

GERI LIPSCHULTZ

A Christmas of Her Own

The crack of dawn, pale yellow light sneaks in through all my windows. I see snow like a can of vanilla frosting. A new day. Very nice.

Then, I sit up on my bed, and look at this!

Have you no privacy? Go get married, I tell you. Go find a home of your own. This house is mine. I labored for this home. I came to this country with twenty dollars in my pocket. My husband worked three jobs, and I waited for him in the park. Together, at three o'clock in the morning, we walked to the apartment. Pitch dark, six flights up. Two little rooms, a shower stall in the kitchen. We cooked on a hotplate. A bathroom down the hall that we shared. We had three kids in that tiny apartment on Mott Street.

You know what it's like to do diapers in a bathroom down the hall?

Oh, that first night we came to America. It was the first time I was on an airplane. And the last.

You think I go in a hotel and make kissy-kissy in silk sheets? No, I sit on a park bench on Mulberry Street, and I wait. I was wearing sandals on my feet. It was after midnight that he came back. Oh, I was young, but I was not afraid. I found a job sewing-sewing. Fifteen hours a day, every day. And then I waited. Just like now. It feels sometimes that all I do is wait. Either I'm sitting and waiting, or I'm jumping up, work-work.

I graduated from college, you know.

You should go to college, make something of yourself. Instead of just staying here by me and making trouble. I'd rather sit in the street than be an uninvited guest in someone else's house. I'd prefer to starve than eat food that belongs to someone else. You people are leeches. That's what you are. And you are full of mischief. You have probably pawned my husband's ring already.

What am I going to do when Stuart finds out you took his father's jade ring? He will blame me.

I put on my little red fluffy slippers and take twenty steps to go wash up.

You stay here. I need my privacy.

In the bathroom, I look out the window to the north. It's a dark blue out there. Dark blue in here, too. My daughter in law always tells me to fix up the broken tiles, but why should I? I don't need to impress anyone. I take care of leaks, but who cares what it looks like. I'm not running a fancy hotel, just a home for me and Grampa.

I wash up, do my business, and freshen up the room a little, because my grandchildren are coming. I don't want to hear that little Aurora tell me it has bad smells. I open my cabinet and spray.

Must be careful, don't want to crack any bones today.

I look into the mirror, and I see that old face. My fingers touch my cheeks. They look like sagging plums. Once I had a pumpkin face. Still, my face very smooth, not one wrinkle. It's because my grandmother cooked me ginseng. I am healthy as a horse. I fumble for the few hairs on my head, and I pin them up. Oh, I love my little caps. I will put on lipstick in a few hours. Now I'll have to just be who I am, an eighty-year old survivor of America. In China, I'd have forty people around me, and they'd have to listen to every word I say. Now, I'm lucky if they don't stuff me in a nursing home, sell my furniture, and steal all my money.

I'm going back to my room, get dressed for Christmas Day at Stuart's. He will come to pick me up, and then I'll stay there a few days. That's what he said. Usually, when I come back, the house is quiet. It's because they all lie down in comas. Some on the floor, others on the couch. I don't care, so long as it's quiet. Maybe some of them will get a transfer.

And you, you two get your own apartment! Better that way.

Rachel makes a big deal out of the holiday, even though she is not Christian. She says she does it for Stuart, but we are not religious. We had a tree because Grampa said what harm is there in a tree. Used to be that Grampa would cook lobster on Christmas, and we'd have our old friends come over, but that has not been for a long time. Then, when he was alive, Grampa would cook here, and we'd bring the lobster to Stuart's house in Jersey. It's because Grampa says turkey is tasteless. I will eat anything, but Grampa makes the best food in this family.

I look around this room.

Everything you see, I bought it.

I came here with nothing but twenty dollars, and now look – I have a castle. Two chairs with all my sweaters, and magazines and books. Over there is where I keep my handbags. Jewelry – so much that I have to put a box in the bank. So, don't even bother stealing it.

I want to wear my Christmas sweater today. The one with the little Santa and the chimney with the stockings. One hundred percent cotton. I am getting tired looking for that sweater. Everything all folded up neatly. The yellow, the pink, the turquoise, bunch of black sweaters, bunch of red sweaters.

But not the sweater I want. Where did you put it?

Well, I will look for it after breakfast. I go downstairs in the flannel pants I bought with my daughter-in-law on the Avenue the other day. Carefully, I hold onto the railing, I make sure the red slipper does not slip with me rumble-tumble down these stairs. Everything with Grandma is slow-slow.

I see they are all there on the couches, the little one is still asleep. I am going to ignore them. Maybe they will not think about breakfast. I open the door to the kitchen, and now the light from the north is not so dark. I see out the window. What is that? People out there, too? I close the curtains. What do they think they are looking at? I shake the little teapot, enough water, so turn on my stove. I don't have my paper. Too much snow to take the trip down to the Avenue. So I just sit down in my special chair and just wait

for the water. Then I get up, pull out the milk from the Frigidaire. I find a piece of bread in there, and I remove a little slab of butter that was an extra from the diner. Okay, I take more bread, slip three slices into my toaster oven, and I go back to my chair. I think I'll have sanko today. It's going to be a big meal, and I will eat like a king. I packed my bag to stay over Stuart's house. Oh yes, I have to make out the presents for my children. Eleven special cards that hold money. I bought them yesterday. Walked to the Avenue. Step by step. The man, he called me, "Grandma," and I said, "I'm not your Grandma."

He said, "You got a big family."

And I said, "Yes. A lot of grandkids. Eleven."

"Me, too," he said. "I got eleven, too."

Think about it. I don't care if I am alone. I will never marry again.

What, are we having, a conference here? I ask you nicely to get out, but you just stare at me. Everybody says you are not here.

That's what they think, my children. They think I am crazy. But look, these villains here have no decency. How do you ignore someone having sex right before your eyes. I'd like to see Rachel do that.

I will do anything to shut you up.

You want ham and liverwurst, okay. A little here, and a little there. One piece on the pink tile table. One piece on the television cabinet. One piece on the hutch. One piece on each of the coffee tables. You want a good deal? Go to the Diner! I don't see anybody putting any money in my hands!

I take a piece of paper towel and wipe my fingers. I run the water and dry my hands.

You're welcome, you're welcome, but this is the last time, I tell you.

I think the cards are here, but I don't see them. I'll get them in a minute. I remember when we would go shopping, Grampa and I. We always picked out special things for the boys, each one of them, and now the wives and of course the children. Grampa likes to get the children special things. Remember when we gave the big girls all my dresses, the

ones I brought from Hong Kong? It was before Aurora was born – so when she came, there were no dresses for her. I remember looking at Cassandra in my favorite dress. Winston's girl, she is a beauty, tall, thin, like a statue. Right then and there, she tried it on for us, the silver one I gave her, and she stared away. Looking at a sun nobody else could see.

That's her picture over there with the American boyfriend. Very sexy.

My grandchildren are beautiful. Bad luck to say it, but it's true. Mrs. Monroe, my across-the-street neighbor, she always said it. Eleven I got. You mix Asian with anything, it's beautiful. My daughters in law, when they have babies, nobody had to tell me which is mine. When we went to the maternity ward, Grampa and I, I spotted them with my eagle eye. Mrs. Monroe, she is lucky, has Joe, her husband, but he has a bad heart. And next-door, my neighbor Mrs. Caruso. Her husband is dead, too, but she goes to parties. And she bakes for the policemen. She remodels her house left and right. First, wallpaper everywhere, then two years later, she rips it off, not a speck left. Everything white. Carpets get pulled up, and you see sparkling wood floor, Oriental rugs. Next year, it's tiles. As for me, I don't care what my house looks like. So long as I can stay in it. So long as there's heat and hot water, what do I care. I must remember to give that dollhouse furniture to Aurora. Grampa selected it, but we forget to give it to her. He was too sick, and I took care of him. I did everything for him. Rachel wanted him to go to a nursing home, but she didn't know Grampa. He sits in that black chair by the door. I keep a fresh blanket on it. I don't see him now, and even when he's there, he doesn't look at me, not once. When he's there on the black chair, he puts them into a coma. Now they are all over the place, but they are quiet because they are eating their breakfast.

I put the butter on my toast, and I drink my sanko. Soon as I am done, I will make out the envelopes for each person in the family. Oh, we have a big family, but not everybody will be there.

Grampa said that one day we would have to tell them all the stories, the ones we were afraid to tell. How do you tell five little boys stories when you can hardly get them to sit still. Maybe today I will tell them. Even his real birthday, I never tell it. His real name, my real name. We made up

stories to tell them. They never questioned us, until they got married, and these women want to know the truth. Maybe they throw us in jail for the truth. We're here sixty years almost. I wonder if they would dig up Grampa and throw him in jail for the truth.

Oh, where are those envelopes. Where you put them?
Ah, that's the telephone. Ring-ring.

Never rush for a telephone. See if the caller decides it's a wrong number. Hello.

"Hi Mom," says Rachel. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I say it back.

"How are you today?"

"I am fine."

"How did you sleep?"

"Fine."

"Did you eat yet?"

"I had my breakfast."

"What did you have?"

"Toast and sanko," I say.

"Good," she says. "Here's Stuart."

Stuart says hello, starts to ask me about the food and sleeping.

"I already said it," I say. "Rachel will tell you."

"So, are things quiet?" he asks.

"The villains took my things."

"Mom, you know there really aren't any villains."

"Okay."

"But you are still seeing them?"

"Yes."

"Did you take your meds?"

"After breakfast is when I take them."

"What things can't you find now?"

"They took my sweater, and they hid my cards."

“What cards.”

“Cards I bought with Rachel two days ago. For the Christmas money. You go ask Rachel.”

“Did they take the money?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Did you look for it,” he says.

“Not yet,” I say. “I just got up. I am eating my breakfast.”

“Good,” he says. “We’ll help you look for it when we get there.”

I used to give out medication to my patients in the hospital. Some of them, they don’t want the pills. I am like those patients because these pills make me crazy. Sometimes they make the villains go away, but it also makes my hair fall out. And gives me back pains and leg pains.. My nose drip-drips. I look like Rudolph the red-nosed Grandma. Ha-ha. I’ll tell it to Aurora, and she will laugh.

Okay, pills. Line you up, and drink-drink.

Now, I go up the stairs and get ready for when they come.

What? Someone at the door?

Those lazy villains sleeping on my couches. You get up. Get up. Get up.

Who could it be? Too early for them.

The door opens and it’s Stuart, holding a key. I am halfway up the stairs. I forget which way I’m going, up or down. My son runs up to help me down the steps. He asks why am I not dressed yet.

I slip into the Toysanese, because I do not want the others to know what it is I say, “How come you don’t say you’re gonna be here so soon. I’m not ready. You only call few minutes ago.”

“They called on Daddy’s BlackBerry, Grandma,” says William, my grandson. “It was about an hour ago.”

“How you know what I say?” I ask him in English. He hugs me. Look how big he is, with strong arms and that hair, light like his mother. He is letting it grow. Hope not as long

as his mother's! His sweater is scratchy. It's beautiful, Irish knit.

"He's taking Mandarin in college," says Stuart.

"Oh, smart boy," I say, because the Chinese language is difficult. But the Toisanese and the Mandarin are not the same. I wonder how did he know what I said.

"Merry Christmas, Grandma," says Aurora. She gives me a big hug and kiss. Oh, she looks like a little apple. Her cheeks are cold, and her eyes are twinkling black stars. She inherited her father's eyes, Grampa's beautiful eyes.

"Merry Christmas," I say.

Aurora tells me to bend down, and she puts something on my head, and she laughs.

"What is this?" I ask, feeling something that feels like velvet sticks on my head.

"Antlers, Grandma," she says giggling.

But I take them off for the pressure.

"Aw," she says. "You look so cute, Grandma." She puts them on her head, looks at me, asks me, "How do I look?"

"Cute," I say.

She turns to her daddy, says, "Do I really look cute like Grandma?"

"Dazzling," he says, then gives me a hug, says, "Merry Christmas, Mom."

"Something smells, Grandma."

"I sprayed the bathroom," I say.

"Not that kinda smell," she says. "Smells like salami."

"Never mind," says Stuart.

"What's this," I hear Billy say.

"Just throw it out," I hear Rachel say. She says it quiet, like I'm not supposed to hear it.

"Throw what out?" I say. "What salami?"

"Nothing," Stuart says. He asks me if I'm ready to go soon. "I don't think you want to wear your pajamas, do you, Mom?"

“No,” I say. “I am looking for my sweater.”

“My God,” Billy says. “This is disgusting.”

“Shhh,” Rachel says.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

Stuart asks me how I am feeling.

“Fine,” I say. “A little headache.”

“You take some Tylenol?” he says.

“What’s this,” I ask him pinching his woolly sweater, that is Irish knit, just like the one on Billy, very warm looking. “That your new sweater? That your Christmas present?”

“How do you know?” he says, smile on his face. He, too, has an apple face, just like the little one. Billy resembles his mother. His eyes big, hazel color. His face not so dark. But he is handsome, looks like he getting taller than his father.

“You forget to shave?” I ask Billy.

“I’m growing a beard,” he says. “Do you like it?”

“It’s okay,” I say. “You, too, with your Christmas sweater, Billy?”

“Yes, Grandma. Compliments of Santa.”

“You see. Grandma is a detective.”

“And Daddy is Santa,” says Aurora. “You can’t fool me anymore. The handwriting of Santa is exactly like Daddy’s handwriting.”

“Who says,” I say.

“Me,” says the little smart one. “Aurora.”

“What are all these cards?” Stuart asks.

“What are you fishing around my things for?” I ask. Then, I realize it. “What cards?”

“There are a stack of cards here with nothing on them but ‘Merry Christmas,’” says Stuart. Maybe these are the cards ----“

“Where did they put those cards?”

“Here, Mom. You want Aurora to help you write them out.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Where is the money?”

“Upstairs. I will get it.”

Slowly I go up the steps, and I hear someone say, “My God.”

“Who is that in my bedroom?”

“It’s me, Mom,” says Rachel.

“No one supposed to go into my bedroom,” I say it.

“I wanted to help you look for your Christmas sweater.”

“If I wanted help, I would ask for it,” I say. I see my Christmas sweater on the bed. “Thank you.” I close the door to my room, and I get changed. All of sudden I remember where I put the money, under the mattress, to hide it, and I try with my little arms to lift up-up. Why the mattress won’t budge? Oh, I try again. This time, I pretend my arm is a squirrel and shove it under, and I feel the little curls of cash, pull it out, count it. Beautiful. Five hundred and fifty dollars. Shove eleven fifty-dollar bills in my pocket. Black jeans I am wearing. This goes with the red and green and white. Pull over the turtle-neck white shirt, then button up the Christmas sweater. Take a red cap and arrange it on my head. Look around.

“Get out. Get out! You still here?” I say it quietly, so no one will hear the old lady talking to herself, then say ‘who are you talking to?’

Slowly go down the steps, one step at a time. Everybody takes a turn in the bathroom, and Aurora helps me write cards. We get ready to go. I put the cards in my special bag, and Stuart helps me with my jacket.

William, my grandson, picks up my bag for me. I didn’t even ask for it, but I am grateful.

“What’s that?” says Stuart.

“That is my bag.”

“Why so big,” Stuart asks.

“My clothes for a few days,” I say.

“We are going to Manhattan,” he says.

“I thought you were going to take me to Jersey, and I will stay with you for a few days.”

“No, we are going to Manhattan, and then I will bring you back here. We are driving to Florida to see Rachel’s family. We leave tomorrow.”

I don’t say anything. “Why doesn’t anybody tell me?” I say, finally.

“I did tell you,” Stuart raises his voice. “You are confused.”

“I will take a cab to Winston house,” I say.

“No,” says Stuart in that ugly voice.

Soon we are in Stuart’s big van heading to Manhattan where my middle son, Winston, lives.

“I thought we were going to Jersey,” I say to Aurora. We are both in the back seat. Billy listens to his music in the way back, big headphones around his scruffy face.

“No,” she says. “We are going to Uncle Winston. Uncle Winston lives in Manhattan.”

“Why not Jersey? Your daddy told me we are going to Jersey, so I can stay few days at your home.”

“No,” she says. “We are going to Uncle Win’s.”

“Not right,” I say. “I am no fool. Somebody is playing games with me.”

“When we come back from Florida, you’ll stay with us, Grandma,” she says. She puts her hand in my hand. “Don’t worry. You’ll see us after Christmas.”

“I can call a cab,” I tell Aurora. “Your daddy does not have to take me to Winston. I can take the subway.”

Aurora says, “It’s okay, Grandma. You’re safe with us.”

I don’t say anything, but I feel angry. How come no one told me we were going to Manhattan.

Thoughts are rocking in my brain. If I speak, I say something not suitable for Christmas. “Where are you taking me?” I say it, finally.

“We are going to Winston’s house,” says Stuart from

the front seat. He has that sound in his voice that shows he's angry.

"Relax," says Rachel. "It's Christmas, and it's snowing," she says. "You don't want to get all riled up over this. Just take your time." Her face profile. I see it from the back seat. She has a long nose. I think she has powder on it. Her hair is blonde, but not natural that way. Her natural color, who knows. It's long, a little curl to it. She wears sunglasses. A little fur on her hat, around the rim. She looks straight ahead now.

"Are we stopping to get *dim sum* from Chinatown?" asks Aurora.

"Yes, sugar," says Rachel.

"I want *don tat*," she says.

"Of course," says the mother.

"You let me out in Chinatown," I say. "I will take a cab back home."

"You're not going back home," says Stuart. "You're going to Winston's, Mom, so just relax."

"Too much trouble to drive me."

"No it's not, Grandma," says Aurora. "Just relax, like Daddy says. We're almost there."

Stuart stops the car in front of the restaurant, tells Rachel to watch out for the police, and he goes in. Rachel turns around and takes her sunglasses off, and I see her tired eyes. She tells me that it's going to be a happy day today. She says she's sorry if I am confused, that I can come to her house when they come back. "Okay, Mom?" she says.

"Okay," I say.

Stuart puts the boxes of *dim sum* in the back of the van, and we head to Winston's, uptown. The city looks like one of those glass bowls that you turn upside down and it snows. Soon we are there, and Winston orders Billy to help me get out of the car.

"I don't need anybody's help," I say. "I carry my own things." Oh, my legs get stuck. Hard to push them out the door. Billy takes my bags and reaches out to grab me from under my arms. He is getting so big. The air is ice because

I've been in the car so long. Good thing I put on my boots. Oh, shivering.

"Very cold," I say. "Icy."

"Don't fall on me, Grandma," Billy teases. "You will crush me!"

Winston lives in a big building. Very fancy, with a big sitting room in the lobby. Lots of gold. Marble, too. We are all in the elevator, five of us, many packages. A mirror in the elevator. We have snowflakes on us, I see. The elevator man, he asks who we are going to see. "Tengs," says Stuart. "Tenth floor."

"Oh, Winston and Marie?"

"Cassandra, too," says Aurora.

"Oh, yes, Cassandra. Are you her little cousin?"

"Yes," says Aurora.

"You look just like she did when she was a little girl."

Aurora smiles.

The elevator man looks at me. "You have beautiful grandchildren," he says.

"Thank you," I say.

It is a long walk to Winston's door. Fancy wallpaper, gold trim everywhere. Looks like a palace. Big framed paintings hanging even in the hallway. Every room is so big you could get lost in it. Billy is with his arm in my arm, or else I would run back, take the subway back to Queens, where I belong.

Opening the door, a maid comes to take our coats. "Hi," she says. "You must be Winston's mother."

"Yes," I say.

"And you must be ---his baby brother?"

"No," says William. "Actually, I'm his nephew."

"I'm new," she says, the lady, who is all in white, like a nurse, except for the black apron.

"Are you Amelia Bedelia?" asks Aurora.

"My name is Nancy," says the maid, "but you can call me Amelia Bedelia if you want – and what's your name?"

“Aurora,” says Aurora. “You can call me “Aurie. That’s what Billy sometimes calls me.”

“Well, Aurie, you look like just like a little princess. Don’t you?”

Aurora giggles.

“Come with me,” she says to Aurora, and they go off hand in hand. Suddenly, I am left standing there with Stuart.

“Come on, Mom. It’s Christmas. Come enjoy yourself.”

“What’s to enjoy myself,” I say.

As we walk into Winston’s living room, I begin to hear a sound of many people. Sounds like a movie theatre. I am wishing that I did not come. I do not want to see strangers. Marie’s family, maybe they will all be there too. Cassandra’s friends, too, and Winston’s business friends. What do I say to all these people? Hello, how are you? Nice weather? Food is delicious? Why do they want an old lady like me to spoil their fun?

“Just put me somewhere where I can sit down,” I say to Stuart. We see Winston, now. He sees us, stops shaking hands with some man in a suit, and runs to me.

Winston is my number two son. He is taller than Stuart, more distant. You never know what he thinks. He was the sweetest baby, gave me no trouble. I look at him, and I see someone I hardly know. It’s because the boys, they all grow up in America, and you never see them again.

“Mom!” He gives me a big hug. I smell whiskey on his breath. “Everybody,” he says to this crowd. “This is the woman who brought me into the world.”

They start clapping.

I look down. How come all these people are in my house again? I thought I asked them to leave? Cassandra suddenly in front of me. “Hi Grandma,” she says, bends down for hug and kiss. She looks at me, asks how I am, will I take off my jacket and hat.

“No, just sit down somewhere,” I say.

Cassandra, tall and skinny, like her mother, says she is going to get me pepsi, and her mother, Marie comes over to

me. Her hair is all pulled back in a bun, like mine, but she has make up and wearing high heels.

“Don’t insult us, Mom,” she says, a smell mixed of perfume and liquor. “Let me get a plate for you.”

“Let me just sit, Marie,” I say. “Catch my breath.”

“Mom, did you see the tree?” she says.

“Oh, Grandma,” cries my little Aurora, “look what I found under the tree for you!”

“For me?”

“A little box, Grandma,” she says. “What could it be?”

I get this flash in my brain of Grampa’s jade ring, the ring I lost, and I get upset. “I don’t know, Aurora,” I say. “What are all these people doing in my house?” I ask her.

“This is Uncle Win’s house,” she says.

“But I am not dead, yet,” she said. “I am still here. I saved all this money up to buy a house, and then I --- oh, what’s the use.”

“It’s okay, Grandma,” says Aurora. “I’ll get Daddy.”

“I am fine here, Aurora.”

I hear Aurora say, “She won’t open her present, Daddy.”

Then the two of them stand in front of me. I am thinking of Grampa’s ring, what they did with it, the villains. They probably pawned it. Suddenly, I remember Grampa wanted me to tell them the stories. We always tell stories at Christmas, when we sit together, and Grampa makes lobster, and everybody is together. But I don’t know who all these people are.

“What they doing here?” I ask it to Stuart.

He says, “Shhh, Mom. They are Winston’s friends. They’ve come for some holiday cheer. They will be leaving soon, and then Marie will serve dinner. Why don’t you open your present.”

“What present?”

“The one in your hand, Mom.”

“Later,” I say. “Later I will open it up. Pass out the

envelopes, will you, Aurora.”

“Want me to put them under the tree, Grandma?”

“Sure,” I say. People come up to me, shake my hand, say what a lovely family I’ve got, and I say thank you.

“Are they leaving?” I ask Aurora.

“Yes, Grandma,” she says, puts her fingers to her little lips. “Shhh. Not yet.” She giggles.

“What so funny.”

“You are, Grandma.”

“You put those antlers on me again?”

“You want me to?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll be Rudolph the red-nosed Grandma.”

“You are funny, Grandma,” she says, with those giggles that sound like little bells. “I’ll go get them.”

“Okay. I’ll wait here.”

“Oh,” says Cassandra. Her long skirt swishes past me. “I forgot your pepsi, Grandma.” She brings me a glass, asks me if I want her to open up my present.

“Sure,” I say. “If you would like to.”

“I love opening up presents.”

“Aren’t you getting too big for presents, Cassandra,” I tease my granddaughter.

“Never, Grandma. I’m never going to be too big for presents.”

“How is school?”

“No more school for me, Grandma. I’m a working girl, now?”

“You work like your mother – actress?”

“No, Grandma. I’m a speech therapist.”

“What you do, tell people how to speak properly.”

“That’s right, Grandma. I help them pronounce their letters, that kind of thing.”

“Pays well?”

“Sure.”

“You like that line of work?”

“Yes. I like to help people.”

“I worked as a nurse for thirty years.”

“I know, Grandma. I remember. You worked hard.”

“I never took a vacation until Grampa got sick. Some vacation.”

“You could take a vacation now, Grandma. You could go to Hawaii. I’ll go with you to Hawaii. Wanna go to Hawaii?”

“Why should I go to Hawaii? I have got a house here, in Queens.”

“Hawaii’s warm and beautiful.”

“It’s warm in my house. It’s beautiful enough.”

“You don’t want to go on vacation?”

“I came to America,” I say. “That’s my vacation. Sixty years long.”

“It was a good thing you came to America,” says Cassandra. “Or else I wouldn’t be here.”

I notice that the group of them, they are all sitting around me. They all have little boxes all piled up around them.

“You feel better now, Mom,” says Stuart. “You want to take your coat off, yet?”

“Sure,” I say. I get up, and he helps me off with the coat, but I have to keep my cap on because my head gets cold. Not enough hair on my head now, but when I was Aurora’s age, my hair was down my back, except I put it in two braids. Thick, black hair.

“You look nice, Mom,” says Marie. “I love that little Santa Claus.”

“Thank you,” I say. I look around at this group. Maybe it’s time I tell the stories Grampa told me to tell. But where are Chester, Kent, Lucky? “Some of the boys are missing,” I say.

“Who’s missing, Mom,” says Winston.

“Chester, Kent, and Lucky.”

“Oh, they’ll probably call, Mom,” says Stuart. “They live too far away. They can’t come.”

“They said they’d call later on.”

“Grampa wants me to tell stories.”

“Stories?”

“I’d love to hear stories, Grandma,” says Cassandra.

“Me, too,” says Billy.

“Which stories, Mom,” asks Winston.

“Tell them, tell them,” they all say.

Now Aurora comes back with those antlers. “Here we go,” she says.

“Stretch them first, so they don’t pinch,” I say, and she puts the antlers on my head. So, now Grandma is a reindeer. Rudolph. And now I am going to tell the story. Just like that because I don’t know how much time I’ve got left.

“Did I tell you this story before?”

“No, Grandma,” says Aurora.

“Is it okay if I tape you, Mom,” says Marie. “I want to save this.”

I start to get choked up when I try to tell the story. “This is what your father wanted me to do,” I say. Tears are coming down my face. It seems as if my lips forget how to move. Cassandra gives me a tissue, and I blow my nose, and then my mouth seems to work better. Mainly, I look at my boys who just look back at me. Their mouths are in straight lines. No little curve up at the corners. Aurora jumps into her brother’s lap. Billy strokes her long hair. He whispers in her ear. “Okay,” I say. “I’ll tell it.” And then I take a deep breath and stop looking at them, just talk, as if Grampa was standing right next to me. He’s looking at me, nodding at me. I say, “We tell you stories all the time when you were little. You ask questions, and your wives ask questions, and the children ask questions. So, each time we tell the story, you get a little more information, a little closer to the story that really happened. I tell the truth, as much as I remember, because I am not remembering things very well. Sometimes I forget the sound of Grampa’s voice, even. I don’t know how I

can forget it. But this is what happens when you get old. I would never have imagined this, that I can't take three steps without feeling so tired, afraid I will fall. Afraid you are going to sell everything I work so hard to buy. I remember how terrible, because I watch my patients, how some families treat them when they get old, and I say I will kill myself before I will depend on anyone, even my own children. And now, look what it is come to."

"What, Mom," says Winston. "What is it come to?"

"I can't even go back to my house when I want to."

"Why do you want to go away from us? It's Christmas? The family is together?" says Stuart.

"Can we open our presents now," asks Aurora.

"Usually, we wait until we've eaten dinner," says Rachel.

"Oh, who cares," says Marie. "You want to open up the presents? Why not? It's okay, isn't it?"

"But Mom's telling a story," says Winston.

"It's okay – open presents, and I'll tell the story when I get settled down."

So, everybody open up presents, and in the little box I get, there is a jade ring. It is beautiful, even more beautiful than the one that was Grampa's, and I don't say anything about that ring. Nobody else does, either. This ring fits my ring finger. It's a pale green, and it feels good on my finger. "Thank you," I say to everybody. "Who got me this ring, anyway?" I ask.

"We all chipped in," says Stuart. "Even Ches, Kent, and Luck. All of us wanted you to have it."

"It's beautiful," I say. "I keep it on all the time, now."

"Good."

They thank me for the money. "Too much," says everyone.

"No," I say. "You deserve it."

"Look," says Winston. "This was sent to me by Chester – from North Carolina. I think he got it from the house in Queens the last time they visited it. Then he blew it

up, so we can really see the details. Hong Kong, circa 1947.”

“Oh,” I say. It is a framed photograph of a young girl standing on the roof of a building near a mountain. It is a balcony. It is black and white, an old photograph of a girl with a trouble look on her face. She is standing, looking away from the photographer. This girl is not even seventeen years old, and her mother gave her away to an old man to marry. Can you imagine? This man was fifty years old. He smelled, and this girl was scared.

“What’s the matter, Mom,” says Stuart.

“This photograph,” I say.

“You remember when it was taken, Mom?” Stuart asks.

“Yes,” I say. “It was right before we run away together.”

“Are you going to tell us the story?” Cassandra asks. “It sounds so romantic, Grandma. You were so pretty, so mysterious looking. But you look so unhappy.”

“Sometimes you have to be unhappy before you will be happy,” I tell her. I am going to tell them what it was like. “This is a long story,” I say. “Because I don’t forget those things. I forget this, that and the other, but I don’t forget working fifteen hours at a sewing machine with only one break to go to the bathroom. I don’t forget that old man my parents married me off to when I was a teenager. Five times as old as me, running after me in the bedroom. I don’t forget hiding at my uncle’s house. I don’t forget when my uncle returned me to my mother, and the way she beat-beat me. Still, I don’t say a word because I am not sorry. I rather have her beat me than have this strange old man in my bed for the rest of my life.”

“What man is this?” I hear Cassandra say.

“Shhh,” says her father. “Just let her talk. I’ll explain later.”

“Keep talking, Mom,” says Stuart. “No one is going to interrupt you.”

“You sure?” I say.

“Please tell us,” says Billy.

“Okay. So, you know that I never again saw my

mother again, after my husband - your father and your Grandpa - took me to America. Not once, not even when she begged me, just before she died in London, with her money all sewed up in her skirt. That was the money from the sale of the buildings. It was supposed to be for me, but my brother took it for himself. He took everything for himself. It's okay, because I don't need anything. Let him have it. He too is dead, soon after Grampa. Ah, what a life it is, my children, my grandchildren. You have to keep your wits about you. Be like Grandma. I will never forget when I met your father. At first he didn't see me, but I watched him. I watched his every move, and I listened when he talked to himself. We had buildings there in Hong Kong. Beautiful buildings, with balconies, and that is where I would stay. On the roof. He would come upstairs on the roof, because he is a dreamer and wanted to paint the mountains, and how could he know that's where my mother --- . She tied me up because she was ashamed. And I, too, was ashamed, being up there, a young girl, with a strange young man talking to himself, walking around and setting up his paints, and I am listening to him when he doesn't know anyone is up there. So he is painting, all the while talking to himself about his dreams, what he will do in America, when he gets there, how he is will invent things to change the world. How he will make a cigarette lighter that's made of dynamite, instead of matches, and also postage stamps that do not have to be licked but are adhesive like tape, and telephones that you don't need wires to, like walkie talkies. And cars that run on balloon energy. How he will be a rich man, everybody will treat him like a king. Meanwhile he's painting the beautiful mountains, and I'm on this leash, but I have got good eyes – once I had good eyes -- , and I can see that he is a good artist. I can see also that he is a handsome man with beautiful eyes. I can see the future too, some part of me psychic. I can see that I could love this man.

“And I am trying to control myself so I do not leak a sound, although I am wondering who this man is and why he is on top of our roof, wondering if he is some kind of criminal who jumps from roof to roof with his paints and his crazy ideas. Or maybe he is someone my mother has hired for one reason or another. Winston, Stuart, Chester – doctor, lawyer, architect – you think you so rich. My family was rich. You know how much three buildings are worth in Hong Kong? Even though my father and his father are in America, my father's mother, my grandmother, she rules the roost. She

tells my mother what to do, although I don't think my grandmother wants to tie me on the roof. Still, I don't know who this man is, but I like him. I don't want him to leave. I am only sixteen years old, younger than most of the grandchildren, except for Aurora, but I have to think about my situation.

"Oh, he is shocked when he finds the young girl! 'You come with me,' he says. 'Wherever I take you,' he says to me, 'it will be better than this.'

"What if they kill me?" I say.

"Better than being tied up like a dog,' is what he says.

"Turns out he's in trouble with the government. Somebody wants to kill him. My uncle, he sells him papers. Those papers, they give me the name Dottie Teng. This is what makes you all Tengs. Mei Len, my first name. Maybe you heard him call me that sometimes? These papers are for a couple going to America, and he needs a wife fast, so I decide I'm going to America with this guy. I stake my life on it. We run-run away together."

I look at them all around me. A United Nation of Tengs.

"If I didn't do what I did," I say to them, all my children, "there wouldn't be any of you here. Not a one."

"That good enough for now?" I say to them. I see that I am not the only one with tears in my eyes. My mouth is sore, my throat aches. I bet Grampa, he is proud of me. Still Marie and Rachel, they get up. Have to set up for dinner, probably. The maid can't do it all by herself. Too many people in this family, even now, when half of us are not here.

"This guy," Aurora asks, "is that Grampa? The one who saved you from the old man?"

"Of course," I say. "He was very handsome. You got your eyes from him, your daddies – all of them did. They get all their talent from him. Smarts – you get from me. Grampa always says how smart I am."

"And what about my eyes," says Cassandra, "and the eyes of Thea and Maxine and Alexandra."

"Hey, boys have eyes, too," chimes in Billy.

"Maybe your eyes are from me? Is that so bad? Billy

got your mother's eyes. I think the twins have their mother's eyes." Chester's wife is from North Carolina. They speak slow and polite, sound like Southerners. Big, round, brown eyes. Even Ches sounds like he come from there now.

"What does it matter who you get it from. You are all beautiful, handsome." I got everything, Latin, blonde, Black, Asian, Jewish. Kent's wife, her name Tiffania, actually, with everything in her, even a little Asian. She's got a boy and a girl from earlier marriage, and two boys and Alexandra with Kent. They live in California somewhere. Five in that family, like us. Hard for them to come visit, so many kids. My youngest son, Lucky, he's unmarried. Artist, dreamer, just like his daddy. So many boys, and now I've got a bunch of girls. Well, Billy and Travis and Lance, that's enough boys. Antonia and Sammy part of the Teng family, too. That makes ten actually. I was counting Lucky, no wonder, eleven. One day Lucky, he'll settle down. Who knows, maybe I'll have more Tengs. There is always room for more.

"I have a perfect family," I say. I got six girls and five boys.

Cassandra says, "Wait, Grandma. You've got six granddaughters, but where are the five grandsons? I only count four: Billy, Travis, Lance, and Sammy. Where you get the fifth?"

"I count Lucky because he's still mine," I say. "I don't have to share him with a wife."

We are at the dinner table now. Crystal glasses, with wine, and there's turkey, ham, potatoes, and five kind of bread, vegetables, everything steaming. Sure the maid and Marie cooking since last night. Everybody talking all around me, but I am hungry. Can't remember the last time I saw such a feast. Everybody asks me if I want more, and I take it, even though I see they are chuckling. They like to see Grandma eat. "Good, good," they say. I just sit there and eat till my stomach pops, and I watch Cassandra and Marie and Rachel run-run. Even Aurora up to help pass out the apple pie and Chinese pastries. Everything delicious. I can barely get up, but Rachel helps me walk to the bathroom, and I go do my business. Come out, all I can do is make my way to the couch. Everybody watching some Kung Fu movie.

Turns out, I fall asleep. When I wake up, time to go.

A thousand goodbyes. So many kisses make my cheek feel like cotton candy.

I'm asleep in the car-ride, too. My darling Aurora, she puts her shoulder on me. She is asleep, too. Then we stop because we are in Queens now. Oh, so cold, but it looks like a winter wonderland, with snow painting everything. Stuart helps me up the stairs, stays for a few minutes to do the shoveling, even though I say, "Forget it." He puts leftover food in the refrigerator. Must be twenty containers. Gives me a hug, says, "Take care, Mom."

Then it happens. Stuart leaves, and everybody else is still here. I go upstairs, see my door still closed. Good. It is quiet up there. I go down, all the way down to the basement, Grampa's old workshop. See my plaques for being good nurse, the framed patents for all Grampa's inventions, posters all hung up. The paints still out, the brushes. His shaver still out, sitting next to the sink downstairs. Then I spot the little imp. "Time for you, too," I say to her. "Even you. Get out, now. I have had enough."

I go upstairs. Must be forty people assembled in my living room.

Okay, now. It's over three years since my husband died. Don't you think I have enough trouble. I don't have enough food for all of you. I've let you stay here. You have the nerve to try to share my bed. And some of you – you know what you are doing in it. Right in front of me. So, now I am going to ask you nicely – to leave. I will open the door, and it's time you will go. You like to take my things, then take them, but just get out. Don't come back. I do fine without you.

I walk slowly to the door. I open it. It's late, but I open it, anyway. I am desperate. I am holding the big wooden door, and now I am stepping in between the storm door and the wooden door. I have the key in my pocket, just in case. These people cannot be trusted. They could lock me out. I am push-push pushing open the storm door. Oh, it's cold outside. Powder coming in with the breezes, stinging my cheeks.

Go. Get out. Get out.

I take a step down the bricks so they can get through the door.

And then I just look out, up at the sky. Dark, but stars there, tiny diamond sparks. I wonder what will it be like when I am not here anymore. Probably I will see Grampa, and he will say to me, "See. Better than being tied up like a dog."

Maybe.

But if I were not tied up, I never would have met him. I'd have no sons then.

No daughters-in-law, grandchildren. Only me.

They say I did not grieve enough. I just took care of business. Imagine that I am in his arms again, my hand in his beautiful hand. Kissy-kissy? What then?

"Be free." I hear him say it. Be free.

Soon. Not yet.

I close the door, inside again, and I lock it. I look around my house. I am a lucky woman. I feel a smile stretching my cheeks.

■