

A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

Here's a fact for you America-philes," a certain Major Tang, in the Army in which I had once served, liked to say when he caught us memorizing English vocabulary. "The moon in America is no bigger or brighter than the moon in China." A scientifically sound statement, though what a surprise it was to find that the moon in Iowa, where I landed in 1996 to go to graduate school, did seem much bigger and brighter. In my native Beijing, the moon looked faded behind the smog, remote and melancholy.

Equally astonishing was American lighting: in many places, lights stayed on from morning till night. At home, our family, conscious of saving every penny, would not turn on a single lamp until the last ray of daylight had vanished. Lights in public places were sound-controlled. The residents in our building had developed the habit of clapping or stomping to turn on a lamp, and to announce their presence; a few, like me, preferred a stealthy, unnoticeable passing in the dark.

How does one live in such a well-lighted country? Before I left China, I had prepared myself with a four-cassette course in American English. Phrases like "Be there or be square" and "Stop running around like a chicken with its head cut off" stayed with me because of their imperativeness.

No one told me to "be there or be square," but everyone I met, it seemed, expected me to have fun. After I had planned a set of immunology experiments with my adviser, he said, "Have fun." The nurse I met biweekly over a six-month period, because I had not passed the TB skin test required for enrollment at the university, always wished me a "good time" with the pills. A sorority mother in her sixties, a member of a local group that

befriended international students, asked repeatedly, "Did you have fun?" after I visited the sorority house and dined with her girls. How could I explain that it was not memories of fun that would stay with me but what I saw in her bedroom: an oil painting of her, at eighteen, riding a prize horse; a black-and-white wedding photograph



of her and her husband, a Navy officer who had died four years earlier; the thirty-seven stuffed animals on her bed, one for each year of her marriage?

As part of a program to help foreign students understand America, I signed up to patrol the town with the police on a shift between midnight and 3 A.M. An officer drove us around and talked about his family: his wife, who had grown up in Correctionville, Iowa; his childhood, in a farmhouse outside the Quad Cities; their three children. He asked about my studies at the university, and about China. When we had exhausted those topics, we cruised in silence.

A little before two that morning, a call came in. A man had been seen buying cold medicine on two consecutive nights. The officer sped to a Walmart at the edge of town, where three more police cars arrived within minutes. The man in question, we were told, was playing pinball in the store. After half an hour, he walked out of the store, a plastic bag with a yellow smiley face

dangling from his hand. Just as he unlocked his car, the four police vehicles surrounded him.

From where I sat, I could not see much besides the officers in their black uniforms, worn over bulky bulletproof vests. Twenty minutes passed. Finally, two of the officers moved their cars, and the man drove away.

The store's undercover security guard, the officer explained when he returned, had noticed a hypodermic needle at the entrance of the store. He had not seen the man drop it, but he suspected that he had. "We ran a search of his vehicle registration," the officer said. "If there's one thing coming up, we could bring him back for more questions. Or if the security guard saw him with the needle. As it stands now . . ." He shrugged, and then said it was time I ended my shift.

In parting, I said goodbye to the officer, and he wished me "a fun time in America."

What a strange country, I thought, where fun, like good lighting, seemed mandatory. Was it fun that had kept the man at the pinball machine when he could have left with his suspicious purchase before the police arrived? Had someone told the security guard to have fun before he went to work, watching sleepless souls wander among the aisles? The other people I had seen on this night shift—the few customers in the diner where we stopped for coffee, the custodian of a water plant, a man behind the counter in a gas station—looked as though they had walked out of the paintings of Edward Hopper, yet the characters in those paintings, lacking an escape from the harsh, hard-edged light, had the choice of silence. They did not exhort one another to have a good time; they did not need to step out of their loneliness to tackle the task of having fun. ♦