

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 me 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 ADELIN YEN in capital letters prominently displayed.

'It was announced today that 14-year old ADELIN JUN-LING YEN of Sacred Heart Canossian School, Caine Road, Hong Kong, has won first prize in the international Play-

Comment [K1]: Education is valued - she doesn't want school to end – reinforced by all the time words

Comment [K2]: Sense of despair, also foreboding to create tension

Comment [K3]: Sense of despair emphasised by short factual sentences and tone of certainty – hopelessness - the communal game shows that life is just happening around her with no involvement

Comment [K4]: Pathetic fallacy

Comment [K5]: Physical pain – haunting and constantly nagging

Comment [K6]: The fact that Mary wasn't mentioned shows how unimportant the game is and how isolated Adeline is

Comment [K7]: Tension built up – unexpected interruption

Comment [K8]: Cold, unemotional relationship – short sentences, uncaring / offended tone foreshadows relationship with the father

Comment [K9]: Is this because she is so nervous

Comment [K10]: Foreshadows the poor relationship – lack of love

Comment [K11]: Solitary activities

Comment [K12]: Sacred, never entered – shows awe and a certain kind of distance

Comment [K13]: Short sentences and lots of energetic punctuation – attempt to create tension

Comment [K14]: Tension eased – but the sensitivity to these things suggests their relationship is not usually good and she is often afraid

Comment [K15]: Shows the level of mistrust that exists between them

Comment [K16]: Double imperative

Comment [K17]: False attempt to be inclusive

writing Competition held in London, England, for the 1951-52 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, 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 that 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 really 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 heaven. Does it matter what you do after you go 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.'

Comment [K18]: Importance of honour and 'face'

Comment [K19]: Short sentences and short punctuation create a sense of excitement – transition from tension to release and excitement. Also a sense of isolation – how did she not know she had won / how come she didn't tell her family she entered the competition

Comment [K20]: Lack of a close relationship emphasised by the fact that he is only pleased because she gave him 'face'

Comment [K21]: Hyperbole used to show excitement – combined with questions

Comment [K22]: Sense of surprise, but also he didn't know about it

Comment [K23]: Related to the idea of 'face' is the idea of humility

Comment [K24]: Sense that we are seeing a rare side to her father – approvingly is interested because he is not happy but pleased that she has answered correctly – even this question was a test for her

Comment [K25]: No recognition of her talent

Comment [K26]: Hyperbole and questions show her bewilderment

Comment [K27]: This is his name – sign of respect, there is no sign of ownership – My Father

Comment [K28]: Sense of certainty decisiveness, joy and expectation

Comment [K29]: Clearly he does not care about her desires

Comment [K30]: Brutal criticism – factually delivered

Comment [K31]: Series of imperatives, regardless of her desires

Comment [K32]: Not really a question – highlights how she has no choice but to agree

Comment [K33]: Such a formal ending, and thanks, even though it's not what she wants reinforces the sense of control but also her excitement

Adeline Yen Mah