DisOriented:
A Brief Autobiography of a Transracial Adoptee

by

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Acknowledgments and Great Thanks

In truth, I could try and write a thousand different autobiographies about my life. I could write a million words about my odd existence as a transracial and transnational adoptee. But none would be accurate or effective without clearly stating that I am wholly indebted perpetually so to the people that raised me and more so raised me right. With that said, I have to thank my entire family for supporting me through my short existence on this earth.

I thank my mom first and foremost for coming to get me and granting me an exciting life that has been full of wonder, woe, growth, and opportunities galore. You’re an inspiration in a multitude of ways, with your ferocious drive, unbreakable spirit, and huge heart. I will never be able to thank you enough for the second chance at life you gave me so many years ago. I want to thank my two baby sisters, Jackie and Ping, for popping my bubble as a wholly self-centered only child. You two have grounded me and taught me how to care for others in a way that would be otherwise impossible, and so your roles in my life have been nothing short of remarkably life changing – all for the better, of course. To Uncle Mike and Jack, thank you both for always pushing me down the creative path. You both guided me towards my true passions and veered me away from a life and career path that ultimately lacked fulfillment. Nanny, you always fed me to my heart’s content with the warmth and goodness that you held so dearly on to. You refined my beauty and fashion senses with your grace and elegance, and with your biting force. You’re a true role model, and I’m sorry that you could not see this final project firsthand. And now I want to clearly state that I always strive to be the type of girl that you, Poppy, would be proud of: adventurous, daring, and above all kind. I still am rough around the edges, but so
much of me was sanded down and shaped by you – I’m a better version of myself and that’s thanks to your attention and wisdom. Thank you so much for being there for me, through the worst times and the undeniable best times. You went to all of my soccer and field hockey games, you helped me with my homework, you raised me when mom was otherwise busy, and you’ve been a constant in my life that’s watched me grow up. You’re the dad I never technically had but always wanted and so much more.

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A Brief Introduction

I’ve always known that I was adopted. There was never a time in my memory that I ever knew anything else. It was the simplest fact about me: I am from China and my mom is from America. She flew out to get me and that was that.

Transracial adoption is, I would say, not the most popular form of creating a family. Many people, parents and prospective adoptive families, that is, can’t always follow through or endure the bombardment of questions and interrogations, like, “Who is this child? Where’s it from? How are you all related?” to list a few.

Transracial adoption, for the adoptee, such as myself, is a whole different ballgame – dodging the endless onslaught of questions and scrutiny from the outside world that cannot place you, the adoptee, with these adults, the adoptive parents of a different racial makeup. And the need to balance those questions with your own theoretical knowledge that you belong with these people you call parents, because that’s your normal, that’s your every day, and that’s all you’ve ever really known.

Growing up, I was the cute but undoubtedly foreign Chinese barnacle snugly latched onto my mother’s hip and thigh. No matter how tightly I held onto her, though, there were still external forces that attempted and sometimes successfully tore us apart – not physically, but rather through their aggressive disbelief that I could really be related to my new family. Their questions, while innocent enough, when stacked and compiled together by the dozens, would eventually outweigh and overcome my connection to my mom, and we’d be severed and separated as not quite related, not quite right for one another.

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To begin, I am one of thousands of transracial adoptees. In 1997 alone, the year I was adopted, there were 13,620 Chinese babies adopted internationally and brought into the supposed and assumed safety of Western homes. Looking back, I keep thinking how crazy it was that I was just one of these 13,620 infants who was taken from my homeland and brought and raised within the borders of a completely different world, with new languages, cultures, and, of course, an entirely new family (Grice).

There is both an intersection and a bisection of the transracial adoptee’s dual identities. On the one hand, I was raised happily content within an upper class white American family. On the other, much more upsetting, hand, I found myself stranded in the solitude of not physically matching my surroundings; I’m not perceived as white enough to pass as one of my family or Asian enough to identify with my Chinese roots. I say that there’s an intersection, simply because my world collided with my new family’s, and, as I was raised by them, I never knew anything else – their truth was my truth, and their life lessons reshaped me. My adoptive family’s culture, language, and perspectives were my bread and butter, and I was quickly enveloped if not wholly influenced by their ideologies, beliefs, morals, and cushy lifestyle. I adopted their culture just as they had once adopted me. However, I am certain that there is and will always remain an undeniable bisection that separates me from this new family of mine. After all, my origins lay severed and dried up in China. My mannerisms and idiosyncrasies now fully connect me to the American landscape and to my household of white faces that have tenderly loved and cared for me as their own. From the outside looking in, my family portrait is a picturesque home full of
benevolent and generous saviors who swooped in and rescued me from the throes of abandonment and subsequent pains of orphanhood.

In fact, my family rundown is a bit more, in a word, unconventional. It is, in another word, innovative. Deeper into my autobiography, you will meet my family more intimately. But for now, I will briefly introduce my motley crew to you. I was raised by a single mom, two greying grandparents, and two learned yet crazy uncles, and I later welcomed two fellow adopted baby sisters into our clan. I've lived my whole post-adoption life in Ann Arbor, Michigan alongside this tethered-together family. I broke away on my own to attend college in Connecticut. Wesleyan University, therefore, is the single shred of Earth that is my own – unshared by my family.

Yes, certainly, my life in America is better than my fate growing up in a Chinese orphanage. From the glossy brochures of adoption agencies, with the beaming and beautiful Chinese baby surrounded by her glowing and grinning new parents, to modern television shows, such as Modern Family and Sex and the City, whose transracially adopted Asian children are seamlessly welcomed into their white families, I grew up engrossed in this fantasy, this myth, of the undeterred adoptee. But, here, in my autobiography, I want to undo the simplicity of a wholly positive institution when it comes to transracial adoption, the process, and the experience of growing up as an individual with two incoherent halves, or someone with seemingly incompatible “white” and “Asian” qualities.

And ultimately, I have a dual and dueling identity. My upbringing in a white family, and not one of my own racial or ethnic makeup, has determined my mannerisms and preferences in irreversible ways, yet I personally fight hard to
maintain a relationship to Chinese cultural practice: I constantly crave hamburgers and Starbucks, but I always secretly long for the lush taste of fluffy steaming rice and juicy dumplings – and I genuinely do not know if that longing is my natural genetic taste buds yearning for the food of my ancestors, or if it’s my own cheap way of trying to reconnect with my Asian “roots.” Regardless, though, I am usually left unsatisfied with my American appetite. I have always preferred chopsticks to silverware. I prefer noodles to pasta. I prefer rice to bread. But, at the end of the day, I live in America. And in America, burgers and fries are far more accessible than soup dumplings or Peking duck. Convenience, for me, oftentimes trumped preference; by surrendering to the convenience of American consumption, I found myself steered toward an American lifestyle, which, effectively, deterred me from elements that link to Chinese history.

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Jennifer Ho, in *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, argues that for many transracial adoptees hailing from East Asian countries, the blogosphere is one of the main modes of communicating, voicing, and sharing their life narratives to hoards of curious netizens and fellow adoptees looking for familiarity (Ho). Transracial adoptees are, like other Asian Americans, an ethnically heterogeneous group whose members are typically perceived as foreign, but they are distinguished from other Asian Americans due to the kind of social advantage that comes from their adoption into white households, resulting in, as Ho calls it, their “racially ambiguity.” In this way, the transracial adoptees’ blogs articulate a different form of ambiguity than the overarching hybridity of Asia America. Instead, the transracial adoptees’ ambiguity is one marked by racial marginalization combined with socioeconomic privileges that
extend above and beyond those of the vast majority of other minority groups in America, including the greater Asian American community.

By galvanizing in the blogosphere, the transracial adoptee community is successfully able to connect with the widespread adoptee population throughout America and the greater world and reorient themselves as distinct individuals with stories to tell. However, these blogospheres are limited in that they typically focus on immediate, current experiences that are not thickly contextualized or nuanced in their long-term ideas. By introducing and incorporating scholarship, my thesis offers the historical and political context that can expand on the shortcomings of personal blogs, which are generative cyber chat spaces for discussion but often do not address important questions such as: What happens to the transracial adoptee, so many years down the road, after adoption? How are we, the adoptees, expected to uphold the façade of the claimed happy ending we were granted from adoption, when for much of our lives we live moored to racial ambiguity? How can we effectively critique the transracial adoption industry for its complicity in crafting adoptees’ identities as subjects needing rescue, as damsels in distress, as salvageable goods to be sold and distributed to the West?

In Chapter 1, “Fragile Love,” I introduce myself in the context of my origins rooted in abandonment due to China’s One-Child Policy. I proceed to interrogate the over-simplified narrative of transracial adoption as an industry, which typically narrates itself as a wholly positive institution. In particular, I draw attention to the dynamic between savior (the adoptive parents) and desperate subject (the orphan) and how, through this rescue narrative or savior-complex, the child in turn becomes more than a baby; rather, she becomes a subject of salvation that confirms the West’s fear
of the cruel and uncivilized East and reiterates the West’s need to intervene through its abundance of generosity and benevolence. Furthermore, I explore the odd shift that occurs during the adoption process and beyond: the baby undergoes the transition from, originally, an abandoned orphan to a sought after commodity that is purchased across borders and brought to be raised within a typically high tax bracket by her new benefactors, her adoptive parents. This is how, I assert, the adoptee is both a liberated subject but simultaneously and contradictorily shackled to her high price tag. She is, thereby, indebted to her new family that paid for her freedom and “rescued” her from the presumed torment and neglect of a Chinese orphanage system.

In Chapter Two, “China Doll Turned American Girl Doll,” I demonstrate that my transition from a Chinese orphan to an adoptee in America lasted far beyond my move into my new home in 1997. Adoption narratives, as perpetuated in countless newspaper articles and in the British documentary, The Dying Rooms, which exposed the allegedly heartless Chinese orphanage system to the world, would claim that I was brought into a safe haven to live blissfully among my white family, my crusaders and saviors. However, I show that I had to negotiate my duality and carve out my own niche in this world that demands coherence instead of nuance, does not trust those with an ambiguous racial identity, such as myself, a woman of color with a noticeably white family: ultimately, my racial ambiguity casts me as deceitful, as a phony who falsely claims identification with her white kin. Therefore, my ambiguous racial and social position in America attracts interrogation, scrutiny, and harsh critique, and I am alone on that front. For I cannot come home to a family that understands these microaggressions or hateful words against me, because my family
members are never the targets of these racist comments. And, while I am oftentimes racially and socially ostracized due to my adoption, I have been integrated into one of the highest economic levels of U.S. society, and thus have been granted access to the elite institution, Wesleyan University, where I have been educated, groomed, and prepared to write down this autobiography and debunk the overly simplistic happily ever after of transracial adoption, which I still wait to receive.

In Chapter Three, “Made in China,” I explore the very place where my new life started, the streets of Gaoyou. As an adoptee, and a writer on the topic of transracial adoption, this was an important journey to make. Here, I am able to witness the inside to my supposedly tragic beginnings. Despite common discourse, as proliferated throughout international media, regarding the barbarianism of the Chinese government and its orphanage systems, I felt a special kind of kinship to the unknown nannies and workers in my orphanage, because they were the people who looked after me for the first dozen months of my life. While I initially sought closure with a country that abandoned me, I unwittingly found validation and received a warmhearted homecoming when the director of my orphanage confirmed to me, “You are Chinese” and “you are always welcome here. It is your home.” Growing up surrounded by a sea of white faces, I never believed that I could rightfully and justifiably call myself Chinese. But here, two decades later on the same streets where I was left and abandoned, I finally received a connection to my birthplace.

Finally, in Chapter Four, “Return to My Mother’s Land,” I relay the adoption stories of my two sisters, Jackie and Ping, through my childhood memories. I come full circle and realize that, while I once viewed adoption as the very institution that disconnected me from my homeland, it later acted as a unifier by bringing my sisters
from China to me in America, where we could commiserate, revel in, and understand our hardships as transracial adoptees together. The drudgeries of my post-adoption experience outlined in the prior chapters ended up being valuable lessons that were preparing me to teach my sisters how to handle the very same situation, to take on the very same institution. Through adoption, I was given two sisters that, in my eyes, are more related to me than any biological siblings or birthparents I may have lost somewhere in this world could be. Jackie, Ping, and I share an unbreakable bond, which is the kinship and likeness that is solidified through our origins that lay in abandonment and adoption in China followed by family integration in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

In my final section, “An Afterward or Two,” I extend and raise the question: What happens now? In the first section of my afterward, I summarize the evolution and shift in ideologies regarding the role and identities of transracial adoptees, starting with the initial savior-complex from the 1990s, in which the adoptee is diminished to the role of pitiful subject needing rescue from an inhumane society, to our modern day 2018 moment in which multiculturalism is much more supported. In this way, I demonstrate the irony in the fact that I have only been able to reconnect and re-forge a relationship to my homeland through the sole patronage and financial support of my white mother’s wallet. The very capital and monetary power that supposedly rescued me from a widely believed transgressive Far East is now in support of me venturing back, to rediscover and learn to appreciate my lost heritage and homeland. In the second part of my afterward, I shift focus and give deeper insight into a man, my Poppy, who has been an indispensible force who has, bit by bit, shaped me into a better person with each day and year I grew up learning from him. It would be,
simply, an injustice not to commemorate his spirit and unparalleled wisdom in the final few pages of my autobiography and the final few moments of his life. And for everything you’ve done for me, Poppy, I dedicate my first written life story to you.

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This autobiography is my first attempt at unpacking a deeply complicated history that personally only spans twenty-two some years but dates back ostensibly to the Cold War with the first eruption of transracial Asian adoption (Choy). And, as I’ve found along my writing process, my adoption story fully aligns with Judith Butler’s argument in “Giving an Account of Oneself”: my identity is, without a doubt, connected to histories far past my own memory and recollection (Butler 22-40). I am connected to the lives of Asian Americans, before and after me, by our shared experience of nativist racism, the subsequent racial stereotypes that foment around us in America, and, as Ho argues, our hybrid identities; I am connected to the One-Child Policy that made so many families, such as my own biological one, feel the desperation and necessity of bearing a son, a male heir, who could carry on their family responsibilities in rural China. I am connected to my mother’s choice to come get me and all of the complications revolving around the process and journey towards her motherhood. I am connected far beyond my own life’s scope; my existence today was only made possible due to these intersecting and colliding factors that were wholly out of my hands.

Here is a brief history of how I was once disoriented and disillusioned with so much of my life – being anchored to unshakable indebtedness to my mother, internalizing racism, lacking a mentor who could guide me through racial ambiguity, and battling the discomfort and subsequent feelings of exile that are married to the
institution of transracial adoption – and how I eventually surmounted the seemingly insurmountable, which ultimately forced me to find my own solace and refuge nestled deeply beneath my constellation of freckles and honey hue.
Chapter 1

Fragile Love

“The thing is not to write what no one else has written but to write what only you could have written.” I found this fragment in my old notebooks. The person who wrote that couldn’t have known what would happen: how a voice hollows how words you once loved can wither on a page.”

~ Nam Le, The Boat

The only documentation of my birth, or hint of my origins, was a note that was allegedly pinned to my blanket that swaddled me as I whimpered and wailed for attention to combat the abandonment. This note proclaimed my birthdate as April 30 in 1996. My alleged birthday was a random Tuesday, and that is the only shred of documentation I ever had – not have, because I was never actually given this mystical relic of my past. It ought to be noted that this letter could in fact be a lie, a fallacy, a made-up story glamorized and proliferated throughout the Chinese orphanage system to ease the restless minds of new mommies and daddies who arrive bearing money and new homes for their adopted babies. My mother was never shown this note, and I never found it while sifting through the piles of government files my mom was given upon my adoption. I am not one to criticize or condone the orphanage for, perhaps, intervening by crafting a fake note into existence, but I’ve come to conclude, and sort of accept, that I am the product of a mystery that most likely will not be solved. Just as well.

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My name was originally Jiao Jiao, 娇娇, which means something along the lines of fragile and lovable. This name seems contradictory; it seems at war with itself.
How could someone, anyone, be fragile, breakable, and insecure, but also enchanting and charming enough to capture another’s love? Seems ludicrous to me. This person must be utter magic.

I was given the name Jiao Jiao in the orphanage by my nannies. It came as no shock to me that this wasn’t my intended name left to me by my mysterious biological parents. For how could two people ultimately abandon something they saw as fragile and lovable? How could someone leave a tender and whimpering newborn on the steps of a gated orphanage with no promise of her survival? They wouldn’t, and thus to my parents I was safest with no name. When I was found outside of the orphanage gates, hours later I presume, I was a total blank slate with no ties, no loyalties, and no knowledge of anyone or anything. All I had to be was simply something fragile and lovable.

Surprisingly enough, though, I somehow get the name Jiao Jiao and this name has come to adopt me, pardon the horrible joke; this name presupposed a destiny of conflict. My name states that I am weak and tender (eye roll), but I am also capable of being the subject of another’s love. I have always wondered: Have I been loved because of my fragility? Or am I fragile, because I have been loved? Does my own innate vulnerability bearing the trauma of my abandonment and now living within a family that does not racially match my own make me a subject to be overly loved and cared for – to overcompensate for the disparate identities? Or does love make a person weaker, more susceptible to codependency?

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It’s strange, now that I think about it, how fiercely accurate my original name was; how it had me pegged the moment I was abandoned. Perhaps it’s because I am
trying to hold madly on to some scrap of my origins, but I can and do identify with this dual and dueling name: I am both exceedingly fragile, alas, and, I suppose, some would call me lovable. Regardless, my original name didn’t stick for long. The moment I was adopted my Chinese name was clipped off, and I was swiftly tagged with a new name, a Western name, a pronounceable name, a familial name.

My name is now legally Jane, which means God’s grace. I was not only baptized into the Catholic Church, but apparently my new name wholly projects my undying devotion to this new God I would only later come to believe in. My Chinese name soon became my middle name, and thus all of my legal documents proclaim: Jane Jiao Jiao Mortell.

The name Jane comes from my mother’s sentimental love for her late elder sister, Jane Senior. I never met her. She died of a massive heart attack in her early fifties inflicted onto her due to her life-long battle with Type I Diabetes, and I was not even made into existence by that point in 1993. My American name, therefore, makes me the sole inheritor or the replacement for my late aunt in my family, and thus I am overwhelmingly brought into this family full force through their act of calling me after one of their own, one whom they lost and regained through my adoption.

There is, but of course, a funny story about how I ended up getting my American name – my mother originally fully anticipated naming me Maya, actually. This was such a solidified plan that my grandma, Nanny, had purchased a special miniature garden chair and had the name Maya elegantly painted on it. The first gift bestowed onto me proclaimed a false moniker and was intended for a completely different girl with a name that sounds calming, relaxing, and reminiscent of a massage. But then my mother’s ingrained Catholic guilt kicked in, and she soon
realized that her duty to her family was to keep the memory of Jane alive. And thus, Maya was never even my name.

But all is well, because I like to think I was destined not to don a mask made of Maya. The soothing name just does not, in the slightest, represent me well. I am not quiet or contained, like any Maya I can imagine meeting. I am exceptionally loud, every shade of absurd, tragically sarcastic, and, quite frankly, a riot waiting to explode. I guess that is my embellished way of stating that I have no real connection to my Maya alter ego.

And while I do have two solid names to go by, Jiao Jiao or Jane, I actually choose to go by Janie. The name itself is something unique; it’s something less common. It’s my own creation built off of an antiquated family hand-me-down. It’s repurposed and refurbished. It’s just close enough to my family, but, again, it’s something separate and distinct – much like myself. It’s jolting, it’s electrifying, it’s jumpy, it’s comfy, and it’s me. I am Janie Mortell.

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They were called the “Dying Rooms,” and they were the sole reason I was adopted. The unlucky baby girls that were abandoned were oftentimes sentenced to a premature death; they would be placed in dank, dark, and scarcely visited rooms to, ultimately, die neglected, forgotten, and unloved. My mom had come across a particularly disturbing New York Times article back in 1996 (Patrick). The article was based on the documentary exposé called The Dying Rooms, which followed a series of British documentarians who snuck into orphanages throughout greater China on a mission to collect documented proof that Chinese orphanages violate basic human rights by creating and subsequently condoning its own domestic gender-cleansing.
The Dying Rooms documentary presented, most famously, the only remembrance of a starving and fatally ill baby girl, named Mei Ming, 沒名 (Blewett). The name she was given by the caretakers in the orphanage literally means No Name. The girl died the way she lived, miserably starving for attention and drowning in a mystery that no one was working to solve. This tragic end to the documentary and most importantly to the life of this baby girl shot through my mother’s heart and spurred her to action. It was the single force that drove her towards adoption instead of following the, say, more conventional way of making a family: marriage and procreating. Moreover, it illuminated a major problem with China’s One-Child Policy internationally to millions of people: it was quickly devolving into a One-Boy Policy.

And while the documentary certainly shed light on an irrefutable issue within the Chinese orphanage systems, it was still a Western infiltration into an Eastern culture that ultimately presented China as a wholly murderous and backwards society that does not care about its children. This documentary confirmed the West’s worst fears and stereotypes of the “Far East.” But I argue it is right to also interrogate works such as the British documentarians and their hidden agendas as well. This documentary was broadcasted, after all, internationally and, in effect, confirmed to so many Western viewers that the East, China in this case, was a barbaric and inhumane state, and thus only through the West’s benevolence and generosity could these baby girls survive. This phenomenon created and solidified the narrative tone of rescue and subsequent salvation that is very much tied to the institution of transracial adoption. Moreover, it helped to cement the overwhelmingly positive image of transracial
adoption: as the creation of a new family bond and kinship born of neglect and original sin: the abandonment of the baby girl. Therefore, the Western families that did embark on international and even transracial adoption fulfilled the prophecy and image of benefiting the lives of their newly adopted young, but also saving them from the terrible conditions of the Chinese orphanage system. And that’s where I come in as a girl who emblematizes the Fragile Love that needs rescuing; I am perceived as one of thousands of abandoned girls who desperately needed the care of the West to nurture me back to health; I was an abandoned girl who, if not adopted, may otherwise have prematurely died at the hands of her irresponsible country. To the West, I was the subject that could be salvaged, could be saved. But, throughout the chapters in this autobiography, I work arduously to undo this overly simple image of a wholly happy ending that is a guarantee to the lucky transracially adopted children.

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For context and clarity, the creation of the One-Child Policy was introduced by Communist forces in 1979 and was brought into stringent action and fruition on September 18, 1980 as a method of controlling the population, or in practice eliminating parts of it. The plan was initially called for in order to stymie the surging population that would eventually run China out of food, water, and other natural resources, but also as a means to lessen the burden of economic, social, and environmental stresses in China (Berenson).

However, the phenomenon of the One-Child Policy never anticipated the mass-abandonment, infanticide, and disposal of baby girls. The population policy was enforced through vicious government intervention, including but not limited to high-taxation on families that did not abide by the policy, forced abortions, subsequent
sterilization, and even infanticide. The need to rid the family of the burdensome weight of a baby girl resulted in a by and large abandonment of the female sex; and so the One-Child Policy came to reinforce the cultural favoring of males over females, thus creating a new phenomenon based on age-old gender biases. According to the literary scholar Helena Grice, “The story of Chinese adoption to U.S. parents is...a tale of gender woe, as almost all Chinese children adopted by overseas parents are abandoned little girls. Ninety percent of the children in China’s orphanages are female (the rest are mainly disabled children). This is not mere coincidence but the tragic consequence of China’s one-child policy...in combination with China’s traditional cultural preference for male offspring” (Grice 125).

However, within China’s borders, the policy that caused the flooded gates of the ill-equipped Chinese orphanage systems did not intentionally anticipate the mass abandonment of the nation’s daughters. It was far more complicated than a mere “tale of gender woe” and deeply rooted in the economies of differing populations. For example, the Chinese government policy “relaxed slightly in the mid-1980s, with the government allowing second children for some families in rural areas or offering exceptions for households in which both parents were themselves only children” (Berenson). And to unpack that fact even further, in rural areas of China, the need for a boy, a masculinity that could carry out the laborious farming required for the family’s survival, was so necessary that baby girls like me, born in the wrong regions of the country, were pretty much all but destined to be abandoned, thus freeing our biological creators to, one day, hopefully master the elusive art of making a perfect boy. I am not condoning the act of abandoning baby girls for the sole purpose of birthing the perfect prince, but knowing a bit more about the economic ties and
constraints of those burdened in the farmlands and rural regions, I can at least understand their distress of bearing me, a girl who might not have been able to physically take on all of the daily agricultural responsibilities of my family.

My very existence as a girl hailing from the countryside of China, I assume, became a crippling, debilitating disability for my biological parents who most certainly wanted, if not wholly needed, a boy, my brother, to help them make ends meet. To unburden themselves they had to, in the end, leave me behind and try again.

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To even conceive and carry a baby, women in China must properly fill out the *Shengyu Zheng* (生育证) if they wish to give birth, which governmental officials sign off on, either allowing (women who comply to the One-Child Policy) or prohibiting (women who already have a child or more than one child) birth. This document, when filled out correctly and in full, tells the government that a woman is pregnant and planning to give birth at a set date. According to countless documentations found in Grice’s work, without properly filling out this form, women are at a high risk of being “forced to submit to a termination (that have even occurred at full term) and subsequently to a sterilization or the enforced use of an IUD” (Grice 125). Women in China, therefore, were and still are entrapped by a system built off of total government surveillance stripping them of basic reproductive rights and, as noted above, they are constantly in danger of undergoing violence against their bodies and their babies.
Furthermore, it should absolutely be noted that while the One-Child Policy clearly limits parents to one child per household, unless the child has a severe disability or illness, the government also makes it illegal to abandon unwanted babies. I would argue that this law, making it illegal to leave the babies properly in the light of day in a humane and controlled orphanage system, makes the abandonments far riskier and dangerous to the baby: mothers or fathers cannot simply go to a Chinese orphanage and drop off the baby or fill out any documents proving their identities. Unlike in South Korea, where the orphanages have meticulous records of the biological parents and modes of contact to them, the Chinese government’s policy makes it so that the abandonment must be anonymous, and thus I have essentially no way of ever knowing or finding my biological creators.

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I discovered that women who deliberately evaded documenting their pregnancy or who defied the One-Child Policy without governmental permission faced other dehumanizing consequences. An ex-population official revealed some haunting testimony regarding the details of abducting pregnant women and forcing them to undergo a sterilization: The official noted: “[W]e go out at night…we take the woman away…she is sent…to get sterilized in the middle of the night by half-asleep nurses and doctors. The woman usually screams and kicks, and our men hold her down for anesthesia” (Grice 126) In this terrifying recollection, the ex-official exposes the system in which women are held against their will and are punished through means including the irreversible and highly dangerous act of sterilization. Moreover, this testimony illustrates the hostile environment in which these procedures take place, what with the “half-asleep nurses and doctors” who are performing these
life-altering abductions. These women, my own biological mother included, were constantly under scrutiny and potential attack for bearing children, (for bearing the weight of me, an unlucky girl.)

Then there are forced abortions. These episodes subject women to watch their own babies be forcibly removed from their bodies and, subsequently, killed. A Chinese gynecologist who worked in Beijing between 1983-1993 noted: “Women who are seven, eight, or nine months pregnant with their second or third baby are taken to the hospital by regional population control officials for induced abortion…[H]er baby should not be let out alive (Grice 126).” These succinct orders, that the baby “should not be let out alive,” demonstrate governmental power and its lack of concern for the health of not only the mother, but also the fetus. How did I come to survive all of these external forces and get the chance, or the opportunity, to be abandoned? After reading these disturbing testimonies, I realize, now, that to be a fully-grown and mature woman originating from this decimating system was, arguably so, a miracle. I guess I can only admit that I am the fortunate survivor of this system. And I realize that my biological parents, no matter who they are or where they come from, cared about me enough to hide me and leave me for someone else’s love. A love they could never give me.

Finally, the One-Child Policy is so powerful it has created and quietly condoned the gruesome act of murdering daughters. Some parents would become so desperate to conceive baby boys that they would ultimately make the decision to murder the birthed, healthy baby girl. According to Grice, “It is also well documented that families in China sometimes commit female infanticide at birth in order to avoid detection after having an unplanned baby girl (although exact numbers are obviously
unknown.) The practice has led to startling statistics: as many as 1.7 million female babies go ‘missing’ every year (Evans 2000, 118)” (Grice 127). I was one out of that 1.7 million. In the end, I am actually one of the lucky girls, one of the lucky survivors.

All of the miserable mechanisms of controlling the population led to the tragic gender-cleansing in which millions of baby girls, such as myself and my two younger sisters, were mysteriously taken in the night and abandoned on the streets of China. And yet, after learning the alternatives, I am forced to be thankful for the most merciful way of removing me from my biological family. The government could have intervened and aborted me or punished my biological mother by sterilizing her. My parents, it is hard to admit, had the option of expunging me from existence through the method of murder, but they didn’t; they simply left me for someone else to find. But they had no promise of my survival. Did they ever care if I made it to adulthood, to a maturation and cognizance level of being able to research their very methods of leaving me? Probably not. To them I am just a faded if not wholly suppressed memory of a lost, what would they even call me, daughter? Offspring? Problem? Setback? Disappointment.

And to my biological mother, whoever and wherever you are, it torments me everyday that this, stealthily abandoning me, was, in fact, the best alternative for you. For that, I apologize to you, mama (妈妈). I am sorry that I was not what you needed or wanted.

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On August 25th, 1997 she came to me, held me for the first time, and I cried unrelentingly – a combative move for an eighteen-month-year old baby that could
not speak, English or Chinese. In all of the photos I’ve thumbed through, mom still had her pale, alabaster skin, classic bushy, untamable brown hair, and melted chocolate brown eyes.

These pictures were the start to my proper documentation and relationship into this family, and the constant appearance of my mom, for some reason or another, presented an image of permanence, as if I was finally supposed to be where I am. To me, a baby at the time, I can only imagine she looked foreign, strange, and unknown. And yet, this was my mother. She was to be the woman I confided in, laughed with, bickered endlessly with, and forged an overall complicated relationship with. We shared moments of unadulterated resentment, utter frustration, despair, and misunderstanding. We shared moments of love, compassion, exceptional appreciation, and genuine camaraderie. We are partners in crime. We are enemies.
We are friends. She is my mother, and I am her first daughter. And while our skin, our hair, our eyes, our interests, and our genetics once lay on the opposite side of the world from one another, she brought me to America to save me.

The day I was adopted, I cried and ached to be released from this new set of hands, but that never did happen. It was a finalized transaction – after months of waiting, tens of thousands of dollars paid, and a fourteen-hour flight, I was given away as easily as a restless, unwilling baby could be. My nanny in the orphanage, who had distinctly webbed fingers, was no longer my caretaker, and this strange woman was now my mom. She was flushed with nerves and sweat dripped from the small of her back. This government room was not air conditioned, after all, and with the added weight of me, an admittedly chunky baby, she was dripping in sweat, nerves, and anxiety. I, on the other hand, did not understand this handoff. I was not aware that my life was to be re-written, this time in English.

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My first taste of American cuisine was actually in China. It was nearly instantly after my mother got a hold of me, realized she was sweating like the pig she craved to eat, and brought me to the one restaurant in Nanjing with guaranteed air conditioning: Kentucky Fried Chicken. China was slowly but surely undergoing the contagiously seductive Westernization or, in this specific case, Americanization, that so many other countries undergo, and as a result my mother found refuge and solace in familiarity, cool air, hamburgers and hotdogs and American-style fried chicken. This was my new heaven, and thanks to the long arms of invasive American capitalism, I could dine at the same fast food joint in China or, later, America. My
world, which at once seemed so big and expansive, was only getting smaller by the second as the West continued to infiltrate the East.

Admittedly, my virginal tasting of the greasy, quickly prepared food was a shock to my whole system—never before had I consumed something so large, so salty, and so addicting in my entire life. To top it all off, my mother, being a new mother and all, unknowingly shot her own foot the second she ordered me a small serving of vanilla soft serve ice cream. This was the first time my small body succumbed to a sugar high.

My mother brought me back to the hotel where I lived out the high and subsequent crash of any small baby on sugar and salt. Mom told me that I was crawling and crashing all over the room. One moment I was scaling the walls by grabbing on to the ends of the bed and balancing myself ever so slightly on the edges of the wall. The next moment I was crawling frantically to the bathroom to feel the cool marble floor and rock-hard bathtub with pudgy toddler fingers.

Then came the crash. My small body, being jerked by its own berserk power, could not keep up this riotous movement. I lay limp on the ground as my new mother
picked me up. She had observed, ardently, that I was not at all interested in the crib left by the hotel staff. So, she laid me in the Queen sized bed and made sure not to squish me while she, too, tried to doze. Sleeping, of course, would not come naturally to any new mother. She told me that she wasn’t able to rest one moment that night, out of fear that she would trample me. I, on the other hand, had no trouble occupying the majority of the bed. I rolled around and shifted positions diagonally and upside down on my back then on my stomach until my last twitch into comfort landed me in the center of this gigantic bed, with my mother on the slim outskirts. I liked the way our dynamic was unfolding.

Late that night, as my mother continued to orbit and shift about my small body, she heard a rapping at the door to our room. She quickly got up from our bed to answer it, fearing that the obnoxious knocking would wake me, a baby desperately in need of an uninterrupted snooze. When she opened the door and peered outside, groggy-eyed and wholly entranced in a sleep-induced state, she witnessed two familiar faces. She instantly recognized the face of the head of the orphanage, a short and squat man, and the nanny who had been holding me before I was formally handed off. This woman before my mother had the same distinct webbed-fingers that earlier that day had clasped me in an ironclad grip, ensuring the greatest stability and protection. Those same hands that were so familiar to me could, easily, rip me away from my new mother. She asked, softly, to see me again, because she missed me, to which my mother refused. Whispering ensued and money was relinquished. When my mom told me this story, years later, she always said that they came in the middle of the night and demanded an additional $2,000 under the table, completely devoid of any governmental or lawful reason. My mother, being the frightened foreigner and
new parent, gave the money away without batting an eye. She wanted to avoid, at any cost, any conflict or chance that I would be taken away from her. After they received their bonuses, the pair dashed down the hall of dim fluorescent hotel lights and back into the shadows of a sleeping country. My mom never heard from them again, and Motherhood, it was proven that night, came at a high cost.

To start, the average cost of a Chinese adoption is upwards of $20,000 and it can take an average of 18 months from start to finish to actually receive the good, that is the baby. This high number creates a system in which only certain socio-economically advantaged people can actually adopt and pay upfront for a child, which tarnishes, early on, the ideology of salvation. What’s more, and I find this personally alarming, we orphans became a privileged commodity, an emblem of wealth, to have and to hold and to raise. According to the literary critic David Eng, “…the transnational adoptee is a form of embodied (though spectralized) value, a special kind of property straddling both subjecthood and objecthood, both capital and labor. Her movement across invisible national boundaries, East to West and South to North, places the transnational adoptee…on the threshold of a tenuous subjectivity continually threatening to undo itself, to unmask the history of its commodification…” (Eng 102). Here, Eng reveals the cycle that both liberates and holds the adoptee hostage, a feeling I’ve been made all too aware of. The adoptee is both a fluidly transported item and commodity that has been purchased from “East to west and South to North” as she is brought into a new lifestyle and home. In this way, the adoptee is liberated from the shackles of neglected orphanhood, and, in theory, rescued and securely taken into a home full of plenty and abundance, love and
nurture. However, Eng also illuminates the way in which the commodification of the adoptee does, in fact, trap her within the greater global capital system. His argument, therefore, complicates the overly simple assumption and widely spread projection that adoption is an institution of good and salvation, and not one of monetary gain. For the transracial adoptee is actually entrapped and limited by her high-ticket price – as her life within her adoptive family originates with an outrageously high price tag. Therefore, she is positioned as a contradictory subject: freed, in that she has arguably limitless opportunities afforded to her, but also imprisoned, as she is eternally indebted to her parent or parents for their monetary power that purchased her freedom.

Furthering Eng’s conclusion, according to Robert S. Gordon in his article “The New Chinese Export: Orphaned Children, An Overview of Adopting Children from China”: “In the 1990s, Americans spent over U.S. $300 million to adopt 18,751 children from China. In 1999, adoption costs from China per child were approximately $20,000-27,000” (Gordon). Again, from these staggering numbers alone, we, the adoptees, are, among other things, mass-produced goods from China, and we are the leftovers of that; we are the unwanted rejects. When adopted into international homes of wealth and prestige, we become an anomaly: we are both underprivileged yet privileged. Because of our origins rooted in poverty, gender-biases, and harsh governmental ruling, upon adoption we ironically become collectible accolades that exude prestige due to our expensive price tag. As Viviana Zelizer notes, “the moment that children are no longer of value in the traditional labor market, they paradoxically become both ‘priceless’ and ‘commodified.’ In this regard, the transnational adoptee becomes emblematic of both gift and goods as she
moves from East to West, and from the space of public orphanage to the domain of private family” (Quoted in Eng 109). As a baby, I was turned into treasure and thus treasured, due to the large sum of money my mom laid down during my adoption. Once I was abandoned, and then quickly tagged with the price of a down payment on a house or the full cost of an automobile, I became this shiny new good, exotic and rare, fresh off the streets of China.

By and large, I have always felt a sense of guilt, of indebtedness, to my mother, after learning how much money she invested upfront to just adopt me alone, not even including the subsequent years of raising me. I constantly feel the need to prove my worth but oftentimes fall short of perfection or excellence. I have been handcuffed to the need to perform and succeed above and far beyond those around me to prove my worth and worthiness of such a large down payment; she’d done her part and laid down the money upfront for a perfect child, and I cannot disappoint.

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I have attended private school since Kindergarten and currently attend an elite private college. After some baseline calculations, I discovered that on education alone my mom has spent, or arguably invested, over $508,000 in me. That is in addition to daycare and pre-school in my formative years, tutors, outside crash-course prep classes, transportation to and from college, etc. The number is dizzying, and yet it was my mother’s choice to invest over half a million dollars in me, and for that I am forever grateful – if not totally and overwhelmingly indebted to her. How could I ever repay a woman who singlehandedly raised me when no one else could or wanted to? How could I repay a woman who granted me every opportunity in the world through her own private patronage? How could I repay a mother that selflessly works full-time
as both a Gastroenterologist and over-time mother to three girls? The simple answer is that I cannot and probably will never live up to the challenge. All I can do is work hard and succeed. But what is actually expected of me? There is, simply put, no guideline for me; and thus, here I am again diving into a pool of liberating possibility, yet I find myself simultaneously drowning, at times, in this abyss of abundance, for we all face failure or rejection. Here, I illustrate again the complex and complicated paradox of the transnational adoptee: we are both free and at the same time constrained by a greater system, to a greater expectation, to our inherent indebtedness to our parents, our saviors, our patrons.

Furthermore, I need to disclose that my lifestyle, while clearly privileged, caused an onslaught of stress for both my mom and myself. I always felt that twang of Catholic or, maybe in my case, adoptee guilt, because my entire life has been stacked on a bevy of elite opportunities. My mom saw me as something worthy of investment, and with that came an omnipresent and unwavering push towards excellence above all else. To be noted, that didn’t always grant me the happiest childhood.

In high school, I found myself locked into my own mind. Coursing through this cage, I would be accosted by a bounty of insurmountable stresses on a loop. Whether I was worried about school work, ACT/SAT prep, battling an eating disorder, fights with and targeted at my mother, my restless nights of sleep, my endless nights of sleep, the anxieties to outperform my peers in school as both the example of and deviation from the model minority myth, the deep guilt I feel that my mother has over spent on me in all facets of life – school, clothing, hair, make up, shoes, tutors, prep-courses, dinners out, etc., I had instilled in myself the guilt that I have been
overly-invested in and the fear that there may be no payoff for my mother. This adoptee guilt will be with me for, probably, the rest of my life.

And, in truth, my adoption was only made possible by the power of money. My new life in America was bought in tens of thousands of crisp dollar bills, it has been maintained by that same source, and without it I can unabashedly tell you I would not be where I am today. Money didn’t buy me happiness, but money and the structure of elite foreign adoption bought me a new life. I feel trapped and, at the same time, liberated by money. It’s the source that bought me and brought me to America. It’s the source that enabled me to attend exclusive private institutions. It’s the source that paid for my painful years of intensive violin and piano lessons. It’s the source that paid for my social outlets of soccer practices and camps. It’s the source that saved me by thrusting me into a pricey therapist’s chair when I was depressed and insecure about myself. It’s the source that both brings and alleviates stress.

Money, it’s an odd thing; it’s just as dual as I am. I can’t love it, but I certainly can’t hate it, because it is still the vehicle that drove me to a new home.

So, here I am, thriving and benefiting from but simultaneously critiquing the very institution that has given me the power and pen to write my story down, DisOriented: A Brief Autobiography of a Transracial Adoptee.

I am a product of a slew of separate and disparate histories that range from the far East to the far West. They meet, intertwine, complicate each other, and create me, a girl with “spectralized value” as Eng asserts. My two halves become a leash, with an unbreakable hold on and command over my life. I know, full well, how to straddle the line – how to play the system. I have learned to pretend to be that submissive and harmless Asian woman that stereotypes and mass media projects out
into world, if it benefits me. I can also be that hotheaded, overly confident bulldozer that my mother has shown me how to be. I am malleable. I am inauthentic. I was Made in China and sold to the U.S. I look Asian, but speak American English. I feel like I am afforded the luxuries of being white but am genetically coded by lost ancestry sprinkled in an East Asian country that is 8,000 miles, not kilometers, away.

I originated within a system that did not place much value on my sex. I was later brought into a family that would treasure me beyond measure. I was once a shard of Fragile Love that was aching to be taken into a niche, a nook, a pocket of this world that could afford to love me. I was thus banished and then beholden. I was impoverished with nothing, not even a legitimate birthdate, to my name. And, in one short year and a half of life, I was a part of the 2% in America.

Once I left China, I left my roots unattended and abandoned. Once I entered America, donned a new name that came with a new identity, I forever morphed into a Mortell. Janie Mortell.
Chapter 2

China Doll Turned American Girl Doll

“Almost the same, but not quite…Almost the same but not white.”

~Homi Bhabha

When I was young, perhaps five or six, and trying my hand at illustrating, I would draw a lush forest at the base of a giant purple mountain with white snowcaps. The giant mountain would house my family who dwelled within an old stony home with a great big chimney that blew out hazy purple smoke – at the time, my favorite color was purple. I had a mom, a dad, and a great big mountain dog named Dumpling that slobbered a lot. My parents would keep me warm atop our mountain with handmade fires, bowls of steaming hot rice, and endless hugs. Eventually, though, they knew they had to give me away. A mountain is no place to raise a baby girl, after all. And so, they descended this purple peak and left me in the neighboring village of Gaoyou. That’s how, I once wholeheartedly believed, I gracefully ended up outside the orphanage gates. I would draw this landscape with billowing clouds enveloping the small house, but I would never draw my parents. They were mysteries to me, and I didn’t want to draw them wrong. All I thought I knew for certain was that I must have come from a scenic, remote, and unfindable place – I was Chinese Rapunzel – a place so out of reach by civilization that no one could ever find my parents again to alert them that their baby girl was happily adopted, and that’s why they never came to look for me. Naturally, I no longer think in such romanticized ways. I don’t color my fantasies in tinges of rosy pinks and purples and sugary sweet fallacies.
After my adoption, I was shuttled to my new home in Michigan where I lived alongside my mom. Our house wasn’t atop a mountain, there wasn’t purple smoke billowing about, and we didn’t have a great big mountain dog that gushed slobber. We lived on a flat slab of Ann Arbor in a humble ranch house with a pudgy and flagellant Pembroke Welsh Corgi named Willie (the single inheritance my mom received from her late sister, my aunt and namesake, Big Jane.)

The day my mother brought me home, my entire family huddled around me – I the new center to their rapidly expanding universe. It was quite the homecoming, so I’ve been told. My grandparents, Nanny and Poppy, had picked us up at the airport and we were met by my two uncles, Mike and Jack, at my new home. Mom put me down on our wooden floors and I, the precocious 18-month-year-old that I was, began my first research project: I took it upon myself to get acquainted with every inch of our modest home. I walked, or perhaps more accurately stumbled, about each room. My family all watched me whiz about with great amusement. My newly minted best friend Willie and I bonded immediately; he trailed me into each and every room I explored. We had established our relationship right then and there: I, the master detective, and Willie, my own Mr. Watson, not far behind.

Here is Willie and me on my second birthday. I loved chowing down on chips. Willie, my sidekick, was always my second shadow (mostly because I would feed him half my meals!).
In my household, we completely banish the nuclear family and any shred of normalcy – if we’re being completely honest. To start things off, my mom is a raging single mother. She’s a full-time doctor, a Gastroenterologist to be precise (I used to tell my friends she is a “poop doctor” when I was young and couldn’t pronounce Gastroenterology), and an overworked mother of three. I was brought up within a nosey, noisy, and riotous Irish Catholic family, the Mortells. We’re definitely unique, to say the very least. My mom has two brothers, one older and one younger. The older brother is my Uncle Mike. Mike is my well-read and learned Godfather. He has Cerebral Palsy, which means he is completely paralyzed and has to use a wheelchair, but he’s a fully functioning human being with a killer sense of humor (meaning he laughs at my lame jokes.) Then there’s her younger brother, Uncle Jack. He’s eccentric, way too loud, and just about the biggest cat-lover (physically he’s a giant teddy bear.) Finally, when mom was busy working, I was watched and cared for by my two grandparents, Nanny and Poppy (aka Thelma Louise [yes, she came before the movie] and Jack Mortell.) Nanny was a master chef and Poppy is a master charmer. Together, they made quite the dynamic duo, raising my overworked mom, her terminally sick sister Jane, Uncle Mike with his disability, and bombastically loud Uncle Jack, and now me (and later my two sisters.) Again, my family is a riot.

This is (most) of my family. From left to right, there’s Nanny, Poppy, Mom (and me!), and Uncle Mike is on the bottom. We’re on our annual summer Bethany Beach getaway in Delaware where we meet up with my extended family from the East Coast. If it’s not obvious from my face, I don’t think I was all that enthused to be taking dorky family photos…
Then there are the newest additions to the family. For some reason or another, mom made the executive decision to adopt two more babies, Jackie and Ping – you’ll hear about them more extensively in Chapter Four. I’m assuming she did this to uphold her Irish Catholic heritage, which is to have a truck-full of children. I am approximately five years older than Jackie and seven years older than Ping. We abhorred one another for the longest time, but then maturation hit us all, what I mean is our hormones calmed down, and we’re totally fine now.

This is Jackie, me, and Ping at a tragically mundane yet scrumptiously delicious Christmas party (2017)

Happy Halloween from we three queens! I’m a hippie, Jackie is, I guess, herself (check out that bowl cut…), and Ping’s a lady bug! (~2004)

This is Jackie, me, and Ping at a tragically mundane yet scrumptiously delicious Christmas party (2017)
My family setting, as noted above, is unconventional. On the surface and, admittedly, in the photos included above, we look normal, or normal enough. We go on vacations, we celebrate holidays, and we take a plethora of incredibly dorky family photos to commemorate the good times. But, we are all, in the end, riddled with a knack for breaking from the norm. My mother chose to adopt and not form her own nuclear family by wedding and then bearing her own children. My grandparents had to raise one severely sick child who eventually died of a massive heart attack and take care of my uncle with CP for their entire lives. My Uncle Jack felt the necessity to move back home, after shifting careers from being a lawyer to a physicist, to eventually take over the responsibility of helping Uncle Mike once my grandfather could no longer do so. And as far as Jackie, Ping, and I go, well, we each have to handle our lives and identities dwelling within and outside of this family. We three sisters are the heirs to and legacies of our family, and we have absurdly big, strong, and independent shoes to fill.

So, don’t let these completely conventional photos fool you. We are an abnormal family. I don’t come from the typical biological, nuclear family structure. I don’t have a dad or a patriarchal figure in my life. My entire post-adoption life, I’ve been raised by a single woman, my matriarchal mom. We’re unconventional. But, with our irrefutable unconventionality comes innovation. We’re innovative in that we did the best we could do with the situation, having to deal with terminal diseases, disabilities, death, adoption, and the tireless list goes on. But, we learned how to cope with our disparities by forging on past our setbacks and judgmental surroundings and by persevering, oftentimes in a very headstrong way. We had to. We had to keep going, and hold our heads and noses high above those that just didn’t understand our
way of life, our way of existing. That’s a lesson I learned growing up in the Mortell family: be unapologetically resilient. I’m still not the best at it, honestly, but I’m working on it with each terrible tumble that befalls me.

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I, as an Asian adoptee, am an odd amalgam who is ultimately racially ambiguous or unidentifiable. Jennifer Ho discusses in *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, “The Asian American adoptee represents a particular kind of racial integration, one facilitated by the ability of the adoptee to be read as racially ambiguous and to achieve a type of honorary whiteness” (Ho 50). Here, Ho coins the phenomenon of the Asian adoptee as the recipient of “honorary whiteness.” To me, “honorary whiteness” in this light means people become colorblind or race-blind when they see me next to my family, and thus I am quickly grouped with them and reap the benefits of this white association by being treated with the same level of respect and trust that my family enjoys, and often take for granted. In a way, I’ve always been validated as “basically” white by my friends and outside spectators. I’ve been told I am “super” or “laughably white” or, even, “the whitest Asian girl that’s ever existed.” It’s as if the outside world is rooting for me to embrace white culture and privilege and reject my Asianness. In this way, my racial ambiguity is negotiated and then bestowed onto me by the white world, those with the privilege to divvy out honorary mentions, as I am peculiarly worthy due to my family setting and adoption. But, then again, I can’t escape my exterior. My appearance complicates and even ruins any chance of an uninhibited access into my family’s fortress of whiteness. And also, for every projected validation of whiteness I receive comes a simultaneous rejection of my Asianness, and I am still neither one in full.
Freshmen year of high school I tried out for the soccer team at my dinky private school. There was a healthy amount of decently gifted D3 athletes that year, so I landed on the JV team. We practiced a good amount – every day after school starting at 4pm we’d all gather on our turf field and begin practice. Our coach instructed us to start passing the ball with two other girls and form a triangle. I simply picked the two girls nearest me, Isabel Maier and Caroline Apley. Isabel is a year older than me, and Caroline is my age. Both of them are white.

We all began passing, varying the tempo and rhythm of our kicks. At some point in the drill, our coach had apparently commanded us to switch up our routine and find two new partners. I hadn’t heard her and continued to pass to Isabel. She stopped the ball, dead in its tracks, and looked me right in the eye. She proceeded to blurt out, “Do you even speak English? This isn’t the drill anymore.” And she dribbled right along to find two new partners, taking with her the ball and my dignity. I thought I hadn’t heard her correctly – no one’s vocabulary in this day and age could be so blatantly laced with racist jargon, I naively thought – so I ignored her and quickly moved on to find new passing partners. Caroline shortly ran up to me and said, “Didn’t you hear her? She just asked if you speak English! That’s so racist.”

I shriveled up. Sure, I had experienced racist remarks before. I had lived through the inglorious tradition of some white peer of mine squinting their eyes at me, mimicking the apparent shape of mine. Or I had been mocked for my ching-chong looks, probable bad driving, and dog-eating ways. But I had never been asked if I spoke English. As a current English major, I find that moment retrospectively ironic and sickly hilarious. However, in the car ride home from that miserable afternoon
practice I certainly found no humor in that event. Once safely tucked away in the comfort of my mother’s minivan, I proceeded to break down crying uncontrollably. I sobbed pitifully and my only audience was the woman who could always protect me, save this time. My mom listened to me as I relayed the scene to her, and she could see how it punctured me. I was a weeping mess, spilling my endless tears all over myself, trying desperately to drown and clean the moment off of me.

My mom reacted as, I assume, any mother, regardless of race, would: with a ferocious maternal rage to protect her young. She was livid and infuriated for me, and yet, to me, she was limited in her personal power as a white woman to act on it. In my eyes, it was hard for her to see the racial dynamic play out: if she were to go into my principal’s office, as she threatened to, and make a stink about the racial injustice against her daughter, it would just be a white body making noise about a person of color’s body, something that, in theory, she would never personally experience or have to endure due to the sanctity and safety of her whiteness. This, to me, invalidated her right to go in, guns blazing, to try and expel this girl, or to even dreg up a complaint. But now she was finally faced with the trials and troubles of raising a girl with a marginalized body in an American landscape. But, again, it was not an injustice done onto her, her people, or her identity. It was against me, a girl who wrongfully assumed she’d always be protected by the strong fortress of her white family members.

My mom then prodded me with question after question. Who was this girl? Was she white? What did she want from you? How could my school tolerate such bullying? Such racism? I was still a soup of tears and snot and couldn’t articulate my words at all, which is just as well, because no amount of my mother’s concern, anger,
or threats to get this girl expelled would calm me. And that is simply because none of that would do anything. Nothing could undo the historical racism that I was unwittingly adopted into as a non-white person in America, as someone who is racially ambiguous and thus cast off as untrustworthy, someone who tows the line of both the white and non-white world – a true outsider but with connections on the inside through her adoption.

This incident, while highly common and not at all unique to my situation, was a blow. It was a reminder that, despite my upbringing in the crystalline white world, I was not one of them. I was not one in my family. I was not one of the community. I was still other. I was still different. I was still Asian or at least Asian-appearing, and ultimately my own mother’s exterior does not beg the question if she rightfully spoke English. Mine, apparently, did and does. I look foreign. My jet-black hair distinguishes itself in and outside of my family. My almond shaped eyes are the poor subjects of humiliation and mockery. My yellow-tinged skin that is blotched with sunspots is my own layer of fleshy armor that is constantly under attack by my surroundings. In *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America*, Catherine Choy offers the awful reminder that “the specter of American racism and nativism toward Asians haunts the joyous imagery of these adoptive families” (Choy 3). And, indeed, it has and does.

The sad after-effect of Isabel’s question rendered me actually speechless, thus proving her question correct: could I even speak English? In the moment, no. I was overcome and consumed by vulnerability, by racial scrutiny, by being excluded, which was never apparent till this one cruel remark dredged it up and ought it above the surface. This moment also revealed the fact that my own mother cannot break
through the bamboo ceiling – the barrier that prevents Asians from progressing in America – to join me in genuine empathy. No amount of her white power and outspoken force can forge an actual kinship to the pain that arises from being racially ambiguous. Likewise, Dorow states that within the institution of transracial adoption “race doubles as an expression of biological difference between parent and child. So even as kinship might shrink the distance between differently racialized bodies, the adoptive family is also compelled to translate and explain its own peculiar hybridity” (Dorow 21). My whole life, I thought I would always be exempt from racism and racialized comments, because I assumed I dwelled within the same gated community of my white family, but no. I learned from this instance, and many more racialized comments thereafter, that I do not exist within their exclusive white microcosm. I am separate, because I have a body and an identity that demands interrogation, explanation, and justification.

And indeed, when I was young, my friends and peers would ask me if I did love my family even though they weren’t my family. They clearly didn’t get it. They didn’t get what a family really is. To me, those kinds of naive and ignorant questions would rattle me at first, agitate me even, but then it would all come down to misunderstanding me. So, I would walk them through it. I would tell them that yes, of course I love them; they are my family; and just because we aren’t genetically related doesn’t mean they’re any less my family. I got used to repeating this answer on a loop, and I thought I was pretty convincing too, because I never knew anything else. This was my normal: having a single mother and living with a bunch of white people raising me Catholic and not speaking Chinese. But to my young peers and even complete strangers on the
streets, the answer never fully convinced them, which irks me, because this is my truth.

Yet, no one could ever fully believe that I, an abandoned orphan from China, could ever find solace in a family that does not look like me, but in a weird way my very identity as a transracially adopted baby complemented the backdrop of my unconventional family. I was yet another outcast saddled with my own setbacks, just like every individual in my household. One of which is that it has always caused me personal pain growing up not having a parent, guardian, companion, or comrade that could fully commiserate with the stigma of being a person of color in this nation full of white faces. My family, specifically my own mother, could never grasp that pain, because she is a part of the racial majority and economic class that both saved me but also works to disassociate itself from me, a girl of color. Through her valiant efforts, mom did her best to fight my racial battles against ignorant peers or daily hardships I experienced revolving around racial issues, as her role as savior urged her to do so. But still, her efforts were just that – efforts. I had to train myself to suck it up, because no one else can fight these battles but me. No one, in the end, can save me from the engrained racism associated with the Asian body in America, not even the beaming institution of adoption.

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In a Hail Mary effort and due to my inevitable exclusion from the white world, I have carved out my own refuge deep within the depths of a fuzzy grey zone. This murky widely and wildly uncharted space has been my figurative home since my adoption, belied by my insertion into the luxurious and comfy domain of white America. Here, alone, I occupy and navigate this unexplored space that supposedly
separates Asia from Asia America. I have been brought into the plush luxury of white America, as a spectacle, a foreigner, granted the access to yet stripped of all of the privileges of this pearly white world. I still seem to be and remain steadfastly a margin of marginalization.

America, the land that my mother fought so ardently to bring me into, is still a country that finds fascination and fear in an ancient and fictional Orient, a Far East, that is unobtainable, unknown, and transgressive from the pure fallen white snow outside of my wintry 2986 Devonshire Road abode in Michigan. I am still exotic and not normal; I am constantly asked where I am “really” from. “China,” I answer with a sigh. And my audience nods in the self-congratulatory way of correctly identifying a foreigner, a non-native. An inauthentic American. My transition from a Chinese orphan to an American girl on the surface seemed seamless, because I did not have to face the tumult of independently immigrating to America. However, the transition did not start and end with my simple adoption—it is an ongoing process that, to this day, is playing its way out through a combination of triumphs and tribulations, both racial and personal.

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I was once given a horrible present that was indeed expensive and wonderfully dreadful in her parallels and implications as a gift to me, a racially ambiguous Asian American girl. I despised her so much that I actually did to her what was once done to me: I abandoned her, despite her intentions to be loved, because she was a replication of me, a symbol of me, a spitting image of me, this Fragile Love in America.
She was stowed away in our dank and grungy basement. The only soul to really ever step foot in this monstrous storage unit was my mom, as she dutifully washed and dried our mess of clothes down in that glorified hellhole.

I abandoned her and mom was forced to heap her on the pile of things that were too high in value to throw away but otherwise useless junk. I wanted to rid myself of her ungodly sight. She was supposed to be a representation of me. She had short, clipped jet-black hair. She had small, delicate almond-shaped eyes. She was not slender, but not obscenely chunky. She was clad in “traditional” Chinese garb, the kind of silk embroidered cloth that is vibrant red and stitched with golden dragons and lotuses. She was me, a Chinese doll turned All-American Girl Doll. She was a gift, and I hated her; I hated the sight of her; I hated her stereotypical representation of me that was, admittedly and upsettingly, accurate at the time. My Godmother had given her to me. My mom told me to be thankful, because it’s the thought that counts and it was a very expensive gift, after all. Again, I was monetized. Again, I was commercialized.

When I received her, I cringed and imagined a fragile pretty blonde girl who collected the entire set of American Girl Dolls and would play individually with each inauthentic ethnic rendition without trying to understand the history, culture, and context of the doll. This doll, the me-doll, would ride around the Great Wall on a Dragon’s back, playing with opiates and eating greasy dumplings with two sticks. She wasn’t real; she was fantasy; she was a stereotype; she was invented by the minds, crafted by the hands, and distributed to the girls of America.

Despite her stereotypical appearance, I saw too much of myself in this sad American Girl Doll. Like myself, she did not belong in either Asia or America. Why,
then, did the American Girl Company assert her belonging in America but clad her in “Oriental” clothing? What was their gain or agenda? They knew, through devilish marketing skills and heavy research, that there were girls like me, living in the margins of marginalization that could create a new market. A market of me. I, of course, did not buy it. Even as a naïve child receiving this terror of a present, I refused to keep her. And so I did to this doll what was done to me. I abandoned her. She remained unloved and unacknowledged until the fateful day I asked my mother to retrieve her from our downstairs dungeon. Mom faithfully found this decrepit thing, still in mint-condition and untouched. I took her out of the box, and I honestly tried to love her, I really did. But was she worthy of my love? To this day, I can’t fully answer that. I haven’t the faintest idea where she is at this moment. I later left her at our neighborhood thrift shop, and I can only hope she went to a happier family, full of love, benevolence, appreciation, and an innocent naïveté of what she haunted me with. Maybe she lives in a white family now, a pleasant white family that appreciates her worth. Maybe she is living alongside a Chinese girl who is seeking a semblance of her lost culture. Or, maybe, she’s been thrown away, tossed and forgotten.

From this experience, I have been haunted. Haunted by the ungraspable memory of being abandoned on the streets. Haunted by the cruel and crushing fact that I will never have a true connection to my birthparents. And finally haunted that I, too, am capable of doing onto an innocent doll what was done to me. While I was, at the time, merely a temperamental and ungrateful five-year-old, I see my attempt of reconnecting with China, with the girl I was supposed to be, and ultimately rejecting this vision as a failure – a failure to actually reunite with a severed past.
Chapter 3

Made in China

“If you think someone else has it better than you, you just don’t know them well enough.”

~Jane Mortell Senior

Gaoyou (高邮), China is currently a rapidly developing metropolis with over 750,000 residents, but to China that is just a drop in the bucket of people. The storybook image I had of my quaint farmland birthplace was dashed. Gaoyou was anything but rural. It had ginormous, newly erected towers, perfectly smooth streets, highways, and a Starbucks and McDonalds planted smack dab in the center of town. I must have lost my chance of exploring it in its rural heyday, for now it was simply another city with 3/4 of a million residents. But I wasn’t one of them anymore. Instead, I was just a visitor, a stranger, a tourist looking for something, or a couple of someones.

On August 31, 2016 mom and I were sitting in a decadent hotel rooftop bar. We were lounging comfortably in the air-conditioned perch overlooking the rapidly growing city. We had nestled ourselves onto two velvet seats, and facing each other, we laughed sipping our complimentary drinks from the hotel staff. Mine was an electric blue vodka concoction. Mom had a chilled beer.

We were back at my birthplace, enjoying the view from a safe distance above. It had taken me 19 years to come back, and I was a rush of nerves and excitement, a feeling I assumed was reminiscent of how my mom must have felt upon meeting me for the first time. Here I was, back at my origins, with no connection to the streets, the people, or the language. I was a foreigner, and it became glaringly obvious the moment I stepped foot out of the cab and on to the very streets where I was found.
As mom and I gabbed about our days to come exploring the streets of Gaoyou at that hotel lounge, she disclosed to me of an event leading up to her adopting me. My mother was dating a man in secret. She never did feel comfortable telling her parents of her personal affairs, and she kept her own life close to her chest. I later came to understand that she is a guarded woman; she protects me through her steadfast silence. Growing up, I often wished I could forge a closer, more personal relationship to her. I would see my other friends gab endlessly with their mothers, and I couldn’t always have that. I was jealous of their intimacy, of their undeniable closeness. And, I couldn’t help but always wonder if our relationship was blocked because of my adoption, because I wasn’t related through blood but through kinship, or if I was a source of untrustworthiness, even within my own family.

That is why I was completely shocked that only now, while thousands of miles away from our home, she was ready to reveal something to me that she never uttered to another living soul. She told me the disturbing and disheartening start to her journey towards motherhood, arguably the moment that fully cemented her decision to get me: my mom and this mysterious man were on a date at one of the finest restaurants in Ann Arbor, the Bell Tower, back in 1997. While seated amidst well-ironed white tablecloths and Ann Arbor’s elite, my mother pulled out a picture from her purse. She told this man that this baby in the photograph was going to be hers; she was going to be a mother and adopt me. The
man, I had assumed, would be stunned, floored, and unable to speak. My assumptions were completely wrong. My mom said that he told her that she had to choose: it was either going to be him or me. Him or this complete stranger she had nothing in common with and really no reason to love, yet. She couldn’t have both, in his eyes. My mom decisively got up from the table at the decadent restaurant and never talked to that man again. Instead, she chose to get me, to save me. But to her, she was simply rejecting a nuisance, an unsupportive deadbeat that was coated in selfish insecurity. It was good riddance, she told me.

When hearing of this historical event in my mother’s life, I realized that in so many relationships humans are inherently selfish and bask in innate insecurity, and, worst of all, force those around them to choose, to make a choice, because, apparently, you can’t have it all. My mom told me that she was, in the end, thankful he showed his true colors right then and there at the finely dressed dinner table aglow with candlelight. If it were not for the documentary *The Dying Rooms*, and if it were not for me, or at the very least, this picture of me, perhaps my mom would have married this monstrously insecure and selfish man. Perhaps she would have her own kids with him. Perhaps they would have gotten a divorce. So many maybes and perhaps-es come about from an alternate timeline, but in the end she chose me. And that’s why I have always told my disbelieving friends, with the utmost confidence, that she is my *real* mother.

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When I got to Gaoyou, I had every intention of trying to find my biological parents. I had and still have a plethora of unanswered questions to ask them. Now, and I want to make this abundantly clear, I was not in search of them to reunite with
them and claim them as anything but vessels that brought me life and a steady heartbeat. They were simply my creators and their genetics contributed to who I am, but nurture or nature aside, I know who my real family is.

What I really wanted to get out of magically finding my biological parents was to see who they were, what they looked like. I have always wanted to know what it would be like to hug my biological mother and father – to take in their smell, to see their wrinkles and scars, and maybe even spot some freckles. I wanted, for once in my life, to see familiarity in two strangers. And, I wanted to, actually, thank them for the life they unwittingly gave me. When I sojourned back to my birthplace, I held no grudges or anger towards them. I did not resent them for gambling my life to eventually get an arguably better one, for both themselves and me, because everything worked out in the end: I was found, I was adopted, and I grew up healthy and for the most part happy.

In an effort to find them, I drafted up a note that I planned to sprinkle around the city and leave at my orphanage:

The English translation: Hello. My name is Gao Jiao Jiao. I was born on April 30th, 1996, and on May 25th, 1996 I was left at the gates of the Gaoyou Children’s Orphanage (高邮市儿童福利院). I am currently living with my adoptive mother and two younger sisters in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I am very happy, and I want to thank my parents for giving me this opportunity of life and happiness. If you or anyone else knows about my parents, please contact me on my WeChat account: janiemortell. Thank you!
On August 31, 2016, my mom and I woke up groggy and jet-lagged in our hotel in Nanjing to meet our translator and guide, Michael, who is a native Najinger. He spoke fluent Mandarin, a bit of rugged Cantonese, and very advanced English. His occupation is to guide adoptees back to their orphanage, which is called a Heritage Tour. He brought us to a local Jiangsu Province government building, the province I was found in, to pay three hundred dollars to gain access to my orphanage. This money is seen as a gesture of thanks, gratitude, and an investment in the orphanage system. After completing that bureaucratic nightmare, we all boarded yet another vehicle, a sticky bus, that would shuttle us from Nanjing to Gaoyou in a short two and half hours.

After driving past fields of grassy countryside and patches of undeveloped land in China, we soon pulled up to a large mecca with classic emblems of development: concrete sidewalks, boundless growing skyscrapers, and enumerable fast food chains. Michael told us that we had reached Gaoyou. As I drank in the scenery, I distinctly recall feeling tense; my vision of my birthplace was one of humble rural roots, perhaps small houses with thatched roofs, and a tight-knit community. But, the Gaoyou before my eyes was anything but that. It was a rapidly developing city, with a noticeable lack of people walking around. It honestly felt like a ghost town, abandoned.

We dropped off our bags at this spectacular hotel, adorned with inside and outside waterfalls, koi ponds, and a free beverage hour that my mom and I would later exploit. Michael advised that we dust ourselves off and head out into the city, so I could see the most of Gaoyou in the short 48 hours I would be there. He took us to
the Gaoyou Postal Office that was converted into a shrine-like Museum. It’s apparently the oldest and last standing postal office in China that dates back to the Ming Dynasty. I learned that it was an important hub for governmental officials to go to and rest after a long journey crossing the country. Important documents and the emperor’s own notes and orders were held in this postal office and then later on delivered to other regions of the country via horseback.

Surrounding this museum is Gaoyou’s “old town.” This little pocket of Gaoyou is exempt and untouched by the rapid construction that is ubiquitous just a few streets over. Instead, in the old town, I found what I had originally anticipated: a quiet, beautiful, and scenic little block of aging houses that is right up against the coast of the famous Grand Canal (a waterway highway of olden times where massive amounts of trade were made throughout China.) Here, I saw elderly fisherman plopped down with fishing rods made of bamboo sticks and long ribbons of durable twine all along the shore and a small but thriving fish market where the locals would sell their wares right off the dusty street corner. I remember seeing turtles loosely bumbling about on a small slab of concrete in the fish market; the owners would watch over their living goods and push them back on to the slab for safekeeping. There were bloodstains left and right from the fresh fish slaughter, and the locals all gazed with lukewarm curiosity as Michael led me, and my noticeably white mother, down the streets.

This old town was the epitome of a wholly insular and self-sufficient microcosm, and I felt a strange, unexplainable kinship to the ruins, elderly people, and strangers slowly walking the streets. In my mind, anyone of them could have known my parents, been my parents even, and I was secretly hoping that one of them
would espy me, a blatant foreigner, and maybe put two and two together...maybe approach me with some information about my birthparents whom I was so sorely after.

That of course did not happen. We were merely visitors in their streets; we didn’t bother them and they didn’t bother us. After we exhausted ourselves strolling up and down the alleyways of the old town, Michael took us to the orphanage, which was a mere ten-minute walk away. Albeit it was blisteringly hot out with nearly 100% humidity, but I still felt rushes of cool nerves up and down my spine the closer we got to the gates.

When we finally arrived, I noticed the building appeared shut down and no longer in use. Michael explained to us that this was indeed where I was kept back in 1996 and 1997, but, due to the shift in the One-Child Policy, which has since evolved into a Two-Child Policy as of October 29, 2015, there has been a huge dip and drastic decline of abandoned babies, which to my ears was joyous news. Therefore, such a huge facility was no longer necessary to house less than a dozen orphans, and so the Jiangsu government is planning on remodeling the building and turning it into an institution for the mentally and physically disabled.

This news, while certainly overall positive, left me, admittedly, the teensiest bit sad and nostalgic for the rooms and halls that I don’t even have a real memory of. I always envisioned a grand homecoming where I would get to walk, so much taller and so much older now, amidst the walls I once called home. But, that dream was dashed, and I know, ultimately, it’s all for the better.
The very next day, on September 1, 2016, I was finally able to go back to my orphanage, or rather the new building they have designated as the local orphanage. It was a day I will never forget. I was still very much consumed by jetlag, a twelve-hour time difference just kind of funks with your body inevitably. So, I awoke at the wee hour of six in the morning, thoroughly drenched in grogginess and a smidge of anxiety. That morning, I had to battle silly trivial things like, “what should I even wear on this occasion to my orphanage?” or “what should I expect to feel…happiness, sadness, nostalgia, or nothing at all? Who are the workers at the orphanage and how will I be treated?” With these enumerable questions racing through my brain, I finally wrestled myself out of bed, plunged into a lukewarm shower, and attempted to prepare myself for what was to come.

My mom, like myself, was also anxious but much more overtly excited about the upcoming adventure. She prepared herself jovially in the morning, steaming her nice white blouse, primping her hair, and sipping on her morning coffee. I, on the
other hand, let my emotional distress hide in between jagged marks of make-up applications and nearly inaudible sighs to myself.

After we were done getting ready, Michael led us to our cab, and we were shuttled off to the new orphanage building. The moment that had evaded me for 19 years of my existence had finally arrived, and I was about to see and, hopefully, forge a connection, a new kind of kinship, to Gaoyou and the orphanage system that cared for me all those years ago.

Once we pulled up to the gates, we waited outside of the building on the scorching hot curb beneath two bare trees. Michael told us that the building itself was not solely devoted to the orphanage any longer. It acted as a few office buildings, apartments of residency for some people of Gaoyou, and a health facility for those with mental or physical disabilities. Strange, I thought. The guard at the entrance was friendly and smiled at us with sincere eyes and happy crinkles in his cheeks. It was nice, and it was welcoming. And my fears and anxieties were melting away along with the sweat dripping down the small of my back.

Finally, two workers emerged from the inside, one bearing a large Canon camera, ready for photo-ops I presumed, and the other, an older woman, greeted us with the biggest grin as she pleasantly saluted us in Mandarin. My mom and I followed the two workers and our guide up into the third floor of the building. There we sat in a comfortable sized meeting room decked out with traditional hand cut wooden chairs and a massive table. There were intricate designs of trees and flowers carved into the chairs’ foundation, and I felt as if I had mistakenly fallen into a decadent home. Michael said that the director was more than willing to answer any questions we could think of regarding my adoption and the orphanage. We all sat
down on the farthest left corner of the large rectangular table. We were quickly and
ceremoniously served steaming hot tea, with the tealeaves still freshly floating and
nestling to the bottom of the cup. I sipped at it nervously, burning my tongue and
causing myself to sweat even more.

As the small talk dissipated we all got down to business. The current director
of the orphanage opened my complete file up and presented the original copies of the
only documents I ever had as an orphan. They showed me the police report, and
even my medical exam, which documented my weight and height at the time. Let it
officially be known that I was a fat baby. At just one month old, I weighed a
whopping 11 pounds. The directors and workers all laughed when this was revealed,
and I definitely owned up to it: I freaking love to eat, so that made sense to me.

This is the police report stating that they registered me as an abandoned child.

This is the official medical report after I was found. Here, it stated that I was 11 pounds and massive.
We proceeded to ask the director many questions – questions that may seem a bit blunt, but I had been dying to know for my entire life. I asked if he believed my parents were from Gaoyou, the alleged birthplace I had always been told I came from. The director scanned my sweaty and eager face, and then sighed when saying that probably not. Back in 1996-1997, the Gaoyou Orphanage system was one of the mightiest, biggest, and best known. It was apparently quite prestigious among the local orphanages in China with as many as 70-80 orphans at a time. Many birthparents parents would come flocking through to ensure their children would be taken care of in this vicinity, so ultimately no. The director asserted that most parents that abandon their children near or within the Gaoyou border were mostly from outside the city, but certainly from a nearby rural area. I studied his face, which was composed and matter-of-fact, and resigned myself that I may actually not be from Gaoyou. I proceeded to ask if I even look like I am from Gaoyou or from the Jiangsu region, and he just nodded his head in a lukewarm manner. Hm, maybe, he replied. All of the questions I asked were met with honest ambiguity, because in truth there was no way of knowing the answers to any of them, alas.

I proceeded to pull out, and present quite proudly, the poster I had made to sprinkle about the streets of Gaoyou to find my birthparents. The director and Michael both exchanged wary and, unfortunately, very sympathetic glances to one another. I could read their reactions right on their faces, with their crumpled foreheads and slanted mouths. They both reasoned with me that most birthparents leave their babies behind with no intention of ever finding them again, because we’ve both moved on. They moved on in life and they only hope that their baby has found a new life and home alongside others, and they don’t want to disturb that new order. In
In a nutshell, people would not respond to the flyer on the street. Instead, the director offered to keep a crisp copy in my file, should my parents, one day, desire to seek me out. Again, his reaction was uncomfortably honest when he said it was certainly unlikely. Nonetheless, I agreed to give him a copy and to withhold leaving them around the city. And slowly, painfully slowly, my one gateway to trying to find my parents was closing, and I was left on the other side, like always, abandoned.

After we snapped a few memorable photos, the director and a trail of workers led me down the stairs, through a park with chickens running amuck, to two rooms where the children of the current orphanage were held. I was told that the children that are now typically abandoned have either severe mental or physical disabilities or both, because their birthparents couldn’t afford the high medical bills to care for their children. When we entered the room, I was met by a beaming baby with Downs Syndrome. He immediately cried and shrieked to be released when I held him. I felt so bad for scaring and startling him. The nanny that cared for this particular room,
and subsequently rescued and comforted the crying baby from my arms, was actually a nanny who was there back in 1997 when I was a resident, and she was an orphan herself who eventually secured a job at the orphanage as a full-time caretaker. She was sweet and spoke of how she distinctly remembered how fat I was (I grinned, again completely unembarrassed, and thanked her for taking such great care of me.)

Finally, the workers and director escorted us out of the orphanage area and we were taken to a restaurant where we were served an absurd amount of Gaoyou cuisine. While driving away, I glanced back to see the orphanage fade away into the distance. Closure was coming.

This is a nanny that took care of me over 19 years ago. She still remembered me for my infamous chubbiness.
Once at the restaurant, in a private room, the director sat to my left, and we spoke in Mandarin. While my Mandarin is far from perfect, I appreciated that he complimented it nonetheless. We bonded over his passions for the orphanage and my passions for Chinese culture. My mom and I even learned that twenty of the orphans in Gaoyou were able to make it to Shanghai, where they learned basic life skills like cooking and economics. We also learned that the director and the director of finances were both invited to several weddings of past orphans, because they were “the parents” of these kids. After hearing this, I realized just how special of a relationship these two directors played in the lives of so many unadopted children and how seriously they took their responsibility to be their parents, as their own kin.

At the end of our magnificent feast, the director told me that I was home and that I would always be welcomed back in Gaoyou, which moved me. He also went on and told me, “You are Chinese.” As a child who has grown up in a white family in a white town, I have never fit into assumptions concerning Chinese culture, or white culture for that matter. Finally getting told and validated that I am in fact Chinese struck me deeply. It was an immeasurable compliment and a fact to me now. For I was always told that I was the whitest Asian girl that ever existed, but now I found truth and acceptance into a world that I so desperately wanted to be a part of, China. My trip back to Gaoyou healed and mended a little bit of my broken identity; I felt a true kinship to China for once in my short life, and it wasn’t even me trying to forge it this time. China, for once, seemed open to welcoming me back through their gates if I would accept it. And I did.
My dual identity always seemed to mean that I would be perpetually unwhole, perpetually split and forced to choose, much like my mother’s choice between me and her boyfriend. My choice was never that simple, though. I couldn’t get up from a dinner table and decisively declare, “I am Chinese!” or “I am American!” – and then reject the other part of the equation, the other part of me. For could I even rightfully choose to fully embrace passing as white to fit in with my family? Or could I rightfully choose to identify solely as Asian, even though I was never raised with much of any connection except for the raw skin on my back that reveals an otherworldly code of genetics. When I was back in Gaoyou, seated amidst many orphanage workers who supported me coming back, or to them, coming back home, I felt a strange burden undone.

In America, I am odd. I am a foreigner, simply through my appearance, but I am native simply through my passport, flawless Midwest accent, and family tree rooting me to an Irish and Scottish heritage. In Gaoyou, though, I was told it was
okay to be Chinese, to identify with the locals, and to embrace and appreciate the most blatant part of me, my appearance.

Maybe, ultimately, I don’t actually ever have to decide; maybe, I don’t have to choose one side of me over the other. Maybe my two incoherent halves can coexist peacefully and equally. What external force is trying to pin me down and force me to confess my identity anyway? My family? No. My friends? Probably not. Strangers? Absolutely. And I don’t owe them an ounce of explanation at the end of the day. If I can just relax into myself and not feel that fiery desperation to latch on to one whole identity then I can move past these strangers, these spectators, these naysayers that tell me I can’t be Asian, because I am “so white” or I can’t be white, because I am undeniably “foreign looking.”

In China or America, I am different. In China, I can be Chinese. In America, I can be Asian American. And for me, I can just be Janie – this unidentifiable puzzle with pieces strewn all about from China all the way to North America. I am this girl who lives off the charts and off the spectrum of racial cohesion; this girl who can be whoever or whatever I grow into. Going back to Gaoyou, speaking Mandarin with the locals, and ultimately being told I have the legitimacy to call myself Chinese, even though my entire life I felt constrained by my white background to ever identify as such, gave me a bit more validity to feel some sense of home in both China and in America. It gave me a little more agency to be okay without making a choice.
Chapter 4
Return to My Mother’s Land

“And into each life some rain must fall.”

~Poppy

While studying abroad my junior fall of college, the Chinese people, upon interfacing with me, could not peg me, could not identify me. What was I? I looked Asian enough, but I certainly did not abide by Chinese beauty standards, fashion, or mannerisms. I wore shear tops, tight pants, and had a bronze glow to my skin since I liked to tan in the summer. I was not frosty pale, chopstick thin, or demure in my actions or dress. To them I was this odd and uncategorizable amalgam. Almost the same, but not quite. Almost the same, but not right. I was an off-branded Asian girl. I was certainly not one of them. While looking me dead in the eye, the locals would unload a whirl of questions upon me when analyzing my appearance: are you Korean?—they would ask. It’s because your Mandarin isn’t very good.—they would explain. You must be foreign, not Chinese.—they would assert and move on. I didn’t move on quite as fast.

In these moments of slight rejection after rejection from the locals of Shanghai, I found myself, yet again and always, pushed off to the side as other. I was, in a sense, being pushed back to America – a land that is not my homeland but is my mother’s land.

Growing up in America and then living abroad in China for a brief stint of my life made me realize that a majority of my life has been coated with white culture while, simultaneously, my cultural connection to China is slowly erased. I have to reckon with the fact that my life living alongside and among white Americans has irreversibly changed me. When I was young, I constantly tried to connect with my
family through physicality. Growing up, I was so pleased to know that white people get freckles just like me. It was a relief to know I wasn’t the only spotted freak roaming the streets of America. And I distinctly recall finding a birthmark near my mother’s armpit that looked reminiscent of the one I detected above my armpit and feeling such glee and elation from that single commonality we shared. All and all, I was trying to be as white as possible – to pass as one of the family. But that never yielded results, and more importantly that never actually made me happy. Trying to be something and fighting the narrow perceptions of the outside world that see me as solely Asian from a quick and dirty glance was tiring and ultimately futile. At the end of the day, I cannot identify as white. My body rejects my continued attempts, and my body is a powerful force. I thus surrender to it.

Well, if I cannot conceivably blend in as white, I found myself continually drawn to reconnecting with what I overtly can, my Chinese heritage. I certainly had and still have a romanticized longing to forge relations to my Chinese roots, hence my extensive commitments to studying Mandarin, traveling back to China on countless occasions, majoring in the College of East Asian Studies, and, of course, consuming Chinese cuisine whenever possible, yet my two younger sisters have very different relationships to China. Jackie has never shown an inkling or an itch to go back to China. In fact she seems quite adamant to never go back to our homeland. Ping, on the other hand, has some desire or interest in visiting, but she lacks a drive to learn about the culture and language. All and all, we three are all quite different when it comes to the sort of relationship we individually hold to our origins. And I think it’s a necessary observation to unpack, because Jackie and Ping’s stories are tied to my own growing up. I can’t quite pinpoint where or when or what separates our interests in
China or what either sparks intrigue or creates an unfixable rift between us and China. Regardless, though, adoption is the vehicle that both separated us from our shared homeland but later brought us together as an actual family. Transracial adoption, therefore, is the great divider and unifier of my life.

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At the beginning of my first grade year, my mom left me to go fetch my second sister, Jackie, from Shanghai. I was left in the loving and trusting hands of Nanny and Poppy, and let me tell you I was spoiled rotten my final month of being an only child. Even though I certainly am unable to recall the specifics, namely the fact that my mother left me for a whole month, which, probably, simultaneously left me in a tizzy of sadness and lonesomeness, living with Nanny and Poppy was the good life. While mom was battling international bureaucrats, legal papers, and adoption hurdles, I was getting cozy and, apparently, fat under the not-so-watchful eyes of my two grandparents. Side note: on an infamous phone call between my mom and Nanny, apparently Nanny confided in my mother, with a deep shade of chagrin, that I was “getting fat.” According to legend, each night mom was away I would scoop a heaping pile of ice cream, uh probably to numb the pain of a second abandonment but I digress, into a great big cereal bowl and just chow down on its caloric goodness. I am not at all surprised by this kind of behavior – honestly what kid wouldn’t reenact a Home Alone kind of lifestyle when your only authority figures were two greying eighty year olds who loved you endlessly and would do anything for you?

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At the time, I was pretty young and naïve, and the news of getting a baby sister was, in a word, exciting (if not a completely foreign concept to me.) I had no
idea that I would now have to share my family with a whole other person. I thought that a sister merely meant having a full-time playmate that would be there for me at my beck and call, but when mom and Jackie actually came home my world was rocked in a way I was, honestly, not all that thrilled about. Ah, sibling rivalry, how it get’s the best of us.

Jacqueline Francis Tao Mortell is her full name; although she doesn’t care for her Chinese roots so let’s scratch out the Tao part. She was born in 2001 and found in Pudong, the financial district of Shanghai, when she was just a few months old.

Jackie, as a baby, was very different than myself. I have to be self-critical here, because it’s only the truth, but I was a well-indulged only child for 5 glorious years of my life – until JACKIE barged into it. It was, at the time, the worst thing to happen to me and is currently the best thing that ever happened to me. My self-indulgences, while still paramount to me, are not the only things in my life anymore. I’m not always my main focal point.

That moment Nanny, Poppy, and I picked mom and Jackie up at the Detroit Metro Airport in late September of 2002 I had to quickly learn to divvy up my family’s love and attention to another tiny barnacle with two light brown tufts of baby hair sprouting from her teensy-tiny head.
Jackie is the pensive one. She is quiet. She is contained. She is unlike anyone else in my family. She rarely cried. She was an anomaly that’s for sure. Yet, she was wonderfully dare-devilish. She’s been to the emergency room at least 6 times in her life, one of which was a hilarious stunt she pulled Christmas Eve circa 2002 when she stuck our baby Jesus Lego figurine up her nose and we couldn’t get it out and mom had to drive her quickly to the ER to get them to remove our Lord and Savior from her nostrils. Moreover, and I stand by this firmly, Jackie was and still is the bravest of the Mortell sisters. She loves terrifying roller coasters; she binges on physical activity and exertion. She was this strange new addition to my life that, now looking back, made me a much more caring, loving, and compassionate brat. While I still hold fast to my early only-child tendencies, in which I require a hefty amount of attention, I, at the very least, am now trained to take the backseat at times, to pay attention to others, and to learn and love someone so very different than myself.

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Then there is Ping. Oh Ping. She is the latest addition to our family, and, even more momentously, she was our final collectible to complete our family’s set. She’s also the sister with the longest name in the history of the Mortells. Her legal and official name is: Katherine Mary Liu Wen Ping Mortell, but I’ll always and only ever call her Ping, sometimes Pinky when we’re being playful.

Now Ping is a firecracker with no off button. She’s always “on.” When she was very young, she didn’t talk all that much, so she resembled Jackie. But when that kid learned some English and watched a bit of late-night TV, she would not shut up. It was unbelievable how many words spewed out of her tiny hole of a mouth. Currently
as a fourteen-year old, she’s a mere 80 some pounds, 4 foot 11 inches tall, and the spunkiest little spit fire you’ll ever come across.

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They say that there’s nothing quite like holding your newborn baby. Now, I certainly don’t know if that saying’s true, but I suppose at the tender age of eight, I had a similar-ish experience while basking in the limelight of favoritism from my littlest sister, wee Ping. Mom, Jackie, Uncle Jack, and I trekked out to China to adopt our last baby, and I was the only person Ping would permit to hold her without hollering and screeching like a crazed, heat-stricken monkey.

The day of the adoption, I distinctly remember an odd feeling in the air. Jackie was more somber than usual; she probably anticipated having to share our mother’s hip and love with a new baby. My mom was a spectacle of blurry lines as she quickly bounced around gathering proper legal papers, baby formula, and diapers galore – she was a seasoned mother of two soon to be three, so she mastered the whole multitasking gig. For some reason or another my family had all coordinated outfits for the occasion, which you can see below in our wonderfully dorky photo at the orphanage. The theme of the day seemed to be pink for baby Pinky.

We arrived at the gates of the Shanghai Children’s Home, and within its guarded walls lived hundreds of children, ranging from abandoned newborns to eighteen-year-olds. We were lead to the Rose Garden room where young children ages 2-5 years old were kept. There were rows of small wooden chairs where the children obediently sat, lines of metal barred-cribs where the children dozed, and little play pens where the kids could roll about and play with the sparse toys. I remember thinking to myself that the children looked remarkably small for their ages – my
mother noted that, medically speaking, children cannot fully grow or develop without nurturing, care, attention, and of course love. This sight of physically small children begged the question of their living situations: were they getting what every child needed? Were they being cared for properly? Were there simply enough caretakers and nannies employed to make sure each child absorbed the love and attention to grow? That day I came to the conclusion, no. But, despite the lack of attention they receive or, perhaps, because of this, the children were all enraptured with such giddiness and glee to see some fresh faces as my family rolled into the room. We were bringing the hope to leave, a hope that was exclusive to only one of those breathtakingly adorable children, alas. Ping was soon singled out and brought over to us. She had been found outside a large apartment complex in Shanghai and swiftly brought to the orphanage for care, so the nannies and interpreter told us.

She was so small, like a baby bird, whimpering a bit as the nanny brought her down to a small wooden seat next to an equally squat table. Ping was being served a meal of mushy rice, greens, and what appeared to be beef. It was steaming hot, but she was a hungry baby despite her frail appearance. Mom and I took turns feeding her, sort of acquainting and preparing her for her new life.

When it was time to leave the orphanage, we said farewell to the adorable children that would not be leaving with us today. Mom tried to lift Ping up, but that just induced a terrible shriek and a tizzy of tears. I was soon tasked with the duty of holding Ping, as Jackie was still a bit protective of our mother and her arms. And while Ping was definitely underweight, her body still proved to be a burden on my eight-year-old arms. Despite that, though, I distinctly recall being overjoyed and flattered that she favored me over her own new mother. I remember thinking, even as
a child at the time, that it must be something with my face, with the slight familiarity of an Asian smile and figure. Relative likeness became the saving grace and comfort that ushered Ping into our Mortell world, and I finally found usefulness for my distinct Asian features – it was what made Ping feel at ease amidst a very new family of white faces. I remember feeling helpful for once.

Clad in rather unfortunately matching outfits, the Mortell family was finalized with the adoption of small baby Ping. Here we are posing within the orphanage as a newly formed and solidified family.

And to all you naysayers: behold proof that Ping could only tolerate the sight and touch of me, a sweaty and thoroughly out of shape child who got sick of carrying her around within 10 minutes of meeting her.

And, to showcase my greatest writing achievement to date, behold two of my journal entries that I kept throughout the adoption process to get Ping!
As you can probably deduce, my spelling and English grammar has improved mildly since my debut journaling career launched circa 2004. I am sentimental for this old and dusty journal, and I am very grateful that my summer English tutor, the great Nancy Laitner, pushed me to document the trip. Albeit, my writing wasn’t all that great and my description was, in a word, lacking. I am, despite that, very proud of this documented history. It’s the only access point I have to remembering the time I was an indispensible part to building our family.

And now, I can unequivocally assert that Jackie and Ping are more related to me than any other biological parent or sibling I may have in this small world. While we are not genetically related in any way, our shared identities as transracial adoptees living together in harmony, most of the time, in the Mortell family forges a truly unbreakable bond. This bond is built off of the most mutual and shared experiences making our ways as outsiders into our family and into the greater communities we live in. I finally see and revel in the fact that my painful experiences facing racism,
exclusion, initially resenting my racial incongruity and ambiguity have become important memories that transcend into life lessons I have since taught my younger sisters. Again, blood relations and genetics do not hold a candle to the mirrored experiences and subsequent powerful unity Jackie, Ping, and I share as transracial adoptees. They’re the truest family members I have, and I’m thankful that we have each other every single day.

After adopting Ping, we all sojourned back to America – the land of the Mortell sisters. And so, our story that brought us all together started with adoption and ended with adoption.

Fin.
An Afterward or Two:

My autobiography draws from and extends previous scholarship regarding transracial adoption. However, I have observed a common shortcoming in the scholarship available. After pouring through published works by the scholars of adoption and transracial identities, I see that a majority of the scholarship focuses on the pre-adoption, such as critiquing the One-Child Policy and subsequently creating the historical rescue narrative or savior-complex, and the immediate act of adoption, such as proliferating the happily ever after moment that comes after the handoff of adoption. In this way, many of the scholars I have read fall into the trap of prolonging and reiterating the same ideologies regarding transracial adoption, as this wholly good and benevolent institution.

But, my life and experiences, as a (trans)racially ambiguous adoptee, only started post-adoption, and yet very few scholars choose to follow-up with and examine the life of a grown adoptee. David Eng, for example, dedicated a whole chapter to analyzing the life of an aggressive grown adoptee who wholly rejected her Korean origins and instead adamantly identified with her American upbringing. While this single example is needed in scholarship on the topic of transracial adoption and identities, it still remains starkly one-dimensional as this particular adoptee aggressively relinquished her Korean origins. I argue that scholarship on this subject ultimately lacks breadth and variety. In this way, my short autobiography works to fill in that hole and give insight into the racial ambiguity of transracial adoptees.

I ultimately decided to write this autobiography, because it enabled me to pick up where the scholars, bloggers, documentarians, media groups, newspaper articles, and numerous television shows left off. I decided to go against the grain and reject the
simplistic adoption narrative, and in order to do so I had to unravel and reveal personal anecdotes that debunk the myth of my supposed fairytale ending. This thesis, therefore, is my first jab at unpacking my life as a transracial adoptee, but it’s also a product of a bigger goal – to offer a different perspective on the process and institution of transracial adoption, one that is distinct from the countless scholarly works and raw statistics. This thesis was intended to be a fully personal recounting of my short slice of life and to shed light on some of the throes and triumphs that come with racial ambiguity and cultural transition. And, ultimately, I decided not to make an impossible choice between my white and Asian qualities, and, instead, to exist in the sweet spot – where my racial ambiguity opened up a gateway to my Chinese history and allowed me to validate both my U.S.-based and Asian-based experiences. This conscious choice to remain and, later, revel in ambiguity allowed me to long for my homeland without feeling any sense of guilt or betrayal to my white family and upbringing.

Through my mother’s support and capital, I have been financed to revisit China six separate times throughout my short quarter of life. And that is how, I assert, in the contemporary moment of 2018, an important shift in prevailing narratives and perceptions of transracial adoption has occurred. Past discourses regarding adoption, such as those that perpetuate the savior-complex, have run their course. Now, through family capital, adoptive families are reshaping and rewriting the discourse around transracial adoption and transracial adoptees by supporting their children to learn about Chinese culture and even sending them back to visit. My autobiography reflects this change: my mother’s initial drive to adopt was to simply selflessly and generously rescue an unwanted baby girl from the throes of a Chinese orphanage.
system, however she has since supported me to return a multitude of times in order to engage with my lost heritage, language, and customs in ways she knew she could never execute on her own. Because of her support, both emotional and financial, I was able to seek out my homeland and forge a connection to the people through my language skills and physicality. And thus, the very monetary power that once “rescued” me from the barbaric Chinese society is now funding my grand homecoming, my grand return. We, the adoptees, can rewrite our narratives (by refuting our origins shackled to a savior-complex), our stories (by reshaping the discourse of transracial adoption), and re-set mindsets regarding our histories (by unapologetically embracing our racial ambiguity.)

So, my final set of questions that I want to raise is: What do we do now? Where do we go from here? What will our generation, the generation comprised of the most transracial Chinese adoptees in history, do with our stories? How will we treat and remember this moment we made in history? Will we continue to let others speak for us, tell our stories for us, and examine our lives for us? Or will we take our lives into our own hands and tell our truth, for once, offline and out loud?

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As a transracial adoptee, I have been granted the wild life experience of straddling very different worlds and, in my own way, bring them together. But, and I know now for certain, I wouldn’t be where I am to this day without the weird, strange, and in my eyes domino effect of being adopted by a fiercely independent, matriarchal force of nature: Pat Mortell.
My life, unlike the photo above, is not in black and white. My life, or anyone’s for that matter, is not that simple. Here, I am depicted as blissfully enjoying an afternoon snack, and my mom is effortlessly glowing in our barely furnished first home, our ranch house on Devonshire Road. A lot of my life has changed since this photograph was taken: for starters, my family now lives in a new house, I have two sisters, and mom can no longer (physically) hold me up for support. I’ve grown up. In America, growing up entails becoming ever more independent, but I think it also means going back to your home to support those around you, to lift them up when they need it.

Mom, you’ve done everything in your power to invest in me and give me every opportunity, and in doing so you gave me a completely new life that would otherwise be wholly unobtainable. Most importantly, you afforded me a life of abundance with the best education on offer. It is through your motivation, pressure, and belief that education is paramount to a person’s life and growth that I was able to
study a topic that is, without a doubt, very important to me: transracial adoption. Through your support, I was able to research the institution and industry extensively and, in the end, learn to critique it. You actually empowered me to interrogate the very industry that brought us together, united us as a family, and granted me the bevvy of opportunities that I've been given and taken.

I think it's my time to be there for you. So, just say the word.

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When I was growing up and feeling kind of blue or having a bad day, Poppy would remind me, in his delightfully lyrical way, “Into each life some rain must fall. I'm just glad it's not falling in mine.” And for the longest time, I thought that was true. I thought that he was such a good, kind, and generous man that nothing bad would happen to him and no rain would ever befall his bliss. My life has had its grey days, its stormy nights, its thunderous moments when I thought the sky was surely falling, but all of that eventually came to an end and life would get better and easier, and I'd get back on track. But here I am again.

Right now, Poppy is dying. I’ve witnessed his regression in health for a couple years now. Two years ago, during the spring break of my sophomore year of college, Nanny passed away and left us, left Poppy. He hasn’t been the same since, and neither has my small, tethered-together family. My family, which once kept growing in abundance with more adopted children, is now losing people.

All of this is to say that I believe it was destiny, not chance or random coincidence, that I ended up in the Mortell family. This was where I belonged from the very beginning. And while I physically do not cohere to the background noise and scenery within which I’ve been raised, I know now, for certain, that my fate was not
to be a full-fledged Chinese girl. I was always meant and intended to be that girl who could straddle the line. I am supposed to be that girl who has faced and overcome exclusion from her homeland and hometown and carved out my own identity, one that I share with my two sisters.

I am dual. I am rightfully Chinese by blood. I am rightfully American by adoption. I am a Mortell, through and through, and despite our distinct DNA, ancestral history, and roots that tear our two worlds apart, I know now that I have loved this family that took me in more than the family that gave me a heartbeat. And so, 22 years later, I’ve concluded that my life, in no way, was or is random; there have been meticulous choices and actions of other’s that brought me into the existence I am currently living in and shaped me in the most significant ways possible. These people and their choices gave me the opportunity and the voice to write down my story, this story:

My story started with my origins that defined me as a fragile and lovable thing, an abandoned girl who needed a healing home, this Jiao Jiao. That was where my origins lay: in the hope of finding the right groove, the right niche, the right family within this chaotic world that could care for something that is very fragile and just the slightest bit lovable. After my adoption and being raised by my family, I know I am more than that. I’m not really Jiao Jiao anymore; I am Janie. I am the recipient of a family heirloom, and I am endowed with an unspoken responsibility to keep up the Mortell legacy. I know I want to see that through. I will always and permanently be a Mortell. No more name changing, identity shifting, or cultural confusion. I’ve finally made my own place.
Dedicated to and for Poppy:

You always would remind me, “Into each life some rain must fall.”

And now I want to tell you, “I’m glad it’s not falling in yours.”

Thank you for guiding me throughout our years together.
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