

Untitled (The Adoption Story)

A boat docked at a jetty on a moonlit night. I never imagined that it would be this way. Although the moon showers a golden glow across the river, it also casts darkness and shadows. I always thought that my husband would be here with me when this happened. But he's not. Instead I lie on the cold, unwelcoming floor, with my mother and sister beside me, urging me to push harder, while Xiao Mei, my first baby, cries at the back of the boat. I have been in labour for two hours now, and while the pain is unbearable; all I can think about is the pain of losing my newborn child.

My husband, Yan Yan, is a fisherman. Although we are poor, Yan Yan invested all of his lifetime savings to buy this old fishing boat, which he, mother, sister, Xiao Mei, and I all call home. After fishing, as early as 3 o'clock in the morning, he travels every day to local and neighbouring markets where he sells fish from sunrise to sunset. How I wish he were here with me instead of travelling to the night markets trying to sell the remaining fish. His eyes, where they used to gleam, have become sunken; and his hands, where once soft, have hardened over time. But when I first gave birth to Xiao Mei, his eyes shined brighter than the moon and stars. However, when I realised I was pregnant with my second child, his shining eyes turned dull again as he confirmed my darkest thought; "This baby needs to be given up."

We both knew the consequences and the impossibilities of raising a second child secretly. At the time, China's "One Child Policy" was still harshly enforced, meaning that if we were exposed, I could risk being forced into having an abortion or receiving a fine which would take our lifetime to repay. We had to think about Xiao Mei too. If we were burdened by a lifetime of debt, how would we be able to feed Xiao Mei, let alone ourselves? I was two months pregnant with a baby who I could never call mine, but I knew it wouldn't be fair for any of us, especially the newborn, to grow up in such circumstances.

The world is silent, yet, the boat is filled with the cries of a newborn, and my mother and sister barking words at each other. Although it is pitch black onboard, the silver streak of moonlight through a small window gives me the chance to see my beautiful baby girl. Mother cuts the umbilical cord, and wraps her in an old tea towel, and for a moment which I am able to hold my beautiful daughter, I felt at peace. She has the same eyes as her father's; wide and deep brown like the soil, which glimmer in the moon. There is only one name suitable for her; Xiao Yue.

The serenity of the moment is lost when a local government official known to us calls out from the jetty. My mother cautiously approaches the man, while my sister cradles Xiao Mei who is unusually fighting her sleep. I hold Xiao Yue close to my chest as she now cries gently, searching for a teat. The officer is not here to arrest me, however, what I hear next is far worse than what I had ever imagined.

Yan Yan is dead. Fatigued by extreme exhaustion, he had unintentionally veered into the path of an approaching truck as he was returning home on his bike with its empty basket of fish. Suddenly the moon seems to disappear behind the clouds, and I feel claustrophobic in the small fishing boat. With the officer now gone, Mother rushes to my side ready to comfort me as she knows that I've heard everything. I am suffocated by the press of the shadows of the night sky. My cries are joined with Xiao Mei and Xiao Yue's cries. It is time to go.

Sister holds Xiao Mei and mother walks alongside me into the streets of Hangzhou. But what once felt like home, felt like a lie. An illusion. The lanterns which used to provide warmth, blinded me. Xiao Yue has settled down in her sling, and silently whimpers as I hold her, as if she knew what I was about to do. "I'm so sorry forgive me, my love." With this she begins to cry softly, and so do I.

It is outside a closed grocer, in a vegetable crate where I safely leave Xiao Yue. I cannot control my emotions as I kiss my daughter goodbye for the final time. Xiao Yue wails as I place her down, which results in some lights flicking on in neighbouring houses. I know my time is short. I gently stroke her soft cheeks and look into her dark brown eyes, which are shimmering and wet. Whispering silently, I gently caress her forehead and then I turn and run. I knew that if I turned back, I would never be able to let her go. All I feel is the weight on my heart and all I hear is my baby's cries in the silent, black night.

That was the evening of the 6th of August 1990. Since then, trying to forget that night has been a losing game. In the moon I see her eyes and, in the water, I see her beautiful teary face as I left her. She would be seventeen now. Xiao Mei has left for factory work in Shanghai while mother, sister and I rent an old room we now call home, which we pay for with the money we made from the sale of the boat. So now I go to bed each night with a heavy heart and empty hands. Not a day goes by without thinking of my lost child, but I hope she remembers the words I whispered in her ear that night; that her mother will always love her.