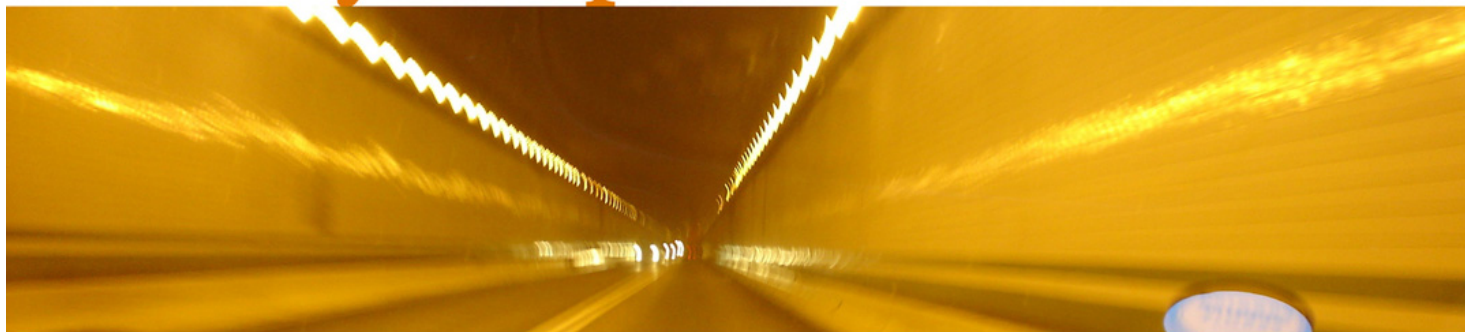


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All the Sounds of China

by Leonora Desar



You can hear everything underwater, even silence. I learned this in the bathtub of our old apartment in the South Bronx listening for China.

My best friend Albertine said you can hear China if you turn clockwise in the tub three times facing Mrs. Noda's bedroom. Albertine talked about this at recess. We were playing soldiers and walking past the sly girls trading cigarettes and the loser girls playing hopscotch and the boys playing "Who would win in a fight?"

"Who would win in a fight?" Luis Álvarez said at our heads. "Diego or his little *novia*?"

"Neither," said his wingman, Justin. "They are too busy F-U-C—"

"Don't listen to them, Diego," Albertine said. "Just listen for China. Tonight, at 19:00 hours. Think of me and turn in the tub three times clockwise—you know which way clockwise is, right?"

At 19:00 hours I opened my ears for China—for the sound of chopsticks combing through hair I imagined to be thick and glistening, like the film over my mother's eyes that kept her in her own space. I opened for the sound of sweet and sour pork turning in the wok, for the hum of heat and crowds and subways humming with heat and crowds because China is so packed that some people can only have one kid by law, or else they make you pay a fine. I think my mother thought this is a good thing, that they should do this in America too to make things easier for the mothers, even though she never said so. She only looked at me and my father and my twin sister Selena with that filmy look—that sad, oily stare that made the hair in my ears stand up as we ate dinner counting cracks in the cheap green dining table, in silence.

At first I heard nothing. I turned clockwise again three times, feeling the slab of the porcelain tub on my chest, the filmy remains of hair conditioner left by my sister. Then I saw Mrs. Noda. She posed in the window wearing only a purple bra and panties, her hand on her veiny hip and ear cocked to a big, bearded man. She was talking to the man and smoking a brown cigarette and the smoke from her cigarette came at me from her window. It came across the clothesline where she hung her silky bedroom things and into the window of our bathroom where it became fog over bathwater, a thin, raspy mist.

I went under and this time I heard. At first I thought it was China. But it was just Mrs. Noda's cigarette. It hissed in the tortoise ashtray her daughter Patrice had made before the state took her away—a green rhapsody of clay and food dye, the head split. I heard Mrs. Noda tell the man, "Not tonight, papi," and her flesh pushing away his.

When I looked again it was my mother pushing away flesh. She appeared where Mrs. Noda had. Her low, doughy breasts filled in the purple bra. "I love you but I need air," she told my father.

I told Albertine I heard nothing. She ate half my cheese sandwich and said she knew a better game—we were going to meditate our way to China instead. Albertine knew all about mediation—her mother was trying to meditate her way out of the South Bronx and her marriage to Albertine's stepfather. She told Albertine that you can attract the life you want by visualizing it. You simply put your desire out there into the universe, like a fat worm on a fishing hook. She had read this in *The Secret*.

That night I took another bath. I heard my mother again beneath the water. Her brainwaves snaked into my ears like smoke rings—borders craggy, the centers dim. Static dripped in to replace the vacuum— a gray, loose chaos.

I'm sorry, the static told my father. *I'm sorry*, it told me and Selena.

She only asked my father—"Are you fucking Carla?" The oil in her eyes rasped in filmy swamps.

"You're crazy, Jazmin," my father said.

I heard her palm hesitate in the air, the lull before it cracked his cheek. His flesh curved up to absorb the shock and made the sound of a pillow buttressing over the ear, over the crescent of the ear that you shield when silence fills the house at night, coming at you through walls. My mother's gut must've been a ceiling fan cutting pulp when she realized what she had done.

"You need help," my father said, but his thoughts hummed below water—

What was I supposed to do when you never touched me?

This time my mother was silent. Her gut inflated. It became crowded with air and regret like China is with all those people and then it expelled the air back into her lungs, into her windpipe, the rejected air dead and stale between them.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

I thought of my desire. Beneath the dark film of the bathtub my parents built a city. They destroyed the green dining table and built a new one from whalebone and my dad forgot Carla and my mother's eyes were clear. "Here is my desire," my father said. He fed it to my mother on a fishing hook and she swallowed it and swelled with it and bore a third child and she was happy, happy.

"I need to use the bathroom," my sister yelled. The door swung open. Selena barreled in, groping for her conditioner. "Get outta here," she said. She removed the plug holding our parents in and then the only sound was the hiss of the bathwater draining, our mother's silence in the walls.

BIO: Leonora Desai's writing has appeared in *Psychology Today*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Parenting* magazine, *Narratively*, and elsewhere. She lives in NYC and holds an M.S. from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she received the Richard T. Baker Award for magazine writing. She is currently working on a novel.



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