

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place - *Saving Catfish* by Jean Wong

"Shit!" The plate slides through my hand shattering into shards of glass--not even the easy clean-up kind with a few ceramic pieces.

"Marc!" I yell for my husband, "get the baby." My one-and-a-half year old grandson is heading towards the mess on his toddler truck. I knew I should have used paper plates, but then my daughter would go into her "save the environment" disapproval mode. This is no time for planet earth. This is my family visiting from Germany for six weeks and this is grandma providing food for five additional hearty eaters. The Sesame Street Song: "*I've got Five People in My Family*" kept running through my head---my daughter, Sarah, and her husband, Albert; as well as Melanie and Tessa---my six and four year old granddaughters and baby Benny—five people in my family--one, two, three, four, five.

Carefully going over the area again and again, making sure there are no tiny bits of glass, I lose ten minutes of precious time. I hear Marc trying to keep the baby from crying and fussing. Poor Benny, he hadn't eaten much lunch and must be hungry. I quicken my pace and finally begin to focus on the salad. Well, at least the adults are in agreement on salad, but the kids won't touch it—okay, I'll cut some oranges for them. No, Melanie doesn't like oranges--how 'bout apples. We just had those yesterday but apples are good. Better throw in one more apple---Marc really isn't that keen on salad. I begin opening an applesauce pack for the baby, but then realized they aren't organic. They only eat organic.

Thank goodness I found these yummy barbeque tofu cutlets that Albert, Melanie, and Tessa, all vegetarians, can eat. On second thought, Tessa hardly touched them last week. Well, she'll just have to eat some of that instant organic Mac n' Cheese I can microwave. She can share that with Benny.

My daughter Sarah said she's dying for a steak. As a matter of fact, I am too. I slip a thick tri-tip in the oven, remembering to put the buzzer on and take Marc's out early so he could have his medium rare. Oops, Jenny doesn't like garlic-- I start lifting the little pieces off her steak

Where is everyone when I could use a little help? Of course Sarah is at the piano getting ready for her Mills College concert. She and Albert, who is a composer, perform all over the world---nothing soothing and nerve calming like Bach or Mozart, but new music-- edgy, loud, jarring and discordant. And Albert is always late. Well, it didn't matter, the tofu cutlets are easy to heat up.

"Melanie, Tessa," I call, "Come and clear your things off the table---we're about to eat." Where are those two? I go into the bedroom and catch them watching TV, breaking the house rule of "television after dinner" only.

"Girls," I say, shutting off the TV, "You know you're supposed to ask permission. It's time to clean up."

"Grandma, I'm starving," Tessa whines as she follows me back to the kitchen.

"Well clear off the table, be sure to put those caps back on the markers."

"I wasn't working there," Melanie complains. "That stuff is all Tessa's."

"No, Melanie, remember you came and asked me to share my notebook," Tessa argued.

I begin helping them. It's really easier to clean everything myself rather than track down who made the mess. I glance about the house. Parcels from shopping sprees are sprawled on the living room sofa, shoes and slippers of every size litter the hallway, all surfaces are covered with coats, toys, laundry. I know it's pointless to teach the children clean up habits when they are on vacation. I'm wondering why I spent weeks before their arrival making sure the house is spotless, even dusting the tops of picture frames and washing the windows.

"Melanie—don't even think of touching those cookies!" I can't believe Sarah let them dip into the Biscotti's just an hour ago---probably totally ruining their appetite. Noticing all the crumbs on the floor, I grab the dust buster.

The doorbell rings.

*Screw.* Albert probably forgot the key to the side door again.

"Tessa, can you let your papa in. Tessa---I didn't tell you to start drawing a picture---you're supposed to be cleaning up!"

Thankfully, Marc goes to the door and opens it for Albert. Albert comes tromping in, still in his shoes. It's the only rule I ask of my family— that everyone take off their shoes before they walked on my off-white, wall to wall carpeting. I can see his big frame laden with two bags filled with groceries in his long arms. I hope he didn't buy more pizza—the freezer is totally stuffed.

"Hi Jean," Albert breaks into an ingratiating smile, "sorry I'm late. That traffic was really bad. I brought some nice catfish for dinner."

"Catfish?" I echo, remembering the last time he cooked us all a "nice" catfish dinner---taking an hour to prepare and leaving the kitchen in total shambles. "Great, how 'bout if we use them tomorrow---dinner's ready. And I got those tofu cutlets you like."

"Well," he said, "we should really cook this fish up now while it is fresh. It's a shame to let it spoil. It will only take me ten minutes." Albert was born in Hungary but raised in Germany. He has a German accent and whenever he wants to make a point, his phrasing seems to take on an insufferable, ponderous tone.

"Albert, we were just going to sit down to eat."

"Yeah, okay, but give me just a second. This is really going to be delicious."

"No, really, Albert, I don't think...."

"Hey, Jean, just relax..." Albert starts rummaging through my cupboards looking for the frying pan.

"Albert," I hear my voice rising to a new level, "you're going to have to plan things a little more ahead of time. The baby's hungry and we're just about read to eat."

"Yeah, sure, by the time everyone sits down, the fish will be ready."

"Look, can you just hold off 'til tomorrow. I don't think I'm up to handling your usual mess in my kitchen!"

"Mess!?" he sputters. His florid face turns pale. His hand hits the counter top with a sharp slap." Do you think I am the only person who makes a mess? Remember when you stayed in our house and left little bits of moldy cheese in our refrigerator!?"

That's it. Now I've had it. I smack the counter, echoing his aggression. "Don't you slam your hand down on me, Albert!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sarah and Marc rush into the kitchen. Sarah grabs Tessa and the baby while Marc scoops up Melanie. They both disappear into the wings of the house.

"Look, don't try pulling your Nazi trip on me. This is California, America, and I'm not some wimpy fraulein you can boss around," I shout.

I can't believe this is happening. I remember my mom telling me that it's alright to fight with your child but not your child's spouse. You could always make up with your own flesh and blood, but get in a fight with a son/daughter-in-law and you're asking for an irreparable break in the relationship.

But nothing is going to stop me now. I feel a gleeful, exhilarating power as I begin to list my grievances. If he wants to talk about messes, did I always have to be the one to put away his goat milk in the refrigerator and deal with his half eaten banana lying in its peel after breakfast? I bring up his total self-absorption, his preoccupation with composing, his tardiness, his inconsideration, his lack of attention to the children. But it seemed that every missile I fire is returned with a more devastating explosion. He says I'm inflexible, excitable, dictatorial, controlling, and— speaking of parenting—he didn't think I was exactly a role model. He knew all about the trips I had laid on my own daughter.

A couple of times, I almost walk out in indignation. But where would I go? Abruptly, like the bell in a boxing ring, the buzzer for the steak rings. I push the button to "off." Insults and accusations hover in the air.

I busy myself examining the steak. Albert picks up the cap of a marker off the floor and turns it around in his hand. The noisy, chaotic house is still.

"Well," Albert said, "I know I'm not so great a father." More silence.

"Yeah, kids are different nowadays" I say. And the conversation takes a little turn, as we begin to talk about parenting and how hard it is to really listen to young children and be a real part of their world. "In fact," Albert continues, "Sarah and I both feel that if anything happened to us, we'd want you and Marc to take care of the children rather than my own mother and father."

This is a complete surprise. I always feel they are so critical about me. I really have to give Albert a certain amount of credit for not holding a grudge and coming up with such a gesture of confidence. And, the thought dawns upon me, at least he's not some sort of narrow-minded redneck. It doesn't hurt that he is brilliant and such a hard worker. Sarah could have picked a lot worse.

I turn my head and notice that Melanie and Tessa have put away all their notebooks and markers. Sarah is setting the table. The baby is already strapped in his high chair, munching on a

breadstick. Marc has taken out the steaks and begins tossing the salad. Albert puts the catfish in the refrigerator. I sit down exhausted. Tessa crawls onto my lap and studies my face, making sure everything is alright.

Everyone sits down to eat. Melanie starts telling her Papa a joke she had just learned. Conversation and laughter fill the room as if nothing had happened. I shake my head, lean over to Marc and mutter, "Is this crazy or what?"

He gives me a little nudge with his foot, accidentally hitting my shin, and whispers, "No, not crazy, just family."

## **Honorable Mention - *Shamed toasters and a piano in the pickup* by Elizabeth Valentine**

"Toasters, Dad?" I asked, looking at the forlorn array on the metal patio table. There were eleven in all, of various makes and styles, none of the high-priced gourmet ilk, just honest toasters you'd find in the local K-Mart or the like. We were standing on the flagstone patio off Grandma's kitchen...well, Dad's for several years now, since Grandma had died.

"Mmm," replied Dad. Pressed further, he explained his system. Having tired of replacing the mundane necessities every year or two when they died, he decided after the latest toaster funeral to disinter one of the previous culprits and give it a second chance. I should mention here that discarded items of Dad's never actually left the property, as they usually do in other households, I believe. They were merely shuffled off into a closet or back room or unused corner or, in the case of the toasters, the back patio. Generally that was it in the way of relocating for the deceased item; decades later you could still pretty much rely on finding it still there, a little dustier, perhaps, but unmoved.

Not so, apparently, for the toasters. When the count had reached an even dozen, Dad decided enough was enough. The latest toaster carcass under his arm, he went out the double-door-and-airlock system that kept the cats from having any hope of escaping the gulag, and went out onto the patio. (Grandma having been a bird lover rather than a cat lover, she had forced Dad to drive around the neighborhood and scoop up loose cats and bring them home and imprison them, so they couldn't catch and kill any birds). Putting down the latest failure, he stared with deliberation at the assortment on the table. Then, choosing one he'd been rather pleased with in the past, he scooped it up and brought it back through the two doors, back to its place of former glory.

The plug was attached to the receptacle, the Wonder bread was opened and two slices removed and placed in the slots, and the lever was depressed. And in defiance of all laws of physics and common sense, the toaster set to doing what toasters do so well. It seemed as though this inanimate object had grown sentient and realized, with the desperate clinging to life that all living creatures exhibit, that this was an unprecedented opportunity to be grabbed and clutched at for all it was worth. And so it toasted up and performed magnificently. The bread rose majestically, golden in hue, sweetly caramelized in textbook evenness. Life was good.

But, as inevitably happens when one lives a lie, there came a time when this toaster realized that this had only been a brief, albeit glorious, reprieve. It really was a dead toaster and the only decent thing

to do was to act like one. And so it quietly re-died, and was taken out to the table of shame and set there to endure the elements. Dad chose a new candidate, and the process began anew.

By the time Dad and I were standing on the patio, the dance of the toasters had become part of the rhythm of life at Dad's. The disgraced toasters suffered through winter snows, Washington's famous humidity, and years of heavy summer rains. They baked in the heat that collected in the walled patio area. Autumn leaves piled over them until winter storms blew them away. And they waited, hoping, planning their performance for that wondrous moment when the current star might break a leg, and their moment to step up into the limelight would arrive.

Toasters were not the only item Dad owned in more than the usual number. When I flew back from my home in Australia to help avoid the razing of the house that the city was planning in response to the growing clutter and disrepair, I found eight upright pianos and a full-size grand piano. I remembered the grand from my childhood, when I would come the few blocks over to Grandma's house with Dad. My mother, a quiet soul, had been driven nearly mad by my father's refusal to play anything but finger exercises and scales, even though he had trained as a concert pianist and, but for the damage he'd caused by shooting himself in the finger with a starter's pistol at age ten, that would have been his career. Instead, he put in his two hours a day, without fail, until my mother put down her foot. So Dad took his unappreciated skills to Grandma's, where he was received with open arms, as was only to be expected, as mothers of sons so frequently feel that only they can appreciate the many talents their sons possess.

Now, years later, the grand had long been home to a family of raccoons, relatives perhaps of the raccoon who lived above the doorway into the library, which we always rapped on for luck as we passed through, provoking a flurry of irritated scratches. Or perhaps they were kin to the old raccoon who lived in the crawl space directly under Dad's bed, whose snoring was so loud and persistent that Dad was permanently sleep-deprived. No matter. The important thing is that they had found a home.

Unfortunately, their presence adversely affected the tone of the piano, and Dad was forced to use the other piano, a quite serviceable upright grand. Things went on in this fashion for several years, with the piano tuner coming at regular intervals to make sure the sound was perfect, and Dad working his way through increasingly complicated series of notes each afternoon, until disaster struck. The piano tuner, in a decidedly inconsiderate move, died. Dad was distraught and, in a few months, when the piano was due for retuning, he did the only sensible thing he could do under the circumstances: he bought another piano. This upright grand performed beautifully for quite a while until it, too, succumbed to the need for a bit of adjustment in the string area. And piano number four arrived.

In case you're wondering, yes, I did suggest to him that there might possibly have been another piano tuner in the nation's capital, but he dismissed the thought as nonsense, and went on with his own solution to the problem.

Now Dad was not a wasteful man with money, so he searched through thrift stores and the like for each new replacement. When number seven began to sound a bit suspicious, he set off for his usual haunts. By now, though, he'd pretty much denuded the racks of decent used upright grands. With increasing concern, he turned to the newspaper classifieds, where he was lucky enough to find what turned out to be quite a nice specimen in a nearby suburb. The people were very pleasant, and their strapping sons were able to carefully place the piano in the back of Dad's pickup. Dad drove home happily, only to realize that the problem with buying from a private buyer meant there were no delivery people to bring the piano into the house. But never one to give up easily, Dad just climbed into the bed of the pickup and did a Jack Nicholson. It was rather nice to play en plein air, and the neighbors were far enough away across the fields that he felt no need to worry about disturbing them. He actually came to enjoy his afternoon hiatus outside, and this was where I found him each day when I'd be working there cleaning up the place.

As I worked at picking up debris, I would put items worth saving in the back of the garage. One week, as there had been a stretch of several days without rain, Dad had moved the pickup under the trees so as to further enhance the experience. By now he was living in an apartment I'd rented for him temporarily while I did more extensive work inside, although he spent his days at the house. One evening that week, returning late from an evening out with friends, I decided to stop by the now-unoccupied property to make sure all was well before I went home to sleep. Rain was expected, and I wasn't sure all the windows were closed. I drove down the long, dark driveway, grabbed a flashlight, and headed towards the house.

"Elizabeth, is that you?" my father's voice came from the garage. "Dad? What are you doing out there?" I asked. "I'm in the pickup. Would you mind bringing me a blanket and a pillow from the house?" "Uh, why?" I asked. "Well, I've backed the pickup in here to keep the piano out of the rain that's coming, and it can't get all the way in because of the chairs you put back there, but it's okay because the piano's under cover. However, the truck doors have ended up exactly at the edge of the garage door, so they can't open. It's okay, though. If you'll just get me that blanket and pillow, I'll be fine until morning."

"Dad, you can't spend the night in the truck. Just pull forward, we'll get you out, and you can sleep inside like a sensible person."

"No, the piano will get wet."

"Dad!"

"All right. Look, if you climb up on the open window of the passenger side and throw me over this bit of rope here, I think I'll be able to get out the driver's-side window and you can help me down."

Did I mention I was dressed rather nicely, I felt, in some combination of linen and silk in a soft buttery-yellow hue, as well as quite a lovely pair of high-heeled shoes in the softest of fine leathers? It was also after midnight, though perhaps that's unimportant. But Dad was adamant, so I took the rope and up I climbed, a somewhat more difficult task than I had anticipated because of the tight quarters. Once in place, I tossed one end of the rope over the roof of the car, where Dad was able to grab it as it dangled. His exiting through the window made my climbing look positively graceful, but eventually we were both standing on our respective windowsills, holding either end of the short rope. There we stood for a couple of minutes, looking at each other, neither of us sure what the next move should be. But I managed to sidle onto the dusty hood of the truck and, from there, off the side over the tire, keeping a tight hold on Dad's balancing rope. He then mirrored my moves, somewhat more slowly, and managed to get down. I got in my car and headed off for home.

Dad, having missed dinner, went in to make toast.