[Snap Judgment intro]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** In order to just maintain, to live my life, I kind of tricked myself to the series of choices. Red jackets or green jacket, oatmeal or toast. Just to get the blood flowing. And, yeah, some of the choices get harder. Is today the day you tear the band aid off that conversation you do not want to have or not? Pay this overdue bill or that overdue bill? When I'm trying to trick myself, framing is everything. Is your lazy behind going to get to the gym or not? "Hey, I'm not lazy." "Then go to the gym. Do you you’re your mother?" "Of course, I love my mama." "Then call her." I know full well that this is a simplification. A game that my universe of what to do at any given moment is not binary, it's infinite. But engaging this game feels safer, feels more comforting, far less bewildering than the fact that [scoffs] I don't have to play.

[upbeat music]

Today, on Snap Judgment, we proudly present Ping, a story about one woman who chooses to play a different game altogether. My name is Glynn Washington, and you've made the best choice of all, by listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music continues]

Snappers, what happens when dreams come true? Since she was five years old, Ping knew she wanted to go to college. But in China, the Cultural Revolution began. So, books were burned, schools were shut down, and Ping wouldn't have it. She educated herself in underground book clubs from third grade to high school, all for the biggest out-of-reach dream, college. But Ping surprised herself, because she not only got into college, she got into Beijing University, the Harvard of China. Ping continued to dream. She wanted to be a college professor in poetry, creative writing. And she kept her head down in school and just a week shy of graduating, someone else had other dreams for Ping. Snap Judgment.

[somber music]

**Ping:** Beijing University was the best university in China, and it was a miracle for me to get in. And I really didn't want to waste any minute [chuckles] to date any man. I never dated any man. Of course, I knew I wanted kids, but I never imagined my future husband. And then suddenly, my husband dropped from the sky. [laughs]

[dramatic music]

A week before I actually graduated from Beijing University, I was sleeping soundly, and then suddenly [knock on the door] the concierge lady just pounded on my daughter to say, "Wang Ping, get up and answer the phone." There was only one phone in the entire building, that was for hundreds of girls. I was sleeping on the upper bunk bed. So, I just came down, stumbled toward the door into the concierge ladies' room. I got into her room, which is also her bedroom and opened the iron little window, which was locked usually, and the phone was locked inside her room on her desk. So, I reached and got my phone and I said, "Hello."

Then, I heard his voice. And he said, "I'm [unintelligible [00:05:18]. You remember me, right? I'm your classmate from Hangzhou Foreign Languages School." I didn't know him much except I had this image of this very naughty boy, lazy boy, [chuckles] a goofy boy. He's also very handsome. And then, he said, "I wrote to you like four years ago when you just got into Beijing University. I wanted to be your boyfriend. You asked me to wait until you graduated." And I said, "Huh?" [chuckles] I barely remembered what he wrote, and he said, "Ping, will you marry me?" [chuckles] I said, "What?" [laughs] And he said, "I'm coming to China. I'm coming back to China to marry you. And just wait for me." Then, he just hung up on the phone. I put down the phone and walked back in a daze. I was still half asleep. I have no idea what just had happened. So, I just forgot about it.

I had one day before I graduated. I was reading a book. All the girls were laughing, telling each other stories, and I was just lying on my top bunk bed and reading a book. And then, someone just said, "Hey, Ping, you've got someone looking for you." And my God, I couldn't believe my eyes. This is the guy from six years ago from Hangzhou Foreign Languages School.

[lively music]

And still very, very more handsome, actually. Wearing the jeans, which is very fashionable in Beijing at that time. So, to see someone wearing those jeans is quite the most fashionable thing. I try not to be too excited, but I almost fell off my bunk bed, [chuckles] coming down. And I said, "Oh, you're here." He said, "Yes, I'm here. Let's go get married." I said, "What?" He said, "I've loved you all these years since the first time I laid my eyes on you. I wanted to marry. But you have been ignoring me all these years. I waited all these years. You didn't know that, right?" I said, "No, I did not know, because I overheard you guys rate my looks, and you called me just B and B minus. So, why should I pay attention? I know I'm an ugly girl. I grew up being called ugly girl. So, I don't care. So, I just want to be a good student. So, why you come all the way from Germany to marry me?" And he said, "Well, every boy in that classroom wanted to marry you. You didn't know that." And I said, "No, I didn't. I never dated any man." So, he said, "Well, I'm here. You promised and you would marry me. Let's go." And I thought about it. And I thought, like, "Here this man, tall, handsome, good looking, and coming all the way from Germany." My heart was just flushed and flooded with emotions I never felt before.

Then, he also told me he wanted to take me to Germany to study abroad, and that is almost impossible for Chinese to go abroad to study. That was everyone's dream. He was like a prince on a white horse, coming to fetch me and promise to take me to a paradise. And I looked around and some girls were just staring at me. When I didn't say, "Let's go," they're just like, "Ping, go get married, and go to Germany. [laughs] Didn't you hear this man is going to take you to Germany? Are you like stupid or something?" Everyone was cheering and cheering, and I just thought that it's so much pressure, and so much confusion. And at the same time, I feel really, really moved. He swung me, and so I said, "Yes." [applause] And everyone, girls were cheering, "Yay, Ping's getting married. Ping's going to Germany."

[applause]

I just wrote a letter to my mom and dad, "I'm getting married, [laughs] and I'm going to Germany." That's it. We went to the police station nearby, and that's how people get married, to go and register. I was wearing like the only shirt I had. So, the woman was very kind, and she registered us. And then, she said, "Where's the marriage candy?" Getting married is a big thing in all cultures. Especially in China, you're supposed to have like three days of banquets. At least, the least you could do is bring some candy to sweeten things up. And I have no idea, I never even dated a man. [laughs] We got the marriage paper, and then my husband would say, "I will give you candy when we come back for divorce." It was supposed to be a joke, I knew he meant it as a joke. Just when I heard that, my face just turned ashen. And I thought, "Whoa. This is not good luck words to say." [nervous chuckle] Then, he said, "Let's go to the sacred Buddhist mountain in Sichuan called Mount Emei for honeymoon." I said, "Whoa, honeymoon?" And I asked him, like, "How long?" And he said, "It'll be at about one month's honeymoon." I said, "Well, in three weeks, I have to start working. So, I need to ask my boss if I could come back a week later."

[somber music]

The new job I was about to start meant everything for me, and for every Chinese. At that time in China, in order to have a place to live, you have to have a job.

[somber music]

I just got a job in a translation company in Beijing. They promised once I started working on September 1st, I would have my own room. I would have my coupons to buy food. Everything in China was rationed. You need coupon for rice, for oil, for salt, for sugar, for clothes. And without a job, then you are nothing and nobody.

We went there. Actually, he brought me a very nice shirt. The collar kind of like draped down and showed a little bit of my chest. And I went there, and my new boss saw the new shirt. I could tell she was not happy to see me wearing [laughs] such a fashionable-- they call it like very unserious and not unprofessional shirt outfit.

I told her that I just got married, and this is my new husband. She congratulated me, and then said, "I may need a little bit extra time because we're going on the honeymoon. And after two or three years, I would like to go to Germany to live with my husband." My husband was immediately like muttering protest. "No, two, three years. That's way too long. I want you to come with me, preferably this time with me. Come with me." When my boss heard that, she just said, "Oh, in that case, why don't you just go to Germany now? You don't need to come to work." She fired me on the spot. She said, "Even if you worked for me, it's very difficult for the company to get a good student from Beijing University. And we fought very, very hard to get you, and we were given just one spot, and you took it, and then you leave, then we lose this opportunity. We're not going to get this another chance again. But if you don't come, we can go back to Beijing University, we can ask for another quota." And I understood, so I didn't try to argue with her. And I just started crying. I immediately felt the weight of that decision, the consequence of that. I had my husband, he was going back to Germany after the honeymoon. And I had no idea when my visa will come through. What was I supposed to do when I had no place to stay?

My husband said, "Don't worry, don't worry. Let's go to honeymoon. And then, we'll immediately start applying your visa for Germany. You know we'll see how things go."

[train engine running]

[dramatic music]

Next day, we took the train, and went to Sichuan, and started climbing Mount Emei. From the bottom, it's almost like a rainforest. So, a lot of greens, lot of woods, some big woods. And then as we go up higher, it changes. The trail was narrow, but we managed to walk together, shoulder by shoulder. So, I thought, as a honeymoon, we would probably share a room, but he seemed not that interested.

[snoring]

I stayed with 10 other women, snoring like crazy, and I couldn't sleep well. And my husband stayed [chuckles] 10 other men. I wondered where he was and why we're not together. I was already a little bit upset, because this is supposed to be a honeymoon. So, I thought he might be still a student, and he probably spent all his money on the airplane ticket. I was a little bit annoyed on the third day, and we're talking about the full moon, and the full moon was still up in the sky. As we were walking and looking at the full moon, and that was a little bit sentimental. And I just said, "The moon in Chinese culture represented the unity, union, romance and love." I was about to say, "I wish we had stayed in the same room together." That's where I was trying to go. And he basically just said, "Just a stupid moon." I said, "No. The moon is so important for us. The moon calendar, the Chinese civilization, and our calendar is moon calendar. And how could you call them stupid? It's nothing." He finally got mad. He called me stupid. And when I get mad, I just stop talking. I just stopped talking to him. And he just stomped away, and he refused to apologize. And I stomped away, and I was really mad. I grew up being called stupid, dumb and stubborn, like a donkey. So, that really got me. I know I'm not stupid. I may be ugly, and I may be socially inept, but I know I'm not stupid, because I always got A's. I would not allow anyone to call me stupid to my face.

Before at least, we were walking shoulder to shoulder, that day he was walking with other people. I was walking with other people. And then the next day, we tried to talk and ended up in another stupid argument. Every time we tried to reconcile, we started arguing. I started doubting, is this what marriage is about? This seems like suck. [laughs] It doesn't seem like that much fun, actually. I was worried how to get along with him in Germany.

[sentimental music]

Next day, I tried to [sighs] reconcile was him and try to bring up other subjects, actually my dream to study in America. I really like literature. I like poetry. I like art. Then, he told me, "Well, one has to eat first, right?" And he basically said, "No, you're going to Germany, and studying business and help me with business. We're going to make money." And I can't argue with my husband. What am I supposed to do? He is right. He is paying for everything, and I have no money to pay for this honeymoon. What could I say, except to be quiet, and walk behind him?

[bird chirping]

He was walking ahead of me. We were going through this beautiful bamboo woods, and just really green and really lush. He was walking like 10 yards ahead of me and I was walking behind him. Suddenly, a group of gigantic monkeys surrounded me. [monkeys making noises] The head monkey is very big. He was taller than me. [monkey screeching] So, I tried to raise my stick to scare them away. And that was a huge mistake. He screamed, and then he was on top of me. [monkey screeching] And all the other monkeys were on top of me. Pulling my legs, pulling my hair, scratching me. And I tried to fight them off with my stick. And then, the alpha monkey bit my leg so hard, and I just screamed. And then, I looked up, I saw my husband standing like a few yards away, laughing. I was furious and just thought, "Come," and I screamed, "Help. Come, help me. Get rid of the monkeys, pull them off me." And he was just laughing like idiot. He will not come close to me.

Finally, I think those monkeys took the peanuts from my backpack, and that's their goal. That's all they wanted from me, the peanuts from my backpack. Then suddenly, they just vanished. They were gone. They came so suddenly, they were gone so suddenly. I got up and my leg was bleeding heavily. I could barely walk. He just said, "Are you okay?" I said nothing. I was really, really mad at him. So, I just walked by him and just limped to the destination to our hotel.

[sad music]

**Glynn:** Snappers, Ping and her husband have been fighting all the way up this honeymoon mountain. Before we climb after them, we'll take a short break. Stay tuned.

[somber music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to the Ping episode. Now, Ping just fought off a band of monkeys on her own. All the while, her husband laughed in the corner. And now, she's headed to the hotel to spend the rest of her honeymoon with the man she just married. Snap Judgment.

**Ping:** We got there, and it was about the dinnertime, but I had to clean up. My jeans were just soaked in blood. I took them off, then I soaked my jeans in the basin outside in the tap water. My husband came out, and he looked a little bit sad. He looked like as if he wanted to reconcile with me. He threw his dirty socks and his dirty underwear into my basin where my bloody jeans were. He said, "Wash it for me." Something inside me just exploded. I understood his motive. It's an intimate gesture for traditional Chinese men, for the wife to wash.

My husband needed a woman who would quietly cook, wash, do housework, and raise children. I always knew I wanted to have kids, and think of my husband, but not in this kind of fashion. I said, "Why don't you wash your own socks and underwear?" I just took them out, washed my jeans and then went back to my own room with other woman, and spent a sleepless night. I could not sleep at all.

We got up at 3:00 AM, we went to the peak. That was the most glorious scene. I was with one crowd, and my husband was with another crowd. We watched this magnificent sunrise. Just the sun rise little by little out of this mist ocean.

Then, when it's all over, I walked towards him. I told him, "I'm going down the mountain. I'm going back to Beijing. I am not going to Germany with you." And he thought about it, he said, "You're probably right. We're not meant for each other. We're not made for each other." Then I said, "Can we just file divorce right now, and I can just bring that divorce paper down with me so I'm free again?" And he thought about it, he said, "Well, when you go back as a single woman, you will encounter a lot of great difficulties. First of all, you don't even have a place to live, and you have no money, you have no food to eat, because you lost your job already. Do you know where you're going to stay?" I said, "That's none of your business now. I will figure it out."

Then, I turned and walked down the mountain by myself. I was just sobbing all the way down the mountain. I was crying in the train, and I was telling myself, "You're such a failure, Ping. A loser. It's supposed to be such an ideal marriage and you messed it up, and now you are homeless. You don't have a job. You don't have a place. You don't have money. You don't have food to eat. What are you going to do?"

I got my baggage. It was not easy. They almost arrested me [chuckles] for trespassing, but I finally got my baggage, and also my bike. I just biked around, and I spent the winter in Beijing from abandoned building to another. Every once a week, I will go back to Beijing University, to that concierge lady and asked her if I got mail, she would always grumpily give me my mail. And the one day, I found this mail. I got this mail from German Embassy that I got the visa. I was really hungry, I was very cold, and I was homeless. I have no future. And here the door to paradise is wide open to me. The normal people would say, "Yeah, I'm going to Germany." I didn’t speak a word of German, and without the language, I couldn't work. I have to go to him, stay with him. But I chose not to go. So, I chose homeless. [chuckles] It was my stubborn nature.

[sentimental music]

**Glynn:** So, what happened to Ping? Everyone wants to know. Well, Ping did eventually make it out of that cold, Beijing winter, became Professor Emeritus in cold, snowy Minnesota. She's an award-winning poet who's published 15 books. And this next clip I'm going to play for you is Ping onstage performing a piece from one of those books, might even recognize some of the elements from the story we just heard. But listen, for additional details about what happened after she came down from the mountain, Ping Wang with the poem, *Flash of Selfish Consciousness*.

**Ping:** *Flash of Selfish Consciousness*. This poem is for the memory of Cultural Revolution. I grew up there since I was eight years old. For 10 years, I have to write self-criticism every day in my family, at home, and in school, wherever I was at the time. Since I came here, I never have to do it. And sometimes, I did feel kind of nostalgic.

[laughter]

**Ping:** It's easy to do a good deed here and there, but a different matter to keep it up daily. For evil has many faces, and we must dig into the bottom of the soul to catch flashes of selfish consciousness as Mao urged us in his red treasure book. "It hurts, but it's good to be hurt from time to time," says my Chinese doctor, digging, elbowing and knee into the acupuncture spots of the body. The body twitches and aches and screams. With a serene smile on his face, the doctor says, "Pain awakens of the heart and keeps it in good shape."

When I was seven, I became crazy about roshambo, five spice beans. My grandma would give me only two or three each time. Five, if I was good. I began to steal coins from under her pillow, one at a time. When I got 57 coins, I went to the store and bought half a kilogram of the beans. I took the bag to the kitchen and put it onto the greasy table. I put my arms around the pile. This was all mine. I didn't have to share it with anyone else. I didn't have to pretend to be a selfless daughter or elder sister. I could eat it quickly or slowly, standing or sitting or lying down, any manner I fancied. I could throw or give it away. I was the master of these beans. The kitchen was dark. The sun was shimmering in the sky of the summer noon. The beans smelled seductive. I filled my mouth with a handful and chewed until my jaws ached and numbed. Tears roll down as I thought, "Ah, life is so good, and wouldn't it be better if no one ever woke up from their nap to interrupt my happiness?"

[mild laughs]

Happiness is as much as anything an illusion, a hypothesis or process of overcoming a series of pains. The sensation of feeling uprooted and floating, or stuck in the present, unable to move back or forward. You say too bad, women don't give you a chance. But do I really want the chance? You placed your hand on my shoulder, your eyes, the look of an animal. One day, I asked, "Mother, something's wrong with me. I feel dizzy and nauseous. My joints hurt like hell. My face burns, and I'm pissing blood." "Too much sex, my dear daughter."

[mild laughs]

"Mother, I just got fired from my job. My writing was rejected, and I might lose my apartment in the summer. What's going on?" "Sex brings bad luck. How many times do I need to tell you?"

[mild laughs]

"Mother, my days are now filled with despair, and my nights taken over by fever and bouts of sweat. I can't make friends with women. Men dumped me for lack of tenderness. Mother, I think I'm going insane." "This is the last time I say this, daughter. Sex is the root of all sickness and evil deeds. Look at me. Since your father's death, I got my house back and my eternal happiness."

[laughter]

[lively music]

**Glynn:** It was poet, Ping Wang, performing an excerpt from her award-winning work. Thank you so much, Ping, for sharing your story. We'll have links to Ping's work on our website, *snapjudgment.org.* That original score was by Daniel Riera. It was produced by Annie Nguyen.

[upbeat music]

Now, in just a moment, the serenade of a lifetime. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington. Now, our next story comes to us from our friends at The Nocturnists. And in it, family medicine physician, Catherine Forest, tells us about a hospital experience that transported her back to her childhood.

[upbeat music]

**Catherine:** Of course, it was the ER nurse that figured it out. This motherly Ukrainian woman sidles up to me and pats my belly, [in Ukrainian accent] "You're with child, no?"

[chuckles]

How did she know? Only two days before I've been hiding in the nurse's bathroom in the ER, propped up in the stall with a pregnancy test in my hand, waiting to see what I was going to find. And when that second pink dot lit up that I was pregnant, I practically screamed holding it in. But that was going to be a secret. You see, this was the 1980s. And to my knowledge, there'd been only one woman at my university, which shall be named Unnamed, that had had a baby in training and hadn't dropped out of medicine completely. The nurse promised me she wouldn't tell anyone. But whenever I came into the emergency room, she gave me that knowing look. This was Mount Zion Hospital. It's in a neighborhood that at that time was largely Eastern European and Russian. We had mostly immigrants for our patients.

I remember this one feisty, older Hungarian woman who had life-size posters of the 49ers in her room and would page me overhead excitedly when she found out that I was from Hungarian heritage. And when I got there, we were all about Roger Craig and Joe Montana's latest play, but mainly, she just wanted to pinch my cheek [foreign language], just like my Hungarian grandparents. It was really a sweet and wonderful time in so many ways.

The morning I found out that I was pregnant, I had admitted a 92-year-old Russian woman to our service. I was a third-year medical student on the team and she'd had a stroke and was in a coma and unresponsive. Her son comes walking up and tells me and the intern, [in Russian accent] "We want her to have dignity," he says. And the intern looks blankly at him, [foreign language] he says, "We want the friend to come visit [unintelligible 00:40:21]," and the intern's completely clueless. But I could hear English in anyone's speech. In fact, when I was nine years old is when I figured out that my grandparents didn't speak English like other people. [chuckles] I thought that's just how older people spoke.

[laughter]

My friends would come over, and I'd be translating English into English. [chuckles] When this 92-year-old woman was there and her son was trying to speak with us, I could step in and translate. And I did. I was able to say that this woman had a living will. The family wanted her to live and that a special guest would be coming that evening. "It is Isaac Stern," he says. Isaac Stern. [chuckles] Only the greatest violinist of that time. My jaw drops. But my classical musician's heart leapt two octaves. So later that night, quite late, this older balding, sick band comes striding up to the nursing station with his worn violin case. And I go to meet him. "I would like to find Mrs. Bina." I'm making up her name. I'm completely speechless because I recognize Isaac Stern.

We walked down the hallway. A nighttime hospital is a sacred place and really quite odd. There's that blue light from rooms from people watching TV. There's the sound of canned laughter and mechanical sounds of respirators. The nurses are all different places charting, but there are no visitors. Together, we walk down the hall, and he says, "Maestro taught me everything I know about music, everything I know. And she was like a mother to me." I say, "Well, she's not awake right now. But we know that hearing is the most primitive of the senses. And if you can communicate with her, you'll be able to connect, you should feel free to do that." We arrive at the door and he says, "Is it okay if I play violin?" [laughs]

[laughter]

"Absolutely," I say. And then, I realize, "Is it okay if I listen?" And he says, "Yes." I take his hand, and we walk into her room together. There's my patient with her head on the pillow, her face sagging, looking ashen. And there's Isaac Stern, transparent with emotion. I say, "Isaac Stern is here to play some music for you." He takes his violin out of the case and begins to tune up, and I step out of the hallway. And I sink down onto the floor, hands on knees to listen.

[violin playing]

When I was just a kid, my brother and I used to climb under the piano of my grandfather. My grandfather and my father were playing four-hands piano versions of symphonies, and we felt like we were inside that piano, like the music was part of us.

[violin continues playing]

As Isaac started to play, this Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto that I know so well, but never have I heard played like this. Tears are just streaming down my face. And I feel my grandfather actually with me. Beautiful, beautiful, I'm just crying.

After about 30 minutes, Isaac Stern comes out of the room with wonder his eyes and he says, "She opened her eyes. She looked at me." I looked at him. He looked at me. We held hands. I looked in his eyes, and he knew that I knew what had happened. I stepped inside to see my patient, Mrs. Bina, and there she was peaceful looking. A couple hours later, she died. That night as I climbed into my bed, I felt actually completely at peace in the universe. I had heard celestial music being played, and I was very excited about this life inside me. And I just hoped with all my heart that my child would be able to experience music the way I had that night just coursing through my body.

The next morning, I get up, put on my lab coat, get off to morning rounds, reach into my pocket, pull out those index cards. Yeah, index cards, and Mrs. Bina's is blank. "She died in the evening," I said. But what I longed to say was that I learned something really important about human connection, and that Isaac Stern's music had made the most beautiful death possible for this person.

[applause]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** That story, Dying to Tchaikovsky, came to us from The Nocturnists podcast. It was told by Catherine Forest, MD. The Nocturnists are vibrant community of healthcare workers who are celebrating their humanity through storytelling. They have live performances, a podcast, and so much more. The Nocturnists is hosted by Emily Silverman, produced by Emily Silverman and Marina Poole. Story Development by Adelaide Papazoglou, sound engineering by Alberto Hernandez. Assistant Producing by Kirk Klocke. Original theme music by Yosef Munro, additional music by Blue Dot Sessions. Learn more about The Nocturnists on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

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Snap was brought to you by the team that greets each day with a smile. Except for the uber producer Mark Ristich, he greets each day blaming random people for hiding his keys. Check your pants, [unintelligible [00:48:23]. Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Regina Bediako, Davey Kim, Bo Walsh, David Exumé, and Annie Nguyen.

Well, this is not the news, no way this is news. In fact, at a kid's party, you could pull a rabbit out of a hat only to realize, this is not a hat, and that certainly isn't a rabbit. All of this, and you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.