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**Zhang Jiong**

His daily routine includes taking three different Western medicines and one traditional Chinese medicine. This combination is the result of years of trial and error, a testament to his enduring struggle with his condition. "If these medications stop working, it means my body has developed resistance," Zhang says. "Then, I'll have to start the search for new drugs all over again."

Despite the challenges of managing his health, Zhang's life is illuminated by the joys of fatherhood. His elder daughter, 16 years old, is a ballet prodigy and Shanghai's youngest registered soccer referee. His younger daughter, 6 years old, adds further brightness to his life.

Zhang boasts a collection of vocational training certificates in fields ranging from computer and automotive repair to baking, pastry and nutrition. "My wife often jests with me, 'It's great being married to you; I never have to worry about cooking,'" he says with a sweet smile.

Their love story began in the ward of Changhai Hospital, where his future wife Li Suyun worked as a nurse in the hematology department. She met Zhang when she was just 20, and after four years of courtship, they married.

Her parents only had one simple, earnest request for him: "Just be kind to our daughter, and live a little longer." It seems that Zhang has greatly exceeded this sincere appeal.

Li first saw Zhang during a critical moment, as he lay in a hospital bed, suffering from stomach bleeding caused by a new medication. He had to spend 12 days in bed, with doctors issuing critical condition notices everyday, a reality grimly joked about by Zhang, "I have a drawer full of these notices, like a deck of cards."

It was during this time that their connection deepened. Despite being bedridden, Zhang's cheerful demeanor and engaging conversation struck a chord with her. "She once told me that the first time she saw me, I was wearing glasses, bedbound, but still so cheerful," Zhang recalls.

The nurse blushed every time she saw him, and Zhang, noticing this, asked directly, "Do you like me?" Her

affirmative response led to their blossoming relationship.

Their dates were modest, with her often footing the bill. "Back then, my health was poor; I had no job, no money," Zhang says.

Their dates were simple yet intimate affairs, journeying on Bus No.937 from Wujiaochang area to Changhai Hospital. There, seated side by side, they would share dreams and comfort with the hum of the city passing by.

In 2004, amidst the challenges and uncertainties, they wed in a union of love and courage. Soon after, they cautiously anticipated the arrival of their first daughter. Zhang stopped all his medication, a pause filled with hope and apprehension.

### The joys of fatherhood

"I was in relatively good shape back then, but my wife faced immense pressure," he shared. The head nurse and doctors in her department couldn't help but express their concern. As they had witnessed so many lives lost in front of them, they questioned her, "You've seen so much death, and still, you chose to love, marry and have a child with him?"

Yet, defying all doubts and fears, their first daughter was born healthy and vibrant, and Zhang's condition remained stable.

However, the birth of their second daughter was not as smooth and fortunate as the first. He halted his medications again in preparation for conception, a decision fraught with consequences. The year of 2017 saw the birth of their second daughter, still healthy, but it marked the onset of a more challenging health period for Zhang.

The halt in medication set off a cascade of complications. "In the first year, I could still climb stairs, but then my health started to deteriorate rapidly," Zhang recounts. Heart conditions, ear and scalp bleeds became frequent, signaling severe relapses of his condition.

By 2018, while his wife juggled caring for their newborn and her responsibilities, Zhang found himself in and



**Zhang's two daughters**

out of the hospital four times, and by 2019, that number had escalated to 11 visits.

There were moments of seizures so severe that his wife would rush him to the emergency room for urgent transfusions, each visit leaving the doctors doubtful of his survival for another week.

### Living well regardless

He has had deep conversations with their elder daughter about death, about the precariousness of his life and the importance of living well regardless. The girl, mature beyond her years, became an integral support. "Whenever I'm rushed for emergencies, I tell her to listen to her mother," Zhang shares, his voice cracking slightly. "She understands, tears streaming down as her mother also weeps."

With a contemplative gaze, Zhang adds, "But if I were to pass now, I would be content. I've earned money, secured a home, and my parents are still in good health. I feel profoundly grateful."

Though his body was frail, it seemed that fortune favored Zhang in his financial endeavors.

After university graduation, Zhang attempted the conventional work life at an advertising agency, clocking in from 9am to 4:30pm. But after just one day of enduring the grueling sitting routine, his body protested, yearning only for rest. The following day, he had no choice but to resign.

The year of 2006 marked a turning point. With his health somewhat stabilized, he ventured into entrepreneurship, opening a computer repair business right from his home. He distributed flyers in the nearby neighborhoods, offering repairs.

During this time, Zhang unwittingly caught the nation's entrepreneurial wind. He invested in a second-hand motorcycle to transport computers needing

repair or assembly to bustling electronics hubs like Saige Plaza and Buynow. The markup he earned from the repairs done by others was considerable, and soon, he found himself profiting significantly from the venture.

The business grew, and he eventually rented a booth at the computer plaza and hired staff, becoming a small business owner himself. At the peak of his enterprise around 2006 and 2007, he had eight employees.

"The money I earned went toward my medical expenses, our new home, and supporting my newborn daughter," Zhang says.

However, as the online marketplace Taobao emerged, it shook the industry, gradually eroding the profits. By around 2013, Zhang closed his shop and warehouse.

In 2014, celebrating a decade of marriage, Zhang, along with his wife and daughter, treated themselves to a two-week European tour.

Now, it's their 20th wedding anniversary. "My wife has been through more than most could bear; I owe her a lot," Zhang says.

For this special milestone, he plans a heartfelt tribute — to seek out and express his deepest gratitude to every individual who has been part of their story, a journey of perseverance, love and shared humanity.

He once queried his wife about her decision to marry him. Her response was as profound as it was touching, "Marriage, to me, is a gamble. I know that being with you might lead to an abrupt goodbye. Yet, I chose to bet on us, to bet on love."



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