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IN 1939, WHEN I WAS SIX years old, the whole family—my two brothers and my sister, and all our relatives—considered me brainless.

"*Mo noi!*" Stepmother used to say in Cantonese, pointing to my head. "*No brain!* Wait until your Auntie Suling comes to Canada. She'll give you a brain!" I looked upon Stepmother's best friend, Chen Suling, as my enemy.

Everyone knew why I was brainless. A stubborn lung infection was keeping me out of the Vancouver public school system. My family, however, focussed on the way I stumbled over calling my adopted Gim San gons (Gold Mountain uncles) their proper titles. I would say "Third Uncle" instead of "Great Uncle."

Whenever I called a visitor by the wrong title again, Stepmother shook her head, apologizing for the blunder. Then she would sing in her *Sze-yup* dialect, "*Suling, Suling, come to Gold Mountain, give my boy Sek-Lung—a brain, a brain!*"

Suling was Stepmother's age, a woman who had given up her own family's wealth to become a Christian teacher in Old China. Stepmother worshipped the bamboo-framed photograph of Suling and herself standing before a moon gate when they were young together and everything seemed possible.

"The street photographer, an old man, thought Suling was so pretty!"

Chen Suling, clutching a thick Bible in her hand, had discovered the Christian God in the spring of 1920, or as Stepmother told it, "The Christian God picked her."

"Suling gave me that beautiful silk scarf with gold flowers," Stepmother said, pointing. "See how it falls over my shoulders."

The two young girls in the picture were stiff, barely smiling. Suling looked righteous, like Miss Mackinney, my Grade One teacher at Strathcona School. Miss Mackinney had a wooden ruler with a steel edge, unbending. She slapped it on your desk if you didn't pay attention in class. Miss Mackinney had not called me Sek-Lung, but "Sekky," because, she smiled, it was "more Canadian."

I looked at the picture of Stepmother's girlhood friend. She looked so stern, I thought she should have a steel-edged ruler in each of her hands. Instead, there was an embroidered sharp-clawed dragon slinking down Chen Suling's wide sleeve. Stepmother noticed me staring at it.

"Isn't that a beautiful jacket? Suling and I picked it out together. When she comes to Canada, Sek-Lung," she paused to imagine that happy day, "I will wear the same flowered scarf she gave me, like the old days."

The dragon on the sleeve looked powerful, forbidding; Chen Suling's long *cheong-sam* hid everything but her dour face.

Because Stepmother's vanity wouldn't let her wear glasses, she insisted that she could not make out the writing in the letters Suling sent from China, so Father read them aloud: "Today, the farmers tell us landlords and Christians are being arrested in the Outer Districts near Tsingyuan. Some

are beheaded. It is difficult to write. Pray for us." Suling's own First Mission Group barely escaped death; then the Japanese pushed deeper into South China and we scarcely heard from her.

Even so, Stepmother believed Suling would someday come to Canada. Rich Chinese merchant families, students and baptized Christians were arriving every three or four months.

"Why not?" she said to Mr. Tom, the fresh vegetable vendor. "Even if the Chen family deserts her, Suling has her God to help her. And my *no no* boy needs her brain."

FAMILY RANKINGS and Chinese kinship terms gave me a headache. For example, Stepmother was the birth-mother of both my sister Liang and myself. She had been brought over to Canada from China to become a family servant or concubine, a kind of second-class wife, after Father's first wife died in China. Kiam was the son of Father and his first wife, and Jung was adopted.

Grandmama decided it was simpler for everyone to refer to Father's second wife as "Stepmother."

"In Canada, one husband, one wife," Grandmama said. Because of her age, the wiry ancient lady was the one person Father would never permit any of us to defy.

When Third Uncle told me that "Stepmother" was a ranking much more respectable than "family servant," more honourable than "concubine," but never equal in honour or respect to the title of First Wife or Mother, Stepmother remained silent.

Every Chinese person, it seemed to me, had an enigmatic status, an order of power and respect, mysteriously attached to him or her.

"Isn't a boy baby better than a girl baby?" I asked Father one day, with specific reference to myself and to my sister Liang.

"The older one," Liang butted in, "is always better than the younger one."

Liang was ten; I was six.

Liang was always jealous that Grandmama, whom she called Poh-Poh, treated me better; I was the one the Old One had spent the most time caring for since I was a baby, and sickly. And I was a boy.

My two stepbrothers naturally felt superior. Kiam was fifteen and was getting all A's at King Edward High; Jung was twelve and was learning how to box like Joe Louis at the Hastings Gym.

One afternoon, over small cups of wine with Third Uncle and Father, Uncle Dai Kew changed his tone of voice and referred to Father and Father's First Wife and "the others."

"What others?" I asked, for I knew that Father's Number One Wife had died in China.

The three men drank their medicinal wine, looked at each other, and shut up.

"Keep it simple," Father said. "We in Canada now."

"Simple best," Grandmama said, sternly, tapping her finger on the kitchen table, ignoring Liang and taking me into her arms. Liang made a face at me.

I always wanted to keep things simple, just as Father advised, and that made things worse.

The Chinese rankings for acquaintances and relatives were overwhelming. There were different titles for those persons related to us according to the father's age, the mother's

age, and even the ages of the four grandparents, and according to whether they were from the mother's or father's side—never mind if you threw in a stepmother and her best friend. And if these persons were also tied to us by false papers to obtain immigration visas, they became "paper sons" or "paper uncles," heirs to a web of illegal subterfuge brought on by laws that stipulated only relatives of official "merchant-residents" or "scholars" could immigrate from China to Canada. Paper money could buy paper relatives. But whose papers were connected to whose relatives? My head pounded.

First Brother Kiam showed me a few kinship terms you could look up in an English-Chinese missionary dictionary. For every one term in English, like "First Cousin" or "Aunt," there were ten Chinese terms. Jesus, for example, had something like eleven brothers and sisters whose Chinese kinship terms, as a footnote, took up half the page. I could only think that Chen Suling was very smart, and Jesus needed her in China.

"Lucky Jesus wasn't Chinese," I said, seriously.

"These rankings," Kiam agreed, "they're more confusing than Confucius!"

ONE DAY, after shopping with Grandmama and studying the Chinese flag and the Union Jack and the Buy War Bonds posters hanging in Chinatown store windows, I had a burning question. I came home and interrupted Stepmother, who was busy learning how to knit socks for the soldiers in China.

"Am I Chinese or Canadian?" I asked Stepmother.

"*Tohng yahn*," Grandmama said, collapsing in her rocking chair and setting her grocery bags down on the floor. "*Chinese*."

"When Chen Suling comes to Canada," Stepmother said, caught in a missed stitch, "she will reach you the right way to be Chinese."

Father reached out to touch her hand, but she withdrew from him. Stepmother did not like my spending so much time with Grandmama. They must have had words again about it: "The Old One spoils the boy! Everyone says so!"

"We are also Canadian," Father said.

After a long pause, Stepmother gave him her hand, and he held it for a moment. She would not smile, and he went back to sorting out his Chinese newspaper cuttings spread out on the floor.

I knew just enough Chinese and English to speak to people, but not always to understand the finer points; worse, each language was mixed in with a half-dozen Chinatown dialects. I never possessed enough details, in either language, to understand how our family, how the countless cousins, in-laws, aunts and uncles, came to be related. Behind their wrinkled hands, the few old women and the old bachelor-men, the *lao wah-kiu*, whispered their guarded knowledge of bloodlines, of clans claimed or deserted, of women bartered for silver coins, of indentured children bought or sold to balance family debts or guarantee male heirs.

Each *lao wah-kiu*, each Chinatown old-timer, had been driven out of China by droughts, civil wars and famines. They put their marks on foreign labour contracts and ended up in Gold Mountain engulfed by secrets.

English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quicksand. I preferred English, but there were no English

words to match the Chinese perplexities. I sometimes wished that my skin would turn white; my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue, and Mr. and Mrs. O'Connor next door would adopt me and I would be Jack O'Connor's little brother.

"Sekky's driving himself crazy," Liang complained.

"Simple, please," Father urged everyone.

"Sek-Lung will never get things right," Stepmother said.

"Even my friend Suling may not be able to help."

"Different roots, different flowers," Grandmama said, chopping a head of cabbage. "Different brains."

EVERYTHING was a puzzle to me. Everyone was an enigma.

When Grandmama, still strong in her eighties, and our neighbour Mrs. Lim, younger at fifty-something, sat together on our porch, they talked in private riddles and spoke in a servant dialect, using a kind of clipped and broken grammar they had in Old China. And this was only one dialect of the many Chinatown dialects they knew in common. Each dialect opened up another reality to them, another time and place they shared.

Old-timers knew about survival. Mrs. Lim exclaimed to Grandmama, "*Aaiiyah!* The tea is bitter, but we drink it."

And they raised their cups to each other, laughing.

"*We are all Chinese,*" Mrs. Lim said. "*Daaih ga tobng yahn.*"

Grandmama nodded agreement, for to think anything else was betrayal. And betrayal meant that one could still be shipped back to China, be barred from Canada, taken away from Gold Mountain, exiled, shamed, removed from the privilege of sending a few dollars back to the family-name

dian starving in war-torn, famine- and drought-cursed China. And always came the pleading letters from village and city: "Send more money, send more, send more."

And other letters came, like Chen Suling's: "Can you help me, dear Lily? I must come to Gold Mountain and see you once more." Surely, once in Canada, one was safe.

But born-in-Canada children, like myself, *could* betray one. For we were *mo no* children. Children with no Old China history in our brains.

"Who are you, Sek-Lung?" Mrs. Lim asked me. "Are you *tobng yabm*?"

"Canada!" I said, thinking of the ten days of school I had attended before the doctor sent me home, remembering how each of those mornings I had saluted the Union Jack, had my hands inspected for cleanliness, and prayed to *Father-Art-in-Heaven*.

But even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be *Chinese*.

Stepmother knew this in her heart and feared for me. All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born "neither this nor that," neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain.

Mo nos went to English school and mixed with Demon outsiders, and even liked *them*. Wanted to invite *them* home. Sometimes a *mo no* might say one careless word too many, and the Immigration Demons would pounce. One careless word—perhaps because a *mo no* girl or a *mo no* boy was show-

ing off—and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night, bang on the family door, demand a show of a pile of documents with red embossed stamps. Then the Immigration Demons would separate family members and ask trick questions. Then certain "family" members would disappear. Households would be broken up. Jobs would be lost. Jail and shame and suicides would follow.

"Keep things simple," Father expounded.

Beneath the surface, of course, nothing was simple: I was the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. The words *RESIDENT ALIEN* were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger.

SOMETIMES I found Stepmother sitting in Father's large wicker chair. She looked far away, and I knew she was thinking again of her girlhood in China and the family she had left behind, and the history that was hers, her ghost-whispering history. Balanced on her lap there were two precious things: the old bamboo-framed photograph of two women standing by a moon gate, and a large, delicately carved sandalwood box. Within its sweet, mysterious scent, Stepmother kept her own family photos and all the letters and the few photos sent by Suling.

Once Stepmother said to me, as if she were stranded on an island, "Suling is *my* only friend who knows my family stories. Not the stories Poh-Poh tells you."

I picked up one of the heavily stamped envelopes and slipped out a sheaf of thin-as-water onionskin papers. Holding a single sheet up, you could see the faintest cloud-haunted

blue colour. Stepmother took the papers from me and carefully unfolded them.

"See how beautiful her calligraphy is," Stepmother said. "Maybe when Chen Suling comes to Gold Mountain she will teach you how to write as beautifully."

I saw a steel-edged ruler slapping down on my hand.

"Like a g-i-r-l!?" I sneered and flew a Spitfire over a wooden village, noisily dropping bombs.

"You're right," Stepmother said, "it will be enough work to teach a *mo no* like you to address your uncles properly."

To my child's mind, the matter was simple. In English, I would have been secure with "Uncle," "Sir," or even "Mister." Three basic choices instead of ten dozen Chinese brain-twisters.

"I'm going to speak and write only English!"

Stepmother smiled.

"Suling once won a prize for her English," she said. "If only Suling were here . . ."

I hated Chen Suling. But maybe when she got here, she would work like Stepmother in one of those basement factories, machine-sewing parts for military knapsacks and uniforms. Maybe Suling would work double shifts, come home too exhausted to bother with me, like Father. After working twelve- or fourteen-hour days any place they were hiring (but rarely any place outside of Chinatown's restaurants, laundries, stores and offices), Father—hardly managing to stay awake—left me alone. So did everyone but Grandmama.

Finally, Chen Suling's family gave her the money to come to Gold Mountain. We also obtained a piece of paper, verified in China by three officials, that said she was the old-

est daughter of Third Uncle, Merchant Class. Now, we would be able to sponsor her, through Third Uncle, to come to Canada.

Chen Suling in Canada.

The thought was horrifying.

She probably had a bigger steel-edged ruler than Miss MackKinney. Grandmama was always telling me that Old China had bigger and better things than anything in Canada. For example, Vancouver had that sea wall in Stanley Park, which we walked once until I had to be carried by Kiam.

"Don't you know about the Great Wall in China?" Grandmama said. And the Old One told me everything. How you would need ten lifetimes to walk it just once. Of course, I reasoned, Suling must have walked the Great Wall twice by now and measured every inch with her yardstick!

My mind set to work, to plan Suling's downfall. I knew enough to understand the person named Chen Suling would have "delicate" papers, trumped-up papers, at best, half-true papers.

Oh, I thought, what if I called her by the wrong title at the very first meeting at Customs?

Any slip in our very first greetings to her, and the White Demon immigration officers and their translators would pounce. Ship her back on the very next steamer, steel-edged ruler unpacked. But Stepmother wanted to be with her best friend again . . . I didn't care . . . I made up my mind: I would call Chen Suling by the wrong name—on purpose.

At Sunday dinner, I interrupted Third Uncle talking about the documents being completed for Stepmother's girlhood friend.

"When Suling comes to Gold Mountain," I asked in my limited *Sze-yup* dialect, "will she be Father's Number Three Wife or Father's Number One Concubine?"

I was playing with my rice, but looked up when there was no answer from Third Uncle. He looked startled and said, firmly, "Not my business."

Everyone laughed.

"*Mo no*," Stepmother said, shaking her head at me. "Suling will teach you proper Chinese," Stepmother said to me. "Suling is a teacher in the Mission House in China."

Stepmother's *Sun Wei* village accent, blunt and final, burned into my ears while she sizzled the late night stir-fry. "*Mo no . . . mo no . . . no brain . . . no brain!*" Then I would hear Father sighing in the next room. He was exasperated with Stepmother's stubbornness.

Against Stepmother's pointing chopsticks, against Father's heavy sighing, I was driven to prove them wrong: *I did, too, have a brain!* There was nothing Suling needed to teach me!

When I got into English school at last, I would push myself. If Chinese was impossible to know correctly, I would conquer my Second Language. I would be a Master of English, better than Chen Suling, even if Miss Chen had ten thousand prizes!

I already had real English books to learn from. I didn't have to struggle for English the way Suling did. "Like a scavenger," Stepmother told me.

Chen Suling had to write down in her copy book the English words she searched for on billboards and war posters, had to pick up old British magazines discarded in heaps be-

hind the Foreign Compound. Stepmother said that Suling fought with her father, for he was angry at the way she was taking in the Demon words and was horrified to see her believe that eating the flesh and blood of someone called Jesus was the only possible way to go to Heaven. Suling would light incense to the family ancestors but would not bow three times before their images. Suling's father expelled her from the family, said to the village he had no such daughter. "She fled her home like the Sky Dragon," Stepmother said.

Chen Suling had moved into the First Mission Church. Suling and Jesus were now best friends.

"In the Mission Church," Stepmother emphasized, "Chen Suling learned First Class English."

I wished someone would expel me and I could live somewhere else. That would be fun. Instead, I pretended it was dangerous to learn English in Canada. I slyly picked up mysterious old books and magazines from the back of Strathcona School. I cut out war pictures and kept them in a wooden, tin-lined shipping crate Uncle Dai Kew got me from the docks. It smelled of sweet marjoram. On the lid I crayoned **KEEP OUT!!!**

I even took to reading the scraps of English newspaper that wrapped up our groceries, and I bugged my two brothers for definitions.

No one laughed at my efforts to learn English. Education, in whatever language, was respected. Around me were "uncles" who had gone to universities in the 1920s and '30s but remained unemployable because only Canadian citizens could qualify as professionals. For if you were Chinese, even

if you were born in Canada, you were an educated alien—never to be a citizen, never a Canadian with the right to vote—"an educated fool" in the words of some old China men, or a "hopeful fool" in the words of those who knew the world would soon change.

"Furnish your mind," Father said to us. "You don't have to be poor inside, too."

"Look at your son," *Sam gon*, one of the old uncles, said to Stepmother, who was setting the table. She pushed my picture book off the table onto my lap.

"He reads books as if he is a scholar," Stepmother said.

"He loves to read, just like my friend Chen Suling."

"But he doesn't know what to call me when I visit," *Sam gon* persisted. "All those *low fan* words, those foreign words, and no Chinese! What a waste!"

I slammed my book shut and glared at *Sam gon*. In my best Chinese, I said loudly, "What's the difference what *you're* called! My *bu-hing-moh gui*, my red-haired demon friend, says if you drop a plate in a restaurant, a dozen Chinks will answer!"

Sam gon's eyes opened wide as saucers. Stepmother dropped a large plate. Grandmama walked out of the room. That evening, there was no supper for me. Stepmother could hit hard, but when Father came home from working at the restaurant, he hit harder. He walloped me with a wad of folded *Chinese Times*.

I was sent to my room and grew even more to hate the Chinky language that made such a fool of me. I hated the Toisan words, the complex of village dialects that would trip up my tongue. I wished I were someone else, someone like Freddy Bartholomew, who was rich and lived in a grand house and did not have to know a single Chinese word.

ONE DAY, when I was struck at home because I was wheezing badly, and everyone was out except Stepmother and myself, the postman had an important piece of mail for us. Stepmother, who was wary of any strange documents, called me to the door. "What does this White Demon want?" I could see she wished Suling were here, with her perfect English.

The bearded postman explained to me he needed a signature; he held out a parcel, as if to tempt us. Stepmother looked at the package with our address in English and some Chinese writing cascading alongside the block-print words: FROM CANTON. INSPECTED / INTERNATIONAL ZONE.

"Just tell your mom to make an X," the man said, drawing in the air. I told Stepmother she must sign for it.

Stepmother took the postman's pencil, and he pointed to the document in his hand. Carefully, Stepmother drew two lines, one crossing over the other. She could have written her name in Chinese ideograms, but the man only wanted an X. It was the first time I saw Stepmother write anything in English. X. She did not like the way the postman smiled at her.

"Sek-Lung, tell the White Demon to give me the box."

"Sir," I said, "my manna wants the box right away."

"You're a smart young fella," he said, putting the box in her hand. He saluted Stepmother and slapped his receipt book shut and left.

"Did you hear that?" I said. "He called me *smart*."

"Smart English not smart Chinese," Stepmother said.

I followed her to the kitchen table. With a sharp cleaver held expertly in her hand, Stepmother cut the twine in two. I tore open the brown wrapping paper.

Stepmother hesitated a moment, then reached in and lifted out a quilted green silk jacket. When she gently, very

delicately, unfolded it, we discovered a thick, water-stained Chinese-English Bible, three photos—one exactly matching the photo in the bamboo frame—and an official *Mission Hospital* envelope.

In silence, Stepmother touched the stained dragon crest on one sleeve of the jacket. Dragon claws gripped my stomach. Giant wings pushed against my ribs.

Stepmother took out a sheet of onionskin from the envelope and looked blankly at the two small paragraphs of typewritten print; the Demon language stared blankly back at her. She put the paper in my hand.

"What does this paper say?" she asked in a low voice. "Hurry, Sek-Lung, tell me!"

I silently read the typewritten message and began tumbling them into my broken, *mo no* Chinese:

"... a bomb . . . Miss Suling Chen . . ."

When I finished, to avoid Stepmother's eyes, and to not hear the silence that was now louder than any noise, I put down the letter and opened up the well-worn Bible. Something was handwritten on the inside of the cover. It faced a decorated page that said this book was presented as a First Prize for Language Achievement. Stepmother pointed her fingers at the handwritten English words.

"Read," she commanded.

I read.

TO SEK-LUNG, SUN OF LONGTIME FRIEND

LILY. I NEVER TO FORGET HER. LEAF

JACKET AND BOOK WITH GOD.

BLESSINGS.

—CHEN SULING.

As she listened, Stepmother strained to read the two columns of hand-brushed Chinese words beside the English words. She nodded her head. Yes, the same meaning. Yes, this was her best friend's very hand. Yes, even if the ideograms were shaky, even if there were ink blots here and there, hesitations as if strength or faith were ebbing.

Stepmother took the Bible from me. "See her excellent English, Sek-Lung? She used to win prizes. Did I not tell you Suling was best?"

I said nothing.

Stepmother closed up the thick book, held it a moment, and put it back in my hand. The dragon in my stomach unclenched—twisted once—and flew away. She folded up the jacket and quickly picked up everything, and silently went up to her room.

I never heard Stepmother mention Chen Suling's name again.

