

Peking Duck
By Ling Ma
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1.

In my first years in the U.S., my parents take me to the library to encourage my learning of English. With my mother's guidance, I check out ten, fifteen books every weekend. Though I gravitate toward picture books, my mother pushes me to start reading more advanced chapter books. "Just the words themselves should be enough," she says. "If you can't think up the image on your own, then that's a failure of imagination."

This is how I come across "Iron & Silk," recommended by a librarian as an adult book that's easy to read. It's a memoir by Mark Salzman, a wushu enthusiast who was among the first wave of Americans accepted into China in the early nineteen-eighties. He travelled to Changsha and taught English at the Hunan Medical College.

Salzman recounts how, during one lesson, he asked the students to read aloud their essays on the topic of "My Happiest Moment." The class consisted of middle-aged teachers brushing up on English. The last to read was Teacher Zhu, who wrote about attending a banquet dinner in Beijing years before. "First we ate cold dishes," he read, "such as marinated pig stomach and sea slugs. Then we had steamed fish, then at last the duck arrived! The skin was brown and crisp and shiny, in my mouth it was like clouds disappearing." He recounted other courses of the Peking-duck dinner: the duck skin in pancakes with sauce and scallions, the meat with vegetables, the duck-bone soup and fruits.

At the end of his reading, Teacher Zhu set down his essay and confessed to Salzman that he had never experienced this. It's someone else's memory, he said. "My wife went to Beijing and had this duck. But she often tells me about it again and again, and I think, even though I was not there, it is my happiest moment."

I've never had Peking duck, but it was once a near-iconographic image. In a past life in Fuzhou, it represented some reality other than the one of daily congee and pickled turnips, cabbage and boiled-rib soup. On TV in the evenings, I saw it in soap operas set among the wealthy, in commercials filmed in Hong Kong. After I moved to the U.S., however, I forgot about it. Flipping through picture books, sometimes I conflate Peking duck with similar-looking things: a turkey in a story about the origins of Thanksgiving, the roast chicken that's part of a hallucinatory dinner that appears to the little match girl, foods she's fantasized about but never tasted.

2.

It's winter when I move to the U.S., where my parents have been living for the past few years. In the airport after we deplane, a woman lunges at me with so much excitement that I draw back toward my grandfather, my escort on the trip. The sliding doors close between us just as I recognize her, faintly, as my mother. I'm seven, and have not had a mother for two years. But I have had a grandma, whose hands, ruddy fingers inlaid with gold and jade rings, patted me reassuringly before I fell asleep at night. Next to her warm, snoring body, I drowsed on a bed overlaid with bamboo mats that kept us cool in the subtropical heat. When it got even hotter, my grandma hung bedsheets all across the concrete balcony to block out the sun.

It's December, possibly, off the top of my memory, when I arrive. There are sensations that exist for me only in English, many associated with winter, that I experience for the first time when I move to Utah. There is the sensation of walking underneath pine trees, of wearing a too big puffy coat, of destroying the clean surface of snow after first snowfall, of buying discounted items in a white-tiled Osco Drug redolent of harsh detergents, the scent of which I will always associate with being poor; overcompensatory cleanliness. The sensation of my mother dragging a wet towel across my face to wipe off dried congee, and the sensation of wet skin drying in the stiff, cold air outside. We live in a one-bedroom apartment that is very tidy, but sometimes ants come in through the bathroom. I sleep in the living room, where, at night, I still hear my grandma's phantom snores.

In someone else's home, a two-story mansion nestled in the mountains outside Salt Lake, a VHS cassette of "Bambi" plays on the TV while actual deer come through the back yard, pulling at the garden foliage with their teeth, and we are separated from them only by a sliding glass door.

My mother points outside. *Deer. Tree. Teeth. Eats.*

I repeat the words, then put them in sentence order: *Deer eats tree with teeth.*

The English lessons take place inside the mansion, where my mother is employed as a nanny to a toddler named Brandon. The home, which has a lobby-like foyer and an elevator, is imposing enough that not even Mormon missionaries bother us. Either that, or it's too isolated from anywhere else to be worth the trek. When I first arrive in the U.S., my mother takes me with her to work every day, my father driving us half an hour outside the city before swinging back to campus to resume his grad studies. At the mansion, our days are geared around my learning English. We watch "Sesame Street," though it's too babyish for me even then, so I can learn the alphabet. I keep a daily journal and write three to five sentences in English every day.

When her charge is napping, my mother goes through E.S.L. workbooks with me at the kitchen table, books she's found at school-supply stores. One question set asks you to come up with the first letters of similar-sounding words. *Mouse, house, blouse. Pill and hill. Bell and knell. Pail and . . .* She gives me hints. "The letter you feel in your nose," she says, and I understand that she is talking about "n." *Nail. Pail and nail.*

When a salesman comes to the door, he has a hard time understanding my mother. She tells him to come back later, when the owners are home, and he takes this as an invitation to come inside, to demonstrate his cleaning sprays. Peering over the railing, I think maybe he's willfully misunderstanding her, hoping it will result in a sale. My mother, noticing that I am spying, tells me to go into the other room.

I'm not sure how my mother teaches me English, when her facility with the language is hesitant and halting. Unlike my father, she didn't learn English in China, and even after living in the States for years she is not fluent or even proficient. Cashiers at grocery stores stare at her blankly, the Mormon missionaries

who show up at our apartment give up trying to convert us, and the sellers at yard sales shake their heads and over-enunciate, saying loudly, “I can’t understand you.” Despite this, her imperfect, broken English serves as a scaffolding for my own.

The winter that I touch snow for the first time, I also taste ice cream. In the kitchen, we review the fridge and pantry foods in English. My mother names every item, foods I’ve never heard of: Minute Maid orange-juice concentrate, Yoplait strawberry-banana yogurt, Farley’s Dinosaurs Fruit Snacks, Lay’s potato chips, Surfer Cooler Capri Sun, Lunchables. I repeat each word after her. They hover in a vacuum, with no Chinese correlation. And we’re not allowed to eat anything, so I can’t associate word with taste.

There is, however, *bing ji ling*, which up until this point I have seen only on TV. My mother sneaks me some from a rectangular paper carton. Breyers French Vanilla. It’s denser and sweeter than I expected, eggy in flavor, fuzzy with freezer burn. To my surprise, I don’t like it at all and feel nauseated by its smell. But I have to like it, because I saw ice cream on TV back home, where all my friends and I fantasized about how wonderful it must taste.

Ice cream is my favorite food. I write these words in the journal my mother gives me to record my first days in the U.S. English is just a play language to me, the words tethered to their meanings by the loosest, most tenuous connections. So it’s easy to lie. I tell the truth in Chinese, I make up stories in English. I don’t take it that seriously. When I’m finally enrolled in first grade, I tell classmates that I live in a house with an elevator, with deer in the back yard. It is the language in which I have nothing to lose, even if they don’t believe a thing I say.

3.

During one semester of my M.F.A. program, we begin every workshop with a discussion of a piece from “The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis.” That week’s piece is called “Happiest Moment.” The workshop, which takes place every Thursday evening, is held in a building typically reserved for the hotel-management program. The instructor reads aloud the entirety of the story:

If you ask her what is a favorite story she has written, she will hesitate for a long time and then say it may be this story that she read in a book once: an English-language teacher in China asked his Chinese student to say what was the happiest moment in his life. The student hesitated for a long time. At last he smiled with embarrassment and said that his wife had once gone to Beijing and eaten duck there, and she often told him about it, and he would have to say the happiest moment of his life was her trip, and the eating of the duck.

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The instructor looks at the class, eight students scattered around a conference table in a fluorescently lit seminar room. “So, what do we think?”

We talk about the way the story frames and reframes an anecdote. Thom, whom everyone calls “the plot Nazi,” likens this device to a game of telephone, where the story is transmitted from person to person. “The wife tells her husband the story about eating Peking duck, the husband shares the story with the teacher, laying claim to it as his own happiness, the teacher writes a book incorporating this story. And then, in this piece, the writer describes what she read in a book, which is recounted by the narrator. It’s being reframed once again.”

We talk about the reframing and what we think the writer is trying to achieve. I tell them about “Iron & Silk,” which contains the same anecdote. “The Lydia Davis story doesn’t give credit to the Salzman memoir, but I can’t imagine that it *isn’t* a reference to that book.”

Matthew, the only other Asian student in our program, has read the book, too. He says, “This idea of framing and reframing the same anecdote raises a question: Can the writer, who’s retelling another’s story, really assume authorship? And, going along those lines, can Mark Salzman assume authorship for his student’s story?”

We kick this ball around for a bit—discussing the difference between appropriating someone’s story and making it new through retelling—without drawing much of a conclusion. At some point, Allie, the star student, declares, “By writing the story, the writer naturally lays claim to it.” To which Matthew responds, “But we know that’s just an excuse. Authorial license never justifies appropriation.”

In the ensuing silence, the instructor smiles. “Well, these are all great points,” she says smoothly. “Since we’re running out of time, we need to get started with workshop.” She turns to me. “Let’s begin with your story.”

4.

My workshop story follows a Chinese immigrant nanny through the span of a Friday, when she brings her young daughter to the mansion where she is employed. The piece is written from the nanny’s perspective, as she moves through a seemingly ordinary workday, which is interrupted by the arrival of a door-to-door salesman, who persistently tries to sell her cleaning products. The day culminates in her losing her job. Her daughter observes the proceedings.

“Well,” the instructor says brightly. “This is a very interesting story. Let’s open up discussion. Any thoughts?”

Thom always speaks first. “The way English is rendered in this piece, it’s kind of artificial. I mean, the first-person narration reads too smoothly and is too well articulated for a protagonist who’s not fluent in English.”

Others in workshop echo some of Thom’s sentiments about the inherent awkwardness of rendering the experiences of such a character in English, but there’s no consensus on how to solve this issue. Someone suggests that it could be written in Chinglish instead, but another student counters that this would play into stereotypes. “Using Chinglish would exaggerate the character’s inarticulateness, and flatten her into an immigrant trope.”

From the far end of the conference table, Matthew clears his throat. Somehow, I’ve been waiting for his response. “Whether the story is written in English or Chinglish,” he says deliberately, “it’s just a tired Asian American subject, these stories about immigrant hardships and, like, intergenerational woes.”

I can’t look at Matthew. His thesis is a Western novel that, in his words, interrogates white masculinity. The few times we’ve spoken outside class, he’s talked mostly about his summers in Taiwan, which he spends playing basketball

with his cousins. He continues, “It also doesn’t help that this is a stereotypical representation of a female Chinese immigrant.”

There is an uncomfortable silence. The instructor clears her throat. She says, “For those of us who may not be familiar, can you expand on this stereotype, Matthew?”

I look at him.

“Yeah,” he says. “Like, when the salesman invites himself inside, she just goes along with it. She’s very passive. It fits into representations of these meek, submissive women we see all the time. It’s unrealistic.” He doubles down. “It’s a kind of Asian *minstrelsy*.”

When no one wants to speak, Thom does. “Is this story autobiographical?”

“The writer isn’t allowed to answer during workshop,” Allie points out.

There is another lull in the room.

“Well, I found the story *so* interesting,” the instructor interjects, forced cheer in her voice. “It shows how differences in cultural assimilation, in English fluency, can alienate this immigrant mother and daughter from each other.” Her voice rises.

“And then there are these *startling* moments of tenderness . . .”

5.

My mother drinks only water in restaurants; any other drink order is an unnecessary expenditure. Because she is my mother, I do the same and order water, even though she’s long ago given up on lecturing me about frugality. A few weeks before my book release, I take her out to a fancy Chinese restaurant, a half-empty banquet hall with roast ducks hanging in the front window. The restaurant is famed for its Peking duck, which is ranked the second best in the world, according to a travel magazine.

When the waiter comes, I order for us in English, the usual dishes. “So, we’ll get B16, C7, and F22. To start, we’d like A5 and A11.”

My mother sets her menu down, looks at me. “Is that how you order? Like a computer.”

“O.K., sounds good.” The waiter, a Chinese teen-ager in Air Force 1s, also answers in English. “I’ll get those appetizers out first.”

Before the dishes arrive, I give her an advance copy of my book, a story collection with a vaguely Chinese cover image of persimmons in a Ming-dynasty bowl. “It comes out next month.”

“So this is the final copy? I’ll show your father when I get home.” She studies it skeptically, as if it were a lottery ticket that will never yield, frowning at the marketing copy on the jacket flap. “Haven’t these stories been published already?”

“Some have. They’re just all collected in one book.”

“People can just read them for free somewhere else?”

“Have you read any of them already?”

“I looked at the story about the nanny you sent me.” She slides the book into her purse. “So, where do you get your ideas?” She asks this in a lightly mocking tone, pretending to be an interviewer.

“For the nanny story? Well, it’s obviously based on your job in Salt Lake.”

Though we start off speaking English, all conversations with my mother eventually move toward Mandarin, the language in which she is the most agile, firing off insults and embedding her observations with acid subtext. Though I am no longer fluent in Mandarin, I try to accommodate. Her English is awkward and mangled, and it’s not easy to move through the world shielded from the unkindness of others by only their thin veneer of liberal respectability.

The teen-age waiter returns with the appetizers and the main dishes together, setting down mock-chicken bean curd, lotus root, garlic pea shoots, mapo tofu, and

salt-and-pepper smelt sprinkled with tiny diced jalapeños. It all comes out so quickly that I wonder about the quality. Topping off our water, he asks, “Is there anything else I can get you?”

Not bothering to switch back to English, my mother asks for a little side dish of chili bamboo.

“I’m sorry, what?” he says.

“A2,” I tell him, and he rushes away. My mother helps herself delicately to a bite of pea shoots, then the smelt. “Do you think the food is good here?” I ask her.

“I like simple food,” she says, neither confirming nor denying. Maybe it was ridiculous to come to a restaurant famed for its Peking duck and just order regular dishes. Neither of us likes duck though, with its fatty skin. She pretends to correct herself. “No, no, that’s wrong. What I *should* say is: I love it, honey! This is the best.”

“But you would never say that.”

She smiles her Cheshire-cat grin. “But I don’t want to be like the usual Chinese mother, someone who is never satisfied, yells at her children, and keeps saying *ai-yah* all the time.”

Now I understand. “Do you think it’s you in these stories?”

“There are so many mothers in your stories, what am I supposed to think?” My mother is suddenly indignant. “But they’re all so miserable. to be so much suffering?”

Does there have

I look down at my plate, a mound of rice covered with gushy mapo. “Well, they’re not all about you. I wasn’t trying to capture your experience.”

“You weren’t trying to capture my experience,” she repeats, as if to herself. “Then why did you write them?”

I'm surprised by this question. "Well, the nanny story was more based on you, compared with the others. It was about what happened to us when you worked as a nanny. I wanted to show how terrible—"

"But how would you even know what happened? It happened to *me*, not to us. You were too young to understand. And you weren't in the room. I made sure of that."

"I was in the hall, listening. And you told me when I was older. The details were very disturbing."

My mother is smiling incongruously. "But, see, you're not tough. You need to be tough. He was just a silly man. You made him seem almost dangerous."

"He was dangerous, very unpredictable. He was nice one moment, then scary the next. The things he said to you, they were very hurtful."

She sighs a little. "Look, we're not like Americans. We don't need to talk about everything that gives us a negative feeling. I wouldn't move forward if I just kept thinking about it. But I do move forward. I set a good example for you. And you had a great childhood."

I take a sip of water. We've been over this before. There's no point in setting the record straight for the millionth time about my childhood, the school bullying. The worst part was how my mother used to encourage me to lie to her, to pretend how great things were. She would phrase her questions like "You're popular at school, right?" or "You have a lot of friends, right?," priming me to answer the way she wanted. She couldn't not have known that I was lying, but she wanted to bathe in the lies. She needed to believe that I was thriving in the U.S., that my happiness came at the cost of hers, rather than acknowledge the fact that we were both miserable in this country together.

Instead of arguing this time, I simply say, "My therapist says that it is always better to acknowledge reality."

She flinches at my mention of therapy, which, predictably, closes the conversation. As we pick at our food in silence, the TV in the background plays a compilation reel of food-show segments featuring the restaurant. In one clip, the host tells the

audience that Peking duck goes as far back as the fourteenth century. He looks at the viewer, breaking the fourth wall. “So remember, when you take a bite of that mouthwatering barbecue, you’re eating a piece of history.”

The waiter comes back. “How is everything?”

“Great. I think we’re actually going to get the rest of this boxed up,” I tell him.

My mother turns to him. In Mandarin, she gives elaborate instructions on how she wants the leftovers wrapped so that I can take them home.

He waits for her to finish, then smiles in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Chinese.”

6.

I am making lunch for the children when the doorbell rings. Because the house is in a remote area outside Salt Lake, it’s unusual that we receive guests. Sometimes I ignore the doorbell, the same way I ignore phone calls to the house. Let people go to the answering machine or leave a note. They’re not here to talk to me.

But today I feel restless. I take the elevator down to the large foyer, where I open the door.

“Good afternoon!” It’s a man carrying a clipboard and a caddy of cleaning products. “I just have one question. How clean would you say your home is?” He holds up the cleaning spray, and informs me that I can take it today for a one-week trial, and if I like it there’s an installment plan for the entire set. . . . His enthusiasm makes him speak very quickly and I can’t catch everything. “Just try it for a week! And then I can come back in seven days to see what you think.”

In his jeans and plaid shirt, he doesn’t look like a salesman. His long, dirty-blond hair and goatee aren’t well groomed, either. He’s looking at me, then past me, at

the gleaming, tiled foyer, which amplifies our voices, the elevator leading up to the second floor, the upstairs railing. He's taking everything in.

"No, thank you. I'm not the owner." I smile politely. He hesitates. "So are you the cleaning lady?"

"I work here. I don't clean." I don't feel the need to specify that I'm the nanny, looking after two children, my daughter and a boy named Brandon. "You come back later. The owners come home. Maybe they buy."

"Oh, O.K." After a pause, he resumes. "This product works for everyone, though. It can go on all surfaces. Let me show you." He walks past me, into the foyer, and begins cleaning the wooden bench next to the elevator.

I worked for a cleaning company when I first came to the States. During the training, the manager told us trainees to crouch down when we were wiping floors with a rag. And then he looked at us, all these women cleaning on their hands and knees. Why would we not use mops and brooms? I'm not a dog, so I quit.

The man in front of me kneels to polish the legs of the bench, and soon he is on all fours. It's strange that he doesn't at least feel shame in this position, a position he voluntarily assumes. Maybe he wants me to feel sorry for him. "Very nice. It's very good," I tell him. "Maybe we buy later."

He looks up. "They don't sell this in stores, Ma'am!" When the elevator comes—did he press the button?—and opens its doors, he walks inside, spraying down the metal handrail, the two-button panel. Unsure of what to do, I step inside with him. There is dirt under his nails, and his clothes carry the smell of gasoline, making me think of farming equipment. The elevator feels very small with two people. He asks, "What are you up to today?"

"It's very busy day. I make lunch now."

"Well, I could use some lunch, too." He smiles at me. When the doors open, he steps out, marvelling at the rest of the home, its view of the valley and the mountains below. It's good that my daughter is not within sight, is in another room. And Brandon, whom the man does not notice, is still sleeping on the sofa.

I follow him, a bit helplessly.

“I haven’t eaten all day.” He seats himself at the kitchen table, sliding my coupons off so they fall to the floor. It’s when he looks at me, a kind of leer on his face, that I finally realize the situation has become unusual. “So, what kind of Chinese food can you cook me?”

“I don’t cook Chinese food,” I say, somewhat formally.

“Come on, play along.” It is his first sign of impatience. “What about moo shu?”

“Mushrooms?” I know what he means.

“No, moo shu. It’s a dish. It’s listed on all those menus.”

“Oh. I don’t know.” I shake my head.

He is annoyed. “Come on, now. I’m not asking for the real thing. I’m asking for you to play along.”

“I don’t eat moo shu where I am from in China,” I say calmly, and that seems to placate him. Of the two of us, only I can be the expert on this. Before he gets too angry, however, I tell him, “I can make egg and tomato.”

He hesitates. “Is that like egg foo young?”

“No, egg and tomatoes. I stir-fry with rice wine and sugar.” It is my favorite quick dinner.

“That doesn’t sound too good.” After a pause, he says, “What about Peking duck?”

“I don’t have duck. But how about kung-fu chicken?” I am just making up names.

He hesitates. “O.K.,” he finally says.

“This is *real* Chinese cooking,” I warn him. As for what kung-fu chicken is, I don’t know. I wanted to say wushu chicken.

In the fridge, there is a leftover roast chicken. I shred the white meat with my hands, afraid of using a knife and revealing where all the sharp objects might be. I make a soy-oil-sugar marinade, then stir-fry the chicken with some green onions, which I also tear apart into jagged pieces. The result is maybe a terrible stir-fry version of three-cup chicken. What matters is that it passes as Chinese to his taste.

There is a wall phone in the kitchen. I calculate the risk of calling 911, but decide against it. It's too obvious. He'll see me. According to the clock, it is two-forty-five in the afternoon. The parents, who own a Mormon jewelry company, usually get home early on Fridays, around three. All I need to do is distract him for the fifteen or twenty minutes until they return.

"This is good," he says, after taking the first few bites, and I feel sorry for him, that he can't tell that what I've cooked is actually a mess, sprinkled heavily with five-spice from a dusty bottle, using old soy-sauce packets I found in a drawer of takeout menus. I wouldn't serve it to anyone I cared about. And he thinks it's good. I almost wish I had made it better.

Then he puts his arm around my waist, and I stiffen. "This is all I want, you know?"

"You want some tea?" I move beyond his reach.

"I want beer. You got any beer?" Feeling bolder, he gets up and begins to root through the fridge himself. My daughter peeks into the doorway of the kitchen, a little confused. Irritably, I gesture for her to hide herself, and she does.

"I get it for you!" I half scold him, which he seems to like. "Finish the food."

He sits back down. "Yes, Ma'am." We are playing house, I realize, the same way my daughter plays it with the Taiwanese boy next door. She brushes the doorway with an imaginary broom and scolds him for tracking dirt into the house. He pretends to watch TV and acts grouchy.

When I place a cold can before the man, he tells me to pour it into a tall glass. As I do this, he tells me earnestly, "I can take you away from here." He points out the

window, to an indeterminate spot in the distance. “I live in a cabin, out there in the woods.”

Where he’s pointing, all I see is a row of snowcapped mountains. I often sit here alone, while the kids are watching TV, and look out the triangular window, built to align with the roof. It is my favorite part of the house, with a view of the sunset in the late afternoons. I can estimate the time of day by the way the light looks. Sometimes I think the landscape of Utah is the most beautiful I have ever seen. This view may be the only thing that anchors me to this job, to this new life my husband insists on pursuing.

The man says, in a voice low and wistful, “Do you want to come with me?”

“I will think about it,” I say, as if deciding whether to buy his cleaning sprays. I feel more afraid than I sound. “I’m very busy. People rely on me.” It’s all so logical. I stop short of filling in the details. That my husband is a Ph.D. student in math, in his second year. That he is paid a small stipend. Until he graduates, I work to help support the family. I went through a string of jobs before landing at this one, the most leisurely one, the one that feels like passing time more than all the others. I am almost thirty-five years old.

“Oh. That’s a pity.” He looks down at his beer. His voice changes. “But I’m going to be honest. When people see you, they can tell you don’t belong here.” He rushes into his next sentence. “Now, I’m not trying to offend you, and you know how you’re different, the way you look and talk. You’re obviously not from here.”

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“Hmm.” I pretend to consider this.

He taps on the window, indicating his home in the distance. “But where I live, it’s far away from anyone. And I’m completely self-sufficient, you’ll see. I have a water pump, I have my own electricity. There’s no one around to judge me.” He turns to me. “So, do you think you’ll reconsider?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, why the hell not?” His agitation is a little splash of hot oil.

“Do you know what I used to do in China?” I say, looking out the window. Not at anything in particular, the trees and the mountains and the road winding through them, carrying, in the distance, the mother’s car, painted a shiny beige shade that I think of as champagne. She will be home soon.

Maybe it’s because of the sight of that car, knowing that someone is coming, that I tell this man more than I would normally, more than I’ve ever told my employers. How, in another life, I worked at an accounting firm, where I managed the accounts of the mayor and other prominent local officials. There weren’t as many high-rise buildings in the city then, but our office was in one of them, and we worked on an upper level. I made more money than my husband, whom I was only dating at the time. For two years, he wrote me long letters, revealing a passion I barely glimpsed from him in person. During reëducation, he, along with both my sisters, was sent out into the countryside to work. Hard labor, manual labor. I saw their hands when they returned. But not me. I stayed in the city because of my job, which was deemed crucial to the Party. I stayed in the city and looked after my parents. Sometimes it felt as if I were the only young adult who lived there. I liked that time very much, when everything else—marriage, children—was something that had been planned but nothing I had to think about in the day-to-day. I liked knowing that my life was following a track without having to accept responsibility for it.

When I’m done, I turn away from the window. Who knows how much he even understood of what I’ve said? I can’t communicate the complicated things in this language.

“So, are you a Communist?” he asks, looking at me curiously.

I know there’s no answer except no. “No.”

“Good, because we don’t like Communists in this country. You know what we do with them?” I can’t tell if he’s joking. I’ve always thought those old American movies about the Cold War were just movies. He stands up, his face a scowl. “Do you know what we do with Communists?”

I don't say anything. It is the first time I feel afraid. I look past him, and I see my daughter standing in the doorway again. I am filled, suddenly, irrevocably, with anger. "Get out of here," I tell her in Chinese. "Go, go into the other room." When she doesn't move, I raise my voice to a scream. "Get out!" I yell, and she rushes away.

The sound of the garage door opening fills the room.

When my daughter first came to the States, she would insist that I tell her a bedtime story every night before sleep. This was a tradition her grandma established when she lived in China without me. So I tried to make up stories, simple fables with a moral lesson. Except when I got to the end, my mind would go blank. What's the lesson here supposed to be? I would always lose track, thinking she'd be asleep long before the story finished. But she would wait for the conclusion, and if it didn't satisfy her she would ask a lot of questions. She wanted the story to make sense, at a time when my own life didn't make any sense. Shortly after, I began taking her to the library. I would read her picture books instead, and that solved my problem with thinking up endings.

The ending of what happened that day is that, as soon as the salesman hears the garage door opening, he panics. Cursing me, he stands up quickly, the fork and knife dashing off the table. Watching him rush out the door and then downstairs, I think, This is so easy. This problem of this stupid stranger is so easily solved despite all the fear I felt.

Then the wife comes through the garage door. She looks at the messy kitchen, the cutlery that scattered across the floor as he bolted up to leave. I explain everything, relieved. Then she asks me a lot of questions. Questions like: Did you invite him inside? Did he misunderstand, maybe, your English? Why didn't you ask him to leave? Did you offer him food? When he forced you to cook food for him, why didn't you just say no? Why is there beer open in the kitchen? Did he also force you to give him a beer? What made you afraid of him? Did he have a weapon on him? How did the food get all over the place?

I'm answering her as well as I can, but in the middle of my answers she interrupts with another question. And so my English falters, becomes distracted and nervous.

When she can't fully understand my responses, she looks over at my daughter, who is only too eager to translate.

My husband, who has arrived to pick us up, watches intently from the kitchen doorway.

The mother says, more to herself, "I have to figure out what to do."

"What about calling the police?" my husband suggests.

"Well, it's tricky, given the arrangement we have worked out . . ." She trails off.

"We're legal U.S. residents," he says, thinking that he's clarifying.

But I know what she's referring to. Even though we have our green cards, I'm not their legal employee, and they pay me under the table. "Let me talk it over with Dave when he gets home," she finally says. "He should be getting back any minute." She glances at the clock, then at me. Indicating the mess in the kitchen, she asks, "Well, can you clean this up now? Then you can go."

"No." It's a reflex, how quickly I say this.

"What do you mean?" She's looking at me. Does she really think I'm going to drop everything to clean her kitchen? While my husband and daughter look on?

"She wants you to clean up, Mom," my daughter says in Chinese. She thinks I can't understand.

I look at my husband. I want him to intervene, to defend me. He opens his mouth, then closes it, unsure. He is an agreeable person, but his problem is that he wants to please everyone. That's how you survive here, he told me. But just because he wants to live in this country doesn't mean I have to eat shit.

She purses her lips. "But that's your job."

"No. I take care of Brandon." All the times that I've wiped down the countertops, the stove, the inside of the microwave at their request—I have tried to be a good

employee, going above and beyond, but cleaning is not actually part of my job. They pay me less than what a trained nanny would cost, what a maid would cost.

She doesn't say anything for a moment. "Someone has to clean up. And I didn't make this mess," she says.

I don't say anything.

"I'll do it," my daughter announces, grabbing the paper towels. I yank her arm back, and she yells in pain.

"Maybe you can talk about it on Monday," my husband proposes.

"Bye, Brandon," I tell the boy as he squeezes his warm body against mine. I give him a little hug. I am not coming back on Monday, I decide. Maybe that will turn out to be a lie, but it's a lie I need in this moment. Without looking at anyone, I go out the front door and sit in the passenger seat of the car, waiting.

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It is several minutes before my husband and my daughter come to the driveway. "You shouldn't have done that," he says, grimacing as he gets into the driver's seat and starts the engine. We drive downhill. My daughter chimes in from the back seat, "Brandon's mom is very nice, Mom. She just wants to know what happened."

In the rearview mirror, I study my daughter. When I first learned that I was having a daughter, everyone in the family was so disappointed. In China, a boy is always better, if you're going to have one child. But me, I was secretly happy. A boy, at best, can adore his mother, but a girl can understand her. When the doctor told me it was a girl, I thought, Now I will be understood. That was my happiest moment. The idea of a daughter.

"Don't talk to me about things you don't understand," I tell her now.

She blinks, doesn't say anything. She makes herself very quiet, as she should, and gazes out the window. Good, I think. Don't look at me.

As if by instinct, she looks up. Our eyes meet in the mirror. Then she looks away. ♦

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