Dancing in Joseph's Coat

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DANCING IN JOSEPH'S COAT

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For
My parents, who gave me spunk
and
Ross, who gave me the moon.
PREFACE

I dance my life in Joseph's coat. Generous squares of jeweled reds from my parents' ancestral land. Snippets of blues, greens, yellows from my many homes. My wandering roots weaving the odd, splendid cloths together. And I dance and rejoice and am blessed in these patches which teach my eyes again and again to see the fine stitches.
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The day after arriving in Taiwan, Anna picked up Fourth Aunt's butcher knife. She stretched out her waist-length hair with one hand and and worked the knife through as if she were playing the violin. She trimmed the uneven ends tight against her head with sewing scissors. Stuck curling clumps of severed hair onto her chin with melted wax. Attached strands to the ends of her eyebrows so they trailed down her face like wild ribbons of ink. Fourth Aunt had raged through the apartment, demanding Anna clean up her face. When Anna remained stiff against the wall, the older woman sulked, feigning complete deafness and a delicate stomach.

Her mother had flown her "home" to a place Anna had never been. A month on the island, the elder woman crooned, to relax, you need this now, I know. Forget about Frank, that crazy dead person. Stay with your Fourth Aunt. She will take care of you. Anna hesitated with the dread of telling another relative about her divorce, but her reticence easily weakened with fatigue. It had taken nearly six months to divert enough energy away from
her humiliation to tell her parents. During that time, Anna prattled frantically about her underpaid job cataloging artifacts at the museum, her father's tyrannical boss, and the latest catastrophies on her mother's favorite soap operas. These topics kept her parents inflamed during entire phone calls.

On her birthday, her father called, cheerfully bellowing, "Happy birthday! Thirty -- the age when parents wonder when their daughter will have children!"

"Huh?" Anna turned up the television. "What? Warm weather here!" She sucked on a block of chocolate. "Frank left me."

"Oh," her father continued, undaunted. "When's he coming back?"

And then Anna understood her father's incomprehension. She was laughing, hysterically, talking in singsong. "He left me. For good. It's over. We're divorced. I'm alone."

Silence. Anna heard her father's hand ride over the mouthpiece and some gurgled conferencing with her mother. Then, her mother grabbed the phone.

"Ack! Divorce? Don't scare us like that. Nobody in our family gets divorced. We're Taiwanese," her mother concluded with bravado. "Why so loud there? Happy birthday." Her monologue continued, detailing their vacation to Baltimore. "The seafood was fresh: delicious! Much better than here in Pittsburgh. But expensive and
they give you only a little bit."

Anna could imagine her mother's look of exaggerated horror when the waiter brought the food out, the hurt tone in her voice as she questioned the size of the portions, as if the quantity were a personal insult.

Her mother sighed. "I wish we could have seafood like that all the time. But more. And free, of course." The older woman would've continued her litany, moving on to an analysis of Baltimore's produce if a loud ka-chunk hadn't sounded on the other end.

"Anna? Anna!"

The stars on screen were having a shoot-out. Anna plucked the receiver off the floor where it had bounced and landed after she hurled it against the couch. "Just dropped the phone, Ma." She shifted and buried herself deeper into her bathrobe, the couch crunching as her weight rolled onto scattered candy wrappers.

"Look, Ma. I'm divorced. Six months now. Got to go."

Her parents took weeks to adjust to Anna's new status. When denial failed to change the situation, they began writing her a series of letters pleading for her to give Frank Collins another chance. Despite the man's cultural shortcomings, they reasoned, he held a good job, came from a good family, and possessed good looks. They considered him good for her. And their arguments were punctuated everywhere with "Why? Why? Why?" Why didn't
she stay married and just ignore him? Why not just fight and continue with life?

With each new letter, Anna quickly ran her marriage through her head. She had dressed attractively, made Frank's favorite dinners, and worried about the appropriateness of his black shoes with his light summer suits. After such replays, she rose in the middle of the night and sat at her desk, surging back with a series of equally passionate letters containing statements like, "HE dumped ME" and "HE doesn't want ME," underlined. She bordered her letters with stick figures beating their chests and huge, contorted faces with mouths askew and tongues hanging out. She never sent the letters, but kept them neatly stacked in Frank's old tackle box. And Anna never told her parents about her infertility, the reason Frank gave for leaving. Or how jealous she was of every thing which could choose to reproduce: of the heavy-teated beagle next door, of worms that duplicate with a simple yank in half, of her mother. Or how she wished her stomach could balloon full and round instead of remaining flaccid against her bones. She never told them how she thought she hated Frank when the point of his desire for fatherhood and her infertility collided. Or how she thought she hated herself more for being unable even to produce more options for herself.

When Anna's mother finally realized the hopelessness of the situation, she bought Anna a roundtrip ticket to
Taipei. She arranged everything. Anna -- having built up a tolerance to the numbing effects of chocolate and tv -- took her vacation time, packed one, small suitcase and was on a plane within two weeks.

Fourth Aunt began her matchmaking the morning after Anna arrived. The old woman was nearly deaf and whispering so loudly on the telephone that Anna heard her in the kitchen: "Ann-a...Frank...shame, shame..." From the little Taiwanese she knew and the furtive rhythm of sighs and clucks of her aunt's lamenting, Anna pieced together the intent of the conversation. Fourth Aunt had arranged a dinner date for her.

So, in cold panic, Anna sawed off her hair.

Despite Anna's independence in Philadelphia, her mother had taken care to infuse her with a sense of ancestral debt. Family honor. Respect for the elderly. Guilt. Fourth Aunt lay sunken in a chair, patting her stomach, and clucking. Occasionally, the old woman moaned in long whistles of breath and turned to a portrait of her great-grandfather. Anna plucked off her makeshift eyebrows and beard. She scrubbed her face. Besides, she consoled herself, the return ticket date was a month away. She had little money and only other relatives' homes to stay at. Fourth Aunt was old; the groaning was making her hoarse.

Since then, Fourth Aunt seemed possessed with renewed energy. She had established a neighborhood reputation
for herself, having found husbands for a friend's daughter who only had three fingers on one hand and for Anna's cousin, Fei-chi, who had been an old maid of thirty-three at the time. However, this was Fourth Aunt's toughest challenge: a thirty-year-old Taiwanese-American with less-than-rudimentary Taiwanese competency, previously married to a "beilun," and handicapped with the inability to haggle at the market. Fourth Aunt felt that all eyes were upon her. Furiously, she arranged for lunch and dinner guests. Chance meetings with friends shopping for fish or mangos with their sons. Sons emerging from back rooms during visits with neighbors. Shows and concerts complete with escorts.

When each man appeared from behind Fourth Aunt, Anna shifted her eyes to the side. One hand slid up and stopped on a cocked hip. The more her aunt gushed over any commonalities between the potential couple, the more Anna's hip tilted. Only when the meetings moved away from Fourth Aunt's view could she unlock her shoulders and lower her hand.

Afterward, sweat would lick across Anna's forehead when a man asked for another dinner or show. "Maybe in a week?" She answered with a polite wave and tried to read the set of the man's eyes or the part in his hair. After the man bid his good night, Anna paced her room. Studied her linear figure in the mirror and practised body positions which gave her torso the illusion of
dimension. She rubbed tight, furious circles on the belly of her perfume bottle with the ball of a finger. The next day, she could never remember what the man looked like.

After one typical dinner with a physics professor from the Taiwan Cultural University, Anna hailed a cab instead of returning home. The professor had been congenial, and polite, but the only English he knew were scientific terms related to physics: quarks, photon, and centrifugal. Unable to grapple with strange words in a familiar language, Anna tried speaking with the Taiwanese she remembered from childhood, but her vocabulary consisted of names of relatives, anatomical parts, and bodily functions. They ended up communicating in a kind of sign language. He would taste a particular dish and give her a thumbs up signal. She would taste something else and give him a thumbs up signal, accompanying the sign with exaggerated expressions of ecstasy. When they ran out of dishes, they signed their approval of each other's clothes, watches, and shoes. The rest of the meal was loud with the talking from surrounding tables.

Anna climbed into the cab. The driver mumbled something, then glared impatiently at her from the rearview mirror when she remained silent. She handed him a note. A Canadian student she met at a bus stop had written "Snake Alley" in characters for her when she explained her ignorance of the local language. "A must see," he had
declared. "Live snakes. Fresh blood. Good for a man," he winked, "...for a woman."

"Ah. Amer-i-can," the cab driver pronounced, the cloud of impatience dissipating from his face as he looked at Anna's crumpled shorts and t-shirt, and wadded the slip of paper. He pursed his lips and made wet, smacking noises. "Amer-i-cans have hairy legs." The man smiled, his eyebrows leaping. He leaned back, running his hand up her bare leg.

She flinched. Slid from his reach and crossed her legs. The wide grin against the backdrop of a car interior sent shivers of recognition up her neck. She didn't trust that smile, that momentary freeze in time when everything else kept moving. Anna felt unsure whether she could distinguish the flash of a smile from a glint of sun. Anna, still unsure of whether Frank had smiled the day they drove to the Apple Festival in Norris. Unsure of whether he said, "Let's marry," even after they had. Or if it had been another trick of light.

Turning her face toward the window, Anna scrutinized the driver's reflection in the glass. She could make out two eyes, heavily browed, over a pinched nose and full lips, but nothing that would have warned her away from stepping into his cab. At her stop, the driver pulled away with a screech and a flap of the door, without returning her change. Anna backed away from the curb, concluded, "Men talk cars."
She remembered the tender, firm pfoom of the doors to Frank's old Honda Civic during their early acquaintance. From her window, she would first see a bobbing golden head, then blue eyes with lids droopy at the corners. She knew that his long-legged lope would follow and carry his outstretched arms, laden with daffodils or silver skinned chocolates.

There was the steady rumble of engine as they made weekend escapes from Philadelphia into the leafy refuge of Lancaster or Deep Creek, car heavy with Navajo blankets, chicken tenderly sliced and wrapped, and genie bottles of rosy wine.

Then the heavy, metallic slam of the trunk the night Frank left.

She winced at how easily she could recall the sound, and hurriedly turned to face Snake Alley. The carnival atmosphere surprised her. Not the mysterious, sultry place she had imagined, Snake Alley was a long, arched corridor with festive red and gold lanterns lining the ceiling. Along both sides of the wide walkway, tiny shops clamored for attention. Carved peach pit necklaces, jades in smoky hues of greens and purples, and festive rice paste ornaments and puppets. One shopkeeper waved Anna over to demonstrate the durability of the ornaments by flinging one against the wall, then showing her that not even the paint had chipped. Vendors had set up carts and makeshift stands of food everywhere: smoked cuttlefish,
skewered and sauced meats, eel, cut open and roasting on small grills, fruits sliced and sweating with juice. The crowds swirled like thick liquid, catching and clogging at the stalls with live slaughtering where men in baggy trousers emceed. The drowsy, musky scents of peoples unused to almost-solid humidity, the spicy wafting haze from the cooking pits, and the slightly tinny smell of fresh blood fused, intoxicating the spectators with a desire to see.

Anna fell easily into the mingle of tourists, pausing in unison in front of a narrow stall with only a couple of tables and a few seated patrons inside. She weaved her way to the front and stood before a makeshift counter lit by a giant, golden lantern. A man with a microphone bantered in careful English, "Come see! Ve-ry dangerous snakes! Drink blood! Gen-toe-men, ve-ry good love med-i-cine!" As he spoke, he tapped at a wall of steel cages. Shifting layers of snakes swarmed inside. With each tap, snakes struck against the wire. The swell of people gathered, settled; the barker put down the microphone. To the confused muttering of the crowd, the man turned his back on his audience and disappeared inside the shop.

From the back of the store, an ancient woman rose slowly from her chair, chewing something, and scratched at the deep center of her back with a bamboo backscratcher. Anna imagined the rasping of the backscratcher against
the papery skin and thought of her own skin which pulled shiny with dryness in some places. The old woman shuffled toward the front of the store, feet flapping in rubber slippers. Her attention excluded the crowd.

She passed by a table where a young woman sat, only her profile visible to the traffic. The man sitting across from her pushed the sweat from his brows back into his long, black sideburns. His face had purpled, swelled from a night of resolute drinking. He glanced once at his companion, then looked down into the plastic cup clutched in his hands. The woman leaned and talked, scowled when he remained motionless.

"How much?" yelled a blond man standing behind Anna. "How much?"

The old woman didn't answer. She unlatched one of the cages, poking in a long pole and pulling it back out with a snake twirled around the hooked end. It writhed: moist metal, shaping and reshaping. The woman's fingers floated over the reptile, then grasped it behind the triangular head, guiding it between a set of pliers. She spit a lychee seed into a can on the floor. The smooth, brown pit clanked against the steel. She squeezed the pliers. The snake's skull caved in with a soft crunch. Its eyes remained open, unflinching, full of the shine of gold. The woman worked with the dull efficiency of one long-used to hanging laundry and set heavy clamps over the snake's mouth, hung the still-twisting body high
on a rack. Running her fingers down the length of the
snake, she pulled it taut before slipping a knife into
its belly. The slit opened, reddened like a sudden bloom.
She crooked a finger into the wound and pulled out the
thick vein. Using a pair of sewing scissors, she snipped
open the vein, then milked the blood into small plastic
cups. When the stream of dark liquid ebbed, she let the
feebly waving snake swing free and offered the cup to
the blond man.

"How much?" the man asked again.

The onlookers began dispersing, moving on to the
next shop. The old woman tottered among them, proffered
cups. The snake tried to curl up but could barely twist,
its gut hanging ridiculously from the slit. Anna remained
still. One cup was left on the table: the liquid looked
almost black. A hole for a finger or a hand to dip into
and disappear. Quickly, she reached for it, but as she
stepped forward, Anna caught the golden reflection of
the lantern on the old woman's knife. Her fingers hovered
over the knife then dropped and slid down the bloody flat
of blade. She tested the edge and watched her blood warm
the steel. Mesmerized by the richness of color and the
steady insistence of the blood as it flowed from the wound,
Anna stared. The intensity of the display from such a
small cut surprised her. She sniffed at the mingled
redness, unable to distinguish the snake's blood from
her own, and twirled her finger to see if the color would
catch the light. The bleeding slowed and stopped as the liquid around the wound began clotting. Anna knew that in a few minutes, the dried blood would turn hard and dark and that in a few days, the resulting scab would itch and fall off. She knew that whether it left a scar or not, she probably wouldn't think about the cut again. Pushing herself away from the table and walking, Anna smoothed the bloody finger across her lips and licked once for gloss.

This last week of Anna's stay, Fourth Aunt, with symptoms of surrender, simply handed Anna a slip of paper with an address on it. Jinhua Xiao, one o'clock. "A doctor," Fourth Aunt tempted from deep in her chair.

He sat at a table by the window, wearing the specified red carnation. Squinting furiously into the sun, he didn't see Anna approach the table. She coughed.

"Ann-a? You are Ann-a Yang Col-lins?"

Anna admitted to this.

"Call me Jeans. My American name," Jinhua said proudly. He glanced nervously at her head before darting his eyes away.

By one-thirty, they still hadn't ordered. Anna had leaned back in her chair and fallen easily into appropriate body language: back curved, face tilted attentively and resting on a hand. The air conditioner blew cold on her bare half-inch of hair. Jeans spoke with a meticulous lack of modulation. Head lowered, eyes fixated on his
napkin, he talked relentlessly.

For hours, Anna, too, used to talk, telling stories about her childhood. On and on, she spoke at Frank's request, as he gazed at her family picture, taken during a rare occasion when all nine brothers and sisters were home at the same time. When she tired, he would take over: breathlessly describing adventures to Disney World, Yellowstone, and Chuck E. Cheese Pizza with their seven or eight kids, endlessly creating educational—but-fun family expeditions. "Kids love that," he constantly pointed out.

He stopped talking beyond the polite after their wedding, spending his time instead on building child-sized furniture. He stopped talking beyond the necessary after they learned of Anna's infertility. She chattered on, stubbornly, about wallpaper patterns and mulching the lawn. He tugged -- playfully, suggestively, she thought at the time -- on his tie. Once, she tugged, too, and winked. He paled. Anna didn't guess.

She wondered, now, how she couldn't have noticed. How anyone could've been so unseeing. Around her, the conversations floated loudly, but most of the speakers looked down at their food or out the window. She glanced at Jeans. His eyes remained fixated, religiously, down. His hands were tucked neatly under the table. She released the top three buttons of her blouse. Licked the tip of her index finger, ran the finger down until it disappeared
inside her bra. Tilted her head back and shaped her mouth into a small "o." Jeans talked on, oblivious.

Anna closed her blouse and placed her palm on the table under his nose. He faltered in his monologue of golf's aerobic and spiritual benefits.

"Do you think I could stick these straws up my nose and suck tea up?" She began peeling the paper from the straws.

Jeans's shoulder twitched. He pulled his head back.

"You're thinking that this is a lot of tea for a little nose, but I think I can handle it." She dipped the straws into her cup and leaned forward.

"But your aunt said you were twenty-five," Jeans whispered.

"Right. Too easy." Anna dumped her tea into an empty bowl. "Let's make it HOT tea. A real challenge." She refilled her cup.

"What are you doing!" Jeans tried to push away from the table but his hands slipped. They bumped into his glass of water which teetered, sloshed, stood. A napkin and chopsticks skidded over the table's edge. A slip of paper underneath the napkin dipped into the air, then fluttered down in lazy sways.

"Thirty," Anna corrected and stood, her skirt puffing. "I'm thirty." She bent to pick up the fallen items. Jeans sat helplessly, his face mottled red.

The paper lay by the next table. When Anna picked
it up, she was surprised she could read it. It was a list, written in neat English: "1. Talk about family. 2. Talk about job..." and ended with "27. Talk about cultural sights of Taipei." On some lines, examples had been cited. Jeans had only gotten to the seventh item: Hobbies and Collections.

Placing the list face down on the table, Anna busied herself dabbing at spills. Jeans snatched the paper and stuffed it into a pocket. She saw that the tip of his index finger was missing.

"I..." He shifted in his chair, hands diving beneath the tablecloth. Freckles of sweat sprouted on his nose. His lips fidgeted against each other. "You are..." he tried again, forcing himself to glance up. "I made... because...because..."

And Anna realized that not one of the month's escorts made the promised call for a second meeting. Fourth Aunt had lamented. Anna shrugged, but chewed her lip. She couldn't recall even one of their names, but as the days passed, she dallied longer in front of the mirror. Shampooed twice. Plucked at her hair to encourage growth. Shrouded her skinny frame and flat stomach under high-bodiced, flowing dresses. Allowed sweet floats of perfume to settle on her shoulders. Colored in her face. But at a restaurant, she would feel her lips' gawdy fluorescence and rush to the bathroom to swipe off the lipstick. Her pearly nail polish looked obvious under
the theatre lights and she had sat on her hands to control
their waving.

She guessed that underneath the tablecloth, Jean's
fingers were tightly laced. He could look like one of
her brothers sitting there, blinking in the sun. Anna
picked up her menu and rested her shoulders against the
cushioned chair. "Tell me about the city," she nodded,
smoothing the pleats of her skirt.
"Going my way," she breathed, slipping inside. Wet hair swung forward and whipped against the dash, leaving it dappled with rain. Her long legs filled the car.

"That depends," Karl said, squinting at the stranger, "on who you are." The car trembled, slipping into stall. He pumped the gas pedal, checked his seat belt. His eyes, usually proficient in obscured light, strained for focus but failed to define her face. He had only caught a glimpse of her under the street lamps.

"You know me," the woman soothed. She lit a match, revealing molasses dark eyes and a cleft in her chin. Passing the light once over his face, she surveyed his features and murmured, "Aahhhhh." When the flame neared her fingers, she placed the match on her tongue, extinguishing it with a quick psst before closing her lips around the ribbon of smoke. "Anyway. It depends on WHAT I am." She swallowed.

Karl's seat belt was uncomfortably twisted and he
tried to smooth it. Why did he stop for a red light at 3 a.m.? The roads had been deserted. When she stepped out from the bus stop, he thought she was crossing the street. He thought he had locked the car doors. She's confused him with someone. The strap held snug, making it difficult for his thick fingers to unravel it. With a loud grunt, he unsnapped the seat belt and yanked it off.

"Light's green, Sugar."

The husky voice jarred his thoughts. For a slip of time, he had forgotten the stranger in the car. Then, he saw the glint of moisture on her lips. He caught the smell of mud and grass tangled in her long hair. He concentrated on imagining how salty her skin would taste on his tongue, how she would feel slippery in his hands like some sea creature.

"Sugar." She turned her face full to him. "Green light." In the flashing shadows, her eyelashes darted out like daggers, then receded. The splice in her chin looked wide as the Monongahela.

It was raining after all, he reminded himself as his foot lifted from the brakes. He imagined her lips, too thin and pressed, but soft after a sweep with her tongue. Her teeth, crooked but strong, holding back the scent of clover. It was just a ride.

"Ooooh, lilies," she crooned as they passed an Easter display in a florist shop window. She pursed her lips
in silent whistle and in that instant, Karl knew that her kisses were rich and ceremonious, and that she had a knack for raising green things. A small, but diverse, vegetable and flower garden where she could identify and pronounce each plant by its proper scientific name.

Names like amitriptyline. Trimethadione. Mephobarbital. Caroline knew every one. Shortly after she and Karl married, she had sat at the piano and listed the drug names she learned that week in pharmacy school. She used to spend hours at the piano then, plunking out keys as she memorized. She invented rhymes to remember their proper groupings and exaggerated the pronunciations in singsong until they both trembled with laughter and excitement at the new shapings of their mouths and rollings of their tongues as they tried each name. They wrestled on the floor, taking turns whispering drug names, and discarding pieces of clothing under the legs of the piano. They had greedily gulped the heavy, citrus smell of fresh wax on old wood.

"Hey!"

Karl's body rocked to the side as the stranger clutched the steering wheel and swerved so violently that her long nails etched into his hand. His skin reddened and beaded with blood. She glared impatiently at him.

"You almost hit that guy."

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. He hadn't seen another car. "Your way. Watch your way," she murmured
in a tight voice and licked the redness from his hand. It didn't hurt and she kept her voice low. She didn't demand, nag; she insisted. Stubborn but courteous. Karl thought he liked that.

"You think everyone's got to do for you," and she turned away, flipping the rearview mirror toward herself. She scrutinized her eyes, nose, lips. Adjusted the thick chain of gold around her neck. He reminded himself of her vanity, a fault he found endearing. And he remained silent as she spoke, focusing instead on the slips of yellow flashing by him on the road. He thought he could distinguish variations in the yellow from street to street. Perhaps someone new had ordered the paint, requesting a hundred gallons of "4021" instead of "4012," Gamboge instead of Cadmium. The woman's damp jeans were the same color as his eyes.

It must be the exact blue, she must have said. She wanted to think of his eyes every moment she looked down at her legs. Only the precise blue would satisfy her. And they had scoured all the shops in the mall and downtown, walking and searching for the exact shade. Finally, when they were exhausted and ready to give up, they had wandered by Torey's Secondhand. On the lean legs of the mannequin in the window, the exact blue waited for them. He remembered how she must have excitedly pulled the jeans on after they raced home, how they frantically tugged them off seconds later. Karl let his mind dwell
on the clank of belt buckle on tile and the fanning of her hair in his ears.

"Stop here." The stranger pointed to a large stone house buttressed by four rising columns. The lights were off and the driveway was empty. "Park on the street. You understand." She pushed her lips forward again.

Karl thought he heard a ringing in his ears. A physiological problem, he had tried to explain to Caroline, that's what it was. Having the other women relieved the ringing in his ears. It's like any other kind of disability that one has to deal with. But it's you, it's always been you, Caroline. "I never," he had soothed, "even asked their names." He eased the car to the curb.

Bursting out of the door, she yelled, "Hurry!" and grabbed his hand. She ran across the lawn to the tall pillars to rest her cheek against the cool surface. "Welcome to the Coliseum," and her look didn't flinch from his. Her eyes were dark as holes, unexpected and sudden, and he tried to step clear, to the door.

She followed, a hand scurrying in a pocket, then abruptly stopped. "Damn. Forgot the keys again." She tugged him toward the side of the house. "The back should be unlocked."

The ringing grew louder and bigger as it whirled faster in his brain, and faster, until he could hear nothing but her. Her words slid down the swirling funnel until they dropped and caught and pinched. Karl moved
across the lawn to counteract the verberations. "Try running," Caroline had said when she left.

The back yard was dark. The rain had stopped but the moisture remained cold in the air. They walked slowly, feeling their way to the patio door. It was locked. "No?" she panted, breath frosting, and moved toward a window. It gave, slowly, and she heaved it all the way up before sliding herself in. She disappeared into the dark room, then her face bobbed up at the window.

"Green light, Sugar."

Karl eased his thick frame through the window and swung the outside leg in, hitting against something cold and hard. His face clenched. Glass shattered. From outside came the rattle of chain and the sounding of a dog. He pulled the window closed.

"Ugly vase. Needed breaking." She smiled, setting a candle on the floor. "No big deal."

Fragmented glass lay scattered. She pulled him toward her, but he remained stiff by the window. She popped up and grabbed a figurine from a mantel, flinging it down into the center of the shards. It split in heavy chunks with a dull thud.

"See, no big deal." And then she was yanking at his shirt and pants.

An itchy ridge of bumps rose across his lower stomach. The dog's yelping, muffled by stone and glass, was steady; the ringing in his ear pulsed. He felt the wisdom of
scratching, scratching down the ridge, until blood rose, pushing down the waking hardness, drying up his innocent curiosity of yet another woman's feel and taste and fragrance. It WAS innocent, he had tried to tell Caroline. Curiosity. The need to know. A keen interest in people, he had explained slowly. He wanted to learn more. Isn't all knowledge good? Besides, it didn't matter, not really, he pointed out, not like the rising of the something else when he was with HER, the rising in his mouth that bubbled thick and full, that made him unable to breath until SHE pressed down, under his skin, in his mouth, and sucked the thickness out.

He stood, quiet, but she pressed closer, rubbing and lifting, making his stomach itch more. She peeled off her clothes. He tried to shuffle backward, but his pants lay roped around his ankles. The ringing had weakened him. She pushed him back and down, climbing on top of him. The warmth of her breast filled his mouth while the cool shards jabbed against his back. Glass crunched as she rocked and rose, and rose above him like some great fish breaking the surface of water. And still she urged herself, on and on, beyond the broken surface, and beyond, eyes open and up as she rocked and rose to another surface, to break, and break again.

He watched her spiral away. The cool spots on his back warmed as the shards worked their way into his skin and the warmth spread and grew. And then, a new warmth
spun and pulsed at his groin, reaching outward like a splash and he was pushing, pushing sweat out through his pores. He had the taste of mud and grass in his mouth, the heat of her over him, and his own heat leaking out in small pools beneath him. The noise in his head spun itself out.

She finished and stood. Dancing around him, she shrilled with clicks of her tongue, stomped on pieces of glass with the heel of her shoe while her arms swirled gracefully over her. She nearly slipped on a small circle of blood where a twisted shard had pierced his arm. By the window, she slowed and picked up one end of the drapes, straddled it, wiping her crotch, shoe shine style.

Karl jerked to a sitting position and yanked his pants up, gingerly tucking his sex inside. The warm spots had begun to prick. Her wildness, he reassured himself, was her release: short-lived, but full and complete. He plucked off the crumbs and triangles of porcelain clinging to his back. His throat felt dry. He was cold.

"You're gonna have...one helluva mess to clean up," he stammered, dabbing at his back with his balled up shirt. He staggered back from the candle's light.

She dropped the curtains to continue her dance. Leaping and whirling, her heels stomped down and again, voice squalling while her shoulders rolled and her hands fluttered. Then finally, she collapsed, laughing, on the couch. "No, I won't."
"You're not going to clean this up?" Karl shivered. He pushed one arm into his shirt, wincing as the material rubbed against his back, and pulled it out again. Only scratches, but still raw. He whirled around to see where she was. "You got a maid or something?" he shouted, his voice catching in the corners of the ceiling.

She howled from the other side of the room, unlit by the single candle. She howled again and then, he heard something breaking under force. He wondered where his keys had fallen.

"No maid." She was suddenly in front of him, biting into a mound of ice cream cupped in her hands. The meltings seeped from between her fingers and from her chin downward in a stream between her breasts. She took another bite, then walked toward him. "Ice. Cream?" and she pressed her hands into his back.

Karl yelped and leaped from her touch. The ice cream slid down his spine, leaving a trail of sting and cold. He hopped crazily, trying to hurry the pain. His mouth flew open again, but nothing came out.

"Too cold?" she comforted, wiping her hands on the wall. She approached him, her arms out and palms up. He took a step back, but she was already there with her cool fingers rubbing circles in his chest. Tenderly, she eased him down on the couch. She kissed his cuts. Karl's back bucked slightly with each touch, but the instantaneous relief after each sting felt close to
pleasure. He settled into the couch, closing his eyes. She hummed.

Suddenly, his back arched sharply. "God!" he screamed and stared wildly at her. She crouched over him, tilting the candle and dripping wax onto his skin. He pulled out from under her and stood, panting. The wax began dropping onto the couch. "God," he said again, quieter.

She was kneeling, the candle nestled in her hands on her lap. The flame lit up white scars stitched across her belly and chest. Some, beautifully long and straight. Others, following more erratic paths. Karl stared. She flinched and moved the candle up, away from her.

"I didn't let them hurt," she whispered fiercely and let the candle slip from her hand. As it fell, the flame blew long before hitting the couch. A thin spiral of black smoke rose.

"God!" Karl screamed and smashed his shirt into the candle. The room fell black. Cautiously, he lifted it to be sure the flame had suffocated. "What's wrong with you?" A cool panic bloomed from his chest, freezing his limbs. He willed them to move. Keep moving. Find the keys. Talk to her.

"I know about this, Sugar." She rose from her seat. Behind her, bright triangles shot through the patio doors from a neighbor's floodlights. She stepped away and gathered her clothes.

"Yeah. Who's going to clean this up?" His hands,
knees kept slipping as he crawled, patting the floor for his keys.

"The owners of the house."

And he slipped again, his chin grazing the floor, and thought that the ringing was still in his ears. She stood swaying above him. A flashlight's beam dipped along the walls and furniture, throwing long shadows. And from somewhere along the thinnest edge of the ringing, Karl heard the pounding of a large dog leaping against the windows. He fell back, trying to fill his ears with his fingers, and he held perfectly still.
Tom Harkness is fifty and harmless, they said. At Tom's birthday barbeque, Edie Harkness handed out the proclamation stamped on small, yellow buttons. She bounced between the guests, the balloons tied to her wrists bobbing. Her pink dress puffed and fluttered with every move. "It's a fact!" she squealed as she pressed buttons into hands. "And, please, call me Sweet Pea."

As Edie made her way through the company, Tessie Schuyler, six-year-old daughter of Joan and Spike who owned the biggest satellite dish on the block, caught a Maryjane in the sprinkler and flew to meet a patch of mud. Edie was there before the girl remembered to cry. She bent, knees sucking mud, and set the child upright. With her sleeve, Edie mopped the child off best she could and sent her skipping. By the time Tom turned, he saw Edie kneeling alone in the mud with dress ruined, gazing vaguely off.

The next time he turned, Edie, in different dress, was everywhere with her skirt riding up one side. In
her hurry to change and get back to her guests, she had accidentally, partially tucked the top of her slip into her pantyhose.

Tom remained by the grill, back to the party. He concentrated on not jabbing his wife with the barbeque fork each time she bounded by. He imagined the metal tips barely puncturing a foot or an elbow, then the immediate whistle of wind as Edie spun wildly up, losing air quickly, then flopping back to earth completely deflated but still clutching the yellow buttons and still jabbering in too high pitch. The image made Tom smile.

"Look, everybody!" Edie shrilled from across the yard. She pointed an accusing finger at Tom. "The birthday grump's smiling!"

The guests followed the line of her finger and looked at Tom. His moment of amusement shattered, he busied himself flipping hamburgers. He barely knew most of the people crowding his backyard, stomping his begonias and dipping their toes into his pool. They were mostly Edie's crowd: the Opera Society and her parchiesi buddies. Only a few people from his office were there, clustered by the rhododendron bushes and kicking the ground.

Except for the "Burgers up yet?" or "Got one there with a touch of blood?" few guests talked to him after the initial welcome. He was thankful for this. Earlier, when he arrived home, the guests had popped up from behind plants and armchairs, all smacking him soundly on the
back or smearing waxy kisses on his cheek. All cheering
in unison and whooping and clapping, "Happy 50th Birthday, 
Tom-Tom!" which got translated in his head as "Tom-Tom-Tom-
Tick-Tick-Tick." He knew it was useless to spur his 
crumbling body on with chants though, and felt annoyed 
at these virtual strangers seeing him at such a vulnerable 
time.

Now, the crowd milled behind him. He kept his apron 
tied snugly. Someone set a glass of wine into his cupped 
hand. Once, after he put a fresh batch of burgers on, 
the contingency from his office stepped up to the grill.

"Great party, Thomas," said Horace Trelms, keeping 
his eyes on Vetta Carlson, the Opera Society President, 
dressed completely in red for the party. Horace had never 
moved and spent long hours at his desk testing the sound 
of various women's names attached to his own. Wanda 
Tanaka, his fitness coach, became Wanda Trelms. Lisa 
Grossman, his downstairs across the hall two doors to 
the left neighbor, became Lisa Trelms. And Maria Ragoli 
in payroll became Maria Trelms. Or Mama T.

"Damn." Paul Keech, the cop turned accountant on 
doctor's orders to de-stress his life, cleared his throat. 
He gulped down his beer and crushed the can with his hand. 
"Man, today was hell. Sheer, holy hell."

"You said it, Paul," concurred Sherman Dibbs who 
had the only desk by a window. He was terrified of the 
knots of muscles in his colleague's arms. But, he figured
that the greatest safety from Paul was right next to him.

"Busy, busy, busy," said Horace, smacking his lips.

Tom turned the burgers too soon and some of the meat stuck to the grill. He looked at Paul. "Want a bloody one?"

"Pure hell." Paul sprayed open another can of beer. "Whoever said accounting isn't stressful doesn't know shit." He tilted his head back and drained the can, his throat undulating.

"Yeah," agreed Sherman and toed a hole in the lawn.

Tom slapped several reddish patties onto buns and handed the plate to Paul. Paul took the plate, the colossal hand still gripping crushed cans. The group moved away in a single body. Tom could hear their buzzing conversations punctuated with "Hell!" and "Yeah!" They settled back in by the bushes.

"So," said Vetta, easing alongside the birthday man. "Why do you like to be called 'Tom-Tom'?"

Her perfume smelled nice - something tropical with a kick to it. Tom stopped scraping meat off the grill. "Did, uh, Edie tell you that?"

Vetta nodded. "Tom-Tom and Sweet Pea, couple of the century."

Tom cringed and looked away. Edie threw him a kiss from poolside, balloons whipping helplessly. He straightened, hooked his thumbs through his belt loops. "So, why do YOU think?"
Vetta smiled in reply, running her tongue along the inside of her cheek. She stared at him for a long while — "Waiting," Horace confirmed later -- before finally shrugging and turning to join the rest of the Opera Society.

"Lovely, uh, dress," Tom blurted after her, but Vetta was already beyond range. He could hear Horace smacking his lips by the bushes.

When all the food had been served, Tom stationed himself at the picnic table, pouring glasses of wine and handing out cans of beer. He lifted bottles, ready to give drink and to avoid questions. From time to time, Edie bounced up and pressed thick kisses on him while cooing, "Oooh, Birthday Boy, wait till you get MY present, oooh."

The rest of the birthday gifts were piled on the other side of the picnic table. When it was time to open the presents, Edie orchestrated. She insisted on taking a picture of Tom holding each wrapped gift, and then another picture of Tom holding each unwrapped gift, both times with the gift-giver beaming and squeezed intimately up against him. After each unveiling, Edie led the group in chirping, "Birthday Boy, Birthday Boy, Do you like your new toy?" And Tom would have to push his lips up and nod as vigorously as he was able. Edie had also orchestrated the gift buying so that each guest bought a part of a new, matching wardrobe for him in her favorite
colors, mauve and beige.

"My old clothes were fine. Great, in fact," Tom bellowed later. He had just stepped out of the shower to discover that Edie had donated his lucky shirts, scrunchy pants and everything else to Goodwill. It was the second time that evening that he stood naked, slightly dazed, in the bedroom. Earlier, Edie had flicked back the shower curtain.

"Phone call, Tom-Tom. It's the office."

Tom had just finished soaping. "Edie, can't you take a message?"

She shut off the water. "Said it was urgent."

And so he stood, soapy and chilled, in his bedroom listening to his boss, Ms. Sanders, explain that the computer billing program had a virus in it and all the work done for clients had to be logged by hand before midnight so be in the office as soon as possible and, of course, you do understand the urgency of the matter Tom thank you.

After the click, Tom left the receiver off the hook. He felt certain that he had used up every cell of energy left in his body. Only a half a day ago, Ms. Sanders had called Tom to come in early -- the last day for filing tax returns was always hectic at Sanders and Moore Accounting. The junior partners referred to the office as "S and M." Reluctantly, Tom towed off and dressed.
Four blocks from the office, his car stalled. Clutching his brief case, Tom ran the rest of the way and up the two flights of stairs. He wondered, as his leather soles lifted and fell, whether the impact of each step was compressing his bones and shortening his stature. By the time he reached the second floor, he became convinced that not only could he hear the pounding of his heart in his ears, but that he could feel pulsing in his stomach. His heart had shifted loose, he was certain, but luckily got wedged against the pouch of his stomach. Too much more excess movement and no telling where his heart would end up. Tom took this as a sign that gravity was winning. After all, he had noticed earlier in the day that his hair was being mysteriously sucked into his head, migrating downward, and popping up on his toes where he couldn't remember any hair being before. He stretched his figure tall and hurried into his cubicle cradling his stomach with both hands. All morning, he had difficulty lining figures up in the proper columns and matching clients with the right deductions. His fingers fumbled for grips on his pencil and digressed to other buttons on his adding machine. He felt compelled to check and recheck his computations. By noon, he found himself several appointments behind and was obliged to direct some regular clients to other accountants.

After work, he rushed home by cab to tell Edie of his impending fate. He entered the house with both hands
cupped at his pulsing stomach, to better illustrate to her what was happening to him. Before he could speak, however, the swarm of surprise-partyers had converged upon him.

And now, for the second time, Tom stood naked with his jaw tight. Hunching inside his emptied closet, he still held one hand cupped while the other clenched around clothes hangers. "I liked my scrunchy pants. Very much," he pointed out.

Edie scuttled over and began hanging up his new clothes. With both hands, she guided him out from under the rack. "THOSE were too tight. THESE are much nicer." She held each piece of clothing up, admiring, before inserting a hanger inside. When she finished, her side of the closet and his side were indistinguishable.

"They gave me support."

Edie jabbed her finger into his stomach. "Oh, Sweetie Pie, it's nothing to be ashamed of. We're supposed to get fat as we get old. I read that. They were too tight." She began putting away his new underwear, socks and handkerchiefs into drawers.

Tom had never seen mauve underwear before that day. He could feel the pulsing in his stomach skip. He remained hovered by the closet door. "Those are YOUR favorite colors. Those were YOUR friends."

"But, Tom-Tom," Edie pouted, "I wanted a celebration for you. Besides, mauve brings out the violet speckles
"in your eyes." She rubbed slow figure eights into Tom's knee, his favorite spot of arousal, to break his anger. "You looked okay about it," she said hopefully, looking up.

Tom snorted. Could barely keep from lashing out in his disbelief that not once did she ask him why, or even notice that, he had his hands cupped at his stomach all afternoon. Didn't such an obvious posture signal ANYTHING to her? And those ridiculous buttons. What did she mean, he was harmless? He scowled at the button still pinned onto her blouse.

"I know you're not harmless." Edie licked his knee and stood, leaving long swatches of lipstick across his skin. She walked to the bed and sat down. "I just don't want to let all those OTHER women know that."

The same color, Tom suddenly realized, she had worn the same color lipstick for the past twenty-five years. At one time, it used to match her hair. Edie never could get that same shade of natural red in a dye. Her hair always turned out too orange.

"Other women?" He didn't know many other women. His office was almost religiously male and Tom only knew a few of Edie's friends by name. In fact, he couldn't think of many women he knew who weren't related to him or who would otherwise make suitable "other women." Besides, Edie knew everyone in Altoona and everyone seemed to know Edie.
"Sweet Pea," Edie corrected in a sleepy voice and sprawled across the comforter. She looked tiny on the huge bed.

Tom gasped, unaware that he had verbalized his thoughts. Ever since Edie returned from her niece Luetta's wedding in New Orleans, Edie had tried without luck to have everyone call her Sweet Pea.

"Luetta looked just like that little doll on top of the wedding cake! And the groom...talk about your catch of the day!" Edie had sighed dramatically. "All of Luetta's little friends called her 'Sweet Pea' and when I asked why, they said it was because Luetta was the dearest, most precious thing ever. And at the reception, her new husband put his hand -- big with long fingers, thick veins -- over Luetta's teeny tiny one and just stared at her, I mean stared DEEP, and said, 'Sweet Pea.' Everyone just about started crying, it was so beautiful."

For awhile, Edie tried adopting a southern accent, but usually forgot herself in her excitement and fell back into her Nebraska drawl. Then, she had argued that didn't she look like a Sweet Pea after all and Tom had to admit to himself that, oddly, the name fit but he didn't let Edie know that. After all, Tom couldn't imagine himself turning to her at the supermarket to ask, "Sweet Pea, don't you think these pork chops look fresh?" or having the receptionist at work paging, "Tom-Tom, call
for you from Sweet Pea," or sending out Christmas cards
with the gold-embossed lettering, "Tom-Tom and Sweet Pea
Harkness." And so it must have been for her friends,
too, who all called her Edie or Ed.

When Tom made no move to join her on the bed, Edie
rose to nuzzle his shoulder. She tugged gently on his
sex. "Ready to play Milk the Cow?" She unzipped her
dress and let it fall. "It's time to give you MY birthday
gift."

Tom left her with her head tossed back, eyes shut
and mouth rounded as she moo-ed. He fled downstairs and
out the backdoor. Once outside, he lay down on the grass
and offered himself to the whims of the moon.

He felt a little dizzy watching the shifting clouds
in the evening sky. Tom braced his hands on both sides,
loved and nauseous in the illusion that the sky was still
and the earth was shifting. He rolled over, then over,
and over again. The cool grass seemed to draw the pulsing
of his throbbing heart down into the ground until Tom
thought he could feel the earth breathing and beating.
And he thought about being five and hearing the heartbeat
of his pillow, and being comforted by the rhythm, and
remaining unconvinced when his mother told him that he
was hearing his own heartbeat. And he remembered how,
later that summer, he had found a baby wren, barely alive,
the only one moving among the other birds dropped and
broken by the wind. He held it in his hands and its small
heart seemed to flicker uncontrollably before simply stopping. The bare heat from the tiny body lifted away with the next breeze.

Tom felt suspended now -- between shafts of moonlight and blades of grass -- swaying weightless, mass dissipated into space. He remembered, too, how that first night together, Edie's heart had also flickered and he almost wept with fear that it would stop. For hours, he kept his ear pressed against her breast, listening with relief and terror, as the flickering steadied, then fluttered again whenever he moved or touched bare skin. She stroked his hair and laughed, his head bobbing up and down when she did. And as she laughed, he imagined that he heard whistles of swirling air and great rushings of breath rise and burst from her lips, sweeping warmly over him. Now, all he could hear was the beating of the earth.

"Get inside!" Edie was standing at the back door, vital parts covered with dish towels. "The neighbors will see!"

Her face looked so old when she frowned, he thought sadly. And the way she stood, clutching the towels, so that her arms looked small in contrast to the generous expanse of her belly and thighs -- she looked like a boiled chicken. He remembered telling her on their wedding day that her waist was so tiny it could fit in his wedding band. She had blushed and pressed her cheek into his. As he looked at her now, her scowl softened...until she
only looked fatigued. He thought about how Edie's neck seemed to have lost length as it gained width and how easily her nails chipped now. Tom wondered whether her heart had shifted loose, too. She had the strained, bleached expression he imagined he must have had earlier in the day. He reached a hand out in her direction.

"Tom, if you think I'm going out there like this...!"

And in that raised voice, Tom saw Edie, coming to that same screen door with the clover-shaped hole, calling him to dinner, again and again, in beehive, bob, perm, in cocktail dress, bell bottoms, a skirt riding up. Each time, the door squeaked louder while her red red hair grew quieter. And each time, she was calling his name. Tom rolled over to the rhododendrons and crawled underneath the sheltering branches. Once inside, he sat up and shook the bushes. He stuck one arm out and gestured for Edie to join him.

"Oooh, Eeee-ddeee!" His falsetto shrill wavered. "Come out, come out wherever you are!" He paused, tracing circles in his palm. The touch of his finger startled him; Tom was amazed at how sensitive the skin was despite the everyday work he put them through. "Sweet Pea?"

Across Edie's panicstricken face, a smile opened up. She hesitated. Looking around to be sure none of the neighbors peeked through curtains, she skittered across the yard and dove into the bush. She landed hard, but safe. Tom wrapped his arms around her to still her
trembling. When their breathing had synchronized, Edie began singing in a shaky whisper, "Happy birthday to you..."

Tom listened to her breathy voice, pleased at its richness. After the first chorus, he joined in. Gradually, their voices gained strength and clarity. With his arms still locked around her, Tom began to rock as they sang, and they both rocked and rocked and sang. And her skin, everywhere, still stretched soft and smooth, but fuller, so she filled his arms completely. Everywhere fuller except her nipples, still like tiny raisins. They look so old, he had teased her that first night. Tom leaned down and kissed one. Edie giggled, making her skin ripple.
Mama used to feed me stories of Ah-gong until I grew fat with images of him wearing slippery robes in jeweled blues and reds. The colors showed off my grandfather's snowy hair and the long, silken beard which danced at his knees. One white hair for every wise thing he had done, Mama said. His cane, dragon kings and monkey warriors carved into the thick wood, supported his thin frame and enforced his word with a sharp crack across buttocks or thighs. He spent evenings sitting and smoking a long, curved pipe with other revered, delicately wrinkled men. He never showed his teeth.

As a child, I listened tirelessly whenever Mama spoke in her storytelling voice. The words breathed over me husky and soft like the sharing of a secret. Every night, when the water for my bath was drawn, she would swirl a square washcloth in the water: a telling was about to begin.

"Tony, your grandfather was a very good man," my mother would often begin. "Everyone in our village knew him. Ah-gong was a great scholar and doctor. And
generous. He donated all the money for the school and hospital. Helped lay the first stones with his own hands. All the villagers loved him." She squeezed the washcloth against my back, releasing rivelets of almost too-hot water down my spine. "He even saved a neighbor boy's dog once. Stayed up all night operating on it after a crazy farmer tried to chop it in half with a machete."

I saw him: beard tucked into his smock, bent over the severed dog reconnecting bones, veins, skin. He sewed by candlelight, using a tiger's tooth needle. As he put the last stitch in, the dog leaped up as if from fitful sleep and jumped into the boy's arms. From outside this image, I heard Mama's voice lower.

"Your grandmother actually did most of the sewing while Ah-gong gave her directions. I saw it myself from the window. Still, I suppose your Ah-mah couldn't have done it without your grandfather. He took the credit. She never disputed it." Mama grunted. "The dog survived only to drown a month later. That dog's owner was your father."

And I would try to attach my father's heavy-jowled head onto a boy's body. I tried to give the boy a voice, but felt ill-equipped since I had rarely heard the man speak. The oversized head was too much for the tiny body and the boy kept tipping over. A heavily scarred dog dragged bravely behind him.

Often, a telling would last through my bath and cradle
me into bed and into seamless sleep. These rituals lasted until the summer I turned eight. Ah-gong turned seventy that year, retired, and came to Philadelphia to celebrate. As my only living grandparent, preparation for his arrival was a complicated process. We took the train into New York City's Chinatown to shop and returned laden with sweet meat sausages, thousand year eggs, long life noodles, and red bean cakes. Mama sewed all week to make curtains for our naked windows and bright covers for our secondhand furniture. The empty jelly jars we used for cups were pushed to the back of the cupboard while storebought glasses formed the new front line. Everything was cleaned.

One of my duties that week was to dust the ornamental plates. They had sat sacred, high on my parents' dresser, for as long as I could remember until Mama took them down for dusting. She held them, stiff-armed in front of her, and placed them in my lap. They would sit in the livingroom after I finished.

The plates had thick borders of red, edged with gold, and pictures of my grandparents superimposed in the centers. I had never heard stories about Baba's parents, dead since my father was a baby, so I ignored their waxen stares. Instead, I studied the portraits of Mama's parents. Ah-gong's face was full-cheeked and wide jawed, but with a delicate nose and tiny, curled ears. In contrast, Ah-mah's head was small with generous features competing for attention: a thin nose flaring out into
a triangle, steady eyes topped by heavy, winged brows, and lips like pillows. Ah-gong looked stern, Ah-mah fatigued but amused.

The day of Ah-gong's arrival, fire ants of excitement scurried up my toes, tingled my belly, and lit my cheeks with red expectation. I felt wonderfully scared and proud with my hair combed flat and my face rubbed shiny. My shoes were just polished with a few drops of spit and Baba's old undershirt. When the quick raps sounded, I hurriedly took a final swipe at the dust on the plates. Walking straight to keep my shirt tucked, I let my grandfather in.

The man at the door smiled and his gold front tooth winked in the light. His clothes didn't billow majestically, but fit neatly around shoulders and hips. A pack of cigarettes peered from the top of his pocket. I smiled politely but craned my neck, hoping to see Ah-gong coming up the hallway behind him.

"Tony." The stranger stepped inside and closed the door. "My grandson. Let Ah-gong give you a hug."

I was horrified. Nobody in our family touched each other, except for practical purposes. Ah-gong scooped me up and nuzzled me with his thin mustache until I squealed. Mama, touching her hair, rushed up the hall to help with the luggage, but Ah-gong grabbed it easily with one hand and stepped into our livingroom.

"Ba, you look so...young," Mama gasped.
I peered at the man from her elbow. My father clapped a hand on the stranger's shoulder. Ah-gong's chest was everywhere.

Mama scurried like a mouse that day, getting cushions and serving lichees. Her legs whirred and her apron flapped and Ah-gong smoked cigarettes. He did not see how soft and round his only daughter had made the dumplings to go with the green bean soup. Or how the curtains matched the furniture. She smiled and smiled but Ah-gong continued talking to my father who sat like a boulder in the easy chair. The men jokes were loud and filled with explosive gestures and shouts. My father nodded in approval at the jokes, his big cheeks jiggling as he laughed, but no sound came out of his mouth except a few, short wheezes. Ah-gong laughed constantly, the bellowing rolling over my mother who flinched and pulled at her dress.

"More tea, Ba?" Mama appeared by my grandfather with the teapot poised, ready to pour.

"Just leave the pot." He turned back to my father.

Both men swirled their tea and chewed on dried cuttlefish. They waited for the click of the door before speaking again. I moved closer, ready for the revelation of ancient secrets. My grandfather placed thick fingers on my head, drawing me into the circle of talk. I listened hard. My father leaned forward and began. Soon, Ah-gong joined in passionately. They raged about parking places,
city buses, and traffic tickets. Even years later, my body tensed with expectations at the closing of doors, at the endings of things, but very little astonishing ever occurred except for the persistence of my expectations. I would grow to accept the lack of drama, but that day, I felt cheated.

Ah-gong was staying for a month. His Old Spice cologne saturated everything so that, for the first couple of days, we didn't realize he spent little time at home. Our apartment smelled as though he was there, but he left early every morning, not returning until evening. He was always gone, no matter what time I woke up.

"Where is he?" Mama would demand as she peered through the curtains. "So many bad people in this city." She danced frantically to the beating of her heart and ran out of the apartment building to look down the street one more time.

I tried to avoid Mama's swirling anxiety and spent my days anchored before the television. I made vague attempts at piecing together my own tellings -- Ah-gong was conducting miracles down on Liberty Square, or releasing dogs from their pens at Macy's, or meditating -- but felt unrewarded for these efforts, and after a few minutes would eagerly turn my full attention back to cartoons.

Ah-gong always returned just as we were uncomfortably hungry. He would have books or parcels tucked under one
arm, things which he put away, locked, in his suitcase before sitting loudly down to eat. He seemed oblivious to Mama's fluttering concern. Sometimes, he brought back bunches of limp flowers which he put in soy sauce bottles filled with water. We were relieved when he finally sat down so we could eat.

"Ba, where did you go today?" My mother uncovered the chicken, meticulously arranged on a large platter.

Ah-gong gulped down a chunk of meat. "Ah-lun, more soup."

Mama's mouth flew open as if to speak, then shut again. Her jaw clenched and held. My father pushed his bowl out next to Ah-gong's. Mama began humming. The muscles in her jaw roped taut as she dipped a large porcelain spoon into the soup. Fish parts dove up and down in the murky liquid as she ladled.

"Ba, please tell us where you go everyday."

Ah-gong's silence intrigued me: he had to be hiding something worth being silent about. I stole a straw mushroom from his bowl and stuffed it into my mouth. "Ah-gong, tell us or I'll eat all your mushrooms!"

"Tony!" Mama smacked my hand. "Don't talk to your Ah-gong like that. His white hairs mean that he has lived a long life and deserves much respect."

I rubbed my knuckles and gave Mama my ugliest face when she turned away. Ah-gong calmly finished his soup then stretched his arms. I was surprised to see wiry
muscles bulging slightly under his new t-shirt. Despite
the cloudy hair and the grooved lines on his face, my
grandfather looked suddenly younger than my parents.
Mama's hair still shone black and her skin held clear,
but braids of worry often wound tightly around her face.
Her expressions mimicked those of the ancient women painted
on tattered scrolls at the Museum of Art. My father,
only a year older than she, was completely bald and carried
the weight of two fat men. The waves of excess rolled
over his body and face, giving him the look of sincerest
stupidity, a misconception he let his shoe store customers
indulge in to safeguard sales. Somehow, because Mama
looked old old, Baba simply had to be. They never wore
t-shirts.

Ignoring the way my mother watched and leaned toward
him, Ah-gong sighed luxuriously. "You want to know where
I go?" He hooked his thumbs through the loops of his
jeans and looked around the table. "Becoming...American."

Mama spooned out more soup but she kept spilling
it on the table. Her humming quickened. She took off
her apron to mop up the spreading puddles. "Tony, help
Mama."

I stood to help wipe the table but Ah-gong pushed
me back down. "Tony, it's okay. Your mother can clean
that."

Mama scuttled into the kitchen and returned with
rags. "But, Ba, you can't." She handed me a rag. "You're
Taiwanese."

I remained seated, dabbing at the spills near me. Ah-gong chewed on his mustache, teeth bared, and tugged at the back of his hair. He dumped the soup from his just-filled bowl back into the larger bowl. Heavy splashes darkened the tablecloth. He blasted up from his seat.

"So, you will not help me?" His chair screeched, fell back. "This, from my daughter." Ah-gong went into the livingroom.

Dropping the rag, I watched Ah-gong stomp and pulled my shoulders up. Mama allowed not even the red-jowled butcher on the corner to dispute her facts. I buried my smile in my soup spoon.

"Trouble, GULP, trouble." Mama mumbled to herself, mechanically dipping her spoon into the soup and bringing it to her mouth. Her hand quavered. Most of the soup dribbled back into the bowl, but she continued gulping rhythmically. "Where is he going to stay? Becoming American takes a long time. GULP. Tony must continue sleeping in the livingroom, but can he study there when school starts? Such a bad student. GULP. Trouble, trouble."

My father finished eating and caressed his stomach happily. "Don't worry. Don't worry." He leaned back in his chair and swung his head. "Don't worry." The center of his face seemed to barely move as he shook his head, but the big cheeks flapped first to one side, then
to the other.

I drank too much soup that night. Reluctantly, I pulled myself out of the blankets. Light slid out from under Ah-gong's door. I scampered from the bathroom and changed clothes. When I heard Ah-gong open the front door, I was ready. I didn't weigh much so my steps were quiet, and the first glints of light were only just appearing: I was invisible behind him. He walked to Highland Park and sat down on a bench under a street lamp.

"Hello. How are you?"

My knees stiffened.

"Beautiful day we are having. The sky is so blue and the sun so warm. Yes, a wonderful day for a picnic."

Scanning the pockets of shadows surrounding him, I saw nobody. I moved to a closer tree. I was scared for Ah-gong.

"Do you like coffee? I think coffee is delicious. May I invite you to partake of a cup with me?" Sometimes, he repeated a word or phrase and added elaborate gestures. Sometimes, he merely mouthed words and tried to synchronize appropriate facial expressions.

"Madam, your eyes are like pools of crystal water and your lips like rubies. How late shall you be receiving calls?"

And he did a series of flitting side steps and mincing hops. He trilled and smiled. His face was so flushed and animated, I began to relax. I could almost see a
clear-eyed beauty on my grandfather's arm. She matched
his every step perfectly, daintily lifting her gossamer
skirt with two fingers. Then, she wanted to parch her
red, red lips with a cup of coffee, no sugar and a touch
of cream.

By the time Ah-gong finished practicing, the sun
had risen. I dropped further back and followed him to
the Spruce Street Diner. From outside the front window,
I watched as he sat down at the counter and waited
patiently for the waitress to take his order. I slipped
inside and leaned behind the cigarette machine.

"Hello. I think coffee is delicious. May I invite
you to partake of a cup with me?"

The woman stuck her pencil back into her canary hair.
She poured, took his quarters and returned to her perch
behind the cash register. Another customer came in.
Ah-gong reached for a donut behind the display case.

"Those are fifty cents each," the waitress said from
behind her magazine.

My grandfather pushed some coins across the counter
and bit into the donut. The waitress stared for a moment
at the money before getting up.

"Fifty cents. I said, 'Fif-tee. Fif-tee.' Not
fifteen." She flashed both handfuls of fingers at him
five times, as if shoo-ing flies from his face.

The other customer was staring at him. Ah-gong
reached into his jacket. I covered my ears, preparing
for the shrieks my grandfather would drive from his tormentor. Chinamen rode fiery beasts and did karate flips over rooftops. They threw chopsticks at their enemies, spearing the wooden sticks through hostile noses. They roamed, tirelessly, around the country avenging murdered fathers or teachers, or insults to their honor.

Ah-gong smiled weakly and pulled out a dollar bill, closing the waitress's hand around it before biting into the donut again. The powdered sugar wreathed his mouth and burrowed into his mustache. He stood and quickly left the diner.

I froze with surprise and betrayal, my knuckles a cool white, but quickly comforted myself with the conviction that Ah-gong didn't waste his time on trivial matters. I grabbed his half-eaten donut before dashing after him again.

He was talking to the flower woman on Carlisle Street. The neighborhood kids called her "Bonkers," from a safe distance. Ah-gong tilted backward slightly to look at her as he gestured; she was monstrously tall and beetled over him. Although his face was serious, she was laughing and wagging her head.

Bonkers tapped her thick glasses. "The eyes are brown and the only thing they look like is mud. Now, what were you saying about the lips?" she chortled.

Ah-gong chanted on. He bought a small bunch of daisies and presented them to her. Bonkers grandly
curtseyed, sweeping out her dirty skirts.

Stepping back, Ah-gong turned smartly and continued down the street. The woman wagged her head again before dropping the flowers back into a bin on her cart. I followed, snatching at the bunch of daisies. Bonkers grabbed my hand, dragging me close and tossing her wild mane.

"You little thief! That's a dollar!" She plucked me off the ground, shaking me as if expecting coins to fall from my mouth and ears.

"That's my grandson." Ah-gong suddenly appeared and pulled me toward him.

She tightened her grip and set her eyes like concrete on the ragged bunch of daisies still clutched in my hand. "Well, Old Man, he tried to rip me off. Nobody steals from me. One dollar!"

Again, my grandfather reached into his pocket and I smiled. Bonkers would regret her rashness. But my eyes moistened with disappointment when Ah-gong quietly handed her a dollar bill in exchange for my freedom. He squeezed my shoulder and pulled me quickly down the sidewalk. His face looked flushed, his hand repeatedly raking through his hair.

"Tony, why are you following me?"

I tried to shake my doubts about Ah-gong's authenticity. "To see where you go." I said stingily, after a long pause. "You talk better than Ma or Baba
and they've been in America for over ten years!" I tried to sound impressed but my voice squeaked with surprise.
"Mama says you're Taiwanese," I added quietly.

He giggled.

"But, Ah-gong," I insisted, "how did you learn our language?"

From his breast pocket, he pulled out a thin, glossy book. He enunciated carefully, "Useful English Phrases for the Social Chinese." He smoothed the curling edges. "I read two chapters everyday. I've finished the book seven times. And English classes. In Taiwan and now."

I wiped my eyes with renewed excitement. I had enjoyed the week our class spent studying books and watching films about the English. The English had pale faces and wore stiff clothes. On certain days, they donned red costumes and gathered their horses and dogs. Then, they sounded a horn and chased a fox. There were knights, castles, and a queen. Tea and crumpets in the afternoons. They even had their own dragons.

I sniffed loudly. "I want to go with you to English school."

When we entered the classroom, a heavy woman was pacing up and down the aisles, her head cocked back so that her chin pointed straight ahead as she talked. The words bubbled out of her mouth to float for a moment before dropping back in for later use.

"...also known as substandard English. You will
not use that here." The chin flicked from side to side like a weathervane.

The classroom was smaller than mine. All the faces were turned toward us and not one of them was pale. I looked at Ah-gong suspiciously. My stomach felt hollow.

The teacher tapped the board. "What is the verb in this sentence?" She spoke slowly, rounding and tightening her lips at the appropriate places.

A mumbling erupted from the center of the room and spread outward in ripples. Nobody spoke above the drone. I smiled in spite of my malcontent.

"'Runs'!" I said.

The teacher didn't look at me, but nodded slowly. "Yes, and what is the noun?" she articulated carefully.

I nudged Ah-gong and raised my voice: "'He'!"

"Yes, and what punctuation is used here?"

I waited to give someone else a chance, but nobody ventured a guess. "Period! That's a period!" I smiled sympathetically at the men and women whose faces remained furrowed in thought. Small wonder these grownups were still in school. I raised my hand. "And I can spell 'Mississippi,' too! M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I!" I used my spelling bee voice.

The people in the front rows shook their heads at me and turned back toward the board. Those around me placed fingers over lips or clapped softly. I bowed.

"Mr. Lin. Your young friend is disturbing this
class." The teacher brought her chin down and hardened herself. "You know better."

I was familiar with the teacher's lowered head and blunt stare over tops of reading glasses, the tight-lipped pronouncement. Usually, an hour in the hallway or facing the chalkboard followed. I looked to Ah-gong, but he had his face turned away. He grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room. We escaped. I felt triumphant.

We headed downtown. I chattered relentlessly, zigzagging up the sidewalks before skittering backward to Ah-gong's side. He walked slowly, occasionally pausing at window displays and dabbing at his hair. At Woolworth's, he stopped for a long minute to stare at the grinning mannequins before pushing through the revolving door. Inside, he peered thoughtfully at the aisle signs then headed toward the back of the store. He paused at the shampoos, then walked down one more row.

"Tony, help me find 'Black'." He pointed at the hair dyes and began scrutinizing each glossy box.

I watched his white head, silver-tipped, move along the rows of boxes. The whiteness gave his head buoyancy as he bobbed up and down to examine each package. Even the cottony eyebrows gave lift to his face: shiny tadpole eyes sailing toward clouds. I moved slowly.

After several minutes, we each clutched a box. Ah-gong held the two packages at arm's length and looked from one to the other. He studied them quizzically before
handing them both to me. "I don't know all the words. Which is better?"

"This says that it will leave your hair 'full and shiny, not dull like the others'," I read. "The smaller box says that you shouldn't look older than you feel and that it will leave your hair thick." I was the best reader in third grade, and at that moment, hated it.

We bought the smaller box. The ten minute walk home was silent and fast. I counted sidewalk cracks. When we walked in, Mama almost dropped the iron.

"Tony, where have you been?"

"With him," I mumbled and flopped onto the couch.

Ah-gong nodded, "Yes," and brushed past her. He hooked my hand, pulling me up and with him into the bathroom before Mama could block me. Behind us, I heard Mama snap her apron.

When we finished, Ah-gong's hair was black, my hands smelled, and Mama was wailing. My grandfather grabbed my towel to rub his hair, leaving black lines and blobs across the flowered terry.

"Oh, Baba! Your beautiful hair!" Mama moaned. Her smooth skin collapsed into folds as she cried. Her tears fell, melting layers of oldness until she was just a tiny, skinny woman, hunched and tired, voice shaking.

"My towel!" I muttered, suddenly angry.

My grandfather tossed the towel into the sink. His damp hair stood in peaks, making him look like one of
the demon masks hanging on our livingroom wall. I always feared they would come to life.

"Stop that noise!"

Mama gulped in her cries and left the room, with me at her heels. Her face stayed red and puffy, full of ready tears, as she cleaned, sliced, and cooked. My father remained silent, sunken in his chair, shrouded behind his newspaper. I scrubbed my hands until the skin around the nails lifted in ragged flaps but the smell of dye had gloved onto me. The odor so strong I could taste it. I propped myself in a corner, hands in pockets.

Dinner was late that night and we ate what Mama cooked. Despite the upset, she had prepared a colorful feast. Her fingers looked raw and dry from cutting vegetables.

"Too salty," said Ah-gong, pointing to the soup.

Mama pressed her lips white. Her cheeks puffed while her mouth remained squeezed. "Too...salty?" Then, all the redness from her face drained into her lips which bloomed full and robust.

"M-I-S-S-I-P-P-Ii" I chanted in my throat, nodding to Mama. I remembered her thinned voice. Sometimes, at the end of a telling, as my eyes fell closed, Mama's voice would strangle into a whisper before choking itself off. "But I never pleased him." She snapped off the light. "Plain. Stupid. Lazy." She remained silent for a moment, motionless in the dark. Then, the floor
would creak as she rocked from one foot to the other, humming a single note continuously, arms circled across her chest. After a few minutes, she would shake herself and repeat, "He was a good man."

"Hhummpf," my grandfather snorted and pushed the bowl away.

It slid across the table, catching on the edge of a dish and tipping over. The hot liquid flooded out onto Mama's special steamed garlic chicken, served whole. As the soup rushed into the chicken's gaping mouth, small bubbles of air trickled out. I was convinced I could hear it gurgling. Another rush of soup came out of the eye sockets. I panicked and leaped up, bumping against the table. The large soup bowl rocked, but its contents remained intact.

Suddenly, the noise faded to mute in my ears, and I could only watch helplessly as Ah-gong's mouth popped and pursed. Baba's face scrunched in annoyance. Mama quickly steadied the bowl, her arched brows lowering when she saw my fearful face. She turned her glare toward Ah-gong.

I looked back at my grandfather and saw that his hair had dried into a stiff sheet where I failed to rinse out some of the dye. Large sections at the roots, untouched by chemicals, remained white. When Ah-gong leaned back, the roots blended with the whiteness of the walls, giving the newly blackened portions the illusion
of hovering, disconnected, over his head. Like magic. Like fear. When scared, the characters in my Saturday shows shot their hair off like porcupine quills. But their hair always fell back into place.

"This!" Mama stood and furiously jabbed her finger in the direction of the soup. "This, I learned to make from my mother!"

She stood, swaying above us, silent. Her arms swooped down and lifted the large bowl up and up, tilting her head back and taking one giant swallow after another. Wild ribbons of soup ran from the corners of her mouth, but she kept swallowing until the soup was gone. Firmly, she set the emptied bowl down in the center of the table.

I had to open my eyes big to see all of Mama and watch Ah-gong at the same time.
I believed in Miss Delia when I was thirteen.

She taught us to feel the invisible string which lifted from the tops of our heads and made us step lightly. She showed us the way to cross our ankles and lean our legs as we sat so that our knees touched and our skirts stay closed. She ingrained in each girl the habit of curtseying and reciting a soft, "Good afternoon, Miss Delia" upon entering the dance studio. In the doorway, she stood tall and thin, pale skin dried onto unflinching bones. Always, she wore her still-black hair pulled mercilessly back, and a pair of black slippers, a navy blue, ankle-length dress, a single string of pearls. Never was her cool hand more than a few inches from her ivory-headed walking stick. As we curtseyed before her, she occasionally stopped a girl to pull lint off her leotard or clap a hand on a slouching shoulder.

And she taught us the necessity of punctuality.
She considered tardiness a "badge of disrespect" and was like a scarecrow set on fire when angry. Dry and cackling, almost carried involuntarily by the weight of her own heat. If one of us were late, she knew enough to look repentent as she said, "I'm sorry I'm late, Miss Delia," curtsey, and scuttle to a place at the barre. For the rest of that class, the offender would suffer the hard eye of Miss Delia. She kept all our spines straight with fear. We wanted to be just like her.

The small ballet studio was on the second floor of a decaying greystone building. Directly below, a VFW club flashed a neon welcome to its patrons. Sometimes, over the strains of Stravinsky, we could hear the smashing of glass or a bawdy rendition of some old platoon song. On these occasions when forbidden language floated through the floor, some of us invariably lost the rhythm of the music and began giggling. Miss Delia never changed her expression, only thumped louder with her cane to help us catch the beat again.

"She's our shepherd," whispered Becca Snow, a compulsive religious metaphor dropper, "and we're her sheep."

"You know less than nothing," Paula Mathes retorted. She had remained sensitive to references of grazing animals ever since Miss Delia remarked Paula would have to lose weight if she hoped to get her toe shoes. "Girls can't be shepherds."
And for the remainder of the music, Becca and Paula would hiss back and forth to each other -- "Yessir!" and "Wro-ong!" -- until Miss Delia lifted the needle from the phonograph to glare and settle the dispute with a level, "Ladies and dancers do not argue."

But Becca had been right. Miss Delia WAS our shepherd, of sorts. It had nothing to do with the tapping cane or the strict code of etiquette, however. It was the picture in Miss Kitty's lobby.

As soon as we came up the stairs, a sign proclaimed in Old English lettering, "Delia Satterley's School of Dance." Miss Kitty would greet us from behind the fishbowl of peanuts on her desk: "How's my little Tinkerbell TODAY?"

Miss Kitty and Miss Delia were sisters, different as anteaters and zebras, but faithfully devoted to each other. On our way out the door, we often saw them, arms linked and sitting side by side, as Miss Delia read out loud from books of Byron and Shelley. Other times, Miss Delia would put "Moonlight Sonata" on the phonograph and the pair would lean into their chairs, faces soft. A charmed life, we agreed. "Spinsters," our mothers said.

Sometimes, when the music for our lesson ended, Miss Kitty's voice would burst forth: "...I cannot cross o'er, And neither have I -- wings..." From the studio, we could look directly into the lobby and see Miss Kitty, ensconced in her chair, head tilted back, arms thrown asunder, singing. Miss Delia always seemed startled by the sudden
voice, the muscles in her face tensing before falling quiet. She stopped the record and glided slowly toward the new song. We shuffled obediently behind. Miss Delia moved to stand behind her younger sister and placed one hand lightly on Miss Kitty's frizzy, gray hair while the other squeezed her sister's palm. She joined in at the chorus: "But give me a boat that will carry two..." And we stood, waiting for the song to end, always surprised and embarrassed by Miss Delia's sorrowful, piercing soprano and Miss Kitty's too loud, rollicking tenor. Finished, the two remained still, looking at some faraway point and caressing individual fingers like rosary beads. Miss Kitty's fingers were generous like her arms and swallowed her sister's fingers completely. After what felt like a summer, Miss Kitty would glance up at the older woman to say, "Lia, you're due at the salon at four," or "Dr. Kramer expects you in a half hour." Miss Delia would look perplexed, "Ah, Tuesday already?" and butterfly-kiss Miss Kitty, lips just flitting the surface of skin. On cue, we curtseyed, bid our goodbyes and scurried into the dressing room.

When I arrived early for my lesson, Miss Kitty would wave me over and open her bottom desk drawer. It was crammed with Tootsie Rolls, licorice, caramels, peppermints, and Butterscotch Lifesavers. The two of us, heads bowed in conspiracy, would glance into the studio at Miss Delia's narrow back which never moved as she
thumped her cane for the beginners, then Miss Kitty and I would each select a candy.

Miss Delia had forbidden candy. Once, she took our class to see the Pittsburgh Ballet's "Apollo." Before the curtains parted, Miss Delia pointed out the most corpulent members of the audience. "You notice that she is down HERE and not up THERE," she'd nodded, hand directed at the stage. When the lights dimmed and the long-stemmed dancers came on, she looked to see if we understood the difference. "Ladies and dancers are thin." she whispered.

Each of us had recognized the willowy forms of the dancers on stage. The same litheness was personified in the giant black and white portrait of Miss Delia which hovered over Miss Kitty's head and provided a dramatic backdrop for her desk. In the picture, Miss Delia was recognizably young, but familiarly lean and straight. Costumed in layers of wafting white, blending with only the barest demarcation into her fair skin. The black eyes and fully painted lips looked startling in the midst of such paleness. Her neck arched so she faced the sky. Her long arms flared back. She rose from the ground on pointe with one leg while the other cocked behind her: a rare, exotic bird about to take flight. The scanty arms seemed too fragile to lift any weight from the earth, but the serene look on her face vouched that she had no doubt she could fly. This was our guiding dream. We wanted to learn to fly.
Often, a group of four or five from our class of ten arrived early, as much to sink into the warmth of Miss Kitty's soft, wide bosom as to delve into her secret drawer of sweets. As soon as a girl pushed inside, she skipped to the desk and Miss Kitty would wrap her great arms, heavy like drapes, around the girl and lock her into such a complete embrace that the girl would be invisible inside the cushiony hold. Her burgundy tacked-leather chair squawked with each swivel as she leaned and gathered us up. After changing into our leotards and slippers -- no street shoes allowed on the varnished floor of the studio -- we huddled around her chair while she told us stories of Miss Delia's dancing days on tour. Miss Kitty had never danced; she had been the costume fitter. "Legendary!" she informed us. She described the pungent smell of menthol rubs in each dressing room, the way sound from the audience travelled in waves, the clatter and shrillness backstage while serene music played onstage. But mostly, she talked about the dance.

As Miss Kitty spoke, Miss Delia became a bird, or a wooden doll, or a love-crazed peasant girl. Miss Delia flew, clopped, faltered. Miss Kitty described how the confusion and tensions backstage disappeared when she watched her sister dance. She explained the singular beauty of it all: how the music and the dance meshed, making it impossible to determine whether the music inspired the dance or the dance inspired the music. How
Miss Delia so strongly conveyed the emotions of her roles that the audience could see what the characters saw, feel what they felt. How, when the music ended, it was cruel.

By the end of a telling, we were huddled so close together that our heads touched. Miss Kitty's breath, always smelling faintly of chocolate or mint, swirled in the center like a friendly genie. Often, we became so intoxicated by the visions that we didn't hear the beginners file by or Miss Delia march up.

"Kitty, don't forget to tell them about the hours and hours of practice, the early morning rehearsals, the drafty auditoriums," Miss Delia said once, thumping her cane and turning to wait for us by the doorway.

We popped up from the floor, quickly dusting our bottoms. Taking care to run in small, toe-first steps, we hurried to curtsey. The trance broken, Miss Kitty squeaked around to scoop up a handful of peanuts, setting one between her teeth. The loud crunch sent splinters and a nut bouncing across the desk. With delicate gestures, she brushed away shell and offered the nut to Miss Delia.

"No, thank you," Miss Delia answered without turning, lips barely moving.

"Sure?" and Miss Kitty's teeth crashed through another peanut. "Quite the morsel, Lia." Another crunch sent a nut hurtling across the desk. Her big palm expertly slapped it to a halt.
"No, thank you, Kitty," and Miss Delia walked stiffly into the studio. We heard the crunching until the cane tapped and Tschaikovsky rolled over everything.

When we came out after the lesson, peanut shells littered Miss Kitty's desk and lap while she faced the portrait, head back and smiling, asleep. Her brambles of hair lolled over the back of the burgundy chair. Immediately, Miss Delia began brushing the shells into the trash basket, her hand flicking. Becca swore she saw Miss Kitty's smile widen, "eyes still screwed," while Miss Delia bent over cleaning. I had believed her.

We never saw Miss Kitty out of that chair and Zoey Mills, who considered herself special because her mother let her wear lipstick at thirteen, remarked that perhaps Miss Kitty was too fat to get up. Zoey took every existing opportunity to use those bright lips.

"She's just big-boned," sniffed Paula.

"Doesn't she have to go to the bathroom?" I asked. "She'd have to get up for that."

Zoey sighed loudly and looked at me sideways. "Delia probably takes care of it. She DOES run the school, y'know."

"Do you think she pays Miss Kitty much?" I asked.

"How?" Becca said.

"A cup or something," Paula replied absently, sitting Becca down and turning to Zoey. "There's NOTHING wrong with Miss Kitty. Some people are supposed to be
big-boned."

"To everything there's a season," affirmed Becca, nodding her head solemnly.

Zoey turned her back on us and swiped another coat of lipstick on. Then, she wet her fingertip and smoothed her brows. She had quit arriving early ever since she turned thirteen. I avoided the smell of her waxy lips.

Then came the day Paula fell off her toes and Miss Kitty left her chair. A few weeks before Christmas, Miss Delia decided that our class was ready for toe shoes. She led us out to the lobby, swung the giant portrait out on one side -- we all gasped, pleased at the drama -- and opened the hidden cabinet in the wall. One by one, Miss Delia asked for our slipper sizes, then presented each girl with a pair of toe shoes. We were all unusually quiet, consumed by the gleam of the pale pink satin. Paula, who spent six months losing ten pounds for this moment, rubbed the shoes tenderly against her cheek. Miss Delia then gave us small rolls of matching ribbons and showed us where on the shoes to tell our mothers to sew them on. Then, she explained how, after sewed on, to wrap the ribbons around the ankles, tucking the ends under on the insides. She demonstrated how to store the shoes: collapsing the sides flat and winding the ribbons around the folds. We greedily watched everything she did. Miss Kitty watched us; her head was propped in her palms and she gushed repeatedly, "The dickens!" Often,
her outbursts interrupted Miss Delia's detailed explanations, but Miss Delia spoke relentlessly, one hand pressed white on her walking stick.

We'd been toe dancing for a few weeks when Paula began wearing a long, billowy tunic over her leotard. Miss Delia was not pleased. Every girl wore identical black leotards, short black skirts, and pink tights. Paula pleaded terrible chills and the beginnings of the flu. Miss Delia didn't press further, but the tapping of the cane was loud that day. The long cover became part of Paula's outfit.

A month after Paula began wearing the tunic, we began practicing arabesques on pointe. We hadn't done this step in toe shoes before so Miss Delia requested individual demonstrations. One by one, down the barre, we each swooped down in a plie, then up in arabesque and held. Already, we had formed hard knots of muscle in our calves and a love of the new height. Paula, the last on our side, rose on pointe after a second try but immediately, her leg quavered, then wobbled and finally gave up. With a loud whumpff, she landed on the floor. Miss Delia fairly soared across the room, but stopped cold. We fluttered to Paula, but Miss Delia's outstretched arms stopped us. We followed her stare.

Paula's tunic had ravelled up around her chest, exposing what we called then, a jelly belly. Sitting up slowly and rubbing her eyes as if from sleep, she
grinned sheepishly. She was unhurt...and a very becoming shade of red. Her smile flattened when she recognized Miss Delia's hard eye and realized the enormity of the moment. She tugged the tunic over her stomach and struggled up. "I...only gained back a FEW pounds, Miss Delia." She looked hopefully up at our teacher. "I tried. I tried SO HARD, but the weight came back."

When Miss Delia's face remained stoic, Paula began blubbering, pearly bubbles forming at the corners of her mouth. "I'll LOSE the weight again! Promise! I LOVE to dance!" and she broke out of our circle and thudded, heel-first, out of the room.

Behind her, Miss Delia marched back to the front of the room. Each of us had sucked in her stomach to make her torso concave. Next to me, Zoey bit her lip, leaving a streak of Primrose Pink across her top teeth. I pressed my mouth closed to hide any traces of caramel.

Firmly, Miss Delia announced, "Toe dancers should not be heavy." She stressed every word, bestowing each with singular importance.

"Pearls before swine," whispered Becca in awe.

Miss Delia thumped her cane three times, hard. Stiffly, we moved back to the barre, each girl stepping gingerly from the effort of holding in her stomach. Miss Delia's hand shook, sliding the needle across the record and making slick zipper sounds. Her knuckles gleamed through her transparent skin.
"WHAT," Miss Kitty roared, "did you DO to this child?"

The line at the barre broke as we shifted for a better glimpse. Miss Kitty stood in the doorway, nearly blotting out the view of the portrait behind her on the wall. She was as tall as her sister but three times as wide. Paula, sobbing and sounding shrill snorts, clutched at the back of Miss Kitty's dress. Miss Kitty stumped into the studio, turning to face Miss Delia.

Paula dragged behind Miss Kitty. Her face was buried into the enormous back of the older woman. We tried not to stare at Miss Kitty's roundness or Paula's quivering arms -- "Staring is rude," Miss Delia would say -- but we did. Miss Kitty seemed to be all unbroken curves. "Just like the circus Fat Lady," Zoey would admit later, with new respect.

"The shoes!" Thump. "The shoes!" Thump. Miss Delia pointed her cane accusingly at Miss Kitty's feet.

"What," Miss Kitty repeated, quieter, "did you do to this poor child?" She remained where she stood.

My stomach muscles trembled with fatigue. I cautiously exhaled, releasing my soft belly.

Miss Delia raised her head. "That child is NOT fit to dance ballet." She smoothed her sleeves. "Paula is a lovely child, lovely...perhaps she can learn tap," Miss Delia offered.

At the sound of "Tap," Paula unleashed a lilting wail. "Because?" Miss Kitty folded her arms and took another
step toward her sister.

Becca shifted behind me and whimpered, "To everything there's a season?"

Silently, Miss Delia switched off the phonograph. She walked to the center of the room and lifted her skirt up by the sides. Without ceremony, she did a perfect cabriole, her string of pearls flapping once, then walked calmly back to the phonograph. "Because, dear Kitty, ballerinas are light on their feet." She paused and looked at Paula. "They are not...large."

Miss Kitty grabbed her tremendous stomach and moved it from side to side, as if measuring the ripeness of a melon. "Large?" She laughed, turning to us. "Dearies, trucks are large." Miss Kitty lifted her skirt high, exposing legs like pillars, and heaved herself off the ground in a graceful hop. Her landing was hard, sending shock waves through her body which kept her breasts, arms, stomach, and legs moving even after her feet were still. "People are FAT!" She slapped a thigh, making it jiggle again. "I am IMMENSELY fat." She pulled Paula around to her front. "This little child is NOT fat. She is a DANCER!" Miss Kitty pronounced and smacked a loud kiss on Paula's ear.

Paula stood limply. Her eyes were nearly swelled shut and her cheeks glimmered. In the mirror, Zoey's eyes looked moist but the curls of her lips twitched. Becca giggled, stopped, sniffled and bowed her head.
I didn't know I was grinning until Miss Delia's glare checked me. Our line drew together.

"Can a large person do THIS?" and Miss Delia did a series of frepes. "Or this?" Grand jetes. "Or this?" She continued doing ballet steps with swift precision, legs a whir and arms bowed gracefully over her head.

Miss Kitty watched the leaping pearls like some expert skip-roper before hopping along in time with her sister. And again. And again. When her cheeks and arms moved upward, the rest of her was heading down. And she began whooping, coyote style.

"I AM the teacher!" Miss Delia stopped. Redness had touched her face like fingers. Tap, tap, tap. Her hand flew up to check the tightness of her bun. "I AM the dancer!" she shrieked. She looked at us for confirmation.

Instinctively, we straightened our line and stood tall, in fifth position, looking forward at the girl's head in front of us. Nine girls poised to dance.

"Oh, my sweet dear," said Miss Kitty sadly, lifting her sister's hand. She rubbed the small hand briskly between her two big ones. Left a lingering kiss on the fingertips before continuing with the motion. "You're chilled," and she blew on the hand and rubbed and rubbed.

For a minute, the pair stood speechless. Miss Delia, suddenly bewildered and shy: a young girl caught in her mother's finery. Miss Kitty's shoulders curled forward
slightly, protectively. All was still except the whisking of hands. From the floor, a raucous song seeped through from the VFW club and I saw Zoey's back in front of me shudder with boxed laughter. The clench of my shoulders loosened a little. Miss Kitty listened and a smile opened up across her face; she swayed and matched the motion of her massage to the music. Miss Delia started at the crash of glass, muffled but still resounding, signaling the end of the song. Eyes big.

Soon after, I left the school. I explained to my mother I was starting high school and wanted to do gymnastics. I swung, flipped, arched my back. At St. Theresa's, I became wiry but never made it to state championships. Later, in college, I danced jazz. I felt guilty about strutting, rotating my hips, or wildly snapping my head but slowly, I learned to trust my body to the music. I discovered African dance. My arms and legs recognized their individual ways, the beauty of contrary motions. And through all those years, ballet still wooed me, but I allowed meetings only in public and only from balconies of concert halls. Then, as the music from Giselle or Firebird washed over me, I leaned and strained to hear the tinkle of shattering glass in the violins.
A dog would have saved my seven-year-old life. Under the table, gulping down greasy chunks of squid or duck. A bone-crunching dog. Still, I had my sister, Jane. She ate steadily, her droopy baby cheeks flapping in and out with each bite. After dinner, my parents would go into the livingroom to watch the news. Minutes later, Jane finished eating and waddled up our long hallway after them. I could hear the bells on her shoes as she raced the whiteness of the walls. I switched our two bowls.

"Finished, Ma!" I smiled at Jane and flopped down in front of my father's chair. "But Jane didn't."

A sigh and my mother bustled up the hall to check. Jane was mildly confused, but accepting, and she ate. A few days later, the routine made my mother suspicious. She began staying in the kitchen with me until I finished. I stared at the bulging fish eyes or clutching chicken feet on the plate and mouthed my apologies to the dead things. Did it hurt, I wondered, when they ripped the
hook out of your mouth? Did you do a funny legless dance?

One day, Mama tired of my lamenting over sectioned eel and hopped up and down furiously. "Stop it! Stop it! Why are you talking to the eel?" She held the plate up to my nose. "Eat!"

On television earlier that day, the animal people had slipped into black rubber suits and sunk into the ocean. Eels waved lazily back and forth between giant rocks while the men prodded them with long poles. Suddenly, one of the eels flashed out at a diver and the man grabbed his arm. They had to return to the boat.

"I don't like eel!"

"Stupid. They're a delicacy. You should be grateful. Eat!"

I held my breath.

Cecilia Grottenmyer and the other second grade girls would laugh when they found out I had been electrocuted by an eel. All that would be left of me: ashes. My parents would keep me in a jar on the top shelf of the pantry next to the cocoa tin. On a dry winter day, the jar would tilt during an unguarded nudge, then crash as Mama reached for the cocoa. In her confusion, Mama would drop the tin. Dust fumes, me, and cocoa, everywhere until a few swoops of the vacuum left the floor slick again.

I gasped for breath and suck in eel, the smell tumbling me out of my chair and back against the wall.
"No!"

She shoved a spoonful of the meat past my pressed lips, quickly jerked out the spoon and squeezed my lips shut. She stepped back and folded her arms. I smiled sadly at her and threw up.

After that, she left me alone in the kitchen. I became creative. I sifted through garbage until my dinner was safely at the bottom of the bag. I threw food out of our kitchen window and watched it pop like a balloon two floors down. When I felt hungry, I took the honey from the top of the refrigerator and dipped spoonfuls of fish or pork in it, careful not to let any food fall into the jar.

They must all come out.

I clenched my teeth. What if I promise to brush after every meal? Eat stuff that doesn't come in foil? The dentist smiled. He tucked in my bib and flicked on the light, sucking my thoughts into the glare.

Mama shook her head at the dentist. Nonono. I do not let my children eat candy. Her bad friends must have given her candy. I cook only things that are good for her.

I leaned away from the glossy light, but dancing green spots veiled my eyes. The spots converged into
tiny floating faces, laughing and scolding. They taunted and shadowed my vision until I hid again in the yellow light.

"We ate rice noodles and almost nothing else for months when I arrived. All of Baba's savings paid to bring me to America." Mama was knitting in the dark, speaking to me softly as I cried. "Your grandmother always made sure that our dinner table had plenty of red-braised meats, vegetables in spicy sauces. Two kinds of soup. But I wouldn't let myself think about that then or I would have hated your baba for being poor everytime I cooked noodles."

I couldn't see Mama. Her voice came from the edges of the darkness. I wanted to call out and tell her to turn on the light, but my mouth was still numb and clogged with blood and tears. My gums throbbed. The click-click of the knitting needles made the softness in her voice less scary.

Cecilia slipped in and out of my dreams. Over lunches of finger foods, we sat laughing together. We were tied for prettiest girl in class. Now, we were in her ruffled pink bedroom, exchanging confidential tips on how to braid
our long, golden hair. We traded clothes. Mama glided in, wearing her worn housecoat, and handed me shimmering, high-collared gowns of jewelled reds and purples. I touched the silk, slowly fingered the embroidered buttons. Mama was a girl again with happy slaps of pink in her cheeks and dangling ornaments twirled into her glossy hair. She motioned for me to try on the gowns, but my arms were full of Cecilia's jeans and sweaters. Mama was floating away. Cecilia was floating away. I yelled for them to wait but I was suddenly underwater with my voice trapped and pulled away in ropes of rising bubbles.

Mama wiped away my tears with a soft cloth and slid back into the darkness. "After awhile, we were able to buy chicken once a week and I began learning to cook. In Taiwan, the servants prepared the meals."

At school, I stood in line to get free lunch tickets. The white envelope marked "Grace Lin Lunch Money" remained hidden inside my jacket where my mother pinned it each Monday morning. In the lunchroom, I handed my green ticket to the cashier and carried my tray to the second-grade table.

"Hey, Gracie! It's my turn to dump." Misty squeezed
in next to me. Her thin, black fingers scooped up the gray lumps from my plate and plopped them into paper napkins. She sauntered to the water fountain. Bending over for a drink, she quickly dropped the bundle in the trash. She glanced quickly around before skipping back toward me.

I laughed, putting an arm around her.

"We've only got fifteen minutes left, we'd better hurry." Misty grabbed her emptied tray and headed for the Mean Lady. I followed, but a third-grader cut in front of me.

"Hold it." A huge hand snatched the third-grader's shoulder and pushed him into an empty seat. "That's not enough. Eat more!" The boy peered up at the black walnut face and frantically stuffed forkfuls of mushy meatloaf into his mouth.

I gripped my tray and stared at Misty waving at me from the other end of the line. Skirting the Mean Lady, I made myself small and hurried to the dirty forks bin.

On our way outside, we passed Cecilia's table. The girls pulled thermoses and neat squares of sandwiches out of bright lunchboxes. The ends of their long, blond hair brushed back and forth over bologna, carrots, cupcakes as each turned from side to side, laughing and talking. Cecilia always sat at the middle of the table. She ate food in geometric shapes.
We followed the parade of children streaming past the Texaco station to Mr. Henry's. I stopped to get a lime from the fat Italian ice man. He stared dully into the distance as he poured the green liquid, his mustache pointing dejectedly, accusingly down at me. Grabbing the cone, I dropped a dime into his open palm. I was careful to avoid looking at the dark, glazed eyes.

Inside Mr. Henry's, we jostled and screamed along and paid for chips and twirled wands of licorice with coins carefully counted out from white envelopes. Misty leafed through comic books and slipped Hershey bars into her coat pocket. I bought peppermint, chocolate malt balls, pixie sticks.

I stashed leftover purchases in a sock, knotted and pushed inside a rip under the loveseat in the living room. For hours, I would lay in the space between the furniture and the wall, slowly and slowly chewing potato chips. I listened to Jane yelling for me as chocolate melted in my mouth. My mother minced garlic while I twirled gum slowly around my fingers, stretching the orange wads into wisps.

The dentist held up a poster showing a magnified set of teeth. He handed me a giant toothbrush. Show me how you brush dear show me. I swirled the toothbrush
over the glossy teeth but he frowned. No dear it's up and down do it for me dear can you show me how to brush your teeth dear? I swirled the brush faster but he shook his head. No no can you do it right dear show me the way it's supposed to be. But I could only hang onto the toothbrush as it whirled in frantic circles. The dentist clucked at me and with a black magic marker, X'ed out each tooth.

"I was very careful to buy the best food for the least amount of money. Anything that didn't have to be cold, I put in milk crates. Long strips of sticky tape around the boxes kept the cockroaches from our things."

Click-click.

I could feel my mother nodding and smiling.

"Every morning, cockroaches of all sizes were stuck on the tape. Some dead, some still moving. I threw them into the garbage and put on new tape."

The nurse turned a knob, lifted a plastic mask from a hook, and patted my head. Okay doctor everything is ready I'm sorry Mrs. Lin you'll have to wait outside okay. I jammed my feet against the footrest and pressed back into the green cushion, but the fat hand brought the white
mask closer and closer. I shook my head and whipped my hair until the nurse grabbed my ears. The dentist slipped the mask over my nose and mouth. Thank you Nurse she'll be out soon boy she's a wild one.

I concentrated on Misty's black fingers and Italian ices and not letting anyone take my teeth. The hissing of the gas sounded like shaken up coke bottles opened just a little.

I used to ask what we were having for dinner. "Shaun chiao tu tzu and hai dai hua sheng pai ku tang." Was it a special occasion? My stomach snarled in approval until I realized we were having pork stomach and kelp-and-peanut soup. I wondered vaguely if Mama was trying to trick me. How could something that sounded as good as "Chao ku feng dan" be chicken liver?

By the time I was six, I realized there was no new food. The same dishes reappeared week after week. The amount, the smell, the seasonings, the colors, never changing. Mama must have dug underground vats while I was at school, filling with day-long made pots of stuff. Filling and filling until there would always be more to spoon out year after year. Filling until the brown and gold and green sauces hiding animal parts spilled out over the edges of the vats and flowed out into the
basement. Shredded Pork with Sweet Bean Paste and Stuffed Glutinous Duck with Brown Sauce spread across the floor. Crispy Chicken Legs crept up the walls. Sharks' Fin Soup seeped into the livingroom and into our bedrooms, into our clothes and noses. Nagging at our brains day and night. At school, everyone knew what I ate because my clothes smelled and had turned into the familiar browns and golds and greens.

Even the ceiling was discolored. My mother stood for hours in front of the sink and stove, chopping and frying and not throwing anything away. She made dinners from one animal: ribs floating in soup and tongues cleverly sliced and sauced to look like steak. Great balls of steam leaped from popping vegetables and hovered over her head like angry genies until, with a wave of her apron, they vanished. Years of wrestling smelly fish and hot oil had left a huge, brown splotch on the ceiling above the stove. During the winters' darkness, I crept up the hall to watch Mama cooking under a single dull light. The brown stain looked black in the dimness and the hot vapors flew up and into their depths. I shivered at the thought of severed chicken and pig souls trying to find their ways to Heaven to piece themselves together again.

I was relieved when we moved. I raced through our new house, happy to see and touch the unblemished walls. I rolled on the new carpeting, letting the dust go up
my nose and cling to my hair. I shut myself in the closet to sit with the stillness and trapped air.

Pushing the furniture away from the walls, I crawled into the space. Flicking up the back skirt of the loveseat, I reached under and up, pushing past the bags of mothballs pinned in place to ward off cockroaches, and pulled out the sock. I unknotted it, with luxurious slowness, and inhaled the drowsy sweetness. One by one, chunks of chocolate melted in my mouth and oozed down my throat.

Mama went straight to work cleaning, slicing and cooking. Under the new fluorescent light, she raised her spatula and wooden chopsticks, plunging them down to stir and turn the crackling food. Oil snapped out at her, but again and again, her hands forged into the pans. The screaming of the frying foods was tamer on the new electric stove, but my mother tricked the meats and vegetables into the familiar flavors. Within minutes, the smell had found us.

Somebody turned on a light in the hallway and a little brightness pushed in under the crack of my door. I could see the silhouette of my mother's feet, and I tried to imagine the dried, calloused toes snug in sapphire slippers trimmed in pearl. The girlhood slippers Mama stored,
wrapped in plastic, in her bottom drawer.

Mama shifted in her chair and continued knitting. The clicking was becoming steadier as her hands learned to see in the dark.

"When you were born, I was already a good cook. Your baba was getting fat and friends came to visit. I never bought baby food. You ate what Baba and I ate. I chewed a mouthful of food until it was soft and smooth, then fed it to you. You were always so happy to eat. By the time you were two, you could use chopsticks and eat by yourself." Her sigh caught in the corners of the room.

One Monday night, my parents promised us dinner at Lenny's Pizza & Subs on the corner. Jane and I boasted about who was hungrier and how much could we eat and worried about do we have enough money. It was our first dinner out.

"Can we help you order?"

Baba carefully picked us off his arm and pushed us toward the tables. "Go sit down. Mama and I will order."

Jane ran to a corner booth, but I dragged her to a center table. A group of older girls from school sat a few seats away. I yawned loudly and looked bored, but watched the girls' reflection carefully in the window.
"Here we are. I hope you're hungry."

My father proudly passed out small cartons of milk and one straw each. He tucked a napkin under his chin and waited expectantly. Mama opened her beaded bag, taking out chopsticks and round, metal tins. She grinned broadly and pulled the lids off the containers, releasing swirls of steam. I felt the other girls' eyes staring at our colorful dinner and knew that I would never be asked to sit at their table.

"I hope you children are hungry. This is a special occasion so I made a lot." My mother chewed happily and passed me a napkin.

I watched the food churning in her mouth; her blunt fingers reached in to loosen chunks of food stuck between her teeth. Mama brought out a small bag from under the table. "A special surprise for this special occasion." She pulled out neat rectangles of cherry pie wrapped in shiny cardboard. "The sign says these are very good. Here." She placed one in front of each of us.

I put mine over the metal tin and peered at the girls' reflection through my bangs. They were sharing milkshakes and pulling pepperoni off their pizza. My mother was eating cherry pie with her chopsticks. She spoke loudly in Taiwanese, proclaiming the blandness of American food and the cleanliness of only some public restrooms.

Why are you doing this to me, I grumbled in my cheeks.
Everyone's going to know now.

"Huh? Whad did you say?" Mama peered suspiciously at me. "Speak louder."

I want to go home. Everybody's looking at us. I raised my voice but kept it in my throat. I want pepperoni, too.

"Huh?"

I bit into my cherry pie and screamed, "This isn't eating out! What do you mean this is eating out? This is worse than eating at home! If we have to eat this stuff, do we have to do it where everyone can see?" I pinched Jane until she yelped, rice tumbling from her lips. "See, Jane wants to go, too!"

The girls at the other table had stopped eating to stare at me. I sat down. My father sighed and popped the last of his pie into his mouth. Mama slapped some pennies in front of me and continued eating. "Want everything? Want peeza? Here. You get it."

The girls were leaving. I ran to the bathroom and threw the coins into the toilet.

My mother was standing by the dentist again. She frowned at the black X's on the chart and asked if she could use some of the sleeping gas. She pulled a huge wok out of her bag and made a stove out of the dentist's
equipment. She put my baby teeth into the pan and started stirring. But the dentist said he wasn't hungry. My mother told him he had to eat anyway.

Breakfasts were soothing after anxious dinners. I liked the baldness of toast and the sogginess of cereal. I knew where to find the butter and the stainless steel knives. One morning, a fat cockroach the size of my nose fell from the ceiling into my father's coffee. It didn't die. Fluttering and fluttering, its blackness made it invisible except for the dimples of its feet.

The soreness in my neck made me realize I was straining to hear my mother. She dropped her words softly as if knitting them into a sweater to keep herself warm. I was leaning out toward the clicking of her needles.

"I don't understand why you stopped liking my food."

Mama stopped knitting.

The silence loosened the tethers of time. I could feel the dull ache in my mouth but couldn't be sure whether my imagination was still dancing with white masks. Slowly, the clicking began again.

"Later, when Jane was born, I fed her the same way I fed you and she became happy. Fat. The other mothers
were jealous at the way she could eat." Mama laughed. "She ate more than other children twice her age."

My head snapped back and forth as the Mean Lady shook me. Not enough not enough. I wanted to tell her to stop, but I couldn't find her face beneath the brown creases and thick glasses. I can't eat anymore, I couldn't tell her. All my teeth are gone. Quiet quiet, a fat man said. Girls with no teeth cannot have special ice.

Far away, someone chanted, "Wakeuakeupwakeuakeup."

"Not you. No. Not my firstborn. So picky now. Everything is 'Yucky' and you're always 'Not hungry.' To me, everything is delicious after I work many hours making dinner. When I sit down, the food tastes good. I eat until I am full."

My body was absorbing the numbness of my mouth and pushing the pain outward. I could feel the cavities eating away teeth that weren't there anymore. The throbbing of my gums pulsed in time with the click-click of my mother's needles.

"Just look at your baba. He eats and eats and is happy. He's quiet because he likes his life. It's a good life with family, job, house, food and clothes."
I pictured the man who sat like a boulder to eat with us once a week. Fourteen hours a day, six days a week in a Chinatown rice shop, he worked. The man who only wanted to sleep and be left alone.

I carefully picked out tendons and gooey things, but my mother told me that only Indians eat with their fingers and to just swallow the whole thing.

"Just because you like it doesn't mean I do." I winced at the rubbery pig knuckles.

"You children just don't know what's good." She placed another helping in my bowl. "When I was young, my mother made pig knuckles and porridge to warm us up in the winter. We had to walk ten kilometers to school. Nothing was better for keeping us warm."

"How come Jane got a smaller piece than me?" I held my knuckles against hers.

"Stupid. In Taiwan, everyone would be fighting for the biggest pieces and you're complaining because I gave you a big one? You don't know." She tapped my bowl with her chopsticks, motioning for me to eat.

"Be quiet!" my father said. "Dinner time is supposed to be peaceful."

I stared at the rice dangling from his ragged mustache.
"Hurry up." My mother tapped my bowl.

I buried the knuckles under the rice and stabbed them, making my chopsticks stand straight up.

"I can't eat my rice. I'm full."

Mama's hand swept over my ear, cheek, nose. "Don't do that!" She jerked my chopsticks up, pork knuckles and all with rice flying in a snowy arch, and pressed the utensils onto the table.

"Do what?" I rubbed my cheek and picked up the scattered rice on the table, squishing the ones on the floor with my toes.

She pulled off a huge strip of meat and chewed in gulping breaths. "Don't stick your chopsticks up like that!"

"That's why you hit me?" I silently pounded the table. "What's wrong with that anyway? I was resting my chopsticks." I considered putting them back up.

"Chopsticks up in food are offerings for dead people." She pried the knuckles off my sticks and placed the utensils across my bowl. "Keep them like this when you're not eating. Who taught you to put them up? My mother would have said, 'You want to give your food to the dead, then we will give it to the dead!' and I would go hungry. How come you do things like that? You children think you're so great."
I lifted my tongue but all I could feel was soggy gauze. I thought I was a hero. I had undergone something terrible, something that hurt. I had blood on my clothes. Mama pulled out the soaked wads of gauze and stuffed fresh rolls in. I wanted her to look at my blood and see me sweating with pain. I wanted her to hear how I didn't cry.

"Eat."

I pulled the knuckles off my chopsticks and plopped them into my bowl. I ate my rice one by one, chewing and swallowing each grain before continuing. Soon, everyone wandered into the livingroom and I was alone. Taking careful aim, I speared the knuckles with my chopsticks but the huge blocks, with no rice packed around them, kept tipping over. I pushed up the window screen and tossed the knuckles out.

"I should make you go outside and pick that up."

Mama stood in the doorway, pulling back a strand of hair and pushing it behind her ear. "I spend hours cooking for you and you throw food out the window?"

I put my bowl in the sink. Once, she made me stand in a corner for six hours because I forgot to practice playing the piano. "Sorry. I'll go get it."

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She picked up her stained apron and snapped it loudly in the air. "No! What's the use? Will you eat it? Of course not. You don't care how much time I spend preparing the food. You'll flush it down the toilet. You'll throw it in the closet. You're a very mean girl."

As Mama's arms fluttered wildly, I saw the numerous nicks and spots of oil burns on her hands.

"You never appreciate anything." She began pacing, tossing her head like a gored bull. "I work so hard to make dinner. If we lived in Taiwan, we would have maids and cooks and I could sit in the garden fanning myself all day and not getting my clothes dirty. I could wear my beautiful gowns again. Every color. All silk." She walked faster. "No more cooking. Like when I was a girl. My father rang a bell and the servants put the food on the table. He rang another bell and everyone came to eat. A feast every night. We finished everything. Even during poor harvests, our family always had a lot. We ate and ate."

I picked a grain of rice off the floor.

She stopped walking and glared at me. Her eyes shone. "All you do is complain! I didn't come to this country to be a servant to my own children! I should have stayed in Taiwan!"
Mama led me from the dentist's office and stretched me out across the back seat of our car. Baba sat quietly behind the steering wheel, turning to smooth my hair. My face was an overstuffed sack of cotton and blood. One hand clutched a small cloth doll. It was ugly with orange yarn hair and limp arms, but it had been enough to lure me into the dentist's chair. I wasn't a hero. I was hungry and humiliated. Spots of color had followed me out of the dental clinic.

We drove thousands of miles to get home. The whistle of wind from a cracked window blew me back to fight the charm of white masks in a sterile room. The light was an orange cinnamon fireball. The white paper cups were filled with strawberry syrup. A seat belt kept me strapped to the padded chair, bound my hands. The mask stilled my shrieks. In the seats next to me, Cecilia was having her teeth polished and Misty was feeding pig knuckles to the Mean Lady. Chinese sauces came up a tube, into the mask and down my throat. The light went out and everything was gone except the tightening mask. I was choking. My stomach was the blown-out throat of a bullfrog, but the sauces kept pouring into me. Choking me in spiciness. Sesame oil thickening my throat. Ginger roots burning my tongue. The distant tastes mingling with the blood from my gums.

A hand brought sudden air and the tightness lifted.
A cool cloth smoothed away sweat and tears, I could open my eyes. The bitter, soothing taste of tea trickled down my throat, forcing the passage open and washing down the thickness. Mama tilted the cup again and waited for me to swallow.