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STRUGGLE
TO SURVIVE

Beautiful

Country

Qian Julie

Wang

A MEMOIR

*BEAUTIFUL
COUNTRY*

A MEMOIR

Qian Julie Wang



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For all those who remain in the shadows:

*May you one day have no reason to fear the
light.*

Home is that youthful region where a child is the only real living inhabitant. Parents, siblings, and neighbors are mysterious apparitions who come, go, and do strange unfathomable things in and around the child, the region's only enfranchised citizen.

—MAYA ANGELOU, *LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER*

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HOW IT BEGINS

Acknowledgments

About the Author

HOW IT BEGAN

My story starts decades before my birth.

In my father's earliest memory, he is four years old, shooting a toy gun at nearby birds as he skips to the town square. There he halts, arrested by curious, swaying shapes that he is slow to recognize: two men dangling from a muscular tree.

He approaches slowly, pushing past the knees of adults encircling the tree. In the muggy late-summer air, mosquitoes and flies swarm the hanging corpses. The stench of decomposing flesh floods his nose.

He sees on the dirt ground a single character written in blood:

冤

Wrongly accused.

It is 1966 and China's Cultural Revolution has just begun. Even for a country marked by storied upheaval, the next decade would bring unparalleled turmoil. To this date, the actual death toll from the purges remains unspoken and, worse, unknown.

* * *

Three years later, my seven-year-old father watched as his eldest brother was placed under arrest. Weeks prior, my teenage uncle had criticized Mao Zedong in writing for manipulating the innocent people of China by pitting them against one another, just to centralize his power. My uncle had naïvely, heroically, stupidly distributed the essay to the public.

So there would be no high school graduation for him, only starvation and torture behind prison walls.

From then on, my father would spend his childhood bearing witness to his parents' public beatings, all while enduring his own humiliation at school, where he was forced to stand in the front of the classroom every morning as his teachers and classmates berated him and his "treasonous" family. Outside of school, adults and children alike pelted him with rocks, pebbles, shit. Gone was the honor of his grandfather, whose deft brokering had managed to shield their village from the rape and pillage of the Japanese occupation. Gone were the visitors to the Wang family courtyard who sought his father's calligraphy. From then on, it would just be his mother's bruised face. His father's silent, stoic tears. His four sisters' screams as the Red Guards ransacked their already shredded home.

It is against this backdrop that my parents' beginnings unfurled. My mother's pain was that of a daughter born to a family entangled in the government. None of her father's power was enough to insulate her from the unrest and sexism of her time. She grew up a hundred miles away from my father, and their hardships were at once the same and worlds apart.

Half a century and a migration across the world later, it would take therapy's slow and arduous unraveling for me to see that the thread of trauma was woven into every fiber of my family, my childhood.

* * *

On July 29, 1994, I arrived at JFK Airport on a visa that would expire much too quickly. Five days prior, I had turned seven years old, the same age at which my father had begun his daily wrestle with shame. My parents and I would spend the next five years in the furtive shadows of New York City, pushing past hunger pangs to labor at menial jobs, with no rights, no access to medical care, no hope of legality. The Chinese refer to being undocumented colloquially as "hei": being in the dark, being blacked out. And aptly so, because we spent those years shrouded in darkness while wrestling with hope and dignity.

Memory is a fickle thing, but other than names and certain identifying details—which I have changed out of respect for others’ privacy—I have endeavored to document my family’s undocumented years as authentically and intimately as possible. I regret that I can do no justice to my father’s childhood, for it is pockmarked by more despair than I can ever know.

In some ways, this project has always been in me, but in a much larger way, I have the 2016 election to thank. I took my first laughable stab at this project during my college years, writing it as fiction, not understanding that it was impossible to find perspective on a still-festering wound.

After graduating from Yale Law School—where I could not have fit in less—I clerked for a federal appellate judge who instilled in me, even beyond my greatest, most idealistic hopes, an abiding faith in justice. During that clerkship year, I watched as the Obama administration talked out of both sides of its mouth, at once championing deferred action for Dreamers while issuing deportations at unprecedented rates. By the time the immigration cases got to our chambers on appeal, there was often very little my judge could do.

In May 2016, just shy of eight thousand days after I first landed in New York City—the only place my heart and spirit call home—I finally became a U.S. citizen. My journey to citizenship was difficult to the very end: torrential rain accompanied me on my walk through lower Manhattan to the federal courthouse where I was sworn in. I brought no guests, not even my parents.

The rain did not matter. I reveled in joyful solitude, my face soaked in rainwater and happy tears. At the end of the ceremony, a videotaped President Obama greeted me as a “fellow American,” and it dawned on me that though I had become American decades ago, I had never before been recognized as one.

Six months later, I awoke to a somber and funereal New York, mourning for a nation that chose to elect a president on a platform of xenophobia and intolerance. It was then that I dug up my voice. Staring shame and self-doubt in the face, I tossed my first attempt at this project and put my fingers to the keyboard anew.

I document these stories for myself and my family, and not the least my uncle, our innominate hero. I write this also for Americans and immigrants everywhere. The heartbreak of one immigrant is never far from that of another.

Most of all, though, I put these stories to paper for this country's forgotten children, past and present, who grow up cloaked in fear, desolation, and the belief that their very existence is wrong, their very being illegal. I have been unfathomably lucky. But I dream of a day when being recognized as human requires no luck—when it is a right, not a privilege. And I dream of a day when each and every one of us will have no reason to fear stepping out of the shadows.

Whenever things got really bad during my family's dark years, I dreamed aloud that when I grew up, I would write our stories down so that others like us would know that they were not alone, that they could also survive. And my mother would then remind me that it was all temporary:

With your writing, Qian Qian, you can do anything.

One day, you will have enough to eat.

One day, you will have everything.

May that resilient hope light the way.

Chapter 0

HOME

My oldest memories shine by incandescent light:
I bury my face deep in Lao Lao's chest, wrapped in red cotton.
She smells sweet—like soap and warm milk all at once. I nuzzle deeper, digging closer, insatiable for the scent. She shakes with laughter.

“She keeps nuzzling, she keeps nuzzling!”

Joy is the song of my early childhood.

Next comes a scene that, for all I know, happens weeks, months, years later. Ma Ma and Ba Ba are each holding two corners of a thick, warm blanket. There I am, giggling, cocooned at the center of the blanket.

“Ready?” Ba Ba asks, eyes dancing.

I nod and off I go: with a flap of their arms, they send me soaring, flying, gliding, and I feel the air whooshing under, over, all around. I squeal, fearless, and soon I am back in the safety of the blanket. I laugh and nod some more, fingers grabbing toes, toes curling into fingers, lolling in my blanket nest.

“Look, she wants to go again!”

And it continues like this for eternity: I am by turns soaring through the air with boundless flight and returning to the blanket's embrace, my parents looking on with dotting eyes, my heart pulsing with nothing but warmth, safety, love.

Chapter 1

ASCENT

I ascended to adulthood at cruising altitude. The takeoff was bumpy, and my braided pigtails, each with its own silk red ribbon, bobbed around the sides of my seven-year-old face. In my lap sat my favorite doll, ladylike in her frilly dress. Her eyes, with their long lashes, flicked open and closed with the turbulence. Her legs were snapped into my seat belt, so I knew she was safe.

Next to me, Ma Ma was slumped over into herself, her dress wrapped around her, her arms guarding her midsection, her face folded into her chest.

I had never seen her like that before. Minutes before, the flight attendant with the fake eyelashes and the drawn eyebrows and the tomato lips bent over me and asked if Ma Ma had her seat belt on.

“Ma Ma,” I squeaked, poking her side.

Ma Ma made no response.

“Make sure her seat belt is on,” said the red lips lined with a darker red.

“Ma Ma,” I ventured again.

Nothing.

“I saw her buckle it earlier.”

“Really?” The eyebrows went up. Sometimes da ren, the big people, the grown-ups, didn’t believe little kids like me.

“Yeah.”

She stared at me for the longest second of my short life. Finally, she moved down the aisle, the only witness to my first lie.

* * *

Ma Ma always suffered from horrible motion sickness. It didn't matter how we traveled. Once, when we took the bus to Bao Ding, she threw up the entire trip, making animal sounds. It smelled so bad that another lady on the bus started throwing up and making the same sounds, and soon the smell and sounds were all around me.

The only difference was that, that time, Lao Lao, Grandma, was with us and it wasn't just me and Ma Ma alone in a fei ji, a flying machine, going to a different country. And I didn't have to make sure Ma Ma was wearing a seat belt or lie about it because Lao Lao was the one who did it. The seat belt part, at least. I didn't know if Lao Lao ever had to lie for Ma Ma.

I was not happy about being in the flying machine.

I had turned seven just five days before, and a few weeks before that, Da Jiu Jiu, the older of Ma Ma's two younger brothers, had gotten me my very first bike. It was white with pink tassels on the handlebars and flowers on the basket. He said he would teach me to ride it but then he had to travel for work, so I spent my time walking the pretty bike around the courtyard of Lao Lao's building.

"What a pretty bike," a passing da ren said.

"Xie xie."

"The tassels match your dress," another remarked.

"Xie xie," I said again, resisting the urge to yank at the frilly lace dress Ma Ma had forced on me.

Now the bike was in Lao Lao's storage unit, waiting for my return.

"Ma Ma." I poked at her side again. "When will we go back?"

A grunt came but nothing else.

We had found out that we would be leaving just a few weeks before my birthday. Ba Ba had left for Mei Guo, America, two years earlier, and Ma Ma had been trying to get a visitor's visa for almost a year. Four times, Ma Ma left our home and traveled hours away to Beijing, where the embassy for Mei Guo, a name that translated literally into "Beautiful Country," kept telling her no.

Da Yi, Ma Ma's older sister, lived in Beijing, and every time Ma Ma went to get another no, she stayed overnight with her, leaving me with Lao Lao and

Lao Ye, Grandpa. Each time, I had trouble sleeping, crying tsunamis into Lao Lao's arms.

“What if she doesn't come back, like Ba Ba?”

The last time, I threw such a fit that Ma Ma took me to Beijing with her. In the morning, as she was preparing to leave for the embassy from Da Yi's, I burst into tears again.

“Why not take her?” Da Yi was always on my side.

Ma Ma stared at my swollen red face and shook her head. “She'll cry.”

“That might be good,” brokered my ally. “She's cute.”

Ma Ma looked at me again and I tried to look my cutest, dripping snot and all.

And so it was that I ended up in the cab with her and a handful of tissues.

“When we get there, Qian Qian, don't make a scene.” Ma Ma used her serious voice, so I knew to look very serious and nod very seriously.

“You can say you miss Ba Ba, but don't go crazy, okay?”

I nodded, but I was never crazy. Da ren were the ones who were crazy.

When we got out of the cab, we waited in a long line that wrapped around the block of the giant building. There were many flags around, flags of a design I'd never seen before, with red, white, and blue and stripes and stars.

Our flag had stars, too, but it was red and yellow, just like the colors on my face when I was crying.

When we finally got inside the building, I thought it meant we would get to go home soon, but instead we got a ticket that had a long number on it, and we sat and waited some more in slippery plastic white chairs in a room full of da ren. It was boring but at least I was with Ma Ma, and if she left to go somewhere, I would go with her. I wouldn't have to point at the flying machines in the sky and say, “That's where Ma Ma went,” like I did with Ba Ba.

After what felt like days, a bald little man in a booth called a number and Ma Ma rushed up quickly. I ambled behind in the wake of her skirt. The man was behind a glass window. I realized that he looked little because he was sitting. There were holes in the glass and he talked to us through it. Did we