

## Flags

by Jane Jiang  
age: 17

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The tinted window was halfway open in the back seat as I leaned back into the smooth, gray leather upholstery. Half closing my eyes to shut out the offensive brightness of the September sun, I caught a faint murmur of mixed Chinese and English lilting back to my ears.

Somewhere outside in the busy street a flag snapped. I stirred, remembering that I had to remind my parents to buy two of those, one for each car. They were Americans, and a flag would be a fine symbol of an appropriate patriotism, especially fitting in light of recent events. Some clichés you could just never have enough of.

The traffic god was congested — hay fever, I had proclaimed, smiling — and the erratic flow of cars past my window brought a dirty white minivan into view. I absently noted the mud splattered on the car; it reminded me of dried and dusty mustard. An American flag stuck out of the back of car like an ungainly tail, and emblazoned across the top was a window sticker featuring a waving Stars and Stripes and the slogan “United We Stand.” I was tiring of the minivan’s plainness when it ebbed back into the line of traffic behind the window, and a sporty little coupe in front of it appeared. I lost myself in the procession of cars, for the moment content to be quiet and attentive to the little details.

A light breeze brought back a whiff of conversation, which I tried to ignore. My parents were talking of *it* again, as if talking would somehow solve the mystery and ease the pain of the loss. Well, let them talk, I thought, but I was going to try to sleep. I was still too haunted by the images from the news stations to think about New York, which I had visited only half a year ago, with any sort of equanimity. It had come as such a shock.

I registered the shouting first, and dismissed it as one would an annoying fly. My fellow Seattleites — I thought — were becoming more obnoxious by the day. That was before I comprehended the words.

“Hey! Hey you! If you’re going to talk, talk English — ” I sat up straight and glanced out the window; the words were too pointed to ignore — “or go back to where you came from!” The voice came from the fat, balding man with a squashed and sunburned face driving the white minivan, which had crept back up to my mother’s car.

The numbness came first, tearing all sensation away and whitening out all the other thoughts in my mind. From some great distance away, I heard my father’s infuriated voice reply. “Yeah? And where are *you* from?”

The statement was rather garbled with indignation, and certainly not a good example of his near-flawless English. But it served to rally my thoughts, and then all the voices in my head broke free from the suffocation of dumbness to clamor and rant, outraged and scared and shocked beyond compare.

I frequently get carried away while finishing English assignments, and “Flags” is no exception. This is a piece of writing that simply refused to let go of my fifteen-year-old self; it was relieving to have found such an outlet for a very real, very jarring experience that occurred not long after September 11, 2001.

### Editor’s Comments:

Jane examines the tension between patriotism and racism in post 9/11 America from a Chinese immigrant’s perspective. She takes the reader inside her experience of alienation with vivid “little details.”

Then, mercifully, the lights changed, and the dirty white minivan was swept back and away for the last time as my mother's new burgundy Mercedes charged to the front, eager to be rid of that man, that place.

A flash of red, white and blue waving in the wind — a flag — caught my eye as we surged forward, and the oddity of the window sticker finally hit my groping mind.

I would reflect on the incident later and muse that a silence fell on the street then, in those seconds before my father replied. And perhaps, if I was feeling especially inventive, I would add that a few others spoke to back to Dirty White Minivan as well, condemning him as a paranoid, uneducated racist.

But nobody did. It was strange, being on a busy street plugged with cars of all shapes and sizes, and having a private conversation — if what had transpired could be so termed — with the man driving the car in the next lane. The world kept on spinning, but for a split second, it seemed as if that part containing the two cars and their passengers had stopped.

The Chinese idiom dictates that, "The great man does not begrudge the small man's faults." And so my parents and I, being good Chinese Americans, felt an obligation to let that memory fade. The spatters of mud were no longer the color of dried and dusty mustard, and were content to be a nondescript gray. And as "squashed and sunburned" was relegated to the annals of memories better lost, the man's face began to blur into a shapeless white patch. The hot indignation and the rankled jabbering of my thoughts were quickly forgotten, and in too soon a period of time the event seemed something from ages past, small and unimportant against the greater trials of the day.

But a few things remained with me. The first was a heightened awareness, a consciousness of being different from others, which showed up always in the most unexpected of times. It was a feeling that would never quite go away to leave me with the quiet peace I had enjoyed before that fateful day. There was also a prevailing sense of oddity concerning the flag: not exactly irreverence for it, but I never could look at it quite the same way again. Before, a buoyant pride surfaced when the Old Glory flapped and waved in the breeze, but now, I felt something akin to pity for those who wore their supposed patriotism proudly on their sleeve. And first before everything I understood that I would never be able to shake that image of a cheap plastic flag, snapping mockingly at my disbelieving face.