

Xueting Tu

March 3rd, 2018

The Wedding Shoes

Very few teenagers in China commit suicide. When a boy in my high school threw himself off a building, the general reaction was quick: “Don’t do it,” said parents to their kids, “because you don’t know how sad we will be.” However, my mother was earnest about the issue. Her eyes were watery that night when talking to me: “I can understand his decision,” she said. “I have been through it.” Pausing for a few seconds, she kept talking with her eyes shining under the moonlight: “When we are young, we all experience some trouble that may seem so monstrous that we can never overcome it. But trust me, people always grow up. It will no longer seem so unconquerable after years of growing up. Don’t make decisions that you will regret, not to mention that suicide does not even give you the chance to regret.”

This vulnerability was unusual for her. Typically, she is a strong woman. She started a beer business with my dad in her 20’s; she used to finish the work as the accountant in the company so well that she can count money as fast as cash counters and can distinguish the counterfeit money only by one glimpse. When I was little, I once asked her to teach me such cool skills. She dodged my request, saying: “These are not good skills. You don’t need to learn them” as if it is ashamed to own such skills. Just like she and my dad succeeded in starting a business, as long as she sets her mind, nothing can beat her. I sometimes hate her toughness and how she forces me to learn math until I like it myself by saying that she hopes I can pick up where she left off—for God’s sake, although I love math now, at the time I didn’t care where she left off at all! I had no clue why me being good math matters so much to her.

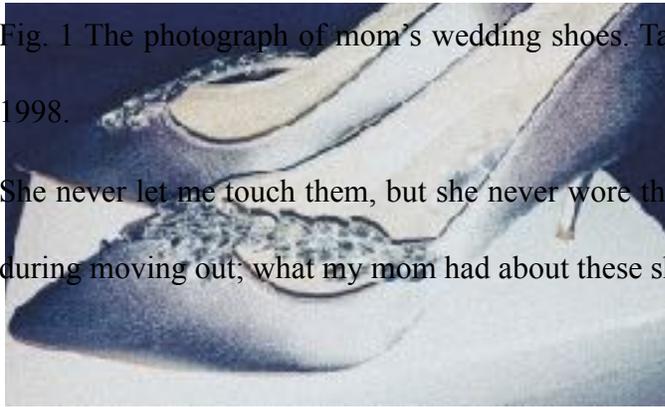
But on the day we learned about that suicide, I had never seen my tough mom this fragile—with tears in her eyes, her voice secretly trembling. But she hid her vulnerable face immediately after ending our conversation. “Now, go to sleep as fast as you can. You have a math quiz tomorrow.” Ugh, math again.

She must have been through something that made her want to commit suicide. Feeling shocked yet curious, I thought in my bed at that night and fell asleep when thinking about asking her. I didn’t know the answer because she refused to tell me about it every time I asked, by saying she was too young and too immature at that time.

As time went by, I forgot about asking her why she attempted to commit suicide, but my dad told me once, secretly. I was in high school then, and rushed home to tell my dad my good news: I have a boyfriend, who is my high school classmate. My dad, surprisingly, got really mad that day and asked me to break up with him immediately. I was annoyed by his attitude and shouted back. We almost got into a fight. Later that day, dad calmed down and talked to me.

“I am sorry for shouting at you. I was too nervous. I don’t support puppy love because you know, we are too immature and impulsive when we are teenagers. I used to bring your mom a lot of misery, and she almost killed herself. Her 20’s would have been much better off if she had not ended up marrying me,” my dad said to me. I was too shocked to answer him. Due to women’s intuition, I at once thought he must have cheated on my mom, given the fact that my dad is such a social guy with sweet words and a playful attitude towards almost everything and everyone. He showed off his heroic stories in one of the biggest gangs in front of me for hundreds of times and never even tried to hide the fact that he fell in love with my mom because she used to be the prettiest girl he ever knew.

Fig. 1 The photograph of mom's wedding shoes. Taken by my grandfather in November 28th, 1998.



She never let me touch them, but she never wore them herself. Then she lost this pair of shoes during moving out; what my mom had about these shoes is this photo.

However, what I didn't know is while my mom seems very strong, she is, nevertheless, fragile inside, my dad seems playful but he is really the strong one—he is the glue between all the women in the family: between my mother and her mother, and between my mother and me. We are all tough, but he has a way with language. He can make everything smooth between us. It works so well that I do not even realize his irreplaceable position.

I kept believing the “fact” that my dad used to cheat on my mom till very recently. I was online shopping, and I sent a picture of the pair of high heels that I wanted to buy, to my mom to ask for her permission. She then sent me an old photo of her wedding shoes (see Fig.1), reminding me that I used to love her wedding shoes so much that I secretly put them on and would “tic tac” around every corner in the house when I was six years old. I remember very little about them—only the sparkling rhinestone and the silvery satin, but because of the assignment of interviewing, I asked her about the story of the shoes this time.

“ Why do you cherish those shoes so much? You never wear them, so you lost them. You could have given them to me.” I was still a bit grumpy about her stinginess.

“They are my wedding shoes. Your dad bought me them, and I loved them so much.” She still sounded happy when talking about her favorite high heels, “They were too expensive for your

dad. He had to work for several months and ate buns at work to buy me those. He is such a sweet guy...” She seemed to immerse herself in memory.

I could not help but burst out “Didn’t he cheat on you?”

My mom seemed quite annoyed: “Definitely no. Who told you this? Grandma? Oh god, I should have known. She still thinks so. That old lady still hates your dad...” She was much grumpier than I now.

I was surprised because I never knew grandma used to dislike my dad. In China, even though arranged marriage is no longer prevalent, whether the bride or the groom’s parents like their kid’s potential marriage partner can still decide whether they can marry because it is of enormous importance to respect elder people’s opinions—listen to them and let them decide for you. Which is to say, it is astonishing that though my grandma used to hate my dad, my parents still got married. I asked her: “Why does grandma dislike dad?”

“Because your dad was poor as hell and most importantly, he was a countryside boy. My family came from the city. Your grandma is too proud to bear her daughter marrying a man from the countryside.” Mom answered.

I was surprised. Even though today, people from the city in China still discriminate against people from the countryside by using words like “country bumpkin,” I just could not believe my ears. Grandma, a very kind old lady, would not do such a thing; there must be a reason. So I asked mom: “How come? Did grandma experience anything that makes her hate men from the countryside?”

“Your grandma hates the countryside because she hated her life in the countryside. She does not belong there. She is one of the very few women who accepted university education in 1960’s

China, and she used to be a math teacher in high school. But after she gave birth to my little brother, which was against the one-child policy at that time, as punishment, your grandma was fired from her job, your grandpa was removed from his work position, and both of them were driven to the countryside. As a result, I transferred from one of the best middle schools in Wuhan to one of the cheapest public school in the countryside. I was preparing for the China Maths Olympic Competition, but I had to quit.” She stopped for a while, seemingly unwilling to recall her pain in the public school. She looked like she was painful about her quitting.

For years, I thought she was a tough person. That toughness is who she is. But it turns out that she has her vulnerability which she never spoke out. My mom must have been looking forward to the competition so badly that it has become her wound as she lost her chance to participate. All of a sudden, I felt sorry for my rebellious attitude towards maths—I had fallen in love with it, but to prove her pushing to be wrong, I refused to admit that I love math or to go deeper in math study. My mom forced me to learn math because she projected her love for math and her unfinished will of conquering math on me. In front of her pain, my rebellion seems so powerless, unreasonable and brattish.

Mom so skipped her the part about her wound and continued: “It was too hard to get back to the position we used to be at in 1980s’ China. Everyone was afraid of the department of family planning. They could do whatever they wanted to you, such as firing people, seizing your property and even forcing the women who were pregnant for seven months to do labor induction and then kill the baby. They did these evil things just to implement the one-child policy. It was almost a dark age, and my dad saw the situation clearly that we might never be able to return to our house in Wuhan again, so he settled down very quickly. But your grandma did not. She had



Fig. 2 The photograph of mom's bike. Taken by my mom on April 16th, 2005.

Nobody can ride that bike now. Nobody can see its previous “glamor” and honestly, it looks like a pile of rubbish, but my mom still refuses to throw it away. Probably because of the unique meaning it has to her.

grown up in the city for over 30 years. Then suddenly one day, she was swept away from where she grew up and the people she grew up with. It was an exile. She always wants to go back.”

I probably understood. My grandma never finds her sense of belonging in the countryside; the place even keeps reminding her of her exile. It is almost her Odyssey. She must have missed her old life as a math teacher in the city very much. Fifteen years ago, I was still a toddler who can hardly read books, but my grandma was already tightly holding me in her arms and teaching me how to do division. If I paid more attention to toys other than math, she would show her grumpy face and hit me on my little palm with a rusty old ruler like she used to do to her students in high school. It turns out math is the connection between the women in our family.

Then a new hypothesis emerged: given that my grandma is such a tough woman and she hates my dad so much, it is so unusual that my parents got married successfully. Probably my mom attempted to suicide just to force my grandma to agree with her choice because it looks like a thing that my tough mom would do. I knew it was still not time to ask my mom about her failed

suicide. Interested in my dad and mom's puppy love, I asked her how they met each other, given the fact that their backgrounds are so distinct.

“Yes. We are from the same middle school, but your dad is two grades above me. Classes were divided by grades at that period—I mean, all students were ranked and the first sixty students are in a class and then this applies, and we were told to not to play with the kids from classes of lower ranking, so your dad and I were never supposed to meet each other. But we met because of my old bike.” She stopped for a few seconds and proceeded. “My family was not super rich, I mean, like a millionaire, but my dad used to administer a huge beer factory, so we used to be the only family with color TV in my neighborhood. However, all of it was gone with your uncle's birth. I had to go to that wretched middle school, but luckily, I got to keep one of my coolest bikes. (see Fig.2) It was “Phoenix” brand and was colored in bright yellow, with the largest tire. Everybody was jealous of me because of my bike, even in the city. I used to ride it for miles to go to school and parked it on campus. I met your dad because of that bike. Your dad saw the bike and asked many people to know the owner of the bike. Clearly, me. I knew for sure that he was planning to threaten me to rob my bike, because I saw him with a stick, looking very unfriendly. But as soon as he saw me, he dropped all his equipment and put on a shocked face. “You are a f*king girl?” He dropped his jaw. I hated him so much at that time because my name does sound like a man and I hate people keep thinking me as a man even before meeting me. I still hate people doing that even today. This is how we met.” True, my mom is often called Mr. Yan by strangers.

“So how did you fall in love and marry him in the end if you hated him at that time?”

“Your dad seemed to notice my fury, so he tried really hard to make up by apologizing and promising me to protect my bike from other bad students who would try to rob it. Oh, listen to this, he was in one of the gangs himself. But about this promise, he is always a person like this. We met for the first time on that day, but he already tried to prevent me from being sad or angry. I think this is why I fell in love with him later. He kept his promise, and he drove off all bad boys who were planning on getting my bike or me. I hated that place and the middle school at first, but your dad rode that bike and took me to many amazing places in the countryside that I have never seen in the city. And it was the first time since my brother’s birth that someone would send me to school, even though by bike. He did give me a huge amount of pleasure at that time. Then I went to university, and your dad went to the army. We wrote to each other almost every week, and after my graduation, we got married immediately.” As I anticipated, she skipped the part where she forced grandpa and grandma to approve of her marriage, so I decided to ask grandma how rebellious mom was in her 20’s.

I told grandma that I was going to ask her a few questions about my mom’s 20’s. She was unwilling to say to me at first. Her reaction was entirely different from how she is used to be. Stories of 20 years ago are apparently “forbidden.” “Grandma, did my mom force you to permit her marriage?”

Probably surprised by my tough, straightforward question, she choked and answered my question. “Yes. I have never seen her that tough. She knelt down on the washboard in front of your grandpa and me. We told her not to stand up until she gave up her foolish decision. But she knelt down for almost two days. She did not stand up even when your grandpa whipped her with his belt to force her to compromise. I have never seen your grandpa that angry. It was nearly a

battle at home.” As she talked, I realized my mom did not attempt to suicide to force my grandparents to approve her marriage. What grandma said proved my speculations to be wrong.



Fig. 3 The photograph of a typical washboard in 1990’s China. Found in family album, but not of the original washboard which my mom knelt on. Unknown taken time.

I knelt down on a similar washboard, too, because of some reason that I have already forgotten. But I can never forget the pain—I can barely stand up after kneeling on such a thing for merely one hour. I cannot imagine what my mom went through when kneeling on this for two days and cannot understand her determination which was so firm that drove her to do so.

“Didn’t my mom attempt suicide to force to you agree?”

“No, definitely no. Your mom attempted to suicide because of another reason.” Grandma realized she disclosed my mom’s secret and turned vigilant, “Why do you ask me this?”

“Granny, I am just curious. This is my school task, you know...”

“Well, your mom doesn’t know that I know the real reason, so don’t tell her if I tell you. She always pretends to be tough. Your mom attempted suicide because she had a bad life after marrying your dad. They were too poor. Your mom never experienced life like that.” Grandma suddenly started to cry at the other end of the phone, but she kept talking, “Because we refused

her marriage at first, she always wanted to prove us to be wrong. She doesn't need to do that. I don't care if I am wrong. I definitely hope she can have a happy and innocent life, but sometimes money decides it, not us. Your grandpa and I refused her marriage, not for other reason but we know they are too distinct to taste the bitterness in life together, especially when your mom never tasted the bitterness in life before. She pretended to be strong in front of us and carried the most expensive gifts when visiting us, but their life was miserable at that time. She just couldn't bear it, but was still unwilling to tell us. She could have borrowed some money from us, but she just wanted to prove her decision to be right, so she stuck with it. But the newlywed life was too different from her imagination, she swallowed a pack of sleeping pills, and luckily, her best friend found out and sent her to the hospital." My mom still refuses to speak out what kind of life she and my dad used to live. She must have felt at least a little regretful about her choice of not listening to her parents. Otherwise, my mom would not still feel ashamed of owning those skills, such as counting cash and recognizing counterfeit money—they are like a symbol of previous poverty to my mom. I suppose that this is also why she refuses to teach me those skills—she hopes I could avoid what she had experienced. I used to secretly blamed her for not willing to share her impressive skills with me. However, now, I feel that my mom's refusal is out of her sense of protection—she finally understands how grandma felt.

I did not realize how sad grandma was until she wiped the tears from her wrinkled face. I remember how serious, severe, and solemn her face used to be when I was little. But now, during this video chat, I suddenly realize how old she has gotten. I notice how her face is wrinkled, but as I grow up, every time I talk to her, she is always smiling. Recalling her smiles in these years, I have a strange sense of sorrow right now. I feel that her life has beat her. My grandma has stayed

in the countryside for over 50 years, and she no longer wants to go back—she never makes back her home again, just like Odysseus never makes back home himself.

Wiped her tears, grandma continued: “Your dad told me this whole suicide thing. I was so furious that I wanted to hit him real hard, but your dad knelt down, apologized to me and knelt down to beg me to keep the fact that I know the real reason from your mom, exactly like what your mom did to beg us to allow their marriage—oh, they are so similar in a way. Your dad said: ‘Bo (my mom, now you see why my mom is always called mister) did not want you to know how her life is. I told her I would tell you the reason why she attempted to suicide is that I cheated on her, so don’t tell her I tell you the real reason. I am terribly sorry for giving her such a miserable life. She deserves a much better life that I will give her in several years. I am sorry.’ I at once forgave him. He is a good man. Your dad mortgaged his beloved car and borrowed some money from us to start their business. And he also kept this a secret from your mom. She would never allow him to borrow money from us.”

“So you don’t hate my dad?”

“How come so many of your odd ideas? Definitely not. I knew he is the one for your mom immediately after he bought your mom the wedding shoes. Those shoes are so pretty. Your grandpa never bought me those.” She replied with a twist of her mouth, “A man with good taste will never mistreat my daughter.” I could not help but laugh out loud. True, my dad always has his way of reaching a truce between the women in our family. He has managed to stop my fight with mom for 18 years. It does not matter that whether he is similar to us—whether he is the only one from the countryside or the only one bad at math in our family or the only one who

camouflages his strength. Perhaps exactly because of such difference, he is the irreplaceable dad. He keeps our family functions harmoniously in his particular way.

“So why did you refuse their marriage and not forgive him for a long time?”

“Well, I need to show him his wife has a tough-mom-support.”

At this point, all things are bright. I never realize my curiosity in my mom’s failed suicide could reveal a piece of “forbidden” memory about my family or a long story full of secrets. At first, I thought this secrecy came from the hideosity in my family; such secrecy led to my suspicion of the relationship between the members of my family. However, it turns out such secrecy comes from protection and connection—my family keeps my mom in the dark and protects her side as an innocent, spoiled girl; each member in my family connects firmly with each other by these little secrets. These secrets used to prevent me from knowing who I am, but through this journey to my family’s past, I know me and my toughness better and sort of understand where my toughness comes from. We both refused to obey our moms and stuck with our own choice, just to prove that they are wrong: my toughness looks exactly the same as my mom’s especially when it comes to math. I refused to admit my passion for math and deliberately chose another path. But through this long talk with my family, which lasted for over ten years, I think I need to face what I love, but not just to fight my mom’s will. I just declared my minor in math.

From this point, I am going to carve this long story, which is full of secrets in my mind and share it with the person who is willing to buy me such fancy, glitzy, and unique wedding shoes—just as my grandma said, a man with good taste will never mistreat me. Also, I will never keep

this story a secret from my daughter, because it is necessary and meaningful for her to know the story about the unexceptional toughness in every woman in her family and to understand where her toughness comes from.