

Summary—Jing-mei Woo: “Two Kinds”

In the section's next story, Jing-mei speaks again. She describes her childhood, which was full of pain and resentment linked to having never become the “prodigy” that her mother desired her to be. Suyuan felt certain that Jing-mei could become a prodigy if only she tried hard enough, and at first Jing-mei eagerly complied, trying her skill at a wide range of talents. As Waverly Jong won championship after championship in chess, with Waverly's mother, Lindo, bragging day after day, Suyuan became ever more determined that she would find her daughter's hidden inner talent. But Jing-mei always fell short of her mother's expectations, and as she looked in the mirror one night, she promised herself that she would not allow her mother to try to twist her into what she was not. However, after seeing a nine-year-old Chinese girl play the piano on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Suyuan made Jing-mei take lessons from their neighbor, a retired piano teacher named Mr. Chong. When Jing-mei discovered that Mr. Chong was deaf, and that she could get away with playing the wrong notes as long as she kept up the right rhythm, she decided to take the easy way out. As long as she kept time, she did not have to correct her mistakes.

Mr. Chong and Suyuan entered Jing-mei in a talent contest. Jing-mei played “Pleading Child” from Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood*. Everyone from the Joy Luck Club attended the show. Refusing to practice hard but still vaguely believing that her inner prodigy would emerge and allow her to play well, Jing-mei came to the recital entirely unprepared. She sat down feeling confident, but the performance proved a disaster. Two days later, when

Suyuan insisted that she continue her regular schedule of practice, Jing-mei declared that she wished she were dead like her two sisters (Suyuan's long-lost children from her first marriage in China). Suyuan never mentioned piano lessons again.

Years later, Suyuan offered the family's piano to Jing-mei as a gift for her thirtieth birthday. She stated quietly that Jing-mei could have become a skilled pianist if she had tried. A few months after Suyuan's death, Jing-mei had the piano tuned. When she tried to play "Pleading Child," she was surprised how easily the music returned to her. She then played the piece on the facing page, "Perfectly Contented." After playing both pieces several times, she realized that they were complementary pieces, as if two halves of the same song.