

Mira T. Lee
from *While We Waited*

We prepared the obituary. Eight years ago Ginny had interned at the *Jersey Herald*, where they'd banished her to the basement to write obits every day for eight weeks. Afterwards, she'd moved into magazines. Now she prepared two versions, one to run in the *Buffalo News*, another for Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*.

Lillian Wei-Ning Chen of Clarence died on _____ at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo after battling leukemia for five years. She was sixty-nine. Born in Shanghai, China, Chen moved to Hong Kong with her family in 1941 when she was six years old. She lived with her three sisters and two brothers inside the Hong Kong Marble Factory, a business started by her father shortly before World War II.

In 1955, Chen received a scholarship to study library science at Simmons College in Boston, where she obtained her master's degree. She obtained another Masters degree in English Literature in 1963 from Columbia University, after writing a dissertation on Virginia Woolf. Four years later, she moved to Clarence, where she raised three children.

In 1980, Chen returned to Hong Kong. During her fifteen-year career at the Hong Kong University Library, Chen headed a project to create a new online cataloguing system that cross-referenced English and Chinese publications, allowing users to access information in both languages by typing in a keyword. She was also in charge of converting the university's card cataloguing system into a searchable computer database.

After retiring in 1997, Chen moved back to her home in Clarence, where she continued her long-time hobby of translating ancient Chinese poems into English. She printed some of the poems inside the many cards and calendars she created using her computer and digital photographs of the flowers in her front garden.

Chen is survived by two daughters, a son, two sisters, two brothers and nine nieces and nephews. A funeral mass will be held for her on _____ at St. Peter & Paul church at 5480 Main Street in Clarence.

Ma's life in five short, clean paragraphs. Just like that.

We threw her a party. On Valentine's Day. A seventieth birthday party, though it wasn't her

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birthday, and she wouldn't make it to seventy. We went through her black spiralled address book and called all her friends. Marcia and Wendy, the small ladies from church. Shirley, the piano teacher. Dr. Wong, the herbalist. Mrs. Wong, his wife. Mr. Tweed, the jolly red-nosed neighbor who took care of her mail when she was out of town, who had prostate cancer now. "Hello? This is Emily... Yes, Lilly Chen's daughter? My sister and I are planning a party for our Mom, a surprise birthday party... I'm sure she'd be so happy if you came..."

We went shopping at Wegmans, upstate New York's pride and joy, a mega-supermarket that carried the freshest produce, finest international coffees and gourmet olives for a blue collar budget. We bought fresh-baked cookies, heart shaped, with red sprinkles, and cheese plates with three colors of cheddar. And vegetable trays, and napkins, and plastic forks, and Pepsi and corn chips and orange juice and grapes and balloons and crackers and streamers and strawberries. And a dark chocolate layer cake with pink frosted roses that said "Happy Seventieth Birthday, Ma!" We strode through the parking lot with our shopping cart piled high, maneuvering past SUVs, dodging small children, our two dozen red and white helium-filled balloons bouncing, straining towards the sky. *Make way for us!* we announced to the world. *Make way, we're having a party!*

We surprised her. She was really, truly surprised. And she was happy. She glowed. "A birthday party, for me?" she kept saying, over and over again. Auntie Ling sang the loudest. Cousin Janice helped cut the cake. "Happy birthday, Ma!" we said. "Happy birthday, Ah Lilly!" relatives said. "Happy birthday, honey!" the nurses said. "Happy birthday, Mrs. Chen!" the handsome young Indian doctor said. Her brother from Chicago called. "They're having a birthday party," for me, she said. "A seventieth birthday party, for me." She said hello to everybody. She said thank you for coming. "Thank you for coming to my last party on earth," she whispered. Guests overflowed into the hallway, but no one seemed to mind – celebrations

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were rare in this wing. Ginny and I took pictures. Ma, with faded johnny draped over a liver-spotted shoulder. Ma, with thin wisps of grey and white hair barely covering her scalp. Ma, with clear tubes hanging down the side of her neck, chaining her to the tall metal IV pole that had treated, tortured, disinfected, nourished, monitored and followed her everywhere like a stray dog, for one hundred and fifty-eight days. She hated that IV pole. “Smile, Ma!” Click. And then she said goodbye. “Goodbye. Thank you for coming. Thank you so much for coming.” We trickled out, and the room fell quiet. The doctors removed her lines. And surrounded by twenty four lovely red and white balloons, she waited to die.