Water Marks

Yang wanted to hold his daughter’s hand, in case they were separated by the crowds of people flowing around and between them, but she refused. Annie was sixteen years old and said that she was a grown adult capable of taking care of herself, but all Yang could see was the little six-year-old who had cried in the middle of the shopping mall when she couldn’t find her parents. He wished he hadn’t been so adamant about holding her hand before because now she refused to talk to him and stared at her phone while walking beside him, not with him.

He looked around the plaza and tried to find something familiar. He had lived in Hangzhou for the first twenty years of his life and left for a better education in the United States. After studying for his doctoral degree in chemistry, he found a job as a chemical engineer at a mid-sized cosmetics company in Ohio, where his wife moved from China to be with him and where his only daughter was born. He had longed to return to Hangzhou and see his family again, but between his dwindling vacation days and the burning animosity between his parents and his wife, he had never had the courage to return and amend the past. Until now, when his sister called that his father was ill, did he have an invitation to return to his hometown.

After thirty years, the city had changed. There were more people than before. Of course, being a city in the world’s most populous country meant that the city must boast a great population, but thirty years ago, in the cusp of poverty, he guessed that only one-tenth of the people had lived here.

During the summer, tourists swarmed the Shangcheng District like goldfish to bread crumbs. He listened to their chatter, mostly young people on summer vacation, and they all spoke the Common Language. He strained his ears to hear fragments of the Hangzhou dialect, but the language was as silent as Latin. It made sense, he comforted himself, since everyone here was from outside of the city.

The plaza was marked by stores of large, glass displays with mannequins dressed in summer clothing, some sporting Asian fashion while others wearing Western brands. He didn’t really care about shopping, although his daughter had insisted in the morning on buying new outfits for her ever-expanding closet. Yang was looking for Snack Street, which should have been only one or two blocks away from the shopping center, although they had been walking for almost twenty minutes. He could have melted from the heat that radiated from inside his pink umbrella (his wife had insisted that Annie take the umbrella to shield herself from the sun, but his daughter, stubborn as ever, wordlessly handed him the umbrella as soon as they left their hotel.)

“Are we lost?” she asked him in English, the first words spoken to him in the last twenty minutes. Annoyance dripped from her tone. Yang had a sudden impulse to reprimand her for her disrespect, but the impulse died as suddenly as it had come. His shoulders dropped to the floor. He didn’t want to widen the distance between them.

Finally, after asking for directions from a stranger (who looked up the restaurant location on his phone), and another fifteen minutes of walking, father and daughter stood in front of the famous dumpling restaurant*.* The restaurant had golden characters shining on the sign above the door, and crowds of people pushed towards the outside counters, which sold common Chinese snacks like sesame and red bean treats.

Annie wrinkled her nose. “We’re eating *here*?”

“This restaurant is famous for its soup dumplings! Aren’t they your favorite?”

“But it’s so dirty here.”

They walked inside anyways. Lines of people stacked next to each other with vibrant pictures of the menu hanging above their heads. The scene was like a fast food restaurant, except with better food. After ordering two rounds of soup dumplings (eight each), Yang carried the tray of steaming food to a recently vacated table. His daughter sat on the very edge of the booth as he brushed grains of rice off the table with a napkin.

He lifted the bamboo cover away and the fragrance of spring onions and pork wafted in the air.

“Eat! Eat while it’s hot!”

“I have to take a picture first.”

Annie stood from the booth and positioned her phone as high as possible, parallel to the table. Her father waited while his stomach growled, and he gripped the chopsticks in his left hand with anticipation. Finally, she sat back down and he plucked a dumpling from the bamboo steamer and dropped it into her bowl.

“This restaurant is famous for being one of the first places to serve soup dumplings. I used to eat here once a year, when I was a teenager. I would have come more often, but we could not afford it back then.”

“Mmm-hmmm.” His daughter plopped the dumpling into her mouth, then promptly spit it back out into her bowl.

“Too hot?” he asked. His heart squeezed at the thought of a wasted dumpling, especially one so delicious.

She shook her head and chugged down some water. “It tastes really sour.”

“What?”

Yang bit into the dumpling. The hot soup rushed into his mouth and scorched his tongue, but even then he could taste the overwhelming sourness from the pork. He set his spoon down and chewed, then swallowed.

“It’s expired.”

She pointed at his chest. “I thought you said this place was famous.”

He plucked another dumpling from the other round and dropped it into his bowl. Although Yang knew that all the dumplings were almost certainly made from the same batch, he wanted to give this restaurant another chance. Fond memories rushed into his mind: his mother pouring tea for everyone, his father leaving the table and returning with another tray of dishes, despite his and his younger brother’s protests that they were already full, and his baby sister’s eyes widening like two full moons after having her first dumpling here.

After putting the dumpling in his mouth, he stood up.

“Let’s go.”

“I can look up a good restaurant on my phone.”

“No. We will go to a famous noodle shop. Don’t you like noodles?”

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When they entered the noodle shop, the tables were packed with the elderly. Snippets of the Hangzhou dialect floated above the loud chatter. Yang was beaming.

“This place has not changed! You know a restaurant is good when the customers are old grandmas and grandpas.”

“So can we eat now?”

They sat down at an empty table near the air conditioning. Yang saw wisps of his daughter’s hair flow behind her head in the cool breeze from the vent.

“Switch seats with me.”

“Why?”

“You will catch a cold from the moving air.”

“Dad, that’s not how colds work. They’re caused by viruses, not the temperature.”

“But you’re not wearing enough.”

She sighed and switched places with her father. When they sat down again, an old man joined their table. Annie glanced at him, then angled her body away from him while scrolling through her phone.

“Can I sit with you both?” he asked in the Hangzhou dialect. “There are no other seats in the restaurant.” His voice slightly rasped, and his hair was silver-white.

“Of course,” Yang responded in the language of his hometown. The words dropped awkwardly from his tongue, since he was trying to remember the right accents and inflections. He waved his hand towards the waitress taking notes at a nearby table.

“*Fu-ran!*” The waitress ignored him.

Laughing, the old grandfather said, “You speak in the city tongue, but you have not lived here for a while, have you? We no longer say *furan*. We call *xiaomei*. Xiaomei!”

After scribbling something in her notepad, the waitress quickly walked to their table. “Ready to order?”

Yang ordered a sea cucumber soup, while the grandfather ordered something with beef tongue. When it was Annie’s turn, she pointed to a picture on the menu with tofu.

“How spicy do you want your soup?” the waitress asked.

“Ahhh…” His daughter turned towards him.

“Not spicy,” Yang answered. “Not even with white pepper.” The waitress smiled amusedly at the request and left.

“Your daughter is very shy,” remarked the old man. Annie was scrolling through her phone again.

“Her Mandarin is not very good. She can understand the Common Language, but she cannot speak well.” Much less read or write, he thought.

“Was she born here?”

“No, she was born in America.”

“Ah,” the old man nodded to himself. “I thought so. She acts like a foreigner.”

The comment struck Yang hard. How could a stranger tell? But looking at his daughter, Yang could see that it was obvious. His daughter wore makeup like the models on the English beauty magazines – harsh shadows cut her face, and her skin was very tan. Her beautiful, dark hair had also been bleached into a yellow-straw color. He and his wife had lamented their daughter’s choices, but Annie insisted that all the girls in her school dressed the same. She wanted to fit in.

He changed the subject. “Hangzhou has changed so much. I still remember when a bowl of noodles was five yuan, and today it is forty!”

“You work in America?”

“Yes, as an engineer.”

“Too bad. The Chinese economy has grown very fast. We are surpassing the US now.” The old man grinned, one of his front teeth missing. “You should have stayed!”

The waitress arrived with their food, but Yang was distracted by his thoughts. *Maybe I should have.*

When Yang moved to the United States, he thought he was moving to a better life. Even on a low graduate student salary, he could afford his rent, food, and still have some money left over to send back to his family every month (without his wife’s knowledge, of course.) But, he had not realized how much earning more money would cost. When his daughter was born, he was the happiest man in the world. But as she grew older, he realized that a wall was growing between them, pushing them further and further apart. His wife assured him that it was not his fault. How could he battle against a downstream current? And so, he watched his little Annie grow up in a culture and society entirely different from his own.

In their house, there was still a semblance of home. They took their shoes off before entering, pinned a lunar calendar on the wall, and drank freshly-made soy milk. But slowly, his daughter began to change, picking up foreign customs from her new friends at school. She started drinking icy water rather than hot tea. She practiced eating with a knife and fork at the table, instead of using chopsticks. She complained that she hated Chinese school, and fearing that this hatred would bleed into her connection with her heritage, his father stopped driving her to her language lessons. Because of this, she forgot how to speak.

As if the gap between generations wasn’t enough, Yang had naively introduced another separator between him and his daughter. He had been waiting for a miracle, for his daughter to experience a reawakening while close to the ties of his hometown, and had asked his wife to leave them alone for the day, in hopes of “bonding.” He stared at his daughter, who was typing on her phone with one hand while swallowing noodles with the other. At least she remembered how to use chopsticks.

When Yang turned back to his own bowl of noodles, he sighed. Everything tasted exactly as he remembered, and yet it wasn’t as delicious as before.

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After leaving the restaurant, Annie complained that she was tired and wanted to go home. He didn’t blame her. They had only arrived three days ago, and jet lag still weighed heavy on their eyelids, despite the shining sun. However, as much as he loved his daughter, he wanted to visit one more place before going back to the hotel.

They weaved through people on the sidewalk until they reached the border of the West Lake. Perhaps the most popular tourist attraction in Hangzhou, the West Lake shimmered under the sunshine. Blue and green mountains bordered the lake and were cast in a hazy fog (from pollution or humidity, he wasn’t sure), as if the scene were a watercolor painting. Pink lotus flowers blossomed in a corner of the lake, while traditional stone arches formed pathways over drifting rowboats. The scene would have been perfect, if tourists weren’t milling around as thick as mosquitos in the summertime.

Unfortunately, his plan to take the scenic route had backfired. Annie wanted to take pictures of herself every few steps, and they had to wait for her turn under the willow trees or on the stone steps before she could pose in front of the beautiful landscape as her backdrop. He tried to take several pictures, even squatting to the floor to get a flattering upward view, but sometimes she would look at her phone and shake her head, and ask him to take another one. Yang didn’t understand why. He thought his daughter looked beautiful in all of them, but she insisted that these photos needed to be perfect for her “story.”

After two hours walking along a path that should have only taken them forty minutes, they were almost there. The sun was about to set, but his childhood home was only a ten minutes’ walk from the West Lake. He told Annie how he used to run around the lake everyday and study for his high school examinations while looking at the mountains afar.

“Really?” She looked almost wistful, and Yang grasped at his nostalgia, hoping that perhaps his memories of the West Lake would be the rope to connect them.

“Yes! There were far fewer people then. And it was much quieter. There weren’t even any cars, unless you were a high-ranking government official. Everybody rode bicycles.”

“Dad, you can barely jog for five minutes now, and you used to be able to run around this whole lake?”

She was already losing interest. Annie reached for her phone from her back pocket and swiped the screen, which glowed to life. Still, Yang persevered.

“Yes, I was a badminton champion! I was very fit, but…” he slowed his pace as they walked away from the West Lake onto the street where his old home used to stand, “that was… a long time ago.”

Suddenly, his steps weighed heavier and heavier, and he slowed his pace until he felt like a turtle. It was a long time ago, and Hangzhou had changed so much. The stores, the dumpling restaurant, the people, the language… Even though his family had moved to a more accessible neighborhood almost two decades ago, he still loved his childhood home in which he lived with his parents and siblings. For all these years, this apartment had existed as a place in his mind untouched by time. He could still taste the rice porridge in the mornings, or hear his father singing as he washed the dishes. He tutored his brother in English, and snuck sugar cubes onto his sister’s plate. His family had celebrated when he had been accepted into college in the United States, and his mother had steamed rice wine dessert the day before he left. Despite the poverty they lived in, his memories in this apartment were some of the most peaceful and loving memories of his life.

Now, as he walked towards his first address, a terrible idea had creeped into his thoughts. *What if… it wasn’t there?*

What if his apartment had been demolished and replaced by some newer residence or shopping mall? What if in its place was a hotel, filled with new tourists who were ignorant of this sacred location’s history and significance? He knew logically, his family could never return to that place, or to that time. But to see his childhood home disappear… It would be as painful as admitting that he could do nothing to piece together the fragments of his relationship with his father and mother. That hope of healing, as unreasonable as it sounded, was inexplicably tied to this apartment. He dreaded to see the truth.

Still, curiosity was stronger, and his eyes wandered to the right and scanned the buildings. He did not recognize them. Apartments towered over them, like huge oak trees in a forest, much taller then they had been before. One building was stamped again and again, all part of the same apartment complex with their huge glass windows and spacious balconies. It made sense, since the West Lake was such a great location, that only the wealthiest would live here. He should not have been surprised that the government seized most of this property after the Revolution.

“Where are we going? I thought the hotel was back at the lake.”

Yang stopped walking. As he looked forward, he could only see more apartment buildings, which melted into hotels and shopping malls a few blocks further. He was tempted to keep walking along this street until it ended, to make sure that his apartment wasn’t just a bit farther. But his daughter was already tired of walking, and he could never feel safe letting her go back alone.

His back curled forwards, and his arms hung weakly to the ground. Breathing was difficult, like he could only expand his lungs halfway and had to take twice as many breaths to get the same amount of oxygen. Slowly, he swiveled around towards the street, intending to begin the long and arduous trek back to the hotel, when he saw his apartment standing right before him!

There it was! Across the street! Like a small sapling, almost suffocated by the taller and more expensive buildings that competed for sunlight. His legs trembled. The apartment looked even more drab and antiquated compared to its luxurious neighbors. The walls were gray rather than light tan, and dark stains streamed down the building. Brightly-colored clothes and underwear dried on the bars above the windows for public display. Potted plants sprouted on the balconies’ floors, which were covered by plastic, green awnings that clashed with the gray. The number six was encased in a small blue sign at the front.

Yang inhaled sharply, and exhaled a shaky breath. His lungs scrunched together, tightening his chest. His eyes grew hotter, and he wiped the corners with his thumb, until he finally relented and took off his glasses, pressing the back of his forearm into his eyes.

“Dad!? What’s wrong?” Annie hovered to his right, her phone still in her hand but her face tilted upwards towards him. This was, he knew, the first time she had seen him cry.

He wiped the tears away and pointed at the old apartment.

“It’s still here! This is where your dad grew up—”

He choked towards the end of his sentence. It wasn’t even the same building, but it was enough. He had lived in building number seven, which had been right next door as a part of the same apartment complex. Passerby glanced at him as they walked past, but nobody stopped to ask why he was crying. To them, he must have looked like an old man weeping on the sidewalk, and their answer was to allow him his privacy.

A few moments later, his breathing was calm. He felt exhaustion, but his mind was more at ease than before.

“Let’s go back.”

He took a few steps towards the West Lake, then glanced behind him and saw that his daughter had not moved. She was staring at the old apartment. Then, she looked at him.

“Do you… want a picture?”

He retraced his steps. “A picture?”

Annie lifted her phone. “I can take a picture of you in front of that apartment, if you want.”

His heart squeezed. A digital picture… Even if the apartment would succumb to its inevitable death, Yang could have a permanent photo to always return to. He blinked rapidly and counted to twenty, until his breathing was steady again.

“Are my eyes red?”

“A little bit, but I can photoshop that.”

He nodded, then walked across the narrow street to stand in front of his old childhood home. He puffed his chest, crossed his arms, and leaned towards one foot. He was not smiling, but his posture betrayed his joy, paramount to when he first saw the building.

After he walked back, he asked timidly, “Can we take a picture together?”

She smiled and nodded, and they turned their backs towards the old apartment. Annie leaned close to her father and held her phone at arm’s length in front of them.

“Smile!”

This time, he was smiling.

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As they walked back to their hotel along the West Lake, father and daughter stumbled upon a crowd of people near a stone platform.

“What are they looking at?”

Annie hopped onto a bench and craned her neck downwards. A moment later, her father joined her.

In the center of the crowd, given some room apart from the others, was a man perhaps eighty years old. He wore a straw hat on his head, and his back was bent so that he was almost forty-five degrees to the ground. In his hand, he held what looked like a mop with a bamboo handle, but the wetted hairs at the end formed a large brush. He dipped the mop into a bucket of water beside him, then slowly traced characters from a traditional Chinese poem onto the stone tiles on the floor. His calligraphy was almost perfect.

“Why does he do that?” Annie already had her phone out and was recording.

“Practice. When I was young, there were also old grandpas who practiced writing like this.”

“But doesn’t the water evaporate? What’s the point?”

Yang knew the answer, but he knew she would not understand. At least, not yet. Already the old characters were starting to fade, transitioning to light water marks that faded quickly in the summer heat. Even as they were fading, he wished that there would always be an old grandpa at the West Lake to practice his calligraphy.