

Prologue: “Brain Child”

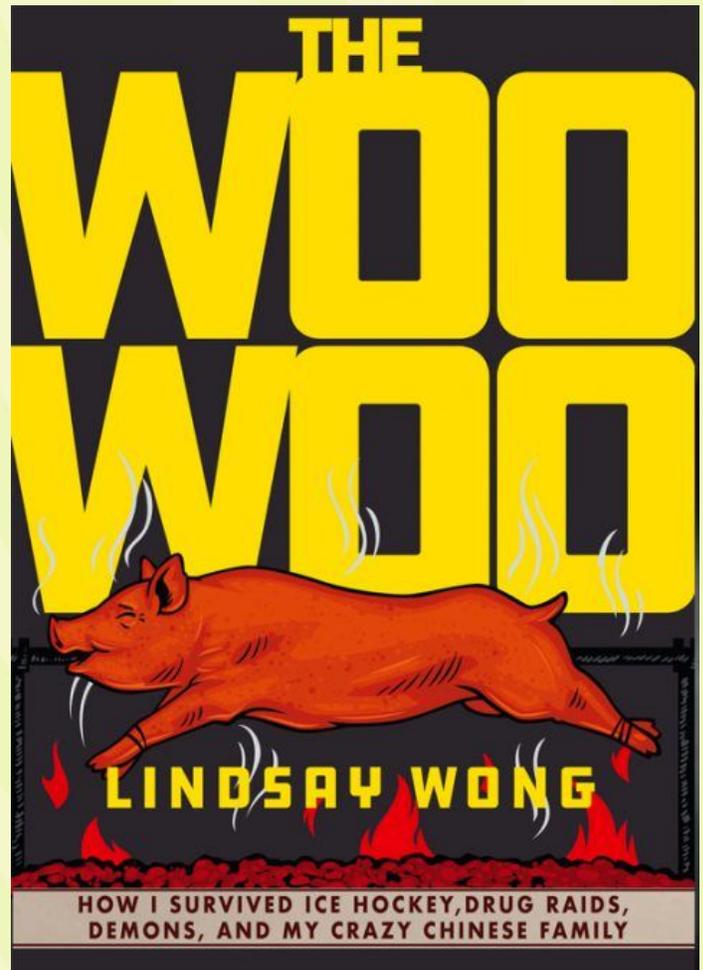
“Miss Wong, you are seriously ill,” the neurologist in a midtown office said, preparing to offer me a sympathy tissue. But I was dry-eyed and benignly frosty, my way of responding to shitty news. It wasn’t like me to fake a ladylike smile, or even to cry.

“The visual disturbances aren’t going away,” he continued, as if he were delivering a lecture in one of my writing workshops at Columbia University. “Migraine-related vestibulopathy isn’t like having a cold. Objects and people are going to float around you. You’re going to see bright auras. You’re going to feel like you’re moving when no one else is. This means that you could have vertigo for the rest of your life. You might have to spend many more months in bed. I don’t even know if you’ll get your ability to read back. You might not be able to finish school. What this means is that you have to start thinking about your future.”

There was a dramatic, intentional pause — the kind that customer service representatives and people speaking at funerals like to use.

“Have you thought about who will look after you? Do you have any family that you can go to?”

I was twenty-two years old and had been on my own in New York City for four months, a good 2,000 miles away from my crazy Chinese family, who were still exorcising fake demons — the Woo-Woo — they called them, from anyone whose opinion they flagrantly disliked. That had included me, and it looked like the Woo-Woo had caught me anyway.



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This was normal in our family, who believed that mental illness, or any psychological disturbance, was caused by demonic possession. The Woo-Woo ghosts were sometimes responsible for cancers, unexplainable viruses, and various skin afflictions like mild psoriasis.

Growing up, my superstitious mother always believed that going to the bathroom alone could lead to possession, whereas my father said any emotional weakness would bring on symptoms not unlike those dramatically thwarted in *The Exorcist*. “Lindsay, you cry and your eyeball will fall off,” he would explain seriously, while clutching his head like he was having a moderate seizure. “Ghosts use any opportunity to possess you, okay? Don’t be weak, or it’s game over for you.”

According to the neurologist, I had an extraordinary disease with no cure and a mysterious source. My brain was one hell of a light-headed mess. Electrical nerves had somehow gotten tangled and unplugged from their loose sockets. The feral wiring had somehow gotten wet and the damage had zapped the pupils and left me scrambling to understand why everyone and everything was jumping and leaping in polar directions; why the sky sometimes swapped with the versatile ground; why I had fallen face down in his office when he asked me to walk in a straight line.

My vestibular case (migraine-associated vertigo, or MAV) was particularly rare (unlike anything the doctor had ever treated), and he seemed impressed by how severe my symptoms were and very excited to investigate my monstrous head. In Canada, I had not been able to get off the waiting list to see a decent neurologist, but in New York City, you could book one on a Sunday afternoon in less than forty-eight hours — a mind-shocking luxury of American health care, which I was happy to have access to as a student.

The neurologist thought I’d be particularly thrilled to know that a famous pop star, Janet Jackson, shared this exclusive brain disorder with me. How nice to know that I was officially un-Woo, I thought, though he was diagnosing me with a lifelong disorder which left me confined to bed and frequently unable to read or write. I had a disease that gave me strange visual hallucinations like my severely schizophrenic grandmother on my mother’s side whom we called Poh-Poh. I had a brain affliction, which made me feel like I was falling with a broken parachute and coated my vision with a dirty angelic glow. For several months now, for twenty-four hours a day, the intensity of these visions and nausea had worsened. I could not sleep. I could not eat. I frequently shat myself when I could not make it to the bathroom on time.

“Well,” I said, “you never want to have anything in common with the Jacksons.”

And that was all I said to him in our three-hour examination that wasn’t related to my bizarre symptoms.

I must have taken my diagnosis remarkably well, because the doctor looked a bit startled by my comment, and I had waved away every tissue. The truth was: I was in shock. I had been trained not to cry in front of strangers; I was trained not to “boo-hoo” — as my father called it — at all. “Crying will turn you into a zombie like Mommy,” he would often announce, making the cuckoo sign around his earlobe whenever he referenced the wild breakdowns on my mother’s side. In our family, crying was considered contagious; it made you extremely vulnerable to the Woo-Woo ghosts,

which was why, as an older teenager and then an adult, I became too scared to cry, convincing myself that I did not suffer from any extraordinary affliction of sadness.

There was no cure for my disease, the neurologist said, but we might be able to control it by experimenting with a concoction of epilepsy drugs and beta blockers and anti-anxiety medication; eventually, we'd concoct a potent mixture that "might make things better." There would be blood and stool tests every month, and the side effects would include balding, epic constipation, weight gain, liver destruction, hearing deficiencies, kidney failure, migraines, etc.

Of course, he had no idea that the childhood I had survived in my neighbourhood of meth labs and pot grow-ops, and — the most dangerous of all — my crazy parents, made this look like a cakewalk.

I had stopped listening to the neurologist, and I saw myself being chemically dissolved, every part of my body disfigured, just so they could stabilize my brain, whose instability — my father had already explained when I was sent to special ed in elementary school for not speaking English — was caused by my low IQ. Born from the extreme darkness of the Chinese loony bin by way of Vancouver, I had been already diagnosed by my parents as "crazy." To freeze the vertigo, the neurologist had to Botox the rambunctious nerves in my head, which had previously defined me as "slow" and "dumb-thinking."

I had never acknowledged that there were other genetic diseases, besides mental illness, that affected the structure and neurons of the brain.

After all, how could I? My mother said that if I left home, an angry ghost would murder me. My father said that if I demonstrated stupidity or vulnerability in my graduate studies at Columbia University, New York City would make my brain implode violently. Of course, what made it dark and frightening and semi-prophetic was here, coming true in a doctor's office.

I hadn't begun a separate, Woo-Woo-less life yet. I had no close personal connections or relationships or hatever normal people in their early twenties were supposed to cultivate, at least no one who would look after me, and I was being sent back to my childhood home. New York had been disorienting — Americans, especially ones my age, were obsessed with discussing their feelings and always wanted to know how you felt, enthusiastically greeting you at least a dozen times a day. My Columbia classmates, roommates, and professors had seemed to me obscenely Santa Claus-like, unreasonably cheerful, and I didn't know where one crazy ended and the other began.

Not to mention, I had no money. And I worried that my untrustworthy brain — defined by my father as the Woo-Woo — meant that I was not employable. At the risk of sounding nauseatingly self-pitying or self-important and even a little tragic, just after leaving the doctor's office, the news that I had a rare form of migraine vestibulopathy snapped me. At first disbelieving and disoriented, I finally let myself break into insect-sized pieces of sludgy sadness and disgusted, paroxysmal rage. I became a nasty vortex as I stalked around the midtown shops, as the vertigo, sensing my dark mood, began to swirl faster and transformed me into a gloomy human

cyclone. Miserable, I elbowed a woman in front of me for walking too slow, but this didn't make me feel much better.

At the subway station at Columbus Circle, I surprised myself by suddenly having a first-rate cry. I didn't know what the hell was wrong with me. I hunched on the people-swarmed stairway and wailed so much I thought my eyes must have been bleeding. So I cleared out my clogged eyeballs. The water had probably been sloshing around for decades and frying my disgruntled nerves in their sockets. Yes, that was it. I needed to cry to clean out my dirty, robotic system.

Even though I had done my best to reinvent myself, I still felt that I was something with the emotional capabilities of a second-hand appliance. Here I was, trying my best not to excavate my tumultuous childhood, but it had soccer-kicked me in the ass.