

THE ADOPTED CHINESE DAUGHTERS' REBELLION

This much we know. Across the playing fields just east of the Jericho Beach Youth Hostel they hobbled, some of them holding hands, Mei Li and Xiao Yu for sure, yes, they would have been holding hands—fingers threaded together in a tight weave, like a waterproof basket made of reeds bobbing along an irrigation canal, a baby girl wrapped in newspaper mewling inside. The other girls hurried alongside them. Mei Ming would have started singing; she was the musical one, the one with *that voice*, as we often heard the mothers of the other girls grudgingly admit.

They stopped halfway across the field. We can tell you that. The moon that night was a fat crescent, like a window on an outhouse door in a *New Yorker* cartoon. Their strange footprints must have shimmered in the fresh snow. *A herd of deer*, an early-morning dog walker might have thought, *how odd*.

How much odder the truth.

A number of the girls appear to have eaten chocolate bars, miniature Caramilks no doubt left over from Halloween, the wrappers casually tossed near the second baseline of the ball diamond. One of them smoked a cigarette, a *Matinée Extra Mild*, the butt found lightly rimmed in marzipan-scented Lip Smacker where the footprints abruptly ended. Another wrote *Up yours* in the snow, not with swaggering piss the way a boy would have, but by clumsily dragging her small heel. (*Not my daughter*, Frank de Rocherer insisted the next morning, stamping his slipper-clad foot—in their panic most of the parents hadn't thought to get dressed. As if that mattered

now, which daughter smoked, which daughter was profane, which daughters had insatiable sweet teeth.)

From a distance, if you approached the snowy field from the west, their footprints looked like a series of brushstrokes forming a long-necked bird. A *crane*, Myra Nagle insisted, and soon that's what it was, a crane rising skyward. A most auspicious symbol, we have since learned.

Of course we weren't there to witness all this. We can only imagine. Conjecture, you understand. And if it hadn't been for the snowfall, a rare Christmas Eve snowfall in the coastal city, we wouldn't have anything to go on at all.

THE YEAR OF THE STORK

We watched, those of us who were too old, too divorced, too medicated (too selfish, some said, too *lazy*) to have adopted Chinese daughters. We watched some dozen years ago as couples living on our cul-de-sac disappeared into the smog-cloaked air of Guangdong Province—one of the most polluted places on earth, where the clang and clatter of an almost desperate progress hearkened back to Dickensian England—and returned with tiny, clear-eyed girls whose provenance was a mystery, known only to the hollow-armed mothers who had forsaken them, and whose only forms of identification, besides the *Resident alien* stamps beside their names in their new passports, were the ragged pieces of rice paper, marked with their footprints in red ink, that their new parents framed behind glass and hung above their cribs in white bedrooms overlooking the ocean, as if to say, *Watch your step*.

We're making it sound as if all this happened seamlessly. In fact, ethical debates stormed through our cul-de-sac for an entire summer on the issue of bringing children into a world beset by woe, when more than a continent away dark-haired babies lay on greying sheets, their futures rapidly fraying at the edges.

We know most of the men cheerfully submitted to vasectomies. "Too much information," we'd say if we met them while hauling our blue boxes to the curb and they jocularly pointed out—although not before noting (once again) that we hadn't flattened our cans—that they'd spent the previous evening parked in front of the Discovery Channel sitting on a bag

of frozen peas, adding that it was the least they could do to help save wear and tear on the planet. Or, as prematurely grey, ponytailed Gary Forsythe put it, making a peace sign and then scissoring his fingers much too close to our faces, *Snip snip*. The women were also aggressive about birth control, although even Carol Fawcett's closest friends admitted they found her opting for a full hysterectomy a little, well, "show-offy, don't you think?"

Jiang Li was first. "You should call her Pearl!" one of us exclaimed as we all crowded around for another look at those fingers, those toes. "Oh, no," said Laura Warkentin, scrunching up her face as if we'd suggested calling her daughter Rover or Spike. Her husband, Joe, standing behind her, recited a Chinese proverb: "Human beings are like falling water. Tip them East and they flow East. Tip them West and they flow West." He sounded like Master Po addressing the young Kwai Chang Caine in *Kung Fu*. At the time we thought he was just trying to be amusing.

We found it touching at first how Jiang Li's parents offered a wealth of detail about the circumstances of her abandonment. Wrapped in elephant-leaved taro and left by an irrigation canal in the Pearl River Delta, water buffalo in a neighbouring field looking as if they were standing guard, an illegible note pinned to her diaper. But as our formerly quiet street swelled with the sounds of cooing and crying, the oft-repeated stories became overwhelming, like some life-sized game of Clue run amok. Xin Qian by a freeway bundled in a pair of worn blue work pants. Fang Yin on a bench in a moonlit park clutching the stub of a movie ticket (*Flashdance*). Li Wei at a railroad station teething on a wizened yam.

It was as if where they were found explained who they were. As if looking back was more important than looking forward. As if there was something intrinsically romantic, rather than profoundly disturbing, about a baby found at an open-air market in a cardboard box amidst a pile of pole beans or winter melons.

THE FENG SHUI OF ANDREW MACINTOSH

We watched, those of us who lacked the emotional fortitude, the capacity for sacrifice, and the largeness of spirit (the *chutzpah*, some said, meaning it, of course, in the ecumenical sense) of our neighbours who had adopted Chinese daughters.

We watched Nina Sawatsky mastering homemade pot-stickers, brushing away our compliments with a breezy, “Oh, you know, they’re just like perogies.” We watched Jamie Tate patiently guiding his girl through her calligraphy exercises, until her brushstrokes were swift and sure, promising her a Shar-Pei puppy if she could master the character for bliss. We watched as Caitlin Rogers (yes, *those* Rogerses), holding her straight, honey-blond hair out of the way, showed her small daughter how to clear her throat and release a frothy gob curbside, just as the girl’s ancestors had done for thousands of years (according to primary sources Caitlin Rogers herself had interviewed at the Chinese Benevolent Association on Pender Street). We watched Andy MacIntosh, a ruddy Scot, standing amidst the rubble of his house, his family ensconced at the Westin Bayshore, while he directed a construction team to favourably reorient their mock Tudor so the wind could blow through it in a manner that maximized the flow of positive ch’i, and to set the doors at an angle to the sidewalk so as to thwart evil spirits. (We were surprised to learn evil spirits were so easy to fool.) And he was just the first.

Feng shui, feng shui, feng shui—the cry rose and spread through our cul-de-sac like the swishing wings of a thousand cranes taking flight. The girls must have heard it, too. They held their hands to their ears; they each pulled a Sony Discman out of hiding places deep in the laurel bushes at the edge of the Gill-Campbell property, plugging themselves in as if to drown out the ancestral murmurs emanating from their newly situated houses.

We watched one particularly wet autumn morning just over a year ago as the girls, dressed in identical puffy quilted cotton jackets and worker pants, participated in group exercises out in the middle of the street, led by Marshall Evans. Their hair appeared to have been cut with pruning shears and was of a uniform, unflattering length. They were assigned households at random and sent off to greet their new parents and tidy their new bedrooms. The traditional-medicine phase of the summer—when the girls, bristling like porcupines, lay in their backyards on bamboo mats while Greig Ladner, a do-it-yourself kind of guy, applied his newly acquired acupuncture skills to everything from sunburns to hurt feelings—seemed so harmless now.

“Let a thousand flowers bloom,” we suggested tactfully as we watched the girls form a human pyramid in order to clean out the eavestroughs on the Simpsons’ stylish West Coast Modern, all the while singing patriotic

marching songs praising Mao Tse-tung. “Oh, mind your own beeswax,” said Dana Simpson, who was, we can be sure, echoing the sentiments of all the other parents.

We often wondered over the years what the girls really heard as they lay quietly in their beds at night in their embroidered silk pyjamas. There must have been something beyond the sharp clack of mah-jong tiles as their parents gathered around dining-room tables into the early hours of the morning, something just beyond the wind shivering through the thick stands of bamboo that obscured the view of the ocean from their bedroom windows. Something that made them continue to return their parents’ hugs with a genuine fervour not born of that ancient curse called filial piety.

After everything that’s happened, it must be said that we never heard the parents of the adopted Chinese daughters speak of undying gratitude; not once did they imply the girls owed them anything. It wasn’t a matter of not enough love, but perhaps of too much. Any parent would understand.

That bamboo our neighbours planted turned out to be highly resilient and invasive. We’ve been finding it everywhere lately—growing in the middle of a cedar deck, through a crack in the foundation of a garage. We need only lift the lid of a compost bin and a couple of rogue stalks spring forth, like something out of a 1950s horror movie. We’ve taken axes to the roots, flailing away until blisters rise on our palms. The roots themselves look prehistoric, like the skeletal remains of dinosaurs, curved vertebrae prickling, dry knobs of joints, and we feel strangely ashamed as we strain to pull them from the ground.

THE TAO OF LITTLE SUSANNA A.K.A. OOPS!

We watched, those of us with, admittedly, nothing better to do, as four years after the adopted Chinese daughters arrived on our cul-de-sac Bettina Lauridsen’s belly began to grow. We watched as if witnessing something terribly transgressive, almost pornographic, although a casual observer at Choices Market on a Saturday morning would simply have noted a tired, pregnant brunette in her late thirties leaning on a cart while an alarmingly red-headed forty-something male scanned labels for MSG and a small Asian-featured girl tugged on her mother’s jacket clamouring for a sugar-frosted cereal that was rumoured to be “Magically delicious!”

We threw a baby shower against Bettina L.'s protestations and invited all the mothers and their daughters. The girls were enchanted, especially Huan Yue, the sister-to-be. They pressed their palms to the tight bulge, their faces full of gravity and wonder, as if they were good fairies laying on a series of blessings, levitating the baby in its puddle of embryonic soup, while in the kitchen Darcas Conrad inverted an ice-cube tray over a bowl of guava punch and said, "Tubal ligation, my ass."

Her name was Susanna, or Oops!, as her parents took to calling her, except within earshot of her grandparents. We had legitimate concerns that little Susanna might be abandoned somewhere in accordance with our cul-de-sac's unofficial but implicit one-family-one-child policy. We watched for a woman sneaking out of the house under the cover of night and returning empty-handed, moth holes riddling her heart. But as time passed, it began to seem the little flame-haired girl was with us to stay.

The endearing thing about Susanna was that she wanted to be a Chinese daughter more than anything else. "Will I look like you when I grow up?" we heard her ask Huan Yue more than once, drooping when told she'd look exactly like herself.

She went door to door with a petition demanding her parents give her a Chinese name (meanwhile, we'd overheard the other girls secretly calling each other things like Krista, Madison, and Delaney). She begged to use chopsticks instead of a fork, to be allowed to practise Shaolin boxing with her sister, to learn Cantonese or even a little Mandarin. She drew little yin and yang symbols on her bare knees with indelible ink and was sent to her room to play with Florida Vacation Barbie™. And in the evenings, while her father diligently quizzed Huan Yue at the kitchen table about Chinese history ("The legendary woman warrior Mu Lan, unlike the Disney heroine, did not require the aid of a boyfriend," Peter O'Reilly often told us, as if we were the ones in need of a lesson), Susanna was banished to the den with a *Betty and Veronica Double Digest* and a mug of Ovaltine.

The day her parents caught little Susanna in the bathroom Scotch-taping up the corners of her eyes, they enrolled her in Irish step-dancing.

We've often wondered, is it a crime to want something you can't have? "She's a very clever girl," we assured each other. "After all, she was born in the Year of the Monkey." Her father, overhearing, actually harrumphed, something most of us had only witnessed in cartoons. "She's a Taurus," he said, as if that was that.

THE I CHING OF KRIS KRINGLE

We watched, those of us who could no longer claim to understand the true meaning of Christmas, who had long stopped believing no two snowflakes are alike. We watched helplessly late last year as the adopted Chinese daughters, in their thirteenth year, at the foggy outskirts of their girlhood, set out to defy their parents.

In mid-November, Jiang Li and Fang Yin were found spray-painting frozen New Brunswick fiddleheads with gold Krylon while watching a Martha Stewart holiday special. Their daring served to embolden the others. Li Wei and Xin Qian skipped out on a horticultural tour at Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden to attend a performance of Handel's *Messiah* at Christ Church Cathedral (by all accounts, it was a very good year for the *Messiah*). Mei Li and Xiao Yu were caught exchanging gifts wrapped in paper embossed with trumpeting angels. Mei Ming was heard humming "Blue Christmas" in the tub, complete with the little Elvis hiccup. And Jiao Ping was spotted in front of Capers on 4th Avenue slipping the rumpled Salvation Army Santa a loonie.

A few days after it was discovered that Huan Yue had auditioned to play the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the school pageant, we received (*FYI*, the attached Post-it notes read) a professionally rendered pamphlet in our mailboxes extolling the virtues of the ancient art of foot binding. Much was made of the cunning little embroidered boots the girls would wear, even to bed. Some of it was a bit too technical for us, with computer-generated diagrams detailing the length of cotton (4.57 metres) that would tightly bind the feet, the degree the four smaller toes were to be bent towards the sole (180), thereby breaking them, and how similar the bound foot is to a lotus blossom (very).

Traditionally, the mothers did the binding, but it appeared the girls' fathers were more than up to the task. Or as Nigel Kempton yelled through the open window of his planet-friendly family compact as he raced off to Fabricland, "Hey, women hold up half the sky, right?"

We didn't see much of the girls for the rest of December. Every so often a wan face would appear at a window, or we'd notice one of the daughters hobble to the car, leaning hard on her mother or father, heading to the doctor for a flu shot or to join one of the other families at Floata for dim sum. Susanna came and went, aiming big, angry kicks at the sodden leaves

still mounded in the gutters, while her sister sat inside, her own feet growing as small as her circumstances.

Then on Christmas Eve, close to midnight, when most of us were already in bed, our doorbells began to chime. There on our steps stood the adopted Chinese daughters, begging to come in, to peer into the stockings tacked to our mantels, to shake a gift or two and puzzle over the muffled rattling inside, to sniff the nutmeg-scented air, to gaze at their own elongated reflections in the shiny balls that hung on the trees they'd glimpsed through our front windows, to snuggle by our hearths and confide they'd always dreamt each other's dreams and that they dreamt of the things they had done, or still wanted to do: sleep on ice floes, kiss the Queen's papery cheek, walk barefoot across burning sand to lay a humble gift inside a stable. To make us pay heed, they peeled their sweaters over their heads, revealing a startling array of undergarments (a puckered training bra, a bronze satin bustier, a frayed, sleeveless T-shirt that read *Remember Leon Klinghoffer*), and showed us the white pinfeathers erupting from their armpits in tidy rows.

It had already begun to snow and we noticed how otherworldly the girls' footprints appeared along our front walks. (Some of us later swore we saw little Susanna tumbling end over end across a snowy lawn with stunning alacrity, an illuminated Catherine wheel, her bare heels and tail spitting sparks.) We only said what seemed the right thing to say at the time, before closing our doors. "It's late. Go home."



Now we watch, all of us who had a hand in the fate of the adopted Chinese daughters and Susanna. We watch the sky for a flock of long-necked cranes and a flying monkey. It's early spring, but the houses on our cul-de-sac are decked out in full holiday regalia. There's even a reindeer on the roof of Huan Yue and Susanna's old house, Rudolph no less, its red nose a beacon that can be seen for miles. The lights on our houses are of the insistent blinking variety. The bulbs don't wink on and off at random, but blink in unison day and night.

Come back, come back, they whimper. S.O.S.

The other night we watched as one of the fathers bent to tidy a life-sized crèche, scooping handfuls of wet debris and a crumpled beer can from the

manger where baby Jesus should have been. We began to wonder whether it was too late to ask what God might have to do with all this, but instead willed ourselves to think about the girls' footprints in that snowy field, and we marvelled, once again, at the effort it must have taken to walk even as far as they had.