

Foreigner

Seventeen.

I was grateful to be here, on your soil. I marveled at how green your grass was, at how you had somehow chosen to be surrounded almost entirely by trees.

Your majestic brick buildings impressed me and I applauded your efforts to pay respect to the old even as you looked ahead, forging the new. Ironically, your young showed little deference to your old. It surprised me. But I loved it: this was freedom.

I laughed inwardly at the way you dragged certain sounds when you spoke. You sounded like someone falling asleep yet determined to keep talking. Or stoned. (I picked up your parlance very quickly.)

The rules were different here. I could strut on your manicured lawns without castigation. At home, someone might have scolded me for killing the grass. I also noticed you paid little regard to dirt, to germs. You sat anywhere and on anything that would hold your weight. You put your feet up, shoes and all, on chairs that you would likely sit in later.

You asked continually about my name. Where was it from? What did it mean? You apologized several times for mispronouncing it.

Nineteen.

I sank my toes in your soil, searching for sustenance. I took in the shades of your autumn, each scene resembling a painting. I watched white fluff settle on the ground. On some nights, I watched bright-red embers flirt with the dark-blue night as marshmallows roasted over bonfires.

You were on time for everything. I noticed and tried to keep up.

I swam in the waters of your books, gulping in their knowledge with every stroke, yet never drowning. I began to understand you better, why you were the way you were.

I still averted my eyes when I addressed your old, calling them by first name was scandalous enough.

Ma called often. One day, she asked why I sounded like I was falling asleep. I laughed. Then I told her I wore jeans to church here. She tsk-ed at me. People at home would have thrown a fit.

I found myself sitting next to you in places and on things not designed for sitting but I still couldn't get myself to hold the handlebars in the subway trains.

Here, standing on your soil, taking you in, reading your books, I realized that my skin carried with it history. So I made it my duty to acquaint myself with the past.

You still stumbled when you said my name. I let you. Then I began to stumble too.

Twenty-one.

It occurred to me that by digging my toes in your soil, I was also loosening old roots. Still, my heart grew lighter when your birds chirped in spring and I heard melodies when buds undressed themselves to flowers.

You were perpetually preoccupied with work. It bothered me. It seemed there was no time to simply be.

I started to eye-talk to your old a little more. To my surprise, it appeared they were not at all insulted. So I practiced.

My r's were no longer sharp enough to cut with. They now rolled over whatever letter was nearby. T's now sounded like d's. Ma asked me often to repeat myself. I laughed. I told her salons were expensive here, so I had learned to braid my hair.

I placed my feet, shoes and all, on a chair that I would later sit in. By the time I caught myself, I was too tired to care.

I retaught myself to pronounce my name. Then I taught you.

Twenty-three.

Your soil had had its way with me and it showed. I looked forward to your seasons now. Even winter. Who would've thought? Summer was easy, its warmth an easy reminder of home. Sometimes, I even complained it was too hot. Who would've thought?

I worked like you now. I hated it. I finally understood how it was possible to be both surrounded and lonely. I spoke into people's eyes now. I made a contest out of it even. I won every time.

I sounded like you too. Except for when you said words like "curtain" or "mountain." My throat refused to swallow the t's the way yours did. I told Ma I stopped straightening my hair and that I caught you staring one time, your eyes asking how my hair grew upwards, defying gravity.

Work had me taking the subway consistently now. So I carried a bottle of disinfecting goo on me at all times.

You did not stop asking about my name. So I told you I had five others like it. You said the sounds were beautiful. I told you that Ma named me. She could sweet-talk even God.

Twenty-five.

My toes will continue to search for meaning here. Every year, I will greet your seasons like pen pals meeting for the first time, knowing everything, yet knowing little. Summer will still be my favorite, because then, Ma and I will both be sweating at the same time.

Title: Foreigner

I will throw myself into my work like I've watched you do. But I will rest when I am tired because I will not die on your soil.

I will continue my staring contests but you will likely still hear my "Sir" and "Ma'am" when I address your old.

My a's will be plump as ever when I say "half" or "pistachio," my tongue refusing to conform to your eh-sounding a's. My r's, on the other hand, will remain inconsiderate like yours, encroaching on their neighbors.

I will continue to celebrate the ways in which you are different from home as I frolic through the park on the way to church, hair standing, jeans hugging my thighs. The floors feet have roamed will serve as parlors, maybe even in the subway station, my bottle of disinfecting goo securely in my pocket.

I know you will ask me yet again about my name. Most times, I will tell you. All of it: how it is pronounced, where it comes from, what it means, my other names, sweet-talking Ma. But other times, my response will be that school is closed. In any case, you should have graduated by now.