HOME IS THE WORLD

BY CHARMAINE POH

It's a curious thing to become an adult in a country other than the one you've grown up in. You find yourself scrambling around for some sense of home and belonging, as if it exists tangibly in the air between four walls, and that if you strain your eyes hard enough, you would be able to grasp it between your fingers.

But home, as you learn, changes as you do. Each year that you return to your city on the other side of the world, you notice how time has made its indelible mark on both you and your family. You notice the wrinkles on your father's face and how he's started to cough every morning. You notice that his pace has slowed, that his bones creak, and that when he tells you he's tired, you wonder if he just wants to sleep or if it's just too overwhelming. You notice how he forgets things more easily now, like your mother does. You wonder when you started to see them as people, too.

You realize that you are no longer a child, and that your home is no longer the one you were born into, but one that you need to create for yourself.

You recall that first plane ride from Singapore to Boston in the fall of 2009. Your hands tingled with excitement—yes, we were on the biggest adventure that your 19-year-old self could muster. I'm moving countries, you pondered, smiling at your accomplishment. In the first few days of fall, you Skype your friends constantly, squealing about every detail—the liberal arts curriculum, the dorm room and its brick walls, your Puerto Rican roommate—and in so doing cling onto a home that only exists through the mysterious portals of the World Wide Web. What you don't realize is how the multiple Skype conversations you envisioned gradually turn into a Skype occurrence once, maybe twice a year, the regularity of conversation diminishing with the passing of time.

The cold gets to your bones; you buy far too many jackets and wrap yourself in blankets constantly, whining, in response to friends who laugh, "I'm from a tropical climate!" Yet in the four years that follow you find yourself wedging in your consciousness the curious temporality of home in the form of Boston, landing spot of the pilgrims, people you've no personal association with other than childhood memories of Pocahontas, people that you soon learn have made indelible marks that go especially unappreciated during Thanksgiving.

Somewhere along the way you pick up a camera and figure out how to use it, its knobs and meters and buttons becoming familiar nodes under your fingers. It's with this camera that you discover the city's nooks and crannies—you find yourself in a refugee center in Worcester, then in a protest with Tibetans, then in that cramped apartment in Somerville, where a Nepalese girl with unruly hair and large brown eyes tells you her life story.

You make friends with these people who are living reminders of a world that extends beyond the confines of college life, people who have lived through war and persecution and moving countries, as you have done. They are the purveyors of the American Dream, which you had only heard about but never really understood, and now that you have it is much less American than it is universal—it is the dream of an elusive Something Better.

And now, in just under a couple of weeks, you'll find yourself walking up on stage in a bellowing black gown, about to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations, which sounds grander than it feels. You'll look back on all the classes you've taken and the papers you've churned out and you'll wonder why you don't feel prepared or very much educated at all. The supposedly famous commencement speaker will encourage you to do big things and follow your dreams. The student speaker will do likewise, but you will cheer, because it is probably someone you know. He or she will encourage you, as they encourage themselves, to believe that life has limitless possibilities, and that home is the world.

Home is the world only in bits and pieces, lodged in the contours of my mind, you think, as you pack your bags and sit in your bare apartment. In the last few weeks, you've given away most of your things to underclassmen in need of a desk chair or a space heater, to Buffalo Exchange in hopes of getting some dollars back for the expensive, impractical pair of boots you had regretfully bought online, to Goodwill for the rest of the lost causes. All that's left, the chosen few of your personal belongings, are your letters, books, and gifts from beloved friends. These are worth carrying over oceans to your new life, you say to yourself. You make sure to take along with you these little reminders of friendships because as with the island home that you left behind four years ago, you know that companionship will fade.

You learned once in your Media and Society class that the world is becoming smaller because of ingenious inventions like Skype, iMessage and Gmail. It was supposed to be different, you think, as your drag your luggage through the door and into the taxi that will take you to the airport that will take you to your new life in another hemisphere.

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