

Scorpions

By Jingyi Zhang

Feng wouldn't have woken Ying up in the middle of the night if his chest pain was still bearable. Having lived together for sixty years, Ying knew that well. Feng wouldn't bother anyone for anything if he could keep it to himself, so when Ying felt Feng's touch on her shoulders amidst the dark, she felt one step closer to her worst nightmare.

Ying still remembered how they went to see the best surgeon in the best cancer hospital in Guiyang three years ago. If their son-in-law didn't know that surgeon from a friend of a friend, there was no chance for them to get an appointment with him at all. The surgeon was busy chewing his lunch take-out when they entered his office. He grabbed her husband's lung CT scan—as well as the one-thousand-yuan red packet underneath—and told them after two minutes of chewing that Feng's tumor wasn't big enough for surgery. Last month, they went to see the surgeon again, with a new CT scan and a three-thousand-yuan red packet this time.

“Let's operate next month. Sounds good?”

But Ying didn't want him to do the surgery, and Feng knew it, so they ended up not doing it. After all, what if Feng couldn't get down the operating table? Ying kept dreaming about this, even though she hadn't had any dreams for almost a decade after she got sleep problems. For all her life Ying had been the woman behind Feng. This time she had to be the one in front. She had to figure something out.

“I told you we shouldn't trust Dr. Bian!” Their daughter Minmin came, with her high pitch that could almost wake up the entire building. Minmin always had something to complain about, whether the restaurant food tasted too oily, or the elevator smelled too stinky, or the customer service wasn't enthusiastic enough. “See, dad's chest pain must be caused by the herbs! Scorpions? I told you it won't work!”

“Shh. It's three in the morning, okay?”

Minmin rolled her eyes and grumbled. “Just hurry! Xiaojian's waiting downstairs!” She said as Feng walked out of his room, slowly, one step at a time. He was in his grey trouser and checked sweater and was putting on his flat leathered cap. This had been his regular outfit for quite a while, a few years if not decades.

“Your mom and I can just call a taxi,” Feng said as he slipped into his bright blue sneakers, the pair that Minmin bought him last year. He only started to wear them this year because his feet were too sour in his old boots.

Minmin rolled her eyes to Feng again. She took his bag, pushed open the door, and rushed to the elevator.

They soon arrived at the hospital—not a traditional medicine one Ying would prefer, just a regular Western one ten-minute away from their apartment. Minmin hurried to take Feng to the ER, while Ying stayed with her son-in-law Xiaojian in his car, as he was looking for a parking spot. But Ying couldn't help thinking about Dr. Bian's prescription after Minmin's complaint. She carefully took the sheet out from her pocket while in the back seat.

Scorpions, ten grams. Centipedes, ten grams. Silkworms, ten grams. Snake berry, five grams. Purple yam, fifteen grams. Ginseng, ten grams...

She didn't know what went wrong. After all, Dr. Bian was on the best TV show on Traditional Chinese Medicine she had ever watched, *Healthy Aging*. He said his herbal treatment for lung cancer could do the exact same thing as surgery and chemo, but without any side effects.

"Don't worry, mom, dad will be fine," Xiaojian said as he pulled open the car door from outside.

"Do you think it's caused by the herbs?"

"I don't know, but Dr. Bian looked nice," Xiaojian said as he offered his hand to Ying. Ying put one foot down and tried turning her body. "Don't worry. Let's hear what the doctor says."

Ying sometimes felt like Xiaojian is the only person that could understand her. Both Xiaojian's mom and dad died during surgery. That was probably why Xiaojian eventually agreed to take them to Dr. Bian's clinic. Ying could still remember how furious Minmin went three weeks ago when she told her about this Dr. Bian on TV. Minmin studied biology in college, but she soon grew tired of it and became a sales representative to sell insurance. She said all herbs were frauds and was always the biggest advocate for surgery.

In the end, Xiaojian drove them to Dr. Bian's three weeks ago. It took them two hours to get there from downtown Guiyang. The clinic was a plain white building in the mountains next to an empty elementary school, where Ying still could hear the school bell ringing once every forty minutes or so. White powders were falling off from the ceiling as they walked in, while some construction workers were sitting on their ladders and painting over their heads. Ying remembered Feng's hesitance when they first arrived, but also how relieved Feng was after Dr. Bian spent thirty minutes talking to them.

"Dr. Bian was the only doctor that's kind to us. Young doctors don't even raise their eyes to look at you," Ying mumbled to Xiaojian when they were walking to the entrance in the dark. "You remember that old lady who lived upstairs? She told me that her cousin has taken Dr. Bian's herbs for seventeen years. He cured her cousin's heart attacks!"

"Oh! I thought his herbs are only for lung cancer," Xiaojian said absent-mindedly, as he was searching around.

"Well, a good doctor knows everything. My father was like that."

"But they do have specialties, right?"

Ying frowned. She used to stay in her dad's pharmacy all day long. She loved how the scents of herbs penetrated through her nose to the top of her head when he was grinding those leaves and mixing them together. Back in the day, even a pharmacist like her dad knew how to treat a headache or a big lump. They knew all their patients, so every day Ying was looking forward to those friendly chit-chats her dad had with them—until the invaders came and he died on the battlefield. But she recalled that her dad used to prescribe scorpions to his patients as well.

"We will go this way," Xiaojian told Ying after he consulted a cleaner about how to get to the ER. Ying wasn't really used to how quiet the hospital was. She found it safer to navigate through the bustling crowds during the day, when you could always find your way as you were pushed around by people around you. She followed Xiaojian down a dim hallway until they reached a brightly lit room. Minmin was waving to them from the counter and pointed them to Feng, who was sitting in the waiting area.

“Did you already see the doctor?” Ying sat down next to Feng and put Minmin’s bag on her lap.

“Yeah, he just told me to do these tests,” Feng said as he showed Minmin a stack of paper in his hands, while he was looking elsewhere. Ying took the papers and held them a few inches away from her. “Your chest still hurts?”

“A little bit,” Feng said, as his hands touched his chest and then his back. Then he looked away again, sometimes to the direction of Minmin, other times to the nurse’s station or the doctors’ offices. Xiaojian sat down as well by a row of seats in front of Feng and Ying. He turned around to face them with a smile too big and said, “It’s good there aren’t many people now.”

Then the three of them sat there in silence. Feng stood up and started to walk around, his hands behind his back. Xiaojian started a conversation about recent politics with Feng, though Xiaojian did most of the talking and Feng wasn’t really paying much attention. Ying fixed her eyes on the air in front of her as her heart went faster. She reached into her pocket for an herbal sachet she ordered from *Healthy Aging* and held it tight.

“Maybe I should have listened to the surgeon,” Feng murmured to Xiaojian, with his back facing Ying. But Ying heard him. “I should have done the surgery—”

Ying went blank. She had never felt so far away from Feng. She thought they were in this together.

“How much did we pay for the herbs again?” Feng asked Ying directly this time. But Ying didn’t know how Feng could ever forget the cost. She handed him Dr. Bian’s prescription without saying a word. Three thousand were out of pocket. Five thousand were covered by insurance. Ying would have never agreed to pay that much if the herbs had been for her. But she told herself that buying Feng a couple of extra years of life was a good deal. Feng didn’t say no either.

The more she thought about it, the more she felt like Feng was leaving her behind. Not just her, but her dad, Dr. Bian, and five thousand years of history, all of a sudden. It drove her mad. She shut her eyes tightly and heard that Feng was called away by Minmin.

While Ying was sitting there, she started to recall Xuanxuan’s visit two weeks ago. Xuanxuan was their older daughter of the two, Minmin’s sister. She left home for Shanghai ever since college and became an architect there. She only came home once every two years, until recently she started coming back on every holiday. One night, when Ying was cooking in the kitchen, she saw Xuanxuan weeping on Feng’s shoulders. The news on TV was loud, so she couldn’t hear them talking but could only see Feng fetching her a tissue from the coffee table. When Ying came out of the kitchen with her stir-fried spinach, they were sitting up straight on the sofa as if nothing had happened. It was the next day that Feng told Ying he didn’t want surgery. He said he wanted Dr. Bian’s herbs.

Ying was woken by Feng and Minmin’s footsteps. It was already six in the morning, so the light already went out and the sun was shining from outside. She saw Feng and Minmin were coming towards her—Minmin quickly in front with a frown, Feng following behind with his slow steps. Maybe Feng was right. Ying didn’t pull him away from death. She pushed him a step closer to it. But Ying found this faint smile on Feng’s face, and he was no longer distracted. He firmly looked back into Ying’s eyes when Ying looked at him.

“What did the doctor say?”

Jingyi Zhang is an undergraduate student at Dartmouth College interested in philosophy, medicine, and writing. She is passionate about end-of-life care, aging, and illness narratives across cultures.

© 2021 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*