

## *WHERE THE GODS FLY*

**by Jean Kwok**

I kneel here before the gods and the thought of what I am about to do stings my eyes like incense.

I can already hear the protest from Pearl's ballet teachers—"you can't do this, she is an extraordinary talent." The gods give with one hand and take with the other, I think, and then, ashamed, immediately touch my forehead to the ground before the triple Buddha's. The gods must forgive my lack of insight. But how could those teachers understand that we had originally allowed Pearl to dance only because we had no place else to put her? Her father and I spent our waking hours at the factory in Chinatown. Pearl was too young, or so I argued, to breathe in that clogged air, thick with fabric dust that clung to our skin like a veil, turning even our sweat the color of the garments we worked on. And somehow the consequences of that initial instinct to protect her have branched out through the years, sprouting and twisting, to arrive at this moment.

I suppose I spoiled her but she is my only girl. And she seemed so tiny when we first came to America, bundled into her red sweater and sent off to second grade alone. "Teacher doesn't like me, Mama," she would say, "teacher likes the boy with hair so white he looks like an egg. Why does teacher like egg-boy better than me?" There were never papers from school for me to see as there had been in China, where she'd brought me tests and homework filled with 100's. "Where are they?" I asked her here and the answer was always, "We didn't get any today" or "I lost them." One day, I found the pile stacked under her underwear, sheet after sheet slashed with red X's. "I didn't know we had to circle the green things," she said, pointing to one page. "Teacher took it from me and marked it all wrong before I understood what she said." This was my Pearl who had already learned to multiply and could read a Chinese newspaper.

In the beginning, we tried to leave her alone at home after school. I had no one in this country, relative or neighbor, to look after her and we could not spare a moment from the work at the factory. It's only for a few hours, I told myself, and she knows not to play with the stove and such, but I could not stand coming home to see her little face in the window of the dark apartment. "I count the headlights passing until you come home," she said. "Today there were twenty-

eight. And when you don't come fast, I beat on Fat Boy until you come." Fat Boy was the stuffed dog her father had given her, one of the few toys we'd brought for her from China.

On the third day we left her alone, I found her huddled on the dusty stairs outside the apartment and when, clutching her to me, I scolded her for leaving the safety of our home, she said, "I thought I saw a face in the bathroom wallpaper and maybe it was a ghost like in the story you told me." After that, I brought her to the factory with us.

Ah, Amitabha, Buddha of great compassion, I whisper, help her to understand that all I have done, I have done because it was the only choice I had.

There were other children at the factory, of course, faces shining from the heat of the steam presses, heads already bowed by necessity and want. These were children who would grow up to wait tables in an uncle's restaurant, perhaps, or to be a fish monger, sanding scales off carp day after day. When I looked upon Pearl at the factory, idly playing with a few spools the seamstresses had laid aside, it was as if I saw her entire life pulled taut before her like thread—her thin fingers worn callused and red by years of sewing in the factory, then, if she was lucky, marriage to some office clerk, a pack of children, and finally, Pearl the woman submerged under the struggle to feed and clothe them all. I constantly entertained hopes of Pearl's escape from the factory—if only we could afford a tutor for her, I thought, or a babysitter.

Even when she slowly, awkwardly, began to make friends and her classmates would occasionally ask her to play at their houses, we couldn't allow her to go. I understood nothing of these people who did not bow to our gods and ate with sharp knives at the table. Furthermore, we would have to invite them to visit in return; how could I serve tea with coconut slivers and sugared lotus roots in our stained apartment? "Our home is beautiful, Mama," Pearl would say, "look at the dances the sun does in the window" but she was too little to care about the floor strewn with the mattresses we slept on, the scraps we'd brought home from the factory to cover the worn table. I had to shake out Pearl's clothes each morning to make sure no roaches had crawled in during the night. She was terrified of insects and they tormented her, antennaed heads peeking from cracks in the wall. I think the roaches were the only piece of our poverty she understood.

So it seemed a blessing when a ballet school came to give a special lesson for her third grade class and plucked Pearl out to be one of their scholarship

students. Now she would have a place to go after school, at least for a few afternoons a week. I had known my child was no beauty: skinny legs sticking out from under her hand-sewn dresses and eyes too big for her face, so no one was more surprised than I when they told me they saw a great gift for ballet in her.

"But Pearl has never danced a step in her life," I protested and they said (so Pearl translated for me), "At this age, it does not matter. She's flexible and quick, her proportions are perfect and so are her feet." Later, I had puzzled over Pearl's feet. They looked as they always had, small and arched, the little toes wiggling in unison as if they were attached to each other.

When Pearl asked me in her child's vanity, "Am I pretty, Mama?" I would hesitate, and then answer, "Well, you have nice eyebrows," because I didn't want to be unkind to the girl. They are the only fine thing in her face, her eyebrows, dark and winged as a swallow against the sky. Now, a mother must not praise her child too much anyway lest the gods grow jealous but I have to say that I never could see the classical beauty these ballet people speak of so generously. The women from my family have always been small, plump, and fair, like wedding pastries powdered with flour, but even now, Pearl's cheekbones protrude, her nose is narrow and straight with no meat on it, her skin is tanned like a field worker's, and her arms and legs are as long and thin as a young man's. She is dear to me because I am her mother, but to another Chinese, she is homely indeed.

When we first came to the United States, Pearl had seemed so conspicuous in her foreignness: her shock of black hair and tawny skin in a classroom of pale freckled children. Even in China, she'd been an intense, quiet child, but here, she seemed to edge ever further inward. Gone were the rare, glad moments of laughter, Pearl twinkling up the stairs with quick light steps, suddenly erupting into a handful of cartwheels across the floor ("You'll fall on your head and your head will sink into your stomach like a turtle," I'd scold.)

And I, I was able to give her so little of myself, with the factory all day and the sewing I brought home at night, the demands constantly upon me—for rice, for clean trousers, for a pair of ears to listen. Why it should be that those who demand are the ones who receive, I do not know, but so it was with us. Even though Pearl would tug at my skirt beside every hot dog cart we passed in the street, never daring to ask but yearning with her eyes, I could count on the

fingers of my left hand the number of times I actually bought one for her. Pearl as a child loved all kinds of food: marinated chicken claws, ginger fish, sweet dumplings, pizza. There was no money then to waste on such frivolities but how many times since have I wished that I'd managed to squeeze out a little more for my daughter. Now, when I try to urge a bit more food upon her, it's always "No, thank you, Ma."

Perhaps it was after she began to dance that she developed that luminous quality people praise. Even I have seen it, but only when she is performing, when she seems as cloaked by her dazzling grace as she is by her solitude off the stage.

After Pearl began to take classes at the ballet school as one of their honored scholarship students, she became suddenly popular. Mothers who had only glanced at me to look over my simple clothes were now eager to smile as they passed us. People began to tell me what a lovely child Pearl was and how beautiful a woman she would grow up to be. But how could I trust people such as this? Perhaps they place the tall hat of flattery on your head while they're actually laughing when you turn your face away. This is wisdom my mother passed onto me and this is what I said to Pearl when she, blushing, would translate their words.

Although I didn't have to pay a dime for her dance classes, it was a great expense to pay so much for a pair of leather ballet shoes and the one set of leotard and tights, which Pearl washed every night in the yellowed bathroom sink. When her father objected, I reminded him Pearl's teacher in the regular school had told us that dancing would help her get into university later on. Now, I myself do not understand how that could be, but who am I to argue with the teacher?

In private, though, I took Pearl aside and said, "Dancing is not something you can keep, like food, or a house, or a university diploma. A few minutes, an hour, and it is gone. If you had an education, you wouldn't have to be dependent on your husband." But she did not listen. When I was a girl in China, I was not permitted to go to classes. Much of the learning I possess, I picked up through lingering at the table, pretending to dust or sweep, as my brothers studied. My mother, a progressive woman, knew what I was doing and not only allowed me this but would leave their books where I could find them when no one else was home. I suppose I left Pearl too much alone in those early years. She had nothing to

hold onto, nothing that was hers, and so she never learned the value of such things.

As the years passed, she began to take classes every day, rushing breathless to the factory to help us out for an hour or two afterwards, her heavy dance bag biting into her narrow shoulder. It was as if the ballet school had swallowed her into its muscled belly; she seemed to belong to a world so foreign to the factory by then that I no longer even minded her presence there.

The glory of her dancing passed into her life at school. At first, I was pleased because she did better in her classes and she seemed to smile more. But slowly, instead of quietly studying or reading, she started to spend her free time on the phone. Suddenly popular, she was invited to movies, get-togethers, holiday dinners. I agreed with her father, of course, that she could not be allowed to go out with her friends as befitted a proper Chinese girl. Once, after we again denied permission for some longed-for dance or party, I heard her sobbing through the sound of running water in the bathroom. The bathroom was the only place she could be alone and she stayed in it for hours. She used to keep everyone at a certain distance; soon, it was only her family she kept away—she embraced the American world now that it embraced her.

When I heard her talking and laughing on the telephone with her American friends, jabbering in English much faster than she could speak Chinese by then, a part of me wanted to run over and wrench the phone from her hands. She could have been giggling over anything—boys, drinking—how could I know? It was just babble to me, her own mother, who used to hold Pearl in my lap and tell her of the fiery Dragon Kings who ruled the seas, the heavenly kingdom turned upside down by a monkey born from a stone egg. After reading her the story of a boy whose father was eaten by a tiger, I'd looked up to find her small face wet with tears. And for years it had been little Pearl who had gone everywhere with me to act as my ears and tongue; she'd told me the prices of cabbage and fruit, spoken for me at the bank, shown me where to buy women's undergarments.

I tell you the truth now, that I wanted to learn English, wanted to learn it for my daughter more than for anything else, because how could I truly be a mother to my daughter when everything she said was a mystery to me? But English was too hard for me, and for her father too.

I should perhaps have stopped Pearl from dancing sooner but I had so little else to give her. Anyway, her father began to sicken when she was almost fourteen, and I had enough else on my mind.

The female monks behind me have started to beat on the prayer drums. I stand up and move to the back of the room, where a line has already started to form for walking meditation or "walking the winds of fate," as we call it. It is not easy to maintain your balance when the winds of fate blow upon your back; when they are strong, if you are not as strong as they, they can topple you over and roll you into the earth. But if you have the strength to withstand their blows, they can propel you to where the gods fly. Pearl once told me that in the West, there is an old story of three sisters who spin and cut the thread of life.

"Chinese," I replied, "must be stronger than that; we have the responsibility of choosing our own fate because we pick which winds to walk with, or to fight against."

"But aren't some winds too strong to resist?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, "but it is not for us to decide which those are. To be human is to choose until we can choose no more."

As I circle the room led by the drumming of the monks, I begin to pray to the spirit of her father. *Ah Sun, why did you leave us so fast? We still have need of you: especially now, your daughter, whom you would call "Little Rabbit" because she was so quick to fetch your things. Do you still remember that in your land of shadows? Help us turn these winds of fate around.*

The evil winds had begun to foment around the time Pearl was in eighth grade, when she auditioned for that other ballet school, the legendary one. The greatest ballerinas trained there, she said, and their professional dance company was one of the best in the world.

I worried that her old dance school might think she was disloyal for trying to get admitted into another but she had only shrugged. "If I do get in, they'll be thrilled. And the number of students they get will double." "Do so many Americans want to be ballet dancers?" I asked then and Pearl had laughed. If she could go to a better ballet school, I thought, well, why not?

I remember that audition clearly: waiting in the packed room for hours before it was Pearl's turn, the parents and children eyeing each other to see who was better trained, more talented, more beautiful. Pearl had never looked more vulnerable to me, with her ribs poking through the thin material of the leotard, the number pinned to her chest like the sheet of magic paper the gods paste on a mountain to contain the demons within. She seemed totally unaware of anyone but the three judges, looking neither to the left nor the right, as though she were under a spell.

Before any of the twelve girls were allowed to dance a step, one judge, the tall woman with the red hair, went down the line and picked up each girl's leg and raised it as high as it would go. In front, to the side, in back—and as she did this, she felt the hip joint with her long thin hands, while the other two took notes and spoke to each other in Russian. When she came to Pearl, I was afraid for my girl, although I cared nothing for this ballet school. But Pearl's leg went higher than anyone else's, her small arched foot almost reaching her eyebrows— I've seen it fly higher since, but she was only fourteen at the time.

Immediately after this, although the girls hadn't moved an inch from the bar, five of them were asked to leave the room. The judges were already finished with them. As I moved aside to let those girls pass through the doorway, I thought to myself, these judges are people with no compassion; it has been carved out and replaced with discipline, muscle, and bone.

I'd always been too busy with work to spare time for most of Pearl's recitals and when I did go, there'd been the constant struggle to keep myself awake through my exhaustion. It was at that audition that I truly paid attention to Pearl's dancing for the first time. I saw her standing in the corner waiting for her turn to do the combination and I suddenly wanted to gather her in my arms and flee the room, flee these people. We don't belong here, I wanted to say, what do we simple Chinese know of these inhuman people with their impassive faces and elegant shoulders?

But then Pearl stepped onto the floor and I no longer recognized my daughter. Every glance, every limb, the arch of her hand, curve of leg, was suspended in beauty and a terrible poignancy. She flew, she turned and leapt like water in motion, weightless and infinitely powerful. She had been made of stone and now was freed. I felt suddenly dizzy —was this then, what had been happening while I cooked rice, folded the sheets, worked the sewing

machine? When had this change, this great gift, come upon my daughter? The room was hushed after Pearl's turn. Then the red-haired woman gave a little smile.

Pearl was offered a full scholarship. Her old ballet school was as happy as she had predicted. When I urged her to translate my apologies to the principal for our ingratitude in leaving it, he protested, "No, no, it is a great honour for us. No one in the history of our school has ever been offered such a thing."

In the years she danced for that school, I was busy trying to keep her father with us, feeding him boiled fish intestines and octopus limbs for nourishment, crushed salted bumblebees for his constant cough.

In China, people died of evil spirits, curses, and old age; here, they call it cancer. Does it matter? Truth has as many visages as the god with infinite faces who can see in every direction. But in the end, the faces are all one: we lost her father.

The monks are ringing the gong. As I gather my things to go, I pause for a moment by the window where the setting sun dances upon the glass.

Everything has been blown by the winds of fate; here I am in America, my husband has just died, and my daughter is pursuing something too ephemeral to grasp. I have let the winds take us where they will for too long; now, I act upon my choice. Please, great Buddha's, allow my daughter to understand some day why I take her greatest love away; I know this will be the blow that finally severs the already tenuous bonds between us. I will go to Pearl now. She is not yet seventeen—time enough to follow another path, to look upon another face of the god. It is my fault that it has all come to this; I have been a foolish, doting mother.

She can go to the local school, perhaps she could study accounting or dentistry. Then she will have something substantial to cling to when I am no longer here to look after her. There is no one else now. She said to me once, "Ma, it all passes anyway," but it is only human to try to keep, to hold and to love.

She is gifted and she is stunning on stage, I know, but these things are not for such as us. We who have lost everything—our country, our family, our culture—cannot afford to be exceptional. To have enough to live by, to eat, that is

enough. And someday, if she proves to be strong enough, let her then stand before the wind like incense that threads through the air: turning, swirling, searching for the place where the gods fly.

END