



40 YEARS

40 YEARS

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EMILY CARR

KLEE WYCK

INTRODUCTION BY KATHRYN BRIDGE

Sophie

SOPHIE KNOCKED GENTLY on my Vancouver studio door.

“Baskets. I got baskets.”

They were beautiful, made by her own people, West Coast Indian baskets. She had big ones in a cloth tied at the four corners and little ones in a flour-sack.

She had a baby slung on her back in a shawl, a girl child clinging to her skirts, and a heavy-faced boy plodding behind her.

“I have no money for baskets.”

“Money no matter,” said Sophie. “Old clo’, ‘waum’ skirt—good fo’ basket.”

I wanted the big round one. Its price was eight dollars.

“Next month I am going to Victoria. I will bring back some clothes and get your basket.”

I asked her in to rest a while and gave the youngsters bread and jam. When she tied up her baskets she left the one I coveted on the floor.

“Take it away,” I said. “It will be a month before I can go to Victoria. Then I will bring clothes back with me and come to get the basket.”

“You keep now. Bymby pay,” said Sophie.

“Where do you live?”

“North Vancouver Mission.”

“What is your name?”

“Me Sophie Frank. Everybody know me.”

SOPHIE’S HOUSE WAS bare but clean. It had three rooms. Later when it got cold Sophie’s Frank would cut out all the partition walls. Sophie said, “Thlee ’loom, thlee stobe. One ’loom, one stobe.” The floor of the house was clean scrubbed. It was chair, table and bed for the family. There was one chair; the coal-oil lamp sat on that. Sophie pushed the babies into corners, spread my old clothes on the floor to appraise them, and was satisfied. So, having tested each other’s trade-straightness, we began a long, long friendship—forty years. I have seen Sophie glad, sad, sick and drunk. I have asked her why she did this or that thing—Indian ways that I did not understand—her answer was invariably “Nice ladies always do.” That was Sophie’s ideal—being nice.

Every year Sophie had a new baby. Almost every year she buried one. Her little graves were dotted all over the cemetery. I never knew more than three of her twenty-one children to be alive at one time. By the time she was in her early fifties every child was dead and Sophie had cried her eyes dry. Then she took to drink.

“I GOT A new baby. I got a new baby.”

Sophie, seated on the floor of her house, saw me coming through the open door and waved the papoose cradle. Two little girls rolled round on the floor; the new baby was near her in a basket-cradle. Sophie took off the cloth tented over the basket and

exhibited the baby, a lean, poor thing.

Sophie herself was small and square. Her black hair sprang thick and strong on each side of the clean, straight parting and hung in twin braids across her shoulders. Her eyes were sad and heavy-lidded. Between prominent, rounded cheekbones her nose lay rather flat, broadening and snubby at the tip. Her wide upper lip pouted. It was sharp-edged, puckering over a row of poor teeth—the soothing pucker of lips trying to ease an aching tooth or to hush a crying child. She had a soft little body, a back straight as honesty itself, and the small hands and feet of an Indian.

Sophie's English was good enough, but when Frank, her husband, was there she became dumb as a plate.

“Why won't you talk before Frank, Sophie?”

“Frank he learn school English. Me, no. Frank laugh my English words.”

When we were alone she chattered to me like a sparrow.

IN MAY, WHEN the village was white with cherry blossom and the blue water of Burrard Inlet crept almost to Sophie's door—just a streak of grey sand and a plank walk between—and when Vancouver city was more beautiful to look at across the water than to be in,—it was then I loved to take the ferry to the North Shore and go to Sophie's.

Behind the village stood mountains topped by the grand old “Lions”, twin peaks, very white and blue. The nearer mountains were every shade of young foliage, tender grey-green, getting greener and greener till, when they were close, you saw that the village grass outgreened them all. Hens strutted their broods, papooses and pups and kittens rolled everywhere—it was good indeed to spend a day on the Reserve in spring.

Sophie and I went to see her babies' graves first. Sophie took her best plaid skirt, the one that had three rows of velvet ribbon round the hem, from a nail on the wall, and bound a yellow silk handkerchief round her head. No matter what the weather, she always wore her great shawl, clamping it down with her arms, the fringe trickling over her fingers. Sophie wore her shoes when she walked with me, if she remembered.

Across the water we could see the city. The Indian Reserve was a different world—no hurry, no business.

We walked over the twisty, up-and-down road to the cemetery. Casamin, Tommy, George, Rosie, Maria, Mary, Emily, and all the rest were there under a tangle of vines. We rambled, seeking out Sophie's graves. Some had little wooden crosses, some had stones. Two babies lay outside the cemetery fence: they had not faced life long enough for baptism.

“See! Me got stone for Rosie now.”

“It looks very nice. It must have cost lots of money, Sophie.”

“Grave man make cheap for me. He say, ‘You got lots, lots stone from me, Sophie. Maybe bymby you get some more died baby, then you want more stone. So I make cheap for you.’”

SOPHIE'S KITCHEN WAS crammed with excited women. They had come to see Sophie's brand-new twins. Sophie was on a mattress beside the cook-stove. The twin girls were in small basket papoose cradles, woven by Sophie herself. The babies were wrapped in cotton wool which made their dark little faces look darker; they were laced into their baskets and stuck up at the edge of Sophie's mattress beside the kitchen stove. Their brown, wrinkled faces were like potatoes baked in their jackets, their hands no bigger than brown spiders.

They were thrilling, those very, very tiny babies. Everybody was excited over them. I sat down on the floor close to Sophie.

"Sophie, if the baby was a girl it was to have my name. There are two babies and I have only one name. What are we going to do about it?"

"The biggest and the best is yours," said Sophie.

My Em'ly lived three months. Sophie's Maria lived three weeks. I bought Em'ly's tombstone. Sophie bought Maria's.

SOPHIE'S "MAD" RAMPAGED inside her like a lion roaring in the breast of a dove.

"Look see," she said, holding a red and yellow handkerchief, caught together at the corners and chinking with broken glass and bits of plaster of Paris. "Bad boy bloke my glave flower! Cost five dollar one, and now boy all bloke fo' me. Bad, bad boy! You come talk me fo' p'liceman?"

At the City Hall she spread the handkerchief on the table and held half a plaster of Paris lily and a dove's tail up to the eyes of the law, while I talked.

"My mad fo' boy bloke my plitty glave flower," she said, forgetting, in her fury, to be shy of the "English words".

The big man of the law was kind. He said, "It's too bad, Sophie. What do you want me to do about it?"

"You make boy buy more this plitty kind for my glave."

"The boy has no money but I can make his old grandmother pay a little every week."

Sophie looked long at the broken pieces and shook her head.

"That ole, ole woman got no money." Sophie's anger was dying, soothed by sympathy like a child, the woman in her tender towards old Granny. "My bloke no matter for ole woman," said Sophie, gathering up the pieces. "You scold boy big, Policeman? No make glanny pay."

"I sure will, Sophie."

THERE WAS A black skirt spread over the top of the packing case in the centre of Sophie's room. On it stood the small white coffin. A lighted candle was at the head, another at the foot. The little dead girl in the coffin held a doll in her arms. It had hardly been out of them since I had taken it to her a week before. The glassy eyes of the doll stared out of the coffin, up past the closed eyelids of the child.

Though Sophie had been through this nineteen times before, the twentieth time was no easier. Her two friends, Susan and Sara, were there by the coffin, crying for her.

The outer door opened and half a dozen women came in, their shawls drawn low across their foreheads, their faces grim. They stepped over to the coffin and looked in. Then they sat round it on the floor and began to cry, first with baby whimpers, softly, then louder, louder still—with violence and strong howling: torrents of tears burst from their eyes and rolled down their cheeks. Sophie and Sara and Susan did it too. It sounded horrible—like tortured dogs.

Suddenly they stopped. Sophie went to the bucket and got water in a tin basin. She took a towel in her hand and went to each of the guests in turn holding the basin while they washed their faces and dried them on the towel. Then the women all went out except Sophie, Sara and Susan. This crying had gone on at intervals for three days—ever since the child had died. Sophie was worn out. There had been, too, all the long weeks of Rosie's tubercular dying to go through.

"Sophie, couldn't you lie down and rest?"

She shook her head. "Nobody sleep in Injun house till dead people go to cemet'ry."

The beds had all been taken away.

"When is the funeral?"

"I dunno. Pliest go Vancouver. He not come two more day. 'Spose I got lots money he come quick. No hully up, except fo' money."

She laid her hand on the corner of the little coffin.

"See! Coffin-man think box fo' Injun baby no matter."

The seams of the cheap little coffin had burst.

AS SOPHIE AND I were coming down the village street we met an Indian woman whom I did not know. She nodded to Sophie, looked at me and half paused. Sophie's mouth was set, her bare feet pattered quick, hurrying me past the woman.

"Go church house now?" she asked me.

The Catholic church had twin towers. Wide steps led up to the front door which was always open. Inside it was bright, in a misty way, and still except for the wind and sea-echoes. The windows were gay coloured glass; when you knelt the wooden footstools and pews creaked. Hush lurked in every corner. The smell of the church seemed fusty after the fresh sea air outside, the paper flowers artificial.

The rope of the bell dangled dead in the entrance. It was a new rope and smelt of tar. Paper flowers stood stifly before the Virgin. Always a few candles burned. Everything but those flickers of flame was stone-still.

When we came out of the church we sat on the steps for a little. I said, "Who was that woman we met, Sophie?"

"Mrs. Chief Joe Capilano."

"Oh! I would like to know Mrs. Chief Joe Capilano. Why did you hurry by so quick? She wanted to stop."

"I don' want you know Mrs. Chief Joe."

"Why?"

"You fliend for me, not fliend for her."

"My heart has room for more than one friend, Sophie."

“You fliend for me, I not want Mrs. Chief Joe get you.”

“You are always my first and best friend, Sophie.” She hung her head, her mouth obstinate. We went to Sara’s house.

Sara was Sophie’s aunt, a wizened bit of a woman whose eyes, nose, mouth and wrinkles were all twisted to the perpetual expressing of pain. Once she had had a merry heart, but pain had trampled out the merriness. She lay on a bed draped with hangings of clean, white rags dangling from poles. The wall behind her bed, too, was padded heavily with newspaper to keep draughts off her “Lumatiz”.

“Hello, Sara. How are you?”

“Em’ly! Sophie’s Em’ly!”

The pain wrinkles scuttled off to make way for Sara’s smile, but hurried back to twist for her pain.

“I dunno what for I got Lumatiz, Em’ly. I dunno. I dunno.”

Everything perplexed poor Sara. Her merry heart and tortured body were always at odds. She drew a humped wrist across her nose and said, “I dunno, I dunno,” after each remark.

“Goodbye, Sophie’s Em’ly; come some more soon. I like that you come. I dunno why I got pain, lots pain. I dunno—I dunno.”

I said to Sophie, “You see! The others know I am your big friend. They call me ‘Sophie’s Em’ly’.”

She was happy.

SUSAN LIVED ON one side of Sophie’s house and Mrs. Johnson, the Indian widow of a white man, on the other. The widow’s house was beyond words clean. The cook-stove was a mirror, the floor white as a sheet from scrubbing. Mrs. Johnson’s hands were clever and busy. The row of hard kitchen chairs had each its own antimacassar and cushion. The crocheted bedspread and embroidered pillow-slips, all the work of Mrs. Johnson’s hands, were smoothed taut. Mrs. Johnson’s husband had been a sea captain. She had loved him deeply and remained a widow though she had had many offers of marriage after he died. Once the Indian Agent came, and said:

“Mrs. Johnson, there is a good man who has a farm and money in the bank. He is shy, so he sent me to ask if you will marry him.”

“Tell that good man, ‘Thank you,’ Mr. Agent, but tell him, too, that Mrs. Johnson only got love for her dead Johnson.”

Sophie’s other neighbour, Susan, produced and buried babies almost as fast as Sophie herself. The two women laughed for each other and cried for each other. With babies on their backs and baskets on their arms they crossed over on the ferry to Vancouver and sold their baskets from door to door. When they came to my studio they rested and drank tea with me. My parrot, sheep dog, the white rats and the totem pole pictures all interested them. “An’ you got Injun flower, too,” said Susan.

“Indian flowers?”

She pointed to ferns and wild things I had brought in from the woods.

SOPHIE'S HOUSE WAS shut up. There was a chain and padlock on the gate. I went to Susan.

"Where is Sophie?"

"Sophie in sick house. Got sick eye."

I went to the hospital. The little Indian ward had four beds. I took ice cream and the nurse divided it into four portions.

A homesick little Indian girl cried in the bed in one corner, an old woman grumbled in another. In a third there was a young mother with a baby, and in the fourth bed was Sophie.

There were flowers. The room was bright. It seemed to me that the four brown faces on the four white pillows should be happier and far more comfortable here than lying on mattresses on the hard floors in the village, with all the family muddle going on about them.

"How nice it is here, Sophie."

"Not much good of hospital, Em'ly."

"Oh! What is the matter with it?"

"Bad bed."

"What is wrong with the beds?"

"Move, move, all time shake. 'Spose me move, bed move too."

She rolled herself to show how the springs worked. "Me ole-fashion, Em'ly. Me like kitchen floor fo' sick."

SUSAN AND SOPHIE were in my kitchen, rocking their sorrows back and forth and alternately wagging their heads and giggling with shut eyes at some small joke.

"You go live Victoria now, Em'ly," wailed Sophie, "and we never see those babies, never!"

Neither woman had a baby on her back these days. But each had a little new grave in the cemetery. I had told them about a friend's twin babies. I went to the telephone.

"Mrs. Dingle, you said I might bring Sophie to see the twins?"

"Surely, any time," came the ready reply.

"Come, Sophie and Susan, we can go and see the babies now."

The mothers of all those little cemetery mounds stood looking and looking at the thriving white babies, kicking and sprawling on their bed. The women said, "Oh my! —Oh my!" over and over.

Susan's hand crept from beneath her shawl to touch a baby's leg. Sophie's hand shot out and slapped Susan's.

The mother of the babies said, "It's all right, Susan; you may touch my baby."

Sophie's eyes burned Susan for daring to do what she so longed to do herself. She folded her hands resolutely under her shawl and whispered to me,

"Nice ladies don' touch, Em'ly."

WAYSON CHOY

THE
jade PEONY

THE AWARD-WINNING BEST SELLER
WITH READING GROUP GUIDE



Jung-Sum, Second Brother

THE OLD MAN FIRST VISITED our house when I was five, in 1933. At that time, I had only two brothers to worry about. Kiam and Jung were then ten and seven years old. Sekky was not yet born, though he was on his way. Grandmother, or Poh-Poh, was going regularly to our family Tong Association Temple on Pender Street to pray for a boy.

Decades later, our neighbour Mrs. Lim said that I kept insisting on another girl to balance things, but Stepmother told me that these things were in the hands of the gods.

Stepmother was a young woman when she came to Canada, barely twenty and a dozen years younger than Father. She came with no education, with a village dialect as poor as she was. Girls were often left to fend for themselves in the streets, so she was lucky to have any family interested in her fate. Though my face was round like Father's, I had her eyes and delicate mouth, her high forehead but not her high cheekbones.

This slim woman, with her fine features and genteel posture, was a seven-year-old girl in war-torn China when bandits killed most of her family. Found hiding between two trunks of clothes, she was taken to a Mission House, then taken away again, reclaimed by the village clan, and eventually sold into Father's Canton merchant family. For years they fed her, taught her house duties, and finally put her on a steamship to Canada. She was brought over to help take care of Poh-Poh and to keep Father appropriate wifely company; but soon the young woman became more a wife than a concubine to Father, more a stepdaughter than a house servant to Grandmother. And a few years later, I, Jook-Liang, was born to them. Now, in our rented house, she was big with another child.

Poh-Poh, being one of the few elder women left in Vancouver, took pleasure in her status and became the arbitrator of the old ways. Poh-Poh insisted we simplify our kinship terms in Canada, so my mother became "Stepmother." That is what the two boys always called her, for Kiam was the First Son of Father's First Wife who had died mysteriously in China; and Jung, the Second Son, had been adopted into our family. What the sons called my mother, my mother became. The name "Stepmother" kept things simple, orderly, as Poh-Poh had determined. Father did not protest. Nor did the slim, pretty woman that was my mother seem to protest, though she must have cast a glance at the Old One and decided to bide her time. That was the order of things in China.

"What will be, will be," all the *lao wah-kiu*, the Chinatown old-timers, used to say to each other. "In Gold Mountain, simple is best."

There were, besides, false immigration stories to hide, secrets to be kept.

Stepmother was sitting on a kitchen chair and helping me to dress my Raggedy Ann; I touched her protruding tummy, I wanted the new baby all to myself. The two boys were waving toy swords around, swinging them in turn at three cutout hardboard

nodding heads set up on the kitchen table. *Whack!* The game was to send the flat heads flying into the air to fall on a roll-out floor map of China. *Whack!* The game was Hong-Kong made and called ENEMIES OF FREE CHINA.

One enemy head swooped up and clacked onto the linoleum floor, missing its target by three feet. Jung started to swear when Father looked up from his brush-writing in the other room. He could see everything we were doing in the kitchen. Poh-Poh sat on the other side of the table, enjoying Kiam and Jung's new game. Bags of groceries sat on the kitchen counter ready for supper preparations.

"I need a girl-baby to be my slave," I insisted, remembering Poh-Poh's stories of the time she herself once had a girl-helper in the dank, steamy kitchen of the cruel, rich Chin family in Old China. The Chins were refugees from Manchuria after the Japanese seized the territory. Not knowing any better, Poh-Poh treated the younger girl, her kitchen assistant, as unkindly as she herself had been treated; the women of the rich Chin family who "owned" Poh-Poh were used to wielding the whip and bamboo rods as freely on their fourteen servants as on the oxen and pigs.

"Too much bad memory," Poh-Poh said, and then, midway in its telling, would suddenly end a story of those old days. She would make a self-pitying face and complain how her arteries felt cramped with pain, how everything frustrated her, "*Ahyaii, ho git-sum!* How heart-cramp!" Though she was years younger than Poh-Poh, Mrs. Lim would shake her head in agreement, both of them clutching their left sides in common sympathy. It was a gesture I'd noticed in the Chinese Operas that Poh-Poh took me and my brothers to see in Canton Alley.

Whack! Another head rolled onto the floor. Kiam swung his toy sword like an ancient warrior-king from the Chinese Opera. Jung preferred to use his sword like a bayonet first, and then, *Whack!*

"Maybe Wong Bak—Old Wong—keep you company later, Liang-Liang," Poh-Poh said, happily stepping over one of the enemies of Free China to get some chopsticks from the table drawer. She was proud of her warrior grandsons. "Kill more," she commanded.

Poh-Poh spoke her *Sze-yup*, Four County village dialect, to me and Jung, but not always to Kiam, the First Son. With him, she spoke Cantonese and a little Mandarin, which he was studying in the Mission Church basement. Whenever Stepmother was around, Poh-Poh used another but similar village dialect, in a more clipped fashion, as many adults do when they think you might be the village fool, too worthless or too young, or not from their district. The Old One had a wealth of dialects which thirty-five years of survival in China had taught her, and each dialect hinted at mixed shades of status and power, or the lack of both. Like many Chinatown old-timers, the *lao wah-kiu*, Poh-Poh could eloquently praise someone in one dialect and ruthlessly insult them in another.

"An old mouth can drop honey or drop shit," Mrs. Lim once commented, defeated by the acrobatics of Grandmother's twist-punning tongue. The Old One roared with laughter and spat into the kitchen sink.

Whack!

Another head fell.

Stepmother rubbed her forehead, as if it were driving her mad.

“Wong Bak come for supper tonight,” Poh-Poh said, signalling Stepmother to start preparing the supper. The kitchen light caught something gleaming on the back of her old head; Poh-Poh had put on her jade hair ornament for Wong Bak’s visit tonight. He was an Old China friend of Grandmother’s; they were both now in their seventies.

Wong Bak had been sent from the British Columbia Interior by a group of small-town Chinese in a place called Yale. He was too old to live a solitary existence any longer. Someone in our Tong Association gave Father’s name as a possible Vancouver contact, because Old Wong might know Poh-Poh, who had once lived in the same ancestral district village.

Most Chinatown people were from the dense villages of southern Kwangtung province, a territory racked by cycles of famine and drought. When the call for railroad workers came from labour contract brokers in Canada in the 1880s, every man who was able and capable left his farm and village to be indentured for dangerous work in the mountain ranges of the Rockies. There had also been rumours of gold in the rivers that poured down those mountain cliffs, gold that could make a man and his family wealthy overnight.

“Go to Gold Mountain,” they told one another, promising to send wages home, to return rich or die. Thousands came in the decades before 1923, when on July 1st the Dominion of Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and shut down all ordinary bachelor-man traffic between Canada and China, shut off any women from arriving, and divided families. Poverty-stricken bachelor-men were left alone in Gold Mountain, with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month, and never enough dollars to buy passage home. Dozens went mad; many killed themselves. The Chinatown Chinese call July 1st, the day celebrating the birth of Canada, the Day of Shame.

Some, like Old Wong, during all their hard time in British Columbia, still hoped to return to China if they could somehow win the numbers lottery or raise enough money from gambling. But now there was the growing war with the Japanese, more civil strife between the Communists and the Nationalists, and even more bitter starvation. Hearing all this, Poh-Poh gripped her left side, just below her heart, and said she only wanted her bones shipped back.

Father always editorialized in one of the news sheets of those Depression years how much the Chinese in Vancouver must help the Chinese. Because, he wrote, “No one else will.”

In the city dump on False Creek Flats, living in makeshift huts, thirty-two Old China bachelor-men tried to shelter themselves; dozens more were dying of neglect in the overcrowded rooms of Pender Street. There were no Depression jobs for such men. They had been deserted by the railroad companies and betrayed by the many labour contractors who had gone back to China, wealthy and forgetful. There was a local Vancouver by-law against begging for food, a federal law against stealing food, but no law in any court against starving to death for lack of food. The few churches that served the Chinatown area were running out of funds. Soup kitchens could no longer safely manage the numbers lining up for nourishment, fighting each other. China men

were shoved aside, threatened, forgotten.

During the early mornings, in the 1920s and '30s, nuns came out regularly from St. Paul's Mission to help clean and take the bodies away. In the crowded rooming houses of Chinatown, until morning came, living men slept in cots and on floors beside dead men.

Could we help out with Wong Bak? Perhaps a meal now and then, a few visits with the family...? asked the officer from the Tong Association. It turned out that Poh-Poh indeed knew Wong Bak when they were in China, more than thirty years ago.

"Old-timers know all the old-timers," Third Uncle Lew said, taking inventory of his warehouse stock with an abacus. "Why not? The same bunch came over from the same damn districts," he laughed. "We all pea-pod China men!"

And now, tonight, Wong Bak was coming for dinner.

I looked up past Stepmother's swelling stomach, at the kitchen counter beside the sink with the pots and pans. Father had splurged on groceries: a bare long-necked chicken's head, freshly killed, hung out of the bag he had carried home. Poh-Poh also unwrapped a fresh fish, its eyes still shiny. Once it was cooked, Kiam and Jung would fight over who would get to suck on the hard-as-marble calcified fish eyes. I wanted the chicken feet. I wondered which part Wong Bak would want.

Father was worried about our meeting him for the first time. Wong Bak, I sensed from Father's overpreparation and nervousness, was indeed not an ordinary human being. He was an elder, so every respect must be paid to him, and *especially* as he knew the Old One herself. Grandmother must not lose face; we must not fail in our hospitality. Excellent behaviour on the part of my two brothers and me would signal our family respect and honour for the old ways.

Father looked at his watch and put down his writing brush.

"Let us talk a moment," he said to my brothers, and they left their game and stood before him. He told Kiam and Jung that Wong Bak might appear "very strange," especially to me, as I was so young, and a girl, and therefore might be more easily frightened.

"Frightened?" Stepmother said.

My ears perked up.

Father answered that the boys, being boys, would not be as easily scared about you-know-what. He spoke in code to Stepmother but whispered details to Kiam first, then Jung, whose eyes widened. After the whispering, Father delivered to the three of us a stern lecture about respect and we must use the formal term *Sin-saang*, Venerable Sir, as if Wong Bak were a "teacher" to be highly respected, as much as the Old Buddha or the Empress of China.

Respect meant you dared not laugh at someone because they were "different"; you did not ask stupid questions or stare rudely. You pretended everything was normal. That was respect. Father tried to simplify things for my five-year-old brain. Respect was what I gave my Raggedy Ann doll. I knew respect.

"I don't want you boys to stare at Wong Sin-saang's face," Father warned, which I thought was odd. Old people's faces were all the same to me, wrinkled and craggy. "Wong Sinsaang's had a very tough life."

“We know how to behave,” First Brother Kiam insisted, waving the toy sword over the buck-toothed “WARLORD” nodding on the edge of the kitchen table. Jung poked his sword, bayonet-fashion, and two other heads nodded away, waiting for decapitation.

Third Uncle Lew had given Kiam the ENEMIES OF FREE CHINA game for his tenth birthday. Third Uncle had imported some samples from Hong Kong with the idea of selling them in Chinatown. Kiam read the game instructions written in English: “USE SWORD TO SMACK HEAD. COUNT POINTS. MOVE VICTORIOUS CHINESE AHEAD SAME NUMBER.”

The Warlord was one of three Enemy-of-China “heads.” The other two were a Communist and a Japanese soldier named Tojo. All three had ugly yellow faces, squashed noses and impossible buck teeth. It was a propaganda toy to encourage overseas Chinese fund-raising for Free China.

Watching Kiam and Jung jump up and down was far better than having them force me to play dumb games like Tarzan and Jane and Cheetah. Kiam had seen the picture *Tarzan* three times. Kiam got to be Tarzan; Jung, Cheetah; and I got to be Jane doing nothing. I embraced my Raggedy Ann and watched another swing of Jung’s sword *Whack!* take off Tojo’s head. Father said that Tojo, a Japanese, was in command of the plot to enslave China for the Japanese.

Whack!

The third head went flying.

“Don’t forget,” Father repeated, thinking of the worst, “no staring at Wong Sin-saang’s face. No laughing.”

“Tell Liang-Liang,” said Jung, waving the wooden sword at me. “She’ll stare at Wong Sin-saang’s face and behave like a brat.”

“Jook-Liang will be too shy,” Stepmother said. “I promise she’ll do nothing but run away. At five, I would.”

“Jook-Liang almost six,” Grandmother interjected. “She look. I look.”

Stepmother turned away. Jung swung. *Whack!*

“Liang-Liang’ll say something to Wong Sin-saang,” Kiam said. “She’ll say something about Wong Sin-saang’s face.”

“You will, won’t you, Liang-Liang?” Jung said, following First Brother’s cue to be superior at my expense.

I looked up at them through the flowered wall and tiny windows of my Eaton’s Toyland doll house. I put Tarzan’s Jane, whose doll legs would not bend, in the front room. At Sunday School, I had learned how all visitors, like the Lord Jesus, for example, and even Tarzan and his pet chimpanzee, Cheetah, should always politely knock first, before you invited them into the front room of your house. At Kingdom Church Kindergarten, I also learned to say the words “fart face,” and that upset Miss Bigley.

“Fart face,” I said.

Jung opened his mouth to reply. Kiam looked darkly at me.

“If you have eyes, stare,” Poh-Poh said to me. “Eyes for looking.”

JUST AS JUNG was putting away the game box and taking my Raggedy Ann from me, and Stepmother and Kiam were setting the oak table, someone banged on our front door. A rumbling *Boom... Boom...* tumbled all the way from dark hallway to kitchen. Grandmother and I were waiting for the rice pot to finish cooking.

“Thunder,” Poh-Poh commented, sniffing the air. The autumn damp would tighten her joints. She was midway through telling me a story about the Monkey King, who was being sent on another adventure by the Buddha. This time, the Monkey King took on the disguise of a lost boatman, and with his companion, Pig, they rode the back of a giant sea turtle to escape the fire-spouting River Dragon. “No one crosses my border,” Poh-Poh said, in the deep voice of the River Dragon.

Boom... Boom...

“It’s the front door,” I said, comfortable against Poh-Poh’s quilted jacket, listening.

“Thunder,” Poh-Poh insisted, “ghost thunder.”

There were in Grandmother’s stories, always, wild storms and parting clouds, thunder, and after much labour, mountains that split apart, giving birth to demons who were out to kill you or to spirits who ached to test your courage. Until the last moment, you could never know for sure whether you were dealing with a demon or a spirit.

“Liang, stay in the kitchen,” Stepmother said, wiping her hands on her apron. I heard Father struggling with the swollen front door, pulling, until the door surrendered and slammed open. “Step in, step in...”

I jumped off Poh-Poh’s knee. Everything in our musky hallway was suddenly lit by the outside street lamp. I could make out a hunched-up shadow standing on the porch, much shorter than Father. I thought of the burnished light that lingers after thunder; a mountain, after much labour, yawning wide.

“It’s Wong Sin-saang,” Father nervously called back to us, as if the shifting darkness might otherwise have no name.

Is it a demon or spirit? I thought, and nervously darted back to join Stepmother standing quietly at the end of the parlour. Jung and Kiam raced to crowd around Father; he waved them away. I grabbed Stepmother’s apron.

In the bluish light cast by the street lamp, a dark figure with an enormous hump shook off its cloak. My eyes opened wide. The large hump continued shaking, struggling, quaking. Something dark lifted into the air. The mysterious mass turned into a sagging knapsack with tangled straps. Father hoisted the knapsack above the visitor’s head and took away a black cloak. The obscure figure gave one more shudder, as if to resettle its bones; now I could see, against the pale light, someone old and angular, someone bent over, his haggard weight bearing down on two sticks.

“This way to the parlour,” Father said, turning to put the cloak and knapsack away in the hall closet.

The stooped stranger, leaning on his walking sticks, confidently push-pulled, push-pulled himself into our parlour. My eyes widened. Everyone was anxious to see his face, but so sloped was the visitor, yanking his walking sticks about, that at first only the top of a balding grey crown greeted us. Finally, he stopped, half-standing in the parlour, a runty frame rising just under First Brother Kiam’s chin; the narrow torso, fitted with a grown man’s broad shoulders, thrust against an oversized patched shirt.

Powerful legs angled out from his suspended work pants. He looked like a half-flopped puppet with its head way down, but there were no strings moving him about. Suddenly, the old man snorted, cleared his throat, but did not spit. The force of his breathing told you he was ready for anything to happen next. Now it was your turn to breathe or to speak. Or to clear your throat. Your turn.

No one moved except Jung. He tried secretly bending his knees to peek at the very face we had been warned not to stare at; Kiam quickly elbowed Jung up again. Did the old man notice? No one said a word. The old man began to breathe more heavily, sawing, as if to inhale strength back into his lungs. Still no one could see the face. We examined the rest of him. Sleeves were rolled up over frayed longjohn cuffs; dark pants, freshly pressed. Gnarled thick fingers curled tightly onto bamboo canes. Scuffed boots pointed in skewed directions. Except for a cane on each side of him, his crooked legs looked no worse than some of the one-cane bachelor-men I'd seen sitting on the steps of Chinatown, hacking, always hacking, with grey-goateed heads bowed to their knees.

“*Sihk faahn mai-ahh?* Have you had your rice yet?” Father asked, using a more formal phrase than Stepmother’s village *Haeck chan mai-ah!* greeting—Eat dinner, yet!

To answer, the visitor straightened himself as far as he could, which was not far, and shook his head sideways: the overhead light bluntly hit Wong Sin-saang’s face. A broad furrowed brow came into view. Wrinkles deepened. Jung gasped; the back of Kiam’s neck stiffened. Father’s warnings echoed in our minds: *Remember not to stare.* How could we help it? We all stared. Even Stepmother stared. I stared until I felt my eyes bulge out. The old man’s face was like no other human one we had seen before: a wide-eyed, wet-nosed creature stared back at us.

A thrill went through me: this face, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom; this face, like those carved wooden masks sold during the Year of the Monkey; this wizened face looked directly back at me, perhaps like Cheetah, but more royal. I heard ghost thunder. A mountain opened, and here, right in our parlour, staring back at me, stood *Monkey*, the Monkey King of Poh-Poh’s stories, disguised as an old man bent over two canes. But I, Jook-Liang, was not fooled. It could not be anyone but mischievous *him*. The air intensified; the world seemed more real than it had ever been for me. Poh-Poh was right: she heard ghost thunder when I heard only the door. A spell was cast in our parlour. Kiam pushed against it, trying to be sensible; First Brother asked the Monkey King, “Have you eaten, venerable sir?” Kiam used the formal dialect, just as Father had instructed him.

Monkey grimaced, showing large tobacco-stained teeth.

“No, not yet, thank you, so good of you to ask,” he said, with Monkey smoothness, in a Toisan dialect, meaning that we, the family, needn’t be so formal. Kiam tried discreetly to clear his throat, gulped, and stepped back, leaving Jung to stand alone. Now Monkey King, exactly as if he were holding court, looked steadily at Jung.

Jung said nothing. There was a long silence; it was Jung’s turn as the Second Son to give his own greeting. Jung kept staring, open-mouthed. I thought of a sword flying through the air—*Whack!*—Jung’s head, tumbling. I laughed, a short unstoppable titter.

Stepmother's hand quickly covered my mouth.

"Wong Sin-saang," I heard Stepmother say, "you must be hungry."

Pulling a red handkerchief from his shirt pocket, Wong Sin-saang blew his nose noisily. Perhaps to signal his companion, Pig, waiting outside for instructions. I looked past the lace curtains, saw only the one-eyed street lamp.

"Who's there?" Poh-Poh shouted from the kitchen, all this time waiting for one of us to call her politely to come and meet the visitor, so she wouldn't seem too rude or too anxious. We'd forgotten. She banged on a bowl and banged on a plate and stayed in the kitchen, waiting.

The Monkey King seemed to hear nothing; he had turned his sable eyes on me. I let go of Stepmother's apron and slowly walked towards him. Stepmother reached out to grab me; I slipped past her. I pushed Jung and Kiam aside. Father began to fidget in the hall.

Across the room, Wong Sin-saang seemed not much bigger than me. His grey head drooped, as if it needed to bend lower. I stepped towards him. Stopped.

"This must be Jook-Liang," Monkey finally said, and his voice trembled, "the pr-pretty one."

I ran the last few steps and reached out to him, at once burying my head against his bone-thin body: *Here was the Monkey King!* After all, I heard his voice tremble—the *pr-pretty one*—a signal to any child not to be afraid of him. Not to doubt him. His disguise as an old man and his two canes were not meant to fool me, especially the canes. I knew what these really were: the two walking sticks, which he could instantly rejoin to become the powerful bamboo pole Monkey used to propel himself across canyons and streams; the same pole he employed to battle monsters, mock demons, shake at courage-testing spirits. I laughed and felt Monkey awkwardly embrace me; very awkwardly of course, so as not to betray his disguise as an Old One with two canes.

His gesture broke the ice; everything was familiar again.

I heard Stepmother and Father welcoming Wong Sin-saang in a jumble of ritual phrases: "Stay, stay for dinner!" "No, please don't stand on ceremony." "How good of you to visit." Even Jung finally spoke, though he did not remember every word. "Have you your rice?" No one felt it necessary to notice how Monkey blew his nose again—and again—or how quickly he wiped his eyes. A signal to Pig, hiding under our porch.

The aroma of twice-cooked chicken filled the air; we could hear Grandmother preparing the food for the table; she stepped into the parlour and boldly stared at Monkey. *Eyes for looking.*

"Aiiiyah! Wong Kimlein!" Poh-Poh exclaimed, calling him by his birth-name in a voice loud enough to break up the hubbub. "It's truly you! They say you come back from Yale. Not die there. Die here, in Salt Water City, in Vancouver."

"Die here, maybe," Monkey said, looking up. "How goes your old years? Are you well?"

"Die soon," Poh-Poh said. "You and me too old for these days."

Stepmother took my hand and led the way to the dining room.

"You hear from Old China?" Poh-Poh took Monkey's arm, as if she would lean on