

Masks

By: CARA LIU

This year, the Chinese New Year celebration was a huge gathering of family, friends, friends of friends, and people that we had met only hours before all assembled in, yes, our house. It was probably the biggest New Year gathering since we came to the States. Everyone whom I cared about, whose opinions mattered to me, was there. To make the evening more enjoyable for the guests, we decided to put on a couple of performances. Never one to refuse the spotlight, I volunteered to be on the program. Each performance received warm applause from the audience, even if the performers sang off tune or forgot their lines. Eventually, the last one on the list was up, and that was me.

This is it, I thought. Don't mess up now.

Adrenaline rushed through my blood as I changed into the costume for my Pavarotti parody of "O Sole Mio." I was going to be Pavarotti—the big, bearded opera singer with a rich tenor. I was going to dress in a suit, wear a paper mustache, and lower my larynx to sing like a man, and it was going to be the best thing ever. I could just hear it: The audience would laugh and adore the performance, and there would be a dramatic pause right before the finale where I would blow them away with my beautiful, deep, manly opera voice. I would wow them with my Italian lyrics and impeccable comedic timing.

This is it, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you have all been waiting for...

Noises. Noises everywhere. The dough-maker machine made a low humming sound while it diligently churned the mixture of the soon-to-be bread. Aluminum pans with an assortment of cookies and pastries slid out from the rack and into the gaping oven. Hurried footsteps. With a woosh, the glass door opened, and in rushed the sound of Taipei traffic followed by a chime of the electric door bell. A customer walked in.

Above all these commotions, I could still hear my mother silently kneading the dough on the counter, squeezing, twisting, and flattening—putting all of herself into her creation. The atmospheric pressure around her seemed to condense as she moved about rapidly—all body, no mind. As the workers grunted, laughed, or shouted, she remained, well, not cool as a cucumber per se, but as cool as she could hope to be in the scorching heat of Taiwan's summer.

I stood and took it all in with amusement, even the window shopper that looked curiously through the sliding glass doors of our bakery

store, probably thinking what a rude child I was to stare so boldly at a stranger. The world looked so large and busy, but my six-year-old self merely looked on in detached interest, just like how I would sit on my heels next to my friends right after school to observe the ants crawling on the ground. The ants paid us no mind and continued with their chores despite our potential to become giants of mass destruction. So *tiring*, I lamented for the voiceless ants. *Don't you guys get any rest?*

I looked at my mother the exact same way. She was not small like an ant, but quite the opposite. She was my world. She ran this small universe that was our bakery shop, and she did not rest. All I wanted was to see her smile, to make her happy, to fix that brow furrowed with the sweat and sleepless nights, for that was the price to pay to run a small business in one of the most populated cities in the world. I would often run up to her when she would be making a cake or shaping some puff pastry while wearing her Very Serious Face and I would smile real wide and think about something interesting to talk about. Sometimes I would tell her stories—only the highlights of my day of course—such as how each of the stray dogs we played with had their own personality, because you see, the black one was shy and the white one was protective of the black one because the white one would always bring leftover bones to him, or was it her? For those stories, she would give me a faint smile to show that she had heard, but her smile faded again as she went back to her Very Serious Face. *Not good enough*, I thought. I had put a smile on her face for just one moment, but I knew I wanted to see it there more often.

I rushed into the store one day (it was our home too because we also lived there), letting my heavy backpack dangle precariously on one shoulder before I swung it into a nearby plastic chair, almost knocking it over.

"Cara, don't be clumsy," my mom sighed at my unrefined behavior.

"Mom! Mom! Guess what? I told a very funny story at school today!" I yipped, waving my arms around emphatically.

"Really? What story did you tell?" she asked, her eyes not leaving the dough she was working with.

"I read a storybook called 'The Butt Mountain'!" I beamed proudly, and just as I had hoped, she looked up at me. Then she did something totally unexpected: She laughed.

"And...and the whole class laughed when I read it," I continued a little

shakily, still not believing what my ears heard. Did I just make Mom laugh? My throat suddenly tightened with anticipation and excitement. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Yes, please tell me the story of ‘The Butt Mountain,’” she beamed. “I want to hear the whole thing.”

And I told her the whole story, or as much as I could remember. I used wild gestures and dramatized the plot just a tiny bit. Overall, it was ridiculous and over-the-top; I even made up some part I couldn’t recall, but she laughed the whole way through. If something I did made her laugh, made her notice me, then no matter how ridiculous it was, I was satisfied.

When I made her laugh, her eyes would sparkle and the fog of fatigue would lift. That, to me, was the most beautiful thing in the world.

“Speak English!” a girl from my class commanded, carefully sounding out each syllable as if that would help me better understand her.

I shook my head and shrugged. I told her I wanted to go to the restroom. Why couldn’t she understand such a simple thing?

The girl—*was her name Tether? She always played tether ball during recess*—gave an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes. “Teacher! Cara keeps speaking in Chinese. I can’t understand her!”

Ms. Moore, our fourth grade homeroom teacher, came over and reprimanded her.

“Heather,” she began—*Oh, so her name was Heather*—“you know that she arrived in the U.S. just a few months ago. She doesn’t know any English. You have to understand that and try to help her.”

This was the routine for my very first few months in the state of Iowa. Whenever I wanted to defend myself and say something back, what came out were words and sounds in all the right places on my tongue, but the wrong people to speak them to. I cried once in class and made a scene. My classmates were horrified, but they wouldn’t understand, and frankly, I didn’t either. How could I make so much noise yet feel like I am mute?

Lunch hour was the worst. I didn’t know who to sit next to and I was scared to death whenever I made my food selections in front of the lunch ladies. I knew I had an accent, but seeing the blank expressions and judging looks from students and teachers alike made it all the more obvious to me that I did not belong with them. I ordered my food and

the lunch ladies giggled among themselves. I told myself that I did not care but my heart jumped and my ears turned as red as the pepperonis on the pizza slice they gave me. They turned even redder when I had to walk back into the lunch line to get new food and to explain that I was vegetarian.

With the exception of a few kids, most of them just ignored me. They didn’t know how to talk to me. They whispered behind my back about how I looked so different from them. Even as my English got better, they still couldn’t accept me. Because letting me, a girl with dark hair and almond eyes who spoke a different language and came from a small island on the other side of the world, join their friend-circle would be too different from everything they had grown up to believe in their small suburban town. I tried to joke around with them and tried really hard to make them like me.

“Hey, you know your face looks like someone stepped on it?” a boy told me once when we were lining up to get lunch. I had the unfortunate luck of being placed next to him because our last names both started with “L.”

I tried to laugh it off. Remember, look cool about everything. “Yeah, I think I ran into a wall and this is what happened, haha.”

Quite unexpectedly, I not only got a laugh from the boy, but the people around us in line who overheard the conversation also snickered. I was amazed that I had gotten attention from these kids, but I immediately regretted it. It was the first time I understood the difference between people “laughing with you” and “laughing at you.” It was also the first time I realized the power of being able to make someone laugh. A laugh could hurt and it could just as easily heal, and when you had made someone laugh, you could wield power over them for just that moment.

I did not tell jokes in school again.

At nine years old, I had already been converted into a cynic, and sarcasm was my weapon. No one was going to laugh at me, and no one could make me laugh.

I had found my ivory tower, as I like to call it, and I could see everything clearly from up here. Nothing could hurt me now. I was alone, but at least I was safe.

My mom got a distant look in her eyes whenever I tried to talk to her. *What was she thinking about?* Sometimes I couldn’t tell if she heard me or not because she wouldn’t respond. It didn’t surprise me that I couldn’t

remember the last time I saw a genuine smile on her face.

On the nights when she stood in front of the stove to fry veggies for dinner, her eyes never left the task at hand. I felt anxious even before I tried to talk to her, feeling like I was interrupting a Very Important Task with whatever tidbits I wanted to share about my day. Me, nervous about talking to my own mom. I wish it were a joke, but the truth was, I wanted, no, needed her to look at me and smile, but she rarely did so without delivering a look of exasperation hidden under barely contained patience. When I shared my thoughts, I expected her to reply, but all I got was a ghost of acknowledgement. It was an unfair transaction, and I felt cheated. Under the faint yellow stove light, I was the amateur comedian telling bad jokes, and my mom was the critical, silent audience who gave me nothing but a straining of the lips.

I was not six years old anymore. Despite being stranded on the barren desert that was the relationship between me and my mom, I could not wildly wave my arms just to be on her radar. I had the choice of sending an SOS signal, but my pride wouldn't allow me to be so vulnerable. If I had to ask my mom to listen to me, it would make this too easy; besides, it meant I didn't earn that attention from her through genuine interest. Were I to show how strongly I depended on her opinion to brighten my day, my body would turn into cellophane and everybody would be able to see that the real me was still that six-year-old girl who crouched by the road to look at ants. No, I was in middle school now, old enough to not have to run back to Mommy whenever problems arose.

Things had changed since we moved to the States, and my parents were too caught up in their work to help me with my struggles in school. They worried for me. My mom did too, but I was too anesthetized, too tired to tell her it was all her fault she failed to read between the lines. *If you love me, why didn't you try harder? Couldn't you hear what I'm not saying?*

We did not see eye to eye, yet we were at a standoff I had unwittingly constructed out of my own selfish desire for her acknowledgement. She was sometimes confused or hurt by the things I said, and it perhaps would have been better if we talked, but doing so would allow a myriad of emotions to come crashing down, and no one wanted to or had the time to deal with that kind of emotional breakdown. At least a standoff was coherent and manageable.

I wanted to be a good person. I really did. I thought I could be accomplished all by myself without any help, least of all from my mother. I would become the best, then maybe I wouldn't be ignored by her anymore. But I quickly realized that I was digging myself a deep hole. Instead of being safe in my tower, I was trapped there. I had voluntarily walked in out of self-protection, but now that I grew tired of

being guarded and suspicious of others, I couldn't bring myself to trust them, to trust the one person I love above anything else. It was simply too risky.

Instead of clamoring for attention like before, I began to avoid it at all cost. At school, I sat at the back of the classroom and never dared to speak up. Thankfully, I survived middle school with barely a scratch, and I wanted to keep it that way. My parents, who I thought had given up on me, had other ideas for my next few years, and they involved uniforms, volunteer work, and a whole lot of self-exploration.

Oh boy.

Leaving Iowa after middle school and complying with my parents' wishes, I attended a private high school in California, about two hours outside of San Francisco, a place between hills of dry, golden grass and endless cerulean sky. The school was located inside a Buddhist monastery at a place called the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. I stood outside its biggest temple with the big statue of a Buddha on the top of the roof. Inside, sounds of soft chanting floated out along with the scent of burning incense. A peacock strutted by and let out a loud honk, scaring me half to death. Some said that these peacocks came to this place on their own when the monastery was first established, and others said they were brought here by someone and had propagated ever since. The male ones were a sight to behold, especially when they opened their feathers during mating season. I would have liked them if they didn't poop on the sidewalk so much.

We lived in a bubble; our lives were governed by a different set of rules than the ones outside. Communication with the outside world was limited; we could not have cell phones or music players. Most people had laptops, but we did not have wireless Internet; the school computers had Internet, but it was clearly meant for only academic use, since all social networking sites were blocked. And don't get me started on the uniforms. Did I mention we had to wear plaid skirts?

"How did you even survive that place!" my college friend gasped, scrutinizing me with this newfound knowledge to make sure I was mentally sane. "I would have just run away."

When I told her that school changed me for the better, she didn't quite believe me.

In high school, days crawled by, and each day began and ended with fixing the buttons of our uniforms. Leaves fell and grew back again. Time was never on our side. There were errands to run and club

activities to attend. The school corridors had spider webs hanging from the ceiling and by the stairs. There were too many books in the library and too little room for them. I was sweeping the hallway when the bell rang. A dozen or so junior high students stampeded in from the door, tracking in new dirt, leaves, and grass into the hall that I had painstakingly swept clean. I frowned.

“Hi, Cara!” one of them waved at me. I waved back, a little worn out.

“What’s wrong? You look tired,” a girl named Annabel commented. “Your eye bags are huge.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said and went back to sweeping up the mess they carried in.

“Why do you sweep?” Annabel asked again in confusion. “More people will walk by and it’s only going to get dirty again.”

“I have to. No one likes to see such a dirty hallway.”

“You’re so nice. Why are you so freakin’ nice? It’s not normal,” Annabel waved her hands in the air dramatically and looked to her friends to back her up. Unfortunately, she was standing by the entrance to the library where somebody was about to walk out, so just before she finished her thoughts, she accidentally smacked that person on the head.

“Oh shi—I mean shoot, sorry! I didn’t mean to cuss or to hit you!”

Annabel’s sincerity and goofiness took me off guard, and I laughed so hard that my broom fell out of my hands.

I was ready. I was in the Pavarotti suit. I recalled the Italian lyrics—*still can’t believe I’m winging Italian*—in my head and went over the timing for each segment of the song as I headed downstairs. *Don’t mess this up now*. The guests were already waiting for my performance. I waved to the MC and he nodded back.

“And now let’s give a round of applause for Cara’s ‘O Sole Mio!’”

I let out a deep breath and strode in with a cup of water in my hand. Most of them wouldn’t even know what the hell I was doing. I nodded to the MC again as he played the instrumental music.

“*Che bella cosa na jurnata ’e sole...*” I began in my normal voice, soft and sweet. The audience smiled. *How sweet*, I could imagine them saying in their heads. Then came the chorus.

I turned my back to the audience, and when I turned around, I had on a huge paper mustache, singing in a deep vibrato, “*Ma n’atu sole...*” It was going well, but I suddenly realized I couldn’t hear the music, so I was out of sync with the orchestra. Everything was starting to fall apart, and not like how I had imagined it. *Screw it*, I thought, and just continued on with the song. I even made up parts of the lyrics that escaped me, not that anyone would know what the hell I was singing anyway. My voice was kind of strained and nasally. My mustache even fell off at one point and I had to tape it back on. It was chaos and disaster rolled into one.

And it was beautiful.

At the end of the song, the audience roared and applauded. I took a deep bow, put my face in my hands, and started laughing at how ridiculous everything turned out. I looked up and instinctively sought out my mom’s face from the crowd. *Did she like it?* For a split second, I could not imagine how I would feel if she wore that ghost of a smile again. I gave this performance my all, and although my mistakes were quite blatant, I prayed that she would see through it, that she would see me. At last, I found her, and my heart stopped. I could see my mother laughing until tears were in her eyes. Her head was tilted back and her face froze in time like a photograph.

The mask I had carefully constructed began to crack, and instead of feeling panic, I felt relief. For once, I was laughing along with everyone even as I made them laugh.

How was such a thing possible?

The performance wasn’t perfect, and I had messed up badly, yet everyone was laughing until they were red in the face. They accepted my flaws just as easily as I condemned them. How could I not have seen? When I embrace my imperfections, I accept myself as I am at this moment. When I am open and vulnerable, I feel more invincible than I was in the ivory tower. I no longer struggled for attention, or deflected joy, because even as I welcomed in the weight of the world, I was letting myself feel love.

Hi there, Cara. Long time no see.

Cara Liu recently graduated with a BA in linguistics and a minor in journalism. She grew up in Taiwan and moved with her family to the US in 2000. A chronic perfectionist, her lifelong goal is to be able to lick her elbow.