

Ten Thousand Ducks

by Jean Wong

Lines of tension crawled from the back of my neck, as I rang the buzzer to my parent's house. I adjusted my three-year-old daughter on my hip. She nodded as I whispered: "Behave. Take off your shoes, don't spill juice."

We waited for the buzz which would release the iron gate. Clumps of tropical shrubs and ferns were nestled close to the ground. The house was painted a brownish green blending with the surrounding foliage. Wooden bars were nailed onto all the bedroom windows.

We continued to wait. Both parents, over seventy, were hard of hearing. I was going to be in Honolulu for three days for my niece's wedding. My mom phoned me three or four times a day to run errands for her. Today she wanted me to pick up some groceries and join them for lunch.

Finally, a loud buzz signaled. We rushed to open the gate before it would lock shut again--then down the steps to the great wooden door, and again, another wait. I heard the sliding of locks and bolts, as my mom opened the door.

"Come in, come in, take off your shoes!" She narrowed her eyes and examined me suspiciously. Ever since I told her I owned two golden retrievers where I lived in California, she thought I carried fleas. This was added to the list of herpes or crabs I most likely picked up from the toilets of Cotati. She had dismissed my lifestyle as "hippie bum" when I stopped teaching at a business college and became a child care aide.

"Hello, Jenny," she addressed my daughter in a singsong coo. "Are you being a good girl? Come in, come in, put those groceries away, we're busy!" As we followed her into the dining room, the same dreary gloom came over me whenever I visited.

The careless interior undermined the spacious lines and high ceilings of the house. Cheap plastic flowers littered the table surfaces. No real plants, a nesting ground for tropical bugs, were allowed. Corners were weighted with stacks of telephone books.

Important numbers written in the front section made them permanently indispensable.

Dull, monotonous memories arose as I glanced at all the old photos scattered throughout every surface. Instead of beautiful koa wood, the furniture was made from termite-proof metal. Drawn heavy lined curtains blocked the spectacular ocean view so no “bad people” could look in.

“Fifty dollars,” I heard my mom bawl, “Are you crazy with the heat? So much money just for a birthday!”

“Hey,” my dad said, “it's her eightieth birthday.”

“So what!” my mom countered, “your family is always having birthdays.”

“Don't be so 'mau sum' (no heart) . She's my favorite sister,” Dad argued.

“Do you think money grows...” she complained.

Tuning out the old arguments about money, I went into the laundry room. Their laundry basket was getting too heavy, so whenever I visited, I'd help them carry it to their upstairs bedroom. I started folding the clothes from the dryer. The towels and clothes were worn with tears and holes. Fluffy new towels took up too much room in the washing machine. Torn pajamas provided “natural air conditioning” in the hot Hawaiian weather. Shelves were filled with bags of laundry, some dating back to my early childhood. Every visit, my mom offered me a bundle for my daughter, and I dutifully accepted the stained, moth ball offerings rather than turn them down and be called a wastrel.

When I got downstairs, my daughter was hopping around in a little circle, getting restless. “Mommy, mommy, where's my markers?”

“Okay, but we're going to have lunch soon.” I put some markers and paper on a little fold up table. I went into the kitchen and took out the groceries being careful to put any unused store coupons in a blue basket. Two over-sized refrigerators occupied the kitchen space. Huge amounts of food were stored in a large pantry in case of airline strikes or war. I started to set the table with plastic cups and plates.

“Jean, Jean!” My mom called with the sharp staccato cry that always sent my heart beating a little faster than it should. “What’s Jennifer doing? Why did you give her those pens? She’s going to mark up all my walls.”

“She’s just sitting right there. She’s drawing on the paper.”

“No, I never let anyone use pens in my house. Now she took all the caps off. She’s going to drop one on the floor and get the rug all marked up. Remember when she spilled the juice. Take them away!”

“Mom, look at the tip of the pen. What is it touching—the walls, the rug, or the paper?” I could hear my voice getting louder.

“Remember the time you dropped the platter of fish and made a big spot on my carpet and broke the dish. You’re always breaking things; you’re such a destroyer--making a mess of my...”

“Grandma, grandma, you’re a Nervous Nellie!” Jennifer piped up, rushing up and playfully shaking her arm.

“What, what--what did you call me?” she demanded.

“Grandma, you’re always squawking, don’t be such a Nervous Nellie,” Jennifer boldly countered.

“Oh, so, calling your old grandma names,” she relented, smiling reluctantly. I was amazed at how fearless my daughter was with her grandmother. Being with my mom was like shifting into the wrong gear and hearing grating metal. Inexplicably, Jennifer captured my mother’s heart since infancy. Watching the baby’s changing facial expressions, she would exclaim, “Key di ugn guy yut man op” (Seeing her is like watching 10,000 ducks). She was entranced by Jenny’s long eye lashes, rosy complexion, and light-hearted nature.

“Hey, cool head, cool head,” my dad said blandly, “let’s have lunch.” Dad was used to my mom’s sudden flares, but she got under my skin. I sat down smarting from her attacks. *That’s it. There’s no point in my coming home anymore. I never felt a part of this family and these visits aren’t worth the trouble.*

We sat through lunch in silence. Like starving refugees, our goal for the first ten minutes was to wolf down the food as fast as we could. As the food began to disappear from the table, my dad mumbled between bites: “So where did you go out to dinner last night?”

“Just to Vino's.”

“What did you order?” Mom asked.

“I had the red snapper. Jenny ordered pasta.”

“Who paid for it?” Dad asked

“What did the bill come to?” joined Mom.

This was the standard conversation. Restaurants, food, what everyone ate, and how much it cost were the only topics that held their interest. The choicest tidbit was who got stuck with the check. Politics, literature, philosophy--all the topics that lit the spark of my passion were foreign to this table as if there was a stuffed ostrich being served on a platter.

“Jean,” my mom began, “tomorrow you need to go and pick up a bath mat. Ours is so old it's sliding all over the place. Yesterday I tried to give Daddy a bath.”

“A bath? I thought he always took a shower.”

“He can't stand up in the shower so good any more so I thought maybe I would put him in the tub. So I got him in the water, and then I couldn't get him out! He tried to stand up, but he kept slipping down.”

Her voice cracked as she broke into a sudden laugh, “And he was so soapy that I couldn't hold onto him.” Her eyes sparkled. “And there he was like a big tuna fish sloshing around in the bathtub!” Her voice was shaking. “That old fatso--you should have seen him. I thought we would...,” she sputtered, “...have to...call the...police!”

The laughter started coming in waves. Mom sat on her chair leaning forward, her legs spread out and holding her belly. The yellow of her teeth showed in her open mouth, as she burst into another volley, laughing and laughing, unable to stop. She started pounding her thighs, “and he was going ' hoi, hoi, hoi,' tossing around, that old naked fatty...”

She bent over, gasping for air and snorting in starts. Her eyes were wet through a face of crinkles. My dad started to chuckle and Jennifer giggled. The gaiety was contagious as mom embellished and repeated each detail of the incident.

The laughter ended as abruptly as it had started. We began talking about my niece's wedding, and how much everything was going to cost.

“So foolish,” my mom pronounced, “you can buy land with that much money. Just go to the judge and be done with it!”

When it was time to go, my mom walked us to the door and placed a pack of my childhood clothes into my hand saying, “There's a good sweater in there Jennifer can use—real wool!”

As we got into the car, my daughter chirped, “Grandma is so funny...I love her.”

“Yeah, I love her too,” I said, noticing how the sun caught Jenny’s sidewise glance and made her look like my mother.

Then I turned the key and drove down the hill heading for a nearby thrift store where I could drop off the bundle of clothes.