

Childhood: The Secrets of Four Seasons

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Spring

My fifth birthday was approaching. My memory had become so clear that daily happenings and all their details were beginning to gradually become one with me. Since these events happened so abruptly, my memories of them are indelible. It was a spring night: I was sitting on my bedroom's window sill, looking out at the white snowflakes that danced across my eyes. The white mass blurred the bonsai that was sitting right outside my window and it eventually filled the entire courtyard. I shouted, "Nanny Chen, Nanny Chen, it is snowing!"

With a swift motion, Nanny Chen carried me off the window sill and tucked me in. She smiled at me and said, "Silly girl, it is spring now. It is the month of May; will it still be snowing? Those are cherry blossoms! Let's sleep. Quick - you still have to attend kindergarten tomorrow."

After she delivered her speech, Nanny Chen turned to Cai Yun and asked, "Have you ironed Commissar Peng's shirt?"

I stuck my head out of the blanket, imitated Cai Yun's words and tone, "It has been ironed. Commissar Peng's... .."

I giggled loudly despite pretending to be asleep. Nanny Chen tucked my head under the blanket and pretended to be angry, "Don't be naughty. Nanny Chen is used to calling him 'Commissar Peng', am I wrong?"

"Auntie Chen, the ironed clothes are now in Commissar Peng's room."

Cai Yun, along with Nanny Chen addressed my father as Commissar Peng. Whenever she said, 'Auntie' (gū), she said it with such a strong northern Jiangsu accent that it sounded like, 'Drum' (gǔ). Cai Yun was Nanny Chen's niece who would turn eighteen in six months. Nanny Chen brought Cai Yun here from her family in Northern Jiangsu. Cai Yun's family had only daughters. Due to the lack of working men, her family was very poor. As a lady of her age, Cai Yun could not do anything to earn money in the village. Since her meals and other daily needs still had to be taken care of, she was nothing but an added burden to her family.

Nanny Chen's husband was a minor officer in the village. He allowed Nanny Chen to bring her niece with her to Shanghai to be a housekeeper. Nanny Chen was afraid that in a city like Shanghai, Cai Yun would be taken advantage of. Hence, she has decided to keep her beloved niece close. Back then, my household could use another housekeeper, so Daddy agreed to take her in, "Alright, you can work together. An extra pair of chopsticks would not be too much."

It was more than just an extra pair of chopsticks: the amateur Cai Yun was paid a salary comparable to the experienced Nanny Chen's. Nanny Chen felt that Daddy was rather unhappy with this deal. Even so, Nanny Chen would rather keep Cai Yun employed, so she dismissed her qualms. After all, Cai Yun was her beloved niece. Daddy brought Nanny Chen in from Northern Jiangsu when he led a troop to attack Nanjing's President's residence. Back then, as they reached the border of Anhui and Jiangsu, Daddy's troop prepared to attack from Jiajiang River. Nanny Chen's husband cooperated with the troop - he stopped the villagers' fishing boats by pushing them to the river bank where the soldiers from Daddy's troop were digging a barricade as they were preparing to cross the river. Jiajiang River was bent and narrow. Here, the villagers' boat had to be pushed aside to create a waterway so that the soldiers can go through for the troop to attack Nanjing. Due to the large scale of this mission, Nanny Chen joined her husband to give a hand in cooking for the troop.

After the war, Nanny Chen stayed in the troop to help with the logistics. When Daddy's troop entered Shanghai, Nanny Chen followed. My mother was pregnant with me and Nanny Chen was taking care of the housework. Before we knew it, she ended up staying in our house. Similar to Daddy and Mommy, she enjoyed the free supply system (provided by the Chinese Communist Party). When Daddy was transferred to the local office in the military unit, Nanny Chen's free supply system was taken away. Hence, she became our housekeeper, living on a monthly salary provided by Daddy. Even so, she was no ordinary housekeeper - she was politically affiliated.

One night in May 1955, everyone in the house was fast asleep. On the other side of my bedroom window, cherry blossoms were still dancing in the sky and eventually, our little balcony was peppered with them. With these beautiful cherry blossoms, I floated to a faraway place. Suddenly, I crashed into a tree. It had no cherry blossoms. There were only dead branches and shriveled

leaves. Then, I heard a very loud noise - it sounded as if someone was pounding on the door with all his might! I gasped, shut my eyes tightly and hugged the tree trunk with all my might.

It was a bright day. A very bright day indeed. Slivers of light pierced into my shut eyes and forced them to open. My house was brightly lit. I saw Nanny Chen ran towards Mommy's and Daddy's room. She almost slipped. She screamed at the top of her lungs, "Commissar Peng, bad news...." Nanny Chen threw open my parents' room door and cried, "Police, police! Police is outside the door, our house's door...."

Shortly after that, Cai Yun came to my room dressed. She held me down under my blanket. She would not allow me to move. Mommy and Nanny Chen walked into my room. As Mommy was about to close the room door, I caught a glimpse of some police officers rushing into the house. Daddy was already in handcuffs. I could hear a faint argument behind the closed door. Daddy spoke very loudly. The police officers, on the other hand, were not speaking, but their movements were very loud. There were bangs and beeps: the sound of a scanner searching through our house. Mommy's face turned pale. She walked towards the door while she was getting dressed and said, "Stay here. Do not move. Wait for my orders."

Soon, she opened the door and a few police officers walked in. Mommy walked out of the room. A police officer angrily said to Nanny Chen, "Dress the child! The whole house is going to be searched!" To his surprise, Nanny Chen replied him furiously, "What could a young child like her be guilty of? It is midnight now, why would she need to be dressed?"

The police officer was not shaken by Nanny Chen's words. He dragged me out of my bed. I was so scared that I clutched my blanket tightly. Nanny Chen pushed the police officer away, "Do not scare the kid! Go away!"

Nanny Chen turned ordered Cai Yun, "Hand me a large blanket from the closet."

Thereupon, Nanny Chen wrapped me with the blanket and brought me out of the room. There were a lot of police officers in the hallway; it was very crowded. At the edge of my eyes, I saw Daddy. He was held by one of the police officers. They were walking towards the living room. As Daddy walked past me, I held myself onto him. As soon as he saw me, he pulled his sleeves and hid his hands. Only years after that – after I grew up – did I understand his actions that night – he did not

want me to see his cuffed hands. From Nanny Chen's back, I threw my hands wide open towards Daddy so he could carry me.

"Daddy!" I cried.

Daddy smiled and told me, "Don't be naughty, stay still."

Carrying me in one hand and holding Cai Yun's hand in another, Nanny Chen led us into the kitchen. My brother was already dressed. With his back towards us, he stood by the kitchen window, gazing intently into the dark courtyard. Cai Yun stayed silent, but she hurriedly put a few small square stools together. Then, she covered them with a small blanket and placed me on it. The kitchen was very quiet. The loud sounds from house search drowned and became very distant. No one spoke in the house. Above my head, the kitchen light got dimmer. The outlines of the heads above me got more distant and slowly, they blurred away. Before I knew it, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, there were only Nanny Chen, Cai Yun and I left in the house. My brother had left for school. He was ten years older than I. That young lad was already a freshmen in high school; he seldom played with me. I was always hanging around Nanny Chen. According to Nanny Chen, she saw me grew from a tiny little mass to a fully-formed human. She had been taking care of me for as long as I could remember. When Nanny Chen dressed me up, I heard her talking to Cai Yun, "Don't be scared. Commissar Peng is a good man. Both of us saw it for ourselves. Could that be wrong? We are the members of the Communist Party. I would not have offered you a job in a bad person's house. You will work well here."

Cai Yun nodded continually and replied, "Auntie, I am still a little scared, but I will listen to you!"

"What is there to be scared? I have worked here for years. How could I not know if they were bad people? Could I not tell?"

Then, Nanny Chen fell silent. She was struggling to pull my pants up. When she lowered her head to button my pants, I saw that her eyes were welling up with tears. With a swift motion, she carried me to the side of the bed where she sat me down and put on my shoes. She was mumbling continually, "What is going on?"

Nanny Chen sighed. “In order to attain success, the Emperor would sacrifice his ministers despite their outstanding service. Commissar Peng is such a good man. If bad things were to fall upon him, then there is no justice in this world! You, little one, (Nanny Chen tapped my body) don’t be scared. You will not die of hunger. If you run out of food, follow Nanny Chen back to her house. You have such a small stomach. I can fill you up with only three slices of dried sweet potato.”

I kept shaking my head, “I do not want to follow Nanny Chen to the countryside.”

“The decision is not up to you. If there were no one to care for you here, you have no other choice but to follow me.”

Nanny Chen carried me off the bed and left me alone. That day, I did not attend kindergarten, but I was not happy at all. Usually, a day off from kindergarten is a holiday for me. For all of that day when I was home, Nanny Chen left me in a corner and would not allow me to budge. Nanny Chen and Cai Yun did not supervise me. Together, they were busy cleaning the house. I seemed to already understood what was going on – I sat on a small stool and did not make a noise. I held onto my cloth doll, put clothes on her, took them off, cleaned and talked to her, and put her clothes back on her. Every now and then, I scolded her in Nanny Chen’s tone. I was very angry! Why was the cloth doll ignoring me? I pulled on her braids so that she would talk to me! That day, Nanny Chen was also in a bad mood. Not only did she not make me any good food, she did not even cook! She simply reheated some fish soup from last night, mixed in some rice, put it onto the stool by me and let me eat on my own.

It was an especially long day. At dusk, Nanny Chen carried me and walked towards the courtyard. The cherry blossoms were still dancing in the courtyard. I extended my hand, caught some petals and stuck them onto Nanny Chen’s face. She showed no interest in what I was doing. She continued to walk until we reached the front gate. She turned to me, “We are going to bring Mommy home.” As soon as she opened the little courtyard door, we realized that two police officers were standing there. They were not in uniform. They were dressed in plain clothes. Nanny Chen asked them, “What are you doing here? Is Comrade Zhu still working?”

Plain-clothed police officers did not answer Nanny Chen’s question. Instead, one of them asked, “Where are you going now?”

“I will go wherever I like,” Nanny Chen replied.

Imitating Nanny Chen, I added, “We are members of the Communist Party.”

Nanny Chen and the plain-clothed police officers laughed. I did not laugh. I shut my eyes and tightened my clutch on Nanny Chen. I finally understood how it was like to be scared. Nanny Chen patted my back and sang a Northern Jiangsu nursery rhyme in a strong Northern Jiangsu accent, “The little one ran up a hill, back home he found a big bill! Prosper... Come, sing with me...”

I did not sing. Nanny Chen asked, “Aren’t you going to learn Northern Jiangsu dialect from me?”

“Why is Mommy not home yet?”

“What is there to rush? She knows that we are waiting for her; she will be back very soon!”

Nanny Chen and I had not walked far from home when we saw a small, black car pulled over in front of our courtyard door. As soon as the car stopped, I saw Mommy sitting in the car. I started to scream loudly, “Mommy!”

Nanny Chen lowered me to the ground so I could go towards Mommy. However, when the car door was opened, a police officer stepped out. Nanny Chen was surprised and ran towards me. She held me tight and say, “Stay still!”

I was held between my steps, so I tried to release myself off Nanny Chen’s grip, “Let me go! I want Mommy!” Nanny Chen smacked my butt lightly, “Do not make a fuss.” Mommy got down from the car with two police officers behind her. Nanny Chen lifted me off the ground. We did nothing and simply watched from the street. As soon as Mommy and the police officers stepped into our courtyard, Nanny Chen hurriedly ran towards the house with me in her hands.

The living room door was left ajar. Cai Yun was sitting in the kitchen. Fear was displayed all over her face. The police officers and Mommy were sitting in the living room. Nanny Chen put me down and burst through the door to the living room. She stood there, not knowing what to say. One of the police officers politely invited her, “Come in. Sit here and let’s talk.”

Nanny Chen turned around to get a stool. Then, she slowly sat down.

To Nanny Chen, an aged police officer said, “You are a socialist worker and a member of the Communist Party. The party believes in your loyalty, so you have to cooperate with us and support our actions. From now on, we are your superior. Listen. Make arrangements for Xu Qiang and his comrades to live in this house, so that they can oversee Zhu Ming’s actions. Keep an eye out for any suspicious people or actions, as well as any Zhu Ming’s actions that are anti-party or anti-socialist. If you discover his wrongdoings, you must immediately inform the party – report them to Xu Qiang and his comrades!”

“Is Zhu Ming not going to work?” Nanny Chen asked.

The police officer looked at Nanny Chen, but did not answer her question. After a moment of silence, Nanny Chen continued, “If she is not working, then I am not going to work in this house either. Let her handle the housework. I am going back to my hometown.”

“She still has to work. For now, stay in this house. Stay and keep an eye on her,” the police officer replied.

“If she goes to work, do I have to follow her to her workplace to watch over her?”

“There are people from the revolutionary mass at her workplace who will observe her actions closely. At home, it would be you, Xu Qiang and his comrades.”

“If she leaves the house, must I follow her?”

“Yes, you should. You must be alert at all times. Our party will never wrong an innocent person, but we will also never let go of a bad person. In the same way, our supervision over Zhu Ming is to better protect this hard-earned socialist country that we finally obtain after the sacrifice of thousands of martyrs during the revolution. We have to do this to prevent damages by our enemies and to ensure the happiness of our people. Right now, as we are speaking, our enemies are already invading our working class.....”

“I have to cook dinner,” Nanny Chen interrupted the police officer.

Every morning, Cai Yun would walk me to my kindergarten, but today, Nanny Chen personally walked me there. With her head down, Cai Yun followed us silently. “Carry me!” I said to Nanny Chen.

“You are a grown child; why should I carry you?” Nanny Chen said as bent down and soon, I was in her arms. I knew Nanny Chen would always fulfill my wishes. However, unlike the usual Nanny Chen, she was sighing as she was walking. I did the same. I sighed continually. Nanny Chen was not impressed with my imitation and asked, “Is this fun?”

I did not say a word. Nanny Chen was scary when she was angry. In a strict tone, Nanny Chen told me, “From now on, heed Cai Yun’s words.”

“I will listen to Nanny Chen’s.”

“What if Nanny Chen leaves?”

“Why would you leave?”

“Nanny Chen has to find another job. I need to earn money!”

“Nanny Chen, I will grow up soon. When I grow up, I will earn money to take care of you!”

Nanny Chen tightened her grip on me, “I did not raise you up in vain. Darling, you are so good to me! Do you know that this household is running out of money? We cannot afford to have two housekeepers anymore.”

“Then, let Cai Yun go!”

Nanny Chen covered my mouth with her hands, “I don’t know what you are talking about! Cai Yun is also my darling, I cannot let her go. Shanghai is huge, where do you want her to go? I will come back and visit you.”

“No, I don’t want you to leave!”

I did not want to listen to these words. Nanny Chen embraced me tightly, and silently shed some tears. I was held in her embrace until we reached the kindergarten. After she dropped me off at the gate, as usual, I walked in on my own. Even when the kindergarten teacher was about to close the

gate, I saw both Nanny Chen and Cai Yun were still standing there. When I got to my classroom, I climbed up the window sill. I saw that as Nanny Chen was walking away, she continually turned her head back to glance at my kindergarten. I knocked on the window, but neither Nanny Chen or Cai Yun realize that I was there watching them. I saw the two of them walked down the road and they became very small. Nanny Chen was still glancing back at my kindergarten classroom.

After school, as per usual, Cai Yun came to walk me home. I felt that something was not right. Along the way home, we did not exchange a single word. As soon as we walked through the gates into the courtyard, I ran towards the house. It was empty – the kitchen, the living room, Mommy and Daddy’s room, and even the bathroom was empty! As I ran, my eyes wildly searched for Nanny Chen. “Nanny Chen! Nanny Chen!”

No one answered me. The lights in the house were off. It looked gloomy. I ran towards the closet and tugged onto the door. It did not budge. I used all my force to pull it, but I ended up slipping backwards, but I did not fall. I felt that someone was supporting my back. I turned my head and I saw a police officer behind me. I let go of the tightness in my throat and broke into a loud cry. Policeman Xu quietly looked at me. After he got me back onto my feet, he turned his back towards me and walked into Brother’s room. Cai Yun held my hands. I ignored her and continued to cry loudly. Cai Yun asked, “What is wrong with you?”

“Nanny Chen, I want Nanny Chen!”

“Nanny Chen will come back and visit you.”

“I want Daddy, I want Daddy!”

Policeman Xu reappeared from Brother’s room. In the narrow hallway, I could not see his face. I could only see both his feet planted on the ground, right in front of me. With a very strict tone, he told me, “Don’t make a fuss! Your father is currently under investigation. Right now, you have to cut off all connections with him.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I came here, to your house, under an assignment. We are here to keep an eye on your mother! Do not make a scene.”

I wanted to know what did “cut off all connections” and “keep an eye on” mean, but before I gathered myself to ask, Cai Yun, who was already more than scared, pulled me into the kitchen. I choked on my sobs, and started to gasp for air. Cai Yun led me towards the water tank and washed my face. I was so out of breath that I could not cry anymore.

“You mischievous one, you cannot make a scene like that again. How could you talk back to a policeman like that?”

I hate Cai Yun! I hate that policeman! “I always talk to Nanny Chen like this!”

“Nanny Chen is not here anymore.”

Those foreign words landed in my ears. I yelled loudly. I could not hold back my tears anymore. I broke into a loud cry, again.
