

# SPEAK, MEMORY: A MEMOIR

## 說吧。記憶

*Celebrated author Ku De-Sha looks back on her life as a factory worker in 1960s Taiwan, when the first explosion of industrial prosperity – and the cycles of boom and bust that came with it – shaped an entire generation of people's lives. The prize-winning novelist takes us through that age and into her own private battles with cancer and with the endless obstacles of a writer's life.*

Celebrated author Ku De-Sha grew up in the 1960s, an age of new industrial prosperity and precarity in Taiwan unlike anything the island had ever seen before. Taiwan's textile industry, which seemed to bloom overnight into a global force, did so on the backs of entire villages of factory workers and private subcontractors. Even after winning multiple literary prizes in her youth, Ku De-Sha eventually joined that workforce, until a fight with cancer and a return to writing liberated her from it.

Part I of *Speak, Memory* describes Ku's childhood in Chiayi and her transition after her father's death from a traditional Fujianese household to a village community. In Part II, she takes us inside the vast network of factories, household contractors, and working villages that provided the raw labor on which Taiwan's textile explosion was built, and her many years trying to be the best worker and wife she could be. Part III depicts an even more arduous struggle: Ku's decade-long battle with cancer that inspired her to return to the writing life.

*Speak, Memory* is a momentously important piece of literary nonfiction because it weaves Ku De-Sha's individual experiences into the broad cloth of a significant, collective memory. That integration of the singular and plural concern lends further resonance to her story of her return to life and an artistic self.



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## Ku De-Sha 顧德莎

As a student, Ku De-Sha was a promising essayist and creative writer, editing her high school's literary magazine and winning national prizes for her writings. After entering the workplace, she stopped writing for a full four decades. In 2012 she picked up her pen once more, and restarted a creative process now imbued with the power of memory.

# **SPEAK, MEMORY: A MEMOIR**

**By Ku De-Sha**

**Translated by Eleanor Goodman**

## **Chapter 1. The Beginning of Memory**

### **The Beginning of Memory**

Does my memory begin with death? Or with a cozy dinner under dizzying lights?

I am standing beneath the ironwood trees in the Dongmen traffic roundabout, looking toward the door of my house several meters away. A coffin has been placed at the entrance, and a mountain of burning paper glints like gold. Not far from that glowing spot is a pedicab, the back of which is usually laden with sugarcane for my grandfather to sell. But now it sits empty.

I've probably been taken to the roundabout by an adult. People in Taiwan subscribe to many taboos when it comes to the rituals of celebration or mourning, so is it that my Chinese zodiac sign indicated that it was unlucky for me to get close? I catch glimpses of people moving inside the house, all clothed in the white robes of mourning: my father, mother, uncle, aunt. I don't see my sisters – why am I the only one standing there?

I'm probably feeling terribly lonely, so I decide to ignore the constraints the adults have put on me, and try to head back home. Between the roundabout and my house is a road. It's close to the East Market, and there's heavy bicycle traffic. I have to carefully calculate the speed of each bicycle, and take advantage of a break in the traffic to run across. I wait for a long time, until finally I see that I can make it across before a bicycle coming from the Nineteen Kung Temple can hit me. I start to dash across to my house.

Almost exactly at the moment I begin to run, I feel a sharp pain behind my eyes.

I crash into the handlebars of a pedicab and am knocked unconscious.

### **A Small Town Past the Tropic of Cancer**

The Dongmen roundabout is a popular place to be on a summer night in Chiayi. After dinner, men in t-shirts sit in the doorways on benches, and women gather in small groups to chat and keep an eye on the kids running back and forth across the street. The streetlamps are bright on the roundabout, and when the occasional bicycle comes past, it always slows down so as not to hit a running child.

The man who pushes the taro ice cream cart has long since taken up his position, and is tossing dice rhythmically into a bowl. They clink as though sounding out some sort of code. Men

wander over one by one and encircle his cart. They throw the dice, competing to calculate the highs and lows, and their delight at the wins and losses carries on their shouting. They appear around dusk: the glutinous rice cake maker from next door, the woodworker from my family, the neighbor from across the street who makes tables. They rush over to throw the dice into the big bowl and compare the results. Sometimes I see my mother in her clogs click back to the kitchen for a bowl when the men manage to win a big bowl of taro ice cream squares. My sisters and I sit on the benches that are abandoned now that the woodshop has closed for the night, filled with happiness as we eat the sweet ice cream. We don't get a big bowl every time; often there's a shallow container with one single square of ice cream that we lick slowly, tasting the happiness that is in the process of melting away. Finally, we'll eat the hard outside layer of the square.

One evening, the woodworker wins half a bucket of taro ice cream squares, and my sisters and I run back to the house for two large soup bowls. The whole woodshop fills with a celebratory spirit as though it's New Years, and a rare smile crosses my grandmother's face.

In the autumn, when the sugarcane is harvested, the small towns past the Tropic of Cancer get oppressively hot, and sugarcane becomes the snack of choice in every house. My grandfather piles it on the back of his pedicab, and sells it from our doorstep. His target customers are those passing by the traffic circle on the way to the East Market, and when the market closes, our neighbors come to buy it too. During the day, Grandfather pares the sugarcane for housewives, and at night the local men use it to make wagers, while the circles of onlookers exclaim sympathetically.

"Sugarcane splitting" is Grandfather's specialty. He pulls out a stalk, names the price, and lets everyone examine it. If a man hands over some money, Grandfather gives the knife to him. The man stands on top of a wooden stool – about a third higher than an ancient-style stool, so as to be taller than the sugarcane – and demonstrates his strength by splitting the cane with the knife.

The buyer holds the sugarcane in one hand and the knife in the other, and, holding his breath in concentration, lets go of the cane and chops with the knife from top to bottom. As the onlookers gasp, a chunk of the cane is sheared off, and that is the prize.

I once saw an expert sugarcane-splitter who sent the knife straight down the middle and split it open. The whole cane was his. I've also seen someone give it his first go and fail to even chop off a chunk from the top.

I am often among the spectators. These performances in the noisy street at dusk make me happy, all these adults absorbed in the drama of stalk after stalk, distracted enough that no one bothers to smack the children.

In my memory, aside from the noisy evening and the sweet fragrance of the sugarcane, my grandfather is a dark shadow, and I cannot pick his voice out of the clamor.

Many years later, from my mother's stories and watching a certain TV show, I realized that the ancestors of the short, slender man may have come from Zhaoan in Fujian Province. After many tribulations, he appeared alone in what was once Taiwan's most economically dynamic region. He ended up marrying into his wife's family and taking their name. He and his tall, thin

wife produced my father. Since I was always told as a child that I couldn't marry anyone surnamed Chang, I'm sure that we were "Liaos on the outside and Changs on the inside". In life, we were named Liao, but after death we would be named Chang: "Never forget as long as you live that Chang and Liao are one and the same."

My mother told me that Grandfather had come from Xiluo Township in Yunlin County. He'd somehow made his way to Chiayi and married into Grandmother's family. At my age, I wouldn't have known about the origins of the Chang-Liao double surname, and I also wouldn't have paid attention to whether Grandfather's ancestral tablet was inscribed with Chang or with Liao. But from a young age, we were told that we couldn't marry a Chang or a Chien. Perhaps because I was a girl, there was no need to explain "Liaos on the outside and Changs on the inside" to me; or perhaps my grandmother had long since forgotten the ancestral lesson.

Grandfather died, and my impressions of living with him for several years yield nothing more than the pedicab. He may have hugged me once, even though I was already the second in a long line of Liao family "unprofitable goods" – namely, "damned girls". But given the kindness that comes with age, at some point he likely held me when I cried, although I cannot remember how he smelled or sounded as he comforted me.

#### **Four Kids Peeing on a Roundabout**

By the time I was born, the tree was already growing there.

On warm, humid afternoons after a rain, a group would surround the tree, and men would use bamboo poles to knock translucent black blobs, wet and soft as clouds, from the bark. I heard the adults call them "wood ears," which made me very curious about what kind of tree would grow ears. Like the man who made candy figures under the tree – he would swing the kettle of hot caramel and produce General Guan Yu, female goddesses, roosters, rabbits.... I would watch it all, fascinated his world of temptations.

Three hundred years ago, the city had four gates. The East Gate near our house had long since been destroyed in an earthquake, and the city gates remained only in the memories of those from my great-grandfather's generation. The traffic circle, by contrast, was like an invisible boundary drawn by adults, and to leave its edges was risky. None of us would cross the barrier unless led by someone.

Aside from the tree that grew ears, there were ironwood trees, royal poincianas, a red telephone box, and two air-raid shelters. In the middle of it all was a round pond, and in the center of the pond was a tall tower with four peeing children. Twenty-four hours a day, those kids peed (water) into the pond. The pond held fish, tadpoles, and water striders.

While the adults worked, the children who lived near the roundabout would gather under the poinciana trees to play "milk caps", or buy a piece of candy from the peddler under the fig tree. The peddler would hand over a needle, and you could etch the shape of a key onto the piece of candy. If you finished the etching, you could exchange it for a bigger candy figurine.

I often sat underneath the iron trees, sweeping the withered pine needles aside to clear a spot to draw butterflies, birds, fish, and children.

We kids were usually left to our own devices when the adults were busy. I would run wild by myself on the roundabout, sometimes chasing after the older kids from next door. The older girls would teach the younger girls how to collect red petals that had fallen to the earth, and make butterflies from four petals and two calyxes. The boys would use the hardened poinciana tree pods as swords, and divide into two groups that would attack each other. Sometimes we were soldiers on the Long March, led eastward off the roundabout by the older kids.

The fig tree sprouted wood ears, as well as a suspended horn, which occasionally let out a few yelps. When that happened, the whole island nation was reminded: war still awaits, and if the bugle sounds, we must all be ready to counterattack.

The loudspeakers transmitted a simple melody which the boys gave lyrics to: “a little black cat, without pants.” All the girls would laugh uncomfortably when we heard it. “Little black cat” meant a pretty girl.

I wasn’t allowed to go too far. Most of the time I crouched under iron tree by the entrance to the air-raid shelter, poking the mimosa plants so they would close up their leaves, or playing with the purple amaranth flowers. More often, I’d look for a flat rock with which to brush pictures in the hardened mud. Or I’d collect discarded popsicle sticks, and draw random lines underneath the iron tree. From there I could see my house and the people moving around inside the woodshop. And when my mother called for me, I’d be able to hear her.

Often I’d make a square grid, and draw a flower or a butterfly or some other object in each box. Sometimes I’d watch how the candy peddler created his goddesses. He could draw expertly. He’d boil his kettle of caramel into golden bubbles, lift it up, and pour the syrup onto a metal plate. Then in a few moments he would have a beauty with a long flowing gown and her hair coiled into tall buns, or maybe a thickly feathered rooster.

Sometimes under the ironwood tree, I’d snap off a needle and break off the nodes one by one. One end of the needle was concave, and the other convex; the glutinous rice cake maker said that the concave ends were female and the convex ends were male. So we would use the needles to determine who would play first in our games. We’d break off all the nodes on a needle, and if the last one remaining was convex, the boys would go first, and if it was concave, the girls would go first.

Not only was I a girl, but I was the second daughter. My older sister was born more than five hundred days before me. Her gender disappointed my grandmother, but at least she was the first granddaughter. A lot of people comforted my grandmother, saying: an older sister can take care of her younger siblings. But when I was born, the whole family was disappointed. My grandmother had to look after me while my mother was busy running the household, and I was called a “useless child”. When I cried because my diaper was wet, or I was hungry, or I was tired, I was always impatiently set on the bed or put into my cradle and ignored.

My heart began its intense demand for love, and my body would start to pant in response. On cold mornings, when the mimosa plants were draped in white frost, my mother would carry

my little sister, two years younger than I, to the water pump by the main door to get water to wash the clothing. I would be put into a bouncing chair and set out in the roundabout by myself to cry. My overwhelmed mother would constantly yell at me to be quiet. I trust that at times, she cried a few silent tears. When she scolded me, she was actually blaming someone else in the family.

When my asthma acted up in the autumn and I was stuck in bed watching people walk outside the window, in the summer silently crouching in the roundabout, or watching my distant house that rang with the sound of sawing, time felt slow and rhythmical. A lot of things appeared before I had the power to understand them.

## **Chapter 2. A Better Wife Than My Mother**

### **Migratory Birds**

In 2008, Y invited me to tea. It was cold on Elephant Mountain, and I wore a wool sweater. He recognized it, pointed to a small decoration on it and smiled. It was left over from an order he'd made from us many years ago. The color was slightly off, but only someone with expertise would be able to tell.

He said that his kids had already taken over his food import company. He still traveled a lot, but this year he'd refurbished his house and was planning to settle down: "I can't keep it up."

He said several times: "Thank goodness I moved fast back then." From the first wave of textile quotas sent out under a different name with unusual prices, to a circuitous route to opening up a factory on mainland China, to pulling out of China ten years later and moving everything to Vietnam and then to Canada, he'd run fast enough to keep a bit ahead of the danger. Now he had a little extra in his pocket, enough not to have to worry about the basics.

He was Hakka, and at that time there were many Hakka working in knitted textiles. When my boss, colleagues, and business partners met, they would immediately start speaking Hakka, and with their amused *chuo* (right) and *wu chuo* (not right), I slowly came to understand their good will and guidance. I gradually grew accustomed to them speaking their own language around me, and all my concern faded.

When Y's factory had just been built, we helped him set up an accounting system. I created forms for everything, from warehouse management to salary calculation, for him to have printed out. It wasn't that I was particularly skilled, I just had a bit of experience under my belt, and I knew that designing those management forms would later come in handy in dealing effectively with the tax bureau. Back then things hadn't yet become digital, and it was easy to commit fraud. It was also easy to slip up and get caught.

When orders flooded Y's factory, I did help him save a little money in taxes – all legally. And when our subcontracting factory was in financial trouble, Y helped us out.

He moved operations to the mainland early on, and the factory I had with C limped on for a few years before closing.



I was a migratory bird who headed north, landing with disheartened wings in a strange place, not knowing when I'd be able to fly south again.

Most likely, when I got on the express train heading to Taipei, God had already prepared my homework for me. They arranged checkpoints to test my intelligence, and at every checkpoint, there was a secret code that would have released me from danger. But I couldn't read the faint code, and waded deeper and deeper into the water.

## **The Second Plain on Guangfu North Road**

The industrial zone in Second Plain is located on the third section of Chongxin Road, in the Guangfu Road area. It's filled with punch press, mold-making, and mill machine factories. Some are big factories with heavy locks on the gate, while others are narrow "peddler places" with a factory floor and dormitory together. (In Taiwanese, "peddler places" refers to a row of old-style low buildings.) From outside the gates, you can see the electric welders spraying out scorching sparks, or machines letting out the earsplitting screech of metal against metal, surrounded by deafening, upbeat Fujianese music. There are also a few buildings piled up like old railroad compartments, and the S knitwear factory is on the third floor of one of them.

The S factory is on the third floor of the structure; another knitwear factory occupies the second. The first floor is a company warehouse, which holds a lot of very large metal drums. Across the way is another similar factory building, housing a branch of the large clothing manufacturer Sanchong, specializing in shirts. From our hallway, we see them distributing milk each morning at ten. One of my coworkers told us that because the solvents in the cloth are toxic, the workers are given milk to detoxify the blood. It was the same traditional Chinese medicinal logic that led us to drink pig's blood broth several times a week. In the wool clothing factory, we'd end up breathing in a lot of fibers, and pig's blood could help clear the lungs.

During the peak of knitwear sales, with the exception of some individually run factories, most wool clothing factories distributed the work out to subcontractors. The team leader knew exactly what work stations were in what town or village. For example, Miaoli had six-needle weaving machines, while three-needle machines were to be found in Zhuangwei Village in Yilan, and seven-needle machines in many places in the suburbs around Taipei. "Three-needle" and "six-needle" designations indicate the thickness of the knit. The leader also knew where the seam finishers lived. Pullovers were generally composed of one front panel, one back panel, two sleeves, and collar. Jackets included a back panel and two front panels, along with lapels and collar, which were sewn together into a single piece of clothing. The seam finishers were spread out in the numerous little alleys across Taipei County, and many of the women were cousins. They all seemed to come from the countryside in the south, and they'd first learned their technique in the factories before bravely deciding to go it alone as subcontractors. When they were ready, they'd reach out to their hometown for more workers to increase production. Some of them went back to their villages, and used the open space there as a factory floor.



Another group of women lived in the village with housing for military members and their families, and their little battalion did crocheting, knitting, and embroidery by hand. At their peak, they could handle 1200 knitted sweaters in a week.

All of the factories had to rely on this mobile workforce. They didn't have to supply work insurance to their laborers, and they didn't need to worry that off-season profits wouldn't be enough to support factory operations, nor did they need to pay half-salary to workers so as not to lose them. They were simply a bunch of worker ants enabling the foreign exchange. There were only one hundred workers at the S knitwear factory, but in a year they could turn over several hundred million Taiwan dollars. More than eighty percent of that production came through subcontractors.

Occasionally I went out with the distribution trucks to bring back finished garments from the apartments along the alleys in Sanchong, and take them directly to the Banqiao building to be processed. Or we went from the Banqiao Apartments, where five zipper workers lived, and brought product to the military village outside Taoyuan to have the collars embroidered. In the military village, when Mrs. J called her neighbors to come pick up the clothing, I felt like I saw every mother in Jingzhong 1st Village come pick up five or six bundles of clothing, sign the book, and take the clothing to their homes. In a few days, the factory trucks would come back to get them.

When I was in sixth grade or so in Jingzhong 1st Village, nearly everyone took in work subcontracted from the factories. My mother would find work making firecrackers, crocheting lace, or doing embroidery, and my older sister and I would spend our vacations helping out. My mother was probably trying to use work to kick her gambling addiction, but she failed in the end, mainly because all these products made the house seem messy, and for someone with OCD, that was impossible to handle.

In the past, military members were paid very badly. I saw my father's bankbook, and his salary as a lieutenant colonel was four hundred yuan a month, along with a heavily stamped booklet of rice, noodle, and oil rations. The rations were distributed according to age, and in an effort to control the birthrate, it was decreed that you could receive rice rations for four children at the most. Households with many boys had to rely on flour rations to make it through the month.

As the population of Jingzhong 1st Village slowly increased, so did family expenses, and the mothers began to think about how to bring home a little bit more money. Early on, Mrs. Tan, who lived beside the main road, stood by the gate to her home and sold peeled sugarcane. Our neighbor Mrs. Chen worked as a tailor, and my sister's classmate's family opened a little convenience store. Most of the mothers in the village did piecework, which required no investment or complicated skillset. All one needed was a bit of patience to learn each particular task and a bit of dexterity, and some extra income could be made.

By the time I got to high school, there were already fewer people doing piecework, most likely because the military increased its salaries by twenty percent in 1974.

In the S knitwear factory, Ms. C was in charge of the subcontracting of the knit panels. Because dealing with knit panels involves the use of raw materials and the dispatching of vehicles, she

counted as a subcontracting leader. My sister was responsible for keeping track of the subcontracted seam finishing work, while my cousin was in charge of keeping track of the subcontracted embroidery, knit borders, zippers, and buttons. I was responsible for the production that happened in the factory itself. We also worked with Miss Li from Keelung, who was in charge of the knit panel production, along with design and technical guidance. A Miss Liu who lived in Taipei was in charge of the warehouse.

Aside from Ms. C, our sample producer, warehouse manager, and the drivers, everyone in my department was an unmarried woman.

Our department was located on the left side of the factory and was called the “front line.” We were mainly responsible for the warehouse (receiving and sending out raw materials and supplies), knit panels, seam finishing, zippers, buttons, and embroidery. The “rear line” was located to the right side of the factory, and received clothing from the “front line,” which they would then wash, press, check for holes and flaws, add labels, darn, fold, pack, crate up, and load onto trucks headed for customs. On the rear line was an area housing the company offices, the head boss, sales department, customs processors, contract writers, and bookkeepers.

There was a dormitory at the far eastern edge of the factory. The female employees slept ten to a room, and it was said that the manual workers were even more crowded. Each person got a wooden bunk just big enough to lie down on and a shelf attached to the wall for one’s personal possessions. Each person had a suitcase with clothes for different seasons, and some had an extra cardboard box, which held cheap trinkets bought at the night market, like hats, different sized bags and purses, belts, and so on. In winter, the quilts were packed away into plastic bags or boxes, and with all of these things crammed in together, the space felt very narrow.

Near the processing floor was a row of six women’s toilets and two public showers. The day I arrived, my sister and I took some fresh clothes and went in, but when we saw a group of naked coworkers, we walked right back out, as someone yelled curses at our backs. It seemed our reaction had insulted them. It was the first time I’d ever been confronted with verbal abuse from anyone aside from my mother. I was a bit scared, but after that I just kept telling myself that I couldn’t take things too seriously.

Hot water came from the boiler in the laundry room. The hot water disappeared by eight in the evening, either because it was a day off or because the workers who did the ironing had gotten off work early. If the front line sent out the clothes too late for the rear line to wash and iron, and the boiler’s flame went out or it stopped working, or if it had been left off on a vacation day, we had to wash in cold water. In summer, I tried washing with cold water, but in the winter, you had to be sure to grab your chance at the showers, because winter was the off-season at the factory and they would cut the hot water supply off even earlier.

When I began at the factory, I had an unrealistic idea of what it would be like in Taipei. We went to work at 8 in the morning, had lunch and a rest at noon, then worked from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. After dinner, we worked overtime from 6:30 until 9 at night. We office workers and the machine operators were all trapped inside a tiny space: them facing their machines, and us facing a pile of numbers and reports.

The first time I received my wages of 2,400 yuan, I lost the courage to try to make it somewhere else in Taipei. I also gave up the idea of returning to Chiayi. I didn't want to go back to face my mother, who was out of control, and I couldn't stand to see my heartbroken father, so I chose to run away from my family's problems and remain in Taipei.

After three months of overtime, just as the Mid-Autumn Festival was about to arrive, the factory announced that there would be no break for the holiday. I marched into the office and told them that I wanted to take a few days off. "I haven't been home for three months." As I spoke, sadness overtook me, and I began to cry in front of the somber factory manager.

In that unfamiliar place, homesickness for the place I had managed to escape had turned me into a weakling!

A few days later, the factory announced that it was closing for three days for the holidays. My sister and two cousins had been away from home for a while and had already made plans. So I squeezed myself onto the 11:45 p.m. express train heading south. The train arrived in Chiayi just as dawn broke. A bunch of motorcycles were parked in front of the station and they picked up the weary but excited travelers one by one, as others walked to the bus stop to wait for the first bus to arrive.

I also could have waited an hour or two for the bus, but of course I'd told my family when to expect me and asked my father to come pick me up on his motorcycle.

On that autumn morning, at a higher elevation than in the city, the dew had turned to frost, and my father would have to climb out of his cozy bed and ride three kilometers to come get me. He drove his motorcycle slowly, in a jacket that was barely warm (only many years later did I realize that underneath his jacket he always wore a t-shirt, and in the winter, he simply layered the t-shirt over a sweatshirt). He hated buying clothing, but when his children came home, he always prepared a full table for us.

I silently handed my bag to him, silently climbed on the back of his motorcycle, and let him take me back home.

I didn't dare ask how things were going at home, and he remained quiet. We cooked and read. Over three days, my mother came in and out of the house, always in a hurry to leave. I sat in the covered study in front of the house, tidying the books, my heart uneasy and restless.

At the end of my vacation, my cousin called (by that time, every household had applied to have a telephone; there was no longer a need for the citizen board's management office to announce a call over the loudspeaker, or for us to go to the office and take the transferred call on their black telephone), and told me that the factory had caught fire.

When I returned to Taipei, I went with a bunch of coworkers to stand in front of the wreck of the factory. There was a sense of absurdity, as the temporary shelter I had found was suddenly in ruins. It was the first sign from God that I should turn around and leave, but still I decided to stay.

## Chapter 3. Learning Love

### A Sunny Room

It was an apartment building on Guohua Street. From the sixth floor you could see the Bank of Taiwan dormitory, a row of old Japanese colonial buildings, and a giant mango tree whose leaves were constantly being ruffled by birds. After a rain, the sparrows would sit on a pile of pebbles along the compound wall and preen their feathers. They would find some sun, beat their drying wings, and fly up to the top of the telephone poles.

I would sit by the French windows watching the birds, on those long days after the children went to school. I was never bored. There were a few books that had accompanied me on my roaming, and each time I moved, I'd bind them up with nylon cord, and slowly move the stacks. Each time, I would find a spot for them in the brightest place in the house.

When I moved back to Chiayi, I found an apartment with big French windows and arranged a spot to read that was sunny enough in the daytime to dry off the tears from the night before.

Simone de Beauvoir once said: "Disappointment isn't an antonym of hope; disappointment is believing that my most basic goals are unachievable. It is a sober recognition of the human condition." I slowly came to understand that if a person wants to be diligent about some task, or responsible toward some person, it involves a test of that person's mettle. So disappointment need not exist; instead, there can be just a deep forgiveness within each person's heart, including toward the self, the self that we do not dare face. You do not need to examine it or question it, but rather to gently turn yourself around.

Turn around, and allow yourself to see the situation with new eyes.

Every month, Yu-Chen helped me with rent, and my three younger sisters bicycled over with food every few days. Sometimes they would bring me to a friend's party, since it's easy to forget one's pain in the company of others. I rested for six months until I finally had the energy to grab my résumé and go looking for a job.

As soon as there was an apartment for rent in Jingzhong 1st Village, I moved back to the military village. It was in an older building that would eventually be rebuilt, so the rent was relatively cheap. With a job, I'd be able to make it.

I found a sunny corner and put in a few plants, hoping that my energy would last while the children were still growing up.

Our neighbor's house backed onto my childhood house and the fourth daughter of the Lin family had had lived there for several years with her husband and two children. With their father's good fortune, the family prospered. Every day by the wall outside my south-facing apartment, my neighbors sat making sausage, and it seemed nothing had changed since I'd left Chiayi. The voices of my neighbors floated up from the main door as they left each morning to buy food. All the women who were once in their prime had aged, and the retired military members had gotten even older. They would go back to the mainland to visit relatives and then come back to the village to

slowly while away their days. The village was where they felt most settled, their second-generation ancestral home.

At regular intervals, I would hear funeral dirges and the cries of a new birth, as the old mothers began to take care of a third generation. The world moves even faster than one imagines, and every death is followed quickly by the joy of new life. Sorrow and happiness remain but briefly, soon diluted by the next tragedy or celebration. Then, after a very long time, you suddenly remember a certain person. You had forgotten to miss him, and you feel guilty, as though it is some kind of betrayal.

When they began to demolish the military village, I moved to an old house on the edge of Hsing-Nan Park. My grandparents' house had been torn down and an apartment building put up in its place. My father's father, who had loaned my mother's father the land, was also gone. Who knew which of those paved roads hid the small fish and shrimp that once lived there.

The house faced west, and at dusk the sunlight flooded the first-floor living room, shining on my bookshelves and computer. I had bought a computer and was taking night classes in finance at the Tatung Institute of Commerce and Technology, studying new tools that would make me more effective at work.

I hung a row of plants along the exterior walls, and told my friends: when you head into the alley, my house is the one with the flowers.

It was an attractive old house, and although the passing motorcycles were noisy, I settled in more each day. The landlord asked me if I wanted to buy the place, but I couldn't afford it and had to move on. One of my sister's in-laws had an empty place, and I moved there. There was no traffic at the end of that alley, and I grew plants again, but they disappeared as soon as they flowered. I asked my neighbor and he said that they were pretty so he'd taken them home with him. He didn't sound like he was going to give them back, and I didn't pursue it. I'd already lost so much; just having a sunny place to live in was enough to make me feel rich.

I moved two more times before Jingzhong 1st Village was finally rebuilt. I went with my younger sister to enter the housing raffle. She had always been lucky. The last time the military village held a raffle, I'd ended up with some soap, while she took the big prize. I had slowly come to believe that one's fate in such things was fixed.

Borrowing her luck, our family got a south-facing apartment on the ninth floor. Each day I stood on the balcony and could see the Central Mountain Range to the east, wisps of white clouds, and the mist slowly rising in the nearby bamboo forest. I used to wander in that bamboo forest outside the village when I was a kid, and the bamboo leaves fluttered like ocean waves, while my days seemed to float along on a spring breeze.

## **The Courage to Fly**

The psychiatric clinic was on Wufeng North Road. After I left the biotech company, the clinic was recommended to me by a well-meaning woman at my church.

The general manager at the biotech company, Mr. Lin, was a Christian, and so was my advisor in the economics department. They took me to the church to be bestowed with God's favor, and I cried during the reading of the psalms, baptized in the feeling that God was calling me back.

I had met Mr. Lin in Taipei, but when I'd left the city, I had deleted all of my old contacts. I never imagined he would trace me back to Chiayi. But one day he came to Chiayi and arranged to meet me, saying he wanted to set up a branch there and inviting me to be part of the planning group. It was a wonderful chance to learn, and I thanked him for giving someone with a finance background the opportunity to study the whole process of setting up a new biotech branch. From buying a factory building to conducting small-scale experiments in the "CPC Business Incubator," equipping the factory, beginning production, finding customers, authenticating the ISO, digitizing the accounting, and so on, during those three years, I learned a great deal from the many challenges we faced.

After the three years, I felt I was no match for the remaining responsibilities, and I needed to find another way to fly. I sent in my resignation in February, but didn't formally leave until September. Each time Mr. Lin came to Chiayi, he would meet with me and try to convince me to stay. Finally, I told him: "You'd be helping me if you let me go." He hesitated for a long time, then at last agreed.

I'm very clear about the fact that I'm not a particularly talented person. All of my successes have come from partnering with people who are outstanding at what they do. As far as I'm concerned, working with outstanding people is the best way to learn. But I would never step out in front and block the view for everyone else.

My responsibilities at the psychiatric clinic were to be there with the patients while they saw the doctor, and when the clinic was empty, to call our patients and ask them about their medications, or to connect with patients who had not been to the clinic in a while.

At first I thought that the clinic was a way station on the path to where I could take off again, but in fact it turned out to be a hidden gift from God.

My office was at the front of the clinic. It was a narrow space with a computer and telephone, and behind the chair was a row of books about depression and manic-depression, as well as a pile of academic psychiatric journals that would periodically arrive. Since my work wasn't strenuous, I read the whole collection in a month, with the exception of some English terms that I skipped over.

After that, I had a sudden realization: the delusions that had ensnared me for a while before disappearing were in fact a symptom. My indefatigable work ethic was just a reflection of my emotional disturbance and anxiety. My endless desire to advance was an attempt to extract myself from the darkness; the fact that I would often find myself crying unawares was a sign of scars that had never healed.



This realization made me look at myself differently. It also made me reexamine my mother, who at forty years old had sunken deep into vice and become unable to extract herself. We were both controlled by fear and lacked self-respect, and we covered it up with pathological behaviors. The only difference was in the masks we chose to put on.

Once I understood I was sick, I began to study how not to allow myself to enter the darkness, and how to go out for a walk if I started to feel bad.

Not long after that, my son got married, and my daughter went off to college. I wanted to travel further, to fulfill a dream I could only fulfill on my own.

I began by looking online for work in mainland China, only considering jobs that involved travel. I was just trying to find a way to travel for free. I thanked my father for the path he had chosen for me – finance and accounting – which might not be exciting or highly lucrative, but was smooth and steady, which is the best gift a parent can give to a child.

When I took a job with Intech Biopharm, it presented me with my first chance to go to the mainland on business. At that time, the mainland was still chaotic; in Shanghai's Hongkou district, the streets were dusty and noisy, like the Xinzhuang Second Plain Industrial Zone of the 1960s. When I went back a second time, the dusty pulsating roads were already flanked with big buildings and the whole city sparkled like the stars at night.

In Shanghai, I always felt like I was wearing clothing made of glass as I moved about the dusty city. I waited for a chance to go to Suzhou, where I could finally see my shadow on the ground. The tidy, bright "Singapore Industrial Zone" was bursting with spring flowers, and on Friday nights, the manmade lake was filled with singing. I walked slowly among the migrant workers, feeling like I was coming close to really living.

I also took business trips, riding long distance buses across the Loess Plateau and taking planes high over the Yellow River, which from above looked like a ribbon flying up to heaven. Each time I went on a trip, I was like a dragonfly sweeping over the water surface. As soon as I'd examined a company branch's accounts, I'd take off for the next location. I did nothing but work, but I also remembered what I'd seen in front of the Zhengzhou Train Station. Early in the morning, it was filled with squatting migrant workers, lugging quilts and cooking pots and bags. They were like grains of beach sand slowly crossing a square the size of several soccer fields. I saw how difficult life could be, but I also saw people who wouldn't give up despite all the hardship. What could I possibly have to be unhappy about?

I hope that I'll have the chance to pay my own way back to all of those places I traveled.

## **A Bruised Reed**

I always work too much, and all of the projects my bosses have approved I repeatedly vetted and reconsidered before proposing. All of my successes were just the consummation of what I'd practiced over and over in my head. Looking back over those years, I see my reflexive lack of confidence, and it similar to my mother's OCD.



For thirty years, I worked more than ten hours a day, until yet again my body refused to do it anymore and forced me to put aside my work to enter the Far Eastern Memorial Hospital.

At that time, the doctor that had delivered my daughter was getting older and he only saw one patient a week for follow-up appointments. So I registered for a doctor at random. Since I'd heard that urinary issues could be solved with minimally invasive surgery and a patient could be released from the hospital after three days, I didn't try to find a well known doctor. In fact, I'd never sought out famous doctors, since I'd never felt I was worth it.

After listening to my symptoms, the doctor ran a few diagnostic tests and then asked me to make an appointment to examine my urinary tract. Then he asked whether I'd had regular pap smears. I shook my head. Aside from giving birth, when I'd been in the hospital for tinnitus, and when I'd been given an intravenous drip for an asthma attack, I'd barely paid attention to my body.

One week later I was informed by the clinic that I was in the first stages of cervical cancer.

"Can't I just ignore it? Everyone's going to die from something, and for me it might as well be cancer." I spoke calmly, thinking only of my family's upset if I were hospitalized, my mother's anxious face.

"If we were talking about heart disease, that might be ok. But the last stages of cancer are terrible. It's better that we address it," the doctor told me earnestly.

So I began my first treatment. The surgeon spent six or seven hours in the operating room. My Caesarian section had caused serious adhesion in my abdomen, and the surgeon had to push aside and rearrange very carefully the tissue around the organs.

I remained in the hospital for a month. Each time my mother visited, she would see that the next bed over had received another new patient and she'd say lightly, "Your doctor must be a dolt. All the other patients have already gotten out!" In general, with minimally invasive surgery for the cervix, there are only three small incisions made, and most patients are out within a week. She didn't know that my surgery had been much more intensive.

During that month in the hospital, my youngest sister Yu-Chen came each week to pay the nurses. She had apparently decided to look after everyone now that our father was gone, and she was always there to lend a hand when we needed it. My son and daughter had jobs and their own families to think of; aside from living expenses, they had student loans to repay. I was always a useless mother. All I could offer was the basics, and everything else they had to get for themselves.

Every few days, my sister Yu-Ling brought some books to me and took away the ones I had read. My sisters had inherited my father's goodness, and had intelligent eyes and warm hands.

Whenever Yu-Ling brought books, she would always say, "This is a good one. But you could write an even better one." It was a warm admonishment, just like when she used to tell me, "I remember you saying that you want to write a novel." I'd mumble a reply, knowing that the humanities were already quite far from me. I hadn't even finished an essay in a very long time.

After I got out of the hospital, I returned to my home in Shulin. It was once my husband's home, but he'd sold it to my older sister to fulfill a debt. She'd fixed it up and let me stay there for a while, but I'd run away. After the place had been empty for a while, my mother used the money my father

had left, along with some of her own savings, to buy it from my sister, and let my brother and sister who were working and studying in Taipei live there.

And so I returned to the house that I had fled from nearly twenty years before.

The newly redone house had a different setup, and each room looked brighter than the last. My mother lived on the first floor, my brother on the second floor, and my sister on the third. They were independent, but could look after each other. I had moved back to live with my mother, and that was my most difficult homework: learning how to get along with her again.