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Casey Kait

Year of the Dog

Meili met us at the door of the restaurant. She kissed my head as my father and I entered, and when he wasn't looking, she slipped me a thin, red envelope. It had a bright-purple ship and two fat goldfish dancing on a turquoise sea. There was a gold border like a Greek key, and gold characters that I couldn't read. I knew what was inside—a crisp twenty dollar bill—same as every New Year.

My father had been her ESL teacher in Paterson, and each year it seemed there was a new wave of students from another part of the world. Julya, a Russian student, gave me a plump nesting doll. Phuong made me special tiny Vietnamese spring rolls wound tight as cigarillos. The students fawned over me, sent little gifts home with my father, a token of their appreciation. But it was Meili who really spoiled me. She had two sons and told me I was her adopted daughter.

I slipped the envelope into my coat pocket and ran my thumb over its bumpy surface. I loved Meili's presents. They were grown-up and seemed expensive. She had given me two necklaces, a gold chain with three small, gold balls strung on it, and a silver one with a jade pendant in the shape of a heart. There were clothes, earrings, a Gucci watch, a Fendi bag—fake, of course. And for the New Year, always a red envelope with a twenty-dollar bill that carried the scent of her perfume and the mustiness of a bank vault.

At first, I saw her only at school events—the annual party or the one day each summer the class drove to the beach. But, over time, she'd stop by when I got home from school with containers of noodles or dumplings that she had made. "So Mommy doesn't have to cook tonight, okay?" We started to love her. All of us.

Meili's thick, black hair was permed, and she had it pinned up on one side with a shiny metal comb. She was wearing high heels, and I remember thinking they made her look younger than she actually was. She didn't look like anyone's mom.

It was cold outside—and noisy—and, even from inside the restaurant, we could hear the crashing of cymbals in the street rising and falling with the head of the dragon. It was the Year of the Dog.

Meili's sons were seated at a large round table not far from the door. Sammy was almost 13, same as I was, and Peter—Little Pete we called him, because my father's name was also Pete—was almost nine.

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“Over here, over here!”

Little Pete jumped up and down, waving his arms so my father would notice him over the chaos of the restaurant. Sammy elbowed him in the ribs. “Shut up, everyone is looking at you.”

But everyone was not looking. No one was looking—it was the busiest day of the year. Families were eating lunch and talking, orders were shouted across the room, and the three of us went unnoticed as we made our way between the round ruby tables over to the boys.

My father was in a sour mood, but his face brightened a little as Meili ordered for us and made sure our plates were full. She knew us well, and my father and I trusted her judgment completely. Soup dumplings, egg custards, congee, fish balls, steamed pork buns—yes. Ox marrow, chicken claws, tea eggs—no. She wanted to make us happy, and the best way she knew how to do that was to make sure we were fed. Even when we swore we couldn’t eat another bite, she ignored us and motioned to one of the carts nearby. Plate after plate came, and waiters stamped their names on the card that stood in an empty plastic water cup in the center of the table.

“How’s basketball going, Sammy?” my father asked.

“I got cut.”

“Well, it’s their loss,” my father said, running his hand through his curly hair and brushing crumbs of fried wonton skins from his overgrown mustache. He sounded like a jackass whenever he tried to talk to Sammy. Maybe it was his age, maybe it was just that he knew the score, but Sammy was the only one who really saw through my father’s bullshit, and I loved him for it.

“I don’t want Sammy playing basketball,” Meili jumped in. “Those boys are too big.” But Sammy was big; he was tall, at least, and lean. He had grown a lot in the past year, and recently, he had sprouted a thin line of black hair on his upper lip.

“I’m taking tennis lessons,” said Little Pete. My father played tennis, and Little Pete shared my father’s interest just as they shared the same name.

“Good. Good for you. You’ll be a good player, Pete. I can tell because you always keep your eye on the ball. I’ve seen you. That’s the most important thing about tennis, keeping your eye on the ball. That and always follow through.” My father made a backhand swing in slow motion to demonstrate. Little Pete mimicked his stroke, but before he could complete it, my father corrected his grip on the imaginary racquet. Sammy rolled his eyes and got up from the table.

“I’m going to the bathroom. I don’t feel so good.”

I thought, *Feel well. You don’t feel well.* I was my father’s daughter after all.

“What’s wrong, Sammy?” Meili asked, but Sammy was already out of sight.

“Pete, I’ll lend you a book I have,” my father said. “It’s called *The Inner*

Game of Tennis. It's about relaxation and concentration, and it'll help you with your swing."

My father was always recommending this book. He made me read it to improve my "piano game," and he lent it to just about everyone he met. The book was as dry as the paper it was printed on, and the idea of Little Pete sitting down to read it was ridiculous and almost too much to bear. The kid was no prodigy, tennis or otherwise, and I thought of telling Sammy when he got back what an idiot my father had sounded like. But, when he finally returned to the table, I lost my nerve. Each time we met it was harder to talk to him. Sammy sat with his arms crossed and stared straight ahead as my father sucked on the cartilage of a rib tip and finished whatever was left on the table.

"Where's your mom?" Sammy said.

"She's got a migraine," I said.

My parents had been fighting that morning. When they stopped I heard my mom crying in the bathroom. She was running a hot bath. I could hear her over the rush of water. She said she wouldn't be coming out with us; she had a headache, a migraine. She didn't want any Chinese food; any fucking Chinese food is actually what she said. She said she didn't give two shits for Chinese New Year, and the MSG was bad for her head anyway.

"Susan's been a little under the weather," my father said.

"Uh-huh," Sammy said. "I want to go home, Ma. I don't feel too good. My stomach hurts."

"Papa's not coming to get us until seven o'clock," said Meili.

"How is Cha Li?" My father could ask anyone anything and sound like he really meant it. Maybe he did, I don't know. I had only recently learned her husband's real name. For the longest time I thought his name was Charlie, and it was Meili's thick accent that made it sound Chinese. But I was the one who had been mispronouncing it all this time.

"He's working," she said. "Always working. I don't see him no more."

"Anymore," my father corrected. "I don't see him anymore."

"I don't see him anymore," Meili repeated.

"Ma, my stomach."

"Don't complain, we'll go to Mr. Shen and get you something for it."

Meili cupped my chin in her hand and inspected my face. "Getting so pretty, we have to lock you up from the boys, eh?" she teased. I turned red, and my father beamed.

My father paid the bill, and Meili forced the boys to thank both of us. I was so embarrassed. I hadn't done anything. It wasn't my money. Sammy grumbled something under his breath, and my father made a big show about it being his pleasure and everything.

* * *

The streets were packed, and my father said, "If anyone gets separated, we'll all meet by the bank on the corner of Mott and Canal." He was really speaking to me. Sammy and Little Pete had Chinese class on Bayard and knew the area better than anyone, and whether it was intentional or not, I was glad that I hadn't been singled out as the one who could get lost.

On the way to Mr. Shen's Apothecary, we stopped at the street vendors selling bumpy lychee fruit, little doughnuts, red bean cakes, almond cookies. Little Pete and I shared a bag of peanuts, while Meili and my father collected red plastic bags filled with treats. Sammy ran ahead, and our parents fell behind. I kept turning back to see where they were. There they were by the fish market. There they were by the bakery. There they were, arm in arm, by the cobbler; Meili's fluffy head rested on my father's thick winter coat. Before I could even register what I was seeing, they had disappeared into the crowd.

"Hold on, Little Pete. Hold on," I said. "Let's wait for them to catch up." We stopped in front of a souvenir shop. There was a plastic box with turtles no bigger than my thumb. There were windup frogs whose legs splashed in a tub, and toy birds that chirped and flew in perfect circles over our heads. The ground was littered with confetti and long, red strips of spent caps. Little Pete stomped on them, looking for the ones that hadn't yet popped. He found a few, and we jumped at the loud, unexpected crack they made.

"Where's Sammy?"

"I don't know," I said. He had been walking ahead of everyone, with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his ski jacket.

I let Little Pete go into the store to warm up and look around while I stayed out front. Every once in a while, he would run out to show me something. A finger lock, a paper yo-yo, a dead scorpion in a small jar.

Almost a half an hour had passed, and I thought about getting Little Pete and walking to the big bank on Canal where we said we'd meet just in case. Maybe they were looking for us. But just as I was about to call him out of the store, I spotted them. They were across the street, standing in front of a restaurant with a plate glass window. My father held Meili in his arms. She was crumpled over, heaving with deep breaths. He held her like that for a while until he grabbed her by the arms and gave her a little shake, not rough or anything, but like he did when I was in trouble and he wanted to make sure I had heard him.

He let go of her, and she collapsed to the ground. One of her shoes fell off, a pointy, red pump, and my father got on his knees to get it for her. Had I ever seen him on his hands and knees? He held out the shoe for her, but she rolled onto her side and buried her face in her hands. They were still clutching the red plastic bags. People walking by started to look. My father was crouching next to her, and I could see him saying to people who passed

that she was all right. *It's okay. Never mind. We're fine, thank you.*

He stood up and was talking to her. He held out his hand to help her up, and she smacked it away. She shouted something, but whether it was at my father or the people walking by I'm not sure. He stood there while she yelled. If I were him I would have gotten as far away from her as I could, but he didn't move from her side. He just stood there while she threw a fit. He was stoic as he could be when I was wild, and I knew her frustration at having him stand there expressionless. I could tell he was saying, *I'm disappointed in you. I expect better of you.*

When she had finally gone quiet, he grabbed her up by the shoulders. Her limbs were loose as a doll's. They looked each other in the eye, and, after a moment, my father handed her the shoe. She put it on and turned to the restaurant they were standing in front of. There were ducks hanging in the window; their long necks gawked at the scene outside, their heads hung in shame. Long strips of pork ribs glistened, and men in white chef's hats folded wontons at lightning speed. They didn't seem to notice as Meili used the window as a mirror to fix her hair.

I could hear cymbals crashing again. They were getting louder and louder as the dragon approached. It was coming down the street, blessing each of the stores one by one. My body vibrated with the sound. Blood pulsed in my temples. I stood there staring at him, at them, unafraid that they would see me. Of course they weren't looking for us kids.

Someone shoved me. It was Sammy. He pushed me out of the way so the dragon could enter the souvenir shop.

"Where's Pete?" he said.

I almost said, *Over there, there with your mother. Don't you see them? Don't you see what's going on?* But he was talking about Little Pete. "He's inside," I said.

"Better be," he said.

The wind cut down the street, and my cheeks stung. "Why do you hate me?" It was all I could think to say.

"I hate *her*," he said.

I hated her too. I hated both of them. I hated Sammy too, for saying it out loud, and I hated my mother for staying home.

"I'm going inside," I said. "Tell them we're in here, if they come."

"Here, this is for your mother." He handed me a paper bag from Mr. Shen's. Inside there was a brown paper pouch that had been folded. A gold sticker held the corners together. It smelled like ginger and rotting fruit. It smelled like lilies. "It's for her migraine," he said.

I blushed, and I knew I'd never give it to my mother.

I went inside the shop and found Little Pete. I told him he could have the finger lock and the paper yo-yo, but not the scorpion. I told him he could have one of those little drums that you rub between your hands, and a cat figurine with yellow glass eyes that was covered in rabbit fur, and a snow

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globe with a green plastic Buddha inside. I told him to pick out a red paper lantern, not one of the small ones, but not the biggest one either, one with a gold tassel and a fake jade bead. I laid everything out on the counter and grabbed a handful of ginger candies, the kind that come folded in waxed paper. It came to \$20.13, and I put back two of the candies and pulled the red envelope from my pocket. I handed the cashier my twenty dollar bill, but I kept the envelope.

Meili and my father were waiting outside the shop. She was wearing a pair of Chanel sunglasses, same as a pair she had given me. Sammy stood with his hands in his pockets, kicking at the trash on the sidewalk.

“We’re going home,” my father said.

Meili tried to kiss me again, but I pulled away. I wish I hadn’t, but I did. I could hear Little Pete playing with the toy drum—*piong, piong, piong*—as my father and I walked down the street to our car.

It was only late afternoon, but the sun was gone, and the sky and river melted into a gray smudge. We drove home over the bridge, and when we got to the Jersey side, I started to cry, and my father let me.