

# A Family That Lives Apart

By Lily Engbith

“So, who are your real parents?” This is usually the first question that people ask when they find out I was adopted from China. It’s followed by a look that always baffles me, an expression that’s at once embarrassed and fearful. I smile and calmly explain that I have two sets of parents: biological and adoptive, and both are very real I love them all equally. I understand why they’re curious: How could I love someone whom I’d never met? How could things have been different had I stayed in China? Didn’t I have any interest in finding my birth parents? These are questions that I grapple with every day. But sometimes I do think about them, and it hurts to admit that I might never meet my birth parents and their families. It hurts to acknowledge the sacrifice my birth mother made when she brought me to the orphanage, and it hurts to know that I might never be able to thank her and my father for giving me my acute ear and wide smile.

Still, I’ve gratefully realized that I was brought home to New Haven because all four of my parents wanted something better for me. They wanted me to attend a school where as a second grader I would learn the Filipino stick dance for an international day celebration. They wanted me to meet children from Mexico, Belgium, and Nigeria. They wanted to give me opportunities to experiment with double precipitates, research the legacy of Stalin, and perform Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony with kids my age. It’s become clear that my birth parents and adoptive parents all had the same plan for me, but that doesn’t mean the plan hasn’t changed since I came home.

Right before I started kindergarten, Mom and I packed up and left Dad’s house for the other side of New Haven. I don’t remember thinking too much about the move itself, but it was definitely an adjustment. Fortunately, Mom and Dad did everything to normalize my life with two homes. I became accustomed to packing overnight bags, being dropped off at Mom’s before Dad went to work, and sometimes having to explain to friends that, “I was staying at Dad’s house.” It seemed strange at first, and there were many typical “Why me?” questions that I wanted answered, but eventually, I was convinced that this back and forth between houses made us no different from families who lived under one roof. Rather than think about my parents’ divorce, I concentrated on my studies and activities just like any other kid.

Our family will never be less intact just because we don’t live together. In the same way that my birth parents let me go so that I could grow up in the culturally rich city of New Haven, and my adoptive parents support keeps me focused on my life as it is not what it could have been. In the end, we are all still a family, just a family that lives apart.