

## FEATURE

# Narcissus from Afar

By Catherine Li

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The lunar New Year is only a couple of weeks away. And in the Chinese markets of southern California, plump narcissus bulbs are on sale. Whenever I see these bulbs, they bring to mind the tiny fragrant blooms flowering in the middle of winter. They are the harbinger of spring and the symbol of my happy childhood when Father was alive.

Although Father was Americanized, he rarely verbalized that he loved me, but carried me whenever I was too tired and told me funny stories that he laughed heartily. In the second grade, Father put my hair in a ponytail before driving me to school. On Sunday mornings, I would cut out coupons from the newspaper and after marketing shared the proceeds with Father. On our father-daughter day, Father took me on special trips, perhaps to see the stars at dawn in the bitter cold of the desert.

Narcissus also reminds me of that winter when Nainai, Grandmother, carried by the warmth of the political wind in China arrived to visit us in southern California when the pale rays of the sun shone above. Nainai came bearing bundles large and small, the best from Shanghai, for her extended family.

The last time that Father had seen Nainai was when he was a toddler. Nainai, a recent widow at the time, had taken Father to visit her uncle-in-law. That visit changed Father's fate forever. As a result, mother and son were separated. And Nainai never suspected that once they parted, it would be over forty years before she saw Father again. From then on, the Pacific Ocean and the barrier of a different language and culture separated Father and Nainai. While Nainai spoke only Chinese, Father spoke English.



At an early age, Father became self-reliant and learned not to cry. He put his heart and soul in excelling for that was how he perceived an immigrant could find a niche in the New World.

Under the glow of a kitchen light, while Nainai taught me how to make dough, Father watched silently nearby. Afterwards, every few minutes she left the kitchen to bring a different gift for every member of the family as though to make up for all the times she could not be with Father while he was growing up.

The next morning, Nainai brought out plump white bulbs sheathed in brown. As she scored them, she said with tears in her eyes that they were a product from the family native town, superior to those found in Shanghai. Since Father could not return to China, Nainai had brought

them across the ocean so that Father could become familiar with his roots.

From then on every evening, Father would silently concentrate on putting together a jigsaw puzzle of a thousand pieces on the kitchen table to reconcile the turmoil seething behind his gentle demeanor. Until deep into the night, Father would hunch over the small pieces, but he could not put the puzzle back together again. He would be lost in this chore until

Nainai left as quietly as she came.

Father never saw Nainai again; for the following year, he died in the prime of his life.

Though he was not able to partake the love of his mother, his love for me was without bound.