

A gay **son's** journey to God.
A broken **mother's** search for hope.

OUT OF A FAR COUNTRY

Christopher Yuan
& Angela Yuan

Foreword by KAY WARREN



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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

OUT OF A FAR COUNTRY
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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The story that is told in this book is entirely true. In an effort to safeguard the privacy of individuals whose lives have touched the lives of the authors, some of the names of the people mentioned in this book have been changed.

ISBN 978-0-307-72935-4
ISBN 978-0-307-72936-1 (electronic)

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Cover design by Kelly L. Howard; photography by JHB Studio/Images.com

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Yuan, Christopher.

Out of a far country : a gay son's journey to God : a broken mother's search for hope / Christopher Yuan and Angela Yuan. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-307-72935-4 — ISBN 978-0-307-72936-1 (editorial)

1. Yuan, Christopher. 2. Yuan, Angela. 3. Christian gay men—United States—Biography. 4. Drug dealers—United States—Biography. 5. Chinese Americans—Biography. 6. Mothers and sons. 7. Gay men—Family relationships. I. Yuan, Angela. II. Title.

HQ75.8.Y83A3 2011

261.8'357662092—dc22

[B]

2010053733

Printed in the United States of America
2011—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For Leon, husband and father:
Thank you for being willing to change,
not giving up on us, and continuing to pursue Christ.*

CONTENTS

Foreword by Kay Warren	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
1 The End of My World	1
2 Out of the Closet	8
3 The End of the Beginning	14
4 Two Lives in Louisville	20
5 New Birth	26
6 Don't Try to Change Me!	33
7 Baby Steps	40
8 A New Love	45
9 A Marriage Built on Sand	53
10 Open for Business	60
11 Let Go, Let God	70
12 Circuit Parties	76
13 Secret Shame	85
14 The High Life	90
15 Lost	98
16 High Church	105

x Contents

17 A Bold and Dangerous Prayer _ _ _ _ _ 107

18 Busted _ _ _ _ _ 111

19 Count Your Blessings _ _ _ _ _ 123

20 Out of the Trash _ _ _ _ _ 127

21 Don't Let Me Cry _ _ _ _ _ 130

22 Rock Bottom _ _ _ _ _ 137

23 It Is Well _ _ _ _ _ 142

24 Hope and a Future _ _ _ _ _ 144

25 Beacon of Hope _ _ _ _ _ 154

26 Making It Through _ _ _ _ _ 161

27 Going to Court for the Right Reasons? _ _ _ 167

28 Snitch or Star Witness? _ _ _ _ _ 169

29 Truly Extraordinary _ _ _ _ _ 178

30 Holy Sexuality _ _ _ _ _ 182

31 Redeemed _ _ _ _ _ 190

32 Finally Home _ _ _ _ _ 197

Epilogue: Where Are They Now? _ _ _ _ _ 201

Study Guide: Prayer, Redemption,
and Holy Sexuality _ _ _ _ _ 205

Notes _ _ _ _ _ 221

The End of My World

Angela: May 15, 1993

It was May in Chicago. The warmth of spring was starting to wrap its arms around the city we had called home for twenty-four years. But that night we sat in silence, picking at our stir-fry with forks as cold and hard as our hearts.

Dinner was miserable, and it had nothing to do with the food.

You'd think that after so many years of living with my disconnected but often argumentative husband, Leon, I'd be used to misery. But this night was unusually dismal.

Our younger son, Christopher, was home for a visit. He had just finished his junior year of dental school in Louisville, Kentucky, after transferring from Loyola University School of Dentistry in Chicago the previous fall. Leon, a dentist himself, was glad that Christopher was following in his footsteps. It was expected that in a year father and son would be working together in our new dental office.

Of course, I too had been looking forward to Christopher's visit. Like any good Chinese mother, I doted on our two sons, but Christopher and I had always been especially close. Normally his being at home would keep the tension in our home from boiling over. But Christopher's presence at the dinner table tonight only elevated our family's permanent state of emotional strain.



A few days before Christopher had come home, Leon was checking the insulation in the crawlspace just off Christopher's bedroom. On his way out of the crawlspace, the beam from his flashlight landed on something tucked away on top of the small access opening. He discovered an unlabeled VHS tape in a worn cardboard case, which he brought downstairs to show me.

As soon as I saw the dusty videocassette, I froze. I knew what it was, but everything inside me hoped it wasn't. The truth was, for six years I had feared that Christopher's problem had never really gone away.

I couldn't bring myself to watch what was on the tape, so I asked Leon to do it. He took it from my hand and went into the living room to play it. Finally, he walked back into the kitchen, dropped the tape on the counter, and said, "Yes, it's that."

That. He couldn't even say the word. It was gay pornography.

I immediately thought back to when Christopher was sixteen years old and I found out from his brother that he had had a sexual relationship with a thirty-year-old man. Christopher had contacted the man, who then invited him over. Sure, Christopher may have sought the man out, but no matter how you look at it, this man had used and soiled my son.

Words cannot express what I felt at that time. Sadness and deep anguish overwhelmed me. But I was also furious at the man who took advantage of my son. Christopher was robbed of the chance to be a normal teenager, and what's worse, I couldn't tell anyone about it. I wanted to see this man brought to justice, but that meant making a horrific private matter a public one. And I would not allow Christopher to go through that humiliation. We decided not to press charges, choosing instead to keep the heartache and shame a secret.

Added to the terrible disgrace was constant anxiety. During Christopher's teenage years, my days were filled with fear. I worried about what people would say if they found out. I worried about how much Christo-

pher was scarred, and whether his future would be affected by this incident. I especially worried about whether he would become...gay.

Even though this was a very private matter, I knew we should do something to find help. That same day, I had been flipping through material from a dental-office management company. This company helped us better manage our practice in order to increase the dental-office income. In this literature, I read about a counseling program offered by the parent organization. It promised resources for dealing with life's problems, and the sponsoring organization was the Church of Scientology. I had never heard of Scientology. I was skeptical, but desperate. I would do anything to fix my son.

So Christopher and I traveled from Chicago to the Scientology Mission of San Francisco, where we enrolled in a program that required us to be there mornings and afternoons for two months. Certainly, their techniques were a little bizarre—sitting in a sauna for hours or holding metal cans during counseling (or “auditing”) sessions. But I was determined to beat this—for Christopher's sake. Failure was not an option that I was willing to consider.

After two months and more than fifteen thousand dollars, we finished the purification program. More important, Christopher assured me that he was over that phase and ready to move on with life. I thought we had it all taken care of.



But on a beautiful afternoon in May 1993, I sat picking at my stir-fry. I was waiting for the right moment to say something, but I had no idea what to say. I glanced to my right at Leon, trying to read his dark eyes. Was he going to confront Christopher as I wished, or wasn't he? He briefly looked at me, then resumed his eating, oblivious to my agony. Leon wasn't going to say anything, and as always his indifference drove me crazy. Once again, we weren't on the same page. Once again, he had no idea how I felt.



Wei-Chi Chiang

Our wedding took place at Notre Dame Church in Central Park, Manhattan, on September 11, 1965. My father is on the far right. I had no idea how difficult life would become after this day.

I could tell that Christopher knew I was upset. Our relationship had been strained in recent months. He'd been acting rudely to me—more like a resentful teenager than a twenty-two-year-old doctoral student. And this night only added to the tension. He kept looking at his watch and seemed to be contemplating a quick exit.

Leon still hadn't said anything, and Christopher was about to leave the table. I needed an answer from my son, and I knew I had to speak up. If homosexuality was still a problem for Christopher, then we needed to take action.

"Christopher, Dad found a videotape in your crawlspace." My voice was shaking—with fear, with despair? I never shied away from confrontation, but this was different.

Christopher looked at me with a blank face. No emotion, no guilt, not even surprise.

“Dad watched it,” I whispered. I swallowed hard, wishing this were a nightmare and I would wake up and everything would be okay. I wished my son would tell me what I wanted to hear—even if it wasn’t true. Besides, how could Christopher still be that? After all I had done for him.

But he just kept giving me that empty look.

“Christopher”—I forced the words out—“are you...are you still...?”

The question hung there, but only for a moment. Christopher sat up straight, looked me in the eyes, and with a voice full of resolve said, “Yes, I am. I am gay.”

He spoke confidently, without disgrace or apology. I couldn’t believe my ears. There was such boldness, as if he were proud of it. But shame swept over me. This couldn’t be true. Not my son, not my Christopher. At that moment, I wished the house would fall down on us and put an end to this mess.

I’d always had our lives all figured out. Christopher and his brother would grow up and accomplish important things in the world. They were both studying to be dentists. They would return home when they earned their degrees, join their father’s practice, and ultimately inherit the family business. Leon and I were just then completing a brand-new, state-of-the-art dental office. I would be at the helm, managing the office and making sure everything ran like a well-oiled machine. It would give me the life I longed for—spending time with my family and keeping us all together.

But now this.

I looked from my son to my husband and back again. I was as disappointed with Leon as I had ever been. Even though our marriage was totally lifeless, at least he should be concerned about his own son. So today, with Christopher announcing he was gay, why wasn’t Leon stepping in to do something? Why didn’t he say anything? Why wasn’t he outraged? Why wasn’t he telling Christopher that he was not, could not be...gay?

It was obvious to me that Christopher was not thinking clearly. Didn’t he know that he couldn’t choose both—to be a dentist and to live

like that? If people knew, Leon would lose his patients. If people knew, no staff would work with us. If people knew, they would be afraid of getting AIDS. Christopher needed to come to his senses and be reminded that this family practice was everything. It had been our one dream—everything we had worked toward—for almost twenty years.

“Christopher,” I blurted out his name in frustration. “You must choose. You must choose the family or choose homosexuality.” This ultimatum would wake him up. He would have to choose his family and not throw away this bright future in our new office.

My son looked at me and said, “It’s not something I can choose. I was born this way... I am gay.” He took a deep breath and looked away. His neck tightened and his jaw clenched as he looked back at me with an expression I had never seen before. “If you can’t accept me, then I have no other choice but to leave.”

He backed away from the table and uttered one last cutting remark. “I expected you’d react like this. But that’s okay. I have a family. A real family of friends back in Louisville who accept me”—his voice cracked—“for exactly who I am.”

He went to his room. In a few minutes he came back through the house with his bags and walked out the door. It was as if he had planned this all along. There was no room for discussion, no time for negotiation. That was it. This was the end.

My knees gave way, and I fell to the floor. I felt as if my blood drained out of my body. My arms, my hands, my legs were cold as ice. The weight of shock and disbelief weighed so heavily on my chest that I had to strain just to breathe. This couldn’t be happening.

I began gasping for air. I was choking on my tears, knowing without question that I was a total failure. My marriage had been a failure for years, and now my parenting was a failure. My husband refused to stand by me. My older son had rebelled. And now Christopher, the one I thought would never do this to me, had rejected me.

I wanted to make Christopher stay, but I was out of options. And

Leon still hadn't said anything. He didn't yell at Christopher or argue with him. Neither did he put his arm around me or hold my hand. He just walked away, leaving me lying on the floor alone, gasping between sobs.

A thought entered my mind, a memory of something Leon's mother had told him. My mother-in-law had said a wife uses three tricks when she doesn't get her way. First, she cries; second, she throws a temper tantrum; third, she threatens to hang herself. On that day, I was not playing any tricks. I was certain that I had nothing left to live for.

Out of the Closet

Christopher: May 15, 1993

I saw my mother fall to the floor as I closed the door to leave. Just more Chinese-mother guilt-trip drama, I figured. I had seen too much of it over the years to be manipulated by it again. Besides, I wasn't Chinese. I was American, born and raised in Chicago.

My gay friends in Louisville had told me what to expect when I came out to my parents—the screaming, the crying, the “after all I’ve done for you” routine. My mother didn’t disappoint, that’s for sure. And my father was true to form as well. He wasn’t even engaged enough to be for me or against me.

After almost a year of being active in Louisville’s gay community, I was ready to come out to my parents. I’d halfway planned to do it when I came home for Mother’s Day a week earlier, but I wasn’t sure how to bring it up. So at the dinner table, it was actually a relief when my mother confronted me. Now I was finally all the way out of the closet. In the gay community, coming out to your parents is a rite of passage. It’s taking the final step in fully embracing your homosexuality. And having completed that step, I had climbed one rung higher on the social ladder.

After hearing my friends’ horror stories, I was expecting to get kicked out of my parents’ house—and that’s exactly what happened. When my mother asked me to choose between homosexuality and the family, it

meant that I couldn't be true to myself *and* be accepted by my parents. And among my friends, I'd gotten used to being accepted. Mom was effectively kicking me out.

That hurt. But the hurt was overshadowed by the relief I felt. I could finally write my parents off. I didn't have to care about them anymore, because they obviously didn't care about me. They weren't my real family. Real family would have accepted me for who I was. My gay friends in Louisville were now my real family.

The farther south I drove from Chicago, the freer I felt. In fact, I had never felt so free. No more having to hide. No more making up stories. No more family obligations. No more putting up with the nightly phone calls from home just to "check in."

My whole life I had been entangled in my mother's apron strings. She controlled every aspect of my life—or tried to. When I went away to college, she called every night to check on me. When I went away to boot camp with the Marine Corps, she demanded that I write home all the time. Even when I was in graduate school, she refused to let me live my own life. But things would be different now. She had kicked me out of the family, and all the meddling would come to an end.



Midway through my first year at the University of Louisville, I came out of the closet to my friends and classmates. It was a freeing experience, and I'd never felt happier. Finally I could stop pretending, and I could be honest with friends who thought I was straight.

One day my good friend and workout partner, Gary, told me, "Rumors are going around the school that you're gay. I've been defending you, telling people it's not true, telling them that you've had several girlfriends." He lowered his voice and his face became serious. "It's not true, is it?"

He was shocked when I told him it was. He'd meant well when he told others that I was straight. He really thought he was defending me



Olan Mills Inc.

Mom wanted me to write home all the time while away at Marine Corps boot camp. I was a reservist when this photo was taken in 1989.

from vicious rumors. But the rumors were true. While I wasn't effeminate or flamboyant, I was gay.

As more people became aware of my real life, I felt more comfortable with my homosexuality. I no longer tried to hide it. If people weren't okay with it, I didn't care. For the first time, I felt I was being completely honest. Living any other way would be a lie.

It just so happened that two gay clubs in the city, the Connection and the Annex, were only five blocks from the dental school. I'd been to a few gay bars in Chicago, clubs that were more a place to cruise or hook up than a place to belong. But most of the men I met in the Louisville bars seemed...normal. They were professionals—bankers, lawyers, executives, dental students. Men like me. I went from thinking, *There's something wrong with me*, to, *This is who I am*. These people were my friends. This was where I belonged.

When I was growing up, kids picked on me for being Chinese, playing the piano, loving the arts, and showing my feelings more than most boys did. I was horrible at sports, and I always felt like an outcast. But when I stepped into the gay community, I was introduced to a world of outcasts who had come together and become family. They stood up for one another, supported one another. They laughed with me, cried with me, and accepted me for who I was—gay.

With my newfound confidence, I became popular in the gay club scene. Never one to be much of a drinker, I started bartending for fun—and was quite successful at it. My outgoing personality and good physique made a difference in that setting, where bartenders often worked shirtless to show off their bodies. I made good tips—especially when I climbed on the bar and danced. After a childhood of being rejected by my peers, it felt great to be so readily accepted.

Telling my parents was the final hurdle in coming out. I knew they would be unwilling to let go of their set ways. It would have been awkward if my mother had said, "You're gay? Great! Why don't I come down to Louisville and you can introduce me to some of your gay friends?" Nevertheless, their rejection showed me how closed minded they were. At the same time, I fully expected them not to understand me. Their reaction fit in with the other coming-out war stories I'd heard. There was a pretty standard script for gay folks, and the big blowup with the parents was the climactic scene that marked the end of act one and the beginning of act two.



Never before had I so looked forward to getting back to Louisville. Driving away from Chicago on Interstate 65 didn't feel like leaving home; I felt like I was going home. And there was someone special I was going back to.

A couple of weeks earlier, I had started a new relationship. Grant was older than I was—well into his thirties—good looking, well built, successful, and generous. He was a lawyer, involved in Kentucky state politics, and he lived in a beautiful guest house on a big estate. Shortly before my trip to Chicago, Grant had invited me to move out of the fraternity house on the university campus where I'd been staying and move in with him. Now I was anxious to get back to him and our new home together.

I'd had a few boyfriends before Grant, but he was different—mature, professional, and stable. Stable, that's what I wanted in a relationship. I wanted to settle down, and my heart raced just thinking about moving into his house. It was the first time that I'd felt sure that another man really cared about me—enough to invite me into his home. I was finally in a relationship that had a future.

As I drove back to Kentucky, I was sure that Grant's acceptance would buffer the pain of my parents' rejection. I was glad that finally there were no more barriers between me and my happiness with Grant.

At last I pulled into the long, tree-lined driveway leading to Grant's house. It was a little after midnight, but I knew he was a night owl and would still be up. I parked in front and bounded up the steps to the front door. I was supposed to be in Chicago another day and was excited to surprise Grant with my early return. I let myself into the house. "Hey, Grant! I'm back!" I called into the darkness.

When I saw his face, I knew something was wrong. He didn't run to embrace me. He didn't break into a grin. He just stood there looking at me, not bothering to interrupt the awkward silence. Then he said, "Hey...you're back already. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

“Yeah, I hoped I’d surprise you. My parents—”

“Listen, we need to talk... Um, maybe it would be best if we...um... cooled it for a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you should stay at the frat house tonight.”

I was crushed. Just that quickly I realized I barely knew the man.

My parents had kicked me out. Now Grant didn’t want me either. Where was I supposed to go?



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