

Haunting

It was an earthquake that introduced my sister and I to Amina, Aygul, and Aynur. I was eight and my sister was six. My mom was out, and me and my sister were busy in our room pretending to be ancient Egyptians while my dad worked in the other room. We were four floors up, and when the earthquake struck we could feel the building swaying beneath our feet. Me and my sister flung ourselves to the base of our bunk bed, following the earthquake protocol my dad had drilled into us. Seconds later he rushed into our room, yelling at us to get up so we could leave the building, worried about an aftershock. It took him a second to realize both me and my sister were topless, imitating ancient Egyptian fashion down to the last detail.

“What on earth are you doing?!” he yelled, and my sister and I jumped to grab the closest dresses we could find and ran out the door with him. The cold bit at our bare shoulders when we reached the ground floor.

It was 2012 in Urumqi, Xinjiang, China, and women and girls were expected to cover their shoulders and their hair. Even at eight years old I remember feeling exposed in my sleeveless dress, as we watched our neighbors all around us pour out of their buildings. The Chinese movie Aftershock was still fresh in everyone’s minds and no one wanted to die in those rusty orange colored apartment buildings. We milled around below, waiting to be safe, chatting nervously with our neighbors. Right across the street an older woman sat on a bench surrounded by children. She must have come from a building further from ours, because she was surprised and curious to see two little blond children among the crowd. My dad was always one to strike up a conversation with a stranger, and she was eager to ask her curious questions. We were Americans, we had lived in China for three years, yes we spoke some Uyghur, no we didn’t go to Chinese school, etc. When she was satisfied she brought her grandkids over to say hello and told them to be friends with us. I felt embarrassed at first but was quickly surprised by the friendliness and kindness of her granddaughters. We exchanged names and ages. Amina was nine, Aygul was seven, and Aynur was six. Introductions are easier as kids, and we started playing together immediately, even with our bare shoulders and conspicuous blond hair. They didn’t care. In retrospect, this was the small beginning of a friendship that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I’ll spoil the sad end of this story. It’s 2024, and I haven’t seen or spoken to them for six years. I live in America, and attend university in the city I was born in but don’t remember. I still dream in Uyghur but awake I can’t remember basic sentences. I am studying International Affairs and for my capstone at the Honors College I am creating a comic book memoir of my childhood in China. I am terrified. In all the years between, I have tried my very best not to think or talk about Urumqi, and I hate myself for it but it feels like an impossible traumatic, emotional wall to overcome. I realize that I have not processed anything when my eyes fill with tears every time I remember any detail of my childhood. I don’t want memories. I want to book a flight to Urumqi and to search the streets we used to live on until I find them.

Here is my dilemma, both broadly ethical and deeply personal, the question that will define the rest of my life. Will I stay silent so that I can hope to see them again, so I can return home someday, so I can find some peace or some closure? Or, will I share my haunting with the rest of the world, use my voice and speak up as one of the few witnesses of China's genocide of the Uyghur people, and in doing so guarantee that I will never return home?

Me and my sister were born in the United States, but our parents relocated us to Beijing when we were two and four. My parents were chronic travellers. My dad had grown up in the military and had never lived in a place for long. My first international flight happened before I was old enough to remember. When they got to Beijing, they started the enormous task of learning Mandarin from scratch. Me and my sister had it easier, picking it up naturally at the neighborhood Chinese preschool. Beijing was our experience of the classic Han Chinese city and culture. My parents learned to adjust both to life in China and to life in a city of 15 million people. My sister and I had to be pulled out of our afternoon English classes because we were starting to speak English with a Chinese accent. We were the only foreign kids in our preschool and children everywhere are mean, but especially mean to those who don't fit in. We didn't make real friends.

However, my parents had never planned to settle in Beijing. They had planned to move to Urumqi from the start. Urumqi is the capital of China's Xinjiang province that the Uyghur Islamic people group call home. In 2009 hundreds were killed on the streets as long simmering racial tensions between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese erupted into widespread violence¹. It wasn't until 2011 that things had become safe enough for foreigners to move there. At this time things weren't so oppressive, and Uyghurs and Han alike felt free to express their hatred and grudges towards each other. I remember one of our first taxi rides in Urumqi, listening to the Uyghur taxi driver tell us how crooked and evil the Han were. Han and Uyghurs tended to keep to themselves, and the North of the city became the Han part while the South became the Uyghur part.

When we moved to Urumqi, our apartment in the South of Urumqi had sat empty for two years because our Han landlord couldn't bear to live there anymore after the brutality she had witnessed during the riots. To make things worse, the apartment was on the fourth floor. In Chinese, the word for the number four and the word for death are pronounced the same, which makes four the unluckiest number. In short, our house was haunted by the ghosts of Urumqi.

¹ Reuters Staff. "Xinjiang Riots Pre-Planned at 50 Places: State Media." *Reuters*, 19 July 2009, www.reuters.com/article/world/xinjiang-riots-pre-planned-at-50-places-state-media-idUSTRE56H1LN/.

Living a childhood free from the threat of violence is a luxury many of my American friends take for granted. Xinjiang was a tumultuous province in the early 2010s. The population shifted significantly as rural Uyghurs migrated to cities and Han Chinese relocated from the East to Xinjiang (meaning New Border in Chinese) for employment. At the same time, East Turkestan separatist groups and terrorist groups carried out several terrorist attacks, including a bomb and knife attack on a train station in South Urumqi that killed 3 and injured 79 in April 2014², and an attack on a popular nearby market that killed 31 in South Urumqi in May 2014³. As a child I was somewhat sheltered from the violence by my parents, but the agitation still hung in the air.

My sister and I were homeschooled by our Mom. Nearly every single afternoon Amina, Aygul, and Aynur would come to the bottom of our apartment and yell our names.

“Sabiha!! Mubarek!!”

We would run to the window and yell back at them, then rush out onto the street. We would spend the afternoon playing together, running around and exploring the neighborhood, doing homework together. We weren't wealthy and so we made do with cheap games. We played hopscotch, jump rope, hacky sack, and football (soccer). We used pieces of drywall we found to draw on the walls of the apartment buildings and on the sidewalk. The game we played the most was called pijer, or Chinese jump rope in English. As kids we always spoke Uyghur together. The highlight of the afternoon would be when we walked to the front of our neighborhood to buy a snack for a couple yuan. In the harsh wintertime we would buy slices of naan, Uyghur flatbread, roasted over the fire covered in chili. In the hot summertime we would buy popsicles. We five were as close as sisters.

As we grew older we changed together. We spent more time doing homework and at each other's houses. We went on trips with our parents to city parks and amusement parks and a farm on the outskirts of the city. We went out to eat and went rock climbing together. The effects of China's growing oppression of the Uyghurs began to creep in subtly. We switched from speaking Uyghur to speaking Chinese, because Uyghur was no longer taught in schools. We no longer explored (trespassed) with the freedom we had as children, because police officers and cameras were everywhere.

China's harsh laws and oppression of the Uyghur people affected their family deeply. The girls had three younger siblings, meaning their family had four more children than they were

² BBC. “Deadly China Blast at Xinjiang Railway Station.” *BBC News*, 30 Apr. 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27225308.

³ BBC. “Attack on Chinese Market Kills 31.” *BBC News*, 23 May 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27502652.

allowed by China's two child policy. This meant that their parents lived in separate cities, pretending to be divorced to try to get by undetected. We only saw their mom and younger siblings periodically when they visited. Their father sold cooking oil and lived with the three older girls in Urumqi so they could get a better education. They were very poor. Their apartment was bare and some winters we could only play with one of the girls at a time because they only had one coat to share between them.

Urumqi turned into a police state over the course of 2016 and 2017. Some of the changes were so gradual that we didn't notice them, like a frog in boiling water. Small police stations were erected on every street with tall poles with lights on them so that you couldn't go anywhere out of view of the lights. CCTV cameras were installed everywhere. Airport-like security checkpoints were set up at the entrance of every single neighborhood, mall, park, and train station, and since as foreigners we didn't have a Chinese ID, we had to bring a copy of our passport everywhere we went. We had to show our passport just to get into our own neighborhood.

Some changes were drastic and terrifying. The police targeted devout Muslims, people who had traveled to Muslim countries in the past, artists and writers, and anyone else who they deemed a threat. Once devout Muslims had to bury or burn their Qurans and religious books, cut off their beards, and remove their head coverings. Multiple friends asked us to hide things in our house, since the police seemed to leave foreigners alone for the most part. Worst of all, black vans came in the night and took away our neighbors. Everyone knew someone who had gone missing.

Distrust, suspicion, and fear crept into the heart of every person living under those oppressive conditions. Joy was hard to come by. Even so, as the end of 2017 approached we had no idea what was in store for us. My dad owned a business and in early 2018 we had to renew our work visas. Chinese visas had always been a difficult process, but this time around was different. We tried everything but the government wouldn't allow us to renew. Time was running out, so we decided to fly to Thailand to try to continue the visa process. We didn't know what was going to happen, so we said goodbye to our friends and neighbors just in case. I remember the night we said goodbye to Amina, Aygul, and Aynur in vivid pieces. We were all crying, sitting on the carpets in their apartment under the bright light. We left with only our most important belongings, two check in bags and a carry on, and then discovered at the airport that we only had one check in bag each.

We arrived in Thailand and spent the next few weeks in a daze. Chiang Mai is peaceful, quiet, and warm, completely opposite from Urumqi in March. Instead of reapplying for visas and going back, we were met with bad news every single day. All other foreigners living in Urumqi were forced to leave, and some were taken by police and interrogated first. The first reports of the awful scale of the mass incarceration of the Uyghurs came out. We deleted all social media and messaging apps that connected us to our friends in hopes that they would stay safe. We learned that my parents were most likely on a blacklist of people never allowed back in China. We started to realize that Thailand was our new home. We couldn't afford to move back to the

US. It took us several months to find a job and a house to rent. We had lost most of our belongings and so our house stayed bare until we could afford to furnish it.

The year following was one of the worst periods of my life. I found myself starting high school in a brand new place, miles apart from everything I called home. I had lost all my friends, I had lost my sisters. I checked the news constantly and watched as irrefutable evidence for genocide was published. I naively hoped that this revelation would catalyze the world into preventing it, but what could they do? What could I do? It felt like I was paralyzed and helpless, forced to watch the end of my world.

I was filled with a deep and overwhelming sense of anger and injustice, one that lies now at the base of all of my thoughts and feelings, decisions and judgements. I have learned that PTSD flashbacks can often just consist of the emotions of the traumatic event, not the actual sights and sounds of the experience. In the same way, I feel haunted by the emotions this instilled in me, while my mind continues to place massive barriers of memory between me and my childhood.

Sometimes I feel like a completely different person than the child that lived in Urumqi, as if someone else's memories were planted in my brain, or as if it was all a dream. I want to have normal dreams and goals, such as finding a steady job, making money or having a family. I watch my peers move on with the timeline of their lives while I feel stuck in the past, filled with a loneliness that comes from knowing how strange and alien your own experiences are from everyone else's. I want to move on, but I can't, not while my friends, my sisters are still out there, while my hometown remains a police state and the world continues to look on helplessly. Will these memories just cripple me for the rest of my life? What do you do with all this trauma?

Even among refugees and displaced people I have had a unique experience. In leaving China I had a taste of the experience of a refugee, but in China I was already an outsider. Even though I was born in America, even in the same city I now live in, I feel less at home here than in any other place I've lived. And among the diaspora of those whose lives were affected by the Uyghur genocide, I have a unique place of privilege, because I am an American citizen, and my blood family are all safe in America. It would be so easy to stay quiet. To make surface level friends and avoid making people uncomfortable. To try to attain the American dream and to have a vague concern for those far away people who do not enjoy the same freedoms I do. To fit in.

But of course I can't, instead I am called again and again back to the issue as if it has been written into my DNA. I feel burdened by a great obligation to find some way to help, to tell the world about the Uyghurs, about my experiences, and about the people I lost.

At the same time, I miss them so much. I miss home. I lost everything and it changed me deeply and made me who I am today. But a voice constantly whispers in my head: "What if I could have it all back? What if I could at least see them one more time?"

I have so much I can say about the Uyghurs, about the genocide, about China, but so far I have avoided saying it because deep down what I really want is to go back. I want to find out what my lost sisters are doing now, as adults. Did they escape incarceration? Do they have children? Where are they employed? Do they still think about me like I think about them,

listening to their voices and imagining them as if they were here? Wondering how they would have aged and changed? Even now I see their faces in crowds and my heart leaps for a second and then leaves me feeling hollow when I realize how impossible it is.

But what could I accomplish by going back, other than getting another look at my lost friends and lost home? I can't live there anymore, and even my presence could endanger my friends. I vowed to myself that I will not let fear and selfishness guide my actions, but instead love and courage. Love wants what's best for others, even if it is painful to the both of us. It does not ask for what it can take, but what it can give. Courage does not cling to the past, it springs into the future even knowing what it might cost us. Jorge Luis Borges says "We have a very precise image—an image at times shameless—of what we have lost, but we are ignorant of what may follow or replace it"⁴. I will choose to believe in a future I can create, where I will at the very least be an outspoken witness, and at best change the world, even if I have to do it one person at a time.

This will be my act of love. I will write my comic book, and I will publish it. I will conduct research about the genocide, and I again I will publish it. I will post on social media and attend conferences and marches and demonstrations. I will associate myself with outspoken East Turkestan separatists and Uyghur advocates. I will do all this, and so ensure that I will never see Amina, Aygul, and Aynur ever again. I will make it certain that I will never set foot in China again, not to sightsee in the modern cities in the East, and certainly not to walk the streets of Urumqi ever again. I will make sure that Chinese nationals and Uyghurs with families stuck in China will not want to be seen with me.

I will seal the coffin of my past life shut, and bring to life a version of myself that does not stand by and stay silent in the face of injustice, that fights fear and oppression even at great cost to myself. I will find a way that I can help, even if it seems to be an impossible challenge. I will remember through the tears. I will do this out of love, because my sisters didn't make it out like I did. They will haunt me as the most welcome of ghosts.

⁴ Sorrentino, Fernando. *Seven Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*. Paul Dry Books, 1971.