



THE THIRD SON



Listening to Dad: A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



Listening to Dad

A Note from the Author

I was thirty-five and expecting my own child by the time I listened—truly listened—to my father. I had been trying to write a Taiwan-based novel and could not, despite years of effort, make it work. I needed to interview him.

He greeted me at his door with his usual kiss on the cheek.

“So, where do you want me to start?” my father joked as I set up my tape recorder. “When I was a baby?”

I laughed, almost convinced to dismiss his childhood entirely. But I said, “Yes.”

He leaned his head back in his recliner and the smile dropped from his lips. His jaw, square and handsome as any Hong Kong movie star’s, set so a muscle bulged in front of his ear. Beside him were shelves filled with our old books and board games, and behind him, picture windows showcasing the lush New England landscape, the pine trees tiered in shades of green.

He stared straight ahead, his voice gravelly. “My memories of my childhood,” he said, “are not exactly happy.”

THE BEATINGS SHOULD not have surprised me. My parents, especially my mother, had always implied that my father had not been loved as a child.

But I had never known the details. For a sixth-grade biography assignment, I had inscribed his birth date in my composition book, followed by his schools, his immigration to America. “Junior college in Taiwan,” he said. “And then PhD in America. Not so easy.”

“Your father’s a remarkable man,” my sixth grade teacher said, handing back my composition book, and I looked up at her in wonder. My father was an electrical engineer who was home every day at 5:16 p.m. He liked bad puns and dozed through all my orchestra performances. The one way he differed from my friends’ dads was his knowledge of, seemingly, everything. One summer he single-handedly poured the concrete foundation for an attached storage room, then topped the room with a deck, complete with built-in benches and room for a picnic table, grill, and bug-zapper.

We did not always see eye to eye. After college, instead of applying to medical schools, I applied to opera performance programs. My father declared that artists were parasites of society.

“All Chinese parents just want their children to be doctors!” I said.

“That’s not true!” he said. “I didn’t want it for your sister and brother. Only you.”

And yet it was during that nadir in our relationship—as I sat at the worn formica counter in my parents’ kitchen—that an image came to my mind of a lonely, unhappy little boy on the floor of his parents’ house in Taiwan. The image was so vivid that I rushed to write it down, to describe the dark floorboards, musty and worn, and the sandalwood-scented dust. I didn’t know where the image came from. But suddenly, I knew what it was to write.

I started a novel about that boy. I planned a masterwork of high drama, of romance and pathos and sociological importance. I wanted a hero slaying a dragon. I absolutely did not want to write a book about my bourgeois mom and dad.

But I needed background on Taiwanese customs. I jotted down some questions and called my parents from Bloomington, Indiana. Their answers shocked me.

“I never told you I had a brother who died—”

My great grandfather had sold my grandmother for complaining too much. My uncle picked up a bag of family money at the bank and found it transformed into foil-wrapped chocolate. My mind reeled. How boring and small my novel now seemed. I stopped asking questions and abandoned the book entirely.

I also left Indiana and went to medical school. I needed to experience more of life.

“MY MOTHER WOULD hide behind the door,” my father said, continuing in his gravelly voice. “Before I got to the door, I already knew what’s coming, what to expect,” he said. “I don’t recall I ever lucked out.”

My own mother was cooking dinner in the kitchen, and as the savory smells of ginger and cloves wafted downstairs, my father continued staring ahead, telling me that he had, in one of the town’s wealthiest households, become malnourished enough to require medical treatment for a year.

It was my mother, he told me, who had been the first to believe in him, to get him to believe in himself. If not for her, he would never have come to America.

AT HOME, I played back the recording of the interview. The microphone, to my horror, had been inadequate and I had to turn the volume all the way up on my stereo. I typed it all out right away, before I could forget it.

I never had a role model. What a father was supposed to be like with a child and so forth . . .

I did have a role model. What a miracle that was.

I had my book. And through the years, my book became that

novel of drama, romance, and pathos that I always wanted to write. I changed many facts—major ones—to increase the unity and drama of the story. But the emotional journey remains my father's.

I can't help thinking that my image of the sad little boy on that musty floor was my father. Perhaps, when our relationship was at its most strained, my mind intuited why and suggested a means—writing—for us to stay close. I had taken the image of the boy and tried to wrest it into telling my story. I had to grow up to let the boy tell his own story and to find out that he was, in fact, the hero I was always looking for. Because being home for dinner can be an act of grace. And a kiss at the door can be, for some, a feat braver than the slaying of any kind of dragon.

Questions for Discussion

1. Martial law in Taiwan was not lifted until 1987, and the first non-Nationalist president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-Ban, was elected in 2000. At the time of *The Third Son*, the history of Taiwan had been one of successive subjugation by one outside force after another. How does this historical context shape Saburo, his family members, and their relationships with one another?
2. When *The Third Son* opens, an American fighter pilot tries to kill Saburo. How does Saburo's conception of America change over the course of the novel?
3. Saburo saves Yoshiko's life more than once. In what ways does she save his?
4. Yoshiko's father is also the third son in his family. How is his life's journey similar to Saburo's? How and why does his outcome differ from Saburo's?
5. Saburo arrives in America expecting freedom. In what ways is he still encumbered? What must he do to gain his true freedom?

6. Some of Saburo's character traits get him in trouble in Taiwan, but are advantageous in America. What are these traits, and how do they reflect the different societies?
7. Yoshiko has a very strong will to survive. How does this develop? In what ways does her role as a woman in Taiwanese society thwart her? How does she maneuver within that role to ensure her survival? Does she ever get in her own way?
8. As a child, Saburo often contemplates the sky. How does his relationship with the natural world represent his personal growth?
9. Professor Chen characterizes both Saburo and Toru as being aware of convention, but burdened by it. What does he mean by that? Are there examples in the book of people who are not aware of convention despite being burdened by it, or people who are aware of convention and are not burdened by it?
10. Professor Chen denigrates Saburo's reverence for Japan. Why might Saburo have developed an idealized view of Japan, Taiwan's previous occupier?
11. Saburo says: "In an oppressed society, there are three main means of survival. There is the farmer's way, plowing on as he has for centuries, his hat shadowing his face. There is my father's method, of opportunism. And then there are those who cannot or will not accept things as they are . . . they must either speak up or leave and seek freedom elsewhere" (page 99). Do you agree? How do the various characters in the book illustrate these modes of survival? Which mode do you think you would adopt in an oppressed society?

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