



Melissa's father, who ended up making a life in the US



'I want to pick that little boy up'

Melissa Fu treasures a photo of her dad taken before he fled war in China

A toddler sits in a toy car, bundled in a padded silk jacket, too big for him, wearing a miniature driver's cap. In the background is a haze of trees. It is 1933 in China; cars are an extravagance. A toy car, especially so. Most likely, this is at a photography studio, and the boy is having his picture taken for a special occasion. On his face is an expression equal parts bewilderment and trust.

The photo is oddly prophetic. Not long after it was taken, sparks from ongoing conflicts between the Chinese and Japanese would burst into full-scale war. This boy and his family, along with millions of other Chinese people, would be thrust into years of chaos and displacement.

Only he, his mother and his uncle would survive, eventually making it to Taiwan. And of those three, he, alone, would travel to the US to make a life and family there.

I remember the first time I saw this picture. I was around eight. Always

a nosy child, I was rooting around in my father's sock drawer and found it. When I brought him it, he just laughed and said, 'That's me!' The next time I looked in the drawer, the photo wasn't there.

Even then, my father was secretive about his past, evading our questions about his early life. By the time he and my mother had settled in New Mexico, he was reluctant to travel anywhere – the farthest from home he would willingly

go was to the Chinese grocery. He was much more interested in putting down roots, literally. I remember him continually trying to plant fruit trees

in our arid back garden. There were so many attempts – cherry, peach, apricot – they never seemed to take.

By contrast, I grew up with itchy feet. For as long as I can remember, I've had a wanderlust for travel and a thirst to hear other people's stories – especially those who were immigrants or children of immigrants. Perhaps this curiosity about other cultures, and other lives, culminated in my husband and I deciding

to move to the UK, nearly 16 years ago.

I next saw this photo in early 2019, near the end of my father's life. By this time, I was immersed in writing a novel based loosely on his experiences. Through research, I had filled in the gaps created by his reticence, and I had an appreciation of how extraordinary his life was. The photo became even more precious. Determined not to lose it again, I slipped it in my pocket, where it would inspire me as I continued writing.

Now when I look at this picture, I want to pick that little boy up, hug him, kiss his chubby cheeks. I want to say hold on. Hold on tight, dear one. You're going to go far. At times, you might be alone and bewildered, but trust that you'll make it in the end. There will be great loss, yes, but there will also be great joy. There will be love. There will be children and grandchildren. There will be peaches.

✦ Melissa Fu's debut novel, *Peach Blossom Spring* is published by Wildfire Books on 17 March.

