

**Francie Lin**  
from *Huang*

At half-past nine on New Year's Eve, Clark Gable Huang stumbled out the front door and into the dark, motionless street on which he and his wife had lived for five interminable years. He was wearing a paper party hat covered with blue foil that trailed streamers from its tip like extensions of uncertain thoughts. The hat had slipped a little in a scuffle with his wife Anita, and as he walked, he adjusted the elastic below his chin, pushing the hat up and setting it at a mild angle that indicated, he hoped, insolence. He imagined Anita watching him from the house, and defiance made him jaunty; he lit a cigarette and strolled slowly to the end of the street flicking ash with his right hand, left thumb hooked in his pocket, although in fact Russell Street intimidated him: too broad, flanked by stucco mansions and a high, sparse line of trees. He would rather have stayed in, surrounded by the close grey comfort of television and laundry and the sound of Anita's slippers against the floor.

Anita herself was going to a party at her friend Hussein's house. They had fought all day about whether they would go to Hussein's or to a pub called Malone's, which Clark preferred. Malone's was warm, crowded, and noisy, and its impersonal crush of customers reminded him somehow of home, which had been in Taipei.

A small cat with tuxedo markings fled as Clark approached. He was walking faster now, with his head down, spurred by the thought of Hussein and her party up in the hills. Hussein! Anita had met her at a discussion of infinity sponsored by the Berkeley math department. She was Russian, with a waxlike complexion, white hair, and blue eyes that scanned everything implacably, like the cold, dreamless eyes of an angel. At six foot two, she could afford infinite calm. Clark hated her parties, which were pitched at an intensity and earnestness that seemed to him an affectation, like the name Hussein.

## Francie Lin

“It must be terrifying to live with the shadow of China over you every day,” a woman had said to him confidingly at the last party. “Your country is a triumph of will.” She touched his wrist with a finger. He looked at her hand. Later it became one of those wasteful images that took up space in his memory without attendant meaning.

“Oh,” he said. “Yes.” Actually, he never thought about the matter. His father had been a KMT soldier, and had died recently, at seventy-two, still anticipating the call to retake the mainland. His last words concerned a kind of fish that you could only get in Fujian.

He walked south on College past the darkened shops and cafes. Nothing was open at this hour, but the singing and shouting from yard parties nearby echoed off the storefronts, so that the street itself seemed half-alive, and full of invisible revelers. He was not sorry he hadn’t gone to Hussein’s, but he missed Anita. Her small, blustering presence was his armor and sword. A few months ago she had chased a huge fat-bottomed raccoon away from the garbage cans with a shoe. The coon, unaccustomed to being challenged, surveyed Anita coolly with his paw in a can of tomatoes before resuming his meal with bloated, somnolent pleasure. The shoe hit him in the rear. Clark applauded his wife from the upstairs window. He had never seen anything so beautiful as her slight figure among the daphne shrubs.

Lately, however, Anita had become tight-lipped and withdrawn. She tottered about the house in high heels, picking up newspapers and stacking his books and sketches with pensive, angry deliberation.

“What good is all this?” she asked him once, coming up behind him as he sat by the window making a sketch from memory. She said it in English instead of Chinese—another affectation that drove him crazy, since his spoken English was slow, and even the simplest conversations became confused and sometimes misleading.

“What good is this,” he repeated. The question was too vague to comprehend.

## Francie Lin

“Books!” She shook one in his face. “Drawing! It drives me crazy that all day you sit at home alone while I’m at lab. Why don’t you go out with friends?” She looked at his sketchpad. “What’s that?”

It was a drawing of the kiln at the temple in his childhood neighborhood of Song Shan, where people burned their ghost money into a sizeable landscape of cinders and ash. His family had lived around the corner. The temple recurred a lot in his moments of free-floating thought, and he had tried, in his sketch, to capture a sense of its high, resonant arcade anchored at one end by the enormous brick kiln. Incense veiled the upper part of the drawing, and the fire from the kiln threw shadows on the walls that suggested people, although he hadn’t put any people in his drawing yet. Dark marks in the foreground and to the right would become, perhaps, in the next version, vendors selling gardenias for the deceased, the buds bunched together in threes with a twisted paperclip. He was not a religious man. But the temple was not religious either, not in the modern understanding of the word; morality never entered the minds of the temple supplicants. People came to divine the future or to feed the dead, and that was all.

Anita sighed and sat down next to him. Whatever bad mood had been driving her these past few weeks seemed to leak out of her, and they sat for a few minutes in silence—in wonder at late afternoon light that struck the window. Their shadows appeared in clear profile against the back wall, like figures in a cameo.

“I’m not going home,” Anita said, after a moment had passed. She was speaking Chinese again. She picked up his charcoal and drew an awkward spiral above his kiln. “I know we agreed to go back to Taipei when I was done with my degree, but I can’t go back. I don’t want to go back.” She let the pencil trail off the edge of the paper, then put it down. “I’ve been looking for a job here. I hope you’ll stay with me. But if you want to leave, there’s nothing I can do.” She was sitting about half a foot to his right, knees together and ankles crossed, her back very

**Francie Lin**

straight. Without moving any closer, slowly, almost imperceptibly, she lowered her head to his shoulder and let it rest there in a strange, uncomfortable position, the significance of which he could not fathom. Was this delicacy? Was this pride? Outside, a bird rattled the branches of a cherry forced into bloom by the mild weather, and tiny white petals scattered like confetti all over the ground. The two of them remained like that until it was too dark to see, and then Anita sat up and said she would start dinner. They ate quietly. Anita found some candles, and they each drank a glass of plum wine.