

**March 18th, 1884**

My dearest Chen Ai,

Dad misses you and *Mama*. The boat ride here was hard - and the trek to our first construction site was harder. Your uncle Li, who arrived early, misses you too. He says he doesn't wish you here, but... Don't tell him I said this, but at night, he gazes at a picture of you and your *Yi Ma*.

I'm far from home, my *baobei*, working on something they call the "*Transcontinental Railroad*." The government says it's the future, a path to prosperity for our land. They promised a better life for families like ours, but, oh, the cost to get here.... This country's promises are echoing in the air. They tell tales of cities flourishing along the tracks and children like you reaping the rewards of a new, modern nation. I hope this is all true. I hope you get to see what I'm building one day.

Tomorrow, we will be passing by a town. I will try to mail you the Canadian comics you asked for before I left. I saved up 50 cents so I can buy you lots! My new friend, Robert, can lend me some more if I don't have enough cash.

How are you doing in school? Have you been eating well? Send me a picture of you and *Mama*, okay?

With all my love,

Dad

**June 4th, 1884**

My dear Chen Ai,

I hope this letter finds you and *Mama* well. The days here are a whirlwind blend, unlike the quaint routine of *Shandong*, and it feels like an eternity since I left you. I miss you very much, *baobei*, and the peace you brought to my life. We've made progress on the railroad, but your Uncle Li has stayed behind in the last town we stopped at. When you get this letter, can you tell *Yi Ma* I'll be sending her his savings?

Robert, my friend from the camp, says hello. He's been generous enough to lend me some money so I could buy those Canadian comics you wanted. Maybe they will bring a smile to your face. It's the least I can do to make up for my absence.

It's noisy here in the camp, unlike anything in our town. Men from all around me protest and cause uproar because of the wages. I worry about the safety of everyone here, but I wish they would settle down. At heart, I wish nothing more than to spend quiet afternoons in the gardens with you. I long for the day when we can all be together again. I received the picture of you and *Mama*. You're growing so much, my *baobei*, and I can't help but be sad I am missing it.

Please write to me about your school, your friends, and the games you play. Your letters are my lifeline, and they remind me of the life I'm working so hard to secure for you.

Dad

**October 21st, 1884**

Chen Ai,

As the days grow shorter and the air turns crisp, I find myself facing the undeniable truth that winter is fast approaching. The world around me is slowly surrendering to the cool embrace of autumn, and it reminds me of the seasons of this life.

The promise of the *Transcontinental Railroad*, like the warmth of summer, now feels distant. The dreams of a better life and the vision of cities thriving along these tracks seem to have faded with the setting sun.

You are old enough now to know the problems I face here. The money I can send back comes with risks, and I was reminded of that from the accident on the tracks last week. I am so lucky I can write this letter to you. I can only hope my fellow workers' families at home are at peace, and receive the letters the rest of us wrote for them.

Winter, my dear Chen Ai, brings with it not only the chill of the season but also the weight of our separation. It's a season of reflection, a time to ponder the sacrifices we've made for the future we've held onto. The thought of spending an unforgiving winter away from you and *Mama* fills me with a deep sense of dread, but I know - I hope I am working for something better - when our work on the railroad is done, you and *Mama* will finally join me here.

Your birthday has come and gone. Did you enjoy the comics I drew for you? You're 14 now, so you must start growing and getting strong for *Mama*, okay?

Dad

**September 3rd, 1885**

Chen Ai,

If you have been receiving my letters, please know I have you in my heart in every moment. Maybe my drawings and comics I sent to you were feeble attempts to bridge the chasm between us, to let you know that, even in this distant place, you remain the centre of my existence. But, I know I have been less than dutiful as a father. As I write this, I feel the weight of all the seasons that have passed since we separated. I wish I could say that our hopes will find their fulfillment, but the truth is far more sombre.

This railroad has taken its toll, both on my body and my spirit. I've learned that progress, as they call it, often exacts a heavy price.

Chen Ai, I'm making plans to return to China. The dreams that brought me here have faded, and I long to be with you and *Mama* once more.

I need to share with you what weighs heavily on my heart, what influenced my decision to return. It's a bitter truth, one that speaks to the changing tides of this land. They call it the "head tax," a levy imposed on those like us who have come here in pursuit of the promises they whispered to us. Truthfully, the money I have been saving is not enough to bring you both here to Canada. My only choices are to stay here, alone, and continue the hopes that I can work for years to come, chasing the dream of your arrival - or to return home. These years have shown me that I am not ready for a future without you, and I am eternally sorry for my selfishness.

I know I once hoped to bring you here, to see the railroad of progress flourish in your adolescence, but I can only bring a piece of it home to you, Chen Ai.

When I see you, will you still remember my face? I have changed from what I used to be. In your final letter, one year ago, you condemned me for leaving you, and I am sorry. I hope you can forgive me by the time I make it across the sea.

With all the love a father's heart can hold,

Dad