

NIGHT OF MANY DREAMS

GAIL TSUKIYAMA



Praise for Gail Tsukiyama and *Night of Many Dreams*

“Tsukiyama [writes with] wit, grace, and keen insight.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“[Tsukiyama] brings a fluid elegance to her complicated novels.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

“Tsukiyama’s third novel is a quiet, simply told story whose denouement strikes the reader with unexpected poignancy.... Tsukiyama demonstrates how the strength of family bonds can provide spiritual sustenance.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Particularly fine at evoking how scent and aroma can jog the memory and clutch at the heart, the tale grows in richness as it proceeds, a paean to the sustaining pleasures of family.”

—*Booklist*

“Tsukiyama’s writing style has a controlled fluidity, that hints at explosive passions lurking beneath the surface.... A sensory experience.”

—*Los Angeles Japanese Daily*

*Night
of Many
Dreams*

Gail Tsukiyama



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FOR MY FAMILY,

NEAR AND FAR

Acknowledgments

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I am deeply grateful to Catherine de Cuir, Cynthia Dorfman, Blair Moser, and Abby Pollak for their ongoing generosity of spirit. And to Norma Peterson, whose life and words will always remain in my heart.

Home would be *here*. I'd made it, unconscious, and the roots were deep.

—*Reynolds Price, "Kate Vaiden"*

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A Reading Group Guide

Chapter 1

The Floating Family—1940

Emma

All the other women in the Lew family were beautiful. Emma saw it time and time again, in the striking faces of her mother and sister, in the old yellow-edged photos of her ancestors. The difference that set her apart from Mah-mee and her older sister, Joan, haunted Emma. It wasn't that she was ugly, but in photos of herself, even as a baby, she saw a too-large nose, a too-round face, that made her feel awkward and conspicuous. She sometimes wondered what kind of fate had caused generations of Lew beauty to be withheld from her.

Emma sat at her father's desk in her parents' bedroom watching her sister get dressed to go out to collect money. Ever since she was a little girl, Joan had tried to appear older by borrowing her mother's clothes and cosmetics, disrupting the neat row of jars and bottles that lined the dresser, upsetting Mah-mee when she was home. Now fourteen, Joan worked as carefully as an artist, darkening the mole on the left side of her upper lip, then applying makeup and dressing so perfectly, Emma thought Joan must be the most beautiful young woman in Hong Kong.

Emma glanced at the silver-framed photo sitting on one side of the desk. She leaned forward and pressed her fingertips against the two girls in the black-and-white snapshot taken almost two years ago in front of their house. In it, Joan was twelve, five years older and at least a foot taller. Emma looked hard at herself. Her flat features stared back. She stood skinny and pale, dressed in a Western-style cotton dress with puffed sleeves and a Peter Pan collar, while Joan looked beautiful in a sleeveless silk cheung sam that Emma remembered had been the color of jade. Emma recalled posing for the camera, standing on her toes so she would appear taller, leaning lightly against Joan so she wouldn't fall. Still, they looked more like acquaintances than sisters. Ever since the picture was taken, Emma had tried to catch up, as

if the years that divided her from Joan were simply a space she could cross over.

Ba ba had snapped the photo during the summer of 1938, a few months before the Japanese invaded Canton. Not long after the invasion, Joan had started collecting receipts from the shops and department stores that owed money to their father. Emma could tell by the relaxed smile on Joan's face then, that the photo had been taken before these monthly money-collecting days began. Even the mole on Joan's upper lip appeared faded, less serious now.

Until 1939, their father's trading company, Ten Thousand Profits, had done very well. From his main office in Japan, he exported everything—bolts of silk, lacquerware, antiques—to Hong Kong and throughout China. While their father and mother traveled to Japan and China on business, sometimes for six months at a time, Emma and Joan stayed in Hong Kong with their gold-toothed servant, Foon. They were also looked after by their mother's first cousin Auntie Go, who lived two houses away.

Not until her father's business began to falter did Emma really understand that a war had begun. Salvaging his company meant staying longer in Japan, so Ba ba had decided to send out fourteen-year-old Joan to collect his outstanding debts. Ten Thousand Profits had always been a family-run business. In the absence of sons, Joan was his only choice. Besides, she already knew some of the shop owners through longtime family dealings. Any money Joan collected was used for household expenses in Hong Kong. More often than not, they barely scraped by from month to month.

Emma wondered how Joan could be so brave. For almost a year, on every last Thursday of the month, Emma had sat outside their house and waited nervously for her return. Emma worried incessantly about money. In the beginning, if Joan returned empty-handed, Emma actually felt physically ill, a dizziness filling her head that made her pause. But nowadays, when Joan finally came into view, walking slowly up the slant of the hill, Emma looked hard for the slightest sign of how her day had been. She relaxed when she saw Joan's familiar smile, the darkened mole, knowing that however anxious she was about the money, at least her sister was safely back home.

Emma glanced up from the photo as her sister unscrewed the lid from a jar. Joan sat in front of the mirror gently patting makeup onto her cheeks and forehead. Emma couldn't remember how many Thursdays she had sat watching the ritual of Joan's preparations for collecting debts. Most of the

time, Emma loved to sit on the red and green silk-embroidered bedspread, which was forbidden to her when her mother was home. And she loved smelling the sweet scents that reminded her of department stores. While Emma would never waste so much time in front of a mirror, she watched mesmerized as her sister sat gazing at her own reflection, outlining the red lipstick, darkening her eyebrows into pencil-thin half-moons, dabbing on Mah-mee's Shalimar perfume. The final touch in Joan's attempt to appear older was to put on their mother's black cashmere coat with the beaver collar, matching black gloves, and a hat. When Joan was finally satisfied with her creation, she sighed softly, then turned around like an actress prepared to go onstage and said in a deep, throaty voice, "*I'm veady to go.*"

"Garbo?" Emma guessed, continuing a game they'd been playing for years.

Joan laughed. "Right. You're getting good, or else I'm getting better." She rolled her eyes and tilted her head back, imitating a scene from the movie *Camille*, which they'd seen together.

Ordinarily, Emma would watch and remain quiet. But on this particular clear and cool February morning, before Joan had a chance to turn away from the mirror, Emma caught her eye and asked, "Can I go with you?"

Emma swallowed and waited for an answer. She had been wanting to ask Joan for months, hoping she could be of some help.

Joan glanced back at her, then adjusted her hat in the mirror once more. "You're too young."

"I'm almost ten," Emma argued. "Besides, don't you want the company?"

Joan was silent a moment, staring at her little sister's reflection in the mirror. "I guess, just this once," she finally answered. "But keep quiet. Let me do the talking."

Emma held lightly on to the back of Mah-mee's black coat as Joan walked confidently through the crowd and down Queen's Road. Emma felt dizzy with the blur of passing faces, and proud that most of them were watching Joan. Years from now, she knew she'd remember the soft feel of the cashmere, and the sweet, thick scent of Joan's perfume, which drifted through the cool air, protecting them.

They turned onto a small street and entered a crowded shop filled with