

Chinese

by Ann Bogle

Brian sits with his hands under the table, fingers upturned like legs of dead beetles. He'd like to say something to Brenda, but she moved her chair away—the leg of the table was between her legs. It would be better if she would scoot towards him, even if he had to move closer to Mrs. Benjamin. The distance between them is disconcerting. Only their butter plates meet. Brenda rearranged them to give Laura more room. Laura is at the end of the table with almost no space to plant her elbows. Girls Laura's age plant their elbows in public, whenever they can, as an act of defiance. Mrs. Benjamin can't see Laura's elbows or her dress shoes kicked off under the table; otherwise there would be Young Lady This and Young Lady That. How people continue to be families Brian doesn't know.

“Brian, would you like some shrimp?” Mrs. Benjamin's face is too near his. He leans to one side, toward the vacant space. Brenda is eating shrimp almost daintily. Really, she's picking at it, unconvinced she wants to eat it. He knows her. The side of her head is waiting for him. He must answer Mrs. Benjamin. Over my dead body, he thinks. Brenda's hair twitches.

“Okay,” he says.

“It's very good,” says Mrs. Benjamin. “You won't regret it.”

Why would he regret eating a shrimp or two, a pear slice or two? She's condemning his skinniness.

“Leave him alone. The worst thing you can do to a teenager is watch him grow.”

Who said this? Probably the woman who's talking to Connie, nodding her silvery head. Joan? Mrs. Seymour? Brian can't remember her name. He's not the sort of young man who would interrupt a conversation to ask someone's name. Jane?

"My son's a walking catastrophe." Mrs. Seymour glances sideways at Brian, and something freezes, for one moment, the side of her face. "All I know is, he won't do anything desperate."

"You're so calm, Jane. How do you know? The teachers say Tony needs regular counseling."

"Educators!" Mrs. Seymour chokes, spits a fleck of ice across the table. The candle flame hisses and cracks. "Faith. That's how."

Mrs. Seymour's dinner companion shifts in his chair. He's over six feet tall and even quieter than Brian, more suited to silence.

Brian's thoughts are slippery maggots, his face a puzzle of movement. It's easier, he decides, to remember men's names. The man with Mrs. Seymour is Gary Hansen. He used to play baseball. Mrs. Seymour takes Gary's hand.

"Where is the bathroom?" Brenda is asking someone—where is the bathroom?

"Over there." Laura admits vaguely that she's not sure.

"I'll find it."

Don't go! Brian thinks so loudly he's afraid he's said it.

Brenda disappears, following Mrs. Cherry, the wife of the restaurant proprietor.

Mrs. Benjamin flips her fingers as a silencing gesture at her husband.

"What, dear?" Mr. Benjamin talks loudly. Mrs. Benjamin leans forward, the angular shelf of her bosom pushing against her plate.

"Sss ... the ... supposed to ... sss ... matter ... us."

"I don't know, Martha. I'm sure if you asked them, they'd ... "

"What time is it?"

Brian tells Tom it is eight o'clock.

Tom is casting about for a new conversation. He considers Gary, the ex-athlete, then leans suddenly toward Brian.

"What did you say you do, Brian?"

Mrs. Seymour's neck lengthens and her eyes dart for plates.

"Oysters?" she says politely.

"Here, Jane," says Tom, reaching in front of Herbert Benjamin. Herbert's dinky dark eyes scrutinize his wife's tight lips. She's mouthing something again.

Brian clutches at linen under the table—the tablecloth scrapes like a skirt across his pants.

"So, what do you do?" Tom asks again. Tom asks questions to be asked questions.

"Encode firearms."

"Huh?"

"Serial numbers, key-punching."

"Where were we?" Mr. Benjamin twists in his chair to face Tom. His shoulder juts over the table, a glacial ridge. Jane abandons Connie and vies for a word with the men.

"Dad, Gary and I read that book, and what we think ... "

"Who's Gary?"

"I'm Gary."

"I'm terribly sorry, Gary."

Gary looks blank. Herbert looks certain.

"I met you last month at that cast party. You and Jane came with my grandson."

"I'm afraid not." Gary looks uneasily at Jane. Jane looks miserably at all of them.

Mrs. Benjamin uncorks a bottle of white wine. "Brian? Your glass is empty." Brian can't tell his glass from Brenda's. He lets her fill both of them. Where is Brenda?

Mr. Benjamin tells a story about losing his passport at the Cairo airport. "Laura was already on the plane. So was Brenda's and Brian's mother. The stewards were running around. 'Passport of Ben-ya-meem, Ben-ya-meem passport.' I'm not kidding. I thought it was over." Mrs. Benjamin twists her watchband. The men and women at the table are laughing.

"Mushrooms," says Mrs. Benjamin. "How's that sauce? This one's good. It reminds me of lemon, but I know it's not."

Brian stands. The edge of the tablecloth goes up with him, clings to his belt buckle, so he must beat it down. Everyone looks at him. The two old ones at the end glare at him coldly, four stupid eyes.

"Where's the bathroom?" Brian asks Mrs. Cherry.

"Down here." She leads the way.

"That's not for you," says Mrs. Cherry. "Yours is over here."

"What I want is ... "

"You can't go in there. See the dress. Yours has pants. What you want?"

"A girl. Dark hair? Is she in there?"

Mrs. Cherry sizes him up, his crumpled shirt, digital watch. She pushes against the door of the ladies' room. "What's the name?"

"Brenda."

Before the door shuts, Brian glimpses floral walls, rows of light bulbs reflected in a mirror, someone's swinging foot. He sits on a bench under the pay phone and rolls and unrolls his sleeves.

Herbert Benjamin's voice boxes its way down the hallway: "I'm not saying that people can't read the book, I'm saying it's ... "

"What are you waiting for?" Brenda stands over him, her chin a little wet.

"Let's get out of here."

"We can't just leave."

"You did," he says.

"Maybe I feel sick. I'm trying to cope, at least."

"I don't like those people."

"Tell them you're an artist. They'll talk to you then."

"Artist?"

Brenda's eyelids thicken and shut. She's counting. "I'm—not—talking to you." She runs back into the ladies' room.

Brian imagines tearing off Mrs. Cherry's dress, putting it on, flapping its black and white wings.

He goes to the men's room. One of the bulbs is burned out. It's cold. The walls are baby-blue tile. There isn't even a mirror. He spits in a urinal, tucks in his shirt.

"Brenda, how about you? Here's Brian. Brian, would you like some more?" Mrs. Benjamin is a huge monarch butterfly. She puts turkey and a dab of cranberry on a little painted plate and pushes the plate at Brian. She feeds everyone.

"I'm fine. Thanks, Mrs. Benjamin." He has killed himself in the bathroom. His mind is empty.

"Brenda, some of this?"

"No, really, we're fine."

Mrs. Benjamin shrugs and scrapes the rest of the spinach and all except one carrot onto her plate.

Under the table Brian takes Brenda's hand. Brenda sips from her teacup, but it's empty.

"They're all out of sherbet. How disappointing."

"I'm full, anyway."

"Look at you two. Who would think you're brother and sister, the way you get along."

Mrs. Seymour cocks her head from one side to the other. An ice cube slides between her molars and bulges at the side of her jaw.

"Herbert, a toast?"

"Let's finish this damned wine."

"To health"

"And good reviews."

All the people raise their glasses, clink them and sip.

"Not a late night for me."

"We'll take all three cars."

"Suppose you borrowed one, just for the night?"

"It broke. I couldn't believe it, but it did. It just ... broke."

Brian moves his arm, and the talking resumes.

"Tomorrow I go."

"All the expectations in the world."

"I've tried, he's still not home."

"Tomorrow then."

"Shall we?"

"Let's."

"Is this anyone's scarf?"

Brenda takes her scarf and plays for a moment with the fringe. Brian lifts her coat from the back of her chair and helps her into it. He touches her sleeve, but she doesn't feel it. Everyone is standing. Everyone faces in a slightly different direction.

The group moves slowly toward the door, buttoning, talking, digging for keys.

"Follow me in the black one."

"It's cold out there. Zip up!"

Brenda runs ahead of Brian. She catches up to Laura. She says something.

