

*The Little Joys: A Novel*An Excerpt from Chapter 1: *In the Beginning*

In every alley, amidst the children’s laughter, the mindless chitchat of the women weaving in front of their courtyards, and the curses of the old men playing chess, Mao’s words settled. At times, it seemed like even the wind was spreading his reign, whispering his teachings. Indeed, his words dictated everything the people did. There were late night studies on the *Book of Red Jewels*, a collection of Mao’s famous sayings that was dyed crimson by the blood of the countless who lost their lives in the Cultural Revolution, and workers could only order food in the cafeteria by saying one of Mao’s quotes first. Sometime in October 1970, halfway into his regime, I was born.

Age 0: October 1970, Hebei, China

“嫁出去的女儿，泼出去的水。”

“A married woman is like water that’s been poured out.”

When my mother’s due date began to approach, she received a one-month maternity leave from her job and, customarily, went to my grandparents’ house on my father’s side: once a woman gets married, she no longer belongs to her biological family and instead, is part of the husband’s family. However, men would always stay in their village unless they had jobs elsewhere. This resulted in everyone, except for the women who married into the village, having the same last name and being related at least loosely.

My birth was in no way spectacular: birth is nothing to celebrate when what cuts through the pain and haziness of labor is the stress of having to feed another mouth, especially a girl’s mouth. My mother delivered me on the *kang* bed-stove in my grandparents’ house. I was never sure of when my birthday was because while my passport read 16 Oct. 1970, my mother told me no one actually kept track of the exact date. She also said that she did not cry because of the pain or because she endured it without my father’s

support since he could not leave his post in the mountains, but because she found out that I, her first child, was a girl.

A month later, at the end of her maternity leave, she was strongly against bringing me back with her to her job. My grandparents already had five grandkids to take care of and refused to add another burden. Out of options, my mother sent me to live with her widowed mother, Fu, a decision that was highly unusual and seemed more like a gamble since Fu had no responsibility to help her anymore. Fortunately, with a monthly stipend of ¥5, Fu agreed to take me in.

Age 4: April 1975, Hebei, China

“春雨润如酥。”

“The spring rains are as smooth as butter.”

The rooster joined in with the pitter-patter of rain to create nature’s choir. The drizzle was as soft as feathers and raindrops melted in my palms; the sprouting leaves of the willows painted its surroundings, the fog and rain, slightly green too. It was a delicate landscape of pastels like baby green and baby blue. I balanced on my tiptoes, grabbing onto the end of a willow branch and tore it off. It was perfect for what I had in mind: designing a whistle. It was common knowledge for kids at the time that by removing the wood inside a branch and leaving only the skin, we could blow in it and create notes that were more like the warbles of a newborn bird that just realized it could sing. I spent hours mastering the technique and I’m quite proud to say I’m an expert in making these whistles. With this, I joined the rain and the rooster as a band that combined man, animal, and nature.

Age 6: June 1977, Hebei, China

“骄阳似火。”

“The sun blazes like a ball of fire.”

It seemed like just a few days ago I was enjoying the relaxing chill of the spring rain when suddenly it was the dead of summer. I was only six but already nearing the end of my first school year. I started school a year early because Fu wanted me out of her sight as soon as possible. At noon, when I came back home from school for lunch break and a nap, the sun was at its peak and tirelessly shining down on the dry land. Everyone was moving sluggishly. Even my neighbor’s mutt, who would always greet me energetically when I walked past, was laying on the ground and could only muster up the energy to wag his tail at me. The rooster that was crowing all throughout dawn was suddenly quiet and the hens ceased their gossiping and only let out clucks that were few and far between. After eating a slice of cold corn bread, I lay down on the *kang* and stared up at the drab cement ceiling. Everything was quiet except for the cicadas, whose rhythmic chirping was the last thing I heard before I drifted off to sleep.

Age 9: October 1979, Hebei, China

“秋风萧瑟。”

“*Fall winds bring desolation.*”

Sweet potatoes, in my memory, were the definition of magic and fantasy: their stalks were something I could use to play dress-up with. By pinching off and leaving parts of the stem on in an alternating pattern, there would be bead-shaped parts left, creating either an earring, a bracelet, or a necklace depending on the length. I would join the other girls who were of equal rank, compare jewelry, and act like royalty. I was part of the top of the hierarchy since both of my parents had jobs outside the small village. Some of my friends of the same status were daughters of country teachers who were uncertified but graduated from high school. One dad was even a barefoot doctor, meaning that he was a high school graduate with some training in medicine. He was the most respected in this village because of his prowess as a doctor: He once diagnosed me with Hepatitis in a matter of minutes because, as he explained, my pee was too yellow. However, in reality, the only similarity I had with a monarch was

isolation. I cherished the rare moments where I was accepted by those who were also at the top of the pyramid. With them I felt like the illegitimate child of a noble family since they all shared a last name different from mine, a fact they would not hesitate to point out-- kids can be unabashedly cruel sometimes. However, I knew that they were only telling the truth: I didn't belong in the village and I should not be living with my mother's family. Hoping that they would continue to accept me in their crowd, I always wore a smile and obeyed their every wish. It helped that my uncle, one of Fu's sons, worked for a government administrative office nearby and would occasionally drive the office's jeep to the village where all the kids would congregate and stare since we only saw a car about twice each year. I would secretly let my friends touch the car even though my uncle never even allowed me to do so because he could not risk damaging the car and ruining his career.

Age 10: December 1980, Hebei, China

“张灯结彩。”

“To hang lanterns and flags.”

Although there was still one more month until the Chinese New Year, everyone had already begun preparations, including nature if the powdery white snow was any indication. In contrast to the stark whiteness of the ground, the villagers hung up couplets written with opaque black ink on vibrant pieces of red paper. Hanging from rooftops across the streets were colorful triangular banners that added festivities to the village. I jumped from rooftop to rooftop, helping to tighten the flags around the roofs. To practice for when I would have to make dumplings for New Year's Eve, I used mud to make mini ones and left them on the windowsills to dry. While doing so, I counted down the days until my mother would pick me up to celebrate the New Year with my father's family-- my real family, as everyone told me.

I would think about their words at night in the *kang*, and the pitch black all around me could not offer any distractions. The night sky here was different than the one now. It was one of pure desolation

but also of immense wonder. No matter how dark the sky was, there was always the subdued light from the pinpricks of stars and the jade moon. It was as if nature was telling me that there is always light in the dark, even if it might be hidden by clouds or distorted by snow and rain.

Age 10: January 1981, Hebei, China

“团圆饭，又称年夜饭。”

“Family reunion dinner, also called the family dinner on New Year’s Eve.”

The sound of firecrackers told us that the New Year was truly here. Now, I spent more time standing at the entrance of the village, looking for my mother riding over the horizon on her bike to reunite me with my real family. I stood on my tiptoes and craned my neck to see further into the distance, but just like how it takes longer for water to boil when you look at it, it seemed like I was waiting for someone who would never appear. I knew that Fu’s sons and their families would be arriving soon to celebrate New Year’s Day and I prayed that I would leave before they got here.

One day, at dusk, after another disheartening long wait, I was assuaged by the lanterns the adults passed out to the kids. Holding our beloved lanterns, we, as explorers, carefully made our way through the thick brush to collect hay. Once again, after finishing our chores, we played tag and pretended to be wild animals as we tackled each other and proceeded to roll around in the dust. Famished and tired, we trod back to civilization, not knowing that was where the real beast was. Joking and laughing all the way there, I was too distracted to see the figure standing outside Fu’s house.

why do i write?

ask the autumn winds

that whispered their stories to me when
my hands were about this wide
i told them i didn't speak their language
then there was tinkling laughter
and i grasped for the invisible bells
they told me to stop and look
and be the one to turn the abstract
into the tangible

ask the moon

i've known her since forever
and some parts of her are some parts of me
but i understood her in 9th grade when
i saw her running from the sun at 4:30 am
she, too, was scared of time,
the equalizing factor for all who have lived
she told me to write for just causes
to fight for equality in my earthly life

ask the puddles

that remain long after
the rest of the ground has dried
they are portals to the sky
where i can be with the clouds
when i stepped forward, the illusions rippled away
but the visions stayed
they told me to write about fantasies
and what could be

ask the beijing air

it's well-versed in chemistry
and knows the stories of 21.5 million people
it'll tell you about the bright-eyed girl who will never
reveal that sometimes she can still smell
the musty, metallic taste of the smog
it told me to write about home and family in all its forms
and to seal memories in plastic wrap
with the leftover dumplings