

*Tropical Rain
over My Heart*

Irene Goh

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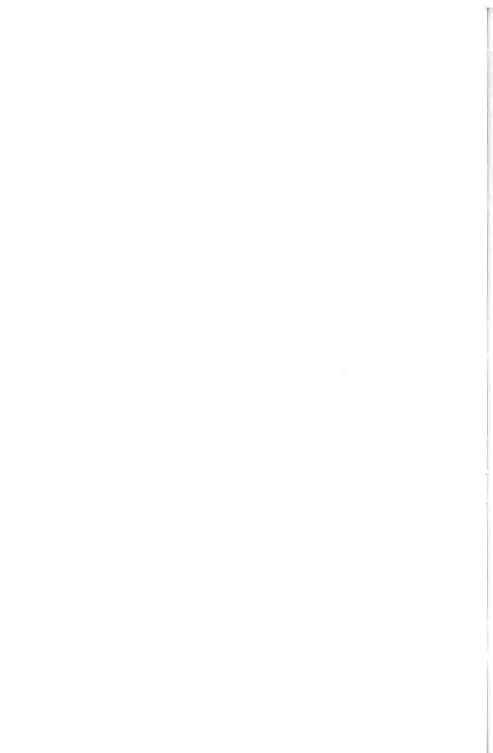
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To my mother and her family, who made this book possible by living their lives as they did.



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Part I

The Early Years

CHAPTER 1

Last night I went back to the old house. It was, as I knew it would be, a gaunt, time-worn, and sad relic of its former glory. A soft wind was whispering through the overgrown vegetation as I sat down on one of the green, moss-covered boulders that still generously broke the monotony of the landscape, only in those days the very same boulders had been a cheerful sun-kissed grey and the surrounding vegetation had been a happy hotchpotch of Grandma's beloved shrubs and rosebushes. Instinctively I tugged at a handful of *lalang*, the long reedlike tropical vegetation that inevitably and tenaciously overran any neglected and abandoned grounds, adding to the haunting melancholia of such neglect.

Grandmother would be mad to see her garden eaten up by lalang like this, I thought inconsequentially. Then I stopped tugging and threw the handful of reeds back. "What the hell!" I said to myself. "What am I doing? Grandma is dead and gone, buried in some graveyard in this rotting place, forgotten and truly gone!" Then, uninvited, the memories came flooding back, beckoning me into their magical realm. How could I resist?

It was the 1930s again and I was back in time, back in a small town called Bau, about twenty-five miles from Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, more popularly known in the history books as "the land of the White Rajahs" or "the land of the headhunters." The White Rajahs were the famed James, Charles, and Vyner Brooke, who ruled Sarawak until it was ceded to the British as a crown colony. This peaceful, untouched, and idyllic country of Sarawak, on the

island of Borneo, chose to become a part of what is now Malaysia in 1963, and I have no comments on it thereafter. Whatever deep sentiments I have towards Sarawak are as it was in the old days and not what it has become today; on that I do not wish to dwell at all.

Even the name Bau had a history attached to it. I remember as a child listening to my grandmother's fascinating tales of history and cultures, which Chinese emigrants like herself had brought with them from China. Many of these have been obliterated through the years by the uncaring new generations in the name of modernisation, progress, and materialism.

Coming back to the name Bau. This is a Malay term meaning, literally, "smelly and rotting." The town had, way before my time, been the site of a bloody and ferocious fight between the indigenous people and the Chinese emigrants, and after the fight the town was strewn with dead and rotting bodies and the stench from this had been so overpowering and so memorable that the name Bau stuck to the town right up to today. My grandmother's vast knowledge of historical events did not come from education, as she was totally illiterate, but from a lifetime of rich and varied experiences.

Even the circumstances of my birth were most unusual by normal standards. My grandmother was renowned in the town as a lady *towkay*, the Chinese term for "boss." That was what she was: a powerful matriarch, landowner, mine owner, and business-woman, achievements that were no mean feat in those days when women ideally were seen and not heard. In fact, as my grandmother once commented, if men could have their way, they would prefer their womenfolk to be kept in the closet and taken out only when necessary to perform their specific duties! But, of course, the men never really had their way.

On the rubber estates, in the gold mine, and in the shops my grandmother had in her employ thousands of men, from lowly coolies, regarded in those days as of no higher social status than working mules, to estate managers and overseers, popularly known as *ban loot*, a local Chinese distortion of the word *bailiff*.

Now, my grandmother had gone through three husbands, each of whom had obligingly died and left her staggering estates of choice rubber lands and thriving businesses; the gold mine she'd inherited from her father. She had arrived from China, accompanied by her father, with nothing but a naturally brilliant and shrewd business sense and a burning determination to succeed in life, which no doubt accounted for her choice of husbands! In fact, ever since I could remember there were some in the town who whispered that the old lady was a "tigress," alluding to a Chinese superstition that if a woman was born under the animal zodiac sign of the tiger, she would be so overpowering and strong that she would literally "eat up" any husband she might have. The superstition was a very real influence in the lives of people in those days, and I have seen girls born in the year of the tiger who were never able to find a husband who was willing to take the risk of marrying them and being "swallowed" up.

My grandmother's greatest personal tragedy was that she did not have any living sons to take over her empire. In an era and in a society that had time only for sons, my grandmother's failure in this area was considered a tragedy of the first degree! Her three marriages produced four daughters and a much awaited son, who was later killed in an accident in Singapore, where he had been sent by my progressive grandmother to acquire a more sophisticated education.

So what was my grandmother to do to acquire an heir? I was told this touching tale of how she braved the perilous journey by sea back to China to her own village to select a young man of honesty, integrity, and reasonable intelligence, whom she would marry to her eldest daughter, my mother, and thereafter groom to run her empire. My mother, of course, didn't have any say in the matter at all.

Well, the grand old lady duly selected her young man and brought him back to Bau, where he was duly married off to my mother, acquired her surname, and became totally absorbed into

the family. But my grandmother had underestimated the young man from China, who was to become my father. He had too much integrity to be happy with a life of bondage to his wife's family, being totally dependent on them for even the clothes on his back and every morsel of food and, above all, the shame of being stripped of even his name. The family name is sacred to the Chinese and is guarded jealously. If you are deprived of it, you have lost all your honour, dignity, and self-respect as a man. I'm sure my father felt this deeply. I never knew this young man who was my father. All I had was what I pieced together from the snippets of information gathered from my aunts, and it was a picture of a sad young man who chafed at the strings that controlled him and dreamed only of taking his pregnant wife away to a home of their own and retrieving his name, like any self-respecting Chinese man.

It was this dream and sheer desperation that prompted this ill-fated young man, on a trip to Kuching to oversee the sale of rubber sheets from my grandmother's estates, to seek his fortune at a gambling den with the proceeds of the sales. My poor father lost everything, and so terrified of confronting my awesome grandmother was he that he did not have the courage to return home.

My grandmother could be ruthless and hard when she felt she had been betrayed and shortchanged by anyone. My father had betrayed her trust. It was unforgivable, and she proceeded to disown him without any thought or compassion for a lost young man in a foreign land. My father was forbidden any contact with his wife, and when I was born and he tried to see his child, he was cruelly turned away. After that, I guess he did not have any more reason to live, and in a fit of deep depression and despair he took his own life in a dimly lit rented room in Kuching. After I was told this poignant tale, for some time I could not quite forgive my grandmother for having destroyed the life of a promising young man, whose only dream had been to acquire the means necessary to provide for his family on his own steam.

But to get back to the unusual circumstances of my birth. My

grandmother and her family usually resided in a grand old house on one of the rubber estates two or three miles from town. When my mother was almost near her delivery time, there was a big and elaborate festival and procession in honour of one of the Buddhist deities that most of the Chinese community prayed to in those days. For some reason or other, my usually meek mother insisted that she had to make the two-mile journey to the town to watch the procession. No amount of persuasion or threats could dissuade her, and finally they gave in.

The procession had been magnificent, and as the crowds dispersed, my mother and her three sisters started to make their way home. My three aunts were boisterously discussing and arguing over the events when my mother suddenly clutched her abdomen and announced, "I don't feel so good. I think the baby's coming!"

"The baby's coming?" My second aunt screamed out the obvious. She was the dramatic one and known to go into hysterics over the smallest catastrophe; on top of that, she had the strongest vocal cords in the area. "What are we going to do? We're in the middle of the rubber estate!"

"Shut up!" my first aunt chided her without ceremony. "You're panicking Big Sister, and that won't do in her condition. Let's see; we're at least another mile from the house. I don't think we can make it back there."

"No . . . I can't walk anymore," my mother gasped, as a spasm of pain assaulted her. "Help me, someone!"

Even my usually cool first aunt was flustered now and broke into a cold sweat. Then she spotted an old hut a few meters away. It was one of the many huts used by the rubber tappers to take rests from the rigours of rubber tapping and process the rubber into sheets to be sold to the rubber dealers.

My mother had always been the spoilt, pampered firstborn, and she started wailing now, "No . . . oh . . . no . . . I can't have the baby in that dirty old hut. . . ."

"You have no choice; at least it's a shelter." My first aunt was

already propelling my mother across the dirt track that led to the rubber tappers' hut.

"One of you go and fetch Mother and bring hot water, towels, blankets, and brandy. . . . Hurry!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"I'll do it." My second aunt, always quick to spot and escape more tedious tasks, immediately volunteered and was off like the wind.

My mother was by now in real agony. My first aunt had no choice but to improvise a bed from some dried leaves over which she placed her own clothes. She laid my mother gently down onto this makeshift bed, hardly befitting the spoilt and pampered first daughter of the matriarch of the town. But there it is; the call of nature cares not for one's status in life! In fact, it became a family joke that my extremely prudish and conservative first aunt had to do a stripping job so that I could be born!

Thereafter, whenever I pushed her beyond endurance with the impossible tantrums and precociousness of a growing child, she could be heard mumbling to herself, "To think of what I had to do, bare my body for all to see, to get that child born!" In an era when the Chinese culture dictated that children, especially little girls, should be seen and not heard, I certainly tried the patience of the adult population in the family very sorely!

And so I was born in that derelict rubber tappers' shanty on a bed of dried leaves and my first aunt's clothes, the wind whistling through the many cracks in the walls. If these were not unusual circumstances to be born in, I don't know what are!

My grandmother arrived soon after, and never a lady to be squeamish about anything, she calmly got down to the task of attending to my birth as if it were something she did every day of her life!

In those days, the life of a woman was cheap. Childbirth was a game of chance, and most women delivered their babies at home, attended only by the local midwife or the prolific old and experienced "birthing" woman. If there were complications in the way of

haemorrhage, infection, or breeched babies, death would more often than not be inevitable. Although her death would be mourned, very soon the mother would be forgotten, and the following year, as likely as not, her husband would have gotten himself another wife. Death in childbirth claimed my third aunt's life, and that was how my sickly and puny little cousin came to live with us at Grandmother's. Following the usual pattern of life, her father remarried and didn't want to be saddled with the puny child of a forgotten first wife, especially as the child was a girl and therefore inauspicious.

My official name was Water Lily, but because of the way I had been born, I was nicknamed Bukuk, a Malay word meaning "a tumbledown shanty." Somehow that name stuck among those close to me throughout my life. The name never bothered me; in fact, when my grandmother used my legitimate name, it bothered me a whole lot, because it always preceded the hiding of my life or some other chastisement!

A year after I was born, my mother remarried a wealthy businessman around town who didn't take to me, so I was sent to stay with my grandmother. Then came two other cousins, girls of course, who had been sent to my grandmother's by my second aunt's irate husband, disgusted with the birth of daughter after daughter. So we were brought up at my grandmother's, a bunch of girls all unwanted, one way or another, by their parents. But matriarchal and authoritarian as she was, the old lady lavished as much care and love as she knew how on us, and we never felt unwanted or neglected in any way but led happy and somewhat normal childhoods, often sending my prudish first aunt up the wall, calling down the wrath of the gods on us!

It seemed destined that my first aunt, already pushing thirty and still unmarried, would spend the rest of her days as an old maid. It therefore came as a shock when, at the grand old age of thirty-two, she suddenly produced a fine and very personable young man,

employed—wonders will never cease—it was whispered with awe among the family, as a civil servant!

Let me explain at this juncture that civil servants were revered and looked upon almost as demigods by the local community. They were educated in English, were genteel and dignified, and were the equivalent, I guess, of our present-day social elite. This breed of revered civil servant spent its leisure at the Civil Service Club, playing billiards and the like, and it was every young girl's dream to land a young man from the Civil Service for a husband!

"Why her?" I could remember the other girls of marriageable age complaining in genuine envy. "She's so old and looks like a used gunnysack!"

"Of course, it's because her mother is the richest woman in the district," someone said. "I mean, look at him. He looks like a film star. Why would he want to look at her otherwise?"

Those females, I remember thinking, overhearing their conversation and eyeing them with deep contempt, *all they ever think about is marriage and a lifetime of slavery to their husbands.*

I was ten years old, mature beyond my years, and had absolutely no respect for men or the marriage institution. I had high-flown ideas about myself and was often considered too progressive for my own good. I was going to be a scholar of great distinction, and as soon as I was old enough, I was going to go to Shanghai to study until I dropped dead! I would have, too, but then the Japanese came in what was known as the Japanese occupation. All our lives and dreams were to be shattered into a thousand pieces of lost fortunes and wasted opportunities.

I don't know how long I sat on that huge moss-stained boulder. The pull of the past and the kaleidoscope of memories that fill every human life are mesmerising, to say the least, and one could be lost in its magnetism forever! I realised that the moon had come out in full force and now bathed the house in its ghostly light, casting long

shadows everywhere, shadows of the past merging with the present. *When did it all begin, and where did it all end?* I wondered.

And then it was time to go. I turned for one last look and started to walk away. . . .

CHAPTER 2

I fancied the town hadn't changed much. Of course, there were more shops, more houses, more people, more cars, and yes, more streets, which were now paved, as opposed to the dusty dirt roads that they had been all those years ago. I remembered how, on rainy days, those roads could turn into rivers of mud and slush. Everybody grumbled a whole lot about it, but nobody really minded because they had never known anything better.

The pavements still had children running around, only now the children wore shoes and, I was pleased to note, they had clean, dry noses! As the years fell away and the present was integrated with the past, the streets were once again alive with children, their feet perpetually bare, children whose noses never seemed to stop running, and children playing marbles, hopscotch, and "five stones," a game concocted by those very children themselves, involving various ingenious manipulations with five stones!

My cousins and I had spent many happy years running wild with those children and participating in all their escapades. Although Grandma was the equivalent of the local tycoon and the children were mostly the offspring of her employees and estate workers, we were never given the impression that we were superior in any way, and there was no concept of class segregation at all. Far from it. Grandma was always telling us that we were all bound together by our common roots in China, and for us kids everybody was "Uncle" or "Aunty" to us, be they the lowest of Grandma's workers or her business counterparts.

I also remember those days as a time when nobody would

dream that children needed to be entertained with toys, and so we learnt to improvise and create our own toys. My cousins and I learnt, for example, that if we tied a few biscuit tins together with a string and dragged them along at great speed, it provided entertainment for many a boring afternoon and produced sounds most pleasing to the ears of children but which incurred so great a wrath from my first aunt that if she had ever been able to catch up with us, the consequences could have been disastrous!

My mother lived in a shop house in the town with her second husband and their brood, which seemed to expand almost predictably every two years. Nobody ever heard of birth control in those days, and the fear of unwanted pregnancies created a real phobia for sex amongst many of the women, as far as I could gather. A lot of times, pretending to be absorbed in whatever I was doing in a corner of the room allowed me to eavesdrop on the most interesting and educational conversations my first aunt and her married cronies often had. They went something like this:

"My husband is like an animal; he wants it every night," one of the ladies, with a big mole perched precariously on her nose, was saying. "Even when I'm unclean with my monthly periods, he still wants it, now. If that's not an animal, I don't know what is!"

I remember looking at her and thinking, *I'm not sure what "it" is, but whatever it is, any man who wants "it" from such an ugly woman must indeed be an animal!*

It was typical of Chinese women in those times to regard the very natural biological process of menstruation as "unclean," and my first aunt would hush me up every time I raised the question of why my aunts sometimes bled and nobody seemed worried!

"I've learnt that the best way to deal with it is to lie back, think of my card game tomorrow, and let him get it over and done with quickly," another lady was commenting.

"Yes, look at me, a baby in my belly almost every year!" a third lamented, patting her obviously engorged middle with distaste.

I remember my grandmother telling me, when I was considered old enough to understand, that marriage and the sexual act were a cross women had to bear in exchange for the protection of a man, material support, and children as security for old age. It was no wonder that when mothers taught their daughters that sex was to be tolerated and never enjoyed, women of that era did just that: tolerate sex! The forbidden conversations I often eavesdropped upon definitely confirmed this attitude, and that was the closest to sex education we ever received!

Like most people around us, my grandmother was obsessed with the very Chinese concepts of "saving for old age" and "saving for rainy days." She was forever drumming into us the need to plan our lives so that our "old-age security" would never be compromised!

I grew up against a backdrop of fascinating cultures with vivid and sometimes downright bizarre superstitions, and most people's lives were ruled and controlled by it all. Simple things like moles were thought to determine one's destiny! I have a mole just above my upper lip, and my grandmother would sometimes rub it approvingly and say, "A mole there! That's an auspicious mole and it's good luck! That means you will never want for food." Another time she would refer to a relative or a neighbour, saying ominously, "Oh, dear, do you know, Uncle's daughter has a mole just beneath her right eye? That's a tear mole and it means she will face many sorrows in her life and cry bucketfuls!" Or, "Your new baby sister has a mole on her left shoulder. That's a bad sign because it signifies that she will have a life of toil and carry many burdens on her shoulders. I must go to the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy and seek a charm to ward off the bad luck!" And the list goes on. If a woman had a mole at the corner of her mouth, that was the mole of a chatterbox and a busybody; on the other hand, if a woman had a mole on the chin, she was a potential seducer and courtesan material. *Thank God, I have a mole in a satisfactory place; otherwise I don't know what they will make me do!* I remember thinking.

Most people of this era, or people of a very different cultural disposition, would probably scoff at the very idea that one's life could be governed by such an inconsequential thing as a mole, but in those days such superstitions were very real and taken very seriously. Even if you started off with refusing to be drawn into such incredible notions, you would eventually be browbeaten and indoctrinated to a satisfactory level of acceptance and conformity. Well, when you come to think of it, life in those days was cheap. People died from all kinds of situations or illnesses that could so easily be averted today; all the women who died from quite basic childbirth complications, the people who just wasted away from tuberculosis or even venereal diseases, they need not have died. Sometimes I think so many superstitions and the unshakable belief in good-luck and bad-luck concepts were created to justify and explain the many situations that were beyond the control of mere mortals like us. Every time someone lay battling with an illness or one of us was burning up with a fever, my grandmother would pray and mutter over and over again, "Your life, my child, is in the hands of the gods." That was the simple philosophy we lived by. We had no choice, really, especially when medical care in our little forgotten town came only in the form of a small government dispensary of doubtful medical standards.

Most people, including my grandmother, did not believe in Western cures and medications and preferred to rely exclusively on Chinese herbs and potions. Amongst the most enduring memories of my childhood were the numerous concoctions of the foulest taste imaginable that were periodically forced down our throats for one illness or another. The government dispensary certainly couldn't compete with the lone Chinese medical store in the town for popularity! The old Chinese physician, a first-generation emigrant from China, was a soft-spoken man of great wisdom, a real sage from the same province as my grandmother in China. He could tell you what was wrong with you by counting your pulse and was relied upon for anything from male virility to female infertility!

More often than not, he was just so kind that you couldn't help feeling better and reassured after a session with him! On the contrary, the government dispensary was controlled by two nurses and a hospital assistant of such ferocious dispositions that the patient was often left wondering whether death would have been preferable to their ministrations!

I remember the scandalous story of a woman who had elected to have her baby delivered in the tiny six-bed hospital ward attached to the dispensary and how, as she struggled with the agony of a difficult first birth, the midwife stood over her and sneered, "Yes, that's right, scream! You deserve the pain; why didn't you think of it when you were having fun, huh?" Most babies were delivered in the primitive way, at home by the local "midwife," which meant merely an old woman reputed to be of vast experience in that area. If there were complications like a breech baby and the like, the woman just bled to death, as any such delivery was a touch-and-go situation and probably justified the saying "the delivery of a child is the exchange of one life for another." If a baby was afflicted with what we now know as a severe case of colic and cried through the night, the elders would surely put it down to being an assault by the evil spirits "that roamed the earth" and, like an arrow, head straight for the nearest shrine to obtain a charm that had to be placed under the baby's pillow to ward off the offending spirit! And if one of us came down with a fever, we were stifled in an airless room completely shuttered and wrapped in layers of blankets to induce sweating and, hopefully, the fever to break! It was a torture in a burning hell I still do not care to dwell upon even now. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. It was a miracle that when so many things were left to fate and destiny not more of the human race of that region was wiped out!

My grandmother, as did most people of that time, went to the Goddess of Mercy for almost everything. I often went with Grandmother and was particularly partial to the fragrant fumes of incense that emanated from the hundreds of joss sticks that the worshippers

placed daily in the mammoth urn that stood at the entrance to the shrine. There is a poignant story connected to the shrine as well. It still stands today at the edge of a beautiful lake and peering into the mysterious green depths of the Tai Parit Lake, just a short walk from the town centre, it is hard to believe that lurking in those very depths were many events of human tragedies and deaths, all part and parcel of the history of the gold mining days.

The lake was the site of a gigantic gold mine owned by my grandmother and her father, and into this gold mine were recruited thousands of young men, fresh from the many boats that arrived from China and raring to seek their fortunes. Alas, gold mining in those days was hazardous business and there were many accidents and deaths nobody wanted to talk about. I remember the young men from the mines, their bodies burnt almost black from daily exposure to the harsh tropical sun, old and worn well before their years. Again, it was the very Chinese concept of suffering and tolerating any form of hardship for the sake of a better future and the next generation that kept these men toiling in sometimes pretty deplorable conditions. To that extent, we, the overseas Chinese of the second or even third generation, displayed very close affinity to our roots in mainland China. Almost all Chinese parents around us were prepared to sacrifice anything for the sake of their children, in particular their sons. Such comments as "Our lives are worse than the mules, but we are working in the hope that the next generation will have a better life" were taken as a matter of course, and that logic was understood by all who shared this obsession with the next generation well before their own lives had run their courses!

Well, after the gold was finally exhausted, the lake filled in with water and became the Tai Parit Lake, which, if you go to the town of Bau, just twenty-two miles out of Kuching in Sarawak today, you will still see as it was all those years ago, serene and obviously unperturbed by the ebb and flow of time and life. After the gold mines were abandoned, my grandmother donated a small fortune, by the standards of those days, towards the construction

of the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy to watch over and appease the souls of the many young men who lost their lives there. It was possibly in part an atonement for the fortunes she had made from the gold mines at the expense of the sweat, blood, tears, and lives of the many men who slaved there day and night for their own meagre pieces of gold.

And as I stood now in the cool and shadowed recesses of the shrine, I could almost hear the hollow jangling of the wooden box that my grandmother would shake to dislodge a piece of paper from the gods that would advise her on which was a good day to travel or to make business decisions, what were the potential dangers to her and her family, and what must be done to avert those dangers, and so on and so forth. This was an age-old "consultation" with the gods for advice that is still observed today in the Chinese temples as, in fact, are many other beliefs and religious practices that have been an inherent part of the Chinese culture since time immemorial.

After almost every such trip to the temple, my grandmother would burn the piece of paper that the Goddess of Mercy had "presented" to her, stir the ashes in hot water, and make us drink it all down to ward off the evil spirits believed to be lurking everywhere in the whole universe!

My grandmother also made many trips to the shrine to solicit the goddess of mercy's help to procure good husbands for her daughters and safe delivery for every pregnancy her various daughters underwent. Credit was of course given to the goddess for my first aunt's miraculous marriage against all odds!

The Goddess of Mercy was especially revered for the solace she was reputed to provide for women and their troubles. In an era when women received precious little solace from anyone or the social structure, it is no wonder that the little shrine was always filled with scores of women jostling with each other to place their joss sticks on the gigantic urn and let the fumes from it wash over them as they laid their troubled heads on the goddess's ample shoulders.

I always wondered why they did that until my first aunt explained. "The fumes from the joss sticks are believed to sweep away all the bad luck and evil that are causing them all the troubles." Then of course she just had to give me a dark look and add, "I think you need it, my child; there has to be a spirit in you that makes you such a handful!" And with that, she dragged me, protesting as loudly as I dared, before the urn right in the path of the swirling fumes, which washed all over me in a spattering of ashes, making me light-headed with the thick, pungent fragrance of the incense. It was not altogether an unpleasant experience and did of sorts smooth the rough edges off what I called my inner self, which always seemed hell bent on annoying as many of the adult population as I could, at least only for the rest of that day!

The last day of the month was the busiest and most exciting time because it was payday and on that day every employee, right down to the coolies, was paid his or her wages by my grandmother. She had an awesome-looking giant of a ledger book of sorts, and into this book were entered every employee's financial record, meticulously supervised and updated by the old lady herself and her right-hand woman, my first aunt. On payday, the very garden outside the house I am in now so many years later would be teeming with hundreds of workers and it always had an atmosphere of festivity and expectation, marred only by the very occasional scuffle between a few workers trying to collect debts from each other, but generally, it was a happy time for everyone.

My grandmother would be seated in her chair on a kind of dais with my first aunt seated beside her, poring over the huge ledger book in front of them. My cousins and I would be roaming around trying to stay out of trouble and away from my first aunt's frayed nerves and temper! But no matter what, there was an understanding that no one was to go near Grandma's treasured rosebushes!

The *ban loot*, or bailiff, of each group of coolies of twenty or so he controlled would go up to my grandmother as he was called to receive the wages for his respective group. After that, the workers

would disperse into small groups to count their money, to settle old scores or create new ones, and to plan. Many of Grandmother's workers were Chinese emigrants who had great plans for the future, and to that end they slogged and saved every day of their lives. Those young men who were still single had to save for years before they could afford the dowry and other expenses needed to secure a bride, because among the Chinese, it was the prospective bridegroom who had to settle a dowry on the bride's family and pay for the wedding dinner. Face was of utmost importance to any self-respecting Chinese man, and if he could not afford a reasonable dowry and the fuss and bother of a sizable wedding dinner, as often as not he would elect to stay unmarried!

Coming back to the subject of superstitions, one that on the face of it sounds ludicrous but dies hard is the belief that some children were spiritually low and should avoid direct contact with brides and pregnant women who were not family. Unfortunately, I fell into the category of the children with the spiritual lows, and when I was a child my first aunt would hustle me away from the path of any bride or pregnant woman we chanced to come upon in near hysteria. When she wasn't quick enough to whisk me away, especially as the lack of birth control meant a generous population of pregnant women in the town, she would forcibly turn my head away and whisper fiercely, "Don't look her in the eye!"

Like most little girls my age, I loved brides, and this interruption of my enjoyment usually drew a very vocal protest from me. However, I wasn't too hot on pregnant women, so I could very easily let that pass!

When I was old enough to insist on my rights, I demanded an explanation as to why I had to stay away from brides and pregnant women and why when I couldn't, I couldn't look them in the eye.

"Well," my first aunt explained resignedly after persistent nagging from me, "it is believed that a bride is at a great spiritual high in the Chinese horoscopic sense. So it is with a pregnant woman, who has four eyes, those of herself and of her unborn baby.

If your paths clash, your spirit will be suppressed and you will fall sick.”

I am not sure whether at that tender age I could really grasp such profound theories of spiritual highs and lows, but I assure you, in whatever way you try to explain it, it was true, I always became sick after any such encounters! I certainly can't explain it.

I said that such traditional beliefs die hard because even today, in ultramodern Singapore, I have noticed my Western-educated daughter following exactly the same pattern of hustling her two children away from brides and pregnant women!

My grandmother was also very particular that anyone who returned home from a funeral or a wake had to wash before entering the house so that the spirits would be washed away and not brought into the house. If you felt you had been spiritually compromised or, in fact, were so compromised, to cleanse yourself and shake off the spirits you had to bathe in five different flowers and with a pair of scissors! This was the environment I grew up in, one in which the living were so intimately intertwined with the spirits that one probably couldn't survive without the other. I recall thinking one day, *Goodness, the way Grandma and all the aunties go on, you would think that the world is one big battlefield between the living and the dead manifested in those spirits of theirs.*

And now they are all gone, anyway, I couldn't help thinking, gone perhaps to the spiritual realm that had been the all-absorbing influence of their lives, while the world of the living continued without them!

As Grandma used to say, “Whether you are rich or poor, whether you are highly or lowly born, this is what life is all about!”

CHAPTER 3

Let me tell you something about the town of Bau in those days. The nominal governor of the place was the district officer, a British man nominated by the reigning rajah, Charles and later Vyner Brooke. He was, for the most part, nominal because the people were left pretty much to themselves and he was so far removed from the local populace that nobody quite knew what to do with him, so they merely avoided him. When I was a child, the district officer was a terrifying personality of gigantic proportions and could sometimes be seen making his way to the Civil Service Club, always dressed in impeccable white European clothes, with a white bowler, and carrying a cane that he was wont to twirl at the turn of every few steps. He lived in a sprawling English-style bungalow on top of a windy hill guarded by a team of dogs of a breed I now know as German shepherds, which terrorised us by their sheer size and ferocity.

Such Europeans were called *hung mau ren*, or "red-haired people," by the Chinese and *Orang Puteh*, or "white people," by the Malays; the local people were as fascinated as they were fearful of their strange red hair, even stranger blue eyes, and pale white skin.

Mercifully, there weren't that many of them around, just the district officer and his wife, the Roman Catholic priest, who was often seen cycling deep into the jungles to preach the word of the Lord to the indigenous people, and the two or three engineers and sorts in the gold mines.

There were some who whispered about a liaison between my grandmother and one of the European engineers from the gold

mines, but because she was so powerful in the local community, they remained just whispers, even when nobody could explain why one of her daughters, my third aunt, was born with reddish hair, unusually white skin, and almost hazel eyes! It was a topic that was strictly taboo in the family and brooked no questions, especially from little girls like me, who once got her mouth severely pinched by my first aunt when I demanded to know, "Why does my third aunt have red hair and yellow eyes?" at the horribly inappropriate moment of a Chinese New Year reunion dinner! Well, I always had lousy timing, even as a child!

When I became older, try as I would, I couldn't imagine my stern, conservative, and moralistic grandmother being embroiled in a steamy affair with a man who was not even Chinese! Well, I decided later, even the most morally exemplary have their fallen moments!

Perhaps it is unfair to portray the district officer as merely a figurehead of the rajah's government centered in the capital of Kuching, as the district officer did oversee the machinery of the civil service, sit as a magistrate in the one single courtroom in the town, and control the rudiments of a police force and, together, all these gave some semblance of law and order in our community. What my grandmother could never forget after the Japanese occupation, which destroyed all her wealth, was that this sorry spectacle of a police force with their mean-looking rifles fled for their lives and left all of us totally at the mercy of the Japanese.

However, as far as I could remember, the local people, particularly the Chinese, tolerated the police and court system that the government tried to impose on them in a good-natured sort of way but went on doing exactly what they had always been doing, taking the law into their own hands and resolving their own problems by themselves! Even the flag that graced the school was that of the "motherland," China.

I remember accompanying my grandmother to the sleepy courthouse for her solitary court case. Everyone from the court

interpreter who had to interpret the evidence of the Chinese parties and the witnesses into English for the benefit of the district officer, who was the presiding magistrate, to the three or four bored chickens from a nearby house who had sauntered into the court-house to seek some action seemed to be afflicted with a real case of lethargy!

The official language used in the government offices was English, but most Chinese families in our town had their children sent to the Chinese School. Together with my cousins I attended the Chung Hwa Chinese School and was taught by some of the finest and most dedicated teachers, mostly from big cities in China like Shanghai. How and why such fine teachers from such big and progressive cities would make their way to our small, intellectually uninspiring, and for the most part insignificant town was something I could never understand. These teachers were greatly respected and admired by the local people and seen as the hope for the improvement of the next generation's lot in life through education.

For a girl I was unusually interested in education and learning and I was determined to emulate the beautiful, graceful lady from Shanghai who taught me and eventually make my way to the institutions of great learning in Peking. Even though we were no the third generation of Chinese emigrants, because we were indoctrinated about our roots, we automatically looked, often blindly, to China as our motherland and our role model. I saw blindly because I don't know whether in doing that we actually took a step forward or backward!

"You have such high-flown ideas about yourself, who would dare to marry you?" my first aunt would despair when she could pry me away from one of the many books and novels I always had my nose buried in. "You will become an old maid, and then what will happen to you?"

"I don't care," I would retort. "I'm not going to be like those women whose only reason for living is to snare what they

believe to be a good husband. I want to be a great scholar, and Miss Huang says that I'm her best student. I will be a slave to no man!"

"Bah! What's the use of so much education for a girl?" my first aunt would throw back at me, walking off in a real huff!

Those teachers from the big Chinese cities were different even in their dressing. The ladies wore *cheongsams*, graceful one-piece Chinese garments with high collars and slits on both sides. How high the slits went depended on what profession you were in. If you a woman of the night and it was your duty to entice, your slits could go all the way up your thighs, but if you were a respectable and classy teacher like Miss Huang, they went up to a discreet one inch above the knee! Now, this was certainly a far cry from the drab, uninspiring clothes worn by the local women.

I must explain that the *cheongsam* was city garb worn by sophisticated city women and, as almost all the Chinese of our town had come from the rural areas of China, they wore the provincial-looking *sam-foos*, a high-collared top worn with loose pants, which was as unattractive as the *cheongsam* was elegant. Then there were those Chinese women who had become so localised that they preferred to wear the *sarong kebaya*, an elegant fitted, elaborately embroidered top of thin voile material worn with a sarong, or a length of material wrapped several times around the waist, and secured with a chain belt. My grandmother and all her daughters, including my mother, wore the *sarong kebaya*, and the magnificent bejewelled pins that were used to fasten their *kebaya*s were worth such a fortune that they were the talk of the town! It went like this amongst the women: the richer you were, the more elaborate and bejewelled your *kebaya* pins were!

This *sarong kebaya* was, in fact, traditionally worn by Malay women, and how and why my very Chinese grandmother and aunts came to be wearing such apparel was something I could never figure out! It was a real enigma. There was Grandmother, who clung fiercely to her Chinese origins and her roots, whose first allegiance was to the country she called the "motherland," and yet

she had allowed herself to be so localised in her daily life that she wore local clothes, spoke Chinese generously interlaced with Malay words, and adopted many of the local habits and customs. It was, indeed, a curious marriage of the Chinese in her and the local person she had become. The more local she became, the more fiercely she clung to her roots and refused to let go!

When I recall those days, I will always remember thinking how old age was thrust upon a woman by society well before her time. I mean by the time a woman reached the age of thirty she should be married and saddled with at least three children, and as she had achieved the sole purpose for her existence, marriage, there was no longer any reason to stay attractive, so she could let herself go and become respectably matronly! It was acceptable and even encouraged!

"You are a married woman now," my grandmother would say to one or the other of my aunts. "You have to put on some more weight. To look prosperous, you must have more meat on you. Otherwise people will think your husband can't afford to feed you."

It was no wonder that most women of that age group and beyond looked as if they had definite weight problems, by today's standards!

By the age of forty, a woman should be seen only in subtle colours of blue or greys. Maybe green was acceptable, but that was it. I remember the wife of the proprietor of the local hardware store, a woman in her forties, who refused to conform to this "dress code" and blithely adorned herself with all the bright colours that were favoured.

"Look at that woman!" my first aunt would say, her mouth pursed disapprovingly, the exact replica of a sour dried prune, thought wickedly. "So shameless! At her age, she insists on prancing and parading herself in those ridiculous clothes."

The town was not without its share of vices. My grandmother often gave us dire warnings of the town trollops, the pain-prostitutes who serviced three categories of men: young bachelors

who wanted to sow their wild oats and could not yet afford the doubtful luxury of marriage, the married men who were bored with their matronly wives, old beyond their years, and wanted to stray, and the old men desperate to recapture the virility of their long lost youth—indeed, it was not uncommon for such men to go into a seizure in the face of such unaccustomed activities, much to the mortification of their families! When such patrons contracted the dreaded venereal diseases such encounters inevitably produced, they were usually too mortified to queue up at the government clinic for treatment and were eventually ravaged by syphilis and ended their days isolated, sightless, and mindless.

One day, I chanced upon my grandmother and first aunt discussing the greatest town scandal of the time! It concerned the town's coffin maker, who had gone berserk when he turned fifty and started to frequent the town's prostitutes. He eventually contracted syphilis and was thrown out of his own house by his wife and sons. One day, when he was lounging around the town's coffee shop, which was also the favourite haunt of the gossipmongers, he tried to relieve himself on the drain outside the coffee shop, and in the process of doing so, his penis, which had been ravaged by syphilis, dropped off right before the eyes of the most tenacious gossipmongers of the town! His family never recovered from the shame of the incident and eventually left town under a cloud!

The other vice Grandma often spoke of was opium smoking, and we were often warned of the dangers of wandering down the dark alleys where the opium smoking dens abounded. One day, out of the habitual gravitation of the growing child towards the forbidden and the unknown, I sneaked into one of those dark alleys for the sheer hell of it.

My grandmother was right; these were real hellholes all right! I will never forget the dingy rooms lit only by a lone kerosene lamp. On the floor on thin mattresses or straw mats lay rows of emaciated-looking men puffing on their opium pipes, their eyes glazed and unseeing, completely lost in a world of their own. *Puff* . . .

puff . . . they went, filling the air with a nauseating aroma that I imagine must have been the stench of exhaled opium smoke. A few of the men had been so ravaged by years of opium addiction that their bodies were skeletal, with only parchment-dry skin stretched tightly over the bones. Once a person had been initiated into opium, he was never able to escape its potent draw and eventually smoked himself into poverty and an early death in a haze of opium smoke. Those were indeed not pretty stories, and having had my appetite for this dark secret of the town satisfied, I never wanted to go near those dark alleys again!

Then there were the gambling dens, mostly patronised by the workers from the gold mines and the rubber tappers, and in the evenings these places literally overflowed with patrons and the raunchy ruckus and tobacco and opium smoke they created were fit to burst both the eardrums and the lungs!

The women, too, were not to be left out. They formed their own gambling dens behind the scenes, mostly housewives at their own kitchen tables, and they gambled as ferociously as the men. In fact, I recall how one of my aunts, who had been adopted by my grandmother after she was abandoned by her rubber tapper parents, became so addicted to the tables that she would carry her rice porridge to the gaming table and eat as she gambled! It was really a family tragedy that Grandmother refused to talk about. That was just her way—when she was unable to do anything about a catastrophic situation, she refused to talk about it and no one was allowed to talk about it in her presence as well.

No Chinese man would marry this aunt because of her propensity to gamble, but my determined grandmother managed to palm her off eventually to a Eurasian offspring of a Malay domestic maid and a Scottish civil servant who, as was common, had returned to his homeland, leaving his makeshift local family behind to fend for themselves. These Eurasian children grew up with the physical attributes of their Caucasian fathers and the cultural and linguistic attributes of their mothers, who were nearly always

to bring them up in whatever environment they could afford. The local people didn't quite know what to do with these Eurasian products of many an illicit liaison. Sarawak was virtually a colony of the White Rajahs, and Caucasians were regarded as superior beings. So I think it made the local community uncomfortable to see these children of obvious European descent often living in very humble and sometimes dire straits. Even when I was too young to understand the complexities of life, I could still see the sadness and wistfulness on the faces of these children who couldn't fit in anywhere or with anyone.

It was to such a Eurasian man that my adopted aunt, as much a social misfit herself, was packed off into holy matrimony, and she actually ended her days, as prophesied, at the gaming table, with a burst capillary in the brain—some say from years of keen concentration and the stress associated with the games of chance for which she lived!

Part II

Of Customs, Traditions, and Festivals

CHAPTER 4

I will always associate this period of my life with the many festivals so colourful, so varied, and so vivid that our lives without them would have been severely retarded in the peaceful but definitely uninspiring town of Bau. Each festival in turn had a multiplicity of beliefs, do's and don'ts, and I can always remember Grandmother or one or other of the aunts always threatening us with these ominous admonitions: "Don't do this . . . you will bring down seven years' bad luck on us. . . . Don't do that . . ." and on and on. . . .

And that was not all. The Chinese are divided into different dialect groups, and depending on which province in China your ancestors hailed from, you were either a Hakka, a Teochew, a Cantonese, a Hainanese, a Hockien, and the list goes on with many other smaller dialect groups. These groups were fiercely protective of each other and formed associations to care for and socialise amongst themselves. They were the fiercely close-knitted clans, and there was very little you wouldn't do to help your clansman.

The Chinese people in Bau were predominantly Hakkas, as were my grandmother and her family, and they tended to marry among themselves. The Hakka Clan or Association was the strongest and most vocal in the town, and I remember, what would be equivalent to the charity drives of today, the many fund-raising campaigns that my grandmother, as a prominent figure in the Hakka Association, organised and the small fortunes in cash, clothes, and other goods that were amassed and periodically shipped to the many poor relatives and clansmen in the villages of China. I guess

Hakkas featured prominently in our community because the first group of Chinese emigrants to settle in Bau were Hakkas and it was only natural that they would eventually invite the rest of their families and clansmen from the same village in China to join them. For as long as I could remember, Grandmother and the aunts were always saving things, even old clothes and shoes, for the less fortunate of their relatives left to toil in the villages in China. My grandmother had survived a childhood barely above poverty and was therefore typically frugal and reluctant to dispose of any item that could be despatched to China.

My favourite hideaway as a child was a room at the back of the house that was also a forbidden zone. This room was so filled with junk and odds and ends that it was a haven for the adventurous spirit of a growing child. I would often lose myself in this room for hours rifling through gunnysack after gunnysack of used clothes, old shoes, baby items, and knickknacks and sometimes couldn't figure out why Grandmother would send a pair of shoes that were mismatched to China or how a faded piece of clothing so worn that even the rubber tappers wouldn't deign to look at it would help the people in China.

When I posed this question to her, my grandmother looked at me with that particular shuttered and faraway look in her eyes that I saw whenever she spoke of China and her Chinese origins. "Do you know, you have cousins back in China who are so poor they live in shacks worse than those on the rubber estates and when it rains, the mud floors turn into slush from the leaks in the roof. The children and even the grown-ups go around without shoes most of the time, and they can eat meat only during the Lunar New Year. . . . These are people who will die for a pair of clean, even mismatched, shoes."

My grandmother talked incessantly of China probably to remind us of our roots, and although they immersed themselves in the life and environment of their adoptive country, emigrant Chinese like her still had very strong bonds with their homeland, China.

She never let us forget for one moment that we were first and foremost Chinese, with Chinese values and teachings, and no one who had newly arrived from China without any kith, kin, or hearth, so to speak, was ever turned away by my grandmother. In fact, it was not unusual for her house to shelter at least some Chinese emigrant or other at any one time. As far as I knew, there was always a "China uncle" or "China aunty" among us.

The most important and most significant of the festivals was, of course, the Chinese New Year. This festival was of special joy to the lower-income groups like the farmers and rubber tappers, because it was only during this time that they could put aside the endless toil of the year and revel in a week of eating, drinking, and merrymaking all decked out in brand-new clothes and shoes, from young to old. This donning of new clothes and shoes during the New Year I think was of particular significance to the peasants of old because it was only once a year that they could afford to indulge in frivolities like new clothes and shoes and to this end they scrimped and saved throughout the year. Even for us, this tradition was upheld, and I can remember the heady excitement of the aunts bustling around, shopping for materials, fitting us out for new clothes, and our trying on those new clothes, primping and parading in front of the mirror. Red was of course a colour prominently featured, as it was a colour representing happiness and prosperity. Oh, those were happy days, indeed, that we eagerly awaited. I see my daughters and their children now hardly batting an eyelid over this auspicious occasion. Even my grandson, aged eleven years, can say with a nonchalant shrug, "What's the big deal? I get new clothes and shoes any time of the year, and I eat whatever I want to eat anytime, too; I don't have to wait till New Year!" I guess this sums up why people of today don't really await the New Year in quite the same way as we did!

This brings me to the very real fact that when and where I was growing up, a lot of families could afford to partake of chicken only during the New Year, and throughout the year poultry was lovingly

reared to be slaughtered on New Year's Eve. I remember how sad I felt when as I was wandering through the rubber estates and playing with the broods of beautiful fluffy chicks, it dawned upon me that they would as sure as anything end up on the dining table come New Year's Eve for somebody's reunion dinner!

At least two weeks before the New Year, the kitchen would come alive with feverish activity as my aunts and the house help plunged into endless rounds of baking right through the night. Nobody had time to notice children, and this was a time we could run wild and not be bothered at all by tedious adult supervision! I remember one New Year when I hid under the kitchen table gorging myself with cookies as they fell onto the floor and emerged occasionally to swipe more from the fantastic arrays on the table and no one was ever the wiser!

For us children, the New Year was always associated with typical New Year's goodies: *kueh kapek*, wafer-thin cookies that entailed hours of backbreaking toil over a hot fire, *kueh bangkit*, a white confectionery made from rice flour and *kueh lapis*, a rich heavy cake also involving hours of toil, spreading layer after layer of batter one on top of the other. These are only some of the fantastic array of confectioneries so typical of the New Year season that they were unavailable any other time of the year. Interestingly, most of these cookies and cakes were of Malay origin, as their names suggested. This goes on to show what was actually happening, that the Chinese emigrants were slowly integrating into the local Malay way of life and importing some of their culture, culinary expertise and even certain Malay words into their daily life. Thus it was that Grandma and the aunts, including my mother, wore the Malay sarong and *kebaya* and the local Chinese people often incorporated Malay words like *suka*, or *like*, and *tahan*, or *tolerate*, to name only a few, into their vocabulary. The Chinese that was spoken by us eventually became a kind of localised Chinese that was progressively different from that of the newly arrived emigrants from China.

Our household was busier than others during the New Year season because my grandmother made it a tradition to throw an open house on the fourth day of the New Year for all the workers in the gold mines, rubber estates, and shops and they all had to be supplied with round after round of food and drinks throughout the day. Every child and unmarried person who visited us received a *hong pao*, or a red packet containing money, from Grandmother. The *hong pao* was, naturally, the most welcomed of all the numerous traditions associated with the Chinese New Year—that is, to the young and unmarried. Every year, we received an impressive number of *hong paos*, big and small, from my grandmother all the way down to her friends and even acquaintances. Once you were married, you lost this privilege of receiving *hong paos* and instead had to join the ranks of those obligated to dispense them!

My favourite New Year confectionery was also the most traditional: the sticky, glucy cake made for the benefit of the kitchen god. It was made from a thick batter of glutinous rice flour and brown sugar that was cooked and stirred over a slow fire for hours and then poured into a round mold made from a piece of banana leaf and left to set. It had a very simple and basic name that was straight to the point, just “sweet cake,” that was all!

“Why do you say that you are making it for the kitchen god, Grandma?” I asked one New Year as I hung around the kitchen covertly watching the rows and rows of my favourite confectionery taking shape and wondering when was a good time to spirit a couple away. Already my mouth was watering and the sweet, oh, so sweet aroma rising from the steaming cakes was becoming almost intolerable!

“Well,” my grandmother replied, “every New Year, the kitchen god has to submit a report to the king of all the gods in the heavens about all our deeds, good and bad, throughout the past year. This sticky cake is offered to the kitchen god to seal up his mouth so that he is unable to report all your misdeeds to the king in the

heavens and to sweeten his mouth so that he will report only our good deeds!"

"Oh," I said, displaying the typical indifference of the young to all this spiritual jargon. I saw an opportunity to swipe one of the cakes and made off with it. Well, so much for the deterrence to misdeeds the story of the kitchen god should have inspired!

The Chinese New Year officially lasted for fifteen days, and although most people made a sluggish return to work and the daily routine of life after one week, a kind of euphoria continued to hang around right up to the fifteenth day. Every year, I never wanted the New Year to end, because people were more tolerant and indulgent during this period and no matter how poor you were in our little town, you always got new clothes, either on your own steam or from people like my grandmother, who always took care of such things. This was the season when even the poorest were happy.

The highlight of the whole event, for the grown-ups, that is, was the family reunion dinner, when the whole family, often spanning three or four generations, gathered for the most sumptuous dinner that whatever culinary skills we had at the time could produce. My grandmother, sadly, had one drawback: her family was entirely female. You must remember that Chinese tradition dictated that daughters had to be "married out." That is to say, once a girl married, she would "belong" to her husband's family and although, as in my aunts' cases, she might literally lodge at her parent's home, come Chinese New Year reunion dinner it would be totally unacceptable for her to be anywhere but with her husband's family. This meant that as my aunts were "married out" one by one, our reunion dinner table became noticeably emptier and quieter! I think after all my aunts left the nest, so to speak, the first day of the New Year became more meaningful for my grandmother, because it was then that all her daughters returned with their families and the gaiety and "noise pollution" of bygone days once again invaded our household in even greater force with the increasing number of offspring that my aunts brought back each year! I remember one

New Year when there were thirty children of varying ages charging around the house! The old lady was the typical indulgent Chinese mother and grandmother. The larger and noisier her brood, the happier and more fulfilled she felt.

Most people in those days had big families, partly because of the lack of birth control and partly because of the general belief in big families. I think this sprang from the traditional Chinese farming community, which had to produce many children, especially strong sons to work the fields. It was not uncommon for the families around us to produce as many as twelve or thirteen children. Similarly, it was socially acceptable, for a man, if he could afford it, to have as many wives as he could handle! Thus the Chinese customary marriage, which permitted polygamy, and all Chinese customary marriages were recognised as legal marriages by the government right until the Marriage Law Reform Act in 1981. Anyway, I remember the town's "most married man," a trader of substantial means who by the time he was seventy years old could boast of thirteen wives ranging in ages from sixty-five to twenty-five, and jointly they produced almost a hundred children! He had his gigantic family installed in a mammoth compound where they coexisted in reasonable peace, sharing out the household duties, with the first wife and the current favourite taking charge! When the grand old man died at the great age of eighty-five, given the size of his family, it appeared in his funeral procession that a whole platoon was in mourning clothes for him! Very often, too, a Chinese who had left his wife in China for the time being eventually took a "local" wife. Sometimes the first wife from China arrived to join her husband and the family of the "China wife" and the "local wife" with all their joint offspring all cohabited under the same roof, happily or unhappily ever after.

In those days, firecrackers were not banned and on New Year's Eve, after the reunion dinner, the firecracker "display" would start, with every household joining in the fun and trying to outdo each other, and this went on right through the night and well into

daybreak. The result was very much like a thousand people cracking whips in rapid succession, guaranteed to split your eardrums and tease your heart! This was our way of heralding in the New Year, and the next morning every street and every pavement would have turned red from the remains of the firecracking festivities of the previous night. This was the spirit of the Chinese New Year, and without it the vivacity and richness of the whole event are very much watered down, as it now is with the banning of firecrackers by the government.

On New Year's Eve, Grandma would line us all up and remind us of her long list of traditional taboos. It went something like this: "Remember, no quarrelling tomorrow, no foul or rude words, no breaking of plates and no sweeping. . . ." Breaking of plates was considered bad luck, as it signified the breaking up of family unity, family fortunes, and so on, and if you swept the floor on the first day of Chinese New Year, why, you would be sweeping away all your good luck!

Chinese New Year for us was also a period of receiving visitors and visiting friends and relatives, and as from each adult visitor and adult visited by us children we received a "red packet," we were always financially very comfortable for months after the New Year! Almost everybody gambled till the early hours during the first three days of the New Year, even the most vocally hostile critics of this "vice," like my grandmother and first aunt. I remember my grandmother's almost sheepish justification: "Gambling is a vice to be avoided at all times, but well, once a year . . ."

Almost everyone used the "well, once a year . . ." excuse to justify all kinds of self-indulgences, and even in the markets during the New Year season the prices of fish, meat, and vegetables almost doubled, but nobody seemed to mind because it was, after all, "once a year . . ." Those were words we heard constantly during this period and justified just about everything!

On the first day of the New Year and well into the fifteenth and last day, the various dialect clans and associations would give

magnificent displays of the traditional lion dance, and the elaborately sequined and bejewelled "lions" prancing to the deafening onslaught of the drums and Chinese cymbals were truly spectacular.

My grandmother, being a prominent figure in the town and a known philanthropist, had to have at least one troupe of lion dancers a day performing in our house, and we spent many a happy and exciting half hour throwing *hong paos* into the cavernous mouths of the lions, which were of course received by the waiting hands of the men inside.

Another festival of great import was the Ghost Festival, or the Ching Min, which came round in the middle of the seventh month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar every year. It was a time to remember our dead ancestors and to be near them, indeed, a time when the world of the living touched that of the dead in a poignant and soul-searching fusion.

Traditional Chinese cemeteries have always filled me with a sense of foreboding and real fear. They don't have the peace and tranquility of Christian cemeteries; far from it, the god called Pak Kung, who guarded each tomb to prevent the spirits from emerging to disturb the peace of the living world, was not a sight a little girl wanted to behold. Only once a year were the spirits allowed out by the gods. I guess you could call the Ghost Festival a kind of New Year for the spirits of the dead!

My grandmother took the Ghost Festival very seriously, and we were required every year to spend hours in the hot sun weeding and cleaning up the fabulously ornate graves of her father and three husbands. It was the only time when I didn't mind being in the cemetery, because with so many people labouring at almost every grave site, there was almost an air of festivity.

Back home, we would spend days folding the "ghost money" to be burnt with paper clothes, shoes, and other necessities that would be offered to our dead ancestors. This ritual is still being observed today, but with the advancement of modern technology

and a more sophisticated lifestyle, I believe that paper effigies of high-tech items like cassette and video recorders, laser discs, TV sets, and the like are being burnt today!

In the kitchens, too, a feast would be prepared for our dead ancestors; it was always a spread so sumptuous and so gargantuan in quantity that five coolies were needed to carry the wicker baskets of chickens, meat dumplings, and even a whole roast pig to the cemetery, and as my great-grandfather was very partial to brandy, several bottles of the best brandy had to be thrown in as well.

For some reason, perhaps associated with the spiritual realm, the Ghost Festival always brought on scorching dry heat, and along with all the other worshippers we would spend the day at our ancestors' graves, sweating it out in the sweltering heat with ashes from the joss sticks swirling around us. After the serious business of praying and talking to our ancestors was over, we would gather around the feast before us and tuck in and soon other people from the neighbouring graves would be doing the same thing and a festive air would soon prevail. Some of the worshippers even brought decks of cards to gamble away the day. The idea was to spend the day with our ancestors, and as far as I could see, it was the living and not the dead who were feasting and carousing up a storm! There was a great feeling of camaraderie and snippets of conversation could often be heard floating all over the cemetery.

"Auntie, whom are you worshipping?"

"Our father is buried here. He liked dumplings very much, so this year we are offering him 100!"

"I notice you are burning so little money for your grandmother. Are you sure it's enough for her? I remember she used to be a big spender!"

Even family grievances were aired!

"My third brother, he's so unfilial, this year, he refuses to join us even though he was my father's favourite son! Has to be that wife of his. . . ."

"Look at those cousins of mine weeping over their father's

grave, all a pretense, you know! They were fighting over his property even before he had time to die."

It was generally believed that after the food had been offered it became tasteless and dry, as if all the succulence and goodness had been sucked out by the spirits. I can vouch for this; it was an eerie and uncanny experience on the single occasion that I had been persuaded to partake of a chicken after it had been offered to my great-grandfather, the feeling was, indeed, that of eating something that had been deprived of all its goodness as if somebody had already gone through it. However, there were those sceptics who attributed it to dehydration of the food from exposure to the scorching sun. But I really don't know.

I never got to the bottom of that one, but whatever it was, my grandmother would bite into a dumpling and nod in a satisfied manner. "Yes, your grandfather was with us today and he ate almost everything!"

The Ghost Month was also a period when spirits were allowed to roam the earth and all incidents of ill health and ill fortune were blamed on them. Predictably, no one tied the nuptial knots or moved during the Ghost Month.

"Ghosts can only walk straight, so to avoid them, you have to walk in a zigzag manner!" my first aunt would say. I never really knew whether she seriously expected us to walk in that manner, but if we chanced upon some people in the neighbourhood adhering to this superstition, we at least knew the reason for it!

The people of that era seemed pretty comfortable with the concept that death comes to us all. Indeed, the older people were never squeamish about preparing for it. Take my grandmother, for example. By the time she was fifty, she had it all planned: a plot of land had been purchased for her burial site after much deliberation, and there was even a gleaming mahogany coffin of the finest quality stored discreetly under the house!

Funerals were another ritual in our society that was truly fascinating. They were undertaken with great care and every atten-

tion to details, for one wrong move could banish the spirit of the dead to an eternity of restless wandering! I remember in particular the death of my great-grandfather and the one-week wake that followed. In those days, the technique of embalming was unknown and in the hot, humid, and tropical weather, inevitably, it was not long before the putrid stench from the body permeated the air and no amount of perfume was able to drown it.

It was necessary for the immediate family of the deceased to be vocal in their mourning so that their filial piety could be displayed prominently. I remember those of my great-grandfather's children who were unable to shed the obligatory tears adjourning hastily to the kitchen to rub red onions into their eyes, which never failed to produce the requisite tears, and after that, the sobbing from the real agony of the red onions was easy! And in the background always was the chanting of the Buddhist monks and the clicking sounds of their prayer beads.

The mourning clothes of the immediate family of the deceased also depicted their position in the family. The sons and their wives were required to wear mourning clothes and headdresses of some rough sackcloth while the daughters wore black, the grandchildren wore blue, and the great-grandchildren wore white. The funeral procession was led by the eldest son bearing a "filial stick," comprising a bamboo pole with a piece of red cloth tied to it, and the daughter-in-law bearing a fire torch intended to lead the way for the deceased to his or her final resting place. In my great-grandfather's case, because he didn't have any living sons, his eldest grandson, my grandmother's then living son, bore the filial stick. It was a grand funeral and the rituals lasted one whole week.

The mourning period for the immediate family, as required by Chinese tradition, was 100 days, during which only blacks, whites, and blues could be worn, and seven days after the funeral the whole house was lit up to show the spirit of my great-grandfather the way back for a last visit. On the forty-ninth day, special prayers were

offered to my great-grandfather to send his soul to its final rest with the gods, and there the matter rested for a while.

Another festival worth mentioning was the colourful and elaborate processions held for the Buddhist gods to celebrate their feast days. The whole town would turn out in full force to watch statues of the gods being carried on a dais by the monks and devotees chanting prayers all the way. There were always a few mediums "accompanying" the gods who would throw them into occasional trances and speak through them. It was an awe-inspiring, albeit eerie, experience to watch these mediums inflicting wounds on themselves and driving knives through their bodies and tongues whilst in the throes of their trances, and through it all nobody saw a single drop of blood shed because the spirits of the gods were in them!

Another festival that was obviously "imported" from China was the Winter Festival, for how else would we in the tropics come by such a festival otherwise?

This festival was characterised by the lavish consumption of the traditional pink and white dumplings made from glutinous rice flour called snowballs. These were cooked in a thin, sweet ginger-flavoured soup and were truly reminiscent of the glacial snowballs of winter!

And then came the Moon Cake Festival, celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar. The highlight of this festival was the worshipping of the goddess of the moon at twelve midnight on the day itself, when without fail the moon would appear in its fullest glory. For that occasion, my grandmother would have two huge tables laid out in the garden laden with all the different varieties of moon cakes that were eaten to the accompaniment of Chinese tea as we prayed to the beautiful goddess believed to be residing in the moon. The silvery light of the beautiful full moon always rendered an atmosphere of magic and deep peace. The Moon Cake Festival was a favourite with all

of us, and when it was over, everyone always packed in at least an extra pound or two of weight!

Compared to the near cultural desert I see of the busy people with their busy lives today, our era was one of great cultural identity and fulfillment. We didn't take time to really appreciate it then, because we didn't know the value of what we had. . . .

CHAPTER 5

One day, when I was twelve years old, there was a great hustle and bustle in the house. Preparations were being made to "negotiate" the marriage of my first aunt. She had reached the great age of thirty-two and was considered unmarriageable by the normal standards of that time. I for one could not understand how such a prudish person, with all the known characteristics of the proverbial old maid, as her had managed to be initiated into the frivolous world of love, for hers was a love match and not the conventional arranged marriage that was the norm in those days.

However, being the inquisitive child that I was, with a great propensity to spy on adult activities, I had observed a subtle change in my first aunt. Somehow she had mellowed a great deal and seemed softer with us. The reason for such welcome changes even I was able to attribute to the many trysts with her betrothed that I often stumbled upon, for which I was threatened into taking a vow of silence!

Although my first aunt's marriage was a love match, my grandmother insisted that all the formalities of an arranged marriage be observed. She certainly wasn't going to let her favourite daughter slip through her fingers without all the trappings of a formal Chinese traditional wedding!

An official "go-between" in the form of an elderly lady with an impressive record of success in that field was appointed. I remember her as a thickset lady on the wrong side of sixty with the keen, appraising eye so typical of her profession, and as she looked

over me speculatively as if to gauge how long it would be before she could sink her claws into me, I took an instant dislike to her!

I remember the many afternoons when the matchmaker remained closeted in the sitting room with my first aunt and my grandmother and the door was so firmly closed in my face that even I, with all my expertise in eavesdropping, could not penetrate that determined barrier against intrusion! But my grandmother later took pity on me and enlightened me on the nature of the discussions, which were centred predominantly on details like the amount of dowry that my prospective uncle was expected to come up with, the number of tables for the wedding dinner, and so on. In Chinese marriages of the time, it was the bridegroom who had to pay a dowry to the bride's family and to foot the bill for the wedding dinner, and so it was that many a young man had to save towards the cost of all these expenses before he was able to make an offer for a wife. A man had pride and had to keep his face at all costs, and so a big wedding was the ultimate dream, because a man's worth and financial standing could well be measured by the number of tables he could afford! I am sure, given my grandmother's prominence in the local society, that my uncle suffered a great financial setback over the wedding. In fact, I remember a wedding dinner of no fewer than one hundred tables crammed into the compound of our home. It was probably the biggest wedding our little town had ever been graced with!

After the marriage had been negotiated and the terms and conditions agreed upon by both sides, there followed a period of great excitement and anticipation, because almost every day the gifts would arrive from the bridegroom and his family. They were borne to the house in the huge triple-deckered wicker baskets by the servants bent almost double from the weight of these baskets, which, as was typical of that period, were carried, two to a person, at each end of a sturdy pole balanced over the shoulders.

We were allowed to participate in the inspection of the gifts, and this was, for me at least, probably the most interesting part of

the wedding preparations. The dowry was, of course, the most significant of the wedding gifts, and it was handed over to my grandmother by the matchmaker in an auspiciously red packet with the word *Happiness* written on it. Then there was the jewellery, thick heavy gold chains of pure unadulterated gold that would put today's delicate creations to shame, matching gold bangles, a fabulous set of jewel-encrusted earrings, and a ring so heavy with gold content that I was unable to figure out how my first aunt was going to wear it. Probably she didn't but kept it as a family heirloom. Certainly the jewellery of those days was nothing if it was not "worth its weight in gold"!

For the wedding ceremony, my first aunt had to wear the *kua*, or a heavily embroidered long Chinese gown in nothing less than the auspicious red, and I remember the commotion and excitement the arrival of the heavy brocade material caused. To us, in those days of simple needs and tastes, it was the most beautiful thing we had ever seen. In this wedding ceremony, the curious marriage of the "Chinese" and the "local" was truly manifested. My grandmother and the aunts could be as localised as was possible, but come auspicious occasions like a wedding, the switch back to everything Chinese was instant and automatic!

I recall the day of the wedding very clearly, because on that morning, as I watched my first aunt, so made up and decked out in all her finery that she was quite unrecognisable, preparing to leave the house, I felt a wave of great sadness washing over me. Ever since I could remember, my first aunt had taken charge of the house and terrorised all its inhabitants, out of such obvious care and affection that no one could really mind. I couldn't imagine the house without her. What would my grandmother do without her? Who would do the accounts? Who would nag us into much deserved subservience? These were thoughts that chased through my mind as I watched the arrival of the red and garishly adorned wedding chariot that would be bearing her away from us and to her husband's home. I guess this was my first encounter with a loss of

this nature, but it was to be the beginning of the many tragedies that would befall us as we lived through the impending Japanese occupation that, mercifully, we were unaware of as yet.

The tea ceremony was an intriguing part of the wedding rituals, when tea was offered in tiny Chinese teacups to the parents of both the bride and bridegroom as a mark of respect for them and this gesture of kneeling before the parents depicted both respect and acceptance of authority, especially on the part of the bride. This ritual is still observed in many Chinese weddings even in modern Singapore, but I think it has become a mere cultural event, because I cannot see the youth of today submitting to the authority of any parent in the truly traditional sense!

The wedding dinner that night was as fabulous as it could get given the limitations of our lifestyles. Everyone who was anyone was there, and even if you were not invited and just felt like coming, you were welcomed as well! That was the way we were, warm, hospitable, with hearts so big that it was enough for everyone and it was not unusual for the families from the farms and rubber estates to arrive with pigs and baskets of chickens in tow as their wedding gifts! None of the glitter and fanciful gifts that are expected today, but they were all gifts right from the heart.

In between the feasting and merrymaking were the inevitable rounds of speeches from relatives and well-wishers bestowing wishes for good health and, of course, strong sons on the newly wedded couple. I remember that night well. There was a beautiful full moon beaming down indulgently on us, its yellow light blending perfectly into the yellow glow of the many kerosene lamps that kept the night at bay. There must have been hundreds of the mosquitoes so prevalent in the tropics that the primitive mosquito coils of fragrant repellent set strategically under the tables could not dispel feasting on us, but nobody was bothered. Nothing short of a major catastrophe, I think, could have marred the joy of this, the most important and unexpected wedding in our family.

The balmy tropical nights of my childhood in our tiny little town are unforgettable. In those wonderful hours after dinner with the sun setting and the dusky twilight casting its magic upon us people sat outside their houses, straw grass fans swishing away the tropical heat, slapping sporadically at the ever-present swarms of mosquitoes and engaging in neighbourly small talk. These evenings for me will always be associated with the warm glow of the primitive kerosene lamps that we pumped laboriously each evening to get them started and the fragrant smoke that was emitted by the equally primitive mosquito coils standing on old tin covers that were our only available insect repellent at the time.

The typical opening line for such conversations was an interesting case of enquiring about the obvious. "Have you taken your dinner?" was a question that had to be asked each evening.

"Yes," the expected reply would come. "What about you?"

Nobody had ever been known to reply, "No." This was, in fact, very much a part of the social behaviour of the small-town Chinese community that we were part of and which might be considered rude in today's sophisticated world.

As I stand now by a blackened and scarred pillar of the old house, I can almost hear the boisterous brandy-sodden laughter of many a wedding guest that night so many years and so many lives ago; almost the garden seemed to be once again flooded with the soft shadowed light of the kerosene lamps. But of course, it was all gone; I had only been dreaming. *Sunrise . . . sunset, sunrise . . . sunset, life just flows on endlessly*. I thought, *and time never stands still!*

And so it was that my first aunt entered the matrimonial realm and life for us had to continue without her. It was also to be a time of great change for me. Almost overnight, I had to grow up, for with my first aunt not so readily accessible, as I was the eldest and most educated of all my cousins, I had to assume the role of my grandmother's right-hand woman.

For the first time, I began to seriously accompany my grand-

mother to the rubber estates as she made her rounds to inspect the rubber processing. I would watch her as she surveyed her employees and inspected their work, from the worn-looking rubber tappers, who had to be up at the crack of dawn to coax the milky latex from the rubber trees, to the supervisors who had to attend to the weighing of the rubber sheets and their grading before transporting them to Kuching to be sold.

I came to admire the dignity and the power she was able to wield over the many men employed by her, whose respect for her was apparent and unwavering. This was no mean feat in an era when women simply didn't have any clout in society. She was indeed almost a legend in our community. I was very proud of her and what she stood for, but I was not to know that looming on the horizon just five short years away was the threat of a war nobody wanted and that this war would eliminate everything my grandmother had clawed her way through the early years to achieve. Very often, wars were forced on ordinary people like us who, after it was all over, were simply bequeathed the task of rebuilding. For some of us, like my grandmother, the empire could never be rebuilt. All in all, it really didn't make any sense!

The following year, my grandmother acquired what for us was an innovation that was just short of a miracle: a car! It was a gleaming red and steel contraption with a canvas roof supported by steel poles and could seat two people in front and two at the rear. To get it started, we had to use a steel rod that was inserted into the front of the car and wound up until the engine roared into life, often before an audience of neighbourhood children and adults alike, and it was a long time before the novelty of this incredible invention wore off. In our town, only two people owned cars at the time: the district officer and my grandmother.

After this acquisition, we somehow seemed to find more excuses to take a drive down to Kuching, either to attend to the sale of the rubber sheets from our rubber estates or to get supplies and

catch up with the rest of the family who had taken up residence in the big town.

To get to the town of Kuching, one had to travel across a wide river of yellow and, it was believed, crocodile-infested waters. Today there is a modern functional bridge that spans this river. Much of its character is gone, together with the crocodiles, and motorists ply up and down the bridge without any interest at all. In those days, there were only two ways for us to get to Kuching. Either we took a boat from Buso that a rickety bus would ferry us to and then it was a three-hour journey from there, or we took the solitary bus that was so crammed with passengers, belongings, and even the odd animals that it could only do the twenty-two-mile journey in two hours! We didn't have any paved roads way back then, only lumpy dirt roads, and this, together with the nonexistent suspension of the ancient bus, never failed to inflict sore bottoms on anyone who had, ironically, the misfortune to be seated!

After we acquired the car, we were able to travel more comfortably. The suspension of the car was still very poor and we were still bounced mercilessly on the bumpy roads, but it was at least an improvement over the old rickety bus.

All those years ago, the only way to cross the river was by a kind of huge raft that could ferry two cars at a time, and incredible though it seems, this raft was rowed across manually by four men using long, sturdy wooden poles! The ferry point was on most days a beehive of activity. There were small coffee stalls and a small market where the haggling over local fruits and vegetables added colour to the whole atmosphere, a far cry indeed from today's cold, modern bridge that spans the river, impersonal and colourless.

The capital town of Kuching was to us the only star that shone in our limited universe. We had never known any better, so it was enough. In fact, many people like my grandmother and various aunts and my mother lived and died never knowing any other world. For the young, the restless, and the ambitious of our small town of Bau, the ultimate dream was to move to the capital town

of Kuching, where they imagined they would make their fortunes and live a life of quality and sophistication that our town could not possibly offer!

A trip to "the big town" was always a source of great excitement for us. After attending to the business of the rubber sales, my grandmother would take us on a shopping and eating spree. After the limitations of the single row of shops in our small town of Bau, the many streets flanked by the shops literally bursting with merchandise of what was to us dizzying varieties and the loud, bargaining crowds were exhilarating! In those days, no one bought anything without a good bargain, and I suspect it was the sport of the spirited bargaining that mattered more than the nonetheless desired result of a price reduction.

I remember Bau had only two typical Chinese coffee shops, which also doubled as the meeting places for many of the town's aspiring literary and political critics! Midmorning was the time these men would gather at the coffee shops, their legs drawn up on their chairs, and over steaming cups of thick, black local coffee and rolled cigarettes they would expound theories on anything from politics to the lowest form of gossip imaginable!

Anyone who wanted to hear about the latest happenings in town had only to hang around the coffee shops and listen in to the animated discussions of the gossipmongers. The way things went sometimes, it was fortunate that the favourite subjects of discussion were not aware of their legal rights regarding slander!

The Kuching of my days of youth was a happy and carefree mess of trishaws and cars as ancient as ours. Without system or control, the ringing of the trishaw bells mingled amicably with the incessant hooting of the cars as they travelled next to each other in the chaotic streets. After we acquired a car, I began to understand why the cars made so much noise. The owners were just proud of their rare and coveted vehicles and took every opportunity of sounding the horn, very much in the manner of a man who likes to hear his own voice.

We would often stop by the busy wharf along the Sarawak River to watch the big foreign ships anchored there and the sun-blackened coolies, their sinewy bodies glistening with sweat, unloading and loading, among other goods, probably bales of our rubber sheets as well, onto those ships that had come from exotic far-off places. Sometimes, I would watch those ships and try to imagine all those places that they had seen and dream of the day when I, too, would be part of that world.

I now stand on the same spot where I had stood and dreamed so wistfully of my future decades ago, nostalgic for the sounds and sights of people and events long forgotten. Only the muddy brown waters of the Sarawak River continue to flow, serene and unperturbed by the changes of time.

And high on a hill overlooking the river was a temple that my grandmother always insisted we visit to pray for good health and prosperity. The temple still stands today, almost as it was all those years ago, except that a busy thoroughfare has sprung up right below it and the roar of traffic now shatters the peace that used to prevail.

Then there was the "open-air market," a name given to a huge food centre comprising many hawker stalls, and the food was so delicious that no one seemed to bother that they were sitting on wooden stools eating off well-worn wooden tables right next to a rough kind of makeshift bus station from which there was always a generous emission of fumes and smoke!

The town also boasted of "progressive" and modern innovations like, wonders of wonders, a perm parlour! My grandmother and all the other women in my family had never cut their hair since the day they were born and wore it in a tight bun in the Malay style. Other women and girls like myself had the uninspiring hairstyle of a straight bob just below the ears, and the strict spartan ethics of our school did not entertain any other hairstyle.

I remember a trip to Kuching when I was fourteen years old and just beginning to care about what I looked like. The pull of the

perm parlour was so great that before I knew what I was about, I had emerged from it with a head of tight frizzled curls! My school of strict, spartan Chinese morals caned me for my pains in acquiring such "corrupt" habits and decreed that I be suspended from school until every single offending curl was eliminated from my head. In the days when straight perms were unheard of, I remember the massive project that had to be undertaken to wash out every curl!

Then there was the legendary wet market, so wet, literally, with the slush of water drained from the baskets of fish and the thousands of feet of the shoppers that only people from our cultural background could brave it to hunt for the most exotic foods, like the mountains of turtles' eggs and the jungle vegetables and produce that the Dayaks or the indigenous tribal people would tramp miles on bare feet to bring to the market for sale. The Dayaks were shy and diffident people who lived in long houses in the jungles, and the way they were exploited by especially the Chinese tradesmen was not something I care to dwell upon. With no commercial sense at all, they often received a pittance for the fruits of their hard labour. I remember these people who often came to the town bearing huge loads of vegetables, fruits, and other produce on long wicker baskets strapped to their backs, their teeth red from years of chewing on the betel nut that the local people, including Grandmother, were so fond of. I remember the many hot afternoons spent watching my grandmother deftly wrapping the betel nut in the betel leaf and chewing it into a red pulp, which was then spat out into a spittoon. It was not a particularly pretty sight but it was a popular habit, especially for women in those days. This betel nut chewing habit was, again, another habit Chinese people like my grandmother had acquired from the local indigenous culture, and to put it mildly, it had disastrous dental consequences for its users!

It was in Kuching, too, that the saga of the White Rajahs whom we knew remotely were our rulers seemed more real. We could at least stand by the Sarawak River and gaze across at tangible reminders of our rulers in the way of Fort Marghaerita, a drab grey

fortress named after the wife of the second rajah, Charles Brooke, and the big, sprawling Istana, where they lived, and think to ourselves, *Yes, they're really here and they are real indeed.* Again, it was only in Kuching that we could really feel the impact of our foreign European rulers in the European-style offices, courthouse, and two churches complete with church steeples and everything.

CHAPTER 6

Not far from our house around the outskirts of the town were a few Malay *kampongs*, or villages, and some of my closest childhood friends and playmates came from these villages. The warmth and sincerity of the villagers in those days made racial discord and friction something that was unheard of, and indeed, we coexisted across the boundaries of multiple cultures, customs, languages, and skin colours in meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and trust.

I remember hot, humid days, our legs deep in the waters of the monsoon drains around, catching tadpoles with the Malay kids from the *kampong*. Our lives were so well integrated with the Malays that we were able to speak Malay almost automatically. Everyone was a *pak chik*, or uncle, and *mak chik*, or aunty, to us, and we ran in and out of each other's houses with the ease of one big family.

Many an afternoon was spent hanging around the Malay houses watching the respective *mak chiks* turn out fantastic Malay cakes and confectioneries that would end up at the coffee shops the next day for the morning and afternoon coffee breaks of the town folk, and all around the immediate air space would be invaded by the most unforgettable aroma of the fragrant *pandan* leaves used liberally for the many famous Malay cakes and jellies.

Often my favourite *mak chik* would send me home with a tray of the most delectable tapioca cake, and if Grandma or my first aunt was cooking something special, this gesture would be certainly reciprocated. This was really a time of great harmony and goodwill

that, like everything else, was not to last forever, and when the bubble of peace burst, things could never be the same again.

The Malays had a culture as rich as the Chinese, and into it we were inevitably drawn. But unlike what it became later, in those days we were willing to make the Malay language and culture a part of our lives and there was no need to use legislation to force it on us. The Malay New Year, or Hari Raya, was, like the Chinese New Year, the most awaited event, for not only did it allow the usual indulgence in the luxuries in the way of new clothes, new shoes, and great feasting, but it also ended the Puasa, or one hard month of the fasting that preceded the Hari Raya. The Malay workers on Grandma's estates were always exhausted and less productive during the fasting month, as they had to wake up around five in the morning to have their meal and for the rest of the day until the fast was broken in the evening could not eat or drink anything.

"Don't make too many demands on Ali; he's on *puasa* [fasting], and he must be very tired," my grandmother used to warn us.

Ali was our Malay gardener and odd-job man, who also took care of our small orchard of fruit trees, and it was his misfortune that the fasting month every year coincided with the rambutan season. The rambutan was our favourite tropical fruit, and it had the most unusual "hairy" appearance, hence the name *rambutan*, *rambut* being Malay for "hair." Despite Grandma's orders to leave him alone, the draw of the fruit was so irresistible and Ali was so much needed to pluck it for us that he never had any peace from us, fasting month or otherwise!

When I became older, I was able to follow my grandmother to the Dayak villages, and I will never forget my experiences there. My grandmother sometimes went there to acquire the betel nuts and condiments that she was addicted to, and in exchange the Dayaks were happy to receive the trinkets and pieces of cloth that we brought. This kind of bartering was very common in those days and often was more appreciated than transactions with actual money. My grandmother could very easily have assigned this task

to any of the estate workers, but she didn't because she genuinely enjoyed interacting with the Dayaks, and my experiences were enriched as a result of that.

The Dayaks lived in "long houses," or rough wooden houses on spindly stilts that were literally so long that they seemed to go on and on. Each family had a section of the long house, and underneath it the pigs and chickens had their domain. I remember the Dayak men wearing only loincloths, the women, with their breasts sagging and worn by the many babies they had to feed, old beyond their years, and everywhere there where children of all ages and babies peering at us with round-eyed awe. Likewise, I would be staring with the same round-eyed awe at the men and women with ears that were so weighed down by the heavy metal rings that hung there that they reached almost to the shoulders and often beyond. It was truly a magnificent sight!

Although it was rumoured that the Dayaks still hunted human heads, the only evidence we had of that were the old human skulls that hung in bunches at strategic points all over the long houses. It was a Dayak tradition in the old days that to prove their strength and victory over an enemy young men had to return with the heads of their enemies in tow. But certainly, we never felt we had to fear for our heads!

And whenever a new bridge was scheduled to be constructed, the Dayaks were said to be delegated the gruesome task of hunting human heads that had to be buried at the site of the new bridge before construction commenced. This almost barbaric tradition was believed to be necessary to ensure that the bridge would not collapse, and possibly it was this particular tradition that gave Sarawak the name "the land of the headhunters."

I remember that whenever a bridge was being put up Grandma would issue this ominous warning: "Don't go out after dark or to isolated spots. The Dayaks are hunting heads again for the new bridge!"

Our arrival always incited a great commotion, with the women

and children emerging in hordes from the long houses and sending the chickens flying and squawking wildly in all directions.

My grandmother might have been the local tycoon, so to speak, but she was especially remembered for her ability to mingle with people of all social and ethnic strata. And so it was that after the inspection and exchange of goods was over, my grandmother would sit cross-legged on the floor made of tree trunks held together by bamboo vines with inch-wide gaps, through which the sights, sounds, and smell of the pigs below were patently obvious, and partake of *tuak*, or a highly intoxicating liquor made from fermenting a local fruit. We would also be offered a mouthwatering creation of glutinous rice and coconut milk, which was stuffed into fat bamboo sticks and smoked over a fire. This was a specialty of the Dayaks that we could never tire of. Whatever remnants of food or debris there was, everybody just disposed of it through the gaps on the floor right into the eager waiting mouths of the pigs and chickens there!

And as the afternoon came to a close and the mosquitoes came out in great droves, it was time to go. Even the pigs had settled down to a contented snore amidst all the squalor and stink that after some time nobody seemed to mind, not even my fastidious grandmother, especially as she became inebriated with *tuak*!

Little did we know it, but this alliance with the Dayaks was to help us survive later, through the most difficult stage of the Japanese occupation, for it was to the Dayak villages, which had been left relatively undisturbed by the Japanese, that we turned to for rice from their fields to supplement a very meagre diet of sweet potatoes and yams.

Now as I stand in the middle of what had once been the town centre, I can recall very vividly the site where two giant water pumps had been installed by the government. This was a significant spot because it was here that the womenfolk gathered each evening with huge pails and bins to collect their water supply for the next day. In the mornings as well, there was usually a large gathering of

women with their washing, which they would scrub vigorously over a wooden board, and with their tongues working as fast as their hands, it was not a place any man wanted to venture near! Until public pumps had been installed, everyone drew water from the wells around and collected rainwater in the huge "dragon" urns that were used to import salted ducks' eggs from China. I guess the urns were called dragon urns because of the dragon etchings on them, which were so typically Chinese.

And again, the sanitary system of those days left a lot to be desired, but it was an inescapable fact of life, all the more interesting because of its sheer primitiveness! The toilet was located in an outhouse and consisted of a wooden board with an oval opening in the centre, suspended about three feet over a receptacle into which the waste was collected. Every three days, a man unceremoniously called the toilet man came round to collect the waste in two huge metal pails or bins, which hung from a wooden pole strung over the shoulders, and the toilet man together with the coffin maker and the rubbish collectors were considered the lowest in the town's social hierarchy.

As a child, my greatest fear was to fall into the toilet pit, and my first aunt's threat of: "If you insist on being so difficult and disobedient, I'll throw you into the toilet pit, where you deserve to be!" intensified this fear even more. In those days, nobody believed that children's feelings had to be handled with care, and some of the almost brutal threats we had to put up with to force us into subservience would make the parents of today baulk!

"Don't point at the moon," my first aunt would say. "The goddess who lives there will have your ears cut for disrespect."

To the little boys would come the threat, "Don't pee against any banana tree. The spirit who lives there will be offended and your penis will burn with pain." Or: "Don't swim in the river. The water spirits of those who drowned there will pull you under to free themselves!"

I remember one of the many beautiful bits of folklore that were

regularly fed to us in the manner of the bedtime stories of the children today. It was about the spirit that inhabited the banana tree.

"How do you know there is a spirit in the banana tree, Grandma? I don't believe it!" I attempted to challenge the validity of this age-old myth one day.

"You dare to tell me you don't believe it?" my grandmother replied. "Well, listen to this! There used to be a farmer who had a large banana tree next to his humble abode, and he had this habit of urinating against the banana tree every day. Unknown to him, this had stirred the spirit that lived within. One day, he arrived home from the fields to find a delicious meal awaiting him, his house tidied, and all his laundry done. After this had occurred a few times, he decided to get to the bottom of it, and so one day he intentionally returned home earlier than the usual time and found a beautiful woman attending to his mending. The woman, sensing a presence, disappeared, but the thread she had been using made a trail that led the farmer to the banana tree, and in great alarm, the farmer took a chopper and felled the banana tree. As the knife sliced through the trunk, blood flowed out in great sorrow, and to this day the spirit has refused to allow any man to urinate against a banana tree!"

This was only one of numerous Chinese legends and bits of folklore that my grandmother used to expose us to. How a localised Chinese woman who was uneducated and could not read or write Chinese had come by such a fantastic store of profound Chinese literature was something I could never figure out! But such stories really enriched our early years and instilled in us a deep-seated affinity with our ancestral China. I think that actually was the intention. Grandma never for one instant allowed us to forget our Chinese heritage.

In the most prominent part of the living room of the house, my grandmother had installed a huge altar, where the photographs of her parents were prominently displayed above the usual paraphernalia of Chinese ancestral worshipping: a small urn of ever-burning joss sticks, a small glass of oil, and a bowl of fruit. Every

morning and evening, my grandmother would devote at least half an hour to praying and communicating with her ancestors before the altar, and no one was allowed to disturb her in this meditation.

I remember as a child creeping past the altar, terrified of the ancient heavily shadowed photographs of my ancestors staring down at me. I often imagined those hooded eyes following my every movement. As I grew older, however, those same pictures began to take on the indulgence and ambience of warm, loving family members who would watch over and protect me, and there was absolutely nothing to fear from them.

When my grandmother discovered my fears, she would admonish me, "There's nothing to fear: they are our own flesh and blood. When my father, your great-grandfather, died, I remember that after the seventh day, when the whole house was lit to show him the way back, his spirit returned to pay us a final visit and he was moving around the kitchen and we could hear plates and cups being handled. We were most happy to have him back in our midst."

Instead of allaying my fears and making me comfortable with death and the spiritual realm as it was intended to, this revelation made me creep even lower every time I approached the forbidding altar, which I had to pass on the way to my room. Grandma obviously had placed the altar in that strategic position so that we could bow our respects to our ancestors every time we passed it! But that was an illusion, of course. Most of the time, we were either tearing irreverently past our poor ancestors or creeping past them in trepidation!

When the Japanese came upon us so tragically, the first thing my grandmother grabbed as we fled to the rubber estates was her parents' precious photographs.

To this day, I cannot see a Chinese ancestral altar, still quite prevalent in Chinese homes, without being reminded of another altar in another time and in another world. . . .



My grandmother's three daughters. From left to right: my first aunt, my mother, and my second aunt. They are dressed in the sarongs and *kebayas* of the local Malay community.



The house in our rubber estate that we used during the Japanese occupation. This photograph was taken on August 13, 1958.



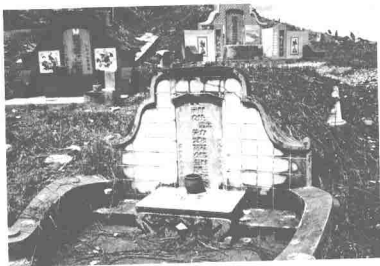
Present version of the old coffee shop in Bau.



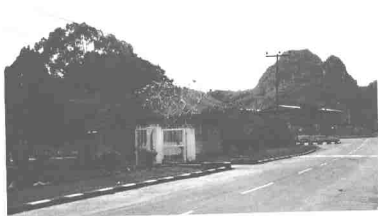
Temple built on the site of the old Goddess of Mercy shrine.



The Sarawak River in Kuching with a view of the rajah's residence in the background.



My grandmother's tombstone in Bau, erected in 1963 at the time of her death.



This building is all that remains of the original old Chinese school in Bau.



Picture of a Dayak longhouse.



Original old temple in Kuching frequented by my grandmother for prayers and offerings.



Dayak girls during the Dayak Gawai Batu, or harvest festival.

CHAPTER 7

The year 1940 was a great one for us. Rubber sales were booming and we couldn't have asked for more from life. If anybody had told us that within a year everything would be over and we would be hiding in our rubber estates, shaking from either malaria or the fear of the Japanese troops swarming everywhere, we would have laughed our teeth off, so to speak, in disbelief. How could anything go wrong when life was so great? I think, considering the suffering and deprivations that would be haunting us very soon, 1940 was intended to give us one final year to remember!

That year, one of my aunts moved with her husband to Buntal, a fishing village about two hours' boat ride away from Bau, to take charge of Grandma's coconut plantations there, and the wonderful memories of our frequent trips there for that one short year were to brighten up the years of isolation that were to follow during the impending Japanese occupation.

The fishing village of Buntal was a really good place to run wild. Although we were into coconut planting and not fishing, we mingled freely with the fishing families and wandered in and out of their houses. Their lives also became our lives. A typical fisherman's house in Buntal in those days was made of *attap* leaves, *attap* being the dried leaves of a kind of palm, and this was raised on stilts over water. During high tide it was therapeutic to hear the sounds of the waves washing against the sturdy wooden posts and the *attap* leaves were forever rustling and crackling in the wind.

But of course it was not always like that. On one of our visits, there was a fierce storm and all of a sudden the sea was friendly no

more. The little *attap* house we were in shook and trembled with each forceful rush of wind, and the sea churned and whirled angrily below. That night, the wind took off a piece of *attap* from the roof and as the water started pouring in, there was the usual rush for pails to intercept the rainwater. We sat down for dinner that night with the sound of the raindrops dripping into the pails! The next morning, the man of the house merely climbed onto the roof and patched up the gaping hole with a fresh piece of *attap* and life went on. This was apparently a common occurrence in the lives of the villagers and there was nothing to it.

Apart from the occasional storm, the sun was obliging most of the time, and every morning the typical fishing village scene on the beach in front was a busy one of the women bringing out huge wicker baskets of small fish and prawns to dry in the sun. There was a division of labour. The men performed the more hazardous task of taking the fishing boats out to the sea while the womenfolk and those men too old to go out to sea were entrusted with the task of processing the catches into the salted fish, dried prawns, and prawn paste for which Buntal was so famous. We spent many a happy morning joining the village children to keep the village cats away from the trays of drying fish and prawns, and as the cats were a determined and tenacious lot, that was no mean feat.

As the afternoon sun climbed higher and shone fiercer, those of the fishermen not at sea would retire into the shadows cast by the fishing boats on the beach to mend and clean their nets and tinker with their boats. All too soon, the day would be drawing to a close, and as the sun went down there would be the happy commotion of the fishermen returning with their catch. In the hazy, lazy hour of twilight, with the heat of the afternoon sun still on the beach, we would join the hordes of children swarming around the returning boats, watching the baskets of shimmering, writhing fish being unloaded amidst the low, subdued voices of the fishermen thoroughly exhausted by their day at sea. In the distance, there would be the approaching yellow glow of the kerosene lamps of

the other returning boats, Even the cats, replete with the spoils of their thievery for the day, would be lounging on the beach, too lethargic even to investigate the commotion just a stone's throw away!

Evenings like these were filled with such peace, such a sense of well-being and beauty, that it was inconceivable to contemplate that mankind would ever want to destroy it all with the agonising strife of war. But of course, I was wrong; there would always be somebody out there whose only reasons for living would be to conquer and to destroy.

The lives of the fishing folk, too, were governed by a set of colourful beliefs and superstitions, and we were expected to respect that. Many of these beliefs, naturally, concerned the sea and its environs. Listen to this one. One day at dinner, when I tried in all innocence to turn a fish over so that we could all eat the other side, my first aunt almost shrieked, "No, no! Don't do that! Fishing folk are very particular that one must never turn a fish over like this. It's bad luck, as it signifies the capsizing of a boat! If Uncle sees you doing this, he'll be most upset!" And another incredible one: "When the sea breeze blows, don't twist your mouth, for if you are unlucky and are caught in an evil wind, why, your mouth could remain twisted like that forever!" I remember my first aunt's warning. I never knew whether this was true or her idea of a joke! However, notwithstanding the doubts we might have had over these superstitions, they put the fear of God into us and were thus quite effective ways to control and restrain us.

Sometimes my uncle would allow us to accompany him to Santubong, another fishing village with vast coconut plantations, an hour or so's boat ride away from Buntal. The most significant and moving visual image as we approached the coastline of Santubong was that of a big mass of rock that was always floating in a sea of mist, aloof, solitary, and yet irresistible. The shape of this rock bore an uncanny resemblance to that of a mother carrying a

child on her back, and this rock had a very moving legend attached to it.

"See that crop of rock mass there?" my uncle said on our very first trip to Santubong. He pointed a gnarled brown planter's finger at the "mother and child" rock looming up on the horizon. "According to the villagers, it is the image of a woman who was turned into a rock together with the child she carried on her back as she sat at that very spot looking out to sea day after day, year after year, awaiting the return of her husband." Indeed, with the mist swirling around it, the rock did look sorrowful, remote, and very much alone, in the manner of someone alone with her grief. Although I had been too indoctrinated to display my emotions openly, the sight of such grief flowing from what was actually just a lifeless mass of rock did strike a chord in my heart.

In the days of my childhood and youth, the Chinese culture discouraged any overt display of emotions. For instance, although we knew that Grandma and the aunts loved us, we did not expect any physical manifestations of that affection in the way of the occasional hug or things like that. The closest they would come to any displays of their affection would be a ruffling of the hair or a pinch or two of the cheek!

Likewise, our culture and value system instilled in us the virtues of modesty and humility, to this end, for as long as I could remember, my grandmother was always drumming this into our heads: "Self-praise is no praise and is not a virtue our ancestors taught us."

And so it was that such conversations were common:

"Aunty, your son is so smart, it seems he always tops his class in school."

"No, don't say that. He's not smart at all. Your son is much more intelligent than mine, and you know it, eh?"

Or: "Your daughter is a real beauty, and such good manners!"

"Now that's not true. My daughter has a temper, and she'll be lucky if she can ever find a good husband."

Or: "You're so fortunate this year. Your business I hear is doing so well."

"Oh, no, my business is so-so and we're just making a living, that's all, nothing more and nothing less!"

This kind of modesty was so typical of our culture of the time, and such was the expected social response. Anyone who dared to stray from this path of social expectations would for sure bring down this comment upon himself: "Look at him, so thick-skinned and boastful, when I praised him about his house, he actually agreed with me and admitted it!"

Of course, quite apart from what was socially expected, inevitably, there was also the question of the superstitious belief of the local people that it was bad luck to extoll the virtues of a person to his face. This was true especially of a person in a weaker position and thus more vulnerable to spiritual interventions, like a finicky baby or a recuperating person. For sure, it would immediately negate all the good fortune with which such a person had been blessed!

Thus if any one of us should unthinkingly make remarks like: "The baby has become so good now, doesn't cry at night anymore or wet his bed," or, "Aunty, you look so well now and you've recovered all your lost weight," my grandmother would literally throw up her hands in horror. "What do you think you are doing? *Never, never* say such words of praise in front of the person. Do you want all those blessings to be taken away from him?"

Some of the numerous customs and beliefs that were imposed on us were impossible to understand or accept, but fear of the consequences of nonconformance made us toe the line!

In the distance, the clouds of war were already rumbling. Of course, we were aware that the Japanese had entered our beloved homeland, China, and the untold ravages and suffering of war were raging there. Our teachers in school constantly kept us informed of those events, and at home my grandmother fretted over the fact that no ships were going to China now and she was no longer able to

despatch her regular bags of what she called "lifeline goods" to her relatives.

Too simpleminded and ignorant of world events because of the lack of accessibility to such news, we ironically put the booming rubber sales down to the good luck bestowed on us by the gods. Little did we know that the great demand for rubber was related to the need for raw materials to produce the tools and weapons of war!

And although we had some rough notions that there was a war going on somewhere, it did not for one moment occur to us that we could ever in any way be drawn into this war that had nothing to do with us. Even when news reached us that the Japanese were marching through Malaya and Singapore, the "political critics" at the coffee shops shook their heads vehemently when the question of whether the Japanese would descend on us was raised. "Impossible!" they said. "Who would want to bother about us? Singapore is different; it's an important port and the Japanese want to control it to facilitate their activities in Southeast Asia. But us, we have nothing to offer anyone; they will leave us alone."

Well, such simple logic, but it made sense, and we were happy to believe it. I think, deep in my heart, I knew we would not escape, but because the cruelty of the Japanese troops as far as we knew was so frightening, it was easier to believe that we would be free from the scourge of their savage rampage. But we were wrong, every one of us. Even when news reached us that the rajah and his family had fled Kuching, we still refused to accept the fact that soon we would be drawn into the anguish and suffering of an unwanted war. So fate stepped in and thrust the truth right at us and we were totally unprepared for what was to come, for we were but children of peace and our little town was nurtured to cope with peace and not war! Oh, how we suffered because of that. . . .

Part III

In the Throes of the Japanese Occupation



CHAPTER 8

I cannot now recall the date in 1941 that it happened, it was all so long ago and, in accordance with the pattern of life, time has dulled the pain, the terror, and the suffering, which were intensified by the fact that I had been so gently reared and had never known a day of hardship in my life thus far. And yet the fierce instinct to survive and to hold onto life would force me to bear what was unbearable in the years of hiding in the jungles that our well-tended rubber estates soon became.

The day had begun well enough although in retrospect, you could say that there seemed to be an unnatural calm and stillness in the air, and for some reason, I couldn't seem to stop sweating profusely. I had just developed a crush on one of the male teachers at school and was terrified that the profuse sweating that had suddenly afflicted me that day would develop into an unpleasant body odour! Later on, very much hardened and with every romantic and frivolous notion wiped out from a mind that was preoccupied constantly with how to procure food for myself and my family, I was to recall the events of that day with amazement. To think that my world was going to be turned topsy-turvy and then fall apart and I was concerned with, of all things, body odour!

At about midmorning, as we were battling with the intricacies of the history of China, deep searing claps of thunder seemed to tear the sky into shreds. We did not know it, but they were the sounds of the much feared Japanese fighters invading our skies. They had finally arrived and we had not been spared after all. Later we were to discover that at least three elderly inhabitants of the

town had been so terrorised by the monsters ripping the skies apart that they had collapsed to their deaths on the spot in fear and in shock. They were to be the first of the many war casualties.

But on that fateful morning, mercifully, we did not know anything about this, and so we rushed onto the school field in great excitement. Although we had read about and knew that such miracles as aeroplanes, which could actually fly, did exist in other faraway exotic places, we had never seen one nor did we aspire to do so. We could not therefore believe our eyes that this morning, unexpectedly, we were actually being treated to the magnificent sight of a sky above our humble school field that was laden with not one but scores of aeroplanes, thundering over our heads. As each plane flew over us, it discharged thousands of white leaflets.

"Aeroplanes! Can this be possible?" I remember screaming as I ducked from the leaflets that had exploded in a white cloud right over my head.

"What is happening? Can somebody tell me what is happening?" another girl was screaming. She was terrified, sensing that all was not well.

I grabbed a leaflet and scanned the bold Chinese characters staring out at me.

"This is an announcement. We, the Japanese troops, have taken over Singapore and we are advancing into Borneo! Surrender and all will be safe!" it screamed.

I started shaking. It was not possible; the Japanese could not be here. Things like that happened to other people, but no, never to us!

Then what is all this, the leaflets, the planes, about? my mind shouted. *Accept it! Accept it . . . !*

Nothing had changed, it was still hot and humid, but the sweat trickling down my back emanated now not from the heat but from an indescribable fear of the war and all its inevitable violence that had arrived at our doorstep, uninvited and unwanted.

And now the planes, having completed their mission, had

flown off in trails of smoke, leaving behind an eerie silence, a school field strewn with a sea of white papers, and the students and teachers huddled together in subdued groups as the full impact of what was happening began to sink in. We all waited, with the resignation of the helpless and the powerless, for the planes to return in full force to vent their fury on us. But they would not come back that day, nor the next, nor the next.

The voice of our headmaster came to us over the loudspeaker, shaking us out of the daze into which we had been thrown.

"Teachers and students, it is with regret that I announce that the Japanese have invaded us. This is an emergency and for the safety of all, I am dismissing the school until further notice."

For me, the "further notice" never came, and with a heavy heart I had to leave the love of my life, school and all the learning and knowledge that was supposed to have given me my ticket to the great institutions of culture and education in Shanghai and Peking. I have wondered countless times what my life would have been if its course had not been so drastically altered and my dreams and hopes so ruthlessly ground to dust and swept away by the tide of war. What dreams, what hopes we have when we are young, and how many times and in how many ways will these dreams be shattered before the cycles of our lives are completed!

In the months to come, I would be thrown into bout after bout of depression. There would be days when it would seem pointless to wake up to another day of strife and the struggle just to fill our bellies with the watery rice gruel and sweet potatoes that would later send us racing to the toilet and to bed with rumbling tummies. A great deal of our depression, lethargy, and inertia was probably initiated by the malnutrition that would plague me for the rest of my life in anaemic bouts and weak lower limbs, both legacies from a meaningless war.

For the moment, my first thought was: *Does Grandmother know about this? I have to get home to inform her and we have to plan what to do!*

The whole house was in a state of tense commotion and confusion when I returned. It was apparent that there was no need for me to apprise them of the situation; they already knew. My grandmother was pacing the floor debating the course of action to take. Her face was grim and for the first time I noticed the lines of age etched on her face. I wondered how she felt as she realised that this was it, she had come to the end of her road, and her whole empire would soon be reduced to the pile of rubble from which it had emerged.

Now two of my uncles also arrived.

"The Japanese are all over Kuching; it is said that they are marching up to Bau. They are dangerous and barbaric, killing, molesting, and raping the women. Our defence forces have surrendered; they are no match for the sheer numbers, guns, and weapons of the Japanese, and we are now at the mercy of the Japanese invaders," my uncles reported.

"Killing, molesting, and raping!" my grandmother repeated. They were words of particular significance to her because she had a whole household of young girls! "Oh, my God!"

"Yes," my uncles reiterated. "Now the word is out that there is no law and order, the robbers are already burning and looting the shops. You must take the girls and hide in the rubber estates. Don't delay; you had better leave today. All of you should be safe there."

They were right. Very soon, in a few short hours in fact, our town would become an unrecognisable battlefield of burning, looting, fighting, and total chaos. I don't know what it is in war that seems to give men the justification to go berserk, but our town was to be no exception. Suddenly men whom we had regarded as our friends had become our enemies. All the renegades of the town whose darker sides and baser desires had been kept in check by the existing social order were emerging in full force, and our shops were looted, robbed, and burnt, and by nightfall a whole row of shop houses would become a towering inferno! In this war, we were as much in danger from our own people as from the Japanese, and

that night my early life of trust and innocence was to be lost forever as I was plunged into an alien world of deceit, violence, and warfare.

I saw my grandmother hesitate for a moment. Like us, she was reluctant to flee, leaving everything behind, and like us, she hoped just for a split second that all this was a nightmare and we were all actors in a drama. Everything was happening just too fast; it was impossible to accept the reality of it all, but accept it we had to do. We didn't have any choice; this was, after all, the destiny of life that we had always been talking about, but when actually faced with it, we instinctively tried to fight it—a very human response, of course. But when war and strife were at our doorstep, there was no longer any more time for human responses and human failings. We realised it, and my grandmother realised it, too, in the nick of time.

By late afternoon we had got together a few things and were ready to leave the house. It was to be the last time we would see it in this condition. Years later when we returned to it, after the war, it was a ruin of gaping roofs and flapping walls, and we were by then too poor to restore it to reflect its former glory. Even our ancestral altar had been stripped by the Japanese, who used it as a hospital ward throughout the war years. As we were fleeing from the house, my grandmother had insisted on lovingly packing every article on our ancestral altar, the fading portraits of her parents, the joss stick urn, and the oil burners, and she refused to be hurried over the final act of love and filial piety even though my uncles hovered anxiously over her. I remember her face scrunched up with irritation as she snapped at them, "Stop fidgeting! If you have no ancestors and no roots, you have no life!"

The journey to the small house we still retained deep in the heart of the rubber estates was solemn and sombre. I remember that two-hour walk as the light of day was fading as vividly as if there were not the deep chasm of a fifty-year time span between then and now.

My grandmother walked in front with my two uncles and two coolies with whatever we had been able to get together at such short notice. As we stumbled over the tree roots that had over the years crept into the dirt roads of the rubber estates, the reality of our situation suddenly assailed me with a ferocity that caused a hysteria to well up inside me that I managed to bring under control only with a supreme effort.

As the sun was setting and the rubber trees shut out most of the remaining light, we carried two kerosene lamps amongst us and the yellow light attracted a lot of the insects that seem to be ever-present in the tropics. It was a memorable journey into another phase of our lives, and as we approached the house, dark and unwelcoming from disuse, it started to rain, great drops of rain that fell through the leaves of the rubber trees onto our heads. It seemed as if the heavens we had so revered were crying for us.

My heart is so heavy and now it's raining, I thought. Why, it's like tropical rain over my heart!

The house was in a deplorable state, because we had not used it from the time I was three years old, when we moved to the town house. It took the family and including the two coolies, who stayed with us for a week, three days to restore it as best as we could to a habitable condition.

We spent an uneasy night in the house, no longer used to the sounds of the wind whistling eerily through the trees and the numerous insects buzzing around. When an owl hooted innocently enough, it was sufficient to send my cousins and me running into each other's arms! Later, when we had got used to all these forest sounds, other sounds like the snapping of twigs and the hissing sounds of the snakes that frequently appeared at our doorstep had the power to throw us into a frozen state of fear. When a twig snapped outside, we would cling to each other wondering, *Is it the Japanese soldiers coming, and if so, what will they do to us?*

Fear, as far as I could remember, was the all-consuming emotion that dominated our lives throughout the three years we

spent hiding on the estate. Long after the war was over and I no longer had any reason to fear, it continued to haunt me.

All in all, it was an experience I do not wish to repeat, neither would I wish it on another!

The next morning, one of the coolies was despatched to our house in town to retrieve as much rice as he was able to carry, and towards late afternoon he returned almost bent double with the weight of the two sacks of rice on his shoulders. He was also ashen with the sights he had witnessed in a town that until two days ago had never known a day of violence since the bloody fighting that had given it its name.

"Boss, boss . . ." he panted as he set his heavy burdens onto the kitchen floor. "The town, it's gone mad. Last night, the looters, they killed some people, robbed everything in the shops, and set them on fire. This morning, the flames were still raging and spreading. . . . Do you know Mr. Chai, the goldsmith? . . . His shop was the first to be looted, and when he put up some resistance, he was killed . . . stabbed over and over again, and his body thrown into the gutter . . . and . . . and . . . his two daughters . . . oh, boss, they were stripped by the looters and raped. . . and the butcher, he's dead, too, chopped by his own butcher's knife. . . . Some people say that rascal and ne'er-do-well Bujang is behind all this violence."

Bujang was the black sheep of the town, who refused to do a day's honest work and spent his days and nights loitering around the gambling and opium dens, getting into fights at the slightest provocation and making a living from petty extortion. I suppose every town had its black sheep and dark alleys, and Bujang was definitely our black sheep. He had seemed harmless enough when there was some semblance of law and order. We never dreamed that there would come a day when those amongst us would be violated and even killed at the hands of Bujang and his small following of renegades.

"Somebody broke into your house too, boss; a lot of things

are missing. The windows are all torn apart. Such violence! Thank our Lord Buddha that you and all the young misses were not there that night—”

Suddenly I couldn't bear it anymore. I placed my hands over my ears and refused to listen to the emotion-charged voice droning on.

The town goldsmith was dead. I couldn't believe it; he was the nicest and kindest man that ever drew breath. Why would anyone want to harm him? Memories and visions of visits with my grandmother and aunts to the goldsmith shop in the town centre and all the glitter and sparkles of the precious stones and gold displayed there came crowding into my mind. We had been particularly close to the goldsmith because there was a kind of joint venture between him and my grandmother. Until our gold mines were exhausted, my grandmother would supply him with the unfinished gold from our mines, which he would use to produce miracles of craftsmanship. He was the finest craftsman in gold around. His work was intricate and so fine that even people from Kuching came to him. It was hard to accept the fact that I would never see him again, and the way it had all ended for him, stabbed and left to die in the gutter, and his daughters, fine and hardworking young women, they didn't deserve to suffer what was the lowest form of degradation a woman could be subjected to, in those days and even now, rape. The double tragedy of seeing their father stabbed brutally to death right before their eyes and the equally brutal sexual abuse they themselves suffered traumatised those two innocent victims of war-induced violence so much that they became mentally deranged, two of the many bright young, promising lives extinguished in such inhumane circumstances.

“But, boss, I peeped under the house, and the coffin, it's still there; nobody touched that at least!” The voice went on so earnestly that I had no doubt that coolie was totally sincere in his relief!

I stifled a hysterical desire to laugh. A war was going on

outside there and we were struggling to cling onto life, and he was concerned about Grandma's coffin!

If the situation were not so grim, I would have found the picture of Bujang and his gang trying to cart off my grandmother's massive coffin most entertaining. Suffice it to say that through all the abuses and thrashing our poor town house was subjected to, no one wanted to touch my grandmother's coffin and after the war, when we returned, the only thing left untouched and intact was that gleaming artifact of death, right there where we had left it, under the house!

I remember my grandmother's sad but practical words as she ran her fingers over its surface of finest wood: "We are so poor now that we can't possibly afford such a beautiful coffin, but thank goodness I at least can still have a decent burial, because it's still here!"

Later that day, one of my uncles came to inform us that the Japanese troops had arrived in Bau, truckloads of them, and they were all over the town. The local defence forces and the small band of policemen had immediately surrendered, and the Japanese had taken control of everything within a matter of hours. But the town seemed deserted. Everyone still left there stayed bolted and shuttered in their houses, under the very human illusion that as long as they stayed out of sight, they would be safe. But of course, that was all it was, an illusion! Doors and shutters were, after all, just pieces of wood that could be so easily kicked and shot open!

At the end of the week, the two coolies pleaded with my grandmother to let them return home to care for their families. We had no choice but to let them go. After they had left, I felt suddenly that we were very much alone, a bunch of helpless females with neither strength nor tools to protect ourselves. We were now on our own, and whatever happened—whether we would survive the war, how we would survive the war—we no longer had any control over our lives, so we resorted to Grandmother's philosophy: "Your life is in the hands of the gods. . . ."

CHAPTER 9

We were into the third month of our enforced exile in the rubber estates. By then all hopes of an early end to the war had faded into reality, and we became resigned to a long wait for liberation, which we wanted to believe would come one day.

We had learnt from my uncle that after the Japanese troops arrived and took control of everything, the looting, burning, and petty crimes had ceased and a frigid kind of fear-inspired order had settled on the town. Very few people were willing to submit to the invaders, but they were compelled to do so, often at gunpoint. The Japanese brooked no opposition, and even minor misdemeanours like failure or refusal to bow to the Japanese troops as their paths crossed in the street would result in the offender finding his forehead being cracked open by the butt of a rifle. The cruelty of the Japanese troops, particularly in the punishments they meted out, was legendary, and in the face of such cold, calculated cruelty who indeed would dare to resist?

Even my uncles had been forcibly recruited into the service of the Japanese, one as a storekeeper and the other as a kind of petty houseboy, being assigned such menial tasks as polishing the boots and rifles of the troops. Very often it was not done to their satisfaction, especially as my uncle was used to a life of having servants and not being a servant and had never seen a rifle in his entire peace-loving life, and the poor man was kicked by many a booted foot like a dog and his forehead was cracked so many times by rifle butts that it was criss-crossed with scars and deep gashes that stayed with him for the rest of his life as a grim reminder of the war.

Another grim reminder was the loss of the tip of his left finger. One day, he enraged an army officer when he dropped one of the officer's boots into a muddy puddle and compounded it by refusing to grovel in apology. He had his finger mutilated within minutes, just like that. After that, and the excruciating pain of his severed finger, he was prepared to grovel with hatred and anger in his heart. Soon afterwards he escaped to Kuching to join the underground to fight the Japanese and, according to my aunt's tearful reports, was involved in so many dangerous exploits that it was a miracle he survived the war otherwise unscathed.

My uncles' visits often brought news of what was happening in the town, and so they were eagerly awaited by us. Sometimes the stories of the atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers were so gruesome that long after my uncles left the chilly fingers on my spine would not go and image after image of such incidents of cruelty and torture would crowd my mind, giving me no peace.

"Today, two men who work in the supplies section were caught stealing a few small bags of sugar, and do you know what was done to them?" My uncle shook his head. "They were tied to a post in the town centre in full view of everyone and forced to eat faeces the whole day! And yesterday one of the workers was so hungry that he stole something from the kitchen, and he was also tied to a post under the blazing sun and had water poured down his throat the whole day. When he was untied unconscious at nightfall, his stomach was swollen to double its size and they just kicked him aside and left him. This is what the war is doing to us; there is no more human dignity left anymore. Those pigs"—he spat on the floor, an action totally alien to his hitherto gentle and nonabrasive nature—"devils, every one of them." He spat again.

I looked at him sadly. My uncle had become virulent and most violently vocal whenever he spoke of the Japanese. Where had my gentle and soft-spoken uncle gone? When had he become so bitter and hardened? I suppose he didn't really have any choice. As was the same for so many people, he just couldn't witness so many

atrocities and violations of the sanctity of life and human dignity that we had always believed in and not become hardened.

There were many other stories involving people dear to us, of our town blacksmith being accused of spying by the Japanese and his tongue and ears being severed in front of his horrified family, then another one of the fatherly man who had been a bailiff on our rubber estate being accused of defying the Japanese and forced to watch his teenage daughter gang-raped. Both father and daughter never recovered from that ordeal and spent the rest of their lives in an insane stupor. Then there was the sweet, gentle seamstress who had valiantly fought off the attentions of a Japanese soldier and so enraged him that in a furious attack he scarred and disfigured her face with a dagger, narrowly missing her eyes. The list went on, the pain and suffering that were inflicted on all these people that we had known all our lives, tragedies from which they would never recover for the rest of their lives. I could be wrong, but the Japanese seemed to have some kind of complex and it appeared to us that they needed to reassert their authority and legitimacy all the time by compelling total subservience from us.

By the time we were into our fifth month in hiding all our supplies of rice, sugar, and almost everything else had been consumed and there was very little else left. The uncles did bring whatever meagre supplies they could get together whenever they visited, but it was not enough. My grandmother had to travel to her friends in the Dayak village to barter for rice and agricultural products, and it almost broke my heart to see the old lady trekking through the jungle paths alone bearing heavy burdens of rice on her back, she who had had hundreds of workers at her beck and call now nothing better than a beast of burden herself. It was hard to accept such reduced circumstances. For my grandmother, her family came first, and she had steadfastly refused to allow us to accompany her. She was probably right. Nobody could be sure what would happen to us if we should chance across any of the Japanese troops. As for her, she was an old lady and would be in no danger.

It was wrong, I agonised, for such an elderly person, who was suffering from arthritic aches, to have to slave like this for younger and stronger people like us. The years of cultural and social indoctrination of filial piety made us feel guilty each time we had to wave off our old grandmother as she started on her journey to the Dayak villages, a lonely solitary figure, shoulders now bowed with the dejection and defeat of her fallen empire, fading into the distance! In the years to come, whenever I thought of my grandmother, this picture would be conjured up in my mind.

The rubber trees had not been tapped for months. Rubber trees are funny; if they are not tapped for some time, the rubber latex will dry up, and with no workers to clear up the undergrowth, our hitherto beautifully organised rubber estates with their unerringly straight lines of well-tended rubber trees had really become a jungle. They were a true reflection of how far down our fortunes had fallen!

Soon after, I decided that the time for action had come, so I rounded up my cousins, ranging in ages at that time from seven to fourteen, and together we laboured and soiled our hands as we never had to before, clearing away the undergrowth and even trying to tap the rubber trees around the house. Fortunately, as it would turn out, we had always mingled freely with the rubber tappers on our estates and watched them at their work, and because of that I knew exactly how the rubber trees were tapped and where to make the incision on the trunks so that the rich white latex milk would flow out and drip into the old disused latex cups I had salvaged from the shed outside the house and deftly hooked onto the trunks of the rubber trees at strategic positions beneath the incisions.

At the end of a hard morning and the endless battle with the hordes of mosquitoes that had invaded the unkempt undergrowth with its pools of stagnant water, I rested my exhausted body under a rubber tree and watched the white rivers of latex flowing unerringly into the cups. I had to pinch myself to be convinced that it was all real and not somebody's idea of a bad joke! After all, just

half a year ago if someone had told me that I would be reduced to tapping rubber just like one of our common workers, it would have been too absurd to even merit any comments!

We even managed to roughly process the rubber ourselves, making use of the primitive tin trays we had chanced upon piled up in the backyard and smoking the sheets over a fire. These rubber sheets, which the uncles collected and bartered for goods in the town, managed to secure some basic necessities for us in those lean years.

Soon whatever rice supplies we could secure were no longer enough to feed so many mouths and we decided that we would have to supplement the rice with sweet potatoes and yams. Life became a daily drudge of clearing the land around us, raking and hoeing the stubborn soil, unused to such abuse, to a condition more receptive to the sweet potatoes and yam shoots we forced into it. It was a backbreaking job and not one we were used to. Consequently, we were irritable, especially when the moist tropical heat often soaked through our relentlessly sweat-sodden clothes, and tempers flared at the slightest provocation.

I remember summing up our lives at this point thus: "We struggle in order to live and we live in order to struggle!" This must have been the thought of many a Chinese emigrant who had arrived in "the new country" with nothing and slogged day and night so that future generations would have better lives.

I remember how my fourteen-year-old cousin, always one to fancy herself as a lady, would burst into tears and wail each time I had to force a hoe into her hands and stand over her until she got down to work. "I hate this place. Why can't we go back to the town house? This hoe will make blisters on my hands and they will develop into hard corns and . . . and my hands will become rough, like those of a labourer's . . . ough!" She would wail and whine endlessly in like manner until one day my nerves snapped and before I could stop myself I had punched her square in the face and grounded it into the bare earth unceremoniously.

"Grow up, you vain, useless woman!" I shouted, truly enraged now. "Go on; go back to the town house and have a hundred men lining up to abuse you. I don't care. Maybe you will enjoy it better than this, huh? You think I like it. Every day spent here is a waste of my life, a life I thought was destined for greater things. I had dreams, too, remember? Dreams of the scholastic pursuits in Peking I'd been waiting for all my life. Where are all those dreams now? Even I have accepted what we are, what we have become. Be realistic; we've got no choice. This is war, the real thing, and every day people are being killed and tortured because of it, and yet you grumble and complain ceaselessly. Here, take this." I threw the offending hoe at her, not caring where it landed. "You follow our rules or I'm through with you!"

My outburst, totally uncharacteristic of my usually sunny and placid disposition, frightened my wilful cousin into sullen submission, and for the rest of the afternoon we plodded and slaved away without further incident.

Then there were the evenings when the day's work was done and I would walk round our sweet potato, yam, and vegetable patches, watching and waiting for the slightest development in the plants. Such quiet evenings brought some semblance of peace to my troubled soul, and I could feel a kindred spirit with the earth I had to work closely with now.

One day I idly pulled up a yam plant, and there amongst the leaves nestled a huge luscious yam. It was the most beautiful and rewarding sight I had had of anything for a long while.

"Grandma, come quickly!" I remember yelling at the top of my voice, which was most unwise, because one never knew what could be lurking in the jungles, but I was too happy to care. "We have a whole field of yams and sweet potatoes!"

They all came running, seeming to materialise from nowhere. This was another unnerving aspect of life in the estates I could never get used to, this feeling that there were so many nooks and

crannies that could hide almost anything or anyone and, consequently, one could never really be safe.

We all fell on the rest of the plants, yanking, pulling, and harvesting the fruits of our labour with great joy, and soon three huge wicker baskets were filled to the brim with yams and sweet potatoes, thus keeping starvation at bay for at least a while. Although hot, sweaty, and dusty, we were deliriously happy, for there was nothing really like the feeling of gratification such as this. All our lives we had only taken and enjoyed the fruits of other people's labours and never given a thought to how many people had to toil to provide us with what we took for granted. Now, for the first time in our lives, we knew what it was like to have to slave even for the food we put in our mouths. It hardened us, but I have no doubt that the experience made us better people.

Eating rice to us was as natural as breathing, but during the war years it had become a luxury we could no longer afford. If a Chinese could no longer afford to eat rice, he had to be in a pretty bad situation! Whenever we were able to secure the occasional bag of rice, our first priority was to stretch it as far as it could go by adding generous portions of yams and sweet potatoes. When our rice bins ran dry, we lived only on sweet potatoes, yams, and the corn that had in better times been fed only to the chickens. The sweet potatoes especially played havoc with our already displaced stomachs, and I often recall, not without some amusement, the race to our hot spot of the time: the toilet! My poor seven-year-old cousin, the most affected victim of this sweet potato-induced stomach disorder, was often the punching bag of the frustrated berating of those of us who had either to accompany her on her numerous trips to the toilet or to fight with her for it. Long after the war and even now, I cannot look at even the most unoffending sweet potato in the eye, so to speak, and not be filled with dreadful memories of our wartime diet!

We were surprised to discover that placed in a situation where starvation could become imminent, we could be most innovative,

out of a very primitive desire to survive. Nothing was wasted, not even the leaves of our sweet potato plants and the wild jungle vegetables that grew in abundance amongst the undergrowth of the rubber estate. The Dayaks had taught us which of the wild vegetation and mushrooms were edible and which to avoid. In short, we ate everything that could be eaten! This experience, I guess, accounted for my strange taste for the most unlikely foods, which I acquired during the war and became the subject of many a good-natured dig in my later life. I mean, whoever heard of a person who had unusual cravings for sweet potatoe leaves, young pineapple or banana shoots, and the like in ultramodern and sophisticated Singapore?

Every morning at daybreak, my grandmother would burn joss sticks at the front door for the gods to pray for a safe deliverance from the war. For the first time in our lives, too, we were able to appreciate the sanctity of such concepts as life, safety, and freedom, which we had hitherto taken for granted. Every day I would wake up convinced that each day of survival would bring us closer to the liberation I was convinced would arrive soon. For the first time in my life, too, I became close to nature, living and working with the earth and learning to cope with the changes and ravages of time. Very often, as I strolled through the rubber trees watching the sun forcing its way through the dense treetops and listening to the never-ending whispering of the wind, it seemed almost callous, how nature continued to thrive and the sun continued to rise and to set with unconcerned precision, totally indifferent to the sufferings and catastrophes visited on mankind.

As our war-enforced isolation on the rubber estates continued and showed no signs of letting up, it was no longer only food, or the lack of it, that bothered us. There were so many other basic necessities of life that we could no longer have access to, so we used our imagination to create some of them. When we ran out of toothbrushes, for instance, we ingeniously invented our own by

tying a bunch of dried coconut husks to twigs and found a substitute for toothpaste in wood ashes!

Then again, we were bothered when we ran out of a simple but vital item like thread, all the more vital now because we had to make whatever clothing we had stretch a long, long way through repeated mending. For days we wracked our brains trying to come up with a substitute for thread, and believe me, I thought for a moment that it had finally got us and we had run out of our seemingly inexhaustible supply of necessity-induced substitute inventions. But no, we had gone through too much to be stumped by mere thread!

A few days after we were presented with this latest predicament, my fourteen-year-old cousin suddenly sat up and declared, "I know what we can do! I seem to remember Third Aunt telling the other ladies that in olden days people used the fibres of pineapple leaves as thread for sewing. Why don't we try it?"

I was quite dubious about the viability of this, especially as it came from my usually frivolous and empty-headed cousin, but then when you're desperate, there isn't anything much you won't try! So we rushed out to the pineapple patch that Grandma had planted at the fringes of the rubber estate and tore open the longest pineapple leaf we could lay our hands on. There, nestled under the surface, were indeed long, sinuous fibres, which when dried in the sun made a very compatible substitute for thread. After that, we never had to worry about running out of thread anymore and spent many a free afternoon processing our "thread," which we found had a calming effect on our frayed nerves and tempers!

Then came a period of good fortune for us, a respite from the greater tragedies to come, but, of course, we weren't to know that yet! Grandma put it all down to her recent renewed efforts to solicit the indulgence of the gods of fortune. But it was, in fact, just a lull before the storm!

A few days later, as I was exploring the inner reaches of the rubber estate, I stumbled upon a forgotten fishpond that the estate

workers had in better times tried halfheartedly to convert into a lily pond. Amidst the muck and neglect of the pond, miraculously, a few water lilies had burst into full bloom, a shot of colour in the otherwise dreary surroundings.

Rather like a burst of sunlight in a stormy sky! I thought, watching the blooms. I have always been partial to water lilies because I had been named after the flowers most favoured by the Chinese, *lian fah*, or water lilies. No doubt, my grandmother had been inspired by her revered goddess of mercy, always depicted as a serene and venerable effigy sitting on a giant water lotus.

As I watched, a violent splashing nearby lifted a water lily out of the water and I held my breath, not daring to believe it. The pond was filled with fat, succulent freshwater fish, which had continued to multiply in peace for years! Fish, how long had it been since we tasted fish? I couldn't remember anymore. If gold had fallen right at my feet, I couldn't have been happier!

After that, we raided the fishpond at regular intervals and the dragon jars outside the house always had at least five or six fish swimming around. It was a sight to cheer even the most depressed soul. Of course, like everything else, it didn't last. After prolonged pillaging, even the fishpond dried up on us, despite our belated efforts to conserve it.

We had also begun to raise a few broods of chickens, which kept us in eggs and offered the very rare treat of a scrawny chicken for a meal, so for a time life didn't look too bad for us. In any case, our needs and wants had become so basic and so simple that as long as we had food, it was enough for us.

The nights were the worst. During the day, we were often too busy to dwell on this much, but we lived in constant fear of being abused and robbed by either the Japanese troops or the renegades, the inevitable by-products of war.

I remember lying awake at night, ears alert for the slightest sounds that could signal danger, and the way my heart would lurch and thump almost painfully each time I imagined the snapping of

twigs or the night creatures flitting off in alarm as if disturbed by something or someone. I never got used to the ink-black inscrutable blanket that enveloped us each night because I never could be sure what was lurking in it. I became suspicious of everything I could not make visual contact with, and I don't think I had more than a few hours of harassed sleep each night throughout the war years!

Then one night, what I had feared most happened. We had just settled in for the night when the sounds of voices in the distance reached my ears. Men's voices, and they were approaching our house! My cousins, instinctively sensing my fear, started to whimper.

"Quiet!" I hissed in real panic now. "These men could be dangerous. Don't make any noise; do you want us to be killed?"

I rushed to my grandmother's room and shook her. "Grandma! There are some men approaching the house. I can hear their voices. What shall we do?"

I can still see myself, so young and so unsure of what to do, just sixteen years old and already foisted with the responsibility of protecting my family, with only an old lady to turn to as the uncertainties and atrocities of war raged around us.

I was trembling with fear now as visions of rape, physical mutilation, and ultimately murder floated before me. I was too young to die and I didn't want anything to befall my family but what was a young, defenceless girl to do?

My grandmother was fully alert now; the dangerous situation had managed to pierce through her mind, which was often hazy with drink of late. "Go on back to your room, take the girls, and hide, quick. I'll handle them; hopefully they will not harm an old lady."

Dear God, I started praying as I rushed upstairs to get my cousins organised, *I take back everything I ever said about wanting to die. I didn't mean it; it was only because I was so tired. . . .*

The voices had become louder. It was a group of what sounded like at least three men, uttering a lot of loud, raucous laughter! I

started trembling. It was obvious that these men were drunk and therefore potentially violent. They were pounding on the front door now.

My cousins and I had by now crawled under the bed and lay huddled together there, not daring to breathe. We could hear my grandmother's voice. Well, at least they were not Japanese soldiers, I thought, but seemed to be Chinese. It was a false sense of security. Of course, as everyone knew by now, the fact that they were local Chinese people didn't mean that they were any less dangerous or brutal.

My smallest cousin started to whimper with fright. I jammed a fist roughly into her mouth. This was no time for fear or emotions of any kind; this was a deadly game for survival. My heart was pounding so heavily that I thought it would surely give the game away, and later I was to see the raw, bleeding crescents on the palms of my hands where my fingernails had dug into them with the violence of the terror I felt.

"What do you men want? We can talk properly; there's no need to resort to violence. I am an old lady, and I am staying alone here, I don't have much, but tell me how I can help you. . . . I am sure you don't mean to harm me," my grandmother was saying.

"An old witch!" one of the men was saying with obvious disappointment. "We were expecting some young chicks here to warm our beds for the night!"

This was followed by loud bawdy laughter and someone spitting on the floor.

"Hey, old lady, are you sure you're staying alone, and what makes you think we won't harm you?" another of the men shouted.

I started to cry then. They didn't believe Grandma; soon they would be thundering upstairs and all would be lost. We were going to be brutally ravished, perhaps even my seven-year-old cousin. I couldn't bear any of this anymore. Men, they were such animals, I never wanted to see one again.

What gave them the right anyway to threaten and harm

defenceless women and children just because they were physically superior?

The silence that followed was the longest I had ever known. If you have ever gone through a gripping fear that is so intense that every part of your body except your brain appears to stop functioning, you will know what I mean.

I resorted then to the only relief still available to me, my grandmother's calming philosophy: "Your life is in the hands of the gods," and: "Submit yourself to the heavens, which rule your life." Over and over again, I whispered these words, my hand still fiercely clamped over my seven-year-old cousin's mouth. One false squeak from her and we could well be thrown over the precipice we were literally clinging onto now for dear life!

"Here, take this bottle of whisky; it's my best bottle and my last," my grandmother was now saying. "Leave me alone and don't harm me. I am but an old, harmless lady. You are Chinese, like me, and surely your family taught you the virtues of respecting old people."

Somewhere, I guess, a pang of guilt and long-forgotten decency must have assailed these men, and even their hardened hearts and souls must have recalled the age-old Chinese teachings of respect for one's elders.

I could almost feel the shrug of one of the men as he replied in a deliberately offhand manner, "All right, Ah Pho [Grandmother], give us your whisky and we'll be on our way."

My reaction to this was, first, a relief so great that I could have collapsed from the extent of it, followed by dismay that Grandmother was parting with her precious bottle of whisky. She had become, to be honest, an alcoholic and would go into fits of the trembles if she didn't have her usual dosage of alcohol. It was wartime and alcohol was almost impossible to procure. Somehow we had managed to get by with the few bottles of whisky and brandy we had brought along when we escaped from the town house. I had made each bottle stretch by discreetly diluting the

liquor with water, and mercifully, most of the time my grandmother was too stoned to notice!

I heard the quick exchange of the liquor for peace and respite. The men seemed almost in a hurry to go now. Perhaps they had been reminded that they once had decent lives and decent families and that made them uncomfortable. I didn't know or care; all I was concerned about for the moment was that the ordeal was over and we were safe, for the moment at least.

When the sounds of their heavy footsteps crunching on the dry twigs and leaves had died away at last, we crept downstairs. Although I was weak with relief, I was also assailed by guilt and self-disgust. Filial piety was an inherent part of the Chinese culture at least most of the time, and I took it very seriously. I was therefore not very proud of the fact that I, an able-bodied young woman of reasonable health, had had to hide behind the skirts of an old lady who, as it was, already had to cope with so many physical, mental, and financial upheavals in her life.

The ordeal had taken its toll on her, and I saw that she had taken a large swig of her most potent brandy and now sat slumped in a chair. She had passed out, but her breathing was even. She was just stoned; that was all. Together we half-dragged, half-carried her to the rattan lounge chair, which was more comfortable, covered her up with a blanket, and left her to sleep off her drunken stupor. I had by now learnt that this was the best and the only thing that could be done. I used to have terrific nightmares that she would never wake up, but I needn't have worried. My grandmother slept off and woke up from her drink-induced slumbers without fail and with increasing regularity as the years went by. She surprised everybody by living to the ripe old age of ninety-eight, when, predictably, she just stopped breathing one night in one of her jolly drunken sleeps!

I retrieved the brandy bottle and almost automatically poured fresh drinking water into it. I was sad, very, very sad, that night, for I knew that my grandmother didn't take pride in herself anymore

and didn't care whether she lived or died. Her spirit had been broken by the unexpected and tragic twist in life that had deprived her of everything and thrown us into this enforced poverty. I think the process of self-destruction begins once the spirit is broken. The ironical second twist in my grandmother's life was that the more bent she seemed on destroying herself with drink, the longer she lived! The war did this to her; it also scarred all of us so much that trust in the inherent goodness of mankind was something I could no longer easily come to terms with after this.

I knew my grandmother would wake up the next morning with only a haze recollection of the previous night's events. For the rest of the day at least, she would be in control of herself, and in the evening the process would repeat itself again. Well, the old lady certainly defied every medical journal, which promises dire consequences for such excessive intake of alcohol, by the great age she lived up to with nary a day of serious illness! I believed my aunts when they concluded later that my grandmother's coveted longevity was a reward from the gods for the good life she had led and the good deeds she had done, except for one thing. While the gods were at it, I used to wonder, why couldn't they have left the trappings of wealth with the longevity as well?

But it was not to be, and in the end all she had was the long life with which she had been blessed. . . .

CHAPTER 10

Time hadn't stood still. The days, months, and years had continued to pass, and by 1943, we had been hiding in the rubber estates for nearly two years. By now my feelings for the Japanese invaders had turned 180 degrees from acceptance to hatred, the intensity of which knew no limits. Not a day passed when I did not curse the Japanese while, alongside my cousins, I toiled. This had something to do with the prevailing belief that if you cursed a person long and hard enough, ill fortune would befall the person. There were times when I wondered whether I was slowly going insane. My mind was in constant turmoil, and I knew no peace. I prayed that the hatred that was torturing me would go away, but it didn't, so I learnt to live with it. It was the constant reminder that all this was but a temporary setback in my life and the vision of that light at the end of the dark tunnel that kept me going during this period when, at seventeen years old, I had to play the multiple roles of father, mother, nursemaid, doctor, teacher, farmer, rubber tapper, and everything Fate could think of to heap on my shoulders!

Then, as if that weren't enough, my eight-year-old cousin became violently ill, alternately burning up with fever and shaking from a mysterious chill. The following day, it dawned on my grandmother and me that my cousin was in the throes of a malaria attack. Illness of any kind was dreaded when there was no way we could procure medicines or even the Chinese herbs my grandmother used for all kinds of ailments.

"Malaria!" I repeated in disbelief after my grandmother. It was a horrifying thought. We didn't have any medicines that could take

care of malaria, and if left untended, people died from it, for God's sake!

It was at this point that I considered giving up on life itself because I was so weary of the endless struggle, but then the sight of my grandmother, at least four times my age and with failing eyesight and strength determinedly ministering to the child, shamed me into pulling myself together.

The next week was the blackest nightmare of my life. By then my other cousin had also come down with the illness and it didn't seem that they were going to make it. I remember those endless nights of depression and deep despair as I massaged my cousins' hands through bout after bout of the violent malaria-induced shivering. There had to be something I could do to get them well. It was a frightening thought, but they could very easily succumb to the illness and become two of the many wartime deaths that were so stupidly needless, so stupidly wasteful of human lives!

By the end of the week, the two girls' skin had assumed an unhealthy yellow pallor and they were worn almost to the bone. I knew that if we didn't get some kind of medication they were going to die for sure!

I made up my mind and went in search of my grandmother.

"Grandma, I can't stand it. I can't sit here and do nothing. Can I go to the town to look for medication for them? I remember when we were talking about malaria in school my teacher mentioned that a medicine called quinine is very effective. Can I go down to the town and try to look for it? Perhaps I can ask Uncle to beg for some from the Japanese?"

"No." My grandmother shook her head firmly. "You are not to go to the town. I don't want you to leave here. I'll go, because nobody will touch an old lady. You stay put and take care of things."

"But, Grandma, I can't let you go alone; it's quite a journey from here. What if anything happens to you?" I persisted.

"What choice have you got? I'm not asking you to stay here; I'm ordering you to do so!"

The old lady was already out the door even as she spoke. She had to hurry if she wanted to catch sufficient light to make it back to the house. I knew she was right, so I let her go, but not without the usual anger and frustration seething inside me at my own helplessness. Dejectedly I went back to the house to care for my cousins. I was exhausted and repulsed by the stench of sickness in the room. I was also worried that my grandmother and I would be the next victims of malaria, and should that happen, with no one to care for us, death from the sickness and starvation was inevitable.

It was really the epitome of human tragedy the way people and especially children were left to die during the Japanese occupation over the smallest ailments and incidents. Malaria was not a small ailment, and therefore it was at least more acceptable to die from it. Things had gotten so bad with the lack of both Western and Chinese medications or medical care of any kind that we were now talking in terms of what kind of illnesses justified death and what did not!

When one of us was stung by a bee and the poison made the stung area throb and swell to twice its size, the only thing we could do was use a poultice made from pounded tea leaves to bring down the swelling and draw out the poison. People had been known to die after being stung by bees, and we could only hope for the best. Mercifully, our hastily improvised poultices seemed to work and the swelling went down after burning up a few days.

Then another time, my youngest cousin had a nasty fall that knocked her out and resulted in a bruise so large and severe that it almost covered her whole forehead. Mercifully, our era was one when nobody thought about the possibility of brain injury and we were left in peace to apply our own remedy of massaging the bruised area with a hard-boiled egg wrapped in a thin-porous material. No matter how one would explain it medically, the swelling and mottled discolouration did go down and almost immediately!

Another time, when the owner of the neighbouring farm was

afflicted with a strange fever that refused to subside, after ten days of suffering during which his skin had become yellow and dry and as he was slipping into a coma, his distraught wife in desperation consulted my grandmother, who was reputed to have no mean collection of "lifesaving" Chinese home remedies. She gradually even became our local doctor throughout the war years!

"Typhoid fever!" my grandmother said immediately. "His body is too hot, and the only way to break the fever is to rub it with hard-boiled eggs and all the heat and toxic materials will be absorbed inside and you will see black hairlike streaks in the eggs afterwards!"

This remedy seems so far-fetched and unlikely that I would have found it unacceptable, too, but for the fact that I was there at the time and witnessed the whole incredible process. After continuous massaging with egg after egg, the fever of the man did break, and buried into the whole of each egg were indeed, as Grandmother said there would be, black streaks of hairlike objects. It was uncanny and unexplainable! This illness was what the Chinese called *motan*, *mo* meaning "hair."

And then, if any one of us had a persistent migraine, my grandmother would say, "There are impurities in your body, and they have to be brought out before the migraine will go." She would then rub oil at four points, both sides of the neck, and down the back and run a saucer over these lubricated areas with some force. Although you may not believe it, true to her word, the areas would soon turn a bright red sprinkled with tiny spots!

"See," My grandmother would nod her head with satisfaction. "The impurities, they've all come out in red spots, and you will feel better now."

She was right. Within minutes, the heavy head and migraine would disappear without much ado! One day, just to prove a point, I did the same thing on my neck without the "benefit" of a migraine. Although the skin turned a pale pink merely from the pressure of

the saucer, there was none of the bright red spotted blotches associated with Grandma's impurities-induced migraine.

When any of us came down with severe abdominal pain from any number of causes, from a simple case of colic to food poisoning, my grandmother's remedy was to pound small red onions into a pulp, wrap the paste in one layer of thin, porous material, and rub it vigorously over the stomach area, after which the red onion paste would be left overnight bound tightly in place by a strip of material. The red onion paste did indeed have a vapourising effect, and true to Grandma's words, it certainly did induce the passing out of all the poisonous and toxic gases from the body and relief was quite imminent!

I remember another of Grandma's remedies that was widely accepted and practiced by the Chinese populace, so it was not in any way peculiar to her. This remedy was so ludicrous that it was almost comical and probably could be viewed as somebody's idea of a bad joke! But do you know, it worked, and how this can be justified medically is beyond me! When anyone came down with mumps, which was known as "pig's head" condition, in a literal translation of the Chinese term, I guess derived from the fact that the face of a person stricken with mumps did indeed resemble that of a pig, my grandmother would immediately produce her blue Chinese ink and brush. The idea was to write the Chinese character for "tiger" and circle the word on both sides of the jaw area where the swelling was, and the tiger would eat up the pig and the mumps would disappear! Which rational person could possibly believe that such an idea was workable, but do you know something? I never heard of anyone who resorted to this ritual who didn't get almost immediate relief from mumps! How that could be possible is something I have never been able to figure out.

My grandmother had also planted in her herb garden a very special plant called the "big ant," in a literal translation of the Chinese term for it. This plant had a most unique ability to stimulate blood clotting. When we suffered severe cuts and even the deepest

gashes, the bleeding could be stopped and the wound closed up by applying a poultice made from pounding the leaves of this plant into a paste. I remember we used to have scores of people from the surrounding farms and holdings calling at our house to beg for leaves from Grandma's "big ant" plant, and as long as it was around, we never had to worry about cuts and the like.

And now as the hours ticked ominously by and still my grandmother had not returned, I managed to console myself by recalling how we had always been able to keep death from calling at our front door and this time it would be no different. Grandma and I had always been able to work something out; we had come too far now to give up.

In the late afternoon, she finally came back. I was relieved to see that she was smiling and she carried several packages, and suddenly I knew that this crisis would blow over and everything was going to be all right.

"The Lord Buddha is smiling down on us today," my grandmother announced as she handed the packages to me and sat down for a rest. I noticed how heavy the parcels were, certainly too heavy for an old lady to lug two miles on foot over rough estate tracks, but she had done it with an iron will.

"I went back to the town house, and there was a young Japanese soldier cleaning his boots in the garden. I was wondering how to communicate with him when he spoke to me in Hockien. I thought for a moment that the Lord Buddha had come down from the heavens to rescue us, for how else could a Japanese speak Hockien? It turned out that he was actually one of us, a Chinese from Taiwan who was drafted into the Japanese army." My grandmother shook her head. "He hates this war and all this conquering as much as we do. It's sinful to force people into a war against their will. He was so kind and gave me not only this medicine for jungle malaria, but also a few packets of sugar. He told me that if his superiors found out, he'd be severely punished."

This was something new to me. There were Chinese in the

Japanese army? Did the Japanese then force Chinese to kill Chinese, too, in this war? Obviously they did. It had to be one of the cruelest things to do, forcing Chinese conscripts to fight, maim and kill their own Chinese compatriots in China and Southeast Asia. But then again, whoever heard of a war without cruelty?

One man, one woman, or even thousands of them can never change the way things are, according to the dictates of those in power. Power: I thought, it has to be the most intense and corrupting force in the lives of those who crave it. The more they have, the greater their need for it, until they are destroyed by this insatiable need. Power and cruelty, they are like Siamese twins, and for those who are the victims of it like us, oh, how great our suffering!

The quinine worked wonders and within days my cousins' appetites returned and they were soon back on their feet again. My grandmother burnt a whole packet of precious joss sticks to the goddess of mercy, who was of course given full credit for the "miracle," and I slaughtered one of our equally precious chickens and, for the first time in a long while, there was laughter and a cause for celebration in our family again.

Miraculously, my grandmother and I did not come down with malaria or any other serious maladies during the whole of the period we spent in the mosquito-infested rubber estates. Later, after we ran out of mosquito coils, the only way we could keep the mosquitoes out was by lighting bonfires around the house every so often. I remember how every inch of the skin on our legs was constantly afflicted with sometimes festering mosquito bites, and to this day my youngest cousin's legs are scarred with old mosquito bites. Sometimes the insect bites would itch so agonisingly that it could not be eased even by one of Grandma's poultices and herbs and I would be scratching the affected areas even in my sleep! The next morning I would wake up to open sores on my legs and fingernails stained with blood. In the end, the only solution to this problem of the subconscious mind acting up to preserve whatever was left of

my skin was wearing a rough kind of gloves made from bits of an old towel, very much in the manner of putting mittens on a baby!

"Don't take dark soya sauce," my grandmother would warn us time and time again, "because it will leave unsightly black marks on all the affected areas, which will never go away."

We were reluctant to follow this probably sound advice, as soya sauce was the only thing that could make our otherwise drab and unimaginative wartime fare bearable, but the vanity that is universal to girls of all ages since time immemorial won the battle for us all except my youngest cousin, who was too young to care, and that explains why her legs are as they are today, scarred beyond redemption.

My grandmother had by now become a full-scale and totally addicted alcoholic. She had always loved her bottle of brandy, but now it had become a necessity. Her evenings were spent either in a drunken stupor or with an effervescent tendency to reminisce about the past, and it was through sitting up with her and listening to all her oral memoirs that I learnt much about her life. Mercifully, my grandmother was never loud or violent when she was intoxicated, except when she couldn't get hold of her nightly dosage of alcohol. Then she would break into a cold sweat, trembling like jelly, almost demented with the need for her elixir—typical alcohol withdrawal symptoms. It was a sight so pitiful and degrading, and I could never bear to see my grandmother in that sort of condition. I learnt to always keep an emergency bottle and even some *tuak*, which the Dayaks would bring for us as they passed through the estate and my grandmother never had to go through this trauma very often. I never tried to stop her drinking habit, which could only be called excessive at best, because I knew that for her it was too late and she needed the numbing effects of alcohol to alleviate her pain and her suffering.

A few days later, my uncle visited us after a long absence and brought us the latest update on what was happening.

"The period of instability and lawlessness seems to be over.

The Japanese seem to have established a rudimentary system of law and order, and it's reasonably peaceful now," he announced. "Some people are coming back to the town, the schools have reopened, but those pigs insist the kids study Japanese, and there's talk that they will be coming out with their own notes and currency. The shops have reopened and life is much the same as before, but there is still fear and much resentment among the people." He shook his head. "Life will never be the same again; the good old days are really over."

"If people are coming back to the town, that means it's safe for us to go there, too, right?" my second cousin asked eagerly. "Grandma, can we also move back to the town?"

"You forget one thing," I reminded her none too gently. Although I loved her dearly, her scatterbrained disposition and inability to accept the seriousness of any situation could try the patience of a saint! "We no longer have any home there. The shop houses have been burnt down and our house is being used by the Japanese as a hospital. What do you propose we do, drive the Japanese out of our house?"

"Oh, I forgot about that." My cousin's face fell. She looked so crestfallen and depressed that I regretted my sharp rejoinder somewhat. My cousin was a dreamer; she wanted to believe that life was a bed of roses and refused to face and accept the harsh realities of life. So I had to force them upon her, often unceremoniously. I understood her feelings because I was just as frustrated in the knowledge that I was wasting my youth and opportunities. This kind of stagnant existence was eating into me, and all I wanted now was to get on with my life. Two years of it had been lost to the meaningless struggles just to stay alive, and I was beginning to feel that if I had to continue in this manner, pretty soon I would be brain-dead!

It was at this point that the tide of my life changed again. With relative peace and order restored, we were at last able to venture out of the jungles that our untended rubber estates had be-

come. . . . The era and saga of almost one hundred years of close-knitted Chinese emigrants was nearing its end, and in its place a new postwar materialism and cynicism were about to emerge.

The fiercely cohesive sentiment of "one for all and all for one" was about to give way to the new mental attitude of "every man for himself . . ."

CHAPTER 11

The twelfth of August 1943 was to be the happiest day for us in a long time, for on that day, for the first time in two years, we were at last able to leave our jungle hideout. Two years of enforced isolation without any contact with the outside world, two years of living on edge and in constant fear, it had indeed been hell!

Weeks before, we had been informed that our stacks of notes and coins that we had brought with us when we escaped from the town house were now no longer recognised as currency and thus had become totally worthless. It was a terrible blow, and once again we were faced with yet another setback in our battle-scarred lives thus far. We had hoarded the money and derived a sense of security from it, but now even that was taken away from us and we really had nothing left anymore. Even after the war, the currency was not revived and we lost a small fortune there. The only items we could dispose of to tide us over during the reconstruction of our lives after liberation were Grandma's fabulous collection of gold and diamond accessories, which were sold for a pittance and marked the end of an era when "all that glittered *was* gold"!

"No money, not a cent to our name!" my cousin wailed. "What good is anything if we have no money!"

The Japanese had nullified the old currency and forced everyone to use their currency, popularly known as the "banana" money. It was probably called banana money for two reasons, the first being the innocuous reference to the picture of a bunch of bananas that characterised the notes used for the remaining period of the Japanese occupation, the second the more sinister and

sarcastic one of portraying the Japanese as a banana, on the outside identifying themselves as Asians and on the inside with the mentality and superior attitudes that were no better than those of the colonists of that period.

Never one to accept defeat easily, I devised a scheme to procure some of the hated but for the time being much needed banana money. I roped in two of our former plantation workers to dispose of the rubber sheets we began to toil day and night to churn out with the amazing speed that comes with purpose and motivation, and this, together with the freshly harvested crop of pineapples, tapioca, sweet potatoes, and yams, sold for a comfortable profit to the traders who had begun to resurface with the restoration of a law and order of sorts. Two policies governed our lives and probably helped sustain us during these difficult years: "Never say die!" and "Where there's a will, there's always a way!" We also discovered the amazing elasticity of life. As long as we were blessed with good health and, as the favourite Chinese saying went, "good hands and good legs," no matter how taut we were stretched, we were always able to bounce back with a way out for everything.

I was deeply gratified by the fact that for the first time in my life I was receiving monetary returns for my pains; it was a new experience for me. In good times I had never had to generate income through my own efforts. It had always been there, all the money and everything else that I could ever want.

It dawned upon me then that when it came to the crunch there was nothing I could not do. This war had caught us all most unexpectedly and unprepared and had plunged us into the alien world of deprivation, poverty, and toil, and there was no turning back. Those who could not pass its stringent tests just could not survive. As it turned out, this toughening process was to stand me in good stead as I passed through the many traumatic phases of my later life.

For now, all I could feel was contentment and a quiet sense of fulfillment as I clutched the thick wad of Japanese notes in my by

now work-worn hands. I noticed them for the first time in years, those white, smooth hands with their long, tapering fingers I had always been proud of.

A sorry sight indeed! I thought ruefully, grimacing at the sight of my hands as they were now, rough and calloused with work, the fingernails so torn and soil-encrusted that they could have been no match for even the most work-worn hands of a rubber tapper on our estates in our prewar world of ease and plenty.

In later years, no matter what I did, I could never get those telltale hands to become civilised again. They stayed as grim reminders of my war experience for the rest of my life, together with my deplorable dental condition and other physical shortcomings due to the at times gross nutritional deficiencies we suffered.

The war was also full of surprises and did funny things to us. Not long after things settled down, I was to be drawn into the most unimaginable, the most repugnant, and the almost sacrilegious situation, that of consorting with the enemy. I hated myself for such weakness, but there it was; emotions in the very young and the very vulnerable tended to be irrational, with a will of their own! I could no more help myself than a bee could help being drawn to honey! But that was to come later, and for the moment I was happily unaware that such controversial issues that were guaranteed to complicate my life were about to surface.

We were in high spirits as we prepared to leave our jungle hideout for the first time in over two years; I suppose anyone who had lived in such isolation for so long as we did could not feel any less exuberant. I could no longer remember a time when I could wake up to a table laden with food, clothes that were dressy and frivolous, and a fulfilling day of books, learning, daydreams, and doing the rounds with a brisk and authoritative grandmother, fully in control of her life.

I suppose I had expected everything to be as they were in the prewar years as we covered the two miles of beaten tracks cutting through the rubber estates that would take us to the town. Every-

thing was still the same, the hard, lumpy tracks with their treacherous tree roots that always seemed to be waiting maliciously to trip up the unsuspecting and the less adapt, the tall slender rubber trees all around, and the whispering of the leaves high overhead.

Nothing has changed in two years, only us; it is only us that have changed! I thought, and suddenly I was sad that I had been robbed of two years of my life and it was not yet over. *How many more years must be wasted before we are free?*

We have no answer! the wind whispered.

Maybe freedom is an illusion and it will never come! the lone bird that had been trailing us mocked.

I couldn't stand it anymore. "Shut up!" I told them.

Suddenly I didn't want to distinguish between illusions and reality anymore!

The town that we stumbled into a good two hours later stunned me as much as it grudgingly intrigued me. Gone was our idyllic little town that had been uncorrupted and untouched by the vulgarity of materialism when I last saw it. I was shocked by what I saw now. Bau had always been left to its own devices; it was so peaceful and crime-free that we were lucky to stumble upon an occasional policeman dozing away in his reluctant duty! In fact, we were considered so unsubversive and noncontroversial that the Brooke government virtually closed one eye on even the Chinese flag occupying pride of place in our school and we were left to manage our community in whatever way we deemed fit. After all, we were no threat to anyone!

Now the town was filled with Japanese soldiers patrolling the streets and lounging around the two coffee shops, which had resumed business with one major difference: gone were the budding and self-proclaimed "politicians" whose vocal cords were unlike any I have ever heard since; gone were the cheerful and animated proprietor and his wife, who, not to be outdone, often insisted on contributing to the din, coffee cups poised precariously in midair. I remember waiting with bated breath for the inevitable

minor accident to occur, but it never did. The couple never forgot that they were skilled coffee vendors first and "political activists" only second! The same proprietor and his wife were still there, but now they skulked around their own domain, scraping and bowing to the Japanese soldiers who monopolised the coffee shop. Understandably, none of the local people wanted to hang out there anymore, as no one wanted to risk any confrontation with the Japanese. I suppose nobody could blame the coffee shop proprietor and his wife after all. When one is faced with a stronger force that could quite cheerfully ram a rifle butt into one's face, bowing and scraping while waiting for one's day to come seems a small price to pay. But still, I was saddened by this clear indication of what all of us had become.

It came to me then that all this was about what we had always been taught to believe in, *jern*, or tolerance and endurance in the face of all adversities in life. It was this principle of rigid endurance that had seen my grandmother and her father through the unimaginable hardships of arriving from China with nothing more or better than the clothes on their backs to build up an admirable financial empire, and it was again this concept that was called upon to see us through the harsh realities of an unwanted war. I have indeed never seen a people more able to adapt to the most severe changes in circumstances and environments and overcome them than us, the overseas Chinese.

I noticed that although most of the shops had reopened and it was business as usual, the unprecedented military presence made everybody nervous. I couldn't blame them; my knees were quaking as we walked down the familiar streets. The sight of those uniforms and the rifles, not to mention the unfamiliar guttural language the Japanese soldiers spoke, was enough to make any simple country girl go into a state of petrified coma! It was a long time and many trips later before we were able to cross the path of a Japanese soldier without a sinking heart and hands clammy with fear-induced sweat. In retrospect, to be fair to the Japanese, apart from the occasional

sexual innuendoes, which I always met with a stony, subservient silence, we were never in any way harmed; it was more our own fear that was our undoing. We had been advised through the bitter experience of others that as long as we were prepared to bow and scrape to the Japanese and feed their thirst for power, we would at least be spared any abuse at their hands.

As the Japanese had gained complete control and there was no threat of any resistance, they had relaxed somewhat and for the most part allowed the local people to carry on with their lives. Thus the lone cinema had started its black-and-white movies again and the colourful Chinese opera shows often held in the field adjoining the Hakka Association had begun insidiously to creep back into the local scene again. The Chinese opera shows, as I remembered them, had always drawn huge crowds from the young and old in a town where entertainment was minimal. They were usually held during the feast days of the various Chinese deities and, although originally meant to entertain the deities in question, gave just as much pleasure to flesh-and-blood mortals like us! These opera shows were most skilfully performed by special opera troupes from China and involved many years of hard training. The actors and actresses were heavily painted and wore garish stage costumes of centuries-old China, and their performances of many famous Chinese legends were so powerful and dramatic that we were often spellbound in a world of fantasy and through them were able to relive the lives of people long dead and events long gone. These opera shows are still today held in modern Singapore but do not appear to hold much interest for the younger people, and much of their magic and meaning is no longer fully appreciated.

Now, with so many soldiers around, I had to remember that our town was no longer a safe place to wander around at night. In the evenings and well into the night the Japanese would be hanging out at the gambling dens, drinking themselves into noisy brawls and open cavorting with the prostitutes who were always around them.

"Well," as my grandmother reasoned in her usual pragmatic way, "the prostitutes serve a purpose, too. As long as they are available to service those soldiers, they will leave girls like you alone."

I remember, too, the foreign-looking girls that the troops had brought with them, sad and tired-looking young women who lived virtually as prisoners at the many camps and were seldom seen by the local people. Some were probably "comfort women," forced into prostitution, and some, as far as we knew, were Japanese girls who had been sold into prostitution by their impoverished parents. They certainly had no cause to look or feel happy, and if you go to the Japanese cemeteries in Malaysia today you will still see the simple and haunting wooden headstones bearing the names of many Japanese war prostitutes, or war victims, as I would prefer to think of them, many dead by the age of twenty, unable to withstand the multiple and savage sexual demands imposed on them by the Japanese troops they were forced to service.

Oh, what sorrows and anguish these women must have suffered in their private hell, where their only reason for existence was to satisfy the carnal appetites of the thousands of men who used and discarded them uncaringly!

There were basically two types of business during the war that flourished, the alcohol and the flesh trade. The Japanese were great drinkers. I had never seen anybody drink quite like that in my life, and keeping them in liquor became the unenviable task of the coffee shop proprietor. In the evenings the two coffee shops became our town's equivalent of the hottest nightspots and bars, catering exclusively to the Japanese soldiers.

The poor coffee shop proprietor and his now unbelievably chastised wife appeared to be perpetually bleary-eyed and tired because they had to stay open until the small hours every night to serve the Japanese troops and their women. It was no wonder that after the war no amount of persuasion, coercion, or lure of

monetary returns could make them stay open beyond six o'clock every evening!

It is said that the flesh trade is an inevitable by-product of any war, and if I had hoped that our small town of strict moral codes and traditional Chinese values would be spared, I was, of course, wrong. The girls quickly learnt that there was money to be made and unlimited supplies of food, materials, and every other conceivable item that had become a real luxury in our war-induced scarcity situation to be had, and all these for the price of their bodies. Somehow a war with its uncertainties always seems to incite in people a sometimes uncharacteristic recklessness, the soldiers who had death stalking them all the time, with their excessive whoring, drinking, and brawling, the at other times perfectly normal and virtuous girls that we had known shrugging their way into prostitution armed with this philosophy: "Who knows what will happen tomorrow anymore? There is only today for us now!" Those girls who lived by this philosophy said, "What the hell?," made up their faces to suit their roles, donned their Sunday best, and got down to business without further ado, much to the mortification of their families, who disowned them immediately.

The Japanese soldiers were more health-conscious than most and required the local prostitutes to line up for periodic checks at the base clinic for venereal diseases and birth control, and in accordance with their reputation for precision and control, one seldom heard of incidents of half-Japanese wartime babies like the Amerasians!

Our former town house was now an army hospital, and it pained us to see the long queue of prostitutes waiting in our garden to be given a clean bill of health before they could proceed with their profession. This desecration of our home affected me so much that I wanted to rush in and sweep out all the moral filth, but I knew that if I did that, I would probably be thrown out or forced to join the queue!

There were two notorious queues in town, the local people

whispered, one of the prostitutes for their periodic checks and one of the soldiers lining up for their services, both opposite ends of the same stick! Who would ever have thought that this was possible in our hitherto straitlaced town?

All it needs is a twist of fate, and the strangest things can happen, I thought. Here I am, standing in the bushes watching strangers running all over my house!

And Grandma's beautiful garden, always vibrant with the riotous colors of the roses and bougainvillea she lovingly tended each evening, was now a mad tangle of dried branches and a few straggly blooms. One of the girls playfully plucked off a small blossom, tucked it into her hair, and did an erotic dance. She was unfamiliar to me, one of the girls from Kuching who had followed the soldiers to their camp in Bau. I had an irresistible impulse to slap her.

"Don't touch Grandma's flowers, you slut!" I wanted to scream, but I didn't. Instead, I just turned away and fled. I didn't want to stick around anymore.

My world, our world, was innocent no more. Social corruption and depravity had been initiated and were here to stay. A truly great era of honour and traditional values would from now on begin to disintegrate. . . .

CHAPTER 12

In 1944, with the Japanese occupation in its third year, although there was much talk about the big, strong countries like America, Britain, and Australia forming an allied force to defeat the Japanese, there was no sign of that happening in Sarawak yet. I was eighteen years old and my body and my mind were beginning to feel all kinds of new emotions, desires, and ambitions that had to be suppressed because the war gave our lives no opportunities to surge forward to fulfill those needs and ambitions. The result was total frustration and an avowed hatred for the Japanese invaders who had wasted so many of the formative years of our lives.

One morning, more depressed than usual, I was sitting propped up against one of the many identical rubber trees for which I had come to develop an unreasonable aversion. I needed to vent my frustration on something, so I started on the song I had improvised from one of the current Chinese tunes that vowed undying vengeance on the Japanese invaders for wrecking my life and that of my family and committing them to hellfire. It was a childish act and not one that I was normally in the habit of resorting to, but it did make me feel better, so what the heck?

Suddenly I froze in midsong. There was the unwelcome sound of feet crunching on dry leaves and the snapping of twigs. Someone was approaching! Since the war, I have never been able to listen to those sounds and not feel the familiar sensation of fear, which began at the pit of the stomach and then moved up to my throat to strangle me with its intensity.

It's the Japanese! If they heard what I was singing, they will

harm me for sure! I thought. *I've gone and done it this time!* Then I relaxed, *How could they understand?* I had been singing in Mandarin, after all! It just showed what a nervous wreck I had become!

I was right; it was a Japanese soldier in army uniform. I considered making a dash for it, but it was too late. So I stayed put and averted my head, hoping against hope that he would not notice me but go away. No such luck, a pair of black army boots appeared in front of me and I was suddenly very aware that I was all alone and very vulnerable to physical abuse, and for the first time in my life I wished I was a wizened old lady with no teeth, which would gain me reprieve from any unwanted attention. Again, no such luck!

And then he spoke and I almost keeled over with surprise. The Japanese soldier spoke the most beautiful Mandarin I had ever heard outside the precincts of my school and my pedigreed teachers. He was obviously a Chinese, an apparition perhaps?

"Don't be frightened, miss. I won't harm you," the apparition said. "even though I understood every word of your song!"

Before me stood the most gorgeous young man I had ever encountered in my life and especially during the last three years, when the only men I had been fortunate or unfortunate enough to come across were my two uncles, the occasional estate worker, and the Dayaks passing through, all most uninspiring in looks and other physical attributes!

The years have blurred my memory of many events, but I can never forget this young man who was the first to stir certain emotions in me that I hadn't even known existed! He was your typical Adonis, tall, well built, with the whitest teeth imaginable! The only thing that marred his perfection was the Japanese military uniform he wore.

When I remained silent, the Adonis spoke again. "You guessed right! I am Chinese like yourself. We moved from Taiwan to Japan to do business when I was just a child, and when the war broke out I was forced to join the army."

Despite myself and my resolution to hate everything that had anything to do with the Japanese, I couldn't help looking at him with interest. He was obviously educated. In fact, I decided he looked more like a scholar than a soldier, and those long beautiful fingers didn't look as if they could hang onto a gun long enough to shoot!

I had always admired education in a person, and suddenly I was very conscious of my localised Mandarin with its unimpressive intonations, which no amount of admonitions from my teachers had been able to correct. That was the problem, I think, with us emigrant Chinese. Very often we felt that we were neither here nor there. We were neither really native speakers of Mandarin nor, when English became the official language and the medium of instructions in most schools native English speakers!

Well, in the next twenty minutes I learnt that he had been a medical student in Tokyo when he was drafted into the army and that he was now serving as a medical officer in the army base hospital, right in our town house! After the war, he intended to return to medical school and complete his studies. From him, too, I learnt that it was unfair to blame every single Japanese for the war. Like us, very few of the ordinary Japanese people wanted this war, which had been thrust upon them, and like us, too, there was much disruption to their lives and even greater suffering and poverty.

It was wonderful to be in the company again of someone closer to my age and intellectual level, and against my will I was drawn to this man who wore the uniform of our enemy and who was, to all intents and purposes, our enemy. I should have hated him, but I couldn't!

Instead, to my own consternation, I heard myself carrying on a most animated conversation with the young soldier, who, mindful of my sensibilities as far as the Japanese and all things Japanese were concerned, introduced himself by his Chinese name of Lim rather than his Japanese name. It was the correct move because it

was impossible for me, a third-generation overseas Chinese, to feel any lasting animosity towards a fellow Chinese notwithstanding that he wore the uniform of the enemy.

I had enjoyed the company of this strange young man who had appeared suddenly without warning into my life so much that I was somewhat disappointed when he stood up, brushed the dry leaves from his clothes, and said, "I have to go back to camp now. It was nice meeting you, and we'll meet again." With a wave and the crunching of boots on dry leaves and twigs he was gone and I was left in a daze, wondering whether it had all been real, this most unlikely meeting, which now left me with a strange disorientated feeling.

I must be mad, shameless, a real hussy, with no self-respect and dignity; I berated myself brutally, to consort with a person from the very enemy camp that brought financial ruin to my family!

A few days later, when I found myself unable to forget the young soldier called Lim, I was convinced that the war had finally gone to my head and driven me insane. And yet I couldn't help myself—I began to take greater pains with my appearance. I scrubbed my hands to some semblance of their former glory and brought out my better clothes from their hiding places, all for the apparition I hoped would surface again. If my family noticed the changes in me, they wisely kept their counsel, as I was known to have the meanest tongue for miles around when I was provoked!

I often think of this poignant experience with deep nostalgia. It was to be one of the many love stories that began with the war and tragically ended with the war. It caused me a lot of pain and anguish, but I would not have missed it for all the world, for never again in my life would I experience such intensity of feelings, such joy in the emotional interaction with another human being. Long after it was over, I could not forget this brief interlude of my life when I learnt to live, to love, and to laugh again against the emotion-charged backdrop of war and strife.

A few days after our meeting, my young man called on us with

a bag of scarce food items hijacked, no doubt, from the army supplies that he had access to, and after that we enjoyed many luxuries compliments of the Japanese army through Lim, who became a frequent visitor! He was excellent with old people and won the heart of my grandmother hands down right from the start! Strangely enough, nobody could remember that he was, in fact, a member of the Japanese army and that we were supposed to hate him. Nobody seemed to care that we could not hate him. Because he was a Chinese, it was easier to see him as one of us rather than one of them!

I remember most of all the long walks, whenever we could get away from my two cousins' grim determination to chaperone us and our equally grim determination to shake them off! He told me about his life in Taiwan and then Tokyo, about his family and his dreams and hopes for the future. He talked about things and places I could only dream about. We were two kindred spirits who should never have been forced apart, but what was never meant to be could never be. That was destiny, and no two mere mortal beings like us could fight it.

"The war will come to an end soon," he told me one day. "The Americans are laying ultimatums for the Japanese, and in the end they will have to surrender. It's wrong, all this conquering and aggression. We are taking a step backward and not forward."

This was what I had always wanted, for the war to end so that we could get on with our lives. Why then did I feel this sudden heaviness of heart? I knew then that it was the end of the road for Lim and me.

Whereas before my life had gone through great physical and material metamorphoses because of the war, now, as it neared its end, I was to suffer great emotional upheaval as well. All in all, I could say now that my life went through the complete circle of disruption because of the war and I was spared nothing. The mental anguish of an ill-fated wartime love story involving a man sitting

on the other side of the fence was totally unenviable, and it was to change my life forever.

Now, even as I considered in silence the weight of Lim's announcement, he was saying in earnest, "You know I have to go back to Tokyo. Come with me; we will have a good life together. I know it sounds preposterous for me to ask you to go with me to a country that conquered yours and caused you so much suffering, a country that is your enemy. But when the war is over, there will be no more hostilities. . . . Come with me."

That evening, my grandmother innocently compounded my suffering by commenting, "You seem to be getting too close to Lim; do you think it is advisable? You know there can be no future in it and in the end you'll be hurt. Listen to me, child. I am an old lady and have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice. Tell him you can't see him anymore. There's talk that the war is nearly over, and when that happens where does it leave you? Do you think you can go back to Tokyo with him? I won't let you; it's dangerous because nobody knows what goes on there and what could happen to you."

I remember that night. It was one of those beautiful nights with a gentle breeze blowing and little birds cooing contentedly, but I couldn't sleep. My head was throbbing and pounding with these words: "Come with me"; ". . . there can be no future in it . . ."; "Do you think you can go back to Tokyo with him? I won't let you . . ."

Whichever way I turned, sleep and peace eluded me, and as the first fingers of light streaked the sky in that quiet time before daybreak, when even the forest creatures seemed to pause, I knew what I had to do. I could never leave my family behind and go to some distant shore, perhaps never to be heard of again. I was a Chinese brought up to honour the responsibilities of filial piety. My grandmother was old and needed me. I could never leave her. My ancestors' wrath would be upon me if I did such a thing, and besides, I couldn't. I just didn't have the courage to venture into

what was not only the unknown, but also until recently a greatly feared enemy territory. Who could blame me?

This is all I needed to make my suffering complete! was my last angry thought as I fell at last into a fitful sleep.

Lim was devastated by my decision, and until the very last moment before his departure he tried to make me change my mind, but although it almost killed me, I stood firm. A few days later, he was shipped out of Sarawak with one of the last battalions of Japanese troops and out of my life. I never saw him again.

For days afterwards I cried, releasing all the pent-up sorrow, anger, and frustration of not only the untimely end of a cherished relationship, but also of four years of the hell of being caught in the maelstrom of a needless war. I cried for the sufferings inflicted on all those people like me who had been brought together and then torn apart by the war. I cried until I was all burnt out and dried up and was able to cry no more.

In 1945, at long last, the war was over. The Japanese had surrendered unconditionally to the Allied forces, and there was much rejoicing amongst the local people. Almost one could feel sorry for the Japanese troops who had invaded us with such great power and strength now slinking away in total defeat amidst the jeering and taunting of those of the local community given to such displays of emotions.

The Japanese troops were withdrawn batch by batch, and following their surrender military supplies were suspended and those last remaining soldiers were reduced to living on wild jungle vegetables while waiting for transportation out of the country, a real violation of human dignity and self-respect. But there were many who felt that the soldiers were but receiving a taste of the bitter medicine of humiliation they had meted out indiscriminately in their heyday.

While all around me people were jubilant and flushed with the success of the liberation, as it was called, I was going through the most traumatic period of my life thus far, for almost as a parting

shot, my wartime love had been taken from me. I no longer cared that the war had ended or that I could now get on with my life.

What life? I asked myself. *When all I have inherited from this war is a ruined heart and a broken spirit! Where and how do I start to put my life in order again?*

Right to the end, the young man from my past had pleaded with me, "Come with me!" but it was no use. I could not do it; I could not forsake my traditional Chinese principles of filial piety and family ties and venture into what was to be the unknown.

You must remember that I lived in the chaotic postwar time when leaving for a distant shore virtually meant cutting all family ties. There wasn't the ease of communication of this current jet age, and God alone knew when postwar Japan would normalise relations with the international community. Because I was, after all, only nineteen years old, because my will was not strong enough to face this challenge, I let my young man go. I never saw him again.

Almost as soon as he had gone, I wondered whether I had done the right thing, and in the years to come I was often tortured with questions of what my life could have been if only I had not been so fearful of the unknown, if only I had taken up the challenge . . . if only . . . There are indeed too many "if onlys," too many regrets, in life that one is constantly plagued with!

Life but gives you one chance to alter its course. All it takes is one moment of hesitation, one moment of indecision, to steer your life down a different direction. I learnt to live with that regret for the rest of my life.

There was nothing left for me to do now but join the throngs of people immersed in the postwar reconstruction of their lives amidst all the chaos, financial ruin, and scarcity of all the basic resources that represented the aftermath of the war.

We returned to the town house, which, though ravaged, was in better condition than we had dared to hope, because it had been used as an army hospital and therefore had to be maintained in a reasonable condition. Still it had not escaped being ravaged in the

wake of the retreating troops towards the end. Because we no longer had any of our workers at our beck and call, it took us quite a while to restore the house to its minimal habitable condition, and still the roof in the kitchen leaked when it rained. My grandmother decided to put this to good use by placing her biggest dragon urns at the particular spot of leakage, and we collected water for washing.

We tried to resume our lives where we had left off, but something was missing. I realised that where there had been the laughter and ease of a prosperous household there was now the gloom and anxiety of a home preoccupied with trying to make ends meet. Although my grandmother tried to cling to her lands as long as she could, in the end she gave in and a large parcel of our rubber estate was disposed off to keep us in clothes and food. This pattern went on. Every time our resources ran out, a parcel of the rubber estates was sold, and in the end all that remained of my grandmother's large empire was the land on which the house stood and her plot of land at the cemetery.

All around us were families who suffered similar misfortunes, and somewhere along the lines of the fierce struggle to rebuild lives and lost fortunes emerged a new materialism and cynicism and the magic of our prewar lives of warmth and sincerity was lost forever.

Exhausted from the efforts to keep the heads of my family above water and the loss of my wartime love, heartsick with endless self-questioning: *Why do I feel that I have made the biggest mistake in my life?*, I accepted a request to teach at the newly reopened Chinese School in the town. There, I was to meet an English teacher ten years older than I, and in a reckless moment, to escape the haunting memories of my beautiful young medical officer who was lost to me forever, I was to leap into marriage, with disastrous consequences. I was just twenty years old.

The war had indeed successfully carved up my life into pieces and laid it in ruins all around me. In the end, it was all fated, this

was my destiny, and as my grandmother would say, "No one in this life can escape their destiny!"

Now, as I stand in the ruined garden of the ruined house, I am once again haunted by the memories of another time, another life. The spirits of people long dead seem to be all around me. I revel in the atmosphere they create, and above all, I remember the agonies of my wartime love. Where is he now who was breathing and living in this very house so long ago? Where is he now who laughed and cried with me as the war approached its tragic end and our lives began to crumble under the weight of responsibilities?

I believe now that life has no happy endings, only worthy or unworthy endings, and in the end we have to live with our memories and bear the burdens of our mistakes. For the last time I let it all wash over me like tropical rain over my heart.

And now it was time to let go of the past and let the memories rest in peace. I turned my back on the old house and began to walk away. . . .