Grown-Up Child

A Memoir by
Chiufang Hwang, M.D.

With Lilian Duval
# Contents

- Diary Entry, Age 11 ................................................................. 2
- Dedication ............................................................................. 3
- Trailer Burning ................................................................. 4
- Trust ................................................................................. 6
- Shards of Glass ................................................................. 12
- How Could You? ............................................................. 18
- Cussing ............................................................................... 26
- Little Translator ................................................................. 34
- Sweet and Sour ................................................................. 43
- On the Run ........................................................................... 51
- Sweet Home Alabama ....................................................... 60
- Tramp ............................................................................... 69
- Prell and Cookies ............................................................. 76
- “This Is Your Home” ....................................................... 83
- An Embarrassing Scandal ............................................... 91
- Girl on the City Bus .......................................................... 100
- Unwanted Guests ............................................................. 110
- To Prolong Her Life ........................................................ 119
- Remission ........................................................................... 127
- College Station ............................................................... 133
- A Tethered Goat ............................................................... 142
- Teenager .......................................................................... 148
- Security Deposit .............................................................. 157

---

Please note:
This pre-publication excerpt of *Grown-Up Child* by Chiufang Hwang, M.D. is for review purposes only.
Diary Entry, Age 11

You always have to be ready. You never know when it’s the next time that you’re going to the emergency room. You never know when the next crisis will happen.

You never know when your little brother’s going to practically slice his finger off, when your baby sister’s going to start convulsing and you leave your food half-eaten, chopsticks poking into their bowls, and you run to the car and speed across town through all the red lights, hoping you make it in time.

You go to sleep thinking that you’d better keep your clothes on and you’d better have your things ready, because how do you know that in the middle of the night, your cozy trailer home is not going to succumb to flames?

You don’t know any of these things. So you always have to be ready.
Dedication

My appearance fools you. I come across as a very professional, classy lady, a medical doctor—a psychiatrist, no less—and then when someone tries to shortchange me, or if I think they do, it’s—oh, my God—it’s … only someone who’s grown up on the streets can know what that’s like. The bottom falls right out of my stately demeanor and, wham, out comes my tough-talking reaction, boom. Just like that.

It all comes from growing up on the streets.

When I react in unexpected ways, even those who’ve known me for years can’t figure out why I did that. People are taken aback. “Why does she act that way?” they ask.

If I do it at home, one of my boys will say, “Ah, her street side’s coming out!” They know when it’s coming. It’s kind of a family joke.

I want to share my experience because it’s an original: here is a little Chinese girl in 1968 and 1969, aged two to three, in Hempstead, Texas and Columbia and Rock Hill, South Carolina, in the Deep South. Almost no Asians were there at the time. There were black and white, and that was that. No Latinos, nothing else.

To be Asian at that time, in those towns where we lived, was way beyond rare. It was exotic. In second grade, I made the front page of The Columbia Record just because I was one of only two Asians who had started school that year. Both of our fathers were graduate students.

I acquired my incongruous Southern accent from the black kids who were my companions. The language that sprinkles these pages is politically incorrect because I’m going to put you back in real time, back into those days, just like what it was then.

This book is for people on welfare and families who live in trailers and parents who stand in line for food stamps. It’s for black kids who attend de facto segregated schools.

I identify with you, and you are my audience.

To all the struggling immigrant children who assume adult roles by default, this book is for you, too. Like you, I was grown up far before my time, and I suffered the consequences.

A child is not a miniature adult.
Trailer Burning

Rock Hill, South Carolina, 1969. I’m standing here. I’m about three and a half years old, and this memory is as vivid as fire, the fire that I’m watching. In front of me, our trailer home has erupted in flames. I feel the heat on my arms.

Two black students from the college are standing next to me, and all around are the other black students. I’m tiny for my age, nowhere near three feet tall. Their kneecaps are at my eye level.

I’m standing on the lawn of the women’s dorm. Our school-owned trailer is on campus between the dorm and the office of the Dean of the Math Department. Everybody’s watching the back end of the trailer on fire, which is the left end of it from our point of view. It’s a two-bedroom trailer, one bedroom at each end. On the right side, that’s where my mother and father and I all sleep. The other bedroom is for Vikram, an Indian bachelor. He’s a math teacher at Friendship College, like my dad. Lucky thing he isn’t there now. It’s his end that’s caught on fire. The fire started at noon when none of us were inside.

We’re waiting for the fire trucks to arrive, but the back end of the trailer is already gone.

I’m listening to the adults talking. My mother isn’t here; I don’t know where she is, and that’s normal. She lets me run around a lot. And she doesn’t understand a word of English anyway. So I’m unsupervised, which is not exactly the same thing as free.

“The propane tank blew up,” they’re saying. The fire started in the propane tank at the Indian teacher’s end. In the middle are the living room, kitchen, and all-in-one. We share those with Vikram—my mother, my father, and I.

It’s the middle of summer now, very hot and humid, 90 degrees on most days. I’m wearing a pair of cheap, synthetic rubber, made-in-Taiwan flip-flops, and I can feel the hot gravel under my feet, poking up through my rubber soles. Scorching hot sun up above, hot rocks baking on the ground below, pressing into my plastic flip-flops. I scoot over onto the dried-out grass, what’s left of it.

_We were just in there last night eating, I think. What about our chopsticks? Are they burning up? What about the plates we were eating on? _I can see them now. The plastic plates were given to us, white plastic, scratched-up plates with autumn leaves printed on them, but the plates are kind of brownish, so faded you can hardly see the leaves. Still, we were so grateful to be given plates to eat on. Now they’re burning up along with everything else.

We’re staying in this trailer for free. At least, we were. It’s free housing. Even though my dad doesn’t have his PhD yet, he was given the opportunity to teach math at Friendship College, a black school, now defunct.

I remember my first experience in this trailer when we moved in a couple of months ago. I went into the bathroom and closed the door, but when I tried to get back out, I couldn’t maneuver the knob to unlock it. My parents couldn’t open it from outside the door.
So my dad summoned some of his students, and a group of young black men ran over. The tallest one climbed onto a ladder or chair and he pulled me out through the small porthole-style window in the bathroom. To me, the window looked as high up as the ceiling. He reached in with his long, strong arms and pulled my whole body out. Everybody was so glad that I got out, while my parents were standing there watching.

Not long after that, my father and I were walking on the sidewalk that connected all the campus buildings, when out of nowhere a long snake slithered onto our path. It was probably a young black rat snake; they breed in the summertime. Black rat snakes can grow to four feet long, and this one wasn’t that big, but we didn’t know what to do. We were unaware that the scary-looking creature was not at all dangerous, not venomous.

So once again, my dad summoned his students. One of them managed to prod the snake into a Mason jar with a stick, putting the glass over the snake and capturing it while we watched. We were so relieved!

The three of us live on this black campus and we spend our weekends here, often going to the student rec room or the dining hall. My mother and I work on 50-piece jigsaw puzzles in the trailer at night, American landscapes. And I have little math workbooks to keep busy with. My mom buys them at the A&P, my dad shows me how to read them, and I write in the answers. I don’t know where we’re going to do that now.

I’m always curious about Vikram, the Indian teacher living on the other end of our trailer, also benefiting from free room and board. Where is his wife? Does he have a child like me? Why does he get free board like we do? Why is he gone most of the day? He teaches math like my father does. Where is he on weekends? More questions swarm around in my mind than in both my parents’ minds combined.

Now my big question is: where we will all go?

I’m very small. And very frightened.
I was perfectly bilingual, yet I hardly ever spoke a word. Even around my parents, I was very shy and barely said anything.

It was a few years before that shy little girl would morph into a tough-talking, cussing, redneck Chinese girl with an uncensored, triple-X vocabulary.

Until around age six, I was the most stereotypical little Chinese immigrant you could find, as compliant as a loyal puppy dog fresh out of obedience school. I was timid, quiet, understanding, and unquestioning, 100% of the time. Good girl. That describes me. Docile, meek, will-do. I never thought to challenge anything my parents said. I did not rebel against them in any way at all. It’s not that I wanted to be good. I simply knew no other way of life.

As for rebellious thoughts, I would come to resent my parents’ neglect after I observed that not all parents let their little daughters roam the dangerous streets unattended, risking grave injury and even death more times than I want to remember. Not many parents would leave a child with babysitters who needed babysitters themselves. I was always very trusting of people, never suspecting any ill intent.

When they weren’t fighting, my parents were sedate and sterile. I have never seen them do anything more than hold hands. They were as chaste as classmates at Bob Jones University. Nothing they did suggested an intimate relationship, but they must have been intimate at some point because they had three children. In a Chinese family, whether in the U.S. or back home or anywhere, you don’t say you love somebody, you show it, but never conspicuously. The principle is that you don’t need to tell a person something that’s obvious. But sometimes we desperately need to hear those obvious things. It’s good for the soul.

Part of their way of showing love to me, at that time their only child, was to establish expectations that I would be studious. The math workbooks that my mother bought at the A&P supermarket provided raw material for my preschool education, which involved lots of practice and repetition, beginning at age three.

My mother would ditto a practice test from the book, making ten copies, and have me work on them one after another over the course of a month until I got a perfect score. Ditto machines were in use before photocopiers were invented. To make copies, first you wrote whatever you wanted on a cover sheet. The pressure of your pen would transfer a purple-colored waxy substance from a second sheet onto the reverse side of the cover. Then you would turn the cover page over and secure that mirror image onto the machine’s drum, where it would act as a printing plate. The process was messy, and the purple ditto ink got on your hands, table, clothes, and anything it touched. Your shoulder would get sore from turning the lever that cranked out the wet, inky copies.
My mother also drilled me on multiplication tables. That was good coaching, and it put me way ahead in math. English was another story. I spoke only Taiwanese at home; I didn’t read Chinese or know Mandarin. The English that I picked up was compromised by its sources: the children of domestics and construction workers in the housing projects we inhabited, and the no-frills kindergarten where I began my education.

My father encouraged me to learn. “You have a good memory,” he told me when I was three. “You have an excellent memory.” He wasn’t trying to boost my self-esteem; rather, he wanted me to be aware that I had the ability to succeed in school. For fun, I would memorize phone numbers, street names, and addresses in English. My dad would ask me, “What’s so-and-so’s phone number?” and I would tell him, rattling off their address too.

I noticed inconsequential details and, during my rare talkative moments, would ask questions like, “Why did that man wear that shirt two days ago? And he wore the same belt.”

“How do you know it’s the same belt?” my father asked.

“Because it’s got that crease on the right side and his other belts are different.” I wasn’t showing off; I was only playing.

#

When we emigrated from Taiwan, I was two years old. The first place we lived was Hempstead, Texas, near Prairie View A&M University, where my father taught math from 1968 to 1969. Our housing structure was on a highway, its entrance hidden by dense, overgrown grass and brush. You couldn’t even see the fence around the property, which was home to farm hands, ranch employees, and our little family.

To enter, your car negotiated a narrow dirt entryway and you drove past the main house on a circular drive. Our rented room was in a row of one-bedroom, attached houses with flat roofs, all connected together, with loads of farm equipment out back.

The main house in front was nicer. The farmers who lived there raised chickens, and their little blond daughter, Kim, was my first friend. She was a happy, carefree girl not quite three years old. Because the snake-infested brush grass was so high that I couldn’t see above it, my mother would carry me to Kim’s house so we could play together.

After a few months, we moved several miles down the highway to Prairie View, closer to the university. Our squat apartment building was a roadside fourplex sandwiched between a Greyhound depot and an Esso filling station. A few months later, we moved more than a thousand miles east to Rock Hill, South Carolina, where my father taught math at Friendship College. That’s where we lived on campus in the trailer that burned up when its propane tank caught fire.

The fire that destroyed our trailer home did not burn up the ugly memories that trouble me to this day. It was spring, 1969, a few months before the fire, and I had just turned three. One Saturday evening after dinner, my father offered to drive my mother and me to the mall while he played ping-pong at the Rock Hill YMCA. He was a big fan of the game, which has always been
popular in Asia. Saturday night was recreation time at the YMCA, and my father was delighted with the good players in Rock Hill.

The YMCA was in the middle of town, not far from Friendship College and next to the day-care center where I stayed on weekdays. My mother was working a few hours a day without pay at the college in exchange for free board on campus in the trailer. None of her work required the use of English. She didn’t know how to take care of a child; until we left Taiwan, my grandmother had looked after me. My mother was never the kind to stay at home with a child. In addition, both my parents were very pro-education, and they didn’t think that staying home would further my education.

That night, we drove down a fast, two-lane highway surrounded by open land, pastures, cows, farms, and very tall grass. Malls were a new concept in the ‘60s, and we rarely went there.

“You can walk around inside,” my father told us when he stopped there around 6:00 p.m. “Look at the American fashions. I’ll be back at nine.”

It wouldn’t be hard for him to find us because this one-level structure had been built before the heyday of giant malls. My mother took my hand and walked me around the entire mall, strolling and window-shopping. It didn’t take us long to explore everything, so we did it twice.

Nine o’clock came and went, but my father did not return. One by one, shop owners turned off their lights and locked their doors. We kept checking out front for our car. At 9:30, the mall was about to close for the night, so we went into a little coffee shop that was still open and they let us wait in there, even though we had no money for snacks. Through body language and gestures, they understood that we were waiting for someone to pick us up.

Nobody did anything after nine o’clock in small towns in the ‘60s. 10:00 p.m., 10:30. The mall was nearly empty. There was no way to call my father. This was long before the advent of cellphones, and public phones were not very accessible back then. We didn’t even know how to ask for the number of the YMCA. My mother certainly would not have been able to handle a phone conversation. My English was brand-new, and so was I.

The last waitress left and the proprietor held the door open and locked it behind us. “Sorry,” he said, striding briskly to the exit, his keys jangling. We followed him out, and a security guard locked and bolted the mall entrance, jogged over to his car, and drove off.

I remember every single detail of what happened next. We’re going to be stuck out here all night, I thought, but didn’t say a word. We stood silently in the dark outside the door.

Around 11:00, my father pulled up in his decrepit blue Plymouth and waited for us to get in. My mother was stone-faced, her cheeks flushed. “I thought you were going to pick us up at 9:00, or at least by 9:30,” she said in an angry voice.

My father looked stunned by her reaction but didn’t answer. He started driving down the highway, in a cheerful mood after his match, which had required three out of five games to win. I don’t know who won, but he and his opponent were equally matched that night and they’d had
many long rallies. Each game must be won by two points, and many of their games had gone beyond the 21 points needed to win. A match between two equal players can go on for hours.

“The mall was closing,” my mother complained. “It was good that the restaurant people let us wait inside there, but then the whole building shut down.”

In the back seat, I kept perfectly still, as quiet as possible.

“Why didn’t you come earlier?” she demanded.

He glanced at her, his profile cold, tight. She had broken some unspoken rule. “I told you where I was going,” he said in a low voice. “You knew I was at the YMCA playing ping-pong. You know it takes time.”

She folded her arms and looked straight ahead.

“I was in a match,” he spat.

She rustled through her handbag.

Furious that she did not respond, he scolded, “We played until we were done.” He accelerated. “You can’t just stop and walk out at a certain time.”

I hoped that nothing was coming the other way, that no animals would cross the highway. My mother did a half-turn to face him, and I shrank back into the plastic upholstery. This conversation was escalating out of control. Just be quiet, I warned her—inside my head.

“You left us there,” she accused in a high pitch. “We were stranded.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he barked. “You should be grateful that I brought you out there to the mall.”

No answer.

“You should be thankful that I had the consideration to take you somewhere so you could keep yourselves occupied because if you came with me, you’d have to watch me play ping-pong for hours in a hot gym.”

He waited.

“Miles out of my way so you and the kid would have something to do. I come pick you up and I get this.”

Twisting the knife, she chided, “The security guard sent us outside in the dark.”

“What?” He didn’t scream. That wasn’t the style of their arguments. But their tone of voice got meaner and uglier. In the back seat, I wanted to plug up my ears.

“You were very, very late,” she whined.

“Unbelievable,” he shot back at her. “I come to this country, get a master’s degree, a teaching assistantship, I’m applying for a PhD program. I’m the breadwinner of this family. And this is how you treat me when I come pick you up?”

“It was dangerous,” she insisted. “You shouldn’t have done that.”
That was it. He slowed the car and glowered at her, a look of hatred burning in his eyes. “That’s enough! You’re going to get out of the car.”

He was almost a stranger to me: we’d known each other only the few months since my mother and I had arrived from Taiwan. But I knew him well enough to understand that this wasn’t an empty threat, and that he lumped me together with my mother as one unit. Wherever she went, I went.

He was going to leave us both right there on the side of the road in the dark. There were hardly any street lamps, maybe one every half mile. It was dark, it was scary. From the posture of my mother, cringing in the passenger seat, I knew that she’d gone too far.

Don’t say anything, I pleaded with her silently.

Someone like my father, I would think that he would love his own daughter and his wife, but no, he was going to deposit us on the highway between a remote mall and the town of Rock Hill. If you stepped outside that mall, there was nothing else, nowhere to go. Even if there was, nothing was open at 11 o’clock at night in Rock Hill in 1969. I was a cute, tiny three-year-old girl and we had just come from Taiwan. He was reuniting with his wife and daughter, but that wasn’t enough to quell his temper. He was going to abandon us there.

We had no money and neither of us had command of the English language. Through the car windows, I saw no buildings at all, no place to seek refuge. We were nowhere near our trailer home in Rock Hill.

My mother scrunched herself into the seat. Don’t say anything, I kept thinking.

The speedometer moved steadily down, down, slower, slower. He waited for her to challenge him.

She did not.

He sped up almost imperceptibly.

She didn’t talk.

He accelerated. The crisis was over. We were going home.

Witnessing his fury, I vowed to watch out and never get him mad anymore, even though I knew that I’d played no part in this violent clash. I learned that you just can’t trust your own parents.

Of course, I was a child, so I had no choice as the years went by. I would give him another chance, and another, and yet another. That first incident in Rock Hill should have been a warning for me: that this was a precursor to my father’s chronic tardiness, a problem that would plague the rest of my childhood.

But what could I do?

The following year, 1970, my father was accepted into the PhD program in mathematics at the University of South Carolina, so we moved to Columbia, 70 miles south of Rock Hill. But
our living conditions did not improve. Our new home was in a very low-income housing project, where I would spend my formative years, starting at age four. Our new address was 4-1 Henley Homes: Unit 4, Apartment 1, in a complex that looked like Army barracks.

Our new neighbors were black, white, and needy. There were a few other Asian graduate student families with small children. At the time, the U.S. wanted bright, scientific minds from India and other Asian countries, people with master’s degrees who were seeking their PhDs in math, engineering, or physics. By that time, I was used to the mixture, and nothing felt foreign to me.

But life in a housing project would prove to be perilous.
My mother was subservient to some degree; a typical Asian wife. However, she always bickered with my father over trivial things in a tit-for-tat exchange.

“Can you bring me the tea?” he might ask.

“Well, I already brought it once,” she would complain. “Can you go get it yourself?”

They would argue over minor, inconsequential things, and he would give her unnecessary orders: “Can you go get me a pencil? Can you get me a sheet of paper so I can jot things down?”

She sometimes would and sometimes wouldn’t. Their conflicts were never-ending. I learned early on to keep quiet and not add anything to the discord.

Occasionally the acrimony would escalate. I remember an especially brutal confrontation at Henley Homes when I was four. My mother had refused to bring my father his tea, which infuriated him. He grabbed a broomstick and lunged for her with such intense rage that he would have killed her if I hadn’t been standing there right next to her, glued to her side like a miniature bodyguard. She defied him in her own way, showing no fear or acquiescence; had she done so, he might have stopped of his own accord.

Silent tears cours ed down my face and onto my trembling body. Terrified of my father’s angry threat, I was nevertheless meek and helpless and wouldn’t dare to scream or say anything in the heat of the moment, sensing that it would only make things worse.

Father caught my eye, and in my eyes, he saw terror. He held up the broomstick in midair. “Do you want me to hit her?” He looked at me for a response while my mother crouched passively on the floor.

“No, no, no, she’s my mommy!” I sobbed, tears flying off my face.

I think he felt my compassion and it melted his fury, so he dropped the broom and spared her. But it would only be a matter of time before another senseless conflict would erupt. Even as a little girl, I knew they were both wrong.

I could never understand my mother’s stubbornness. As I grew older, I would think to myself, Mommy, just go get his pencil, and when you do, bring a piece of paper too. In my young mind, I would say, Geez, you know he studies every night at this time, so why don’t you get the teapot boiling and get the study items ready, in place? It’s just hot tea; it’s not your personal worth. When he’s studying, why can’t you simply set out some pencils and paper on the table nearby? This is not like asking you to cook a gourmet meal or pick up horse manure. His routine is so predictable and easily anticipated. Why don’t you give in a little bit and make it easier on yourself and keep us both out of danger?

Their marriage was never joyful. My mother had not earned a college degree and always needed to prove to him that she was just as valuable as he was. In return, he degraded her in any
number of subtle ways, day after day, year after year. It tore me apart. They were twin stars revolving around each other in a merciless, loveless orbit.

#

Henley Homes Day Care and Kindergarten, right inside the project, was where I learned English. There were no ESL programs for children, so I acquired the language in a hit-and-miss sort of way. The handful of other Chinese kids in the school spoke different dialects, so the only language we had in common was our rudimentary English.

Kindergarten didn’t prepare me at all for the next year’s academic challenge: a new private school was opening, the St. Andrews branch of Timmerman School. They were accepting any and all students. My parents probably got a reduced rate for me, and they enrolled me there in first grade at age five. Going from Henley Homes to Timmerman was a shock. Everybody else was reading fluently already, while I couldn’t even manage Dick, Spot, and Jane. I was way behind.

Making things worse was the lunch that my mother made me take to school. On my report card in first grade, the teacher wrote plaintively, “Chiufang cries every afternoon. Perhaps some reassurance that you will pick her up will help out.” What I needed was not reassurance; it was for someone to actually come pick me up. This private school was not walking distance and was not served by buses.

But that’s not what I was crying about. My mother handed me a Thermos every morning to bring to school. There were two problems with this lunch treat: first, she would pack the Thermos with hot food the night before and leave it out on the table all night. Second, the stuff inside the Thermos was utterly inedible. She’d put in a boiled egg and some kind of roast beef or some other weird Chinese food that none of these other kids had ever seen or smelled. When I opened the Thermos, out wafted a stench disgusting enough to repel ravenous bears from a campsite. All the kids would be grossed out and run away, leaving me there alone with the offending gunk until one of my classmates would kindly offer me half a sandwich.

After I ate my substitute lunch, I would start crying. When the teacher noticed and asked why, I would answer tearfully, “My father won’t come pick me up, my father won’t come pick me up; I know he won’t come pick me up.” Actually, that was true often enough.

Two teachers were on duty during dismissal and pickup, and one of them had to leave by 4:00 p.m. The second would try to stay until the last kid was gone. Within 15 to 30 minutes, all of the other kids had been picked up on the school’s circular drive. When my father remembered to come, he would be at least 45 minutes late and would arrive after one or both teachers had left. Sometimes he was two hours late, and the janitors would be waiting to lock up. If he forgot, he wouldn’t pick me up at all. But that’s another story.

#

Our housing project was full of surprises. It was a chilly night in December and I was five years old, halfway through first grade. We woke up in a panic around 2:00 a.m. to the sharp, piercing noise of shattered glass hitting the asphalt in our parking lot. Someone was doing a bit
of Christmas shopping, and the gift was going to be our ailing blue 1968 Plymouth. With a BB
gun in hand, the perpetrator shot most of the glass out of the driver’s side window so he could
unlock the door, jump in, and speed away.

Unfortunately for the thief, the faded clunker had carburetor problems and wouldn’t
cooperate with him. Half the time, we couldn’t get it to start, either. After he tried and failed and
pumped the gas to no avail, he gave up, left the broken door hanging open, and ran off in disgust.
“Guy damn mutha fock-a,” he cursed to himself as he turned around the corner and out of sight.

A few months later, we were eating dinner when we were robbed in broad daylight, hours
before the summer sunset. It was a Saturday and my mother had hung the laundry out to dry on
the clothesline right outside our back door and down the back steps. My father was sitting at a
table provided by a church that accepted donations from people who wanted to get rid of old
furniture. I never saw my mother sit down to eat, and I usually ate while walking around.

Through the screen door, we could see my father’s new Fruit of the Loom underwear all
lined up in a neat row like obedient pupils. He had splurged on some undershirts and boxer
shorts at Kmart after his old ones got ratty and fell apart. A flock of cinnamon-colored Carolina
Wrens shared space on the clothesline, chirping their chorus of teakettle-teakettle from their little
round bodies.

My mother put the rice on the table. Next moment, the birds flew off in a flurry of
beating wings. Our eyes all turned to the screen door, and the underwear was gone. One minute
you saw it, next minute you didn’t. The culprit had vanished along with his prize.

My father jumped up, but just as hurriedly, slumped back down, dejected. In a place like
that, you don’t want to run out and chase someone because you just might get stabbed or shot.
All you can do is to freeze and keep quiet.

Henley Homes wasn’t a safe place at any time of day or night, but I would go outside to
play anyway. Shortly after the underwear theft, I was playing with the other welfare kids who
lived there. I was running around in my foam flip-flops when blood started gushing out of my
right foot. Bleeding profusely, I sat in the dirt and found that a long shard of glass, maybe from a
soda bottle, had pierced my cheap slipper and penetrated my foot. There was a scary-looking
gash between my first and second toes. I went inside and my mother washed it and wrapped it,
but I didn’t get a tetanus shot.

I wasn’t very good at sports or outdoor children's games; I couldn’t even climb the
monkey bars because I was not very nimble or flexible. My parents stressed academics and very
much discouraged sports or outdoor activities. I was a frail little girl, always getting dizzy, and
both my parents wanted me to be feminine and not get my knees skinned.

#

My brother Chi-Cheng was born when I was in first grade, nearly six years old, and I was
so excited that now I had this real, live, little baby doll to play with. I’d been the only child for so
long, and I was overjoyed from the first moment I saw him. In the Chinese tradition, I called him
“little brother,” not by his given name, and when he learned to talk, he called me “older sister.”
My brother was born in an old county hospital, typical of the ‘70s. The tall building was made of dark, old bricks and dated from the ‘30s or ‘40s. This inner-city hospital was like a smaller version of Bellevue. Patients occupied wards with eight rows of beds on each of two sides. There was no privacy at all, except for a curtain you could pull around each bed. Bathrooms and showers were shared, along with the misery and pain. The hospital stopped providing medical services when I was still in grade school, and my parents sent me there many times to pick up welfare checks and WIC vouchers.

During my mother’s pregnancy, I was old enough to notice her getting bigger and then suddenly smaller, but I didn’t ask any questions about the process, nor did anyone offer an explanation. I knew not to ask questions. That was just standard for me; you wonder, but you don’t ask. It was a long time before I learned that you had to have sex to have a baby.

In the Asian tradition, a woman doesn’t want to tell people she’s pregnant. American people would say, “Oh, congratulations!” about the visible pregnancy, but my parents were very low-key about it. It was either something to be embarrassed about because obviously you had sex to get into this condition, or maybe you dreaded the possibility of miscarriage, so you didn’t want to make a big deal about it.

In those days, fathers were not allowed in the delivery room. They waited outside, and then when the baby was delivered, the father got to see it and sign papers. There’s a picture of me next to my mother beside the blue car that didn’t work, and a nurse is holding my baby brother. My father brought me to the hospital to take them home, and he took the picture.

The custom back then was to bottle-feed. Breast-feeding meant that you were poor, so it was a prestigious thing to bottle-feed. Our poverty plan gave us free Similac and Enfamil. We had piles and piles of those cans of formula.

I held my baby brother as I would hold a doll, but babies and children were not cuddled in the American sense. As a child, I didn’t think that was unusual. None of the other Chinese parents, such as other graduate students, did that with their kids either. There were a handful of other Chinese families at Henley Homes, and they didn’t bestow much affection on their children. I didn’t feel that I lacked anything; it was normal.

I had a toy doll that had been shipped to me by my grandmother in Taiwan. She provided most of my clothing at that time. My mother grew up in a middle-class family, so they had good provisions. When we came to the U.S., many of my clothes and my mother’s were Japanese-made, custom-made, very high-end, middle-class. Here I was, a little girl in a housing project, with an expensive Japanese doll that opened its eyes. I loved that doll. But I loved my real, live baby brother a million times more.

#

My parents were so proud that they had a son, very important for an Asian family, and big news to send to our relatives in Taiwan. They were prouder still of his birth weight. Both parents would announce to anybody at all, even into the air just to hear the sound of it, “A nine-and-a-half-pound boy!”
Our family had a short honeymoon where everybody felt happy. But two weeks after my brother was born, my mother had to return to work. We needed the money. She was a sewing machine operator at Stone Manufacturing Company, where she worked the 7-4 shift on the assembly line, sewing parts of undergarments together—bras and men’s and women’s briefs. This stingy leave of absence was more than most new mothers got. Because my brother was born in the middle of December, she had one week off for maternity leave plus one week for Christmas and New Year’s, and that was that.

We needed a babysitter fast because my mother was returning to work the next morning. So we went out the back door, the three of us—my mother, my infant brother in her arms, and me. We stepped past the clothesline from which my father’s underwear had been stolen. Our back door bumped up to the back doors of the Henley Homes apartments behind ours.

“Knock,” my mother told me when we reached our nearest neighbor’s back door. Each unit had an inner back door and a screen door, and my little five-year-old fist didn’t make much of a sound. No one answered. The baby whimpered and we walked on. My mother couldn’t speak any English, and I was ready to ask the questions she had coached me on.

The second apartment’s inner door was open. Through the screen door, we could see a massive shape silhouetted against the open window on the opposite wall. The TV was turned to a quiz show. I knocked as hard as I could, bruising my knuckles. The woman who responded was the largest human I had ever seen—morbidly obese and out of breath just from walking a few steps across the room. I could hear her breathing, and she coughed with a vibrating, rattling sound, like coughing up clams.

From the point of view of a physician, she must have been diabetic and might have had emphysema or chronic bronchitis. From the point of view of a little girl, she was a giant who coughed like a reverberating bass drum. With horrible fascination, I stared at her upper arm, much wider than my slender mother’s waist, barely two weeks after giving birth. I thought to myself, *If I get on her bad side and she whacks me with that arm, I’ll be flattened.*

“Yes?” she said through the screen, holding her lit cigarette out to the side. We didn’t enter the house, nor did she ask us to. I hoped she would say no when I asked her, “Do you stay at home?” I didn’t want her to touch my baby brother. But my mother’s qualifications for a babysitter were limited: was she female, did she stand up, did she answer the door, and did she answer “yes” to my questions?

My mother looked at me and motioned to the baby in her arms.

“We need someone to watch my baby brother,” I said clearly.

And the woman agreed. I negotiated the price with her. Here my memory is fuzzy because we had a series of babysitters for my brother, and some were paid more than others. Along the way, my mother had to raise the rate because babysitters would complain that the pay was too low. All these neighbors in Henley Homes were on welfare and did whatever they could to bring in a little extra cash.
I watched the woman shuffle back to her TV but didn’t say anything. These days, people ask for references for dog-walkers and pet-sitters. Here was my precious baby-doll brother, only two weeks old, being left with someone who looked terribly unhealthy and untrustworthy, even to my little girl’s eyes. I could hardly sleep, and the next morning came all too soon. Through our back window, I watched my mother hand over the baby to the huge woman. She didn’t even step into the house. They passed the baby over the threshold like a sack of flour.

Months passed by and first grade was coming to an end. Near the beginning of June, my mother and I went to the fat lady’s house one evening to pick up my brother, and he wasn’t there. Her teenage daughter came to the door saying that her mother had caught pneumonia—in the summer?—and was in the hospital. I had seen her coughing blood into a handkerchief more than once; looking back, I suspect that the diagnosis was tuberculosis or something worse.

The baby had been transferred to the woman next door, the first door we had knocked on back in the winter. I translated for my mother and she casually stepped over to the next door. The woman who lived there had a daughter about two or three years old, too big for a crib, but didn’t let my baby brother stay in the crib.

I saw for myself what happened on the one day that I had to stay there. My school had a day off for some reason and my father couldn’t take me with him to college that day. All these welfare apartments had two floors, and this babysitter kept my brother in her upstairs bedroom on the floor all day. He was a peaceful infant, sleeping most of the day. When he woke up, she would let him cry for a while, then give him his bottle, and then put him back on a thin cloth on the floor to go to sleep.

I was horrified but couldn’t say anything to her, so I sat on the floor next to my brother all day, stroking him and whispering to him. At home, I told my mother all about it.

“She doesn’t let him sleep in the crib?”
“No, he’s on the floor all day.”
“Then she doesn’t want to get the crib dirty.”
“The baby isn’t dirty,” I countered.
“He’s on the floor, so he can’t fall down,” she said calmly.
I began to cry. “I don’t want Little Brother to stay there anymore!”
“You don’t know. I know,” my mother scolded me. “I’m the parent.”
First grade was over, and what were my parents going to do with me all summer? My mother was at work in the factory and my father was in his Master’s program at the University of South Carolina. So the solution was to put me in his charge for the summer. I was lucky that I survived.

Part of my father’s child care system was to leave me in a library. Every morning we would drive to USC so he could attend classes. About 7:30 or 7:45 a.m. he would deposit me at the graduate library of the Data Processing Center (DPC). This was a math and engineering library on the second floor of the building, where the computer science and engineering departments were located.

“Stay in here. See you at lunchtime,” he would command, and then hurry to his 8:00 a.m. class.

Except for a brief lunch outing, that’s where I spent the entire day. By noon I was starving, starving. My father would walk me to Hardee’s on the USC campus, where he bought his burger and fries and a little kid’s meal for me, which was a real treat; I loved that part of the day. I was so tired of my mother’s yucky, gross, nasty, smelly food that the fast-food kid’s meal was the best lunch I could imagine. Every day I ate a freshly-grilled burger, which was neat, tasty, and just the right size, plus a little packet of French fries.

We had 30 minutes to eat and then we would walk back to the library, where I remained from 12:45 until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. He never asked me what I did all day. No one else asked me what I was doing there, although people sometimes stared at this tiny girl, not even four feet tall, alone all day in a library with adults.

My first week there, I prowled around looking for something to do. They had a gigantic unabridged dictionary, a few Webster’s dictionaries, and lots of other reference books. That’s where I discovered the Encyclopedia Britannica, which was a best friend to me all through those long summers between elementary school grades.

I was not a good reader, but all of the articles were illustrated. Flipping through a volume, I would stop at pictures and decipher the captions. That’s all I would read because the articles were far above my reading level. “Oh, the California Condor is extinct!” I would say to myself. What did “extinct” mean? I would look it up in one of the dictionaries and then feel sad that this huge, funny-looking bird had ceased to exist. Years later, I learned happily that the species had been reintroduced in the western United States.

Although my “research” didn’t help me master the English language, it did satisfy my curiosity about countless subjects. I would pore through articles from A to Z, spending hours on each. I learned all kinds of things just by studying these articles on my own. Thanks to those
encyclopedias, I managed to entertain myself all summer, eight hours a day, five days a week, from the end of June to the beginning of September.

There was another encyclopedia in the library called Childcraft, much easier to read and chockfull of glossy pictures. When you opened a volume, a good smell came out, the enticing aroma of nice, new books. And so I whiled away the hours, alone indoors.

I didn’t really feel neglected at the time; instead, I felt special because I was among adults and I got to see what they were doing. At the data processing center, I was the only child. Most of the others were male graduate students. It was odd that hardly anyone noticed me.

When my father finally showed up at 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., I was ready to go home for dinner, but he wasn’t done yet. In those days, computer programs ran on keypunched cards, and he would still have to run his cards before we could leave. On the bottom level of the DPC were enormous keypunch machines with reels. My father had to keypunch his cards, then stand in a long line behind other graduate students, and then run his deck through the machine.

If the cards worked, fine. If they didn’t, that meant trouble—and time, lots of time. He would have to figure out which card in the keypunched series was wrong, and then re-punch that card, stand in line again, and rerun the batch to see if it worked. Sometimes this required many iterations before he finally solved the problem.

I’d be waiting in the library until 8:00 p.m. or even 9:00. Sometimes, I would go down to the lower level and find my dad, still fussing over his cards.

“Dad, I’m starving, I’m starving.”

“Yeah, okay.”

One time I asked him, “Aren’t you hungry, Dad?”

And he said, “No, if you get busy working on something, you forget you’re hungry.”

Often we wouldn’t get home until after 9:00 p.m., in the dark. My mother never said anything about our late hours. That was just the way it was. By that time, even her cooking tasted good.

#

My father would always lock me in the car, starting when I was four years old. He saw it as a matter of convenience and safety, and he did this often during my summers with him at USC. He might have to run into a building to drop something off, or see an advisor, or run some more keypunched cards. The parking lots on a college campus are so far away from where you have to go. And he had me to take care of.

His main concerns were avoiding long walks; not putting money in parking meters; and having someone sit in the car to ward off traffic cops. That someone was me.

One steamy July day, we parked at a meter along the curb in front of the DPC. He didn’t put any money in the meter because he said he was going to be really quick. “Keep an eye on the car,” he said.
The way I was going to do that was by sitting in it. If there’s a passenger sitting in the car, then it looks like the car is there only temporarily.

“You stay in the car,” he ordered. “I just need to run some keypunched cards. Roll up the windows so no one will kidnap you.”

It was so unbearably hot and airless in the closed car that I could have died from suffocation. Being confined in the car was like putting someone in a glass room and sealing it, letting the oxygen run out. I waited until my father was out of sight and then rolled down the windows a little bit. Not even the tiniest breeze was blowing; there was no relief for the sweat that was pouring down my face, chest, and arms. I tried to figure out a way to get out of the car. When I rocked back and forth, the compact car rocked with me. People on the sidewalk stopped and stared. This time, he was gone at least half an hour. He hadn’t left me with anything to drink.

And this happened again and again. He would lock me in the car and say, “Hey, I gotta drop this off. I gotta go meet my advisor and discuss this.” And then he would be gone for 30 minutes, 45 minutes, or sometimes an hour. I had a cheap watch and I would time him.

My job was to guard the illegally parked car so that no one would steal it and so that the traffic meter cop wouldn’t give him a ticket. He coached me so I’d know what to say: “Tell the meter man that your father went to drop something off and will be right back. That way I won’t get a ticket.”

Every time he returned to the hot car after one of his prolonged errands, his first words would be, “Did the meter cop come? Oh, good, I didn’t get a ticket.”

I reported him to my mother more than once, but all she said was, “Your father shouldn’t do that.”

On another occasion, I was locked inside the car somewhere in town. Luckily, the windows opened manually. It was the middle of the day in South Carolina in August. I waited half an hour, one hour, and he didn’t return. I was six years old and had figured out how to open the car, so once in a while I would get out and try to cool off. But then I’d quickly jump back in and close the door. If my father came back and saw me outside, he’d get mad.

Three construction workers were sitting on the steps of a nearby building, eating their lunch. I had seen them watching earlier when my father first locked me in the car, and they knew what was going on. I was sitting in the car crying when I saw them pointing at me. Afraid that they would go to kidnap me, I stopped crying right away.

One man got up and came over with a cold can of Mr. PiBB, a weird-tasting soda popular in the South in the ‘70s. He popped it open and said, “Here, sweetie, you need to drink this.”

“Oh, I can’t take that,” I said. “You’re a stranger. My father will get mad at me.”

But he left the can on the hood of the car, and I was so hot and thirsty that I gave in and drank the whole can so fast that I got burps from the bubbles. After they had finished their lunch, the kind and generous men retrieved the empty can from where I’d left it, back on the hood of the car. They didn’t want me to get into trouble. The men waved goodbye and went back to their work.
It was a genuine act of kindness. I still believe today, unless proved otherwise, that everybody has a kind heart, and everybody wants to be good and do good deeds.

Soon after, I was standing beside the car when I spotted my father walking along the sidewalk, and I had just enough time to get back in and roll up the windows before he looked in the direction of the car.

“Did the police come?” he asked.

“No.” My hair was soaking wet and hanging in my eyes, and I was crying too. My summer T-shirt was soaked to my skin.

“Oh, good, I didn’t want to get a ticket. I was afraid to get towed.”

At home, I told my mother about the Mr. PiBB can while my father was in the shower. “Oh, your father shouldn’t do that,” she said again.

Looking back as an adult, what saddens me the most is not my father’s negligence; but rather, my mother’s indifference. It should have been her responsibility to take care of her child, and she barely reacted.

By the end of August, I knew everybody who worked in the library, and I recognized all the graduate students who appeared briefly during breaks between classes. I knew the librarians, the guards, and the custodians.

One day a man in his thirties showed up. Most of the students were tall, thin, and in their twenties. This guy looked old enough to be someone’s father. He had thinning dark hair, a mustache, and glasses. I thought to myself, This guy is not right.

I was in a study carrel in the back of the library, the place where I always went when my father dropped me off. The guy sat down in a study carrel three seats away from me, and I knew that he was not there to study. Everyone else, including me, had books or papers on their desks, but this guy just slumped in his seat. I scrunched down under the desk and looked at the creepy guy, who was bent over, staring up at the crotch of the young woman in the next carrel.

Oh my God, I thought. This guy’s peeping at women’s underwear.

No one had ever warned me about people like this. When he saw me looking at him, I waved at him, and that startled him. He popped right up and left the room. For half an hour, I didn’t see him, so I went back to the article I was reading and tried to forget about him.

When he came back, he sat two study carrels away from me. My heart started beating fast. So I turned around and bent down underneath the ledge of the desk and looked at him upside down. This time, I just stared at him and didn’t wave. He got scared again and left the room.

The next day, he wasn’t there. The following morning, he returned and I played this charade again. For me, it was an enjoyable game. That library was my domain, my playground. I was bored, and here was this strange guy, playing games. I found it funny that he was afraid of me, afraid that I was going to turn him in. No one had to tell me that his peeping under skirts was
wrong. There was one female student between the creepy guy and me, but she soon walked away. Maybe all that rustling under the desks was distracting her.

At noon, I stood by the library entrance, ready for lunch. My father came to pick me up, and just then, the weird guy came along, heading for the door.

“Hi there, hello, forgot your name,” my father said to him. He was always friendly. “Which classes are you in? Haven’t seen you in a while.”

And I thought, oh my God, my dad knows this guy. This guy is a pervert, he’s weird, he’s scary.

My father said, “I need your address and phone number.” That was standard for him; he would always get out his pad and pen. So the guy wrote it down. I kept staring up at him, watching sweat form on his temples and trickle down his face. He was probably worried that I’d spill his secret to my father.

On the way to Hardee’s, I said, “Father, that man, your friend, he is strange. He is weird. He is not right.”

“Oh, really? He’s one of the grad students.”

“He peeps at girls’ underwear.”

“Why would he do that? He has a wife and children.”

I’m not sure my father believed me. A few months later, my parents send out Christmas cards to everyone, but the pervert’s envelope came back marked “Return to sender, no forwarding address.”

If that guy really wanted to see girls’ underwear, he should have gone to the main library, the Thomas Cooper undergraduate library, where there were lots of education majors and music majors, prettier girls. But later I realized that the graduate library was more secluded and he could not get caught—except by some six-year-old who spoiled his routine, hee hee hee!

For second grade, I went to my regular local public school, A.C. Moore Elementary on Rosewood Drive in Columbia. The public schools that I attended from second grade on had a mixed student body. About 80% of the kids at A.C. Moore were children of construction workers and lower-class families who lived in Henley Homes and another housing project, Rosewood. The rest had parents who worked at the university, and they were a very different breed. They spoke clearly and knew many more words than the housing-project kids. Their families lived in middle-class neighborhoods, in nice homes with two or three bedrooms.

Two of the middle-class girls, Ellen and Janet, were very nice to me. Janet’s mother drove me in her station wagon during a field trip. The other passengers were daughters of professors, and listening to them converse with Janet’s mother and among themselves was a revelation. I didn’t know that family life could be so nice and peaceful, and that socialization could be comforting instead of competitive.
In class, I was very serious about my studies and did just what I was told. Math was easy, thanks to the workbooks my mother had given me. But reading was a big challenge and I had to work very hard to get the hang of it. My goal was to be teacher’s pet, and I always was. I wasn’t the smartest, but I was the most compliant, and I loved being the teacher’s favorite in every grade.

Going to the local school meant that I needed somewhere to stay both before and after school, from September through May. In 1972, there were no after-school programs, no childcare centers. Most women were housewives, or they worked nearby and could come home to take care of their children. My mother had to leave home at 6:30 a.m. to catch the bus to work, returning home twelve hours later. My father studied Numerical Analysis by day and worked the graveyard shift at Magic Market, a convenience store.

We had to take action. The only time that I ever really talked was when my parents would make me a spokesperson for them and talk to someone in English. Then, I would speak in a very adult voice, sounding much older than I really was.

My mother took me around the neighborhood two weeks before second grade started so that I could hire my own babysitter. Door to door, we walked around until we had found the right person—which actually meant, until we found the first person who agreed to watch me. The prospective babysitter’s qualifications were not relevant. We did this every August for three years.

In our neighborhood, a row of cheap little one-tract houses faced the Piggly Wiggly supermarket on Rosewood Drive. Looking through the front door of each house, you could see straight through to the back door. All of the houses had the same floor plan: the front door opened on a small front room, or living room. Next was a bedroom, which you walked through to a kitchen-dining room combination, and then out the back door.

My mom would take my hand in the afternoon and we would walk from house to house. She knocked briskly on the door and then motioned to me. That was my cue to look up at the woman answering the door and ask in a clear voice, “Do you have any children?”

And the lady would be astonished. All of a sudden, these two Chinese people came to her door asking if she had children! And the tiny six-year-old girl seemed to be the one in charge.

I just waited patiently for her to answer. If she said yes, then I would ask, “How old are your children?”

I did all the talking, every word, and all the negotiations and persuasion. My mother never said anything; she just stood there uncomprehending. I had to make the offer and close the deal.

If the children were of school age, the next question in my script was, “Can you babysit me after school?” It didn’t matter if the woman was a drug addict, an alcoholic, a shoplifter, a prostitute, or all four. It didn’t even matter if she was, in fact, the mother of the children. The goal was simply to designate a babysitter.
That last question always elicited a puzzled look. In 1972, nobody went around asking for babysitters. People weren’t babysitting other people’s kids. Most women stayed home, especially in Columbia, South Carolina. I had to convince these women to take me in.

On to the next question: “Can I come in the morning before school starts, cuz my mother has to be at work at seven. So can I stay here until I can walk to school with your children?”

If the lady hesitated, I would say, “I won’t cause any trouble, I’ll be real quiet. I’ll just wait in your living room after my mom drops me off and then walk to school with your kids. And in the afternoon, I’ll walk back with them and stay until my mom picks me up.”

The lady would at first be very reluctant; no one had ever heard of such a situation. I was very shy, very sweet, gently coaxing, and always stressing that I wouldn’t get in their way. But she would eventually say yes; these people were all on welfare and could never make ends meet. Many households had only one parent, usually the mother. The agreed-upon rate was a dollar a day. So at the end of the week, the babysitter would get five bucks for letting me hang around.

My first babysitters were the Chavis family, and I loved them all. Like all of my subsequent babysitters, they were on welfare. That was no different from us—we were on welfare, too. There was Mrs. Dorothy Chavis, her husband Junior, and the grandmother, who slept in a big, high bed in the front room. Doris was in fifth grade, Bubba, the only boy, was in third grade, and Jenny was in first grade.

Even though I was terribly shy, I never cried when I was deposited there every morning in pitch darkness. I absolutely loved being in these people’s homes. The atmosphere was lively with children, activity, and conversation. I soaked it up. The Chavises had a cat, while we never had any pets. Junior, the father, was a construction worker, and I got to see him in a hard hat every morning. I was fascinated by that hat and wondered where he worked.

One morning, Mrs. Chavis had to take Junior to his construction site because his car pool hadn’t shown up. “Come on, chill’ens, we need’a get in the car,” she hollered, hustling her children and me into their station wagon. Just like that. She always treated me like one of her own kids. That day, I got to see his construction site in action, and I was mesmerized.

I felt so lucky that these nice, normal people would let a total stranger enter their home and take part in everything they did. The family fed me every evening, cheerfully setting an extra place and pushing over an extra chair. Soon I was devouring collard greens, black-eyed peas, hominy grits, biscuits, okra (“oker”), fried chicken, and corn bread like you don’t know. Along with the Chavis children, I helped serve and clean up.

It took me no time at all to prefer authentic southern food to my mother’s home cooking, which was neither Taiwanese nor Chinese. Our typical meal consisted of white rice with beef chunks and green beans. The greasy gravy came from cooking the meat, which my mother would pour over the rice. Sometimes we had cabbage or Chinese cabbage, but there wasn’t much flavor to those, so we sprinkled on salt if we wanted to. MSG was the popular condiment in the ‘70s,
and we’d buy big containers of it at Piggly Wiggly. Mom also cooked pinkish fried rice, made of frozen mixed vegetables, cooked rice, and ketchup.

That was Mom’s cooking: an amalgam of foods lumped together. Once I had grown up and gone to a Chinese restaurant, I was very pleasantly surprised by the appetizing variety. But as a child, I feasted on Cap’n Crunch cereal, peanut butter and other flavors. I liked that better than the meals she fixed.

The coolest thing at the Chavises’ house was watching great programs like Gunsmoke and Bonanza with the kids and Grandma in her living room-bedroom combination. Their old TV broadcast in brown and white, not black, but we didn’t even have a TV, so I was delighted.

Out in their back yard was a strange machine that I’d never seen before. “What’s that? What is this?” I asked Mrs. Chavis.

“It’s a washing machine,” she said. It was an ancient wringer type. When you washed your clothes, you pushed them through the wringer to squeeze out the water, and then you pulled them through at the other end. After that, you hung up your clothes in the back yard.

The Chavises had an odd, unemployed uncle, the mother’s brother, who lived down the street in another one of those little houses. Uncle Jed was always looking for a job but never finding one. He was a scrawny guy with an unkempt look, but was good at fixing things.

Their house was on stilts and had a big crawl space underneath, populated by a zoo’s worth of marmots, possums, raccoons, skunks, stray cats, and whatever rodents the cats didn’t catch. You could always hear animals running underneath the house. It was unsanitary and dusty.

No matter what, I loved being with the Chavises. They took me in as one of their own, absorbing me into their lives with no questions asked. They were not an educated family, but for the year and a half I spent with them, they were the best family I ever had.

In spite of being a good Chinese daughter, my submissive demeanor at home masked the conflict that was escalating in my doubting mind. By the time I was six, I had already lost faith in the infallibility of my parents. I had begun to question their judgment, but only internally.

To confront them was as unthinkable as to get into their beat-up old car and drive across the country alone. Instead, I had imaginary dialogues with my parents in which I played all three roles: father, mother, and the daughter who was forming her own private opinions about her family.

It hurt me to defy my parents, even secretly. Defiance was flagrantly contradictory to my culture’s ingrained respect for elders. But I could do nothing to stop these dialogues, which played out in my mind day after day like a private soap opera for an audience of one.

And each episode began with the little girl asking the parents, “How could you?”

This concludes the pre-publication excerpt. To review the entire manuscript, please contact the author, Chiufang Hwang, M.D.