MOTHER CLUCKER

In her new "sort of" memoir, Lainey Gossip's ELAINE LUI divulges her most personal scoop yet: the inner workings of her insanely close relationship with her mom, semi-affectionately known as the Squawking Chicken. Over dim sum, MAUREEN HALUSHAK observes the dynamic. Read on for the full experience, plus an exclusive excerpt

PHOTOGRAPHY: JACLYN LOCKE. ILLUSTRATION: LAUREN SCHROER.

"I like to suck on the longest toe first, like this," says Elaine Lui, before clenching a chicken foot between her teeth. It's noon on Sunday, and the Lui family—Elaine, father Bernard, mother Judy and husband Jacek—is gathered around a large table laden with dim sum at Legend Chinese in Thornhill, Ont., where they've been regulars for the past decade. I follow suit and quickly realize there's no graceful way to eject toe cartilage from one's mouth. "Look, Ma! She ate it," says Lui, as Judy smiles tightly in my direction.

I've been invited here today to observe the legendary Squawking Chicken in her natural habitat. Anyone familiar with Lui's celebrity dish blog, Lainey Gossip, knows that her mother—referred to as the Squawking Chicken by virtue of her brash voice and ballsy demeanour—figures large in her life. So much so that Lui has written an advice manual–cum–memoir about their relationship, the just-released *Listen to the Squawking Chicken*.

Admittedly, I had low expectations for the book. Not due to apprehensions about Lui's talent, but precisely the opposite: I'm such a fan that I didn't want to set myself up for disappointment. As it turns out, Lui herself is a "First-Book Bitch," a term she uses on her blog for a writer who hits it out of the park on her debut.

Listen to the Squawking Chicken is a funny, seemingly unfiltered ode to Judy, who was born in Hong Kong and rose above a difficult start to play a near mythical role in her daughter's life. Judy's parents were chronic gamblers and often in debt; she had to quit school in Grade 10 and waitress for extra household cash. She was raped at 15 and tried to overdose on pills afterwards; her parents refused to take her to the hospital, "to save money and also to save face," Lui writes. The Chicken eventually moved to Toronto with her husband to build a better life, only to find herself waiting tables again. She ultimately returned to Hong Kong, exhausted, leaving her husband and six-year-old daughter behind. It's a story that verges on sad smut (Lui's term for gossip related to topics such as death, suicide and drug addiction), the likes of which Lui refuses to discuss in much detail on her site.

Today's lunch has been in the works for weeks, meticulously planned with the aid of two PR associates and the insight of the Squawking Chicken's Chinese calendar, down to date (February 23 is more auspicious than the 22nd) and seating plan: Lui and her mother will be side by side with their backs to a window, so that *FLARE*'s photographer, who has 15 minutes, can get a decent shot as we eat.

I walk into Legend's lunchtime din with trepidation, because such highly orchestrated interviews often don't yield the one thing a writer wants: an authentic experience. But I needn't have worried. Within seconds, I'm loading my plate with spareribs and fried turnip cakes from the lazy Susan, catching up with Lui, whom I've interviewed before, and desperately attempting to impress her mom (hence the chicken foot). The 64-year-old Squawking Chicken is gorgeous, with perfect skin, a huge smile and shiny black bobbed hair. She's also, Lui tells me, on her best behaviour, constantly ensuring I have enough hot water (her beverage of choice) in my cup and signalling the waiter to bring clean plates midway through the meal with a wave of her rhinestone-manicured fingers. "She's been really worried about the plates," Lui whispers, with an eye roll. When the photographer arrives at the allotted time, the Squawking Chicken hands her a plate.

Could it be that the Chicken is more chirp than squawk? It appears that way, even after the table is cleared and our official interview begins. "Am I too bad?" she asks with a girlish laugh when I bring up the book. Was it hard for her to relive the dark times in her life? Does she feel uncomfortable sharing her story with the world? "It's OK," she says, >

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after consulting with Lui in Cantonese. "I don't want to keep anything a secret."

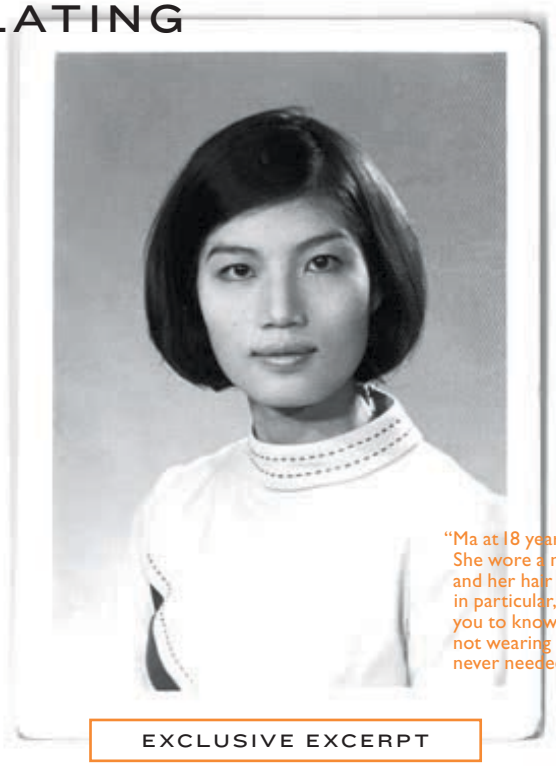
Nor does Lui, apparently, writing openly in my favourite chapter, "You Will Be Thanking Me for Your Entire Life," about getting angry at the Chicken after she bailed on her, or, as Lui puts it, "f—ed off with another man." (Following her parents' split, Lui and her mother lived apart for a decade, though she spent summers and school holidays in Hong Kong with the Chicken and her second husband. Her parents eventually reunited when Lui was 16.)

Lui's candour on this subject surprised me. When I previously profiled her for *FLARE*, she was tight-lipped about the after-effects of her parents' divorce. But in reading the book, I realized that she probably just wanted these stories told in her own words, not mine. Lui writes: "[Ma's] secrets, even though some of them were terrible, became her truths, because she was the first to squawk them out before anyone else, owning them before they could own her. In doing so, she taught me that if you can tell the story of the worst thing that has ever happened to you, you'll never be silenced."

At the end of our interview, I steer the conversation toward Chinese astrology—the Squawking Chicken is an ardent believer. I tell her I was born in the year of the snake and ask her for career advice (I have a particular goal in mind, which continues to elude me). "This year, snake is good," she says, noting that August should be especially fortuitous. "In the winter, snake is tired. In summertime, snake go out." This is encouraging.

I'm about to shut off my recorder when the Squawking Chicken looks me in the eye and bursts into a smile brighter than her canary-yellow sweater. "But one thing…" she says, her voice finally rising into its promised pitch. "You change your eyebrows!" I'm momentarily taken aback as the rest of the table erupts in laughter. "A little bit darker! Better!"

She confers with Lui in Cantonese again. "Right now," Lui says to me, "there's no arch. So she wants you to add one. That's where your power is." Point taken. I say my goodbyes, make my way to my car and immediately book a brow appointment.

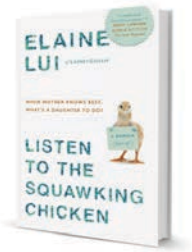


"Ma at 18 years old in 1968. She wore a mini-dress and her hair in a bob, but in particular, she wants you to know that she's not wearing any makeup—never needed it"

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

I don't ever remember Ma telling me that I was beautiful. It's not that she ever said I was ugly. Or that she didn't, on occasion, tell me I looked nice, even pretty. But between Ma and me, there's never been that mother-daughter movie moment, somewhere in the third act, when she's held my hand, and through eyes brimming with tears, she's whispered, her voice choked with emotion: *"Baby, you are so beautiful."*

For starters, Ma and I don't speak like that to each other. Actually, we don't speak like that to anyone. Ma abhors affection—physical and verbal. She's not great with hugs—giving or receiving. And corny talk is gross to her. This is partly cultural. "I love you" in Chinese is super, super cringey. In our language people just don't say it like that, straight up. We might say, "I care about you a lot." Or, "I like you so much," but actually uttering those three words, "I love you," is uncommon. It sounds weird. It sounds uncomfortably intimate. "I love you" is used only between lovers, never as a general expression of feeling between anyone in any other kind of relationship, and even then it's reserved for those very rare occasions, in total privacy and never as an open declaration.



Listen to the Squawking Chicken: When Mother Knows Best, What's a Daughter to Do? A Memoir (Sort Of)
Elaine Lui
(Random House Canada, $28)

But the Squawking Chicken's emotional reticence goes beyond the standard Chinese reserve. She's just >

Above: "My parents' official wedding portrait, taken on April 1, 1971, after they were married at city hall in Tsim Sha Tsui in Hong Kong. Ma wore 'a little' makeup because 'it was a special occasion.'" Left: "Me at six months. Many Chinese babies are given a jade bracelet to wear. When it breaks, the jade pieces are often turned into pendants for necklaces"

not one to share her affection through words or gestures. Ma prefers to show her love through action. So if she ever did tell me she loves me, or that I'm beautiful, I think I would laugh. Or rush her to the hospital. Because that would be a sign that she'd gone insane. These are just not words that would ever come out of Ma's mouth. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I was eleven years old when Ma first told me I wasn't beautiful. Of course, we were at Grandmother's mah-jong den. While Ma played, I watched the Miss Hong Kong pageant on TV. Back then, the Miss Hong Kong pageant was a big deal. There were only two main broadcasters in Hong Kong in the eighties. TVB was the most watched and most powerful. It had the resources to turn Miss Hong Kong into the major event of the summer, splitting each round into a week-end special, so that the pageant took up almost an entire month. Everyone watched Miss Hong Kong. Everyone talked about Miss Hong Kong. And every little girl wanted to be Miss Hong Kong.

It was the day of the semi-finals. The favourite that year was Joyce Godenzi, born to an Australian father and Chinese mother. Godenzi was gorgeous, with wide-set eyes and curly hair, a totally different aesthetic than all the other contestants. Hong Kong was obsessed with her. I was obsessed with her. I practised walking like her. I threw a shawl around my shoulders, pretending it was the Miss Hong Kong cape that's presented to the winner when she's crowned. I clutched a soup ladle in both hands, imagining it was the diamond sceptre that Miss Hong Kong carried around on her victory lap. I worked on my smile in the mirror, hoping to achieve a combination of sweetness and whatever my idea of intrigue was at the time.

My biggest concern in previous years had been the question-and-answer section. I worried that my Chinese answers wouldn't be good enough since English was my first language and I couldn't read or write in Chinese. But Joyce took care of that. Joyce's Chinese wasn't great either, and all the aunties talked about how this was an advantage because being a foreign-raised candidate was considered exotic.

That afternoon, Ma's sister was on her way to get her hair done. Ma wanted me out of the way for a while so she told me to tag along. One of the other stylists at the salon had extra time and ended up curling my hair into ringlets, just like Joyce Godenzi (sort of). When we returned to Grandmother's, all the mah-jong aunties, and Grandmother too, went bananas over how pretty I looked. They said I was so pretty, I could enter the Miss Hong Kong pageant in a few years. This made my life … for about thirty seconds. Until the Squawking Chicken weighed in: "You're not pretty enough to be Miss Hong Kong. I could have been Miss Hong Kong. But Miss Hong Kong is a whore."

It's true. Ma was a first-class beauty. I've seen the photos—because she shows them to me all the time. While I do resemble her, I'm also half my father, and she reminds me of this all the time too. "It's too bad you got your stocky body and thick legs from your dad's side." All the aunties reacted like you're probably reacting right now. How could she say that to a little girl? Let her dream. But for Ma, dreaming was the problem. "Dream? Stop putting dreams in her head. You think I bust my ass raising a daughter just so she could be a beauty pageant whore?"

Most people in Hong Kong believe that the Hong Kong entertainment system is corrupt. And many people believed that Miss Hong Kongs were >

"In our first house, when I was three. The carpet was orange. Ma put me in tights because she thought they would make my feet look smaller"

just glorified escorts for the rich old men who ran the industry. The following year a public uproar broke out when the winner was revealed to be someone people considered inadequate (she was pretty average-looking and short), and their suspicions seemed to be confirmed when she started dating the geriatric chairman of the network.

So it's not that Ma meant to be cruel when she told me that I could never be Miss Hong Kong. She had her reasons. First, obviously, she didn't want me sleeping my way to success. But being "beautiful" also wasn't an attribute she considered to be important in my case. Or, for that matter, all that useful. From her personal experience, beauty, her beauty, didn't fix anything and it didn't make anything either. In Ma's mind, being beautiful only caused her to be exploited by her parents, and their neglect caused her to be violated as a young girl, and, later, resulted in her being dependent on men—first my father and then my stepfather.

I met him for the first time when Ma finally sent for me to spend the summer with her in Hong Kong a year after she and Dad broke up. I was seven. By this point, I was afraid to leave Dad. I was afraid to get on the plane by myself as an Unaccompanied Minor. But I was more afraid of who I would encounter on the other side.

A gorgeous young woman met me in the airport arrivals area. Her hair was parted in the middle, hanging down each shoulder, held back by jewelled clips on either side. This was not the tired, harried woman who worked two jobs that I remembered. She lifted a multi-ring-adorned hand. And her long red nails beckoned me forward. A glimmer of recognition. And then … the voice. "ELAINE!" The Squawking Chicken. My mother. I was claimed. "This is Uncle."

Ma introduced me to an older man standing next to her with benevolent eyes and a goofy expression. He had no hair and wore glasses. He was tall, taller than Dad, with a soft belly and a round face, the kind of face that ate well, drank well and never worried. Uncle tried to hug me. I resisted. He laughed, a kind laugh, and patted me on the head. "We're going to have a great summer," he told me. Then he led us to the car and drove us home, only he didn't leave. Uncle came inside too. And Uncle stayed. In Ma's bedroom.

He was an executive with an oil and gas company. When he went to work, Ma played mah-jong with the old crew. He indulged my mother's whims. He was generous with my greedy grandmother. He loaned money to her siblings. He didn't mind when Ma invited her mah-jong friends over for all-night sessions. He didn't shut himself in the TV room and smoke cigarettes, sulking about money, sulking about life's injustices. Instead, Uncle offered to go out for late-night takeout. Uncle offered to do everything. And he never seemed bothered when people teased him that Ma ran his life.

Ma met Uncle before she married Dad, while she was working in the smuggling trade, shipping Western goods into Communist China. He was almost forty years old while she was only twenty. He pursued her but she wasn't interested. Shortly after she returned to Hong Kong, they ran into each other again. She was haggard and gaunt. She was sick all the time—the bitter unhappiness of the last few years had taken its toll on her body. She locked herself in a dark room at Grandmother's house, barely eating, trying to figure out her next steps. Uncle came to visit—bringing healing herbal teas and soups, offering to take the entire family out for dinner, offering to take Ma to the doctor. Grandmother was quickly charmed. She encouraged Ma to go out with him. She practically pushed Ma out the door. Eventually, Uncle wore her down. He had no expectations. He just wanted to make >

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"Ma and I had matching haircuts when I was nine. She had come back to Canada for a short visit. I would quit ballet a couple of years later because my legs weren't straight enough"

her happy. He just wanted to look after her. He just wanted to make it easy for her.

"Easy" was the magic word. It had never been easy for Ma. She was exhausted. She was twenty-nine years old and she was tired of rebuilding her life from scratch. Disillusioned by the romanticism of youth, betrayed by the lure of idealistic love, with no assets and no opportunity, with Uncle she wouldn't have to start from nothing and this was a proposition she couldn't afford to walk away from. The Squawking Chicken was nothing if not pragmatic.

Ma was honest with Uncle. She told him that she would always love Dad. She told him that she didn't know if she could ever love him the way she loved Dad. But she promised him she would be loyal to him. She promised him she would be a good wife. She became a great asset to him professionally. She helped him navigate tricky business relationships, advising him on how to diplomatically advance through the company, cautioning him about potential enemies, encouraging him in areas where he could benefit, politically and financially. She accompanied him on business trips around Asia, a lively, pretty accessory, delighting his associates and partners. She looked after his elderly parents, supervising funeral arrangements for his mother when he was too overcome by grief to manage. He grew more and more successful with Ma at his side. And he rewarded her with luxurious gifts [and] trips and, most importantly, by being a wonderful stepfather to me. For a decade they were a formidable couple.

Ma, who trusted very few people, even family, especially family, grew to trust Uncle. Perhaps more than she ever trusted anyone. But over time, Uncle grew to realize that although Ma held up her end of the bargain, no matter how devoted she was to him, no matter the peaceful contentment of their life together, he would never be her One True Love. This began to eat away at him.

When I was sixteen, ten years after they hooked up, Ma found out that Uncle had been spending time with another woman. She first heard it from the neighbours, who casually mentioned that they'd seen a mystery woman coming in and out of the house. Then the housekeeper, Leticia, confirmed that Uncle had a female "friend" over quite often when Ma was at mah-jong. Leticia revealed to Ma that she busted Uncle on several occasions and that he'd begged her not to say anything. Ma immediately checked Uncle's passport. She realised that when he said he was on a business trip to Singapore, he had really been in Hawaii with his lady friend. She then checked the bank account. Turns out, Uncle had purchased a new Mercedes. But there was no Mercedes parked in their driveway. He'd been lavishing gifts on the other woman and depleting their savings.

Ma was furious at Uncle, but it wasn't about the money. What was worse was that, yet again, she'd been disappointed. Once again, she'd let herself be disappointed. She'd let herself trust a person who only let her down. And, once again, that disappointment was a result of her powerlessness. Because Ma believed she could never be independent. She had relied on Dad and he let her down. When she relied on her beauty, though it paid off for brief periods of time, it could not be relied on to bring any lasting fulfillment.

Which is why "beautiful" is not an attribute the Squawking Chicken considers to be a compliment worth giving. It's also why she didn't think beauty should be relevant to me. Because beauty wouldn't bring me what she could never achieve: independence. And Miss Hong Kong was not independent. ●

Ma was honest with Uncle. She told him that she would always love Dad. But she promised him she would be a good wife

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF ELAINE LUI.