



worry about the future

pseudo-memoir by jonathan lam



To my grandma,

陈玉金.

for being is the strongest, most caring,
and awesomest person I know.

Thanks for raising your three sons well,
picking *ma-churn* with us,
and ripping out that girl's hair.

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Forgotten

“A bird is safe in its nest - but that is not what its wings are made for.”

Amit Ray

When I enter the bathroom uncle John comes in after me and says that he would stay with me, which is very nice. He is my favorite uncle. I don't have a phone or anything to contact anyone. So I am always afraid of getting lost.

I poop and leave the bathroom but when I go back outside he is Gone!

We're at Lake Compounce water park and I'm stuck outside the bathroom.

I'm too short to see any the rides at the park or over the crowd.

I venture out a little further, into the bright sunlight. The sun is dazzling. People are walking all around me, so that I can't see too far in any direction. It is mid-afternoon, probably around three o'clock, so it is really busy. The bathrooms are in front of a large, open space where many of the paths meet.

The only “ride” I can see is the water playground in front of me. It's like a much larger version of the playground at Beaches Pool near our house, where the water cones balance on a rod in the middle and fill up with water and flip scarily when the water is too heavy. I used to stand under them, counting and guessing when and which way they would flip so that the heavy water dumped on my head would make me scared that I would drown. But I stopped when it stopped becoming scary, or maybe because my sisters started copying me. But this playground was a lot bigger and had a lot more children to play with. It was pirate ship-themed, so it had a huge bucket at the top that poured down on the children.

Will it be better if I stayed or went? I pout, anxious.

I waited.

Should I ask someone to use their phone? I only know two phone numbers (three, if you include 911): my mom's and my dad's.

I started to walk.

But strangers might not let me use their phones, or they might kidnap me if they see me alone, just a little kid, as my parents always tell me. Or what if the strangers think I'm a trick? My parents also keep showing us videos from their friends in China of people doing horrible things to each other, like using

kids as distractions for stealing. My friends say that doesn't happen in America, but I really don't want to be kidnapped.

But if I leave, then my parents might go looking for me and not find me where I should be. I will be forgotten.

I stop again.

Which way do I go?

I am surrounded by a wave of people
scattered, talking happily with each other while I
stand in the middle, not walking.
I keep turning in circles,
not sure which way I should go. I keep
going back and forth, saying that going
means that I will lose them but staying
means they will lose me. And nobody tries to help me— they
just walk in circles around me, giving me some space but never really
looking. I am in my little bubble of being lost.

Waiting is very awkward. I stand out in the crowd because I'm not happy. I want someone to realize that. But nobody does, and I begin to grunt. They just keep walking by, smiling, and I know nobody else is lost. I want to cry.

Where is my family? Where could they have gone? They can't have walked too far. I was only in the bathroom for five minutes, I swear! Maybe they left me here on purpose?

I begin to count the times the big bucket flips.

Should I stay?

(Bucket flips.)

Should I go?

Should I leave? I look around again.

(Bucket flips.)

...

Out of the crowd, I see uncle John, who is very tall. I run over to where he waves me over at the bench at the edge of the water playground. He tells me that my cousins are on the water playground. He doesn't seem scared at all that I was missing. But I tell him how scared I was, and he laughs and says I'm with them now and they would never leave me, but that doesn't change my scarediness.

Because I could have been stolen by someone else, or I could have run off and they would have blamed me. I told uncle John and my parents about the reasons I was scared, but he laughed again and told me to go play with my sisters and cousins.

But I think my thinking saved my life. If I went to a stranger and asked for their phone, I could be in serious danger right now. I know my parents and uncle John couldn't see it, but I did.

I don't like theme parks anymore. (2018 self: I still don't.)

Mileage

“Growing up is losing some illusions, in order to acquire others.”

Virginia Woolf

I used to live next to a trail. For many years, it was just “the trail” to me. A dirt path, two-and-a-half miles long. Where we biked and our dad easily outran us. Our house was right next to the beginning, and our driveway was separated from the path by only a two-and-a-half foot gap of poison ivy. It ran parallel to our road, Tait Road, and, for the first few years, ended where we reached a road. But some years and a new bicycle later, we learned that there was a second part, about a mile-and-a-half long, extended past that trail, and it was very smoothly paved with asphalt and had a rickety bridge and ended at a park, Old Mine Park. And even then, just before we moved and after the paving of the first trail segment, we realized that the trail went even further, reaching to Wolf Park in Monroe, some five miles past that, and beyond. We stopped at Wolf Park every time, whining and turning back. And only this year, a decade later, did I hear that the trail goes in the other direction as well. What I had thought of at as a beginning at our house was only a tiny sliver of a greater system.

Now I mostly know the trail by name and bittersweet memories. Bitter because it’s all gone now. Sweet because I remember the carefree happiness of a childhood the trail created for me. Its name is the Pequonnock River Trail (a name whose spelling I have never bothered to remember), a trail constructed in the tracks a long-gone railroad, and now Tait Road has a parking lot built for the bikers and runners. I’ve only been to the trail recently for cross country or track, and I don’t see many little children like I used to. Just sweaty joggers.

But I can still walk through those first two-and-a-half miles a decade later with my eyes closed, in any season, at any time, remembering every bend and milestone. The furled American flag, the mile-stone (which was paved over), the quarter-mile markers, the trail Indian Ledge Park, the skipping-stones place, Lion King’s den. I can still see my dad’s slippery running pants flowing and my sisters taunting at me from their bikes, white and purple. And I can hear my dad trying to say “invisibility cloak,” but failing because of his incomplete English. But we didn’t care. We didn’t know better either.

The Great Invisible Clock

Long icicles hung from the rock walls of the second gorge. In the summer, daddy would ride up onto the top of the gorge on his bike while we stayed at the bottom, but he said it was too slippery now. Our bicycle tires weren’t completely full of air, but daddy said that was okay because it was cold and the tires would fill back up in the springtime. The newly-melting ground was muddy and slimy and spread all over the white tires of Jessica’s bicycle and made squishy noises as we biked. It got all over daddy’s grey, shiny sweatpants and mommy would probably yell at him later for it.

The dirt path below us became pebbly, and we stopped. On our right, the path to Indian Ledge Park appeared. We stepped off the main trail and onto that path. A few steps in, after we descended some fifteen feet and around a short bend, we stopped. Juliet and Jessica gave their bikes to daddy, who leaned

them against a tree. He put an invisible clock over it and we continued down the small trail. I took my bike with me, because it was a mountain bike unlike Jessica's and Juliet's, but didn't ride it because the trail was very steep and there was still some slippery snow on the ground. We crossed the stream on the creaky wooden bridge, passed the huge tree stump that was uprooted and lay sideways with a patch of dark dirt underneath, and onto the other main path that led us straight to Indian Ledge Park. Then I got back on my bike and raced my sisters to the park.

I won, of course.

We played on the playground there. The slides were extra slippery because there was a small layer of snow on them, and the metal was very cold. Juliet fell off of one of the monkey bars because it was so slippery, and we had to go home early because she couldn't play anymore. There wasn't even time to play on the swings, the best part. Both Jessica and I could use the *real* swings, but Juliet had to use the buckets with foot holes.

We walked back to the trail, slower now because Juliet was riding on daddy's shoulders, piggy-back style. Daddy took off the invisible clock and we started biking back, Juliet still crying a little bit. There was only a bruise and no blood, so it couldn't have been that bad, Jessica and I told her, but she wouldn't stop crying.

When we got back to the place where the trail split to go down to the river, where I had rode my bike across and we had skipped stones and swung on the rope swing, we noticed that there was a bicycle there. The biker must have been around Jessica's age, but a boy. The bike was black and red, like my old bike, and had no snow on it. We didn't see anybody around.

"Why didn't they put an invisible clock over their bike?" asked Jessica to daddy. He stopped.

"They must have forgot." He went over, dragged an invisible clock out of his pocket, and threw it over the bike. "I'll do it for them because they forgot."

But we still saw it. That meant it would be invisible to them. Our bikes were invisible to everyone but ourselves because daddy did the magic trick over our bike.

Jessica saw it too. "Now they won't be able to find their bike," she whined.

Daddy said, "No, they can see it too."

"But I thought only we could see it if you put it on."

"It's works with magic, of course they can see it."

I wasn't totally sure that made sense, but once we started moving again, it was time to say the Pledge of Allegiance as fast as possible as the large American flag appeared as we went around the corner. With one hand on my heart and the other on the steering wheel (I had just learned the one-handed steering trick, and even Jessica couldn't do it) I raced Jessica with the pledge. She won this time.

But then, as we passed the first gorge and saw icicles again, I began to cry. I thought daddy was lying, and that by putting on the invisible clock, they wouldn't be able to see it and lose their bike. Daddy lied to us because he couldn't undo the magic. We made someone lose their bike.

Bouncy Ball

My grandma was out on the hunt with us. She was picking at the *ma-churn* (or in english, the "smart grass") from the sides of the trail for us to eat. She taught us how to pick it as well, and we did it too, every time we couldn't see people on the trail. It smelled very good when we picked it, and we made sure we didn't pull the roots out so that they would grow again. (But sometimes we were wrong and plucked normal grass by accident, which isn't very tasty in soup.) And then there was the *chong-chong* ("scallion" or "scallop" or something like that). They were easier. They were round, not like the *ma-churn*.

She was holding a plastic bag from Stop and Shop that we poured our yummy treasure into. It filled up pretty quickly, because we had not picked the *ma-churn* or the *chong-chong* for a few weeks and they had all grown tall again. I don't think anyone else picked them. I never saw anyone else picking them. But my grandma was cool, and we got free food from the trail. My dad always made fun of her for scavenging food, but he never cooked like she did.

We were in the middle of our sneaky veggie-picking when I noticed the blue ball. It was at the bottom of a ditch near a little stream that carried water under the trail in a large pipe. I liked it right away because it had a cool pattern, like the stone marble. Someone must have dropped it down there and not tried to pick it back up. It was very steep and far down. I pointed it out to my grandma, and she looked and started climbing down.

Jessica and Juliet and I all told her to stop. It was too dangerous. But she climbed down on hand and foot, picked up the ball, and climbed back up again. She was still holding the bag of veggies in her other hand. She brushed off the dirt, and we returned home, and we filled up the bouncy ball with air and played with it for another day and a half before we got bored.

It's still a good bouncy ball, many decades later. The cats are afraid of it though.

I have an awesome grandma.

Crash Bandicoot Spring

We picked up Ray from his house, so it was Juliet, Ray, my dad, and I in the car. We were on the way to the trail. The snow was melting, but the ground was still frozen. Nonetheless, it was a *warm* 40 degrees Fahrenheit, so we chose the day to take a run. The sun was high, there were few clouds, and there was almost no wind. It was the kind of day you would remember for being extraordinarily ordinary. In its weather, in the event. A typical Sunday-afternoon jog with a friend.

Ray was no ordinary athlete. He was the top sprinter at our school, almost at the point of breaking the school record in the 100 meter dash. And I was just some skinny Asian kid who somehow picked up running because my family did it. He was an amazing short sprinter. I endured through distance. He was well over six feet tall. I hadn't gone through most of my growth spurts yet. He swore a lot around friends. I never did. We were a good match, I think. Balanced.

We parked in one of the spots leading up to the trail.

Our old house's driveway and the beginning of the trail both are located on a steep incline. Actually, one of the reasons we decided to move away was because of that steepness— on very cold days, the driveway became an impassable sheet of black ice, uncontrollable on the way down and sometimes unable to go up in a car. (When it got this icy, my grandma headed out with us with a sharp garden tool we called the "icepick" and we chipped away at it). The trail has the same incline. When we first moved to the house, we couldn't make it to the top of either hill from a standstill. So if we were going into the trail we would first check if any cars were coming, then use some of the momentum from hurling down our driveway to go up onto the trail, or vice versa from the trail onto our driveway. Or we could cross the poison ivy path, at our own risk.



Our old house and the trail. The hill is steeper than it looks.

The poison ivy path didn't exist anymore. A hedge grows there now. I guess the current owners of our old house wanted some privacy from the influx of sweaty people. And the familiar sight of the 1999 Nissan Maxima was replaced by a red Hyundai Sonata.

Not much had changed about the trail. It was just a lot more active, with many older runners exercising. I didn't see any toddlers. The floor was still mostly speckled with the incoming sunlight from the trees.

My sister had not yet begun cross country, so she was very slow. My dad went with her. Ray and I went ahead.

The first thing I noticed was Crash Bandicoot Spring, which was near the beginning of the trail. A name I hadn't recalled in many years. My sisters and I thought it looked like something from the PlayStation 2 videogame, "Crash Bandicoot." I don't remember which part.

After that came the first gorge. The American flag. The skipping stones and rope swing. The paved-over mile-stone. The long hill. The short hill. The second gorge. Indian Ledge Park. The straightaway with the new fence. And then the yellow gates that marked the end of this segment of the trail. All in heavy breaths, so that we didn't really pay attention to the sounds or smells. It was so fresh and quiet that there wasn't really much to hear or smell. Just old landmarks, ancient memories, rushing by in blurs.

Two-and-a-half miles. It took us sixteen minutes. But to me, this was something that began over a decade ago. Nobody passed us.

Panting, sweating, we turned back.

Dinnertime

“There’s a difference between thinking you can’t be wrong and having no regrets. Wrongness is what occurs prior to empiricism, in hindsight a counterpart of revelation, and revelation is nothing to regret.”

Criss Jami

We sat down to eat dinner. My dad sat to the left of me, my mom to the right of me, Juliet facing me, and Jessica in some dorm seventy miles away, probably at some irregular angle from my orientation.

We never changed where we sat at the table, except the slight redistribution of chair-space when Jessica left for college. We picked the spot we wanted when we moved into the house and bought the dining table, and a decade later, we haven’t moved.

It was the same with the cups: Juliet always drank from the red, plastic, wide cup, now beginning to splinter. Jessica drank from a simple, plastic, narrow, tan-colored cup. My dad drinks from one of the mugs he brought home from work, and my mom drinks from one of the set of white porcelain cups. I drink either from the tall, blue plastic cup that came with a (now long-lost) cap and straw, is dual-layered and says “Escape the Ordinary,” or the yellow mug with an image of a Chevrolet Camero and the words, “Burning the midnight oil” on its side. However, we generally share the same eatingware amongst ourselves, many of which are older than any of us children, from the restaurant my dad used to own. When someone drops and breaks one of those almost-ancient bowls, I actually feel quite distraught. That was a piece of history. It reminded me of an old Chinese TV series we watched as a family about a poor girl named “A’xing” that gotten a broken old bowl of sentimental value stapled back together, but I don’t think we would go so far.

My parents sat on both sides of me. Even when Jessica was home, she and Juliet sat next to each other, opposite me, so that one sister was always cushioned from the onslaught of two parents by the other sister. I never had that luxury.

I just told my family a joke.

My mom chimed in. “So it’s like Shannon and McKayla. Tris keeps posting images of them, and they’re always happy. And Shannon is winning all of the ...” she gestured with her arms “... rowing competitions.”

“What? That has nothing to do with what I was saying,” I said.

“I thought that’s what you meant,” she said, a little quieter. She looked at my dad, who immediately juttet in.

“Yeah. It makes sense. It’s a piece of wisdom, that the second person is actually smart.”

“No, it doesn’t! There’s no second person! It wasn’t supposed to be a piece of wisdom. It was supposed to be a joke! You didn’t get it.”

“You can’t say that,” he retorted, almost shouting. But he didn’t continue to explain.

“You know you’re not making any sense, right? You don’t get it– just admit it!”

Juliet said, “Let’s just forget about it. So... how were your days?” She imitated my dad’s low, loud voice. It was a question my dad always asked when he got home from work, and he would always get angry if we didn’t provide an explicit rundown of the day.

But I didn’t stop. “I’ll repeat it one more time. Only once more. You guys didn’t get it at all.” My parents gestured at me to continue. “The quote went, ‘People who think they know everything are a great annoyance to those of us who do.’ It’s sarcasm, can’t you see?”

“Oh– yeah, you could interpret it that way as well. I was thinking of it a different way.” But he didn’t finish his thought. There wasn’t a thought. I saw him trying to make sense of the peculiarities of the English language, his secondary language, that made the quote funny, while he looked into my glowering eyes. I don’t think he found anything. My mom had already given up by the first criticism.

There was a brief silence.

“*Again*, how did your days go?” Juliet repeated, louder. No one replied.

There was always some sort of debate going on at dinner. The next night, my mom asked me whether or not a new immigrant from China should move in with a man she had just met. They said it was hypothetical, a moral question, but I knew it was an issue with my uncle. I wasn’t listening to the context of the problem, so I mumbled that I didn’t have enough information to answer the question. Besides, my parents were always talking about the problems on my mom’s side of the family, and I didn’t want to get caught up in the drama. I always seemed to support the family members my parents complained were lazy, irresponsible, or naïve. They asked again. I said *I don't know*.

When they asked a third time, I didn’t say anything. I finished my rice, not eating any more *poi*, shoved my seat out without setting it back under the table, put my bowl and chopsticks in the sink, and left downstairs to try to memorize and solve a Rubik’s Cube blindfolded in the company of our cats, Sharon and Jane. But I fall asleep every time I’ve tried to memorize a Rubik’s cube, and this time was no exception. I was asleep before I knew it, Sharon purring and comfortably kneading my chest with her claws extended.

About an hour later, I woke up as the cats scattered because my mom came downstairs to wash the laundry. She approached the sofa I was reclining on with frizzled hair that meant I had fallen asleep, and posed the question again. I repeated that I don’t have a good answer. My dad followed, yells at me for several minutes. He said I should have said, “I don’t know.” That I should have some respect. I said I did say “I don’t know” at dinner, but he ignored that. I then said “I don’t know,” again. Then he said that I have an attitude. That it was my place to understand these family issues, because they will affect me and because family matters. After a few minutes they both returned upstairs.

None of the argument registered in my mind. What bothered me more than the confusing accusation was the overwhelming-ness of the sound. My dad may not have really been shouting. It wasn't loud enough to hurt my ear, like the snare drums that perform right behind me in the brass section, but it was too much. I imagined every syllable intoned with the square- or sawtooth-shaped waves I've seen as illustrations for the sound of electric guitars.

I fell asleep again, because the cats returned and I had no freedom to move without lifting them, which I had not the heart to do.

An hour later, my dad returned and yelled at me again to get up. He turned off the lamp, grabbed my hand, and jerked me up the stairs. I looked to the cats for help, but being the skittish cats they are, they were nowhere to be seen in an instant.

An American Dream

“But I can say that life is good to me. Has been and is good. So I think my task is to be good to it. So how do you be good to life? You live it.”

Morgan Freeman

On September 16th, 1994, the staff of Brookdale Hospital saw a Chinese man in his mid-twenties, dressed in a clean white shirt, enter the emergency section. His right eye was swollen under his rounded spectacles. The attendees went up to him to assess the level of injury and decide if he needed urgent help, but he denied the help.

He tried to introduce himself as *lam-zheng-wong*, or Chunwang Lam. The nurses ignored his introduction, worrying instead about the injury. He said he was here to work, but they said they didn't know him. He repeated that it was his first day as a medical student, not a patient. It took a few minutes for the hospital workers to accept that he was, indeed, working for his first day as part of clerkship for his third year of medical school.

Over twenty years later, he would tell this story to his children, and laugh about it. “My face was banged up so bad it took them some time to figure out I wasn't actually a patient,” he liked to say.

Wang was a twenty-four year-old medical student who worked in the family-owned Chinese restaurant on E. Gun Hill Rd. in the Bronx. His parents cooked, and he and his brothers John and Frank served food and cleaned up. The restaurant made marginal profit, but it supported the family of five in their cramped apartment, and paid off Wang and Frank's tuition to the City College of New York. What made it manageable was that they were all in it together: three young brothers, recently legal citizens, struggling in the English-dominated landscape, wanting to raise families in comfort and get out of the slums of New York City.

Sometimes, biking from house to house for deliveries, one of the orders would turn out to be a robbery at gunpoint. There was no choice but to relent if the person who ordered the meal had a gun, and to report the incident later. But the police often didn't care much for small thefts like this, because there was no way to prove anything and no physical harm was done. All that could be done is to lock all the large bills away after every trip to minimize the losses.

Other times, the guns or knives would flash in the restaurant when customers refused to pay for their meal, and the family had to quickly hide or get behind the bulletproof glass. To them, the small amounts of money (ten, twenty, thirty dollars) weren't worth harm.

Sometimes the fights weren't even over money. One time, Wang was jumped on a street corner by three African American kids on his way to the restaurant from school, just because he was an easy target: a skinny minority youngster. The cops were called afterwards, but the other kids couldn't be found.

A week later, another young Asian male was murdered on that same street corner, reportedly by African American kids as well. The suspects weren't caught, but Wang speculated that the same people were involved, and that if he had been there again, it likely would have been him.

A lot of the time, Wang ended up studying for high school and college behind the counter on slow times in the restaurant. For him, the restaurant was a temporary inconvenience—his parents paved the way to America because they wanted him and his brothers to get a better education than they could have in China, taking years to be able to pay for the move. There was no time to waste. So after school, beginning from the move to New York when he was fifteen to his twenties, work came after school, and didn't end until late in the night. No exceptions. He envied Frank, who often went on long excursions to other restaurants to fix broken refrigerators and other appliances and spent extra time flirting with the girls there, and he envied John, who was the smartest of the three and could get by without trouble in school.

In the end, John didn't attend college until he was fifty-two years old, at Kingsborough Community College. While he was the best suited for school, he was the oldest and it was his responsibility to take care of his brothers. So Frank and Wang went off to the City College while John worked even longer hours.

The day before he began working at the hospital for the clerkship, the Lam family was working at the restaurant in the late afternoon. A group of five teenagers were loitering outside, smoking cigarettes and chatting for a few hours. The problem was that they kept coming into the restaurant to use the bathroom and leaving it disorderly and unclear. Wang and his brothers had to clean the bathroom, so they told them not to keep coming in. While they agreed, they came back in again to use the bathroom in clear defiance, so Wang hit him. This started a brawl between the group of teenagers and the family, which ended until Wang's mom grabbed one of the girls by her hair and began dragging her out until a good chunk of her hair came out. Wang came out with some bruises on his face, but no serious injuries.

A few days later, walking down to the restaurant, Wang saw two of the teenagers again. He quickly turned onto another street, but not before one of them noticed him. The teenager shouted "wait!" and approached Wang. He said that his friends were just being stupid and didn't really want to do any harm. He said they wouldn't do it again.

Seven years later, shortly after the bombings of September 11th, 2001, Wang, his wife, and his young children (only one and two years old) moved to a larger apartment in Stamford, Connecticut, a large city, but much smaller than the Big Apple. Two years later, they would move again to their first house in Trumbull, a more suburban setting, next to the Pequonnock River Trail. Another five years would pass until they moved to rural Easton, to a larger house. In Easton, there was no such thing as street violence.

He would tell the stories of his younger life. He would say that the kids on the street corner, like the rowdy teenages, were simply bored and had nothing better to do with their lives— it wasn't their fault that they were raised so that they couldn't find a nonviolent output. His children would listen— partially in awe, partially in disbelief. And he would watch as they grew up in the quiet countryside, sixty miles away from the ghetto where he fought for his life, thousands of miles away from the fight that his parents fought when they moved to America.

End.