

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

"Keep his head cool! Let's go!" My mother strained her voice above the wails. Clutching the curtain, I peered through its small holes at the panicking farmers, their arms clumsily wrapping around the twisted child with pastel cheeks and flickering eyelids. Nippy Hanoi wind rushed in as they dashed out of the Pediatric Emergency Clinic and crammed on my mom's 40cc motorcycle. Then the chugging trailed off. I said a prayer, hugged my knees and waited.

An only child of a divorced doctor, I accompanied my mom four nights a month to the clinic, literally a wooden box floating in the acrid smells of antibiotic. A white curtain divided the room in half. On one side, the doctor's bed cluttered up with piles of fading medical records, while a table, three chairs and a sink occupied the rest of the space to meet patients. Even in half dozes, I could hear their urgent poundings on the door, then my mom rustling out of the mosquito net. Then the chaos chilled in: cold air, the parent's heavy breath, the child's hiccups, musty smell of sweat; then all quieted at the comfort of my mom's reassuring voice. Still, the curtain troubled me greatly as it singled me out on "the other side." My mom never fully belonged to me until she drew that tattered piece of cloth to shield us from vulnerability and sickness.

Through the small holes, I could only squint at her, pick up random pieces of her conversations and filled in an 11-year-old fantasy for the rest. One time, I thought she must have been a fairy from a folktale, for she spoke magic words that made people smile. But that night I saw her urgent face. She did not return till the next morning, and as I insisted, told me that the boy had flown away with the incense on his altar. It was the first time she had lost a child.

After that, afraid for my young mind in the heavy environment of the clinic, she left me at home. Still, I could not help feeling deserted. That tattered piece of white cloth had cemented between us, crystallized in it my mother's toil and the time we lost because she was always too busy. I had lingered too long behind the pink looking-glass until reality surged forth: the dying boy, my mother's veined hands and the three dollars she was paid for a sleepless night. I needed to tell her I understood.

My first attempt in the kitchen caused my mom's eyebrows to knit in a puzzle, less because of the burned rice than because of my sudden eagerness (the cooking matured with time, till I could finally whisk out dinner without any major injury). Every night, I tried my best to greet her with little caring touches like a neat house, a hot bath, a compliment note from my teacher. To spare her three hours driving everyday, I ploughed seven miles through Hanoi's spilling traffic to school and advanced

classes, proudly swaying my butt up and down on an adult's bicycle. Those weekly lonely nights turned out not to be so bad, for I enjoyed experimenting new cuisines and my mom had fun directing me through the phone. The white curtain melted with the realization that I did not have to possess her for myself to treasure these moments.

Now we are in America; I have outgrown that little uncomfortable corner and my mom does not have to suffer from any more restless nights. Still, an 11-year-old's memory dies hard. I missed my old looking glass, the small holes through which life is wrapped in a nutshell. It will always be there to remind me that I have only witnessed the tip of the iceberg, and that I cannot afford to be just a spectator, blindfolded behind an outworn curtain of fantasy.