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My Short American Decade

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MY SHORT AMERICAN DECADE

On freshman move-in day, as I unpacked my stuff, I played a Jay Chou CD on my new roommate's Dreamcast, Taiwanese pop riffs spilling out the open common room windows of our suite towards the Old Campus green. I heard someone say Christopher Reeve was outside, here to see his daughter off, but I can't remember if I saw or just imagined looking out and seeing the back of a wheelchair in the Bingham courtyard. This is the oldest part of campus, the site where in 1718 the Collegiate School became Yale College after a Welshman from Boston and onetime governor of Madras donated four hundred and seventeen books and some spare goods that sold for eight hundred pounds sterling. There is also a statue here of Nathan Hale, class of 1773, hanged by the British for espionage two months after the Declaration of Independence, but not before uttering the words that wrap around the base of the statue. "I only regret," he said on the gallows, "that I have but one life to lose for my country." The execution took place in Manhattan at what is today the intersection of 66th and Third, where you can now buy some Gap jeans on one corner and then pick up a Starbucks macchiato on another.

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My roommate on the bottom bunk was six-foot-two, 260 pounds; he was from nearby New Britain and eventually became a starting defensive lineman. His AOL handle was DaRuffRyder, but Willie was, as giants are, gentle, something he seemed to have inherited from his generous, if smaller, parents, who were originally from Puerto Rico. We shared the suite with two normal-sized guys in the other room: Matt, white and blond from Oakland, and Lee, from Portland, the son of Vietnamese refugees. They all came with their parents and siblings and things, suitcases, laundry hampers, lamps, fridges. Willie brought a nineteen-inch TV, on which I watched *The West Wing* every Wednesday night. Matt brought an old Nintendo system, which he used to dominate us at Tecmo Bowl. Lee brought a rice cooker, which I was thankful for. I brought my checked baggage allowance.

I remember my mother waving from underneath the vaulted arch at Phelps Gate the morning we said good-bye, not really thinking about what she must have been thinking, dropping her youngest child off on the other side of the world for four years. She had made a similar trip thirty-five years before, leaving Indonesia to study in Australia. She never went back.

Sometime around the year 2040, the United States will become what my freshman suite was on September 1, 2001: majority minority, with a large Hispanic presence. I made up the foreign-born population.

In an attic in Michigan, or Colorado, or wherever my friend Paul's parents now store their family artifacts, there is dust collecting on a VHS cassette labeled "Talent Show, 1992." Paul was my best friend that year and for many other years, a stocky, cheeky, little blond boy born in Fayetteville, Arkansas, not long before his teacher parents found jobs in Hong Kong, where we met.

We were nine years old in 1992, which began with Michael Jackson's "Black or White" as the number one single in the United States, where Paul was born, and in Australia, where I was born. It was also number one in the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. And also in Cuba, Mexico, and Zimbabwe. "Black or White" was the eighth track on *Dangerous*, the first CD I ever bought. We didn't have MTV yet, so to see the music video everyone was talking about, I had to get lucky and hope our local Hong Kong channels chose it as the one music video they would show each day, the one with Macaulay Culkin and Slash and the crazy cool ending where an Asian guy morphs into a black girl morphs into a redheaded white girl into a black guy with dreads into an Indian woman into black guy into Asian woman into white guy into Asian girl with ponytail into Hispanic guy with moustache into blond white guy into blonde white girl into black girl and then ends by panning out behind the scenes and seeing the director say, "That was perfect."

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It was perfect; the morphing technology was dazzling, a Final Cut Pro trick seven years before there was Final Cut Pro. And the message couldn't have been better suited for teachers trying to impart to their third-graders that in our Benetton world, Michael says, if you're thinking about being my baby (or my brother), it don't matter if you're black or white. Maybe it didn't need to be said in the days of Rodney King and the L.A. riots, but to some nine-year-olds in an American school in Hong Kong, this was pretty cool. It was good for us *and* it was cool.

And so Paul and I and four other friends—Thomas and Michael, a pair of blond American twins, Andy, a big Argentinean fellow, and Kevin, who was also Chinese-Australian—signed up for the talent show. We memorized the words, rehearsed a dance, put on some black pants and a white button-down

shirt whose ends we tied in a knot, and with Paul's dad taping, in front of the whole grade, we did a full-on lip-synch of "Black and White." I still remember the lyrics, though maybe not the dance. If someone ever finds the tape, up in that attic somewhere in Michigan or Colorado, I will be embarrassed for all the reasons one might imagine, and then one more. We couldn't replicate the video's morphing technology live at the talent show, so one of our parents must have come up with what they thought was the next best thing: paint one side of our faces black and then turn our heads side to side to the music.

I was nine years old, and I was in blackface.

Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, is arguably the most infamous case in all of American jurisprudence. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld a Louisiana law that required railway companies "to provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races." Separate but equal as a legal practice—as a *required* practice—would haunt America for at least the next sixty years, if it doesn't still today. But there was one bright spot: Justice John Marshall Harlan, the reason *Plessy* was not a unanimous decision, wrote a dissent that has in many ways supplanted the Court's actual opinion as the law of the land.

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"Our Constitution is color-blind," Justice Harlan declared, "and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color."

There is a less-cited passage from Justice Harlan's dissent, a few paragraphs down, and it reminds me of the exercise in which one draws a black dot in the middle of a blank piece of white paper and asks an observer what she sees. The observer invariably answers that she sees the black dot, and the moral of the story is that she failed to see the whiteness that covers the vast majority of the paper. If the Constitution is, as Justice Harlan proclaimed, color-blind, if at least he made no distinction between the white men who wrote it and the black ink it is written in, it seems to me that he nevertheless failed to notice the yellow parchment it is written *on*.

Because, as Justice Harlan pointed out, "There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely

excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race. But, by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race in Louisiana, many of whom, perhaps, risked their lives for the preservation of the Union, who are entitled, by law, to participate in the political control of the State and nation, who are not excluded, by law or by reason of their race, from public stations of any kind, and who have all the legal rights that belong to white citizens, are yet declared to be criminals, liable to imprisonment, if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race.”

The implication is clear: that persons belonging to the Chinese race, Chinamen, would not risk their lives for the preservation of the Union. That they should not be entitled, by law, to participate in the political control of the State and nation. That they should be excluded, by law or by reason of their race, from public stations. And that they, these strange persons belonging to the Chinese race, should not have all the legal rights that belong to white citizens.

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My passport has a kangaroo on the cover.

I have lied many times about where I’m from. It’s easier. I have never come up with a stock introduction that covers all my bases, explains why I was born one place and grew up in several others, look one way and sound another. People generally don’t expect much more from “Where are you from?” than we do from “How are you?” We accept it as a way to get things started, as easily forgettable as someone’s name or how they were doing, if there was even an answer to that. We don’t expect, nor do we really want, to run through the itinerary of someone’s life in the first sixty seconds we meet them. I don’t even usually want it to last sixty seconds. And so I lie, what you might call a white lie, offering whatever somewhat factual answer will most quickly move or end the conversation. Depending on the context, I can be from Australia, Hong Kong, or Taiwan; California, New York, or DC. I do it so much that sometimes I don’t realize I’m meeting the same person again but telling them I’m from a different place. Though they don’t seem to mind. Or care.

In any Asian-American discourse, at some point, usually early on, someone will raise the “Where are you *really* from?” question. And the fallout from it. There may be no simpler way to encapsulate the Asian-American experience, and the struggle, than by saying those five words with an unmistak-

ably inquisitive inflection. Here, someone is being both genuinely interested, willing to go beyond the superficial formalities, and yet stuck hovering at skin depth, the loaded (and yet unavoidably correct!) assumption that you must be from somewhere else, somewhere down the line. White people sometimes don't understand why this question provokes anything other than a compliant response; "I'm just curious," they'll say, and often it's true, but sometimes, sometimes they're more than just curious.

"Where are you *really* from?" was what the United States government was really asking, when it relocated Americans of Japanese descent to internment camps during the Second World War, even as the all Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team of the 92nd Infantry Division of the United States Army became the most decorated unit in American military history. Halfway through my first semester of law school, my Constitutional Law professor told me he thought *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214, which upheld the internment, was maybe the second-worst decision ever made by the Supreme Court. Justice Frank Murphy was one of three Justices who voted against what he called "this legalization of racism." More than he could have known, Justice Murphy came up in his dissent with the answer we would give if only we had the time and an understanding audience.

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"Where are you *really* from?" someone asks. Some Asian-Americans will tell you to respond by asking, "Where are *you* really from?"

But the Asian-American in Frank Murphy, an Irishman, would respond another way. "All residents of this nation are kin in some way by blood or culture to a foreign land," Justice Murphy would say, as he did in his dissent. "Yet they are primarily and necessarily a part of the new and distinct civilization of the United States."

"And they must," he would go on, "be treated at all times as the heirs of the American experiment, and as entitled to all the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution."

This, and the Japanese-American internment, and the forgotten part of Justice Harlan's dissent in *Plessy*, these are why there was one time at a gas station somewhere on the East Coast when I lied about where I was from not to end the conversation but to make a point. It was probably unnecessary, because the guy asking me was an immigrant himself, an older South Asian man at the cashier wearing a turban, and I was probably more defensive than I was polite. He asked, "From China?"

"No," I said. "From here."

One night during that first semester of law school at Georgetown, I put my Constitutional Law casebook in my backpack and walked to the Lincoln Memorial, where I thought I might be inspired on the steps facing out towards the Washington Monument and the Capitol to concentrate harder on what can be exceedingly dry material. Running the three miles from my apartment past the White House and to Lincoln would become a favorite nighttime activity of mine, especially once you hit Constitution and start bearing right, towards the Reflecting Pool. That last third of a mile, running alongside the still water, Lincoln's lanky frame coming slightly more into view with every step, is fraught with the dilemma of wanting to run slower so it doesn't end or faster to end with a flourish, to bound up the stairs and catch your breath in front of this great man.

But on that night I walked there with my homework, it started to rain, so I couldn't sit on the steps and read. I tried to get through maybe one full case while leaning on a column in the shadow of the Second Inaugural, but the pages of my casebook were already damp, clinging together as I tried to turn them, and I could more easily resist the words in the book I was reading than those on the wall I was facing: "Fondly do we hope—ferverently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." I have always wondered if he was trying to rhyme.

Since I couldn't study, I just kept walking that night, past the Korean War memorial, whose embossed silhouettes of soldiers are terrifyingly beautiful in the dark and in the rain, and then around the Tidal Basin, all the way to the Jefferson Memorial. There was a security guard talking on the phone with his girlfriend, unlimited nights and weekends, and there was Thomas Jefferson, and there was me. That was it. All it takes is a late hour and a little rain, and suddenly America's front yard can become your own; the humblest can be the peer of the most powerful. We hold these truths to be self-evident.

Constitutional Law was the only class I got an A in during my first semester of law school. Maybe in that downpour of a night in which I walked the monuments, as the rain bled through my backpack and into my casebook, maybe a little bit of Jefferson and Lincoln seeped into me, and the writing on their walls, and the decisions of justice, the ones that have tried to craft a more perfect, but ever imperfect, union.

At the liquor store on the corner of Corcoran and 17th, Northwest DC:

Guy at the counter when I bring up a bottle of champagne is a middle-aged Ghanaian man. Asks if I need a bag.

“Yes please.”

He tells the guy next to him that I must be English, saying yes please and all, or maybe Canadian. This guy next to him seems like a DC local, sounds like a DC local, especially when he looks at me and hmphs back, unimpressed, “He’s probably from Southeast.”

Ghanaian Man, like he had it in a holster: “Southeast Asia.”

I’m just standing there, getting out my wallet and getting my money out of my wallet, sort of stunned (1) that DC Local awesomely just doesn’t do stereotypes, going more with common sense, no reason why the Asian kid isn’t also DC Local. And sort of stunned (2) that Ghanaian Man, without me saying anything more than yes please, has pegged me in close to exactly the right hole: from the Commonwealth *and* from Southeast Asia.

I finally speak up when Ghanaian Man decides to settle it and asks me straight up where I’m from, my favorite question of all time. So in return for him being completely on point for me, I abandon my usual stereotype-dispelling lie and instead dispense with the truth.

“Hong Kong.”

And Ghanaian Man smirks and says to DC Local I told you so without telling him so. Then he eyes the Chinese Taipei flag on my baseball cap with the Olympic rings and says, “Yeah, you were out there for the Olympics, weren’t you?” DC Local rolls his eyes, apologizing to me without words, minority telepathy that says, sorry for my F.O.B. friend who thinks all one billion Chinese people went to the Olympics just because they were in China. Again I want to reward DC Local for his awesomeness, but again, the truth is out there.

“Yeah, I actually was at the Olympics.”

Ghanaian Man is beaming. DC Local is quiet. Except, “‘Bout time he got something right.”

Ghanaian Man asks me where I was born, and when I say Australia he just laps it up like he had me at yes please. But DC Local gets the last word, at least in my book, because when I explain that I lived in Hong Kong most of my life, he asks if I was there for the handover.

And I’m like, yeah, I was.

And he’s like, yeah ‘coz that was pretty cool.

And I’m like, yeah, it was.

And that's like, the most informed conversation about where I'm from that I've ever had through four years in the District of Columbia, capital city of the United States of America.

There was another liquor store across the street. Glad I picked this one.

On my business card, under the name of my law firm, it says, "American Lawyers" in small caps, and I am indeed one such kind of lawyer, and no other such kind. Though I have never lived in New York, I am licensed to practice law by and only by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, not by any other jurisdiction where I have actually lived and under whose laws I have actually been governed, not the District of Columbia, not Connecticut, not Hong Kong, where I actually practice, nor Taiwan or New South Wales.

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I have only ever appeared in court twice. Once was in the Small Claims and Conciliation Branch of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, where I sued a sports apparel chain for not keeping an eye on my brand-new MacBook as it was stolen from amongst the bags checked at the front of the store. When, before the judge, the store representative questioned why I hadn't noticed that my bag was significantly lighter when I left the store, implying there was no computer in there to begin with, I reminded the judge that I was a law student, and that casebooks are very, very heavy. In fact, I told her, I have some in my bag right now, just as I did that day, and when I pulled them out, all the judge could do was say, "I remember those," and then order the store to pay me the cost of my MacBook.

The other time I appeared in court, the only other time I've said, "Your Honor," was at a Department of Justice Immigration Court in Baltimore, representing an asylum seeker through a legal clinic at my law school. We tried to convince the immigration judge that our client would be persecuted if she returned to her home country, offering not only her oral testimony but also six hundred pages of documentary evidence that the government lawyer seeking her deportation referred to as "the book."

I was the only student in our clinic who wasn't himself an American citizen. In all my years on my F-1 student visa, I was never in any serious risk of deportation, had never committed an immigration violation, but the hassles alone—FedExing visa documents back and forth around the world, always needing to remember to get my Form I-20 signed each year by the university and to bring its weathered pages with me (in my carry-on, can't be checked-

in) to show the CBP officer at the airport, and the five or six times the officer sent me to the back room to double-check who knows what—all these made it hard to forget that this was not home, that it was my great privilege to be in the United States, and that I, like my client, was there at the discretion of whichever immigration official found my case file piled on top of her desk.

And so, while I never faced any imminent threat of being removed from the United States—or being persecuted if I went home—I sometimes wondered what it would be like if I were the one in immigration court, if after all the jokes my friends made about me getting deported, after year after year of losing the Green Card lottery, if somehow I found myself in removal proceedings before an immigration judge, if it came to that, what would she do with me? How would she deal with my accent, so Californian you can hear the sunshine and beaches? How would she react when I say I remember threading red, white, and blue string through the punched holes of my fourth-grade report on Paul Revere and the American Revolution, how I tore and burned the edges to make it look more like that yellow parchment of the Constitution? Where on the merits would I stand after telling her how my mother at her left-wing Chinese high school in Indonesia celebrated JFK's assassination, but I spent a freezing January night in 2008 sleeping on the floor of the gym at the Columbia YMCA so that I could get up at dawn and knock on the doors of perfect strangers and remind them to vote in the South Carolina primary, how the one reason more than any other that I want to be an American citizen is so that I can have the chance to serve at the pleasure of the President?

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America is losing citizens. A friend's father who has lived in Asia for decades recently switched his citizenship from American to Chinese, and perhaps he did it mainly for tax reasons, but you can't tell me that there isn't something else afoot when a man who grew up on the streets of Manhattan, who received multiple Ivy League degrees, and who once served in government—in the American government—would rather be Chinese than American. This is something deeper than the tax code. America is losing its citizens, and she doesn't want new ones like me? Or like my client, whose story is more American than I could ever know how to tell, who risked her and her children's lives to bring them somewhere they could go to school and work hard and be safe?

But that is her story, not mine, and in any case, I'm not of, not with, not at liberty to tell it.

I have an apology to make. Willie, my freshman roommate from New Britain, Connecticut, was a huge UConn fan. He introduced me to college basketball and to one player in particular, Emeka Okafor, the undersized center who led the Huskies to the NCAA Championship in 2004. Okafor has since had a mediocre career in the NBA, but in college, he dominated the paint like few ever have. I remember watching one game where the opposing team simply stopped driving to the basket because Okafor was literally blocking every other shot. He graduated as the school's all-time leader in blocks, with honors, and also one year early. I graduated without honors and no years early.

But during his freshman year, which was also my freshman year, Okafor was still struggling to adjust to Big East basketball. He was obviously talented, but somewhat inconsistent. Willie kept barking at me about how good Okafor was going to be ("Okafor be roastin'!") and how much more exciting college basketball was than the NBA. This was and still is a sore point for me, and I think for most basketball fans who grew up outside America and could only ever catch NBA games on TV, sometimes only tape-delayed, sometimes only once a week. Even when they were broadcast live, we had to wake up painfully early in the morning to watch them, and until the twenty-first century could only ever listen to the play-by-play in Chinese.

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Out of this long-distance love affair with the NBA, and to shut Willie up, I wrote a column for the *Yale Daily News* in January 2002 arguing that college basketball has nothing on the NBA. "There is no brighter stage on which basketball is played than on the hardwood of NBA arenas," I wrote, "and Emeka Okafor would get sent back across the Atlantic before he ever managed to reject even a Muggsy Bogues shot."

There was a massacre that night in our suite. Willie, Matt, and even Lee—especially Lee, who became my Asian partner in crime and best friend in college—picked on me mercilessly for hours, reading that line aloud and cracking up over and over again. After a semester of constantly pulling out the race card on all things Asian, I had essentially told Emeka Okafor to go back to Africa. Emeka Okafor, who was born in Houston and grew up in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. The only time they made more fun of me was when I brought home a carton of half-and-half because I thought it was 0.5% fat milk.

Years ago, I compiled all the e-mail addresses I could find for the Charlotte Bobcats, who selected Okafor with the second pick in the 2004 draft a couple months before he represented the United States at the Athens Olympics. I

began writing an apology, Dear Mr. Okafor, but I never sent it, never even finished.

I like to think that one day I will somehow meet Emeka Okafor, and I will be able to apologize to him in person. I will say to him that I'm so very sorry for assuming anything about him, for assuming he wasn't going to be a star when he became college basketball's biggest star, and for assuming he was anything less than completely, utterly American. I will say, Mr. Okafor, my own parents immigrated to Australia in the 1960s and would have heard the same taunts to go back to Indonesia and Hong Kong, and would be ashamed that I could even come close to saying the same kind of thing to you. I will tell him that I feel so strongly about this now that I even lie to people about where I'm from, because in my assumed Asian-Americanness, I need to be able to belong; because I think it's important we all help dismantle these assumptions we have about people, and places; because we all have to try harder and stop making lazy, easy decisions about who our friends are, and who our enemies are.

“Your country is on fire.”

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These were the words I woke to that Tuesday morning. My girlfriend at the time called me from Montreal, where she went to school, to tell me this. She didn't say much except to tell me to turn on the TV and then call her back. I turned on the TV. I forgot to call her back.

The first thing I saw was the second plane going into the South Tower.

We were one of the few suites in the hallway to already have a TV set up, and we were on the ground floor, so a swell of other freshmen started taking a seat or just stood in our common room, watching. I remember seeing from our windows one girl running frantically past and speaking loudly enough on her cell phone for us to know that she had someone, a parent or sibling, who could have been down there. It was the same spot where, ten days before, I thought I had seen Superman in a wheelchair.

In the days and weeks after September 11, in the common room of my freshman suite, I could not pull myself away from the TV and the stories of survivors and the bereaved, and those still searching. There was something compelling about the heartbreak, something vulnerable about this country I had thought I knew and yet just started to know, the same way you don't want to pull away from a conversation with someone who has just or finally opened up to you, who has just or finally revealed what it is that makes them

hurt; their hopes and, yes, their fears. Maybe in the eleven years since, as I've come closer to learning about grief and loss, and maybe in the years ahead, as I am sure to learn more, maybe the names and the stories affect me more, reach deeper into my soul and squeeze tighter. There is so much to say, big ideas about war and peace, about government and religion, about human rights and civil liberties, about how we interact, how we respond to crises, and how we, as people and as nations, deal with loss. How we grieve. There is so much to say, and yet I don't know what, or how.

I saw my first NBA game in New York. After a decade of tape-delayed replays or early morning live broadcasts or surreptitiously, furiously refreshing ESPN's first-generation website on the computer in my AP Calculus classroom, after visiting the States for years but only ever in the summer, I set my alarm for five minutes before ticketmaster.com went live for the Knicks' 2001–2002 season, climbed down over Willie's bottom bunk, and refreshed and refreshed until I was able to buy my ticket for opening night at Madison Square Garden.

132 Knicks-Wizards in New York, October 30, 2001, was the fiftieth day after. The start of the NBA season was another one of those things that was supposed to bring us closer to that elusive return to normalcy, another routine reemerging from a time fifty-one days in the past. Even Michael Jordan, restless after three years of retirement, was back in baggy shorts and sneakers.

But there was, of course, nothing routine about that night. Spike Lee auctioned off one of his courtside seats for over \$100,000 to be donated to the families of lost firemen, and the seat itself was then donated to one of the lost firemen's children. Bill Clinton welcomed the crowd back to Madison Square Garden. At nearly the very same moment, up in the Bronx, George W. Bush was throwing out the first pitch of game three of the World Series. And when the crowd rose to face the flag hanging in the rafters, I got infected with chills for the Star Spangled Banner that I have never been able to shake. Now, whenever I attend a professional sports event in America, especially a baseball game, where the flag flutters in the open summer sky and you might be looking out past the right field fence at the sun setting over the San Francisco Bay or the Potomac River, I cannot help but be moved as thousands of people stand together and mouth the words to the only national anthem I know by heart.

October 30, 2001, was a Tuesday; I must have had class, but even after the two-hour Metro-North ride down from New Haven, I somehow still managed to arrive in New York a few hours before tip-off. I remember because I went straight from Grand Central down to maybe Wall Street, if the 4-5 subway stop there was even operating. Up in Grand Central, the flyers of missing loved ones were wallpapered over every square inch of space Scotch tape would stick. Downtown, they lined whole streets, expanding, growing not only on walls but on poles, chain-link fences, streetlamps, and handrails, plastered all over the long stretches of tarp that draped over the scaffolding, curtains for the dead that onlookers like me tried to peek through to catch with our own eyes the rubble, the ruins, the remains we had already seen over and over again on TV.

The thing I remember most about those couple hours was the smell, which left a metallic taste in my mouth, though maybe because everything was so gray. I remember feeling like I was stuck inside a dusty room, like I couldn't take one clean, full breath even though I was outside, and not just outside, but outside where there was now a huge hole in the sky. How can you say it was anything but apocalyptic? There were only a couple stores on the street that were open, T-Mobile and a Burger King, and their usually fluorescent signage was dulled by layers of dust and ash. Everything looked underexposed, and faded. And gray.

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Not at all on purpose have I often found myself in New York on subsequent September 11ths. When I am, I try to make my way downtown, where there will be family members reading names, and flowers, and flags. It is still impossible. It is like one of those distortions of reality in a dream, a face or item that has no business being in your life, even your imagined life, but it never goes away, and the next morning in the shower it comes back to you and you realize you must have been dreaming. As if my entire time in America, from when I met my college roommates and they laughed about my Okafor gaffe, and about the half-and-half, until the day I graduated from law school months after watching a black man move into the White House, as if all of that, my short American decade, was some kind of alternate reality, as if I grew up thinking I would step into one wardrobe but then upon stepping out realized it had been another.

A couple weeks before I left America two and a half years ago, on a tepid, early summer night, I visited the Pentagon Memorial for the first time.

There are 184 benches laid out in opposite directions, each hovering over a small pool of water. The benches that face the Pentagon are for the people who were in the building, so that when you read their names, you see the Pentagon in the background. The benches facing the other way remember those who were in the plane. They face the sky.

The benches are arranged in rows representing years of birth. The first row represents 1998. It has one bench; Dana Falkenberg was three. When you look at Dana's bench, you see the sky, and inscribed inside the pool below, you see the names of her family members, the ones we also lost. Her parents were taking her and her older sister Zoe to Australia that day. Their mother, a Georgetown professor, was going to be a visiting fellow. To get to Australia from Washington, you have to fly from Dulles to LAX first. And you have to do this on American, so that you can connect in Los Angeles to the Qantas flight that will take you to Sydney or Melbourne or Canberra, which is where Dana was going.

I know this route. This was my route. That September morning, the Falkenbergs were flying from Dulles to LAX on American Airlines flight 77. Thirteen days after visiting the Pentagon Memorial, and nine years after I first arrived in America and moved into my dorm room, I flew from Dulles to LAX on American Airlines flight 75, before catching the Qantas connection to Sydney. Twice a year, every year, for nine years, I flew from Washington to Sydney or, before my parents retired, from New York to Hong Kong, on flights that are the reason the route maps in the back of the airline magazine have extra fold-out pages. People complain about these flights, about the insomnia during and the jet-lagged stupor that comes after, about running out of things to read or watch and twenty hours of breathing recycled air. But it also frees you; you are incapacitated for a whole day and it frees you, from e-mails to reply to, or papers to write, from phone calls to make and errands to run, from the clutter. I get to just sit there, staring out at the Earth as it makes an almost complete revolution on its axis, and whether I am flying with it or against it, I am always flying over it, a speck of humanity floating between the starlight and the city lights.

And maybe there is something else at work here. Maybe on a plane, or anywhere between countries and places, coming from places and going to places, maybe that's where some of us come to rest. It can be no-man's-land or it can be this man's land, not really ever a part of anywhere, and yet it lets you go everywhere.

I may never go back to America, not for real, not to learn and grow. The America I knew is already in the past; another election has come and gone, another generation, Zoe and Dana Falkenberg's, has moved into their dorm rooms.

I may never go back, but wherever I land, I know I will always feel as if I never left. I take America with me. I take her comforts—the language and the music, sports heroes, my friends—and I take her ideas, the persistence at perfection, the persistent imperfection. Maybe we don't have to always touch down in the same place to feel grounded; maybe home is as much your place of origin as your destination.