

# Suyuan / Jing-Mei

Maybe I'm being paranoid, being a mother and all, but you just can't be too careful. *(People around the table glance at Jing-Mei, who, self-conscious, stops eating.)* You should go see my guy, Mr. Rory. He does fabulous work — although he probably charges more than you're used to.

JING-MEI. Maybe I could afford Mr. Rory if someone's firm paid me on time.

WAVERLY. Excuse me?

JING-MEI. It's pretty ironic that a big accounting firm can't even pay its own bills on time.

CANNING. Hey, hey, you girls. No fighting.

WAVERLY. That's right. We don't want to talk about this right now.

JING-MEI. Well, every time I call you on the phone, you can't talk about it then, either. *(An awkward silence.)*

WAVERLY. Listen. June. I don't know how to tell you this. But that stuff you wrote — well, it's unacceptable.

JING-MEI. What? *(Waverly shrugs.)* You said it was great.

WAVERLY. I didn't want to hurt your feelings. And I thought maybe we could fix it. But it's not quite ...

JING-MEI. Most copy needs fine-tuning. It's normal not to be perfect the first time, I should have ...

WAVERLY. June, I really don't think ...

JING-MEI. Re-writes are free. Believe me, I want it to be perfect as much as you do ...

WAVERLY. Look. I'm trying to convince them to pay you for at least *some* of your time. I owe you that much, at least ...

JING-MEI. Just tell me what you want changed. I'll call you and we can go over it, line by line. Okay?

WAVERLY. June — I can't. It's just not ... sophisticated. I mean, really. *(Imitating a television announcer.)* "Three benefits, three needs, three reasons to buy ... for today's and tomorrow's tax needs ... " *(Everyone laughs.)* See? See what I mean? *(Jing-Mei stands suddenly and begins clearing the table. The laughter dies.)*

JING-MEI. Excuse me. *(Jing-Mei carries the dishes into the kitchen.*

*Suyuan follows.)* Good dinner, Ma. *(Suyuan shrugs. Jing-Mei indicates a plate.)* What happened to your crab? Why're you throwing it away?

SUYUAN. That crab die. Even a beggar don't want it.

JING-MEI. How could you tell?

SUYUAN. Can tell even before cook! I shake that crab. His legs — all droopy. His mouth — wide open, like a dead person. I only

Start

Suyuan/  
Jing Mei  
Linda

cook because I thought ... maybe he only just die. Maybe not too bad. See? Only you pick. Nobody else take it. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different.

JING-MEI. ... Ma, why don't you ever use those new dishes I bought you? If you didn't like them, you should have told me. I could've changed the pattern.

SUYUAN. Of course I like. Sometime something is so good, I want to save it. Then I forget I save. *(A pause. Suyuan suddenly unhooks a pendant and chain from her neck and takes Jing-Mei's hand, pressing the necklace into her palm.)*

JING-MEI. What's this?

SUYUAN. For you. Is yours.

JING-MEI. No, Ma. I can't take this.

SUYUAN. Take, take. For a long time, I wanted to give you. See, I wore it on my skin — so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. This is your life's importance. *(Jing-Mei hesitates; then puts the necklace on.)* Not so good, this jade. Young jade, very light color. But if you wear it every day — it will become more green.

JING-MEI. Thanks, Ma. *(Suyuan exits. To audience:)* That was the last time I saw her. And today, I find myself thinking about my life's importance. Like my mother said, I've been wearing it every day — just as she did before me. And I wonder what it means, this little piece of jade. *(A pounding at the door.)*

End

~~YING-YING. *(From offstage.)* Jing-Mei! Jing-Mei! *(Jing-Mei answers the door and lets in the three aunts, much agitated.)* See, I tell you! She is here!~~

~~LINDO. Why you no answer phone? Day and night, we call, we call, phone ring and ring ... no answer!~~

~~AN-MEI. I say, call police! Your Auntie Lin say, Bad idea! Auntie Ying say, try again! Everything all confused!~~

~~LINDO. So we come ourselves! *(Ying is opening curtains.)*~~

~~JING-MEI. I'm sorry about the phone. I know I missed the Joy Luck Club last week. It's just that I haven't been really ...~~

~~LINDO. Is no matter. We have something else to tell you!~~

~~YING-YING. Something important.~~

~~AN-MEI. Should I tell? *(To Lindo.)* Or maybe you tell. Ying, you want to tell? *(Lindo swats at her.)*~~

~~LINDO. ... it's from your mother!~~

~~JING-MEI. My mother?~~

~~YING-YING. She die with an important thought on her mind!~~

# 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 Fin sit next to the Woos, Hsus, and St. Clairs. Old Man Chong leans against a wall, watching.)*

# 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~~

Ma as

Canning  
Woo

End