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Chapter 2

Gail stared at the table, dumbfounded. Two places were laid for breakfast. Was her maid *deliberately* trying to hurt and sabotage her?

Conchita entered, carrying a tray with two bowls of *congee*, the plain rice porridge served every morning. Seeing Gail's furious glare, she gasped "oh my god!" and quickly removed one setting. As her maid placed just one bowl down, their eyes met briefly, and to Gail's surprise, Conchita said. "She just wanted to go home for Chinese New Year. Was this such a sin that the Lord should take her too?"

Conchita's words bothered her. Despite the enforced religious education at the Catholic school she attended as a girl, Gail dismissed Catholicism, and all religion, as benign superstition. She ate, hungrily, having barely touched dinner the night before. Sleep too had been fitful, her body charged and restless.

The phone rang. It was Barbara Chu, whom she hadn't managed to reach yesterday.

Even though the two women were not extremely close, talking to an old familiar voice reassured Gail. Repeating the story, that moment of discovery — *how horrible to have been so far away*, Barbara said — and it helped to know that someone who was a parent and also traveled for work would understand this.

Barbara, a senior partner at one of the "big six" global accounting firms, was horrified. "Why didn't you say something on your message?" she demanded. "I'd have called last night if I'd known, come over with our friends. You shouldn't be alone at a time like this."

"I didn't want to *ma faan* you," Gail replied.

"Come on Gail, after all these years? How can tragedy be too much trouble?"

Yet even as they chatted, Barbara recalled the last funeral and knew that it was up to her to tell the others and harness collective sympathy. Gail would be reticent about this the way she was about everything, even when her son had died from a snake bite of all things who would have imagined such a possibility, so tragic, and now this, this dreadful accident! But the girl hadn't changed, not really, too independent for her own good, always going it alone, *still* as ridiculously secretive, and melodramatic, as when she was a teenager — but then, that *was* Gail Szeto and after all these years, one accepted this and didn't ask questions anymore. Afterwards, she rang the "old girls," what they named their network of alumnae from their girls' school — mostly senior professionals, all Chinese, many educated abroad, plus a few society ladies, *tai tai*'s married into wealth, themselves being from money — whom Gail saw five, maybe six times a year over dinners to gossip with about work, to trade family stories out of earshot of husbands, to reminisce as they pushed the boundaries of middle age, comforting themselves by recalling the girls they once had been.