

CHAPTER

13

BING

Age 16

SUZHOU, 1945

DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED THAT SHE HAD FAILED TO FIND ANY sign of Mama Hsu after running away to Suzhou, Bing had figured that there was no point in returning to Shanghai. The food crisis there wouldn't have improved, and Ma was certain to be even more unhappy and irritable with them, the two adopted girls both agreed. They decided to accept the offer from Mama Hsu's uncle to help them find work and a place to live in Suzhou.

Uncle, in turn, enlisted his daughter to check around for possible jobs at the big Suzhou Customs Office where she worked. The Japanese occupation had taken over the office at the start of the war, and Uncle's daughter learned of a Japanese coworker who was looking for a maid. The coworker hired Ah Mei. Then a Chinese couple at the customs bureau wanted someone to care for their three small children while they were at work. They offered Bing room and board—there'd be no pay but no dreaded corn mush either. Bing agreed. At least she'd have Ah Mei nearby.

By mid-1945, the girls had been in Suzhou for about a year. The days had passed quickly, each much like the one before. Bing didn't care; she was biding her time, waiting for Mama Hsu to return. Even at age sixteen, Bing believed that the kind Suzhou woman would want her back. If for some reason that wasn't to be, then perhaps her return

would lead to Baba and her birth family. Maybe they would want her. Bing didn't expect much for herself, but still she couldn't extinguish the small pilot light in her heart. For now, she had a place to stay, and she loved taking care of small children—she showered them with the affection she had never received, and they gave it right back. That was enough.

In August, when the steam of summer heat could be seen rising from the city's canals, news of the coming Japanese surrender erupted. People burst out of their curfew-shuttered homes, rejoicing in the narrow lanes. Bing could hardly believe it. Yet it had to be true when everyone working at the Japanese-run customs office, including the couple she lived with, was abuzz over rumors that they would all be fired or even arrested for working with the Japanese.

Ah Mei's Japanese employers flew into a panic, prompting her to consider returning to Shanghai. She asked Bing if she'd join her. But with the war over, Bing felt that her Suzhou mother would surely return and she'd finally get answers to her gnawing questions. Though Bing was sorry to see her friend leave, she decided to stay put in Suzhou. And wait.

IN EARLY 1946, a few months after the Japanese surrender, Bing answered a knock on the door of the apartment where she was living. She was shocked to see Ah Mei—with Elder Sister and her building's gatekeeper. They had taken the train from Shanghai that morning.

"Bing! I've been looking all over for you," Elder Sister said, her deep voice reverberating. Bing had forgotten how loud Elder Sister could be. In rapid-fire Shanghai dialect, she told Bing that she had been searching for the two girls ever since they ran away nearly two years before. She had enlisted the building's gatekeeper and others to help her find the girls but had had no luck. Then, after the Japanese surrender, the gatekeeper spotted Ah Mei on the street. Elder Sister found where she was staying and asked her to come back.

After Ah Mei's return, Elder Sister asked about Bing. At first, Ah Mei professed ignorance, knowing that Bing wished to stay in Suzhou. But Elder Sister persisted and gradually convinced Ah Mei that she

was sincere in her concern for Bing. Once the railway line to Suzhou was safe to travel, Elder Sister asked Ah Mei to take her to Bing, bringing the gatekeeper along in case they ran into trouble with maverick soldiers or other ruffians.

"Bing, please come back to Shanghai with us," Elder Sister entreated. "We all miss you. Ole misses you. He calls out your name. Ma misses you. Kristian too. We all want you to come back."

Bing was too surprised to speak. She stared at Elder Sister, as dazzling as ever with her red lipstick and Western hairdo. Although the women of Suzhou were renowned for their beauty, they were more modest in appearance. Elder Sister was the epitome of her city: stylish, outspoken, and brash as only a Shanghai woman could be.

Bing quizzed Ah Mei. "Ma isn't mad? She really misses me?"

"It's true, Bing. Things are better now," Ah Mei offered. "Kristian has a good job—there's real food again. Ma is calmer. Ole is going to school, and Peter can walk and talk now!"

Bing stared down at the floor, thinking hard. She'd been in Suzhou for nearly two years. In that time, she had kept checking with the elderly uncle for any contact from Mama Hsu. Not one word had come through. Could Mama Hsu be dead, one of the many thousands killed in the Japanese bombings of Chongqing? If Mama Hsu never returned to Suzhou, what then? On the other hand, Elder Sister really seemed to *want* her to come back. Unaccustomed to feeling wanted, Bing hesitated. Then she squared her shoulders and said, "Yes. I'll go back with you."

ON THE TRAIN BACK to Shanghai, Bing watched villages and farms whiz by vast spaces of blackened rubble and stark wasteland. The last time she had traveled this route with Ah Mei, they'd been fourteen-year-old runaways. How naïve Bing had been to think she would knock on Uncle's door and find Mama Hsu waiting to welcome her and resume her schooling. Now she might never see Mama Hsu again. And she'd lose her only link to her father. But even if she found them, maybe they would reject her—again. And what about Ma in Shanghai? Bing dreaded the tongue-lashing that Ma would surely mete out.

Tears of uncertainty, sadness, and regret began to run down her cheeks.

To comfort Bing, Elder Sister spoke in her most soothing voice: She hadn't been able to search for Bing in Suzhou sooner because hundreds of American bombers had been flying over Shanghai, destroying roads, bridges, and rails, until the Japanese surrender. Life in Shanghai had improved: Curfews and barricades were gone, and American soldiers were now keeping the peace. American GIs were everywhere, with lots of greenbacks to spend. "And so you must be careful," Elder Sister advised. "You've grown into a pretty girl, and soldiers want only one thing, no matter what uniform they wear." Bing recognized the same warnings that Ma used to give Elder Sister and her girlfriends so many years before.

Ah Mei told Bing how the American, British, and other European civilians had been released from the internment camps scattered around the Shanghai area.

"They came back looking so thin and hollow, with tattered rags loose on their bones. Can you imagine foreigners looking like beggars? Many have no homes because the Japanese and their puppets took everything. The Nationalists are back, and everything's getting shaken up again like a fortune teller's sticks." Ah Mei described how all Japanese civilians were being deported to Japan, even decent ones like the two ladies who ran the restaurant next door on Avenue Joffre. "Now it's the puppets' turn to go to prison, especially the murderous thugs at 76. They deserve the firing squad!"

Elder Sister added some good news: Her husband had a big job at Texaco, an American oil company—and got paid in U.S. dollars.

When they reached the familiar apartment on Avenue Joffre, Bing glanced around cautiously, absorbing the changes. The building's simple lines and gray brick seemed brighter than before, without the wartime soot and grime that had coated everything. The marble lobby glistened, though the walls still had gaping holes once occupied by heating pipes and radiators, before the Japanese had scavenged them. But the bronze trim in the elevator had regained the sheen lost to the grim war years.

Bing instantly noticed that the apartment seemed roomier. The

tenant from Fujian and his girlfriend were moving out, furniture had been pushed back to make more open space, and the blackout curtains were gone. Before Bing could look further, six-year-old Ole ran over to embrace her. How he'd grown while she was in Suzhou! Meanwhile, Peter stood by his father, watching shyly.

Kristian smiled broadly. "Welcome home, Bing. Son, say hello to Bing."

Without taking his eyes off her, the little boy squeaked, "*Ni hao?*" Bing laughed in delight to hear the Eurasian child speak Chinese in his baby voice. Seeing his older brother, Ole, wrapping his arms around Bing's waist, Peter rushed over and hugged her leg. Bing glowed from their affection. Then she looked up and saw Ma. Bing braced herself.

To Bing's relief, Ma was subdued. The corners of her mouth appeared to curl up a bit. Bing suppressed a nervous giggle—was that a smile? "I was very worried about you, Bing. I'm glad you came back," Ma offered.

Surprised, Bing stole a glance at Ah Mei, who smiled and nodded. Maybe they really want me, she ventured to herself. Under the new arrangement, Bing was to stay at the apartment with Elder Sister, Kristian, and little Peter, while Ah Mei would take Ole to stay with Ma. Each morning they'd all have breakfast at Elder Sister's apartment and spend the day together until the dinner dishes were put away and it was time to go to bed. It felt so familiar to Bing. Better, she hoped. Like being home.

THERE WERE OTHER SURPRISES in postoccupation Shanghai, with signs of the new regime everywhere. In place of the rising sun and swastika were the white sun and blue sky of the Nationalist flag and the American Stars and Stripes. Giant portraits of Chiang Kai-shek hung on Nanjing Road and at other strategic points around the city. The foreign concessions had been eliminated in 1943 and were now referred to as "the former International Settlement" and the "former French Concession," though everyone preferred the simpler "French-town" and "Englishtown" that they were used to. Street names were changed to honor Nationalist heroes, with Avenue Joffre becoming

Returning to Shanghai in 1946 after two years away in Suzhou, Bing (right) felt happiest with her best friend, Ah Mei, and the boys, Ole (top) and Peter.



Lin Sen Road, named after a prominent Nationalist. Most people ignored the newly minted labels and stuck with the more familiar Shanghaiese versions. Business establishments simply ran ads with both old and new names.

The most dramatic change came with the overnight omnipresence of American troops and aid, in spite of the official U.S. policy of "non-involvement" in the tensions between Nationalists and Communists. Nine hundred million dollars in U.S. war surplus equipment arrived for Chiang's army as tens of thousands of Yanks airlifted about five hundred thousand Nationalists to north China, Manchuria, and elsewhere to block the Communists. Some fifty-three thousand U.S. Marines were occupying Beijing until the Nationalists could replace them. Other American GIs were busy rounding up the Japanese soldiers and civilians still in China to return them to Japan, now under U.S. occupation. General George Marshall himself arrived in Shanghai on December 23, 1945, to serve as President Truman's special envoy to China. On Nanjing Road, Avenue Joffre, and other commercial streets, Bing was surprised to see newly arrived American soldiers

grabbing the arm shafts of rickshaws and taking their drivers for rides yelling, "Yahoo!" Ah Mei reported with a chuckle that this strange ritual was repeated with nearly every fresh batch of Yankees, who paid rickshaw drivers unheard-of sums for the privilege of pulling them. Shanghai's local riders, fearing drastic increases in fares, demanded regulatory action to limit the price paid for such tomfoolery.

The Shanghailanders like Kristian welcomed the Americans, hoping that their efforts would bring stability to the war-torn country. Local newspapers featured the efforts of General Marshall and his successor, General Albert Wedemeyer, the American military chiefs tasked with brokering a truce in the deepening civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. Bing listened with interest as Kristian and Elder Sister discussed Chiang Kai-shek's refusal to negotiate with the Communists to end the hostilities. They and many of their friends believed Chiang's officials were too busy lining their own pockets with the spoils of war to work on a peaceful new order. About \$500 million in emergency relief goods from America and the United Nations poured in—and almost immediately appeared for sale on store shelves and the black market. Chocolate, Spam, military meals, American cigarettes, chewing gum, and other emergency-aid supplies mysteriously made their way into the hands of profiteers.

Most irritating to Elder Sister was the steady stream of carpetbaggers arriving in Shanghai from Chongqing and other interior Nationalist strongholds to help themselves to the reappropriated property taken from Japanese officials and their Chinese puppets. Complaints from the original prewar owners abounded. Everyone had stories of some petty government officials they had seen flaunting their windfalls. Around the mah-jongg table, Elder Sister's friends grouched about the gold bars that the Japanese had extracted from Chinese people during the occupation—and speculated about where that gold might have gone. Elder Sister's husband wryly observed that the game hadn't changed; just the flags had.

Others in Shanghai were plotting to get away, knowing that their prospects had become precarious under Nationalist rule. Elder Sister's tenant, the young Chinese from Fujian who had gone to college in Tokyo, claimed to have no interest in any political ideology, saying

that he had worked for a Japanese company in order to survive the war years. That job history was now a major liability.

"I'm moving north to work with the Communists. I've heard they'll take anyone with skills," he explained. He had learned from friends that the Communists were growing in strength, steadily building an economic and political base in the mountainous hinterlands of Yan'an. The Red Army's crack guerrilla soldiers were fighting both the defeated Japanese and the Nationalists and had captured huge caches of their armaments. "The Communists will take the people shunned by the Nationalists. I'm joining the Communists."

Elder Sister was appalled by his plans. "The Nationalists may be crooks, but the Communists are crazy," she declared. Bing tried to imagine the urbane young man and his stylish girlfriend in a mountain cave with the Red Bandits. She was glad they were leaving, though, because there'd be room for a cot for her to sleep on instead of the floor.

With Kristian back at work as an engineer for Texaco, Elder Sister was in high spirits. She no longer had to work, though the war years had taught her to be prepared for anything. American businesses were back in full force, protected by the U.S. military, whose fleets lined the riverfront. Best of all, the U.S. greenbacks that Texaco paid their employees were as good as gold in postwar China. More money at home meant that Ma didn't stress as much over the continuing inflation or nag when Elder Sister replaced the dark curfew curtains with cheerful floral prints. Elder Sister returned to spending her evenings at parties and dinners with friends, both female and male, while her husband preferred to stay home sipping sherry and playing solitaire as he puffed on his cigar. Bing and Ah Mei now received allowances to spend in shops that again had plenty of stock to sell. There was even an effort to reduce the number of homeless refugees, with the new mayor of Shanghai, Princeton-educated K. C. Wu, moving thousands into some of the former military encampments, providing food and shelter to reduce the number of corpses after a cold night. Life in Shanghai had improved.

When Bing asked herself if she had made the right decision by returning, she had to allow that she was treated more as a sister and daughter than anything else. She was never treated as a servant or a

xiao yatou—the young servant girls who were hardly more than slaves. Shanghai was filled with discarded, displaced girls, and Bing knew that she could have ended up like them. Ma, superstitious as ever, told her that she had had dreams while Bing was away about the reincarnation of her infant daughter who had died shortly after birth—in Changzhou of all places, where Bing was from. “You must be my lost daughter,” Ma had declared not long after Bing returned. If such a thing could possibly be true, Bing mused, then fate had brought her to the Woo family.

AFTER BING TURNED SEVENTEEN in the spring of 1946, Elder Sister took her to get her hair permed at a nearby beauty salon. Then she took Bing shopping and bought her a couple of fashionable dresses. “You’re reaching the age where men will chase after you. If you want to catch a classy guy, you’ve got to be a classy act,” Elder Sister advised. “You have a lot to learn.” Elder Sister started sharing her womanly secrets with Bing. She brought Bing along to her favorite nightclubs to join her friends as they sipped tea and Coca-Cola, and she taught Bing some simple dance steps. While puffing on cigarettes and flashing her painted nails, Elder Sister would check out the prospects and dispense advice to Bing.

“You can take a cigarette from a guy if he offers, but wait for him to light it. Then puff, but don’t inhale or you’ll choke,” Elder Sister admonished. “If a boy asks you to dance, why not? Have some fun. But if he wants to get more serious, first find out if he can provide you with the essentials.”

Without pause, Elder Sister and her friends enumerated the Essential Four Things a suitor needed to offer a girl: gold jewelry, a diamond ring, a fur coat, and a place to live. “If he can’t give you these,” they said, “don’t waste your time.”

Soon Bing had a chance to put her lessons to the test. She’d caught the eye of a handsome young reporter who had returned to Shanghai after spending the war in Chongqing. He asked Bing for a date, and they went to a movie. When he brought her home, Elder Sister appraised him.

“He has no money,” Elder Sister sniffed. “Forget him.”

The next time he contacted Bing, Elder Sister instructed her to meet him at Ma’s apartment. Her place had no indoor plumbing, and he stopped to use the *ma tong*, chamber pot. After he left, Ma inspected the pot and rendered her verdict. “His urine is strange; maybe he has syphilis.”

It fell on Bing to ask the fellow to stop calling on her. Embarrassed, she stammered an explanation. “My elder sister says I can’t see you unless you can provide the Essential Four Things.”

“What?” he shot back after hearing what the four things were. “The war just ended, and I’m lucky I got out of Chongqing with my life! Who has that kind of money? Your sister must be a gold digger!” After he left, Bing asked Ah Mei what he had meant by “gold digger.”

“It’s a woman who only wants a man for his money,” she answered knowingly. “Lots of money.”

Bing was indignant. How could he have said something so rude about Elder Sister? “Good riddance!” she exclaimed.

Ah Mei laughed. “Don’t be so naïve, Bing. Men want women for their own pleasure. If a woman can get what she wants, what’s wrong with that? Look at Elder Sister’s husband. He’s so old! They both got something they wanted, and they seem content.”

Bing frowned. She had never thought about Elder Sister and Kristian that way. They treated her well, and she loved their two boys. That was enough for her.

Her brief first romance extinguished, Bing was reluctant to encourage other possible suitors. She hadn’t dated the reporter long enough to feel anything toward him but embarrassment, and she didn’t relish the prospect of another inspection process. Moreover, soon the family would be moving again. This time to a hotel.

One of Kristian’s Chinese friends owned a construction company and hoped to curry favor with him, since the Dane was in charge of Texaco’s construction projects in Shanghai. Expanding its China operations, Texaco was planning to build several Western-style villas in the exclusive Hongqiao area for its foreign managers. The friend offered to let Kristian and his family live rent-free in the large hotel room the friend had once kept for a mistress. By moving into the

nearby building, they'd save lots of money. They'd get their deposit back from their current landlord, and they could sell their excess furniture. Kristian, Elder Sister, Peter, and Bing would move into the hotel room, while Ah Mei and Ole would continue to stay with Ma only a few blocks away. In 1947, the four moved into the Weida Hotel on the corner of Avenue Joffre and Avenue du Roi Albert. It thrilled Bing to stand at the window and see the Cathay Theatre lit up in neon at night across the street.

Big, bright, and modern, the hotel had a shiny elevator with mirrors and elegant brass trim. Their room was only on the second floor, but Bing could keep three-year-old Peter entertained for hours by riding the elevator with him. The huge bathroom had white marble on the floors, walls, and sink counter. Elder Sister arranged the furniture to create sleeping and living areas. They brought a table and chairs from the old apartment and fashioned a small cooking area with a kerosene-burner hotplate. Elder Sister and Kristian slept in the big bed with Peter on a child's bed next to theirs. There was no room for Bing's cot.

Bing didn't mind going back to the bedroll on the floor. She liked the hotel. From their balcony, Bing could watch the bustling street scene below. In the evening, shiny cars driven by chauffeurs in white uniforms pulled up to the entrance. Bellboys with pillbox caps and white gloves rushed to open the car doors. It was fun to watch a silk-stockinged leg appear as a bejeweled woman emerged in a fitted, embroidered *qipao* or a flowing French gown. Dapper men with slicked-back hair offered their arms to the ladies before disappearing into the hotel.

Sometimes Bing joined Elder Sister and her friends at the hotel's dance club. Its sparkling lights and music performed by a Filipino band mesmerized. On special occasions, American Negro musicians were the headliners, drawing in the crowds as dancers floated across the smooth parquet floor. It was a magical sight, straight out of a Hollywood movie. Except the magic was right in front of her. So close, she could almost grab it.

CHAPTER

14

HO

Age 23

SHANGHAI, 1947

IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF MAY 1947, AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES mailed their admissions notices to prospective students for the fall. On May 22, Ho received letters of acceptance from both MIT and the University of Michigan for their doctoral mechanical engineering programs. He was ecstatic to be accepted by his top choices, especially knowing that every engineering graduate in China would have applied to both schools.

Ho couldn't decide which school to choose. The University of Michigan would be the less expensive alternative for his family, but MIT had the big name and reputation. As he prepared the documents to apply for his visa, he suddenly noticed that the letter from MIT had no signature. Ho went to the visa authorities to see if the unsigned letter would be accepted. Their answer was an unequivocal no. The hard decision was made for him—he would go to Michigan, home of the American automobile.

Forging ahead to make arrangements, Ho had no time to waste, for the conflict between the Nationalists and Communists was spiraling downward. At the start of the year in 1947, the American general George Marshall had made it clear that he had given up on his attempt to bring Chiang Kai-shek to the table with the Communists. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had agreed to talks, but Chiang had refused. General Mar-