

HANDBOOK FOR HEALING

修復事典

This book explores how the bereaved family of a survivor of suicide learns to deal with what has happened and begin the process of healing as they restart their lives and find hope and joy again.

After her mother, gradually losing ground against terminal cancer, chooses to take her life and end her suffering, author Chiang Pei-Chin sinks into a morass of shame, guilt, and grief. She turns to her love of writing for solace, to extirpate her deep-set pain, and to let healing begin; the remaining scars testifying to that dark page in her life.

In this book in three parts, the first, titled “Things”, centers on the physical remainders of her mother’s life – her organ donor card, insurance policy, prepaid cell phone card, a prized jade pendant, and other items now all tucked safely away in a mini storage unit. While all part of her mother’s coherent being in life, they now exist as dispersed, disjointed pieces of her former existence.

Next, “Emotions” dives into current theory on psychological well-being. She first plumbs the scholarly consensus regarding strategies both for resolving the roots of pain and sadness and for navigating one’s way back to psychological health. Then, the author documents heartfelt discussions with others who, like her, have lost family members to suicide to explore how their path to reassemble the pieces of their lives and continue moving forward overlaps with and, potentially, strays from academic theory.

“Life” returns the narrative to the author’s own story, discussing her journey of healing in overseas travel, author-in-residence experiences, and creative writing; in encounters with new people, things and experiences; and in reflections on life, discovering in the process that love resides in the acknowledgment and acceptance of pain.



Category: Memoir, Essay Collection

Publisher: Locus

Date: 12/2022

Pages: 236

Length: 52,000 characters
(approx. 33,800 words in English)

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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

This book explores the physical, psychological, and practical shrapnel taken by those experiencing the suicide of a loved one. The author's lived experience, told in a refined and emotive writing style honed through her practiced, reporter's mind, is much more than an autobiographical missive; it offers supportive companionship and comfort on the reader's personal journey to healing. The narrative in this book takes multiple perspectives to show those left behind a potential way forward to coexist with their pain and restart their lives.

Chiang Pei-Chin 江佩津

Chiang Pei-Chin, a prolific writer across a diverse range of genres, holds a bachelor's in Agricultural Chemistry and an MBA from ESSEC Business School in France. A seasoned journalist, Chiang Pei-Chin has recently jumped tracks into a career in software engineering. Her literary works, including the essay collections *Uncover the Shell* and *Handbook for Healing*, draw on her lived experiences and contemporary social issues and concerns. She holds numerous domestic literary awards and has, more recently, participated in several author-in-residence programs in the United States (Santa Fe Art Institute, New Mexico) and Spain (Can Serrat, Barcelona).

HANDBOOK FOR HEALING

By Chiang Pei-Chin

Translated by Marrienne Yeh

Mini Storage

I'll always remember that faint smile at the corner of my mother's lips. I didn't understand the source of the confidence or acceptance in that smile at the time, but I did the next day.

Looking back at the messages on my phone from that day, I mustered the courage to open conversations with close friends: "It's stiffened" ... "Smells like smoke." I tossed these words out as if doing so might take the memories away with them. But those unprocessed memories remained there, and in my mind, day after day.

Not long after, I went back to work, found a new place to live, and put my life back in order. I took on a few projects that just managed to cover my expenses while, perhaps more importantly, keeping me busy and distracted from what had happened. Fortunately, interview days were always bright and sunny; unfortunately, that also meant each interview left me drenched in sweat after hours of waiting at stations, hoping to find subjects with compelling stories, then following them wherever they went – up into the mountains or down to the sea.

One day, after wrapping up an interview, I sat with a few senior cameramen at a shaved ice shop beside the old southern train station. We could finally set our equipment down and relax rather than worrying about what shots we still needed to get or what soundbites we had to capture.

"I thought your mom passed away because of an illness?"

To fill the silence in our conversation, I had brought up the topic of my mother's passing. One of the cameramen hesitated for a moment before asking the question. I used my metal spoon to cut through the shaved ice in my bowl, chipping at the frozen chunks piece by piece, making a soft, sandy crunch. "Yeah," I replied. "I guess so." When it comes to death, this might be one of the most difficult ways of leaving for people to accept. Sudden departures always leave people stunned, not knowing what to say. I've grown used to the silence and discomfort that follows whenever I mention the word.

In any case, a full year afterward, I finally opened a blank document on my computer and began writing about that final day, rather than the cold, lifeless days after everything had already happened.

Earlier that day, my mother had a smile on her face reminiscent of how she looked after I would take her to and from the hospital. Before that, the nurse had given her an anti-nausea injection and an IV drip to replenish the strength she had lost after days of vomiting and barely eating due

to the side effects of chemotherapy. But before that medication took effect, she didn't even have the strength to remove her shirt and bra for the CT scan. So, I went into the changing room and stayed with her in that tiny space, helping her undress.

A black checkered blouse, a delicate lace bra that had become somewhat loose. It was the first time my mother and I had ever been this physically close. It would also be the last.

We waited for a while in the ER, learning finally that the scan looked normal and that she didn't have a fever; both readings were considered good for a cancer patient. I breathed a sigh of relief. The ER doctor told us we could go home; no need for hospitalization.

My mother's head hung low, as if she was about to fall asleep, or perhaps she really did doze off for a bit. I called an Uber and took her back to my grandmother's house. When we arrived, she lay down on the couch while I went to the kitchen and lifted the lid on the Tatung rice cooker. Inside was the pumpkin porridge my grandmother had made, with bits of shredded meat. I was still committed to eating vegetarian then, so I picked out the meat from my bowl and placed it into hers. She ate, smiling as she did, all the while urging me to hurry along to meet up with my friends. Then she handed me a business card from a secondhand dealer, telling me to contact them later to sell anything of value in the house. Pushing back, I tried to refuse. I remember feeling a little irritated when replying, "No need, there's no rush. If you want to sell something, you can do it later." But she insisted, so I took the card. It was from a dealer on Liouhe Road in Kaohsiung who, the text claimed, "specialized in vintage liquor, antique coins, and stamps".

My mother smiled at me from the sofa. That was the last smile I remember from her. I turned and left to meet up with my friends.

I heard that soon after I left, my mother had followed in my footsteps downstairs and told my grandmother, "I'm sorry, I've been a failure as a daughter." Then, she went back to her own place where she lived alone. When my grandmother called, she told her she was with friends and not to worry.

Twenty-four hours later, she was found lying in her windowless bathroom; her body cold, her smile gone.

I never used the secondhand dealer's business card my mother had given me. Instead, I packed everything into boxes, one by one. I moved out, sealed it all up in storage bins, telling myself I'd deal with it another day. At that time, I didn't have enough courage to throw away or sell all of my mother's belongings. The only thing I could manage was canceling the lease on her apartment. Feeling completely lost, I ended up packing everything away, including all of the possessions from the life I shared with my mother, in a mini storage unit.

I had known early on I would be a mini storage user. With no permanent home and living freely without knowing where I'd be the following month, mini storage units were more of a necessity than a house ever could be. Some people have told me, "Someone without roots should practice letting go." But even in letting go, I still wanted to keep a few scattered remnants I could hold on to. Perhaps they were memories I hoped to be brave enough to face someday. So, I sealed up box after box of what proof remained of my mother's existence – her ID card and passport with

the corners cut off, personal seals that no longer held any meaning, and old photographs she had worked so hard to preserve.

Each time I opened the storage unit door, I felt a faint, almost imperceptible sense of home – the kind of place that gave people the strength to carry on.

“Because we still have a chance,” I told myself, “to rebuild the life we once loved.”

But did we? I remember how my mother kept several rose salt lamps and pieces of fossilized wood. These were items from the department store counter where she had worked before it went out of business. To keep her monthly sales figures from looking too bad, she would buy the merchandise herself to boost her numbers. Many of the unopened decorations she had at home were things she had once tried selling to others. “If we had our own place, we’d finally be able to display these,” she sighed one day as we sorted through her things, looking for items we could sell. I agreed with my mother. For the countless objects now confined in mini storage, I held out hope that one day I’d have a home of my own where there’d be a place for them all, as if she had never left, as if we were still living together.

One year after my mother’s passing, I finally mustered the courage to visit that secondhand dealer on Liouhe Road. The owner had probably long forgotten the masked woman in a bucket hat who had once stepped inside his shop asking for a business card and perhaps had lingered long enough to exchange a few words. None of that mattered anymore. When I reached the storefront, I found the shop shuttered, its metal gate locked tight. This street ran through what was once the city’s most prestigious district. Now, after a slow and steady decline, just a handful of long-standing family businesses were still operating. Due to the pandemic, the nearby tourist night market was also sparsely populated, with vendors running their businesses only intermittently.

I still kept that business card deep inside my mini storage unit.

“How much are you paying for that unit, anyway?”

Friends would ask occasionally. When I told them the amount, some would stare at me in disbelief. But it was more than just the storage unit; I also needed a bank safe deposit box for valuables and items I had no idea how to store.

And every time, I’d find myself asking reflexively, “Is it *really* so expensive?”

I always felt having a place where I could keep what little was left of my home to be worth the cost.

I went through a period of time when my sense of material value was off-kilter. I wasn’t spending recklessly or in some kind of retail therapy trying to numb the pain; I had simply stopped forcing myself to count pennies. For example, I rented an entire floor for myself with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a living room. Indeed, it was too big for just one person, but I was desperate to move out of the place my mother had rented and to clear out the household items, and didn’t want to spend money furnishing a new home. I wanted a place where I could move in with nothing but a suitcase. All I needed was a space with good lighting, a window that opened to the outside world, and a bed where I could get a good night’s sleep. That was what I thought; and yet, in the world of rentals, that most basic of needs was still a luxury.

Some people would choose to continue living in the house where their loved one ended their life by charcoal burning. I think, if not for relatives and friends urging me to terminate the lease and move out, I might have made the same choice – to continue living in that apartment, wanting to climb into the same bathtub my mother had lain in. Maybe on that day, she had changed her mind. Maybe she climbed out, ended up on the floor, slowly suffocating as the air thinned. Part of me wanted to run from this place of sorrow as fast as I could, but another part of me actually longed to lie down right there, to witness the last bit of the world my mother had seen.

At the time, I escaped in the quickest way possible, yet I couldn't help wanting to return to that familiar way of life.

After facing death so directly, it seemed like nothing mattered anymore, like I could live more freely. But in reality, I found I still pushed myself too hard. When life felt overwhelming, when I just wanted to lie down and give up, I found myself questioning: *Is it okay to be this lazy? Is it okay to stop moving forward? Is it okay not to become "better"?* I told myself that every single day I lived after my mother's passing was something her death had brought me. What she left behind for me might be money, or good fortune – a kind of blessing that allowed me to grow up safely. That thought alone always took my breath away, as if I were trapped inside the bell jar Sylvia Plath wrote about, struggling to breathe in air that just wasn't there.

I believe my mother's smile had perhaps been meant to tell me not to worry. That she had made her choice, and that I should make mine, too.

I opened the library reservation system and typed in the keywords: healing, grief, suicide. In addition to reading, I joined a Facebook group for suicide loss survivors. I hesitated but eventually signed up for events to meet others who had been through experiences similar to mine. I just wanted to know how people like me, the ones left behind, would make it through the rest of their lives.

Here in Taiwan, two to three thousand people die by suicide each year, with 3,656 deaths by suicide officially recorded in 2020. That's twelve out of every 100,000 – higher than the global average. Although it seems everyone I know has at some point experienced the death of someone in their lives, whether close or distant, and that death should by now be accepted as "ordinary", I seem to remain trapped inside it. All I can do is read and write, hoping only to let others who might be going through the same thing know that life is like this. There's no need to worry. And if you do worry, that's okay too.

This is what life looks like for those of us left behind.

In the Car

Now, having already walked through the final journey of saying goodbye to my mother, I find that the memories often seen as ominous or inauspicious are, in fact, incredibly precious.

It may be because during those forty-nine days of mourning – or even just the first seven days, or up until the funeral – I still had my mother's physical form to watch over, still had upcoming rituals to look forward to. Whether I was willing or not, I was pushed forward by the

next task at hand. Looking back now, as someone who has lived through it, I can't help but wish I had taken more time and been a bit more composed. I wish I could've taken the time to carefully choose the flowers for her farewell ceremony. I wish I had spent more time at the altar, speaking to her. I wish I had used my camera more to capture what that day looked like. But all of that was beyond me then, when I was desperate to escape the shadow of death.

I still returned to my hometown, that city where I had grown up but no longer called home, several times during that year. After my mother passed away, I cleared out the home we had shared, packed up our belongings, and officially changed my household registration. For a brief moment, it felt like I had bid my final farewell to that place and would never return.

I'd travel an hour and a half alone on the high-speed rail, catch a taxi and, upon reaching my destination, lean forward and quietly ask the driver: "Would you mind waiting for me here for a bit?"

The cemetery area was so desolate, with no signs of life for miles around except for the people selling ceremonial paper money. If this cab left, there was no telling whether I'd be able to find another driver willing to accept a pickup request from here later.

This was the only place where I could still speak to my mother – or maybe it wasn't. I believed that whenever I wanted to speak with her, no matter where I was, she would listen. She was no longer bound by the limits of a physical body. Two years after the so-called "tree burial" (eco-friendly burial), the cemetery staff would turn over the soil, dig out new spaces, and place new ashes there. Her ashes had been held in supposedly biodegradable paper bags. I still remember them looking just like McDonald's takeout bags. However, an adult's ashes are much heavier than a McDonald's meal. The ashes, along with their paper bag, would enter the water cycle with the rainfall. The substances leached from the soil would spread throughout this world, cycling through it again and again.

Therefore, perhaps speaking to my mother in this particular place didn't mean that much after all. Maybe she wasn't even here anymore.

Still, whenever she crossed my mind, I wanted to come back to this place, to see her again.

Before catching a cab from the high-speed rail station, I wandered around a nearby department store, but couldn't find the right gift to bring her. I thought that if I spent a lot of money on flowers or some fancy offering, only for it to be cleared away in the end, she would probably scold me for it.

From the station to the cemetery was about a half-hour drive. I was actually very familiar with this thirty-minute journey – it was the same route I had taken when bringing my mother to the hospital for each radiation treatment and inpatient stay, just a bit farther down the road.

As usual, I bought ceremonial paper money and paid my respects to the local deities. At the temple housing the Earth God and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, no one else was around. To light the incense and paper offerings, I stared at the lighter I'd always been afraid to use and forced

myself to press down on it. I pushed hard two or three times, striking the flint. No flame at first, but then, for the first time, I saw sparks produced by my own hand. I brought the flame close to the incense, holding it there until the heat rose high enough that I had to let go. The second time I pressed the lighter to burn the paper money, it went much more smoothly. Watching the ceremonial money that I lit myself blazing in the burner, I finally felt a sense of independence. Perhaps it was like the moment when early humans first discovered fire, the thing that set us apart from the other primates. Maybe that was an exaggeration, but this simple, ordinary task was something I learned to do only after my mother was gone.

It's been three years since my mother passed. If I had kept a memorial tablet, this would be the time for what's called a helu – a ritual merging of her spirit into the family altar. But for someone who had married and divorced, where exactly would she return to?

It was only in this third year that I began to feel grief wash over me – shadowy moments flickering through my thoughts like a dim light in the distance.

But when I returned to the cemetery, everything was so bright.

I remember one cab driver once remarking that, "It's so peaceful here. Very nice."

And I replied, "Yes, it is."

Every time I got out of the taxi, it always took quite a while to find my mother's tree. Once, I even got the wrong tree and spent five minutes with my head bowed in prayer before looking up and feeling that the tree before me seemed unfamiliar. Only then did I realize the next tree over was my mother's. Fortunately, the cemetery management has recently started hanging numbered tags on each tree. Although I know deep down that the tree itself doesn't hold much significance – I mean, she is everywhere now and her presence permeates the very ground I walk on – I still return instinctively to the first tree where she was buried.

Tree burials or other eco-friendly interments are often chosen for infants who were never able to be born, or for young children, as they are destined to have no descendants to pay respects to them. If their parents pass away and siblings are no longer around, no one will remember that they have ever existed, and their memorial tablets naturally gather dust. So, every time I visit the cemetery, I see dolls and pinwheels placed under the trees. Thanks to these objects, the place feels neither sad nor haunted by death but somewhat like a quiet playground.

Under the tree, pinwheels left by other visitors began spinning as I spoke to my mother. I couldn't help but wonder if she was here. Maybe she wasn't, but that didn't matter either.

I arrived at the tree where my mother was supposed to be and crouched down at the spot where her ashes had once been placed. Mixed in the soil were some reflective materials – bits of stone, sand, and what looked like children's scented beads and marbles that refracted colors in the sunlight. Near the spot where her ashes had been laid, I noticed a seashell.

I picked it up, felt its weight in my hand, then gently set it back down, right where my mother had once been laid to rest.

Shouldering my bag, I walked back to where the taxi was waiting. The driver looked slightly surprised and asked, “Are you done already? It’s fine if you want to talk to her a little longer, since you came all this way.”

I said, “It’s alright. That’s about enough.”

I sat inside, buckled in, and leaned my head back, sinking into the leather seat, feeling it supports the weight of my body. The taxi pulled away, retracing the same road we came in on. Everything around me was bathed in familiar light. I felt content, grateful that I had made the trip.