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DISAPPEARING
MOON 殘月樓

SKY LEE



The Seal Press

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This U.S. edition first published in 1991 by The Seal Press, 3131 Western Avenue Suite 410, Seattle, Washington 98121. Published by agreement with Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, British Columbia.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Lee, Sky.

Disappearing Moon Cafe / by Sky Lee.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-878067-12-5

1. Chinese--Canada--History--Fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.3.L393D57 1991

813'.54--dc20

91-22580

CIP

Printed in Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Seal Press paperback edition, September 1992

Cover design by Alexandra Hass

Cover photograph: Photo transfer onto Kakali handmade paper by Sharyn Yuen; archival photograph courtesy of Ian Lee.

To Mother

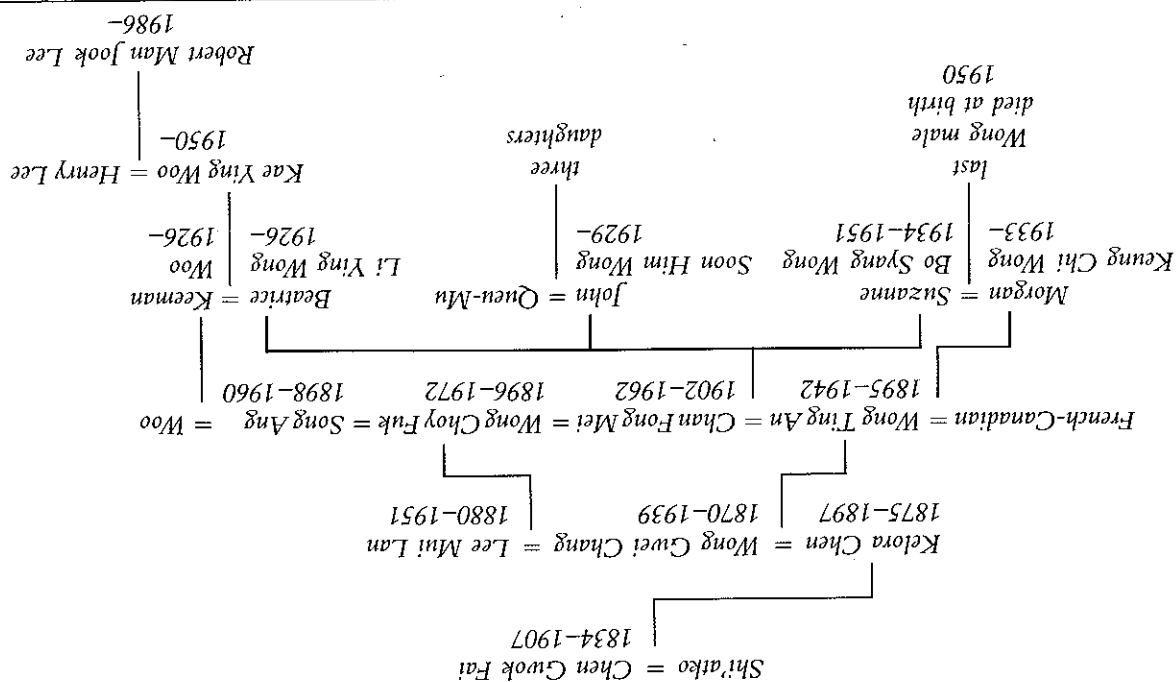
Acknowledgements

I offer my thanks and appreciation to those who have shared in the realization of this dream. They include Saeko Usukawa, Ginger Lee, Philip Wong, Jim Wong-Chu, May Lynn Woo, Lorraine Chan, Jamila Ismail, Viola Thomas, Paul Yee, Frederick Lee, Agnes Mui, Leila Chu, Shirley Chan, Albert Lee, Nathan Wong, Dennis Lee, Cao Xiao and Don Poy.

Special acknowledgements to the old Makara collective, the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop, the people at Cordova House, and John Haugen of the Lytton Indian Band.

Thanks, Jim, for the title.

THE WONG FAMILY



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DISAPPEARING MOON CAFE

殘月樓

PROLOGUE

Search for Bones

W O N G G W E I C H A N G

1892

He remembered that by then he was worn out from fighting the wind. He had to stop and rest in a shaded spot, so he found a smooth, flat stone to sit on, beside a stream that meandered off around a sharp bend. He was bone-tired from all this walking, watching the land dry out and the trees thin out. He wasn't thirsty; he was hungry, the last of his provisions gone days ago. So very hungry, so very tired of quenching his thirst on cold mountain water, sweet as it was.

He wanted to complain out loud, "Why send men out to starve to death?" But the wind snatched the words out of his mouth, and even he couldn't tell if he had spoken them or not. He looked up at the unsettled sky and realized that if a freak storm should happen, he would be finished. He slapped his knees and shook his head. Ill-equipped, ill-informed, he was doomed from the start.

Ha! he thought. A bone-searching expedition! We'll find bones all right, gleaming white, powdery in the hot sun, except they'll be our own. His feet ached relentlessly, throbbing cold from wading through ditches and icy creeks. Already, holes in the thinned soles of his borrowed boots.

"I suppose I should be damned grateful I am still alive to feel the ache!" he cursed out loud. Then there was the loneliness. He didn't

want to think about the loneliness; it was the most dangerous struggle.

He didn't know why he'd been chosen. Perhaps because he was young and big, and had muscular shoulders. Maybe because his hair was thick and smooth, and not just black but blue-black. He had two whorls on the crown of his head—the sign of a nonconformist. He also had very big hands. Most likely the old men had liked his face and its look of kind innocence.

They said, "This youth has a tender face, but he has the look of an old soul."

"An old soul?" he asked when they leaned close, looking for promises.

"Yes," they replied, "you have been reincarnated many times. You have lived many lives fruitfully and have a deeper understanding of many things." They told him that he must believe.

"Believe what?" he demanded.

"In your mission."

"My mission is to search out the bones of those who have died on the iron road, so they can be sent back home . . . by you, the Benevolent Associations."

"No!" the old eyes commanded brilliantly. "It is more than that. To believe is to make it live! You must make your mission live, or else you will not succeed."

Thus, they sent him into a trance. Around him, the mountain barricaded with trees reaching into the eternal mist, and the rain pressed down from the heavens. He felt totally hemmed in. His eyes untrained to see beyond the wall of wilderness, his heart unsuited to this deep, penetrating solitude. Hunger had already made him hallucinate, afraid of the rustling leaves and whistling animals.

So he thought she had to be a spirit when he met her. In this dreamlike state, he thought maybe he had died and she was another spirit here to guide him over to the other side.

"Look, a chinaman!" She crept up behind him and spoke in his language. He whirled around and his knees buckled under, the last of his strength not enough to contain his furious trembling. Meanwhile, she darted back into the safety of the underbrush and hid. He couldn't see her, but he could hear her laughing at him; the

sounds gurgled like an infant's blown back and forth by the wind. The whole landscape winking and flashing at him.

"You mock me, yet you don't dare show yourself to me," he challenged, peering into a shimmering sea of leaves. "Come out now!" he barked with bravado.

"Ah, so he speaks chinese," the voice observed. Finally, a brown face peeped out of the stems and brambles. She was an indian girl, dressed in coarse brown clothing that made her invisible in the forest. Her mouth did not smile, but her eyes were friendly—a deer's soft gaze. He was astonished when she stepped out onto the tall grass.

"You speak chinese," he said, indignant, unwilling to believe what he saw before him.

"My father is a chinaman, like you. His eyes are slits like yours. He speaks like you." She spoke deliberately and demonstrated by pulling back the skin beside her dark, round eyes. He saw that she was wearing a crude cape made of a worn animal skin. A long blanket served as a skirt and covered her bare feet. A small basket hung across her chest and made her look stooped over. Yet she moved gracefully, swaying from side to side, small intense movements like a little brown bird. He stared like a crazy man, because he thought she would disappear if he didn't concentrate on her being.

"But you're a wild injun." He spilled out the insults in front of her, but they were meaningless to her. In chinese, the words mocked, slanglike, "yin-chin."

"You look hungry, chinaman." She tipped her head to one side as she looked him up and down. From her clothing, she drew out coiled strips of some kind of substance and held these out to him.

"My father tells me chinamen are always hungry."

"I am not hungry," he shot back. He could tell she was teasing him, and he was offended that she knew more than he did. She could tell he was hungry, that he had no more power left, that in this wilderness he was lost.

"Ahh, he has no manners," she exclaimed. He could only blink, astonished by this elegant rebuke from a "siwashee," a girl, younger than he. It made him feel uncivilized, uncouth; the very

qualities he had assigned so thoughtlessly to her, he realized, she was watching for in him.

It was then he recognized familiar features on her dark face. A melon-seed face, most admired in a beautiful woman. Her hairline high, inkstrokes by an artist's brush down both sides of her face. Cheeks caressed.

Ah, he thought, why be afraid of her! What was she but another human being? Why should she mean him harm? He stepped up to take whatever it was from her hand, but as he reached out, she sprang back, dropping the strange food behind her like one of those shy creatures who sense no great danger but move prudently out of range just in case. Again, he was surprised to see that she was wary of him. It emphasized the distance between them, as if she was not a human being as he was, or . . . as if he was not a human being as she was.

The food was seaweed, both crunchy and rubbery soft. As he chewed hungrily, she watched him and he watched her. After a while, she hoisted a heavily laden basket of freshly dug-up roots and bulbs up onto her back. She secured it with a wide band across her forehead. Her hand carried a slim stick, one end of which was dirtied, perhaps from digging the roots, and the other end of which was carved, perhaps bone. This she waved at him and called out, "Come and sit!" nonchalantly as if the invitation was for any time, as if in a day or two he would not be dead of exposure. "My father enjoys the company of his own kind. And he will be glad to help you find your way."

"Yes," he answered, his mouth full of gracefulness, "perhaps I should have a word with your father."

Then, as if the barren wasteland around him had magically opened and allowed him admittance, he followed her through dense thickets, up hills and down through ravines, a respectable distance between them. He marvelled at her bare feet, which padded softly along the forest floor without injury. Many times he sank to his knees, soaked in sweat, so tired he could hardly hold up his head. He was fearful that she would abandon him, but she paced her steps according to his strength and smiled encouragingly.

They followed the big river until they finally arrived at her home, which stood high up on the cliff side of a mountain overlooking the water. By then darkness had fallen and the wind was blowing fiercer than ever, the first raindrops of a storm about to descend.

He knew it was on a cliff because he could see the wide expanse of stars beyond the immediate trees, and he could hear rushing water far below them. She ran into the little cabin first, then a man and a woman came out and stood beside the door. They peered excitedly into the night, looking for their visitor.

"Come in!" said the man.

It was so dark, he couldn't see their faces. He just got the idea that they were older by their voices and the placid way they both moved.

"My name is Chen Gwok Fai. Come in and rest, sir! What is your precious surname, sir?"

"Wong," he said, "Wong Gwei Chang."

Chen put his hands on Gwei Chang's shoulders and led him into the tiny cabin. Beside a small fire in the fireplace, Gwei Chang saw the girl kneeling, her hands in front of her, reaching for warmth. He noted the intelligence in her face, ignited by the firelight; hers was a beautiful face full of vision. He didn't remember anything else, because he fell unconscious right on the spot, and he slept for a long, long time. By the time he awakened, he had stayed for three years.

G W E I C H A N G

1939

He was an old man now. And he played with his memories all day long. Or they played with him. He felt he must tell of a most peculiar dream he'd had around that period of his life when he went looking for the bones of dead chinamen strewn along the Canadian Pacific Railway, their ghosts sitting on the ties, some standing

with one foot on the gleaming metal ribbon, waiting, grumbling. They were still waiting as much as half a century after the ribbon-cutting ceremony by the whites at the end of the line, forgotten as chinamen generally are.

In his dream, he was strolling down a street in a wealthy residential area of Victoria. He knew it was a street where rich people lived, because it was lined by fine old trees at neat intervals in front of each sprawling lawn. And he was troubled because he was about to turn down a job as a servant in one of these grand houses in order to go on a dangerous, almost senseless expedition. Not only was it going to be gruelling hard work, but the pay was a bad joke. Of course he knew that the rewards for the performance of such work would come later, but his family in China needed to eat now.

As he walked, he noticed some crested myna birds flitting back and forth, looking for nesting sites in the trees. They had a shrill, rasplike cry, which got on his nerves. In order to make himself feel better, he began to search the ground, hoping to spot a glimmer of gold in the dirt, convinced that the Gold Mountains weren't a myth at all. He got so crazed by this idea that he couldn't stop gawking at the sidewalk; then in a mad rush, he got down on his hands and knees, his hands groping and sifting the ground. He didn't care that he demeaned himself nosing through the dirt like a dog. Worse still, he panicked and started rummaging through the garbage cans. Whenever he glanced back, he noticed that the mynas were following him and were getting bigger, their black plumage and crests more and more distinct. But he was so intent on what he needed to do that he took little heed of them.

Suddenly, a huge shadow fell over him, and he heard the flapping of giant wings directly over his head. Unable to fight off his instincts, he crouched and his hands flew up to ward off attack, but he was too late. A bloodcurdling scream shattered his ears, and a windstorm caught him about the head and beat him to his knees. The rest was a blur, but he did manage a glimpse of the menace; huge wings of a black raven swooping down upon him. When its talons ripped into his flesh, he felt neither pain nor fear, just the sensation of being lifted into a flying dream.

KE LORA CHEN

1892

Gwei Chang remembered being half-unconscious, with Old Man Chen telling him that it was the isolation that tore out a man's good senses. Then Chen told him that he had been delicious for days. "The white men have a name for it. Cabin fever," Chen laughed, "cabin fever, he, he, he!" and made a grand gesture towards his surroundings. He was without a doubt a most peculiar man.

"I got this cabin from a white man," Chen grinned foolishly. "I climbed up here and found a white man dying of a festering gunshot wound, with his head in an indian woman's lap right here," he pointed to the bed Gwei Chang was lying on. "So, as he died, I just stayed and took over where he left off, you see. I took care of his woman like a wife and his cabin like a home. She had a daughter. Kelora—indian name. I taught her to speak chinese. She's old enough to have a husband now," Chen smiled down at Gwei Chang.

Gwei Chang didn't know whether he could believe Chen. Chen told him lots of strange, elusive stories, but who knows which ones were true and which ones were fragments of his own fantasy? As far as Gwei Chang could make out, Chen had worked on the railroad. He also seemed to have participated in the gold rush over thirty years ago. He also might have come because of the tong wars in San Francisco. For sure, life was hard for a chinaman, and Chen would have had to give up something in order to survive.

Nevertheless, he obviously had led a very enchanted life by the time Gwei Chang happened along. Even though Old Man Chen wasn't a very good provider for himself, he survived very well, because Kelora was more than a good provider—she was also a healer and a retriever of lost souls. Her family on her mother's side was very wealthy, old and well-respected, so their people always made sure that little Kelora was given any little extra that they could spare, as well as her father, of course. They called him "Father of Little Kelora."

So, when Kelora went to her aunts and uncles and told them that her father had chosen a young man for her to marry, they must have known it was just a formality. Still, they all found excuses to drop by her home to take a look at the man "whom Kelora's father had chosen for her." Summertime was a busy time of year, but for Kelora's family of the Shi'atko clan in "the village at the mouth of the two rivers," finding a husband for their sister's daughter was important too. Kelora always had been a bit of a worry for them because, although well loved, she had no rank. But, on the other hand, they knew a girl with Kelora's abilities really chose her own husband. Nothing wrong with that! Not everybody was sure about another chinaman, but Kelora seemed to prefer it, and that was enough for them.

Of course, Gwei Chang was quite unaware of all this. At the time, he thought that Kelora's relatives and people normally dropped by often and visited a lot. For instance, the old woman he had seen the first night was not her mother, who had died over seven years ago, but an old aunt who was visiting.

Another time Gwei Chang awoke, he asked for hot water. Kelora brought him a crude swamp tea which cooled him too fast and started him sweating profusely. Her numerous aunts and female cousins stood about, watching without really looking, as if they were trying to get a sense of him. But after a long sleep, waking was difficult and confusing, made even more abstract by a beautiful woman. Turning his back on all of them, he was about to settle into some more sleep when Kelora suggested he go and bathe in the river. Exposing his already weakened body to such inclement elements was a foreign and foolhardy idea, he thought, but there was a challenge in her voice that quickly restored him.

Along the rock face of the cliff was a natural ridge that led down to the riverside. It was not a difficult descent, but the terrain was unfamiliar and Gwei Chang was still wobbly. He felt slow and awkward beside the children and old women who ran ahead of him.

However, he impulsively plunged into the roiling waters, as there was no other way to do it. Energy such as he had never expe-

rienced vaulted through his body, and a cold, raw reward of strength filled every muscle. He flung out his arms and churned through the muddied green water for as long as his lungs could hold out. The river's forces, tortuous with fast-flowing currents, pulled him in all directions at once, but he had no sense of danger and did not struggle.

When he bounced back up to the surface, Kelora was kneeling by the river's edge. She was naked except for her long hair draped wet against her. Naturally, Gwei Chang was curious, so he swam a little closer to the shore. Her old aunts, perched on soapstone boulders around her, seemed to approve of what she was doing; shading their faces against the glare of water and sun, they peered at him as if there was a connection between what she was doing and him. She picked up a small snake and dropped it in front of her. It fell onto the fleshiness of her thighs, twisted itself into the water, and slithered off.

Gwei Chang was shy of Kelora at first, clumsily dodging her stares whenever he could. There was something very untamed about her. Her casual nakedness used to devour him. When she realized this, she toyed with him for her own amusement. The summer got very hot. His first instinct was to run, but always with a backwards glance that grew longer and longer until it made him swell; his fear of her made him wince with love.

Chen's cabin was situated on a very strategic spot. The same ridge which served as a convenient ramp up to his house spooned out into a sizable terrace on which his little log abode stood. It made a cozy sight—his little home and vegetable garden snuggled into the edge of a pine forest that crept in from the windward side of the mountain. And it made a welcome respite for the Indians who travelled up and down this busy avenue of commerce—"grease trail" they called it, naming it after the much sought-after fish oil they ate. When they came by they always left a little token for their stay, because they recognized Kelora and her father to be the keepers of this picnic site. The exchange was fluid though, flowed both ways, depending on the seasons of nature. Often enough Kelora and her father would share their food with a boat-

load of impoverished guests. Either way, it made a good life for them.

One day, Gwei Chang stood on the very edge of the bluff to admire the far-reaching beauty of this tiny spot on earth. The view was breathtaking, like a windy crevice against heaven. It made him dizzy with joy, his toes curled over rock as he pressed his body up against the wind. As the Chinese say, "mountain and water": the delirious heights and bottomless depths flung him out into the clarity of the sky.

"A view like a soaring eagle's." Kelora had followed him, and Gwei Chang could feel her soothing powers reach out for him. He looked at her as she stepped up to the ridge, and she looked at him, and they both smiled down at the world, because they knew then and there that they would fly together.

THE BONES

Gwei Chang remembered that, one evening, after a meal of rice, fresh salmon and unfamiliar mushrooms, Old Chen said, "I've been waiting for someone like you to come along for many years—so many years that I even forgot I was waiting." He always looked at Gwei Chang as though he was going to burst into laughter at any time. He said that he knew of many burial sites and had heard of many people who knew of many more, though the bones must be dust by now.

"But the Benevolent Associations have already sent many on the same mission," Gwei Chang replied.

"Yes, but they have not thought to come up here to ask chinaman Chen, have they?"

"Well, it is a little out of the way!" Gwei Chang felt obliged to say, glancing at Kelora whose eyes looked remote and made him want to follow. Already, he was forgetting that there was a whole other world with its own determined way of life out there, somewhere, and that he was from there.

"What are your plans, boy?" There was no edge to Chen's question, merely a sense of duty that had to be recalled.

Gwei Chang turned to face him squarely. "I'm not sure, Uncle." He shrugged his shoulders. Of course, he thought he was just being modest. He had maps, with sections of the railroad numbered. He pointed out the gravesites, haphazardly described at the end of each section. He'd been told that there would be markers, or cairns, or something. How hard could it be . . .

"Hah! You're a dunce!" Chen's expletive clipped him on the chin. "Come with me! Bring your so-called maps!"

"Now? It's black out there."

"Light, dark, what difference does it make," Chen's voice boomed, "when we've got brothers to send home." Since Kelora didn't even blink an eye, Gwei Chang could only imagine that this kind of gesture was not at all out of the ordinary, so he followed Chen out into the moonlit forest.

After a two-hour trek, mostly along the train tracks made silver now and then by an isolated moonbeam, Chen led Gwei Chang to the first of many leftover work camp gangs. This one, an independent group of gold dredgers, dour and suspicious, was camped out on the edge of a clearing beside a stream. That late at night, there were no words wasted. The only remark was from a watchman, that Old Man Chen had come. Gwei Chang was thrown a rag to sleep under, and he wandered about until he found some rotten barrels that would support a plank of sorts, and a sluice box. That was his bed for several nights.

In the morning, Gwei Chang shared their cold rice while they scrutinized his maps and criticized his information. Then he was given a shovel. They talked while they worked. That's how Gwei Chang found out a few things. He found out that old overseas Chinese never wasted anything—not their time, not their leisure. They worked unceasingly, as if they would fall apart if they ever stopped. They also sat up all night, gossiping and swearing and laughing. They were strange men, maybe because of the shadow of loneliness and isolation that hovered over them. In their midst, Chen seemed less peculiar to Gwei Chang. In fact, Chen

was well liked and a regular visitor. Because Gwei Chang came with Chen, he was immediately a friend. When Chen told them what Gwei Chang was doing, he was taken seriously at once.

News of Gwei Chang and his work went ahead of him. Eventually, he could stroll into any bull gang or small Chinatown, onto any farm or campsite, and they would have been expecting him, ready to share food and whatever else he needed. Over and over again, he watched groups shed their surliness at his approach and spread in front of him all that they had from their pitiful little hovels.

At first, he didn't value their reverence for him. Thinking back, he knew how unthinking he had been then, grabbing opportunities for fun—sitting up all night, gossiping, selfishly filling his pockets with goods and information to make his work easier. He saw the loneliness in the brothers, toiling, poor—left behind to rot because the CPR had reneged on its contract to pay the Chinese railway workers' passage home. But he felt only a little disdain for them. He was fresh off the boat from China. When they hankered for news from their villages, he thought he was doing them a real big favour by telling them stories. He was too young, and he didn't understand.

Not until he touched the bones. When he finally did, he was awed by them. At first, he actually dreaded the macabre work. What were a few dried bones to him, except disgusting? But the spirits in the mountains were strong and persuasive. The bones gathered themselves into the human shapes of young men, each dashing and bold. They followed him about wherever he roamed, whispered to him, until he knew each one to be a hero, with yearnings from the same secret places in his own heart.

How could he not be touched by the spirit of these wilderness uncles who had trekked on an incredible journey and pitted their lives against mountain rocks and human cruelty? In the perfect silence of a hot afternoon, he used to stop here and there to run his hands along the sheer rock face of a mountain, the surface still biting hot from a dynamite blast. He imagined the mountain shuddering, roaring out in pain, demanding human sacrifice for this

profanity. And the real culprits held out blood-splattered chinamen in front of them like a protective talisman.

By then, he understood. By then, in the utter peace of the forests, he had met them all—uncles who had climbed mountain heights then fallen from them, uncles who had drowned in deep surging waters, uncles who had clawed to their deaths in the dirt of caved-in mines. By then, he wasn't afraid and they weren't alien any more. Like them, he would piece himself together again from scattered, shattered bone and then endure.

The next time Gwei Chang walked into a work camp, he was ready to share with them instead of taking from them. He took on their surliness and learned to talk tough and blunt, a chiselled edge to his words to express the backbreaking task of survival that all of them shared day after day. They talked like comrades-in-arms after the battle, still grateful to feel the ache of so many work-worn years, to fill their lungs with mountain mist, to see their shadows walk ahead of them, homesick.

When Kelora took him into the forests of "the hidden place," another world opened up. She had a way of murmuring as they walked. Gwei Chang remembered Chinese women doing the very same.

"We go into the forest," she might say. "It's old. Look at how big the trees are." He watched her as she smiled up at the canopy of wind-swept boughs against a glorious sky. Her braids fell away from her ears, exposing an earlobe that looked inviting, as if it would taste sweet.

"It is hot outside, but in here, it is always cool and wet," she said. When he tore his eyes away from her, he looked up, and wished she could have shot him like an arrow, straight up into the endless blue.

"Look, a yellow cedar tree! If I need to gather cedar, then I have to say a few words to the tree, to thank the tree for giving part of itself up to me. I take only a small part too, but not today. Look, the path is worn and smooth. Many women have come here to

gather what they need. When we walk in the forest, we say 'we walk with our grandmothers.' She wore a cotton shift, faded ging-ham against her deep brown skin. Her baskets, mats and hat hung by a thong behind her left shoulder.

"Look at that swampy place!" Kelora tugged on his arm, and Gwei Chang beamed down on her. "See there! We call those rushes 'the geese eat it' plant. The women say to boil it for medicine when some old men can't urinate." This reduced them to giggles. She gave him a playful push that landed him in a garden of ferns. And he lunged at her, but she took off like a little bird.

Kelora and Gwei Chang wandered high and low in the summers, like deer foraging through new pastures, like children. Summertime gathering was women's work, and Kelora would have to go and gather her berries, dawn until dusk sometimes. And Gwei Chang would have to go and find his bones. Yet they found many ways to flow together, like wind brushing against leaves. Like lake and lakeshore, a slow meandering dance of lovers.

He would help her pound her berries, and she would help him scrape bones and carefully stack them into neat bundles. She wasn't afraid and seemed to understand the rituals that had to be performed around them. More amazing, she had a peculiar intuition for locating gravesites whose markers had long ago deteriorated. More than once, she wandered ahead of him; by the time Gwei Chang caught up, she would be pointing at the site where he was to dig. These occasions made his skin crawl. She laughed at him, tittering behind a cupped hand.

When he asked her how she knew, she said, "Chinaman, first listen to yourself sing! Every soul has its own voice."

Chinamen are a superstitious bunch. Gwei Chang got to wondering what she heard. Before he became a human being himself, he mistook her meaning. Kelora was a strange one, with her own private language—neither Chinese nor Indian, but from deep within the wildness of her soul. Fascinated, he began to press his ear against the ground too. He followed her everywhere, even as she went about her woman's work. She taught him to love the same mother earth and to see her sloping curves in the mountains.

He forgot that he had once thought of them as barriers. He learned how to cling onto her against a raging river, or bury into her away from the pelting rain. Or he could be somewhere, anywhere, cold and bone-tired, but he would stare at the consummate beauty of a bare branch trembling in the breeze. He would watch red buds bloom into freshly peeled blossoms. Clouds tinted pink-gold, slanting over the mirror of an alpine lake; this beautiful mother filled his heart and soul.

Old Chen came at Gwei Chang with two questions at the same time. He asked, "How are you going to transport those bones down to the coast?"

He also asked, "Do you have anything you can give me as a gift? If you don't have anything, then I'll give you something to give back to me."

Gwei Chang played dumb. "Huh?"

"It's the custom," Chen said, "to give a gift when you take a wife. Even nowadays." Kelora's maternal aunt shuffled in and out of the cabin, excitedly shouting at the young boys who had followed her up the bluff, carrying fifty-pound bags of flour in their arms.

"I have a gold watch," Gwei Chang replied without hesitation, "and a Bowie knife I bought off a drunk demon in Spuzzum. Oh yes, those farmers gave me six Hudson's Bay Company blankets in exchange for a few days' work—used but not worn out."

Chen looked relieved. Gwei Chang didn't let on that he had been preparing all along. By then, he was well aware of what caught Kelora's eyes and what didn't.

"Not bad," Chen said, "not bad at all for a boy who was starving, eating 'chinook' wind just a while back! Go with Kelora and give them all to her people. Politely! You and me, of course, we can forego the usual ceremony. They're just to keep the women happy anyway."

The other question was not so easily answered. Gwei Chang knew it would provoke some controversy because he had already

tried it on some elders in the Chinatown at North Bend. He figured Chen must have surely heard about his idea by now. He could well imagine the indignant sputters Chen would have had to face.

"You know what that crazy Wong boy was thinking about? Him and that hothead, Lee Chong. Did they get that stupid idea from you? People have been saying that that crazy old Chen had a hand in it. Who else!"

Gwei Chang had a wonderful idea! Lee Chong thought it was a good idea too. Kelora said it was worth a try. When you're young and stupidly proud, everything is worth a try. Lee Chong was a small, wiry fellow—face like a rat in those days. He had quit his laundry job in a huff, and when Gwei Chang met up with him, he was on his way back to Victoria. Lee Chong came up to Gwei Chang and asked if he would give him a job.

"Yeah," Gwei Chang said, "I need someone to take the bones all the way back down to Victoria." Lee Chong looked enthusiastic, which was a relief to him. It wasn't easy trying to find someone who didn't mind hauling a load of skeletons back down the old Cariboo Road, through hostile territory ridden with whites, and camping out alone with ghosts in the mountains, in the dark.

Gwei Chang asked if Lee Chong had a horse and wagon. "Nope," he said, "don't you?"

Lee Chong and Gwei Chang hit it off right away. It was the height of summer then, and Lee Chong didn't have much trouble finding odd jobs here and there, picking fruit, hand to mouth, so to speak, while he waited around for Gwei Chang to make up his mind. Lee Chong wasn't in any hurry. By then, Gwei Chang had been very successful at his bone-searching expedition and thought much of himself.

The Benevolent Associations hadn't given Gwei Chang any specific instructions on how to get the bones to Victoria. The assumption had been that the first bone searchers would find their own way, with the minimum of expense and manpower. All the monies for their transport had been donated, and there were so many bones left still. This was in 1892, the beginning of the retrieval of bones, which lasted well into the 1930s.

Gwei Chang had travelled up and down the Fraser Canyon and

watched many an indian canoe skimming down the white rapids, the travellers whooping and hollering, their hair plastered straight back behind their heads. He thought it an exhilarating way to travel! Those raging waters mesmerized him. They didn't seem like dangerous obstacles. Then, one day, he saw white men, on axe-hewn rafts, come dancing around the bend, men and boxes securely tied down with a strong network of ropes. That decided him. What could be easier?

"Look," he said to Lee Chong, "I don't have a wagon, but I've got something better, faster. More challenging."

Lee Chong and Gwei Chang started to build their craft. They asked around to find out how. They traded with indians for hand-woven cedar ropes, and the indians told them which trees were the most buoyant; the hardwood for sternposts; tough flexibility for poles and hand-hewn rudders.

The other chinamen fumed, "If you capsize and spill your cracked brains, that's O.K. by us, but if you lose any bones, you're condemning human spirits to ten thousand years of aimless wandering."

Lee Chong and Gwei Chang saw things differently. They told each other, "Old women, every one of them! Got no gall! We just want to give the spirits of those mountain heroes one last thrilling ride." Lee Chong and Gwei Chang figured the spirits would laugh at peril. After all, they had died for adventure and daring. Why should they object now?

When they finished lashing their craft together, Lee Chong and Gwei Chang figured it could fall down hundreds of feet of a waterfall without splintering. They were ready to bet their lives on it, but were the dead ones prepared to risk their souls on another long shot?

Well, in order to avoid the wrong people answering that question, early at dawn the next morning, with cedar boxes full of bones lashed down in the centre of the raft, Lee Chong and Gwei Chang pushed off. Once out of Chen's protective cul-de-sac, the eddies of the big river grabbed the craft and threw them along the most dizzying, joyful ride of their lives.

The sun shone through the fine mist spray which lifted out of

O the river and doused them with fancy. They just let the river take them. Sometimes the river was calm and giving; sometimes it knocked their senses askew. The world encircling them was raw and beautiful. The life that blew into them was inspiring and intoxicating. They careened along, hemmed in by the steep rise of gorges and canyon cliffs. Sometimes the river was fretful, contorting back on itself, treacherous. Other times, the river sprawled and meandered through pastures and rich flatlands; they glided along its shimmering reflections. The pair felt like they had ridden the river dragon, and it had lifted their souls skyward. At the end of their journey, they walked away transformed, feeling a little closer to immortality.

Gwei Chang parted ways with the bones at the bone-house in Victoria and with Lee Chong on Tang People's Street, and began his trek back home to Kelora.

Waiting for Enlightenment

K A E Y I N G W O O
1986

I'm so very disappointed. I've been brought up to believe in kinship, or those with whom we share. I thought that by applying attention to all the important events such as the births and the deaths, the intricate complexities of a family with chinese roots could be massaged into a suant, digestible unit. Like a herbal pill—I thought I could swallow it and my mind would become enlightened.

All my life, I have been faithfully told, and I have also respectfully remembered. My maternal grandmother, for whom the chinese term is Poh Poh, had one son and two daughters. Her son, my uncle, whom I must address as A Queu, married a girl from Jung Saan district, whom I must call A Queu-Mu, to indicate that she is my auntie by marriage. She had three walloping huge baby girls. Poh Poh's eldest daughter, my mother, had me—her only child and a scrawny one at that. Poh Poh's younger daughter, my blood aunt, died of pneumonia as a young woman, when I was still a baby. She didn't ever marry or multiply.

My paternal grandmother, or Ngen Ngen, had three children—only my father survived. Both Ngen Ngen and my paternal grandfather, or Lo Yeh, came from destitute backgrounds, torn from starving families too feeble to stay together—but since they had