

The Palm Leaf Fan

WHEN THE HAKKA CHINESE immigrated to Calcutta, many of them settled into the shoe-making and leather-tanning businesses. My father took up the shoe business. I remember him as a big person with a loud, belly-quivering laugh, and hair cut close to his scalp so that he looked as though he were wearing a black brush, and he seemed to be always surrounded by his friends, always cracking jokes, always chortling, always drinking chai with friends.

Mother was as different from Father as black is from white. She spent most of her time in the kitchen, cooking for Father and any of his friends who happened to drop by. Mother's thin shoulders were hunched over her stomach, which had grown big and distended due to the many pregnancies. I don't remember her ever raising her voice. She seemed to be always looking at somewhere we could not see, and listening to something we could not hear.

A year after he stepped off the ship at Kidderpore, Father opened his first shoe shop, Sam Hin, at 85, Bentinck Street. Two years later, he opened his second shop at 86, Bow Bazaar Street. Three years after that, he opened his third shop at 26, New Market.

The summer of 1942 was hot and dry, the monsoon late in coming. Calcuttans chose between sleepless nights indoors, drenched in sweat,

and sleepless nights on rooftops and verandahs, plagued by mosquitoes and flies.

Mother sat outside Sam Hin with a glass of lassi and a palm leaf fan. She waved her fan at Mrs Wong, sitting outside her shoe shop, Yun Fa, with her five daughters. Mrs Wong waved back.

Bentinck Street, a narrow cobbled road, linked the business district of Bow Bazaar with the shopping district of Chowringhee. That afternoon, cars, trucks, rickshaws, and trams had jammed Bentinck Street. Vendors wandered beside cars, selling sugarcane juice, boiled potatoes, cucumber in masala, roasted peanuts. Beggars wandered between the cars, stopping to beg for coins and food.

Mother waved the fan in front of her face. A mosquito darted and bit her behind her ear. At this point Mrs Wong called out, "Come over to this side of the street. It's cooler."

Mother meandered through between honking cars, a rickshaw and the Park Street tram to reach the opposite side. One of Mrs Wong's daughters got up, moved her stool closer to Mrs Wong, and said, "Aunty Li, please take a seat."

"I wish the rain would come," Mrs Wong said. "The news on the radio this morning said that two rickshawallahs died of heat stroke yesterday."

"Well, it would be cooler. But think of all the washing that will rot on the clothes lines."

"Yes. There is that."

Mother looked at the five Wong daughters. "Hey, you know what?" she said. "One of your daughters would be perfect for my son. Lin is eight years old. I should really find a wife for him."

"Your eldest is such a good-looking boy. Hmm. I would like that." Mrs Wong nodded. "Why not? Which of my daughters would you like?"

The five Wong daughters sat in a row, fanning themselves. They giggled when Mother walked over to them. Mother looked at each girl and thought out loud. "I would like my grandchildren to have nice noses. I want them to have bridges between their eyes." She touched her

nose. "Not flat like mine. Your daughters have nice, fair skin. Good, good. My grandchildren will be fair also."

Mother examined the five noses again and pointed to the third daughter, six-year-old Yun, who had given up her seat for Mother. "I want her."

Mrs Wong nodded. "All right. She is yours. I will speak to my husband tonight."

Mother spoke to Father. Mrs Wong spoke to Mr Wong. Father and Mr Wong spoke over cups of tea and plates of beef curry and chapatis at Nizam's.

Mother and Mrs Wong made offerings at the Ti Hui Mu (Earth Mother Goddess) temple to ask for her blessing so that Lin and Yun, when they married, would have many sons. Mother and Mrs Wong also went to the Moi Kong, the Buddhist temple near New Market, and made offerings to the Buddha, Amitabha, the Bodhisatva of the Western Heaven, and Kwan-yin, the Goddess of Mercy.

The resident monk at Moi Kong looked up the Chinese almanac and chose a date for the adoption.

Father paid for a Saturday and Sunday announcement in the *Chinese Daily*.

Mr and Mrs Wong Po Chu
wish to announce to the community
that from the 16th day of the third Lunar Month of 1942,
our third daughter, Si Yun, will reside
with Mr and Mrs Li Hu Tai.
When Si Yun comes of age,
she will marry their eldest son, Li Lin Hoi.
Mrs Wong and I will not interfere with Si Yun's upbringing, nor
will we be responsible for her upkeep.

Mother cut out the newspaper announcement, wrapped it in oiled paper, and stored it in the safe together with all the passports, birth certificates, immigration papers, and lease agreements for the shops.

She pasted another cutting on a piece of cardboard and displayed it under the family altar.

A month later, Father and Mother reserved the second-floor banquet room of the Au Chu Restaurant. They invited one hundred and fifty guests, mostly the Li uncles and aunts, who came from the same village as Father in China, and the Wongs, who came from the same village as Mr Wong. Mother planned the menu with Mr Chen, the owner of Au Chu Restaurant.

Father borrowed money from Tai Qui, Mother's brother, to pay for the banquet. "Lin is our eldest. We can't appear to be stingy," he said and patted his stomach. "We must have whole roasted pig, we must have duck, we must have fish and shrimps, and don't forget the beer. Get some whisky, too. I want everyone to be happy for us. It's not every day that I acquire a daughter-in-law."

Mother sighed. She spoke to Mr Chen and expanded the menu from eight to ten courses. She ordered five cases of beer from Chandra's Trading Company and five bottles of firewater from Mrs Liu, who brewed moonshine at the Moonshine Pond in Tangra.

The banquet started at noon. Mr Chen set eight women's and children's tables near the kitchen and five tables for men near the windows. Children ran around the women's tables. They munched on shrimps and dumplings and spilled coke and root beer on the floor.

Yun sat with Mother, Mrs Wong, three Li aunties, Grandmothers Liu and Li, and two Wong aunties.

At the men's tables, glasses clinked. Beer and moonshine flowed. The Li and Wong uncles toasted Father and Mr Wong. The men yelled out dirty jokes. The women gathered up the children and confined them to the women's side of the room.

Four hours later, Mr Chen and his two servants carried Father, Mr Wong, and six other Li and Wong uncles onto the couches in the back room of the restaurant. Mother paid extra for Mr Chen's servants to clean up all the vomit from around the men's tables.

Mother, Mrs Wong, Auntie Yee, and Auntie Ai packed the left-over food into aluminum canteen boxes. The Li and Wong children carried

the canteen boxes to Sam Hin. Mother invited neighbours for dinner.

When Father and Mr Wong staggered back to Bentinck Street later that evening, Yun had moved across the street with her belongings and had settled into the bedroom with my sister, Nuen.

Yun went to the same school as my eldest brother, Lin, my second brother, Chien and my sister Nuen.

As Yun grew, Mother taught her to sew and to cook Lin's favourite dishes.

When Yun was eighteen years old, Mother talked to Father. "It is time for Yun and Lin to get married. We are lucky to have such a pretty and docile daughter-in-law."

"Yes. You are right." Father sighed. "Pity she is so short. My boy is so tall and handsome."

Yun married twenty-year-old Lin that year. They had five children. All the children have fair skin and dainty noses, but only two of them grew above five feet tall.