If We Want Light, We Must Conquer Darkness

Before I was born, my parents had to leave the city where they grew up to work in the northern mountainous areas. During the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party promoted the slogan that it was “better to be red than expert.” Jobs were assigned by the government and often did not correspond to an individual’s skills. My mother, who had trained to be an opera singer, was assigned to work in a factory packed with graduates from universities around the country. My father, who had just graduated from medical school, was sent to work in a different village hospital with “barefoot doctors.” Father could not come home every night, and Mother lived alone in a small room she had been assigned, which was near a prison. Once a prisoner escaped and tried to break into Mother’s room. She was scared to death. She was rescued by her neighbor, but she told me she was always afraid to be alone in darkness after that.

Later, Mother became pregnant and felt tired and could not perform her work as usual in the factory. She was accused of being lazy and was publicly criticized for not working hard for the Communist cause. She was told to kneel down to admit her mistakes. It was humiliating, but Mother was not the only one who had to do that. She told me many times later in life: “When you are struggling in darkness to survive, dignity and dreams become luxuries.”

I would have been born in the mountain area if it had not been for Mother’s physical condition. She was allowed to return to the city to give birth. On the day I was born, Mother’s aunt walked her to the hospital. It took a while to get the news to Father. When Father finally received permission to return to the city to take the first glimpse of his newborn daughter, he gave me the name “Xiaoqing,” meaning “clear dawn” in English, to express his generation’s longing for light and justice.
We were soon back in the mountains. Mother became ill again, probably resulting from poor nutrition and overwork. She was operated on several times in the hospital. Father had to work and take care of Mother at the same time. I was left in the care of their friends. Unfortunately, I was not a popular girl because I cried all the time. Mother explained to me when I grew up: “I think you were hungry. I had no mother’s milk to feed you. And we had no money to buy milk or milk powder. We later somehow managed to get some milk powder and mix it with other stuff to feed you, but then you had stomachaches and diarrhea all the time. It was so hard to raise you.”

Father’s aunt, San Gupo, came to our area to help take care of me. San Gupo was the younger sister of my grandfather. Her husband had died shortly after their marriage and she never got married again. According to the Confucian moral code, a woman should remain chaste and faithful to her husband, even after his death. San Gupo was a kind and warmhearted woman. She lived in the same dark and shabby room, where she had first lived with her husband, for her entire life. After we left the mountain area, we invited San Gupo to stay with us, but she insisted that she did not want to leave her home. I could not understand then, and I don’t understand even now, how a few months’ memory could sustain her to be alone for the rest of her life. She looked so lonely and miserable in that small room. Maybe that room was San Gupo’s root. She felt she belonged to that room. Any type of spiritual force, whether we agree with it or not, can be strong enough to move mountains.

It was cold in the mountain area—there was no heat, and no hot water. San Gupo did not wash me every day because of the cold. “You kept crying and crying and nobody understood why you were such a crying girl until one day we found out: Your right upper leg was all rotten because the string for the diaper was too tight and it went deep into your flesh. We felt so sorry for you. Father and I suddenly felt so helpless. We weren’t sure if we could bring you up.” Mother told me this story many times later on. The scar is still there on my right upper leg. I know it will stay there, like all the hardships carved in my memory; and it will never, ever, be gone with the wind.

Father and Mother decided to send me back to the city to live with my grandmother, my father’s mother. I was too young to be sentimental about the separation, but Mother told me that my crying shook the world when I was taken from her arms. For the first time in my life, I left my parents and headed for a place that was strange and uncertain to me.

Grandmother was working in a sewing factory to support the family. My grandfather had died before I was born, leaving behind my grandmother and four young children. My father was the eldest son in the family and my youngest uncle was only 12. Grandmother actually gave birth to five children, but one had died when it was still a baby. Grandmother told me that in those days not every baby survived.