

HAPA GIRL: A MEMOIR

Chapter 1: The Wearing of the Green

I'll begin where I'm happiest, or most clueless--either adjective could be equally appropriate. I'm a child, eight maybe nine years years old, living in the suburbs, part of the megalopolis twenty-five miles outside New York City, where my father is chair of the Asian Studies Department at City College. It's my parents' wedding anniversary.

As it's St. Patrick's Day, our house was filled with the scent of corned beef and cabbage. And I do mean filled--from top to bottom, every inch of every room permeated. There was no escaping the pungent vapors, not under my bed, or in the closet, or even in the upstairs bathroom with a towel rolled up and stuffed against the bottom of the door. I know because I'd tried them all.

For more ordinary occasions my father might have preferred Chinese food, but on this day only the most Irish of dishes would do. It was a time for celebration. Chinese was for everyday.

My brother and I were eating our TV dinners in the family room, watching sitcoms or reruns of Star Trek, while our parents dined together privately in the kitchen. Candles on the table, fresh roses in a vase on the counter. We could hear them laughing together, excluding us. Sharing private thoughts. Secret things. Normally, we might have been jealous, on any other occasion we might have caused a ruckus just to get their attention, but for their anniversary we had to be good. This was the one and only night when they were allowed to be a couple and not just our parents.

Still, it's disturbing to my brother and me that our parents could sound so happy without us. Our egos didn't like the implication at all.

They were going to see a movie, after dinner. A revival of It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World. They'd first seen the film on their honeymoon and they remembered it as the funniest film ever made. Back then, in the 1970s, there was no such thing as VCRs, so they hadn't been able to see it for years. Now they were leaving my brother and me behind to relive the moment. My brother and I pretended we didn't mind. We didn't want to see that old movie anyway. Who cared if it was the funniest film in the world! There was going to be a Western on TV. What could be better than that? I had my six-shooter ready, my brother his feathered headdress, we were all set to play along with the film. My brother always sided with the Indians in those days. Me, I was gonna be John Wayne.

My mother came in to check on us before the babysitter arrived. She was wearing a clingy red dress and a long string of onyx beads around her neck. Her hair was piled high upon her head, and when she kissed my little brother good-bye, her lipstick left a red halo on his cheek. She smelled like perfume and hairspray, and when she hugged me, I could almost forget the boiled cabbage. Was there ever any scent as glamorous as Chanel No. 5 and Aqua-Net? I wanted to rub my mother all over my arms. I wanted to smell exactly like her. Sophisticated and grown-up and happy and in love.

Then my father was standing in the doorway to the family room, pointing at his watch impatiently. He was wearing a good suit, Brooks Brothers, with a green silk handkerchief in his breast pocket and a green stripe in his black silk tie, in honor of my mother and St. Patrick.

"Hurry up, we're going to be late!"

“I’m saying good-bye to the children!”

“Hurry up, hurry up!”

My mother turned towards us, and for a second, worry flitted across her face.

“Don’t let any strangers in. And don’t tell anyone your parents are gone if anyone calls on the phone. And don’t let the babysitter invite her boyfriend over.”

“Hurry, hurry!”

The doorbell rang and it’s the babysitter and my mother kissed us both good-bye again and then she and my father disappeared.

After they were gone, the house no longer seemed full of secrets, just cabbage, and my brother and I gave the babysitter a hard time because we didn’t like to be abandoned.

As we squinted at John Wayne fighting his way across the Plains, I imagined my parents laughing uproariously at the Funniest Film Ever Made. I could see my father with his head tilted back, tears springing from his narrowed eyes, and my mother holding onto my father’s arm as she gasped for air. I knew how they laughed together when they were happy--and naturally, I felt bitter. I convinced the babysitter that our parents didn’t mind if we let the dogs into the family room and later I told her that No, my brother and I didn’t have to go to bed, we were both allowed to stay up as late as we wanted.

“You’re gonna get in trouble,” my brother mouthed to me. He was a year younger and very obedient in those days.

“It’s St. Patrick’s Day,” I retorted. “It’s special.”

But when our parents did arrive home, they weren’t angry, even though our Siberian Husky had missed the newspaper we’d put on the floor for him. The babysitter had cleaned it up, but she told our parents immediately even though I’d

made her promise not to, and my father gave her an extra tip before driving her home. I would've thought my father would have been upset, and any other night he would have been, but this night nothing we did could ruin our parents' happy, anniversary mood.

"I'm so glad you kids are still up," my mother said. She sat down between us on the family room sofa, slipping her feet from her pumps and propping them upon the coffee table. She wiggled her toes. "I missed you."

"Really?" I forgave her for abandoning us.

When my father returned, he was still hyper, maybe he wanted the day to last a little longer. "Let's watch some movies," he said, rubbing his hands together.

"There's nothing on TV," I pointed out, and there wasn't. Only a rerun of Love, American Style, which my brother and I hated. "You missed everything."

"No, no, I mean our movies," he said.

And so he ran to the basement to set up the movie screen while my mother made my brother and me change into our pajamas. Then the three of us sat in folding chairs on the far side of the ping pong table, while my father ran the projector and showed us the honeymoon reels of my parents' trip to Niagara Falls.

The Super-8 footage was already worn by this time, it had caught on fire once, bubbled and split, but my father had spliced it all together again so that it only jumped a little. There were my parents dancing together in black-and-white, my mother in her long, off-the-shoulder, backless evening gown--which I knew was a deep green velvet--my father in a slim black tuxedo. They whirled round and round, faster and faster, as people in the background clapped. And then the camera zoomed in on an elderly Chinese couple seated at a dinner table, my father's parents, my Ye-ye and Nai-nai, and they were clapping most furiously of all. From a corner, my

father's middle brother waved. I recognized my uncle immediately even though he was older now and his glasses were different. My father's entire family had accompanied him on this part of the honeymoon, which my grandparents had paid for. They were all so excited to be welcoming a bride into the family.

"Where's Uncle Alvin?" my brother asked.

"He's taking the pictures," my father explained.

There were more shots: shaky images of clouds, then water, as my uncle experimented with some art-house photography. My parents and grandparents standing on the deck of a boat, everyone covered up in raincoats, the giant falls rushing behind them. They smiled and waved, smiled and waved. In the flickering light, the projector humming, my brother curled into a ball and fell asleep, but I watched the screen without blinking. I loved these movies of our family. My parents dancing like giants on the screen, my grandparents beaming, as the camera zoomed closer until their smiles were literally three feet wide.

When the film ran out with a click, the screen filled with a blank square of white.

"One more time," I insisted.

"It's late. It's time for bed."

"Please!"

"All right. One more time."

My father threaded the film through the reels again, because in truth he was proud of these home movies too, and I sat up straight in my chair, ready for my movie-star parents to flood the screen once more.
