

THE WINTER HIBISCUS

— *Minfong Ho* —

Saeng stood in the open doorway and shivered as a gust of wind swept past, sending a swirl of red maple leaves rustling against her legs. Early October, and already the trees were being stripped bare. A leaf brushed against Saeng's sleeve, and she snatched at it, briefly admiring the web of dark veins against the fiery red, before letting it go again, to be carried off by the wind.

Last year she had so many maple leaves pressed between her thick algebra textbook that her teacher had suggested gently that she transfer the leaves to some other books at home. Instead, Saeng had simply taken the carefully pressed leaves out and left them in a pile in her room, where they moldered, turned smelly, and were eventually tossed out. Saeng had felt a vague regret, but no anger.

For a moment Saeng stood on the doorstep and watched the swirl of autumn leaves in the afternoon sunlight, thinking of the bleak winter ahead. She had lived through enough of them now to dread their grayness and silence and endless bone-chilling cold. She buttoned up her coat and walked down the worn path through their yard and toward the sidewalk.

"*Bai sai?*" her mother called to her, straightening up from neat rows of hot peppers and snow peas that were growing in the vacant lot next door.

"To take my driving test," Saeng replied in English.

Saeng remembered enough Laotian to understand just about everything that her parents said to her, but she felt more comfortable now speaking in English. In the four years since they had migrated to America, they had evolved a kind of bilingual dialogue, where her parents would continue to address her brothers and her in Laotian, and they would reply in English, with each side sometimes slipping into the other's language to convey certain key words that seemed impossible to translate.

"*Luuke ji fao bai hed yang?*" her mother asked.

"There's no rush," Saeng conceded. "I just want to get there in plenty of time."

"You'll get there much too soon, and then what? You'll just stand around fretting and making yourself tense," Mrs. Panouvong continued in Laotian. "Better that you should help me harvest some of these melons."

Saeng hesitated. How could she explain to her mother that she wanted to just "hang out" with the other schoolmates who were scheduled to take the test that afternoon, and to savor the tingle of anticipation when David Lambert would drive up in his old blue Chevy and hand her the car keys?

“The last of the hot peppers should be picked, and the kale covered with a layer of mulch,” Mrs. Panouvong added, wiping one hand across her shirt and leaving a streak of mud there.

Saeng glanced down at her own clean clothes. She had dressed carefully for the test—and for David. She had on a gray wool skirt and a Fair Isles sweater, both courtesy of David’s mother from their last rummage sale at the church. And she had combed out her long black hair and left it hanging straight down her back the way she had seen the blond cheerleaders do theirs, instead of bunching it up with a rubber band.

“Come help your mother a little. *Mahteh, luuke*—Come on, child,” her mother said gently.

There were certain words that held a strange resonance for Saeng, as if there were whispered echoes behind them. *Luuke*, or child, was one of these words. When her mother called her *luuke* in that soft, teasing way, Saeng could hear the voices of her grandmother, and her uncle, or her primary-school teachers behind it, as if there were an invisible chorus of smiling adults calling her, chiding her.

“Just for a while,” Saeng said, and walked over to the melons, careful not to get her skirt tangled in any vines.

Together they worked in companionable silence for some time. The frost had already killed the snow peas and Chinese cabbage, and Saeng helped pluck out the limp brown stems and leaves. But the bitter melons, knobby and green, were still intact and ready to be harvested. Her mother had been insistent on planting only vegetables that weren’t readily available at the local supermarkets, sending away for seeds from various Chinatowns as far away as New York and San Francisco. At first alone, then joined by the rest of her family, she had hoed the hard dirt of the vacant lot behind their dilapidated old house and planted the seeds in neat rows.

That first summer, their family had also gone smelting every night while the vast schools of fish were swimming upriver to spawn and had caught enough to fill their freezer full of smelt. And at dawn, when the dew was still thick on the grass, they had also combed the golf course at the country club for nightcrawlers, filling up large buckets with worms that they would sell later to the roadside grocery stores as fishbait. The money from selling the worms enabled them to buy a hundred-pound sack of the best long-grain fragrant rice, and that, together with the frozen smelt and homegrown vegetables, had lasted them through most of their first winter.

“America has opened her doors to us as guests,” Saeng’s mother had said. “We don’t want to sit around waiting for its handouts like beggars.” She and Mr. Panouvong had swallowed their pride and gotten jobs as a dishwasher and a janitor, and they were taking English lessons at night under a state program that, to their amazement, actually paid them for studying!

By the end of their second year, they were off welfare and were saving up for a cheap secondhand car, something that they could never have been able to afford as grade school teachers back in Laos.

And Saeng, their oldest child, had been designated their family driver.

“So you will be taking the driving test in the Lambert car?” Mrs. Panouvong asked now, adeptly twisting tiny hot peppers from their stems.

Saeng nodded. “Not their big station wagon, but the small blue car—David’s.” There it was again, that flutter of excitement as she said David’s name. And yet he had hardly spoken to her more than two or three times, and each time only at the specific request of his mother.

Mrs. Lambert—their sponsor into the United States—was a large, genial woman with a ready smile and two brown braids wreathed around her head. The wife of the Lutheran minister in their town, she had already helped sponsor two Laotian refugee families and seemed to have enough energy and good will to sponsor several more. Four years ago, when they had first arrived, it was she who had taken the Panouvong family on their rounds of medical check-ups, social welfare interviews, school enrollments, and housing applications.

And it was Mrs. Lambert who had suggested, after Saeng had finished her driver education course, that she use David’s car to take her driving test. Cheerfully, David—a senior on the school basketball team—had driven Saeng around and taken her for a few test runs in his car to familiarize her with it. Exciting times they might have been for Saeng—it was the closest she had ever come to being on a date—but for David it was just something he was doing out of deference to his mother. Saeng had no illusions about this. Nor did she really mind it. It was enough for her at this point just to vaguely pretend at dating. At sixteen, she did not really feel ready for some of the things most thirteen-year-olds in America seemed to be doing. Even watching MTV sometimes made her wince in embarrassment.

“He’s a good boy, David is,” Saeng’s mother said, as if echoing Saeng’s thoughts. “Listens to his mother and father.” She poured the hot peppers from her cupped palm to a woven basket and looked at Saeng. “How are you going to thank him for letting you use his car and everything?”

Saeng considered this. “I’ll say thank you, I guess. Isn’t that enough?”

“I think not. Why don’t you buy for him a Big Mac?” Big Mac was one of the few English words Mrs. Panouvong would say, pronouncing it *Bee-Maag*. Ever since her husband had taken them to a McDonald’s as a treat after his first pay raise, she had thought of Big Macs as the epitome of everything American.

To her daughter’s surprise, she fished out a twenty-dollar bill from her coat pocket now and held it out to Saeng. “You can buy yourself one too. A Bee-Maag.”

Saeng did not know what to say. Here was a woman so frugal that she had insisted on taking home her containers after her McDonald’s meal, suddenly handing out twenty dollars for two “children” to splurge on.

“Take it, child,” Mrs. Panouvong said. “Now go—you don’t want to be late for your test.” She smiled. “How nice it’ll be when you drive us to work. Think of all the time we’ll save. And the bus fares.”

The money, tucked safely away in her coat pocket, seemed to keep Saeng warm on her walk across town to the site of the driving test.

She reached it a few minutes early and stood on the corner, glancing around her. There were a few other teenagers waiting on the sidewalk or sitting on the hoods of their cars, but David was nowhere in sight. On the opposite side of the street was the McDonald’s restaurant, and for a moment she imagined how it would be to have David and her sitting at one of the window seats, facing each other, in satisfying full view of all the passersby.

A light honk brought her back to reality. David cruised by, waving at her from his car window. He parallel parked the car, with an effortless swerve that Saeng admired, and got out.

“Ready?” David asked, eyebrow arched quizzically as he handed her his car keys.

Saeng nodded. Her mouth suddenly felt dry, and she licked her lips.

“Don’t forget: Step on the gas real gently. You don’t want to jerk the car forward the way you did last time,” David said with a grin.

“I won’t,” Saeng said, and managed a smile.

Another car drove up, and the test instructor stepped out of it and onto the curb in front of them. He was a pale, overweight man whose thick lips jutted out from behind a bushy moustache. On his paunch was balanced a clipboard, which he was busy marking.

Finally he looked up and saw Saeng. “Miss Saeng Panouvong?” he asked, slurring the name so much that Saeng did not recognize it as her own until she felt David nudge her slightly.

“Y—yes, sir,” Saeng answered.

“Your turn. Get in.”

Then Saeng was behind the wheel, the paunchy man seated next to her, clipboard on his lap.

“Drive to the end of the street and take a right,” the test instructor said. He spoke in a low, bored staccato that Saeng had to strain to understand.

Obediently, she started up the car, careful to step on the accelerator very slowly, and eased the car out into the middle of the street. *Check the rearview mirror, make the hand gestures, take a deep breath*, Saeng told herself.

So far, so good. At the intersection at the end of the street, she slowed down. Two cars were coming down the cross street toward her at quite a high speed. Instinctively, she stopped and waited for them both to drive past. Instead, they both stopped, as if waiting for her to proceed.

Saeng hesitated. Should she go ahead and take the turn before them or wait until they went past?

Better to be cautious, she decided, and waited, switching gears over to neutral.

For what seemed an interminable moment, nobody moved. Then the other cars went through the intersection, one after the other. Carefully, Saeng then took her turn (*turn signal, hand signal, look both ways*).

As she continued to drive down the street, out of the corner of her eye she saw the instructor mark down something on his clipboard.

A mistake, she thought. He's writing down a mistake I just made. But what did I do wrong? She stole a quick look at his face. It was stern but impassive. *Maybe I should ask him right now, what I did wrong*, Saeng wondered.

"Watch out!" he suddenly exclaimed. "That's a stop sign!"

Startled, Saeng jerked the car to a stop—but not soon enough. They were right in the middle of the crossroads.

The instructor shook his head. An almost imperceptible gesture, but Saeng noted it with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Back up," he snapped.

Her heart beating hard, Saeng managed to reverse the car and back up to the stop sign that she had just gone through.

"You might as well go back to where we started out," the instructor said. "Take a right here, and another right at the next intersection."

It's over, Saeng thought. *He doesn't even want to see me go up the hill or parallel park or anything. I've failed.*

Swallowing hard, she managed to drive the rest of the way back. In the distance she could see the big M archway outside the McDonald's restaurant, and as she approached, she noticed David standing on the opposite curb, hands on his hips, watching their approach.

With gratitude she noticed that he had somehow managed to stake out two parking spaces in a row so that she could have plenty of space to swerve into place.

She breathed a deep sigh of relief when the car was safely parked. Only after she had turned off the ignition did she dare look the instructor in the face.

"How—how did I do, sir?" she asked him, hating the quaver in her own voice.

"You'll get your results in the mail next week," he said in that bored monotone again, as if he had parroted the same sentence countless times. Then he must have seen the anxious, pleading look on Saeng's face, for he seemed to soften somewhat. "You stopped when you didn't need to—you had right of way at that first intersection," he said. "Then at the second intersection, when you should have stopped at the stop sign, you went right through it." He shrugged. "Too bad," he mumbled.

Then he was out of the car, clipboard and all, and strolling down the curb to the next car.

It had all happened so quickly. Saeng felt limp. So she had failed. She felt a burning shame sting her cheeks. She had never failed a test before. Not even when she had first arrived in school and had not understood a word the teacher had said, had she ever failed a test.

Tests, always tests—there had been so many tests in the last four years. Math tests, spelling tests, science tests. And for each one she had prepared herself, learned what was expected of her, steeled herself, taken the test, and somehow passed. She thought of the long evenings she had spent at the kitchen table after the dinner dishes had been cleared away, when she and her mother had used their battered English-Lao dictionary to look up virtually every single word in her textbooks and carefully written the Lao equivalent above the English word, so that there were faint spidery pencil marks filling up all the spaces between the lines of her textbooks.

All those tests behind her, and now she had failed. Failed the one test that might have enabled her to help her parents get to work more easily, save them some money, and earn her some status among her classmates.

David's face appeared at the window. "How'd it go?" he asked with his usual cheerful grin.

Saeng suppressed an urge to pass her hand over his mouth and wipe the grin off. "Not so good," she said. She started to explain, then gave it up. It wasn't worth the effort, and besides, he didn't really care anyway.

He was holding the car door open for her and seemed a little impatient for her to get out. Saeng squirmed out of the seat, then remembered the twenty-dollar bill her mother had given her.

"Eh . . . thanks," she murmured awkwardly as she got out of the car. "It was nice of you to come here. And letting me use your car."

"Don't mention it," he said, sliding into the driver's seat already and pushing it back several inches.

"Would you . . . I mean, if you'd like, I could buy . . ." Saeng faltered as she saw that David wasn't even listening to her. His attention had been distracted by someone waving to him from across the street. He was waving back and smiling. Saeng followed the direction of his glance and saw a tall girl in tight jeans and a flannel shirt standing just under the M archway. Someone blond and vivacious, her dimpled smile revealing two rows of dazzling white, regimentally straight teeth. *Definitely a cheerleader*, Saeng decided.

"Hold on, I'll be right with you," David was calling over to her. Abruptly he pulled the car door shut, flashed Saeng a perfunctory smile, and started to drive off. "Better luck next time," he said as his car pulled away, leaving her standing in the middle of the road.

Saeng watched him make a fluid U-turn and pull up right next to the tall blond girl, who swung herself gracefully into the seat next to David. For a moment they sat there laughing and talking in the car. So carefree, so casual—so American. They reminded Saeng of the Ken and Barbie dolls that she had stared at with such curiosity and longing when she had first arrived in the country.

But it wasn't even longing or envy that she felt now, Saeng realized. This girl could have been David's twin sister, and Saeng would still have felt this stab of pain, this recognition that *They Belonged*, and she didn't.

Another car drove slowly past her, and she caught a glimpse of her reflection on its window. Her arms were hanging limply by her sides, and she looked short and frumpy. Her hair was disheveled and her clothes seemed drab and old-fashioned—exactly as if they had come out of a rummage sale. She looked wrong. Totally out of place.

“Hey, move it! You’re blocking traffic!”

A car had pulled up alongside of her, and in the front passenger seat sat the test instructor scowling at her, his thick lips taut with irritation.

Saeng stood rooted to the spot. She stared at him, stared at those thick lips beneath the bushy moustache. And suddenly she was jolted back to another time, another place, another voice—it had all been so long ago and so far away, yet now she still found herself immobilized by the immediacy of the past.

Once, shortly after she had arrived in America, when she had been watching an absorbing ballet program on the PBS channel at Mrs. Lambert’s house, someone had switched channels with a remote control, and it seemed as if the gracefully dying Giselle in *Swan Lake* had suddenly been riddled with bullets from a screeching getaway car. So jarring had it been that Saeng felt as if an electric shock had charged through her, jolting her from one reality into another.

It was like that now, as if someone had switched channels in her life. She was no longer standing on a quiet street in downtown Danby but in the midst of a jostling crowd of tired, dusty people under a blazing sun. And it was not the balding driving instructor yelling at her, but a thick-lipped man in a khaki uniform, waving at them imperiously with a submachine gun.

Ban Vinai, Thailand. 1978. Things clicked into place, but it was no use knowing the name and number of the channel. The fear and dread still suffused her. She still felt like the scared, bone-weary little girl she had been then, being herded into the barbed-wire fencing of the refugee camp after they had escaped across the Mekong River from Laos.

“What’re you doing, standing in the middle of the road? Get out of the way!”

And click—the Thai soldier was the test instructor again. Saeng blinked, blinked away the fear and fatigue of that memory, and slowly that old reality receded. In a daze she turned and made her way over to the curb, stepped up onto it, and started walking away.

Breathe deep, don’t break down, she told herself fiercely. She could imagine David and that cheerleader staring at her behind her back. *I am tough*, she thought, *I am strong, I can take it*.

The sidewalk was littered with little acorns, and she kicked at them viciously as she walked and walked.

Only when she had turned the corner and was safely out of sight of David and the others did she finally stop. She found herself standing under a huge tree whose widespread branches were now almost leafless. An acorn dropped down and hit her on the head, before bouncing off into the street.

It seemed like the final indignity. Angrily, Saeng reached up for the branch directly overhead and tore off some of the large brown leaves still left. They were dry and crisp as she crushed them in her hands. She threw them at the wind and watched the bits of brown being whipped away by the afternoon wind.

“Who cares about the test, anyway,” she said in a tight, grim whisper, tearing up another fistful of oak leaves. “Stupid test, stupid David, stupid cars. Who needs a license, anyway? Who needs a test like that?” It would only get harder, too, she realized, with the winter approaching and the streets turning slippery with the slush and snow. She had barely felt safe walking on the sidewalks in the winter—how could she possibly hope to drive then? It was hopeless, useless to even try. *I won't, I just won't ever take that test again!* Saeng told herself.

That resolved, she felt somewhat better. She turned away from the oak tree and was about to leave, when she suddenly noticed the bush next to it.

There was something very familiar about it. Some of its leaves had already blown off, but those that remained were still green. She picked a leaf and examined it. It was vaguely heart-shaped, with deeply serrated edges. Where had she seen this kind of leaf before? Saeng wondered. And why, among all these foreign maples and oak leaves, did it seem so very familiar? She scrutinized the bush, but it was no help: If there had been any flowers on it, they had already fallen off.

Holding the leaf in her hand, Saeng left the park and started walking home.

Her pace was brisk and determined, and she had not planned to stop off anywhere. But along the way, she found herself pausing involuntarily before a florist shop window. On display were bright bunches of cut flowers in tall glass vases—the splashes of red roses, white carnations, and yellow chrysanthemums a vivid contrast to the gray October afternoon. In the shadows behind them were several potted plants, none of which she could identify.

On an impulse, Saeng swung open the door and entered.

An elderly woman behind the counter looked up and smiled at her. “Yes? Can I help you?” she asked.

Saeng hesitated. Then she thrust out the heart-shaped green leaf in her hand and stammered, “Do—do you have this plant? I—I don't know its name.”

The woman took the leaf and studied it with interest. “Why, yes,” she said. “That looks like a rose of Sharon. We have several in the nursery out back.”

She kept up a steady stream of conversation as she escorted Saeng through a side door into an open courtyard, where various saplings and shrubs stood. “Of course, it's not the best time for planting, but at least the ground hasn't frozen solid yet, and if you dig a deep enough hole and put in some good compost, it should do just fine. Hardy plants, these roses of Sharon. Pretty blossoms, too, in the fall. In fact—look, there's still a flower or two left on this shrub. Nice shade of pink, isn't it?”

Saeng looked at the single blossom left on the shrub. It looked small and washed out. The leaves on the shrub were of the same distinct serrated heart shape, but its flower looked—wrong, somehow.

“Is there—I mean, can it have another kind of flower?” Saeng asked. “Another color, maybe?”

“Well, it also comes in a pale purplish shade,” the woman said helpfully. “And white, too.”

“I think—I think it was a deep color,” she offered, then shook her head. “I don’t remember. It doesn’t matter.” Discouraged and feeling more than a little foolish, she started to back away.

“Wait,” the florist said. “I think I know what you’re looking for.” A slow smile deepened the wrinkles in her face. “Come this way. It’s in our greenhouse.”

At the far side of the courtyard stood a shed, the like of which Saeng had never seen before. It was made entirely of glass and seemed to be bathed in a soft white light.

As she led the way there, the florist started talking again. “Lucky we just got through moving in some of our tropical plants,” she said, “or the frost last weekend would have killed them off. Anything in there now you’d have to leave indoors until next summer, of course. Next to a big south-facing window or under some strong neon lamps. Even so, some of the plants won’t survive the long cold winters here. Hothouse flowers, that’s what they are. Not hardy, like those roses of Sharon I just showed you.”

Only half listening, Saeng wished that there were a polite way she could excuse herself and leave. It was late and she was starting to get hungry. Still, she dutifully followed the other woman through the greenhouse door and walked in.

She gasped.

It was like walking into another world. A hot, moist world exploding with greenery. Huge flat leaves, delicate wisps of tendrils, ferns and fronds and vines of all shades and shapes grew in seemingly random profusion.

“Over there, in the corner, the hibiscus. Is that what you mean?” The florist pointed at a leafy potted plant by the corner.

There, in a shaft of the wan afternoon sunlight, was a single bloodred blossom, its five petals splayed back to reveal a long stamen tipped with yellow pollen. Saeng felt a shock of recognition so intense, it was almost visceral.

“*Saebba*,” Saeng whispered.

A *saebba* hedge, tall and lush, had surrounded their garden, its lush green leaves dotted with vermilion flowers. And sometimes after a monsoon rain, a blossom or two would have blown into the well, so that when she drew up the well water, she would find a red blossom floating in the bucket.

Slowly, Saeng walked down the narrow aisle toward the hibiscus. Orchids, lanna bushes, oleanders, elephant ear begonias, and bougainvillea vines surrounded her. Plants that she had not even realized she had known but had forgotten drew her back into her childhood world.

When she got to the hibiscus, she reached out and touched a petal gently. It felt smooth and cool, with a hint of velvet toward the center—just as she had known it would feel.

And beside it was yet another old friend, a small shrub with waxy leaves and dainty flowers with purplish petals and white centers. “Madagascar periwinkle,” its tag announced. *How strange to see it in a pot*, Saeng thought. Back home it just grew wild, jutting out from the cracks in brick walls or between tiled roofs. There had been a patch of it by the little spirit house where she used to help her mother light the incense and candles to the spirit who guarded their home and their family. Sometimes she would casually pick a flower or two to leave on the offerings of fruit and rice left at the altar.

And that rich, sweet scent—that was familiar, too. Saeng scanned the greenery around her and found a tall, gangly plant with exquisite little white blossoms on it. “*Dok Malik*,” she said, savoring the feel of the word on her tongue, even as she silently noted the English name on its tag, “jasmine.”

One of the blossoms had fallen off, and carefully Saeng picked it up and smelled it. She closed her eyes and breathed in, deeply. The familiar fragrance filled her lungs, and Saeng could almost feel the light strands of her grandmother’s long gray hair, freshly washed, as she combed it out with the fine-toothed buffalo-horn comb. And when the sun had dried it, Saeng would help the gnarled old fingers knot the hair into a bun, then slip a *dok Malik* bud into it.

Saeng looked at the white bud in her hand now, small and fragile. Gently, she closed her palm around it and held it tight. That, at least, she could hold on to. But where was the finetoothed comb? The hibiscus hedge? The well? Her gentle grandmother?

A wave of loss so deep and strong that it stung Saeng’s eyes now swept over her. A blink, a channel switch, a boat ride in the night, and it was all gone. Irretrievably, irrevocably gone.

And in the warm moist shelter of the greenhouse, Saeng broke down and wept.

It was already dusk when Saeng reached home. The wind was blowing harder, tearing off the last remnants of green in the chicory weeds that were growing out of the cracks in the sidewalk. As if oblivious to the cold, her mother was still out in the vegetable garden, digging up the last of the onions with a rusty trowel. She did not see Saeng until the girl had quietly knelt down next to her.

Her smile of welcome warmed Saeng. “*Ghup ma laio le?* You’re back?” she said cheerfully. “Goodness, it’s past five. What took you so long? How did it go? Did you—?” Then she noticed the potted plant that Saeng was holding, its leaves quivering in the wind.

Mrs. Panouvong uttered a small cry of surprise and delight. “*Dok faeng-noi!*” she said. “Where did you get it?”

“I bought it,” Saeng answered, dreading her mother’s next question.

“How much?”

For answer Saeng handed her mother some coins.

“That’s all?” Mrs. Panouvong said, appalled. “Oh, but I forgot! You and the Lambert boy ate Bee-Maags. . . .”

“No, we didn’t, Mother,” Saeng said.

“Then what else—?”

“Nothing else. I paid over nineteen dollars for it.”

“You what?” Her mother stared at her incredulously. “But how could you? All the seeds for this vegetable garden didn’t cost that much! You know how much we—” She paused, as she noticed the tearstains on her daughter’s cheeks and her puffy eyes.

“What happened?” she asked, more gently.

“I—I failed the test,” Saeng said.

For a long moment Mrs. Panouvong said nothing. Saeng did not dare to look her mother in the eye. Instead, she stared at the hibiscus plant and nervously tore off a leaf, shredding it to bits.

Her mother reached out and brushed the fragments of green off Saeng’s hands. “It’s a beautiful plant, this *dok faeng-noi*,” she finally said. “I’m glad you got it.”

“It’s—it’s not a real one,” Saeng mumbled. “I mean, not like the kind we had at—at—” She found that she was still too shaky to say the words *at home*, lest she burst into tears again. “Not like the kind we had before,” she said.

“I know,” her mother said quietly. “I’ve seen this kind blooming along the lake. Its flowers aren’t as pretty, but it’s strong enough to make it through the cold months here, this winter hibiscus. That’s what matters.”

She tipped the pot and deftly eased the ball of soil out, balancing the rest of the plant in her other hand. “Look how rootbound it is, poor thing,” she said. “Let’s plant it, right now.”

She went over to the corner of the vegetable patch and started to dig a hole in the ground. The soil was cold and hard, and she had trouble thrusting the shovel into it. Wisps of her gray hair trailed out in the breeze, and her slight frown deepened the wrinkles around her eyes. There was a frail, wiry beauty to her that touched Saeng deeply.

“Here, let me help, Mother,” she offered, getting up and taking the shovel away from her.

Mrs. Panouvong made no resistance. “I’ll bring in the hot peppers and bitter melons, then, and start dinner. How would you like an omelet with slices of the bitter melon?”

“I’d love it,” Saeng said.

Left alone in the garden, Saeng dug out a hole and carefully lowered the “winter hibiscus” into it. She could hear the sounds of cooking from the kitchen now, the beating of the eggs against a bowl, the sizzle of hot oil in the pan. The pungent smell of bitter melon wafted out, and Saeng’s mouth watered. It was a cultivated taste, she had discovered—none of her classmates or friends, not even Mrs. Lambert, liked it—this sharp, bitter melon that left a golden aftertaste on the tongue. But she had grown up eating it and, she admitted to herself, much preferred it to a Big Mac.

The “winter hibiscus” was in the ground now, and Saeng tamped down the soil around it. Overhead, a flock of Canada geese flew by, their faint honks clear and—yes—familiar to Saeng now. Almost reluctantly, she realized that many of the things that she had thought of as strange before had become, through the quiet repetition of season upon season, almost familiar to her now. Like the geese. She lifted her head and watched as their distinctive V was etched against the evening sky, slowly fading into the distance.

When they come back, Saeng vowed silently to herself, in the spring, when the snows melt and the geese return and this hibiscus is budding, then I will take that test again.

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