

Novel Excerpt

**Happy Birthday, Baba**

I have vivid recollections of how I fell mute the second time. It was during the visit to BaBa at his Re-Education Executives' School.

I did not get to visit my parents until three hundred ninety days and ten hours after they were taken.

The afternoon before the visit, Brother Jun was feeding me spoon by spoon of this “Qi-cooling-sweet-soup” as we both sat on our little bamboo stools, face to face, on the balcony of our corporate apartment.

Big Sister crashed in through the door and beamed with joy. She tapped her two fingers on my nose. A sign for a nice surprise. Brother Jun's nurse mother brewed the green-bean soup, to get rid of the heat in my body, to nourish my Qi, and Brother Jun brought it to me. He told me his mother said this food medicine would prevent my winter month asthma.

“Are you taking me to the Bund to see the River tonight?” I asked. Big Sister took me for a summer evening stroll along the Bund to watch the big ships driving to the end of Yangtze River towards the Pacific Ocean as a treat, since we lived five blocks away.

“How about going to see BaBa tomorrow?”

I jumped up from my bamboo stool and leapt onto Big Sister, tipping the stool to the cement floor. Brother Jun picked it up. He always picked up things when I made a mess.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” She picked me up and held me into her long warm arms.

“Really? Really? Really?” I gazed into her almond shaped brown eyes.

“Yes, yes, Little Ling-Ling. It’s true. I’ve gotten the permission to take you, and it will be Baba’s birthday soon so we can bring him some yummy food. ” Her smiling almond eyes turned into two thin lines.

Brother Jun beamed with us too and poured us summer tea—chrysanthemum—as he calmed us both to sit down around the little round bamboo tea table.

“What about Mama then?” I questioned. I was told my Baba and Mama were separately re-educated (a word too long for my five-year old brain) in two schools—Baba in Executive Reform School and Mama in Learning From Working Class Factory for Managers.

“Another time for Mama!” Big Sister said, “now you are five, you are allowed to visit them with me once a month now!”

“Can Brother Jun come with us?” I reach out to hold his hand.

“No, sorry, Ling Ling. Only family!”

“But you are family, aren’t you?” I protest.

“They mean blood-related family, Little Ling Ling!” Brother Jun stood up. He gave my hand a little squeeze and Big Sister a little pad on her shoulder to show his shared joy after he was leaving for his house. The warmth of his hand has remained in all these year since then which gives me strength and courage.

The next morning, we rode a long distance bus to the countryside soon after the Big Clock on the Bund stroked six. Big Sister began telling me about my parents on the bus.

“Papa was forty when you were born,” Big Sister said. “He had been happiest then, as he was at the prime of his career. You were a happy baby and everyone played with you at the Textile Compound. Everyone said you were a happy spirit, just like Papa.”

“But they don’t smile or play with me anymore,” I complained, my voice muffled by the gauze mask.

“Because we’re considered black people now, Big Sister explained. “Black. That’s what Mao calls people he views as enemies of his Cultural Revolution.”

After we got off the long-distance bus to the countryside, we walked along watery rice fields and down a narrow, muddy road until we reached a long, white, shabby one-story building with dried grass piled up front, in little yellow hills. I stared up at the big slogans written in red across the white walls of the building. The characters looked like an unhappy red dragon trying to keep himself still on the wall.

“What do they say?” I asked.

“Down with the Capitalist Roaders and Running Dogs,” Big Sister said quietly, like it was a secret.

“Who are they?”

“The people inside this school.”

“Like BaBa?”

“Yes.”

“Must be a good thing to be a Capitalist Roader then.” I was really proud of Papa.

“Shut up, Little Ling-Ling, you’ve got it all wrong.”

I was worried I would be able to recognize BaBa as I had not seen him for over a year. I took out the picture Big Sister had been showing me throughout the spring, and clutched it tightly between my fingers.

However as soon as I saw man a jungle-bearded man walking towards us, I blurted out “Ba-Ba!” in my meek little voice.

His dour face softened into a big smile. He picked me up and held me high in the sky. His beard touched my chin and his eyes were dripping water, wetting my cheeks. I giggled as BaBa’s beard tickled me, and everyone in the room laughed.

The next day we caught another long- distance bus to visit Mama in a knitting factory in a Shanghai suburb in a different direction.

When we reached Mama’s “Learning Factory,” Big Sister put a big gauze mask on me. “This will protect you from breathing in too much cotton dust.”

The noise of huge textile machines was as loud as the summer thunder a few weeks before. I put both my palms on my ears as we stepped in. Cotton dust was flying in the air like snow dropping in the wrong season. In a corner room next to the roaring machines, I saw Mama, whose dark-circled eyes looked like those of a panda in the Shanghai Zoo.

“Don’t, little Ling-Ling,” Big Sister whispered to me while Mama went to get some water for us. “Don’t stare at Mama’s eye-bags. It’s rude and will make her unhappy.”

“Why are they so black? Is that why Mama is black as her dad had many hotels before?”

“Don’t confuse things, Ling Ling. It’s those round-the-clock shifts. She doesn’t get enough sleep.”

Mama came back with two mugs of warm water for us. I drank my mug quickly and kept my eyes focused inside it without saying anything. Within half an hour, a small fat woman entered and asked us to leave. She looked like a blue ball in her dark blue worker’s uniform. As the blue ball rolled out, I suddenly heard myself uttering,

“Ma-ma, ma-ma,” muffled behind my white gauze mask. Mama pressed her lips on my forehead. A touch of a smile opened up the shallow lines at the corners of her eyes.

The time I went to visit BaBa which brought my second muteness was on a hot July day a year after my first visit to him. I was almost six.

That night before I could not sleep as it would be Baba’s birthday and I was practicing how to say “Happy Birthday” to him for months.. Even though I tried to keep my eyelids tightly shut, I kept on rolling around my bamboo bed. Sometimes I jumped up to see if the sky was getting lighter. But the yellow moon was always moving only a little in the darkness as the summer breeze pushed the gray clouds around it. I thought. *When will it be a new day?*

When the sun finally rose, I put on grey silk dress Big Sister altered from a dress of Mama’s for this special day.

The bright Shanghai summer sun rose soon after the Big Clock on the Bund stroke seven. The loud cicadas singing aggregated my impatience to get to BaBa's School, this time by boat first and then bus.

We walked to a boat terminal.

"This is the Cross Yangtze Ferry," Big Sister explained.

This was the first time I took a boat. The slow speed and loud honking did not match the urgency of my heart to see BaBa. The Bund, where BaBa's corporate building stood, shrank to logo size as approached the other side.

"Could we take something faster to get to Baba?" I shouted to Big Sister to compete the noise of ships and ferries on the River.

"The long distance bus next will be faster—I was told they would be in a Town Square this time. Slight different place the Farm House we went in the past as they would have a meeting there!"

"A birthday meeting for BaBa?" I got excited.

"I don't know. That was where I was told to go for this visit!" Big Sister was impatient and sounded more worried than happy. She wiped off some of my sweat on my forehead with her white cotton handkerchief, matching her white blouse, another alteration from Mama's left over clothes.

A small breeze from the water cooled me a little as we transferred to ferry to bus. After the ferry, we got on another bus. Farmers brought their chickens and ducks onto the bus which amused me.

"This is Pu-Dong, meaning East of the Yangtze", Big Sister explained to me.

I wanted to touch the feather of the ducks—the first time I was this close to a live animal expect for in the Shangai Zoo.

“No, Ling Ling”, Big Sister gently slapped my hands.

She apologized to the farmers, whose dark faces smiled instead of blaming. The Bund disappeared after crossing the HuangPu River. Rice paddies were lining next to the muddy road. I thought if BaBa’s School was in these farm land with these nice people, he would be really enjoying his life.

We wobbled through the watery rice fields until my legs were as stiff as wood so Big Sister took me on her back as I could not walk any longer.

I clutched her shoulders tightly until we arrived at a long, shabby, one-story building with dried grass piled in front. A few yellow-feathered chickens were running around.

Big Sister said that every birthday that ended with a five or zero was a big birthday and our Baba would be forty-five years old. I began a chanting “Happy Birthday” every day for the last three months for BaBa until perfect. They were simple words for me to say but I had never used them for anyone before. The revolution told us that birthday celebrations were not allowed for anyone, except for Chairman Mao. We were taught to shout: “Long Live Chairman Mao,” even when it was not his birthday. We were all told his birthday was on December 26, and that we should shout more of the “long live” sentences on that day. I was, however, never trained to wish our parents a happy birthday as they were not with me.

As we walked closer to the Town Square, there came the noise of a truck from behind us. Sharp voices screamed through hand-held loudspeakers on top of the truck. The volume was getting louder and louder. My world bobbed up and down as Big Sister began to chase the truck,

which moved slowly alongside the wiggly country road. The truck stopped from time to time to shout slogans at the public. We followed them all the way and realized that we were back the bus terminal that we had just come from.

Big Sister stopped abruptly.

“BaBa!” she screamed.

Confused, I looked around to see a few men on the truck. All of them were tied up. They wore white paper conical hats and the same kind of dark blue Mao cotton clothes on BaBa’s photo. Several young people in green uniforms with red armbands were holding down the shoulders of these men wearing the hats.

I held Big Sister’s back more tightly.

“Baba! Baba!” Big Sister’s scream was piercing the air.

A familiar voice got through to us from somewhere, like a whisper sneaking underneath all the noise: “Ah-Hong, go home! Go home now! Take Little Ling home!”

That must be BaBa, I thought to myself. But this BaBa sounded strange and husky, as if he had caught a bad cold. I panicked as I could not see Baba. The truck with them kept on going.

The nightmare often haunted me now crept over me in the bright sun—I could not recognize BaBa! In desperation, I waved to the truck frantically. But those conical hats kept moving away from us, disappearing into the horizon, leaving only street dust for us to run through.

Big Sister picked up her pace as I clutched to her back. Finally we arrived at a Town Square after running ten minutes passing the bus terminal.



The truck was parked. A crowd was slowly gathering around. Many of the people in the crowd looked like farmers we met on the long-distance bus. But these farmers did not smile at me kindly.

Big Sister was panting so hard she sounded worse than I did during my asthma attacks. She put me down as we approached the crowds and grabbed my hand.

“Hold my hand tightly, Little Ling-Ling. Don’t let go. Don’t let go.” She whispered to me repeatedly.

We elbowed our way into the crowd. All the men with white cone hats were sat together. A tall Mao statue stood solemnly at the center of the Square. Mao’s arm thrust into the air. The heads of BaBa and four other people were bent towards the ground. This time, even though I could not see his face, I knew it was BaBa. Their hands were all tied behind their backs with thick ropes.

Three young people with red armbands were waving a leather belt and shouting at them, “Bend your heads lower, you Capitalist Roaders!”

The white cone hats sank further to the ground. I spotted some calligraphy on each hat. Big Sister had just started to teach me Chinese characters. She would be really proud of me whenever I could read a street name or any character written on posters or shop banners. As soon as I recognized the calligraphy on the hats I shouted excitedly,

“Running Dog Captial Party!” I should to show Big Sister of these character.

“Ha.ha..They said Capitalists Roaders and Running Dogs!” On boy in red armband corrected.

Big Sister said nothing but covered my lips with her palm. BaBa looked up. His face was twisted with lines of wrinkles I never saw before. His hair had gone gray since I last saw him over a year ago. His forehead and cheeks were the crimson color of Shanghai summer bayberries. I had never seen BaBa this way.

“Go away, Ah-Hong,” he shouted at us. “Take little Ling-Ling and get out of here. Now!”

I was dumbfounded. Big Sister suddenly burst into tears. I glanced at my weeping sister and my angry father. Puzzled, I took out my handkerchief to wipe Big Sister’s cheeks.

“Don’t cry, Big Sister. Please don’t cry. I’ll be really good. Don’t cry.”

“Bend down your big Capitalist Roader’s head!” A Red Guard shouted.

Baba’s twisted face turned dark and he bent his reluctant head down.

The three Red Guards started to circle around Baba’s group of five. One of them announced, “The Criticizing and Denouncing Meeting is now started.” He read out loud something from a paper. They called Baba’s name. They read aloud many other phrases I could not comprehend. The four uncles next BaBa were stealing glances at him. They were as silent as the Mao statue.

My head was swirling. My heart hurt. I felt nauseous. The words that the Red Guard was reading circled around and around in my head and made no sense. Together with Big Sister’s sobbing, they sounded like the waves of crazy noise I often heard when I lay in bed day-dreaming after my asthma attacks.

Suddenly a shrill voice pierced my confusion: “Who are these?”

The Red Guard with the leather belt was pointing at us. Startled, I nestled myself into Big Sister, clutching a corner of her white blouse. Baba remained silent.

“Tell our masses—are these your black kids born by your wealthy wife? Didn’t her hotel chain owner father commit suicide to escape revolution?” The belt-waving Red Guard look not much older than Big Sister.

BaBa’s head rose, the white conical hat shifted a little. More of his grey hair sticking out the hat.

“Talking revolution to me? When I was in the real revolution fighting the Japanese, you were not even born yet!” BaBa sneered.

“How dare you!” The Red Guard’s face turned as scarlet as his armband.

*Slap!* The belt came down hard onto BaBa's face. It left a thin line of blood across his dark-skinned cheek. It looked like a worm growing larger and larger. A sharp pain pierced my heart. Suddenly I wanted to run. I let go of Big Sister’s blouse and my legs took me out of the crowd.

I heard BaBa shout, “Go home! Now!”

Big Sister screamed, “Little Ling-Ling, Wait! Don’t run, Ling-ling! Do *NOT* run!”

The crowd murmured many phrases about me and Big Sister as I ran out of the Town Square — “poor daughters,” “capitalist families,” “bourgeois”— words that I’d heard from the Red Guard’s speech. My silk dress was soaked in sweat and stuck to my skin. The curious stare of the crowd drove me to run faster.

Big Sister’s steps and screams were tracing behind me.

I always obeyed Big Sister, but this time my legs would not listen. They moved as if they had their own mind. I ran between rows of bicycles and through the rundown houses. I recalled

how I was forbidden me from running, jumping, and even playing ball games with other kids. I was not allowed cold drinks or seafood either, to prevent asthma attacks.

All these rules were running through my mind as I zoomed through the streets. I wanted to get as far away as possible away from the images of my suffering Baba. However BaBa's twisted face was getting clearer, together with a sea of white cone-hats mixed with his bloody face. My vision blurred.

My breath was getting heavier and I coughed violently. My windpipes were blocked and my chest was hurting. I began to wheeze as I tried to step over the bricks and little rocks along the muddy road.

"Stop, Ling-Ling! Stop!" A hand grabbed the back of my dress, pulling my body to a full stop.

"No!" I breathed out my agitation. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of Big Sister's teary eyes, shocked face. Suddenly I remembered I had forgotten to say happy birthday to BaBa. I screamed back in his direction with all my strength,

*"Happy Birthday, BaBa, Happy Birthday!"*

I tried with all my strength to pull myself free of Big Sister's hand. I heard my dress torn. Big Sister was screaming my name before my forehead hit something hard. All the sounds of the world stopped all of sudden.