**A Hard Life, But a Better One by Chui-Ling Tam**

J**ustice of the Peace-** A government official who can marry people

**Intoned**- said, recited

**Emphatically**- strongly

**Suppressed**- held back

**Scant**- small number, barely

**Grace**- goodwill, mercy,

**Reunification-** reuniting, connecting families who were separated

**Modest**- simple, small

**Extensive**- large

**Shack­-** tiny/very poor house

**A string**- a series, one after another

**Bungalow**- a one floor house

**Suburb­**- a neighborhood outside of a big city

**Recall**- remember

**Far Cry**- long way off, very different

**Trooping**- walking together

**Outhouses**- outdoor toilets

**Hordes**- crowds, lots of people

**Pitched in**- helped

**Reeked**- smelled bad

**Wistfully-** sad because you miss something

My aunt married her sweetheart of twelve years last week. It was a simple wedding at home, with a justice of the peace who intoned the marriage vows in words they didn’t understand.

That didn’t matter. She knew when it was time to say “Yes,” and she said it—emphatically—in a tight, hard voice that suppressed twelve long years of waiting to start her new life in Canada with her husband and family. Beside her, my new uncle grinned foolishly in relief a scant three days before his ninety-day grace period with immigration expired. It was the first time I’d seen him smile since he arrived from China.

It may seem strange for two people to wait twelve years to marry, but it was the price my aunt paid to leave her homeland, where she met her husband on a state farm in their late teens. She would not have been allowed to leave if they had married in China.

My aunt was the last member of my mother’s family to come to Canada, by grace of the reunification program introduced in 1988. She came in search of a better life, and in the modest home she shares with her two younger sisters, her brother-in-law, and her father, she has found it.

Many Southeast-Asian immigrants arrived in the 1970s. My family was part of that group. We had little worldly wealth to lose. When we landed in Ottawa in 1972, we had about one hundred dollars in cash, and all we left behind, besides a rather extensive family and numerous friends, was a little two-room shack that passed for our home.

My mother has worked at the same restaurant for the past eighteen years, and my father has hopped along a string of jobs in other people’s restaurants. They did not take a vacation until two years ago, and they did not go anywhere when they did. They couldn’t afford it.

But they don’t mind. My older brother and I are working—not in kitchens—and my younger brother and sister are in university. My parents now live in a red-brick bungalow surrounded by trees in a quiet suburb in Ottawa. They have running water, a 28-inch colour TV, and a car.

It’s a far cry from the two-room home we left in Hong Kong, which had no running water. As a child of five, I recall trooping off to the big black outhouses down the street and the hordes of women and children who washed and bathed in the common watering area near our house.

When a thunderstorm knocked out the roof in the front room, the whole neighbourhood pitched in to attach a new corrugated-iron roof, and the air reeked with the smell of tar.

Not speaking English and with only a high school education, my parents never expected to find comfortable jobs. Some days, my mother doubts whether her life would have been any harder in Hong Kong, where she worked for a time at a laundromat. She knew the life of riches was long behind her, ever since the Chinese Communists forced her family to give up their mansion and servants in Canton.

Often, before my grandparents and aunts arrived in 1985, my mother would talk wistfully of them, never expecting to find the money to make the trip back. The last time I gave her roses, she told me that the blooms were more fragrant in China.

But I don’t think my parents ever regretted their choice. They have friends and family in Canada, and their children will never know the life they had.

Canada hasn’t been wonderful. The winters are hard, the work is hard, and the range of services is bewildering to a Chinese-speaking couple. In leaving Hong Kong, my parents gave up some of their independence. They rely on their children to help them with finances and visits to the doctor, or choosing paint and wallpaper at hardware stores.

**Bewildering**- confusing

**Murmurs**- mumbles, speaks quietly

**Seamstress**- someone who sews clothes or fixes clothes

**Grateful**- thankful

My mother often stares at her knotted hands and murmurs that when she was a young woman, she had long, beautiful hands. Two decades of dishwashing and cooking eight hours a day, six days a week, have left brown spots from splashing grease.

Today, she and my father are both worried about how long their aging bodies can continue such work.

For all that, they have a good life. They have a comfortable home and enough to eat. They can brag about their children to friends. Their son, the pilot, their daughter, the journalist, their younger son and daughter, the university students. Very probably, my aunt and her husband will have a similar life. She works as a seamstress and he at a laundromat. They expect, and ask, for little more. It is enough that they can choose their lives, that their children will have an education and perhaps work in offices rather than endure the hard labour of state farms in China, or the hot kitchens and dirty hotel toilets in Canada.

I expect that they will brag about their children in twentyfive years, as do my parents. And they will quite likely have their own home and be grateful that after twelve long years, they were finally able to start the family they wanted for so long in a country where they could decide their future.

Their life will be hard, but I doubt that they will ever regret the loss of their homeland. While Canada is not the land of milk and honey, it offers them a lot more worldly wealth and freedom than China ever could.