

PANG-MEI NATASHA CHANG

DOUBLEDAY

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A WOMAN IS NOTHING

I am your grandfather's sister, Chang Yu-i, and before I tell you my story, I want you to remember this: in China, a woman is nothing. When she is born, she must obey her father. When she is married, she must obey her husband. And when she is widowed, she must obey her son. A woman is nothing, you see. This is the first lesson I want to give you so that you will understand.

I was born in the small village of Jiading in the Baoshan District outside Shanghai. There were twelve children in my family—eight boys and four girls—but my mama, your great-grandmother, always told people she had eight children because only the sons counted. Sons would carry forth the family name, while daughters would marry and take on the duties of their husbands' families.

When a boy was born to the house, the servants saved his umbilical cord in a jar under Mama's bed. When a girl was born, the servants buried her umbilical cord outside the house. A girl left her father's house as soon as she came of age, and there was no need to save the umbilical cord of a guest.

Your grandfather and I are brother and sister, and we are very close in age. I was born in 1900. He was born in 1902. There was

another brother, Seventh Brother, who was born between the two of us. He came out only eleven months after me. There were so many little children around that I wasn't weaned until I was six years old. I could walk over to my wet amah and reach for her breasts whenever I wanted a drink. I had natural milk for so long that I never got sick, even now that I am old. I always believe this is what has made me so strong.

The family says that I was born this way, though, tough like a man. Seventh Brother, the one born only eleven months after me, was exactly the opposite. Seventh Brother was soft and weak like a woman. I took all the man out of Mama when I was born, and left Seventh Brother with only the female, the family says. That makes me laugh, but I am not sure I agree. I think what happened is that life made me hard. Think of it: at your age, eighteen, I had already been married for three years. Married at fifteen and divorced by age twenty-two. So young to go through so much.

I live on my own now in New York City—my son and grandchildren near, but not with me—which is the American way. Back in Jiading, our whole family lived together in one compound in the Chinese way. The compound stood near the center of town and had two courtyards—one formal and the other informal—and a front hall that spanned eight mahogany doors. Most homes had only a single courtyard and one hall with a front door of four, but we owned a lot of land in the area and your great-great-grandfather, my grandfather, had been a high-ranking judge of the imperial government. I never knew Grandfather Chang, but his portrait hung above the ancestral altar in the front hall that we used for guests, and a special shed in the front courtyard housed the two sedan chairs which had been presented to him by an official of the court. No family ever owned its own sedan chairs, and these were prized possessions we used only on special occasions. There came to be an unlucky story connected with these sedan chairs, but I will tell you that later. Oth-

erwise, the natural position of the house, the *fengshui*, which, translated literally, means "wind and water," was excellent, full of good omen. From the north come winds and the enemy; from the south come sunshine and good fortune. Our compound stood on the north-south axis line facing the south, its back toward the north. We were very lucky to have found a house with this position.

My father, Baba, had two older brothers, and we lived with their families and Grandmother Chang in the rear hall off the back courtyard. Three generations living together: there were so many of us, we kept separate kitchens and servant staffs in the back of the compound. We even had one servant who just made shoes for the family. At that time, everyone wore cloth shoes, and our big family needed new shoes every day. There was also a German shepherd at the house. One of the elder cousins who studied in the West at the turn of the century had brought him home as a puppy, and he was our pet before we had to kill him. The servants did not know how to take care of that dog; they fed him so many table scraps, all his hair fell out, and he began to bleed and blister until we gave him poison so that he would die in his sleep.

Baba, my father, your great-grandfather, was a doctor, a very good one. Even today, there are people who come up to me and say, "Your father saved my mother's life," or something of that kind. Baba could heal anyone, it seemed, but the donation box he kept outside his office in the middle of town was rarely filled with money. This was because his patients did not think that money showed enough respect or gratitude. Instead, they offered him slaughtered chickens or ducks fed daily on sweet wine and rice, fresh eggs or vegetables, and sometimes even paintings. Do you know all those Chinese paintings your father has hanging in your house in Connecticut? Those came from Baba, your great-grandfather, many of them orig-

inally from Baba's grateful patients. That was how good a doctor Baba was, that he received paintings as payment. Everyone in the area knew of his collection and wanted to add to it.

All the paintings were kept in a tall mahogany cabinet in Baba's bedroom. When Baba took them out, usually only one or two scrolls at a time, he spread them on a long, low table with rounded edges made especially for viewing the works. Chinese paintings required admiration from above, Baba said, explaining that the perspective of Chinese paintings differed from Western ones. The best paintings were only hung when your grandfather, Eighth Brother, and I cleaned them, passing tiny feather dusters over the surface of the rice paper. Of all the children, your grandfather and I were the two that Baba allowed near his paintings, and he would hover behind us as we worked, explaining the genius behind a misty mountain landscape or historical portrait. Our favorite story was of Zhang Sengyao, an artist of ancient time who specialized in painting the dragon but would never fill in the dragon's eyes. One day, as Zhang Sengyao completed a magnificent dragon painting, the Emperor commanded him by imperial edict to finish the brushstrokes on the creature's eyes. Having no choice, the artist obeyed, and lo and behold, the dragon lifted his heavy wings and flew off the paper!

You must understand how I had to act in front of Baba. It was very formal. When I visit your house in the summer, I see how you act with your parents, very loose and casual, but this is not how I was taught to behave as a child. I was taught to respect my elders and behave.

The first lesson of filial piety is this: that your life and body are gifts to you from your parents. This means that it is unfilial to try to commit suicide. I tell you this now so you will understand why later,

when my life was very sad, I could not kill myself. I had to honor my family and stand on my own two feet.

The second lesson is: you must always inform your parents where you are going and what you are doing. You must get their permission on important decisions in your life. Again, I tell you this so you will understand how later, when I divorced without telling my parents, I broke this rule of my past.

But the other lessons of filial piety I learned as a girl—twenty-four classical examples in all—will probably make you laugh. There was the perfect filial child who would lie in his parents' bed to warm it for them in the wintertime, and to allow the mosquitoes to feast their fill on him first in the summertime. Then there was the filial child who, on his fiftieth birthday, dressed up in baby clothes and danced for his parents so they might feel light and youthful. I liked most the story about the filial child whose sick mother longed for soup with bamboo shoots in the dead of winter. The filial child wept so heavily and sincerely onto a bamboo plantation that his tears became the soft rains of spring, and bamboo shoots burst forth through the snow for him.

This was how I was brought up, to honor and respect my family and elders. So I never entered Baba's presence unless asked, and I never left it without his telling me I could. Unless he spoke to me first, I did not speak in his presence. When he scolded me, I bowed my head in thanks for his corrections. And I never addressed my father by "you." I never said to him, for instance, "Would you like another cup of tea?" I had to say, "Baba, would Baba like another cup of tea?" Most of the time, though, I never even asked Baba about refilling his teacup; I just did it. Anticipating his wishes was even more filial.

Baba was a very fussy man with a violent temper, like your grandfather's. In fact, of all my brothers, your grandfather most resembled Baba, the same round face and high cheekbones, the same manner of raising his voice or throwing things across the room when angry. Terrible, such a temper.

Baba was extremely fussy about his food. He kept a separate kitchen, cook and kitchen staff from the rest of the extended family. Grandmother Chang, the two uncles and their families usually combined their two kitchens and staffs, while we had the other to ourselves because of Baba. In the mornings as Baba ate breakfast, Cook, First Kitchen Boy and Second Kitchen Boy would line up in front of him to announce the freshest vegetables and meats they had procured from the open market early that morning. Baba would then make the great decision about what the family would eat for lunch that day. Or sometimes, without listening to Cook, he would simply proclaim his desire. Mama said food was the only reason Baba rose from bed in the mornings, and it was true; thinking about eating and eating made Baba very happy. When he talked about food, the eyes in his narrow face fairly danced, and he was not always so short in temper. Stroking the ends of his mustache, or folding his hands across his long thin frame—he was not fat at all—he would tell Cook exactly how he wanted it done: how he wanted it to look on the serving dish, weigh on the tips of his chopsticks, roll on his tongue, sound as he chewed, feel as he swallowed, and, of course, taste as he feasted. Taste was everything. Sometimes Baba himself would go into the kitchen to oversee Cook's preparations. Most of the time, however, Baba had Mama supervise Cook, and even this was unusual for Chinese families. None of the uncles' wives ever entered their kitchens, and they would sometimes tease Mama for spending so much time in the back with the servants. But Baba was so fussy about his food, he did not care that his wife might appear

improper. Also, Mama did not complain. She said if Baba wanted her in the kitchen she must obey.

Mama was only two years old when she was promised to Baba's family for marriage. Baba had not even been born yet, but their families were good friends, and it was decided among the elders that if Baba were a boy he would marry Mama. There is a famous Chinese saying: "If the wife is two years older, then the rice will be everywhere." And this was true with our family. We were very happy, and food was plentiful.

I have two names, "Yu-i" and "Chia-fen." "Chia-fen" is my formal name. The character "Chia" is very complicated to write while the character "Fen" is very simple to write. "Chia" is the generation name; all my brothers, sisters, and cousins have the character "Chia" as the first part of their name. "Chia" means fine, excellent.

Shortly after he married Mama, Baba composed a couplet for the Chang family: *chia kuo pang ming*. This means fine kingdom, bright country, and was meant to express Baba's deep love for and loyalty to China.

Each character in the poem is selected as a generation name. My generation is all named with the character "Chia." Everyone in your father's generation is named with the character "Kuo," meaning kingdom. Your generation is all named with the character "Pang," for state. Your, or rather your brother's, children's names will have the character "Ming," which means brightness. Each new generation takes the next character in the poem until we finish and then begin again.

Because the first part of the name is already given, it is very important to choose the character for the second part of the name correctly. My parents chose the character "Pao" for First Brother, the eldest child, because this meant protection, guardian, a type of

security. First Brother had many responsibilities; he owned a cotton factory and was always busy supervising. Second Brother was more of a scholar—he was always reading or deep in debate with his friends—and his name, "Sen," which means majestic and dignified, suited him well. Fourth Brother's was "Ao," which was an ancient musical instrument.

My own name is "Fen," meaning "jade," which the Chinese consider fine and expensive. Jade is supposed to represent all that is perfect in human virtue. There are nine types of jade, each with different Chinese characters. My name means not the popular green "bi" jade, but the unusual, clear "fen" jade. Once, when Baba returned home from a trip, he had with him a pin that caught the sunlight and shimmered in his hand. It was a pin of "fen" jade just for me—not for any of my sisters—because of my name.

Chia-fen is my formal name. My informal name is Yu-i. This is the name I use every day. "Yu" means goodness, and "i" means propriety, righteousness. I do not know whether it is because of my name, but I have always tried to do right, first for my own family and then for my husband's family. As a result, I sometimes feel I have had no life of my own.

In 1900, the year I was born, a group of Chinese called the Boxers tried to lay siege to Western delegations in the nation's capital of Beijing. They succeeded for two days and then were slaughtered by an international army of 20,000 made up of American, Japanese and Russian forces sent in to protect their nations' holdings. Second Brother, Chang Chia-sen, who was fourteen at the time, carved up a melon from the front courtyard to explain this horrible massacre to me. The front courtyard was reserved for guests, but melons grew wild along a vine in the corner near the wall, so this is where we sat

one afternoon when Second Brother said that I was old enough to understand the world around me.

Along with Fourth Brother, Second Brother was my favorite. He was clever, although absent-minded and dreamy; Fourth Brother, Chang Chia-ao, who was three years younger, acted much more deliberate and levelheaded. These two became the most famous of my brothers; after study in Japan, they returned to China to lead distinguished careers, Fourth Brother as chairman of the Bank of China and Second Brother as an influential statesman and philosopher.

In their own manner, both cared for me throughout my life. Second Brother always explained to me that which I could never learn on my own. Fourth Brother chose my scholar husband for me and instructed me how to behave correctly in public during different times of my life. He was concerned with how I was regarded from the outside. But Second Brother, unlike anybody else in my family, taught me to respect how I felt inside, no matter what showed on the outside.

That afternoon in the front courtyard, Second Brother said for me to imagine that China was the melon. We had chosen one big, firm, pale green fruit from among the others, and he passed it to me now so that I could feel its full weight heavy and ripe in my arms. Second Brother then took the melon from me and thrust a knife through the smooth skin to divide the fruit almost in half. Breaking away the bigger part of the melon, and holding it up so that its juice dripped down the back of his hand, he said, "This piece is the provinces and ports of China that the foreigners now own."

Indochina lost to France, Burma and Hong Kong to Great Britain, Manchuria and Port Arthur to Russia, Korea to Japan, Second Brother explained, scooping away the pulp of the melon half with the back of his knife. He cut me a thick slice as he named the five main ports that had been forced open to free British trade:

Amoy, Canton, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai. In nearby Shanghai, where foreign rule was the worst, foreigners governed large sections of the city with their own laws and ways, making huge profits at the expense of the Chinese people.

The Boxers were Chinese mainly from the countryside who hated all Western people and ideas and wanted to eradicate any trace of foreign thinking from China. The Qing government, which had lost a large part of China to the foreigners, hated the Westerners too. But the Empress Dowager and her court had been too slow to modernize and were too weak to act on their own. So they secretly supported the Boxers, funding battle training in the remote countryside and the movement's migration to the capital. This was where the sad part about old-fashioned thinking came in, Second Brother said. Antiforeign to the core, the Boxers believed that ancient exercises and control of breath made them invincible to bullets. Even though there had been almost as many Boxers as foreigners, the Boxers had tried to fight the international forces with lances and swords instead of firearms. Their defeat was so great, two leading Chinese officials committed suicide in humiliation. The Empress Dowager fled to the west of China disguised in coarse peasant's clothes to reestablish the imperial court in Xi'an.

All this happened the year I was born, Second Brother said, explaining something which I had felt in my heart from my beginnings but could not articulate on my own. You see, when Mama said women were nothing and my amah cursed me as a "guest" and a "wasted bowl of rice," part of me heard but part of me did not. I was born into changing times and had two faces, one that heard talk of the old and the other that listened for talk of the new, the part of me that stayed East and the other that looked West, the spirit in me that was woman and the other that was man.