



Frisbee

Jeric Chen

Blue jacket, black trousers, the person in the photo is my father, standing in front of the house he lived in when he first moved to Maryland.

I've never lived in that house because he moved in way before I was born, even before my mother followed him to the States. The only things I know about it are from the recounts of my father. He told me how the house had only one floor and a basement, how barely anything stood around it except for grass and trees, and how the rest of the houses along the road were built in a similar manner: brick walls, wooden roofs, stairs up to the front porch and a path from the house to the sidewalk that ran down the main road.

"Did you live there alone?" I asked him.

"It does seem so, doesn't it, from the photo," He replied. "But no, I lived with seven other people."

"Seven?"

“Six or seven, I can’t remember.”

He told me that they were all PhD students, just like him, and that the house was close to where they had studied at, the University of Maryland.

“It was just a few blocks away, a biking distance of ten to fifteen minutes. I couldn’t afford a car, so that saved a lot of money.”

I can’t imagine what it was like for seven people to live in a house with two bedrooms. I was born into a comfortable home, a home my father had fought hard to obtain. Many things I take for granted my father didn’t have, like the way he would worry about money, the way he would count to the very last penny for necessities like groceries.

I don’t know much about my father’s upbringing, but I know it was harsh. My grandparents lived in the rural parts of China, but they had no land to farm, so my grandpa made a living selling pastry and buns. He earned little to support a large family, but enough to send his children off to school.

“That’s why you learn.” My father would often tell me and my brother. “I saw learning as the only way out, the only way to lead a better life.”

My aunts and uncles did not go abroad to study, neither did they persist to such a degree. My grandparents did not support him; they had no money to do so, so he relied on himself, step by step, slowly. He told me once he tried reciting the dictionary to overcome the language barrier. Soon after, my mother would quit her job and join my father in the States. What seems like an experience to us now was a challenge for them before. I’ve always admired their courage; perhaps it was the better life my father had envisioned, and the better future he saw for his children that propelled him forward.

“One last question, what were you going to do, with that plate and that bottle of juice in your hands?”

My father laughed.

“Is that a plate? Try again.”

I stared at the photo and squinted my eyes, but I could not think of anything else.

“You are not the only one. Everyone else who has seen this photo saw it as a plate. It’s actually a frisbee.”

That’s when I saw what my father saw on the day the photo was taken, the smile on his face, the happiness he could find out of things as small as throwing a frisbee in such difficult times.