

Vignettes from Francisco Ave

While my memory is generally quite lacking, the recollection of my childhood is particularly jarring with its wide swaths of empty gaps, filled only with tales others have told me. Still, I do have a few momentary glimpses of a bygone childhood. My family immigrated to the United States when I was a toddler, so my earliest memories begin at a small one-bedroom apartment on Francisco Avenue.

It is nighttime, and I am in my pajamas in bed. Usually it is the three of us – my mother, brother, and I – tightly packed into the small bed, while my father sleeps on an extra sheet on the floor next to us. However, on most nights, my brother and I settle in next to my father before bed so that he may tell us fairy tales and stories from his own childhood. He grew up as one of the youngest in a family of 10, having lost both of his parents before becoming an adult himself. I enjoy the stories, but I enjoy even more learning about what my father was like at my age. Be glad that you are able to go to school, he tells us. When he walked to school in his village, he did not even have shoes, and he studied outside by the oil lamps in the street.

It is daytime, and it must be summer as the breeze is blowing and it is not cold in Chicago. A few other kids from the apartment building are playing outside, and I am exploring in the grass. I feel a little alienated by the other children, but I am content by myself. My mother comes out with a treat for us – popcorn! To my childhood self, it is like a joy beyond measure. As I have said before, my memory has wide gaps, especially of my earlier years. But this memory I know to be mine, because my family has never since talked about this particular summer day. My mother is folding the white printer paper into cones, which she then puts the popcorn in. A simple gesture, but to me, it feels like a wonderful magic trick.

My memory has its limits, though, and needs to be supplemented. Recently, my father uncovered cassette tapes – he always loved to create home videos of us, detailing his family's small adventures in the new country. In this tape, it is New Year's Eve in the early 2000s. My family is driving around on Michigan Avenue – the street is filled with lights, and the skyscrapers and tall shops seem to tower over me. I shout 'Happy New Year!' outside through the car window and revel in the falling snow. The lights and the snow are beautiful, and it hardly feels cold at all. Together, huddled in our car in this glittering city, my family and I welcome the new year and all of its possibilities with open arms.

It is 2020, and these memories are the fading traces of a distant past. From over a thousand miles away, my seven-year old niece calls me on video. She begs me to convince my brother to let her have a cat, a plight I very much sympathize with. Outside, a global pandemic marches on in its destructive path. To the seven-year old, the pandemic must be an inconceivable concept; it could hardly compare to the petition of being allowed a pet. Yet, she has a point. It is more necessary than ever to seek out friends and companions, human and animal alike, as we struggle against that which we do not fully understand or see. In a way, our desires are quite alike, my niece's and mine – desiring happy moments with our loved ones.