

· confessions ·

My mother's thoughts reach back like the winter tide, exposing the wreckage of a former shore. Often she's mired in 1967, 1968, the years my older brother and my father died.

1968 was also the year she took me and my little brother—Didi—across the Atlantic to Switzerland, a place so preposterously different that she knew she had to give up grieving simply to survive. That year, she remembers, she was very, very sad. I too remember. I was sixteen then, and I recall a late-night hour when my mother and I were arguing in the chalet, that tinderbox of emotion where we lived.

She had pushed me into the small bedroom we shared, and as she slapped me about the head, I backed into a corner, by a window that looked out on the lake, the Alps, the beautiful outside world. My mother was furious because I had a boyfriend. She was shouting that he was a drug addict, a bad man who would use me for sex and throw me away like leftover garbage.

"Stop seeing him!" she ordered.

I shook my head. The more she beat me, the more implacable I became, and this in turn fueled her outrage.

THE OPPOSITE OF FATE

"You didn't love you daddy or Peter! When they die you not even sad."

I kept my face to the window, unmoved. What does she know about sad?

She sobbed and beat her chest. "I rather kill myself before see you destroy you life!"

Suicide. How many times had she threatened that before?

"I wish you the one die! Not Peter, not Daddy."

She had just confirmed what I had always suspected. Now she flew at me with her fists.

"I rather kill you! I rather see you die!"

And then, perhaps horrified by what she had just said, she fled the room. Thank God that was over. I wished I had a cigarette to smoke. Suddenly she was back. She slammed the door shut, latched it, then locked it with a key. I saw the flash of a meat cleaver just before she pushed me to the wall and brought the blade's edge to within an inch of my throat. Her eyes were like a wild animal's, shiny, fixated on the kill. In an excited voice she said, "First, I kill you. Then Didi and me, our whole family destroy!" She smiled, her chest heaving. "Why you don't cry?" She pressed the blade closer and I could feel her breath gusting.

Was she bluffing? If she did kill me, so what? Who would care? While she rambled, a voice within me was whimpering, "This is sad, this is so sad."

For ten minutes, fifteen, longer, I straddled these two thoughts—that it didn't matter if I died, that it would be eternally sad if I did—until all at once I felt a snap, then a rush of hope into a vacuum, and I was crying, I was babbling my confession: "I want to live. I want to live."

For twenty-five years I forgot that day, and when the mem-

ory of what happened surfaced unexpectedly at a writers' workshop in which we recalled our worst moments, I was shaking, wondering to myself, Did she really mean to kill me? If I had not pleaded with her, would she have pushed down on the cleaver and ended my life?

I wanted to go to my mother and ask. Yet I couldn't, not until much later, when she became forgetful and I learned she had Alzheimer's disease. I knew that if I didn't ask her certain questions now, I would never know the real answers.

So I asked.

"Angry? Slap you?" she said, and laughed. "No, no, *no*. You always good girl, never even need to spank, not even one time."

How wonderful to hear her say what was never true, yet now would be forever so.

*· pretty beyond belief ·*

I once asked my mother whether I was beautiful by Chinese standards. I must have been twelve at the time, and I believed that I was not attractive according to an American aesthetic based on Marilyn Monroe as the ultimate sex goddess.

I remember that my mother carefully appraised my face before concluding, "To Chinese person, you not beautiful. You plain."

I was unable to hide my hurt and disappointment.

"Why you want be beautiful?" my mother chided. "Pretty can be bad luck, not just good." She should know, she said. She had been born a natural beauty. When she was four, people told her they had never seen a girl so lovely. "Everyone spoil me, the servants, my grandmother, my aunts, because I was pretty beyond belief."

By the time she was a teenager, she had the looks of a movie starlet: a peach-shaped face, a nose that was rounded but not overly broad, tilted large eyes with double lids, a smile of small and perfect teeth. Her skin bore "no spots or dots," and she would often say to me, even into her seventies and eighties, "Feel. Still smooth and soft."