

Better Than Ten Thousand Ducks

By Jean Wong

Lines of tension crawled from the back of my neck to my shoulders, as I rang the buzzer to my parent's house. I adjusted my three-year-old daughter on my hip and whispered: "Now remember, I want your best behavior around Grandma. Take off your shoes when you get inside, don't spill any juice."

"O.k. mommy," she nodded solemnly, as we waited for the buzz which would release the big iron gate. Nestled low to the ground among huge clumps of bougainvillea, ferns, and tropical greenery, the house was painted a disagreeable brownish green blending seamlessly with the surrounding foliage. Wooden bars were nailed onto all the bedroom windows.

We continued to wait. You never knew whether both parents, nearing eighty, could hear anything. Finally, a loud buzz signaled, and 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, saying briskly, "Come in, come in, take off your shoes!" She narrowed her eyes and examined me suspiciously. Ever since I told her I had two golden retrievers at our house in California, she thought I carried fleas. This was now added to the list of herpes, crabs, or other diseases I might have picked up from the toilets of Cotati as I pursued what she thought was my hippie lifestyle when I stopped teaching at a business college and became a child care aide.

"Hello, Jenny," her voice broke out addressing my daughter in a singsong coo. "Are you being a good girl? Come in, come in, put those groceries away, we're busy!" she said as we followed her into the dining room. As soon as I walked in, I felt the same dreary gloom that came over me whenever I visited. The house itself was designed by one of the foremost architects of Oahu, but the careless interior undermined its spacious beauty. The tables were haphazardly covered with photos. Real plants with their bugs and ants were unthinkable, and a large vase of plastic flowers anchored one corner of the living room. Old blankets and pillows were spread upon the sofa so my dad could take his daily nap. A garish Chinese calendar hung on the wall. Tall piles of telephone books were stacked everywhere with numbers written into the front section making them too precious to throw out. Instead of beautiful wooden koa cabinets, everything was made from termite-proof metal. Drawn heavy lined curtains permanently 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. I tuned out their voices as the old arguments about money continued.

I was going to be in Honolulu for three days for my niece's wedding. My mom would phone me three or four times a day to run little errands for her. Their laundry

basket was getting too heavy for them so she called me to carry it up to their room. Then she wanted me to pick up some groceries and have lunch with them.

I went into the laundry room, took out the clothes from the dryer and started folding them. The towels and clothes were worn with tears and holes. Fluffy towels took up too much room in the washing machine and torn pajamas provided “natural air conditioning” in the hot Hawaiian weather. The 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, smelly moth ball offerings rather than turn them down and be called a wastrel and a spend thrift.

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 set her markers and some paper on the little fold up corner table. I went into the kitchen occupied by two over-sized refrigerators. You never could have enough food stored as what would they do if the airlines or ships went on strike? I took out the groceries being careful to put any unused store coupons in a blue basket. I started getting out the plastic cups and plates, and setting the table.

“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 always amazed how fearless and playful my daughter was around my mom. My attempts at harmony with her was like shifting into the wrong gear and hearing that grating metal sound. But inexplicably, Jennifer held a soft spot in my mother's heart from the moment she saw her at six months old. 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 the sudden flares of mom's temperament, but she got under my skin. I sat down still smarting from her attacks. *That's it*, I thought. “*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 really engaged their interest. The choicest tidbit was who got stuck with the check. When I went out to dinner with my brother and sister-in law, my parents kept a running tab permanently in their minds as to who picked up the bill. 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 all settled 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 started shaking. "That old fatso--you should have seen him. I thought we would..." she started sputtering, "...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 big naked ..."

She bent over, gasping for air and snorting in starts. Her eyes were wet through a face of crinkles. Her laughter was contagious. My dad started to chuckle and Jennifer giggled. Soon we were all holding our sides, laughing uncontrollably while my mom embellished and repeated each detail of the story.

Finally, the laughter subsided and we went on talking about my niece's wedding, and, of course, how much everything was going to cost.

When it was time to go, my mom walked us to the door and placed a pack of my old 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." She gave me a certain sidewise look and the sun caught her eyes so that her glance reminded me of my mother,

"Yeah," I said, wishing my own feelings for my mom could be so simple, "I love her too." And I drove down the hill heading for a nearby thrift store where I could drop off the bundle of clothes.

(This piece was formerly titled "Visit to Diamond Head")

