

Edge of the World

When I was about 4, my mother and I spent our days sitting side by side on the couch, watching soap operas and eating chocolates and laughing. My mother's laugh was loud and wild. She never covered her mouth, which would open so wide that I could see the half-chewed chocolate mashed up against the inside of her cheek. She would laugh this way only when we were alone. With my father or in the company of others, she would giggle and put a hand over her mouth. I wanted everyone to see what I saw when we were alone.

My mother learned to speak English watching these soaps, and soon she started practicing what she had picked up. When my father didn't feel like eating, she would ask who he had been eating his meals with that he had no appetite. When a sock went missing from the dryer, she would ask where it had gone, and when he had no answer, she would accuse him of having an affair.

My father didn't take my mother seriously. He tried to keep their talk light, saying he wished that he wasn't so busy working and that life really was as full of opportunities for affairs as she imagined it to be. But then he would turn serious, saying, "You don't know, do you? What it's like for me at work. They all talk so fast in English. Barking at me all the time about keeping up. Sometimes I don't even feel like a human being."

My parents didn't spend much time alone, and when they did, there were no Lao¹ bars or cafés or restaurants for them to go to. Occasionally, we were invited to get-togethers at the homes of other Lao refugees. Some had been here a long time, like us, and some had just arrived. These parties were where everyone went to dance and listen to music, play cards and eat, reminisce and talk about old times. They would laugh all night – sad, faint bursts of air – and shake their heads in disbelief at what they had made of themselves in this new country.

My parents went to these parties to hear the news from back home or to ask what had happened to those they had left behind. Who was still there? Was their house still standing? And if they'd made it out of Laos, which refugee camp had they ended up in? How long were they there? Where did they land?

When my parents read the newspaper or watched the evening news, they never heard anything about what was happening in their country. It was almost as if it didn't exist.

My father was at the center of many of these parties. A wave of laughter would crash in from the living room, and whenever I'd peer inside, I'd see him surrounded by the other guests, telling everyone his stories. [...]

My mother would watch and listen to all of this from the kitchen, but she'd never join in. She'd keep to herself, surrounded by Tupperware, glass casserole dishes, steaming pots, simmering pans, plastic forks and spoons, and paper plates. I would stay there with her, and she'd tell me what each dish was and how it was supposed to be cooked. She would say that some of the key ingredients were missing and that none of the dishes could live up to her memory of the real thing. She'd say that the food in Laos just tasted better and that maybe someday when I was older, we could go back and visit. She'd say all this to me in Lao.

One time, a woman in the kitchen overheard her: "Your child understands Lao?" she asked. My mother was proud that I could still have something from the old country even though I had never been there. But the woman said to her, "Oh no, no! Oy! You'd better start speaking English to her. How is she going to fit in once she gets to school?!" When the woman left the kitchen, we laughed at her, how worried sick she seemed about not fitting in with everybody, as if that was a thing to want.

Later, my mother encouraged me to go and play with the other kids at the party. They were rowdy and running around and speaking English. I wanted to play with them, but they kept pushing

¹ the nationality of the Southeast Asian country of Laos

45 my arm and telling me I was “it.” I did not know what “it” was, but every time I tried to get near one of them, anytime I came close, they’d run from me like they didn’t want to play with me at all. [...]

The closest my mother came to having friends were the cashiers at the *Goodwill*². They were friendly and knew her by name, and they’d let her wander the aisles for hours. They might only have been doing their jobs, but my mother didn’t see it that way. Once, she brought them egg rolls wrapped in
50 aluminum foil, and they took them to the back room to eat while we picked through the clothing together. But the way my mother walked by the racks, with a hand trailing behind her, made it seem as if she wasn’t really searching for anything she wanted. It made me wonder whether she might have wanted to be invited to the back room to enjoy the food. To distract her from thinking about her egg rolls, I grabbed a yellow dress and brought it to her. She looked at the price tag – one dollar
55 – and nodded. Before we left the store, my mother glanced back at the cashiers. She said to me, “You think they liked it?”

Once I started school, my mother watched the soaps alone and told me about them when I came home. There was always an affair, a long-lost twin, someone in a coma, a handsome doctor. After a while, I didn’t want to hear about them anymore. I started reading books, and my mother would
60 come sit with me and have me read them to her. She would ask questions about the drawings inside. The books she liked best were the scratch-and-sniff ones, and the ones where animals popped out at you. [...]

At night, she would bring a book to my bed and insist that I read it to her. There were not too many words inside. Sometimes she’d fall asleep right away, but when she didn’t, I would make up
65 stories for her. “No one is ever alone in the world,” I said one night. “There is always a friend somewhere for everyone.” She must have been 24 then, but when I look back, she seemed much younger – and smaller. I watched over her, and when she shivered I pulled a blanket up to cover her, trying not to wake her. Sometimes she had nightmares. I could tell by how she was breathing – short, panicked breaths. I would reach out and stroke her hair, tell her that things would be all right,
70 though I didn’t know whether they would be or what it meant to say those words. I just knew it helped to say them.

I never thought to ask my mother why she slept in my room most nights. I was just glad not to be alone in the dark.

One Saturday morning, we wandered into the toy section of the *Goodwill*, and my mother picked out
75 something for me. It was a map of the world, a puzzle, 1,000 cardboard pieces inside a box for 50 cents. Each piece had a unique shape that fit with another. The point was to find the other pieces that fit with it somewhere in this pile of shapes and lock them together.

When we got home and I sat down to work on the puzzle, she did not pick up a piece or try to help me put it together. Instead, she watched me. She’d say, “That one doesn’t go there. Try
80 another one.” When one fit, she’d say, “Every piece belongs somewhere, doesn’t it?”

I would work on the puzzle when I came home from school, and piece by piece, I put the colors together. First the blues, which stood for the oceans. Then the reds, greens, oranges, yellows, and pinks of all the many different countries. Weeks later, only a handful of pieces were left, and when I put in the last piece, I announced with pride, “Ma, I’m finished!”

85 My mother peered at the puzzle and pointed at a green spot. That was where she was from, she said. A tiny country in the lower far-right. Then she pointed to where we were at that moment, a large pink area at the top far-left. After a moment, she pointed to the puzzle’s edge and then the floor, where there was nothing. “It’s dangerous there,” she said. “You fall off.”

“No, you don’t,” I said. “The world is round. It’s like a ball.”

² an American charity thrift store.

90 But my mother insisted, "That's not right."

Still, I continued, "When you get to the edge, you just come right back around to the other side."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"My teacher says. Miss Soo says." There was a globe on Miss Soo's desk at school, and whenever she talked about the oceans or the continents or plate tectonics, she would point to those features
95 on it. I didn't know whether what Miss Soo was telling me was true. I hadn't thought to ask.

"It's flat," my mother said, touching the map. "Like this." Then she swept the puzzle to the floor with her palm. All the connected pieces broke off from one another, the hours lost in a single gesture. "Just because I never went to school doesn't mean I don't know things."

I think now of what my mother knew then. She knew about war, what it felt like to be shot at in
100 the dark, what death looked like up close in your arms, what a bomb could destroy. Those were things I didn't know about, and it was all right not to know them, living where we did now, in a country where nothing like that happened. There was a lot I did not know.

We were different people, and we understood that then.

A few weeks later, we went to the park. It was cold and the grass was yellow underneath a lumpy
105 sheet of ice. Earlier, I had been reading while my mother watched television. She usually found a show to make her laugh, but that day she couldn't settle on one. She kept pressing the button on the remote control, flipping to the next channel, and then the next, until she started all over again.

I rushed over to the swings, hopped on the seat of one, and pumped my legs so that I shot myself
110 high into the air. My mother sat on a park bench alone, in her blue winter coat, facing me. She was not far. I called to her so she could see how high I had managed to swing on my own, but her head was turned away, her eyes focused on something else.

I stopped swinging and turned to see what she was looking at. A man had run out of an apartment building in his boxers and a white T-shirt. He was flustered.

A woman dressed in a pantsuit had followed him out, heels tapping on the sidewalk like a pencil
115 on a table.

The man glanced behind him, stopped, and screamed, "It's over. We're finished!" When the woman tried to embrace him, he batted away her arms.

I walked over to my mother and stood right in front of her, blocking her view of the couple. "Let's
120 go home," I said. She looked at me and there were tears in her eyes. "It's snowing," she said, and glanced away. She said it once, like that. In a small, clear voice. *It's snowing*. But the way she said it made it seem like it was not about snow at all. Something that I can't ever know about her. Then my mother looked up at me again and said, "I never have to worry about you, do I?" I nodded, even though I wasn't sure whether it was really a question.

Soon after, sometime in the night when I was asleep, she walked out the door with a suitcase. My
125 father told me he saw her leave. And he did nothing.

All of this was years ago, but I can still feel the sadness of that time, waiting for her to come back. I know now what I couldn't have known then – she wouldn't just be gone; she'd stay gone. I don't think about why she left. It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that she did. What more is there to think about than that?

130 Often, I dream of her face, still young like she was then, and although I can't remember the sound of my mother's voice, she is always trying to tell me something, her lips wrapped around shapes I can't hear. The dream might last only a few seconds, but that's all it takes, really, to undo the time that has been put between us. I wake from these dreams raw, a child still, though I am 45 now, and grieve the loss of her again and again.

135 My father did not grieve. He had done all of this life's grieving when he became a refugee. To lose your love, to be abandoned by your wife, was a thing of luxury. It meant that you were alive.

The other night, I saw an image of the Earth on the evening news. I had seen it many times before, and although my mother was not there, I spoke to her as if she were. "See? It really is round. Now we know for sure." I said it out loud again, and even though it disappeared, I knew what I'd said had become a sound in the world.

140 Afterward, I went to the bathroom mirror and stared at the back of my mouth. I opened my mouth wide; saw the hot, wet, pink flesh, and the dark center where my voice came out of; and I laughed, loud and wild. The sound went into the air vent, and I imagined the people living in the building who would hear it wondering to themselves where a sound like that came from, what could
145 make a woman laugh like that at this hour of the night.

(2020)