The cicadas lazily chirp under the haze of the summer sun. The air is still, as if the heat is choking everything in it alive. A buzzing silence fills up the void instead; my head rings with it.

Damn. China is way too hot.

It was family tradition to visit China—specifically, Beijing—every couple of years. We would eat local food, tour famous monuments, reunite with old faces. I would catch up with my grandpa, who still jokes about adopting me after finding me in a dumpster. And as a July baby, China would also be where I celebrated most of my birthdays in elementary school. China was fondness and nostalgia. As for this particular visit—well, as academics and extracurriculars consumed my life, something had to go. What left were the trips. I returned to China the summer after my senior year of high school after a decade away with dyed hair and Vans, an American accent, and a rapidly fading Chinese culture.

I stumble into the shade of my destination—a local dimsum store. Though it’s cooler here, my relief still cannot hide the overall shabbiness of the shop. It’s empty right now. No one comes this late in the morning, but at its peak hours, it is flooded with children grabbing a bite before school, businessmen late for work, and elderly coming back from grocery shopping. With wallpaper peeling off and a barely functioning fan in the back, it’s still hard to believe that this was my father’s favorite store growing up.

My father is strange. For one, there’s this store. For two, he’s a sports fanatic. He’s also an entire paradox: aloof yet emotional, smart yet silly, hardworking yet the laziest slob I know. I’ve also always looked like my father. Or at least, that’s what my relatives in China say. While
my visage isn’t exactly something I can control, and while I hate to admit this, we both share a love for a certain thing.

I look down. Meat buns—or baozi, as its Chinese name dictates—stare back at me.

Don’t get me wrong—my father and I love each other (hopefully). But who couldn’t love baozi? At home, every Saturday evening at 6:15 pm, my mother would put on a performance. With flour, water, pork, and a little bit of magic, she would breathe life into inanimacy. I envision my mother: her sleeves rolled up halfway, her bare hands dancing with the rolling pin, her apron crinkled from friction. She would knead. Her fingers would pirouette with meaning, pushing folds in here and there; it is familiar territory. Dropping them into a pot, she would glance quickly at the clock. 7:15. 7:20. 7:23. And as quick as she first dropped them, my mother would magically conjure out a plate of steaming, fluffy, juicy, yet scalding hot meat buns. And the taste—imagine a warm, tight hug in the shape of a bun. Biting into one always communicates home, my dad sometimes said.

I soon learned when I was younger that I had no talent for the art of meat bun making. My fingers just weren’t perceptive. The dough would flop around, limp; if I didn’t put enough flour, then I didn’t put enough water. My mother would scold me for wasting materials, and I would sullenly retreat to my father, who would wipe away my tears and tell me his stories. How he once failed an English test and hid from home for three days. How he once fought the neighbor who made fun of his sister. How he once dreamed of being a soccer player before permanently injuring his shins. And how he missed home so terribly when he first moved to America that my mother tracked down the meat bun shop he so loved and demanded for the recipe from the owner, who probably gave it out of surprise that a woman standing at 5’3” could
command so much intensity. My father usually finished this story with a chuckle—despite the
tasteless blobs!

The store owner sits up from his blue plastic stool. Sweat gleams from his bald head. One
leg of the stool creaks back and forth. It is broken. He shoots a glance at me as the hum of the
defeated fan almost drowns out my mumble in broken Chinese.

“四个生煎包，四个素包.” Four fried meat buns, four vegetable ones.

His eyes squint at my face. I know what he’s thinking. After all, since my first visit to
China at the age of five, I’ve been convinced that Chinese people are psychic. I don’t belong. All
it takes is one look to recognize an alien. I may look as Chinese as my father, but everyone
somehow knew that I was a fake in every way, shape, and form.

But I’m wrong this time.

“Is your father home?”

What? It’s evident that I’m a bit taken back. He repeats.

“Is your father home?”

I gape at him. He turns away to fiddle with a pan. Perhaps he thought I didn’t know
another ounce of Chinese, or perhaps he didn’t want to bother with old memories anymore.

It’s not that I didn’t understand the question. Yes, my father is home. He is home in
California; he is home in China. The shop owner’s question asked for the latter, but nowhere in
the rulebooks does it say that home is one location. I was born in Singapore. I grew up in
California. I have roots in China. I moved to Dartmouth. The ambiguity of the term “home”
leaves me no choice but rely on indications of home. Maybe that’s why meat buns are so
important to the two of us—not because of their taste, but because they evoke what it means to
find family in a land of strangers. Family is jokes about adopting grandchildren from the
dumpster. Family is waking up early to run down to a favorite local store for breakfast. Family is Saturday dinners because life is not forgiving and at the end of the day, even if you’re stranded, an entire Pacific Ocean away from everyone and everything you identify with, you can always find a tiny home away from home.

There’s a loud clatter. I turn around. The shop owner yells something, and it is only then that I realize his stool fell over. He’s fine. We look at each other.

“It’s been 30 years,” he finally says. “You look like him, you know. He was here that day in ’89.”

That same thought—what? Except this time, I feel like I know what he’s talking about, yet at the same time, I don’t. My curiosity gets the better of me, and I invite myself back into his shop. He hands me another meat bun—on the house, he says—before leaning against the wall. He clears his throat before beginning.

It’s morning. The sun beams faintly from behind the mask of clouds, yet the streets are already bustling with noise and people. The pattering of feet—it’s a customer. My father drops by the shop as per his usual ritual. He’s abnormally skinny for his twenties, making his clothes look extra baggy on his frame. It also seems like he hasn’t slept in ages. His eyebags stick out, his face is gaunt, but when asked about it, he dismisses it as staying up late for schoolwork. He doesn’t even have to say his usual order—two pan-fried baotzi—before the owner winks and dumps them in a bag for him. A hasty thanks later, my father is outside again. He eats the meat buns mindlessly. His friend pulls him along, and they chatter about future hopes: post-graduation plans, job offers, girls. After all, to two smart, ambitious, and daring young men, is the sky even the limit?
Growing up around the area, both know the road all too well. Continue straight, take two lefts, and finish with a right turn. The air around Tiananmen Square isn’t still, but it isn’t exactly alive either. He sees his tablemate standing a short five meters ahead. They wave. His friend dashes forward to join, but his own feet drag against the ground. It’s all a grand idea, and he supports it, yet he’s also heard the whispers going around in the streets. His mother begged him to stay home; his sister, though also in Beijing, chose to not attend; his fiancée tried to talk him out of it. There’s a faint rumbling in the distance. He stops. Something feels off. No—something is definitely wrong. Before he knows it, the distant chatter breaks into screams; there’s a rumble, almost as if someone was trying to tear the walls of the world down, and why, why does it taste like a bittersweet mix of sweat, blood, tears, agony, failure? There’s dust. He squints to see clearly. Nothing is there and everything is there.

At least, that’s what I imagine. I wouldn’t know. The shop owner only told me how my father looked like that day. It is sad that I know more about June 4, 1989 from the Internet than from my own father. BBC reported that the death toll seemed to be at least 10,000.1 The Secretary of State said it was between 180 to 500.2 No one knows what happened to the Tiananmen tank man. It is a marked day shrouded with mystery. A forbidden silence follows its victims. Outsiders do not really know the truth, but the truth no longer matters. Sometimes, leaving things to our imaginations defends us from what horrors actually happened. What I do know is that after holing up inside his room for the next three days, my dad announced to his family after clearing the dishes for dinner that he would be leaving the country after his college graduation. My dad, who graduated top of one of the highest-ranking universities in China, started packing his belongings to abandon the very country that nurtured his childhood and

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1 Tiananmen Square Protest Death Toll 'was 10,000', (BBC News, December 2017).
education. My dad, who failed every single foreign language class in school, departed three months later to Singapore with the clothes he had on his back and less than $50 under his name to build his future with his own two hands. My dad, whose silence is a memento, is the man I am most proud of. Not because he suffered through too much alone, but because despite of that, he still never forgot to tuck me into bed when I was eight and scared of the dark. He still always showed up to every single one of my school plays, piano recitals, orchestra concerts, dance showcases, and badminton tournaments. He still cooked my favorite dishes for dinner when he knew I had a bad day at school. He still never complained about driving me all over the place before I got my driver’s license, even if it required more effort on his end. He still always brings freshly picked flowers from his garden for my mom on her birthday, because he still sees her as the most beautiful woman in his life. He still always wraps me in the biggest, tightest bear hug whenever I go home, reminding me that even if I’m over 3,000 miles away from him, he is always next to me. I am the future he built.

He was one of the 1.6 million Chinese who left after June 4, 1989. One of the ones who got away. And he never went back.

Maybe my father will one day tell me everything; maybe he won’t. It doesn’t matter. I take one more bite of the baozi. Its all-too-familiar taste encourages me. I open my mouth, smiling slightly.

“He’s home.”


