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**KELLY YANG**



# Finally Seen

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*To the teachers and librarians all over this country working so hard to  
make sure every child feels seen.*

*I see you. I love you. I thank you.*

# Chapter 1

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I listen to the quiet hum of the plane and the not-so-quiet flutter of my heart in my chest. *This is it.* Another six hours and I will finally see my parents and my sister again! I try to picture Mom's and Dad's faces when I land. Except I keep picturing Marge and Homer Simpson. Only Asian. With shorter hair. And a less smart Lisa. (Hopefully.)

I guess that's what happens when you haven't seen your family in five years (and you've watched a *lot* of subtitled *Simpsons*). I was starting to give up on the whole going-to-America thing, until my mom called six weeks ago.

"Lao Lao told me you're doing your middle school applications," Mom said. "And you're writing an essay on your parents being in America?"

I nodded, coiling the phone cord around my fingers.

"Is that not a good topic?" I asked.

"No...," she said, "it's just... what are you going to say?"

I shrugged. I like writing, but not as much as I like drawing pictures. But art's a sure way to get kicked out of any school in Beijing, let alone Beijing Normal Middle School #3, where I was applying. It was my aunt Jing's middle school. She now has a fancy tech job in Shenzhen. She says there's no future for artists in China. Beijing Normal would get the art out of me... and turn me into a steady workhorse. Just like her.

"Well?" Mom asked.

I felt a rush of heat spread across my forehead. Here was my chance to tell her how I really felt about being left behind all these years. I was only five years old when she left. I thought she was going on a *work* trip. I didn't even understand.

Most of all, how could she take Millie, my baby sister, and not me? My sister got to grow up with my parents. Me? I grew up with postcards from my parents.

But as usual, my voice was locked in the chamber of my throat.

There are things I don't want to tell anyone, well, except Lao Lao.

My grandmother, Lao Lao, is my moon and my Wilson. Like the volleyball in *Cast Away* (another movie I binged), she is my companion in my waiting city. That's what Beijing feels like, just me and Lao Lao waiting. It used to be me, Lao Lao, and Lao Ye. But last year, when Lao Ye passed away... our trio of tea leaves went down to two. Now I am Lao Lao's human alarm clock (I wake her up every day at 6 a.m.), dumpling steamer, pu'er brewer, flower waterer, and medicine fetcher.

I know how much she needs me. I'm all she's got left. Which is why some feelings are too hard to even tell her.

Instead, I catch them and tuck them behind my cheek.

Lao Lao says that's the way to succeed in China.

Every morning, Lao Lao reminds me: go to school, make your parents proud, and watch your words, lest they label you a bad apple. She grew up in the era of the Cultural Revolution, and her father was thrown in jail for being a "bad apple." Even though that was a long time ago, the memory of it never really left. She's always telling me to sew up half my mouth. I imagine an invisible thread running along my mouth, my lips stitched like a sock.

But the thing about some feelings is... they just won't go away. Instead, they form a tight ball at the base of my throat. Where they sit and they wait, planning their escape from the thread. And one day, just when you least expect it, they shoot out like a rocket.

That's exactly what happened that rainy Beijing spring day when Mom called.

"Do you really want to go to Beijing Normal #3?" Mom asked.

I looked over at my lao lao, craning her head eagerly to catch snippets of our conversation. She put her knitting needles down, massaging her hand. Her arthritis had gotten so much worse since Lao Ye passed, she could hardly keep knitting. The doctors in China had warned her that this day would come. They told her to do more acupuncture, to get out and exercise. But Lao Lao was born in the Year of the Ox. She does not like anyone telling her what to do.

I turned away from Lao Lao, held the phone close to my face, and cupped a hand around my mouth.

“No,” I whispered. “I want to go to school in America. Please, Mama. I want to come.”

And with that, I chose my future over my past.

. . .

A hand on my arm pushes me awake.

“Lina Gao?” the flight attendant asks. I rub my eyes awake. She smiles and says to me in Chinese, “We’re moving you up to first class. So you can get out first when we land!”

I blink in confusion. I reach for my sketch pad. I was in the middle of working on a sketch of Lao Lao gardening, but as I look up, my eyes nearly pop when I see the flight tracker on the screen. We’re almost *there!*

“Your escort will be waiting as soon as we get to LAX to take you to your parents.”

I leap up from my seat. *Let’s gooooo!!!*

I follow the flight attendant up the long aisle to first class, staring at all the people stretched out in *beds* with their noise-canceling headphones and cotton candy slippers. These are airplane *apartments*.

I take a seat in one of the cabins and reach for the fancy first-class cotton slippers. I’m so saving these for Lao Lao. I wonder if she likes her new nursing home.

I feel a tug of guilt thinking about it, but Aunt Jing said it was necessary. She and Uncle Hu both live in Shenzhen, which is about twelve hundred miles away from Beijing, and they both have 9-9-6 tech jobs. A 9-9-6 job means you work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week. They’re the envy of the country, because they make the most money. But it also means there’s no *way* my aunt can be a tea brewer for my lao lao.

So they took me and Lao Lao to visit the nursing home. I remember the floors were very shiny, almost like you could go Rollerblading on them. I pictured a bunch of elderly folks Rollerblading, and then had to bite on my cheeks to stop myself from giggling. Because it wasn’t funny.

The rooms were bright, with big windows that allowed the team of nurses to look in at all times. Aunt Jing said she got Lao Lao the biggest room of all—a private room. It was the nicest room in the entire nursing home. But to Lao Lao, it was like living inside a fishbowl. She didn't like the idea *at all*.

*"No way!" she said, stomping her walking cane down on the ground. "Not happening! I am a free spirit—I need to be able to roam around the park and go to see my friends!"*

*"They can come see you!" Aunt Jing insisted. "That's why we're putting you into a retirement home in Beijing—so your friends can come visit. Anytime!"*

*Lao Lao has two good park friends: Chen Nai Nai, a grandma who loves to dance, and Wang Nai Nai, whose daughter is also in America. I've never seen either of them come to our house, though.*

*"Why can't I just stay by myself?" Lao Lao asked, peeking at my aunt.*

*"Because, Ma, your arthritis and osteoporosis, it's all getting worse. And now that Dad's gone... Frankly, you should have gone into a retirement community a long time ago," Aunt Jing said. "But you had Lina—"*

*"And I loved every minute of it, sweet child," Lao Lao said, patting my hand.*

*I felt a tear escape. This was all my fault.*

*"No, don't you cry," Lao Lao told me. She nodded to my aunt, and with a shaking hand, she signed the papers.*

I put my hand to the airplane window and whisper with all my heart:

*"I'm so sorry, Lao Lao. I promise I will find a way to bring you over. I will find a way to get you out of the waiting city, too."*

*"Fifteen minutes to landing!" the captain announces on the speaker.*

I immediately grab the stash of free goodies next to the cotton candy slippers. I stuff as many as I can into my backpack. Socks, sleeping masks, you name it. I add the stash to my collection of Chinese snacks I've brought over for my (almost) new family. I've packed wheat flour cake, hawthorn flakes, pumpkin chips, and White Rabbit candies for them, hoping the candies will fill them with sweet guilt for leaving me behind.

I gaze out the window at the wispy clouds. The Los Angeles houses sprawl across the land, stretching all the way to the shimmering blue sea! I've never seen the ocean before. Before Lao Ye passed, we talked about going to Beidaihe, the

closest beach to Beijing. But it was always too hard, with Lao Ye's work and health. He was a magazine editor. Even after he "retired" he kept going into the office. He said working was the best way to stay young, but Lao Lao secretly suspected it was so he could keep eating lunch at his favorite fried dumpling place next to his office.

My lao ye had heart disease and diabetes. He used to joke that at his age, heart disease and diabetes were like stamps in a passport—signs of a life well lived.

I wish Lao Ye had had actual stamps in his passport, though, and more time to get them. But at seventy-two, he had a stroke in the taxi on his way home from work.

We didn't believe it even when we were sitting in the hospital waiting area. Lao Lao and I were still talking about going to the beach and pushing Lao Ye to actually retire after this. When the doctor delivered the news, all I remember is my grandma falling to the ground, pounding the cold stone floor, crying, "You get back here, you old goat! Don't you dare leave me!"

But her beloved goat was already gone.

Lao Lao's voice comes burrowing into my head as the plane starts to descend.

*This is different. Remember, we may be six thousand miles apart, but I'm right there in your heart. Anytime you want to talk to me, just put your hand over your chest and I'll feel it, sweet child.*

As the turbulence jiggles my butt, I open my mouth, like I'm about to eat a gigantic baozi, the tears running down my cheeks. *This is it, Lao Lao! I made it!!!*

We touch down at 9:58 a.m. As the plane taxis, a flight attendant comes up to me. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready!" I announce.



## Chapter 2

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I scamper after my escort, who kindly helps me with my carry-on suitcase. She's a fast-walking Chinese lady named Miss Chen, with a walkie-talkie and a giant stack of documents, leading me through immigration. The immigration officer takes one look at my passport and stamps it with his big rubber stamp.

As we wait for my bags, Miss Chen chats with me in Mandarin.

"You excited? I hope your parents are here already, we got in an hour early."

"I'm sure they'll be here!" I say to her, rising to my tippy-toes with excitement. I can hardly wait to walk out those double doors to see them.

I scan the conveyer belt for my luggage. Lao Lao made me bring over three full suitcases of stuff. One of them is an entire suitcase of sweaters she knitted for me and Millie—even though Mom kept telling her it's warm in LA.

"Did you go on a trip to visit your relatives?" Miss Chen asks.

I open my mouth to say *No, this IS the trip*—but I nod instead. Probably easier.

"You have any brothers or sisters?" she asks.

"I have one sister," I tell her. "She's seven."

"Oh, that must be fun! You two love playing together?"

I cross my fingers behind my back. *Sure hope so!*

As I wait, I tell Miss Chen all the things I know about my family by heart, from reading their many letters. I tell her my dad is a scientist. A microbiologist, to be exact. My mother works at a big fancy salon. We live in a beautiful pale blue two-story house with a white fence in Los Ramos, California. A house that's taken my parents some time to finally find. It's just forty miles from Los Angeles.

I talk of my family's accomplishments, as if they're mine.

"Wow," she says. "Sounds like they've really achieved the American dream."

I smile.

Every movie and TV show I watch is always talking about the American dream. I'm still not sure exactly what it means, but I think it means something like this:

1. To be able to buy any kind of Frappuccino you want.
2. To have a nice home and fill your bed with *a lot* of pillows, like you have a thousand heads.
3. To say *I love you*, all the time, to your family. And not be embarrassed.

I like number three the most. I don't remember when Mom and I stopped saying it on the phone. Maybe Mom didn't want my little sister Millie to be jealous. Or she didn't think I needed to hear it.

But I did.

The truth is, my time in the waiting city wasn't just all dumplings and tea. It was hard, too. I'm not going to tell Mom now that I'm back because what's the point? But I hope I hear Mom say *I love you* again. All the time. And not just because it's the American thing to say.

## Chapter 3

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Lina? Is that you? Lina?” a voice calls out in Mandarin when Miss Chen and I finally push through the double doors with my luggage.

I see a Chinese woman with long, wavy hair. A man standing next to her is snapping pictures. She runs up to me, crying and sobbing so uncontrollably, I take a step back. The little girl standing next to her looks just as confused as I am.

It’s only when the man says, “It *is* you, sunflower!” that it hits me. This is them. My parents!

I recognize them from the pictures!

I stand there, emotion choking me as I replay Dad’s nickname for me on my tongue.

Mom kneels in front of me on the stone airport floor and wraps me in a warm hug. I close my eyes and breathe her in. She smells like warm congee on a rainy day.

“Mama!” I cry.

Dad adds his arms around us and Millie jumps in too, and we’re a wet sandwich. We stay like this, cocooned in our little world. And I know I made the right choice. The future is infinitely better than the past.

When we finally pull away, I smile at my little sister. She looks just like me. But cuter. I try not to think about how much cuter. (Like, a *lot*.) She still has all her baby fat and her eyes shine brightly above her dimpled cheeks. She looks like some sort of perfect Pixar character.

“Is China enormous? Do you like my earrings? Mom let me get my ears pierced for my birthday and I have to keep these in for six weeks, but then I can change them! Do you have a TikTok account?” she asks in Chinese.

I am relieved she knows Chinese, and I shake my head. My new sister's mind is like a space cruiser from *Star Wars*—traveling at light speed. Her rapid tongue shifts between Chinese and English words whenever she gets stuck. At my old school, I studied English too. But hearing *her* speak English... my tongue shrinks in intimidation.

“No, we don't have TikTok,” I reply in Chinese. “We have something called Douyin, though.”

Millie repeats it. “Well, do you have *that*?”

I shake my head. Lao Lao had very specific rules against social media. Especially after some kids in my class started calling me *Lina, Lina left behind. Out of sight, out of mind! She's such a bore, even her parents don't want her anymore!* My ears turn bright red at the memory.

Luckily, Millie is too busy dancing to notice. She prances around my luggage cart as we push it toward the exit. Mom suddenly stops.

“Are you hungry?” Mom asks. “Thirsty?”

“I could use some water,” I say.

Mom looks to Dad, who says regretfully, “I forgot the water bottles at Pete's.”

Mom fumbles through her purse and pulls out a five-dollar bill. She hands it to me and tells me to go and buy something from the café in the airport. “Millie, why don't you go with her?” Mom says.

My sister dances ahead toward the café. I get in line and stare at the enormous menu of drink options. There are so many words I don't understand, like *Blends* and *Smoothies* and *Kombucha*. They all sound so delicious, and terrifying at the same time. I turn to my sister, but I'm too embarrassed to ask.

When it's my turn, the server asks me what I want.

“Water,” I say, with as much confidence as I can.

“Sparkling or still?” she asks.

Uh-oh. *Is she asking me if I still want it?*

“Yes, I do,” I tell her.

“Nooooo.” Millie jumps in and says in Chinese, “She wants to know what *kind* of water.”

*There are kinds?*

“Water kind!” I tell her. Obviously. I look at my sister. She smacks her forehead, like there’s a huge fly on her brow. I squirm, embarrassed. I should never have opened my mouth and said I was thirsty.

“She means still,” Millie says. “How much is that?”

“We only have Fiji. That’ll be four seventy-five plus tax,” the server says.

“Do you have Dasani? Or Arrowhead, maybe?” Millie rattles off brands I’ve never heard of. The server shakes her head. Millie peers down at the five dollars in my hand. “You know what, can she just have a cup with ice?”

Before I know it, the server hands me an empty cup with ice. I stare at it, confused. *That’s* it? Am I just supposed to eat this ice?

But Millie’s already bounced back to my parents, who praise her for her quick thinking.

“Good call. They’re always overcharging at these airport places! We can fill the cup up with water when we pass a water fountain!” Mom reaches out a hand and smooths Millie’s hair.

I follow my family, chewing nervously on the ice cubes. To think that in Beijing I was able to converse effortlessly with Lao Lao’s doctors on the phone and take down complex medicine combinations. Here, I can’t even order a water without my little sister.

I wonder how I’m ever going to be the big sister.

## Chapter 4

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Dad plays tour guide, chatting away in Chinese as he drives. I'm so glad we speak Chinese as a family, aside from the occasional English word Millie sprinkles in. I'm in the back of our Honda Civic, with Millie, trying not to spill my cup of ice water.

Mom found a fountain for me to fill it, and I drink hungrily from it. I glance down at the duct tape holding together the backseat of the Honda Civic.

"To your left is the Westside," Dad explains on the freeway. "It's where the beach is. And actually, if you take the beach highway all the way up, you'll end up in Ventura County, where we live!"

"Can we go there sometime?" I ask, putting my ice water down on the hot seat. I sit up. "Oh, please! I love the beach! I saw the ocean from the plane—it looks so blue!"

Mom and Dad exchange a glance. "We'll see. Your dad usually has to work," Mom says.

"Even on the weekends?" I ask, picking at the duct tape on the seat with my finger.

Millie gawks at my hand, like *What are you doing?* I instantly stop tugging at the tape. Note to self: Don't destroy our car.

"Weeds and insects don't understand weekends, unfortunately," Dad sighs.

I furrow my eyebrows. *Insects?*

"Dad works on an organic farm!" Millie says, bouncing in her seat.

Millie seems to always be moving. If she were in China, the teachers would definitely label her a *zuo bu zhu*, or can't-sit-still kid. Definitely not the best kind of apple, but still redeemable with a little work and discipline. First, the teachers

would try to scare the bouncing bean out of her. And if that didn't work, they'd call up her parents and demand she be taken off all sugar.

But Millie reaches into her pocket and gleefully tosses orange Tic Tacs in her mouth, bouncing so hard I can hear the duct tape go *squish-squish-squish*. I look at my parents, but they don't seem to mind. It really *is* a totally different country.

"Yes, an organic farm! It's pretty amazing. Actually, it's also a regenerative farm," Dad says proudly.

"Wait, I thought you were a scientist," I say, looking at my parents, puzzled. "That's what you wrote in all your letters. A microbiologist!"

"I am," Dad says. "That's what I studied in graduate school, when I first came to America. Now I work on a farm for Pete Burton. He's one of the first organic regenerative farmers in Winfield."

"What kind of stuff do you grow?" I ask.

"Carrots, tomatoes, beans, you name it."

So Dad's a legit farmer. Why didn't he just say so in his letters?

I think of the farmers Lao Lao and I met in Bei Gao Li Village. It's out in the countryside, about three hours from Beijing. Twice a year, Lao Lao and I used to go and volunteer there. It was the only time she left Lao Ye at home. And even after he passed, when walking started getting painful for her, she insisted we go.

We had some of our best memories in Bei Gao Li Village.

It used to be a farming village. But over the years, as the locusts ravaged the land and the droughts sucked the soil dry, folks went in search of new opportunities in Shenzhen and Shanghai, leaving behind young children with grandparents.

Bei Gao Li became a waiting village.

I think that's why Lao Lao always took me there. I smile a bit, thinking of little Tao, a five-year-old boy with a teddy bear he carried around everywhere. Little Tao would run around, helping Lao Lao pass out her homemade pork buns.

At the thought of pork buns, my tummy rumbles. Mom must have heard it because she turns and asks, "You hungry?"

This time, I shake my head. I don't dare risk going into a restaurant and making a fool of myself ordering again, just to come out with a bowl of napkins.

“I’ll make us some lunch when we get home,” Mom says. “Just as soon as the bombs harden.”

Did she say *bombs*?! My heart lurches. Who *are* my parents??

“Maybe you can help!” Mom says. “The more hands, the faster it’ll be.”

“Yeah, it’s fun!” Millie adds.

*She’s* making bombs too??

I put a hand to my forehead, horrified that I left my lao lao in a nursing home to join a family of carrot-chomping criminals.

“Uhhhhh... I don’t know,” I say, chewing on my lip. “I’m not really good with explosives.”

“Explosives, what are you talking about? We’re making *bath* bombs,” Mom says.

I stare at her.

“It’s like a soap, for the bath,” Millie says. “And they smell really nice! You’ll see when you get home.”

“Oooooooohhhh,” I say, sighing in relief. How did I forget? American homes have bathtubs! I imagine myself soaking in a warm, soothing bath, surrounded by candles, in our beautiful American home.

I close my eyes for just a second, the word *home* tickling at my lashes. It feels almost too good to be true.



## Chapter 5

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I drift asleep in the car, dreaming of Lao Lao. If Beijing is a waiting place, my dreams are like meeting places.

In my dream, the two of us are running around the fields of Bei Gao Li Village. We're playing the Eagle and the Chicks, my favorite Chinese playground game. In my dream, Lao Ye's still alive and Lao Lao's chasing me, her arms stretched as she laughs and tries to catch me. Lao Lao's the eagle, trying to chase us "chicks."

There's a long trail of village children behind me. We make a giddy, squealing dragon as we run around the field, dodging Lao Lao.

Every time a kid runs near Lao Lao, she tries to hug them in her arms, her silvery hair glistening in the wind. But she's too slow. Finally, she sits down on the green field to catch her breath, and I sit down next to her.

I put my head on her shoulder and twirl a blade of grass around my finger.

"I'm getting too old for this game," she says, patting my head. "You guys keep playing without me."

"No you're not," I insist. I try to pull her up to standing but she won't budge.

The other village kids are waving me over, shouting, "C'mon, c'mon! Lina jie jie, we want to keep playing!"

I look at them and gaze back at my lao lao, torn between joining them in their screaming, giggling fun and staying here with my grandmother.

"Go on," Lao Lao urges. "Have fun! Your friends are all playing!"

In my dream, I do not choose my friends. I sit right by Lao Lao, shoulder to shoulder until the sun sets. It feels like the right choice.

Until I wake up and I realize, it's not the one I actually made.

## Chapter 6

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Two big eyeballs blink down at me from the top bunk. I scream, which prompts Millie to scream back.

“She’s awake!!!” Millie shouts.

I look around, disoriented for a minute. My parents must have carried me in while I was sleeping. Millie jumps off the bunk and tries to pull me to standing.

“Do you like our room?” she asks. She pounces from one corner to the next, like a proud tiger cub showing me her cave. The room is bare and small, but the sun reflecting off the apartment wall next door tints the space light pink.

“I do,” I tell my sister.

Millie walks over to my suitcases and examines them curiously.

“Here,” I say to her, reaching over and unzipping one of them. I pull out the big bag of Chinese candy and hand it to her.

“YESSSSSS!” she squeals. “I love candy.”

She grabs hawthorn flakes, Meiji biscuits, and rabbit candies and rips them all open. I laugh at her enthusiasm. She takes five rabbit candies and stuffs them all in her mouth.

“What is this?” she mumbles, chewing.

“Rabbit candy!” I tell her.

She immediately spits it out into the trash can. “These are made from rabbits?” she asks, making a face.

“No! They’re just called rabbit candy because they’re creamy.”

“But rabbits aren’t creamy,” she says, confused.

“You know what—never mind. Just try it. They’re really good.”

I get out another piece, urging her to try it. I unwrap it for her. Lao Lao and I went around to five different stores, which was not easy with Lao Lao's arthritis. Millie has to give the sweet chewy vanilla candy a chance—it'll melt her mind!

"No thanks, I'm good," she says.

I frown at Millie, trying to brush off her rejection. *Whatever.*

Millie walks over to the closet and opens the mirrored doors. "This is our closet. You can unpack and put your stuff in here!"

I stare at "our" closet. The whole space is packed with Millie's clothes, crinkled-up posters, and stuffed animals. I don't know where I'm supposed to put my clothes—tape them up to the back of the door?

Mom walks in.

"Are you settling in all right?" she asks.

"Uh, where do I put my clothes?" I ask her, pointing to my three stuffed suitcases.

Mom glances at the packed closet and then scolds Millie. "I thought we talked about this. You were supposed to put all your stuffies in a bag and gift them to the little kids in the apartment building, to make more space!"

"But Unicorny and Deery will be so sad to leave," Millie protests. "And so will Liony and Piggy, and Mousy. And don't forget Rabbity!"

*Rabbity? Okay, we have got to come up with some better names.* Millie grabs each stuffed animal from the closet and holds them tight in her arms.

Mom sighs. "We'll talk about this later. Let's eat first! I made some lunch while you napped." At the mention of lunch, Millie drops her animals and bolts out of our room.

I follow her down a long corridor. There are framed family pictures hanging in the hallway, and I peek curiously at them.

I see baby Millie trying to walk at the park. My parents holding her at the zoo. My dad in a Texas cowboy hat holding hands with my mom. Mom and Millie jumping on a sand castle at the beach.

They look like the perfect family... but I'm not in any of them. I plunge my eyes to the ground.

I feel the temperature rise as I try to shake the feeling of being completely left out. *Why am I not in any of the pictures?* Lao Lao and I sent them so many over

the years. There was the one of me at the Bird's Nest and at the Beijing Zoo, when my grandfather was still alive. I even remember Mom writing back, *Wow! Lina's so tall now!*

So what happened? Did she run out of frames? She could have just used tape! As my mind runs through millions of other possible adhesives, a powerful scent wafts up my nose—lavender. I look up. There are bath bombs everywhere in the living room—on every corner, every surface, every square inch of the carpet.

“Whoa!” I exclaim. Mom and Millie weren't kidding about their fizzy hobby. “You guys must take a *lot* of baths!”

“Oh, they're not for us,” Mom says, picking one up and carefully wrapping it in paper. I notice that Dad's not home. It's just Mom and Millie.

“We don't even have a bathtub!” Millie adds.

I knit my eyebrows. *Then...?*

“We're selling them!” Mom announces. “Twenty dollars a box on Etsy!”

I've heard before of people selling things on the internet in China. One of my classmates' moms sold pencil pouches on Alibaba, but she had tons of employees working for her. Is Mom doing this all out of our home? And wait, whatever happened to the spacious two-story home with a garden they wrote about in their letters? I look around.

This apartment, crammed full of plastic buckets of Epsom salts, is decidedly single story. Was *anything* they said in the letters true?

Mom quickly moves aside the blankets and pillows on top of a thin yoga mat on the floor. I stare at the mat—is that where my parents sleep? Mom sees the shock on my face. “I know this isn't what you imagined... but your dad and I... we're working hard...”

My face heats in embarrassment. “No, it's fine!” I quickly say. I've been here two seconds and I'm already making my mom feel bad. I leap past the buckets of Epsom salts toward the bath bomb molds on the kitchen table. “How can I help?”

Mom gives me a smile.

“You can help by moving those bombs outside so I can get lunch on the table. We're having stir-fried eggplant!”

The name of one of my favorite dishes puts a big old grin on my face. How I've missed stir-fries! Lao Lao used to make the best ones, my favorite being chicken