

Lin Xiu-Tzi was born in Taishan Township, and was brought to her grandma who lived in Shulin Township when she was three. She wasn't taken back by her mother until she turned eight.

Lin Xiu-Tzi rarely told others about her childhood, she did not want to talk about it at all. Shu-Mei and Shu-Li learned fragmentary information about their mother's youth from few relatives, such as a distant uncle still living in Taishan. Their root was as obscure as drifting clouds and they did not care to find its origins. As Kai-Hseun grew older and enjoyed having extensive conversations with his mother, Lin Xiu-Tzi began recollecting her stories about the time before she got married. Her childhood therefore was drawn out not unlike a pencil sketch.

Lin Xiu-Tzi was raised by her grandma for five years mainly because her father, whose image was faint. The only thing she could remember about him was that he got drunk every day right after noon. One time when her mother was leaving her in Shulin, Xiu-Tzi cried, resisting being left behind. Xiu-Tzi's grandma said to her: "Kids all want to be with their mothers, don't they? But your vagabond father once hit your head viciously with a wooden board. I was told that you fell like a bowling pin and passed out right away. Your mother was too afraid of her husband to save your life, she cried all the time but had to go away as he ordered. TheIt suddenly fell quiet outside, except the cries of cicadas. Minutes later Xiu-Tzi ran outside and saw her mother walking at the intersection of a road and the ridges of fields, her head low and her hands seemingly wiping something off from her face. A box of cookies scattered around the ground, mother chickens led baby chickens pecking at them. Xiu-Tzi grasped a handful of earth from the ground and cast it toward them: "Eating, eating, eating, all you know is nothing but eating." Frightened, all the chickens leaped away.

Xiu-Tzi heard grandma complain behind her: "She never asked you to come back for years until I had raised you up and made you a good helper. How convenient for her. Is it fair? Is it fair?"

Xiu-Tzi threw the rest of the earth in her hand further toward the escaping chickens and repeated her grandma: "Is it fair? Is it fair?"

One year later, Xiu-Tzi's mother came again with an elderly man and two policemen. Grandma's attitude this time was different, she sat on the edge of bed, holding Xiu-Tzi closely to her.

The elderly man spoke first: "Auntie, I respectfully defer to your honorable position in our village. We came because we all know that you've helped raise Xiu-Tzi and everyone in this neighborhood would give you a thumbs up for being so benevolent. But legally Xiu-Tzi is still her mother's daughter, she has the priority of custody, not you."

Grandma said: "I don't know anything about laws, I protect my granddaughter because her parents almost killed her. It is a simple reason. My spineless daughter wants her back now without thinking how we two have depended on each other over these years. If she had sense of responsibility she shouldn't have betrayed her own little girl in the first place. "

"Mom, you know I had no choice because of my evil husband. . . "

"Leave us alone."

The negotiation of mother and daughter was deadlocked. The stout policeman tried to mediate: “Xiu-Tzi is only moving back to Taishan with your daughter, it’s less than one-hour bus ride, she can come back to be with her grandma every weekend. Xiu-Tzi is eight years old now, you can’t keep her from going to school, she should go to the elementary school near her mother’s home.”

“I want to be with my sweet granddaughter until I die. That’s my only wish.”

“Mom, why don’t you move in with us?”

“Impossible! You’d remarry, you won’t be a widow for long. Who can foresee what kind of torture my granddaughter is going to suffer from her stepfather? By that time I won’t have the energy to save her.”

Xiu-Tzi, who has been silent all the time, began to wail agitatedly. She held grandma’s torso tightly and all the adults around were dumbfounded. After some moment, Xiu-Tzi’s mother finally spoke up:

“Mom, I respect your decision not to move with me now, but as so many people around to be my witnesses, I promise that you can come any day. And I’d yield my bedroom to you without your asking. If I fail to fulfill my promise I’d hope I’m killed by thunderbolts!” She continued: “You did not remarry for me, I swear I won’t remarry for Xiu-Tzi.”

Grandma looked at her daughter, saying: “Don’t take such an oath too early. You could be choked by your own oath and no one would sympathize you. I am clear that you are pregnant for months now. Others might not be able to tell it but I had been a midwife, you can’t deceive my eyes.”

Everyone focused their eyes on the belly of Xiu-Tzi’s mother, and she denied the accusation eagerly by shaking her head. vagabond should be punished by god’s thunderbolts! Who on earth could be so cruel to hit his own little girl? Anyway all kids should be with their mothers, shouldn’t they?” She wiped her tears off with sleeves.

“What is a vagabond?” Lin Xiu-Tzi was too young to understand hatred, she was curious about the father she hardly knew.

“Vagabond is. . . a loser that is good for nothing. They are gutless outside but at home they bully their wives. Xiu-Tzi, do not marry a man like that. Swear to god that you’d never marry a loser like your father.”

Lin Xiu-Tzi still did not understand what the words “vagabond” or “loser” meant, but she swore to her grandma anyway. “Then, grandma, what happened?”

“Thanks to the woman living next door, who carried you to her home. She massaged your chest and breathed for you so you were brought back to life. I called my son and several strong men to accompany me to confront your father and take you away from him after I heard this. I carried you without saying a word to him right after we arrived your home, the men with me put their hands on their hips and stared at your father fiercely. Your dad was such a coward he did not even dare to fart. Your poor mother did not know what to do except cry, I wanted to take her back as well, but married daughters are like spilled water. If she

went back to her parents, her family would get the cold-shoulder from her neighbors. “At that time grandma’s days were also difficult. She had been widowed not long after Xiu-Tzi’s mother was born. Later grandma adopted a son who she raised by enduring much hardship, but the son went back to his real mother when he grew up. Out of her chagrin, grandma moved out of town and rented a rice paddy field to support herself by farming.

When Lin Xiu-Tzi was taken to her grandma, she was still a rice farmer and Xiu-Tzi learned how to set fire to cook rice or feed chickens and ducks when she had barely turned four years old. Xiu-Tzi’s mother would come to see her as often as she could and bring her candies or clothes each time, but she was always in a big hurry. Grandma was cold to Xiu-Tzi’s mother, she never treated her to even a small meal. Before she was leaving, she always carried Xiu-Tzi to take a walk around the paths among fields and said to her in tears: “I am sorry, I am so sorry. I owe you one thousand, ten thousand apologies. . . I promise you that one day I will take you back, now you stay with grandma and wait for me.” She’d cry out agitatedly after saying this and after squeezing a wrinkled dollar bill into her daughter’s palm, she said goodbye to her little girl at an intersection.

Grandma aged especially fast when Xiu-Tzi was seven-year old but she still refused to move near her foster son. Xiu-Tzi took over most of the house work and cooked meals for hired helpers during harvest seasons. She delivered their lunches by bicycle.

Most of the temporary workers were from other towns, they wondered: “Why does this little girl have a lovely face but such an unusually flat back side of her head?”

“It’s her vagabond father’s work. A man treating his own daughter like this should be drown in a ditch so the justice of god will be known.”

Strangely enough, Lin Xiu-Tzi’s father really fell in a stinky ditch under the bridge near a temple. No one knew he had been lying with his head down in the black mud where nothing survived but worms and red bugs until several days later, when a tropical fish vendor came to find some red bugs to feed his fishes, he found a pair of legs were pointing upward from the ditch. Lin Xiu-Tzi’s mother had become used to not seeing her drunkard husband for days but never expected he had really drunken himself to death. She rushed to see him and her heartbroken cries were so loud that the whole street could hear her.

“He deserves such a bad death, it’s the retribution from god.” When grandma heard about the news, that was what she said. Even when Xiu-Tzi’s mother wanted to bring Xiu-Tzi to her father’s funeral, grandma refuted: “Is this man worthy of his daughter? Does he deserve his little girl’s attendance at his funeral?”

Years later Lin Xiu-Tzi could recall that not long after her father’s death someone told her because her father died in a headstand position, he was buried vertically with his coffin turned up ninety degrees. Lin Xiu-Tzi never heard of such a burial again throughout her entire life, so she figured it must be a bitter joke from their neighbors. Lin Xiu-Tzi felt embarrassed to find out the truth so she kept her wonderment to herself for the rest of her life.

After the funeral, Lin Xiu-Tzi's mother came to her own mother and asked to take her daughter back: "Mom, I was afraid to ask you before my worthless husband died, but now he is gone and Xiu-Tzi is supposed to go to school. I won't have problem raising her by working for a noodle stall in the street where I live. We will be okay if we live thriftily. And when you want to retire you are welcome to move in with me. You can rely on me if you don't want to grow rice, there is talk that the prices of crops may drop off quickly in the future. "

"I am not so unfortunate that I need to depend on my daughter. . . I'd be disgraced if I did."

"But you don't want to go to my brother, either. . ."

"I am dependent neither on him nor on you, I count on my granddaughter."

"Xiu-Tzi is my daughter. . ."

"It's shameless for you to say that. When the god-damned man hit her with a board, what did you do to protect her? Your daughter had died that day, you should find your daughter in hell instead of here! What made you think you have the right to take her from me?"

"Mom, you can't do this to me, Xiu-Tzi is my flesh and blood...."

"You are still able to give birth, you can remarry. Don't even think you can take Xiu-Tzi away. The times have changed, widows don't maintain widows for long like in my time....."

"Mom. . ."

"Go! Leave us alone. I told you not to marry the god-cursed man and you wouldn't listen. Now you are paying the price as a widow. . ."

"You are a widow, too!" She murmured.

Hearing this, grandma grasped a bowl on the table and threw it toward Xiu-Tzi's mother, the bowl hit the wall and the tea in it splashed over before it fell to the floor and shattered into pieces. Xiu-Tzi's mother ran out of the house but called to her from a distance:

"Xiu-Tzi, my sweet daughter, mommy came to bring you home as I promised, tell me do you want to come with me?"

Grandma yelled back: "Go to hell!"

"Xiu-Tzi, come with mom!"

Grandma seized Xiu-Tzi's arm, forcing her to renounce her mother: "Say what I say loudly." So Xiu-Tzi shouted toward the door: "Go to hell!"

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