

The Letter

Mark Liu

The envelope itself was unremarkable – plain, vanilla, with my name printed in cursive, black ink. I slit the top and slipped out the letter. Embroidered with a glossy and flowery design, it had a faint smell of lavender. Emblazoned onto the top, again in cursive black ink, were the bride and groom's names, names that I hadn't seen for what seemed to be ages. Time seemed to stand still as I traced the names, letting the weight of the letter slowly sink in and my mind to rein in the past. Then, it all came flying back to me. Visions of the bride walking down the aisle to the altar, spliced with images of our late night excursions in Lowell basement, musical jam sessions in Kirkland, and our road adventures in an old PBHA van around Storrow Drive. The bright white wedding gown blended into the snow that blanketed the Charles River and the snowball fights on the deserted Mass Ave. As the swirl of visions and emotions began to fade, a black undercurrent of doubt made its way into my mind, a complicated feeling that was driven by a simple question – can things ever be the same again?

Nostalgia is a strange, curious feeling that affects all of us. As I searched possible flights for the wedding, I couldn't help but wonder if the bride had changed at all since graduating. Part of me ached that this wedding should be the first chance to see her again since three years ago; another part felt genuinely happy for the bride and groom's happiness. But, as a psychology major, I am of course obligated to ask the question, what possible evolutionary reason is there for nostalgia to exist? Sure, memories of the past can be powerful and poignant. Memory is a vibrant canvas that inspires and makes us all feel the full range of emotions, from joy to melancholy. Perhaps these feelings, especially regret, help us learn from our mistakes. Perhaps these feelings drive us to recreate the environments around which we had first experienced those positive emotions. But, what possible reason is there for us to give the past such a strong clout in playing with our emotions? What possible reason is there for the past to not only inspire and unite, but to trap as well?

I liked my Expos 20 class: an investigation of Hinduism and Buddhism's views of humanity. It was thoughtful; it was conscientious. It gave me opportunities to watch the sun rise, and it allowed me to enjoy perusing the dark, deep stacks under Widener, unfortunately and tragically not for the more enjoyable reason that most students enjoy the stacks. However, one image that that class burned into my mind that has lasted until now is that our lives all represent a candle. The flame, although perpetually existent, is perpetually different. Once a piece of wax or part of the wick is burned, it is extinguished, never to exist again. The flame we see now is different from the flame we saw before and the one that we will see after. However, the flame continually reinvents itself, continually burns brightly in the face of dissipating fuel.

So, as I packed my bags for the wedding, I tried my best to dispense with the nostalgia and regret and think about the perpetually evolving nature of our lives. To enjoy a new form of friendship with the bride and groom, those memories I had of our interactions at Harvard needed to be if not extinguished, at least sidelined. Just as we do not let the past dictate how we replace our clothes, taste in music, or computer and phone software, we have the ability to create better and more powerful interactions with other people, whether it be friendship or family, if we focus on the present and do not allow the emotions of our pasts to encroach on our lives. Realize that the minutes and seconds that pass by you with every breath represent that flame that is constantly changing. So, meld your present, shape it, and your present and future self will marvel at what you have just created.