

MY NAME IS NIAN

BY NIAN HU

An eight-year-old girl describes what it is like to live as an exile in the only country she has ever known.



Nian Hu

My name is Nian. Nian in Chinese means “to remember.” To tell the truth, I don’t really like my name. Many times I have wondered why I can’t have a name like Amy, Kristina or Michelle, since I think those names sound more natural. My name sometimes causes me trouble. When people ask me what my name is, I tell them it’s Nian, and they usually don’t understand what I say and I have

to repeat it again. However, my parents told me that I should keep my name. They said that this name is for me to remember our exile life.

“Exile?” What does this word mean? It means that a person is forbidden to go back to his or her country. My dad has not been allowed to go back to China since 1987.

As a child born into exile, I have never been to China. Every summer vacation, several of my Chinese classmates fly back to China. When they come back, they always talk with great excitement about China, especially about their relatives in China. I can’t share any of this with them. I also have a lot of relatives in China, but I have never had a chance to see them.

I especially feel bad that I never met my grandma; she was my father’s mom, and my only grandparent still alive when I was born. I remember one evening when I was about four years old, I was in my bathtub and my grandma called me from China. She was calling my name, “Nian, Nian!”, and my mom told me to reply to her by saying “Grandma!” That was the first and only time I talked with Grandma. My dad told me that Grandma was extremely happy when she heard my voice. I learned afterwards that Grandma was very sick, and that she really wanted to meet me. Unfortunately, she didn’t get to see me, because the Chinese government rejected my parents’ request to enter China for one week to visit Grandma. Grandma

died later that year. I had hoped that I could meet Grandma and hug her. Sometimes when I see someone with a grandma, I feel a bit jealous. My parents told me that my grandma asked to have my name carved on her gravestone before she died. Whenever I think of this, tears fall from my eyes.

Being born into exile has given me many family friends who were once prisoners in China. Many times when I go to a party, my mom tells me that this friend was in prison for ten years, that friend was in prison for four years, the other was there for eight or six years. My godfather, Liu Qing, was actually in prison for eleven years. That sounds awful! My parents told me that these friends were in prison not because they were criminals, but because they tried to bring freedom and democracy to China. I respect them a lot. They sacrificed their lives for a better China, and their courage and bravery really impress me.

I have never been to China, yet I honestly don’t have a strong wish to go there. From the books I read and from what I hear, I feel that China is kind of a strange place. In the books from China that my cousins send me, there are too many stories about killing and roughness; whenever there’s a problem, the solution is that someone kills someone else. My mother and I are nature-lovers, but in China there are people who put live blue peacocks in small cages in front of their restaurants for customers to choose to eat. My mom once showed me a picture. There was a person that chained little baby tigers on the street and let others put a strong thick stick into the tiger’s mouth and take pictures. Isn’t that horrible?

I like my life in America, yet I also have my hopes for China.

I know that my parents miss China. I know that they want our exile life to end. I like my life in America, yet I also have my hopes for China. I wish it would become a democratic country soon so that our friends’ sacrifices would not be in vain. I wish China would pass strong animal protection laws so that animals there would live safely. Most of all, I wish that I could visit my relatives in China someday. I would make a special trip to Grandma’s grave. I would hug the gravestone and tell Grandma, “Grandma, I’m Nian. I’m here.”