

THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE

ALSO BY AMY TAN

The Joy Luck Club

THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE

AMY TAN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEV

NEW YORK

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Published by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.
Published simultaneously in Canada

The text of this book is set in Times Roman.

Designed by MaryJane DiMassi

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tan, Amy.
The kitchen god's wife / Amy Tan.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-399-13578-2 I. Title.

PS3570.A48K58 1991

91-7828 CIP

813'.54—dc20

Printed in the United States of America 12 13 14 15

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



TO MY MOTHER, DAISY TAN,
AND HER HAPPY MEMORIES OF
MY FATHER, JOHN (1914–1968),
AND MY BROTHER PETER (1950–1967)
WITH LOVE AND RESPECT



I am grateful to the other mothers of this book:
Sandra Dijkstra, Molly Giles, and Faith Sale.
As a writer, I feel lucky to have your wisdom and advice.
As a friend, I feel blessed. And thanks always to
Robert Foothorap, Gretchen Schields, and Lou DeMattei
for warmth, humor, and Chinese take-out food—
essential ingredients for writing this book.





I

THE SHOP OF THE GODS

Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument.

"Pearl-ah, have to go, no choice," my mother said when she phoned last week. After several minutes I learned the reason for her call: Auntie Helen was inviting the whole family to my cousin Bao-bao's engagement party.

"The whole family" means the Kwongs and the Louies. The Kwongs are Auntie Helen, Uncle Henry, Mary, Frank, and Baobao. And these days "the Louies" really refers only to my mother and me, since my father is dead and my brother, Samuel, lives in New Jersey. We've been known as "the whole family" for as long as I can remember, even though the Kwongs aren't related to us by blood, just by marriage; Auntie Helen's first husband was my mother's brother, who died long before I was born.

And then there's my cousin Bao-bao, whose real name is Roger. Everyone in the family has been calling him Bao-bao ever since he was a baby, which is what bao-bao means, "precious baby." Later, we kept calling him that because he was the crybaby who always wailed the minute my aunt and uncle walked in the door, claiming we other kids had been picking on him. And even though he's now thirty-one years old, we still think of him as Bao-bao—and we're still picking on him.

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"Bao-bao? How can he have an engagement party?" I said. "This will be his third marriage."

"Fourth engagement!" my mother said. "Last one he didn't marry, broken off after we already sent a gift. Of course, Helen is not calling it engagement party. She is saying this is a big reunion for Mary."

"Mary is coming?" I asked. Mary and I have a history that goes beyond being cousins. She's married to Doug Cheu, who went to medical school with my husband, Phil Brandt, and in fact, she was the one who introduced us to each other sixteen years ago.

"Mary is coming, husband and children, too," my mother said. "Flying from Los Angeles next week. No time to get a special discount. Full-price tickets, can you imagine?"

"Next week?" I said, searching for excuses. "It's kind of late notice to change our plans. We're supposed to—"

"Auntie Helen already counted you in. Big banquet dinner at Water Dragon Restaurant—five tables. If you don't come she is one-half table short."

I pictured Auntie Helen, who is already quite short and round, shrinking to the size of a table leg. "Who else is coming?"

"Lots of big, *important* people," my mother answered, saying the word "important" as if to refer to people she didn't like. "Of course, she is also telling people Bao-bao will be there with his new fiancée. And then everybody asks, 'Fiancée? Bao-bao has a new fiancée?' Then Helen, she says, 'Oh, I forgot. This is supposed to be a big surprise announcement. Promise not to tell.'

My mother sniffed. "She lets everyone know that way. So now you have to bring a gift, also a surprise. Last time what did you buy?"

"For Bao-bao and that college girl? I don't know, maybe a candy dish."

"After they broke up, did he send it back?"

"Probably not. I don't remember."

"You see! That's how the Kwongs are. This time don't spend so much."

Two days before the dinner I got another phone call from my mother.

"Now it is too late to do anything about it," she said, as if whatever it was were my fault. And then she told me Grand Auntie

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Du was dead at age ninety-seven. This news did come to me as a surprise; I thought she had already died years ago.

"She left you nice things," my mother said. "You can come get it this weekend."

Grand Auntie Du was actually Helen's blood relative, her father's half sister, or some such thing. I remember, however, it was my mother who had always helped take care of Grand Auntie. She carried out her garbage every week. She kept the old lady from subscribing to magazines every time she got a sweepstakes notice with her name printed next to the words "One Million Dollars." She petitioned Medi-Cal over and over again to pay for Grand Auntie's herbal medicines.

For years my mother used to complain to me how she did these things—not Helen. "Helen, she doesn't even offer," my mother would say. And then one day—this was maybe ten years ago—I cut my mother off. I said, "Why don't you just tell Auntie Helen what's bothering you and stop complaining?" This was what Phil had suggested I say, a perfectly reasonable way to get my mother to realize what was making her miserable so she could finally take positive action.

But when I said that, my mother looked at me with a blank face and absolute silence. And after that, she did stop complaining to me. In fact, she stopped talking to me for about two months. And when we did start talking again, there was no mention of Grand Auntie Du ever again. I guess that's why I came to think that Grand Auntie had already died long ago.

"What was it?" I asked when I heard the news, trying to sound quiet and shocked. "A stroke?"

"A bus," my mother said.

Apparently, Grand Auntie Du had been in vigorous health, right up to the end. She was riding the One California bus when it lurched to the side to avoid what my mother described as a "hotrod with crazy teenagers" running a stop sign. Grand Auntie pitched forward and fell in the aisle. My mother had gone right away to visit her at the hospital, of course. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong, besides the usual bumps and bruises. But Grand Auntie said she couldn't wait for the doctors to find out what she already knew. So she made my mother write down her will, who should get the thirty-year-old nubby sofa, her black-and-white TV set, that sort of thing.

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Late that night, she died of an undetected concussion. Helen had been planning to visit the next day, too late.

"Bao-bao Roger said we should sue, one million dollars," my mother reported. "Can you imagine? That kind of thinking. When we found out Grand Auntie died, he didn't cry, only wants to make money off her dead body! Hnh! Why should I tell him she left him two lamps? Maybe I will forget to tell him."

My mother paused. "She was a good lady. Fourteen wreaths already." And then she whispered: "Of course, we are giving everyone twenty-percent discount."

My mother and Auntie Helen co-own Ding Ho Flower Shop on Ross Alley in Chinatown. They got the idea of starting the business about twenty-five years ago, right after my father died and Auntie Helen was fired from her job. I suppose, in some way, the flower shop became the dream that would replace the disasters.

My mother had used the money donated by the First Chinese Baptist Church, where my father had served as an assistant pastor. And Auntie Helen used the money she had saved from her job at another flower shop, which was where she learned the business. That was also the place that had fired her. For being "too honest," is what Auntie Helen revealed to us as the reason. Although my mother suspected it was because Auntie Helen always urged her customers to buy the cheapest bouquets to save money.

"Sometimes I regret that I ever married into a Chinese family," Phil said when he heard we had to go to San Francisco, a hundred miles round-trip from our house in San Jose, made worse by weekend football traffic. Although he's become genuinely fond of my mother over the fifteen years we've been married, he's still exasperated by her demands. And a weekend with the extended family is definitely not his preferred way to spend his days off from the hospital.

"Are you sure we have to go?" he said absently. He was busy playing with a new software program he had just loaded onto his laptop computer. He pressed a key. "Hotcha!" he exclaimed to the screen, and clapped his hands. Phil is forty-three years old, and with his wiry gray hair he usually strikes most people as reserved and dignified. At that moment, however, he had the pure intensity of a little boy playing with a toy battleship.

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I pretended to be equally busy, perusing the help-wanted section. Three months ago, I took a position as a speech and language clinician with the local school district. And while I was basically happy with the job, I secretly worried that I had missed a better opportunity. My mother had put those thoughts in my head. Right after I announced I had been chosen over two other candidates for the same position, she said, "Two? Only two people wanted that job?"

And now Phil looked up from his computer, concerned. And I knew what he was thinking, about my "medical condition," as we called it, the multiple sclerosis, which thus far had left me not debilitated but easily fatigued. "It'll be a stressful weekend," he said. "Besides, I thought you couldn't stand your cousin Bao-bao. Not to mention the fact that Mary will be there. God, what a dingbat."

"Um."

"So can't you get out of it?"

"Um-nh."

He sighed. And that was the end of the discussion. Over the years that we've been married, we've learned to sidestep the subject of my family, my duty. It was once the biggest source of our arguments. When we were first married, Phil used to say that I was driven by blind devotion to fear and guilt. I would counter that he was selfish, that the things one had to do in life sometimes had nothing to do with what was fun or convenient. And then he would say the only reason we had to go was that I had been manipulated into thinking I had no choice, and that I was doing the same thing to him. And then our first baby, Tessa, came along, and a year later my illness was diagnosed. The shape of our arguments changed. We no longer fought self-righteously over philosophical differences concerning individual choice, perhaps because Phil developed a sense of duty toward the baby, as well as to me, or at least to my medical condition. So the whole issue of individual choice became tricky, a burden to keep up, until it fell away, along with smoking cigarettes, eating veal, and wearing ivory.

These days, we tend to argue about smaller, more specific issues—for example, my giving in to Tessa's demands to watch another half-hour of television, and not our different attitudes toward discipline as a whole. And in the end, we almost always agree—

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perhaps too readily, because we already know the outcome of most disagreements.

It's a smoother life, as easy as we can make it. Although it bothers me from time to time. In fact, sometimes I wish we could go back to the old days when Phil would argue and I would defend my position and convince at least myself that I was right. Whereas nowadays—today, for instance—I'm not really sure why I still give in to my family obligations. While I would never admit this to Phil, I've come to resent the duty. I'm not looking forward to seeing the Kwongs, especially Mary. And whenever I'm with my mother, I feel as though I have to spend the whole time avoiding land mines.

So maybe it was guilt toward Phil or anger toward myself that made me do this: I waited until the next day to tell Phil we'd have to stay overnight—to attend Grand Auntie Du's funeral as well.

For the dreaded weekend, Phil and I had decided to come into the city early to get settled and perhaps take the girls to the zoo. The day before, we had had a polite argument with my mother over where we would stay.

"That's very kind of you, Winnie," Phil reasoned with my mother over the phone. "But we've already made reservations at a hotel." I listened on the other line, glad that I had suggested he call and make the excuses.

"What hotel?" my mother asked.

"The TraveLodge," Phil lied. We were actually booked at the Hyatt.

"Ai, too much money!" my mother concluded. "Why waste money that way? You can stay at my house, plenty of rooms."

And Phil had declined gracefully. "No, no, really. It's too much trouble. Really."

"Trouble for who?" my mother said.

So now Phil is getting the girls settled in the room that once belonged to my younger brother. This is where they always stay whenever Phil and I go away for a medical convention. Actually, sometimes we just say it's a medical convention, and then we go back home and do all the household chores we aren't able to finish when the children are around.

Phil has decided that Tessa, who is eight, will sleep on the twin bed, and three-year-old Cleo will get the hideaway cot.