GRAILS

BY JEANNIE GALEAZZI

Late on a muggy September afternoon in San Francisco, I had just parked the Mercedes in the garage under Portsmouth Square in Chinatown when I *should* have been at the plastic surgeons' conference delivering my lecture on techniques in double-lid surgery, or, my pet name for it, "How to Spit on Your Ancestors and Make Your Asian Eyes Look White." And earlier this week, when everything was different and the earth was still orbiting the sun, I *would* have honored that speaking engagement. Earlier this week—say, Monday morning at 8:53 , seven minutes before the routine blepharoplasty on Vilma Tsang—I *would* have been there. Except Vilma Tsang, post-op, had bled behind her eyeballs, and the blood had exerted pressure on her retinas, and her rods and cones had gone dim. I, Dr. Funston P. Fong, had blinded a patient. Blindness, permanent or otherwise, struck fewer than one in ten thousand blepharoplasty patients, and Vilma Tsang was the one, *my* one, my perfect record spoiled. Any day now I expected another bludgeoning call from her lawyer, Maxine Q.Y. Toy, Esq., vowing to bring me down. I'd told no one, not Father, not even Jill.

That is, I hadn't told Father yet. My mission today in Chinatown was to surprise him at his club and, well—*if* Vilma's sight failed to return—to solicit his "help" should I need it. And why not? Father gloated to me all the time about his "fortune" just as he gloated about *me* to his cronies at the club: "*Hah, my only child, and so lazy."* (I happen to be one of the youngest and busiest plastic surgeons in town.) "*Not even good-looking."* (I am in fact quite handsome despite being only half Chinese, and a trifle stout, and cursed with crinkly hair the color of tarnished brass.) "*Married a foolish girl."* (He might have me there.) "*Unlucky marriage, unlucky baby, great big unlucky new house…"* And yet I'd done it all for him.

The elevator took me up through the garage to Portsmouth Square , benches thick in this heat with gossiping old fogies mummy-layered in windbreakers and cardigans. In shirt-sleeves, I was hurrying along Grant Avenue toward Father's club when I ran smack into a funeral procession oozing along to the strains of "Nearer, My God, to Thee" played by the Lucky Rest Mortuary Band, the band's name blazoned in English and Chinese in the bell of the sousaphone. The musicians marched ahead of the hearse tailgated by the family limo—its windows spiked with spears of incense, its roof mounted with a pompous portrait of the old goat framed in white carnations—and, after the limo, the queue of mourners' cars. The Funeral Police straddle-walked their motorcycles, lights flashing, and gestured for us pedestrians to wait.

I didn't have all afternoon, and neither, apparently, did the kid waiting next to me, a bespectacled Chinese lad half the size of his backpack. He and I stepped off the curb in sync,

my oxblood wingtip and his red Ked, but his mother yanked him back by the collar.

‘‘Hey, dummy,” she said to him in Cantonese loud and basic enough for even me to understand, “you *know* it’s bad luck to cross a funeral queue.” But then Mom, with the plump lacquered aspect of a ripened runner-up Miss Chinatown, softened her pout. “Oh well, so what,” she said, tossing me a wink, switching to English (for my benefit?), “we don’t believe in that old mumbo-jumbo.” And she grabbed her son’s hand and lugged him through the intersection between stopped cars. The boy bleared back at me, no doubt anxious about the mumbo-jumbo.

Worried that I’d miss Father, I broke the queue myself and hastened down the next block to the Tong Yan Fau Benevolent Society. I hopped up the front steps to the grated door, but before I could punch the pertinent buttons on the buzz box (decades ago, with much ceremony, Father had taught me the code), the door swung open, and an ancient face peered out at me and beamed, gold teeth and black-rimmed gums, very possibly a century-old smile.

‘‘Hou noi m-gin!” said the owner of the smile. *Long time no see!*

I relieved the old gent of the door. “Dojeh,” I said, *Thank you.*

‘‘M-sai m-goi!” *Don’t mention it!* He eased himself down the steps one at a time, and then ambled off with a springy, spraddle-legged gait.

I closed the grate after myself and climbed the dark fusty staircase to the club on the third floor. One scan of the card tables and couches, and my heart turned belly-up: Father was *not* here, *not* among these duffers and geezers I’d known since my youth. Ranks of elbow-patched arms were waving me toward the door, stirring the canopy of secondhand smoke. “Keui sik faan! Sik faan!” *He’s eating,* they said. Which meant that Father was next door at House of Gum Lung, favorite haunt of the Tong Yan Fau brethren, a venerable and picturesquely seedy subterranean dive. Wheezing, my bronchioles charred with nicotine, I signaled my thanks and jogged back downstairs and out through the grated door and down the next-door steps into the restaurant.

And there, seated at a large round table near the front, was Father, his silver-fringed dome as speckled as a quail egg. He was drinking tea with five other men, everyone in cheap dark suit coats, all six pretending to ignore a seventh who was orating in Cantonese and rapping the table for emphasis. Each man around the speaker shook his head and chuckled. Each sat tapping his foot or bouncing his leg on his loafered toes as if itching to get away, as if he had things to do, places to go, people to meet, as if the speaker were *keeping* him from *important business.* In the chair next to Father sat a Chinese-bakery bag—the classic bag, flimsy pink plastic printed with red Chinese characters—tied off at the handles and bulging with crushed aluminum cans: recycling booty culled by the Master. For Father and his tribe, thrift was a sport. *Don’t invite envy,* ran the thinking, *just keep everyone very, very curious.*

The hostess, businesslike in knee socks and denim jumper, accosted me. “How many?” she said—in English—her voice shrill enough to snare Father’s attention.

‘‘Hey! My son!” Father got up from the table and grabbed his bag of cans. “Today my grandson fourth birthday,” he broadcast to his mates (as always butchering his English for his cohorts, loath to show them up). “And this selfish son forget invite me for dinner. So busy doctor, so much patients, no time for family. Good-bye! Joi gin!”

‘‘Sons these days! A shame to have such a son! What kind of son—,” chorused the table in a jumble, and sent him off with a hearty *Joi gin!,* all glad of his troubles.

Father swaggered up to me, and I was about to set him straight on Cedric's birthday, but he seized my elbow and guided me out of the restaurant and up the steps to the sidewalk with the force of the martial artist he'd once been, with the dynamic poise of the countless dawns he'd spent lost in the art of t'ai chi, a water lily swaying on the tides of the universe. A water lily, now, with a heart condition. Three and a half years ago, when I'd stumbled into fatherhood myself, I'd anticipated having this same authority over my own son, automatic supremacy by virtue of having sired the little squirt. Instead, at home, it was Cedric making *me* feel small.

''Father," I said as he steered me down the block, "today is *not* Cedric's birthday."

''Of course," he said. "I'm not *that* old." True, but his heart had forced him to take early retirement from the repair shop at his beloved Cable Car Barn.

''Where are we going?" I asked, scudding along.

''Shh!" He stopped and cupped his hand to his ear. Audible in the sweltering distance, drums and cymbals grumbled and clashed over the stuttering rip of firecrackers, trademark sound of lion dancers warding off evil spirits one storefront at a time. Father had always urged me to become a kung-fu lion dancer—the daredevil head or the powerhouse rump, either one—but I'd waged homework instead of war. And now, courtesy of Vilma Tsang and her bloodthirsty lawyer, I was about to drop on him a *new* disappointment. Father lowered his hand from his ear. "You ask where we're going?" he said. "You show up at dinner time, we go eat dinner."

It was barely half-past four. "Oh, but I really just wanted to see you," I said rather too quickly, and Father tilted his head and studied my face with a keenness that made me fear he could read the truth: that a tsunami was roaring my way, and that Jill and I were already shipwrecked. We'd need to plunge deeper into hock to live the life Father wanted for us—brag-fodder for his cronies at the club—and to buoy up our new mortgage and our chokehold of monthly bills, to *survive* the likes of Vilma and Maxine. But with an influx of cash, I could scale down that practice I'd never really wanted, limit my exposure and take time to get used to the wife and son he'd wished on me. All my life I've walked the thinnest ice, walked it for Father and his cronies at the club; I'd *earned* that fortune—and with it, we *might* just pull through. "To see you," I resumed, "and have a little chat."

''Then we'll chat over dinner." Father dragged me two doors down into a noodle shop, an alley of vacant stools and coat hooks, and he sat me and the clanking bag of cans down at the counter, himself in the middle. Overhead, a ceiling fan wobbled, bleating, on its stalk.

A woman came waddling out of the kitchen, her apron splashed with a soy-sauce Rorschach. "Nei yiu me'eh a?" she asked Father. *Whaddya want?* No menu in sight. Father ordered a pot of *bo lei* tea and a mystery meal. Before lumbering back into the kitchen, the woman had the gall to rummage up a fork and set it next to the chopsticks at my place.

Father glanced at the fork and chuckled. My surgeon's reflex said, *I could fix those saggy eyelids for you;* but of course that's what I'd told Vilma Tsang. Catching me staring, Father scalpeled me with a look. "Jou me'eh a?" he said.

I blinked. "Nothing's the matter, Father. Why do you ask?"

He pulled his collar away from his neck and fanned himself. "Because right now you're supposed to give a talk at the surgeon conference. Ngaam m-ngaam a?"

I nearly fell off my stool. "What? How'd you know?"

‘‘Jill.”

‘‘Ah. Jill.” Of course. Between my studies and my career, I’d never had time for courtship. Six years ago, through the matchmaker sister of a card shark at Father’s club, I’d met and married Jillian Yat-Tau “Sunshine” Mah. Father and my lapsed-Mormon wife enjoyed a rapport similar to the one I remembered between Father and Mother: they shared recipes, laughs, health complaints, and a breezy come-and-go attitude. Throughout my childhood and into early adolescence, Mother had been a divine sunny blur, a butterfly blimp, a radiant *Hindenburg* tethered to the earth by the silken thread of the home life of which I found myself the axis. One bad grade, one snide word, one surly glance, one neglected chore, and I feared the thread might snap. As, eventually, it did. But we were speaking of my wife. “I hope she wasn’t bothering you.”

Father laughed silently, shoulders shaking. “This morning she called, gave me another Utah recipe to try.”

‘‘Oh.” It was doubtful that Father had ever tried any of Jill’s recipes, bricks of gold from the Mah family vault: neon Jell-O-mold salad landmined with canned fruit and plugs of cottage cheese, potato salad thick with mayonnaise and the squeaky whites of hard-boiled eggs, the unforgivable creamed green-bean casserole topped with bread crumbs and fake bacon in a Tarmac of melted orange cheese.

Father wiped his cup and chopsticks with his paper napkin, standard Chinatown etiquette. “Then she asked me for a new recipe, a Chinese dish to make you happy.”

‘‘I see.” To *make* you happy. It sounded like something Mother Mah might say as she spooned a glop of carrot slaw dotted with raisins onto your wilted paper plate at one of her punishing tofu barbecues. She’d wanted her horsy daughter to marry a man who was a Mormon or at least a Chinese; in her book, I was neither.

Father now set about de-germing *my* cup and chopsticks, using the same paper napkin with which he’d just de-germed his own. “She wanted something with duck tongues. I had to get out my cookbook—so embarrassing!” he said. “But don’t tell Jill.”

Our amiable hostess shuffled back from the kitchen, clunked down the teapot equivalent of a cauliflower ear, and shuffled away. I poured tea for Father first, the *bo lei* steeped as dark and sour as coffee, a real tooth-stainer. “Okay, Father. I won’t tell about the cookbook,” I said a shade too friskily, “if *you* won’t tell on *me* about the conference.”

‘‘No deal.” He tapped his fingertips by his cup, the Chinese way of saying “*Thanks for the tea”* without derailing the conversation or its tone. “Jill said this talk today is very important, an honor to be asked. But you’re not there. Dim gaai?”

Why indeed was I not there? For what reason had I shirked? Her name was Vilma Tsang. It was horrible what I’d done, what Vilma had lost. If her condition persisted, the poor woman *should* sic her lawyer on me. But whose side would Father take? I sipped my tea, my tongue shriveling at the taste of smoked vinegar. “Can *I* help it if the conference coordinators switched my time slot at the last minute?” I said into my teacup. “Naturally they *asked* me if a spot on tomorrow’s roster would suit my schedule. To accommodate them, I said yes.”

Father looked skeptical. “Mmph.”

Our hostess came scowling back over to us, plopped down two covered clay pots, and whisked away the lids; a blast of stew-scented steam hit my face. Father’s pot bubbled with oysters and greens and magenta slivers of barbecued pork, mine with turnips and noodles and

gristly chaws of beef. Our hostess thrust a rice bowl at Father, no rice bowl for me, and trundled back into the kitchen.

To placate Father, I'd at least have to nibble at my dish. Spurning the ignominious fork, I picked up my chopsticks and very properly used the chunkier top ends to pinch up some noodles from my pot and transfer them into Father's. "Here, Dad," I said, slyly commencing my campaign. "Long noodles for long life."

Father sulked, perhaps still miffed about the conference, the dents at the sides of his mouth deepening as if pressed there by an invisible fingernail. "Hmph. About *time* you take your old father to dinner," he grumped, digging out his handkerchief. "Mou cho la." *And no mistake.* He swabbed his brow and his bald pate and the back of his neck.

I gestured toward his attire. "May I ask *why* the dark suit jacket in this heat?"

Father stuffed the hankie back in his pocket. "Old Wong's funeral this morning." He patted the lumpy pink bag on the stool next to him. "Cheap reception, lots of cans."

‘‘Really, Dad. Why don't you leave some cans for someone else to recycle? You don't need the money, and those cans aren't worth a pittance."

‘‘Those *cans* will send me to China for heart treatment."

‘‘Uh-huh." I'd heard this crackpot notion of his before. "And if those witch doctors over there poison you or maim you or *kill* you, what will you do?"

Father turned toward me with the gravity of an imperial scholar dictating his memoirs to a pigtailed young scribe. "Your ancestors invented the horse collar and the compass. They invented porcelain and paper and gunpowder. They invented printing *centuries* before that German fool. You don't trust the Chinese?"

‘‘I repeat. If those quacks murder you, what will you do?"

‘‘Get buried in China ."

‘‘Well then," I said, mustering the requisite indignation, "I will *not* be shipping the Lucky Rest Mortuary Band overseas for your funeral."

Father lit up and slapped my thigh. "Hah! Good one!"

But I wasn't joking. "Listen, Dad. Speaking of last wishes—and I *hate* to ask you this, but—your affairs, are they in order?"

Father crimped a grizzled eyebrow at me. "My what?"

‘‘I'm asking if you've written a will."

Father flicked the idea away. "Fongsam la," he said. *No worries.* Which meant no will. Which meant probate court, endless fees, Father's fortune tied up ad infinitum.

Out on the sidewalk, through the open door of the noodle shop, a spurt of explosions and a hail of red firecracker papers heralded a Chinese lion trotting past, its collar of spring-mounted white puffballs trembling under its outrageous square head, two pairs of fringed pajama legs and white sneakers pumping beneath its fur-trimmed silk skirts. A drummer and two cymbal

players slouched in the beast's wake.

Father pointed at the street. "Hey, they skipped us! That's a bad sign."

‘‘Pure mumbo-jumbo," I said, and blotted at my brow with my sleeve. "So, tell me. How are you set?"

‘‘Set how?"

‘‘Money. *Money,* Dad. I'm asking if you have any—for emergencies." Like this one.

‘‘Oh, money." He shot me that conspiratorial glance I associated with bedtime stories, extemporized fairy tales: a lazy monkey or a shy peacock or a tender-hearted rhino. He leaned in close. "In the garage," he said, speaking low over a chuckle. "A fortune."

‘‘In the *garage*?"

‘‘Shh!" Father glanced around the deserted noodle joint, his eyes dancing a jig.

As far as I knew, that garage was empty; Father, relishing his Muni bus rides, had never replaced the decrepit station wagon with which Mother had absconded twenty-five years ago. But I played it straight. I played it Chinese. "How much?"

‘‘Big bucks. Big, big bucks!"

Undocumented big bucks I'd *need* should Vilma and Maxine go locusting through my life. "Shouldn't you show me where it's hidden?" I said. "Just in case?"

Father shrugged. "It's there."

‘‘Okay, but do you have anything in the bank?"

He squinched his mouth to one side. "Taai faisih. Too much trouble."

‘‘What about your cable-car pension? What do you do with your checks?"

‘‘Cash 'em."

‘‘At the bank?"

‘‘At a check-cashing place, of course," he said, clucking at me. "Nei janhai ban lo." *You're really getting stupid.*

I was really getting something. "You're saying nothing in the bank. Everything in the garage. *Everything.*"

Was that a wink? "A fortune. You hear, Mr. Mercedes? A fortune!"

Our hostess trudged over with the check and a plate on which sat and two pulverized fortune cookies, bogus chinoiserie with roots not in China but across the bay in Oakland . Father's hand was creeping toward his wallet.

I got to mine first, thrust a twenty on the woman, and waved her and her smashed cookies

away. “But Father, back to this fortune…”

Ready to go, ready to get back to his club, he was reaching for his pink plastic bag of crushed aluminum cans, but then sat up and nudged my arm with such zest that I almost dropped my wallet. “Hey! You and Jill and Cedric doing anything this weekend? Maybe come by with the Mercedes and Jill’s big Jeep. We’ll clean out the garage, drive all my cans to the recycling center.”

I nodded. “Should work. I’ll have to check with Jill. But anyway, about this fort—”

‘‘So many cans, thousands of cans,” Father cut in, clearly reveling in his calculations. “We’ll need to make ten-twelve trips, or at least maybe eight. Eight’s a lucky number!”

Lucky for whom? was my first thought; and then I thought: *Wait.* I looked at Father, looked at his bag of cans, looked at my wallet and felt my skin freeze slick like black ice.

‘‘I got all those cans packed in garbage bags, all those bags piled up in rows against the walls,” crowed Father, making jubilant stacking motions with his hands, stacks upon stacks upon stacks, “no place to walk anymore in that garage, but all this can-collecting will pay off.”

I dug my nails into the eel skin of my wallet. Would he say it? Could I bear it?

‘‘You, me, Jill, and Cedric, we’ll split the profits four ways,” he said, brimming with glad tidings. “*You’ll* see. The four of us, we’ll make a fortune!”

My inner tectonics lurched, and a continent cracked free; I let my hands, and my wallet, fall into my lap. A second or two passed before I could speak, and then I managed to say, “I’m sure you’re right, Father,” in a remarkably level voice considering the seismic tumult shuddering through my gut. “And we’ll be happy to help you with the cans.” (Though it *could* be argued that I should have guessed, should have figured it out long ago; it *could* be argued that Father, too, should have figured some things out.) “Now, shall I walk you back to the Tong Yan Fau?”

The answer, of course, was yes. Anything for the cronies at the club.

Jeannie Galeazzi's work has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in thirty-eight publications including *Fence, The Literary Review, Permafrost, Southern Humanities Review*, and *Main Street Rag* as well as *Feathertale Review* (Canada), *Dotlit* (Australia), and *Snorkel* (New Zealand), and is forthcoming in *SoMa Literary Review, All Rights Reserved* (Nova Scotia), and *Quality Fiction*. "Grails" is for Julia Vink and Lisa Galeazzi, valued readers.