

First Place High School
The House of Many Faces
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Mei stared at the shriveled piece of tofu in front of her, poking it with a chopstick. The sudden shaking of the table broke Mei's trance as her grandmother Nai Nai motioned to stop playing with the chopsticks, yelling at her in Chinese that it was bad luck. She stopped. Satisfied, Nai Nai continued her game of mahjong. Mei's mother joined in, sitting next to her. Beside the numerous boxes of take out Chinese food and cups of tea, the clinking mahjong pieces suddenly ceased as Nai Nai let out a hoarse laugh. Mei could not help laughing at how her grandmother pointed at the mound of tiles in front of her as if they were pearls from the sea. Nai Nai lit a cigarette and casually talked to mother and Mei in Mandarin. Mei's mother finally relaxed herself into the folding chair and accepted her defeat. Nai Nai waved her arms and reminisced about when she was growing up in Huang Cun near the Yin Yu Tang house. After taking a long drag from the half burned cigarette, she added "hen piao ling" (so beautiful). She released smoke as if she were clearing her mind for more memories. Being part of the second generation after Nai Nai's immigration to America, and her lack of Chinese comprehension, Mei sat in utter confusion watching Nai Nai speak. Mei peered over at the digital clock. It was nine o'clock. The small suburban kitchen grew dimmer by the second. She yawned and left the kitchen, kissing her mother and Nai Nai goodnight as she left. Mei slowly closed her bedroom door and tip toed over her soft purple carpet to bed. Closing her eyes, she could still hear Nai Nai's voice with the occasional sound of a cough, or the sliding of porcelain teacups.

When Mei awoke the next morning the room was dark. She reached for her alarm clock but caught only air. Sighing to herself, thinking she must have knocked it over, she lazily got up and noticed the dampness in the air. Slowly stretching out of bed she gingerly placed her toes on the floor. With a sudden scream she hopped back on the bed. Instead of carpet, her toes had felt the cold of wood. The room was still dark but she saw the defined lines of wooden panels on the floor. Sucking in air she quickly stepped across the panels and opened the door. Wide eyed, she stepped back to take in the view. The narrow corridor lining the second floor she stood on wrapped around a magnificent courtyard. She inched over the corridor banister and looked down. The sun bathed the courtyard in a yellowish glow, reflecting off two symmetrical pools of water which, when Mei looked closer, had fish.

Directly across from Mei, on the other side of the courtyard, were rooms that appeared to be like hers. She noticed panels too, which had dragons and a pot design carved into them. She gently ran her hands along the panels on the wall behind her, watching her fingers catch and release on the tiny designs in the wood. Through some of the designs she even noticed paper on the panels reminding her of how dark her room was. She felt a cool refreshing breeze coming from above as she looked up. The roof was tiled with slanting shingles facing the courtyard, and above that Mei noticed walls on top of the shingles. The walls seemed to delicately calm the wind. Mei laughed to herself, thinking they looked more like white horses than walls.

Curious, she walked to where the corridor made a right turn and noticed the familiar smell of incense was being produced from a nearby room. It smelled like the incense her mother lit on Chinese New Year. Stepping into the room Mei felt like she was in Nai Nai's house, which was full of Chinese superstitions and ancient relics. The familiar pictures of the Chinese deities gazed at her and she noticed a statue of Guan Yun, the deity of mercy, resting on a half table against the wall. Mei remembered Nai Nai having a similar statue in her bedroom. Suddenly she turned around as the sound of shuffling of footsteps stopped behind her.

Mei awoke, her heart beat with confusion and disappointment. She jerked her head to the left eyeing the blaring alarm clock. Stepping across the carpeted floor she shut it off and looked out her window. The bright morning sun shined through her window. She closed the shutters and ran downstairs. She kept to herself that day. In school she talked to no one and when she got home she jumped the gate and ran inside, slamming the door. Tired, Mei jogged to the sink to get a glass of water, almost passing Nai Nai who was seated in the kitchen again playing mahjong and listening to infomercials on the radio. Nai Nai just nodded with one of her excusing smiles. Mei nodded back then quickly ran upstairs. She flung herself onto her bed burying her face in the pillow. She felt exhaustion take hold of her.

She awoke when she felt something rub up against her ankle. Mei jumped out of the way of a group of clucking chickens that were racing after a grasshopper. She stopped short, suddenly realizing that there was a man next to her and he was staring at her. He opened his mouth to speak and Mandarin came pouring out like an over-flowing pond during a surprise rainfall. Somehow Mei could understand every word of it. To her surprise she found herself responding back, her accent in perfect harmony. She realized she was in a different open area of the house she was in before. She noticed the same shingles and white walls on top of the house and the same familiar breeze that smelled like damp earth and forest. A few people

stepped out through a doorway at the center wall of the house. Above it were sculpted scenes of lions and other various Chinese motifs. Intrigued, she walked towards the doorway, drawn to its stunning array of overhead sculptures. As she neared the entrance, she peered inside and to her confusion she found that she was looking at a wall. The man that was beside her moments before walked quickly to the entrance, nodded to her, stepped through the door and around the wall inside. Mei could feel her face reddening as she also stepped behind the wall.

The courtyard changed as Mei ran to one of the pools hoping to see a carp. Instead she saw one unrecognizable fish, its scales were neither shiny nor colorful like the fish she had seen before. Nonetheless, she bent down to touch the water but was interrupted by a lady wearing a dirty apron. The woman pulled the fish out of the pool and walked off to another room carrying it in her hands. Mei stood in shock and stared at the empty pool, her reflections rippling like the water. Eyeing a way to go upstairs she rushed to where she remembered her room to be. She stepped in and startled a young girl, who screamed in surprise and, throwing up her arms, dropped her combs and teacups. Some people in the courtyard yelled after Mei but she ignored them, making a right turn, and stopping in front of a door. She was sure this was the room she woke up in but on the door there was a red piece of paper depicting the double characters “xi”, meaning happiness. She did not remember seeing that before. As Mei reached to touch the paper she suddenly felt her body collapse.

She awoke to the sound of rain pelting shingles. Water flowed from the slanted rooftop into the pools, like water escaping clasped hands. Mei looked around the courtyard, not knowing what had happened, but tilted her head to hear the sound of cheering. Curious, she stepped towards where she had entered the house. She saw newspaper clippings and posters of Mao pasted to the walls of the rooms she passed. What surprised her most was that the wall at the entrance was gone. Rubbing her arms against the cold, she crept outside. The rain had become a soft sprinkle. She looked up hoping to see the lions again, but when she stepped back she covered her mouth in shock of what she saw. The once beautiful sculptures were destroyed, the lions only a memory. As she rushed to the front gate she began to cry. Rain and tears became one, and she no longer cared. She slid in mud puddles and tripped over rain-exposed rocks. She banged on the gate helplessly, as if it would open and she'd be home again. She didn't know what was happening or where she was. Tired from her outburst she hugged her knees, leaned against the courtyard wall, and slowly fell asleep.

Mei awoke with a sudden and swift movement. She rubbed her eyes fiercely before taking in her surroundings. Peering towards where her alarm clock should be, she sighed when she noticed she was up three minutes before the alarm. She let herself relax, rested her head on the pillow and tried to make sense of everything. She immediately remembered Nai Nai's stories and smiled to herself.