

ART IN MEDICINE

Home Visit

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“Sip the tea slowly.” Mother never neglected the customs she brought from mainland China. She still prepared for the afternoon tea with diligent precision. The moment was necessary. Tea leaves rise in the hot water, and a green tail swirls as I blow off the steam. In the rising vapor, ghosts dance before my eyes. Children at play. I hear my own voice begging my mother to hold me.

I was a frail boy. For much of my childhood I hung to the hem of her dress. The intestinal cramps were crippling. In the middle of the night, when my belly ached, she would serve a painfully bitter mixture of herbs that discouraged my pretention of sickness. On one occasion, I remembered seeing little beetles floating on the water, some not yet dead from the boiling. I ran to get a spoon and tell mother that she had bought buggy tea. Indeed she had. She proudly stated the bugs were an added bonus—she did not have to pay for them this time. She said something about their power as a stimulant. Visually at least, I had to agree with her. She then would rub me to sleep. I do not recall the words of the lullabies, but I do remember the whining sound. The kind of sound an animal might make for its wounded offspring. I was to learn later that they were old Chinese folk songs. Under this tender surveillance, I gradually gained the strength to be independent. The distance has widened, but the bond remains. She has not forgotten my frailty. Still on rainy days, I find warnings for additional clothing on my answering machine.

I tell my mother that the tea is just right. Not too weak. Not too dark. The aroma is pleasant and mellow. She raises her cup to her lips. This one is for the very worst cold of your life, she says. Mother has always been the first to brag about her son, the doctor. But she has never asked for my advice. This is a foreign science, she claims, for white folks. Herbs work best for her.

One time we talked about her diabetes. We reviewed how the monitor worked, the need to take her drug on schedule, even details of her dietary regimen. Then she went out and hired a local Chinese herbalist, at whose recommendation Mom quit her medication and started taking an herbal concoction that, as she was told, would completely cure her ailment. Predictably, her diabetes went totally out of control.

Folk remedies are difficult habits to break. There is a sense of connection to the past, as well as to the culturally ingrained magical nature of healing—much more appealing than taking a couple of factory-made pills.

Mom's small hands embrace the warm cup of tea. She glances over at the plants in the back patio. “I am growing enough aloe plants to last me until the end of spring. I think you should try them the next time I make small salad. They taste like very green and young cucum-

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ber. It definitely beats the taste of aloe juice. That is more like sucking on grass."

She tells me how much better she feels since eating the plant for the past several months. I admire the loyalty and adaptability of her taste buds. I tasted aloe once when mother was trying to turn a few slices into a rather rustic version of a pickle. I must confess it wasn't quite as bad as the time I ate a live snail, thinking that it was a piece of overcooked meat.

After we finish drinking our tea, Mother rearranges the kitchen. Through the bay window, the multi-colored glow of sunset begins to settle on the flowers and on the aloe vera plants. As the water cools

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and the whistle on the kettle goes silent, we wash the dishes and put the cups away. The ritual is finished. I feel as though a portion of my life is gradually meeting its own twilight.

It always ends as it begins. We sit across from each other and talk, first about work and weather, then there is a long pause and she asks me about my marriage plans. The smell of tea quietly hangs in the air. Expectant. The seasons keep changing. My singleness is becoming as much a burden to her as it is sometimes to me.

My social duties have not produced a wife yet. I laugh and adjust my body on my chair.

Now, about those diabetes pills. . .