

PEARL OF CHINA

A NOVEL

ANCHEE MIN



NEW YORK · BERLIN · LONDON

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I belong to China for I have lived there from childhood to adulthood . . . Happy for me that for instead of the narrow and conventional life of the white man in Asia, I lived with the Chinese people and spoke their tongue before I spoke my own, and their children were my first friends.

Pearl S. Buck
My Several Worlds

Behind the calm steadfast eyes of a Chinese woman, I feel a powerful warmth. We might have been friends, she and I, unless she had decided first that I was her enemy. She would have decided, not I. I was never deceived by Chinese women, not even by the flower-like lovely girls. They are the strongest women in the world. Seeming always to yield, they never yield. Their men are weak beside them. Whence comes this female strength? It is the strength that centuries have given them, the strength of the unwanted.

Pearl S. Buck
Letter from Peking

CHAPTER I

Before I was Willow, I was Weed. My grandmother, NaiNai, insisted that naming me Weed was better. She believed that the gods would have a hard time making my life go lower if I was already at the bottom. Papa disagreed. "Men want to marry flowers, not weeds." They argued and finally settled for Willow, which was considered "gentle enough to weep and tough enough to be made into farming tools." I always wondered what my mother would have thought if she had lived.

Papa lied to me about my mother's death. Both he and NaiNai told me that Mother died giving birth. But I had already learned otherwise from neighbors' gossip. Papa had "rented" his wife to the town's "Baresticks" in order to pay off his debts. One of the bachelors got Mother pregnant. I was four years old when it happened. To rid her of the "bastard seed," Papa bought magic root powder from an herbalist. Papa mixed the powder with tea and Mother drank it. Mother died along with the seed. It broke Papa's heart, because he had intended to kill the fetus, not his wife. He had no money to buy another wife. Papa was angry at the herbalist, but there was nothing he could do—he had been warned about the poison.

NaiNai feared that she would be punished by the gods for Mother's death. She believed that in her next life she would be a diseased bird and her son a limbless dog. NaiNai burned incense and begged the gods to reduce her sentence. When she ran out of money for incense, she stole. She took me to markets, temples, and graveyards. We would not act until

darkness fell. NaiNai moved like an animal on all fours. She was in and out of bamboo groves and brick hallways, behind the hills and around ponds. Under the bright moonlight, NaiNai's long neck stretched. Her head seemed to become smaller. Her cheekbones sharpened. Her slanting eyes glowed as she scanned the temples. NaiNai appeared, disappeared, and reappeared like a ghost. But one night she stopped. In fact, she collapsed. I was aware that she had been ill. Tufts of hair had been falling from her head. There was a rotten smell to her breath. "Go and look for your father," she ordered. "Tell him that my end is near."

Papa was a handsome man in his thirties. He had what a fortune-teller would describe as "the look of an ancient king" or "the matching energy of sky and earth," meaning he had a square forehead and a broad chin. He had a pair of sheep eyes, a garlic-shaped nose that sat on his face like a gentle hill, and a mouth that was always ready to smile. His hair was thick and silky black. Every morning, he combed and braided it with water to make his queue smooth and shining. He walked with his back straight and head up. Speaking Mandarin with an Imperial accent, Papa wore his voice like a costume. But when Papa lost his temper, his voice would slip. People were shocked when Mr. Yee suddenly took up a strange voice. Ignoring NaiNai's opinion that his ambitions would never be realized, Papa dreamed that one day he would work for the governor as an adviser. Papa attended teahouses where he showed off his talent in classic Chinese poems and verse. "I must keep my mind sharp and literary skills tuned," he often said to me. One would never guess from the way he presented himself that Papa was a seasonal coolie.

We lived in Chin-kiang, a small town far away from the capital, Peking, on the south side of the Yangtze River in Jiangsu province. Originally, our family was from Anhui province, a harsh region where survival depended on an endless round of crushing physical labor. For generations my family worked the region's thin and unfertile soil and struggled with famine, flood, locusts, bandits, and debt seekers. NaiNai bragged that it was she who brought "luck" to the Yee family.

She was purchased by my grandfather when he was forty years old. No one was allowed to mention that the purchase took place in a local sing-song house. When NaiNai was in her prime, she had a slender figure, a swanlike neck, and a pair of fox eyes with both ends tilted up. She painted her face every day and modeled her hairstyle after the Imperial empress. It was said that men's blood would boil when NaiNai smiled.

By the time the family crossed the Yangtze River and migrated to the south, NaiNai had given the Yee family three sons. Papa was the eldest and the only one sent to school. Grandfather expected a return from his investment. Papa was expected to become an accountant so that the family could fight the government's tax collectors. But things didn't turn out right—Grandfather lost his son to the education.

Papa believed that he was too good to work as a coolie. At sixteen, he developed the expensive habits and fantasies of the rich. He read books on China's political reform and chewed tea leaves to sweeten his peasant garlic breath. An ideal life, he told others, would be to "compose poems under blossoming plum trees," far away from the "greedy material world." Instead of returning home, Papa traveled the country, making his parents pay the bills. One day he received a message from his mother. The message informed him that his father and brothers were gravely ill and near death from an infectious disease that had swept through his hometown.

Papa rushed home, but the funeral was already over. Soon enough, his house was possessed by the debt seekers. NaiNai and Papa fell into poverty and became coolies. Although NaiNai vowed to regain their former prosperity, she was no longer healthy. By the time I was born, NaiNai suffered from an incurable intestinal disease.

Papa struggled to keep his "intellectual dignity." He continued to write poems. He even composed a piece titled "The Sweet Scent of Books" for my mother's funeral. Invoking a newfound spirituality, he insisted that his words would make better gifts than jewelry and diamonds to accompany his wife in her next life. Although Papa was

no different from a beggar in terms of possessions, he made sure that he was lice-free. He kept his appearance by trimming his beard and never missed a chance to mention his “honorable past.”

Papa’s honorable past didn’t mean anything to me. For the first years of my young life, food was the only thing on my mind. I would wake hungry every morning and go to sleep hungry every night. Sometimes the clawing in my stomach would keep me from sleeping. Having to constantly scavenge for scraps, I existed in a delirium. Unexpected luck or a good harvest might bring food for a while, but the hunger would always return.

By the time I was seven, in 1897, things had only gotten worse. Although NaiNai’s health had continued to deteriorate, she was determined to do something to better our lot. Picking up her old profession, she began to receive men in the back of our bungalow. When I was given a fistful of roasted soybeans, I understood that it was time to disappear. I ran through the rice paddies and the cotton fields into the hills and hid in the bamboo groves. I cried because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing NaiNai the same way I had lost Mother.

Around this time, Papa and I worked as seasonal farmhands. He planted rice, wheat, and cotton and carried manure. My job was to plant soybeans along the edges of the fields. Each day, Papa and I woke before dawn to go to work. As a child, I was paid less than an adult, but I was glad to be earning money. I had to compete with other children, especially boys. I always proved that I was faster than the boys when it came to planting soybeans. I used a chopstick to poke a hole and threw a soybean into each one. I kicked dirt into the hole and sealed it with my big toe.

The coolie market where we got our jobs closed after the planting season was over. Papa and I couldn’t find any work. Papa spent his days walking the streets in search of a job. No one hired him, although he was received politely. I followed Papa throughout the town. When I found him wandering into the surrounding hills, I started doubting his seriousness about finding a job.

“What a glorious view!” Papa marveled as he beheld the countryside spreading below his feet. “Willow, come and admire the beauty of nature!”

I looked. The wide Yangtze flowed freely and leaped aside into small canals and streams that fed the southern land.

“Beyond the valleys are hidden old temples that have stood for hundreds of years.” Papa’s voice rose again. “We live in the best place under the sun!”

I shook my head and told him that the demon in my stomach had eaten away my good sense.

Papa shook his head. “What did I teach you?”

I rolled back my eyes and recited, “Virtue will sustain and prevail.”

Virtue finally failed to sustain Papa. The demons in his stomach took over—he was caught stealing. Neighbors no longer wanted to be associated with him. The pity was that Papa never actually succeeded as a thief. He was too clumsy. More than once I witnessed him being beaten by the folks he stole from. He was thrown into the open sewage. He told his friends that he had “tripped over a tree stump.” Laughing, they asked him, “Was it the same stump you tripped over the last time?” One day Papa came home holding his arm, which had been knocked out of its socket. “I deserved it,” he said, cursing himself. “I shouldn’t have stolen from an infant’s mouth.”

By the time I was eight years old I was already a seasoned thief. I began by stealing incense for NaiNai. Although Papa criticized me, he knew that the family would starve if I stopped. Papa would sell the goods I stole.

I snatched small items at first, such as vegetables, fruit, birds, and puppies. Then I went for farming tools. After selling what I stole, Papa would rush to a local bar for rice wine. He took his sips slowly, closing his eyes as if concentrating on the taste. When his cheeks began to redden, he would recite his favorite poem. Although his friends had long since left him, he imagined his audience.

*The Grand Yangtze River runs toward the ocean,
Never to return, so went the dynasty's glorious days.
When would the time come again for heroes?
Though music continues playing, swiftly and triumphantly,
Reform miscarried, reformers beheaded,
Foreign troops plagued the country
His Majesty locked in the island of Yintai.
Where have been the gods' responses?
Weep the learned man,
Brokenhearted and in despair . . .*

One day a man clapped. He was sitting in a corner. He stood up to congratulate Papa. He was tall, a giant in the eyes of the Chinese. He was the brown-haired and blue-eyed foreigner, an American missionary. He was by himself with a thick book and a cup of tea in front of him. He smiled at Papa and praised him for his fine poem.

Absalom Sydenstricker was his name. The locals called him the “plow-nosed and demon-eyed crazy foreigner.” He had been a fixture in town for as long as I could remember. Not only was he ceiling tall, he also had hair growing on his forearms and the backs of his hands like weeds. All year long Absalom wore a gray Chinese gown. A queue went down his back, which everyone knew was fake. His costume made him look ridiculous, but he didn't seem to care. Absalom spent his time chasing people on the street. He tried to stop them and talk to them. He wanted to make us believe in his God. As children, we were taught to avoid him. We were not allowed to say things that would hurt his feelings, such as “Go away.”

Papa was familiar with Absalom Sydenstricker since he, too, spent time wandering the streets. Papa concluded that Absalom was laying up credit for himself so that his God would offer him a ticket to heaven when he died.

“Or else why leave his own home to wander among strangers?” Papa questioned.

Papa suspected that Absalom was a criminal in his own land. Out of curiosity that day, Papa listened to what the foreigner had to say. Afterward, he invited Absalom home for “further discussion.”

Thrilled, Absalom came. He didn't mind our dirty hut. He sat down and opened his book. “Would you like a story from the Bible?” he offered.

Papa was not interested in stories. He wanted to know what kind of god Jesus was. “Based on the way he was tortured, stabbed to death, nailed and tied to posts, he must be a royal criminal. In China such elaborate public torture would be given only to criminals of high status, like the former Imperial prime minister Su Shun.”

Excitement filled Absalom's voice. He began to explain. But his Chinese was difficult to understand.

Papa lost his patience. When Absalom paused, Papa interrupted. “How can Jesus protect others when he couldn't even protect himself?”

Absalom waved his hands, pointed his fingers up and down, and then read from the Bible.

Papa decided that it was time to help the foreigner. “Chinese gods make better sense,” he said. “They are more worshipper-friendly . . .”

“No, no, no.” Absalom shook his head like a merchant's drummer. “You are not understanding me . . .”

“Listen, foreigner, my suggestions might help you. Put clothes on Jesus and give him a weapon. Look at our god of war, Guan-gong. He wears a general's robe made of heavy metal, and he carries a powerful sword.”

“You are a clever man,” Absalom told Papa, “but your biggest mistake is that you are knowledgeable of all gods but the true God.”

I observed that Absalom's face was a big opium bed with a high nose sitting like a table in the middle. His eyebrows were two bird's nests and under them were clear blue eyes. After his talk with Papa he went back into the streets. I followed him.

“God is your best fortune!” Absalom sang to the people who paused in front of him. No one paid attention. People tied their shoelaces,

wiped snot off their children's faces, and moved on. Absalom stuck his long arms out like two brooms in the air. When he saw Papa again, he smiled. Papa smiled back. It took Papa quite a while to figure out what Absalom was trying to say.

"We have shed blood unlawfully," Absalom said, waving the Bible in Papa's face. "It may be innocently, but the stain remains upon us. Mankind can only remove it by prayers and good deeds."

I discovered where Absalom lived. His house was a bungalow located in the lower part of town. His neighbors were coolies and peasants. I wondered what had made Absalom choose the place. Although Chin-kiang was the smallest town in Jiangsu province, it had been an important port since ancient times. From the water's edge, stone-paved streets led to shops and then the center of the town, where the British Embassy was located. The embassy occupied the highest point, with a broad view of the Yangtze River.

Although he was not the first American missionary to come to China, Absalom claimed he was the first to arrive in Chin-kiang during the late nineteenth century. According to old folks, soon after Absalom arrived, he purchased a piece of land behind the graveyard, where he built a church. His intention was to avoid "disturbing the living," but to the Chinese, disturbing the dead was the worst crime one could commit. The church's tall shadow stretched out over the graveyard. The locals protested. Absalom had to abandon the church. He moved down the hill and rented a shop as his new church. It was a room with a low ceiling, crooked beams, falling studs, and broken windows.

Most of the people thought Absalom a harmless fool. Children loved to follow him around. His feet were the main attraction, because they were huge. When Absalom asked the local shoemaker for a pair of Chinese shoes, it became news. People visited the shop just to see how much material it would take and if the shoemaker would double the charge.

When asked his reason for coming to China, Absalom replied that he was here to save our souls.

People laughed. “What is a soul?”

Absalom let us know that the world was coming to an end, and that we would all die if we failed to follow God.

“What evidence do you have?” Papa asked.

“That is what the Bible is for.” Absalom winked an eye and smiled. “The Lord explains the one and only truth.”

Papa said that he was rather disappointed by Absalom’s description of the Western hell. Chinese hell was much more terrifying. Papa loved to challenge Absalom in teahouses and bars. He reveled in the gathering crowd and his growing popularity. Behind Absalom’s back, Papa admitted that he followed Absalom around for the food, especially the cookies baked by Absalom’s wife, Carie.

Compared to NaiNai, Carie was a big woman. She had light brown eyes and a wrinkled, soft, white round face. She wore a funny-shaped hat, which she called a “bonnet.” Stuffed inside this hat was her brown curly hair. Carie wore the same dark dress all year long. It was the color of seaweed. Her skirt was so long that it swept the ground.

Carie had been warning her husband about Papa. She didn’t trust Papa. But Absalom continued to treat Papa like a good friend, although Papa refused to attend his Sunday church on a regular basis.

Like a true artist, Papa fooled Absalom by pretending that he was interested. He was giving me an opportunity to steal. The day after I took the church’s doormat, I heard Carie cry, “There is no need for housekeeping because everything is gone!”

CHAPTER 2

When Absalom held up his Bible-story drawings, I asked about the beard-men who had golden rings on their heads. “Why are they walking in the desert with sheets draped around them?”

Absalom didn’t know that I only asked questions to distract him, so I could carry on with my stealing.

It was hard for Absalom to concentrate. He was interrupted by people’s cries. “When can we have food, Master Absalom? Would you ask God to bring food for us now?”

As Absalom went on with his speech, children pulled his arms and pushed him around. “Who is Virgin? Who is Mary?”

“Who is Madonna?” I asked loudly, attaching myself to Absalom like a leech. My hands were inside his pockets.

By the time Absalom blessed me with a “Jesus loves you,” I had his wallet.

Slipping the wallet into my pocket, I hurried down a side street and made my way out of town. I sensed that I was being followed and cut a jagged path. Still I felt the pair of blue eyes at my back. They belonged to a cream-skinned white girl wearing a black knitted cap. She was a little younger than me. She always sat in the corner of the church room with a black leather-bound book in her hands. Her eyes seemed to say, “I saw you.”

By now I knew who she was. She was the daughter of Absalom and Carie. Her family servant had called her Pearl. She spoke to the servant in the Chin-kiang dialect. Her mother and father never seemed to need her. She was always by herself and was always reading.

To get rid of her, I ran as fast as I could toward the hills. I passed the wheat and cotton fields. After a couple of miles, I stopped. I looked around and was glad that she was no longer in sight. I took a deep breath and sat down. I was excited about my harvest.

As I began to open the wallet, I heard a noise.

Someone was approaching.

I froze and held my breath.

Slowly, I turned my head.

Behind me, in the bushes, was that pair of blue eyes.

“You stole my father’s wallet!” Pearl yelled.

“No, I didn’t.” I imagined the food the money in the wallet could buy.

“Yes, you did.”

“Prove it!”

“It’s in your pocket.” She put down her book and tried to reach into my pocket.

I knocked her aside with an elbow.

She fell.

I held tight to the wallet.

She rose. Anger made her pink lips quiver.

We stood face-to-face. I could see sweat beaded on her forehead. Her skin was white, as if bleached. Her nose had a pointed tip. Like her father’s fake queue, her black knitted cap hid her blonde curly hair. She wore a Chinese tunic embroidered with indigo flowers.

“Last chance to give the wallet, or you’ll get hurt,” she threatened.

I worked up a mouthful of saliva and spit.

While her hands went up to protect her face, I ran.

She followed me through the fields and up and down a hill. By the time she caught me, I had already hidden the wallet. I raised both of my arms and said, “Come and search me.”

She came and didn’t find the wallet.

I smiled.

She gasped, taking off her knitted cap. Golden curls fell across her face.

From then on she followed me everywhere. I was unable to steal. I spent day and night thinking about how to get rid of her. I learned that she had one living sibling, a younger sister, Grace. The Chinese servant who took care of the girls, Wang Ah-ma, had been with the family for a long time.

“Pearl and Grace want so much to look like the Chinese girls,” Wang Ah-ma chatted to her knitting friends. They sat outside the house under the sun. Wang Ah-ma was making new caps for Pearl and Grace. The caps would cover their blonde hair so that they could look like Chinese girls. Wang Ah-ma said that she had to knit fast because the girls were wearing the old ones out. “Poor Pearl, every day she begs me to find a way to help her grow black hair.”

The women laughed. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her to eat black sesame seeds, and she went crazy eating them. Her mother thought that she was eating ants.”

Before the spring planting season, farmers came to town to purchase their supplies for the year. While men bought manure and had tools fixed and sharpened, women inspected the livestock. Going in and out of food stalls and supply shops, I hunted for stealing opportunities. It had been weeks since I'd had a full meal.

Papa had pawned nearly every piece of furniture we owned. The table and benches and my own bed were all gone. I now slept on a straw mat on the packed-earth floor. Centipedes crawled over my face in the middle of the night. NaiNai suffered from an infection that wouldn't heal. She could barely move from the one bed we still owned. Papa spent more time with Absalom, trying to get hired.

“Absalom needs my help,” Papa said every day. “Absalom doesn't know how to tell stories. He puts people to sleep. I ought to be the one to tell his Bible stories. I could turn Absalom's business around.”

But Absalom was only interested in saving Papa's soul.

One night I heard Papa whisper to NaiNai, "The dowry would be handsome." It took me a while to figure out what he meant. One of his friends had made an offer to purchase me as his concubine.

"You are not selling Willow!" NaiNai hammered her chest with her fist. "She is just a child."

"It takes money to make money," Papa argued. "Besides, you need to buy medicine. The doctor said that you are getting worse . . ."

"As long as I am breathing, don't even think about it!" NaiNai broke down.

What if NaiNai died? I became scared. For the first time I looked forward to Sunday, when I could attend the church, where Absalom would talk about heaven and Carie would serve meals. Papa and NaiNai wanted to join me, but they were embarrassed to show their despair in front of foreigners.

Absalom's church was a room with benches. The walls were mud-colored. Absalom said that his God was a humble god, one who cared more about his followers than about the appearance of his temple. Absalom said that he was in the middle of raising funds to build a proper church.

I wanted to tell Absalom that people were not interested in his God or his church. Food was the reason we came. We waited for Absalom to finish preaching. We had to endure. I cried joyfully when it was time to clap our hands together and say "Ah-men."

After the meal we felt good. We sang songs to thank Absalom's God. Carie taught us Hymns and Oratorio. The first song Carie sang to us was called "Amazing Grace." Her big voice surprised everyone. It was deep like a Chinese gong. The room vibrated. The sound was like a spring waterfall pouring down from the mountains. Carie's soft round face melted into a sweet expression. She sent her notes up through the ceiling effortlessly.

I fell in love with "Amazing Grace." The song moved me in a strange way. I grew up with Chinese operas, but it was Carie's song that made

me think of my own mother. Never before had I been able to imagine what my mother looked like. The song brought her to me, vivid and clear. Mother was as beautiful as a Chinese goddess. I could almost smell her fragrance. Her face was egg-shaped and her eyes gentle and bright. She was petite but had a full figure. "Come, my child," I could hear her say. "I have been longing to see you."

Tears filled my eyes. I noticed that I was not the only one who was falling in love with "Amazing Grace." NaiNai wanted me to learn the song so that I could sing it at her funeral.

Carie had a monstrous instrument she called a "piano." She often played it to accompany her singing. Her fingers danced over the keys as she sat on a stool with the bottom of her dress covering the ground. We spent many Sunday afternoons together. Word by word, Carie taught me "Amazing Grace." I went home and practiced in front of NaiNai and Papa.

*Amazing Grace,
How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.*

I sang the same way I would sing a Chinese opera. My voice was charged and loud.

*I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

Papa and NaiNai enjoyed the song and waited eagerly for me to go on. I had to tell them that this was all I had managed to learn so far.

Papa went quiet for a while and then said, "Although 'Amazing Grace' is a foreign song, it is about us, because we are lost, confused, and scared." NaiNai agreed. "Willow," she said, turning to me, "make sure you learn the full piece from Carie, because I could go at any time."

I asked NaiNai if she was going to heaven and if so whether she and

my mother would meet. NaiNai nodded. "Your mother would love to hear you sing 'Amazing Grace.' "

I went to Carie and begged her to teach me the rest of the song. She was delighted. She sat me next to her by the piano and began.

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

Carie's voice changed. The tone became tender, reminding me of a gentle creek flowing through a meadow.

*And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

From Wang Ah-ma, we learned that Carie had lost four of her children after arriving in China. "I don't know any woman who has experienced worse, four male children," Wang Ah-ma sighed, putting up her four fingers.

According to Wang Ah-ma, Carie had her dead sons' names carved on her bed board. "The Mistress speaks to their spirits every night before sleep."

People wondered what kind of food Absalom's family ate and what it tasted like.

"Cheese and butter," Wang Ah-ma said. She stuck a finger in her throat and bent over to imitate retching. "It tastes like spoiled tofu."

"What about Pearl?" I asked.

"Pearl is different. She has a Chinese stomach." Wang Ah-ma smiled with approval. "Pearl eats what I eat. She is strong as an ox."

"Do you mean she won't die like her brothers?" I asked.

Wang Ah-ma lowered her voice to a whisper. "It doesn't make sense

to me that four of Carie's children had to die. It was the same disease. I mean, the boys suffered the same as the Chinese children. Why did the Chinese children survive? Pearl's body has learned to fight the disease like a Chinese. For Buddha's sake, she has been successful!"

The listeners nodded in admiration. "You did well for your mistress, Wang Ah-ma!"

Wang Ah-ma's face bloomed like a summer lotus. "Pearl eats double meals. One in the kitchen with the servants, and the other with her parents. The child has an incredible appetite. She loves soy nuts, lotus seeds, and roasted seaweed. Pearl's favorite is scallion pancakes, which I buy every week especially for her."

I should have seen it coming when Pearl caught me. My mouth was stuffed with pancake, which I had stolen from Wang Ah-ma. Pearl waited for the moment. She made sure that she had a witness. My hand was in Wang Ah-ma's basket, although Wang Ah-ma hadn't realized what was happening.

Pearl dragged me to Carie, who was sitting in front of her piano.

The town followed.

Papa and NaiNai were called.

"*A rat naturally knows how to dig a hole,*" children cheered. "What do you expect, the father sets an example?"

"I caught her in the act," Pearl announced.

Carie didn't look at her daughter. She turned to me.

"You didn't do it, did you, Willow?" Carie asked, closing the piano lid.

Fearing that Papa and NaiNai would lose face in front of the town, I boldly lied. "No, I did not do it."

Carie rose to greet Papa and NaiNai. In a gentle voice she said to them, "I'm sorry, my daughter made a mistake."

"But Mother!" Pearl interrupted. "I caught Willow in the middle of her act!" She turned to Wang Ah-ma. "Please, Ah-ma, tell Mother the truth . . ."

"Mistress," Wang Ah-ma said, stepping up. "Pearl made no mistake . . ."

Carie signaled a stop with her right hand and said, "Ah-ma, the soup on the stove is boiling."

"It is not boiling, Mistress. I have just checked."

"Go and check again," said Carie.

"Yes," Wang Ah-ma said, nodding, "I'll go now. But Mistress, Pearl was right about the pancake. Willow did steal it."

"No, Willow did not," Carie repeated without looking at anyone.

NaiNai and Papa exchanged relieved glances.

"Mother!" Pearl's tears streamed down her cheeks. "If you check Willow's breath, you will smell the scallions!"

"That's enough, Pearl." Carie waved a hand.

"I swear to God." Pearl began to weep.

"Go and help set the dinner table," Carie said. "Your father is on his way home."

"Mother, I'm not the one who lied!"

"I didn't say you lied, Pearl."

I had a hard time that afternoon. My neck felt stiff, as if pressed under a stone grinder. I went up into the hills and sat alone. I didn't move until the sun set and the boatmen returned. Mist began to spread along the riverbank. The moisture was thick in my lungs. I lost sleep that evening. I was deeply ashamed. Pearl's tearful face hovered before me all night long. I got up and admitted to Papa and NaiNai that I had taken the pancake.

They were not surprised.

CHAPTER 3

The teahouses celebrated spring by hosting parties. “Men of words” gathered around blossoming camellias and peach and plum trees and composed poems. Papa loved the parties, while I loved the blooming peach flowers that looked like pink clouds. Then came the April wet season. The southern China rain didn’t come in showers. It came like a spreading thick fog. When I stuck out an arm, I could feel no drops. But once I stepped outside, wetness would wrap me. In ten minutes of walking, moisture would soak through my clothes. If I wiped my face with a hand, water would come off. Very slowly, my hair would droop. Strands of hair would paste against my skull.

In a month, the river would rise a few inches. Water and sky would become one gray color. Toads, eels, earthworms, and leeches would be found everywhere. The dirt path would become sluggish. Bamboo would thrive. By the time summer arrived, it would cover the southern slopes of the hills.

My teeth were green from chewing milkweeds. I had just turned nine. It became harder to resist the urge to steal. I had been thinking about a boy who had visited us during the past Chinese New Year. He was a distant relative and seventeen years old. His name was San-bao. He was an apprentice working for the local blacksmith. What I really had been thinking about were the soy nuts San-bao had promised me. I wondered when he would deliver his gift.

My legs carried me to San-bao’s shop. I wished that I had nicer clothes. San-bao was surprised to see me. He wore a dirty apron and was

bare-shouldered. He was a strong and cheerful man who had a horse's jaw. I could see wormlike thick veins under his skin. Putting down his sledgehammer, he asked what had brought me to visit.

I couldn't tell him the truth. I couldn't say that I had come for the soy nuts. I said that I was just passing by. He smiled gleefully.

"Have you eaten?" he asked after a moment.

"No." I was embarrassed for replying too quickly.

"What would you like me to get you?"

Before I could stop myself, my tongue went, "Soy nuts would be nice."

"Oh, right, soy nuts." He remembered his promise. He told me to wait and went inside the shop. When he came out, he said, "We'll take a walk, and I'll get you the soy nuts."

As soon as San-bao paid for the soy nuts, I reached for the bag.

"No, not yet." San-bao took it away. "I don't want the beggar children to jump on you. We must find a quiet place to sit."

I followed San-bao. We arrived at the back of the old churchyard where the weeds were waist-high. Black crows shot into the sky. Field mice ran through the wild berry bushes. We sat down. San-bao watched me eating the soy nuts. As soon as I finished, he put his arm around my shoulders.

"I am good to you, aren't I?" he asked.

I nodded, feeling a little awkward.

"Do me a favor," he said, pulling my hand over and placing it on top of his crotch.

I was shocked.

"You don't have to be so serious." He grinned.

"I'm going home, San-bao."

"Come on, Willow."

"No, San-bao."

"You owe me." He dropped his smile and his voice turned cold.

I was frightened. I got up and ran, but he caught me.

"You really believe that I'd let a cooked duck fly away?" He pushed me down.

I struggled to free myself.

He held my neck and twisted my head to the side. "I paid for your soy nuts."

"I'll give you the money back!"

"You have no money."

"I'll find a way."

"I want it right now!"

"I don't have it."

"Yes, you do. You have something I like. All you have to do is to let me touch it . . ." He reached inside my clothes.

"San-bao, please!"

"Willow, give me no trouble."

"Let me go!"

"Don't make me hurt you."

"No!"

"You bitch!"

"No!"

He pressed my face down to stop me from screaming.

I fought and kicked, but he was too strong.

My clothes were ripped.

I begged him to stop.

Refusing, he forced himself onto me.

Losing strength, I broke down. There was no way I could escape. I regretted my foolishness.

It was when San-bao pushed my face to the side that I saw a shadow. There was a figure hiding behind a stone tablet.

A familiar black knitted cap revealed who it was.

"Help!" I screamed.

Before San-bao could react, Pearl ran up. She struck San-bao with a big rock.

Instantly, San-bao fell over and was still.

"Oh, my God." Pearl stepped back. "Did I kill him?"

I gasped getting up.

Pearl bent down and put a finger under San-bao's nose.
"He's not dead!" Pearl said. "Should I hit him more?"
"No, no more!" San-bao pleaded, trying to raise himself.
"You deserve to die!" I yelled.
Pearl picked up the rock again.
"No!" San-bao rose and ran.
Pearl chased him until he disappeared.
Gratitude filled my chest.
Pearl came back and brushed the dirt off my clothes.
"Thank you for the rescue, my friend," I uttered.
"Who is your friend?" She turned away. "Liar!"
"Please forgive me, Pearl. I'll do anything to make it up to you."
"Do you expect me to trust you?" She looked at me, disgusted. "You took my father's wallet and spent his money; you stole Wang Ah-ma's pancakes and lied to my mother . . . You little donkey ass!"
She walked down the hill, swinging her basket.
I tried to hold back my tears.
She sang a Chinese song that I knew well. The hills echoed. The colorful wild flowers in her basket bounced under the bright sunshine.

*Jasmine flower, sweet jasmine flower
Your beauty and fragrance is the best among the spring
I'd like to pick you and wear you in my hair
But I fear that you would be upset and wouldn't come back the next year*

Noises filled the Sunday church. Men exchanged opinions on the weather and methods for pest control. Women knitted, mended, embroidered, and chatted. Someone shouted across the room. Children threw pine nuts at each other. Mothers nursed their infants and yelled at their elder children. Absalom was unable to quiet the crowd until Papa rang a merchant's bell.

"Folks, the Western monk needs our help," Papa said with raised voice. "In my opinion, Absalom offers not an alternative but a better

deal. Look, we have fed our gods and they are fat and happy. But what have they done for us? Nothing. Now, folks, I'd like you to take a hard look at Absalom's God, Jesus Christ. Just look at his appearance. Anyone who is not blind can tell that he works harder than the Chinese gods. So listen, folks, listen to Absalom."

Absalom picked up the opportunity. "Today we shall learn about the Baptism of Christ." He pulled out his color drawing and pointed. "The two men are Lord Christ and John."

I saw two figures standing in a river performing a ceremony. John and Christ had almost oriental features, with smaller noses and slightly slanted eyes. Absalom had finally taken Papa's advice. He had smoothed the deep-set Western eyes and flattened their pointed noses. Christ now had longer earlobes, resembling Buddha's.

Papa told me that Absalom at first had insisted on presenting a fully bearded Christ. It wasn't until Papa proved to him that no Chinese would worship a god that looked like a monkey that he agreed to trim the beard.

"Buddha's face changed as he traveled from India to China." Papa pointed out to Absalom the difference between the early India Buddha and the later Chinese Buddha. Buddha's eyes grew smaller as he arrived in China, his skin lighter and smoother. The Chinese sculptors made sure that Buddha appeared well fed. With his eyes half closed, Buddha looks like he is about to nap after a satisfying meal.

When Absalom baptized Papa, it was a big day for the town. Everyone wanted to see Papa being dipped in the river like a pot sticker in soy sauce. It was the first time Pearl and I sat together. We both had been trying to help our fathers draw a crowd.

Absalom and Papa stood face-to-face in the river with water up to their waists. Absalom was in his dark gray robe, while Papa wore his washed white cotton gown. Papa was red-faced and looked nervous, while Absalom was serious and solemn.

Speaking his heavily accented Chinese, Absalom explained, “Descending into the waters implies a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness.”

Papa repeated loudly after Absalom.

“Make a new beginning!” Absalom shouted. “Come to the light on the Cross!”

Papa tried to stand still but wasn’t able to. “When should I take a breath?” he asked.

Absalom ignored him. “ ‘Take me and throw me into the sea,’ says Jesus,” he sang.

“Tell me when,” Papa spoke again.

“Wait.” Absalom held him.

“I am afraid of drowning,” Papa said. “I really am.”

“Trust in God.”

Gently, Absalom pushed Papa back until his head went under the water.

The crowd held its breath.

“Lord Jesus bears all righteousness!” Absalom hailed.

The crowd cheered.

Papa looked frozen. He emerged from the water and immediately sank back again.

“Papa, what are you doing?” I shouted.

“He is accepting Christ’s death,” Pearl said quietly.

“For what?”

“For his sins and the sins of humanity.”

Papa reemerged from the river, spilling water like a fountain. He didn’t choke. I was relieved. I saw NaiNai among the crowd wiping her tears. The night before she had told us that she liked the idea that her son was getting a cleaning.

“God calls out, ‘This is my beloved son!’ ” Absalom shouted. “ ‘This is the anticipation of his death on the Cross and his Resurrection!’ ”

Led by Absalom, Papa walked out of the river.

“I feel God and his Will!” Papa said to the crowd. “Jesus made me shake off a failed life. I am to begin a new one!”

I was sure Papa did it for Absalom to thank him.

As if touched by Papa's transformation, Absalom stuck out both of his arms toward the sky, calling out, "Praise the Lord!"

Speaking together as if singing a duet, Papa and Absalom stood side by side in the church on Sundays. Folks were curious when they heard about Papa's new luck on getting blessed by the foreign god. They came to see if they could acquire the same protection.

Papa delivered an outstanding performance for Absalom.

"We live in an underworld filled with demons," Papa began with the same enthusiasm he showed when reciting his Chinese poems. "Doomed by fate, we are captured by evil, spellbound by mean spirits. We, the incense burners, the coolies, the losers, gamblers, drunkards, thieves, and deaf-n-blinds. Be afraid no more, because Jesus is here to help. All you have to do is to make a new start by signing up with Absalom."

Papa asked the town's seventeen-year-old widow, Lilac, who was an egg seller, "Am I right to guess that Buddha hasn't answered your prayers?"

"No, he certainly has not," Lilac replied.

"Are you losing faith in him?"

"I am afraid to say yes, but yes."

"You are disappointed."

"I don't mean to offend Buddha. But yes."

"Lilac, you have been visiting the temple since birth. The incense you have burned could make a hill. Did your life change for the good? You were bought and sold twice. You were married to a sick man who was dying. You were forced to sleep with the crop in order to balance his yin and yang elements. You barely escaped from your in-laws. You came to Chin-kiang friendless and family-less and still are. Have you ever questioned the god you worship?"

Lilac shook her head and began to weep.

"Well, consider your disappointment an investment!" Papa said.

“An investment?” Lilac’s big eyes widened.

Absalom frowned.

Papa’s tongue had never been so slippery as his words poured. “This investment warns you not to make any more bad choices, so that you won’t end up captive to evil spirits forever!”

“But I have been burning incense!” Lilac protested. “I don’t deserve bad luck forever!”

“Have you ever asked yourself the reason that bad luck still follows you?” Papa asked.

Lilac shook her head.

“Why you and no one else?”

“Why?”

To drive home his point, Papa punched his right fist into his left palm. “It’s the wrong god you have been worshipping!”

Lilac was stunned.

“The Christian God says, Lilac, you deserve a chance for a better life. Yes, you, Lilac!” Like an opera singer, Papa commanded the stage. “God tells me that Lilac deserves the same chance as his beloved son, the Lord Jesus Christ! Now make your wish and claim it!”

“I’d certainly make that wish,” Lilac said in a small voice. “But first and most of all I wish that my eggs be given a chance to become chickens.”

I admired Lilac because she never complained about her misfortune. She was always cheerful and kind. Her egg service was fully booked before winter. This year she thought that I was old enough to help her separate the good eggs from the bad. She hired me. What surprised me was that Pearl was there too. I learned that Pearl had been visiting Lilac since she had been a little girl. Lilac’s egg house was her playground. Lilac adored Pearl because she was such a dependable helper. Carie told Lilac that her daughter was permitted there for the learning experience. Pearl had so much fun that she would forget to go home. Wang Ah-ma had to come and drag her back at the end of the day.

At Lilac's request, Pearl showed me the way. I learned that it would take about a month and a half for the eggs to hatch. Pearl taught me to separate eggs from the main basket. We removed the eggs that were too small or whose shells were too thin, or had a broken yolk or had been in the storage too long.

Pearl told me that what she loved to do most was shine the eggs. This was done after Lilac sealed the egg house, leaving only a small hole in the door. Pearl and I took turns holding the eggs in front of the hole where the sunlight shone through. This was called "the first look." The purpose was to see if the egg yolk carried a pearl. If there was a pearl, the hen had been visited by a rooster, which meant that the egg would turn into a chick.

After the examination, we placed the qualified eggs in warm baskets padded with cotton. Lilac would take the baskets and store them underneath her big brick bed behind her stove. We had to wait for four days to have "the second look."

The purpose of the second look was to see if the pearl had swelled. Lilac taught us to hold the egg in our palm. Back and forth we turned the egg toward the sun. We looked for a shadow, the pearl. It was not an easy task and it took an experienced eye. Afterward we removed the eggs that hadn't swelled. Again we put the qualified eggs in the cotton-padded baskets and put them under Lilac's bed.

We would repeat the procedure every four days. It was what Lilac called "the third look" and "the fourth look." When the shadow became clear to our eyes, we moved all the egg baskets from underneath Lilac's big bed and transferred them to ceramic pots. Inside the pots was a mixture of earth and straw. It looked like a hot cave. A tiny fire was built underneath the pots to keep the temperature warm. According to Lilac, this was the most crucial step. If it was too hot, the eggs would be cooked. If it wasn't warm enough, the pearl wouldn't turn into a chick.

The success or failure of Lilac's year would be determined in a few days. Lilac invited all her gods onto her walls. She lit incense and performed ceremonies begging to be blessed. This year she put up a picture of Jesus Christ.

I was tempted to take a peek into the pots. But Pearl refused to go along with me. She followed Lilac's instruction faithfully. Like a mother hen, Lilac wouldn't leave her eggs. Day and night, she guarded the pots, adding and withdrawing straw to and from the fire. She no longer spoke but whispered—she was afraid to disturb the eggs.

I watched Pearl draw pictures of Lilac, who was sleeping with her mouth wide open. Lilac had been talking about making good money hatching her eggs before she fell asleep. In the last two-week period Lilac had grown thin. She had no time to eat or sleep. She feared that the temperature would waver and destroy her harvest. Her eyes became red and her cheeks sunken. Pearl and I avoided talking to Lilac because she was irritable and nervous.

When Lilac put out the fire, we knew that the winter was over. In just a few days the air warmed. Spring came with dampness, and we had to battle excessive moisture.

The three of us took the eggs out of the giant ceramic pots to air them. We put the eggs on Lilac's brick bed with cotton pads underneath. Lilac sent Pearl and me to notify the farmers that the time to pick up their baby chicks had come.

We were thrilled when we saw the little beaks appearing. The young chickens chipped away at the shells and worked their way out. Pearl called it a grand birthday party when all the chicks finally broke through.

"What beauties!" Pearl cried to the chicks hopping on and off her hands.

Lilac was too tired to celebrate. She snored, leaning against the wall, while Pearl and I counted the chicks. We put the chicks into baskets to be picked up. Lilac laughed and cried in her sleep. Her face glowed with pleasure. "What should be done in summer, you don't do in spring!" she yelled. "Am I not right?"

"You are perfectly right, Lilac!" Pearl and I answered. We helped her to the bed, where she would sleep for days.