

I

A Strange Gift from the Pig Farm

Fifteen years ago when I left China for the United States, I wanted to forget the dreams my peers and I used to have. These we had inherited from our parents. Some of them had long since turned into nightmares for me. I wanted to open a new chapter in my life. Let the old fear, anger, and guilt melt away and the barriers between myself and others slide into the melting pot. But by and by I realized that this was just another dream.

I could not leave my past behind, as I could not help waking up at three o'clock in the morning. I acquired this habit in China in the early seventies. When I woke up, for a moment I did not know where I was. The chill in the air reminded me of Manchuria. Then as light slowly filtered into my bedroom, worries began to flood back into my mind.

The J-1 visa I was forced to take when I left China, a handicap in my hopes to compete with others in the United States.

The agents the CIA sent to the door of my university to check on me.

The liberal professor who told the agents to get out of his sight (while I had hoped that he might answer some of their questions in my favor).

The sense that I was an outsider, socially and culturally, then and thereafter, no matter how hard I tried to fit in.

The doubt that I was as competent as others . . .

Such thoughts told me that I was in America. My new life was not easy. What the future held for me I was not sure. So the old memories, though painful at times, had become quite reassuring.

So I turned my thoughts back, to China, to the pig farm where I worked on the night shift and acquired the habit of waking up at three o'clock. For a seventeen-year-old girl who had grown up in big cities—Bern, Geneva, and Beijing—the night shift was a tough job. The day before I had to work for more than ten hours like everybody else, racing after the pigs on the grazing land, feeding them, and cleaning the sties. At dusk others would finish their work and go back to the village to eat and sleep. After the last person was gone, I alone had the com-

pany of several hundred pigs. My duty was to protect them from whatever danger might arise during the night and to drive them out three times (at midnight, three o'clock, and dawn) to relieve themselves so they wouldn't mess up the sties.

On such nights the light of my oil lantern was small, a faint, shivering, yellow ring against the immense darkness that reigned over the huge swamp called the Great Northern Wilderness. Here the night wind flew high and the moon was as pale as a ghost. The grass around the pig farm grew to the height of a person in summer. Wolves, hungry for piglets, lurked in it. Outside my window, my dogs howled in the middle of the night like wolves, echoed by other dogs in the village; or maybe it was the wolves running across the plain who answered them. I really couldn't tell which was which.

When winter came the nights became endless. At four o'clock I lit my oil lamps, which I kept burning until after nine the next morning. Outside, all was covered with snow, two to three feet deep on the plain. On the southern side of the shacks, the snow formed a slope after the first blizzard. The tip of it nearly touched the eaves. Throughout winter the snow would not melt. After midnight the temperature dropped to forty degrees below zero, centigrade or Fahrenheit, it made no difference. The heavy old sheepskin coat Mother sent me felt like a piece of paper once I stepped out into the wind.

Sometimes when the region was pounded by a snowstorm, I remembered the stories the villagers told: some people lost their sense of direction in it. Scared to death, they kept running until they dropped to the ground. Afterwards they were frozen in the snow. The next April, if the wolves did not get there first, people would find their remains.

Even more unfortunate were those who perished within a stone's throw of their own homes. Blindfolded by the storm, they walked in endless circles, hour after hour. Being "walled up by ghosts," the local people called it. In such cases, people were doomed unless timely help reached them from the outside.

With such stories lurking at the back of my mind and the snoring of the pigs rising and falling all around me, I moved from sty to sty to carry out my duties. A lantern and a whip, I held in my two hands. A pair of sharp scissors was hidden in a pocket next to my heart; I would use the scissors as a last resort to defend myself.

Of course even at the age of seventeen, I was not so naive as to really believe that the scissors would save my life or my reputation if I

were attacked. But what alternatives did I have? I once thought fire-crackers might work better. Yet how to keep them dry and light them in an emergency, I never quite figured out.

On the wall of our shack, somebody had left a gong. With a smile I stood in front of it and contemplated the idea. After a while I decided that a gong was no good either. The nearest house in the village was a good half-mile away from the pig farm. The weather was so cold in this region that people slept with their windows shut even in summer. During winter, sawdust was packed between windowpanes, the houses were literally sealed up. If something happened on the pig farm during the night, no one would hear me no matter what I did. I'd better face the fact.

Actually I wouldn't need to work on the night shift and worry about such things if I had not volunteered to do so in the first place. Before I came to the pig farm, no one had ever imagined that a woman would work on the night shift. It had always been strictly a job for men. Then in 1969, somehow there was a temporary shortage of manpower on the pig farm. So I told Chen, the head of the farm, that he could count me in to work at night. When he realized that I meant what I said, he looked at me as if I were from another planet.

This was, however, not the first time that I volunteered myself. In the summer of 1968 I had volunteered to leave Beijing for the countryside. I did this out of a conviction that it was not fair for some young people like my schoolmates and me to enjoy all the privileges China could offer, which included living in big cities, having access to top schools, good libraries, large bookstores, museums, parks, and theaters, while others had to stay in their native villages and never had a chance to prove themselves. In new China everybody should be equal. If we wanted to reform society, we ought to have the courage to let the change start from us. By giving up our privileges, we would make room for the children of the peasants. Let the hardship in the countryside temper us as revolutionary wars did our parents. Eventually we would eliminate the gap between cities and rural areas in China. This idea soon carried me to a small village in Manchuria called Cold Spring, a thousand miles northeast of Beijing.

In Cold Spring, before three months was over, I volunteered again. This time I went to the pig farm where the work was the dirtiest. I wanted the challenge. Ever since my childhood I had lived in clean houses with clean toilets. My worst nightmares had always been that squashy, smelly excrement surrounded and suffocated me. My feet got stuck in it. I could

not move. The hot excrement seeped through my shoes. I was so disgusted that I woke up with goose bumps all over my body.

In my mind, such an ordeal would be a hundred times worse than all the tortures the revolutionary martyrs had gone through. Yet I knew that this way of thinking was wrong. It belonged to the exploiting classes. No doubt about it. Peasants in China loved excrement, using it as manure. So working on the pig farm, I reckoned, would be the most effective way to correct my thinking as well as my feelings.

The night shift was the third entry in my history of volunteering. It was also the last. After that, I discovered some unpleasant truth about volunteering: in China it always turned out this way. When you first volunteered, the leaders would be agreeably surprised and would praise you. Pretty soon, however, it became an obligation. They expected you to do it. But that was not the worst. The leaders would also use your example to put pressure on others and make everybody “volunteer.” So a few months later when all the women on the pig farm had “volunteered” to work on the night shift and some of them, I knew, were quite uncomfortable doing this, I began to feel sorry about what I did.

The truth is, I did not feel too bad about my volunteering until the summer of 1971, when the night shift got Laomizi into trouble. Laomizi, which means Sleepy, was the nickname the villagers gave to a girl from Harbin, the capital city of Heilongjiang province. Like many others from the north, she was tall and plump, well developed physically at the age of eighteen. One night she worked on the night shift and something happened. The next morning Laomizi told people in the village that Chen had come during the night and raped her.

The incident occurred when I was on my first home leave. By the time I got back from Beijing, Laomizi was gone, transferred to another farm that was remote. It was usual practice in those days. Supposedly it would protect her. Thus I never had a chance to talk to her.

I heard, however, a great deal of gossip that was still spinning around in the village. The young women on the pig farm told me that before Laomizi left, she cried and said repeatedly, “What am I to do? How can I face people after today? I lost face for my parents. I lost face for my whole family. They will disown me. I don’t want to live!”

Many of the villagers, however, men and women, believed that Laomizi was not raped but merely seduced by Chen. “She must have been willing at the time and regretted it only afterwards.” Why? Because Chen was not a stranger. As the head of the pig farm, he had

worked with her side by side and taught her many skills. In the evenings she was often seen at Chen's home, having a meal or using their sewing machine to mend her clothes.

While this was true, Laomizi was not the only one who did this. In fact, all the young women on the pig farm had worked with Chen, learned from him, and visited him at home in the evenings. Such activities were encouraged by the leaders as parts of our reeducation by the poor peasants. Chen was a poor peasant and a veteran of the Korean War. The exact type for us to "unite" with.

A few days later another argument prevailed in the village, which said that Laomizi was a fool. First she let herself be taken by a married man who was probably older than her father. Then she went around telling everybody that he had raped her. As a result, it would be useless to transfer her, for gossip would surely find its way to her new work unit. In the future who would want to marry such a woman? So if her reputation was ruined and her future was in jeopardy, she had no one else but herself to blame for it.

As for Chen, after he was questioned by Zhao, the political instructor who was the number-one leader of our village, he packed up his belongings, left the pig farm, and reported to work at the construction site. Seeing this, some people said Zhao was partial to Chen, because they were both from Yangzhou of Anhui province. Yet others said that Chen was hardly punished because it was not easy to punish a peasant in China. You could not strip him of his Party membership if he did not have one in the first place. You could not demote him, as he was already at the bottom of the society. Take away his city residency? That was out of the question. Expel him from the country? Where could we send him? So as the saying goes, "A dead pig is not afraid of boiling water." A peasant in China was a dead pig.

So this was how the Laomizi incident ended. Gradually people ran out of things to say about her and she was forgotten. Perhaps that was what she wanted. After she left the village, she never came back to visit us. Nor did she send letters to anyone. She simply vanished from our lives. Yet she comes back, in my dreams, and she stays, in my memory. Always a grown-up teenage girl, with rosy cheeks, big hands, and big feet. She is blushing and smiling. She is happy. I have never seen her cry.

Besides this incident, something else made me regret that I had worked on the night shift. In the beginning it was a small problem: the pig farm did not have an alarm clock, which did not seem to bother

others. But without it, for a while I found it extremely hard to wake up at three o'clock.

To this day I remember vividly the panic I felt, when I opened my eyes in broad daylight, knowing that I had overslept. As a result, the pigsties were an awful mess and others had to toil for hours under the low roof, attacked by mosquitoes from all sides, to clean them. This unpleasant truth I would soon have to reveal to my fellow workers, and their eyes would shame me to death even if they said nothing. It would be useless to try to explain or apologize.

Yet buying an alarm clock was out of the question. In those years my wages were thirty-two yuan a month. Everything had to come out of this budget: food was twelve yuan a month; the rest had to cover my clothes, shoes, working gloves, postage stamps, toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, shampoo, toilet paper, feminine napkins, candles, batteries, plus a few cans of fruit that I could not resist. On top of this, I needed to save thirty yuan in two years for a train ticket to Beijing or else I wouldn't be able to have a home visit. Taking these into consideration, I decided that an alarm clock at more than ten yuan was beyond my means and I would have to cope without it, like everybody else.

Gradually I trained myself into waking up at exactly three o'clock, as if I had a magic clock ticking in my head. At first I was thrilled by what I had accomplished. Later, however, it became a scourge. The alarm went off every night at three o'clock, on the nights I worked and the ones I didn't. Three years later I left the pig farm and began to work in the fields, and the invisible clock kept waking me up.

Another two years passed, I left the Great Northern Wilderness and began to study with my parents. The old habit followed me back home like a ghost. Even the Pacific Ocean could not stop it from chasing me. Therefore the pig farm gave me a souvenir I was unable to forsake.

Many times when I woke up in the middle of the night and could not find my way back to what the Chinese call *heitianxiang* (the black and sweet homeland), I was so annoyed that I found myself in tears. When I took up my studies again in 1973, seven years had elapsed without my hand ever touching a textbook. At the age of twenty-two, it wasn't easy for me to start all over. I hated to lose sleep at night, knowing the next day my head would be a big jar of paste, thick and heavy; nothing would register there. At such times I wished I could make a deal with a deity or even the devil himself. I was willing to give up ten years of my life if only he could rid me of this cursed habit.

Despite the bitter regrets, now when I look back on it, I must say that waking up at three did me some good as well. For instance, it made me remember and think about my dreams. The ones I had while I was awake and those I had in my sleep. Most of them would have been forgotten, if I had not suddenly waked up in the middle of the night.

On the farm I hardly had time to think about dreams or anything. By day the work was very hard. At night I shared a room with nine other women. Five slept side by side on one big bed on the southern side of the room; the other five on the northern side. Between the two beds there was a passage some five or six feet wide. In such a room I had privacy only when I woke up at three o'clock.

Knowing that no one was watching me, I felt safe enough to ask myself: what kind of person am I? A die-hard Manchu aristocrat like Nainai, my grandmother, or an educated new peasant in a new society? Am I a true believer of communism or a hidden counterrevolutionary with many dangerous thoughts? Is my life meaningful only because I can serve the people or work for the revolution? What is the purpose of my life? What things am I willing to sacrifice for the sake of my dreams? And what are those, I know by now, I won't give up despite the dreams my parents and I have cherished? In trying to make our dreams come true, what foolish things have we done? What crimes have we committed? If the crimes were committed out of good intentions for the world, would heaven punish us for them or pardon us? If there is no retribution from heaven, should there be no indictment from the court of my own conscience?

Old Monkey Monster

Speaking of dreams, I recall a famous Chinese dream in which Chuang Tzu, an ancient philosopher, became a butterfly. In the spring wind he fluttered his wings; he danced among flowers. He drank dew and rested under a green leaf. His heart was ever so happy and serene. When he woke up, he was Chuang Tzu again. Wearing a scholar's hat and a long robe, he sat in his study meditating on the nature of all beings including himself. "Am I really Chuang Chou who dreamed that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly who is dreaming that I am Chuang Chou?"*

When I look back on what I have been, sometimes I, too, am perplexed. The pictures that remain vivid in my memory don't seem to fit together.

—In the fifties there was a black-eyed and black-haired Chinese girl on Lake Geneva. A precious pearl on the palms of her parents, followed everywhere by her devoted Chinese nanny. Pink satin dress. White leather shoes. Colorful hairpins. She was proud. She was nice to people. Tourists were charmed by her. They asked to take her picture.

—In 1966 there was a Red Guard who jumped on a train and traveled over a thousand miles to Guangzhou to spread the fire of the Cultural Revolution. She criticized First Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang to his face for his tolerance of capitalism and saw drops of sweat as large as soybeans roll down his face. An order issued by her and her comrades shook the city like a hurricane. In its wake, thousands of privately owned shops were devastated.

—In the early seventies there was a peasant on a pig farm. Her face was dark brown and weather-beaten. Her hair was as dry and brittle as straw in late fall. She had strong muscles and a loud voice. She loved to eat dog meat with raw garlic. Her face did not change color after she gulped down several cups of Chinese liquor, which was more than

**Chou* is the personal name of Chuang Tzu, which means "Master Chuang."

60 percent alcohol. Although her clothes and boots carried a lot of stinking mud, the work she did was neat and she took great pride in it.

—In the nineties there is a Chinese professor in an American college. She has a Ph.D in comparative literature. She teaches Chinese language and a variety of courses on Chinese culture and literature. To her American colleagues and students, she is very Chinese. Yet her Chinese friends say that she is westernized. Some suspect that she is a feminist, because she is too independent. She has a son, whom she chose to raise by herself after a divorce. It seems unthinkable that she is doing quite all right without a husband.

Can these be the same person? Can this person be me? Among these, which is the real me and which are the roles I have played? Once in a while I even doubt my memory. But I am sure of one thing: since I was a child, I had a feeling that the materials of which I was made were ill at ease with one another.

My parents brought me into this world on December 1, 1950. My father, people said, was an old revolutionary. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1940s. My mother, who graduated from Yanjing University (now called Beijing University) the year before I was born, was a new enthusiast for the Maoist revolution. She, like many of her peers, believed that only the Chinese Communist Party could save China. It would provide secure jobs for intellectuals and liberate workers and peasants from slavery. It would root out corruption that had plagued all the previous governments and revive China's economy that had collapsed in the 1940s.

One thing the adults liked to tell my generation when we were young was that we were the most fortunate, because we were born in new China and grew up under the red flag. In my case only part of this was true. I was born in new China. But when I was one year old, my parents took me to Switzerland. There I grew up under a red flag, not one with five golden stars symbolizing the Communist Party and four hundred million Chinese, but one with a large white cross on it. That must have messed things up for me from very early on.

In Switzerland we lived in Bern and Geneva, in quiet and comfortable surroundings. At that time there were four of us in our family: Father, Mother, Aunty, and I. From Monday to Saturday, I hardly saw my parents. They were both busy working at the Chinese consulate. In the morning they always left in a great hurry; in the evening unfinished work, meetings, or banquets kept them away. By the time they got home,

I was already fast asleep. On Sunday, Mother usually slept until noon and Father until two o'clock in the afternoon. So in those years Auntie was about the only one who was always there for me.

Auntie, I later found out, was no relative of ours. She was my nanny. My paternal grandmother, whom I called Nainai, hired her in Beijing shortly before I was born. Five days after Mother gave birth to me, that is, as soon as we left the hospital, Auntie took over the work from Mother. Henceforth day and night, it was she who fed me, washed me, and rocked me in her arms. I fell asleep to her soft wordless songs. It was her smile and her voice that I remembered when I was a baby. My own mother, on the other hand, left me when I was barely one month old. She flew to Switzerland to resume her work. As for my father, I did not meet him until I was one year old. At that time he came back to report on work. While he was in Beijing, he celebrated my birthday with me. Afterwards he took Auntie and me to Switzerland.

On arrival at our new home, Father said: "Now in China it is a new society. Everybody is equal. There are no more masters and servants. People are of one big family. So let Rae, our little girl, call her Auntie instead of nanny from the start."

Thus I learned to call her Auntie. For me, the word Auntie was dearer than Mother and Father put together, and over the years I became more important to Auntie than her own daughter, whom she had tried hard to forget. I do not know when my parents found out how I felt or how they took it when they found it out. Were they sad or glad of the fact that because of their dedication to the revolutionary work, they let a nanny steal the heart of their only daughter whom they insisted they loved very much?

When I say this, I do not mean that I did not love my parents. Of course I did. Yet that love was different. It was rational, unlike the mysterious tie that bound Auntie and me together, body and soul. By this, I mean if a misfortune was about to befall Auntie a thousand miles away, I would feel it in my blood. I would have bad dreams at night. Such premonitions were hard to explain; yet they turned out to be right when I had them in 1978. In contrast, when my mother died suddenly in 1976, I did not feel anything. I learned the bad news the next day from Father's telegram.

In the late 1950s, when I came back to attend elementary school in Beijing, I discovered that my attachment to Auntie was not unique. Many of my classmates, who were children of high-ranking cadres, were just

like me. They loved their nannies, aunts, or grandmothers more than their own parents. Sometimes the parents became so jealous that they told the nannies to go home. Others let the nannies stay for the children's sake. Of these parents, many were richly rewarded a few years later. That is, when the Cultural Revolution broke out and the parents got into trouble, the nannies took the children into their own homes and brought them up as if they were their own.

Aunty's love for me made her blind to my shortcomings. To her I was the best child in the whole world. My younger brothers were extraordinary kids too. But I was undoubtedly the smartest and prettiest. She was proud of me at all times.

According to her, I could remember things that occurred very early in my life. Such memories were of isolated scenes. The sight, the sound, the smell, and the touch stayed with me. Some of them were quite vivid in my mind. But the context was lost. She and my parents often had to supply the where and when.

In Cold Spring village, the scene that came most often to my mind was of our second-floor apartment in Bern. In the morning bright sunshine poured through the large windows and glass doors. I opened my eyes in the warmth. I saw Aunty's face break into a gentle smile; tiny wrinkles appeared at the corners of her eyes. I knew soon she'd go to the nearby bakery to buy my favorite pastry. "Little mice bread" was the nickname Aunty and I gave it.

The short while she was away was the most exciting time of my day. I tried to hide myself in the closets, on the balcony, or behind a piece of furniture, knowing Aunty would soon be back and would seek me out. The rest of the day I did not have many games to play. I had a room filled with toys: dolls, stuffed animals, music boxes, little houses, kitchen and tea sets, a train that ran around the room . . . but the problem was: I had no one to play with me.

For five years I was the only child. Although we had neighbors, my parents never tried to socialize with them. Was it because of rules that forbade them to make friends among the local people? Or was it the neighbors who were afraid of being tainted by us, knowing that we were from red China? Whatever the reason, I hardly had a friend in my childhood. So in those years the seed of loneliness dropped into my heart. Later, when it grew into a monstrous tree, I tried very hard to cut it down but I failed. Now I am an adult, I realize loneliness is my fate and I might as well enjoy it: I can sit in the shade of this gigantic tree, far

away from the comings and goings of the world. Breathing a deep sigh of sadness and relief, I forget the intricate network of relationships in China and elsewhere.

Despite the loneliness, my childhood was not unhappy. Father, Mother, and Auntie all loved me. I loved them too, Auntie especially. By then, Auntie was in her early fifties. Her long hair was still mostly black, but silver threads were beginning to show around her temples. Each morning she would spend some time combing and oiling her hair. The hair oil sent out a mild sweetness to my nose. Afterwards she'd coil her hair up and pin it into a bun, which looked so elegant behind her head. This, Auntie told me, was the traditional hairstyle for a married woman in China. She had been dressing her hair like this for more than thirty years.

Aside from her hair, her clothes were also traditional. In my memory Auntie was always wearing a slender cotton dress called *qipao*, which was either silver gray or indigo blue. It fitted her perfectly because she made it herself. European fashion did not affect her. In Switzerland, the only Western garment she had was a fur coat, and even that was a gift from my parents.

Like most women who grew up in old China, Auntie had never been to school. When she came into our family, she did not know how to write her own name. Her mind, however, was a treasure box, filled with stories. Some she learned from Peking operas to which she loved to "listen" (as people in old Beijing put it, rather than see). Others were folktales told to her by her own grandmother. It was from these stories that I came to know China, my native country, which was thousands of miles away: the peasants, the water buffalo, the rice fields, the forbidden city in Beijing, the emperor and his concubines, scholars and the imperial examinations, ancestors who protected their descendants and depended on them for food and money in the nether world, and the various animal spirits that obtained Tao and magic power through meditation.

The old monkey monster in my favorite story was such an animal spirit. To this day I remember vividly how Auntie told it to me.

"Once upon a time there was an old monkey monster who lived in the deep mountains. One day he saw a little girl in the village who was very pretty. He started a whirlwind that darkened the sky and put dust into everybody's eyes. In the wind, the old monkey monster grabbed the girl. Carrying her under his arm, he flew over many mountains and took her to his home, which was a dark, smelly cave.

"He asked the little girl to be his wife; but she said no. The old mon-

key monster was very angry. But he did not eat the girl. He shut her up in the cave.

“One morning when the old monkey monster went out to gather wild fruit, the girl’s mother arrived. She had followed the whirlwind all the way to the cave. When she found her daughter there, she took her into her arms and the two of them cried. Afterwards she taught the girl what to say and went into hiding.

“Soon the old monkey monster came back, in a gust of wind. He came into the cave and sniffed around, saying: ‘The smell of a stranger person! The smell of a stranger person! If I catch her, I will eat her up!’

“The girl said: ‘Nonsense! There is no stranger person here. Only my mother came to visit us. She has a secret remedy that can cure your festering eyes.’

“When the old monkey monster heard this, he was very glad. For many years his eyes had been red and watery. They bothered him a lot. So he asked eagerly: ‘Where is your mother? Quickly bring her in. I want to see her. I will not eat her!’

“Hearing this, the mother came forward. She had gathered a lot of tree gum on her way, which she melted in a big wok and spread on a long piece of foot-binding cloth. She told the old monkey monster to sit still and shut his eyes while she put the medicine on. She wrapped the cloth round his head many times.

“‘You must keep your eyes shut and do not move for three days. If you move or open your eyes before that, the medicine will not work and your eyes will never be cured!’ After she said this, she took her daughter by the hand and the two of them sneaked out of the cave. They returned home safe and sound. Three days later when the old monkey monster tried to open his eyes, he couldn’t. For the glue had dried up. The cloth stuck to the old monkey monster’s hair and skin. He could never get it off and open his eyes. After that, the mother and the girl lived together for many, many happy years.”

I loved this story. Each time I listened to it, Aunty’s voice made me sense the danger and I was a little scared. I imagined myself to be the little girl who was snatched away by an old monkey monster. Yet I knew that I was safe, for Aunty was holding me with both her arms. Aunty, I believed, loved me as much as the little girl’s mother did, and she was every bit as smart and brave. In the future she could and she would save me from the grip of any monsters.

Another scene I remembered was the pavement in Bern. In the spring

when it rained, the pavement was covered with earthworms; I did not dare let my feet touch it. On such days Father would carry me to places on his shoulders, and I loved it there! My father by then was just over thirty. He was tall and handsome, always well dressed. I was very proud of him. He walked with long, springy steps on the sidewalk, overtaking other pedestrians. From time to time he rocked me a little. One step toward the left; one step toward the right. I was scared, so I held on tighter to his neck.

Besides earthworms, I was afraid of numerous other things. For instance, at home people had to warn me before they flushed the toilet; Auntie had to make sure I was out of the kitchen before she put vegetables into a hot wok. On the playground I was afraid of the swing and nobody could make me climb to the top of the slide. The seesaw was better, but when my end went up, it had to move very slowly and never go any higher than Auntie's waist. The sandbox was the only place where I felt safe. As a result, each day I made more cakes than the baker from across the street.

In winter after snow had fallen, sometimes Mother would take me to a small slope behind our house for sledding. I wore a little white fur coat and Mother a long green woolen overcoat. The new snow was soft. My footsteps were small and Mother's big. On our way we stopped beneath a leafless tree on which crimson apples hung. Pretty little birds were picking at them. Mother whistled to the birds and the little birds answered her. Then we were at the slope and the sled began to move. The wind blew into my face. I had to shut my mouth and hold my breath. Involuntary tears of fear fell down my cheeks like a little stream.

Once our lives were really in danger, Auntie said. By then I was four. "One day," she said, "it was in May; your parents took us boating on a mountain lake. It was a nice day. Warm and sunny. Your father was half asleep. The boat drifted by itself. Suddenly he saw a sign—there was a waterfall downstream. Alarmed, he jumped up and tried to row the boat back. But he couldn't. At that place the lake narrowed. It was like a big river. The water was swift. Your mother tried to help. After a while, the sun was setting and no other people were in sight. We were all terribly frightened.

"I held you tightly in my arms. I thought if we were to go down that waterfall, I would die with you. At that moment I was really sorry I had come all the way to this foreign country to die. It was so far away from home. Our spirits would be lost. We'd be hungry ghosts for eternity.

"All this while your mother was furious; she scolded your father non-stop. Your father was furious too after a while. So he started to yell back. The two of them quarreled as if heaven and earth had been turned upside down. Yet in the meantime they rowed together as fast as they could."

"What happened next? Did we go down the waterfall?" I asked.

"Of course not, you silly child! We were rescued by a steamboat."

"Aunty! Was I afraid at the time?"

"No," she said, "you were asleep in my arms. I did not wake you up."

So on the day when our lives were really in danger, I was the only one who was not afraid. I was glad to hear that. By then my parents took me out more often, to parks, restaurants, and theaters. This I liked very much, not because I was sophisticated enough to appreciate the food and the performances. It was because I had a feeling that the people I met liked me. Mother agreed with me a few years later when we talked about this.

"People liked you because you were nice and sweet!" she said with a great deal of annoyance in her voice. "What has gotten into you and made you change so much after we returned to China that I can hardly recognize you?"

I had no answer to her question. It was true that my temper changed for the worse when I reached the age of seven. Somehow I lost the desire to be a sweet little girl.

My family went back to China when I was five. We traveled by train, on which we had a compartment to ourselves. Father, Mother, Aunty, and I each had a bed. My little brother, Lian, who was a baby, slept in a basket under Aunty's bed. Day after day I sat in front of the window to watch the scenery. The great cities of Europe were left behind. Vast wilderness of Siberia, Mongolia, and Manchuria rushed forward to welcome me back. Snow flakes in summer, tall grass to the end of the sky, yellow flowers, and blue lakes. Half a month later our train pulled into Yongding Gate Station in Beijing.

From there we went to Nainai's house, which was situated to the east of the forbidden city in a place known as Wangfujing. When we were in Switzerland, my paternal grandfather died of lung cancer. So by now Nainai was the head of the household. In fact, many said she was in charge even when her husband was alive.