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*BEAUTIFUL
COUNTRY*

A MEMOIR

Qian Julie Wang



DOUBLEDAY NEW YORK

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First Edition

For all those who remain in the shadows:

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

NATIVE SPEAKER

I had many first days of school, and I never liked any of them. On the eve of my first-ever day of school in Zhong Guo, when Ma Ma told me I would be starting school the next morning, I dissolved into a puddle of sadness. This had Ma Ma and Ba Ba laughing, something da ren liked to do when kids cried.

“Ni ku shen me?”

Da ren were always asking me to justify my emotions.

School was scary, I sputtered. I didn't know what it was and I wanted to stay home, where I could play with my dolls and train set.

You'll like it, they promised.

But the more they insisted, the more I resisted, and the next morning found my face bloated from tears. I refused to get dressed until finally Ma Ma had to rush out of the door for her class.

Ba Ba stayed. He sat across from me, staring me into submission.

It won't work, I thought. I was his child and if there ever was someone more stubborn than him, it was me.

There was a Chinese idiom I came to know later because Ma Ma and Ba Ba would repeat it to me in those moments: “Purple comes from blue but is superior to blue.” It was inevitable, they seemed to believe, that I would one day outshine them in the best and worst ways.

After untold minutes of staring at the half-genuine misery painted on my crumpled face, Ba Ba relented.

"Hao, hao."

He walked to the kitchen and returned with my favorite kind of ice pop, as much for the taste as for the fact that it turned my tongue blue. "I know what it's like. I never wanted to go to school, either."

"Really?" I asked, eyes still wet but wide open.

He gave a quiet, sad nod. I saw him go away for a while, like he did sometimes when we played with the shadow birds at night. Then he offered, "How about we put off school for another day and instead go to the zoo?"

I nodded my head as vigorously as I could while still holding on to the quickly disappearing pop.

And so I donned my jacket and my new backpack—why not carry it, Ba Ba said, since it went well with my polka-dot dress—and skipped downstairs, climbing victoriously into the seat at the back of Ba Ba's bicycle. How smart was I, I thought as we passed through town, that I had tricked Ba Ba out of a full day of school. I could keep this up forever, and every day we'd just go to the zoo.

When we turned the last corner, though, it was not the smell of grass, monkeys, and manure that greeted us. Instead, it was the sight of red gates, of a hundred little kids just like me, running around with their pigtails and their backpacks. Worst of all, they did not even seem upset that they'd been conned into being there. By the time Ba Ba got off his seat and kicked down the stand of his bike, I was crying again. In disbelief, I watched him lead me by the hand to the gate and place my hand in that of a woman with big square glasses. Through the betrayal, I saw him give me a kiss on each cheek and tell me that Ma Ma would come get me in a few hours. That I should be good for Lao Shi. That I should have fun. I watched as he kicked up the stand of his bike, mounted it, and rode away. And in that moment, I swore that I would not forget the joy-turned-bitterness of betrayal, that I would never believe Ba Ba again.

But I did believe him again. The next morning, in fact, when I pleaded to skip school that day—I couldn't go back there again—not today, not so soon, and again Ba Ba seemed to relent and again I climbed aboard the bike happily, thrilled to actually go to the zoo this time. I forgot all about my resolve from the previous morning until we turned the corner and I saw the red gates yet again.

The next morning, I cried again, but I did not ask to stay home. And I never again believed Ba Ba—not in the same way; not when he told me we were going somewhere fun; not when he told me he'd come back from Mei Guo in a month, then another month, then the month after that; and certainly not when he told me that everything would be okay.

* * *

The first day of school in Mei Guo was also full of false promises, but in the worst way, because they were of a new kind. For weeks, when we had walked past the neighborhood school, gated with a barbed-wire fence, Ma Ma and Ba Ba had told me that it was the school I would be starting at in September, and each time, Ba Ba reminded me that on that day in September, I was to tell everyone that I had been born in Mei Guo, that I had always lived here. Each time he said it, I wondered why it mattered, and how anyone could believe me.

We only ever saw brown children funnel into the graffitied building. I wondered why Ba Ba wanted me there, given the rules that he had prescribed me for our new life, the ones that I had memorized without question: None of the other races were our friends. The white people had the most money, but the others were dangerous, too. To all of them, we were weak, easy targets who wouldn't fight back.

Just remember this, Qian Qian: we are safe only with our own kind.

On the actual day in September when Ba Ba brought me to the

school, my face again stained with sadness, he seemed to see for the first time how very different we were from everyone else, how unwelcome we were, how poorly we fit in.

Staring down the pipeline of my future as playground roadkill, Ba Ba stopped short of approaching the school and turned to me. He asked whether I wanted to start school a different day. Sure from our past that he would only lead me to an even scarier school, I nodded anyway, and followed him with bated breath as we walked away from the school, down the blocks, into the subway, onto the train, then after many, many stops, out of the station, and several blocks down. I did not resume my natural breathing until I saw that he had brought me to the door of the sweatshop. I ran upstairs, eager to find Ma Ma and get to work before Ba Ba changed his mind. I spent the rest of the day wondering why Ba Ba had told the truth this time, and whether I would be spending the rest of my days in that dark room, yanking threads loose and then cutting them.

The next morning, I thought Ba Ba would bring me to the sweatshop again, but just as we approached the grimy street entrance, its steps lined with abandoned bottles of yellow and brown liquids, Ba Ba crossed the street and I chased along. He stopped there for a second and knelt down to my level to utter the sentence that I already knew by heart: "Gao su ta men ni zai zhe li sheng de, ni yi zhi jiu zai Mei Guo." *Tell them I was born here, that I have always lived in America.* I nodded while repeating the sentence back.

Ba Ba then climbed up the few small steps of the red building I'd admired for weeks, as much for its clean façade as for its windows, which were not only many in number but wide and papered with beautiful colors and fun drawings. It was the kind of building where, when you looked at it, you knew life abounded within. It was beautiful for the same reason that the sweatshop was not.

Ba Ba led me into the lobby and down the halls, which matched the windows in its colorful papering—of cats, dogs, babies, and

rainbows—of real and surreal drawings of childhood that I hadn't seen since entering Mei Guo's gray world. During that walk, my new world grew many shades brighter, and I passed by one drawing after another to both the palpitation of excitement and the chorus of fear and dread.

Having found the room of *da ren* he seemed to be looking for, Ba Ba guided us in and led me to a tall and skinny man with a handsome but very rectangular face. The lines of his face were so severe and angular that he reminded me of a robot. He didn't seem to speak Chinese, though, choosing instead to talk to me in the sharp, brusque tones that I had begun to recognize as English. I did what I could, smiling and staring back blankly, while Ba Ba exchanged the same tones with the man.

Ba Ba then knelt down and told me to be good, *guai*, and to remember what he had told me time and again. He said that Ma Ma would meet me outside, on the steps, when the day was over. And then he was gone, leaving me with the tall robot, who steered me up the stairs and down another hall, full of more colors that were already losing their effect on me.

Robot Man brought me into a large, sunny classroom—the sunniest room I'd been in since boarding the plane. The room was full of kids grouped into fours, with each of their desks pushed together into rectangular clusters. At each rectangle, two kids on one side faced two kids on the other side. Facing the front of the room on each desk was a white placard with letters on them. The cards all stood at attention facing a woman in a long dress who was writing on the chalkboard. She was Chinese and wore a big smile. She reminded me of an *ah yi*, an auntie, one of Ma Ma's friends back home.

All eyes turned to me as I entered the room with Robot Man. I felt the warmth of embarrassment take over my face and neck. Without even realizing it, I resorted to the mantra Ba Ba had bestowed

upon me: "Wo zai zhe li sheng de, wo yi zhi jiu zai Mei Guo." But each time I assured myself under my breath that I belonged there, that I was born there, I believed it that much less.

There was a pause, too long for comfort, before anyone did anything. No one smiled at me but Ah Yi. Relieved to have something to distract me from the mantra and the sharp pangs in my stomach it stirred up, I smiled back at her as the Robot Man shared a few incomprehensible tones with her, and then turned to me with a quick, efficient grin, before clicking out of the room.

Ah yi, who told me her name was Tang Lao Shi, spoke Mandarin with a tongue that seemed to have been stung by a bee. None of the words sounded quite right, but with some careful deliberation—which, I realized only in hindsight, must have convinced her that I was not too bright—I pieced together what she was trying to say.

After some whispering by Tang Lao Shi and reshuffling of my classmates, including a girl in a pink dress who was not happy to be separated from her friend in a ponytail, Tang Lao Shi sat me at the cluster of four closest to the chalkboard. I turned to examine the girl with the ponytail, who was now next to me.

"Wo jiao Janie." She wore a scowl as she said this. Her Mandarin was better than Tang Lao Shi's, but it was caked with an accent I had never heard before.

"Wo jiao Wang Qian."

"Wang Qian," Tang Lao Shi assured me in Mandarin, "Janie will translate everything for you, because everyone only speaks English or Cantonese. But if you have a question, just raise your hand, okay?"

I nodded.

"Can you write your name on this card here for everybody?"

I wrote the two Chinese characters that had taken me months to perfect. The second character in my name was particularly hard and I could never get it quite right without sticking my tongue out

As I finished it, I looked up and saw Tang Lao Shi grin, and all too conscious of my face, I retracted my tongue.

"No, in English. Can you write it in English?"

"I don't know English."

"Pinyin?"

That I knew. And with an uneven hand I drew out in even more uneven letters my pinyin name: WANG QIAN.

"Can you write it . . . can you write it small-case? Smaller?"

Why, I thought, would she want it smaller? I had written it as large as I could so she could see it from the front. Shrugging, I duplicated what I had written on the other side of the placard, this time writing as small as I could: WANG QIAN.

Tang Lao Shi's forehead bunched up. "Not like that . . . small . . . lowercase. . . . Do you know the difference?"

I had no idea what she was trying to say and figured it must be that beesting on her tongue that made her speak funny. Picking up on my blank look, Tang Lao Shi gave up.

"It's okay, Qian. You will learn."

I had never had anyone call me "Qian" without a "Wang" before it or another "Qian" after it, but for the rest of the day, it was all Tang Lao Shi and Janie called me. Just like that, I had been reborn as a girl divorced from her family name, orphaned from her Chinese past.

I spent the morning in a thick fog. It felt as if I were back on the plane again, with the doors shut to my ears. Janie said very little to me and bothered to translate a few spare words here and there only when Tang Lao Shi admonished her. After what felt like weeks, Tang Lao Shi told us it was lunchtime and all the kids got up. Not knowing what else to do, I followed Janie, who ran to the girl in the pink dress and locked arms with her. The two turned back to look at me before turning around to whisper and giggle.

You don't have to whisper, I thought. *I don't speak English anyway.*

After I followed the laughing pair down the stairs and through two sets of halls, Janie unlinked her arm and turned to me again.

Maybe, I thought, she was ready to be friends now.

"Qian," she declared in a self-serious tone, "I am Tang Lao Shi's favorite. That's why she chose me to help you. But I will help you only during class, and then, only when I feel like it. Got that?"

I stared back into her large brown eyes, narrowed into a glare.

"During lunch, you are on your own. And don't you ever think of complaining about me to Tang Lao Shi. No one understands you and your loser language but me."

Neither of us moved, and I continued staring, locked in stalemate.

"It's lunch now. Get lost."

And with that, she went back to her giggly friend.

I had to use the bathroom—I had had to use the bathroom for hours, in fact; I waited because I had not wanted to annoy Janie by asking—but I didn't know where it was, so I fell in with the current of kids who flowed into a large room with long benches and tables like at the sweatshop, except it was brighter and smelled better. Across the hall from the large room were two doors. I stepped away from the large room and approached them just as a boy came out of one of them, the sounds of water running and toilets flushing emanating from within. As soon as the door swung shut after him, I pushed my way in.

I was so eager to relieve myself that I did not realize something was wrong until I got to the stall doors. And then I had to blink to see that, in fact, many things were wrong. It took me too long to see there were only boys in the room. By then, they had already started laughing and pointing. My cheeks flushing with heat, I ran out of the boys' bathroom through the swinging door, only to bump into

two more boys. After a moment, they also pointed their fingers at me, chortling. Their faces were still scrunched up in laughter and their fingers still raised at me as they pushed through the swinging door of the bathroom.

I placed my hands on either side of my burning red face and avoided the eyes of my classmates, many of whom had already seen me and were still laughing. I walked into the adjacent door, after a girl who gave me a sad smile, and ran into a stall, slamming the door shut. After I relieved myself, I stayed seated without flushing. I sat there thinking about how in *Zhong Guo*, my class had a single bathroom that boys and girls took turns using. I sat there thinking about what Ba Ba and Ma Ma had told me: that Mandarin was not the loser language but the language of the educated, and anyone who didn't speak it well was likely a farmer. I sat there and puzzled over all the ways in which my simple life had changed, all the while listening to the rumbling of my tummy as the large, white-faced clock with black numbers ticked the seconds and minutes away, until I guessed it would soon be time to return to class. Then I slowly stood up, flushed, and left my only sanctuary.

The rest of the day passed in the same way the morning had. A handful of times, I dared to ask Janie what was going on, but she acted like I did not exist. At one point, Tang Lao Shi came over to see if I was understanding everything, and Janie started talking before I could respond, answering for me by explaining something in English, which caused Tang Lao Shi to look at me with her forehead scrunched up again. I said nothing, not wanting to alienate the closest thing I had to a friend, but something at the bottom of my stomach ached and I contented myself with resting my face on my forearms, one stacked upon the other, until the end of the day.

At the end of the day, I followed the stream of classmates as I had at lunch. I felt Tang Lao Shi's steady eyes on me but told myself to ignore the ache in my stomach, the ache in my head, the ache

everywhere. It would all be better, I thought, once I met Ma Ma on the steps outside, and had some rice at the sweatshop to settle my empty tummy.

* * *

In Zhong Guo, I had adjusted quickly to school. After the second day, Ba Ba no longer needed to pretend to take me to the zoo. After the second week, I no longer awoke with tears; instead, I was excited, and often rushed Ma Ma and Ba Ba out the door so I could see my friends sooner.

I had collected friends easily. I was precociously vain, often wearing a brand-new dress, top, or ribbon Ma Ma had designed and sewn for me. And beyond that, I was bossy. At that age, it was all I needed to be a leader. During recess, before our parents picked us up, I led my gaggle of friends—all but one or two of the girls in my class, all of us clad in dresses of bright, clashing colors—in a game of my choice. Often it was an old favorite, like duck, duck, goose or musical chairs, but at times I even had the power to make up a new game altogether. Those rarely worked out, since I never thought the rules out far enough. But my friends played anyway. They never went against me.

One of our old standbys was mother hen. All but one of us lined up in a row, each with her hands on the shoulders of the girl in front. It was the duty of the mother hen (the one at the very front of the line, usually me) to protect her baby chicks (those behind her in line). It was the task of the odd girl out—the eagle, the vulture, or some other hungry predator—to “catch” a chick by tapping her anywhere. The “caught” chick would then become the vulture, and the game would start anew, with the mother hen forever at her protective post.

It didn't take long for the game to seep into my friendships. I became the mother hen in matters big and small. My friends asked me everything: What should Tang Yuan wear to school tomor-

row? What should Xiao Hong ask her mother to cook for dinner? Should Fei Fei poop at school or wait until she was picked up? So it came to be that I barked out orders left and right, my authority feeding upon itself.

One day, just after we had resumed school after the New Year break, Ma Ma met me at the school gates with her eyes aglow.

"Qian Qian!" she exclaimed. "You've made me a celebrity!"

I responded with a wet peck on her cheek. "What did I do?"

Ma Ma explained to me that she had just met Xiao Hong's mother, who was so excited to be meeting the famous Wang Qian's mother.

"She really was! She even said, 'Oh, so *you* are Wang Qian's mother! It's wonderful to meet you!'

"Then she said Hong Hong couldn't do anything over break without lamenting, 'Oh I should ask Wang Qian what to do—she would know!' And, 'If only I had school today, I could ask Wang Qian.'

"She even thanked me for making her daughter so excited to go back to school! Can you believe it?"

It was true, Xiao Hong had been particularly excited to see me that morning, but so had many others. She pestered me all day through class and recess with questions, so much so that Lao Shi made her sit in a corner in silence for ten minutes. It had been hard to focus on the lesson. For the first time, I saw that there was a downside to being a bossy know-it-all.

I was happy, though, that I had brought pride to my sweet Ma Ma, so I said nothing and smiled as she boasted on.

"How did you do it, Qian Qian?"

"Oh, I don't know, mei shen me. I just answer their questions."

Ma Ma beamed back at me, and for the following weeks she retold the story of the famous Wang Qian to family, friends, strangers.

On the morning of my second day of school in Mei Guo, Ba Ba dropped me off at the school lobby. From there, I went up the stairs and found the classroom. I was sitting obediently by Janie's side, feeling the growing knots in my stomach and anticipating the slow day of incomprehension to come, when Tang Lao Shi gestured me to her desk at the front of the classroom.

"Qian," she said so warmly that I knew bad news had to follow, "ni gen wo lai."

I was to follow her.

My mind raced. I had been found out. I should have said more of the phrase Ba Ba had given me! Was it too late?

"Lai, na zhe." It seemed to be a permanent change, because Tang Lao Shi grabbed my backpack. Yet another permanent change. Didn't Tang Lao Shi know that my backpack was already exhausted from flying all the way from Zhong Guo to Brooklyn and then Brooklyn to here? But of course how could she know? *Wo zai zhe li sheng de. Wo yi zhi jiu zai Mei Guo.*

After issuing a quick, stern sentence to the class, Tang Lao Shi took my hand and walked me down to the end of the hall, to a room with large windows—one window looked into the hallway but another divided the interior of the room in half. I saw one child playing in a life-size fort while another around my age sat at a small desk, coloring with a blue crayon inside and outside an outline of a rabbit. There were still others milling about the room, but they have faded into the recesses of my memory.

Through her swollen-tongue Mandarin, Tang Lao Shi explained to me that this was the classroom for students who did not speak English. The room was also for, as I could barely make out, children with "special needs." I had no idea what "special needs" were, but I asked who else in the classroom did not speak English. She told me I was the only one.

There was one teacher—much younger than any of the others I had seen in the school—for the many students in that classroom.

Tang Lao Shi introduced me to her quickly before leaving, but I had so little interaction with that teacher that I don't even remember her name. The teacher had kind, soft eyes, but they were red and had bags under them. She led me to a tiny table across the room from the coloring boy and handed me a picture book with a few Chinese words on each page.

I explained to her in Mandarin that I had read that book years ago and that I was far beyond picture books in Chinese. If she understood Mandarin, she chose not to respond. She spent most of the time with the coloring boy, who had by then moved beyond the blue bunny and was drawing on the desk.

The rest of the day passed in solitude. No one talked to me, and I was left with just the picture book for company. Lunch was less painful, though. There was a bathroom just across the hall from the classroom and I hid there in peace and quiet for the hour. The teacher did not seem to notice me at all, and I wondered whether I should just go to the sweatshop instead.

In the end, I decided to return to the classroom—I had lived in Zhong Guo for seven years, after all, and had some obedience drilled into me—but in an act of defiance, I grabbed a few English picture books on the way back in and spent my afternoon with those instead. One in particular featured a giant red dog, which over the course of the afternoon, I came to understand as being named Clifford, because that was the word on the cover and on every page where he showed up. I felt fortunate that Ba Ba had taught me many of the English letters and sounds before leaving Zhong Guo. The rest of the day passed in much more joy as I shared in the company of Clifford, his happy owner—a little white girl with yellow hair whom I came to envy—and their friends.

* * *

Trusting that I had learned to cross the street and get to the sweatshop on my own on the first day, Ma Ma did not pick me up on

the school steps on the second day. When I got to the stool by her side, I stayed silent about the change in my schooling during our shift and on the walk home. As I had come to expect, Ma Ma was quiet after our shift—silent but for the sniffles she tried to hide, and which I pretended not to notice. I didn't know why pretending was necessary, only that she wanted me to do it and I, badly as ever, wanted to make Ma Ma happy.

Ba Ba didn't come home from his shift at the laundromat until I was already tucked into bed, eyes and ears muggy with sleep. Ba Ba's work was hard, but not as hard as the job he told us he had had before we had arrived. Back then, he had worked long hours in a place for people who he said were crazy and had to be locked up. He was the only Chinese person who worked there. He told us that the other workers had called him names and banded together so that he was always the one stuck with the worst tasks, like cleaning the toilets and showering the patients, chasing them down the hall when they ran out of the bathroom, water dripping from their bare butts and legs as they slid on the floors. Ba Ba explained that in our new world, we were thought of as just Asian—like the Koreans, the Japanese, the Filipinos, and the Thai—and together we were all considered the weakest race, small and fragile. He told me that he had been considered a full man in *Zhong Guo*, but that he was no longer one in *Mei Guo*. Maybe that wasn't how it was among the rich—he said he had no way of knowing, that maybe one day I could find out—but it was how it went among the poor. Until I was rich, I had to be careful, he said. We all had to be very careful.

Ma Ma and Ba Ba's bed was no more than an arm's length away from mine, and usually when Ba Ba returned, I half awakened—amid warm dreams of being back home with Lao Lao and Lao Ye—to whispers, grunts, and moans.

Ba Ba liked to brag about how many dollars he had collected from random pants pockets, by turns gloating about his finds and

warning me to never be as careless as lao wai, the white people, were. I assumed that that was what those late-night whispers were about, but I could not explain the other sounds. I intuited only that I was not supposed to hear them, so as those nights piled up on top of one another, I developed a habit of ducking my face under the comforter. I also covered my ears with my hands and made quiet grumbling noises until the moaning faded into soft breaths and snores. It was hard to be sure when they were over, and I dreaded uncovering my ears, so I stayed grumbling under the covers for as long as I could. Sometimes I fell back asleep that way, waking to the morning light like a beetle, curled up into myself.

* * *

On our way to school the next morning, I finally told Ba Ba about the change, and he said that Tang Lao Shi must have insisted on sending me to the other class, and why hadn't I claimed to be an American, as he had told me to?

"If you had said you were born here, Qian Qian, they wouldn't have treated us like this."

Years later, Ba Ba told me that on my second day of school, the Robot Man, the vice principal, had confronted him about the fake address Ba Ba had used to get me into the school. Yes, it was in Manhattan, the Robot Man had said, but it was not a residential address; it was a warehouse, and an abandoned one at that. Ba Ba did not dare push back, for fear of further questioning. In my mind's eye, I picture him keeling over with apologies, explaining that I could not go to our local school, where no one spoke Chinese, and that I was a good, easy child who would make no trouble. Whatever he did or said that day, they had decided to let him go and let me stay.

Only later, after living many years in fear, would I understand that the risks were much lower than we believed at the time. But

in the vacuum of anxiety that was undocumented life, fear was gaseous: it expanded to fill our entire world until it was all we could breathe.

In the weeks that followed, as the leaves changed colors and the air grew sharp, I spent my school days much as I had spent my second day of school: in the company of the Cat in the Hat, the Very Hungry Caterpillar, the Berenstain Bears, Amelia Bedelia, and Shel Silverstein. I made my way through the classroom bookcase as the coloring boy made his way through the crayon box: every day he went through a different color, and every day I learned a few new words. I read until my loneliness dulled, and I felt myself to be in the good company of all my vibrantly colored, two-dimensional friends. I read until excitement replaced hopelessness. I marveled that I was teaching myself to read English—slowly, of course, but without an adult next to me. I was excited to meet the whole new worlds waiting for me on the bookshelves and tables. Each book had a place and a role. Even the ones meant for the boy who colored were among the most helpful guides in my journey through basic English, because I could press the large buttons that spoke words to me loudly. So it was that I felt my way around colors, shapes, and animals in our new country.

By October, I developed a habit of pleading with Ba Ba to get me back in Ms. Tang's classroom, showing off the English I had taught myself. I must have been somewhat convincing, or at least annoying, because when we got to the red-brick building one day, Ba Ba went into the school with me, and asked me to wait outside the office on the first floor.

When he came out, I was sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall, my knees weary with impatience. He looked as frazzled as he had when he went in, but in his eyes was a foreign glint of victory.

"Okay, Qian Qian, you can go back to Ms. Tang's class. But they are going to treat you like any other student."

“Good!”

“Are you sure? You’re going to have to take tests like everyone else, and follow along somehow. Can you do that?”

I didn’t know that I could for sure. But as Sister Bear had felt at the end of her first day of school, I had the sense that I would be able to figure it out as I went. That had been enough for her, so that was enough for me.

“Yes, Ba Ba.” I barely took the time to reach for a hug before running up the stairway and toward Ms. Tang’s classroom.

* * *

There was a spelling test during my first week back in Ms. Tang’s class. By spelling out words that were on the signs hung around the room—*A* for Apple, *D* for Dog—writing gibberish, and copying not so covertly from a handwritten list of words I had in my pocket (Ms. Tang caught me twice, though she said nothing), I scored a proud 33 percent. So began my path to graduating from college with an English degree fifteen years later.

By Halloween, when Ms. Tang gave each of us a tiny pumpkin and a knife with the smallest and dullest of blades, I was able to generally muddle through class without incurring Janie’s wrath. In fact, when Ms. Tang told us to empty out the pumpkin’s belly innards before carving three triangles—two facing down at the top for eyes, one facing up at the middle for a mouth—I understood instantly and went to work. And by November, I was even able to tell when Janie took credit for my answers, which I occasionally offered by raising my hand and then whispering to her. So proud was I to have figured out what was going on that I didn’t even bother to rat on her. I knew that soon I wouldn’t need her at all. Soon, I would make Ma Ma and Ba Ba proud, and it would be just as if I had always been here, as if I had been born here, a native English speaker at last.