

The things distance can do...

I never wake up before eight in the morning. I've only been here for two months, but I could already tell that I won't wake up any earlier in the many months to come. So when my father was calling from home while my eyes were still shut, it was still too early to answer. But what was too early here was late for the people back home. I muted my phone and placed it on my chest. As I struggled to get back to sleep, white flashes of incoming calls were stinging even through my eyelids. I ignored it; my mistake. Not a minute later my phone started vibrating as though the end of the world was near. I sighed. I wanted to throw the damn thing across the room, but the cost of the phone stopped me. I chose the peaceful way at the end: I turned it off.

A couple of hours later I woke up again on my own. Still lying in my bed, I checked my phone. *February 21*. There were four missed calls, an email, and too many text messages stacking up as notifications. They were blocking the family photo I had as my wallpaper, taken in front of the terminal gate just moments before I left Indonesia. The plane on the taxiway, waiting in the background, was the same one that carried me to Kalamazoo. I opened the email first, it read: "So worried... Are you okay? Can you contact us?" It was from my father, and so were the four calls. There certainly would be more calls if I hadn't turned my phone off. The messages came from different members of my family, my mother, sister, and some cousins. They were asking the same thing—the only thing that mattered—about last night; a man drove through the city and shot at people in different locations. The terror lasted for almost seven hours. Seven hours of an act of random violence. I replied to all of my family with the same answer, "I'm okay. The shootings were from yesterday."

I was indeed alright. The news shocked my family more than it did to me. Even though the incident was in Kalamazoo, I was unaffected. When I first heard about it from my friend, I shielded

myself in disbelief. Shock followed soon. But there were others who weren't as fortunate as I was, those who had to go through more than a shock. Those who were actually there. The last person who messaged me regarding the incident was a dear friend in Illinois. He said, after making sure I was alright, "Welcome to America." *America*. Was it really that different here?

A month ago a bomb exploded in a parking lot, right in the central part of Jakarta, my hometown. Besides the two suicide bombers, no one was injured, not yet. Everyone in the vicinity evacuated. A baffled crowd was formed on the street, among them was a shoeless paperboy, a man wearing a batik¹ shirt, and a motorcyclist who still had his helmet on; people from different occupation and ethnicity stood together, some shook their heads while others were standing on their toes trying to peak through. But as the crowd fixed their attention towards the thick cloud of smoke invading the sky, a man in a black t-shirt and jeans, whose head was covered by a cap, pulled a pistol with both hands. He started shooting at the mass of people. The flying bullets picked off the dispersing crowd one by one, causing each man to run for his own life. The police arrived swiftly, but when they did, another man from the sidewalk pulled his revolver and joined the first perpetrator. Four people were killed. Twenty injured. The national media outlets censored the dead victims and their blood on the streets, their existences were blurred on the television and newspapers. They were represented only by their names, who will soon too, be forgotten. A terrorist group claimed responsibility the same day. When all of that happened, I was in the same position as my family right now. I was the one asking the questions to my family, uncles, aunts, and cousins then, making sure they were fine, and altogether thinking whether they were the right questions.

¹ ['batik]) A traditional Indonesian clothing made using a technique of wax-resist dyeing applied to the whole cloth. Traditionally worn on special occasions such as weddings. They are usually expensive.

How long must bullets fly, before they've finally served their purpose to *glorify*?

How long must bombs explode, before craters filled those that were once schools, stores, and roads?

How long must parents not sleep, consumed by the haunting possibility of having to bury their child whose last words were nothing but, "Dad, don't weep."?

How long until we humans—not God, not nature—will stop all of this nonsense?

These thoughts reminded me again of my family. My family of which distance had separated. Yet, the same distance managed to unite us in a way that no other forces can.