

CHAPTER

26

BING

Age 21

NEW YORK, 1950

AFTER THE WEDDING FESTIVITIES IN OAKLAND, BING AND her husband, John Yee, headed to New York by plane. The roller-coaster flight made several stops to refuel before landing at Idlewild Airport on Long Island. Elder Sister and Peter had taken a transcontinental train to New York. The plan was for Bing to meet up with them before they boarded their ship to Denmark.

John had hired some painters to spruce up his apartment in anticipation of Bing's arrival, but since they hadn't finished in time, he rented a cheap hotel room in Times Square for a week. During the long days while he was at work, Bing explored midtown Manhattan, admiring the skyscrapers and bustling city. There was even a Chinese restaurant in Times Square—Chin Lee's—but unlike the eating places she had known in San Francisco's Chinatown, the customers were American, not Chinese. When she saw the high prices, she didn't eat there either. Instead, she walked and gawked. New York was bigger, taller, brassier than Shanghai, but the energy was instantly familiar and reassuring. Where San Francisco was comfortable and friendly like Suzhou, New York was electric, just like Shanghai. Times Square resembled the more risqué sections in the Badlands and near the Bund, complete with bright lights, prostitutes, and beggars—though instead

of the downtrodden being Chinese, here they were all Americans—a strange reversal to the young woman from Shanghai.

When Elder Sister's train arrived, she booked a room at the Hilton near Times Square, where she and Peter would stay a couple of nights before crossing the river to New Jersey for their ship. Stepping into the palatial lobby to meet them, Bing had to smile: Of course Elder Sister would pick a fancy hotel no matter how tight her finances, never the modest place that John had chosen. Elder Sister spotted Bing first and bellowed, "You're so thin! What's wrong with that husband? Is he starving you? I warned you that Cantonese men are cheapskates!" Bing grinned broadly, glad to see Elder Sister and already sad to have to wish her a bon voyage, not knowing if they'd see each other again.

By the end of the week, Elder Sister had departed, and John's apartment on the Lower East Side was ready. The taxi stopped at a six-story walk-up at 32 Henry Street, on the edge of Chinatown. When they stepped into the old, dark building, Bing thought there was some mistake. John unlocked the door to an apartment on the ground floor. Bing looked around in disbelief: The rooms were small and cramped. A covered bathtub sat in the middle of the kitchen, doubling as a table and lit by a circular fluorescent light that cast an eerie glow on the tin-type ceiling. The ill-fitting windows in the front rooms did little to block the sounds and soot from the busy street. Bing straightened her back when she realized there was no bathroom. Before she could ask, John cleared his throat. "The bathroom is down the hall. We share it with the other tenants."

At first Bing said nothing. Finally, she spoke. "The worst place I ever lived in Shanghai was better than this. Must we stay here?"

John gave her a pleading look. "The rent is only eleven dollars a month; that's how I saved two thousand dollars to pay your sister. Please give it a try. That's all I ask."

Bing gave a reluctant nod. Her new life would not be as she had hoped, but she would try to make the best of the situation.

NEW YORK'S CHINATOWN WAS smaller than San Francisco's, with far fewer Chinese people. Yet it seemed more congested, hemmed in by Little Italy and the tenements of the Lower East Side, home to generations of immigrants from all over. Each morning after John walked to the Bank of China branch at Chatham Square, Bing went about her own routine. As in San Francisco, most of New York's Chinatown residents were from Taishan and elsewhere in Guangdong's Pearl River Delta. During her months in San Francisco, Bing had already begun picking up some Toisan dialect, which was more useful in America than her own. And as in San Francisco, wherever Bing went, the Chinese workers in the restaurants, shops, and laundries stuck their heads out to get a glimpse of the *Shanghai nui*.

One day, as Bing walked across Doyers Street, an older woman leaned out of the corner curio shop and exclaimed loudly, "*Nung Shanghei-ni? Are you from Shanghai?*"

Bing swung around, startled. This woman spoke her own Shanghai dialect! Excited, Bing went over, and the two began chattering in rapid-fire Shanghainese. Her name was Mrs. Fung, and she claimed she could spot fellow Shanghainese just by the way they carried themselves. She was married to the Cantonese merchant who owned the curio shop and, having lived in New York's Chinatown for several years, could speak the Canton, Toisan, and Shanghai dialects as well as English.

"I didn't think there were any Shanghai people in Chinatown," Bing confessed.

"Oh, there are quite a few," Mrs. Fung said. "On weekends there are even more—the high-nosed 'uptown' Shanghainese only come to Chinatown to eat or buy groceries. But a number of Shanghainese live here, mostly young—like you. They stop at my shop for tea in the afternoons. Come by and meet them."

Soon Bing was a regular at Mrs. Fung's curio shop at the corner of Doyers and Pell, becoming fast friends with the circle of other displaced Shanghai exiles. Some, like Bing, had fled China because of the impending revolution. Others had gotten out during the tumultuous



(From the left) Bing in New York's Chinatown at the curio shop with her downtown friends: Mary Yu, holding her new baby, Maybing and her husband, and the Fungs, the store owners.

war years. Unlike the stranded students and intellectuals, these "downtown Shanghainese" weren't inclined to leave America for a revolution-in-progress—and few could have afforded to go back in any case, or their travel documents might have been too irregular to risk leaving. Bing's circle included Mary and Maybing, two sisters who had married brothers, all from Shanghai. The brothers both were Chinatown waiters who worked at fancy Jewish resorts in the Catskills during the summer. One of the brothers had served as a GI in the Pacific, and thanks to postwar federal legislation, could marry a "war bride" from China without having to apply for one of the 105 immigration quota slots allotted to Chinese. The other brother was a merchant seaman who had jumped ship and bought the paper name of Sing.

Then there was Vicki, a nurse, who had come to America after the

Japanese war and married a Chinatown merchant, and Suzanne, divorced from her diplomatic-corps husband and overstaying her visa; she worked at the Bulova Watch Factory. These downtown Shanghainese had become friends, taking day-trips together to Jones Beach and Coney Island. Like Bing, most were in their twenties. None made enough money to pay uptown rents—and in any case, few landlords beyond Chinatown were willing to rent to Chinese. Chinatown was affordable, and they formed a downtown Shanghai community of their own.

Like the Chinese exiled in the United States, everyone in the downtown Shanghai group had family members in China. They anxiously awaited any word from home, glad to receive even the most cursory news confirming that their families were okay. Sometimes the letters included tiny black-and-white studio portraits. Bing wrote letters to Ma in the painstaking calligraphy she had practiced since the third grade, her last year of formal schooling. She told Ma of her marriage to a good Cantonese man and her life in New York. Bing treasured each missive from home and sometimes caught herself missing Ma, relieved to know that she was safe and well cared for by other relatives.

Yet even as these Chinese looked back to Shanghai, they were putting down roots. By the early 1950s, the women of the postwar marriage boom were having babies. That nasty “love potion” from John’s sister must have worked, for Bing was pregnant too. She felt lucky to have such a kindhearted and easygoing husband. When he complained about her cooking, she answered tartly, “Then you cook.” And so he did, preparing their dinners from then on. He was delighted to become a father at his age. As Bing’s pregnancy progressed, she had to stumble through the dark hallway at night to reach the communal toilet. John promised that he would look for a new place after the baby came.

When their son was born, John named him Henry, the same name as their street. A girl would’ve been named Catherine for the cross street. Little Henry was as chubby and cheerful as Bing and John were proud and doting. When Henry turned one month old, they had a red-egg celebration at a restaurant. Bing’s Shanghai friends came, many with their own small children in tow.

IT HAD BEEN MORE than a year since Bing had last seen elder sister Betty. Bing missed her but was glad to have finally set up her own household. Every day, Bing took Henry around Chinatown in his carriage, joining other young mothers out with their children at Columbus Park on Mulberry Street. She ended her daily outing at Mrs. Fung’s shop to see her downtown Shanghainese friends. There, Bing caught the latest news about the situation back home and the need for Chinese to be cautious in America. Her friends talked about the clean-cut *lofan* FBI agents, who stuck out like stinky tofu as they surveilled Chinatown, seeking Communists, potential deportees, as well as possible informants. On her way home, she’d pick up some fresh groceries for John to cook for dinner. Her life fell into a pleasant rhythm that offered more contentment than she’d ever dared dream of.

Then came the letter from Elder Sister. She was returning to New York—alone. Her two boys were moving to Australia with their father. Because the mail delivery had been slow from Europe, Bing and John calculated that Elder Sister’s ship would arrive in just a few days.

They flew into a frenzy of preparation for Elder Sister’s return. Bing couldn’t wait to show off her new baby and new life to her sister, but John was in a panic. “Oh, that sister of yours,” he moaned. “She’ll have nothing good to say when she sees this place.”

John was right. Even as Elder Sister’s taxi pulled up to their building, Bing could hear the distinctive, booming voice: “Are you sure this is the right place? What kind of a dump is this?” Elder Sister stood outside the building in her leopard-skin coat and French high heels, with several leather suitcases. She practically bowled over John with her energy. “Is this where you brought my sister? No Shanghai woman would want to stay in a place like this.” Inside the apartment, she lectured Bing nonstop in Shanghainese, repeating the same basic message: You must learn to control your husband and get him to move into a more suitable location. Though John couldn’t understand every word, Elder Sister’s meaning was unmistakable.

Pausing occasionally between volleys, she’d stop to look at the baby. Then she’d start again. Bing said nothing, suddenly flashing

back to her days as a young girl trying to survive Ma. I don't miss this about Ma—or Elder Sister, Bing realized.

When Elder Sister finally calmed down, she told Bing that Kristian had convalesced slowly while she waited in Copenhagen with Ole and Peter. It hadn't taken long for Betty to conclude that she could not possibly live in Denmark. "The food is terrible; the weather is bad; it's dark all day long in the winter. That's why the people are pale as ghosts. I can't live like that—and I won't."

Kristian didn't want to stay in Denmark either. He feared that the Cold War with the Soviet Union could heat up into another war in Europe. He'd always wanted to move to Australia—and so they'd hit the same impasse as when they'd plotted their escape from Shanghai. This time they'd decided to split up. Kristian would take the boys to Australia, and Betty would return to the United States. He wouldn't contest a divorce should she seek one.

Bing was stunned to learn that Elder Sister was actually going to end her marriage. Bing had thought Betty had been bluffing all along with Lee, the San Francisco man who had paid their expenses for months. In a small voice, Bing asked if this meant Elder Sister was going to get together with Lee. Elder Sister looked blank. "Oh, him? He'll get over it." Bing marveled at Elder Sister's ability to land on her feet, whether in San Francisco, Denmark, or occupied Shanghai. Now she was going to take on New York.

Kristian and the boys left Denmark for Australia via Italy. As Elder Sister had predicted, Kristian was allowed ashore when the Italian liner pulled into Sydney Harbour in January 1951, but his biracial Eurasian sons were not. One Australian newspaper headline queried: "CAN THESE TWO STAY HERE? Immigration officers today temporarily banned from landing two Danish-Chinese children who arrived by ship from Genoa with their Danish father."

Australia's white supremacist policies were so politically charged that the arrival of Peter and Ole, seven and eleven, had violated those race laws. It was big news. After some bureaucratic juggling because of the boys' youth, the national government in Canberra decided to allow them to join their father temporarily until the national government could decide whether to let the half-Chinese boys remain. When

Elder Sister learned of her sons' ordeal, she was incensed—and vindicated. "Can you believe how those Australians treated my boys? They'd never have let me off the ship. And I'd never let them treat me like a second-class person. I was right not to go there!"

Elder Sister rented an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, near Columbia University and the cluster of educated uptown Shanghainese. This came as no surprise to Bing, knowing how much appearances mattered to Elder Sister—she could never live downtown. Bing was pleased that Elder Sister was close enough to visit and far enough to keep John calm.

Bing was caught unaware, however, by the stream of surprised questions from her Chinatown friends after they met Betty. "Are you really sisters?" they asked. "You're so different in every way." Yes, they were sisters, the two assured everyone.

Elder Sister reminded Bing not tell anyone—not even John—that she was adopted: "People can be cruel. Don't give them reasons to look down on you. Me and you, we're as good as blood sisters."

With all her heart, Bing felt that Betty was a true sister. When friends got a bit too curious, she'd throw them off with a quick answer. Bing's close friend Maybing especially liked to probe.

"Where in Shanghai did you live?" she asked.

"Off Avenue Joffre," Bing had answered truthfully, naming the biggest and longest street in the former French Concession.

"Which school did you attend?"

This was harder to answer because Maybing had been a teacher in Shanghai.

"I had to start and stop school several times during the war," Bing said.

Bing was accustomed to saying little when conversations got personal. She'd been so invisible as a child, it wasn't hard to make herself small. When she couldn't evade a question, she gave a casual shrug and said, "Those are bad memories of wartime."

That was an answer that would stop even the most curious questioner. Every Chinese knew how devastating the eight-year war with Japan had been. Few had been untouched by the suffering, misery, and loss. Among Bing's circle of Shanghai friends, no one wished to re-

kindle wartime nightmares. Not even her husband. After those tragic war years, everyone had painful stories they'd rather forget. This was the time to look to the future.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1951, John surprised Bing by coming home from work at lunchtime. He knocked on the door, and Bing was puzzled as to why he didn't use his key. When Bing opened it, he staggered in and collapsed on the bed. Bing couldn't rouse him. Panicked, she didn't know what to do. Finally, she put the baby in his crib and ran to the nearest doctor's office, a few blocks away. The doctor was in, and he rushed back with her to Henry Street. The baby was crying, and a neighbor had come into the unlocked apartment to comfort him.

John had suffered a massive stroke. He was alive but unresponsive. The doctor called an ambulance to take John to nearby Gouverneur Hospital in Chinatown. Three weeks later, John died. From his death certificate, Bing learned for the first time that her husband had not been in his forties but in his fifties. Still, it was a shocking death for a seemingly healthy middle-aged man.

An onslaught of emotions swept over Bing: grief, anxiety, fear. Some of John's friends blamed her for failing to call an ambulance to take him to Bellevue Hospital, which they viewed as much better. But Bing knew nothing about American ambulances, hospitals, emergency rooms. Then came all the people who claimed to be friends and associates of John's. She'd never heard John mention most of them, but because he had worked at the Bank of China, they all seemed to think he had a lot of money. Now they contacted his widow, saying that John owed them.

Bing's friends stood by her, helping her with the baby. John's boss and close friend Berne Lee was John's executor and Henry's godfather. He helped Bing sort out John's finances. Elder Sister comforted Bing and watched out for her interests too. John had owned a life insurance policy, a savings account with a small amount of cash, and some stocks—mostly worthless. After paying for the hospital, funeral, cemetery, and various debts, there was enough to put aside a couple thousand dollars for Henry's education and for Bing.

Widowed at twenty-one, in a strange country, with a child not even

a year old, Bing faced her new reality. Some people in Chinatown clucked that she was unlucky, that fate was unkind to her. Bing didn't care—they had no idea how much bad luck she had already overcome, and it had made her strong. Now she was grateful for their tenement apartment. She wouldn't have to worry about paying the eleven-dollar rent.

But there were other problems. Everyone in Chinatown knew how the INS and the FBI were hunting for Chinese to arrest and deport. Under orders from Director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI conducted raids on Chinatown organizations and publications while openly tailing suspected Communists throughout Chinatown. At Mrs. Fung's curio shop, the Shanghainese worried that Chinese like themselves would come under greater scrutiny. News reports said that some Chinese were being held on Ellis Island. What if they were deported—and to where? Back to Shanghai to live under the Communists?

Bing's friends asked her if John had taken care of her immigration status. John had been a naturalized American citizen and everyone, including Elder Sister, had figured Bing would readily become one too. John had even hired a Chinatown lawyer to apply for her permanent resident status as the wife of a U.S. citizen. Concerned, Bing's friends urged her to straighten out her status. But with so many other more pressing matters to attend to after John's death, her immigration matters had to wait.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER John's death, Bing ran into a Shanghai man named Frank Hsieh at Columbus Park, where she often took little Henry to play. She and John had purchased a crib from Frank, the owner of a baby-furniture store in New Jersey. Frank spoke flawless English, having studied at St. John's University, and had lived in America for more than a decade. He had been a translator at the United Nations for a time and held a number of odd jobs before buying the baby-furniture store.

Bing was impressed by how much Frank Hsieh knew about America. He began to call on the young widow. When Bing told him about Elder Sister's plan to get a divorce, he suggested that she file in Flor-

ida. He had been through a divorce himself and knew that courts moved faster in Florida than New York. Frank offered to take Elder Sister and Bing to Florida in his car for a short holiday. Elder Sister encouraged Bing: "Why not? He's sweet on you, and if he'll take us there for free, let's go!"

Bing, Elder Sister, and baby Henry piled into Frank's Studebaker. After a two-day drive, they were in Miami, basking in the sun. It was fun for Bing, the kind of trip she'd seen in magazines and movies. They found two rooms at a cheap motel, with Bing, Elder Sister, and Henry sharing one. Frank had been right—Elder Sister's divorce sailed through. To celebrate, they went to a little diner near the motel on their last night. Everyone was in great spirits—until Frank and Elder Sister started talking about China.

"That Chiang Kai-shek has never worked for the best interests of the Chinese people," Frank argued. "He robbed China blind and let the people starve to death while lining his pockets with American dollars. No wonder so many Chinese turned to the Communists."

"What? How dare you say such garbage about the generalissimo!" demanded Elder Sister. "You must be a Commie pinko!"

Bing listened helplessly with Henry on her lap as the conversation rapidly spun out of control. In Chinatown, tempers flared whenever the issue of the "two Chinas" arose. Now her sister and her suitor were going at it. Bing knew that Elder Sister would never back down—and soon it was clear that Frank wasn't about to either. Their voices grew louder as they began cursing in Shanghainese.

"You college boys think you're so fucking smart," spat Elder Sister. "You're no better than dog shit."

"Goddamn you, big-mouth whore. What do you know?" he shot back. "I was in Chongqing during the war; I saw it all firsthand when you were screwing white devils in Shanghai. How dare you!"

Suddenly they were throwing things. Frank tossed his drink at Elder Sister, then heaved the glass, shattering it. She slapped him, knocking his wire-rimmed glasses to the ground, breaking them. The police came and hauled Frank to the station. Elder Sister jumped up to leave, practically dragging Bing and her baby with her to catch the first bus back to New York.

On the long ride, Elder Sister fumed at Bing. "If you ever see that useless mule penis again, we can't be sisters. It'll be over between us!"

FRANK MADE IT BACK from Florida and began calling on Bing again. When he was with her, he was charming and gentle. He recited couplets by China's great poets, and Shakespeare sonnets. He wrote beautiful love letters and poems to her. There were no signs of the angry man she had seen in Miami. They didn't talk about the ugly incident and never mentioned Elder Sister.

Some of Bing's friends in her Chinatown community knew Frank. As word got around about the fight in Miami, her friends warned her to stay away from him. "He can't control his temper," they said. "Don't get involved with that guy."

Frank kept stopping by. Bing had never had such attention lavished on her, not even from John. Whereas John had been hesitant to marry her, Frank was smitten and eager to wed. John had been cautious about spending money, while Frank wanted to take her places and

*True to her haipai
Shanghai spirit,
Betty (right) was
always fashionable
and perfectly
coiffed, even on a
visit to Chinatown
to see Bing and her
baby in their
tenement flat
in 1951.*



didn't worry about the expense. He was handsome and athletic, with big ideas about China, politics, world peace. Though Frank was older than Bing, he was much younger than John had turned out to be. He made her feel beautiful and wanted. Special. That was something new—and Bing liked it.

Moreover, Bing was a young single mother. What about her son's future in this foreign land? Others warned her about Frank, but would they be around to help her when the insurance money ran out? Frank might not have been perfect, but he was educated. After dating so many waiters in San Francisco, she wasn't sure that she'd find anyone better. Maybing's husband had turned out to be a gambler who squandered his children's food money at the racetrack. Elder Sister was still looking for her next husband. Even if Frank had a bad temper, she had seen his kind and loving side. Surely he would be different with her.

When Frank asked Bing to marry him, he said he'd treat Henry as his own. Bing wanted to say yes, but how would she win over Elder Sister? She knew she had to make her own decisions rather than always following the commands of the two women who had dominated her life. But then the choice was made for her: Bing discovered she was pregnant. They went to a justice of the peace and were married in late 1951, with Bing radiant in a borrowed wedding gown. Frank was overjoyed to marry this beautiful young woman—and to be an expectant first-time father.

BING'S NEW LIFE WAS off to a good start: Frank rented an apartment in a brand-new high-rise, complete with an elevator and basement laundromat, in Irvington, New Jersey. She was finally able to move out of the tenement with the communal toilet down the hall. Elder Sister had found a Chinese businessman to marry; she put aside her differences and invited Bing to the wedding, without Frank. Elder Sister repeated her admonition to Bing: Don't tell anyone, especially not Frank, that you're adopted. Even without the warning, Bing had no intention of telling Frank: She figured that if he knew that they weren't blood sisters, he'd never let her see Elder Sister. Whenever Frank asked her a question about her life in China, Bing gave her stock an-

swer: "The war years are bad memories that I try to forget." Soon he stopped asking.

Just when the couple was settling down after Bing had given birth to a baby girl, she received a notice from the INS ordering her to appear at a deportation hearing. Bing tried not to panic. Her marriage to Frank, coming only eight months after John's death, had drawn considerable disapproval in her close-knit community. Had someone reported her? Frank took Bing to the Chinatown immigration attorney whom John had hired to adjust her immigration status. The lawyer had done nothing. Now the INS was accusing her of overstaying her visitor visa, which had expired two years earlier in November 1949, right after her marriage to John. His American citizenship should have led to her permanent residency, but his death had thrown her into jeopardy. Worse yet, with the Korean War under way, Communist China was America's enemy. Politicians in Washington were raising alarms about the Chinese threat in America. Surveillance, arrests, and deportations in Chinatown continued unabated.

At least Bing didn't have to face the immigration court on Staten Island by herself. Frank was with her at every step, able to navigate the court with his fluent English and knowledge of American ways. He testified that she was his wife and that they had two native-born American children. The immigration officials ruled that the U.S.-citizen children would be harmed if their mother were sent away. Bing's deportation was suspended, and she was granted a green card to stay in the United States as a permanent resident.

But now the INS fixed its spotlight on Frank. He had entered the United States on a diplomatic visa and then stayed under the radar when he left the United Nations. By defending Bing, he had made himself vulnerable. The INS launched an investigation into his status and found that he had not worked at the UN in years. Federal agents went to their apartment, arrested and detained him.

With help from John's life insurance proceeds, Frank posted the required five-hundred-dollar bond and was released from immigration detention in Newark. However, the INS launched a "special inquiry" investigation because Frank had written numerous articles about China and was outspoken in his criticism of Chiang Kai-shek.

After more than two years of hearings and legal limbo with no end in sight, Frank and Bing expected to be deported to Taiwan, a place neither had ever been. The journey would be all the more difficult because they had a third child—and another on the way.

Worn down by the stress of the immigration proceedings and exhausted by so many pregnancies in a short time, Bing became ill and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The cost of his immigration case and expenses for the children had drained Frank's finances, leaving him little money to pay for doctors. Most upsetting of all, health officials were threatening to take her children away. What more could happen? It seemed ages ago that she had left Shanghai convinced that her bad luck as a twice-abandoned girl was changing. Now she had to wonder—if good fortune ever came her way, would she have any strength left to hold on to it?

CHAPTER

27

BENNY

Age 23

NANJING, 1951

IN MAY 1951, THE PINK-TINGED MAGNOLIA BLOSSOMS WERE IN full bloom, and Benny was enjoying his second spring in Nanjing. He had been working at the National YMCA office for more than a year when a telegram from Annie, his elder sister, arrived. Benny braced himself.

The message was brief:

FATHER IS DEAD. GO TO THE PRISON, GET HIS THINGS.

Benny felt as though his heart had stopped momentarily. Then he said a silent prayer for his father. Benny had feared that this day would come. He left immediately for Shanghai, where he learned that his father had been executed at Tilanqiao Prison. That was all he needed or wanted to know. He had to acknowledge that it was a miracle his father had stayed alive for so long. At least I'll never have to go into that shameful place again, he told himself.

Just beyond the immense prison gate, Benny collected his father's worldly goods from the surly guards—some articles of clothing and his wire-rimmed spectacles. There was no body to collect; it had already been disposed of.

Is this all that's left of him? Benny wondered. He choked back his