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VIOLETS

by

Xu (Sherry) Wang

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Joy Castro

Lincoln, NE

May, 2010

VIOLETS

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University of Nebraska, 2010

Advisor: Joy Castro

Violets is a multi-genre work that explores the complex relationships of Chinese women from the 1980s to the present day as they move through different settings—from the countryside of Zhejiang province, to the metropolis of Jiaxing city, to the suburbia of Omaha, NE. It was inspired by a story heard by the author about a Chinese woman whose husband left her for a year because she had a daughter instead of a son. Half of Violets is made up of a sustained, imagined story about a woman named Xinling and the year she spent as a single mother. It explores her day-to-day life, her tense relationship with her mother-in-law, her complex feelings toward her absent husband, and the societal and cultural expectations and context of 1980's China. The other half of Violets is made up of personal vignettes told from the point of view of the author, a Chinese-American immigrant, belonging to the generation following Xinling's. The vignettes mainly focus on lessons and lies from her family stories, centering on the inherited oppression of Chinese women by the older generation. The unconventional back-and-forth format of the work attempts to convey both parallels and differences between the two stories, in hopes of finding an understanding and deeper truth through both fiction and nonfiction.

青出于蓝，胜于蓝

qin chu yu lan, sheng yu lan

Violet comes from blue, yet is beyond blue.

- Chinese Proverb

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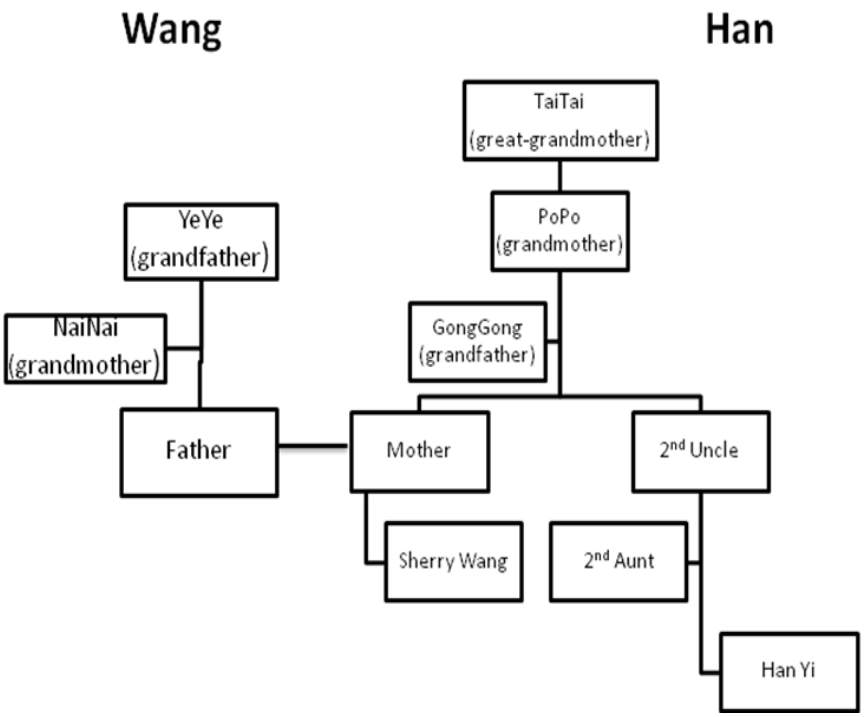
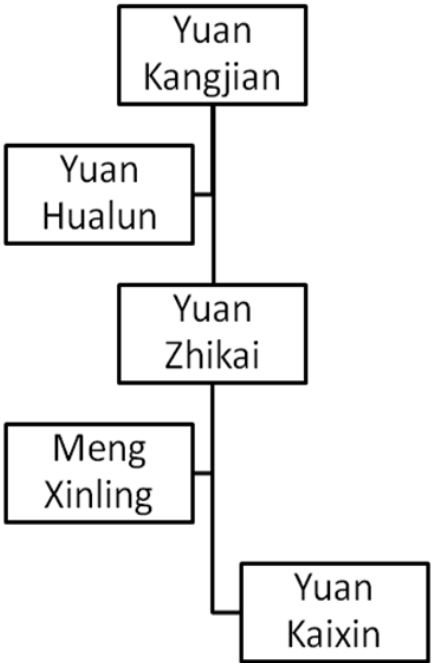
Anhui


Wang
Han
TaiTai
(great-grandmother)
YeYe
(grandfather)
PoPo
(grandmother)
NaiNai
(grandmother)
GongGong
(grandfather)
Father
Mother
2nd Uncle
Sherry Wang
2nd Aunt
Han Yi

Zhejiang


Yuan Kangjian
Yuan Hualun
Yuan Zhikai
Meng Xinling
Yuan Kaixin

Introduction

One of the first works of nonfiction I ever read was Tony Earley's *Somehow Form a Family,* but this first foray into the genre already shattered my expectations of what creative nonfiction was. Tony Earley began his collection of essays by writing about an incident he remembered wrongly. The night Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon, he sat outside with his sister and stared up at the full moon, imagining an actual person wandering around up there. A quick fact check by an editor revealed that the moon that night, that he had remembered so clearly, so vividly, was in fact not full as he had remembered, but a waxing crescent. His first reaction was wonderment, surprise—how could that memory possibly be wrong? The second, panic. The third, resignation and understanding—memory, like everything, was not foolproof. Memory fills in holes, just as it makes connections. Thusly, he explained his essays as "Stories that Are Mostly True."

Audre Lorde's *Zami* could be called autobiography, but it was not the truest description, so she coined a new genre she named "biomythography." It was the story of her life, but not her life transcribed on paper, so it became a myth. Again I thought, I didn't know creative nonfiction could come in this form.

Both of these authors knew they had a story to tell, yet it was impossible to tell a completely true story. But to call it fiction and deny any resemblance to their own lives, also did not seem right. I wondered if presenting this story as a work of fiction, where so many more liberties could be taken, would also make the story lose its power as something that actually happened. I had to ask the question, how does one tell a "true" story without knowing the concrete details, the personal psychologies, or even how

exactly the "plot" unfolded? Like the stories my grandmother told me as a child in China, sometimes lies portrayed as facts were also told, and sometimes it was impossible to tell what was lesson and what was lie.

Ultimately, this project began as a quest for understanding. My mother's friend's husband left her for one year after the birth of their only daughter in the 1980's. It was a basic story, yet I was most curious about the passage, the day-by-day of that year. Moreover, the choice for this woman to take her husband back after this year away, choosing to continue this marriage until the present day, more than twenty years later, was a choice at once baffling to me, as a young Chinese-American woman, very aware of the Chinese culture yet inevitably influenced by American values as well, but also a choice that I knew to be an obvious one in the setting of 1980's Southern China.

The story resonated with me for a number of reasons. Often I placed my own mother in her position, my grandmother in the position of the woman's mother-in-law, and myself sometimes in the role of her daughter, as well as herself. The knowledge that a similar story happened to us, that we were in such a similar situation, made me wonder: why was our outcome any different? The character that grew out of that curiosity and desire for understanding, Meng Xinling, was someone not wholly different from the original woman of my mother's friend, yet inevitably influenced by my own understanding and experiences. The intention to pen a story, based closely on her experiences, framed and placed next to my own experiences and the family stories I have listened to, was not an attempt to pass an untrue story off as a true story, but a wish to make sense of her story through my own unique perspective, and moreover, to present an author and her penned story together. I think it is important that the reader understand

the parallels I see from her story and my own, in my hope that they can empathize with Xinling's story as I do. Through this method, the so-called truth in writing becomes more than just a dichotomy of truth and lie. Tim O'Brien writes that "fiction is for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth" and furthermore that "[f]iction is the lie that helps us understand the truth." I hoped to present both the truth and the fiction.

These questions of how to balance a work that includes both fictional and nonfictional elements were all in my mind as I wrote forward. Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* showed me that creative nonfiction could be made up of fictional and nonfictional elements, of myth and memory, and though I agree with Ha Jin's criticisms of Kingston misusing facts in order to prove her points, the innovative form of her book did appeal to me, and I found it relevant to what I was trying to write. I shifted my focus to bringing the reader through different times and settings that I had either first-hand experience with, or had thoroughly picked my mother's memory for. The setting of 1980's Southern China was a critical part of my project. The uncertainty of the decade following the Cultural Revolution, the return of the education that was essentially wiped out during much of the 1970's, and the very wide social gap, both in terms of class and culture, between the rural and the urban environments were all important factors in shaping this story. The claustrophobia of having several generations of a family living together in close quarters, the inability to speak candidly about one's feelings, and the sense of being trapped and resigned to a Chinese woman's fate and choices were also aspects of this world that I wanted to convey. My intention was certainly not to propagate further stereotypes about Chinese women when there are already so numerous

in Chinese-American literature, but instead to quietly paint a picture of a society in flux and in motion, torn between the old and the new, and struggling between binds set by the older generation of Chinese women and the strong urge to break free of such binds.

More specifically, I was focused on the delicate balance between a woman's love and obligation toward family. Xinling struggled with her love for her husband, the dignity of being a Chinese woman in a society where much was expected of her—career stability, competence as a mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law—as well as maintaining a peaceful and calm exterior to the outside world, no matter what inner turmoil was within. Allowing the reader access to Xinling's thoughts and staying close to her body throughout much of the narrative was a choice that I hoped would make her position more clear, especially her fears, her thoughts, and her reactions. Getting deep into Xinling's psychology was a move that I knew I, as a listener to her story and a writer, needed to really comprehend her story, and it only made sense to me that the reader would need such candor as well.

I experimented with the changing of point of view between the two viewpoints of Xinling and my own memories because I wanted to create a rich mixture of memory, imagination, and everyday life, hoping to achieve a very complicated psychology, especially the psychologies of two very different Chinese women, but whose stories could still resonate with each other. I hoped readers could find deeper truths about both stories as they read them side-by-side. The memory I wrote of was not necessarily tied together by chronology, or even direct cause and effect, but instead by themes or pieces, the senses, and even stories that I will never know are true or not. This was especially pervasive through the parts of the narrative told from my point of view. The choice to

write vignettes flowing naturally into another story, another memory, seemed to me to be most true of how memory functions. Though some immediate cause-and-effects may have been lost, the revelations that come with time and reflection, I believe, were gained.

The importance of a grandmother in the family structure was also a pervading theme throughout the work, especially a grandmother that bore sons. I hoped to show that a Chinese woman could at once be the most powerless as well as the most powerful member of a family. Though the society that I wrote about of course valued boys over girls, especially in a one-child-per-family generation, the strength of the grandmother was also never undervalued. Hualun took care of her four sons on her own after her husband's death, sending them to school, feeding them, tending to their farm. My grandmother's parents died when she was teenager, and so she took care of her three younger sisters, as well as her own five children.

Other works that I came to for guidance, in addition to the ones mentioned in the very beginning, included Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, which, though very different in subject and setting, was a work I thought demonstrated the beauty in writing about the ephemeral nature of memory. Deng Lijun's classic love ballads, that began to be popular in Mainland China from Taiwan in the 1970's, although they could only be listened to in secret during the Cultural Revolution, also aided in understanding the position of a Chinese woman and how she was expected to be during this time. Fan Wu's works about modern-day Chinese-American immigrants struggling with their new hybrid identities, along with Jhumpa Lahiri's works about Indian-English-American immigrants, were both works that were helpful to me in their exploration of similar content. I hope that my work will find its own niche among these contemporary works in its exploration

of 1980's China, identity and its ties with setting, and the role of Chinese women in the home through the generations. Moreover, the use of multiple genres and voices to tell a story, I hope, will reveal a young woman's attempt to understand the decisions of an older woman, who ultimately wasn't blessed with the same luxury of freedom.

Prologue

I first met the woman I call Meng Xinling when I was maybe five or six. Her daughter was in middle school by then, and had just recently grown interested in boys and makeup. Our families would run into each other at parties and gatherings, mostly because there were a limited number of Chinese families in Omaha at the time. Though that number has grown significantly since then, it is still fairly easy to identify every Chinese person we come upon, if only to place them with a certain group of people—graduate student, wife of so-and-so, someone we heard was leaving soon, native of such-and-such province.

I didn't remember a great deal about Xinling or her daughter, and because she and my mother were never very close, our families remained merely acquaintances through the years, through my years of middle school and high school, through my father's numerous strokes and our moves from different apartments to finally a house. Once we met Xinling at the store while I was sick and my eyes were still puffy and red from crying, likely from some small prepubescent worry that I don't even remember. It was awkward because both she and my mother were being overly polite in the way where their voices kept reaching for higher and higher notes at the ends of sentences and questions. When we left and walked toward the parking lot, I asked my mother who she was again, she looked familiar. My mother said to me that she was Kasey's mom, and that was the one way she was identified. I knew very little of Kasey except for what was related through the Chinese grapevine. I knew she was boy-crazy, once announcing to everyone at a

wedding that she had a boyfriend, and that she was, in the eyes of many Chinese parents, whitewashed.

After I went away to college, many of my mother's closest friends moved away, and through meeting again and often at the same gatherings of Chinese people, she and Xinling struck up a friendship. It seemed strange to me that they would finally become friends after knowing each other for so many years, yet when I suggested to my mother that it was because she was low on friends and that was why she had befriended Xinling, instead of chuckling or becoming upset with my assumptions, she calmly replied that Xinling was different from how she had always expected, and that they found they had a lot in common.

As she and my mother grew closer, Xinling confided in my mother about her marriage, her worries about her daughter, and her family. Once my mother let her borrow a Chinese drama series about a couple in the 1980's. We had stacks of dramas on DVD. Even now, my parents watch episodes every night after watching the American news. The woman in the series Xinling borrowed was from the city and the man from the country. Xinling said she cried while watching it—that it was practically her story. When she told my mother her own story, she began crying in the hospital cafeteria where the two of them met during their lunch breaks from their research jobs at the medical school. When my mother told me Xinling's story, it sounded like one of those stories where it seemed fiction. Maybe even fiction that had a rather clichéd plot—a plot done to death. Yet when I think about my mother and the relationship that I have with my own grandmother, my grandmother's distrust of people from the country, or really anyone who isn't of her family, or who isn't as educated or well-off, or any of her daughter-in-

laws who didn't bear sons as she did, I wonder how many other women have stories like Xinling's and my mother's. I wonder if these women are in the same positions as Xinling. Are they, like her, women in their 50's living in the United States as well? Do they talk about divorce every year but never go through with it? Do they watch drama series and see themselves so clearly in the female protagonist they wonder why they get so angry when the fictional protagonist makes the same decisions they do? Or perhaps strangely liberated when she makes a different decision?

I don't know Xinling's story as she does. But I imagine it often. And sometimes when I visualize her story, inevitably my mother gets substituted into her position, and sometimes when I imagine her mother-in-law speaking to her, I remember words my grandmother once said to me, or what my mother says she once said to her. I try to put myself into Xinling's position, try to place myself back in time to before I was born, and try to reason with myself why she would choose to stay with her husband, and I don't know if I am successful. Mostly, no. Most of the time, as someone who grew up in America, I cannot understand.

Sometimes when I sit with my younger cousin, Han Yi, whose mother asked me while she was heavily pregnant whether I wanted a little sister or brother and I answered sister, I wonder if I am responsible for her. Genetically and biologically speaking, I know that I'm not responsible, of course, but at times I feel like I was the only one who ever wished for her. She is loved now—she is her parents' only child—yet I wondered if I was the only one who wasn't disappointed with her. I wondered whether or not my wishing really did affect her coming out a girl, instead of the boy my grandmother had prayed to the Goddess of Mercy for. Instead of the boy that both my cousin's parents

prayed for. At the very least, she was born in the city, instead of the numerous girls born in the country that are abandoned on park benches or drowned. Between the abandonments, the abortions, and the deaths, my generation of only children is now made up of four girls for every five boys. In the context of a population of 1.3 billion people, that 4:5 ratio is no small number.

I remember my choir director in 6th grade telling me on a yellow school bus about her friends who adopted a baby girl from China.

"I heard she was left to die. Luckily she was taken into an orphanage. The orphanage only had girls."

I nodded.

"But she's beautiful and so smart. Why would Chinese people not want a beautiful little girl?" she asked me. With the exception of a few kids calling me chicken fried rice when I was a child, I had never felt so out of place as in that bus-full of white kids, with a choir director whose pursed red lips, freckles, and clumpy lashes seemed to be disapproving of me and my entire country. That she was asking me to explain why my country thought this way. I didn't know how to answer her because I didn't understand either.

* * *

Meng Xinling was originally a real person, and the story that I try to tell of Meng Xinling and myself in the following pages is based on a true story—a story born out of my many summers spent in China throughout my childhood and adolescent years and the memories and knowledge my mother has shared with me. And though I grew up and am now attending graduate school for English in America, I wasn't surprised that my

nonfiction work found its way back to China. Stories like Xinling's story still seemed important to me, because her story—the story of a woman faced with the pressures and limitations of her time and culture—is universal despite its personal meaning to her and to me. Thusly, the province and city the story is set in, names, the vegetables that Xinling's mother-in-law planted, are all changed. They are changed because of privacy issues and also because these are the details that I imagine as I try to make sense of her story, so that the story seems real to me. I know that sounds oxymoronic—fictionalizing a story in order to make sense of it, to find a deeper truth, but this particular story, withered by passing time and retold through the mouths of several authors, is as filled with holes as they come.

Meng Xinling is no longer one woman in my mind. In my more honest moments, I realize that she is a combination of every woman I don't have to be.

Xinling Zhejiang, Summer 1983

Chapter One: Country

This is what I imagine: a woman named Meng Xinling, a native of Zhejiang province—a province in the southern, humid part of China, known for their soups, their beautiful, delicate women, and domineering men. She is twenty-eight, married for two years, with a daughter not yet a year old. She visits her mother-in-law every weekend in the country, a good ten miles outside of the heart of Jiaxing City. Her husband is absent.

On this August day, she makes a decision. On this day that Meng Xinling purchases the blue mosquito netting, she decides she will finally give up on these weekly visits.

She hadn't originally intended to buy the mosquito netting at all, only meaning to stop briefly at the market and buy what she would need for dinner that night. A big pot of stew was what she was craving, even though there was more than enough heat and humidity already in the summer air. But she still wanted stew. So she bought pork, as fatty as it came so that almost half of the meat was white while the other half was a lightly tinted pink. She bought vermicelli that would swirl around in the clear broth—thin, jellylike, and glistening. She bought lettuce and wondered if she would need to buy green onions and ginger and star anise and sesame oil, whether her mother-in-law had already used up what she purchased last time. Just in case, she purchased some anyway, wiping the beads of sweat on her forehead with a handkerchief as she haggled with the vendor over the price of half a kilogram of pork. Though she intentionally picked a fattier piece of meat because it was what she personally liked to eat, she still used that

usually unfavorable characteristic to try drive the price down. She was somewhat successful, for the butcher, wearing a blood-stained apron wrapped tightly over his stomach, relented to the point of meeting her halfway in price if she offered to buy an entire kilogram instead of half.

On her way to buy soybeans, she passed a table of brightly colored squares. The old lady sitting behind the table was wearing a blouse with small, blue flowers scattered over it, a straw hat with a broad, long rim, and a set of navy sleeves over her forearms and wrists, like what Xinling wore sometimes while she cooked so the hot oil wouldn't splatter on her skin. Xinling could see the old woman's messy black and white hair peeking out from beneath her hat. Sitting on her stool, she muttered the same slogans over and over: "Mai wen zang la! Mai wen zang la!" Her words had a distinct rhythm and pitch to them, like the refrain of a song. Though she spoke with the heavy accent of their local Zhejiang dialect, her voice was surprisingly gentle and soft. Maybe it was her voice that lured Xinling over to her table to look at the different colored squares that she only realized when she looked closely were mosquito nettings. There were pale pink nets and white and a pale blue. She stared at the netting folded in thick squares and under the bright sunlight, the pink looked particularly saturated. Xinling walked over to look at the white netting, but it seemed too morbid, like a death shroud. So that left the blue.

"Feel free to look around," the woman said, spreading the netting out across the edge of the table. "It's all of the finest quality. Will last you a lifetime. No holes. Will not rip."

A lifetime was an awfully long time, Xinling thought. She had bought the things before, and they nearly always ripped if tugged on a little ungently.

"All right," Xinling said, fingering the netting. The color looked so saturated while they were piled there layer over layer, but lifting only one layer, the netting nearly disappeared. "I'll take a blue one."

The woman stared at her silently for a moment, likely surprised at the ease and quickness of her sale. But she didn't allow her surprise to linger for long.

"That's right," she said. "I'll give you a new one. Never been opened," she pretended, as though she were doing her a huge favor. She fumbled beneath her table and pulled out a blue mosquito net, wrapped in plastic wrap. Xinling counted out wrinkled bills and plucked a few silver coins out of her little coin pouch and handed it to the woman.

"Come often," the old woman said.

The walk from the market to her mother-in-law's house was long and humid, and Xinling could feel the drops of sweat that ran down her temples and the back of her neck. But she was anxious to get back to her daughter, and she just kept telling herself that after dinner tonight she could go to bed and the night would go by quickly in slumber, and then it was just the first half of Sunday to sit through. Then she would cook enough at lunch to last for dinner, and then she could go back with her daughter to the city and her parents' home, and she wouldn't have to even think about coming back here for another week. But it was the filial thing to do, and after marriage, she was a part of her husband's family. She was of their people now. Still, the countdown was something she started every Friday evening when she couldn't sleep for dread of the next day, and in her mind she could see the landmarks she set by mealtime or weekly chore, crossing each of them off after completion until the list slowly dwindled down.

Too quickly, she reached her mother-in-law's, entering the small concrete house with the door wide open. The house looked lonely, its grey walls and low, red, brick roof peeking out among the grasses and yellowish brown dirt. The smaller henhouse was nearby, and there were small patches of green vegetables grown in neat rows. The nearest house was close enough to see and hear faintly, but still far enough where they were well out of each other's hair. The hot wind blew in and around the room, fluttering the once-white curtains at the windows and the pieces of tattered red paper peeling from the door. The characters on the paper had been painted months ago by her brother-in-law for the Lunar New Year, but her mother-in-law, Yuan Hualun, had never bothered to remove them afterwards. Now they just hung like torn ribbons from the door, and likely would remain until they would be covered by the next year's banners.

"Ma?" she called as she went in the door hesitantly. When she didn't see her anywhere and didn't hear a reply, she walked straight toward the kitchen to drop off her purchases. She placed the thin plastic bags, thinner than skin and transparent, full of vegetables and spices, on the counter by the little coal stove.

"I'm back," she attempted again, calling out to the yard. When she looked out, she saw her mother-in-law crouched down against the ground. Her back was towards her, her short, straight hair disheveled by the wind. Her body was so close to the billowing tall grasses they seemed to surround her. Xinling was sure that she had heard her call, but Hualun didn't even seem to flinch. Her hands remained busy. Xinling's daughter, Kaixin, was still outside, sitting in the dirt, while Hualun sat close by, picking weeds with her brown leathery hands. An excess of skin seemed to cover Hualun's entire body, overbaked and overdried—a brown raisin.

Xinling went back to the kitchen to grab her mosquito netting and sneak it into her room while Hualun was still outside. She ripped open the package and unfolded the netting. The fabric was light and floated slowly down, hanging almost still in the air. It looked like sea foam draped loosely around her. She climbed on her bed and began to hang up the netting.

Small nails were already in the walls. She couldn't remember who had lived in this room before her, perhaps her brother-in-law, who had moved out after he had gotten married. The bed had to have been his, another thing that she used that somehow seemed not hers no matter how long she had it. The bed really wasn't much of a bed, just a frame of criss-crossed bands that had been slept on long enough so that the bands were loose and the entire bed cratered in the middle. On top of the frame was a layer of cardboard consisting of pieces ripped from various boxes. She assumed they were left over from when they'd moved into this house. And then it was just the layer of peach-colored cloth that she slept on, with a large purple chrysanthemum blossom in the middle.

She had discovered the layers one night when she couldn't sleep, and with every toss and turn the creaking of the bed was so loud, she had to hold her breath and listen for the sound of Hualun's footsteps approaching her door. She would surely be reproached for keeping her mother-in-law awake. So Xinling had quietly turned on her light on the bedside table and flipped through the layers of the bed to discover the cardboard and the bands that were the only thing that she slept on. She might as well have slept on the ground. The concrete would probably feel cooler than the cloth, or the bamboo sheet they spread on the beds in the summer.

The large purple chrysanthemum, she thought, looking down at the blossom from above, was morbid. No one ever brought chrysanthemums unless there was a death in the family. She remembered when her grandmother had died when she was nine. They had all worn white, even she and her little brother. Her mother had cut off the little white chrysanthemum blossoms that neighbors and old friends had filled her grandmother's house with and tucked them in her hair. Now she was sleeping on an enormous chrysanthemum, with small delicate petals hanging and dripping down at the sides. The flower was frozen in the already-beginning-to-wilt stage. It seemed almost like wishing death upon someone.

When she was finally done hanging up the mosquito netting, she stepped back to admire her work. The canopy the mosquito netting created above the full-sized bed, stuck tightly against the wall, was so thin she could barely feel it with her calloused fingertips, and if the netting she bought hadn't been blue, the foamy gauze it created, almost like a cloud, would have been nearly invisible. She had rummaged through drawers and found a few wooden clothespins, dirty and rotting, which she would use to keep the netting closed at night and during afternoon naps.

Her daughter's poor fingers, so plump and pale and fleshy, were covered in red swollen spots, courtesy of the mosquitoes who seemed especially attracted to her baby daughter's blood. When her daughter would grow up and ask her why mosquitoes only bit her, she would answer that her blood was sweeter, that it was like drinking soda pop or licking candy for them.

Tired, and finally home after work, all Xinling wanted to do was to be with her daughter. Her baby daughter had been "aahh"-ing more and more frequently lately,

reaching out with her fat, short arms for her. Sometimes she wondered if her daughter knew when she was coming home, waited for her expectantly, missed her when she was gone. Her daughter, whom she was certain would grow up to look more like her, inherit her pale skin, her creased mouth that could easily turn to a pout, her uneasy, slightly self-deprecating smile.

She should start dinner.

In addition to the blue mosquito netting, she had purchased tomatoes, green onions, green beans, cucumbers, and a slab of pork. The slab of pork had been an extravagance—most of the slab wasn't even pink meat, but white fat that would become soft and smooth after being stewed in soy sauce and sugar. The sweet, tangy aroma would fill the house and drift out to the yard. Her mother-in-law would scold her, ask her what she was doing buying a slab of fat, and what she was doing eating such heavy foods in the middle of summer.

But she was sick of cutting cucumbers in small cubes, seasoning them with nothing but a bit of grainy salt. Eating that with old porridge that had been reheated so many times, re-diluted so many times the overboiled grains of rice, long split open, now all sunk to the bottom, leaving the porridge to be practically opaque rice water. She always drank it quietly, directly from the large, shallow bowls, which were so heavy she couldn't hold her bowl normally, her thumb over the rim with the rest of her fingers below, but instead had to balance the entire bowl in the center of her palm. She remembered making fun of those children who held their bowls that way when she was a child in school, those kids that always seemed dirty with their hair a mess, wearing brightly colored, mismatched clothes, their pants too short, their jackets too long, their

skin all a leathered brown. They would all hold their bowls like that, shoveling their food into their overstretched mouths. She had felt sorry for them, but had not thought enough to go over and talk to them. Her mother had warned her to keep her distance. That they might carry diseases, and that they came from families of petty thieves.

She remembered that they always looked so dirty to her. Perhaps because their skin was darker, or the other kids would stick things in their hair. They all knew what they were—immigrants. Country kids who had been taken pity upon by their better-off distant relatives in the city. Their parents had come for work, working odd jobs here and there—fixing bicycles or selling shirts on the streets for a few yuan. Some came and learned to drive taxis. They came from a different world. She had always drawn a thick line between them and her.

Of course, until she married one.

Zhejiang was so hot this summer of her daughter's first birthday, but it was hot every summer. Oppressively humid, and the sun always seemed to be larger and closer to the ground than any other place she had ever been. She wore straw hats or walked around with an umbrella to keep her skin fair. Her umbrella was a pale green, with small ruffles lining the curved edges. She liked to pretend a canopy of leaves was shading her from the sun on hot days.

Each week since she finished her *yuezi*—the month of rest after a woman gave birth—nearly a year ago at her mother-in-law's, she had brought her daughter back from the city to visit her in the country. Ideally, she should have lived with her mother-in-law full time, helping her with the cooking, the grocery shopping, washing her feet in the tin washbasin before bed.

But she had used numerous excuses to leave. All of out of politeness really, for she knew very well that her mother-in-law had no desire for her to stay, complaining she did her work too slowly, that she cut her vegetables into such large, clumsy pieces, or threw out old food when it could still be eaten. That Xinling was not a strong woman was what she meant. Perhaps that was why she could not bear a son.

This weekly visit was already bordering on unacceptable. She knew that people had been muttering and whispering about her.

A married woman, with a child, living with her own parents still?

Perhaps her husband is trying to divorce her?

Maybe he only married her long enough to use her father's connections to get him a good job in the city. He's from the country, you know.

Oh and she was so pretty when she was young. What a pity—had the palest face, the smallest cherry mouth. Half the men at her college were after her.

Always offering her rides home on the backs of their bicycles.

But you know what they say, "Hong yan bo ming."

Yes indeed, she had read that, and had heard it before too, usually heard it preceded or followed by a long sigh, as though to say, I wouldn't wish such a fragile life on anyone. She wouldn't either, she realized. But she hated that phrase *Hong yan bo ming.* The idea that a beautiful woman was nothing more than a man's love, and so her life was fragile, completely determined by how the man felt about her. Look at her mother-in-law. She certainly didn't have a fragile life, it was hard as nails. Indomitable, unbreakable. She had borne and raised four sons by herself. Her husband in the ground barely after her youngest son was born.

Xinling imagined the sky fluttering with thin, white scraps of paper as her mother-in-law escorted her sons, with her newborn in her arms, all wearing white capes and carrying small bouquets of white flowers. Hualun would have cried as she was expected to, throwing herself against the casket before they torched her husband's body, sobbing at the black and white framed picture of him that now hung prominently in the main room. Xinling always found herself unconsciously staring at her dead father-in-law's picture whenever she walked past. His eyes always seemed to be boring into her though she had never met him. He looked eerily like her husband—prematurely balding, a thin, gaunt face, large mouth and thin lips, dark eyebrows. But his jaw was squarer than her husband's angular face, his forehead longer and less rounded at the hairline. And his eyes were larger, his pupils seemingly more dilated, or maybe it was just the nature of the old photograph. But the sight of his face there, with unblinking eyes, while she was eating dinner at the table, silent except for the occasional clang of a soup spoon against the bowl or a loud slurp as they drank their clear soup, terrified her, and she couldn't help but look up at this picture every now and then, if only to verify that he was still confined to the frame.

When Xinling finished cooking dinner, she called out to her mother-in-law in the yard. Her mother-in-law was sitting on a low stool, wearing loose flowery pants she had pulled up to her ankles. On top she wore a dark blue blouse. Her coarse, straight hair was streaked in grey and white, with three bobby pins keeping it from falling in her face—two on one side, and one pin on the other. She waddled slowly in from the yard carrying the baby, her arm hooked around Kaixin's stomach. Her worn plastic slippers were dirty over thin socks pulled up as high as they would stretch. Before she entered the

doorway, she kicked off her slippers and took off her socks, so that her bare feet met the concrete floor. She came in and sat at the table, expectant and mute. Xinling carried over a clear soup with lettuce, green onion, and pork at the bottom of the pot. On top floated swirls of vermicelli that made the entire soup look glassy. She dipped a large spoon into the small pot, then brought out a plate of cubed raw cucumbers she had tossed in salt, rice vinegar, sesame oil, and sugar. Her mouth craved this because it was the only thing on the table that would be cold, but still not cold enough for the day. She felt beads of sweat accumulating on the back of her neck and around her nose. She rubbed her nose with a handkerchief.

She carried her daughter over and sat her between Hualun and herself. Kaixin's eyebrows were furrowed and her full lips upturned in a pout. She was obviously uncomfortably warm too, but Xinling didn't ask her mother-in-law if she could turn on the fan.

If Hualun bothered to give her an answer at all, the answer would be no. She would think there was no need for a fan—that the heat was part of Zhejiang summers and in the country, people were strong enough to brave the natural elements. This difference even extended to how they ate. Her mother-in-law held her chopsticks differently than Xinling did. Instead of her middle finger stuck between the two sticks, thus balancing them and leaving them free to move back and forth, she placed her index finger in between the two chopsticks, leaving only her thumb to navigate through the small pieces of food, making her eating look clumsy. She tried to pick up the thin slices of meat, the slippery cubes of cucumbers, the soft, dripping pieces of lettuce. When she dropped food on the table before it could make it from the pot to her bowl, she picked it up again,

shoving it quickly in her mouth and leaving the greased stain on the table unwiped. She chewed with her mouth partly open and crooked, her yellow and brown teeth peeking through. As Xinling watched Hualun further, she began to lose her own appetite. With the humid heat lately, she hadn't wanted to eat very much at all. She concentrated on feeding her daughter, picking the bite-sized pieces of food, paired with clumps of white jasmine rice. She loved the smell of freshly cooked rice. It was so clean.

Xinling tried to smile at her daughter as though to encourage her and assure her. But the table remained silent. Her daughter was quiet as she chewed, her cheeks puffing out and red from the heat. When the baby turned her head abruptly when Xinling offered her more rice, she carried her daughter to the bedroom where she closed the curtains in hopes of making it cooler.

Xinling felt the silence keenly, the quiet making her more aware of the sounds outside. Children's voices drifted in from across the fields, the breeze slipping through the tall grasses, the faint cluck of bobbing-headed chickens. But what she felt was the awkwardness of the silence. Someone she called "Mother" sat across the table from her at every meal and she had nothing to say to her and nothing to ask. But to make it worse, she had this feeling that it was only awkward on her part. That she was alone in her discomfort. And really that was where the problem lay, wasn't it? She was the only one whom the silence bothered. She could never ask her but she didn't need to. Her mother-in-law had no desire to connect to her, to form any sort of relationship that resembled mother or even grandmother, not to her, and certainly not to her daughter—the daughter that should have been a son.

Moreover, her mother-in-law would never talk about what she most wanted to know. At first, Hualun tolerated brief questions, answering with curt answers that gave as little information as possible while still, technically, answering, but now she tolerated no more questions. As far as she was concerned, all questions regarding the absence of her oldest son, who was off working hard on his research career for a year or more in the city and building a future by which he could feed the household, were superfluous. An overflowing bucket of water, too many tea leaves at the bottom of a shallow cup of tea. Or this plate of meat that was more grease and fat than anything else. All of it was too much—Xinling was questioning things she had no right to question.

But not getting the answers she wanted seemed only fair, because Xinling dodged questions posed by her friends from high school and college about where Zhikai, her husband, was at work, at parties her parents gave, at the store when she met an old acquaintance. She would smile her self-deprecating smile and say something like, "Oh, all men are like this, aren't they?…He's so focused on his career…such a strong sense of duty to his family…so filial…but of course couldn't possibly compare to your husband…you're so lucky." And then the conversation would smoothly transition to someone else's husband, or brother, or son. She would be safe, at least for a little while.

But even if she was willing to explain, she didn't know how. She could barely explain it to her mother and father. Her younger brother, who was about to get married, was there after the birth of her daughter. While she was still at the hospital, her back aching terribly, she called her husband to tell him that she had given birth, and that it was a daughter. He answered with silence at first, and Xinling hoped that it was just the bad connection. He asked how she was feeling; she answered tired. He didn't mention when

he would return. Her mother expected him to rush back immediately to take care of her and see his daughter. His daughter was big and strong, had a full head of black hair. But he never showed up. She found out later from her husband's brother that he was living with a friend in Hangzhou.

When she told her family, her mother was the one who asked the difficult questions out loud, not to her, but to the air.

"What does this mean?"

"When is he coming back?"

"Are you…are you getting divorced?"

The answer to all three of those questions were "I don't know." But what could she do even if she was divorced? Be a single mother? Remarriage was out of the question. She was already second-hand goods, with a child, with a daughter. No one would come near her now. She had chosen wrong, and now she would pay for it with the rest of her life. The butt of jokes and the opposite of a role model. It was the way that so many parents liked to parent. "Don't do this, or you'll end up like her." She would be the worst-case scenario for single girls not yet married.

After Hualun finished eating dinner, she untangled her legs from the chair and placed her bare feet on the concrete floor. She placed her used chopsticks on her bowl, balanced neatly in the middle of the circle, and got up from the table wordlessly and left, leaving Xinling alone at the table. Xinling's own bowl was empty, half-filled with only white rice. It had stopped steaming by this point and the grains had started to stick together.

No one would want her now. And so what could she do but wait? Wait for him to come back, as she had to believe he would. She knew that he had to come back, if at least to see his mother and visit the grave of his father. She couldn't believe that he could just leave like this. Disappear without a note, a letter. When she arrived at his family's home to spend her *yuezi* there, nearly a year ago, with her tiny daughter, whose face and head were still so red and long, he wasn't there, and she developed a habit of walking around outside in the evenings after dinners of oversalted chicken to watch the sun set quickly over the horizon. Weeds and grasses always crunched beneath her feet. She insisted on wearing shoes, even though her mother-in-law was used to being barefoot, inside and outside her house, and so didn't bother to ask if she preferred a pair of house slippers. Living in the city, her own mother had several pairs ready in a row beside the door just for guests, with separate pairs for men and women.

She remembered the air smelled wet and keenly of chives. The small patch of chives was filled with wilted flowers in late autumn—the small, delicate white flowers, now brown, looked from a distance like they were floating in the air. The strong smell of chives kept the rabbits from eating it, she learned, though she could barely tell the difference between the chives and regular long grass that grew in what looked like bouquets around the house. Crickets began to sing as it quickly grew darker, and by the time she would circle back to the house to wash the dishes, it was always completely dark.

One day, her mother-in-law had grudgingly slit the throat of one of the chickens to make chicken stew because a neighbor had come and asked how many times she had made chicken stew already. It was what was done for women who had just given birth. The chicken stew should have had the grease skimmed off the top, accompanied by leafy

spinach, salt and ginger, and ginseng root that neighbors and family friends had brought her along with dyed pink eggs, congratulating her on the arrival of her new baby. But her mother-in-law just filled the pot with water, splashing the chicken in ungently. When she came bearing the chicken stew, all Xinling could see was a layer of yellowish-orange grease floating over the top of liquid, covering pieces of chicken and kernels of white rice beneath. The layer of grease looked almost opaque, so she stirred it around to break it up. The result turned her stomach. The yellow grease broke apart and peeled away like dead skin.

When her mother-in-law left, Xinling used her chopsticks to pinch the skin out of the bowl, wincing as she did. The skin was heavy with liquid, dripping grease on her blanket. She turned to the right, then to the left, her left hand cupped beneath to catch any more drips of grease, but she couldn't find a proper place to dispose of the yellow skin. She heard footsteps approaching the open door of her room, and she quickly dropped the skin back into her bowl of stew. When her mother-in-law approached her, the two of them locked eyes, but neither said anything. It was a disarming stare that her mother-in-law had. She seemed to be able to keep herself from blinking for an abnormally long time, her face devoid of movement or emotion. Her face seemed so hard—dark and frozen, as if stuck forever in that one position. Xinling's eyes, usually already wide, and her mother-in-law often remarked to her son, blank, like shallow black pools, only seemed to make her more annoyed.

Hualun's eyes grazed over the untouched bowl of soup sitting on the desk beside the bed. Her eyes narrowed, and she slammed a spoon into the bowl, the spoon clanging loudly against the porcelain.

"You can eat or not, but don't expect me to spoon-feed you," she said, before turning her back and walking back out toward the door. Xinling's daughter woke up from her nap at her grandmother's words, and started crying, her red face scrunched up in some baby-sized discomfort. Xinling wondered if maybe even her little daughter, at this time not even a month old, had some sort of unconscious sixth sense about this place, that she didn't want to be here either, that she somehow knew that she wasn't wanted here, didn't belong here. Xinling climbed out of her bed to pick her daughter up. She remembered being so amazed that her daughter's entire head fit in the palm of her hand. She lifted her up and rested the baby's head on her shoulder, patting her gently on her back and rocking up and down as she paced around the room. She cooed at her as though to tell her that she sympathized, that if anyone sympathized with the need to cry, it was her.

And so she had moved back to the city only a month after she had given birth—the very minimum for a mother to rest after having a baby, saying that her own mother could help to take care of her daughter and after all, she needed to return to work. More than that though, she was tired of waiting around helplessly for her husband to return. If she was really honest with herself, then she would admit that the reason she had endured living there for that long was only her hope that her husband would one day suddenly reappear at the door and tell her that he had been detained by some horrible accident that she hadn't read in the newspapers. He would say that he was so unbelievably sorry and tell her that nothing would have kept him from coming home to see her and their new daughter.

But he hadn't returned. Hadn't even called or sent a letter asking about how she was doing, how his daughter was doing. So that was what Xinling tried to ask Hualun each weekend she visited. She just wanted to know if she had heard from him. She could have easily tried to rummage through drawers to find letters, except she knew that Hualun never learned to read and could only clumsily write out her own name. He would have to call if he contacted his mother at all. So she tried to broach the subject again that night after dinner.

"It's hot out today, isn't it? It's almost dark and it still feels like the middle of the day."

Hualun grunted.

"You know I saw these great short-sleeved shirts at a store in the city."

Hualun looked up at her, raising her hand to pull a bobby pin out of her hair. She patted her hair back with her hand so that it was smooth, and slipped the bobby pin back into place.

"They're made out of silk, so it's especially cool to wear during the summer."

Xinling heard her voice get higher, like she was trying to fake enthusiasm, or doing a bad job of trying to sell something to someone that they didn't actually need. But she had begun this, and so she had to follow through.

"I was thinking of buying one for Zhikai."

Then Xinling waited, for Hualun had to mention something about her son now.

Finally, Hualun replied.

"Xiaokai doesn't need any silk shirts," she said, saying *silk shirts* like it was something disgusting and excessive to her. "And you should stop wasting his money."

In the bedroom, Xinling could hear her daughter start to cry. Hualun got up, walked to her own bedroom at the other side of the house, and closed the door.

Xinling Zhejiang, Summer 1983

Chapter Two: Two Homes

That evening, Xinling carried her daughter across the length of the small village to the larger dirt road that had brought her here earlier in the day. It had grown nearly dark by now, and she knew that she would have to walk far down this road if she was to find a taxi cab willing to take her back into the city. Even then she knew that an actual cab would be nearly impossible to find. The most she could hope for was one of those tiny vans everyone called bread cars because they were shaped rather like a loaf of bread, and maybe were used to transport bread. She always had to hold on for her life whenever she rode those. They were unsteady and narrow and the insides seemed to be missing something, with only two seats in the very back and the center of the car completely bare so that when making a sharp turn or suddenly accelerating, it was very likely that she could fall forward right onto her face.

She repositioned her daughter on her hip, tucked her purse and bags closer to her torso, and started to walk down the dirt road that was lightless and very quiet. The road stretched out far ahead of her, with the only shadows from the small trees with wavering, draping branches. It seemed like only those small trees near water were the ones that thrived, or managed to survive, in the hot and humid climate here. She could see her moving shadow as well, stretching from her feet as she walked down the lane. Xinling thought she looked like a dark, weirdly shaped blob with tall knees and large, round tumors growing out of her side.

She knew that if she wasn’t so emotional she would realize that this was a bad idea, that she had no business trying to make it back to the city tonight. Her only hope

would be a long-distance bus that would be passing through from Hangzhou back to Jiaxing. But they were never very safe, especially after dark. All kinds of people rode these buses and she always heard stories about thieves robbing people at night while passengers were asleep, or a group of people blocking the road and holding people hostage while they forced everyone off of the bus until every passenger handed over all of their valuables and cash.

But they were only stories, she told herself. She had ridden the long-distance buses before to get to her mother-in-law's, but it was always with her husband, Zhikai, or with her brother-in-law, and it was always in bright daylight. This didn't seem like the best time to try her luck, especially with a baby, but she walked on anyway. If she thought about it, riding alone in a cab with a strange driver couldn't really be considered safer, could it? Who knows where a driver might take her? But anything would be better than walking alone here in the dark. The last traces of red clouds close to the horizon darkened to purple and then black, but the road remained empty and quiet. She listened for any sound that indicated a car was approaching but all she heard was the billowing, tall grasses slapping gently against each other as the wind whipped through them. It was still very humid but the temperature seemed to have dropped quickly, or maybe the gravity of the situation she had gotten herself into was finally dawning on her.

Her daughter had fallen asleep on her shoulder, her thumb serenely clamped in her mouth, with her right cheek squashed and the corner of her pouty lips curved up so that she looked like she was giving her mother a small half smile in her sleep. Xinling held her tightly, and looked back over her shoulder when she felt a glare of lights on her back.

She was blinded at first; all she saw were lights, forming unsteady circles like ripples. The light, she couldn't tell if it was more yellow or white, like the sun while high up in the sky around noon, making it nearly impossible to make out the distinct circular shape of it, all of it just rays and rays. Then the lights stopped in front of her, and the lights dimmed so that she saw a man sitting in the car, a cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth, his hair a bit browner than black. His eyebrows were thick enough that she thought that the two of them should have grown into one, but they hadn't.

"Hey, are you going to get out of the road or not?" he yelled from the window.

Xinling stood still there for a moment, surprised at the sound of his voice. He spoke with a thick Zhejiang accent, articulate and blunt, with hardly any curling of the tongue.

"Are you going back into Jiaxing tonight?" she asked. Her eyes were wide and unblinking. She realized that he hadn't put up the red sign that was usually popped up at the windshield that indicated that the cab was empty and welcoming of passengers. She knew that there was a great possibility that he would just ask her to get out of his way again.

But after another drag at his cigarette, he tapped the extra ash out the window, stuck the cigarette back in his mouth, and with his now free hand, gestured for her to climb in the car. She obeyed quickly, afraid that in the next moment he would change his mind. Her hand grazed against the handle of the passenger seat door, but she decided instead to sit in the back. It seemed better that way, to maintain more clearly the boundaries of passenger and driver.

"Thank you," she said, after she had gotten in the car. Her bag was sitting by her side and she rebalanced her daughter on her lap, letting her legs rest on either side of her torso.

"You shouldn't be out with a baby so late," the driver said. He shifted the car into gear without warning, so that the car, and Xinling, jerked forward. The dirt road was bumpy, littered with rocks. Miraculously, her little daughter managed to stay asleep.

"I'm coming back from my mother's," Xinling answered, hoping that her short answer would be enough, and she wouldn't have to elaborate, or think back again on what had just happened. Even now that she was in the car, she could hardly believe that she had walked out on Hualun. She wondered if Hualun had even realized by this time that she was gone, had heard her slam the door, or wonder about the absence of a child crying.

"I was visiting my mother too," the driver continued. "Was trying to convince her to move to the city. Got it figured out with my wife and everything, but she says the only way she'll leave home is if we drag her out in a coffin." He shakes his head and sighs. "It's hard for the old to live alone out here. It's not right."

Xinling nodded. She first thought of her own mother, who likely had never spent a day alone in her life.

"Why won't your mother move to the city with you? Is she worried she won't be able to adjust?"

"That's part of it, I'm sure. My father died a few months ago, and she says she won't leave him. For the first month all she did was kneel in front of his headstone all

day, crying and burning paper. She wouldn't eat, she wouldn't sleep. Finally my older sister managed to coax her to go home."

Xinling pictured an old woman crying in front of a headstone, simultaneously seeing her mother's face and Hualun's face on the old woman's body. But she had trouble, because she realized she has never seen either of her two mothers cry.

"It must have been hard for her. To lose her husband after so long together," she replied.

She admired the old woman for her stubborn loyalty, however irrational. The irrationality of her wanting to be alone just so she could stay close to her husband's final resting place seemed to her to only prove her love more. The paper she burned was never enough, always afraid that her husband wouldn't have enough money to use in the afterlife. Wouldn't she do the same thing? It was probably easier to lose someone after only a year together rather than half a lifetime. But now she was thinking like her husband was already dead. And he wasn't. Their separation wasn't one of life and death, but out of choice—one person's choice. One person's choice that could decide the fate of two. Three, really.

"Of course, but it doesn't change the fact that she's all alone out here."

"Is anyone staying with her?"

"My older sister. She never got married, so she's the only one without a family to take care of."

Xinling nodded.

"Is your husband staying with your mother-in-law?"

"…No," Xinling said, quavering.

"Oh, you came to see your mother-in-law on your own? I wish my wife got along with my mother as well," the driver said, laughing. "Well, you should just get her to move to the city with you. She could help take care of your daughter, and there wouldn't be any more long drives out here for you."

Xinling shuddered at the thought, but was then comforted by her recent decision that this would be the last visit. She'd have to be dragged to come out here again.

"It would be convenient," she replied. She hoped the conversation would shift quickly back to the driver's own life.

"What does your husband do?" he asked.

Of course. Everyone liked to ask questions like this. What does your husband do? How much does he make a month? How is his family? They were the rudimentary, basic questions that everyone got asked.

"Scientist."

The driver tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. "Oh you're lucky. He has education then. You'll never have to worry about him being able to support you."

Xinling swallowed a cold laugh. She managed a weak chuckle instead, hoping it would be enough to signal agreement. How convenient it was that he was already away the week she gave birth, that the only number she could reach him was a convenience store where he went to make long-distance calls, supposedly close to where he was living or working. She had done her best to track down his friends, his colleagues, anyone she wasn't too embarrassed to ask. But she had only found out so little, only that he was working at a lab in Hangzhou.

She had thought about going to find him, scouring the area around the convenience shop, wandering local food stands that sold his favorite foods. But her father had forbidden her—"What kind of a woman rushed off to the city alone to look for her lost husband?" Except he wasn't lost, not like a lost key or an odd number of socks. He was just gone.

She looked at the driver through the rearview mirror and almost wanted to lie, to make up a big, huge story about her husband. What would stop her? She would never see this driver ever again. Why couldn't she make up a story that would save her own face? She could say that he was away for some noble goal, some medical venture that would bring both great glory and profit, and that their separation was for a greater future good. That this separation was necessary for their future happiness. That it wasn't something as simple as the baby, the only baby that she could ever have, was not the boy that they had prayed for and hoped for, even expected, but a girl. A girl that, in the eyes of her husband's family, was completely useless. Not even a decent consolation prize worth looking at.

The driver droned on as he made the long drive back into the heart of Jiaxing City. The night breeze that blew in her face through the open window brought tears to Xinling's eyes, and she leaned her arm against the door, her hand supporting her heavy head. Yellow lights that started out dimly against the horizon grew more vivid, and soon the smell of chives and grasses faded, replaced with the smell of people and a bit of smog. Xinling managed to give enough nods and distant questions between the bumps in the road for the driver to feel like it was a conversation, and later she feigned sleepiness so she could close her eyes and have some peace.

Finally, they reached the bottom of Xinling's apartment building. A small concrete wall surrounded the bottom of the set of buildings, with sharp pieces of glass imbedded in the stone to keep out burglars. From the windows covered in rows of metal bars hung laundry—shirts and socks and even underwear. Xinling counted out almost all of the bills on her. The man was kind enough to subtract some of the fee because he was headed back into the city, but it still took most of Xinling's cash to cover the cost. He circled around to the other side of the car and held her bags as she climbed out of the car with her baby. She said thank you and headed into her building. The stairways were dark by then and so was the foyer that led into the living room. She managed to unlock the door without dropping her keys. When she walked in, her mother was watching television with the volume turned down almost so that nothing could be heard. When Xinling walked in the door, slipping off her shoes and setting her bags down by the doorway, her mother called out her name worriedly. Xinling saw her mother shuffling over in her slippers toward her.

"Nothing happened, Ma. I'm just not going back," she said.

Sherry Anhui, Winter 1994

Chapter Three: Lessons

The first time my family returned to China after we had immigrated to the States, I was in first grade. From my dim memory and pictures, this is what I looked like: bowl haircut, my two front teeth gone, and in all of the pictures, I was wearing some form of red. All of us wore red because we were going back for the Lunar New Year. Maybe it was feigned enthusiasm, or a half-hearted attempt to fit into a place we had already left behind.

All four of my mother's brothers came to meet us at the airport in Shanghai. We took the night train from Shanghai to Hefei, the capital of Anhui, where my mother's family was from. On the way home, my favorite uncle, Han Chen, sat with me through the night. I was wide awake, both because of jetlag and because I was so overwhelmed by China. My memories were so blurred about my home country—the smells, the beggar on the street who had smeared fake blood on his arm, all of the people everywhere so that there was no place to walk, or stand, or sit.

I tried to tell my uncle things in Chinese, but it was tiring, because it turned almost into a game of charades. I gestured and made sounds, scratched my head to try to figure out how to explain it to him in a way he would understand. I remember he was so patient with me, just smiled at me, and tried, very sincerely, to understand what I tried to tell him. I remember his shiny, voluminous hair and his triple eyelids. He had always been a bit self-conscious about his height, and I think the hair gave him a good three inches.

I wonder now why he didn't sleep; on either side of us sat my parents and three other uncles, all of whom slept like babies squished together on the narrow, army-green leathered seats of the train. My second uncle's wife was heavily pregnant at this time, yet he still insisted on leaving her to come to meet us. My mom scolded him for it, though she was grateful and glad he came, but when she walked in the door of my grandparent's home and saw just how big my aunt was, even bigger under the long blue winter coat she wore, she said that my uncle really shouldn't have come.

My aunt has always had a way with children, and I remember I liked her right away, liked that she was generous with her smiles, and had a big, bellowing voice that was warm and immediately made you feel like the two of you were already very close. She patted her belly and asked me, "Do you know what's inside?"

"A baby," I replied.

"So do you want me to have a girl baby, or a boy baby?"

"A girl baby."

At this point, when my mom heard my answer, she clicked her tongue and frowned at me, and I knew right away that I had said something I wasn't supposed to say. My mother apologized to my aunt, and explained that I was still too young. "Bu dong shi," she said, literally, didn't understand things. She took my hand, and led me away from my aunt.

That was the only time I talked to my second aunt in the month we were China. A few days later I saw her groaning in pain, with one hand on her waist and the other supporting her belly. My uncle helped her into a taxi cab that would take her to the

hospital. It was the beginning of February and it had just snowed. When I heard from my grandfather the next morning that my aunt had had a girl, I was ecstatic.

"I told her I wanted a baby girl," I said. I told my mom that I wanted to go to the hospital and see them right away, but my grandmother said that it was too soon, that they were still resting.

"There's too many people at the hospital anyway," she said. "Xiao Gong's parents, her brother, her cousin." My grandmother went outside and lit a cigarette.

Later on I asked her why she smoked, that it was bad for you, and it wasn't right for women to smoke anyway. She already had problems breathing, so she steamed pears until they were soft and sweet, said they soothed her throat. She said that I would understand when I was older, and besides, her cigarettes were thinner and shorter than the ones my grandfather smoked.

We didn't see my uncle for the next week, until my mom said that she was going to the hospital to see them. I wasn't allowed to go with because I was sick, but I heard from my mother when I was older than my second aunt had been so offended no one besides her own family had come to see her new child that she spent that week crying and throwing things at my uncle's head.

"Your hormones are abnormal at that time," my mother taught me. "You can't help what you do."

I saw my uncle a few days later wearing all black. His hair had seemed flatter, without a life of its own like before. We talked about how sometimes when I got up really quickly I would see colorful stars, and he said he was seeing them now. My mother told me that when he was young his hair turned completely white. "Because he

was depressed," she explained. Seeing him standing there in the snow, his hands in his pockets, his tired eyelids made me wonder if his hair would turn white again.

Sherry Anhui, Summer 2008

Chapter Four: More Lessons

Only last summer while I was in China on my own for the month after I graduated from college, did I realize how that simple choice of going to visit my aunt and cousin at the hospital, or not visiting, had affected the state of so many relationships now. The baby girl I was so excited about when I was seven was now fourteen, about to start her first year of high school. Her mother, vigilant about anti-aging, had her daughter pluck out stray white hairs and worried about the deepening crow's feet around her eyes when she smiled. Of all of my cousins and aunts, my mother and I are closest to them, and my mother says often that my second aunt is the only one of my aunts that married into our family that really treats us as family.

My aunt and cousin, Han Yi, frequently avoid going to my grandparents' home, and every time before they go, they are strangely quiet. Even in the brief time I was there, I felt awkward in having to fill in that quietness that they usually do such a thorough job of filling.

My grandfather always pinches children he especially likes, and he pinches and caresses my younger cousin, Han Jianhao, who at twelve, is his favorite and oldest grandson. The nickname he was given upon birth was Da Bao, literally the most precious one. Sometimes, when Han Yi brings my grandfather food she especially made for his bad teeth, or shares a piece of good news (a 98 on an algebra test, a prize won for an essay she wrote), he nods and occasionally reaches to touch her, but the compliments are nothing more than the standard polite comments, and his pinches are mostly only to

marvel at her plump size. Han Yi says often that she loves her maternal grandfather the most, that he always wanted a granddaughter, but she is his only grandchild, and when I see her grow quiet, and stare down at her shoes, her trendy dark-rimmed glasses slipping down her nose, I look at my grandfather, who obliviously goes back to reading his newspaper or drinking his green tea.

Han Yi insists this year, as with every time I return to China, that I sleep with her so we can tell secrets before bed. While the two of us lie on her pink, lacy bed, I tell her that it doesn't matter about our grandfather, that he doesn't mean anything by it, it's just the changing of the times. She says she knows, but knowing something is different from understanding, and understanding is different from agreeing with, or resigning oneself to a certain way. She doesn't know yet that my grandmother blamed my aunt for having a girl, not just because any sort of "problem" with a child is always attributed to the mother, but because right after my second uncle and aunt got married, my aunt got pregnant. They didn't have their own home yet, and she had started a new job, so without consulting my grandparents, she decided to have an abortion. Han Yi was her second pregnancy. Of course, my grandmother, with no knowledge of biology, assumed that the child my aunt aborted was a boy, and in her ungratefulness, the gods bestowed a girl on her next pregnancy.

The fact that anyone can see a girl, especially my cousin, who I see as beautiful, intelligent, hilarious—someone I see as so full of potential in what she will contribute to the world, someone who I feel like I don't have to worry about at all because she is so much more mature and aware of the world than I ever was at her age—as a punishment for a wrong is incomprehensible to me.

Yet I can't blame my grandmother. At least that's what my mother says. My maternal grandmother, whom I call PoPo, has been hard of hearing since she was about forty, and the tops of her ears aren't rounded with grooves of cartilage as ears should be, but are jagged, like bites were taken out of them. While fleeing their family home when the Japanese invaded China in the 1930's, pieces of her ears froze off. PoPo was younger than her older brother, harder to take care of and keep from crying, and someone would have to carry her the entire way. So they left her behind, with no intention of going back. I suppose they expected her to die and were at peace with it. Her mother, whom I call TaiTai, had lost many of her children through miscarriage and infant mortality, and she had fulfilled her duty of leaving a male heir to the Ren family, so perhaps the loss of a child was no longer something to be mourned over.

My PoPo's grandfather was the only one who went back to get her. She said he found her on the side of a street crying, beside the ruins of a collapsed building. Her face was red and tear-stained, from fear and the cold. She said that he carried her to catch up with the rest of their family, and that he scolded her parents—said that they should take care of their own children or not have them at all. But she had still been left outside for too long, and the memory of that day is forever memorialized by her ears.

But am I supposed to tell this story to my cousin? So I can tell her that she should be grateful that she wasn't left to die, or drowned, or abandoned on a park bench? That she, just by being alive, is luckier than most, and that by living in her own pink room with a big stuffed teddy bear on her lace-edged bed—what? That maybe, somehow, she is even luckier than she deserves? Was that the moral that I was supposed to relate to her?

Every story told to me since I was a child seemed to have a moral, a meaning, something that I should apply to my own life. Like the stories I was told the most as a child by my paternal grandparents, my YeYe and NaiNai. My grandfather, YeYe, was usually the storyteller of the family. He told me legends about a monkey king who made his way into the West (a Buddhist quest) that was made a part of a Hollywood movie, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, a few years ago.

My grandmother, NaiNai, told only one story. The story of a boy named KongRong, who was asked by his father to pick out a pear. His entire family was there to watch him, and it was a test to see what his choice would say about his personality. Imagine the pressure—your entire future and personality determined by a single choice in fruit. But KongRong made the correct decision; he picked the smallest pear, leaving the larger pears for his younger brother, his parents, his grandparents, his aunts and uncles.

I remember being confused by the story, not because of the basic plot, but because my NaiNai's Yangzhou dialect, which changed all of her R's to L's, made me think that a dinosaur, a *konglong*, was the one giving up the bigger pears for the small one. I remember that I felt worse for the little dinosaur, who must have been huge despite being so young. He must have been so hungry, I said to my grandmother.

I didn't want to make an example of my PoPo's almost abandonment. Didn't want it to be so simple a story, a moral, as KongRong and his choice of a pear. Especially since such a simple moral was still somehow lost on me. I wanted to tell her different things, that she's just as good as a boy, and that she can do whatever she wants. That she doesn't need a man and that with the disproportionately large population of eligible Chinese men in our generation, she should pick and choose.

But I worry about the responsibility that comes with that. Because I know that at the age of 22, I'm already getting nudges and hints, from my parents in America and my extended family in China, about bringing around an eligible boy to meet the parents, settle down, and start a family of my own. "You should start looking now," my mother's sister said to me, the summer I visited China when I was 21. "The good men don't want old women. If you're too picky, you'll let all the opportunities slip by."

My mother tells me about my second cousins—sisters, both of whom have extremely successful business careers in Beijing and spend money like running water. I remember I first met them the winter I was seven when we visited Beijing—the same winter my cousin, Han Yi, was born. The sisters were in their twenties then—thin with long black hair and boyfriends. I remembered they went to buy us kids ice cream and little lemon cakes. Now, my mother says, the two of them lie about their age. They have to, if they still want any chance of landing a husband. I could sense the pity in my mother's voice, and I know it wasn't intentional. I know that she doesn't equate a woman's success, or more specifically my success, with a marriage. She worries about other things like divorce, and finances, and finding common ground. Yet it's apparent the way that everyone in our family speaks about these two sisters that in their eyes, they have failed by not getting married. And moreover, their failure is relished because it teaches a lesson, demonstrates a moral to a story. My family can use their story to try to tell me to set my sights lower so that I don't end up being the pitied one.

Xinling Zhejiang, Summer 1983

Chapter Five: City

The journey from the countryside to Jiaxing city could be made by car, if minimal traffic was met, in less than half an hour. Some who lived in the country biked to the outskirts of town in the mornings to sell their fresh vegetables at the market. Yet that journey seemed so long—from grass and dirt to tall buildings, honking horns, and swarms of bicyclists. Little more than a week after Xinling returned from Hualun's farm, she sat at a table with a bowl of noodles in front of her, alone, finding that she couldn't relax, even during her lunch hour at work. When she saw just how red her yellow noodles had turned, she poured more boiling water on top until the water reached the top and the red sauce had been pushed to the bottom. The steam burned her nose and eyes, but she stuck her chopsticks in the bowl and looped the noodles into her mouth.

It was Hualun's first day with the baby all alone, and though Xinling had spent the last weekend doing everything she could think of to do—helped Hualun unpack, filled the small refrigerator with fresh groceries, cut the meat into small strips, washed the vegetables, reminded Hualun of where her daughter's clothes and diapers were, how to turn on the hot water, how to flush the toilet, where the salt and oil and woks were, she still wondered what else she could have done to help. She just wished that she was at home with her daughter. If she wanted to leave her daughter alone with anyone, it wasn't Hualun.

But she knew that she had no choice. The night Xinling abruptly returned from Hualun's, and made the decision that she would give up on visiting her every weekend

and waiting for word from Zhikai, her mother told her that she couldn't take care of the baby anymore. She needed to go back to work if she was going to keep her job and get her retirement pension down the line. Xinling knew she couldn't depend on her mother anymore.

"You're a married woman, Xinling," her mother said.

A married woman, even without a husband present. Little details like that didn't matter. It didn't matter where her husband was, even how good or bad he was to her. Even if she had married him and he dropped dead that very night before consummation, she would be considered married. She was lucky there weren't betrothals anymore. In her mother's generation, little girls whose betrothed died as children were left as 7-year-old, 8-year-old widows, destined to spend a lifetime alone, mourning the almost-husband they never had.

Within a week, Xinling's parents had found an apartment that Xinling could rent with Hualun. It was small—two tiny bedrooms next to each other, both connected to an outer room that served as living room and dining room. The bathroom was in one corner, while the kitchen broke off from the common room so it could have a small window. The balcony, where their laundry would hang to dry, could only be reached through Xinling's room.

Though Xinling had wished for a home of her own—one separate from Hualun and her own parents—she hadn't imagined it would be like this. Her brother and his friends had helped move the heavy furniture—the beds, the dressers, the table and chairs. The decorating was sparse, and in some rooms, even nonexistent. But Xinling's father reminded her that it was important to have what she needed first—she could do the rest

by and by. He looked worried, even more so than her mother. He was always the one who worried about her the most.

"You inherited your mother's demeanor. Her habit of not being able to see what's most important, focusing on the small details instead of the big picture." He shook his head briefly. "Thank goodness you weren't a boy."

What worried Xinling the most was the memory of Hualun walking away from a crying Kaixin the last weekend she took her to see Hualun on her farm, how she ignored her, annoyed by the sound of her cries, even scoffing at her. What would happen to Kaixin if she cried and there was no one but Hualun there?

It seemed ironic to Xinling that she hadn't eaten her words. She said that she was never going to go back to Hualun's, and she didn't. But Hualun came to her. She was now living in the same little apartment, with cold concrete floors and a colored curtain covering the window on the door. Their tiny bedrooms were right next to each other, a thin wall separating the two. The small table stood against the only window in the main room. Only three chairs would fit around the table when one side was pushed against the wall. Xinling wondered where guests would sit if they dropped by.

She reminded herself that likely no one, except for her mother, would come and visit her. It wasn't appropriate anymore, unless she invited them over. What could she offer them? Hardly anyone knew where she lived now anyway.

She hadn't met her new neighbors yet, but she knew that an old couple lived below her and a young family lived across the hall. Sometimes she would see the father taking his son to school. The son must have been a good student. He wore a small red tie around his neck and he had a large yellow, square backpack with a bear's face on it. The

father nodded at her sometimes when they met on the stairway while she was going to work, but they had never spoken or exchanged names. Xinling wondered if they saw each other on the street, in a different environment than their shared apartment building or stairway, if they would recognize each other. She saw the mother too at times, when they met while hanging up their clothes to dry on the railing of the small deck, or taking the dry clothes down in the morning, or when it suddenly began to rain.

Xinling's mother had saved her the trouble of asking Hualun to move in, bravely making the trip by car to Hualun's farm to ask her to move to the city to take care of Kaixin while Xinling was at work. Xinling couldn't imagine what kind of conversation they must have had. Couldn't imagine anyone having a successful, or even normal, conversation with Hualun. Nevertheless, only one trip was necessary to convince Hualun. Soon Hualun had packed three summer outfits and two winter outfits with her. When Xinling and her brother met Hualun at the long-distance bus station, she refused to let Xinling or her brother carry her bag.

"How was the bus ride, Ma?" Xinling asked. She wondered what people on the street would think of them. They didn't look like they belonged together at all. Xinling with her pale skin and good posture, wearing a crisp, white blouse and dark pants. Hualun walked beside her hunched over, making her seem so much shorter than Xinling. Her brown, wrinkled hands swayed by her sides. She wore a flowery shirt with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

Hualun shrugged her shoulders in reply. "Crowded." She didn't elaborate.

Hualun wasn't looking at Xinling as she spoke, but was instead staring around at the busy street filled with people riding bicycles, with a smattering of bread vans and

electric blue trucks transporting lumber and mounds of coal. Hualun seemed to flinch at the sound of each honk.

"Are we going to be living around here?" Hualun asked.

"No," Xinling answered, but didn't elaborate either.

The city was certainly a different world from the country, from Hualun's little farm where the only sounds were of crickets or clucking chickens, bobbing their heads in the yard. It was easy to hear a truck or car approaching, even from miles away, or someone calling for you. They were always prepared, even expectant, for a visitor. Not like in the city, where Hualun could be lost in the swarms of people crossing the street, her voice drowned by others' loud voices and the honking of cars. Where people lived on top of each other instead of side by side.

Xinling had nothing but a sense of dread as she walked beside Hualun. She thought about how she had almost liberated herself from Hualun, from those weekly visits, thought that it was over and she could just wait for Zhikai from her parents' home. Wait or not wait. She didn't want the feeling that she was waiting so simply, so helplessly. And she hadn't even intended to explain to her mother-in-law that she wouldn't be coming anymore. She would just stop going altogether. She figured that after a few weeks' absence she would understand. Hualun was not a stupid woman.

When they entered the *xiangzi*, Hualun seemed to calm down and look more closely and longer at the several apartment buildings in a cluster. T-shirts and thin socks fluttered from the small decks off each apartment except for the first floor. First floors never had balconies because it would have been too easy for robbers to jump inside.

"Don't people's clothes fly away?" Hualun asked, staring up at the hanging clothes.

"Sometimes," Xinling answered.

As they walked deeper into the neighborhood, Hualun asked, "Which building?"

Xinling pointed to the farthermost one in the corner.

"Right there," she said. "And we're just on the third floor," she continued. "It feels like the fourth floor I guess, since there's stairs to get to the first floor. The actual first floor is a small convenience shop."

Xinling wondered why she felt the need to blabber on all of a sudden. Both she and her brother instinctively reached for Hualun's bag, but she tugged it away. Xinling saw her brother look at her, but Xinling shook her head just slightly. She followed behind Hualun up the stairs.

Before she entered her apartment, she could hear her mother's voice coming from inside. Lunch was likely ready, and she was grateful that her mother and brother would stay with her at least for the meal. Her baby daughter knew a lot of words now—Mama, Ah-yi, Waipo, AhGong. She could point and say that person's name when she wanted them now. When Xinling entered the room, she first saw her mother sitting at the table, with Kaixin balanced on her lap. Across the table from her mother sat a man, with his hands on his knees. His hair stuck up in the back. He gave Xinling a hesitant smile and a small nod.

"Yuan Ma, how was the bus ride in?" Xinling's mother asked, standing up to give her seat to Hualun. Xinling stepped forward to take Kaixin into her arms.

"Not bad," Hualun replied, taking a seat and placing her bag on the table.

"Xinling?"

"Hmm?"

"Guess who this person is," her mother said, smiling.

Xinling looked at the man again, and he smiled at her. She looked at her mother.

"I—" She shook her head slightly. She didn't want to offend him, because she felt like she should know him, but all she could think about was dread at the prospect of being alone with Hualun. She didn't want her mother to leave.

"It's Hu Le, remember?" her mother asked. "He lived in the apartment across the hall from us years ago."

That's why he looked so familiar, Xinling thought.

He didn't act offended that she couldn't recognize him, but made a small joke that he had cleaned up quite a bit, wasn't so dirty and messy anymore, and didn't run around barefoot.

"Oh, where are you working now, Hu Le?" Xinling asked, swaying her daughter back and forth in her arms.

"I'm managing our family's herbal medicine shop now. My dad's health hasn't been so great these past few years and my older brother is studying in Shanghai."

Xinling's mother nodded. "It's a big responsibility, taking care of two aging parents and managing the family business."

"Ma—" Xinling interrupted, frowning.

"No," he said, chuckling. "Chen jia li ye, right? Have to have the career and then the family."

"It's about time to start a family. Your parents must be anxious to have a grandson soon."

Hualun dropped her shoes on the ground. The loud clacking sound reminded everyone of her presence.

"Yuan Ma, let me take you to your room. You must be tired from the trip," Xinling's mother said.

Hu Le stood up, but quickly sat back down when Xinling's mother told him he couldn't leave yet until he left an address and phone number with them. She took Hualun's bag and waited for Hualun to walk in front of her.

Hu Le stood up again, and Xinling and her brother sat down at the table. Kaixin was quiet, and staring curiously at the unfamiliar face. He waved at her, and smiled. She laughed.

"It takes a while for her to get used to strangers," Xinling explained.

"How old is she?"

"About eight months."

"She's big. She's nice and rosy."

Xinling poked her daughter's cheeks.

"That was your—"

"Mother-in-law. She'll be helping me take care of my daughter."

"That's nice. I'm sure your husband's a good help."

Xinling's brother scoffed. She cleared her throat. "He's actually in Hangzhou. He works there so it's hard for him to get away often." Xinling could hear her voice

getting softer the more she spoke, as though her vocal cords knew what she said was a lie and refused to be a part of it.

Hu Le nodded, like he understood. "Your daughter. Did you pick out a name for her yet?"

"Yes, actually. Yuan Kaixin."

"Which kai, which xin?"

"Kai as in happiness. Xin as in heart."

He nodded. "A happy heart."

"Right." Xinling chuckled. It seemed like such a simple explanation behind a name.

"It's a good name. A lucky name."

A lucky name. Xinling hadn't thought about it that way, but that was the first name, the only name, that she had thought of. If she changed the tone of *kai* and added *xin*, it literally meant happy, or to have an open heart.

She hoped her daughter would be lucky. She hoped she would be happy.

Hu Le wouldn't stay for lunch, but promised to visit Xinling's parents soon. Lunch was light, and with the occasional chatter of Xinling's mother, passed without incident or painful silence. Hualun retired to her room for her afternoon nap, and Xinling's mother and brother left. Xinling was left in her room with her baby daughter, and watched her roll around from side to side on the bed until she fell asleep, her plump face toward the side, her little fingers curled toward her tiny palm.

* * *

On Xinling's way out of the office to her bus stop, her friend and colleague, Xiao Liu, ran up to her, grabbing her arm and panting.

"I'm getting married!" she blurted out. Her husband-to-be was the second son of a former mayor. He was college-educated, four years older than Xiao Liu, wasn't balding as far as she could tell, and moreover, his mother had died when he was a child.

"That's wonderful, Xiao Liu," Xinling said. "I'll definitely come and drink a glass of your wedding bliss wine."

"Xiao Meng, you have to keep your word!" Xiao Liu tugged on Xinling's sleeve before she left, practically skipping.

On the bus home, Xinling held on tightly to the metal pole she had been lucky enough to claim as she stood, body to body with at least four other people. The bus jerked and turned, but with her arm bent at the elbow and wrapped around the pole, she managed to stay upright. Her other arm gripped her bag close to her torso; she was always fearful of robbers. She had the habit of keeping her bag tight against her stomach, never allowing it to sling toward the back or at her side, where it would be easy for a robber to walk past and grab it from her, running, or surreptitiously slit an opening at the side of her bag, just big enough for her wallet to slip through.

She thought about the prospect of going to a wedding. Of course she had promised, but the idea of going by herself made her cringe. She imagined her and Zhikai going together as a happily married couple. Instead, she supposed she would attend with her parents—the Lius and the Mengs had been friends for a long time, after all. Perhaps she could cite her baby as a reason to go home early—an excuse not to stay out late, drinking and singing. But she wondered if Xiao Liu's parents would even want her there.

If Zhikai went with her, she could go. She would be a young wife, a new mother, bringing her blessings and well wishes for the bride who was her friend, and whom she wished a similar happiness upon. What wisdom or luck could she offer Xiao Liu, when she didn't even have enough for herself?

When she had climbed up the stairs that led to her apartment door, she saw that the inner wooden door was cracked open. She opened the screen door made up of interlocking metal bars and then pushed back the wooden door. She heard the stove and the loud fan of the kitchen and then smelled burning. Coughing as she was greeted by smoke, she ran to the kitchen. Hualun was standing at the stove, shoveling around what Xinling found out later was supposed to be egg fried rice with a metal spatula. The spatula against the wok made a sharp scraping sound as Hualun stirred around and around, sending brown flecks of rice flying.

"Ma, take it off!" Xinling cried. Hualun was holding the wok far away from her body, almost cringing, so it wasn't difficult for Xinling to grab the wok and throw it into the sink. She heard the wok give a sizzling sound, like a sigh of relief. She went to pry the window open in hopes the smoke would clear a little. Her hands went instinctively to her head and ears. It took Xinling a few moments to figure out why she still felt so suffocated and anxious. Finally, she unplugged the fan and it became quiet.

"What are you trying to do?" Xinling demanded.

Hualun had on Xinling's apron, the front of which now had patches of brown.

"I showed you how to work the stove yesterday, didn't I?"

Xinling walked back over to the sink to check the status of the burnt fried rice. Steam was still rising from the bottom of the wok, and the rice had started to stick and

harden to the sides of the wok and to the metal spatula. They would have to soak for hours before the rice would ever come off, if the wok could even be salvaged. The small kitchen was still filled with smoke, and Xinling closed the sliding door of the tiny kitchen from the main room so the smoke wouldn't get to Kaixin.

"You could have set the entire building on fire. Do you understand that?"

Hualun stood still, eyes to the floor, looking almost like a child being reprimanded by a parent. Xinling lowered her hands from her head as the smoke began to clear. She left the kitchen to check on her daughter.

There was a lot more that Xinling wanted to say to Hualun. She thought about asking her to leave, making her leave, but the only reason she had asked her to come at all was because she had no other choice. Because there was no one else. But not only had Hualun not taken good care of Kaixin, she had almost put her in harm's way today. So what was the point of having her come then in the first place?

Kaixin was in Xinling's room, sitting on her bed and playing with a red plastic flower that swayed back and forth when it was under sunlight. She was fingering it and, judging from the wet streaks on the flower, had likely placed it in her mouth once or twice. Her thin, light brows were furrowed above her round, black eyes like she was concentrating hard on figuring how exactly the flower was moving on its own. The smoke and shouting in the kitchen hadn't seemed to have affected her.

Xinling went over and took Kaixin into her arms. Her daughter struggled a bit—it was still so warm, and the last thing she probably wanted to have a pair of hot arms around her.

A clanging came from the living room, and Xinling carried Kaixin out to see where it was coming from. She wondered if Hualun had done something with the now useless wok, but the clanging was from a knock at the steel bars of the outside door. In her haste, the inside wooden door was left open. She recognized the young father from across the hall she saw most mornings.

"Hello," Xinling said as she opened the door for the man.

"I don't mean to just drop in like this, but my son and I saw smoke from outside—"

"Oh, we just burned something in the kitchen," Xinling replied quickly. She managed a weak chuckle. She realized she was blocking the doorway, and quickly moved, but the man stayed outside.

"I was worried there was a fire."

Xinling shook her head. "No, everything's fine."

The man nodded his head, but still seemed a bit unconvinced.

"Sorry to bother you," he said. "I was just worried for my son." He nodded, then walked to his door. Xinling closed and opened her eyes. She saw the man's door close before hers, then she closed both of her doors, pushing in the latch.

Xinling Zhejiang, Summer 1983

Chapter Six: Mother

The next morning, Xinling woke up her daughter at seven, even though Kaixin usually slept for another hour. The baby stared out the window while Xinling got dressed and combed her hair. She kept her hair short nowadays, so she could go to sleep and go out the door without having to plait it.

A dab of a dark brown eyebrow pencil filled in the tiny bald spot on her left eyebrow, and she smudged some lipstick on her finger and rubbed it on her lips and brow bone. She dressed her daughter and fluffed her hair. It seemed a physical impossibility that Kaixin's still unbelievably soft hair still managed to stand straight up on its own.

"Come on, Kaixin. You're coming to work with Mama."

She had made this decision last night, after she had spent the evening scrubbing the hardened bits of rice off the wok and then cooked another meal. The food she cooked still smelled burnt, even though it tasted fine. All of them were hungry by then, and she set out one bowl of rice on the table for Hualun, taking another bowl to her room where she ate quietly with her baby daughter. She knew taking Kaixin to work at the hospital office wouldn't go over well for long, but for now she cared most about keeping her daughter with her. The secretarial office was filled with women, and she hoped they could trade off watching Kaixin while they worked.

Xinling opened the door quietly, trying not to wake Hualun, but when she looked up, Hualun was already sitting at the table. She had a pillowcase in her brown hands, working with a needle and small bunch of colored thread. She wore little clear glasses

low on her nose and held the cloth close to her face. Sunlight barely peeked in the window this early in the morning, and Xinling wondered how she could possibly see without any other light. She reached and turned on the light switch. Hualun looked up toward the light when it clicked on.

"You can turn the ceiling fan on, too. It's right here next to the light switch."

Hualun picked up her needle again and stuck it through the cloth, sticking her finger beneath the pillowcase to find where the needle came out again. Xinling stood there holding her daughter and looking at Hualun for a moment, not really knowing what she was waiting for her mother-in-law to do or say. When Hualun continued her embroidery, with hands that probably couldn't even feel the needle pricks anymore, Xinling slipped on her shoes, slung her bag over her shoulder, and left with Kaixin.

At work, her friends gathered around Kaixin. All of them complimented her beauty, how big she had grown already, and tried to teach her more words.

"Say butterfly. *Huuuu di-ye*."

Kaixin giggled, as did Xinling. She hadn't ever heard anyone break up the last syllable of butterfly into two. Xiao Liu came by as well and sat Kaixin on her lap.

"Oh, doesn't she make you want a daughter too? It'd be so much fun to dress her up and braid her hair," she said.

"And a daughter will always be close to her mother. Not like a son who'll answer to his wife instead of his mother," someone else piped in.

Many people laughed at that.

"You sound like you have so much experience."

"I do! In my last life, I was a poor abandoned mother whose daughter-in-law was an absolute nightmare," she continued, laughing.

"Did you ever think about having a kid earlier, Xinling?" her colleague asked. "By the time you had Kaixin, the one child law was already set, wasn't it?"

"Yes, for several years already," Xinling answered.

Her colleague sighed. "I worry about these kids."

"I worry about us," Xiao Liu retorted.

"What do you mean?"

Xiao Liu clicked her tongue, then brought out her hand, prepared to give a math lesson on her fingers.

"Think about it. Our parents have four, five, sometimes even more kids to look after them when they're old," she said, holding up more fingers as she counted. "But what about us?" Only her index finger stayed standing. "We'll only have one kid to depend on. One. And who knows whether our kid will be successful?" When several people chuckled, Xiao Liu shook her head. "I'm not being dramatic, I'm serious. What if your kid turns out worthless?"

"Your kid won't be worthless."

"But you never know."

Xinling saw Kaixin furrow her brows, and then look behind her and reach her arms for her mother.

"Oh, oh, she wants her mother back. She's had enough of us."

Xinling smiled, and took her daughter back into her arms. She held her tight.

"All right, we should all get to work. Before boss comes and yells at us."

Xiao Liu stood up to get back to her office.

"See everyone at my wedding!"

* * *

"I don't know what to do."

"About what?"

"About…anything. I don't even know how to take care of my daughter. How I'm supposed to make enough money to feed her and still manage to watch her."

Xinling found herself squatting outside of her apartment building with Hu Le. At the end of the day, Xinling was exhausted, and Kaixin didn't look very happy either. Her friends had been kind enough to watch Kaixin in shifts when Xinling was busy or when her boss came in, but at the end of the day, her boss had asked her who was supposed to be watching her daughter while she was working, and told her directly that the office was not a daycare, nor was it an orphanage.

Her walk back from the bus stop seemed longer than usual, because Kaixin was getting heavier and bigger by the day. Xinling was glad, of course, but was already looking forward to when her daughter could walk on her own.

Weighed down by the heaviness of her daughter and groceries, Xinling ended up chasing after her tomatoes as her bag broke and they rolled every which way. She ran after the reddest one, the one that she was most afraid of turning to mush. She took it gently in her hand, all while trying not to drop her daughter. When she stood back up, she saw Hu Le standing with a tomato in each hand.

"Need some help?" he said, smiling kindly.

Xinling nodded.

Very naturally, Hu Le stepped over and took Kaixin into his arms. They collected the lost tomatoes together, and Hu Le brought over a stool that Xinling's neighbor must have left outside. Xinling sat down and stretched her legs with her back hunched, so much that her chin could have touched her chest.

"Maybe it's not the best idea to have your mother-in-law live with you. I know that it was meant to be helpful, but now you have both a young and an old to take care of," Hu Le said with uncertainty, like he was trying to figure out a definitive solution to something where he didn't even know the definitive problem. "Is Zhikai sending money every month?"

"I think he sends money to Hualun. I wouldn't know."

Xinling found herself telling him about Zhikai. That he was working in Hangzhou and staying with a friend. She hadn't seen him in nearly a year, since before the birth of Kaixin. That he had never seen his daughter, that she thought up her daughter's name on her own. That Hualun never talked about her son to Xinling, acted as though she had no right to ask about what he was doing, or when he was coming back. That she had no idea if he was coming back, no idea if she was going to get divorced and raise her daughter on her own, or even if Zhikai had found someone else. No, she guessed that he hadn't found anyone else. Otherwise she probably would have heard from him by now. At least then she would have a definite answer. A definite end to this.

Hu Le listened quietly, with his eyes a little squinted. When Xinling turned toward him, she saw him looking at her with an upward glance. He looked a bit like he was in pain, like he pitied her, and it was only then that she felt embarrassed that she had blurted all of this out to him. They hadn't seen each other in years after all. He was

successful; he would take over his family business; he would marry a woman who wasn't as stupid as she was. Someone who was well educated and came from a good family, a family comparable to his. Xinling was sure of this. She wondered what he thought of her now. Wondered if his dim feeling of innocent curiosity had transformed.

"I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed I just told you all of that," Xinling said, shaking her head. She stood up suddenly and kept her eyes averted from his. "Let me take her," she said, taking Kaixin back. "Forgive me. I'll invite you in for a cup of tea some other day." She turned and started climbing up the stairs, leaving the tomatoes in a small pile by the small stool. She didn't turn back to see if Hu Le was still there, but once she got back into her apartment and put Kaixin on her bed, she looked out the window for him. By that time, he was already gone.

* * *

When Xinling came home, Hualun was in the kitchen, fumbling around with pots and plates. Xinling didn't look because she didn't want to know what she was doing, so she went wordlessly to her room and stayed in there with her daughter. She had never before felt like she didn't have a place to be in her own home.

When it was close to dinnertime, Xinling came out of her room and closed the door quietly behind her. She was surprised to that Hualun had set the table and that there were two bowls of rice and a pot of soup in the middle. She immediately looked toward the kitchen to see if it was once again filled with black coal smoke, but it looked clear, and the window was open. She heard the clang of chopsticks against porcelain bowls coming from the common room.

Hualun sat down and lifted her legs up and crossed them. Her knees stuck out on either side. She was wearing her flowery, flowing pants and her feet were bare. Her bowl was balanced in the center of her palm, and she reached to ladle soup into her bowl. Xinling sat down beside her and looked in the pot to see what kind of soup it was. It was Zhikai's favorite—spinach and scallion-ginger meatballs. She had made it often for Zhikai. She remembered he complained that her meatballs were always too hard, and never tender enough. She always protested that the only reason the meatballs were tender was because so much cornstarch was put in, and that it wasn't healthy.

"Don't make excuses. It just isn't as good," he had said.

"I've already put a lot in," she returned.

Xinling listened to the sound of Hualun eating, scooping the rice now mixed with broth into her mouth with her chopsticks. She picked up the ladle and got some soup of her own. The rice was already too sticky, very apparently because it wasn't completely cooked through. Perhaps when she put the hot broth on top, the rice would continue cooking. The meatballs plopped down, not round but lumpy. She figured that Hualun must not have rolled the meat into balls first, but had simply scooped into a lump into the boiling water and let it cook. The green water, dyed by the shriveled spinach, was ladled on top so that the rice turned a bit green as well. She looked again at Hualun. Her bowl was nearly empty already while Xinling had barely touched her food. She looked down, and picked up a meatball and bit into it. She nibbled at it and chewed a large piece of ginger. Then she bit deeper inside, and then had to spit it out right away. What she spit out was pink, and she still had the taste of the raw, gooey meat in her mouth. Hualun

looked up when she heard her, and looked annoyed, like she was making a big fuss over a simple meal.

"It's not cooked all the way through, Ma," she said, wiping her mouth. "You can't eat that."

Hualun kept on chewing, finally shoveling the rest of what was in her bowl into her mouth. She set the bowl down on the table, placed the chopsticks on top, and got up from the table.

Xinling heard her walk into the bathroom and close the door. She sat at the table for a moment, pondering the bowl of undercooked food in front of her. She could feel the soup cooling before her. The soup from the pot wasn't steaming anymore either. Finally, she poured her bowl of soup, complete with her undercooked rice, back into the pot and stirred it around. She carried it back to the kitchen and placed it on the counter. She examined the small coal stove. The top block of coal had burned from black to a reddish white, close to the color of old brick, with small orange flecks still burning in between the holes. She lifted that one and put a fresh black one in, and proceeded to boil the soup again, thoroughly, until she was sure that the meatballs were cooked all the way through. Only then did she take the pot off of the stove, ladle it again into the same bowl, and sit down to eat her dinner.

When Hualun came back out from the bathroom, Xinling expected her to go directly into her room. She knew that she slept early, and spent her time sewing and embroidering. That's what she imagined at least, but she didn't really know what she did. But Hualun sat back down beside Xinling at the table, causing Xinling to stop eating

again. She looked at Hualun, not knowing what she would say, or if she would say anything at all.

"I got some news from Zhikai today."

Xinling blinked slowly, hoping that Hualun would meet her eyes, but her eyes stayed fixed on the empty bowl in front of her.

"Oh?" Xinling answered. She directed her eyes down toward her bowl as well.

"Zhixun talked to him on the phone."

Xinling didn't know how to react. She figured that Zhikai had contact with his brothers, but she never knew how much. After all, it was Zhikai's little brother, Zhixun, who told her where he was and what he was doing.

"How…How is he?"

She couldn't believe that was the only question she could think of, but she was afraid that whatever question she asked, Hualun wouldn't answer.

"Good."

Xinling waited. "Is he—"

"He's coming back," Hualun said. "Next week. Thought you should know."

Next week.

"Is he—he's not coming here?"

"I don't know. We'll see."

Xinling's thoughts weren't focused at all on Hualun, or even on how Zhikai was, but completely focused on what it meant for her. Hualun must have told her for a reason that Zhikai was coming back. Did it mean that he wanted to give their marriage another try? Did it mean that he had gotten a job here? Would they settle in Jiaxing? She

wondered if he had changed, if he looked the same, changed his hair, or his glasses. But Zhikai hadn't contacted her about coming back. He could have called her work, or her parents' home. Did he know that Hualun was with her in the city now? He must, or he wouldn't have known to contact her.

"When did you hear?" Xinling asked.

"Zhixun talked to him this morning, and he had to come into the city today anyway so he stopped by to bring me the news. He bought cigarettes downstairs."

Xinling nodded. Why did you tell me? she wanted to ask.

"Good. That's good," she muttered. She tapped her chopsticks against her bowl. Her mouth felt dry and numb. She couldn't imagine putting anymore food in it. Even her throat felt like it had contracted, making speaking, swallowing, breathing difficult.

"I'll clean up the table."

She took up both hers and Hualun's bowls and chopsticks and put them in the sink. When Hualun went back into her room, Xinling unlocked the door and took the pot of soup with her, taking it downstairs. She dumped it at the bottom of a tree near the opening of the neighborhood. A neighbor's dog would enjoy the meatballs, maybe not the spinach. The broth splattered on the dirt, and the meatballs fell with soft, wet plops. Xinling suddenly felt sick, and squatted on the ground, with one hand over her stomach and the other cupping over her mouth as she gagged. The hand she held over her mouth traveled up to cover both her eyes, and she started to sob. Her body shook, but her sobs were muffled so that no sounds really escaped from her except for her gasps and shaking.

She heaved, and what she heaved up joined what remained of the soup under the tree.

Sherry Anhui, Summer 2008

Chapter Seven: Lies

My uncle dropped me off at my father's parents' home, leaving after drinking half a cup of tea, and the four of us—my grandparents, my eldest aunt, and I—sat around the blurry television on the couch. I asked my grandmother why the television was blurry, and she said that it was because it had been so rainy that mold that grown inside the television, but that after it was on for a while, the heat would melt the mold away and the picture would naturally clear up.

I wondered if that was normal for televisions, or even possible.

I acted like I was very immersed in the blurry shapes, at least trying to make out what kind of program we were watching by sound alone. I figured out it was a drama series of some sort, with dubbed over voices, but Chinese, and judging by the constant swishes and cuts through the air, it was an action wuxia series, likely set in the Qing or Song dynasty, with all the characters wearing colorful costumes and long, complicated hair. When I was ten and my mother decided that my Mandarin was so awful that I needed to stay in China for the entire three months of summer, I watched over eight different wuxia dramas each day. I memorized which drama was on each channel, which days two episodes were shown instead of one, and imagined I was the heroine, leaping onto rooftops and through trees, and kicking some serious ass.

Before my trip alone to China the summer of 2008, my mother told me that years ago, some rumor made it to China that my mother was divorcing my father. The rumor had made her out to be a woman who followed her husband to America, got a green card,

and then ran off, either with his money or because she had found an old, rich American to marry. No one knows how the rumor made it back, since it was only ever the three of us. Every time I went back as a child, and my grandmother got me alone, she would ask me if my parents fought a lot.

For the past few years, my parents have always gone together to visit her, and though my grandmother doesn't know that it's because my father's four strokes have made speaking without my mother present to guess what he's trying to spit out impossibly difficult, she at least doesn't worry anymore about my parents' marriage. When she saw me this summer, after I graduated from college, she said that I looked the same, a little bit plumper, hair still messy, a little taller. All of that, so far, was pretty painless. But when we sat around the blurry television and there was nothing to look at but hazy, barely colored shapes floating about on the screen, she started in on me.

She mentioned something about my parents coming together again, about them staying for too long in their apartment in Suzhou instead of staying longer with their parents and helping out more. She expected me to cook for her and not just sit around while I visit. She asked me questions about my mother's family. Did my uncle get divorced again? Are any of my cousins planning to go college, or are they more concerned, as their parents are, about making some money? She couldn't believe my mother thought it was okay for me to come back by myself again, even though I've always come by myself ever since my dad got sick.

My parents only stay with my grandparents for two or three days out of the month they spend in China each autumn. When my father said that I had to stay with them for an entire week last summer, I asked him why.

He stayed silent for a moment, taking a breath in as though ready to speak, but then let the breath back out when he didn't have an answer.

"They're your grandparents and they're old," he said. He paused. When he realized that this same excuse should apply to him as well, if not more so, he sighed.

Finally, he added, "If I stay for too long, I worry that they'll figure out that I'm sick."

And that was true. My parents used the excuse that my dad spent too much time speaking English, so it was hard for him to remember his Chinese. Which somehow was a passable excuse. He had had a bit of a stutter since he was a kid, when he and my twin uncles imitated a neighbor who had a stutter. My grandmother proudly said she slapped my uncles until they stopped, but could never bear to slap her youngest son.

Without another word, I stayed for the entire week.

I didn't know what to bring my NaiNai so I asked her, and she said painkillers, because the bottle we bought her three years ago had expired. She actually said that to us: Don't bring an expired bottle like last time. I won't, I said, but couldn't help but yell over the phone that if you keep the same bottle for over three years, of course it'll expire. She acted like she didn't hear me, or maybe she really couldn't.

The apartment my grandparents live in now is not the home I remembered. They moved down from the side of the mountain right before their entire village was demolished, away from where my parents were married and I lived until I was three. After several years of construction, the village was transformed into a long tunnel that led to new highway that would cut in half the time it took to get to the capital. My aunt took me to see it right after it was finished but before it had opened for traffic.

The tunnel was as beautiful as a tunnel could be. Tiny yellow lights filled the inside walls of the tunnel, making it look like the clearest night sky. The long, little island in between the two sets of lanes was filled with red and yellow flowers and small, perfectly spaced trees. The roads were flat and smooth and a dark grey, and all of the colors seemed more vivid and heightened on that whitish cloudy day.

My aunt pointed at a red, brick chimney at the top of the tunnel and asked, "Does that look familiar?"

It did look familiar, but I felt as though I wasn't used to looking at this chimney from this angle.

When she tells me that the chimney was the one right outside of the preschool I attended for three weeks was, I try to imagine the school back on the side of the hill. There's nothing there but dirt and some weeds left where the building was, and I already cannot, even in my mind, place the building back where it once was.

* * *

I lived solely with my grandparents for over a year of my life, from the age of two to three, on the house on a hill in a village called the East Mountain Village. The house had grey, concrete walls and a front yard that opened out directly onto the mountain, where my grandmother planted pumpkins and chrysanthemums and raised chickens. Goats with white, wooly beards would sometimes come down and bid salutations, bah-ing the bad weather. Retired friends of my grandparents would drop by with their own grandchildren. The children and I would play games in the yard; they would talk about their parents and I would show them the picture of my parents I kept under my pillow. They would then nod politely, wondering at what I treasured.

I remember knowing that my parents were in America, but it was more of an abstract idea, not much different in my mind from their being in heaven or on the moon. To a child who had, literally, barely been out of her own backyard, the magnitude of halfway around the world was completely incomprehensible. The only foreign places I had been were in my grandfather's stories. He and I would climb up the mountain on fine days, and we would sit in the pagoda on the hill for hours, where he would tell me of his life, or of a monkey making his way into the West, depending on his mood. I would beg him for "One more! One more!" but eventually we would have to return home. Memories of my grandmother were more blurry, probably because I spent most of my time running away from her or bent over her knee crying while getting slapped. Every morning, she would chase me all over the village with a hard-boiled egg, which she would eventually manage to shove down my throat after I finally grew tired of running. To this day, the smell of hard-boiled eggs will bring a wave of nausea over me.

Some days, my orange-striped cat would stand on his hind legs and place his paws gently on my fat cheeks, and we would have moments of his looking at me and my looking at him, both with our heads cocked slightly to the side. His feet would leave perfect paw prints on my face that I never wanted to wash off. My grandmother took no notice of my protests and would always wash off my face not-so-gently and somewhat grudgingly. Another time, I wanted to help my grandmother wash the chili peppers she was using for lunch, except that the capsaicin burned my fingers and hands, so much so that I could no longer distinguish between numbness and pain. She came running after I accidently rubbed my eyes and had started screaming. I would imagine that relief, and not the realization that she would miss me once I was gone, was likely the most

prominent emotion she felt when she got the call from my father that I was to be returned to them.

* * *

My parents began the switch from letters to a weekly phone call when my dad got sick the first time when I was twelve, and he realized that he couldn't read the letter he had written in Chinese the day before his stroke. My grandmother didn't seem to mind. Each successive time my dad got sick, my mom would make up excuses like my dad was busy with work, or was working out in the yard, or was out of town for several weeks, while he went through speech therapy and practiced what he would say.

"Ma, we're all well, how are you and dad? Please take care."

My mother would call my eldest aunt and cry while my dad was asleep, and my aunt would make sure to be there on Saturday morning when we made the call, and help us with the lie. Say things like "Of course he's busy. He's under so much pressure" when my grandmother wondered why her son suddenly stopped talking to her. The next week, my grandmother would say to my mother to cook more good things so my father will come home earlier from work, or that marriage is about sacrifice and compromise, and that the woman should be shouldering more of the responsibility. Sometimes my mother would shake after she hung up, and sometimes my father, listening at the side, would too.

* * *

Besides my own memories, all the things I know about my grandmother are few and far between. I know that her parents died when she was a teenager, and that she took care of her three younger sisters on her own. I know that my father gets his fiery temper

and impatience from her, and I from him. I know that she lied to us that my grandfather needed an operation and she couldn't pay the hospital bill, and then kept the money my parents emptied out of their bank account and wired to her. I know that my uncle gives her money every month but that my grandfather sees none of it, and that she hoards it, or gives it to my cousin who is her favorite, because he is the only boy. I know that she has always been unfair to my mother. I know that my father cannot stand to be with her for more than three days. I know that we have kept our mouths shut about money, because she is old, and that it isn't right to doubt your elders even if they are lying. After all, we have been lying to her for the last ten years about her son, whose sudden and lasting change to a healthy lifestyle and speech impediment was not a coincidence or a random change, but because he got sick, and because he worried more about her feelings than his own.

When I get really upset with her, I think about times I have hurt her. Like the time I got mad at her when she said something about my mother and her family and how they have no education, because only my mother is college educated, and to her, a woman's education doesn't really count for anything anyway. I remember I told her in broken Chinese that she was mean and violent, and that the only memories I have of her from when I was a child were of her slapping me. Or the time she dropped me off at my mother's family's home right before I was supposed to return to the States the summer I was ten years old, and all I did was give her a short wave and then prepared to run off and play, and she had to grab me back and force me to hug her. I remember this because when she let go of me, she wiped a tear from her eye and her voice shook when she told

me to be obedient. I think that was the only time I wondered if I meant anything to her at all.

I try to understand. I try to understand that it is difficult to love a duty and it is difficult to love a consolation prize. Sometimes I try to do the math in my head so that everything comes out even. Maybe the money she lied to get from us was to pay the expenses of my living with her that one year—pay for the eggs and all the trouble I caused. Pay for her making the trip from China to the States carrying me the whole way because I had lost one of my shoes. Pay for this huge lie of my father's illness we have kept from her for the last ten years.

* * *

I still recall waking up in the middle of the night to a terrible thrashing sound. A fox had been coming down from the mountain, somehow managing to jump our concrete wall. In the two nights beforehand, the bloodthirsty creature had killed and eaten both of our ducks, leaving behind only their heads in our water basin for us to find. Each morning, I saw the look of disgust on my grandmother's face—a mixture of anger, resentment, and pain. The next night, however, when the fox decided to go after our chickens, my grandmother was ready. My grandmother prized her chickens, proud that they were so plump and well-fed, and produced the most eggs out of our East Mountain Village. I woke to the sound of thrashing and an odd, high-pitched yelping of pain. My grandfather told me not to be afraid, and I fell back asleep listening to my sound of my grandfather's voice telling me about an unselfish dinosaur. The next morning, my grandmother was burying the bloody pulp that remained in our front yard—she said that it would be good as fertilizer. Next to her on the ground was a broken broom.

* * *

The first lie I remember someone telling me was the lie my grandmother told me after my mother left. Apparently I continued to cry long after her leaving, and nothing would appease me until she told me that my mother went to buy me chocolate, and that the longer she was gone, the more chocolate she would return with. After she had been gone long enough that I could hardly remember her face or the sound of her voice, I figured that when she finally did show up, she would bring with her a mythical amount of sweets—something on the scale of Charlie and his Chocolate Factory. The promise of chocolate, and only that, was on my mind as my grandmother carried me through Eppley Airport, jetlagged with a lopsided bow on my head and only one shoe. As my parents came into view, looking just like the picture under my pillow that I looked at every night before bed, she pointed and said, "Look, there's your family." My family, who just happened to have several bars of chocolate in hand.

Chapter Eight: Grandmother

My mother didn't grow up with her mother, but with her mother's mother, whom she should have called PoPo, but instead called NaiNai. The Chinese are careful to distinguish between paternal and maternal relatives, older or younger siblings. If you say a cousin or a grandmother or an aunt, it's evident exactly how this person is related to you—by marriage, whether this person shares the same last name as you, even what side of your paternal side of your family—your father's mother's family or your father's father's family. PoPo always suggests someone more distant than a NaiNai, so my mother called her PoPo NaiNai to make her happy.

My PoPo dropped my mother off at her NaiNai's when my mother was six years old. At the age of twenty-six, my PoPo already had three children and had another one on the way. PoPo's mother scolded her for having so many children she couldn't take care of, and offered to take her oldest daughter. My mother cried while she watched my PoPo leave. My aunt, two years younger than my mother, became the caretaker of the rest of the children. PoPo called her second daughter Dai Di—brings brothers. And she did; she brought along four brothers. Today, my aunt still gets angry whenever PoPo forgets and uses this name.

My mother talks happily and nostalgically about her grandmother, who didn't know how to read, a secret no one but her family knew. Everyone called her Gentleman Zhang—a term of respect for someone well-educated. She only wore black and white—black, pressed pants, neat, white collared shirts, white socks, black shoes. She worried

about my mother's hair, which was sparse and brown and partly curly, the exact opposite of the hair deemed beautiful by Chinese standards, so one day she went out and bought her an expensive red and blue hat and made her three dolls out of little pillows, even drew little faces on them, and shaved my mother's head in hopes that her hair would grow back black, straight, and thick. That winter my mother stayed inside wearing her hat and playing with her dolls, blissfully warm and with enough entertainment that she wasn't at all bored.

When her hair grew back the same it always was, her grandmother patted her head and said, "Yellow-haired girls are luckier anyway." My mother said this same thing to me when I was young.

My mother said that TaiTai, my great-grandmother, always talked about PoPo, her daughter, negatively. Said she was slow and not nearly as smart as my mother. She said she was worried that she wouldn't even get into middle school, but miraculously she did. She married my grandfather when she was 18, after he spotted her running home after school and immediately getting the laundry to wash in a basin outside their yard. He was already betrothed to another girl, but he said that he would only marry my grandmother.

My TaiTai dressed my mother like herself. She bought her the prettiest shoes—leather and not cloth like most children's shoes. She pressed my mother's pants so that there was a clear crease in the middle of her pants leg. She bought her handkerchiefs instead of making them out of scraps. My mother said all of her grandmother's neighbors and extended family said she was spending too much money on a little girl. She wasn't

even a grandson and didn't need so much. My great-grandmother said she would spend her money on whomever she liked.

She encouraged my mother's talent for singing and dancing. My mother stopped going to school and joined a performing troupe during the Cultural Revolution, where she wore exaggerated eye makeup and drew on dark eyebrows and wore red string around her two braids. They would travel around and perform songs about Chairman Mao and their country.

My mother lived with her grandmother until her death when my mother was fourteen, and she moved back from Benbu to Hefei, the capital of Anhui. She said she was really depressed when she first moved back—not used to so many siblings running around everywhere—a younger sister who was used to being the oldest sibling, and four younger brothers. My second uncle also returned to Hefei around this time, having spent his childhood with my grandfather's mother. They struck up a friendship because they were the outcasts. They didn't fit in because in their childhood, they lived the life of being the only one—the cherished one—and the rude awakening they had after they returned to their former lives was difficult for both of them.

My mother tells me a story her NaiNai told her one day while they kneaded dough together. My mother was maybe eight or nine. When TaiTai was a new bride, Tai Tai's own mother-in-law wanted her to make shao bing—a flatbread with scallions and sesame seeds. My great-grandmother was tired that day and said she would make it another day. When her mother-in-law grew angry, she told her son that he needed to teach his wife a lesson, that she wasn't showing respect to her mother-in-law and therefore not showing respect for her husband. She wasn't being filial. Finally my great-grandfather relented

and asked his wife to make the flatbread again, which she refused. When he had beaten her until her head was bleeding, she went obediently to make the flatbread. She wiped the blood from her head and kneaded it into the dough until it turned a pinkish-brown, sprinkled salt, sesame seeds, oil, and scallions on top as usual, fired it, and served to her mother-in-law on her knees. No one ate the flatbread, and her mother-in-law never asked her to make the flatbread again.

Xinling Zhejiang, Summer 1983

Chapter Nine: The Ones Who Stay

Xinling couldn't sleep. Her stomach was still churning and her mouth tasted acidic, like it always did after she got sick, even after she had brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth many times. She lay awake with her curtains open, and a dim bluish streetlight outside her window blended with the pale moonlight so that she could still see the contours of her thin, white legs and her daughter's glowing face. There was a warm breeze, even though there were steel bars over her window, and more bars surrounding the small patio where the day's laundry still hung.

She wondered if Hualun was sleeping. The neighborhood's old couples would gather outside on the street at nine or ten at night wearing their pajamas to enjoy the night breeze. They would sit on the side of the street on old newspapers, fanning themselves with large, round fans made out of woven, dried banana leaves, fried yellow. Occasionally, they kicked their legs to shake off mosquitoes and ticks, their plastic slippers clacking against the pavement. Hualun never went to join them.

The door to Hualun's room was often closed, but the light was on every night before Xinling went to bed and she was up again by the time Xinling woke in the morning. She never came over to check when Kaixin would cry at night, even though Xinling was certain that she heard the baby's whimpers through the thin walls. When Kaixin woke up in the middle of the night crying, Xinling would pace back and forth in her room, from the dresser to the window, with Kaixin's head resting on her shoulder, softly singing old ballads from her favorite singer, Deng Lijun. It was ironic that Deng

was so known for her love songs, since she was so unlucky in love herself. Xinling loved watching her sing on television. She was always radiant, with round, bright eyes and short, wavy hair. She always had a smile on her face, her red lips making her perfect teeth seem even whiter. One ballad was called "What You'll Say," about a woman who is promised by a man he'll visit her in a few days, yet doesn't return until a full year later and then proceeds to address her by the wrong name. She had previously thought the lyrics were rather funny, in a sad kind of way. The repeated chorus was the line, "Give my love back to me," rhetorical, since those 365 days that Deng sang were so miserable to bear, could never be returned, even with the man's final return. What was the difference if he remembered her? The song ended with those words repeated, "Give my love back to me / Give my love back to me."

Xinling imagined Hualun asleep on her bed, her lips pursed lightly in a contented smile. Excited for her son's return, or maybe amused at Xinling's shaky, stuttering reaction. Xinling hadn't bothered to explain her puffy face and red eyes after she came back in, and Hualun had mercifully ignored her. She hadn't bothered to provide any further details either, though Xinling wasn't sure if she could have handled any more information beyond the simple knowledge that Zhikai was coming back.

It was too dark to be out, and she thought about calling her mother, who was certainly already asleep. But what would she say? She wondered what her mother would say when she heard the news that Zhikai was returning, but couldn't imagine any possible reaction at all.

* * *

When morning came, Xinling rushed over to her parents' with Kaixin. When she finally told them, her mother answered her with silence at first, and Xinling knew what she meant. She was surprised that Zhikai was coming back, but to say that she expected him never to come back wouldn't be quite true either. Xinling stared at her hands in her lap. They were cold and clammy; she tried to wipe the cold sweat on her pants, but her hands still didn't seem dry enough. Her father, who sat beside her mother at the table, sipped tea out of his cup, which looked more like a jar. She bit her lip. Xinling continued to explain softly, but didn't really remember what she said. Her voice faltered as she spoke. Something hopeful. Something optimistic and vague perhaps. The room was silent. Kaixin crawled around on the ground and knocked her ball against the floor. Finally it was Xinling's father who spoke.

"It's about time for him to come back," he said. He cleared his throat.

"Is he coming here?" her mother asked.

"I don't know. Ma didn't say."

Her mother shook her head. "You didn't ask her?"

Xinling shook her head. "I…No."

Her mother furrowed her brows, then quietly cleared her throat. She looked like she was about to say something, but then changed her mind. Xinling didn't know if she wanted to her to say something or not.

"Zhikai is a filial son," her father said.

Xinling nodded.

She wondered if her father would ask her what she wanted to do, though how could he not know that she had no idea. No, he would think that she had already decided,

that by just telling them that her husband was returning that she had no other choice but to stay with him, and pretend nothing had happened. Or maybe her father would tell her what she needed to do, which maybe was what she needed. That really, it was all as she had told everyone, that Zhikai's absence was something discussed and decided upon as a couple, that he would live in Hangzhou and better his career. Her loneliness was a sacrifice she had agreed to. It was all for the greater good. She remembered what her mother always said to her, that anything that belongs to you, you can't run from, and anything that doesn't belong to you, no matter how much you want it, will never be yours. She didn't know if Zhikai belonged to her. She just knew she had Kaixin. Dear little Kaixin, who was blissfully unaware and crawling around on the cool tile.

Her father sneezed, breaking the silence. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his nose.

"Ba, are you sick?"

He shook his head. "Just a little cold."

Xinling's mother placed her hand over his forehead. "You feel warm," she said.

"I'll go buy medicine," Xinling said, getting up from the table. Her parents didn't answer. "I need to go buy groceries. I'll drop off the medicine before I go start lunch."

"Xinling," her father said.

She froze, but she didn't turn around. She figured her father would just tell her politely that he would buy medicine himself, or that she had forgotten something on the table—her wallet, or Kaixin's toy. But what he said surprised her.

"He has to be good to you," he said.

Xinling closed her eyes and inadvertently sniffled, and as she picked up Kaixin she found she had to brush her hair back from her face. She nodded, but she wasn't sure if her father saw. She said, "I know," and wondered if she really did know before her father told her, if she had known this entire year she had spent by herself.

When she turned around again, she had put on a smile. "I'll be back with the medicine soon."

"Be careful," her mother called after her. "Take a car if you need to."

* * *

On her way to the Chinese Herbal medicine store, Xinling regretted not taking a hat before she headed out the door that morning. Sweat poured down both of her temples, and strands of hair stuck against her neck. She adjusted her daughter's thin yellow hat so that the sun wouldn't burn her delicate skin.

"We'll be out of the sun soon," she whispered to Kaixin.

She automatically headed toward the Chinese Herbal medicine store that they had always gone to, only a five-minute walk away from her parents' house. When she saw Hu Le at the counter, she started, almost turning and leaving, but he saw her there and waved, motioning for her to come in. She nodded, and went inside. He smiled at her, and shook Kaixin's hand. Her tiny hand grabbed onto his finger and wouldn't let go.

"Sorry," Xinling said, prying the baby's fingers off.

"No problem," he answered. "She's gotten so big now."

Xinling smiled at her daughter. "She gets bigger every day."

A customer at the other end of the counter needed help, and Hu Le went over to help her. A woman came up beside Xinling and leaned her elbows over the counter. She

looked about Xinling's age, and her son, who looked about eight or nine, with spindly, dark legs stood beside her, staring at Kaixin. He was holding a cup of chilled mung bean soup in his hand, a drink sold frequently on streets during the summer months. Xinling tried to smile at him, but he grabbed onto his mother's blouse. His mother clicked her tongue, and quickly slapped his hand.

"Stay still," she said.

After Hu Le had finished with his customer, and had waved them out the door, he returned over to Xinling.

"Sorry that took so long."

"No," Xinling said, shaking her head.

"How have you been?" he asked.

She shook her head again, looking down at the counter.

"Excuse me, but could I get my medicine now?" the woman beside Xinling asked.

"Sorry, of course," Hu Le answered. "Name?"

"It's for my mother," she answered. "Her name is Yang Jinhua." The woman had now placed her hand under her chin, and she was looking impatiently at Hu Le's back. She slid over closer to Xinling to see what he was pulling out from the long columns of tiny drawers. He used small metal tongs to fish out the different dark green herbs and medicines, which honestly, looked no different to Xinling than the tea leaves she dumped in her cup every morning.

"I need two weeks' supply. I don't have time to pick it up next week," she said. Looking like she was biting on insides of her cheeks, the woman's cheekbones were

prominent and her cheek was pointy and narrow. Xinling thought she knew who listened to whom in her household.

"Mama," her son said, but she shoved his hands back and with a push, the pale green soup spilled on Kaixin's leg and on the side of Xinling's blouse. Xinling yelped, and Kaixin started to cry, and the woman, instead of apologizing, grabbed her son by his shoulders and started to yell at him. He was still holding the empty cup in his hand, and she took from him and chucked it at his head. He started to sniffle, and his shoulders trembled.

"Oh cry, cry," she said. "Just cry all day."

Hu Le had flung the paper containing a pile of medicine on the counter, and was now trying to comfort the crying Kaixin.

"Here, let me take her," he said. Xinling was dripping with soup, and she lifted her daughter over the counter into Hu Le's arms. She took out her handkerchief and began to wipe off her blouse. It felt cool against her skin.

"I'll go find a towel," Hu Le said.

He disappeared with Kaixin into the back. After the woman had successfully made her son cry, she turned back around and clicked her tongue again.

"Is this it?" she asked, staring at the small scattering of dark green dried herbs in the center of a crumpled white piece of paper. "Where did he go?"

Xinling looked over at the woman's sniffling son, who could now barely breathe, his breaths quick and shallow, with tears and snot caught in his throat.

"You didn't need to make him cry. Children spill things all the time."

"Mind your own child," she said. "This child makes a mess everywhere he goes." She dug a finger into his temple, pushing so hard his head turned to the side. The finger left a red mark on the side of his face.

The boy wiped his face with a dirty hand.

Xinling leaned closer to the counter, now aware of how transparent her silk blouse had become, then shrugged. "He's your son. He'll take care of you in your old age."

The woman scoffed. She turned to look at him. "He's his father's son. No flesh and bone of mine."

"He's…"

"Stepson," the woman answered. "Not my child but my responsibility. I'm the one who has to discipline him."

Xinling looked for Hu Le to come back through the door that led to the back. A man finally came through, but he was significantly older and shorter than Hu Le was. He rolled up his sleeves as he approached the counter.

"Is this yours?" he asked Xinling.

She shook her head.

"It's for my mother. Yang Jinhua," the woman answered.

"Oh," he replied. "Yes, we have that prepared. Two weeks' worth, right?" he asked.

He walked over to the drawers against the wall, picked up two packages from the large drawer at the left, and looked at the bottom of the packages for Yang Jinhua's name. They were all wrapped in white paper, and tied with a thin, tan string. He placed the two packages on top of each other on the counter.

He explained, “Now each dose is wrapped separately in the packages, and she just needs to take it after breakfast and din—”

“I remember,” the woman said hurriedly. “Thank you sir,” she said. She slung the two packages from her fingers, and she grabbed the boy’s shoulder and turned him around, nudging him out the door.

“Hu shushu, hello,” Xinling said. “I don’t know if you still remember me. I’m Meng Shihong’s daughter.”

“Yes,” Hu Le’s father said, nodding. But he seemed a bit cold. His hair was thinning and wispy, not yet white yet already with quite a bit of grey. He was wearing a long, navy high collared shirt that went to the ground—the type that all men his age who didn’t work in corporations and academia wore. She supposed that it conveyed a sense of tradition, a classic garment that suited a Chinese Herbal doctor—what was called *zhongyi*—Eastern medicine as opposed to Western medicine.

“He…my father just has a little cold. I wanted to come by and get some medicine for him.”

He nodded again, going to his drawers to prepare another mixture.

“So, you work in the hospital, is that right?”

Xinling nodded, but then realized he couldn’t see her. “Yes, that’s right.”

“You could always get medicine there, probably be easier.”

“My father still only believes in Eastern medicine. It’s the older generation’s beliefs, I suppose,” she replied. Then she shook her head, as she saw Hu Le’s father’s hands freeze for a moment. She paused.

"Of course Eastern medicine doesn't have nearly as many complications. Side effects. With no surgeries and such," she continued. She let out a quiet sigh.

Through the door came Hu Le, with a towel. He scurried over and handed the towel to Xinling, whose thin blouse had become nearly see-through.

"Thank you," she said, wiping the stain with the towel. "It's so warm, I'm sure it'll dry."

Hu Le looked around. "Where did that woman go?"

"She left," his father answered. "Didn't I teach you not to leave the counter? She was so impatient she would have come over and grabbed the medicines herself."

"Sorry, father."

Hu Le's father turned and asked, "Whose child is that?"

"Oh." Hu Le gave Kaixin back to Xinling. "She's Xinling's daughter."

His father answered with a soft release of air, which could have been a quiet scoff. "You know nothing about taking care of children. What would you do if something happened to her?"

Xinling placed Kaixin on the counter, facing her. Kaixin looked over her shoulder at Hu Le's father. Her sniffling had calmed down, but her cheeks were still streaked with tears.

"It was only a moment, father."

Hu Le's father closed the drawers, and taking a piece of string, tied up the package carefully on the counter. "Tell Shihong to drink this for a few days. If he doesn't feel better, tell him to come and see me. I can't tell if I don't feel his heartbeat."

"Thank you, Shushu," Xinling said, bowing her head slightly as she took the package.

"Or you can always take him to the hospital, if it's a real emergency. Does your husband work there too?"

"No," Xinling said quickly. "I will bring him if he gets any worse."

He nodded his head with his back turned.

Hu Le stared at her, and he nodded briefly.

"Father, I should go make sure Xinling gets home safely. It's difficult alone with a baby to carry." Hu Le looked toward his father. Xinling's lips were slightly open, her eyes wide. She picked up Kaixin from the counter, balancing her daughter's legs around her torso.

Hu Le's father waved his hand, and Hu Le rolled up his sleeves, walking over to the other side of the counter.

"Thank you, Hu shushu," Xinling said again, before she left.

* * *

"You still don't know when he's coming back?"

"My mother-in-law didn't say. Soon. I don't know, maybe even tomorrow."

Hu Le furrowed his brows. He was carrying Kaixin. She stared at him wonderingly, sitting in his arms, but seemed comfortable, or at least not uncomfortable. Xinling thought about how the three of them looked together, walking side by side on the street. The pack of medicine was slung from her left hand. Her purse was hanging off her other shoulder, and she bent her arm around so her right hand grabbed onto the sling of her purse. Even though both of her hands were full, her arms felt strangely light

without the weight of her daughter. She had been happy, of course, that her daughter had steadily gained more and more weight, and was pale and plump, with hardly any yellow undertones in her baby skin, but her arms didn't take to her daughter's weight gain as kindly. But too soon, her daughter would walk, and she would take her hand everywhere she would go. They would walk slowly and she would point everything out to her daughter. What each building was, what each tree was. But lately, these imaginings only involved the two of them. Just mother and daughter.

When they reached the bottom of Xinling's parents' home, Hu Le stopped to hand Kaixin back to her mother. Slinging the pack of medicine across her wrist and to her elbow, Xinling balanced all of her packages in her two, thin arms.

"Thank you," she said. "You won't come in for some tea?"

"No," Hu Le answered, shaking his head. "I should head back."

Xinling nodded, pressing her lips together.

He reached his hand out and brushed the back of his finger against Kaixin's cheek. She nestled her head against Xinling's neck. Hu Le smiled, blinking slowly.

* * *

After she dropped off the medicine at her parents', Xinling borrowed a basket and set out to buy what she would cook for lunch, and dinner, and what she would cook on Sunday to feed herself, her daughter, and Hualun. If it was autumn, she would have only cooked once that weekend, but food wouldn't keep while it was so hot, and flies inevitably still followed her into her apartment. Flies and mosquitoes.

Her head hurt when she thought so long and hard about what she would cook each day, how to change the routine of what she ate every day. But after a while, she just

cooked what was easiest and what would last the longest. She gave up on hot dishes that weren't at all appetizing for her, and just bought more raw vegetables, like cucumber and tomatoes she could just slice up and add salt or sugar to. She made more soups. All they ate were soups recently. At each successive meal, she could simply add some more fresh vegetables and hot water.

She wondered if Hualun would have thought to have rice cooked before she returned, or if she would assume she would eat at her parents'. Xinling wondered how Hualun ate when she wasn't there.

To unlock the door, she set the basket of groceries on the ground. When the outside steel door and the inside wooden door were both unlocked, she picked up the basket once more and nudged the inside door open with her back. She turned around, swinging the basket in front of her. At the far wall between the kitchen and the bedroom, sitting at the table across from each other were Hualun and Zhikai. Xinling froze, setting down the basket limply on the ground again. She cocked her head to the side, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted.

"You're back," Hualun said. She walked over to Xinling and picked up the basket to take into the kitchen. Her feet made soft clacking sounds against the concrete floor. Xinling expertly slipped off her shoes while still holding Kaixin and stepped into her slippers.

Zhikai had stood up by this point, and now walked over to her. Xinling didn't say anything, but looked at Kaixin, who was now staring at Zhikai. He stared back at her, and Xinling could see the corner of his mouth twitch slightly, as though he wasn't sure

whether he should try smiling at his daughter or not. Kaixin looked at him for a little while, then turned away from him, wrapping her plump arms around Xinling's neck.

"I named her Yuan Kaixin," Xinling said finally. "I didn't look up many characters or anything, but…"

"It's fine. We can always pick out another name before she enrolls in school."

Xinling stopped. She lowered her chin, then lifted it a moment later.

"You should hold her," she said softly.

Zhikai reached over to take Kaixin, holding her facing away from him, his arms below the back of her knees and around her chest. It didn't take long for Kaixin to nearly squirm out of his arms, and she was returned back to Xinling. She didn't try to explain how to properly hold a child.

"Did you just get in?" she asked.

"Yes, I took the train in this morning."

She nodded. "Was the train crowded?" The trains were always crowded.

"It was fine."

She nodded again. She walked automatically toward her room to put her daughter down. Zhikai followed her quietly. Her curtains were open so the far half of her room was bright, while the tall, dark dresser beside her bed made the other half seem dark. She placed Kaixin in her crib and she walked over and sat down silently on her bed. The sheets were pulled tight and smooth against the mattress. The embroidery on her pillowcase was turned over on the other side so the rough thread wouldn't leave marks on her face. She stared to the side, sitting with one leg stretched out and the other bent, anchoring her to the ground. She bit the inside of her mouth, at first gently, then harder.

Her jaw was tightening, and she could feel her eyes closing and then her lips trembling. She bent her face forward toward her knees and her hands rose up, but she didn't bury her face in her hands but stood up and looked at Zhikai full on in the face for the first time since she walked in the door. Then she threw her fists against his chest, against his shoulders, her face contorted so all of her features scrunched toward the center of her face and tears and breathless sobs escaping between her mutters of "You bastard, you bastard" and "You stupid, hateful bastard." Her mutters escalated into curses quickly, and all she wanted to do was to hit his face, push it away, the man who had left her and her daughter, acted like he had no wife and no child and run away.

"You traitor," she blurted, sobbing. Her louder sobs quickly muffled any words that could possibly come clearly out of her mouth and she stood there gasping, her head falling against Zhikai's chest, with his hands holding her arms up against his shoulders. There they stood for what seemed like a long time, her breaths quick and loud, like her airways were narrowed, her eyes were so blurred with tears that she could barely see anything. She tried to scream, but sound barely came out even though she felt like she was using so much strength. She quickly wondered if the door was closed, and then was horrified, wondering if Hualun had witnessed this whole exchange. Her tense arms slid down slowly, and she lifted her face up to face the door. Zhikai had thought to close it behind him. He always remembered to do little things like that—to avoid embarrassment, to save face. Her face was now red and swollen, her lips a deep, raw red, and she had to look away from him because she couldn't stand the way he was looking at her. There was no sorrow or resignation at all, she thought, just a tinge of pity mixed with a bit of

annoyance. She was always overdramatic. Always gave him ultimatums. Was always the one that talked about ending everything when that was what she was most afraid of.

She forced herself to look back at him, if only to stare him down, to make him have to look away first. She noticed his worried eyes, his eyebrows low and the little raised creases right above his nose. He looked like he was out of breath too, from holding back her fists, and she realized that he looked puzzled, as though he didn't know how to react. Different from how he usually reacted whenever they fought, different from the way his face grew cold, his chin lifted high and his nostrils flaring, like his emotions were completely controlled and shut off, and anything she could say, any fits of hysteria and tears were met with stone, hard coldness. But this time, puzzlement showed on his face, and maybe even a little bit of fear, of vulnerability. Or maybe she was imagining it. A knock made them both jerk their heads toward the door, and Hualun opened it and stuck her head in, calling them for lunch like children. Xinling quickly wiped her cheeks dry, patting them briefly. She sniffled, avoiding Zhikai's gaze even though she felt it heavily upon her.

"I'm going to wash up before lunch," she said.

Sherry Anhui, 1987 – 2008

Chapter Ten: The Ones Who Leave

In the summer of 2008, a fortune teller told me that I would live to the ripe old age of 91. He was a monk, or a lama of some sort. He had a shiny, bald head stuck low on his neck, auburn robes draped around him, and small eyes that seemed half-closed and never looked me straight in the eye. My aunt paid 10 yuan because the sign outside said that he could tell one's birthday just by looking at someone's face. *How was that possible?* Turns out it wasn't, because he never said anything about birthdays. We were on vacation in Beidaihe, a seaside town, and it was the first time I saw a grey ocean.

He said that out of the three women in the room at the time—my second aunt, my cousin Han Yi, and myself—that I would have the best life. But he was clear about saying that my "best" life would not because I was particularly talented at anything, or even that I would be particularly happy, but simply that I would live a very long time. To prove to me that 91 was not a random number, he had me pick numbered wooden sticks out of a can. I picked 91. I didn't think to check if all of the sticks were numbered 91. He later told me that I would score a husband I could depend on, thus further contributing to my "best life." The character for depend and wait/pine for sound the same—*wang*—with the tone slanted downward, so I misinterpreted, exclaiming an "Aw, crap." He looked puzzled, until my aunt nudged me and said, No, that was a good thing. Oh.

My paternal grandfather, YeYe, is 91 the year I am 21. My paternal grandmother, NaiNai, is 81. By the time my grandmother was the age I was that summer, she already had three kids—a girl, and twin boys. YeYe worked as the head of surgery, NaiNai as

the head nurse. NaiNai often contradicts herself as she gives me her suggestions regarding how I should live my life—especially concerning love. She criticizes her younger sister, because all of her grandchildren are "planning their lives around their significant other" and "children should think about their education before starting a family", yet I can't help but think that my grandmother's grandchildren have all done the same thing as her sister's, and even earlier than my great-aunt's. NaiNai tells me to pick someone older than me to marry, because he will take care of me. She tells me I am young and that I have the opportunity to go to school and take care of myself, yet warns me that if I wait too long all I will have to choose from are second-hand goods, i.e. the dreaded divorcee, likely with a kid, and an angry ex-wife to boot, or the too old balding type. "Do you want to be a *step*-mother?" she asks. "None of our family's children are divorcees," she says.

Even though the apartment where my grandparents live in 2008 is different from the house in the mountain village where I grew up, and also different from the house they lived in before I was born, when my parents first got married, remnants from 20 plus years remain. An ashtray shaped like a swan sits on a new coffee table. No one in my family smokes, at least no one dares in front of my grandmother, so that ashtray has remained unsullied by any ash, but holds the same pack of cigarettes my grandmother must have bought decades ago, just in case they ever entertained guests who smoked. My mother tells me how she bought the ashtray before she was married, and was scolded by grandmother for it. "Why would anyone need such an elaborate ashtray?" she asked. But NaiNai kept it for herself, and that ashtray belonged to her after that.

When I came to America at the age of three, I left behind a few of the things my parents bought me. There was an umbrella with a different color in each panel with a stencil of bamboo on the white panel my dad had bought for me from Shanghai. It was broken but it stayed in the cabinet of the guest room on the second floor that always held the two chairs decorated with a silky red fabric with gold embroidery that had been prepared for my parents' marriage. In the cabinet also were a little blue bag I took with me the two weeks of preschool I attended while in China and a stuffed panda, whose fur used to be white and black I'm sure at some point in time, but quickly turned to grey and brown.

The thought of taking these things with me back to the States the summer I was 10 and stayed in China the entire three months never crossed my mind. Mainly, because to me, these things belonged here. And in my naiveté, I thought that they would always be there, waiting for me, never withering in physical or spiritual form, even though they smelled musty and were wrinkly and falling apart.

My grandmother came to pick me up from Hefei one time that summer I was ten, after I spent a few weeks with my PoPo and my little cousins. At the train station, we met my YeYe's only surviving sister—a half-sister who his father had had with his fourth wife after my YeYe's mother, his second wife, had died in childbirth. The fourth wife happened to be his dead second wife's maid. This great-aunt, the youngest daughter of the fourth wife, looked nothing like my grandfather because she looked just like her own mother. When my grandfather showed me the picture of his father with his "new family"—his new wife (the former maid), and the three daughters she bore—I couldn't

help but think that this new wife looked comically like a large pig. I remember thinking that my great-grandmother was surely much more beautiful than her.

My great-aunt, sitting in one of the orange, plastic chairs in the train station that had no air conditioning, smiled at me in that polite but impersonal way. I knew my grandmother didn't like her, said that she didn't act her age and looked manly. I met her granddaughter, Hao Hao, who was wearing a less-than-neat green and white dress and sporting a mushroom haircut. In her hand, she was gripping my broken umbrella with the bamboo stencil.

At first I thought she just had the same umbrella—it seemed like a popular umbrella that most Chinese children would have, but then I saw that it was broken in the same place.

"Where did you get that umbrella?" I asked, a little bit accusingly, a little bit rudely.

"Oh, Great-Aunt gave it to me."

I glared at my grandmother. She seemed surprised when she caught my glance, turning her head back quickly to face my great-aunt. To her my anger was unprovoked and strange. She had no idea why I would be angry with her.

Poor Hao Hao tried to talk to me some more—she was only a year or two younger than me and I think she wanted to make friends, but she kept her hand tightly around the umbrella handle, so I ignored her. I wouldn't even look at her. I didn't consider asking for it back, because that would have been embarrassing, although it's likely the umbrella was chucked by her grandmother before they even boarded the train. They were always so crowded.

The hour-and-a-half train ride from Hefei to Huainan was tense, after we boarded our train and left my great-aunt and her granddaughter still waiting at the train station—me sulking by the window, my foot propped up against the base of the narrow table built into the little booths lining both sides of the train cars. Above us were long parallel poles passengers could place their luggage, though they often fell off dangerously whenever the train shook too much. NaiNai said that girls shouldn't prop their legs up, and then scolded me for not wearing socks with my sandals, that feet should be covered at all times or I would catch cold.

I told her, "You had no right to gift my things to someone else." She seemed surprised at this sudden outburst, perhaps expecting that I retort with something about liking bare feet. "You have no respect for someone's property and no respect for me," I continued. I become overly brave when I am angry.

"You're supposed to respect me," she said slowly, pronouncing each character clearly, in the patronizing way that I hated. "And the day when I need your advice and criticism will be the day after I die."

I said, "I'll remember that."

She muttered something about children growing up in America having no discipline and no respect for their elders that I couldn't quite catch.

"You're not supposed to say I'm from America in public," I said, cutting her off. My parents worried about ransom, since most people in China at this time assumed that everyone in America was profoundly wealthy. She stopped speaking, then asked rhetorically, "What would you ever need a broken umbrella for?"

"What would Hao Hao do with a broken umbrella?" I retorted. She didn't have an answer. "My dad bought me that umbrella. It wouldn't mean anything to anyone but me."

Whenever my mother talks about the years she lived with my grandmother, the conversations she describes resemble the conversation (can it be called a conversation?) I had with my grandmother on the train. Mother says that the only time she was ever happy was at night, after her day of work at the hospital, after dinner was cooked and the dishes were washed and she had given me my bath and had hers and it was only the two of us in the second floor room. She says that was when she taught me how to talk, taught me nursery rhymes and told me stories. That was when she said she would place both of my feet in the palm of her hand and watch me until I fell asleep.

My parents married the year my father began his PhD in Physiology in Shanghai, and he continued up until a year after my birth. Because of the Cultural Revolution, everyone's education was delayed, or in some cases completely abandoned. My father was among the first class of students eligible for college—the entering class of '78, when he was 24. My parents met at the Huainan Hospital where they were both working, and where all three of us were born. While my mother was pregnant with me, YeYe and NaiNai moved from a house close to the Huainan Hospital to a village halfway up a mountain called the East Mountain Village, where many of their old friends had retired. There, my grandmother looked forward to fresh air and planting vegetables. My grandfather bought a plum tree for her, one with yellow blossoms that would bloom in winter, filling the entire front courtyard with the sweet fragrance. My grandmother was

named after the plum blossom, being born in winter and having the last name “Huang”, meaning “yellow.”

My mother told me that NaiNai never wanted my mother to move with them. She didn’t want to either. She told my father that she would stay in the dormitories in the hospital. He asked her how she would manage—seven months pregnant, with her asthma and heart problems acting up so much. How would she manage a move in her condition? she asked. He said that at least if she moved with his parents, she would have someone to take care of her, who would at least be there if she needed help.

It wasn’t something strange for my mother to live with her mother-in-law. My father made barely enough to afford his tiny apartment he shared with two classmates in Shanghai. He lived on porridge and pickled vegetables and steamed buns most days. At least street food was (and still is) inexpensive. My mother’s salary alone would have made supporting a child difficult, and furthermore, it would have been unorthodox for a married woman to live with her own parents, or out on her own. Mainly because people would have talked, would have assumed their marriage was on the rocks, or that they were practically divorced, or that at the very least my grandmother didn’t approve of my mother. For all of these reasons, my pregnant mother lived with her mother-in-law. That doesn’t mean she didn’t escape frequently to her friend’s home for a night here or there, or insist on visiting her parents in Hefei or even getting on the train to Shanghai to see my father.

My mother said that she basically didn’t eat for the first few months of her pregnancy—the only thing she could keep down was watermelon, so all she ate that summer was tons and tons of warm watermelon. She tells me about the moment she got

her appetite back after her morning sickness. She was in Shanghai to visit my father, and after not seeing her for almost two months, my father was worried about the weight that my mother had lost instead of gained. Her hollowed cheeks were even more hollow than usual, her already thin hair had thinned out at her part and her temples, and she put her hair in rollers to give the illusion that her hair was thicker than it actually was. The morning my mother was supposed to go back to Huainan after her Shanghai visit, my dad decided to accompany her back. He got up that morning and whipped a lunch together—a specialty of his: a stewed dish of soy sauce, brown sugar, star anise, soft-boiled egg, and pork. He packed the dish with some rice in two boxes and they carried them onto the train. My dad started eating on the train where they sat across from each other, but because they bought their tickets late, they sat close to the aisle and so couldn't reach the small table in between each of the little booths with the army green leather seats. My dad balanced his lunch on his lap.

It was the smell of the dish—the tangy saltiness of the soy sauce, the faint, hearty sweetness of the brown sugar, and the melding of the egg and the pork that made my mother regain her appetite. My dad said that he had never seen my mother eat anything so happily. When the train stopped in Huainan, my father immediately bought a ticket that would take him back to Shanghai—he had to work the next day, and besides, my grandmother would have scolded him for putting his personal life ahead of his career. My mother understood, NaiNai would say. At least she should.

Little more than a month later, my mother fell sick. A telegram (it was still the fastest and easiest way to communicate something urgent at the time) was sent to my father in Shanghai and he rushed back, likely expecting to face a miscarriage. An asthma

attack coupled with a rapid heartbeat had caused my mother to faint, and there was abnormal bleeding.

When my mother fell sick, the sneers from my grandmother intensified. How she could carry a child when she couldn't even take care of herself? How irresponsible was it to get pregnant when her health wasn't good enough? She was too old to be a mother (she was 29). Didn't she know that it was dangerous to be an older mother, that it was bad for the baby and the mother? That there was more chance that something could be wrong with the baby.

So many things are described in four characters, as a ways to condense and poeticize. *Xin zai le huo* was how my mother always described my grandmother. As though she was happy when something bad happened to someone else. The four characters are like the checks on a picnic blanket—*xin* (lucky), *zai* (disaster), *le* (happy), *huo* (calamity). Good bad good bad. Delighting in someone else's misfortune.

NaiNai was always gracious when there was company. If there was company my grandmother would encourage my mother to eat more, to eat more meat and protein so she would have more energy. She wasn't gaining as much weight as she should. She would clamp pieces of meat into my mother's bowl with her chopsticks, purposefully reaching way across the table. My mother hated the falseness of her generosity. Maybe it wouldn't have bothered her as much if her stinginess was at least consistent. After the guest left, things would be back to normal. NaiNai would bring out one leftover dish at a time and wouldn't bring out another one until the first one was completely eaten. Sometimes she would drink the oily residue that stuck to the sides of the bowls.

After my mother came to the States when I was two, NaiNai encouraged her to have another child. Of course, talk of her health issues during her last pregnancy was now forgotten, but now my mother was in a country where she could have more than one child, and moreover that child would be born an American citizen. They could stay regardless of whether my father could find a secure job. NaiNai even offered to take care of me for longer if my mother decided to have another child.

My mother said she was too busy and they were too poor and she was too unhappy to even think about having another child, especially while they lived in a dingy, two-bedroom apartment they shared with a man who liked cooking in nothing but his tighty-whiteys, singing old Cantonese songs off-key. My mother and father slept on a second-hand twin bed with a mysterious stain in the middle of the mattress that they then turned over. For their fifteenth wedding anniversary, my mother bought a new bed—complete with a new mattress, new headboard, new sheets, everything. She said that ever since she had married my father she had only ever slept on someone else's bed, and that all she wanted was to sleep on a bed she knew no one else had ever slept on.

I don't remember my mother leaving for America except from what she has told me, and sometimes my imaginings are vivid enough, or her stories are retold often enough, that they almost seem like true memories. She said that she asked me several times, teasingly or jokingly of course, if I wanted to come to America with her. She said that the answer was always no, which made her wonder, even when I was little more than a year old, if maybe I did understand how far away America was from China. In the 1980s, a letter took nearly a month to make the trip, and a ten minute trans-Atlantic phone call would cost my mother nearly her entire month's salary.

I know that I kept a picture of my mother under my pillow, and that I would nap cuddling with a towel. That it took my grandmother nearly an hour to get me to take a nap. That when I woke up, I always had a tantrum, and then she would let me sit on the bed and stuff myself with crackers until I stopped crying. She kept a large tin of crackers next to my bed for that express purpose. When I wouldn't eat the dry, hard-boiled egg in the morning, she would slap me, and stuff a bottle of milk in my mouth to stifle my sobs. All the eating I remember doing when I lived with her was while crying, which might explain why I hated mealtimes for so many years after that.

Sometimes when my mother is upset she plays the "what-if" game. What if we never came to the States, maybe we would be in Shanghai, speak the Shanghainese that I have always had such a hard time understanding. My father would be a professor in the medical college and she would be a doctor. We would live in a condo in a high building, and be used to the humid, seaside climate instead of the dry, grassy plains. Maybe if we had stayed, my dad wouldn't have had so much pressure, and he never would have gotten sick. If my grandmother hadn't been so opposed to their having children when they first got married, saying that they had no business having a child before my father was finished with school, maybe their child would have been three years older, and more able to take care of himself earlier than I could. Maybe their child would have been a boy—some people say that if you have children later in life there's a bigger chance that your first child will be a girl. Urban legends or a poll from too small a population to really have any merit or credibility perhaps, but maybe things would have been different. The thing about "what-if" situations is that people only think that things could have been

better, and never worse. It's a game you always lose. What you have is always worse than whatever you could have had, which is never nothing.

The true story is this. I was the girl instead of the boy everyone hoped for. My mother didn't have any more children. And even though I have tried for over twenty years, I can't say honestly that I love my grandmother. Because I know that whatever I do, my very existence as a girl is reason enough for my grandmother not to love me. Her definition for a best life is very likely the same as that of the monk, who I can assume is paid to tell people what he thinks they want to hear. He looked at me on that summer day, tired from the heat and too much walking, still too young to be married but old enough to think about such things, and told me that I would have longevity and a husband who wouldn't leave me. That should be enough.

That should be enough.

Sherry Omaha, 2009

Chapter Eleven: Beyond Blue

Maybe everyone leads two lives. The what-ifs are the dream life—the escape from real life. For a while during college, a few friends tried to see if we could manage lucid dreaming, controlling what would happen in our dreams consciously while we were mostly unconscious. Controlling where we were and who we encountered, what happened and when we would awake. What I imagine is that Xinling could always do that with Hu Le. At the times she couldn't swallow that this was the life she chose, Hu Le was her fallback. As she remembered him she could think of him as a true option at the time. He came to her with a dream of an offer. He would marry her and take care of her, and promised that he would love her daughter as his own. Xinling would have never asked if he would have wanted a child of his own, if there would be similar pressure on her to bear a son to him. She had no idea if Zhikai would have been in her daughter's life, or if she ever would see Hualun again.

All of those were the realistic questions she must have asked herself while she pondered over her decision, if it was a difficult decision at all, if she didn't just completely dismiss his offer as a moment of madness and impulsiveness. He hadn't thought it through at all, was just drunk off his own feelings. She convinced herself that realistically, they would have been miserable, that the short-lived rush of having the world against them—their families, their friends, their colleagues, the gossip and whispers behind their backs—would wear off, and then they would just be left with each

other, stuck in an unfortunate situation that could have been avoided, had someone just been less romantic, and more clear-headed.

She stayed with her husband, because she loved him best, and she always wanted what was difficult to keep. That was what she told my mother. She said that there were tons of men after her, who came from good families, who were better-looking, who showered her and her family with gifts and politeness, yet the only one she loved was Zhikai, who after a bit of coyness from her turned away and didn't look back, until she ran after him. She only wanted the one she ran after, not the ones who ran after her.

Wasn't it her own fault if she wasn't happy? It was her own choice to marry him, to stay with him, to follow him to the States when her daughter was six, leaving her behind with the child's maternal grandmother until she was eight, when she was brought over. Wasn't it her own fault she fought with her husband often over the years? Oftentimes she ended up sleeping in her daughter's room after she went away to college. She remembered spending an entire afternoon standing on a small ladder in her daughter's room, sticking those glow-in-the-dark stars up on the ceiling. On nights after she had fights with her husband she would lay on her daughter's bed on her back and stare up at those stars, at first wondering how her daughter could possibly sleep with such light, only realizing later that the stars' light would fade gradually through the night. By early morning, the stars didn't glow at all.

Often her husband would leave again, taking a job here and there for a year, and she would sit in her big, empty house with the flowered wallpaper and the fake flowers and ferns in vases and baskets in every corner. I was always amazed and slightly alarmed by the amount of fake flora and fauna at her house. Sometimes she would water her

plants while she had us over, occasionally dumping water into a fake potted plant, the water seeping through the cracks and into her carpet. She said she didn't like having empty corners, empty walls. She said it felt more welcoming when there weren't any bare areas—like every place was accounted for.

She was proud of this house she and her husband bought together, bought soon after their 25th wedding anniversary and two years after their daughter had finally graduated from college and had found a job out in California. They painted the inside of the house top to bottom on their own, even though the house didn't really need it. Her husband insisted, said it would really be their house then. They sealed the grout between the kitchen and bathroom tiles, re-stained their dinette set. It was the house they planned to grow old in. She lived for a year in that house alone while her husband went South for a job. At the end of the year, he told her they were moving down there and their house would have to be sold. She cried when she heard; she didn't think she'd ever have to move again. She told my mother that she hadn't lived enough in this house yet, that she wasn't ready to say goodbye, wasn't ready to move away from this place she had made so many friends and start over.

"I'm a fifty-year-old woman," she said. "The prospect of trying to make new friends seems so daunting." My mom tried to comfort her over cups of tea and dried dates, but she was inconsolable.

Xinling's daughter is grown up now, and only visits China for the shopping, the sightseeing, and the food. She drops in to see her maternal grandparents and uncle, but hasn't seen her father's mother since her maternal grandmother took her to see her shortly before she came to the States when she was eight. Xinling hasn't visited Hualun since

then either. She knew she was still alive—she had the most rock-hard constitution of any woman she ever knew—but she had grown old after all, but she still insisted on living on her own out there on her farm. Stubborn still, maybe stubbornness was one of the only things that didn't fade with time. Her husband went to visit his mother for a few days every time he returned to China, always alone. The three of them—her daughter, her husband, herself—now visited China at different times. It only made sense. Otherwise, all the time they would share would be the plane ride to and from.

It wasn't like a family at all, my mother insisted to me. "No matter how bad your grandmother's and my relationship is, we at least maintain a politeness." My mother still calls her "Ma" and brings her small gifts when she visits with my father, still cooks for her and fetches her things. "Because she's old," my mother says. "She still deserves respect." She continues, "Sometimes it's not worth talking about, because what would it solve? Americans are so obsessed with talking about everything. They lie too. They pretend too. They're no different than us."

My mother gave up her dreams of being a surgeon when she came to the States. Her hands, small and adept at intricate procedures, were used for years doing nothing but bringing plates and hot beverages to diners at various Chinese restaurants. Never mind her medical degree. She came to support her husband's American dream. That was how she first met Xinling, while they were working alongside each other, catching the latest bus home, counting tips and rubbing their sore necks.

My mother says she is blue, and that I should be violet. "Like bruises?" I ask flippantly. She shakes her head. "Violet is beyond blue," she explains patiently. "Is

bluer than blue, even though it comes from blue. All I want for you is to be better than me."

And I suppose that is what every loving mother wants for her daughter, for her to live a better life. She tells me to make my own money, be less shy, never be afraid, never marry a short man or a bald man, always be able to let go of things, because certain events, especially the best things in life, are determined by fate. Everything from the pair of beautiful shoes she'd had her eye on for month, conveniently 80% off in her size, to the speeding car that hit me but didn't kill me, to my father surviving four strokes. "If you live through something horrible, only good things can follow. Everything is in balance. Eventually."

TaiTai said that a woman's cooking skills always skipped a generation. She told my mother, "My cooking is too good, so that's why your mother's cooking is so horrible," in a whisper and a chuckle. My grandmother burns everything, even egg fried rice, possibly the most basic and easiest dish to cook in Chinese cooking. "Strength may skip a generation too," my mother said. "If a mother is too strong, there's no reason for her daughter to be. Everything is a reaction to something else."

"You're strong," I said.

She shook her head. "I'm strong because I had to be. I wasn't born that way."

"I don't know if I'm strong."

"I should have made you stronger," she said. She paused, meditative.

"You'll be stronger than I am," she said. "I was forced to be. I wasn't strong enough, so you'll grow stronger." She patted my head, running her hand over my hair. "But just enough." She added thoughtfully, "You're still a woman after all."