

Amy Tan

My mother has Alzheimer's disease. Often her thoughts reach back like the winter tide, exposing the wreckage of former shore. Often she's mired in 1968, the year my older brother and father died. This was also the year she took me and my younger brother across an ocean to Switzerland, a place so preposterously different that she knew she had to give up grieving simply to survive. That year, she remembers, she was very, very sad. I too remember. I was sixteen then, and I recall a late-night hour when my mother and I were arguing in a chalet that tinder box of emotions where we lived.

She had pushed me into the small bedroom we shared, and as she slapped me about the head, I backed into a corner, to a room that looked out upon the lake, the Alps, the beautiful outside world. My mother was furious because I had a boyfriend. She said he was a drug addict, a bad man who would use me for sex and throw me away like leftover garbage. "Stop seeing him!" she ordered. I shook my head. The more she beat me, the more implacable I became, and this in turn fueled her outrage. "You didn't love your daddy or Peter! When they die you not even sad." I kept my face to the window, unmoved. What does she know about sad? She sobbed and beat her chest. "I'd rather kill myself first than see you destroy your life!" Suicide. How many times had she threatened that before? "I wish you the one die! Not Peter, not Daddy." She had just confirmed what I had always suspected. Now she flew at me with her fists. "I rather kill you! I rather see you die!" And then perhaps horrified by what she has just said, she fled the room.

Thank God that was over. Suddenly she was back. She slammed shut the door, latched it, then locked it with a key. I saw the flash of a meat cleaver just before she pushed me to the wall and brought the blade's edge to within an inch from my throat. Her eyes were like a wild animal's, shiny, fixated on the kill. In an excited voice she said she was going to kill me first, then my younger brother, then herself, the whole family destroyed. She smiled, her chest heaving, as she asked me, "Why don't you cry?" She pressed the blade closer and I could feel her breath gusting on my face as she ranted, hoarse and incoherent. Was she bluffing? I wasn't afraid. If she did kill me, so what? Who would care? While she rambled, a voice within me was whimpering, "This is sad, this so sad."

For ten minutes, fifteen, who knows how long, I perched between these two thoughts – that it didn't matter if I died, that it would be eternally sad if I did – until all at once I felt a snap, then a rush of hope into a vacuum, and I was crying, and the I confessed, "I want to live. Please let me live."

Since that day I've wondered if my mother really meant to kill me. I needed to know, yet I couldn't ask. Not until now. Now she remembers me differently. Now she recalls that I was a good girl, so good she never had to spank me, not once that she can recall.