

a novel



**REVENGE OF THE
MOONCAKE VIXEN**



Marilyn Chin

A L S O B Y M A R I L Y N C H I N

Poetry

Rhapsody in Plain Yellow

The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty

Dwarf Bamboo

REVENGE
OF THE
MOONCAKE
VIXEN

A MANIFESTO IN 41 TALES

Marilyn Chin



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Moon

A CHINESE AMERICAN REVENGE TALE

Moon was a little fat Chinese girl. She had a big, yellow face befitting her name. She was sad and lonely as were all little fat Chinese girls in 1999, and she had a strange, insatiable desire for a pair of trashy blond twins named Smith (no accounting for taste, of course). Every night she would wander on the beach in search of them, hoping to espy them taking a joyride around Pacific Beach in their rebuilt sky-blue convertible Impala: their long blond hair swept backward like horses' manes, their faces obscenely sunburnt, resembling ripe halves of peaches.

One chilly September evening the boys stopped to make a campfire on the beach; and Moon, feeling quite full and confident that day, descended upon them, waddling so fat, so round and shiny with sea spray. She offered them chocolate Macadamia nut clusters and began to sing, strumming a tiny lute-like instrument her grandmother sent her from China. She began singing, in an ancient falsetto, a baleful song about exiled geese winging across the horizon, about the waxing and waning of stormy seas, about children lost into the unknown depths of the new kingdom.

The boys were born and raised in “the valley” and were very unsophisticated. They were also functional illiterates and were held back twice in the fifth grade—and there was no way that they could have understood the complexities of her song. They huddled in that sporting male way and whispered surreptitiously, speaking in very short sentences between grunts or long, run-on sentences with ambiguous antecedents, so that Moon was not quite sure whether she was the subject of their discussion. Finally, the boys offered to give fat Moon a ride in the stainless-steel canoe they got for Christmas. (We know, of course, that they were up to trouble; you don’t think their hospitality was sincere, do you?)

Moon graciously accepted their invitation. Actually, she was elated, given the bad state of her social life; she hadn’t had a date for centuries. So the two boys paddled, one fore, one aft, with fat Moon in the middle. Moon was so happy that she started strumming her lute and singing the song of Hiawatha. (Don’t ask me why; this was what she felt like singing.) Suddenly, the boys started rocking the boat forcefully—forward and backward—making wild horsy sounds until the boat flipped over, fat Moon, lute, and all.

The boys laughed and taunted Moon to reappear from the rough water. When she didn’t surface after a few minutes, it suddenly occurred to them that she was drowning; they watched in bemusement while the last of her yellow forehead bled into the waves. Finally, they dove in and dragged her heavy body back into the boat, which was quite a feat for she was twice as heavy wet than dry—and she was now tangled in sea flora.

When they finally docked, Moon discovered that the boys saved her only to humiliate her. It appeared that they wanted a reward for saving her life—a blood-debt, if you will. In this

material world—where goods are bartered for goods—actions, however heroic or well intentioned in appearance, are never clearly separated from services rendered. And in the American ledger, all services must be paid for in the end, and all contracts must be signed at closing, bearing each participant’s legal signature. Thus, the boys ripped off Moon’s dress and took turns pissing all over her round face and belly, saying, “So, it’s true, it’s true that your cunts are really slanted. Slant-eyed cunt! Did you really think that we had any interest in you?”

After the boys finished their vile act, they left Moon on the wharf without a stitch on, glowing with yellow piss. And she cried, wailed all the way home on her bicycle. Imagine a little fat Chinese girl, naked, pedaling, wailing.

When Moon got home, her mother called her a slut. Her father went on and on about the Sino-Japanese war and about the starving girlchildren in Guangdong—and look, what are you doing with your youth and new prosperity, wailing, carrying on, just because some trashy white boys rejected you? Have you no shame? Your cousin the sun matriculated Harvard, your brothers the stars all became engineers . . . where are the I. M. Peis and Yo Yo Mas of your generation? They sent her to bed without supper that night as a reminder that self-sacrifice is the most profound virtue of the Chinese people.

Up in her room, Moon brooded and swore on a stack of bibles that she would seek revenge for this terrible incident—and that if she were to die today, she would come back to earth as an angry ghost to haunt those motherfuckers. With this in mind, Moon swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills, only to cough them back up ten minutes later. Obviously, they didn’t kill her. However, those ten minutes of retching must have prevented oxygen from entering her brain and left her deranged for at least a month

after this episode. (Hey, I'm no doctor, just a storyteller, take my diagnosis with caution, please.) Overnight, she became a homicidal maniac. A foul plague would shroud all of southern California, one that, curiously, infected only blond men. (Both natural and peroxidized types, those slightly hennaed would be spared.)

For thirty days and thirty nights Moon scoured the seaside, howling, windswept—in search of blond victims. They would drown on their surfboards, or collapse while polishing their cars. They would suffocate in their sleep next to their wives and lovers. Some died leaving a long trail of excrement because whatever pursued them was so terrible that it literally scared the shit out of them. And not since Herod had we seen such a devastating assault on male children.

On the thirty-first night, the horror subsided. Moon finally found the Smith boys cruising in their sky-blue convertible Impala. They were driving south on the scenic coast route between San Clemente and Del Mar when she plunged down on them, her light was so powerful and bright that the boys were momentarily blinded and swerved into a canyon. Their car turned over twelve times. They were decapitated—the coroner said, so cleanly as if a surgeon had done the job with a laser.

Moon grew up, lost weight and became a famous singer, which proves that there is no justice in the universe, or that indeed, there is justice. Your interpretation of this denouement mostly depends on your race, creed, hair color, social and economic class and political proclivities—and whether or not you are a feminist revisionist and have a habit of cheering for the underdog. What is the moral of the story? Well, it's a tale of revenge, obviously written from a Chinese American girl's perspective. My intentions are to veer you away from teasing and humiliating little chubby

Chinese girls like myself. And that one wanton act of humiliation you perpetuated on the fore or aft of that boat on my arrival may be one humiliating act too many. For although we are friendly neighbors, you don't really know me. You don't know the depth of my humiliation. And you don't know what I can do. You don't know what is beneath my doing.

Round Eyes

I woke up one morning and my slanted eyes had turned round, which was nothing to be alarmed about. It happened to my rich cousin Sunny, whose mother thought that she was too ugly to capture a rich Chinese American prince; she was gagged, sedated and abducted—then zoomed to Japan in a private airplane to a famous round-eye plastic surgeon. Well—Sunny woke up with huge, round “Madonna” eyes. They fixed her flat nose into a perky “Little Orphan Annie” one, and while she was still deep under, they gave her new mammoth “Pamela Anderson” breasts for half price.

So when I woke up with round eyes, I was not particularly surprised. But then, I thought, hey, wait a minute, my family’s not rich. We don’t have any money to be vain. We’re immigrants who toiled in sweatshop after sweatshop. We’re the poor relations that everybody spat on. Sunny’s family gave us hand-me-downs and scraps that their Cairn Terriers didn’t want. In the fifties, they bought my father’s papers, shipped him here, and he worked as a slave cook for them in their chain of chop-suey joints for most of his life.

Of course, we were supposed to be eternally grateful. I

remember one steamy episode in which my father banged his head on their giant butcher block and said, “You want grateful! You want thanks! Here, kowtow, kowtow, ten thousand years kowtow!” He banged his head so hard that he opened a gash three inches wide, and the blood streaked down his face. Such histrionics continued until he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1989.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and expect to see my father’s bloody face. But on this particularly succulent spring morning, the birds were cheeping and the dogs were barking, and in our old cracked bathroom mirror—you know, the kind that is so old that the beveled edges are yellowing—I saw the monster of my own making. This morning some Greater Mother Power had transformed me into a bona fide white girl with big round eyes. My single-creased eyelid turned double, which forced the corners that originally slanted upward to slope downward. My eyes were now as round as orbs and appeared twice as large as before. My eyeballs that were once deep brown, almost black, had suddenly lightened into a golden amber. Even my eyelashes, which were once straight and spare, became fuller and curled up against my new double lids.

I immediately felt guilty. My conscience said, “Serves you right for hating your kind, for wanting to be white. Remember that old Chinese saying, don’t wish for something too hard, you might just get it—and then, what?” There were no tell-tale signs of expensive surgery—no gauze, no swelling, no pus, no nothing. When the good lord makes a miracle, she does it seamlessly. After surgery Sunny looked like Frankenstein for about two months. She was black and blue and had huge ghastly stitches. Three months later, she was a completely new person cut out from *Vogue*. She had totally reinvented herself—new clothes, new friends, new attitude. She even lost her Hong Kong accent. And

there she was hanging out with the in-crowd, smoking and swearing up a storm like a rich white person, like she had a piece of the American dream in her pocket. “What did you do?” I said. “Pay for your face with your soul?”

The terrible truth is that I was desperately jealous of Sunny’s new popularity. She said once, while buffing her fake nails, “We’re Americans now, we have to climb that ladder of success, keep up with the Joneses . . . always one up ourselves.” Well, this has become our new motto—isn’t it quaint?—“*Improve ourselves Wongs.*” Sunny’s family started this trickle-down effect. In the eighties, the fierce Reaganite competition and struggle for status in Sunny’s family infected ours like the plague. Every day, after my father’s death, my mother would come home from her long day’s work at the factory and scowl blankly at us. My sister and I—we were never good enough, pretty enough, smart enough. My mother was the sacrificial tree on which the next crop was supposed to flourish and bear beautiful fruit—only the present harvest was not quite ready. We were an anemic batch, or one too hard, or green and small to bring a good barter at the market. My mother would scrutinize us in her sleepy sadness and sob, then fold herself up in bed and not come out again until it was already the next morning and time for her to go to work at the factory. There was no end to her misery.

My father used to say that only in America could you reinvent yourself. Morons become presidents, fools become princes, bandits become CEOs, whores become first ladies. Of course, what he was really getting at was that my uncle, the “immoral two-bit, four-legged thug sodomist” became a millionaire restaurateur overnight. The “golden mountain dream” had eluded my father. The great lories of gold had passed him by, and all he had left in his wretched soul was rage and envy.

My father loved to bitch and mutter and spit his venom into the giant wok of chop suey—into that great noxious swill they called Suburban Chinese American food. He would spit and swear, “Your Mother’s cunt! Your turtle’s eggs. Your dead bag of dead girl bones!” He would shovel and toss unidentified chunks of flesh and veggies into his giant sizzling wok. An unfiltered Lucky Strike dangling from his lips, rivers of sweat pouring from his greasy hair. I can still see him now, bless his dead soul, red-faced, shoveling and wokking in the great cauldron of hell, hacking and coughing up bile from his black lungs.

So on that fine, succulent spring morning in 1985, I stood in front of the mirror of my own enlightenment. After my initial shock and strange shiver of delight, I noticed that the extra epicanthic folds had made deep creases around the sockets. My eyes felt dry, I supposed, because more surface was now exposed to light. Suddenly, it occurred to me that my new eyes were not beautiful. They looked like they were in a persistent state of alarm. If my cousin had purchased the subtle “Madonna” job at the premium price, I must have had the bargain-basement “Betty Boop.”

Finally, I managed to pull myself away from the mirror to go downstairs—to ask my wise sister, Moonie, for her opinion. She said, barely looking up from her cereal, “Nah, don’t worry about it. It’s the process of assimilation. Happens to the best of us.” To me, my sister was God. Like my grandmother, she always had this “Buddhistic” attitude, like, “So what, you turned into a donkey, you’ll get over it.” She was never a team player. In fact, as a child she was always relegated to the sidelines to warm the bench. The white kids never chose her to play in their team sports. They used to tease her for being a four-eyed geek, and she didn’t give a damn. “Dodgeball, what kind a game is that? Who wants to be a moving target and get brain-damaged?”

Moonie was one of those Chinese wise-women who could climb to the apex of a mountain and see everything. Someday she will become a famous biologist or anthropologist, and the people will pay two hundred bucks a plate to hear her talk about neo-genetic theory. And she will get back at those white folks for all those years of humiliation and bench-warming by saying something utterly inane, like, “Caucasoids have more hair on their bodies because they are less evolved,” and everybody will applaud, buy her book and stand in a long line for her autograph. Afterward, they will go home and say, “I have touched the sleeve of genius.”

But I was not as self-assured as Moonie. I was a shallow nobody. I was a teenager, for God’s sake; I didn’t have any depth. It was not my station in life to see beyond my petty, personal predicament. I was always falling through the cracks, always afraid of being different. In this way, I was more like Sunny than Moonie. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be conventional. I wanted the sublime, banal package made in the mall. I wanted to be the perfect, stupid blonde girl who married the perfect stupid, blond boy next door. It was no secret that I wanted to be white, to be “accepted” by the in-crowd, to look as white as a magazine cover—I confess, in sixth grade, in the shameful privacy of my own bathroom, I used to tape my eyelids up with strong Scotch mailing tape and pretend that I was Madonna, with big round cow eyes.

Don’t worry. This is no Kafkaesque tale in which I turn into a giant cockroach and my family, the Philistines, beat me up and kill me. I had no fear of my present transformation. We know that anything can happen during adolescence: nipples turn into breasts, breasts turn into beards. Look, there is no mystery to this—at fifteen, the entire female population of the species is mired in self-hatred and most girls despise their own face and

body. We all wanted to be cookie-cutter Barbies. If the dominant race had green skin and purple genitals, I would've wanted that too. It was not until I turned thirty-five that I finally realized that I was a beautiful Chinese woman and that my ancient features were hand-painted on the elegant Sung Dynasty scrolls. But so what, my enlightenment came too late; my self-esteem was already irreversibly damaged.

Finally, on that fateful day, Moonie suggested that I tell an adult. Mind you, this was the last resort. In my household, my father was already dead. My mother and grandmother were my guardians now. My mother was doing double shifts at an electronics firm, putting tiny chips into "motherboards." She had just returned to work after spending three days in the hospital recovering from carpal tunnel surgery. And she was asleep, which was her favorite thing to do on Saturdays. I dared not disturb her dreams. She smiled in her sleep. I knew that it was only in her dreams that she could be happy.

So, I had to tell my grandmother, the Great Matriarch. She was the one who raised us while my parents spent most of their lives grueling at their respective sweatshops. She was, as all Chinese grandmothers are, the self-appointed keeper of our Chinese identity. She thought that we were still sojourners, that sooner or later we would improve our Cantonese and pack up our belongings, and that the Chinese from ten thousand diasporas would fly back to China like a pack of homeward geese, back to the Middle Kingdom. And there we would start over in a new Utopian village, marry yellow husbands, produce yellow children and live in eternal golden harmony.

Indeed, my grandmother would be the one to offer me a profound explanation. She was the one who knew about the transmutation of the soul. She used to tell us stories about all kinds

of magical transformations—women turned into foxes, foxes into spirits. Don't be a jerk in this life, for you would be punished in the next by being transformed into a water-rat. She showed us pictures of a Buddhist hell where the punishment always fit the crime. If you were a liar, an ox-headed hatchet man would cut off your tongue. If you were a thief, he would cut off your hands. If you were an adulterer, he would cut off your "you know what." What, then, would be the appropriate punishment for a girlchild who wished so hard to be accepted by white people that her beautiful slanted eyes turned round?

Right then Grandmother was asleep, snoring in her favorite armchair. See that squished gnat on her dress—that was her characteristic signature. The Great Matriarch did not believe in frivolity. I never approached her with the various hormonal problems of prepubescent girls. When I found a spot of blood on my panties, it was Moonie who bought me a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and said, "Damn, sorry, sis, but you've entered the world of womanhood."

When two bullies at school beat me up and stole my lunch money, I was too ashamed to tell my grandmother. Instead, I worked an extra shift at my uncle's restaurant and peeled shrimp to pay for the missing money, and I had to work extra hours to pay for my own lunch. I peeled so much shrimp that my allergic fingers blew up like pink pork sausages. Finally, I told my pugilistic father. He immediately took time off from work and drove me to the hospital to get my fingers drained. They also gave me adrenaline shots that made me dizzy. My father then went to school and grabbed my vice principal, Mr. Comely, by his lapels and loudly urged in broken English that those boys be suspended. "Moogoo-gaipan, you want Moogoo-gaipan? You get Moogoo-gaipan." For some reason, my father just happened to have a giant spatula in his

pocket that day. He pulled it out and started slapping Mr. Comely with it, making tiny red marks the size of chop-suey chunks all over his face. And there I was, a typical stupid teenager, not proud that my father was trying to defend me, but embarrassed that my geek-father would actually use a spatula as a deadly weapon. It would be a different story had he brandished a machete or a sawed-off assault rifle. What a sight, my father waving his spatula and Mr. Comely backing up, defending himself with a wooden chair and his gold Cross pen.

The boys were never suspended. But suddenly, I was given a reprieve. After all, it's not divine intervention but fate that is the catalyst for change. Within the next few months, everybody sort of—*poof*—disappeared. My father died shortly after that episode; my mother finally gave up on the American dream and bought a one-way ticket back to Hong Kong. Mr. Comely was transferred because of his alcoholism; one bully went to prison; the other moved to Pittsburgh with his divorced mother. (And who could've predicted that I would someday end up graduating magna cum laude from Harvard Law School to become a Yuppie trial attorney for the Small Business Administration? Or that after several failed marriages, I would marry a Filipino activist I met at a coffee shop, a man whose radical ideas would transform my whole life? Or that I would end up devoting my life's work to writing poetry and defending the wives of assassinated guerrillas in Luzon? Of course, this is another story.)

Well, anyway, in my terrible childhood, life was humiliation after humiliation and tiptoeing around that sleeping mother and grandmother. My grandmother had survived a series of natural and man-made disasters: the Sino-Japanese War, famine, drought, flood, torrential rain, bloodthirsty warlords, the Nationalist debacle, Communist tyranny, even a long bout of the cholera

epidemic. Now that she was eighty-five and had survived everything and reached the shores of safety, it was the ripe time for her to finally enjoy peace, her grandchildren and napping in her favorite armchair. I was worried that she would have a heart attack upon seeing me. I climbed up onto her lofty lap and said, “Granny, look what happened to my eyes, they’ve turned round, I am sorry for having been remiss, for being a bad child. For wishing the unthinkable. For dreaming the unmentionable.”

She looked at me with her complacent Buddha smile. “So, girlchild, now you are a round-eye. When you were born you were such a beautiful princess, more beautiful than Yang Kuei Fei. You had skin of jade and slanted moon-like eyes. Our ancestors were proud to behold such a plum blossom. Now, look what has happened to you, my little snake-in-the-grass, my little damselfly, how you have changed.”

Her compassionate words touched me deeply and I began to cry from my little round eyes. The tears were especially bulbous and fat. She caressed me all night long, telling me ancient revenge tales and fables, where the tiniest girl always ended up victorious. We munched on baggies of glazed ginger and dried plums. No mention was made of my transformation. Deep in her heart, she knew that each step backward would only mean regret—the vector goes in only one direction, the homing geese must find their new nest, the ten thousand diasporas will never coagulate—there was no way back to the Middle Kingdom.

Parable of the Cake

The Neighborwoman said to us, “I’ll give you a big cake, little Chinese girls, if you come to the Christmas service with me and accept Jesus Christ, our lord, into your heart.” We said, “Okay,” and drove with her to the other side of the city and sat through a boring sermon when we should have taken the bus to Chinatown for our Cantonese lessons. Afterward, she gave us a big cake that said “Happy Birthday, Buny” on it. She must have got it for half price because of the misspelling. My sister and I were really hungry after the long sermon, so we gulped down the whole cake as soon as we got home. I got sick and barfed all over the bathroom and my sister had to clean it up before Granny got home. Then my face swelled up for two days on account of my being allergic to the peanut butter in the frosting. My sister was so afraid that I would croak that she confessed everything to Granny. First, Granny gave me some putrid herbal medicine, then she whipped us with her bamboo duster. She whipped us so hard that we both had red marks all over our legs. Then she made us kneel before the Great Buddha for two hours balancing teapots on our heads.

On Christmas Eve, Granny went to Safeway and bought a big

white cake with Santa's face on it and made us go with her to the Neighborwoman's house. She placed the cake into the woman's hands and said to me, "Peapod, translate this, 'Malignant Nun, we do not beg for your God.'" I didn't know how to translate "malignant" and said politely, "Dear Missus, No beg, No God."

My sister and I both wept silently, embarrassed that Granny made us into a spectacle and ashamed that we had to lie to get out of it. Meanwhile, Granny was satisfied that we learned our lesson and decided to take her two favorite peapods to Chinatown for sweet bean dessert. We were the only riders on the bus that night; everybody else was probably home with their families preparing for a big meal. "Merry Christmas, ho ho ho, I am Santa's helper!" said the bus driver. He was wearing a green elf's hat, but we knew that he was really Mr. Rogers the black bus driver. He winked at Granny and gave us each two little candy canes. Granny scowled, "Tsk, tsk, ancient warrior in a fool's cap!" Then we sat way in the back of the bus and Granny began singing our favorite song.

"We will go home and eat cakies, little lotus-filled cakies," Granny sang. "We will eat sweet buns, sweet custard sweet buns!" she sang. "We will eat turnip squares, salty white turnip squares," she sang. "We will eat grass jelly, tangy green grass jelly. We will eat dumplings, soft, steamy dumplings." She was so jolly that we forgot our embarrassing episode and we sang with her, clapping hands—we sang and sang.

Granny would die a few years later, leaving us three thousand dollars under her mattress and a brand new cleaver, still wrapped in Chinese newspaper from Hong Kong. We would grow up into beautiful, clear-skinned young women. We would become born-again Christians and get a complete makeover at the mall. We would work hard in our studies, become successful and drive little white Mercedes. We would remember nothing, nada,

nothing that our grandmother taught us. We would learn nothing from our poverty, but to avoid poverty at all cost.

Fa la la la la, little cakies, little cakies, little cakies . . . We would drive around in our little white Mercedes all over southern California eating little cakies. Yes, let's put on the Ritz, sisters: little petit fours in pastels and rainbows . . . booze-soaked baba au rhums, oooh yes, nuttynutty Florentines on little white doilies . . . Oh sisters! Let's ghetto it! Ho Hos, Ding Dongs, pink and white snowballs, let's suck the creamy hearts out of the Twinkies. Come hither, come yon, young Chinese girls. Come, let's drive around in our little white Mercedes eating cakies, little cakies. Come, let the crumbs fall down our chins and dance on our laps. Come, light light airy madeleines, come, creamy creamy trifles. Come, little cakies, little cakies. Come, the sweet, sweet hereafter. . . .