

**Proof of Life**, by Times Wang

The office was the southernmost room on the second floor, and its built-in bookshelves and treetop views so intimate the branches seemed to reach inside had done the most to seduce me. This is where I'll make myself into a writer, I thought. Here, in Norfolk, just like Kazuo Ishiguro, though his Norfolk was a county in England, while mine was a city in Virginia. If you were to look at the house on a map, you'd see it was right in the middle of a near-perfect semicircle jutting out from the land, surrounded on its curved section by a tributary of the nearby Elizabeth River, like a bowl, floating in the water. At 3,500 square feet, the 100-year-old Victorian was bigger than anything we could've afforded in D.C., and seemed custom made for the life we were envisioning. It even had an old-fashioned salon that shared a door with the master bedroom, perfect for a nursery.

The subject I'd chosen for my first book—my father—would've found my self-satisfaction with buying a house laughably quotidian. Buying a house was nothing; at my age, 34, he was aiming to bring democracy to all of China, having given up his medical career to do so. But that was precisely why I was so pleased. Unlike him, family was a priority for me, and this seemed an ideal place to raise one. My siblings all had kids already, and our father's absence from our childhood made them devoted parents. When Regina got pregnant shortly after we closed on the house, I vowed to be one too.

Not that I resented my father, at least not anymore—after all, a desire to increase his stature was the main reason I'd decided to write the book in the first place. He'd been a political prisoner in China for nearly two decades, and we were running out of ideas for how to save him. A book about my relationship with him, I thought, might do some good. Besides, I'd always wanted to write, and here was a subject that touched nearly all my interests: politics, history, family, and the question of what constitutes a life well lived.

It was harder than I thought it'd be. One of the biggest problems was that, as I realized once I started writing, I knew almost nothing about him beyond what I'd read over the years, such that he existed, for me, more as a caricature than a real person. Indeed, in the past, I'd sometimes referred to him in family emails not as my father or even his name, Wang Bingzhang, but by the initials WBZ, as if he were what social scientists called an intersubjective entity: something that exists because fellow human beings agree it exists, like a country, or a set of values, or money. The Chinese Communist Party was such an entity, as was the People's Republic of China. CCP. PRC. WBZ.

Yes, we'd reconciled after he was imprisoned, but how much can you learn about someone from a dozen 40-minute meetings, separated by soundproof glass and steel bars? And yes, to compensate, I'd talked to many people who'd known him over the years. But all they told me was how single-minded he'd been in his pursuit of Chinese democracy, how naïvely he'd gone about it, and how heroic they thought he was for sacrificing his freedom for that goal. I knew all that already, and none of it brought me any closer to understanding him.

Then I had to put the book aside for a while to meet a court deadline. I'd recently struck out on my own, and this was the first brief I'd be writing as a solo lawyer. It was a major one, too, with the future of a multimillion-dollar charitable trust fund at stake. But I was frankly relieved to be working on it. Here was something I knew how to do.

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## DRAFT—DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

Two weeks before the brief's mid-April deadline, the previous owners left the house, and we took possession. The next day we had a routine follow up with the OB-GYN; Regina was ten weeks pregnant. The clinic was close enough to walk—the house's urban location was another thing we'd fallen in love with.

It was raining as we walked. It seemed to rain a lot in Norfolk, but I didn't mind. It's not that I liked rain, but I thought it silly—weak, even—to let your mood be dictated by something so totally out of your control, a failure to exercise what Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl called the "last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." It's a beautiful day, I joked to Regina as we huddled under the umbrella.

At the clinic, we watched as the OB-GYN placed her handheld doppler here and there over Regina's belly. It didn't seem to be picking up any sounds, but she told us not to worry, that that happens sometimes. Then she sent us to a different clinic 20 minutes away, one that had an ultrasound. There, we watched the technician quietly move her probe around, make incomprehensible adjustments on the monitor, and take a few pictures. She looked gently at Regina before breaking the silence.

"Honey," she said. "I'm so sorry."

Regina once told me that, during her medical training, long before we met, she used to be so emotionally regimented that she'd release her feelings on a schedule—every Thursday, to be precise, while showering. It was in part a matter of professionalism, but also a matter of her personality. Perhaps it was a remnant of that discipline that helped us mostly keep it together as we talked to the doctor on staff about what came next, went to the pharmacy to pick up labor-inducing medication, texted our parents in Canada the news, and drove to our soon-to-be-packed-up apartment.

Once we got there, that discipline withered. The picture of the thumping, blueberry-sized mass we'd taken home with us a month earlier was still on the fridge. We collapsed into each other's arms, convulsing. From a part of me I'd never before known existed, I gasped the only two things I felt to be true in that moment.

"It's not fair."

Then:

"Life is pain."

A few days after the appointment, my mother called to tell me she was worried about me because I'd never experienced any real setbacks in life before. That's not true, I said defiantly, without being able to come up with an example. Then I said I had to get back to work, when what I really wanted to do was cry. A few days later, we slept in the house for the first time. It seemed to be mocking us.

It was our second night in the house, late Sunday evening, and I was sitting in the darkened office, surrounded by boxes and working on the brief, when my aunt called.

April is the cruelest month, I'd heard before, later learning that it came from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It's a testament to something—the absurdity of existence, perhaps, or the universality of literature—that those lines seemed to describe exactly what was about to happen next.

"*Dai Dai*," my aunt wailed, using my Chinese nickname. "Your father is dead!"

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I contemplated hanging up. Really, I just did not have time for this.

Over the next hour, I learned that this information had come into being via a tale out of spy novels. It involved a Beijing lawyer who happened to be my ex-uncle and who'd previously acted as a backchannel for us with the Chinese government; a dinner with his schoolmate who now worked in the Public Security Bureau, as well as the schoolmate's boss; and what was either an offhand remark, or the reason the schoolmate had tried so hard to arrange the dinner in the first place.

As my ex-uncle explained when I called him—after I'd gone downstairs to tell Regina—at some point over that dinner, the officials asked him casually if he was still in touch with Wang Bingzhang's family.

Not really, he said, though he'd recently seen a startling video on the internet about how my father—whom my ex-uncle affectionately called *Lao Wang*, or Old Wang—had lately been feeling afraid for his life. (This was true—my half-sister had visited him around Christmas when he'd mentioned that, and the news made the rounds in dissident circles online.)

“Oh, but doesn't the Wang family know?” the officials replied.

“Know what?”

“Old Wang is no longer with us.”

It was now nearly 10 p.m., and outside the night was still, as if it too were holding its breath. A soft streetlamp glow cast faint shadows into the lightless living room where I was now sitting—we still hadn't unpacked any lamps.

“Could they have been lying, or wrong?” I asked.

“It's certainly possible, but unlikely, given their positions.”

“What do you think we should do now?”

“I think you should try to arrange a visit with the prison officials and see what they say.”

I thanked him and hung up. Then I called the prison officials—it was the beginning of the workweek in China—and said I wanted to visit in a couple of weeks. That'd be fine, they said. I hung up. Then I called back.

“This is going to sound strange,” I said, “but is my father alive?”

My heart stopped beating for a split second.

“Of course he is! Who told you otherwise?”

“Oh, I don't know actually,” I lied. “My family just told me there were rumors.”

“Well you shouldn't believe those kinds of rumors.”

“I know. That's why I called you.”

“Well, do you still want to visit?”

## DRAFT—DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

I wasn't about to explain it all to him, so I just said yes.

I debriefed my family via text, and my mother and sister over the phone. My sister, who'd devoted a good deal of her adult life to lobbying on our father's behalf, was crying. We agreed nothing was definitive, and made a plan to get more information before signing off for the night. Then Regina asked if I was okay.

Though the last few days had proven that I clearly had no difficulty showing pain, I'd remained stone faced the entire evening. One reason, of course, was that an ultrasound was a fact, incontrovertible, beyond criticism or doubt. Whatever this story was, it had emanated from places controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, which meant it couldn't be said to be any of those things, at least not with confidence. But the deeper reason was that the earlier death had been of someone whose hopes and dreams I'd known better than my own, since I was the one who'd created them. This supposed death was of a person I was still getting to know.

I was okay, I told her. It would've been different had the news been about my mother, I said, which would have wrecked me. Given that it had been about my father, and given that we still weren't sure it was true, the main thing I was feeling was anger. Anger at the thought he might've died in a Chinese prison. But not sadness, at least not yet.

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Two weeks later, and for the second time that month, I set out to get proof of life. It would be, by my count, my fourteenth visit to see my dad.

The first dozen or so times had been to a shabby compound called North River Prison, but he was later transferred to the much newer Shaoguan Prison, named for the small southern city where both were located. I'd come to feel nostalgia for Shaoguan, and on my last few trips would do some exploring to see how it had changed, but this time, I mostly stayed in the hotel room, jet-lagged, drinking warm beer and eating stale chips, while switching between trying to write and watching late-night Chinese TV. We were by then pretty sure he was not dead—other, more formal inquiries had been made—but until I saw him with my own eyes, I couldn't help but imagine that an elaborate conspiracy might still be unfolding. The morning I went to the prison, I even took a picture of my backpack and papers, to see if they'd been moved while I was gone.

In the prison waiting area, my apprehension was heightened by the presence of four sinewy men in black uniforms that said "Special Police" in Chinese who looked straight ahead, expressionless, even as two of them stood directly behind me and two off to my sides. But then, they'd also been there my last visit, so I didn't read too much into it.

At length, the officer who usually served as my escort appeared. I'd asked his name the first time I met him, and he demurred, but on later trips I heard others call him Liu Kang. This was the same spelling as the name of a character in the Mortal Kombat video game series, but I can assure you the resemblance ends there. One of the men in black, perhaps, but the Liu Kang of Shaoguan Prison was a baby-faced family man who, though he couldn't speak the provincial Cantonese dialect, had clearly enjoyed the local cuisine over the many years he'd lived in the south.

As we walked to the meeting room, on the second floor of a separate building, he asked about my trip and how I'd been doing. Normally, I'd be happy to chat, but this time I was too tired, and too on edge, to give anything but one-word responses. Even when he, undeterred, asked if I'd started a family yet, I simply said no, and kept walking, eyes forward.

## DRAFT—DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

In the meeting room, I sat and waited for what felt like an eternity for my father to be brought in. When I saw his face—grizzled, tired-looking, but very much alive—I heard myself audibly exhale.

He picked up the plastic neon handset, and so did I.

“This window is so dirty, I can barely see you,” he said, tapping on the glass. “You’ve got to ask them to clean it.”

“Dad, I’m so happy to see you. We heard a rumor you were dead.”

He sucked in his breath. “Don’t believe anyone who says anything like that! Trust me, and only me, when it comes to that kind of thing!”

“I know, dad, but we were very scared.”

“Well, I’m doing okay. The prison has been taking me for checkups regularly.”

“I’m glad. Everyone’s going to be so relieved.”

He didn’t ask how the rumor had come about and seemed ready to move on; we didn’t exactly have the luxury of time. Plus, as he told me a few visits ago, he only learned he had a visitor when the guards came to his cell to fetch him, giving him just minutes to consider which topics were the highest priority.

“How have you been lately?” he asked.

“Okay. Regina had a miscarriage a few weeks ago.”

He made a pained expression. “I’m sorry, son.”

“Thanks, dad.”

“These things happen. It doesn’t mean anything. You can try again. She’s a doctor, she knows that.”

“I know, dad.”

He gave a three-sentence lecture on the biology of pregnancy and suggested some traditional Chinese therapies Regina might consider. Then we moved on to the topic that dominated most of our visits: how to get him out of prison.

I mentioned an idea my father-in-law had recently suggested, and that my family had agreed with, which was to see if the government would allow him to serve out his sentence in house arrest.

“I’ve tried that before. Around 2006, I wrote to Hu Jintao asking for exactly that. It didn’t work. You can try again, but I don’t think it’ll work. The only thing that’ll get me out is if you guys do what I’ve asked you to do. But you won’t listen, so what can I do?”

He said this matter-of-factly, without a hint of anger.

What he'd asked us to do—and had been asking for a while—was to set up a tent near the Canadian prime minister's residence, like the parents of Gilad Shalit, a young Israeli soldier who'd been captured by Hamas, had done with the Israeli prime minister. After five years in captivity, and enormous public sympathy for that family's plight, a deal had been struck between Hamas and the Israeli government—over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Shalit's release. And my father was right—we hadn't listened, for a variety of reasons, some of which I thought were good, and some not so good.

Then, after thirty minutes, the line cut out, as expected. We knew we could get another ten minutes, and, in the past, they'd simply tacked it on in advance. Lately, though, they were making us go through the rigmarole of “submitting” a request for the extra time once the initial 30-minute allotment was up, for which we'd then have to wait for approval. The “rule of law,” they would assuredly say if I'd asked what the point was, failing utterly to understand what the phrase actually meant.

I never asked, though, because I enjoyed the waiting period. It gave me a chance to spend more time in his presence, to observe this man who had such a relentless hold on my psyche, and to contemplate why that might be. It certainly wasn't because of our physical resemblance, as his delicate features had not been passed on to me; my brother and sister, yes, but my big-cheeked, thick-eyebrowed face was my mother's doing. Build, neither—I could probably thank his father, my grandfather, for that. But a symmetry-loving, syllogistic way of thinking; earnestness; and a passion for justice—those were unmistakably part of my patrimony.

He said something to the sentries on his side of the divide, which came through as a muffled drone, like the adults in Charlie Brown. I could see he was smiling. Then the Liu Kang of Shaoguan Prison, who was sitting to my right, and who'd been engaged in various, intermittent colloquies over the radio in a tone that betrayed stress and exasperation, said the line should now be active. My father and I picked up our handsets.

“You know, I almost don't even want to get out anymore. Sometimes, it feels like some of you want me to stay in prison.”

“Dad, you know that's not true.”

“Anyway, it's not so bad in here. I have a small garden. I plant strawberries, carrots, and small watermelons, and they let me out to tend to it twice a day, thirty minutes at a time.”

I'd known about the garden. Liu Kang had touted it to me on my last visit.

Soon the ten minutes were up. We lingered, as we usually did, and pressed our hands against the dirty glass. Then we were each escorted out by our respective minders.

“I'm sorry for asking if you'd started a family,” Liu Kang said on our way out. “I didn't know.”

“Don't worry about it,” I said.

Downstairs, he helped me with an “application” for the ten-minute extension on a blank piece of printer paper. He wrote what he wanted me to say on his sheet and watch me scratch out the same characters on mine.

*I, Wang Daishi, in light of the long distance I've traveled, hereby apply for an extension of time for my meeting with my father, Wang Bingzhang.*

*Daishi* had been based on my English name, Times, and was an inversion of *shidai*, which in turn meant era. Both names were my mother's idea, and though I'd always known the English one—inspired by a venerable newspaper and a tourist trap in the place of my birth, New York—was considered unusual by native English speakers, I only learned as an adult that so too was *Daishi* by native Chinese speakers.

Liu Kang then fetched a pad of red ink, had me solemnize the infantile document with a thumbprint, and we went back to the main waiting area.

“Safe travels,” he said.

“See you next time,” I replied.

Halfway up the road to the bus stop—taxis rarely passed this far from the city—I turned around and saw the four men in black in the parking lot of the waiting area, standing in a row, straight-backed, looking at me. I took my phone out and tried to discreetly take a picture of the spectacle, which I found ridiculous, but it was too far to get a good shot. The bus soon came, and after I got on, I tapped out a message to my family that my father was indeed alive.

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Back in Norfolk, Regina and her parents, who'd come to stay with her while I was gone, asked about the visit. I told them I was worried about him, and particularly his mental state, and that the last time had gone better. A few days later, I emailed my family a longer-than-usual report with my impressions. Everyone needed to write him more, I said.

By now, we'd had some time to grieve our pregnancy loss, and I had a few weeks before getting a response to the brief I'd filed, at which point I'd have to write a reply, so I set myself to working on the book again. I was even looking forward to setting up the office, which hadn't yet been unpacked. Regina had half-jokingly left it untouched in light of a face I'd made involuntarily when she'd wondered where her desk would go. Even though I now insisted we should share it, she wasn't about to let me off that easy, so I concentrated on my side of the room, leaving a space for her. In the meantime, I put her desk in the salon, the one that adjoined the bedroom.

After I'd left the prison, through the fog of the last several days and weeks, I'd had a single, awful, blinding realization. Just about everything I'd written about him up to that point had to be revisited.

“It's all wrong. Too raw,” I told Regina, who'd been acting as my editor.

“But I like the rawness.”

“Yeah, me too. But think about it from his perspective. I think he'd be hurt if he read what I've written so far.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don't know.”

## DRAFT—DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

I didn't know, so I busied myself with arranging my writing desk. I put up a picture of my late grandparents, who'd helped raise me in my father's absence, with my parents and me in New York about a year after I was born. In it, my grandparents wear their customary stoic looks, from which you'd never be able to tell how deeply I'd already wormed my way into their hearts, while my father, dapper in a brown tweed jacket, and my mother, proving in a crimson sweater that she deserved her reputation as a beauty, smile softly. My mother has her arms draped around me; I am sitting in her lap, craning my neck, the only one not looking at the camera. Instead, I am looking, quizzically, straight at my dad.

Who are you? I seem to be saying.

\* \* \*

In June, I asked my mom to come to Norfolk. I wanted to show her the house, and get her help identifying the plants in the garden, below the treetops out back. I'd once seen her casually ace an entire Jeopardy category testing this skill, even though she was terrible at Jeopardy, and even though four of the five prompts had stumped the whole panel.

But the main reason I needed her in Norfolk was to help with the book. Only she had any hope of helping me decipher my father, even if she herself, as she claimed, hadn't been able to after 40 years of trying. I hoped a month with her of all Wang Bingzhang, all the time, would help to shed some light.

"Your father isn't normal," she told me over the phone one day, before her visit. "He lives in a world of ideals, beyond the concerns of everyday people. That's why people find it so hard to relate to him. That's why he alienated so many people over the years."

I got what she was saying, but I knew it couldn't be completely true. I tried a different tack.

"What about day-to-day living? Did he have hobbies? Did he like going to the movies? Did he enjoy life?"

"Yes, he enjoyed life immensely—when he wasn't working. He liked cameras, and took beautiful pictures, much better than I could."

Okay, here we go. My brother and I both liked cameras.

"He explained to me one day how it worked. You need a foreground, a background, and the subject in the middle."

Nope, that sounded nothing like the way I liked cameras.

"And he loved going to the movies. Remember, he took you a few times when he came to Montreal?"

I did. I'd even reminisced about it with my brother not long ago.

"But he was impulsive about it. Sometimes, it'd be the middle of the day and, out of nowhere, he'd want to go see one."

That, I never did.

"What about his work habits?" I asked. "When he was working on his thesis, did you ever see him procrastinate?"



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This was especially relevant to me; in law school, I'd turned in two papers *after* convocation.

"Never. He was like a machine. You know, he finished his Ph.D. early."

Another dead end.

"What about *Dao Wang*?" I asked. It meant "Topple Wang," and was an episode in the late 1980s when he'd been kicked out of the pro-democracy magazine he'd founded, *China Spring*, and a related organization. "Why were people so angry at him? Why did he make so many enemies?"

"Part of it was jealousy, I suppose. Part of it was that he was fed up with certain people acting as informants for the Taiwanese government, and was trying to sideline them, which threatened their livelihoods. But I'm telling you, it's mainly because he wasn't a normal person, and didn't know how to deal with other people."

I sighed. I'd heard this all before, and even if it was true, I knew there had to be more to it than that. Where was his flesh and blood? Surely it existed.

Now my mom was in Norfolk, in the living room. The sun was streaming through the bay windows, and she was lying on the new couch we'd gotten, exactly where the old couch had been two months earlier, when I'd called my ex-uncle on a spooky Sunday night to discuss my father's death.

I'd been interviewing her about *Dao Wang* for an hour, trying to understand the personalities and motivations involved. She'd begun the interview in a sitting position, but midway through, the effort of excavating long-buried details and background information had put her on her back. I too was growing frustrated, doubting whether anyone other than the players in that relatively personal drama would ever care about such minutia, necessary though they were to my understanding of the surrounding events. We both needed a break, so I turned the recorder off.

We headed toward the kitchen, where she'd been experimenting with Chinese-Italian fusion recipes. Before we got there, I commented on the impact *Dao Wang* seemed to have had on my father, and, subsequently, our home life.

"I didn't realize how challenging that was for him. It sounds like he was never quite the same after that."

"Of course. It was an extremely difficult time. Why do you think, after he left that meeting, he cried in the snow for five hours? Can you imagine, a grown man in the streets of New York, crying on his knees?"

I stopped in my tracks. *This. This* was what I'd been after.

"Hold on. You never told me about that."

"Haven't I? Anyway, it's true—all his supporters saw him and told me about it after. They were crying with him."

"I have to turn the recorder back on," I said, before telling my mom to go back to the couch. "Tell me more about that."

She sighed. “Like I said, he thought it was going to be a relatively straightforward discussion of minor financial questions, which he was ready to explain. But what was actually happening was that a coup was underway, led by people he’d handpicked for their positions. He was caught totally unprepared. When the vote went against him, it was a disappointment unlike any he’d ever experienced. So he went outside and wept, right there in the street.”

Finally, I thought. A grown man crying over broken dreams. Now there was something I could relate to.

We talked a bit more before I turned the recorder off again.

A few weeks later, my mom left. Together, we’d interviewed a few people from my father’s past, and I’d made a plan to speak with more. It still wasn’t clear how I was going to integrate everything into a book, but I wasn’t worried. It was going to come together. I was sure of it.

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The office is the southernmost room on the second floor. When it rains, I can see the treetops dancing from my writing desk. It seems to rain a lot in Norfolk, but I don’t mind, not because I like rain, but because, like my father, I have a garden out back. And here in this room, with his help, I’m going to make myself into a writer.

In the office, I’ve put up a picture of me and my family. I am the foreground, a piece of art the background, and my parents and grandparents the subject. I am the only one not looking at the camera. Instead, I am looking, calmly, straight at my dad.

You don’t look too familiar, I seem to be saying, but that’s okay. One day, I’ll know you.

