

Jing-Mei / Ensemble #2 Old Asian

CANNING. Very poetic names. One means "Spring Rain," the other "Spring Flower."

Start

JING-MEI. So what does Ma's name mean?

CANNING. "Suyuan." The way she writes it, it mean "Long-Cherished Wish." But there is another way to write it. The first part look the same — but the last part changes the meaning to "Long-Held Grudge."

JING-MEI. What about my name? What does Jing-Mei mean?

CANNING. First part means "best quality." *Jing* is good stuff left-over when you take impurities out of gold, or rice, or salt. What is left is *jing* — pure essence. And *Mei*, this is common *mei*, as in *meimei*. "Younger sister."

JING-MEI. Younger sister. All these years, and I never even knew what it meant. Dad? Why did Ma leave her babies behind?

CANNING. Jing-Mei. Why do you want to know this now?

JING-MEI. Because I need to know. My sisters will need to know. Please, Dad? (*A beat.*)

CANNING. Very well. Your mother had sewn money and jewelry into her dress. She wanted to trade for a ride, but it was no good. Too many people, all running, all begging for rides. Your mother became sick. At last she could no longer walk. She lay on the road and knew she would soon die. But she couldn't bear to die in front of her babies. And so she stumbled away, to die alone ... praying her babies would be spared her fate. When she awoke, she was in the back of a truck, being taken care of by an American missionary. But it was too late. And when she finally arrived in Chungking, she found out her husband had died two weeks before. In the meanwhile, a peasant woman found the babies. She and her husband were good people, and took care of them like their own.

JING-MEI. But why didn't she try to locate Ma?

CANNING. She did. Years later, she went to the address your mother wrote down. But of course the house had long since burned to the ground. Your mother and I, her new husband, had already gone back to that same place in 1945, hoping to find news of her daughters, before returning to America. But of course there was none.

JING-MEI. 1945. That was years before I was born ...

~~CANNING. Your mother never stopped searching for them. When letters could be openly exchanged between China and the United States, she wrote to everyone. Relatives. Friends. Old~~

Make as

Canning
Woo

End

YOUNG JING-MEI / Ensemble #2

thing you wanted. You could open a restaurant. You could become rich. You could even become a child prodigy. So every night, my mother and I would sit at the kitchen table, surrounded by the magazines she'd been allowed to take from the houses she cleaned. She'd search for the stories about remarkable children ... then she'd try, again and again, to find some hidden vein of genius in me. I had to multiply numbers in my head ... find the queen of hearts in a deck of cards ... predict the daily temperature in New York and London. Then one day, she had her greatest inspiration of all. SUYUAN. Is all arrange. I talk with Mr. Chong upstairs. He give you weekly lesson, let you play on his piano every day, two hour. JING-MEI. What?

Older
Asian
Male
as
Old Man
Chong

SUYUAN. I do houseclean for him. We trade.

JING-MEI. But I can't play the piano!

* Start out to audience

~~SUYUAN. So you learn.~~

JING-MEI. Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano! *(Suyuan slaps her.)*

~~SUYUAN. Who ask you be genius? Only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you be genius? Huh! What for! Who ask you!~~ *(Lights up on Old Man Chong, seated at a piano. He is in a reverie, noisily humming and conducting to himself. Jing-Mei approaches him.)*

JING-MEI. Mr. Chong? I'm here for my lesson. Mr. Chong? *(He doesn't hear her. She attempts to sneak away, but he spots her.)*

OLD MAN CHONG. My new student, yes? Come in, come in! Sit! I teach you all I know about piano. With hard work ... you too can be fine musician. Like Rubinstein, yes? Now! What is your name?

JING-MEI. June Woo. *(He can't hear.)* JUNE WOO!

OLD MAN CHONG. Like Beethoven — both listening only in our head! Now! Key! Treble! Bass! No sharps, no flats! So this is C major! Listen and play like me! *(He sits at the piano and plays the C scale.)* You see? Now you try! *(Jing-Mei plays the C scale once — then starts banging the keys dissonantly.)* Very good! Now we learn ... to keep time! *(She continues banging the keys.)* One-two-three, two-two-three! Good! Good! *(Lights out.)*

end

JING-MEI. *(To audience.)* With a teacher like Old Man Chong, I never had to practice, or even correct my mistakes. Somehow, I picked up the basics. But I was so determined not to try, I never gave myself the chance to be good — not even when I had to play in the local talent show. *(Music starts. Lindo and Tin sit next to the Woos, Hsus, and St. Clairs. Old Man Chong leans against a wall, watching.)*