GOLDEN ORCHID

The True Story of An ONLY CHILD in CONTEMPORARY CHINA

KAREN ZHANG

Born in Guangzhou, China, Karen Zhang is a freelance writer, columnist, translator, and blogger. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Crazy English Speaker* and *Crazy English Teens* magazines, *Coal Hill Review*, *The Loyalhanna Review*, NolaVie of *The Times-Picayune* and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

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Dedication

For my parents

Endorsements

"If you are simply curious about "real China", read Karen Zhang's Golden Orchid: The True Story of An Only Child in Contemporary China, the honest memoir about life and death and the cultural clash of tradition and modernity in an ordinary family in rapidly changing China…Rarely do Chinese express feelings as directly—and bravely—as Zhang does."

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— Bapsi Sidhwa, bestselling author of *Ice Candy Man* and other novels

"A heart-felt and vivid account of growing up in China's one-child generation, with all the pain and privilege entailed."

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The True Story of an Only Child in Contemporary China

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Prologue

Chinese people often say the country is changing too quickly to adapt. The central government gives birth to all kinds of new regulations almost daily. It is exaggeration but true to its core, that a policy enacted one day, its amendments or retraction are likely to follow the next. More than thirty-five years ago, China implemented the one-child policy in an effort to curb population growth and cut family size. Every married couple, in particular in the urban areas, would have to strictly abide by the "national policy" which allowed each family to have only one child regardless of the baby's gender. Violators would face heavy punishment such as loss of employment, a hefty fine, forced sterilization or abortion, and their unlawful children would be rejected from all social welfare programs and free mandatory education.

Growing concerns about China's ageing population and shrinking labor force finally led to pressure for change. In October 2015, China ended its three decades long one-child policy, allowing married couples to have two children. The news arrived when tens of thousands of young Chinese married couples, many of whom were only children born in the post-1980s, were beginning parenthood. With the new two-child family planning policy in place, I realized the aching fact that I am one of China's first and also last one-child generation.

Just like our parents who found it difficult to talk about those tumultuous years in Red China when they starved, toiled, punished, attempted escape and survived, it would not be easy for us to explain to our children and grandchildren who may grow up with a sibling, what an only-child childhood and adulthood was like, and nor would any policy maker who set up the history-making one-child policy in 1979, have foreseen the filial burden on the one-child generation to care for their elderly parents. The controversial one-child policy is estimated to have prevented about four hundred million births over the course of three decades. And yet this figure also suggests a reason why China now faces an irreversible shortage of

labor over the next thirty years.

I remember that my mother's co-workers in the timber factory in Guangzhou, China used to joke with me, hinting it would be joyous for our family if I could persuade my mother to have a little brother. At the age of four, I did not know the tough consequences adults had to face should they have more than one child. All I could grasp from my mother's stern look on her face when this question was posed was that she really needed her job. Mother would work even harder at her job without saying a word. Years later, as a grown woman, I learned from my father in private that before I was born, my mother had a miscarriage when she was pregnant with my big brother. I was saddened. My father seemed to have read my mind. He comforted me and said, "Without that episode, we wouldn't have you. You're the greatest joy in your mother's life." I fell into graver grief for my mother who had just passed on. There was no way for me to find out if my mother's silence to my question about having a little brother was solely because of her painful loss of a child, or the consequential punishment for having a second child.

Neither would matter anymore. The truth is in my parents' day, they were deprived of making choices. Their involuntary silence and submissiveness to the top-down mandates was in fact their key to survival. I am thankful to my father for not letting this pre-history of me be buried together with my mother. In the same vein, as one of China's first and last one-child generation, I shall not let my one-child story flow away with the fast-moving currents of Chinese history.

Chapter 1
The Alarming Call

It was a breezy afternoon in Guangzhou, China. The Beatles' "Yesterday" broke the silence of the editorial office. *Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away…*It was my cell phone's ringtone. I usually would not answer the phone until my favorite tune completed its first cycle. But that day—I remember clearly it was in October 2006—the music was unsettling, a harbinger of something I must face. I picked up the phone immediately as if my ringtone was about to become noise pollution. Off I ran to an empty conference room.

"*Wei?*" Hello? I said.

"Can you come to the First Municipal Hospital after work?" came a familiar, low male voice. He was my father.

"*Mama* is in the gastrointestinal ward on the fifth floor of the Internal Medicine Building. It's the second building on the left in the in-patient center."

"What's the matter?" My heart fluttered.

"I accompanied her to the hospital for a checkup today. The doctor suggested she stay for a thorough examination."

"Is her condition serious?" I asked, pressing the phone with my clammy hand against my ear.

"She's OK now. We'll talk about it after you get here."

Father finished the call quickly to cease my bullet-like questioning. He had always been like that. His style was to shorten every phone call or text message with me, examples of his principle of succinct speech.

Disturbed, I walked back to my desk. I glanced at my watch. It was only mid-afternoon, two more hours before getting off work. My mind raced. *What's going on with Mom? Is she in pain? How come she didn't tell me she was going to the hospital today? Can Baba manage till I see them?*

The editorial office was as quiet as a hospital. I knew I could no longer

concentrate on my work after the phone call. I paid more attention to my surroundings than I normally would; the sounds of the fans humming in the computer cases, of the electric current passing through the fluorescent light, of the leaves fluttering in the breeze outside the window which became disturbingly loud.

I looked around. Most of my colleagues were women. Only three men in their twenties worked in the office. The gender composition of the staff in the editorial office overly reflected Chairman Mao's famous dictum, "*Women hold up half the sky.*" That originally meant that the participation of half the society—its women—played a significant role in the emancipation of humanity. Contemporary Chinese give the maxim a further meaning—women are just as independent and important as men. My colleagues somehow were not chatty. Their lips were sealed, eyes fixed on computer screens. They worked like mute automatons in an upright sedentary position. They worked like *me*. No. I should work like them after I finished the phone call. But Father's words pulled me away from the computer screen.

* * * * * *

I am an only child born of Chinese parents. Like millions of only children who were born in the 1980s and after, I also carry an English name, Karen. The phenomenon has become so popular that many young Chinese prefer addressing one another by their English names. From Laura, Adam and Tracy to the quirky ones like Duckling, Stone, Gates and Einstein, the Chinese Echo Boomers spread their wings of imagination when it comes to their unique English names.

I did not have an English name until the fifth grade when I first studied English. I guessed my English teacher, Nancy (I forget her Chinese name), wanted us to closely experience English culture. She gave all her students English names, including me. I was named Helen, which I later changed to Karen after learning *Helen* was a common name for older women.

Every once in a while, I wondered how much English had transformed me. Since that day in elementary school, when I studied the English word: M-U-M, Mum (I learned British English as a beginner), I addressed Mother in English.

"From now on, I'm going to call you Mum. OK?" I asked when I ran into the kitchen after school.

"Umm—what is it?" Mother said immediately. She was hesitant to be called something fancy and unknown to her, especially since the pronunciation of "Mum" is similar to the Cantonese word for "muddle head."

"*Mum, mum?* You're the *m-u-m*," the muddle head, she said.

"No—it doesn't mean that. It's the English word for *Mama*."

"*Ng ho*. Mum is no good," said Mother while scooping rice from a red plastic rice pail. "*Mama* is just fine. Why bother to change?"

"Pleeease? It's unique. Nobody would call their mothers Mum except *me*. It's special!"

"Let me think about it. Now go, don't be in my way while I'm making dinner."

I did not give up my lobbying. Every day I would say, "Good morning, Mom," or, "Bye, Mom" when leaving for school, "Mom, this dish is delicious." "Mom, can we go shopping this weekend?" "Mom, do you need help in the kitchen?" "Mom—mom—you're wanted on the phone!" I could not remember how long it took, but eventually Mother agreed; or I should say after I had called her "Mom" on all occasions, she had no chance to protest anymore.

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But Mom is sick now. Is she all right? My eyes could not help glancing at the clock at the right bottom corner of the computer screen. Every minute passed as tensely as a countdown clock of a soccer game. I was so anxious to see her that I became annoyed by everything on my desk: the manuscript layout, the reference books, the used magazines and the stationery. Staring at a pile of open letters from the readers, I was in a trance. Everything around me seemed to fall still. I felt numb. My thoughts bounced in all directions. I was amazed at my achievement at this point of my life. Even though I had worked a year since my college graduation, I sometimes questioned how I got here. A year before, I had been hired on the spot after my first interview with the *Crazy English* chief editor. I had not planned to become an editor. Like thousands of students who graduated from a less prestigious university in Guangzhou, I had expected I would spend weeks, months, or maybe a couple of years hunting for a decent job. Unexpectedly blessed, I found a full-time job faster than many of my classmates in college.

My roaming mind kept returning to Father's urgent voice on the phone. The words, *Hospital* and *Mama*, flashed in my head at the speed of my nervous pulse. I shuddered. Daydreaming ceased. I flipped a couple of pages of the *Crazy English Teens* magazine, in an attempt to hone my concentration onto something to disguise my absentminded state.

The magazine name, Crazy English, originated from the concept of "To shout out loud, you learn" conceived by Li Yang, a millionaire entrepreneur and educator who used to suffer from low-grade English. He encouraged his students to go behind buildings or on rooftops to shout English insanely to overcome their shyness. His competitor, Earnest Corporation Ltd., registered the name in the mid-

1990s for its bilingual audio magazines, including *Crazy English Teens*. The *Crazy English* magazines helped students from the fourth grade through university learn English by reading and listening. The monthly English magazines with Chinese translations included a wide range of subjects, from international travel to Hollywood entertainment. Each copy contained a CD disk with the magazine contents read in English by native speakers.

Working for *Crazy English* magazines then was a perfect fit for me. Since my childhood, I have had a penchant for foreign languages, particularly English, my first one. I don't know why. Perhaps I liked musical phonetics; perhaps I felt safe to keep my secrets in a language that my parents did not understand; or perhaps I loved the heart-pounding-cheeks-glowing-and-praise-singing ecstasy when I spoke English with the golden-haired-and-big-nosed foreigners on the street. My fever for English became extreme in high school. I translated some of the texts, particularly the technical terms, of the science textbooks from Chinese into English, in order to make the subjects more interesting. Knowing I was hopeless in dealing with figures and logical thinking, I chose English as my major in college. It seemed to be fate rather than a plan that my twenty-three years of living was closely associated with English.

English disturbed my normal feeling of being an only child. Whenever I introduced myself as an only child in English, in my early teens, my foreign listeners often expressed brow-raising disbelief, together with a sympathetic "Oh, really?" For a while I was puzzled. "Yes, really," I would reply firmly. After watching a number of American movies and TV dramas, I noticed it was not uncommon for an American family to have at least two children. One girl and one boy was the ideal. I had assumed everyone about my age in the office was an only child that was until my one-year-apart colleague, Tiffany, told me she had a younger sister. I used to envy my childhood playmate, Connie, who is one year older than I. She has a younger brother who looked after their parents while she studied in England.

Before I attended high school, my parents often sent me to the homes of other friends and families for my long vacations. I played with other only children—daughters of Father's friends, and my cousin Jerry who is ten months younger. I used to wonder why I visited my playmates but they never came to my home for a longer stay. After I grew up, I realized it was mainly because my small and run-down house was not capable of putting up any guests. My parents wanted me to have a memorable childhood with playmates instead of being alone.

My parents' friends probably thought the same. When all the kids played together, it was hard to tell whether they were siblings or only children. At a very young age, I became close friends with Ivy and Yip. They are daughters of

Cheong's and Yu's.

"We hope you girls can stick together like sisters," said Cheong, one of Father's best friends, at a dinner. "Just like your fathers and I, we've been friends for forty some years. Our brotherly friendship is priceless." He raised his wine glass and toasted Father and Yu, who is Father's other lifelong best friend.

"The three of you don't have siblings, so it's crucial you support each other through difficult times in the future," Cheong said in a fatherly manner.

In our late teens then, my close friends and I were too busy pursuing our interests to meet as often as before, not until a few years later, I met them again by my mother's bedside in the hospital.

Cheong's speech resonated with me for a long time though, particularly, after I heard Father's tense voice on the phone; I realized how much I wanted to count on someone trustworthy, to tell that person how frightened I was and to draw strength and calmness from that person. A sibling would fit that role; a lover might as well. But I had neither of those. I did not even think of Ivy or Yip, despite our sharing girls' secrets in our coming-of-age years. We no longer met as often as when we were kids. Instinctively, I prayed to my god, who had been in my imagination since I was a little girl. It was an intimate way for me to communicate with someone spiritually.

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The clock struck five. My desire to jump into a cab for the hospital grew. I packed my handbag too early, putting it on my lap as if I were a refugee vigilantly waiting to escape. I had already geared up as soon as the clock's minute hand touched six: to shut down the computer, grab my bag, run down the stairs, clock out on my time card and run straight to the pedestrian footbridge to flag a cab.

I ran like Forrest Gump toward the in-patient center after the cab dropped me at the hospital. This place was familiar. My parents had taken me to the First Municipal Hospital for treatment when I was ill in my childhood; most of the time we only visited the out-patient center, which was partly funded by the Hong Kong tycoon, Henry Fok Ying Tung. It was a ten-story building with comprehensive medical departments and offices. In daytime, the building was jammed mainly with the old and the young. Coughing, sneezing, groaning, bawling, shouting, chattering, a babble of voices filled the air of the lobby.

Unlike the out-patient center which was as noisy as a bazaar, the in-patient center was a peaceful sanatorium. I seldom visited the in-patient center, which was composed of several beige and gray buildings on the other side of the hospital. Concrete buildings of various heights lined both sides of a shady

boulevard in the hospital grounds. Two gates on each end of the boulevard bracketed the road. Guards were on duty at the entrance as vehicles and bikes were restricted from entering. Although two busy main roads ran in front of the hospital, the city noise was reduced greatly in the hospital area, thanks to the old banyan trees. Their lush branches turned down the volume of the city noise. Patients in loose gowns strolled along the boulevard and rested in the vine-covered pergolas.

I found the Internal Medicine Building without any problem. Mother's room was on the fifth floor. I could have taken the elevator but I could not wait for it. Huffing and puffing, I skipped every other step up the staircase. The steps were wide, fenced by cold, stainless steel railings. I had not run so fiercely for a long time. I dislike running. I reject any sport that requires me to run. Since I had started working, I only ran to catch my bus to work. Living in big cities in China, you have got to be aggressive when taking a bus in rush hour. Buses never wait; since buses just frequently pull over before the stop, passengers have to dash for ten to fifteen meters to meet the arriving bus. If the bus is packed, but you do not have time to wait for the next one, you have to shove and squash and operate little tricks from martial arts to elbow in before the bus doors close. Otherwise, you may never get on the bus in time for work.

Seeing Mother immediately was like catching that bus in the morning. I could not think of anything except the one command blinking in my head: GO FORWARD. I gasped for oxygen. Mother used to say the hospital air was filled with germs. But the antiseptic odor in the staircase was pungent. My lungs must be aseptic after a deep breath. After spiraling up a few flights of stairs, I was already dizzy. Clenching the icy banister to support my fatigued body, I was afraid I would fall. I could not speak. My chest was blocked all the way to my throat. *I need water.* I thought. *I need to slow down.* I panted fast and deep. My breathing was so loud that my eardrums vibrated. Sweat trickled down to the corner of my eyes, under my nose and down onto my lips. *Mom, I'm here.*

* * * * * *

The fifth floor, a big circular sign read "5" at the entranceway. I stood, gulping the antiseptic air like a dog sticking out his tongue to cool off. I did not want my parents to see me red-faced and breathless. Mother would be worried, I thought. I wiped the sweat off my face with the back of my arm. For a moment, my legs were numb. If I had had a choice, I would not have wanted to have come here in such a mad rush. I did not know at the time that I would have to return to this place every day in the following three weeks. I did not know Mother's thorough

examination would take longer than we expected. I did not know the results would be too obscure for the gastrointestinal specialist to determine a diagnosis. I did not know that the problem would compel Mother to finally turn to Western medical treatment, about which she was always doubtful.

Composed, I walked into her room. Lit by half a dozen white fluorescent lights, the room accommodated two rows of beds, four on each side. Several patients were lying in their beds. Some had visitors. The patients were women above fifty, presumably having various digestive problems. A color television hung up in the corner, blaring sound that nearly swallowed my exhausted voice when I greeted Mother from the door.

She was in a loose, white patient gown, sitting on her bed. Her short hair was disheveled over her tawny forehead. Her eyes were round and shining. Her full lips, dry and lusterless, relaxed between her sagging cheeks.

My lips bear a resemblance to Mother's. In fact, both of my parents have full lips. I inherited this from both. I used to hate this genetic trait about which my elementary school classmates teased me. They gave me an ugly nickname, Snout Witch, although they had mistaken a pig's nose for its mouth. The name followed me for six years until I separated from those mischievous rascals after graduation.

As soon as I saw Mother's face in the hospital, my pounding heartbeat gradually slowed to normal. Although she looked haggard, she flashed one of her comforting smiles. I recognized the dimple in her right cheek. Father sat by an empty bed next to Mother's. Mother averted her gaze to the flickering TV, as if she wanted to show me she was fine and watching TV as she did every day at home.

"Mom, how's it going?" I asked and hugged her.

"Fine," She answered wearily, releasing herself from my hug.

"*Baba*." I looked at Father's eyes and greeted him.

"So what's going on? Any results yet?" I asked.

"Well, Dr. Deng said he needed more medical proof for his diagnosis. He suggested she stay in the hospital for a thorough checkup. She has done a couple of tests today," Father briefed me.

"What are the tests?" I turned to Mother.

Neither of my parents is talkative by nature. They are chatty only when each is with friends. When they were in the same room, Father usually took charge of the conversation. If not, the room would quickly fall into silence. This had been my observation since I was a little girl, learning to recognize that these two reticent adults were my mother and father.

"I had a fingertip blood test, then an X-ray and a urine test. Tomorrow I'll have another blood work and a gastroscopy. So I have to fast."

"Have you eaten yet?" I asked.

“Yes. I had noodles and congee in late afternoon with your father.”

“Do you need to take pills now?”

“Not yet, but very soon. Otherwise, how can a hospital make money?”

I chuckled at Mother’s witty response and said, “You have a good rest tonight for tomorrow’s tests.” I looked around her night stand and opened the drawers. “Do you need anything from home? I can bring it to you tomorrow.”

“Can you bring me two rolls of toilet paper and my comb on the cupboard next to the fridge?” She thought for a while and said, “Oh and my cell phone charger. I don’t know how long I’m gonna stay here. I put the charger on the dresser in the bedroom.”

“OK. I’ll bring these things tomorrow. Just call me anytime if you remember suddenly what else you need overnight.”

Mother reclined her head on the pillow. After a while, she turned from the TV and said to Father and me it was time to go home. I looked Father square in the eye and he agreed. So we said goodnight to Mother. I turned around as I stepped through the doorway. Mother looked petite underneath her baggy patient gown. Her gaze fell upon the TV in the room. Her sallow face was shrouded in an air of edginess. She looked in my direction.

“Mom, I’ll be back tomorrow,” I assured her.

She nodded.

* * * * * *

After Father and I left the hospital, I suggested we should grab a bite. I had not yet eaten. He took me to a diner, specializing in noodle and congee, a kind of rice porridge, across the street opposite the hospital. He and Mother went there in late afternoon. The small diner was called Zaam Gai, a colloquial way to name a Cantonese restaurant after the owner’s name. In this case, the name means “Buddy Zaam.” The diner served Cantonese fast food, including combo platters of rice and two or three different dishes. The patrons were mainly patients and their visitors as well as the hospital staff.

The hospital canteen also provided meals three times a day. The food choices there varied depending on the day of the week. The canteen staff delivered food in a stainless steel pushcart to every floor for the hospitalized patients. According to the dietary condition of each patient, food was basically divided into three categories: clear liquids, semi-liquids and solid foods. Mother had to order her meals a day before by filling out a menu sheet. In the drawer of her night stand was a wad of meal tickets, each of which was worth two or five *yuan*, the Chinese currency, also known as *renminbi*, people’s money.

Although every day the canteen provided a dozen different food choices, ranging from fried noodles and plain congee for breakfast to stewed chicken soup and minced pork with preserved vegetables for supper, the repetition of the same choices on the same day of the week stimulated patients to dine out or order takeout for a change. So bakeries, fast food joints and restaurants mushroomed around the hospital.

Zaam Gai was a favorite diner in the neighborhood because of its prime location. It sat right at the corner of a T intersection, facing the guarded gate of the in-patient center across the street. The place was always crowded, and I waited a long time to get my food. During lunch and suppertime, the in-store phone rang non-stop for takeout orders. Boxes of takeout were piled on the cashier's desk, ready to be delivered. There was no air conditioning. Electric fans on the wall spun day in and day out. A big glass window separated the kitchen and the eating area. Patrons could see how the food was made while they were waiting.

The cooks in white were swamped: Cook A scooped soup into a bowl and passed it to Cook B who prepared the noodles in a deep, boiling pot. After he filled the bowl with strands of noodles, he passed the bowl to Cook C who completed the culinary procedure in the impeccable assembly line. She checked the order and added cooked beef or pork or other combinations, then sprinkled spring onions on top of the noodles. In less than five minutes, out came a bowl of steamy noodles in soup through the pick-up window.

The kitchen exhaust fans above the cooks blasted hot air. The steamer against the wall churned like a grouchy tuba player, accompanied with the clink and clang of the cooking utensils. On the other side of the kitchen, several other cooks were in the midst of conducting their own duet or trio of culinary masterpieces. White smoke enveloped the kitchen, veiling the sweaty faces of the cooks. Through the pick-up windows and the staff-only entrance, the cooking heat steamed out into the eating area. Since the diner was a storefront with no concrete divider, pedestrians could see the patrons dining inside Zaam Gai, and vice versa. The early-bird patrons usually sat by the street, where they could watch the hustle and bustle at the intersection and hear the clamor of the city while smelling the scent wafted by the steamy air from the kitchen.

"What did you have with Mom?" I asked, after Father and I were seated.

"Your mother had a bowl of plain noodles in soup and I had a bowl of congee with sliced fish and a dish of pork *Cheong Fun*," Father said.

"I see. I'll have *Cheong Fun*, too," I said.

Father and I were big fans of *Cheong Fun*, literally, the intestine rice noodle, because the stuffed rice noodle is like a long roll of intestine. Inside the stuffed noodles are sliced beef or pork or dried shrimp. Congee and *Cheong Fun* are

typical snack foods in the Cantonese-speaking region of South China.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to the hospital today?" I said while munching my beef *Cheong Fun*.

"We didn't want to disturb your work," Father said without a second thought.

"But this is a serious appointment. You ought to have asked me to join you."

"I was surprised myself this morning when your mother asked me to accompany her to the hospital."

"She did?"

"Yes. You know, she hasn't looked well for quite some time. Her face is sallow and she has been to bathroom frequently in recent months." Father took a sip of the brandy he had just bought and continued, "I've urged her to go to a comprehensive hospital for a formal checkup many times. But she never listens. She'd rather go to the out-patient clinic that her sister recommended. You know, she'd taken the traditional Chinese medicine."

The out-patient clinic Father mentioned was one of the branches of the Guangdong Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which was located near my aunt's apartment building. An old friend of *Yee-ma*, Mother's elder sister, introduced Mother to that humble clinic. It was small and dreary. Mother had been visiting there for solutions to her digestive problems and rectal bleeding. I had not been aware of the seriousness of the matter.

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Father's words reminded me that I had seen Mother making the distinctive ink-like herbal medicine from time to time at home. The smell was acrid. Mother had a fascination with traditional Chinese medicine. She stored a number of dried herbs in the cabinets and the fridge: Chinese yam, longan, red dates, malt, sweet and bitter almond kernels, ginseng, deer velvet slices and many other beans, twigs and cubes that I could not recognize. She used them for her Cantonese soup as part of Chinese nutrition therapy, which is common in sub-tropical Guangdong province.

When I was sick as a child, Mother usually took me to a Chinese medicine physician after I was cured by a Western medicine doctor. She believed Western medicines could cure symptoms, not the disease, but the Chinese medicines effected a permanent cure. In her opinion, a combination of Chinese and Western medical therapy could achieve the best results. However, Father thought she had blind superstitions without any scientific knowledge.

"Who cares what he thinks? He doesn't believe anything but his nitwit water," Mother blurted out one day after I told her Father disliked the medicinal smell.

She was cooking the herbal soup while Father was not at home. The bitter odor pervaded the house. Mother often demonized Father's brandy as nitwit water. She thought the alcohol muddled Father's mind and inflamed his temper.

Mother would make Cantonese Cooling Tea at home if I had a sore throat, chapped lips, pimples or bad breath. These were signs of internal heat, according to Mother. Although her medicinal Cooling Tea sometimes tasted bitter, I admitted it was effective—my symptoms would be all gone after two or three days.

"The medicine is good for health and bitter for your mouth," Mother always said when she saw my eyebrow-furrowed face before I drank the dark liquid from a bowl. I believed that was also her motto—to strengthen her will to drink up the bitter medicine. She did not need any sweets to go with her Chinese black coffee—a term that was used after a Chinese doctor described what the traditional Chinese medicine tasted like. I could not do that. Having candy was my reward after drinking the medicinal soup when I was a kid. Otherwise, the bitter taste would remain in my mouth for an unbearably long time. In fact, Mother often told me she enjoyed the liquorice aftertaste.

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"So what'll you do tomorrow?" I asked, wiping my lips with my own tissue. It is wise to bring your own tissue because there are no free napkins in most restaurants in China.

"I'll go back to the hospital in the morning, in case your mother needs help during the tests," Father said.

"Should I come along? I can take a half-day off."

"No, it's not necessary. If I need help, I'll tell you."

"OK. But please keep me informed. We're family. I can help anytime. I'll be around." I stopped eating and eyed him firmly. I wanted to assure him I was standing by. Father said nothing. The tightness on his face loosened up.

Chapter 2

The Lost Generation

Father and I could not have known then that evening would be the beginning of a long, distressing journey for our family. We could not have known then that Mother would stay in the hospital much longer than she wanted, much longer than we could have imagined. I always thought Mother was so tough that she did not want others to care about her business; she refused to answer my questions more than once when I was curious about what she was doing.

"Don't ask so much. Go about your own business," she would say.

Returning to my math problems about functions, I felt like she had pushed me out of her world and slammed the door in my face.

Nevertheless, Mother was not unfriendly. She liked chit chatting with her lady friends—co-workers, old neighbors, relatives on her side, and wives of Father's long-time friends—but not me. I did not think she considered me her friend. There were probably a hundred reasons that she did not want to share her thoughts with me. But the main reason I figured was that our mother and daughter relationship might make Mother feel unable to confide in me. She might always think I was too young to understand her woes, or perhaps she was afraid to interrupt my life, seemingly occupied with my schoolwork or full-time job. Until my early twenties, I still foolishly believed she could take care of herself as well as she had taken care of me. I rarely paid attention to Mother's health unless she complained to me, mostly about her quarrels with my, in her words, "opinionated father."

A few days after Mother was admitted to the hospital, Father mentioned to me that she had abdominal pain constantly. He learned it from her conversation with Dr. Deng. Father looked defeated and agitated, as if he was too late to have Mother treated. Mother had told him that the traditional Chinese medicine was good for her diarrhoea and internal hemorrhoids. But Father had been suspicious of the effect. He disbelieved traditional Chinese medicine could improve

Mother's health.

Once, Mother was preparing her medicinal soup when Father came into the kitchen. The strong herbal smell irritated him.

"Cooking medicine, *again*?" Father asked impatiently. He filled up his porcelain teacup with hot water from a stainless steel thermos.

I could tell his word "again" was full of sarcasm. I sensed the contentious sparks between my parents. Mother said nothing, preoccupied with making her medicinal soup. She opened a brown paper bag that contained a lump of dry twigs and leaves and grains. After she poured out the medicine into a big bowl, she filled up the bowl with water to rinse the herbs and then threw them in a clay cooking pot reserved for cooking traditional Chinese medicine.

"Make sure the medicine is not expired," Father said as he walked out of the kitchen, holding the three-quarters-filled teacup.

"*You are* expired," Mother muttered. She continued to fill the pot with three rice bowls of water and stirred the herbs with a pair of wooden chopsticks.

Father grumbled almost every time Mother cooked the herbal medicine. For that reason, she avoided making Chinese medicinal soup when he was around. Yet, that did not stop Father lobbying her to consult specialists in a big hospital. He was convinced Mother's health would continue to decline if she did not receive a formal physical examination.

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I visited Mother every day after my work at *Crazy English*, although both of my parents told me it was not necessary. The bus ride was about forty minutes. My parents were afraid the constant travel between my work and the hospital might tire me. I told Mother it was more convenient for me to come to the hospital from work than to go home. That lessened her concern.

Indeed, thanks to the fact that the bus terminal was only three blocks away, I usually could get a seat on the bus from my work place to the hospital. For weeks, my time card was punched exactly at five thirty for departure. How could I not be proud of myself for such punctuality? That was the moment I anticipated the most of the whole day. When I walked out of the office building, the sun would hang low in the western sky, radiating its last brilliant golden light. The street already teemed with people from all walks of life. Teenage students in school uniform, pre-school kids holding the hands of their faltering grandparents, men and women in casual wear, in business suits, or in working uniform, the bikers, the hawkers, the illegal rickshaw guys all joined the daily commotion of the urban rush hour. They swam through the sea of busy traffic toward their respective destinations.

Ambling to the bus terminal, I found pleasure at looking down at the pedestrians' feet. They walked fast as they went to work, as if their destinations had a magnetizing power. A fast pace has become a distinction of city dwellers. We think fast, talk fast, walk fast, eat fast, drink fast, read fast, and even love fast. *How often do we really slow down to feel the world around us? How much have we missed when we are so preoccupied with what we are doing?* I pondered whether I was living proof of the increasing tempo of modern life, whether I was among those twenty-and-thirty-something office workers who filled their vacant self with iPod music, e-book reading and to-and-fro text messaging.

Unconsciously, I became contemplative whenever I was on the journey to the hospital. Perhaps, seated comfortably on the bus, my mind went off leash for an instant without worrying about being pushed or shoved or stepped on. Perhaps my destination made a difference. Unlike most of the passengers, I was *not* on my way home, but traveling to visit Mother who stayed in a place of bleak future.

On most days when I commuted from my office to the hospital, the sun fell behind the skyscrapers. As the bus steered forward, a glaring golden spot bounced between the soaring glass walls. The sun cast a rugged shadow of the city skyline on the bus ceiling and the passengers' faces. Traffic became dense near downtown. On the worst days, the eight-lane East Wind Road—one of the main arteries in Guangzhou—was so congested that the traffic was like a paralyzed dragon without head and tail. The red, white, blue, gray, green, yellow and black car roofs glittered in the setting sun. Our bus was surrounded with unbreakable queues of sedan cars and taxis, as if we had been ambushed by the tiny people from Lilliput and Belfuscu in *Gulliver's Travels*.

The gridlock tried everyone's patience. Some drivers stuck out their heads to rubberneck; some stretched their left arms out of the windows with cigarettes locked between the index and middle fingers; some others grabbed the creased newspaper by the driver's seat and read the headlines to kill time. The passengers on the bus were getting agitated. Some changed their standing position while the others whined about the problematic city traffic.

"*Aigh*, what chaos!" sighed one female passenger sitting behind the bus driver.

"That's the price we have to pay for having so many cars on the street," another passenger interjected.

The female passenger sighed again, "The municipal government keeps encouraging residents to buy cars but the road infrastructure never catches up."

I was not surprised by such casual conversation. In fact, what the two passengers were describing had become a headache in a number of big Chinese cities. More and more urban people had been able to afford private cars in the last

decade since the millennium. Purchasing an automobile was one of the first investments for the majority of white collar workers. With car factories such as Japan's Honda Motors, Nissan Motors and Toyota Motors, Guangzhou ranked at the top as the city with the largest auto output in China, surpassing Shanghai in 2008. Car ownership in the city had increased from about three hundred and fifty thousand to one million in the last ten years.

In the 1980s, we had an old saying, "If you know math, physics and chemistry, you will not be afraid to travel around the world." Twenty years later, I heard a new interpretation, "If you know computers, English and driving, you will be invincible in all competitions." That partly explained why driving schools in Guangzhou were prosperous all year round. In 2009, more than a quarter of the ten million Guangzhou residents had a driver's license.

Our bus inched forward with intermittent sudden brakes.

"The next stop is the First Municipal Hospital. Please get ready and alight from the back door," the recorded announcer spoke in both Mandarin and Cantonese.

The announcement jammed with static broke my chain of thought. I elbowed my way out, raising my voice, "*Ng goi! Yau lok!*" and repeated in Mandarin, "Excuse me! Getting off here" as more people understand Mandarin in public.

It was getting dark by the time I took the familiar route to the hospital. *Go straight, cross the road, turn left, cross the pedestrian footbridge, go on ahead, and turn right…*I had learned the directions by heart as if a biological GPS guided me in my subconscious mind. I began thinking of my parents as I walked. *How's Mother hanging in there today? Has Father visited her yet? When will he drop his guard and talk to me?* I wondered if it was my family tradition to always say no at first to a source of help, then, after polite compromise, to give in. For instance, a few times when Father talked on the phone with his sister and brothers, he repeated "It's not necessary." I assumed my relatives wanted to visit Mother or give us financial help. Father kindly declined.

Mother often said "It's not necessary" to me when I offered to help in the kitchen; I helped anyway.

Father said "It's not necessary" to Mother when he wanted to finish his work before having dinner. We always waited for him.

I probably said "It's not necessary" too frequently to remember. Like when I was in college and had to move into another dormitory. With no elevator in the building, it would have taken me hours to carry all my boxes of books to the new sixth floor dorm room. Thank heaven! Lee's boyfriend did not take my "It's not necessary" seriously. He helped me lift the heaviest boxes of books, and I moved as quickly as a slam dunk.

* * * * * *

We had hoped Mother would be discharged from the hospital within a few days, just as the words on the chest pocket of her patient gown suggested: “Have a Quick Recovery.” The six Chinese characters were sewed in bright red thread. They stood out on the faded patient gown, as if the patients wore a scarlet letter A on their chests.

In the first two weeks, whenever I asked Mother if she needed anything from home or from the store, she said no.

“You really think it’s a good sign to be in the hospital for this long?” she said bluntly.

I no longer asked her what she needed from home. I did not mean to irritate her. I looked at her anxious, sparkling eyes. She must be bored in the hospital. She must be restless at night. The wrinkles under her eyes were like two brown pouches. Her round face seemed to have shrunk. Her unkempt dark hair grew longer, covering her earlobes. The skin on her arms and hands was chapped like the surface of an arid land. Her patient gown was getting bigger day by day. She often had to pull her collar and refold her sleeves and pant legs. She looked disinterested while I gave my pep talk.

“Look at my wrist, tanned and bony,” she said, lifting her arm.

“It’s OK. You’ll have a comeback soon,” I comforted her.

“*Aigh*,” she heaved a sigh of frustration and said, “I’ve had liquid food for several days. I’ve lost my appetite.”

“You’ll have a normal meal after the tests.”

“They draw my blood every third day. I’ve already had an X-ray, a colonoscopy, an electrocardiogram and an ultrasonic exam…”

I was overwhelmed with the tests that Mother listed. I had heard of these names but never sure exactly the function of each. The most familiar test was the X-ray exam. I had one when I was a student during our annual physical exam. Each of us boarded the X-ray bus in which we stood between a pair of big black gloves sticking out from “the wall.” Later I learned that was the X-ray screen. We had to lean our chests against “the wall.” The examiners slid their hands into the black gloves to position our bodies. After the test was done, they would pat our waists to signal us to get off the bus. I heard some naughty boys once gave a karate chop on the gloved hands, wounding the radiologist’s hands.

Mother’s tests were more complicated. She said she had never had so many medical tests. I did not know how to show my sympathy other than telling her things were going to be all right. But deep inside I had no idea if things would turn

out well. What I said was just an expression, like “I’m fine. Thanks.” We were taught to say so when asked, “Hi, how are you?” in my English beginner class, even though I was not fine at all. My English teacher explained the phrase was only a greeting. After all, nobody wanted to listen to your whining.

Everything will be fine. Will it? I hoped Mother had faith in what I said. As I grew into my late teens, I had found myself looking at almost everything as if it were gray. The Chinese proverb, “Things do not turn out as one wishes; the more you wish, the more you lose,” had greatly influenced my pessimistic vibes. When in high school, more than once, I had hoped my hard work in science would lead me to a good grade. But I still did terribly in the subject. I did not know why. Gradually, I lost faith. I would rather have lower expectations with hope for a surprisingly good result. I was inclined to think less positively, or even negatively. That had been my way to overcome big disappointment. However, I told myself I must stay upbeat for Mother’s sake. She deserved some good news after being so cooperative, abiding by her doctor’s dos and don’ts.

I fidgeted. I did not know if there had been a side effect from the tests. Mother told me she had lost her taste for food. The CT scan, in particular, made her uncomfortable, after drinking lots of liquid that contained iodine. She had to go to the bathroom so many times that she felt sick of it. The night before the scan, she had had to fast. She disliked going to sleep with a hollow stomach.

I brought Mother a Walkman and a couple of books about food therapy. By accident, I found these books in a bookstore. The more I read, the better I understood the current situation. I had been ignorant about the human body. What’s more, I hoped the books could pick Mother up. I knew she missed cooking. The smell of the kitchen had been her stimulus for food and joy for life.

“I’m sorry for not being able to make soup for you these days,” Mother said every now and then.

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ve grown up. I can take care of myself.”

“Look at you.” Mother’s gaze fell upon my face. “You don’t have much soup lately. Your lips are so red and you talk with bad breath.”

I was embarrassed. I sometimes disliked her being so candid. But if she had not said so, I would not have realized how much I needed her soup. Soup was an important dish in my family. Cantonese called it *Lo Foh Tong*, meaning Slow-Cooked Soup. We had soup nearly every week, sometimes twice a week. Mother believed different seasonal soup could heal and strengthen our health. In summer, we had winter melon soup with duck, which was said to expel the heat inside us. In winter, we had spare rib soup with watercress and apricot kernels to nourish the *yin* and moisten the lungs. Mother would add Chinese herbs into a clear broth together with meat and other ingredients. She enjoyed selecting the right kind of

herbs to match her recipe. She was like an experienced traditional Chinese medicine pharmacist, measuring the amount, breaking it into short pieces and grinding them into powder. It took two to four hours over low heat before the soup was done. However, the long preparation hours of *Lo Foh Tong* annoyed Father. He thought they wasted fuel and time.

I missed Mother's *Lo Foh Tong*. I began learning to make soup on my own in the hope that Mother could eat my soup after she recovered. Memories of the times when I was ill and tended by Mother rose up in my mind. I remembered once at the age of five when I had a high fever of forty degrees Celsius. She was by my side all night long. I rested on the couch bed in the living room, half-conscious. She changed the ice bag on my forehead every other hour, wiped my sweaty body and changed my drenched clothes. Every time I opened my fuzzy eyes during the night, I saw her frowning face.

"Are you thirsty?" Mother asked softly.

I nodded with difficulty as my neck muscle was quite sore. Mother slightly raised my head up with one arm, slowly tilting a glass of water to my mouth.

"Enough?" She asked after she heard my faint swallow.

"Ya," I answered feebly.

Mother sponged my lips with a hand towel and leveled my head down onto the pillow. "Close your eyes and go back to sleep," she whispered.

She must have fanned me for a long time as I fell asleep in a soothing cool breeze. I doubted Mother closed her eyes that night.

The next few times I visited Mother in the hospital I caught her reading in bed. The medical books must have enlightened her. She said reading helped her to sleep. She placed the books under her pillow and refused to let me put them away.

* * * * * *

I was used to thinking—I lived two months in advance of the calendar. The magazine production was a two-month-ahead schedule. I often forgot the present month while working on the future issue. But the November of 2006 was different. Every day, Mother counted how long she had been hospitalized. Her daily medication bill was dated. On average her bill came to forty *yuan* a day. It cost five times more if her test involved advanced medical devices, such as the CT scan and ultrasonography. Every once in a while, Father collected the sheets and calculated at home how much we had already spent on Mother's medical fees. Her retirement medical insurance could cover forty percent of the expenses. My roughly three thousand *yuan* monthly salary could also share Father's burden.

The outside temperature gradually dropped. The northern wind defeated the

“Autumn Tiger,” a figure of speech that the Cantonese use to describe ferocious heat in October. The air became cool and crisp. Although trees remained green and lush in Guangzhou, their leaves fluttered briskly without the weight of the hot and humid air. The night chill made people stay in their beds longer.

I continued to pray to my imaginary god for Mother. It was also my way to talk to my inner world. Since I was a little girl, I had believed my god lived in the sky and the airplane was my god’s messenger. If I heard a plane rumbling in the sky after I prayed, my message would have been received. I still believed so after I grew up, especially when I was in trouble, I prayed, I sobbed, I meditated. I hoped a plane would pass above my head afterwards. Nearly every night after visiting Mother, I prayed in my heart and looked forward to hearing a plane passing over. It was like making a wish on a shooting star streaking across the sky. Sometimes a plane did roar above me like thunder after I prayed. I was gratified. *Thank you, my prayer has been heard.*

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Going to the hospital after work was like my part-time job. On one of those days, I saw Father sitting on the bench outside the Internal Medicine Building with his two best friends, Cheong and Yu. They had been good friends since high school. Both Cheong and Yu were in their late fifties, about the same age as Father. Our immediate families were as close as kin. I called them Uncle Cheong and Uncle Yu.

Slender and myopic, Uncle Cheong started his own shipping business after he got laid off in the reform of the Chinese state-owned enterprises in the 1990s. The reform affected millions of workers, mainly those in their forties and fifties. After losing their jobs, many received insufficient compensation because of the poor or corrupt management and limited company resources. My parents were also among *The Army of Unemployed*, as the sacked workers ironically called themselves.

I was in high school when my parents lost their jobs. Ignorant as I was then, I did not understand completely the obstacles my family faced. Years later, I read in a news website about the state-owned enterprise reform:

> *The central government decided to retain the ownership of between five hundred to one thousand large-scale state-owned enterprises and to allow small firms to be leased or sold. As a result, by the end of 2001, eighty-six percent of all state-owned enterprises had been restructured and about seventy percent had been partially or fully privatized. The reform improved economic performance, but it also created serious social*

problems. From 1998 to 2004, six in ten state-owned enterprises workers were dismissed.

Both Father's state-owned textile factory and the city's timber factory where Mother had worked for some twenty years were forced to close in the ownership reform. Working in the timber factory was Mother's first and only job. She had worked in the timber factory since her father, my *Gonggong*, passed away in her teenage years. Considering the financial difficulty in her family, the leaders of the factory allowed Mother to take over *Gonggong*'s position a year earlier than the legal employment age of sixteen. Even though Mother's job required a large amount of physical labor, such as lifting heavy plywood boards and piling large brown paper, she worked very hard to keep her "iron rice bowl"—a well-known Chinese term for a secure job with steady income and benefits. However, the good days did not outlast privatization. Mother's iron rice bowl was shattered.

Since I had become a working woman, I could *now* understand how Mother might have felt about her unemployment—the frustration, the anger and the loss. Perhaps that was why she was indifferent when I asked about her business in those years. I guessed most people who lost their jobs at that time had similar reactions. Perhaps these reactions had also propelled Uncle Cheong to work even harder to provide a good life for his family. Father said, Uncle Cheong was the most successful and industrious one among the three of them. He owned a private car and a roomy apartment of two bedrooms, one study and a balcony, three times as big as my home.

Uncle Yu was unaffected by the ownership reform because he did not work in a state-owned firm. He was fortunate to work as a senior driver in a municipal psychiatric hospital until he retired at the age of sixty, the legal age for men to retire in China. Because Uncle Yu had worked in the healthcare industry, he was knowledgeable about medical services. He often gave Father such insights as which hospital had better facilities for certain treatment, what the procedures were if a patient needed further examination, and how to get the best benefit as a retired worker from the government medical insurance. Uncle Yu cared about his health more than Father. He swam and went to the gym. He kept his body solid and healthy, and looked younger than his contemporaries.

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It was unusual for me to see Mother having other visitors in the hospital besides Father. My relatives would visit Mother during the day when I was at work. The warmth of appreciation overwhelmed my heart when I met with Father

and his best friends outside the Internal Medicine Building. *Baba and I are not alone*. I thought. *Mom is also on the minds of our friends and family.* Speaking of who should come to visit Mother, Father and I disagreed with one another. He believed it was not necessary to inform everyone who knew Mother about her admission to the hospital.

"Telling so many people that your mother is in the hospital means we expect them to visit her," Father argued at home one evening. "You must consider that nowadays everybody is busy working for a living. I don't want to bring them *mafan*."

How come he thinks keeping others informed is bringing them troubles? I protested inside, noticing the no-further-discussion expression on his grim face. *Won't we receive more support if more people know Mother is in the hospital?* I totally disagreed with him that a phone call would impose on our friends and family, let alone waste their precious time for making a living. In the end, Father only notified our immediate families and his close friends, such as Uncle Cheong and Uncle Yu.

I greeted Father's friends and they smiled back at me. I asked Father about Mother. Surprisingly, he did not respond.

"I know today the result is out. How is it?" I asked in a relaxed voice. My heart thumped fast.

"She'll be alright," Uncle Cheong said, patting Father's shoulder. "You should think of the bright side."

I heard Father's whimper as he turned around, remaining speechless. *Something must have gone wrong*. I eyed his friends. At dusk, I could not distinguish the expression on their faces. The night was falling; pedestrians and traffic abated. The streetlights along the boulevard lit one by one. The November wind blew against my face hard and fast, leaving echoes between my ears. Father finally spoke.

"Dr. Deng said the tests show numerous polyps in your mother's colon. They're likely to be…" he choked at the last word, "…cancer."

What? The word, cancer, sounded familiar yet shocking. It jolted my senses, as if a defibrillator had electrified my heart. I said nothing, trying to hide my utter astonishment and ignorance.

"It'll be alright," said Uncle Yu. "The diagnosis is not yet confirmed. You should not speculate too much."

Father seemed to know what I was about to ask. He sniffled and said, "Dr. Deng said it's a complicated case. The examination results suggest several possibilities. He said even though the polyps might become cancer, they might be benign or malignant. But he can't tell at this point."

Under the yellow streetlight, I saw shimmering tears rolling down Father's cheeks. He must have summoned a great amount of courage to give out the information. In my recollection, he rarely cried. He was always a tough man in control of everything. He was born in the Year of the Tiger, so Mother often joked about his peppery temperament, a characteristic of his zodiac. She compared Father to a roaring tiger in the jungle when he was enraged. In that instant, I could not believe that the man in front of me whom I fearfully respected and adored in my childhood, who had weathered numerous storms in his life, who could fix almost everything in the house, was my father.

What kid does not imagine his or her dad a superhero—the kind who can rescue the world and suffering mankind like in the comic strips? I did. I wished Father could tell me that Mother's health condition was under control and that we could overcome obstacles. But he said nothing more. He looked down and breathed deeply. His heaving shoulders were silhouetted against the golden pink evening sky in the west.

Uncle Cheong and Uncle Yu suggested I visit Mother before we all went for dinner. They had met her earlier. Father asked me not to tell her she had cancer until the doctor confirmed her illness. I said "yes" and turned around to enter the building. My pace slowed as if I were a locomotive running out of fuel. I was deep in thought. *What exactly is cancer? What do polyps look like? How do polyps grow in her intestines? Why was Baba so shaken up? What shall I do?*

Unconsciously, my feet transported my body to the stairwell. Two strands of thoughts intertwined in my mind. On one hand, I was concerned about Mother; on the other, I was still captured in the moment when Father shed tears. An urgent sense of mission transfused throughout my body, as if I had been injected with a stimulant. *I'm their only child. I must buck up and take control now.* I was worried the news would defeat his strong will to deal with what was to come. On that particular evening, I thought about Father a lot.

* * * * * *

My father had had a unique life. From the stories he told me as I grew up, I understood he had been through many hardships. When I started to learn numbers as a kid, I counted Father's many skills. He had taught himself to make wooden furniture, assemble crystal and semiconductor radios, repair TV sets and other electronic home appliances, farm in the rural area, sell bus tickets, work in front of fiery furnaces in a ferro-silicon alloy factory, work in the high-voltage power workshop of a textile factory and also restore antique porcelain. I gathered these from the stories he told me. But I felt that he knew even more than what he had

told me about being able to survive during difficult times.

In my eyes, Father could fix anything and everything. He was my superhero, Mr. Fix-It. In fact, he was so skillful that Mother and I were proud to tell our friends who had broken fans, radios and TV sets to have him examine them before they threw them out. He repaired everything in our household, from the TV set, electric fan, washing machine, rice cooker, my tape recorder to the leaking sink, the dilapidated shingled roof and my broken-heeled shoes.

Father was like a surgeon of electrical appliances. On his desk, he had screwdrivers of all sizes, pliers, tweezers, a flashlight, a mirror, and a box of tiny parts like bolt rings, nails, springs and screws. He had larger hand tools like wrenches, hammers and brushes in the drawers. No matter whether they were strangers or friends, everyone came to him and asked, “Can you fix this for me?” Because of Father’s magic hands, I even made good friends with my teacher in elementary school. She sewed a beautiful floral dress for me in her gratitude to Father who fixed the constant glitches of her color TV set.

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