Father was silent. We could all hear Grandmama's rocker.

“What about Sek-Lung?” Older Brother Jung pointed angrily at me.

“He was sick last year, but this year he should have at least started Chinese school, instead of picking over garbage cans!”

“He starts next year,” Father said, in a hard tone that immediately warned everyone to be silent. Liang slammed her book.

Grandmama went on rocking quietly in her chair. She complimented my mother on her knitting, made a remark about the “strong beauty” of Kiam's brushstrokes which, in spite of himself, immensely pleased him. All this babbling noise was her family torn and confused in a strange land: everything here was so very foreign and scientific.

The truth was, I was sorry not to have started school the year before. In my innocence I had imagined going to school meant certain privileges worthy of all my brothers' and sister's complaints. The fact that my lung infection in my fifth and sixth years, mistakenly diagnosed as TB, earned me some reprieve, only made me long for school the more. Each member of the family took turns on Sunday, teaching me or annoying me. But it was the countless hours I spent with Grandmama that were my real education. Tapping me on my head she would say, “Come, Sek-Lung, we have our work,” and we would walk up the stairs to her small crowded room.