There’s a country music song that goes, “She’s a wild one with an angel’s face.” That’s my younger daughter, Lulu. When I think of her, I think of trying to tame a feral horse. Even when she was in utero she kicked so hard it left visible imprints on my stomach. Lulu’s real name is Louisa, which means “famous warrior.” I’m not sure how we called that one so early.

Lulu’s Chinese name is Si Shan, which means “coral” and connotes delicacy. This fits Lulu too. From the day she was born,
Lulu had a discriminating palate. She didn’t like the infant formula I fed her, and she was so outraged by the soy milk alternative suggested by our pediatrician that she went on a hunger strike. But unlike Mahatma Gandhi, who was selfless and meditative while he starved himself, Lulu had colic and screamed and clawed violently for hours every night. Jed and I were in earplugs and tearing our hair out when fortunately our Chinese nanny Grace came to the rescue. She prepared a silken tofu braised in a light abalone and shiitake sauce with a cilantro garnish, which Lulu ended up quite liking.

It’s hard to find the words to describe my relationship with Lulu. “All-out nuclear warfare” doesn’t quite capture it. The irony is that Lulu and I are very much alike: She inherited my hot-tempered, viper-tongued, fast-forgiving personality.

Speaking of personalities, I don’t believe in astrology—and I think people who do have serious problems—but the Chinese Zodiac describes Sophia and Lulu perfectly. Sophia was born in the Year of the Monkey, and Monkey people are curious, intellectual, and “generally can accomplish any given task. They appreciate difficult or challenging work as it stimulates them.” By contrast, people born in the Year of the Boar are “willful” and “obstinate” and often “fly into a rage,” although they “never harbor a grudge,” being fundamentally honest and warmhearted. That’s Lulu exactly.

I was born in the Year of the Tiger. I don’t want to boast or anything, but Tiger people are noble, fearless, powerful, authoritative, and magnetic. They’re also supposed to be lucky. Beethoven and Sun Yat-sen were both Tigers.

I had my first face-off with Lulu when she was about three. It was a freezing winter afternoon in New Haven, Connecticut, one
of the coldest days of the year. Jed was at work—he was a professor at Yale Law School—and Sophia was at kindergarten. I decided that it would be a perfect time to introduce Lulu to the piano. Excited about working together—with her brown curls, round eyes, and china doll face, Lulu was deceptively cute—I put her on the piano bench, on top of some comfortable pillows. I then demonstrated how to play a single note with a single finger, evenly, three times, and asked her to do the same. A small request, but Lulu refused, preferring instead to smash at many notes at the same time with two open palms. When I asked her to stop, she smashed harder and faster. When I tried to pull her away from the piano, she began yelling, crying, and kicking furiously.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying, and kicking, and I’d had it. Dodging her blows, I dragged the screeching demon to our back porch door, and threw it open.

The wind chill was twenty degrees, and my own face hurt from just a few seconds’ exposure to the icy air. But I was determined to raise an obedient Chinese child—in the West, obedience is associated with dogs and the caste system, but in Chinese culture, it is considered among the highest of virtues—if it killed me. “You can’t stay in the house if you don’t listen to Mommy,” I said sternly. “Now, are you ready to be a good girl? Or do you want to go outside?”

Lulu stepped outside. She faced me, defiant.

A dull dread began seeping though my body. Lulu was wearing only a sweater, a ruffled skirt, and tights. She had stopped crying. Indeed, she was eerily still.

“Okay good—you’ve decided to behave,” I said quickly. “You can come in now.”

Lulu shook her head.
“Don’t be silly, Lulu.” I was panicking. “It’s freezing. You’re going to get sick. Come in now.”

Lulu’s teeth were chattering, but she shook her head again. And right then I saw it all, as clear as day. I had underestimated Lulu, not understood what she was made of. She would sooner freeze to death than give in.

I had to change tactics immediately; I couldn’t win this one. Plus I might be locked up by Child Services. My mind racing, I reversed course, now begging, coddling, and bribing Lulu to come back into the house. When Jed and Sophia arrived home, they found Lulu contentedly soaking in a hot bath, dipping a brownie in a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

But Lulu had underestimated me too. I was just rearming. The battle lines were drawn, and she didn’t even know it.