1994

4. My First Year in America 45
5. Different but Normal 61
6. Our Louisiana Neighbors 73
7. The American Flag 85
8. Church on Sunday Afternoons 95
9. The Black and White Yearbook 109

## III 1994–1995

10. South to North 127
11. A Month in the Basement 147
12. New York, New York 167
13. East to West 183
Preface

Whenever I’ve told my friends about my unique early childhood experiences, many of them suggested that I should write a book someday. I could tell that they were usually half joking and just making polite conversation, not expecting me — a lifelong science nerd who went to MIT and is now at Stanford pursuing a Ph.D. in Computer Science — to actually write and edit hundreds of pages of English text that wasn’t a lab report, technical paper, or software documentation. In 2003, during my sophomore year of college, I actually took them up on their suggestions and began to write a book about my early childhood. Throughout the past five years, I have dedicated time during breaks from school to work on my manuscript.

I never aspired to become a writer, but I’ve always loved telling stories, especially those grounded in real-life experiences. My favorite part of storytelling is crafting the narrative in such a way that my listener can make connections to his/her own life. My indicator of storytelling success is when my listener in turn tells me his/her own related story,
and then we proceed into an engaging discussion. I’ve been able to develop this rapport numerous times while sharing my childhood experiences. My motivation in writing this book is the hope that I can approximate the same kind of connection with my readers as I’ve been able to create with people who’ve heard me tell these stories in person.

Writing has been a hobby of mine ever since middle school. I’ve written hundreds of short essays just for fun about whatever topics happened to come across my mind (a small number of them evolved into the content of this book). The vast majority aren’t in good enough shape for other people to read; the ones that I think might have an audience are posted on my personal website: www.pgbovine.net

One of the most rewarding aspects of working on my personal website throughout the past 10 years is receiving questions, comments, and occasionally praise about my essays via emails from strangers all around the world. The essays that seem most interesting to people and that attract the most responses all have one property in common: They are written for others rather than just for myself. Whenever I wrote about a topic that people actually cared about and could relate to (ranging from advice for getting into graduate school to my theory of social popularity), I received plenty of positive email feedback. And whenever I uploaded some writing I did purely for myself, just a brain dump of my discursive thoughts and feelings, I received little to no feedback.
Thus, throughout the process of writing and editing this book, I’ve strived to follow the lesson I have learned from maintaining my website: to write for others rather than just for myself. I’ve tried to include stories I feel that people can relate well to, and to frame these stories within broader social and historical contexts to give them deeper significance than simply as childhood anecdotes.

Realistically, my writing cannot possibly appeal in the same way to everybody: People with whom I share similar experiences, especially Chinese Americans and children of immigrants, will likely find my stories to be more relevant to their own lives than those who have less in common with me. That said, I’ve tried to include content that appeals to a general American audience, regardless of ethnicity or place of birth. Throughout the writing process, I’ve solicited feedback from people of diverse cultural backgrounds to see what parts did and did not resonate with them. I’d love to hear your feedback as well. The best way to reach me is via email at philip@pgbovine.net

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Additional Notes

The names of most people and institutions mentioned throughout this book have been changed to pseudonyms.

This book chronicles the first 12 years of my life, as told simultaneously through two perspectives: a child who makes observations about his surroundings and a young adult who reflects back on his childhood experiences. I often switch back and forth between these two perspectives throughout each chapter.

I have chosen not to focus on my parents in this book, so I mention them only to the extent that is relevant for me to describe my own life experiences. My parents have far more dramatic immigrant stories than what I have room to describe; their amazing struggles during the past few decades could fill entire volumes, and they actually plan to write about their own lives someday.

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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to numerous people for their contributions to the publication of On the Move, which is my first book.

First of all, I thank Karen Schein at Whittier Publications for her work in pushing this project through to fruition.

I also thank Michael Ames at Vanderbilt University Press and Naomi Schneider at University of California Press for
reading an earlier draft of this manuscript in 2004 and pro-
viding useful comments and suggestions to guide me in the
right direction when making my revisions.

Most importantly, I thank the following people for read-
ing over my manuscript and for offering me numerous in-
sightful critiques and editorial comments: Nate Chambers,
Gwen Guillet, Imran Haque, Robert Ikeda, Stephanie Lee,
Greg Little, Mitra Lohrasbpour, Marc Schaub, Susan Tang,
and Min Zhou. I have learned so much from hearing all of
you describe what parts you liked and disliked, what you
found interesting and boring, what you thought was overly
repetitive, and what you felt needed more elaboration. Re-
ceiving and incorporating your feedback have been the most
eye-opening and intellectually satisfying parts of my book
writing experience.

Philip Jia Guo
October 2007
Part I

1983–1990
Chapter 1

The Little Emperor

My mother used to tell me that she found me in a dumpster on a street corner while she was out on a morning walk. Whenever I misbehaved, she would jokingly threaten to get rid of me by throwing me into a nearby dumpster so that another woman in need of a child could pick me up just as she had done. Although she didn’t actually find a baby in that dumpster, it was where she learned that the Chinese government officially gave her permission to have a child. Even before my parents were married, they had to apply for a birth permit from the local government because nobody was supposed to give birth to a child without one. The local government distributed a fixed quantity of birth permits to maintain control over the number of babies born each year within its jurisdiction. In my parents’ neighborhood, a public notice announcing the couples who were eligible to have babies in the upcoming year was posted on a bulletin
board above the dumpster on every street, a convenient location because everyone made daily trips there to dispose their garbage. The government purposely made these announcements public so that everybody on a particular street could know exactly who did and did not have permission to have babies. If the residents ever saw a pregnant neighbor whose name was not on the notice, they had an obligation as loyal citizens to report her to the authorities.

One morning, as my mother walked past her local street dumpster, she checked the board and saw that her name and my father’s name were on the list. They had the green light to try to bring me into the world. If my parents were somehow unsuccessful in conceiving a baby within the time range given on their permit, they would have to apply for another one in the following year. Birth permits were by no means guaranteed, so many couples had to wait several years before the government gave them permission to conceive. In fact, if my mother had actually found me in a dumpster, she could have adopted me without nearly as much paperwork or government-imposed bureaucratic delays; but then, she would have been forbidden to conceive a child of her own.

The Chinese government has enforced a one-child family policy since the mid-1970’s, selectively issuing birth permits in an attempt to slow down the nation’s rapid population growth. There are harsh penalties for violators, such as heavy fines, job demotions, layoffs, and public humiliation. This policy has been fairly effective in slowing
down China’s rapid population growth during the past three decades. However, since boys are traditionally more valued in Chinese culture than girls, this policy has led to increased abortions, infanticides, and the abandonment of female babies as families attempt to fill their one-child quota with a prized boy to carry on the family name. As a result, the sex ratio in China’s younger population has become increasingly skewed: In 2000, there were 117 males for every 100 females born. Another social effect of this policy is the prevalence of the \textit{Little Emperor Syndrome}, which refers to the fact that many Chinese children in my generation (especially boys) grow up overly spoiled and self-centered because they never had to share their parents’ attention and resources with siblings.

During my mother’s nine-month pregnancy, nobody knew whether I was going to be a boy or a girl. In order to prevent excessive abortions of female babies, the government made it illegal for anyone to find out the gender of a fetus. Most of my relatives, including my father, thought that I would turn out to be a girl, but my mother somehow knew that I would be a boy. I was eight days overdue, and my mother was in labor for over 24 hours. Moments after my large head popped out, the nurses took a peek down under, and it was official. At 11:50 PM on October 30th, 1983, I became the firstborn son of the Zhou and Guo families.
When I was 11 months old, my mother left China to attend graduate school in the United States. Shortly thereafter, my father went to Switzerland to pursue business opportunities for a Chinese company. Although they told me that they came back to visit and even took pictures with me, I had no memories of either my mother or my father until we reunited in Switzerland when I was five years old.

It is common in China for several generations of family members to live together under one roof; the only unique aspect of my early upbringing was that two particular members were absent. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles cared for me during my first five years of life. Thus, when I mention *family* throughout this chapter, I am referring to my extended family. Back then, I had no concept of a nuclear family consisting solely of my mother, father, and myself, since we were scattered across three different continents.

The extended family is the only concept of family in traditional Chinese culture, a fact that is deeply ingrained in the language. There are Chinese words to refer to specific family members with great detail: For example, the word *jiu mu* refers specifically to *my mother’s brother’s wife*, which is much more precise than the comparable English word *aunt*. There are clear distinctions for words referring to relatives on the mother’s side and those on the father’s side, and between relatives belonging to different generations and even those within the same generation. Most notably, words
referring to members of the extended family are just as detailed as those that refer to members of the nuclear family.

My family raised me in two different cities in Southern China, which were about an hour’s drive apart from one another: my mother’s (and my own) birthplace of Zhongshan, where most of her relatives lived, and my father’s birthplace of Guangzhou, where most of his relatives lived.

I spent the summers living with my mother’s family in Zhongshan, an up-and-coming industrial city with agricultural roots. When my mother was a child, it was all farmland with a tiny commercial downtown. By the time I was born, it was starting to develop into a modern city. My grandfather played a key role in Zhongshan’s development. He was the chief architect in charge of many new civil engineering and housing development projects in the city as it rapidly expanded during the 1980’s. My mother’s family was quite well-known locally since my grandfather was one of the big-shots in town. He was part of the elite and knew the mayor and every key political and business figure in the city. Everybody liked him since he was always willing to help people both personally and professionally.

The most noticeable benefit of my grandfather’s profession was that our family had plenty of guan xi, which loosely translates to connections in English. In a socialist society where material possessions were not used as metrics
for social status, political and social capital were the primary indicators of status. Since my grandfather was well-connected to powerful people in Zhongshan, whenever we went into a restaurant, someone would greet us and lead us to dine in a private room, whenever we needed a TV or other hard-to-obtain electronics items, one of our family friends would deliver it to us (at that time, not many families in China owned television sets), and whenever we needed a car to drive us somewhere, a chauffeur would pick us up. If I gave that same description in America — VIP treatment at restaurants, powerful political and business connections, and a private chauffeur — it would seem like we were multi-millionaires. However, the truth was much less glamorous. Although my grandfather was the man who helped oversee the transformation of Zhongshan from an agricultural market town into a modern industrial city with 1.25 million people, we still lived as modestly as our neighbors, albeit with many perks due to our family’s connections.

In a capitalist society like modern-day America, somebody of my grandfather’s status would be financially wealthy, but in the socialist China of the early 1980’s, very few people had an abundance of material goods. Because the government owned and controlled most industries and commerce, there was no concept of individual entrepreneurs being able to become millionaires. Most city people, regardless of profession, lived in modest yet comfortable conditions. We always had food on the table, clothes to wear, relatively safe
neighborhoods where kids could play with neighbors in the streets, and a roof over our heads, although we sometimes had to share our home with other families. We had an apartment with a private bathroom, kitchen, and even a refrigerator. What more could a family in early 1980’s China want? Freedom of speech? Freedom of press?

These democratic ideals were not on the minds of a people who had lived through a tumultuous Cultural Revolution just a decade earlier. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, Chairman Mao Zedong mobilized common citizens to rebel against the authority of intellectuals and officials at various levels of government in an attempt to consolidate power under his absolute control, disrupting social order for a decade. He encouraged teenagers to root out bourgeoisie intellectuals and capitalist supporters and even to beat up their teachers and other authority figures. Men were publicly humiliated and hanged on the streets for speaking out against Mao’s government (my father witnessed a public hanging). Everybody loudly chanted their love for Mother China, some out of genuine revolutionary enthusiasm, but many out of sheer fear. After Mao’s death in 1976, the Chinese people simply wanted to return to leading stable, peaceful lives.

When I lived with my mother’s family in Zhongshan, I had everything that I wanted. Due to the bias of traditional Chinese culture towards male children, my extended family treated me like a pampered Little Emperor since I was not
only the firstborn son of my generation, but I was also the only son of my generation throughout my early childhood. They all spoiled me with special attention and preferential treatment, and my parents were not around to teach me about restraint. I enjoyed the privilege of always having plenty of toys, fancy clothes, good food to eat, people to drive me to amusement parks, and relatives always catering to my endless demands.

Due to the one-child policy, few people of my generation in China had brothers or sisters, so our cousins became our surrogate siblings. I played with my cousins like they were my little sisters, and I always assumed the role of the dominant bully since I was the eldest and the only boy. One of my earliest memories involved vague recollections of me pushing my cousins over onto a tile floor in our living room. When I was two years old, I loved to push my two cousins over, chuckling as their skulls hit the tiles. This wasn’t playful wrestling; it was deliberate and mean-spirited shoving. This wasn’t soft carpet or bed mattresses; it was hard, cold floor tile. Some kids liked biting, other kids found joy in yelling and screaming, but for some reason, I enjoyed rough pushing. Whenever I did that, they would immediately start crying so my aunts and uncles would all rush over to us. This did not just happen once or twice; it happened fairly frequently, from what my family told me. I was never seriously punished for my horrible behavior. If I were a parent, I would have severely scolded my kid for doing something
so thoughtless and harmful to others, but my own parents were not around, and my extended family treated me like royalty.

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During the school year, I attended preschool and lived with my father’s family in his birthplace of Guangzhou. Unlike my mother’s family, who were well-connected in Zhongshan society, my father’s family held no special status in Guangzhou, so we blended in with the millions of other people in the city and lived a far more humble lifestyle. My aunts and uncles on my father’s side of the family had neither the leisure time nor the resources to pamper me like my mother’s family could. I lived in a minimally furnished apartment building with my grandmother (my father’s mother) and my step-grandfather, a man whom she married shortly after her first husband died in 1984.

Guangzhou is one of the largest cities in China. The British used to call it Canton, hence coining the term Cantonese, an adjective referring to the people, the language, and all other things related to the city. The Cantonese dialect of the Chinese language sounds as different from the official national language, Mandarin Chinese, as French differs from Spanish. Everybody in my family knew how to speak Mandarin, but we were much more comfortable talking to each other in Cantonese. In contrast to the up-and-coming city of Zhongshan, Guangzhou is a metropolis rich
in history and culture and is home to several notable universities.

My parents met while they were attending college at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou. During Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the government shut down most universities throughout China for over a decade. In 1977, after Mao’s death, universities reopened and resumed their rigorous admissions procedures. Unlike in America, the sole determiner of college admissions in China is an annual national college entrance examination called the *gaokao*. Teenagers spend countless hours memorizing facts from textbooks, solving practice problems, and taking mock exams in the hopes of maximizing their scores on the one crucial exam that will determine their post-high-school fate. The competition was especially fierce in 1977 since a whole generation of youth had been denied opportunities to attend college in the preceding decade and were all competing for one year’s worth of university spots. That year, 5.7 million people took the national college entrance examination and competed for 270,000 spots in universities throughout the country. My parents both excelled and earned spots in the prestigious first post-revolution class at Sun Yat-Sen University.

Thus, it’s somewhat fitting that Guangzhou was where my own education began. I started attending preschool when I was two and a half years old. When I first moved to America, I was surprised that preschool here consisted of taking naps and fitting colored blocks into matching holes.
In contrast, preschool in China was a serious experience in early learning, not simply an extension of daycare. During school hours, I actually remembered sitting in desks within the classroom, with everyone facing forward towards our teacher. There I learned to interact with other children, to do simple math, and to read and write in Chinese. I wasn’t in some kind of special gifted education school; this curriculum was a regular part of the Chinese educational system. Preschool also served as daytime babysitting since most adults had to work. Kids as young as two or three often spent the entire day at preschool away from their parents and sometimes even overnight in boarding schools.

Although I liked learning during school hours, I enjoyed doing it more at home. My favorite teacher was my step-grandfather. He entered my life shortly before I started preschool. After my paternal grandfather passed away, my grandmother married this man not out of romantic love or for mid-life companionship, but simply out of pragmatic necessity because she thought that he could do a good job taking care of me. This man’s office was much closer to my preschool than my grandmother’s workplace was, so she found it more convenient to have him pick me up from school every day and watch over me at home while she was at work. Like many marriages in China at that time, this one was borne out of practical consideration for the family instead of the ideals of personal love.
The most significant contribution my step-grandfather made to my life was teaching me mathematics from age two until I left China at age five. He bought me colorful workbooks filled with math word problems. At the time, I did not know whether other children my age were learning the same things about math as I was, but I enjoyed spending time with him learning about basic arithmetic, fractions, and solving word problems. By age three, I could easily multiply a multiple-digit number by a single-digit number by successively recalling entries in the multiplication table. For example, I could do $23 \times 3$ by figuring that $3 \times 3$ equals 9, and $2 \times 3$ equals 6 so $23 \times 3$ equals 69. I still vividly remember the time when he tried to teach me how to multiply two multiple-digit numbers, a somewhat more difficult feat. I am fairly sure that the first two-digit example he gave me was $22 \times 22$. I stared at the paper for a while and decided that the answer must be 44, reasoning that $2 \times 2$ was 4, and $2 \times 2$ again was 4, so $22 \times 22$ must be 44. He listened to my explanation, gave a friendly chuckle, and proceeded to teach me how to really solve a multiple-digit multiplication problem by reducing it into several simpler problems that I already knew how to solve. He demonstrated that $22 \times 22$ could be broken down into $(22 \times 2) + (22 \times 20)$, and I realized that I knew how to solve each of these individual sub-problems. His encouraging and easy-going style of teaching worked remarkably well to boost my self-confidence and stimulate my passion for learning math at a young age.
Before my fourth birthday, thanks to my step-grandfather, I had already memorized the multiplication table and could perform basic addition and subtraction, multiplication up to three digits, and division with remainders. Sadly, I do not remember much else about this man who provided the initial impetus that contributed to my lifelong love for learning. I never saw him again once I moved out of China. My grandmother divorced him soon after my departure (probably because his mission to take care of me had been fulfilled), and he moved to somewhere in Australia. How random.

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I lived the first five years of my life in relative bliss, splitting my time between receiving an early education in Guangzhou during the school year and enjoying my summer vacations in Zhongshan. My family was not rich, but then again, we were not poor either. Unlike millions of our countrymen who lived below the poverty line on remote mountains, deserts, and rural farmlands, both of my parents’ families were fortunate enough to live in cities and receive all the basic amenities required for a comfortable life. My family treated me with the utmost of care and affection, and it never crossed my mind at the time that my life would ever deviate from that status quo. I never considered it abnormal for me not to see my parents for extended periods of time; the abundance of other relatives made up for their absence.
However, despite the fact that I was the center of attention, the Little Emperor of my family, I still had an intrinsic humility about myself. Outside the confines of my family, I was never a loud kid. I never acted up in public or picked fights with other kids in school or neighborhood playgrounds since I knew that outside the shelter of my family, I was just an insignificant little boy. I knew nothing about the world outside of Zhongshan and Guangzhou, but I had no fears about the outside since I thought that my family would always be there to support me as I grew up.

In Chinese, the name for the country of China is Zhong Guo, which literally means The Central Kingdom. The ancient Chinese people regarded their empire as the center of the civilized world. At age five, I was the center of my own world, surrounded by loving family members who treated me like an emperor. I was destined to have a bright future in China — working hard in school to earn good grades, getting into a prestigious university, and then perhaps going to work for a government-owned science laboratory, following my grandfather’s footsteps in city planning, or starting my own business in my hometown — all bolstered by the ever-so-important guan xi (connections/social capital) that my mother’s family possessed in Zhongshan.

When I blew out my five birthday candles in October 1988, I had no clue that this would be the last birthday of my childhood that I would celebrate in China in the company of my extended family, in the shelter of the only world that
I had ever known. Nobody at the time told me (or probably even knew) that five months later, my real life would begin.
One night in March of 1989, I woke up at 3 AM and scurried onto a public bus in Guangzhou, accompanied by my grandmother (my father’s mother) and several large suitcases. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, the bus was packed with people and the city was still awake with the sounds of honking cars and the glare of storefront lights. My grandmother told me that we were headed to the train station to take a train to Hong Kong. Even though I was an intellectually precocious five-year-old, my world view still consisted solely of the cities of Zhongshan and Guangzhou where I grew up. I had never been outside of the shelter of my two homes, so Hong Kong seemed like a world away, even though the train ride was only going to last an hour.

When we arrived, I noticed that the people in this former British colony looked Chinese, but parts of my surroundings
were foreign-looking. For instance, I could understand the Cantonese dialect that Hong Kong residents spoke, but I could not make out some of the words on the signs and billboards along the streets. The writing was not the neatly-printed, block-style pen strokes of Chinese characters that I was accustomed to reading, but rather consisted of narrow symbols with both straight and curvy components that strung themselves together into clumps separated by spaces. Some of these strange symbols appeared more than once in a word, and I wondered what kind of written language could be so simplistic that it recycled its symbols so frequently. I mean, how many different words could you make out of a few dozen symbols?

Too bad I didn’t have much time to marvel at the sights of narrow streets crowded with layers of neon signs and double-decker buses that drove on the wrong side of the road. My grandmother and I headed straight for Hong Kong international airport. It was my first time in an airport, and I had no clue where we were headed. She told me that I was going to Switzerland so that I could live with my father, but I had no idea where that was on the map. I barely even knew what was 100 kilometers outside of Guangzhou, so how could I possibly imagine what the world was like on another continent?

After what felt like an eternity spent on my first-ever plane ride, we finally landed in Zurich, Switzerland. My father greeted us at the airport and drove us for several hours
to Geneva, a city located near the Swiss-French border. As we set down our bags, I laid down to rest for the first time in over 36 hours since leaving my grandmother’s house in the middle of the night.

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As I was trying to fall asleep that night, I had a gut-wrenching feeling that I would never go home again. This wasn’t a vacation; it was a relocation. I soon learned that the only reason my grandmother came to Switzerland was to help take care of me for a few weeks while my father made the adjustment to parenthood. After my grandmother returned to China, it was just my father and me.

At the time, I had no idea why my father was in Switzerland, but years later he told me that he was there because he worked for a Swiss-China joint venture company during the second half of the 1980’s. His company assigned him to go to Switzerland to find new business opportunities, and as a result, he opened a Chinese restaurant in Geneva as an investment and spent several years managing it.

To save costs, he lived on the second floor above the restaurant in a room he shared with several co-workers. It wasn’t nearly as cozy as a room in a typical house; it was more like an attic that was converted into a dorm room, with each person’s living quarters separated by makeshift partitions made out of thin sheets hung on clotheslines. The head cook lived in the partition next to my father’s.
During the afternoons when the restaurant was closed, I watched my father and the other workers fold napkins and tablecloths, set up plates and silverware, manage the inventory, and make various preparations for the dinnertime crowd. I often grew bored and restless since nobody was around to entertain me.

At night, the real action started. Since the customers were mostly local French-speaking Swiss residents, my father hired a few Chinese men who could speak French reasonably well to serve as waiters. He often worked double duty as both manager and waiter when he was short on manpower. I loved watching him interact with customers, even though I could not understand what he was saying. He spoke French quite fluently for a man who had never formally studied the language. With his tall stature and confident smile, he was an impressive salesman, even though he was just marketing roast duck and fried noodles.

At the time, I did not understand the world that my father had entered. I could not fathom what it was like to interact with people who did not look Chinese or speak the Chinese language. I felt most comfortable in the kitchen, with the loud sizzle of woks and skillets, the overwhelming feeling of hot oil and grease, the aroma of Chinese spices and sauces, and the rough Chinese slang and cursing that the cooks yelled to one another. That was more like home. I could understand what the cooks were saying to one another, and I could relate to the smells of their cooking. I
knew that this was the most I would see of my former home, these few men crowded into a back kitchen with stains on their aprons and oil burn marks on their forearms.

I recalled that my family back in China used to cook festive meals, take me out to lavish banquets, and feed me everything that I ever wanted. And now I found myself in a foreign land where my only family was my father, who had neither the resources nor the time to give me privileged treatment like the rest of my family had done in China. I had suddenly come from being a Little Emperor with dozens of relatives as my faithful servants to being all alone with nobody to cater to my whims.

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After getting over the initial shock of moving, I tried my best to behave and to stay out of trouble when my father was busy working. I did lots of thinking during those long and lonely hours I spent in the restaurant, relieving my boredom and anxiety by pondering about the world. I would queue up long streams of questions, mostly about the physical sciences, and ask my father whenever he had a free moment — Why is the sky blue? What is fire made of? Aren’t we going to run out of oxygen if millions of people keep on breathing all of it? My mind was overly active and curious, and my only outlet was to ask him questions.

I would ask him questions when he was busy relaying orders or whenever he had a five-minute break to take a sip
of water. Even more annoyingly, I would wake him (and everybody else sleeping in the same room) up at 5 AM almost every morning by jumping into his bed and pestering him with questions that I had accumulated from the previous evening. I usually went to bed by 9 PM, long before he and his co-workers were done closing up the restaurant. I didn’t realize at the time that he came up to the bedroom around midnight every evening and studied for an hour to improve his French skills, so he only got four hours of sleep each night before I jostled him awake.

Even though I was trying hard to behave, I had grown up accustomed to receiving instant gratification from my family back in China, so I desperately wanted my father’s undivided attention as well. I did not feel as appreciative at the time, but I am now very grateful that he always tried his best to answer my questions, no matter how busy, stressed out, or fatigued he felt. It did not matter that his responses were not always scientifically accurate. What I cherish most about our interactions back then was that he was always willing to listen to me and to answer my questions, which helped to nurture my scientific curiosity and love for learning.

I always inquired about how the world worked, but I never asked personal questions about our family’s status. I never questioned why I was stuck here spending every day in a Chinese restaurant in a foreign country without seeing any other child my own age. I grew homesick, but it
didn’t matter. It was the first of many times throughout my childhood when I had to accept my circumstances without question since I had no power to change anything. I never asked to go back home to China, because somehow I knew that it was impossible to do. Instead, I learned to seek comfort in observing and thinking about the world around me.

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Just as I was becoming accustomed to having my father as my only family, one day he brought a woman home with him. This woman seemed very excited and eager to see me, as though she had not seen me for many years. Even though I had no idea who she was, I was happy that she seemed to know me well, so I let her take me on a long walk around Geneva while my father worked. I had barely been outside of the restaurant for several months. She asked me about myself, and I told her about how my previous life in China contrasted with my current life here in Switzerland. Out of courtesy and respect, I never felt that it was my place to ask her about herself. After all, she was an adult who seemed to know my father well, so she wasn’t a stranger.

After we spent that first day together, she asked me whether I knew who she was. I honestly replied that I did not. “I’m your mother,” she told me. “Hi, Mommy. Thanks for taking me around town today.” She seemed happy that her own son acknowledged her presence. However, later that
evening, after we finished dinner at my father’s restaurant, I said to her, “Mommy, my dad and I are going upstairs to take baths and to go to sleep. You can go back to your home now. Goodbye.” My mother told me years later that she cried after hearing me say that, but at the time, I didn’t realize I had inadvertently hurt her feelings. I didn’t know what it really meant for someone to be my “mother” since I had no memories of ever seeing her before. When I was 11 months old, she left China to attend graduate school in the United States. Now, four years later, she had just graduated with a Ph.D. in Sociology, and as soon as she received her diploma, she immediately rushed over to Switzerland to reunite with her family. The greeting she received from her only child was, “You can go back to your home now. Goodbye.”

How could I have known any better? I never recalled having a mother, and until a few months prior, I never even recalled having a father. My universe never included a special place for Mommy and Daddy, because my extended family in China was my only family. I understood what it meant for this woman to be my “mother” by the literal definition of the word: She was the woman who gave birth to me. But I thought that she was no more important than any of my other relatives in China. I did not realize that she was coming to live with us in Switzerland so that we could form a nuclear family consisting of my father, my mother, and me. The concept of a three-person family living far away
from cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents was unheard of back in China. But then again, we were not in China anymore.

It did not take long for me to get comfortable with having my mother around. Since my father was at work most of the time, I spent the majority of my days with her. She had waited for over four long years to reunite with her son, and she was trying hard to make up for the valuable lost time. She was more than eager to take me around the city, tell me stories, or just be with me. Within a few days, I grew inseparable from my mother, and never again would I view her as simply another family member. The pampering that my relatives in China provided was mostly superficial, but now for the first time I felt a deep love that only a mother could provide.

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At the time, I still had no idea why my family was in Switzerland or how long we would remain there, and it turned out that my parents knew little more than I did about our uncertain future. They told me years later that, although both of them wanted to eventually return to China, my father had hoped to make lots of money off his restaurant business and then return to China to start another business. After four years of separation while my mother was in graduate school, he wanted our family to be together again in Switzerland and to remain there for at least a few years until
he made enough money to kick-start his business ambitions in China. Of course, I had no input in any of these family decisions, and my mother also had little choice since she had just graduated from school and my father was already working.

All three of us concur today that our year in Switzerland was one of the most emotionally challenging experiences in each of our lives: My father worked night-and-day to keep his restaurant afloat since business was slow and often inadequate to maintain profits, my mother felt frustrated about being stuck in a country where she could not find a job commensurate with her academic credentials, and I had to start kindergarten in a new school where nobody else looked like me or spoke my language.
Chapter 3

Kindergarten

In August 1989, less than five months after I arrived in Switzerland, my parents decided that it was a good idea for me to start attending school. Since my father filed his immigration papers in Fribourg, a town located about 100 kilometers northeast of Geneva, Swiss law mandated that I attend school there. My parents rented the second floor of a house on the outskirts of Fribourg, chosen because it was conveniently within a five-minute walk of an elementary school. Three families lived in that house, but we each had our own residences on separate floors.

Even though the three of us were now in the same country, my family wasn’t quite reunited yet. My father lived in Geneva to manage his Chinese restaurant full-time. He only came home on Sundays because he had to work until midnight on Monday through Saturday.

Like many Chinese immigrants, especially married women,
my mother prioritized family stability over her individual pursuits of career and happiness. Her professional goal was to start an academic career as a professor in China or even in the United States, but she had to put her ambitions on hold in order to be together with her family in Switzerland. There were no opportunities in Fribourg for her to utilize her recently-earned Ph.D. degree in Sociology, so she found a temporary job as a secretary for a shipping company in order to help support her family.

For the next nine months, my mother cared for me by herself six days each week. We had brief family reunions each Sunday when my father drove back home to rest. I am extremely grateful for all the love and care that my mother provided for me during the evenings; she always tried her best to answer my curious questions and to listen to my often-incoherent ramblings despite being exhausted from long days at work. However, even she could not help me face my toughest challenge to-date: being at school every day amongst kids who had almost nothing in common with me.

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My parents enrolled me in kindergarten because it was the appropriate grade for my age. Before I began school, though, they felt that I needed a French name. They predicted that it would be difficult for Swiss people to pronounce Jia, my Chinese first name, so having a French name
would make it easier for my teacher and fellow students to interact with me. They rummaged through children’s books until they came upon a teddy bear named Philippe. They liked that name because it translated well into English — Philip. My parents were both English majors as undergraduates in China, so they liked how Philippe could be English-French bilingual. At the time, they actually had no idea just how useful this bilingual name would be a year later when we made an unexpected move to America.

Every morning after my mother fixed me breakfast and left to take the bus to work, I walked to school by myself, following the road directly in front of our house, which ran alongside a small neighborhood park. After a few minutes of walking, the park would disappear behind me, leaving in my sight only a barren field with a few dumpsters. I sometimes saw young men with shaved heads and leather jackets hanging around those dumpsters, but I just ignored them and always kept on walking straight along the road. When I told my mother about these men, she cautioned me to stay clear of them, fearing that they might be neo-Nazi skinheads. My elementary school was located right beyond the field. It had the requisite playground, classrooms, offices, and gymnasium. Nothing could be more ordinary-looking to the average European or American observer, but I was no average European or American observer.

On the first day of school, everyone I saw looked nothing like me, but very much like one another, with pale skin,
blonde hair, and blue eyes. After coming to America, I realized that white people in this country had greater diversity in their physical appearances than the kids I saw in my kindergarten class, perhaps due to the greater mixing of European blood resulting from centuries of immigration and intermarriage. Americans use the term *white* to describe people from a wide variety of European ancestries such as Germanic, Scandinavian, or Mediterranean. White people in America do not have one distinct look; they may have fair skin or dark skin, brown eyes or blue eyes, brown, red, or blonde hair, thick jaws or pointy jaws. However, as a five-year-old boy who had never seen a non-Chinese kid before, I didn’t know that there were so many different kinds of white people; my classmates all looked like they came from nearly identical local Swiss roots.

I still have my kindergarten class photo in my childhood album. The photo shows my teacher and 20 kindergarteners gathered around a slide in the school playground. Amidst the sea of blonde hair, blue eyes, and grinning fair-skinned faces, there I stood: black hair, brown eyes, with a big frown across my tanned face. I was the only one who did not look like anybody else, and also the only one who was not smiling.

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I was beyond confused during my first few weeks of school, mainly due to the language barrier. Everyone spoke French except for me. Switzerland has four national languages — German, French, Italian, and Romansh — and the region where one lives determines one’s native language. Half the people in Fribourg spoke French while the other half spoke German, and my school happened to be in the French-speaking part. If I had some clue as to what everyone kept saying to me, then at least I could try to figure out the words that I could not understand and ask for clarifications. But I had absolutely no idea what anybody said, so it was difficult for me to establish a starting point for learning French.

I felt like a monkey at the zoo: All the kids tried to talk to me, but I could only respond with primitive groans and head nods. I don’t remember exactly what my classmates said to me during those first few weeks, but I do remember that they asked me many questions since I recognized the inquisitive tones in their voices and the brief pauses that ensued while they looked at me and awaited my reply. Unsurprisingly, the first two words of French that I learned were _oui_ and _non_, corresponding to _yes_ and _no_ in English, respectively. I started by randomly alternating my answers between _oui_ and _non_, subconsciously gauging my classmates’ reactions to my utterances. I could not understand what they were asking me, but those two words seemed to provide satisfactory answers most of the time.
Even if they were actually asking what my name was, where I lived, or where my parents came from, all that I said back to them were *oui* and *non*. They probably thought I was pretty dumb.

My teacher, a kind young woman in her mid 20’s, understood my situation and made sure to tell the other kids certain things about me, like to call me “Philippe Jia” (a combination of my French and Chinese names) and the fact that I was from “la Chine,” the country of China. One of the earliest French phrases that I learned to recognize was my own name, “Philippe Jia,” as my classmates said it in the classroom, during recess, and most notably, in the gymnasium during physical education class. I vividly remember playing some sort of ball game in the gymnasium, with the squeaky sounds of sneakers running across the floor and the echoes of foreign voices off of the walls. Maybe that location remained clear in my memory because people tended to yell out names often while playing ball games. I would hear “Philippe Jia” whenever somebody threw a ball towards me or signaled me to throw the ball to them.

I learned through quiet observation, the only method available to me at the time. My speaking was far worse than my listening comprehension, so I was afraid to ask the teacher questions. Fortunately, we spent most of the days making watercolor drawings, crafts projects out of cardboard and glue, running around in the playground, and other non-academic activities (rather than learning math
and science like I had done in preschool back in China). I wouldn’t have stood a chance if the teacher expected me to read textbooks and do homework problems; my mother barely understood French so she wouldn’t have been able to help me, and I only saw my father once a week. However, it was far easier for me to become proficient at physical activities since I could observe and imitate what other kids did. Whenever my teacher gave directions on how to assemble an arts and crafts project, I could not understand exactly what she was saying, so I often glanced over at the kids next to me. I tried to play it cool, blending in as much as possible with my classmates and pretending that I could understand the directions as well as they could. I mimicked what they did while applying my own common sense and ingenuity. It wasn’t too difficult to brush off my mistakes since other students made errors as well; I looked just as clumsy as the other slow learners in the classroom.

I remained silent most of the time because I was trying to pay careful attention to what the other kids said and then what actions they subsequently performed, subconsciously making connections in my mind between words and actions. Gradually, I began to recognize patterns in other students’ behaviors associated with certain words and phrases, and my brain started to figure out the French language bit by bit. I never remembered waking up one morning and suddenly being able to understand everyone, so it must have been a gradual learning process. Within a month, I could
comfortably understand much of what my teacher and classmates said to me. I wasn’t able to read or write fluently, and I couldn’t speak well either, but at least I could understand French well enough to make it through the school days.

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Even though I quickly learned to comprehend simple conversational French, there was this one phrase that my teacher would occasionally tell the class, but I could never pick up on what it meant until it was too late. One day, she suddenly hustled the entire class into several vans parked in the front of the school. I did not ride in the same van as my teacher, so the only adult in my van was the driver. As it pulled away from the school, I was a bit worried that we were being kidnapped. However, I noticed that the other students were talkative, excited, and most importantly, cooperative, so I just followed along and hoped for the best (I really had no other choice). I sat in the back of the van, my head resting up against the rear window, in one of those seats that could be removed to provide extra trunk room.

I looked out the window and saw that we were driving on a road that wrapped around the side of a mountain, our van ascending with every loop, headed towards some unknown destination. My fellow classmates were all so excited about something, but I didn’t know what it was. I couldn’t speak French well enough to formulate the proper question — Where the heck are we going?
In one of my few lucid flashes of memory from that year, I remember a girl sitting right in front of me in that van, and I recall that she was quite pretty. She sat in one of those backwards-facing seats, so we were face-to-face like how people face one another while sitting in a booth on a train. Out of nowhere, she suddenly leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. It was such an innocent and friendly physical act; for a split second, the language barrier was gone, and I felt like I belonged. I never figured out her intentions, though. Most likely, she was acting out of simple childhood curiosity, or maybe other kids challenged her with something like, “I dare you to kiss that foreign-looking boy because he probably has alien cooties!”

However, that feeling of comfort quickly faded. What started to worry me even more than the fear of abduction was that everybody carried a little bag with them, but I didn’t have anything with me. When we arrived at our destination, I noticed that it was a huge unmarked building. I thought to myself: \textit{Hmm, looks like a good warehouse for keeping child hostages. Oh well, even if we were going to be kidnapped, at least I had gotten a kiss.} The other vans arrived a few minutes later, and to my relief, I saw my teacher again. She led the entire class inside the building, and there I saw a huge Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool.

Now things started making sense. The bags that the other students carried? Swimsuits and towels inside. Their excitement? The first swimming day of the year. I imme-
diately panicked when I thought about how I was going to go swimming without a swimsuit. I nervously followed the other boys into the men’s locker room as our teacher led the girls into the women’s room. As everybody around me unpacked their bags and changed into their swimsuits, I tried to look as though I had things under control. I took several quick glances around the locker room, desperately trying to find another boy who had also forgotten his swimsuit, but I was the only one. It was the most nerve-wracking moment of my life up to that point.

I fiddled around with the door to the locker that was right in front of me, squeakily opening and closing it a few times to pretend like I was busy with something (like unpacking my non-existent little bag). When I sensed that nobody else was watching, I quickly took off my shirt and shorts and just stood there wearing nothing but tiny white briefs. I didn’t want to look around to see the responses from the other boys, but then I thought more clearly: What did I have to lose? In their eyes, I was already different, and nobody had ever given me any trouble before for my foreignness. As far as they knew, Chinese kids all swam in their briefs. I tried to reassure myself by thinking that the other kids were all wearing tight Speedo-like swimsuits, which showed just as much skin as my briefs, so what was the big deal? We were all wearing almost exactly the same thing: tiny pieces of fabric that only covered up our butt cheeks and willies. Maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad.
As the boys marched out to greet our teacher and the girls at the pool, I started to feel much more nervous and self-conscious at the thought of the opposite sex seeing my white briefs, which I knew would become almost-transparent as soon as they got wet. Oh well, I figured that once we all went into the water, nobody would see my tighty whiteys anyways. But luck was definitely not on my side that day. The teacher lined us up along the diving board located right above water level, and we had to practice jumping into the water. I didn’t mind jumping in, but diving practice required me to get out of the water every time after I jumped in, walk around the side of the pool, and wait in line to jump again. It wasn’t a fun time standing in line in my soaked underwear. I don’t remember anyone laughing out loud, but people must have talked and snickered when they saw that I wasn’t actually wearing a bathing suit.

For what seemed like an eternity, I waited in line with a soaking wet, almost-transparent piece of cotton wrapped around my crotch, jumped into the water when it was my turn, doggie paddled to the side of the pool, walked back out, and got back in line. When it came time for supervised free swimming time, I just stayed by myself in one corner of the pool, making sure to submerge nearly my entire body so that nobody could see my underwear. I was probably the only kid who was not smiling that day. Everyone else was giggling and laughing, talking amongst themselves in a language I barely understood.
Once we finished swimming for the day, it was time to return to the locker room to change back into our regular clothes. Again, luck was not on my side. At that moment, I realized that everybody else had brought towels, but all I could use to dry myself off were my shirt and shorts. Once again, I played it cool and tried to appear like I knew what I was doing. I opened my locker, took my clothes out, and nervously alternated between shaking myself dry and using my clothes as makeshift towels. Eventually, I managed to put my damp shirt and shorts back on and boarded the van for the ride back to school.

On the way back, I was cold, tired, and embarrassed beyond belief. I tried to hold myself together and not to cry in front of everyone in the van. Some kids asked me questions as usual, and although I did not understand most of what they were saying, I could still recognize the inflections in their voices and the expressions on their faces. Their tone was not demeaning, just simply curious. They probably wanted to know why I did not bring a swimsuit and towel, but I simply nodded, shook my head, and repeated *oui oui* and *non non* in my usual semi-random manner. I tried to stare out the window or down at people’s feet so that I wouldn’t have to see anybody face-to-face. I even tried to pretend like there was water in my ears so I couldn’t hear them, tilting my head to the side and jerking it up and down, showing them that I was trying to expel the imaginary water. I cursed myself inside for my ineptitude while
fiddling with my wet clothing, wishing I were somewhere else.

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I was fine at school for most of the year, surviving well as a silent observer, but once every few weeks or so, when I least expected it, a fleet of vans would pull up in front of the school, and I knew that we were headed to the pool. The French phrase that my teacher would tell the class the preceding day went something like, “Okay kids, we’re going swimming tomorrow, so don’t forget to bring your swimsuits and towels!” Since there were so many phrases I couldn’t understand, I never learned to recognize that announcement, so I was totally unprepared every time we went swimming. If I were smarter, I would’ve brought a swimsuit and towel to class every day.

Every time it was a surprise swimming day (which was only a surprise for me), I simply went into the locker room, took off my clothes, walked out, and jumped into the pool wearing nothing but my white briefs. When we were finished swimming, I wiped myself off with my clothes and then put them on again. I think the other kids came to expect that behavior from me, so it would have been weird if I had shown up one day carrying a towel and wearing brand new Speedos. After the first few times, I stopped growing embarrassed because it became normal for me — the kid who was different — to swim in my underwear. My
French was never good enough to tell anybody that I had simply forgotten my swimsuit and towel, so I bet that my teacher and the other students eventually concluded that it was some kind of traditional Chinese custom to swim in underwear and not to use a towel.

After school ended for the year, my parents informed me that we were moving once again, this time to the United States of America. My first thought was that I would have to start all over, going to a new school and learning a new language. It turned out that this year in Switzerland was just a warm-up for the most difficult period of my childhood: my first year in America.
Part II

1990–1994
Chapter 4

My First Year in America

In August 1990, my mother and I moved to America. My mother started her new job as a tenure-track assistant professor of sociology at Louisiana State University (LSU). My father stayed behind in Switzerland to take care of closing his failing restaurant business; he rejoined us six months later and went back to school to work towards his MBA degree at LSU. We rented a house in the suburb of Baton Rouge, the capital of the state of Louisiana.

It was somewhat an accident of history that my family ended up in America. After receiving her Ph.D. in the spring of 1989, my mother planned to stay in Switzerland only for a short time and then return to China to take up a faculty position in one of the best universities there. My father planned to stay a little longer running his restaurant until he had accumulated enough money to launch a new business in China. But the 1989 pro-democracy protests in
Tiananmen Square in Beijing changed my parents’ ambitious plans. After the Communist government’s crackdown on students and intellectuals, my mother and many other scholars who were educated in Western democratic countries felt deeply uncertain about their future careers upon their return to China. Fortunately, with the help of her academic advisors in America, she was able to obtain a faculty position at LSU and initiate our family’s journey towards becoming American.

Even though we lived in a tranquil suburban neighborhood, my mother enrolled me in first grade at Jackson Elementary School, located right in the middle of the downtown Baton Rouge ghetto. Why? Because it had a low-cost extended daycare program that lasted from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM every day. My father was not around, and my mother was starting a challenging new job which required her to put in a high number of hours. The 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM schedule of a regular school (such as the one in our neighborhood) would not be sufficient since she could not possibly go to work that late or leave work that early to come home to look after me. She could not afford private after-school care, so sending me to Jackson was the most practical option.

The school officials were proud of their extended daycare program, telling my mother that it was the ideal choice for a working mother such as herself. She later learned that the locals used the term working mother as a euphemism to describe young, poor, often unwed single mothers living in the
inner-city. These women had to work long hours every day (sometimes at multiple jobs) to support their children, thus creating the demand for after-school child care programs.

As a new immigrant, my mother was pragmatic yet naïve. At the time, Baton Rouge ranked as one of the most crime-filled cities in the United States, and I ended up enrolled in a school in the middle of the most dangerous part of downtown. Despite having attended graduate school in America for four years, my mother still had not seen firsthand how different neighborhoods within the same city could manifest such vast disparities in social class. She was simply unaware of what attending a ghetto school might mean for a child’s education and even physical well-being. She thought that she had found a good solution for making the best out of her time and financial constraints.

This extreme stratification in social class was unheard of back in China and Switzerland. In 1980’s China, there was no concept of the “bad part of town” since everybody lived more-or-less equally-modest lives. Even in Switzerland, people were fairly homogeneous in race and socioeconomic status. The homogeneity that my mother grew accustomed to in China and Switzerland left her unprepared for the stark disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in America and the astounding differences in material wealth and social environments between our suburban neighborhood and the downtown Baton Rouge ghetto. It was bitterly ironic that she placed me in the most dangerous part of the city.
for ten hours a day with the intention of ensuring my safety, but she could not think of a better option at the time.

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As she had done in Switzerland, my mother tried her best to take care of me while I was at home, but I was all on my own while at school. Every weekday morning, she drove me to school in her second-hand Subaru that she bought for $3,000, a huge sum of money for us at that time. There were two things I remembered about our daily drives. The first was listening to All Things Considered, a talk show on National Public Radio (NPR) filled with classical music and the deep-voiced commentator discussing social and political issues far beyond my comprehension. During my first few weeks in America, I could not understand a word that man was saying, and that made me even more nervous as we drove towards school. It was like a daunting prologue to my next ten hours. If I could not even understand what Mr. Walter Morris or Alexander Stuart (or whatever stoic model-citizen-white-guy-name the NPR commentator’s parents gave him) was saying during my ride to school, then how could I possibly hope to comprehend what my furiously compassionate black first grade teacher Mrs. Jones was spouting out in the classroom in her strong Southern-accented English?

My other prominent memory of those morning car rides was feeling physically ill: I always got a terrible pain in
my gut, caused by fear and anxiety. Everybody can imagine the “butterflies in your stomach” sensation, that tense feeling in your gut when you have to make a first impression on somebody, when you initially move to a new place and have no friends, or when you are nervous about some important occasion. Everybody has experienced that weak but chronic tummy ache that won’t ever go away, and that cold weakness in your bones and joints. I had that gut-wrenching feeling every morning as my mother drove me to school, and the soothing voice and classical music of NPR only exacerbated my anxiety. Where I was headed had no classical music or white guys neatly dressed in suits. Every day, the same agonizing pain pervaded through my body before I even reached the school’s front doors. I never got used to going to school during my first year in America, and I knew it because that terrible discomfort never went away.

What is somewhat ironic but unsurprising is that I do not remember anything about ever being in the classroom during that entire year. I don’t remember what the teacher taught us, who was in my class, or what kind of desks we sat in. All I remember is that I was by far the best student in the classroom. My teacher must have been shocked that, even though I did not know a word of English when I first started school, within a few months I could read and write better than anybody else in my class. I was a quick and voracious learner; my love of acquiring knowledge had developed naturally from a young age. I was able to read and
write Chinese fairly fluently at a child’s level by age three; I loved reading all of the street signs and shop names out loud whenever my grandmother took me walking around Guangzhou. At age three, I started learning math, both from preschool and from my step-grandfather, and became proficient at doing arithmetic that kids in America would not learn until third or fourth grade.

So why don’t I recall any specific experiences within the classroom throughout that entire year? I think it’s because that was the most normal part of my school day. Those six hours every day were well-controlled and productive, and I had so many new things to learn. I learned most of my English by listening to the teacher talk and tell us stories, and by watching her write on the board. It was the only time when everyone sat in their own seats with an authority figure present who could keep everything under control. Even the most bad-ass of playground bullies had to simply sit in their seats and struggle through reading children’s literature passages out loud. When I focused on my work during class time, the terrible butterflies in my stomach finally went away. I was in my element inside the classroom because there I knew that I had an advantage over all the other kids. However, even though I gained self-confidence in terms of my academic abilities, I still remained quiet and humble. I never regarded my precociously-acquired knowledge as a mark of pride because scholastic intelligence didn’t matter at all outside the classroom.
In stark contrast to my relatively calm classroom experience, the times I spent at Jackson Elementary during recess, lunch, and before and after school in the extended daycare program were beyond chaotic and overwhelming. The kids I had encountered in Switzerland a year earlier all came from middle-class families in a country known for social tranquility. I was not afraid of them because their docile environment gave them little impetus for aggressive behavior beyond good-natured roughhousing. However, most of the kids I encountered here had grown up on the turbulent, crime-ridden streets of the Baton Rouge ghetto. Many boys looked intimidating to me and flaunted macho tough-guy attitudes, ready to challenge authority or fight to defend their personal honor or ego. The vast majority of my classmates were black, but their race had little to do with their heightened aggression and antagonism towards me — put a white, Asian, or Hispanic boy in the ghetto for a few years (usually with unwed or separated parents) and he would develop the same street-tough sense of self-defense as well, pushing and shoving to assert his pre-pubescent masculinity.

When my mother dropped me off every morning at 7:00 AM, I went straight into the cafeteria, where teachers provided supervision for two hours before class began. There was always deafening noise created by kids playing with one another and a pervasive nauseous smell resulting from the mix of the humidity, the freshly-mowed grass outside, and
the hot dairy-filled breakfasts (often creamy Southern biscuits and unlabeled plastic packs of milk) being served to the students inside. Hundreds of kids ran loose around the cafeteria — talking, yelling, screaming — but the teachers didn’t do much to calm the rowdy atmosphere. After all, it was like recess, only before school, so it was acceptable to give the kids some amount of freedom.

I was overwhelmed by the amount of chaotic activity that took place before my eyes. It wasn’t like any kind of school that I had ever attended or that I could even imagine. I tried to remain as far away from the center of attention as possible. I often sat alone in a corner and watched the other kids playing, roughhousing, and fighting with one another. I never ate breakfast in the cafeteria because it tasted really gross. My stomach was not used to the richness of American butter and cream (kids in China usually do not grow up eating much dairy products), and the constant grumbling of the butterflies in my stomach further quashed my appetite. I really don’t remember what I did to pass the time during those mornings, but somehow I managed to survive until the bell rang and we all entered the more orderly world within the classroom. Knowing myself, I probably looked around a lot and tried to make sense of how the other kids behaved.

I stayed out of trouble by using my animal instincts because that was all I had with me. Of course, I never consciously thought to myself, “Hmm, what’s my next move” or “What am I going to do now?” or “How am I not go-
ing to get whooped?” Rather, I just followed my gut feelings and tried to avoid arousing the attention of the most threatening-looking kids. Like a small animal in the wild, I learned to stay alert and to instinctively avoid places where there might be trouble. I wouldn’t go near groups of larger kids who were playing ball games; I tried to stay near the smaller kids in order to camouflage my physical differences. I never actively joined in to play games with anyone. I kept busy by talking to myself and by observing other people around me. I was that loner kid who always sat by himself in the playground, but I was most comfortable when left alone.

When I started first grade, learning English became a top priority since nobody else knew French or Chinese. I employed the same tactics of learning through silent observation that had worked for me in Switzerland just a year earlier, naturally becoming more adept at it since it was my second attempt. During those first few weeks, I was very cautious when kids approached me to ask me questions since I could barely understand what they were saying. Some may have been malicious, some may have been making fun of me, some may have been curious, and some may have really wanted to be my friend, but I was always curt with my responses. I could say yes and no, just like how I could say oui and non while I was in Switzerland. Once again,
I had absolutely no idea what the other kids were asking me at first, but judging from the tones of their voices, I knew that they were being inquisitive, so I alternated my answers between yes and no. As my sense of the English language became more refined, I could better understand people’s questions, and my replies became more accurate and realistic. I soon started moving up to phrases and then sentences.

Within three months, I could understand pretty much everything that kids around me were saying, and I could speak a good deal of it myself without any sort of foreign-sounding accent (as a consequence, I completely lost my ability to understand or speak French due to lack of practice). I sounded like everybody else around me in school because I had learned to mimic their speech patterns, which meant that I talked exactly like a black kid from Louisiana. I spoke with a thick Southern accent mixed with black slang. One time when I tried to order food at McDonald’s, I articulated my request quite eloquently in my Southern black accent, and the black guy who manned the cash register enthusiastically told me, “Kid, you speak GOOD English!” My parents love telling that story to their friends. My unique accent faded the following year when I enrolled in a suburban school, which consisted mostly of white kids. But throughout my first year in America, whenever I moved my lips, it sounded like there was a Southern black kid standing behind me speaking the words that came out of my mouth.
After school ended at 3:00 every day, teachers and other staff members shuffled the kids who enrolled in the extended daycare program into various classrooms and locations on the athletic field. For the next two hours, the adults supervised activities such as sports, arts and crafts, and additional tutoring until our parents (i.e., our working mothers) came to pick us up at 5:00. The only activity I did was related to computers, since that seemed to require the least amount of physical effort. The school had a computer lab containing old, run-down Apple machines with huge 5.25” floppy disks. Our supervisor for the computer activity was a white woman who seemed fairly young; she was one of the only white people I saw in that school, and she was definitely younger than the teachers. Perhaps she was a high school student who was volunteering to help kids in the inner-city.

This supervisor lady taught us to play educational games on the computer, which usually involved solving math or spelling problems. Unfortunately, I almost never got a chance to play the games since the bigger kids always hogged all the machines. I would often sit behind those kids and watch them play. I always knew the correct answers or how to properly maneuver through the game (often playing through it in my head as I watched them), but I was too timid to ask for a chance to use the computer. I would point to the screen to help out the kids who were playing, but I never received any credit for my assistance. One time I was stand-
ing behind several big kids, watching them struggle with the keys on the keyboard. I was so eager to help them out, except I was nervous about how they would react when I gave them advice. I ended up sporadically pointing my finger here and there on the screen and keyboard, giving subtle hints to them so that they could magically “figure it out” on their own.

After a few weeks, my actions finally caught the supervisor’s eye, and she actually gave me some recognition. She let me roam around to help other kids who were having trouble with their respective games. I learned to remain humble even if I knew the correct answers while the other kids did not and to refrain from showing off my knowledge since it might make others feel inadequate or embarrassed. I figured that kids who felt uncomfortable weren’t likely to treat me well, so I kept my mouth shut to protect myself — survival instinct. Of course, I didn’t consciously think that I was learning an important life lesson; everything happened very naturally.

There was not much room for higher-brain activity during my first year in America. I mostly went with my instincts because that was all I could rely on. I was not exactly going with the flow because I was not even part of the (metaphorical) river. I had to carve out my own stretch of land, fill it with my own water, and then swim upstream in my own river. But the most important thing is that I somehow knew how to do it. I somehow innately knew how to
survive. I never had to consciously make an effort to learn like I had to do with math or science. We humans have an amazing ability to adapt, and this self-preservation instinct was what kept me going throughout that entire year.

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My mother left work and picked me up from school at 5:00 PM every day. At around 4:45, the extended daycare activities ended and the teachers lined up all the students by the front entrance. We sat along the wall in the hallway and waited for our parents to come pick us up. By the end of each ten-hour school day, I was anxious to see my mother and to go home. Whenever I saw her Subaru pull up in front of the school, I would almost burst into tears in relief that everything was okay. I was deathly afraid that something might happen to her one day and that she would not come to pick me up. I didn’t know what would happen to me if that ever occurred because I knew nobody else in this country.

I always stared at my wristwatch or at the school clock as 5:00 approached. As soon as the minute hand hit the 12 to indicate that it was 5:00 and my mother was not yet in sight, I sometimes began to cry incessantly in panic, worrying that something horrible had happened to her. Whenever she was stuck in traffic and came only five minutes too late, she would often find me bawling in tears. Concerned over my all-too-punctual daily cries, the teacher who supervised
parental pick-ups at the front desk gave her diagnosis to my mother: “You know what your son’s problem is? He knows how to read a clock. If he didn’t know what time it was, then he wouldn’t cry so much.” My mother was shocked and thought to herself, “He’s six years old, how is it possible that a six-year-old kid doesn’t know how to read a clock?” We did not realize that many six-year-olds in America could not read analog clocks with hour and minute hands. We had always taken that skill for granted since I had known how to tell time since I was three, just like my cousins and many other Chinese kids. I never forgot those feelings of utter hopelessness and anxiety which struck me the moment the clock hit 5:00 every afternoon. I could not accept being separated from my mother even for a second longer than scheduled. I could tell time like a champ, but this accuracy became a burden since I lived in an imprecise world that I had no way of controlling.

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Halfway through the school year, my teacher saw my academic potential and told my parents to sign me up to take a standardized aptitude test. If I passed that test, I could enroll in the gifted and talented education program in my suburban neighborhood school in the following year. One of the few vivid scenes I distinctly recall from first grade was when I walked into a classroom to take that test. It was administered in one of those makeshift portable buildings; I
had to walk up a slightly inclined ramp in order to enter the room. It was very cold and dry in there, so cold that I got goose bumps on my skin. It was often very hot and humid in Louisiana, and I cringed at the shock of walking into an air-conditioned room after being outdoors in the sticky heat. I easily passed that test and won my way out of spending another year at Jackson Elementary, saying goodbye to long drives with my mother into downtown every morning while my stomach tried to digest itself, and saying goodbye to being at school for ten hours every single day.

I wasn’t traumatized by my first year in America; rather, I made the best of my situation. I never thought that I deserved a more stable childhood. I never even knew what a normal childhood ought to be. I expected nothing more ideal because I was never shown anything else besides my own life. I grew strong during that year because I learned about my deepest weaknesses and fears. I also reinforced many of the skills that I had acquired in Switzerland since I faced similar challenges, albeit in a far harsher environment: Again I had to learn a new language and culture, keep myself safe and entertained when nobody else looked out for me, and cope with prolonged separation from my parents. Those two years marked my transition from an outspoken and spoiled *Little Emperor* in China with high prospects and extensive family connections to a reserved and independent immigrant boy.
Chapter 5

Different but Normal

I started the following school year in a gifted and talented second grade class at Grant Elementary School, located in the suburbs not far from my home. After two consecutive years of starting school as the new kid in class, I had already grown accustomed to the anxiety of entering a classroom filled with strangers who looked nothing like me. I was not nearly as nervous this third time around; at least I didn’t need to learn a new language. I also felt more comfortable going to a school in my own neighborhood rather than in the downtown ghetto, and I wasn’t sad to leave anybody behind since I never really got to know my first grade classmates at Jackson Elementary to begin with.

When I walked into the classroom on the first day of class, I was amazed by the abundance of whiteness — the teachers, the students, and even the school building were all white. Just like kindergarten in Switzerland, but in
stark contrast to my inner-city experience of the previous year. Grant Elementary was a lovely-looking school nestled amongst huge magnolia trees in a quaint suburban neighborhood. There were large open spaces, lots of trees in the playground that we could run around and climb on, and plenty of grass and leaves everywhere, as opposed to the Jackson Elementary scenery of badly-manicured fields encased by barbed wire fences. But what amazed me the most was how polite and friendly the people were towards me. It seemed like true Southern hospitality at its finest. Maybe part of the reason why I felt so welcome was because it was the first time that I could understand what other people were saying to me when I entered the classroom. I’m sure that my teacher and some of the kids at Jackson were just as nice to me, but I could not appreciate their kindness since I did not understand English at the time.

Second grade was so much fun. I made friends fairly quickly since I now felt comfortable in my environment. The two gifted second grade classes contained mostly kids from my middle-class suburban neighborhood. Most students were white, but there were also a few Asian, Middle Eastern, and black kids. I truly appreciated having friends at school after spending two consecutive years as a loner. Most of the kids in both classes got along really well. Whenever someone had a birthday party, he/she would send out invitations to everyone. My classmates and I went on field trips to the zoo, played with caterpillars in the playground
during recess, and even cleaned up the classroom together one morning after it had flooded during a heavy thunderstorm. Over the course of a few months, I gradually shed my Southern black accent as I picked up the local white dialect from my friends. We took our class picture outside on the steps in front of the school, surrounded by beautiful magnolia trees. The radiant sunshine and the cordial smiles on everyone’s faces perfectly captured my feelings about second grade. That was the first class photo in which I was actually smiling.

My mother did not need to drive me to school anymore since school buses went around the neighborhood to pick up and drop off the students. I looked forward to chatting with my friends on the bus and, on special days, I would get off at one of their houses to go play. By this time, my father had moved to America to live with us after closing his restaurant in Switzerland and was attending graduate school at LSU. He was home whenever he did not have classes, so he could take care of me in the afternoons while my mother was at work. In my abundant free time, I loved going over to friends’ houses to play video games, having water balloon fights on the streets, riding my bike on the sidewalks with other neighborhood kids, and playing Little League baseball in the park. That year was the closest I ever came to experiencing what I envisioned to be an ideal suburban childhood.
Ever since I left China, I knew that I was different from everybody else, but these differences never mattered much to me until I started making friends in second grade. In Switzerland, everyone was white and I was the only Chinese kid in my class and probably in the entire school. During first grade at Jackson, almost everyone was black and I was still probably the only Chinese kid. I had grown accustomed to the fact that I was different, so I didn’t closely associate with any of these people who looked nothing like me. I didn’t know about their culture, I didn’t know about their families, I didn’t know about their traditions, customs, or values, and I had no way to learn these things since I never made friends with anyone during kindergarten or first grade. I was just trying to survive.

But second grade changed everything. I could talk fluently about baseball cards, Ninja Turtles, video games, and other topics that little boys liked, so I made friends fairly quickly. As I became better friends with the kids in my class, I went over to their houses more often and saw their family interactions and customs firsthand. I soon began thinking about how their households differed from my own.

I always loved going to my friends’ houses much more than having them come over to mine because I thought their homes were so much more interesting than my minimalist immigrant refuge. They always had so much stuff in their houses, plenty of decorations, artifacts, and knick-knacks,
so many family pictures with grandiose frames, refrigerators filled with American snacks, and beautiful antique furniture, while my house was much sparser and less glamorous. My parents valued practicality over aesthetics, so our house was comfortable but by no means luxurious. We used aluminum foil to cover the greasy stoves, old newspapers to serve as mock-tablecloths, and grocery bags to hold the trash. We had mismatched furniture everywhere since we purchased chairs and tables at the lowest prices from various flea markets, garage sales, and second-hand stores. Our refrigerator was nearly empty except for the bare necessities of meat, vegetables, and soy sauce; my parents never bought any of the food I saw advertised on TV — snacks, desserts, frozen dinners, butter, and condiments — because all they knew how to cook was Chinese food (their one attempt at baking a pizza was disastrous). As an immigrant family with only one source of income — my mother’s modest assistant professor salary minus my father’s business school tuition — our house reflected our frugal lifestyle.

The more my friends’ families welcomed me into their homes, the more times I played Nintendo or football with them, the more home-cooked American meals their mothers prepared for me, the more times we rode our bikes together, the more I began to realize just how different I was from them and the more I wanted to be just like them. My friends’ mothers were always at home cleaning, cooking, doing the laundry, and politely offering me food and
drinks whenever I came over to play. I didn’t know that mothers could stay at home; that was a strange concept for me since my mother was always at work. If only my mother could stay at home, then I would be one step closer to being normal like everyone else.

Whenever I ate meals at my friends’ houses, the father would always propose a moment of silence to pray and say Grace, something which my family never did. At first, I didn’t know what to do so I just sat still, but when I saw everyone else with their heads down, eyes closed, whispering words of gratitude to God for the food and His blessings, I surmised that this was some sort of ritual white people went through before eating every meal. I was too ashamed to ask my friends about the meaning of this ritual for fear of sounding like an uncultured foreign heathen. They already thought that I was different since I was not white, so I didn’t want them to learn that I was also not Christian.

I was never able to find anybody to play with me on Sunday mornings. I used to wake up early on weekends to watch cartoons. At around 9:00, I always called all of my friends to try to find someone to go play. Every Sunday morning, I called friend after friend, but nobody was ever home. At first, I thought that everyone just woke up really late on Sundays, so nobody bothered to answer the phone in the morning. My parents couldn’t explain this phenomenon either. However, I eventually learned that everyone went with their families to church on Sunday mornings.
single one of my friends. Everybody in my neighborhood. Except for my family.

Why didn’t my family ever go to church? Why didn’t we pray to God before eating every meal? Why didn’t my mother stay at home to bake cookies for my friends? Why didn’t our house smell fresh and bustle with activity so that I could invite my friends over to play without feeling embarrassed? Why couldn’t we be just like my friends’ families so that I wouldn’t have to go to their homes so often in order to experience what I could not get in my own? Why couldn’t my parents talk without foreign accents or understand American culture just like my friends’ parents? Why couldn’t I be white just like almost everyone else I knew?

I remember making a shocking realization one day while sitting alone in my room: I could never be like my friends, no matter how hard I tried. I could never be white since I was not born that way. I could never live their lives since I was not destined to do so. It was horribly disheartening for me to realize that I was so different. The problem wasn’t that other kids ostracized me for not looking like them. On the contrary, almost everyone at school made me feel very welcome, and my white friends and their families were always nice to me. But rather, the problem was that I did not like myself for being so different. The firsthand exposure I had gained to traditional devout white Southern households with stay-at-home moms made me realize how much my family did not fit that norm.
As an immigrant child, I was constantly on the move, so I didn’t have any firm roots in America. In contrast, most of my friends were born in a hospital less than 15 minutes away from their homes, their brothers and sisters enrolled in the same schools they attended a few years earlier, and their parents and grandparents had gone to school on the other side of town. I didn’t have any of that continuity in my own life. Why couldn’t I be just like them? I realized that my childhood experiences were so much more turbulent than those of my friends, and for the first time, I desperately longed to have my memories erased and to start a new life, a tranquil domestic existence living in the suburbs of Baton Rouge, a stable life with bike rides, with my mother at home baking cookies, and with my family dressing up to go to church on Sunday mornings. I wanted to wake up one day, look at myself in the mirror, and see a handsome Caucasian boy with blue eyes, blonde hair, and an All-American smile. I wanted to see that white kid whom I knew I wanted to be.

Good thing I didn’t wake up one morning and have my wish suddenly come true. Very good thing. I eventually learned to accept my own heritage and not be so envious of the ideal Southern household. I grew accustomed to masking my differences in order to fit in with my white friends. Second grade ended up being the most fun year for me throughout all of elementary school.
However, I only had a year of attending Grant Elementary before returning to the ghetto once more. Grant only had the gifted and talented program from kindergarten through second grade. The nearest elementary school with a gifted program from third through fifth grades was Davis Elementary School, located directly in the middle of downtown only blocks away from Jackson, the place where I spent ten hours every day during my first year in America. Any second grader who wished to remain in the gifted program had to transfer into Davis to begin third grade.

I was not shocked to re-enter the ghetto on the first day of third grade, but I could see the anxious looks of the other kids on the school bus. My suburban classmates were probably scared because they had never spent much time in downtown Baton Rouge, which was widely regarded as a dangerous neighborhood. They might have been intimidated by the sight of the masses of black kids walking towards the school as our bus (which only carried mostly-white kids from the suburbs) pulled up to the main driveway. I was already used to being in the same playground and classroom as kids from the ghetto, so the transition to Davis was fairly smooth for me.

I looked forward to starting third grade because I knew that it was going to be the first year when I could walk into a classroom on the first day and actually see familiar faces. Every prior year, I started school by entering a classroom filled with strangers. I had arrived during the first day of
classes as a nervous new kid for the first three consecutive years of my elementary school career. I always had the butterflies-in-my-stomach feeling because I knew something unknown awaited me. Now I actually received a genuine welcome from my friends on the first day of school. This gesture was something that everybody else took for granted since they had pretty much seen the exact same kids in class since kindergarten or even preschool. It was ironic that I felt so comfortable going to a ghetto school that was so physically and demographically similar to the one I had attended only two years earlier. It was all because I now felt comfortable with the kids around me. Even though we were in the ghetto, at least we were all here together.

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I went to Davis Elementary for two years: third grade and fourth/fifth grade. I began fourth grade in the gifted class with all of my friends, and then one quarter of the way through the year, my parents decided to have me skip a grade. They reasoned that it was a good idea because I was much more academically advanced than the other kids in my grade. At first, I strongly objected to the idea: I didn’t want to leave my friends, and I didn’t want to step foot into a new classroom filled with strangers once again — this time, older strangers. In retrospect, I’m really glad that I skipped a grade, and I have grown to appreciate the accuracy of my parents’ foresight. I think it was one of the
best decisions they ever made for me during my childhood.

At the time, though, I was unhappy, but my parents did not give me a choice. When I told my friends that I was going to skip to fifth grade, they felt genuinely upset and betrayed that I was leaving them. Some of my friends pleaded me not to go, and I was touched by their sincere loyalty. It was the first time that I felt like I was abandoning people I had grown up with; this group of friends was the first that I had remained close to for more than two years, which was a long time by my childhood standards.

In fifth grade, I spent more time on academics and less time playing with friends. My proudest accomplishment that year was winning the school and county social science fairs with my project on contrasting simple versus compound interest rates. My father taught me basic concepts from microeconomics and referred me to a few textbooks, but I developed the project completely on my own. I made all the charts and diagrams using computer programs such as Harvard Graphics and Microsoft Excel and then printed and arranged them on a three-panel presentation board. Everyone else’s parents pretty much created their kids’ projects, but like many immigrants, my parents had no sense of what it took to make such a project and also had neither the leisure time nor the enthusiasm to work on it with me.

I impressed the school judges by being able to eloquently explain economic and mathematical concepts that were far
Beyond fifth grade level, I answered their questions with natural confidence instead of simply reciting notes from pre-written scripts like most other kids did. I won first place in the school competition and then advanced to the Baton Rouge county competition. I did the best I could, and I was surprised that I took first place there as well. However, at the Louisiana state competition, my charts and math equations didn’t stand a chance against the elaborate three-dimensional models that the parents of many other finalists carted into the auditorium.

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My three years of living a relatively normal childhood in Louisiana were so much fun that I didn’t want them to end. I accepted my differences and thought that I had finally found a home, a place to settle down and to grow up as a proud Southern boy. But my childhood journey was far from over. I would soon have to experience two additional cross-country relocations — first to New York, and then to Los Angeles.
Chapter 6

Our Louisiana Neighbors

When my family moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1990, we rented a house in a suburban neighborhood. Our neighbors were a typical WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) family — mother, father, and two blondish-redheaded daughters who were around my age. Everyone in their family always greeted us politely with their pleasant-sounding Southern accents and offered assistance whenever we needed it. I went over to their house to play quite often. They had the quintessential American home, complete with a swing set in the backyard, one of those miniature electric Barbie dream cars that you could drive, fancy family portraits everywhere, fine china in the dining room, and my favorite toy — Nintendo. In comparison, our rental house was barely furnished except for a few beds, some old couches, and a tiny television. Our neighbors were always very nice to us, and we enjoyed their hospitality during our vulnerable first year in
America. We still continue to exchange holiday cards every year, long after my family moved away from Louisiana. However, these neighbors are not the focus of this chapter.

After a year of living in the rental house, my parents saved up enough money to put a down payment on a house located just a block away in the same neighborhood. We took our first big step towards the American Dream: owning a home. Our new neighbors, the Taylors, were a black family with a mother, father, son, and daughter. Their son was two years older than I, and their daughter was two years younger. From the time we moved in, and for the remaining three years that we lived in Baton Rouge, they were wonderful neighbors and became good family friends.

Although we greatly appreciated our previous neighbors’ kindness and warmth, I sensed something subtly different in our new neighbors. Even though the Taylor family did not often perform typical acts of Southern hospitality such as baking cookies or inviting us over for afternoon tea, they showed their generosity in a more down-to-earth manner. For example, Mr. Taylor, who was semi-retired, offered to help fix things around our house, to provide us with practical advice, and to watch over me when my parents were out running errands. Mrs. Taylor worked just like my own mother, so she wasn’t a stereotypical Southern housewife who milled around the house cooking, cleaning, and making everything look perfect. Whenever they went out of town on family vacations (which was much more frequently than
my family ever did), they gave me the privilege (or the “re-
sponsibility,” as they called it) of keeping the key to their
house. They let me feed their goldfish and dog and pick up
their mail and newspapers every day. Back then, I really
believed that I was doing them a favor, but now I realize
that they were actually doing me a huge favor by allowing
me to play “grown-up” with these responsibilities, and more
importantly, trusting me as their loyal friend.

I don’t think that we could’ve asked for better neighbors.
Living next door to the Taylors helped us to acculturate into
American society. If we had lived next to a white family for
the four years that we were in Louisiana, we might not have
learned as much. Of course, we would have experienced the
traditions of typical Southern life, but we would have never
gotten so close at the personal level. Even though our for-
mer white neighbors were very kind to us, we always felt like
guests receiving polite treatment. There was a lack of spon-
taneity in our interactions. Perhaps they subconsciously felt
the need to be a bit more cautious about how they acted or
what they said around us, for fear of sounding insensitive
or politically incorrect. The cultural barrier between their
well-established American family and my recent-immigrant
family would have been tough to overcome.

Racial and cultural differences did not seem to form a
barrier between my family and the Taylor family, though,
probably because we both shared something in common:
We were both minorities in our neighborhood. They were
the only black family and we were the only Asian family on our block. Even though we came from vastly different back-
grounds, we shared a unique bond as minorities. My family could discuss matters of race and culture with the Taylors more candidly than we could with our former white neigh-
bors. We felt more at ease sharing our family history with them without the slightest fear that they might stereotype us as communists or job-stealing foreigners. They were gen-
unely interested in our immigrant stories, and likewise we enjoyed hearing about their experiences in America. I took it for granted at the time, but it is amazing to think back on just how close we were to those neighbors. Ever since we moved out of Louisiana, we have never even stepped foot inside one of our neighbors’ homes. In fact, we don’t even know most of their names.

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The Taylors surely didn’t mind that we appeared to be foreigners, but I had to be a bit more conscientious around my peers at school. One thing my mother repeatedly told me while we lived in Louisiana was for me to keep a low pro-
file regarding my past. I didn’t really understand why she didn’t want me telling people about my family’s experiences in China or Switzerland, but later I realized that it was for my own protection. She didn’t want me to inadvertently make myself seem more like a foreigner than I already did just by looking like one. If I kept my mouth shut about my
origins, then the other boys enjoyed talking to me about Nintendo games and playing with me as a friend. My peers in school and around the neighborhood definitely noticed that I looked different, but it probably didn’t click for them that I was an “immigrant” or that I came from a “communist country,” words which they had probably overheard adults muttering with negative undertones.

There were a handful of Asian kids in my elementary school classes at Grant and Davis. Fortunately, we were never publicly ostracized because we did not look white. Most of the time, I did not see or hear things that adults would typically characterize as racist. The worst it ever got was the white kids pulling their eyelids apart and squinting to simulate Asian slant-eyes, making mock kung fu noises and speaking with exaggerated accents, chanting broken-English “me Chinese, me like cheese . . .” and related rhymes, and making Chinese cuts in the lunch line (which meant that they cut behind you instead of in front of you, though I still don’t understand the connection to the Chinese).

At the time, I never felt too uncomfortable around these public displays of racial insensitivity since the white kids did not have mean-spirited tones in their voices. They performed these gestures to try to be funny or to attract attention, not to intentionally irritate the Asian kids. I could tell that they were just playing around — kids acting like silly kids. I never felt the urge to tell them to stop since I didn’t want to alienate myself from the majority. After all,
many of these kids were my friends. I desperately longed to maintain a secure place in a social group since my school experience was ideal most of the time.

For the most part, the white kids in my gifted and talented class never treated me any differently just because I was Chinese, and I didn’t think that they treated the few black kids in our class much differently either. In fact, if anything, they were more sensitive about not making anti-black comments since everybody was aware that it was socially unacceptable to act prejudiced towards black people in America. Every American child must learn in school about slavery, segregation, and Dr. Martin Luther King. However, few Americans learned about the European colonization of Asia and the resulting exploitation and humiliation of the indigenous populations, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, or Japanese-American internment during World War II. The kids in my class wouldn’t ever dare to pretend to be black slaves getting ordered around by their white masters just to make a joke, but they somehow felt that it was okay to squint their eyes and make “chee chong chang” sounds, mocking Asians in an equally derogatory manner.

I think that racism in modern-day America, and also in the rest of the world, quietly and insidiously passes itself from one generation to the next mostly through these kinds of subtle remarks and gestures rather than through well-publicized violent hate crimes. For example, if two groups have been fighting for centuries in some region of
the world, then I doubt that little children from one group would learn from their parents to unconditionally love little children from the other group. Even though parents don’t explicitly teach their kids to hate on the basis of group membership (and might even preach the ideals of tolerance), they are likely to inadvertently transmit negative views through their speech, behavior, and tone of voice whenever people of the opposing group are mentioned or seen in the media or on the streets. All it takes is for parents to make a few contemptuous looks, disapproving sighs, and scornful under-the-breath comments, and their kids will quickly read between the lines and become indoctrinated with prejudice.

Living next to the Taylor family allowed me to become more sensitive to race relations in the Deep South. Many middle-class white Americans have never invited a black person into their homes, even though they may say that they have “black” friends, emphasizing race gratuitously just for the sake of pointing out that they personally know people who are not white. When I told my friends that I went over to play with my neighbors, I never said that I went to play with my “black” neighbors. There was no logical reason why I should point out that my neighbors were black. I learned not to be racist through close interactions with people of various races, not just by listening to other people’s lectures about racism being morally incorrect. I think that the best way to combat racism and other forms of prejudice is to get to know people as individuals and not merely
as representatives of a particular group. We weren’t neigh-
bors with nameless, faceless “black” people when we lived in Louisiana; we were neighbors with the Taylor family.

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The fence that separated our house from the Taylors’ house was barely three feet tall, and it was one of those chain-link see-through fences with an easy-to-open gate that was never locked. Our two backyards were essentially one large piece of grass separated by this tiny fence. We always welcomed members of the Taylor family into our home and they always welcomed us into theirs. We even exchanged house keys for emergency purposes. Since my parents were often out of the house, they were grateful that we had such a good relationship with the Taylors and felt fortunate that there was always someone next door to watch over me in case of an emergency.

During the spring of 1994, three years after we moved next door to the Taylors, my family prepared to move to New York City. We put our home on the market, offering a fairly competitive price since we wanted to sell as quickly as possible with the fewest hassles. My parents put up a For Sale by Owner sign and first attempted to sell it by themselves. My father had just earned his MBA degree and knew a bit about real estate, so he figured that we shouldn’t hire an agent for something which he believed that he could do by himself. Immigrant pragmatism. How hard could
it be to sell our house? We were in a safe neighborhood, we had a big backyard with a basketball hoop and beautiful three hundred year-old trees, we kept the house free of strange smells, stains, and cracks, and we offered a reasonable price. My parents were optimistic, and rightly so, since several potential buyers who saw our house immediately expressed initial enthusiasm at making a purchase. Some even came back a second or third time, seemingly ready to close the deal, but nobody carried through with making an actual offer. After it had been on the market for more than two months, my parents grew anxious and disappointed; they could not figure out why people kept on canceling at the last minute without giving legitimate explanations.

My parents started to figure out the answer to this puzzle from one potential buyer who was a white working-class mechanic. He came over to tour our house twice, loving it more each time he saw it. Both of his visits were in the late mornings when all of the children in the neighborhood were at school and the parents were at work. The mechanic loved every aspect of the house, just like our previous potential buyers — the location, cleanliness, spaciousness, surrounding environment, and price. He told my mother that he would definitely make an offer after coming back one more time with his tools to check that the air conditioning and other mechanical systems within the house were in good working order.
The final time that he visited was in the late afternoon after he got off from work, not in the morning like his previous two trips had been. The Taylor children and I were playing in their backyard while Mr. Taylor was there fixing the kids’ bicycles. While the mechanic was checking out the air conditioning unit in our backyard, my mother noticed that he caught a glimpse of the black family next door through the low three-foot see-through fence. He then abruptly left without finishing up his inspection. She recalled that he left with a smile and politely said goodbye but didn’t seem to express the same level of enthusiasm about our house as he had done during his previous two trips. He didn’t even mention whether he was going to put down an offer. My mother never heard from him again. This guy seemed to love everything about our house. Our air conditioning unit worked just fine. All it took was one look at the black family next door.

At that moment, my parents suddenly awoke to the reality of racial segregation. Numerous families had pulled out at the last minute after coming so close to giving an offer, but my parents never put the pieces together until they saw the mechanic’s reaction upon seeing the Taylors’ backyard. Many white people in the area had moved into the suburbs to escape the inner-city, a phenomenon known as white flight. Not only were these people uncomfortable with living next door to a black family, they likely believed that having black neighbors or living in a “mixed” neighbor-
hood would eventually drive down the resale value of their home (which is, unfortunately, a real phenomenon). In retrospect, my parents now recall being seriously advised about the possible financial implications of moving next door to a black family when they were looking to buy that same home three years earlier, but they had just moved to America at the time and weren’t aware of these race-related issues.

As June approached, my parents hired a real estate agent since they couldn’t wait much longer. The agent’s first suggestion was for us to erect a six-foot-tall wooden fence between our backyard and the Taylors’. He told my parents that people like to keep their homes private by building tall fences, but what he was really trying to convey was that potential buyers would not be as likely to see the Taylor family in their own backyard over a six-foot-tall fence. Without this subconscious racial cue to discourage buyers, there may be a higher chance for us to successfully sell the house faster and perhaps even at a slightly higher price.

Building that fence might have been the most practical thing to do to ensure a quick sale. However, I was proud that morality won over pragmatism in this particular situation. My parents simply could not bear the idea of building that fence, not because they were too frugal to spend money on the unnecessary but because they saw it as blatantly racist and insulting to the Taylor family and the friendship we had formed. If people did not want to move here because a black family lived next door, then it would be their loss.
They decided to leave the fence alone and to just remain patient. My parents became frustrated seeing family after family come and go without much interest in making an offer, but fortunately, an LSU professor who was new to town eventually bought our home.
The year was 1991, and patriotism was running high in America. Our young men and women were off in the Middle East fighting the Persian Gulf War. People at home showed their support by proudly displaying American flags in front of their houses. When Southerners believe in something, they really believe in that something. Whether it’s cordial manners towards friends and neighbors, traditional family values, unwavering faith in the Christian God, or, in this case, a strong sense of national pride, people in the South are extremely adamant about their beliefs. Even though I may not agree with all the views of the conservative majority in the region, I admire the honesty, sincerity, and passion of many of its residents (traits I have rarely witnessed to the same degree elsewhere in this country).
Almost every family in our neighborhood and in other neighborhoods around Baton Rouge bought a full-sized American flag, complete with a huge wooden mounting pole and a metal rack that propped it up against their houses, usually right above the front door. Every morning as I waited for the school bus on the street corner, I saw people bringing out their flags, unfolding them with respect, and setting them up for everyone to see. It was sort of majestic to see large American flags sticking out of almost every house and flapping in the slight breeze.

The father of the family right across the street from our house was in the Middle East serving as a combat medic. When he returned safely, his family invited everyone in the neighborhood over to their house to celebrate his homecoming. For the kids, it was just another party, but the adults reminded us of how valuable our freedoms were in America, and how they were worth defending. Thinking back now, I doubt that most of them had ever lived anywhere outside of America or witnessed these freedoms being taken away; they were probably repeating sound bites they had heard from politicians’ speeches. While the war was taking place, I tried hard to feel proud to be an American like all of the other kids. But there was a lingering uneasiness inside of me which prevented me from immersing myself in the patriotism that was supposed to feel so natural and so right.
Up until that point in my life, I had never felt a strong bond towards any particular country. I had spent time in three countries — China, Switzerland, and the United States of America — but I didn’t know which one I was supposed to feel patriotic towards. I was too young to develop a sense of national identity associated with China, I never felt any sort of connection with Switzerland because I only lived there for a year, and I didn’t feel that I was American since I grew up in an immigrant family that did not know nearly enough about American history or culture. Switzerland was not a contender; it was a toss-up between China and the United States, between my ethnic heritage and my present home.

At the time, I didn’t know how my parents felt about China or about being Chinese; I simply assumed that they were highly patriotic towards their home country since they moved to America as adults. However, I later learned that both of my parents became disillusioned with the Chinese government after living through the ridiculous yet tragic years of Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution and felt extremely fortunate to be in America. Back then, I rarely asked my parents about their feelings on politics or national identity, but even when I did, they never gave me satisfactory answers. They always told me that I wouldn’t understand until I was older. That was fine with me, but the result was that I grew up without strong patriotic attachments to any particular country.
I was a boy without a flag to call his own. I felt that my family should raise an American flag in front of our house like everybody else, but somehow I thought that we did not deserve to have one. I felt that we were not real Americans, and I was afraid that other people would ridicule us for being impostors who were pretending to be American. My white friends’ families provided the model of what I thought it meant to be American: a stay-at-home mom, a warm, comfortable house filled with decorations, relics, paintings, and family portraits, going to church together as a family every Sunday, and praying together before every meal. I didn’t know much about America, but I did know enough to feel that we were definitely not American according to my naïve definition at the time. I thought that if these families deserved to put American flags in front of their homes, then we definitely did not. In my head, it was a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation. If we didn’t put up an American flag, I was afraid that people would easily single us out as treacherous foreigners (our house was the only one on the block without a flag hanging outside), but if we did put up a flag, I was afraid that people would mock us as fake wannabe-Americans.

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During the first few days of first grade at Jackson Elementary School, I noticed that some strange cult-like activity took place every morning right as class began. All of
the kids stood up together as if commanded by some higher power and put their right hands on their chests, slightly left of center. I don’t remember if they were led by the teacher or by a voice on the loudspeaker, but they all started chanting this thing in unison with amazing exuberance — “I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States of America . . . ”

I couldn’t understand a word that they were saying since I didn’t speak English at the time. Fortunately, I had grown proficient at mimicry from my kindergarten experiences, so I stood straight up along with everyone else, placed my open right palm flatly against my chest, looked at how the boy next to me was positioned, and just moved my lips along with his. No sounds came out of my mouth. I did this same mime act every single morning, hoping that nobody around me would notice that I had no clue what we were doing standing in the classroom chanting this passage.

As the weeks passed, I began to recognize certain words, but I just couldn’t memorize the entire pledge yet. It was a challenge for me to even comprehend the easy phrases, but words like republic, indivisible, and liberty were impossible to recognize by listening to two dozen kids chanting slightly out-of-sync in thick Southern accents. I was always too timid to ask the teacher, much less the other kids, about the meaning of the pledge (and I didn’t have access to the Internet back in those days to look it up myself). I’m sure that if I had asked my teacher one day after class, she would have patiently explained it to me and even practiced it with
me until I got it right. I didn’t even bother to ask my parents since I (rightly) assumed that they knew nothing about this ritual; I didn’t even tell them that this occurred every morning.

After spending a year reciting the pledge daily, I memorized it and no longer had to lip sync during our daily morning recitals. I was glad that I went through my not-knowing-the-pledge phase in first grade because I never saw those kids again. When I started second grade and entered the classroom with people whom I would later become good friends with, I was prepared to say the pledge every morning with confidence. It helped me to appear a bit less different.

The pledge of allegiance wasn’t too difficult to learn, but the U.S. national anthem was a real doozie. I first heard the Star Spangled Banner at a high school football game that my mother’s colleague took us to one evening in order to introduce us to that very American sport. Before the game started, everybody in the stands stood up in unison. I thought that I was all set because we were going to say the pledge of allegiance. My mother didn’t know the pledge, so I was prepared to show her how smart I was by reciting it in front of her. But then, to my surprise, music started playing and people all started singing. I began to panic. *Wait a minute, this wasn’t the pledge of allegiance, or was it? Was there some tradition where people sang the pledge at sporting events instead of reciting it?* As my mother and I stood there silently, I tried to make out the words, but
it was really difficult since so many people were all singing at the same time. I only recognized enough words to know that it wasn’t the pledge of allegiance.

I never did learn the national anthem when I lived in Louisiana. I only heard it a few times at sporting events, special school ceremonies, and during my elementary school graduation. I found that it was much more socially acceptable to just stand there and listen to the national anthem rather than singing along. I could pretend that I was ashamed of my horrible singing voice. Even to this day, I don’t know when or where kids first learn the pledge of allegiance or the national anthem — from parents, teachers, television? I really don’t know.

Learning these traditions helped me to appear more American, but I still felt like an outsider looking inwards since I didn’t really know what the words to these patriotic poems really meant. In hindsight, the irony is that, as recent immigrants, my parents would have probably been able to better appreciate the message in those patriotic words than their American peers since they had actually lived in places where many of the freedoms taken for granted here weren’t available.

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Remember how almost every family in my neighborhood erected a big American flag in front of their houses during the Persian Gulf War as a sign of patriotism? My father
suggested that, to follow suit, we should put up a Chinese flag in front of our house since we were Chinese. My father was a man of logic, and he figured that this was the most reasonable course of action: Our neighbors displayed a symbol of their home country, so we should follow suit by displaying a symbol of our own home country. My mother, who had a much longer exposure to American culture since she attended graduate school here, was horrified by that idea and vehemently objected to it. She knew that it would be utterly idiotic to display the flag of a powerful Communist nation during wartime in a politically conservative climate just a couple of years after the Cold War had ended. I objected as well, but on the grounds of childish fear rather than political sensitivity. I was already so paranoid about what others would think of my family if we put up an American flag; I was deathly afraid of what people would think (or do) if we hoisted a big red Chinese flag up in front of our house.

At the time, I thought my father was strongly patriotic towards China since he wanted to prominently display a Chinese flag in front of our house. Years later, I found out that, even back then, he had already been disillusioned by the corruption of the modern Chinese government and how it had warped the ideologically-noble philosophies of its early founders. So why would he still want to display a Chinese flag even though he didn’t support its government?
For my father, the flag represented pride in China as an influential civilization with an over 5,000-year heritage rather than as a modern 20th century communist regime. He was and still is extremely proud of China as a culture. He used to take every opportunity to show how advanced the Chinese civilization had been in ancient times. He always sneered at the American history books that I studied for class: “You kids have it so easy here in America! You only have to study 200 years of American history! We had to study over 5,000 years of Chinese history in school! The great Chinese civilization has been around far, far longer than America!” Whenever we went out to eat Italian food, he would tell me about how the Chinese had first invented pizza and spaghetti, not the Italians, and how the Chinese had invented just about everything else thousands of years before the Europeans did. I didn’t know how much of what he told me about ancient China was true, but I always sensed the pride of being Chinese reflected in his voice whenever I heard him boasting about how the Chinese were better than other civilizations in one way or another.

My father did not see what was wrong with hanging a big Chinese flag in front of our house. He had recently arrived in America and was attending graduate school at the time, and all of his friends were unassimilated foreign students like himself. He didn’t realize that everyone was erecting American flags as a collective display of patriotism to support America during wartime, so that hoisting a huge
symbol of communism wasn’t exactly the most socially acceptable thing to do in this particular situation.

Besides, where could you buy a full-sized Chinese flag in the Deep South? I rarely saw flags of other nations, much less a symbol of the world’s most feared communist country (after the recent downfall of the Soviet Union). Even if it were easy to buy a Chinese flag, could you imagine driving down our quiet neighborhood street and seeing a procession of American flags and then BAM — a bright red Chinese flag protruding out of our house? I think about it now and laugh at that absurd mental image, but back then I wasn’t laughing. It wasn’t funny at all. I was really afraid. I was desperately trying to fit in, to become assimilated into American society, and the last thing I wanted was for my family to brand our own home with the MADE IN CHINA seal.

This flag incident made me realize that my loyalties were torn between two countries, so I responded by distancing myself from both. I was scared of putting up a Chinese flag and uncomfortable with raising an American flag. I tried to be proud of my Chinese heritage, but my mother taught me to keep quiet about my origins since she didn’t want me to further highlight my foreignness. At the same time, I tried to feel more patriotic towards America, but nobody had fed me enough propaganda yet to complete my transformation.
Chapter 8

Church on Sunday
Afternoons

During the four years I lived in Louisiana, I noticed that almost everyone around me was deeply religious. Most families went to church on Sundays, prayed together before eating every meal, and mentioned Jesus on a daily basis. The fact that religiosity runs strong in the South may seem obvious to most Americans, but as an immigrant from the secular nation of China, I arrived with no notion of organized religion and no clue about who Jesus was — I figured that this guy must have been pretty important since both black kids from the inner-city and white kids from the suburbs frequently talked about him with equal reverence. Like the majority of the over one billion people in China, my family is non-religious. My parents believe in some traditional Chinese folklore and draw life lessons from the works of an-
cient philosophers such as Confucius and from their Chinese cultural heritage, but they never raised me to adhere to doctrines derived from one particular set of ancient scriptures.

Since my parents did not grow up in religious families, the only possible way for them to become religious would be through conversion. Many Asian immigrants converted to Christianity as a way to become more accepted as Americans, but my parents never adopted any formal religion, mostly because they didn’t have the desire, time, or energy to do so. During my early childhood, they were incredibly busy working, going to school, and dealing with the excruciating challenges of staying afloat as immigrants; they simply did not have time to study scripture or to go to church. People who grow up in religious families often do not realize just how much effort it takes to suspend one’s disbelief and become fully-immersed in a particular religion.

Pragmatism won out over all else in my parents’ minds during their first few years in America; any knowledge or activity that did not directly (and I mean directly) help to put food on the table or to pay the bills was extraneous. If prayer or other rituals could magically increase my mother’s salary or help pay my father’s graduate school tuition, then my parents wouldn’t hesitate to sign up for whichever religion offered the most effective and lowest-cost solution to their struggles. They were open-minded to the benefits of becoming religious, but none of the reasons they saw were compelling or practical enough for them to convert.
My family had some ephemeral spiritual beliefs (e.g., in ghosts, spirits, reincarnation) that we took with varying degrees of seriousness. But in the eyes of our Christian friends and neighbors, we were atheists because we did not believe in god as the Christian God (with a capital $G$). After a few negative experiences, my parents and I quickly learned that the term *atheist* had extremely negative connotations in parts of American society, especially in the South, so we consequently kept our mouths shut regarding our lack of religious beliefs. Many people we knew felt that atheists were anti-religious and were thus a threat to religion. My family was simply non-religious; we would never march in the streets to protest against religion or stand outside of churches handing out atheist pamphlets, partly because we didn’t have time for these luxuries of self-expression that established middle-class Americans could afford to explore.

The first time I recall witnessing the touchy and personal nature of religious beliefs involved the creationism versus evolution debate. I loved reading science books in my spare time; I learned on my own about the Big Bang, the Earth’s formation out of cosmic collisions, and the evolution of living organisms, several years before my friends saw these ideas presented in the classroom. Whenever I tried to explain these scientific concepts to my friends, usually on the school bus, I often found them vehemently rejecting my claims as falsehoods. They knew that God had created
the Earth and all life, including human beings, during the seven days of Biblical Genesis. I had always been a science-minded kid, never willing to accept anything on faith, so I sometimes challenged my friends to prove their assertions. Not a good idea! They often grew frustrated with me and refused to continue these discussions. The typical “I don’t want to talk about it” or “you’re wrong” responses just shot out of their mouths like pre-programmed reflexes without any conscious thought whatsoever. I quickly learned it was unwise to challenge the factual veracity of religious teachings, and that even attempting to do so would offend my friends.

The other memorable incident that convinced me that I could not fight the deep-seated religious beliefs of everyone around me occurred in my neighbor’s backyard when I was talking to Mike, Mr. Taylor’s son. When we were playing on his swing set, Mike asked me which church my family attended, and I told him that I did not believe in God and that my family did not go to church. His immediate response: “What? You don’t believe in God? You’re going to Hell.” He wasn’t saying that out of spite. He did not sound angry or bitter. He was not trying to be mean to me; the words just came out automatically like a knee-jerk reflex. It was more of a compassionate I want to help you avoid going to Hell kind of tone rather than a you deserve to burn for eternity kind of tone.
At first, I didn’t understand why people felt so uneasy about my lack of religion. I wasn’t ever claiming that their religion was bad in any way; I wasn’t trying to offend anyone. After these two incidents, though, I realized that mentioning certain aspects of science or even one’s own atheism was an affront to my friends’ religious beliefs. Because it hurt their feelings, even in some indirect way, I became more sensitive and simply learned to keep my mouth shut on anything related to religion when I was around my friends. If I talked about “safe” subjects such as toys and video games, then we would get along just fine. I made sure to never again mention that I did not believe in God for as long as I lived in Louisiana.

While I learned about the taboo of challenging Christianity from my friends, my mother learned a similar lesson in the classroom. At the time, she had just started her job as an assistant professor and was teaching an introductory sociology class at LSU. One of her lectures was about religion. As a sociologist, she considered the church as one of the most important social institutions in a community. During the lecture, she analyzed the social functions of the church. When she reached the section on different religions around the world and their various forms of social organization, she mentioned atheism as a particular example: She said that many people around the world do not believe in God and therefore do not have a church as a community gathering place. She provided herself as an example: “For
instance, I am not a religious person. I do not believe in God. My family does not attend church.” She noticed that everyone in the room turned completely silent and stiff at that moment. She kept on lecturing, sensing that something was not quite right, but not yet realizing the shock that her casual remarks had just delivered to these bright-eyed college kids. When she finished her lecture, one shy student came up to her after everyone had shuffled out of the classroom. In the most sincere tone of voice she had ever heard from a student, the young man asked her, “I’m confused. You don’t believe in God? Then how come you’re so nice?”

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I always felt lonely on Sunday mornings because every family except for mine would get all dressed up and go to church together, so I couldn’t ever find any friends to play with me. I wanted to go to church on Sundays too, but not for religious purposes. I never had any desire to become Christian. I just wanted our family to go to church so that we could seem more American and, well, more normal.

I received my blessing in the form of Chinese school. In cities all across the nation, groups of Chinese parents organized local Chinese schools that were held on weekends. The primary purpose of these schools was to teach Chinese language, history, and culture to the younger generation, who spent most of their time immersed in American society and were at risk of forgetting their ethnic heritage. Chinese
schools are often non-profit and charge affordable tuition just to offset their operational costs; parents volunteer to serve as teachers and administrators. The Chinese school (and related ethnic schools for Japanese, Korean, and other immigrant groups) is an important community institution which provides supplementary education for the kids and social connections for both the kids and especially for immigrant parents whose lack of English skills and American cultural literacy limit their connections in the society-at-large. Not coincidentally, supplementary education and social networking are two prominent roles of the church as a community organization.

Starting in my third year in America, I attended Chinese school every Sunday, and it became my equivalent of going to church. My parents enrolled me in a Chinese school that was actually located inside a church. The local Chinese school organizers rented church premises on Sunday afternoons to hold classes. On Sunday mornings, the wholesome dressed-up white families would go learn sacred lessons from The Bible, and then in the afternoons, the barbarian horde of Chinese heathen would invade the hallowed grounds and hijack it as a platform for teaching Chinese language and secular culture.

The Sunday school classrooms where we had class were always decorated with Christian memorabilia. In the mornings, kids would often sketch Biblical verses and scenes on construction paper and post them up on the walls. When we
arrived in the afternoons, my mostly-atheist Chinese school peers would always be curious about what these words and images meant. They would inspect the artwork on the walls, flip through the Bibles, examine the holy crosses, and explore the premises like curious kids. Our teachers would often get agitated at the sight of this meddling behavior and yell at the kids in stern Mandarin Chinese, “Don’t touch anything here! We are guests in this church, and if we don’t want to be kicked out of here, then you kids better behave!”

These parents-turned-weekend-teachers were absolutely correct. They knew that if the churchgoers ever found anything out of place — even one Bible that was not put back in its proper location — they would be harshly reprimanded for not respecting the sanctity of church property. These unassimilated immigrants were easy scapegoats because of their minority status. I’m not saying that the churchgoers would actively and maliciously discriminate against us; after all, we were renting their property and had a responsibility to keep it tidy. But imagine if another group of people who were demographically similar to the churchgoers rented the church, say for weekend knitting lessons; they would probably be more lenient if the white amateur-knitters left the classrooms a bit disheveled than if the Chinese school students did. Minorities are less likely to receive the benefit of the doubt and are more likely to have their specific offenses generalized into group stereotypes. In this hypothetical example, the amateur-knitters might be warned about their
specific act of messiness, but there would be no negative social stigmas attached to the group itself. In contrast, the reprimand of the Chinese school tenants would likely reinforce stereotypes of the Godless immigrants as filthy and disrespectful.

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The best part of Chinese school for me wasn’t the education or the camaraderie with other Chinese kids; it was the simple fact that I had somewhere to go on Sundays. Now I could tell my friends that I went to church on Sundays just like they all did. And I wasn’t even lying, since Chinese school was actually held in a church. I was one step closer to fitting in with my Christian friends. I proudly told my neighbor Mike that I now went to church so I was no longer Hell-bound. He probably found it strange that I went to church on Sunday afternoons; but then again, it wasn’t unfathomable for Chinese people to go to church at different times.

Throughout elementary school, my classmates sometimes brought up the topic of religion, never as a focus of academic study or scholarly debate, but rather always in the form of a simple question: “Which church does your family go to?” Nobody asked the more logical two-question progression: “Does your family go to church? If so, which one?” It was assumed that all families went to church. Kids would ask each other this question on the school bus and in the
playground when discussing what they did over the past weekend. For instance, “I went to a church barbeque with my family. What church does your family go to? Did your church have a special event this weekend?” Fortunately, I was already attending Chinese school by that time, so I could reply with confidence, “I go to the church on so-and-so street. It’s an all-Chinese church.” Everyone would always naturally assume that I attended a Christian church for Chinese people.

My cold sweat would subside as my peers bought my white lie every time, but one time my friend Raymond, whom I went to Chinese school with, overheard my response and interjected, “That’s not church! It’s located IN a church but we don’t actually go there to worship! We go there to learn Chinese! It’s a Chinese school!” Oh man, that was bad! That was doubly bad. Not only did he tell everyone that we did not go to church to worship God, but he also highlighted our differences by mentioning that we went there to learn Chinese, thus reinforcing our image as foreigners. It was like, not only would we be ostracized because we were not part of the Christian majority, we would be further scorned because we banded together in Chinese school to become even more foreign.

Raymond was always notorious for talking before thinking. On December 7th, 1992, the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, our third grade teacher asked the students what they knew about that incident. Several students replied that it
was when the Japanese attacked a U.S. naval base in Hawaii. Then, some of them turned around and stared straight at Raymond and me, the two Asian kids who happened to be sitting together in the back of the classroom. Raymond got so upset and yelled out loud, “What are you looking at us for? We’re not Japanese! We’re Chinese! Can’t you tell the difference? You’re all so dumb!” Even though I felt uncomfortable that our classmates singled us out just because we looked more like the Pearl Harbor attackers than anybody else in the class did, I was embarrassed that Raymond spoke out so harshly against kids who didn’t know any better. They weren’t trying to be prejudiced or racist.

During my final year in Louisiana, I converted from being Christian to being Buddhist. Rather, I converted from trying to pass myself off as Christian to trying to pass myself off as Buddhist. I had stopped going to Chinese school, so I could no longer claim that I went to church on Sundays. It was time to find a new religion to pretend to join. By this time, the kids in my school had learned about many world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam through history book lessons. My teacher portrayed all religions besides Christianity as relics of ancient history that were safe to study in the classroom. It was always something like, “Let’s study ancient India. There was a guy and he got a lot of believers and he became the Buddha. Buddhists
believe in peace, harmony with nature, etc...” or “Let’s study ancient feudal Japan. They believe in Shinto, which emphasizes values X, Y, and Z.”

This survey of world religions provided me with several suitable choices, but I never had to make up my mind until one day when counselors gathered students from several classes together in the school gymnasium. They were taking a survey about ethnic and religious diversity in our school (or rather, the lack thereof). We each had to say what nationality we were, and more importantly, what religion we were. Dammit. I started to grow nervous as student after student beside me stated their European countries of origin and their specific denomination of Christianity. As the counselors approached the kids who were seated right next to me, I frantically thought about what we had learned in class. When my turn came, I said with the utmost of confidence, “I’m Chinese and I’m Buddhist.” (Imagine the uproar I would have caused if I had said, “I’m Chinese and I don’t have a religion.”)

At that moment, I made up my mind to say that I was Buddhist whenever anyone asked about my religion. It was a good religion to pretend to join since it seemed very exotic and fitting for an Asian boy; my peers didn’t know anything about it so they couldn’t ask me more detailed questions. Thank God (or Buddha or whomever) since I also knew almost nothing about Buddhism. Even though I was still probably Hell-bound, at least it wasn’t as bad as being an
atheist. Fortunately, I only had to put up a ruse during those last few months that I lived in Louisiana. As soon as I moved to New York City, I never again felt peer pressure to pretend that I was Buddhist. Kids in the big city were much more tolerant about religion or the lack thereof.
Late August, 1990. My mother drove me to Jackson Elementary School, located right in the middle of downtown Baton Rouge, to enroll me in first grade as a new student. A secretary greeted us at the front desk with a big smile and handed her the paperwork for new student registration. My mother proceeded to fill in the blanks while I anxiously waited by her side. Name: Jia Guo (my legal name wasn’t changed to Philip until a decade later). Sex: Male or Female. Male. Race: Black or White. Wait a minute. She politely asked the secretary, “Excuse me, which box should I check for race?” Without even looking up from what she was doing, the woman nonchalantly fired off, “Just check white.” My mother began to explain, “But, but he’s not white . . .” The secretary stopped what she was
doing, looked up at my mother — no longer with a smile — and lectured her sternly in a strong Southern black accent, “WELL, HE SURE AIN’T BLACK!”

At that moment, just days after I had arrived in America, I was branded as white simply because I was told to be white by a non-white person. (I wonder what would have happened if the secretary had been a white woman. Would she have told my mother to classify me as black because I sure ain’t white? Probably not.) Race in early 1990’s Louisiana was truly black and white, and I was stuck in the colorless void between the two extremes. There were no shades of gray, at least not according to the school registration form. I was definitely not black and could not possibly integrate into the black world, so in the subsequent few years, I tried my best to make myself white. For me, becoming American meant becoming white.

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The purpose of collecting data about the racial composition of public schools was to determine the level of desegregation (racial integration) that they had achieved. On school forms, there were only two check boxes for race — black and white. Asian kids like me were simply classified as white. Thus, I will adopt the school officials’ terminology throughout this chapter and often use the term white to refer to kids who are white, Asian, Hispanic, or belong to any other non-black ethnicity.
As my mother shockingly discovered that day, the categories should have really been labeled *black* and *non-black*. The school officials in predominantly-black inner-city schools didn’t care what race you were; as long as you weren’t black, you helped to lower the percentage of black students in the school, thereby making it look more desegregated. Actually, several years after I moved away from Louisiana, I heard from my friend Raymond that the true categories emerged more explicitly in high school: The counselors in his inner-city high school would sometimes take the following race survey in the classroom: “Please raise your hand if you are black,” and the black kids would all raise their hands. Then they requested, “Please raise your hand if you are *not* black,” and the white, Asian, Hispanic, and all other kids would raise their hands. So why all of this fuss about race? Why were school officials in Baton Rouge, Louisiana so eager to make their public schools appear racially diverse?

Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled “separate but equal” segregation unconstitutional in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954), public schools have been forbidden to deny any student the right to enroll on the basis of race. Over half a century earlier, in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities for different races were legal as long as they were equal in quality, giving legitimate backing to “separate but equal” segregation and legalizing “whites only” and “colored only” public facilities such as water fountains, restrooms, and schools.
The *Brown* ruling overturned the precedent set by *Plessy* and concluded that separate was inherently un-equal. As an ideological statement, *Brown* testified to this nation’s progress towards colorblind social equality. As a pragmatic consideration, it protected the rights of children like Linda Brown to walk seven blocks to an all-white school in her own neighborhood instead of over a mile to the nearest all-black school on the other side of town.

Since the historic *Brown* decision of 1954, there has been a push to desegregate public schools, especially throughout the American South where the history of racial segregation was the most prominent. The simplest and clearest metric of success was to achieve a well-balanced mix of races within the school walls. For inner-city schools in downtown Baton Rouge, achieving racial integration meant bringing in more white students. The vast majority of the inner-city population was black, so when they all attended their local neighborhood schools, those schools were naturally comprised mostly of black students.

Even though no explicit segregation was taking place (white students were not barred from attending inner-city schools, and black students were not barred from attending suburban schools), the huge disparity in racial composition between predominantly-black inner-city schools and predominantly-white suburban schools reminded people of the era of school segregation. Thus, school officials often sought to balance out the mix of races within schools so
that they could appear to be upholding the ideals of desegregation.

How could inner-city schools bring in more white students? By forcing white students from the surrounding suburbs to attend these schools rather than their own neighborhood schools. How was that possible, or even legal? One tactic was to cancel the gifted and talented classes in suburban elementary schools and only offer them within inner-city schools. For example, Grant Elementary, located in my suburban neighborhood, only had the gifted and talented program from kindergarten through second grade. All students at Grant who wanted to continue in the program (which was pretty much everyone) would have to transfer to a predominantly-black inner-city school, Davis Elementary, to attend third, fourth, and fifth grades. Instead of riding the school bus for 15 minutes each way every day, my friends and I now had to ride the bus for an hour. This reverse school busing policy, which brought suburban kids into the inner-city, greatly contrasted with the prevailing busing trends in the rest of the country (in cities such as Boston and Los Angeles) where inner-city kids were bused out to various suburban schools in order to achieve racial diversity.

The vast majority of kids in gifted and talented classes in suburban elementary schools around Baton Rouge were white (I only remember one or two black kids in my classes), so transplanting all of these kids into inner-city schools bal-
anced out the black vs. white ratio quite well. This policy was perfectly legal because school officials could say to my parents and to my friends’ parents, “Hey, we’re not forcing your kids to attend an inner-city school; it’s your choice to keep them in the gifted and talented program. You could just switch them to regular-level classes and continue to attend your neighborhood school.” But the reality was that almost all parents whose kids attended gifted classes wanted them to remain in those classes.

The transition from Grant to Davis was surprisingly smooth for my classmates and me. The only inconvenience was that the bus ride took four times as long, but it wasn’t too bad because I still rode the same bus with all of my friends. Every morning as my bus approached the school entrance, we could see the neighborhood kids walking to school. It didn’t feel like desegregation at all — the white kids from the suburbs rode to school inside of buses, while the black kids from the inner-city walked alongside those buses. Once inside the school walls, my friends and I still saw the same kids in our gifted classes; it was rare for a student from a regular class to move up to a gifted class. We almost never interacted with the kids from the regular classes. Davis looked completely segregated to us — the regular classes were predominantly black and the gifted classes were predominantly white.

What happened to my classmates and me was exactly the reverse of what the Brown ruling had intended. Mr.
Brown wanted his daughter to be able to go to a school in her own neighborhood, not to have to walk over a mile out of her way just to receive a “separate but equal” education. Not only did my friends and I have to go out of our ways to receive an equal education (riding the bus for over an hour to downtown Baton Rouge rather than being able to attend school in our own neighborhood), but we ended up enrolled in classes that were completely separated (by race) from the rest of the school.

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Busing suburban kids into the inner-city successfully created the illusion that schools like Davis Elementary had achieved the noble goal of racial integration. While writing this chapter, I took out my fifth grade yearbook and made the following measurements: Out of the approximately 500 students who attended Davis at the time, the racial composition was 55% black, 35% white, 9% Asian, and 1% other, which closely approximated the racial composition of the Baton Rouge population: 50% black, 40% white, 3% Asian, and 7% other. When the school officials reported these numbers to their superiors, they made it seem as though Davis had attained a diverse mix of all races within the school walls — a shining beacon of contemporary American desegregation. However, if you excluded the kids from the six gifted classes (two classes in each grade for third, fourth, and fifth grades), the school would have been 73% black, 22% white,
4% Asian, and 1% other, which was almost identical to that of Jackson, the predominantly-black inner-city school where I had attended first grade. Thus, the school busing policy had a dramatic effect on the racial composition of the school when viewed through these superficial statistics.

Unfortunately, the only way you could actually witness desegregation inside my school would be if you shoved all 500 students in the gymnasium and told everyone to run around randomly and then suddenly stop and sit down. As you walked around and counted the obediently-seated kids looking up at you, you would see a fairly even mixture of black and white kids with the occasional Asian or Hispanic kid in the mix.

Although the school as a whole seemed desegregated, every single class was almost completely segregated by race. Each class received a page in the yearbook with small black and white pictures of the teacher and students. Each page is either filled with mostly black faces or mostly white faces; there was not a single class with a race ratio that even came close to being reasonably balanced. All of the gifted classes had a white teacher and mostly white students, which was unsurprising since these kids were bused in from the suburbs. Also unsurprising was the fact that there were only four non-black kids in all seven kindergarten, first, and second grade classes combined, since these kids were all from the local predominantly-black neighborhood.
What shocked me the most while looking through my yearbook was the fact that, for third, fourth, and fifth grades, there was always one regular class with a white teacher and two regular classes with black teachers, and that each *white regular class* consisted almost entirely of white students while each *black regular class* consisted almost entirely of black students. I don’t doubt that all these kids received more-or-less equal quality educations, but it seemed to me like they were purposely separated by race. I don’t have enough evidence to speculate on the motives behind this segregation, but any reasonable person who looked at my yearbook could see that the racial makeup of these classes could not have turned out that way by pure chance alone.

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I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of commuting for over an hour every day to get to school, but I figured that if all of my suburban peers had to go to Davis, wouldn’t it be a good educational experience to attend classes with black kids whom we rarely saw in our own neighborhood? I mean, wasn’t that the point of racial integration, to have black and white kids sit together side-by-side in the classroom so that they could learn to interact with each other as flesh-and-blood peers and not as manifestations of racial stereotypes?

During my first year in America, I sat in the classroom with mostly black kids in first grade at Jackson, and in the following year, I sat with mostly white kids in second grade
at Grant. I learned to deal with kids as individuals, not as “black kids” or “white kids.” Wouldn’t it be beneficial for other students to have my experiences of attending classes and playing together during recess with kids from different ethnic backgrounds? Davis had the perfect demographics to realize this ideal of racial integration: 55% black, 35% white, 9% Asian, and 1% other. Why not assign kids semi-randomly to classes in order to maintain similarly-diverse percentages within the classroom as well? Why not make more of an effort to provide inner-city black kids with the opportunity to join the gifted classes?

But here’s the problem: What middle-class white or Asian parents who lived in the suburbs would prefer to have their children attend a predominantly-black inner-city school rather than a predominantly-white neighborhood or private school? How many of these parents would go out of their way to send their sons and daughters to school in the inner-city just so their children could make friends with black kids? Which one of these parents would voluntarily send their kids off to attend a gifted and talented program in the inner-city just to balance the racial demographics of these schools for the purposes of political correctness?

Schools such as Davis needed the suburban parents’ cooperation to willfully send their kids into the ghetto instead of simply abandoning the public school system altogether and placing their kids in private schools. If the parents did not permit their children to attend inner-city schools,
then there would be no hope of attaining a balanced racial mix. The school officials needed to provide middle-class suburban parents with a certain peace of mind that their children would be well-protected within the school walls . . . protected from the kids who lived in the ghetto. One means of achieving that protection was via physical separation.

What I witnessed during my two years at Davis Elementary definitely felt like segregation. When I went to Jackson where almost everybody in the school was black, it felt natural to be in a class with mostly black kids. When I went to Grant where almost everybody was white, it felt natural to be in a class with mostly white kids. However, in Davis, only 55% of the school was black, yet every single class was either almost all-black or almost all-white.

Unlike most of my gifted class peers, I recalled how it felt to attend a non-segregated inner-city school at Jackson, where there was nothing protecting me from my street-tough peers. My time at Davis did not feel nearly as frightening because the school officials and teachers went to great lengths to keep my classmates and me as separate as possible from the majority of kids in the school.

We never talked to kids who were not in the gifted program, and if we did not look outside beyond the barbed wire fences on the school perimeter, there was almost no way for us to tell that we were in the ghetto. During recess, we al-
ways played in our own gifted class section of the field while the regular class kids played in their own separate section. The gifted and regular class kids ate lunch at slightly different times and sat in different parts of the cafeteria, so the only people I ever saw in the cafeteria were suburban kids who lived in my neighborhood. Also, we would only participate in school activities with kids in the gifted and white regular classes. For school performances, the gifted and white regular classes usually presented whitewashed skits and plays with ballet and classical singing while the black regular classes presented black skits with baggy clothes and hip hop music.

Certain parts of my elementary school experience reminded me of the “separate but equal” segregation that I saw on television documentaries about pre-1960’s American society. Throughout the school days, I always saw groups of black kids with black teachers and groups of white kids with white teachers, but never groups that were actually racially integrated. I also remember waiting in the cafeteria lines with my white gifted class friends and seeing classes full of black kids march out after their lunch hour was over. By the time we sat down with our food, we rarely saw any black kids at all, and the ones we did see were all sitting in the opposite corner of the cafeteria. Of course, there were no “whites only” or “colored only” signs, but the repeated instances of separating kids by race — in the playgrounds, classrooms, and cafeteria — imprinted the message in our
young minds that it was somehow expected for white and black kids to be separate in school, and by implication, in society as a whole.

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The cover of my fifth grade yearbook is emblematic of race relations in the South at the time. The theme that year was (ironically) racial diversity, so the counselors spent lots of time asking everybody in the school about their ancestors’ countries of origin. The yearbook design committee, consisting of both students and teachers, decorated the front and back covers with full-color flags of countries that the students supposedly reported as their ancestral homelands. The ten flags on the front cover were the United States, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Colombia, Greece, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Nigeria. The seven flags on the back cover were Switzerland, Israel, Australia, Ireland, Iceland, Japan, and Mexico.

Interestingly, most flags (13 out of 17) come from countries with predominantly-white populations, even though only 35% of the students in the school were white. Families of white kids were able to keep better track of their heritage since they had not been oppressed throughout the past few centuries, and also most white kids were of mixed European descent, so they could usually claim three or four countries of origin.
What stood out the most to me was that the only flag from an Asian country was the Japanese flag. 9% of the student body was Asian (~45 students), and almost all of those kids were Chinese, yet there was no Chinese flag on the cover. Judging by the names and faces of the kids in the yearbook, I don’t think there was a single Japanese student who attended Davis that year. I was not on the cover design committee, but I suspect that the most reasonable explanation for this error was simply negligence rather than malice. Asians weren’t a significant part of the racial discourse — it was all black and white — so people weren’t as sensitive to the differences between Asian countries. (I sometimes heard my friends making blanket statements like, “Chinese? Japanese? It’s all the same to me.”) Even though dozens of students must have reported to the counselors that their ancestors came from China, the yearbook committee probably did a sloppy job and just equated Chinese with Asian and then decided to pick the Japanese flag for the cover since it was the most familiar and “U.S. friendly” Asian country.

During my four years in Louisiana, ever since the secretary at Jackson told my mother to “just check white” on my new student registration form, I thought that I was in the same category as white people. I grew up around and made friends with the white kids in my suburban neighborhood, I envied the traditional white Southern household, and on some nights I even wanted to wake up the next morning as a white boy. Starting in third grade, I was branded as
white and shipped into Davis to help alter the racial mix from 73% black and 27% non-black to a well-balanced 55% black and 45% non-black. Even though I went to school in the predominantly-black ghetto, I rode the school bus with white kids from my neighborhood, sat with white kids in the classrooms, ate together with white kids in the cafeteria, and played football and soccer with white kids on the field, so I naturally felt like I belonged on the white kids’ side of my internally-segregated elementary school.

But when I received my fifth grade yearbook a few months before I left Louisiana, I saw on the cover that I had never been in the same category as the white kids. As a minority, I had never received the consideration that my white friends took for granted; the white kids claimed 13 out of the 17 flags, and all the non-white kids — the majority within the school but the minority in society as a whole — were left with the remaining four. Even though the requirements for school desegregation focused on the ratio of black versus non-black kids, the yearbook cover reflected the true measure of race at the time, the two real check boxes that society provided: white and non-white. Just check non-white. Because I sure ain’t white.
Part III

1994–1995
Chapter 10

South to North

After an initial year of major adjustments, my subsequent three years of living a fairly normal childhood in Louisiana were so much fun for the most part that I never wanted to leave. One Saturday morning in the spring of 1994, I jumped into my parents’ bed as I usually did on the weekends. They used to lie in bed for hours after waking up, gossiping about their mutual friends or talking about their own lives. I usually listened while I squirmed around under the blankets or played with my Lego blocks in their bedroom, but I never paid much attention to what they were saying since they always talked about boring adult topics. But on that particular morning, I heard something that left me paralyzed with depression.

Half a year before that day, my parents decided to have me skip from fourth grade to fifth grade. I remember my friends from my fourth grade class pleading me to stay with
them and not to move up to fifth grade. Some of my friends actually grabbed my shirt and begged me not to take those few steps down the hall into the fifth grade classroom. I was really touched by the sincerity in their voices. At that moment, I felt like I had made lifelong friends and earned my place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I had come so far during my first four years in America: I had matured from a scared little kid in an inner-city school who could not speak a word of English to a confident and sociable boy who went to sleepovers with friends, played baseball for a YMCA Little League team, and had pretty Southern girls in my classes comment on how I would get wrinkles when I was older since I smiled so much. I felt like I had endured enough challenges during my ten-year childhood to earn the right to grow up here as a normal teenager. Someday I wanted to tell my kids about my tough year in Switzerland, my experiences adjusting to life in America, and how I grew up to be a proud Southern boy. I was all ready to graduate from elementary school with my friends and take the bus with them to middle school the following year.

That’s why I was devastated on that Saturday morning when my mother told me that our family was going to move to New York City at the end of the summer, live there for a year, and then relocate once more to Los Angeles, California. My mother had won a prestigious research fellowship that allowed her to spend a year working at a foundation in New York City, and she was simultaneously offered a
tenure-track position as an assistant professor of sociology at UCLA, which she could defer for a year. She said that it was a phenomenal opportunity for her career advancement, and more importantly, an even greater opportunity for our family to expand our horizons. I did not believe her.

I had never doubted my parents before that moment. I had never fully understood why we had to move around so much when I was younger, but I always trusted that they knew what was best for the family. The closest I had ever come to questioning their judgment was when they wanted me to skip a grade. However, this was the first time that I was truly angry at my parents’ decision, even though I was powerless to change their minds.

I did not believe that this move was good for our family. Not good for me, especially. I thought we had the greatest life we could possibly ask for here in Louisiana. But I was selfish and ignorant. I didn’t know what else was out there. “We’re moving to the big city,” my mother told me, and I still remember thinking to myself, “What? We’re already in the big city! There are so many chain stores here: K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Piggly Wiggly, Church’s Chicken, even McDonald’s! How much bigger than Baton Rouge can you possibly get?” The answer: much, much bigger. When I went back to visit Baton Rouge after a few months of living in New York City, I was surprised to see how everything there looked so small compared to what I saw around my new home, and I laughed at my younger self for actually believing that Baton
Rouge was a blossoming metropolis.

At the time, though, I didn’t care if New York City was cultured, cosmopolitan, or awe-inspiring. I didn’t care about my parents’ job opportunities or our so-called family opportunities. All I wanted was to stay in Baton Rouge with my group of friends and grow up alongside them. I despised the butterflies-in-my-stomach pain that always surfaced whenever I moved to a new place and started class at a new school as the new kid. I could foresee that our one-year temporary stay in New York City and subsequent move to Los Angeles meant that I would have to experience the gut-wrenching pain of displacement, of having no friends, of having no place to call home, of feeling left out, scared, and alone.

This was the first time I felt deeply sad for an extended period of time. I was never depressed (scared and anxious, but not depressed) about moving around and adapting to new environments when I was younger because I was never in a single place long enough to start feeling at home. But this place was different. I had spent four years here with countless sleepovers, video game matches, baseball games, and bike rides around the neighborhood. As soon as I started feeling like a normal kid, everything was going to be ripped away from me. I would have to start all over again — new city, new school, and new kids. Everything and everyone I knew up to that point in my life was just going to be a memory. It wasn’t fair.
My friends did not take the news well, either. They were upset by me moving to a classroom a few dozen feet down the hall when I skipped a grade, but New York City was a thousand miles away. They knew that I was never coming back. I collected everybody’s home addresses and promised to write letters to them. There was no email or online instant messaging services back then, so it was much harder for us to keep in touch. These kids were my first set of real friends, and I was devastated at the thought of leaving them behind.

In hindsight, I now realize that my idealized future of growing up with my elementary school friends was all an illusion. Since teenagers naturally associate more closely with those who are in their classes or share their interests, my friends would quickly join different social cliques as they entered adolescence — the geeks, the drama queens, the stoners, the jocks, the outcasts, the rich snobs, the wannabe-gangsters, and so forth. The more academically-focused kids would enroll in the advanced math, science, social science, and English classes while most others would take the regular versions. The kids in the honors and Advanced Placement classes would start to lose touch with the kids in the regular classes, even those who used to be their best friends in elementary school.

When I was in high school, I asked Raymond, one of my few remaining friends from Baton Rouge, what actu-
ally happened to our elementary school classmates. He told me that he had lost touch with most of the kids we had played with and only still kept in touch with those who enrolled in the high school honors classes. We had a mix of white and Asian friends back in elementary school, but by high school, Raymond had lost touch with most of his white friends and associated almost exclusively with Asian kids since they were much more often in the honors classes together.

If I had stayed in Louisiana, I would have hung out with Raymond and other nerdy Asian kids. We would soon forget those pretty girls who used to invite us to birthday parties, since they would quickly join the cool crowd as the vicious fight for middle school popularity ensued. I would have stopped playing with my less studious friends when they started to grow out their hair, wear flannel and torn jeans, and listen to grunge rock bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam. By high school, most of my former friends would probably be driving their pick-up trucks, smoking, drinking beer, and shooting rabbits with shotguns while I would be studying for SAT’s on the weekends and earning community service hours during the summertime to polish up my resume for college applications.

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In early August 1994, I flew from Baton Rouge to La-Guardia airport in New York City. My mother was finishing up her job at LSU, packing our belongings, and finalizing the sale of our house. She decided to send me to New York one month before her research fellowship began in September because she was too busy running errands to take proper care of me. Earlier that summer, my father had started a job as a sales manager at a Long Island telecommunications company. He lived in Queens, one of the five boroughs (districts) of New York City, in the home of an elderly Chinese couple, the Yaos. This was the first plane ride I had ever taken by myself. For the duration of my flight, the excitement and anxiety of traveling alone as a 10-year-old overshadowed the dismal reality that I had a one-way ticket.

My father picked me up from the airport in a crappy run-down car that he had borrowed from the Yao family. I had absolutely no idea what to expect of New York City, so I imagined the worst — rampant crime, muggings, pollution, and the suffocation of grimy city life. As soon as we exited the airport, the noise and traffic of the city overwhelmed my senses. Ever since I had left China five years prior, I had never seen highways with more than two lanes going each way, pedestrians walking faster than cars stuck in traffic, and pothole-filled roads which were jam-packed with so many different kinds of vehicles — yellow cabs, buses, vans, second-hand junkers, luxury sedans, ambulances, police cars, limousines, and trucks. I was scared and appalled
that people honked and yelled so much while driving.

As my father concentrated on fighting his way through traffic, sweating from the lack of air conditioning and power steering in the car, I just looked around. First came amazement, then came disenchantment, then came the butterflies in my stomach again. I did not see a single thing that reminded me of home. Not one thing. The people here looked so different, so much more stressed and rushed all the time. Nobody smiled. Everybody just grimaced and honked their horns and cursed at one another while trying to get frantically from point A to point B. Nobody looked like the people from typical wholesome Southern families whom I saw everywhere around my former home.

As we drove through Queens, I noticed that the people I saw on the streets and in adjacent cars were mostly black and Hispanic, but there were a fair number of white people as well. However, these weren’t the white people I was accustomed to seeing. They were dark, tanned, and hairy, and they looked more like Mario and Luigi from Super Mario Brothers than the clean-cut patriarchs from idyllic 1950’s television shows. These white people were likely the offspring of working-class Italian and Eastern European immigrants. They were still Caucasian, but they looked far different than the fair-skinned white people I had been used to seeing back in Switzerland and Louisiana. I didn’t know how I was ever going to fit in or make friends in this strange new place. Even the white people didn’t look white! I
quickly realized that the big city was most definitely not a black-and-white world. It was everything in between: brown, yellow, gray, red.

When my father stopped at a gas station to refuel, something caught my eye: two golden arches. McDonald’s! Finally, I saw the first sign of home. I begged him to give me money to buy a hamburger. I didn’t want to grab a burger from the White Castle next door since I had no clue what it was, but I had eaten at McDonald’s countless times, both in Switzerland and Louisiana, so I knew exactly what to expect there. McDonald’s was a strange symbol of constancy throughout my early childhood (how appropriate, since they were one of the pioneers of commercial globalization). I loved ordering their trademark Happy Meals to get the toys, and I often bought two or sometimes even three additional hamburgers to fill me up. I had been hooked on their fast food ever since I left China.

After I bought my burger, I went back outside to watch my father pump gas at the station. I looked up and saw huge bridges and overpasses, which I had never seen in Baton Rouge. We were directly underneath a highway, so the noise was deafening. We had to yell just to communicate. Now I knew why everyone in the city was yelling all the time. It was so loud here that shouting was the only way to overcome the background noise.
I took another look around, but I still saw nothing that reminded me of home besides those tacky golden arches. I couldn’t believe that a few hours ago, I still thought that Baton Rouge (with a population of less than 300,000) was a big city. I looked across the East River and saw the majestic Manhattan skyline — the World Trade Center twin towers, the Empire State Building, and the Chrysler tower. I couldn’t imagine so many people packed so densely on a thin island; it would be another month before my family became one of them.

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After an hour of battling traffic, my father and I arrived at a three-story house in a working-class Queens neighborhood. Grandpa and Grandma Yao greeted us by manually opening up a chain-link gated fence (laced with barbed wire) and allowing our car to enter their short driveway. I had never seen locked fences protecting people’s driveways before. It looked like we were entering the confines of a maximum-security prison, but the Yaos’ warm welcome assured me that I was in friendly territory. The Yaos were our distant relatives on my mother’s side; we were connected indirectly through several marriages but not by blood. They tried their best to be hospitable even though they had never met my father or me before we moved to New York City; Chinese custom encourages people to try to treat distant family members with as much affection as close kin.
I always addressed our elderly hosts as “Grandpa Yao” and “Grandma Yao,” even though they weren’t my real grandparents, because it’s Chinese custom to always address older people with these terms of respect. Throughout my childhood, I always felt uncomfortable hearing my friends call adults simply by their first names, since it’s extremely rude to do so in Chinese culture.

When I first saw the Yaos’ house, I thought that it was huge since it had three floors plus a basement. I loved big houses and looked forward to exploring this one, but my father told me that the Yaos rented all three floors out to tenants in order to make extra money. I couldn’t believe that Grandpa and Grandma Yao lived in their own basement while total strangers roamed around on the other three floors! I couldn’t imagine renting out even one room of our four-bedroom Louisiana home since I thought that a home was only meant for one family.

I soon learned from my father that many new Chinese immigrants in the city pooled family resources together to buy homes, but then rented out rooms to tenants to help pay for the mortgage. My parents actually had several friends whose American Dream was to buy a home and rent out most of the rooms to tenants, confining their own family to a cramped corner; they felt that it was strictly more prestigious to own a home rather than to rent an apartment, even though the latter would provide them with more privacy and personal space.
I understood that my father and I were also tenants in the Yaos’ home. Even though they were distant relatives, my father still paid them a few hundred dollars for rent. We slept in a bedroom on the first floor. The last time I slept in the same room as my father was five years earlier when we lived on the second floor of his Chinese restaurant in Switzerland. I used to wake him up at 5 AM to pester him with curious questions, but now I knew better. I was twice as old and many times more mature. I knew that he could not afford to be disturbed. He had just started his first job after graduating from LSU with an MBA degree, so he needed all the energy that he could muster from a good night’s rest to prepare for work the next day. He needed to work hard to prove himself and to climb the corporate ladder.

I could not sleep well during my first few nights in New York. There was no air conditioning. The hot and humid August weather mixed with the stench of the dirty streets outside the first floor window made me want to vomit. The butterflies in my stomach never went away. I sat awake in bed for hours every evening, listening to the clock ticking and trying to hypnotize myself into going to sleep. In the middle of the night, I could hear dogs barking and cars driving past the house. These were the barks of ferocious guard dogs, not the friendly pets that I used to see people walking in my former Baton Rouge neighborhood when my parents and I took our nightly post-dinner strolls. I remi-
nisced about my friends and the fun times we had playing video games, eating pizza at birthday parties, and even going to school. It was all gone.

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The Yaos were in their late fifties and had been in America for more than ten years. Like many Chinese immigrants in the city, they could not make it into the mainstream because they had neither transferable skills nor adequate English language proficiency. But they were hard workers who were willing to take any jobs available to them. Back in China, Grandpa Yao was a high-ranking hospital administrator, and Grandma Yao was a head nurse, but without the proper credentials, they could not remain in their respective professions once they arrived in America. Since they could only speak Chinese, local Chinese-owned businesses seemed to be their only option even though the wages were extremely low (when you were being paid “under the table” in cash, there was no such thing as a legal minimum wage).

Grandpa Yao worked in a small Chinese-owned sign-making and painting business down the street from his home. Grandma Yao sewed clothes in a garment factory in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Every afternoon at 5:30 PM, Grandpa Yao would get off work and drive for almost an hour through rush-hour traffic to Chinatown to pick up his wife from work. Sometimes they grabbed Chinese food and groceries before
heading home. They had been doing this same daily routine for over a decade.

The Yaos had three children who were in their late 20’s and early 30’s. They lived in other parts of New York City. They were hard workers like their parents, but due to their lack of English proficiency and formal education, they were also stuck in blue-collar jobs in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown — sewing clothes, fixing cars, and performing other below-minimum-wage manual labor.

At first, I felt sorry for the Yao family. They didn’t appear to be able to realize the American Dream of living in a suburban house and taking leisurely strolls along the sidewalks. Four years after coming to America and starting from scratch, I felt that my family lived a decent middle-class life in Louisiana. We had the beginnings of the American Dream — two cars, a four-bedroom house in a safe neighborhood, and a modest but steady source of income from my mother’s university job. The Yaos had been in America for over ten years, yet they only managed to buy a home by pooling the collective savings of all five family members and renting out the majority of it to strangers. They lived in a dangerous part of the city where people put double deadbolts on their doors and barbed wire over their gated fences. Yet they seemed to be happy. I couldn’t understand how anybody could be satisfied living in such a dump. Didn’t they know what they were missing? Didn’t they know about large backyards or magnolia trees or pretty
Southern girls? Wait.

The Yaos absolutely did not know what they were missing. Maybe that was why they were happy. They lived in Queens, New York ever since they came to America, so they never experienced life in any other part of the country. They had little social (or even physical) mobility. Ever since they immigrated to America, all they knew was a small world within a big city, consisting of Chinatown and other Chinese-owned businesses where they didn’t need to speak English to interact with others. They relied on a network of Chinese friends like themselves who could not speak English but managed to survive in the city through years of experience and accumulated shared wisdom. They loved going to Chinatown to speak their native language and to eat their favorite Chinese foods. They knew enough English words to be able to read the subway signs so that they could make their way to Chinatown and back every weekend.

Like millions of their working-class immigrant peers, the Yaos never seemed to be able to assimilate into mainstream American culture. Instead, they thrived on a transplanted Chinese culture within ethnic enclaves. Opponents of (mostly non-Anglo) immigration often cite the inability of people like the Yaos to learn English and integrate into the American mainstream as a drain on this nation’s resources. However, I witnessed firsthand that the Yaos were grateful to this country for providing them with the opportunity to earn more money than they could back in China; in return,
they contributed to American commercial prosperity by performing manual labor for less pay than what their unionized “native” American peers would accept.

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During my first few days in New York City, terrible images often flew through my confused mind and haunted me during my waking hours and in my sleep. I had this recurring nightmare in which I would be in the Yaos’ house looking outside from the first floor bedroom window. I would see Grandpa Yao walking back home after work, carrying bags of groceries and whistling a cheerful Chinese tune. All of a sudden, I would hear gunshots and see his wrinkled face freeze in shock as he was shot repeatedly in the back. His arms would then flail wildly as the groceries dropped to the ground along with his lifeless body. And that was it. No shooter, no motive, and no purpose. That was it. That was what I thought of the city: cold-blooded and senseless killing.

Grandpa Yao was always cheerful and smiling, but his grizzled face and calloused hands revealed that he was a tough man built for hard labor and a rough-and-tumble life. He told me that he never turned down a fight when he was a young man in China. He showed me his scars and ensured me that the other guys ended up looking worse. He encouraged me to fight if the other kids at school ever gave me any trouble. He told me to stand up and fight dirty,
to kick kids in the groin, to gouge out their eyes, to use pipes and wrenches as weapons, and not to take shit from anybody, no matter who they were — black, white, Hispanic, or Asian (he freely used derogatory slurs for all races as he spoke to me in his coarse Chinese slang). However, Grandpa Yao grew up in an antiquated world where everyone was scrawny, malnourished, and unarmed, so fights didn’t turn deadly. He was no match for the drug dealers and gangsters in the parts of the city he frequented, which were infamous for their atrociously high gun violence and murder rates in the early 1990’s. I was afraid that he would randomly get killed one day and not even know why.

Along the same paranoid lines, I had a bizarre nightmarish fantasy that my father would win the lottery. My father bought a lottery ticket one day, and I strongly felt that we were going to hit the jackpot. I had such an undeniable feeling that the six numbers on TV were going to match those on his ticket. It was the closest I had come to having a spiritual experience. I somehow knew that we were going to win. However, I did not immediately fantasize about the lavish cars and beautiful house that we could afford to buy with our winnings. Rather, I remember this terrible fear gripping me as I sat in the back seat of his car riding through Queens, thinking about how much we would be the targets of theft and murder if we suddenly became millionaires. The lottery winners usually went on TV to sign their big ceremonial checks, and if we went on TV, then every-
body would recognize our faces and try to come after us. I thought about what a horrible life we would lead in a few days when we won that money. I thought about walking down the streets in constant fear that somebody would kidnap me and use me to extort ransom from my parents. I wanted to destroy that ticket so we could be spared from that abysmal fate.

This perverted way of thinking dominated my mind when I first moved to New York. It was precise logic mixed with delusional paranoia. I had been thrown out of my home and banished from my friends. Worst of all, nobody around me could understand what I was feeling. I remember standing outside the Yaos’ home and looking up at the night sky within the confines of their barbed wire fence. The sky was so bright from the city lights that I could barely see the moon. I wanted to look up at the stars while lying on the grass in my own backyard, but that backyard was not mine anymore. We had already sold our home in Louisiana.

There was nobody I could talk to about my feelings of anxiety and homesickness, so I let my imagination run wild. Everywhere I went in the city, I would imagine that strangers were coming after me. Even standing within the safety of the fence that separated the Yaos’ house from the street, I thought about the slim but non-zero probability that a stray bullet would fly right through the holes in the chain link and dig into my flesh (I heard news stories about people being killed by stray bullets while sitting in their
homes). I always tried to avoid standing in large open areas and to constantly seek shelter behind pillars or walls in public places so that bullets could not hit me. I always looked for windows and doors so that I could plan out escape routes in my mind. I slouched down in the back seat whenever I rode in cars so that I wouldn’t accidentally catch a bullet in the head. *Stand up straight. Sit up straight.* People would tell me all the time but I never listened. I wanted to make myself as small a target as possible. I never destroyed that ticket, but thankfully we did not win the lottery that week.
Chapter 11

A Month in the Basement

After I lived with the Yaos for a few days, my father decided to send me to live for the rest of the month with their daughter, Mrs. Mei. My father and the Yaos had to go to work during the daytime, and they did not feel comfortable leaving me home alone in their unsafe neighborhood. Mrs. Mei could provide daycare for me since she worked from home. I lived with her family in Brooklyn, New York for the entire month of August while my father lived with the Yaos in nearby Queens.

Mrs. Mei knew that my parents were Chinese immigrants like herself and were distant relatives, so she was sympathetic to us during our time of need, even though she had never met me before agreeing to take me into her custody. She worked as a sewing machine operator for a garment factory. The primary benefit of her job was that she was able to bring home large sacks of fabric and sew them into clothes
at home rather than work in crowded sweatshop-like conditions in Chinatown like her mother, Grandma Yao. She set up a huge sewing machine and various tools in the basement and spent every day working down there. Working at home allowed her to bring in an income and simultaneously take care of her two young daughters. Her husband, Mr. Hand, worked as a jewelry repairman in a Chinatown shop. He made the usual daily hour-long subway commutes to and from work like millions of fellow New Yorkers. I refer to him as Mr. Hand since his Chinese name literally means *hand* when translated into English; it’s not that weird — my Chinese name means *country*.

During the daytime, Mrs. Mei and I were the only people in the house since her husband was at work and her two daughters were attending a Chinese summer school located in their neighborhood. Her family did not rent out any rooms to tenants, so there were no strangers walking around the hallways. That reassuring quality made her house feel a bit more like a home. Mrs. Mei positioned her sewing machine so that she could have a clear view of the television set while she worked. We spent every morning watching *The Price Is Right* down in the basement while she sewed; she would periodically yell out her guesses for the prices of various items on that game show. She was a really good guesser, probably because she had been watching that show every day for over a decade.
During commercial breaks, Mrs. Mei would sometimes ask me about myself and my family. I told her a bit about my life in Louisiana and how I had moved around a lot when I was younger. Like many of her peers, she could not understand much English, so I spoke to her in Chinese. However, by this time, I had not lived in China for five years, so my Chinese-speaking abilities had greatly diminished. Pretty much the only people with whom I spoke Chinese was my parents, but we would often converse in a combination of English and Chinese phrases since both of them understood English extremely well for being recent immigrants. We could switch back and forth between the two languages and choose whichever one most naturally conveyed our thoughts at the moment. When I had to speak solely in Chinese, though, I could only talk about simple everyday topics; thus, I was never able to convey my deep feelings of loneliness and homesickness to Mrs. Mei.

I spent the majority of every day in the basement under her supervision. It was the same routine for the entire month: She worked non-stop sewing clothes, sheets, and other garments while I watched television, played video games on their family’s Nintendo, and learned to type on their personal computer. When her daughters returned from summer school every afternoon, they usually played with each other, not with me. I could not really relate to them since they were a few years younger. I also didn’t have any enthusiasm for playing with them; I was too busy day-
dreaming nostalgic thoughts about my Louisiana home that I would never see again. Around 6:30 PM every night, Mr. Hand would return from his Chinatown jewelry repair job and walk straight over to the Nintendo to start playing the game Dr. Mario while Mrs. Mei prepared dinner for the family.

I liked to watch Mrs. Mei cook because she was the only one in the house who would try to make conversation with me. I noticed that she had lots of old dirty rags lying around the kitchen. Whenever she finished wiping something with a rag, she would wash it, wring it to get out the excess water, and then place it back on the countertop to dry. She assigned each rag to clean a particular part of the kitchen. One was for the stovetop, another was for the dinner table, and so forth.

It took me a bit of time to realize that those funny-looking rags were actually paper towels which she washed and re-used. She loved using Bounty paper towels and even gave me a big speech about them as she was preparing dinner one day: “These paper towels are the best. You can re-use them so many times. See, watch . . . ” She took out a new paper towel from the roll and wiped down the counter with it. Then she washed it in the sink, wrung it to get out the excess water, and laid it out on the countertop to dry. “You can re-use them many times before you have to throw them away. See, look at these.” She pointed to the wrinkled, dirty rag-looking things on the counter. “I’ve used
these for the past few weeks. Each sheet can last at least a month before I have to throw it away. I have one sheet for the oily stove, another sheet for the counter, and another one for the tables. A roll lasts us a whole year or more.” Mrs. Mei had always lived as a poor immigrant in the city, so she learned to save money in any way possible. I had never seen anybody re-use Bounty paper towels as much as she did, and I doubt that I ever will again.

I never asked Mrs. Mei about her family’s past, but I was always curious to learn how they ended up in America. It wasn’t until years later that my parents told me their immigrant story. When Mr. Hand was growing up in China, he was a high school dropout with grand ambitions. He instinctively knew that the world outside of China was somehow better and more exciting than what he had seen in his own life, even though he had no idea why or how. He managed to escape from China to Hong Kong by trying to swim over there illegally, getting caught on the shore by police dogs, being brutally beaten by the officers, and almost dying of pneumonia in a jail cell. The Hong Kong police were compassionate enough not to send him back to China after releasing him from jail. Mr. Hand worked in Hong Kong for a few years and eventually saved up enough money to get to America in the late 1970’s. Since he was uneducated and could not speak English, the only jobs that
he could find in America were the same types of manual labor that he performed back in China. He worked in various restaurants, grocery stores, butcher shops, and shipping companies, all within the confines of Chinatown.

Even though the quality of his impoverished life in America did not fulfill his ambitions, he acquired a magical symbol of status which gave him prestige over his peers in China: After a few years, he obtained a U.S. passport, which legally designated him as a citizen of the United States of America. It took my family over ten years of wading through the muck of various government bureaucracies before we attained U.S. citizenship. We intimately understand that a U.S. passport is the Holy Grail of any immigrant’s journey.

One time when Mr. Hand came back to China to visit friends and family, somebody introduced him to a young Miss Mei, the only daughter of the Yao family. She was in her early 20’s and worked for the municipal public transportation company as a bus conductor. She had a bright future in her hometown and good prospects for attaining a college education. Since she was a pretty young woman, she had plenty of male suitors including the sons of government officials and influential public figures, many of whom came from families with high social standing.

Back in early 1980’s China, social status was everything. You were either part of the proletariat (commoners) or part of the ruling class of Communist Party government officials who received all the benefits. There was no capitalism or
free enterprise, so nobody could start their own business and become a millionaire. Nobody could get promotions to double their salary. Everybody except for the few who belonged to the ruling class lived a humble existence. My parents had to buy food using government-issued meal tickets since all food was rationed. Every morning, they received one ticket for their bread ration, another ticket for their meat ration, and another one for their rice ration. Everybody earned the minimum amount of money necessary to survive and to feed their families. Nobody had extra spending cash to buy cars, televisions, or other luxuries. That was the Communist way of life. Everybody was equal. Equal in social standing and equal in relative poverty. Everybody was equal . . . except for the people who actually had the power to run the government. They drove around in fancy sedans and ate at banquets paid for by government funds, paid for by the People’s money. Miss Mei had the beauty, work ethic, and intelligence necessary to make her an attractive wife for the most status-filled men in her hometown, so several of these powerful men chased after her.

When a mutual friend introduced Mr. Hand to her as a potential marriage partner, she felt no love towards him. But that was expected. Few people in China at the time could afford to marry for love. Most people married in order to better their social standing or to improve their economic status. It was heartless, but it was real life. Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage only in de-
veloped countries where people have the freedom to choose their partners in their personal quests for happiness. Many people in poor third-world countries do not speak of love; there are no horses or carriages. Well, there are horses, but they are used for transporting spices and goods across the country and then eaten as meat when they become injured. Third-world life is brutally pragmatic. Everything has a concrete and practical purpose, and the purpose of marriage is usually to enhance or at least maintain socioeconomic status. So Mei had a choice between Mr. Hand, a man who came from a humble working-class background, and several more cultivated suitors who were the sons of government officials or other respected members of high society. However, Mr. Hand had one thing that none of the others did — a U.S. passport that could provide his future wife with a one-way ticket to America.

People in early 1980’s China had a love-hate relationship with the United States. On one hand, the U.S. represented the evil imperialistic capitalist superpower which tried to bully the rest of the world into being friendly towards their own economic and political interests. The official Chinese government propaganda taught its citizens to hate capitalism because it supposedly spawned greed, corruption, immorality, and violence. Of course, the government had its own agenda to simultaneously promote socialism as a panacea for social ills. Chinese children were taught that the United States was a dangerous place filled with sin
and corruption caused by the free flow of money. Although some Chinese citizens hated the United States because they had been indoctrinated with the idea that capitalism was inherently evil, many adored the United States because of the prospect of unlimited financial opportunities that capitalism was rumored to make possible and also because their own government made it such a taboo subject (the best way to arouse curiosity is through censorship).

Most Chinese citizens at that time did not have much information about the United States besides the fact that it was a sinful place filled with money everywhere. Many dreamed of becoming rich in the New World. Due to U.S. immigration laws, though, it was very difficult for Chinese nationals to immigrate to and gain citizenship in the United States. That was why Mr. Hand’s U.S. passport gave him such powerful leverage when he tried to woo the young Miss Mei: A U.S. citizen can apply for his/her spouse to legally immigrate to the U.S. and start the process of becoming a citizen. This law is the basis for mail order bride services and also for illicit “fake marriage” business deals where a U.S. citizen gets paid a large sum of money to legally marry a foreign person just so that he/she can move to America, but the two are not actually romantically involved.

Mei was an obedient girl who knew to put the priorities of her family before her own. Even though her parents had decent jobs in China, her two younger brothers were stuck as factory workers. She had the dream of finding them a better
life in America, a life filled with money and opportunity. She wanted to get her family into America, and she knew that the easiest way to do so was to marry somebody with a U.S. passport like Mr. Hand. As soon as she immigrated to America, she could fill out the paperwork to sponsor her family members to come over as well.

Mei could have married into a prominent family in China and lived a relatively privileged life, but she sacrificed her chance for a better future in order to provide a rare opportunity for her family to come to America. She could have probably lived a much more comfortable life in China than how I saw her in the basement of her Brooklyn home, working non-stop every day sewing clothes for less than minimum wage. But back in the 1980’s, all she knew was that America was rumored to hold the possibility of great riches. She decided to marry Mr. Hand. They moved into a tiny two-room Chinatown apartment located in lower Manhattan, New York City. They never found the fabled riches.

As soon as Mrs. Mei arrived in this country, she applied for immigration visas for her parents. After a few years of red tape, Grandpa and Grandma Yao joined her in America. As soon as they arrived, they in turn applied for their two sons (Mrs. Mei’s brothers) to come over as well. The Yaos did not care too much about moving to the United States since they were already fairly established in China, but they wanted to give their two boys the opportunities to make money in a place where they heard that “you can
do anything if you put your mind to it.” They knew that if they did not come to the U.S. and sponsor their sons to immigrate, it would be much more difficult for Mrs. Mei to directly apply on behalf of her brothers because of how immigration laws worked. This pattern of chain migration — spouse, then parents, then siblings — is an extremely common way for immigrants to get their entire families into America with the shortest waiting time.

Grandpa and Grandma Yao came to the United States primarily because they wanted to provide the best possible opportunities for their sons. What they did not realize was that social advancement was nearly impossible without proper education, English language skills, and familiarity with Western culture. Like the many Chinese immigrants who inhabited Chinatowns, ethnic enclaves, and working-class urban neighborhoods throughout the country, all members of the Yao family were not college educated, could not speak, read, or write in English, and remained completely unfamiliar with Western ways of life.

How could they possibly earn reputable jobs as white-collar professionals or even as office workers when they could not hold meaningful conversations in English? There was no hope. For the ten years that they lived in America, every member of the Yao family was stuck working in manual labor in Chinatown or Chinese-owned businesses. Their two sons worked various jobs as auto mechanics and construction workers. Mother and daughter both sewed clothes
for a living. Father worked in a sign-making and painting business. Their unassimilated status and lack of U.S. citizenship made it easy for unscrupulous employers to exploit their labor and pay them far below minimum wage. Did they even know that there was such a thing as minimum wage? Even if immigrants like the Yaos who came to this country legally knew that they were being exploited, what better alternatives did they have?

Many working-class Asian immigrant parents pressure their kids to excel in school and to attend good colleges because they understand that education is the most sure-fire way to break the cycle of poverty. These parents have already given up on themselves; instead they place all of their hopes and dreams in their children. They work long hours in factories, butcher shops, and grocery stores for below minimum wage, with the hope that their children do not have to live next door to them and follow in their footsteps by working in those same jobs.

Despite their unfavorable circumstances, the Yao family felt like they were getting paid much more in America than they did back in China. They could report back to their friends in China that they earned as much in a day as laborers in China earned in a week or even in a month, which would garner immense awe and respect. However, to preserve the family’s pride, they didn’t tell their friends that the cost of living in the United States was orders of magnitude greater than the cost of living in China. This
selective reporting was one of the reasons why the illusion that anybody could come to America to make big money, even without an education, kept propagating back to Chinese citizens. In relative terms, the Yaos were actually far poorer in the United States than they had been in China. Plus, they had to deal with higher crime rates and live in a society where there were snobby rich people driving around town in their fancy cars. If they were still in China, they wouldn’t have been wealthy, but at least everybody else around them would be equally poor.

Mrs. Mei’s family lived in a two-room apartment in Chinatown when they first moved to America. I actually visited that apartment, which they still rented under their name but sublet out to tenants. When I entered the front door, I saw a tiny kitchen consisting of almost nothing but a sink and a stove. Adjacent to the kitchen was a toilet seat. In the same room! A kitchen and a bathroom all in one. You couldn’t take a shit and cook at the same time unless you wanted to puke. The second room was a bedroom with a large bunk bed. Five people once slept in that room: Mrs. Mei, Mr. Hand, his mother, and their two daughters. After Mr. Hand and Mrs. Mei worked for a few years to accumulate a bit more money, they moved out of Chinatown and into the Brooklyn house where I lived during my month-long stay with their family.

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There weren’t many days when I had an opportunity to get out of the house during that month. There was no reason for me to be outside during the daytime, nor did I want to prance around outside. In my paranoid mind, the city was unreasonably dangerous, and I was not going to make myself a bigger target by walking around on the streets. I knew that I was relatively safe down in the basement. I never saw much sunlight, but at least I was protected from the stray bullets that might sneak in through the first floor windows.

The only time I remember venturing out on the streets of Brooklyn away from Mrs. Mei’s home was to go on a class trip with her daughters’ school. Their school was similar to the Chinese school that I had attended in Louisiana, except that it was much smaller and held every day during the summer in a local public elementary school. Mrs. Mei’s daughters told her that they were going to see The Lion King in a movie theater with their class. Mrs. Mei thought that it would be a good idea for me to go along with them and see other children since I had been stuck in the basement for so long. She received permission from the teacher and walked me to school that morning. I was a bit scared to enter a classroom filled with strangers since it reminded me of the many times I had to do so over the past few years. However it wasn’t so bad since these kids were all Chinese, so at least they looked like me, and I was only going to see them for a day.
The teacher took about 20 children, all around my age or a bit younger, on a 20-minute walk to the movie theater. This was the first time that I saw the Brooklyn neighborhood during the day. There were lots of little specialty shops along the streets — grocery markets, florists, hardware stores, and cheap jewelry boutiques. It wasn’t as dangerous as I had previously imagined. Nobody looked like they were loitering around the streets just to come after us. I was still a bit scared that we were such prominent targets, though. I was in a crowd of 20 little Chinese kids accompanied by only one adult who was not much bigger than we were. I tried to blend in by walking in the middle of the pack so that I wouldn’t be as easily seen by strangers. I was on full alert, ready to run for my life at any moment’s notice. Unfortunately, I didn’t know where to run because I had no clue how to get back to Mrs. Mei’s home. I had no idea how I was possibly going to survive a year in the city if I couldn’t even keep myself mentally composed during a 20-minute walk in the daytime with a group of other kids around me.

We stopped by a candy store before reaching the movie theater. All of the other kids immediately grabbed bags and stuffed them full of their favorite candies. I thought it was a bit odd that we stopped at a candy store before entering the theater. I knew the usual movie theater rules — No outside food allowed in the theater. I wondered if the teacher also knew this rule. I thought of two possibilities:
Either he knew but decided to allow the kids to sneak in candy in their pockets, or he had no clue about the rule at all. I briefly thought of a third possibility — movie theaters in New York did not have that rule — but that seemed unlikely.

Did these kids realize that they were not allowed to bring candy into the theater? Or did they also know about the rule so they were preparing to sneak in the candy by stuffing it into their pockets? Either way, I was not going to buy anything. I didn’t like being sneaky, and I didn’t even like candy. After all of the other kids paid for their candy and happily held the bags in their hands, I figured that they would start hiding it in their pockets before we entered the theater.

At that moment, I thought it was clever for the teacher to allow the kids to buy candy at the store since it was much cheaper than buying it inside the theater. Chinese immigrants, especially those belonging to the working class, always found small ways to save money (like how Mrs. Mei re-used her paper towels). Thrift was a virtue. Pragmatism was a mantra. White lies were okay to some extent and some light rules could be bent. *No outside food allowed in the theater? Fine, we’ll sneak it in. No problem.* That was the immigrant way. When we lived in Louisiana, my family saved money whenever we went to eat at a local restaurant using the following scheme: The adult buffet was $6 but the children’s buffet was only $3. My parents would order
the children’s buffet for me and then order something tiny for themselves. I would grab as much food as I could from the buffet and bring it back to feed my whole family. We saved $3 on every meal. It seems laughably silly now, but we counted every single dollar back then. One time, when a waitress saw that my mother went to the buffet using a child-sized plate, she told her that she was going to charge her the adult price. My mother grew furious and instantly boycotted the restaurant. We never went back there again. She told me that the restaurant could have made $3 from us buying the children’s buffet, but now they would make no money from us. As we exited the candy store, I thought the same frugal immigrant ethic flowed through the Chinese school teacher’s mind: Bend the rules a bit. Save a few bucks. Keep the kids happy.

As we approached the movie theater, the kids were happily swinging their bags of candy around and making no attempts to hide them. As we approached the box office, we each bought our own ticket and proceeded as a group to enter the theater. The two theater employees saw all of these Chinese kids, each holding a bag of candy, and told the teacher, “I’m sorry. We can’t let you bring outside food into the theater.” No shit! The teacher looked confused. “But these are kids,” he tried his best to plea in his heavily-accented English. “Please just let them bring their candy inside this one time.” But the theater employees were unsympathetic. They had to do their job. “I’m sorry, but
rules are rules.”

The teacher stood in disbelief, shocked at hearing about this rule for the first time. I gave him way too much credit for his shrewdness; it turned out that he was so unassimilated that he had probably never even been to a movie theater in America before, and the equally unassimilated working-class Chinese parents of all the students had never taken their families to the theater either (there was no reason to watch English movies if they didn’t understand English). “Look at them. They are just kids who want to eat their candy. They mean you no harm.” The teacher’s English was not good enough to plead any longer, so he just gave up. He told all of the kids that they would have to finish their candy outside or throw it away. Only a few minutes remained before the movie started. The disappointed kids stuffed a few pieces of candy into their mouths and threw away all of their bags in the trash can outside the theater. They probably made some lucky homeless guy with a sweet tooth very happy.

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The movie theater candy fiasco was one of the few light-hearted moments in an otherwise depressing month. I felt alone and homesick every day because I never saw my parents. I couldn’t even write letters to my Louisiana friends because I didn’t have a return address; they could not send mail to Mrs. Mei’s home since I was only a temporary guest
there. I felt like I had gained so much in Louisiana but suddenly lost it all for reasons beyond my control. I had no idea what my future looked like. All I knew was that I didn’t want to be stuck in this house like the members of my host family. I needed to do well in school so I could go to college so I could find a good job so I wouldn’t have to live in a neighborhood like this one and re-use Bounty paper towels or sew clothes or work as a jewelry repairman or constantly watch my back to see who was following me on the street. I felt genuinely grateful for Mrs. Mei’s compassion, but I really could not wait to get out of that house.
Chapter 12

New York, New York

In the beginning of September 1994, my family moved into a luxurious Upper East Side Manhattan apartment located on the corner of 64th Street and Third Avenue, minutes away from multi-million dollar Park Avenue town houses, expensive Fifth Avenue fashion boutiques, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We lived on the 18th floor of a building that was fully-equipped with closed-circuit security cameras and a fleet of doormen and bellboys who knew all the residents’ names. The foundation that awarded my mother the year-long research fellowship also offered our family an enormous housing subsidy. We only paid a nominal fee of $800 per month for a one-bedroom apartment whose rent was at least five times more expensive. Without this subsidy, there was no possible way that my family could afford to live in the Upper East Side. Our neighbors were stock brokers, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen who all made
at least $200,000 a year. My parents’ joint incomes barely matched half of that figure. We knew that we were given a rare opportunity to live among the privileged. This marked the beginning of one of the most fun-filled years of my childhood.

Manhattan’s Upper East Side was blossoming with many small shops like those I had seen in other parts of the city — the usual florists, magazine kiosks, and liquor stores — but everything looked neater and cleaner. There were also high-end supermarkets, huge department stores, expensive designer boutiques, bookstores, and coffee shops which I had never seen in working-class neighborhoods. I felt much safer walking around the Upper East Side, even by myself, than I had been in either Brooklyn or Queens. My parents let me wander around our neighborhood, read at the local bookstore and magazine kiosks, buy cards at the comic book shop, and even do some grocery shopping for them. I loved the freedom of being able to navigate the city blocks by myself as a ten-year-old.

I quickly grew to be a street-wise city boy. I learned which neighborhoods were safe and which ones were dangerous, and how to take the subways and buses by myself. I began to shed my fear of the city as I immersed myself within it. When our neighbors from Louisiana (the ones before the Taylors) came to visit New York City, I showed them around to tourist attractions by taking public transportation. They were a bit scared of the scruffy-looking
people on the subways, the graffiti on the walls, and the panhandlers on the sidewalks, just as I had been when I first came to the big city, but I assured them that there was nothing to fear. After a few weeks, I began to overcome the anxiety and irrational paranoia that I had experienced while living in the basement of Mrs. Mei’s Brooklyn home.

I felt grateful to be able to live in such an affluent part of New York City. My family was not rich by any regards, but we knew that people would think we had money simply because we lived in a luxury apartment building. We learned to act more upper-class and to speak to our neighbors with confidence and poise. It was fun to pretend to be rich for a year. We learned how rich people lived. We observed that delivery men would roll shopping carts into the apartment building and carry bags of groceries upstairs where they would be greeted at the door by old ladies and their checkbooks. It seemed like rich people did not go out to buy groceries; they just phoned-in their orders to the supermarket and had people deliver to their doors.

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Every weekend, my parents and I would take a 30-minute subway ride down to Manhattan’s Chinatown to eat dim sum and then buy groceries. I felt awkward and ashamed whenever I saw the hordes of Chinese immigrants there who could not speak English. I felt like I was somehow above them since I lived on the Upper East Side and most of them
could not even dream of stepping foot into such a wealthy neighborhood. Although we were only separated by a few miles, it felt like we were from different worlds. I had lived with working-class Chinese immigrants for a month so I knew a bit about their lifestyle. But now I lived amongst wealthy doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. My neighbors probably earned 20 times as much money as the people in Chinatown or the Yao family in Brooklyn and Queens.

Even though I still looked Chinese, I felt like I was somehow different than the mostly working-class people I saw every weekend in Chinatown: I was not from the ethnic ghetto, I spoke perfect English, and my parents were both well-educated with graduate-level degrees. We had been spared from life in the ghetto through education, hard work, and some luck. I didn’t want to develop a sense of superiority over the Chinatown residents because I had also experienced the challenges of being a new immigrant, but it was difficult to avoid doing so. Thus, I tried to distance myself from these people since I felt a bit ashamed that my Caucasian peers might classify me in the same category as them.

In reality, though, my family had more in common with these working-class Chinese men and women than we did with our apartment neighbors. I knew that we were not actually rich. We could pass ourselves off as rich, but we couldn’t forget the immigrant thrift that made us into who we were, the pragmatic mentality that connected us with our impoverished fellow immigrants. Every weekend, my
parents and I went to Chinatown to buy groceries and ex-
haustingly carried back dozens of bags of food and sup-
plies on the subway and walked the few blocks from the
station back to our apartment. The doormen must have
been either amused or shocked to see my family struggling
to haul cheap-looking pink plastic bags with Chinese writing
on them, overflowing with exotic-looking groceries, into our
upscale apartment building. We could have bought those
same groceries in the neighborhood supermarket (for twice
the price). We could have even called for delivery (for three
times the price). But we were not rich. We saved money by
expending our own energy to buy and carry cheaper food
from Chinatown. My parents never let me forget that we
were only temporary guests in this affluent world.

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One evening our dear family friend (and distant relative)
Grandpa Yao came to visit us in our apartment. It was his
first time entering a luxurious Upper East Side residence.
He stopped at the front desk and handed the concierge a
slip of paper containing my parents’ names and apartment
number (my parents had written down their information
for him earlier because they knew that he couldn’t speak
English well enough to tell the concierge where we lived).
Security was tight in our building; residents must person-
ally approve all visitors before they could enter the eleva-
tor. The concierge called us on our closed-circuit TV phone
that rested by our front door. Whenever somebody wanted to visit us, the concierge would call us and a live video of the visitor waiting at the front desk would display on the phone’s monitor. As soon as I picked up the phone that evening, I saw a black and white video of Grandpa Yao holding a bag of Chinese food. The concierge asked me over the phone, “Do you want to send him up?” I told him yes, and within minutes, Grandpa Yao rang our doorbell.

As soon as we welcomed him into our apartment, he gave us his usual friendly smile and handed us a plastic bag containing boxes of Chinese food that he had bought for us in Chinatown. He was wearing an old baseball cap with nondescript sweater and jeans. He told us that the doormen had escorted him to a special elevator, and he sounded extremely excited about his elevator ride. He recounted the story loudly in Chinese as we sat around the dinner table eating Peking Duck and fried noodles: “After the nice man at the desk called you, he told me to follow the other man to the back of the building. I passed by the elevators near the lobby and saw several people waiting there. The man led me to an elevator in the back that was all empty. I didn’t have to wait at all! Haha! Those other people had to wait but I didn’t! What did you guys say to the man at the desk? How come I got to ride in the special elevator?”

My parents quietly smiled at each other when they heard Grandpa Yao’s story, but I didn’t understand what was so funny until after he had left. Back in the lobby, the
concierge saw that Grandpa Yao was a shabbily-dressed Asian man who was carrying a large bag filled with Styrofoam boxes and pungent-smelling food. He naturally assumed that Grandpa Yao was a Chinese food delivery man coming to bring food to us. The standard policy for delivery men was that they were supposed to take the service elevator in the back of the building. The wealthy residents did not want to ride in the same elevator as working-class laborers. Grandpa Yao’s wait-free “special elevator” was actually the service elevator assigned to mechanics, servicemen, and food delivery personnel.

Grandpa Yao sincerely believed that we had put in a good word for him over the phone so that he received better treatment than the residents by not having to wait for the regular elevator. In fact, he was marked as a lower-class citizen simply because of the way that he presented himself. I now understood why my parents just smiled and said to Grandpa Yao, “Oh really? Special elevator! Haha, that’s funny,” and then quickly changed the subject. They couldn’t bear to tell Grandpa Yao the truth that he had been discriminated against based upon his looks. They saw how genuinely happy he was to come see us and to have the opportunity to take the special elevator. They didn’t want to ruin his jovial mood or to hurt his pride.

It wasn’t until after he had left that my parents cracked up in laughter and let me in on the joke. It was a bittersweet moment. My parents did not feel sorry for Grandpa Yao,
though. They could laugh because they admired his good spirit and happy nature. They knew that Grandpa Yao didn’t need their pity or sympathy. He was from a different world, even though he lived only a few miles away from our apartment, a world where everybody looked like mechanics or janitors or delivery men. My parents understood that appearances were everything in the rich, superficial world that we had temporarily entered for the year.

I attended sixth grade at Madison Elementary School, located within a 30-minute walk of our apartment. I felt much safer going to school in the Upper East Side than in downtown Baton Rouge. To get to school and back every day, I either rode the city bus or walked with friends. Kids in New York City went to elementary school from kindergarten until sixth grade. In most other cities, they only went up to fifth grade, so I graduated from elementary school before I came to New York. I liked the fact that I could once again be part of the highest grade in elementary school instead of starting out as the lowest grade in middle school. As an added bonus, I would get to have a second elementary school graduation at the end of this year. Now I was glad that my parents made me skip a grade, or else I would have started middle school when I moved to California without attending a single elementary school graduation.
The kids who attended Madison Elementary mostly lived in the Upper East Side. There were hundreds of public schools throughout New York City, and enrollment was primarily determined by geographical vicinity to each school. Some of the richest kids in the city went to Madison. Most of my classmates were still white, but they were predominantly Jewish rather than Christian. I saw far more Asian kids here than in Louisiana, and there were a few black and Hispanic kids as well. In contrast to the WASP-dominated Louisiana classrooms, the classrooms in Madison contained a diverse mix of students belonging to many different religions — Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism — and even some non-religious students. I no longer felt uncomfortable about being a Chinese boy who did not go to church on Sundays. Here I could be accepted for my differences without pretending to conform.

Regardless of race, culture, or religion, all of these kids shared one thing in common: money. On Monday mornings, many of my classmates would exchange stories about how they spent their weekends at their family’s beach house in Long Island or New Jersey. Their families were wealthy enough to own an Upper East Side apartment for the weekdays and a beach house for the weekends. I really liked those kids, though, because they were not obnoxious about their wealth. The kids at Madison were not too spoiled because their parents decided to put them in public school even though they could probably afford private schools. Their
parents were part of the upper middle class (doctors, lawyers, and high-ranking businessmen) but not super-rich like CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, sultans of third-world countries, or oil tycoons.

As soon as I started school, I realized that I was in a special position because I was only going to be in New York for one year before moving to California. Since I would probably never see my classmates again, I could do whatever the heck I wanted without fear of leaving a bad impression. I didn’t need to invest my heart into making long-lasting friendships; I even told everybody from the start that I was only going to be around for a year. I was not nearly as afraid or nervous as I had been whenever I moved to a new school in the past. By this time, I was already a veteran at being the new kid in class. I still tried to make friends since I didn’t want to spend the year as a loner, but I emotionally distanced myself from my peers because I didn’t want to become distraught again when I moved to California. If certain kids liked to play with me, then I would be nice to them, but I didn’t go out of my way to impress anyone.

Even though we were still in elementary school, I began to see a rift appearing between different groups of kids. It was a simple division of the cool and the un-cool. Some of the kids wore baggier clothes and pretended to be gangsters even though they lived in such privilege. (If they really wanted to be gangsters, they should have taken the bus up twenty blocks to Harlem and strutted on the streets there.) I
belonged to the group of kids who were more academically focused (a.k.a. the nerds). There were some people who could jump between the cool and the un-cool crowds. They were smart and studious enough to be accepted by nerds like me but still trendy enough to hang out with the cool kids. I admired those kids since I wanted to be cool while still doing well in classes.

The gap between the cool and the un-cool was not nearly as apparent as it would later become in middle and high school, but I could begin to sense that we were not all one big happy family like my elementary school class in Louisiana had been. Even if I had gone to middle and high school in Louisiana, I would have started to lose touch with my less studious friends as they joined the cool cliques. After coming to this realization, I stopped feeling homesick about Louisiana and decided to live for the moment in New York City. I had been granted a wonderful opportunity to go to school with these children of privilege in one of the nicest parts of the city. I wanted to enjoy the school year and only think about my inevitable relocation to California when the time came. I realized that constantly dwelling on my past led to depressing nostalgia and thinking about the future brought uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. I strived to live in the present, and I had an amazing time during my year in New York City.
The education I received in Madison Elementary far surpassed what I had experienced in Louisiana. In fifth grade just a year earlier, we read children’s novels, did some simple math, and decorated our classroom with cardboard and watercolor projects. This year, I took four serious academic classes: math, science, art history, and Latin. We would sit in each class for an hour and then shuffle to the next classroom to learn another subject from a new teacher. In Louisiana, I had one teacher per year. Here, I had four teachers, each specializing in a specific topic, even though I was still in elementary school. Math and science were business as usual; I had always excelled in these subjects from a young age. Art history and Latin were not classes that were normally offered to elementary school students; those ended up being the most enjoyable parts of my education that year. We learned Latin out of a textbook like high school students. Our teacher treated us like mature young adults and did not baby us with fun and games. I appreciated her professionalism and began to feel like I was being intellectually challenged in the classroom.

Art history was by far my favorite class. We studied the history of Western art from the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman times through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, impressionist, and contemporary 20th century periods. Through slideshows, textbook reading, and numerous presentations, the teacher taught us an amazing amount of material about not only art, but also the fascinating history
and culture that accompanied the art. This was the most interesting and thought-provoking class I had ever taken up to that point in my life. It was as scholarly as a class geared towards ten and eleven-year-old children could become. The best part about the class was that the teacher would first lecture on a particular piece of art, then she would show us slides and photographs of it, and after some analysis, she would take us on a short walk to the world-famous Metropolitan Museum of Art where we would actually see the real thing. We would quietly examine the sculptures, paintings, and statues, then make sketches and take notes in our notebooks.

My year in New York City was when I began to really love learning. Academics had been neither challenging nor rewarding for me back in Louisiana. I never felt like I was actually learning anything meaningful until I took art history and saw those magnificent works in the museum right next door to the school. Many of my fellow students were genuinely interested in learning whereas most of my friends back in Louisiana just liked to play with Ninja Turtles action figures and have fake wrestling matches on the grass. I liked having people around me who shared my enthusiasm for knowledge, and I began to feel like I fit in around the studious kids.

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Life at home was equally great. My parents were doing better financially since our rent was subsidized and they both now had jobs. We spent the weekends going to Chinatown, attending free music recitals at the Juilliard School on the Upper West Side, visiting museums around the city, and occasionally watching Broadway plays. We enjoyed life as a typical middle-class family in New York City. We couldn’t afford the extravagant luxuries that my classmates’ families enjoyed, but we lived decently on my parents’ incomes. My family shed our shallow Louisiana country roots and embraced the cosmopolitan culture, accelerating our assimilation into the American mainstream.

I was a bit sad when school ended, but I always knew that I would only be here for a year. I remember that we had a graduation ceremony followed by a school dance in the playground. That evening was the most fun I had ever experienced up to that point in my life. It was the first time I let myself loose and danced the night away. The DJ played loud fast music and threw beads and rubber chickens into the crowd. For one night, nobody cared who was cooler or smarter or more popular. We all danced together until we sweated ourselves to exhaustion, then we sat down, drank some water, got back out there, and danced some more. It was unforgettable.

When my father picked me up from school that night and walked me home, I replayed the pure joy of the dance in my head over and over again. I was sad that I would prob-
ably never get to see these kids again, but I was prepared all along not to become emotionally attached. I knew that I was moving to Los Angeles, California in a few months so nothing that I experienced here could stay with me. The year had exceeded all of my expectations, and I felt so thankful that we had the opportunity to live here. I remembered all of the good times during my year in New York City, and I just smiled.
Chapter 13

East to West

After my wonderful year in New York City, my parents decided to send me to live with my relatives in China for the summer, figuring that it would be a good chance for me to brush up on my Chinese language skills and to experience Chinese culture firsthand again. Their plan was for me to fly from New York to Hong Kong, spend the summer with my mother’s family in Zhongshan, China (my birthplace), and then fly back to Los Angeles at the end of August to reunite with my mother, who was about to start her new job as a professor at UCLA. My father had to stay at his job in New York, so he was not going to immediately move to Los Angeles with us. My 12-year childhood journey concludes in 1995 with a summer in China and one final relocation to Los Angeles, California.

I had visited China with my mother two years earlier, but this was the first trip there by myself. I remember
sitting next to a friendly older Chinese-American guy on the plane. He saw that this 11-year-old kid next to him was all alone and struck up a conversation. He told me that he was 18 years old. At that age, 18 seemed ancient! Nevertheless, we had a good chat, and the 16-hour flight went by quite smoothly. When my plane landed in Hong Kong, my uncle picked me up and drove me to a nearby Planet Hollywood (a gaudy chain restaurant founded by American movie stars) where we ate burgers and fries. He wanted to give me an American-style welcome. When he saw that I was gawking at a display case containing a denim jacket decorated with the Planet Hollywood logo, he instantly bought it for me without saying a word. He also let me use his cell phone to call my parents in New York to tell them that I had arrived safely — wow, an international call on a cell phone in 1995! Let the spoiling begin.

That summer was the peak of my uncle’s career in China as a real estate developer and import/export entrepreneur. He made loads of money and never hesitated to spend it on me. He was my mother’s younger brother, and she had taken good care of him back when they were kids, especially during tough times in his pre-teen years while my grandparents were in labor camps during the Cultural Revolution. He remembered my mother’s compassion, so he wanted to give me the best possible treatment to repay her. Family loyalty is a strong Chinese value.

My uncle and I took an hour-long boat ride from Hong
Kong to Zhongshan, where the rest of my mother’s family greeted me with open arms. They set me up to live in a guest bedroom in my grandparents’ house. I was still the only boy of my generation, and they treated me like royalty; they had far more money now, so they gave me even more preferential treatment than when I had grown up there as the *Little Emperor* a decade earlier.

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Excessive food was the most prominent manifestation of my pampering. Every morning, my grandmother would go down the street to the market to buy fresh meat, fish, and vegetables for the day’s cooking and make me porridge for breakfast. Almost every single day, some relatives would take me out to eat dim sum at different upscale restaurants throughout the city. They knew the managers and waiters by name since my uncle and grandfather were prominent figures in the city of Zhongshan, my uncle known as a wildly successful businessman and my grandfather as the chief architect who oversaw much of the development of this modern city. My grandmother would spend all afternoon in the kitchen preparing dinner, and we all ate together as an extended family when everyone came home from work. Usually, almost a dozen people gathered around the table — cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Sometimes my aunts or uncles would take me out to eat a midnight snack and cruise around town on their motorcycles.
Everybody marveled at how pudgy I grew during those three months. *Look at that cute fat boy. Fat boy!* Among the older generation in China, it was a compliment to call kids fat because fat was synonymous with health and wealth — the exact opposite of the perception in modern Western society. Back when my parents were growing up, almost nobody in China could grow fat since the majority of people received barely enough food to survive: rice, vegetables, and occasionally some meat. Accustomed to images of emaciated, malnourished children, the older generation thought that kids who were pudgy were healthier than kids who looked too skinny. The only people who could grow fat were members of the privileged class in society — high-ranking Communist government officials and their families. Thus, being fat was also a symbol of high social standing.

As China opened up its economy to the global market, American fast food chains such as McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken invaded Chinese cities. Parents loved taking their kids out to these fast food joints because they felt like they were experiencing a slice of Americana — an unhealthy cholesterol-laden slice. My relatives sometimes mailed us family photos taken at fast food restaurants because those were viewed as cool and trendy places to hang out. The increased availability of high-fat, low-cost foods combined with the old-school view of *pudgy equals healthy* led to the explosive growth of child obesity in China during the 1990’s. The one-child policy exacerbated this epi-
Because parents placed all of their resources into keeping their single child happy, they were more reluctant to refuse requests to eat junk food all day. Neither parents nor kids received proper nutrition education about calories, fat, cholesterol, or the long-term dangers of obesity. Since millions of Chinese parents had grown up without much food on the table, it was absurd for them to ever deny their kids the privilege to indulge just because some arrogant Western doctors were saying that it was unhealthy.

I was such a gluttonous pig. I could not stop myself from eating everything in my sight. All of my relatives encouraged me to eat as much as possible, and I could not resist. I had absolutely no self control. I did not exercise one single bit. It was so hot and humid in Zhongshan during the summertime that it was painful to even take a walk outside of the house. My relatives relished in how fat I was growing, and they just laughed and kept feeding me more and more. They loved to parade me around town as the fat boy from America. Whenever I went shopping with my aunt, she would tell the merchants, “Look, that’s my fat nephew from America. Look at how healthy he is, that American boy!” I gained over 20 pounds that summer.

I became so spoiled that I even began to think at the time that I might actually be spoiled. Whenever I saw a toy that I wanted, my uncle would buy it for me without
asking any questions. When I returned to America, I ended up filling three huge suitcases full of expensive model cars, name-brand clothes, video games, and other toys that my uncle had bought for me throughout the summer. My relatives often took my two female cousins and me to amusement parks, arcades, and hotel/resorts to go swimming or to play tennis. We dined at the finest restaurants with first-class treatment. My uncle loved to take me around to do cool manly things like driving go-carts, building gas-powered remote controlled cars, and riding around the countryside in a Porsche sports car, speeding over 120 miles per hour. At that time, he owned several luxury cars including a Mercedes S500 sedan, a Ferrari, and three Porsches. My mother’s family had cell phones, expensive cars, recognition at local restaurants, hotels, and shops, and all other material luxuries that money could buy. I was the corpulent prince of that empire built upon my uncle’s newly-acquired wealth.

But, wait a minute — this was China, a place I had described earlier as where everyone grew up in relative poverty. Even if a family like my mother’s had prestige in their local community, they still could not accumulate significant monetary wealth to buy excess material goods. Then how was all of what I have just described even possible? Well, this was definitely not the same China where, only a decade before, nobody made any money beyond what was necessary for bare survival. Starting in the late 1970’s, under the
leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China underwent a nationwide economic reform, opening up its economy to global interests. By the mid-1990’s, it was possible for a fortunate and savvy few to make huge sums of money as entrepreneurs.

I didn’t know how long our family’s wealth could last before the Communist government launched another campaign against the nouveau riche: people like my uncle and other like-minded entrepreneurs who were getting too wealthy too fast. But I wasn’t thinking about the future at the time. I had everything that I could possibly imagine in terms of material goods and personal entertainment. I visited my father’s family in Guangzhou a few times during the summer, but I had already been spoiled by the luxuries I received while living with my mother’s family in Zhongshan. In all fairness, I should have stayed longer with my father’s family, but I was an 11-year-old kid who saw nothing but toys, arcade games, and endless amounts of good food. My father’s family lived a much more modest existence without these luxuries. I had never experienced such extravagant material wealth before that summer, and I doubt that I ever will again. Unfortunately, my uncle’s luck in business ran out a few years after my visit, and my mother’s family can no longer afford to live like they did back at the peak of his career in the mid-1990’s.

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The more that my mother’s family pampered me and
gave me everything that I wanted, the more complacent I became. I began to lose my fierce independence and cosmopolitan savviness. Back in New York, I loved being able to have the freedom to do everything by myself. I could navigate the streets and subways with ease. But here, I did not have any freedom to go my own way. Even though my relatives answered my every demand, I relied on them to do everything for me. My childish materialistic desires were always fulfilled but my mind was not challenged. I had grown up as a quick-thinking boy who excelled in school, but now for an entire summer, there was nothing around to stimulate my mind. None of my relatives knew my love for learning. They just viewed me as the cute fat boy from America. As a result, I grew lazy and sluggish, both mentally and physically, giving up any attempts to think independently and just taking every day four to five meals at a time.

I remember being emotionally empty during that summer. I would sometimes cry at night and not be able to figure out why I was crying. I had everything that an 11-year-old boy could possibly want, but I didn’t have my parents. I was without a home again, my family in the midst of a cross-country move between the east and west coasts of America. I felt like I was a visitor in my own birthplace of Zhongshan, like I didn’t really belong here. By putting me up on a pedestal and treating me with such excessive kindness, my relatives made me into an honorary guest — an outsider — instead of an ordinary family member.
I started to miss some of the friends I had made in New York City, but I tried to shut them out of my memory because I knew that nostalgia would upset me even more. Eventually, I learned to put my feelings aside and to live every day by eating incessantly and demanding material goods and entertainment. As the summer came to an end, I did not remember having any serious feelings of attachment. I was grateful for my family’s wonderful hospitality, but nothing about that summer left a strong emotional mark on me. It had been a fun ride, but a frivolous one. My mind was not challenged except by one recurring question: *What should I buy or eat next?*

Several days before summer ended, my aunts thought that it would be cute for their hair stylist to give me a trendy haircut and perm before I went back to America. The stylist, who had never been to America before, emphatically told them that perms were fashionable in America. “Those Americans love the big wavy hair!” Too bad that advice was for the wrong decade. I came out of the salon with awkwardly wavy hair that smelled like toxic chemicals.

In late August, I flew by myself from Hong Kong to Los Angeles International Airport. After spending an hour passing through immigration and customs, I pushed my luggage cart down the arrivals ramp to try to find my mother in the midst of a huge crowd of people lined up to meet the flight’s passengers. When my mother first spotted me, she barely recognized her own son. In the three months since she had
last seen me, I had accumulated over 20 pounds of fat and sported a new wavy permed hairdo. She just laughed in disbelief. “Oh my God! What has my family done to you?”

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My mother and I moved into our new home, a three-bedroom house located in a suburb 30 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. I started seventh grade at a local public middle school. On the first day of classes, my mother told me to insist to my guidance counselor that I deserved to be placed in the most academically-challenging classes for my grade, which were the gifted classes. She had to go to work early in the morning to beat the rush hour traffic, so she couldn’t go to school to speak on my behalf. She told me to stop being shy and humble and to show off everything that I knew. She (correctly) predicted that if I were in the gifted classes, I would find myself surrounded by the more studious and well-behaved students. She wanted to start me down an academically-focused path, but I was new in the school district so I had no California standardized tests on my record to prove that I could excel in the gifted classes. She told me to show off my knowledge to the counselor so that he would put me in the gifted classes even though I did not have the proper paperwork.

When I met with the counselor that morning, I was nervous because I was a shy boy who never liked boasting, but I listened to my mother’s advice. I managed to answer
his questions with confidence and successfully requested to start in the gifted classes. The stage was set: One more big adjustment to a new school, and one more new set of friends to make. I thought that I had everything under control. I was a cosmopolitan boy from the big city. I didn’t have anything to worry about. It wasn’t even that difficult for me to adjust to school in New York after moving from Louisiana. How hard could this transition be?

Excelling in academics came naturally, but fitting in at school was much harder than I had anticipated. I was now in middle school, so kids had already formed into tightly-knit cliques — stoners, skaters, surfers, jocks, drama queens, band geeks, preppy snobs, studious nerds, and the loser outcasts. I was part of the last category. Entering middle school in seventh grade gave me a huge disadvantage on the social scene because everybody had already formed their cliques one year earlier in sixth grade. If I had not skipped a grade, then I would have started middle school in sixth grade at the same time as everybody else and stood a better chance at finding a social group to join. But what was past was past; I had to adapt to the circumstances presented to me in the present.

If you thought that you were dorky back in middle school, I guarantee that I could beat you. When I started seventh grade, I was overweight with pale white skin and unnatural-looking wavy hair. I wore FOB clothes straight from China (FOB stands for Fresh Off the Boat, which is self-deprecating
slang used to describe recent immigrants not in tune with American culture or fashion trends). My relatives bought me the most expensive name-brand clothes in China, thinking that it would be so trendy in America. But they were dead wrong. They bought me neon pink and green shorts and brightly-colored T-shirts covered with English phrases that didn’t make any sense. I looked like a disaster out of a bad 80’s movie. I wore shorts so short that they would ride up when I sat down in my seat so that everyone could see my fat white hairless legs. People thought I shaved my legs since I didn’t have any visible hair on them at the time. I was the laughingstock of my class, but in retrospect, I don’t blame my classmates. If I were in seventh grade and saw a fat pale Asian boy with a perm and neon-colored shorts that almost came up to his butt, I would have also laughed.

Kids were vicious at that age. They looked down on anybody who didn’t dress in the same clothes or talk the same way or like the same types of music as they did. I was fine in the classroom because I could concentrate on learning, but the lunch hour was torturous. I would sit all alone by myself at a lunch table and observe silently while everybody around me chatted and giggled, messed around with their food, and then ran up to the basketball courts to play after they finished eating. There was no possible way that I could just sit with a crowd of kids and become accepted. This was definitely not elementary school anymore. We were all friends in our tightly-knit gifted class in
Louisiana, and although I wasn’t friends with everybody in my class in New York, we all got along reasonably well. But this was middle school. These pre-pubescent kids were so image-conscious that the last thing they wanted was to be seen around an embarrassingly out-of-place new kid.

Throughout the entire year, I did not find a single clique to join. I wasn’t even cool enough for the nerds. I was part of the losers at the absolute bottom of the popularity hierarchy who roamed around the cafeteria every day and sat alone somewhere in a corner. I eventually made one good friend, Peter, who was also new to the school. We hung out together at our own lunch table, so at least I didn’t have to sit alone anymore. Even though Peter was a new student like me, he knew that he was going to move to Ohio after the school year ended. Therefore, he didn’t want to bother with the social formalities of finding a clique to join. He didn’t give a damn what other people thought of him, and I liked that about him. We got along really well and often went over to each other’s houses to play. He had the same free spirit that I saw in myself a year earlier when I lived in New York City. I knew that I was only going to be in New York for a year so I didn’t give a damn and had the time of my life, and now Peter knew that he was going to leave this school in a year so he didn’t give a damn either. I knew that once he moved away the following year, I would have to start all over again to make new friends, but at the time, I didn’t give a damn. One friend was better than none.
My 12-year childhood journey across three continents concludes here as I begin middle school in suburban Southern California. Fortunately, my social life started to improve after my horribly awkward seventh grade year. I attended karate classes several times a week, which helped me to lose the fat I had gained during my gluttonous summer in China. I wore baggier shorts so that my pale thighs were no longer exposed. I got a trendy parted-down-the-middle haircut. And, most importantly, I finally made friends and joined the clique of kids who were mostly in my honors classes, so that I no longer had to sit by myself during lunchtime.

I spent the rest of my childhood (the next six years) facing the usual challenges that all teenagers must inevitably face: dressing to conform to the fashions of the day, overcoming the fear of talking to the opposite sex, figuring out how to navigate the school social hierarchy, balancing academic and personal lives, determining when to and when not to listen to parents, and preparing for the transition to college. However, my teenage experiences were not nearly as unique as those of my early childhood, so I have chosen not to write about them.

During my first three years in California, I lived with my mother while my father continued working in New York. He was advancing rapidly in his job and did not want to lose momentum. He flew over to visit during summer and winter vacations, and sometimes my mother and I took trips to
New York to see him. We voluntarily separated because it was best for the family. My family has always been accustomed to living apart: When I was a young child growing up in China, my mother went to graduate school in the United States and my father went to work in Switzerland. Many of my friends thought that my parents were divorced, because it wasn’t normal in American households for husband and wife to live separately for such long periods of time. In reality, their marriage has always remained solid, strengthened, ironically, by the physical separation, and perhaps more importantly, by the adversities they faced. Throughout my childhood, both my parents endured difficulties far greater in magnitude than what I have experienced, and their shared immigrant struggle to make it in America has tightened their bond to each other.

My parents had to move wherever career opportunities arose, and I had no choice but to tag along for the ride and adapt to the diverse foreign environments I encountered along the way. Like many immigrant children, I stayed home alone frequently at a very young age, usually for a few hours each day after school. My parents taught me how to protect myself around the house, left me with their friends’ phone numbers in case of an emergency, and were themselves only a phone call away. I was a latchkey kid starting in Switzerland when my mother worked full-time and didn’t come home until 6 PM every night and my father lived and worked in another city. Naturally, I was scared at first, but I
understood that my parents had no other options, so I made the best of my situation. Since I had no siblings, I had to learn to entertain myself during all of those hours I spent alone. I immersed myself in reading science books, playing with LEGO blocks, and imagining ideas for wild inventions and sketching out their “blueprints” in my notebook.

When my parents came home in the evenings, I would often be eager to talk to them about what I had learned from reading or what crazy inventions I had dreamed up. And here is where I give them the most credit for my upbringing: *They would listen intently and ask questions to encourage me to think and talk in more detail.* Even though they were probably tired, stressed, and didn’t really care about my childish drawings or discoveries, they would always make an effort to allow me to talk about what I wanted and try to engage in dialogue with me to stimulate my critical thinking. At the time, I felt that it was so natural and fun, but looking back, I am now extremely grateful that they didn’t just brush me off and shut me up like some parents in their position might do. It definitely takes a determined effort to listen to the excited, high-pitched ramblings of a little kid when you have more serious adult issues on your mind, and only in retrospect do I appreciate my parents’ patience.

I was an inquisitive kid by nature, and my parents wisely recognized my personality and tried their best to nurture my curiosity rather than stunt it by being overbearing or imposing. I have a feeling that many children who have a
naturally strong sense of curiosity get their passion for learning quashed by nagging parents. Whenever someone forces you to do something, it becomes a chore, and chores are no fun. Quite a few of my Asian friends suffered through their parents making them do extra homework or practice quizzes on the weekends, memorize SAT vocabulary flash cards, rehearse class presentations to the point of frustration, and other activities that sapped the excitement out of learning and made them view the acquisition of knowledge as a chore required to earn good grades, get into a reputable college, find a stable job, and ultimately please their parents.

Fortunately, my parents never imposed their will on my hobbies, so I always found learning and creating new things to be interesting and fun. They never forced me to learn anything that I didn’t want to learn, such as piano, violin, tennis, supplemental material for more advanced academic subjects, or other extracurricular activities that Asian parents would often tell each other to make their kids do because they were supposedly beneficial for the kids’ development.

Even though my parents were often too busy to spend much time with me throughout my childhood, I never felt like they were absent; whenever we did spend time together, they would always make an effort to pay attention to me and to make me feel like my opinion and insights mattered, despite how immature or irrational my thoughts might have been at the time.
Like most other kids, my own childhood journey has ultimately been about finding my place in the world — intellectually, emotionally, and socially. There is only so much that parents can do to guide their kids, because kids are influenced tremendously by their environment and especially by their peers in school. I feel that my parents played their role well, and their greatest contributions to my upbringing were providing a home environment conducive to learning and open communication and then leaving me alone to let me find my own way.