

THE LAST SHIP

ALSO BY JAN LOWE SHINEBOURNE

Timepiece

The Last English Plantation

The Godmother and Other Stories

Chinese Women

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THE LAST SHIP



P E E P A L T R E E

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For Anne Webster

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
—T. S. Eliot

The winter of 1861-62 was not a period of famine in China, so the impetus to leave was not great. Additional recruitment depots had been established in Canton/Hangshai, Swatow, and Amoy. In order to fill the vessels, the British officials combined people from these different regions onto each ship, not realizing their incompatibility. At the same time, there were private agencies in Hong Kong and China competing for workers to be sent to Cuba, California, and Peru. To the Europeans, China was viewed merely as an impoverished, overpopulated source for unskilled labour. Little concern was shown for the vast cultural and language differences. The British assessed the nature of the Chinese people as capable of surviving tropical conditions and of being hardy, industrious and ambitious. The reality of the situation was that those who were recruited for the purpose of emigrating had no idea of the implications of their actions. Many were people who had been displaced from their homes during bloody conflict, or who were just part of the marginal population.

— Helen Atteck & Philip Atteck, *Stress of Weather*

...in British Guiana, a number of individual Chinese families... had achieved prominence by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most of them not only merchants but also large plantation owners. Among them was the family of John Ho-a-Shoo (1852-1906), who came with the Corona in 1874 and ten to fifteen years later was a sugar estate owner and prominent merchant (Ho-a-Shoo Ltd.) with several businesses in both the sugar-bearing and gold-mining areas of the colony. Three of his children studied at the University of Edinburgh in the 1900s and 1910s, two of them medicine and a third agriculture. One – a girl – Asin – became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and eventually settled in Hong Kong in 1915. Another family of merchants and estate owners was that of David

Ewing-Chow, whose father arrived on the Dora in 1860 and whose two sons were in 1915 studying in England, one a law student at Cambridge, the other a medical student at Edinburgh. One of Georgetown's leading jewellers, based on Lombard Street, was M. U. Hing, whose grandfather had lost all his possessions in China, a victim of the Taiping Rebellion, and whose father, Wu A Hing had migrated to British Guiana as a mere boy on the Chapman in 1861. The most famous figure in 1915 was the Chinese empire builder Wong Yan-Sau (also known as Even Wong) who came to British Guiana at the age of ten with his parents on the Dartmouth in 1879. By 1915, he was one of the wealthiest colonists in British Guiana, owner of the Omai goldmines in Essequibo and several thousands of acres of plantations in East Coast, Demerara and Essequibo, growing sugar, cocoa, coffee, rubber, coconuts, and timber... he was a merchant and landlord of several businesses and properties in Georgetown and in the rural areas. He was also connected with the gold and diamond industries... owner and possessor of several sawmills, shareholder in many companies in Georgetown, and owner of several racehorses as well as a number of brood-mares. In 1915, one of his children was a student of civil engineering at Bristol University in England.

— Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*

THE OLD LADY

Her name was Clarice Chung but in Canefield, Berbice, everyone called her *The Old Lady*, even her own children. *The Old Lady* could have meant any old lady, for there were many old ladies in Canefield, but there were no other *Chinese* old ladies. When they called her *The Old Lady*, they emphasised *old*, though when she came to live in Canefield in 1923 she was only fifty, and when she died there in 1946 she was seventy-three, not so very old at all. It was her Chineseness that made her seem old, to the point of being *ancient*, like China, and this is why the title stuck to her. She knew this and the awe it excited in people, so it pleased her to be called *The Old Lady*.

For twenty-three years, she sat in her shop in Canefield in the same spot, behind the counter, where she guarded the money drawer. She hardly moved except to open and close the drawer. She rarely spoke to customers, only to her three children, Norma, Frederick and Harold, who worked in the shop and bakery daily, obeying her commands and serving the customers. She did not speak to the customers other than when she had to, but she observed them closely; she spoke to them to let them know that her shop was not there to dispense charity, and they must pay the price she demanded for her goods. No one ever disputed the prices, or asked for discounts. They learned not to go to her shop for any other reason but to make a purchase – not for companionship or conversation or to shelter from the sun

or rain. If a small group of men or women or children gathered in the shop to gossip, she ordered them to leave: “Gwan! Go way! Get out me shop!”

It was a shock when she broke her silence, as if a statue had suddenly come to life; they were so used to seeing her sitting very still, white as chalk and dressed in her black Chinese silk pyjamas, with one hand resting on the money drawer. Children rarely came across any actual dumb people in Canefield, so they came to think of *The Old Lady* as a dumb person. When she suddenly shrieked at them, waving her arms to shoo them away, it was terrifying, as if a corpse had risen from one of the graves in the churchyard to pursue them, a popular nightmare of theirs. Children did not like her and grew up to think of *The Old Lady* as a witch or devil.

Many years later, near the end of the twentieth century, these same children, those who were still in Guyana, now themselves nearing old age, were reluctant to speak to Joan Wong, Clarice Chung’s granddaughter, who had returned to Canefield to research Clarice’s history. They were reluctant because they had nothing good to say about her grandmother who had come to British Guiana in 1879, on the last ship to bring Chinese people to the colony.

FREDERICK WONG IN LOVE

In Canefield's only cinema, the *Tajmahal*, they showed the movies of Hollywood's golden era. Clarice noticed that after he saw these movies, the elder of her sons, Frederick, would use the word "love". It was his favourite word. Since he was a boy, he loved to watch Hollywood movies. He idolized the female film stars and would say how much he was in love with them. He collected their photos and pasted them on the walls of the shop with their names written plain for all to see – Claudette Colbert, Jane Wyman, Joan Crawford, and Rita Hayworth. Clarice often caught him staring at their photos with a dreamy expression. When she looked at Frederick's photos she called them *gweilos*, meaning *white ghosts*, and spat in contempt at their big bosoms and painted faces, with lipstick red like blood. They made her swear in Chinese, "Si!"

When he said he was in love with them, Clarice knew exactly what that meant. She thought that when your children talked about sex, it was time for them to marry. In Canefield, it was easy for her two sons, Frederick and Harold, to get sex, because they were shopkeepers. From the time they became teenagers in long pants, the women started to sweet talk them into giving them free groceries and joke that they would give them sex in return. Some women said they were only joking, but Clarice saw when Harold began taking women to the bottomhouse, the four-foot high space under the floorboards, where they stored

planks of wood, old furniture, empty oil drums and other rubbish. She gave him condoms and warned him not to make the women pregnant. When he reappeared from under the shop, she would check for discarded condoms among the rats, centipedes and cockroaches. If there were none, she would have it out with him in the shop so everyone could hear and he would be shamed into using the condoms.

One day, when she was reprimanding Harold, he lost his temper, ran to the kitchen for a cleaver and threatened to chop her. It was the first time she saw him in such a rage. The shop was full of customers but he did not care. He threatened to chop off her head, cut her into small pieces and throw her body parts into the canal. He chopped at the wooden counter, sending the splinters flying, leaving deep cuts. He swung the cleaver in the air, and rushed towards her. His face was red and swollen, he was bathed in sweat. She wailed and raised her arms to protect herself. The women in the shop shrieked in terror, and begged the men to disarm Harold, but he charged at them with the cleaver raised. In the mayhem and panic, Frederick shrank into a corner where he crouched and wept in fear. Seeing his older brother weeping brought Harold to his senses and he went to Frederick and handed him the cleaver, reassuring him that he would never hurt him, only *she*, he said, pointing to their mother who sat slumped in shock against the money drawer. The commotion brought their older sister Norma from the kitchen. She had watched in horror Harold's violent display.

Afterwards, there was silence between them, and business returned to normal, and the incident was never mentioned again, by the family or the customers.

This was not the only silence. There was also little

mention of the child, Doris, whom her oldest daughter Norma had conceived in her teens for an Indian man. Norma had been sent away to New Forest, where the child lived with her father. They also kept hidden away Clarice's younger daughter, Anna, who was an epileptic. Her fits were so severe she would foam at the mouth, collapse and shake violently; then her siblings would tie her with ropes and lock her away. Anna's fits, Norma's child and Harold's rage were kept out of sight so the family could give the impression they were living quiet, industrious, virtuous lives.

Not long after Harold's rampage, Clarice received a letter from her cousin in Georgetown, the doctor, Elizabeth Chung. Elizabeth told her that her laundress, Susan Leo, was looking for a husband for her daughter, Mary, and would like to come to Canefield to make a match with Frederick. The letter came when Clarice was thinking that something was needed to give stability to her family, and getting Frederick and Harold married might be just the thing. Frederick was really getting a little long in the tooth not to be married, and it disturbed her to see Harold having sex with all kinds of women. Harold already had a son with a black girl, Cordelia Patterson, conceived when she was working as their servant. One day, her belly started to grow, and then her mother came to the shop to tell Clarice that Harold was the father. Harold denied it and Clarice backed him up. All through her pregnancy, and after she had the baby, a boy she called Winston, Cordelia would come to the shop and sit there waiting to be given the recognition she wanted. In future years, when anyone asked the boy his name, he said "Winston Wong". The customers understood very well that by her silence Clarice was denying that the boy was related to her. Day after day, Cordelia and

Winston would sit in the shop in the corner on the long bench used by customers, behind the glass case where bread and cheese were displayed. Clarice sat on the other side of the glass case. She could see mother and child clearly but pretended she couldn't. She could see that the little boy bore a resemblance to Harold. His eyes were almond-shaped, with long eyelashes and his mouth was small like Harold's, with round lips. Although his mother's skin was dark, Winston's skin was a very light brown, like toffee. Sometimes Clarice was tempted to soften her heart and give the boy a drink or cake, but she knew that the slightest weakness on her part would be taken as an acknowledgment that Harold was his father. Sometimes she even felt sorry for the mother too, but hardened her heart against her. She was certain that Cordelia wanted to be given goods from the shop for nothing and Clarice was determined that she would never get that. With just one exception, it was only Clarice's silence that Cordelia ever knew.

Sometimes customers in the shop would try to make Clarice speak by greeting her, "Good morning, Miss Chung!", "How you do, Miss Chung?", but she refused to respond. To excuse her, Frederick would even tell people, "She can only talk Chinese", though he knew that while she rarely spoke English, she could communicate perfectly well in Creole. He would remind them she came from China, though he couldn't be sure if that was true. One thing was certain, if you told people she came from China and she spoke Chinese, they became overawed and kept their distance. Who knew what was true? Only Clarice knew the truth, and in Canefield she remained a mystery so no one could take advantage of her. This was her biggest fear. She'd taken Cordelia in when she was thirteen years old, given her food, clothes, and shelter; all she had to do in return was cook, sweep, and wash clothes. It injured Clarice

to think that Cordelia was trying to bring disgrace on her. But just once, when they were sitting in silence in the shop, her sense of injury and betrayal so overwhelmed her that she began to complain bitterly to Cordelia about the injuries she had borne in her life.

Cordelia was so used to Clarice's silence that the sound of her voice made her jump with fright, but she listened keenly, trying to understand what Clarice was saying. It was difficult because to tell her story Clarice mixed Creole with some random Mandarin words she had brought from China. She spoke some Hakka, too, and this was also mixed in. It was in this eclectic language that Clarice told Cordelia every single thing about herself, about her memories of the China she left in December 1878. It was a language filled with grief, bewilderment and anger that this was how she had ended up – a Chinese person, whom no one understood, on a remote, poverty-stricken sugar estate in British Guiana, far from the homeland she would never see again. When she arrived on a ship, the *Admiral*, in 1879, she and her family had to stop speaking their language, had to stop being Chinese because people laughed at them.

People thought she did not remember China, but she did. Her children would tell people, "She come from China long long time ago, but she don't remember nothing, she don't remember, she forget", but she remembered everything, and she told Cordelia Patterson about her memories, her feelings of loss, of having to become a different person in British Guiana, a person whose children were not real Chinese, and would never be real Chinese because they did not speak Chinese or have any Chinese culture. As she spoke, she looked at the small boy who was supposed to be her grandchild, the little black boy with Chinese eyes. She knew he did not understand what she was saying, but she wanted him to remember the day

his Chinese grandmother opened her mouth and spoke her whole history. It was the first and last time she ever did this. She talked so much that day it wore her out, and made her wonder why she'd done it.

Frederick overheard all this because he was sitting in the small room behind the shop doing the accounts. He, too, did not understand all she was saying, only the Creole parts, but it shocked him to hear her pouring out her heart to Cordelia Patterson, and he wondered what had prompted her to do it. It so mystified him he came into the shop to stand beside his mother, gazing at her in surprise and waiting for her to speak to him because he felt that she owed him an explanation. He found his mother's pain unbearable; it reminded him of how unhappy her brooding had made him as a little boy, and he could see that it was making little Winston unhappy too, so he gave him a lollipop and Cordelia a bottle of chilled malted milk. It brought smiles to their faces, and made Frederick smile too, but Clarice grimaced, to show Frederick she was not happy with his generosity.

It was at this moment that she gave Frederick the letter she had received from Elizabeth Chung and he read its contents to her. He had gone to school and learned to read and write; she relied on him to do this for her. When he handed her back the letter, she put it in the money drawer and declared that it was time for him to get married before he too "get baby with black and coolie people".

She told Frederick to write to Elizabeth Chung and ask her to send a photo of the girl they wanted to make a match with; it was time for him to get married and have children legally. For the sake of peace, Frederick never argued with his mother, so he wrote the letter and asked Elizabeth Chung to send a photograph of his prospective marriage match.

When the photo arrived of Mary Leo, Frederick fell in love with her image instantly and decided he would marry her. He thought she looked like Jane Wyman, his favourite Hollywood pin-up, and he put the photo next to Jane's, above his bed. He told his mother he did not need to meet Mary Leo to be sure he wanted to marry her, but she told him not to be so foolish; it was imperative he meet her first, so she chose a date for Susan Leo to visit them with her daughter, Mary.

Norma was not happy. She tried to dissuade her mother from permitting Frederick to marry and gave many reasons: they could not afford a wedding; the place was too small with just a bedroom and kitchen behind the shop; there was no room for anyone else. Norma wept and begged her mother not to let Frederick bring a new wife to their home. She flew into a rage, pulled down the photo of Mary and tore it into shreds and threw them down the latrine.

Clarice ignored her, knowing exactly why Norma was behaving like this. She was afraid she would have to move out, and go to live in New Forest with Henry Singh and Doris. He was always begging Norma to live with them, but Norma refused because she was ashamed she'd had a child with an Indian man; she had always hoped to marry a Chinese man. Before conceiving the child, she used to beg her mother to find her a husband from Hong Kong, saying she would only leave her mother's home to live with a real Chinese husband.

THE MARRIAGE MATCH

On the day of the marriage match, Susan Leo arrived with not one, but four daughters. It was midday, the sun was high up in a bright blue sky; it was very hot; there was no breeze. Clarice was sitting in her usual place, near the money drawer, fanning herself. There were no customers in the shop. At this time of day, the only people outdoors were the field workers. Other people would wait for the day to cool before they came to the shop. Not even the stray dogs moved on such a hot day.

Into this stillness, Susan Leo and her daughters appeared suddenly, like apparitions. Clarice had assumed that Elizabeth Chung would choose a Chinese family for a marriage match, but as soon as she saw them, she knew the girls were not pure Chinese, that they were mixed with another race. Susan Leo looked Chinese but she was dressed like an East Indian; she was wearing the short white organza ornhi that Indian women wore on formal occasions, along with a nose ring, gold bangles, earrings and necklaces. She was such a small, skinny woman she looked weighed down by her jewellery. Her daughters were well built, with big bosoms; they looked alert, healthy and well-fed while their mother looked starved and tired. One thing was certain, the daughters were a good-looking bunch, all of them dolled up. And even in her middle age, you could see that Susan Leo was still a pretty woman. There was an air of glamour about her. Her clothes were immaculately laundered. The ornhi