

Fanwa Road

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JANUARY 4, 2002

The birthing was the easy part.

Zhou Li's mother had cleared a table in the kitchen. The wood-paneled windows were bolted to keep out prying eyes, though their nearest neighbor lived five miles away. The pale light of a single lamp flooded over crates of potatoes, eggplants, and leafy bok choy. The spuds stared at Li in an accusing fashion. Their brown spots and wrinkled skins resembled the face of Li's disapproving mother, who had left the house after the birthing and hadn't returned.

The reason for her mother's disapproval was asleep at the moment, swaddled in blankets with pink lips slightly parted. Zhou Zeng Ya had been alive for all of two hours. Li had refused to budge from the birthing table. Though her throat burned with thirst, Li satisfied herself by drinking every detail of her newborn daughter, from the shape of chubby her face to the dip in the bridge of her nose. *Like mine?* Li felt mingled warmth and unimaginable sadness, two opposite feelings that tugged at her heart, poised to tear it apart.

The pain of birthing was nothing.

Li would never teach Zeng Ya how to speak Chinese or tie her shoes or make dumplings. Li's mother had given her two days to abandon her daughter, and two days was not enough time for such things.

"Law is law," Mama Zhou would say, a pinch in her nose and a glint in her eye. "You are unmarried and young. No husband will want to marry a woman with another man's daughter, and you won't be able to pay the fees to keep her!"

Li lifted her daughter's tiny hand, which had slipped from the folds of the blanket.

How can I give you up?

JANUARY 6, 2002

Red-tiled roofs sagged on either side of the road like hunched shoulders, with rain pouring down their stony necks. Zhou Li ambled through the stone streets of Hefei City, her shoes slipping on cracks and loose stones. The hike from the train station had left a chill in her bones. Li's worn coat weighed on her, drenched in mingled tears and rainwater. The wind cried and tugged at the frayed ends of her clothes, catching at wisps of her hair. Li wished she were a dandelion seed, so she could let the wind carry her away.

Zeng Ya wailed louder than the storm, pounding little fists into Li's coat. Li did not look at her daughter as she slipped from shadow to shadow. The new

mother limped past homes with blinking windows and grimacing balconies and rusted doors that groaned in their frames. Fanwa Road was witness to her transgression, and made its objection known.

Hefei Social Welfare Institute gleamed like the gates to heaven. Li shook the bars of the front gate until her fingers were numb. Locked. She bent down and positioned her daughter in a small crevice of the wall, so that her face was shielded from the storm. Zeng Ya's eyes fluttered, tears frozen on a face that was too pale and pink.

Voices rose in the distance, and Li pulled her hood over her head, brushing her snow-riddled hair from her face. Her puffing breath formed clouds in the frigid air. Zeng Ya yawned and stretched in her blanket bundle, which Li had wrapped tighter than a silkworm's cocoon.

Li couldn't think of what to say that wasn't a lie or an empty promise and an apology that only the wind would witness. Numbness spread to Li's toes and fingers and cheeks, but the worst of the cold was inside, a winter that froze her heart.

"Good luck," choked Li. She touched her daughter's cheek with one mitten-clad hand. "Zhou Zeng Ya."

Li turned around. Each step was like plunging into heavy snow. Every instinct pulled Li back to the little bundle, but she pressed on. Her breath came out in gasps and her hands curled into fists, nails sinking into the skin of her palms.

Yes, birth was easier than this.

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Fanwa Road slept on as Officer Wang made his rounds.

The day shifts were long, and the night shifts were longer still. Officer Wang swept his flashlight around the darkened alley, a blaze of orange in the deepening blues of the village. He shrugged against the pouring rain, anticipating the cup of tea that would warm his hand when morning came. His skin grew paler and his hair turned grayer with each late night shift. He reminded himself to have a word with his boss about next week's schedule; he had a few decades to go before he was ready to look like an old man.

A soft cry broke the monotony of street traffic. The beam of Officer Wang's flashlight lurched down to illuminate a bundle of mud-splattered blankets near the gate. It was a sleeping baby, no doubt his careless footsteps and incessant muttering had woken her up.

Officer Wang studied the baby girl, for he knew in an instant that it was a girl. Abandoned daughters were as common in these streets as empty bottles and alley cats. The only thing unusual about this baby was the letter tucked within the folds of the blanket.

Officer Wang lifted her. He headed back to the station, grateful for an excuse to satisfy his boss and perhaps leave a few hours early. At the Shushan Police Station down the road, Officer Ming was brewing a cup of coffee.

“Another baby?” he grumbled. “It seems you’re always the one finding them.”

“It would seem so.” Officer Wang held up the note. “But I found her with this.”

“It’s probably forged by the institution, all those notes are.” Officer Ming shook his head. “You ought to take her back where you found her. The Welfare Institute will take her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Officer Wang plodded back the way he’d come, he unfolded the letter in the baby’s blankets. He struggled to read the messy scrawl within, and paused to stand beneath a lamplight.

I’m extremely grateful for you taking in my baby. Due to the harsh reality of the circumstances, my baby can’t grow up with me, by my side. I am sure you all will love her dearly and educate her well. My daughter’s name is Zhou Zeng Ya. She was born on January 4, 2002. Please, I request that you remember her birthday. This is my greatest wish. Please, please treat this little orphan well. As a result of mistakes caused by my ignorance, I will never ever forgive myself. My daughter is a healthy baby. I believe that with the support of you good-hearted people, she will become a successful child.

January 6, 2002

Officer Wang folded the note. Streaks of dawn painted the rain-thick clouds. He searched the lightening shadows of Fanwa Road, from the blinking windows to the grimacing balconies to the grumbling doors.

There was no mother in sight.