

**THE EIGHTH WIFE'S DAUGHTER**

A Thesis

by

SHAVONNE WEI-MING CLARKE

Submitted to the office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2010

Major Subject: English

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**ABSTRACT**

The Eighth Wife's Daughter.

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This thesis explores, through fictional storytelling, the cultural duality of individuals inhabiting Singapore prior to World War II. The primary locale in many of these stories—an actual residence known as Eu Villa—interconnects each narrative and helps to uncover the hybridization of a Chinese family (and servants) living in a British colony. Many of the stories are imparted from different perspectives: wives, children and *amahs*, each of them pieced together to bridge the space between Chinese heritage overlaid and intermixed with British culture. In this way, the stories of this thesis reflect on the history that preceded the distinct multiculturalism of contemporary Singapore.

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## INTRODUCTION

The stories in this thesis are part of a much larger historical trend: where it was once taboo to consort with an Asian it is now taboo to deny their place in literature. With a focus on Singapore, I attempt to trace the progression of literary portrayals of Asians as written during the past century. The first section places emphasis on Somerset Maugham's depictions of Singapore and the clear cultural delineations seen in his work and in Paul Theroux's *Saint Jack*. The second section outlines the shift in English literature that occurred with the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as well as the succeeding literature in the past thirty years. In the third section I discuss the stories written for this thesis and the space they inhabit within these larger cultural and political histories.

### I. Literature of the 1920's-70's

Stories of Singapore are rare in the West; indeed, much of what is known about the city-state as it exists today is based on its cleanliness and the unforgiving eye it casts upon crime. Little has been presented in the way of Singapore's Straits Chinese prior to the war, particularly as fictional prose is concerned. Early depictions, as in Somerset Maugham's "The Letter," approach the city through a European lens: "Singapore is the meeting-place of a hundred peoples; and men of all colors, black Tamils, yellow Chinks, brown Malays, Armenians, Jews, and Bengalis, called to one another in raucous tones"

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This dissertation follows the style of *MLA Manual*.

(307). In “The Letter,” the salaciousness of Mr. Hammond’s relationship with a Chinese woman and his consequent murder by his European lover reflect the general attitude of pre and post-World War II narratives. In many ways, Maugham's depictions of Singapore in the first decades of the twentieth century were long considered to be definitive. In Noel Barber's *Tanamera*, the protagonist notes that, between the years 1921 and 1936, “the Singapore of my youth was still the Singapore of Somerset Maugham” (62).

Another of Maugham’s stories “P. & O.,” while actually set on a ship en route from Singapore to Europe, remains nonetheless consistent in its portrayal of Asians; when the British protagonist observes two Japanese men dressed in European clothing, she feels that “to look at them filled [her]...with a vague disquiet. Because they seemed to wear so easily a disguise there was about them something sinister” (101). Frequently in these stories, the distrust that exists between Europeans and Asians is compounded by any attempts on the part of non-Europeans to mimic or adopt some portion of Western culture.

Conversely, Asian characters are just as readily classified if they make no attempt to alter themselves. Returning again to “The Letter,” we see that Maugham sets a scene in which the very Westernized Ong Chi Seng, a Chinese clerk who wears “neat...white ducks” and speaks “beautiful English” is contrasted with a “fat Chinaman” who also wears a duck suit except that his is marred by the characteristic “large gold chain across his breast” (332). Ong Chi Seng is regarded by the narrator (a British lawyer), to be “industrious, obliging, and of exemplary character” (307), while the “fat Chinaman”

seems of low character, perhaps hoping to benefit from the illicit meeting he arranges between the narrator and Mr. Hammond's lover.

Maugham's stories also provide evidence of another trend. Much of the twentieth century literature that deals with Asians remains consistent in one aspect: the narrator, as a rule, is almost always European. A late example would be Paul Theroux's 1973 novel *Saint Jack*, which imagines an American's memoirs about his life as a pimp in Singapore. Though the novel is fairly well flooded with an assortment of characters—many of them Chinese—none achieve any fullness or dynamism aside from the protagonist, Jack Flowers, and his one-time European partner, Ed Shuck. Despite Jack's unhappiness at being pigeonholed into a certain type of work based on his skin color—“[being a pimp] was the only role open to me because it was the only one the people I dealt with accepted” (Theroux 103)—the only relationships he seems to nurture are with his European drinking pals and Shuck. The smallness of Jack's sphere does not afford the Chinese characters around him any deviation from their own flatness.

## II. Recent and Contemporary Literature

It is only in the past thirty years that Asian otherness seems to have dissipated to any degree. Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 memoir *The Woman Warrior* presents one of the earliest examples of a narrative shift brought to Western readers. The reversal of position—Chinese come to inhabit the West—presents a palpable change from earlier storytelling. Kingston's portrayal of womanly strength serves as both an entrance into the

Asian psyche as well as an affirmation that Eastern subordination and Western dominance are not based on essential human differences but on politics. Kingston's complaint that she "hated the secrecy of the Chinese" (183) becomes a very transnational articulation: her broadened perspective allows her to see the shortcomings of her very own people from a hybridized vantage point. Western readers could not read her simply as Chinese or as American, and this duality helped to weaken the barriers between Asian and Western culture.

Though many stories are still narrated by Europeans, storytelling has undergone a clear shift. Novels such as Barber's 1981 *Tanamera* and Lee's *The Piano Teacher* create a distance between author and protagonist in their attempts to depict the Western mindset during the first half of the twentieth century. Now it is with a degree of irony, as in Janice Y.K. Lee's 2009 novel *The Piano Teacher*, that Chinese stereotypes are invoked: "Her mother had warned her about the Chinese...an unscrupulous, conniving people who would surely try to take advantage of her innocence and goodwill" (4). Furthermore, the primary love interest of Lee's novel, rather than the British protagonist, becomes in truth a half-Chinese (half-Portuguese) woman who embodies a great deal more intrigue than the narrator herself.

As seen with a huge number of contemporary works—of Amy Tan, Yiyun Li, Ha Jin, and many others—the Asian character is no longer restricted to the "Chink" or "Chinaman" or, altogether, a generalized assumption of Chinese heritage. The Eastern mind is no longer unfathomable.



### III. My Stories

The stories in this thesis seek to address the pre-WWII divisions that existed between East and West, even in such a small and varied place as Singapore. The unique position of a wealthy Chinese family—distrusted by the Europeans for their conformity to Western influences and unable to retrace the path to “true” Chinese—has allowed for a series of narratives that explore and, in many ways, serve to knit together the spaces where a single individual can be divided among cultures. Though each is narrated by a woman, it is my hope that the universality of the human condition as translated through fiction will provide an insight into the characters presented.

The first story, “Taitai,” provides an introduction into the lives of the wives and children of Tong Sen Eu, a merchant wealthy off tin mines and rubber plantations. Lily, the eighth wife, was promised by her parents as a *taitai* (first wife) to Tong Sen. Her choice to run away with another man and leave her three children behind is what shapes much of Ruth-Ann’s narrative in the subsequent stories.

Female value and objectification in Chinese culture are thematically central here and provide one of the threads for interweaving each story to the next. Lily’s story is at once the familiar story of a Chinese wife and, by her circumstances and her choices, something much more: her change is a precursor to the many changes that the inhabitants of Eu Villa will undergo in the years before World War II.

“Cellist,” my second story, is narrated by Ruth-Ann Eu, first daughter to the absent eighth wife and the “Malay chicken” (dark-skinned) of the children. Ruth-Ann’s

abandonment by her mother is compounded by Tong Sen's fringe presence, a space only filled to some degree by her *amah*, Wong Kwai.

The theme of music provides a juxtaposition of Western and Eastern culture, here seen in the cello and the *pipa*, a traditional Chinese instrument. Ruth-Ann's understanding of her own place between these cultures remains unresolved in the story, but her character undergoes a scale enlargement that allows her a new perspective on British and Chinese influences.

"Third Wife" presents a similar dilemma, as it is narrated in the third person by Reumah, one of Tong Sen's early wives and the only one among the eight to have undergone foot binding as a child. As of the story's telling, the practice of foot binding has recently been outlawed in China and thus provides—for Tong Sen in particular—a certain allure.

Reumah's story imagines the subjugation of a Chinese woman and the subsequent lengths to which she must go in order to escape a dying tradition. The actions of many of the surrounding characters evoke stereotypically Chinese sensibilities: the beauty of a woman borne by pin-like feet—her entrapment—and the ways in which she acts as a physical reminder of undiluted Chinese culture. Conversely, Reumah is influenced by the modernity and freeing aspects of Western culture.

"*Di ba's Daughter*," the fourth story, returns again to Ruth-Ann's perspective following her mother's departure and preceding her father's death. Ruth-Ann bears an unwilling closeness with her *amah*, the only adult presence in her life. She refuses to

conform to standards of female behavior and attempts to behave like her brothers who, on a summer trip to Malaysia, spend their time cliff-climbing.

Ruth-Ann's position in the family becomes especially clear when one of the boys (a local Malay) is injured and Ruth-Ann is left halfway down a cliff—petrified and alone. The prominence of the first son, even in a hybridized family, remains deeply ingrained in the Asian psyche.

The following two stories seek to provide a perspective somewhat outside the Eu family. “The Oily Man” is written in the folktale style that is, in many ways, apropos to Asian culture. The story speaks to cross-cultural love between an unnamed Chinese serving girl and a Malay man as well as the female hierarchy and gossip prevalent in Chinese culture.

“Amah Mun” presents a similar—closer—look at the life of a servant. As an *amah* and former prostitute, Mun Woon's story speaks to several concepts: the treatment of Chinese women as sexual creatures, as household servants and—in the present of the story—as elders.

Senility is not a topic often addressed in fiction, especially in the case of a Chinese woman without family. When Mun Woon falls and injures herself at the end of the story, Mei-Ming's song for her becomes a display of filial piety though they share no relation. The story, then, exemplifies the surrogate role that an *amah* will often play, particularly in a household with twenty-four children and eight wives.

“Boat Quay,” Ruth-Ann’s third narrative, occurs as she is entering adolescence and her father has been poisoned by one of his wives. Memories of her father are interwoven with those of her mother. Surrogate motherhood is again prominent in the form of Wong Kwai.

As a rock-skipper, Ruth-Ann still passively seeks to fill the role of son. She views the present given to her by her father years before—a well-formed rock for skipping—to be his only acknowledgment of her worth.

The final story, “Leaving Singapore,” depicts the Japanese bombing and invasion of Singapore in 1942 as well as the Eu family’s departure from Eu Villa. The final story in this collection follows Ruth-Ann’s escape from Singapore on a boat to the United States. British colonialism and Japanese imperialism are at odds here, which presents an important distinction: should a Singaporean Chinese consider him or herself to be Asian before Singaporean, and, by extension, British?

The hybridization of the residents of Singapore seems especially important in the face of Japanese occupation. This story also addresses the social and class layering that exists in Singapore even as a British colony populated primarily by Chinese.

As a collection, these stories are intended to provide a view into transnational issues prior to World War II. Their dealings with Singapore Chinese act as an alternative to tales of Asian-Americans, instead asking: what does it mean to exist in a place that does not promote a “melting pot,” but rather privileges a single culture and a single race?

*Taitai*

1929

In the next room an *amah* frets over a cushion's place—on the divan or the floor. It is the Indian room, “exotic,” always smelling of the jasmine East and, somehow, *paan* bread and lentils. When she comes out to the terrace where Lily sits she straightens up in some surprise, her tight-skinned hands balling, her face opening up. Lily does and does not know her: she is dressed in the black and white uniform of a woman who runs after children, replacing the dust spun high in their wake. Her clothes are especially pale and spare, the dark tunic buttoning up at the collar and the string of the loose pants cinched at her straight waist. She has likely been working for Tong Sen for some time.

“Good day Mem,” the *amah* says. Lily nods at her and the *amah* continues on, her fingers running over the rattan chairs on the terrace, checking for dust or pollen or insects. Lily knows her thought: it is rare for a wife to sit alone, without a houseboy or a child, consumed by nothing at all. Her hands are idle in her lap and her eyes have been unfocused on the far wall. She is filled with thoughts of her father.

After he lost the *mah jong* game, Lily's mother would not speak to her father for three days. Both walked separate paths through the small bungalow, her father stepping loudly as if to warn Lily and her sister. Every time her parents were unlucky enough to pass one another in the hallway her mother would let out a sharp, bird-like noise that Lily and Ai'li could both hear, though the two sisters were often on separate ends of the house. When she and Ai'li caught eyes, Ai'li would scrunch her face and corner her

eyebrows together. Her look meant, “why haven't you left already?” because she was jealous that Lily was to be married well and before her.

When Lily's mother looked at her daughter, her eyes seemed to grow so wide that Lily thought she might reach out with her hand and place it on her shoulder or her cheek. Instead she had Lily hold out her own and checked the nails for dirt and pushed the cuticle back with a little file she had begun to carry around. By the time she left home her fingers ached and her nails had never seemed longer. When she made motions to pull her hand away, her mother would say, “where is your sister?” and Lily could not answer because Ai'li never held fast to a single place. Her mother knew this, and it was because of it that she would ask: it would give her something motherly to say.

If Lily encountered her father he would find great occupation in something until she left the room. Most often he would lift a book so high that it covered his entire face except for the top of his high forehead that, every year, his hairline revealed a little more of. He had tried not to look at her ever since the loss of his greatest *mah jong* wager. When he finally did, her father had stared for minutes, closing and unclosing his eyes slower than a blink, faster than a rest, parting his lips only to lick them until finally the words edged out and became a tumble.

He said, “You were won by Eu Tong Sen, a merchant man, and are to be his wife.” Then he told her to get her things ready for when the driver from Eu Villa came in his motor-car.

She knew of the place. Her father had stood in the great foyer and seen a grand winding staircase. He would say, “You know that you’ve arrived before you even get inside the gates. He has his surname etched in giant black and white stone letters right there for every passer-by to see.” He told her, “There are giant sculptures of naked men and women—they look foreign—doing things in the yard. Some are dancing in circles. He even has a black motor-car, driven by a *syce* called Ling who will open the door for him and take his hat before he gets in.”

To this, her mother once asked, “And what if he wants to open the door himself?”

“Then he would not be rich.”

As a child Lily would walk to the bay-side market with her mother, and from there she could see the house sitting like a solid pillar atop the city. It did not have the look of their bungalow or any house of Singaporean construction. Level upon level of stone and brick rose up so high that when the sun was at its highest point a person could stand on the beach below and the house would cast a shade over his body. She thought that the house must be very cool compared to most, because it was situated so close to the bay that the wind would blow through it like it did the shaking reeds of a bamboo forest just when a midday *sumatra* was coming in.

Lily had pulled at her mother’s silk sleeve and asked her, “Who owns that house?” She pointed up at it and she saw how small her hand looked, the short fingers reaching out to something so vast. “The wealthiest man on Singapore Island,” her mother said, looking with her. “It is said that, when the midday heat descends on the city and

everyone goes into their homes to rest, one can simply open the shutters of Eu Villa, close their eyes, and imagine that they are standing at the mast of a fast-traveling ship out at sea.”

At this, Lily did close her eyes. She thought how simple life must be for a man who had so much wealth – to simply open a shutter and escape the heat that no one else could. She envied him for being rich enough to buy the wind off the bay.

When her mother went to her father to ask him why Lily was being sent to Eu Villa, he said, “Do you want debt or your home?”

Her father was a notorious gambler, always trying to increase his wealth through his richer friends. When he went out, her mother would sigh and compare him to *yan que yong you hong hu zhi*: little sparrows with dreams of swans. He thought he was good at *mah jong* but really he was just awful at addition because he never counted up his debt until it was suggested that he trade his oldest daughter.

She was to be given to this man, Eu Tong Sen. On the last day before she left, her mother put down her nail file and said, “He is the richest man in Malaysia; he has seven castles.” Then her breath halted, and she said, “He will make you his number one *taitai*—first wife above all others.”

Lily said, “You mean he has many wives?”

“All rich men do,” she said, and then the small wrinkles below her eyes were filled like rivers, their creases overflowing onto the smooth curve of her cheek, “They often have many *mah jong* partners.”



She was just starting to learn things when she had to leave home: needlepoint, painting, knitting. Her father was teaching her some French that he had learned from his British gambling friends. She was just now allowed to wear a *cheongsam* with slits above the calf. The day before her father told her of the marriage, she had been admired by a boy while looking at fans in the Yangzhi market. He said, "This one would complement your eyes," and picked up a light brown fan with yellow leaves on the side. Lily had lowered her head, smiled at him, and gone to find her mother.

When Lily told her mother about the boy in the market, her mother turned to her in the rickshaw and she took her filed hands. She knew of her husband's debt, though Lily did not, so that when their hands met she placed her palms flatly against Lily's. She bent the tips of her fingers backwards a little, right at the last knuckle. Lily was surprised at how elastic they were. "Do you know what this means?" She asked. Lily shook her head. "These are the hands of a woman who will never know the feeling of mud between her toes or the sun's heat on her neck. They are a sign of your heritage." She put her hands to Lily's and she saw that they came together almost symmetrically. "These are the hands of a woman who will never know want."

At night she thought of this, and she also thought of the knocking of her bamboo wind chimes. They sounded most clearly in the evening in chorus with the night birds and the cicadas. When she was a child, her mother hung one from the ceiling above her bed and twirled it around with her thin fingers. She was like the wind, her mother, in the way she sounded her chimes. Lily could not tell the difference.

The night before she was to go away to Eu Villa, her mother lifted up the mosquito netting and lay beside her in the bed. She told Lily all the things she needed to know for her future as a wife. She said, “Always please your husband. If he is a rich man, then he needs you only for as long as you can hold his gaze. To be the number one *taitai*, a woman must know when to laugh and when to cry, and, most of all, when to be silent.”

Her mother was the only wife. To have borne her father only two daughters and still remain at the center of his gaze, Lily knew that she must be very wise.

Before she fell asleep, Lily had put her arm around her mother’s chest to feel her breathing. Her mother said, “Men are like *gou*: barking dogs that nip at your legs until they get your attention. Then they will try to dominate you.” It was only the rise and fall of her mother's chest that brought her any sleep.

On the day the driver from Eu Villa was to come, her mother and father finally walked the same path of the house together. His hands were at her back and her mother held fast to Ai'li's unwilling shoulders as she glowered at Lily. Her sister had worn her best dress and pinned her hair up above her ears as though the *syce* might mistake her for the older sister, though she was only eleven. They stand like a portrait, her family, and it is the last image she has of them: unblinking and forward-facing until the black motor-car was only a small dot on the road to Eu Villa.

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This morning she was accused of stealing one of the green peppers from the garden of the fifth wife. As the eighth and lowest of rank, her guilt was never in question.

To this she says *po fu chen zhou*: I want to destroy the cooking cauldrons and sink the boats.

She has borne three children to her husband. He has a *taitai*: an older woman with three sons who spends all her time in the main house. She yells, “*Reshui!* More hot water!” and Lily can see the houseboys running with steaming buckets through the hallways. First wife tells them to sweep the floor after it has been washed because anything that is not being cleaned is already on its way to becoming dirty. She makes her *amah* check her hair every morning for any gray seedlings that want to take root. Meanwhile, she gives all the wives dirty looks for the relations she knows that they have had with her husband. She is very good at knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

For her part, Lily sees her master very little, and rarely during the day. She looks in the mirror and see the pink color in her cheeks and lips—the untouched darkness of her hair—and she knows why he comes to her at night. No, though she is *ib a*, the lowly eighth, he prefers her to the second, who carries the weight of five children around her midsection.

When she first arrived at fourteen, Tong Sen spoke to Lily in formal Cantonese and said that she would be treated well in his household. His hair was mostly gray with streaks of black still lingering near his part. His face had begun to sag in areas and when he spoke the lines around his mouth became very deep. She thought he looked older even than her father. Lily avoided his eyes.

He tried to gain her affection by asking me how well she spoke English; she said that she knew it well. Lily wished that she had not, because he was always speaking the language to her from that point on, asking if she knew what this plate or that vase was called, and which was her favorite color.

He goes on business trips for months at a time, leaving the wives to peck away at one another. When Lily became pregnant with her son he did not know until she could not see past her stomach to her feet. He arrived home and said, “Very good, very good. If it is a boy, he will be called Henry,” and patted her stomach lightly.

Tong Sen loves to see his wives with their hands on their backs and their abdomens swollen with the fruit of a one-sided relationship. If two are pregnant at the same time it is like a wonderful gift for him to return to, and he slicks his grey hair back like the Oily Man in heat. He has twelve now, including Lily’s own. When Henry was born, she saw the blood cleaned off his pink body before the midwife took him away to be presented to Tong Sen. Instead of asking, he said, “We will name him *this*,” because her son’s little hands had the look of a knobby Brit.

There was one other wife present at Henry’s birth. This thin woman with hair so thick it fell in tendrils when she tried to put it back. As Lily gripped the side of the mattress, she urged the baby onward by rubbing the base of her back with her knuckles. She said, “Come, *ib a*, let’s finish this,” and helped her to lie back. She called her “eighth,” like the others did, but not with the same dip to her voice when she pronounced the second word. The tone went up at the end, as though it was pleasant to her.

When she began to call Lily by her real name, she herself had become pregnant again. She wanted another boy. She was *di si*, the fourth, but Lily was to call her Kay, she said, otherwise it was disrespectful. When she looked at Kay, Lily saw how all the wives appeared: drawn, gaunt under the weight of their stomachs, bending backwards to relieve the tension. Kay would sit by her fish pond, looking quite elegant and holding her fingers just level with the water so that if her koi fish wanted, they could brush the tips. She spoke to them and wished that they could have an ocean to swim in, but it was a hollow desire, because, as she told Lily, she knew that more room also meant that she would not see them again.

It was there that Lily first found her, skipping the water with her fingers and listening to the breaching of the *koi*. She was belly and hair. She helped Kay to stand by leaning back with her weight. Kay kept hold of Lily's hands like they weren't strangers and offered to name one of her *koi* after her. Lily told her she wanted to be the one with the white blaze over its right eye—the one that looked young enough to swim circles around the other larger fish in her pond. Over the years, Kay would come to tell her of Lily's progress and growth in the *koi* pond, until she didn't any longer.

This is because Singapore is a city of forward-looking people. Lily learned this when she came to know of death. Not insect or animal death, but the death of long, well-formed limbs, of kind dark eyes, of words strung together in wholly unique ways—of man. The moment is singular, but the memory is as a fine piece of an instrument falling into place, sounding its first note, trilling deep inside. It becomes a lifetime rather than a single moment, and for that reason, the moment is often forgotten.

But she does remember her first death, and the rickshaw runner who died. Her mother said, “Lily, look,” and she held in her hands a pretty pearl comb. Lily fingered it and then she looked back to the coolie collapsed in the road and the anxious faces of the passengers in the tumbled rickshaw. Without asking, her mother put the comb into her hair, saying, “Look, see, so pretty.” Seconds later another man bent down and picked up the unmanned poles and Lily saw him guiding the rickshaw past the fallen man as their own runner tugged theirs onwards. Over the ringing bells of the rickshaws she heard the two passengers saying in English, “Did you see that, I nearly fell out,” and, “I wonder if he’ll get up?” And even though he was obscured by the covering of the rickshaw, Lily saw the man with one leg folded underneath his body and the moisture of his last breath congealing at the corner of his open mouth.

She wears the comb on the right side of her head when she goes places in the motor-car and from there Lily can see the people in the street part like the two halves of a rent melon.

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It was an unusually humid day when her oldest daughter came to Lily, her cheeks flushed. She said, “*Mami*, the circus,” and tugged at the sleeve of Lily’s dress. She asked her, “What, what about the circus?” She lifted Pansy into her arms and wrapped her wispy girl-hair around her finger. “They are here from Shanghai—with elephants, horses! People swinging from ropes,” she said, looking at her with big eyes.

Tong Sen was gone to Kuala Lumpur, which meant that the wives and the mistresses did as they wanted. Third wife had even hired a dancing instructor, which was

far more scandalous than even the female stilt-walkers. So Kay and Lily took their children to see the Shanghai Circus.

They had set up a white tent with flaps that hung down so that, from the outside, all they could see were bright lights blooming from behind the flaps and the roof of the tent like fully extended day lilies. There was a man with a face like an opera singer's walking around outside the entrance, inviting stares. When people looked, he would yell, "Come see—you will never believe it!"

Inside the tent there were people of every way, from the peasants with their rattan hats hanging over their shoulders to white-haired women with bound feet, pushed along in four-wheeled chairs. They went to see the un-tamable tigers, where the children screamed, "*Biao biao!*" and leapt from foot to foot in front of the cages.

In a moment Lily felt a child's grip on her arm and she looked down to see that it was her youngest child. "*Mami,*" Sheila said, "ghosts!" And she saw that Sheila was pointing to the far side of the tent, where a man and a woman danced across the white flap.

"American cinema," said Kay, "they show them in the circus tents now, trying to convince us that a silent world in black and white is entertaining."

They went to watch the dancing ghosts, and Lily saw that they were the creation of a man. He was evenly turning the arm of the projector and watching the screen as avidly as if he were one of the circus-goers. His frame was slender like a woman's, and

he had straight hair that drooped over his eyes. She thought he couldn't be more than twenty.

Kay went up to him and said, "Our children think you can conjure ghosts."

He did not stop turning the projector or even look away from the film. His arm working, he said, "I can, Mem. These are ghosts of real people right here. Spend a couple dollars to see them laugh?"

Kay came back to her and the children and sat down. She said, "What a strange man."

Lily didn't tell Kay why she went back two days later. Instead she said, "Can you take care of the children?" Kay saw the look in her eyes and nodded, and then, "Be back before the servants' entrance is closed." Lily said to her children, "I'm going out to the market to look for a bargain; don't cause any trouble," and left the compound in her high-collared dress with a pale green veil over her hair and face. She took a rickshaw to the circus tent and paid two dollars to get in. She went to see the man who was still standing there with his projector as though he had never stopped turning. He did not look at her, but said, "Sit down, drop a dollar in the box and enjoy."

The seats were empty; most had gone for tiffin and few remained to see the circus performers; the barren straw littering the ground beneath the tent was wide open. The acrobats milled around with shawls over their costumes, talking to each other and taking bites of *tanguo* from the sweets booth.



She sat down in the chair directly in front of his machine and began to watch a new film with a young, fair-haired woman. She wore a beaded headdress and clasped her hands beneath her chin. The caption below was translated into standard Chinese and Malay. In both, Lily read, "My love, he is gone!" Then the woman's lips parted and she let out a sob. Lily imagined it to be long and deep like the inside of a great drum.

After a time, without turning to look at him, she asked, "Are these your films?"

"I get them cheap, Mem, from America," he said. The wheel clicked as he rotated the arm.

"Do you have any part in them?"

"I just run them," he said, "but someday, they won't be ghosts."

She turned around to look at him through her veil. She could not call him a man. There was still childishness in the tilt of his dark eyes and the set of his small lips. He looked down at her for a moment and said, "You like the cinema?"

"I like ghosts," Lily said. At this, he laughed and she saw the hand turning the arm of the projector slow a bit.

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She tells Kay about his proposition. They sit on the stone bench beside her *koi* pond long after dark, their knees tucked towards each other. "Are you going to meet him, then?"

Lily takes the fine fingers of Kay's hand in her own. "Tell me what to do," she says. Kay looks at her with her mouth wide open and she can see the muscles in the back of her throat working like she has eight different words trying to come out at once.

Finally, she asks, "How are you, the eighth wife, going to help this man do anything but get in trouble for kidnapping one of Eu Tong Sen's women?"

"Tong Sen has a mind for business," Lily says. "And Run-Run will someday be rich."

"Will you be his *taitai*?" she asks.

"Yes," Lily says. She watches her reflection in the pond. It is only a moment before she sees Kay's mirrored hand sliding across the bench towards her own.

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Lily stands at the entranceway to her home. It is dark outside; the sun falls over the bay earlier during these rainy months when everyone has a small pond in their yard. From here she can see every building in Eu Villa. There is the main house casting a shadow over the rest of the living quarters; it reflects largely in the lantern-light of early evening. Outside she hears the voices of Malay servants saying to one another what a relief the cool air is since the monsoon season has begun. One of them has the soft voice of her father.

She goes into the children's room. She can see their faces but does not dare touch them. The youngest, Sheila, curls in on herself and sucks on the tip of her thumb. Her

boy, Henry, lies prostrate on his stomach and has his head turned away from her. Pansy, her flower, she can see in the moonlight. She can see in her fine lips and sloping nose that she will look just like Lily herself, and like her mother, and nothing like her father. She walks to the far corner and sees the chime there, still in the humid air. She twirls it with my hand, and she knows they will not notice because it sounds just like a breeze blowing through their window. They could not tell the difference if she ran through the whole house, fingers splayed, ringing every chime at once, saying, “This--*this* is the wind: you cannot wait for it.” And just as she thought, they remain motionless, breathing deeply in sleep.

Kay comes just after the sun has set to tell her that Tong Sen has gone out for a few hours to Bukit Timah to play *mah jong* and bridge. They stand in the front room of the house for some time, watching a bobbing lantern make its way through the darkness of the compound to the main house, all five stories of which are now illuminated.

“Maybe it’s better for them,” Lily says, running her fingers over the mouth of the bag she holds, “maybe people will forget that *di ba* was their mother.”

She sees Kay look towards the children’s room; this is not what she worries about. Lily has given her one of her jewels, though she does not know it. It is a bracelet of emeralds on her bedside stand, left while she was out feeding her fish. She knows these things: when Kay tends to the koi and what noise she makes when she soothes a child who has fallen and hurt his knee. She knows these things, because they are also her things. She knows that when her children run down to the water’s edge to escape the midday heat they will feel the wind blowing across the strait from Sumatra, and they will

say that it is a wonderful sight because they live in this high up place from which they can see all the lights of Singapore on a night like this. She knows these things, and this is why she can look at their faces in the dark and say, “You, you can understand why.” It is the way of things in this forward-facing city.

Kay's eyes are still averted. Lily stands a moment before taking the steps, one by one, down the front stoop. When she touches the grass she raises her hand in the air, watching Kay's turned shoulder, and then she runs for the side entrance to the villa, ducking her head like a thief. Between the bars and the vines grown up over them she can see the city, sloping away from the hill, lit from end to end. In the distance, Lily can almost see the large white tent, the man on stilts, the two-tone actors playing at loss and the black-haired boy who took her hand and said he would take her to the place where ghosts were real.

## Cellist

1933

Before my mother left there was no *amah*. She was opposed to their Chinese severity: the tightly wrapped hair and their thick-fingered hands that they balled into fists. More than that, she hated to be watched. My father controlled his wives through the childrens' *amahs*. They reported to him when their mistresses had gone out from the villa at too late or too early an hour. They noted when the wives' cheeks were rouged too darkly, their lips pert and red like Hollywood film stars. My mother said, flustered, "I will watch my own children," but then, of course, she was always out too late.

She was right about *amahs*, my mother. After she ran away with the acrobat my father brought in a woman named Wong Kwai to take care of us. The first day she walked into the house she got us into a little line like my father did when he inspected all twenty-four children, except this time it was just the three of us and she was much more thorough. She lifted my lips and inspected my teeth and all I could see, in a blur, was her wide nose and the hilly creases on her forehead. Her finger felt coarse in my mouth like a cat's tongue and she was not gentle with it. Afterwards she stood back and closed her hands and said in accented English, "When you misbehave I hit you like this," and the curled side of her fist struck her own thigh so hard that the loose skin on her cheeks shook a little. Sheila, only four, began to cry.

Instead of playing in the yard in the afternoons, Wong Kwai made sure that we practiced on our instruments. My father chose one for each child when they turned four

and for me he had picked the cello. I played it like any untalented, unwilling child: slowly and without resin, the fibers of the bow like sand over the strings. My fingers ruined their whiteness, the dirt under my nails staining it, offsetting the melody. Before Wong Kwai I had no teacher, really—the old one had given up when I took to hiding in the high branches of the *angsana* tree during my lessons.

Naturally, then, I was better at restringing my cello than playing it. My *amah* still made me practice, buying the boxes of strings for me and sitting at the window while I pretended to follow the black notes on the sheet. I had never been able to read music, though I imagine if I had ever begun to—if the notes had reformed themselves into something I knew, like the letters of the English alphabet—I may have been taken away with them. I may have become a real cellist with resin and resonance. I could have made my father proud.

His business trips sometimes lasted months. He would go to Malaysia, where he had his rubber plantations and tin mines, or Hong Kong, where he had a house and British partners. While he was gone the first wife oversaw all of Eu Villa, from the *amahs* to the gardeners. She ran the house so tightly that it felt as though we were holding the air in our chests, afraid to catch her eye.

When he was gone, Wong Kwai made me play more than ever. She would not have me be the shameful daughter again, last in line of all the children, a better tree-climber than cellist. At the store she had found sheet music for me to learn: a song by Bach. The notes that littered the page meant nothing to her, even when I showed her my old music book.

“Look at how many more there are here,” I said, holding them next to each other, pointing between the lines of each.

“So you play faster,” she said, “you play like K.C.”

K.C. was the oldest son and the only musician in the family. When he played his violin my father’s hand never went up to stop him. When he played it seemed as though his bow was moving too slowly for the pace. He was the only child my father ever clapped for.

I played Bach like I had played the songs in my beginner’s music book: slowly and with gravel in the notes. Most of the time I would stare out the window with Wong Kwai and play the strings methodically. She did not notice except for one day when I went to pick up my bow at the start of my lesson and she put her hand over mine to stop me.

“Let me,” she said, and she picked the cello up and sat with it across her legs like a guitar laid flat. “I show you a song.” Instead of putting her left hand to the neck of the cello, she dropped it down to the base as though she were caressing it. “This is like the *pipa*.” At once her right hand went to the strings and she began plucking at them with her fingers, each one deft as I had never seen before. The song was unusual: it was like the Chinese street players I had heard outside the cinema, their instruments high and airy and light-colored, not like the dark wood of my cello. Wong Kwai’s song was different—deeper, stronger—as though the strings were thicker or her fingers more insistent.

She played it with her eyes closed until she was done, and then she handed the instrument back to me abruptly, setting it between my legs, placing the bow in my hand, her fingers just as coarse to the touch as before. She would not look away from the window again, even as the sun was going down and I knew my lesson should be done. She would not look at me at all that day.

At nights I began to hear her play it in the sitting room. I wondered, why not Sheila's flute or Henry's horn? But, then, neither of them were like the *pipa*, or stringed at all, and then I felt selfish for caring whether she touched the cello.

Eventually I would listen to her closely, waiting for the notes of the bridge and the faintness of the song's ending. I wondered if my brother and sister heard it, but their breathing was always of deep sleep before five minutes had passed in their beds. Only I knew, then, that my *amah*'s hands were ever uncurled from their fists.

Wong Kwai told me that I was ready to play Bach for my father when he returned. For two days before I stared at the pages of the score, willing myself to understand the music as K.C. did. I practiced until my fingers hurt and my thighs had indentations from the hard wood of my cello.

We were lined up two hours before my father was due home. Wong Kwai had dressed the three of us in our Sunday clothes and she would slap at Sheila's hand whenever it went up to scratch the itch from the lace. The other children were not brought in until much later, all of them positioned by their *amahs* closer to the door than us, the wives arguing about which of their children should come first. It was sons and then



daughters, so Henry was led to the middle, right where the boys ended and the girls began. Sheila and I were at the very end.

The wives formed their own line just before Tong Sen arrived, each of them proper as they never were when he was gone.

He came late, as he often did. We said, "Hello, father!" and the twenty-four of us stood up straight like bamboo shoots. His hat and travelling coat were taken, his cane was replaced at his hand, and then he walked before us, looking each one of us over, lifting our chins and turning our faces until he was satisfied. The music came last.

The *amahs* brought our instruments out, each of them different than the other, all of them from the West. K.C. played first, standing alone without the music. It was greater in my father's eyes that he had memorized it. He played for minutes before anyone thought to wonder at how the time passed and my father's hand went up, the fingers curled unwillingly. All of us clapped.

All the rest of it seemed to move like a train: starting and stopping, the hand raised, my brothers playing as futilely as I always did. I felt my stomach knot when the boys were done and my sisters had begun to play. I watched my father's hand until I heard my name. "Ruth-Ann," he said, and that was all.

I did not hesitate. The bow was slick in my hand and I held it hard as I stared at the sheet, trying to follow the notes, pressing the fingers of my left hands to the strings when it seemed I should. I played without looking at my father—long past the ten seconds I knew I had—pressing the bow down on the strings until my motions were

almost violent and then I heard the little wooden length of it crack. I continued, holding it still harder until I felt a release and a louder crack sounded and I saw that the bow was bent at two different angles.

I looked at my father and I saw his hand up and his mouth open as though he were about to say something, and then I could not look—I turned my face away until I found Wong Kwai's. Hers was not so surprised. Her arms were long at her sides, the fingers bent inwards as though she were longing to cup something there.

I picked up the cello and laid it across my legs, holding it as I had seen her do that afternoon. Beyond the rushing in my ears I heard voices, but I watched only my *amah* as my hands went to pluck the strings, to sound out the melody. I imagined, if anyone else was listening, that the song might sound as familiar to them as it was to me: it was of the East, of the instrument called the *pipa*, of the street outside the cinema.

## Third Wife

1935

They will wonder, where has the old wife gone? Where is *di san* and her puckered lips and her pipe? They will say her little feet could not hold her back.

The girls have cut up bits of paper and begin coloring the pieces with pencils. They place them over their dolls and laugh when the bottoms don't extend far enough or when the shirts are too low. They clothe them fully—in hats, dresses, little necklaces and gloves. There is only one thing missing.

“It will hurt more if you resist,” Kai Tian says, her fingers sliding under the silk wrapped around her mistress's feet. Reumah lifts the long pipe to her mouth and breathes in as she watches the girls in the sitting room. They are both of them light skinned and dark-eyed like Tong Sen. Their *amahs* curl their hair like coquettish European girls who will giggle at everything they cannot understand. The younger one has become still, one pink paper shirt still in her hand as she stares at Kai Tian's hands. The silk comes away quickly and the single large toe begins to protrude from the top. Reumah holds the smoke inside her chest until her body forces her to exhale, filling the room. Kai Tian does not slow.

Later, Reumah will teach the girls the most important aspect of *mahjong*: keeping a serene face. She lifts a dragon tile and turns it between her fingers, pressing it harder as Kai Tian pulls away the bits of cloth stuck to her toes. She is the only woman to have touched her feet since Reumah was four and her grandmother folded the four toes under

with one hand. She remembers the little woven shoes that she was given to wear and the way she was made to sleep for weeks beforehand: on her chest, legs straight. Most of all, she remembers that it started with chicken blood and *reishi*.

“Swish swish, you hear?” Grandmother’s quick fingers played in the bowl. Reumah lay on the floor of their home, a soft blanket folded beneath her. “That’s the sound of marriage for you.”

Grandmother took up the white cloth beside the bowl and ran it once over Reumah’s face and her bare feet. Then she picked up a file and began working at the nail of the big toe on Reumah’s right foot, singing the only happy song she knew. Her voice was no good. It was like a holey drum.

“I don’t know why you cried,” Grandmother said, “look at how I pamper even the dirtiest part of you.”

Grandmother had left a candle too close to Reumah’s soles and she would have said something but the poppy tea that Maa Maa had given her was bitter and strong. Instead she watched Grandmother’s black shadow on the ceiling as she lifted each of Reumah’s feet and set them in the chicken blood for softening.

The first binding was unbearable. She remembers her hoarse wail and how it sounded even after her mother’s hand fell across her mouth and one nostril. It was then, trying to breathe through the phlegm and pain, that Reumah had fainted. When she awoke it was to her grandmother’s voice. “Like a lotus,” she had said, turning the bound feet in different directions to admire them. Reumah’s arches were wrapped straight and her legs

were as level as sanded wood. Her knees looked like man-made hills. “Every man will admire you, and every flat-footed woman will wish it had been done for her.”

It was true what her grandmother had told her of men. By the time she was fourteen—only three years before her marriage—her hips swayed like palm fronds in the wind. When she left her home she refused the shoulder of her *amah*—she would not even accept a cane. Reumah had walked with painful steps through the streets of Singapore, happy in her discomfort and the unusual step it lent to her walk. Two years ago the smallest toe on her left foot had fallen off and she hadn’t known it until Kai Tian changed the bindings and a black nub fell to the ground. Reumah had her wrap it up in a cloth napkin and put it aside, afraid of the feel of it between her own fingers. Later she had unwrapped the cloth and stared at the toe in her palm until the sun went down and Kai Tian returned to help her into her nightdress.

When Tong Sen first came to her at night he had admired the old fashion in her feet, the pretty little silk shoes she wore even though she only walked a few feet in them at a time. He took them off gently and said, “You are perfect, like a doll,” and he had run his fingers from the bindings up her leg to her powdered cheeks.

She draws at length from the pipe as Kai Tian kneads each foot. “Another one falling out,” she says, looking up at Reumah as though she should come and see for herself. “You want me to take it off?”

“No,” Reumah says. She watches as the girls leave their dolls and run outside, their laughter muffled through the walls. Their *amahs* follow them out.

Kai Tian lowers each foot into a bowl of water. The feel of her wet hands on the sensitive arches makes Reumah's skin prickle. "That's enough," she says, "put the wrappings back on." The woman ignores her and dabs at her feet with a wet cloth. Every touch feels distant and familiar, like her grandmother's hands from many years ago. "Do you hear, Kai Tian?"

She does not hear. Her dark fingers press into Reumah's papery skin. The sensation is like sparks off an ember. There is life in them still.

In the evening Reumah will use her feet for the first time in five years. She knows that it is time; when she looks around her boudoir the smell of it comes on her suddenly—a stink that one must see to know. Long layers of silk hang from her bedposts to the floor. The corners of her dresses peek from the drawers of her bureau and she forbids Kai Tian to arrange them properly. In the corner, a little wooden rack of shoes, two pair to a panel, stands from the floor to the height of the window. They are smaller than her oldest daughter's. She doesn't notice the smell of it until she runs her finger across the rack and a fine dust comes away. Whether it is ash from her pipe or powder from her tin, she can't say, but when she lifts her finger to her nose—and she always does—it is there. Even on Sundays when the wrappings are new, it is there. She has lived at Eu Villa for so long that even the dark wood of her furniture is steeped in it.

Reumah was not always the old wife. There were two others before her, and it seemed to Reumah that the first wife was already growing matronly when she herself arrived at seventeen. Both women had come up to her with their hands together at their chests and kissed her on the cheeks, their lips cold and slick. First wife, Mary, had lines

crosswise and lengthwise on her forehead that she tried to cover with a sheaf of fringe. The front of her dress was tight at her uneven waist. Second wife was more conservative: she kept her hair back with a brooch and veiled her large eyes under her half-closed lids. The three of them stood in the great tiled foyer of Eu Villa while Tong Sen looked Reumah over. “I was told about your feet,” he said. “Will you walk for us?”

Grandmother had put Reumah’s best shoes on her feet that morning. They were of a blue silk with pink and green flower stitching and thin gold laces. When her grandmother measured their length with her hand, she looked as though she were grasping an invisible glass of water. “Almost as small as the day we started,” she said, and then she had cried and held Reumah, repeating again and again her pride.

Reumah had walked for Tong Sen and his two wives. The pain was greater than she had ever felt because the little shoes had never been worn and they were tight and unforgiving. But she walked—did not wobble—swayed as she should have, and her new husband did the same that night. He gave her one of the little cottages on the grounds because, as the second wife would come to tell her, “the villa is for two things: entertaining Tong Sen’s Christian conscience and his British friends.”

Her name was once Soo Mei. It was the day after her arrival that her husband had come to her with an open Bible, the red ribbon hung down the center and his finger up in the air as though he were testing the wind. “What do you think of this one, out of Genesis?” and he had pointed to the spot where her name had always been: Reumah, Nahor’s concubine. At the time, Reumah thought her cheeks might still be flushed from

the night before. She had run her hand over her smooth hair, which hung straight down over her back and shoulders, and said, “Yes—that is pretty. Reumah.”

On the wall opposite her chair is an edge-curved mirror that Reumah will stare at when she must. What reflects is Kai Tian’s slim back, her long braid of hair, and then above her, some false woman with too-dark eyebrows and a series of wooden sticks holding her black hair in place on top of her head. When she brings the pipe to her mouth her fingernails tap against the wood like the long beak of a pecker bird and her mouth puckers into a hundred small lines. Beneath the layers of shining silk—beneath the tight collar at her neck—she feels her body formed to the chair, soft and pliant.

When she leaves she will close the room up and hide the brass key somewhere safe. No one will be able to get into Reumah’s little boudoir unless they break the door or climb in the window, and the window she will lock as well. Her oldest daughter will be persistent, as she always is, and may in a few weeks or months insist that the door be opened. She will be the first into the room and she will see the rack of little shoes and the eyelet lace hanging out of the drawers. She will see the pink silk hung off the bed in layers. She will see the pieces of the long-stemmed pipe placed aside on the vanity. And when she does, all of it—all of it will bring the stink to her nose like a rotten peach and she will want to get away from that room just as fast as her mother did. She will want to run away like Reumah.

“The white or the yellow?” Kai Tian holds up the two lengths of cloth, one in each hand. She does not smell it anymore, after so many years spent hunched next to the feet. She touches them as she would her own.



Reumah points to the white with the end of her pipe. It is the color of purity. “When you’re finished, tell the boy to come in,” she says. Zahrin is not a boy, but Reumah feels old.

The wrappings go on quickly. Kai Tian pulls the cloth tight and tucks it under itself. She goes out of the room for a second and calls to the boy. When he comes into the room Reumah raises her arms and he goes to her. She turns her face aside and he puts one arm under her legs and one behind her back to lift her. When he is not around she can sometimes hear him, his voice hidden under one cupped hand, “again to the toilet, again and again.”

When Zahrin passes Kai Tian he looks away from her. Kai Tian does the same. He carries her to the bathroom and sets her down there. When he closes the door, Reumah hears the staccato of his voice and the small swells of Kai Tian’s. They come clearest to her at night. Reumah will pull the latch on her window and let it swing in a bit, enough for the wind and their words.

Reumah knocks on the door with her cane when she is finished. Zahrin comes inside and lifts her. Sometimes she lays her palm flat on his arm and the thin shirt means nothing when her eyes are closed. His breath always smells like unwetted turmeric, stronger than the dust and ash lining her room.

They meet Kai Tian in the hallway. “Should I bring the girls in for *mahjong*?”

Reumah keeps a serene face. Zahrin has stopped and he stands with her in his arms. Kai Tian appears short before them. “What do you think?” She looks to Zahrin. His

Chinese is poor and his English is worse. He shrugs with both shoulders, lifting Reumah's body as though it were just a long length of cloth. "I think we will let them stay outside," she says.

Zahrin brings her into the boudoir and sets Reumah back on her chair. She takes hold of his wrist as his hands come away and she says, "Wait," and Zahrin stands still, his held hand still outstretched. "Stay with me," Reumah says. "Kai Tian will have a rest tonight."

Their eyes do meet then: Zahrin and Kai Tian, who stands at the doorway, her hands held tight at the cross of her thighs. "I am not tired," she says.

"But I am tired of you," Reumah says, lifting her cane towards Kai Tian. "You don't do a thing as I ask you to do it, and the boy does each thing before I can ask. He will do my nightdress tonight."

She does not have to hold her cane long; Kai Tian leaves the doorway, her shadow not long behind her as she leaves the apartment. The front door closes so softly that there is almost no noise at all. Zahrin, as still as a monument, bends over Reumah, her fingers still tight on his wrist.

She has smelled the smell of a man in her bedroom before. Tong Sen's welled like a bubble in hot soup, surrounding him every which way he walked, but weak as an old man's would be. Reumah can hardly remember it, now. Especially now, with the boy's skin under her hand. His scent pervades the room like wisps of smoke, snaking into the

far corners, through the eyelet holes of the lace, under the clawed feet of the dresser, up the rack of little shoes and right into her nose.

“There will be none of what you think there will be,” Reumah says. She drops his arm. Zahrin straightens his body but his face does not change. His tanned cheek and straight nose are illuminated by the afternoon sun. Reumah drops the end of her cane to the floor and taps it there. “Do you understand?”

It is only when she stares at him, as she does now, with her lips pursed and her eyes wide that he realizes that she expects him to do or say something. His face, as always, grows suddenly bashful. He smiles and draws in a little, his shoulders hunching. “I understand, Mem.” He always says that, too.

“First, close the window. I know Kai Tian is out there.”

He goes to the window and pulls the latch shut, drawing the lock over the top. He stays a moment before coming back to her.

“This is what I have to say,” she says. “And when I am finished, if you will do this thing for me, I will give you all the money and jewels I have. You can give it all to Kai Tian—you can live together, away from this place. But you can never tell her or anyone what you’ve done.”

Zahrin stands still, his fingers lacing and unlacing, but he bows his head as though he is not surprised at all. It is her chance to speak, and Reumah resolves never to call him a boy again.

She begins slowly, as if the words are honeyed to her tongue. She tells him of the chicken blood and *reishi*, of the hundreds of small breaks a foot may undergo before it is fully broken, of the way her mother pinioned her arms to her side while the wrap went on, tighter than skin, the cloth as white as her paling face. It was only a year before Grandmother gave her the long pipe—showed her how to close her lips around it and suck in and all the exactness would fall away until she felt that the cloud around her *was* her and she remembers that she never wanted to be exact again. And then Reumah's face is in her hands, and the sobs are silent—everything is silent because Zahrin does not move unless to fulfill her wish. She only spends a minute before she wipes the tears onto her hand. There is much still to say.

There is Tong Sen, drawn to her—nightly at first—and then sporadically, his arrival darker and darker, dark as a shade until she would wake and he was there on top of her, his hand over her doll-like face, his other far below, and all the while she would only think, “Are the wraps coming undone?” and something clouded about her fate. Soon she knew his silhouette better than his face, the sound of his breath better than his voice, the tight grip of his hands better than their touch. Most of all, she knew his smell, and how little it differed from the rot of her room—a bit more like fish bait.

And then he didn't come at all because there was a fourth and a fifth and sixth and seventh and then an eighth, none of them bound by anything except the desires of Tong Sen as to whether they should be on the bed or the floor, in the apartment or in his own vast bedroom, the posts hung with rich red silk that she had only heard about. Sometimes

she hears his voice from the veranda of the grand villa and, because Zahrin will not know this word, she admits: there is nothing she loathes more.

It was all of it fine, she explains, until the physician came last month with his small spectacles and his little way of coughing into his shirt sleeve that made his black hair fall into his eyes. He kept pushing it aside as he prodded the toes with his white-gloved hands and then he stood and pushed the hair aside once more as he said, “All of it has to go,” and then his white-gloved hand was level, cutting through the air. Reumah could see a little black smudge there on the index finger and then she wondered if it was her feet or her pipe and she had truly looked around the room for the first time and saw the whole place was littered in it.

She points to Zahrin’s tanned toes in their sandals. “If I could, I would be a man. I would cut off these little nubs and take your large feet.” She leans down and begins to tug at the tail of the fresh wrapping, undoing Kai Tian’s quick work. Reumah hears the creak of wood as Zahrin begins to step forward, but he does not. He stays and she sees, peripherally, his eyes gone wide. She begins to unwind the cloth from its figure eight wrapping, faster and faster, the binds shrinking until it seems there could be no more cloth, the feet are so small, but there is: there is layer upon layer until she reaches her blackened skin. Reumah and Zahrin stare at the feet, and she remembers seeing a little tintype of an American dancer, dressed up in lace, her body balanced on her toes in her fine bright shoes. Reumah’s two little feet are what that American’s would be if, as in the photograph, she spent all her years in that position, on those two sets of toes, her life some endless struggle towards grace. “But I cannot. I cannot be a man.”

Outside, beneath the florid sky, there is the muffled laughter of two women passing the cottage.

“I do it, Mem,” Zahrin says in Malay English. “I take you out of here.”

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In the evening, the girls and their *amahs* play in the sitting room. Reumah sits on her bed, watching the lantern-light out her window while Zahrin straightens out her long sleeping dress. He does not work like Kai Tian: his hands are large and his fingers slow, but he does it well enough. Out of his pant pocket she can see the head of the brass key to her boudoir. She wonders where they will go—whether they will stay in Singapore or travel to Malaysia, or cross the strait to Sumatra and live simply. If necessary, he will carry her wherever she needs to go. He will be good to her.

Reumah does not hear any knock from Kai Tian that night. When all the wives' apartments go silent and the lights grow small like withering fireflies, that is when she wishes that Kai Tian would come, but Reumah's words ensured that she would not.

She gathers up the *mahjong* tiles into a velvet bag that she ties tight. She sits it upright on the playing table. “These will go to the girls,” she says. “Ask Kai Tian, please, to teach them, before you go.”

“Yes,” he says. He struggles to find more words, “Yes, Mem, she do.”

Zahrin sits next to Reumah on the bed, their shoulders brushing as she brings the pipe to her mouth once more and breathes in on it and then out, the smoke only visible in soft curls at the window. She hands the pipe to Zahrin. "Break it," she says.

There is no hesitation in the way the wood pops and then splinters. Zahrin sets the two halves on the dresser before he picks Reumah up and takes her out through the bedroom door, her long nightdress shielding his legs.

Outside it is a thick night, full of bugs and moonlight and air like melted butter. Zahrin crosses the long yard to the gate and he waits while Reumah undoes the latch and they pass through. He takes the thin, windy path down the hill away from Eu Villa and soon his footsteps have less of a tap than a soft, powdery step as he pushes through the sand. Over his shoulder Reumah sees the hill and the incline straight up to the villa, the large house backed by all the little apartments that she cannot see. There is only one light at a window on the third floor, and she stares at it until Zahrin's steps are flooded and she can feel the spray through the bottom of her dress.

He continues on, his legs wading in that *swish, swish* kind of way that Reumah now recalls. When the water touches her bare feet she cannot feel it until it reaches the ankle, and then it is warm and she exhales as though her chest were stoppered with years of smoke. Soon they are both immersed to the shoulders and Reumah's dress buoys up around them. Zahrin's hands are tight on her back and legs.

"Lift me," she says. And he does, his strong arms extending as he lifts her body until she is level with the water. Her head goes back and the salt water rushes into her

ears as she floats, arms out and palms up. The moon is a shining sliver, and by the time she has left his arms, she thinks, it will already be on its way to a half, and then three quarters, and maybe by the time she has floated all the way to Sumatra, where she will live simply, it will be full.

“Zahrin,” she says. Her voice sounds contained in a jar. “Tomorrow I will be thirty.”

He does not answer—or maybe she cannot hear it. But she knows that what will happen is this: there will be a party, and the wives will wonder, “Where is Reumah with her pipe and her cane?” but Zahrin will not say; he will keep a serene face. And finally they will see that she is gone, and they will wonder, did she walk? Did she run? Even if he told them—and here she smiles—they would not believe that the old wife simply floated away.



*Di ba's Daughter*

1936

When we got to Brinchang it was dark outside and I was too tired to be excited. Wong Kwai let me sit against her soft shoulder, my head flopping as we rode in the motor car that would take us to our summer house. I had heard that it had many rooms and it was near a line of cliffs almost fifty feet tall. After the muggy train ride from Singapore I wanted to stand at the edge of one of those cliffs and let the wind hit me forever. In the car I dreamed I that I was ten feet tall and running up and down the hills in the highlands faster than anyone had ever run before. If I had my way, that was how our time in Brinchang would have been.

But things did not go that way at all.

Every day I would sit by the window of our room and watch my brothers run by, their shirts off, eight or ten of them running together like a team of horses. They would go down the path and the dust would rise high into the air behind them as they made for the cliffs.

“K.C. always gets down the fastest,” my little brother Henry said. “They had me keep score and it was always K.C.”

K.C. was our oldest brother. There were many rules for Eu children, but one of them was this: for K.C., none applied.

“Did they let you do it?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “They said I would get too scared halfway down and they would have to rescue me.” I watched him kick at the leg of my desk. “But that only happened once.”

“Chicken,” I said. “You wasted your chance.”

Henry looked at me suddenly and I saw the tears come into his eyes. He turned and ran out of the room before they could get to his cheeks. I felt a little bad, but then I looked back at my calligraphy on the desk and the feeling went away. I knew that I would not waste my chance. It was during that summer in the Cameron Highlands that I realized I wanted nothing more than to be a boy.

Ever since I had become a lady that spring, my *amah* and everyone else treated me like I was meant to hang on a wall. Even the year before my aunties would talk about anything in front of me because they thought I was too young to understand. Sometimes they even talked about my mother and it was then that I tried the hardest to pretend I wasn't old enough to care. Most of the time it was just talk of, “Do you remember how tight she would wear her *cheongsam*?” but then, once, I heard Auntie Jenny say how she had seen my mother on High Street while she was out shopping. “She pretended not to see me,” she said. The three of us were alone on the veranda and I was at a separate table, bunched over my schoolwork. They were playing *mahjong* and Auntie Reumah lifted a tile into her hand. “She would pretend, after running away with that acrobat,” was all she said. I stayed on the veranda until the sun got low and their *mahjong* game finally finished. I must have traced the same English letters a hundred times, hoping to hear more. But there was none.

Soon the aunties stopped gossiping in front of me all together. It was just after I turned ten that my *amah* cupped her hands against my chest and decided that I was no longer a girl. “It’s flat,” I said, running my palms over my body, up and down, “flat, flat, flat.” But by then Wong Kwai was already gone out of our little house towards the villa to tell my father. I knew things would change, then—I had seen it happen to my older sisters. I would have to wear a tie over my shirt when I went to school and Wong Kwai would keep me inside all afternoon because I was ready for womanly studies, like how to hold a paper fan.

I wanted everything to stay the same. Every day after school I would tear off my uniform in my bedroom and put on my loose cotton pants and my sandals that looped around my heels. I would run outside and I would climb the tall *ketapang* tree in the yard and hide myself in the branches while Wong Kwai walked around below calling my name. I didn’t come down until she had given up and gone back inside. When I came back to the little house in the evening she would yell at me as though she were my mother, wishing that she could still use the bamboo stick on me. That was the one good thing about being a lady.

After a week, though, Wong Kwai was waiting in my bedroom when I came back from school. She watched me take off my uniform, helped me on with my lace dress, walked me into the sitting room of the small house and sat on the sofa while I worked at the desk. Every moment she watched me, so that when I slumped a little her fingers would be there immediately, poking into my back like the needles of a cactus. She made me show her everything I drew, every character I painted with my brush. There was a

woman—an etiquette instructor—who came in and sat with me and we practiced with a little napkin and silverware. If I looked out the window during my lessons, my *amah* would suck her tongue sharply. “Ruth-Ann,” she said once, “your mother would be ashamed.” But then, I didn’t know for sure, and neither did she. I doubted a woman who ran away with a circus acrobat would care about how I held a spoon.

It was just the same with Wong Kwai in our summer house in Brinchang. I could never go outside because my skin was too dark. A year earlier my father had lined us up for inspection as he usually did, but when he came to me that day he turned my face from side to side. “Who does this little black chicken belong to?” he asked. Wong Kwai was more embarrassed than me and made me carry a parasol everywhere I went. I must have lost about a dozen of them in the bushes around Eu Villa before she gave in.

I had not known it, but Wong Kwai had brought along all the paper and brushes and pens I would need to continue my lessons in Brinchang. Every day I sat in the parlor with my older sisters and watched them braid and unbraid each others’ hair and practice holding their tea cups so lightly that they seemed to hold themselves in the air. They barely looked at me, and when they did it was a quick look and then back to their talking. I had heard them call me “daughter of *di ba*,” like they couldn’t remember my name or like I was someone else, someone not of their family at all. I was the daughter of the eighth.

In moments like that, something that my *amah* had once said surfaced again. I had run into our little house to get away from my brothers. They had been chasing after me chanting, “*di ba, di ba*,” as though I was her, or I was part of her, and that was enough.

When Wong Kwai saw me, she asked me what was wrong, and why I was crying, and when I told her she straightened up and her wide body looked less wide in the armchair. She said, "The past is the past," and I realized then that I did not know anything about her past, or who she was, or if she had ever had a family. She lifted her hand and gestured it around the room. "And where you stand is what you are now." I didn't know exactly what she meant, but something in her face softened then and I had wanted her to take me in her arms and let me stay there. But I was afraid of her still, so I never asked and she never had.

I listened every night to my brother while we were at the summer house. I learned his voice better than anyone, asking him to tell me about what he had done that day. Usually he would yawn after two or three stories. "I'm too tired," he'd say, and then, "Come with us next time," knowing well that I was a lady. "Or pray to God to make you a boy."

I did, and though I didn't ever change into a boy, something just as good happened. Maybe it was the cool air coming through the windows, or maybe it was all the food we were eating at lunch, but something made Wong Kwai start falling asleep every afternoon. I watched her head start to bob like a half-dead fish and slowly it would come to rest partly on her shoulder, partly on the back of the armchair she sat in. I watched her do this for three days and each time she slept for exactly one hour and fifteen minutes, lifting her head again only when the grandfather clock chimed 2:30 and she was as awake as if she had never drowsed at all. It was on that third day that I decided to go to the cliffs.

When she had fallen asleep I got up from my desk and I went into my bedroom that I shared with Wong Kwai. She had packed all my clothes for me and none of them were right, so I went into her dresser and pulled out an old green work-shirt and pants that she would wash clothes in. I threw the heavy dress on the floor and got into Wong Kwai's clothes. They were too long, so I rolled the pants and sleeves up until I looked like I was about to wade into a stream and catch a fish.

I went to the window and pulled up the little slatted blinds. I didn't have to worry about any windows being shut in that home: it was far too hot--and far too windy--to leave them closed. I climbed out and landed barefoot on the ground. It was such a green place that most of us went without shoes anyway.

Even though I couldn't see them, I knew the boys would be at the cliffs. Henry had told me that they were through a patch of trees, just downhill from our high-up home. The sky was cloudless and the air strong with the smell of grass. I ran down the little slope, wanting to pull off my shirt like they did, but my fingers hesitated at the hem. I realized that I felt already too much a lady and that made me run faster, past the trees and through the thicket until I heard their voices on the other side.

When I got through they were all standing in a group at the edge and they were already looking at me.

"What's she doing here?" one of them asked. It was a boy that I didn't recognize—one from town, maybe. He looked a little smaller and squatter than my brothers with dark hair that swept over his eyes.

“She’s our sister,” K.C. said, stepping towards me. His arms went across his chest and I realized how little I had ever really looked at him, and how big he actually was. He was sixteen and taller than anyone else. He had the same hard look in his eyes that our father sometimes had. “Go home, Ruth-Ann,” he said.

“I’ll go back if you race me,” I said. “To the bottom of the cliff.” I pointed towards the edge as if any of us needed reminding.

“Bloody hell, you’ll get hurt,” K.C. said.

“I used climb that tall tree in the yard at the villa every day. I’m not a lady yet.” I grabbed the bottom of my shirt as though to pull it up over my head.

K.C. laughed. After a pause, the other boys did too. I saw Henry looking at me, a little embarrassed, a little angry, and a little bit admiring. “She’s right—she did it every day,” he said.

“All right, one race,” K.C. said. “But don’t be like Henry and make us help you down.”

Henry’s hands balled, the skin gone a little white. Mine did, too.

After a few minutes we were all lined up at the edge of the cliff, each of us bent in the back leg, our heads forward as though we were about to run a race. Henry stood to the side and he put his hand up in the air and we all knelt down, our hands over the edge. The rock was solid under my fingers and smooth from the constant wind. My own hair was

blown back towards the house. In front of us I could see the hills dipping and lifting like the sand on the bottom of an ocean, except all of this was endless green.

When Henry's hand went down I saw it slice through the air only out of my right eye, and then I was already turned around, my toes searching for the first groove in the rock, my eyes scanning ahead. That was how it went: one foot pushed into the rock, finding a groove, and then the next, my hands following where my feet had been so that I was constantly moving. It was easier than I had imagined, as though I had done it before, and maybe I had, every time I listened to Henry's stories at night. I didn't think about anything else then except the feel of the rock against my hands and feet. I didn't even know how close I was to the bottom when he fell.

I heard it first. Before he even left the cliff he gave out a cry like he knew it was about to happen and then I saw something fall past my right eye, like Henry's hand had. When I looked down over my shoulder I saw him on the ground only for a moment before the wind pushed my hair into my face. But that moment was enough: I saw that I was less than halfway down, still at least thirty feet from the ground, and suddenly my hands felt sweaty like I had held them together for hours. I heard the other boys climbing down fast now, but everything else was kept out by the wind in my ears. I pushed myself against the rock and held there with my hair over my face and something welling up in my chest, quick and round like a balloon. I didn't know how long I was there and I couldn't hear anything through the wind anyway.

There were lulls, though, and in them I began to hear adult voices. I thought I could hear the high, unhappy sounds of my aunts, shrieking and crying. I imagined that



one of the boys had run into the house, yelling again and again, “Someone fell,” and all of them had come rushing out of the front door, down the hill, falling over their long lace dresses or *cheongsams*, hoping that it wasn’t one of their boys. And when I heard that cry I knew it wasn’t one of my brothers—it had been the boy from town, the little one who looked at me like I should be a lady instead of a boy. And for the first time, someone had been right about that.

I hung on to the grooves in the rock until it grew quieter. I thought maybe they would leave me on the cliff as punishment for what I had done—for trying to get away from my fate. Soon the cries stopped and the voices got farther away. I thought I was right, but then there was one voice, coming up to me on the wind.

“Ruth-Ann, climb down.” It was Wong Kwai. She was calm. “Don’t be afraid.”

When she said that, all of it came back to me: the *ketapang* tree I had climbed, the old pants and shirt I had thrown on and rolled up, trying to be like the boys running with their shirts off, and I realized how silly I must look, not just to Wong Kwai, but all of them in their brief glance up the cliff: a girl, not even a lady, already on the same path as her mother.

But then there was Wong Kwai’s voice again. “Look below your left foot.”

And there it was: a little ledge borne there out of the rock as though it were meant just for me. I went down to it and stood there for a few seconds, wiping my running nose and pulling the strands of hair off my face. Down below I could see Wong Kwai with her hands held together, cupped like she was praying, her eyes on me.

I went down slowly then, my hands shaking and her voice coming louder as I got closer to the ground. “Keep going, Ruth-Ann,” she said, all the way down. Her voice was like the metronome on top of the piano at the villa.

When I got to the bottom of the cliff and I turned around I saw that everyone had left except for the two of us.

“The boy—” I began, but then I stopped.

“He’s alive,” she said.

I took a step away from the cliff and tried to say that I was sorry, but the balloon in me split then and I squatted down on the ground and put my dirty hands over my face.

“Just leave me,” I said.

“I cannot,” she said.

“I do everything wrong,” I said.

About that, even, I was wrong. Soon I felt Wong Kwai’s arms lifting me onto my feet and then they wrapped around my back and her face went onto my shoulder and she sobbed. I could not remember my mother, but it was how I imagined she might have hugged me when she was worried, or scared, or so terribly happy for me that she was reduced to just holding me. She stayed there for a very long time, so long that I eventually closed my eyes and then I could have pretended that the wetness on my shoulder was anyone’s—even my mother’s own. But it wasn’t, and I was done with pretending.

## The Oily Man

1937

It was not long before the Oily Man was known all around Singapore.

At Eu Villa, Eu Tong Sen brought his wives around him. He said, “All of you will stay in the house until this is done,” and when the wives began to object, he raised his hand in the middle of them to call for silence. First wife continued to live in the house as she always had, but the rest of them had to leave their small apartments on the grounds and were assigned bedrooms on the third and fourth floors where they would sleep until the Oily Man was caught. During the day the wives would sit together for *mah jong* and tea and they would tell each other any developments to the story. Only the seventh wife did not speak because she was the youngest and the only one whose window Oily Man had ever stood at. Her black hair framed a pale face and a naturally flushed mouth, which made the older wives especially jealous. On most days the eighth wife was excluded from their gossip and she sat alone on a divan with her yellow fan and her serving girl. She was guarded most heavily by Tong Sen who had become suddenly possessive of her. He came to her room almost nightly and left a bright light on that was visible through the window for half a kilometer. Sixth wife wondered one day, “How can she sleep that way?” at which the wives widened their eyes and laughed with their hands at their mouths.

All of the wives agreed how terrible it would be to see the Oily Man, and yet each of them sat at their windows—feigned to be reading or brushing their hair—until late, late into the night.

On one day they could no longer hold themselves back and they brought the seventh wife into their circle. “What did he look like, really?” they asked.

“I’ll get in trouble,” seventh wife said, turning her face aside. The wives came closer—even the first wife leaned in.

“Tell us, was he really covered in oil?” The seventh wife nodded, and then she told them about the sheen over his body as if he had been dipped in a large vat of coconut oil. He was a small, muscular man with a sheaf of black hair matted down over his face.

“He stood outside the window, silent for minutes; he was naked but for his drawers.” The last she said under cover of her fluttering yellow fan.

On the third day after his appearance at Eu Villa, news came that an inspector had chased a man through the streets, his form only visible in brief pockets of window-light where he gleamed like a glazed pastry. When the inspector finally caught the man’s wrist it was only for a moment before Oily Man’s hand slipped through his grip and left behind a ring of clear oil. Tong Sen was furious at this news. He moved the seventh wife’s bedroom to the top floor of the house and ordered the gates checked every hour during the night. He could not say what made him angry, or why he was at all, because he had never seen the Oily Man himself and what he had heard was nothing to fear: he was said to be a little Malay man, no more than five feet, almost silly in his habits. Even so, when he passed the veranda and saw his wives drawn around the seventh, their faces lit as if he had never known them at all, he felt that they might slip through his fingers like sand—like the Oily Man.

That night, as the seventh wife was undressing in the bathroom and the bathtub was being filled, her serving girl stood holding her robe for longer than usual. “What is it?” she asked. The girl had a very soft face with wispy hair that hung long below her shoulders. Seventh wife liked it so much she let the girl keep it down always, but now it covered half her face like a curtain, and seventh wife saw the way the girl clutched the robe to her chest as she would a child.

“I know who the Oily Man is,” the girl said. She kept her eyes down and spoke quietly, though no one would hear over the running water. “That night, at your window, he came for me.”

Seventh wife came close to the girl, lifting her chin. “How do you know?” she asked. The girl began to cry and then she spoke quickly, her nose filling, her voice thick. She told the seventh wife that she loved him and how poor each of them were, how he would have married her a year ago but her parents needed her to work and he could not impress them.

“They sent me here to live and work in secret, so that he would not know, but he found me.” She used the robe as a tissue, unaware. “That is why he is the Oily Man—he has to undress and make himself slippery enough to get through the gate.” Seventh wife laughed a little. She remembered how the other wives had wondered that many times between themselves.

The serving girl slumped to the floor. “He will return until I go away with him,” she said. “Soon he will be caught and they will take him to prison.” Seventh wife knelt

down by the girl and ran her hand over her long hair. The tub had begun to run full. The bath seemed almost a nuisance.

“When he returns you will leave together,” she said, taking the girl’s hand in her own.

“But how can I? The villa is watched all night. I would not even know where to look for him.” The serving girl looked up at her mistress. The seventh wife’s face was as smooth as a river pebble.

“You will look for him here,” she said.

The Oily Man did not return to Eu Villa for many nights. Seventh wife instructed the serving girl to stand at the window every night, for as long as she could, as though she were protecting the seventh wife. Tong Sen wondered at it from his chair on the far side of the room, but soon it was nothing to him, and so the girl’s silhouette was at the window long into the night, her face a shadow at the pane. She thought long about the night when he would come and how she would whisper it into her mistress’s ear, as softly as a little feather, and then the seventh wife would know to wake and send the girl out of the room so that she could bring Tong Sen to her bed.

But on the night that he came the serving girl had fallen asleep. She was perched on the sill with her face flush against the glass when she heard a woman’s cry from below. “The Oily Man, he’s here, I see him!” And it came to her in an excited way, as though he were a rare, beautiful bird. By the time she had stood, Tong Sen was already gone from the room, his bellowing loud in the hallway. Lights went up around the villa

and when she looked out the window she could see him looking back up at her, the Oily Man, naked but for the drawers he always wore. They met eyes just as his arms were taken behind his back, the men clinging tightly to his slippery skin as they brought him into the house.

The serving girl ran down the stairs, each flight longer than the next, until she reached the staircase to the foyer and leaned over the railing and saw him standing on the marble below. Before him was Eu Tong Sen.

“Do you think that you could have my wives?” he asked. The Oily Man seemed dwarfed by Tong Sen. “That they would want you?” He paced with his cane, clicking three times with each step. The Oily Man was silent. His head hung low. “What’s this, a criminal with no defense? You have nothing to say before I give you to the police?” At this, the serving girl ran down the stairs, nearly tripping over her long nightdress. She ran to the Oily Man and put her arms around him, coating herself in oil.

“He was for me,” the girl said. “Not for them—not so good as them. Just for me.”

Tong Sen stopped his pacing and looked at the pair for a time. The serving girl he knew well now; he had watched her nightly at the window while he stayed in the seventh wife’s bedroom, and he understood finally why she had been there at all. The Oily Man spoke and it sounded as though his insides were coated as well.

“I would have married her,” he said, “but I was too poor.” It was true—always true. The other servants, Tong Sen noticed, for once did not have their eyes fixed on him,

but on the girl and the man covered in oil. They looked almost like one of his statues, the two of them affixed together. Finally he clicked his cane on the ground.

“Leave the villa,” he said. “It is for neither of you, anyway.” He knew that his wives, all of them—except perhaps the seventh—were at the banister behind him, there even as he watched the man and the woman run out of the foyer, his prints in little drops of oil, both of them slipping out of each other’s grasp over and over again, but grasping nonetheless. He knew they would not tell.



*Amah* Mun

1937

Mun Woon puts the yellow shirt into the bucket. She begins to rub it with the soap. Every stroke is like a child's flat palm slapping the water. When she looks at her hands she sees that the veins stick out and there are dark spots up her arms. The skin looks pruned even where it is dry.

She wonders of Leong Lay's health. Mun Woon remembers the song that she used to sing to her. She would hold Leong Lay in her arms and sing it when she was ill. Now that her daughter has gone to China, Mun Woon cannot sing to her. She still remembers the song. She begins to sing it as she rubs the shirt.

A young *amah* comes over to Mun Woon. Her face is like a bear trap. She says in English, "Here is something you forget," and drops a bundle on the pile. There is a smile on the woman's face that bothers Mun Woon.

"These are not my childrens'," she says, picking up a pair of dirty trousers. She is proud of her English. "Look, the legs are too long."

The woman laughs and flicks her hand like a fly has landed on it. She says in Cantonese, "That yellow shirt is worn down to a rag and yet you wash it ten times." Mun Woon watches as she walks away and wishes she could remember her name.

She takes the shirt out of the bucket and wrings it. The water comes out more and more slowly. She twists harder. When Leong Lay would get the fever Mun Woon would

have to use the whole day's bucket of water. She would hold it next to the bed and get the towel wet in every inch. Then she would wring it until it held the water without dripping. She would wring the towel over Leong Lay's face and chest. Mun Woon would twist to the last drop.

The yellow shirt in her hand is damp. She looks at the sky. She puts the yellow shirt into the bucket. She begins rubbing the soap onto the shirt. Nearby there are other *amahs* with buckets, all of them rubbing and wringing and hanging clothes on the lines. Mun Woon recognizes one of them: she is Jin Lee, *amah* to sixth wife's children. Mun Woon stares. She thinks that Jin Lee looks much older than her years and that her face has fallen. She remembers when Jin Lee first came. She was very young and her eyes darted and she said she had a little boy she had left at the convent on Victoria Street.

Mun Woon looks at her hands. She is surprised by how old they look, at how the veins come out and how dark the spots are. It was not so long ago, she thinks, that men admired her light skin. Other women would get jealous because Mun Woon made the most money every night. She was the most profitable woman in the Greylang district when she was nineteen.

Jin Lee comes over to her. She looks at Mun Woon's pile and takes a few pairs of trousers off the top.

"Why are you taking my clothes?"

"They are already washed," Jin Lee says. "And these are hers." She points to a young woman with a face that looks pushed in. She takes the clothes to the woman and

Mun Woon watches them talk. Jin Lee points back at Mun Woon and then her hands go to her head. She points to the clothes and then the young woman smiles in a way that bothers Mun Woon. She can't think of her name.

She takes the yellow shirt out of the bucket and wrings it. She twists it hard. She watches Jin Lee go back to her washing and wonders about the boy at the convent. Mun Woon would have done the same for Leong Lay but she found that every moment she wanted to hold her. As a baby she had to keep her hidden away in her room during visits and no one would know except for when she cried. But Leong Lay was a good, quiet baby, maybe a little thin, but with a soft pink mouth. If they found her baby, Mun Woon would do something extra to make sure the men didn't tell.

When Leong Lay got older Mun Woon was afraid because she was very pretty. She would not let her leave the room except for when there were visits, and by then *lou bou* Liu knew about Leong Lay. Every time Liu saw Mun Woon she would ask when she could start training the girl. She said a third of the profits would naturally be Mun Woon's.

Mun Woon holds a damp yellow shirt in her hand. She looks up at the sky. There are some dark clouds pushed together. She puts the shirt into the bucket and begins rubbing it with the soap.

She watches a couple of the boys playing in the rain tree near the house. Their voices are carried to her by the breeze. She has always liked living in Eu Villa, where the

wind comes in from the water all day and she can smell the ocean. At night she listens to the sound of the children sleeping in the beds around her.

Mun Woon feels a finger tapping her shoulder. She looks up into a soft, round face with a scar above the left eye. It is a circular scar like a fat bug. Mun Woon watches it for a long time before she hears the voice speaking to her.

“*Amah* Mun,” the woman says. She has a sweet voice that is both young and grown. Mun Woon looks into her eyes and sees that she has just become a woman.

“Come inside—you must be tired.”

“Only my children may call me *amah*,” she says. She raises her chin.

“I am your child,” the young woman says, putting her arms around Mun Woon’s neck. The touch feels warm and familiar, and though she would ordinarily object, Mun Woon allows the strange young woman to stay there, her fingers gently touching the top button of Mun Woon’s collar.

“So you will come in, then?” the woman asks. “Will you do it for your little Mei-Ming?”

“Too much washing to do,” Mun Woon says, tapping the shirt with the soap. She dunks it in the bucket and does not look up until the woman has left. She watches her cross the yard and go into the little house of Mun Woon’s own mistress. The young woman wears a canary-colored dress, just as Mei-Ming does. Mun Woon wonders at how alike they look. “If little Mei-Ming grows up that nice, she will make a man very happy,” she says. She tries to hold her smile inside of her.

Mei-Ming did not want her as an *amah* at first. She had said, “look at how old that woman is, she must be fifty!” and because she was just a little girl she stuck her pink tongue out at Mun Woon and hid. It was only the next day that Mun Woon was sweeping the foyer of her mistress’s house and she saw Mei-Ming dash across the yard followed by some of the boys. Mun Woon put her broom up and watched from the doorway as one of the boys threw a rock at the girl and hit her on the forehead. Mei-Ming screamed, the boys laughed and then became scared as they saw her bleed, and they ran.

When Mun Woon went outside, Mei-Ming hid in the crawl space under the house. Mun Woon said her name until her voice cracked, and then she went back into the house.

Mun Woon waited with a cloth and bowl of water until Mei-Ming came inside, the left side of her face a long streak of red. She began crying and Mun Woon held her and wiped away the blood even as it went through her own shirt. She got a needle and stitched the spot up nicely and Mei-Ming had never hid from her since. She called her *Amah* Mun and soon the two boys did as well.

Mun Woon begins to sing a song. It was the song she sang to her daughter when she was ill and she held her. She cannot remember some of the words anymore so she replaces them with other words. As she finishes the song she begins to cry. She does not know why she holds the wet yellow shirt to her face. It feels cool against her skin and smells like soap.

Mun Woon puts the shirt back into the water. When she looks up she sees a young woman with a strange face walking towards her. Her nose is pushed in like the wives' little lap dogs and she is smiling in a way that bothers Mun Woon.

"Here some you clothes," she says in English, dropping them onto the pile.

"Where did you find them?" Mun Woon asks. She picks up a shirt. "They are too big looking." She is proud of her English. She learned it many years ago when she first came to work for *sin sin* Eu. All the *amahs* were required.

"Be quiet, crazy," the woman says, "I already heard too much from Jin Lee. You get me in trouble."

"Who are you?" Mun Woon says. "Do you know how many years I have worked for the *sin sin*?"

"Too many," the woman says. "Look there and see." She points to the left pocket of Mun Woon's pants.

Mun Woon flicks the sopping shirt at the woman, who steps back with a yell as water sprays onto her. Mun Woon laughs. "I've been working here long enough I can do that," she says. The woman walks away and there is no more funny smile on her face.

That was how she took care of *lou bou* Liu too. One day Leong Lay was there, and the next, Liu walked into Mun Woon's room and she was alone. Liu said, "Bring me the girl for training." And Mun Woon said, "She is not a girl now—she is a wife." And Liu looked at Mun Woon for a long time and looked around the decorated room and said,

“Well, where is she?” And Mun Woon said, “Far away from here.” And it was true.

Leong Lay was on a boat to China. A man on a trip to Singapore for business had seen her. He had liked her more than Mun Woon, which made Mun Woon happy, and she had said, “Make her your wife, sir, and you can have me tonight for free.”

And he had said, what is her name, and Mun Woon had said Leong Lay, it is Leong Lay, just promise me she will be your wife. Promise me. And he said yes, and she had gotten Leong Lay up in her best *cheongsam* and hugged her and hugged her until the man said he had to go. He had to get back to Foshan, where he was a successful grocer with two young wives and a girl just born. He took her hand and they left the room and Mun Woon put her ear to the door to listen to their footsteps. It was only when she couldn't hear them any longer that she remembered to ask his name. She went barefoot into the street and yelled for the man from Foshan until *lou bou* Liu came and brought her inside and made her wash her dirty feet.

Mun Woon wrings the yellow shirt. She wipes one hand on her leg to dry it. There is a crinkle noise as her fingers move past her left pocket. She looks down and puts her hand into her pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. It is nice paper like the *sin sin* uses. She lays the shirt over the bucket and wipes both hands off very well. She unfolds the paper and begins to read.

The note is written in Chinese characters that have been drawn by a steady hand. She looks at each character closely and closes her eyes for a moment, trying to remember their meaning. “We no longer have a need for your help,” she says. “The children are grown,” she says. “Thank you for your service,” she says.

“What does this mean?” Mun Woon asks, lifting the paper above her head. She looks around at the other *amahs*. She sees Jin Lee and Jin Lee does not look back. Some of the women are laughing. They look at each other and they look at Mun Woon and laugh.

Mun Woon stands. She holds the letter in her hand and her voice is louder when she asks, “what does this mean?” A woman with a pinched face laughs the most. She slaps the water in her bucket and Mun Woon goes to her. “Please tell me,” she says.

“She get crazy again,” another woman says, one hand curved around her mouth.

“It mean you better get out of here,” the laughing woman says, and then she points towards the villa. Mun Woon looks up and sees two-dark skinned men walking towards them from the villa. Their faces are dark because the light is behind them and Mun Woon begins to back up.

“It is nothing, Mun Woon,” Jin Lee says, “they are coming to help.” But Mun Woon has already knocked over her bucket of water and she is still stepping backwards. She feels the tug of the clothes line behind her head and she ducks underneath, the wet clothing running along her back. She holds the letter tight as she steps backwards again and again. The men push the clothes aside and walk towards her still.

Mun Woon’s back touches the gate and she turns around and unlatches it. She opens it with a creak and she doesn’t look back. She starts walking quickly down the road and in the distance she can see the beach and hear the ocean. She hears a man’s voice at the gate behind her and she tries to run. Her knees are weak but she has always had wide,



flat feet and strong ankles. She drops the paper as her legs carry her faster, off the road and onto the soft dunes. The sky is a dozen colors and the ocean is only one. She follows the smell of salt and lets her feet carry her, she doesn't know where, but into the sand.

“Mun Woon,” she hears from behind. It is a woman's voice—Jin Lee's—but it sounds so old. She cannot understand but she trusts Jin Lee and turns her head. The next step is a bad one, and Mun Woon knows it the moment her foot touches the ground. It sinks far into the sand and sticks, and then her whole body is off balance, her face still turned. She falls forward into the white sand and it spreads for her even as her leg holds. The pain is immediate.

Mun Woon lies in the sand. Her right eye has grit in it but her left looks around. She sees the feet of the dark men coming towards her. Her fingers close around handfuls of sand but she does not go anywhere. The pain is worse than childbirth. It comes up through her body every time her heart beats. Her heart beats fast.

One of the men picks her up and holds her like a young woman, her face on his chest, her legs over his arm. Her eyes close and she cries as she did when she was barefoot in the street, calling for the man from Foshan.

“What do I do with her?” The man's chest vibrates beneath her ear.

“Take her inside,” a deep voice says. “Fix the ankle.”

She hears his feet pushing through the sand for a time. She hears her own voice, high and pitiful. Both grow quieter until Mun Woon hears no more.

She remembers the song. It plays in her head like a caught gramophone. There is another woman singing it. Her voice was breathy and high. She held Mun Woon in her arms and her hand went up and down, lifting and pressing the small hairs on her skin. She put a wet towel on Mun Woon's forehead and the water dripped down her nose and Mun Woon licked it and it tasted salty. She said something. She stopped singing and she said something.

Mun Woon can't remember what.

There are voices around.

"Mun Woon," a woman says. It is an older voice, not Leong Lay's. When she opens her eyes she knows she has been asleep for ten years. Jin Lee's fallen face looks down at her and it says, "How are you, Mun Woon?"

Mun Woon stares at Jin Lee. She looks at Jin Lee's hands holding her own. She looks around and sees a window with clouds and white walls and all around her a big bed.

"Where is my daughter?" She hears the name over and over inside her.

"She is here," Jin Lee says. She looks past Mun Woon to the doorway. Mun Woon's eyes close and she struggles to hold down the flutter in her throat. Her heart beats fast. Beneath the white bedding, her leg begins to hurt.

Warm fingers close over her other hand and Mun Woon blinks to clear her eyes. The face is blurred. Mun Woon says, “Are you healthy?” She hears a voice but it is far away from the loud rushing in her ears. She asks again. “Are you well?”

“Yes,” the girl says. Her voice is like Mun Woon always imagined. Mun Woon knows that she is beautiful and married and maybe pregnant with a son. She blinks again and the face becomes clearer. She sees an indent in the girl’s forehead like a fat bug once burrowed there.

“What happened to your head?”

“I was hit with a rock,” the girl says, one of her hands rising to touch Mun Woon’s cheek. “You sewed the cut like a real nurse.”

“I always kept you,” Mun Woon says. “When you got a fever I wrung the towel and when you started to cough I got the medicine.” Mun Woon watches the scar move a little across her forehead. There are lines between her daughter’s eyebrows. “At night I made a place for you in my dresser drawer and when you cried I gave you my finger with a little honey on it and you were so good.” Mun Woon holds her hand tighter. “I thought maybe you heard me calling for the man from Foshan that night and I always thought you would come back.”

“Drink some of this tea,” Jin Lee’s voice says, “it will make you sleep.” There is something in her voice that bothers Mun Woon. She looks hard at her daughter, holding her hand tight.

“Is that why you came back?” Mun Woon says. “Do you remember me calling?”

“Drink this, Mun Woon,” Jin Lee says. There is steam at Mun Woon’s mouth and she smells something strong in the drink. She turns her face.

“I said, ‘please come back,’ and I thought maybe I saw you in the red *cheongsam* at the end of the street but they took me inside and I was never sure. Do you remember the song I used to sing?”

Jin Lee puts one hand on Mun Woon’s face and forces the tea on her. The smell of it makes her eyes water. She closes her eyes and mouth. Her leg feels like the center of her body. Her heart beats in the wound.

“Wait, Jin Lee.” the girl says. “I remember. I remember it.”

It is silent a moment, and then Mun Woon hears her daughter’s voice, soft and slow, rising above the three of them. She sings it and it catches on the white walls and the lace canopy of the big bed and the clean window panes. She sings every word and they are all right, all in place. She sings it until the tea goes down and Mun Woon is far away, far inside herself. Even then, she sings it.

## Boat Quay

1938

“I was there,” I say, only because of the look in my *amah*’s eyes. All of China is in her face: the rivers, the hills, and the valleys all seem to run together in the wrinkles. Her eyes reflect my bad behavior like dark water. She sees the pads of dirt stuck to my bare knees where my pants are rolled up and she knows. I think that she must pull her hair back so tight just so that I can see her disapproval more clearly.

I hide my hands behind my back anyway, hoping I can rub away the encrusted earth before she grabs them for inspection. For the past few months my nails have been more black than pink and my skin is cracked, brittle from washing so often in the tub. When she sees me walking up the hill towards our home I know she wishes I were seven again and chasing the autumn leaf butterflies that I would never catch.

She says that I should forget about it and concentrate on improving my calligraphy. She doesn’t know that when I’m writing I think of my early days of skipping rocks along the banks of Boat Quay, when the mouth opened up like a geyser and spit out browned leaves and bits of bark and water, so much water. It was best when the stones had a sanded flatness to them and curved like supple leather around the edges. Then they would travel far; my rocks would skip so far they seemed to breathe air when they leapt.

“Why would you want to go to that place?” Wong Kwai still asks with the same skeptical look on her face. I never pay much attention to her questioning because it’s her place as my *amah* to be always pestering the children she watches. But she is correct in

some sense; it really isn't the prettiest place, Boat Quay. Hundreds of bumboats sailing in and out of the harbor have spoiled much of the water so that it has taken on a green-brown hue and smells a little bit if you get close. The air feels thicker in a person's throat from the boat exhaust, so you also breathe harder.

But people are always doing things: *swaylos* unloading boxes of rubber and tin from the moored boats, men in black suits going in and out of the shops in the business district. The south bank resembles the underside of a carp, a sure sign of wealth and prosperity, so the quay is lined with buildings all ready to burst for how closely they've been pushed together. I used to think of my father when I saw the Asian men walking around in suits like the British, all "dapper" as they would put it, but never in the same way as the Europeans.

My first time at the quay was with my mother. Memories that old become like the little sparks of burning oil that fly up off a pan when it's red hot: they come at you and burn you and you jump away only when it's too late. I see a flash of my brother squatting over a grasshopper in front of our house; I see my younger sister, barely old enough to sit up by herself, picking apart the brittle legs of a reed doll she holds. But none sting in the same way as when I see my mother's gliding-walk and the green silken *cheongsam* she had over her arm. She had gone to Chan Yu's to get the dress tailored up and she had brought me on what I supposed to be an adventure. I walked next to her the entire way, proud of myself for how well I could keep up with my tall mother. She had lovely hair that reflected even when there was only the tiniest bit of light around, and she always wore it pinned back with glimmering bird clips.

“This much,” she said, and I saw her use her fingers to indicate the portion of the dress she wanted hemmed—or how much more of her leg she wanted to show. First wife would often hassle the other wives in this way if she saw their hemlines getting too high. “Too much leg—not enough dress!” I can see now why my mother went to such trouble.

We left the dress with the tailor and went outside into the street. I remember it being early in the day—hot and humid and smelling of sweat. She took my hand and looked down at me as though to say, “So, where are we going?”

My mother had sorrow-driven eyes, the kind that make a silent movie watchable, and when she looked at me I felt numb. Not to her, but to everything else.

I told her I wanted to go down to the banks of the quay.

“I want to feed the fish,” I said, because I was thinking of my Auntie’s koi pond and the way they came up to people so fearlessly. My mother said nothing, though I feel sure she knew that we wouldn’t see any fish in the water at the quay.

We stood there for a few minutes, balancing on the rocks lining the water’s edge, my mother holding my hand. The water was lifeless, broken only by the ripples from the bumboat engines. Finally she took up a small, flat rock that she showed to me.

“Look what I can do, Pansy,” she said.

I can see a flash of her hand in mid-toss, but not the motion. Everything is still, stagnant, like an ongoing series of photographs. I want to say her hand moved like mine does, but I would be hoping rather than remembering.

Her rock skipped over the water's surface twice before sinking with a sound like nothing I had heard before. I always think of it now as the water saying, "Oop," as though the rock had gotten away and was being reclaimed.

That day we threw many rocks. I couldn't believe that my mother would dirty her hands like that and then clean them off in the backwash hitting the steps. It was not like her or any of the wives to touch the ground, much less come away with it on their skin.

Because of this, we never told my father about our trip to Boat Quay and the rocks that would take forever to resurface from the bottom, if they ever did. It was our rebellion against *amahs* and the first wife's cleanliness and, most of all, my father's seeming knowledge of everything that went on with his family. It was a secret between her and me, something that I kept after her leaving, though I can't say why. It was different there, then, than when I look into the quay now. I can't see as far. I can't see down into the water at all.

I want to tell Wong Kwai about my memories. I want her to understand and to place her hand on my cheek and say, "All this time and you never told me," because she always thought I had gone to look at boys. But I've realized that if I tell her one part, then I must also reveal the other.

The truth is, my father once saw me at Boat Quay. He came up next to me like a spectator and said, "Decent form, but I think you could do better."

I had been trained with bamboo switches to respond to the tones of my father's voice. When he said this, my muscles tensed so that I stood up straight—rigid—and I



dropped the little rock in my hand. I was always stunned by how much higher his voice sounded when he spoke English, and how accented the British had made him.

He picked up the rock, turned it over in his hands and shook his head.

“Too bumpy,” he said. I didn’t move, but I watched him, ready for an order or a command. “But I do have this one.”

He took an object out of his suit pocket as though it had been born there in the folds of cotton and held it to me. He lifted my hand and put it onto my palm. I nearly dropped it before I could get a feel for its weight.

“You should have told me,” he said.

I stood, stiff with the fear and relief in my body. I felt nine again, bowing under the weight of my Auntie’s cane and crying for someone to help me because I had no one to call for. I expected my father to turn around and motion for a servant to come pick me up and take me home. Instead he clasped his hands behind him and looked down at my hands—at the object there—and nodded his head.

What I found was what I expected but not what I could understand.

He said it would never stop skipping if I threw it. My father did not give me many gifts; most things I received came filtered through many screens—the aunts and the servants, even my brothers and sisters—but never had my father given me something so clearly precious from his own hand.

“For my little Malay chicken,” he said, and I should have felt hurt. The pang came over me the first time he said it, after he had lined the children up for inspection and he came to me with an incredulous look on his face. “Is this one *mine*?” he had asked, thumbing the side of my tanned cheek as though to wipe away the coloring.

Its touch was not that of a thrown stone. People think you can’t tell whether or not a stone has been in water, but most have never touched one that hasn’t. In my palm it was amber smooth, formed in the depths of the earth and raised to the surface by the hand of nature, or so he said. I believed him and eased it into my dress pocket, satisfied by the weightiness of it against my thigh.

When we left the quay we went separately like two people who had come for a business meeting. He never spoke of it and we never again met on the bank.

The stone sat on my dresser at *mu* house for months before it became a paperweight for my schoolwork. I used it to weigh down pencil drawings of my house, of the street leading up to it, and even those of Boat Quay itself. This was because it was the heaviest skipping stone I had ever felt. To explain this, I imagined rocks having little holes—like pores—in their surface just as humans did on their faces, and how the absence of water after it had dried away left my skin feeling drier than it had before. It was just so with rocks, so that if one was picked up from the beach it was sure to be porous and light, whereas one like this felt solid to me. It had the heft of a man’s clenched fist.

Now Wong Kwai asks me, “What is it about that place?”

I can't say to her, "I like to watch the men," without risking the chance of her going for a bamboo switch and forbidding my rock skipping, so I say, "To watch."

"What? What do you want to watch?" She takes a pail of water and drops a pair of Henry's trousers into it. Instead of scrubbing a soap bar against the cloth, she takes the soap, rolls it in her hands until they become covered with bubbles and begins rubbing one worn leg. "Faster this way," she once told me, but we know that it is because Wong Kwai has no surviving children except for us, and she likes for us to smell her when we put on the clothes.

"I watch the boats," I say. She knows that this is not true, but she doesn't say any more except to grunt sometimes when she leans over to pick up a shirt or dress for washing. My *amah* goes easier on me now when I wish she would treat me just as she did before. Now, only after the fact, does she call me Ruth-Ann instead of my mother's name for me. I look at my dry-skinned hands and at Wong Kwai, who diligently washes, and wonder if she finds any irony in all of it.

When they found his body turned black under the covers I was at my place with the scummy water, tossing rocks like they were crumbs and wondering how many skips it would take to reach the other bank. I often watched my reflection in the water and I distorted my mouth or my eyes and practiced my smile to perfect its best look. Sometimes I would make an ugly face just so I could break it apart with one toss.

I was angry at Wong Kwai for standing aside the day before while K.C. the eldest laughed at me for my dark skin. "Hey, chicken, are you some kind of laborer?" he said. I

stood in the doorway of *mu* house, watching a few of the other boys gather around. “Are they going to send you off to the workplace for motherless children of *di ba*?”

It was hardest not to cry when I knew it was coming, up and up from the bottom of my stomach. I dug my fingernails into the wooden supports of the doorway and wished that my *amah*, who was sewing up a hole in a shirt, would look up from what she was doing and use her heavy voice on them like she so often did with me. Instead she sat cross-legged on the floor and hummed. It was like all the adults were hiding away, making sure not to notice this scene.

I could never think of anything good to say when angry, so I picked up one of the rocks lining the front path and threw it at them. It made a soft arc in the air and was dodged by the boys, who started laughing so hard that some fell on the ground and began wiping the moisture from their eyes.

“You think you’re better,” I said, struggling to keep my voice regular, “but really you’re just *say fai tsai*. I would rather die than be as lazy and useless as you.”

It was coming then, the lump like a stone from the bottom of my stomach all the way to my throat. Daniel *was* a stupid, useless stick, but what would my father do to me if he knew I had said it? Our father never let us speak Cantonese. If he heard us slip out of English—especially the girls—he would punish us, always in a new and unique way so we never knew what to expect. I had never received worse than the beating given to me by my Auntie for what I said at the convent school, but I had heard from Wong Kwai that sometimes the boys were made to stand in a corner for thirty minutes while holding a

stool over their heads. My brother Henry had even been put into a closet once, which was not so bad to me, but the concubines could be very cruel and second wife put three black cats in there with him. “All I could see were their devil eyes,” he had said to me, “I fought them off at first, but one of them got me.” He had held his arm out for me to see and I had to look away from the lines of broken skin.

I saw the boys pan their eyes around, waiting for some *amah* or servant or even our father to come out with a large tree sprig or cane held aloft. I saw the patio door to the main house begin to open and the boys started to make strung out vowel-noises, higher and higher. Before I could see who it was I leapt from the front stoop of *mu* house and ran past the group to the side gate. I pushed aside the metal door as I ran, nearly colliding with a man carrying a yoke and two pails over his shoulders. I heard the water splash and something sharp said to me in Malay as I ran down the driveway towards the city.

I stayed down by the water for the rest of that day and through the night. I slept under a tree in the wooded area near the south side of the quay where a little park had been preserved, wanting them to regret their words more than I hated the ache in my neck from lying over an old root.

“Wong Kwai,” I say in a small voice, “if you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to the quay tomorrow.”

She looks up at me for a moment and I see her eyes flick back and forth over my face. It used to be that she would tell me what to do and when, but now she just asks *why* all the time, as though to develop a sense of guilt in me.

“What for?”

I begin picking blades of straggly grass around me, waiting to answer. I can hear her hands splashing the water around a bit. This means she’s growing impatient, that she wants to hear one thing or the other so that she can get back to washing. Finally I stand and go into *mu* house. I bring her the bundle with my father’s handkerchief wrapped around it and I hold it out to her. The two letters of our family name are embroidered in black on the corner. She looks up at me and she knows—I can tell—and her eyes become large. She asks for the first time if she can come with me to the quay. I have never been in this position before.

“I did not know the master,” she says in her weak English. She has never been able to speak the language like some of the *amahs*. I have taught her many words since she first came to the villa when I was ten. At first she only washed the clothes and kept our rooms clean, but now we speak often and she uses the words I have taught her.

I understand what she means. She sees the faded handkerchief as an excavator sees an old relic, half buried in the dirt, almost as precious as the hands that once touched it.

It was the first thing I wanted to hold when my father died.

No one told me about the poisoning until many hours after it happened. I came back to the house early the next morning, expecting anger from many directions for how I had insulted the oldest son, but the courtyard was empty. I went into the house and found the wives standing together in a muddle. They were speaking very low with bowed heads and when I walked inside they looked at me only as if I were someone they were not expecting.

“What is it?” I asked, thinking there had been an accident, that maybe one of the children had been hurt. The boys skinned themselves almost daily climbing the cliffs on the strait. But when they did not answer me, even though I had spoken very clearly, I knew that it was much worse. Third wife grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the huddle. Her hand went to the back of my head and pushed it forward.

At that moment I heard strained voices from the top of the staircase. Dark-skinned men I had never seen before were speaking in Malay. I picked out a few of their words, none of them the important ones. I looked up to see them working to guide a tourniquet draped with a white sheet down the stairs, one step at a time, each of them straining to keep the load upright.

“Who is that?” I said, loudly, to anyone. I saw the second wife’s face appear at the head of the steps and she gave me an angry look through the red outlines around her eyes. I hushed and we watched the slight paunch under the sheet. I was imagining a suited figure with a buttoned overcoat who was too vain to allow it to show. I remembered my mother’s leaving and I couldn’t understand why people always had to go

in the night, why they could never stay for Pansy. And then I began to cry, because I remembered the hours just spent at the quay, and why.

There was no official inquiry, only small gossip around the house about the green tea my father had taken the night before. They ordered a wooden casket for him to lie in. He stayed in the sitting room on the main floor for days, the lid hanging open and his face an inky black under the gauze. On the third day I entered the house for the first time since I had seen the procession on the staircase, only because my Auntie had told me that I had to. The children were gathered like stray flowers and placed in a line before the room, boys first and girls second. I stood almost at the end with my sister and she took my hand because she knew what was coming for us.

Earlier, my Auntie Kay had taken me by the shoulders and looked at me sadly like it was a punishment. She said, “You know he loved you,” and I felt her fingers gripping me harder, “just as much as he loved any child of his.” She had not done the same with her children because they were older—which somehow made them wiser and the situation easier—and they had not lost her.

I couldn't see Henry's face as he stood in line, but I could see his curled fingers and his bitten nails and the way his back was so straight. I remembered the time my father had come to visit us during the afternoon and how he had looked at our ink-writing and said that he admired the shapeliness of my letters. To Henry he had nodded and pointed at one spot and said, “Work on this, here,” because he was expecting more. It was the expectation that had led my brother to stand like that in front of a lifeless casket, just like all the other boys did.



When it came to be my time to go in I walked very quickly across the room. I curtseyed as I always had, except this time much lower so that my head would fall below his on the upraised casket. I looked in and I could see the blackness of his features through the material. I wanted to run outside, to get away from the dim room and the smell of rot and that face, but I knew they would pull me back and never let go until it was done. I lifted the very tip of the cloth with my thumb and first finger until his entire face was uncovered. It looked very saggy and wrinkled—much more than when I had last seen him—and his hair appeared strangely brilliant, like a golden whiteness on top of his blackened scalp.

I leaned down into the casket and closed my eyes. I pictured the curve of his mouth when he smiled and the sound of his Cantonese, the way he always seemed so much happier speaking it even though he tried not to, and when my lips touched his I imagined that they were warm and pink. I tried not to feel them as they were, but when I stood back up—and for the rest of that day—my lips felt stained and chilled. I wiped at them for hours until my skin chapped and Wong Kwai had to pull my hands away from my face.

Now second wife's jockey lover walks around our house as though he were some kind of king, spitting out bits of broken English at us like an archer fish. If he sees one of the girls he will come up to us with his shoulders thrown back and his chest pushed out. Usually he wears one of my father's old suits, which are too long and wide for him, so he rolls the cuffs and pant legs up and looks like a fisherman. If we tell him to take off that

suit, to have some respect, he'll cock an ear at us with one hand cupped, saying, "Eh? Eh?" until we relent and walk away.

I wonder whose home I live in, and what they intend to do with those of us that are left. Perhaps second wife will give us all green tea? Not, of course, without a bow and a smile and her jockey lover close by.

My *amah* stands up and brushes the dust and suds off of her shirt as though she's about to present herself to someone important. She hurries into the house and I see her holding a pair of blue parasols when she comes back out, as though she actually believes that my skin could become much darker than it is. I take one and hold it over my shoulder unextended, which somehow seems like something my father wouldn't mind, even if I have become a chicken because of it.

I show her the path I take down to the business district. We go through the south-side servant's entrance and follow a grassy indenture down the hillside. She does not say anything, and I cannot think of anything to say, so we go silently into the city, our heads bowed against the flow of people headed home for the evening. When I am alone I feel less afraid of meeting eyes with the Malays, as though our sun-affected skin will give us understanding of one another, but Wong Kwai does not believe in such things. She moves closely—protectively—by my side, and I cannot help but think that I'm getting younger, somehow, by going back to this place for this purpose. I have remembered my father's stone and I hold it in my hands for the entire walk, thumbing the cool smoothness of it beneath the cloth.

When we arrive at Boat Quay it's all I can do to sit on the bank and watch the water lap at my shoes. My *amah* stands slightly behind me, perhaps out of formality, and I do not question it. I wonder if she has ever been to this place—this exact spot—in her life.

I don't want to tell her about the stone, about what my father said it could do. Perhaps it will do nothing at all and she will be similarly disappointed like I was when I threw in my first rock. We are silent, staring blankly, our skin touched by the wind coming off of the water.

Then I feel her hand on my back up by my shoulder, not lightly, but firmly—insistently—as though she knows and is waiting. I unwrap the handkerchief and hold the thing in my palm.

“Tong Sen Eu,” I say, unembarrassed, and I can hear my voice carrying across the water, farther and farther, each rippling breath refracting off of every surface and coming back on itself in smaller and smaller fragments until I can't tell which word comes first anymore. Only *father* comes to mind, and even then I can't bring myself to say it.

“Eu Tong Sen,” I hear her voice correcting me, reminding me. She is right, my *amah*, but I am right, too. I remember my Auntie Kay once telling me, after the nuns had sent me home for reciting the Lord's Prayer in Cantonese, that no one can be just one thing, not even if we are very determined.

I take the handkerchief in my left hand and crook my arm, angling it like a real rock skipper would do. I snap the stone across the water, but as soon as I let it go I want

to call it back, do it over. It plops in a regular sort of way: the sound of return to its natural place. It will sink, I am sure, to the bottom in a couple seconds, my throwing stone. But when it hit the water, I knew it—I could see it in the ripples growing from that soft spot until they spread a mile, forever. My father had been right: his thrown stone would never stop skipping.

## Leaving Singapore

1942

The whirring of their propellers reflects in the blackest part of her eyes, and with all of it this close to me I feel I can remember the exact color of my mother's hair; the curve of her lip line; the way her hands moved towards her mouth when she laughed. I can hear her flower name for me, Pansy, and how unlikely it sounded coming from a Chinese wife.

In my Auntie I see only lined fear: around the lips and stemming from her eyelids downwards like an offset estuary for which her cheekbones are the sea. I try pulling her away, telling her, "Auntie Kay, please come," because I can hear my brothers and sisters running through the house. They are knocking over things so that their shouting mingles with the shattering of glassware and hollow clanking of bronze. The blue-patterned vase from Paris, the one my father went there himself to get, I had found earlier, broken in three places on the sitting room floor.

When the Japanese fighters fly over our house it is as though they are contesting with one another to see who can come the closest to clipping the roof or breaking off a few shingles from the central spire. Sometimes when they come by it almost sounds that way, like a thud and the trickling of clay down the house, and I think that they have finally succeeded, but none of us are brave enough to leave our beds to check.

Mostly I become aware of them when, in the earliest hours of the morning, they shoot past like a steam engine burning too much coal, rousing the entire city for a few

moments of penitent desire for our lives to continue on. It is at times like this that I recite the Lord's Prayer in the only language that it has ever been taught to me, saying the words in English and thinking them in Cantonese, all the while hoping that God speaks one or the other.

I tug at my Auntie Kay's arm and it gives way underneath my grip like a loose root. She falls into me and I can barely keep us both upright. She says, "All of it, all of it." Her wrist lifts with her hand dangling and she makes a dismissive motion, and I can tell that what she really means to say is *none of it*: nothing will be spared. I call out for a servant, for Wong Kwai, my *amah*. I stand with Kay on the veranda, looking between the villa and the sea and the expanse of blackened city that lies between it all.

Henry and Sheila and I had watched the boats leaving from the third-floor bedroom—the highest in the house—touching our fingers to the window panes as they sailed out of the harbor towards the straits of Singapore. Mostly the people lived, but sometimes the fighters would come before they could escape. The steamers usually made it, but one bomb would destroy the junks. I could see the white scarves, the waving arms, and just as quickly, the flotsam and the remnant planks burning in the smoky harbor.

Henry says that it is the fall of British rule. Their two sunken ships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, were all that the navy had sent. If my father were alive he would have poisoned his own tea before admitting a British defeat. He would have told us to close our eyes, to turn the other way. And I would have told him that it was not so easy. Not to close one's eyes, but to do things his way.

“Please,” I say, wrapping my arms around Kay’s small shoulders, “we have to leave, Auntie.” I can hear fast, hard footsteps—running steps—coming towards us. Henry skirts the corner and stops just next to us.

“The Japs are coming into the city,” he says, “They’re riding across the causeway from Johor on bikes with bells, a whole swarm of them just ringing those bells like it’s a holiday.” I take Kay’s arm over my shoulder and he takes the other. She is small but she weighs on us as though her feet are of no use at all.

“One of the old motor-cars is still here,” Henry says, “and there are a few boats still at the pier. Sheila says the family will wait for us.”

*The family.* And what good would Sheila do, our little sister who had snuck out to dance with boys at the Raffles Hotel, who sprawled across her bed dreaming of cutting her hair in a page-boy style so she could have a chance with Humphrey Bogart? It was a worse consolation than if he hadn’t tried.

“I’ll be right back,” he says. My brother leaves us standing in the doorway. My Auntie turns her head to me and her eyes wander. She says, “I remember,” and points at the long staircase leading to the second floor, “I remember it all.”

I look in the direction of her pointed finger, up the stairs. Before I can reach the top, the house begins to shake. A marble statue falls to the ground just by my feet and, even from this distance, I can hear the dull thumps in the water.

“Jesus Christ.” I can hear my brother’s yell, long and breathy. He comes back into the house and stands before us. I can feel Kay’s shoulders shaking but I cannot bring

myself to turn and look outside. "The God damned Japs are bombing the boats again," he says.

"Maybe we should stay," I say.

"Have you lost it?" He takes my hand and begins pulling us outside. "Do you know what they'll do to us? It'll be worse than dying on a boat, that's for sure."

We help Kay into the back seat of an old motor-car that had been sheeted and dormant in the garage for at least five years. I can feel, faintly now, the familiar temptation to slide to the bottom of the seat as I did when I was taken to the convent school in the morning. I couldn't explain to my father then why it would have been easier just to drive something simple, commonplace. I had heard that Ford was everywhere in the United States. If I envisioned my plea, it was always shortly followed by his reply. In my mind he would have puffed his pipe at me, let loose an 'O' of smoke, inhaled and said, "So, it is not enough? Ruth-Ann wants more?" and how could I, Pansy, have contradicted his logic? My rebellion became my refusal to let Ling open my door for me.

There is a moment of sputtering uncertainty when Henry tries the ignition, and I feel glad, for once, for all his time spent fiddling with our father's things despite the canings administered by Wong Kwai afterward. The engine responds after only two tries and I can see my brother's tensed shoulders fall. He puts his hands on the steering wheel like he knows it well and turns back to Kay and I, saying, "I took it down to the beach once." It is enough to say that; the aftermath is clear in my mind. Sheila and I had been called down to place bamboo sticks under the back wheels so he could drive it out of the



sand. My father would have beaten him himself, had he known. We had spent hours in the garage scrubbing away the granules one at a time, Henry once pausing to say, “Aren’t you happy I didn’t try the marsh?”

From the hill of our home I can see lines of people filing through the streets towards Marina Bay, where the last ships are docked. The smoke writhes over the city as a typhoon would and I can see Clifford's Pier—our small and distant destination—full with people from edge to edge.

Henry turns back to me and pushes something into my hands, saying, “This will get us on board; don’t forget it.” The first thing I see is the tip of my mother’s bird comb jutting out like it had been picked up at the last minute, on a whim. I want to ask him what good it will do, to have all these precious gems when people are dying in the water. But I know my brother and the serious look that would come over his features in his reply. He would sigh and say, “You think we’d have more luck if we went there and announced ourselves?”

I hold the bag to my chest as Henry guides the old motor down the driveway. I cannot stop myself from turning back to the house to look once more, to stare until my brother steers us down the hill and out of sight. I can see the dark stone and the mosque-like spire in the center that I once thought rose up like a beacon in the nighttime. The white “greeting” statues of full-figured, curvy women holding grapes to one another that I had always seen from behind Ling’s silly chauffeur hat come into my peripheral vision. I watch our home grow fainter as the settled dust from the road kicks up behind us.

I have left all my clothing, my drawings, and my mother's chimes in the small house where we lived. I wonder what the Japanese will think when they come by the villa and hear all that noise.

This is what my father would have said: "Ruth Ann, you think too much on nothing."

I know very little of my father, but this thing is what he would have said.

When my mother left, Kay said that Tong Sen would bellow her name so loudly it would ring in the Cameron Highlands for all the jewels she took. She said that he would gather the Singapore police at his doorstep and they would fan out across the island, combing the tall grasses for her and that acrobat. Kay did not know my father.

When he found out that Lily had run away, Tong Sen sat in his office chair and smoked on his pipe. He said, "Let her go, then," and waved away the wives who were crowding into the doorway for a listen. "You hens think too much on the past."

While all the concubines were well-treated by my father, he had been especially kind to my mother. Not only was *di ba* a pretty lady, but she spoke English—and who could not see the pride in that when living in Lion City, the stronghold of the empire? It has been said to me by my Auntie Kay that my mother left with over three million Singapore dollars in her possession. She had worn much of it on her like a stage actress, the earrings and the necklaces and the bracelets a testament to her defiance. I know now that my father could have had her killed, and the blood smatterings on his hands would have been ignored.

So when I say that my father would have said this to me, I mean that the chimes are no less important than they were before, but that they, along with my childhood, are of the past. When I hold this bag that Henry thinks will secure our passage on the ship, it is not my mother's bird comb that I see, but our escape from the Japanese machines.

Before my father died he had begun to realize the insignificance of the past. I was ten when he decided to change his will. The wives questioned him, prodding his body with their practiced hands and filed nails. It seemed that everyone wanted to know why Tong Sen had made this rash decision to allow his twelve daughters to share in his fortune, where it was quite obvious to me. The British talk about God and dogs being defamed by one another in the English language, but my father was reformed by the Holy Trinity. Towards the end he would come home from services and he would tell us all that we should be as thankful as he was.

If asked why, he would say, "Why, look at my children, my wives," and he would point here and there, but never mention his wealth. He was an upright man, my father, very serious in expression but joyful in the way he went about his daily rituals. I saw the change in him when he lined us up to be inspected after returning home from a trip to Shanghai. Sheila played the harp for him, and instead of the customary nod and the smoothing of his pants' leg, he said, "I'd like to hear more."

Whether my father said "more" or "better" became a point of contention among the concubines, but I was there with my flute, standing beside my sister when our father looked at us—for the first time—considering his girl children. I like to think that it was because of my mother, that a man must show pity when a woman like her is reduced to

stealing away with an acrobat and her jewels. In truth, the only thing I can speak for is what occurred after his reformation.

The fifth wife had four sons and two daughters. She was seeing a British jockey from the Singapore race course in secret, but it was common knowledge among the posh Eurasian and Chinese families. Anyone could have told my father that they saw her with him, leaving hotels and hanging off his small shoulder, but they chose not to. Kay said that it was because they felt sorry for the fifth mistress having to share Tong Sen's fortune with a bunch of worthless girls. They said he was becoming senile, that he would soon start passing out his paper money for the birds to line their nests with.

After my father was gone, the jockey would walk around the main house in Tong Sen's tailored suits despite the arms being too long and the breasts too wide. He would talk in broken English and gesticulate from corner to corner, and then demand to know why the wives laughed at him for coming into the kitchen, arms flailing, asking, "Can I be to the toilette?"

How my father became replaced with a man like this is the story of a woman's blindness. It has been said that, on the night of Tong Sen's return from a London trip, a servant brought a cup of green tea to his bedroom. In our home, green tea was a sign of welcome, a wish for good health and a long life, and my father took two cups of it per day. However, on that night he did not request it.

The next morning, that same servant went into my father's bedroom to find a black man in the bed. The servant ran from house to house in the villa, screaming that a

demon spirit had taken hold of the master's soul and refused to let it escape his body. It had come in the middle of the night, the servant said, and turned his master's skin black and bloated his face up with the fullness of its shape.

I had heard stories of this kind before from Wong Kwai, and then only at night when no one else could hear. Ghost stories were not allowed in our home, and anyone who spoke superstitiously of them would be removed from my father's employment. The servants felt strongly about these things: spirits, demons, and what certain occurrences meant.

If a person died overnight, in his sleep, it was thought that a good spirit had come to release his soul from his body. However, if his body turned black, it signified that an evil spirit had invaded the body and contaminated it so that the soul would be unable to escape. The only way to rid the body of such a spirit—to release the soul—was to place white lotus flowers around the coffin at the wake, so that the darkness of the demon would be absorbed into the petals, and the victim would be freed of his constraints.

Of course, this was only superstition, and though the servants pleaded with first wife that she follow these guidelines for their master's body, she chose to have him cremated. I think Wong Kwai was right, because I can still see his presence everywhere besides in the urn of black ashes that sits on the mantle. He still speaks to me in his own way, sometimes cursing the day he decided to split his fortune up twenty-four ways, other times reminding me that the greed of man is not the fault of woman.

Second wife knew something of toxins, and also something of embarrassment. Which one she had a greater understanding of is now quite clear. When the will was read by his British lawyer, Mr. Dougherty, it began: *It is my will that my assets, both monetary and otherwise, be divided equally among my twelve...*

At this point there was a unanimous intake of air from all the wives. The sons and the daughters stared, not at Mr. Dougherty, but at one another from across the table, curiously divided twelve and twelve. When he finished reading, my Auntie Kay nodded and lowered her head, I thought, out of shame. Later, she said to me, “We live in a time when a man’s will is no longer his *will*.”

Just then I felt that my Auntie was a very poetic woman. Now I see that she was an observer of what is true, because although my father was reformed in his heart, it was not so in his head. He had not changed his will in over thirteen years and not a single daughter of his was to ever stand on equal ground with his unrepentant sons.

The car draws us close to the city now and Henry maneuvers us around rubble and shrapnel and the ever-increasing flow of people. Many carry bulging bundles, most of them white sheets tied together at the corners, brimming with possessions too precious to leave. Sometimes I can see a baby’s ruddy face poking out from where they are strapped to a woman's chest. Others carry two pendulum-like bags in each hand, swinging unbidden as they stagger down the street. The road seems to be narrowing from either side, the lines of people hemming us in. The only other vehicles on the road are those that have been pushed off to the sides, out of fuel or burned, or both.

Faces turn to us in our motor-car and Kay shrinks into me. I fall back into the seat. I know their looks; they are the same Malay people who had served us at the dinner table, who had taken our money in the pharmacy. And to them, we are the same light-skinned Chinese who had driven past while they walked along the side of the road, dripping from ear to ear in the noonday heat.

We swerve suddenly and over the side I can see that we've narrowly missed a deep hole in the road. The smell of char rises from it like the brew in a cook pot. Overturned vehicles have been rolled to the side where they lay in the bushes. We pass Saint Joseph's, my father's church, where bandaged bodies spill out the open doorway. All are bloodied but only some of them move or make any noise at all. Nuns with rolled up sleeves struggle to pull a man with a bandaged head up the stairs and into the building. His arm lolls out to the side and they make no effort to replace it on the cot.

The street ends in a pile of refuse and rubble and we are surrounded by people and the smell of sweat and smoke.

We leave the car sitting in the middle of the road, surrounded by the men and women and their bundles. Were I twelve again, I would have been happy to do so, but before today I have never stood with so many bodies. People around us are speaking in languages that I have never heard before. The fighters are out of sight for the moment, though the sound of their engines is one that I feel I will always know acutely.

I hold tight to Henry's hand as he maneuvers Kay and I through the crowd. Their bodies seem almost to have come together almost as a single entity, its entire mass

pushing towards the pier. I wonder if the family had truly meant to wait for us, and if it is even possible for them to keep the boat from sailing with the Japanese working hourly to sink us all into the ocean.

When we reach the water I can see two large steamers docked on either side of the pier. Both are vast and well-shaped, their steel sides rising high above the heads of those of us on the ground. I can see pitying faces looking down at us from their decks.

“Which one is it?” I yell to my brother. I can hardly make out the sound of my own voice over the shouting, the cries of offered money, the wailing of mothers who hold their crying babies high. Kay stands between us, looking around like a small child might, her nails digging half-moons into my arm.

“Over here,” he says close to me, and pulls us along close to the water's edge. I can see old vegetables floating amidst newspaper leaves in the brown water.

“Where are we going?” I say, falling back as we pass the pier. The crowd begins to thin as we approach the far side of the harbor.

“This one,” he says, drawing us towards an old Chinese junk. A single sail hangs limp and patched and the wooden frame looks ancient—the planks sanded maybe a hundred years ago. A thin, darkly skinned man is on his knees at the front. He has a little bit of hair on his chin and above his lip and he looks up at us for a moment while unwinding the junk's tether from around the dock post.

“Here,” Henry says, pulling the bag from me and handing it to him. I close and unclose my sweaty hands as we cross the short gangway onto the boat's low deck. We



stand against the railing in the small crowd of people piled onto the deck. Henry and I call out for our brothers and sisters and the wives. Other voices call too, for mother and father and uncle. I hear clipped Tamil and low Malay blending together like a chorus.

I try to recall the pitch of my sister's voice and the breathy way she ends her sentences when she is anxious. I yell for Sheila, but my voice is engulfed by a far louder sound. A long, human wail draws heavy across the city, filling our ears for the moment that we cannot think to react. My brother pulls us downward to the deck and hovers over us in a half-crouch as though it might spare Kay and I. One of the steamers at the pier has begun to pull away from the harbor. I can see people falling into the water after it.

"Go, please, we have to go!" Henry calls to the thin man—the captain—who is already winding his way past people, through the crowd.

"What are we going to do, raise the sail?" I scream, "Let the wind carry us away?" I angle my face up towards my brother. "Is there even a motor?"

Just then the boat begins to vibrate and I can hear, low like the last white key on a piano, the ship's engine begin to rumble. The junk begins to move—to angle its shallow draft slowly through the water—at the same moment that a small, far away dot glints in the sun and the acute noise of their machines reach my ears. The wail dies away as hundreds of faces turn upwards, a thousand eyes squinting at their barrel-like bodies above us. We are moving faster now, away from the harbor, but in the opposite direction of the steamer. I can see the ship knifing away at a diagonal.

“We're going the wrong way,” Henry says, taking a few steps towards the cabin. Our old boat is following the shoreline now—the captain navigating a deep channel towards the tree line at the west end of the city. I can feel the guilty hope churning around me that this time, just this time, they will not open up their doors over the boats, that something else—someone else—will be more enticing to their trigger-fingers.

The last thing I hear is the captain's thick accent, his words echoing in the cabin around him, “They'll take the steamers.”

My father was right: one should not think on nothing, but always on something. The fighters loom large now, their cargo doors opening, but I cannot hear the high squeal of their descent. I cannot hear the hard spray of bullet into flesh and the clipped cries. I cannot hear. It is only the feel of my brother's hand around my own that links me to that moment, and in the following, my eyes are open. The junk is rocking to the left and suddenly I feel the railing hard against my back. The sun comes into view and, for an instant, the entire craft hangs at that odd angle, poised between sky and sea. People cling to the railing of the ship and I can see their mouths open and moving but no words come out.

With an aching slowness, it seems, the ship rights itself and we slump onto the ancient wood of the deck as though it were land. I lift my face to look for Henry's, to say, “Look, it was not us,” but my words are silenced beneath the shrill ringing in my head. Kay clutches her hands over her ears and when I touch my own they feel dull—useless. I follow the direction of her eyes and I see one funnel of the giant steamer jutting from the water. The rest of the ship is all pushed together like crushed aluminum with little pieces

of cloth and hair fluttering down to rest on top. The pier it departed from is gone also, as are the mass of people who stood upon it; only the very tip remains, jutting from the shore like a fiercely tipped spear.

The people on land are climbing to their feet and backing away from the water, pushing each other until they crowd against the street shops and abandoned booths. Some point up at the sky, as though what had occurred were some kind of divine act. On the deck around me I see expressions that I have never seen before—I imagine they are the kind saved for when nothing else can suffice, for when a person finds himself vivisected, torn in two, beyond pain.

My mother once told me that if I felt I wanted to cry, I should laugh instead, because while both can be tearful, only one of these brings joy. Soo Nooi was what she called me then, and I had looked at her closely because she only ever used my traditional name when she was very serious. “Never let anyone see you without a dry face.”

I think that maybe I can feel myself laughing, but I have never tried without being able to hear my own voice, so I put my hands to my eyes and I feel for the wetness. All that is there is my skin, burning like an iron against the chill of my palm. I can think only on my guilty hope—the irrepressible hope that had filled all of us upon seeing that familiar glint in the sky.

Despite my deafness I can feel the ship’s wooden boards vibrating underneath my fingers and I see them coming from the sea now, arcing back in formation, low enough that I can smell their spent fuel and hear their engines like small pins driven through the

wedges in my ears. It only grows louder—angrier—and then it whistles like an over-spun top.

Suddenly the deck is hard against my cheek and I feel pain—pain everywhere like my limbs are being stretched from my body—and I see nothing. I can hear Kay's voice murmuring—or maybe shouting—that we are dead. Everyone dead, she is saying. But she is wrong: I can hear the human wail again on the distant harbor shore. And there is a new sound, one like a fallen glass rolling across a table-top, the way I know them to do before they shatter or, long ago, my *amah* would catch them. As my vision returns I can see a blackened shell rolling away from a circular hole in the wood of the deck. It is a hole so round that the planks might have been perforated and still they would not have broken so exactly.

And then, finally, I hear a queer, disembodied voice over and over again shouting, “You bastards, you bastards,” until the pitch of it dies away. It is my brother, somehow standing and shaking his fist at the sky while everyone else is still looking around as though for the body parts they should have lost.

The sail of our ship flies high in the wind and, though the motor has stopped, we continue along the shoreline away from the harbor. It is when I can no longer see the city—when the first tree engulfs the sight of the last British building—that I open my mouth to speak but I find that only one word presses up my throat and past my lips, and it is aging, inexpressible except to those who have known it. I cannot think to do anything but cover my face with my hands and cry for how my mother had been so wrong. At the age of five I had been old enough to know that sometimes it was better to be sorrowful,

but I had laughed. When she left I had laughed and laughed until the tears came and I had run into my room and hidden from everyone so that they could not see me, shameful and laughing with a wet face.

## CONCLUSION

While many of these stories are told from different perspectives, all of them, I believe, are tightly bound. They are important in their exploration of hybridization *outside* of the United States, particularly during a time when nations and cultures were vehemently demarcated. In many ways, the current trend towards exploration of transnational literatures could benefit from a closer look at how hybridized individuals sought to identify themselves at a time when transnationalism was not welcome or even a widely considered notion.

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