

Excerpts from *The Kitchen Master*
By Vivian Liao

I.

They traded glances silently as the Bronco bumped down the dirt road and the signs of civilization slowly receded from the horizon, Yang in the front passenger seat looking into the vanity mirror above the windshield and Fan-Len riding in the back seat with Xinyi and Yuming. Breaking eye contact, Yang threw a sideways look at their driver, who had spoken a total of eight words to them since the moment he had picked them up outside the bus depot in Prescott. *You must be the Yangs*, he had said, pulling out their name into three long syllables in a way that Yang had never heard before. When Yang had nodded, the man reciprocated the motion and brought out the strange twang once more. *Name's Larry Murphy.*

Larry Murphy was a tall man who wore a tall hat on his head, which dipped in the middle and curved out on the sides and seemed a bit longer on the front and back ends. He kept his eyes fixed on the road as he drove, one hand on the wheel and one resting on the head of the stick shift. Yang tried to think of something to say to the taciturn stranger, but being a man of few words himself, he decided to let the quiet alone.

Outside, the fading light was coloring the landscape purple, and traces of snow on the ground glowed with a neon-like intensity. In the distance, a pock-marked mountain jutted into the cloudless sky, its jagged surface appearing to change color as their car continued west, into the quickly-dipping sun. Soon, Yang realized, there would be nothing to illuminate the landscape. There was not a building or house in sight, merely miles of brush spread out before them, the flat terrain broken only by an occasional tumbleweed or solitary cactus sticking out of

the ground like a wayward signpost, fingers pointing to the sky. Yang smiled to himself, thinking that his new job would surely be easy, as it appeared there would hardly be a soul to cook for.

Larry steered left onto another dirt road, this one filled with gallon-sized holes that seemed to swallow and spit out each tire that drove across it. Yang tried to throw a reassuring glance to Fan-Len in the mirror just as the Bronco drove over a deep rut and nearly knocked his head into the passenger-side window.

“Sorry ‘bout that.” Larry hadn’t raised his voice over the rumble, but somehow it was still audible. “Road can get kinda rough in the winter.”

The vehicle was vibrating faster now, a quick and successive rhythm that reminded Yang of being on a train. He steadied himself using the door grip, which Larry must have noticed, because, as soon as the roaring echoes had stilled, he spoke again.

“We call that a washboard road. Happens sometimes on these unpaved parts. Up ahead, we’ll be going over some cattle guards.” Larry slowed the Bronco enough to bob his head upward, indicating the road in front of them. “You’ll feel that too. Those are on purpose, though. Keep the herd from roaming into the wrong places.”

Yang saw several long metal rods placed side by side in the road and felt their protests in his feet as they drove across. He was beginning to worry now and turned to look at the children. But the consternation he had expected to find was not there. Yuming sat quietly, her body craned sideways and her chin resting on the back of the seat, so she could look out the window, while Xinyi peered out the other one, a look of boyish glee spread across his face. All of a sudden, his son pushed his forehead right against the glass, pointing outside.

“Ba! What’s that?”

Yang turned to look and saw a herd of animals feeding under a bucket-shaped tree. They looked like deer, except for their light brown-and-white coloring and black antlers. He motioned to Larry.

“A deer?” Larry’s mouth twitched as he followed Yang’s line of sight.

“Close. Them are antelope. A lot round these parts.”

Yang said it slowly for Xinyi, who turned over the unfamiliar syllables on his tongue.

“An-tah-lop.”

The ride was smoothing out now and the vegetation thickening. Tall evergreens filled the landscape and shorter bushes with tiny reddish leaves. The bucket-shaped tree popped up here and there with the same naked trunk and coiffed foliage. In front of them, on a low wooden fence, a sign read: Spider Ranch, M. T. Morris. Sandwiched in between the words was a circle with three curved lines jutting from the top and bottom like legs. As if hearing his thoughts, Larry said, “That there’s our brand.”

“Brand?”

“We burn it on the cattle so everyone knows they’re ours.”

Yang was about to explain to his family, when Xinyi interrupted. “Ba, it looks like a space ship!”

Yang looked out to see a massive structure looming in front of them. Thick concrete posts held up a wide sloping roof, the point of which supported a long rectangular beam jutting over the sides like a landing strip.

“What *is* it?” Xinyi could not sit still now.

Larry threw a glance in the rearview mirror and then to Yang. “Your son wondering what that building is?”

Yang smiled sheepishly and said, “Yes. He thinks it looks like, what you call it, UFO.”

Larry chuckled out loud. “Haven’t heard that one before, but I can see why he thinks it. You can tell him it’s the barn. That beam on top collects water and stores it for the animals. It probably cost a pretty penny to build, but it’s surely practical.”

This explanation seemed to placate Xinyi for the moment, and their drive continued past two smaller concrete structures, which Larry pointed out as House A and House B.

“These ain’t your typical ranch homes either, but Mrs. Morris was pretty particular about what she wanted. You know she owns the whole ranch? Had the buildings designed special by some fella in Hawaii.” Larry paused a moment and chewed on the inside of his cheek. “That’s where she was ‘fore she came out here. Now, I live in that one there. But you’ll be going up to live in the main house.”

A gray dog with muddy-colored eyes appeared in the road before them and gave two sharp barks before turning and leading them up a slight incline. Larry laughed and said, “That’s Kylo. Thinks he’s the boss. Here we are now.”

House C was much like the two homes they had just passed, but at least twice as large. A guest house connected by a slim walkway sat on one side, and a covered car park on the other. As the Bronco crept up the drive, a porch light suddenly flickered to life. A woman stepped out, bending over to ruffle Kylo behind the ears and place a tin dish before the animal, then straightened up and walked toward them. She was dressed informally in jeans and a corduroy button-down, but her easy carriage and confident steps said here was someone used to getting what she wanted.

Yang stepped down and turned to help Fan-Len and the children. Larry's voice rang out from the bed of the vehicle, where he was unloading their bags, "Evening, Mrs. Morris. Here's your new cook."

"Thank you, Larry. I see that." She stepped forward, wiping her hand on her pants before extending it to Yang. "You must be Yang Nai-Pieng. I am Margaret Morris."

He was impressed that she had known to address him by his last name first, and he took her hand, equally impressed by her grip. Up close, she appeared older than Yang had first imagined, probably sixty. Her straw-colored hair fell in neat waves to her shoulders, and Yang felt her assessing him as he spoke.

"Yes, it is nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting us. This is my wife," he placed one hand on Fan-Len's shoulder, "and these are my children."

Mrs. Morris nodded at them and said, "Lovely to meet you. Larry, can you manage their things on your own? I'm going to show the Yangs around."

She led the way inside, her buckskin boots tapping lightly on the black stone floor that ran throughout the house. She pointed out the different rooms quickly and efficiently, and Yang did not interrupt to translate for his family. In the main living area, giant windows ran along two walls, where in the last traces of sunlight, Yang could just discern the vast landscape dotted with rock croppings, low-lying shrubs, and dark, emaciated trees. A stone ledge ran underneath the windows, and below the ledge, narrow cupboard-like doors extending the length of the room stood open to let in the evening air. Two four-top tables that matched the black décor rested in front of the longer set of windows, directly across from a bar partially obscured by a sliding accordion panel pulled partway shut.

“And here is the dining area, where I take my meals.” Mrs. Morris pointed to another longer table positioned so the person sitting at its head could look out over the desert. “I designed the house with the view in mind, so I like to see it whenever possible.

“Your rooms are back this way.” She motioned to a private wing off the kitchen, on the other side of the main entrance from her own. “Your son can sleep downstairs in the recreation area.”

She turned now to face them, as if she were a museum curator awaiting questions. But Yang sensed that the pleasantries were over and ushered Fan-Len and the children out of the way, while he waited for her to continue.

“I’m sure you are tired from your travels, so I won’t expect you to cook this evening. But I rise early every morning to ride with my ranchers, so I’d like breakfast at 6. It doesn’t need to be elaborate. Fresh fruit and something hot, like oatmeal. Do you understand?”

Yang nodded, and Mrs. Morris returned it, started to depart, then turned back. “I hope you and your family will enjoy it here. Good-night.”

He found Fan-Len and the children waiting for him in the larger of the rooms, where Larry had also placed their suitcases. Xinyi and Yuming sat with their legs dangling off the double bed, while his wife stood at the window overlooking a garden of some kind.

“Xinyi.” His son instinctively straightened as he looked up.

“Yes, Ba?”

“Your room is downstairs.”

“Downstairs? I didn’t see a downstairs.”

“Take your sister and go find it.” They started to rise obediently from the bed. “Xinyi. Yuming.”

“Yes, Ba?”

“Make sure you behave. Remember, you’re in someone else’s home.”

He heard Fan-Len scoff under her breath, a white flash which burst and vanished on the window in front of her, and he stepped full into the room and shut the door behind him.

“Fan-Len?” Her right cheek reflected in the glass, a sliver of moon suspended in a black pool. It did not move, and though he paused as if his wife would speak, Yang knew that she was waiting for him to start the argument she wanted to have.

He sighed and said, “Fan-Len, we should be grateful for this opportunity. America is a wonderful place to live.”

She turned away from the window and began opening and shutting closet doors and dresser drawers. “America, America. All you talk about it is America. If this place is so great, where are all the people?”

He couldn’t argue about that. Yang hadn’t expected Arizona to be so...desolate. “But America is big. Not every place is like this. You saw how crowded it was in San Francisco.”

“Yes, but we’re not in San Francisco, are we?” She was turning down the bed covers to inspect the sheets now. “You said your Ambassador had arranged a good position for us. I think you’ve been fooled.”

Yang sighed. It would take some getting used to, but he was sure they could make this work. “Please, Fan-Len. Just try a little and see. Okay?”

She stood and met his gaze, not blinking a few moments, then dragged their suitcase over to a closet and began unpacking. “*Suan le*. I won’t argue. Just don’t expect my sympathy when things don’t work out.”

Spider Ranch spanned 55,000 acres, most of it national forest, and supported a 450-head cattle operation managed by two families – Larry had a wife and two sons, and the foreman, Milo Fair, a wife and a daughter – living on the land. Winter was a slower season for the cowboys, but this still meant they were up at dawn taking care of repairs around the ranch, chipping icy water sources so the livestock could drink, and getting ready for spring round-up, apparently, one of the busiest times of the year.

Yang had never ridden a horse before, much less seen one, and he watched with awe every morning as Mrs. Morris made her way after breakfast down to the barn and emerged minutes later astride a snowy white mare.

The children had been pestering him about learning to ride, but Yang had not found the occasion to ask Larry or Milo. He figured once they started school after the mid-winter break, Xinyi and Yuming would be too busy with their studies for horseback riding. Yang could tell that they were anxious – especially his daughter – about meeting their classmates, but this is why they had come; they would learn to adjust.

Yang also had worries of his own. He quickly learned that Mrs. Morris favored clipped, business-like instructions and assumed that he should be able to interpret her wishes accordingly. When he could not, Yang found it even more daunting to ask for clarification. There was nothing intimidating in her stature – she maintained the slim and attractive figure that often comes with wealth – it was the way she seemed to look right through him whenever she spoke.

“What do you expect? Any woman who lives alone has no need to make herself clear.” That was Fan-Len’s explanation. Yang had rebuffed her, not entirely sure why, with the information that Mrs. Morris had been married twice and had two grown sons.

“Is that so?” Fan-Len, of course, was unconvinced. “Then where are they?”

Yang shared some of his wife's reservations, but kept them to himself while on the job, which was pretty much all the time. The kitchen was spacious enough for a private residence: a walk-through with four burners and side-by-side convection ovens. He had stocked the pantry full of food items purchased in Hong Kong – part of his contractual obligation – and familiarized himself with the modern appliances.

What had taken the most adjustment was training himself to look up, a necessity now that his job included constant monitoring of the red light mounted on the wall just inches from the ceiling. This was how Mrs. Morris summoned him from her room, out of speaking range, by pressing her foot down upon a lever housed inside a velvet box. Yang didn't mind the act in itself – he was hired, after all, to serve – but he had gotten used to a certain kind of relationship with his employers, status notwithstanding.

He tried not to let this bother him, and that morning, as he sliced grapefruit quarters for breakfast and noticed the illuminated red light, Yang thought nothing of it as he padded down the hall and tapped lightly on the door, opening it after a muffled voice prompted him to enter.

Mrs. Morris was seated at her writing table, dressed not in her riding clothes, but a long, dark green robe. She barely raised her eyes from the book she was reading when she said, “The Polks are coming for dinner tonight.”

Yang absorbed this information and waited to see if more would follow.

“Is my breakfast ready?”

“Yes. Almost.” He briefly considered adding a side of potatoes to the quiche. “Would you like me to bring your meal in here?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll eat outside on the lanai.” She placed a slip of paper into her book and shut it, then pushed herself up from the table. “I won’t be riding today. After breakfast, I’d like you to accompany me into town.”

Yang nodded as he closed the door to her room and walked out to the back porch. The sun was just beginning to rise over the rocky crags in the distance, and he paused a moment to watch it cast animal shapes through the arms of the manzanita trees. He wiped down the umbrella-topped table and set out a placemat and silverware and was just placing the ramekin of quiche Lorraine, the sliced fruit, and hot ginger tea, when Mrs. Morris emerged.

She also raised her head instinctively to the east, then sat down and began to eat immediately. Yang let himself back into the kitchen, where he began tidying up while keeping an eye out should Mrs. Morris need anything.

He wondered about her. It was clear she had left behind certain entitlements to live in this desolate wilderness, and contrary to Fan-Len’s belief that Mrs. Morris had been escaping something – rumor, scandal, heartbreak – Yang held a different notion: Mrs. Morris liked it out here. Soaking in the warm summer nights. Sharing her living space with fearsome creatures like the javelina and coyote. Riding the scat-marked terrain with her ranchers. Despite himself, Yang admired these hearty sensibilities.

“I’d like a Chinese meal tonight.” Yang jumped. He hadn’t noticed her come inside.

“Pardon me?” He reached for the dishes she was holding in her hands, embarrassed that he had been caught unaware.

“You may prepare anything you see fit, but I’d like to offer my guests a cuisine they may not get elsewhere. An authentic Chinese meal seems appropriate.”

“Yes, Mrs. Morris.” He placed the dirty dishes into the sink to soak and wiped his hands on a towel.

“Do you know what you need to purchase?” She must have noticed his blank expression. “In town.”

Yang swallowed and asked, “How many guests will attend?”

“The Polks have three children, two boys and a girl.” Mrs. Morris said and promptly let herself out the front door. When Yang realized she wasn’t coming back, he dropped the towel in his hands and followed her to the car park, where she was letting herself inside the open-air Jeep. She made no indication that he should join her, but also did not protest when he climbed into the passenger seat.

The trip seemed longer than it had his first time leaving it, a phenomenon Yang attributed to his company. Mrs. Morris made no attempt at pleasantries, a slight for which he felt grateful; Yang was not sure he could match small talk with this woman.

He concentrated instead upon the scenery; with the wind whipping around his face, imagined he was galloping astride a horse, no trail or guideposts, prepared for whatever might come. Here were the edges of town. The large plaza sitting on one end of the main street looked familiar; Yang remembered the white stone building with tall marble columns that rose behind it – the courthouse, Larry had said on that first day. A right turn, and he slowed a little to read the storefront signs. Hotel St. Michael. Trapper’s Alley. Bird Cage Saloon.

“Here we are.” The car pulled to a stop.

“I need to buy wine for dinner. The grocery store is there.” Mrs. Morris pointed across the street to a one-story stucco building. “I’ll meet you back here in one hour. This should be plenty of money for you.”

She counted out several bills and handed them over, which Yang folded and tucked deep into the chest pocket of his shirt. He was used to the pungent air of markets and bazaars, the jostling of hagglers for a bargain, so Yang entered the brightly lit grocery store as if stepping into an artificial oasis. He wandered among the aisles lost in the neatness of it all, the fruit stacked in pyramids, the leafy vegetables bunched in orderly piles, the rows of canned goods lined up with the labels facing center. He found a metal cart which rolled on wheels and strolled every inch of the industrial tiled floor, taking time to peruse, enjoying this leisure allowed to him.

When he had found all he needed – the corn starch and the vegetable oil, the watercress and the sweetened condensed milk – he queued up in line where a sprightly girl wearing a red checkered vest stood behind a cash register. Yang watched the woman in front of him placing items on the conveyor belt, and he followed suit, waiting for his turn.

“Hello sir. Did you find everything you needed?” The cashier gave him a friendly smile. Yang noticed the rhinestone barrettes fastened at random throughout her hair and wondered if Yuming would like them.

“Yes, thank you.”

“You new around here? I’ve never seen you before.” She lifted each one of his items, scanned for a price, punched her numbers into the cash register, and placed the item into a brown paper bag.

“Yes.” Yang wondered if he should help her bag the groceries.

“Not real talkative are you? That’s okay. I’m a chatterbox. The other checkers sometimes call me Chatty Cathy. Only my name’s not Cathy. It’s Tracy. What’s yours?”

She looked up from the line of groceries still moving down the conveyor belt, waiting for his answer. “My name is Nai-Pieng Yang.”

“Oh! That’s hard to pronounce, isn’t it? Mind if I just call you Mr. Y?”

Yang nodded and smiled politely. The line was beginning to build behind him, but no one seemed to mind.

“Well, I sure appreciate it. I like to know all the customers’ names, isn’t that right, Mr. Beasley?” She nodded to the elderly man standing behind Yang, who either didn’t hear her or didn’t care to respond.

“Now your total will be \$34.52. How would you like to pay for that?”

Yang pulled the bills from his pocket and extended them to Tracy.

“Don’t give me all your money, Mr. Y! You’ve got sixty dollars there.” She shuffled through the money and handed him back one of the notes. “And here’s your change to go with it. You have a real nice day now. Do you need help out with your groceries?”

Yang shook his head and lifted the three bags, balancing the middle one with the bottom of his chin. He smiled to himself as he exited the store, looked across the street, and saw Mrs. Morris waiting for him by the Jeep. Yang felt suddenly lighthearted. If everyone in town was as nice as Tracy, his children would have no problem settling in.

Mrs. Morris was a gracious hostess, and from the way she interacted with the Polk family, Yang gathered she knew her guests well. As he served the party of six hors d’oeuvres in the formal dining area, he turned his attention to the children, a welcome distraction while he waited for Mrs. Morris to be seated for the meal.

The girl had sunny blond hair and the scabbed knees of a tomboy, and Yang observed that she especially liked the little toasts smeared in sesame oil and fresh peanut paste that he had prepared for the youngsters. The two boys were playing with the chopsticks he had placed at

each setting, and to his surprise, Mrs. Morris turned an indulgent smile upon them as they tried to pick up the finger foods with the wooden utensils.

“You boys are doing that the hard way, you know. We have an expert here who can show you how to properly use those.”

She motioned to Yang and nodded to him, an instruction he understood. He complied and stepped forward, holding his hand out to the taller boy with a smile. “Can I see?”

The entire party watched as Yang placed one chopstick between his thumb and first two fingers and held it up in front of the children, rolling it back and forth like a pencil, then slid its mate into the fold created by his thumb pressing up against the palm. Bracing this stick on the other end with his third finger, he moved the original stick up and down, making clacking noises which brought laughter from the children and polite appreciation from the adults.

“Well, now that we all know how to use our chopsticks, shall we eat?” This was another cue, and Yang handed the chopsticks back to the boy, who immediately set to work trying out his newfound skill.

In the kitchen, the sounds of dining could already be heard from his own family seated in the small alcove near the pantry. He looked at Yuming, face tucked over her bowl, and called her name. She made no movement, but just as he was about to repeat himself, she asked in a voice not much louder than a whisper, “Why doesn’t Xinyi have to help?”

Xinyi’s torso raised up slightly, an aftereffect of the kick he gave his sister underneath the table. Yuming did not flinch and looked up at her father.

Yang walked to the stove and began scooping the stir-fry into a serving bowl. “Yuming, why do you hate it so much? Your Ba does it everyday. I only ask you to do it because there are dinner guests. I need the help.”

“It’s because your daughter doesn’t know how to work.” Fan-Len began to clear the dishes at their table. “She wants to live an easy life now that she’s in America.”

Yuming rose slowly from the table and said nothing, walking over to the sink and dropping her empty bowl in the soapy water. Yang looked at his daughter and wondered whether this might be the day she decided to disobey him – he had heard that teenage girls could be rebellious – but she simply stood there, waiting. He handed her the steaming dish in his hands and said, “Just for tonight, okay? Help out your Ba.”

She nodded and moved toward the dining room, Yang right behind her with a pot of jasmine rice.

The guests were already seated and waiting for their entrance, and he saw looks of curiosity on their faces when Yuming set down the first dish.

“What is this?” The younger boy said what everyone appeared to be thinking. Yuming looked up for help. Was that dread written on her face?

Yang directed his answer to the entire party, motioning at the dish in question. “This is pork and diced sea cucumber. A Chinese delicacy from Hong Kong. Please try. We also have silken tofu salad,” he nodded at his daughter’s obvious relief, “sesame-glazed mushrooms, and fried chicken.”

“Where are the egg rolls?” The little girl’s expression was earnest, as all eyes turned toward him. He swallowed and searched for a quick answer, remembering the batch of leftovers in the freezer.

“I will make a special kind of dumpling for you to try, okay? Very similar to egg rolls.” Yang was relieved to see the girl smile, and he pulled Yuming aside into the kitchen.

“Yuming, Mrs. Morris likes someone to stay in the dining room while they eat. I have to prepare the dumplings.”

The same look he had seen moments before flashed across his daughter’s face. “Don’t make me stay out there. I don’t know what to say when they ask.”

“It’s a good chance to practice your English, Yuming.”

She said nothing, but her lips puckered out as if she were biting the insides of her cheeks in anger.

Yang sighed. “Can you fix the dumplings?”

“Yes. I’ll do a good job, I promise.”

He nodded and took his place just outside the kitchen entrance into the dining room, where he could see both the desert brush illuminated by the lights outside the house and any signals given by Mrs. Morris.

“Margy, you’ll get a kick out of this one.” That was Mr. Polk speaking now. He had a kind smile and shrewd eyes.

“Oh? Let’s hear it then.” From the kitchen, Yang could hear Yuming preparing the dumplings. He marveled at her shyness and hoped it was something she would outgrow.

“Folks in town are saying you’re connected to Dole. As in pineapples.” This caught Yang’s attention. In the grocery store today, someone had asked him if he was from Hawaii.

“Well, that’s certainly sharp of them. Apparently, my previous whereabouts are no longer secret. Yang, more rice, please.” He found he had to be alert on these nights, for his directives were frequently mixed in with the dinner chat as though he were part of their conversation.

“Well, there could be worse assumptions. At least they haven’t latched onto Uncle Harry yet.”

Mr. and Mrs. Polk laughed heartily, and Yang used this opportunity to retrieve the empty rice pot. He walked to the kitchen, trying to make sense of what he had overheard. Yuming stood over the stove, scooping up the fried dumplings with a slatted spoon. He offered his daughter an encouraging smile. “Looks good, Yuming. Thank you. You’re free to go now.”

Relief spread over his daughter’s face, and this warmed Yang’s heart a moment. Shyness wasn’t such a bad quality. Hadn’t he been that way once?

He arranged the dumplings on a tray, drew a deep breath, and walked to the dining room, where appreciative murmurs rose once again as he set his offering upon the table.

II.

It seemed she had searched everywhere for him, but after a symbolic 44 days of burning incense and beseeching her ancestors, Fan-Len finally had to admit it: her father’s spirit was gone. Or perhaps more accurately: had never arrived. It was time to put his ghost to rest.

The 44th day – double-death day – was hot and arid, like most of the days she had spent in this strange land of dust and wild silence. They had arrived just after the last snow, and the season seemed to have skipped spring altogether. She did not sleep well in the heat, but even though she rose early, her husband was already out, gone to prepare meals for the upcoming round-up, no doubt.

In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face and ran a comb through her hair, stopping to pull out a few gray strands that seemed to have popped up overnight. She put water on the stove to boil congee for the children and then padded softly down the hall to the room where she had set up the makeshift altar. She tried not to look at the bicycle leaning against the

ledge by the window and the boxes and empty suitcases stacked on one side, as if doing so would conceal the room's other function. She looked only at the 8-by-12 portrait of her father on the wall; it hung in a frame of gilded brass, which she had purchased at the Pic 'N Save on her first trip into town. Beneath it, stood another Pic 'N Save purchase: an inexpensive, but sturdy buffet table with crawling vines of pink roses painted on all four legs. A white lace doily which she had crocheted rested on the surface, dotted here and there with prior offerings: a string of old coins, a piece of smooth obsidian she had found on one of her walks around the ranch, and a jade Bodhisattva she had kept since she was a child. On one end stood another photograph of her as a young girl, holding her mother's hand. The Christian cross laid at the other end, its silver chain snaking over the edge, the necklace a gift from Yuming, who said she believed in Jesus now and that her mother should too. Fan-Len had said she would think about it and set the necklace upon the altar, in front of which she did all her contemplation.

From a drawer, she retrieved a box of matches and a new incense stick, holding it up to her nose for the briefest of seconds, then burying one end in the bowl of sand in the center of the table. It jutted into the air like a too-long stick set upon a funeral pyre. She lit the match and held it to the exposed end of the incense, watching it catch flame then burn down to a trail of fragrant smoke that began to rise immediately. She closed her eyes and let the smell of musky cloves and sandalwood wash over her, focusing on an image of her father in full health, before the malnutrition had distended his stomach and weakened his bones.

When his face was vivid before her, she emptied her mind, listening only for his voice. She tried to believe that today would be the day, even as her own restless voice within intimated otherwise. After a time – seconds? minutes? – she opened her eyes and sighed. Nothing.

She lowered herself onto her knees. In this position, her forehead reached the top of the buffet, and she cupped one hand over the edge and leaned forward to rest upon it, closing her eyes once more. In her first days in this foreign land, she had taken her father's silence as punishment. There was new guilt now, besides the death she could not prevent. Leaving China had meant leaving his graveside to the care of others. So her father's spirit did not need to accuse her; she was well aware of her desertion.

But recently, she had begun to view his silence differently. She thought back to the days she was a child, much adored by her father, and she fostered hope that he had finally come to forgive her. That his silence was in fact releasing her to live in America without a haunted past.

She thought about this, looking at the calendar that hung on the wall underneath the buffet. It was the kind common in restaurants back home, red-backed and adorned with raised gold numbering, displaying two months at a time. The Korean couple who ran the small novelty shop in town had given it to her – free of charge – when she had pointed to one. Secretly, she liked the reminder of home, but she had frowned at the time, looking at the glossy pictures of pretty models dressed in *qi paos* or fancy Western dresses. When she got home, she had hung it underneath the altar, where the pictures were obscured from view unless one knelt down to see them.

She didn't look at the pictures now, but at the empty white square signaling the day's date. She had handwritten the number 43 in yesterday's square. Today was the 44th day. Two fours side by side – double-death day.

Another image glimmered before her: the memory of the place Yuming had recently taken her, where they sat with other people on long cushioned benches and Fan-Len stared in wonder at the bowed heads, the somber expressions, the remnants of ash imprinted – left to right,

up to down – like seals upon their foreheads. At the front of the room, where the short man in black had given a talk, she could see the outline of a large cross like the one hanging on her daughter’s necklace, but this one was covered in a black drape. She understood that in America, this was the color of mourning, and right away, those heavy traditions had felt familiar: how many times had she gone through similar ministrations at the temple in Tianjin?

She opened her eyes and leaned forward, grabbing the hot end of the incense stick between thumb and finger a moment, feeling the pain of burnt skin only after she let go. She rose to her feet, the blood slowly returning to her lower limbs, and looked again at her father.

The word was on her lips before she knew it, “*Baba*,” but she did not listen for his voice. Instead, she reached out, pressing an ash-scarred thumb to his eyes, first left then right, and pulling ever so slightly down.

The Woman slept very little, a fact that did not surprise Fan-Len – she still believed her husband’s boss had plenty of unsettled thoughts to keep her up nights – but caused no small measure of irritation: unless Fan-Len wanted to adjust her sleeping habits to stay up into the wee hours of morning, she would have to find another time to use the kitchen. Her husband was not a possessive man, but the room belonged to him by sheer sake of utility; the Woman kept him working so much that he began to refer to it as his office. Fan-Len would have to be cautious if she didn’t want her secret discovered, and discretion seemed somehow important, even though she knew Yang would not have minded. He might have even embraced the discovery, knowing that she had found a way to fill her days.

So Fan-Len watched and memorized routines. She noted that the Woman rose without fail before six in the morning, ate breakfast, and was out riding with her cowboys by seven, if not

earlier. Lunch was never skipped, and even though Fan-Len suspected the other ranchers packed theirs in with them, the Woman always took hers at the table on the outside patio which Yang had said she always referred to by some fancy Hawaiian name. Unless there were plans for a dinner party later with guests, the midday meal was the leisurely one, and even when Yang outdid himself, preparing three, even four courses in advance, the Woman insisted on sampling each one, a bite that relegated that dish to leftover status in Yang's mind and meant he would start all over again for dinner.

Because of the Woman's tendency to stretch noon into one or two, and because her post-lunch ride would take her right up to dinner, served always in her room, the light shining underneath the crack in her doorway until long after midnight, Fan-Len determined that the best opportunity would come in the morning. Even on a day of light ranching duties, she would have a good four hours to herself.

Yang complicated this somewhat, for his routine lacked predictability. Some mornings after he had cleaned up the meal, he might catch a ride with one of the hands into town to stock up on supplies. But he was just as liable to spend the time until lunch preparing for that meal or pruning the vegetable garden that sat outside the kitchen windows.

Fan-Len would need to find a way to get him out of the house. She feigned an interest in the planting, thinking she might send her husband on a succession of errands related to the garden – a wire trellis for the tomatoes, a new spade, manure for fertilization – and so keep him away long enough for her to do her own in-house tinkering. It was an imprecise plan, and she knew it, so she was glad when her husband came home after a morning on the ranch and told her about his first experience riding a horse.

Yang had been surprised, she could tell, when she encouraged him to take up riding lessons, so she had thrown in a few pointed remarks about him behaving like a schoolboy just so he wouldn't grow suspicious. But the ploy worked, and Fan-Len chuckled at her own eagerness on the day her husband went out for his first real horse lesson after breakfast. He would be gone two hours, not near as long as she wanted, but she would use every minute gratefully.

A few recipes had been added since the last time she looked at the journal. But she felt gratified as she flipped through the pages and realized she could read enough of the characters to decipher what the new dishes were. The one with chicken and cherries and that strange spice called saffron must have been added when they were in Teheran. It seemed the Persians were always mixing fruit with their meat.

She looked at the ingredients listed underneath some English words and shook her head when she picked her way through the directions. These were clearly *jiao zi*, but she had never heard of any Chinese putting carrots inside their dumplings. Yang must have amended the recipe once he got to America. She made a note to herself to change it on the version she would copy down later.

But for now, she needed to be quick, and she needed to be selective, and her selection would depend on what ingredients she could find and take without attracting Yang's attention. She turned to the page with Yuming's name on it, scanned the familiar recipe that was really for traditional *zong zi*, but she knew that bamboo leaves would be hard to come by.

The next entry was for some sort of egg dish, and though she couldn't think of the last time her husband had served shrimp on the ranch, she figured she could make do well enough. And the baking time was only half an hour, which would leave her plenty of time to clean up afterward.

She set a pot of water onto the stove to boil, dropping in a cube of bouillon, then cracked the eggs into a bowl, whipping as she folded in the pork and mushrooms and salt. Neither she nor Xinyi had known what the third-to-last ingredient was, but she figured the amount called for was so small that it would hardly be missed. She added the chicken broth and then poured the mixture into a baking dish.

She looked back at the recipe – it said to bake in a hot oven for half an hour – and furrowed her brow. She had noticed Yang’s vague instructions in many of the recipes. With a shrug of her shoulders, she turned the dial to 350 degrees and set the pan inside.

She felt nervous about overcooking the dish, so Fan-Len switched on the oven light and leaned back against the counter across from the oven to keep an eye on the progress.

There had been many occasions in her days in America when she felt the minutes ticking by in slow motion, like morning would never dawn to bring the distractions of getting Xinyi and Yuming off to school, or that the afternoon and the children’s return was ebbing away instead of toward her. But here in this kitchen, at this precise moment, Fan-Len’s heart seemed to race in her chest, one minute past and then ten and then twenty and before she knew it, she was retrieving her perfectly baked egg dish from the oven.

She grabbed a spoon from a drawer and was just preparing for a taste when she heard shoes crunching on the gravel driveway. She looked up at the clock and then out the window and saw Yang. He was home earlier than she expected. Quickly, she sunk a spoon deep into the eggs, placed a bite into her mouth, and grabbed the baking dish with an oven mitt as she pushed out onto the patio.

She swallowed quickly and called, “Kylo! Kylo!”

The gray dog came as soon as he heard the spoon clink against his bowl; this was an unexpected treat. He began to lap up the yellow goodness immediately, and Fan-Len nodded with satisfaction before heading inside. She filled the sink with water and with one swipe across the counter pushed all the dirty dishes into a soapy bath. She grabbed a sponge and plunged her hands down into the sink just as her husband opened the front door.

A flash of confusion spread across his face, and Fan-Len took a deep breath and realized the kitchen still smelled of garlic and cooked pork. She lifted a soapy hand and cranked open the window, set her mouth into a firm line, and hoped Yang would not ask her what she had been doing.

“Well, are you a cowboy now?” She bantered, and her playful tone had the intended effect. Yang smiled and blushed slightly. “Well?”

“Larry says a few more days, and I’ll be good enough to go on one of their round-ups.”

A few more days? Fan-Len thought she would have longer. “Hmph. Then I suppose you’ll want to learn how to throw a rope next.”

He averted his eyes, too quickly for Fan-Len to see whether she had planted another idea in his head. “What are you doing?”

She turned back to the dishes. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m washing dishes. The baking pantry is filthy. When was the last time you cleaned it?”

Yang either did not hear or did not care to answer; instead, he walked to the refrigerator and opened it, peering inside for so long that Fan-Len thought she had given herself away. But then he pulled out several stalks of leeks and celery, grabbed an onion from a bowl on the counter, and began to mince and chop.

She let out a long and quiet breath, absently brushing the sponge against the remnants of egg caked onto the baking dish. Out the window, she watched Kylo's tail sway from side to side as he loped down the driveway to a patch of grass, where he reclined and began licking his paws. She hated wasting good food on a dog. She would have to do a better job of planning next time. Pick a recipe that would pack well for Xinyi and Yuming to take to school for lunch.

Yang's next lesson was on Monday.

That would give her three days to plan.

Her second effort was an exercise of the memory, because after tasting the dish she had prepared last week, she had formed an immediate opinion: baked egg dishes are not meant to be salty. She recalled a treat she had eaten often as a child, an egg custard with a hint of vanilla, set inside a delicate pastry shell. Each dessert fit into the palm of a hand, so they were popular with all the village children.

After rolling out a small batch of simple dough – flour, salt, sugar, oil, and a little milk – Fan-Len used most of the two hours trying out different versions of the same base of eggs, vanilla, and powdered sugar: one with a touch more vanilla and a cup of milk, one with evaporated milk and water, one minus the milk altogether. When she finally had a combination that tasted like she remembered, she turned to the muffin tin she had set aside. She sliced the dough into twelve small sections and began to roll the pieces flat into small pancakes no bigger than her fist. She laid each one over the mouths in the baking tin and then began to fill them with scoops of custard, pushing down slightly as she did. These tarts would not be as pretty as the scalloped shells she remembered as a child, but she was proud nonetheless at her ability to improvise.

When she was finished, she placed the tarts into the oven and began to wash the mixing bowls and utensils she had used. She glanced at the clock – just past ten – and smiled. Yang would not catch her off guard this time. The tarts would be done and packed away before he even set foot up the driveway.

She dried the dishes and put them in their places in the cupboard, wiped her hands on a towel, and then turned to the oven, giving it her full attention. That small surge of excitement – part rebellion and part childlike wonder – she had felt last week fluttered in her chest. She opened the oven door, felt the momentary sting in her eyes from the heat and then the comforting aroma of egg yolk tinged with vanilla. She pulled the tin from the oven, closed the door, and turned off the heat, sensing simultaneously a presence in the room with her. Her father? Without drawing a breath, she trained her eyes on one spot of bubbly custard that had fallen to the tray, listening intently, and then she realized her mistake. This was a living being in her midst.

She looked up. The Woman was staring at her from the doorway near the front entrance, pulling the leather tail of her hat's chin strap through her fingers. Fan-Len froze, the tarts poised in midair. She was not afraid, for she did not care what action the Woman might take; it would be a gift if Yang got fired. She only contemplated whether there was some measure to delay the Woman's recourse a few more weeks – just until Fan-Len had finished going through all the recipes. She started to lift one of the desserts, meaning to offer a taste, when the Woman nodded and passed by her without a word.

Well. Fan-Len was sure to hear about it from Yang.

Now that her secret was out, she took her time lifting each pastry from the tray. She set two onto a square of tin foil to cool and repeated once more with another sheet of foil and two custards. She left the remaining tarts on top of the stove and selected one of them for herself,

which she placed onto a small plate. Without rush, she seated herself at the kitchen table, blowing lightly before taking a small bite.

The memory of her village rushed back at her with surprising force, and she closed her eyes, seeing the dusty streets cramped with small houses, the swallows darting in and out of the eaves, and the familiar slope of her father's back as he bent ankle deep in the rice paddies, pushing the floating shoots back into the black earth. He straightened and turned around, waved a muddy hand, before bending down once more.

"Dan ta?"

She opened her eyes. Yang stood over the tray of tarts, looking back at her.

"Yes. I had a craving. Try one."

He lifted the pastry and consumed half of it in one bite, swallowed, and ate the rest. "It is delicious. How did you –"

"You think you're the only one who knows how to cook?" She finished hers and pushed up from the table. "I used some eggs from the refrigerator. That woman saw me. I'm sure she'll complain about it later."

Yang looked as if he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Then he placed two of the tarts onto a plate and left the room.

He was back a few minutes later, his hands empty.

"Well?"

"I told her I asked you to prepare them." Yang moved the muffin tin off the stove and set two frying pans onto the burners.

"Hmph. You don't need to cover for me. I am not afraid of her."

“Fan-Len. Don’t be so defensive. She did not say anything. She only asked me to tell her more about *dan ta*.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her they are quite popular back home. For children. And adults too.” He poured olive oil into the pans and ignited the heat beneath each one. “She asked me to prepare some more of our favorite snacks. I thought *cong you bing* and *you tiao*. We have leftover congee, don’t we?”

Fan-Len said nothing, but retrieved the pot of rice porridge from the refrigerator and set it onto one of the empty burners. Then she let herself outside.

Kylo was laying on the porch, and his head popped up expectantly, as if Fan-Len might be bringing another treat. But she brushed by the animal without acknowledgement, and he laid back down, sighing through his nostrils.

She seemed to walk without direction, but Fan-Len knew where she would end up. She had found the spot one day and spent many an early evening seated on the flat rock, facing the line of cacti as she watched the sun set behind it.

The surface was warm beneath her as she sat, and Fan-Len wished she had thought to bring an umbrella with her. The sun shone high overhead, and her dark hair felt hot to the touch. The audience of thorny plants stared back at her in silence, and she watched as the shadows they cast inched ever so slightly with each passing minute.

She felt somewhat let down. Her husband didn’t care, and the Woman didn’t care about what she had been doing. The meals no longer seemed dangerous; her secret now just a silly preoccupation. There was no disguising anymore how void her life really was, and suddenly she could stand it no longer. She looked around, despising the flat emptiness, the shriveled-looking

trees, the disfigured rocks. She picked up a stone that rested near her feet, brushed the loose gravel that clung impossibly to its surface, and hucked it at a cactus in front of her. The rock sailed between two green stumps and landed with a skip on the desert floor, displacing a spray of dust. Another let down.

Fan-Len dropped her head to her knees and wrapped her arms behind her head, willing herself to cry. But the tears would not come. She was dry, arid. Just like the land she could not bring herself to face anymore.

III.

He had lived through the business of spring works, seen Larry and Milo depart on their long, everyday-of-the-week roundups, watched the rite of passage for all the new cows born in winter – the assembly line of vaccinations, earmarking, castration, and branding – and now Yang marveled at the book end that was fall.

Shipping day, as the cowboys called it, had come to Spider Ranch. Yang sensed it was a momentous event because Larry and Milo had let their children stay home from school that day. Since there would be no one to drive Xinyi and Yuming out to the main road to catch the bus, all the ranch children, including his own, now sat atop the corral fence, braced by the front crooks of their feet wrapped around the middle beam, waiting for the trucks to arrive.

The livestock had been sorted the day before: the calves from the cows, the steers from the heifers, the ones to keep and the ones to sell. Mrs. Morris walked among this latter group, pulling her weathered hands across the backs of the animals as much to assess their worth as to

pay her last respects. As she reached down to pat the sides of one of the larger heifers, all heads turned toward the road, where a low rumbling could be heard.

“There they are!” Milo’s daughter pointed to the first truck just rounding the bend.

The approaching drone of the vehicles would have drowned out any conversation, but no one was talking. Even the children understood that a few short hours could determine whether the entire year had been successful.

The lead truck stopped just short of the corral, and a burly man in overalls dropped from the bed, tipped his hat toward Mrs. Morris, and moved around to the back. Larry and Milo stepped forward, disappeared from view for a few moments, then re-emerged with the other man, the three of them carrying a large portable cattle scale.

From his own perch in the shade of a barn wall, Yang watched as the men shuffled and shimmied inside the corral, setting the clunky blue cage down on a flat piece of ground, then wheeling it into position so the head faced out toward the unsuspecting line of livestock.

Two other men had joined them by now, and there was an exchange of handshakes among all of them, followed by a more awkward greeting to Mrs. Morris. The group appeared to discuss a few logistics, then one man pulled open a metal door attached to the scale, while Larry and Milo maneuvered the first of the bigger steers up the walkway. Their bodies blocking the cow’s exit, the two cowboys watched anxiously as the buyer representatives bowed their heads over the reader. Mrs. Morris then stepped forward to approve the number and gave a curt nod to her ranchers.

Yang could not see her face, but it must have been a good sign, because Larry and Milo immediately broke into smiles and ushered the steer off the scale. Larry led the animal to the trucks outside the corral, while Milo brought forward the next steer for weighing. The tension

had been broken. The children were chatting among themselves, and Mrs. Morris had taken off her hat and was fanning herself in between weighs of the scale.

Yang looked down at his watch and figured he should get back to the house soon. Mrs. Morris would be hungry after the morning activity, and he still had preparations for the evening meal. Only Kylo noticed his departure and trotted along with Yang a few steps, nipping at his heels, before turning back.

Yang found the Cornish hens as he had left them in the kitchen sink. He picked up one of the birds to begin cleaning it when he remembered Fan-Len, and he set it back down, rinsing his hands and wiping them on a rag.

He knew she hadn't heard him enter, because his wife never would have let him see her like that, kneeling in front of the altar to her father, head bowed, voice whispering something like a prayer. He tried to step out of the room quickly and leave her to the dignity of privacy, but something caught her attention, and she turned sharply, as if someone had called her out of a dark dream. She looked past him a moment, like she was dazed, but her gaze settling upon him was steady.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I'm sorry. I came home to fix lunch. I heard a noise.”

“Yes, me.”

There was meekness in her voice, which he was not prepared for; he expected her to be angry. “Are you...okay?”

She slowly rose to her feet, brushing out the full skirt she wore, another surprise. She rarely wore skirts. “No, I'm not.”

“What is it?” He noticed his heart then beating in his chest.

“I want to leave.”

“Leave?”

“I hate it here.”

“Why?” He knew as soon as he spoke that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Why? Yang, you can’t be serious. Look at this. Where we live. What you do.” Her voice caught on something. “What I do. I’m...lonely.”

He tried to think, could not get past the word she had spoken, could not believe it had come to this. “Where would you go?”

She looked him in the eye then and what he saw – confusion – flooded him with relief. She hadn’t meant what he thought she had meant.

“What? Not me. Us.” There was the annoyance he wanted to see. “I want us to leave.”

Yang did not know the timid woman who had spoken to him moments ago, but he knew enough not to reason with this woman before him now. Fan-Len had reached her limit, and it was his choice now to follow or watch her go.

“Very well. I will speak to Mrs. Morris.”

She nodded. “Ask her to make a recommendation for you. I want to go to a place where there are people. Lots of people.”

She swallowed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Phoenix.”

Dread was an understatement, but Yang knew it had to be done and he figured that evening was as good a time as any. He could tell Mrs. Morris was in good spirits from the weigh-in earlier in the day, and when he set the tray of seared pork chops, mustard greens, and

baby potatoes onto her writing desk, she smiled and said, “Looks wonderful, Mr. Yang. Thank you.”

“You are welcome, Mrs. Morris.” He lingered, unsure how to proceed.

She pulled her eyes up from the magazine she was perusing. “Is there something else?”

He cleared his throat. “I wished to speak with you about something. Perhaps after you finish your dinner?”

She closed the magazine and tossed it onto the bed, motioning to a free chair beside her own. “Please. If you don’t mind talking while I eat, I wouldn’t mind the company tonight. We – my first husband and I – used to have guests all the time when we lived in New York. I miss it once in a very blue moon.”

Yang lowered himself into the chair, slightly awed. He’d never heard her mention New York before, and he wondered what other secrets she held. “Well, Mrs. Morris, I wanted to thank you for all your kindness in arranging my family’s stay here. It has been most...enjoyable for me. But my, well, I think my family and I might like it better in the city. Phoenix, maybe.”

Mrs. Morris dotted the corners of her mouth with a napkin and took a long drink of her iced tea. She did not appear fazed by what he had said, and Yang wondered for a moment if he would need to repeat himself. Finally, she turned her eyes on him. “You’d like to leave Spider Ranch then?”

Yang looked down at his hands and braced himself. “I’m sorry, but...yes.”

She sliced a potato, chewed it, and swallowed. “Well, I cannot say I’m surprised. I’m afraid I’ve noticed that your wife does not appear to like it here.”

Had Fan-Len’s displeasure really been so obvious? He needed to explain. “It is not the ranch, Mrs. Morris.” He saw her attention was focused on the food and felt the courage to

continue. “You, Larry, and everyone have been so welcoming to us. It is just that my wife, she’s not accustomed to the...wilderness.”

She laughed, not unkindly. “Yes. It is certainly wild here. Your wife must think I’m crazy. Living out here on my own. Sometimes when she looks at me I think she’s sizing me up.”

“Oh no, Mrs. Morris. She thinks you are quite...brave.” He didn’t know what else to say. Embellishment was not his strong suit.

She laughed again. “I’m something. That’s for sure. She and I are not so different, you know. We are both very...*solitary*.” Her face took on an amused expression. “Well, I can’t say I’m thrilled at the idea of you leaving. I think you’ve adjusted quite remarkably here. But...I understand the importance of keeping your loved ones happy. When would you go?”

Yang thought a moment. “As soon as I could find something else. Would you perhaps make a recommendation for me?”

She nodded dismissively. “Yes, of course. But couldn’t you stay on through the spring at least?”

He knew that she would find it difficult to hire a new chef during the holiday season, but another six or seven months would be out of the question for Fan-Len. “I am sorry, m’am. I think the end of the year would be the longest.”

Mrs. Morris pursed her lips. “I see. Well, I suppose I will have to make do. I have a friend in the oil business who lives in a large house near a resort. Perhaps he may know of some work for you.”

Yang was overwhelmed all of a sudden by her generosity and felt tears welling at the corner of his eyes. He blinked them back quickly, feeling somehow that it would be inappropriate to cry in front of her. “I would be very grateful, Mrs. Morris.”

“Is that all?”

“M’am?”

“Is that all you wished to discuss?”

“Yes.”

“You may leave then. I’d like to think about this on my own now.”

“Yes, Mrs. Morris.” He stood quickly. “Can I bring you anything else?”

“No, thank you. Yang?”

He turned around just shy of the bedroom door. “Yes?”

“Your wife and children are lucky to have you.”

He felt a hard lump in his throat. “Thank you, Mrs. Morris. For everything.”

Their house was a one-story brick structure tucked at the end of Montbello Street, its west side facing the alley. Yang had laughed when the owner called it a “ranch-style,” because its trellised front porch, sprinkler system, and central air conditioning reminded him nothing of ranch life. He knew immediately that Fan-Len would like it.

First and last month’s rent set him back considerably, but Yang considered it a small price to pay for his wife’s happiness. She didn’t say it in so many words, but it was easy to see the change. When he came home after work, leftovers from the Biltmore kitchen in hand, more often than not, she had already prepared a meal. He noticed soil for a flower bed upturned in the front yard, small shoots peeping above ground, and in the back, the tilled beginnings of a vegetable garden. Fan-Len was more patient with Yuming, who had made friends with a girl at school named Sheila, and no longer pestered Xinyi to come home from college in Tucson every weekend.

Yang smiled when he pondered the word, *this*. This is what he had come to America to find. This is what he still wanted for Lanyu and Chuen.

The letters were harder to write now, not because he feared who might discover his whereabouts, but because of the ache in his fingers. He had initially noticed it during his hours at work. It was nice to be in a first-class establishment once again, but his movements had slowed considerably and his precision with a knife gone soft. It frustrated him. He could see clearly the cut he needed to make, felt instinctively how fast to guide the carrot beneath his chopping blade, but his hands simply could not keep up.

The other chefs made allowances for him, he didn't quite know why. He thought maybe it was because they felt sorry for him, and instead of being ashamed, Yang took some pride in knowing they regarded him enough to show pity.

But he didn't dwell on these sentiments, because there were other more pressing matters that required his attention. Yang had followed closely President Nixon's visit to China and rejoiced when the meeting with Chairman Mao seemed to go well. He celebrated when he heard the news that Americans would now be welcome abroad, but not because he himself wished to return. Instead, Yang dared to hope that this might ease the way in bringing all of his children to America.

So he ignored the arthritic cramps in his fingers and wrote, not to Lanyu and Chuen, but to the United States government. He completed the necessary forms – filling in the tedious blanks with uppercase block letters and calculating the precise figures he needed for sponsorship – and checked every other week with the immigration center about the status of his children's applications.

Yang knew it was a waiting game now, that all he could do was wait. But this was something he knew how to do, and he resolved to do it as long as was necessary. He tried not to be fanciful, to resign himself to the reality that had been reinforced again and again. But on days he was feeling particularly low, he allowed himself the luxury to dream. And before he knew it, dreaming became belief. He believed that one day the small eat-in kitchen in their new home would be cramped for the best of reasons: extra places at the table and his family's feasting loud and nostalgic and utterly alive.

His bicycle needed a new chain. There was no doubt about it. He had stretched its life as long as he could, oiling each link individually and hoping the whole mechanism would stay intact for one more ride. But now as he pedaled, he could feel the chain start to stick again, grinding over the tiny pebbles caught within its parts, the roller clanging like a crank.

He should have waited at Lee's house and called Yuming to come and pick him up. She would be finishing up her English lessons and on her way home by now. But it was a nice night, and Yang liked to ride in the summer, when the light was just fading from the sky and the cool of the desert evening beginning to descend.

At the intersection of 28th and Camelback, he stopped at the red light and hopped off, bending over to fiddle with the chain. The links felt greasy to the touch, but he knew it was time to start looking for something new. Maybe he could get one of those bicycles with ten-speeds and impress Yuming, who thought her dad too old to be riding on two wheels.

The light blinked to green, and he pushed the bike into the street, walking alongside it, momentarily hypnotized by the clicking sound of the chain. A flash like two lightning bugs streaked below his right eye deceiving him, because when he looked down, there was nothing

there. It was only when he felt the glare of headlights upon his face that he turned to look right. He had time only to register his temporary blindness, before the source of the blindness hit him just above the knees, knocking him off his feet and into the air. He landed with a thud on his right hip, the ilium cracking in two where it met the brute metal of a shiny new '72 Ford Ranchero. When his face hit the windshield, he heard more than felt the pain of tearing flesh, and he lay there on his pillow of glass for a few, long seconds, blinking a few, long blinks, during which he thought of nothing and everything.

During which he thought of his last thing, which was how they would hear the news. Fan-Len would be asleep, on her right side, her left arm with its left hand gripping the orange blanket she had brought all the way from China. The ringing phone would sound like part of her dream, and she would not awaken to answer it the first time. On the second call, fourteen minutes later, she would finally rouse, pick up the phone, sleepily hear her husband's friend ask if Yuming was home yet. No, she would yawn. Does Yang want a ride? Um, yeah. Tell him to wait. Okay, I'll tell him. Yuming would get home just in time for the third call, dropping her keys just inside the front door as she dashed for the phone. Hello? Yuming? Yes. It's Lee Bo-Bo. Is it my father? Yes. Does he want a ride? No. She would not drop the phone, but instead lay it gently back in its receiver, tiptoe down the hall, and look in on her mother. She would swallow and gather the strength she didn't know she had and say, just above a whisper, Ma. She would have to say it twice to get her attention. Ma. What? It's Ba. You going for him? No. Again, a third time. Ma. Fan-Len would sit up then and flip on the light, prepared to chastise Yuming for disrupting her sleep, until the tears. When she heard the tears, she would know without it being said. But someone would have to say it still. To Xinyi at school in Tucson. Who would get the call in the

middle of a dream about Lisa Perez. Hello? It's me. Who, Lisa? Whose Lisa? Ma? It's Yuming. What are you doing? What? Calling so late. It's Ba. What about Ba?

They were the last words he would hear, because the car would come to a stop then, his body flying noiselessly through the air in a brazen show of grace before smashing to the ground.

IV.

What she remembers now about their first night was how tender he was.

Her family did not have much money to spend on finery, but Fan-Len's mother had insisted on a red lace veil, which they sewed together in the week before her wedding. They sat across from each other by kerosene light with opposite corners held in their laps, listening to the sound of thread whistling through the lace, not talking except to trade occasional comments on the progression of the veil. Falling into a rhythm, Fan-Len's mind wandered to images of a village she recognized only by name, a place she imagined not so different from her own.

Almost everything she knew about her betrothed had come to her in song, the night her father came home late from working the fields, the smell of liquor on his breath. As Fan-Len bent over to help him soak his cracked and soiled feet in a bucket of warm water, he patted her on the head and whispered to her softly in the sing-song voice he adopted after drinking too much.

"*Xiao nui, xiao nui*. Soon you will be leaving me. Small girl, small girl. It's time to go away."

She leaned back on her haunches, taking in the nice lilt of his voice and the airy baritone like a bassoon in their small two-bedroom house, before she registered the meaning of his words.

“What did you say?”

Her tone seemed to call him to attention, and he looked straight into her eyes when he said, “I found you a husband.”

“A husband? For me?”

“You’re almost thirteen. It is time to enter a new home.”

Her eldest brother’s fiancé had also been thirteen when they married, and Fan-Len had been preparing herself for this moment. Now that it was here, she felt more curious than frightened.

“Who is he?”

But her father simply smiled and patted her on the head again, went back to humming his favorite Peking opera. Over the weeks that followed, she managed few details – he is 19 years-old, he has two brothers and a sister, they also live on a farm – which she turned over in her mind as her fingers turned their way over and under the red silk thread of her wedding veil. As the fishtail pattern started to emerge, Fan-Len imagined she was weaving a picture of the life she was about to assume.

Snow fell on the eve of her wedding day. Her mother called it a sign that the marriage would be prosperous – *good snow means good year* – but Fan-Len found it particularly troublesome as she would have to walk nearly a mile to the sedan carriage in her thin cloth shoes. The cold on her feet, she did not dwell on the ceremonial signs of her exile from her father’s house – the spilled water and the door to her home slammed shut behind her – until she was seated in the carriage. She had not thought to look back upon her father’s face and she knew her mother’s would be covered in tears, but Fan-Len did not hold these thoughts long. She would see them at the banquet hall, after she had taken her traditional ride.

As the sedan chair bounced up and down with the gait of the men carrying her, she winced each time a man lost his step, fearing the shame of a broken carriage more than a broken bone. Her family had not been able to afford the full ride from her village, so her father paid the men to carry her around the block of the banquet hall three times, hoping the luckiness of that number would ward off any misfortune they invited by forcing her to walk to her own wedding.

The crunch of feet on day-old snow began to take on a regular rhythm, and Fan-Len leaned back into the cushions of the carriage and inhaled deeply. She could smell faintly the Tiger balm her mother used to rub into her arthritic joints as the web of red lace swished back and forth against her nose. It soothed her while she rode, but later, during the ceremony, it frustrated her, adding another layer of irritation to cloud her vision of the man she would soon be joined to for the rest of her life.

She tried to study him through the red lace, but could discern only outlines: a wide sloping face, big teeth when he smiled, and hair that seemed to chart its own course. Later, when he removed the veil to kiss her, she had time only to register the nice smooth curve of his nose, before he pressed his trembling lips to hers.

The wedding meal was the combined effort of the newly joined families. Hers provided rice and vegetables from their fields; Yang's brothers had slaughtered a few of their chickens and spent days fishing the lake for trout and catfish. But as they dined on red-dyed eggs and steamed whole fish and pickled pig's feet, the feasting was peppered by a rumor that spread round the room nearly as fast as the rice wine flowed: *The Japanese had bombed Shanghai again.*

Yang's father stood to say a few words, and all eyes turned to him, as if their rapt attention could quell the disturbing dispatch they had just heard. When he sat down and all the men had toasted, they turned once more to their food, bowing their heads as if to pray, the

conversation a silent din and no match for the imagined sounds of explosions and gunfire and death in the streets of Shanghai.

But the news did not trouble Fan-Len. What she heard were mere words – distant scenes – compared to the drama unfolding beside her: this man, whom she now could study at length as they ate, had become her husband. He had uttered his first words to her moments after he had pulled his lips away from their first kiss, words whispered so close to her face that she could feel the whirr of his breath as he spoke them: *xie ni*, thank you.

She thought about these words, thinking her new husband a finicky eater as she watched him pick the choicest pieces of meat and place them into his bowl. He took the head of the fish, prying out the eyes and cheeks with his chopsticks, before throwing the bones to the floor. Last, he grabbed long, leafy stalks of mustard green and *cong xing cai* and laid them on top of the rice. Then he had set the bowl before her.

But he would not look into her eyes. Not even when she returned the words he had used – *xie ni* – and he had bowed his head slightly and reached for the empty bowl sitting beside the steaming bowl in front of her and started filling it with his own portion. They ate – side by side, husband and wife – looking straight ahead, occasionally lifting their glasses together when a relative stopped by their table to pay respects with a toast.

She could feel the rice wine going to her head, and it seemed like all her words were tumbling out in a detached voice she could not control. Her cheeks hurt from smiling so much, and she wondered if people were staring at the teeth she didn't like to show. Fan-Len noticed Yang stealing glances at her, but no, he wasn't looking at her lips, he was looking at her eyes now. When she matched his gaze, he quickly looked away, and she realized she was laughing again.

The good part about the wine was that it made the rest of the evening go faster, and soon Fan-Len found herself alone with her new husband. She sat on the bed and giggled as he helped to take off her shoes. She thought he was reaching down to undo his own shoes when he suddenly righted himself and held open his palm to her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for you.”

“Me?”

She regarded the ring a moment before reaching for it and slipping it onto her finger where it fit snugly. She held her left hand out in front of her face and turned it side to side so she could admire it. She had never seen anything so fine before. The flash of the gold delighted her, and she was surprised to see that what she had heard about jade was true.

“Look, it gets darker on my finger!” She turned to look at Yang, whose expression she could not discern. She thought of something her father had told her offhand, not as a warning, but more as a hint of what she could expect in days to come: *if a boy gets married, it’s happiness; if a girl gets married, it’s sadness.*

But where was the sadness in this? Surely someone who valued her enough to give her jewelry would not demand the things she had been taught a husband demands.

“Is this what I am worth to you?”

“I saved for many months to buy it.”

“Why?” She tried to read the expression on his face.

“I wanted you to have something...special.”

“Why?”

All of a sudden, he looked as if he would start to cry, and she began to doubt herself.

“*Suan le*. I just wondered if that was all I was worth. Or if a wife meant more to you. Nevermind.”

She didn't know what else to do, so she changed the subject by reaching for his pants, undoing the buckle like she had seen her brother do when he met the neighbor girl in secret. Fan-Len had followed him once – to the bamboo grove behind their house – and watched as they made love among the tall tubular reeds. It was not her brother she had wanted to spy on, but his girlfriend, Mei-Gwan, a tall, long-haired beauty Fan-Len had idolized ever since chasing her around the village as a toddler.

But Yang put out his hand to stop Fan-Len, and his embarrassment surprised her; this wasn't how she thought a man was supposed to behave. She pulled back and crossed her arms and spoke in a voice bolder than she felt, “*Aiya*, don't you know how to use it?”

Her words seemed to help him recover, and he nodded as he shut off the light and slipped out of his pants, lowering himself onto the bed. They sat there side by side – their eyes adjusting to the dark as they looked straight ahead much as they had at dinner – until he turned to her and kissed her, groping awkwardly at her softer parts.

When he finally entered her, it felt nothing like she had imagined it would. It was too quick, too painful, and she tried to keep from shouting out, but she couldn't help it, and that only made him push harder. She closed her eyes, trying not to look at the face grimacing inches above her, and after a few dark minutes, it was over.

She opened her eyes when Yang had rolled off of her, and they started to water because she had been squeezing them so tight. She tried not to move, hoping he would go to sleep next to her, but she could feel the unevenness of his breathing and even in the dark his eyes upon her.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm not, I don't –”

She turned her face toward him and felt the wetness of her tears as she rested her cheek on the pillow. She didn't know what she was supposed to say, so she said nothing. They had simply laid there looking at the whites of each other's eyes until sleep overtook them both.

She tried to picture those eyes now, imagining them behind his eyelids shut in their last forever blink. But all she saw was the line across his jawbone marking the edge of where the mortician had swiped the cosmetic sponge – a color too pink and not golden enough – a last and final ignominy for her husband to take to his grave.

“Ma.”

“What?”

“Come. Sit.”

“*Wo bu yao.* You sit.”

She watched as Xinyi seated himself in the first row next to his sister, bowing his head and fumbling with his hands, first on the seat and then on his legs and finally folded with interlocked fingers in his lap. Behind him, she saw some of Yang's coworkers from the Biltmore Estates and the Lee family he had been visiting the night he was killed. The room was small enough to look part full, but that only made the empty seats stick out even more. None of his friends from San Francisco had come, not even Wong Lao Jiu or his sons who Yang had helped sponsor out of China.

She turned back to her husband and fingered the pale pink satin lining the coffin and picked invisible specks of lint off his charcoal gray suit and thought of Lanyu and Chuen – still back in Tianjin – unaware of their father's death.

Why did you leave me to bear your burdens again? Huh? That's all you do is leave.

Somewhere behind her, she heard expected sounds – the shuffle of feet and the loud rustling of people trying to be quiet – and then unexpected sounds. Deep, heavy wailing filled the air, cacophonous cries that sounded like the imitation of grief, like the attempt of the lungs to mimic the soul’s pain.

You think I should be crying for you? Like I cried for my ma and ba?

She had not emptied out her sorrow like this since her mother’s funeral – and then her father’s a few months after that. Then it had been collective anguish, the mourners there all sharing their burdens, raising their voices also for their own dead, buried in the unyielding earth whose barrenness had put them there.

“Ma.”

The wailing stopped.

“What?”

“Come. Let’s go.”

“No.” She turned back to the coffin, gripping the sides and straining to hear the others.

What did you do with them? You would deprive your widow of her agony?

She realized then that it had been her. She had been mourning alone, her cries not subsumed by the grief of others in the room; her grief had been the intrusion.

“It’s time, Ma. They need the room.”

She looked down, releasing her grip.

You see that! Now I’m the one who has to leave. How does it feel?

She let herself be pulled away by Xinyi whose hands had suddenly found a purpose: they gripped her arm where the black band of cloth was pinned to her beige-colored suit. It had been the closest she could get to white without offending her children.

“It’s not right, Ma.”

“Who says it’s not right? In China, you wear white to a funeral.”

“This isn’t China, Ma.”

There was Yuming now, walking around in that half-conscious way she had whenever she didn’t want to face reality. She had worn black of course.

You see that? Your daughter can’t even properly mourn you.

They drove to the cemetery in Xinyi’s brown Rambler. She sat in the front seat and leaned on the dash in front of her for support. Every time they made a turn, she pressed her fingers into the vinyl and felt the heat of the desert sun baked into the cracks of its surface.

She kept her eyes on the car in front of them, hoping the black tinted glass on its backside was doing a proper job of shielding the heat. The make-up would be sliding off his face now, tingeing the collar of his white shirt a pinkish shade of clay. Good thing no one had to look at him anymore.

She followed the dark black car with her eyes as it wound its way through the gravel paths of the cemetery. It kept going when their car stopped and parked in the blacktop spaces designated for families. As Xinyi came around to open the door for her, she stepped out and looked around for the others, but no one was there. No other cars had followed them.

They walked in silence across the thirsty lawn – Xinyi on her right and Yuming on her left – and she felt the blades of grass pricking at her ankles through her pantyhose as she craned her neck to look for the dark black car.

All around her, silent eyes stared, eyes etched into stone with thick gray letters: some up and down, some left and right, a few curved at the top and bottom. Granite slabs encroached upon each other, like the tilt of a woman’s head seeking her lover’s shoulder. Except these lovers

were strangers, all of them, forced by chance and circumstance to share eternal residence. In China, the dead were given room to breathe: massive ancestral burial chambers sometimes carved into mountainsides, members of an entire family entombed within. In America, her husband would rest between Mitzhaufen and Davis – that’s what the man in the sales office had told them.

She had lost sight of the car and gave up, setting her gaze ahead of her, and that’s when she saw it. They had been walking straight toward it the whole time. She watched as a man in a suit emerged from the driver’s side and began fiddling with something in his hands. He looked up and then opened the back of the car, fiddled some more.

By the time they reached the burial site, Fan-Len could see he had removed the coffin from the belly of the dark black car. She looked at his skinny arms and doubted he possessed the strength to lower the coffin on his own. But there were no other workers in sight.

It was just the man in the suit and Fan-Len and Xinyi and Yuming. The three of them stood there with their hands crossed in front of them and watched as the man started to crank a pulley. The coffin began to descend into the ground.

Wait!

She grabbed her son’s arm.

“I want to see him.”

“What Ma?”

“I want to see him.”

“Ma, you already saw him. Back at the funeral home.”

“Don’t argue. I want to see him. Again.”

Xinyi sighed, and she watched as he stepped forward to talk to the man in the suit, who by now was sweating profusely. She felt their eyes upon her and their shared exasperation, but the man must have wanted the break, because a moment later Xinyi was stepping back and pulling her toward the edge of the rectangular depression in the earth.

The top of the coffin was almost level with the ground they were standing on, and the man in the suit kneeled down and pried open the lid, pushing it back so it rested on the cranked part of the steel arms attached to the hinges.

Xinyi and Yuming stood behind her, giving her some privacy as she kneeled next to her husband. She was right. The make-up had started to run. She took out a handkerchief and dabbed at the line of skin above his collar. She hadn't been this close to him since the coroner at the morgue had pulled him out of a cold gray locker for her to identify his broken body. At the funeral home, the coffin had been set up on a platform, and she had to stand on her tiptoes to see both sides of Yang's face. Now she looked full into it.

Will you be okay?

She didn't feel angry anymore. She thought of a cold February night, sedan chairs, food she had not tasted, Japanese bombs, red lace, milky jade set in gold, the dark, and his arms on either side of her, propping himself up. Underneath him, this time she dared to open her eyes and look.

It's time to say good-bye, okay? You'll be okay.

She reached out with her finger and touched his closed eyelids and then his cheek. She had thought his face would be sticky, but it wasn't. She sat back on her heels and looked around her.

There, that one must be Davis. His headstone was surrounded by yucca stalks poking out of the ground like hair. A few of the strands had turned yellow – the spiky flowers long since bloomed and withered.

Not so bad, huh? Next spring, you can see the new flowers.

Mitzhafen had a simple marker – sitting on a small incline – parallel to the ground.

Hmph. No frills. She'll be a good listener.

Behind her, Xinyi cleared his throat. It was time to say something.

She didn't know what.

She said what she remembered.

What she knew he would remember.

“Xie ni.”

They walked back to the car across the same thirsty lawn, without looking back at the man in the suit who was still struggling with the pulley. She looked instead at the witnesses around her, blinking her eyes in response: thank you. *Thank you for coming.*

When they got into the car, no one spoke. Fan-Len fingered the ring which only fit onto her pinkie now because the heat had swelled every part of her body. She looked down at the jade, rubbed her thumb around its edges, and realized that that was what Yang's face had felt like: cool, and full of luster, when they had made love on a night she could remember now with fondness. Hard, but rounded like a moon, when he had answered the touch of her finger, just moments ago, with release: I am not here anymore. *You can let me go.*