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My Cousin

Zhang Lijia

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My cousin died in Nanjing shortly before his 56th birthday this September, killed by multiple myeloma, a rare and nasty form of blood cancer.

He was a good and honest man. "Why? Don’t people say ‘a good person stays well?’” My mother kept quoting the popular Chinese saying. “He was so young and so healthy.” My mother, who probably felt closer to him than to her own son, couldn’t comprehend or accept what had happened. Nor could his wife, his daughter, or his siblings.

It happened all too quickly. At the end of May, he first complained about pain in his arms and then shoulders. Since he was a driver, everyone presumed this was due to the driver’s usual problem of tense shoulders. One hospital suggested massage. But the pain intensified. By mid-June, he was hospitalized. Tests suggested something serious, possibly spinal cord cancer. He was then sent to Long March Hospital in Shanghai, which specialized in bone-related diseases. A famous doctor did operate on him, and my cousin did put up a brave fight. Still he lost: the survival rate of such cancer is extremely low, at least in China at the present. The fact that the tumor grew high up on the spine didn’t help his case either.

My cousin was called Ji Weiping—maintaining peace; he was born in 1954, shortly after the Korean War. When he was three, his mother (my father’s sister) brought him from Jinan, in Shandong province, to live with his grandmother in Nanjing. Grandma Zhang—as we used to call her, to differentiate from our own loving grandma Nai—demanded that each of her two daughters lend her a child, supposedly to keep her company, but also to make sure that her children would send her monthly payments. Described in my memoir as Granny Long Tits, Grandma Zhang was a big spender and a fierce woman. Towards the end of the month when money had run out, her household sometimes had to rely on a neighbor’s charity. Weiping’s mother, battling mental illness, didn’t pay him much attention, either.

Weiping nevertheless turned out to be a sweet and well-behaved child. He was very handsome, too, with broad shoulders and a pair of large, bright eyes. He wasn’t good with his studies, and his illiterate grandma, needless to say, couldn’t help. But he was smart in his own way. In spring time, I sometimes followed him and others to the city wall to fly kites, made from rice paper and fine bamboo and stuck together with sticky rice. His kites were often the best. Weiping even taught himself carpentry and made furniture for his wedding.

Since he was the only relative our family had in Nanjing, my mother relied on him heavily, especially since my father worked outside Nanjing. Weiping was often called on to help with handiwork at our home.

Weiping never held great ambitions. All his working life, he served contentedly as a driver—a good, reliable one who never had an accident. All Weiping really wanted was a happy family. His first wife was a girl from the neighborhood. They have a smart and lovely daughter named Candy. However, after a long affair with a married businessman, his wife dumped him, leaving Weiping devastated.

Often hanging out with driven and ego-filled men, I personally find my cousin—a kind-hearted, simple, and honest working man—a breath of fresh air. In today’s increasingly materialistic, money-driven, success-driven world, few would probably regard Weiping a hero and his kindness could be taken as a sign of weakness or stupidity. Indeed, some would describe him as "dai," a Nanjing slang, referring to someone a little silly or square, since Weiping refused to cut corners and insisted on putting other people’s interest before his own. Around his death bed, Chen Zhihua, his colleague and best friend, told a story to illustrate Weiping’s "dai"-ness. One winter night years ago, Chen caught Weiping emptying a chamber pot—a job most men regard as beneath them—for his terminally ill mother-in-law, while his wife was out playing mahjong and screwing her businessman lover. Outraged, Chen
disclosed the open secret. Weiping was probably aware of the affair already. He put up with it for years because he wanted to give his daughter the warmth of a family he didn't enjoy as a child.

In 2003, having stayed single for seven years, he was introduced to an attractive and successful civil engineer named Chen Suqiu from Jinan. She fell for his kind and caring nature. They got married one year later but commuted between Jinan and Nanjing. The love between them grew, and one year ago she retired early to be with Weiping in Nanjing. They renovated their flat and bought new furniture. Weiping was enjoying the time of his life when tragedy struck. Upon hearing the severity of his illness, Chen Suqiu burst into tears and said: “The heaven above just can’t bear to see us so happy together.”

In mid-July, while in Shanghai for a lecture, I visited Weiping at Long March Hospital, with my two daughters May and Kirsty and the largest bouquet I could find. He lay stiffly on the bed, no longer able to move his legs. He had lost a little bit of weight, but was still a fine-looking man in his prime. His head had just been shaved, in preparing for the next day’s operation to remove the tumor in his spine, which compressed the nerves and led to the paralysis of his legs and caused unbearable pain, which no painkiller could cure. The operation was a gamble: at best, it would only prolong Weiping’s life, and he could easily die from such a major operation. And it cost 20,000 yuan. To save his life and to spare him further suffering, his family was willing to spend any amount of money and to take the gamble. He was surrounded by his wife, daughter, brother, and sister, who had rushed down to Shanghai from Jinan.

To cheer Weiping up, I asked my Euro-Asian girls to sing him songs. He listened carefully to the sweet singing, his right hand moving to beat time and his face looking peaceful as if being momentarily relieved from the pain. When they finished singing, he said in English with strong Nanjing accent: “Thank you very much,” which made everyone laugh. That turned out to be one of the few light moments Weiping enjoyed in the last months of his life.

It was so hard to imagine that he had actually walked to the ward himself only a week earlier. To save money, the family had taken public transportation to the hospital. In the metro, his daughter Candy had accidentally dropped the pigeon soup she had cooked for him. Although in great pain, Weiping immediately squatted down to wipe the pigeon soup off the train because he worried that people might tread on the soup and fall over. He always thought about others, even then.

Weiping survived the operation, but the cancer had spread. He was transferred back to Nanjing where my well-connected sister found him the best hospital and best doctor. He endured chemotherapy and more operations. But the nasty cancer continued to disable more parts of his body and made it harder and harder for him to breathe. His family, relatives, friends, and colleagues took turns to take meticulous care of him, often on duty at night. If Weiping didn’t feel well-loved as a child, he must have felt so in his last days. To me, that was the ultimate success.

I wish him rest well in heaven.

Zhang Lijia is author of “Socialism is Great! A Worker’s Memoir of the New China”. Read her China Beat interview with Nicole Barnes here.