



My mother (center), around age eight, Hangzhou, China, circa 1924.

• my grandmother's choice •

In my writing room, on my desk, sits an old family photo in a plain black frame, depicting five women and a girl at a temple pavilion by a lake. When I first saw this photo as a child, I thought it was exotic and remote, of a faraway time and place, with people who had no connection to my American life. Look at their bound feet! Look at that funny lady with the plucked forehead!

The solemn little girl is, in fact, my mother. She looks to be around eight. And behind her, leaning against the rock, is my grandmother Jingmei. "She called me Baobei," my mother told me. "It means 'treasure.'"

The picture was taken in Hangzhou, in 1924 or so, my mother said, possibly spring or fall, to judge by the clothes. At first glance, it appears the women are on a pleasure outing.

But see the white bands on their skirts? The white shoes? They are in mourning for my mother's grandmother Divong, known as the "replacement wife." The women have come to this place, a Buddhist retreat, to perform yet another ceremony for her. Monks hired for the occasion have chanted the proper

words. And the women and little girl have walked in circles clutching smoky sticks of incense. They have knelt and prayed, then burned a huge pile of spirit money so that Divong might ascend to a higher position in her new world.

This is also a picture of secrets and tragedies, the reasons that warnings have been passed along in our family like heirlooms. Each of these women suffered a terrible fate, my mother said. And they were not peasant women but big-city people, very modern. They went to dance halls and wore stylish clothes. They were supposed to be the lucky ones.

Look at the pretty woman with her finger on her cheek. She is my mother's second cousin Nunu Aiyi, "Precious Auntie." You cannot see this, but Nunu Aiyi's entire face was scarred from smallpox. Fortunately for her, a year or so after this picture was taken, she received marriage proposals from two families. She turned down a lawyer and married another man. Later she divorced her husband—a daring thing for a woman to do. But then, finding no means to support herself or her young daughter, Nunu Aiyi eventually accepted the lawyer's second proposal—this time, to become his number-two concubine. "Where else could she go?" my mother said. "Some people said she was lucky the lawyer still wanted her."

Now look at the small woman with the sour face. There's a reason that Uncle's Wife, Jyou Ma, has this expression. Her husband, my great-uncle, often complained aloud that his family had chosen an ugly woman for his wife. To show his displeasure, he insulted Jyou Ma's cooking. During one of their raucous dinner arguments, the table was shoved and a pot of boiling soup tipped and spilled all over his niece's neck, causing a burn that

nearly killed her. My mother was the little niece, and for the rest of her life she bore that scar on her neck. Great-Uncle's family eventually arranged for a prettier woman to become his second wife. But the complaints about his first wife's cooking did not stop. When she became ill with an easily treatable disease, she refused to take any medication. She swore she would rather die than live another unnecessary day. And soon after, she died.

Dooma, "Big Mother," is the regal-looking woman with the plucked forehead who sits on a rock. The dark-jacketed woman next to her is a servant, remembered by my mother only as someone who cleaned but did not cook. Dooma was my mother's aunt, the daughter of her grandfather and his "original wife," Nu-pei. But Divong, the replacement wife, my mother's grandmother, shunned Dooma, her stepdaughter, for being "too strong," while her own daughter, my grandmother, loved Dooma. She did not care that Dooma's first daughter was born with a hunchback—a sign, some said, of Dooma's own crooked nature. She did not stop seeing Dooma after Dooma remarried, disobeying her family's orders to remain a widow forever. Later Dooma killed herself, using some mysterious means that made her die slowly over three days. "Dooma died the same way she lived," my mother said, "strong, suffering lots."

Jingmei, my own grandmother, lived only a year or two after this picture was taken. She was the widow of a poor scholar, a man who had the misfortune of dying from influenza shortly after he was appointed vice-magistrate in a small county. I only assume it was influenza, since his death in 1918 was sudden, as were the millions of other deaths during the great pandemic. Family lore, however, reports that the ghost of a man on whom

he had passed a judgment for execution returned from hell and killed him.

Around the time this photo was taken, during another lake-side outing, a rich man who liked to collect pretty women spotted my widowed grandmother and had one of his wives invite her to the house for a few days to play mah jong. One night he raped her, making her an outcast. My grandmother became a concubine to the rich man, and took her young daughter to live on an island near Shanghai. She left her son behind, to save his face. After she gave birth to a baby boy, the rich man's first son, she killed herself by swallowing raw opium buried in the New Year's rice cakes. "Don't follow my footsteps," she told her young daughter, who wept at her deathbed.

At my grandmother's funeral, monks tied chains to my mother's ankles so she would not fly away with her mother's ghost. "I tried to take them off," my mother told me. "I was her treasure. I was her life." She also tried to follow her mother's footsteps. Since that time she was a small girl, she often talked of killing herself. She never stopped feeling the urge.

My mother could never talk about the shame of being a concubine's daughter, even with her closest friends. "Don't tell anyone," she said once to me. "People don't understand. A concubine was like some kind of prostitute. My mother was a good woman, high-class. She had no choice."

I told her I understood.

"How can you understand?" she blurted. "You did not live in China then. You do not know what it's like to have no position in life. I was her daughter. We had no face! We belonged to nobody! This is a shame I can never push off my back." By the end of this outburst, she was crying.

On a trip with my mother to Beijing, I learned that my uncle had found a way to push the shame off his back. He was the son my grandmother had left behind. In 1936 he joined the Communist Party—in large part, he told me, to overthrow the society that had forced his mother into concubinage. He published a story about his mother. I told him I was writing about my grandmother in a book of fiction. We agreed that my grandmother was the source of strength running through our family. My mother cried to hear this.

I look at that photo often, and it's safe to guess that my grandmother never envisioned that she would one day have a granddaughter who lives in a house she co-owns with a husband she loves, and a dog and a cat she spoils (no children by choice, not bad luck), and that this granddaughter would have her own money, be able to shop—fifty percent off, full price, doesn't matter, she never has to ask anyone's permission—because she makes her own living, doing what is important to her, which is to tell stories, many of them about her grandmother, a woman who believed death was the only way to change her life.

A relative once scolded my mother, "Why do you tell your daughter these useless stories? She can't change the past." And my mother replied, "It *can* be changed. I tell her, so she can tell everyone, tell the whole world so they know what my mother suffered. That's how it *can* be changed."

I think about what my mother said. Isn't the past what people remember—who did what, how and why? And what people remember, isn't that mostly what they've already chosen to believe? For so many years, my family believed my grandmother was a victim of society, who, sadly, took her own life, no more, no less.

In my writing room, I go back into the past, to that moment when my grandmother told my mother not to follow her footsteps. My grandmother and I are walking side by side, imagining the past differently, remembering it another way. Together we come upon a tomb of memories. We open it and release what has been buried for too long—the terrible despair, the destructive rage. We hurt, we grieve, we cry. And then we see what remains: the hopes, broken to bits but still there.

I look at the photograph of my grandmother. Together we write stories of things that were and shouldn't have been, or could have been, or might still be. We know the past can be changed. We can choose what we should believe. We can choose what we should remember. That is what frees us, this choice, frees us to hope that we can redeem these same memories for the little girl who became my mother.

