

## Just a Joke

By Jean Wong

Anger greeted Mrs. Chen as she switched on the light in the kitchen and a lone cockroach darted between the stacks of dirty plates by the sink. Last night she had reminded Kayla three times to do the dishes. And each time, Kayla had mumbled, “Yeah, in a second.”

*Second, my foot— here I am again, the fool, stuck holding the bag.* She swallowed several times, knowing her bitterness made her ill. She pressed her hand against her stomach thinking she should take a Tums. Now her eyes were hurting. Her heart fluttered, vying for attention, then pulsed faster, as she recalled the new skirt she had just bought Kayla, now sprawled on the bathroom floor.

She cleared a space for the oranges, wondering at the huge perfect fruit, and cut them in half, carefully picking the seeds out, leaning heavily over the squeezer and draining every drop from the pulp. Her arms felt mechanical, weak, only her thoughts pounded keen and potent, turning over each piece of the puzzle that could help her deal with her children.

*What went wrong?* Her sisters had no trouble when they sent their children off to college. They had all come back, marrying within their own. *That Allen—to get Hee Ing’s daughter.* She remembered seeing her once at a birthday party—lovely like a prize saved for a prince. And the whole family was loaded.

*Kayla, what she does cannot be helped; always that stroke of wildness in her, but Joel, oh Joel.* She strained the last glass of juice and began heating the leftover rice. *How can he be so blind? That cheap little tramp out for his money.* The face of her son’s girlfriend appeared in her mind and made Mrs. Chen want to turn her off like a horror movie. Her skin looked like mayonnaise, and those eyes which reminded her of big fish eyes, bulging out of a red snapper sprawled on a platter, green onions with soy sauce on top. *So plain and ugly. What can he see in her?*

She knew her sisters would never let up. “What a shame after two generations in America,” they would snicker, “the first one to marry a polar bear!” *Kayla’s fault, that damn Kayla! Why can’t she keep her friends to herself. No, she must flaunt them about and entrap her son.*

The sky was beginning to clear from the morning cloudiness, and the sun peered through, revealing the dust on the kitchen screen. Another scorcher. The heat gave her headaches. Already her youngest son Dylan had begun to fiddle with the dials of the television, waiting for the Saturday morning cartoons. She

heard the hushed laughter of Joel and Kayla, exchanging their secrets. She hated their shutting themselves up in Kayla's room—their sudden silence whenever she walked in. *Always conspiring, deceiving me, working against my will.* She wished she could be like her own mother—burst into their room, a dragon scorching them with fire, these enemies, strangers, plotting in her own house. But it wasn't like the old days. You had to be careful about what you said. Kayla had told all her friends that her mom was always cursing in Chinese and now that nosey Mrs. Kwock had mentioned something about it to her least favorite sister.

Kayla came in, silently setting the table. Her daughter had become something poisonous and vengeful. Restless and impulsive she always was, but now she was questioning everything with spite.

"Why is the food still there if the gods are suppose to eat it?" she would jeer during the temple offering. A real God doesn't need food. But yours does, because they don't exist!" Mrs. Chen felt helpless. She didn't know if she believed in these things either, but how could she dare stop feeding her own ancestors?

The silverware banged against the table. Kayla carelessly drew up a chair scraping the floor. Mrs. Chen returned her sullenness. She would repeat this battle every morning even if it killed her. After all, she was the mother. A daughter should say "good morning" first.

Joel came in, shirtless, his pants worn low about his hips. His nonchalance gave him a cool, casual bearing. They gathered about the table and began eating.

"Hey, Kayla?"

"Yup."

"Have you seen my pen?"

"I should know?" she shrugged.

In front of their mother, they would talk to each other with studied indifference. It was a maddening cover-up for the closeness she knew they had.

"Have you lost it now?" Mrs. Chen cried.

"Now, mump, I don't know yet. I haven't really looked," Joel replied.

"Probably left it at that Amy's house. You'd lose anything there, coming home at two in the morning. I couldn't sleep all night after that..." She felt herself losing control, but she couldn't leave it alone. She must get him to stop.

"All night, I tossed and turned. How long do you think this is going to go on?"

"What?"

"You know," she spat, "that tramp! She'll ruin you. Have your fling, but everyone sees you and no decent Chinese girl will have you after."

Joel was used to these attacks, and unlike Kayla, he refused to get upset. Over and over he would go through the steps of her argument, patiently lingering over each point.

“Why does it have to be a fling?”

“She’s out for your money don’t you see? If you think I worked for that land all these years just so you can squander it on some cheap...”

“But you think everything is money. Money and family. What if there’s something more. Look at you. Are you so happy?”

“Wait,” she hissed, “wait ‘til you see what life really is. You think you have it so easy now, but when everyone deserts you, it’s the family you’ll see.”

“How do you know. How does...”

“Mommy,” little Dylan came running in with his toy rifle, “look, the trigger doesn’t click.”

“Put it on the table. Daddy’ll get it later,” she said sharply. She had little time for her youngest son.

“Oh well,” Joel pushed back his chair, “I’ve got to go.” He paused, “And I need some money and the car.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” She blinked, her eyes smarting. Her voice softened, “Joel, why don’t we do something, together, just the family.”

“Go ahead, but I’ve got to go.”

“Amy again! But you just saw her! Come Joel,” she pleaded, “spend one day with the family. Forget her, for my sake.”

“Nope. I promised.”

“Well then,” her eyes flashed, “don’t come to me for any money. And we’re using the car, so you can’t have that either.”

“Why, where’re you going?”

“Out.”

“Alright,” Joel sighed, “You’re making a desperate man out of me.”

He gave Kayla a wink. “But lend me a pen, huh? I’ve got to write a letter before the mailman comes.” And with a quick jump he playfully began tugging on his mother’s arm.

“Let go,” she said, getting up. She remembered the little hand that used to pull at her, *Mommy, mommy, come see what I did*. She felt the old yearning for her son, her wrath pushed back by a worrying love.

She let herself be led to her bedroom where an oversized closet held all of her treasures and family supplies. She unlocked the closet and began rummaging around. Finding a pen, she turned to Joel pressing it into his hand. Her voice was choked. “Joel,” she moaned, “forget that girl. Please. My whole life...”

The telephone rang. She could hear Kayla’s pleasant “hello” break into a low murmur. *Could that be Amy? How dare she call! Must she pester them every minute before she was satisfied!* She rushed out.

Kayla glanced up, startled at the look on her mother’s face. “Well, look,” Kayla said hurriedly, “I’m sort of busy right now. I’ll call back.” She hung up. They stood there, two hating, tense women.

“Who was that? Who was it I say!” Mrs. Chen yelled.

“Why? Why should you know?” Kayla countered.

“Don’t try to pretend. I know! It was Amy! What does she...”

“Alright,” Kayla said, “Yes, it was! If ever, ever again the phone rings and someone calls for me, it’s always Amy, only Amy, my friend. So now you know, you needn’t ask any more!”

“That whore! That big nosed whore! She’s filthy,” Mrs. Chen screamed.

“Oh no, no, not her, it’s you. You’re the one that’s dirty. Not a mother—a screaming witch!”

“Shut up”

“You’re crazy, you’re out of your mind...”

“Shut up!” She picked up the toy rifle and began banging the table. “Shut up! Shut up!”

“Look mom, I’ve turned bad!” Joel shouted. She turned and saw her son run past her, thrusting his hands before her, holding the keys to the car and a roll of money. The door slammed and out he went, leaping into the car and driving off.

“Joel,” she gasped. “Joel!” She ran blindly to the closet. Her money was gone. *He had stolen it—her son—a thief!* “Joel! Kayla, Kayla, look what he’s done. He stole my money!”

Kayla was bent over, laughing wildly. “Oh mom, for god’s sake,” she shrieked, “calm down, it’s just a joke.”

Mrs. Chen looked down at the rifle she was gripping, her hand clenched and white. The banging continued on in her head. A memory hovered over her of the smooth-faced clerk who had worked for years at her father’s store—he was caught stealing from the cash register—a common thief. She wanted to check the closet again, but her leg was shaking. *Why was Kayla laughing?* She saw her as from a distance, crouched, her face filled with hateful mockery, strange and malevolent.