

Ceremony

by Jaime Karnes

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She chose the red sky lantern. She didn't ask him to help her light it but he did, kneeling in the damp grass, flames creating a window-like frame for her to watch his steady gaze in the dark field. The stubble on his cheeks, the color of golden wheat, reminded her of their first kiss forty years before, when they were two fifteen year-olds in his parents barn, awkwardly feeling behind each others smiles with their tongues. How many kisses had they had since then? How long since their last?

"Make your wish," he whispered.

"We're supposed to send happy thoughts for the couple," she said.

He looked around at the mass of lanterns readying for flight. "Everyone is thinking of the bride and groom," he said. "Make your own wish. No one will know." He placed his hand around her bare ankle, squeezed. "In Thailand these symbolize wisdom."

"Yes, and in China they believe..." she trailed off, noting how others had gathered around the young couple. "We should stand over there." She pointed so her husband would look at how far they were from the others.

"The Thai believe that these lanterns help release your problems," he said.

She held the word problems in her mind. Plural.

She thought of their estranged children, each living on another coast, away from the family farm: their son, Griffin, their daughter, Molly. She thought of her mother, home alone, in the hospital bed that had been brought in 3 summers before, when they could no longer afford a visiting nurse.

At home, yes. Her husband's land, the house they'd inherited when his parents passed, now mortgaged for the third time, its foundation cracking.

Problems.

She couldn't bring herself to choose only one.

"I can't choose one," she said.

"You have that many wishes?" Her husband let go the lighter and winced at the hot metal as he rolled his thumb over it, trying to retrieve the flame.

"We," she said, "We have that many problems."

As if in a movie, the lantern took flight as she finished the long *s* of problem-s, and the wind, almost mocking, swept up its glowing red body, curving in the shape of the sound.

Soon the wedding guests—laughing, clapping—made their way around to the front field of the house. Their necks craned at a starless sky ablaze with a constellation of hope.

It was possible, she realized, to hope through hopelessness.

"When Griffin and Molly get married," her husband said, "I'd rather not have this kind of ceremony."

