

The Places We Call Home

I had never been above the clouds before. And I don't mean in the figurative sense. I don't mean elation, that feeling when you achieve your greatest goal or get accepted into your dream college or job. I mean in a literal sense. Along the narrow roads winding up the mountain, where at its peak, the wind is sharp and cold, biting your face. Where the air is thin, and whistles past your ears, trying to tell secrets; trying to tell you what is hidden above the clouds. Looking down, below you the ground is nowhere to be seen.

I had never been above the clouds before Taiwan. In the country where green covers the mountains and hills and surrounds the highways. I had never been away from home, across the ocean, across the globe, until Taiwan.

It was only a few months before that my girlfriend, Meiya, and her mom, Christy, invited me on their trip to Taiwan, and only shortly after that my ticket was bought, making it a reality. When Meiya was younger, she would visit Taiwan every summer with her mom. From the time she was an infant until she was 12, they would make this trip to see their family, the country her mom was born in. But this time, it would be special, 7 years lying between this and the last visit. And with them, a complete foreigner to the country which meant so much to them.

It would be my first trip out of the country, my first time on a plane, and my first time away from home for 3 weeks.

At the airport, my saxophone strapped over my shoulder and boarding pass in hand, my mom hugs me tight, her head reaching my shoulder. She looks up at me, holding onto my right arm. "Behave out there," she says. This is something she always tells me. It doesn't matter where I'm going; out with friends, to school, to work, and, as it has now been proven, across the overseas. And as sure as she tells me this, I tell her that I will.

Set to board in 45 minutes, Meiya, Christy, and I, make our way up the long elevator to customs. Like in the movies, my mom stands waving to us as we ascend, and suddenly I am taken back to my first day of school, a 6-year old me holding back tears as she leaves me in a room full of strangers where I am expected to get along with them and learn. There is that feeling of tears welling up behind the eyes. That feeling of the heart sinking as you are left to unfamiliarity. This feeling stays with me as I pass through customs, through the terminals, and finally, onto the plane.

On the plane, I peer out across the window seat where Christy sits through a window of deep blue, dark with streaks of clouds. The screen in front of me tells me there are 13 hours until we reach Taiwan. Next to me, Meiya leans her head on my shoulder, sleeping so easily as she always does, while Christy attempts to get comfortable in her seat.

I only manage to doze off a handful of times, and in between sleep I listen to jazz to keep me comfort. The sound of my favorite music makes the physical discomfort tolerable. What Taiwan will be like, I have little idea, but eventually I am ready to experience it.

I wake up from a light sleep, and soon after, the plane lands.

It becomes Saturday again, as if we traveled back in time 13 hours. Already, I think of what time it is back home, devising a formula in my head to make the calculation quickly. If I subtract 3 hours, then switch pm to am, then I have the time. I wonder if my parents are sleeping, if my dog, Luffy, is fed, if my dad is doing ok. I wonder about all the things back home and it has only been a day.

In my mind, the airport is some sort of portal, people from different parts of the world gathering upon arrival to go to places and meet people unknowable to me. I am curious where these people come from, what sorts of lives they lead back home, what brought them to Taiwan.

We make it to the bus station with our baggage, and Christy speaks to the clerk, a woman with beautiful short hair that outline her cheeks. They speak in Mandarin, of course, and I don't understand a word, a fact that I would have to come to terms with.

On the bus, a 2-hour ride south to Christy's hometown, Taichung, the highways were lined on either side with views of trees and hills that stretched for what seemed like forever. I could tell when we finally reached Taichung because of the tall buildings and wide streets which emerged as we pulled off the highway. All around us were rows and rows of moped scooters zooming past us, like a school of fish past a whale. I was afraid that the bus might run one over as we pulled to our stop, but from what I could tell, most Taiwanese, in cars or on scooters, drove with little fear.

Getting off the bus, the noise and heat and smell and tall buildings and people overwhelmed me, and I knew this was drastically different from the Santa Barbara beach town that I knew so well. It wasn't long after we pulled our luggage out of the bus that our ride arrived to pick us up and take us where we

would be staying. A gray Ford Explorer parked by the curb, and from the passenger seat came a woman with a jolly face whose thick rimmed glasses hung loosely on her nose. She ran towards Christy, embracing her, and all the anticipation and yearning those seven years built between them had been unleashed, all at once. She hugged Meiya, then turned to me, smiled, and shook my hand.

“Hello, I am Gina,” she said. “I am Christy’s little sister.”

Out from the driver’s seat, briefly greeting us, a man began to load our luggage into the car. He had a haste about him, and he wore athletic clothes and a fanny pack around his waist.

“That is my husband,” said Gina. She told me his name too, but it was quick, and I didn’t catch it. It wasn’t long before I started referring to them the way Meiya did. Wei-Wei Ayi (the first part being Gina’s nickname and “Ayi” meaning “aunt”) and Yi-Zhang (simply meaning “uncle”).

Waiting for us at their home was the full family. An older woman with short hair greeted us cheerfully. She gestured towards my shoes, which I began to take off in respect of the customs and spoke to me in a language I didn’t recognize as Chinese. Meiya translated for me, and later told me that she was her cousins’ grandmother, referred to as Chim Nai Nai, and like most older generations in Taiwan, spoke mainly in Taiwanese, an unwritten native dialect very different from Chinese.

Outside, a boy about my age and height, that wore glasses, a tank-top, basketball shorts, and Nike slippers, unloaded our luggage with Yi-Zhang. I greeted him, and he responded quietly, greeting me back in English. This was Ting-Shuan (or “Shaun” in English, although I only referred to him by his real name), Wei-Wei A-yi’s oldest son. Ting-Shuan studied Structural Engineering at a university a few hours away from Taichung. He also played basketball, loved the NBA which I pretended to know something about since it came from the States, and would remain one of the tallest Taiwanese people I would meet on the trip.

Inside, the house opened into a living room with a tall ceiling and huge fan hanging from it. Wooden mats were strewn about the couches which lined the walls, and low stools surrounded the dining room table. I began to hear an incessant chirping from somewhere, and looking down, I saw a small cockatiel that began to peck at my feet.

“Jiu-Jiu, no!” Ting Shuan said in his deep voice, walking in from outside carrying one of our luggage. Jiu-Jiu, named after the sound he made all day, scurried off back to his perch, running past a cage in which a hamster gnawed on its white bars.

“Mickey!” Meiya ran over to the cage and stuck her finger in between the cage.

The house was full of life—people and animals—and I wondered who else I would meet.

The next few days would be mostly uneventful, as I situated myself in a new environment and recovered from jetlag. Meiya and I stayed in the third-floor guest room, where Yi-Zhang and Ting-Shuen, always ready to help at any given moment, took our suitcases up the narrow, winding hallway. Across the way from our room, a pleasant smell drifted through the hall, and peering in, incense was burning, small trails of smoke carrying the smell along a shrine dedicated to ancestors.

It was not long before I met the few remaining members of the family. There was Li-Han (or in Lianne in English), the middle child who was so petite that I could have mistook her for the youngest, who I caught by surprise coming out of the bathroom as she opened her room's door. It must have been the afternoon, and I believe she had just woken up, a look of confusion on her face as I said hello nervously. I somehow felt so embarrassed that I didn't care to explain who I was. I simply walked back upstairs, a stranger in her house. Meiya, who had been away with her mom as I stayed home to sleep off the jet lag, laughed later at the story.

Then there was the youngest, Shiang-Shiang. The first time I met him, he was sprawled across the living room couch, shirtless. He had died blonde hair and looked at me without interest, as if I wasn't a stranger to him. Another night, as we ate dinner in the living room, he walked in from outside, wearing his KFC uniform. He had just gotten off work and smelled a little like fried chicken. But I will admit, the uniform is much nicer than in the U.S.

The last living thing in the house was brought down in Li-Han's arms, and that was the family cat, Mao-Mao. He looked around cautiously with big eyes, then began to stare down Jiu-Jiu, who shifted nervously where he perched. This would complete the family, excluding the countless neighbors, other relatives, and friends that passed in and out of Chim Nai Nai's home, each and every one of them welcome to sit and eat and talk for as long as they pleased. I was one of them who lived a little farther away but felt just as welcome.

"It's going to be fun," Christy translated for Yi-Zhang, as he drove while from the passenger seat Wei-Wei A-yi sat fed him bell fruit we had bought on the roadside. I-Zhang was excited to take us to Kenting, what he proudly called "The Hawaii of Taiwan," the first big stop of our 4-day road trip down south, along the west, then east coast of Taiwan. Despite seeming like a long journey, Taiwan is such a small island, that such a trip could be done in less than a week.

In the very back, Ting-Shuen, Li-Han, and Shiang-Shiang were sleeping, and Mao-Mao, who they didn't want to leave alone at home, came along with is in a mesh carrying bag. She too, was asleep.

Yi-Zhang had this excitement about him, especially taking us on the road. In fact, he was the first in the car that morning, a silver Mercedes van, wide awake and pushing us along as we trailed, still waking up. I would learn that he was also always the first one out of the car. And even though he had experienced this trip multiple times, for he was a natural adventurer who loved to fish, he seemed much more excited than we could possibly be.

But in Kenting, Christy told me that Yi-Zhang had planned for us to go rafting. In my mind, this would be a relaxing time. My mind conjured up images of a leisurely cruise down the ocean's waters, something relaxing from the constant driving, the hustle and bustle on the streets, the constant stops along this 4-day road trip; but when it came time, I realized I was mistaken.

We pulled into a cramped, dirt parking lot, guided by two eager locals who worked on the beach. They wore matching red caps and polo shirts, and waved their arms as they guided our big van into an open spot that was just big enough to fit in. We then quickly changed into our swimming clothes and walked down the sandy bank towards the shore.

At the very least, Yi-Zhang wasn't lying about Kenting being the "Hawaii" of Taiwan. I've never actually been to Hawaii, but the beaches of Kenting were what I imagined it looked like. The ocean's view was nothing short of spectacular. Few clouds clung to the sky and below it, the ocean was a wide expanse of the clearest, bluest water I had ever seen. On the right side of us as we stood on the shore, a large mountain with a soft peak overlooked what must have been its most prized possession, the blue of its ocean.

But before I could enjoy the view too much, I realized that Yi-Zhang's idea of "rafting" was different from mine, and by the look and Meiya and her cousins' faces, theirs too. To my right, Yi-Zhang stood squinting at the ocean, hand over his brow to block the sun, and smiled at me, that big smile of his, gesturing with his other hand towards the ocean. And down there, skidding along the ocean's surface, jet skis roared, dragging along with them on a thick rope tied to an inflatable raft filled with passengers whose joyful screams were unmistakably tinged with genuine fear as they held on, bracing the speed of the jet ski.

These screams cut through the calmness of the view before me, the same way the skis cut through the ocean's surface, leaving trails of disturbed, white water.

It was only a matter of minutes between my witnessing from a safe distance the rafting and then putting on heavy life jackets to join them.

“Good luck,” Christy told us while we stood before the empty rafts, helpless, her smiling as she held up her phone recording us. Those who had just got off their rafts giggled from what I believed must have been shocked as they stumbled off them, trying to regain their balance. The five of us—Meiya, Ting-Shuen, Li-Han, and Shiang-Shiang, and me—were guided along by the locals who all stood so comfortably in the waters, wearing only beach shorts and the occasional pair of sunglasses, as the waves pushed against their tanned bodies. It seemed to me that they could have been born in the very ocean itself. They spoke to one another in a language I did not recognize and when they did speak to us in Mandarin, which I still couldn’t understand, I noticed that they spoke it differently. I was later told by Christy that the farther you traveled down south, Kenting being on the southernmost tip of Taiwan, the larger the indigenous population became, a population that often spoke native languages other than Mandarin.

The guide helping us onto the raft, a stocky man with had a friendly, childish face, smiled at us while he gave directions, to which I noticed his teeth stained red as if he had just swallowed a bottle of ink. The others around him had a similar smile, which I found initially frightening, until I later learned that it was from chewing betelnut, an addictive fruit grown in tropical areas which stains teeth from long consumption. On a different occasion, I would be offered betelnut, and despite my curiosity, I kindly declined.

After taking our positions on the raft, gripping onto the wet handles until our knuckles turned white, the man with betelnut-stained teeth pointed along the rope to the jet ski driver oddly enough, I began to put complete faith into. He was a young boy with a slim, athletic build, a buzzcut, and a pair of shades on his smooth face. He couldn’t have been much older than any of us on that raft, and by the smile on his face, I can tell he loved his job.

Suffice to say that, as I expected, this experience would not be the relaxing one I had hoped it would be. We went through two rounds of intense rafting, each one resulting in us screaming and shouting curses. At that moment, despite the language barriers, Meiya’s cousins and I shared a special moment, and at the very least I was grateful for that. We had shared the intensity, the life or death feeling as our arms ached from holding on for dear life, as well a few “oh my gods” and “holy shits.” Beneath it all, was a genuine rush and joy, pure adrenaline that is enough to bring anyone together. By the end, we stumbled on the shore, panting and looking at one another in lingering shock. Yi-Zhang and Christy waited for us on the shore, and by the look on their faces, they could have been having more fun than us. Wei Wei A-yi sat in a beach chair comforting the cat who hated the sand.

Luckily, the intensity decreased as we went on. By the last ride, a slow cruise along the water, the sun had begun to set and the real beauty of the night began to show itself. Afterwards, done with the rafts,

all of walked into the ocean. The water was warm and clear, I could see my feet touch the sandy bottom and my hands as I moved them.

Meiya and I floated on our backs, and Li-Han wondered how we did it. We tried to show her how, but she couldn't get it. Ting-Shuen and Shiang-Shiang joined us, and beneath the setting sun, we shared words in one another's language, Meiya being the mediator. We laughed and pushed water towards one another. Then, drawn at the same time behind us, we watched the sky as it changed before us. I held Meiya in my arms, and we let the waves rock us slowly. Everyone on the shore and in the ocean around us also looked at the sky, and the soft mountain, all of us drawn to the shifting light.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Meiya asked.

"Piao-Liang," I responded. "Piao-Liang."

It meant beautiful in Chinese, as I had just been taught.

On our last day on the road, having visited 3 more cities which lined Taiwan's coast, we cut our way through the mountain as a shortcut back to Taichung.

For the most part after Kenting, I resigned myself to going along with few questions. Where exactly we were going and how long it would take to get there became less and less of a concern. Yi-Zhang drove and guided us with such confidence; I knew that at the end of whatever stretch of driving, we would get somewhere beautiful, where he would inevitably urge us to take our phones out and take pictures. I can tell he was proud of the beauty of his country.

As we got to the bottom of the mountain, Yi-Zhang at the wheel, maneuvering the narrow, winding roads calmly, I soon realized that this would be a spectacular drive. He'd been on that route many times at that point and was eager for us to get the best view of the city before the sun fell behind the mountains which surrounded us.

Outside the trees and mountains flashed by as we went along the roads. I had hardly ever seen such density of green, trees covering every inch of the mountainsides. Even Mao-Mao, who had been sleeping in the back with Meiya's cousins, came up, stretched her legs along the window, and sat staring outside.

I soon gave up counting the signs that marked the altitude. And as we ascended the roads became narrower and narrower, but Yi-Zhang didn't bother to slow down. We made our first stop at a visitor area, a wooden deck overlooking a valley, Meiya, Christy, and I took photos, Yi-Zhang acting as a highly

enthusiastic tour-guide. Then we stood for a moment, leaning on the wooden railing, looking at the valley of gray stone below us. How stark the contrast between the calm, gray waters below and the vibrant green trees which surrounded us above.

We continued for what felt like hours, the roads getting narrower and narrower. At some points, the two opposing lanes turned into one, sometimes at corners. I closed my eyes at these moments, putting faith in Yi-Zhang and not wanting to feel sick with anxiety. At one point I even saw a mother with her child holding her waist, driving along these roads on a scooter. Taiwanese are quite brave.

“Years ago,” Christy began to say, leaning slightly over Meiya in the seat between us, “Meiya’s father used to drive these same roads, and he never had to worry about drinking coffee to stay awake. He was always on the edge of excitement because they are so narrow. There was a word he used. Was it... clothespin?”

She stopped for a second, index finger on her chin, while she tried to remember. No, it wasn’t clothespin. But it was something with the word pin in it.” I began to think about the word she was trying to remember, while Meiya looked slightly annoyed. In the back, her cousins were sound asleep along with the cat, unbothered by the constant turning of the van along precarious roads.

“Or maybe it was ‘pinstripe,’ like the pants?” She continued. “No it wasn’t that, either.”

By this point, I was looking out the car window as Yi-Zhang drove confidently through the...

“Hairpin roads! I think it was the hairpin roads that he used to call them.” By the look on her face of satisfaction, I was sure she was confident in her words. And Yi-Zhang drove through them with a confidence that seemed to move the car faster than it should have really gone. Out the window, the trees covered entire mountains, making them completely green, and they drifted past. As we continued higher up, to an elevation of 3000 km, the clouds began to hug the sides of the mountain and spread between the valley, hiding what lay beneath. The sun, now setting, shone behind the clouds.

By the time we had reached the top, it was nearly night. The view was beautiful nonetheless, and we took a few pictures, before the elevation and cold made us feel sick. We hopped back in the van, and descended down the other side of the mountain.

I must have fallen asleep because by the time I awoke, we were back in Taichung. Yi-Zhang turned the corner where there was a 7-Eleven, the only marker I was familiar with. I only remember climbing back up the staircase, following behind Meiya, and falling asleep, still thinking about what they

called the “Sea of Clouds,” how we had been so high up, and how the clouds somehow reminded me of the waters of Kenting.

In the countryside of Taiwan, things are much hotter. On the car ride there, Chim Nai-Nai would lean forward, her elbows resting on the backs of the driver’s and passenger seats of the van, pointing at the dirt paths, the dilapidated houses covered with tin roofs, and the beautiful fields. Each of these signified to her a memory, one made so clear by the fact that things around hadn’t changed all that much. Her voice became filled with life, retelling the images of childhood. I did not understand what she was saying, but suddenly I became filled with thoughts of home, and for some reason, thoughts of my father.

We were in Yun-Ling, a rural area not far from Taichung, filled with unmarked roads and a stillness around the fields that made it seem like hardly anyone lived there. Chim Nai Nai had a trip planned for us: to go picking baby corn and peanuts on her cousin’s farm.

After an hour or so of Yi-Zhang getting lost, a quick stop at a retirement community so that Chim Nai Nai could visit her sister, we finally pulled into a driveway which veered off the road; roads that went straight and were only occasioned by an intersecting road, all surrounded by flat fields with low-built houses.

It was afternoon, the hottest it would be during the day, and outside, Chim Nai Nai’s cousin, whose name I never caught, sat in foldable chairs with other relatives under the shade of a tin awning. He had arms that reminded me of my grandfather’s, strong and weary. As they spoke, a playfulness arose in Chim Nai Nai’s voice. They peeled the tough, pink skin off lychee, sucking out its white flesh. I tried one myself, and like all fruit in Taiwan, it tasted better than anything I had tried back home.

Chim Nai Nai’s cousin advised us to wait out the heat before going out into the fields to pick corn. So, a few hours later, with the sun already descending lower, easing its warmth that seemed to stick itself into the ground, shooting up through our bodies with each step, we made our way down to the fields.

First, we walked among the tall stalks of baby corn. Yi-Zhang, who remembered as a child being in similar fields, told us that the smaller the corn, the sweeter it was. So Meiya and I shared an empty bag, which we filled within an hour. The corn was beautiful and tasted wonderful even raw. While we did this, Chim Nai-Nai had started on the peanut harvesting, which we joined her soon after.

Her toes looked like the peanuts themselves, covered in soil and wiggling. She harvested with such assurance and ease, the same way she appeared so natural and at ease in the kitchen. Occasionally,

she'd look at me, letting out a laugh, and tell me instructions. I always did something wrong, and I knew it, but accepted it.

“She says those peanuts are no good,” Christy translated to me. “Too small.”

Meiya laughed beside me as I tossed the rejected peanuts out into the mounding soil. Chim Nai Nai would rip out an entire peanut plant, tugging until the roots succumbed under her strength, tearing one by one until she held it like a hunter holds its bunny by its ears. Dangling off each root, which ran like veins, the peanuts were beautiful. She would toss the bunches to the side for Meiya, Christy, and I to start picking.

As time went on and the sun continued to fall past what seemed like endless roads in all directions, we filled an entire bucket with peanuts. Determined to finish the entire row, Chim Nai Nai moved faster and faster, occasionally brushing the sweat off her forehead with her forearm.

“She says she wants to get enough to gift to her neighbors. She's going to boil a big pot when we're back,” Christy said.

Out in the heat, it was not only for us that we picked that baby corn and those peanuts; not only for us that we bent over, roughing up our hands; not only for the joy of the experience of us, their visitors from across the ocean, but for her neighbors. The same ones who left fresh fruit at her door, or brought ingredients to her home. Suddenly, there seemed to be more purpose to our labor.

Christy left Taiwan when she was 19 after marrying her now ex-husband. When she left Taiwan she left behind so much. In Taiwan, I can tell she was revived; she was the happiest I had ever seen her. Because when she left, she left part of her identity; she left behind her culture, she left family, and she left friends, and a whole lot of them too.

On my last night in Taiwan, Meiya and I joined her for a reunion with some of her former high school classmates. We went to a restaurant with large tables meant for gatherings and where robots went along with trays, bringing our food to us, which, to my frustration, we were meant to cook in gas lit pots filled with broth. After burning myself a few times and eating undercooked taro root, I sat defeated, and Meiya could tell, holding my arm.

Afterwards, at Christy's request, I brought my saxophone. Outside we sat on a beautiful deck, and they all stared with excitement as I took out my saxophone and played for them. They had heard so much about me and seen videos of me playing back home. They wanted to hear.

Along the deck stretched above the pond, its wooden legs sinking beneath a dark water that reflected the stars and moon which the koi fish danced with, I played my saxophone. I just played; played in that inexplicable way in which the body and mind does something that it had always wished to do, with complete freedom. This was my last night in Taiwan. Behind me, Christy and her friends laughed and talked, while Meiya sat drawing quietly. The men of the group, husbands and sons, stood talking, looking at the pictures they were taking on their cameras. More than ever, I felt at peace where I was, in a country that I had grown to love in the three weeks I was there. I don't know if those sitting at the table understood me as I played, but it didn't matter, not at this moment, not so much anymore. Looking into the pond's reflection I played one of my favorite jazz tunes, Stella by Starlight, and around me, I heard some people stop and listen, really listen, then go along, walking slowly, speaking to one another in a language I could not understand, yet found beautiful all the same.

It felt strange, walking through the airport alone. My mind muted everything into a quietness, despite the hundreds of people that I could now readily understand surrounding me, walking urgently from place to place, dragging luggage across the shiny floors of LAX. Perhaps it was my loneliness, traversing through an airport on my own for the first time. Whatever it was, the color seemed to be seeping out of everything around me, like a melting candle. I felt like I had left something important in Taiwan, despite being back in the States.

I made my way through customs, and while I stopped at the bathroom, my dad gave me a call. I realized that I hadn't called much while I was away, and suddenly the idea of my absence became real.

“Que paso, Mijo. What happened, are you back already?”

“Yes, just landed. I gotta walk through customs, but I think I'll be home soon.”

“Okay, just tell me when you'll be getting back so I can stay awake and see you. The house is so quiet without you, you know? Too quiet, no music, no saxophone. I'm glad you're back, we missed you.”

“I'm glad to be back, too. I'll see you soon. Bye, Pa,” I said.

“Bye, mijo.” And then we hung up.

I had not expected this moment from my father who is mostly a stern, grumpy man. Few emotions ran through my father, and so to hear him say those words affected me deeply. Any of the issues or quarrels that I may have had with him before leaving for Taiwan suddenly vanished.

I wait for my mom outside of LAX. She calls me a few times, saying how bad the traffic is.

“Can you believe it? One hour to the roundabout and still 15 minutes to get to you,” she says.

“It’s fine, I’ll wait,” I tell her. “I’m right next to a sign that says ‘Right Lane Must Turn Right.’ Call me when you get closer.”

Soon I see her red Mazda inching along while cars in the roundabout honk and curse at one another and I grab my luggage making a run for her car as traffic comes to a halt. I throw my stuff in the back and jump in the passenger seat.

She hugs me and grabs my cheek as she had done since I was a child.

“My baby is finally back,” she says happily.

We talk for a while, about how everyone was doing, what had happened since I was gone. My father was doing better, after a life-threatening illness had taken him to the hospital a month before I left. My siblings were doing well, Luffy was still alive. I had almost forgotten that life hadn’t paused while I was gone, and that my parents weren’t the only ones who had felt my absence.

I doze off in the car and wake up as my mom parked in front of the house. She unlocks the front door, and I have never been happier to be home, despite feeling like I left a part of myself in Taiwan.

But I know I am home. I know I am home because I hear the shaking of Luffy’s collar as I walk to my room, because I hear the ocean from outside my window, the rustling of the bushes outside. I know I’m home because my dad’s snores travel from his room next to mine, a sound I could never have been happier to hear, as I sleep dreaming about my day above the clouds, listening as the wind reminded me of the place I call home.