

stray cat. Sometimes he fed it with his own food. He struck me as a gentle soul, and I believed he loved my grandmother and she him. But none of his children wanted to talk much about him. Were they still busy reconciling the fact that, if their father were as honorable as they wished, none of them would've been born?

By the time I lived with my grandmother, he had been dead for close to seven years. Yet he was still the thousand-pound gorilla in the one-bedroom apartment. Everyone performed acrobatics around him as well as each other, avoiding his bristly, flea-covered hair. And of course, his past life was never discussed. What had happened to his first wife? Did the Red Guards torture and execute her, too? People talked about her less than the ducks he herded.

Often my grandmother would paint. Flowers, animals, mountains... everything under her brush looked true to life. She tried to teach me, too. But, like all the other talent classes my parents made me attend in the following years, I failed spectacularly. Unlike my parents, she didn't try to bend me into a shape. She left me alone to play video games and painted by herself. Effortless and quiet, she remained lost in her own world. That self-containment may have been the most important lesson she taught me.

When I beat Super Mario Bros the fourteenth time, my year was up, and my mother took me back to Shenyang.

Half a year later, my grandmother fell ill. Undiagnosed, she transferred hospitals three times before she lost to the mysterious disease. On the morning of her cremation, she lay on a rolling table and wore her signature half smile. She was ready to reunite with my grandfather, and maybe, her own mother, too.



In middle school, when my parents were not home, I used to sneak into their room and read the diaries they kept on the bookshelf. Tears, joy, and