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The Thorn of Lion City

Lucy Lum

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The Thorn of Lion City: A Memoir

«HarperCollins»

Lum L.

The Thorn of Lion City: A Memoir / L. Lum — «HarperCollins»,

An intense and emotive memoir of one girl’s difficult family upbringing in a Singaporean Chinese family during the Second World War.Lucy Lum was the third of seven children, born in Singapore in 1933 into a Chinese immigrant family ruled with an iron hand by Popo, her fearsome and superstitious grandmother. Popo is a firm believer in the old ways, in stomach-churning herbalist remedies, in the dubious fortune-telling of mystics, and in mischievous little girls like Lucy knowing their place, and is forever keen to dispense her own wicked brand of justice, much to the despair of her adopted family.Yet the suffering does not end at home. This is Singapore in the forties, a former British colony now living under the spectre of the invading Japanese – the hungry worms crawling down from the north as Lucy knows them – and fear floods the streets outside the family home. Lucy's father, a kind-hearted and talented linguist, finds himself being used by the occupiers as a translator, and brings back terrifying stories of his merciless employers, family friends blown apart inside their rickety shelters, dead bodies heaped on top of one another by the roadside, that he confides to his daughter under the heavy teak table in the dining room.‘The Thorn of Lion City’ is a fascinating and honest account of wartime occupation and of a little girl's upbringing in a repressive Chinese family. At times harrowing, at others touching, it breaks the long silence of the Singaporean Chinese and speaks of hardship, family and the softly-spoken, redemptive relationship between a father and daughter.

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The Thorn of Lion City

A MEMOIR

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In memory of my father, Lum Poh-mun

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'Look at the red-haired devil's air-raid shelter,' Popo said, pointing to our neighbour's garden. 'How clever he is. So different from your father. It is like a house, their shelter, with camp beds and chairs, a wireless and lights. And so pretty outside, with tapioca, sugar cane and all those flowers.'

For weeks my grandmother Popo had told us that we were not to worry: the Japanese would never capture Singapore because the British would turn back the invaders. 'Life will go on as normal,' she said. But there were soldiers on every street, in the shops and the cinema. Every rickshaw had a soldier inside it. There were air-raid drills, and people dug in their gardens, building makeshift bomb shelters. You could tell how big a family was from the size of the mound of soil in the garden. Some of the shelters were like little foxholes, covered with wooden planks, branches and earth, but in our street the red-haired devil's shelter was the biggest and best, and we were jealous. He was the English officer in charge of the police station where Father worked. His wife and children had been evacuated to England and he told Father that if the bombs came we could hide in his shelter with him and be safe.

Father said we did not need a hole under the earth to hide in. Instead he put the heavy teak table in the middle of the bedroom, then piled blankets and three kapok mattresses on top. He put more mattresses round the sides. He said these would stop the flying shrapnel and the ceiling crashing down on us. 'If the bombs come, you won't need to run outside to our neighbour's garden. You can jump from your beds and curl up under the table. You must have fresh water and biscuits at the ready in your satchels,' he said. 'There will be no time to waste.' When he talked to us about the bombs he was careful not to catch Popo's or Mother's eye. He was frightened of them. They did not like him telling them what to do.

My brothers, my sisters and I looked forward to the air-raid drills. We thought they were games. We five would grab our satchels, as Father had told us, race to the bedroom and dive under the table. It was dark and snug in there and we would play for hours. Sometimes Father would tell us stories about the island his family came from, Hainan, and we would listen and munch our biscuits.

I was seven, and no one explained anything to me. I was frightened of Popo too. Father told me that we should call her Waipo, Outside Grandmother, because she was our mother's mother, not his. But if we called her Waipo she beat her chest and told us she would kill herself. 'This old bag of bones has lived too long,' she would say. 'Even my grandchildren do not love me.'

One day I was brave: I asked Popo who the invaders were and why they wanted to attack Singapore. She went to a cupboard, pushed aside the piles of paper and the tiny red purses in which she kept the dried umbilical cords of her children and grandchildren, and pulled out a great map of the world. It was yellow with age and almost falling to pieces, but she spread it on the table in front of her.

'Listen,' she said, lowering herself into her favourite armchair. 'My mother told me this story when I was a child. The mulberry tree is covered with rich and delicious leaves, which the silkworm likes. This is China,' she said, pointing to a huge pink country on the map. 'It is a country of plenty, like the mulberry tree with its leaves, but it is plagued by starving Japanese silkworms from across the sea.' She rapped her knuckles on the islands of Japan, which crawled across the blue sea towards China. 'The silkworms have hardly any food and their greedy eyes are fixed on China where there is plenty. That is why they attack. To devour us.'

Popo told me of the long history of fighting between China and Japan, about how the Japanese invaded French Indochina, about things I didn't understand then – economic sanctions and oil embargoes, Japan wanting more oil and planning to steal it from Borneo, only four hundred miles to the east, but Singapore was in the way. And she told me of a British man called Raffles, who came in 1819 and wasn't frightened of the swamps and marshes. He had taken control of the narrow strait between Malaya and Java, and borrowed Singapore from the Sultan of Johor. She told me of how the British had come to Malacca and Penang, Labuan and, most of all, to Singapore, and how the Chinese had come too, from Fukien, Swatow and Kwantung, where she and her husband Kung-kung had been born. She told me all of this, and then she spat, 'The filthy Japanese! They have killed many Chinese and we will always be their enemies.'

We lived in British government quarters and our house in Paterson Road was across the street from where Father worked. The house was divided into flats. We had the ground floor and a Malay police inspector lived upstairs with his family. The red-haired devil said they, too, could come into his air-raid shelter if the bombs fell. Our house was square and had wide verandas shaded with bamboo blinds. Inside we had three bedrooms, a sitting room and another room for the servants. In the garden there were hibiscus, papaya, banana, cherry and jackfruit trees, and an oriental henna with leaves shaped like little lances; the Malay women in the *kampung* at the back of our house came to us to ask for the henna leaves and I would watch them stain their palms and fingers for weddings and other ceremonies.

The Malay cemetery, with its lines of numbered round headstones, was next door. It was for Muslims so there were no plants or flowers. From my bedroom window I could see the Chinese cemetery on a hillock across the road, the graves terraced with marble and mosaic. Popo had told me that the richer the family, the more elaborate their ancestor's resting-place; sometimes we played hide and seek among the graves, and when I hid, I would remember the dead all around me and not want to play any more.

A huge durian tree stood at the bottom of the Chinese cemetery; it was the tallest tree I had ever seen, fifty or sixty feet tall, perhaps more. No one dared climb it to pick the fruits, but waited for them to fall to the ground. In season, the abundance of spiny-shelled durians, hanging high in the tree, made people stare. Then the tree's owner would hire two guards to stop anyone helping themselves to the fruit. Sometimes the guards left the tree, and when strong winds brought down the durians, the boys from the *kampung* ran to pick them up. We loved the sweet custardy pulp, and I asked Popo if I could search the ground beneath the tree before the guards arrived in the morning. But she told me, 'We cannot eat fruit from that tree because it is different. The *fei-shui* from all those dead people feed and sustain it and we don't eat the *fei-shui* of dead people.'

The Malay children upstairs wouldn't play with us in the garden. When they came to visit, they would not eat or drink. When they cooked for us we ate their tasty food, and we couldn't understand why they wouldn't eat ours. Father told me about the Prophet Muhammad, and how Muslims could not eat blood or pork, or food that had been offered in prayers. Whenever Popo and my mother went to Chinatown, they would bring back meat and hang it on a bamboo pole in the garden to dry; in the heat, the fat would melt off the bacon and the pork sausages and drip to the ground. Father said the Malay children would not play in our garden because the soil had in it the fat of pigs.

Popo was always talking about the spirits of the dead and the demons who lived in the world below. If we were ill, or there was an accident in the house, she would say it was because one of us had upset the gods. She prayed hardest when she hadn't won at *mah-jongg* for a long time. She would rush to the temple to find out if the gods were angry with her, and pray as hard as she could, then shower them with *shong yau*, oil for the lamp, and burn gold joss paper with the ends tucked in, like tiny ingots. But sometimes she thought her bad luck had been brought about by the spirits from the Chinese cemetery across the road, who came out after dusk to roam free in the upper world. 'They are dangerous and unforgiving,' said Popo, 'not like the gods. The spirits are invisible, but they hear

and feel us. When the gates of the world below open, they come out from the earth. Don't pee or spit outside,' she would warn us, 'but if you must, remember to say first, "Forgive me."'

After sunset, Popo would lay offerings to the spirits on the ground at the back of our house near the chicken coop, out of sight of the cemeteries. She would burn silver joss paper, lay out flowers and fruit for the Chinese spirits, and a dozen split coconuts for the Muslim spirits. My brother Beng's job was to stoke the burning joss paper with a metal rod. He liked to pass me the hot end so that I burnt my palm, and screamed in pain. After her prayers Popo would scatter the offerings all over the garden where she said the spirits could find them, but Father worried about our Muslim neighbours. Popo ignored him, and talked of *mah-jongg*, so he would disappear to swim or lift weights, or to the veranda where he had hung exercise rings from the beams. Time and again he would lift himself on to those rings without removing his glasses; when he swung himself back and forth, they would fall off and smash on the floor beneath him.

One day, my father crawled under the big teak table, where I was eating my biscuits, and told me about his life before he came to Singapore. He had been born in Hainan, he told me, the second largest island in China after Taiwan. I had seen Hainan on the map Popo showed me. His parents had owned a fruit and chestnut farm, which his father worked with hired labourers to help him tend the orchards and fell the chestnut trees for timber. His mother had managed the accounts. Father told me that they found it difficult to make a living from the farm. It would rain and rain, and when the river flooded, the expensive fertilizer would be washed from the soil and they had no money to replace it. Sometimes the fruit crop was diseased and they would have to cut down more chestnut trees to sell. Father told me that chestnut wood made good charcoal, which burnt slowly and gave off an intense heat.

He also told me how, shortly after he was born and his mother was still recovering, it had rained for two weeks. The river had got higher and higher, then overflowed its banks and flooded the farm. His mother had watched the garden furniture float away, then the shed where the farm tools were kept, and the little family of piglets they had reared with the sow. When she saw that sow being swept away in the current, she had got out of bed, taken off her clothes and swum after it. But the pigs and the furniture were too far along on their journey to their new home in the sea with the fish, and she waded back to the house. There, she found she was bleeding, so the doctor came and said she would be unable to have any more children.

My grandfather only knew how to be a farmer, but my grandmother was determined that her son should not follow him and did not let him work on the farm. She wanted him to be a government official, or a school teacher. After a day's work, no matter how tired she was, she would read the teachings of Confucius to him. She went to great trouble to buy some books in English from friends who had emigrated to Singapore, and kept them for him as a surprise birthday present. Father said that on his birthday he was in his room writing with a brush pen when he heard his mother call him from the hall. 'Come quick! Come quick!'

When he rushed down to her she was holding out a parcel, and the excitement on her face told him it was a special gift. He took it from her, shook it, squeezed it, and finally tore off the wrapping. The books inside were not new – the covers were worn and the pages thumbed – but he didn't mind because they were picture books with stories in English. Father told me that when he turned the pages of the first he saw pictures of fierce men, with pistols and cutlasses, dragging a boy with them; the book was *Treasure Island*. Another, *Robinson Crusoe*, had pictures of the hero, his dog and a wrecked ship. His favourite was a collection of stories that included 'Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp' and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves'. As he looked at the pictures, he was eager to read the stories and so, with the help of a dictionary, he began to teach himself his first foreign language.

Work never stopped on the farm, even on the wettest days. One day, when it was raining and the river was swelling, Grandfather was chopping down a chestnut tree. It fell on top of him and killed

him. That day my grandmother decided she would leave the island for ever: she would emigrate to Singapore, the Lion City, with her little boy so that he would not be a farmer.

Two

Father told me how that chestnut tree had buried his father in the mud and how his mother's tears had mixed with the rain, and that was why he had come to Singapore in 1919, when he was five. His mother was called Kum Tai, and she was only twenty-nine when the tree fell on her husband. At first Kum Tai was frightened by the hustle and bustle of the city, and as the only work she knew was farming, she bought an orchard of rambutan and mangosteen fruit trees in Nee Soon, north of Singapore, with the money from the sale of her home in Hainan.

Kum Tai named my father Poh-mun, but often called him Po-pui, which means precious seed. Father told us that when he came to Singapore he liked the different people in his new country, and their many languages, which he didn't understand. There were brown-skinned Malay men and women in colourful sarongs, and there were Sikhs from India, who never shaved or cut their hair and wore cloth wrapped round their heads. There were Indian tea-sellers, who carried copper urns heated by charcoal fires on bamboo poles and sold ginger tea or Ceylon tea; some carried rattan baskets full of delicious *roti*. Father would listen to the different dialects, like nothing he had heard in his village in China, and became determined to understand them. He looked forward to visiting the town's bookshops, and spent whole afternoons hiding among the shelves, reading and dreaming.

Kum Tai hired workers for the orchard and a servant to cook and clean. The workers spoke different dialects and she became frustrated when she could not communicate with them: when they misunderstood her instructions, they pruned the trees in the wrong way. She did more and more of the work herself, spending long hours in the plantation. At night the sweet smell of rambutan attracted swarms of bats – the locals called them flying foxes – which would tear apart the soft, hairy shells of the ripe fruit and feast on the white flesh inside. In China Kum Tai and her husband had hired fruit-watchers, who had patrolled all night and slept during the day. But in the new country my grandmother, fearful of the cost of hiring extra workers, protected the trees herself. She walked through the orchards with a lantern and a long stick to scare away the bats, and by dawn she would be exhausted. Father would find her asleep in a chair.

'You are working too hard,' my father said. 'Let me do it, Mother. Let me stay up and frighten away the bats. It is only for the fruit season.'

'Do you know why we left China after your father died?' she said. 'You must not be a farmer here. You must read your books and then, some day, you will be someone. It is the only way for you in this new country.'

One day, while she was supervising the plantation workers, Kum Tai fell and broke her ankle. She had to be carried back to the house. A bonesetter was called, but he did not come, and throughout the night my father heard his mother cry out in great pain. He went to her side to hold her hand.

The next morning, Lum Pang, the bonesetter, appeared at the farm. He was just five feet tall, very fat, and Father said his grin stretched from ear to ear. Everyone called him Fat Lum. He held his surgery every morning on the pavement of a busy side-street in Singapore. Fat Lum was so fat that the little stool he sat on disappeared beneath his stomach and thighs so that he seemed to be sitting on the ground. He worked next to the tooth-puller, who had a spittoon and cases of extractors and offered only one service: a toothache meant that a tooth had rotted and must come out. When the tooth-puller was called away, he would leave a set of extractors so that Fat Lum could cover for him.

When Fat Lum saw my grandmother's ankle, he busied himself grinding roots, leaves and cacti in his granite mortar with the pestle, and softened banana leaves over his charcoal fire. Then he spread the mixture on the leaves, which he gently wrapped round my grandmother's ankle and tied with fibres from a banana tree-trunk.

Fat Lum was a widower and, like Kum Tai, a native of Hainan Island. He had settled in Singapore many years earlier, and spoke the dialects, English and Malay. Everyone thought he was a

very good bonesetter, and while Kum Tai was waiting for her ankle to mend, he came each morning with a fresh mixture of ground herbs and banana leaves. When Fat Lum applied them to her leg, he would help her with the instructions to the plantation workers, in their various dialects, then tell them what needed to be done. For the first time in the few months since she had bought the plantation, everything went smoothly for Kum Tai – especially after Fat Lum had come to work for her, alongside his bonesetting. He asked if she had space for him to live there, rather than travelling from his home in the city. He had no family ties, he said, so there was nothing to stop him. Because my grandmother was a widow, she could not allow him to sleep in the main house: that would have led to gossip and she would have lost the respect of her neighbour. Instead she put him up in one of the outbuildings used for storing fruit.

My father was pleased that Fat Lum was living with them: it would ease his mother's workload. Fat Lum helped him, too, with the dialects. Father loved to follow Fat Lum round the orchards, listening as he gave orders to the workers. Sometimes they would speak Hylam, their mother tongue, but often Fat Lum would use another dialect – the more my father could learn, the less likely it was that he would be a farmer and end up killed by a chestnut tree, as his father had been.

Fat Lum did more and more for Kum Tai and soon he was setting hardly any bones. When he had to respond to an emergency, he would make up for lost time on the farm at the weekend, repairing the house and the outbuildings. Father would gobble his dinner each evening, then rush out to find Fat Lum so that they could sit together on the bench by the duckpond and talk. They would stay there until it was dark when the mosquitoes drove them inside.

One day Fat Lum went to the city and came back, in the middle of dinner, with a stack of books under his arm. Father's eyes lit up. 'Uncle Lum, are these English books for me?' he asked. When Fat Lum nodded, Father stretched out his arms, then remembered his manners and looked at his mother: he did not know whether he should accept the gift. Kum Tai saw the joy in his eyes and knew how much he wanted the books. But she was proud: she did not want it known that she accepted gifts from her workers. On the other hand, she did not want to upset Fat Lum. She insisted on paying for the books, and said that next time all three of them would travel to the city to buy books so that Father would learn not to be a farmer. As they were in the middle of their meal, she asked Fat Lum if he would like to join them. She expected him to say no, because he was an employee, but he said, 'Yes,' with a smile, and lowered his huge body into a fragile rattan chair, which groaned under his weight.

Father had never seen so many English books. 'Thank you, Uncle Lum,' he said, as he leafed through them. 'Can I read with you every day?'

'Of course you can, my son,' said Fat Lum, 'and you must come to me if you do not understand something.'

Kum Tai noticed that Fat Lum had called him 'my son', and was happy that the pair got on so well together.

After that, Fat Lum and my father would sit by the duckpond each evening with the books, and if it began to rain they would shelter in the outbuilding among the crates of ripe rambutan and scarlet, green-stemmed mangosteen. Kum Tai began to worry that her son was spending too much time away from her so, instead of sending meals to the bonesetter in the outbuilding, she began to invite him to dinner so that she could keep an eye on them both. Father would bolt his food and wait for Fat Lum to finish. Then they would sit and read together under the light of the oil lamp until Kum Tai said it was time for bed. Sometimes Father would be asleep already with a book in his hand, and Fat Lum would carry him to bed. Then he would return to Kum Tai and they would chat late into the night.

Kum Tai was alone in a strange country and was grateful for the bonesetter's attention. She thought him a good and honourable man, and feelings for him stirred in her heart. One evening, after dinner, he asked her to marry him. Father was awake in his bed in the next room and waited anxiously for her reply. He knew how difficult it had been for her, alone on the plantation, and since

the arrival of the bonesetter her life had been easier. He wanted her to marry again and to sit by the duckpond with Uncle Lum.

Kum Tai and Fat Lum were married at the Chinese Consulate, then had a wedding dinner at a restaurant. The next day Fat Lum told Father that 'Lum' meant forest, like their plantation, and that it would be best if Father changed his name to Lum. Kum Tai agreed that they should all bear the same name, so when Father went to register at the Anglo-Chinese Primary School it was under the surname 'Lum'.

He excelled at school. 'Study hard,' Kum Tai would remind him, 'and get a government job. You must mix with city people, not farmers.' Father told me that he spent his holidays with friends, hiking, camping and swimming in Penang, and that he always worked hard for his exams. 'One day we will sell the plantation and move to the city,' his mother told him. 'But everything depends on you passing your exams and finding a good job.'

Fat Lum took over the running of the plantation and dealt with all the paperwork. Kum Tai was glad that all she had to do was sign the letters. She did not stop guarding the orchards though, and when the trees were fruiting she would walk about with her long stick and a lantern, frightening off the bats. In the mornings she was so tired that Fat Lum could get hardly any sense out of her. 'Why not shoot those flying foxes?' he asked. 'Buy a gun. A few bangs here and there and they will fly away.'

Father told me that at first after Kum Tai bought her rifle things were easier. She only needed to fire a few shots and the bats would be gone for the night. Sometimes she would kill some and take them home to make bat soup. She added medicinal herbs to strengthen Father's weak bladder so that he did not have to rush out in the middle of his lessons.

One night, shortly before the rambutan harvest, Kum Tai was in high spirits when she went out with the rifle to patrol the plantation. As she walked through the trees she thought of the life they would have in the city after her son had passed his exams. The rambutans had turned red and were very ripe and there were more bats than she could ever remember, so she shot many rounds into the night sky. She was under a cluster of trees firing her rifle when, suddenly, there was a thump on the ground and she saw a dark shape a few yards from her. She approached with her lantern and, as she drew closer, saw a dead monkey. Blood was pouring from its chest and its hands were clasped as if in prayer. Kum Tai felt faint and began to tremble. She turned and ran through the dark. 'Aii-ee, aii-ee,' she cried. 'I have killed the monkey god! I have killed the great monkey god! My life is not worth living.' As she ran, the low branches of the fruit trees cut her face and eyes and, Father told me, as we sat under the big teak table, the wounds eventually caused the loss of her eyesight.

Back at the house, Kum Tai knew what she had to do. She took hold of the rifle by its barrel and smashed it on the cement floor, screaming at the evil spirit in the gun: 'Get out, get out, get out!' she cried. But the rifle would not break, so she ran outside and threw it into the duck-pond. It sank to the bottom and was never seen again.

After that night Kum Tai was never the same. She became tense and nervous, and would not go into the plantation. Soon she was unable to work at all and Fat Lum had to take over. She would mumble to herself about how she had shot the monkey god out of the sky, and Father would try to comfort her. 'It's like any other meat, Ma,' he told her. 'They serve monkey at all the best restaurants in Chinatown.' But Kum Tai would put her hands together, showing Father how the monkey's had been clasped in prayer, and she would turn her head and walk away, whispering sadly to herself.

Fat Lum ruled the plantation like a dictator. If a worker arrived a few minutes late he was sacked on the spot, and if anyone was disrespectful he, too, was replaced. Kum Tai did not discuss the farm with him: she had lost interest in it. Father hoped that in time she would regain her health and take back control from Fat Lum, but she did not improve. Instead she began to worry about her only son finding a wife and starting a family.

'Listen carefully, Poh-mun,' said Kum Tai. 'Your father was young when he married me. It is time for you to take a wife. I want to see grandchildren before the end of my days.'

The first time Father saw my mother was at a meeting arranged by the local matchmaker. It happened like this. One day Father and Kum Tai sat at a table near the entrance of a little tea-house in Chinatown and, at the appointed time, a rickshaw, with the hood down, pulled up in front. The matchmaker and the bride-to-be, my mother, were inside.

'She will make you happy, Poh-mun,' whispered Kum Tai, pointing to the girl sitting next to the matchmaker. 'That is Chiew-wah. She will be a good wife, trust me.'

Father told me that she was only fifteen, and he had stared shyly at her, unable to speak. The rickshaw stayed for a few minutes, then left. Kum Tai explained that it was not necessary for him to see Chiew-wah again before the wedding, that love was like the wind and would soon blow through them. She talked to him every night about his duty.

The matchmaker negotiated a dowry to be paid by my father's family and a trousseau to be given by the family of the bride. Chiew-wah's mother had discovered that my father's family were well-off and requested ten tables for the guests of the bride's family at the wedding dinner; she demanded a fine restaurant and the very best food. My mother Chiew-wah's trousseau included a set of new teak bedroom furniture, three sets of embroidered linen, a jade bangle, jade and pearl earrings and a thick necklace of pure gold. Father told me that the Singer sewing-machine had been a wedding gift, the very best model, and that was why Mother never let my sister and me use it.

Three

My father told me all of this while we were under the table with the mattresses stacked on top and around it, and I was curled up next to him in the dark, munching my biscuits. Then I could forget the hungry Japanese silkworms crawling towards us with their bombs. I was happy in that place with my father, who had come from the island where the rain had carried the pigs and the furniture down the river to their new home in the sea with the fish.

Father was only sixteen when he was married, and one year later he had his first child, my brother Beng. He told me how Kum Tai had held him in her arms for the first time. 'First Grandson! You look just like your father, my Po-pui,' she said, and tears ran down her face.

'Why are you sad, Ma? Are you not happy with your grandson?' asked my mother.

'I am happy, Chiew-wah, very happy,' she said. 'When I look at my grandson, I think of a time before. I always wanted more children, but after Poh-mun I was not able to have another.' She was lost in thought as she stared at the child in her arms. 'You must not walk too much or carry heavy things, because it will hurt you,' she said eventually. Then she told Chiew-wah how she had swum after the pigs and how it had damaged her womb. 'Don't make the same mistake,' she said. 'You and Poh-mun must have many children, a big family. You must rest. And no housework for one month!'

Father told me that Beng's birth did not interrupt his studies. In fact it made him work harder. He was impatient to pass his exams so that he could get a good job and move to the city, his mother's dream. Her eyesight was fading and she talked all the time about the monkey with its hands locked in prayer. She never left her bedroom: Father took her meals to her there, and in the evenings he would sit with her, reading the book of Confucius that she had once read to him.

Early one morning, in the middle of a thunderstorm, Kum Tai jumped out of bed, got dressed and mumbled that she was going to inspect the fruit trees. Father was at school and Fat Lum had gone to the city on business. Kum Tai stumbled outside in the rain and Chiew-wah, with Beng strapped to her back, worried until Father returned in the late afternoon.

Dusk set in early because of the heavy rain and Father lit a lantern and rushed out of the house. He met Fat Lum returning from the city and explained to him what had happened, then went straight to the tree where the monkey had been killed but his mother wasn't there. He breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps she had gone to a neighbour's house. And then, in the distance, he saw Fat Lum's lantern. As he ran towards it, he saw that his step-father was bending over a figure on the ground.

Father and Fat Lum carried Kum Tai back to the house, blood pouring from a deep gash on her head. She had fallen and hit it on a stone. When the plantation workers saw her, some left for good because they were frightened of the monkey god's revenge.

Father told me that Fat Lum changed after his mother's death: he wasn't interested in him any more. He made all the funeral arrangements without consulting him. On the last day of the third week after her death, when the prayer rites had been completed, in accordance with the Taoist observance, Father thought the time was right to approach Fat Lum about the plantation and his mother's property.

But Fat Lum beat him to it. 'You can forget about lessons today, Poh-mun. We have things to discuss,' he told my father, as he was leaving for school.

Father was surprised to hear Fat Lum use his name – he always called him 'my son'. 'Can we talk when I get back from school?' Father asked.

'No. You will not be returning here. This is no longer your home.'

Fat Lum went into the bedroom. When he came back, he had with him a pile of documents that proved the plantation had been transferred to him.

'My mother would never have signed those papers if she had been able to read English,' said Father.

It was no use. 'Take your wife and baby and leave. Your mother is dead. We no longer have any family connection,' said Fat Lum. 'Furthermore, the monthly allowance for your education will be discontinued.'

Father told me that he, Chiew-wah and little Beng went to live with Popo, my mother's mother, in her flat in Chinatown – where I can remember living as a small child. There, Mother gave birth to her second child, my older sister Miew-kin; the nurses thought it a good omen that she was born on the sixth birthday of the elder daughter of the King and Queen of England. Popo was a devout believer in Chinese astrology: 'A birthdate that coincides with a royal child cannot be more auspicious for your daughter,' she said to my mother. For once Popo thought an astrological consultation unnecessary. 'What better news can the astrologer forecast?'

When Father talked to me under the table about Popo he would lower his voice to a whisper. She did not like him telling us about those years. I would peep round the mattresses to make sure she was not listening to the stories Father was telling me.

Father explained that Popo paid for my mother's stay in the maternity hospital, and when Mother came home, Popo employed a *pue yuet*, an attendant for the first month. Every day my mother was washed with towels dipped in hot water in which a mixture of lemon grass, pomelo leaves and ginger roots had simmered for an hour. She had to eat special foods to chase away the wind that enters the body after childbirth: ginger roots, dark brown sugar and black Chinese vinegar were heated, then left to mature in great earthenware pots; later, pigs' trotters were added to the mixture, cooked, and served to Mother at every mealtime for four weeks. She was made to drink tea made from roasted ginger roots and boiled black beans, which, Popo said, would prevent arthritis in old age.

The *pue yuet* was the best in the area and Popo paid her well to look after Mother. She spared no expense. Father was not yet working and had no money, so Popo did not consult him. When my sister was born she treated him like a bystander. He offered to care for Beng while my mother nursed the new baby, but Popo would take Beng from him, saying, 'Go away. This is not a man's work.' Then she would mock, 'Poh-mun, how can you stare at books all day and night when you have two children to care for? You should leave school now and find a job.' But Father had no intention of abandoning his studies after all the sacrifices his mother had made, so he buried himself in his books and let Popo take control of his family.

A year later, just before I was born, he passed his final examinations and found a job as an interpreter. He told me how glad he was to have fulfilled his mother's dream that he would not become a farmer, and how proud he was to be earning money for his family at last.

My grandmother wasted no time in reminding him of what he owed her. 'You are in my debt for life,' she told him, 'and you can never finish repaying me. I took pity on my daughter and grandson. I did not do it for you.'

Father told me that she had worn him down with her insults and demands, and that he had surrendered his first pay packet to her. When he talked about these years I could tell from his voice how sad he was, and tired, and I was afraid of the Japanese bombs coming down on my head, through the ceiling and the mattresses and the thick teak table.

Four

I was the third child and Popo gave me my name. On the day I was born, 19 December 1933, she consulted with an astrologer and chose the name Miew-yong, Subtle Lotus.

I slipped out of my mother in the blink of an eye at the maternity hospital close to Serangoon Road, where the air was thick with spices from the shops where they were milled, and people queued on the pavement, clutching their precious bags of turmeric, cardamom and cumin, grown on their plots of land and brought to the shops for grinding. As they waited their turn patiently, they watched the women squatting over enamel basins of buds and flowers that they threaded deftly into delicate hair ornaments. Undulating rows of floral garlands were draped over poles, the sacred star-shaped champaca among the sweet-scented blooms. Next to the milling shops, goldsmiths sold exquisite jewellery, and fabric merchants displayed layer upon layer of sarees in a tangle of colours. Along the road, tucked away, tiny restaurants served curries, sweetmeats and yoghurt on banana leaves cut into squares.

We lived in Chinatown until I was five. Popo's flat was on the first floor of a three-storey building on a busy tram route, which cut across Chinatown towards Geylang, above a little coffee shop in Tanjong Pagar Road. The flat was divided into small rooms and cubicles, and Father and Mother, Beng, Miew-kin and I had a tiny room at the front. The overhead tram cables hummed a few feet from our window, and as I stood looking out on life in the street below, the trams lumbered by, shooting sparks. How easy it would be, I thought, to touch the cable with Popo's rattan cane. Aunt Chiew-foong, my mother's younger sister, lived in the next room; she had a sewing-machine that she pedalled all day long. Popo and Kung-kung, my grandfather, lived at the back and the three windowless cubicles in the middle of the flat were let, as was the space under the stairs.

To reach the flat we climbed a dark staircase to the large landing area with an altar and the table at which we had our meals. The walls around the altar were sooty with the smoke from the hundreds of joss sticks my family and the tenants had burnt. The flat was gloomy: Kung-kung insisted on fifteen-watt bulbs to save money, but on his birthday he replaced them with sixty watts and, for that day, the flat was flooded with light. In the kitchen there were charcoal stoves for cooking, and in the bathroom a big tub for washing and a toilet, the bowl stained black with age.

Outside, the street was always busy. Workers went to and from the tobacco factory, women struggled with bags of food from the market, hawkers called their wares, and at the tea-shop opposite people met, talked and laughed. I would stand at the window and watch all this for hours, and when I grew bored I would go outside on to the pavement by the door to our flat. Sometimes I would venture further with my father, or one of the tenants, past the tall, terraced buildings with brightly painted shutters and through the tangled streets lined with shops and stalls selling glistening fish, steaming bowls of noodles, cloth of every colour, pots, pans, and songbirds in cages. Sometimes I would be taken to the temple in the heart of Chinatown where my grandmother went to gossip and exchange news with her friends, or to my grandfather Kung-kung's herb stall, where he spent his days telling customers how to treat their ailments and selling them the remedies they needed.

At home Popo would spend hours talking with her *chimui*, sitting in the kitchen as the trams rattled by outside. The *chimui* were her closest friends, her 'foster sisters', and many owned herb shops. Together, they discussed ailments, symptoms and remedies, but they also liked to talk about the past.

When she was in a good mood Popo loved to tell her story, and sometimes Miew-kin and I would sit quietly by the women and listen to her talk. We never interrupted: we were careful not to do that.

Kung-kung and Popo had been born in a village in Canton, she said, the capital of Kwantung Province; they married when she was nineteen and he twenty-one. Popo would tell her *chimui* of how she had left her village for Hong Kong in 1911, the year of the Canton uprising, with her husband and his family. They had set up a herb shop in Nine Dragons, and when they had settled in, Popo's mother-in-law had decided to leave her share of the work to Popo. That was how Popo had gained her wide knowledge of medicinal leaves, fruit and roots, and how to use them to treat all sorts of ailments.

Popo said that she had given birth to my mother, Chiew-wah, in the year of the tiger and, two years later, in the year of the dragon, to her second daughter, Chiew-foong. When Kung-kung was not in the shop, he often ventured to the docks to hear tales of faraway countries – America, Russia and Liverpool in England – from Chinese seamen with grey in their beards. He couldn't tear himself away, and on his return to the flat he would grumble to Popo about his long hair, which was plaited into a queue. It had never troubled him until he started going to watch the ships, and now he wanted to look like the sailors: 'They have no queue but short-cropped hair. I want to cut mine off,' Kung-kung said. 'When I bend down it sweeps the floor.' Popo was not surprised when he came home one day with short hair, and it wasn't long after this that he decided to leave Hong Kong and take his young family with him.

As soon as his younger brother was old enough to take over the shop and look after their parents, Kung-kung, Popo and their two daughters boarded a cargo boat bound for Singapore. The island offered many opportunities, he said. They would find good fortune and prosperity there.

My mother was ten and not a good traveller. While crossing the South China Sea, a heavy storm churned the waters and the boat tossed violently. She was seasick and could not keep down any food during the long journey. She stayed on deck with Kung-kung, but every time she felt a little better, the smell of dried fish and meat from the cargo hold below would make her sick again.

Popo would tell her friends how the family had found the flat in Chinatown, and how my grandfather had had to pay the landlord more than he could afford for the lease because so many immigrants were pouring into Singapore. He spent what was left on setting up his market stall selling herbs, the only trade he knew well, but to safeguard his business he had to pay the *tongs*, the gangsters of the district. They told him that only they could protect him from other stallholders and those who wished him ill, but mainly they guaranteed him freedom from the threats and intimidation of other *tongs*. Kung-kung worked hard and looked to the future: he wanted to expand into a proper medicine shop some day, like the one his family owned. He expected Popo to help him sell the herbs, as she had in Hong Kong, but he soon found that only one pair of hands did the work – his own. Popo told her friends that she would not work on the stall, and she expressed no shame for her failure to behave as a loyal and dutiful wife should; neither did she care that she had not borne Kung-kung sons who would carry on the family name.

My grandfather Kung-kung was a quiet man and paid me little attention, but he let me sit in the corner of his bedroom to watch him smoke his opium, which he did every night after dinner. Kung-kung's bed was his special place, made especially for smoking; there were elaborate carvings on the headboard and on a rosewood panel at the foot. Instead of a mattress, a closely woven rattan mat fitted over the frame. Every night after dinner he would spread over it a piece of heavily stained canvas to catch the tiniest drop of spilt resin. On top he would place a teacup-sized oil lamp and his polished black pipe, which was two feet long with a wooden bowl at one end. When everything was ready he would unwrap the packet of precious opium pellets and place one in his pipe. Then, stretched out comfortably on his side, he would rest his head on a porcelain-block pillow, and begin to smoke.

As I sat watching him from the floor, I would enjoy the aroma of the opium, a delicious roasting smell. Later, when he had finished, he would unscrew the bowl from the pipe, scrape the residue into a container, then painstakingly retrieve every speck of opium that had fallen on to the canvas.

One evening Kung-kung returned home after another hard day's work on his stall. After he had eaten, he hurried to his bedroom and I followed. Sitting quietly on the floor, I watched him make his usual preparations and start to enjoy his pipe. Before he had finished, Popo marched into the bedroom with fire in her eyes. 'Go and smoke in the opium den down the road,' she said. 'I cannot stand it any more.'

Kung-kung looked at her in amazement and I could see that he was angry. 'I have smoked it all these years and now you cannot stand it?' he said, through clenched teeth that the opium had stained brown.

'I am thinking of the grandchildren,' said Popo, looking at me.

'So it's all right for them when the tenants smoke – or will you tell them to go to the opium dens too? Why don't you tell the truth? I'm not stupid. You've made life miserable for Poh-mun, forcing him to hand over his wages, and now you want to do the same with me. I will go to the opium den, but you will regret it.'

Kung-kung never thought of himself as an addict, even though he had smoked opium since he was a young man. 'It is for medicinal purposes,' he always said, reminding everyone that, as a herbalist, he knew what he was talking about. He smoked at home because opium dens were expensive. I heard him complain to Father that the beautiful women who worked there encouraged him to gamble and that this made him smoke more. The dens were dangerous too, he said, and under the protection of the *tongs* who took a percentage of their takings and beat up any addicts who did not pay. Popo knew that the dens were guarded by the *tongs*, who sometimes fought territorial wars; she even knew some of the gang members and could interpret their secret hand signals but, as she told her *chimui* when they discussed what she had done, she was glad to have Kung-kung and his opium out of the house.

After Kung-kung had been forced to abandon his carved bed for the opium den, word spread that he was under the thumb of his wife. He nurtured a silent anger, and spent less and less time at home. Instead he wandered the streets and sat in coffee shops. Some weeks passed and then one day, just after we had finished our dinner, he came out of his bedroom with a suitcase in his hand. 'Take this,' he said to Popo, and handed her a wad of banknotes.

'Where are you going? Where did you get this money?' Popo cried.

'I'm going away and that is all you need to know. Don't wait for me to come back.'

With that, they parted for ever.

After Kung-kung left, my mother went to Trengganu Street where he had had his herb stall to ask the other stallholders if they knew where he had gone, but nobody would say anything. She thought Kung-kung must have asked them not to tell his family. Weeks passed but she didn't give up hope. She returned to the street every day, at different times, trying to find someone who would tell her where Kung-kung was. As she walked up and down, she would think of her journey with her father on the cargo boat, and how the churning sea and the smell of dried fish had made her seasick, and how Kung-kung had taken care of her. She grew more and more distracted and Father became so worried about her that he went to a seamen's club to see what he could discover about Kung-kung's disappearance. When he returned he told us that Kung-kung had met an old friend called Chow, whose ship was in dock for repairs. Chow had told Kung-kung that he had made his home in San Francisco and had offered to get him a job working with him in the ship's laundry.

Popo behaved as if she had done nothing wrong in causing Kung-kung to leave Singapore and his family. With my father's monthly wages and the rent from her lodgers, she had plenty of money, so she spent even more time playing *mah-jongg* with her friends from the temple and with other immigrants who had come to Singapore across the tumultuous South China Sea.

Five

Aunt Chiew-foong was nearly twenty and still unmarried. She had a dark complexion and was less than five feet tall, but she looked even shorter because she walked with a stoop. Compared to my mother she was no beauty, but she liked to smile and show off her decorative gold-capped front

teeth. Her voice was high-pitched and shrill, and she would imitate the screeching calls of hawkers, peddling their noodles and chicken congee.

When my mother gave birth to her fourth child, plump and happy with stiff black hair and a chubby face, we nicknamed her Wang-lai. It means 'pineapple' and we thought she looked like one. While Mother tended Wang-lai, Aunt Chiew-foong looked after Beng, Miew-kin and me. She liked to play with us – she was still a child at heart – but Popo couldn't forget that she was still single with no children of her own. She worried that her daughter never had any boyfriends, and I often heard her complaining to her *chimui* about the hard task of finding a husband for her. 'Daughters must be married by sixteen, when they are like flowers coming into full bloom and can fetch large dowries,' she said, 'and parents can have the choice of suitors. At twenty, women are past their prime. Over twenty-five, they are old maids. Then we must pay the costs of marrying them off in whatever way we can.'

According to Popo's calculations with the Chinese calendar, one year had to be added to my aunt's age because she had been born just before the New Year, which made her even older than she was. 'Time is not on your side, you should already have many babies, like your sister,' Popo nagged, day in, day out. 'You wasted many years at school. What work can you do? You can't read or write. You have no luck with matchmakers. How will you find a good husband?'

'Why don't you tell brother-in-law Poh-mun to find one for me, Ma?' Aunt Chiew-foong asked.

My father was persuaded to invite his bachelor friends home at weekends for lunch, in the hope that one might become Aunt Chiew-foong's husband. Sometimes three or four young men would join us, and every week there would be new faces. They enjoyed the food but had no idea why they had been invited. Popo was a good cook, with a discriminating palate, and she had taught my mother and aunt well. Now our Sunday lunches became more and more sumptuous and the menu was planned meticulously days in advance. There were always tasty bowls of thin noodle soup, flavoured with herbs, steamed fish, pork or chicken and sometimes snake, bought live from a stall in Chinatown. After dinner on Thursday or Friday, Popo, my mother and my aunt would begin to discuss their strategy.

'I'm going tomake this Sunday's lunch extra special to get aman for Chiew-foong,' my grandmother said one evening.

'No rich bachelors coming this Sunday,' said Mother. 'Poh-mun's invited people who work in other government departments. We don't need anything special.'

'What do you know?' Popo shouted. 'Another son-in-law in the government service would be most satisfactory.'

Recipes were proposed and discarded until Mother suggested clay-pot chicken. 'You've always liked that,' she said to Popo. 'We'll need chicken, tofu, pork, sea cucumber, Tientsin cabbage, ginger, bean sauce and black vinegar. One taste of the clay-pot chicken and all the men will want to marry her straight away.'

That Sunday the food was the best it had ever been and the guests paid many compliments. At every opportunity my father heaped praise on my aunt's cooking.

One man said, with his mouth full, 'This clay-pot chicken is so good. Better than any restaurant.'

'My sister-in-law prepared everything,' said my father, winking at my aunt.

With all eyes on her, Aunt Chiew-foong rose shyly from her seat with a bowl in her hand and left for the kitchen, apparently to refill it. When she was out of earshot, Father added, 'She's such a good cook. It's a shame I've no brother-in-law.'

Despite the clay-pot chicken, there was no interest in my aunt, and soon my father tired of playing matchmaker. Apart from the cost of the food, it prevented him enjoying quiet weekends or going swimming with his friends. In a rare moment of defiance, he stopped the lunches altogether. But Popo did not give up hope. She had consulted a fortune-teller who had told her, 'When the time arrives, Chiew-foong will marry a good, caring husband.'

Then, unexpectedly, one of the bachelors who had attended a Sunday lunch approached Father and asked for Aunt Chiew-foong's hand. He was called Cong and was a government employee from the Municipal Department of Public Utilities. Father was dismayed. 'He's short, balding, and has a squint that makes me uneasy,' he said to my mother. 'He never meets my eye.'

'Why did you invite him to the house, then?' Mother asked.

'I had no choice. Your mother forced me to consider any man as a husband for your Chiew-foong,' Father replied.

But Popo had her eye on Cong and confided to my mother that she did not mind his odd appearance. 'All that matters is that I will gain face when my *chimui* find out where my second son-in-law works.' With a toss of her head, she added, 'They will be so envious. None of them has any family in the government service, but two members of mine will be.'

In view of my aunt's age, Popo did not demand a dowry and insisted that the pair marry as soon as possible: she was relieved that my aunt was soon to be off her hands.

Aunt Chiew-foong and Cong married and moved into his house in Rangoon Road, a few miles from Chinatown. After their honeymoon, Popo allowed them time to settle in, then made her move. One morning, she packed a bundle of clothes and set out, intending to spend a few days with my aunt: she said she wanted to get to know Chiew-foong's blind mother-in-law who lived with them – but really she wanted to test the water, find out if she could get my aunt's family under her thumb as well. She returned the same day, tight-lipped and ill-tempered. It wasn't until some hours later, after much snorting and cursing, that we found out what had happened. At the midday meal Aunt Chiew-foong had served Popo a bowl of rice congee and a small saucer of pickled sour greens left over from the previous night's dinner. Popo had eyed what was placed in front of her in disbelief and asked my aunt what kind of food they were having.

'Teochew,' Aunt Chiew-foong said apologetically. 'I have learnt to prepare their kind of food and to keep to a very strict budget. My husband and his mother don't believe in eating as much as we Cantonese, and I am given enough money each day to buy one meal at the market. I must have meat on the table for dinner.'

'So, Poh-mun was right about your husband,' said Popo, sniffing the congee. 'Yesterday's leftovers.'

'I have hardly anything for myself, Ma, so I have to pocket a few cents from the housekeeping for my daily stake on the *chap-ji-kee*,' Aunt Chiew-foong moaned.

She was addicted to the lottery. She had a cigarette tin that contained the numbers one to twelve written on small squares of paper rolled into little tubes. That tin went everywhere with her. Whenever she came across burnt-out joss sticks at the foot of a tree, a bush or at the corner of a street, she took that as a sign to ask for numbers. She would kneel, if it was a fine day, or squat, if it was wet, then mutter a prayer, and shake her tin until two numbers fell out, which she would scribble down. Her favourite place to consult the tin was by the pond for rescued turtles at the temple, near the market in Balestier Road. If she struck lucky, she would celebrate by going to the stall that served turtle soup. She kept a record of each day's draw in a length of red paper rolled up like a scroll.

My aunt told Popo that if there was nothing left from dinner the day before, she and her mother-in-law would have plain congee, with a sprinkle of soy sauce, for lunch but she insisted, miserably, that she was content and adjusting to married life.

When my aunt admitted that she had no say in how the family's money was spent, Popo's hopes of staying for a few days and taking control of the family were dashed. It was hardly likely that her second son-in-law was going to part with any of his wages. Still, she was curious about what he did with his money. My father had a large household to feed, and my new uncle earned almost as much as he did. She decided that as a bachelor he must have saved a large amount. She began to press my aunt for the truth about her husband.

'Is he gambling?' she asked. 'Does he go to prostitutes? What does he do with his money?'

Finally Aunt Chiew-foong lost patience. 'Enough,' she said. 'He never goes to prostitutes. We go to bed early every night because he wants a fat son quickly.' Then, in a hushed tone, she added, 'I wouldn't dare ask him for money but he talks about it with his mother. She has a lot of gold jewellery.' She nodded towards her mother-in-law's room and whispered, 'It is hidden under her mattress and she never leaves her bed.'

'Why? Is she lame?'

'No, only blind. The jewellery keeps her in bed. She is afraid to leave it unguarded.' Aunt Chiew-foong told Popo that as her mother-in-law never left her bed, her legs had become weak. She took her mother-in-law's meals to her and the woman ate them leaning against the pillows. She wouldn't even take a bath, but was wiped with a wet towel as she lay on her bed. Rather than go to the toilet, she used an enamel pot.

'My husband used to pay someone to come in to help a few times a week, but he sacked her after we got married. Emptying the pot and cleaning her every morning is my duty now,' said Aunt Chiew-foong.

Popo shook her head. 'How can you do this without complaining?' she scolded. 'Aiii-yah, after all the trouble I took to find you a husband, you are a servant to a blind old woman.'

Six

Three years before the starving Japanese silkworms would begin their deadly journey across the sea to Singapore, we moved from Popo's flat in Chinatown to a two-storey house in the Tanglin area of Singapore. Father was doing well as an interpreter and thought that now he could afford a house for his family he would escape Popo. But she decided to let her flat and come with us.

Our new house seemed full of light after the gloom of the flat in Chinatown. Downstairs we had a sitting room, a dining room and a kitchen. Half of the kitchen was open to the sky: that was where we did the laundry and where we ground soaked glutinous rice into the flour that we used to make sweet dumplings. Outside our front door, I would watch passers-by, and families sitting and talking outside their houses. Tanglin was different from noisy Chinatown where people pushed and shoved, chattered loudly in different dialects, and the smelly open drains were always filled with stagnant water and rubbish. The house stood on Emerald Hill Road, which snaked up to meet Cairnhill Circle, and in the afternoons piano and violin music drifted into our house from the children next door. On the pavement boys and girls played badminton and marbles.

Our neighbours in Tanglin were Chinese but dressed in Malay clothes. They spoke Malay and English, but only a few words of Cantonese. The women wore colourful sarongs and the long-sleeved *kebaya*, made of voile and embroidered along the edges and the cuffs. In place of buttons, a *krosang* – three long gold pins linked with a fine chain – held it together at the front. On their feet they wore multi-coloured beaded cloth slippers, and it wasn't long before my mother and Popo discarded their clogs for a pair each.

We discovered from our neighbours that they were 'Straits Chinese' or Peranakans, which means 'locally born'. Their Chinese ancestors had settled in Malacca, one of the four British Straits Settlements; the men were known as *babas,* the women as *nyonyas*. Popo said it was strange that a Chinese person could not speak Chinese. Over the centuries the Peranakans had adopted the culture and language of the Malays; my mother and Popo noticed that the *nyonyas* were polite and refined, unlike their own women friends.

My father's office was close by, so he no longer had to cycle to work early in the morning. Instead, he walked through the leafy streets, and I would watch him set out each morning, his black hair gleaming with Brylcreem, combed straight back with a side parting; he wore a crisply starched white shirt and trousers. He enjoyed his job, but his interest in books and languages did not die away. He bought books all the time, regardless of the cost, and paid for them in monthly instalments, building up a small library at our new home. He stamped each one 'Lum Poh-mun Library'. There were books on language, history, psychology and the classics, and one shelf was filled with paperback

novels. I would often see my father reading books like *The History of the Roman Empire*, or the five classics: *Changes; History; Poetry; Collection of Ritual*; *Spring and Autumn*. He told me there was so much wisdom in their pages that he could never finish learning from them. His favourites, though, were the *Four Books* of Confucian literature – the only ones he had that his mother had brought from China. He told me that reading them reminded him of Kum Tai, who had read them to him on their farm, where the rambutans and the scarlet mangosteens had grown. From them he had understood the value of learning, the importance of integrity, sacrifice and duty, and that human nature tends to be good.

Popo still ran the house and my mother did not dare challenge her. Father tried to insist that his wife should have his wages but did nothing when she handed it to Popo. With the family money in her hands, Popo dismissed the cleaner, who had come in for a few hours in the morning, and hired a live-in servant to do the washing. Father said that the real reason Popo had taken her on was to impress the neighbours.

Sum-chay belonged to an association of professional servants, known as *mah chay*. They looked down on other servants who did not have their special training and would carry out only certain duties. They wore black trousers and white Chinese blouses, and we called them 'the black-and-white snobs'. Sum-chay made it clear at her interview that she would not cook or look after children. Although she was in her early forties, she had never married and didn't like this to be mentioned. We children called her by her name followed by the respectful 'Older Sister', and after a while she softened towards us and would sometimes keep an eye on my younger sister Wang-lai while my mother was playing *mah-jongg* with her friends. Every festival day she left our house and returned to her lodgings in the *coolie fong*, where all the *mah chay* would congregate, to celebrate with her fellow professionals.

One evening at the house in Tanglin I caught a chill after I had spent too long bathing in cold water. Hot water was a luxury in my family, and we only had it when we were unwell. My cold had persisted for more than a week and I developed a burning fever. I did not see a doctor as my grandmother never allowed us to use Western medicines: she took charge of our health and had a cure for every ailment. Bottles of dried herbs lined the kitchen cupboards, alongside jars of birds' nests, lotus roots, dried bees, lizards, sea-horses and cockroaches. Some, like the sea-horses, were added to soups and stews as a health-giving ingredient; others, like the many bitter herbs, were for medicines. Whenever we were ill, Popo would point at several jars in turn and Sum-chay would take them down and put them on the table. Then Popo would take a handful from one, a pinch from another, mix the herbs on a bamboo tray and tip them into a pot for boiling. Some of her treatments were simple: if a rash appeared on someone's skin, she would say it was caused by spiders crawling over it in the night and would soak dried orange peel in water, chew it to a pulp, then paste it over the rash. Her concoction for my fever was made up of nearly twenty herbs, insects and animal parts, simmered to a black, glutinous soup. I swallowed it obediently, trying to ignore the horrible smell.

Then Popo said I needed a treatment called *mungsa*, which means to 'draw out the sand'. My heart sank. She had done this to me before and it had been very painful. I put on a cheery face and lied: I felt much better, I said. Popo was not deceived. She summoned Sum-chay and told her to hold me down on the bed. She dipped her fingers into a bowl of salted water and began to pinch me, starting at my neck and moving gradually over my chest, my waist and along my ribs to my armpits. I screamed and kicked, but Sum-chay held me fast and Popo kept up the pinching for more than an hour. When she had finished my skin was red and sore.

I knew that for seven days after a *mungsa* treatment I would only be allowed sweetened condensed milk, soda biscuits and fruit, and prayer water from the altar mixed with specks of ash from burnt joss sticks. I would have to embark on this regime the next morning. When day dawned, my fever had not subsided despite the bowl of herbal brew. 'It serves you right for playing with water, Miew-yong,' my mother scolded, and as I lay there I remembered how Mother and Popo doted on Beng when he was ill. As my fever worsened Father became very worried about me, but Popo forbade

him to call a doctor. He watched me anxiously, but when I looked up at him his face swam and I wondered who he was. He pleaded with Popo to try something else and finally she prepared a different remedy with rhinoceros horn. As she squeezed open my jaws and forced the liquid into my mouth I heard her scold, 'Don't spit it out, Miew-yong. This medicine is very expensive.'

Popo was worried, not for me but for herself. She was concerned that I would die and she would be held accountable, but she was still determined not to call a doctor. My mother followed her orders and together they made sure my father did not find out that I was dangerously ill. They massaged me with pungent red-flower liniment and waited. Two days later I woke with a burning sensation all over my body and began to choke at the suffocating scent. My mother was standing next to my bed. I looked up at the woman from whose body I had come, in the blink of an eye, into a world fragrant with a hundred spices, and she gazed back at me with no joy in her eyes. 'Are you hungry?' she said flatly.

A few weeks later my mother had her fifth child, a son. When he arrived, he did not cry until the doctor had held him upside-down and smacked his bottom. Popo said it was a sign that he would grow up to be stubborn. Father said she was happy to have a second male grandchild, after three girls, and she carried him in her arms whispering her pet name for him, 'Little Cow'. 'Sai-ngau, Sai-ngau,' she would say, 'you will grow up to be big and strong.'

Seven

As my father's grasp of dialects and languages grew, so did his wages. When I was six we moved to Paterson Road, opposite the police station run by the English officer, the red-haired devil. As soon as I saw it I loved that big house, with its many windows and wide verandas. The first thing Popo did when we moved in was call in the *feng-shui* master to inspect it. He arrived wearing a Chinese jacket and looked very wise. For nearly an hour he spoke with Popo and my mother, pointing from time to time at a list he had placed in front of him on the table. On it were the names of each member of our family with the time, date and name of the animal year in which each of us had been born. I was curious about what he would do next so when he went out into the garden I followed him. I watched him take out of his jacket pocket a small, octagonal block of wood carved with elaborate decorations and with a compass set in the centre. With outstretched arms he held it out, turning in various directions, and mumbled, 'Too many tombstones, too many tombstones.' With a frown, he replaced it in his pocket, took out a piece of paper, made some notes, then walked to a different place and did it again.

While the *feng-shui* master made his calculations Popo walked round the garden, followed by the gardener, to look at the flowers and fruit trees. In the far corner a bush of mauve bougainvillea had been trimmed into a ball, and was surrounded by orange bird-of-paradise, motherin-law's tongue, gladioli and spider orchids. Gladioli and spider orchids were Popo's favourite flowers for the altar and she told the gardener to put plenty of cow dung on the beds where they grew. When she got to a huge cactus, with flat fleshy stems and deadly needles, she said: 'Ah, palm of spirit. How useful. I won't have to travel to Chinatown for dried ones now.' She used it to treat the sole of the foot for aches and pains. She would clip off the spines, roast the stems on charcoal and lay them on newspaper. The patient would stand on the hot cactus flesh while it drew the unhealthy wind from the body.

There was another useful tree in the garden, the papaya. Popo did not like the fruit, but she used the leaves when she made a stew of pig's stomach, garlic, tofu and mustard greens in dark soy sauce. She used them to scrub the pig's stomach and remove the lining of slime and the nasty smell. We often ate pig-stomach stew. When Popo and Kung-kung had arrived in Singapore with little money, she had searched for the cheapest food and discovered that Europeans, Malays and Indians did not eat pigs' stomachs, which could be bought for next to nothing. Of course, she never served such cheap food to guests.

When the *feng-shui* master had finished in the garden, he returned to the house and went from room to room, pointing his compass. I wanted to follow him and watch everything he did, but one glare from Popo told me to stay where I was. I wondered whether he had come to cleanse the house

of the spirits from the cemetery, but when his inspection was complete, he sat with Popo and told her that he had calculated the lucky date and position for the setting of the altar, then wrote a list of other things Popo had to do around the house so that we would enjoy the beneficial effects of *chi*. After he had gone Popo followed his instructions to the letter.

I found that by climbing over the verandas I was able to get in and out of the house without using the front or back doors, which meant I could come and go unnoticed. While my brothers and sisters stayed at home, I would sneak off to the police-station courtyard to play with the policemen's children. The station stood on two acres of ground at the corner of Orchard Road and Paterson Road. The main building was a typical two-storey colonial-style structure, bordered by verandas on all sides. The charge room, cells and some small offices were on the ground floor, and upstairs the offices of senior policemen and the administration staff, including my father. The red-haired devil's room was the largest, and just outside his veranda a Union flag fluttered on a long pole. Apart from the main building, there were living quarters for about sixty policemen, the prisoner interrogation rooms, the canteen and the recreation hall. In the middle, screened from public view, was the quadrangle where the policemen had their daily parades and drills.

When the drills were taking place, children were not allowed in the grounds, so I would watch from my friend's house close by. As I looked at the policemen, sweat dripping down their foreheads and drenching their shirts, I wondered why they wore such warm clothes for their parades. Eventually I learnt from Father that they had to wear British uniforms – bluish-grey shirts, khaki shorts, knee-high woollen socks and woollen berets.

When I was not at the police station or playing in the garden I would wile away my time on the veranda, watching the lorries pass with their loads of tin, rubber or timber on their way from the plantations in Malaya to the wharves where they would be loaded on to ships for export to Britain. I could always tell if a load of rubber had gone by as it gave off an unpleasant chemical smell that stayed in the air for a long time. The timber lorries carried huge logs held together with a few ropes, and a man sitting precariously on the top log. I thought those men deserved extra wages for being so brave, but my father told me they sat on the load because they had no choice: they needed the work. One day, walking home with my father, we saw a timber lorry brake suddenly and swerve to avoid colliding with a car. As it screeched to a halt, the man on the top log was thrown on to the road and, a split second later, crushed to death under the load of timber that followed him.

With more money and a big house to show off, my grandmother and my mother began to transform themselves. They invited old and new friends to play *mah-jongg* and for meals, and we had visitors almost every day. When Father returned from work, he had to smile at people he hardly knew. My mother stopped doing housework and caring for us to spend most of her time attending to her makeup and going out with her friends. She would see our former neighbours from Tanglin, Mr and Mrs Khoo, and together they would go ballroom dancing and never missed a Sunday tea-dance. She bought a gramophone and invited them to our new house to practise the waltz, the quickstep and the tango. She urged my father to learn, but ballroom dancing was not for him, although he joined in to humour her.

On most Friday evenings two square tables on the veranda were wiped down so that my parents, Popo and the same five friends could play *mah-jongg*. I was already an expert at setting the *mah-jongg* tables but although I felt I could play as well as they did, I was never allowed to. First I lined a table with five or six layers of brown paper to lessen the constant noise of the solid white bricks knocking against each other. Then I poured out the 144 little bricks and left them for the players to 'wash'. Next I counted the chips needed for each player and placed a set before each chair.

The atmosphere at the two tables was very different. At my father's there was quiet, cheerful conversation and analysis of the play. At Popo's, there was loud chatter and the slamming of bricks as the game went on. When Popo, using all her ingenuity to outguess her equally skilled opponents, mistakenly gave away the one brick needed by someone else, she would excuse herself to 'wash away'

the bad luck: she would visit the lavatory and wash her face, then light joss sticks at the altar and pray for the return of good fortune.

We were allowed to stand behind the players to watch them select and discard the bricks. Miew-kin and I had to empty the ashtrays, which Popo and some of the other chain-smoking players soon filled again, and refill their cups with black coffee. Beng would sit beside Popo. The games went on for four hours; sometimes the players would break for dinner, and carry on afterwards until early morning.

The number of guests made extra work in the house and Popo engaged a cook. Dai-chay came from the same *coolie fong* as Sum-chay and knew her own value: she stated at her interview that she would do no housework and would shop where she pleased. She was short, with enormous buttocks, breasts that hung to her waist, and a deafening voice. Before she agreed to take the job, she strode about our house to inspect it. As we soon discovered, she detested children and took much pleasure in telling tales about us to our parents and Popo. We were forbidden to enter her kitchen without her consent to get drinks and snacks.

Until now Popo had collected the rent every month from her tenants, but now that she had a successful son-in-law and lived in a big house with an experienced cook, she was too proud to do it. Instead she paid her friend Tai-pow Wong, whom everyone called Gasbag Wong, to collect it and deliver the money to her. Popo and Gasbag Wong had been friends from the time when they had first been neighbours in Chinatown. Gasbag Wong was a go-between, doing deals and running errands for a living, and knew many people. Sometimes she helped drug addicts and debt-ridden gamblers to sell their children. Boys were usually reserved before birth by families who had no sons and were willing to pay large sums, but girls were readily available and sold as *muichai*. Although this was against a law introduced by the British, the trade in girl slaves was widespread in Singapore.

On one of her visits Gasbag Wong arrived with a big smile. She normally came alone at the end of each month to deliver the rent money, but this time there were three girls with her, between ten and twelve years old. They looked pathetic and frightened. There were holes in their clothes and they were not wearing shoes. Popo handed a roll of money to Gasbag Wong and ordered them to kneel. Then she said, 'You must be obedient. If you run away, you will be severely punished and your parents must pay back a lot of money.'

Popo's family in China had owned *muichai* rather than employ servants and she was happy to disobey the law. In the households of their owners the *muichai* lived in fear and drudgery. They could be sexually assaulted, beaten, given away to other families or sold by their owners as wives or prostitutes. They were paid nothing and wore their mistress's old clothes. One of the most distressing ordeals for a *muichai* was to be sent back to her parents if she was disobedient. The parents were usually so poor that they would refuse to accept her for fear of having to repay the money they had received from selling her into slavery.

While the girls were kneeling, our cook Dai-chay walked into the room. She looked at them, sniffed the air and said to Popo, 'How can I cook with such a foul smell coming into my kitchen?' It was clear that they had not washed for some time so they were ordered to the bathroom to bathe and have their hair trimmed, then told to try on some of my mother's old clothes. The blouses were taken in, the trousers shortened to fit, and then they were summoned before Popo. The transformation was remarkable. Two of the girls were cousins and their names were Lai-yuen and Lai-pin. But Popo did not like the first part of their names, Lai, meaning 'to look askance', so she changed it to 'Ah', renaming them Ah-pin and Ah-yuen. The other girl was Yan-fok.

Popo chose Ah-pin as her personal maid because she had a pleasant face and would wash and iron Popo's costly silk clothes. Yan-fok had to do the menial work and was at the beck and call of the household, including Sum-chay and Dai-chay. The *muichai* worked non-stop, hurrying to answer every call in fear of a beating or a knuckle round the head and they were not allowed out on their own. Neither were they given time off to visit their families.

After many weeks of learning how to do the housework, Ah-yuen was sent to Aunt Chiew-foong, who by now had had her first child and was expecting a second. My aunt said that her husband Cong would not waste money employing a servant, but he had no objection to accepting a free *muichai* who could take his blind mother her meals, empty her enamel pot and clean her as she lay on her bed, day after day, guarding her gold jewellery. Before she handed over the *muichai*, Popo was careful to point out to my aunt and uncle that Ah-yuen would continue to remain her property and only she could decide her ultimate fate.

Eight

Not long after the *muichai* arrived, my mother had her sixth child, a girl. My sister, Miew-lan, was premature and underweight. Mother was disappointed that she wasn't a boy and refused to breastfeed or care for her when they returned from the hospital. She engaged a live-in *amah* to look after her but the *amah* was young and inexperienced. My father had strong misgivings about employing her because my sister, who weighed no more than four pounds, was so tiny and fragile.

'This *amah* has never looked after premature babies. Can she be trusted to care for one so small?' Father asked.

'Well, I'm not going to nurse her. If you don't trust the *amah*, you can look after her yourself,' Mother replied.

As she had done after each birth, my mother washed every day in fragrant water and ate the specially prepared pigs' trotters at every meal. Most of our Chinese relatives and friends were superstitious and considered a house unclean until a new baby was a month old. My mother was impatient for the cleansing ceremony to be over so that her friends could visit again. She spent the evenings before bedtime leafing through the calendar, sighing, 'I wish tomorrow was Miew-lan's full month.' When at last that day arrived, the ceremony was performed. Sprays of leaves from the pomelo tree were added to the baby's bathwater and Miew-lan was rubbed with them to purify her and bring her luck. My mother dipped her own hair and body in the same water and then we sat down with some friends to eat pig's trotters. After the meal the guests were sent on their way with hard-boiled eggs for good luck, the shells dyed bright red.

The next morning, after breakfast, my mother sat for an hour in front of the huge circular mirror and put on her makeup. Miew-kin and I were fascinated by the collection of perfumes, lipsticks, nail varnishes, face creams and boxes of powder that were neatly arranged on her dressing-table, but we knew better than to touch any of Mother's belongings. If we did she said she would burn our fingers with a lighted wick. We would stand on the threshold of her room, as though held back by an invisible barrier, and watch her transform her face. Our fingers itched to reach out and play with a lipstick or perfume bottle. Later that day my mother had her Shanghainese tailor come to the house for fittings. The Shanghainese were regarded as the finest ladies' tailors; my mother's hand-embroidered cheongsams were trimmed with piping and she wore them with matching shoes.

After the birth of Miew-lan my mother left Popo in charge of us. She was very strict and always had a cane by her side at mealtimes. We were constantly reminded that children 'should not have plenty of mouth'. If my elbows rested on the dining-table or were spread too far apart while I was holding my bowl and chopsticks, she would strike them with the cane, and did the same to my sisters. When my brothers made the same mistakes, they were left alone.

Popo would fill our bowls with food and we could not leave the table until we had eaten every scrap. I preferred the Malay food of vegetables, anchovies and beans, which I was sometimes given at friends' houses, to the oily Chinese meat. Sometimes I would look in dismay at the food in my bowl and make an excuse to leave the table without finishing, but Popo would see this as a temper tantrum and beat me.

Not long after we moved to Paterson Road, when I was seven, I started school. My grandmother would wake us early each morning and Miew-kin and I would get ready. I would put on my white blouse and Yan-fok would help me tuck in my cotton trousers, which we wrapped round my waist and

tied with a sash. Then she would tie my shoelaces and I would join my family at the breakfast table. We had bowls of rice congee topped with chopped fried breadsticks or piles of steamed dumplings. After breakfast two red-painted rickshaws would arrive outside the front door. Beng would climb into one and Miew-kin and I would get into the other. The rickshaw-pullers, in Chinese jacket, short trousers and straw coolie hat, would take us to school where we would learn to read and write in English, practise arithmetic and sing songs.

Miew-kin started at the school a year before I did and I had only been there a few days when I got into trouble. At mid-morning we had tiffin, and Miew-kin always spent her break with a rich girl who was the granddaughter of one of Popo's friends, a woman whose husband was the biggest importer of herbs in Singapore. This girl was always accompanied by a servant, who carried her metal tiffin box. Once the girl had finished eating, she would offer Miew-kin the rest of her food. When I began at the school I would sit with them during tiffin and eat some too. One morning, as we waited for the girl to finish eating, I decided I did not want to eat her leftovers. I pulled Miew-kin away and said, 'Let's not eat – we don't want it.' Then I turned to the servant and said, 'We are not beggars. Why must we wait until she has finished? Why can't we eat at the same time?'

When we returned home from school at lunchtime, Popo was waiting for me with her cane. The servant had told her mistress what I had said and she had stormed round to speak to Popo. 'Why did you make trouble?' Popo shouted at me, as I struggled in her grip. 'Look at your sister! Now she will have no food.'

As Popo beat me I thought defiantly, I don't want to eat that food. No matter how much you beat me I'm not going to eat like a servant!

After that Miew-kin's friend never offered her leftover food to us again and instead we were sent to school with two cents each to spend in the 'tuck shop'. It was a collection of stalls selling home-made cakes, vermicelli, fried noodles, mixed nuts in paper cones made out of the pages of an exercise book and, best of all, chocolate milk from England, which I loved to buy even though it cost half my tiffin allowance.

It wasn't long before I was in trouble with Popo again. After school finished each day we would go home in a rickshaw and during the journey the rickshaw-puller would unbutton his jacket. One hot afternoon Miew-kin and I were pulling faces at the strong smell of his sweat.

'Button your jacket!' I yelled to him. 'If you don't button it, I don't want to sit in your rickshaw.'

When we arrived at home, the rickshaw-puller complained to Popo about my behaviour and, once again, she beat me. Afterwards, just as she did every day, she welcomed Beng home from school, sat him on her lap and asked him what he had been doing. I watched as they smiled, laughed and talked in a babyish way to each other. I did not know what to think.

After school, we would do our homework on the veranda and then, in our free time, I would play with insects under the henna tree, or explore the *kampung* behind our house. My brothers and sisters stayed indoors. The boys liked playing in the bathroom, splashing each other and wetting the wall and floor. Miew-kin and I took care to keep away in case we were blamed for the wasted water. Our bathroom had a squat toilet at the far side and measured about seven by ten feet. In one corner, beneath the cold-water tap, an oval stoneware tub held more than a hundred gallons of water. Popo thought we would save money if the tap was left to drip continuously, day and night, so the water meter would run very slowly, if at all. Every day we each had a bath using an aluminium bowl to scoop the water and, by morning, the tub would be filled to the brim again.

One day some decorators were in the bathroom, repainting the walls and ceilings white and touching up the black skirting. In the evening, when they left, they reminded Dai-chay to keep an eye on the wet paint. Dai-chay yelled a warning to us: 'Listen, all of you, the paint in the bathroom is still wet. You can use only the toilet. No one can bathe until tomorrow. Is that clear?'

Only my sisters and I responded, and I wondered what my brothers were up to. I found them sitting on the bathroom floor. Beng was trying to remove paint from his feet with a towel and I saw

that the walls were smudged and streaked with black. 'Beng, you're in trouble now. Popo will surely punish you,' I cried, imagining her striking him with her cane for the first time. But he put down the towel and then, springing to his feet, he pushed me against the smudged wall. I lost my balance, turned to brace myself against the wall and, pressing my hands on the slippery wet paint, slid to the floor. Before I could get up, he shouted, 'Popo, come quickly! I saw her, Popo, she did it.'

My grandmother and my mother came running. I tried to tell them what had happened but they wouldn't listen to me. Popo flew into a rage and my mother held my hair in a tight grip to stop me running to the garden. Together they dragged me into the dining room and pushed me down by the teak table. My arms were pulled round one of the legs and my wrists were tied. Holding my left hand, Popo wove a chopstick between my fingers, then did the same with the right. She put my hands together and tied the chopsticks tightly at both ends, squeezing them against my finger joints. The loose ends of the string were tied round my wrists so that any movement would increase the pressure of the chopsticks against my fingers. There was no escape. The thin rattan cane, looped at one end for a handle, slashed down on to my back, delivering the first sting. 'Did you do it?' Popo screamed after each lash. 'Did you? Did you?' The more I cried out my innocence, the harder she beat me. As I struggled, the chopsticks tightened on my fingers and the string bit into my skin. Blood streamed from the cuts in my wrists.

Mother, believing that my brother would never lie, snatched the cane from Popo and rained blows all over me. 'Where did you learn to be so stubborn, Miew-yong? Is it from your father? Is it?' she asked, again and again. I tried to hold out against the pain, and take my mind to the places I enjoyed visiting in secret after I had delivered Popo's *chap-ji-kee* lottery stakes. I shut my eyes and pictured the giant trees in the botanical gardens with their huge exposed roots and imagined myself sitting on the low-hanging branch gazing at the water-lilies in the still pond beneath. After a while, Mother and Popo got tired of beating me and sat down to smoke cigarettes. They called the *muichai* to bring them tea. I thought they had given up, until Popo said I was to have nothing to eat or drink until I had admitted my guilt. I was left kneeling on the floor, tied to the table, while my family had dinner. Only Miew-kin felt sorry for me, but her fear of Mother was greater so she stayed silent. My father had not returned from his office and I suspected he had heard of my plight and stayed away. I knew he loved me, but he never had the courage to stand up to Mother and Popo.

After dinner, my mother and Popo returned their attention to me. I knelt on the floor resting against the table leg with my eyes tightly closed. Popo lit a grass wick, the same type she used for the oil lamp on the altar, and each time I protested my innocence she pressed it, lighted, to my lips to teach me not to lie. When tears ran down my cheeks, she doused the wick on my eyelids, to stop me crying. My lips and the skin round my eyes were soon swollen and blistered. 'If you want the punishment to stop, admit your fault and stop crying,' she shouted. In the end I gave in and said what she wanted me to say.

I did not cry again and I would not cry for many years. That night, I sleepwalked for the first time. I climbed on to a chair, unbolted the kitchen door, opened it and walked through our garden towards the Muslim cemetery, past the beautiful mauve bougainvillea, the orange bird-of-paradise and the huge cactus, which loomed dark against the night sky. Popo saw me go and watched me as I walked but she didn't wake me because she believed that the soul wandered during sleepwalking: should the sleepwalker be awakened, the *wan pak* might not return to the body and the sleepwalker would fall into a deeper sleep from which they would never return.

Many times, after that first night, my soul would wander while my bare feet took my body outside into the night and back again through the kitchen door, which I always bolted firmly behind me.

Nine

When a new black Wolseley arrived outside our house in January 1941 we were all excited. My grandmother and my mother had raised the money for the car by buying tontine shares, a method of

investing that was popular with housewives. Few people had bank accounts and they had paid for the car in cash. That afternoon, when Popo went to the temple, she made Father drive her there in the car so that the people at the entrance would see her arrive in style. She boasted to her friends that she had paid for the car, and added that she had a clever way with money.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.