

HISTORY

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My mother tried to stop being Chinese at 18.

She didn't tell her parents when she applied to colleges as far as she could get from San Francisco Chinatown where she grew up. She didn't tell them when the University of Massachusetts accepted her with a full scholarship and grant. She didn't tell them that, instead of attending Chinese school, she'd been delivering evening newspapers so she could afford the cross-country bus ticket. She ran away at the end of July, 1958, carrying all she'd decided to take in one small, hard, turquoise suitcase. When she got safely there, she mailed them a post card.

"It was a post card of the Statue of Liberty," she told me once. "To throw them off the scent. Also, symbolism."

My grandparents knew she'd applied to San Francisco State, and they even celebrated her going there. They figured she could get an accounting degree—

my grandfather's printing business could always use a new accountant. Even my mother would be better than the cousin's son they already employed, whom my grandmother suspected of embezzlement.

"Not that Cousin Guo would have stolen a pen," my mother has said. "Your grandmother was just bitter that he was already engaged to a woman he'd never met back in Guangdong. Otherwise, I could've been his little accountant wife and given her little accountant grandchildren. Of course, he went on to have all sons, to your grandmother's outrage. Just think—you could have been born an accountant. And a precious boy."

She does not point out that I would also have been both sides Chinese.

She's told me very little of how things were before she left. When she was teaching me to drive, she described the family friend who taught her, how she'd made him carsick racing up and down the hills of Pacific Heights, and how, trying to parallel park, she scratched his car, once in and once out. "I'm telling you this," she said, handing me the keys the first time, "to tell what you may not do." When I was picking out a dress for a high school dance, she told me about my grandmother and a neighbor hand-sewing the stiff, formal cheongsam she wore to the Chinese-only dances her parents allowed her to attend. She's told me about Grandpa's sister, Chi Min, because half my name,

Min-Hua, is hers. Auntie Min used to brush and braid my mother's hair when my mother would let no one else touch the knots that had been slept into it. When Min died of breast cancer, my mother wasn't even in elementary school yet, but she remembers how she broke everything she could reach the day of the funeral, including the tortoise-shell brush Auntie Min had used.

About the ten years that passed between my mother leaving San Francisco and meeting my father, she never tells the stories the same way twice, and when I try to pin the events down to external context, it's useless. The one piece of history she remembers is watching the moon-walk with my father, and when I asked her if she remembered what year that was, there was an uninterrupted pause. She's one of two Americans in her generation who don't remember where they were when Kennedy was assassinated. The other, of course, is the ghost CIA agent on the grassy knoll.

Our conversations have gone much like this:

"Ma, when did you move back to San Francisco that first time? Was it right after college?"

"That sounds right-ish."

"But I thought you told me you worked for a while in Boston."

Pause. "Oh, yeah, I worked at that thrift store."

"For how long?"

"A few months. I remember being broke. I was very good at watering down ketchup for soup."

"And then you moved back here when you ran out of money?"

"Possibly?"

"What did Po-po say when you knocked on their door?" I asked.

"She didn't say anything." She laughed. "For about a month."

"How did you even get inside the house?"

"Your grandfather let me in. Just to annoy her."

Still, I have pieced together something like a time-line. Those years contained her BA in literature, her being broke in downtown Boston, that painful pit-stop at her parents' house, and her leaving the Bay Area to teach English to Mexican lettuce-cutters in the Central Valley. Sometime in there, she played viola in a community orchestra. She wanted to quit when the cellist dumped her, but the conductor convinced her to be professional and stay. The cellist went on to lead a religious cult, which got in a dispute with the FBI in the early 70s. When she moved to Los Angeles, she dated one of the men who currently mastermind the Scientology movement. She hasn't commented on the religious bent in her romantic partners, but I think she was merely going

from one cult to the next, trying to escape the cult of China. The difference between cult and culture, after all, is just size.

Her last-ditch escape attempt was her relationship with my father, a white law student at UCLA. The attempt failed, of course. My grandparents fell completely in love with my ex-father, as my mother calls him, because he got her back on track for their original plan for her, marriage and motherhood. What's more, he somehow moved her back to San Francisco.

"Ma, how did you feel when Dad told you he'd accepted the clerking position up here?"

"You sound so innocent when you ask that question. If I hadn't been so sleep-deprived thanks to you, the divorce would have come much sooner."

"You're saying if I'd kept up the colic to the present day, you'd still be married? I'm feeling kind of nauseous right now. Does that count?"

My father was completely in love with my grandparents, too. His parents and sisters were in New Hampshire, shoveling out their driveways every winter morning, and my grandparents offered family in a way he missed. He'd had the nerve to be excited when he told my mother about the job. After the divorce, I saw him more often at my mother's parents' house than anywhere else, which suited Ma just fine.

"This way," she said, "I can avoid everyone at the same time. You've got to admire the efficiency."

My grandmother's past, on the other hand, was well-embroidered. When I was young, we'd sit on the couch in their well-kept sitting room, and she'd tell me stories. My grandfather would usually be reading a Chinese-language paper over in the corner wing-back chair by the light of a faux-Tiffany desk lamp.

"My mother, Yi Wen-Li," said my grandmother, "met my father, Bai Ang, on the steamer from China to San Francisco. She had been working as a house servant for a Portuguese family on Macao. They brought her with them when they came to Gam Saan. My father's brother had been prospecting for gold in the Sierras and sent for my father to help him. After too many seasons of picking through empty dirt, he returned to the City and was hired as a valet to a wealthy family in Atherton."

"She said 'valet'?" said my mother, when I told her about it later. "That's quite the posthumous promotion."

"My mother couldn't read," said my grandmother, "so my father couldn't write to her while he was in the mountains. Neither knew if the other was alive. Luckily, the Portuguese family was invited to the estate where my father

worked. My parents encountered each other in the servant's quarters, and learned they had been waiting for each other all along. It is like that, Nui-nui, waiting for each other." My grandmother smiled significantly over at my grandfather, who ignored her as he turned and refolded a page of the newspaper.

"My father had been saving to return to China. Instead, he offered all his money to the Portuguese family for my mother, and bought her freedom. His employer, Mr. Hills, wasn't pleased, but he hired my mother for his kitchen. Then I was born—a useless daughter who would eat years' worth of good food only to marry away from the family. People said I was proof that my father had made a mistake, that he'd married badly. The other servants started calling my father, Fool, and me, Fool's Daughter. Then, one winter, my mother's cough started. We never knew what illness she had, but a doctor friend of my parents' employer told him to remove us from his house for his own safety. My father's last paycheck was enough for a ticket to Chinatown, where he started his own laundry, which he called Fool's Laundry. My mother died one year later."

At this point, my grandmother might pause and breathe carefully for a moment, for effect. The couch springs squeaked underneath us, shifting.

"Then my father married Jiang Mei, a seamstress."

"I think she means, a prostitute," said my mother, later.

"When she'd come to California, a fisherman named Hau Bin --" said my grandmother

"One of her johns," said my mother, later.

"Fell in love with her. They married and were honored with three sons. But then Hau Bin received word that his father was dying in China, and he took his eldest son with him to pay his final respects. You know, Nui-nui, about the laws stopping the Chinese coming into the country? Not just for coming in the first time, but for returning. Even if your papers were in order. Even if your family was already here. Hau Bin and his son weren't allowed to leave the ship when it docked in San Francisco. They were still on it when it came out through the Golden Gate, returning to China. Hau Bin had rented his fishing boat to another man while he was gone, and this man was on the Bay as the steamer embarked. He recognized Hau Bin standing on the deck and followed the steamer until Seal Rock. When he was close enough, Hau Bin yelled to him, and the fisherman told Jiang Mei that he had said, "Tell her we are dead. Tell her for our American sons that she must live. But we are dead."

My grandfather coughed a couple of times.

"Yes?" said my grandmother.

"Family theater," said my grandfather, slapping the folded paper against his thigh.

"Read your news," said my grandmother and turned back to me. "Jiang Mei never heard from him or her son again. She sold the fishing boat, and after the proper mourning period she proposed through the matchmaker to my father. It made sense. His laundry would be able to offer adjustments. Her sons could stir the washing pots. And I was an obedient daughter."

"Have you ever noticed," said my mother, later, "that your grandmother's family history somehow encompasses 150 years and hits all the high-points of Chinese-American immigration?"

"What?"

"Try the math some time."

I was home, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen, looking back into the living room at her. "Ma, why can't we have this conversation with Po-po in the room? I want to see her face when you call her a liar."

She went to say something, and then stopped herself. She probably waited for an internal count of ten, then said, "She just—embellishes. In certain ways.

That make the past look—more iconic than it was. She manages to make herself look more Chinese than your grandfather, and he's the one who was born there."

When I was older, I could admit that Po-po's memories were carefully curated, that the stories she told me were that, stories. There were bits of truth there, but my mother was right about the math. But at that time, I said to Ma, "How would you even know? You don't remember anything."

Her response was, "I remember when I hear her tell it wrong."

It was a conflict that wouldn't be resolved, of course, even if we'd had more time, even if my grandmother had lived longer. It was only my first semester in college—at Cal, across the Bay—when my grandmother's ever-present heart condition went beyond the reach of the medications. For the last few weeks of her life, I'd go sit with her at a nursing home. In the end, I wrapped myself around the huddled half-moon of her and whispered questions in her ear. In the end, she only answered back in Cantonese, the language she spoke to my grandfather when they were alone.

After my grandmother died, my grandfather moved in with my mother. We had to clean out my grandparents' apartment: all the pairs of slippers in

the closet, the moth-balled dresses from the 1920s, the dress suit my grandmother wore in the picture of her standing in front of another apartment building, holding my baby mother, my grandfather standing on a step above her. My mother came across a small chest full of letters from my grandfather's family in Guangdong, onion paper inked with kanji, folded over, stamped and franked. In among the letters were yellowed photos, ribboned together, the photographed subjects identified in characters neither of us could read. We took them to my grandfather, who sat in the front room in his usual wing-back chair, imported to its new spot. He looked at the first few and said, "I never could read your mother's writing." He declined to recognize any of the faces as well.

In the back bedroom, as we put the letters away, my mother was angry. "She never forgave me. If she had, she'd have written the damn names in English."

The contrast was this: Before dying of emphysema, Auntie Lo, wife of my grandfather's brother, gave my mother copies of all the family photos and documents for that side of the family—my father's grandmother in a handed-down kai-po on her wedding day, his grandfather in Mandarin jacket and long robe; the two brothers, my grandfather and his brother on the steamship to

America, in sharply-cut, Western-style suits; even a precious photo of the sisters who had originally stayed behind. Auntie Lo had translated everything that needed it. She told my mother that she'd done it for her sons, though neither of her sons had cut Chinese school for a paper route and one even worked in Hong Kong. When she got them, my mother just put those albums away. I didn't see them again until the evening we returned with the chest of letters. She took them down from the upper shelf in her bedroom closet, and sat on the couch, holding her past, half in each hand.

My grandfather was asleep down the hall in the room that used to be mine. I'd just come from checking on him, and I stopped in the threshold into the living room. "What happened, Ma? Why didn't you want to be Chinese?"

My mother looked up from the burden in her hands. "Did your grandmother tell you that? That I didn't want to be Chinese?"

"No. I'm saying it. That's my diagnosis. You tell your life like this—you were naive, then you were disillusioned. I want to know what disillusioned you."

"I don't know. The world."

I moved into the room. "That's not an answer."

"It's the answer you're getting."

"It's no use to me." I stood in front of her, arms crossed.

"I'm sorry, honey, but it hasn't been much use to me either." She closed her eyes and leaned back into the cushions. Her short grey hair stood at attentive angles. The wrinkles on her face were like crackling in a fine glaze.

Older now, I can see she was telling me everything she could. She knew what I was asking, she knew why—but even after all her searching, even after tracing all those eccentric paths, she really had no way to answer. At the time, I thought she was just being evasive, just playing hide-and-seek, this time with the very thing that would help me make meaning of her life, of my own. Thick with resentment, I fumbled through my purse for the car keys, left the apartment without another word, and wept all the way back across the Bay Bridge, all the way back to the dorms.

The interment of my grandmother's ashes at the Colma cemetery collected a small crowd of family friends, cousins, and, of course, my father. A color photo of my grandmother stood upright next to a temporary marker; it had been taken just before my birth. The older people, mostly elderly women who had travelled together in antique sedans, smelled of garlic, powder, jasmine. My father—his butterscotch-colored hair white at the roots—wore one of his good suits, a trial-day suit. He was the tallest person there, and I was second.

He and my mother nodded at each other, but didn't talk. I walked him to the road, where his car was parked, and watched him drive away. Then I sat down on the curb in the shade of an ailanthus. The late morning sun threw the tree's shadow over the curb, into the road. It wasn't long before my mother sat down next to me.

"Ma," I said.

"Yes?"

"I don't know what to do."

"About anything in particular?" She ran her hand along my back, smoothed my hair over the far shoulder. "Sorry, that sounded glib."

A Lincoln passed us slowly as if it were making its way by Braille. I coughed from the exhaust, and my mother said. "Somebody's got a bad gasket. I should let her kids know."

"I don't know what to do." I reached into my pocket and pulled out some paper money I'd bought from a shop I'd never gone into before, off Sacramento Street. It was thin, like onion skin, and printed in red. "I want to give her this. But I don't—I forgot to bring—"

"Don't worry," said my mother. "I brought matches."

Sian M. Jones received an MFA in fiction from Mills College in 2004. Her work has appeared in *Best New American Voices 2006*, *Cheat River Review*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*.