

The Spirit Catches You
and You Fall Down

A Hmong Child,

Her American Doctors,

and the Collision of Two Cultures

Anne Fadiman

The Noonday Press

Farrar, Straus and Giroux / New York

For George

Somos el barco

The Noonday Press
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

Copyright © 1997 by Anne Fadiman
All rights reserved

Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Abby Kagan

First published in 1997 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux
First Noonday paperback edition, 1998
Ninth printing, 1999

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:
Fadiman, Anne, 1953—

The spirit catches you and you fall down : a Hmong child, her American
doctors, and the collision of two cultures / Anne Fadiman.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-374-52564-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Transcultural medical care—California—Case studies. 2. Hmong
American children—Medical care—California. 3. Hmong Americans—
Medicine. 4. Intercultural communication. 5. Epilepsy in
children. I. Title.

RA418.5.T73F33 1997
306.4'61—dc21

97-5175

Contents

Preface / vii

- 1 / *Birth* / 3
2 / *Fish Soup* / 12
3 / *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* / 20
4 / *Do Doctors Eat Brains?* / 32
5 / *Take as Directed* / 38
6 / *High-Velocity Transcortical Lead Therapy* / 60
7 / *Government Property* / 78
8 / *Foua and Nao Kao* / 93
9 / *A Little Medicine and a Little Neeb* / 106
10 / *War* / 119
11 / *The Big One* / 140
12 / *Flight* / 154
13 / *Code X* / 171
14 / *The Melting Pot* / 181
15 / *Gold and Dross* / 210
16 / *Why Did They Pick Merced?* / 225
17 / *The Eight Questions* / 250
18 / *The Life or the Soul* / 262
19 / *The Sacrifice* / 278

Note on Hmong Orthography, Pronunciation, and Quotations / 291

Notes on Sources / 293

Bibliography / 313

Acknowledgments / 327

Index / 331

The Sacrifice

Long before Shee Yee turned into a tiny red ant and bit the evil *dab* on the testicle, he spent three years apprenticed to a sorcerer. He learned how to change himself into anything he wished, to kill *dabs*, to fly like the wind, to heal the sick, and to raise the dead. Shee Yee's services as a healer were sorely needed, because there was much illness in the world.

This is how the illness had come. The wife of a wicked god named Nyong laid an egg as large as a pig house. For three years, the egg did not hatch. Nyong's father chanted to the egg and, in response, heard the jabbering voices of many evil *dabs* inside it. He ordered Nyong to burn the egg, but Nyong refused. So the egg burst, and out swarmed the *dabs*. The first thing they did was to eat Nyong's wife, down to the last bone, hair, and eyelash. Then, still hungry, they came after Nyong. Nyong opened the door that led from the sky, where he lived, to the earth. Through it flew the *dabs*, as big as water buffalos and as red as fire, with showers of sparks in their wake. Nyong was safe, but from that day on, the people of the earth have known illness and death.

Shee Yee spent many years fighting the *dabs* and restoring sick people to health. He was assisted by a winged horse, a bowl of holy water, a set of magical healing tools, and a troupe of familiar spirits.

One day Nyong murdered Shee Yee's infant son and tricked Shee Yee into eating the flesh. When Shee Yee realized what he had done, he was so stricken with grief and horror that he fled the earth and climbed the staircase up through the door in the sky. To avenge his son's death, he pierced both of Nyong's eyes. Nyong, blind and enraged, now lives at the foot of a mountain in the sky, and Shee Yee lives in a cave at its summit, surrounded by his familiar spirits.

Shee Yee never returned to earth, but he did not leave its people entirely at the mercy of illness and death. After he climbed the staircase through the sky, he poured the bowl of holy water into his mouth, and then he spat it, with great force, on his healing tools: a saber, a gong, a rattle, and a pair of finger bells. The tools broke into pieces and fell to earth. Anyone who was sprayed with holy water, or who caught a fragment of one of Shee Yee's tools, was elected to be a *txiv neeb*, a host for a healing spirit. The door in the sky is now closed to everyone but *txiv neeb*s. When they pursue the lost soul of a sick person, they summon Shee Yee's familiar spirits and ride Shee Yee's flying horse up the staircase through the sky. In order to deceive any evil *dabs* they may meet en route, they pretend they *are* Shee Yee, and thus they partake of the first healer's cunning, courage, and greatness.

The *txiv neeb* who was to perform a healing ceremony for Lia brought his own tools: saber, gong, rattle, finger bells. He also brought his own flying horse. The horse was a board about ten feet long and ten inches wide which, when attached to a pair of sawhorselike supports that fitted into four slots, became a bench. To the people who filled the Lees' living room, the bench was not a piece of furniture. Nor was it a metaphor. It was truly a flying horse, just as to a devout Roman Catholic, the bread and the wine are not a symbol of Christ's body and blood but the real thing.

The Lees had risen well before dawn. Foua told me, "We must have the *neeb* ceremony early in the morning, when it is cool, because that is when the soul can come back better. Also, if it is hot, the pig will get tired and die." (I thought: But the pig is going to get killed anyway! Then I realized that a dead pig cannot be sacrificed.) The sun was rising when I arrived, sending pale shafts of light through the door that opened onto East 12th Street. Two translucent plastic paint-

er's tarps had been laid over the threadbare brown wall-to-wall carpet to protect it from the blood of the pig—or rather, pigs, since a small pig was to be sacrificed for the whole family and a large pig was to be sacrificed for Lia. The Lees had bought them the previous day at a local farm, paying \$225, which came partly from welfare savings and partly from relatives' contributions, for the pair.

On the electric stove, three large aluminum pots, filled with water that would be used to singe the pigs' bristles, had been set to boil. Bags of fresh vegetables and herbs, grown by the Lees and their relatives, rested next to the mortar and pestle Foua had brought from Laos. They would be used in the preparation of the traditional festal dishes: minced pork and vegetables rolled in rice wrappers; pig bones and meat boiled with homegrown greens; chopped intestines, liver, heart, and lungs (the dish May Ying called "doo-doo soup"); raw jellied pig's blood; stewed chicken; two kinds of pepper sauce; and steamed rice. A Hmong proverb says, "With friends, flavorless vegetables are as tasty as meat, and water is as good as wine." However, the combination of friends and good food is better still. The feast, which was to follow the *neeb* ceremony, would continue far into the night.

Early this morning, Nao Kao had used a special paper punch to cut a stack of spirit-money, which would pay the pig for its soul and settle other spiritual accounts. The spirit-money, thick and cream-colored and pinked into scallops, lay on the carpet next to the *txiv neeb's* altar, which represented the cave of Shee Yee. In Laos, the altar would have been made from one of a pair of identical trees; one would have been left standing, and one would have been felled with an ax in the direction of the setting sun. Here, the altar was a crude wooden table that had been covered with the sports section of the *Merced Sun-Star*. Arrayed on top of a refrigerator ad that said NO DOWN PAYMENT FOR 90 DAYS! were the *txiv neeb's* sacred tools, the same ones Shee Yee had used: a short saber ornamented with red and white streamers; an ancient iron gong; a monkey bone with a padded end wrapped in black cloth, which was used to beat the gong; a tambourine-sized iron ring strung with rattling metal disks; and two finger bells, which looked like bronze doughnuts and enclosed little tintinnabula made of jingling metal pellets. Next to the tools was a brown plastic bowl containing rice and a single uncooked egg, sustenance for

the familiar spirits. Three Styrofoam coffee cups and a white china bowl—a lake into which the *txiv neeb's* soul could plunge if he were pursued by evil *dabs*—were filled with holy water. A small candle at the front of the altar, not yet lit, would shed light on the unseen realm into which the *txiv neeb* was to travel.

I had read a number of ethnographic commentaries on the power and influence of *txiv neeb's*. Somehow, I had never imagined that when I finally met the ultimate metaphysical interlocutor, the great pleabargainer for the soul, the preeminent champion in the struggle for the demonic—to cite three of the many reverential epithets I had come across—he would be sitting in front of a television set, watching a Winnie-the-Pooh cartoon. The *txiv neeb* who was to perform today's ceremonies was named Cha Koua Lee. He wore blue flip-flops, black pants, and a white T-shirt decorated with dancing pandas. May Ying Xiong had told me all *txiv neeb's* were skinny, because they expended so much energy in the shaking trance during which they traveled to the realm of the unseen, and indeed Cha Koua Lee, who looked to be in his late forties, was thin and muscular, with sharp features and a stern expression. It was against his code of honor to charge for his services—especially with the Lees, who were members of his clan—and although some families voluntarily paid him, he was forced to live on public assistance. However, he always received compensation in the form of the heads and right front legs of the pigs over whose sacrifices he presided. After eating the meat, he left the lower jaws to dry outside his apartment, and then added them to a collection he kept on a shelf, to be ritually burned at the end of the Hmong year. At that time the pigs' souls would be released from their duties as proxies for the souls of the people for whom they had given their lives, and allowed to be reborn. In Laos, Cha Koua Lee had burned his pig jaws in a fire pit. In Merced, he burned them in a disposable turkey-roasting pan. Then he placed the charred remains in the branches of a tree outside town, beneath the sky through which they had already journeyed.

After the smaller pig, a tan-and-white female, was carried into the living room and laid on one of the plastic tarps, the *txiv neeb* performed the day's first order of business: a ceremony to safeguard the health and well-being of the family for the coming year. The Lee family stood in a closely packed huddle in the middle of the living

room. Wearing a black cloth headdress, the *txiv neeb* tied a cord around the pig's neck. The pig grunted softly. Then he ran the cord from the pig to the Lees, wrapping it tightly around the whole group. The pig's soul was thus bonded to the souls it would protect. The *txiv neeb* regarded each person's soul as a tripartite entity, composed of one part that, after death, would stand guard at the grave; one part that would go to the land of the dead; and one part that would be reincarnated. All three parts would be secured today. Then the pig's throat was slit—by a Lee cousin, not by the *txiv neeb*, who must always maintain good relations with the animals of whom he has requested such a priceless gift.

In Laos, this ceremony would have taken place in the Lees' house, which Nao Kao and Foua had built to shelter not only their family but also a host of kindly domestic spirits: the chief household spirit, who lived in the central pillar, above the place where the placentas of the Lee sons were buried; the spirits of the ancestors, who lived in the four side pillars; the spirits of wealth, who lived near the uphill wall; the spirit who watched over the livestock, who lived in the downhill door; and the spirits of the two fireplaces. The presence of these spirits would have been felt by everyone in the house. It seemed to me that at 37 East 12th Street, Apartment A—where there were no pillars, no fireplaces, and indeed, according to the Lees, no benevolent spirits, because it was rented—the maintenance of a sacred atmosphere was an uphill battle. The television was still on, though without sound. Winnie-the-Pooh had been succeeded by a wrestling match between Hulk Hogan and Randy “Macho Man” Savage, broadcast from Atlantic City. Five feet from the altar, on the other side of the wall, hummed a refrigerator that contained a case of Budweisers, one of which would later be consumed by the *txiv neeb*. To the left of the front door, through which the familiar spirits would pass, there was a king-size carton of Attends youth diapers. The door was open. This worried me. What if an American were to stroll past and see a dead pig on the floor and nine people tied up with twine?

While the *txiv neeb* prepared for the next ceremony, several of the Lees' male relatives carried the slaughtered pig to the parking lot, which, fortunately, was behind the apartment building and could not be seen from the street. First they poured scalding water over the carcass and scraped the hide with knives. Then they expertly gutted

the pig, threw the offal in a Rainbow low-suds detergent pail, unfurled and re-coiled the intestines, and rinsed the abdominal cavity with a green garden hose. Rivulets of bloody water, dotted with bits of hair and pig flesh, flowed through the parking lot. Cheng, May, Yer, True, and Mai watched with interest but not surprise. Like children raised on a farm, they were familiar with death, and indeed could probably have done the job themselves. They had all learned how to kill and pluck chickens before they were eight, and the older ones had helped their parents butcher several pigs.

When we walked back inside the apartment, I could tell in an instant that there had been a sea change. By some unaccountable feat of sorcery—I was never able to figure out exactly how it had happened—the bathos had been exorcised from Apartment A. Everyone could feel the difference. The Lee children, who talked and giggled as they walked from the parking lot, fell silent as soon as they crossed the threshold. The television was off. The candle on the altar had been lit. A joss stick was burning, filling the apartment with smoke trails that would guide the familiar spirits. The *txiv neeb* had put on a black silk jacket with indigo cuffs and a red sash. His feet were bare. He had shrugged all the American incongruities off his outer aspect, and his inner aspect—the quality that had singled him out for spiritual election—now shone through, bright and hard. I saw that I had underestimated him.

It was Lia's turn now. Foua and Nao Kao believed that her condition was probably beyond the reach of spiritual healing. Another *txiv neeb* had told them that medicines must have hurt her irreparably, because if the cause were spiritual, the frequency of their *neeb* ceremonies would certainly have restored her ability to talk. However, within her status quo, there were degrees of illness. They hoped this *txiv neeb* would make Lia happier so that she would stop crying at night. And there was still the faintest flicker of a chance, not altogether extinguished even after years of failed sacrifices, that Lia's soul would be found after all, that the *dabs* who were keeping it would accept the pig's soul in its stead, and that she would be restored to health.

Foua sat in the middle of the living room on a red metal folding chair, wearing black pants and a black-and-blue blouse: American clothes, but traditional Hmong colors, the same colors the *txiv neeb* was wearing. A yard of shining black hair fell down her back. Lia sat

on her lap, bare-legged, wearing a striped polo shirt and a diaper. Foua nestled Lia's head in the crook of her neck, smoothing her hair and whispering in her ear. Lia fit into the curves of her mother's body as tightly as a newborn infant.

The *txiv neeb* placed a bundle of spirit-money—Lia's expired life-visa, which he would attempt to renew—on the shoulder of her polo shirt. A Lee cousin waved a live brown chicken in the air. It would be sacrificed for Lia's *bu plig*, her soul-calling: a version of the same ceremony that had installed her soul in her body when she was an infant. After it was boiled, the chicken would be examined to find out if Lia's soul had returned. Tight feet, firm eyes, an upcurled tongue, and a translucent cranium would be good auspices. Of these, the most important sign was the feet. A toe which did not match its mates—which, like a Hmong who failed to conform to the group ethic, did not fit gracefully into its community—would signal disharmony and disequilibrium. The cousin chanted to the chicken:

*I hope your legs are good
I hope your eyes are good
I hope your tongue is good
I hope your beak is good
I hope your head is clear.*

Lia was surrounded by her entire family and by more than twenty of her relatives. Their solicitude converged on her motionless form like sunlight focused by a magnifying glass until it burns. Dee Korda had once said, "Lia knew how to love and how to let people love her." Whatever else she had lost, Lia still knew how to be loved.

Foua kissed Lia's nose and said, "You look very happy!"

One of the cousin's sons took the chicken to the kitchen, quickly sliced its neck, and shook the spurting blood into a plastic garbage bag.

Lia's pig—a bigger, browner one—was carried into the living room, its trotters bound with twine. Because Lia was a girl, her pig was male; their soul-bond would be a kind of marriage. It lay, snorting and struggling, on its plastic tarp. The *txiv neeb* tied a cord around its neck, then wrapped it around the integral unit of Foua and Lia, linking Lia's soul to her mother's as well as to the pig's. He walked the circuit

from pig to Foua-and-Lia many times, shaking his rattle loudly so that Lia's soul, wherever it was, would hear it. Then he beat his gong, again and again, to summon his familiar spirits. Finally, he tossed the polished halves of a water-buffalo horn on the floor to divine whether the spirits had heard him. When both horns landed flat side up, the answer was no; when one horn landed flat side up and one horn landed flat side down, the answer was ambiguous; finally, when both horns landed flat side down, he knew that his spirits had all heard their master's call.

The pig had to be paid for the great gift it was about to give Lia. So the *txiv neeb* took a thick sheaf of spirit-money from the floor next to the altar and placed it next to the pig. Squatting low, he spoke quietly to the pig, explaining that it would be well rewarded for its work and that at the end of the year its soul would be set free from its obligations. He threw the divination horns again to see if the pig had accepted. When they told him yes, he thanked the pig, unwound the cord from the pig's neck and from Foua-and-Lia, and brandished his saber to cut Lia's sickness away. Then he took one of the cups from the altar, poured some water in his mouth, and spat it out, as Shee Yee had done, making a trilling noise.

Prrrrrr.

Prrrrrr.

"These are waters of gold and silver," he said. "They will wash the sickness clean."

Prrrrrr.

From the kitchen came the sound of a knife being sharpened.

Two men lifted the pig onto a pair of folding chairs. Three men held it down. A Lee relative stuck it in the neck. It bellowed and thrashed. Another relative held a stainless steel bowl to catch the blood, but a good deal spattered on the plastic tarp, the carpet, and our bare feet. The *txiv neeb* took the pig's spirit-money and held it in the torrent. The blood would indelibly mark the money as belonging to the pig. Calling his familiar spirits, each by name, the *txiv neeb* touched Lia's back with a finger bell he had moistened with the bloody spirit-money. She, too, would now be marked, and any *dabs* who wished her ill would be barred from touching her.

The *txiv neeb* washed away more sickness.

Prrrrrr.

Then he took the spirit-money from Lia's shoulder and placed it on the flank of the sacrificed pig.

With the blood of the pig on her back, Lia could go anywhere in the world—even hundreds of miles away—and still be recognized as the child who needed healing. Since she no longer needed to be within sight of the *txiv neeb*, Foua carried her into the bedroom, laid her tenderly on the double bed, cushioned her legs with the blue blanket the family had brought from Laos, and turned on an electric fan. Lia's gaze, whatever it saw, was focused upward. Her glossy hair floated in the breeze.

Now the *txiv neeb* was ready for the most dangerous part of his mission. Standing in front of the bench, he flipped part of his cloth headdress over his face, completely blocking his sight. When the veil was down, he was blind to this world but able to perceive the realm of the unseen. The veil—along with the incense, the mesmeric iteration of the gong and rattle, and the *txiv neeb's* own repetitive movements—also helped him enter his ecstatic trance. In Laos he might have used opium, but it was not a necessity. When his familiar spirits were present, he could enter an altered state at will.

The *txiv neeb* sat on Shee Yee's winged horse, crossing and uncrossing his feet on the carpet, doing a rhythmic tap dance as the rattle he held in his right hand and the finger bell he wore on his left hand echoed the sound of his horse's harness bells. Meanwhile, his assistant, a young man who wore black aviator sunglasses, beat the gong to tell the spirits that the journey was beginning. After a little more than half an hour, the assistant placed his hands around the *txiv neeb's* waist. In a single movement, without missing a beat, the *txiv neeb* rose to his feet and jumped backwards onto the bench. All his familiar spirits were in attendance. Without their aid, his body would have been too heavy for such a leap.

At this point, the *txiv neeb* was risking his life. During his trance, his own soul traveled far from his body, and if he fell before his soul returned, he would die. No one, not even the greatest *txiv neeb* in the world, could help him. Even if he did not fall, he might encounter *dabs* on his journey who wanted him dead, and it would take all his might and guile to fight them off.

The *txiv neeb* started to gallop. Sometimes he was on top of the horse, sometimes on the ground. Sometimes he *was* the horse, neigh-

ing and whinnying. He chanted loudly in a minor key, singing ancient incantations that were part Hmong and part Chinese. Even the Lees could not understand him, but they knew he was speaking to his familiar spirits and negotiating with *dabs* for the release of Lia's captive soul.

The front door had been shut for some time, and the room was very hot and close. The air was thick with incense. The gong clanged. The rattle jangled. Someone poured water on the joints of the bench to cool them down. Now the horse was flying up the staircase to the sky. Now the door in the sky was opening. Now the *txiv neeb* was outside Nyong's home. Now he was climbing the mountain to Shee Yee's cave.

While the *txiv neeb* was on his journey, the cousin who had waved the chicken in the air—the soul-caller—opened the front door and stood facing the street. A small table at his feet held the sacrificed chicken, some rice, an egg, and a burning joss stick. In his right hand he held a pair of divination horns, and in his left hand he held a rattle. From time to time he tossed one or the other on the ground, judging the success of his work by the disposition of the horns or the lay of the metal disks.

*I am calling you
I am calling you*

he chanted to Lia's soul.

*I have an egg for you
I have rice for you
I have a chicken for you
I have everything waiting for you.*

Inside the apartment, the spirit-money was burned and sent to the realm of the unseen. The gong sounded. The *txiv neeb's* horse galloped faster and faster. The soul-caller looked out toward East 12th Street and chanted:

*Where are you?
Where have you gone?*

*Are you visiting your brother?
Are you visiting your sister?
Are you visiting your cousin?
Are you looking at a flower?
Are you in Laos?
Are you in Thailand?
Are you in the sky?
Have you gone to the sun?
Have you gone to the moon?
Come home to your house
Come home to your mother
Come home to your father
Come home to your sisters
Come home to your brother
I am calling you!
I am calling you!
Come home through this door
Come home to your family
Come home
Come home
Come home
Come home
Come home
Come home
Come home.*