

Prologue: Jade

In Hong Kong, everything about me seems wrong, so I obsess over jade bracelets. I eye them in the windows of fancy jewelry stores. Entranced by the marbled greens, milky whites, and translucent lavenders as much as by jade's alleged magical properties, I imagine how a jade bangle will slip over my wrist and slide against my arm — a small but visible link to this foreign world where I feel so out of place. If jade can also bring me luck, healing, and harmony, all the better.

We're spending two weeks in Fred's childhood home on the small island of Cheung Chau. Since we arrived, my dependence on Fred for translations, directions, and instructions for everything from table manners to shared bathroom protocol has catapulted me back to my shy and surly teens. In our Hawaii life, I'm an articulate, accomplished PhD student, still thrilled by my mid-life reinvention. In America, in English, I'm in charge of my life. In the midst of Fred's family, I'm a beginner, a bumbler, an untrained extra in a crowd scene.

Fred has heard tales about people getting scammed with fake or dyed jade, so he wants to consult with his mother, the shopping expert. There are eight of us packed into the tiny dining room for lunch when he asks her where to go. His parents and two pairs of aunts and uncles start talking at once. Under the loud cross-currents, Fred translates while plopping steamed bok choy and

chunks of chicken on top of my rice. He says they're amused I want something so old-fashioned. "Taitai jewelry," he says, using the Cantonese term for wives to imply rich women who spend their days shopping and playing mahjong. More American eccentricity for them to talk about, I think.

As the discussion swirls around me, I sink from feeling invisible to wanting to disappear, mortified to have my shopping under scrutiny. If I could crawl under the table, I would. Why couldn't he have asked her privately? And why does everyone here feel entitled to give advice? I left home at eighteen to escape my family telling me what to do. Fred, on the other hand, seems unconcerned about all the interference.

I'd imagined sitting side by side in Luk Fook or Chow Tai Fook, elegant jewelry stores in the city. Instead, the family decides that we should go to a local jade shop because the Laus know and trust the Cheng family that owns the shop. Fred's mother and Second Aunt will accompany us to make sure they sell us the real thing at the best price. I smile while resolving to humor them. After the past few days, I should know that activities within the Lau family take on a momentum of their own. So far this has not been the trip I imagined, nor have I been the kind of enlightened and adaptable traveler I presumed myself to be. Not even close.

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The next afternoon, the four of us descend steep staircases and walkways to a narrow, shop-lined backstreet that tourists from Hong Kong Island seldom visit. The two old women, married to brothers and living together for half a century, could easily be mistaken for sisters with their tightly permed, dyed-black hair, mismatched polyester clothing, and unfashionable umbrellas

that doubled as walking sticks and shields from the sun. Fred's mother, a head shorter, holds the elbow of Second Aunt as they stroll along the narrow street, greeting neighbors at every turn. I've never considered walking like that with my sister, mother, or daughter. I imagine them jerking away in surprise if I reached for a hand or arm.

Fred and I follow behind, holding hands. Beside him, I'm a sojourner, not a tourist. As usual, I notice that our steps match, as if we're running a three-legged race in slow motion. Such a welcome change after two tall husbands to be with a man close to my own size, our conversations always on the same level. I squeeze the hand of this foreign man who wants to protect me, who makes me laugh out loud, who has welcomed me into his world. Now I'm the foreigner.

We walk through the streets of Hong Kong, past stalls of fruit, stacks of twists, egg tarts, and wife cakes filled with melon paste (the first gift Fred gave me when we met in Hawaii), the sundries shop with plastic baskets and toys hanging from the ceiling, and the rag shop where a tortoiseshell cat sleeps atop piles of discarded clothing. Laundry and fish hang on overhead balconies beside large, flat baskets of shrimp. The aromas of baking bread and drying fish are undercut with occasional whiffs of sewage.

I wonder aloud if the laundry ends up smelling like fish, or if anyone would notice if it did. "Don't make fun of my island," Fred says, only half joking. He's proud of his humble origins in "the country" outside metropolitan Hong Kong, but prickly about it too. I make a mental note that what's funny in Hawaii is serious stuff here. There we revel in our differences — his fearlessness to my watchfulness, my counterculture America to his Asian cosmopolitan, his frugality to my spending, his rice to

my potatoes — but here, on his home turf, I sense cracks beneath our usual play.

Unlike the gold shops in the city, with their velvet-backed window displays of orangey, 24-karat gold and jade carved into fantastic flora and fauna, the Cheung Chau jade shop is a cubicle in one of the white-tile buildings that line the street. Out front is a display table on wheels topped with jadeite zodiac animals and charms. Through the window, I glimpse a pegboard on the right-hand wall displaying gold necklaces and earrings. Farther back is a glass-topped display case with trays of rings and bracelets arranged on black velvet. I try not to show my disappointment at the dowdy surroundings and skimpy selection.

Mr. and Mrs. Cheng, a middle-aged couple, are eating a late lunch behind the counter. They set aside bowls of noodles and stand when we enter. “Neih ho! Neih ho!” they say.

As Fred’s mother and Second Aunt strike up a conversation with the shopkeepers, Fred explains, “Mom and Second Aunt are saying that they know the grandfather who owns the shop and they’ve known the Cheng family for a long time. They’re saying they know this shop will give us real jade and a good price.” Their exchange is teasing and friendly. I imagine it as a flirty and loud version of the infamous “we know where you live” threat from gangster movies.

Mrs. Cheng points me to a red plastic stool in front of the counter. When I sit down, she reaches into the back of the case and pulls out a tray of jade bracelets that she sets in front of me.

While I look half-heartedly through the tray, Fred’s mother and Second Aunt exclaim over ornate multi-tiered gold necklaces hanging on the wall; yet from what I’ve seen, neither of them dresses up much, even to go into the city. For a dinner out they

might add a scarf or a string of pearls, but the gold on display includes the kind of showy necklaces given to brides-to-be by their wealthy mothers-in-law in pre-nuptial rituals. Mr. Cheng takes the necklaces down one by one, and the women try them on in front of the countertop mirrors, turning this way and that to admire the shimmer and flash of gold against their printed polyester blouses.

When I raise an eyebrow, Fred says, "It's part of the process. They're pretending they might come back to buy something else if we get a good deal."

"Like a reverse bait and switch?" I ask in a whisper, but Fred's standard volume indicates that no one but us understands English.

"Something like that," he says, listening more to them than me. I'm pretty sure he has no idea what this means. Even after two decades in the United States, he's sometimes baffled by American idioms although he's a master of Cantonese proverbs, swearing, and slang.

I point to a circlet the color of seafoam mixed with cream. "Can I see this one?" Mrs. Cheng lifts it out of the tray and hands it to me. I hold it in my palm, admiring the smooth coolness of the stone, the play of light in its delicate veins. "Pretty," I say to Fred, "but it looks like it was made for a child."

I set it down, so she pulls a few more bracelets out of the tray, some wider than others, some cylindrical and others flat on the inside, all in different shades of green — fern, mint, emerald, seaweed — some translucent and others more opaque, some veined and some clear.

We are the only customers, and Fred perches on a blue stool next to mine. Over our heads, Fred's mother and Second Aunt banter and laugh with Mr. Cheng, who occasionally consults with his wife. My plan to look and leave appears less and less possible.

I whisper to Fred, "What about the price? How are we supposed to know how much they cost?" There are no price tags on any of the bracelets.

"Don't worry about it," he answers. "They'll agree on a price, and we'll figure it out later."

"You mean pay her back?" Uneasy, I imagine a replay of the discussion at lunch, only this time about how much we spent.

He talks to his mother and then tells me, "She wants to buy it for you as a gift." Embarrassed by her generosity and annoyed that my romantic fantasy has been co-opted, I suck in my breath and decide to choose a skinny band in hopes it will be less expensive than the wider ones I prefer. I don't want to be labeled the extravagant girlfriend on top of the eccentric American.

The conversation swirls above and around me, making me feel like a small child. I fidget as I wait for translation. Mrs. Cheng lifts my left hand in hers and kneads it, gently pressing my fingers and thumb together while talking to Fred. I assume she's trying to determine my size. He says, "She's saying your hands are soft like a little girl's. Some women's hands aren't so soft." I beam at her, flattered that my nearly fifty-year-old hands have garnered such a compliment.

Mrs. Cheng waves her hand over the tray, and Fred says, "She's asking which one you like." Feeling pressured, I look again through the tray. "I like this color and width," I say, pointing to the first one, "but it's way too small." He translates, and Mrs. Cheng smiles and nods while placing the same bracelet over the tips of my fingers, where it comes only to my second set of knuckles. She removes it and leans down to rummage under the counter, where I guess she must have additional stock.

She emerges with a plastic squeeze bottle and beckons her husband to where I'm sitting. She hands him the bracelet and

squirts a cool gel onto my hand. Fred is facing away, talking to his mother. I elbow him and hiss, "Translate! What's she doing?"

"Dish soap," he says, reading the Chinese label. Mrs. Cheng positions my elbow on the counter with my hand in the air, then presses my fingers into the shape of a budding tulip. Her husband leans over and, with a single downward thrust that makes me yelp, rams the tiny bracelet from my fingertips to my wrist, where it fits perfectly, and, as it slowly dawns on me, permanently.

Everyone admires the shiny bracelet on my wrist while Fred and I exchange a wide-eyed look. Holding my hand high, Mrs. Cheng motions for me to stand and leads me into a back room. She washes my hand and wrist at a wall sink, pats me dry with a paper towel, and massages oil from a small bottle into the ball of my thumb. I recognize the peppermint and camphor scent of White Flower Oil, what Fred and I always refer to as old-people smell.

She speaks to Fred as we re-enter the front of the shop. He explains, "She's saying the oil helps with bruising. Last week one woman's whole hand turned black." Cradling my tender hand, I watch as Fred's mother pays for the bracelet and thanks the couple, extending greetings to the Cheng family.

Mr. Cheng gives Fred's mother a bonus gift, which she passes to me — a tiny jade monkey on a red string. "Lucky," she says, patting my shoulder.

"Doh jie sai," I say, careful to use the more grateful form of thank you for the gifts and not *m goi*, which is for expected and small courtesies. I haven't yet learned that what I consider courtesies can also mark me as an outsider.

"She wants to protect you," Fred says. "Jade is supposed to keep you safe from harm."

Toying with the bracelet, I remember the Chinese finger cuffs my siblings and I played with as kids, the kind where we stuck

our fingers into each end of a brightly woven raffia tube that entrapped us when we tried to escape.

“Mom says the color will change as you wear it,” Fred says. “The jade gets greener the longer it stays in contact with your skin.”

“It will look plenty green tomorrow when my hand turns black,” I respond.

As we walk home behind his mother and aunt, I gingerly test the bracelet. It locks firmly at the base of my throbbing hand. Knowing it won't come off makes me feel manacled. We've both shed wedding rings in the recent past, and this is way bigger than a ring.

“Did you know it would be permanent?” I ask.

“I had no idea! Hey, at least you're protected!” he adds with a lopsided grin. I can't stop turning the bracelet on my wrist. “I feel like I'm married to your mother!”

“What's wrong with that?” he asks.