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.

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.

'Adeline!' Ma-mien Valentino was calling.

'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.

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

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

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

'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.

‘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.’

‘I had forgotten,’ I said as I got out.

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.’

‘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? …

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?

‘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.’

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

‘It was announced today that 14-year-old Hong Kong schoolgirl ADELINE 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.'
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, ADELINE YEN, for bringing honour to Hong Kong. We are proud of you!

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

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!

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.

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

‘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!’

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?’

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

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 the stars.

Comment [MK47]: Shows the degree of excitement, emphasised by the use of hyperbole.

Comment [MK46]: He is unaware of any of her interests, talents- lack of communication within the relationship.

Comment [MK45]: Asking a question is bold, shows distant relationships, and lack of communication. However, it also shows her degree of reverence and respect towards him, does not want to be rude and disrespectful at all. Gender roles- brothers going to England to study at university.

Comment [MK44]: Suggest that even a mere question that he asks her is a test, approvingly is an interesting choice of verbs as he is not happy but pleased that she answered the question as he wanted her to.

Comment [MK43]: Also has to be very humble about her achievements and not boastful- family duties.

Comment [MK42]: Distant relationship, father has no confidence in Adeline and his lack of knowledge about this subject shows that he does not know that she even entered the competition and much less about her writing talents, he is surprise that she has won this competition.

Comment [MK41]: The thought of an opportunity to go study has left her feeling really excited. The use of hyperboles emphasise this and her excitement is conveyed through the tone of her voice.

Comment [MK40]: Winning this competition is her equivalent of a fairy god mother, it is her opportunity to go to school and to be away from home. Her joy and excitement at winning this also creates pathos as it implies how much she dreads being home and how desperately she wants to get away from her family.

Comment [MK39]: Sense of pride and face in front of colleagues, shows there is competition between the two men and he immediately compared to other instead of being glad for this daughter because of achievement. He is only proud because of the ‘face’ that she has given him through winning this competition and not really proud of her.

Comment [MK38]: Friend does not even know of this daughter than he has, it shows the he does not talk about her and does not tell colleagues about his daughter.

Comment [MK37]: Unaware of anything that is happening with his own daughter and if not for his friend, he would have not have even known of this. Shows distance in the relationship and also his lack of concern and care for his daughter.

Comment [MK36]: Friend does not even know of this daughter than he has, it shows the he does not talk about her and does not tell colleagues about his daughter.

Comment [MK35]: Winning this competition is her equivalent of a fairy god mother, it is her opportunity to go to school and to be away from home. Her joy and excitement at winning this also creates pathos as it implies how much she dreads being home and how desperately she wants to get away from her family.

Comment [MK34]: She has a duty in making her parents, family and country proud of her achievements, shows the importance of honour and ‘face’.

Comment [MK33]: Unaware of anything that is happening with his own daughter and if not for his friend, he would have not have even known of this. Shows distance in the relationship and also his lack of concern and care for his daughter.

Comment [MK32]: The thought of an opportunity to go study has left her feeling really excited. The use of hyperboles emphasise this and her excitement is conveyed through the tone of her voice.

Comment [MK31]: Winning this competition is her equivalent of a fairy god mother, it is her opportunity to go to school and to be away from home. Her joy and excitement at winning this also creates pathos as it implies how much she dreads being home and how desperately she wants to get away from her family.

Comment [MK30]: He is unaware of any of her interests, talents- lack of communication within the relationship.

Comment [MK29]: He is unaware of any of her interests, talents- lack of communication within the relationship.
heaven. Does it matter what you do after you get to heaven?

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

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?]

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

'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?'

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.

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

Adeline Yen Mah
Notes:

Genre: Autobiography, recount of a childhood event
Audience: Primarily young teens, although anyone could read it

OPs:

- The importance of education and school to the narrator (probably as a means of escape from home)
- The distance relationships between Adeline & her father/mother/family/home
- The traditional family and gender roles evident in this family - in particular the importance of duty
- Pride and the importance of her parents being proud of her; her earning her parent’s ‘face’
- Emotional progressions: Depression – anxious tension – uncertain relief – happy excitement