

Seymour Ubell

The Birth Mother Excerpt

1

A Dream Comes True

“An orphanage?” I questioned, somewhat annoyed. “What’s the reason for this visit? What’s the purpose?” I turned to my new business partner, sitting beside me in his chauffeur-driven car.

David Chen, a native-born Taiwanese businessman, rolled his eyes and spoke directly to me. He was a no-nonsense guy. Grim faced, he replied, “You Americans— where is your heart? Why must it be business, business all the time?” He turned his head, peering out the window of our speeding car. “For your information,” he continued, somewhat irritated, “it is a worthwhile charity that I frequently help.” His tone was condescending and impatient. I knew in one piercing moment that the comment I’d made was insensitive and foolish “Sorry, David,” I apologized. “I understand,” I said, backing off. “We, too, support important causes back in the States. It must have been the jet lag that spoke without thinking. Please forgive my careless remark.”

Mr. Chen, a man of about forty-five years old, give or take; of medium height compared to other Asian men I knew. A pair of rimless glasses was held tightly at the tip of his nose. I erred when I spoke. I knew he felt that my imprudent sting was unintentional. In his wisdom, he graciously let it go. I sat there without a sound, embarrassed by my unwise aside.

Our sleek black Mercedes pulled up alongside a graying, time-worn stone building. Gazing out the window, I saw one crucifix dominating the front lawn, and another was at the entrance of the ancient edifice. The solemn but antiquated nunnery/orphanage was tucked away in a remote village between Fushun and Guangzhou in China. I stared silently, looking directly into the face of history, speculating the structure had been standing there for perhaps four hundred years or more. It was now a mere two-hour drive from Hong Kong.

David Chen lifted the heavy brass knocker on the ancient front door, allowing it to fall against the massive wooden frame. He did this several times. An echoing thud—in fact, almost a boom—exploded as the antique knocker crashed against the entrance.

On the other side, I could hear someone struggling to open the enormous oak gate, which sang its weary song of a thousand openings and closings. The entryway was studded with brass nails like in a medieval fortress. The old hinges noisily announced access to the archaic building.

A nun, dressed in a white habit, her head uncovered, seemed quite relaxed as she spoke in Mandarin. Chen's

assistant, Francis Lee, who accompanied us, translated the conversation for me.

“Welcome, Mr. Chen. It has been too long since we have greeted you,” she said in her native tongue.

“It is the same for me. Permit to introduce my friend and new partner, Mr. Scott Landsman, from New York in the United States. Mr. Landsman, this is Mother Nun Ying,” Sister Ying responded in both English and Mandarin. I stood silent, surprised and listening. The sounds of the Chinese words were like a new song waiting to be sung.

“I very pleased meet you, Mr. Landsman. Please join us for tea and baked cakes.”

“I am also very happy to meet you,” I responded, smiling and a little taken by surprise. I stepped back with some disbelief upon hearing English flowing easily from the nun’s lips. I returned to my original position, not wanting to display any disrespect for my new partner.

In an anteroom, tea was served. We all sat as the Mother Superior began the conversation in English, mixed with some idiomatic Mandarin expressions, which Francis easily translated for me.

“May I express to you, Mr. Chen, our gratitude once again for your monthly generous and most gracious gifts?” The Mother Superior humbly stated, looking at Chen and acknowledging me as she simultaneously bowed her head.

“You are most welcome,” Chen reciprocated, also bowing slightly. “I am aware of the important work you do here. As a Taiwanese guest in your country, and for much of my family living in China, I appreciate the effort you make and the life

you have generously given to ease the pain of these helpless children.”

“I pray you enjoy our meager offerings. It is but a tiny gesture for your kindness, and to show our appreciation for God’s work that is performed here,” she replied.

We sipped the tea and quietly ate the tiny cookies that tasted more like bread to my Anglo taste buds. I, nevertheless, complimented the Mother Superior on the tastiness of her offering.

She smiled and invited us, “Please, join in nursery.”

The Mother Superior led us into a small room. Sheer curtains covered the windows. Three ancient oak tables, perhaps a donation from a local resident, surrounded the area. Disposable diapers and sterilized bottles for milk, water, or juice lined the tables, waiting for the infants’ demanding cries. Boxes of tissues, paper towels, white cotton, and plastic gloves, and tiny receptacles holding hand- cleaning liquid, lay adjacent to the other baby-care tools. To my surprise, two or three dozen, perhaps more, Gerber baby food jars rested on the table. There was an aroma of talcum powder in the air, and a wet diaper lay in a trash can close by. I pursed my lips and shrugged my shoulders. This was an unexpected adventure.

It was an astonishing scene. I was standing in a room, a nursery, with thirty-three newborn children. Each infant was a girl no more than two or three months old. Every child lay in a rickety bassinet, and these were lined in three rows of eleven. The babies were in tightly swaddled bundles; only their round little faces peeked through the bundling. Most were asleep. Two or three crying children settled quickly as

volunteer nurses brought miniature bottles of water and placed them to the babies' softly curled lips, while comforting them with care, cooing, and obvious affection. Several of the teeny tots lay silent with their petite almond-shaped eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Perhaps two or three were voicing their opinion of discomfort. A few others were awake but quiet. The infants lay there, eyes wide open and little lips rounded and content.

"Sister, may I walk down the aisles to better see the children?" I asked, turning to Chen with obvious deference. My curiosity had gotten the better of me. Chen nodded his head, approving.

"Yes, Mr. Landsman. Please wear garments." The Mother Superior turned to the ancient table, and made her selection of a white smock, which she held out—a square white hat; a face mask to cover my nose and mouth; and finally, white cotton gloves.

"We protect little ones from unnecessary exposure," Mother Superior explained, turning her head slightly to the right and looking me over carefully. I raised my weary arms for the garment to be placed on my chest. Then I held out my hands for the gloves. I tilted my head forward for the mask. I crouched ever so slightly as the petite nurse, on her tiptoes, placed the white cap on my head.

In hushed steps, I walked alone, silently up the first aisle and down the next. I listened to the rhythmic breathing and the muffled sounds that oozed from the babies' bodies. I turned my head from right to left, taking each muted step while gazing at the babies and feeling an out-of-body experience. I peered with interest as the infants moved their

lips or their eyes ever so slightly. Pausing for a moment to look, I admired each child.

“All girls?” I whispered

“Shh, shh.” The nun nodded.

“Why are there only girls here?” I questioned more quietly. “Where are the boys?” I murmured.

“In our country boys have more value than girls. Families keep boys.”

“Why?”

“I do not know. But that is how it is. Five thousand years of tradition,” the nun responded.

“Very sad, very strange,” I said.

One child close to the last cradle caught my eye. She appeared different. She was Asian but not Asian. Her rounder, less Asian-shaped, almost Western eyes were punctuated by her pale complexion.

She was different. I paused, cocking my head to one side and then tilting it the other way. I stared at this unique-looking child for several moments.

She’s so Beautiful, so angelic, I thought.

The truth was, my heart jumped a little. It was that inner voice signal of instant connection. Or was it my fantasy creeping up on me? Unexpectedly, I trembled at the realization of this child’s vulnerability. My thoughts galloped. I confess it was one of my rarest experiences. A feeling of warmth covered my face and body, as if something had just happened. It was a moment of I knew not what. I did not know from where it had come.

Bring this child home? Am I insane? With one word of consent and my signature on a document, I could take this

sweet, Beautiful infant, this human being, this real person, home with me to New York and change her life forever. She would be our daughter. It feels like magic.

“Doss vellzine ah mitzvah fun Gut,” as my mother would say. This would be a gift from God. These thoughts raced through me.

“Sister Ying? Mr. Chen?” I said softly. “Would you both join me for a moment?” They approached. I asked, “Why does this most unusual child look so different from the others?”

“Do not comprehend question,” Sister Ying responded.

“Her skin is not Asian and not white. She is more Western-looking, and her eyes are less almond-shaped than those of the other babies.”

Sister Ying turned to Mr. Chen; they spoke in Chinese.

David looked at me for a moment and then turned his head, looking at the baby girl. He did not lift his face. He only stared at the little girl with saddened eyes as he spoke. A heartbreaking look of pain crossed his face.

“There is shame here with this child in her new life,” he began. “She is”—he spoke haltingly—“half Chinese and half European.”

Another sister scurried toward them and spoke in Chinese. Sister Ying responded, and Mr. Chen smiled. Sister Ying gave some instructions and the young nurse left. The sister showed us into the adjoining sitting room.

Tea was served once again. For the first time I spoke of the strange feeling I’d had when looking at that Beautiful baby. I attempted to explain my feelings; once again a tic

nudged my insides. The others just nodded, understanding my encounter.

“You mentioned shame when we spoke earlier. Please explain,” I questioned Mr. Chen.

“The child was conceived”—he hesitated—“in an attack on the birth mother by a Westerner.”

A pang of pain in my chest. “And the mother?” I questioned.

“She lives. She is well and has recuperated from the assault physically. The rest, we are uncertain.” I began to understand the Anglo-Asian look of the baby.

The young nurse returned moments later, carrying another small bundled child in her arms, looking down at her in amazement. She turned the infant to show me another baby with looks similar to those of the first child—white complexion, perhaps slightly lighter, and her eyes clearly with an Asian–Western appearance. The nurse gently pulled the top of the bundle back from the little girl’s head to show me a full crown of Beautiful golden hair.

“Oh my!” I blurted out, unable to control myself.

Mr. Chen turned to me and said, “This is her twin sister.”

2

Ancient Chinese Tradition

“Scott, you hired me to write your biography. Damn it, you have spoken enough. Let me tell your story. That is why you hired me and why you pay me. I am the so-called author; I am the biographer of your life. You are the subject and the storyteller. It’s your life. But I am the translator of your narrative, your pain, and your joy. Let me work... Please, sit back and be silent.”

Scott sat back in his easy chair as we continued our interview. “You’re right,” he agreed. “Please do your magic. However, allow me to jump in whenever clarification of the truth is needed.”

With the slight misunderstanding settled, I began.



Let me take you to a time two years earlier, in a small village just north of the vast city of Guangzhou, China, in a mud hut. Ling Na Chan sobbed in stabbing convulsions, watching her

eldest daughter being led away on that fateful day to the employment broker.

“Please, please,” the woman pleaded to her husband, “Shan Di is our child. What you are doing is cruel. If you take her to the employment center, we will never see our daughter again,” she begged.

“Silence!” Dong Chan commanded. “She is my child as well as yours. Shan Di is the only possession of value we have to offer. And this must be done to save our only son. You know as well as I that we must have the money for the doctor and the hospital,” he shouted.

“Please know that I am the father; I too live with much hurt in my heart. Tomorrow I will take our Shan Di to the employment center. I am aware that other families have made this difficult decision for the past many centuries.” He ached with the sting of his choice.

“I fear others like us in China and perhaps beyond also cope with much the same choice.” He put his hand to his face.

“I am not a stupid man. I am frightened to even think of our daughter’s future. And I cannot bear to consider that most likely, as you weep, we will never see her again. I hate the thought of her life being one of struggle with much harshness.”

Chan’s wife sat in silence, her aching body rocking to and fro as if in prayer.

“Can you even imagine how I am feeling?” he begged. “Soon I must take our daughter to the employment agency. The man there will give me documents to chop and to sign

that I cannot read. He will give me money that I cannot count.

“I speak to you with grief in my heart and in my tortured body. When I leave with Shan Di, I will be taking her to an unknown future.

“As your husband, as the father of our children, I sit here in both shame and sorrow that our Shan Di will be the collateral for a loan I must make to save our son. I feel unhappiness for our daughter. My body stings with the thought that our child will work for five years until the debt is repaid. I know her wages will be minimal, perhaps only two hundred Yuan each month. The food will be little, and they will give her a place to sleep. Can you not see my body tremble and raw with shame? I hate myself,” he shouted.

At the time of this dramatic change in her life, Shan Di was all of fifteen years old. Her family was poor. Everyone slept in one room, a room with a dirt floor covered in straw. It was that tiny, impoverished, improvised mud hut they called home. Here they ate, worked, and slept, and where they would most likely die.



“Poppa, do you think they will like me? I just put on my new white dress that Momma made. She even washed and dried it in yesterday’s sun.

“Please, Poppa, look at me. Do not shut your eyes. It is sad for me to see how you tremble. You are in pain, as am I.”

Shan Di sat with her eyelids tightly shut. I must not weep; I must hold back my tears, she thought.

Her hands covered her ears, so as not to hear the rolling wheels of the rickshaw on the bumpy dirt road.

“Poppa, may I sit close? I’m frightened.”

“I too am filled with fear. Come sit nearby, but not too close. It is not fitting for a girl child to be very close to her baba (father).”

A strong-armed man, sweat pouring down his back, pulled a rickshaw sent by the broker. The vehicle moved quickly on the country road.

Shan Di could feel the morning dampness. She felt the touch of a cool breeze as it brushed her face. Silently, she stared at a mist that rose from the earth.

Poppa Dong Chan tried not to look at his child as she quivered by his side. He knew her fate; she would face endless days cooking, cleaning, and washing from dawn until nightfall. She would live in a shed with three or four other women, serving the master in a huge, elegant house. For any errors, which he knew she would make, she would be beaten. In a good home, perhaps beaten once a month; with a cruel master, everyday beatings would be a common ritual. In his mind, Poppa Chan shut his eyes tightly to block the thought of unwelcome sexual commands from the master.

“I too am filled with fear,” he said.

Chan forced the nightmare from his head. He understood his life—to forgive himself a thousand times or more for this decision. He could never earn the money to save his only son, who was very ill, the twenty-year-old Leong Chan. This was a necessary choice. It was his only option.

His thoughts persuaded him. Once I receive payment from the employment agent, I must travel to Putian. There I

will find the doctor and the hospital. Poppa Chan, in a deep private conversation with himself, tried to believe that this was a good decision.

I must save my only son. He has to be saved at all costs. My Shan Di must be the sacrifice. It must be that way. After all, she is only a girl... only a girl.

Moving along the potholed road, bouncing, bouncing, as they moved every step of the way. Shan Di sank into a moment of hypnotic silence, watching the tiny huts surrounding huge rice fields, a small stream, two women washing clothes, and another woman filling a pail with water. She thought for the first time of the weary life that many people in her village endured. Her mind was blank, not wanting to reflect on or consider her future. Tucked inside her recently developed bosom was a tiny feeling of hope. It was August 8, 1988. A very good omen, four eights on my departure date. She smiled. The eighth month and the eighth day, plus the two eights in 1988. The number eight was good luck in Chinese folklore.

Shan Di felt, perhaps this was her lucky day.

How fortunate I am to leave on such a very special four-eight day, she thought. I will make this come out good. I promise I will work hard, learn, and have a new life.

A building stood tall, straight, and dark in front of their eyes. Poppa stretched his neck, tilting his head back to see the top of the four-story structure. It looked ominous and unpromising. The letters at the front on a glass entryway, in red calligraphy, glared at the new arrivals and spoke out: Center for Work Placement. Although Poppa Chan could not read or write, he knew in his pained heart that they arrived.

Poppa Chan took a deep breath; it left his lips in a deep sigh. On his face was fear, a fright that suddenly struck him directly in his gut like a knife slicing into his flesh. Poppa shuddered as he climbed from the rickshaw, stepping onto a wet, muddy street. He looked up at his daughter, her eyes filled with tears. He knew his daughter's new, Beautiful white dress would soon be spoiled and a bad impression made. That was not an option. His paternal protective instincts took over.

He watched as Shan Di stretched her pleading hands out toward him. His arms open and with all his strength, he lifted Shan Di high in a quick and gentle movement, sweeping her from the cart onto the wooden street at the side of the building. He had never touched his daughter that he could remember. He felt her warmth and smelled her smell.

For the first time he realized that Shan Di's child body was gone and that her body was now firm and maturing. Poppa knew she was no longer a girl. He experienced the feeling, much to his surprise, that his daughter would soon be a woman. And in all probability, his little girl was no longer a little girl. She was already a woman. Shan Di's eyes moved swiftly from side to side as she and her poppa stumbled into the offices of the employment center. It was the first time she had ever been to a town or, for that matter, entered a true stone and wooden building.

Straw was the only material used on any structure she had ever seen. Clear and polished windows, like eyes opened wide, welcomed light into the room. Shan saw desks and chairs and a strange machine in front of its own wide

window that young women sat in front of and punched finger by finger on buttons that produced she knew not what.

The ceiling, with shining white circular bowls, threw off light—another miracle that was unfamiliar. Suddenly a frightening roar came from outside of the office that she and her father were in. Shan's eyes bulged at the sight of the strange-looking machine with four wheels. In it, a man sat behind yet another wheel, moving quickly out of sight. This young girl had never seen a car in her life.

Surely this visit was filled with wonders of the modern world. Shan Di's life had been one of isolation, with little knowledge of the world that existed. She was uneducated. She could not read a book and had never seen a television screen. The ten or twenty minutes at this office were a staggering experience. Her vision and her brain tried to absorb the labyrinths of puzzlement she viewed. Shan's heart skipped a beat as a tall, Western-dressed woman approached them. She wore a long gray dress with large black buttons running down the front. Her hair was neatly tied in a bun. She smiled and greeted them: "Nee how (Thank you)." They responded in kind. Shan bowed slightly as her father introduced her.

The young girl listened carefully as her father explained the arrangements he'd made with the employment broker in his village. His daughter was to be given work in a fine home, where she would earn two hundred Yuan each month to pay down the loan for two thousand Yuan, over a five-year period.

The woman nodded and took them into another office. She introduced Mr. Chan and Shan to Yang Su Hong, the big boss of the employment agency.

Mr. Hong took out an envelope from his desk, opened it, and removed two thousand Yuan, placing the bills neatly on the counter in full view of Poppa Chan and Shan. Neither had ever seen that much money in their lives. It was a tempting sight—a ploy by the agent to keep the father from changing his mind.

Shan sat as the agent smiled and moved the documents close to her father. Her eyes squinted as she tried to understand what was happening.

She watched her father sign the papers with his mark and then place his chop in the proper place as directed. Shan knew that with the stamping of the chop, all the arrangements had been completed. She watched in silence as her father put the tightly bound money into a sack that hung inside his trousers connected to his waist. Shan instinctively recognized that she now belonged to a stranger. Mr. Chan was silent. They both stood hushed looking at each other. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, a half minute; it felt like forever. He could not look at Shan. She wanted to embrace him, longing for a final hug from her baba. That hug would never happen. Their culture would not allow it.

The young girl shivered an almost unheard murmur, “Tai tsien, Poppa,” saying goodbye. Tears glazed her eyes. “Tai tsien,” she whispered again.

He watched in silence as she was taken away by still another TaiTai (housewife). They both understood that they would never see one another again.

