I do not know

China

I don’t understand what I am seeing. Baba is doing something with some white powder. Looks like he is chopping it with a razor blade then for some reason uses what looks like a yuan all rolled up straw-like then places it to his nose and sniffs up the white powder to his nose.

America

Sitting here in my room, I cannot help but think of the conversation I had with LuoLiNa this last summer when I was visiting China for the sixth time. I said, “I just don’t know LuoLiNa, I sometimes feel like I am making up memories.” LuoLiNa stares at me and I can hear the tick tock of the clock, as the second hand creeps to a stop each time. “Well, I once overheard the teachers talking about your Baba…I could not hear exactly what he did but they said he was in prison.” Pain and relief flows through me. Pain because I did not want to be right about my memories of him. There is too much tension in my head, my eyes are heating up and stinging on the edges. Regardless of the hot liquid rolling down my cheeks, I am relieved that at least this part of my memory was accurate.

I don’t know what baba’s job is and until recently there was always enough to get by comfortably. Since he started coming home less each night, I have been falling asleep to the hum of mama’s sobs. I don’t know what to do and the worst part is neither does mom. We now live in a one bedroom room: not apartment; no kitchen, no living room, just this room. There is one bed
big enough for my mama, my didi (baby brother), and me and a small sink in the corner of the room on the wall opposite the door. Oh and as the toilet, there is a pot under the bed.

“Check under the bed!” James yells to Davey. That is so not fair! James doesn’t understand that the point of the game is for Davey to find us without being told of our locations; maybe I should have hid under mom and dad’s bed. Well at least our version of the game is done in the dark, so maybe I can sneak out and find a new location before he makes it up the stairs to my room and sees me here. Squeak, step, step, step, squeak. Okay, Davey is starting up the stairs, so that gives me about 30 more steps before he reaches me. I am moving my little elbows and knees as fast as I can to crawl from under the bed and am almost toward the end when a sharp pain is shot from my head down my spine. Ouch! Dang it! I hate the evil underside of this bed because just as I am about to escape, it steals a chunk of precious hair from me, like how rude! Oh well, I have no time to lament over the casualty and spring to my feet. Thinking I am heading toward my closet door I crash into Davey just as he is entering my room. Stunned, I lose control and fall into my lately not-so-infrequent fits of uncontrollable soprano giggle. My new family has grown accustomed to my “fits,” where they usually watch with amusement as I try without success to gain control over myself for several minutes. This time Davey’s tenor crackle is accompanying mine, he is laughing along with me… or at me. Does he even know I hurt my head and pulled out some hair? Rude! I manage to control myself just enough to take an uncoordinated swing at his side, but completely miss, and now the laughter is worse than ever accompanied by streams of tears (it is unclear from laughter or pain).

I hold back soft sobs as I watch something that I wish to never see again. Through the small crack of the door I can see helpless mama in the arena with my scary popo (grandma). I use to fall asleep to the drone of mama’s sobs, but never have I heard them out loud and even
I can’t believe the streaks of blond in Davey’s hair; looks like the sun-in really did its job. Well, maybe it can partly be attributed to the clear, blinding sunlight right above our heads bouncing its luminous light off of his hair. Even with the Sun-In, he won’t be feeling so great about his self-esteem after my team royally dominates his. The victorious outcome is easily predicted; after all it’s Adam, Dad, and I against Davey, Mom, and James. This really shouldn’t even be considered a competition, more of a massacre waiting to happen. With the crashing of waves as background music for this battle, and the soft, grainy sand pushing through our toes, we are ready to begin yet another electrifying family battle.

Memories of the game are unclear with just one distinct scene. The best part of the game was when mom served the ultimate, un-returnable, killer ball. The greatest part was not the serve but the way she served it. She was always good at making everyone laugh without doing it intentionally. With the ball held in her left hand in front of her body, she has her right arm extended out like a bat (mind you this is volleyball and not baseball) parallel to the floor, she knows that’s not how you serve a volleyball but her arm had been bothering her, so she served it
the only way she could. She then surprises us by twisting her body like a screw, and then using the momentum from the twist the right hand sends the ball right for me. After the ball leaves moms arm her body continues to do one twist and sends her twirling into the sand like a nail being screwed down by a screwdriver. Joyous, innocent, pure laughter erupts from every member of the family and trying to still concentrate on the incoming serve I dive for it, but fail miserably and end up with a blanket of sand in my face.

*I don’t remember the exact expression on mama’s face, but it looked like she was harboring something too painful to speak out loud about. I ignore the pained expression and look at my surroundings while concentrating on the warmth from her hands, as she leads me hand in hand across the busy intersection. After crossing the car filled street, mama asks me to hold my baby brother. “I need you to hold your baby brother and wait for me here, while I go look for…” I honestly don’t remember what she said she was going to go get, but the forced smile and dull coal eyes, made me uncertain of her purpose for leaving us and not taking us with her. My memories tell me that I can see her re-crossing the busy intersection and heading down a street I did not recognize. Her silhouette blends in with the countless people out on the streets now and I lose track of her. I do not remember my exact location but it was somewhere very busy with a lot of people. I think I am near a market because I can smell the foul scent of day old meat, and fishy seafood, and there are people arguing over prices of vegetables, I think. I am met with gazes of pity as people walk by me, a four- year-old holding her baby brother in her lap, as if they knew something we didn’t, but it was a secret they were totally unwilling to share with us. I cannot understand what could be taking mama so long. My heart starts to race, my head is spinning, the tension begins to build in my head causing my eyes to sting, and pathetic whimpers are forming inside of me.*
I do not understand the meaning of this. Why would mama go look for something without us? I don’t want to walk around looking for her because she said she would return and for us to wait HERE for her. I can never remember a time she went somewhere without us, so why today? What was the meaning of that look of hurt in her eyes? I am sitting here thinking about all these and many more questions, holding onto my baby brother with fear, as I am drenched by my own tears. I see a light coming towards me, there is a man holding the light, the man dressed in a uniform approaches me and holds the light down on me and my baby brother. He looks at us with great concern and gently lifts us up from the floor and asks me what I am doing here. I tell him I am waiting for my mama.

The next thing I know I am in the back of his car and he says he knows a place for kids like us. I don’t understand what he is talking about, kids like us. There is only one place for kids like us, and that is at home with mama. I do not hesitate to follow this man because he seems kind and I think he will help us find mama. I do not remember how but when the car stopped we were in front of a tall building. There was a gate and in front of the gate were some ladies waiting for us. Mama is not among the ladies, I am confused, but do what I am told. The man said we are to live here now with many other kids just like us. I do not understand; other kids just like us? Are they also searching for their mamas? At least I am with didi James and now we will be living here for who knows how long.

“Dinner!” I glance at the clock and it is already 6:30, I didn’t even realize I had been in here for almost two hours. This time instead of racing to be the first one to the kitchen, I take my time strolling down the stairs because I am reminded of the funny and happy memories created on these squeaky steps.