

# jiadai lin

## IN THE BLUE HOUSE

IT IS LATE-AUGUST 1997 WHEN MY FAMILY pulls off the Long Island Expressway after a days-long drive from Milwaukee. Nine years old, I roll down the window and try to smell the ocean. How far away is it and in what direction? Which roads might take us there? I am disoriented on this unfamiliar sliver of land.

Bright specks appear along the wooded highway. Pieces of napkins and receipts and Dunkin' Donuts coffee cups. Some of it dangling from the trees, some of it caught in the metal lane divider. I can't see past the filth, as sparse as it is. I am searching for affirmation of a place that I have antagonized in my mind: New York, crowded and urban, nearly as far from home as I could land. It would have been a concession to smell the ocean and feel a lightness in my shoulders. To look around and see that this place is actually a whole lot of wilderness, of thick pine forests and grassy fields lit by the sun. Instead, my chest tightens with a voice that rises above the whirl of tires on concrete: *you're a New Yorker now.*

I didn't want it to be so. I am a Beijing-born country girl who immigrated at age two to Wisconsin, land of dairy farms and mystic lakes and football. I am the cousin who would grow up in *Mei Guo* — America, a place that translates to *Beautiful Country* — and in this new landscape I would conjure the earthy beauty that Dad described about the homeland. In Wisconsin, I was surrounded not by family but by forests and cornfields and rivers that Dad and I would walk along for hours. In gentle Mandarin, he would tell me stories of the farm in China, the teachers who encouraged him to test for college, the ones who slapped his forearms with pencils when he did not behave. Always the same stories from Dad, always the same fondness. I am his firstborn child, his only daughter, the one who, when Mom was pregnant, the nurses predicted would be twin boys. In a few years, there will be a second child in our family, a son, but for now it is just me, a lone girl filling a void in my own way. Dad grew up in a time and place where a boy meant carrying on the family name and a girl

was something to eventually give away. But that insult never seemed to reach me. I took in these stories feeling a particular kinship to Dad, to the boy who dreamed of crossing the Pacific, who was foolish enough to perhaps try. I listened eagerly as if I hadn't heard the tales before, as if I didn't already know where I came from.

When Dad found a postdoctoral position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, I didn't want to go. I wanted to cling forever onto this piece of the American Midwest that felt like mine. But eventually, I got in the car and we drove east. Because I didn't have a choice in the matter and because this was the immigrant way, to leave places we love to follow possibility.

Off the expressway, up Country Road 97, which takes us from the southern to northern shores of the island, we pull into the driveway of a basement apartment in the house of a university professor. This is our first home on Long Island, before the blue house, and the moment we walk in we know that we cannot stay here long. The windowless rooms reek of wet leaves and rusted-over plumbing — living here will surely make us sick, the way yearning for home is already beginning to take over my body. In that dark apartment, my vision blurs and my hands shake. I drop bowls of soup handed to me for dinner and sweat through sheets at night trying to sleep. We stay outdoors as much as possible, taking in the thick, salty humidity, strolling through summer nights punctured by the clicking buzz of cicadas.

*Where's the ocean?* We ask constantly, to each other, and to those we encounter.

The professor directs us down a series of roads, starting at the farmer's stand and winding deeper and deeper into the woods, where the homes grow massive and secluded behind long driveways occupied by BMWs and Mercedes. And just as we begin to wonder if the professor misled us on purpose — he did seem a bit impatient about Dad's heavy accent and our Midwestern clumsiness — a line of pine trees opens into a sweeping marsh. The air empties out. Seagulls with round, white bodies and pale, yellow beaks dip elegantly, dangerously, close to our car.

The three of us take off our shoes and pick our way across the pebbly beach toward the water, toward the horizon, toward Connecticut. We stand in the shallow waves with seaweed lapping at our ankles. We lick our fingers after dipping them in the cool water. We walk back to a bench by the parking lot and eat sandwiches and soup that Mom made earlier in the day. Dad tells a story of how, when he first met

Mom studying at the university in her hometown, a frigid and landlocked city deep in China's Northeastern Peninsula, he promised that he would eventually take her to see the ocean. And now here we are, three inland kids finding themselves at the shore.

It takes us nearly four years of living in motels and apartments before we can afford the blue house. It is a simple colonial on a street where each home is framed by a grassy block of lawn and giant oak trees growing by the curb. The ground floor stacked with red brick and the second story covered with wooden shingles painted a robin's egg blue, it is the only house on the block that isn't beige or gray or brown. On an overcast afternoon, Mom picks me up from school to meet the realtor. I stand at the top of the driveway and gaze into the second-story bedroom windows that will soon belong to my parents. The shutters match the afternoon sky, a bright white, perfectly open to possibility.

On moving day, we rent a carpet cleaner and haul it up and down the stairs. We want to start fresh in the first home my parents have ever owned, but we also accept items that the previous owners have left behind — a drawer of knives and cheese graters, a kitchen table with a corner gnawed off by a dog, an entire bedroom set for my room. We stand in the foyer and peer up the staircase, listening for the echoes of our voices. We walk around the backyard, a fenced third of an acre, level and grassy, and look back at our house from every corner. *Our house*, we are still getting used to calling it that. We notice a patch of dirt the size of a pool table boxed off by wooden beams and agree that it would be perfect for a vegetable garden. Dad says, *I never thought I'd farm my own land in America.*

With having a house, I discover an unexpected stressor. *Xin teng* — literally, *heart pain* — expresses tenderness and regret towards something precious that is lost or wasted. When I leave a bobby pin on the ceramic soap dish in the shower, I find the next day that it has left a small rust stain that cannot be scrubbed off. Accidental nicks on the kitchen counter, doorknobs banged into the wall — at every turn looms a reminder of the inevitable wear and tear of routine; that, like us, our house will age and eventually cease to be. One day, I am holding a picture of my family up to the light against a windowpane when it slips out of my fingers and drops into a

crack in the windowsill. I feel the *xin teng* immediately. I imagine the blue house being demolished one day and somebody finding this picture of an Asian family. Modest-looking parents with simple haircuts; a small boy sitting comfortably on his mother's lap; and a lanky teenage girl on the cusp of a transformation. What won't be apparent: our careful selection of clothing for this occasion, the excited but tense car ride to Sears, Dad's awkwardly formal exchange with the photographer about where to stand. The picture is now irretrievable, no longer ours to keep. It lives deep in a crevice of the house, belonging to somebody else, or nobody at all.

Up in my room, I spend hours logging my wildest aspirations in my journal, believing that each of them can come true. My teenage years are consumed not by the ordinary commotion of school or boys or having friends over so we can lock the door to paint our nails in private, but of something beyond. I dream of growing up to be a novelist or screenwriter, working alone at a desk by an open window overlooking an expanse of thickly wooded mountains. I dream of being a singer-songwriter telling stories of youth and heartbreak, road-tripping across the country with a hard-cased guitar in the trunk of my car. In each scenario, I am fleeing suburban Long Island, fleeing New York and its haughty sophistication, all that suffocating ambition dressed up as potential.

When I let some of these visions slip to Mom, she says, *you're a dreamer*.

This is not a compliment, and I am pricked with regret that I've exposed myself. She says, *I have to work hard to keep you on the right path*.

I am reminded that living securely in the upper middle class is the ultimate goal for an immigrant like me. If I can accomplish that, I will have already done far better than my parents.

More than a decade later, as I'm about to graduate law school, I will find myself having a Blue Moon on a terrace overlooking the Hudson River and explaining to a friend that I am the sacrificial good girl in my family tree. I will make the safe choices and earn the stable income so my children may flourish in the arts. The next generation, not mine, will have room to dream. I will mean this in an honorable, sensible way. But my friend, a film student, will sit back in his chair and say, *that's very mature of you*, and I will hear the sadness in his voice and recognize that it mirrors my own.

My brother becomes part of a posse of neighborhood boys. They fly down the streets on their bikes, standing on their pedals, confident and carefree like statues. That American ease I can't seem to embody as I spend my days up in my room writing in my journal.

A few times a week, the posse comes knocking on our door at dinnertime carrying footballs and baseball mitts, asking for my brother. They stand with their backs pressed to the wall and steal glances at our flowered wallpaper, our fish tank, our pile of shoes by the door. Their noses twitch as they contemplate the earthy, savory smells that fill our tiny foyer. This much is obvious: we are the only Asian family on the block.

Mom reminds us of this constantly as she agonizes over the details of our comings and goings. She hesitates to make eye contact with the neighbors, then dwells at dinnertime about whether she had been rude not to say hello. She expects us all to help maintain the lawn, forever pulling out patches of crabgrass, because *things like this matter*. She comes home from an overnight shift at the nursing home and gets sidetracked halfway to the door. Sometimes I see her from the upstairs window as I am getting ready for school. Her pink purse dangles from the crook of her elbow as she's bent in half, a pile of spidery weeds gathering at her side.

For a long time, I am sure Mom is just paranoid. After all, the neighbors are nice to us. The parents of the posse wave as they drive by. In the winter, our next-door neighbor offers to clear our driveway with his snowblower. And in the summer, his wife shares gardening tips with my parents over the fence. But then one day a few years later, we notice slashes of black marker on our mailbox. Soon after, we find a bumper sticker that is the American flag painted black slapped onto the back of our Dodge Caravan. This seems targeted; it surely doesn't feel good or right, but we don't discuss it. In Mom's language, every word is tinged with the shame of being different, but we never call it by name.

In the closet of my parents' bedroom, through the little wooden cutout door in the ceiling leading to the attic, there is a folder with my documents. *Your brother was born down the street, but you're different*, Mom says as she climbs down from a chair clutching the folder. She flips through the passports, utilities bills, school transcripts, and copies of everything organized in clear plastic sheets. She performs this ritual

once in a while during our first years in the blue house but by the time I am in high school, almost daily. I awake in the early morning hours to see a sliver of light below my door and hear my parents whispering aggressively. Dad tells me later, *your mother, she wanted to check the papers again*. When we go away for vacation, Mom labels my folder with a sign that says *documents inside*, as if to signal to potential burglars that there is no money here, just boring documents, so please don't mess this folder up.

My brother and I laugh about this. Our mother is worried about nothing, we say. But over the years, without realizing it, the fear rubs off on me. Not Mom's frenzied, overt fear, but something more subtle, a compulsion to prove myself again and again.

One day, I will graduate from law school and accept a job at a law firm and I will look back and see it there, that trail of fear drip, drip, dripping, right up to my feet.

The backyard slowly morphs. The lawn is crabgrass-free summer after summer. Mature oaks are cut down when they loom too dauntingly over the telephone pole. Dad's garden stays within the confines of the pool-table patch but reaches upwards each year, a lush maze of trellises dangling with cucumbers and green beans and bitter melon.

When our neighbor with the snowblower starts stuttering his words, we all become worried, then sad. By the time he dies from a brain tumor in the winter, his wife and Mom are friends, and Mom is invited over for a Christmas party. Mom has never attended a non-work party with non-Chinese Americans. Over the phone, we discuss what she should wear, what gift she should bring, how she could respond to common conversation topics. I am twenty-four years old, a lawyer working at my firm in Manhattan. I know all about schmoozing with people who have little in common with me.

After the party, Mom reports that the inside of our neighbor's house is even fancier than she imagined. They have a venetian-styled kitchen and artwork hung

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up on the walls, things she has only seen in magazines. When I ask her if she had fun, Mom says she is just relieved it's over.

One day, I visit Long Island and the house isn't blue anymore. My parents had the wooden shingles ripped off and replaced with strips of beige vinyl. I don't tell them I dislike the new look. I don't tell them I think it is boring, uninspired. I don't tell them that I miss the quirky blue. I know they paid good money to have their house done up to look like the others on the block. I know it's a matter of belonging.

All my time spent alone has prepared me well to be a junior associate at a law firm. For ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day, I sit at my computer thirty-five floors above Rockefeller Center. I read through pages and pages of case law, write research memos, and occasionally get so lost in doing a good job that I forget the nagging pull of dissatisfaction in my stomach. At night, I come home to a studio apartment minutes away from the New York Stock Exchange, a perfectly updated, white room that I've filled with teal, cerulean, aquamarine furniture — unconsciously summoning the colors of the sea and sky. I strip down to my underwear and climb into bed, imagining the other young professionals stacked above and below me along the spine of our building. I read through my old journals like they are fiction, stories from another life and, in many devastating ways, they are.

One weekend in the summer, Mom takes the train into the city with my brother. In the evening, the three of us go out onto the rooftop of my building and lay back on a daybed, our feet propped up on a coffee table and our heads reclined. Our faces tilt toward the darkening sky framed by buildings rising, rising, and lighting up all around us. Beyond the rooftop: traffic on the FDR, apartment parties, subways veering on their tracks. A balmy, city night enveloping us. Laughter drifting from the next daybed over. A group of friends and a bottle of wine, the story of a hot date, perhaps, or a promotion. The sound of comradeship, of ease. I could recognize it anywhere.

Mom leans over and says to my brother, so earnestly that it makes me want to cry, *if you work hard one day you could have this too.* 🍷