

## **Friends of a Lifetime, Fulfillment between Two Worlds**

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### **Chapter 1 The Devastating News**

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Again it was a clear, scorching summer day in Taichung. I decided to carry out a plan that had been put off for ages—buy some Brazilian jasmine and soil and make the already beautiful courtyard more beautiful. After putting on my carnation pink working clothes, I drove toward a vegetarian restaurant in the suburbs, humming to myself. I planned to eat lunch first and then go to a shop nearby.

As I was savoring the hot delicious truffle pizza, the cell phone rang. It was from Rendong. “Lanxing, you got a minute?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Xueji passed away yesterday.”

“What?! How come?!” I was thunderstruck, wishing she had been kidding! But she was Xueji’s best friend. She couldn’t be joking. I put down the food in my hands and asked, a voice I could hardly hear myself, “Why did it happen so suddenly?”

She said slowly, but clearly, “She suddenly got a headache on the twenty-third, so she called an ambulance and went to the hospital emergency room by herself. Later, she was moved to a room. In the middle of the night, the nurse found that her heartbeat and breathing had stopped . . .”

“What!!!” I screamed.

“The doctor administered CPR immediately,” Rendong continued, “and her heartbeat was restored. Then she was put on a respirator to help her breathe. The diagnosis was that large amounts of blood came out of her cerebellum. The doctor suspected the cancer had spread to the head.”

“Th . . . this . . . couldn’t possibly be true,” I stammered.

“Because Xueji did not like to get too much radiation, afraid that it might affect her body functions, she hadn’t had any skull X-rays. So both she and her attending physician were not aware that the cancer had spread to the brains.”

I was still in shock. Why did it happen so abruptly? Only a week ago, she just had her artistic photographs taken! Also a week ago, she was still shopping for a pot! We were talking on the phone that night! It was hard to believe that she had been gone! I had not yet prepared myself for this. I had not yet said goodbye to her . . .

### **Chapter 2 Xueji’s Artistic Photographs**

“Xueji’s husband, daughters, sons-in-law, and grandkids have all come to Taiwan. Yesterday we lost her.” Rendong said.

“Where’s the mourning hall? I’d like to pay my respect to her and offer my condolences to her family.” I said anxiously.

“At a funeral home in Taipei. It’s already past two. Could you come tomorrow instead?”

“Well, OK,” I answered reluctantly, heaving a sigh. I did not want to wait, but considering the possibility that I might need her assistance when I arrived in Taipei, I had to agree.

“This evening,” Rendong continued, “Xueji’s girls and I are going to a studio in Banqiao to examine Xueji’s artistic photos—”

“I’d like to look at the photos, too,” I interjected. “May I come with you?” Xueji had long wanted to have artistic photographs taken. While she was finally doing it, I was not able to be there. In addition, they were also her very last pictures. I wanted to see how they came out. If I did not come today, I felt I might never get a chance to see them.

“Let me ask the girls and see if it’s OK. Hold on.”

While waiting for Rendong’s call, I, with trembling hands, texted Xiazhu and Liuqing on Line, relaying the devastating news regarding Xueji’s passing. Xiazhu replied immediately. He was very surprised. We decided to go to Taipei together the next day. Liuqing was living in San Diego. Because of time difference, it might take a few hours before he read the message.

Rendong called back. The reply was I was welcome to come along. I felt relieved. Xueji’s death was so unexpected and I was not prepared to stay in Taipei overnight; therefore, I decided to come home after eyeing the pictures and go to Taipei and say goodbye to Xueji the following day.

I drove toward home directly from the restaurant in order to change before catching the earliest high-speed train. On the way, I finally collapsed. I couldn’t focus my attention. I clutched the wheel tightly, my tears rolling down, blocking my vision. I could not help but recall Xueji’s phone call at 9:00 on the night of the twenty-first, two days before she went into coma . . .

### **Chapter 3 Which Pot Is Better?**

“Lanxing,” Xueji’s voice came from the other end of the line, very gentle, “I’m at Top City, browsing. There’re three pots here. All of them look good, but I can’t decide which one to buy. What should I do?”

I was not there. How could I help her choose one? I sighed and answered, “Get the one you like.” I told myself to be patient, but I knew my tone was apparently impatient.

“But if I get one, what am I gonna do with it when I’m going back to Japan?”

With growing annoyance, I said, “Then don’t buy any.”

“Would you like to get one? Would you like to come look?” Her voice was still very soft, unaffected by my response.

I tried to control my temper and said, “I don’t want to buy any.”

“Right, you don’t cook.”

“Right!” I almost snapped. She finally remembered!

After a long silence, she said, “Then I’ll take one more look.” She was not upset or even angry at all.

I hung up and couldn’t control myself any longer. I was not there. How did I know which pot was better! It was already 9:00 and this woman was still shopping! What was more ridiculous was that she wanted me to come keep her company! It was totally absurd!

### **Chapter 4 The Song of Remorse**

Days later, I remembered Xueji's phone call about the pots. I tried to call her, curious if she bought any. The phone rang a few times, but she did not answer it, so I hung up, shrugging my shoulders. I did not know, however, that at that time she had been in a coma, all alone in the freezing ICU, and was not able to answer the phone . . .

The remorse that gripped me was strong, a deep sadness laced with guilt.

That night, browsing around alone at the department store, Xueji must have gotten exhausted and reached out to me for help. Nevertheless, I was so dumb and only cared about my own feelings. I should have driven there instantly and helped her pick a pot! And taken her home!

I was so sorry that our friendship had ended so abruptly and terribly! I was awful! Cold and uncaring! I was no friend.

## **Chapter 5 The High-Speed Rail Station**

As I reached home, wiping the tears away, I hastily took off the pink clothes and put on a black crewneck knee-length dress. Then I hopped on a taxi and raced toward the high-speed rail station in Wuri.

The expansive hall of the station was full of throngs of tourists. I rushed to the ticket counter and, fortunately, was able to buy a half-priced ticket for the earliest train bound for Banqiao—5:08. Nevertheless, I needed to wait for an hour, so I got some walnut bread and a tall latte at one of the shops and hid myself in a deserted corner of the courtyard. Having the kind of pastry and coffee had been a must to me whenever I came to the station. Today, however, the food was tasteless. Lowering my head, I tried to hide my tears, and yet they kept streaming down the face.

Where was Xueji now? Still in the ICU? At home? Or had gone to Taipei with her body? Was she still in pain? Or had been free from the unrelenting bind of the cancer?

## **Chapter 6 The Classmates from Elementary School**

We three women—Xueji, Rendong, and I—and two men—Xiazhu and Liuqing—had been friends since university. Xueji, Rendong, and I entered Tunghai University, in the suburbs of Taichung, in the same year—1971. I was an English major and they Chinese Literature majors. One year later, Xiazhu and Liuqing were also admitted to Tunghai, majoring in architecture.

Xueji and I, however, had met much earlier. It dated back to our childhood. We were in the same class—with only girls—when we were fifth and sixth graders at one of the famous elementary schools in Taichung. Xueji and I were not friends, though; we had our own besties. At that time, our homeroom teacher offered an additional evening class after school twice a week at my house. Although Xueji came to class every time, we were still not close. My group was quiet while hers was boisterous. Whenever there was a break or classes were over, I could hear waves of laughter from them.

I did not have a sense of beauty then. I never felt Xueji was pretty. I only noticed her uniform was unlike ours. The color—white—was the same, and yet the material and cutting were different, especially the belt. Probably carefully picked somewhere, it was extraordinarily thin.

Her family was also different. Her father, Uncle Bai, who held a doctoral degree in medicine from Tokyo, was a renowned gynecologist in Taichung. Her mother, Auntie Bai, had a taste in clothing. We often saw her, with high heels and a handbag on a forearm, waiting for Xueji outside the classroom. It was said that they were very rich.

After elementary school, Xueji and I went to different junior and senior high schools. Both of us were living in Taichung, but we did not connect with each other. It was the vibrant campus of our university on a golden September day that brought the two of us together.

## **Chapter 7 A Goddess**

Xueji was as beautiful as a goddess—a slender figure, impeccable complexion, delicate nose and sensual lips. Her eyes were the tenderest, most beautiful ones I had ever seen. Rock Hudson, a former Hollywood movie star, once admired the eyes of Elizabeth Taylor, an equally famous film actor, by saying, “Her eyes are so enchanting that you just want to jump right in.” To me, Xueji’s eyes were so mesmerizing that only those of a goddess descending from the heaven could be compared.

A real beauty is not just beautiful in terms of facial features, skin, and figure. If the temperament and carriage are commonplace, she should not be called a beauty. Xueji’s charm was natural and unique. She always stood out in a crowd of girls.

Compared with her, I was ashamed of my own appearance. I had a face ravaged by acne and walked with a slouch. The only aspects I beat her were my English ability and height. However, I was only 2.5 centimeters taller.

## **Chapter 8 The Time at Tunghai**

We had not seen each other for years, and now we went to the same university. In addition, our dormitory rooms were close. Therefore, we became good friends very quickly.

In our sophomore year, we, Rendong, and three other girls from the Departments of Chinese and History—Zilian, Haixian, and Liuli—moved into the same dormitory room—number 1026. Facing a small wood of handsome acacias, it was a brightly-lit white-walled rectangular room with a lovely balcony in the back. We six girls took the same required courses and electives, had early dinner at school cafeterias together, and went to bed at the same time. We could not stop chatting.

That year we made friends with six male students—all architecture majors—living together in a boys’ dormitory room. Xiazhu and Liuqing were two of them. Because the six men were one year younger than us, we twelve people called ourselves sisters and brothers. From then on, most of us often went together to the Western pop music concerts performed by Liuqing’s band at Mingxian Hall on campus.

One day, it was Zilian’s twentieth birthday. That evening, to our pleasant surprise, she brought back to the dormitories a pot of fried rice noodles, which was still warm, concocted by her mother. To celebrate Zilian’s birthday, we twelve sisters and brothers did something we had never done before. We brought the rice noodles to the rooftop of the Music Department Building, not far from the girls’ dormitories. We remembered to bring a ladle, but completely forgot bowls and chopsticks. As a result, each of us used our own palms as a bowl. Smelling the sweet aroma of the food, we dug into it and enjoyed every bite.

Today, forty-six years later, I had long forgotten if that night the moon had been bright, the stars had been glimmering or if we had sung the birthday song; however, I had always remembered one thing. That year—1973—Taiwan was still under martial law. As the imposition of martial law usually involved curfews, the girls’ dormitories also had one—10:40, when the only entrance, a Venetian red moon gate, of the dormitories would be shut and locked. We six girls had been well-behaved and got good grades at school. That night, nevertheless, as if we had gone crazy, we missed the curfew intentionally, planning to do what those girls did after their dates—enter the dormitories by climbing the wall.

## **Chapter 9 The 1026 Adventure Team**

The walls surrounding the perimeter of the dormitories were about two meters high. They were built with fired bricks, which were arranged in such a way that there was a big hole between every two. To an

athlete, climbing this kind of walls was very easy. Nevertheless, to us girls, who only studied and never exercised, it was quite a challenge. And so, we first searched and discovered the easiest part of a wall and then climbed clumsily and slowly over it one by one and sneaked into our room. We even made it back before the night-time checking! We patted our chests and breathed a sigh of relief, feeling lucky that no one saw us.

Anything can happen, however. The next day, Ms. Li, the superintendent of the girls' dormitories, who never went out, but seemed to know everything, summoned us to her spacious but darkened office. Nervously, we stood in a line before her like private soldiers waiting to be punished. As always, she was clad in a loose-fitting dark-colored qipao and sitting in a high-back rattan armchair. With her forever gentle voice, she asked us why we missed the curfew and climbed the wall the night before. We were so ashamed that we put our heads down, speechless. Finally, she smiled and said that we were good kids and that it was the first time we made a mistake. She let us go free.

Liuqing transferred to the Department of Industrial Engineering at the end of the year. He and Xiazhu, who was still an architecture major, continued to be close friends.

## **Chapter 10 Piano? Electric Piano?**

Xueji's home was near mine, only four blocks away. It was a two-unit, four-story condominium at the end of the building. Even today, I could still recall the number of the house—278. Xueji and I often visited each other when we were in university. I was from a big family and Xueji a small one. Furthermore, she and her parents were all nice and hospitable. Therefore, I visited Xueji more often than she visited me.

Xueji's good looks were inherited from the tall, handsome Uncle Bai. In addition, she was the only girl of her parents' three children. It was no wonder that she was the apple of Uncle Bai's eye.

One day, when we were in our freshman or sophomore year, I was visiting them. Xueji suddenly sat down close to Uncle Bai right in front of me and started to whine to him, asking him to buy her an electric piano. At that time playing this kind of musical instrument was popular. Uncle Bai smiled and said she already had an upright piano. Xueji explained that she was now interested in taking electric piano lessons. Uncle Bai turned her down gently by suggesting they talk about it some other time.

Days later, I went to Xueji's home again and saw in a corner of the living room, the old gloss black piano had been replaced by a giant brand new wooden electric piano! I couldn't believe my eyes. Trying to keep the excitement from her voice, Xueji whispered to me, "It's worth one hundred and sixty thousand New Taiwan dollars."

## **Chapter 11 The Story of Catching the Train in Taipei**

Xueji's parents bought her a huge condo on Dunhua South Road in Taipei. When we were seniors, Xueji invited me to visit her there for two or three days.

I seldom went to Taipei and did not know that because it was a much bigger city than Taichung, I needed to leave home much earlier for the train station to take the train back to Taichung. I imagined that if I left Xueji's house and walked for twenty minutes prior to the departure of the train, I would definitely catch the train, just as what I usually did in Taichung. In addition, I already had the ticket in my pocket.

On the morning when I was supposed to return to Taichung from Xueji's condo, Xueji explained the traffic situation and suggested that I leave early. Astonished, I hastily grabbed my backpack and dashed out to catch the bus for the station. She was worried that I might get lost; she gripped her bag and came along.

The sluggish, rocking bus we were on finally pulled over at the stop of the station. I jumped off the vehicle and ran as quickly as I possibly could. Xueji ran behind me. I did not have time to glance over my shoulder to see if she was keeping up. I could only hear her hastily giving directions as to where to turn right or left and which train to take.

By the time I saw my train, it had been belching and rumbling, starting to depart. I sprinted up and narrowly managed to jump aboard, catching my breath. Then, I saw Xueji running strenuously side by side with the train I was on, waving her right hand to me and mouthing bye-bye.

## Chapter 12 Luther Wenyu

The train was full. There were even a handful of passengers with their luggage standing in the aisles. Grabbing the ticket in my hand, I felt fortunate that I had bought it before coming to Taipei.

Walking through a few cars, I reached my seat. To my surprise, sitting right in front of me was Luther Wenyu, a classmate and buddy of Liuqing's. Liuqing often talked about him, but I hardly knew him. I felt I still needed to say hello. Therefore, I greeted him by calling him his name. He was a little surprised. Then, he gave me a forced smile and looked out the window. Feeling odd, I sat in my seat.

After I arrived home, I called Xueji long distance, thanking her for her hospitality and seeing me off at the train station. I also told her I ran into Luther Wenyu.

She chuckled and asked me, "Did you call his name?"

"Yes," I answered, confused by the unusual question.

"What did you call him?"

"Luther Wenyu. Why?" I asked, getting more confused.

She burst out laughing and could not stop.

Totally bewildered, I asked her, "What's up? What's so funny?"

Trying to catch her breath, she finally explained, "His surname is Wen. Yu's his given name. Liuqing calls him *Loser* Wenyu, not *Luther* Wenyu!" Then she continued laughing.

"Oh, my god! I thought Luther was his English name!" I screamed, feeling very embarrassed.

At the end, I joined Xueji and we laughed our heads off.

## Chapter 13 The Best Friends

Although Xueji and I were close friends, even besties—we almost went everywhere together and shared secrets with each other, I had to admit that deep down in my heart, I was jealous of her beautiful appearance and popularity. Whenever we were together, even though I was 2.5 centimeters taller, she was always the center of attention. She would always walk to the side of the man, if there was any man walking with us. I felt as though I were just her entourage. The worst moment, which happened often, was when a man was gazing at her admiringly. I did not know if Xueji ever noticed how I felt; however, I always tried to hide it.

In spite of all that, Xueji was a hospitable person, very nice to me. Whenever I was visiting her, she would put coffee and tea and lots of snacks on the table for me and invited me to have lunch or dinner with her and her family. Nonetheless, I just couldn't understand one thing. Sometimes she forgot that I was around. There was a good example. Once I was in her house, but she let me sit alone in the enormous

living room for twenty minutes. I did not know what to do, wondering if I should leave. Then I found she was having a chat with her mother in her parents' room.

Xueji's looks and attraction to men sometimes caused other women's jealousy and gossip. Being her bestie, I, having a strong sense of justice, would always stand up for her.

I had mixed feelings about Xueji. Nevertheless, I often told myself that she had a good personality and that she had no intention to hurt anyone. I should be understanding. And every time I was tolerant and forgiving.

## **Chapter 14 The Bride**

After Xueji graduated from university, Uncle Bai used his connections and a local newspaper in Taichung, therefore, gave her a job offer. Now I couldn't remember what kind of job it was. Anyway, Xueji was thrilled and looking forward to starting working. Probably on her first working day, a colleague of hers, attracted to her, started to find excuses to come near her. It happened so often that she began to feel annoyed. Finally, she couldn't bear it anymore and quit the job. She worked there for only one week. And since then, she had never worked again.

One year later, Xueji was introduced, by a matchmaker, to Mushan, a young man, who came from Taipei and was now studying medicine in Fukuoka, Japan. Mushan fell in love with Xueji at first sight, which was not surprising, and started running after her passionately. He often wrote her letters in beautiful handwriting.

One day, I was visiting Xueji. She showed me a shoulder bag made with a special fabric. It was exquisite and classical, just flown in from Fukuoka. Gently feeling the fabric with her hands, she could not help smiling and said, "I'm glad it's not a plane model." Xueji fell in love for the first time.

A few months later, on April second, 1977, which I now still remembered, they were getting married in Taipei. Rendong and I went to the wedding.

Just several days before the ceremony, unfortunately, Uncle Bai fell ill and was hospitalized. He was very disappointed not to be able to see his daughter tie the knot.

Early that pleasant wedding morning, Xueji had her makeup done and put on a high-collared long-sleeved wedding dress, a matching hat-shaped headdress, and sliver high heels. Next, we got on a taxi and headed for the hospital. When we arrived, Xueji jumped off the taxi and ran into the sliding glass doors of the building. I hastily reached down and picked up the train of her dress from the ground and ran after her. We ignored the curious long stares of the doctors, nurses, and patients on the way.

Then, Xueji pushed open a door and stepped inside. I followed closely. It was a bright single-bed room. When Uncle Bai, lying in bed, thin and fragile, saw her in the bridal gown suddenly appear before him, a broad grin spread across his face. He gazed at her lovingly.

## **Chapter 15 The Newlyweds**

According to a Taiwanese custom, an odd number of the bride's female friends or relatives should accompany the bride to go to the groom's house on the wedding day. Therefore, Xueji invited seven of her close friends, including Rendong and me, and we followed the custom. Thrilled, we—the friends—were all dressed up in various kinds of floor-length evening gowns.

It was probably because I kept a now brownish photograph with Xueji and us in the newlyweds' room, I still remembered what had happened there. At a time, the eight of us were sitting side by side on a long bench against a wall by the door. The most beautiful one, of course, Xueji was sitting in the middle and still wearing the same bridal dress with an elegant full-bloomed magenta cattleya on her chest and

holding a bouquet of the same flowers on her lap. She was smiling radiantly. Mushan was seated at the other side of the huge sumptuous bed. With his legs crossed, he was smoking and gazing at his bride, smiling.

I asked him, "Is the bride beautiful?"

"Very," he said without moving his eyes.

"Happy?"

"Very," he repeated, his eyes never moving from his bride.

Mushan, five years older than Xueji, was handsome and attractive. With his appearance, he could have easily gone into the film business and become a leading actor; however, he chose to practice medicine for his career. The new couple matched perfectly—not only their appearances but also their family backgrounds. Like Xueji's father, Mushan's father was currently a doctor and Mushan himself was going to receive a doctoral degree in the future. Most of all, after that, he would too become a doctor. Marrying a man with such a profession was most Taiwanese women's dream! It was so obnoxious. What was worse was that after the wedding, they were going to settle in Japan and live happily ever after! It was absolutely ridiculous . . . yet saddening.

## **Chapter 16 The Days in Japan**

Before marriage, Xueji, a woman from a wealthy family, had never had any experience in grocery shopping, not to mention cooking in the kitchen. After the wedding and moving to Fukuoka, like a traditional Japanese woman, she not only shopped for groceries and cooked three meals a day, but also did all the housework herself. Furthermore, she studied Japanese diligently and was able to converse fluently very soon. I was amazed at her transformation.

Two years later, the first daughter, Kikuko, was born. Not long after that, the family moved to Nagasaki. There, Xueji gave birth to the second daughter, Lanko, and Mushan obtained his doctorate in digestive surgery from a university. He started to work as a surgeon at a local hospital. Xueji raised the two lovely girls herself and they grew up gradually.

Mushan and Xueji bought an enormous two-story house in Meguro Ku, Tokyo, in 1991 and the family moved there. Mushan opened a clinic of general medicine. Xueji would help with the clinic business in addition to her housework. Her duty was about the taxes. At that time, I had never had experience in tax filing. I admired her competence.

One day when we were in our forties, I visited her at her parents' house in Taichung. She saw me off at the door when I was leaving. All of a sudden, she locked eyes with me and said seriously that she preferred living in Taiwan. When she got old, she would like to return to Taichung and live here. I couldn't recall what I said upon hearing this. Nevertheless, I now still remembered that I was bewildered and confused. Wasn't moving to Japan her dream when she was getting married? Why did she change her mind and want to move back to Taiwan? Was there something wrong living in Japan?

Xueji lived in Taichung for four years for her cancer treatments. Finally, she passed away in the city. Her dream was realized in a way. Only did she live to be sixty-six years old. The moment I recalled this, a sadness settled in quietly.

## **Chapter 17 A Test of Friendship**

Xueji returned to Taichung to visit a few times every year. We got together every time she came home. Sometimes Xiazhu, who had long graduated and was now working in the architecture industry, would join us.



I never figured out the reasons why, but Xueji seldom talked about her life in Japan. She rarely spoke of her husband, children, friends or even leisure activities. Once in a while, she would mention that she was a member of a singing group, featuring Taiwanese songs. Strangely enough, she would not elaborate on her hobby in singing. All I could figure was that it was her personality.

I was never certain whether it was Xueji or I, who had changed. One day, I found that Xueji had a shortcoming, a rather irritating one. Sometimes after I told her about someone, she would reveal it to that person! I was very annoyed. If it was some admiration, it was understandable. If it was a complaint, it was totally wrong! It would create unnecessary misunderstanding or even hostility between that person and me. At the beginning, due to my personality, I did not tell her how I felt. Not long after that, however, the same thing happened again. Therefore, I had a serious talk with her, expressing my concerns and stressing that it violated the mutual trust between friends. She listened and promised she would not do it again.

Days later, however, she made the same mistake again. This time she informed me what someone complained about me. I spoke to her one more time. I just couldn't understand if it was that she had forgotten what I had said, or that she had thought she had simply been relaying what others said, or that she had believed this kind of matter had been harmless. Anyway, from then on, the matter in question occurred so often that I became disappointed in her.

## **Chapter 18 The Four Million New Taiwan Dollars**

One afternoon, Xueji and I dined out together in Taichung. After lunch, as we were walking back toward her parents' house, she stopped short. With sorrow in her beautiful eyes, she shared with me what had happened to her in the past few months.

She had been investing in stocks in Japan for a few years and had trusted her agent with buying and selling stocks. Nevertheless, one day, she found that her account was twelve million yen short, which was equivalent to four million New Taiwan dollars! She made countless requests to the agent and company for reexamination of her accounts. The reply was the same every time: all the buying and selling transactions had been correct and no mistakes had been made in all the accounts. She had been furious and distressed. Most of all, she blamed herself for not being cautious. That missing money had been her savings over the years.

Startled, I felt very sorry after hearing the story. I tried to cheer her up by saying what was fortunate was that the loss of the amount would not affect the living expenses of the family. I urged her to stop feeling bad, leave the incident behind, and move on. She said that her husband and parents had given her the same advice, but she just couldn't do it. She couldn't go to sleep every night and had to take sleeping pills.

Later, Auntie Bai told me that she and her husband were very worried about Xueji. They gave her the same amount of money she had lost in hopes that she would get happier. Nonetheless, she still did not recover. The mother was afraid that Xueji might have depressive disorder. I did not agree that Xueji's case was so serious. She just blamed herself too much. She would get over it soon and feel happy again.

## **Chapter 19 The Friend in Misfortune**

Xiazhu's career developed quickly and became very successful and renowned both domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, a few years later, the company went bankrupt. All his employees left and his wife divorced him. When I learned that he only ate mantou—Chinese steamed bun—every day, I gave him fifty thousand New Taiwan dollars as his living expenses. I deliberately did it in front of Xueji in hopes that she would also donate some money to help this old friend of ours. Xueji, however, did not do anything; she just gazed down and said nothing.

One day at the Bais', Auntie Bai and I were having a discussion on making some donations for charities. I asked her if Xueji could also chip in. She paused and then answered that Xueji would probably not make any contribution in any way. She was very cautious about money.

Hearing this, I felt a familiar sadness inside.

## **Chapter 20 Discussion about Life**

Xiazhu and I like to discuss life. He is more intelligent, much wiser, and has had more experiences than me. It is interesting and beneficial talking about life with him.

Both of us used to believe that friends should talk about life, which would make conversations meaningful. A university teacher and Buddhist, I firmly believed that friends, as we aged, should discuss meaningful topics such as thoughts, how to behave ourselves, and how to associate with others so as to elevate our integrity and wisdom. It was acceptable that sometimes friends exchanged opinions on things of unimportance. However, if friends spent all their time talking about husbands, children, food, shopping, and entertainment, it would be quite a waste of time.

Both Xiazhu and I believe in reincarnation. We often tried to persuade Xueji to believe it. Xiazhu even introduced some books to her. Nonetheless, she always listened quietly, saying nothing. I did not realize until much later that she would not believe it. She never talked about what would happen when a person died. One day, she finally told me that discussing life caused a headache to her. I felt frustrated at first, then disappointed. Finally, I slightly looked down upon her.

Nevertheless, I still kept a good relationship with Xueji. I went along with her topics, but I became quiet.

Xueji was now in her forties, and yet she looked as if she were only thirty. She was a lucky woman. Suddenly, I found that my hidden jealousy of her had long gone.

## **Chapter 21 The Agreement**

It was the time when the cell phone was in trend, but the smartphone had not yet been invented.

It was cheaper to get a haircut, color hair or have a perm at a hair salon in Taiwan than in Tokyo. Whenever Xueji, who had soft wavy medium-length hair, returned to Taichung, she would go to a salon near her parents' house to have a perm. Although I did not get a perm, I had my hair cut and colored regularly at a different beauty parlor by the same stylist, Haitang, every time. At Haitang's request, I always booked an appointment prior to a visit.

Xueji often paid attention to my hair and admired my hairstyle; therefore, one day, we made an agreement that I take her to my hair salon to get a haircut by Haitang. Happily, I set a date and time—1:00—with Haitang, and Xueji and I concurred that I pick her up at her parents' on that day at 12:30.

After a quick lunch on that balmy day, I arrived at her parents' on time. Nevertheless, the usually-opened iron roll-up door was down, which felt odd. I still reached out and pressed the intercom button. No one answered. Imagining that Auntie Bai might not have returned from Taipei and Xueji might be out for lunch and come home soon, I was pleased to wait for her. Across from her parents' was the elementary school we went to when we were young. It was a good place to park cars on that side of the road, so I moved my car there and waited inside.

It was 12:45 and Xueji had not yet returned. I called Haitang, informing her we would be late. She said that there was no problem.

It was 1:00. Xueji was still not in sight. I had not gotten any calls from her. I understood that she did not have a cell phone during her stay in Taichung, but she could have phoned me with a paid phone or

borrowed phone, informing me what had happened. Moreover, the day before, I even reminded her of our arrangement; there was no way she forgot it. I got irritated and contacted the stylist, postponing the appointment until 1:30.

It was 1:30! This woman had not come home nor phoned! I had no choice but to cancel the arrangement and speedily drove away, fuming.

## **Chapter 22 The Phone Call**

In *The Analects of Confucius*, Zixia said, “Friends must keep their promises.” I did not consider myself a person of complete integrity; however, I believed in the saying. Promise keeping was the most important aspect in friendship. If friends did not keep their promises, they were no friends.

After I reached home, I waited for Xueji’s phone call. I was anxious to hear how she would apologize and what excuses she would give. Nevertheless, the phone never rang. I was very angry and decided to call her myself to “interrogate” her. I typed her number. It was she, who answered the phone. Thank God she was home at last! The reason she gave me for not showing up was that someone had advised her not to get a haircut. Therefore, she listened! I asked her why she did not call me and inform me before our appointment. The event took place many years ago. I couldn’t recall what her excuse was. Anyway, what followed was that I waited for her to ask me to take her to that hair salon on another day as a gesture of apology and reconciliation. This woman, however, never asked. Heaving a sigh, I asked her myself. To my utter disbelief, she replied that she did not want to go anymore!

Having this kind of friend like her, I would like to quote what she often said, “It’s infuriating!”

## **Chapter 23 The Meaning of Friendship**

It was still an era without the smartphone, and yet MSN was popular.

When Xueji and I heard that the MSN service allowed people to talk internationally for a long time free of charge, we were excited about trying it. Both of us were not computer whizzes, so we each carried our own laptops to ask other people to teach us. Finally, one evening with her in Tokyo and me in Taichung, we were connected! Both of us were thrilled to bits and that evening we talked to our hearts’ content!

The following evening, we invited Xiazhu to join us. Very soon Xiazhu and I found that trivial chit-chat was dull, so we withdrew from the MSN communication one by one. And so, Xueji started to talk with Rendong on MSN every Saturday evening for at least one hour. When MSN was no longer in service, they continued their weekly small talk using Skype until Xueji came to Taiwan for her cancer treatments in 2015!

After Xueji passed away, I asked Rendong what they talked about on the Internet. She said it was just unimportant matters. However, after Xueji got ill, Rendong would tell jokes to make Xueji laugh.

Besides Rendong, Liuqing also told good jokes and every time Xueji laughed. A few weeks ago, when I was considering posting this story *Friends of a Lifetime, Fulfillment between Two Worlds* on Facebook, I asked Liuqing his opinion. He answered, “Certainly! Our stage names sound nice.” I chuckled and said, “If Xueji had heard this, she would have let out a hearty laugh.”

## **Chapter 24 The Cancer**

Recalling my fun conversation with Liuqing, I smiled to myself and stepped into a car of the 5:08 high-speed train bound for Banqiao. My seat was the middle one of three adjacent seats. Normally, I preferred the window seat so as to appreciate the views on the way. Today, however, I did not mind taking the seat in the middle because I did not want to look out the window. Instead, I was planning to savor the wonders Xueji and I had created together.

It was November, 2013. Both Kikuko and Lanko had gotten married, to Japanese men. Kikuko had a daughter named Yoko and Lanko a son Tomokazu. Xueji, already a grandmother, was sixty-one, but she looked as if she were only forty!

On the twenty-fourth, Xueji called me from Tokyo, telling me she got transitional cell carcinoma! She had already had a kidney and the ureter connecting it and the bladder removed and was now on chemotherapy. I was dumbfounded! It was hard to believe that a winner at life such as Xueji would get cancer! She said that she couldn't understand why she got it. She had always been in good health.

Soon, Rendong, Xiazhu, and Liuqing learned of the unfortunate news. We all did our best to comfort and encourage Xueji. Perhaps it was because Xiazhu had endured and overcome the worst of life's hardship, his suggestion was unique: apart from the power of religious faith, Xueji needed to figure out the meaning of her life.

## **Chapter 25 The Impromptu Online Concert**

February twenty-eighth, 2014

Liuqing and his family moved to the United States in 1983. He often returned to Taipei to visit. In February, 2014, he was coming again. I had never seen him since he emigrated to the States. I, therefore, invited him to come to Taichung for a visit. In the meantime, I also invited Xiazhu, who had been living in Taichung, and Rendong, living in Taipei, to join us and have a big reunion. Xueji, who was now having chemotherapy in Japan, was not able to come.

On the afternoon of the twenty-eighth, the first thing we four old friends did was visiting Auntie Bai, who was in her mid-eighties and living alone. Her husband had long died. She was thrilled when she saw us. Almost instantly, however, a sadness clouded her face. She started missing her daughter.

In the evening after dinner, Liuqing, Xiazhu, Rendong, and I held an impromptu online concert in my living room. Liuqing took out the guitar he brought from Taipei while I called Xueji, who was in Tokyo, on Line, informing her to get ready for a surprise concert.

Liuqing tuned up the instrument a little and then a dulcet melody flowed out from his magical fingers. Then he started to sing the song *Hallelujah*, from the animated film *Shrek*. His voice was clear and touching. What followed was Teresa Teng's *The Moon Represents My Heart*. And, at our request, Xueji sang the famous Japanese song *Nada Sou Sou* by Rimi Natsukawa. Her mellifluous voice allowed the beautiful song to take on a completely different feel to it—graceful and affable. Greatly moved by the concert, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. At the end, we sang a few old Mandarin songs together.

Today, five years later, all of us couldn't remember what oldies they were. Xueji had extraordinary powers of recollection, the best ever. I wondered if she could tell us . . .

## **Chapter 26 The Request**

Xueji's chemotherapy finally ended in April. She came back to Taichung on the eighteenth. I went to see her the following day. Amazingly, she did not look like a patient at all. The only thing I did not agree with was her wig, which was short and straight, not as lovely as her real hair.

A week later, Xueji and I went out for lunch at a vegetarian restaurant with Rihong, a friend from our elementary school. Naturally, we talked about Xueji's illness. Xueji did not mind that we discussed what to do after her passing. Therefore, Rihong and I suggested that she make plans as soon as possible, for example, selling the condo her parents bought her in Taipei. If she did it, it would save her daughters, who did not understand or speak Mandarin, a lot of trouble in handling their inheritance in the future.

After lunch, as Xueji and I were walking toward my car, she stopped short before we reached the vehicle and asked me with a serious expression if I could assist her daughters with receiving their inheritance in Taichung after her death. As it was something I was able to do, I agreed instantly. I appreciated Xueji's trust in me, but I also felt a surge of sadness.

## **Chapter 27 Chung Tai Chan Monastery**

Two days later, the weather was clear and warm. Considering it a perfect time to be outside, Xiazhu and I took Xueji to Puli, a town in central Taiwan, for a day trip. Auntie Bai and her caregiver came along.

We went to a famous Buddhist temple—Chung Tai Chan Monastery—first. Inside the holy place, I told Xueji that based on Buddhist scriptures, doing a good deed or an act of charity without asking for anything in return is praiseworthy and asked her if she would like to donate some money here. She hesitated. Therefore, in front of her, I gave away two thousand New Taiwan dollars as a demonstration. Immediately, she followed suit. Later in another room at the sanctuary, she contributed some more. I admired her deeds openly in hopes that she could stop being a penny-pincher.

At a quiet corner of the beautiful courtyard in front of the building, we saw an enormous iron bell. There was a Buddhist poem, written in Mandarin, engraved on it, which read: "May the sound of the bell transcend different worlds, reaching all the corners of the dark hell. Those who hear it will gain absolute purity and enlightenment. All creatures are able to attain Buddhahood." A massive heavy-looking wooden mallet was hung with thick ropes next to the bell. It was said that if people pushed the hammer to strike the musical instrument, chanting the poem simultaneously, they might be able to eliminate some of their karmic debts, thereby increasing their welfare and wisdom.

Xiazhu suggested that Auntie Bai and Xueji try it. They consented. However, the mallet was too heavy to move. Instantly, Xiazhu assisted Auntie Bai, pushing the hammer together and they successfully hit the musical device. A deep booming sound emanated. We all laughed. Then Xiazhu helped Xueji. The entire scene was touching. I pulled out my iPhone and snapped some photographs.

After we left the monastery, I took the group to a dessert shop, still in Puli, to have the best ice cream in the world, acclaimed by some friends of mine and me. At a table outside the store, each of us savored his or her own enticing gelato, three scoops of different flavors, and gazed at the camera with a broad smile at the same time.

This was the last time that Xueji and I had an outing together.

## **Chapter 28 The Trip to the Airport**

May third, 2014

It was time for Xueji to return to Tokyo. I had never driven to Taoyuan International Airport by myself before, but as a gesture of friendship and support, I offered to drive her there. Xueji was not clear about my lack of practice and nodded with a smile. When Rihong learned of our trip, she was worried about my safety while returning to Taichung and insisted on going to the airport with us.

On the morning of May third, therefore, we three women left Taichung for the airport. Graduating from the same class in elementary school, we had a great deal to talk and laugh about on the way.

As we reached Chungli, without warning, the lane we were on was suddenly elevated to ten meters high, which was rather scary. Furthermore, the wind was strong and my speed was fast. It seemed that the car was about to take off! Without letting the two passengers notice the situation, I calmed myself down and grasped the wheel tightly. Finally and fortunately, we arrived at the airport safely.

I found a good opportunity and talked to Xueji in private, asking her if she could show a little more, well, compassion to other people so that the boat of friendship could sail more smoothly. To my astonishment, she agreed instantly!

Rendong too came to the airport to see Xueji off. Now there were four raucous women of us. So exciting was the mood of the crowd that the nearby people shot amusing glances at us. We finally waved good-bye cheerfully to Xueji. Turning again and again to us at the entrance of the customs, she beamed.

This was the first and also the last time that Rihong and I drove Xueji to the airport. It was also the last time Xueji and Rihong saw each other. Rihong had breast cancer then, but she would not let me relay the news to Xueji. She died in October the following year.

That night, after Xueji arrived home, she sent me group photographs taken at the airport and asked me if I was tired. She said that she was very thankful and happy that we drove her to the airport. Then she added, "You must have been tired. You spent a lot of time with and did so much for me while I was in Taichung. I'm very grateful. Please take good care of yourself."

I was overjoyed and touched. Xueji started to change and have compassion at last!

Nevertheless, five days later, I got furious with her on Line.

## **Chapter 29 The Quarrel**

May eighth, 2014

I received my master's degree in telecommunications from the United States in 1981. Then I returned to Taichung and started teaching English at Tunghai, the university I graduated from. In 2008, I transferred to the newly established English Language Center. Over thirty-four years, Tunghai and all the chairs of my department and center had supported the teaching philosophy of us English teachers so that we could stick to our beliefs in teaching and continue our work in this fast-changing world.

Although my degree was not in language teaching, over the years, I had learned various teaching approaches and skills through teaching English and the interaction with my colleagues. Without the support of the university, I would have had a completely different career and life. I had been grateful to Tunghai. The school was like my home.

On the afternoon of this relaxing spring day, I was first working and then texting messages with Xueji on Line in my Tunghai office. As soon as we started talking about the university, which she too graduated from, she began to criticize it harshly without reserve. I was enraged instantly. I told her that the school was in a difficult situation and that I had been working here for so long that I loved it! I also complained to her that her rebuke was heartbreaking to me.

She apologized; however, she immediately defended herself by saying what she just said was true! What was more, she added that many people felt the same way as her! Then she said, "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I did not mean it. I'm sorry. I had a bad day, so I was too direct. I did not know what I was saying."

I was still angry, but my reply was "That's OK."

Putting down my cell phone, I felt rather disappointed in her. So wretched was my mood that I couldn't resume my work. Therefore, I went outside and took a walk on the expansive campus. The tall lush trees on the two sides of the quiet road and the squirrel jumping up and down on the trees seemed to understand how I felt and try to soothe my pain. All of a sudden, tears coursed down my cheeks.

One month later, Xueji sent me a message to apologize. I was still upset, so I did not reply.

## Chapter 30 The Old Photographs

July twenty-second, 2015

In the evening, since I had nothing better to do, I started to sort out the old photographs piled up in one of the corners of a room. Accidentally, I saw a picture, taken by me at a friend's house in 1977, with Xueji and two old friends of ours—Hanxiang and Shuijun—in it. They also went to our elementary school. All three of them, dressed formally and sitting close to one another in a couch with Xueji on the left, were staring at the camera, beaming as if they had been chatting about the good old days.

They were all born in October, 1952, and in the same happy bunch, which was always laughing. What was more, they continued connecting with one another after they graduated even though they went to different junior and senior high schools. Before the university entrance exam, they even studied together at Hanxiang's house. Now Hanxiang was seriously ill—fighting lung cancer. And Shuijun had a chronic disease. Living far away from one another, the three besties had not gotten together for years. I guessed Xueji, who was now in Tokyo, might love this photo, so I scanned and sent it to her on Line.

Just as I had anticipated, Xueji was both woeful and joyful in her reply. Then she began to complain that all of her pictures from her childhood to the days prior to her wedding, including this group photo, had been thrown away when her parents' house was being renovated. That saddened her. She asked me if I had more of her photographs. If yes, she would like to borrow them and have them photocopied at a photo shop in order for her daughters to keep.

She was so serious and polite that I was moved. Immediately, I dug out from my archives all the pictures with her in them and scanned and sent them to her with the shooting dates. The earliest snapshot I found was a black-and-white square-shaped group photo, taken in front of a classroom on a beautiful summer day in 1965 as we were graduating from elementary school, with her, her fourth-grade homeroom teacher, and five other girls. Standing on the far left, Xueji, with short straight hair, was laughing heartily.

I told her I would like to give her this original photograph and the one taken in 1977. She wrote many thanks in her reply. Although I couldn't see her, I could feel she was very grateful.

## Chapter 31 Advice to Xueji

October eighth, 2015

Xueji sent a message to me from Tokyo, saying, "I had a terrible day yesterday. Quarreled with one of my daughters. I was angry they had urged me to take the laparoscopic surgery and transferred to this hospital I'm in now. I can't see the end of the treatment, not to mention when I can recover."

I replied, "They made the suggestion for your own good and you agreed then. It was not right saying they were to blame."

Xueji said, "It made sense. But if they had agreed to my idea, things might have been different."

I wrote, "It was a different situation and required different consideration at that time. It was not right to hold them accountable. It's easy to say in hindsight, but it's useless and hurts other people's feelings. We should put ourselves in others' shoes and not hurt their feelings."

October eleventh, 2015

Xueji wrote late at night, nearly 1:00, “I just awoke and read your message. Thank you for your advice. You were right. They must have discussed for a long time and made the decision. They did it for my own good. As to the chances of my recovery, no one will know except God, I guess.”

She continued at 7:00, “The doctor said I could live for six more months. So my birthday celebration, the university class reunion, and the New Year’s Day would all be the last time for me. I found it hard for me to accept this. I just don’t understand why I got this cancer. I had been very healthy.”

I answered in two hours, “You’ve changed, Xueji. You’ve become better! You took my advice and did not defend yourself. You have my respect!” I continued, “The meaning of life is not living for a long time, but rather living a meaningful life. We all don’t know when we’re going to die. However, as long as we make good use of time to do meaningful things, our life is not wasted. You don’t mind talking about death and have been making arrangements. That means you’re doing something meaningful! No matter it’s six more months or forty more years, as long as you change your personality and ways of thinking and learn from the saints, your life will be more meaningful!”

Xueji said, “After reading what you wrote, I cried.”

I encouraged her and said, “Keep it up! Anyone can do anything.”

She accepted and concluded, “OK. Thank you for your encouragement.”

I finished our dialogue by saying, “You’re most welcome.”

Xueji’s cancer cells metastasized to the lungs later. She returned to Taiwan and received immunotherapy at a well-known hospital in Taoyuan. It was said that this new, advanced therapy was effective to only twenty percent of patients who went through the treatment and Xueji was one of the lucky ones. Furthermore, she was also the best cancer fighter ever! During her six-year-long illness, she learned everything about her disease and conditions and never gave up her treatments. She had been hoping that some day she could be cured.

In October, 2015, her doctor projected that she had only six months to live. Six months later, not only was she still alive, but she continued to live three more years and four more months!

## **Chapter 32 Hour of the Reunion**

I accidentally broke my right ankle in August this year. After the surgery, I underwent a six-month rehabilitation before I could walk again without a stick. During this period of time, Xueji and I often cheered each other up. However, one day she suddenly changed her tone and lamented that my ankle would heal for certain and, unfortunately, that she did not know when she would finally recover.

October thirty-first, 2015

This year was the fortieth anniversary of our graduation from Tunghai University. There was a big two-day celebration department-wide. Therefore, more than half of the alumni were coming to the reunion at a hotel near the school on the first evening. Xueji regarded this homecoming as the last time she could revisit Tunghai and wanted to go to the party on the first evening very much. And so, she got dressed up in red for the get-together while I, with equal excitement, hobbled there with my walker.

Xueji, Rendong, Zilian, Haixian, Liuli, and I—the six girls sharing one big dormitory room during our sophomore year—finally reunited for the first time after we graduated. We all were in our early sixties, but we felt as if we were still twenty, living, studying, and partying together. We couldn’t recall whether we had had photographs taken altogether back then, so this evening we had as many group snapshots taken as we possibly could.



Xueji was ill, but she looked flushed and jovial, her head held high. She did not mind telling Zilian, Haixian, and Liuli her condition. They all showed their sympathy and gave her their best wishes.

The following day we continued our festivities surrounding the renowned timeless Luce Chapel on the campus—more partying and picture taking—to make up the time we had lost.

I was exhausted at the end of the two-day reunion. Nevertheless, I loved it. It was heart-warming and unforgettable.

Just as Xueji had predicted, it was the last time that she returned to our university, that we—the six roommates—had a get-together, and most importantly, that she had a great time with us.

### **Chapter 33 The Story of Selling the Condo**

The train was speeding in the countryside and through the mountains. The passenger to my left was swiping her phone while the one to my right was dozing off. This was a non-stop train to Banqiao, but it would take a bit more time before arrival. Shifting my body on the chair, I continued to immerse myself in the many recollections of the time Xueji and I spent together.

Xueji's house on Dunhua South Road, Taipei, which I had visited, was sold for two million New Taiwan dollars prior to her wedding. A few years later, her parents bought her another condo in an alley on Zhongxiao East Road, Section Five, still in Taipei. Xueji owned the property outright. Since I had never been there, I had no knowledge of the size and décor of it. Xueji rented it out to a middle-aged couple and asked the helpful and trustworthy Rendong to be the property manager. Rendong immediately accepted the task. It turned out that she was in charge of the condo for a total of ten years!

Ever since Rendong and I learned that Xueji fell ill and that Xueji did not mind we discussed what to do after she was gone, we had suggested that she sell the house as soon as possible so that her daughters, who had been living in Japan and did not speak Mandarin, would not need to deal with the property after her passing. Xueji, however, couldn't make up her mind. She had three concerns. First of all, she was once told that her previous condominium was underpriced. This time she wanted to sell her house with a much higher fee. Secondly, her household materials had been registered at the address of the place. If the condo were sold, she couldn't decide where these important materials should go. And finally, she was not clear when it came to the procedure and the legalities of the process of real estate resale in Taiwan.

In 2015, Xueji's tenants were interested in purchasing the old condominium, offering twenty-eight million New Taiwan dollars, a bid that was a few times more than what Xueji's parents had paid for. Nevertheless, Xueji hesitated. Then, Rendong persuaded the renters and the price was raised to thirty million dollars. Xueji still would not agree to sell the property.

One evening in a few months, while Xueji and Lanko were having dinner in a restaurant at a hotel in Taipei, without warning, Rendong invited the tenants and their real estate agent over to see Xueji, attempting to talk her into selling the condo. It had already been after midnight and the meeting was still in progress. Xueji was too exhausted and polite to dismiss the guests; therefore, she agreed to sell her house.

The process of the sale went smoothly and the thirty million dollars started to come in bit by bit. Besides, Xueji's household materials could remain at the same address and the buyer was willing to take care of Xueji's mail. I congratulated her and felt happy for her.

Nonetheless, Xueji started to feel sorry. She regretted her decision. She complained to me many times, thinking that the price could have gone higher. She held Rendong accountable. I kept defending Rendong to the point that I got angry with Xueji. I believed that Xueji never changed her mind in her life.

Hesitation is a shortcoming in most situations, but it does not hurt people's feelings. Regrets and buck-passing do and they hurt much more. Therefore, whenever Xueji couldn't make up her mind about something and asked for my opinion, which happened often, I would just offer my analysis of the options and not give suggestions.

## **Chapter 34 The Meaning of Friendship**

In 2015, when Xueji found that the cancer—transitional cell carcinoma—had spread to the lungs, she came back to Taichung to live at her parents' and started taking immunotherapy at a famous hospital in Taoyuan. Rendong had been living in Taipei and retired, so she kept Xueji company whenever Xueji had her treatments at the hospital. Xueji's husband and daughters were all working in Tokyo. They took turns coming to Taiwan to see her on a regular basis. Once every three weeks, Xueji would take a high-speed morning train to Taoyuan for treatments. Afterwards, she would get on the same kind of train and return to Taichung. By the time she reached home, it had already been 11:00 p.m. and she had always felt exhausted. She followed the routine for one or two years.

Then after listening to someone's suggestion, she changed her itinerary. Instead of taking the train, she hopped on a bus that went straight to the main entrance of the hospital after two hours. After the treatments, she stayed for one night at a hotel across from the hospital and took the same bus home the following afternoon. Nevertheless, Xueji would not dare staying at the hotel alone, so Rendong stayed with her every time.

August sixteenth, 2018

Xueji was going to see the doctor at the hospital again; however, Rendong had some important matters to tend to the next day. Rendong could go to the hospital with Xueji, but not stay at the hotel with her. Xueji, therefore, asked me if I could go to Taoyuan with her. I consented.

That day, Rendong and I kept Xueji company during the entire process of Xueji's treatments. It was the first time that I witnessed how Xueji received her therapy as well as how much Rendong cared for her. Rendong was not just a good friend; she was more like family! It was touching.

Here at the hospital, I even witnessed a scene, which made me startled and ashamed of myself. I remembered that the event started in the outpatient chemotherapy room. At that time, Xueji was lying on a hospital bed in a corner, receiving her treatment, which was a forty-minute IV therapy. I was sitting by her bed, chatting with her while Rendong was running here and there, paying bills on Xueji's behalf. When Xueji discovered that Rendong paid a bill of one hundred New Taiwan dollars, which was equivalent to three US dollars and twenty cents, she regarded it unnecessary and fumed. In my opinion, no matter this payment was right or not, it was a small amount and she had better put it behind her and move on. In contrast, Xueji insisted on going to the cashier herself and demanding a refund.

And so, when the IV therapy infusion was complete, we three women headed together toward the cashier in question. Walking in front of me, Xueji and Rendong kept debating. Following them quietly, I felt upset, but I couldn't do anything. It was a huge hospital and there were many offices and rooms in it. The hallways connecting them were like a maze, very easy for visitors to get lost. Knowing the ropes, the two women strode at the same pace and made the same turns, arguing loudly yet listening to each other. They were walking side by side with their shoulders touching each other occasionally. However, they had never separated!

When we arrived at the cashier's window near the main entrance, Xueji complained—high in pitch—to her and insisted on getting a refund. The middle-aged woman frowned and groaned, looking unhappy, but she still returned the one hundred dollars to Xueji. Then Xueji nagged at Rendong a bit with a lower voice. Next, to my utter disbelief, Xueji and Rendong changed their moods and started discussing where to take me to dinner as if nothing had happened!

Seeing the entire process, I was stunned! If I had been Rendong, I would have got enraged and left Xueji before getting to the cashier, not to mention eating dinner together!

Later, I recounted to Xueji what I had seen and how I had felt. I also expressed my admiration for their friendship. Xueji replied that whenever they had a fight, they did it like this—forget it and move on. They were true friends indeed! I felt a surge of remorse rising in me.

### **Chapter 35 The Trip to the Studio**

I had a hobby—acting, which could be traced back to my childhood. I was now sixty-six and retired. To celebrate the interest, I had a series of artistic photographs taken at a studio in downtown Taichung in January, 2019. I wore costumes as a Japanese as well as an ancient Chinese woman and called the pictures “the stills.” After I received them from the company, I sent some of them to Xueji and she enjoyed them very much. To my surprise, she began pondering seriously having this kind of photos taken herself. She wanted to leave them to her daughters after her death.

March twenty-second, 2019

On this beautiful spring afternoon, I took Xueji to the studio, where I had my photographs taken, to meet with the manager. Before we went there, I just told the company I was bringing a friend over without giving them Xueji’s name.

After Xueji and I arrived at the studio, the woman manager, Ms. Yuan, who was at her early forties and looked quite competent, welcomed us warmly and showed Xueji a thick, heavy photo album for reference. Xueji started to flip the pages. When she spotted a picture of a white woman wearing a royal blue floor-length evening gown, she immediately said she had a dress that looked exactly the same—including the color, cutting, and fabric. She even started to describe in detail how she bought the garment. Amazed, both Ms. Yuan and I did not know what to do, so we did not interrupt her.

Smiling, the manager guessed that Xueji came from Japan. Xueji was shocked. Trying to control her fear and anger, but still trembling slightly, she asked Ms. Yuan, “How did you know? You’re so good at collecting intelligence.”

The manager was startled and speechless. Stunned, I explained to Xueji instantly, trying to smooth over the situation, “She’s met a lot of people in the business. She could tell you’re from Japan. It’s just a guess.”

Nevertheless, Xueji said the word “intelligence” again a couple of times. An experienced businesswoman, Ms. Yuan was calm. She knew there would probably not be any deal today, but she kept her smile. She just talked less.

As soon as we left the place, I told Xueji in a serious and anxious tone that the woman was simply speculating she came from Japan. Meaning well, she just wanted to make a deal; there was no reason for her to investigate Xueji’s background prior to the meeting! Xueji would not admit that she had been mistaken and started to complain about many things including her regrets at selling her condo and leaving her household materials at the address of other people’s house. We got on a bus to go home and she kept grumbling until she got off. Feeling frustrated and distressed, I regretted that I took her to the studio. I lost my face completely.

That was the last time I saw Xueji.

She called me a few times after that incident. I was either quiet or impatient. The last call she placed was the one on the evening of August twenty-first at 9:00. Browsing alone at a department store, which was not far from my house, she asked me which pot was better . . .

## Chapter 36 The Best Friend

August thirty-first, 2019

The train arrived in Banqiao at exactly 5:46. Exiting the train, I searched for Rendong, who I was supposed to meet. When I spotted her standing alone at the end of the hallway, waiting for me, I felt a surge of sadness. Wearing black all over, she looked fragile and exhausted. She had already been thin and now she looked even thinner as if she were going to collapse any time. For days, she had been busy arranging Xueji's funeral, assisting her family, and mourning over her death. To console her, I strode up toward her and embraced her.

We were meeting Kikuko and Lanko at the studio around 8:00. After Xueji's artistic photograph shooting, the studio produced quite a number of digital images in JPG files for examination. The two sisters were going to select the ones they liked to be retouched. Rendong was going to be the interpreter and I was looking forward to viewing the photos. There was plenty of time for Rendong and me before the meeting, so we decided to have dinner together at the station. Rendong insisted on treating me. I complied.

The station was packed with people moving about. Most of the restaurants, big or small, were full. We picked one, which looked modest and less crowded, sat down at a small table, and ate a light dinner. Rendong told me in low spirits that the night before the night when Xueji went into coma, they were still talking on the phone. They planned to visit together in a few days the recently-opened hidden passageways and slides at the Grand Hotel in Taipei, built during Chiang Kai-shek's administration.

Rendong's husband and only daughter were very supportive of Rendong's friendship with Xueji. Therefore, Rendong was able to do everything she could to help and care for Xueji while she was having her four-year treatments in Taiwan. Comforting Rendong, I said that no one else could have done a better job. She was the best friend one could find in the whole world. Rendong, however, would not accept my admiration. She explained that she helped Xueji because Xueji's family was living in Japan and not able to take care of her in Taiwan. She lamented that if she could turn the clock back, she would have done something here and fixed some mistakes there . . .

## Chapter 37 Xueji's Artistic Photographs

Rendong and I arrived at the studio before Kikuko and Lanko did. The studio, which was small, was located on a busy street in Banqiao. A couple of days ago, Rendong and the two sisters came here to choose a photograph of Xueji for the mourning hall. Since Rendong had seen all of the photos, I took a seat at a quiet corner and started to look at the pictures one by one on a computer screen, which was as enormous as a television display.

Xueji finally had her artistic photos taken in a studio. Nevertheless, she was not able to examine them herself before her death, the thought causing a surge of sorrow in me. There were more than one hundred pictures altogether, taken on August twentieth. Rendong was with her during the shooting. Xueji wore three different evening gowns provided by the company and a cherry-colored dress of her own. I did not pay attention to the aesthetic quality of the photos. Instead, I found Xueji got more relaxed and happier as the photographing progressed. Having been ill for many years, she had not laughed like this in a long time. I wondered if it was the realization of her dream—artistic photograph taking—that made her temporarily forget her illness and worries.

Xueji's physical condition was different from most cancer patients'. Although she had to take sleeping pills every night, she had a good appetite, was energetic, talked loudly, and moved about briskly. In addition, she was able to walk a long way to buy groceries and cook for herself. Those who did not know she was sick would probably not believe she was seriously ill. I myself often forgot her sickness and asked too much from her. I was too demanding and harsh. I was no friend . . .

All of a sudden, my phone pinged, pulling me from my faraway thoughts. It was from Liuqing, who was living in San Diego. Awaking early in the morning, he read my message on Line regarding the passing of Xueji. He had many questions, his voice confused and saddened. I did not know how to answer them or console him. I handed the phone to Rendong.

### **Chapter 38 Kikuko and Lanko**

Kikuko and Lanko arrived. Both of them were wearing black and looked calm. I had not seen them for more than a decade, and yet the youth, beauty, maturity, and serenity they revealed at this difficult time amazed me. When they saw me, they beamed. Thinking of their mother, I couldn't hold back my tears and gave them a warm embrace.

We conversed in English. Very soon, I suggested that we have a group photo taken. Xueji too needed to be in it. The sisters and Rendong agreed instantly. I asked Kikuko and Lanko to select an artistic photograph of Xueji's. A moment later, they chose one with Xueji wearing a maya blue V-neck off-shoulder floor-length evening dress, her long hair lying on the left shoulder. Standing under a tall, lush tree with yellow and orange leaves, she was holding a bouquet of white flowers, smiling gently. With Xueji in the middle, we had a few group snapshots taken. I looked at these beautiful pictures again and again. It appeared that the three old friends and two daughters were laughing, celebrating the reunion. I did not feel sad, sorry or regretful, but delighted and satisfied.

These artistic photos of Xueji's were JPG images that needed to be airbrushed a bit. The sisters could pick twelve of them without paying extra fees. They hesitated, afraid that they might choose too many, thereby spending too much money. I advised them that they should not consider the costs; they should pick all the ones they liked. They could afford them.

I let them do the picking on their own. However, sometimes they were unsure about some photographs and asked my opinions. I felt honored and helped them.

The studio would like to give them an album as a gift. There were many pretty picture books of different designs and colors on some display shelves against the far wall. Again Kikuko and Lanko asked me for help. I studied each book carefully and chose two. Both of the covers were coral blush, a bride's delight. Feeling the two albums, I told the girls that if their mother had been alive, she might have been fond of them. They listened to me attentively.

It was 9:00, time for me to return to Taichung. I did not want to leave, but I forced myself to say good night to the sisters, who were still busy with the photos. As an interpreter, Rendong had to stay, but she walked me out of the studio. Strangely, I found my heart filled with inexplicable warmth, happiness, and amazement. I was very surprised I was feeling this way. Xueji had just been gone the day before and I was just informed with the news in the afternoon! I was not sad, sorrowful or remorseful anymore!

Rendong hailed a taxi for me. I got into the back seat and continued savoring the strange feelings as the car sped toward the train station.

### **Chapter 39 The Mourning Hall**

September first, 2019

Xiazhu and I made an agreement to meet on this morning at the high-speed rail station in Wuri and then catch the earliest train to Taipei to pay our respect to Xueji.

As I saw Xiazhu standing at the enormous hall of the station, I recalled the good old days we spent with Xueji. From now on, however, Xueji could no longer be with us. I felt my tears rolling down. Xiazhu, nevertheless, looked as composed as he always was, not a tinge of sadness on his face. Curiously, I asked him why he could be like this. He answered, his tone serene, "When a person dies, his or her spirit will go

to the spirit world. The two worlds—ours and theirs—can communicate with each other. Therefore, Xueji did not leave at all.” He was able to let go something like losing a friend and move on. It was something I could never do.

We finally arrived at the mourning hall in Taipei. Arranged by the funeral company, it was located near the end of a wide quiet alley. Five gigantic Chinese characters—雪姬之靈堂 (Xueji’s Mourning Hall)—each the size of about thirty square centimeters, were placed vertically next to the entrance facing the alley as if announcing the news of Xueji’s unfortunate death to the whole world. Only twelve days ago, she called me, asking my opinion about which pot to buy. And what I saw now were just these five shocking, terrifying words. It was hard to believe she had already been gone. Moreover, Xueji was extremely cautious about using her personal data when she was alive. I wondered if she had been protesting the way her name and passing were handled.

We stepped inside and found the room was quite small and the air smelled heavily of incense and different kinds of flowers. Almost instantly, Rendong, Mushan, Kikuko, Lanko, and their husbands and children came forward to greet us. Not knowing what to say to them, I could only force a smile, if it was a smile.

Then, I glanced up and caught sight of a large framed photograph of Xueji, placed at the center of a wall of various kinds of fresh flowers. In it, she was wearing red and beaming broadly as if she were very pleased to see me. The picture was one of those taken in the studio on August twentieth. In front of the photo, there was an incense burner with some burning incense in it. Now I was in Xueji’s funeral hall, gazing at the pretty photograph she left behind. Suddenly, I felt a sense of surrealism, questioning myself where I was.

Standing upright, I held up some burning incense Rendong handed me toward Xueji’s photograph. At this instant, my tears abruptly rushed down my cheeks, my body shaking involuntarily. Xiazhu, in contrast, was smiling, paying his respect to Xueji gracefully with incense in his hands.

## **Chapter 40 The Groom Forty Years Later**

Rihong’s niece, also the daughter of another classmate of ours, Fongdan, arrived at the mourning hall not long after us. Her mother, who was busy, and aunt, who died four years ago, couldn’t make it. Fongdan, a good daughter and niece, came to express her grief in their stead. Fongdan hardly knew Xueji, though. I found I liked this young woman.

After offering incense to Xueji, Mushan and Rendong invited Xiazhu, Fongdan, and me to a modest living room inside to have a chat. The room, about the same size as the hall, had a small rectangular table in the center and some sofas around it. Rendong and I sat on the sofa against the wall, shared by the hall. Xiazhu and Fongdan took the seats on our right and Mushan was on our left opposite Xiazhu.

As soon as Mushan saw my bloodshot eyes, his tears streamed down the face. While Xueji was taking her treatments in Taiwan, every day she discussed her physical condition with Mushan, who himself was a doctor. Therefore, although Mushan was far away in Japan, he knew everything about Xueji’s illness.

Naturally, our topic was all about Xueji. We all agreed she passed away unexpectedly. We also concurred that it was fortunate she did not know the cancer cells had metastasized to the brain and that if she had known it, she would have felt utterly devastated. In addition, we were all amazed at her unrelenting willpower in fighting the cancer. She outlived most of the patients who suffered from the same cancer.

Mushan complained that Xueji hid from him the fact of having artistic photographs taken before her death. Nevertheless, he smiled and said artistic picture shooting was a long, tiring process, afraid that it might have put a strain on her health. Feeling overcome with guilt, I admitted she learned that from me and apologized to Mushan. He was a little surprised, but he kept his warm smile. A forgiving man, he did not hold me responsible. I heaved a sigh of relief.

Letting out a tired sigh, he mentioned that Xueji had always wanted to return to Taiwan to live. Then he smiled again and told us he understood. Not until then did I realize Xueji did discuss her dream with him. However, Mushan did not reveal the reasons why Xueji wanted to do that. Since I did not know him well, I did not ask him. I guessed the reasons would remain a mystery forever.

Then as if recalling something, Mushan felt refreshed all of a sudden. Instantly, he pulled out an iPhone from his pants pocket and showed us a close-up photo of Xueji's. In it, Xueji, bathing in magnificent sunlight, was dressed in red, her favorite color, her wavy short hair brushing her face gently. Giving a V-sign with her left hand, she laughed in such a way that it seemed she had temporarily forgotten her illness. Mushan said with a grin that he himself took the picture last November and he loved it the most among all of her photos. I liked it, too, so I extracted my phone and took a snapshot of it.

I inquired about the date of the funeral service. "There would not be any open formal service," Mushan answered. He explained that he did not have close relatives in Taiwan, that Xueji's mother was already ninety and bedridden, and that Xueji's relatives and friends had been coming to the mourning hall. The cremation was going to take place the next day and they were taking her ashes back to Tokyo two days after that. As to Xueji's resting place, he added, he would leave it to Kikuko and Lanko to decide. However, he would like to rest alongside Xueji after he was gone. Then, getting a bit excited, he cordially invited us to the viewing, private funeral service, and cremation ceremony the following morning at 7:00. Moved, I replied that I would love to attend them, but I promised someone that I would wire an amount of money at a bank in Taichung the next day. I would come to the cremation ceremony, nevertheless, after the errand to the bank. Xiazhu and Fongdan couldn't attend any of the ceremonies due to personal reasons. Mushan lowered his head, his smile fading.

Suddenly a sadness crossed Mushan's face. He fell silent a moment and then whispered, "Not until after Xueji has been gone, have I realized a saying: a man would rather die before his wife passes away so that he does not need to suffer from the pain of losing her . . ." Startled, I had not expected that he would open his heart to us and say this. I was speechless, not knowing how to console him.

Mushan was no longer the handsome, attractive young man marrying Xueji on their wedding day forty-two years ago. He was wearing an old-fashioned dark-colored jacket and pants, his hair thinned and gray and his face despaired. He was talking long hours away and he seemed to be missing his wife terribly. Gazing at him, I remembered a poem written by Nalan Xingde, a poet in Ching Dynasty: ". . . How I wish you could keep me company just like the bright full moon in the sky. To lower the temperature of your body, I would have taken off my clothes on this snowy night to chill my body and use it as ice . . ."

## **Chapter 41 The Fearless Grandchildren**

For a while, Mushan, Rendong, Kikuko, and Lanko were out in the mourning hall receiving new visitors. I spotted the three children of Kikuko and Lanko's playing quietly in a corner outside the door. I had never met them before and loved children very much; therefore, I walked over to them to have a chat. They stopped playing and gazed at me curiously. They were adorable kids!

I introduced myself in simple Japanese first and then asked them their names and ages. The oldest and tallest one was a girl, wearing a white top and a baby blue skirt, aged nine. Her name was Yoko. She resembled her dad. The second oldest, aged six, was a boy, named Tomokazu. Taking after his daddy too, he was dressed in a navy blue T-shirt and anchor shorts. The youngest was a girl, Aiko, in a striped white top and a carnation pink skirt. She was only four. She looked exactly like her grandpa. Yoko and Aiko were Kikuko's daughters while Tomokazu was Lanko's boy. Tomokazu did not think that I pronounced his name correctly and said it seriously and slowly again, just like a teacher. Grinning, I repeated after him.

My Japanese was quite limited and ran out very quickly. I paused and asked them if they spoke English. Yoko nodded and said a sentence in English, which I couldn't recall now. Tomokazu and Aiko, however,

shook their heads, looking confused. I did not know how to resolve the embarrassing situation, so I returned to my seat.

Moments later, to my astonishment, I noticed Tomokazu and Aiko, one taller than the other, walking straight toward me, their expressions brave and determined, their strides resolute. They did not stop until they were only about twenty centimeters away from me. Tomokazu was even standing against one of my knees.

Then Aiko locked eyes with me, opened her little mouth, and said fearlessly in English, “My name is Aiko.”

Following her, Tomokazu also stared at me with his bright eyes and enunciated each English word confidently and clearly, “My name is Tomokazu.”

I was so touched that I wanted to reach out and embrace them. Afraid that I might scare them, I held back and said slowly with a smile, “Very good!”

I understood what they did and said had been taught by some adult after our chat. Nonetheless, their courage and resolution was rarely found in Taiwanese children in this kind of situation. They were absolutely amazing!

## **Chapter 42 My Reflections**

This morning, the considerate and hospitable Rendong brought to the mourning hall some rice dumplings, wrapped with bamboo leaves. When it was noontime, she took out the dumplings and distributed them to all the people in the hall. We started to eat right there in the living room. The food became cold a long time ago, but I felt a warmth in me. I had never eaten with Xueji’s entire family before. Nevertheless, the thought of Xueji’s absence saddened me, tears welling up in my eyes.

Fongdan left after lunch. Xiazhu and I exited the funeral hall a bit later.

As we were walking toward the MRT station, I felt both joyful and regretful. There were two reasons for my joyfulness. First, I had a long, enjoyable chat with Mushan. Although we met more than forty years ago, I hardly knew him. Today, his friendliness, frankness, and love for Xueji were touching. Second, I had an equally enjoyable, a different kind, interaction with Yoko, Tomokazu, and Aiko. There was a language barrier between us, but our communication was beyond words and unforgettable. The reason why I felt remorseful was that I had been impatient with and contemptuous of Xueji. If I had known she was dying, I would have treated her differently.

“If I had known Xueji was dying,” I said to Xiazhu, lowering my head, “I—”

“Don’t even think about it,” he interjected. His tone was still calm as if nothing had happened.

## **Chapter 43 My Favorite Photograph of Xueji**

September second, 2019

At 9:00 in the morning, I went to the bank and wired a payment hurriedly and then rushed to the high-speed rail station in Wuri. I wanted to attend Xueji’s cremation ceremony in Taipei. Right after I purchased the ticket, however, Rendong called. She said they were already at the crematorium. By the time I arrived there, the cremation might have completed and they might have been gone. She suggested that I not go to Taipei at all. Now that she said so, heaving a long sigh, I couldn’t but comply.

After returning the ticket, I took a bus to go home. On the way, I sent the photograph of Xueji that Mushan loved best to Ziyu, a friend of Xueji’s and mine from elementary school. She replied that I once



sent her a picture with Xueji, Xueji's father, and me in it and that she liked that one more. At that moment, I remembered that one and immediately dug it up from my album.

The photo was taken in the living room of Xueji's parents' house in 1997. I was on the left-hand side, grinning. Uncle Bai, who was always smiling gently, was in the middle and Xueji was on the right. She was sitting gracefully on an arm of Uncle Bai's sofa, leaning toward him. The afternoon sun filtered through the window to the right of Xueji and played lightly on her and the father. Xueji was wearing an emerald green slightly formfitting long-sleeved turtleneck satin dress with a beige matinee necklace. Her lush shoulder-length hair was wavy, caressing her oval cream-colored face. The wispy bangs were tenderly brushing the skin under them, greeting the red full smiling lips. Her most exquisite eyes, along with the perfect eyebrows, were radiating soft, friendly glow at the camera. The photographer was Lanko, who was then a senior high school student.

After Uncle Bai passed away, I went inside Auntie Bai's bedroom with Xueji a few times and always spotted the blown-up version of the photograph on the glass door of a cabinet. Apparently, Auntie Bai also cherished this picture.

At the beginning of this story about Xueji and me, I described the good-looking Xueji like a goddess. "[Her] eyes," I wrote, "were so mesmerizing that only the eyes of a goddess descending from the heaven could be compared." Some readers complained to me that I had exaggerated it; they did not believe it. After I showed them this photo, they all nodded and added, "Beautiful indeed!"

I scanned and sent this picture to Xueji in Tokyo in 2015. When she received it, she cried. She said that four months after it was taken, her father died.

I loved this photograph of Xueji most.

## **Chapter 44 The Auntie in the Wheelchair**

September eighth, 2019

I was working—preparing the teaching materials—in the dining room at home on this beautiful afternoon. Suddenly, an idea crossed my mind—to visit Xueji's mother, Auntie Bai, who I had not seen for a few years, at a nursing home in Taichung. I was not sure if it was a good day or I was welcome. I told myself that if I wanted to go, I might as well do it. However, I had promised Xiazhu that I would invite him to come along if I planned to go. Therefore, I texted him. He replied that he would love to, but he was busy at the moment.

It was in 2016 when I last visited Auntie Bai at her house. I went with Rendong. Xueji was there, too. Auntie Bai, who had been bedridden, had two middle-aged female caregivers around—one Taiwanese and the other foreigner. For convenience reasons, she had been moved from the lavish master bedroom on the third floor to a simple, much smaller, recently-converted room on the first floor. When Rendong and I saw her, she was lying on a hospital bed in the center of the room, accompanied by the caregivers. She was very happy to see us. Like always, she asked Xueji, who had been standing behind her, smiling, to take us out to dinner. We felt a warmth inside.

Auntie Bai was ninety-one now. This July, she moved into the nursing home inside a hospital not far from her house. I had no idea how her health was now, nor what her room number was. I went anyway.

With the help of a nurse, I found her room easily. The door was wide open and I went straight in. The room was spacious, bright, and clean. Auntie Bai, sitting in a wheelchair between the white wall and a hospital bed, looked a little fragile and much smaller than before. Wearing a nasogastric tube and holding a string of beads in her skinny left hand, she stared at me without any expression. One of her sons, also Xueji's brother, Boren, was standing at the other side of the bed. I greeted him with a nod and smile. Surprised, he was happy to see me.

“Auntie Bai,” I took the old lady’s right hand, held it, and talked loudly into her right ear. “It’s been a long time. Do you know who I am?”

“Lanxing,” she whispered, but I could hear it clearly. Then she added, “You’re so beautiful.”

I choked up, unable to hold back my tears. Other people might think she was just being polite, but I knew she really meant it.

Boren told me she did not know Xueji had been gone. They hid the news from her because they were afraid that it might be too big a blow to her. Then he pointed at the television, which was on, on the wall in front of Auntie Bai and explained that she was hard of hearing, and yet her eyes were still good. She could understand what television was saying by reading subtitles. I felt happy for her. Glancing down, I asked the auntie if I could come see her again in the future. She nodded.

I was no good friend of Xueji’s, but as an old friend of hers, I had been to her mother’s house countless times. It was natural for Auntie Bai to think of Xueji when she saw me. Nevertheless, she did not ask me if Xueji had come along. My assumption was that having a clear mind, she must have guessed that Xueji was probably no longer alive. However, she refused to verify what had happened to Xueji. She would rather cling to a glimmer of hope, even if it was just a glimmer, that Xueji was still alive. Nonetheless, Auntie Bai was not aware that less than three weeks ago, Xueji was hospitalized and went into a coma right here at the hospital. And only ten days ago, Xueji was pronounced dead at the ICU, not far from her room . . .

After exiting the nursing home, I crossed the road and walked toward my bus stop, following the babbling and burbling Willow River. I could not help but feel sorry for Auntie Bai’s old age and illness and missing her daughter. Nonetheless, I couldn’t control my excitement! It was the first time in fiftysomething years that Auntie Bai said I was beautiful! I was so overjoyed that I nearly opened my arms sideward and danced on the busy street!

## **Chapter 45 *The Road Not Taken***

September twelfth, 2019

This morning, Rendong called me at home, saying that Kikuko and Lanko would like to know how to file an insurance claim to Xueji’s insurance company regarding Xueji’s passing. She asked me if I could assist them with it. Considering it an opportunity to honor Xueji and her two daughters’ request, I agreed instantly.

Xueji and I had known an experienced agent from the company, Shijun, quite well. Both of us were her clients. I purchased a policy from her many years ago and it had expired in 2010. Xueji bought from her two policies, which were still good. Seven years ago, I had a quarrel with Shijun over some personal matters and we had not seen or spoken to each other since then. Xueji had been busy with her illness; therefore, she had little contact with Shijun.

That I promised Rendong I would inquire about filing the insurance claim put myself in a dilemma, though. I could bypass Shijun, phone the company, and accomplish my mission easily. I could also call Shijun and ask her to do the filing for the daughters. However, if I chose the latter option, how should I handle the bitter disputes between us? It would be very difficult.

To improve my health, I had been seeing a doctor of Chinese medicine, Dr. Qin, at a clinic in Taichung for over a year. He believed that the body, mind, and soul were closely connected. Therefore, he was also a psychiatrist. He stressed that there was a strong link between some problems in my body and interpersonal relationship. I could consult him whenever I had questions regarding thinking and everyday life. He was always delighted to discuss them with me and suggest ways for improvement.

Last summer, for example, owing to his suggestions and encouragement, I apologized to many people including my family, relatives, friends, and colleagues, who I had offended, in order to resolve the conflicts between us. At that time, I did think of Shijun. However, I imagined that if I took the initiative and phoned her, she would say the same harsh words repeatedly as she always did in the past, which I hated to hear. Besides, I still held a grudge against her. And so, I did not contact her.

Today, for the sake of Xueji and her daughters, I considered this a good opportunity to make amends with Shijun. Therefore, just like what Robert Frost wrote in one of his famous poems—*The Road Not Taken*, I finally selected the tough road instead of the smooth one people usually preferred. I decided to phone Shijun directly.

## **Chapter 46 The Most Unforgettable Moon Festival**

Anxiously, I punched Shijun's old phone number into my iPhone. She answered the phone very quickly. Thank goodness! She still used her number. We had not connected for so long, and yet her low, raspy voice was still so familiar at the end of the line. With the desire for reconciliation and the need for her assistance in mind, I tried to make my tone as friendly as possible and, without mentioning our past conflicts, got straight to the point. I told her Xueji had passed away and asked her if she could inform me how to file a claim.

Knowing Xueji had been ill, she was still very surprised when she learned of Xueji's sudden death. She said that her husband, Songying, had been managing the insurance business on her behalf and that he would be delighted to explain to me face-to-face what documents to prepare and the procedure involved. Hearing this, I requested an urgent meeting with Songying. She consented. And so, we decided that Songying and I were to meet at my house the next day at 7:00 p.m. The evening happened to be the very evening of the Moon Festival, the time for the family to get together and celebrate the holiday. Feeling a surge of warmth, I had not expected that Shijun would let her husband come to a business meeting on an important occasion such as this.

September thirteenth, 2019

The doorbell sounded at precisely 7:00. I opened the gate and standing in front of me was not only Songying, but also Shijun, looking spirited and grinning at me. I was greatly amazed! "There's a good chance for us to make up," I whispered to myself. For convenience reasons, I invited them to a spacious and cozy convenience store nearby for the meeting.

At the shop, I bought some tea and mineral water for us. Then we took them to a rectangular caramel brown table near a glass wall and sat there. As soon as we were seated, Shijun asked me with concern about Xueji's cancer treatments in Taiwan and how she passed away. I answered in detail. Then she complained that whenever Xueji returned to Taichung, Xueji would call her and ask her questions related to her insurance policies. Xueji often repeated the same questions and was unable to make any decisions, which made Shijun rather annoyed. What Shijun was recounting was exactly how I had felt about Xueji, so I comforted Shijun, saying that I understood completely.

A few years ago, I heard that Shijun had health challenges. However, she took good care of herself and exercised regularly. Now, she was a little thin and weak, but she looked refreshed. I asked her how she was. She said that she had a minor surgery not long ago and got much better. Her doctor told her she could live many more years! She couldn't hide her joyfulness. I felt happy for her.

Then Songying took out a form with three blank copies from a big brownish envelope. He explained clearly item by item how to fill out the form and what documents to prepare. He also mentioned that the claim could be filed at any branch of their company in any city.

While Songying was away browsing the store, I seized the opportunity and apologized sincerely to Shijun for the mistakes I had made against her. With both hands, I held up the mineral water bottle before me, used it as wine, and asked for forgiveness. Smiling while listening, she too raised her cup of tea with her hands and offered an apology to me! We made an agreement that we would forget the past and be friends again. Then we “clinked” our “glasses” together, had a drink, and beamed to each other.

When the couple was leaving for home, Shijun and I embraced each other. Although we had known each other for decades, this might be the first time that we were so close.

After they were gone, I walked toward home with a spring in my step. I could not help smiling from the bottom of my heart. Gazing up, I found a brightest full moon in the sky giving off a warmest glow on me. At this instant, tears flowed down my cheeks. This was the most beautiful and would also be the most unforgettable Moon Festival in all my life.

## **Chapter 47 The Transportation to the Heaven**

September seventeenth, 2019

It was almost noon. I left my house and came to a bus stop on the side of a wide busy road, waiting for a bus to go to a hamburger place I loved. Soon I spotted a slender elderly man wearing a white T-shirt, black fitting knee-length shorts, and white sneakers with matching white socks. A black messenger bag was swung across a shoulder. With the head held high and the back straightened, he ambled over to the stop alone. His face was thin, dark, and full of wrinkles, his expression serene. He was about ninety years old.

A man of such an age was dressed like a young man and walking freely without the needs for a cane or company. Having never seen this kind of scene before, I could not help admiring his mind and health.

Immediately, I pulled out my phone and sent a message on what I witnessed to Xiazhu. This was what he replied: “He was just catching a bus. Xueji, nevertheless, called an ambulance for herself, jumped in, and went to the heaven. She was more impressive!”

## **Chapter 48 Xueji Returned**

September seventeenth, 2019

Today, I needed to visit Dr. Qin again. As usual, I went in the evening. I told the doctor that there had been a series of wonderful events that happened to me in the past two weeks, which made me overjoyed and touched. What was more, very strangely, all of them were connected with Xueji. Dr. Qin listened. He was not an ordinary man; he had psychic powers.

Immediately, he replied that Xueji was behind all of them; she made them possible! I was dumbfounded, feeling a chill going up my spine! I believed that ghosts had supernatural powers, but not Xueji, who seldom put herself in others’ shoes! She would never have done that.

I asked the doctor, “Are you serious, Doctor? I find it hard to believe this.”

Dr. Qin reached out, pointed in the direction of the space to my left, and said in a serious tone, “Here’s your friend.”

“What!” Startled, I screamed loudly and put my head and arms on the examination table, crying and shivering uncontrollably. Without saying anything, the doctor handed me a tissue from the tabletop.

I could not see Xueji’s spirit, so I turned toward the space where she might be and said to her, sobbing, “Thank you so much for these wonderful, beautiful things . . . which you’ve made possible for me! From

now on, . . . I'll try not to complain about you so much . . . Months later, when your daughters come to Taiwan to apply for . . . the inheritance you left behind, . . . I'll do my best to help them. In addition, . . . I've been chanting Amitabha for you. I hope you've received it."

I could not see Xueji, nor could I know her response. Dr. Qin was the only person I could speak to. Wiping my tears with the tissue, I asked him curiously, "When she was still alive, I was often mad at her and criticized her behind her back. Why was she so nice to me after her death? It doesn't make sense."

"Now she knows that you've got a true heart and have done a few things for her." He answered, his tone very serious.

But what had I done for her? What made her return my favors in a hurry? Why did she do so many incredible things for me one after another? There were so many questions racing in my mind. I asked the doctor, "Why didn't she return my favors while she was alive? Why did she do it after she was gone?"

He replied patiently, "Maybe she cared about her face. Maybe she couldn't see things clearly."

Then Dr. Qin suddenly changed his tone and said, "Your friend asked you to write her biography."

"What?!" I said, my face clouded with disbelief.

He continued, "You don't just write down the story. You should also upload it on the Internet so that people can read it and learn something from it."

After hesitating for a moment, I said, "Now I've changed my views of her completely. But there's a problem. If I document her life, to contrast how amazing she is now, I would need to write the negative side of her. Would that matter?"

"Not at all. Just go ahead and do it." The doctor answered instantly.

I had no idea if Xueji was still here listening to us. I also had difficulty communicating with her directly. So, without thinking further, I held my head high, straightened my back, and said to Dr. Qin, "I'll write it."

Now realizing how much effort Xueji had used and how much she wanted to return my favors, I had really changed my perception of her and had enormous respect for her. Furthermore, I believed that it would be a meaningful thing to write the story and make it public. Therefore, I did not need to consider if I had enough ability to write it or what difficulties I might encounter in the process. I simply went ahead and gave Xueji and Dr. Qin my word. I took the writing task as my mission. I would do my best to accomplish it.

After I came home, the images of my interaction with Xueji over the years kept flashing in my mind. My tears kept streaming down, too. I apologized to her over and over again for all the prejudice I had had against her and all the negative treatments I had done toward her.

I told Xueji in my heart not to worry about the worldly matters including me, Rendong, her daughters, grandchildren, husband, mother and anyone else. I asked her to focus her attention and chant Amitabha in order to go to the Land of Extreme Happiness soon.

## **Chapter 49 Friends of a Lifetime**

My father fell ill and finally passed away in 2012. When Xueji heard the news, she emailed Rendong, Xiazhu, Liuqing, and me from Tokyo, saying, "Yesterday evening Rendong told me Lanxing's father had died. I was shocked and felt very bad. If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know. Lanxing and I have known each other since elementary school. I believe our connection will last until we die. Please let's keep in touch, Lanxing. Don't stop."

On April second, 2016, Xueji shared a secret with me on Line and asked me not to reveal it to anyone. Then she said, "We've been friends since childhood, so I tell you everything. Although sometimes you misunderstand what I mean, I choose not to explain and forget about it. I've always regarded you as a good friend of mine."

Stupid, I finally realized Xueji had always considered me her friend. When I was angry with her, which she knew, she still called me as if nothing had happened. Probably she thought since we were close friends, we could have a fight sometimes. And yet, once the fight was over, she forgave me and let it go. The bond between us remained the same. The quarrel between her and Rendong that I witnessed at the hospital a year ago was a perfect example. When I was cross with Xueji, however, I would bear the grudge and speak ill of her behind her back! Now feeling a wave of remorse, I realized what a terrible person I had been.

Just as Xueji had predicted, the inexplicable connection between Xueji and me really lasted until she passed. Not only that, after her death, she managed to contact me. First, she did many things in the dark for me to make me joyful and touched. Then, she asked me to write her biography. As a smart person, she knew all along I would understand and agree to her request at the end.

On September seventeenth, 2019, I really accepted her request and decided to write down the biography. Xiazhu supported the idea and suggested the title, *Friends of a Lifetime, Fulfillment between Two Worlds*. I loved it and used it right away. Then he proposed that I too produce an English version so that not only Kikuko and Lanko could read it, but those who did not understand Chinese were also able to enjoy it. Although I was aware that it might create a heavy burden on me, I couldn't decline it. I agreed instantly. On the nineteenth, I made the outline very quickly and started writing with confidence without the main points. Chapter Forty-Seven *The Transportation to the Heaven*, written earlier on the same day, was included. On the early morning of the twenty-second, I had a dream that Xueji and I were savoring some rice noodles together. The delightful taste made her laugh heartily. On October ninth, I started sending the beginning of the story, a chapter a day, to my friends on Line, including Xueji's daughters, Rendong, Xiazhu, Liuqing, Fongdan, Shijun, and, of course, the respectable Dr. Qin. The following day, I began to release the biography on my Facebook page, in both Chinese and English versions.

## **Chapter 50 The Name**

October tenth, 2019

Before I started writing the story, I named Xueji Shuixian, a kind of flower. Several days later, I happened to see the name Bai Xueji in a series of flower names and loved it very much. The name was not only pretty, had a Japanese aura, but also fitted the main character perfectly. Therefore, I changed Shuixian to Xueji immediately.

Today, I was thinking about translating the names of the characters, which were in Chinese, into English. Not until I looked up the word Xueji in a dictionary, did I realize it also meant Snow White—the name of the heroine of a Japanese cartoon *The Red-Haired Snow White*.

I recounted the little story to Lanko. She replied that her mother would have loved to be called princess. She added that at her kindergarten graduation ceremony, her mother played Snow White in a play the parents put on! Upon hearing it, I felt a chill. I speculated that my old friend herself would like me to give her the name Xueji! Now I finally understood how much she wanted me to write her biography!

## **Chapter 51 The Shock**

October seventeenth, 2019

I retired from Tunghai in February, 2018 and continued to teach part-time there. This semester I am teaching again my favorite course *English Animated Film Appreciation and Discussion*.

This morning in an office, I was reviewing my lesson plan regarding the 2008 film *Wall-E* for my afternoon class. Among my notes, I noticed a phrase I had used to describe the character Eve, “like a goddess descending from the sky.” At this moment, an idea crossed my mind: I could use the expression to describe Xueji’s beauty in the English version! I wrote it down instantly and changed it to “like a goddess descending from the heaven.” I couldn’t control my excitement.

Then I went to a nearby convenience store to get some lunch. As I was walking on the wide familiar road with tall lush trees on both sides, suddenly I felt an unexpected, inexplicable warmth inside and all my sadness over what had happened in the past few weeks vanished. Miraculously, I became refreshed and light-hearted.

I texted Dr. Qin on Line about what had just occurred. I wrote, “Dr. Qin, I found my recent problems could be solved easily by my description of Xueji’s beauty! It’s amazing!”

He replied, “Writing someone else’s memoir makes the writer and the person in question transcend time and space, through the fusion of both parties’ jealousy, self-reflection, admiration, mutual recognition, tolerance and so on, and gradually enter each other’s heart, then body, then mind, and finally soul.”

I was stunned at learning this. The initial reasons I decided to write the story about Xueji from my perspective were our friendship and my respect and guilt to her. I did not expect that it would lead to this! I was not certain if this kind of result was beneficial or harmful to me. After all, Xueji and I were now in different worlds.

However, considering that I had promised to write the biography, written half of it, and released a few chapters, I could not back off. I had to continue and still do my utmost. I had to finish the memoir and post the rest of it online. Therefore, I encouraged myself to keep writing and releasing the story in the same way as Tomokazu and Aiko, Xueji’s grandchildren, were striding forward with a resolute and unswerving attitude in Xueji’s mourning hall on that very morning.

## **Chapter 52 The Fulfillment**

*“Xueji, my dear friend, for fifty-six years, you and I had spent countless enjoyable, heart-warming times together. We had also made mistakes and learnt from them. There had been many times that I was disappointed in you, and yet I did not have the courage to tell you face-to-face. Instead, I spoke ill of you behind your back and decided not to speak with you anymore. Nevertheless, you always forgave me, so I changed my mind afterward every time. We made deals that I was going to take you to get a haircut and that we were going to have dumplings together. You also suggested many times that we travel together. However, either you stood me up, or I brushed you off. Those plans had never been carried out.*

*“Then, you left this world. I believe that now you must have realized there was reincarnation and understood everything about your life. You’re no longer the old you, that were inconsiderate and self-centered; you keep creating amazing, beautiful things in this world. You asked Dr. Qin to persuade me, who never had any formal writing experiences and was full of negative comments about you, to write your life story from my personal narrow perspective! What a great mind and wager! It proved how much you trusted me! Incredibly moved, I started documenting it with your assistance and finally completed it!*

*“In the process of narrating and describing different events in the memoir, I understood your true personality and friendship as well as my shallowness and egotism. Writing your story, which is the same as ours, we are no longer shy, worried, withdrawn, afraid, or even frightened. We put our egos aside, faced our own worlds, opened our minds, and showed our true hearts. Many years ago, I decided to improve my ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. However, I had not gotten much progress over the years. Now I found that portraying our tale is a great, effective way! Xueji, this task of ours is the biggest, longest, most*

valuable, and most meaningful collaboration for us! My old friend, I would like to apologize to you for my jealousy, arrogance, and misunderstanding! I would also like to salute you for your understanding, forgiveness, and wisdom!

“We must maximize the readership so that people get to know the transformation of our minds and hearts, the existence of the spirit world, and our extraordinary friendship and, hopefully, they can understand the feelings and situations of their families, relatives, friends, and colleagues and reach out to them, and if possible, cooperate with them. Hopefully, through this teamwork, both parties can learn from each other and reach an unspeakable, satisfactory state that their bodies, minds, and souls all change in a better way.”

## Chapter 53 Traveling and Writing Together

I took a six-day trip to Japan on October twenty-ninth while I was writing the memoir. I went to Oirase Keiryu and Shirakami-Sanchi for the beauty of the fall foliage. I also visited Xueji’s city, Tokyo. Whenever I had time, I would take out my pen and continue to put down the story. No matter when I was on the plane flying through the bouncing turbulence or pouring rain, or at the beautiful sights, or even at a hotel late at night, as long as I started scribbling, Xueji would appear and work with me. I could not see or hear her, but I knew she was at my side. I did not know which parts were my ideas. I also couldn’t figure out which segments were her thoughts. Anyway, we traveled and worked together like this in Japan.

In *Gulliver’s Travels*, a novel written by Jonathan Swift, the hero, Gulliver, was able to call any ghost in history and discuss historical events with it. I, nevertheless, could work on the biography with Xueji wherever and whenever we were.

During the writing period, I ran into some difficulties a few times and thought about quitting writing. Encouraged by my family, friends, and Dr. Qin and fully authorized by Kikuko and Lanko, I finally overcame the obstacles and the story—18,000 Chinese words in length—was completed on November seventeenth.

While we were working together, Xueji and I had become the best friends ever. Whenever I thought, “Is Xueji OK now?” she would appear next to me immediately, smiling, and say gently, “Lanxing.”

Dr. Qin told me that before this lifetime of ours, Xueji and I had been good friends. One day, one of us said, “I’m thinking about getting reincarnated.” The other responded instantly, “OK. If you do it, I’ll do it, too.” I was one month and a half older than Xueji. It seemed that I was the one who wanted to get reincarnated and Xueji was the great, devoted friend that followed suit!

## Chapter 54 The Song of Blossoms

Again, it was a quiet November evening. After cleaning the bowl and dish in the kitchen, I flashed on the unique international concert Xueji, Liuqing, Xiazhu, Rendong, and I had right behind the wall in the living room five years ago. I could still feel a tightness gripping my throat and got an urge to listen to Rimi Natsukawa’s *Nada Sou Sou* again. Therefore, I opened my laptop on the dining table, clicked YouTube, and searched for the song. Nevertheless, surprisingly, from a video uploaded by Youku, another song sung by Natsukawa, *The Blossoms*, which was equally beautiful, flowed out continuously, filling the room and, eventually, my heart.

The river’s running. Where are you running?  
People, too, are running. Where are you running?  
In the place where there’s no more running,  
There’re blossoms.  
Flowers bloom for you.  
Cry if you like, laugh if you want.  
There will be a day, though no one knows when,  
When you’ll surely bloom like a flower.



Blossoms have their own smiles.  
People have their own tears.  
They're the songs of nature.  
Blossoms are in your heart.  
Cry if you like, laugh if you want.  
You'll always, always bloom as flowers.  
Cry if you like, laugh if you want.  
When is the day? There'll be a day.  
When you'll surely bloom like a flower.

As I was listening to the song, I burst into tears and couldn't control myself. Somehow I knew it was Xueji, who was talking softly to me, comforting me gently through Natsukawa.

Yes, Xueji and I had helped and completed each other in two different worlds. From now on, we had to say good-bye and go our own ways. No matter where we went, there would be obstacles as well as laughter on the way. At the end, however, each of us would definitely see the flowers in our hearts bloom. Our names Xueji and Lanxing, one purple and one blue, were truly beautiful, indestructible blossoms!