



ROOTED IN GRACE

A Memoir of Two Rivers and Three Trees

WEIMING ZHANG

In April 1993 I was told I had blood cancer.
I was thirty five. My younger son was six months old,
my older son was eight.

My first thought was not for myself. It was that
the children needed to sleep, and I had to see to them.

In October 2000 the doctors said the remission
would not last six months.

On the third of January 2001 I recorded a message
for each of my sons, because I was afraid
they would not remember their mother.

On the tenth I was given a stranger's cells.

On the eighth day the new marrow began to grow.
I have called it the eighth day of rising from the dead
ever since.

Later I watched my younger son graduate from West Point,
and I watched my grandson turn five,
which was the age I had once not dared to hope for.

The bitter days, we lived them sweet.

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First edition

Set in Georgia.

For my two sons, and for the people who kept me alive.

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10

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East of the River: Where I Come From



All my life I have kept the record of other people's families.

The Zhangs, the Chens; the generation above, the generation below. What year, what place, which photograph, who is standing third from the left, what somebody happened to be wearing that day: the things everyone else forgets the moment they turn around, I have gathered up one by one, put in order, and made into album after album. People ask me what I get out of it. I cannot really say. Probably it is because people scatter, photographs go yellow, the days get rinsed away until nothing of them is left, and only words set down on paper will stay on with us and refuse to go.

So if you want to know where I come from, I will not begin with myself. I will begin with a photograph.



Photo: Nineteen sixty-three, my parents' family portrait. In those days having your picture taken was a serious business. You changed your clothes, you combed your hair, the whole family sat down in a neat row, held its breath, and waited for the one word, "Done." I was five or six that year, sitting in the middle, my eyes open very wide.



My father

My father was called Zhang Guofeng, from Gaomi in Shandong province, born on the eighth of March, 1929.

Gaomi is a place that produces people. Yan Ying, the great minister of the Spring and Autumn period; Zheng Xuan, the classical scholar of the Eastern Han; Liu Yong, the grand secretary of the Qing; and later Mo Yan, who won the Nobel Prize for literature. All of them walked out of that stretch of the Jiaolai plain. My father did not. My father was driven off it.

He lost his father in infancy, lost his mother in childhood, and afterward lived with his uncle.

That single line is the exact wording I put in the album, and when I wrote it I did not add one adjective, and I do not want to add one now. A child loses his father, then loses his mother, then goes on growing up beside an uncle until he is grown. Everything that needs saying is already inside it. One word more and it would only be us, the children, weeping on his behalf. He never wept for himself. He enlisted young, went south with the army, and walked the whole way to Guizhou.

"Going south" in those years did not mean moving house once. It meant a few thousand li. It meant going and not turning back. It meant leaving your accent, your soil and water, and your ancestors' graves behind you. My father's lot were carried like that by an army, lifted out of the north and set down in the south, set down in this place ringed on four sides by mountains where it rains more than half the year, and there they stopped. That is how he walked himself out of being a Shandong man and into being a Guizhou man; how a man with no home walked himself into having one.

A person who had no home as a child is the person who wants one most. That he later ruled his household so absolutely, defended his own so fiercely, insisted on gathering the whole family around one table to eat: I think all of it came from there.



Photo: My father when he was young. One pen, one desk, sitting bolt upright. That is how he did everything for the whole of his life, so serious about it that it went a little past serious.

My father was upright in character, warm toward people, capable and quick-handed, conscientious in his work, but quick in temper.

How quick? Quick enough that we children, hearing that step of his on the stairs, would go still inside before anyone had said a word. He was not fierce. He was fast. Fast in speech, fast with his hands, fast in temper, as fast to let it go as he was to take it up. Once it had passed he loved you exactly as much as before, and the extra piece he laid in your bowl at dinner was his apology.

He loved his family and looked after it, though the old style of the household head ran strong in him, and he did favor sons over daughters.

That line I copied down too, without flinching. We sisters knew perfectly well that the precious one in that house was our brother. It was not my father's private fault. It was a coat of old lacquer on that whole generation, and it does not scrape off. But here is the funny part. To his sons-in-law he was good past all telling. The three Zhang sons-in-law: once a man came through that door he was my father's own son, tobacco and drink without limit, never a sour face, and he would walk them all the way out to the mouth of the lane when they left. We sisters have laughed about it privately for decades. Being a Zhang son-in-law is a far better bargain than being a Zhang daughter.

In that 1986 photograph the three sons-in-law stand in a row, from the left my second sister's husband, my eldest sister's husband, and Huagang. My husband stands at the end. He had not been in the family long that year.

My father died in Guiyang on the twenty-sixth of August, 2002.

Ten years later, in April 2012, the three sons-in-law came together again, went back to Guiyang, and swept their father-in-law's grave. When I saw that photograph I sat there a long while. My father favored his son his whole life, and in the end the ones who pulled the weeds clean off that hillside were his three sons-in-law.

Some accounts Heaven keeps, and settles by itself.



My mother

My mother was called Liu Tingmei, from Fengyang in Anhui province, born on the twenty-sixth of October, 1933.

Fengyang carries a great many titles: home of emperors, home of the flower-drum, home of reform. My mother had nothing of that grand manner about her. She was the younger daughter of the house, three older brothers and an older sister above her, one younger brother below, raised steadily in the middle of the row.

My mother was inward in character, kind in heart, careful and cautious in all her dealings.

Before she married she graduated from an accounting school; after she married she bore my father one son and four daughters. She did financial work in a provincial office her whole working life, diligent, uncomplaining, and stayed at it until she retired at sixty.

A person who spends a lifetime with figures takes on a certain quality. My mother's was this: it must not be wrong. If one number failed to agree she would sit up past midnight hunting the missing cent. My father was quick; my mother was fine-grained. My father left his voice in the house; my mother left order in it. My father taught us to be hard; my mother taught us to be exact.

In her living, and above all in matters of the spirit and of culture, she pursued perfection, held to her own independence, and was a classic case of the small-bourgeois sort.

Those words about the bourgeoisie are mine. I wrote them about her, and having written them I laughed at myself. In those years who had any bourgeoisie to speak of. What it came to was this: the collar had to be clean and the hair had to be neat; however cramped the house was, there had to be a vase on the

table and a flower in the vase. It came to a garment worn ten years and still kept trim at the cuff. It came to a woman whose days had already gone that bitter, still insisting that they be lived with dignity and be good to look at.

The one who pursues perfection is the one who is most worn out by it. It took me many years to understand how much of the family's worry she had carried in advance, folded away inside that carefulness. The grain coupons had to be counted out, the cloth coupons had to be counted out, five children's shoes had to be lined up in order of need. Which month could breathe a little, which month had to be pulled tight. Which matter my father could be told, which had to be swallowed alone. She never said. None of the women of her generation ever said.

That our family stood through those years without coming apart was owing to my father's hard bones, and it was owing to my mother's ledger, which always came out even.



Photo: My father and my mother. One from Shandong, one from Anhui, standing in the Guizhou sun, standing there as one family.

I think about this often. An orphan out of Gaomi in Shandong, a youngest daughter out of Fengyang in Anhui, two people who by every reasonable account should never have met, and they met in Guiyang. Guiyang, which goes by Zhu for short and is also called the forest city, mountains on four sides, more than half the year overcast and damp and green to the point of darkness. It was not the hometown of either of them. But it is mine.

So if you ask me where I come from, the most honest answer is this: I come from the home that two outsiders made for themselves in a mountain city. That is probably the ground my whole life stands on. I have never been afraid of changing places. My father and mother had already done the changing for me.



One son, four daughters

Between them my parents raised five children: one son and four daughters.

My eldest sister came first, the pearl in my parents' palm, and in my mother's above all. My second sister came next. I was third. Below me was my little sister, and the youngest was my brother, who was the treasure of my parents' hearts.

The pearl in the palm above me, the treasure of the heart below me, and me in the middle.

The middle child has a middle child's way of living. Nobody watches you especially, so you are especially free. The praise never comes around to you, and neither, most of the time, does the scolding. You learn to make up your own mind, to tidy yourself up yourself, to keep yourself in good spirits. Many years later, when I carried a suitcase across the Pacific alone, I looked back and thought that whatever small skill that took, I had probably learned it from that seat at the table. So I have never felt hard done by. What I have felt is that I got the better end of it.

We four sisters were called, in the family, the Zhang family's Four Golden Flowers.

A title like that comes at a price. Four golden flowers meant four dowries, four weddings, four rounds of a bride's crying. It also meant that in those years my mother sat alone under the lamp mending four girls' clothes, plaiting four girls' braids, listening to whatever four girls had on their minds. She never once said she was tired.

The pictures of us I later collected, one at a time. My eldest sister and my little sister standing together in one. My eldest and my second shoulder to shoulder in another. My little sister and me leaning against each other in a third. And one earlier than any

of them: a cousin of my father's with my eldest sister, my second sister, my brother and me, five of us crowded into one small square frame, nobody's hair behaving. My brother and I were photographed alone together once as well. I am some years older, and in the picture one of my hands is still braced behind his back, the way an older sister stands. He was the treasure of their hearts, and he was also my brother. Those two facts have never once quarreled with each other in me.

My eldest sister, my second sister and I all graduated from Jiaxiu Primary School in Guiyang.

Jiaxiu Primary sits on the bank of the Nanming River, and takes its name from standing next to the Jiaxiu Tower, that old symbol of learning. The road we had to take to school was called Cuiwei Lane.

I can still walk that lane end to end today. Flagstones, narrow, the walls on both sides damp all year round, so that on a rainy day you had to hug the wall to keep your shoes dry. Out of the lane mouth was the Nanming River. Across the river was the Fuyu Bridge, some ninety meters of it, lying on the water like a white dragon, lying all the way to the foot of the Jiaxiu Tower. There was the Hanbi Pavilion on the bridge and the Cuiwei Pavilion to its south, both of them old past any telling of their age, and at the time not one of them meant a thing to us. All we knew was that it was the bridge you crossed to get to school.

Three girls with satchels on their backs going over that bridge. Once in the morning, once in the afternoon, year after year. My eldest sister walked in front, my second sister in the middle, and I came last, and everything we said on the way was forgotten by the next day. Later I walked over a great many bridges in America. Every one of them was wider, newer, and far grander. But the bridge in my dreams is still that one.

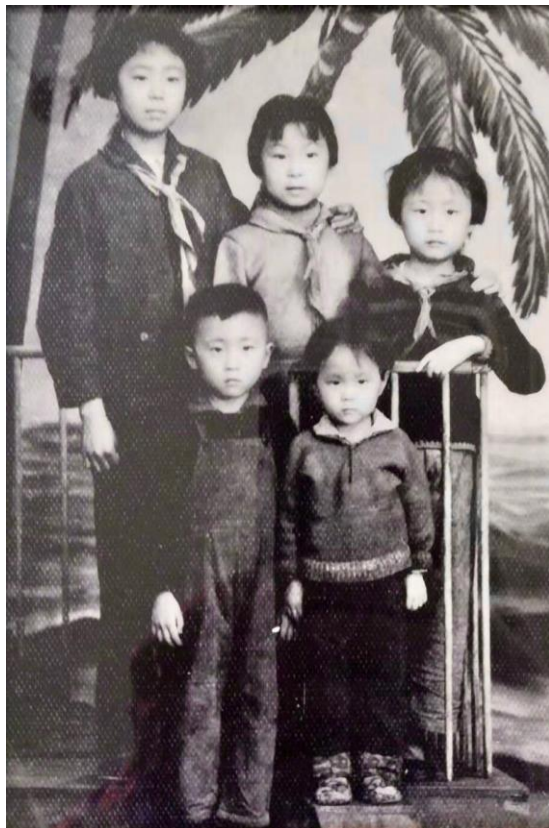


Photo: National Day, 1965. The five of us. The big ones next to the big ones, the small ones next to the small ones, and not one of us with any idea what the world outside was going to look like a year later.

After that the photographs grew fewer, and further apart. By the time the family stood together in front of a lens again, some years had gone. The stretch that went missing in between was taken from us by the world outside. That account is a hard one to add up, so allow me to leave it until later.

In the summer of 1975 my father and mother went up to Beijing on their own and had a picture taken. At the New Year of 1976 the five of us managed to gather again. In the family portrait at the New Year of 1979 there are visibly more people, and visibly

more grown. That is how the days go: bitter, truly bitter, and still they move forward a year at a time, and nobody can stop them.



Photo: Me at twenty. The lace collar on that blouse I picked out myself. The girl in this photograph knows nothing yet. She does not know how far she will go, or what she will meet, or how long she will live. Let me answer her now, on her behalf: it turned out all right. You can stop worrying.

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Edited and produced by: Weiming

Afterward I made all of it into an album, and called it *The Zhang Family Courtyard*.

On the first page I wrote one line: *Dedicated to our beloved mother.*

That album was made for my mother. Making it, I put the studio portrait of her at eighty at the very front, and the one of her at eighty-five toward the back. In that later picture she is full of spirit, full of appetite for things, not the least bit like a woman of eighty-five. In April 2018 she really did come to America, and when she came out at Dallas Fort Worth International, mother and daughter meeting in joy, the two of us held on to each other. In those weeks I took her to feed the pigeons in Waco, took her to Austin to see the state capitol, to San Antonio, to the lakeside at Arlington, and to the festival in Fort Worth to gnaw a Texas smoked turkey leg and an ear of roasted corn. An old lady of eighty-five, and she could outwalk the rest of us.

On the last page of the album I wrote: *Photographs from: The Zhang Family Courtyard. Edited and produced by: Weiming.*

That is the post I assigned myself in this world. Edited and produced. I did the Zhangs, and I did the Chens; my father's, my mother's, my brothers' and sisters', the grandchildren's, the great-grandchildren's, straight through to four generations under one roof. In 2018 my mother held her great-grandson by her granddaughter; in October 2019 she held her great-grandson by her grandson. Four generations crowded into one photograph. That was the time our family looked most like a tree.

Other people live the days; I stand beside them and record the days. People laugh at me and say I have spent a lifetime sorting photographs. I do not argue. I know what I know: every single person in this family is going to need somebody to have kept the record for them, sooner or later.

And where I learned to do it, that took me a long time to work out too. My mother spent her life doing accounts in a government

office, and in her ledger every cent and every fraction of a cent had to agree. What I have done all my life is the same work, except that what I count is not money, it is people. What year, which person, which event, whose face. Every cent of it has to agree. She left her ledger to the office. I left mine to ourselves.

One son, four daughters, four golden flowers, and not one of them may be left out of the record.

Except that I kept recording, and kept recording, until one day I noticed something. Out of all those albums there was not one, not a single one, that I had kept for myself.

And so there is this one, the one in your hands.



Photo: My mother's studio portrait at eighty. I put it on the first page of the album and on the last page as well, the head and

the tail of it, both of them her. There is not much a daughter can give her mother. What I could give was this: to let her stay on the paper looking beautiful, looking like herself.



In September 1988, at our parents' house, we four sisters had a picture taken. The Zhang family's Four Golden Flowers, all present.

It is a perfectly ordinary photograph and nobody thought anything of it. We are laughing, we are standing, the way we had every other year.

Only I knew that I was leaving that month.

I came out of the home that a Shandong man and an Anhui woman had made in Guizhou, and for thirty years I knew one river, one bridge, one Cuiwei Lane. I did not know what was on the other side of the river. Nor had it ever occurred to me that my life would put thirty years east of the river and then thirty years west of it.

I only packed the case, and had the picture taken, and then turned around and looked one more time at that lamp.

East of the River: The Young Years That Were Taken



My life, as the old saying has it, is thirty years east of the river (China) and thirty years west of the river (America). The first thirty years were unsettled years, years not mine to steer, so I will not go into them...

That sentence I wrote myself, and I meant it when I wrote it. Not going into them is not the same as having forgotten. It is that going into them will not buy any of it back. But since I have set out to lay a lifetime's footprints down in order for my children and my grandchildren to look at, the stretch east of the river cannot very well be left blank. Leave it blank and the thirty years west of the river have nowhere to have come from. So I will say a few words. A few words are enough. No grievance, and no settling of accounts.

I started primary school before I was quite seven.

There were five children at home and I was the middle one, two elder sisters above me, a brother and a little sister below. The middle child has a middle child's way of living: nobody holds you up, nobody quite forgets you either, and whatever you want done you arrange yourself. I think I was born to be a student. Not that

I was clever. I mean that I truly liked it. I liked the smell of a new exercise book, liked the sound of chalk traveling across a blackboard, liked the red circle on the page when the teacher handed the homework back.

In those first years I threw myself into it. I packed my own satchel, kept my books clean, sat in the classroom with my back perfectly straight, and was even made a squad leader. That small vanity I remember sixty years later: I remember the red scarf on my chest, and I remember the little jump in me when the teacher called my name. The first thing a person truly loves in this life is a thing you cannot put down again.

I set all this out because I want whoever reads this book later to know one thing. The young years that were taken were not taken from a child who did not want to learn.

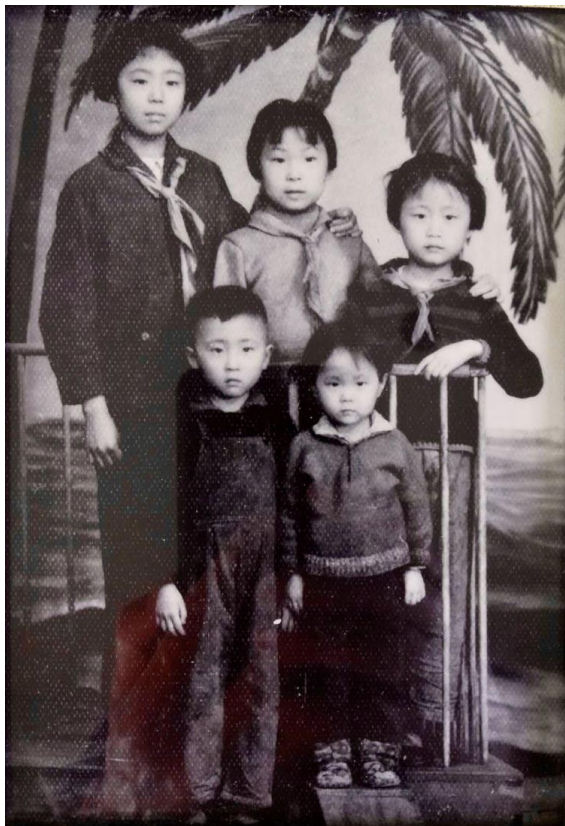


Photo: Me, just started at primary school, back row on the right. I was a squad leader that year, and very pleased about it.

Around the second or third grade, things out in the society and inside the schools began to go abnormal.

Abnormal is the fairest word I can find for it. The school was still there, people still went, only that as you went on attending you no longer knew what it was you were attending. In those years all we needed to bring to school was a small red quotation bag, and every day we recited Chairman Mao's quotations and the Three Old Articles: "Serve the People," "In Memory of Norman Bethune," "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains."

The quotation bag was made of cloth, red, a small one, worn across the body, and one book of quotations filled it. The satchel

used to be for carrying books, stuffed full, heavy enough to make your shoulder ache. The later one had nothing to carry.

The bag was light, so light you could not feel it. The books were thin, so thin you could not remember what was in them. The days were long, long enough to memorize a whole article in one morning.

A child does not notice that the days have gone off course. While the grown-ups sat under the lamp talking with their brows drawn together, we went on skipping rope, went on chasing each other around the courtyard. Even reciting the quotations was a contest: who could get through fastest, smoothest, without stumbling on a single word. I recited beautifully. I have always had to do everything as well as it can be done, and that temper of mine went with me from primary school into old age. It was only that in those particular years, the things a child could do well were being taken away one at a time.

I can still recite the Three Old Articles today. Three essays, and it turns out they were not memorized for nothing. Bethune was a doctor who came from very, very far away, went to a place that had nothing to do with him, and treated people he had never met. The Foolish Old Man was a slow man who dug at a mountain one basket at a time, and what he could not finish he left for his sons and grandsons to go on digging. I was small then and took them for so many strings of words to be learned by heart, and I did not understand what any of it had to do with a little girl in Guiyang. It took me decades to come around to it: this life of mine was caught, in the end, by two people who had never met me, a doctor and a young woman. And the lessons I missed I really did dig back one basket at a time, one year at a time.

At the point where primary school became middle school, every one of us in that year in our district was put out to graze. A whole year at home doing nothing.

Grazing the sheep, letting them find their own grass. Those were the actual words people used then; I did not invent them. Turn the sheep out and they feed themselves, no one to tend them, no one to teach them. It is an accurate phrase and a cruel one: the people who said it understood perfectly well that nobody was tending us that year, and since it would not do to say so plainly, they borrowed the sheep to say it. But sheep are supposed to eat grass. Children are supposed to study. A sheep on the hillside for a year puts on weight. What does a child at home for a year put on?

I was twelve or thirteen that year. A whole year, and what exactly we did in it, I truly cannot say now. Not being able to say is probably the most honest answer there is. What stayed in my head are scraps: helping my mother with the housework, squabbling with my brother and sister, and whenever somebody's family got hold of a book we passed it around and read it over and over until the pages went soft and curled at the corners. That year was not bitter and it was not hard to get through. It was empty. An empty, hollow year, like a room with no furniture in it.

My mother was a woman who had to do everything to the full ten parts. That year even she had no way. There is a great deal a mother can keep off her children, and the one thing she cannot keep off is a whole year of emptiness. All she could do was keep the house spotless, make the meals a little better than they had to be, and see that five children ate on time and slept on time as always. Years later, when I was a mother myself, in another country and another decade, what I did was exactly the same thing.

One year, set against a lifetime, seems like nothing much. But a year at twelve or thirteen is not one year. It is the year you grow, the year your mind opens, the year the foundation is supposed to go down. The foundation did not go down, and afterward it took ten years, twenty years, to fill the hole.

Later the schools started up again, and I went on through, finished what there was to finish, and went out to work when it was time to work. What was missing I made up: what I could not make up by day I made up at night, and what I could not make up in a proper classroom I made up by finding books myself. The days went on. And the young are the young, after all. Even in years like those we still had our pictures taken, still went out, still would not stand in front of a camera until our hair was combed straight.



Photo: November 1976, Liuzhou, Guangxi. I had just turned nineteen.

Photo: Nineteen seventy-seven, me at twenty. I kept this photograph my whole life. All those moves, and a Pacific Ocean in between, and I never lost it.



Photo: June 1978, the Three Pools Mirroring the Moon at Hangzhou. November 1979, the Great Buddha at Leshan. March 1980, Hankou in Wuhan. If there was leave, I went; as far as it would take me. I did not know yet that this was a habit I would have for life.

Whoever looks at those pictures sees a girl smiling nicely. Photographs cannot talk. They will not tell you that this girl's middle school was patched together, that her high school was squeezed out of nothing, that the small store of learning in her hands was scratched back, a little at a time, out of years somebody else had taken.

I love taking photographs, and that love also began in those years. Back then a photograph was an occasion: you picked the day, you changed into something decent, you walked to the

photographer's shop, you sat up straight, and you waited for the man under the black cloth to press the shutter. When the prints came back one picture would be passed around for days. I think the less a person feels able to hold on to the days, the more that person wants to leave behind some proof. Leave one picture and the day was not entirely spent for nothing. Later I took photographs beyond counting, made album after album, set down two families' comings and goings stroke by stroke. Trace it back to the root and the whole thing started with that one thought.

The people of my generation: from ten to twenty we were in the middle of the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution; from twenty to thirty we were busy with work and busy with study, and busy besides with marrying, making a household, having children. Those three stretches used up, completely, the best time our generation had between childhood and youth.

Ten to twenty was not up to the times. Twenty to thirty was not up to me. Work had to be done properly, further training had to be kept up with, a household had to be made, children had to be borne and raised. Every one of these is a good thing; every one of them takes a person, and takes time. By the time the things in your hands loosened a little and you lifted your head to count, a person's best twenty years had already been spent. As for who I met in those twenty years, whom I made a home with, how the child came, all of that is for later, and I will come to it slowly.

Writing this down, I have no intention of blaming anyone. It was a generation's business, not one woman's. Nobody can add up a generation's account, and if it were added up, there is nobody left to pay it. So I will not go into it...

Not going into it does not mean not knowing. The young years were taken, and I know it perfectly clearly. But I know another

thing as well: the days were taken and the person is still here; the schooling was not finished and can still be gone back to; the time cannot be caught, but it can be bought back.

Buying back time is not a pretty phrase. It is paid out a day at a time. You study while other people rest, you are still studying after other people are asleep, you study until your eyes go dry and the characters blur into one gray field, and you go to work the next morning all the same. Everyone in my generation has that streak in them. Put nicely, it is striving. Put plainly, it is refusing to accept it. Refusing to accept that a whole life should be fixed in place by one stretch of years.

Later on I gave my own life a name. It went like this.

The bitter days, we lived them sweet.

It is not a pretty saying. It is a trade I learned in my teens: when there were no books to read, go and look at the flowers; when there was nothing good to eat, make the one plate of greens look good; when there was a photograph to be taken, comb your hair first. What is not in my hands I do not dwell on. What is in my hands, I want it to have some shape to it.

The trade is simple enough to explain and takes a lifetime to do. The bitter part cannot be dodged; bitterness never asks whether you are willing. The only choice is what you set beside it. Somebody else hands you the days; the flavor you add is yours. That half of the decision is always your own. That half I learned in my teens saved me many, many times over, so many that I lost count. What those times were, exactly, cannot be told until we get to the western side of the river.

To buy back the time, to fill in the schooling we had missed, we drove ourselves upward and struggled forward, and past thirty, on the strength of nothing but a blank before our eyes and empty hands, we left home to study and to live overseas.

Nothing before the eyes, nothing in the hands. I wrote those eight characters lightly and they are heavy. Nothing before the eyes: the road ahead ran out past where you could see, and where you could see it was not clear. Nothing in the hands: apart from one person, one suitcase, and a stubborn refusal to be beaten, we brought nothing at all.

The rural sent-down that our year slipped past, there was no escaping in the end. We paid it off with a foreign sent-down instead, and once we began paying it ran to decades.

The rural sent-down was a gate our generation could not get around: the young were sent down from the cities into the countryside to work the land. My year, by one accident and another, missed it. But what is missed goes on Heaven's books, and sooner or later you are made to pay it in. So past thirty, when we packed our bags and crossed an ocean and came down in a place where we did not speak the language and had to begin from the bottom, it dawned on us at last: so this is the paying in.

The foreign sent-down has no work points, no team leader, and no quota for going back to the city. What it has is speech you cannot follow, money you cannot reckon, coursework with no end in sight, and a child who is still small. Once in, it ran to decades. It ran until both my sons were grown men, until I had handed this life over once and had it handed back, until today, when I sit in a house in Texas setting these words down one at a time.

Every time I read that sentence back to myself I have to smile. When the smiling is done, the thing is plain enough: it is never the gate you get around, only the hour that has not yet come. The countryside I never got sent down to from Guiyang, I was sent down to in the end. It was simply on the other side of the Pacific, and it lasted most of a lifetime.

That is as much as I will say about the thirty years east of the river.

The woman I was then knew nothing. All she knew was that the years that had been taken from her, she meant to trade back one at a time; and if she could not trade them back in their own shape, she would trade them for another shape. Ahead of her was a river. On the far side of it, thirty years were waiting.

East of the River: The Man I Married



For my generation the decade from twenty to thirty was spent being busy with work, busy with study, and busy besides with marrying, making a household, having children. The first two I have already talked about. This chapter is about the third.

When I go back through the album I made myself, the box marked 1981 holds one photograph and seven characters.



Photo: Nineteen eighty-one. The two of us, courting.

Seven characters. I have written tens of thousands of words about other people's families, run down which month of which year some aunt was born in, which year some cousin moved to Australia, and when it came to my own turn I could only bring myself to give those two years seven characters. (Everyone who keeps records has this failing: writing another person's life is a pleasure, and one line about yourself feels like one line too many.)

What were those two years like. They were like riding a bicycle a very long way for the sake of a few sentences. Like a letter that took four or five days on the road, and when it arrived had to be read through twice. Like two people who had nothing to give each other, and so gave each other their time. Our generation courted without any ceremony and without much choosing: if you could walk together, and talk together, and between you make a thin, plain life sound livelier than it was, that was quite enough.

I do not intend to go back and fill it in either. Some days need no explaining. The look on the two faces in the photograph has

already said it all: an age that had not yet been given its big examination by life, an age that still believed the days would go according to plan. Man reckons, Heaven decides, that was a lesson I learned later. All I knew then was that I had met someone, and that someone had met me.



He was working in Guizhou then, and so was I. I was Guiyang born and Guiyang raised, a child who came up from under the Jiaxiu Tower. He was not. He came to Guiyang from a long way off, by a very wide circle. Why the circle was so wide will only be clear in the second half of this chapter, after I have set his family's business out straight.

When I write about my own family I am done in a few strokes: what the character was like, how they were with people, what was good, what was quick-tempered, one sentence and on. When it came to writing about him I found I could not produce a verdict at all. Husband and wife as long as we have been, verdicts stopped working long ago. I know where he is good. I cannot find one word big enough to hold it.

So I will not write a verdict. I will write what he did.

He is a man serious about his learning, serious to the point of a certain woodenness. In 1987 he was sent by the Guizhou provincial education bureau to America as a visiting scholar. Not many people got out in those years, and it was won one examination and one assessment at a time; it was not handed to anyone. Once in America he sat the entrance and got into the pharmacy graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin, and began again from the beginning. A man past thirty, with a family behind him, going back to being a student. How many nights that took without sleep, he has never once said.

He is also a man willing to write things down. Thirty-odd years later he led me through setting out the Chen line, person by person, from 1644 to the present day, and we made it into a book. In it he wrote a page of special thanks, formally, properly, to his own wife: thanking her for revising the Chen family history draft after draft with no regard for her illness and no regard for how weak her body was, and for the fact that with each revision the record grew fuller.

A man putting a solemn thank-you to his wife in his own clan genealogy. The first time I saw that page, I read it three times.

(The book is signed at the end: edited and produced, Weiming. I will come back to that.)

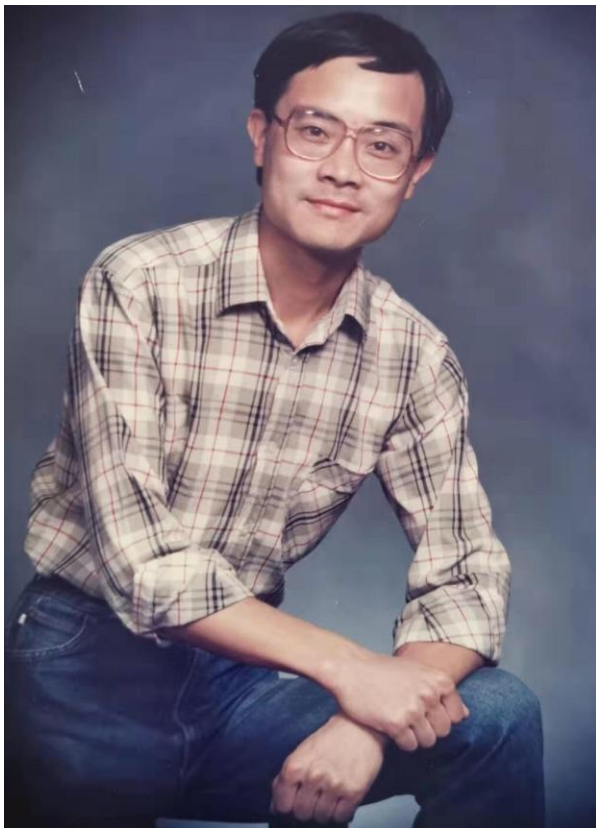


Photo: Him, in those years. Thin, serious, in a shirt washed pale. I always say he has only two expressions in his whole life: working it out, and having worked it out.

My father was upright and warm, capable and quick-handed, a bit quick in temper, and did favor sons over daughters. I wrote that earlier and I wrote it myself, so nobody can call it telling tales. But my father had one great virtue: with his sons-in-law he was good in every way, good past all telling. He judged a man not by his mouth but by what his hands had made. The first time Huagang came to the house my father said very little, and afterward said only a few words: this one is solid.

In our family, solid was the highest verdict there was.

(Many years later, in 2012, the three Zhang sons-in-law gathered again to sweep my father's grave. The three of them stood there and none of them said much. Whatever the old man's eye for people had seen, the case was closed that day.)



On the tenth of April, 1983, we married in Guiyang.

Marrying was a simple business then. No wedding company, no hotel ballroom, no whole procession of arrangements waiting for you to walk into. Two families came together, tables were pushed into one, sweets were handed round, and the thing was done. I remember the Guiyang weather that day was neither good nor bad. I remember the room was so full of people you could not turn around in it. I remember somebody laughing the whole time, and what they were laughing about I can no longer recall. Forty-odd years, gone in the flick of a finger.

"Making a household," in those days, was two very concrete words. Making a household meant collecting a certificate. It meant being allotted a room. It meant putting two people's grain coupons, quilts, washbasins, and small private hopes into one place. Nobody told you anything about forever, and nobody talked to you about the future. The future was not up to us; our generation had learned that lesson early, earlier than anyone. So we did not talk about the future, we only lived the day in front of us well: what to eat at this meal, where to patch that shirt tomorrow, what had to be dealt with at the work unit the day after. That is how the days were shifted forward, one at a time.

(Thirty years on, we spent our thirtieth anniversary in New Orleans, in America. By then I had already been out past the gates of death and come back around. The two of us sat there eating,

and neither of us mentioned that pushed-together table in Guiyang. Some accounts do not have to be settled out loud.)

The wedding portrait was not taken in Guiyang. It was taken in Shanghai, at the Honglei Photo Studio.



Photo: Taken in April 1983 at the Honglei Photo Studio in Shanghai, China. This picture was later put into the Chen family genealogy, with a small line under it: Huagang and his wife's wedding portrait. I married my husband in Guiyang, and our wedding portrait was taken in Shanghai.

That has always struck me as interesting: we made our home in Guiyang and went back to Shanghai to be photographed. A person lives in one place while the root goes on growing in another. Shanghai was the Chens' place, the place where his

father was born, the place where his grandfather studied and worked. When a person marries, it is not only two people; it is two lines running into one. The day I married in, I ran into a line a great deal longer than myself.

How long that line was, I did not know at the time.



It took me a good many years to get the Chen family straight.

The Chens' old home is Jinxi, a water town of bridges in Kunshan, Jiangsu. Their branch moved to Jinxi in 1644, the first year of the Qing. Count from that year to now and it is close to four hundred years.

In four hundred years the family produced scholars, and it produced officials, teachers, men of learning. Count back six generations and there is a forebear named Chen Zhijian, an official of the Qing and also a mathematician, who wrote a book on the calculus. It was this old gentleman who laid down, for the ten generations that would follow him, a single line for the ordering of their names:

其文定华国，唯德可传家。

>

*By letters shall the country be settled; by virtue alone can
a family be handed on.*

Ten characters, ten generations. Each generation takes one character, and each character is carried by one generation. When your turn comes you set that character in the middle of your name, like taking a baton: the generation above hands it down, you hold it a while, and you hand it to the generation below.

I am very fond of those ten characters. Not because they are grand, but because they are plain. The first half, *by letters shall the country be settled*, speaks of the road outward: study, stand up in the world, do something of use to the country. The second half, *by virtue alone can a family be handed on*, is the half that comes back home. What can actually be passed to the next generation is not an office, not learning, not houses and land. It is conduct. Two hundred years ago the old gentleman had already put it plainly: houses fall down, money scatters, names get mispronounced, and only that one word, virtue, can be handed on generation to generation.

His grandfather Chen Wenfeng was of the *wen* generation. Born in Shanghai in 1888, he read arts at Aurora University and worked in the judicial office of the Shanghai French Concession, and he died in 1943, not old. His father Chen Dingwei was of the *ding* generation. Born in Shanghai on the twenty-fourth of October, 1927, he read civil engineering at Datong University and spent his working life with engineering.

In 1954 a single official transfer order sent his father up to the northeast to work on the country's key construction projects, in the factories of Fushun, Jilin, Anshan, and Zhengzhou, one after another. The man followed the projects, and the family followed the man.

So it was that on the eighteenth of March, 1956, Chen Huagang was born in Anshan, Liaoning.

The first time I heard that whole account I sat and thought about it for a long while. A child of a Shanghai household, born in Anshan, sent to work in Guizhou when he grew up, married in Guiyang to me, and later gone with me to Texas. His whole life was pushed along by one transfer order after another and one chance after another. The ways in which our generation was not

our own to steer each look different, and in the end they are all one shape.

The character *hua* sits inside his name. The *hua* of Huagang.



Photo: Summer 1984, the family portrait taken while his mother was still living. Front row from the left: mother, nephew, father. Back row from the left: brother-in-law, Huagang, the daughter-in-law, and his sister. The "daughter-in-law" is me.



My mother-in-law was called Zhu Minhua, from Fenghua in Zhejiang, born in 1926. In her early years she worked for the Shanghai municipal construction committee, and in 1954 she went northeast with my father-in-law. She was a woman of few words, careful in what she did, everything about her put away in its proper place.

In April 1985 she died in Guiyang. Lung cancer.

This part of the book I would like to write slowly.

That year my eldest son had been born just three months. A new person had only just come into the family, and an old one went. I held the baby and watched the people going in and out of the house, and understood for the first time that birth, age, sickness, death are not four words in a book, they are four things that come in a queue, one entering only after the one before has gone, and nobody asks whether you are ready.

There are two family portraits in the genealogy, one year apart. In the one from the summer of 1984 the mother is seated in the front row. In the one from the summer of 1985 it is the same family, standing much the same way, and the seat in front is empty.

When I made the album it was I who put those two photographs side by side, in order. I added no caption. Some things are said more clearly by two photographs set next to each other than by a thousand words.

Cancer came calling on the Chen family once. That year was 1985.

It came looking for me eight years later.

I knew nothing of that then. All I knew was that my mother-in-law had gone, that my child was small, and that the days had to go on being lived. We are not permitted to know too much in advance in this life. Looking back now, I think that is a kind of mercy.



My eldest son, Chen Bo, was born on the thirty-first of January, 1985, at the provincial people's hospital in Guiyang, Guizhou, China.

Of the day itself I remember rather little. Mothers are all like this: while it hurts you remember everything with perfect clarity, and the moment the child is laid in your arms the whole of it goes. All I remember is that January in Guiyang is wet and cold, that there was a film of mist on the hospital window, and that when the nurse brought him over she said one thing: it is a boy, easy to raise.

Easy to raise turned out to be the nurse being polite.



Photo: Early 1986, Guiyang, Guizhou province, China. The baby is not quite one and I am twenty-eight. I did not know then that in three years I would go on ahead alone and leave him with his grandparents in Guiyang, and I did not know anything of what came after that. A photograph is a good thing. It answers for the day it was taken and for nothing later.

We named him Bo. By the generation poem his generation takes the character *guo*: by letters shall the country be settled.

From the old gentleman at Jinxi in 1644, ten generations were counted down, and the count came to rest in a delivery room in Guiyang in 1985.

Holding him, of course, I thought none of this. I thought his eyebrows were very faint. I thought about whether there was enough milk. I thought about whether it would rain tomorrow. Four hundred years is the sort of thing that only takes shape on paper much, much later, when you sit down and put a family history in order one word at a time.

Later another child came into our family. That one was born in America.

One born east of the river, one born west of it. Standing at the window of that Guiyang delivery room with my first son in my arms, it never once crossed my mind that I would put my two children down on opposite banks of two rivers.



In 1985 I was not yet thirty. I had a husband, I had a son, and I had a surname going back nearly four hundred years, a surname that had come all the way from the water's edge at Jinxi, through the Qing, through the Republic, through factories in the northeast and mountains in Guizhou, and arrived at last in the child in my arms.

I thought at the time that I was only the one who had married in, the "daughter-in-law" in the caption.

It never occurred to me that the record of this line would one day be put into my hands: checking sources, verifying years, comparing old photographs, revising draft after draft until my eyes swam, until I forgot to eat and forgot to sleep. Nor did it occur to me that in the years I would be doing it, my body would no longer be doing quite as it was told.

It is a strange thing to say. In that family there were officials, and teachers, and engineers, and men who wrote books, every one of them with more standing than I had. And the one who finally sat down and put the whole line in order from the beginning was the Guiyang girl who had married in from outside. I often think this must be the division of labor that fate arranged: some are in charge of living the days, and someone is in charge of writing them down. At the first they were all better than me. The second fell to me.

All of that came later.

In Guiyang in 1985 I knew only one thing: the child in my arms was born east of the river.

West of the River: One Suitcase



"In 1987 my husband came from China to the University of Texas in America to do research. In 1988 I came to America too, as an accompanying spouse. In 1992 my younger son was born in Dallas, and in 1993 I was diagnosed with leukemia."

Those are a few sentences I later wrote at the head of another piece of writing. Four lines, six years. They came easily enough at the time, and reading them back I found it strange: the whole earth of a person's half-life turned over, and it can be got through in a single stroke.

So let me take that stroke apart. Inside it there is a suitcase.

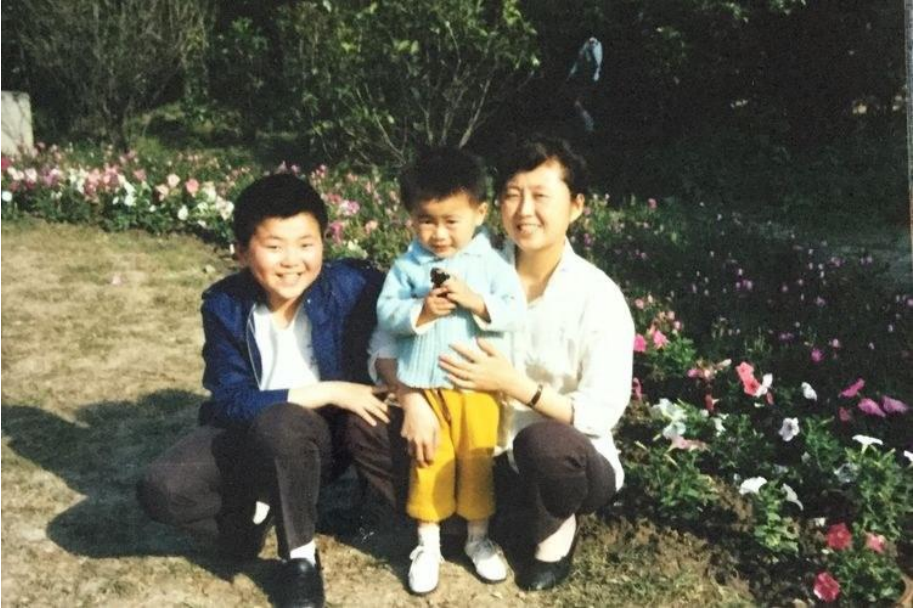


Photo: May 1987, Shanghai. He went alone.

In May 1987 my husband left alone to study in America, at the college of pharmacy at the University of Texas at Austin. Sent by the state, one man, one suitcase. How many chops had to be stamped and how many months had to be waited for a Chinese person to get out of the country then, the young people now probably cannot imagine.

That step nearly did not get taken at all. He had passed the examination to go abroad, and at first his work unit would not release him to study English. Several reasons were given, and not one of them sounded much like a reason. He is not a man who likes to argue; he gave way, and that was very nearly that. I would not give way. I went and put the case, and put it again, and kept putting it until it had been made plain. I did this sort of thing more than once, and afterward I seldom brought it up. In the end he walked his own road, and that road belongs in his book. Here I only touch on it and move along.

When I said above that I would not give way, I put it too lightly. The truth is that in those weeks I understood something very clearly: if we missed this bus, our generation would not get a second one. Ten to twenty had been taken by the times. Twenty to thirty had been taken by work and marriage and children. What was left was this one road out.

When I saw him off, our elder son had not long had his second birthday. On the thirty-first of January that year we had celebrated it in Guiyang, the three of us in one photograph; four months later there were two people left in the photographs. A child does not understand what "Papa has gone to America" means. He only knows that the house is suddenly one person short, and the table one bowl and one pair of chopsticks short at night. For a while he asked every day, where is Papa, asked for a month and more, and then all at once stopped asking. Children forget easily, I told myself at the time. Later I understood that the child had not forgotten. He had learned not to ask.

For the next year and four months I had him on my own. Work, the market, taking him and fetching him, getting up in the night to feel his forehead. Nothing at the unit could be let slip, nothing at home could be put off; the one at the stove was me, the one in the hospital queue was me, and the one hauling two quilts out into the courtyard to dry on Sunday was also me. Letters went slowly, ten days or twenty for one, still warm when written and long cold by the time it came. Telephone calls we could not afford; a minute cost so many catties of rice, and I had worked out exactly how many, so there were only a few calls in a year, and each time I wrote out first on paper what had to be said and read it off and hung up. The days were made of small pieces, and they held.

There is one other thing I did that year, which I find rather funny now: I photographed the child, one picture at a time, and saved them up in stacks. He learned to ride a tricycle, I

photographed it; he lost a tooth, I photographed it; he wore new clothes at New Year, I photographed it. When enough had piled up I posted them to America. My reckoning was that when the family sat down together one day, these days could not be left blank. Later I made each of two families a thick book of its history. I expect that habit was contracted right then.

In 1988 he wavered, too. Alone out there, the language, the coursework, the visa status, the money, all of it on his shoulders, and he thought about coming back. It was my mother and I, sentence by sentence, who talked him out of it. My mother was an inward woman all her life, careful and cautious in everything, and that once she did not hesitate for a moment.

By the autumn of that year, it was my turn.



Photo: September 1988, at my aunt's house in Xujiahui, Shanghai. In a few days I would be leaving.

What I took with me was also one suitcase.

There was not much a suitcase could hold: a few changes of clothing for the seasons, some dried goods the family pushed in, a packet of photographs, an English-Chinese dictionary worn furry at the edges. What it could not hold was clear enough as well: a room I was used to living in, a job I was good at, my parents' old age, and a child of three and a bit.

My elder son stayed in Guiyang, with my parents.

Written down it is one line. That is how I said it to people at the time too, and then I went off to see to the next thing. A person

is leaving, the bags must be packed, the formalities must be done, and tears are not food.

People often asked me afterward how I could bear it. I always said that everyone did it that way then: get your own feet under you first, then send for the child. That is not untrue, and it is not the whole truth either. The whole truth is that I did not dare think about it closely. Think about it closely and the suitcase could not be lifted.

The half month before I left I stayed at my aunt's house in Xujiahui in Shanghai, waiting for the visa, the ticket, the last chop. September in Shanghai is still hot, and in the evenings people sat out in the lane talking behind their fans. My aunt cooked me something different every day, saying that once I was out there I would not get it again. She was right and she was wrong. Later I learned to cook everything in Texas; only the taste was always short by a little, and the little it was short by was probably that fan out in the lane.

The plane left from Shanghai. It was the first time I had ever flown, and the first flight was a Pacific Ocean. Out the window there was sea, then cloud, then black. Everything on the tray the stewardess brought had its own little lidded box, and I opened them one by one and thought, this country is certainly willing to spend. We flew for I do not know how many hours, and when we came down it was still the same day. In that moment I felt, truly and physically, that I had left the past thirty years on the other side of the earth.

Someone came to meet me. We got onto the freeway, pitch dark on both sides, the lamps falling away one after another behind us. I sat in the back with my forehead against the glass and watched the whole way. Thirty years old, and it was the first time

I had ever seen a road that wide, that empty, in the middle of the night.

Austin is a college town. Many students, many trees, low houses, slow days. We lived in an apartment near the university, the furniture left behind by people who had moved out, the table wedged with cardboard under one leg so it would not rock.

The first few weeks I was like someone who had only just learned to walk. The supermarket was the size of a warehouse and there were five or six kinds of milk; I stood in front of the cold case a long time, took one home at last, drank it, and it was vanilla. I had studied English at home, I could read it, I could recite it, and the moment it came to my mouth it knotted. Someone would say a sentence and I would translate it in my head, and by the time I had translated it they were on their third. Bank, utilities, lease, driver's license, all of it had to be dealt with and all of it had to be spoken. Not a relative in sight, and a place and people I did not know: that is exactly what those three months were.

Luckily there were plenty of Chinese in that college town, most of them having come through the same way. Whoever had a car was half a bus stop; whoever had just worked something out would pass the experience on to the next person the following day. Before long I was the one passing it on.



Photo: The seventeenth of November, 1988, Austin, Texas. Two months in America, and the woman in this picture has not yet learned how to loosen up in front of a camera.

"In September 1988 I came to the college town of Austin, Texas, in America. Back home I could not so much as ride a bicycle, and yet three months after arriving I had a driver's license. Circumstance really does temper a person!"

That sentence in my album is the one I am proudest of.

I did learn to ride a bicycle as a girl. I fell off once and never got back on. At home not being able to ride was no defect at all; the bus took you where you were going just the same. It was only in Texas that I found out this place is built to the measure of the automobile: the supermarket four miles from the house, the school six miles from the house, and a person without a car has no legs. My husband had classes and laboratory work every day. I could not spend my life waiting for him to come and fetch me.

So at thirty-one I went to learn to drive. The handbook was in English, the rules of the road were in English, and I understood half of what the examiner said and guessed the other half. On the reverse-parking attempt I turned the wheel the wrong way. The examiner beside me did not make a sound; he only touched his pen lightly to the paper. I sat there thinking one thing: no. Again.

In three months I had my license.

A woman who could not ride a bicycle at home, driving on the freeway three months after landing in America. Circumstance really does temper a person! (I have told that line to a good many new arrivals since, and I laugh every time I tell it. One of them went and signed up the same day.)

The photographs of those two years, every one you turn up has a smile in it. In November 1988 we went to Orlando in Florida, the sun so full it dazzled. In October 1989 I went with my husband to an international pharmaceutical conference in Munich, changing planes at Charles de Gaulle in France, and set foot in Europe for the first time. In front of the Nymphenburg Palace the long canal ran out to where you could no longer see it, the trees clipped straight along both sides.

The woman in the photographs is smiling. What was going on outside the photographs, no photograph will show you.

For that year and more, my body was west of the river and half of me stayed east of it. I calculated the time difference, calculated whether he would be asleep by now or just getting up. I calculated the days, calculated how many more months of saving before we could bring him over. I calculated the letters, calculated whether this one had arrived, when the next one might. I calculated and calculated and ended up laughing at myself. Numbers are the least sympathetic things on earth. Beg them as you like, they will not give up one minute.

The American neighbors sometimes asked how many children we had. I said one. They said, we have never seen him. I said, in China, with his grandparents. And then I changed the subject. Some things said once are an account of yourself, and said twice they become a complaint, and I do not care for complaining.

Beside the canal at Nymphenburg I stood looking a long time. A German couple came past pushing a pram, the baby asleep, its little hat knocked sideways. I did a small sum in my head: it is the middle of the night in Guiyang now, he will be sound asleep.

On that trip to Europe my husband sat in the conference rooms for a few days and I walked outside for a few days. Palaces, churches, squares, rivers, all of it beautiful. And what I remember most clearly is that crooked little hat. People are strange creatures: put them somewhere as large and far away as you like, and how much their eyes take in still depends on which part of them is standing empty.

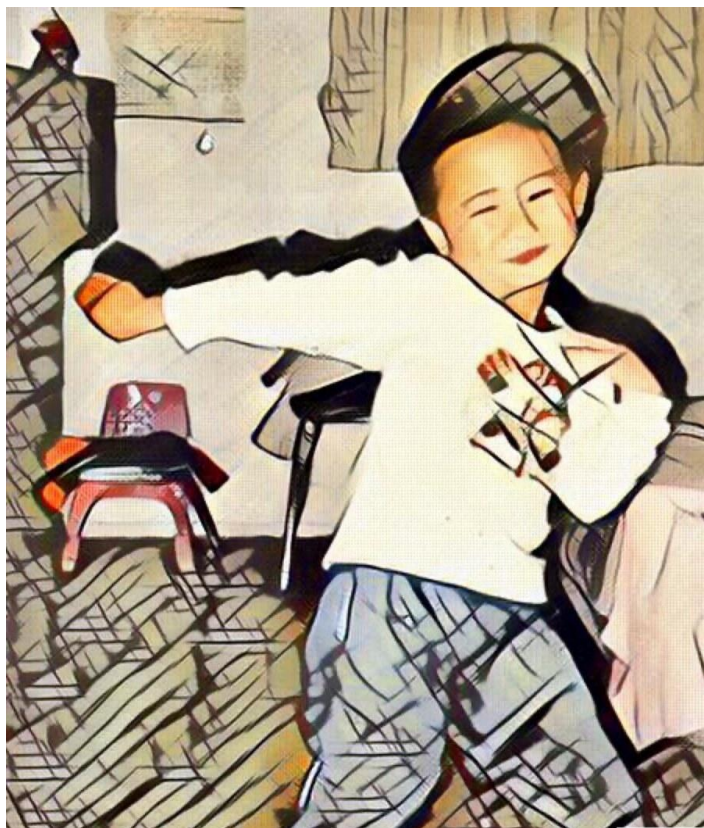


Photo: November 1989, my elder son arrives in America. He is four years and ten months old, and we have not seen each other for fourteen months.

At the beginning of November 1989 my son came.

Fourteen months apart. He had shot up, his hair cut very short, and the moment he opened his mouth his Mandarin was full of Guiyang. He called my parents Grandpa and Grandma, called it easily and brightly. When he called me Mama, he stopped first for a beat.

Half a second, that beat. I remember it to this day.

I did not cry. I crouched down, picked him up, weighed him, and said one thing: heavier. Then I went to see about the food. A

child straight off a plane is hungry. A mother gets the meal on the table first and leaves the rest for later.

For the first month he needed the light on to sleep. He did not know the room, and he did not quite know us either. I did not hurry him; I let him be. Children are not like grown-ups: a grown-up agrees once he has thought it through, and a child agrees once he has got used to it. In two or three months the light went off. Half a year after that there was English mixed into what he told me when he came home from school, and the Guiyang in his grandparents' speech was being rinsed out of him a little at a time. Sometimes I would put a sentence to him in Guiyang dialect on purpose. He would blink, laugh, and answer me back, and the tail of the sentence had already gone wrong.

I minded a little. Only a little. A child grows forward, and a mother's only job is to keep walking forward with him.

At the end of that November we spent Thanksgiving at an American friend's house in Austin. That was the first Thanksgiving in America that was really a Thanksgiving for me; at the one before, my body was present and I was not. The turkey was huge, and the pumpkin pie was sweet to the point of cloying (that particular item I have never managed to love, even now). Before the meal a whole room of people held hands and gave thanks. I could not follow much of it and only lowered my head along with them.

When it came to my turn to speak inside myself, what I said was: the three of us, together.



Photo: November 1989, Austin. Thanksgiving at an American friend's house. That was the year I finally had something to give thanks for.

We stayed on in Austin two more years. Those two years passed ordinarily, so ordinarily that there is nothing to write: he studied and did his laboratory work, I kept the house, the child started kindergarten and traded his Guiyang dialect for Texan English so fast it caught me off balance.

At the end of 1991, along with finishing his degree, my husband found a good job, and the three of us moved from Austin to Dallas.

On moving day the car was packed to the roof. It came to me suddenly that three years earlier, leaving Shanghai, everything I

owned had been one suitcase. Three years, and the suitcase had become a carload. That, I suppose, is what putting down roots means.

Dallas is bigger than Austin, and hotter. That first summer I pushed the door open and the heat came at me like a wall. I stood in the doorway and thought: good. Here, then. Whatever comes of it, good or bad, it will be here.

I planted my first flowers in the yard. The soil is red and very hard, and I broke it up with a spade over two afternoons. Whatever I planted grew, though not all of it; whatever died I replaced. The neighbor asked me across the fence what that flower was, and since I could not produce the English name I pointed at it for her. She laughed and said a word, and I said the word after her, and I kept it. Of the first several dozen English words I learned in America, nearly half are the names of flowers.

Those were the steadiest years I had after coming to America. My husband's work was settled, the child took to school like a fish to water, and the pots and pans came into the house one at a time. I began to live the days in finer detail: the curtains had to go with the color of the sofa, a festival had to look like a festival, Sunday you went out and walked somewhere. People say all that is froth. I do not think so. There are very few solid things a person can hold in a lifetime, and making the days good to look at is the one that costs least and is worth most.



Photo: The nineteenth of October, 1992, my younger son born at St. Paul Hospital in Dallas, Texas, USA. The love between a mother and her child is the most beautiful music in the world.

In 1992, at thirty-four, I was carrying the second one.

People tried to talk me out of it: at your age, with the eldest already in school, why put yourself through it. My accounting was a different book. When my eldest was born his father was away much of the time; and for a whole year, when he was three going on four, I was the one away from him. As his mother I was in arrears by a stretch. I wanted to make that stretch up, and not to my eldest either, but to myself. You only learn in middle age that some things do not go away if you leave them undone. They stay exactly where they are and wait for you.

On the nineteenth of October my younger son was born at St. Paul Hospital in Dallas.

I remember that day very firmly. The hospital corridor is long, the lights are white, nurses push carts up and down and their soles make no sound at all on the floor. In the delivery room I heard him cry his first cry, and the nurse brought him over and

laid him on my arm and said something I did not catch, and all I saw was that she was smiling.

I was smiling too.

One born in Guiyang, one born in Dallas. One a child of the east of the river, one a child of the west. Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west: I have used that old saying most of my life to explain my own fate, and the truest footnote to it is these two boys. The elder was carried over from the eastern bank; the younger grew straight up out of the western one. Between the two brothers lie seven years and nine months, and a whole Pacific Ocean.

My elder son's birth certificate is in Chinese, the paper gone brittle, stamped with the red seal of the Guizhou provincial people's hospital. My younger son's is in English, laminated, its corners crisp. I keep the two pieces of paper in the same tin box. Putting them in, I thought: there is not much a mother manages to accomplish in a life, and getting the children of both banks into the same box may count as one.

What I did not know then was this: these walls of St. Paul Hospital, this long corridor, this smell of disinfectant, would be waiting for me again a few years later, and would keep me a great deal longer than this time. At the time I knew nothing. At the time I only knew that I had a seven-pound-something baby in my arms and that outside the window it was October in Texas, blue past all reason.

"The love between a mother and her child is the most beautiful music in the world!"

That sentence I wrote under the photograph. I was not thinking of anything in particular when I wrote it, I wrote what came. Reading it later, I decided it was not badly put. There is a

great deal of music a woman gets to hear in one life, and the most beautiful piece needs no ticket.

Home from the hospital, my eldest was waiting at the door. He was seven, and came up to my waist. I lowered his brother a little so he could see, and he put out one finger and touched the baby's cheek and snatched it back at once, as though he had touched something of great consequence.

That half year was the finest half year of my life. The younger one wanted feeding three or four times a night and I lay with my eyes open counting toward daylight; the elder wanted company over his writing after school, and I soothed the small one with one hand and watched the big one with the other. Tired, truly tired, but it was the kind of tiredness that grows upward, not the kind that sinks. When a person's strength goes where that person wants it to go, it does not count as suffering.

I was not quite thirty-five then. The suitcase had long been empty and the house was fuller by the day: two children, a kitchen's worth of pots and pans, a yard of flowers newly taken root. My whole mind was on how to make the years ahead livelier still.

The suitcase I had brought from Shanghai sat on a shelf in the garage all those years, gathering dust. We moved once and I could not bring myself to throw it out. It was no longer much good for carrying anything, one of the catches broken, a piece knocked off the corner. But it was the whole of what I had carried from east of the river to west of it, it was everything I owned and everything I was in the year I turned nearly thirty-one. I kept it not out of nostalgia but as a reminder: this family began with one suitcase, so however much gets added afterward, it is never too much, and none of it needs to be held too dear.

In another half year, the family doctor would telephone me.

West of the River: The Valley of the Shadow



On the nineteenth of October, 1992, my younger son was born at St. Paul Hospital in Dallas. The day we brought him home the autumn sun had the car windows hot to the touch. My elder son was eight that year, and he leaned over the baby seat the whole way, watching his brother, unable to take his eyes off him. The days have settled at last, I thought. From Guiyang to Austin, from Austin to Dallas, so many moves, so many changes of standing, and on this day the four of us were finally living, all together and all in order, under one roof.

Man reckons, and Heaven decides. Plans cannot keep up with change.

The word cancer was not, in fact, a stranger in our family. In April 1985, when my elder son was barely three months old, my mother-in-law died of lung cancer in Guiyang. We were all still in China then. I took the baby to the hospital, went in a hurry, and on the way home he fell asleep in my arms, asleep and knowing nothing. I thought at the time that once in a lifetime was already more than enough weight for one family to carry.

April 1993

In April 1993 I went for a routine physical examination. When the results came back everyone was stunned. I was only thirty-five, and though I had my share of headaches and colds and days of feeling off, I had never had a serious illness in my life. How could I suddenly have cancer, and blood cancer at that?

My family doctor was a middle-aged American, a white man, the first family doctor I ever had after coming to America. On the afternoon of the third day after the tests I got a call from him personally, telling me to go to the hospital at once. I did not at the time understand exactly why he wanted me to go, and so I did not take what he said seriously.

I ignored him, so he telephoned my husband's company and demanded that he take me to the hospital immediately. Afterward my husband called home from the office and said he was taking me to the hospital. I asked him what for. He said, "I am not too clear about it either. Just that we have to go to the hospital again." I refused.

That night, after seven o'clock, the doctor telephoned the house. He said to my husband, "If she does not come to the hospital today, her life could be in danger at any moment." And then, "Your wife's life is in your hands."

A doctor who had seen me only a handful of times, making three calls in one day for a patient who would not do as she was told, each call more urgent than the last. You could say that this doctor was the first person to save my life. If he had not held so absolutely to his responsibility for a patient's life, there would be no today for me.

Having no choice, I agreed to go to the outpatient department at St. Paul Hospital in Dallas: the same hospital where my younger son had been born a few months earlier. The same

building, the same corridor, the same lights. Last time I had walked out of it carrying a baby. This time I was the one who stayed.

In the emergency room, with the blood drawn, waiting for the doctor's order releasing me, what I got instead was this: "You cannot leave the hospital today. You must be admitted for treatment immediately." "You most likely have blood cancer."

Blood cancer? I did not believe it, and did not dare to believe it. I still insisted on going home, because my two children needed their rest and their sleep, and I had to see to them.

The doctor said, "We have to be responsible for your life. The final diagnosis will have to wait for the bone marrow puncture tomorrow."

By the time all the admission paperwork was done and I was in a bed on the oncology ward, it was eleven at night. My husband went out of the ward door with the little one on one arm and the big one by the hand. I watched the three of their backs grow smaller and smaller. I was worried and I was frightened, I was terrified and helpless, I did not know how I was going to face the future or these days that left a person at a complete loss.

Early the next morning a Pakistani oncologist came in, a man past middle age, Dr. Khan, and did the bone marrow puncture himself. When the needle went in I heard the dull sound of it inside my own bone. The results confirmed it: I did have blood cancer, chronic granulocytic leukemia. (That was the name they used then. Today the same disease is called chronic myeloid leukemia, CML.)

One name, and a person is lifted out of one life and set squarely down in another.

The days in pieces

The moment I went into hospital, the ordinary, peaceful life of our family of four was knocked into pieces. My husband had to work. My eight-year-old could only take the school bus to school and back by himself. And my younger son, only six months old, what was to be done about him? Overnight, caring for the baby became our greatest difficulty. In the urgency of it my husband and I decided to ask friends who lived in Austin to look after him for a month, to put out the fire at our eyebrows.

After three weeks in hospital my blood counts came under some degree of control. Once discharged, besides the daily chemotherapy medication (Hydrea, two thousand milligrams), I had to go to the doctor's office every week to be seen and to have a blood count done.

Every day I went to the hospital I had to bring both children and a stroller besides. The stretch from the parking lot to the consulting room is not long, but pushing the stroller, leading the older one by the hand, carrying the bottles and the diaper bag, I often had to stop and rest twice on the way. What with the side effects of the chemotherapy drugs, the pressure of daily life, and the sheer physical exhaustion, I was worn out in body and mind, and my strength no longer answered to my will.

At the end of our rope, we got in touch with Sister Xiaoxia and Brother Zhang, who were living in Mississippi at the time. Our thought was to ask Sister Xiaoxia to come to Dallas and help look after the baby a while. In the end the two of them talked it over and simply took my younger son home to raise at their own house. It was thanks to the wholehearted help of that elder brother and elder sister that we got room to breathe.

What it is like for a mother to put a six-month-old child into someone else's hands, I still cannot tell you today. All I remember

is that when the car pulled away I did not turn around. There are roads you cannot go on walking if you turn around.

The day after Thanksgiving that year, alone with my two children, one aged one and one aged eight, I flew for more than twenty hours, Dallas to Los Angeles, Los Angeles to Shanghai, and went back to China for the first time. Five full years and more since I had left my country and left my parents and family. Only when the plane touched down did I understand that this trip was not entirely about missing them. I wanted my parents to see me one more time, while there was still time.

I stayed three months at my parents' house, and then took the two children back alone to our own home in Dallas.



Photo: Nineteen ninety-three, the months after the diagnosis. We held the birthdays as usual, went to Disney in Orlando as usual, stood in a row in the photographer's shop as usual, one, two, three, smile. You cannot see a thing of it in the pictures. That is exactly what I wanted.

In those years I worked out a method of my own. When it is time to take the medicine, take the medicine; when it is time to have blood drawn, have blood drawn; and when the blood has been drawn, take the children out for ice cream. The doctor's calendar belongs to the doctor and mine belongs to me. On my calendar are written whose birthday it is, which day school starts, when the Christmas tree comes into the house. Two calendars, each keeping to itself, and neither one is to take the other's ground.

Kept going on oral medication, round and round again, it held for about four years. During those four years the doctors also tried interferon injections, but the side effects were more than I could take, and it had to be stopped.

July 1997

In July 1997 I went to the hospital with a sudden and serious turn for the worse. It was a full week before my next scheduled visit. The blood work confirmed that my condition had indeed turned malignant, and I was admitted at once.

The bone marrow report that followed showed this: alongside the chronic myeloid leukemia I had now developed acute leukemia as well, with severe anemia besides.

Under high-dose chemotherapy twice a week, headaches, nausea, vomiting, blood drawn, blood transfused, all became a major part of my daily life. The chemotherapy wore me down to nothing, and the side effects of the prednisone kept me from sleeping at night. Looking at my own body growing weaker and my own face growing gaunt, I truly did feel bitter and wretched.

What I could bear least of all was that the good soft hair I had always had began, as the high-dose chemotherapy went on, to fall out in handfuls.

I am a woman who loves beauty. I could accept a bone marrow puncture, I could accept two injections a day, I could accept vomiting three times a day. What I could not accept was the handful of hair in the comb. In those weeks I did not look in the mirror. When the nurse came to take my temperature I turned my face to the window.

I was in an isolation room at St. Paul Hospital. The children looked at me through the glass, and to come in they had to wash their hands and put on a gown, and only one at a time. My elder son was twelve that year, and he would come in and stand still first, as correct as if he were visiting an elder. My younger son was not yet five, understood no rules at all, and threw himself forward to climb onto the bed. The nurse stopped him the first time. The second time she did not.

We had our pictures taken in that room. One with each child. What I wanted to keep was not the hospital room. It was the way the two of them looked that year.



Photo: August 1997, St. Paul Hospital. I am in a mask and they are in gowns. My younger son was born in this hospital, and five years later I was in the same building waiting for my blood counts to come back up. The same walls, two different lives.

After a month of treatment my condition finally steadied, and my attending physician at last agreed that I could go home. Through the careful treatment and care of all the medical staff, and the concern of family and friends, I came out of danger once again, came out of the place of the shadow of death, and went home to be with my children.

February 1998: the little flower hat

After a full six months and more of chemotherapy, my hair was gone entirely.

A friend brought me a hat. A small soft hat with a few cloth flowers on it, the stitches fine and close, in the kind of pink that makes no noise. She said, try it on.

I put it on. I looked in the mirror. It was not bad at all.

From that day on I wore it out of the house. Wore it to the clinic, wore it to the market, wore it to collect the children from school. This was not concealment. Concealment covers a thing over; what I was doing was answering. The illness was going to take my hair and I knew I could not stop it. But what goes on my head is mine to decide. Wherever a flower opens, that place is still my ground.

The method of my whole life comes down to just this one thing: do not butt heads with fate, trade with it. It takes one thing away and I put back one beautiful thing in its place.



Photo: February 1998, Irving. Six months and more of chemotherapy, my hair all gone, and I put on that little flower hat. It is only a hat. But the day I wore it out of the house, I was myself again.

After I was discharged I went back and forth between hospital and home, two points on one line, eight chemotherapy sessions a month, four a week, two weeks on and two weeks off, round and

round again, and that is roughly how it went until May of the year two thousand.

There were good days in those two years too. On the tenth of April, 1999, the family went to the Dallas Arboretum. That day was our wedding anniversary. The tenth of April, 1983, the Honglei Photo Studio in Shanghai; sixteen years, by the count. The irises in the garden were at their best and the children ran on the grass slope. I took a great many photographs. I did not know yet how large a place gardens were going to occupy in this life of mine.

May 2000: my life hanging by a day

The disease turned sharply worse again. The leukemia cell count in my marrow broke well past thirty-five percent, over the twenty percent threshold for blast crisis. Once more I was in real danger, my life hanging between one morning and one evening. Even my attending physician was somewhat at a loss, the Guizhou donkey out of tricks.

The Guizhou donkey at the end of its tricks. I grew up in Guizhou and could write those four characters as a child. I had written them for decades, and this was the first time they had ever landed on me.

In July of the year two thousand I was fortunate enough to be admitted to a two-month clinical trial of a leukemia drug then running at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. The trial drug had no name at the time, only a code: STI-571, supplied by the Novartis pharmaceutical company. The name it went to market under later is Gleevec.

A month later the bone marrow results came back. My leukemia cell count had gone from thirty-five percent to one percent.

Only afterward did I slowly understand what those two months had been. That was the very first group of people to take a certain drug. It would go on to rewrite this disease altogether, would let thousands upon thousands of people who came after eat it and live with the illness as a chronic condition they carried along with them. And I walked into that trial ward at the very hour when I had almost no days left.

Several times in this life of mine it has gone that way: the door opened at the last moment.

In early September the two-month trial ended and I went back to Dallas. On the thirtieth of September my mother and our family had a photograph taken together.



Photo: The thirtieth of September, 2000, my mother and our family. She had come from China to see me. In the photograph she stands beside me with her hand on my arm, and she never once took it away.

October 2000: no more than six months

In October I went to Houston for a follow-up, and the doctor gave me bad news. On the trial statistics, the remission I was in

would last no more than six months, and once it relapsed there would truly be nothing left to try. The doctor's advice to me was this: "Take the chance while you have it. Have a bone marrow transplant."

I went to see two more hematologists, and the answer I got was the same both times.

On the morning of the twentieth of October, with a good friend along, we went to the bone marrow transplant department of Baylor Medical Center in Dallas. After a long talk with its chief physician, Dr. Joseph Fay, he said to me:

"If you are willing to put yourself in our hands for treatment, I promise you we will look after you the way we look after our own family."

We asked him roughly what the success rate was. He said, "Somewhere between ten percent and fifty percent."

How could there be so wide a gap? Dr. Fay's explanation was this: "Given your medical history, your age and your physical condition, perhaps only ten percent. But going by your state of mind, the success rate may be fifty percent."

I sat there turning that sentence over and over. He was telling me that forty percentage points were not in the hospital's hands but in mine. Those forty points have no drug and no machine and no laboratory report. They grow out of how a person gets out of bed, how a person eats, how a person speaks to her children.

Walking out of the hospital that day I said to myself: good. Those forty points are mine.

To everyone's surprise, after a wait of only three short weeks, on the thirteenth of November I got a call from the hospital. They said a marrow match had been found, a full six out of six, and the donor's blood type was the same as mine as well.

The whole medical team congratulated me and were glad for me. Somewhere in this world there was a stranger with six markers, and not one of them off. I have never won anything in my life.

Three weeks with the piece still in my hand

Before a transplant there is a run of tests to assess a patient's basic condition: heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and then age, weight, diagnosis, and how long the disease has run. Once the results passed, the doctor gave me two weeks to decide whether to do it or not.

Those two weeks were the hardest two weeks of my life.

Every morning before work my husband said no, and every evening when he came home he said yes. He was one man in the morning and another at night. When he said no, it was because he was afraid this step would be the one that took me away. When he said yes, it was because he was afraid that without this step there would be no steps at all in six months. We wavered between doing it and not doing it, the piece hovering over the board, and the two weeks went by fast. In the end we had to ask the hospital for one more week.

That week nobody at home mentioned it. Meals were cooked, clothes were washed, homework was signed. At night when I could not sleep I got up and went through the closets, sorting everything out, item by item. Which sweater belonged to which child, which drawer held the insurance papers, which compartment held their birth certificates. I was not tidying. I was writing the instruction manual for this household in a place that does not speak.

The day before Christmas Eve we finally reached our decision and told the hospital.

The next day was Christmas Eve. The four of us had a family portrait taken in Irving. In the photograph I am smiling. The allogeneic bone marrow transplant had entered its countdown, and perhaps this would be the last family photograph we ever had, perhaps in two weeks' time my family and I would each be in a different quarter of the world...



Photo: The twenty-fourth of December, 2000, Christmas Eve, Irving. The bone marrow transplant has entered its countdown. Perhaps this is the last photograph of all of us together; perhaps in two weeks my family and I will each be in a different quarter of the world...

On the twenty-ninth of December the whole family drove to New Orleans. That was our last trip out before the transplant. I sat in the passenger seat looking out the window. The Texas roads are long and straight and the whole way is the color of dry hay. The children slept in the back. My husband drove without speaking. We all knew what kind of trip this was and not one of us said so. In the French Quarter I got out and bought a bag of

powdered-sugar doughnuts and stood at the curb eating them, and got white powder all down my front. I ate three that day.

January 2001

January third: saw to household matters at home, arranged small affairs, and recorded a spoken message separately for each of my two children.

When I set that line down on paper I put it between "saw to household matters" and "arranged small affairs." I still think that was the right place for it. That morning I did the washing, emptied the refrigerator, wrote a note to the school, and then sat down on the living room sofa, switched on the recorder, and said my elder son's name. Then I changed the tape and said my younger son's name.

I will not write what I said. Those two tapes are not for the reader. They were left for them.

I will say only one thing. Recording the second one, I stopped for a long while, because my younger son was eight that year and I did not know whether to use words an eight-year-old could understand or words he would only understand at twenty. In the end I said both.

January fourth: went to the hospital and completed all the relevant formalities. That evening I handed over full authority for the finances to my husband, every last part of it (surrendering power is easy; clawing it back is hard). Then, loath to let go, I said my goodbyes to the children, and we took a photograph to keep.



Photo: The fourth of January, 2001, the eve of the bone marrow transplant, at home, with my two sons. This was the last night I slept in my own house. The last night I knew was the last.

At five in the morning on the fifth of January my husband went with me to the bone marrow transplant department at Baylor Medical Center. Into the operating room at seven thirty, and two hours later a triple-lumen central line was in place in my left chest.

From that day the transplant was on its countdown: minus five days.

January sixth (minus four) to January seventh (minus three): the preparatory treatment began. Chemotherapy.

January eighth (minus two) to January tenth (day zero): total body irradiation at ultra-high dose, roughly ten thousand times a normal X-ray, twice a day, thirty minutes each time.

Those days I lay on that table with the machine turning above my head. I counted inside myself. I knew what they were doing at

that moment: clearing my own marrow out of me without leaving a trace, taking apart, completely, the part of this person that makes blood. When they were done taking it apart, I would be an empty house. An empty house waiting for a stranger to move in.

I was not afraid of the taking apart. What I was afraid of was that it would be taken apart and no one would come.

January 10, day zero

January tenth, day zero. The donor's marrow stem cells arrived at the hospital by chartered flight, and after testing and processing by the radiology department were delivered safely to the ward.

At around ten o'clock at night, Ms. Monica's marrow stem cells went into my body through the central line, drop by drop. The transplant went on until the small hours of the following morning.

I did not sleep that night. I watched the bag hanging on the stand. One drop. One drop. One drop. There are very few chances in a life to watch your own life come into you one drop at a time.

About her, everything the hospital would tell me at the time came to two lines: female, twenty-nine years of age.

Two lines, and that was all. All of us were curious, wanting to know who on earth this person was. A young woman of twenty-nine, somewhere in this world, who did not know me and owed me nothing, and who one day walked into a room, put out an arm, and said: take it.

January eleventh (plus one), the first day after the transplant. By then my own blood-forming system had been entirely destroyed, and every related count, white cells, red cells, hematocrit, hemoglobin, platelets, was at rock bottom, the white cell and platelet counts in particular near zero.

With no resistance whatsoever, the slightest infection would have consequences past imagining. So every one of the medical staff and all our family and friends carried the same wish: waiting for the new marrow to grow inside me.

In the waiting and the hoping, seven days went by, gone in the flick of a finger. Tension, anxiety, unease were written on everyone's face, my attending physician not excepted. He may have been more anxious than the rest of us.

January 18, day plus eight

January eighteenth (plus eight), the eighth day after the transplant, the eighth day of rising from the dead!

The new marrow inside me had at last parted the clouds and found the sun, and had begun to grow.

Every face was full of happy smiles. Dr. Fay's smile was the broadest, because this was the proof of his and his staff's fine medicine.

What is life? Life is bearing. Bearing the accident, bearing the disaster, bearing the upheaval, bearing all of everything, everything of all.....

What I thought about that day was none of these large truths. What I thought about was something very small: when the nurse pushed the door open in the morning to report the numbers, the sun happened to be falling on the edge of the paper in her hand. I thought, I can have a drink of water today. I thought, I will probably see my younger son start middle school. I thought, when I get out of here I am going to plant something in the front yard.

The bitter days, we lived them sweet.

Every method I have had in this life is inside those six characters. It does not mean waiting for the bitter days to be over

and then having something sweet. Wait for that and it never comes. It means that right in the middle of the bitter days you dig out a little sweetness by force: one flower hat, one bag of doughnuts that gets powder all over you, one family photograph you know may well be the last. When the sun came up on the eighth day I understood completely: all those years I had not been gritting my teeth, I had been saving. All that saved-up sweetness turned, on that day, into part of the fifty percent.

The team led by Dr. Fay in the bone marrow transplant department at Baylor Medical Center in Dallas made good on the promise they gave me when they asked me to put myself in their care. Whether the doctors' medicine or the nurses' skill, I consider both first class, absolutely superb.

After

Once I was home from the hospital I had to go in for tests and treatment seven days a week. Three months later it became three days a week, then two days, then one.

Six months on, chronic graft-versus-host disease began to appear in me and to progress: eye disease, mouth ulcers, gastrointestinal trouble, obstruction of the esophagus and the throat, skin problems, fingernails and toenails coming away..... Several of these were severe enough that they nearly cost me my life.

When another person's marrow moves into your body, the matter is not finished when the forms are signed and the drip has run out. It is every year afterward, working things out with the new tenant.

February 2006: her

In 2006, five years after the transplant, Ms. Monica came to Dallas on business, and we finally had the chance to meet.

We arranged to meet at Williams Square in Irving. I got there very early that day. I had imagined a thousand times what she looked like. Six markers out of six, a full match: our whole family was sure she must be Chinese.

She is not.

Monica's father is Korean and her mother is American; she is of mixed blood herself. She was taller than the two lines in my memory, and when she smiled her eyes curved. I held her hand and did not manage to say one of the things I had prepared. I had prepared for five years, and when the moment came not a single sentence was any use.

On the way home a funny thought came to me. The whole apparatus that makes blood in my body has been hers since January 2001. Her father is Korean, her mother is American, and she herself is of mixed blood. So then: what race, exactly, do I belong to now?

I have been in debt to a great many people in this life. To a family doctor who put three telephone calls into my house. To Dr. Fay, who dared to measure my state of mind at fifty percent. To Sister Xiaoxia and Brother Zhang, who took a six-month-old baby home to raise. To that friend in Austin whose name I will never know, who carried my younger son for a month. And to this one, who gave me her own marrow.

The one who gives you back your life: four characters in Chinese, and I have used them my whole life without once feeling I was repeating myself.



Photo: February 2006, five years after the bone marrow transplant, the first time I ever saw Monica. In the photograph the two of us stand together laughing like old friends. In fact that was the day we met for the first time, though from ten o'clock on the night of the tenth of January, 2001, she had already been living inside me for five years.

On the day I was discharged I walked out through the front door of Baylor Medical Center. The January sun in Texas is thin, and the wind was cool. I stood on the steps a moment.

That trip of mine was a walk out of the valley of the shadow of death.

I did not know then how many years were still to come. The doctors did not know, Dr. Fay did not know, Monica did not know, and I least of all. All I knew was that I went down the steps, got into the car, and went home. There were two children at home waiting to be fed.

West of the River: Twenty-Five Years No One Promised Me



The year the new marrow began to grow inside me, I was forty-three.

The day I was discharged the Texas sun lay on the parking lot at Baylor Medical Center, white enough to hurt. I stood a moment holding the car door, and what was in my mind was not some large truth about surviving a catastrophe. It was a small thing: there was probably still a pile of the boys' clothes in front of the washing machine at home.

The days that came after, I gave a name to in my own mind. I called them the extra days.

My "specialty" was still getting sick, except that from then on the specialty went into semi-retirement. Once every three months, once every six, later once a year: go in, have blood taken, wait for the results, come home. Chronic rejection is like a tenant who will not leave, skin, eyes, mouth, each in turn dropping by to say hello, and neither of us able to get rid of the other. These small matters are of no interest, so I will not go into them...

The sixth of September, 2014; August 2018; September 2019: the bone marrow transplant patients' reunions at Baylor Medical

Center in Dallas, and I have never missed one. Every time I go there are new faces, and every time some old faces are fewer. Nobody says so out loud. We look at each other, we shake hands, and everyone understands. Around 2005 we moved from Irving to Arlington. The house is smaller and the yard is bigger, and I finally had somewhere to plant flowers.

In those years the children grew up, one after the other.

My elder son, Chen Bo, is a child of the east of the river, born in 1985 at the provincial people's hospital in Guiyang. He was eight when I fell ill, exactly the age when a child most needs looking after and is least looked after. He went on to make his own way, gave me little to worry about, and told me little of what he worried about. This book is his doing; he is the one who pressed me to write it. I said, I am a housewife, what have I got worth writing. He said, Ma, write it.



Photo: May 2015, my elder son giving his mother a Mother's Day. He is not much of a talker. Once a year he says it, and this is how he says it.

My younger son, Chen Han, is a child of the west of the river, born on the nineteenth of October, 1992, at St. Paul Hospital in Dallas. I was diagnosed when he was six months old, so that from the time he could remember anything, his mother was a person who took medicine on schedule and had blood drawn on schedule. I expect that shaped him.

In August 2011 we drove, and flew, and drove again, to West Point on the Hudson in New York State, for my younger son's entrance ceremony at the United States Military Academy.

It was very hot that day. He and a company of others just as young stood in the square and swore their oath, uniforms sharp, faces burned red by the sun. I stood in the ranks of the parents and watched him past a great many shoulders. Back home I could not so much as ride a bicycle, and three months after arriving in America I had a driver's license, and at the time I thought that was the limit of how far circumstance could temper a person. It was on that day that I learned how much further circumstance can go: far enough to temper the son of a Guiyang woman into an American cadet standing there taking an oath.

After the oath they marched in formation into the barracks area. The parents could go as far as a line and no further. I watched the back of his head grow smaller and smaller until I could not tell which one was his. A mother beside me was crying. I did not cry. I was only thinking of eighteen years earlier, when I sat in an emergency room insisting on going home, because my two children needed their rest and their sleep and I had to see to them. What I was most afraid of then was that one day they would not be able to remember my face.



Photo: August 2011, my younger son's entrance ceremony at West Point. He is inside the crowd and I am outside it.

In August 2014 we visited him at his post, and I took a picture of him. The caption I wrote came to four characters: a gallant and dashing figure.

In May 2015 we went to my son's graduation from West Point. The caps all went up into the sky at once and the whole field was white specks. I looked up at those caps with my neck aching and could not bear to lower it. Throwing the caps is probably the same at military academies the world over, and out of all of them coming down, one was ours.



Photo: May 2015, my son's graduation from West Point. In the moment the caps went up I counted the days over in my head.

After graduation he was an officer. Things went onto his shoulders one at a time and I could not tell one from another, so I asked him every time and forgot the answer as soon as I turned around. What I did recognize were other things: how squarely his heels came together when he stood, how much faster he ate than he used to, how his luggage was always packed to the last corner. A child born in America grew up looking like America; and the woman who bore him came over from Guiyang carrying one suitcase. Put those two facts side by side and I often have to stop and stare at nothing for a moment.

In July 2016 my younger son married. My daughter-in-law is called Sarah-Gail, with a bright, open laugh, and the first time we

met she called me Mom, and I could not find anything to say back for quite a while.

For the photograph from that day, the caption in my album is one line: the parents at my younger son's wedding. I have spent a lifetime taking pictures of other people, the lens always turned on the children, on the flowers, on the scenery, and that day for once somebody turned a lens on the two of us. We are standing together. My husband's hair has gone white, and mine is the hair that grew back after the transplant, softer than it used to be and thinner too. Both of us are smiling a little foolishly.



Photo: July 2016, the parents at my younger son's wedding. I did not take this one, which is why I am in it.

People ask me why I am always off somewhere these days. I say that my hobbies are traveling and looking at gardens, photography and taking pictures. That is true, and it is not the whole truth.

I am not much good at posing when I am out. In my husband's photographs I am usually turned away from him, crouched in front of a sign reading the small print on it, or standing at a wall counting bricks. When we get home I copy out what I have looked up, line by line, under the pictures, and I copy carefully. Other people travel to have been somewhere. I travel to get it straight.

The first long trip after the transplant was February 2004, a cruise to Cozumel in Mexico. The day we boarded I was not at all sure about it: no hospital on a ship, no signal at sea, and what if something happened. My husband said, then we deal with it when it happens. In the end nothing happened. I stood on deck with the wind blowing my hair into a mess (it had only just started to come back then), and it came to me all at once: I have been asking what if something happens for eleven years now, and if I keep asking it I will have handed the whole of my days over to it.

After that there was no stopping. The Caribbean, the Bahamas, Saint Martin, Yellowstone, Mount Rushmore, Salt Lake City, the Great Smokies, Las Vegas, Taiwan, Mexico. My husband handles the route, I handle the pictures, and when we get home I make the album. He often says one thing: do not tire yourself out. I say, what tires me is the collage and the layout, not the walking.

In April 2012 I went back east of the river.

Guiyang was still Guiyang, only the streets had all changed and so had the people. We went to the Thousand-Household Miao Village at Xijiang in the southeast of the province, and to the Huangguoshu Falls. Standing under the falls with the spray

in your face there is no talking at all. At thirty I walked out of that province with nothing before my eyes and nothing in my hands, and what I was thinking about then was buying back the time I had lost. Twenty-odd years later I came back, and I had not bought back much time, but I had picked up a life. In September 2015 I went again, to see my parents, to see the old house, to see that river under the Jiaxiu Tower. The water still goes by at the same unhurried pace.

In April 2013 we went to New Orleans for our thirtieth wedding anniversary. Of the two young people photographed at the Honglei studio in Shanghai thirty years before, one had become an old man working at a pharmaceutical company and the other an old woman whose specialty is being sick. Of those thirty years, twelve he spent with me in hospital corridors. He never brings it up, and I would be embarrassed to bring it up for him, so I am putting it here.

In October 2015, in Orlando, I took a helicopter tour over the city. The caption I wrote was: straight up into the clouds. A woman who cannot ride a bicycle, riding in a helicopter at sixty and complaining that it does not go high enough. In November of the same year we went to White Sands in New Mexico for my birthday, a whole field of sand that is white, so white it does not look like anything on this earth. I walked out onto it a way and looked back at my footprints, a clear line of them, and the wind smoothed them over in no time. Let it smooth them over. I had the picture.

In November 2017 there was a dinner for my sixtieth birthday. A whole table of people, and when they lit the candles what I thought was: those three words, sixty years old, I never expected to have. Thinking it did not stop me. I blew them out, all of them, in one breath.

In July 2017 we boarded the Norwegian Getaway. The route was Copenhagen, Berlin, Tallinn, St. Petersburg, Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen. Ten days and nine nights, six countries. We sailed from Copenhagen at five in the afternoon on the twenty-seventh of July, went more than fourteen hours down the Baltic, and reached the German port of Warnemünde at half past seven on the morning of the twenty-eighth. A tour coach carried our party of fifteen south. There was a comfort stop on the way, half a euro each. That, too, went into my album, and I did not leave out a single figure.

Three hours by road, and we were in Berlin.

That day we saw the Olympic Stadium, Charlottenburg Palace, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, the Victory Column, the Reichstag. The histories of all these places I looked up when I got home and copied out under their photographs. I will not copy them out again here.

There were a great many people at the Brandenburg Gate that day, tourists from all over the world. The guide said that the war leveled most of the Pariser Platz, and only this gate came through. It became the witness of Germany's reunification, and the emblem of the city of Berlin.

A woman who had once been told she had six months left, standing under the Brandenburg Gate, thinking.

What I was thinking I did not tell anyone. There were a lot of people, the wind was strong, my husband was a little way off adjusting his camera. I stood there about five minutes, and then I caught up with the group.



Photo: The twenty-eighth of July, 2017, Berlin. The war leveled most of the Pariser Platz, and only this gate came through.

Not far from there is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

It is called a memorial, but in fact it is only a field of gray concrete blocks, regular in size, uneven in height. In all there are two thousand seven hundred and eleven concrete slabs of differing heights across the square. That number was set by the American architect Peter Eisenman according to the area of the site and carries no symbolic meaning at all. Between the slabs run passages that are not wide, and each slab is tilted slightly, about a meter across, over two meters long, each a different height. The whole memorial carries no marking or explanation of any kind. It

simply lies there, gray rectangles, in the very heart of central Berlin.

There are no Jewish remains here. It is only a square for remembering.

I walked very slowly in that field of stone. By the time I reached the middle the slabs were higher than my head, there was nothing on either side but gray, the ground under my feet ran on a slant, and the sound of the street had suddenly gone far away. A memorial that explains nothing and symbolizes nothing turns out to be the one that makes a person remember everything.

I have no standing to speak for anyone. I will only set down what I saw: that day the Berlin sky was overcast, the stone was cool, and as I came out the sun happened to come out too.



Photo: The twenty-eighth of July, 2017, Berlin, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Two thousand seven hundred and eleven gray concrete slabs, lying still in the heart of the city.

A little further on the guide pointed at a pond and a patch of perfectly ordinary ground and said that deep beneath it had been

Hitler's bunker, and the place where he finally killed himself. On the surface there is nothing at all.

We went to the Berlin Wall as well, where Checkpoint Charlie still stands. The wall was begun on the thirteenth of August, 1961, and ran one hundred sixty-seven point eight kilometers in all. It shut West Berlin inside East Germany like an island, which is why West Berlin came to be called the show window of the free world. Show window: I said those two words over twice in my mind.

That whole area now is the Berlin shopping center, commercial banks, and Starbucks coffee everywhere you look. The traffic in the street never stops. In the evening we got on the coach and said goodbye to Berlin.

After the ship left Germany there were five more countries. The old town of Tallinn is paved in stone that clacks under your feet. In St. Petersburg we went along the Neva by boat and into the Winter Palace and the Summer Palace, so much gold that the eye cannot take it all in, and I wrote down every sentence the guide said. Helsinki is as quiet as a city that has just been washed. In Stockholm I went to the city hall and had my picture taken in front of the Nobel Prize Museum. Ten days, nine nights, six countries, and on the morning we returned to Copenhagen I was in the cabin sorting photographs, more than a thousand of them. My husband said, this is hardly a holiday. I said, this is handing in my homework.

In December of that same year we went to Florida.

Saturday the ninth of December, half past ten in the morning, American Airlines flight 1523 out of Dallas Fort Worth International, arriving at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at nine minutes past two local time.

On this flight I observed a strange phenomenon I had never seen before. The plane was completely full, thirty rows in all, and

our seats were in row twenty-seven. During the flight, every time I raised my head and looked around me, front and back and to both sides, what I saw was that almost all of the heads in view were old heads of white hair, I would estimate seventy to eighty percent of the total, and possibly more. Why should one aircraft carry so many elderly people? I could not help wondering.

When the plane landed and we came off, in the instant I stepped out of the cabin door I saw seven airport staff waiting along the left side of the jetway with seven wheelchairs. At that point my question had found a reasonable explanation.

Later, while we were waiting for the luggage, a second explanation arrived: nearly all the older people on our flight were going on from here to board a cruise ship.

One small case, opened in the air and closed on the ground, the whole thing inside ten minutes, and I was pleased with myself for half a day. My husband says of me that I have to get to the bottom of everything I look at. I say, what else is a person alive for.

At three in the afternoon we got the checked bags, half an hour later we were on the road in a rented Buick, and around five we reached the hotel in Florida City. The next day we started south, the highway over the sea running bridge after bridge, hopping all the way down to Key West. In December the sea is green, the wind is warm, and both sides of the road are nothing but sky. Later we took a boat out to Dry Tortugas National Park, the old fort at the southernmost point of the United States, water on all four sides.



Photo: December 2017, Florida. South all the way, and both sides of the road nothing but sky.

The following September we went to Germany again, this time not with a tour. My younger son and daughter-in-law were stationed there and we went to see them. The same Germany, and the last time I had been noting place names through the window of a coach, while this time I was sitting at their own table eating dinner. On the way we took in Frankfurt, Cologne Cathedral, the Rhine, Luxembourg, Paris, Amsterdam. The sun on the Seine that afternoon was very fine, and I took a picture of my husband from behind without his noticing.

Nobody promised me these years.

Nobody promised me that I would see my younger son put on a cadet's cap. Nobody promised me that I would sit at his wedding table. Nobody promised me that I would stand under the Brandenburg Gate with my mind somewhere else. Nobody promised me the highway over the sea running south. Nobody promised me that I would walk slowly out from between two thousand seven hundred and eleven gray slabs of stone...

These years all came free. What comes free should be used sparingly, and used hard.

On the twenty-sixth of September, 2020, our grandson was born, Levi. That year the whole world was shut indoors and I looked at him through a screen, looked for a very long time. On the thirtieth of July, 2023, our granddaughter was born, Caroline.

When I hold them my hands shake a little. Not from nerves. It is because of those few nights in January 2001, when I recorded a message for each of my two sons, afraid of exactly one thing: that one day they would not remember me. That was what I was afraid of. It never once entered my head that a day would come when two smaller people would depend on me to remember the day they were born.

That spring in 1993, I was thirty-five and my younger son was six months old. This summer in 2023, I am sixty-five with my granddaughter in my arms. The stretch in between, gone in the flick of a finger.

The refrigerator at home is covered now with pictures of the two of them, layer over layer, the old ones all buried. My husband says it is time to clear some off. I say no, leave them up. Thirty years ago what I feared most was that nobody would remember my face, and now I lower my head and the refrigerator is covered in the faces I mean to remember. However you add that account up, I came out ahead.

Photo: Levi was born in the autumn of 2020. That year the whole world was shut indoors, and I looked at him through a screen for a very long time.

On the fifteenth of October, 2019, we went to the Fort Worth Botanic Garden.

Nothing in particular happened that day; we went for a walk. The two of us each took a long pole and climbed the hill for exercise, by way of celebrating. What we were celebrating, I did not write in the caption either. I walked slowly in that garden, looking at the trees. In autumn a tree lets its leaves down a layer at a time, unhurried, as though it knew it would grow them again next year.

I did not know that day that a few years later there would be three trees in that garden that were ours.

Lived Sweetly: A Woman Who Loves Beauty



Women who love flowers love beauty, and I am the sort who falls for a flower the moment she sees one.

I like flowers. Flowers hold a particular pull for me. A flower can give a person the enjoyment of beauty; a flower can make a person's heart open and her spirit lift; a flower can also refine the temperament.

I love flowers, love their spotless purity, their selflessness and their fearlessness. I love flowers, love their fragrance and their grace, standing slender and tall. I love flowers, love the drift and the sway and the scatter of them.

Those few lines I wrote on the first page of an album. Reading them back I thought they were a little large, and in the end I could not bring myself to cut them. Everyone should have one thing in life about which they are allowed to talk a little large. Mine is flowers.

Some people think loving flowers is an idle person's business, that only when the days have gone easy do you have time for things you cannot eat or drink. I do not see it that way. In this life of mine the busy stretches have far outnumbered the idle ones, and bitter days I have had my share of. And the harder those years

were, the more I insisted on setting something alive and fragrant and open on the windowsill, in the yard, in the middle of the dinner table. The days are bitter. A person has to put the sugar in herself. Flowers are the sugar I put in.



Taken with a phone

When I made that album of flowers I wrote myself a statement of intent:

Borrowing the album platform, and inventing my own method of composition, I blend photographs I have taken myself with collages I have assembled myself, so as to dot the eyes of the dragon and give the album a livelier, brighter effect.

It sounds solemn, like a project with a budget. In practice it was entirely domestic. No camera, no tripod, none of those long and short lenses. Just a telephone. Which is why, in that album, the words "taken with a phone" appear a good few dozen times over. Watering early in the morning, seeing the drops still hanging on a leaf, crouch down and take one. Bringing in the washing at dusk, seeing the western light come in on a slant across the petals, put down the washing and take another. Halfway through cooking, turn the heat down, go out and take the picture, come back and go on with the stir-fry.

It is after the taking that my real work begins. In the evening I pour the pictures out of the phone one by one, four or five of the same flower, put the best in the middle and range the rest around it, in a line or in a stack, the darker colors weighting the corners and the lighter ones letting it breathe. And so, one page. Underneath a page like that I write one word: collage.

I do not only photograph the flower. I also arrange it.

Other people may not see the difference; I see it clearly. Photographing is recording, collaging is making. Recording keeps what is already there; making brings out what was not. My hobbies, listed out, make quite a string: travel and gardens, photography, decorating, art collage, cooking, horticulture and flowers. In fact they are all one thing. When there is material in your hands, you make it into something good to look at. A length of cloth, a plate of food, a yard, a stretch of years that was not yours to decide: all of it counts as material.

The same temper runs indoors. However ordinary the dish, I arrange it before it goes on the table, a little red at the edge of the green, dark food on a white plate. When the children were small they did not understand and would ask what I was arranging it for, since it was all going into the stomach anyway. I said, going into the stomach is going into the stomach, and looking at it is looking at it, two different things. A life is made out of those glances, one after another.

That album took me a long time. One photograph to one line, one line to its own position, and working past midnight was ordinary. When a page was done I would look at it again the next morning, and whatever did not sit right I pulled apart and did over. Nobody was hurrying me and nobody was going to inspect it. I did it that way because I wanted to.



The front yard

Our yard was made a little at a time. The first year after we moved in the front was bare, and the back was barer than the front.

The maple by the road in the front yard is the one I noticed first. It asks nothing of anyone; it grows on its own year after year,

comes into leaf in spring and turns in autumn, and when it goes red the whole street brightens a shade with it. I have photographed it more than anything else; it has its share of all four seasons. Later we added a Japanese maple, smaller leaves, a finer shape, a deeper color, like the quiet younger sister of the first one.

There is a patch of crocosmia in the front as well. Orange-red, each stem striking out sideways, blooming without the least apology. I like a flower with no apology in it. They do not ask how your year has been. When the day comes, they open.

Some years I spent longer crouched in that yard than sitting indoors. Mud on my hands and mud under my fingernails, and a good long wash when I came in. My husband would look out the window sometimes and say, take a rest. I would say, what do you think I am doing.

When the yard was photographed I went further afield. I know these streets well now: which house has a ginkgo at the gate that goes yellow in autumn as though somebody had lit it; which stretch of road has the best leaf-fall, rustling underfoot; whose crape myrtle blooms out over the wall, which I photograph every year without the owner ever knowing. One picture I labeled *busy gathering flowers*, and another *all the colors there are*, and one more I gave three characters: *flower fairy*. People probably laugh and say this woman names her photographs very carelessly. Careless it is. Those were the words in my mind at the time, so those are the words I wrote down.

I use one telephone and I walk a few streets around my own door. And I always feel I am walking in a very large garden.



The magnolia

Against the wall in the back yard there is a magnolia.

Under that one name hang a whole string of others: white magnolia, mulan, spring-greeter, spring-watcher, spring-answering flower, jade-hall spring, xinyi. I copied all these names out, and while I was copying them I wondered what one flower needed so many names for. Later I understood: it is because so many people have loved it, and each place called it its own way, and that is how it came by so many.

Its flower meaning is: gratitude repaid, sincerity, purity of character, fragrance, cleanness.

The first of those I copied out without thinking much about it. Gratitude repaid. Two characters. I copied them under the photograph the way I copied every other flower meaning, and having copied them I turned to the next picture.

The magnolia blooms without leaves. Out of bare branches, overnight, come all those white thick upheld flowers, each one opening upward, like a tree holding up cups. It opens fast and it opens full, and it drops just as decisively; one gust of wind and the ground is covered. I have swept it up several times, and while sweeping I felt a little sorry, and when the sweeping was done my heart was clean: it had opened everything it had to open, and kept nothing back.

Two of its names I am especially fond of. One is spring-watcher and one is spring-greeter. One stands in the winter and looks ahead; the other brings the spring in at the door. The same tree, two ways of saying it, and both are right.

In those years I photographed it most diligently of all. One year it flowered particularly well and I carried a low stool out and sat under the tree from morning until noon, and every time the

light shifted I took another. Back indoors I found more than a hundred. I picked through them until late at night, kept nine, and made them into one page.

Those two characters, gratitude repaid, have sat at the bottom of that page ever since. Sat there, and I never moved them.

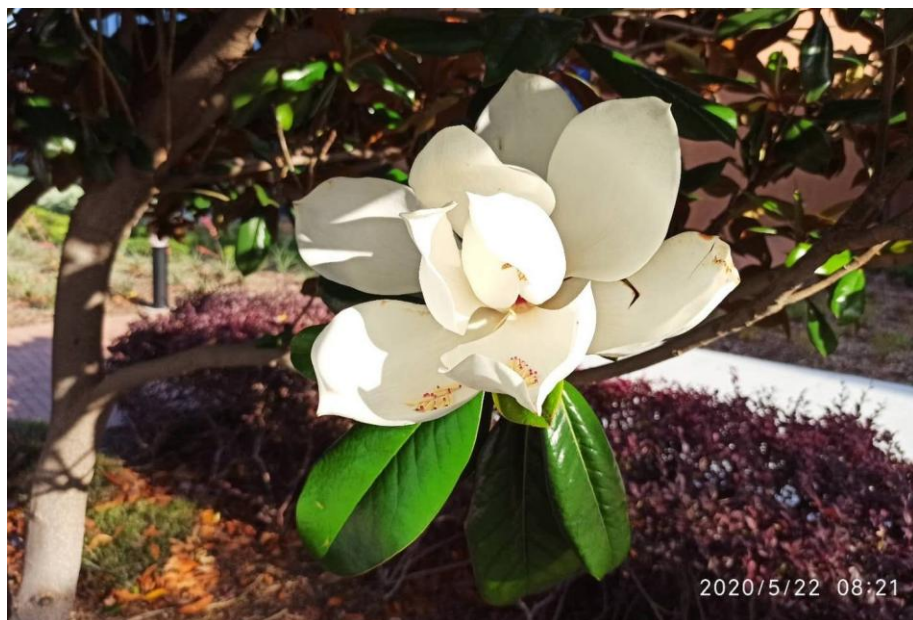


Photo: The magnolia in the back yard. Flower meaning: gratitude repaid, sincerity, purity of character, fragrance, cleanness. This tree flowers first and leafs afterward, so that while it blooms there is not one leaf on the branch. All of its strength goes into the flowering.



The back yard

The irises in the back yard I divided out from one small clump. The French take it for their national flower, and its meaning is one word, elegance. To me it is more than elegant. Three of its

petals hang down and the other three stand up, one bowed and one lifted, and it looks like a flower that has made up its mind.

In autumn there are chrysanthemums. Chrysanthemums are nothing rare where we come from, but I plant them every year. The Chinese say the chrysanthemum blooms in defiance of the frost: every other flower has put itself away and it chooses the turn of the cold to open at its best. That temper has my respect.

In the corner along the back wall I planted a lemon. When the lemon flowers, the scent arrives before you do. Beside it I put up a mandevilla, pink trumpets climbing all the way up past where I can reach. Sitting out there on a summer evening, the lemon flower and the mandevilla mix their scent together, and the mosquitoes come to join in, and I sit slapping mosquitoes and refusing to go indoors.

There are spider lilies in the back yard too, the ones people call the flower of the other shore. When it blooms there is not a leaf on it, and when the leaves come there is no flower; the flower and the leaf never meet in their whole lives. It is a strong red, and the fine long filaments curl and spring outward, as though someone had let off a firework halfway up the air and it had stopped there and stayed. People say it is an unlucky flower. I pay no attention to that. It blooms in my back yard, so it is my flower.



Photo: The irises in the back yard. Three petals down, three petals up, one bowed and one lifted.



Photo: The spider lilies in the back yard, also called the flower of the other shore. When the flower is out there are no leaves; when the leaves come there is no flower. It blooms in my back yard, so it is my flower.



Kept indoors

There is a batch inside the house as well, and in the album I gave them all the same label: kept indoors.

The indoor moth orchids stand the most looking at. Seven or eight blooms ranged along one spike, opening one after another out of step with each other, and they will go on for two or three months. People say moth orchids are difficult. I find them

sensible: leave them alone, do not keep watering them, and they will flower by themselves.

The indoor begonias, I looked up their flower meaning: unhappy love, heartbreak. When I found that out I laughed a little and went on tending them just the same. Flower meanings are given by people; the flower never asked for one. Mine sits on my windowsill flowering away, a great red potful, and whose heart is broken.

The indoor Christmas cactus comes out every year right around Christmas. When it blooms it hangs down layer over layer, like a small pink waterfall. When the children were little the Christmas tree stood in the living room and the Christmas cactus stood on the piano, one of them bought and one of them raised.

In winter it is all gray outside, and those few pots indoors are the whole of the color. Set a person in front of color and it is harder for the inside of her to stand empty.

Some winters were very long. I would sit at the window with gray outside and not much light inside, and move the moth orchid over next to my hand and go along it bloom by bloom, seeing how much further it had got today than yesterday. One bloom a day is still progress. By the time I had counted to the last one, the maple outside would be about ready to bud.



Dead wood meets spring

In that album there is one picture I labeled with four characters: dead wood meets spring.

What it shows is a length of wood in the yard that had dried out long before. The bark split, the color gone gray, a thing that

looked entirely finished. And that spring something new came out of the split, green, very small, pushing up a little at a time.

I photographed it, wrote those four characters under it, and turned the page.

The next page after it is ornamental kale, and the page after that is the Christmas cactus. I did not write one word more. Some things do not need saying, and saying them only makes them lighter.



Photo: Dead wood meets spring.

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A flower is beautiful for a season; you are beautiful for a lifetime

I copied out a whole book of flower meanings. I copied out China's ten famous flowers: the plum is first among flowers, the peony is king of flowers, the chrysanthemum blooms in defiance of frost, the orchid is the gentleman, the Chinese rose is the queen

of flowers. I copied out the Western set too: the briar rose is grace, the white lily is purity, the lemon flower is devoted love, the blue violet is honesty. When I got to roses I had to sort them by number as well: one rose is *there is only you in my heart*, three is *I love you*, nine is *forever*. I copied them out line by line, very carefully, like a primary school child doing homework.

None of what I copied is what I have to say. It is what I wrote down on the flowers' behalf.

Only one line has stayed with me to this day. It is the meaning of the lipstick plant, eight characters:

A flower is beautiful for a season; you are beautiful for a lifetime.

The first time I read it I stopped short. A flower may bloom as well as it likes and it still has only so many days, and one wind and one rain and it is down. But it is not talking about the flower. It is talking about the person looking at the flower. A flower's beauty has a term on it, and a person's does not, so long as she herself will not set it down.

I am a woman who loves beauty. That has not changed since I was young, and it did not change in the hardest years either. February 1998, six months into chemotherapy, my hair coming out in handfuls, coming out until in the end I did not dare look in the mirror. Somebody brought me a hat then, with flowers on it, and we called it the little heart-and-flower hat. I put it on, and I had a picture taken. In the picture I am thin and my color is bad, and the flowers on the hat are good to look at, and the way I am smiling is good to look at too.

I was not thinking about any great truth that day. I only felt that the hair was gone and the hat was still there; that there were flowers on the hat; and that therefore today would do.

Eight characters. It took me until later to understand how exactly right they are.



Photo: A collage. The one in the middle took me a long time to settle on, and the ones around it are all the same flower on the same day.



*Photo: The maple in the front yard, taken with a phone.
When it goes red, the whole street brightens a shade with it.*



The roses

I closed that album with the roses in the back yard.

In China the Chinese rose is called the queen of flowers, and it has not the least queenly air about it. It flowers often, it flowers long, from spring straight through until the cold, and you cut one flush and out comes another. It has thorns and it has caught me several times, and I feed it and prune it every year all the same. On the days it is at its best I cut a few stems and put them in the

vase on the dinner table, so that the family eats with a jar of our own yard in the middle of it.

That is my whole life, then: turn the soil into a yard, turn the yard into photographs, turn the photographs into pages set out one by one, and leave the pages for whoever wants to look at them.

I have never grown anything rare. I have won no prize and nobody comes to view it. What I grow are ordinary flowers: maples, irises, chrysanthemums, roses, and a number whose names are too long to remember. They all do well enough with me. Flowers are not particular about people. Take trouble over them and they will bloom for you; neglect them a while and they hold no grudge, and go on blooming when you come back. In that respect flowers are more decent than people.

Not everything in this life of mine has been sweet. But the flowers went on blooming, the meals went on being cooked, the pictures went on being taken. The bitter half I have never gone into at length. Not because I forgot it, but because I am not willing to let it stain the color of the other half. There is not much in a lifetime that a person gets to decide. Whether it is lived so as to be good to look at is one of them.

I am a woman who loves beauty. That is the definition I have given myself, and the account I give of myself.



Photo: The roses in the back yard. Cut one flush and out comes another, from spring until the cold. This one is the last page of my flower album.

Lived Sweetly: Three Trees



That day was the fifteenth of October, 2019.

We went to the Fort Worth Botanic Garden.

My husband knows that garden better than I do. He volunteers there, squatting in the dirt, able to tell you the family and genus of a leaf, able to give you a plant's Latin name, able to remember which row of shrubs was replanted in which year. I cannot do any of that. All I can tell is whether a thing is good to look at. The two of us walk the same path and look at the same garden's trees and flowers, and each of us is thinking his own thoughts. He is thinking about what they are; I am thinking about what they are like. It has been this way for decades and we have never once fallen out over it.

The autumn sun was fine that day. Autumn in Texas is always too warm to leave. There were a few roses left unfaded in the rose garden, a thin layer of green floating on the water in the Japanese garden, the lawn running all the way out into the shade of the far trees. I stood on the grass a while, looked at that row of tall trees, looked at the autumn flowers that were just at their hour, took a few pictures, and went home.

One afternoon, four photographs, and dinner picked up on the way back. Nothing given much thought.

Sometimes a person stands in the middle of a day with no idea at all what that day is going to turn into. The patch of ground I walked over that day became the piece of ground I value most in my life; the stretch of lawn I walked past without so much as turning my head is where three bronze plaques now stand. All of that came later. At the time it was only a Tuesday afternoon, the weather was good, and my husband and I had come out for a walk.



Photo: The fifteenth of October, 2019, the Fort Worth Botanic Garden. That day I only went for a walk and to look at the flowers. I did not know that six years later I would buy three trees in this garden, and I did not know whom I would buy them for. That year Dr. Fay was still in the world. That year Levi had

not yet been born. The woman in the photograph knows none of it, and is smiling easily.



Six years and more later I came back to that garden. This time there was something to be done.

In the Fort Worth Botanic Garden in Texas, my husband and I bought three trees. They stand side by side, and each of them carries a different weight: not to ornament the scenery, but to set memory down, and keep it with us through the days we go on growing.

Three people. Three trees. One tree each.

I have lived sixty-odd years and I am in debt to a great many people. Some debts can be paid: buy a dinner, send a gift, say thank you, and the thing is done. Three people's debts I cannot pay. This life of mine was held up by those three, one hand each, and that is how it was held as far as today. For a debt like that, money is no use and words are no use. I thought about it and thought about it, and the only thing left was to plant a tree.

A tree does not talk. A tree only grows.



The first tree: Dr. Fay

The first is for Dr. Fay.

The plaque does not say "dedicated." It says "in memory of." Because he is no longer here. On the eighteenth of February, 2022, he died.

Joseph Fay. One of the founders of bone marrow transplantation at Baylor Medical Center. On the twentieth of October, 2000, I sat across from him for the first time. That

autumn the doctors were counting my time in months, and I understood perfectly well myself that the road had come to its end. He finished reading that stack of my records, lifted his head, and said to me:

"If you are willing to put yourself in our hands for treatment, I promise you we will look after you the way we look after our own family."

I asked him the success rate. He said, somewhere between ten percent and fifty percent. I asked him why the range was so wide. He said:

"Given your medical history, your age and your physical condition, perhaps only ten percent. But going by your state of mind, the success rate may be fifty percent."

I have heard a great many doctors speak in this life. Only that one sentence I have carried for twenty-five years. He did not deceive me and he did not frighten me. He handed the ten percent half to medicine, and the fifty percent half he handed back to me. He was telling me: you have a share in this too.

What a dying person fears most is not dying. It is having no hand in it. He gave me something I could do.

I only learned later that he built that transplant center at Baylor himself, from nothing. The year he got it started I was still in Guiyang, not yet married, with no idea there was such a place in the world as Texas. Through those years he kept at it, and made a team out of it, a whole body of practice, a ward full of nurses; so that when I pushed my luggage through that door in January 2001, the whole of it was already there, waiting for me. Most of the care a person receives in a lifetime was prepared for her by people she had not yet met.

When he said "the way we look after our own family," it was not a courtesy. In the half year after the transplant I was at the hospital seven days a week, and chronic rejection came at me one thing at a time: eyes, mouth, stomach and gut, skin, nails. Every one of them he and his people saw me through, one at a time.

On the eighth day after the transplant, the day the new marrow began to grow, there was a ring of people around the bed on rounds, and the one smiling widest was him.

With extraordinary skill and a compassionate heart, he brought life and hope to countless families. To us he was not merely a doctor. He was the steady hand that held fate at the turning point.

The tree's roots go deep into the earth, and so did his giving. No noise about it, and it nourishes for a long time.

The bronze plaque is engraved this way:

IN MEMORY OF DR. JOSEPH FAY

With extraordinary skill and a compassionate heart,

he gave life and hope to countless families.

Photo: In memory of Dr. Fay. Born in 1946, died on the eighteenth of February, 2022, aged seventy-five. When I had my transplant he had been saving people for close to twenty years; when he went, I was still here. There is not one word too many on this plaque, and he was a man with not one word too many in him.

♦ ♦ ♦

The second tree: Monica

The second is for Monica.

On the thirteenth of November, 2000, the match was found. Six markers, six of six, and even the blood type the same. The hospital would tell me eight characters and no more: female, age twenty-nine.

On the tenth of January, 2001, at ten at night, her stem cells were flown to Dallas by chartered plane and went into my body drop by drop, dripping the whole night through.

That night I had never seen her face. She had never seen mine.

A young woman of twenty-nine, somewhere else in America, lying down on a table for a Chinese woman she had never met. She did not know who I was. She did not know I had two sons. She did not know that the younger one was eight that year. All she knew was that there was a person about to die, and that she could keep her from dying.

The rule is this: for one year the two sides do not learn each other's names. After a year, if both are willing, they may meet.

It was five years before we actually met. February 2006, Irving, Williams Square. All the way there I was working out what I would say. I had rehearsed it several times over in my head, once in Chinese and once in English, and neither one would do. Thank you is too light, so light I could not get it out; anything heavier I do not know how to say.

In the end we met and I did not use one word of it.

I had always assumed she must be Chinese; a match that exact. She is not. Her father is Korean and her mother is American. I looked at her smiling, and a very improper thought came up in me: so what race, exactly, do I belong to now?

I have often thought since: the bloodlines of this world are not only born, it turns out. They can also be given. A person can hand over something out of her own body to someone she may never

lay eyes on in her life, and then go back and get on with her own days as though nothing had happened.

A gift of life that gave me twenty-five years of new life.

Twenty-five years. I write those words lightly and living them took a long time. In twenty-five years there were two sons' graduations, one wedding, two grandchildren born, and countless perfectly ordinary mornings on which nothing at all happened. Those mornings are the most expensive thing in it. Those mornings were all given to me by her.

The bronze plaque is engraved this way:

DEDICATED TO MONICA MEHLER

A GIFT OF LIFE THAT MADE POSSIBLE

25 YEARS OF NEW LIFE FOR WEIMING.

Photo: Monica. On the night of the tenth of January, 2001, she was twenty-nine and we were strangers to each other. What she gave me I will never be able to repay, and I have stopped intending to. Some things are not for repaying. They are only for remembering.



The third tree: Shuni Kang

The third is for Shuni Kang.

The first two trees are one for medicine and one for blood. This one is neither.

The hardest thing to get through in those years was not the chemotherapy. It was the nights. In the daytime there are things to do, children to see to, medicine to take, forms to sign; at night, once a person is lying flat, the thing comes down on you. I could not cry in front of my husband, who had work in the day and two

children in the evening; still less could I cry in front of the children. Shuni is the one who prayed for me all through those years.

I cannot explain how praying actually works. I am no good at reasoning and I have never had any thought of explaining it to anyone. All I know is that a person in the darkest place needs somebody outside holding up a lamp for her. The one holding the lamp is tired too, and has her own household full of things to do, children to collect and meals to make and difficulties she does not tell anyone about, and the lamp stays lit.

She held it up for me for many years. Held it through the months before the transplant, held it through the half year after, and when I got well and the days went smooth, she was still holding it. It is in the easy times that a person is most easily forgotten. She did not forget me.

Over the years I have given her a few things: a pot of flowers, a collage I put together myself, some photographs. None of them are equal to it.

Her life is rooted in the love of God, held up in prayer, growing in grace. This is a tree that grows toward the light.

Writing that line for her tree, I found when I had finished that what I had written was in fact the thing I hope to become.

Amazing grace. I have used those words for many years and sung them for many years, and it was only when I put them into the ground that I began to understand them a little.

The bronze plaque is engraved this way:

DEDICATED TO SHUNI KANG

ROOTED IN GOD'S LOVE, SUSTAINED BY PRAYER,

GROWING IN GRACE.

Photo: Shuni. In all the years she was praying for me I was mostly not present, and could not hear it. To be remembered by someone when you are not there is the quietest kind of kindness I know of.



The trees

The three trees are all the same kind: American sweetgum, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, the garden variety called 'Slender Silhouette'.

Which tree to choose, I left to my husband. He said this one is good: it grows tall and narrow, like a pen standing on end, and several of them can be set very close side by side without any of them taking another's light. He was talking about trees when he said it, and what I heard was something else.

It is deciduous. In winter the leaves come off it completely and only three thin trunks are left standing there, looking dead. In the spring it comes back green. I have seen this happen many times in my own yard, and I have written four characters under photographs of it: dead wood meets spring.

It grows very tall, fifty or sixty feet and more, and yet it is narrow, no more than four or five feet across from top to bottom. So the three can be planted touching, pressed close together, like three people standing in a row for a photograph. When the wind comes, they sway together.

Its lifespan is one hundred to one hundred fifty years.

That is the real reason I chose it. My husband and I both understand: these three trees are meant to outlive us. The ones who planted them will go, one of the ones being remembered has already gone, and the trees will go on growing. One day there will

be nobody in that garden who knows the three names Dr. Fay, Monica, Shuni Kang, and the three plaques will still be there, and the three trees will still be growing.

I planted a magnolia once in my own yard. Its flower meaning is gratitude repaid. When I planted it I was not thinking anything of the kind; I only thought that a tree full of white flowers looks clean, and good.

All my life I have planted flowers, and taken photographs, and brought good-looking things up out of the soil one at a time, and pieced them into albums one page at a time. These last three I planted are not for looking at.

The three bronze plaques are all the same size, set side by side in the ground at the foot of the trees. The words on them are short; you can read one plaque through in under ten seconds. And that day the two of us stood there a long time.

Inside the trunk, one ring a year. Those rings can be counted. If someone one day were to saw these three trees open and look (and I hope no such day comes), he would count more than a hundred. He will not know what year the innermost rings began to grow, and he will not know that in that year a woman lay in a ward at Baylor Hospital, waiting for a stranger's blood.



Three trees, standing in the garden. As the seasons turn they will go on growing; as the wind and rain come and go they will watch over one another. The years grow ring by ring inside the trunk, and ring by ring they are cut into our gratitude. These three trees bear witness that rebirth is not a miracle, but a reality accomplished together by love and by courage.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."
(John 10:10)

Photo: Three trees, standing in the garden. There is nothing much to see in the photograph: three thin trunks standing close together, all about the same height. It will take many years before you can see what they have grown into. By then I expect I will not be here to look, but that is all right. They will go on looking for me.

Afterword: The Keeper, Finally Kept



"The album *Footprints of a Life* took nearly five years from beginning to end before it was finally finished. There is not a great deal of writing in it, but the work in it was not small. From the first idea to the shaping of it, from looking things up to sorting them out, from taking and processing the photographs to laying them out and uploading them, all of it consumed a great deal of my time and my energy, and often enough I forgot to eat and forgot to sleep over it. Forgetting food and forgetting sleep, pouring out heart and blood: that is truly what it was."

That passage I wrote on the first page of the album. Writing it, I never thought it would end up as the last page of a book.

Five years. One person, five years' work, setting the road she has walked back where it belongs, one step at a time.

Photo: That desk at home. On it are photographs, a magnifying glass, and a stack of small slips of paper sorted by year. Doing this work I often lost track of the hour, and I would look up and it would already be dark, and dinner not started.

Before this one, I made a book for the Zhangs and a book for the Chens.

The Zhang book was for my mother. The Chen book was harder: four hundred years of a single line, ranged from Jinxi all the way to Texas, the names, the births and deaths, the moves, the branches that scattered and were found again, revised draft after draft. At the front of his family history Huagang wrote a passage thanking me, saying that with no regard for her illness and her weakened body I revised the Chen family record over and over, and that with each revision the contents grew richer and more complete.

Those years I truly was doing it with the medicine in one hand. People told me to rest. I said, when it is done I will rest.

On the last page of every one of them I wrote the same line as always: edited and produced by Weiming.

The Zhangs I wrote. The Chens I wrote. My father and mother's, my children's, my grandchildren's, I wrote all of them. The only one I never wrote was my own.

Now I have. It is the one in your hands.



The Chens have a naming poem, laid down by a forebear six generations back, ten characters long:

其文定华国，唯德可传家。

By letters shall the country be settled; by virtue alone can a family be handed on.

One character to a generation. His grandfather was of the *wen* generation, my father-in-law of the *ding* generation, Huagang of the *hua* generation, and my two sons of the *guo* generation. Next in line is *wei*.

In 2020 my younger son became a father in Texas. Huagang and I talked it over for a few days and sent that character *wei* across the ocean, and asked them to name the child Chen Weiyi. A poem laid down at Jinxi in Jiangsu in 1644 traveled four hundred years and came down on a baby born in Texas. What a grandfather and a grandmother have to give, that is about the whole of it.

Three years later a granddaughter was added to us, Caroline. The day she came, I kept a place for her in the book as well.



On the night of the third of January, 2001, I recorded a message for each of my two children. The younger was eight that year; the elder would turn sixteen in four more weeks. What I was afraid of was nothing else. I was afraid the younger one was too small, and would not be able to call my face to mind later on.

On the twenty-sixth of September, 2025, that small boy in Texas, my grandson, turned five.

When the photograph came through he was standing in front of the cake, holding up his five fingers for me, one at a time.

Photo: My grandson and my granddaughter. One of them can count how old he is; the other still puts everything in her mouth. I have recorded a great many faces in this life, and only here is the record complete.

What I have done in my life comes to one thing in the end: whatever I saw, whatever I went through, whatever there was no time to say out loud, I wrote it down and set it in order, so that the ones coming after would not have to guess. Huagang is doing the same work now, keeping the handwriting of an old gentleman he never met. The two of us have spent our lives looking after other people's things.

This is the last one. This one is mine.



Photo: November 2017, my sixtieth birthday dinner. That year was twenty-four years on from 1993. A candle goes out at a breath. A person does not.

The year I turned sixty, blowing out the candles, one sentence went through me and I did not say it aloud. I will write it here instead, and let it close the book: what had to be borne has been borne, and there is still time for what is owed in sweetness.

The bitter days, we lived them sweet.

Photographs and Sources



Nearly all the photographs in this book are mine, or my family's.

The photographs

The old black and white pictures come from my parents' albums and from a few of my own that I have carried around all my life. The 1963 family portrait of my parents, the National Day photograph of the five of us in 1965, the studio portrait taken the year I turned twenty: all of those come from there. Some have a date written on the back and some do not. Where there was no date, I worked out the year from how people look and what they are wearing, so I may be off by a year or so.

The wedding photograph was taken in April 1983, at the Honglei Photo Studio in Shanghai.

The pictures from America are mostly ones I took myself. I have been taking them for decades, from film to a telephone. The flowers in the yard, the trees along the street, a branch reaching over somebody else's wall: I photograph all of it. Every flower in this book grew in my own yard, or I passed it on a walk.

A few were taken by other people. The ones in the hospital were taken by my husband. The ones at the boys' schools were sometimes taken by another parent. The photograph of Monica and me in 2006 was taken by someone who was there that day.

The books I made before this one

Many of these photographs and captions first appeared in the Meipian albums I assembled myself: *Footprints of a Life Lived Sweetly Through Bitter Days*, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, *The Zhang Family Courtyard*, *Father, Mother and the Children*, *The Chen Family Line*, *Grandfather Chen Wenfeng's Line*, *Women Who Love Beauty Love Flowers*, and the two travel pieces from Northern Europe and Florida. The text and the pictures in those albums were edited and made by me. This book is those albums gone through again and set in order, as one.

What is not here yet

The three trees in the Fort Worth Botanic Garden, the three bronze plaques beneath them, and the photographs of Monica and of Shuni Kang are not in this book yet. When my family finds them, they can be added. Where a picture is missing, I have left the words instead.

The words

Wherever I quote what I wrote in earlier years, I have copied it as it stood, without changing the punctuation or the wording. A few of the terms are not what the hospitals say now. Chronic granulocytic leukemia is one of them. I did not update it, because that is what the doctors said to me at the time, and it is what I wrote down at the time.

My husband Huagang Chen has a book about Dr. Carlquist, and this one is its pair. He kept the handwriting of an old

gentleman he never met. I kept my own days. The botanic garden in Fort Worth in his book and the one in mine are the same garden.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weiming Zhang was born on November 6, 1957, in Guiyang, Guizhou, the middle of five children. The Cultural Revolution took her schooling; the opening of China gave her a way out. She married Huagang Chen in Guiyang in April 1983, crossed to America alone in September 1988, and waited more than a year to bring over the small son she had left with her parents. In 1993, at thirty-five, with a six-month-old at home, she was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia. On January 10, 2001, she received an allogeneic stem-cell transplant, and afterward lived what she calls the twenty-five years no one ever promised her. Her profession, she says, was raising her two boys; her specialty was being ill; her hobbies were flowers, photography, collage, cooking, and travel. She compiled the family records of both the Zhang and the Chen families, and never wrote her own. This book is the one she never wrote.