

Lara JK Wilson
from *After Pho*

On Wednesday, the mother and daughter arrive in heavy wool coats. After ordering, they lean close to whisper in the almost empty space. Did they see Dinh-Boa picking his nose beside the register? Have they noticed my torn pocket, the brown stain that will not disappear from my sleeve? Their eyes stick together like rice. If I remembered the long English word Great-uncle told me, *conspiratorially*, I'd apply it now. When I forget his words he says I'm well-named, Ngu, which means stupid, chosen only to ward off evil spirits. Although she was alone with my birth, my mother was faithful to Grandma Liar when naming me.

I serve the mother and daughter, but before they drop chopsticks for forks, both let out a big laugh, AI- HEH-YA! At the ice machine, I put a cube on my tofu crumb. What is it about them that makes my skin weep? Does an evil spirit suspect envy? No. I cannot envy what I don't know. In honesty, they make me see who I am. Not to them, to me. A waitress who married a man with three jobs and lives in a basement below my family where I search for coins in hall coats with hope to buy my little girl pink clothes at Marshall's that say Princess, or Barbie.

The daughter eating *pho* would not wear these. Her clothes are sky colors, morning blue or sunset orange, and have fancies on them. Ribbon, buttons that hold nothing. The mother's clothes are dark. They wear leather shoes, no sneakers. Their hair falls evenly against their shoulders in two shades of gold, one real, the other close to this. Grandma Liar would call the mother's hair tainted. If she knew, she

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would scold me louder than Great-uncle for lightly brushing two fingers over the daughter's shoulder to feel her soft sweater.

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The tofu crumb is dark and swollen. Tuesday I will see a doctor. I will not serve restaurant lunch, or make *pho* at home to share with my baby. For the first time since she was born and I bled inside, I will be a patient. My heart becomes a swift river in my ears.

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I return from the doctor in Chinatown with a bandage on my neck. Below this white square, the tofu is gone (the needle pinched, the cutting did not). I have also returned with two bags for Grandma Liar: one green herbs, the other heavy with tamarind, *romdehng*, *ma'am*, and artichoke for tea. Again I tell her they never have fried crickets, no matter where I look. She shrugs and shows me her red stained teeth while I change shoes for slippers. In the kitchen, Grandma Liar spits her betel nut into the trash. When I set the bags on the counter, the neighbors' little children leave my mother's television show to pull at my pants, asking for treats. They give up when I pick up my baby. Her neck smells like a gentle day. I shake my nose there to tickle, breathe her scent and laughter until my ribs gives a little crack.

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What they say? My mother's voice is hollow, as if blown through bamboo.

Biopsy, I answer, not bothering to explain. You're young, the doctor told me, don't worry. Instead of saying this, I think of something my mother said when she was doing pedicures all day: Customers don't respect age. Even then she looked like a grandmother and never bothered with flattery. Maybe she would learn if she worked in the restaurant instead of watching babies and television. But she pulls out her eyelashes when strangers come near.

I'll know in eight days, I tell her.

My mother chews her tangled gray hair and returns to her show. She has loaned me the seventy-five dollars for the office visit and plans to stay downstairs until my husband comes home at 3:00 a.m. so he can pay her back.

Grandma Liar shuffles in biting the end of a scallion. Soon we do *nuoc mam* for Great-uncle, she says. Go upstairs. Get my fish paste.

My baby pokes at the gauze and giggles. I sing softly, Grandma has rotten fish upstairs, fish upstairs, fish upstairs. She wiggles to get down and crawl to my mother, who fakes sleep.