

Workshop 1

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Workshop 1 Readings

“What Means Switch”

Gish Jen

THERE WE ARE, NICE CHINESE FAMILY—FATHER, MOTHER, TWO born-here girls. Where should we live next? My parents slide the question back and forth like a cup of ginseng neither one wants to drink. Until finally it comes to them, what they really want is a milkshake (chocolate) and to go with it a house in Scarsdale. What else? The broker tries to hint: the neighborhood, she says. Moneyed. Many delis. Meaning rich and Jewish. But someone has sent my parents a list of the top ten schools nation-wide (based on the opinion of selected educators and others) and so *many-deli* or not we nestle into a Dutch colonial on the Bronx River Parkway. The road's windy where we are, very charming; drivers miss their turns, plow up our flower beds, then want to use our telephone. “Of course,” my mom tells them, like it's no big deal, we can replant. We're the type to adjust. You know—the lady drivers weep, my mom gets out the Kleenex for them. We're a bit down the hill from the private plane set, in other words. Only in our dreams do our jacket zippers jam, what with all the lift tickets we have stapled to them, Killington on top of Sugarbush on top of Stowe, and we don't even know where the Virgin Islands are—although certain of us do know that virgins are like priests and nuns, which there were a lot more of in Yonkers, where we just moved from, than there are here.

This is my first understanding of class. In our old neighborhood everybody knew everything about virgins and non-virgins, not to say the technicalities of staying in between. Or almost everybody, I should say; in Yonkers I was the laugh-along type. Here I'm an expert.

“You mean the man . . . ?” Pig-tailed Barbara Gugelstein spits a mouthful of Coke back into her can. “That is *so* gross!”

Pretty soon I'm getting popular for a new girl. The only problem is Danielle Meyers, who wears blue mascara and has gone steady with two boys. “How do *you* know,” she starts to ask, proceeding to edify us all with how she French-kissed one boyfriend and just regular kissed another. (“Because, you know, he had braces.”) We hear about his rubber bands, how once one popped right into her mouth. I begin to realize I need to find somebody to kiss too. But how?

Luckily, I just about then happen to tell Barbara Gugelstein I know karate. I don't know why I tell her this. My sister Callie's the liar in the family; ask anybody. I'm the one who doesn't see why we should have to hold our heads up. But for some reason

I tell Barbara Gugelstein I can make my hands like steel by thinking hard. “I'm not supposed to tell anyone,” I say.

The way she backs away, blinking, I could be the burning bush.

“I can't do bricks,” I say—a bit of expectation management. “But I can do your arm if you want.” I set my hand in chop position.

“Uhh, it's okay,” she says. “I know you can, I saw it on TV last night.”

That's when I recall that I too saw it on TV last night—in fact, at her house. I rush on to tell her I know how to get pregnant with tea.

“With *tea*?”

“That's how they do it in China.”

She agrees that China is an ancient and great civilization that ought to be known for more than spaghetti and gunpowder. I tell her I know Chinese. “*Be-yeh fa-foon*,” I say. “*Shee-veh. Ji nu*.” Meaning, “Stop acting crazy. Rice gruel. Soy sauce.” She's impressed. At lunch the next day, Danielle Meyers and Amy Weinstein and Barbara's crush, Andy Kaplan, are all impressed too. Scarsdale is a liberal town, not like Yonkers, where the Whitman Road Gang used to throw crabapple mash at my sister Callie and me and tell us it would make our eyes stick shut. Here we're like permanent exchange students. In another ten years, there'll be so many Orientals we'll turn into Asians; a Japanese grocery will buy out that one deli too many. But for now, the mid-sixties, what with civil rights on TV, we're not so much accepted as embraced. Especially by the Jewish part of town—which, it turns out, is not all of town at all. That's just an idea people have, Callie says, and lots of them could take us or leave us same as the Christians, who are nice too; I shouldn't generalize. So let me not generalize except to say that pretty soon I've been to so many bar and bas mitzvahs, I can almost say myself whether the kid chants like an angel or like a train conductor, maybe they could use him on the commuter line. At seder I know to forget the bricks, get a good pile of that mortar. Also I know what is schmaltz. I know that I am a goy. This is not why people like me, though. People like me because I do not need to use deodorant, as I demonstrate in the locker

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room before and after gym. Also, I can explain to them, for example, what is tofu (*der-voo*, we say at home). Their mothers invite me to taste-test their Chinese cooking.

"Very authentic." I try to be reassuring. After all, they're nice people, I like them. "De-lish." I have seconds. On the question of what we eat, though, I have to admit, "Well, no, it's different than that." I have thirds. "What my mom makes is home style, it's not in the cookbooks."

Not in the cookbooks! Everyone's jealous. Meanwhile, the big deal at home is when we have turkey pot pie. My sister Callie's the one introduced them—Mrs. Wilder's, they come in this green-and-brown box—and when we have them, we both get suddenly interested in helping out in the kitchen. You know, we stand in front of the oven and help them bake. Twenty-five minutes. She and I have a deal, though, to keep it secret from school, as everybody else thinks they're gross. We think they're a big improvement over authentic Chinese home cooking. Ox-tail soup—now that's gross. Stir-fried beef with tomatoes. One day I say, "You know Ma, I have never seen a stir-fried tomato in any Chinese restaurant we have ever been in, ever."

"In China," she says, real lofty, "we consider tomatoes are a delicacy."

"Ma," I say. "Tomatoes are *Italian*."

"No respect for elders." She wags her finger at me, but I can tell it's just to try and shame me into believing her. "I'm tell you, tomatoes *invented* in China."

"Ma."

"Is true. Like noodles. Invented in China."

"That's not what they said in *school*."

"In *China*," my mother counters, "we also eat tomatoes uncooked, like apple. And in summertime we slice them, and put some sugar on top."

"Are you sure?"

My mom says of course she's sure, and in the end I give in, even though she once told me that China was such a long time ago, a lot of things she can hardly remember. She said sometimes she has trouble remembering her characters, that sometimes she'll be writing a letter, just writing along, and all of a sudden she won't be sure if she should put four dots or three.

"So what do you do then?"

"Oh, I just make a little sloppy."

"You mean you *fudge*?"

She laughed then, but another time, when she was showing me how to write my name, and I said, just kidding, "Are you sure that's the right number of dots now?" she was hurt.

"I mean, of course you know," I said. "I mean, *oy*."

Meanwhile, what *I* know is that in the eighth grade, what people want to hear does not include how Chinese people eat sliced tomatoes with sugar on top. For a gross fact, it just isn't gross enough. On the other hand, the fact that somewhere in China somebody eats or has eaten or once ate living monkey brains—now that's conversation.

"They have these special tables," I say, "kind of like a giant collar. With a hole in the middle, for the monkey's neck. They put the monkey in the collar, and then they cut off the top of its head."

"Whadda they use for cutting?"

I think. "Scalpels."

"Scalpels?" says Andy Kaplan.

"Kaplan, don't be dense," Barbara Gugelstein says. "The Chinese *invented* scalpels."

Once a friend said to me, You know, everybody is valued for something. She explained how some people resented being valued for their looks; others resented being valued for their money. Wasn't it still better to be beautiful and rich than ugly and poor, though? You should be just glad, she said, that you have something people value. It's like having a special talent, like being good at ice-skating, or opera-singing. She said, You could probably make a career out of it.

Here's the irony: I am.

Anyway. I am ad-libbing my way through eighth grade, as I've described. Until one bloomy spring day, I come in late to homeroom, and to my chagrin discover there's a new kid in class.

Chinese.

So what should I do, pretend to have to go to the girls' room,

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like Barbara Gugelstein the day Andy Kaplan took his ID back? I sit down; I am so cool I remind myself of Paul Newman. First thing I realize, though, is that no one looking at me is thinking of Paul Newman. The notes fly:

"I think he's cute."

"Who?" I write back. (I am still at an age, understand, when I believe a person can be saved by aplomb.)

"I don't think he talks English too good. Writes it either."

"Who?"

"They might have to put him behind a grade, so don't worry."

"He has a crush on you already, you could tell as soon as you walked in, he turned kind of orangeish."

I hope I'm not turning orangeish as I deal with my mail; I could use a secretary. The second round starts:

"What do you mean who? Don't be weird. Didn't you *see* him??? Straight back over your right shoulder!!!!"

I have to look; what else can I do? I think of certain tips I learned in Girl Scouts about poise. I cross my ankles. I hold a pen in my hand. I sit up as though I have a crown on my head. I swivel my head slowly, repeating to myself, *I could be Miss America.*

"Miss Mona Chang."

Horror raises its hoary head.

"Notes, please."

Mrs. Mandeville's policy is to read all notes aloud.

I try to consider what Miss America would do, and see myself, back straight, knees together, crying. Some inspiration. Cool Hand Luke, on the other hand, would, quick, eat the evidence. And why not? I should yawn as I stand up, and boom, the notes are gone. All that's left is to explain that it's an old Chinese reflex.

I shuffle up to the front of the room.

"One minute please," Mrs. Mandeville says.

I wait, noticing how large and plastic her mouth is. She unfolds a piece of paper.

And I, Miss Mona Chang, who got almost straight A's her whole life except in math and conduct, am about to start crying in front of everyone.

★ ★ ★

I am delivered out of hot Egypt by the bell. General pandemonium. Mrs. Mandeville still has her hand clamped on my shoulder, though. And the next thing I know, I'm holding the new boy's schedule. He's standing next to me like a big blank piece of paper. "This is Sherman," Mrs. Mandeville says.

"Hello," I say.

"*Non how a*," I say.

I'm glad Barbara Gugelstein isn't there to see my Chinese in action.

"*Ji nu*," I say. "*Shee veh*."

Later I find out that his mother asked if there were any other Orientals in our grade. She had him put in my class on purpose. For now, though, he looks at me as though I'm much stranger than anything else he's seen so far. Is this because he understands I'm saying "soy sauce rice gruel" to him or because he doesn't?

"Sher-man," he says finally.

I look at his schedule card. Sherman Matsumoto. What kind of name is that for a nice Chinese boy?

(Later on, people ask me how I can tell Chinese from Japanese. I shrug. You just kind of know, I say. *Oy!*)

Sherman's got the sort of looks I think of as pretty-boy. Monsignor-black hair (not monk brown like mine), bouncy. Crayola eyebrows, one with a round bald spot in the middle of it, like a golf hole. I don't know how anybody can think of him as orangeish; his skin looks white to me, with pink triangles hanging down the front of his cheeks like flags. Kind of delicate-looking, but the only truly uncool thing about him is that his spiral notebook has a picture of a kitty cat on it. A big white fluffy one, with a blue ribbon above each perky little ear. I get much opportunity to view this, as all the poor kid understands about life in junior high school is that he should follow me everywhere. It's embarrassing. On the other hand, he's obviously even more miserable than I am, so I try not to say anything. Give him a chance to adjust. We communicate by sign

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language, and by drawing pictures, which he's better at than I am; he puts in every last detail, even if it takes forever. I try to be patient.

A week of this. Finally I enlighten him. "You should get a new notebook."

His cheeks turn a shade of pink you mostly only see in hyacinths.

"Notebook." I point to his. I show him mine, which is psychedelic, with big purple and yellow stick-on flowers. I try to explain he should have one like this, only without the flowers. He nods enigmatically, and the next day brings me a notebook just like his, except that this cat sports pink bows instead of blue.

"Pret-ty," he says. "You."

He speaks English! I'm dumbfounded. Has he spoken it all this time? I consider: Pretty. You. What does that mean? Plus actually, he's said *plit-ty*, much as my parents would; I'm assuming he means pretty, but maybe he means pity. Pity. You.

"Jeez," I say finally.

"You are wel-come," he says.

I decorate the back of the notebook with stick-on flowers, and hold it so that these show when I walk through the halls. In class I mostly keep my book open. After all, the kid's so new; I think I really ought to have a heart. And for a livelong day nobody notices.

Then Barbara Gugelstein sidles up. "Matching notebooks, huh?"

I'm speechless.

"First comes love, then comes marriage, and then come chappies in a baby carriage."

"Barbara!"

"Get it?" she says. "Chinese Japs."

"Bar-bra," I say to get even.

"Just make sure he doesn't give you any *tea*" she says.

Are Sherman and I in love? Three days later, I hazard that we are. My thinking proceeds this way: I think he's cute, and I think he thinks I'm cute. On the other hand, we don't kiss and we don't exactly have fantastic conversations. Our talks *are* getting better, though. We started out, "This is a book."

"Book." "This is a chair." "Chair." Advancing to, "What is this?" "This is a book." Now, for fun, he tests me.

"What is this?" he says.

"This is a book," I say, as if I'm the one who has to learn how to talk.

He claps. "Good!"

Meanwhile, people ask me all about him. I could be his press agent.

"No, he doesn't eat raw fish."

"No, his father wasn't a kamikaze pilot."

"No, he can't do karate."

"Are you sure?" somebody asks.

Indeed he doesn't know karate, but judo he does. I am hurt I'm not the one to find this out; the guys know from gym class. They line up to be flipped, he flips them all onto the floor, and after that he doesn't eat lunch at the girls' table with me anymore. I'm more or less glad. Meaning, when he was there, I never knew what to say. Now that he's gone, though, I seem to be stuck at the "This is a chair" level of conversation. Ancient Chinese eating habits have lost their cachet; all I get are more and more questions about me and Sherman. "I dunno," I'm saying all the time. *Are we going out?* We do stuff, it's true. For example, I take him to the department stores, explain to him who shops in Alexander's, who shops in Saks. I tell him my family's the type that shops in Alexander's. He says he's sorry. In Saks he gets lost; either that, or else I'm the lost one. (It's true I find him calmly waiting at the front door, hands behind his back, like a guard.) I take him to the candy store. I take him to the bagel store. Sherman is crazy about bagels. I explain to him that Lender's is gross, he should get his bagels from the bagel store. He says thank you.

"Are you going steady?" people want to know.

How can we go steady when he doesn't have an ID bracelet? On the other hand, he brings me more presents than I think any girl's ever gotten before. Oranges. Flowers. A little bag of bagels. But what do they mean? Do they mean thank you, I enjoyed our trip; do they mean I like you; do they mean I

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decided I liked the Lender's better even if they are gross, you can have these? Sometimes I think he's acting on his mother's instructions. Also I know at least a couple of the presents were supposed to go to our teachers. He told me that once and turned red. I figured it still might mean something that he didn't throw them out.

More and more now, we joke. Like, instead of "I'm thinking," he always says, "I'm sinking," which we both think is so funny, that all either one of us has to do is pretend to be drowning and the other one cracks up. And he tells me things—for example, that there are electric lights everywhere in Tokyo now.

"You mean you didn't have them before?"

"Everywhere now!" He's amazed too. "Since Olympics!"

"Olympics?"

"1960," he says proudly, and as proof, hums for me the Olympic theme song. "You know?"

"Sure," I say, and hum with him happily. We could be a picture on a UNICEF poster. The only problem is that I don't really understand what the Olympics have to do with the modernization of Japan, any more than I get this other story he tells me, about that hole in his left eyebrow, which is from some time his father accidentally hit him with a lit cigarette. When Sherman was a baby. His father was drunk, having been out carousing; his mother was very mad but didn't say anything, just cleaned the whole house. Then his father was so ashamed he bowed to ask her forgiveness.

"Your mother cleaned the house?"

Sherman nods solemnly.

"And your father *bowed*?" I find this more astounding than anything I ever thought to make up. "That is so weird," I tell him.

"Weird," he agrees. "This I no forget, forever. *Father bow to mother!*"

We shake our heads.

As for the things he asks me, they're not topics I ever discussed before. Do I like it here? Of course I like it here, I was born here, I say. Am I Jewish? Jewish! I laugh. *Oy!* Am I American? "Sure I'm American," I say. "Everybody who's

born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American." But he says no, he could never. "Sure you could," I say. "You only have to learn some rules and speeches."

"But I Japanese," he says.

"You could become American anyway," I say. "Like I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all."

"But you Catholic," he says.

I think maybe he doesn't get what means switch.

I introduce him to Mrs. Wilder's turkey pot pies. "Gross?" he asks. I say they are, but we like them anyway. "Don't tell anybody." He promises. We bake them, eat them. While we're eating, he's drawing me pictures.

"This American," he says, and he draws something that looks like John Wayne. "This Jewish," he says, and draws something that looks like the Wicked Witch of the West, only male.

"I don't think so," I say.

He's undeterred. "This Japanese," he says, and draws a fair rendition of himself. "This Chinese," he says, and draws what looks to be another fair rendition of himself.

"How can you tell them apart?"

"This way," he says, and he puts the picture of the Chinese so that it is looking at the pictures of the American and the Jew. The Japanese faces the wall. Then he draws another picture, of a Japanese flag, so that the Japanese has that to contemplate. "Chinese lost in department store," he says. "Japanese know how go." For fun, he then takes the Japanese flag and fastens it to the refrigerator door with magnets. "In school, in ceremony, we this way," he explains, and bows to the picture.

When my mother comes in, her face is so red that with the white wall behind her she looks a bit like the Japanese flag herself. Yet I get the feeling I better not say so. First she doesn't move. Then she snatches the flag off the refrigerator, so fast the magnets go flying. Two of them land on the stove. She crumples up the paper. She hisses at Sherman, "*This is the U.S. of A., do you hear me!*"

Sherman hears her.

"You call your mother right now, tell her come pick you up."

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He understands perfectly. I, on the other hand, am stymied. How can two people who don't really speak English understand each other better than I can understand them? "But Ma," I say.

"Don't Ma me," she says.

Later on she explains that World War II was in China, too. "Hitler," I say. "Nazis. Volkswagens." I know the Japanese were on the wrong side, because they bombed Pearl Harbor. My mother explains about before that. The Napkin Massacre. "Nan-king," she corrects me.

"Are you sure?" I say. "In school, they said the war was about putting the Jews in ovens."

"Also about ovens."

"About both?"

"Both."

"That's not what they said in school."

"Just forget about school."

Forget about school? "I thought we moved here for the schools."

"We moved here," she says, "for your education."

Sometimes I have no idea what she's talking about.

"I like Sherman," I say after a while.

"He's nice boy," she agrees.

Meaning what? I would ask, except that my dad's just come home, which means it's time to start talking about whether we should build a brick wall across the front of the lawn. Recently a car made it almost into our living room, which was so scary, the driver fainted and an ambulance had to come. "We should have discussion," my dad said after that. And so for about a week, every night we do.

"Are you just friends, or more than just friends?" Barbara Gugelstein is giving me the cross-ex.

"Maybe," I say.

"Come on," she says, "I told you *everything* about me and Andy."

I actually *am* trying to tell Barbara everything about Sherman, but everything turns out to be nothing. Meaning, I can't locate the conversation in what I have to say. Sherman and I go places,

we talk, one time my mother threw him out of the house because of World War II.

"I think we're just friends," I say.

"You think or you're sure?"

Now that I do less of the talking at lunch, I notice more what other people talk about—cheerleading, who likes who, this place in White Plains to get earrings. On none of these topics am I an expert. Of course, I'm still friends with Barbara Gugelstein, but I notice Danielle Meyers has spun away to other groups.

Barbara's analysis goes this way: To be popular, you have to have big boobs, a note from your mother that lets you use her Lord & Taylor credit card, and a boyfriend. On the other hand, what's so wrong with being unpopular? "We'll get them in the end," she says. It's what her dad tells her. "Like they'll turn out too dumb to do their own investing, and then they'll get killed in fees and then they'll have to move to towns where the schools stink. And my dad should know," she winds up. "He's a broker."

"I guess," I say.

But the next thing I know, I have a true crush on Sherman Matsumoto. Mister Judo, the guys call him now, with real respect; and the more they call him that, the more I don't care that he carries a notebook with a cat on it.

I sigh. "Sherman."

"I thought you were just friends," says Barbara Gugelstein.

"We were," I say mysteriously. This, I've noticed, is how Danielle Meyers talks; everything's secret, she only lets out so much, it's like she didn't grow up with everybody telling her she had to share.

And here's the funny thing: The more I intimate that Sherman and I are more than just friends, the more it seems we actually are. It's the old imagination giving reality a nudge. When I start to blush; he starts to blush; we reach a point where we can hardly talk at all.

"Well, there's first base with tongue, and first base without," I tell Barbara Gugelstein.

In fact, Sherman and I have brushed shoulders, which was equivalent to first base I was sure, maybe even second. I felt as though I'd turned into one huge shoulder; that's all I was, one

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huge shoulder. We not only didn't talk, we didn't breathe. But how can I tell Barbara Gugelstein that? So instead I say, "Well there's second base and second base."

Danielle Meyers is my friend again. She says, "I know exactly what you mean," just to make Barbara Gugelstein feel bad.

"Like *what* do I mean?" I say.

Danielle Meyers can't answer.

"You know what I think?" I tell Barbara the next day. "I think Danielle's giving us a line."

Barbara pulls thoughtfully on one of her pigtails.

If Sherman Matsumoto is never going to give me an ID to wear, he should at least get up the nerve to hold my hand. I don't think he sees this. I think of the story he told me about his parents, and in a synaptic firestorm realize we don't see the same things at all.

So one day, when we happen to brush shoulders again, I don't move away. He doesn't move away either. There we are. Like a pair of bleachers, pushed together but not quite matched up. After a while, I have to breathe, I can't help it. I breathe in such a way that our elbows start to touch too. We are in a crowd, waiting for a bus. I crane my neck to look at the sign that says where the bus is going; now our wrists are touching. Then it happens: He links his pinky around mine.

Is that holding hands? Later, in bed, I wonder all night. One finger, and not even the biggest one.

Sherman is leaving in a month. Already! I think, well, I suppose he will leave and we'll never even kiss. I guess that's all right. Just when I've resigned myself to it, though, we hold hands all five fingers. Once when we are at the bagel shop, then again in my parents' kitchen. Then, when we are at the playground, he kisses the back of my hand.

He does it again not too long after that, in White Plains.

I invest in a bottle of mouthwash.

Instead of moving on, though, he kisses the back of my hand again. And again. I try raising my hand, hoping he'll make the

jump from my hand to my cheek. It's like trying to wheedle an inchworm out the window. You know, *This way, this way.*

All over the world, people have their own cultures. That's what we learned in social studies.

If we never kiss, I'm not going to take it personally.

It is the end of the school year. We've had parties. We've turned in our textbooks. Hooray! Outside the asphalt already steams if you spit on it. Sherman isn't leaving for another couple of days, though, and he comes to visit every morning, staying until the afternoon, when Callie comes home from her big-deal job as a bank teller. We drink Kool-Aid in the backyard and hold hands until they are sweaty and make smacking noises coming apart. He tells me how busy his parents are, getting ready for the move. His mother, particularly, is very tired. Mostly we are mournful.

The very last day we hold hands and do not let go. Our palms fill up with water like a blister. We do not care. We talk more than usual. How much airmail is to Japan, that kind of thing. Then suddenly he asks, will I marry him?

I'm only thirteen.

But when old? Sixteen?

If you come back to get me.

I come. Or you can come to Japan, be Japanese.

How can I be Japanese?

Like you become American. Switch.

He kisses me on the cheek, again and again and again.

His mother calls to say she's coming to get him. I cry. I tell him how I've saved every present he's ever given me—the ruler, the pencils, the bags from the bagels, all the flower petals. I even have the orange peels from the oranges.

All?

I put them in a jar.

I'd show him, except that we're not allowed to go upstairs to my room. Anyway, something about the orange peels seems to choke him up too. *Mister Judo*, but I've gotten him in a soft spot. We are going together to the bathroom to get some toilet paper to wipe our eyes when poor tired Mrs. Matsumoto, driving a shiny new station wagon, skids up onto our lawn.

"Very sorry!"

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We race outside.

"Very sorry!"

Mrs. Matsumoto is so short that about all we can see of her is a green cotton sun hat, with a big brim. It's tied on. The brim is trembling.

I hope my mom's not going to start yelling about World War II.

"Is all right, no trouble," she says, materializing on the steps behind me and Sherman. She's propped the screen door wide open; when I turn I see she's waving. "No trouble, no trouble!"

"No trouble, no trouble!" I echo, twirling a few times with relief.

Mrs. Matsumoto keeps apologizing; my mom keeps insisting she shouldn't feel bad, it was only some grass and a small tree. Crossing the lawn, she insists Mrs. Matsumoto get out of the car, even though it means trampling some lilies-of-the-valley. She insists that Mrs. Matsumoto come in for a cup of tea. Then she will not talk about anything unless Mrs. Matsumoto sits down, and unless she lets my mom prepare her a small snack. The coming in and the tea and the sitting down are settled pretty quickly, but they negotiate ferociously over the small snack, which Mrs. Matsumoto will not eat unless she can call Mr. Matsumoto. She makes the mistake of linking Mr. Matsumoto with a reparation of some sort, which my mom will not hear of.

"Please!"

"No no no no."

Back and forth it goes: "No no no no." "No no no no." "No no no no." What kind of conversation is that? I look at Sherman, who shrugs. Finally Mr. Matsumoto calls on his own, wondering where his wife is. He comes over in a taxi. He's a heavy-browed businessman, friendly but brisk—not at all a type you could imagine bowing to a lady with a taste for tie-on sun hats. My mom invites him in as if it's an idea she just this moment thought of. And would he maybe have some tea and a small snack?

Sherman and I sneak back outside for another farewell, by the side of the house, behind the forsythia bushes. We hold hands. He kisses me on the cheek again, and then—just when I

think he's finally going to kiss me on the lips—he kisses me on the neck.

Is this first base?

He does it more. Up and down, up and down. First it tickles, and then it doesn't. He has his eyes closed. I close my eyes too. He's hugging me. Up and down. Then down.

He's at my collarbone.

Still at my collarbone. Now his hand's on my ribs. So much for first base. More ribs. The idea of second base would probably make me nervous if he weren't on his way back to Japan and if I really thought we were going to get there. As it is, though, I'm not in much danger of wrecking my life on the shoals of passion; his unmoving hand feels more like a growth than a boyfriend. He has his whole face pressed to my neck skin so I can't tell his mouth from his nose. I think he may be licking me.

From indoors, a burst of adult laughter. My eyelids flutter. I start to try and wiggle such that his hand will maybe budge upward.

Do I mean for my top blouse button to come accidentally undone?

He clenches his jaw, and when he opens his eyes, they're fixed on that button like it's a gnat that's been bothering him for far too long. He mutters in Japanese. If later in life he were to describe this as a pivotal moment in his youth, I would not be surprised. Holding the material as far from my body as possible, he buttons the button. Somehow we've landed up too close to the bushes.

What to tell Barbara Gugelstein? She says, "Tell me what were his last words. He must have said something last."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Maybe he said, Good-bye?" she suggests. "Sayonara?" She means well.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Aw, come on, I told you everything about—"

I say. "Because it's private, excuse me."

She stops, squints at me as though at a far-off face she's trying

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

to make out. Then she nods and very lightly places her hand on my forearm.

The forsythia seemed to be stabbing us in the eyes. Sherman said, more or less, *You will need to study how to switch.*

And I said, *I think you should switch. The way you do everything is weird.*

And he said, *You just want to tell everything to your friends. You just want to have boyfriend to become popular.*

Then he flipped me. Two swift moves, and I went sprawling through the air, a flailing confusion of soft human parts such as had no idea where the ground was.

It is the fall, and I am in high school, and still he hasn't written, so finally I write him.

I still have all your gifts, I write. I don't talk so much as I used to. Although I am not exactly a mouse either. I don't care about being popular anymore. I swear. Are you happy to be back in Japan? I know I ruined everything. I was just trying to be entertaining. I miss you with all my heart, and hope I didn't ruin everything.

He writes back, *You will never be Japanese.*

I throw all the orange peels out that day. Some of them, it turns out, were moldy anyway. I tell my mother I want to move to Chinatown.

"Chinatown!" she says.

I don't know why I suggested it.

"What's the matter?" she says. "Still boy-crazy? That Sherman?"

"No."

"Too much homework?"

I don't answer.

"Forget about school."

Later she tells me if I don't like school, I don't have to go every day. Some days I can stay home.

"Stay home?" In Yonkers, Callie and I used to stay home all the time, but that was because the schools there were *waste of time*.

"No good for a girl be too smart anyway."

★ ★ ★

For a long time I think about Sherman. But after a while I don't think about him so much as I just keep seeing myself flipped onto the ground, lying there shocked as the Matsumotos get ready to leave. My head has hit a rock; my brain aches as though it's been shoved to some new place in my skull. Otherwise I am okay. I see the forsythia, all those whippy branches, and can't believe how many leaves there are on a bush—every one green and perky and durably itself. And past them, real sky. I try to remember about why the sky's blue, even though this one's gone the kind of indescribable gray you associate with the insides of old shoes. I smell grass. Probably I have grass stains all over my back. I hear my mother calling through the back door, "Mon-a! Everyone leaving now," and "Not coming to say good-bye?" I hear Mr. and Mrs. Matsumoto bowing as they leave—or at least I hear the embarrassment in my mother's voice as they bow. I hear their car start. I hear Mrs. Matsumoto directing Mr. Matsumoto how to back off the lawn so as not to rip any more of it up. I feel the back of my head for blood—just a little. I hear their chug-chug grow fainter and fainter, until it has faded into the whuzz-whuzz of all the other cars. I hear my mom singing, "*Mon-a! Mon-a!*" until my dad comes home. Doors open and shut. I see myself standing up, brushing myself off so I'll have less explaining to do if she comes out to look for me. Grass stains—just like I thought. I see myself walking around the house, going over to have a look at our churned-up yard. It looks pretty sad, two big brown tracks, right through the irises and the lilies of the valley, and that was a new dogwood we'd just planted. Lying there like that. I hear myself thinking about my father, having to go dig it up all over again. Adjusting. I think how we probably ought to put up that brick wall. And sure enough, when I go inside, no one's thinking about me, or that little bit of blood at the back of my head, or the grass stains. That's what they're talking about—that wall. Again. My mom doesn't think it'll do any good, but my dad thinks we should give it a try. Should we or shouldn't we? How high? How thick? What will the neighbors say? I plop myself down on a hard chair.

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And all I can think is, we are the complete only family that has to worry about this. If I could, I'd switch everything to be different. But since I can't, I might as well sit here at the table for a while, discussing what I know how to discuss. I nod and listen to the rest.

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Family Ties

Exposing the Lighter Side of the Vietnamese American Experience

by Khoi T. Luu

At home this Christmas, I was seated across from my grandmother, eating one of her famous bowls of phở.¹

Like all chefs and all grandmothers (or both), she likes to see the glow in my face, to hear the sighs of my delight while I eat. We sat there talking about everything from my studies in college, to Boston weather, to my love life — a young man and his grandmother, decades apart but chatting and laughing like old friends from the same village. I remember noticing the smile lines around her eyes and mouth, like gentle wrinkles on silk. And that's when it struck me: my grandmother — a seventy-two-year-old woman who's witnessed the loss of her husband, her only son, her son-in-law and her country — has survived all these tragedies, and to this day, is strong enough still to laugh and enjoy life for what it is, for what she makes of it. She is irrepressibly, incorrigibly happy. How can I not admire someone like that?

And then I remembered what Huy Thanh Cao, editor-in-chief of *Horizons*, a national magazine based in Southern California dedicated to Vietnamese issues, said in a letter to me about his Vietnamese American experience. "Somewhere along the way, I realized that to be Vietnamese means to endure." Most Vietnamese people — my grandmother and myself included — would acknowledge that suffering and enduring are, indeed, dominant themes of our national experience and character. I myself have thought, written and cried about the tragedies of our people's recent past. My family and I have experienced our burden of that collective pain, more than we ever asked for.

But must endurance be coupled with perpetual sorrow? Life does go on. My grandmother, for one, has endured, but she is also stronger for it. As for me, I have lost my father, my homeland, my roots, my childhood innocence and parts of my sanity — all because of the war. But what I do have left — and I thank my family for teaching me this — are my dignity, an ironic sense of hope and, believe it or not, my sense of humor. This is where the other part of me emerges, the part that refuses to be trampled by tragedy, the part that knows that Vietnamese people are — surprisingly — capable of smiling and laughing all the same. Most of Hollywood — and therefore the American public — might not realize this fact; consider *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Casualties of War*, *From Hollywood to Hanoi*, etc. The list of heart-rending movies about the war is endless. But, must the history of our nation, the character of our people, everything that we think, breathe and feel, be unilaterally defined by suffering and sorrow, bombs and tanks, napalm and Agent Orange, re-education gulags and refugee camps, ideologies and politics, My Lai and the Tet Offensive, perilous seas and Thai pirates? Is this, solely, the Vietnamese American experience? Or is there a whole other dimension to us, one rarely reflected in the media, books or, most important, our own self-perceptions?

I am not undermining the anguish that many Vietnamese people still feel as a result of the war. Nor am I suggesting that all Vietnamese people must heal, immediately, from the wounds of the past and start laughing for no particular reason. Most of the time, I — having lived in Vietnam until the age of seven — still carry the memories of the war and its aftermath like a secret, invisible scar inside my heart. Many other people — especially from the elder generations — need more time to heal.

¹"Family Ties" by Khoi Troung Luu is reprinted with permission from Khoi Troung Luu. This essay originally appeared on Tolerance.org, the news and activism Web site of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

Nonetheless, I want the Vietnamese expatriate community to stop for a second and appreciate some of the light-hearted and less-solemn aspects of the Vietnamese American experience. I believe that we are not a cursed people, doomed to emotional pain. The way I see things, we, as an ethnic community — and, more importantly, as human beings in general — still have a great deal to appreciate from life's levities. And this ability to laugh — at ourselves, at each other — is, I think, what makes us truly human.

The twenty-something generation of Vietnamese Americans find ourselves straddling the cultural fence. Being culturally “mixed” can be heart-wrenching at times; we all have had disagreements with our parents because they think we are not “Vietnamese” enough, and we feel they are too “traditional,” on the wrong continent or obscenely anachronistic. But straddling the fence does have its advantages. All of us, whether we are conscious of it or not, have come to embrace a heterogeneous cultural identity, and this hybridization distances us from the strict polarities of “Vietnamese” and “American” culture.

Occupying this unique middle position has allowed me, throughout the years, to be very self-aware of my Vietnamese-American experience and to garner an invaluable cross-cultural perspective. Sure, being an uprooted Vietnamese has been painful at times, but, over the years, I have found comfort and strength in my ability to collect memorable observations and to laugh from them. There are not tragedies or tears here; this is, for me, the most precious and charming aspect of the Vietnamese refugee experience.

What follows is a collection of reflections, observations and anecdotes I have either written down or stored in my mind over the years. They are not polished masterpieces of philosophical musings; they are just one man's memoirs — how I see things — edited/updated from old journal entries or recently transcribed from the depths of my memory.

FAMILY TIES

Bồ Ngoại²

My grandmother is an incredible woman, full of love, energy and life. I've seen pictures of her from the 1930s when she was a beautiful young woman, adorned with French makeup and elegant clothing. It is hard for every man to imagine his grandmother as a young belle, but sometimes it is quite easy for me. She has, in many ways, retained the youthful energy and joie de vivre of days past, a sense of radiance that seems to contradict her position as the sage matriarch of my clan.

Grandmother has been in the States only since 1986. Before coming to America, she lived with my uncle in Canada. At present, she is part of a rare breed: a seventy-something Vietnamese semi-actively learning English. In Vietnam she had already enrolled in classes, partly because she knew she would be emigrating soon, partly because she wanted to support the teacher, an old family friend, but — if I know my grandmother correctly — mostly because she wanted to do something for self-improvement, to learn another foreign language besides French. Of course, her English is not stellar. She can barely hold a conversation. But who cares? I find it inspiring that she is even making an effort.

Three years ago, my grandmother fell down the stairs and broke her hip in the middle of the night. I was the one who found her there lying almost motionless. She said she had been on the ground unable to move for almost an hour, but that she did not want to wake up anyone in the house. When the ambulance men lifted her onto the stretcher, I saw fear in her eyes. We were all scared for her, too, but then I heard her striking up a casual conversation with one of the ambulance workers: “Hello, how are you doing? ...” And then I knew that, somehow, no matter what, my grandmother would make it. Three months later, she was back on her feet again — cooking, cleaning, laughing, spreading joy and inspiration everywhere she went.

On December 15, 1992, Grandmother became a U.S. citizen. Supposedly, she was extremely nervous the last couple weeks before her citizenship exam. She would study out loud in her broken English: “There are three branches in the U.S. government: executive, legislative, judicial ...” Too bad I was not there to witness it. I would have been so proud. When all the grandchildren came home for Christmas, my mother announced that Grandmother had passed and that she was now an “American” on paper. Then my mother joked that “Ha Nguyen” is now “Helena Nguyen.” I almost believed it.

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

COMPANY PICNIC – AUGUST 22, 1985

My aunt Nga is an electrical engineer. Every summer Motorola invites all their employees to a company picnic at a huge amusement park. This year, after heavy debating with my parents, I finally gave in and agreed to go. It was, rather surprisingly, fun. I observed one important cultural difference: I think American notion of inviting your family to a company picnic means nuclear family, but of course we brought out the whole clan: uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren — the whole family tree. We were the largest family there, hands down.

And yet I felt proud of the fact that we were all there, laughing, interacting with other families, enjoying American food. The Vietnamese familial bond/clan consciousness was definitely alive and well. I don't think, though, that this means a typical Vietnamese family is somehow, always closer and more loving than an American family. More accurately, I think the perception of what constitutes a "family" is different. In terms of affection, though, it's all the same: family love is family love.

SALTY SOUP – OCTOBER 14, 1990

I've been at Harvard for a couple weeks now, but already I miss my family. I went to a Vietnamese restaurant last week with my friend Chris, who has never had Vietnamese food. I needed to make a phone call, so I left her there waiting for our appetizers, fresh spring rolls. When I came back, she had a funny look on her face and was quickly gulping down water. "You okay?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. They brought out the soup, but it's really salty and pungent."

I looked at our table. There were only small bowls of nuoc mam fish sauce for dipping our spring rolls. I laughed the kind of boyish/impish laugh that I should probably outgrow now that I'm in college. It took me five minutes — I was still laughing so hard, relishing the moment — to explain to her that nuoc mam is really a condiment, like soy sauce, not soup. Now Chris refuses to let me take her out for Vietnamese food.

WHAT A COUNTRY! – DECEMBER 28, 1992

This Christmas my mother sponsored her half-brother to America. Uncle Tuan is a highly respected gentleman, having been a professor of pharmacy at the University of Saigon. For the time being, he will stay with my aunt Nga, who lives twenty minutes away from us. Auntie Nga is vacationing in "Cali" for the holidays, so he will be in charge of the house for a couple weeks, including gathering the mail. Last night at around two A.M., he called me with a hushed yet excited tone of voice. Having studied at the University of Florida in the mid-1960s, his English is superb.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, but I have something here for Auntie Nga. You wouldn't believe this, but she just won ten million dollars!"

I tried to explain to him about junk mail, how it was all a hoax, how some American companies will do anything to grab your attention through correspondence. But he insisted: "It says right here in big, black letters. Nga Ly is the recipient of ten million dollars." After several minutes of listening to me ramble, he finally gave in, somewhat peeved: "Okay, but if she really won that sum of money, you're the one who will be blamed for letting it slip away." And then he hung up.

ETHNICIZATION: PROCESS AND CONSEQUENCES

How to Become "More Vietnamese" — February 20, 1992

I have a lot in common with my friend Andy. Our fathers were both political officials who studied at the National Institute of Administration in Saigon. They did not know each other; his father knew only of my uncle, also a graduate. Still, the bond is there, as if we're long-lost brothers. Andy has been described as "1000 percent American"; I used to be the same way, but I'm on my way back. I'm far from the ethnic expert, but I'm trying to "ethnicize" Andy. For his benefit, and my own, I've drawn up this self-help life:

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

TOP TEN WAYS TO BECOME “MORE VIETNAMESE” FOR THE TWENTY-SOMETHING GENERATION:

10. Wear flip-flops (*dep*) around the dorm.

9. The day after an intense workout at the gym, and your back hurts, ask your roommate or loved one to “strike your back” (*dam lung*) or “step on your back” (*dap lung*) you. They’ll think you’re weird, but hey, you’ll feel better. Afflicted with a severe New England flu? Ask your girlfriend/boyfriend to perform *cạo gió*³ acupressure on you. (He/She doesn’t have to be Vietnamese to do it right.)

8. Enroll (in order of parental preference) in: medical, law, engineering, dental, or pharmacy schools. Do not become a creative writer.

7. Take up ballroom dancing. Cha-cha-cha, be-bop, tango, boston, waltz, etc. Sweep all romantic prospects off their feet.

6. Watch “Paris By Night,” every entertaining edition. Then reenact the songs through karaoke. Finally and forever, hold Linda Trang Dai and Trizzy Phuong Trinh as the ideal paragons of female beauty. Or, for a change of pace, watch all ten thousand phim chuong kung fu episodes ... and then cry afterwards.

5. Answer the phone in an unspirited, “Allo?”

4. If you’re dating someone Vietnamese, and it’s time to get married, do it in June.

3. Condense polysyllabic geographic words, to make it easier on the tongue. For example, “Cali,” “Los,” “Phila,” etc.

2. Use random French words and phrases to assert familiarity with and nostalgia for the old colonial elite way of life. For example, moi, toi, pate chaud, buche de Noel, gout, maquiller, demi-saison and contre soleil.

1. Make sweeping generalizations about everything and everyone — like I’m doing in this essay.

There you have it, an intimate and light-hearted account of what it means to be a twenty-something Vietnamese American (or should I say Americanized Vietnamese?) in the 1990s.

I wish I could have painted a more balanced portrait of our collective experience. It would be intriguing to read, conversely, the memoirs of a fifty-something Vietnamese person, weaving anecdotes from a “more Vietnamese” perspective.

But I can’t change the way I am. I came to America when I was seven. I remember my initial difficulties adjusting to the “American” way of life, how I longed to be a true “native.” Throughout my childhood, I waited with eager anticipation for my fifteenth birthday to arrive, because on that day, I knew that — arithmetically — I would be more “American” than “Vietnamese,” having spent eight years in this country compared to only seven “back there.” Now, ironically, painfully, I’m trying to return to my roots, and sometimes I wish I were a “real Vietnamese,” whatever that means. The road remains long and arduous, and I’ll need more than a silly Top Ten list as a guide. But I think as long as I keep my sense of humor, I should be okay. Laughter, they say, is the best medicine.

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

Family Ties

FOOTNOTES TO WRITING

1. Phở is a popular noodle soup dish. See the Glossary Section for a more detailed description.
2. Translation of “Bờ Ngoại”: maternal grandmother.
3. Cạo gió literally translates to “wind scratch,” but is termed “coining” by Western health practitioners. Cạo gió is a common, traditional Vietnamese practice of dipping a coin in mentholated oil and vigorously rubbing it across the skin, usually one’s backside, causing a mild dermabrasion. This practice is believed to release the excess force or “wind” from the body and, hence, restore balance. Cạo gió is usually used to relieve flu symptoms.

Workshop 1 Readings, continued

HALF-AND-HALF

You can't be, says a Palestinian Christian
on the first feast day after Ramadan.
So, half-and-half and half-and-half.
He sells glass. He knows about broken bits,
chips. If you love Jesus you can't love
anyone else. Says he.

At his stall of blue pitchers on the Via Dolorosa,
he's sweeping. The rubbed stones
feel holy. Dusting of powdered sugar
across faces of date-stuffed *mamool*.

This morning we lit the slim white candles
which bend over at the waist by noon.
For once the priests weren't fighting
in the church for the best spots to stand.
As a boy, my father listened to them fight.
This is partly why he prays in no language
but his own. Why I press my lips
to every exception.

A woman opens a window—here and here and here—
placing a vase of blue flowers
on an orange cloth. I follow her.
She is making a soup from what she had left
in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean.
She is leaving nothing out.

