



# CHAPTER

## 1

AFTERNOON SUNLIGHT filtered softly through the slats that covered the window, casting streaks of light and dark across my father's face. As I sat watching him, cool damp air seeped through the walls and gave the room a chill, but I was determined to remain with him, savoring every moment left to us. It was a dreadful time—for him and for me—but it was a wonderful time, too.

My father spent his life as an academic—a scholar in the teachings of Confucius—as had his father. As he lay there on his bed, unable to move, facing an end we both knew was rapidly approaching but neither of us dared acknowledge, he poured out his mind and soul to me in a manner I, in all of my seven years of living, had never known. Compressing a lifetime of conversation, teaching, and instruction into the little time that remained.

A time shortened by tragedy and compounded by poverty and the ignorance of the times in which we lived.

A few days earlier Father had come upon a Master beating a servant. True to the teachings of Confucius, Father intervened on the servant's behalf. In the ensuing struggle, the Master struck Father on the side of his head with the handle of a broom the servant had been using. The blow sent Father to the ground and as he lay there, the Master stomped his foot on Father's leg, a little below the knee. The bone snapped in two with a sharp end protruding through the flesh. Blood spurted out.

Our physician, one of Father's former students, set the bone as nearly as could be done by traditional methods, but lacking modern equipment, training, or medicines, he was unable to properly address the wound. A week after Father's leg was broken, an infection developed. Ten days later, the infection had spread throughout his body. Already confined to bed with a broken leg, the infection spread to his lungs.

Many people witnessed the incident between Father and the Master but the Master, an influential merchant who dealt in linens and rare herbs, was known to have a vicious temper and had taken retribution in prior incidents against those who spoke against his interests. Because of that, no one would identify the Master as the assailant. Hence, the visit of Chen Bocheng, whose arrival we awaited.

Father turned to look at me. "I am thirsty."

A glass half filled with water sat on a small table next to his

bed. I took it and eased it to his lips. He took a sip, then smiled and closed his eyes. “Perhaps you should light the lamp,” he added.

A coal oil lamp was on the table next to where the glass had been sitting. I walked to the front room, lit a small stick from the fire in the cooking stove, and brought it back to the bedroom. By the time I removed the glass globe from the lamp, the flame at the tip of the stick was almost gone. I blew on it gently and the flame glowed as the wick of the lamp caught fire. Suddenly, a flame leapt up, glowing with a combination of orange and red. I watched a moment, then turned the wick down, forcing the flame to burn lower.

Just then, we heard Mother open the front door. There was the sound of muffled voices and then footsteps approaching. In a moment, Chen Bocheng appeared in the doorway and came to stand at the side of Father’s bed, opposite where I stood.

Chen Bocheng was an elder in our village of Yiyang, a thriving community on the outskirts of Changsha, the capital of Hunan province located in south central China. Even then, during the closing days of the Qing dynasty at the beginning of the twentieth century, neighborhoods like ours were self-organized. Everyone lived in small homes known as *siheyuan*—constructed of wood and arranged in a square with houses on four sides and a courtyard in the center. Each *siheyuan* chose a representative to the prefecture that consisted of one hundred *siheyuan*. The prefecture was presided over by an elder. Chen Bocheng was our prefecture’s elder, responsible for maintaining peace and order and

for resolving disputes that could not be decided at a lower level. Someone had reported Father's difficulty. Chen Bocheng came to investigate.

"You have a broken leg," Chen Bocheng pointed to the lower portion of Father's body.

"Yes," Father replied.

"They say you intervened to stop a beating."

Father shrugged but did not speak.

"We must find the person who did this," Bocheng said.

Father did not want to press charges. Not because he was afraid of the man who hurt him, but because he was committed to his view of Confucius's teachings. If he identified the Master and formally accused him, the Master would be detained and questioned. Ultimately, however, he would be set free. That is how justice worked back then. When wealthy and influential people were accused of a crime, authorities made a show of investigating—often detaining them in an abrupt and confrontational manner. But they were always set free and always with the explanation that the accused had proven his innocence.

Servants, however, were another matter. Once the Master was released, the servant Father intervened to protect from a beating would be accused of lying and beaten again by the Master. Perhaps even killed. And all of it with impunity. Nothing would ever happen to the Master. Father knew that, and so he kept quiet for the servant's sake.

"Have you questioned the others?" Father asked finally.

“They say they did not get a good look at him,” Bocheng replied. “They only turned in that direction after the fight started. Are you certain you could not identify him?”

Father looked away. “I was too busy fending off his blows with the stick.” I could tell from the fleeting expression in his eyes that he most certainly knew the identity of his assailant and detested the charade of the investigation Bocheng was conducting. They both knew how this would turn out and the part they had to play.

Chen Bocheng continued to ask questions, but Father avoided them. After a while Bocheng grew tired of the effort and departed. When he was gone, Father looked over at me. “Remember the four pillars.”

“Of Confucius?” I asked, knowing full well what he meant.

“Yes.” Father sighed heavily. He had a look in his eye as if he were seeing far into the future and after a moment he said, “Feng Shan, your mother is Christian.” There was a hint of resignation in his voice.

“Yes,” I replied.

“She will lead you in the direction of her beliefs. And perhaps it must be so. But you must always remember the four pillars.”

“Yes, I will remember them.”

Indeed, Mother was devoutly Christian and participated in worship services with the Lutheran missionaries at their compound near our home, the same location where I attended school. At her behest, I went with her to the weekly services and sat quietly beside her. But even then, when I was only seven years old,

there was a tug-of-war in my heart between traditional Chinese culture and beliefs—steeped in Buddhism, Taoism, and the philosophy of Confucius—and the Christian beliefs Mother attempted to instill in me. Father recognized this tension in me very early, before I was old enough for school. Yet he did his best to help me work through the struggle without telling me the answers and without forcing me to believe one way or the other.

“Tell them to me,” he instructed. “Tell me the four pillars.”

“Morality, respect, justice, sincerity,” I replied.

Father smiled. “Now I shall die in peace.” Father’s words hit me hard. He was sick. So sick that even I, a young boy, could not ignore it. The thought that he might die soon left me devastated. Father seemed to sense that I was upset and looked over at me with a kind smile. “Do not let it trouble you. Jesus taught the same thing, though He . . .”

“I am not worried about that,” I blurted out, tears streaming down my cheeks by then.

“Then, what?”

“I do not want to lose you,” I sobbed.

Father reached out and touched me gently on the arm. “You cannot lose me. I will always be with you.” He took hold of my arm and tugged me toward him. I leaned over him, taking care not to bump his leg and felt comforted by the feel of his closeness. Father wrapped one arm around me and hugged me with what I am sure was every bit of his strength. “You must find your own way,” he whispered. “It is the way of manhood. We all have followed the

path. You must follow it, too. I had hoped this moment would come later for you, after years of tutelage at my side, but I have every confidence you will be a success. You have gifts and intellect I never had. You will do well.”

After a moment, Mother entered the room. I heard her footsteps and then felt her hand on my shoulder. “Come,” she said. “We must let your father rest.”

I did not want to leave Father’s side but when I hesitated, Mother pulled at me all the more. “Come,” she repeated. “He needs his rest. You can see him again tomorrow.”

Father nodded and gave a thin, tight-lipped smile. “I will be here,” he whispered. “Bring your books and we will study together.”

With that assurance, I relented and followed Mother from the room.



In the weeks that followed, I continued to attend the Western-style school operated by the Lutheran missionaries. They were from Norway and worked as an extension of the Norwegian Lutheran Church. The compound where the school was located was known to us as Sin I or, in its complete form, Chung Hwa Sin I Hwei—a school of the Lutheran Church in China.

Each morning I said good-bye to Father and Mother and walked to school with friends who lived near us. In the afternoon I returned home, lit the lamp on the table beside Father’s bed, and

sat in the room with him, positioning my stool as close to him as possible.

The missionaries were kind to us and gave us instruction we could not receive anywhere else, tutoring us in Western literature, mathematics, and classic Christian teachings. But many said that what they taught was merely Western lifestyle and ideals. They argued that because we would spend our lives in China we should learn the Chinese way, not the ways of another country or another people. Mother told me to ignore the critics. Father said it was good to learn many things and to learn them from every point of view.

Classes at the missionary school were taught in English, which I learned very quickly, but at home with Father I practiced Chinese letters—the ancient art of calligraphy—and listened as he instructed me in the traditional Chinese way. We spent many hours with the Five Classics of Confucius—the subjects he stressed with his students—Poetry, Documents, Rites, Changes, and Annals, which were a collection of ancient poems, hymns, social traditions, and the like. In this way, contrary to the concerns of those who criticized the missionary approach, I received the best of both traditions.

Father told me, as he had the day when Chen Bocheng visited, that Confucius did not teach religion but merely a way of organizing one's thoughts and world view. However, the Classic Poetry and I Cheng—the Classic of Changes—opened the way to ancestor worship and divination. Mother was squarely opposed to those

practices. She permitted me to study the poems while in Father's presence but forbid me even to mention the subject of I Cheng, a prohibition she conveyed to Father. Consequently, he avoided the topic with me.

When Father and I concluded the traditional lessons, I completed my school homework assignments from my teachers at the missionary school, still sitting on the stool beside the bed, while Father dozed. The rhythmic sound of his relaxed and unlabored breathing was like music to me. I loved him more than life, as he did me, and in spite of Father's condition, those were some of the most peaceful, exhilarating days of my life. Just the two of us. Alone in his room. Studying. Learning. Enjoying each other's presence.

In the weeks that followed, however, all of that changed. Father began to cough and then to wheeze. The doctor visited and listened to his chest, then shook his head. "You have pneumonia."

"Is there anything we can do?" Mother asked.

"If he is able, he can try sitting up or walking some, but there is not much else to do."

Over the next several days, I helped prop Father up in bed to elevate his head. And once or twice Mother and I helped him to a chair in the corner of the room. But the broken bone in his leg made even the slightest movement excruciatingly painful and he could sit upright for only a brief period of time. He was obviously very sick.

Once, when Father was feeling particularly alert, my uncle,

Tian Yutang, came to the house and moved him from the bed to a chair we'd positioned in the courtyard between the houses. Father sat for almost two hours, basking in the warm sunlight. He did so well, we thought he'd taken a turn for the better and would ultimately recover.

A few weeks later, though, I returned home from school and found Uncle Yutang standing outside the house, waiting for me. He had a serious look on his face and my heart sank at the realization of what his presence might mean.

As I approached the house, Uncle Yutang stepped forward to meet me. He put an arm around my shoulder, and the sinking feeling inside told me the worst had happened.

"This is a day for bravery," Yutang said softly. "Your mother needs you to be strong."

"Why?" I asked, sensing the truth already in my heart. "Has something happened?"

Yutang looked down at me and suddenly grief struck my heart. I knew then that Father was gone, but I did not want to accept it.

Instinctively, I broke free from Yutang and ran into the house to Father's room. He was lying on the bed, right where I'd seen him early that morning. Only, now he was dressed in white. His eyes were closed and his hands rested peacefully on his chest.

"Father!" I shouted, but he did not answer.

I leaned forward to rest my head on him and take him in my arms, but just then Mother appeared behind me and took me by

the shoulders with both of her hands, restraining me but not leading me away. "He is not here," she whispered. Mother was crying, too. I could hear it in her voice and turned toward her, burying my face in her abdomen. "He has died?" I asked, stating the obvious as only a child could do.

"Yes," she sobbed. "He has died." She wrapped her arms around me and held me in her embrace with a gentleness she had not always shown.

After a moment, Uncle Yutang entered the room. I did not look up to see him but felt his arms tighten around us both and smelled the musky scent he always gave off.