

## A Scarlet Letter

*There's a scarlet letter sewn across my chest.*

*Invisible yet exposed.*

*An ever-present prickling sensation that sometimes borders tenderness, and other times, pain.*

*For as long as I can remember, it has branded me.*

*From the moment my mother hopped on a plane across the world.*

*Chasing after a faraway dream.*

*To the moment I travelled back.*

*Trying to escape reality.*

*Was it a blessing or a curse? I often wonder.*

*I wanted to feel pride for it. But its very existence seems to insinuate the opposite.*

*I wanted to rip it off, feel the pain of scarlet stitches rip through my skin before being freed from its mark.*

*But a moment of hesitation, a moment of mercy, a moment of bittersweet nostalgia over distant memories –*

*And I knew I shall never be free.*

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You were born in a city of red. Red flags, red scarves, red blood on the pavement outside a red city gate. A city of spiraling alleyways and towering skyscrapers. Streets rich with history, documented and concealed. You remember biking through the hutongs on a sunny morning, past the *si he yuans* where famous scholars once dwelled, the rows of *da ye*'s playing chess and *da*

*ma*'s bargaining for lychees, and the tiny hipster coffee joints that have generously fueled your caffeine addiction. You remember grabbing a *jian bing* and *mian cha* from a literal hole-in-the-wall as you head to your job at an old courtyard theater. The sky is blue. A warm spring breeze ripples through your pink hair. You feel connected to the fabric of the city and its inhabitants. You feel free. You are at peace.

These moments of rare belonging entangle you to an identity you can never abandon. They make you feel grounded in a world where you are lost, yet you sometimes wonder whether it is better to be lost if the maze that you navigate will eventually take you back to the starting point.

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What does it mean to feel pride in one's roots? When you were a child, they told you that you should love your country. They uniformed you in garbs of neat pleated skirts and white blouses – red scarves wound tightly around round collars – and marched you across the soccer field every Monday morning to salute the flag. You learned about heroes that everyone should strive to emulate and ideals that everyone should embrace and that it was wrong to waste even a speck of rice because the farmers broke their backs sowing it.

But ask no questions, they said. Admit no mistakes. Be like those textbook heroes, with their love for the motherland more powerful than any grenade they hurled themselves against. They stood behind you unsmiling, their eyes scanning your bowl for specks of unfinished rice, their hands forcing milk down your throat when they saw leftovers in your cup. Your memories of those days are littered with fear – of punishment, of ridicule, of scrutiny for nonconformity, synonymous with disobedience. You resented the obligation to feel pride for something you

couldn't change. When the opportunity came to leave that place forever, you convinced yourself that some roots were better left abandoned.

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What does it mean to embrace your culture? When you were a child, you moved overseas for the first time. You thought you found paradise, with fresh air, clean streets, and toilet paper in every bathroom stall. They said hi to you on the streets and made small-talk inside convenience stores and didn't question why you never drank milk. Aren't you glad to be here? They asked. Aren't you glad to be, *not there?*

And you were. All too excited to forget. All too excited to condemn. All too excited to trade the red scarf for the moral high horse. Even if they sometimes mistook you for someone else or asked if you've ever consumed a canine, you willingly put your hand over your heart every day, convinced that by reciting "with liberty and justice for all" you could bury all that shamed you about where you had come from.

You strived to embrace a new identity, where culture became something ancient and exotic that people brought out once a year in a *qi pao* and a lion dance. You attempted to relate to those of similar backgrounds, with their seemingly mutual experiences of tiger moms and tapioca pearls. You tried your best to assimilate, because *here* was better than *there*. You convinced yourself that feeling lost meant that you simply have not tried hard enough to fit in.

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But at what cost? Read the headlines, whenever they report a seemingly positive development

from that place. The stories are spun until the world accepts as a fact that everything back there comes with a cost, heavy as the burden on a farmer's back. But at what cost? You see the cracks in the foundations of the democracy you have embraced, the narrative that they have maintained. Two propaganda machines rally against one another, and, despite all those hand-over-your-hearts, you feel the bullets from both sides.

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What does it mean to belong? The only place you ever felt like home was inside a 400 square meter theater deep in the *hutongs* of that red city, when you unexpectedly returned that year to escape a pandemic. Crowded inside a crumbling old kitchen among souls who could not have been more different, you found a pocket of idealism in a place you thought none could exist. Your past identities dissolved, your masks disintegrated, and you felt, for the first time, that you did not need to try to fit in. How coincidental? Back in this city of red where you were born, among the backdrop of red flags, red scarves, and red city gates.

But those moments of belonging are all too fleeting. Now you are back to reality, seemingly more lost than before. You dream of red lanterns and red kites and red *tang hu lu*'s clutched in the fingers of children in uniforms. You left a piece of you back there. But at what cost? Echoes the voice inside your head. But at what cost? Echoes those headlines over and over again. How does one feel pride in something they've spent their entire life rejecting? Your dreams of red lanterns are riddled with nightmares of red QR codes, broken tennis racquets, and women in chains. How does one reconcile the beauty of that color with the pain and abuse? Red like the *tang hu lu*'s sweet in your mouth. Red like blood on the pavement.

And now you bury yourself in the writings of Ai Weiwei, Gao Xingjian, and Li Yiyun. You find comfort in the words of those overseas artists, exiled or otherwise. You relish in their descriptions of those places that you had once been and those streets that you had once biked across, even if their stories are imbued with pain that you've been sheltered from. You wonder if they are lost. You watch Ai Weiwei's *The Second Ring* just to catch a glimpse of those familiar *hutongs* – to feel, even for a brief moment, a sense of connectedness, a tremor of belonging. But did you really belong? You dream of villages and chains and eyes that never shut – and you feel a different kind of pain.

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The international students speak English to you.

Like they know there's a perpetual barrier, even if you respond in perfectly fluent mother tongue.

This article no longer exists.

Where is your hometown? You hesitate every time. But you never end up naming the red city.

They've canceled more flights. Your mom is still stuck overseas. You are the only person left on your floor over winter break.

You tell yourself home is where your body is.

You dream about another life far away, the melody of bells ringing as you push open the door to that courtyard and your temporary family greets you.

But the ringing of bells becomes the clanking of chains. You sit across the ocean on your mountain of privilege. Locked out. Sheltered. And utterly helpless.

This article no longer exists.

The international students still speak English to you.

You try not to respond in English.

You are lost in a maze of red but you just keep going straight

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*There's a scarlet letter sewn across my chest.*

*I don't want to pull it off.*

*I just wish that it was not so scarlet.*