# All the Stars in the Air

In middle school, my family made five trips from the Pennsylvania border into Upstate New York with a trunk full of fireworks. They were illegal back home, but when we shot them off, cars pulled off the road and stopped at a safe distance. Their headlights shone across the soccer fields, casting a web of shadows on my mortars, and I thought I could see little faces pressed up against backseat windows. I lit my best fireworks, the ones that I earned, and imagined that the little faces were watching

My mom made a point system when I started playing sports. In basketball and soccer, I got a point anytime I touched a ball. I got more points if I made a pass, and even more points if I scored a goal. Points compounded across games and across sports. She counted the tallies in a spiral notebook, the same she used to track her progress towards a doctorate degree.

Every time we went to *Spectacular Fireworks Warehouse*, my mom picked a few boxes from the premium section. She put them in a Sterilite box. As one form of reward, I could redeem my points for the special fireworks in her stash.

Going into her room, I would look at the hazy shadows inside that box: the stiff tubes of mortars, fountain pyramids, double-headed peanut shells that blew up twice when lit. I imagined their explosions so loud, the colors so bright that the whole neighborhood would come out and sit in their lawn chairs, around the soccer field like they did on Sunday mornings to watch the games. So, one day when a soccer ball struck me on the chest and I crouched in the mud gasping for air, I was thinking about goal blocking: two points.

The system stayed in place for years, an exchange of goals, steals, and best-times for prizes. For much of my childhood, my mom tried to make me into an athlete. We went to swimming lessons, tennis lessons, surfing camp, ski camp, recreational soccer, recreational basketball, karate at the Dojo, and once a year, golf camp. Mom shuttled me to practices in our family Volkwagen, a tape of Pimsleur's *Learning the French Language* playing on loop. But unlike the French and the competitive math and the C++ coding, which I enjoyed, my mom's obsession over athletics confused me. The way I saw it, most sports were nothing more than running in an enclosed space. There was no right conjugation, derivation, or script. It was chaos.

A few months after my mom started her firework collection, I got three best-times at a swim meet. My mom came downstairs holding a giant sword sparkler behind her back. That night, we went out to the soccer fields, where the heat still hung damp in the air and moon filled the fields with a skim-milk glow.

Mom held an iPad camera as I lit the sword with the tip of an incense stick. It roared with white sparks that fell like a glowing horsetail onto the ground. Everything around me, the parked trailers, the painted grass, even the tree leaves were caught in a shimmering whiteness.

From time to time, I still play this video to hear my mom saying *this, this is for breaking the record, son!* You can see me in my blue jacket, holding the flaming sword in the air, the sparks reflecting in my safety goggles. Eventually, it burns out and casts my

face in shadow.

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In my earliest memories of swimming, I was in the shallow end, kicking water as my mom held a hand to my belly. I was three years old at the YMCA. She was pushing me high enough to lift my head out of the water. Then, I felt her hand drop away. The water seemed to swoop around me, a feeling of foreignness. I flailed my arms, and I felt my mom's hand on my belly again. "I didn't move my hand," my mom said. "You are swimming away."

As I started to learn my strokes, she hired a YMCA instructor who I only know as "Miss Kim." Miss Kim kept a paper table filled with swimming goals and as I conquered then, she put ducky stickers over the table boxes. The first time the table filled, Miss Kim came over to our house with a stack of presents: bathtub crayons, a motorized fish, a solar system projector.

Miss Kim was young and white and freshly married. My mom spoke of her in reverence. She was someone from the other world, a specimen that we studied to the point of mimicry. We used the same household cleaners as Miss Kim, a clear liquid that claimed it could be everything: mosquito spray, dish soap, mirror polish. It was Miss Kim's calendar system that inspired my mom's point system. Instead of duckies, it was tallies on spiral-bound lined paper, and somewhere in that process, I felt the stakes rise.

My mom promised kits from RadioShack and new pieces of electrical equipment. When I needed a heat gun to melt the solder on some old circuit boards, she waited until I could do a swimmer's flip turn before we went to Home Depot. In the basement she stashed a small tea-tin filled with exotic chemicals for my chemistry set. After particularly good games, she gave me a bottle.

I was obsessed with the idea of synthesis, of purity. In sixth grade, when I earned a bottle of potassium iodide, I turned it into elemental iodine. Iodine is a brilliant purple, but on the skin it turns a dirty brown. I couldn't understand how the two colors could exist in the same pure element.

After we started making regular trips to *Spectacular Fireworks Warehouse*, my mom added fireworks to the list of prizes. I studied fireworks too. I learned about the chemical compounds that gave them color. On YouTube I found tutorials for homemade fireworks. I replicated the techniques with old toilet rolls and pieces of twine.

Summer nights, we'd pull out my firework collection from mom's walk-in closet. We'd sit together and spread the fireworks all around. I noticed the tissue paper that covered the fuses. They were all red, a lucky color in the Chinese tradition. As she read the labels of the fireworks, my mom told me stories of Lunar New Year back in China. They rolled firecracker strips through the street and let them go pop-pop-pop like gunfire. The streets were littered in bits of lucky red paper.

"When the Chinese made gunpowder, they made fireworks," she would say as she turned an explosive shell in her hands. "When the white people made gunpowder, they made cannons."

At the end of seventh grade, we shot off a *Red Crosette*. The rocket left a glowing crimson dot above the soccer fields. Silently, it broke into four pieces—a frame in the sky.

"That was stupid," I said. There wasn't even an explosion.

"What a waste of money," said my mom.

I pulled a shell from the wagon, palmed it in my hands. The shell was smaller than a

tennis ball, but perfectly spherical and hardened with layers of gum tape. I shook the shell like I always did, to hear the grains of gunpowder that would throw it into the air.

"It's your willow," I said.

Sometimes, as I loaded the mortars, my mom would ask if she picked the shell that was sliding down the barrel. She paid more attention if it was. She wanted to see if the colors were the way she imagined it.

I touched the incense to the fuse, which sputtered to life. There came the *THWOOMP*, the whizzing of the shell as it spiraled in the air like a football. Then came the burst: streaks of orange that curled downward. The explosion left a plume of sulfurous smoke that shone in the moonlight. My mom stood still. She looked at the fading orange sparks as the cardboard rained down like confetti.

All these years, I've never asked my mom about her home on Poyang Lake and the feral cats and the fireworks they set off on Lunar New Year. She'd tell me stories sometimes, I'd listen, and that was it. The truth is, I didn't know how to ask for more. That night, we just stood near the warmth of the citronella candles, talking about firework effects. Fireworks are named after flowers and plants. We wondered if Golden Willow shells really wept as beautifully as the tree.

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When I grew old enough, I started practicing with the community swim team. We swam in a middle school pool with a giant ocean mural at one end. My mom would sit on the pull-out bleachers next to a painted anglerfish, a notebook in her lap. When a boy behind me tapped my toes and I let him pass, she made a note. When I paused too long and let another boy start first, she made a note.

"You need to be more aggressive," she once said after a practice. She told me that if someone tapped my toes, I should speed up.

"That's not good manners," I said.

"Good manners? That's what white people say to trample all over you."

I can't remember how long we fought that night. As I grew older, we sometimes went for hours. My mom had a temper that took only a sideways comment to set off.

"You're in America." She spoke to me in Mandarin. "In America, you make friends through sports."

I responded in English. "I have friends that don't play sports."

"White men like sports. White men are always playing sports."

"I'll choose white people who don't talk about sports."

"You won't have white friends, then."

In these arguments my mom would threaten to take away my fireworks, my Christmas presents, my chemistry set. It did happen: when I refused to learn a competitive flip-turn, she folded up the hammock and hid it in the basement.

I knew that my mom could just take apart something I loved and stash it away forever, but I wanted to test my limits, to feel how far I could go with my own voice. It wasn't worth fighting another boy for a change in the swimming order. It meant far more to fight my mom, to show her that I knew more about the American Male. Later on, I would understand these arguments as flashes of indignance. *You're not an American Male*, I'd want to tell her. *I'm the American Male. Why are you teaching me my own life?*

There was only one time when my mom and I lost control of each other. That night in seventh grade we fought about getting up at 5:30 am for an early tennis practice. On

weekend nights like this one, my mom let me sleep in her bedroom. I didn't like sleeping by myself.

After one hour of my tennis complaints, my mom suddenly got up and flipped open her prize firework box. She grabbed one of the large shells and threw it into the toilet. I didn't register what she had done until I heard the splash in the bathroom. Yelling, I jumped out of bed, and fished it out with my bare hands, scrabbling at the paper to see what effect I had lost. My mom came back with another shell and I grabbed her shirt. By the bunched pajamas in my hand, I tried to pull her back from the bathroom. Her slippers skittered across the floor as she stumbled, but she gave the shell a toss and it landed in the toilet too.

There was a moment of quiet in the bathroom. I was holding one of the fireworks, toilet water dripping from my elbow.

"I'm sorry mom," I said. "I'm sorry mom."

I said this the way she wanted it to be said, from an obedient boy who listened to his mom's word as law and had white people friends who talked about sports and knew how to fend for himself, even though none of it was true.

Later that month, a boy tapped my feet and I swam faster. He grabbed my feet and I kicked back. At the starting block, the boy pushed me aside and went ahead. I tried to pull him off the block and the coach had to separate us.

As I went into a different lane, I felt something buzzing in my body, not anger, but a song, a rhythm, and in that moment I felt my mom's vision of the American Male. *There's a beauty in this,* I thought. *A power.*

I kept the two destroyed fireworks. Because I had fished out the shell quickly from the toilet, the main explosive charge stayed dry. With a razor blade, I peeled away the thick walls like an apple, and from inside came the marble-sized black balls: the "stars" of the shell. Each of these balls burns brightly when the main charge bursts apart.

I made new shells that I filled with stars from these destroyed fireworks. In my imagination I embellished them with swirls and hissing trails too bright to come from consumer fireworks. I gave them names like the pros did: *pistil, peony, willow, palm.*

Sometimes, fireworks have special compounds that make them scream. In the fields, the sound fills the air, the trees, the grass. Because of the high frequency, the source of the screaming is untraceable. I tried this trick during swim practice. When I turned my head to breathe, I yelped as high and loud as I could. It echoed around the concrete walls of the indoor pool. The coaches couldn't figure it out. So I kept doing it.

Gradually, I became a swimmer. I began to care about the numbers on the clock. We went to more swimming meets all across Upstate New York, and when I got my first medal, my mom stood me against the living room wall, draped the medal over my shoulders, and took a picture with my iPad. I brought best-time and heat-winner ribbons. With those, I earned more fireworks.

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It's a two minute walk from our house to the school soccer fields where we shot off fireworks. Past that, it's five minutes to the backroads where you see the old country: barns with collapsed roofs, baling machines, tilled fields.

I stood on the edge of these old country fields once, and I felt a sense of timelessness, as if by staring long enough, I could conjure the snarl of telegraph cables and the wood-shingled houses with the family crests. As my mom said so often in a Chinese saying, these people had seven uncles and eight aunts at their service. When a

car dealership ripped her off, she blamed it on the uncles and aunts. The same happened after botched dental cleanings, bad parent-teacher conferences, a slow cake shop on Martha's Vineyard.

When I was younger, I spent many weekend nights with the kids in our neighborhood. We played football quite often. I couldn't catch a ball or throw a spiral, but I was the oldest and tallest, and it took no skill to intercept balls by batting them out of the air. They called me "drinky," because my middle name sounded like that, and nobody could pronounce the Chinese.

Summer afternoons the neighborhood kids biked down the hill to Sno Top for ice cream. The ice cream shack was in the village center, where the country turnpike met the road to the city. For one reason or another, I never went with them. There was always something else to do.

As I grew older, nearly all of the neighborhood kids became athletes. Some of them swam, others ran cross country. A freckled boy became a football player with dreams of D1. Their fantasy teams, fanatic sports watching, football hikes on manicured lawns, it became part of the chaos that I understood as sports. Summer nights I heard their whooping, saw the glow of their fires, but I would turn to my computer and go back to work. Some people did make friends through sports: these small village white men.

When I came home from college for vacation, I decided to walk to Sno Top. It was the first time that I had ever gone to the village center on foot. As I came down the hill, I found myself among the old and the new. The timelessness felt even more expansive: the repair shops with cast iron sewing machines, the one-room schoolhouse, the churches turned into pubs. I realized that Sno Top stood alone, a small square shack in a massive sea of a parking lot.

I ordered black raspberry soft-serve in a cherry chocolate dip. I took the ice cream to the Swan Pond, where children fed geese and the massive mute swans with pellets from a dispenser. A fountain sprayed a shaft of water in the air. The ducks paddled on the surface, and a swan nibbled at its feathers. All around was the sound of flowing water.

I wondered if my mom would ever sit and watch the swans like this, licking drips of cream as it melted in the sun. She always saw the village center as a place to drive through. She was missing out on the ducks, the swans, the children holding shakes the size of their heads. I wondered if my mom would ask where I'd gone for the afternoon.

But picture this: two decades ago, two Chinese immigrants drive through the village center in their hand-me-down Toyota Corolla, their infant son in the backseat. They see the glowering sign of a Burger King, the lines of white people in front of the Sno Top with massive ice cream sundaes. At the light they turn and see the three Christian churches in a row, crosses pointed to the sky. We didn't have our aunts and uncles. We didn't want to make history. We just wanted to be a part of it, to thread ourselves into this timeless world.

As I grew older, my mom grew more cynical. I saw her cry once, watching the news of Sandy Hook. I saw her pin a local newspaper to the fridge. Someone in the village had smashed the Mute Swan eggs at the Swan pond. Much later, my mom stuck motion-activated lights all around the house. With paracord, she even tied them around the branches of our pear tree.

In the act of threading, adapting, the ideas were right but the colors were painted with a broad brush. To my mom, every disturbed teen was a school shooter, every man an egg smasher, every American man an athlete. I tried to fill in the details. I walked

alone at night in the moonlit fields. I couldn't give two shits about the Bengals and the Jets. We shot off fireworks on school property.

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At the start of Seventh grade, my mom promised me two special fireworks if I made the school soccer team. It was easy to fail tryouts intentionally. I knocked down half of the cones during agility tests. It was harder to tell a convincing story to mom. There was a technique, I learned, that worked on her. All that mattered was being her model character: the unflinching athlete, the American male. The pitfalls, the intentional failures, all of this I blamed on the environment. So in my story, the soccer coach knew how good I was, but he had to give my spot to a friend's son.

I used the same technique to leave the cross-country team. I lied to my mom about the practice schedule, and when I was kicked off the team for missing practice, I told her that I was intentionally told the wrong times by a jealous teammate.

There were times in sports when I felt the pulse of a game and race. In the electric second between the *take-your-mark* and the starter beep, nothing mattered more than the clench of my legs and the grip of the diving block against my feet. These are the times I forget what I'm doing, and all I can think is *push, push, push* until I feel the rasp of the timing pad and see my numbers glowing on the screen. But then the thought of my mom would come back. What would she say for a best time? A heat winner? A qualifier to regional championships? Sports was colored by my mom, her points, her words after I won, her words after I lost and lied.

In ninth grade, my mom signed me up for the varsity swim team. We had practice every day for two hours at a nearby college. On the bus rides to the pool, many of the boys would sit in the back, banging around to the music of a Bluetooth speaker and smelling of old chlorine.

I'd lean into the aisle and watch them like zoo animals. One of them liked the Reeses Puffs rap. Soon all the back-bus boys were singing it. They called one of them Milk Tank Mike. He had a box of almonds at every swim meet. He held them out to me once. *Want some complex carbs?* I looked at the unseasoned nuts rolling like marbles in the Tupperware and shook my head.

Practice after practice, I realized that I didn't belong here. It wasn't about the boys-will-be-boys whipping each other with towels in the locker room; it was about who they worshipped. Everyone loved A., who swam the slowest but cheered the loudest for his teammates. He reminded me exactly of the person my mom wanted me to be, that swagger, that team spirit, that boisterous voice. Or take E., who had a Chinese dad and a white mom. He looked just like my kind, but flocked with the backseat boys and barged his way up to the fastest lane.

I didn't hate these people either; I hated the idea of these people. I hated how they aligned with my mom's view of the world, how her broad brushstrokes carried with them a weight greater than I anticipated.

My mom and I fought often about the swim team. We clashed so much that I stopped telling the truth. I never told her that I feigned distraction during a race so I wouldn't have to train for a sectional meet. She didn't know that I refused to dress like the team on meet days, and as punishment I willingly swam the 200-yard butterfly. I stopped cheering with the team after ninth grade. Instead I stood in the circle and mouthed the words.

It became another part of an illusion, the separation of who I was, and who my mom

wanted me to be. In her eyes, I had become an athlete. I was making history without the help of all the aunts and uncles.

The word “artifice” comes from French. In French, “firework” translates to “feu d'artifice”: the fire of illusion.

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The coach had a history of giving captains to all high school seniors, so in the days before the my twelfth grade season, my mom made a bargain. If I didn’t become a captain, she said, I could quit. To her, it was like advancing a grade in school: an inevitable title for this American male she had raised on sports.

For two weeks of the season, nobody talked about new captains. Then, on the night before Thanksgiving break, I drove myself home from practice and threw down my bag.

“Mom,” I said. “They didn’t make me captain.”

The next few days, my mom sent emails to the coach and athletic director. Their responses were the same. It was a team vote, and I had lost. My mom and I spent the next month working on college applications together. But in the kitchen, or at the fireplace, while going over an essay about swimming, the thought would strike her. She’d curse the coach. *He didn’t deserve you*, she would say. *There’s no space for people like us anymore.*

What I said to my mom was the truth. I told the truth because I knew she’d be sending out the emails. My mom took pride in “figuring things out,” as she would say. She found the most important people in anything and wrote them complaints in her broken English.

But here’s what actually happened. In the first team meeting, I pulled the coach aside. I’m not going to run for captain, I said. Far from what my mom ended up believing, I think the coach noticed how I huddled alone on the bench, curled over a clipboard filled with math problems. He knew that look of meekness of someone pushed to the edge of his identity. So when I gave him further instructions on what to say to the inevitable email, he didn’t question anything.

The summer after I quit, right before I started college, my mom and I took afternoon walks around the old soccer fields. In the last few years, the school changed them. They put old trailers and snow plows in the gravel lot where we used to launch fireworks.

She couldn’t talk without going into a lecture. It was the purpose of the walks: to give me her wisdom before I left for college. I found myself listening only to the inflection of her voice, waiting for pauses and tone-shifts to say my *uh-huhs*.

One afternoon, my mom talked about the American sports lifestyle. None of the things she said were new. Play sports like white people, make friends, live a good, athletic life. But as she remembered the cross country team that had kicked me out, the soccer team that had cut me from tryouts, the swim team who refused my captainship, there came in her voice a twinge of something close to defeat. “What white people get by trying,” she said, “we have to try even harder.”

The first lesson of firework handling is to respect the powder. The shells you hold are the artifices, the thrower of brilliant stars through the air. But the slightest spark and you will be blown to smithereens. At the receiving end, the artifice is nothing but an explosive.

It had been years since my mom kept the prize bin. Some time in my high school, she merged the prize collection with my own and said nothing about it. I hadn’t shot off a firework since.

We stood on a berm and looked at the rusty husks of snow plow blades. It was humid and hot, and I knew that once the sun went down, it would be perfect firework weather. I wanted to go home and spread out the shells like we did years ago. I wanted to smell the sulfur and see the colors in the sky, my own colors. But the fireworks were too old to light safely. Besides, we had lost our field to the snowplows.

So I had to settle on a memory.

The night of the Sword Fountain was also the night I shot my first homemade firework. My mom held the iPad for that too. In the footage you can see me lighting the fuse and sprinting away from the mortar. The fuse disappears into the long muzzle. Silence. Then, all the stars spray from the tube, a wonderful fantail of reds, blues, crackles, greens, whites.

What you don’t hear is my sigh after the camera stops rolling. The shell had exploded prematurely on the ground. What you also don’t hear is my mom’s voice.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“It’s a mistake.”

“No matter. It’s still beautiful.”