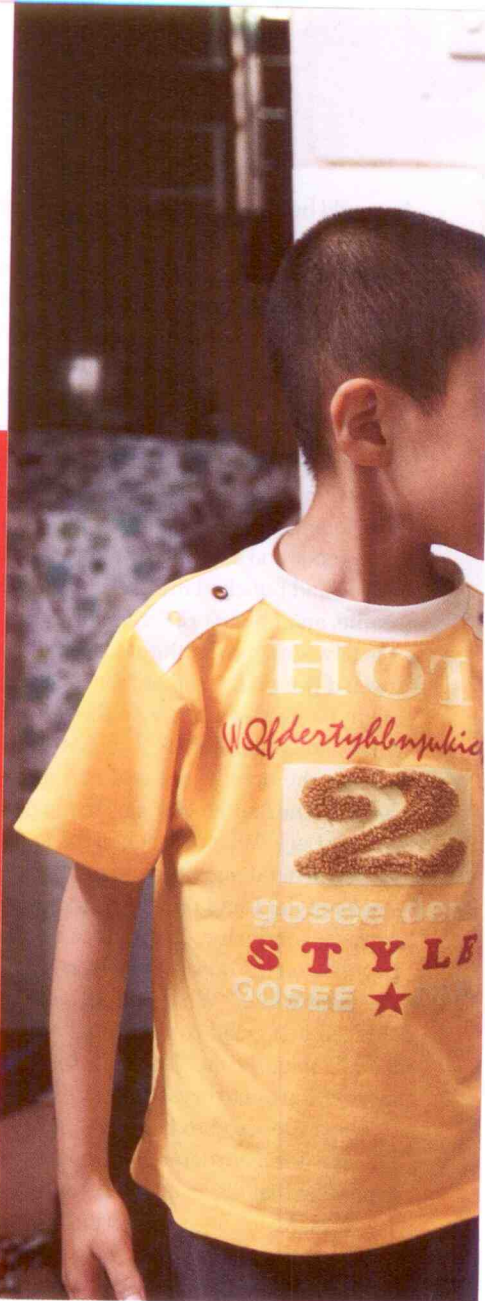


★ When Chinese officials discovered this woman had had a second child, they jailed her brother-in-law until she agreed to be sterilized. What would you do?



By Abigail Haworth  
Photographed by Tim Pelling

During lunchtime one day last April, Wei Laojin, 35, was cooking spicy pork for her two young sons at home in southern China when she got a frantic call from her husband. His brother had been arrested, he said. A dozen Chinese officials had beaten down the man's door and dragged him away. "What has he done wrong?" Wei asked in alarm. "Nothing," her husband replied. "He has been jailed because he is related to us."

Wei, a bird-thin woman with bobbed hair, let lunch burn on the stove as she heard more. "My husband said we had broken the law by having two children. The authorities were imprisoning his brother until we were punished," she



says. "As soon as I learned it was about birth control, I began to cry and shake." Family-planning officials in the southern county of Puning, in Guangdong province, were going to shocking new extremes to catch and punish violators of the country's infamous one-child policy: They were seizing family members of women who had given birth illegally and were holding them hostage. The aim? To coerce the women into

submitting to sterilization. Says Wei, "The officials said there was only one way to get my brother-in-law released: I had to undergo forced sterilization."

As Wei panicked in her kitchen, the same scene was playing out in households all over Puning, a region of 2.2 million people, about six hours by bus from the provincial capital of Guangzhou. In early April, the local Family Planning Bureau, which oversees population control, launched what it termed an "Iron Fist Campaign," targeting 10,000 women who had more than one child.

According to state-owned media—which proudly reported the news on local channels—a task force of more than 600 officials was deployed to storm homes across 28 Puning townships and seize family members of women who

he would help, but to hold on for a few minutes.

I waited outside—crouched in a ball—thinking the man was probably calling the cops. But then he appeared again and ushered me inside. “I don’t know where this man is, but the way out of here is down the stairs and through the green doors,” he said. “Push the button to get out.” Then he told me how to get back to my hotel. An older man standing by the door in the apartment handed me a bunch of tissues as I hurried past him. I caught a glimpse of my face in a mirror by the door and saw that I was covered in blood. Marco had punched me in the nose during our scuffle, and I hadn’t realized how bad it was.

I flew down four flights of stairs and ran toward the exit. I remember thinking Marco might be waiting for me on the other side, but what choice did I have? I took a deep breath, buzzed the door open, and ran for my life. I sprinted the four blocks back to my hotel, never looking back. When I reached the hotel doors, I turned around and pumped my fists in the air, Rocky-style. I had done it. I had gotten away from this monster. I ran up to my room and pounded on the door. When Lynn saw my face, she went white. “What happened?” she asked. “Marco just tried to rape me,” I said. “But I won,” I said. “I *won*.” Then, for the first time all night, I started to cry. We both did.

I was supposed to be on a flight back to the States a few hours later, but I couldn’t go. There is nothing that disgusts me more than rape, and I would have felt like a hypocrite if I didn’t report Marco to the authorities. I was battered and bruised—and still scared he might find me—but I couldn’t let him get away with his attack. So Lynn and I got to work, calling my health-insurance company, my sister, the U.S. Embassy, the hospital, the police, my boss at ESPN. About an hour later, I started shaking uncontrollably. Just before daybreak, we went to the hospital for X-rays (miraculously, nothing was broken) and then to the U.S. Embassy, which helped me start a police report and arranged for an interpreter to meet me at the police station.

The next day, I spent 10 hours with the police and an interpreter, filing a report. At one point, we stood outside of the building where the man had helped me, and I tried to explain how I’d gotten away. The investigators were getting frustrated because I couldn’t remember the balcony in question. Just then a woman walked up. “Are you American?” she asked. “I think my husband let you into our apartment last night.” She let the police into the building and directed them to her balcony.

**“I ran and leaped over the patio wall, hoping to hit the balcony below. But my sweater got stuck on the railing, and I just hung there.”**

(She and her husband also went to the police station to give a statement.) While she spoke to the police inside, I walked up and down the street crying, talking to myself and to God, even though I’m not a churchgoer. But I have to say, I felt a presence when that man let me in off the balcony, and I felt it again when his wife happened upon us in the street.

When the police were finished piecing together the escape route, the lead investigator looked at me and said, “You are Wonder Woman.” Marco was interrogated that day and later charged with attempted sexual assault.

Lynn and I flew home, but the fight was far from over. I hired a legal team in Italy to follow through on the case, and I returned to Rome six months later for an interview with the public prosecutor. I wanted Marco to be punished for what he had done; I thought about how many other women he may have tried this with, and it made me feel sick. So I researched Italian criminal law to better understand the court system. I talked to the U.S. State Department and the Department of Justice about my case. I stayed in constant contact with my attorney, filling out court documents and visiting Italian Embassies in the U.S. to get papers stamped. Fortunately, my coworkers at ESPN were incredibly supportive, giving me the flexibility to finish my mission.

After a yearlong investigation, the public prosecutor decided to boost the charge from attempted sexual assault to sexual assault. She also added a charge of assault, which meant that instead of looking at five years in jail, Marco had the potential to get 12. Ultimately, he plea-bargained, and on April 22, 2010, he received a suspended sentence of 11 months, 10 days, which means he didn’t go to jail. However, he is on probation for the next five years, and if he commits another crime of any kind during that time, he will go straight to prison. He was also ordered to pay all my legal fees, which amounted to about \$10,000.

At first I felt disappointed that Marco wouldn’t be jailed, but now I feel proud of my efforts; I never gave up. A day doesn’t go by when I don’t think of that night. I have a small scar on my stomach where Marco gouged his fingernails into me, and I look at it often. I alternately love and hate that scar. I hate it because it reminds me of what happened, and I love it for the same reason. **mc**

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