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## Across Seas, Across Shelves

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## Across Seas, Across Shelves

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English was not my first language, but it is my first love.

My mind is multiethnic, a cataclysmic whirlwind of lullabies from Spain and parables from Asia; my body, a transnational vessel that is often the only home I truly know.

I began learning how to read when I was five, when the most intuitive first step for acclimation to the United States was the replacement of my Chinese library with an English one. Picture books like *Goldilocks* taught me to stop asking for 稀飯 (*xifan*) and to start identifying my breakfast as *porridge*. I pored over the Great Illustrated Classics, the entirety of which was stocked promptly on my bookshelves because Mama saw happy white children on the covers and thought she had found the adolescent exemplars for American success. She also refused to confuse me further with her own imprecise, broken articulations, so English was a self-led expedition with a hopeless lack of authentic direction. *Heidi* became “Hey-dee,” and *Aesop* was half struggle, half “sop.” But my mispronunciations could not erode the universal appeal of these classics, and as I immersed myself more deeply into these books, I learned about the world that Mama wanted for us.

Over a decade later, I still gravitate towards Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* or Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Of course, I can now reach for their original editions, but the abridged versions from my childhood ultimately served as a literary microcosm of my mother. They made a complex world accessible, and while they couldn’t possibly give me every detail, they granted me entrance at my pace and at my limited abilities. My collection (or rather, my mother’s) of the Great Illustrated Classics represented avenues of aspirations and portals of possibilities. Simplified? Yes. Limited? Definitely. But it was within these pages of extra-large text and black-and-white illustrations where I learned that the beautiful and genuine interaction between human beings was called “kindness.” It was within these pages where I understood the sacred and eternal bond of sisters before I had one by my side. I fell in love with English because its written form gave my world definition and context. I now love it infinitely more because I realize that this was how Mama chose to raise me with the universe in my palms.

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Picture books were eventually pulled off the shelves and replaced by non-fiction and beautiful leather novels snatched up at a Barnes and Nobles sale. Mama believed that comic books and steamy beach reads were unwholesome to the mind and soul, and thus banished such paraphernalia. When I indicated the slightest interest in art, my bookshelves were immediately stocked with hefty hardcover volumes of Picasso and Dali, O'Keeffe and Warhol. My short-lived obsessions with astronomy, mathematics, and physics (more abbreviated than the rest) have also marked their territory among my collection, though many of their pages remain pristine and crisp from lack of sustained interest. Eventually, my growing independence compelled me to fill the shelves myself with Machiavelli, Robert Greene, and a host of many, many self-help books.

And poetry. God, I love poetry.

Rilke and Sappho never made it to my bookshelves. My poor copies were tattered within weeks of being slept on, carried everywhere, and stuffed beneath pillows at night. The more I cherished them, the poorer their physicality. If love is meticulous care, I did not love my books. But I interacted with them, and literally poured my life onto their pages in the form of Hot Pocket stains and tears. I folded down so many corners to mark beautifully written passages, it eventually made more sense to *unfold* the pages to which I wanted to return. The books themselves became fatter, corpulently thriving on the haphazard bookmarks I fed them: dollar bills, tissues, and clothing tags.

To this day, my library remains a mosaic of the dreams my mama holds for me in a country where we are still perpetual foreigners, written in a language we both still struggle to understand. They taught me about this world before my body felt comfortable in it. They taught my mind to recognize words while my tongue still stumbled clumsily over the consonants and vowels, and gave me the words to identify an existence that was at first too overwhelming, too chaotic, too much.

Slowly, shyly, the evolution of our collection is reflected in the changing trajectory of our lives. My aspirations are no longer of cultural survival, but of prosperity. I have retired those dependable classics for poetry that frees the spirit and fulfills the soul. My adoration for the instabilities of such raw literature is definitive proof that I have made this language my own, that English prose and poetry have become as instinctive as Mama's silky Mandarin.

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I often explain to people that I feel things in my native Taiwanese soul, but understand them in my English tongue. Mama and I, we remain the color of our skin and the shape of our eyes. But these books tell us that we belong here, and that we have earned the right to be here. That with every new word, new page, new chapter, new book, we are declaring and solidifying our capacity to excel and thrive in this country.

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