

Clara Chow

### Girls' House

My grandmother was seventeen when she got married.

It was a 'love match' – a romance born of free wills and enamoured eyes. My grandfather was a then-eligible bachelor in Guangdong province, the Canton of western imagination. Jiangmen, their hometown, meant literally the "river's door" in Chinese; a port forced to open to Western trade in 1902, through which wealth and modern ideas flowed. Off the mainland, in the South China Sea to the south, there was – and still is – an island called Little Bird Paradise, where murmurations of swifts and starlings rose each evening from the trees and wheeled in the sky. In this heady place, this confluence point of business and ideas, desires and migration patterns, a young woman met a young man, and a piece of me came into being.

Nobody ever told me the details, but I imagine them: Her, a student in a high-necked blouse, pleated skirt and black cloth shoes, walking along the waterfront with her books clutched to her chest; him, a freshly returned engineering graduate from a far-off land, in a grey changshan, tilting his trilby politely at her. Perhaps they had friends in common. Perhaps they were on the way to the same political lecture, scions of capitalists play-acting at revolution. Maybe, it was outside the theatre, my grandmother idly fanning herself with a playbill, secretly eyeing my grandfather. Somewhere, far away, an unheard shot fires in the green heart and lungs of Little Bird Paradise, startling its inhabitants. Causing a woman and a man to look up, as an avian cloud bloomed like nuclear dust in their dark pupils.

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On her wedding day, her father, my great-grandfather, gave her a house.

*We're not poor, he said. You don't have to move into their house and become your mother-in-law's slave.*

It was a Frankenstein house, in keeping with the times. Classical portico, wrought-iron railings wreathing the balconies and French windows. Tiles painted with scenes of Chinese mythology embedded in the columns: Chang'e and the jade rabbit, floating to the moon; the cow herd and the weaver maiden; the butterfly lovers. Art deco pendant lamps dangled before the chiselled stone calligraphy on its lofty lintel: 不便居。 *Bu Bian Ju*. My great-grandfather had christened the house his money had paid for, dubbing it the "uncomfortable abode". An ironic name, for everything inside was the height of luxury; nothing but the best for his daughter and only child.

But it was also a name that signalled the town's richest merchant's scorn for his new son-in-law, nowhere near as wealthy as he expected, tinkering with his machines and inventions. It was indeed a *bu bian ju* for my grandfather, this house that was not his; that he had to approach, trilby in hand, in order to visit his wife. My grandmother was happy to live apart from her new husband from day one. She created for herself a sorority of sorts, populating her home with close friends and female cousins. The mansion's ten bedrooms held a plethora of kinfolk and maids, and she revelled in their company. They whiled the days away, playing mahjong, feeling the grooves of ivory tiles with pensive thumbs and discarding unwanted ones as casually as strewing petals, jade bangles clinking. Seven mouths chatting, eight tongues wagging. The click of front teeth on black-and-white striped sunflower seeds, gathered by the delicate fistfuls from crystal bowls and gnawed on as the lazily-turning fan made slow oblique shadows on the ceiling.

When her father had his man send them bolts of the latest silks from his emporiums, my grandmother and her sworn sisters sat at sewing machines, working the treadles with embroidered slippered feet, curls of smoke rising from thin cigarettes in their hands. Hands that flitted like butterflies, feeding fabric through to the needle, perching for a moment on ash trays, visiting rouged lips, then unfurling to smooth down permanently waved hair. Hair bobbed at the ear, carefully arranged in the wind-etched patterns of sand dunes.

Once, long ago, I made the mistake of asking my grandmother about those halcyon days. The idea of having a house of one's own – especially something like this overgrown, life-sized doll's house of my paternal grandma's gilded youth – was irresistible to my impressionable young mind, sick of being squashed into a four-room flat with three brothers and two nosy parents. I craved privacy and freedom; a place to read my books in piece and where no one would nag me about having meals on time or sleeping at sane hours. Having heard the whispered tales of Mah Mah's storied house for years, I finally could hold back my curiosity no longer.

"What did you *do* in that house?" I pestered her to tell me.

She stared at me like one would a cockroach skittering across the courtyard in broad daylight. A mangled twist of paper – the result of me trying to teach her to fold pages torn out of old magazines into containers for old prawn shells at the dining table – lay limply in her wrinkled hands.

Finally, she said: "I don't know what you're talking about. When we got married, your grandfather and I lived with his parents. Then the Japs attacked, and we left for Singapore. We spent three months at sea, in steerage with fifty other families, with no proper sanitation. I was pregnant with your father, and spent all my time throwing up into a steel bucket. And then we were here, and many years later, there was a government-built flat. You've seen it. We live in it."

I was disappointed. Why did she have to lie? I'd heard the story about the house a thousand times from my parents.

By then, I was seventeen, the same age she had been when she got married. I didn't understand it then, but my grandmother was going senile. She would sit in a chair by the kitchen window, watching clouds all day. She forgot what year it was. She turned our mobile phones over and over in her palms, those Nokia bricks we regarded as the height of technology in the 1990s, and asked where the cords were. But I knew that she had been lucid when I mentioned her house to her. That she had not merely forgotten, but had remembered with such sharp clarity that she needed to take a long time to recover before faking her answer. It had been a calculated denial.

An erasure of the past.

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*Girls' house.* That was what they had called it, said my aunt.

Before or after my grandmother died? I can't remember. My aunt was saying this, many years ago.

Aunt Xiaoyan had gone to visit our ancestral village, in search of her roots. Jiangmen had grown from a port town to a prefecture-level city. In 2009, the city's inhabitants had petitioned to change its name to Qiaodu – "capital of the overseas Chinese". *Gungmun*, the old name in Cantonese, they argued, sounded the same as 'anus'. But, like most assholes, the original name was hard to shake.

女人家? I asked, in Mandarin. *Nu ren jia?* A girl?

女屋, she corrected. *Lue ouk*, in Cantonese.

Some people still remembered it, my aunt went on, back from her trip and bearing gifts of counterfeit designer handbags from Shenzhen. The girls' house had been famous, until it burnt down.

Burnt down? I said. How?

Nobody knows, shrugged Aunt Xiaoyan. Here, take this one. Chanel 2.55. Suits you. Shorten the strap. All they know is that it was arson. The doors were barred from the outside, and they found a padlock on the charred gate later. All the cousins and maids died. Your grandmother would have been dead, too, if she hadn't slipped out. On a date with your grandpa, apparently.

Who did it? I probed. I stood in front of the mirror, staring at my fake leather bag and wondering if it did anything for my silhouette; wondering if my friends could tell it was not the real deal.

Some jealous rival, said my aunt, with a shrug. Maybe someone who carried a torch for your grandfather.

Oh, added Aunt Xiaoyan. I almost forgot.

She put a piece of paper in my hand. It was a photocopy of a newspaper article in Chinese, worn along the lines it had been folded and refolded on. Seven Women Die In Local Fire, read the headline. I studied the grainy black-and-white photo accompanying the article. The Girls' House. It was just the way I imagined it, except completely different.

Look here, said Aunt Xiaoyan, tapping the page.

I squinted at the inset photo. Mah Mah, veiled in white lace, wearing a flapper dress that stopped at her calves, revealing her silver T-bar heels. The picture must have been taken on her wedding day. It took me a while to decipher the tiny caption: *Girls' house mistress swiftly left town, following the tragedy; bereaved families demanding restitution.*

The Second Sino-Japanese War had just been an excuse to flee.

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Life is not neat. It goes wherever it wants to go, dragging you with it, like the owner on the other end of a dog leash.

For the longest time, I thought I was the dog sniffing around the story of my grandmother's Girls' House, trying to uncover it like a long-buried bone nobody could remember the location of. Turns out that it was the story that was yanking me along on a chain. Winding itself around my ankles. Being immobilised to one spot is a narrative. Unable to take a step, because one is so paralysed by history, by everything that makes us, us, is one narrative. Falling over is another narrative.

Years later, when my birthdays had gone by, one after another, in a blur, I panicked about finding a man and moved away from my family, in search of options in foreign lands. I would find myself in a girl's house – singular, this time – a small flat in Hong Kong, once again off the South China Sea. Waiting for the unmistakable bird call of the male from my species.

My apartment was near Hong Kong University, in Kennedy Town, and on lazy Saturdays, I would walk to the seaside, looking over the coastal wall, and watch the dark blue waves. I read a lot. 书中岁月长 – as the saying goes, the years were long in books, and I needed a way to stem the rising tide of fear in me. That I would live an entire life without finding anyone. I had dreams: of a scholar watching a pot of cherry blossoms open and wither in quick succession, his eyes wide with morbid fascination; of brocade growing dull and old, fraying and falling apart on a wearer's sleeve; of

a dusty game of chess, so neglected that the figures from paintings nearby come to life and move the pieces out of pity.

I would sit in my apartment and felt sorry for myself. I had four walls that were all my own, but nobody to share it with.

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Growing up, my grandmother had been a sad, lonely presence in my room. She shared a double bed with me, and I would lie awake at night, listening to her ghastly sniffling and raspy coughs. She cried out in her sleep, thrashing around and moaning, and I went to school hit black-and-blue by her brittle bird limbs. Beaten by frantic wings.

I hated the poverty that squashed Mah Mah and I together into the same measly space, keeping us like two cells that failed to divide completely. My father kept his hardware store, sitting among the greasy machine parts and dusty boxes of nuts and bolts year after year, while middle-men were cut out of stream-lined distribution and supply chains. People bought things off the Internet, disposing much that they wantonly consume, and scarcely bothered to repair anything any more. Where were Mah Mah's jewels, cash and fine fabrics when we needed them? Why did she leave everything behind and not spare a thought for us, her descendants, now toiling in this city like frogs in a saturated murky pond?

It was only much, much later that I realised what her nightly terrors were.

Please, she begged in her sleep, raising one hand to ward something off. I didn't know about it, I swear. I had nothing to do with the fire. I'm so sorry. I really am. I would take your place if I could. You don't know how much I miss you. All of you. I am a coward, and I hate myself. I hate that I am still alive.

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My grandfather, it is said, was the model husband.

From the day they wed, to the day he died, he wrote my grandmother a letter a day and presented it to her each evening before bed. Never mind that they were mostly together – he wrote to her about the minutiae of his existence, the pockets of time he had to spend apart from her: riding the bus to see an old classmate visiting Singapore from Qingdao, strolling to the market to buy vegetarian beehoon for her breakfast, or waiting for my eldest brother to be released from kindergarten. He penned his thoughts on the tissue-paper thin leaves of his notebooks, in his fluid Chinese script, like blades of leaves thrown against the page. He wrote in his oblong blue notebook, which he tucked into his shirt pocket. Afterward, he tore out the pages carefully and laid them on her pillow. Sometimes, when he forgot to bring his notebook, he scribbled on the squares of paper he rolled his loose tobacco in. Or picked up discarded cigarette boxes from coffeeshop tables, requisitioning the tin-foil lining within, and wrote her missives dense like war-time code. Obsessively, he chronicled his thoughts for her. It was as though he was aiming for total understanding. That he needed her to know everything in his soul.

Yeh Yeh worked in a company specialising in cash registers after he came to Singapore – a job he held for fifty years before retiring. Ten years, to the day, after his retirement, he was on a bus home when the bus captain ran the entire double-decker aground onto the pavement, buoyed along by some insane momentum. The bus' pavement-surfing came to an abrupt end; curtailed by a huge rain tree. The front of the top deck buckled and folded in like an accordion, squeezing my grandfather along with it, driving the pole of a hand rail into his crotch and pinning him like a butterfly to the red vinyl seat. The civil defence first-responders spent three hours trying to saw him free, but he ebbed away before their eyes, thin and pale as the piece of paper on which he had been writing to my grandmother at the moment of impact.

It had been late evening. The mynahs had been noisy witnesses, jostling for space on the bent-bean heads of the just-flickering-into-life street lamps. Sunset wreathed the sky in fire.

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I met a man.

He was not too young, not too old; not too poor and not too beautiful as to strike fear in my heart.

Will you love me forever? I asked. We had been fucking, and the endorphins were running rampant through my bloodstream, inducing all sorts of stupid speech acts.

What is forever? He said.

I told him about my grandfather and his daily letters to my grandmother. My poor grandmother who went increasingly insane after the abrupt loss of her husband. I didn't say anything about the ghosts who haunted her at night – the ones who reached through time, out of the fire. The Girls' House just diluted the romantic narrative.

He listened, one arm behind his head, the other around me. I plucked idly at the black wiry strands of hair in his armpit. He batted me away.

Yes, of course, he murmured absently. He was Canadian-Chinese; one of the returnees to greater China. My Robin Redbreast. I was determined to be his little bird. We were going to own paradise. We would.

Wouldn't we?

On the night before my wedding, I was home again. Home from Hong Kong, back in the tiny room I used to share with my grandmother, on the bed where she used to tangle with crispy ghosts. My father came into the room, holding a box in his hand. It had once been red, but the paint was now so old and so dull that it might as well have been covered in a layer of dried blood. Yellow chrysanthemums were laid in mother-of-pearl on the lid, around the double happiness symbol: 囍

For you, he said. It used to belong to Mah Mah.

I undid the iron clasp and opened the lid. A pair of small pearl earrings lay in its velveteen guts. I put them on and surveyed myself in the polished brass mirror tucked on the underside of the lid. My inheritance, I thought. All that I have left of her.

Thanks, Dad, I said.

He nodded. Smoothed down the hair on my head. What was there to say when your 40-something daughter gets married for the first time? Long after everyone else in the family had given up 'hope' and accepted that there would be a spinster around to look after the parents? But I knew it wasn't easy for him. No father ever found it easy, giving a beloved daughter away. He trusted I knew what I was doing – better than a seventeen-year-old, anyway.

女人家，终归嫁人。 My father smiled and touched my cheek.

I looked at the pouches under his eyes. The grey on his head. What used to be distinguished silver sideburns had now taken over the entire territory of his pate. My pater's pate. How did he get so old? Where did all the time go?

He stood up, on spindly legs which ended in feet encased in brown leather slippers. Goodnight, he said.

Sleep soon, he added, before closing the bedroom door behind him.

I waited until I heard his and Mum's bedroom door click shut before sliding out the little drawer at the bottom of my grandmother's jewellery box. Empty. I didn't know what I'd expected to find, but felt let down anyway. Like a dentist exploring a patient's mouth with one latex-gloved finger for cavities, I slid my hand into the box and stroked its furry red lining.

A bump, like a pimple under the tongue. Something folded, rectangular.

A gold bar? Stowed away for a rainy day, then forgotten? An amulet; a spell for happiness and forgetting?

I had to get at it. Like a detective prising up the floor boards to reveal the dead body beneath, I scratched at the sides of the velvet to separate it from the wood of the intricate little box. Age and memory, rather than any sort of glue, kept the two together. That, and dirt, perhaps. But, finally, it was peeling away, and there was a piece of paper there – yellowed, flattened, fragile. One of Yeh Yeh's love letters to Mah Mah.

I extracted it with a pair of eyebrow tweezers, then unfolded it carefully, palming it carefully flat on my vanity table.

Had it ever been read? Judging by the paper's pristine condition, unlikely. Running my eyes over it, my blood ran cold.

*My dearest Ye Ying, my sweetest nightingale:*

*I am leaving this letter here, in the hopes that you will know to look here should anything happen to me. I know you love this box a lot. Oh, how you pestered me to get it for you after you first saw it at Yuehwa Department Store. You never could stop talking about how you were going to leave it to our daughter, or failing that, if we didn't have one, our grand-daughter as part of her trousseau. 嫁妆.*

*I have spent a huge part of our lives together writing to you. Think of it as one long confession letter. I have tried over and over again to put into words the terrible thing I've done, but I never seem to be able to do it. The thought of you finding out and hating me is more than I can bear. Because I did it for you. For us. For our future together. Maybe there would have been some other way, if I just thought about it a bit more. But I was being driven crazy. Being unable to be with you all the time. Like we had gotten married and yet I was still unable to possess you. It felt like a dead-end. A road block. A glimmering jewel forever out of my reach.*

*Remember how I wrote to you, then, too? In those horrible-lovely early days. In those days where you remained locked up like Rapunzel in the tower or Sleeping Beauty in the house your father bought for you. He did it to keep us apart. I know you thought it was your own house, but he was using it to tie you to him. Couldn't you see?*

*So I asked you out that night, and bought us ticket for a movie. And when the lights went down and the reels began, I told you I was going to queue for snacks, and I ran back to the house your father bought, and locked its doors and padlocked its gate, and set fire to it.*

*I'm sorry you felt so badly about it ever since. I've heard you cry out for your sworn sisters. But if nobody had died, he would have just bought you another house, and we would never have been free. You wanted to be free, didn't you? Free like a bird in Little Bird Paradise? Aren't you, now? My little nightingale?*

*Your loving husband,*

*Guan*