

My Story

Golden Mountain was the name that the Chinese people gave to the New World in the 1800s. Even in the homes of poverty, homes of red dust and little rice, they had heard of the Golden Mountain. If you could get papers and passage to the Golden Mountain, then you would return to China rich and help your family and village, and bring honour to the name of your ancestors. But first, you must bribe a lot of people for the proper papers and pay the five hundred dollar head tax. This was a suck-in-the-breath amount of money. Five hundred dollars was a year's wages for some, a lifetime's for others. Five hundred dollars was the Impossible Mountain. The Debt Mountain. The Theft Mountain. The Soul Lost Mountain.

In the 1800s, some men counted themselves lucky to get contracts to labour in the gold fields of California or build the thin railway lines lost in the vast open spaces that became a penetrating root that would spread across Canada and the United States of America. The railway would bring a steam infusion of settlers – an intrusion. The Chinese were indentured labourers, brought in only to work, and when the work was done they were to go home. But they didn't. They couldn't. They had no riches, only blisters. They dug to the heart of the Golden Mountain, but others claimed the wealth of their toil. They had no dreams left, no money, no honour, and so they stayed. They sent money back to their families when they could, and were buried far from their ancestors in the slag heaps left from their digging and their lives.

When cheap labourers were no longer needed, the governments of the New World tried their best to get rid of them. They were taking jobs from real Canadians and Americans – white immigrants. They established laws to prevent these broken, lonely men from bringing out wives, children, and other family. The head tax continued to rise. It was blood money.

My father was one of the few who came to the Golden Mountain in the early 1900s, when the head tax was very high. When he left China, he cut his pig tail and changed his name to Jimmy. Not James, just Jimmy. Jimmy Li. He opened a Chinese take-out in the back of a red brick building in the village of Cooksville. Cooksville would grow up to be an urban sprawl called Mississauga, a huge satellite city of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, but it was a crossroads village then. When I was young, the red brick building still had an old rusted ring in the wall where they had tethered the stagecoaches years before. My father was tethered to the building too. His take-out was always open, even on Christmas. The only day the take-out was closed was on my father's birthday. He first rented space in the red brick building, then bought the building, then bought other buildings that he rented to cover his mortgages. They were always red brick buildings, imperial buildings in my father's mind. My father would grow smaller, older, and richer each year.

My father was sixty-two years old when he had me. When I was young, I was embarrassed to have such an old father. I would tell my white Canadian friends that my real father was dead and Jimmy was my grandfather. Later, I was sort of proud that my father could conceive me at sixty-two. This was without enhancement drugs, you understand. My father conceived me under his own steam.

I cannot remember not being in the kitchen of our take-out. My mother cooked along with the others, her stomach round and full of hope. I was to be Jimmy's son. Once born, and a girl, I lay in a back corner of the kitchen in an old crib. I watched the activity intently as I sucked my hand and filled my diaper, fulfilling my role in the family while wrapped in the comfort of food smells and Chinese voices. I was a contented baby. I didn't know yet that I was a disappointment.

As I got older, I played in my back corner with dark serious eyes and an expressionless face. I knew by then I was a disappointment; my mother told me so often. "If you had been a son, your father would have married me," she would say as she combed my hair with strokes made hard by emotion and strong work hands. My mother was not my father's wife. His wife shared a room with my father; my mother had a room next to my half sister's and mine. My mother was my father's concubine.

He had met her in China when he had made his first trip back to his village after many years. She was the third daughter of an old school friend. My father would say he had not found her pretty, but she looked strong and healthy and so he thought she would give him the son his wife could not. First, he had made arrangements with her father and an agreed bride price was established. My father then took my mother for a walk in the vegetable garden. He did not talk of love; he talked of red brick buildings.

"I am a man of substance. I own a red brick building, but I am still poor because I have no son to carry on my family name. If you are willing to come to Canada and work hard and give me a son, I will make you my wife and you will have anything you want. If you do not have a son, you will work hard and I will provide for you."

My mother was a practical woman. As a third daughter, she had no prospects beyond marriage to some local farmer. Politically, China was not a good place to be. It was Red. Not red brick, but red Maoist and Red Guard. My father, she knew, was educated and kind. Even if he was old and wrinkled, his breath was still fresh. She would be better off with him in the Golden Mountain. And so, she had agreed.

I called my father's wife, Aunt Quin. My half sister is five years older than myself. She was called Sarah. I am Kelly. I am strong and healthy, like my mother. I am not pretty, but women say I am handsome.

1955 was the year of my father's happiness. He adopted a son. My father rented a big hall, and many people came to offer their congratulations. I was too young to question where my brother had come from or why he was not living with us. I do not know if my sister Sarah asked. If she did, I am sure she didn't get an answer. My mother would say, "We can't talk of these things. These people," she would say, "have never had to boil nettles and eat them to survive. They cannot understand." I had never had to survive on nettles, either, but I knew not to talk of things within the Chinese community to those on the outside. When I went to school, and later to work, I went through a cultural decompression chamber each morning and came out into the liquid white world, protected by a deep diving suit of secrets.

And so, after 1955, I had a half sister and brother. My brother's Chinese name meant The Noble One. His English name was Jason. Sarah and I had no Chinese names. My father thought for a long time about what my brother's name should be. Sarah and I were named by our mothers: Sarah, after Sarah Bernhardt, and me after Grace Kelly. I did not meet my brother until I was fourteen. He was raised in Singapore by relatives.

My first experience with a woman was also in 1955. I was five years old and my father had bought a TV. It was a black and white picture, and came in a wood cabinet that took up a whole corner of the room. Workmen came and put an antenna on the roof of our red brick building. My father went outside to look up at it. The antenna was another symbol of his success.

Sarah and I were not normally allowed to watch TV. My father watched. Sometimes his wife and my mother were allowed to watch, as well. My father watched wrestling and horse racing. He watched Gorgeous George and Man of War. He gambled on these events. Gambling is a Chinese vice. We are superstitious because we like to gamble. We look for signs, knock on wood, carry charms, anything that will bring us good Joss, good luck. My father was lucky at gambling, but not lucky at having sons, not until that year.

In 1955, Sarah and I were allowed to watch TV this one night. It was a special treat, because it was the year of my father's happiness. My mom and aunt made a special meal, and we were allowed to stay up late to watch Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*. I was mesmerized. I wanted to be Peter Pan, because I was too young to know that I wanted Wendy. My sister wanted to be Wendy and have two sons. That was one of the many differences between my sister and myself. I was not afraid to fly across rainbows to Neverland to fight pirates, and Sarah was not afraid to be tethered to a red brick building.

That was many years ago now. In a futile attempt to prove my worth, I excelled in school and ended up fighting pirates in a court of law. It was in court that I met Jane Anderson. I cross examined her. She was the arresting officer, and I, the lawyer for the defendant. My client was a Chinese Canadian businessman charged with smuggling. I was looking for loopholes in order to save my guilty client from jail time. I found none. My client got five years and a bill from me for ten thousand. He could have gotten ten years and a bill for fifteen thousand, but the courts, and I, were lenient.

I met Jane again three months later, at a climbing meet on Hamilton Mountain. She scrambled past me and deliberately took my next handhold. It would have been bad etiquette if she'd done it out of carelessness, but doing it deliberately made it a challenge. I followed her up and used my height to intimidate. I am tall for an Oriental.

"You probably don't know this, but you don't cut off the ascent of another climber."

"You probably don't know this, but the law is there to protect society, not the guilty."

I remembered her then. Out of uniform and in a sweat stained t-shirt, she was still worth noticing. "I was doing my job, which was to defend my client, as is his right under the law."

"Glad I don't have your job." She let her line drop over the side and rappelled down to a woman who waited for her at the bottom.

Even in those closeted days, I sensed they were a couple. I coiled up my lines slowly, giving them time to move off. I am a good lawyer; I had done nothing wrong. Still, I did not like the feeling this cop's criticism had left inside me. I felt my comfort levels violated. *Screw the bitch*, I thought, and then smiled. I would have liked to.

Our paths did not cross again for over a year, not until the night of the accident. An officer from the police station phoned my condo to tell me my mother was trapped in her car and was calling for me. I drove like a lunatic to the scene of the accident, using my Crown Attorney ID to get through the police line. I ran up to the overturned car and found Officer Anderson kneeling in the mud, holding my mother's hand and talking to her softly as the paramedics worked to stabilize her.

“So, what does your daughter do?” I heard her ask.

“I’m a lawyer,” I said from behind her, and then knelt down by my mother and talked to her in Cantonese, ignoring Anderson. After a minute, Officer Anderson got up and moved off. We were even.

The night of the accident, my mother had taken the car to go to bingo at the Chinese Cultural Centre. She had gotten on the exit ramp, but had somehow managed to drift over to the shoulder of the road and roll down the embankment. Later, at the hospital, I would learn that she’d had a small stroke.

I’d always thought it would be my father who would die first. He was ninety-five and fragile, but still sat in his office and worked each day. My father never mixed business with pleasure. His mind was quick, and he still put in an eight hour day before turning on the news to get the race results. My mother was fifty-five, and was having strokes.

I sat at her side at the hospital and held her hand. She’d had another stroke on the way to the hospital, and she looked at me with blank eyes and made noises like a baby.

Reality is smoke from an incense stick: fragrant and varied, but elusive. We know who we are only until our mind wanders down new paths, then we are lost. I wondered what paths her mind was taking her down, and whether she would meet me there or would never recognize me again.

By morning, she knew me but she was confused and scared. She kept asking me why she was in a hospital and scolding me for not taking her to a Chinese doctor who knew the old medicines. It was several days before I was allowed to take her home. I explained to her that she had dangerously high blood pressure and would need to be on medication. I took her to my condo; Aunt Quin had enough to do with caring for my father. So, after living with my father for thirty-four years, she left him. She did not seem to mind, and neither did he. They now walked down different paths. Reality is smoke.

So my mother came to live with me after her accident and stroke. It was a daughter’s duty to take care of her family. While I did not question this, I did resent it. I enjoyed my private world. I am, by nature, a solitary creature. What gay person has not lived in isolation? Since adulthood, I had lived a discreet but alternative life style. Having my mother move into my guest room was like moving home and being a child once more. I lost control. My Western frozen dinners disappeared and my apartment smelt of Eastern herbs and spices and things tossed in a wok. I was forced back to eating rice and giving up pizza.

I phoned Mom three times a day from my office and spent evenings with her. I spoilt her, and she spoilt me. One day, a week after I moved her in with me, she appeared at the door to my den. “Kelly.” My name sounded foreign on my mother’s lips. It was a very different sounding name when my friends said it. “You must find that nice cop who helped me. You must thank her and give her a gift. I have some red money envelopes. We will give her some money in thanks.”

I smiled. In the Chinese culture, the gift of money is common. We have special red envelopes for such gifts. Sometimes the chop for good luck or good fortune is embossed in gold on the front. “I can’t give a police officer money, Mom. It would be seen as a bribe.”

My mother sniffed in annoyance. She felt that white Canadians were very strange. They would order Chinese food, but insist that it only be made with European ingredients. They would pick up the wrong fortune cookie, not knowing that the ends must be pointing towards them. And they would ask why there was no take-out rice pudding. Rice as a dessert; how ridiculous.

“Then you must give her another gift. It is proper. I will pay.”

I was a child again. My mother had given me an order and I would obey. What kind of gift did one buy for a cop?

When I was in elementary school, students would give each other valentine cards. The teacher would have us make envelopes to stick on the side of our desks. They were our valentine mailboxes. We decorated them with red and pink hearts that we cut from construction paper and stuck on with mucilage. The teacher told us not to eat the glue because it was made from horse's hooves, and you never knew where a horse had been. I had a pretty good idea.

I never got a lot of cards, and I never knew what to do with the ones I did. These cards were bought in variety stores in sheets. All you had to do was punch out the cards and sign your name. Some said things like, "Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you." Others said things like, "Roses are red, cabbages are green, sugar is sweet and you're ugly and mean." Which were supposed to be funny and which were truth? Reality is smoke.

My mother let me buy my cards the night before Valentine's Day, when they were on sale. I was allowed to sit up late to get them done. I sent everyone in the class a valentine because I didn't like to hurt anyone's feelings. The ones I got, I took home and then secretly threw them out. More secrets. Even small secrets build up over time.

I did keep one card in fourth grade, from Tracy. She sat three seats over from me and giggled a lot. She was very popular and I was proud she had given me a card. I stuck it on the mirror above my dresser and left it there until spring. Then I threw it away. I cannot remember Tracy's last name, but I do remember she favoured pink underpants and liked to dance around in them in the girls' change room. My undies were always white, and I tried not to show them. I am a private person of many secrets.

I phoned police headquarters and found out that Officer Anderson worked out of Station Six. I phoned Station Six and left my cell phone number, requesting that Officer Anderson call me. She did, several days later.

"This is Officer Anderson. I have a message to call this number to speak to Kelly."

I took the call in my office, leaning back in my chair and trying to act as if I were in control. I did not feel in control. I was a little girl back in a red brick house, doing the chores my mother had set for me.

"Officer Anderson, this is Kelly Li, over at the Crown Attorney's Office."

"I thought you were in criminal law working for Barrs, Miller, and Wang."

"Now I work as a Crown Attorney."

"Welcome to the other side."

The remark had an edge of dry sarcasm to it that I ignored. "Last week my mother had a stroke and rolled her car. You were very kind to her and she wanted me to express her thanks."

"It was my job. How is she?"

"She had another stroke on the way to the hospital, but she seems to have recovered, although she is not as active as she has been in the past."

"I'm glad she is okay. She was scared."

"Yes, she would be."

"Thanks for calling. Please give your mother my best."

"There is something else."

“What?”

“My mother wants to give you a gift.”

“Counsellor, you know better.”

“Yes, but my mother doesn’t. She wanted me to give you money; it is the Chinese way. I thought perhaps we could find some middle ground and I might be able to thank you by taking you to dinner.”

“With you?”

She didn’t need to sound so incredulous. I gritted my teeth. “Yes.”

There was silence at the other end while she considered. “All right.”

“Good. Are you free Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“Where can I pick you up?”

“Let’s meet somewhere.”

“Very well. What do you like to eat?”

“Chinese.”

Was she being funny? My silence must have alerted her to my annoyance.

“I figured you’d know a good place.”

“Oh. Actually, I have a better idea where to buy good pizza.”

She laughed.

Was I making progress in this chore? “I’ll ask my mother. I’m sure she’ll know a good place for American Chinese.”

“American Chinese?”

“North Americans do not like real Chinese.”

“How do you know?”

“My family runs a take-out.”

“Is the food good?”

I got huffy. “Of course the food is good! What do you think we do, pick up stray cats on the street and stew them in sweet and sour sauce?”

She laughed again, not realizing how sensitive a subject this is. Do the Whites not realize that we know what they say about us?

“Okay, let’s go get take-out at your place. I picked the place, so you pick the meal.”

“Okay. Saturday at eight. Jimmy Li’s Take-Out. It’s the corner of Hurontario and Dundas. A red brick building.”

“I know the place. Saturday, then. Thanks.”

I phoned my mother to tell her I was taking Officer Anderson out for dinner on Saturday night.

“Where?” my mother wanted to know.

“Our place, in the kitchen.”

We had been talking English, now there was an explosion of Cantonese. Officer Anderson would be insulted. We would be shamed. I must take her somewhere nice. Was my mother not worth a good gift of thanks?

Guilt. It bricked me in on all sides.

“She wanted real Chinese. She picked our place. I thought if she wanted real Chinese I’d give her the complete experience,” I snapped. My mother hung up with a snort. I was a disappointment again.

Once, my mother sent me to school with a special lunch of fish cakes. They were my favourite; I was being rewarded for having good marks.

“What is that smell?” the teacher asked, wrinkling her nose.

The students laughed and held their noses. “It’s Kelly’s lunch.”

The teacher tried to be understanding. “Come with me, Kelly. We’ll wrap it up and keep it in the staffroom fridge until lunch time.”

I got my lunch later and ran to the farthest corner of the playground to eat. After that, I told my mom I wanted only peanut butter sandwiches for lunch.

My half sister and I lived in two different planes of reality within one room. She was five years older and her mother was married to my father. She did not care that she was a disappointment. She cared about boys, dances, and rock stars. She planned to marry a rock star and live in a huge, red brick mansion. I felt the disappointment. My mother was only a concubine. I felt the guilt. I cared about nothing but success. I studied. I had no life. It is better anyway to have no life if you are a lesbian teen. It is easier that way.

I have read that many lesbian women have terrible teenage years with awful experiences filled with the pain of discovery and often rejection. I did not. I had nothing. I studied. I would make my father and mother proud, and then I would live the life I wanted quietly. Secrets. They are a deep sea diving suit against truth.

Joanne had been in my grade ten class. She always wore a plaid lumber shirt over a t-shirt and blue jeans. Everyone called her Jo-the-dyke. She didn’t look like a dyke to me. She had wide hips and big breasts. I thought then that dykes should look like guys – flat chested and narrow hipped.

The sorority girls complained because she shared their gym change room, so she was allowed to change in the staff change room. I envied her. I did not like changing with the girls, even though I was gay. I am a very private person and I was Chinese in a White school. Once a girl asked if I was yellow down there, too. How do you answer a question like that?

Jo-the-Dyke was strong but she had no grace, and so she was not good at sports except shot put. She could beat anyone hands down in shot put, but nobody cared. Shot put was not a sport anyone cared about. No one cared about Jo, either. Jo was not good at school. She’d come late and skip class. When she was yelled at by a teacher, she would shrug.

Because we were both outcasts, sometimes she would sit with me at lunch in the cafeteria. I never sent her away because I was raised to be polite, but I never chose to sit with her. I would let her copy my math or French so I would not have to make conversation. I am not good at conversation.

She told me that she had a horse and liked to ride. I thought this strange. Girls like to ride, so dykes shouldn’t. Girls like to spread their legs and feel the heat and leather against their sex. Girls ride, women fuck. I never rode. My mother believed it would damage me. Damage me how? I was never told. I never wanted to ride anyway, at least not horses.

“Kelly,” Jo would say, “I’m going to be free someday. You wait and see.”

Jo-the-Dyke left school in grade eleven and drove trucks. I heard she was killed in a winter pile up. When I think of her, I don’t picture her as a frozen corpse waiting for a body bag; I see her smiling, free to be herself on the open road. I think she would like that I remember her that way.

I need to talk about secrets. You can't have secrets without having lies. I have heard people say that you can't have a good relationship if there isn't complete honesty. It surprises me that there are any relationships at all then. You tell me that you do have an open, honest relationship. I wonder. Reality is smoke. Perhaps you have forgotten that you cheated on that test and really didn't deserve that A. Or that you snatched cigarettes from your father's pack when no one was around. Perhaps you masturbated and said the stain on your sheets was from your dog, or played show and tell with the boy next door to see what boys had that girls didn't. Perhaps you told your parent or partner all these things but there are some things that embarrass you still or that are too personal, that you have not shared. There are some things that we can't even be truthful about to ourselves.

Smoke. We are all smoke. Try and catch us.

My cherry was ripped from my bush by my brother when I was fourteen. He was nineteen. The stain it left on the sheets was the colour of red brick. He had come to live with us six months before. My father was delighted by my brother's arrival. The rest of us were resentful most of the time and embarrassed at others. Jason did not know how to act properly. He did not offer the best pieces of food to his guest by placing them on their plate. Instead, he would reach out and snaffle the best pieces with his chopsticks and eat them noisily. He never knew to pour the tea, as is proper for the oldest son, and always had to be reminded. He spoke in a loud voice and was always bragging about his latest scheme for making money. None of them ever seemed to turn out, but somehow, it was never Jason's fault. My father kept bankrolling him.

My sister had gone to the movies with some girl friends and the adults in the family had gone to the races. I'd had my bath and was getting ready for bed when Jason opened my bedroom door without knocking.

"Get out!"

"Do not speak to me like that, bitch! You are only a girl."

"You can't come in here, Jason. It is not right." I was hot with embarrassment, but not fear. I had not yet learned fear. I wrapped my bath towel around me closely.

"You are very sexy. Men will want you. Are you a virgin?"

I was shocked. "Yes, of course! Don't talk like that, it's rude, Jason."

"I want you." He came in and closed my bedroom door.

"You're my half brother."

He laughed. "No, I'm not. Your father paid the Green Dragon to kidnap a boy child for him. I was only ten, but I can remember a stranger offering me money to go with him. I cried for my mother for a long time."

"My father wouldn't do anything so horrible," I protested, but I wasn't sure. My father had wanted a son so badly.

"Horrible? I am much better off than I would have been had I not been kidnapped from my mother. But, I am not your brother. I'm the man who is going to take you."

When it was over, I knew fear. Fear is a red brick stain on your life. I cried. Then I limped into the kitchen and got the fish boning knife. Jason was asleep on the couch in front of the TV. I stuck the point against his balls. He woke with a scream like a frightened girl and looked like he would be sick.

"If you ever touch me again, I will wait until you are asleep, and I'll cut your balls off."

I never told anyone what he had done. I was too ashamed, and I was sure he would lie and I would be blamed. He was the male child and perfect; I was the female child and a disappointment. My mother and Aunt Quin wondered what had happened to the knife. It was under my mattress. It is still under my mattress. Whenever the knife was mentioned, I would look at Jason and see him sweat. He never touched me again. Yet he had taken and kept something of mine, and I hated him for it.

On Saturday night, I waited outside our red brick take-out for Officer Anderson. She arrived on a bicycle. I was glad to see that she was not in uniform. Instead, she wore blue jeans and a white t-shirt. The round blue patch on her left shoulder read *Peel Police Department: Sharpshooter*. She was tougher than she looked. I wore blue jeans, too, but my tailored shirt had no badge of merit. I hoped she would like eating in a take-out kitchen.

“Hi, Kelly. Am I late?”

“No, Of...err”

“Jane.” She smiled.

I smiled. “No, Jane. I thought I’d better wait outside so you’d find the place okay. Do you really want the whole Chinese experience?” There was the Steak House down the street if she had changed her mind. My mother would approve if I took her to the Steak House.

“How often does one get the chance for a genuine Chinese meal and not an American-Chinese meal?” she asked, a teasing note in her voice.

Never. “Then come in and I will cook for you.”

“You, Counsellor?”

“Me. I grew up in this kitchen, and I learned to cook well before I was out of elementary school. I’m good. You are in for the whole cultural experience.”

She laughed. It was a nice laugh.

The kitchen was hot and steamy. It smelt of vegetables, herbs, and the starch of rice. I showed Jane to the rough table in the back corner where I had studied and eaten most of my life. On the way, I introduced her to my family. Not my immediate family, they no longer worked in the kitchen, but to my cousins and uncles who have replaced them over the years. Canada gives preference to family members who wish to immigrate. I taught her how to greet them in Cantonese. She did not say it right and my relatives laugh at the strange sound, but they are pleased that she has tried and welcome her warmly. Most were new to Canada and they had not learned to be Canadian. If they could have read her t-shirt logo, they would have been more cautious. They thought about police as they had in the old country.

I tried to explain to Jane that Chinese languages, like First Nation languages, are tonal. The meaning for the word is changed by the lilt of the voice, so the Chinese language sounds sing-song to the Western ear. I smiled and explained that the various tones make the Chinese language hard to learn at first. She smiled in return and took the seat I offered her.

The topic reminded me of when I was a child and the children in the playground would pull up the corner of their eyes and make funny sing-song noises from behind buck teeth. They called me Charlie Chan. Children are not cruel; parents are cruel for teaching their children to be racist bigots. The taunts often hurt. You have to learn to ignore the ignorant. My mother would tell me

to put up a wall between their taunts and my feelings. I imagined a red brick wall. Was the Great Wall of China made of red brick?

"They are not cultured like the Chinese. They do not know any better," my mother would say. In traditional Chinese languages, there is no word for foreigner. The word barbarian was used. Every culture has its bigotry.

I started from scratch, boning and scaling the fish with quick, sure movements. I was good with a knife. Then I chopped the vegetables and prepared them in a heated wok. Jane didn't talk. She watched my preparations with interested eyes. When it was time to eat, I sat beside her not across from her. I placed choice pieces on her plate with chopsticks. She didn't seem to find this unusual. Instead, she picked up the morsels and bit into them, looking me straight in the eye.

I was wet, moist fish. I wanted to be in her mouth, tasting her. Does she only ride a bike?

We said good-night on the sidewalk.

"That was an amazing meal and a really unique experience. Thank you, and thank your mother. Give her my best."

"I will. I'm glad you enjoyed your meal."

"Very much so. Well, good-night."

Ask her out! "Good-night." I watched her ride away. I was a private person. I feared I might have read too much into the evening. I would have done my mother great dishonour if I had misunderstood Jane's friendliness. *Was that the reason I hesitated?*

My first crush was a girl in high school. I was still in elementary school. We would stand at the same street corner to catch the bus for school. Sometimes, if the bus was crowded, she would sit beside me. I got off the bus before her. My dreams were full of adventures and twists of fate that brought us together in a happily-ever-after. I fantasized about our times together. It was sex without fear. I asked once if she liked to ride horses. She told me she did when she was younger. I considered that a good sign.

One day, I was sitting well behind her. On impulse, I rode past my stop, wanting to see her get off and enjoy the secret moment of watching her swaying hips and cute behind as she got off the bus. A guy was there waiting for her, and she hugged and kissed him. He had bad acne – red brick stains over his face. I wept.

I never had the social pressure to date. My father had been a scholar in China. He had worked toward joining the civil service. My father expected us to study, not date. Jason had been lucky to have been out of the country. He had been allowed to be a failure. My sister and I were expected to study. I did. My sister learned how to scale red brick walls at night and escape to her world of friends. My sister is not handsome and tall, she is petite and cute and very popular. My world was within; hers was wide spread.

Sarah said there was an imaginary wall down the center of our room that could not be crossed. I was in trouble if I did so. Her clutter sometimes leaked over to my side. My side was neat, orderly, and dull. Hers was a garage sale of teenage paraphernalia. So was my sister's life. During the day, she was always bouncy and smiling. She filled a room with energy and happiness. At night, she sometimes cried. I would ask the darkness if she was all right, if there was anything I could do, but the muffled reply was that she was overly tired and not to worry.

Secrets. They reveal themselves at night, but they do not resolve.

The wall between my sister and me had many different types of bricks. She was five years older – a generation of thought away from me. She was outgoing; I, introverted. My love was learning and hers was playing. I saw order; she saw a kaleidoscope of possibilities. We were not close, but we were bonded by the genes of our father.

In high school, I was greeted by “You’re Sarah Li’s sister?” It was not possible to live up to my sister’s reputation. I was glad of that. I didn’t have the energy or the smiles. I remained isolated.

I was the class Browner from whom the others came to copy homework. That all changed in grade ten when the gym teacher pulled me aside and insisted I try out for the basketball team. I am tall and strong, as I have said, and by then had gotten over the awkward years when limbs were too long and kept knocking over things. I took up basketball with the same intensity that I did everything else in my life. Perhaps my parents would not see me as a disappointment if I was a sports star.

I scored on the court and in the change room. I had matured and seeded, spreading out roots and twining others close. I was a weed of an adolescent – strong, needy, and demanding. But I was also very much a wall flower. I spread, but clung to a wall of normality. There was no coming out for me. Now I moved like a Time Lord through three worlds: Chinese, Canadian, and Alternative. In each, I was a different person. Each jump to hyper-space tore at my soul. Who was I?

Katherine Ustinov was a team forward, and forward. She played one on one with me for three years. She also played with others. Kate had a lot of team spirit. She’d had a tough life, even at that early age. Her father was abusive and her mother a closet drunk. At sixteen, when she told them she was a lesbian, they had kicked her out of the house. Her father had beaten her up first, though, and her mother had drunk and watched it happen. Kate said it was worth it. She now got welfare support and had her own apartment. Her apartment was where we all hung out: the queers, and the straights who were proud of being liberal thinkers. Kate collected conquests. I was her Chinese conquest. As the village of Cooksville was swallowed up into the urban sprawl of the city of Mississauga, Kate had great opportunities to sleep with every nation of the world.

Kate liked to be on top, so did I. The sex was good, but the dominance battle was the usual lesbian problem. Kate was noisy in bed; I was quiet. “Let’s pretend,” she would say, and go off into a great fantasy. Kate was always fantasizing. She had a hard time staying in reality. Reality for Kate was no fun. She went to school to play basketball, and for no other reason. Once she threw my history text across the room in disgust.

“Why are you always reading that crap?”

“To learn.”

“Bullshit. By now I know everything there is to know.”

I laughed. Kate got through school copying my homework and using the cheat sheets I made for her for tests and exams. “Sure you do.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “Test me. Pick a subject.”

“History.”

“We go through ages. In each, we learn to kill better. Then we go to war and regret it. End of story.”

“Geography.”

“We go through ages. In each, we learn to deplete resources quicker and pollute more thoroughly. We do so and regret it. End of story.”

"Language."

"We go through ages. In each, we communicate in a different language. The message is always the same and we regret it. End of story."

"Mathematics."

"We go through ages. In each, we learn to calculate better. We have done so and now we have enough nuclear bombs to destroy the world twenty-seven times over. We regret it. End of story."

"Art?"

"We go through stages. We regret it, and that regret weeps in our art."

I laughed. Kate had cynicism down to a fine art. "So, what is our next stage?"

Kate shrugged. "Who knows? But we'll live to regret it."

Kate had a favourite fantasy. It was about making love on the court after a big game. She had a basketball net screwed to the back of the apartment building wall. It was above the handicap parking spot. No one in the building was handicapped, so the spot wasn't used much except by the occasional visitor. We'd play in the late afternoon on hot pavement. The oven-hot brick wall radiated heat over us and echoed our voices back to us like a crowd. Hot and sweaty after the game, we'd head up to her apartment. We'd barely be inside the door before Kate would be pulling the clothes off me to make love.

For her birthday, I made a tape of a play-off college game. If she could wait long enough, I'd turn it on and then she'd really get hot. We'd go at it until we were exhausted, then we'd shower and I'd have to go home. There would be someone else there at night. Kate hated to be alone. Going down in the elevator, I'd feel myself cross over into my Chinese self. It tore at my soul every time.

I remember the first time I stayed over, Kate watched me slip the boning knife under my pillow.

"What is that for? I'm not into S&M."

"You're safe. It is to protect me from spirits."

"You believe in ghosts?"

"Many Chinese do. The belief in the spirits of our ancestors is very strong."

"You have an ancestor who wants to see you dead?"

"No, my fear is the ghost of Christmas Past," I joked cynically. "The knife wards off nightmares."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No."

When it came time to consider a university, my father told me that there would not be much money. At that time, I did not know my father was rich. He had led us all to believe that his money was all tied up in loans and the business. He told me I could stay at home, and he would pay for my food, but there would be little money for tuition, books, or living expenses.

Around the same time, my brother Jason was arrested on an arson charge. It appeared that criminal life was what suited Jason best. Unfortunately, he was not good at that, either. My father hired him an expensive lawyer and so there was little available cash for my education. It was unthinkable that my father would liquidate any of his investments to help me out.

"I hate him," my sister said of Jason. "I fucking hate him! Don't you?"

"Yes."

“I swear I’m going to kill him.”

“Why?”

“He shamed me.”

The question was on my lips, but I swallowed it. To ask her if the shame was rape would be to reveal my own shame. I remained silent. Would things have been different if I had not? I don’t know. I was silent. So many are. We women bind our secrets to our souls with lies.

A scholarship finally made my future possible. I got a job as a cook in a Chinese restaurant downtown, found a cheap apartment, and enrolled at Toronto University. I studied law. I always wanted to be a lawyer. I was going to be a great lawyer and put people like Jason behind bars for good.

My sister got pregnant when I was in grade nine and she was in her first year of college. The father was a Chinese boy from Hong Kong. They were married in a hall in North York. Once the Chinese community was downtown, but the City built a new town hall in Nathan Phillips Square, and the city councillors did not like the scruffy shops of the Chinese being just around the corner. The dead chickens hanging by their legs in the window, the barrels of hundred year old eggs in their dirt globs, the Buddhist Temple – every smell, sight, and sound offended City Hall, even though the Chinese community paid their taxes and encouraged their children to learn to fit into Western society. They were slowly forced out and moved to North York. North York is now Ontario’s Chinatown.

As far as I know, my sister’s marriage is a happy one. They have three children, all boys. This did not please my father; it was not his name that would be passed on. My sister’s husband took accounting and worked for a Chinese import business in North York. My sister learned bookkeeping and worked for a local hardware store. They have a home in a subdivision in Mississauga, close to Burnhamthorpe and Dixie. My sister is a good mother. She adores her twin boys, but she fights a lot with her oldest son. He looks like Jason. Secrets.

I do not plan on being a mother, but I try to be a good aunt. I visit my nephews regularly and take them places. They are young but seem to have good minds, and their parents have taught them to be polite and self disciplined. My sister has set the same standards for her children that she rebelled against as a child. All things come full circle. Sarah’s oldest child is named John. Not Jonathan, just John.

John and I talked about his name once.

“I am named after a toilet.”

“Nonsense,” I said.

“Mom is stricter with me than my brothers.”

“You are the oldest.”

He nodded. “Mom said she worked very hard in school and got excellent marks, and I must do the same. She only quit school to have me.”

I smiled. Secrets bonded to lies become the breeding ground for myths.

Some weeks after my dinner with Jane Anderson, she contacted me. I had not had the nerve to phone her again although I had thought about it often.

“I was wondering if you are doing anything Saturday,” she asked.

“Nothing special.”

"I was wondering if you would be free to come to a Maple Leaf hockey game at the Air Canada Centre. I was given some tickets. Chrissy is going to spend the day with her grandparents."

"Chrissy?"

"My daughter. She's three. Can you come?"

"Sure. I like hockey." I was afraid to say anything else. She might hear the surprise and disappointment, although I would try to hide it well. I didn't know she was married.

"Great! If you give me your address, I'll pick you up about noon."

I do so, too surprised to think very clearly.

Jane's daughter is called Christine, named after her father Christopher. Her father was a cop too. He was killed when he was hit by a car as he directed traffic around the scene of an accident. The driver was drunk. Christine had not been born then, so she never knew her father. I learn all this as we drive along the Gardener Expressway.

"I am sorry. It must be hard to raise a daughter by yourself."

"It is very difficult with the shift work, but my parents and my in-laws are wonderful. Chrissy is so used to being with them that they are like second homes for her."

We have great seats. They are season tickets that the Anderson's have. Now and again, they give the tickets to Jane.

"You are confused." Jane smiled.

I'm startled. Could she read minds? "Yes. I guess. I'm not sure why you invited me."

"Because I want to get to know you better."

I don't know how to take that. The hard part of being a closet gay is that you don't have any way of easily establishing a relationship with another person. You are operating in the darkness of lies and secrets.

Jane looks at me. "I need you to know that I'm gay. It's not just a friendship I'm looking for, and I got the feeling last month when you made dinner for me that there was a possibility that you might feel the same way. Am I wrong?"

"No. You are not wrong." The words were out of my mouth before I could consider them. Jane kept me totally off balance. I try to get a handle on what is going on. "You were married. You have a child."

"Many gay women do."

"What happened in the last three years to make you want an alternative life style?"

"Nothing. I knew I was gay before I married Chris. Chris and I met at the Police College. We really hit it off and became good friends. One thing led to another and I thought, why not? I was getting a lot of pressure from home to marry and have a family. I didn't think I could ever bring myself to come out, and I liked Chris. I guess that sounds pretty cowardly and shallow, but I did my best to make the marriage work. I think we were happy enough. Maybe there were no bells and whistles, but there was a lot of fun and contentment."

"Did Chris know you were gay?"

"Yes, of course. I wouldn't deceive him. It wouldn't be fair. He said he didn't care, as long as I felt I could be happy with him and didn't stray."

She looked at her hands for a bit, weighing her actions. "I was really angry and shocked when Chris was killed, but a part of me was relieved, too, that I was no longer married to him. I had fulfilled my societal obligations and I was free again. That's awful, isn't it?" She looked up, eyes filled with tears.

I'm not good at this sort of stuff. I try, but the words come out blunt. "It wasn't right. Then again, how many of us do the right things? Society, culture, belief, they all push us into roles that we don't particularly want to play. Perhaps that is why so many of us are depressed. You didn't wish Chris dead. He died. Bad things happen. You can't hold on to that guilt and make it your own. I don't believe that any of us have truly honest relationships with anyone. All we can do is come as close as we can and try to work through issues as they arise."

"Maybe." She looks out onto the field with blank eyes. "It's just that living a lie seems so unfair to Chris."

I consider this. "Perhaps. But from what you said, he was happy with the relationship. That's more than most people find in marriage, and because of you, there is a part of Chris that lives on in his daughter. When you put it all on a scale, it seems to me to balance, and I figure that is about all you can hope for in this world."

"You are rationalizing."

I laughed. "Of course. I'm a lawyer." Then I got serious again. "I can't make it better for you, Jane. I wish I could. All I can tell you is that it doesn't matter to me what you have done in the past. I like you. I'd like to see you again."

She smiled. The game was good. The momentum swung back and forth, and it ended in a tie. That's all you can hope for in life. It is all smoke anyway.

We had dinner at an Italian restaurant. Pizza. She teased me about my love for Italian food. I told her that noodles were invented in China and so spaghetti was really Chinese. She drove me home and I invited her up for a drink. It was safe to do so. I had left my mom at Aunt Quin's for the night.

"Sorry, I can't. I have to go say good-night to Chrissy. I'm on the graveyard shift tonight. Another time. Please?" Her eyes seemed earnest, almost frightened.

I leaned over and kissed her lips gently. "I'll be in touch."

I went up to my condo, and, too restless to settle, I cleaned the place and did the laundry. Then, too tired to carry on, I snagged a beer from the fridge and flopped down in an easy chair with my feet up. I didn't drink very often, but that night just called for a beer. I wondered what was going on between Jane and me.

I'd had relationships before, a few very serious ones. I knew the heady excitement of newfound love and the heat of discovery. My reactions to Jane, however, had been totally different. I found myself not in control. Instead, it felt like I was free falling and had no idea which way was up anymore. Jane was like no one I had ever met. She didn't play mind games; she just told you straight up where she stood and left the ball in your court. I felt way out of my league. Jane was playing hard ball with my emotions. I mused over the day for some time until the second beer was gone and I fell asleep.

The phone ringing woke me up.

With a start, I fought my way back to consciousness and I hauled myself up to pick up.

The voice was frantic. "Kelly? Kelly!"

"Sarah? What's the matter?"

"Oh God, Kelly."

I felt my heart tightening. "Sarah, what's happened?"

"I've killed him."

"Who?"

"I've killed Jason."

"Where are you?"

"At home."

"Have you phoned anyone else or talked to anyone else?"

"No."

"Don't. Are Hu and the boys there?"

"No. He's taken the boys camping with the Scouts for the weekend."

"Anyone else there?"

"J...just Jason."

"Sit down right where you are. Don't touch anything. Don't move. Don't answer the door or the phone until I get there. Understood?"

"Yes."

I put down the phone and gripped the edge of the table. My heart was drumming like a sledgehammer. *What was I going to do now? The Golden Mountain shakes.*

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