

SARAH FENG

## Take Root

Big Ma makes me tend to the plants with her. Skin baked by the sun and cracked full of mud, we mine fleshy roots from the old lot and drop them into grey pails. Then Little Ma'll come in the noon and pick them up, her arms big and dense like wires, and sell them in the town square.

In the week, Pa will come back, so all of it gets stuffed into a shed, and we take care of him. His eyes bob in a milk-white sheen of film, froth dripping from his mouth. When the week starts Big Ma has to take off her ring, because it's Little Ma's turn to wear it.

We float him to bed. Little Ma is in charge of the pee tub, while Big Ma chops up the old roots and boils bitter soup.



Men will come to the door and ask for the roots and bulbs, and my job is to press a coin into their palms and tell them to come back later, we will sell them to you. This is a de-poh-sit. The last word is read from the smudge of ink on the back of my hand. They'll look at me weird, all big and dark.

On Little Ma's hand, there is a pale band of skin where the ring should be. Sun has shelled deep, hard brown on her hand. When the men come, she smooths down her blue dress and takes off the ring. She opens her mouth to speak, but by then, I can't hear them anymore.

I go see Pa after the Mas leave for their night shifts at the fast food joint.

He curls limp on the bed, his body like a thin coarse rag. When he folds in, his spine juts out, like it's nosing for air. Pee sloshes in the metal basin. The sour reek clings to the room.

"Pa, are you up?" I say.

He slumps left to face me, and he pinches his ring tight. "Queenie, I met a girl last week."

I squint at him. "You mean Little Ma?"

"No, from Jane's place. She was a pretty little thing."

"Oh. Well, Pa, are you gonna see her again?"

"Don't know," he says. "You think I should?"

I shrug. "Little Ma says we shouldn't talk to strangers." His eyes turn bright, and he slumps back to the right, his lips dry husks.



On Friday nights, Jane comes to get Pa. They bring him out in a wheelchair, load him into the white truck. They'll take him to the nursing home soon.

Little Ma hands her the wad of bills. We don't have the money to pay for a whole week, so we just send him in for the weekend.

Jane helps him into the wheelchair and starts taking him out. Her body looks like a tuber: pulpy and plump on top, skinny on the bottom, peach-flushed near the wide curves. And her legs fan out into thick green fronds on the ground. She is wearing a little dress. Pa stares straight into her chest while she grips the bars of his wheelchair.

In the white truck, girls spill out of the door. The red seeds of their lips gush into the wind. "Those girls aren't so old," I say. "They don't look sick at all."

"Don't think about it too much, Queenie," says Big Ma.

I start to run towards the door. "Bye, Pa," I am calling. Little Ma's hand latches around my shirt and pulls me back. Her tricep, a thick stem.

"Try not to go near those girls," she tells me. "You might catch the sickness."

Jane's tuber top spills out of her small dress. She pushes Pa along our front yard and into the van. The wheels bump chunks of dirt.

Little Ma hands the ring back to Big Ma, and I see their legs starting to flush green, too, sinking into the spongy ground.