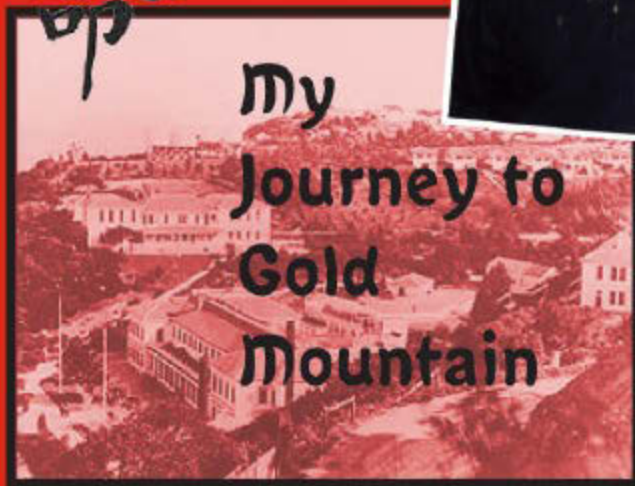


神
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Good
Fortune



Li Keng Wong

Good Fortune

My

Journey

to Gold

Mountain



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The Chinese characters on the front of the book reading from top to bottom represent Spirit, Courage, Happiness, and Destiny.

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Good Fortune

My
Journey
to Gold
Mountain

Li Keng Wong

*To my late husband, Roger L. Wong,
who spent countless hours on the computer
typing the manuscript for me.*

*And to Kirby Wong, Karen Weller,
Amanda Wong, Brian Weller, and Andrea Weller.*

*Without the support and encouragement
of my family and friends,
I would never have been able to write this book.
You know who you are.*

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Chapter 1

A LETTER FROM GOLD MOUNTAIN

Mama, when will Baba come home?" I asked.

"Don't be so impatient, Li Keng," Mama replied. "Your father's letter just arrived. I'll find out as soon as I read it."

"But we don't even have a picture of Baba," I complained. "It has been so long since we've seen him that I hardly remember him. All I know is that he works in Gum Saan."

Gum Saan means "Gold Mountain" in Chinese. It also means the United States. To all of us children in our rural village in China, Gold Mountain seemed like a magical place that was very, very far away.

"All the other families in our village have a father at home," I went on. "But we don't, and I don't like it."

My mother sighed. Of the three girls in our family, I was the whiner. I always pestered my mother with many questions. Sometimes she smiled, but sometimes she glared at me when my questions annoyed her. Mama was very strict. She often scolded me for talking too much.

My name is Gee Li Keng. Gee is our family name. Chinese people always put their last names first. Li means "beautiful" and Keng means "jade." In April 1933 I turned seven years

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old. It was around that time that we received the letter from Baba.

We lived in a rural village called Goon Do Hung, which means “A Village of Good People.” Life was slow paced and peaceful. Villagers trudged out to the fields each day to attend to their rice crops and small vegetable gardens. Water buffalo pulled plows to turn the soil. Everyone worked hard to survive.

Li Hong, my older sister, was eleven years old. She was the daughter from Baba’s first wife, who died when Li Hong was a baby. Mama was Baba’s second wife. Lai Wah, my younger sister, and I were Mama’s daughters. Lai Wah was not quite three.

Our family had a maidservant named Fung, a teenager who helped Mama around the house. She bathed us, cooked all our meals, cleaned for us and, most importantly, she played with us. Mama brought her from a family in a nearby village. Baba had sent money from Gum Saan to do this. Mama explained to us girls, “Fung’s family is very poor. They felt it was necessary for them to sell her to us so that they would have one less mouth to feed. Her family was almost starving.”

Mama welcomed Fung as an oldest daughter. She relied on her for help and treated her kindly. We three girls enjoyed her company and loved her very much. But since there was no man in our house, I envied my playmates who had fathers at home.

“So why can’t our Baba live with us?” I asked Mama now.

“Hush, Li Keng, you talk too much,” Mama said. She sounded angry and frowned at me. “Your Baba works hard in Gold Mountain so that he can send money home to us. The

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money takes care of all our living expenses. We don't have to grow two rice crops each year like our neighbors. We buy our rice and vegetables. Our neighbors toil in the fields day in and day out from one year to the next just to put food on the table. We may not be rich, but we're better off than others."

I looked at the ground. I knew Mama was right.

"I know Baba is like a stranger to all of us," Mama continued. "And I know you want him at home. But there is nothing I can do to change this. Now I want you to go and find Li Hong and Lai Wah. I have good news to tell you girls."

Good news? Dashing outside, I grinned as I yelled to my sisters, "Li Hong! Lai Wah! Mama wants you two in the house right now. She has news for us. *Fai dee! Fai dee!* Hurry! Hurry!" I bossed them as if I were Mama.

The three of us rushed into our small kitchen. A letter written in Chinese was spread out on the table.

"Mama, we're back. Please tell us the good news," I begged.

"Girls, I received a letter from your Baba. He says he will be home in the ninth month, which is five months away."

"What day of the ninth month?" I interrupted Mama. In my excitement, I forgot good manners.

"Let me finish, Li Keng, and don't interrupt me again," Mama scolded. "Keep quiet now. Your Baba will arrive toward the end of the ninth month. He said he will take us back to Gold Mountain with him."

We girls smiled and clapped our hands in unison. Wow! Going to Gold Mountain? We could not believe what Mama had told us. We had no idea where Gold Mountain was, exactly, but we knew that this was indeed very good news.

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Then I began to think. My mind tried to conjure up a picture of Baba. Did I look like him? And what would it be like to have a man in the house? What was Baba like as a person? Was he a gentle, kind, soft-spoken man like our next-door neighbor Hong, who always smiled and patted me on my head? Sometimes Hong gave my sisters and me rock candy as treats. We all liked him, but especially me. He always gave me the largest piece.

Or was Baba like another of our neighbors, Ping? He was a mean, nasty neighbor who screamed at his children and his wife. Sometimes he beat his children. I often heard his wife crying because of her misery and I covered my ears with my hands. Were other men as cruel as Ping?

How would Baba treat us? Mama said that the last time Baba came home from Gold Mountain was several years ago. I was too young to remember him. It would be wonderful if he was like Hong, our kind neighbor. But what if he was like Ping, who always gave me dark, angry looks and never smiled at me?

We would find out soon.

Chapter 2

WAITING

After Baba's letter arrived, I noticed that Mama was smiling more. Her steps seemed lighter, as though she were floating on air. She seemed happier because Baba was coming home again.

Every day I pestered Mama. "Did a letter come from Baba today? I'm tired of waiting!"

Mama frowned and answered, "Li Keng, that's enough. You're always so impatient. Whining isn't going to bring Baba's letter to us any faster. You're getting on my nerves. Stop it right now before I get a headache!"

"Yes, Mama," I answered, clamping my lips together. Then I raced outside so she wouldn't see that I was upset.

Li Hong stood and listened as Mama scolded me. My mouth always made trouble for me. But Li Hong was gentle and sweet. She never bugged Mama. She followed me out of the house as we headed toward the village square to play with the other children.

On the way we saw Cousin Soe. Cousin Soe was a widow and she had no children. She loved to play with us. "Come join us!" she called, waving.

Mama leased our land to Cousin Soe. Fung helped Cousin

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Soe raise vegetables like cabbage, green onions, and bok choy, which is like Swiss chard. Every family but ours planted two rice crops a year. Most of the children in our village would have to plant rice in the paddies or weed the vegetable gardens when they grew older. But for now, young children could still play instead of working all day.

The boys and the girls of our village didn't play together. The girls played with the girls and the boys played with the boys. Sometimes the older boys showed off by treading water in the shallow lake with big, silly smiles on their faces. The girls usually ignored their antics. They turned their heads away.

Mama came out to check on us. "Your Li Hong is such a good girl," Cousin Soe said. "Could she sleep at my house at night to keep me company? I've been a widow for a year now and I am so lonely. She could go home in the mornings."

"What do you think, Li Hong? Do you want to do that?" Mama asked my sister.

Li Hong smiled and nodded yes.

I didn't say anything. I was sure I would miss my family too much to sleep at someone else's house, even Cousin Soe's. But Li Hong seemed happy.

That night I couldn't sleep. I missed Li Hong. But mostly I was still worried about the letter. I wanted to know exactly what Baba had planned for us.

Chapter 3

JOYFUL TIMES

Chinese people love all kinds of festivals. In Goon Do Hung we celebrated the New Year Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Clear Brightness Festival. Festivals brought people together for fun and relaxation.

Everyone in our village looked forward to celebrating the Clear Brightness Festival, which was held in early April. This festival was held to honor each family's departed ancestors. The Chinese call this festival Ching Ming. Some families visit their ancestors' gravesites during this time. They bring food like rice, stir-fried vegetables, chicken, and sweet pastries. Before placing the food in front of the headstones, they tidy up the gravesites. They burn incense and bow three times to show respect to their ancestors.

Later, they picnic and play. Flying kites was a favorite pastime in our village.

Weeks before the festival that year in 1933, many families began making kites in all kinds of shapes, colors, and designs. Imaginations ran wild. Every kite was like a piece of art.

To take my mind off of worrying about Baba's letter, I went next door to Hong's house and offered to help his family make their kite. They had already started the design.

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“May I help you?” I asked. “My family isn’t making a kite this year. I can cut the shape, glue, and cut the string. Please?”

“Yes, Li Keng,” Hong answered. His son and daughter seemed pleased also. I smiled.

On a table I saw colorful rice paper, bamboo sticks, strings, and a small dish of freshly cooked sticky rice. We typically ate sticky rice, but this sticky rice would be used to help glue the rice paper to the bamboo sticks.

We worked slowly and carefully. Hong cut out the shape of the kite as a big butterfly. We children concentrated as we carefully applied the glue.

Everyone smiled because the butterfly kite turned out beautifully. I felt good because I had helped. When I returned home I told my family about our big project.

We waited for a crisp, windy day in April to hold the Clear Brightness Festival. The celebration would last all day. Everyone in the village stopped work and joined in.

Mama smiled when she heard the loud jabbering of our neighbors.

“Let’s join them!” I said eagerly.

“All right,” Mama said. “We will visit our ancestors’ gravesites another day. I want all of us to have fun today. This made us girls very happy.

Fung held on to Lai Wah’s hand and carried our basket of food. Li Hong walked with me. We hurried to the grassy slope of a small hill where everyone had assembled. We sat on the grass and turned our eyes skyward.

A strong wind carried the colorful kites up, up, and away. It seemed as though the many kites almost blocked out the

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sun. There were kites that looked like creatures such as butterflies, frogs, crabs, centipedes, and bats. There were many other designs, too. The villagers smiled, clapped, and yelled, “*Ho! Ho! Good! Good!*”

“Mama, I helped to put together the yellow and orange butterfly kite,” I said excitedly. “Can you see it way up there?”

“Yes, Li Keng, it’s beautiful!” Mama replied.

We ate cookies and cakes and chewed watermelon seeds as we watched. Everyone stayed out until the sun slowly disappeared from the horizon. Then the villagers trudged home tired and happy. I wished Baba had been there to see my kite.