
MELODY S. GEE

Back Home

It would have been rude to ask my mother what she was thinking as I followed her down Nathan Road. One's true thoughts, she had always told me, do not come out right if asked to be revealed. I imagined her thoughts getting tangled and caught like twine on her tongue when answering questions, but unspooling in a straight line of truth if I just remained silent and waited for her to speak. I never could keep track of when her words were coming out right and when they were not. I never paid enough attention to who was the first to speak.

I had been watching my mother as I walked behind her through the packed streets of Kowloon's open air market, past stands of vegetables and unrefrigerated meats, tanks of squirming turtles and stretching crabs, cases of jewelry and thousand-year-old tea. She was beginning to walk in step with the tide that crashed endlessly against the stone edge of the city. We were talking, as we had been for the past four days, of China. Stopping only at the windows with the best jade displayed, my mother still clicked her tongue at their watery color, their too-thin white veins that carried too-thin good luck.

"No cheap jade like this in China," she muttered, pointing with her chin at a display of pendants. A woman was straightening hair-thin gold chains with her fingernails the way one would brush out the tassels of a rug.

"In China," my mother continued, "you don't have to worry about imported jade. That kind the poorest quality kind, coming from outside China. They put a dye inside so it look like dark, expensive kind. But it's not."

I wanted to ask her how they did that. How she knew that. My mother did not read trade journals on the jade market. How could she know pure from doctored jade, natural from fraud?

"Mmm," I said.

My mother was not thinking about jade when she said this. She always looks directly at the thing she is talking or thinking about, and by the time I had decided to back out of asking her about jade swindlers, we were

nearly at the next block. Perhaps she was thinking about China instead, the China that sold only pure precious stones, the China that was never as humid as Kowloon so that you never had towels still wet in the morning from your shower the morning before, the China that we would see tomorrow.

It was July of the summer before I left for college. My mother and her sister had decided over the phone that past Christmas to go to China. They did not want to tour any of the big eastern cities, the banks of the Yellow River, or the Great Wall. They decided they wanted to go back to their town and their village in Guangdong where many of the Kwans and SooHoos still lived. And they wanted to bring me and four of my cousins, who had all heard the stories, but never seen the China of our parents' youth.

The flight took seventeen hours. We landed in Kowloon, a peninsula that stretched out toward Hong Kong Island, and spent four days eating cold noodles and tapioca tea with the locals. We made our way across the city in standing buses and overpriced cabs, bargaining for souvenirs with our fingers and clumsy Hong Kong Cantonese. My mother apologized for her poor vocabulary and American accent, explaining to everyone we met that she had been away for a long time, that in America no one understood her either.

On our last day in Kowloon, my mother and I shared a plate of wine-soaked chicken and greens at a café near our hotel. The entire city dined out at lunchtime; high-rises emptied and restaurant counters overflowed with hungry, fidgety people too heavily dressed to be outside their air-conditioned offices.

"This *choy* not so tender," my mother said with her mouth full of wilted leaves.

She said this about everything in restaurants. This pork crackling wasn't so crisp. This soup wasn't so flavorful. This tea's bitterness wasn't so balanced. What she meant was this *choy* wasn't as tender as what she would cook in her restaurant, with her own hands that could measure volume, texture, and flavor to make everything just so. For thirty-five years she had cooked in my grandfather's take-out restaurant in Bellflower. The best sweet and sour in town, proclaimed the salesman from the auto mall.

That afternoon as we ate, my cousins were hunting the markets for branches of sweet, sticky lychees they had become addicted to, and my aunt was napping in our room. Shifting in the vinyl booth, my mother was uncomfortable in her travel clothes. Showers had become painful and tedious rather than relieving, only saturating our bodies with more water. My mother was staring at a group of schoolgirls at the table by the window, who whispered and tugged at their uniforms.

"I am telling you something now," she began, as she did every conversation. I am telling you something now. You better not take more than four years to finish college. I am telling you something now. Your first cousin is getting married to a not-Chinese and her mother says she is going to drown herself in their hot tub. I am telling you something now. I am closing the restaurant for two weeks and going to China. You are coming, too.

"You know, I didn't like to live here in Kowloon after me and your Ah-Hoo leaving China, before I coming to *Mei-Gok*."

My mother told me often about her childhood in the countryside of Guangdong, usually in wandering episodes before bed. She spoke, half in Cantonese and half in English, about her village, the small town an hour's walk away, the one-room schoolhouse, the woods haunted by lonely ancestors. I could see her clearly, running to school with her short, boyish hair flapping behind her, standing in line with her classmates in their red uniforms as they did their morning exercises before school, scratching characters into her slate with chalk pencils at her little desk. I had heard her talk about China so many times that I began to see my mother as someone who was away from her home. Even today, when people ask her where she is from, she answers, "China," not "Los Angeles."

But she never said much about Kowloon. I knew only a skeleton of facts: she arrived when she was twelve, went to school, worked in a sewing factory with her mother, and left before she could take the entrance exam to college. I never asked her about Kowloon because her stories about the village in China were always more appealing, more far away and fantastic. That was where she met fortunetellers and traveling salesmen and hiked into the mountains for days. Kowloon was always just the place between China and America.

During the four days we were there, my mother never showed me Kowloon. She didn't point out her old home, high school, or any of the places she had frequented. She saw the sights and took in the city as if she didn't remember having ever lived there.

Shifting again in the booth, my mother poured us both more tea.

"We making a better life over here," she said. "But it so hard all the time because we poor, you know, from the country. Everyone make fun of my accent in the school, and I working so hard learning to talk like these people. And they always going to some restaurant and I can't go because I no money to pay. And then, I come to *Mei-Gok*, and everyone there make fun of me too. Maybe I rather stay in China. We hungry there, but we just like everybody else."

After leaving China, my mother and grandmother lived for six years in Kowloon. They shared a two-room flat with a second cousin and her two

sons. My mother was in the middle of her senior year at an all-girls' high school when their visas finally came through, giving them five days to pack a trunk and board a ship for San Francisco.

I tried to picture my mother at eighteen. I could only find a vague image of a small, slender girl in a blue-gray vest and skirt, with the same awe for the city that I had at that moment. She could have been one of the girls at the next table gossiping after school over sweet taro dumplings.

"So, you didn't like it here?" I asked. "It was worse than China?"

When I said this, "China" came out of my mouth all wrong. My harsh, upwardly lilting emphasis revealed how I imagined China in the years between the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution: teenagers turned into Red Guards, villagers forced to melt their farm tools to supply the government's demand for steel, starving lines of people dragging themselves away from Nanking. I didn't understand how that, for my mother, could have been better than this swarming, mad city.

"It OK only." My mother balanced her chopsticks against the lip of her bowl. "Just when I getting used to it here in *Heng-Kuong*, we leaving for *Mei-Gok*."

I watched my mother walk in Kowloon the same way she walked at home: quickly, eyes down, bottom lip tense and curved in against her front teeth. She was hesitant with her words here just as she was in California. She glanced quickly at every movement around us, taking in the people and noises just as I did, like a tourist. She must have felt this way when she first moved to Kowloon, perhaps even all the while she was here the feeling never left her. Even if her village in China was dangerous and impoverished, it had still been home. Tomorrow, I recalled just then, we would be on our way to Guangdong, back to the village where my mother was born, the place from which all her stories came.

"Are you excited about going home tomorrow, MaMa?"

She looked at me.

"Oh, not home to our house," she said. "You mean home to village. Yes, exciting to be back. Been a long time since I see my family."

"How long has it been since you've seen your brother?" I asked.

My mother paused and counted on her fingers.

"Twenty—no, it's being thirty-nine years now," she replied.

Thursday morning we boarded a ferry that would take us to Guangdong, a southeastern province in China, famous for exotic seafood and dark, fecund farmland. My mother, her sister, and three brothers were all born in a small village, Li-Hong Lei, outside the town of Hoi-Peng. Her family

home is still in that village, still surrounded by many of the same families that lived there when my mother was born.

Our ferry had two decks and a full kitchen where we ordered oxtail soup with flat rice noodles and settled in for the four-hour trip. Other passengers had bags and brightly wrapped boxes tucked under their seats, bouquets of flowers, and tins of cookies ready to present to whomever they would be meeting on the other side of the water.

"Is your brother going to meet us?" I asked.

My mother said he would be there with the truck and the driver we had hired to take us into the village. She had brought with her a suitcase full of cookies, moon cakes, sweaters, shoes, and dozens of red envelopes stuffed with cash. She also had a suitcase full of new, white socks and T-shirts.

"What do I call him when I meet him?"

Everyone in the family is called by their rank and relation to you, and the rule about addressing elders is strict: never call them by their given name, only by their family position.

"*Mm-ai-kue*," my mother answered. Fifth-Eldest-Uncle. *Kue* actually means "uncle on your mother's side," so there is never mistaking any one relative for another when speaking. I practiced saying it, trying to get the sides of my mouth and back of my tongue working to make the new sounds.

"Your uncle Moon always in so much trouble," my mother told me. "You know, I remember him always never going to school. Your uncle, you know, he even stealing chickens and persimmons from neighbors to sell in next town at market. You know why? He buy cigarettes with that money."

Uncle Moon never helped my grandmother or his two brothers work the farm or keep the house; he ran away every time they tried to make him go to school or get a job. Just before my mother left for Hong Kong, he eloped with a girl who had no family and no dowry. He and my mother never said goodbye. She remembers, though, that Uncle Moon was the one who always took her to and from school so she wouldn't have to walk alone in the early morning or after sunset. It was Uncle Moon who chased mean girls away when they threw stones at my mother for being the smartest in her class, the only one who didn't have to stay late and clean off her slate with her own spit.

"He such, how you say?" my mother murmured, searching for the word. "He such a—brat."

Over the years, through an exchange of letters with Uncle Moon's wife, my mother learned that he had changed. He was now a cook at a reform school for boys, the very one he himself had been sent to as a teenager. He was running the farm with my mother's uncle, even sending his oldest son to college in Macau. His wife wrote that he had fixed up the house, part of

which had been destroyed in a fire three years ago. My uncle cannot read or write, but he wanted his wife to write to my mother: *You will like what I have done with the house, Ah-Len. You will be happy to see it when you come home.*

My mother left China with my grandmother just as the Cultural Revolution began spreading to the countryside. Her sister had married and left for Sacramento, and her two eldest brothers followed soon after. Uncle Moon was the only one who stayed behind, with his wife and two sons, keeping the farm and the small house, the few animals that were left.

When my mother called that summer to tell him that she was, at long last, coming to see him, there was silence on the other end of the line. She repeated her plans.

Ah-Moon, did you hear me? I'm coming with your niece to Li-Hong Lei to see you. I will be there in two weeks.

My uncle remained silent for a moment before replying.

Ah-Len, you are very, very late.

I imagined my mother and uncle laughing and telling me embarrassing stories from their childhood. We would sit in the house where they were born, and they would tell stories together, each remembering everything the other had forgotten. I would see my mother's house, her relatives and neighbors, her old school, the town. My mother would show me the places where she used to go hunt for frogs and dig up worms for fishing. She would pull back the heavy lid and let me peer into the well where she nearly drowned as a girl. China would finally become real, no longer a myth or a memory I could never quite imagine. And for my mother, no longer the place she had left behind forever.

"I not seeing him, my brother, you know, for a long time," my mother said suddenly, not to me, or anyone in particular. "Maybe he not know me when I get there."

I couldn't reassure her that of course he would know her, his own little sister. I didn't know if she would recognize him either, after thirty-nine years and only a few exchanges of pictures. I thought of the uncles I did know, Uncle Yee-Man and Uncle Yee-Don. They were short, broad men with small mouths and thick hair. I imagined their faces, only younger, meeting us at the dock.

When the ferry lurched into the harbor at Guangdong Station, we lost our grip on our packages and watched them hit the wall. The people next to us flew out of their seats and landed on their hands and knees on the hard wooden floor. We all picked up our bags and waited for the platform to ease down over the water, for the door to open.

It was noon, achingly hot, and only slightly less humid than Kowloon. The station looked like any bus or train station I had seen in America: cement floors, vending machines, posters and schedules peeling off the walls, ticket agents behind glass booths. We presented our passports to the agents, each with a guard behind him in an olive army uniform, a machine gun strapped across his chest. I looked at my mother as we stood in line.

"We're here," I said, pushing to get to the other side of the station.

My mother nodded. "Mmm."

As we walked through the station door and toward the parking lot, my mother looked beyond the high gate and pointed, without any hesitation, to a man with dark, leathery skin leaning with his hands in his pockets against the seat of a motorcycle.

"That's him? That's Fifth-Eldest-Uncle?" I asked as we kept walking toward the station gate. I tried to keep my eyes on him as heads bobbed in front of me and shoulders flung me off balance. He looked tall but gaunt, his thin clothes hanging loosely and awkwardly on him. He didn't look like my mother, my aunt, or my other uncles. His face was long, dark, and tired, his mouth a little crooked and turned down. He stood, not smiling, not quite frowning, watching the people who passed through the gate.

"Yes. There, that him next to bike he ride to work."

Other passengers pushed past us, getting to their parties in a frenzy. But we went slowly, my mother not looking at the brother, but down at her feet as she walked. My aunt and cousins struggled with their suitcases on wheels, not looking toward the gate either. Uncle Moon stood up straight and drew his hands out of his pockets. He saw us. But he didn't leave his motorcycle. I began to walk faster, telling my mother to hurry up, he was waiting for her, but we were stopped in the congestion of people trying to get through the turnstile.

When we finally filed through, my mother walked up to her brother and set her bag down. They looked at each other for a moment. Then my mother nodded her head at him, and they shook hands. Uncle Moon took her right hand in his, then put his left hand over them both. He nodded to her, and then they let go.

"Ah-Len," her brother said.

"Ah-Moon," my mother replied.

My mother stepped aside and her sister walked up, took Uncle Moon's hand in hers the same way my mother did, and nodded her head at him. He nodded back and took her hand. They each said the other's name, then took their hands back.

Ah-Moon, my mother said plainly, in Cantonese, pointing at me. *This is your niece, my daughter, Fui-Ghen. She is going to college.*

I stood there, dumbly, with my bag still bearing down on my shoulder. Uncle Moon nodded at me, looking at my face with a sure, quiet recognition, as if he had seen me every day of my life.

Taking my cue from my mother and aunt, I said softly, "*Mm-ai-kue.*"

He nodded again, then took my hand the same way he had taken my mother's and aunt's, and said my name in return. Then he said something else. It took me a moment to realize what it was, to translate the strange sound of his voice, the accent I had never heard outside my mother's family at home.

Fui-Ghen. You are very, very tall.

There were two trucks waiting for us. The drivers stepped out their cigarettes and loaded our bags into the open cabs, stuffing them under the built-in wire cages that were empty but covered with white feathers. I sat by the window and my mother squeezed in next to me, our knees touching the front seats in the cramped cabin. My aunt, exhausted and seasick, slept with her head pressed against the other window as my cousins folded themselves into the second truck. I didn't say anything as we pulled away from the station, following Uncle Moon on his motorcycle as he led us through the town and toward the village.

Finally I turned to my mother and said, "That was it? A handshake?"

"What you mean?" she asked, looking through the windshield at her brother as he weaved in and out of traffic, the back of his shirt billowing out behind him.

"A handshake, MaMa. You haven't seen your brother in almost forty years. Aren't you glad? Aren't you excited? You didn't even say anything to him."

I didn't expect shrieks or spinning hugs, but I couldn't believe that after thirty-nine years, seventeen hours on a plane, four long days in Hong Kong, and a choppy ferry ride to the mainland, that there had been nothing more than handshakes. My mother shrugged, never taking her eyes off the front window.

"We say hello. We not seeing each other for so long, what more to say? Yes, this is how we say to each other, hello."

The countryside of Canton was silent. It was a deep, heavy silence that swallowed us whole every time we stopped to let a herd of cows cross from one field to another. I put my head out the window at each stop and listened to the emptiness around us. The cows seemed to move across the road noiselessly; the clang of their bells lasted less than an instant before being sucked into the same enormous vacuum that silenced us, our breathing, our every move.

Uncle Moon balanced on his motorcycle with the tip of his left foot as he let a large herd pass, followed by a man flicking his thin switch against their rumps. We passed rice and sugarcane fields, orchards drooping with almonds and pears. Lonely houses appeared now and then among all the tame, trimmed wilderness.

A scene through my window: three men bending over a row of new seeds, maybe squash or spinach, each wearing a white shirt and wide bamboo hat. They all rise at the same time to turn and look at our caravan of rusty chicken trucks piled with luggage, trailing after a motorcycle. They all lean against their wooden hoes and draw a free hand up to shade their eyes. We watch each other, these three men and I, until the kicked-up dust and distance becomes too much for us to press our gazes through any longer.

The village came upon us suddenly, after nearly an hour of driving. First a fence, then a single, slouching outhouse were the only signs of people out there in the dense, infinite farmland. Then we were surrounded: gray cement houses standing close together, chicken coops, barns, fields of goats, and people everywhere. Children running, elders squatting around mah-jong boards, men on bicycles, women wrangling animals. People stopped and stared, then encircled us. There was, all at once and out of nowhere, chaos around us. All of it was happening in a language I hardly knew.

My mother gave out every last shirt and pair of socks to the children looking up at her with their dusty, sunburned faces. I stood there as they fingered my jeans and prodded my sneakers, calling me Auntie and Miss. I tried to talk to them in my hesitant Cantonese but could only form broken questions about their names and ages. As we were turning to leave I said, because I was unsure of how to say goodbye correctly, *See you tomorrow*.

My mother sighed at the group of children as we turned to leave them.

"Such a poor country. No money for nothing, not even socks. Nothing clean for them. Hard to live like this when you are young."

Our bags on our backs, we began walking in a line behind Uncle Moon. We kept walking even after the road disappeared, ducking under low branches, following a road no wider than a bicycle tire. I heard Uncle Moon's voice come from the front of the line, almost in a chant. Straining to catch his words, I realized he was calling out the names of the families whose homes we were passing. Chang Farm; Old Lum Farm; Old Lady Bo's House: a gray, square building; a two-story, white house with worn shutters; a shack with a red tarp over the doorway. My mother had been quiet during the drive and still hadn't said anything more to her brother than his name at the station.

The house, my mother's house, finally appeared, and out of the front door a line of women made their way toward us. They lifted our bags onto their own shoulders, giving us quick pats on the arm, nodding, smiling. They had short, jagged haircuts, wore loose cotton pants and shirts. There was a shy teen-aged girl in a white dress holding a parasol. In the doorway of the house a toddling boy peered at us.

Ah-Len. Kwan Yim Len. We have not seen your mother for a very long time. Ai-yah, there is your sister Ah-Nay. Ah-Len, is this your daughter? Who is this tall girl? Do you speak Cantonese? Do you understand what I'm saying to you? I am your auntie, you call me Second-Brother-in-law's-wife. I am Fifth-Eldest-Aunt-on-your-mother's-side. I am your cousin. I am your cousin, too. You are so tired and hungry. You are so tall.

I shuffled into the house with my mother, my American cousins, and my Chinese cousins. We put our bags away and finally settled into the late, hot afternoon.

"This is your uncle's room," my mother said as we reached the top of the stairs and stepped past a blue bedroom. "This one mine, I think," she said as we passed a room with posters of dragons and tigers and squares of pink cloth softening the corners.

We had been greeted inside by a group of uncles, male cousins, and neighbors who had already carried over a pig for roasting. My uncle, eager to make his new dishes, went outside to pull up vegetables and rice. Fifth-Eldest-Aunt had carried in an armload of straw and wood to fuel the stove. She was a tiny woman, smiling with an open grin that revealed some missing teeth. The rest of the family and neighbors were working to move two wooden tables together. Some ran back to their homes to bring in the extra dishes it would take to serve us all; others lingered in the heat, fanning themselves with fly swatters, chatting, and watching us curiously as we wandered through all the rooms.

In the pink room, I touched a scroll hanging by the window. "Was it your room? You don't remember?" I asked.

"I don't know. It's looking very different now. They have a fire and rebuild the house. Maybe the rooms in different places now." She shrugged. "Don't remember."

"Who used to have all these rooms over here?"

"All these cousins' rooms. Now, this is Second-Aunt's-Daughter's room, with new baby bed, there."

Peering behind one of the bedroom doors, she exclaimed, "Ah, you see this, here? You know what is this?" She laughed and pointed to a round

porcelain urn. "And you see outside that skinny house? You know what is that? No toilets here, oh no. Nothing like this in America, huh?"

We moved through the rest of the upstairs and my mother posed for pictures in the doorway of each room, at the top of the stairs, against the rooftop balcony railing. Her smile seemed strained.

The Kwan house was small and narrow, the floors all concrete and covered here and there with thin rugs. The walls were the same gray concrete, and they were covered with good luck calendars, embroidered handkerchiefs, posters of Hong Kong movie stars, and small photos taped down in the corners. The family had just gotten indoor plumbing last year, and only in the kitchen. The pump needed to be worked by hand for a few minutes before water appeared in a thin stream, falling into a plastic bucket they used as a sink. A wood-burning stove in the kitchen heated the entire house and sheltered a noisy litter of kittens in a hole beneath it. Though the walls and floors were gray, hard, and cold, the home glowed softly.

A crowd of neighbors and cousins were at the house all the time we were there, not always talking or even paying attention to us, but helping to make lunch, playing mah-jong when it was too hot to work outside, watching each others' children, and tending each others' animals.

I looked around at the living room where my mother and her brothers had, during the March floods one year, unhinged the front door and floated right into the kitchen, past their mother standing waist-deep in water. Outside in their rice paddies, they had ridden on the back of a lumbering water buffalo until one day it leaped up and threw my uncle against the trunk of a tree. My mother didn't mention any of these things to me as we wandered through each room. I wanted to ask her about all those times she had talked about. I wanted her to show them to me.

"Where did you study?" I asked.

We continued looking into each room and I fingered the bedspreads and clothes hanging on the doorknobs. I sat on one of the beds with a hard thud. There were no mattresses, only quilts and pillows over wooden slats. "How did you ever sleep on these things? Where did your sister sleep? What did you do for fun?"

"Oh, we do like you. Eat, play, go to school. Same thing."

"MaMa, everything is so different here. How can you say it's the same thing as where we live?"

I didn't know why my mother was so quiet, why she seemed so nervous. She didn't touch objects in the rooms or launch into stories about her brothers and sister and cousins. At home she was always eager to talk about China, to tell me what she missed about the country, what it was to be young with her family, what I, the American girl, didn't know anything

about because I had it so easy. But now that we were actually here, she said nothing. Perhaps a story only makes sense when everything has to be imagined.

We walked through the kitchen, past the indoor coop that kept the chickens from dropping over in the heat. My mother looked at everything as if for the first time, as if she was afraid to put her hands on things that didn't belong to her.

"But what was it *like*?" I pressed.

"Oh, you know what it's like. You see here, it was like this. Just long time ago." She sat down on a low stool and brought her knees up under her chin. "You know, I only remember good times here, always good and happy times. Then I see those kids, you know, so poor, so dirty. And I guess I poor like that too, but I never know it."

"You don't recognize anything? What about the village outside, the town?"

"All very different now. Or maybe just me, not remembering so good. Maybe exactly the same as when I leave, I can't tell."

I couldn't think of anything more interesting or comforting to say to her then. We would be going back home in two days after spending our first night here in my uncle's house, the next at a hotel in town because none of us could manage without showers or soft beds.

"It's pretty, MaMa. I like it."

"I like too," she said. "Only, you know, I can't be living here anymore. Too used to things different at home."

My mother had passed out all her red envelopes, the fattest ones for the eldest relatives, and the ones with single bills or half dollars for the little cousins. She had unloaded her bag of gifts onto a side table, piling the tins and boxes up high. We seemed to be left to ourselves for a long time as everyone prepared the meal for us, so we slipped outside into the yard.

I noticed then, for the first time in six days, what my mother was wearing: a red T-shirt, flowered capri pants, and brown sandals. She had styled her short hair the best she could against the unfamiliar humidity. Her appearance startled me; she was so bright against the circle of gray houses surrounding the algae-filmed pond, the sagging buildings, the short blades bursting from the newly planted rice fields. It was a heavy afternoon in this tiny village of twenty-nine, and I watched my mother standing on a slope of dirt at the edge of the pond where she and her sister scrubbed their clothes with smooth stones and powdered soap, where her brothers dragged their watering buckets through the thick layer of mosquitoes to fill and throw over the fields. I realized that her appearance was surprising because she looked so American: she wore makeup and Calvin Klein

sunglasses, her hair was streaked with auburn highlights, and her brown purse matched her shoes perfectly. My mother, who I had always seen—who had always seen herself—as so out of place in America, suddenly looked more American than the Colgate and Skippy people on TV. I wondered if her thoughts were coming to her now in English or Cantonese.

Before I could press her for her thoughts, Uncle Moon called to us from a screenless window in the kitchen.

Ah-Len. Ah-Ghen. Lai-ah. Ne gai gook ho lo.

Linda. Melody. Come in. The chicken we just killed is ready to eat now.

We turned to go into the little house with red scrolls flapping against all its doors and windows. My mother whispered to me as we neared the door, “I hope lunch is OK. It’s been very long time since I eating Chinese food.”

Lunch was spread out over two tables: greens, melons, chicken, yams, bean sprouts, soup, and pomegranates all arranged out to the tables’ edges. Uncle Moon lit three sticks of incense and set them in a cup in the middle of the tables. Behind us stood an ancestor worship altar with sketched portraits of my great grandparents and the names of my great-great grandparents drawn in gold ink over red scrolls. I watched as the elders blessed the food with words and gestures I vaguely recognized from the rituals my grandmother used to perform on our Christmas meals. My mother explained that we ask ancestors for protection, longevity, and good luck, and let them have the first taste so we could all eat with their blessing as they watch over us with full bellies. My cousins and I followed along awkwardly, slicing through the thick curls of incense smoke three times with folded hands.

As we were eating, my mother turned to me and asked, in English, “You like the food?”

“It’s great,” I said. “MaMa, is this like what Ah-Hoo used to cook?”

“I think this is what we eat when I’m younger. Can’t remember exactly, but this taste like what we eat.”

I nodded. Uncle Moon watched us exchange English words.

Fui-Ghen, he said. *Do you know how to cook? Did your grandfather teach you?*

I replied that I didn’t know how to make dishes like these.

Your mother didn’t teach you to make wintermelon soup like this? Ai-yah, this was her favorite when she was a little girl. She wanted it all the time.

My mother nodded, absently, as if consenting to this memory, as if she herself had no recollection of any such desire and was merely acquiescing to her brother’s version of the past. I wondered how much of her life in

China she had given over to him because he had stayed behind. I wondered what she had let him keep for her so that she could leave home at twelve.

At times, I’ve asked my mother if she ever wishes she had stayed in Guangdong a little longer or even for good. She always says no, of course she is glad to be here and have a better life. But she always pauses before replying, as if she is trying to convince herself of her answer, as if she is allowing herself just a moment of imagining not having left. She brushes it aside every time and says, “No, I don’t think I can stay in China. Things getting too bad.” I wondered what she would say, how exactly she would say it, if I asked her that question then as we were eating, as she was remembering just how much she had forgotten.

Before we left my uncle’s house for the hotel, my mother said she was feeling tired. I asked if she was OK.

“Yes. Oh, yes, doing OK,” she reassured me. “Just tired. Long trip, you know.” She looked around at the soft walls of her brother’s house, the sun-bleached cloth flapping over the open window, and after a small pause she said, “Ready to go home now.”