

FICTION OCTOBER 1, 2018 ISSUE

WHEN WE WERE HAPPY WE HAD OTHER NAMES

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Audio: Yiyun Li reads.

he funeral director would be right with them, a woman's voice said through the intercom when they rang the bell. After standing on the porch for a minute and then another minute, Jiayu and Chris sat down on two wicker chairs, a small round table with a potted yellow chrysanthemum between them. It was a cloudless day, the sky intensely blue. A pair of squirrels were chasing each other on the lawn, and some unseen birds in the trees, which had yet to change colors, made loud noises, a game of hue and cry in the quiet neighborhood. Perhaps the real setting of every Shakespeare play, Jiayu thought, is a wall-less waiting room like this: life as an antechamber to death.

That thought, four months later, struck Jiayu as unnecessarily theatrical. Who was she to talk about Shakespeare, when the last time she had read him was in college, in Beijing, for an English degree she had made little use of? Now, when Jiayu thought about the sun-soaked days immediately after Evan's death, she realized that the woman whose voice she and Chris had heard through the intercom on that first and subsequent visits had never appeared in person. There was no front desk at the funeral home. Every time the door had opened, it was the funeral director's handshake they'd encountered. The first time Jiayu had phoned, the soft-spoken man had said, "Oh, God," after he had asked for Evan's date of birth and received the answer.

But the voice on the intercom belonged to someone, a receptionist who did not need a nametag. And she'd be spared meeting with all those clients, day in and day out, who never would have set foot in the house were it not for death's mandate. Jiayu had never previously given a moment of thought to the

receptionist in any other office. Yet this unmet woman, having remained faceless, refused to be reduced to a generic receptionist. The dead, too, should never become generally and generically dead, but that, Jiayu had realized as she read a recent article on the alarming statistics of teen-age suicides, was a futile protest.

eath brought a new routine. There were grief support groups to join, letters from relatives and friends to attend to, pleading phone calls to make to Naomi, **D**who was a college sophomore in Wisconsin and who, after the funeral, had begun to limit her parents' access to her life. This new, flimsy routine reminded Jiayu of her first transistor radio, a birthday present from her grandfather when she turned five. It was a luxury for a five-year-old. Frustrating, too, since it was not easy for her fingers to maneuver the dial to find the one station with a half-hour afternoon preschool program. And, when she did succeed, the dial stayed at the right frequency for no more than a few minutes before it began to shift, and the songs about the thieving foxes and partying bears would drift into static.

How did that girl with the radio in her lap become this woman, in the middle of her life, with so many dials failing? Sometimes Jiayu parked her car in front of the garage door, unable to push the button to open it. Other times, she cleaned the house tirelessly, or chopped onions until they became a translucent puddle of tears on the cutting board. Why she balked at the garage door or ill-used the onions she did not ask, because the answer was a given. Any action, any feeling, erratic or not, fell under the all-encompassing umbrella called grief.

Grief? What is grief? One morning when Jiayu opened her eyes she said to the ceiling, Grief, I don't know who you are, so don't pretend you know who I am.

She and Chris went back to work right after the funeral. Jiayu administered cultural-exchange projects at the public university in a neighboring town. Chris managed the medical-engineering department at a local hospital. Both had struggled at first, Chris leaving work a few times, Jiayu hiding in the ladies' room

and weeping for two days in a row, but they carried on with a steadiness that appeared stoic to the world. Jiayu tidied up their garden and planted the autumn bulbs before the first frost. Chris winterized the irrigation system. Together they bought pumpkins from a roadside stand, four as usual. Both texted Naomi daily, knowing that behind the cold mask there was a heart as damaged as theirs. After some time, Naomi softened and agreed to come home for Thanksgiving.

In their own minds it was not stoicism that sustained them but defeatism. At the end of the workday, when one of them felt paralyzed—they fell into that state by turns—the other would insist that they drive to a park in a nearby town. There they were just a middle-aged couple taking a walk in the dusk. Dusk fell earlier day by day and then took a leap into darkness in early November.

But why? one of them would say, breaking the silence on their walk.

And why him?

I didn't see it coming, did you?

No, I thought it was adolescence.

I thought so, too. I imagined adolescence as a difficult exam everyone has to take.

Not everyone passes.

It's so hard to be a young person these days.

Harder than it was for us, isn't it?

A lot of researchers think so. I read about it in the newspapers.

But I don't understand. He talked about his swimming meet that morning. I thought he looked excited.

And the way he talked about his driver's license. I was going to take him to the D.M.V. first thing on his birthday. I was going to call the school and say he had a doctor's appointment.

Do you think something happened at school?

If none of his friends knew . . .

You'd think with so many friends . . .

And a happy childhood . . .

We did give him a happy childhood, didn't we?

He said so himself.

Naomi says so, too.

What went wrong, then?

We'll never know.

Not knowing is hard.

It's so hard.

The hardest, isn't it?

Fifty years ago, Jiayu and Chris might have caught side-glances in their Midwestern town. But now it was not a big deal for a man who'd grown up on a corn farm and a woman who'd grown up in a Beijing alleyway to marry and lead a family life not much different from their neighbors', even though Chris's mother had said several times at the wedding that to her it was a mind-boggling miracle. Their marriage—nineteen years this past summer—had had its share of stumbles, the kind that occurred in any marriage. Together Jiayu and Chris had striven to make a solid life, parenting Naomi and Evan with common sense and love. How had something this colossal found and trapped them, Jiayu thought, when they were so ordinary, so unambitious, so inconspicuous? The death of a child belonged to a different realm—that of a Greek tragedy or a mawkish movie. What was the probability of an ant's being struck by lightning? And for the ant to survive and toil on? With what wounds?

Jiayu started a spreadsheet on her computer. Family members, relatives, neighbors, acquaintances—she tried to list all those she had met who had died. She put in what she could remember, the birth and death year for each person and the cause of death, leaving question marks here and there, though she could have looked up an obituary to find the missing information. What she wanted was to test her own memory. If she could remember a story or two about each of the dead, they would not be reduced to the generally and generically dead.

Take, for instance, Mrs. Eileen Wilson, one of the oldest guests at Jiayu's wedding. A cousin of mine, Mrs. Wilson had told Jiayu at the reception, was a missionary in China.

When was that? Jiayu asked.

1891, Mrs. Wilson said.

My grandfather was born that year, Jiayu said.

What a coincidence! My cousin died that year. He was in Shandong Province for two months and got his head chopped off, Mrs. Wilson said, placing a hand on her own neck.

Oh, my goodness, Jiayu said. I'm so sorry.

The old woman laughed. Pah, you don't have to apologize. I never met him. I'll tell you who I would love to have met. My great-aunt Sallie. She stole five sheep from her neighbor. Back then you'd get hanged for that crime, but she was pardoned on account of being a woman.

Thinking about the deceased was nothing like travelling down memory lane. Memory lane, Jiayu said to herself, what an odd phrase. Only an organized mind could have come up with it. Remembering was not like walking along a tree-lined path with wooden posts marking the years. Memory was a haystack. Search for any one story and you'd get a hundred stories, none of them complete.

And the stories kept coming. They were distractions from thinking about Evan, even though distraction was unattainable, and thinking about Evan was the wrong way to put it. Thinking, like remembering, was an action of retrospect. But Evan was here all the time: in the new, elaborate recipes she tried on weekends, in the vases of flowers she placed around the house to combat bleakness, in the

hollow voice of the guided-meditations app that brought her little reprieve from heartache.

She left the spreadsheet open on her computer. Each name was more than just a story of a death. Take Sister Wen's husband, for instance. Sister Wen, the youngest daughter of the family who'd lived next to Jiayu's in Beijing, was fourteen years older than Jiayu. When Sister Wen started dating a police officer, every Sunday morning Jiayu would wait for him at the entrance of the alley. The moment he arrived on his motorcycle, she would run back. It didn't matter that Sister Wen was already standing in the yard, listening for the engine. Jiayu wanted to be the one to shout, He's here, he's here, he's here, as though she were a magpie, bringing the early good tidings of the marriage.

Fifty, liver cancer. When Jiayu typed this next to the man's name, she could not see him as an older man. Once, he and Sister Wen had taken Jiayu for a ride. Jiayu had climbed into the sidecar, clutching the metal bar in front of her and looking up at Sister Wen and her boyfriend: she in an apricot-colored dress, he in a white uniform. "When we were happy we had other names": Jiayu remembered reading the line as a student, though she could not recall the context now. A young couple in love and a child wanting nothing more than to witness that love story—what were they all now? A dead man, a widow, and a mother who had lost a child.

But Jiayu was not the first parent to lose a child. Of this she constantly reminded herself. There was her cousin Min, whose baby had died of leukemia before she turned two. The baby had faded from Jiayu's memory, though she knew that if she opened an old album she would find a picture of her. After she died, many relatives had shed tears, but how many of them could tell a story about that little girl now? Min had another child later, a healthy boy. An aunt who treasured sons more than daughters had said to Jiayu's mother once that the whole thing could be seen in a positive light, since the baby's death had made room for the little

brother. Sometimes a daughter is just bad news, the aunt had said, and the one-child policy certainly doesn't help.

And there was Yingying, Jiayu's playmate before the pair had moved to different elementary schools. Their mothers taught together at the Beijing No. 2 School for the Deaf and the Mute, and the girls would play together in the schoolyard in the afternoon as they waited for their mothers to get off from work. A year younger than Jiayu, Yingying was a timid girl, and Jiayu liked to tease her with a caterpillar hidden in a matchbox or a beetle let loose on the back of her hand. Yingying would cry, and Jiayu would comfort her, and then they would reconcile, all the while pretending that they did not notice the students around them, most of whom were boarders supported by the government. They were much older, some in their late teens, ready to leave school after an apprenticeship.

Jiayu wondered now if they had both been performing a little, she seeking any excuse to make Yingying cry, and Yingying welcoming every opportunity to make loud noises that would differentiate the two of them from the students. Some of them stood in a half circle around Jiayu and Yingying, staring unsmilingly at the two girls and then gesturing among themselves. It thrilled Jiayu to know that they were talking about her and her friend. There was no other way for her and Yingying to enter that silent world than by being at the center of the half circle, speaking to each other without having to move a finger.

A year ago, Jiayu's mother had called to report the death of Yingying. Ovarian cancer, forty-three, her daughter just starting middle school. Jiayu could not see her childhood playmate as a woman in a coffin, a mother's lost child, a child's lost mother. But what difference did seeing make? Perhaps grief was nothing but disbelief.

The first snow fell and melted. And the second snow. After that, there was no reason to keep counting. The neighbors put up Christmas lights, blue and white icicles under the eaves, orange and red bulbs outlining the evergreens, a

deer pulling a sleigh in one front yard, wide-winged angels trumpeting in another. The world was not new and offered little evidence that it would ever be new again. Perhaps grief was the recognition of having run out of illusions.

Would decorating the house make us too sad? Jiayu asked one evening as they parked in front of their unlit house.

Would we be sadder if we didn't?

What do you think Evan would've wanted us to do?

I don't know. I can talk myself into either option.

Same here.

What about the Christmas tree? What about the four stockings Jiayu had embroidered with their names? What about going to Mrs. Erickson's house on Christmas Eve? Mrs. Erickson's granddaughter and Evan had been born a day apart, and had, for different reasons, stayed in the NICU in adjacent rooms. After that, Mrs. Erickson had turned Evan into another grandchild of hers, and for fifteen Christmases they had joined Mrs. Erickson and her extended family, feasting on baked ham, scalloped potatoes, and krumkake. Afterward they sang Christmas carols, accompanied by Mrs. Erickson on an old upright piano, which was tuned once a year for the occasion.

Every question asked led to a dead end. Jiayu figured that one of these days she and Chris would look at each other and, without hesitation, drive to the lot to pick out a tree. Chris would put up the lights and Jiayu would arrange the stockings, including Evan's, on the mantel. When the invitation came from Mrs. Erickson, they would ask if they could bring pot stickers, their usual contribution. They would do everything as they had always done it. "Always" was an untrustworthy word. Still, what could one do but abide by the rule of "always"? In a fallible life, it was a path no better or worse than any other.

The spreadsheet stopped growing. The ache remained unmitigated. A person's knowledge of death could be exhaustible, yet it did nothing to exhaust the pain of losing a child. If Jiayu were to start a spreadsheet of people who were alive and healthy and happy, perhaps she would end up with a much longer list, but if many deaths could not produce an effective antidote to one death, what difference would many lives make?

It occurred to Jiayu that someday Evan might appear on another person's list. The thought neither consoled nor disturbed her. On the spreadsheet there was Hua, a

high-school classmate who had committed suicide the year before they graduated. There was the father of Jiayu's preschool friend, who had killed himself two years ago, one evening after he finished rehearsing with the retirees' choir. Jiayu had never once spoken to Hua in high school. Her friend's father wore dark-framed glasses, but that was all she could remember.

Still, she returned to the spreadsheet often, trying to recall one more moment, one more detail. Sometimes a new name occurred to Jiayu, amazing her, as though the dead were patiently waiting for her to recover them. An old woman known as Granny Brave, who had lived alone in the next alleyway, was said to have been a peasant partisan during the Second World War. After her death, this was confirmed by the newspapers, which also printed a picture of the Brave Girl—her nickname during the war—when she was a teen-ager, her hair chopped short, a carbine on her shoulder, and two unsheathed daggers haphazardly tucked into her belt. In third grade, Jiayu and her best friend had schemed to win a yearlong contest that consisted of doing good deeds, and they decided that they would visit Granny Brave every day, cleaning her house, running errands for her, preparing simple meals, and listening to her reminisce about her legendary war years. She waved them away the first two times they came, and when they persevered she chased them out with a broom. If they dared to show up again, she admonished, she would report them to the school as harassers of a veteran revolutionary. Oh, such humiliation, such injustice, Jiayu thought now, feeling, for the first time in a long while, the urge to laugh. She remembered that, the day after Granny Brave's threat, she and her friend had dug up ten earthworms and hurled them into the old woman's yard.

Oh, what fun to relive the years of the young and the undefeated.

Or to retrace the lives of the old and the accomplished. Of all the people on her list, Jiayu was most often drawn back to her grandfather. He had lived a long and happy life and had died at the age of a hundred and one. He had been a good husband to his wife, a loving father to his eight children, affectionate and fair to

all his grandchildren. He had not cried when Min's little girl died but had given each of his great-grandchildren born after that a silver longevity lock—a pendant with "A Hundred Years of Long Life" engraved on one side and "Wealthy, Lucky, Safe, and Peaceful" on the other—to secure their fragile existence.

In his old age, after the death of his wife, he had spent part of his time living with each of his children and part travelling alone, sometimes stopping by the homes of those grandchildren who had established families of their own. Because Jiayu's mother was the youngest of the siblings, her family often received her grandfather in August. Never did the visit extend beyond a few weeks. He did not allow himself to become a nuisance to anyone.

Her grandfather's life alone would make a good memory lane, Jiayu thought. His stay had usually overlapped with her summer holiday, and she had been his companion on his morning jogs, evening strolls, and many outings to the palaces and the parks of Beijing.

She could, while sitting in front of the computer, walk down memory lane in the Summer Palace or the Forbidden City, as long as she followed the never-changing routes: from a round pavilion to an octagonal pavilion, from an arched stone bridge to an arched wooden bridge, from a koi pond with lily pads to a koi pond without lily pads. On the hottest days, they had remained at home, sitting in the shade of the scholar tree in the yard, her grandfather pouring tea for himself from a tin pot kept cool in a basin of water, Jiayu hunting for inchworms among the low-hanging branches. The transistor radio he had given her they kept at low volume, but when they tired of readjusting the dial they left it to broadcast static. Sometimes her grandfather dozed off. Only then would Jiayu pick out one of the coins he'd given her and go buy an ice pop.

Every summer before her grandfather's arrival, her mother would talk to herself as she readied his room. Each visit is one visit fewer in this life, she said. At his age, you never know if there will be a next time. After years of teaching at the school

for the deaf and the mute, she had developed a habit of speaking her thoughts aloud, forgetting that the world could hear what she said.

Jiayu heard everything. A more sensitive child might have worried herself sleepless or watched her grandfather's every movement with anxiety. But nothing about him had indicated ill health. After a day or two, it was hard not to believe that he was going to live forever.

All things had seemed in order under that scholar tree. Jiayu was an ordinary child, easily contented; her grandfather, a man with a well-lived life. Life was supposed to be like that, each generation reaching a gracious end when it was their turn. Yet this order, disturbed by Evan's death, made Jiayu uneasy. If she had taken it for granted that Evan would lead a long and happy life, like her grandfather, could she not have made similar mistakes in blindly taking everything for granted?

Then two more deaths showed up for her list one day, a mother and a daughter, neither name known to her. This so startled Jiayu that she thought her heart, already brittle, could no longer remain a steady organ inside her. For days afterward, she lived in a trance, fearing the inaccuracies of memory, excavating the archeology of her childhood, the fragments like small pieces of bone, delicate and dusty.

It was on one of their evening walks that Jiayu and her grandfather had met the woman and her two daughters, the older one Jiayu's age, the younger one still in a bamboo stroller. That there had been two girls Jiayu was certain. And that there had been a bamboo stroller. She and the other girl took turns pushing it around while Jiayu's grandfather and the girls' mother sat on a bench nearby. Jiayu had turned five earlier that spring, and she carried the transistor radio with her everywhere. The girl who was to be her playmate for a few weeks asked to see the radio, and Jiayu showed her the on-and-off switch, the dials for changing the

frequency and the volume, and the collapsible antenna, which they pulled out and pretended was a fishing pole. The girl in the stroller, who, in their play, was the fish to be caught, held her hands up and cried, but they kept the end of the antenna just out of her reach. All these things Jiayu remembered now. The pot-lid haircuts of both sisters she could see. And her own favorite dress, a yellow sleeveless smock with sunflowers embroidered around the hem.

Then the younger girl disappeared, along with the stroller. It happened that same summer, but Jiayu could not remember exactly when. One day, she and the older sister climbed up onto a rock next to a man-made lake, where the girl said that her sister had died but didn't say how. Without the little sister to be the fish, Jiayu and the girl did not have a game to play that day. They stayed on the rock listening to the radio, Jiayu remembered, taking care not to drop the radio from that height, and watching the girl's mother and Jiayu's grandfather on the bench. Was the woman telling him the news with tears, or with dry eyes? Was he, despite maintaining the proper distance between an older man and a young mother, imagining her hands in his?

And soon came the storm in the house. It was the only time Jiayu had seen her mother lose her temper with her grandfather. Impossible, she had called him. Crazy, she had called the woman. What would people think, she had yelled, a man of his age and a woman young enough to be his granddaughter?

It could not have been only financial support that he had wanted to give the woman, Jiayu thought now, as he could have given her money without letting anyone know. Was it a marriage, or a less conventional arrangement, he was proposing? Had he envisioned altering his widower's life out of pity for a widow and mother who had lost too much, or out of affection for a woman who had brightened a summer as his life approached its curtain call, or, perhaps, out of a loneliness that his many children and grandchildren could not entirely alleviate? Jiayu did not dare to answer any of these questions. An answer was unnecessary when a question asked was enough to give the past another name.

The summer after that had been eventless, as were those that followed. As always, Jiayu and her grandfather walked the city, but they did not run into the woman and her remaining daughter again. A few years later, the girl transferred to Jiayu's school. Jiayu recognized her right away, but the girl didn't seem to remember Jiayu. The story was that the girl's mother had died, and the girl now lived with an uncle and an aunt, the latter a distant cousin of her mother's. The couple had given her a new name, which Jiayu now remembered—memory could be tightfisted with the past and then, without warning, open the floodgate. Shuchang, the girl was called, a name with two characters, meaning "happy and carefree." The couple who had adopted the girl must have had some hope for her. Jiayu realized that she had not known and would never know the girl's old name, when she had been her mother's daughter.

Jiayu's grandfather had died when she was in college. Only then did she learn that he had had a wife before her grandmother. That wife had killed herself when their only son died, as an infant, of diphtheria. This knowledge, learned too late, had been boxed up by Jiayu as distant—ancient—history, and she had not imagined that family of three until now. If life was an antechamber to death, death was an antechamber, too—to other lives. She thought about the rock by the man-made lake, from which she and the girl had watched the man and the woman on the bench. It had taken her child's death for Jiayu to mourn her grandfather again, this time as the young man who had buried his wife and child. She would not say it was late, though. True grief, beginning with disbelief and often ending elsewhere, was never too late. ♦

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Yiyun Li won a 2020 Windham Campbell Prize. Her latest book is "Tolstoy Together: 85 Days of War and Peace with Yiyun Li."

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