



Lost and Found

words & photos by Juanmin Tan



I found a part of myself on 11th Avenue and 14th Street, sometime in the summer of 2012.

Just days before this I had been doing a casual tour of the East Coast: visiting some friends in Philadelphia and meandering through the charming Princeton University campus in New Jersey. I had had my share of the notorious Philly Cheesesteak, tried what National Geographic claims is the best ice cream in the world (*Capogiro Gelato* in Philadelphia), and sat in the libraries of two Ivy League universities in the midst of some of the brightest minds around. I was a week into my summer vacation, and yet everyday still felt like my first day in the US of A.

Maybe it was the knowledge that I had chosen to do something this bold. After all, it wasn't usual for me to have bought a single flight ticket to halfway across the globe, when all I had known about vacations prior to this were group tours to Disneylands and theme parks, or with family. And yet here I was, some thirty feet above street level, sitting alone in a park with a tuna wrap in my hands.

Two extremely powerful feelings hit me at some point while I was enjoying my oversized lunch:

1. I am in America, I am Asian, and female, and I am alone. But I am safe.

I guess it may be difficult for you to understand how I felt then, but I must admit that I had been largely sheltered for most of my life, because I grew up under the extremely watchful eyes of my parents, who never quite let me out of their sight. I was protected, sure, but there were undoubtedly moments when I'd felt trapped. I'm sure this is something that most of us have encountered before, in some form or another:

"It's so messy in (insert destination of choice), why would you want to visit a place like that?"

"I heard there are plenty of crimes, you'd better not go. If you're lucky they'll slash your pockets; if you're unlucky they'll slash your throat!"

"They carry guns!!!"

Or for women, this has got to be a classic:

"You're a girl! You won't be able to protect yourself if someone attacks you! You can't take these risks!"

Naturally, it felt surreal for me to be in a position quite contrary to what I had been brought up to believe was the norm. Somehow, taking the first step of going beyond my 'safe' zone made me even more aware of the possible dangers around me. I could never have imagined the dangers that existed just by listening to my parents;





they were made real only when someone confronted me along the streets of Manhattan with his personal beliefs of the shortcomings of Asians. But maybe we don't quite know danger until we are exposed to it, and only then can we learn how best to protect ourselves. And that was lesson #1: independence cannot be taught, only learnt.

But of course the more relevant part of this story is the second part:

2. I am alone. But I am not lonely.

A large part of why I chose to set off on a trip on my own was because it still felt like there was some part of myself that I hadn't yet found, a gap I still needed to fill. Although I had spent years before this trying to convince myself that I knew myself well enough, I reasoned that I couldn't actually say so for sure – after all, how could I say I knew myself if I had never truly been with myself?

Surely this has been a part of growing up for most of us, the feeling that we need to fit in, to belong. It was no different for me. I had spent a large part of my younger days living for others, being the person that they wanted me to be and never quite feeling like myself. I was always concerned with other people and their perceptions of me. In some sense they must have shaped me into the person I am today, but before coming on this trip I had always felt like I had never quite found my place.

It wasn't until that morning at the very lovely High Line Park that I felt comfortable in my own skin. I'm not exactly sure what caused it, but I suppose it may have to do with my being lost in a sea of complete strangers. The ultimate disconnect from the world that I was used to meant that I was free to be, well, me. There was no one I could call to hang out with and nobody around me knew who I was, but that in turn lent a great amount of freedom.

I can't quite describe what it was that I found that morning. As I strolled along the pathways, peeping up into the apartments of others or down at the streets below, I found myself wondering about everything and anything: what I wanted my future home to look like, some of the

things I wanted to do with my free time back home... Better yet, I looked at the people around me and tried to picture their personalities through the interactions they were having with one another, then asked myself what *my* true personality was. It was as if I was breaking myself down in my head, layer by layer, searching for the good qualities that I thought defined me and reflecting on the bad ones I wanted to change. And for once in my life I could see the person that I was inside, stripped down to the very core. It was the most liberating, most empowering, and most enigmatic case of lost and found.

The rest of the trip was, without a doubt, made up of many memorable events after my visit to New York. Though I was in the company of others when I took trips to Boston, Niagara Falls, and Chicago, I truly felt that I had left an old part of myself that was weighing me down in Manhattan. I felt brand new and maybe even a little more confident of the person I am inside.

There is something beautiful about every new place that I have been to in my life. The views, the people, even the weather. But I can say for sure that the most special places are not the ones with the most picturesque and scenic spots, but those that evoke memories and emotions of your "firsts". Anybody can sport a camera and capture the same skyline, but nobody else can replicate those same feelings of that one moment when something unfamiliar became familiar to you for the rest of your life. Perhaps it was your first snowfall, your first time whale-watching with your best friend, or even your first taste of deep-fried creepy-crawlies. Hopefully, when you next get the chance to pick your destination, you will be convinced to do something different. Rest assured you will be pleasantly surprised in more ways than one. 🌍

Juanmin tries to sneak off overseas whenever she can. She prefers trips that include rock-climbing and camping out in the cold to typical tourist itineraries. As a third year medical student, she is usually busy trying to juggle school work with... school work.