



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

NOTICE

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

AVIS

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Canada

Yellow Sleeve Princess

Lucy Ng

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 1994

Copyright Lucy Ng, 1994



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

THE AUTHOR HAS GRANTED AN IRREVOCABLE NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENCE ALLOWING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA TO REPRODUCE, LOAN, DISTRIBUTE OR SELL COPIES OF HIS/HER THESIS BY ANY MEANS AND IN ANY FORM OR FORMAT, MAKING THIS THESIS AVAILABLE TO INTERESTED PERSONS.

L'AUTEUR A ACCORDE UNE LICENCE IRREVOCABLE ET NON EXCLUSIVE PERMETTANT A LA BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DU CANADA DE REPRODUIRE, PRETER, DISTRIBUER OU VENDRE DES COPIES DE SA THESE DE QUELQUE MANIERE ET SOUS QUELQUE FORME QUE CE SOIT POUR METTRE DES EXEMPLAIRES DE CETTE THESE A LA DISPOSITION DES PERSONNE INTERESSEES.

THE AUTHOR RETAINS OWNERSHIP OF THE COPYRIGHT IN HIS/HER THESIS. NEITHER THE THESIS NOR SUBSTANTIAL EXTRACTS FROM IT MAY BE PRINTED OR OTHERWISE REPRODUCED WITHOUT HIS/HER PERMISSION.

L'AUTEUR CONSERVE LA PROPRIETE DU DROIT D'AUTEUR QUI PROTEGE SA THESE. NI LA THESE NI DES EXTRAITS SUBSTANTIELS DE CELLE-CI NE DOIVENT ETRE IMPRIMES OU AUTREMENT REPRODUITS SANS SON AUTORISATION.

ISBN 0-315-97697-7

Canada

ABSTRACT

Yellow Sleeve Princess

Lucy Ng

Yellow Sleeve Princess is a collection of four linked short stories which focus on the life of Rose Wong, a Chinese-Canadian girl living in a working-class immigrant neighbourhood on the eastside of Vancouver in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Rose's growing up provides the narrative framework for the collection. The stories are all told from the first person point of view of the adult Rose, now in her mid-twenties, looking back on the people and events of her childhood that shaped her view of the world. The desire to reconcile the past with the present is a motif that runs throughout the collection. Each story is in some way an exploration of identity and the particular cultural inheritance of ethnicity, gender, or family history.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Yellow Sleeve Princess, 1

Nightingale, 24

Forgiveness, 44

Crossings, 72

Yellow Sleeve Princess

My mother always declared that she had come from a good family in China. She did not remember the family home--they had moved from the village to the city when she was very young--but she said that someone had once shown her a picture of it, and that it had a gently curving rooftop and a courtyard in the middle. At one time, long before my mother's birth, the Chans had been a banking family with extensive estates.

When she spoke of this past, I imagined a house with rooms and rooms furnished with rigid, lacquered, hardwood furniture, walls hung with silk. In the courtyard, I saw a pond filled with shimmery, gold-skinned carp. If I strained, I could hear the bright laughter of the servant girls in the summer, smell the faint perfume of peach blossom in the air.

Ever since I could remember, my mother kept a small, black and white photograph of herself on her bedroom dressing table. It was a picture taken of her, at age twenty, a few months before her marriage to my father. Even though she

was the sole subject, the photograph was an engagement picture of sorts, my mother explained to me, one that was sent to her future in-laws in Vancouver, my paternal grandparents, for inspection and approval.

The young woman in the picture had shoulder-length hair that curved softly around her face and a shy smile. Despite the girlish hesitancy of her expression, she looked out at the camera with bright, steady eyes. It was an image of my mother that I held close to my heart, one of her before the disappointment she felt at my father's death had extinguished the light in her eyes.

In the photograph, she was wearing an elegantly styled jacket with a short skirt and high-heeled pumps that showed off her slim ankles. The outfit was a new one, purchased with some of the money her father had given her for a trousseau. Their family did not have much money by that time, my mother said, but an elderly aunt had persuaded my maternal grandfather that the trousseau was an absolute necessity. An auspicious event such as a wedding came only once in a lifetime, the old woman said, and thus the occasion ought to be celebrated in a manner which reflected most favourably upon the family's honour and standing.

Last summer, at the last moment, I was invited to the wedding of an old high school friend. My mother offered to lend me something to wear since most of my clothes were still in my apartment in Toronto. When she brought the

jacket and skinned out from her battered brown suitcase with the rusting hinges, I recognized it immediately as the suit she had worn in that photograph of long ago. It was made of a fine, lightweight wool, a pale robin's egg blue with a band of cream around the lapels and sleeves of the jacket. The label on the inside said that it was designed and sewn by Regency Tailors, Kowloon, Hong Kong. The suit was impeccably cut and stitched, something I could picture the young Jacqueline Kennedy wearing, a costume fit for a modern-day princess.

I slipped on the jacket and buttoned it up. It was too tight for me under the arms. I managed to zip up the skirt, but then I couldn't button the waistband.

"How did you fit this, Ma?" I asked her suspiciously. "How much did you weigh when you married?"

"About seventy-five pounds, I think."

I groaned. "No wonder. I'm a good twenty pounds heavier than you were then."

"Well," my mother said, miffed. "I was only trying to help you. I don't know why you didn't bring more of your clothes home with you. How much longer do you expect to stay out there in Toronto? How many years does it take to do a master's degree, anyhow? It's costing a fortune in airfare and long distance phone calls."

I bit my lip. I considered reminding her that when I called her during the school term, we would only talk for

about five or ten minutes at a time. "I called to see how you are," I would say when she picked up the phone. "Good, what about you, are you eating regular meals? Do you have rice once in a while? How's school?" Then, after a bit, she would get flustered and say, "We should get off the phone soon. This must be costing you a fortune. You know the telephone company charges by the minute, Rose."

I would feel annoyed then, and get off the phone with a curt goodbye. Usually, afterwards, I would regret my hasty action. It was silly of me to let her anxiety about money get in the way of our conversation. I knew that she missed me. Every now and then I received care packages---Chinese sausages, dried mushrooms, almond cookies, even plums from the fruit tree in our back yard. I had learned, long ago, that in Chinese families, mothers and fathers gave candy and cookies instead of kisses and hugs.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I felt a little depressed that the suit did not fit me. It was a beautiful colour--perfect for the wedding. Yet, somehow it seemed appropriate--the past and the present never fitted together so neatly. I was always having to make revisions.

* * * * *

When I was young, I had difficulty connecting the pretty young woman in that photograph with the woman that I called my mother. The woman I knew never wore dresses, only

shapeless sweaters and polyester pants with elasticized waistbands plucked from the clearance tables of the Army and Navy Discount Department Store on East Hastings in Vancouver. Her hair was cut short and permed into frizzy curls; her hands rough and red from washing dishes and scrubbing down the counters at the restaurant where she worked at the corner of Pender and Main in Chinatown.

Sometimes I went to visit her at the Maple Leaf Cafe during recess at Chinese school. The air in the restaurant was always thick with steam and smoke. The smoke came from the grey and brown-suited old men who belonged to the benevolent societies in the surrounding buildings. They sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, calling out to each other across the room while the waitresses moved in and out of the clouds of smoke, plunking down fresh pots of tea, egg custard tarts and dishes of shrimp and pork dumplings.

My mother presided over the front counter with its row of red vinyl bar stools kept warm by a host of regulars. There was Mr. Chan, the balding morose barber from across the street, Mrs. Jung, the old woman who sold Chinese newspapers at the corner of Pender and Gore, two brisk lady social workers who walked over from Hastings Street, and a whole group of others, the youngish clerks from the banks and stores in the area.

She kept busy--pouring coffee, filling orders, wiping down the counters and the glass display case filled with

apple, Boston cream and lemon meringue pies, chocolate eclairs and parfait glasses filled with cubes of red Jello topped with whipped cream. Every hour or so, the red-faced owner, Mr. Lee, emerged from the kitchen with steaming trays of buns. Some of them were filled with minced barbecued pork, others with a mixture of pork, chicken, preserved duck egg, mushrooms and bamboo shoots. There were sweet buns, as well, filled with black lotus seed paste. It was my mother's job to transfer the buns from the trays to the gleaming metal drawers behind the counter to keep warm. The customers trooped in all day, ordering a dozen at a time. My mother filled the cardboard boxes, then tied them with red string. The customers had no idea, and she did nothing to suggest, that once she had been something else.

My mother's family left the village for the city of Canton when she was five or six. Then, a few years later, in the late fifties, they moved again. First to Macau and then Hong Kong. With the Communist "Liberation" it had become dangerous to be a member or a former member of the bourgeoisie. They had escaped with only a suitcase or two and my grandmother's marriage gold sewn inside the linings of the children's coats.

Over the years the jewellery was sold off piece by piece so that there was enough money for food and rent

during the times my grandfather was late in sending money home. He had gone to Lima, Peru, to work in a restaurant. My grandmother found a job sewing men's shirts in a textile factory on Kowloon Road. Even the children worked. My mother and her sister called on the clothing factories after school, asking for piece work, odds and ends. They went home loaded down with bundles of cloth coats. Late at night, after they had finished their school work, they stayed up and worked on the coats, snipping off stray threads and sewing on buttons. They were paid a few pennies for each bundle. Their brother had a job making deliveries for an herbalist and tea store owner. He was paid hardly anything at all, but sometimes the customers gave him tips. For amusement, my mother and her siblings made up stories, played cards and mah jong for melon seeds.

"Your grandmother wept after the last gold ring was sold," my mother said. "She said it was wrong to leave nothing for the children, to have no dowry for us when we married. Then she regretted that we had not brought more with us when we left. She said that we had left so many things behind."

"What did you leave behind?" I asked.

"Oh--I don't know. Some pieces of jade and ivory. A few pictures. Silk. Linens--embroidered sheets, pillowcases, quilt covers."

"What happened to them?"

My mother shrugged. "I suppose the house was looted after we left."

I did not like this story as much as the one about their escape from China. That one was full of intrigue, mystery, triumph. I was dismayed that my mother had given it all up so easily, trading precious rings of jade and ivory for a handful of melon seeds. I wanted to bury my face in the folds of those embroidered sheets, to trace my fingers over each sculpted flower petal, each bird feather. I wanted to lie beneath a quilt on which dragons danced.

Instead of battling in the waters of the Middle Kingdom the dragons of my imagination were harnessed to decorate the red pillars of the Dragon and Phoenix Food Store, or Yuen Fung Foods, in Chinatown. Pronounced in English, all the shop names were ugly monosyllables--Hing Loong, Sun Wah, Gum Fa. The clanging sounds of these words echoed in my ears, hard and sharp like the word "Chink."

I had only been called that name once before, when I got into a scuffle with a group of three girls on the way home from school. I had been walking with my head bent down because I was busy skimming the back of the new paperback which I had just borrowed from the school library. I did not pay much attention to the trio of girls smoking cigarettes and walking towards me with their black leather

purses slung over their thin arms. I was not sure if I actually bumped into them or not, but the next thing I knew I was lying on the sidewalk and they were punching me. "Watch where you're going you stupid Chink or next time you won't be so lucky." Their blows were not hard enough to really hurt me, but I felt stunned that I, with no effort at all, had moved them to such hatred.

Often, while waiting for my mother when she was shopping inside Yuen Fung, I would lean against the dragon pillars, my back pressed to the peeling gilt scales. I learned to be patient. My mother was not a careless shopper. She took her time sorting through the piles of snow peas for the youngest, most tender pods. She weighed each mud-covered preserved duck egg gently in the palm of her hand before putting it in the bag. She boasted that none of the butchers would dare parcel up a piece of meat for her that had too much fat or bone. They knew that she had sharp eyes.

Once, when I was leaning against these pillars, I saw one of my classmates walking towards me. Her name was Melanie Stewart. She sat two seats in front of me in our Grade Four class, but I had never really spoken to her before. I thought she was beautiful with her pale hair and freckles. In my opinion, the freckles looked like little flecks of gold dust against her white skin. She always wore lacy white blouses and jumpers or wool sweaters with pleated

skirts. Even her underwear matched--white cotton camisoles and panties with a pink rosebud motif. When I saw her changing during gym class, I felt doubly ashamed of my own underwear. I always sat on the bench of the girls' changing room, keeping my blouse or sweater on until I had pulled on my shorts. My underpants were cut and sewn from the rough printed cotton of fifty-pound rice bags. "Couldn't we just go out and buy some?" I pleaded, when my mother was bent over her sewing machine stitching them up. She only clicked her tongue and said, "Why waste perfectly good fabric? These will be fine. What difference will it make--who will see them? They are only worn on the inside."

The rice bag underwear did make a difference to me, but I did not know how to explain it to her without sounding frivolous, petty and ungrateful. As a young girl, my mother had survived civil war, food shortages, the death of a parent. How could I tell her that I could not bear the scratchy feeling of the rough cotton against my bare skin?

I darted behind the pillar and pretended not to see Melanie, but she had already seen me. She waved at me.

"Hi, Rose."

"Hi."

"What are you doing down here?"

I flushed and stared down at my sneakers. "My mother's shopping."

She scanned the entrance of the store as if to look for my mother. A clerk had just unpacked a crate of dried salt fish. "Dai kam ka, Dai kam ka, big reduction!" he shouted. Several women crowded around him, grabbing at the fish. My mother pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

"You can't see her," I said. "She's inside." I looked down and pulled at the drawstring of my jacket. I prayed fervently that my mother would not call me over to help with her packages when she went inside to pay for the fish.

"Oh!" Melanie seemed disappointed. "Well--this is my mother."

"Hello," I said.

Mrs. Stewart frowned. "What's all the commotion about? Why is everyone crowding in?" She wrinkled her nose distastefully.

"There's a big sale on salt fish."

Melanie made a face. "Yuck."

Mrs. Stewart tapped her daughter's arm, "Now, Melanie, don't make fun. Everyone has a different opinion about what tastes good."

"My mother and I came down here for lunch," Melanie said. "I just love wonton soup and egg rolls. It's a special treat for doing so well at my recital."

"Recital?"

"Yes--you know--for piano," she said a little impatiently. "I came in second overall in my group."

"Oh," I said. "That's wonderful."

I knew that Melanie took piano lessons. During choir practice, she turned the pages for the music teacher. I tried to focus on what Melanie was saying, but from the corner of my eye I saw my mother waving at me.

"Do you like wonton soup?"

"Mmm--yeah." I felt bewildered by this conversation. Melanie was saying more to me than she had said to me all of last year when I sat directly behind her.

"But I guess it's nothing special for you--you must have it all the time."

I didn't have a chance to answer.

"Mui-Gui, Mui-Gui!" My mother's voice was shrill with annoyance. "Didn't you see me waving at you? Take these while I go in to pay for the salt fish." She thrust several bags, crammed full with vegetables and canned goods, at my feet. A tin of straw mushrooms spilled out of the bag and Melanie made a little move forward, as if to catch it. I quickly shoved the offending tin back into the bag.

My mother glanced at Melanie. "Oh--ha-lo. Who are you? You friend of Rosie's?" she said brightly in English.

I winced. "Yes, we're in the same class at school."

My mother waved the salt fish like a baton in front of Mrs. Stewart. "Look at this--best quality fish. Not every day they have it at this price," she said. I wondered why she was telling this to Melanie's mother. I didn't think

that it was because she thought that Mrs. Stewart enjoyed salt fish.

"That's lovely. But we must be going," Mrs. Stewart said. "If you want you can invite your young friend over to our house some time, Melanie."

Melanie shrugged. "Sure. Do you want to come over tomorrow?"

I hesitated. I could tell from Melanie's peevish expression that she did not really want me to come. "I have Chinese classes after school."

"Well, then, what about Tuesday afternoon?" Mrs. Stewart offered.

"I have to go to Chinese school every day," I said.

"Surely--not every day?" Mrs. Stewart asked.

"No--no," my mother said. "Rosie only go Monday to Friday. I want her to get a good Chinese education. Not like her mother. I have to teach myself. She can get better job with two languages."

"Well, your mother certainly plans things well in advance," Mrs. Stewart said. She flashed me a brief smile. There was something else in her eyes too--pity perhaps. "I'm sorry you won't be able to visit with us, Rose."

She turned and took her daughter by the hand.

"Bye, Rose," Melanie said. "I'll see you at school."

"Don't walk so close to the stalls, Melanie, you'll make your dress smell," her mother admonished.

I lifted my hand to wave goodbye to them, but they had already disappeared into the throng of people moving down the street.

My mother frowned. "What did that woman say to me at the end?" she asked me in Cantonese. "She sounded as though she disapproved of me."

"Nothing much," I said.

"Tell me what she said, then."

I looked at my mother. She was doing her best to sound nonchalant, but I detected a note of uncertainty in her voice.

"She just said that you were a good mother to consider your daughter's future so far in advance."

"Really?" My mother's face brightened visibly. "Then she must understand how difficult it is to be a parent herself."

In English school my favourite stories were Grimm's fairy tales. In these stories the beautiful maidens were clothed in silks so fine that the fabric could be pulled through the circle of a gold ring or tucked into the curved hollow of a walnut shell. All the princesses had hair the golden colour of corn silk or of sunbeams. The only one who did not was Snow White, whose hair was as black as ebony. However, her skin was as white and pure as snow.

Whenever I looked at myself in the mirror I saw the stain of yellow on my skin. In Chinese school, we practised writing the word for yellow--wong. It was the same as my family name. As I drew the black ink in strokes across the white paper, I remembered thinking that I was yellow through and through. Yet, the word for yellow also sounded like the word for emperor or king. Yellow was the colour reserved for the emperor, the teacher told us. All his ceremonial robes and gowns were lined with yellow silk.

I once had a dream in which my mother was serving her customers at the Maple Leaf Cafe. Everything was the same as it usually was, except that my mother was wearing a delicate high-necked gown of rose coloured silk instead of her brown and white uniform. The customers did not seem to notice her changed appearance. I sat at the counter as well, but I did not notice either. It was only when she bent her wrist to pour tea for me that I saw the pale yellow lining of her sleeve.

* * * * *

It was the first day of my second term in Chinese school. During the break I went to visit my mother at the Maple Leaf Cafe.

"School okay?" my mother asked.

"Yes," I said.

"What characters did you learn today?" She always wanted to know what words I was learning. She was proud of her reading ability. She had never finished high school in China because her mother had died when she was young but somehow, over the years, she had acquired enough of a vocabulary to read Chinese novels and newspapers.

"Blue, sky, high, mountain, river, boat," I told her.

A balding man with a brown moustache came in and sat down two bar stools over. I knew he was a salesman because his black leather shoes were polished to a high shine. My mother always said that the shoes were a giveaway. "The regular, Annie," the man said to my mother. Annie was the name the white customers gave to her.

My mother went to the display case, took out the apple pie and cut a large wedge from it. She topped it with a dollop of whipped cream. She set the plate in front of the man with a fork and napkin.

"Here you go, George," she said. "Busy today?" The English words rolled off her tongue easily but to my ears they sounded artificial. She poured him a cup of coffee.

"Not bad. Got a nice commission from this older couple who are going to re-do their living room. Their kids just moved out. Premium aquamarine saxony."

I realized, then, that George was the carpet salesman from Woodward's Department Store my mother had told us

about. My mother always said that if we ever needed new carpet, we could go to him. He would give us a good deal.

"Oh? Sounds good," my mother said. I knew that she didn't know what colour aquamarine was. I took a napkin from the metal dispenser and wrote in Chinese: blue blue of water. It was a phrase from my reader.

"Here," I said, "aquamarine is the blue colour of water." I pushed the napkin in front of her. My mother pursed her lips and studied the characters.

"Hmm--you missed a stroke here," she said, pointing to the word "blue."

George leaned over to look too. "Don't you read English, Annie?"

"No," my mother said, "Too old."

He laughed. "You sure know how to add up a column of numbers. A real Jew under the skin, I'd say."

"Yes, sure," my mother said, although neither of us understood this comment.

* * * * *

That evening, after she had washed the dishes and I had finished drying them, my mother said that she wanted me to teach her how to read.

"Are you sure?" I asked her doubtfully. "I don't know if I can teach you."

"Why not?" my mother asked. "You always have your nose in books. It can't be that difficult a task. Or do you think your mother is too stupid to learn?"

I brought her the simplest book I had. It was an illustrated book of fairy tales I had bought for ten cents at the school bazaar a few years before.

I also brought a pencil and a sheet of paper. I printed out the alphabet neatly in upper and lower case letters. She knew the alphabet. When my mother first came to Canada, she had briefly attended language classes. Then I printed out a list of simple words. We practised sounding them out: cat, hat, fat, row, bow, flow, old, gold, hold. I made her repeat them again and again.

"Can we try the book?" my mother said finally.

"I think it's too hard for you," I said.

My mother shrugged. She began to flip through the pages slowly. She pointed to the first illustration in the book. "What is this story about?"

The picture showed a bed piled high with mattresses and a young girl lying on top of them. It was "The Princess and the Pea."

I told her the story in Chinese: "There is an old King and Queen who are searching for a royal bride for their son. One day a stranger arrives at the palace during a storm and asks to spend the night. She claims to be a princess. The

old Queen decides to find out whether or not she is a true princess by placing a pea beneath twenty mattresses."

My mother interrupted. "What kind of pea? A fresh one or a dried one? A fresh one would be flattened right away."

"I don't know--a dried one then, I guess." I felt a flash of annoyance. I continued. "In the morning when the young woman wakes up and is asked how she slept, she answers that she had a terrible night and that her body is bruised and sore. The King and Queen rejoice at her answer and begin to plan the wedding of the Princess and their son."

My mother was perplexed. "That was her reward for answering her hostess so rudely?"

"No--no," I said. "It was the pea. It was because she was sensitive enough to feel the pea through all those layers."

"But why did they put it there in the first place?"

"They wanted to know if she was a true princess or a false one. They were looking for a bride for the prince."

My mother frowned. "Why didn't they ask her to recite the court history, to solve a riddle, or to sing a song? That was the test--to detect a lump in the bed?"

"Her sensitivity revealed that she was a true princess," I insisted. "It was something inside her which distinguished her from the common people."

"Ah," my mother said. She did not sound at all convinced. "All those mattresses. What a waste. In China

we slept on boards mostly. So many mattresses. Crazy, don't you think?"

I thought I would laugh when she said that, yet somehow I did not want to.

"So crazy," she said again.

"I guess so." I mumbled the words.

"What?"

"I guess so," I said sullenly.

Several emotions seemed to flit across her face all at once--confusion, annoyance, hurt. She held my glance a moment longer and, then turned the page.

Much later, when I was in university, I told stories about my immigrant childhood over coffee in the student lounge of the English Faculty. Everyone talked that way, as if they wanted to disown everything, their whole history. It did not matter if their fathers and mothers were doctors or teachers or union people. I told stories about Chinatown, the Maple Leaf Cafe and the people--the characters--who ate there. It pleased me to know that I could survey my past in that way.

"But Chinatown's changing now. The new grocery stores are more like supermarkets nowadays with their parkades built over top, their shopping carts and scanners and vegetables pre-wrapped in plastic. My mother can't stand

those places," I said, afterwards. "She says that they wrap the vegetables in plastic so that they can hide the spotty leaves in the middle. Just another way to cheat the customer, she tells me."

I knew that I talked as if I mourned the old Chinatown unequivocally, even though I did not. When I came home from school in the summers to live with my mother, life did not seem so different. She barely acknowledged that I had grown up, even though I had already completed a Bachelor's Degree in English, and had lived on my own in Toronto for three years while working on my Master's.

Every summer I returned to the same job--shelving books at the Main Library on Burrard Street in downtown Vancouver. On the weekends, I went out with friends but on the weeknights I usually stayed at home. On these evenings, I often lounged around in my bedroom and read. Sometimes my mother would come in, unbidden, and attempt to tidy the mess of papers on my desk or to do my laundry.

"What a mess," she said one evening as she sorted through the crumpled clothes at the bottom of my closet. "If you don't have time to do your own laundry...at least bring it downstairs so that I can do it for you."

"No--leave it, " I told her. "I'll do it myself. Most of those things need to be hand-washed anyhow."

"Do it yourself? Sure! When?" she snorted. "You're so busy. Always coming and going. You come home for the summers and I hardly see anything of you."

"Don't worry, Mom," I said. "I manage to do my own laundry all the time in Toronto."

I realized, a moment too late, that I had given her the perfect cue to launch into an attack.

"Toronto...I don't know why you must go thousands of miles away for school when there's a perfectly good university on our doorstep. What is it you do at school? You study literature...you read books. Can't you do it just as well here? It would be different if you were studying something else. Winnie Lee is studying to be an optometrist. Her mother tells me that there are only two schools in Canada and so she has to leave home. That I can understand. Sometimes one has to make sacrifices. But what can I tell Mrs. Lee about my daughter? That she does not want to live with her family?"

"That's not true," I protested.

"Then tell me, what is it? Are you ashamed of your mother?"

Her question caught me off guard. I would never admit to being ashamed. Embarrassed, uncomfortable perhaps, but didn't most people feel that way about their parents?

"No, of course not."

"You're so educated, so refined. You think that you're too good for your own mother." There was a note of bitterness, of self-pity in her voice.

"I don't understand you. At home you have a mother to do your laundry and make nutritious soups for you and yet you insist on going away for school. You have no heart. If it weren't for all those soups I fed you when you were a girl, do you think you would have the mental strength, the fortitude to do so well in school? I know that you don't believe in such things now, but how could they not work when I had such good intentions."

"Yes, I know," I said, "I am grateful. I know that you have always tried your best for me."

My mother looked at me searchingly as if she wanted to believe me, but was not sure of my sincerity. I looked back at her with steady eyes. I knew that I meant what I said.

And yet I was aware of a sense of duplicity creeping over me, too. How could I tell her that I would have preferred pretty clothes and piano lessons to herbal soups that steadied the heart and mind? Would she tell me, scathingly, that I was foolish to want beautiful illusions instead of wisdom? In the end, I didn't have to say any more because my mother retreated from the room, appeased, for the moment, by my answer.

Nightingale

Every year on the anniversary of his death, as far back as I could remember, we visited our father's grave with offerings of flowers, meat and fruit.

We went to the cemetery early in the morning, before our mother went to work at the Maple Leaf Cafe and before we went to school. When we set off, the sky was violet and grey. Often it was drizzling. As we hurried along the quiet streets--our mother with her brown scarf wrapped around her head and her dark blue flowered umbrella lifted high, Jimmy and I with the hoods of our raincoats tied too tightly under our chins--we could still see the street lamps burning orange-white against the dark limbs of trees. After we had transferred buses and embarked on the twenty-minute ride across town along Forty-Ninth Avenue, we saw the landscape changing before our eyes. As we left behind the sleepy houses, the sky got brighter, and by the time we arrived at the cemetery across from the park, it was day and we could hear the sweet, sharp chirping of birds.

The cemetery grounds were usually deserted. As we walked, the heels of our shoes dug into the wet grass, displacing little clumps of soil in a trail behind us.

Jimmy and my mother walked on ahead, not noticing. I followed them with more tentative steps, weaving an intricate path between the memorial plaques. I did not want to offend the ghosts by walking on their graves. Finally, we stopped in front of one simply inscribed with a name and dates: Wong Kok-Lun 1940-66.

Our mother unwrapped the packages she had carried with her. On top of a large white plastic bag she carefully arranged three tiny porcelain cups and three pairs of chopsticks. The chopsticks were set vertically, pointing towards the grave--rather than in their usual horizontal position at our dinner table--signifying that the gods and spirits were being invited to partake in the feast.

She then laid out the offerings on several foil pie plates: a large slab of roast pork, some apples and oranges, the fresh egg sponge cake she had steamed at five o'clock in the morning when Jimmy and I were still blanketed by the fog of sleep and dreams.

She lit incense and poured rice wine into the cups. Then she stood behind us and showed us how to clasp our hands tightly together to pray and ask for our father's help during the following school year. We finished our prayers by pouring the wine from the cups onto the wet grass.

Afterwards, our mother brought out a small metal bucket. She crumpled a paper bag into it and threw in a match. We then took turns feeding the fire with pieces of

coloured paper printed with the words "Hell Bank Notes." It looked like real money, embossed in dark red and green inks. There were paper clothes too--a jacket, shirt and trousers, a hat, a pair of shoes and a long Chinese gown. We handled them gingerly, unfolding and smoothing out the creases before dropping them into the flames.

The smell of ash and incense always clung to my clothes afterwards, when the streets were busier and my mother left me at school. At recess, the other girls would frown and sniff the air. "Why do you smell so funny?" they asked sharply.

"I've been to visit my father's grave," I said. I never had to say any more than this. They would edge away respectfully. Once, one girl offered me a tissue. "Are you all right?" she asked. For some reason, I took the tissue even though I didn't have to cry. I did not think it was pain I felt, since I had never been given the chance to know him.

My father had died one week before I was born. It was an accident. A young man had had too much to drink and his car had run up onto the sidewalk where my father was walking. He had just left my grandmother's house and was on his way home. It was an accident, but my mother said that she would not have been much surprised if they had told her that he had had his nose buried in a newspaper or book and had strayed too close to the road. She had always known

that he was a dreamer, she said. I understood that my father had disappointed her. Her voice sometimes held the same flat note of regret and disapproval when she spoke about me.

I was born in 1966, the Year of the Fire Horse. When she was a young girl my mother heard that a woman born under this sign would bring disaster, fire and flood to the people around her. It was considered inauspicious to have a daughter born in this year as Fire Horse women were also reputed to be overly passionate and wilful--they made bad, even dangerous, daughters and wives. There were stories, my mother said, of women drowning their infant daughters or leaving them out in the wilderness to die of starvation and cold.

My birth came at a very dark time in her life. The labour was difficult and since I was premature, I was kept in an incubator for the first few days. There was no one with her, since my father had just died and she had quarreled bitterly with his parents.

For two days, she refused to see me in the nursery. She did not think of herself as a great believer in astrology, but she felt that I had brought trouble. Even though I was born afterwards, I was still touched by the stain of my father's death.

She felt her heart harden against me. It felt as though she had swallowed a plum pit, my mother said, and that it was lodged in her chest. Without a husband, she felt that she could not look after both Jimmy and me. She decided then that she was not going to keep me, and that she was going to write to her sister in Hong Kong to ask if she and her husband would bring me up as their own. Her sister had married a man of moderate wealth, a tailor who owned his own shop. They had a boy and a girl already, but were very fond of children.

Then, after she had made this decision, my mother came to see me for the first time. I was very strange-looking, she said. I had a very small, longish body and I was covered all over with very fine dark hair, like down. She thought I looked like one of the delicate, furred melons she had helped pick from grandmother's garden in China long ago. Though I was small, the nurse told her that I was healthy. The strength of my heartbeat when she held me against her cheek confirmed the woman's words.

"Suddenly I felt very ashamed for wanting to abandon you," my mother said. "You were a girl and had had so much against you, yet you had survived. In China, a female fire horse is a brand of misfortune but a male fire horse is not necessarily a bad thing. They say passion and intensity can lead to distinction and honour. Then I thought to myself, why should it be different for a woman? Why should we

always suffer this brand? I knew then that I wanted to keep you and bring you up and protect you."

I felt bewildered when my mother told this story. It was the closest she ever came to admitting that she cared about me. Since I was young, I had learned to look for little clues, signs of her affection for me. She never expressed her love for Jimmy or me openly; she never hugged or kissed us.

Once, when I was about four years old I climbed up and nearly fell out of the plum tree that grew by the cedar fence that bordered our property. My mother had turned her back to me while she was hanging up the laundry--bedsheets, shirts, towels--blowing like glorious white flags on the wind. I had made up my mind to tug one of these flags down so that I could play with it, and so, I clambered up the nearby fence and somehow I managed to pull myself up onto one of the lower limbs of the plum tree.

Pleased with myself, I called out to her. "A Ma-- Look at me!" I stretched my small arm out as far as I could, reaching for one of the shirts on the line.

My mother gave a startled cry and dropped the laundry basket she had been carrying. She rushed over, grasped my arms roughly and forcibly dragged me down from the tree. I protested and tried to squirm out of her arms, but she pulled me against her, squeezing me so tightly that I felt the breath catch in my throat. "Don't ever--ever--try that

again!" she said in a strained, shaking tone of voice that terrified me. In those moments, I was truly confused, not sure of whether the passionate response, that I had awakened in her, was due to love or hate.

On Sunday mornings my mother would often make dumplings and pastries for the Maple Leaf Cafe to earn extra money. I liked to watch her, and when I had the time, I helped her with some of the simple tasks.

One morning, when I came downstairs, I saw that she was making sticky rice parcels. My mother had already assembled most of the ingredients on the table. There were ceramic bowls filled with tiny yellow peas, sweet rice, small pieces of sausage and salt pork and the yolks of preserved duck eggs. My mother was at the sink, rinsing the dark green dried bamboo leaves that she used to wrap the sticky rice parcels.

"What do you need me to do?" I asked.

"Have you finished your school work yet?" my mother asked sternly. I nodded my head.

"All right--then you can peel the chestnuts for me, Mui-Gui."

I stuck my hands in the bowl filled with chestnuts and water. The shells had been removed already but the dark brown skin still clung to the meat. I peeled it away,

exposing the wrinkly grey surface of the nuts. My mother began to hum softly to herself.

I watched her plunge the bundles of bamboo leaves into the sink, rubbing them against each other vigourously. When she finished this, she scooped the leaves out the water, shaking them dry before she lay them in a tidy sheaf inside the large wicker basket she put beside the sink. She always performed tasks with the same deft movements, as if she were impelled by a sense of urgency and necessity.

She had always told me that she had fended for herself from a very young age. My maternal grandmother had died when my mother was only thirteen years old. Since her father was working outside the country, my mother had no choice but to take responsibility for her younger brothers and sisters. After all those years of drudgery, I wondered if she had expected--had hoped--to be looked after, finally, when she married my father. I wondered, too, if she ever cared for him, before her disappointment set in.

"Tell me about Father," I pleaded. "You never say very much about him. What was he like?"

"What is there to tell?" my mother asked. She brought the basket of leaves to the table. I shifted the bowls over to make room for them. "He was a young man when he died."

She took two leaves and folded them so that they formed a half-pouch in her left palm. Then she quickly filled it with a generous scoop of rice and peas, a piece of dark

orange egg yolk, several pieces of meat, a sprinkling of dried shrimp, and finally a few chestnuts. I watched her fold the upper edge of the first leaf down and then, with another leaf and with some twine, she secured the whole package with a few twists of her wrist.

"Did you like him?" I asked. I was afraid to say "love." In Chinese school we had learned the ideograph for "love." It incorporated the characters for "heart" and "breath." To love someone was to breathe into his or her heart, to give him or her life. My mother was so strong, so capable, I could not quite picture her engaged in such a delicate task.

"I liked him well enough. We were formally introduced by an older cousin of mine who knew his mother. From the very first, I saw that he was a gentle, honest man." My mother laughed. "If anything, he was perhaps too honest. When he asked me to marry him, he said, I should tell you-- I'm not a rich man. I only have my job at the Canton Palace restaurant and my parents and I live in a small house. I don't know what I can promise you for the future."

My mother paused and rearranged the bowls on table. "How could I have known that he was telling me the truth? I only thought, He is a person with a good heart and he works in a big restaurant. At least we will never starve."

I laughed aloud. "You thought that?"

My mother shrugged. "It seems silly to you but life was like that. You just don't know what it is to be hungry," she said fiercely. She sighed. "But I was right about your father--he was too soft, too sensitive. Always running back and forth between his mother and me. He could never stand up to her. Even after we decided to move out on our own, he couldn't tell her. I had to do it."

She pressed her lips together, as if remembering the scene. "Your father had no kuat-hay, no bone in his breath, no courage."

I felt as though I wanted to defend him but I didn't know how to begin. "But was a good man, though," I said. "He cared about us, didn't he?"

My mother turned to me. Her eyes were bright with scorn. "What kind of man brings children into the world and then lets go of life so easily?"

I bent my head and pretended to stir the bowl of peas in front of me. I knew that if I answered her I would only betray my own weakness.

I knew that my mother did not lack bone in her breath. She was tireless. She was up every morning long before we awoke, packing our lunches, doing laundry, ironing. At night after Jim and I had gone upstairs to bed, I heard her quick, deliberate steps on the hardwood floor as she moved

from room to room, putting things away, sweeping. She did not miss anything--a cough, a sigh, a loose coat button.

It was our health that most concerned her. She was always boiling ginseng and other bitter broths for us to drink. When Jim got eyeglasses for the first time, she made us both drink a tonic she brewed from a packet of dried seeds and roots that she had bought from an herbalist in Chinatown.

We called these concoctions "poison soup" and when her back was turned, we poured the broth down the drain. She caught us doing this once. "You are such ungrateful children," she snapped. "Not everyone has the money to buy these herbs. Don't you know how lucky you are?"

With the exception of his eyesight, Jim was very healthy. I, however, despite my lusty heartbeat during early infancy, was susceptible to all sorts of minor ailments--rashes, stomach aches, colds.

I could never hide my illness from her. At the first muffled cough or snuffle, she would pounce. "You've got a cold, haven't you? You must have gone to sleep with your hair wet again." Then, she would say in an aggrieved tone, "Don't you ever listen to me, Rose? You must have a weakness in your chest. A bit of your father in you. He had a delicate constitution too."

I knew that she did not mean it kindly. My mother only admired the strong, not the weak. The stories from her

girlhood were always stories of triumph over adversity.

"Whatever will I do with you?" she would exclaim as she sent me upstairs. Once she had me in bed, she would rub Vicks VapoRub onto my throat, chest and back, the dry skin of her hands scraping not unpleasantly against my skin. She would finish with a few quick swipes of the ointment under my nose and behind my ears and then she would cover me with a pile of blankets. I lay there, submitting to her rough, disdainful ministrations, flushed with shame, but also with a kind of sullen pride because I had dared to be unlike her.

There was one story my mother told about my father that I remember most vividly. It was about how they had so little money when they first moved out into a separate house of their own, away from his parents. They only had enough money to buy a bed and a small kitchen table to begin with, but they agreed that my father would purchase the chairs when he received his next pay cheque.

Thus, on the Saturday after the next pay day, my father went out to buy some chairs. Yet, when he came home he was carrying a picture instead of chairs. "I thought you would rather have something pretty to look at on the wall of our new home," he said. "We can buy the chairs later."

"If he were a child," my mother said, "I would have slapped him. What good was a picture? We could not eat it

or sit on it or sleep on it. How could he buy such a thing when we still had his parents to look after as well?"

Sometimes I dreamed that my father had not died but had simply run away from all the duties and obligations that weighed so heavily upon him. He was a prisoner, like the nightingale of Andersen's fairy tale, who had been taken from his forest home to sing for the Emperor. The nightingale was permitted to fly, but he could not be free because they had tied a silken cord around one of his legs. Constrained to sing at the Emperor's beckoning, the nightingale dreamed of escape. Yet, all the lords and ladies of the court were mystified by the bird's melancholy air since they believed that he could have no greater desire than to serve the Emperor.

When I was in Grade Seven my teacher was Mrs. Medina, the art teacher. From the beginning, our classroom seemed a world of its own. Located in the basement of the building, it was spacious and comfortably secluded from the rest of the school. The only drawback was that the room was occasionally drafty and cool. Also, when we looked out of the classroom windows we had a strange, sloping half-view of the asphalt parking lot.

"Look outside," Mrs. Medina commanded on the first day of school. "What can we see from this view? Shoes and legs

without bodies, right?" There were nervous giggles all around the room.

"Right," Mrs. Medina said firmly. "It's a view that we don't normally have access to, so it's startling, fresh, even funny. It makes us pay attention." She paused. "That is what art should do, too."

"Today, I want you to draw the flowers on my desk. Not just what they look like but what they are. Show me their essence and don't be afraid to show what is in your own heart."

"She's nutty," the boy behind me muttered. A few other people giggled and shuffled their books and papers. But I was fascinated by her words. I picked up my pencil and began to draw. I felt as though I wanted to learn everything she could teach me.

I loved everything about that classroom--the precious pots and tubes of paint labeled mysteriously "azure," "canary," "vermillion," the rich, smoky smell of India ink and the sticky soft pastels that stained my fingers brilliant colours. There were drawers and drawers full of art supplies: paint trays, brushes, scissors, delicately translucent tracing paper, crinkled crepe, shiny panes of neon cellophane and stiff blocks of coloured construction paper.

In our house, there were very few bright colours. The walls were painted a muted eggshell colour. The sofa and

chairs were covered with a grey and brown speckled tweed; the carpet was a flat, hard-wearing wheat brown, chosen, my mother said, "because it hides stains and will last forever." Long ago, she had lost her youthful interest in beautiful, useless things.

Mrs. Medina also encouraged us to draw and paint in our free time, after we had finished our regular assignments and during recess and lunch. I began a picture of my father in pastels. I drew a man with a thin face and a shock of black hair. He was leaning against a fence.

One day, Mrs. Medina stopped by my desk. "That's a very good portrait. Who is it?"

I hesitated ever so slightly. "It's my father."

"Yes?" She picked the picture and studied it for a moment. "I think you may have gone a little heavy with the black for his eyes, though. It makes him look very sad."

"He is sad," I said.

"Why is that?" She slipped behind the empty desk beside mine and sat down.

"You see, he's a prisoner," I said. I was not quite sure why I said this, but the statement seemed truthful enough. I plunged on. "He's a political prisoner in China." I didn't really know what a political prisoner was, but I sensed that the phrase carried with it a certain amount of weight.

Mrs. Medina frowned and bit her lip. "Why is he being imprisoned?"

"I don't know." I paused and took a breath. "He's a poet and an artist. Maybe it's because they don't understand his work. It's like you told us. They try to look into the heart of it but they don't know how to, so they think it's bad."

I thought of my mother when I said this. I had decided that even though she prided herself on being clear-eyed about so many things, she had been completely blind to my father's virtues.

"The separation must be very difficult for your family," Mrs. Medina said. She stood up. "I hope the government releases your father soon."

"Yes," I said. "We've been waiting for a long time. We want to be together."

Over the next few months, I drew several other pictures of my father using charcoal, watercolour and crayon. I showed him riding a bicycle, watering flowers in a garden, writing a letter home. I could draw figures quite well technically, but I still had some difficulty with faces. No matter how I tried, my father's face in the pictures never looked the same. Perhaps it was because I had never seen a really good photograph of my father. We only had a small faded passport picture at our house. There was a picture of him in my grandparents' house, but no matter how long I

stared up at it, I could not recall the details of his face once I was at home sitting in front of my desk.

Mrs. Medina continued to ask about my father. I told her that he had been in prison ever since I could remember. Perhaps seven or eight years. He spent his time composing poems which he memorized, because he hoped to recite them to us after he was released from prison. He knew that anything he wrote might be incriminating, I said. Sometimes, Mrs. Medina looked at me searchingly and I wondered if I had confused some of the details, but then she never questioned what I said.

Three months into the school year, Mrs. Medina passed out notices requesting parent-teacher meetings. For the first time, I realized that my stories might catch up with me. I felt giddy, nervous, and a little exhilarated by my deception.

"I don't know if my mother can come," I told Mrs. Medina. She usually works late."

"That's all right, Rose. I can arrange for her to have the last appointment. I'm quite anxious to meet her."

"Her English is not so good," I said.

"That's doesn't matter. I'm sure we will be able to understand one another. Just bring the notice home and tell your mother to come in."

That evening, after we had finished dinner, I handed the slip of paper to my mother. My mother glanced at the notice.

"What does it say?"

"The teacher wants to have a meeting with you."

"Is something wrong at school?" she asked sharply.

"No," I said. "She just wants to show you what we've been doing in our class. All the parents go."

The next evening, I helped her get her coat and scarf as she left for school. I gave her the directions to my classroom. For a while, I tried to do my homework but then I gave up and wandered around the house aimlessly. Finally, I sat down at the top of the stairs and waited for her to come home. Before long, I heard her click of her shoes on the front steps and the scratching of the key as she turned the lock. The door opened.

"Rose, where are you?" she called. There was an edge to her voice.

I paused. I heard a rustling sound as she slipped off her coat and hung it in the closet. There was a bang as she slammed the door shut. I raced down the stairs.

"A Ma," I said. "What is it?"

She turned upon me, her eyes flashing.

"I have never been so embarrassed in my life. How could you lie about him like that? Did you think that your mother's English is so bad that she wouldn't be able to

understand anything the teacher said? She thought I was crazy when I told her that you didn't have a father."

"I do have a father," I said.

"Yes," my mother glared at me. "I saw all the pictures you drew of him. A whole drawer full of them."

"Is that a crime?" I asked in a trembling voice. "I just want to keep his memory alive. You do the same thing when you take us to the cemetery." In truth, I did not feel that it was quite the same thing. My mother visited his grave out of duty, because she felt obliged to.

"No, it is not. But lying and pretending that he is alive is wrong. It is an injustice to your mother! What has he ever done for you? Did he ever feed you, or clothe you, or care for you when you were sick? All these years I've tried to be both mother and father to you. And this is how you thank me!"

I looked in her eyes and saw, for the first time, mixed in with her anger, her fierce, stinging love for me. I was frightened, but I felt that my soul was satisfied. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

"You're a crazy ungrateful girl," she shouted.

"Yes," I whispered.

My mother was quiet. "I'm going upstairs," she said. I watched her leave. She did not climb the stairs at her usual quick pace. She looked tired. I heard her bedroom door close with a soft click.

I waited a moment and then I followed her. I paused by her closed door before I went to my own room, but she did not call out for me.

Forgiveness

When she was not visiting her husband in the hospital, my grandmother retreated to her garden. It did not matter that it was already late November. The rain did not deter her-- she wrapped a woollen scarf around her head and wore gloves, grey knit ones with holes where the fingertips should have been. In the summer, the garden had been crowded with raised beds of leafy bunches of Chinese greens, with pea vines, bean stalks, scallions, melons and squash. Now, in the sobering cool of autumn, there were only untidy mounds of brown earth crowned with dead leaves, twigs and vegetable peelings. The garden looked forlorn, empty.

In the hospital, my grandmother passed out plastic bags of chewy fruit candies and longnan, brown-shelled dragon eyes. She pressed me to take a piece of fruit.

"You must have something sweet," she whispered, "it's not good to visit a place like this."

I did not protest. I knew that from her point of view, a hospital was almost as inauspicious a place to visit as a funeral home or cemetery. How many times had I heard my

mother say, "I pity that family's ignorance. Who in his right mind would buy a new house at the bottom of the hill facing a cemetery? The feng-shui is extremely bad."

I plucked off a longnan and peeled it. The fruit smelled sweet, fragrant. There was another smell in the room, the cloying pine scent of disinfectant that did not completely mask the stale odour of urine. I clenched the pieces of brown shell in my hand. I didn't see a wastepaper basket anywhere in the room and I didn't want to ask. I slipped the bits of shell into the pocket of my jacket. The soft flesh of the fruit felt cool on my tongue. It was syrupy sweet, overripe.

"Ah Gung," I said. "How do you feel?"

"Not too bad."

He struggled to sit up. The pale green hospital gown that he was wearing gaped a little, exposing his pale wrinkled back. I bent my head down and focused on the shiny, waxed tiles of the floor. It felt strange to see him like this. I was used to seeing him in three-piece tobacco-brown or grey suits with matching dress shoes. He had always taken pains with his appearance. It made no difference if he were staying home or meeting his mah jong cronies in town, he always dressed in the same manner. He had always cherished certain routines--buying a newspaper every day, going to the barber shop the first Monday of each month.

"Have you been eating?" my grandmother asked. "I made you some congee. It will calm your stomach down. I just made it this morning. Your favourite kind--with sliced pork and thousand year egg." She set the thermos down and produced a ceramic soup bowl and spoon from the plastic bag. She began spooning congee in the bowl.

"I don't want any," my grandfather said.

"Just have a little. A taste," she wheedled.

"No."

"Che seen--you're crazy," my grandmother spat, "It's good. Why don't you just try a little? You'll starve yourself if you don't eat. Look at you--you're just a bag of bones."

"I don't want any, " he repeated. He sounded tired. He slid down further on the bed and turned his face away.

Jim put his hand on my grandmother's arm. "Perhaps we should go. He needs his rest."

"But if he doesn't eat, how will he get better?"

Jim shrugged.

"The doctor said that he would have difficulty eating and keeping his food down. We have to expect that. Come on, I'll drive you home."

It had all begun with his refusing to eat my grandmother's

cooking. My grandfather would eat a few mouthfuls of rice, a few pieces of meat and vegetables and then push his bowl away.

"I can't eat this," he'd complain. "It's spoiled, sour. It will make my stomach churn around." At other times, he'd raise his voice and say accusingly, "The vegetables from your garden are past their prime. You waited too long to pick them."

"Crazy old man," my grandmother would retort. "Living in Canada all these years has made you soft. Why--the children and I ate much worse in China and were grateful."

"China? China? Why do you always talk about China? It's been more than twenty years since you left," he would say then.

It was I who told her the news. The doctor had asked me to tell them. His Chinese was only competent, he apologized. I wanted to tell him that mine was not so good either; but he was right, perhaps I could let my grandmother know more gently, more tactfully. I was fourteen years old at that time and I felt too young to bear the weight and finality of those words. I wished my brother Jim was there to tell them but that particular day, he had been in a hurry and had dropped us off at the doctor's office on his way to work. He had a part-time job bagging groceries at a local supermarket after school.

Grandfather has a growth in his stomach, I told her. The doctor says that it is spreading. I didn't know the proper word for cancer, but I had heard my mother refer to it. That poor family, she would say in a hushed voice to one of her women friends, the mother died a year ago. It was that "filthy stuff" growing in her body. No one ever named the disease--it was too terrible to say aloud.

Ever since I was young I understood that there had been a terrible falling out between my mother and my paternal grandparents. That rift resulted in seven years of silence, the first seven years of my life. Some time after my seventh birthday, we, Jimmy and I, began to visit them regularly. However, although she permitted us to visit our grandparents every other Sunday afternoon, my mother never accompanied us inside the house or even to the front door.

It was from her example that I learned to subdue desire in the name of duty. Despite all the bitterness that had raged between them after my father's death, my mother said, she could not deny them the right to know their own flesh and blood.

I remember the first time my mother brought us to the broken front gate of their house. It was a tall, narrow Victorian style house with peeling grey paint and a picket

fence that badly needed mending. It was located on Princess Street on the outskirts of Chinatown.

My mother simply said that we were going for a visit that day, but I sensed that we were visiting someone important because she laid out a dress for me to wear and my new shoes, a pair of black patent Mary Janes. I knew she was distracted because she didn't answer any of my questions on the bus ride there, but she said a few things to Jimmy in a low voice. I didn't know what they were talking about.

I didn't know exactly when she told me that we were going to visit our grandparents, our father's parents. Perhaps it was when we disembarked two blocks away; perhaps it was not until we had almost reached the front gate of the house. I was not really paying attention to what my mother was saying--it was raining steadily and my eyes were focussed on the wet pavement, the puddles of water and the pale worms that wriggled alongside. I didn't want to dirty my new shoes by stepping on any worms. I suppose that I didn't really understand, at first, exactly who we were visiting because our mother had often instructed us to address Chinese elders in that way--"Pah-Pah" for the women and "Gung-Gung" for the men.

"You must remember," my mother said, "to say dah-jeh when your grandmother gives you a cookie or some other snack, m'quai when she pours tea or does some other service for you. I don't want her to think that I'm not bringing

you up properly." Her tone was sharp, accusatory, as if she had just discovered we had broken something.

"I will come back for you at four o'clock," she said. "I'll be waiting for you at the gate." She pulled me towards her, tightened the strings of my rain hood and then gave me a little push. I took a step forward, then stopped and tipped my head back to look up at her.

"Aren't you coming with us?" I asked anxiously.

"No."

"Come on, Rose. They're waiting for us and it's too wet out to stay out here." Jimmy moved purposefully towards the staircase.

As I followed Jimmy up the creaky front stairs of the house, I noticed gaps where the wood had rotted and long brown weeds pushed through. I felt worried that one of my shoes would slip off and fall in between. When we got to the top of the stairs, I turned to look back at my mother. She nodded sharply at me. It was raining harder now. A car sped by and I heard the swishing of water beneath its wheels. My mother's face looked wet.

The door opened and there was an old woman standing there with short curly grey hair and broad face. "Come in, come in," she said in Chinese. "It's so wet outside--you must take off your shoes." We slipped off our shoes and left them on top of several sheets of old newspaper she had

laid out on the floor of the hallway. When I breathed in, I could smell the sweet smoky scent of joss sticks.

The small foyer was crowded with plants--a tangle of green and white striped spider, brown-edged ferns, the delicate white blossoms of a dwarf orange tree. In one corner, there was a large jade plant that resembled a shrivelled miniature forest. We heard a rustling sound, the sound of a newspaper being pushed aside and in the next moment, an old man stepped forward. He was taller and thinner than the woman. He wore a dark brown suit with a grey woollen vest inside. In the gloomy half-darkness of the hallway, it looked as though he was frowning.

I edged closer to my brother, but Jimmy moved away from me. "Ah Kung, Ah Pah," he mumbled. He nudged me. "Ah Kung, Ah Pah," I repeated, the last syllable trailing off into a whisper.

"How polite you are, Kok-Wing, " my grandmother said, "just like your father. Your little sister is a bit shy though, isn't she? Now, come into the living room so that I can see you better."

We followed her into the next room. It was furnished with a sofa and armchair covered loosely with threadbare green and gold throws and a small television set. In one corner of the room there was a dark brown bookcase in which there were two shrines. The one on the uppermost shelf centred around a sepia-toned photograph of a frail-looking

bald-headed man. The second picture was of a much younger man with short, neatly clipped hair and a rather earnest expression in his eyes. I recognized, after a moment, that it was a photograph of our father.

"Do you remember your grandmother?" she asked Jimmy. "You used to live with us when you were a little boy, when your father was still alive."

"Yes," Jimmy mumbled. "I think so."

"Have you eaten?" she asked. "We have some fresh egg custard tarts that your grandfather bought in Chinatown this morning. You'll like those." She paused. "But you'll need slippers before you come into the kitchen with me. The floor is too cold. I bought you some slippers last week when I heard that you were coming for a visit. Now, where did I put them?" She rushed to one corner of the room and began to rummage around. After a moment, she brought out a small package wrapped in plastic and tied with a scrap of red fabric. "Here we are!"

"Don't fuss so much," my grandfather barked irritably. "They just got here. They aren't leaving right away."

I don't remember exactly what we did for the rest of that first visit. Grandfather tried to engage Jimmy in a conversation about school, what subjects he was interested in, what he wanted to study when he finished high school. At that time, he was ten years old and he had yet to start high school. After a while, my grandfather went back to

reading his newspaper. Jimmy slumped down on the sofa and turned on the television set. There was an episode of The Brady Bunch on. I tiptoed around the room, obediently following my grandmother around.

"This is a photograph of your aunts in China," she said, pointing to small framed snapshot on the bookcase.

"You should visit them when you are old enough. They were very good to your father. They used take turns carrying him around on their backs while I did the housework and such. They thought it was great fun indulging him. Yes, you must go see them when you grow up. We should not forget family even if they live far away."

I nodded. I wished that I could slip away from her to join Jimmy on the sofa, but I was afraid of appearing rude. I did not want to fail my mother by behaving badly. In the meantime, Jimmy had turned the volume up as if to drown out our grandmother's voice. The Brady parents were having a talk with one of the boys who was having trouble at school. They were firm, supportive and unrelentingly cheerful. How I envied them! I wondered how it was possible that these two families had blended together so seamlessly. They were so voluble, so genial in their interactions with one another--they would never have to suffer awkward silences. Nothing would be left unspoken--anger, resentment, love.

* * * * *

It was not until later that I learned that it was my grandfather's idea that we come for a visit. He had called my mother up one day and suggested it. Even though she had not spoken to him for almost seven years, she did not consider turning down his request. She thought that the timing of it had something to do with Jimmy getting his name in the community newspaper because he had come in first in his class at Chinese school. Her father-in-law was a very proud man, she told me. He had been a school teacher in China a long time ago. He would have seen the announcement in the paper as a sign that his intellectual talent was being passed down through the generations. He and our grandmother had had high hopes for our father too, my mother said.

I had noticed, too, that our grandfather liked to quiz Jimmy about what he had learned in school. I remember listening to his gruff, smoke-roughened voice as he dictated passages from Jimmy's reader. My brother would scowl, but comply sullenly, scratching out the characters on the back pages of old calenders my grandmother had saved.

Although he rarely called on me to perform, I was petrified of him. As I printed out each character labouriously, I was uncomfortably aware of his eyes following my progress on the page, and I would become even more confused--confused about the proper order of the strokes, the directions of the hooks and slants, the correct

number of dots and dashes to put in--and then I would have to start all over again.

I wondered if our grandfather had drilled our father in the same way when he was a boy. My mother said that he had told her that he hardly knew his father at all until, at the age of sixteen, he and his mother came to live with his father in Vancouver. It was the first time that Grandfather and Grandmother Wong and my father lived together as a family.

Before that, Grandfather Wong had lived by himself in Vancouver. He had left his village in China, shortly after his marriage to my grandmother, to find work. He journeyed to Canada and got a job with the railway company--first as a dishwasher, and later, as a cook. He sent money home and when he was able to, he visited his family. They did not join him in Canada for a long time. First, there were government restrictions and later, when they were eased somewhat, he said that he wanted to wait until he could afford to purchase a house for them to live in. By the time he was ready for his family to join him, the two eldest, my Aunties Ming and Ling were already married and that left only my grandmother and my father. My mother said that she always thought my grandmother felt bitter about being left behind for so many years. "When I lived with them, she always questioned him closely when he came home after visiting with friends. She knew that he liked to play mah

jong in the clubs and benevolent associations in Chinatown. I think that she was suspicious that he had frittered away their passage money to Canada at the gaming tables a few times before he actually arranged to have them come over."

They had great expectations for my father, my mother said. He had been a brilliant student in school in China, particularly in the field of mathematics. By the time the teacher had finished copying out the equation on the blackboard, he would already have arrived at the answer.

His dream in life was to be an engineer or a mathematics teacher. When he got to Canada, however, things were not as straightforward as they seemed. "It was very difficult for him to learn a second language at the age of sixteen," my mother said. "It was his dream to attend university, but first he had to get his high school equivalency diploma by taking night classes. He was a dedicated, conscientious student and he was making good progress with his English until your grandfather got laid off from his job at the railway. In order to help support his family, your father quit school and took a job at the Canton Palace. Then later, we got married and started a family. After that there were too many obligations for him to consider going back to school full-time. Yet, your father never complained about having to make that sacrifice for his family. It was not in his nature."

* * * * *

Over the years I became very familiar with my grandparents' home--the kitchen table cluttered with old newspapers, half-filled ashtrays, pens and ink-stained letters from China in pale blue air mail envelopes, the pink and yellow plastic carnations that adorned the window sill by the kitchen sink. I knew that they kept a bucket of rice in the broom closet in the kitchen, and if I were to lift the lid, the room would be permeated with the scent of salt fish and wind-dried duck.

My grandmother despised having to throw things out, and so, the kitchen drawers were crammed full of bent twist ties, wrinkled plastic bags, bits of string and partially melted stubs of candles. Likewise, the cupboards were filled with grease-stained cardboard pastry boxes, battered foil pie plates and glass jars that had once contained pickled ginger, hoisin sauce and fermented bean curd. She had never forgotten the lessons she had learned in wartime China, the wisdom of frugality.

It was a house weighed down by the past, occupied by the ghost of my father and the shadowy presences of the aunts who had been left behind in China. I knew without being told that there were lessons to be learned here--save money, get a good education, honour your elders.

Yet, when we visited, it was our grandparents who wanted to please us. They bribed us with food--savory buns filled with barbecued pork or curried beef, sweet ones

filled with lemon jelly or a buttery sweet coconut paste. Every time we visited, they had a new treat for us--spicy fried peas, shrimp chips, sweet beef jerky, fiery bits of dried preserved ginger that stained our fingers orange-red.

"Do you like it?" my grandfather would ask, gruffly. "If you do, I'll go out and buy some more for the next time you visit." They never said any more than this, but it was enough. We understood, as children often do, that we only had to ask to have our heart's desire.

"Don't complain if you get stomach aches and blisters in your mouth," my mother sniffed when we told her what we had eaten. "I would have thought that they knew better than to stuff you with greasy snacks all the time."

There was a garden behind the house and it was my grandmother's pride and joy. Soon after she came to Canada, she began growing vegetables in the back yard to sell to the greengrocers in Chinatown. In late autumn and winter, the beans and seeds were spread out to dry in cardboard flats near all the radiators in the house. In early spring, the young plants nestled furtive in green plastic pots along the window sill, on top of the kitchen counter and table, even on the floor alongside the walls. If the kitchen was warm enough, the moisture from the rows and rows of tiny plants left a layer of condensation on the windows. On this

canvas, I traced my name out in flowing script: Rose Mui Gui Wong.

In the summertime, the garden came into its glory--tightly packed with plots of mustard greens, dark green stemmed gai lan and creamy white-stemmed bok choy. At the outer edges of the garden, delicate snow pea vines laced themselves around the wooden stakes she had driven into the ground--row upon row of neat crisscrosses. Later when the season for snow peas had passed, the vines were torn out and as if by magic a thick curtain of long furred green beans sprang up.

"Why do you put those long sticks in the ground?" I asked her once. "Won't they hurt the plants?"

"The pea vines need the support of the stakes." She bent down next to me and showed me the young plant. It was about a foot and a half above the ground. "See how it bends this way and that--without direction. Just as children need the guidance of their parents to teach them right from wrong, the plants rely on the strength of the wood to support them so that they can grow higher and higher."

She also liked to talk about the garden that she had had in China. It had been the family's salvation during difficult times. That garden was nothing more than a narrow strip of land behind the house, she said. The soil was not good, but she had persisted and had managed to coax a few straggly bunches of greens from the earth. She had enjoyed

more success with root vegetables. "Sometimes in the evenings, I would take your father out into the back to play. When the neighbours weren't watching I would quickly dig up a few stubs of taro root and stuff them into the pockets of my pants. I was terrified of inciting the jealousy of our neighbours--people were ruthless then. They would loot and steal. I had to be cunning to provide for my family, especially since your grandfather was not around to help."

When I first met my grandfather, he was no longer working. For a time, he had held a job in the kitchen of the Canton Palace but he had been forced to quit because his fingers had become too stiff and arthritic to make noodles, wontons and spring rolls. Before that, he had worked as a cook for the railway company, but was let go after he got into an altercation with his supervisor. My grandfather had accidentally burned a whole pot of fresh soup and in the heat of the moment the supervisor screamed at him--you stupid Chinaman! The supervisor refused to apologize and, when my grandfather insisted on a retraction, the supervisor fired him.

My grandfather spent much of his time in the cafes and clubs in Chinatown, drinking tea and socializing. He also belonged to an amateur opera club. He usually directed the

shows. The club mounted two productions a year and occasionally, when they were short of performers, my grandfather sang as well.

One time, my grandmother invited us to attend a show with her. It was held in the gymnasium of an elementary school which had been rented out for the weekend. My grandfather, clad in white makeup, winged black brows and a green silk brocade gown, was playing the role of the matriarch of a large, wealthy family. He tottered delicately onto the stage in time to the clash of cymbals and drums. His big scene was the one in which the old woman was cursing her daughter-in-law for failing to provide the family with a male heir. What a sullen and lazy female she was! Hadn't they clothed her, sheltered her, fed her the very best from their table? His thin voice twined itself around the notes deftly.

"But what has she done?" I asked. "Why is everyone so angry with her?"

"Ai ya," my grandmother said. "Don't you listen?"

I knew the circumstances surrounding my father's death. I had run the story through my mind so many times. My parents had been invited to dinner at the old house that night because it was Chinese New Year's Eve. They had decided my father would go, but that my mother would stay at home with

Jimmy because they were both recovering from colds. My mother was also eight months pregnant at the time.

I tried to imagine the scene at the house that night. I knew that my grandmother would have had the table set with good things to eat: golden brown dumplings filled with lotus seed paste, roast chicken and pork, perhaps a rich stew of pigs feet, black moss and dried oysters. Earlier that day, she would have burned incense and made offerings to the gods so that they might assure the family good health and prosperity throughout the coming year. She would also have pasted red paper emblems by all the doorways in the house, so that all who walked through would be granted safe passage.

It was likely that he had only just sat down to eat when my mother called him. The baby was coming, she said. She needed him at home right away. After he put down the phone, he left immediately, overhastily, leaving untouched the glass of tea my grandmother had poured for him, the plate of dumplings, even the little red envelope, his lai see, his New Year's grace. My grandmother saw the envelope lying on the table when she returned to the kitchen after seeing him to the door. She felt her heart contract. She picked it up and ran outside, but she could not see him anywhere in the darkened street.

I decided that this was the reason that the front gate had never been repaired. Perhaps that was his last promise

to my grandmother--that he would be back to fix it. He might even have struggled with it as he was leaving, but he was in such good spirits that he had joked with her, saying that, if the baby came quickly enough, he would be back to mend it in time for the New Year.

Even afterwards, when she knew he was dead, she found herself standing by the window the next evening, and the next--looking for him, waiting for him, her only son, to walk out of the darkness.

I was not born that night or the next day. The pangs that my mother had felt were only false labour, but my father never knew this because, on Chinese New Year's Eve in 1966, a car ran up onto the sidewalk hitting and killing him.

They blamed her for his death, my mother said. If she hadn't schemed to take their son away, he would still be alive, they said. If she had not called him away so hastily, he would not have forgotten the little red envelope that would have protected him from harm. It was just an unfortunate accident, my mother told me, a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She said this to me defiantly as if she expected me to disagree with her, but her voice faltered slightly at the end. Even after all the years, she was still not quite sure what to think of it all.

"I don't know why it came as such a surprise to me that they blamed me for his death. They were very bitter when we moved out. We tried to explain to them that we wanted Jimmy and the new baby, that was you, to grow up away from Chinatown. It was fine for them, or me, or even your father to stay behind--we didn't speak any English--what did it matter? But for you, the young, it would make a world of difference. Is it not true? With English, you can be anything you want in Canada--a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher.

"But the truth was that they were unhappy with me even before we made this decision. Your grandmother was a very difficult woman to live with. In China, there used to be a custom whereby a bride curses her future in-laws for three days before the wedding. You see, in our culture, the older woman has all the power and the wife has to fight for what respect and honour she can get. I did not expect to win her affection easily, but I was willing to try. Yet, nothing I did met with her approval.

"When I came to Canada to live with your father and his parents, I already knew how to cook and clean, how to keep a nice home. You see, I was the eldest girl in my family and my mother had taught me well before she died. I knew how to be thrifty in my cooking. I would poach a chicken and then use the broth for soup. If I bought a fish, I prepared two meals--I would serve the fillets the first night and, the next, we would have the head and tail braised with bean

curd. But she had many complaints--the rice was too hard, the vegetables too soft.

"The funeral took place four days after his death. Some people say that a pregnant woman should not visit such places because the unborn child will see the faces of ghosts and be disturbed. I was afraid for you, but I felt that I should go. I remember the air in the chapel was thick and sweet with the scent of flowers. It made me feel dizzy. There were so many flowers there: wreaths of yellow and white chrysanthemums, red gladiolus, pink and white carnations. There were red banners hanging from them too, with messages and the names of the people paying their respect to your father. I did not even know that he was acquainted with so many people. But of course--he was friends with everyone in Chinatown.

"He looked so young lying there in that beautiful wooden box, as if he were resting and at any moment he would wake up. He was my husband, so I knew what he looked like when he was sleeping. I could not really believe that he was dead.

"After the service, I went to speak to your grandmother. I felt very tired and I was frightened about having the baby alone, without my husband's support. You see, I had no other family here in Canada. But she refused to speak to me. She looked right past me when I greeted her. Not a word...and all those people there. As I was

walking away, I heard her speaking to one of those old busybodies, one of her friends. She must have known that I could hear what she was saying. She was speaking loud enough. She told this woman that I had been the ruin of her son. I had made him restless and discontented with my desires, my new ideas. Only a disobedient, ungrateful, unfilial son and daughter-in-law would leave the family home to live on their own, she said.

"I felt the blood rush to my cheeks and a hot shame sear my heart. How could she say those things about her son? About me? I should have defended myself then, but I didn't. I was a coward. I ran away. I shouldn't have let her tear away my pride, my face. My mother always told me, you must guard your reputation, your honour, because you are a woman and that is all you have. But that day, I decided that no matter how difficult it got, I would never go back to live with them."

"Why do you let us visit them now?" I asked.

"Why?" My mother shrugged. "They are your grandparents. I cannot take that away from them."

"The doctor says that he doesn't have much longer. A few months--perhaps a little more or a little less," Jim said to our mother one day. He asked everyone to call him Jim at that time. He was in his final year of high school by then,

and he was conducting himself very seriously. "He said that we should notify all the relatives. I talked to Grandma and told her to write to our aunts in China."

"Yes, of course," my mother said.

"Are you planning to see him?" he asked.

"Me? Did he ask for me?" There was an edge in her voice, a note of feigned surprise. "Or did your grandmother ask that I come?"

Jimmy shrugged. "They didn't say anything to me. I just thought you might want to."

"I wouldn't want to force my presence upon them."

"I think Grandma would like to ask you, but perhaps she's afraid to," I offered.

"Why?" my mother asked. "I brought you to visit them when they asked me. I am not one to hold grudges."

"Then why don't you come with us?"

My mother turned away. "Don't you know? I am the woman who killed their son. Seeing me would only bring back bad memories. But what is the use in talking about these things? We cannot change the past." She got up and walked out of the room.

"Grandmother got into an argument with one of the nurses today," I said to my mother one evening. It was almost two weeks after Jim and I had last broached the topic of our

grandfather's illness. I was washing the dishes after dinner and my mother was sorting through a large pile of clean laundry that needed to be ironed.

"How is that?" She didn't look up from her task.

"She wanted to post red banners with scripture on the walls and around his bed but the nurse wouldn't let her. They said that it wouldn't be fair to the other patients in the room. They might be offended, she said. Jim tried to explain to her that the messages were harmless, that they were simply prayers to the gods asking for protection. The nurse got annoyed. She said that since no one else could read Chinese, for all they knew, the old woman might be trying to put a hex on the rest of them."

My mother laughed. After a moment though, she sobered.

"How is your grandmother doing?"

"Not so well." I shrugged. "She doesn't say much now. She doesn't nag him or prod him to eat any more. She just walks around with this frightened look in her eyes. I think it's because she is afraid of being alone."

My mother's hands paused for a moment in mid-air. She was lifting out one of her uniforms from the laundry basket. Her hands fluttered and she let the piece of clothing drop on top of the ironing board.

"She's such a strong woman. Why should she be afraid of being alone? For so many years, she raised three children on her own in China."

"But she's lived with him for the past twenty years. That counts for something. Who would she talk to, argue with?" I asked.

My mother smoothed out the fabric with her hand and began to iron the smock, pressing down on each area firmly. She didn't say anything for a long time.

"Don't worry--he'll get better," she offered finally. She tweaked the white collar of the smock and pushed it aside. "It will be all right."

Suddenly, inexplicably, after weeks of pleading, my mother offered to come with us to the hospital. I came down to breakfast one morning and found a bunch of bright yellow chrysanthemums lying on the table.

"What are these for?" I asked.

"I thought I would visit your grandfather in the hospital today. You and Jim are planning to see him later, aren't you?"

I wanted to ask her why she had changed her mind, but I was worried that her mood was too fragile and that she would change her mind again if I pressed her for an explanation.

Although he was groggy from the morphine, my grandfather seemed to know who she was. He even called her by her name, Mei-Lan. He did not ask why she had come or what had taken her so long. He was drifting in and out of

consciousness now, and he could barely speak. But it seemed to me that he was less troubled after she came to visit him, his breathing softer and more regular.

Later, when he began his slide towards death and my grandmother fussed and fretted by his bedside, my mother was sympathetic but calm.

"Hush," she said, "It is better this way, better for him to leave the suffering of this world behind."

It was a mystery to me how things could be all right suddenly, after all the years of bitter silence. Yet, at around the same time, I was discovering in my friendships the way it was--how ugly and awful things might be said in the heat of the moment and later, how it was possible, if one really wanted to, to push them aside, to pretend and then believe that nothing bad had happened. It was surprising to me that the process of reconciliation could begin with something as simple as a smile or the offer to walk home together.

"What good is it to speak bitterness?" my mother said, shaking her head, as the three of us walked back to the car. "He is an old man and she is an old woman."

"Respect and honour are the privileges of the old. They are earned with great sacrifice," my mother said. Jimmy made a low sound in his throat as if he agreed with her. I said nothing.

She stopped suddenly and turned to face me just before we reached the car. Her eyes looked hard and glittery and her lips trembled a little. "You too, Rose. I hope you don't forget your mother when you grow up," she whispered fiercely.

Crossings

In the fall of 1979, I started high school. It was significant, I decided, that high school was located just on the other side of Victoria Drive. When I was a child I always felt that the ragtag streets of my own neighbourhood, the tiny section of east Vancouver which I had come to know as intimately as the lines on the palm of my hand, was bounded by Victoria Drive to the east and Knight Street to the west.

Within those eight blocks or so, I had staked out all the landmarks--Wing's Grocery, the small, white church with the pointed steeple at the end of my block, the tiny park with the swings and merry-go-round three blocks south of my home. I knew which houses on my street belonged to Chinese families, or Italian ones, because I had peered into their lush gardens--crammed with bok choy and gai lan, or thick with spinach and tomato plants.

It had never been necessary to cross Victoria Drive before. But now, each morning, I negotiated my way across that busy thoroughfare, where the trucks roared on their way up the hill, spraying dust and grit into my eyes. The very

first time I walked through this boundary, I felt as though I were crossing a threshold, venturing out into the unknown.

That year, in October, when the leaves on the trees had turned yellow, orange and red, the all too rare splashes of colour in a landscape that was already overcast and grey, two other significant events occurred: I got my period and my first best friend.

I thought afterwards that both had caught my mother off-guard. When I pulled her aside and told her about the blood on my underpants, she left the room without saying a word. She returned a moment later and handed me a box of sanitary napkins. I had seen it in the bathroom before, pushed in the back of the cupboard ignominiously, behind the rolls of toilet paper. The cardboard box gave off a harsh, soapy smell, like laundry detergent.

"Here..." she said sharply. "You should also wash your underwear right away or it will stain."

My mother sat down on my bed beside me and smoothed the pink floral cotton coverlet with her hand.

"Don't forget to bring an extra napkin with you when you go to school."

"Yes, Ma."

"Mui-Gui," my mother said suddenly, "you are in high school now, and soon there will be boys who want to be your friend. If a boy asks you to go somewhere alone with him, you should refuse."

"Why?" I asked.

"Don't ask me why. Just trust your mother."

"But what if it is for school?" I asked. "What if we are doing a class project together?" It was not as though I expected the circumstance to arise, since I was shy and had hardly spoken a word to the boys in my classes.

"No," my mother said, "and never, under any circumstances, go to a stranger's house for a party. Anything could happen--you are so slight and small, it would not take much to overpower you. Sometimes, they don't even use force, they simply put something in the food and drink and you become too weak to fight them off."

"What are you talking about?"

My mother gave a loud sigh. "I knew that you wouldn't believe me. It's true--every day I read the newspaper about how they prey on young girls--by drugging them. How else do you think those women who walk all day on Hastings Street got in the situation they are in?" She glared at me.

I knew the women she was referring to. Sometimes, when my brother Jimmy and I went shopping with her at the discount stores at one end of the strip of East Hastings Street called Skid Row, we saw them limping around in their high heels and their thigh-high skirts. With their long unkempt hair, pale faces and heavy makeup, the women managed to look both young and old at the same time. I was baffled by my mother's stern admonitions. It was as if the entry of

the monthly "Visitor" in my life, as my mother called it, connected me intimately and irrevocably with these lost women.

My best friend Elsie had got her first period a month earlier, at the beginning of our Grade Eight year. For once, she said, her sisters had been extraordinarily kind and solicitous, bringing her hot water bottles and sour lemon candies. Elsie was the youngest of the five girls in her family. Thus, her elder sisters sometimes treated her as if she were their baby.

Elsie and I walked home from school together every day, even though we lived in different directions. Sometimes, I walked her part way down the hill on Victoria Drive before I retraced my steps up to 22nd Avenue to go home. At other times, it was she who took the detour--walking with me to my house before continuing down along 18th Avenue to the grocery store that her family owned. Even after we had decided to part ways, we would find ourselves standing on the corner of the street, shifting our heavy school bags, first over one shoulder and then the other, as we talked on. We often got so caught up in our conversation that we simply sat down on the curb to talk, oblivious to all around us--the passing cars, the curious glances of people who walked by. Even though our life experience was limited--neither

she nor I had gone out with a boy, or had a first kiss, or even taken a ride on an airplane--the scope of our conversation was unlimited. There was nothing to distract us from the purity of our longing and desire. The intimacy and understanding we craved, we found in one another. On more than one occasion, when we said our final goodbyes, I felt a sense of wonder and shock when I realized that it was twilight already--the street lamps had sparked to life and the sky was a rich inky purple hue.

Elsie's parents owned a grocery store across from John Hendry Park on 19th Avenue and Victoria Drive. Sometimes Elsie and I went for a walk at the park before we stopped inside the grocery store for a snack. We had to conduct our "juicy" conversations outside because her older sisters were all terribly nosy and interfering, Elsie said. That was the problem with being the youngest in the family.

In addition to a children's playground with its swings, its weathered wooden teeter totters, and monkey bars, John Hendry Park had tennis courts and a recreation centre with an ice rink. There was a lake in the middle of the park, surrounded by ancient weeping willows. I thought that the willows resembled a circle of old women with their heads bent together in mourning--their hair, wispy grey and golden fronds trailing and dipping into the murky surface of the

water. We tried not to walk too close to the edge of the lake. The water gave off a foul smell, and the grounds were soggy, turgid, choked with long brown weeds.

Elsie said that the lake was called Trout Lake, but she had never actually seen anyone catch a fish there. Once, however, an elderly man who was taking his dog for a walk discovered a dead woman in the lake, lying face down with her long brown hair tangled among the lily pads. Elsie said that she knew this because a policeman had come by the store to ask her parents if they had noticed anything suspicious. It was the kind of gruesome discovery which gave credence to my mother's ominous warnings about young girls being led astray, and which gave me pause for thought after I left Elsie and walked home alone.

The red and white Coca-Cola sign shaped liked a bottle cap above the store front said "Kenny's Grocery," but Elsie said that her father's name was Gordon. The man who had owned the store before them was called Tommy. The hand-painted sign in the store's grimy front window advertised fresh fruit, vegetables, milk, bread, cigarettes and confectionery. At one time, when Linda and Margaret were still in elementary school, Mr. Louie said, he used to do a big fancy display of fresh fruit and vegetables--piling up the shiny Red Delicious apples and Sunkist navel oranges so that they formed colourful pyramids on the shelf. But now he only put out a dozen or so apples and oranges, a few

bunches of spotty bananas, and two or three cello bags of carrots and celery at a time.

"Too much competition from the big supermarkets," he said, shaking his head. People only came in to buy the items that they had forgotten to pick up on their big shopping trips--a half pound of butter, a bag of icing sugar, a single bulb of garlic. Still, Mr. Louie remained optimistic. He kept a wide stock of items--everything from Kitty Litter to Pepto-Bismal and bobby pins.

The store's busiest periods were after school and on weekends. In the winter, people came in to buy hot coffee and newspapers while they waited for their kids to finish their skating lessons and hockey practices. In the summer when the park was full of picnickers and children playing ball and frisbee, they sold ice cream and soda pop. Later, the children brought in the empty pop bottles for credit. They would stand in front of the candy counter mulling over their choices--fruit-flavoured Mojos, toffee and chocolate caramels, Double Bubble chewing gum, marshmallow strawberries and bananas, long twists of red and black liquorice. I sympathized with their dilemma. Mr. and Mrs. Louie always let the girls pick an afternoon snack from the grocery store shelves when they came home from school. When I accompanied Elsie home, I was offered the same privilege.

"You hungry, Rose? Help yourself to a little something. It will be a while before you go home for dinner," Mr. Louie would say genially.

Elsie would nod or nudge my arm. "Go ahead. It's all right."

Then, she and I walked around the store making our choices. I peered through the plastic bubble top of the ice cream freezer and contemplated the Popsicles, Drumsticks and Fudgesicles. I fingered the bags of potato chips, the silver foil-wrapped discs of chocolate Ding Dongs and clear plastic pouches of golden yellow Twinkies.

When we had finally made our choices from the vast selection of goodies, we settled down in one corner of the store, usually at the back near the staircase. We sat on plastic milk crates, dangling our feet, as we flipped through magazines and comic books--nibbling, sipping, savouring.

Linda and Margaret, the eldest sisters, rarely worked for their parents now. They were university students and had part-time jobs of their own. That left Lily, Ellen and Elsie. Elsie grumbled that the other two were terribly bossy and had the habit of leaving her the dirty jobs--sorting soda pop bottles and stocking shelves.

It was very much a family business--even the grandmother had her role to play. It was her responsibility to stand by the door and keep her eyes peeled for shoplifters. The joke among the sisters was that the grandmother's eyesight was so bad that she had once mistaken a picture, which Ellen had taken, of a rosy, pink-skinned pig at the summer fair for a photograph of their baby boy cousin Charles. "It's true. Grandmother's eyes are terrible," Elsie's mother said. She told me that she had once caught an old man trying to leave the store with a boiled ham stuffed down the front of his trousers. The sisters laughed aloud as their mother recounted the story, pulling at the waistband and the front of her trousers to demonstrate. I stared at the sisters' bright eyes and animated faces, entranced by their easy camaraderie.

The family lived in an apartment above the store. There were three bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen with a dining area and a single bathroom. Elsie shared the largest bedroom with Lily, Ellen and their grandmother. It was furnished with two sets of bunk beds. Lily and Ellen shared one set, while Elsie had the bed above her grandmother. Lily was in Grade Twelve and Ellen in Grade Eleven. At that time, they were the best of friends.

The dusty pink walls on Lily and Ellen's side of the room were plastered with posters of their favourite stars--Leif Garrett, Shaun Cassidy, Andy Gibb--which they had

surreptitiously removed from the centrefolds of the unsold copies of Tiger Beat and Teen Beat before they were returned to the magazine company for credit. The heartthrobs were all boyishly handsome with long wavy hair and shirts unbuttoned at the neck to expose their tanned chests. Mr. Louie said the pictures were scandalous and insisted that they take them down. The girls always said that they would, but never did. I admired their audacity and wished that I had the courage to stand up to my mother that way.

As the second largest bedroom had been claimed by the parents, Linda and Margaret shared the smallest bedroom. They also shared a cherry-red Volkswagen Rabbit which they drove to school. Both attended the University of British Columbia on the west side of Vancouver.

Linda was studying to be a nurse. Like all the sisters she was petite, but she liked to wear high heels which she paired with skirts and dresses. Elsie said she could always tell what time Linda came in from her dates because of the clicking of her heels when she climbed the stairs. Linda was sharp-tongued, pert and professional. As the eldest, she had grown up with the expectation that everyone around her would automatically defer to her opinion. "You aren't going to do that, are you?" she would say habitually, with a toss of her permed curls. "I wouldn't advise it." The other girls called her "the Queen Bee."

Margaret, the second sister, was a calm, collected personality. It was she who usually settled the disagreements between the sisters. Elsie said Margaret was the sister she had felt the closest to, but that was before Jason came along. He was Margaret's first boyfriend. Elsie rolled her eyes back mockingly as she said this.

The previous summer, Linda and Margaret had embarked on a re-decorating project and had repainted the original eggshell-coloured walls a soft lilac colour. They had bought new bedspreads--burgundy with tiny white sprays of flowers and ruffles across the bottom. As well, the girls had purchased a new dark oak dressing table which they placed along the wall beside the window that overlooked the bustle of 19th Avenue. All along the top of the dressing table, they had arranged tiny glass bottles filled with eau de toilette and cologne--Chantilly, Windsong, Emeraude.

When Linda was feeling indulgent, she invited the younger sisters and me into their bedroom. She curled our bangs with her curling iron and braided our hair while Margaret painted our nails in delicious colours--"seashell pink," "misty mauve," and "coral sunset." Linda even complimented me once, "You have lovely hair, Rose. It's so thick and shiny." For days afterward, every time I looked in the mirror, I recalled her off-hand comment and smiled.

I commiserated with Elsie whenever she complained about her sisters. However, I secretly thought that she was very

proud of them--their beauty, poise and intelligence. She did not mind basking in the glow of their reflected glory. If I had been offered the chance, I would have traded places with Elsie in a moment.

My own house always felt unbearably quiet after I came home from Elsie's. Jim rarely came out to greet me because he was usually barricaded in his bedroom doing his homework. He was in Grade Eleven now, and he was taking algebra, chemistry, physics and biology. He was hoping to get into engineering or medicine when he got to university. His earnestness depressed me, but my mother was gratified by his ambition.

"My son is going to be a professional when he finishes school. He's not going to be sweating over a grill or gutting fish in a cannery like us old-timers," she boasted to her girlfriends at the Maple Leaf Cafe. "He's going to wear a suit and tie to work and he's going to smell sweet as a flower." She was exasperated by my apparent lack of direction. "I know you have a good head on your shoulders, Rose. You just spend too much time on daydreaming. Don't let yourself get distracted by fun and boys. There'll be time enough for that when you've finished your studies."

On most evenings, my mother did not come home until six-thirty, so we did not eat until seven-thirty. I tried staying at Elsie's place until the last possible moment, until her grandmother set the table for dinner and asked if

I wanted to join them. I was tempted to stay, but I did not want Elsie's sisters to think that there was something wrong with my family, that there was a reason why I did not want to go home. Occasionally, Mr. Lee let my mother leave work a little earlier, so she would already be in the kitchen cooking dinner by the time I got home. My entrance rarely escaped her scrutiny.

"How come you're so late, Rose?" she demanded, one evening.

"Elsie and I were doing our homework together," I said, hoping that the ginger, garlic and black bean smell of the food cooking in the wok drowned out the scent of cologne that lingered on my skin. "We just lost track of the time," I said sullenly.

"Really?" My mother continued stirring the meat and vegetables vigourously around in the wok. "Are you telling the truth?" A few drops of oil splattered up and landed on her right forearm. My mother rubbed at her arm impatiently. I stared at the tiny pale pink marks the hot oil left on her skin.

I shrugged. "You can phone Elsie's parents and ask them if you want."

"Are you wearing lipstick, Mui-Gui?"

"No," I said quickly. "Of course not." Before leaving Elsie's house, I had spent ten minutes in her washroom scrubbing my face. I was sure that I had not left any trace

of makeup on my cheeks and lips. My mother was just trying to catch me out. Nevertheless, I surreptitiously put a finger up to my lips and rubbed.

"I don't know what to do about you, Mui-Gui. Ever since you've started high school, you've been evasive, secretive. You don't talk to your mother. You never want to stay at home. You are like a bird who's sprouted wings. You want to fly away as fast as you can. You are still young. You should be spending more time with your own family."

"A Ma," I protested. "It's boring to stay at home all the time. What difference does it make anyhow? You're always at work," I muttered. "I don't want to be like you, to have so few pleasures in my life." I did not wait to hear my mother's inevitably aggrieved response. I snatched my schoolbag from the kitchen table and raced upstairs.

Margaret was in the third year of her education program. She had met her boyfriend Jason in one of her classes. He was planning to be a gym teacher. He was tall and thin and wore silver-rimmed glasses. Elsie said that he did not look strong or muscular enough to be in physical education.

Jason was teaching Margaret to play tennis. On the weekends, she would return home, her face shiny and pink, wisps of hair slipping out from her ponytail. Jason would

have his arm thrown loosely around her shoulders. One afternoon, I saw that his white t-shirt was damp and stuck to the front of his chest. Margaret was standing in front of him, resting her head against his chest and the weight of her body against his, not noticing or not minding. Elsie and I were sitting on the sofa in the living room. We were only about five feet away from them. When I breathed in, I thought I could detect, mixed in the faintly salty smell of his sweat, the scent of his cologne--hints of fresh cedar and spice. My cheeks suddenly felt flushed and prickly with heat--I felt shocked, even a little dismayed by their easy intimacy.

"Don't you know how to play yet, Margaret?" Elsie asked petulantly that day.

Margaret laughed. "Well, it takes more than a few games to learn how to play tennis well." She turned and gave Jason an affectionate tap on the arm. Her eyes, and her lips curved up into a half-smile, half-laugh. I felt a flash of jealousy. "I'm not very good, but I do manage to return the ball once in a while."

Elsie turned to Jason. "Does that mean you're not a very good teacher?"

He grinned. "I guess you could see it that way."

I began to have daydreams with Jason in them. Usually, he and I would bump into one another inadvertently as we were leaving the grocery store. He would apologize and I

would say, blushing, that I was all right, no harm was done. He would look around him then and say, it's getting dark out now, I should walk you home. It isn't safe for a girl. It was the sort of thing that my mother would have said, but from his lips, the words sounded sweet instead of brusque and forbidding.

We walked for a while not saying anything at all, and then when we reached the block where my house was, he said, you know, you're very pretty. I've been watching you. I would confess then that I had noticed him too. He told me that he had done his best to suppress his feelings for me because he did not want to hurt Margaret. I felt the tears prick at my eyes then, and a small, hard lump form at the back of my throat. It was all right, I whispered, I don't want to hurt her either.

Jason bent his head then and pressed his lips very softly and gently against mine, as if he wanted to give me a first and last kiss. At the very last moment, I weakened, my lips parted and I returned his kiss.

Sometimes, when no one was looking, Elsie spirited down a copy of Penthouse for us to peruse at our leisure behind the covers of a tamer magazine such as Seventeen. On the upper shelves of the grocery's magazine rack, tucked in behind the stolid seriousness of Time and Macleans, and wholesome,

heart-warming covers of Chatelaine and Good Housekeeping, were the girlie magazines--Playboy, Penthouse, Hustler and other more lurid titles. Thus, hidden in behind an issue of Good Housekeeping, whose cover proclaimed "Our Best Thanksgiving Issue Ever!" above a photograph of a huge golden brown bird garnished with wedges of orange squash and sugar coated cranberries, was D-Cups, subtitled "the magazine of mammoth mammaries." We were intrigued by the magazine's name and once, when Elsie's father was at the counter with his back turned to us, we slid the magazine out to have a quick look at it. That particular month, the cover featured a pair of enormous creamy white breasts squeezed into a tight pink lace push-up bra. Unattached to a head and body, the breasts took on a surreal, slightly menacing quality.

In the mornings when I took my shower before school, I often paused in front of the mirror to study my naked body. I trailed my fingers over the softly rounded swellings of my breasts and buttocks. I sucked my breath in to see if I could make my waist small enough so that my hands could span it. I wet my lips and practised seductive, inviting smiles, as if I were posing for a magazine. Inevitably, I would be interrupted by a sharp rap on the door--Jimmy demanding to know when I would be out of the bathroom.

Elsie and I giggled and laughed aloud as we studied the pictures in the magazines. The women's nude bodies were

always contorted in uncomfortable, improbable positions, so that a wayward breast or buttock flopped out, exposed. Sometimes, the women were photographed with props, such as a Stetson hat and boots, or a black leather motorcycle jacket and chains. I thought the addition of these articles made the scenes even more incongruous and silly. Despite this, I could not help feeling a little flutter of excitement when I looked at these pictures.

Sometimes when we laughed too loudly, Elsie's mother would look up from what she was doing and frown. But usually she was too preoccupied to notice. In any case, I didn't think that she suspected us of doing anything wicked or immoral. I knew that if my mother saw these pictures she would tell me that women had been drugged or beaten, or humiliated in some terrible, unspeakable way.

One evening, when we were sitting at the back of the store, we witnessed something else that we weren't supposed to see. Margaret had come down to say goodbye to Jason. They lingered at the foot of the stairs, talking in soft voices.

"Promise you'll phone me when you get home," she said.

"Okay," he said. I felt a shiver run through me. To my ears, the tone of his voice was exquisitely tender. I turned my head slightly to look at Elsie. She was making faces at me.

"I can't wait to hear from you. I miss you already."

"I know." Jason's voice sounded strained.

He leaned forward suddenly and embraced her. From where we were sitting crouched beneath the staircase, her face was hidden from us, enveloped in darkness. We could only see Jason's back and his shoulders. The single light bulb that lit the stairwell cast a soft, warm, yellow glow on his black hair and the tanned nape of his neck. He was holding her, running his hands up and down her bare arms, over and over again, as if he were trying to commit to memory the subtle curves of her shoulders and elbows, the fine texture of her skin.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he loosened his hold on her. She took a half step forward and buried her head in his chest. She was breathing heavily but she did not say a word.

After Jason had left and Margaret had gone upstairs, Elsie turned to me. "Wasn't that gross? I think he put his tongue in her mouth."

"It was, wasn't it?" I said tentatively. I did not want to disagree with her.

Later that afternoon, just before dinner, Elsie and I gathered in Linda's room to play cards. We were playing "Hearts" and Elsie was losing badly. She dropped out of the final two games.

"Hey girls," she said suddenly. "Do you want to know what Margaret looks like when she's mooning over her precious Jason?"

She thrust her face towards me suddenly, fluttered her eyelashes, and tipped her head back. "I can't wait to hear from you. I miss you already," she whispered breathily.

"Elsie!" Margaret's cheeks were bright red, her eyes looked glittery. It looked as though someone had slapped her very hard across the face.

Linda and Ellen burst out laughing. Lily merely looked confused. They did not know how accurately Elsie had mimicked Margaret, but I did. In my mind, I saw Margaret's boldly rapturous face once again--her eyes closed, mouth opened stupidly. I felt humiliated for her.

"How could you do that to her?" I asked when everyone else had left the room. "It was so cruel."

"Don't be so superior, Rose," she snapped. "I'm not the one with the crush on her boyfriend."

I flushed. "What do you mean?"

Elsie shrugged. "I've seen the way you look at him."

"That's not true," I said vehemently. "You had better not tell anyone that."

"And if I do?" Elsie taunted me.

"I'll never forgive you!"

* * * * *

My mother came upstairs to my bedroom to see why I wasn't coming down to dinner. "Elsie's not my friend any more," I sobbed. "You needn't worry about me going over to her house any more."

My mother was silent. She walked over to my desk, pulled two tissues from the box and handed them to me.

I blew my nose loudly into the tissue. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"You need not worry Mui-Gui. She would be a fool to give up such a loyal friend as you," my mother said scornfully. "Just see, in a day or two, she will meet you for lunch and it will be as if nothing happened."

For the first time in a long while, I was grateful that my mother saw things so simply, in black and white. I saw that she struggled, was struggling now, to say the right things, to offer comfort. More often than not, the words tumbled out of her mouth like rough, unpolished stones, bruising my soul. But this time, I felt revived and restored by her brusque assertions. I discovered three days later, that she knew Elsie better than I did. Then I understood, for the first time, exactly how well she knew my heart.