

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother



AMY CHUA

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DESIGNED BY NICOLE LAROCHE

This is a story about a mother, two daughters, and two dogs. It's also about Mozart and Mendelssohn, the piano and the violin, and how we made it to Carnegie Hall.

This was *supposed* to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones.

But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory, and how I was humbled by a thirteen-year-old.



The Chinese Mother

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it's like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I've done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A

- not be the #1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

I'm using the term "Chinese mother" loosely. I recently met a supersuccessful white guy from South Dakota (you've seen him on television), and after comparing notes we decided that his working-class father had definitely been a Chinese mother. I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish, and Ghanaian parents who qualify too. Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are *not* Chinese mothers, by choice or otherwise.

I'm also using the term "Western parents" loosely. Western parents come in all varieties. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say that Westerners are far more diverse in their parenting styles than the Chinese. Some Western parents are strict; others are lax. There are same-sex parents, Orthodox Jewish parents, single parents, ex-hippie parents, investment banker parents, and military parents. None of these "Western" parents necessarily see eye to eye, so when I use the term "Western parents," of course I'm not referring to all Western parents—just as "Chinese mother" doesn't refer to all Chinese mothers.

All the same, even when Western parents think they're being strict, they usually don't come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice their instruments thirty minutes every day. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It's hours two and three that get tough.

Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies out there showing marked and quantifiable differences between Chinese and Westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that "stressing academic success is not good for children" or that "parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun." By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be "the best" students, that "academic achievement reflects successful parenting," and that if children did not excel at school then there was "a problem" and parents "were not doing their job." Other studies indicate that compared to Western parents, Chinese parents spend approximately ten times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children. By contrast, Western kids are more likely to participate in sports teams.

This brings me to my final point. Some might think that the American sports parent is an analog to the Chinese mother. This is so wrong. Unlike your typical Western overscheduling soccer mom, the Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2) an A-minus is a bad grade; (3) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in math; (4) you must never compliment your children in public; (5) if your child ever disagrees with a teacher or coach, you must always take the side of the teacher or coach; (6) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (7) that medal must be gold.



Sophia



Sophia

Sophia is my firstborn daughter. My husband, Jed, is Jewish, and I'm Chinese, which makes our children Chinese-Jewish-American, an ethnic group that may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns.

Sophia's name in English means "wisdom," as does Si Hui, the Chinese name my mother gave her. From the moment Sophia was born, she displayed a rational temperament and exceptional

powers of concentration. She got those qualities from her father. As an infant Sophia quickly slept through the night, and cried only if it achieved a purpose. I was struggling to write a law article at the time—I was on leave from my Wall Street law firm and desperate to get a teaching job so I wouldn't have to go back—and at two months Sophia understood this. Calm and contemplative, she basically slept, ate, and watched me have writer's block until she was a year old.

Sophia was intellectually precocious, and at eighteen months she knew the alphabet. Our pediatrician denied that this was neurologically possible, insisting that she was only mimicking sounds. To prove his point, he pulled out a big tricky chart, with the alphabet disguised as snakes and unicorns. The doctor looked at the chart, then at Sophia, and back at the chart. Cunningly, he pointed to a toad wearing a nightgown and a beret.

"Q," piped Sophia.

The doctor grunted. "No coaching," he said to me.

I was relieved when we got to the last letter: a hydra with lots of red tongues flapping around, which Sophia correctly identified as "I."

Sophia excelled in nursery school, particularly in math. While the other kids were learning to count from 1 to 10 the creative American way—with rods, beads, and cones—I taught Sophia addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals the rote Chinese way. The hard part was displaying the right answer using the rods, beads, and cones.

The deal Jed and I struck when we got married was that our children would speak Mandarin Chinese and be raised Jewish. (I was brought up Catholic, but that was easy to give up.

Catholicism has barely any roots in my family, but more of that later.) In retrospect, this was a funny deal, because I myself don't speak Mandarin—my native dialect is Hokkien Chinese—and Jed is not religious in the least. But the arrangement somehow worked. I hired a Chinese nanny to speak Mandarin constantly to Sophia, and we celebrated our first Hanukkah when Sophia was two months old.

As Sophia got older, it seemed like she got the best of both cultures. She was probing and questioning, from the Jewish side. And from me, the Chinese side, she got skills—lots of skills. I don't mean inborn skills or anything like that, just skills learned the diligent, disciplined, confidence-expanding Chinese way. By the time Sophia was three, she was reading Sartre, doing simple set theory, and could write one hundred Chinese characters. (Jed's translation: She recognized the words "No Exit," could draw two overlapping circles, and okay maybe on the Chinese characters.) As I watched American parents slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks—drawing a squiggle or waving a stick—I came to see that Chinese parents have two things over their Western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children, and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much they can take.

Of course, I also wanted Sophia to benefit from the best aspects of American society. I did not want her to end up like one of those weird Asian automatons who feel so much pressure from their parents that they kill themselves after coming in second on the national civil service exam. I wanted her to be well rounded and to have hobbies and activities. Not just any activity, like "crafts," which can lead nowhere—or even worse, playing the drums, which leads to drugs—but rather a hobby that was

meaningful and highly difficult with the potential for depth and virtuosity.

And that's where the piano came in.

In 1996, when she was three, Sophia got two new things: her first piano lesson, and a little sister.



Louisa



Louisa

There's a country music song that goes, "She's a wild one with an angel's face." That's my younger daughter, Lulu. When I think of her, I think of trying to tame a feral horse. Even when she was in utero she kicked so hard it left visible imprints on my stomach. Lulu's real name is Louisa, which means "famous warrior." I'm not sure how we called that one so early.

Lulu's Chinese name is Si Shan, which means "coral" and connotes delicacy. This fits Lulu too. From the day she was born,

Lulu had a discriminating palate. She didn't like the infant formula I fed her, and she was so outraged by the soy milk alternative suggested by our pediatrician that she went on a hunger strike. But unlike Mahatma Gandhi, who was selfless and meditative while he starved himself, Lulu had colic and screamed and clawed violently for hours every night. Jed and I were in earplugs and tearing our hair out when fortunately our Chinese nanny Grace came to the rescue. She prepared a silken tofu braised in a light abalone and shiitake sauce with a cilantro garnish, which Lulu ended up quite liking.

It's hard to find the words to describe my relationship with Lulu. "All-out nuclear warfare" doesn't quite capture it. The irony is that Lulu and I are very much alike: She inherited my hot-tempered, viper-tongued, fast-forgiving personality.

Speaking of personalities, I don't believe in astrology—and I think people who do have serious problems—[View Page 88](#) Zodiac describes Sophia and Lulu *perfectly*. Sophia was born in the Year of the Monkey, and Monkey people are curious, intellectual, and "generally can accomplish any given task. They appreciate difficult or challenging work as it stimulates them." By contrast, people born in the Year of the Boar are "willful" and "obstinate" and often "fly into a rage," although they "never harbor a grudge," being fundamentally honest and warmhearted. That's Lulu exactly.

I was born in the Year of the Tiger. I don't want to boast or anything, but Tiger people are noble, fearless, powerful, authoritative, and magnetic. They're also supposed to be lucky. Beethoven and Sun Yat-sen were both Tigers.

I had my first face-off with Lulu when she was about three. It was a freezing winter afternoon in New Haven, Connecticut, one

of the coldest days of the year. Jed was at work—he was a professor at Yale Law School—and Sophia was at kindergarten. I decided that it would be a perfect time to introduce Lulu to the piano. Excited about working together—with her brown curls, round eyes, and china doll face, Lulu was deceptively cute—I put her on the piano bench, on top of some comfortable pillows. I then demonstrated how to play a single note with a single finger, evenly, three times, and asked her to do the same. A small request, but Lulu refused, preferring instead to smash at many notes at the same time with two open palms. When I asked her to stop, she smashed harder and faster. When I tried to pull her away from the piano, she began yelling, crying, and kicking furiously.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying, and kicking, and I'd had it. Dodging her blows, I dragged the screeching demon to our back porch door, and threw it open.

The wind chill was twenty degrees, and my own face hurt from just a few seconds' exposure to the icy air. But I was determined to raise an obedient Chinese child—in the West, obedience is associated with dogs and the caste system, but in Chinese culture, it is considered among the highest of virtues—if it killed me. "You can't stay in the house if you don't listen to Mommy," I said sternly. "Now, are you ready to be a good girl? Or do you want to go outside?"

Lulu stepped outside. She faced me, defiant.

A dull dread began seeping through my body. Lulu was wearing only a sweater, a ruffled skirt, and tights. She had stopped crying. Indeed, she was eerily still.

"Okay good—you've decided to behave," I said quickly. "You can come in now."

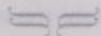
Lulu shook her head.

"Don't be silly, Lulu." I was panicking. "It's freezing. You're going to get sick. Come in now."

Lulu's teeth were chattering, but she shook her head again. And right then I saw it all, as clear as day. I had underestimated Lulu, not understood what she was made of. She would sooner freeze to death than give in.

I had to change tactics immediately; I couldn't win this one. Plus I might be locked up by Child Services. My mind racing, I reversed course, now begging, coddling, and bribing Lulu to come back into the house. When Jed and Sophia arrived home, they found Lulu contentedly soaking in a hot bath, dipping a brownie in a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

But Lulu had underestimated me too. I was just rearming. The battle lines were drawn, and she didn't even know it.



The Chuas

My last name is Chua—Cài in Mandarin—and I love it. My family comes from southern China's Fujian Province, which is famous for producing scholars and scientists. One of my direct ancestors on my father's side, Chua Wu Neng, was the royal astronomer to Emperor Shen Zong of the Ming Dynasty, as well as a philosopher and poet. Obviously wide-ranging in his skills, Wu Neng was appointed by the emperor to be the chief of military staff in 1644, when China faced a Manchu invasion. My family's most prized heirloom—in fact, our only heirloom—is a 2000-page treatise, handwritten by Wu Neng, interpreting the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, one of the oldest of the classic Chinese texts. A leather-bound copy of Wu Neng's treatise—with the character for "Chua" on the cover—now sits prominently on my living room coffee table.

All of my grandparents were born in Fujian, but at different

points in the 1920s and 1930s they boarded boats for the Philippines, where there was said to be more opportunity. My mother's father was a kind, mild-mannered schoolteacher who became a rice merchant to support his family. He was not religious and not particularly good at business. His wife, my grandmother, was a great beauty and devout Buddhist. Despite the antimaterialistic teachings of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, she always wished her husband were more successful.

My father's father, a good-natured fish-paste merchant, was also not religious and not particularly good at business. His wife, my Dragon Lady grandmother, made a fortune after World War II by going into plastics, then investing her profits in gold bars and diamonds. After she became wealthy—securing an account to produce containers for Johnson & Johnson was key—she moved into a grand hacienda in one of Manila's most prestigious neighborhoods. She and my uncles started buying up Tiffany glass, Mary Cassatts, Braques, and condos in Honolulu. They also converted to Protestantism and began using forks and spoons instead of chopsticks, to be more like Americans.

Born in China in 1936, my mother arrived in the Philippines with her family when she was two. During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, she lost her infant brother, and I'll never forget her description of Japanese soldiers holding her uncle's jaws open, forcing water down his throat, and laughing about how he was going to burst like an overfilled balloon. When General Douglas MacArthur liberated the Philippines in 1945, my mother remembers running after American jeeps, cheering wildly, as U.S. troops tossed out free cans of Spam. After the war, my mother attended a Dominican high school, where she was converted to Catholicism. She eventually graduated from the

On Generational Decline



*Newborn me and my brave parents,
two years after they arrived in America*

One of my greatest fears is family decline. There's an old Chinese saying that "prosperity can never last for three generations." I'll bet that if someone with empirical skills conducted a longitudinal survey about intergenerational performance, they'd find a remarkably common pattern among Chinese immigrants fortunate enough to have come to the United States as graduate stu-

dents or skilled workers over the last fifty years. The pattern would go something like this:

- The immigrant generation (like my parents) is the hardest-working. Many will have started off in the United States almost penniless, but they will work nonstop until they become successful engineers, scientists, doctors, academics, or businesspeople. As parents, they will be extremely strict and rabidly thrifty. ("Don't throw out those leftovers! Why are you using so much dishwasher liquid? You don't need a beauty salon—I can cut your hair even nicer.") They will invest in real estate. They will not drink much. Everything they do and earn will go toward their children's education and future.
- The next generation (mine), the first to be born in America, will typically be high-achieving. They will usually play the piano and/or violin. They will attend an Ivy League or Top Ten university. They will tend to be professionals—lawyers, doctors, bankers, television anchors—and surpass their parents in income, but that's partly because they started off with more money and because their parents invested so much in them. They will be less frugal than their parents. They will enjoy cocktails. If they are female, they will often marry a white person. Whether male or female, they will not be as strict with their children as their parents were with them.

- The next generation (Sophia and Lulu's) is the one I spend nights lying awake worrying about. Because of the hard work of their parents and grandparents, this generation will be born into the great comforts of the upper middle class. Even as children they will own many hardcover books (an almost criminal luxury from the point of view of immigrant parents). They will have wealthy friends who get paid for B-pluses. They may or may not attend private schools, but in either case they will expect expensive, brand-name clothes. Finally and most problematically, they will feel that they have individual rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and therefore be much more likely to disobey their parents and ignore career advice. In short, all factors point to this generation being headed straight for decline.

Well, not on my watch. From the moment Sophia was born and I looked into her cute and knowing face, I was determined not to let it happen to her, not to raise a soft, entitled child—not to let my family fall.

That's one of the reasons that I insisted Sophia and Lulu do classical music. I knew that I couldn't artificially make them feel like poor immigrant kids. There was no getting around the fact that we lived in a large old house, owned two decent cars, and stayed in nice hotels when we vacationed. But I *could* make sure that Sophia and Lulu were deeper and more cultivated than my parents and I were. Classical music was the opposite of decline, the opposite of laziness, vulgarity, and spoiledness. It was a way

for my children to achieve something I hadn't. But it was also a tie-in to the high cultural tradition of my ancient ancestors.

My antidecline campaign had other components too. Like my parents, I required Sophia and Lulu to be fluent in Chinese and to be straight-A students. "Always check your test answers three times," I told them. "Look up every word you don't know and memorize the exact definition." To make sure that Sophia and Lulu weren't pampered and decadent like the Romans when their empire fell, I also insisted that they do physical labor.

"When I was fourteen, I dug a swimming pool for my father by myself with a pick and shovel," I told my daughters more than once. This is actually true. The pool was only three feet deep and ten feet in diameter and came in a kit, but I really did dig it in the backyard of a cabin near Lake Tahoe that my father bought, after saving up for years. "Every Saturday morning," I also loved to harp, "I vacuumed half the house while my sister did the other half. I cleaned toilets, weeded the lawn, and chopped wood. Once I built a rock garden for my father, and I had to carry boulders that were over fifty pounds each. That's why I'm so tough."

Because I wanted them to practice as much as possible, I didn't ask my daughters to chop wood or dig a pool. But I did try to make them carry heavy objects—overflowing laundry baskets up and down stairs, garbage out on Sundays, suitcases when we traveled—as often as I could. Interestingly, Jed had the opposite instinct. It bothered him to see the girls loaded down, and he always worried about their backs.

In imparting these lessons to the girls, I'd constantly remember things my own parents had said to me. "Be modest, be hum-

ble, be simple," my mother used to chide. "The last shall come first." What she really meant of course was, "Make sure you come in first so that you have something to be humble about." One of my father's bedrock principles was, "Never complain or make excuses. If something seems unfair at school, just prove yourself by working twice as hard and being twice as good." These tenets too I tried to convey to Sophia and Lulu.

Finally, I tried to demand as much respect from the girls as my parents did of me. This is where I was least successful. Growing up, I was terrified of my parents' disapproval. Not so with Sophia and especially Lulu. America seems to convey something to kids that Chinese culture doesn't. In Chinese culture, it just wouldn't occur to children to question, disobey, or talk back to their parents. In American culture, kids in books, TV shows, and movies constantly score points with their snappy backtalk and independent streaks. Typically, it's the parents who need to be taught a life lesson—by their children.



The Virtuous Circle

Sophia's first three piano teachers were not good fits. The first, whom Sophia met when she was three, was a dour old Bulgarian woman named Elina, who lived in our neighborhood. She wore a shapeless skirt and knee-high stockings, and seemed to carry the sorrows of the world on her shoulders. Her idea of a piano lesson was to come to our house and play the piano herself for an hour, while Sophia and I sat on the couch and listened to her tortured anguish. When the first session ended, I felt like sticking my head in the oven; Sophia was playing with paper dolls. I was terrified to tell Elina it wouldn't work out, for fear that she might throw herself wailing over a parapet. So I told her we were incredibly excited about having another lesson, and that I'd contact her soon.

The next teacher we tried was a peculiar little person with short hair and round, wire-rimmed glasses named MJ, who

every day, including weekends. On lesson days, we practiced twice as long. I made Sophia memorize everything, even if it wasn't required, and I never paid her a penny. That's how we blasted through those Suzuki books. Other parents aimed for one book a year. We started off with the "Twinkle, Twinkle" variations (Book One); three months later Sophia was playing Schumann (Book Two); six months after that, she was playing a sonatina by Clementi (Book Three). And I still felt we were going too slow.

This seems like a good time to get something off my chest. The truth is, it wasn't always enjoyable for Sophia to have me as a mother. According to Sophia, here are three things I actually said to her at the piano as I supervised her practicing:

1. Oh my God, you're just getting worse and worse.
2. I'm going to count to three, then I want *musicality*!
3. If the next time's not PERFECT, I'm going to
TAKE ALL YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AND BURN THEM!

In retrospect, these coaching suggestions seem a bit extreme. On the other hand, they were highly effective. Sophia and I were a great mother-daughter fit. I had the conviction and the tunnel-vision drive. Sophia had the maturity, patience, and empathy I should have had, but didn't. She accepted my premise that I knew and wanted what was best for her—and she cut me a break when I was bad-tempered or said hurtful things.

When Sophia was nine, she won a local piano award, performing a piece called *Butterfly* by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. *Butterfly* is one of Grieg's sixty-six Lyric Pieces, which are miniature compositions, each meant to evoke a

particular mood or image. *Butterfly* is supposed to be light and carefree—and it takes hours and hours of grueling drudge-drilling to get it to sound that way.

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something—whether it's math, piano, pitching, or ballet—he or she gets praise, admiration, and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.

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At the Winners Concert where Sophia performed, as I watched her deft fingers fluttering and tumbling up and down the piano like real butterfly wings, I was overcome with pride, exhilaration, and hope. I couldn't wait for the next day, to work more with Sophia, and to learn more music together.



Tiger Luck



Jed and me on our wedding day

Like every Asian American woman in her late twenties, I had the idea of writing an epic novel about mother-daughter relationships spanning several generations, based loosely on my own family's story. This was before Sophia was born, when I was living in New York, trying to figure out what I was doing working at a Wall Street law firm.

Thank goodness I'm a lucky person, because all my life I've made important decisions for the wrong reasons. I started off as an applied mathematics major at Harvard because I thought it

would please my parents; I dropped it after my father, watching me struggling with a problem set over winter break, told me I was in over my head, saving me. But then I mechanically switched to economics because it seemed vaguely sciencelike. I wrote my senior thesis on commuting patterns of two-earner families, a subject I found so boring I could never remember what my conclusion was.

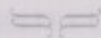
I went to law school, mainly because I didn't want to go to medical school. I did well at law school, by working psychotically hard. I even made it onto the highly competitive *Harvard Law Review*, where I met Jed and became an executive editor. But I always worried that law really wasn't my calling. I didn't care about the rights of criminals the way others did, and I froze whenever a professor called on me. I also wasn't naturally skeptical and questioning; I just wanted to write down everything the professor said and memorize it.

After graduating I went to a Wall Street law firm because it was the path of least resistance. I chose corporate practice because I didn't like litigation. I was actually decent at the job; long hours never bothered me, and I was good at understanding what the clients wanted and translating it into legal documents. But my entire three years at the firm, I always felt like I was play-acting, ridiculous in my suit. At the all-night drafting sessions with investment bankers, while everyone else was popping veins over the minutiae of some multibillion-dollar deal, I'd find my mind drifting to thoughts of dinner, and I just couldn't get myself to care about whether the sentence

Any statement contained in a document incorporated or deemed to be incorporated by reference

rejected by Jed's colleagues. This was not ideal—and it made socializing a little tricky.

But then I got another huge break. When Sophia was two, Duke Law School gave me a teaching offer. Ecstatic, I accepted the offer immediately, and we moved to Durham, North Carolina.



Lulu's Instrument

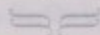


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Lulu and her first violin

I loved Duke. My colleagues were generous, kind, and smart, and we made many close friends. The only hitch was that Jed still worked at Yale, which was five hundred miles away. But we made it work, alternating some years between Durham and New Haven, with Jed doing most of the commuting.

In 2000, when Sophia was seven and Lulu was four, I got a call from New York University Law School, inviting me to visit. I hated the idea of leaving Duke, but New York was a lot closer to



The Violin

One jarring thing that many Chinese people do is openly compare their children. I never thought this was so bad when I was growing up, because I always came off well in the comparison. My Dragon Lady grandmother—the rich one, on my father's side—egregiously favored me over all my sisters. "Look how flat that one's nose is," she would cackle at family gatherings, pointing at one of my siblings. "Not like Amy, who has a fine, high-bridged nose. Amy looks like a Chua. That one takes after her mother's side of the family and looks like a monkey."

Admittedly, my grandmother was an extreme case. But Chinese people do similar things all the time. I was recently at a Chinese medicine store, and the owner told me that he had a six-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. "My daughter," he said, "she smart. Only one problem: not *focused*. My son—he not

smart. My daughter smart." Another time, my friend Kathleen was at a tennis tournament and fell into conversation with a Chinese mother who was watching her daughter play a match. The mother told Kathleen that her daughter, who was a student at Brown, was probably going to lose. "This daughter so *weak*," she said, shaking her head. "Her older sister—much better. She go to Harvard."

I know now that parental favoritism is bad and poisonous. But in defense of the Chinese, I have two points. First, parental favoritism can be found in all cultures. In Genesis, Isaac favors Esau, whereas Rebekah loves Jacob better. In the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, there are always three siblings—and they are never treated equally. Conversely, not all Chinese practice favoritism. In *The Five Chinese Brothers*, there is no indication that the mother loves the son who swallows the sea any more than the son with the iron neck.

Second, I don't believe that all parental comparisons are invidious. Jed is constantly criticizing me for comparing Sophia and Lulu. And it's true that I've said things to Lulu like, "When I tell Sophia to do something, she responds instantly. That's why she improves so fast." But Westerners misunderstand. When I say such things I'm not favoring Sophia; just the opposite, I'm expressing confidence in Lulu. I believe that she can do anything Sophia can do and that she's strong enough to handle the truth. I also know that Lulu compares herself to Sophia anyway. That's why I'm sometimes so harsh with her. I won't let her indulge her own inner doubts.

That's also why, on the morning of Lulu's first violin lesson, before she'd even met her new teacher, I said, "Remember, Lulu,



Teeth Marks and Bubbles

Chinese parents can get away with things that Western parents can't. Once when I was young—maybe more than once—when I was extremely disrespectful to my mother, my father angrily called me “garbage” in our native Hokkien dialect. It worked really well. I felt terrible and deeply ashamed of what I had done. But it didn't damage my self-esteem or anything like that. I knew exactly how highly he thought of me. I didn't actually think I was worthless or feel like a piece of garbage.

As an adult, I once did the same thing to Sophia, calling her garbage in English when she acted extremely disrespectfully toward me. When I mentioned that I had done this at a dinner party, I was immediately ostracized. One guest named Marcy got so upset she broke down in tears and had to leave early. My friend Susan, the host, tried to rehabilitate me with the remaining guests.

“Oh dear, it's just a misunderstanding. Amy was speaking metaphorically—right, Amy? You didn't actually call Sophia ‘garbage.’”

“Um, yes, I did. But it's all in the context,” I tried to explain. “It's a Chinese immigrant thing.”

“But you're not a Chinese immigrant,” somebody pointed out.

“Good point,” I conceded. “No wonder it didn't work.”

I was just trying to be conciliatory. In fact, it had worked great with Sophia.

The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable—even legally actionable—to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, “Hey fatty—lose some weight.” By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of “health” and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image. (I also once heard a Western father toast his adult daughter by calling her “beautiful and incredibly competent.” She later told me that made her feel like garbage.) Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best. Chinese parents can say, “You're lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you.” By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they're not disappointed about how their kids turned out.

I've thought long and hard about how Chinese parents can get away with what they do. I think there are three big differences between the Chinese and Western parental mind-sets.

First, I've noticed that Western parents are extremely anxious about their children's self-esteem. They worry about how their



Darkness



My little sister Katrin and me in the early eighties

When I was growing up, one of my favorite things was to play with my third sister, Katrin. Maybe because she was seven years younger than me, there was no rivalry or conflict. She was also preposterously cute. With her shiny black eyes, her shiny bowl haircut, and her rosebud lips, she was constantly attracting the attention of strangers, and once won a JCPenney photo contest that she hadn't even entered. Because my mother was often busy

with my youngest sister, Cindy, my second sister, Michelle, and I took turns taking care of Katrin.

I have great memories from those days. I was bossy and confident, and Katrin idolized her big sister, so it was a perfect fit. I made up games and stories, and taught her how to play jacks and Chinese hopscotch and how to jump rope double Dutch. We played restaurant; I was the chef and the waiter, and she was the customer. We played school; I was the teacher, and she, along with five stuffed animals, was my student (Katrin excelled at my courses). I held McDonald's carnivals to raise money for muscular dystrophy; she manned the booths and collected money.

Thirty-five years later, Katrin and I were still close. The two of us were the most alike of the four sisters, at least on the surface. She and I both had two Harvard degrees (actually, she had three, because of her M.D./Ph.D.), we both married Jewish men, we both went into academics like our father, and we both had two children.

A few months before Lulu chopped off her hair, I got a call from Katrin, who taught and ran a lab out at Stanford. It was the worst call I have ever received in my life.

She was sobbing. She told me that she had been diagnosed with a rare, almost certainly fatal leukemia.

Impossible, I thought confusedly. Leukemia striking my family—my lucky family—for a second time?

But it was true. Katrin had been feeling exhausted, nauseated, and short of breath for several months. When she finally saw a doctor, the results of the blood tests were unmistakable. In a cruel coincidence, the leukemia she had was caused by the very kind of cell mutation she was studying in her lab.

"I'm probably not going to live very long," she said, crying. "What's going to happen to Jake? And Ella won't even know me." Katrin's son was ten, her daughter barely one. "You have to make sure she knows who I was. You have to promise me, Amy. I better get some pictures—" And she broke off.

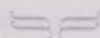
I was in shock. I just couldn't believe it. An image of Katrin at ten flashed into my head, and it was impossible to put that together with the word *leukemia*. How could this be happening to Katrin—Katrin? And my parents! How could they take this—it would kill them.

"Exactly what did the doctors say, Katrin?" I heard myself asking in a strangely confident voice. I had snapped into my big-sister, can-do, invulnerable mode.

But Katrin didn't answer. She said she had to get off the phone and would call me again.

Ten minutes later, I got an e-mail from her. It said: "Amy, it's really really bad. Sorry! I'll need chemotherapy then bone marrow transplant if possible, then more chemo, and low chance of survival."

Being a scientist, she of course was right.



Rebellion, Part 2

I took Lulu to a salon the day after she cut her hair. We didn't speak much in the car. I was tense and had a lot on my mind.

"What happened?" the hairdresser asked.

"She cut it," I explained. I had nothing to hide. "Is there anything you can do to make it look better while it grows out?"

"Wow—you did a real job on yourself, honey," the woman said to Lulu, eyeing her curiously. "What made you do this?"

"Oh, it was an act of adolescent self-destruction aimed primarily at my mother," I thought Lulu might say. She certainly had the vocabulary and the psychological self-awareness to do so.

But instead, Lulu said in a pleasant voice, "I was trying to layer it. But I really messed up."

Later, back home, I said, "Lulu, you know that Mommy loves you, and everything I do, I do for you, for your future."

My own voice sounded artificial to me, and Lulu must have

thought so too, because her response was, "That's great," in a flat, apathetic tone.

Jed's fiftieth birthday came up. I organized a huge surprise party, inviting old friends from his childhood and every part of his life. I asked everyone to bring a funny story about Jed. Weeks in advance, I asked Sophia and Lulu each to write her own toast.

"It can't just be tossed off," I ordered. "It has to be meaningful. And it can't be clichéd."

Sophia got right on it. As usual, she didn't consult me or ask my advice on a single word. By contrast, Lulu said, "I don't want to give a toast."

"You *have* to give a toast," I replied.

"No one my age gives toasts," Lulu said.

"That's because they're from bad families," I retorted.

"Do you know how crazy you sound?" Lulu asked. "They're not from 'bad' families. What's a 'bad' family?"

"Lulu, you are so ungrateful. When I was your age, I worked nonstop. I built a treehouse for my sisters because my father asked me to. I obeyed everything he said, and that's why I know how to use a chainsaw. I also built a hummingbird house. I was a newspaper carrier for the *El Cerrito Journal* and had to wear a huge fifty-pound pouch over my head stuffed with papers and walk five miles. And look at you—you've been given every opportunity, every privilege. You've never had to wear imitation Adidas with four stripes instead of three. And you can't even do this one tiny thing for Daddy. It's disgusting."

"I don't want to give a toast," was Lulu's response.

I pulled out the big guns. I threatened everything I could think of. I bribed her. I tried to inspire her. I tried to shame her. I of-

fered to help her write it. I jacked up the stakes and gave her an ultimatum, knowing it was a pivotal battle.

When the party came, Sophia delivered a minimasterpiece. At sixteen, standing 5' 8" in her heels, she had become a stunning girl with a sly wit. In her toast, she captured her father perfectly, gently poking fun but ultimately lionizing him. Afterward, my friend Alexis came up to me. "Sophia is just unbelievable."

I nodded. "She gave a great toast."

"Absolutely . . . but that's not what I meant," said Alexis. "I don't know if people really get Sophia. She's totally her own person. Yet she always manages to do your family proud. And that Lulu is just adorable."

I hadn't found Lulu adorable at all. During Sophia's toast, Lulu stood next to her sister, smiling affably. But she had written nothing, and she refused to say a single word.

I had lost. It was the first time. Through all the turbulence and warfare in our household, I'd never lost before, at least not on something important.

This act of defiance and disrespect infuriated me. My anger simmered for a while, then I unleashed my full wrath. "You've dishonored this family—and yourself," I said to Lulu. "You're going to have to live with your mistake for the rest of your life."

Lulu snapped back, "You're a show-off. It's all about you. You already have one daughter who does everything you want. Why do you need me?"

There was now a wall between us. In the old days, we'd fight ferociously but always make up. We'd end up snuggling in her bed or mine, hugging each other, giggling as we imitated ourselves arguing. I'd say things totally inappropriate for a parent,

sweet sixteens. The truth is that Lulu has a strong Jewish identity. Unlike Sophia (or for that matter, Jed), Lulu had always insisted on observing Passover rules and fasting on Yom Kippur. For her, even more than for Sophia, the Bat Mitzvah was an important event in her life, and she threw herself with a passion into learning her Hebrew Torah and haftarah portions.

I wouldn't take the bait. "If you don't play the violin," I said calmly, "then Daddy and I won't throw you a party. We can just have a small ceremony—it's the ritual that's important, after all."

"You have no right!" Lulu said furiously. "That's so unfair. You didn't make Sophia play the piano at her Bat Mitzvah."

"It's good for you to do something that Sophia didn't," I said.

"You're not even Jewish," Lulu retorted. "You don't know what you're talking about. This has nothing to do with you."

Six weeks before the date, I sent out Lulu's invitations. But I warned her, "If you don't play the 'Hebrew Melody,' I'll cancel the party."

"You can't do that," Lulu said scornfully.

"Why don't you try me, Lulu?" I dared her. "See if I'll do it or not."

I honestly didn't know who'd win this one. It was a high-risk maneuver too, because I didn't have an exit strategy if I lost.

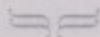


Katrin

The news about Katrin's cancer was unbearable for my parents. Two of the strongest people I know, they simply crumpled in grief. My mother cried all the time and wouldn't even talk to Sophia or respond to calls from friends. She wouldn't even talk to Sophia and Lulu on the phone. My father kept calling me, his voice anguished, asking me—over and over—if there was any hope.

For treatment, Katrin chose the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center in Boston. We'd learned that it was one of the best bone marrow transplant facilities in the country. Harvard was also where Katrin and her husband, Or, had studied and trained, and she still knew people there.

Everything happened so fast. Just three days after getting her diagnosis, Katrin and Or locked up their house at Stanford and moved their entire household to Boston (Katrin refused even to consider leaving her children behind in California with their



The Ending



Lulu on court

We recently hosted a formal dinner at our home for judges from all over the world. One of the most humbling things about being a Yale law professor is that you get to meet some awe-inspiring figures—some of the greatest jurists of the day. For ten years now, Yale's global constitutionalism seminar has brought in supreme court justices from dozens of countries, including the United States.

For entertainment, we invited Sophia's piano professor, Wei-

Yi Yang, to perform part of the program he was preparing for Yale's famous Horowitz Piano Series. Wei-Yi generously suggested that his young pupil Sophia perform as well. For fun, teacher and student could also play a duet together: "En Batteau" from Debussy's *Petite Suite*.

I was incredibly excited and nervous about the idea and nurturingly said to Sophia, "Don't blow this. Everything turns on your performance. The justices aren't coming to New Haven to hear a high school talent show. If you're not over-the-top perfect we'll have insulted them. Now go to the piano and don't leave it." I guess there's still a bit of the Chinese mother in me.

The next few weeks were like a replay of the run-up to Carnegie Hall, except that now Sophia did almost all her practicing herself. As in the past, I immersed myself in her pieces—Saint-Saëns's *Allegro Appassionato* and a polonaise and *Fantaisie Impromptu* by Chopin—but the truth was that Sophia barely needed me anymore. She knew exactly what she had to do, and only occasionally would I yell out a critique from the kitchen or upstairs. Meanwhile, Jed and I had all our living room furniture moved out except the piano. I scrubbed the floor myself, and we rented chairs for fifty people.

The evening of the performance Sophia wore a red dress, and as she walked in to take her opening bow, panic seized me. I was practically frozen during the polonaise. I couldn't enjoy the Saint-Saëns either, even though Sophia played it brilliantly. That piece is meant to be sheer virtuosic entertainment, and I was too tense to be entertained. Could Sophia keep her runs sparkling and clean? Had she overpracticed, and would her hands give out? I had to force myself not to rock and back forth and hum robotically, which is what I usually do when the girls perform a difficult piece.

But when Sophia played her last piece, Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu*, everything changed. For some reason, the tension in me dissipated, the lockjaw released, and all I could think was, She owns this piece. When she got up to take her bow, a radiant smile on her face, I thought, That's my girl—she's happy; the music is making her happy. Right then I knew that it had all been worth it.

Sophia received three ovations, and afterward the justices—including many I've idolized for years—were effusive in their praise. One said Sophia's playing was sublime and that he could have listened to her all night. Another insisted that she had to pursue the piano professionally because it would be a crime to waste her talent. And a surprising number of the justices, being parents themselves, asked me personal questions like, "What is your secret? Do you think it's something about the Asian family culture that tends to produce so many exceptional musicians?" Or: "Tell me: Does Sophia practice on her own because she loves music or do you have to force her? I could never make my own children practice more than fifteen minutes." And: "How about your other daughter? I hear she's a fabulous violinist. Will we hear her next time?"

I told them that I was struggling to finish a book on just those questions and that I would send them a copy when it was done.

Around the same time as Sophia's performance for the justices, I picked Lulu up from some godforsaken tennis place in Connecticut about an hour away.

"Guess what, Mommy—I won!"

"Won what?" I asked.

"The tournament," Lulu said.

"What does that mean?"

"I won three matches, and I beat the top seed in the finals. She was ranked #60 in New England. I can't believe I beat her!"

This took me aback. I'd played tennis as a teenager myself, but always just for fun with my family or school friends. As an adult, I tried a few tournaments but quickly found that I couldn't stand the pressure of competition. Mainly so we could have a family activity, Jed and I had made both Sophia and Lulu take tennis lessons, but we'd never had any hopes.

"Are you still playing at the Novice level?" I asked Lulu. "The lowest level?"

"Yes," she answered amiably. Ever since I'd given her the choice, we'd gotten along much better. My pain seemed to be her gain, and she was more patient and good-humored. "But I'm going to try the next level soon. I'm sure I'll lose, but I want to try it for fun."

And then, out of the blue: "I miss orchestra so much," Lulu said.

Over the next six weeks, Lulu won three more tournaments. At the last two, I went to watch her play. I was struck by what a fireball she was on the court: how fiercely she hit, how concentrated she looked, and how she never gave up.

As Lulu notched herself up, the competition got much tougher. At one tournament, she lost to a girl twice her size. When Lulu came off the court, she was smiling and gracious, but the second she got in the car she said to me, "I'm going to beat her next time. I'm not good enough yet—but soon." Then she asked me if I could sign her up for extra tennis lessons.

At the next lesson, I watched Lulu drill her backhand with a

focus and tenacity I'd never seen in her. Afterward, she asked me if I would feed her more balls so that she could keep practicing, and we went for another hour. On the way home, when I told her how much better her backhand looked, she said, "No, it's not right yet. It's still terrible. Can we get a court tomorrow?"

She's so driven, I thought to myself. So . . . intense.

I talked to Lulu's tennis instructor. "There's no way Lulu can ever be really good, right? I mean, she's thirteen—that's got to be ten years too late." I'd heard about the explosion of high-powered tennis academies and four-year-olds with personal trainers. "Also, she's so short, like me."

"The important thing is that Lulu loves tennis," the instructor said, very American-ly. "And she has an unbelievable work ethic—I've never seen anyone improve so fast. She's a great kid. You and your husband have done an amazing job with her. She never settles for less than 110 percent. And she's always so upbeat and polite."

"You've got to be kidding," I said. But despite myself, my spirits lifted. Could this be the Chinese virtuous circle in action? Had I perhaps just chosen the wrong activity for Lulu? Tennis was very respectable—it wasn't like bowling. Michael Chang had played tennis.

I started to gear up. I familiarized myself with the USTA rules and procedures and the national ranking system. I also looked into trainers and started calling around about the best tennis clinics in the area.

Lulu overheard me one day. "What are you doing?" she demanded. When I explained that I was just doing a little research, she suddenly got furious. "No, Mommy—*no!*" she said fiercely. "Don't wreck tennis for me like you wrecked violin."

That really hurt. I backed off.

The next day I tried again. "Lulu, there's a place in Massachusetts—"

"No, Mommy—please stop," Lulu said. "I can do this on my own. I don't need you to be involved."

"Lulu, what we need to do is to channel your strength—"

"Mommy, I *get it*. I've watched you and listened to your lectures a million times. But I don't want you controlling my life."

I focused my eyes on Lulu, taking her in. Everyone had always said she looked just like me, something that I loved to hear but that she vehemently denied. An image of her at age three standing outside, defiant in the cold, came to my mind. She's indomitable, I thought to myself, and always has been. Wherever she ends up, she's going to be amazing.

"Okay, Lulu, I can accept that," I said. "See how undefensive and flexible I am? To succeed in this world, you always have to be willing to adapt. That's something I'm especially good at that you should learn from me."

But I didn't really give up. I'm still in the fight, albeit with some significant modifications to my strategy. I've become newly accepting and open-minded. The other day Lulu told me she would have even less time for violin because she wanted to pursue other interests, like writing and "improv." Instead of choking, I was supportive and proactive. I'm taking the long view. Lulu can do side-splitting imitations, and while improv does seem un-Chinese and the opposite of classical music, it is definitely a skill. I also harbor hopes that Lulu won't be able to escape her love of music and that someday—maybe soon—she'll return to the violin of her own accord.

Meanwhile, every weekend, I drive Lulu to tennis tourna-

ments and watch her play. She recently made the high school varsity team, the only middle school kid to do so. Because Lulu has insisted that she wants no advice or criticism from me, I've resorted to espionage and guerrilla warfare. I secretly plant ideas in her tennis coach's head, texting her with questions and practice strategies, then deleting the text messages so Lulu won't see them. Sometimes, when Lulu's least expecting it—at breakfast or when I'm saying good night—I'll suddenly yell out, "More rotation on the swing volley!" or "Don't move your right foot on your kick serve!" And Lulu will plug her ears, and we'll fight, but I'll have gotten my message out, and I know she knows I'm right.

Coda



Our family, 2010

Tigers are passionate and rash, blinding themselves to danger. But they draw on experience, gaining new energies and great strength.

I started writing this book on June 29, 2009, the day after we got back from Russia. I didn't know why I was doing it or how the book was going to end, but even though I usually have writer's block, this time the words streamed out of me. The first two-thirds of the book took me just eight weeks to write. (The

last third was agonizing.) I showed every page to Jed and the girls. "We're writing this together," I said to Sophia and Lulu.

"No, we're not," they both said. "It's your book, Mommy, not ours."

"I'm sure it's all about you anyway," added Lulu.

But as time went on, the more the girls read, the more they contributed. The truth is, it's been therapeutic—a Western concept, the girls remind me.

I'd forgotten a lot of things over the years, good and bad, which the girls and Jed helped me remember. To try to piece things together, I dug up old e-mails, computer files, music programs, and photo albums. Often, Jed and I were overcome with nostalgia. Sophia was just a baby yesterday, it seemed, and now she was a year away from applying to college. Sophia and Lulu were mainly overcome with how cute they used to be.

Don't get me wrong: Writing this book hasn't been easy. Nothing in our family ever is. I had to produce multiple drafts, revising constantly to address the girls' objections. I ended up leaving out big chunks about Jed, because that's a whole other book, and it's really his story to tell. Some parts I had to rewrite two dozen times before I could satisfy both Sophia and Lulu. On several occasions, one of them would be reading a draft chapter, then suddenly burst into tears and storm off. Or I'd get a curt, "This is great, Ma, very funny. I just don't know who you're writing about, that's all. It's definitely not *our* family."

"Oh no!" Lulu cried out once. "Am I supposed to be Pushkin, the dumb one? And Sophia is Coco, who's smart and learns everything?" I pointed out that Coco wasn't smart and couldn't learn anything either. I assured the girls that the dogs weren't supposed to be metaphors for them.

"So what purpose are they serving?" Sophia asked, ever logical. "Why are they in the book?"

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "But I know they're important. There's something inherently unstable about a Chinese mother raising dogs."

Another time, Lulu complained, "I think you're exaggerating the difference between Sophia and me to try to make the book interesting. You make me sound like a typical rebellious American teenager, when I'm not even close." Sophia, meanwhile, had just said, "I think you tone down Lulu too much. You make her sound like an angel."

Naturally, both girls felt the book shortchanged them. "You should definitely dedicate this book to Lulu," Sophia once said magnanimously. "She's obviously the heroine. I'm the boring one readers will cheer against. She's the one with *verve* and *panache*." And from Lulu: "Maybe you should call your book *The Perfect Child and the Flesh-Eating Devil*. Or *Why Oldest Children Are Better*. That's what it's about, right?"

As the summer went on, the girls never stopped nagging me, "So how's the book going to end, Mommy? Is it going to be a happy ending?"

I'd always say something like, "It depends on you guys. But I'm guessing it'll be a tragedy."

Months passed, but I just couldn't figure out how to end the book. Once, I came running up to the girls. "I've got it! I'm about to finish the book."

The girls were excited. "So how will it end?" Sophia asked. "What's your point going to be?"

"I've decided to favor a hybrid approach," I said. "The best of both worlds. The Chinese way until the child is eighteen, to de-

velop confidence and the value of excellence, then the Western way after that. Every individual has to find their own path," I added gallantly.

"Wait—until eighteen?" asked Sophia. "That's not a hybrid approach. That's just Chinese parenting all through childhood."

"I think you're being too technical, Sophia."

Nevertheless, I went back to the drawing board. I spun more wheels, cranked out some more duds. Finally, one day—actually yesterday—I asked the girls how *they* thought the book should end.

"Well," said Sophia, "are you trying to tell the truth in this book or just a good story?"

"The truth," I replied.

"That's going to be hard, because the truth keeps changing," said Sophia.

"No it doesn't," I said. "I have a perfect memory."

"Then why do you keep revising the ending all the time?" asked Sophia.

"Because she doesn't know what she wants to say," Lulu offered.

"It's not possible for you to tell the complete truth," said Sophia. "You've left out so many facts. But that means no one can really understand. For example, everyone's going to think that I was *subjected* to Chinese parenting, but I wasn't. I went along with it, by my own choice."

"Not when you were little," Lulu said. "Mommy never gave us a choice when we were little. Unless it was, 'Do you want to practice six hours or five?'"

"Choice . . . I wonder if that's what it all comes down to," I

mused. "Westerners believe in choice; the Chinese don't. I used to make fun of Popo for giving Daddy a choice about violin lessons. Of course he chose not to. But now, Lulu, I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't forced you to audition for Juilliard or practice so many hours a day. Who knows? Maybe you'd still like violin. Or what if I'd let you choose your own instrument? Or no instrument? After all, Daddy turned out fine."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Lulu. "Of course I'm glad you forced me to play the violin."

"Oh, *right*. Hello Dr. Jekyll! Where's Mr. Hyde?"

"No—I mean it," Lulu said. "I'm always going to love the violin. I'm even glad you made me drill exponents. And study Chinese for two hours every day."

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Yeah," nodded Lulu.

"Really!" I said. "Because come to think of it, I think those were great choices we made too, even though all those people worried that you and Sophia would be permanently damaged psychologically. And you know, the more I think about it, the madder I'm getting. All these Western parents with the same party line about what's good for children and what's not—I'm not sure they're making choices at all. They just do what everyone else does. They're not questioning anything either, which is what Westerners are supposed to be so good at doing. They just keep repeating things like 'You have to give your children the freedom to pursue their *passion*' when it's obvious that the 'passion' is just going to turn out to be Facebook for ten hours which is a total waste of time and eating all that disgusting junk food—I'm telling you this country is going to go *straight down-*

hill! No wonder Western parents get thrown into nursing homes when they're old! You guys better not put me in one of those. And I don't want my plug pulled either."

"Calm down, Mommy," said Lulu.

"When their kids fail at something, instead of telling them to work harder, the first thing Western parents do is bring a lawsuit!"

"Who exactly are you talking about?" asked Sophia. "I don't know any Western parents who have brought a lawsuit."

"I refuse to buckle to politically correct Western social norms that are obviously stupid. And not even rooted historically. What are the origins of the Playdate anyway? Do you think our Founding Fathers had Sleepovers? I actually think America's Founding Fathers had Chinese values."

"I hate to break it to you, Mommy, but—"

"Ben Franklin said, 'If thou loveth life, never ever EVER wasteth time.' Thomas Jefferson said, 'I'm a huge believer in luck, and the harder I work the more I have of it.' And Alexander Hamilton said, 'Don't be a whiner.' That's a totally Chinese way of thinking."

"Mommy, if the Founding Fathers thought that way, then it's an American way of thinking," said Sophia. "Besides, I think you may be misquoting."

"Look it up," I dared her.

My sister Katrin is doing better now. Life is definitely tough for her, and she's not out of the woods yet, but she's a hero and bears everything with grace, doing research around the clock, writ-

ing paper after paper, and spending as much time as she can with her kids.

I often wonder what the lesson of her illness is. Given that life is so short and so fragile, surely each of us should be trying to get the most out of every breath, every fleeting moment. But what does it mean to live life to its fullest?

We all have to die. But which way does that cut? In any case, I've just told Jed that I want to get another dog.