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FOX WEDDING

BY HOA PHAM

Tenuous blood ties will strangle you when you need it the least.

I had gone to Victoria Street for a bowl of *pho* by myself, sick to death of bland Australian food. Hong would have been pleased with me; I was making an effort to fit in. As usual she was at the university teaching.

In Richmond the English was rounded with a Vietnamese accent. I could now almost pretend I was back at home. Paris Night karaoke video was playing on the TV screen and the kitchen smelt of familiar herbs and dishes. On the TV screen women synched to Vietnamese love songs accompanied by male dancers and synthesiser chords.

Because I was alone the waiter started to talk to me, ignoring my gaze fixated on the chicken floating in my bowl. I had ordered a special so all the insides were there: the dark liver, the halved grey heart, the bright yellow egg yolk, the twisted intestine. Drowned in soup stock it smelt of coriander rather than blood, but I had no choice in the city.

He asked me what my name was and I told him. Stupidly I told him Mai's name. I did not want him to identify me as Hong's sister. And surprise, surprise there was a branch of "my" family living in Footscray.

There are lots of us now, here and everywhere.

I honour these connections; they are useful sometimes. Once someone had called me at Hong's from the US, looking for another cousin of my chosen surname. I rang back, an expensive USD call because obligation demanded me to say I didn't know.

So I was invited to a family wedding that was held that weekend. And the waiter gave me the address of Binh and his wife: they were his uncle and aunt and lived closest to the reception restaurant. I could go in with them.

"Perhaps I will see you there," he said hopefully. I held a porcelain soup-spoon of *pho* up to my mouth and lapped the soup up with my tongue.

"Maybe," I said and smiled when he recoiled.

*

I prepare for the wedding, primping. I am careful of my choice in clothes. I cannot wear black, red, white, or upstage the bride. I opted for my burgundy two-piece suit. That way I wouldn't upset anybody.

Hong was so pleased I was invited to the wedding by a man. You can meet people, she told me encouragingly.

There was a knock on the door.

"Are you ready yet? When you are I'll unlock the door," said a tentative female voice outside.

Unlock the door?

Carefully I patted down my jacket and slipped the garish, red and gold-embossed invitation into my pocket. I picked up my black bag and went to the white guest bedroom door.

Quietly I attempt to turn the knob.

She has locked me in.

I go to the bedroom window and parted the beige curtain. Outside in the evening light was her starved German Shepherd imprisoned in a small wire mesh cage.

My cousin's aunt by marriage was pottering at the back door waiting for me. Somewhere out there was her husband, the man who had caged the dog.

I knocked on the window. She hurried up, glancing to either side teetering in clumsy white flats. Her black dress was splashed with metallic hues of purple and gold. It clashed with my suit but it was not my job to match my hostess.

The lock clicked and she opened the bedroom door.

"Come on. Hurry," she said beckoning to me.

I strode out of the bedroom, tucking my bag under my arm.

She unlocked the heavy wooden front door, then the battered fly screen.

I had seen this sort of paranoia before. But not to the point where guests were locked into their rooms. Usually the locks were inside the door.

We stepped out onto the concrete driveway and I winced at the glaring smoggy sunset of the Footscray afternoon.

As she locked the doors behind us, I glanced around for the husband. He reminded me of a brown ferret. When I arrived he was cleaning his car in an ill-fitting red tracksuit, refusing to look at his wife or me.

She scurried down the steps, clutching the remote for the garage door. The aluminium door rose revealing a dark blue sedan.

"What about Binh?" I asked as she went and unlocked the car door.

She looked away.

"He'll be coming later. He doesn't want to go now," she muttered, pulling at her straggly black hair shot through with grey.

I got into the passenger seat and noted that all the controls for the locks and windows were located to the driver's side. Overwhelmed by Elizabeth Arden's Red Door I tried not to choke. I never use human scents. It annoys me beyond bearing; it is like slipping a blindfold over your eyes. Perhaps she used it to conceal her fear.

*

In the car I feel again the red envelope in my bag wedged between the bank notes. Around my neck was a gold necklace the wife had given me. Giang was her name.

"Wear this and hide it," she had told me tucking it under my shirt, ignoring the warning in my eyes. "I don't want my husband to see it, he will get angry."

Because I am forever young they will continue to take these liberties with me. I watch her drive, her hands clenching the steering wheel like a charm.

"Is this your car?" I ask.

"No. It is not mine. Nothing is mine."

I shift my glance from her dazed, open look. We pass houses and concrete

driveways, all the trappings of civilisation that have yet to reach our ancestral home.

I wonder what I can give her in return. Hong had told me to go to the wedding and meet new people. Maybe this was why.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" she asks, relaxing as we drive further from her home. "No."

"You should not be by yourself. You should have a husband. You are twenty-five. You should have children now."

I say nothing. What I do she would not understand.

"Do you have children?" I ask.

"No," she says mournfully, not realising the nature of my question.

My blood is beginning to simmer and boil.

*

We draw up at a Chinese restaurant.

The car park is almost full. I spot people in ugly taffeta lace dresses and make up in bright pinks and blues. The men are in suits.

Maybe the food will be good, I hope forlornly. I'm hungry.

I step out onto the driveway. The smell of monosodium glutamate is on the night wind, with the smog, the tar and the warm oil of the engine.

Clacking my heels on the asphalt I walk alongside her, shuffling to the front door of the restaurant. The maître d' is there, Cantonese I divine, with a red cummerbund. He gestures and we make our way to the guest book in front of the large gold hanging symbol of double happiness.

I sign my name in Chinese characters, putting my address as Chen's in Ballarat.

I stand up looking at the mistress of ceremonies, in a glistening silk blue *ao dai*. It shows off her breasts and full rounded figure.

Next to her on a black chair is a box of corsages.

"You would be on the bride's side." She takes a yellow rose from the box and pins it to my lapel.

"Dep," she sighs to Giang as she looks at me, her violet lined eyes glowing.

Beautiful.

Yes, and unmarried, thank god.

Giang smiles wanly for the first time.

We are escorted in and no one mentions Binh. When we are seated at a full table I realise that I have taken his place.

Next to me is the *pho* waiter, now resplendent in a shirt and tie.

"Hello," he says smiling too widely.

I nod, too busy looking at the surrounding tables. The wedding table is at the back of the hall. The blur of white would be the bride. The cake is three-tiered traditional. Red crepe streamers and balloons line the roof. The tablecloths are white, the chairs black. I wonder what Hong would think of this combination of ceremonies.

I avoid the actual wedding ceremony by telling them my great aunt died last

week. It makes me unlucky. I am hoping it will get me out of the reception too but they are determined to show me off. Or to balance the table, I'm not sure which.

I am a bit more tolerant of my waiter friend now and the silent stares I receive from the other people present. I can tell from his parents' exchanged glances that they are glad that I am here.

His name is Phuc and he introduces me to his mother and father, who nod and smile too much. They are dressed conservatively, I can tell his suit and her dress are from a chain store; the cut is sharp and unflattering.

There are three others, three girls dressed in flashy disco ball sequined dresses, friends of the bride who chat amongst themselves. The girls hold each other's hands, leaning over each other for reassurance. This is the leftover table, the one where all those that can't fit in with the others have to sit.

A waiter pours tea for us. A bottle of cognac sits in the middle of the rotating circle of the table next to the soy sauce and tooth picks. I look at it longingly, but I can't touch it in this company. Everyone here is Vietnamese or Chinese. Oh, except for those six uncomfortable white Australians sitting on the other side.

At least they can talk to each other. I think I might spend the evening talking to the crispy-skinned chicken and myself.

*

There was no chicken. They served pigeon instead. I lick the salt from my lips and crunch into the bones.

"She's hungry," chides Phuc's mother. "We thought you were on a diet."

I had the fish soup. I didn't eat the fried wonton, the abalone hot pot, the mixed vegetables in oyster sauce, the sweet and sour pork or the scallops. Everyone has a tiny fried dark wing on their plate delivered by the waiter. By the sixth course they are quite happy to let me consume the rest of the pigeons on the central plate.

"You eat like a cat, and your legs are like chopsticks. You should eat more," confides Giang to me. She's more relaxed now, although sometimes she glances at the door as if she thinks Binh will turn up.

Phuc the *pho* boy spends some of his time trying to talk to the girls across the table, who smile and ignore him. He observes me occasionally and tries not to see when I lick my fingers.

"Can you cook?" he asks me when my mouth is full.

"No," I spit after gulping.

Taken aback he lets his mother speak.

"We could teach you. Then you can work in the restaurant and stay here in the City. Ballarat must be so boring for a young girl like you."

"I'm happy where I am," I grate.

"But you aren't doing anything."

"I'm studying," I say shortly.

"What are you studying?" asks Giang.

"Poultry," I retort.

"What?" Phuc exclaims.

"Poetry," I amend, giving up.

"She's artistic," Giang pipes up.

"Do you write poetry?" Phuc asks. His eyes frame me as if I have become his artistic muse.

I nod, reaching for another piece of pigeon.

"Phuc wants a traditional wife," his father says. "He's going back home next year and maybe he'll find one. Don't you want to get married?"

Phuc, embarrassed, sweeps back his gelled hair with a hand before excusing himself to go to the restroom.

*

Giang has now gone to the powder room. I turn to Phuc's mother as she watches her leave.

"It is good Binh is not here," I mention.

She turns and smiles at me, hard as iron, presuming that I know.

"All the family knows that he is a bad man. If you stay here he will stop what he is doing. He will be too scared. He knows everyone knows. He's ashamed, that's why he is not here."

I raise my eyebrows.

"I have tried to help him," she confides in me.

"Has it gone on for long?" I ask.

"Yes. Since they were married. I tell her he will change."

I choke on a bone.

*

I lean my head against the vibrating car window as Giang drives back to her house. My cheeks are pink from the toasts. The speeches were in Cantonese, Vietnamese and English. The cake was sponge with fake cream. The bride and groom looked happy though.

Giang's driving too fast. Wrrrr.

She explains why we were first out the door: "I have to feed the dog."

≠

"You go shower and head to the spare room. Then I will lock your door," Giang says nervously.

"I'll call a cab and go back home," I reply.

"No. No. Stay here. You can stay here."

We get out of the car. I hold on to my bag.

"Come in for a cup of tea," she insists, closing the garage door.

My eyes gleam in the dark as I shrug.

*

Giang is checking on her husband. I stand in the backyard next to the dog cage.

Miffy. What a stupid name for a German Shepherd. It is growling.

I open the latch on the cage. The dog just stands there snarling at me.

I hiss back. Miffy starts barking. I open the cage door.

I hear shouting in Vietnamese and a slap.

Fantastic.

I feel myself dwindle as a door slams in the house.

He's coming.

The German shepherd towers over me, its teeth bared. From here I can see that it's starving skinny, black and gold fur flaking off its ribcage. I fence to the left and then the right yelping, vixen dancing, my red tail swishing behind me. I dance on my clothes and my bag, now fallen onto the concrete.

The dog lunges then tumbles as it rolls out of the cage. It leaps to its feet enraged snapping for me, lashing out at its newfound freedom.

Turning I see the brown ferret storm out of the back door. I jump for him, paws flying.

The German shepherd comes after me, bowling him over as I leapfrog again into the house.

Miffy is furious and snaps at the ferret. He bleeds and swears, wrestling with the dog.

Someone has to feed the dog, I think as I speed into the guest bedroom. Gi-ang runs past me, aghast at the noise. I jump out the bedroom window into the backyard and bound over the wooden fence. I land on concrete in the next yard, jarring my paws.

Giang is shrieking. The lights of the house turn on. The neighbours are awake.

After the first few thumps and swears there are only yelps of pain. The sound of the carnage over the fence fills me with delight.

At least someone has had a good meal tonight.

Binh has not put up much of a fight for a man.

Chicken.

Hoà Pham is an award winning author, playwright and psychologist. She is also the co founder of *Peril*, an Asian-Australian online arts and culture magazine at www.peril.com.au. Her work can be checked out at www.hoapham.net.

FOLKTALE

The fox fairy has been mentioned in numerous cultures, featuring prominently in Japanese and Vietnamese mythology, as well as Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. A story on the fox fairy typically revolves around a man catching a fox woman, seductive and beautiful; he imprisons her to either make her his wife, or obtain good luck and fortune for himself. Sometimes the man's plan backfires, forcing him to escape from the fox's spell instead; sometimes the fox fairy's real form is revealed, causing the fairy to flee, and the man to miss the woman he loves.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

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Cyril Wong. "The Dragon Prince's Letter to His Father." *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night*. Australia: Transit Lounge, 2009 (1st edition); Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012 (2nd edition).