

## **Sample Chapter from Professional Ghostwriting Project – Birth**

My mother was making rice congee in the kitchen when she felt the burst, and then the rush of water down her leg. Not having had any childbirth education, it took her a few moments to realize that her water had broken. She stood there in the dim light of early morning, two bowls of steaming congee and pickled radishes in her hands, unsure of what to do.

My parents lived in an apartment with a kitchen that they shared with two other families. As the women all vied for space in the cramped kitchen, one took notice of my mother's situation. "You're going to have the baby!" she whispered excitedly to my mother, careful not to raise her voice, as only thin curtains separated the kitchen from the three bedrooms.

Quietly, my mother crept into the small bedroom she shared with my father and jostled his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked sleepily. My mother said nothing, but simply pointed to the faint stain seeping down her leg. Eagerly, my father sat up, looked my mother in the eye, and, without saying a word, put his pants and shoes on, discreetly packing a small stack of folded bills in his back pocket.

There had been no plan of what to do at this moment. There were no taxis in our town, no family member planning to come pick them up. Instead, my father carried his rickety bicycle down the three stories of their building and instructed my mother to sit on the rack attached to the bike. As my father cautiously pedaled through the streets of Anshan, my mother held on to my father, her full belly pressed against his back.

In 1984, the city of Anshan was, for China, modest-sized. Nevertheless, with almost a million people and the site of the largest steel factory in China, it was a crowded, industrial city. It was also the home to hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom were determined, that warm August morning, to get in the way of my parents on their nine-mile journey to the hospital. Buses stuffed with riders lurched down the street. Vendors pushing breakfast carts with fried dough and steamed rice haggled with their customers. Streams of cyclists navigated through traffic like fish

through rapids, bundles of all sizes strapped precariously to their bicycles. “Baby coming through! New baby coming through!” my father yelled to the other bikers, swerving between them. Although the road was full of potholes, trash and rubble, my father steered the bicycle carefully around the obstructions.

“Are you alright?” My father asked periodically.

“Yes,” my mother would respond, knowing that there could be no other answer, since nothing more could be done.

As my father reached a crowded intersection, he slowed down, eyes fixed on a billboard that proudly displayed the faces of a smiling father, mother and son. Soon this would be his own little family. The billboard was promoting China’s “One Child Policy.” The plan, intended to slow population growth, had been in effect for the past five years. With China’s rapid industrialization, the country suddenly found itself feeding twenty-one percent of the world’s population, but with only seven percent of its farmable land. If the Chinese people didn’t do something to curb their numbers, they were at risk of starvation. If my parents were only able to have one child, my father, like many parents at the time, was hopeful that that child would be a boy. Not only would a boy carry on the family name, but boys were seen as strong workers, despite Chairman Mao’s pronouncement that women “hold up half the sky.” Because of this, the new ultrasound technology that revealed the sex of a child was illegal and orphanages throughout China were packed with unwanted female children.

My mother and father had, like many others, followed an ancient Chinese method to help conceive a boy. My mother had consulted a special calendar that indicated the proper time of the year to conceive. My aunts had advised my mother to avoid acidic food as well, another technique thought to increase the likelihood of a male child. Because my only uncle’s one child had been a girl, this new baby was the last chance for the family name to be carried on.

It took over two hours to navigate across the city to the hospital, and by the time my parents finally arrived, my mother was in great pain. As my father assisted my mother through the hospital’s clean white doors, a nurse met them with a wheelchair.

After an examination, the doctor returned to the waiting room to tell my father that my mom's cervix wasn't dilating properly and, because of this, the baby wasn't descending. He would have to perform a cesarean section, a procedure that was, at the time, quite risky.

As the doctor handed my father a clipboard of forms, my father discreetly placed the folded bills in his hand, a hundred yuan in total, and the equivalent of about forty U.S dollars at the time. "For you," he explained as the doctor placed the bills in his pocket and nodded knowingly. The practice of bribing medical professionals for extra care and attention was so rampant at the time that it was almost customary, and though my parents had little money to spare, my father knew he couldn't afford not to participate. My father watched as the doctor disappeared down the hall to the operating room, his heart pounding heavily.

Turning his attention to the forms in his hands, my father slowly drew his finger across each line, identifying each character. Although he was not a strong reader, one question was impossible to misinterpret. "If both mother and baby are in danger, and we can only save one, which would you like us to save?" My father wiped the sweat from his brow and gazed across the empty waiting room. Gripping the pen between his fingers, he scrawled hastily, "If the baby is a boy, save the baby. Otherwise, save the mom."

Turning the forms in at the front desk, my father asked to use the telephone. He needed to call the steel factory to explain why he hadn't come to work that day. "Congratulations," the operator said. "I'll be sure to notify the proper channels."

For the next few hours, my father sat in the waiting room, staring at the peeling white paint on the cement wall. In the heat of the summer morning, flies buzzed nervously around the room. He opened up a magazine and flipped through the pages, but all the images of soldiers posing proudly in uniform beside beautiful nurses ran together in a colorful jumble.

Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice. "Brother!" my uncle exclaimed, bounding into the waiting room. Their oldest sister followed closely behind, cradling a thermos in her hands like a precious statue.

“How did you know to come here?” My father asked, baffled by his sibling’s sudden arrival.

“Did you think word wouldn’t get around the factory?” my uncle laughed proudly, slapping my father on the back. The two had worked side by side for years in the same factory. When my father had called to inform his employer of the reason he wasn’t at work that day, the office manager had judiciously informed his brother.

“When he called me up at work, I wanted to come as well, so I feigned sickness,” my aunt added eagerly. “But before I left, I went to the cafeteria and bought half a dozen boiled eggs.” She lifted up the thermos and unscrewed the top, letting the smell of eggs waft out. Eggs were such a rare delicacy for my parents that they would often drop raw eggs into a pot of hot sugar water and serve it as “sweet egg water” over the course of a few meals. “In celebration of the arrival of your son,” she added with a wink, screwing the top back on.

In the operating room, my mother was given acupuncture in her abdomen as an anesthetic. A thin curtain separated my mom’s face from her stomach, but she could still feel as the doctor pressed the knife into her belly. The pain was sharp, followed by a dull burning sensation and my mother clung to the cold metal bars on either side of the operating table, letting out a single cry before biting down against her lip. Through hazy vision, she watched as the new life was lifted up by the doctor.

In the waiting room, the nurse’s heels clicked sharply against the polished white ceramic floor as she made her way to my father. My father stood to receive the news, holding his breath.

“Congratulations,” the nurse said with a strained smile. “You have a healthy baby girl.” As my father registered these words, he exhaled slowly, the relief of the word “healthy” dampened by the word “girl.”

Turning her back to my father, my aunt sheltered her thermos against her chest, making it clear that she would not be sharing her costly delicacy with the new mom. My uncle put his arms around my aunt’s shoulders to comfort her, while

offering my father a weak smile. "Congratulations," he mouthed so that my aunt couldn't hear.

"Would you like to meet your daughter?" the nurse asked. My father nodded, but rather than moving towards the room, his feet stayed planted.

"Hey, let's go have a cigarette first," my uncle suggested, holding out the pack.

My father took a cigarette and looked down at it. "No, I want to be alone," he said, and made his way out the door.

"I have a daughter," my father whispered to himself as he stepped out into the hot summer morning, "a daughter." A son would have carried on his surname. A son would have been able to work beside his father at the steel factory. A son would have been able to support his parents in their old age. A son would have brought honor and pride to the family. But instead, his wife had given birth to a daughter.

When he finished the cigarette, he stubbed it out with his shoe and took a deep breath. There was nothing left to do but go meet his child.

Cautiously opening the door to the hospital room, my father peered in. In the far corner, my mother lay in the hospital bed, a window on one side, and an old fan on the other, blowing a few stray hairs across her face. Against her breast was the small child, suckling softly.

My mother's eyes met my father's, and she smiled faintly. "Come in," she invited. "Would you like to hold her?"

My father hesitated and, for a moment, he looked out the window, where a bird lighted on the branch of a birch tree, its silvery green leaves shuttering in the hot summer breeze.

"Alright," he answered.

As my father took me in his arms for the first time, I didn't make a single sound. My small, open face, all newness and curiosity, peered into my father's wide eyes. In the distance were the sounds of bus horns and trolley cars, but up close, just out the window, was the soft flutter of bird wings.

My uncle poked his head in. "May we come in?" he asked gently, waiting for my father's slight nod before making his way into the room, my aunt trailing

apprehensively behind. As their faces loomed large above my own, my uncle turned to my father, "What will you name her?" he asked.

My father thought for a moment, looking out the window just as the little bird took flight, its delicate wings carrying it away from the building and above the treetops. "Fei Fei," he responded confidently. "It means Fly Fly."