Lifelines

A DOCTOR'S JOURNEY IN THE FIGHT FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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“Our children are living messengers to a future we will never see. The question is how we will send them. Will we send them strong? Will we send them hopeful? Or will we rob them of their destiny, their dignity, and their dreams? Will we take from them their health and their ability to succeed before they even have a chance to get started?

No, we cannot do that. We will not do that. We must not do that.”

—Representative Elijah E. Cummings (1951–2019)

Prologue

The first sign of something wrong was the sound of a high-pitched squeak.

"What's that?" Christine whispered. I had just opened the door of the apartment complex my family shared with hers and two others. We looked at each other as the noises continued. It was a wet rattle and wheeze.

Then we heard someone shouting in rapid-fire Spanish. I grabbed Christine's hand, and we ran toward the noise.

It was the apartment next to Christine's. The door was open and we saw that the noise was coming from Tony. He was in the third grade, two behind me and Christine. Tony was sitting upright, straight as a board, clutching the sides of a rocking chair. His cheeks were streaked with red. His breathing was short and shallow. Each exhale ended in a wheeze and a squeak, each shorter than the one before.

His eyes were wide and beads of sweat ran down his face. He looked terrified.

I knew that feeling well. Asthma.

Tony's grandmother was yelling and begging us to help. There was an inhaler on the floor. I grabbed it and held up it up to Tony's mouth. I pressed it, but nothing happened.

I got my own inhaler out of my backpack and pulled his lips open. I pressed twice. I took it out and tried again.

The medication dribbled out of his mouth. His eyes were starting to close. His breathing was slowing and I could barely hear the wheezing. His lips were turning purple and blue.

Christine's mother had heard the noise. She held the phone in her hand. "We need to call 911!"

"No, no, no!" The grandmother yelled. "Policia, no! No policia!"

"Not police, ambulance. Medical. Doctor. 911!"

I was holding Tony up, and he felt heavy in my arms. His grandmother shook him and begged him to wake up. She thumped him on his back. She grabbed him by his hair.

Christine's mother had been a nurse back in her home country. She lifted Tony and laid him flat on the floor. She pressed on his chest and breathed into his mouth.

Eventually, she stepped back and shook her head. The grandmother began to wail.

We listened to her scream and cry all night.

"Do you think Tony would have lived if we'd brought him to a hospital?" I whispered to my mother as we lay in bed. In Shanghai, where I was born, I'd had such severe asthma that I ended up in the hospital nearly every month. It was terrifying to fight for air, but I always knew that once I got to the hospital, the doctors would make me better.

"Maybe he was so sick that nobody could have helped him," my mother said.

"What about 911? In school, they always say to call 911 and an ambulance will come."

"Who knows who else would come? Maybe the police. They could all be deported and sent back to Mexico."

"So if something happens to you, I shouldn't call 911 because you'll be sent back to

China? What about Father—what if his ulcer bleeds and he's very sick?"

"Think about what happened to your father in China. Going back is not better than death."

"But that's not right," I remember saying. "How come other people can call the ambulance and go to the doctor? Why is it different for us?"

My mother's answer fixed my future. "Life is like this for some people. Maybe one day you can change things for people like Tony and your father."

That night cemented my decision to become a doctor so that when I encountered another Tony, his life would not have to end in a preventable death.

Fifteen years later, I did meet another Tony. He, too, was a third grader with severe asthma. I got to know him because he and his mother would come to the emergency department every week, sometimes multiple times. He always had the same symptoms: wheezing, coughing, and gasping for breath. When it was particularly bad, he'd get that familiar frightened look in his eyes, the look of not knowing whether the next breath would come.

Each time, I had every medical tool at my disposal. I'd put a mask on him to administer oxygen and nebulizers. I'd give him steroid medications. I'd monitor his breathing. Most of the time, he'd get better within a couple of hours and go back home.

But he kept on returning, week after week. He and his mother were homeless. They shuttled between shelters and the homes of different relatives and friends. His clothes always reeked of cigarettes because his mother's boyfriend and her family smoked. At some point, they moved into a home of their own, but his asthma didn't improve—they were in a row house where all the units were vacant and harbored mold and other allergens. Two blocks away, an incinerator pumped out toxins.

This Tony was being treated at one of the best hospitals in America. Every time he got sick, we'd make him better. But medicine could not treat the poor air quality he breathed. Medicine could not change the poverty, instability, stress, and powerlessness of his and his mother's lives. This Tony, too, was a testament to the notion that the currency of inequality is years of life.

This is a reality I knew all too well from my childhood. My family and I came to the United States from China with less than $40 to our name. We lived paycheck-to-paycheck and worried every month about making the rent. Inequality left a mark on everyone I knew: my classmates, who became victims of gun violence; their families, who were decimated by drug addiction; our neighbors, who died young from preventable diseases.

I became a doctor to save Tony. I chose emergency medicine so that I could treat everyone and turn no one away, not immigrants afraid of deportation or people who couldn't pay. But working in the ER was also where I saw the limitations of health care. I could resuscitate a young man dying from gunshot wounds, but what could I do about the violence on the street, violence so consuming that elementary schools didn't have recess outdoors? I could stitch up a child's laceration, but what could I do about the ache in her belly because the last meal she ate was her school lunch two days before? I could prescribe drugs for diabetes and heart disease, but how could I recommend healthy eating knowing that the corner store my patient depended on for food sold no fruits or vegetables?

It wasn't just health care that my patients needed: it was public health. Public health is housing. It's food. It's clean air. It's education. It's the ability to level the unequal playing field. It's the social supports that give everyone their best chance to survive. For so many people— indeed, for all of us—public health is our lifeline.

There is a saying that public health saved your life today—you just don't know it. Public health works when it's invisible, because it prevented something from happening. It is the forgotten subject that no one thinks about. Politicians don't campaign on a platform of public health. Budgets don't prioritize public health. Even the U.S. health-care system treats public health as the forgotten stepchild, with less than 3 percent of America's total

health-care spending going toward it.

The late congressman Elijah Cummings often said that "the cost of doing nothing isn't nothing." The cost of neglecting public health is people's livelihoods and their lives. Now as never before, we have seen the tragic consequences of that neglect. The United States—and the world—has lived through the greatest public health catastrophe of our lifetimes: a pandemic in the form of COVID-19, which has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans and triggered an economic crisis, made all the worse by decades of disinvestment in public health and fueled by science denialism.

My life is a journey into public health. In this book, I tell that story with the goal of making this crucial but invisible work visible. When I was named health commissioner for the city of Baltimore in 2014, a position I held for nearly four years, I saw the immediate and far-reaching impact of public health—and of its neglect—every day. Like many other cities, Baltimore has its share of economic challenges that are directly reflected in poor health outcomes and vast disparities. A child born in one neighborhood has an average life expectancy of sixty-five years, while another born just a few miles away can expect to live eighty-five years—a twenty-year gap. The same neighborhood that has lower life expectancy also has higher infant mortality, more drug overdose deaths, higher homicide rates, lower educational achievement, and—not coincidentally—a larger concentration of poverty.

If the currency of inequality is years of life, then the opposite of poverty is health.

As the doctor for the city, I worked every day to improve the health and well-being of Baltimore's residents. These were not random people, but my neighbors and fellow community members. Every problem was deeply personal, yet they were all potentially solvable with the tools of public health: providing direct services like care for uninsured patients and services in senior centers and schools; implementing public education campaigns; and shaping health policies as a means to effect change on the city and state levels.

My role allowed me to be a vocal advocate and translate the community's needs into policy reform and programs that targeted the greatest sources of harm, such as combating the opioid epidemic, reducing infant mortality, and treating gun violence as a public health issue. My team and I were unafraid to call out racism as a public health concern and to tackle systemic injustices like childhood trauma and mass incarceration. There was always more to be done, more programs to start or expand, more policies to improve the public's health, and more people we could serve. And although the work was deeply immersed in the crushing reality of poverty and trauma, in Baltimore I witnessed the resiliency and dedication of people who gave everything of themselves to their communities.

Public health is unusual in that it straddles the worlds of science, advocacy, medicine, and politics. Through my experience, I learned how policies that improve health advance the goal of equity and how they translate into direct services on the ground. Public health ties to every aspect of society, and all sectors of our society are needed to strive together for better health.

My time in Baltimore forged my approach to patient advocacy, improving access to care, and responding to national public health crises. It was an approach that I brought to the leadership of a national organization, Planned Parenthood, that at the time was threatened with funding cuts that could have left millions of low-income women and families without cancer screenings, HIV testing, and other preventive care. Leading Planned Parenthood offered an opportunity to work for a world in which health care will finally be regarded as a fundamental right guaranteed to all, not a privilege available only to some. In that fight, I learned a great deal about the growing schisms in the country and saw access to health care threatened by escalating ideological battles in Washington.

These lessons proved invaluable when, in December 2019, a novel coronavirus quickly spread around the world and swept through the United States. Day by day, the public

health catastrophe worsened, accelerated by the federal government's bungled response of deliberate obfuscation, rigid partisan ideology, and muzzling of top public health officials.

Those most affected were, once again, the most vulnerable populations, the people I had always been drawn to serve. With a background in emergency preparedness and public health expertise, I joined the battle against the pandemic, analyzing and guiding policies, advising businesses and schools as they navigated the challenge of keeping employees and students safe, and educating the public through the media. In many ways, responding to COVID-19 was my life's calling, the culmination of everything I prepared for.

There is a second story that I tell here, too: my own, which is at once a personal journey and an improbable and uniquely American story. Just before I turned eight, my parents brought me to the United States, seeking political asylum. They left their families and their lives in China to wash dishes, clean hotel rooms, and deliver newspapers so that I and, eventually, my younger sister would have the chance of a better life. We depended on Medicaid and food stamps. Living paycheck-to-paycheck, we went through times when we were homeless.

My life is a testament to public health. I was able to rise from my humble beginnings because of my parents' hard work and extraordinary sacrifice, as well as the fortuitous interventions of supportive mentors at critical moments. The social safety net played a no less crucial role, providing housing and food, education and health when we most needed it. This is all public health. It's what saves your life from infectious disease. It's what can change the reality of your zip code determining your life expectancy, or the place of your birth or the color of your skin determining your destiny. Public health is a powerful tool for wellness, advancement, and social justice. Housing, education, poverty, and violence—these are all public health issues. And, as we saw with COVID-19, the census, voting, and even the post office, are inextricably linked to public health issues, too.

I also want to share my story so that young people growing up in difficult circumstances know that that they too can dream big dreams and strive for them. Not every chapter that I tell is a tale of success; this book is also about resilience, grit, and the courage to persist.

A final reason for this book is a call to action. We generally understand getting involved to mean voting or running for elected office. These are not the only ways to make a difference in civic life. So much is done by people on the front lines, in community organizations, local government, and civic volunteering. In my work, I have met the most inspiring people—the formerly incarcerated, individuals overcoming the disease of addiction, and those who survived unimaginable horrors—who have succeeded in channeling their disillusionment and pain into their purpose and calling.

Those who are deeply embedded in their communities have a duty to speak up and be heard. They are the ones who know what works and what doesn't, who understand the hopes and dreams of fellow community members. It's they who must be represented so that the national discourse reflects the needs of the people on the ground. In my work and travels, I've encountered so many who feel alienated by the divisiveness of our times, yet there are those who seek common ground and have devised practical approaches that improve health and well-being for all.

We are at a critical point in our history, when we have the chance to channel uncertainty and anxiety into a sustained groundswell for equity and health. How will we ensure that our fellow citizens will no longer be robbed of decades of life, that *where* children live will not determine *whether* they live? How can we leave future generations a world where all aspects of health are understood as fundamental human rights, where no one is denied access to health care because of an inability to pay or someone else's political ideology? How can we bend the arc of the universe back toward justice, so that health is no longer defined as the opposite of poverty?

PART ONE

Learning

1

Chi Ku

Chi ku. In Mandarin, it means "to eat bitter"—to sacrifice and go through great hardships. My grandparents always added a second part: that one eats bitter in order to taste sweet.

I was born in Shanghai, China. My early memories were happy ones. I lived with my Nai Nai and Ye Ye, my grandmother and grandfather on my father's side. They had a one-room apartment in the heart of the bustling Huangpu District that was the gathering place for all their grandchildren. I was the youngest and spent my days helping Nai Nai wrap delicate dumplings and watching Ye Ye read books until my cousins finished school and came home to play.

We lived in very tight quarters. My grandparents' apartment barely fit a bed, a dresser, a small table, and a bamboo mat. Kitchen and washroom facilities were in the hallway and shared among a dozen families. When my parents first got married, they lived in the same room as Ye Ye and Nai Nai, their beds separated by only a curtain. When I was born, they moved out, to another apartment down the hall.

For most of my childhood in Shanghai, my mother lived away from home. She was a student at the same university where my Ye Ye taught, studying for a bachelor's and then a master's degree in English language and literature. Our neighbors spoke of my mother with awe. Going to college was exceptionally rare in those days. My mother had been in elementary school when the Cultural Revolution started and all schools ceased operation. Her mother—my other grandmother, Wai Po—smuggled books and taught my mother and her sister by candlelight.

It was a testament to Wai Po's persistence that both of her daughters tested into university just after the Cultural Revolution ended, despite their having no formal schooling beyond elementary school. They each had to beat out millions of others who vied for a small number of coveted college openings.

It was expected that university students lived on campus. So I saw my mother every other weekend.

Once, she'd been away for longer. When she came home, I didn't know what to say to her.

Nai Nai urged me to give her a hug. "Ask your mother how her studies are," she whispered to me.

"How are your studies?" I said.

My mother was not one for hugs or small talk. She held me at arm's length.

"Duo Duo's hair is so long," she said to Nai Nai, using my nickname, which was conceived out of irony. "Duo Duo" means "too many" and was a common moniker for children in families that had many offspring. I was born shortly after the start of China's one-child policy, so I was destined to be the only child. "Duo Duo" didn't mean that I was

one too many, but that I was the only one to embody the many ambitions everyone had for me.

"I'm going to cut it tonight. She looks better with short hair." My mother turned to me. I had a cold and was trying to suppress a cough. "Stop coughing. It will make your asthma flare up."

That night, we were eating Nai Nai's steamed fish when my chest started tightening. I started coughing and soon couldn't catch my breath. Nai Nai grabbed my inhaler and told me to take two puffs. This was the routine. We tried the inhaler first, then she turned on a machine and put a mask over my face. If the attack was very bad, I'd swallow three pills, then put on the mask again.

"Isn't that too much medication?" my mother called out. "Shouldn't we go to the doctor?"

"No, we try this first," Nai Nai said. "Most of the time, we don't need to go."

Nai Nai put the mask over my face. I took a few breaths, then pulled it off so that I could cough.

My mother was grabbing my hand. "She can't breathe! We have to go get her help."

"She's fine!" Nai Nai insisted.

They both looked at me.

"I don't want to go to the hospital," I said. Tears were running down my face.

"Don't cry," my mother said. "The sniffing is not good for your asthma."

"I'm not crying. It's the mist from the breathing mask," I said. Each word took a breath to get out, and I was panting. My chest felt tight. Any tighter, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to take the next breath.

I was terrified. I turned to Nai Nai.

"It's OK," she said. She took me into her arms and started singing the song from my preschool about monkeys and ducklings.

My breathing didn't get better. With the next coughing spell, my mother began yelling that I was turning red and blue.

"Duo Duo is sick," she said. "I have to take her to the hospital now."

"I'll go," I said, "but I want to go with Nai Nai."

There was a story Nai Nai would tell me that always gave me nightmares. It was about a beautiful woman who made many men fall in love with her. They would do anything for her. They all wanted to marry her and so bestowed her with flattery and gifts. What they didn't know was that she was actually a monster who would kill them when she grew tired of them, which inevitably happened. When it became time, she would peel off her face, which was a mask all along, and reveal a horrific pale-faced ghoul.

Nai Nai told me the story so that I would be careful of strangers—they were not always who they said they were. Sometimes I had dreams about this woman being my mother, and I'd wake up soaked in sweat as I imagined her peeling off her face.

That night, when my mother stared at me, her face was as white as the pale-faced ghoul from Nai Nai's stories. Nai Nai carried me in her arms, and my mother followed us out the door. Tears were running down my cheek, and also down hers.

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IN THOSE DAYS, I DIDN'T understand why my mother and my father were gone all the time. Ye Ye and Nai Nai would tell me that it was *chi ku*: their lives were hard so that my life could be better.

Chi ku was the same answer my grandparents gave when I asked them about their early days. From my aunt and my cousins, I'd pieced together some details, though most of their story remained unclear. I know that they had grown up in a poor village near Guangzhou in southern China and got married in their teens. Somehow, Ye Ye was able to go to school

and defied all the odds to attend university and become a renowned linguistics scholar in Shanghai.

During the Cultural Revolution, he and other academics were deemed elitists and targeted for persecution. Ye Ye was tied up and beaten in front of his students and then imprisoned. Nai Nai was forced to leave her children, who were sent to labor camps. Their home was burned and every possession confiscated by the government. My father, then in his twenties, ran away and became a revolutionary against the Communist regime. He was caught, jailed, and suffered innumerable abuses that I would only learn about many years later.

The one story that Nai Nai liked to tell was how my parents met. The Cultural Revolution had ended, and she and Ye Ye had rebuilt their lives in Shanghai. Nai Nai's concern was her only surviving son, who was approaching forty and still didn't have a wife or child.

She asked Ye Ye, who by then had been restored to his faculty position at the university, to set my father up with one of his students. In those days, unmarried men and women were not supposed to go out by themselves. This woman brought her roommate as a chaperone on their first date.

That roommate was my mother, and it was love at first sight for her and my father. My father was eleven years older, handsome, and a rebel. They were married within months.

People told different versions of their courtship. I knew that Wai Po didn't approve of the relationship, but nobody explained why. Did they have a wedding? I was always told no, but then my aunt showed me a photo of my mother in a wedding dress. I asked Nai Nai about it. She immediately put the picture away and said that we shouldn't talk about it anymore.

My father was absent for long periods of time. When he was home, he had many friends who came to visit. I didn't know any of their names; I was told to call all of them "uncle." One day I asked one of the uncles whether he was an engineer like my father. Nai Nai was so upset that she took me outside to the hallway and slapped me, the only time she'd ever hit me. "Never say anything to anyone about your father," she said.

When he was at home, my father reentered our daily lives as if he were never gone. He went to work during the day and spent time with the family at night. Nai Nai and my aunts —his sisters—would fawn over him, and someone would always make his favorite meal of spare ribs and sticky rice.

One day, my father took me to the park. There was a lily pond, and I reached in to try to touch the fish. I lost my balance and fell in the water. It was winter and I was freezing. The pond was probably no more than a few feet deep, but I was terrified. The next thing I remember, my father was in the pond with me. He lifted me out and, as I proudly reported to Nai Nai and Ye Ye, he saved my life.

For months after that, every time Nai Nai would take me to the park, I'd peer into the lily pond in the hope that I would see my father's reflection. Once, I deliberately stepped into the water, certain that my father would materialize and rescue me. I had either grown taller or the pond was shallower, because the water only came up to my chest. My father did not appear, and after a moment I climbed out, wet and disappointed.

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I WAS SEVEN WHEN MY mother told me that she was leaving.

It was the first warm day of the new year. We were walking along the Huangpu River. I remember my mother buying two ice cream sandwiches from the sidewalk vendor. Mine was melting and my mother took out a tissue to wipe my hands. Hers had melted, too, and she also had ice cream all over her face. We pointed to each other and laughed.

"Duo Duo, now I'm going to tell something," she said. "Ever since your father and I met,

we've been looking for a way out of China." She explained that because of my father's rebellious activities during the Cultural Revolution, he was labeled a political dissident. Whenever foreign dignitaries came to visit, and whenever the government perceived an internal threat, he would be taken in for questioning. Sometimes he was imprisoned.

"He lives in constant fear. We all do," she said. "You must have seen that our family has different circumstances than other people."

I nodded. Virtually everyone in my parents' and grandparents' generations had experienced great suffering during the Cultural Revolution, but I saw that there was something unusual about my family. Although they behaved as if nothing was wrong when my father went away, they would never speak of him, and in their silence I would feel their anxiety. When he'd come back, he would always be thin and gaunt, with dark shadows under his eyes. Nai Nai and my aunts would fuss over him, but our neighbors stayed away. Classmates who would stop by after school to play would stop coming.

"I knew when I married your father that our lives will always be like this while we're in China," my mother went on. "This is not a good life for us, and it will not be a good future for you. One needs to look forward, not always behind, because one is always afraid of the shadows. That's why I study so hard, so that I can get into an American university."

Later, I'd learn that this was one of the few ways out of China at the time, and that this had been my parents' plan from the time they first met. My mother must have known that this was what she had to do, and how much my father and our entire family were counting on her.

It took a year to apply, and another full year for my parents to borrow enough money from relatives to supplement their savings for the visa and plane fare. The plans were finally coming together. They had enough to buy her ticket (and tickets for my father and me to follow afterward), her visa was approved, and she was about to start a PhD program.

In fact, she'd been accepted to two PhD programs. One was at the University of Illinois in Chicago, to continue her work in English literature. The other was at Utah State University, in educational psychology. Her professors didn't know much about Illinois, but someone had a colleague who knew someone who had studied in Utah. In addition, my mother thought that psychology was a more useful degree than English. "English is useful in China, but in America, who wants a Chinese person who specializes in English?"

So, Utah it was. In less than a week my mother would be leaving for a place called Logan.

"Duo Duo, we are going to America," she said. "You are going to be an American."

Soon, she was gone. No one could tell me when I'd see her again. My grandparents showed me a letter that said she had arrived safely. They acted as if it was just like when she went away to study at the Shanghai university, but I knew this was different. There was a plan that my father and I would join her, but no time line. It depended on when my father was home again, and whether our visas would come through.

The days went by as we waited, and the magnolia trees grew delicate blossoms and then turned a golden brown.

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AS THE WEEKS STRETCHED INTO months, I became more and more convinced that I didn't want to leave the life I knew. My girlfriends and I read sad poems aloud to each other about eternal friendship. We vowed that we would keep in touch. I told my cousins that I wanted to live with them. My journal entries from those days had long treatises on why I didn't want to go to America.

I begged Ye Ye and Nai Nai to let me stay. Ye Ye tried to console me, but Nai Nai was unyielding.

"Do you know why your mother is in America?" she asked, her thick eyebrows

furrowing as her lips pursed together. "She doesn't know one person there. It is frightening for her, but she is doing it because she wants you to have a better life." She handed me a dish towel. "Dry your tears and never speak of your selfish desire again. From now on, you are living for something bigger than yourself."

If my parents were eating bitter for me, I needed to learn to eat bitter for them, too.

I have only two more memories of my life in China. One was in the hospital. I was being led to see my father. A nurse pulled back the curtain, and I didn't recognize the man in the bed. His eyes were yellow and there were two tubes down his throat, one through his mouth and one through his nose. I watched the nurses change his sheets, and they were stained with black tar that smelled like week-old chicken liver. In my clinical work later, I'd recognize this distinct scent of gastrointestinal bleeding. Every time I smelled it, I'd see my father lying in that bed, prone and helpless, and me staring at him just as helplessly.

The second memory was of our last hours in China. The day after my father was released from the hospital, we headed to the airport. As we walked through the terminal, my father leaned on my aunt on one side and Nai Nai on the other.

It would soon be my job to watch out for him. In the months since my mother had left, Ye Ye had been trying to teach me basic English phrases. I didn't learn nearly enough to communicate, so we came up with a plan. Ye Ye gave me twenty slips of paper. Each had Chinese on one side and English on the other.

"My father has a bleeding ulcer. He just had an operation and blood transfusions. Please call a doctor," was one. I also had slips of paper to explain that we had visas and that my mother was waiting for us. Ye Ye and I practiced each situation, and he gave me his English-Chinese dictionary in case I needed to translate something that wasn't on the paper.

At the gate, we said our goodbyes. Nai Nai had warned me not to cry. I lasted until I saw that she herself couldn't hold back her tears. I hugged her and Ye Ye. We knew we might never see one another again.

Thankfully, I didn't need to use the slips of paper during the flight. My father and I landed at Los Angeles International Airport on December 12, 1990, and went through immigration without incident. The immigration officer asked me for my name, and I told him "Linda"—Ye Ye and I had decided that it was the English name closest to my Chinese name, Linyan. The officer wrote down "Leana" and pronounced it as I do now, "Lee-na." That was my new name. My father, Xiaolu, became "Louis." My mother, previously Ying, was "Sandy."

We still had one more flight, a much shorter one. When "Louis" and I arrived in Salt Lake City, there was a tall white man with my mother, whom she introduced as her professor. He was her thesis adviser and the person who had sponsored her visa. Only much later did I recognize how unusual it was for a professor to offer to drive nearly three hours each way, in heavy snow and sleet, to pick up the family of a student. This was the first of many acts of kindness we would experience in America.

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OUR NEW HOME WAS IN the graduate student accommodations of Utah State University, on the second floor of a set of low-rise buildings. The one-bedroom apartment was easily five times the size of Ye Ye and Nai Nai's room in Shanghai. My mother showed me how the kitchen and bathrooms were actually inside the apartment and that they were our own. Everyone kept their doors closed, and I didn't hear the neighbors except when they came out into the courtyard area.

All I could think about was how cold it was! After the flights and visas, my parents had only forty American dollars. That was all they came to the United States with. It was a lot for them—it was what they had earned in China in a year. Heat was a luxury we could not

afford. Because electricity was included but not heating or hot water, I helped my mother boil water on the electric stove and used that for everything: to cook, to wash our hands, and to fill the bathtub.

We washed our clothes by hand and hung them to dry on the balcony. The next day, there were icicles covering everything. When I tried to take down the clothes, my father's shirt broke in my hand. To go out, I wore five layers of pants and even more sweaters. When I walked through the snow, my sneakers and pants quickly became soaked. At night, we slept huddled together to keep warm.

A week after we arrived, someone knocked on the door. There was no one there when we answered, but there was a huge brown bag just outside. In it were several pairs of boots, winter coats, mittens, hats, and a thick down blanket.

There was also a note: *Welcome home.*

Apparently, the local church had held a clothing drive for our family. This was the same church that would host us for every holiday meal, enlist volunteers to teach me English, and raise money for my father's hospital stay when his ulcer bled again.

"Americans are so nice!" my parents said often. "We are so lucky." My father speculated that Utahans must be kind to outsiders because they needed more people to live there. In comparison to Shanghai, a city of twenty-four million people, Logan was minuscule, with a population of thirty thousand who were nearly all white and Mormon. But there was just a handful of us immigrant families—all tied to the university—and welcoming us could not be the solution to increasing the population.

My mother thought it was because America is a land of immigrants, that everyone had relatives who were once strangers in a strange land. She also attributed the warm welcome we received to the church, which was a new experience for us. We were not allowed to have religion in China. Everyone around us went to church every Sunday, and I started going, too. The values I was taught, of tolerance, respect, and compassion, were the values exemplified by my mother's professor, our neighbors, and everyone else in our community. I didn't understand the intricacies of Mormonism versus other forms of Christianity (or other religions, for that matter), but I did appreciate the early grounding I received in a community of faith and fellowship.

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A FEW WEEKS AFTER WE arrived, I started school at Hillcrest, the local public elementary school. I was entering the third grade midway through the school year. That morning, I practiced saying, "Hello, my name is Lee-Na" in front of the mirror, dressed in my newly donated winter coat over three sweaters and four pairs of pants.

My mother walked with me to my new school and introduced me to the teacher.

"Hello, my name is Lee-Na!" I said. I bowed to her. She said something to me that I didn't understand. She saw my puzzled expression and said it again, slower, but I still didn't understand.

This continued throughout the day. I wondered if the words Ye Ye taught me were really English. Everyone spoke at what seemed like fifty times the speed of what I'd learned. I also got very hot, and by the end of the day I was carrying around a pile of sweaters and pants.

I was also hungry. In my school in China, every student would get a bowl with rice and vegetables, sometimes some pork shavings, and we'd go to assigned tables. In America, I had no idea where to start once I walked into the cafeteria. Students looked like they were picking and choosing different foods, but they were all nothing I'd seen before.

I tried to mimic what others were getting. When I got to the line, I saw that there was a cash register. I didn't have any money. I left my lunch on the counter and hid in the bathroom until the bell rang.

After two weeks of hungry afternoons, a teacher found me in the bathroom. She helped me sign up for a free lunch program and showed me how to put food on my tray. I learned that in America, people like to eat their food separately, green beans separated from the chicken and potatoes instead of all mixed together in one bowl. I learned that in America, milk came in a little paper container and that there was a way to peel it open without splashing the contents everywhere.

I also learned that in America, it wasn't just adults who are kind. On my first day of eating school lunch, four students sat down next to me.

"Hello, my name is Becky," one of them said. "Want to play together at recess?"

I wasn't sure what that meant. She pantomimed skipping rope, something I loved. I nodded eagerly. "Oh! Yes!"

"That's jump rope," she said.

"I like jump rope!" And I was thrilled to be having my first conversation with real Americans.

Every recess, I played with Becky and her friends. She invited me to her home after school. Becky had several brothers and sisters, and they also brought over their friends. Her mother gave us cut-up apple slices and the occasional Oreo cookie. We'd sit on her bunk bed in the room she shared with her sister. From school and from my new friends, I picked up conversational English quickly and soon was able to talk to Becky about our families. I was fascinated by how her family could trace their roots to Joseph Smith and the mass exodus to Utah. She was just as transfixed by my stories of Ye Ye, Nai Nai, and a land that seemed so far away.

Just as I did in China, I enjoyed going to school in America. My teachers prepared extra homework for me, and I used Ye Ye's dictionary to memorize twenty new words every night. I went to church with Becky's family, and our Bible study teacher would stay after Sunday service to tutor me. Older children and adults would make a point of speaking to me and helping me learn English. Their efforts paid off. Within two years, I would win my grade's spelling bee.

So many people helped me in those early days. As with my friends in China, I've long lost contact with Becky, our Bible study group, and my other teachers. I wish I could find them to tell them how much their generosity and kindness made all the difference in my life.

I also didn't appreciate at the time how much my family relied on public services to help us in those difficult days. My mother went to a public university that granted her free tuition and subsidized our housing. I took part in a school lunch program and attended public schools from elementary school through college. We had Medicaid and relied on reduced-cost clinics for our health care. Later on, we would need food stamps and housing assistance during particularly difficult times.

For us, these public assistance programs were not "entitlements." My parents weren't using them to game the system; they were trying their best to make it on their own, and these programs ensured that our basic needs were met. My parents certainly had no plans to depend on the government in perpetuity. In fact, my mother spoke constantly about how she was ashamed to be "taking advantage." In her mind, public assistance was reserved for the neediest, and since there was a finite amount of services, she strove to get us out of this category so that the services could be used by others.

"Always remember how good this country has been to us," she'd tell me. "China may be where we were born, but America is where we have chosen to make our home. America is our country now, and we must give to our country and its citizens." It was this spirit that would lead her, in time, to retrain as a public school teacher and to choose to work in some of the most challenging areas in Los Angeles.

Though my parents and I were now living together, I still almost never saw them. My mother was studying during the day and then went to her job of cleaning rooms in a

guesthouse across town. I was usually asleep by the time she came home, and she was always gone by the time I got up to go to school.

My father, too, was laser-focused on getting work. Unlike my mother, who spoke fluent if heavily accented English, my father didn't know the language and didn't have the benefit I did of immersion at a young age. He was a very proud man who hated to admit that he had a major deficit that held him back in our new home. There were no "English as a second language" classes for him to take, and even if there were, I'm certain that he would have prioritized earning an income. He'd learned enough English to get his driver's license, but he turned red when people addressed him. "Sorry, I don't speak English," he'd respond.

Every day my father would leave in the morning to look for work. There was nowhere that would make use of his engineering background, but he was quick with his hands and eager to do anything. He did some handyman work for our neighbors until the local plumber asked him to stop. A couple of downtown businesses gave him odd jobs like cleaning and restocking shelves. At some point, he went to another town to work in a cheese factory. He never talked about what happened there, but after a month or two, he came home and told us that he couldn't set foot there again—and to this day, he cannot bear the smell of cheese.

There were many nights when I'd wake up to my parents' raised voices as they argued over money and work. My father would talk about how unhappy he was and why he needed to move to another city so that he could make use of his skills and earn money. He had a friend from Shanghai living in Los Angeles, which is where he wanted to go because L.A. had many more opportunities. My mother would counter that she was doing fine in Logan and she needed to complete her degree. Also, our family had been apart for so long and was finally together. *Stay for Duo Duo*, she'd plead. *Eat bitter for her.*

One day, my father left for Los Angeles. I wrote in my diary that they must have had a fight, because we didn't say goodbye—he just left. We had lived together for such a short time. I worried about him and when we'd see him again. We had no money for long-distance calls, so we communicated by mail. I'd send him updates about my school, and he'd write back to tell us about L.A. I pictured it to be just like Logan, only bigger. The people would be just as nice, only there would be more jobs for my parents.

When my mother finished her PhD, my father came back to pick us up. By now I was ten years old, and it was time for a new adventure. We packed all our belongings into a car and drove west, with a detour along the way to Yellowstone National Park.

Our stay at Yellowstone was brief—we spent two nights in a motel before the long drive south—but I associate it with some of our happiest times as a family. Someone took a photo of me feeding a squirrel. My right hand is raised as I watch the squirrel cautiously. My parents are standing behind me, just out of focus, holding hands and smiling. This is my lasting snapshot of our time at Yellowstone, the two of them enjoying each other's company and mine.

It would be the first and only road trip, and the first and only vacation, that we ever took together.

★ ★ ★

LIFE IN L.A. WAS NOT at all what I expected. For the first couple of months, we stayed with my father's friend. My father was delivering newspapers for a Chinese company, and my mother found work for a translation business that promised to sponsor her work visa. Soon, they saved up enough money and we moved into a two-bedroom duplex that housed three families.

It wasn't long before we had to leave. My father's van was stolen, and he got fired. The company my mother worked for closed so suddenly that one morning she went into work only to find that all the office furniture had been taken away. She couldn't get the wages

welcoming immigration policies than the United States, and they'd given my mother and me a visa to enter the country.

This was Plan B. Plan A was through my father, but it was much riskier and unlikely to succeed. Years ago, he had applied for political asylum. It was a long process. We hadn't heard anything, and our visas were running out.

"If he gets it, then all of us can stay," my mother told me. "But I don't think it's going to work. We don't have enough time. Then we have to go with the other plan. Your father and I will get divorced. That way, he can marry someone who has visa status. It's called a paper marriage, and people do this all the time."

I could not fathom what she was saying. All I knew was that I couldn't start all over again.

I started pleading with my mother. I told her that I missed Nai Nai and Ye Ye but had finally got used to America. That I missed my friends in Logan and was finally figuring it out in L.A. I was doing well in school again. "Why do you have to ruin my life?" I said.

"This is not just about you," she replied. She finally turned to look at me. I saw from her face that she was going to tell me something very serious. "Duo Duo, can you keep a secret?"

"If I do, can I stay here?"

She sighed. She sat down on the bed and gestured for me to sit next to her. She took my hand and put it on her belly.

"This is my secret," she said. "Meet your little sister. You cannot tell your father. If you tell him, he won't go through with the plan. He won't want to divorce or for us to be apart."

I had no idea what to say.

"Look, Duo Duo, I don't want to leave and start over, either," she continued. "I've tried so hard to make a new life for us in this country. This is a setback, that's all. Can you help me so we get through this together?"

That night, we packed up everything we could fit into four suitcases. My mother told me about our new home: Calgary, Alberta. I checked out a French dictionary from the library and began to drill myself in French vocabulary words, thinking that everyone in Canada spoke French. I started saying goodbye to my friends.

A few days before we were to board the plane to Canada, my father was called to his immigration hearing. At the last minute, a friend convinced him to bring a lawyer with him.

This turned out to be key. They were in with the immigration officer for under an hour when they were told that our asylum status was granted.

It's over, I thought. *We can stay in America. Our family can stay together. We don't have to start all over again.*

Most of that turned out to be true, but there was one outcome I could not have fathomed. In April 1994, my little sister was born. I was eleven and so excited to have a little companion. I'd picked her name, Angela, because to me, she was an angel, a gift from heaven. I had big plans for her. She wouldn't have all the family around as I did growing up, so I had to make up for that with my own love and attention. And I needed to shield her from all the trouble I'd gone through so that she didn't have to *chi ku*.

My parents had a different plan. They decided that it would be best for Angela to be raised in China by my grandparents. When she was just three weeks old, she was gone.

I was heartsick and furious. I couldn't understand how my parents could send away our own flesh and blood. I wrote in my diary that my mother must not have wanted either of us. If she did, how could she stand to send my baby sister away?

It would take me many years to understand the difficulty of my parents' choice and the depth of their sacrifice.

2

Belonging

In L.A., one of the places we lived in was the duplex that we shared with three other families. The walls were so thin that we could hear every conversation, though we didn't understand what was being said because all the neighbor families spoke different languages. My friend Christine's family shared our floor; the duplex also housed an elderly Vietnamese couple and the family who'd fled from Mexico only to lose their young son, Tony, in an asthma attack that did not have to be fatal.

Even before Tony died, I understood that society did not value everyone the same way. People like us who were poor and came from other countries weren't treated like others. We didn't belong; in many ways, we didn't matter. I was conscious of those around me who were struggling just to survive. One of my father's coworkers had a heart attack but didn't have the money to pay for a hospital stay. A woman in our neighborhood became sick with pneumonia but never sought medical care. They both died. Their families mourned their deaths, and I remembered wondering whether they, and Tony, could have been saved if they had the means, or if they weren't immigrants.

When I grow up, I thought, *could I be that person who would care for everyone, especially those who had nowhere else to go? Could I become a doctor, a healer, and work to change the reality of my neighbors and all those whom society cast aside?*

★ ★ ★

WHEN PEOPLE LEARN THAT I started college at age thirteen, they make a lot of assumptions. They think I must have been very smart, that high school must have been terribly boring, and that I probably really struggled to fit in with my classmates.

Only one of those things is true. How I came to college so young was neither about my smarts nor about my experience in high school.

It was mainly because of money, which was a daily concern. About a year after my sister was sent back to China, our family's living situation started to stabilize. My mother was tutoring a wealthy family during the day while getting her teaching certification at night. My father found a Chinese boss who appreciated his ability to fix just about anything. I was finally able to complete a year at the same school without transferring. I made friends and even played in the school orchestra.

Health care was a luxury that we could ill afford. When my father's stomach ulcer flared up, he couldn't miss work to see a doctor, so he relied on pills he'd brought from China that had long expired. When those ran out, he found an herbalist who gave him a concoction in exchange for household repairs. I had problems with my teeth from years of taking steroids for asthma. Going to a dentist would cost too much, so my mother found a cheaper alternative. We went to the apartment of a man who claimed to have been a


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