

She stared at me for a few seconds and lowered her gaze to her bowl. She never wanted to talk about her parents, and I didn't know why. Asking had been an act of desperation on my part.

After a long while of us chewing on our rice in silence, she glanced up. "No. They married in their free will. A new thing back then. But it wasn't love."

"Please," I said. "Tell me."

And she did.



Born in 1925, Changchun, my mother's mother grew up in an orphanage. Her mother had been a live-in maid for a wealthy family, and she didn't know her father.

Before my grandmother met my grandfather, she had many suitors. But none of them resulted in an arranged marriage. Then, in her mid-twenties, she caught tuberculosis, a death sentence in China at the time. The treatment was antibiotics and hope. All her suitors lost interest except my grandfather, whom she knew as a dead farmer's son. He was her only hospital visitor. Every day, he brought her corn porridge and pickled vegetables, the cheapest items on a street vendor's menu and all he could afford. Not scared of her deadly, contagious infection, he told her stories beside her bed to cheer her up. As soon as she recovered and left the hospital, they got married.



"Choosing her own man to marry was brave and rare in an era of arranged marriages," I said. "She must have loved him."

"She was weak and likely to die," my mother said. "He was the only one interested in her. She had no choice."



Fifteen years later, the Great Cultural Revolution began. To answer Chairman Mao's call, ordinary young people became Red Guards and formed the Rebel Groups. They destroyed buildings and statues, burned train stations and bridges, and held massacres.