



A BIOGRAPHY
ROLAND L. GOT
CELEBRATING MY FATHER'S 100TH BIRTHDAY!
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My father, Roland L Got, the Chinese-American actor, was born in San Francisco, California, on August 6, 1916. Today would have been my father's 100th birthday! My family and I have been looking forward to celebrating his colorful life, and this special milestone—his Centennial.

According to the Chinese Zodiac, Dad was born in the Year of The Dragon. It was fun "Googling" the strengths and weaknesses of a Dragon's personality: Dragons can be "Decisive, inspiring, magnanimous, sensitive, ambitious, romantic and eccentric, tactless, fiery, intolerant, and also unrealistic." Hmm... Maybe so!

After finding that he was a Dragon, I became curious to find what Dad's Western Astrological sign was. Dad was a Leo. I read about a Leo's strengths & weaknesses: "They're action-oriented, they have warm personalities, are driven by the desire to be loved and admired. They have an air of royalty about them and love the limelight. They often choose the performing arts as a career. They can be egoistic, possessive, dominating, arrogant, and impatient."

As horoscopes go, Eastern or Western—Oriental or Occidental—these characteristics seem rather general. They are attributes many of us might share or have in common. Still, from what I recall, I guess he could have been many or even all the above, but I never saw a violent side to him! Otherwise, a lot of the above sounds just like my dad!

Daddy also came from good stock. My grandmother, Lily Got, was a hard-working seamstress. Although she was born in San Francisco, she could only speak Chinese. She had several siblings. I believe all her sibs spoke Chinese and English well, so I don't understand why she too wasn't bilingual. She had spent most of her life living and working in Chinatown... Indeed, a lifetime of being cloistered in a sweatshop may not have allowed her an opportunity to learn anything but Chinese.

My grandfather, William Got, was orphaned as a child and came to the United States when he was only 13-years old. He dreamed of becoming a master tailor one day. He was a perfectionist, he was ambitious, he could be shrewd, and he was driven.

Dad told me, *Your grandfather grew up in a village near Canton, China. These Cantonese villagers were known by their family name, "Lowe-Lui" (our surname). His given or first name was "Got." When he arrived at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, an immigration official asked him what his name was. Your grandfather said, "Lowe Got." The official didn't understand that in the Orient, a person's surname precedes his given name. The last name is spoken before their first name. For instance, They would say Smith, John. Here in America, we say John Smith.*

Actually, that misunderstanding is how our last name became "Got" not "Lowe" (or "Lui")! That mistake is why we are the only Chinese family in the world named Got. When I became an actor, I chose Roland Lui as a stage name. Sometimes, I was also known as Roland Got or Roland L. Got." Later in life, my father chose to be known as Roland "Lewis" Got, I have no idea why.

My grandparents had four children: Bill, Archie, Roland, and Diana. They were all bilingual, speaking both Chinese and English. For the most part, Dad's family lived in San Francisco and Los Angeles. However, they also lived in Sacramento and San Diego for some time.

All the Got children were artistic like their father. As for their mother, she could be a drama queen. I'm certain she must have passed her love of theatrics on to my dad—her adorable baby boy. In her own shy way, she certainly could have been a Chinese "Stage Mother!"

Daddy may have been a budding actor, but from the time he was very young, he really dreamed of becoming a professional artist. I'm grateful my mom was able to save some of his artwork for me. It's an impressive body of work, especially for one so young. It will be a thrill to share them with my children and grand-children.

Dad's rebellious teenage siblings often made fun of him. His brother-in-law, Ernie Leong (Aunt Diana's husband) once told me, *Your aunt and uncles didn't like your father. They thought he was such a "Square" and they resented his "holier than thou" attitude! He was a teetotaler. He not only frowned on their drinking, he also disapproved of their smoking and gambling. Sometimes, they partied long into the night, whenever their parents went on a business trip. Your dad would complain their shenanigans were so loud he couldn't study, draw, paint, or sleep!*

At Jefferson High School (in Los Angeles), Daddy was a high-achieving, well-rounded student. He was athletic, had leadership ability, and was popular with students and teachers alike.

He was not only good-looking, well-built, and tall for a young Chinese man of his generation, but he was also a "snappy" dresser. He was friendly, had a sweet disposition, was personable, and exuded an air of confidence. His siblings might have thought he was square, but most others thought he had a good sense of humor, was cool, and even "hip!"

On top of this, he was known to be a young man of his word... He was forthright, honest, and highly principled. He was a very good role model. I can still remember him say, *"Without integrity, you have nothing!"* Many of his pearls of wisdom are etched in my memory. He was definitely a hard act to follow. He was my hero.

Yes, all Dad's teachers, especially his art instructors, loved him. He was respectful, cooperative, and a serious student. He was exceptionally gifted and unbelievably creative. It was no surprise then that his teachers appreciated his potential and encouraged him to pursue his passion for art.

On February 20, 1934, Dad won a prestigious art poster contest. He received the \$25 prize. In 2016 (with inflation), \$25 would be the equivalent of nearly \$500! The competition was open to students of every high-school in the L.A. area. It was an annual competition for The Southern California Festival of Allied Arts. The poster was chosen to advertise the festival and the printed copies of the posters were displayed throughout the city. The event was held from June 22 & July 1 of that year.

How I wish my multi-talented father had followed his dream of becoming a fine or commercial artist. He would have gotten a scholarship to UCLA—an art degree. He could easily have been an Art Director in an ad agency. The Graphic Design field would have been a perfect fit for him. He would have excelled in that profession. It could have been a very stable way for him to make a living.

Instead, as fate would have it, Hollywood came calling. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was the most powerful studio in Hollywood (during the '30s and '40s). Daddy was around 18 when he was “discovered” by MGM. They wanted him to become a star in what would be their next epic film: “The Good Earth.”

Such an opportunity was impossible for my dad to resist. The offer must have been enticing, especially for one so young. For Daddy to be offered a shot at stardom (in Tinseltown!) was extraordinary. I can certainly understand why he was “star-struck” and he chose to become a performance artist and not a visual artist.

“The Good Earth” novel was published in 1932. It was written by Pearl S. Buck. It is a touching rags to riches story, which takes place in a poor, beleaguered, revolutionary China. Her story was inspired by her real-life experiences there. Buck’s missionary parents took her to live in China when she was just three-months old. She spent almost 40-years living there. Like my dad, she was a Leo!

Many great authors write about what they know best. Not surprisingly, most of her books were about China—the place she loved and knew best. She was aptly able to chronicle the struggles of a peasant farm family in this book. Her novel became a world-wide bestseller. It is considered a classic and many students are still encouraged to read it today. She received both the Pulitzer-Prize (1931) & Nobel Prize (1944) for “The Good Earth.”

During the 1st Sino-Japanese War (1894 and 1895), China and Japan fought over who would control Korea. After The Boxer Rebellion, China was most vulnerable. By 1937, Japan was determined to over take China. The Chinese were no match for these blood-thirsty invaders. The infamous Rape of Nanking (Aka: The Nanking Massacre), was an especially egregious blood-bath. Without America’s help, China would have lost the 2nd Sino-Japan War.

Buck’s novel (and the film) would help Americans to become more sympathetic to China’s plight. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, America became allies with China (post haste!). Together, of course, we were finally able to defeat Japan in 1945. With respect to my Japanese-American Aunt Jean, her daughter-in law, and many friends of Japanese descent, I’m relieved we won that awful world war.

Actually, in the United States, the stereotype many Americans had of the Chinese were mostly negative ones. At best, people of Chinese descent were thought to be shy, retiring, and inscrutable, etc. At worst, the Chinese were thought to be mysterious, secretive, crafty, Opium-smoking dealers, smugglers, or worse—Tong War assassins to be feared!

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio bought the film rights to “The Good Earth.” Mayer’s “Resident Boy Genius,” Irving Thalberg, was excited about adapting the novel to film. He planned to spend millions of dollars to produce the film adaption.

Buck and Thalberg were determined to have an all Asian cast for “The Good Earth” film. Before the Chinese government would grant permission to do any filming in China, they too wanted an all Chinese cast. However, MGM would not allow it. First, they did not think an American audience would accept a movie with an all Asian cast. Second, this project would cost a small fortune to produce, so they couldn’t risk not casting their most bankable stars. Third, having to deal with the censors (the Hays Code) would be a problem: Interracial actors could not be romantically involved on the silver screen. Also, Anti-Miscegenation Laws (enacted in 1863), made it illegal for different races to marry or engage in sexual relations (off screen!). These laws were ruled unconstitutional in 1967. As powerful as MGM was, they knew they would not be able to take on Mr. Hays and the U.S. Government! As a result, most of the principal roles would have to be played by Caucasians. Luise Rainer and Paul Muni were chosen to play the leading roles (“Mother” and “Father”). They were established stars. Muni had won an Oscar for “The Story of Louis Pasteur” in 1935. During production of “The Good Earth,” Rainer received an Oscar for Best Actress for “The Great Ziegfeld” in 1936.

Most of the other lesser roles went to Caucasians as well. The studio finally agreed to audition “Orientals”—mostly to act as “Extras” or “Background” for mob scenes. By the way, the studios expected their make-up artists to make these Caucasian actors look Asian! At the time, this was a common practice in the film industry.

My mother loved telling me, At last, the time came for the casting call (Aka: “Cattle Call”). Gobs of timid, self-conscious Asian amateur actors showed up for the audition. They stood around, not knowing what to do. Your Aunt Diana told me a popular Cuban Carnival dance tune began blasting throughout the sound stage. Your dad rose to the occasion. Within seconds, he took the lead, started dancing, and managed to get several dancers to follow him. Everyone else fell into the snake-like line—followed his lead. Somehow, they all got in sync and caught up to the beat of the music. Your dad’s hips were jutting back and forth—to and fro... Your hammy dad led that “Conga” line—with panache and gusto!

When the studio heads spotted your dad they were floored—stunned! They couldn’t believe how fun-loving, extroverted, sophisticated, and sexy the Chinese kid was. He had the right look, he was animated, he had all the right moves. Your Dad gave it his all. He could be a “ham”—a character. Anyway, MGM had found their “Younger Son” for “The Good Earth.” The next thing your dad knew, the casting director signed him to a contract. Except for the Jefferson High’s Senior play, your father had very little acting experience. Of course, the studio knew what they were doing and quickly recognized your Dad’s potential. They were impressed by how charismatic he was. He definitely had presence and star power. He knew how to sparkle! Whatever that “IT” quality is, your Daddy had it. His essence was definitely captivating. When he did his screen test, the camera liked what it saw... It’s hard to describe, but his IT quality came across on the stage and screen.

The major studios of the 30s and 40s invested in their new talent. Their method was known as the “studio system.” Each crop of fresh, new players were given acting, elocution, singing and dancing lessons, etc. This formula prepared their young actors to succeed in the studio’s future films. Your Dad got to be part of that system. He was carefully groomed to be an actor, long before “The Good Earth” began shooting. According to one source, he received acting training for a year—with pay—at The Motion Picture Academy.

Dad was really fortunate to be chosen for the coveted role of “The Younger Son” in *The Good Earth*.” Very few Chinese were offered any principal roles. It was a break-out film for him... It brought him celebrity, fame, and a small fortune. It was a remarkable achievement for any young actor, especially for an inexperienced Chinese actor—an unknown.

The premiere of “*The Good Earth*” took place at the Carthay Circle Theater on January 29, 1937. The theater was the most palatial, beautiful, Mission-style venue of its day.

My 21-year old father and his pretty date arrived in a black limousine. He wore a classic black tuxedo. She wore a white ball gown (trimmed in black) and a traditional Chinese jacket. It was made of silk and beautifully hand-embroidered.

It’s doubtful my father had an opportunity to see a preview of “*The Good Earth*” before that night. In any case, he must have been so excited to see the opening credits, which ended with the following: “To the memory of Irving Grant Thalberg we dedicate this picture, His Last Great Achievement.” He then read the following introduction: “The soul of a great nation is expressed in the life of its humblest people, in this simple story of a Chinese farmer may be found something of the soul of China—its humility, its courage, its deep heritage from the past and its vast promise for the future.” Even today, this film would be considered quite a long movie. The runtime was 2-hours & 18-minutes, so there was an intermission. Dad appears in the second half of the movie (the adult “Younger Son”). I’m sure he savored watching each and every minute!

Daddy saved the elegant program from that special night. The film credits were printed on a gold centerfold. Judging from the program’s elegance, the studio had spared no expense in promoting the film. Two of the program’s pages featured two supporting cast members: Walter Connolly, a seasoned character actor and Roland Lui (Got), a disarming newcomer!

MGM had banked a lot on my dad—their fledgling star. They had hand-picked him to be their handsome “Man-genie” (the male equivalent of “ingenue”) for their *Good Earth* film. They expected him to have continued success in the film industry. Naturally, as far as I’m concerned, my dad was the studio’s only actor to exude any sex-appeal in this or any future films!

The morning after the premiere, “*The Good Earth*” received rave reviews. My father’s performance was also well-received by the critics. He must have been so pleased and proud to be appreciated for his part in the movie. The film would prove to be as fine a debut as Dad could have hoped for and it went on to garner a Top 10 slot at the box office for 1937. The Academy Award nominations were announced almost a year later in 1938. “*The Good Earth*” received five nominations: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Cinematographer, Best Film Editor, and Best Actress.

Luise Rainer was awarded an Oscar for Best Actress. Obviously, her peers thought her portrayal of the “O-lan” (“Mother”) was honest, touching, and very convincing. She had already won her first Oscar in 1937 for “*The Great Ziegfeld*.” By winning this second Oscar, for Best Actress, in 1938, she had the distinction of being the first actor to win Oscars “Back to Back.” In December 2014, she died at the age of 104. Karl Freund also won an Oscar for Best Cinematographer.

Seven months after “The Good Earth” premiered in Los Angeles, the film opened in Hong Kong, China. I believe the opening was on August 6, 1937—Daddy’s 21st birthday! My mom and her school friend happened to be in Hong Kong the night “The Good Earth” opened. Mom had spent almost a year studying in China. As soon as they saw Roland Lui (Got) on the big screen they were both quite taken—smitten! My mother never imagined she would ever meet him, much less marry him one day.

Three years later, fate stepped in again. My parents were destined to meet. Mom was a stunning, tall, beautiful young woman. She was shy, sweet, naive, and wasn’t used to dating. During a short stay in L.A., while Mom was visiting family friends, they introduced her to a young man. He took her to a nice restaurant for dinner. As they were waiting to be seated, Dad hit the scene. A couple of hours later, her blind date took her home. He never knew what hit him—never saw her again. Dad was fast on his feet. He wanted to elope with her by their second date, but she declined. After a whirlwind courtship, my parents, Miss Grace Chew & Roland Got, said, “I do” (in 1940). I was born the following year—their one and only.

Once I was an adult, my mother opened up to me. She said, *The life of an actor can be glamorous. They can be paid well, but it’s either feast or famine. It’s especially challenging for Asian actors—even today. In order to survive in the business, most actors have to learn to be thick-skinned. They need to deal with a lot of rejection. Understandably, an actor’s ego can be,, fragile. Your father was a very proud man. He did his best to work as hard as he could—as much as he could—in a “dog eat dog” profession.*

Of course, being married to an actor can be difficult at best. It didn’t help that we hardly knew each other when we got married. We had been raised so differently. When my sisters and I were growing up, our protective father would smile and say, “If you choose not to marry, you’ll always have me to protect you—take care of you!” We didn’t realize what an unrealistic notion that was for him to say.

After our honeymoon, your dad and I returned to L.A. We moved into the tiny house behind his family’s big house on 20th street. Talk about culture shock... I felt like a Peking Duck out of water! Until I met your dad, I’d never had to concern myself with cooking, cleaning, working, or worrying about money. I didn’t even know how to boil water! Besides, in those days, many women stayed at home, kept the house in order, cooked, and raised their children.

Before we got married, your dad had acted so Americanized—so modern. Afterwards, he became very strict, opinionated, very Chinese, and old-fashioned—like his father! I didn’t speak Chinese and I wasn’t raised to be a traditional Chinese wife. Fortunately, your Aunt Diana took me under her wing. She was my guardian angel. We were best friends.

I got pregnant with you right away, so my first year of marriage was rough. I was either pregnant or nursing you. It was often hard for us to make ends meet. Most of the time, we struggled between his “gigs.” When he got discouraged, I’d encourage him to find other work, so he could support us. His father would intervene and say, “No, you’re a professional actor! You can’t take just any menial job!” So your dad continued acting.” This all took a serious toll on our marriage.

Your dad’s debut in “The Good Earth” was absolutely phenomenal. The money he made

working on that film helped his parents buy their house in Los Angeles. His parents had only been able to rent in the past.

Your father made some other wise investments. He became partners with a friend who ran their curio shop in New Chinatown in Los Angeles. He also invested in a photo booth. For a quarter, you could get a strip of four photos. Every month he would make sure the machine was in good working order and then collect \$50 worth of quarters. When we were finally able to move to our own place in Hollywood, that \$50 was exactly what we needed to pay our rent each month!

The business definitely can have its ups and downs. Even though your father made a lot of money working on "The Good Earth," he ended up with chronic back problems from one pivotal scene from that film.

During that climactic, lustful boudoir scene, Paul Muni's "Father" character bursts through the doors of the private quarters of his concubine ("Second Wife"). He catches the bored, narcissistic young wife trying to seduce his "Younger Son"—her stepson! She was lounging on her bed (playing her mandolin) as your Dad was sitting beside her.

Paul Muni rushed over to your father and began beating him. He actually struck him multiple times in that scene! Muni had insisted on "being in the moment"—insisted on absolute realism, as many actors like to do. Muni beat him so badly, your dad could hardly get up off the floor. He was barely able to stumble out of that bedroom (set)! The wardrobe department had sewn special padding inside your dad's silk jacket. They thought the shoulder pads would protect him from Muni's beating. Of course, no amount of stuffing could protect him from what must have felt like Herculean blows!

Hopefully, Muni and the director were satisfied with the first take. In any case, your father suffered with back problems for the rest of his life. It could be the money he was paid for that part was not so "good" after all. I doubt it was enough to cover his future doctor and physical therapy bills. It was not worth his future pain and suffering.

Later on, there were times when he had to accept lesser "bit" roles (even uncredited ones) to support us. Every day I'd watch him sit by the phone, hoping his agent would call to offer him another part. It was also hard for him to compete with a select number of other Asian actors for the best parts.

The "seedier" side of the business can be shocking. Your dad arranged for me to see the filming of his next film. The beautiful lead actress was on the brink of stardom and her co-star was one of my favorite actors. I was excited to be on set, until I saw how cruel and abusive the director was. He made the actor do take after take, until the poor man lost his composure, broke down and sobbed. The actor was so distraught, he had to quit for the day. Later, your dad told me he had heard the sadistic director could have been homophobic.

Ironically, that actor was straight—not gay—as the director apparently assumed. Nevertheless, during this actor's lifetime, he was married five times and divorced four, possibly five times. By the time he retired from acting, he was only 44. He had made \$18,000,000 and invested his money very wisely. He loved playing golf and lived near the beach until he was almost 90.

Mom also said, *Your father became acquainted with a charismatic Broadway actor. He was tall, blond, blue-eyed, well-built, and very good-looking. He was well-educated, cultured and refined—a gentleman. He had it all: acting, singing and dancing “chops.” The studio was eager to sign him to a five-year “show biz” contract. His agent told him, “There’s just one thing you need to do... You’ll need perform on someone’s “casting couch” first.” In return for a shot at stardom, some actors and/or actresses were willing to give sexual favors. The actor refused to sign the contract. The following day, he and his wife hopped on a train back to NYC. I’m relieved your dad didn’t have to deal with any monkey business like his friend. He too would have had to walk away from such a compromising condition.*

If my naive and virtuous mom thought these stories were “seedy” and shocking, I can’t imagine what she would think of the “seediness” of today. She would be horrified by the hyper-sexual, lewd, and lascivious behavior of this new Century!

Due to the typecasting of the time, movie audiences never had an opportunity to discover my father’s full potential or his versatility as an actor. Had Hollywood allowed Asian actors to play more leading roles, his career would have gained more stature. He did, however, earn a notable place in Hollywood’s Asian-American film history, as well as the American film history. Despite the challenges of the movie industry, Daddy was able to maintain a professional acting career from 1936 to 1944. In addition to working with MGM & Lowe’s, Inc., he worked for various other studios: Universal, Warner Bros., Inc., RKO Radio Pictures, Corporation, and Republic Pictures, Inc. He was fortunate to work for exceptional directors, like Sidney Franklin, William Wyler, and Walter Huston.

Dad was also able to share the silver screen with some of Hollywood’s brightest stars. Besides Luise Rainer, Paul Muni, and Walter Connolly, he shared screen time with many other famous actors of his day: Myrna Loy, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Gene Tierney, Donna Reed, Mary Astor, Deanna Durbin, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Gregory Peck, Charles Laughton, Herbert Marshall, Peter Lorre, Victor Mature, William Boyd (“Hop-along Cassidy”), William Frawley (the actor who became the crusty neighbor, “Fred Mertz,” on “I Love Lucy” TV comedy series), and Noah Beery, Jr. Beery played James Garner’s father on the popular TV show, “The Rockford Files” (from 1974 to 1980).

Dad even co-starred with Rod Cameron in “G-Men vs. the Black Dragon” (’43). After the previews (today’s trailers), this action-packed serial, was shown between two feature films, a cartoon, and newsreel! The kids loved seeing a new episode every Saturday. A ticket (for almost four hours of entertainment) only cost 29-cents in 1943!

I must say, having my father pop in and out of my life on TV (Turner-Classic Movies) can be fun. However, as his child, having to watch Daddy play a villain or Japanese spy was not fun. Once again, my apologies to my Japanese-American Aunt Jean (now deceased), my cousin’s wife, and many dear friends.

Dad’s acting career ended when he was drafted into the US Army, towards the end of WWII. He received his basic training near San Antonio, Texas and was deployed to France and Germany. As stated previously, I believe it was around this time that Daddy decided to change his name from Roland Lowe Got to Roland “Lewis” Got. I wish I knew why. While my dad was gone, my mom and I lived with her family in El Paso, Texas.

Unfortunately, as a result of the war, he contracted a serious abdominal condition (when he was overseas). Mom told me, *The doctors at the Veterans' Hospital ruled out the obvious: Ulcers or Stomach Cancer. They suggested he could have been suffering from some sort of chemical warfare—poisons the Germans might have used during WW II. Dad's attacks were so severe, he would often double over in pain. The Army Internists were never able to definitively diagnose what had caused his painful condition. These attacks (and his back problems from "The Good Earth") continued to plague him for the rest of what was to be a short life.*

On July 11th, just before my 5th birthday, Daddy finally came home to us in El Paso. Naturally, having him home again was my favorite gift of all. He brought me two fur coats from Paris. El Paso's really hot in the summer, but I didn't care. I loved my soft, furry coats! He didn't stay with us long. He left for San Francisco, where his parents and siblings lived. We were to join him, once he found a place for us to live.

Of course, like many who survive a horrible war, my father was very different when he came home. He wouldn't talk about what he had seen or done during his time overseas. He had been such a "happy-go-lucky" type of person but had also led a relatively privileged life. He had been the Chinese version of a golden boy before he went to war. For someone as sensitive, honorable, idealistic, and virtuous as he had been, he came home a very changed man.

It's a shame my father could not have fought in Asia (instead of Europe). He would have loved helping the US and China defeat Japan! Unfortunately, shortly after WWII ended, the Nationalist Chinese still had to contend with The Chinese Revolution and deal with the ruthless Chinese Communists. These Red Chinese were eventually able to over-throw the Nationalist's leader, Chiang Kai-Shek. He, his family, and his regime were forced from mainland China to the Island of Formosa (now Taiwan).

Daddy was raised to be a proud American-born Chinese man. During his time overseas, he had time to reflect on what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. The images and experiences he witnessed in France and Germany were still difficult for him to forget. When he got to California, he felt all the more conflicted. In 1946, he was 30-years old, so it's possible he also had an early mid-life crisis. For whatever reason, he really felt the need to embrace his Chinese roots more. He dreaded returning to the old grind of making movies. The business of acting had lost its luster. After returning home from the war, an actor's life seemed inconsequential to him.

He was determined to devote the rest of his life to ridding the world of Chinese "Commies! Daddy and his friends were passionate about helping Chiang Kai-Shek and his followers. This regime had to take Mainland China back from the Chinese Communists—no matter what! He and his Chinese-American compatriots sought to help the Chinese Nationalists redeem themselves.

The first time Dad read the introduction to "The Good Earth" film ("Its humility, its courage, its deep heritage from the past and its vast promise for the future"), he was a naive young man. As a mature man of 30, the significance of these words must have meant far more to him, especially after the war. He could, therefore, relate to these eloquent words in a more profound way.

Yes, Daddy was committed to what he thought was a noble cause. After more soul searching, he also knew he would have to give his all to this new mission. To do so, he realized he could no longer be married—no longer be tied down to a family. He agonized over this decision.

First, he had to find a job which would allow him the flexibility to continue his new pursuit. Before the war, Dad had been popular, and engaging. He had known a broad spectrum of people. As an actor, he could be persuasive. The CC Wing Insurance Agency of San Francisco offered Dad a position selling Occidental Life Insurance in Los Angeles. Mr. Wing knew my charming father would bring many new customers to his agency—not only Chinese clients. He was sure my father would be a perfect addition to his sales force.

My father called my mother in Texas and asked her for a divorce. Like my dad, my mom could be persuasive and obstinate. It was an expensive long distance phone call. Somehow, they resolved their issues over the phone and decided to stay married. As soon as we could, Mom and I left Texas, so we could go join him in San Francisco. I attended Kindergarten at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Chinatown. We were not happy living in the Bay Area.

The following year, we moved back to SoCal. I was enrolled in 1st and 2nd grades at The Chinese Catholic Academy. We were Episcopalian, but my well-meaning mother thought private school would be better than a public one. From the start, the nun hated me. She thought I was too Americanized—too inquisitive. At best she was just plain mean. Actually, she was horrific! To add insult to injury, we had to be bussed to an after school program to try to learn Chinese! Living in “Frisco” had been bad, but living in L.A. was ten times as bad.

When I was six, my parents finally separated. Mom and I stayed in L.A. Dad moved to Reno, Nevada. It took less time to get a divorce in NV than CA. While Daddy was there, he took flying lessons and learned to fly solo—in more ways than one. It could be he was planning to join the Chinese Air Force!

On Tuesday, November 30, 1948, fate stepped in one last time. Our lives would forever be changed... That day, Daddy decided to go Christmas shopping for my mother, his mother, and I. By chance, he met an old acquaintance there in San Francisco's Chinatown. Her name was Lil Woo (Aka: Lily W. Chong). She was the sister of Dad's good friend, Eddie Woo. Dad suggested they shop at the outlet stores in Oakland. He told her he had dinner plans with his boss (and his wife) back in Chinatown. He told her they would need to take the 6PM ferry back, so he wouldn't be late. Somehow, Dad and Lil Woo missed the ferry and had to take a later one. Halfway, across the San Francisco Bay, Lil and Dad were sitting inside the ferry. Dad became ill and Lil suggested they go upstairs to the deck. She told him, "*The fresh air might do you good.*"

Once they got to the upper deck and were seated on a bench, Daddy placed his Christmas purchases between them. On top of the two gift boxes was a shopping bag. He had bought a coat for me, a coat for my mom, and a hat for his mother in the shopping bag. Daddy's cramps got much worse. Mrs. Woo still assumed he was just seasick. She feared he'd embarrass himself by throwing up in front of her (or on his Christmas gifts) and so she told him, "*No, not here, go to the railing!*" It was a foggy night, the water was choppy, and the upper deck of the ferry was wet. Lil Woo saw Daddy disappear into the thick fog. When he didn't return, she rushed to find the Captain. He stopped

the engines, hoping to locate my father. He surveyed the scene. He saw how Dad's shoes had left track marks on the wet deck. He could see how Dad had to slide across the slippery deck. Once Dad's body hit the low railing, the force must have instantly propelled him into the frigid water. The ferry ride back to S.F. had been rough and could have contributed to Dad going overboard. Some would say, it was kind of a perfect storm—a recipe for disaster—a tragedy.

After the ferry docked, Woo and the Captain were met by the San Francisco Police Department and my father's older brother, Bill Got. The detectives questioned the Captain and Lil Woo. The detectives had to rule out the obvious: Was the person a victim of foul play or did the person die at his own hand? As the Captain and Woo were leaving, she overheard the investigator ask my uncle Bill some routine questions like: "*Was your brother depressed? Could your brother have committed suicide?*" Basically, my uncle said, *Yes, he could have been depressed about his divorce.*

Apparently, Uncle Bill must not have known my parent's divorce wasn't final. In fact, Mom and Dad had agreed to reconcile. It's also possible my uncle didn't realize my father had been suffering with a chronic stomach condition. Later, Bill notified the Coroner that he was convinced my father had accidentally drowned. Unfortunately, Mrs. Woo left the interrogation room thinking Bill Got must have been right. He was his brother, so he would have known more than she did. He must have committed suicide! Roland must not have accidentally stumbled after all.

The following day, on December 1, 1948, an unnamed reporter for The Oakland Tribune newspaper reported: "The Captain ordered the boat stopped and circled the area for almost two-hours without finding Got's body. An 83-foot Coast Guard Patrol Boat searched until midnight without success." Lil Woo must have been interviewed by that reporter the night my dad died. As such, the reporter likely based his report on the misinformed Lily Chong (Aka: Lil Woo). In any case, it's unfortunate the writer jumped the gun. He should have checked his facts and found more reliable sources. Had he waited for the San Francisco Police Department and Coroner's reports, he would have had to retract his suicide story in 1949!

Two or so years ago, I finally located the very spry 96-year old, Mrs. Woo. She agreed to meet me for lunch, so I could interview her. Shortly after we were seated at the restaurant, I asked her if I could tape our conversation. I was nervous. She said it was okay. She can be blunt. I'd barely pressed the record button, when she blurted out, "*I hope you don't think I had an affair with your father.*" I gasped! She then said, "*You know your father committed suicide!*"

20-plus years before, my aunts, uncles, and mother had convinced me my dad had died accidentally. So her lack of sensitivity and curt words came as a shock! Somehow, I gained my composure. In less than a minute, this woman was able to refute everything my relatives (and mom) had told me so long ago. It was painful to finally hear her speak. But I still had to hear her account of what happened to Dad that awful night. Even if she refuted everything I'd been told, I needed to hear the truth from her mouth. I had to know, no matter how painful the truth was to hear.

I heard myself telling her yes, I had grown up thinking she was my father's girlfriend. I then told her yes, for 43-years I had convinced myself my father had killed himself. It wasn't until I had

an opportunity to visit my Aunt Diana and Uncle Ernie that they convinced me otherwise. They finally straightened me out—told me the circumstances surrounding my dad's death.

To my surprise, instead of my interviewing her, she began interviewing me! Mrs. Woo wanted to know what my aunt and uncle had said to convince me my father had not killed himself.

I explained how Aunt Diana was dying of Lung Cancer, so I went to visit her and Uncle Ernie in Lacey, Washington. I was 52 at the time. When I broached the taboo subject of my father's suicide to them they were shocked! They wanted to know how I'd gotten such an idea. I told them I was 10 when I overheard a boy tell his little brother, *She's the girl whose father committed suicide!* I'd never heard that word before. By the way he said it (and his body language) I knew it must be a bad thing. As soon as I found out the word suicide meant, I kept the secret to myself. I didn't tell my mother. Diana and Ernie were amazed I'd carried such a thing [to myself] for so many years. A couple of years later, I consulted Bill & Mal Got, they too were stunned to learn I'd lived with such a secret for most of my life (See: Pages 10 & 11).

After Mrs. Woo heard what I had to say, she replied, *Well, I always thought he stumbled on the way to that railing... He must not have jumped overboard after all.* I asked her why she didn't tell the Captain and the police my father had stumbled or tripped as he rushed to railing. She said, *I did! I told the Captain and investigators I thought he stumbled. I was about to leave, but when it was your Uncle Bill's turn to be questioned by the police his words left me thinking, his brother thinks Roland was upset over his divorce. Roland must have been depressed and committed suicide!*

She continued by saying, *By the way, I hardly knew your father, He was my brother's friend, not mine. I didn't know he had come back from the war with a stomach condition. Furthermore, I never met your mother, or his family. I had no idea your parents had been separated and were divorcing, until I heard your uncle tell the policeman. I remember that day and night well. It was my birthday. I had a date to celebrate my 30th birthday at a nightclub in San Francisco. The whole ordeal made me very late to meet my fiancée. I never looked back. So, until we met that afternoon—66-plus years after my dad drowned—Woo thought my father had killed himself.*

On December 23rd, 1948, Dad's body was found floating on the San Mateo side of the South San Francisco Bay. While duck-hunting, three teenage boys saw him and notified the police. He still had a \$100 bill pinned to the elastic waste band of his underwear and another \$55 in his wallet (almost \$1,700 today!). An autopsy was ordered the following day. The Mills Memorial Hospital Pathology Report Diagnosis was: "Pulmonary congestion and edema, consistent with drowning."

Mom arranged for me to stay with my aunt and uncle in Arizona, so she could attend my dad's funeral. The services were held at a Chapel at Gantner-Felder-Kenny Funeral Home in San Francisco, at 11:30AM on January 4, 1949. He received over 50 bouquets. My mother kept all the condolence cards and two telegrams for me. My father was interred that day at the beautiful Golden Gate National Cemetery, in San Bruno, California. The inscription on Daddy's white marble headstone is: Roland Lewis Got.

An investigation into the exact cause of death remained pending. On 1/10/48, a Coroner's Inquest

was held at South San Francisco, San Mateo County. On 3/3/49, the Coroner officially concluded the following: "Pulmonary congestion and edema consistent with drowning." On 3/9/49, a five-page copy of the Deputy Coroner's Report, stated my father died of an Accidental Drowning. One page states the following: "The Recorder's Office-County of San Mateo, "Autopsy Surgeon Stuart Lindsay's Report Attached Hereto—Note: Brother of the deceased, Bill Got, phoned the Coroner's office that his brother Roland had been ill with severe stomach disorder. He stated that he was convinced that he became ill on the night he fell into the bay and fell from the ferry boat, accidentally, while ill. (Signed) Deputy Florence McClain, Deputy Coroner"

It's unfortunate, there are still people—some family members included—who think my father killed himself! As for the erroneous Oakland Tribune article that appeared in (the morning after Dad died), I had hoped they would do a retraction of their 1948 story. Recently, I was told The Oakland Tribune was taken over by another newspaper (only a year or so ago!). Obviously, the retraction I wanted them to write will never be written.

To make matters worse, a woman wrote a short book about Chinese actors in 2013. She mentioned my father in her book and claimed he had committed suicide! The source for this misinformation must have come from the The Oakland Tribune article (1948). She was asked to correct her mistake, but she said she had no way of knowing who had already bought her books. However, she agreed to correct any unsold copies and said she was not planning to have her book reprinted.

For so many years, I avoided discussing this matter with my mother. She was a very private person. She rarely spoke of the events surrounding my father's death. I wanted to honor and protect her, which is why I chose to live with my secret. Shortly before Aunt Diana passed away, in 1992, she encouraged me to open up to my mom. Thank goodness I did, because that's when my mother finally told me, *Your dad and I were about to get back together, just before he died.* No wonder Daddy bought mom a Christmas present... No man would have bought an expensive gift for his soon to be ex-wife!

Of course, having a father die is painful. Believe me, thinking your father has killed himself is much worse. I know I've spent a great deal of time dwelling on this tragic event. I've done so with a heavy heart. It was tough being burdened with the belief that my dad had committed suicide. I've often read journaling can be a great way to deal with your pain. It's true, as I enter my 75th year, writing my dad's biography has relieved me from repressed memories, grief, and sorrow. It's given me closure.

So as a tribute to my dear father, it's time for me to set the record straight. I owe it to him, my mother, my children, great-grandchildren, and any generations to come. This is my opportunity to clear up any past or future misunderstandings, curiosity, and/or idle gossip. For once and for all, on November 30th, 1948, my father, Roland L. Got, died from an "Accidental Drowning."

The San Francisco Chronicle is doing a feature article about my father called: "Rediscovering Roland Got, S.F.'s forgotten movie star" (on 8/22/16). I've just seen the online preview. The staff writer, G. Allen Johnson, has done a lovely job describing my Dad's life and his acting career. I am thrilled Daddy will receive this special recognition. I'm also pleased Mr. Johnson

mentioned how my father died: “The coroner ruled it an accidental drowning.” My family and I are grateful to the Chronicle (and Mr. Johnson) for recognizing my dad as the multi-talented Chinese-American actor he was. Their story will be a gift that keeps giving—a great way to help us celebrate what would have been Dad’s 100th birthday, and future birthdays for that matter!

I have a feeling my Centenarian father and 98-year old mother are up there together—somewhere. I believe they continually find ways to help inspire me, when I least expect it. Without them, I doubt I’d have been able to do any justice to Dad’s remarkable life story.

As for my parent’s story, I’m still not sure I believe in Astrology. I know my mother thought reading daily horoscopes was “hogwash!” However, after reading about Dad & Mom’s signs again, “Leo men and Sagittarius women are compatible and should marry,” I’m definitely willing to keep an open mind. Seriously, I truly believe my mom and my dad were much more compatible than they realized... Daddy would always be my mom’s matinee idol—the love of her life. She would never remarry. Mom really was the love of Dad’s life and she was his one and only!

My mother died on November 3rd, 1998, almost 50-years after my father passed away. A few weeks later, we buried Mom with Dad, so they could be together again. They were finally able to rest in peace, to finally have their “Happily Ever After.”

We were fortunate she was in our lives for so long. She was devoted to her grandchildren and to me. I’m so glad she was able to enjoy her first-born grandson for a year. She would have adored her great-granddaughter and her second-born grandson as well.

I still can’t help thinking how different our lives would’ve been, if Daddy hadn’t been an actor. I’m sure he would have been more grounded, fulfilled, and happier. I’m happy he was able to spend some time sketching and water-color painting later in life. He also delved into cinematography and recordings, performed and directed his antique Chinese puppet shows, and as a public speaker, he warned of the dangers of Chinese Communism. Likewise, it is comforting to know that Dad’s love of the applied and performing arts lives on through my children, grandchildren, and I.

Occasionally—thanks to Turner Classic Movies—it’s such a treat to see Dad in one of his old movies on television. Being able to watch and hear him helps keep my memories of him alive... Naturally, being a daddy’s girl, I could not be more proud of my dad—the actor and the man. I should add, my father’s story has come from my heart.

Daddy, we send our love to you on your Centennial Birthday! We hope you and Mom celebrated by laughing, singing, and dancing the night away. One more time, may you both rest in peace—until Mom’s 100th. In two years, it will be her turn to finally upstage you. Since she was the dancer in our family, she will be the one to lead the Conga Line next time. I know you’ll be cuddling right behind! All my love to you both from your “Baby Doll!”

Herlinda Got Mahler

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Dedicated to my kids & grandkids

Shawn (Grace) Mahler Shope & Patrick Roland Shope
Austin Cole Mahler, Lauren Grace Shope & Grant Ryan Mahler

Acknowledgements

rolandgot.com CREATOR, RICHARD HARRISON

A few years ago, a man named Richard Harrison, contacted me on Facebook. He wrote to ask if I would share any personal information about my father's life. I spoke with him by phone.

He told me how he loved old movies and was a film buff. When he saw "The Good Earth" he became fascinated with my father's portrayal of "The Younger Son." He was so intrigued, he made a concerted effort to find other films Dad had played in. He was dumbfounded to learn my father's movie career hadn't taken off as he imagined it would have.

After several months of gathering material, vintage photos, posters, film clips, etc., he decided to build a website to honor my father. He asked if I would be willing to share any personal photos and/or stories of my father's life. I agreed to help to put the puzzle pieces of Dad's life together. That night, we spoke for almost two hours—long distance. He also asked me to do this biography for the rolandgot.com website.

It's been 23-years, since my dad's family informed me Daddy died accidentally. I must say, I was stunned to finally learn the truth, then relieved, and ever so grateful to them for sharing what they remembered.

The one piece that was missing was that I still felt the need to find Lil Woo—the woman who was the last to see Dad alive. I'd been looking for her since I was 10-years old (for over 60 years!). Richard is a whiz-kid. He can find just about anything and/or anyone. In fact, he was the one who was able to locate Ms. Woo two years ago.

Several months later, after a lot of digging, he was also able to find Dad's original Autopsy and Coroner's Reports. These documents listed my father's death as an "Accidental Drowning." Unfortunately, the San Francisco Police Reports had been "purged or destroyed." I'm so glad he was able to find these documents for me.

THE AWESOME APPLE STORE AT VICTORIA GARDENS!

Many thanks to the Creative Team at The Apple Store at Victoria Gardens. A special thanks to Josie Huizar, Shawn Richter, Michael Maule, Chris Cook, Carlos Noriega, Gilbert Gutierrez, Marlone Sese, Carlos Noriega, Brianna Jimenez, and one Red Zoner, Sean Peterson.

As for their cool Managers, I can't thank them enough for allowing me to hang out at their store ad nauseam! Without their patience and understanding, I would never have

been able to complete My Aunt "Glo" and this biography for my father. Your One-to-One Training Program has been fabulous! On my last day, I was at the store from noon until closing—perched on one of your black stools—at my usual “station.” I can’t believe I even got a mini “Clap-Out!”

To my Editors

Last, but not least, I want to thank my bright, multi-talented grandchildren: Cole, Lauren, and Grant. Writing is not really my thing. However, I knew one (or more) of my (genius!) grandkids would help me make sense of any and/or all of my story telling attempts.

A year ago, Grant, did a terrific job helping me edit my first book (My Aunt "Glo"). I’d hoped he would do this shorter version of my dad’s bio too, but he couldn’t. His hands have been full, deftly dribbling his basketball and playing his piano in between dribbles!

Last month, “Laur” edited half of the longer version of my father's biography. Somehow, she did so on a “red-eye” flight from California to New York. Unfortunately, her smart phone slipped off her lap and landed out of sight. That American Airlines 1st-class seat had swallowed up her Apple iPhone 6! She could have finished making her corrections, had that debacle not happened. Thankfully, once we came home, she was able to finish editing the other half of Dad’s long biography. I was thrilled when she did so, as I know she would have preferred “hanging,” and/or “Tweeting” with friends or even learning how to drive...

It’s now August—my deadline for Dad’s biography to be uploaded to his rolandgot.com website. Cole and I are scrambling to fine tune, edit, and finish this condensed version of Dad’s bio as soon as possible. We live 90-miles apart, so sharing this task over the internet has been a challenge! I'm grateful he’s taking the time to help me. He’s a brainiac who will be returning to his (Cognitive Science) studies at the University of California at San Diego. I’m also sure he too would rather be with his friends: rock-climbing, going to the beach to surf, or getting settled in his new digs in la-de-da La Jolla!

Finally, I hope my kids and grandkids realize how much I’ve appreciated their love, patience encouragement, guidance, understanding, and support.

To my family, friends, and any others who have read this (my father’s bittersweet tale) I really appreciate the time you’ve spent doing so.

