

Ting nǐ shuō (It's Up To You)

Written by Madalyn Bussey

To: My precious flower, follow the passion your soul yearns for.

From: tai laolao

October 27, 1950

In my old age, it is difficult to bring back my childhood memories. I hardly remember my friends in the alley. My mind confuses dreams with memories. I can no longer recall the name of my favorite teacher. However, the 24th day of October, 1871 is a stain on my brain that will not be scrubbed clean until death itself consumes me. And death is not yet 2 feet behind me, ready to halt the beat of my heart. So I write this day of my past and my adulthood that follows in a journal before my time comes, for your eyes only. I hope these memories serve you with a new perspective, rather than the pain that it has served me.

My Memories of Home

I never particularly liked my clay home along Calle de los Negros. There were cracks that crawled up the walls, but ceased before reaching the ceiling. I used to look for coins hidden within those cracks, wedging my little fingers between, hoping to find something of value in this town. I had heard white folk call my area the slums (despite them coming there often), but at the time I could only guess at what the term meant. Ten year old me believed it meant old, poor, and trashy. I wasn't far off. Compared to the pristine Los Angeles stores and homes, our community was like a dirty rag forgotten and left on the floor. I wish I would have told my parents these thoughts. I wish I would have convinced them to move to the Mississippi Delta. A place far

away from our one street Chinatown in Los Angeles. A home in which they could have had a chance at a better life.

My Memories of The Evening of October 24, 1871

Although I didn't appreciate the looks of my home and the homes surrounding it, the neighboring children were lovely. We would play Hacky Sack, Jianzi as my parents called it, in the alley together, attempting to keep the ball off the ground while standing in a circle, using our feet, passing it back and forth. That is what we were doing when we heard of the dead white man.

I was in the circle with a few of my alley friends when a rush of men, one including my father, staggered towards us. Their chests were rising quickly, as if they had been in a rush. One of the men quickly grabbed a child and headed off to one of the adobes. He practically pulled my friend's shoulder out of the socket with how much force he used. It didn't appear as an aggravated grab, though, more so as an urgent one. A few of the men quickly scanned over us and moved forward, my father, however, locked eyes with me and instantly took a hold of my face. My father was not a man who shielded the worst of the world from his children, so when he explained to me that a white man had been shot by a Chinese man at the Coronel building, I promptly nodded my head and followed him into our cracked, clay home.

The Coronel building was a place booming with business. It was a popular area that drew in two kinds of people. Money hungry, gambling men who stumbled around the room to find a drink to put in their hand and a woman to hook onto their arm, or struggling, lowly men who were desperate for an income. My father was the latter. It was common for fights to break out and blood to be shed at the Coronel building. It was, in fact,

a place where the white men and Chinese interacted. And Los Angeles was known for being a deadly town, but death at the Coronel building was unheard of.

That is why as I sat in my home—tables and chairs placed against the door, family huddled together in the far corner, my tiny little fingers searching the cracks in the walls—I was taken aback by the immense force on my front door. I had heard the distant yelling, but didn't believe that the screaming men would come as close as they were. That anyone would target my household. Yet, as the banging continued, the door splintering down the center, it became clear that it was not by chance they ended up at my home, the white men were determined to get inside. When they did, I watched as my father stood in front of his family. I watched the white men laugh. I watched as my mother screamed when my father was dragged out the door.

Then I watched in horror as I walked up into the jail yard and saw my father, facedown and lifeless, among sixteen other Chinese men, young and old.

### My Memories within those Sixty-Two Long Years.

I decided after my fathers death that I wanted to become a doctor. After seeing the bodies of those who needed saving the most, it became my dream. I wanted to learn how to take a person off the brink of death. I didn't want another family to end up missing a piece like mine. I was hopeful. The want consumed my soul. How naive I was. Twelve years later my passion died along with my soul.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 only caused more discrimination towards the Chinese and Chinese American community. Although me and my sisters had been born in the states, our citizenship had been revoked. We had no power in our home country. There were only a select few Chinese Americans who were

given privileges that my family was prohibited from. Students and scholars were included in that minute group. I was neither scholar nor student, and therefore my mission to become a doctor was long-forgotten. Instead, my sisters and I worked for another family cleaning their home.

They didn't enjoy having us there. We were berated and belittled constantly. They believed that we were the reason for the low wages, that we were taking their money. Even the children believed that claim and many more. I remember the youngest child of the household, he was eight at the time, insisted that I should go back to China with my mother. He must have overheard his father scream that at my sister when she couldn't get a stain off the wallpaper, and repeated it. My mother was deported in June of 1882 when an officer approached her and she did not have a legal paper stating that she was a citizen of the country on her person, at least, that's what I was informed happened. After that incident, I kept my paper concealed on me, in case anyone attempted to approach me and tear it. Specifically the young boy within the household. He had a hatred for me that could only be taught.

Seventeen years later, at age thirty-eight, I bore my first and only child, your grandmother. I got married to a Chinese merchant man a year before. It was not a legal marriage, but it was my last desperate attempt at staying in America. By then, both of my sisters had been deported, and marrying a man of status was my only hope. I never loved him as a wife should love a husband, but we treated each other well. He wanted a family so I gave him a child. I wanted a safe place, so he gave me a home. We learned to compromise. I wasn't approached as much by officers when I had a man holding my hand. They believed I was married, so they didn't accuse me of wrongdoing. I got skeptical looks and people bumped my shoulder as they passed by, but I didn't mind. As long as I looked the part of a merchant's wife, I was content with being scrutinized when out in public.

I had never anticipated becoming a mother. I didn't have that urge to love and raise a child. I thought of myself as selfish, but now I realize that I was overwhelmed with the want to survive rather than to live. I didn't want another responsibility when surviving was already complicated enough. However, your grandmother was the only source of happiness I had. I never took her outside of the house, in fear that someone might take her from me. I taught her at the house. I told her how to avoid the white man. I told her to never speak back, how to prevent her thoughts from slipping off her tongue. I thought I was doing right by her. That I was giving her all the security and knowledge she would ever need. I acknowledge now that I was teaching her how to conform to the role society has given her.

Your grandmother lived a life similar to mine. When she died from childbirth in 1929, I raised your mother with the same standards I used to raise her mother. However, she deemed herself quite defiant. When she was approached and asked to show her paper, she would deny that she had such a thing. When the men would get angry, she would giggle and toss her crumpled paper onto the pavement. Her childlike innocence and my apologetic pleas kept her out of immense trouble. In her early teenage years, she learned to silence her mouth. However, by then the Chinese Exclusion Act had been repealed.

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I hope that you have inherited your mothers sharp tongue and malicious words. You are not yet one, and I don't believe I will live to see if you do get her traits. However, even if you do not, I write my memories of my past to give you purpose. Do not let your dreams slip by with your age because a society didn't allow for you to achieve them. Conforming to others will do you no good, it will only allow you to survive, not live. I never became a doctor. The white man gave me that dream by killing my father and took it from me by stealing my rights. I could have found a way. If I had traveled and searched for someone to teach me. If I would

have found someone willing to give me a chance. I could have been a doctor. It was not the white man who took it from me, it was my choice to conform. And I taught the generations from me to conform and do the same. Your mind will consume you, tell you to take the easiest way out. Do not listen to your mind, it tells you how to survive. It tells you to watch your father be dragged out of the house and do nothing but watch. It tells you to marry that man because it is your only source of safety. It tells you to raise your children to adapt. Do not listen to your mind, listen to your soul. It knows how to make you live.

To my Zhen Hua, others do not prevent you from your dreams if you do not allow them to.

-tai laolao