

FAILING UP

A Professor's Odyssey of
Flunking, Determination, and Hope

BARBARA HONG, PH.D.



COLUMBIA
PUBLISHING
HOUSE

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THE KIRKUS STAR
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"An absorbing, eye-opening narrative about the value of grit and education, sure to inspire a wide audience."

KIRKUS REVIEW

In this stunning debut memoir, Hong (Special Education/Brigham Young Univ.-Hawaii) recounts her exceptional transformation from floundering student to flourishing professor.

Born in Singapore to an uneducated mother and an alcoholic, abusive father, Hong grew up in severe poverty. She attended school against her parents' wishes. Despite her intellectual curiosity, she consistently failed her subjects because she couldn't keep up with the fast-paced, competitive, shame-inducing educational style.

Flunking her 10th-grade finals just about extinguished her academic hopes. But one act of kindness radically changed her trajectory when an inspired acquaintance convinced her to redo the grade.

Her new teacher—who was passionate and caring—taught students instead of subjects. A friend from her church gave her the finest tutoring, much-needed friendship, and even an example of a loving home and family. After completing 10th grade with top marks, she spent her remaining school years

working tirelessly, eventually earning the Best All-Round Student award.

Her passion for learning expanded into a passion for teaching; she pursued post-secondary degrees in America and began an influential career as a professor of education and international education consultant.

Hong's eloquent present-tense narration animates scenes of family strife and academic struggle and evokes an astounding range of emotions—commiseration, frustration, and eventually elation. Something is always developing, whether it's the narrator herself or the plot.

Though the memoir charts the author's intellectual growth, it also considers complex family relationships, poverty, Southeast Asian culture and education, disability, and determination. Hong demonstrates, through her own experiences, the pleasures and rewards of scholarship and effective teaching, and her account underscores how ordinary people can have life-changing effects on others.

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

—*Prologue*—

I sit in the scuffed and dented steel sink that takes up a quarter of the dingy kitchen in a squalid Singapore apartment. I may be four or five years old. The water is running while my sister Jennifer and I pretend to cook—we wash vegetables, fill pots, and cut pieces of paper from the telephone book as if they're chicken breasts.

Bored, we climb out of the sink and hide under the overstuffed bed in our one-bedroom flat, pretending to play ghosts so we can scare our older brothers, Phillip and Winston when they walk in.

I can hear Jennifer breathing softly beside me. I cover my eyes while peering through my fingers to see if our brothers are coming. Instead, I see a tiny square of our cement-block window. A piece of clothesline cuts across it. It's stuffed with underwear, shirts, sheets, and towels that wave in the humid, hot wind, blocking my only view of the outside sky.

Under the bed are stacks of battered shoe boxes with no shoes inside, plastic bags bulging with textiles of all shapes and sizes, and other hoarded items with no names or owners. Everything has a suffocating, damp, and lingering sweaty smell.

"I can't breathe," I cry to Jennifer, hoping we can switch position even though it doesn't help my coughing. The cobwebs are sweeping into my mouth. My breaths are getting shorter; I need air.

Two feet from my parents' bed is a bunk bed where the cracked gray paint is peeling off, layer by layer, each day. The space beneath it is also packed with more litter,

fragments of clothing, and assorted trash. Where does all this junk come from?

Our apartment is so cluttered that I can't tell the difference between the living and sleeping spaces. Most of the items are either broken or antique, at least to me, but Māma (*mother in Chinese*) can't stop piling and shoving bags into every inch of space she can find. When offered a free item, I have never heard her refuse. She always has some rationale for why such and such an item will come in handy one day.

We live carefree at times. No one cares who does what as long as we don't kill each other. The only noise in the house is from Bāba (*father in Chinese*) yelling at Māma and at us. Almost everything that comes out of his mouth is vulgar and offensive.

I learn to tune out the pain by slipping under the moldy-smelling bed and escaping into dark spaces. I find the darkness a haven; like I'm carried away into a fairyland, far from the raging battles of that inhospitable place—at least temporarily. This was my beginning, in a sense, my first memory of fear and emptiness, anguish and loneliness, in search of safety, belonging, and purpose.

There were no books lying around the house. I didn't learn to read until fourth grade. Getting an education was never a priority. If anything, Māma and Bāba believed the opposite. Whenever I got a bad report card, which I frequently did, they would jump down my throat and cane me for wasting my time and their money, saying I'd be better off getting a job and contributing to the family instead.

The loftiest wish Māma ever had for any of us was to be an office clerk so we could enjoy air-conditioning while working. As far as I was concerned, that was my only aspiration too. Doing well in school was simply not on the radar for many of the kids in my neighborhood. There was

only one university and only the top percentile ranked students could be admitted.

When I decided to write my story, I reflected on how the craftsmanship of a house defines the strength of its structure and whether it will withstand the winds and storms that come its way. Ideally, a steady foundation should include being raised decently; taught right from wrong, protected from harm, and provided basic physical and psychological needs.

There are some who live a more-or-less predictable life, from my perspective at least, getting from point A to point B somewhat unscathed. I envy such a life so much. I wish I could be a fly on the wall of at least one of those homes.

A cipher in a home where life is always out of sync, where there is always trouble lingering around the corner, I just didn't know, even at that early age, how long I wanted to live. Once I asked Māma if she knew when my birthday was. She brushed away my question, saying, "I don't even know when I was born, let alone you." I didn't know who I was even from birth or where life would take me.

Every day, until it was etched into my skull, were all the reminders from my teachers of who I was. Reminders saturated with the message, "You're a hopeless child!" I went through the motions of school each day, with no idea what I was getting out of it. No one talked to me, hung out with me, ate with me, or even said *hi*.

The repertoire of labels I acquired included: retarded, mute, idiot, half-brained, stupid, lazy, undisciplined, and the winner—*cabbage head*. I believed I was all these labels. After all, I barely made it through each grade.

When I flunked my most important year in 10th grade (the equivalent of US 12th grade), I was angry and disappointed, but it wasn't like I was expecting anything different. I had hoped to be the first in my family to finish

high school, but that went out the window with my failure. I wanted to be the one who put a smile on my parents' faces, even if they couldn't care less about school. It is still a part of being raised in an Asian family. No matter what kind of parents I had, there was an inherent sense of loyalty I must reciprocate. I wanted to please them no matter what.

My pride was my greatest enemy. I hated losing more than anything. I had to repeat the grade, and I vowed I was only going to allow myself to be embarrassed for one year and never again fail another grade. That's 365 days, 52 weeks, 8,736 hours. That was all I was willing to handle. I would never go through another humiliation like that, ever again!

I began to turn everyone and everything away from me. I became my own worst nightmare. I still hated school, but I hated myself even more. I hated everyone. I knew how difficult my parents' circumstances were, and I was fiercely determined to escape that plight. My drive became a clever tool for me to be selfish, arrogant, and detached. I figured if no one cared about me, then why should I care about anyone else? I relinquished my moral instinct and only thought of what I wanted. I had to be a survivor.

I avoided my past because I was ashamed. I never wanted to put myself in the narrative. I just wanted to move on and embrace my present and the future. Then one day, an undergraduate with a drinking and drug problem called me out, "You're an Asian! You'll never understand. You had a good life because your parents are wealthy, you're smart, and you went to a big-name school."

What! Why would he think that's my life?

It turned out that he was not the only one with such stereotyped perceptions of Asians. Many of my colleagues and students, too, have this preconceived notion that Asians are born into a prepackaged life, filled with milk and honey and wealth. Somehow, it is thought, everything always

turns out the way it is supposed to be; perhaps due to our work ethic or some natural genetic endowment.

I decided that it was time I stopped hiding behind my own shame. I wanted to make sense of my past. There's no shame in being broken. I've been broken over and over again (not by my choice nor by anyone intentionally). Nevertheless, the struggle of the "fixing" process has strengthened me; *not* ruined me. Vance Havner¹ poignantly describes this evolution I experienced:

*It takes broken soil to produce a crop,
broken clouds to give rain,
broken grain to give bread,
broken bread to give strength.
It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume.*

The events described in this book are taken from my journals, which I have kept since I was twelve. Each account is based on my perspective of things at that point in time—some mature, some naïve, but all are intuitive recollections of events as I experienced them. If I describe moments that seem commonplace, it is because I am living a prescribed line, and for virtually all my life, that line has been defined by poverty, mislabels, abuse, and ridicule. The one thing that remains constant is my teachers; some from heaven while others from hell.

When I ask my students why they chose to become a teacher, their unanimous answer is often: "A teacher touched my life!"

There seems to be at least one teacher in everyone's journey that makes an indelible mark on us, for better or for worse. That teacher somehow shapes the way we view the class subject, what we believe about ourselves, the way we choose our career paths, and the way we view learning.

¹ "Broken Things," an excerpt from *The Still Water* (Old Tappan, NJ: Flemming H. Revell, 1934). Quoted in *Guideposts*, October 1981.

Although I have attempted to describe events as they happened, the accounts veer back and forth across time. This is a function of memory and its failings, as well as the missing links that inevitably exist between experiences. The journal entries were from my teenage years, while the story I'm relating began when I was much younger.

I hope *Failing Up* gives readers a first-hand perspective on what life is like growing up in a harsh, unforgiving culture of stigmatization, marginalization, and humiliation when it comes to academic performance. In this memoir, I hope to shine a personal light for educators and parents from all walks of life: A light that will encourage readers to reflect upon the effects their words and actions have on the lives of children and their future. And for everyone who has ever failed or who are failing now in any capacity of your life, I hope you'll take shake off the shame and embrace failures as a way of finding who you are and what you are *really* made of. Perhaps in time, you will discover, like me, that failing can be some of life's most meaningful blessings you'll ever experience.

Part One
SPIRIT LEVEL



Chapter 1
FLATS

Home is one's birthplace, ratified by memory.
∞ *Henry Anatole Grunwald*

“*W*ake up! Wake up NOW!”
“What, Mā? I was asleep,” I pry open my eyelids in protest, “it’s two in the morning.”

“Get up!” Māma jerks Jennifer and Phillip from side to side.

I drag my sleepy feet into the kitchen and pretend to open my heavy eyes while Winston walks in the front door after his late shift at McDonald’s.

“Your Bā didn’t come home again,” Māma laments. “He has gone off with another woman. I can’t take this anymore! A leopard never changes its spots. I have had enough!”

I try to make sense of what Māma is getting at as she summons all of us to gather by the toilet door.

Crammed between my siblings, I can barely see what Māma is doing. When I finally squeeze through from underneath, I see a round tray with five cups of cloudy white liquid filled to the brim. Māma passes a cup to each of us. Mine is so full I spill some, but she doesn't yell at me.

“Drink it up, starting from the oldest. Right now!”

I inhale to see what the cups contain. Bleach. The smell of chlorine is so strong; now I'm awake.

“Yuck, I don't want to drink this,” I push it away, but Māma gives that look.

“When your Bāba sees us all lying dead on the floor, he'll be sorry! Drink it up!”

Jennifer, who's a year older than me, releases a screeching cry in rebellion, as Winston, the eldest, shepherds us into the living room, ignoring Māma's hysterical bawling. I clumsily spill more liquid on the floor.

“Never mind, don't worry about it now,” Winston says. “Just leave. Quick, hurry.”

On the pale blue wall, covered with chipping paint, is a picture of Jesus. Māma hung it there to remind us that Jesus is watching over us, but I'm not sure she believes it herself. While Māma tries to cling to faith, her belief wavers whenever Bāba doesn't come home.

Unruffled, Winston grabs hold of Māma's arms and gestures at her to kneel with us.

“Mā, come. Let's pray. Bā will come home soon. Jesus is watching over him, right? You taught us that.” Winston soothes Māma gently like a child until she falls asleep upon the floor.

“Now I'm awake,” I yawn and take a deep breath, then catch myself pinching my nose again.

Winston looks at me and points at the floor. “Clean up that spill and pour the bleach back in the bottle.”

Jennifer sits in a corner on the floor with her arms wrapped around her legs, nodding herself to sleep. Phillip

crawls back into the bunk bed as if this night is as normal as any other. Just another drill.

Whenever Māma gets this way, Winston, five years my senior, is the one who calms everyone and everything down. I have looked up to him as our protector for as long as I can remember.

Three or four nights later, Māma wakes us up again in the middle of the night. This time she has a pair of large black scissors, the extra-sharp kind that seamstresses use to cut fabric. She directs us to stab ourselves.

“If you stab in the heart,” she says, “it’ll be a quicker death.”

Winston snatches the scissors by the blade, slicing two inches across his palm.

“I’ll cut myself for the younger ones,” he intercedes. “Don’t do this to them, Mā, please don’t.”

Winston mediates on our behalf, and we’re once again spared a mass suicide.

None of this is out of the norm. Māma often awakens us in the middle of the night, between two and four, if Bāba does not come home.

Two nights later, it happens again. This time Māma turns on the gas stove. I didn’t even get out of bed. Fortunately, Phillip’s sleep is disturbed by the pungent smell. He wakes up and finds Māma kneeling on the kitchen floor, distraught and sobbing.

Although I am only six, I understand that my family is unlike the others in the neighborhood. We are to bury everything within the four walls of our apartment; never to air our dirty laundry in public.

I never have a neighbor kid come over to the apartment because I don’t want anyone to find out who I am and what my family is like.



In 1965, five years before I was born, Singapore achieved independence from Malaysia and was struggling to become self-sufficient. Due to land constraints, the government built flats to conserve space and to warehouse the increasing low-income population.

These heavily subsidized government flats still exist today, though they have been remodeled to look more urbanized and architecturally aesthetic. These days, even upper middle-class people reside in these flats because of their convenience, community-like living, proximity to public transportation, and schools. Each community even has its own playground, parking garage, and void deck to hold events.

The Toa Payoh area, where I grew up, was one of the first waves of newer flats completed by the Housing Development Board. To accommodate the masses, a brutalist architecture was chosen. The common height of ten storeys, with twelve units per floor, defines a block. These are simple rectangular slabs with flat roofs, straight walls, and all painted white—a landscape of the modern-day ghetto. A horizontal strip of concrete balconies marks the front of the flat while the back is smeared with bamboo flagpoles of wet laundry—trousers, bras, shirts, and bed sheets—a testament to the life teeming inside.

Sometimes, when the wind is strong, pieces of neighbors' clothes fall from the bamboo sticks because they're not properly secured with clothespins. Jennifer and I sheepishly swoop the stray laundry up from the ground, often soiled and still damp, and rush home to show it off to Māma, as if they're gifts from heaven.

I know we're stealing, but there is no way to return these clothes. We can't tell, from the hundreds of bamboo sticks, to which household they belong.

From the side, the buildings are narrow, a line of identical structures that stand in desolate rows. I suppose in the US these neighborhoods are called projects, like those

in New York City or South Chicago. Picture a plantation with rows of domino-like flats, narrow strips of concrete buildings lined with the occasional bit of greenery. The flooring in each apartment is a slab of gray cement. Ours is covered with two layers of linoleum—the bottom one looks dull, brown, and rotted by termites, while the top has a pink-and-blue floral design.

Our block gets hot water only when we're lucky. Most days the fluorescent lights in the stairwells work, but if they start flickering, it is only a matter of seconds before we hear a bulb burst, leaving the entire floor and stairway pitch dark. When this happens, an air of melancholy surrounds me, further deepening the emptiness and forlornness within me.

In some ways, the intrinsic emptiness of the flats covers up the chaotic lives of the people who live within—prostitutes, lounge singers, waiters, street sweepers, janitors, seamstresses, and construction workers—people who can't afford to live anywhere else.

While the adults in the apartment buildings bear no ill-will toward their children, although some do when they're drunk, they also hold no big dreams for their children. Each family aspires for nothing more than simply making it through another day.

The staircase leading to our fourth-floor apartment is littered with garbage, broken beer bottles, decomposing insects, and occasional human feces. On the off chance the elevator works, it reeks of urine and dead animals.

There's little in the way of sanitation, even less in the way of orderliness. We never eat as a family except on the Eve of Chinese New Year. Families make a point to gather for this special one-night festival. It's my favorite time of year, not so much for the dishes Māma worked all day to prepare, but for the nostalgic aura of being together like a normal family.

After the meal, we each get a red packet from Bàba with some cash inside, usually two dollars for the girls and ten dollars for the boys. This is like candy money; we can get anything we want from the stalls across our block.

Our two-room apartment is on the corner, so we have access to a small balcony area about two by three feet. The living room and the bedroom combined are 34 square meters or 366 square feet. A doorway leads from the living room to a bedroom on the right. The toilet is at the corner of an L-shaped kitchen. A large vertical sheet of heavy aluminum serves as its door. Māma must have scrounged it from the dumpster which is next to our flat. The problem is this door was unskillfully placed backward, so it stays ajar by more than a foot, allowing anyone to peer right in while you're doing your private business.

The kitchen has enough space for a single-burner gas stove, a two-foot-round, white marble table Māma inherited from her mother (the only thing she inherited from her) and two rusty metal stools. Squeezed in beside the table is a corroded three-and-a-half-foot refrigerator, another one of Māma's treasures from the dumpster. She mounted it on four unsteady cinder blocks to raise its height. This fridge has been clumsily painted over from a natural beige to cloudy white to a greenish blue and, now, an azure blue.

The only bedroom is half the size of the living room with a foot of space between the closet and the foot of the bed. We maneuver gingerly around the space to avoid stubbing our toes.

Mā's and Bà's pale sheets are worn thin with holes and unmatched patches beneath, but they feel soft. Māma reminds us the sheets were once embroidered with bright floral designs.

"Ah, expensive threads," Māma, a seasoned seamstress, rubs the silky fabric between her two fingers, "A wedding gift from so long ago."

If I squint, I can make out the faintest lines of orchid petals. They are worn to the quick from years of washing, sweating, and bodies turning, friction of both happy and sad times.

Māma caresses my back as I curl up next to her. I feel her coarse fingers stroking me gently even as she drifts off to sleep, like the way I caress Bāba's back when he's drunk. Her delicate but overworked hands prominently display a crisscrossing of thin blue veins that have surrendered to the years of heavy lifting, washing, carrying, and scrubbing. I've never seen Bāba put a plate into the sink, pick up a piece of trash from the floor, or even turn on the stove to boil water.

Soon, Māma's breathing slows down, and her hand falls off my side rib, but I'm still awake. I can hear the blaring snore, not from Māma but from Bāba. If he's really drunk, his snore is non-rhythmic, like a growling beast, oblivious to the world. However, if he's not too drunk, he sounds symphonic and gentle, like an infant falling asleep after a full meal, at least until tomorrow.

I like Bāba best when his eyes are closed. I look right into his tired ruffled face with its long eyelashes, thick nose, and exposed rotting teeth with his lips puffed and drooling. He smells like an open bottle of beer.

Why was I given this Bāba of all the bābas in the world? Why was I born to this one? Do I look like him? Do I want to look like him? What if I became like him?

On most nights, I share a two- or three-inch, twin-size foam mattress with Winston. There are no sheets, and we rarely use blankets because of the tropical heat, and monsoon-rich humidity that is especially intense when night falls. Winston and I bruise ourselves constantly, butting knees or heads, as we fight in our sleep to get some cushion underneath our bodies.

"It's like sleeping with a twelve-legged octopus," Winston teases and hugs me.

I don't have a bed I can call my own, a personal space, or a pillow on which I can lay my head whenever I want. Each night, after some squabbles, Māma assigns someone to let me lie down with them. I don't know why no one wants to sleep with me. Maybe everyone feels grown up now. Maybe because Māma keeps calling me the *unwanted* child—I never asked her why. Maybe being the youngest I just have to earn my sleeping space.

Phillip has the top bunk bed while Jennifer has the bottom. Since Winston often works until midnight, he gets a mattress like me so he won't wake anyone up. When I wake from what sleep I can manage, I put my mattress back in the bedroom, leaning it vertically against the wall. That's the only way we have enough room to move bodies around that sordidly hot enclosure.

The best times are when I get to sleep with Jennifer. She never likes to share, but she gives in and lets me lie next to her as long as I am quiet. This is better than sleeping next to Winston, though perhaps not as good as curling up next to Māma. If Jennifer is in a pleasant mood, she holds my hand and asks me to hum along as she whispers some Chinese songs into my ears. This is our quiet way of fun so we don't wake up the sleeping dragon. We try to control our giggles, almost choking ourselves. We fall asleep, smiling, and grasping hands.

Jennifer is bold and speaks her mind. She's never too timid to fight for what's hers, even a bed. I wish I could be more like her. I'm always afraid of something or someone. I feel insecure, cowardly, and gutless. I dare not challenge anyone or anything. I give in all the time. At no time do I talk back, raise my voice, or defy authority. Māma says that's because I'm an obedient daughter. I don't ask for something that's contrary to what Māma or anyone says. Māma calls me the peacemaker, a good girl every mother wants. That's the ideal I live up to every time; I feel conflicted.

I wish I weren't this way.

I don't like me.

Being good willingly is one thing; being coerced into being good is quite another. I don't know who I am or what my personality is like. Why do I have to be the one who gives in all the time? I want to oppose. I want to say something. I want to win sometimes too. I don't want to be the one who gives in all the time.

As I continue to do poorly in school, I become angrier at myself. I'm done with being the peacemaker. It never pays off. Being bad at least gives me an avenue to get angry. I don't want to listen to anyone anymore, especially my stupid teachers.

When I'm not in school, the time I wake up depends on where I sleep the night before. If I sleep next to Māma, I wake up when she does, either because she's tugging on my hand to snip threads or I don't want to be alone in bed with Bāba. If I sleep next to Winston on the living room floor, I wake up to someone accidentally stepping on my hair, arms, or legs. If I sleep next to Jennifer in the lower bunk, I usually wake on my own by rolling over into the empty spot where she was. It's hard to sleep alone when I never have a bed.

On very hot nights, when even the walls sweat, Māma opens the front gate to let in some air while Jennifer and I take turns keeping the rats away from our bed. We swat them with the bamboo cane or broomsticks, but they're never afraid of us. Why should they be? Our place is almost a second home for them with all its clutter, stench, and mess clogged around every corner of the house. They have more of a permanent abode each night than I do, as if I'm the intruder and they're the hosts. Sometimes, when Jennifer curses at them, I silently thank these vermin for tolerating us in their dwelling.

Like many rural parts of Singapore, Toa Payoh has an infestation of stray cats that has spread like wildfire.

These felines never stop reproducing, and they never die. There are simply not enough vehicles to run them over either. I suspect there's a community conspiracy between these rats and the cats. Maybe the cats never prey on the rats, and the rats never get caught; instead, both wild animals have joined forces to feast off of the human provisions and to take over our dwellings come midnight.

I know cats all too well. The problem with stray cats in our block is notably excessive because of the large Malay population on the second floor. They have this esoteric fondness for felines, particularly the black, Siamese kind with the long fur coat. I don't even know if these are Siamese, but that's what Māma calls them. Each night, legions of them convene on our fourth-floor balcony, growling, trilling, yowling, and chattering, having a great night out. My hawk-eyed observation tells me they're conniving about which apartment to invade once the clock strikes midnight, and for some reason, it's always ours.

Our front door has a rusty blue gate covered in multiple layers of paint, the kind you see on an old elevator in Manhattan. The problem with our gate is that it's too crooked to close all the way, so the only thing we can do is leave it ajar, like our toilet door. When we do that, we're inviting anything lurking in the stairway to stroll right through our gate, and these Siamese cats almost always shoot straight for the toilet.

Lying half-asleep, I hear sounds from all around. As soon as we're still, the first Siamese makes its way through the gate. In a second, the rest of the gang slinks through the rickety aluminum windows and rusty gate like it's party time. If Winston or Jennifer is lying next to me, I cling to them and hold my breath for as long as I can. I shut my eyes and pretend to sleep, thinking maybe these felines have a sixth sense and they'll go about their business and leave me alone. I cover my ears so I won't hear their blood-curdling growls, battling over whatever is in the kitchen.

Make them go away! I pray with my eyes shut so tight that they hurt. *Make them go! Please God ... please!*

I hear more wailing as one Siamese wolfs down something odious. I never call out for Māma, not even when a large, black Siamese that's missing an ear rakes me with its claws. When I awaken, the sheet is streaked with bloody stain.

"It wasn't me," I try explaining, but Māma is angry because now she has more to wash just to get rid of the bloody stain.

I never got over the hisses and yowls of cats. The way they whine and cry like a baby drives fear through my spine. My stomach churns. My heart pounds. Call me paranoid or an ailurophobe. I can appreciate a cat's grace and agile poise, but I prefer to stay away from them. We can never coexist. We should never get in each other's way.

Ironically, I deeply admire lions. My fixation came about when I accompanied Bāba to the coffee shop each morning for his dose of Guinness Stout. I slouched over the sticky uneven table to study the oval logo on the bottle, marveling at the untamed fringe of the long mane, swaying to the wind as he charges toward what he wants. He never hesitates or stalks. He never creeps or hides. His prey has no escape now, leaving merely a faint heartbeat to pure surrender. If only I could be as gallant and valiant as the king of the jungle. His audacious confidence to conquer are formidable. He will achieve his goal.



One Sunday morning, Māma finds out there's a seamstress in the neighborhood who needs help to watch her four-year-old daughter so she can go to work. Māma agrees to care for the child, thinking this is the answer to her prayer for some extra income.

The only nice thing about having a younger child in the house is that she has to regard me as her older sister, which puts me on a higher status now that I'm no longer the youngest. This is my first encounter with another child in my household. I'm not sure how Māma is going to treat her and me, but I finally have someone to play with.

Ah Cheng is a novelty. Everyone is excited to give her our attention. We want to hold her, cuddle her, and dote on her, but within a few months, Māma's agitation with Ah Cheng becomes apparent.

Māma is supposed to get twenty dollars each month for babysitting, but her mother never pays. The debts start to pile up. One month, then two, and then three. Māma may not be literate, but she manages to scribble some sloppy accounting on a small pink notebook for all of the back payments.

Over the next few months, the debts keep mounting, but Ah Cheng continues to be dropped off regardless. Sometimes, her mother doesn't even pick her up and she has to sleep over. Other times, we have to keep her over the weekend and even during public holidays. Soon, it becomes apparent that we are her foster family. Ah Cheng is never going to go home.

Māma is not pleased with this presumptive arrangement. Ah Cheng's mother is obviously taking advantage of us. Not only is there no additional income, but we now have another mouth to feed.

"I should have said no!" Māma regrets while lashing out at Ah Cheng. "Your mother is so manipulative and deceitful. Says she needs to work, but never pays me a single cent!"

I can't tell if Ah Cheng is embarrassed or guilty about this whole situation. She is only four or five years old. I squat in the corner of the living room, watching Māma badgering and slapping her, but I dare not do anything. I don't know if I should be on Māma's side or Ah Cheng's

side. Even though Ah Cheng never utters a word in retaliation, I know she feels responsible for her mother's debts. Maybe it's her way of letting Māma release her injustice.

"If you want to blame someone, then blame your own mother. She's the one who gave birth to you and then couldn't afford to raise you!"

With great tremor, Ah Cheng bows her head as low as her neck would go, sniffing and biting her lips while her tears bleed down her pinkish cheeks.

"Wipe up those tears," Māma yells. "Don't think for once I'm going to pity you. And mop up my floor."

I walk nimbly past the commotion and step outside onto the balcony, staring at the brown patch of dead grass, something I often do to tune myself out. I resent being such a coward. Why can't I stand up for something for once? But what would that be? If I choose justice, then who is going to protect Ah Cheng? If I choose mercy, then who is going to feed our family? Still a child myself, I am confused and torn.

Six years have passed, nothing much has changed except Ah Cheng has another sister. Once again, her mother begs Māma to take care of her newborn and promises to pay up this time. Māma reluctantly agrees, giving in to her inability to say *No*.

This new baby seems to be different. She has thick, black, long eyelashes; a feature Chinese parents find exceptionally delicate. My whole family grows so fond of her like she was part of us. I even named her Sharlynn. For me, Sharlynn is like a new doll, and she feels cuddly, unlike her sister.

Something is different. The baby has a black, circular half-millimeter birthmark on the right side of her forehead. It is a Chinese belief that if a birthmark is hidden, in this case under her hair, then it's an auspicious sign.

Māma has a skin-colored mole on the right side of her upper lip, but since it is not hidden, she resigns to her fate that life is never going to be blissful. She expects herself to be in a state of constant misfortune by almost seeking after it, like the Zen proverb, *“Man stands in his own shadow and wonders why it’s dark.”*

Even now, Māma refuses to allow herself a millisecond of enjoyment, whether it’s dining out, buying a new outfit, getting a perm, or putting on makeup. She feels as if giving in to comfort and indulging in a little luxury will negate everything she has gone through and diminish her claim to have lived a hard life. She likes to remind us that no one will ever empathize with her hardship and suffering.

Day and night, I see Māma washing piles of cloth diapers and baby clothes, but still not getting paid. With the water bill increasing and stability diminishing, I grow angrier and angrier with this injustice.

Additional children in the home are hard on younger children by nature. Not only does Māma feed these girls, but she also has to clean them, do their laundry, and pay attention to their emotional needs.

Ah Cheng grows jealous of the attention Sharlynn is getting, and so do I. I want to be noticed too. I feel as if I’m doubly invisible now with these two girls in our family. Will I ever be Māma’s baby again?

“I only nursed you once,” Māma recalls as she caresses my back. “I was always busy doing this or that, sewing, cooking, cleaning. No help. You had the least nourishment of all the children. You were always by yourself. Very good girl. Hardly cried, except the time when you got burned.”

Māma holds up my right hand to examine the scar, now wrinkly and less noticeable.

When I was about two, I crawled around the living room to track wherever Māma went. One time, after ironing, Māma had turned off the switch but left the

vertical-standing iron to cool. She proceeded to make dinner, forgetting that I would be tracing behind her. When I tugged on the cloth on the floor, the iron fell flat on my right hand.

The iron was heavy; I couldn't withdraw my hand from underneath, so I let it sit there and mumbled, not even crying. I'm not sure why, but perhaps the intense heat had killed the nerves.

Minutes passed, Māma was still cooking. I don't know how long my hand was pinned underneath the hot surface. When she finally turned around, it was too late.

She instinctively lifted the iron, but my stubborn infant skin would not unglue from the scorching surface. Māma impatiently waited for the iron to cool, staring in shock while meticulously peeling off the slimy flesh, like the thin layer of skin underneath a hard-boiled egg, willingly forgoing a few layers of the skin.

"You didn't cry loud enough; that's why I didn't hear you," Māma admits with a deflated sigh. "You just wailed and croaked, 'nnn ... nnn ... nnn' so no one paid attention. You didn't even have the strength to moan."

Mā beats herself up every time we talk about the mishap even though I don't recall an ounce of pain.

She presses me closer to her chest. "That was the first time I nursed you. The only time you ever had Māma's milk."

Each time I see the scar on my hand, I think only about Māma holding me close to her bosom, brushing my long black hair, kissing my forehead and right hand, to comfort me.

Māma is the sole breadwinner since Bāba drifts from job to job. The babysitting is not only depriving us of the additional income but has become a burden. No matter how Māma calculates it, we still end up being the doormat.

The mere sight of Ah Cheng agitates Māma so much that she does not allow us to play with her. Ah Cheng

gets all the heat in the house because she's the older sister and the start of a bad chain of debts. The babysitting arrangement changed Māma from being a benevolent soul to an unfeeling neighbor. The worst part is I mimic Māma's tone and mannerisms toward the girls.

Both Ah Cheng and Sharlynn are only a few years apart. We eat the same food, sleep under the same roof, and get our fair share of beating and scolding from Māma, yet, my contempt and hatred become more apparent each day. I don't know why. I take a quiet pleasure in tormenting Ah Cheng by ignoring her and shaming her so I can upset her day. I want someone to pay for my anger, for the money owed us, the suffering that my family has to go through because of her penniless, manipulative, and selfish mother.

My experiences with these girls are the beginning of my search for vindication. There's no such thing as kindness in the real world. It doesn't pay to pay it forward. It's like poker. I can bluff my way into winning. I can win by learning to be a liar and exonerate myself by begging for sympathy and forgiveness afterward. God doesn't care one bit since he allows us to be the victims. I can do whatever the hell I want. I get to play mercy or justice at my own discretion. I take things into my own hands and determine I will never again fall prey to manipulations.

I am cynical about everyone and everything. I see only the faults in others. I don't trust any gestures of humanity, kindness, or generosity. I reject affection. I become my own gatekeeper and guard against anyone who tries to pry into my emotions to get me to feel something.

Māma's anger at not getting paid inescapably bleeds deeper into me. My instinctive reaction to any mishandling is to preserve my own self-interest, even at the expense of others. I resent anyone who is wealthy or has it easy for them when it comes to making a living.

My survival mode kicks in, and I'm at war with everyone, even myself. Everyone is a suspect. Everyone is an enemy. If there are going to be winners and losers, then I must win. I gear up for a strong defense because I swear I'm not going to end up like Māma at the losing end.

I've no idea what fuels this indignation, but I take pleasure in seeing others get their share of bad luck. If people, even so-called friends, can treat my family this way, then why shouldn't I do the same? I don't want to be a bully, but I also don't want to be bullied. Every petty injustice provokes me. I just want to vindicate. I harbor such a perverse consciousness of misbehavior that I become a fugitive entrapped by my own snare.

I hate myself.

Chapter 2
MĀMA TERESA

*Sometimes the things we can't change end up changing us
instead.*

∞ *Moi*

*M*āma was named after Mother Teresa. A doctor at a local hospital gave her the English name when she was young and was helping out there. She likes having a Christian name because it makes her sound more educated. Her given name is Joo Hiang, but everyone calls her Ah Hiang. We have nicknames, proper names, formal names, names we keep secret for good luck, and a name for official use only, like our middle name. I don't know why I'm called *Ah Hong* after my family's last name. I know Māma calls me that because she can't pronounce *Barbara*.

The Chinese regard names as a powerful foreshadowing of one's destiny—success, prosperity, health, and intelligence. In many respects, a child's name says

more about the parents' hopes and dreams for the child than it does about the child. Children try to live up to what their names connote.

Winston and Phillip's Chinese middle names are about heralding an abundance of wealth. Since males are the sole breadwinners, their names are a foreshadowing of future prosperity in providing for their family. Jennifer and I were given middle names that denote gems to signify both physical beauty and riches. My name "Siew Swan" means *beautiful diamond* while Jennifer's name "Siew Kim" means *beautiful gold*. Māma had little to do with naming us since she is not literate and can't pen a single stroke.

For my English name, Bāba selected the blue-eyed, powerhouse vocalist Barbra Streisand, with a slightly different spelling. Either he was drunk at the time or it was a harbinger of how my life will be. While I don't know another soul named Barbara in Singapore, I wonder why Bāba chose a name that means foreigner or traveler from a strange land.

Bāba enjoys watching American movies and picked out our Christian names randomly from Hollywood characters, like Jennifer and Phillip. Winston, on the other hand, was named after the cigarette brand. (I can't imagine it was for Winston Churchill!)

Māma never learned to write her name, not in English at least, but with some effort, she could partially sketch her Chinese name. She also figured out some basic addition and subtraction on her own when she needed to account for the babysitting debts. For the most part, holding a pen or pencil is still beyond her. For years, Māma struggled to teach herself to write, and only in her late forties did she manage to memorize enough strokes to read some scriptural verses and pen a few Chinese characters.

Māma was born on the mountainside; that's what the section of Singapore was called, even though there aren't any real mountains in Singapore, just small hills. Her

mother had a friend who lived on the other side of town called the countryside, and they visited frequently. This friend was married, but she couldn't bear any children, and she adored Māma so much.

“Why not let Ah Hiang stay here and be my daughter?” she wondered.

Māma was four, and of course, exhilarated and flattered that a stranger would want her as her daughter. She didn't mind calling her Māma too.

Māma's father had a decent job in the government housing office and could support all nine children. It seems mysterious and laughable that such a whimsical arrangement was even considered.

Māma was given away for no apparent reason. There was no payment, no receipt, and no legal documentation. A one-time casual conversation on a Sunday afternoon and, poof, Māma belonged to another family. The anecdote doesn't make any sense at all. I never felt like Māma told me the whole story.

Didn't she realize that the Sunday she was dropped off with a plastic bag of her clothes and personal items that she wasn't going to come back home?

Didn't she realize that it was not a sleepover or a weekend visit? I assume her mother said some tearful farewells to her, but maybe not.

Didn't Māma feel abandoned? Maybe she wished she had been born to her new family anyway. Don't we all wish that once in a while? I do.

I wonder what my life would be like if I had another family. Could Māma have given me away?

Over the next few days and weeks, Māma became homesick and begged to go home, but this lady said she was too busy to take her. Soon, days became weeks, and weeks turned into months and years.

A year after Māma was “dropped off,” the woman got pregnant and was blessed with her own child. Over the

next few years, three more arrived. Māma's hands were full each minute; mopping, washing, cooking, and changing diapers—the cloth kind. She only had experienced two days of formal schooling in her life and was kept at home. Māma wished she could learn and swears she would have been the most diligent student. I believe her just by watching how hard she tries to read the Bible. She sits in her bed for hours, even as she's aching with osteoporosis, poor eyesight, and other aging issues, just to decipher a few characters. She never stops teaching herself.

I'm ashamed that I never took the time to teach Māma how to write a word, not even a single alphabet or Chinese character. I admit I'm not good at Chinese, in fact, I hate Chinese, but she's my Māma, and I should have done more.

Whenever Māma shares her childhood stories, I have this sneaking suspicion that she was treated more like a child slave than an adopted daughter. The way she tells it, her new life was all about drudgery. She took care of all the younger ones since her new mother was the family's breadwinner. The husband, an opium addict, couldn't sustain a job. Māma ended up taking on the heaviest load and the most onerous tasks around the house.

I have never seen a photograph of Māma as a young girl. I don't know how she looked when she was little, how she dressed, what kind of activities she did, or who her friends were. I imagine that at age five or six, all she ever did was bounce a baby (or maybe two) on her hip to keep one calm and feed the other one. I could see her cooking or washing dishes while rocking an infant next to her. I could see her squatting on the floor mopping or cleaning up milk spills, never a dull moment to savor her own childhood.

When her father learned she had been given away, he was terribly distraught. Still, I don't know why he didn't just jump on a bus and bring her home. After all, the

agreement was not legally binding, and the distance was less than an hour away. They knew she missed home and her brothers and sisters. They knew she was sad and being abused. They knew she was not attending school. Still, not one word about bringing her home. Perhaps the tradition is that once something, or someone, is given away, it's gone forever, lost and forgotten, so people should just move on and not talk about it anymore.

Maybe Māma didn't expect her new life to be any different from how she had lived previously, but each time she talks about her adoptive family, her eyes are devoid of life, and tears begin to well up. I'm not sure whom she resents more; her adopted family for the abuse or her biological mother for giving her away.

Māma must feel so hurt for being regarded as the lesser child among her eight siblings; the sister that no one missed, the daughter who could be given up, the child who was expendable. How could a mother give up her own flesh and blood after carrying the child in her womb for nine months and then nurturing her for years, watching her grow and crawl, walk and fall, laugh and cry? And why didn't her father, who opposed vehemently, rescue her?

Whenever I push Māma with these questions, she sighs, "Some things are better left unsaid; questions better left unanswered, and memories better left untouched. The truth is not always pretty. Why dig out what you can't change?"



I grew up visiting two grandmas from Māma's side of the family. We called them both *Ah Mah*. Every elderly person is an *Ah Mah* (grandma) or *Ah Gong* (grandpa). Everyone else is an aunty or uncle. That's how we show respect, even if we're not related by blood. There is much unresolved

distance in our extended family. I don't remember ever being close to any one of them.

My adoptive grandmother is a petite but strong person. She only wears the traditional Chinese one-size-fits-all blank satin pants and cotton blouse that overlaps across her chest. We refer to her as *Country Mah* because she lives in the rural part of Singapore. She is a tireless woman with her right eyelid constantly drooping limply from her weary brow, always hurrying about as if she's behind in her chores. Her energy is contagious, and everyone who speaks to her dares not defy her. Her husband died in his fifties from an opium overdose, so she had to raise all the children by herself. I've never met him but I often saw his picture on the living room wall next to the Buddha altar.

Country Mah runs a canteen stall with one of her daughters and son-in-law, so she always has something cooking in the kitchen—an open cement floor overflowing with utensils, containers, and baskets of every kind. The kitchen area spills into the back alley, where the toilet and shower are located. The toilet door resembles a medieval dungeon door with the wide, heavy wooden block and one-inch thick iron hinges and sliding bar locks. Only a sledgehammer could knock down that thing. Because the toilets are linked to the back alley, rats and cats often stroll in and out throughout the day, sniffing for food from the kitchen.

One time, Country Mah asked me to hand her some noodles she had just fried. As I reached for the bowl, a mammoth sized, rat jumped right off the shelves and onto my face. The bowl went flying into the air, as did the pots and pans on the stovetop. Grandma grabbed a heavy bristle brush from behind the refrigerator and chased that irksome beast into the toilet. She gave it a big flush, and it torpedoed down the hole. I'm not sure it drowned because the next morning, while I was in the toilet, an identical

beast jumped right out of the hole and scurried into the back alley.

I S-C-R-E-A-M-E-D and pandemonium ensued!

After that incident, I dared not use her toilet again. All I could think of was that loathsome rodent leaping out of a pit and wildly biting at me.

If Bàba beats up Māma then we have to spend the night at Country Mah's place. When this happens, I can never fall asleep until the wee hours of the morning because I'm afraid I'll be brutally attacked by rodents. When I finally do fall asleep I have violent nightmares about the disgusting creatures.

Country Mah is still alive and strong today at age 104 and can give chase to those shameless intruders whenever they invade her kitchen.

Māma got married at twenty-four and left the countryside to move to the Toa Payoh housing flats. Now she's able to visit her biological mother and does so faithfully each week. We call her *Mountain Mah*, because she lives on the mountainside in a shack. I like visiting her because the mountainside is greener and cooler than our overheated flat.

Mountain Mah was once a slender, beautiful lady—tall and shapely with long, elegant fingers; small, slanted eye; and a tight waist, like Māma. Now she has no teeth so when she speaks, her lips smack jerkily and she spits involuntarily.

Unlike western grandmas who dote on their grandchildren, Asian grandmas are the opposite. The minute a grandchild is born, the grandma takes over how the child is raised. They are harshly stern, nitpicky, and tolerate no nonsense. There's no pampering allowed. They consider themselves to be the disciplinarians in the family since they're the most experienced adult in raising children. Chinese grandchildren try to avoid grandmas as much as possible, at least I do.

“Ah Hong! Ah Hong!” Mountain Mah smacks her lips as she yells into the air, “Get over here now. I’m talking to you. You’re grown now. You don’t visit anymore. No respect. If I die, you won’t even know who I am.”

Mountain Mah always talks like that, as do old people in general, about dying and about being forgotten by their descendants. She is disgruntled about how grandchildren forget their roots and neglect their elders. We have mastered the art of drowning out her grumblings.

“Yes, Ah Mah.” That’ll hold her tongue for a few hours before she starts smacking her lips again to chasten us.

All Mountain Mah does is foretell of her death and make it sound like we have already abandoned her. Māma seizes the opportunity and reiterates, “When I get old, I’d be so lucky if one of you should faithfully visit me like I do my māma.”

Then both Mountain Mah and Māma would weep and compare about how pathetic their lives are, marrying the wrong man and being forsaken by their children.



My favorite time is staying overnight at Mountain Mah’s shack. It doesn’t happen too often. Phillip and I love to see who can spot a monkey in the nearby rainforest or chase after wild rabbits.

Our favorite activity is climbing the huge rambutan tree. This is a small, reddish tropical fruit with hairy skin and a translucent egg-like flesh that’s sweet. The only troublesome part is I can never figure out how to chew the fresh part without biting into the husk of the pit. Jennifer, on the other hand, is a pro. She has a way of figuring out any challenge related to food.

Mountain Mah’s farm also has an evergreen mangosteen tree. This is my favorite because they’re easy to

peel, but I must be careful never to let the reddish-purple skin stain my clothes, or it'll never come off. The edible endocarp is shaped like an almond and the flesh inside is tangy and juicy. Of course, Jennifer and I have a stomachache due to overeating.

The scariest part of the shack is bath time. The bathroom is a five by three feet brick wall. There's no window, only a small opening for some outside light to enter. In one corner is a two-foot-tall clay pot filled with cold water. Usually, my uncle, who stays with Mountain Mah, goes to the well to draw buckets of water early in the morning, and this pot is to last throughout the day for everyone to use.

"Conserve water. Don't use too much," Mountain Mah reminds us. "There are others who need to bathe, too. Only wash where you need it most."

It is too creepy to shower. I don't trust the water or the door. We use the same pot for brushing our teeth too.

Toward the evening, my sister and I skip to a tiny candy stand where we have to duck our heads to enter. To buy some, the boys get fifty cents while the girls get twenty cents from an aunty or uncle who's visiting. Oh, if only I were a boy.

Everyone fusses over grandsons as if they're rare gems given to only the luckiest parents. Granddaughters, on the other hand, are temporary goods stored away until we're married off for a reasonable endowment.

Among other things, Mountain Mah's shack lacks a septic system. Typically, about eight to ten families within the block are assigned to two communal toilets, two-by-three feet each. These concrete cesspools are built in the public sidewalks so families can access them. Each unit has a visible hole underground with an oval-shaped bucket that collects the waste. Twice a day, the disposal men clear the buckets in a truck and then place the same buckets back in the hole. If I'm lucky enough to catch an empty bucket, I

don't have to withstand the foul smell of a full tank. However, if I need to go at the last wave of the bucket, then I not only have to shoo away multitudes of giant flies attacking me while doing my business, but I also have to pray my addition doesn't overflow the bucket. I don't know why that should matter because I'm not the one picking up that bucket, but somehow the thought of not making it into the bucket is nauseating. Other than that, Mountain Mah's place is like a vacation to me, the only kind I know.

Even in the mountainside, Māma's unhappiness is like the bad air that won't settle. She hates and loves her two mothers at the same time. She struggles to find her identity but often returns to the childhood she claims was stolen from her. I see the uncertainty in Māma's eyes. She's still afraid of being abandoned. No one in her family ever talks about her other life. Everyone treats it like nothing had happened and Māma just went away for a long summer break. No one asks about her childhood, school or servitude. There's no apology, no inquisition, no talking about it at all.

Before we leave, Māma slips ten or twenty dollars into Mountain Mah's hand. I am disgusted because we can't even afford food and here's Māma giving up our food money to a mother who has disowned her. She can't help trying to buy her way back to her mother's heart.

"Why, Mā? Why do you need to give her money, and so much? She didn't even raise you."

"You wouldn't understand," Māma reckons. "No matter how old you are, your Māma is your Māma."

She's right. I'll never understand how or why Māma agonizes to make sense of all this. I suspect now, as I have grown older and come into myself, that Māma is entangled with emotions about her own children's successes. She's thrilled, jealous, resentful, and proud of me, all at the same time. She smiles at my ability to beat the odds but also begrudges me for defining a future for myself.

“Mā, aren’t you proud of me?” I beg to know.

Māma doesn’t respond; instead, she hunches her shoulders and turns away.

“You are just lucky. You don’t know how hard I had it. You are given everything on a silver platter. You live in a fantasy world. I gave you a life, a decent one, too, that I never had. That’s why you are successful. Don’t think for one second you did this on your own. You’ve no idea what real suffering is.”

Even now, when I visit her, she compares aspects of her life to mine and does not allow me one moment to savor a sense of personal pride for what I have accomplished. She makes a point to remind each of us that if she had never married Bāba or sacrificed herself for us, then she would have been a hundred times the person she is, and none of us would have matched her.

I know Māma went through the valley of the shadow of death to give me life, and I’ll forever be indebted to her. I know I didn’t get to where I am today without her daily toils. Of course, I know Bāba wasn’t good to her for most of their marriage. But, for one moment, why can’t she just give me a little credit for my own effort? For once, why can’t she stop bringing up her childhood as a comparison?

All I ever want is to please her. Why can’t Māma be happy for me? Why can’t she accept me for who I am? I want to be the center of attention for once and be acknowledged for once.

“No one had it worse than me,” Māma wallows in her episodic sob stories, “so you don’t have the right to be miserable.”

Māma thinks I had it easy even when I try to share my struggles with her. She always has to emerge as the greater martyr. It is hard to breathe around her sometimes, and there’s simply not enough room for the both of us to talk about our lives. I suspect Māma would be happier if I had stumbled more through life.

No matter how old I get, I still yearn for some motherly empathy and words of wisdom, but I can never get anything from her. I stop bringing up my battles in life. I can see her laughing in my face and mocking me. Because she's my Māma, her words pierce sharper than anyone else's and linger longer in my heart and my mind.

When I think about life and what can go wrong, I think of Māma, the child whom no one saw as she really was. She hoped things would be different when she became an adult, but they weren't. Her marriage to Bāba was a prearranged sham. She had given up the prospect of ever being free or happy.

She reminisces about the time she worked at a hospital and there was a young doctor whom she was fond of. He liked her as well, but she was already betrothed to Bāba. The irony is that for Māma, a servant child, to be promised to a man from an upper-middle class family, like Bāba, was an honor.

"You should consider yourself so lucky that someone wanted to marry you," Mountain Mah awakens her. "Instead of commiserating over your fate, you should be grateful you have a chance at a new life, unlike me."

Māma was so anxious to abandon her lamentable life that she would have married anyone who would take her. She wants to be sure she passes this same notion to my sister and me.

"If someone wants you, just marry him. Don't think too much about how you feel. You would be so fortunate to be selected."

"Marriage," Māma explains, "is about being claimed, not loved. No one can love you more than your own Māma."

Sometimes, when the noise in the apartment has settled, not that it ever becomes completely quiet, Māma shares random stories from her childhood.

“When I was small ...” she begins as she threads the needle in her sewing machine. I lean forward, expecting a story of some adventure or wild mischief.

“Just before monsoon season when it’s getting cooler, but the heavy rain has not come, there is an hour or two when I’m not cooking or cleaning. I climb a tree, look out across a field, and see the shack we live in. Everything looks so small and faraway. I wonder what my own māma is doing and if she’s coming to rescue me.”

Māma speaks of that moment with a special kind of wonder, not that she had climbed a tree and seen far beyond, but that she had been free for a brief time to be a child. That instance, time stopped and she was allowed to be a child again and see the world outside her servitude.

Whenever Māma talks about her past, she expects me to feel sympathetic for her and to imagine her torture as she describes it. She expects me to say something to applaud her sacrifices and then crown her with praises of bravery. If I don’t respond with applause, she gets agitated. What does she want from me—pity, sympathy, empathy, or admiration? Maybe everything, or maybe nothing.

I long to know what she has been through, but each time she relates her past, she takes it out on me as the perpetrator of all her sorrows. She resents my dull regards for her afflictions while sailing towards my own bright horizon. No matter what image I summon of Māma, solace is not in the vicinity.

She’s doing something, day and night, night and day. Māma works wonders with those hands like an unstoppable octopus; scrubbing, cleaning, mopping, washing, making the house miraculously organized beneath those piles of junk.

She bends over the sewing machine with pins in her mouth, biting off a strand of thread, pedaling the foot-operated lever as rapidly as she can to finish an outfit and deliver it on time to secure a few dollars.

No matter how angry she is with Bàba, or how tired she is, she gets up each morning and carries on with her day. She never asks for a few more minutes to sleep in or take a day off. Bàba is the opposite. He's kind one minute, even expansive, and the next he's drunk. When he's out of it, he groans, moans, reproves Māma with vulgarities, and kicks her in her stomach, slaps her, and punches her. We never know when Māma and Bàba are going to blow up at each other. Every night and day, we gnaw our fingernails, hoping to find a place of refuge to escape whatever new plight comes our way.

In anticipation of Bàba coming home, Māma makes us pluck the roots of each bean sprout because he hates the rusty brown look, and it's the only vegetable we can afford. He considers the roots to be dirty and unnatural. All the girls in the household, including Ah Cheng and Sharlynn, sit on the muggy kitchen floor plucking away the pounds of sprouts Māma bought from the wet market. We chat and laugh and compete to see who can finish the largest pile before Bàba gets home, if he does.

Bàba always eats first, so we don't mess up the presentation of the dish, or else he won't eat. He's fastidious that way. He likes his rice a certain texture, his chopsticks placed in a certain way, and his beer at a certain temperature. If things aren't exactly the way he wants them, he throws a tantrum. The goal each night, if Bàba comes home, is to make sure he's happy.

"If he's happy, then he'll come home again tomorrow night," Māma rationalizes.

One night, Bàba sat down to eat his dinner but noticed a few brown roots from the sprouts. He got so irate that he threw the plate across the kitchen, shattering it all over the floor. He started slapping and yelling at us.

"Sorry, sorry. I should have made sure," Māma begs. "Don't be mad. It's my fault. Don't hit the kids, please, don't. Please don't."

She grabs a cloth from the sink to wipe the floor, salvaging whatever sprouts in one palm while picking up the broken glass with the other, cutting herself left and right.

“This is the only dish we have for dinner. The kids have nothing to eat now,” she cries, still bleeding.

“Mā, it’s ok,” Jennifer comforts her, “We will eat whatever is salvaged from the floor. The floor gives an extra special flavor.”

We all start laughing again as we wipe off our tears. Bàba storms out, to drink of course, and who knows what unearthly time he’ll come home tonight.

When Māma is not cleaning, she is clucking happily and snipping loose threads from designer clothing—Guess, Polo, Gap, Calvin Klein, Tommy, and Oshkosh B’Gosh.

Before clothes are delivered to the retail stores, the excess threads are trimmed away so that each outfit looks neat on the shelf. For every dozen trimmed, we make about thirty cents. Typically, Māma asks for ten to twenty dozen of garments, so she can earn enough to cook one meal for us. The clothes are delivered at four in the afternoon and picked up the next day at the same time. We have exactly twenty-four hours to trim every item of apparel we picked up or else we can’t get as much apparel the next time. More trimming means more food.

My sister and I snip the most. As soon as Ah Cheng and Sharlynn can handle scissors, they help, too. We compete to see who can trim the fastest. Of course, Winston and Phillip never lifted a finger for menial chores like this. They are boys.

Until I came to America, I had never heard of these brands. They were merely pieces of clothing and money for food. Now, when I see someone wearing designer clothes, it brings back memories of my childhood labor in that sweatshop. Have consumers ever stopped to think what it takes to bring one piece of clothing to the shelf?

I'm still obsessed with pulling loose threads whenever I see one hanging off someone's apparel. This is the most stable income we have, but it's not enough to keep us afloat. Māma decides to find something to sell. This is ironic because she's not a very good cook, a trait I apparently inherited.

"Burnt onions, meat, mushy, overcooked cabbage," Bāba says about her cooking, "She even burns rice."

Māma picks up some random recipe from a neighbor and starts to experiment with making curry chicken puffs. She rolls the dough flat and cuts little circles to make two halves, then stuffs seasoned chicken and curry potato mix in between the fold. The secret to a good curry puff is to fold the seams neatly so when it is in the hot oil, the stuffing doesn't fall out.

Initially, my stuffing keeps falling out, so they're not fit for sale, but I quickly get the hang of it. I need to be more agile to tuck each crease and create the uniform pleats. When the dough is ready to be fried, it takes five minutes to create a golden-brown, fresh, crispy puff. I become really good at folding the intricate pattern. The puffs may be a little rough around the edges, but they look good enough to sell for fifty cents apiece.

"Take your hands off," Māma slaps my hands. "If you want to try one, take a burnt one. No one buys those."

The aroma of the savory batter and spicy curry fills the whole apartment. I'm hungry. I am always hungry, like an earthworm digging for food constantly.

Jennifer carefully places each puff in a neat sequence, about fifty of them, and covers them with a towel to keep the flies away.

Jennifer and I are the only ones who are excited about selling these puffs. Winston and Phillip would never stoop so low as to sell food in the street. I like to sell because I love the adrenaline rush when I offer something

wonderful to people and see their faces light up. It's like opening the door to a bouquet of flowers.

"Curry puffs. Curry puffs? Curry puffs! Delicious, hot curry puffs!" Jennifer recites the rhythm. It sounds like one of the Chinese songs we sing beneath our blanket.

She approaches everyone everywhere, fearlessly—on the balcony, in the hallway, in the middle of the stairs, and along the walkway.

"Here, fifty cents. They're still hot, fresh. Try one."

If the puffs aren't selling by afternoon, Jennifer drops the price to forty, thirty, even twenty cents. Sometimes, she'll throw in two for seventy-five cents. She's the best at negotiating and teaches me how to work people's appetite by persuading them to imagine biting into one of the puffs.

One time, she stops a man, probably a government official or insurance salesman, in a nice suit. I don't know why he's in our neighborhood. I hunch my shoulders and shrink back, letting Jennifer do the talking because it's actually illegal to sell without a permit. He looks into the basket and picks out three puffs, hands her two dollars, and says "keep the change." Jennifer and I stare at each other like we've just won a lottery.

"Wow, Mā is going to be so happy! We're rich!"

Seeing Jennifer happy makes me even more excited to become a salesgirl. I want to be like her and learn the art of persuasion. When I grow up, I want to go door-to-door to sell something. Imagine how much money I'd make. I am confident I can convince anyone to buy anything.

Jennifer and I beg Māma to let us eat the leftover puffs for dinner, even if they are not shaped the best. By then, the puffs are cold and greasy, but they're the yummiest things we've eaten all day.

Chapter 3
HOLLOW LOVE

Life keeps throwing me curveballs, and I don't even own a bat. At least my dodging skills are improving.
~ Jayleigh Cape

Bàba is an average man, five feet or so, with a beer belly. His skin is exceptionally dark for a Chinese adult, probably from patrolling under the sun. His best trait is his genial and alluring smile. In his policeman days, in his twenties, he had a relatively good physique. His voice was husky and deep, commanding at times. He had everything it takes to be an officer.

The memories of B`aba are fragmented. I can't put together a complete picture of him even now. I look at the photos of him before he got married, before he started drinking, before he had us. Those images show a regular-looking young man with a happy life ahead of him.

Bàba is a hulking presence to be avoided, especially compared to Māma, a fine-boned and small-waisted woman. I never hear Bàba praise Māma for anything, not her looks, her cooking, or her skills, not even for bringing money home. He never looks at her except to yell, usually for something she didn't do right for him, such as his pants being too loose or too tight, that the bed sheets aren't aligned, or the hallway is too narrow. He hardly touches her except to kick her when she's down on her knees, mopping up his spit.

"Clean up now, good for nothing! Get everything clean before I get home!"

Bàba doesn't care one bit if the house is clean or messy. He's hardly home though Māma makes us keep the house dust-free for the sake of the garments we cut. She also drives home the notion that Bàba is more pleased to come home to a clean house than a messy one.

"If we keep the house clean," Māma says, "Bàba is more likely to come home. If not, it's your fault, all of your fault."

We clean to please our anxious Māma and to calm her down as she anticipates Bàba's homecoming and, hopefully, a peaceful night.

Jennifer is the natural apartment cleaner. She's swift and has good eyes for where things can be hidden. She packs them so neatly you can hardly tell there was a pile of unwanted items there in the first place. We girls are the only ones doing the chores. The boys never lift a finger to help. I hate it that Māma never calls on the boys to do anything, not even to carry the heavy garments up and down from the parking lot each afternoon. We scrub the floor, clean the dishes, and spread newspapers to cover up piles of clutter in every corner. As long as we keep the mess out of Bàba's sight, it doesn't matter where we pile things up.

“Hurry, put all the clothes away. Quick, he’s on his way up!”

We go into a frenzy when we hear Bàba parking his car and scramble to make a pathway for him to enter like he’s a Hollywood celebrity arriving for the movie premier on a red carpet. Each night is a dramatic night. Our neighbors must be looking forward to our nightly soap opera to find out the latest plot developments. Māma scrambles to pick up the last strands of thread while frantically pushing the rest of the unsnipped garments under the couch. The irony is, Bàba is so drunk he never notices anything anyway. Māma teaches us to believe in miracles, and that one of these days, perhaps today, Bàba is going to be a different man.

“If you are good and obedient, maybe this will be the day God listens to our prayers and changes your Bàba.”

At ten, I am paranoid about everything I do and don’t do. The fear of not pleasing Māma overwhelms me, and if Bàba is really drunk, Māma gets even more upset and reaches for the bamboo cane. Then I have two angry parents to deal with.

“Why are you caning me?” I beg to know.

“I’m angry. I’m angry that God is blind to our suffering.”

Māma goes on to cane me, even as her arms tremble, with tears dripping from her eyes.

There are empty bottles, ten or twenty of them, piled in a corner on the kitchen floor. At one point, we can’t get into the bathroom and have to skip over the bottles to get inside. It’s like an arcade game in an amusement park. Māma keeps these bottles in exchange for a few cents here and there.

When Bàba gets drunk, his speech grows faster and more exuberant, and he boils into anger and blares out vulgarities at everyone.

Māma thinks of running away from home with us, but she doesn't know where to go. We have no friends or relatives who would take us in for a night, and we have no money. Sometimes, when we get home from school, Māma won't let us inside the flat. She meets us in the hallway and whispers, "Go away, and be quiet." We know instantly that Bàba is drunk. Other times, Māma sends us away when Bàba has guests that he picks up from the bar. Māma tries to keep us from knowing who these ladies are, but we're too experienced by now and can tell by the way they dress, smell, walk, and talk that they're prostitutes.

"Go and get beer for our guests! Now! Go!" Bàba screams.

There's no law restricting the sale of alcohol to minors, but at nine or ten, it's embarrassing to run home clutching a bottle of beer. If there are no lady guests, then Māma tells us to take our time coming home with that bottle so she can try to caress Bàba to sleep. If she's unable to get him to sleep, she tells us to hurry home before he smashes too many things around the house. We have to rush back because as much as Bàba hates having no beer, he hates warm beer even more.

I don't know which is worse, having him home and drunk, with call girls sitting in the living room, or not having him home at all. Māma thinks it's better to let Bàba get drunk at home so at least we know where he is and we don't have to hunt him down at a bar or, worse, find him naked or dead in a ditch somewhere.

The smell of beer is all too familiar. That's how Bàba smells. Even with all the other odors at our flat, I can't get away from the one that identifies Bàba. I told myself never to touch anything remotely alcoholic in my life. I hate alcohol and I can't stand to be around alcoholics even more. I don't mean to be unsympathetic toward people overcoming their addiction, but Bàba wasn't trying to overcome anything; he wanted to get drunk every day

and made sure he stayed drunk, never slightly drunk or half-drunk, as some may call it.

As days and years go by, Bàba's sober days become a rarity in our household. As much as I hate buying beer, I like the way the bottles look. Usually, I pick out the dark brownish-colored bottle called Guinness Stout, but a few times I buy the amber bottles or Tiger beer. I like the elegant and alluring motif on the bottle. It's a love-hate relationship. I want to know what makes a man loves this bottle more than his family. What makes a man give up his children's happiness for this bottle? Why would a man throw away everything for this bottle? Maybe I should be like this bottle, and then Bàba will pay some attention to me and love me too.

Bàba hardly brings home money from his day job as a taxi driver. He spends what little he has on beer. Māma seldom gets even ten dollars a week from him. Whatever money we have, we get it from our trimmings of those garments.

Māma has to come up with strategies to cut down the beer expense. She learns to be shrewd very quickly after she married Bàba. She keeps a bottle of beer in a remote place in the kitchen that no one can find, and then she dilutes the beer with tap water until it makes a whole bottle.

She pounds the cap back on neatly with a hammer to make sure Bàba won't suspect it's been opened. Then she wipes the bottle clean and lets it settle in the fridge. In the event that Bàba demands a bottle and Māma is out of cash, she'd dig out that hidden treasure and charge him full price for it. Māma says this will keeps Bàba from getting too drunk because he's drinking diluted alcohol. Why doesn't Bàba realize the beer tastes weaker? After all, he's an alcoholic. Maybe he knew it but did not want to confront Māma, or maybe he's too drunk to tell the difference.

When Māma runs out of every penny and can't afford any beer, she resorts to borrowing from the

neighbors, a dollar here, a dollar there. If all else fails, Māma asks me to knock on every friend's door and beg for a few dollars.

“No, Māma. I don't want to ask people for money; not for beer.”

“We all know what's going to happen when Bāba is desperate for a beer and does not get what he wants.”

Yes, we know that all too well. Bāba is not a nice person if he doesn't get his cold beer promptly. He throws furniture, smashes dishes, and whips us with his cheap plastic belt from his half-fallen pants and brandishes a knife at any of us who gets in his way.

When Bāba finds out Māma has been borrowing from the neighbors, he gets even crazier. Bāba is a prideful person. Everything we do is about saving face—the Chinese etiquette of not embarrassing oneself in public and having a backbone. He never asks for help, especially from his own family.

“I'll never beg, not even from my own mother or sister,” Bāba rants. “I'd starve to death in the streets before I asked for help! If you can't find the money, then cut more and sew more. You are useless! All of you!”

Bāba's vulgarities are a repertoire of every language utterable—Malay, Hokkien, Teochew, and English. There is no way to shield my ears.

“Kneel and pray,” Māma cries, trying to comfort herself and us.

I don't know why, but I think I can only ask for one favor from God in my lifetime, so I have to choose wisely in case He decides to answer me. I'm not sure if I should pray for Bāba to come home drunk, or for him to not come home at all. I don't know if I should pray for him to stop beating us or for him to leave us. I have so many favors to ask of God. Is He there at all?

What if I pray for Bāba to die? Will God answer me?

I am my Bàba's daughter. I don't know how I could pray for anything bad to come upon him. I want to believe there's more to this man. How did a young man with such an affable smile, raised in an upper-middle class home, educated more than others in his generation, turn into the person he is—cursing, abusing, gambling, womanizing and drinking?

His eyes are dull and his jaws slack. He looks angry. He's angry at the world, at his family, at us, and at himself. Does Bàba know how afraid we're of him? At times, his face takes on a gentle look of ineffable sadness, and he reaches out to ruffle my hair or pat Jennifer on the head. We love it when he chats with Winston or jokes with Phillip. We love it when he takes all of us to a movie, like *Jaws* or *Superman*, the only two movies I ever saw with my family. These moments, though rare, are some of our most precious times.

For some reason, Phillip has had the strongest enmity toward Bàba. He received the harshest beating of us all and has never recovered from those scars, both physically and emotionally. Bàba did not stop whipping Phillip even when his nose was bleeding. One of his arms was also permanently fractured by Bàba. The two never saw eye to eye again.

Phillip turns twelve and stops talking to Bàba. Bàba stops talking to him, too. Both become strangers and enemies at the same time. They want nothing to do with each other. As the youngest child, I lost not only one, but two men in my life, at once. We are no longer a family unit. There is no family unit, just a hundred miles of separation between Bàba and Māma, and a hundred more between my brothers and sister. Even Bàba's own siblings assures us that any bàba in the world is better than our own Bàba, mourning, "the sooner he dies, the better you all will be."

I'm not sure I agree. Maybe there's another side of Bàba I don't know yet. He can be cheerful, generous, and

kind. He tells stories about animals, airplanes, and politics, but mostly about cars, and these stories make me laugh so hard that my stomach hurts. He sings songs in local dialects, though I don't understand a word. I enjoy humming along with his happy voice. He tickles me, flips me upside down, and chases me around as dads do. To me, he's as ordinary a Bāba as I can ask for.

Bāba works for a time at a second-hand car dealership. In that early evening time, before the beers get into him, he tells me about the types of cars he might drive home next week, maybe a convertible, a Beetle, or even a Mercedes. These cars are usually old and beat-up, but Bāba fantasizes about being behind the wheel, and we fantasize along with him. My brothers know far more about cars than Jennifer and me, but we all get excited when Bāba starts detailing them to us.

“Imagine driving one of those elegant, bright-red-lipstick-sleek cars like Elvis Presley’s 1960 MG Roadster from *Blue Hawaii*,” Bāba relates from his movie obsession. “Imagine sitting in genuine leather seats with the top down. Imagine powerful engines, comfort, envy . . .”

Bāba helps us picture how we would feel with him behind the wheel, Māma seated in the front with a floral scarf over her head, and all of us squashed in the back—laughing, cheering, and screaming at the top of our lungs. But these chimeras never last long. Bāba’s eyes grow red suddenly. Someone says something and sets him off into a round of profanity.

“Get the hell out! Leave me alone. Useless bunch of brats!”

It’s like a sudden storm; no one knows what happened, and we all try to find shelter until the unexpected tirade passes. When that happens, we give him more beer to calm him down until he passes out. That’s the ploy to get some peace in an alcoholic home.

I hear Bàba moaning in his sleep, “Why me? Why me? I’m better off dead than alive. I have nothing. Nothing.” Then he drowns himself into an alcoholic stupor and falls asleep.



I don’t know Bàba’s side of the family very well, including my grandmother. We call her Fat Granny, but not in a demeaning or disrespectful way; it’s just a lighthearted way of addressing someone close to you. The picture of Fat Granny I have in my mind is not particularly appealing. She looks like a traditional old-fashioned granny style and wears a matching button-up outfit all the time, blue or gray, simple and non-accessorized. What she does possess is a powerful persona. She’s quite tall and large in stature, so when she speaks, her voice demands that everyone turns toward her.

Fat Granny is a legend. Relatives from Bàba’s side of the family speak highly of her as the woman who founded her own empire by building a fleet of taxis. She lives in a nice, two-story bungalow with a carport and a garden bursting with red hibiscus, purple bougainvillea, and all kinds of orchids. She even has her own maid.

What makes Fat Granny extraordinary is that she’s a woman. She took charge of her life when she got married and became a shrewd entrepreneur, something quite unusual for her generation. From what little I know, she was born fairly poor but married a much older, richer man as his second wife. She saved what she had and then did a very simple thing—she invested. With the profits she made, she bought more and more taxis. Before long, she owned a dozen cabs, all in her name.

Fat Granny works ferociously; the upshot is that none of her children are very close to her. Money is what brought the family together, but money is also what tore them apart. It’s as easy to love a child as it is to disrupt that

love at any second. Bàba was the most beloved child of all. He got everything he wanted. He never needed to utter a sound to get what he wanted. He was spoiled from the second he was born, being the oldest child and a male child. Over the years, this created insurmountable rivalry between his siblings, including the biological children of his father's first wife.

We see Bàba's family only three or four times a year. Everyone on that side of the family looks down on us and isn't afraid to let us know what they think of our Bàba. The arguments are always about money. They complain about the way he squanders his mother's inheritance through gambling and drinking before she's even gone, how willful his temperament is, and about his shameless appetite for women. Our weekend visits usually end with a negative tone, with his family saying the sooner Bàba dies, the more peace there will be in the world.

As a child, Bàba was wild and rebellious, but he was also one of the most popular and well-liked kids in school. Māma said he was very smart, and his teachers liked him a lot. He never had to study much to get good grades. He was one of those naturally gifted students. He always aspired to be in law enforcement. He was charismatic in a way that could be quite surprising to many, but these tendencies are also what got him into trouble. He had a hard time saying no to his friends, so he frequently ended up doing whatever it took to please the crowd.

As he grew older, his so-called buddies further exploited those tendencies. Bàba will still do whatever it takes to please his friends; including drink, gamble, and womanize. That's probably how we ended up living in the slums while his siblings live in ritzy bungalows and luxurious townhouses.

It has been rumored from estranged relatives that sibling rivalry has resulted in backstabbing, slander,

betrayal, and defamation. It's all about who gets on the best side of Fat Granny for a bigger piece of her inheritance.

Bàba becomes an even greater disgrace when he refuses to quit his vices. As time moves on, his siblings reject him, and Bàba rejects them in return. We're told to dissociate ourselves from our cousins and relatives because they all have evil intents and are out to see us dead.

I defend Bàba when I hear relatives at weddings or funerals spreading rumors about him. Whenever I see my cousins, I have to ignore them because I don't want to be the black sheep caught socializing with the enemies. My parents don't get along with relatives, but I have no reason to suspect my cousins are part of this discord. Growing up, I never play or communicate with any of them. I barely know their names. To this day, no one remembers how things reached that boiling point, but we all witness how the past generational conflicts have inevitably spilled over from one to the next.



Poh Geok, my older sister, was born right after Winston. When she was nine months old, she had to undergo a difficult surgery to fix a blockage in her bowels. Due to complications, Poh Geok did not make it. Her medical record indicates the cause of death as peritonitis, a life-threatening bacterium that infects the membrane of the abdominal wall supporting the organs. Māma could not afford to bring the baby in for treatment, so the fungus spread into her bloodstream and infected her other organs, causing rapid kidney failure and liver decay.

Sometimes, Māma explains away her sorrow by rationalizing that perhaps Poh Geok wasn't as lucky as the rest of us because she wasn't given a Christian name. Bàba is grief-stricken beyond consolation when his first daughter dies.

“Don’t mention her name,” he laments, “Poh Geok is no longer here. Why talk of her? She’s gone.”

He will never speak of her again, ever. I sense the piercing pain in Māma’s heart, too, each time I ask about the sister I once had. Māma doesn’t want me to get to know her. Maybe she’s trying to protect me from having to carry a burden of loss in my heart. Maybe she’s trying to avoid remembering ever having this daughter. I don’t know how she looked or what she did as a baby. It’s as if Poh Geok was born and then disappeared from the family; as if she never existed. Because I never knew Poh Geok, I never have a sense of loss. Māma struggles when she talks about her, and when she doesn’t talk about her.

“Come, sit here,” Māma says as she lies on her bed and beckons me to listen. “Your sister is such an angel, perfect from head to toe. That’s why God had to take her home. She hardly cried; she was such a good baby, so good that I never knew she was suffering inside. Imagine a baby in pain, and her mother doesn’t even know. She’d have been a wonderful sister to you.”

Tears of sadness and happiness roll simultaneously down her cheeks.

“Your sister was so hungry before her surgery. She looked me in the eyes ... I could tell she wanted me to nurse her,” Māma painfully reminisces.

“I was wearing a stupid one-piece dress, and the zipper was on the back so I couldn’t nurse her. She went into the surgery hungry ... and never woke up again. She wanted to drink Māma’s milk for the last time, and I couldn’t even fulfill her last wish. How can I ever forgive myself?” Māma beats herself up again and weeps.



Before Bàba's rivalry with his siblings left him ostracized from his family, there was a younger brother, Ah Chung, whom Bàba loved and spoiled immensely.

Ah Chung was the baby of the family, so Bàba paid special attention to him. They spend a lot of time together, so much so that Māma complains that Bàba spends more time with Ah Chung than with his own family.

One week after Poh Geok was buried, Bàba was on his way home from work when he saw a commotion on Bukit Timah Road near where Fat Granny lives. He headed toward the scene to see what all the fuss was about.

A huge crowd gathered around a motorbike and a lorry transporting some vegetables. When Bàba finally worked his way through the throng, he recognized the motorcyclist; it was Ah Chun. He was lying face down on the road with his head almost destroyed, bleeding profusely from both ears. He was only twenty-three.

This tragedy sent Bàba into a downward spiral. He liked to have a beer or two before that, but Māma recalls after these two grievous losses, only seven days apart, Bàba began to drink in earnest. The misfortunes cracked him deep inside. Though I wasn't born yet, I imagine what life was like before my sister and uncle died. I picture these newlyweds with a commitment to build a life together. I imagine the joy they felt when their first son was born, followed by a first daughter. I surmise Māma and Bàba worked hard to provide for their children. What more could they ask for?

I envisage my life would have been very different, devoid of the ugliness of gambling, alcohol, profanity, and abuse and filled instead with typical childhood memories—laughter, fun, family meals, occasional sibling fights, and weekend picnics.

In 1967, weeks following these deaths, Bàba lost his job as a police officer because he misfired his gun. Thankfully, no one was hurt. Shortly after that, Bàba found

himself working in a second-hand car dealership. For several years on and off, more off than on. Bàba tried to stay in this line of work, but he couldn't sustain his family. Eventually, he gave up selling cars and resorted to driving taxis. He rented one from his mother, probably the hardest thing he ever had to do. Armed with his taxi license, Bàba vowed to start anew, for his family and himself.

Bàba values his reputation more than anything else. He hates being a driver. He hates being told what to do, and now he has to listen to backseat drivers all day long.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, when Bàba gets home from his shift at work, he stands outside on the front balcony, shirtless, wearing only his loose-fitting, blue-striped, pajama pants. I want to hug him, or be hugged by him and tell him about my day, but I dare not disturb the graveyard silence. The air around him is blue and obscure. I can't make out what he's thinking; if he's in a good mood or not, or if I should talk to him or not.

From our apartment up high, he stares down at the people walking by on the brown patches of grass and puffs away, but interestingly, never with a bottle in his hand. He doesn't like to smoke and drink at the same time, or maybe he thinks these vices should not mix. Maybe one is for ruminating, and the other is for drowning out his thoughts. When I finally work up the courage, I grab his hands. I say nothing as I lie on his shoulder, wrapping my whole self on his arm. He holds my hands gently and puts them close to his chest, as if afraid I may run away if he lets go.

We say nothing.

Chapter 4
TONIC AND TOXIC

Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.

∞ *Amos E. Dolbear*

*M*āma presents the very worst that can happen to us like a spell that binds us and can never be broken. “There’s no such thing as true happiness. If you’re happy, there’s something wrong with you ... You’re born into the unluckiest family. That’s why you have to suffer ... Everyone wants something from you. No one becomes your friend for nothing ... Dreams can only bring you more sorrow and disappointment.”

Since Bāba is hardly around, he doesn’t advise us much—which may be a good thing. Māma speaks about

the people around us as if they're all enemies, and we're prey. She instills in us not to rely on anyone or befriend our relatives. Relatives are people, too, and people only think of their own selfish interests. If anything, relatives want to see us fail and suffer more than anyone else.

I keep Māma's teachings in my heart, but I struggle silently with the conflict that if the world is such an evil place, why are some people so happy?

Māma has special names for me. She often calls me *cabbage head* or *vegetable head*. I'm not sure what they mean, but they don't sound flattering. I think she's challenging me to rise above being in a vegetated state; I'm not sure. I hope I'm more than a head of lettuce. Māma knows me best, so maybe I'm too proud, and she's teaching me not to expect too much of myself, so I won't be disappointed. Gradually, I learn to complain less and comply more. Like all mothers, Māma wants what's best for me. Why else would she stay up late sewing, cleaning, and ironing? She walks miles and miles in her worn vinyl flip-flops, delivering a glamorous dress to a nightclub singer so she can bring home some money for food. Why would a mother do all of this except to give her children a better life?

In the 1950s, the government of Singapore began to institute strict policies for planned parenthood. These efforts reached their peak in the late sixties and early seventies, the time when I was born, and continued into the early eighties. The programs went under various names. The best known perhaps was *Stop at Two*.

In a country that covers only a little more than 200 square miles, with families regularly having four or five children, the government becomes wary. Efforts to slow down the birthrate took various forms. In the year I was born, Singapore legalized abortion and offered incentives for sterilization.

Lower-income and uneducated women were offered large sums of money to have their tubes tied. Hospitals

increased the fees charged for delivering babies after the second child, and the fees steeply accumulate with each subsequent child. Other punitive measures, such as income tax penalties, educational disadvantages for children born after the second child, poorer housing allotments, and no maternity leave for third births and beyond were also implemented. Having more than two children became a heavy burden on almost every family.

Despite their dire financial situation, I was conceived as an accidental child; Māma reminds me of this every day. It's already a real hardship to feed three mouths—Winston, five, Phillip, three, and Jennifer, one, and Bāba is not bringing home any stable income.

When I turn seven, Māma tries to enroll me in first grade. She hopes I'll be accepted into the same school as Jennifer, the parochial Methodist Girls' School, where Fat Granny is a donor. Māma thinks it'll be an easy process given the affiliation. After sitting for what feels like hours in the hallway on a wobbly, wooden chair, I finally hear my name, "Barbara Hong, next." We grab our belongings and head toward the door.

"Sit," orders a stern administrative woman.

Without hesitation, she points at me and speaks in her Singaporean-English accent, or *Sin-glish*.

"Fourth child. Why apply, eh? Government says no, cannot. Control, no more children, okay?"

"Please, my daughter, Jennifer, attends this school, too," Māma pleads. "One more child, she needs to come to school here. Please try to take her."

"No, no," the administrator says with a sneer. "Not my rule, can't take this one. No choice. Try another school and no more children."

The lady doesn't even try to be discreet. She chides Māma for not stopping at two. Like Māma has a choice. How could anyone fault her for getting pregnant? I sit there watching Māma supplicate on my behalf, ashamed I was

even born, as if I was expelled from school, even before I started.

Still, the administrator is unmoved.

Rejected, we lug through the hallway, passing at least one hundred mocking stares on our way out of the building. Everyone within earshot of that office heard my rejection. I hate myself for putting Māma through this.

We stroll down a flight of stairs. Māma is ahead of me, so I try to catch up. As we walk across a giant green field, she turns around and mutters something. I'm not sure if she's talking to herself or me.

"What, Māma? Did you say something?"

"You shouldn't ... born!" Māma says. "I should have ... you sooner. Spending all that money for nothing. Medicine didn't even work."

I am still lagging behind and can't hear what she's saying. "What did you say, Māma?" I ask again as I try to catch up.

"Never mind, medicine didn't work, not aborted," Māma says as she walks even faster. "Black market doctor said sure work, but three months later, you still came out."

I'm seven. I don't know what she's talking about or what *abort* means. I simply brush off the thought and never bring it up again, but Māma won't let it go, especially when she's upset with Bāba or me.

"I didn't want you to be born, but I had no choice; you just wanted to come out," she says in distress.

"I have to suffer whenever I get pregnant. You know your Bāba, he kicks me in the belly, even when I'm with child," Māma moans. "I knew he would beat you if you were born, just like he beats your brothers and sister."

While Māma accepts the fact that we're not bright children, she's particularly concerned about me. As the months pass, Māma attempts to explain what abortion means. I try to take it all in, never completely understanding what the emotional and physical toll entails.

“I try to get rid of you twice,” Māma confesses. “You were six months inside Māma. Everything was getting so expensive, and the government says we’ll get fined if we have you. I panicked. I drink bitter medicine, horrible tasting ones the back-alley so-called physician gave me. Who knows what he put inside.”

I listen as she talks about the potions, teas, and root concoctions she drank day and night to get rid of me. Anise seed is supposed to calm the belly so the baby won’t grow. Asafoetida, an Indian indigestion preventative, can cause a woman to lose her fetus if taken in large quantities. Teas of ashwagandha root and bitter melons are both calming drugs known to harm pregnant women, and, most powerful of all, tea of Dong Quai or Angelica is known to cause contractions strong enough to cause a miscarriage even in the latter stages of pregnancy. Other teas are strong enough to make a woman bleed heavily. I suspect there must have been several of these snake oil physicians going around promising to end pregnancies for a price.

“I took them all, every sort of toxic,” Māma’s eyes glances sideway.

One of the stronger medicines she drank was highly salty and acidic, and she vomited all day and night. She thought the medicine was working because I stopped kicking, but within days, I started to move again, though not as vigorously as before. She wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or an omen that I was going to be born with brain damage.

“You were so stubborn and wouldn’t go away. I kept drinking more medicine,” she confesses, “I suffered, too; my stomach got so painful. I thought I was going to die too.”

It’s hard to imagine what she put herself through to get rid of me. Perhaps those remedies were nothing, only old wives’ tales, because here I am. Perhaps the remedies did irreparable damage, Māma doesn’t know.

That December morning, from the moment I opened my eyes and made my first cry, Māma became preoccupied with making amends to fix my brain.

“I knew what I did to you so now you must have some sort of brain damage. You’ll never be normal again. From now on, you must drink everything I give you, or you’ll become retarded like your brother.”

Chinese people believe that if some parts of your body have a weakness, you can compensate by consuming the corresponding parts of an animal. The supernatural power of animals can correct any deficits in the human anatomy.

If I want to be fast, eat frog legs. If I want to have good blood, eat chicken blood (my favorite). If I have a weak heart, eat a pig’s heart. To live a long life, drink turtle soup. Digestive problems? Consume pig intestines. The practice goes on and on. There are stalls everywhere in the streets that sell various organ soups and dried body parts. These are considered delicacies, so they’re not cheap. Māma has to save quite a bit each month to brew up these “nourishments” for me.

Māma purchases organs with curative powers from local medicine men each chance she gets to make up for the intelligence I supposedly lost or never fully formed in her womb. This tonic is the horror of my childhood—dark red, almost black, a hellish brew made from the pig’s liver and brains. Pigs, one of the animals of the zodiac, are supposedly very smart creatures.

“Pigs pretend to be lazy and messy so humans will feed them and take care of them. To be smart, you must eat pig’s brain,” Māma grunts.

Occasionally, she brews sun-dried insects and lizards, such as bees, cockroaches, geckos, and beetles, and then forces me to drink them up. I hate anything that’s hot, so I put some ice cubes in the soup, which only makes Māma mad.

“I spend all this money to heal you, and you just wasted the tonic by throwing ice in it. The heat is what heals you!” Māma yells. “Now! Big gulp, drink it all at once, so it’s more powerful.”

Occasionally, if she has a few extra dollars, she gets the more potent herbal soup with dried seahorse, bird’s nest (made from bird vomit, and most expensive), dried scorpion, and, most expensive of all, deer antler.

The man behind the counter takes a piece of broken glass and shaves off thin layers of the outer horn onto a piece of paper. The shaved portion looks like a small pile of silver threads or silkworms. Māma boils them with some sugar and a few lotus seeds if she can afford them to give it a sweet taste.

I know Māma loves me, and that’s why she’s going to all this trouble and expense to fix me, but as the weeks and years go by, my brain does not improve, as evidenced by my school report cards.

“All these soups and still can’t study,” Māma laments. “It’s hopeless now. Your brain is gone. Wasted. This is blood-earned money, you know.”

I want to believe the tonic is working, too, but the taste is so vile that each time I drink it, I gag. Māma says I need to stop resisting the aura so the animal spirits can work inside me.

“Will it really make me normal again?” I ask as I stare at yet another noxious concoction.

“I’m your Māma. I know how to heal you, but you must not fight it,” she claims.

I look at the lumpy pig brain in a green bowl. It’s probably overcooked. Even though Māma adds some clear gingery aroma and sesame oil, I still have to pinch my nose and shut my eyes so I can sip it.

“Māma, add some more flavor, soy sauce or salt or sugar, I can’t drink it,” I protest.

“If you can’t drink it, then eat the brain, it’s your choice,” Māma compromises.

I gaze at the sludgy gunk, shut my eyes and take another sip. I throw up again. I can’t swallow at all.

Māma comes back to check on me. “Don’t be a baby. Close your eyes and gulp it down! Think of the pig’s brain replacing your brain now.”

“Easy for you to say, I’m the one drinking it,” I rebel.

I force myself to guzzle down that ghastly soup and feel the steam streaming down my throat. Immediately, I try to picture myself a little smarter, a little sharper, a little more like the witty pig. Ironic? Yes, but it pleases Māma and makes her feel less culpable.

After several months, Māma meets someone on the market street who says she might be able to enroll me in another local primary school. “This school will take your daughter, good or bad,” the lady says, “Go quickly, so you don’t lose your seat.”

Māma rushes home to tell me the good news. “We have a school that may take you!” she screams with joy, still catching her breath. “Quick, put on that outfit Auntie Lee from upstairs gave you. Wear red. It’s good luck. Pray. We need luck now. Don’t forget to comb your hair. Neat means smart, and don’t open your mouth, or they’ll know you’re stupid.”

I don my pair of uneven length blue jeans and my one bright-red t-shirt. From that day on I learn that if I’m quiet, sit still, and do as the teacher directs, I’ll not get into trouble. Obedience is the most important rule in school.

I’m beaming when I get the news that the local school will accept me. Now I can finally say I’m a real student with a real uniform and have real books like my brothers and sister.

The first day of school is tense but exciting. I get up early to walk there with Māma. As a rule, all shoulder-

length hair or longer has to be tied up so that not a strand is dangling off your face. Māma brushes my long black hair and ties up two buns on each side with a fluffy red band. Jennifer and I get jittery when Māma does our hair. If we move our head or body even slightly, Māma strikes us with the heavy wooden brush. This ordeal is the longest ten minutes of my morning routine.

“Ouch! Ouch!” I scream.

“Stay still. Don’t move,” Māma scolds.

“Sorry, sorry, don’t hit me again,” I plead, promising to stay still.

“Ouch! That hurts!” I wail again.

“Move again, and I’ll smack you harder this time,” Māma warns.

Within a few minutes, I feel the tension in my head. Māma pulls the hair so tight like I’m getting a facelift. I dare not show the tears welling in my eyes, but she notices them anyway.

“Stop crying, you’re going to mess up your face,” Māma snaps. “Don’t you dare scratch your head or try to loosen the band.”

From the minute I step into school, it’s all about formality, uniformity, and conformity. We all wear the same uniform, from kindergarten through high school.

My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Chang, is strict. She’s the no-nonsense kind, dealing with students as if we’re criminals and she’s a warden. After the first two months in school, she complains to Māma about how slow I am.

“Everything with your daughter takes so long,” Mrs. Chang says. “Is she retarded?”

Māma is not happy with the report. It’s only two months into school. She resorts to brew more tonics for me to drink, hoping to heal me this time.

“Drink it up. The teacher will see you can learn. Good girl,” Māma says.

Though Māma thinks the medicine is working, she continues to call me “retarded” and “stupid” whenever I do the slightest thing wrong, like wiping the table, sewing a pillow, or saying the wrong word.

“I try to fix you,” she says somberly, “but your brain doesn’t know how to work. After all these soups, still nothing.”

By the 1980s, the Singaporean government realizes that their effort to *Stop at Two* is working too well. They are now facing a declining population that, if it goes too far, will be devastating for a young nation. Later, *Stop at Two* is replaced with the cautionary slogan, *Have Three or More—If You Can Afford It*.

The upshot of this is that I grow up with the notion that I’m the generation of unwanted pregnancies. I learn to speak little, keep to myself, and act as if I don’t exist. Like the persona of a zombie, I became lifeless, voiceless, and soulless.



Meet the Author

*D*r. Hong obtained her Ph.D. from Columbia University in Special Education in addition to three master's degree in instructional practices, policy and leadership, and as a learning specialist from the same institution. She was a Senior Fulbright Scholar, a Senior Fulbright Specialist, a Fulbright Hays Fellow, and the First Honorable Visiting Scholar to Taiwan Municipal University of Education.

Hong has been a professor for almost sixteen years at the time of this publication and has taught in New York, Texas, and Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Hawaii. She is also certified as a special educator, school principal, and district administrator.

In 2014, she was appointed by the US State Department, Bureau of International and Information Programs, as a Speaker Specialist and Expert on Disability where she consults with governmental agencies around the world. Her research examines the cognitive science of teaching and learning and the development of self-determination through the ethics of caring.

Hong is the recipient of the national Teacher-of-Honor award by the international education honor society and the University Exemplary Faculty Award at her current university.

Hong serves on the Advisory Council for Oxford Education Research Symposium, Board of Directors for the Council for Exceptional Children, President of BYU-Hawaii Honor Society, and is the Founder of PACE™—Parents as Advocates for Change in Education.

Prior to joining BYU-Hawaii, Hong worked as the education specialist for the Virginia Fairfax County Government, Department of Family Services, and Institute for Early Learning. She lives on the North Shore of Oahu with her four children and husband.

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