

From Chinese Cinderella

Growing up in a wealthy family in 1950s Hong Kong, Adeline Yen Mah should have had an enviable childhood, but she was rejected by her dominating stepmother and despised by her brothers and sisters. She was sent to a boarding school and left there. In this extract from her autobiography she relates one of the few occasions when she went home.

Time went by relentlessly and it was Saturday again. Eight weeks more and it would be the end of term ... in my case perhaps the end of school forever.

Comment [RK1]: Sad tone. Contrasts with typical views of a Saturday.

Comment [RK2]: Ellipses creates tension and the sense that the end of term would be a bad thing.

Four of us were playing Monopoly. My heart was not in it and I was losing steadily. Outside it was hot and there was a warm wind blowing. The radio warned of a possible typhoon the next day. It was my turn and I threw the dice. As I played, the thought of leaving school throbbed at the back of my mind like a persistent toothache.

Comment [RK3]: Short sentence, builds up suspense.

Comment [RK4]: Thinking about the weather shows she's obviously bored.

'Adeline!' Ma-mien Valentino was calling.

Comment [RK5]: Similie emphasizes that she really didn't want to leave school.

'You can't go now,' Mary protested. 'For once I'm winning. One, two, three, four. Good! You've landed on my property. Thirty-five dollars, please. Oh, good afternoon, Mother Valentino!'

We all stood up and greeted her.

Comment [RK6]: Shows that there was obvious respect as they all stopped their game to greet her

'Adeline, didn't you hear me call you? Hurry up downstairs! Your chauffeur is waiting to take you home!'

Comment [RK7]: First impression that she is wealthy.

Full of foreboding, I ran downstairs as in a nightmare, wondering who had died this time. Father's chauffeur assured me everyone was healthy.

Comment [RK8]: Contrasts with what the common idea of coming home is.

Comment [RK9]: The fact that she only left school to attend funerals shows the relationship.

'Then why are you taking me home?' I asked.

Comment [RK10]: The chauffeur appears here to know more about Adeline's family than she herself does.

'How should I know?' he answered defensively, shrugging his shoulders. 'Your guess is as good as mine. They give the orders and I carry them out.'

During the short drive home, my heart was full of dread and I wondered what I had done wrong. Our car stopped at an elegant villa at mid-level, halfway up the hill between the peak and the harbour.

Comment [RK11]: Again emphasizes that she is scared of returning home and adds in that it must be her fault.

'Where are we?' I asked foolishly.

'Don't you know anything?' the chauffeur replied rudely. 'This is your new home. Your parents moved here a few months ago.'

Comment [RK12]: The author again shows that her relationship with her family isn't very strong as she doesn't even know where her house is.

Comment [RK13]: Blunt statement shows she doesn't really care that much.

'I had forgotten,' I said as I got out.

Comment [RK14]: Contrast with a typical return home from boarding school. Nobody to greet her.

Ah Gum opened the door. Inside, it was quiet and cool.

'Where is everyone?'

'Your mother is out playing bridge. Your two brothers and Little Sister are sunbathing by the swimming-pool. Your father is in his room and wants to see you as soon as you get home.'

Comment [RK15]: Her family didn't even come to say hello and her mother went to play bridge instead of welcoming her home.

'See me in his room?' I was overwhelmed by the thought that I had been summoned by Father to enter the Holy of Holies - a place to which I had never been invited. Why? ...

Comment [RK16]: Connotations of being supernatural and shows clearly who is the master of the house.

Timidly, I knocked on the door. Father was alone, looking relaxed in his slippers and bathrobe, reading a newspaper. He smiled as I entered and I saw he was in a happy mood. I breathed a small sigh of relief at first but became uneasy when I wondered why he was being so nice, thinking, Is this a giant ruse on his part to trick me? Dare I let my guard down?

Comment [RK17]: Shows family roles and that her father is superior to herself and that his room is almost a sacred place.

Comment [RK18]: Again shows family relationship as she hasn't even entered her father's room.

Comment [RK19]: Short sentence with ellipsis creates tension.

'Sit down! Sit down!' He pointed to a chair. 'Don't look so scared. Here, take a look at this! They're writing about someone we both know, I think.'

Comment [RK20]: Shift of mood from tense and a lot of suspense to relaxed.

Comment [RK21]: Shows the extent of her nervousness and implies that she wasn't expecting such a calm figure.

He handed me the day's newspaper and there, in one corner, I saw my name ADELIN YEN in capital letters prominently displayed.

Comment [RK22]: The fact that she is having her guard up when meeting with her father shows strained family relationship.

'It was announced today that 14-year-old Hong Kong schoolgirl ADELIN JUN-LING YEN of Sacred Heart Canossian School, Caine Road, Hong Kong, has won first prize in the International Play-writing Competition held in London, England, for the 1951 - 1952 school year. It is the first time that any local Chinese student from Hong Kong has won such a prestigious event. Besides a medal, the prize comes with a cash reward of FIFTY ENGLISH POUNDS. Our sincere congratulations, ADELIN YEN, for bringing honour to Hong Kong. We are proud of you'.

Comment [RK23]: Shows pride in their nation and already expresses the importance of education

Comment [RK24]: Emphasizes importance of education in Hong Kong at the time.

Is it possible? Am I dreaming? Me, the winner?

Comment [RK25]: Short rhetorical questions shows clearly that her achievement is very important to her.

'I was going up the lift this morning with my friend C.Y. Tung when he showed me this article and asked me, 'Is the winner Adeline Jun-ling Yen related to you? The two of you have the same uncommon last name.' Now C.Y. himself has a few children about your age but so far none of them has won an international literary prize, as far as I know. So I was quite pleased to tell him you are my daughter. Well done!'

Comment [RK26]: Her father wasn't even aware of her entering the competition and his friend had to tell him.

Comment [RK27]: He appears to know more about C.Y.'s children than his own.

He looked radiant. For once, he was proud of me. In front of his revered colleague, C.Y. Tung, a prominent fellow businessman also from Shanghai, I had given him face. I thought, Is this the big moment I have been waiting for? My whole being vibrated with all the joy in the world. I only had to stretch out my hand to reach the stars.

Comment [RK28]: Short sentence implies her excitement.

Comment [RK29]: Shows how important face is to her family and to her father.

Comment [RK30]: Uses hyperbole to emphasize the happiness from winning the award.

'Tell me, how did you do it?' he continued. 'How come you won?'

Comment [RK31]: Shows that he is very surprised at her winning.

'Well, the rules and regulations were so very complicated. One really has to be dedicated just to understand what they want. Perhaps I was the only one determined enough to enter and there were no other competitors!'

Comment [RK32]: Very polite statement which doesn't appear like it was a conversation between father and daughter

He laughed approvingly. 'I doubt it very much but that's a good answer.'

'Please, Father,' I asked boldly, thinking it was now or never. 'May I go to university in England too, just like my brothers?'

Comment [RK33]: Shows she would never ask it normally.

'I do believe you have potential. Tell me, what would you study?'

Comment [RK34]: Again emphasizes gender roles.

My heart gave a giant lurch as it dawned on me that he was agreeing to let me go. How marvellous it was simply to be alive! Study? I thought. Going to England is like entering heaven. Does it matter what you do after you get to heaven?

Comment [RK35]: He goes straight for the point. Again sounds like a business meeting.

But Father was expecting an answer. What about creative writing? After all, I had just won first prize in an international writing competition!

Comment [RK36]: A constant reminder of how important education is to her family.

Comment [RK37]: Back to reality and shows that answering her father was more important than her moment of happiness.

'I plan to study literature. I'll be a writer.'

'Writer!' he scoffed. 'You are going to starve! What language are you going to write in and who is going to read your writing? Though you may think you're an expert in both Chinese and English, your Chinese is actually rather elementary. As for your English, don't you think the native English speakers can write better than you?'

Comment [RK38]: Quick dismissal of her passion which shows how little he cares for what she wants.

Comment [RK39]: Crushes her wish and contrasts with her being able to win an international writing competition.

I waited in silence. I did not wish to contradict him.

Comment [RK40]: Contrasts with her just winning first prize.

'You will go to England with Third Brother this summer and you will go to medical school. After you graduate, you will specialise in obstetrics. Women will always be having babies. Women patients prefer women doctors. You will learn to deliver their babies. That's a foolproof profession for you. Don't you agree?'

Comment [RK41]: Repetition of 'You' shows it is an order and that she couldn't question it.

Comment [RK42]: A very stereotypical view of society and doesn't give her any options.

Agree? Of course I agreed. Apparently, he had it all planned out. As long as he let me go to university in England, I would study anything he wished. How did that line go in Wordsworth's poem? *Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.*

Comment [RK43]: Shows that he didn't want to take any risks.

Comment [RK44]: Answering her own questions shows that there was no way she could refuse and again reminds family roles.

'Father, I shall go to medical school in England and become a doctor. Thank you very, very much.'

Comment [RK45]: Very blunt statement but shows her loyalty and submission to her father.

Adeline Yen Mah