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WHERE VIRTUE GOES: STORIES

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Broken Ceramics: Part 1

The matchmaker sought relief from the stifling humidity of his room by taking a nap outside in his hammock. There was no breeze; the rocking helped, but only a little. He fanned himself, alternating hands until both were tired. He blew four puffs of air into his collar to unstick his shirt from his armpits. When that was unsuccessful, he removed his shirt. He closed his eyes.

He could not sleep.

Not one to continue trying in vain, he decided to use the time for thinking and planning. Later, he was going to visit a bride-to-be's family to negotiate the dowry on behalf of the groom's family. He was deep in thought when he was interrupted. He heard the cry before he heard the running.

"Mr. Matchmaker!"

His eyes shot open at the sound. He swung his legs onto the ground and ran barefoot to the gate. His hand reached for the wooden latch, but, before he could secure it into place, the Seed brothers came hurtling through.

"Mr. Matchmaker, we are so glad you are here!" little Seed said, panting.

"Hey hey, excuse me, little soldier!" the matchmaker said, prodding little Seed's shoulder with his foldable paper hand fan. "No one allowed either of you to barge into my house like this!"

"But we are not in your house," said big Seed. "We are still in the yard—"

"Mr. Matchmaker! You must help our brother—" little Seed said. The boy was referring to his older brother, Glory, whom the matchmaker knew well.

“I don’t have to do anything for anyone,” said the matchmaker, “least of all your brother! You have no right to disturb me during my nap time! Unless you are the district police or my mother!”

“But your mother is dead—”

“But our brother is your client—”

“Your brother *was* my client,” the matchmaker corrected the boy, “and I dutifully formalized his marriage two years ago. If he wants my services again, he will have to get in the queue—”

“Gentle is pregnant,” said little Seed, “but she won’t give up the child. Please sir, we need your help.”

Something little Seed said cut through the matchmaker’s lethargy. He glanced back at his hammock. *I can’t nap anyway, he thought, and I won’t be able to concentrate on anything else now.*

“Very well, I will come and see what I can do,” the matchmaker said. He put on his shirt and buttoned it up. He tied his neck towel around his forehead. They set off.

The fastest way from the matchmaker’s house to Gentle’s parents’ house was through a rice terrace. Rows and rows of bright green rice seedlings peeked over the surface of the water, like a polite audience hoping for a show. At this time of the year, months shy of harvest season, the fields were largely undisturbed. In the cooler months, when the wind blew, the seedlings could whisper to one another while they worked, but this month the sun had been particularly

watchful and strict, allowing them no comfort or distraction. Since the fields offered no shade, the villagers wisely opted for the cooler—albeit longer—paths snaking around the paddy fields.

That afternoon, the seedlings witnessed a short burst of action. Two village boys darted across the narrow path that cut through the rice paddy field and, shortly after, came running back the same way, this time followed by a man strolling behind. The man was making little effort to keep up with the boys, carefully shading his face with his paper fan. The boys yelled back at him. Eventually one of them ran back and tugged the front tail of the man's shirt, prompting him to unhappily break into a jog.

A short while later, the trio arrived at Gentle's parents' house, where she lived before she had gotten married and had returned to after her separation from her husband. The brothers pointed the matchmaker to the kitchen, which was sectioned off and its own separate structure. *Why can't they argue in the courtyard,* the matchmaker wondered. *So much more space.*

"The whore comes with me until I get my firstborn," a man's voice shouted from within. "Then I'll leave her at your doorstep."

The voice belonged to Glory, the Seed boys' eldest brother. Glory was standing in the middle of the kitchen. The matchmaker hesitated before stepping in. If a physical fight broke out, as was common in these sort of family affairs and even more likely wherever Glory showed up, it would be hard for the matchmaker to escape quickly through such a narrow doorway. He entered anyway and saw the familiar cast of the Glory-Gentle drama. All the adults of both families were there. Glory's parents stood by his side. Gentle's parents stood protectively around her. The mother was holding the girl, while the father stood in front, shielding them

both. The matchmaker suspected that Gentle's younger siblings were in the main house or sent out while the argument was going on.

The midwife was a new addition to the party. She stood to the side, next to the wooden block table that served as a cutting board. She was an outsider to the conflict, just as she was an outsider to the village. She came when she was needed, which was not infrequent given that the village did not have its own midwife. She was known locally as the Mountain Midwife, a reputation earned by journeying through unforgiving mountainous terrain to reach even the most remote and isolated villages in the North. She was strong, but not young; she was unmarried and well past any hope of reversing that state.

No doubt, she was summoned as soon as Gentle was discovered to be with child. Like the matchmaker once was, the midwife was a newcomer. She would learn to assume the role that he, rather reluctantly, had long since taken on: the concerned but ultimately powerless family friend. The matchmaker had been there when Glory and Gentle got married (against his counsel). He had been there when Glory returned Gentle to her parents' house, one year into their marriage. He was there for every major conflict of theirs. He was here now.

"Ah, Mr. Matchmaker," Glory's father said as soon as the matchmaker stepped in. "Thank heavens you have arrived! This family has no sense of dignity or reason. I am ready to settle this by the rules!"

"Hold on, he doesn't know the full story," Glory's mother said, placing a hand on her husband's shoulder to pause him. "Mr. Matchmaker, the girl left our house, hiding the fact that she was carrying our son's baby. And now she means to raise the baby as a bastard child! She dares to defy the village rules!"

“Well,” the matchmaker cleared his throat, “those rules only strictly apply to formally unmarried couples. Gentle and Glory, though separated, are still technically married, so convention does not— ”

“Then I’ll unmarry the whore!”

“Surely convention still dictates that the baby stays with us!”

“Our daughter is not going anywhere.”

“It is not his child!” Gentle said.

“Quiet,” Gentle’s mother said sharply to her daughter, shielding her further from view.

For a moment, everyone paused in the middle of what they were saying. Only Glory took two steps forward, towards his wife and in-laws. His eyes widened so much that his eyelids were tucked behind, out of view. “Why shut it up?” he said. “If the whore is so proud of its whoredom, let it rejoice! Let the neighbours hear! I will round up the village!”

He kicked the stack of clay cooking pots and hit the large round metal tray against the wall. The explosive clang echoed for some seconds. There was a heavy silence afterward while everyone waited to see if he would do anymore damage. It seemed like he was debating it himself, when the midwife spoke for the first time since the matchmaker’s arrival.

“I know you are aware, Mr. Glory, that your firstborn is nestled inside ‘the whore’. Indeed, you put it there yourself. As a result, unfortunately, if your ‘whore’ decides you must not have the baby at all costs, she can ensure that the baby never enters the world altogether.”

It was rare occasion that Glory, a rooster of a man, was struck silent by the gravity of anyone’s words. The midwife continued, “Whether we like it or not, we need her cooperation. She will come with me and stay at my house for the coming months. I am near the health

centre, so we can make sure the baby is delivered safely and healthily. Then you folks can decide where the baby goes and who lives where and who unmarries what.”

“How can we agree to that? You live so far away!”

“How do we know you are not helping her escape?”

“Why can she not stay here? We are her family!”

Amidst the burst of objections coming at her from all directions, the midwife picked up her back basket and slipped her arms through the straps, ignoring the gazes of everyone in the room on her.

“You know where I live, and you know what I do. I am busy person. This trip was a waste of my time. If I don’t leave with this pregnant woman, I will not come back for her case again. You can assist your wife in the delivery of your own child, Mr. Glory. Write to me if you have questions.”

She proceeded to walk past the lot of them, toward the door. She gave everyone almost no time to process what she had just said. The matchmaker gathered his senses enough to step out of her way.

Glory’s mother suddenly grabbed the midwife’s basket, saying, “Wait!”

A moment later, Glory, catching on, pointed a finger at his wife and said, “Fine, take the whore with you.”

The midwife said, “I will take her with me after you leave. She will stay at my home, then I will transfer her to the health centre when she goes into labour. I can make the arrangements and I will write to you about payments once Gentle is settled in. You can go home now, Mr. Glory.”

Glory and his parents looked at each other. They reached an understanding amongst themselves.

“I’ll come for my child when he’s born,” Glory said. “I’ll kill anyone who tries to stop me. Including you, midwife.”

Then, with nothing more to say and no one more to threaten, he motioned for his parents to leave the room and followed them out.

It was decided that the matchmaker would accompany the midwife to take Gentle over the mountain, back to the midwife’s house, a task customarily carried out by the girl’s husband. In his absence, the girl’s father or brother would have helped, but Gentle’s father was too old to make the journey, her brother too young to remember the way back, so the matchmaker was the man for the job, despite his not-so-prime age of fifty.

Gentle’s parents were surprised when the matchmaker agreed. Given what they knew of him, they expected the man to roundly turn down a request he had neither the time nor obligation to complete; instead, he said he would oblige them, but only if Gentle’s brother would deliver a message for him to the family he was supposed to meet later to negotiate a dowry.

A simple bag was packed, promises to visit made, and goodbyes exchanged between Gentle and her family. “Please look out for her,” Gentle’s mother said to the midwife. “Our girl is careless and impulsive; somehow trouble always finds her, so please, on our behalf, take care of her.”

Gentle's mother exaggerated, as concerned mothers sometimes do. Gentle was neither careless nor impulsive. The girl was not soft as her name suggested either.

The matchmaker, the midwife, and the girl set off. They left the village but kept to the motorbike roads, walking in single file on the outer side of the mountain. Then, after half an hour of walking, the midwife instructed the other two, "We turn here. Watch how I lower myself, then do the same. Step exactly where I step. Matchmaker, you hold her arm. Do not release her grip until I tell you to."

The midwife led the descent with the same self-assuredness she carried everywhere, but there was something different about how she moved now.

She is home among these rocks, the matchmaker realized, whereas we are merely guests.

The matchmaker loved the mountains just as much as the next villager. All of them were born here, cradled by the valley, raised on rice terraces that inspired an early fondness of fluffy white rice. As children, the villagers found it perfectly natural that clouds would linger by so near, near enough for them to touch. As they reasoned it, the clouds leaned in to give the mountains an embrace and fell asleep there, as their mothers sometimes did when singing babies lullabies.

"How long have you been doing this?" the matchmaker wanted to know.

The midwife told Gentle and the matchmaker. Three decades ago, she made her very first journey alone. Back then, she was a young nurse with a mission to reach the small mountainous commune with alarmingly high maternal mortality rates. She had lost her way many times, she admitted. Ten hours of walking and climbing rocks each day. However, after

three days of wandering and relying on the hospitality of the families she passed, the midwife covered forty-eight kilometres by foot and delivered eight kilograms worth of medical supplies to the commune. On the way back, the mountain showed her where to step so that her slipper did not slip on a rock or get caught in the green overgrowth. Over the years, the mountain shared its shortcuts, allowing her to make a journey in three hours instead of five, a journey in five instead of ten.

The midwife did not pause in between her talking to catch her breath, not even when they had to climb over steep rocks. Perhaps she knew that her stories distracted her companions from the increasingly unbearable humidity and mosquitos. As it was, they forgot that they had been on the road for over an hour.

They reached the midwife's village within two hours. In the village, people greeted the midwife in another language, which the matchmaker and Gentle did not understand.

"Which did you learn first?" Gentle asked the midwife.

"I grew up speaking Vietnamese, then learned other languages when I came here to work at the hospital."

"What else do you speak?" Gentle asked.

"I speak Hmong and Nùng," the midwife replied, referring to the languages of two other ethnic minorities of the North. "I know the basics of others as well, enough to understand and say simple things."

Gentle smiled admiringly at the midwife, who was walking a little ahead and therefore did not see the smile. The matchmaker did.

They arrived at the midwife's home, a simple house with earthen walls, a tiled roof, and a stone fence. It was a small house, but spacious for just one person. They left their slippers outside the door and stepped into the main room. The matchmaker found himself wondering who had helped the midwife build this house. Was it already built like this when she arrived? For his own house, he had mobilized his brother and the young men of his village to help with the wooden molds and clay work. Who had helped her gather large stones for the fence around the house? Who had arranged the stones so that they would form a secure structure without any adhesive material?

The midwife set her back basket on the ground and led Gentle to the right wing of the house, which consisted of the guest bed and—during the cold months—the fireplace. The left wing was for the midwife's bed and the kitchen. The midwife helped Gentle onto the guest bed. The girl fell asleep.

The matchmaker was sitting on a bamboo stool in the main room, resting. From where he sat, he studied the ancestral altar table in the far corner of the room. The altar supported a pair of painted wooden lamp stands, a plate of rice, a cup of wine, some scrolls of paper, a tray of plums and persimmons, and a vase of incense sticks. He wondered if the altar was only for ancestors, or if it was also for close family members who passed away. A late husband perhaps.

The midwife joined him at the table with a pot of tea and two small cups. When she saw the matchmaker massaging his calf muscles, she laughed, "Old man, if you find the journey downhill tiring then how will you manage the way back?"

“A little rest is all it takes, don’t worry,” he said. He waited for the midwife to set the tray on the bamboo table and sit down. Then, after he took his cup of tea from her, he said, “I’ve always wondered about one thing.”

“And I invite you to ask it,” the midwife said, pouring herself a cup.

“I have seen you around, in my village, over the years, and of course everyone knows who you are. But I couldn’t help but notice—how can one say this? I didn’t think someone your age would be making these trips...”

The midwife was amused. “You find it strange that someone my age is travelling these mountains, yet somehow there are fewer than ten mountain midwives in the whole province. If an old woman can make two to three trips a day by foot, why aren’t there more midwives—
younger midwives—doing it.”

The matchmaker sipped his tea. He realized belatedly that the midwife was waiting for a response from him. He quickly said, “Yes, I wonder about that.”

“It’s because the walking isn’t the hardest part,” she said. She stood up and walked away. He thought he had offended her, but she was getting something from the altar.

“Do you like these?” the midwife asked, returning with a plate of plums and persimmons. He told her he did. The province’s central plateau, which was not far from her house, was famously well-suited for growing them.

The midwife handed the matchmaker a deep purple plum and retrieved a knife from the kitchen. She returned to the table, started cutting the persimmons, and told the matchmaker about the first time a patient of hers died. The girl was only sixteen years old at the time. Her husband had refused to let the midwife take his wife to the health centre, even though the risk

of high blood pressure was too high for a home delivery. The husband had heard rumours about babies being swapped in government-run health centres and hospitals. He kicked the midwife out of the house and never let her come in. The girl died a week after giving birth.

The midwife set down the knife and walked over to the altar again. The matchmaker thought she was getting more fruits and was about to tell her they already had plenty, but she returned not with fruits or tea, but with a scroll.

“We midwives get eighteen months of training,” she said. “They teach us how to care for women throughout pregnancy and after birth. But none of our medical training prepares us for some of the situations we meet. I meet girls who have suffered through recurrent miscarriages, girls too young to make informed decisions, girls too scared to speak up against their husbands, girls too filial to defy their parents’ wishes, girls too ashamed to leave the house after a rape-related pregnancy... I am the bridge between these girls and the medical care that they need. Over the years, I have learnt that from the moment I step into a house, what I say and how I say it determines whether or not I leave the house with the girl. If I don’t get her out, she will lose her baby or die during childbirth or shortly after. It is a difference of how quickly I read the room, how carefully I take calculated risks, how well I build trust, how tactfully I say no, how quickly I pivot when things don’t go my way...”

The midwife unfurled the scroll and showed it to the matchmaker. The scroll contained a list of names, male and female names. He recognized some of the names of his ethnic group. There were names in scripts he did not recognize.

“These are the girls I could not help and babies I could not save,” the midwife said. She closed her eyes and scratched her eyelids as if to remove an itch. She rolled up the scroll and placed it back on the altar.

They sat in silence. Gentle slept peacefully in the next room.

After some time, the midwife said softly, “Everyone assumes that the walking is the hard part. All of us can walk. The hard part is difficult families, aggressive family members who threaten violence... The hard part is talking to these very people and convincing them to hand over a pregnant woman to you. Convincing a scared pregnant woman that you are trustworthy. Negotiation is the most important skill of a mountain midwife. It is the deciding factor between who is a midwife and who is a mountain midwife.”

It was late afternoon. The hum of the cicadas began to pour in through the window. The matchmaker needed to begin his journey back in order to reach his village before dark. Before leaving, he paused by the door of the room where Gentle was sleeping. Seeing the concern on his face, the midwife said, “I will take good care of her. Don’t worry.”

The midwife walked the matchmaker to her gate. She knew what was on his mind. She could read it from his expression, but she needed him to say it out loud.

“How can I help?” he asked.

“Get this poor girl a formal separation from her husband.”

“But... That’s impossible. Her husband won’t agree to it.”

“You disappoint me, old man. In your many years of matchmaking and matchbreaking, you have never convinced a stubborn youngster out of a bad match?”

“I will try my best,” he said. “Goodbye.” He turned to leave.

“You will have to do more than your best, Mr. Matchmaker,” the midwife said. “If not now, some day in the near future, once Glory agrees to have the match broken. Men like him, they will remarry. And the next girl he wants to marry has the right to know why his first wife left him. You will have to tell her.”

The matchmaker paused. He found it difficult to say no to her. As he bumped against this difficulty, something loosened in him. He came upon a realization. This was why the midwife requested him, specifically, to accompany Gentle on the journey here. She confided in him, even though they had met for the first time earlier that day. She had showed him the scroll. *These are the girls I could not help and babies I could not save.*

“I cannot tell her. It is not my place,” the matchmaker said. The midwife bristled at his remark, but before she could reply, he continued, “I cannot tell her myself, but I will bring her to you so that you can talk to her. You have a way with words that no one can match. Not even me.”

The midwife nodded. Then the matchmaker turned and headed back to his village. The singing cicadas kept him company through the journey.

Stuck Fishbone

It is awkward to find out one's name has an unflattering sound or meaning in another language or culture. However, unless one lives and works in that language and culture, it is fairly easy to disregard the inconvenience.

Phúc's younger sister, Kim, had suggested early on, before the move, that he should consider picking an English nickname, for convenience. Bob or Bobby or Tom or Tommy. He was amenable when it came to things like this and would likely have agreed, if not for the fact that his American boss, Mr. Andrew, had managed—after diligent practice—to pick up the correct pronunciation of Phúc's name. "You don't know, the Americans are very obliging," he had told his sister then.

"Not all Americans are like your Mr. Andrew," Kim had replied.

Of course, he knew that. He was born in 1961. Their mother had raised all five children on her own while their father was away fighting in the American War.

Phúc's parents knew that he worked at an embassy, as a driver at first, and then as the ambassador's personal chauffeur. He and his siblings had decided it would be easier to tell their parents that he worked at the Australian embassy rather than the American one. A small alteration that saved questions and conflict. Two years after his parents passed away, Phúc and his immediate family became eligible for the green card, thanks to his seventeen years of "faithful service" to the embassy and, by extension, the US government.

Phúc did not wait to share the news with his wife and daughter and brothers and sisters. Good news—like food, money, responsibilities, and goals—were to be shared with family and relatives. Soon, his wife Hiền was buying interactive video DVDs to learn English, his daughter

skipping school because she only cared about passing rather than doing well in her university exams, his sister helping the whole family apply for passports, his older brother getting in touch with their distant relatives in Oklahoma, his sister-in-law planning for the family feast the following month, his cousins from the countryside promising to visit...

If his parents had been alive, the decision would have been harder. He would have been torn between his obligations to them and his obligation to his daughter. He would probably have deferred the move until after his parents passed away, however many years that would have taken. He was committed to providing the best future for his daughter, but equally devoted to securing the comfort and happiness of his parents.

Back then, it did not occur to him that he could have kept the news to himself. He could have deliberated on it, come to a decision *not* to emigrate to the US, and gone on with his life in Việt Nam, obligations to anyone be damned. He alone had worked for over a decade and half at the embassy, and so the decision could have been his alone.

Back then, it did not occur to him that his personal goals, his interests, his happiness, and his needs could be separate from—and even in conflict with—those of his family. That was something he would learn after moving to the United States of America.

“Looks like we’re all set,” the man said, returning the signed delivery paper to Phúc.
“You have a good evening now, Mr. Puck. Drive safe.”

“Thanks, good evening, you too,” Phúc said with a smile. He no longer corrected their pronunciation. *My name Fook*, he used to say. Then, as his daughter suggested, he would add, *You say it like Cook but with F. It mean fortune in Vietnamese. Nice to meet you.*

It had been three years since he arrived in the US with his family. Within two months, he had gotten his American driver's license. He worked as a delivery driver for auto parts, but it did not pay well enough. He did that for half a year, while training to get a commercial driver's license. After he got his license, he found his current job, which he had been at for over two years.

He had just dropped off one trailer and picked up an empty one. Today was a drop and hook freight day. This meant he didn't have to wait for the people at the supermarket to unload; just unhook, hook, get papers signed, and go. It also meant he could find a good parking spot for the night and have a little more time to eat his dinner.

Phúc got back into the truck and joined the highway.

The sun was setting. Nighttime always made him feel lonelier; he pushed through by looking forward to video calling his family over dinner.

Some days, like today, the sunset would leave behind a dim light in the sky and trigger unwelcome nostalgia. An overlap of two homesicknesses. One was not so easily relieved through a phone call to his wife and daughter.

He missed getting tea from the street side lady while he waited for his old boss to finish a meeting. He missed the lightness of experimenting with different daily rituals without worrying about the expenses adding up. Indulging in a bowl of silky cool soybean curd from the bicycle street vendor.

He missed how easily impressed his boss was with his memory of the roads. On the rare occasion he didn't know the way, he welcomed the opportunity of asking for directions.

He missed the streets. He misses their distinctive personalities. He never mistook one for another. He missed watching out for motorbikes around him. He missed the ease of generous gestures like giving way to bicyclists even at the cost of holding up cars behind him.

Here, there was so much distance between one vehicle and the next. The best favor you could do another car was not to be in their way. Roads were indifferent to him and indistinguishable from one another. On the roads in the US, there was no noise. No one honked. Everyone listened to things inside their cars: music, the radio, podcasts, or GPS. He liked the GPS though; it was necessary and helpful. He practiced the names of the roads by repeating the GPS. It was one of the gifts of the privacy in the truck.

Another habit made easier by the privacy of the truck was crying. However, every serious driver knows that crying or becoming angry while driving makes you ten times more likely to get into a vehicle accident. Phúc was a serious driver, so, accordingly, he had decided early on that missing his siblings or his parents was off limits while driving.

An hour and a half later, Phúc reached the truck stop. He parked his truck and took his blue bucket and small striped towel to the single public bathroom. He set his bucket in the sink and turned on the tap. While the bucket was filling up with water, Phúc removed his clothes. He wrung the towel out in the sink and used it to clean the sweat and dirt from his face and body.

He returned to his truck, put the bucket away, and hung up the towel to dry. He plugged in his 12-volt portable cooker in the socket and waited for his dinner to warm. He adjusted his cell phone holder and called *Vợ lu*, the name his daughter saved as his wife's contact.

He had taken two bites of his dinner when his wife answered the call.

“Honey, can you hear me?” Hiền said in Vietnamese, as her image appeared on his screen.

“Yes, yes, I can hear,” Phúc replied.

“You eating?” she asked, adjusting her eyeglasses and peering closer at the screen.

“How is it?”

“Good, dear,” Phúc said with his mouth full. “So yummy.”

They took turns talking while he finished his dinner. Thùy Anh came to the phone halfway into the call. Phúc was eating a piece of fruit that Hiền had carefully peeled and cut, when Thùy Anh said something that made him laugh. It was his first laugh of the day.

After the call, he laid out his mattress and watched an episode of the crime show that Thùy Anh had helpfully downloaded to his phone through the Netflix app. Then he brushed his teeth and went to sleep.

Five days later, Phúc was standing outside on the back porch of his home, smoking a cigarette. It was his day off. His wife was still asleep. Thùy Anh was not at home. Phúc had found out from his wife that Thùy Anh had gone to Arizona for the weekend with her friends—not for a student technology conference as she had told them, but for a useless anime convention.

When he pictured the glory of living in the US, he had imagined three cars, one for each member of the family. He had never owned a car in Hà Nội, despite having a big house. Unlike in Việt Nam, where all the cars were imported, in the US cars were cheap.

More than anything, he dreamed about the day Thùy Anh would have kids here. It was the greatest gift he could ever give his grandkids: to be born in the US. To speak English like a native. He imagined driving them to tuition classes for math. He would teach them fishing and gently correct their Vietnamese and be their favorite grandfather.

This dream kept him going through the initial year of unfriendliness from strangers, of awful driving assignments and night shifts, of financial hardship.

But in November, his dreams for this future experienced a setback. This setback came in the form of a brown boy Thùy Anh was dating. By the time Phúc and Hiền found out about the boy, the kids had been seeing each other for six months. The boy was not even an American. He was here without documentation, without family. He worked at an Indian restaurant and sent money home. He was a vegetarian.

As Phúc chewed his dinner, he stared at the empty chair where his daughter usually sat. Phúc remembered how it was during the first year— how grueling his workdays were, but then how joyful his days off were. All three of them would take walks in the morning and cook dinner together. If it was a good day for fishing, Hiền and Thùy Anh would indulge him, and they would all go on an outing.

Husband and wife ate in silence. The anticipation of Phúc's departure the next morning had dampened the mood.

"I'm thinking of bringing Anh Huy here for a visit," Phúc said suddenly. Huy was his older brother.

Hiền was surprised. "Anh Huy? Anh Huy from our family?"

“Yes, which other Huy do we know?” he said. “I think we can—”

“Is Chị Liên coming too?” she asked, referring to Huy’s wife.

“No, how can we afford two plane tickets—”

“*Who?* Who is paying?”

“We would buy Anh Huy’s ticket. That is, I would. I’m sure he would be happy to pay a portion. I won’t ask—”

“Are you joking?” she asked. “How can we host him? Forget it. We can’t.”

Hiền stood up and went to the kitchen to get a tray to clear the table and a rag to clean the surface. She returned to the table and motioned to his bowl of rice, “Are you still eating?”

He didn’t answer. She started clearing her bowl and utensils.

“Recently, it has been a little extra difficult,” he said. “I just need to see a familiar face...”

Hiền did not hear his words. So rare in their marriage had he turned to her in a moment of weakness. She did not sense that he needed her compassion, perhaps now even more so than when his parents died. In the past he could turn to his friends and family, and therefore only needed compassion from his wife in small doses, but here, she was his only friend.

In Phúc’s words, she heard an indictment of her inadequacy. *I am lonely*, he had essentially confessed to her. She stared at the bowl of caramelized pork ribs, the tomato tofu, the soup, and the water spinach on the table, her pathetic attempts to recreate their feeling of home— of their home back in Hà Nội— despite lacking the exact ingredients she needed.

“What about my face?” she asked. “You’re bored of it already? Only twenty-five years, we are only halfway. How are you going to manage another twenty-five?”

“Woman, what are you saying? I am speaking to you civilly—”

“Find cheaper ways to cope! We don’t have two thousand dollars!”

“—and you turn so loud-mouthed? Why—”

“Why? Because I haven’t seen my mother in three years, and you want to bring your brother here for a vacation! No. I say no. You’re not going to touch the savings.”

“Who said anything would happen to the savings!? I am still saving! We will visit Việt Nam in a year or two. But in the meantime, for now, I just think it would be nice to have someone come over. Thùy Anh would like that too, I’m sure.”

“Don’t bring Thùy Anh into this. You are really selfish, old man,” Hiền said, shaking her head. “We are not going to delay the trip. If I have to wait five years to see my mother, then you can wait just as long to see your damn brother.”

“Why are you being like this?” he asked. “Anh Huy has been good to us. He has been so good to you, you ungrateful...”

“Tell me then, where will he sleep if you invite him over for a royal holiday, huh? Our big grand sofa?”

“He will sleep in Thùy Anh’s bed! She’s not sleeping in it half the time, always staying overnight with that brown piece of trash—”

“How about I sleep in her bed with her,” Hiền said, “and you can share our bed with your brother! If you two need privacy, we will leave the house to you two—”

“—That girl is never home. She goes off for the whole weekend and you don’t even check where she goes? Is this how you manage your children? You have one job at home, and you can’t even take care of it. Thank god we stopped at one child!”

“—and maybe while you are lying in bed next to your Anh Huy, you can ask him how he keeps his wife and kids happy. Ask him for some tips. Maybe his visit may prove fruitful yet!”

“Can you imagine if Thùy Anh had asked for a sibling? How that would have overloaded your limited parenting capacities! The house would be utter madness.”

“Don’t talk about my ability to rear more than one child if you can’t give me more than one!”

Phúc had never laid a hand on his wife. For a moment, in the time he was fumbling for the words to express his rage, he nearly hit her. His arms came for her, but they changed course at the last moment and landed on the dining table.

Hiền’s eyes were wide with shock. She said nothing, but her lip curled slightly at the corner. The expression on her face nauseated Phúc so much— for at that moment she looked so ugly— that—in a desperation to wipe it from her face— he shoved everything off the table. Everything. The ceramic hit against the wall and fell on the ground. Hiền screamed. The soup spilled and dripped over the edge of the table. The pork left an oil stain on the wall.

“Stay away from me,” Hiền said quietly, stepping around the broken pieces of ceramic. She went to the bedroom and locked the door.

Phúc stood in the kitchen by himself, horrified and satisfied.

Phúc cleaned up the dining table as much as he could and slept on the sofa. He woke up at 4:45am and knocked on the bedroom door, but the door was locked and Hiền did not answer. He made breakfast and ate alone. He showered in Thùy Anh’s room. The shower failed to refresh or comfort him, but he still prolonged it, knowing it was his last one in a while.

Disappointment stained every mirror he saw; it stained his teeth as he brushed them, stained the trash he took out, and stained his lonely fifteen-day “workweek” ahead. Every corner of his truck and every task he carried out stank of disenchantment.

That evening, after a 6am-6pm shift, after sitting through heavy traffic, after wasting an extra hour to find a parking spot for the night, Phúc went to the diner at the truck stop. The lady who was taking his order did not understand him the first time, so he had to point to the words in the menu. “Oh,” the lady said. “You want a *barbecue chicken* panini.”

Phúc set up his phone, plugged in his earphones, and called his wife, *Vợ lu*.

The phone rang.

She did not answer.

He tried calling her again. No answer.

Phúc felt low. He glanced around, but no one cared enough about his existence for his self-consciousness to be worth it. He wouldn’t think about calling his daughter. She was absent on his one day at home and did not even send a text message to apologize.

Ungrateful and entitled, both of them, each in her own damn way. He no longer cared who his daughter dated or who she would marry. He would be around for her firstborn, if she needed him. Then, he would cut his losses and leave. He would go back to Việt Nam.

He choked on the thought as if it were a fishbone caught in his throat.

Leave Thùy Anh? Here, with no family or relatives? He couldn’t do that to her.

But Hiền would probably want to stay. And they could live without him, as they had made abundantly clear. So they would have each other. They would be fine.

The panini came. “There you go,” the waitress said, unsmilingly. “Enjoy.”

Phúc had dampened his definition of joy after coming here, but even by his newly modest standards, he knew then that he could never be truly happy. He longed for familiarity. He knew that if he had the company of his brother or sister right now, the waitress could have served cardboard paper and he would have munched away merrily.

He picked up his phone, opened Whatsapp, and called his brother Huy. It was 8am in the morning there, and Huy was probably at work or on the way to work, but Phúc would try anyway.

“A lô? Phúc à?” Hello? Is it Phúc?

“Anh! Ừ, em đây!” Brother! Yes, it’s me!

They talked for an hour. The next day, at dinner time, he called his sister Kim and they talked. The following day, he did not even try to call his wife, and instead called Đạt, his closest friend from high school. The day after that, his wife called him, and with great satisfaction he ignored her call. In the evening, he talked to Tiến, a work-colleague-turned-friend, who worked as a security guard at the embassy when Phúc was a driver there. On he would go, calling a family member or a close friend back home each night, before circling back to his brother to catch up on the week that has passed since they last talked. Let his wife and daughter worry about their unreturned calls and unanswered texts.

On his tenth day, he had 28 hours before his next delivery. Usually Phúc would have gotten a budget motel room, but today he decided to treat himself to a nice room at a nice motel with a swimming pool and a workout room and an indoor jacuzzi.

What had the bitch said? “Find cheaper ways to cope”? If she would not let him spend \$1500 on a return flight for his brother, then he would spend \$1499 on other shit.

Given the rare window of time to safely indulge in a few drinks before driving the next morning, Phúc got a six-pack of beer bottles. He settled into his room, then decided the first thing he would do was to go to the hot tub. Sipping on his Asahi beer, Phúc undressed, wrapped a towel over his boxers, and walked to the hot tub room.

No one else was there, which was too bad. He had brought his beers to share.

The steam from the water already helped to clear his mind. He stepped into the warm water, propped his arms on the ledge, and closed his eyes. The water jets massaged his back and his muscles eased delightfully. He would sleep so, so well tonight, in a soft and comfortable bed.

He had been missing out on so many simple but intensely gratifying pleasures. And for what? He decided to do this more regularly. This kind of indulgence, once a month, wouldn't hurt. He remembered his earlier idea, the one that felt illegal, the plan that formed before he could dispel it.

Would he and Hiền recover from this fight? Did he *want* to recover? Recover and what? — go back to way things were? Things were so bad before, even in the early days. Just because they were worse now, doesn't mean they weren't bad before. Was his unhappiness a sign that coming to the US had been a mistake? Or was it merely an indication that this was not the place to retire? Perhaps this was a trial run, and it was time to go? If Hiền didn't want to go back, would he still go? Would they get a divorce? If he went back to Việt Nam now, without his wife and daughter, could he be happy? Wasn't he, if nothing else, a family man?

Phúc didn't know, couldn't come up with answers, though he sat in the jacuzzi for a while, until his head started to ache, which he attributed not to his body overheating but to his

mind overthinking. An overpowering frustration welled up. Can't even sit in a jacuzzi in peace without being tormented by perceived obligations to his damned family! Even when they were more than a thousand kilometers away! How far would he have to go to escape them? Yet another impossible question, and the jacuzzi gurgled on, as if trying to offer some answers.

A guest found Phúc in the hot tub, unconscious. He pulled Phúc out and called 911. There was no way of knowing how long Phúc had been in the water, but Phúc's body was dangerously hot. The lady at the front desk came running in as soon as she heard the man's shouts for help. They found Phúc's phone on the ledge, wrapped in his towel, next to a pair of plastic slippers. The phone was locked. The lockscreen showed 29 missed calls from *Vợ lu* and 17 from *Thùy Anh No.1 baby*.

Broken Ceramics: Part 2

The chill of the January breeze slipped in around the window doors of the midwife's house. Gentle was lying beside her newborn baby boy on the wooden bed. The baby was sleeping. She was on her side with her head propped on her hand. The midwife stood on the bedframe, tying the mosquito net over their heads.

"You lied to me," Gentle said. She was patting her son in a soothing rhythm. "You said we could stay here. You said things will work out."

"I hoped it would be a girl," the midwife said quietly. "Your husband would not care for the child if it were a girl. It would not be difficult to convince your husband to unmarry you and let you keep the baby girl."

"But now what?"

"Your son will go to your husband. The village will not stop it. The man has a house, he has a job. You have nothing."

"I won't let my son go."

"Gentle, if there are things to be discussed, let us do it tomorrow. The boy is sleeping. We will wake him up."

"If you care about his future as much as you care about his rest, you will discuss this now."

The midwife sighed. "You must go back to your husband's house with your son."

"Are you mad?" Gentle said, so filled with disbelief that she stopped patting her baby and sat up. She moved too quickly and realized her mistake a moment after. Her body was still

sore from childbirth. “Besides, that old bull won’t take me back. We’ll kill each other if we live in the same house.”

“Then make sure you don’t do it in front of your son.”

Gentle glared at the midwife. “Are you making jokes? At a time like this?”

“Yes, I can. It’s my house, I do what I want.”

“You *are* mad. I’m not going back. Anything is better than going back there.”

The midwife, having finished securing the mosquito net in place, crouched down and crawled in, turning to tuck the tail of the net under the bamboo mat and the blanket. She removed the metal snap clip from her hair, sending her bun unravelling down her back. Then, hair loosened, she lay down next to them, on the other side of the baby. “It will not be the same as it was before. You have a son now. You are a mother. The family dynamic has changed. You have changed. Your husband must too. You can insist on it.”

“And if he doesn’t change?” Gentle said, crossing her legs carefully, slowly, and looking down at the older woman. “You know what he does to me.”

“I know what he does to you, but I also know he drinks, how much, five cups a night? A bottle? Just watch, he will die within five years, I promise you. He’ll fall into a ditch and drown. He won’t be around for long.”

“What if I don’t want to bank my life chances on your approximate calculations? You told me the ancestors would take pity and give me a baby girl. You said my problems would fix themselves. Now look where I am!”

The midwife sat up and whispered sharply, “Then what do you want, child? If you don’t listen to my advice, then what do you want from me? Free lodgings?” Gentle looked away. The

midwife shifted her position so Gentle could not avoid her gaze. “If that is what you need the most, then you have my permission! You can live here with me, even after your husband takes your child away. After your husband dies from his drinking habits, your child can come live here too, even if you are a stranger to him.”

“You need not mock me, midwife.”

“I know that what I am asking of you is cruel. I am cruel because I know how much crueller life can be. You must try to go back to that house with your son and protect him. If your husband hurts the child, come to me and I will help you both escape. But that life is not easy, and I want to spare you from it. The only work available to a young woman from an unknown village is not the kind of work that is good for you or your son.”

The midwife lay back down. She adjusted the baby’s pillow and pulled the woven blanket over herself. The baby stirred, and the midwife gently stroked his back until he settled back into sleep, while Gentle sat leaning against the wall, hugging her knees. The two women said nothing, for a long time.

Eventually, the midwife interrupted the silence to say, “Five years, my dear. You need to give it five years.”

With that, she closed her eyes, indicating that the conversation was actually over.

Two weeks passed, and the day came for Gentle and the baby to return to their village. Gentle spoke little to the midwife in the days leading up to her departure. She sulked over her decision, a decision that spelled out her helplessness not only against her husband, whom she had spent a good portion of their marriage fighting, but also to his family and the village. She

would not be returning to her parents' house, but to Glory's house, where she would have to be guarded and alert. Unlike before, her caution would not only be for her own sake, but also for her son's.

She shuddered at the memory of Glory's smug smile. Her mother-in-law's criticisms, always addressed to some invisible person in the room but directed at Gentle, "Did anyone clean the toilet this week? I wonder why it's still so dirty." The way her father-in-law walked around the house, sweaty and shirtless. The thought of lying in the same bed as Glory. His impatient, probing fingers. His temper.

The matchmaker had tried to convince Glory and the village council to let Gentle raise the baby in her parents' home. He had reasoned with Glory that when the boy was older, time would be divided equally between Gentle and Glory. It was a novel arrangement, yes, but it was a compromise that would suit the interests of all parties.

Glory roundly rejected the matchmaker's suggestion.

The matchmaker turned his efforts to a different source. He drafted a letter to the village council:

REQUEST FOR OFFICIAL RESOLUTION

Regarding the official placement of new-born child (male)

Dear Esteemed Members of the Council,

I would like to request a consideration from the council in the official placement of the newborn boy (father: Glory Seed, mother: Gentle Copper). Parents' status: married but separated.

I was the one to formalize the marriage between Glory and Gentle. I negotiated their (informal) separation. I know the terms of their union and separation. Glory has not proven that he can provide the safe environment that is needed to welcome a baby and a new mother back into his house. Glory's past offenses of beating his wife and creating physical fights and disorder in the village weigh heavier now that we must account for the welfare of a baby. I trust that the council will agree with my assessment.

REQUEST FOR ISSUE TO BE RESOLVED AS FOLLOWS:

Article 1) Gentle raises the baby boy in her parents' house, where she has been living. Glory is (temporarily) exempt from providing financial support to the baby, until...

Article 2) ... the baby turns four-years-old, at which point the council will reassess the situation and, upon agreeing that both parents' have fulfilled the terms satisfactorily, divide rights and obligations equally between both parents.

Article 3) During the four years, conditional on zero misdemeanours, Glory can visit the baby at Gentle's parents' house (up to three times a week). If Gentle or her family submit a complaint, this arrangement may be revoked.

I look forward to the council's review and approval.

Best Regards.

Person making request the request:

Courage (Official Village Matchmaker)

For the first time in thirty-two years, the council denied the request made by the matchmaker.

When the matchmaker and Glory visited a week earlier to relay the news to Gentle and the midwife, the two women were not surprised, but Gentle had still felt hurt, nonetheless. It was a bitter betrayal. Her village, which had supported her decision to move out of her husband's house after his mistreatment, viewed her welfare differently, it seemed, now that Gentle had a baby. Now that she was a mother.

Gentle had wanted to wait for another month or two before making the journey back. She still experienced regular pains and aches all over her body, particularly her legs and her joints. In fact, the midwife had advised against such extreme physical exertion merely weeks after childbirth. However, Gentle's parents-in-law were determined to have the baby back by February. "The baby should be with his family on Lunar New Year," Glory's mother had insisted. "Not in a stranger's house."

Gentle resisted, claiming that she was not well enough to make the journey, at which point Glory informed her, as his parents had instructed, that he would take the baby back first, and Gentle could return whenever it suited her to. There it was, the familiar smug smile. She had wanted to yell in his face, "Who is going to feed him, you fucker?" but before she did, the midwife took her aside and told her to go, to wait until she had returned to her husband's house with the baby before starting a fight. She needed to pick her battles wisely. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that Glory obeyed his parents' wishes without a thought to his wife's well-being. Gentle would have to learn to share her baby with this man, as well as with his parents and everyone else.

This last hour in the midwife's house would be the last hour that Gentle would have alone with her baby for a while. She thought about the hours she had spent in this house while

the midwife was out working. Often, Gentle would soak the glutinous rice for hours during the afternoon so that she could cook sticky rice, in the midwife's favourite style, for dinner. At the end of the day, the midwife would sit at the foot of the bed, chewing betel, while Gentle crouched over the midwife, leaning the midwife's head against her round belly and tenderly plucking grey hairs with a tweezer, as she had often done for her mother. The midwife would tell Gentle about the visits she made that day. "That's it! That's the one," the midwife would interrupt herself every now and then, when Gentle plucked a particular hair. "That one's itchy. It's been bothering me."

It was past noon, but there was no sunlight. It was cold and grey outside. Gentle was tucked warmly in bed cradling her son. Her blouse was unbuttoned, not because she had been breastfeeding, but because her nipples were so sore. The feeling of her blouse, despite how light and soft its fabric was, when pressed upon her bare nipples, created sharp sensations of needle pricks.

The midwife came into the room and sat down beside Gentle. Gentle carefully gave the baby to the midwife. "Don't cause any trouble for your mother, you hear me?" the midwife said. "Your mother has been through a lot for you. You grow up to be a good, healthy boy, okay?"

Gentle had managed, until then, with great effort, to not cry that day. In that moment, her restraint failed her. She wiped her tears quickly.

Soon, too soon, there was a call outside the front door. Glory and the matchmaker had arrived. "Stay here," Gentle said, buttoning her shirt. "I will open the door."

Gentle returned to the room with Glory and the matchmaker, both of whom were tired from the journey. Whereas Glory looked tired and eager, the matchmaker looked tired and apologetic. Greetings were exchanged, offers of tea were made and politely declined. The room was colder from the air that came through the door.

“Thank you for taking good care of my son,” Glory said to the midwife, placing an envelope with money on the table. “Here is the remainder of the payment, as promised.” Then, he walked over to the bedside and held his arms out to take his son from the midwife.

The baby transferred from the midwife’s arms to Glory’s arms. For a terrible moment, Gentle thought Glory might drop the baby, perhaps by accident, perhaps to spite her. But no, Glory held the baby tightly. The boy’s fate was sealed, and, with it, his mother’s.

Gentle rearranged her husband’s arms so that their son’s head was properly supported. Then, with a composure and firmness she had learned from the midwife, she instructed him to wait in the other room while she gathered her things. The matchmaker followed him.

“Ma, I don’t know how to thank you,” Gentle said, fighting back an overwhelming sense of loss, “for the past six months—”

“Hush, baby,” the midwife said, enfolding the girl in an embrace. “Ma knows.”

In the delivery room, in the health centre, during the onset of labour, the words *Ma* and *baby* had spilled between them naturally, as the midwife held Gentle’s hand tightly and repeated, “Baby, I’m here. Ma is right here.”

The midwife’s arms were strong. Her hoop earring pressed against Gentle’s cheek. In that moment, nothing in the world could convince Gentle to let go. Nothing could have compelled Gentle to leave that embrace, except the sound of her son crying in the next room.

Gentle went to calm him. The midwife motioned for the matchmaker to follow her to the kitchen. She handed him water and food for the journey.

“You need to make sure the girl rests every thirty minutes,” the midwife said. “If her lower back starts hurting again, stop at someone’s house and come get me.”

The matchmaker assured her that he would. “There was one thing,” he said. “Gentle’s parents wanted me to convey their gratitude—”

“Don’t,” she said sharply, shaking her head. “If I hear another thank you, I will go crazy.” Then, she added quietly, “I miscalculated. I hope I’m not making a mistake by sending her back to him, after she has worked so hard to escape...” The midwife’s lips were trembling, and she turned away.

The matchmaker felt a deep desire to reach out and take her hand, to hold it for a moment, and comfort her. However, he knew that that was not she needed from him then, so instead, he said, “We have both failed her.”

The midwife looked at him with surprise, not because she disagreed, but because she had not thought the matchmaker would ever admit such a thing.

The matchmaker continued, “Everything we are doing now is to compensate and make the best out of the situation. You have cared for her well. You have done your part. I will do mine.”

The midwife nodded. His words had helped. They returned to the common room together.

With the baby warmly bundled up, Gentle, Glory, and the matchmaker embarked on the journey up the mountains back to their village. After they left, the midwife shrugged on her

back basket and went to the health centre. Tomorrow would be easier, but today, she knew from experience, would be unbearably difficult to spend alone in the empty house.

“Grandpa Courage!”

The matchmaker had been sweeping his house and humming a tune to himself. He looked up at the call from outside and set his broom aside, for he recognized the child’s voice at once. Smiling, he walked out to his paved front yard to greet his favourite visitors.

The smell of fried spring rolls and fish sauce entered the gates first. Then came Gentle, balancing a tray of food with one hand and holding her four-year-old son’s hand with the other. When they entered the yard, Gentle let go of her son’s hand to hold the tray with both hands, which the boy took as permission to run towards the matchmaker and hug the man’s legs. The matchmaker knelt down and embraced the small boy.

“Look at you two, happily leaving all the heavy stuff for me to carry by myself,” Gentle scolded teasingly. Then, more seriously, she added, “Virtue, where are your manners? You haven’t greeted Grandpa Courage, yet you are already playing. What did I teach you?”

The boy, still giggling, crossed his arms over his chest and bowed his head respectfully, saying, “Hello Grandpa Courage. Happy New Year.”

“Not quite yet, little one. Still two more days,” the matchmaker corrected him. “Let’s go in and help your mother.”

Virtue played with some unripe ambarellas he found on the guest table while Gentle and the matchmaker arranged the food and flowers on the altar. As she had been doing over the past few years, Gentle invited the matchmaker to her family’s house for the Lunar New Year

feast. The matchmaker had, in her eyes, become a part of the family after Virtue was born. In fact, she and her husband had asked the matchmaker and the midwife to choose an auspicious name for their son. *Virtue*, the midwife had decided.

For the past five years, ever since his first trip through the mountains with the midwife and Gentle, the matchmaker had been sending young couples to visit the midwife in her village. He required the groom- and bride-to-be to attend basic workshops at the health centre and receive the midwife's approval before he would give the couple his blessing and formalize their marriage. It was a fruitful arrangement. Once the high bar was set, the matchmaker made fewer matches and, therefore, less money overall, but the number of matches that needed to be broken shrunk to almost zero the past two years.

The matchmaker inquired after Gentle's parents, then her husband.

"He is how he is," Gentle said. "He's been working hard on the field and saving money. Wants to get a motorcycle this coming year."

Gentle could take care of herself, but the matchmaker still worried. There was one night, when Virtue was only two years old, when Glory came home heavily drunk and harassed Gentle in front of the child. Fortunately, the neighbours intervened. The next day, Gentle demanded that Glory sleep on the straw mat in the common room, and that a door with a lock be attached to her bedroom. Husband and wife hadn't shared a bed since.

"Is there something you want," Gentle asked the matchmaker, "for the coming new year?"

"Me? What more could I want? I have you to bring me food, Virtue to look after me when I retire." Gentle laughed at this. "I have everything. I'm the happiest man in this village."

Gentle was about to respond, when the sudden sound of shattering ceramic pulled her attention to the corner of the room, where Virtue was playing. She and the matchmaker moved quickly. The matchmaker lifted the boy away from the broken ceramic pieces. Gentle was anxiously checking whether he was hurt.

Virtue was unhurt. He was also unfazed. If anything, he seemed surprised at the fact that the two adults had interrupted his playing.

“That was Grandpa’s mistake,” the matchmaker said. “Grandpa is always leaving plates and bowls on the edge of the tabletop, very easy to knock over by accident. Grandpa does it all the time.”

Gentle was flustered. She saw the space the ceramic pieces took up on the floor, noted the way they were arranged. There was no way the bowl had fallen by accident. Virtue had thrown it as a part of a game.

She instructed her son to apologize to the matchmaker.

“It’s okay, Gentle, don’t worry,” the matchmaker said. “The boy is small. There’s still time.”

Gentle knew then that the matchmaker was not talking about the ceramic bowl. He was responding to a deeper concern of hers.

Gentle asked the matchmaker, “So, are you going anywhere tonight?”

“Later I’m going with my brother to Skinny Silver’s house for some drinks with a couple of the fellows.

“I know it’s a special occasion, but not too much, okay?” Gentle turned her head and said to her son, “Dear, come tell Grandpa not to gamble his bicycle away this time. Say: Grandpa, don’t gamble too much.”

Virtue, who had quickly forgotten the broken ceramic, grinned and, without concerning himself with what he was saying, giddily echoed his mother.

“Shush, little one, don’t always listen to your mother,” the matchmaker said with a gleam in his eye. “Your mother doesn’t know everything.”

The matchmaker and Gentle cleaned the house and played with Virtue in the front yard. Then, Gentle took Virtue home.

The matchmaker lingered in the front yard after saying bye to the mother and son. It was a cool February night. All the cleaning and arranging and preparing had been done—Gentle had seen to that—so there was nothing to do in the house.

Such was life on the mountains, the matchmaker thought to himself. These mountains, millions of years old, have stopped growing at a certain height so long ago and you think they’ve settled. But they shift, erode, and change.

He thought of the broken ceramic.

The matchmaker admitted, then, that there *was* something he wanted to be different that year. Tomorrow, he decided, he would visit the midwife and invite her to go to the pagoda festival with him on Lunar New Year day.