

*What can I do about my problem that
doesn't require the reciprocal actions of others?*

The Cook's Story



James and Jennifer Louie

We've all lost something along the way.

In Jennifer Louie's case, what she had lost was a belief that her family was a fundamentally essential thing, a meaningful purpose worth her devotion, a principle on which to build her life. Family is like Religion: there are all kinds, but when you get right down to it, you either believe, or you're not sure, or you think it's a crock of hooey. Jen had lost her belief. She had it in China, and she lost it when she came to America. These things happen – she was moving on. She was in the right place to lose it: the United States of America has 76 million great families with roots around the world, but it's also one of the best places to move on after losing belief. It can be done there. Those "Not Sure" have plenty of company.

Then, unexpectedly, it came back. Her belief. It came back when she got to know her father James, but not *as her father*, just as a man, a human being with feelings. She found herself loving him again, with a respect she'd not had in twenty years.

This is their story.

I had actually met Jennifer before.

"Do you remember?" she asked.

"I still have your old business card," I recalled, truthfully. We would bump into each other at a South of Market club where my best friend and I used to swing dance. What I remembered about Jen was that she spoke very directly about her emerging career as a television producer. She was ambitious and sharp. And this was memorable, because we were in a club where 1) businessy career conversations seemed out of place, let alone hard to hear, and 2) Jen was working as a Lucky Strike cigarette girl, in costume, giving away cigarettes. Her second job. It was amusing to listen to the beautiful, fiercely independent Chinese Lucky Strike girl going on about her successful day job for a cable channel in the big city. It always stuck in my memory, a multiculti Mary Tyler Moore moment. Yes, she was in Lucky Strike costume, but she moved around the nightclub with the body language of a manager in an office, armed with business cards, never missing a chance to network. When she mentioned her family, she always

painfully waved the topic away. “They just don’t get me,” she would say, or “They don’t approve of what I’m doing with my life,” or “They’re living their life, I’m living mine.” Unable to please them, she’d stopped trying. She treasured her career passion like a good secret, it being the only part of her life that was hers alone to ruin or shape into something grand.

Then, one day some six years later, after I made a presentation at a business conference (about the heroic courage required to find a meaningful career, no less), Jennifer came up to me, wondering if I remembered her. She said she’d just moved back from New York. There was something different about her, a peacefulness to equal her confidence. It intrigued me. We agreed to meet for a glass of wine after work the next week.

With Jen, there’s so much to attract the eye. She puts the double-H in Hip-Hop. Blond streaks highlight her black hair. A mountain lion tooth dangles from her leather choker. Metallic powder-blue eyeshadow, umber lipliner, and rose-tinted sunglasses add color to her visage. Pinstriped pants, a snug t-shirt, and black boots with two-inch heels proudly show off her curves. But while I noticed these details, my eye fixed on the one accessory that didn’t fit. On her left wrist was a delicate bracelet of beaded hooks, with a single gold heart dangling from the chain. It was solid gold, but somehow raw – shiny, but without the lustrous shine of contemporary jewelry. It looked fragile. This was not the sort of bracelet one bought in Soho. An heirloom?

“Is it a locket?” I asked, referring to the single gold heart.

“No, it’s not a locket,” Jen answered, “but it’s very perceptive of you to notice this, of all things. It never leaves my wrist.”

“There’s more to it than that, I can tell from your voice.”

“I didn’t see this bracelet for twenty years. Now a whole story is *represented* to me by this bracelet.”

A locket after all.

Over the next year I spent many afternoons with Jen and her father, James. He’s 53, relaxed in the face, but often looks down in contemplation. He is not a formal man; sometimes I found

him in a Sacramento Kings t-shirt and flip-flops, at other times in an open-necked dress shirt and dress slacks, but shoeless. We laughed together, and hugged unselfconsciously, which was not something Jen had seen him do with anyone in America except with his immediate family. I think of physical affection as a sort of fourth dimension; you can get through life without ever knowing it's there, but it sure adds something to the experience when you open up to it. I guess James was demonstrative with me as a way of reaching across the limitations of language. When narrating facts, he spoke Cantonese, with Jen translating, saving his sparse and humble English for the very few concepts or feelings he was desperate to communicate. Often he needed to say it to Jen once, get the English translation from her, shake that off like a pitcher might a catcher's sign, modify it, test a better word on Jen, and then be the one who delivered this translation to me, warm from the oven of his heart. When communication slows down – when the data rate slows down – we can *feel* more. In fact, it was my practice to go over the same material repeatedly, often forcing a source to retell the story five to eight times, until he had lost track of his codified “safe” version and was spilling out untapped remembrances that made him feel it all again.

Just then, James had said something that made him laugh almost silently to himself. Because laughter is infectious among friends, I giggled impulsively.

“What'd he say?” I asked Jen.

She repeated in English, amused. “This must be a world record.”

“For what?”

“For the longest anyone has ever listened to a fry cook.”

Before leaving China, they had hid the gold.

The gold had been forged into necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Their fortune fit into the flat, round plastic cases of two powder compacts, their makeshift treasure chest. One of the bracelets was a family heirloom passed down from a great-

grandmother – a string of beaded hooks with a single small gold heart dangling off the chain. It fell over on itself in a double loop in the compact case. A fold of silk kept the jewelry from rattling.

It's traditional for migrating families to convert their savings to gold, since it's a reliable currency accepted everywhere. But James Louie didn't bring the gold with him to California. He brought all his cash, \$500, but he hid the gold in the house he was leaving. In this moment – in this very untraditional and revealing decision – what heartwarming, charmingly hopeless love of home! James Louie stashed the gold because he fully intended to come back. Frequently! He anticipated making enough money in America to return every few summers on vacation. The house he and his children had been born in – a brick and cinder hovel in the rice commune of Tai San, (house #18 in case you're ever in the neighborhood) – would become his summer home. While there was no plumbing whatsoever (they scooped water from the river) and they didn't have a stove (cooking instead over small fires of fig leaves and branches), the house had been supplied with electrical current ten years before, and recently James had wired a television – the only one in the village. On Thursday nights James' daughter, Jennifer, all of 8 years old, would sell tickets to people from neighboring villages to watch the only Chinese television show they could receive.

James had farmed rice almost every day of his 29-year-old-life in a village where barter, not money, was the primary currency. He had been to high school, where he had met his wife, Kim, but that was it. His peasant's life did not resemble that of the doctors and academicians who had been thrown into the rice fields during the Cultural Revolution, torn from their children and spouses. Even if James – like everyone else – wanted a ticket out, communism had never scarred his family. Occasionally the communists showed up and hauled away the stored rice. They were not an everyday presence. They let James plant vegetables in an unclaimed corner of a field and keep a pigsty and chicken coop across the street. James Louie was a simple man. His love for Tai Sun was not complicated.

So he ordered the pots to be left hanging from their hooks. He told his family to take some clothes, but to leave others folded neatly in chests. The heart and soul of the home was an altar of framed photographs of family members going back a few generations, with James' mother dominating in the middle. He harvested very little from the altar, only the smallest mementos.

"I will be back, mother," he said, bowed before her photo.

This was July of 1980. He was in southern China, 120 miles from Canton City, 200 miles from Hong Kong, 7100 miles from California.

He slipped the gold into the red compacts and pried loose a wood panel from the brick. Jimmying a white block forward with his fingers, he opened his secret hiding place. Behind the wall was a worm hole just wide enough for his arm to snake down into. At the end of his reach, he wedged the gold. (He was the tallest man in the village, thus, his arms were longer. The few extra inches might make a difference).

The whitewashed brick-and-wood panel were set back in place. The door to #18 was locked, and James entrusted the lock's skeleton key to his best friend. They paid one last visit to his mother's grave in the rice fields, and then James told his grandfather – the man, now in his 80s, who raised him – that he would be back the following summer. James held back the tears and the fear that it would probably be three or four years before he returned. He knew that he might be seeing his beloved grandfather for the last time.

Jennifer had been given a pink princess dress and a Dorothy Hammill haircut for the occasion. (Somehow, the Dorothy Hammill bob with blunt bangs had made it to China.) Jennifer remembers fretting about whether this American ice skater's haircut would be sufficient to allow her to fit in, but her father seemed confident in what he was doing. In their culture there was no such thing as questioning one's father. "Your cousins will teach you," he promised. His father, sister, and brother had gone to San Francisco twenty years earlier. By now they were thriving. The family would smooth their transition.

They didn't. The family was caught up in their own lives.

They treated the new Louies rudely, mocked them for not speaking English, and overlooked them at Christmas. The new arrivals were never "emotionally claimed," to use James' phrase.

Way too soon, the new Louies were on their own, living in Sacramento, running restaurants, sacrificing, trying to assimilate, hoping their children would attend college, maybe even – if they were a very lucky family – the University of California at Berkeley. Which is exactly where Jennifer went. All that unfolded like the great American Dream, but they never knew it would work out like that. In any given moment, they were terrified and powerless and felt like failures and took it out on each other in the way only families can: cruelly. On paper they appeared a success, but financially the extreme hardship never relented. Emotionally, they became dire enemies.

James: "The father my daughter knew was bitter ... controlling ... *rough*." He knows this now, abuse being an American concept he's had to learn.

Jen added, "He also now knows it was illegal to have left his children at home unsupervised every afternoon and evening."

James corrected her, "No, I knew then. I knew."

Jen absorbed this, then, worried her father was shouldering all the blame, offered her own confession: "The daughter my father knew was *selfish*, she thought only of herself, she was embarrassed by her Chinese heritage, she refused to speak in Cantonese to her parents anywhere in public. In 9th grade I won an award for a poem I had written about my great-grandfather unwillingly letting us go on our last day in China. I didn't even invite my parents to the awards ceremony. I told myself it was because they couldn't come anyway, but the truth was, I was afraid they'd show up in their communist pajamas and embarrass me." Jen dug out the poem from a paperback book her high school published. I read it quickly. I sensed James' interest. I handed the book to him. He read it as only a man fifteen years too late can read a poem.

In her poems and journals, young Jen had started to carve out her own secret life. In high school, she lied in order to see boys

and go to dances. Her parents sensed all this, and in their minds they had already lost her. Nothing they said or did could keep her from becoming Americanized. When they telephoned her at Berkeley, all they heard was “Yeah Dad, yeah Mom, okay, yeah.”

In graduation photos, forced to stand with her parents, she looks positively gloomy.

Then, the *ultimate* indignity: after college their daughter went to work for pennies as a producer for a new cable show, Q-TV, an issues and entertainment show for gays and lesbians. They knew their daughter wasn't lesbian but if she was that might have made more sense. Occasionally she showed up with videotapes, proud of her hard work, hoping to share.

Imagine this scene! Imagine what her parents were feeling. They've left their homeland at middle age, their siblings have sabotaged their attempt to assimilate, they've both worked double shifts for fourteen years to put their daughter into one of the best colleges in America, and what has she done with this incredible opportunity? – not buy a house, not buy a new car, *but rather – she created a great seven-minute segment on the hot new gay comic!*

She has no steady boyfriend, no real income, but *she's gone to Palm Springs and sat by the pool for two days interviewing lesbian conventioners about how, exactly, they practice safe sex!*

And did she even get paid for this work? *Not enough that she didn't have to sell cigarettes to make her rent!*

Oh, they were thrilled.

And try to imagine this without the benefit of your complex understanding of how things usually work out one way or another in America. Try to imagine this from the point of view of a village peasant in a strange land, a man who has no experience to give him confidence it'll be okay, no family to tell him she'll be all right. A man who's never been in a nightclub, and has only his wildest fears to conjure what might go on in one. There's nothing that will keep a man like James Louie up at night like the fear he can't save his own children. How did this happen? How did it come to this?

James Louie's greatest dreams had come true, but so had his greatest fears.

Several years seemed to disappear, thrown away faster than they were lived, down into a black hole of memory. Jen had cut off her roots, emotionally if not in practice. Her parents now vested all their hopes in her brother. Jen would drive out to Ocean Beach and sit in the sand looking toward China and cry. She'd lost something, back across that ocean. She'd left it there and she was never going to get it back. Did anyone but her even remember? Could anyone in her family ever remember those days when they did not yell at each other?

It seemed as if far more than the heirloom gold bracelet had been forgotten in that worm hole in the wall in Tai San. When they came to America, they forgot that their childhoods had been happy. They forgot the charm and innocence of belonging to a place and a community. They forgot the joy of running down the street chasing a friend on a tricycle. The rocking chair James had carved for his daughter by hand. They forgot what it was like to play hide-and-seek in the long grass while the parents worked the rice fields nearby. They forgot what it was like to love each other.

Could anyone even remember that feeling?

It was as if their love had all been traded into gold, then forged into bracelets and rings, and stuffed into a wall rather than brought with them.

They had left it behind, in two red compact cases.

And somehow, the Louies found it again. There is that bracelet, which Jen never lets leave her wrist. She adores her Dad, and that feeling is mutual. So the question we want to know is, *how?* How'd they do it – and more importantly – can the rest of us do it too – can we get that feeling back?

The Louies didn't go to counseling, though perhaps they should have.

And Jen didn't give a big speech that all of a sudden convinced her parents to stop judging her.

And nobody said to anybody else “*I’m sorry*” or “*I forgive you,*” though in the way they relate today it’s apparent they *are* sorry and they *have* forgiven each other.

And they did not dig their heels in – stubbornly refusing to see each other until one side or the other broke down and agreed to change – that was not how it happened.

What happened was, Kim Louie went into the hospital. This was a big deal because while she complained for years of aches, she didn’t believe in Western medicine and was too proud to ever see a doctor. So if she was in the hospital, she was really sick. With what nobody was sure. Kim believed she had contracted an illness from drinking rice field water in Tai San. When Jen was born, James had to buy blood for Kim from neighboring villages.

Anyway, only one thing is certain when you go to the hospital: you get billed.

The bills piled up. They didn’t ask Jen outright for money. It was more like they criticized her clothes, picked a fight, and then, in the heat of the argument, said things like “We sent you to college and you’re still no better off than we are! We’re still washing dishes and can’t pay our medical bills, and look at you, you have nothing!”

One day – completely out of the blue – Jennifer decided to apply a sort of reverse psychology on her parents. She can pinpoint this decision to a very particular place and time. She had just walked into a popular hip-hop radio station to interview for a job as a radio producer. She had noticed all these sweet rides in the parking lot – Mercedes, Lexus, BMW. During her interview, she happened to ask the senior producer, “Which one is yours?”

The producer laughed. “Me? You gotta be kidding. Those all belong to the advertising salesmen.”

Something clicked. “Then I’d like to interview with that department.”

She had this idea that she’d do it for one year, and send a truckload of money to her parents. This might finally get them off her back, and then she would be free of them. Her obligation would be fulfilled.

So she did it. “Just to be clear on my motives,” she explained to me, “I didn’t want to *take care* of my parents. I just wanted to shut them up. I wanted them to stop yelling at me.”

In this way, she met both her own criteria and theirs: she managed to be insolent and obedient at the same time. *I’m just doing this to SHUT THEM UP!*

Jen turned out to have a work ethic much like her mother’s. But selling advertising is a lot more lucrative than washing pots. Jen paid her mother’s medical bills. A year went by. She paid off her parents’ mortgage. Another year. She discovered – to her total surprise – that it felt good to support her family. She went looking for a little house of her own. When her brother and his girlfriend got pregnant, she bought a five bedroom house and let them live there, keeping her apartment. Mind you, there had been no apologies. There had been no forgiveness. But it seemed petty to harbor resentments with Mom sick. While Jen told herself she would soon go back to her passion, now that her family life wasn’t so outright contentious it didn’t seem so crucial that she be pursuing her passion every minute.

One day at a business brunch, Jen bumped into the Mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown. She had interviewed him about gay politics a few times during her Q-TV days, and he remembered her. He was about to embark on a ten day tour of China with a delegation of business leaders and dignitaries.

“Where in China?” she asked.

“Southern China.”

“Which provinces?”

He listed a few, and then added, “Guangdong.”

“That’s where I was born,” she said proudly.

“You weren’t born here?”

“No, I only got my citizenship last year.”

“Have you ever been back?”

“No.”

“You must come with me. Bring your parents.”

Mom was too sick to travel, but Dad agreed to go.

“You have to understand how big a deal this was,” Jen narrated. “My parents had never taken a vacation in their entire life. You have to understand – in their first ten years here, they never took a single day off from work. Not one day. I am not exaggerating. Forget about the fact they’d never been back to China, never been to Los Angeles, never been anywhere. They simply had never left the kitchen of their restaurant. For my Dad, to go on a vacation was like winning the lottery.”

From the couch, James rocks and nods in memory.

“We flew to Hong Kong, and the first night, we’re put up in a hotel, I think it was called The White Stallion, overlooking Hong Kong Harbor. The view from the patio is incredible. Dad, I say, let me take your picture out here, I say. No, no, he says, take my picture in here. I go in, and he’s sitting at the hotel room desk. Take a picture of me sitting here, he says. Why Daddy? Because this desk will make me look important. He had never worked at a desk in his life. Then it was the bath soaps, the little plastic wrapped soaps. He was enchanted by them. Never seen them before.”

“Never seen hotel bath soaps before?” I asked.

“Well he’d never stayed in a hotel room before.”

“Never in his life?”

“No. It was his first time. In the mornings he would make our beds. Finally, I said, Daddy you don’t have to do that, the maids will do that for us. He didn’t know there was maid service in hotels.”

“Wow, a real innocent.”

“Exactly. I’d never seen innocence in my father before. To me he was always the authoritarian. He always told me how to do things. But it turned out he didn’t even know how to tie a tie. I caught him standing at the mirror fumbling with it as we got ready for the first night’s banquet with the delegation. Something was wrong. What, Daddy?”

“I don’t know how to do this,” he said.

“You’ve never worn a tie?”

“When would I have worn a tie?”

It took half an hour for Jennifer to make his tie presentable. They agreed to buy him a clip-on the following day.

“I do not belong here,” he said glumly.

“You do too, Daddy. We were invited.”

“*You* were invited.”

“Daddy, you are a successful businessman.”

“No,” he corrected her. “I am just a cook.”

“You must understand,” Jen explained, “that shattered my heart to hear. My father was always such a proud man. And now, to see him *afraid* – when he had always made sure I was afraid of him. You must understand – whenever I spoke back to my parents, I was whipped with bamboo lashes on my butt and hands, or sometimes hit with a shoe. There were times I could not walk. Up until the age of twelve I was abused. This is just the way it’s done in China. Sometimes I threatened to turn them in. ‘They’re going to come get you,’ I would say, but I never did because I was afraid of being orphaned. I was scared of my father. Now, to see fear in him ...”

Fear that he would embarrass himself and his family. Fear the other delegates would see right through his tie and his suit jacket and know this poor man was no dignitary. Why, this is no businessman! Look at his tie! Anyone can plainly tell – he’s a cook! He sweats over a fryer sixteen hours a day!

“I had never seen that vulnerability in my father,” Jen said. “It was the beginning of learning that my father had feelings of his own, feelings that he had always been too proud to reveal.”

James stirred from the couch, coming forward to pick up the story: At the dinner, she was not the daughter I had known for twenty years. All these dignitaries treated my daughter with such respect. She was so composed, so confident.

“She had turned into a lady,” I concluded.

James nodded. Then he felt it important enough to offer, humbly, “I stood in back.”

“He stood in back because he did not think he belonged,” Jen clarified. “I had turned into a woman and he had turned into a little boy. That night was the first time he ever told me he was

proud of me. But then, over the next few days, it was very interesting. Most of the dignitaries – though of Chinese heritage – had been born in California. As we moved through the provinces and into the villages, they started to feel like tourists in a strange land. They became insecure. But my father's confidence grew. He knew the language, he knew the country, he knew the mindset of the people. He seemed so comfortable. There was a manhood about him that I'd never seen. He was reclaiming a dignity he'd lost. I'll never forget the day the Red Army came out to shake hands with everyone in the delegation. My father was so emotional. He left as a peasant rice farmer, and now the Red Army wanted to shake his hand. In that moment everything he had sacrificed for was finally recognized. There was a parade, and all these schoolgirls lined the street, yelling 'Welcome! Welcome!' in English. They were wearing the same red school dress I used to wear at their age. Then, the delegation moved on, but we had arranged for a car to take us to our village."

Tai San is a tiny village, only about a hundred people, and it had barely been touched by time. As their car rolled down the dirt road, children ran behind it, screaming.

"What did you think would happen?" I asked.

"We didn't know. We had told nobody we were coming. They had heard about the parade in the province but of course had no idea we were in the delegation. We thought we might just take a look around and go. You know, it could have been very disappointing, and we were ready for that. We didn't know who was alive, or who had moved away. Just like anybody goes back to their childhood house. It's mostly symbolic. In your heart, you know it's all changed. You know it's not going to be the way you left it."

"Did anyone recognize you?"

"Oh, it was so funny. They recognized Dad the second he stepped out of the car. They crowded around him, ecstatic, until I got out of the car. Then it was dead silence."

"Why?"

“They thought I was his mistress. They thought he had left his wife, and that was why he had never returned. They didn’t recognize me. But then I said, in perfect dialect, ‘I’m no mistress, I’m Louie Louie Wah.’ That’s my Chinese name. I was so in love with my father that moment, being cheered by our village, and for the first time I could really see how far he had come. I could see how much sacrifice it had taken to get us to where we were. There was a young woman there, a peasant girl, who looked at me in all my glamour with such envy, like she was seeing a movie star, but I was looking at her with envy to equal hers, craving what she had – simplicity, family. We wanted to trade places, and for a moment, I would have, if I could have had my Dad with me like she had hers.”

Then the entourage went walking up the road, taking in the village. Soon they were outside #18, their house. There it was.

James asked the villagers, “who lives there now?”

Everyone laughed.

“What’s so funny?” he insisted.

“But *you* live there,” he was told.

Surely that is not possible. Surely people moved in, people moved out, life went on? Surely the Party has transferred the house to another family?

“Oh no,” he was told. “We wouldn’t let them.”

It had been seventeen years since he had even written anybody in the village a letter. James was dumbfounded by their loyalty.

“I’m sure everything inside has been taken,” he suggested to his longtime neighbors. For surely, in a village this poor, all the clothing and furniture would have found better use in someone else’s home.

“See for yourself,” he was told.

James asked who had the key.

Nobody knew.

James knew.

A moment later, he was in the village machine shop, where his best friend was making bolts. They embraced, tried to get over

the shock, and another moment later, James had the skeleton key in the door to #18. He and Jen entered alone.

There was dust everywhere. James pulled back the curtains to let in the light.

“Nothing had been touched,” Jen remembered. “It was all there. The pots from the hooks, the clothes in the drawers, the altar of photographs. I was shaking. It was – it was like a dream.”

James went right to the altar and bowed three times to his mother.

“I’m home Mom.”

Jen looked at the photo he was bowing to, and to her surprise, it was like looking in a mirror. Her grandmother – who she’d never met – looked just like her. So young.

“Daddy?” she asked him, “How old was your mother when she died?”

“The same age you are right now,” he answered.

She was shaking.

“Daddy, why did the villagers think I was your mistress?”

“They didn’t really think that.”

“Yes they did. I heard them say it. I heard the women whisper, ‘Just like his father.’”

“My mother died of a broken heart,” he said. “When she washed Dad’s clothes, she’d find letters and photos from other women. I heard these stories growing up. Mom died when I was only one year old. You are all I ever had of her. I never knew my mother.”

I never knew my mother.

For Jen, this was an unbearable confession to receive. Because while Jen knew this fact, had picked it up through osmosis, she’d never heard her Dad mention it. Her Dad’s long silence had implied he did not recognize it as material. His long silence had always suggested such things simply don’t matter. But now she knew *that he knew* – he had known all along, and he had suffered silently, stoically. Jen had grown up believing her father simply didn’t have an emotional inner life. For twenty years, his pain hid behind this proud façade.

“My father,” James went on, “My father did not leave with my sister and brother when I was nine years old. He actually left right after mom died. He went to Hong Kong. He came back when I was four, for awhile, and then again when I was nine. He was going to take me to America. At the last minute, I was scratched, because I was not old enough to work. I was left behind by a father I never knew. I waited to be sent for. I did not understand why it took so long. Why, why did it take so long for my Dad to send for me? He was sending money, he was doing well, why did he not send for me? Why did he not come for me? Why, why did it take so long?”

James looked at his daughter, who was unable to control her tears.

“Now I know,” he said sadly. “Now I understand. For it has taken me every bit as long.”

James removed the wood panel. Then the brick. His arm snaked down into the worm hole.



Out came the two compact cases.

Jen remembered, “There was a huge smile on my father’s face. It was the first smile I had ever seen on him. He was so excited. That it was still there. Despite years and years and years of neglect, it was still there, still perfect, wrapped in silk.”

He thumbed the jewelry, momentarily that boy again, then removed the bracelet that had belonged to his mother’s mother. He gestured for Jen to extend her wrist.

“This, my daughter, this is for you.”

Despite years and years and years of neglect, it was still there, perfect.

We have all lost something along the way. And we've moved on. There's no point going back for it. We're surviving just fine without it. So much pain has shattered it to dust, surely. If not, someone has stolen it, surely. Put it to other use. Besides, we've tried before to get it back and never made progress. Why dig up all that guilt? Why provoke old animosities? We simply don't have the energy for it. We have all lost something along the way.

These things happen.

It's been shattered.

We're not sure if it ever was really there in the first place.

But maybe – just maybe – in that place in our souls where the roads are still dirt, and where the houses are still cement and cinder, and the paint has long peeled from the door, under all that dust, despite years and years of neglect, it is still there, waiting for us, perfect. Waiting for us to let it out.

I'm reminded of a passage from a book that once helped me through my divorce. I was a wreck. I absolutely believed that I was ruined, tainted, broken for good. I would never really be able to love anyone again. Then I found this book about Buddhism, and I stumbled onto a single page that has never failed since to soothe me. The passage insisted that believing we are broken is a mistaken perception of our true nature. The passage insisted that we are all inherently virtuous and noble, but time covers us with layers and layers of experience. We often act badly, for the world is confusing. And we are often hurt, because others get confused, too. And when we look in the mirror – when we build a mental image of ourselves – we see only these layers upon layers. We conclude “I am not a good person,” or, “I have been hurt very badly.” But we are mistaken. This is not our true nature. Inside us all, under all those layers, despite years and years of neglect, there is still a virtuous and noble person, waiting to be let out. One

doesn't *become* a good person. One simply ceases, slowly, to be deluded by the layers.

That page – just two paragraphs I'd underlined, really – became my calm in the storm. It reminded me that the start of a better life was not out there somewhere, out there in the freak-show universe of spiritual guides, but rather, that the start of a better life was my own goodness, and *it was already inside me*. It had been there all along, under all those layers. Waiting for me. I just had to calm down, stop looking everywhere else for answers, and start letting it out.

I do not mean to turn this true story of the Louies into a parable. I'm not suggesting we all need to take a trip with our Dad, or that we all need to be more devoted to our parents, or that our families all need to kiss and make-up, because that's not going to happen. This is about each of us and our core beliefs. This is about choosing the principles upon which we build our lives. This is about what we find meaningful enough to devote ourselves to. This is about what we find fundamentally essential. With stakes this high, isn't it worth considering that we have let our bad experiences cloud out the good ones, that we might treat each other badly but we are still good people, that there is an emotional inner life inside each of us no matter what we see on the outside, and that culture and poverty and hardship explain a lot of what happened?

Is it possible that it's waiting for us, still there, perfect?

No sooner was the story told than the Louies wanted it retold. They insisted I come back the following week.

Spread out on the glass coffee table were maybe fifty photographs, most of them reprints of old photos from the altar and drawers in Tai San. Jen had another fifty of the trip in a plastic zip-lock bag, and then a few from high school and college. We go through them again.

Jen was afraid she has not communicated how hard it was on all of them. "You must understand, my parents left every

morning at 6 a.m. for their restaurant, and did not return until 11:30 p.m. They both worked two shifts a day to avoid hiring more workers. Every afternoon and evening I babysat my brother and cousin. I missed my parents terribly. I wrote in my journal that I had been orphaned. I was not allowed to go to movies or dances. Instead, my brother and I were sent out to gather bottles and cans for recycling, digging through public trash cans. The only times I saw my parents, they were yelling at me for what I'd done wrong, or yelling at each other. I told them to get a divorce. They told me I think like a white girl. But they fought constantly, usually over money."

James spoke, and Jen gave me the gist of it. "My parents," she explained, "believed in two opposing Chinese values. My mother believed in saving for the future, for a house and college tuition, so she sewed us clothes, which we refused to wear. My father believed in maintaining face, so if we kids needed new clothes from Macy's to fit in, so be it. He was proud and wanted to be seen as taking care of his family. These Chinese values were in a permanent clash."

Jen added her own memory to her father's analysis. "The biggest fight I ever saw was when Dad bought jumbo shrimp for my brother's birthday, to spoil us, when we didn't even have money for new shoes."

After this, there was a shame in the room. The past had returned, slipped in the back door. Jen chased it away with another story. "You must understand, I never had respect for my parent's relationship. I wanted romantic love, not what they had. Theirs was not a marriage, it was a merger. Mom and Dad were matched not because they had longed for each other from afar, but because Dad's father was in San Francisco and Mom's father was in Canada. Their marriage was a ticket out of communism. They stuck together, building a life together as equal partners. Since our trip to China, the biggest change has not been my relationship with my father. It's been Dad and Mom finally falling in love. That dignity he recovered there, he brought it home. That manhood about him, he came home with that. The confidence. He started to

be openly affectionate with her. Every night he rubbed her shoulders and feet with Chinese therapeutic oils. He treated her with an old fashioned chivalry you don't see in modern men. Most children watch their parents grow out of love. I've watched mine grow into it. I used to never want a relationship like my parents. I wanted a glamorous life. Now, I want exactly what they have."

The next day Jennifer called. She was frustrated at not having got something right – it was left unspoken, perhaps implied, but it should be articulated just to be sure. It was humbling to go to China. It was humbling to behold that kind of loyalty and devotion. She thought she "got" what loyalty and devotion were, but this was on another scale. Imagine, these poor villagers, taking care of the Louie's house for twenty years, when they had not heard from the family for seventeen. Out of loyalty to her Dad. And to see her Dad in front of his mother's photograph – to see he'd been devoted for nearly 50 years to a woman he'd never known other than in that photograph. Jen laughs at her own foolishness, to think she ever presumed to know what devotion was. Her parents were willing to wait thirty years for the love to enter their marriage. It was so humbling, so *calming*, so reassuring. She realized she could never drive her parents away. She realized nothing she ever did would truly cause them to give up on her. For they knew mountains. She thought she knew mountains but no, oh no, she did not. *They* knew mountains, nothing like she had ever seen.