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Ashes  
by Darryl Benjamin

The first thing she notices is the garden. She parks her Toyota Prius in front of the faded grey house, a two-story duplex. She's not sure if he lives in the bottom or the top. She recognizes his car, a blue Ford riddled with rust. "Stay here," she says to her kids. "I'll just be a minute."

But she is distracted by the garden. It looks as if it doesn't belong to the house. It is a neat garden, twenty feet by twenty feet, with orderly rows of impossibly lush cabbages, lettuce, and spinach. There must be a hundred shades of green, she thinks. It reminds her of her youth in Shanghai. She remembers her mother tending the garden and is flooded by sadness. She finds it difficult to tear her eyes from the garden. It is late summer, and she is dressed in orange shorts and a pea-green sleeveless shirt. Then she remembers why she has come.

Three rickety steps lead to the weathered porch and the door. They creak as she ascends. She knocks gingerly. There is no name on the door. Fifteen seconds pass. She begins to think no one is home and wonders if she has a pen to write a note when the door opens.

Her husband wears boxer shorts. He is bare-chested. She is used to seeing him this way. She would rather see him in a T-shirt and shorts, but he always complains it is too hot. He sweats as he invites her in. She notices there is no air conditioning. "Are the kids with you?" he asks.

She hesitates. "Yes, but I don't want to upset them. You'll see them this weekend." She has managed to stay away for three months. She imagined seeing him now she might detect a spark worth fanning. The best season of the year is almost over, she thinks.

She looks around. The kitchen is large, with a worn linoleum floor in a floral pattern that may have once been colorful. The cabinets are dark around the handles from use. She sees empty Styrofoam cups of Ramen crowded like grubs in the trash can.

"That's a beautiful garden," she says. Her voice sounds too cheerful.

"Yeah, I'm trying to make some money at the local farmer's market," he laughs. "I heard you can make a good profit with cabbages. I guess I've got a green thumb. Actually, it's a pain in the butt to maintain. I don't have the time with all my projects. I spend too much time out there." He wonders if he's talking

too much, if he revealed more than was necessary. He had the *déjà vu* feeling he was trying to sell the worthiness of his projects to her.

She registers fleeting annoyance. He had never gardened before. Had he put that much effort into caring for her? “I can only stay for a minute,” she says. “What have you been up to? I mean, besides taking care of the garden?”

He is unsure if she really wants to know, or if she’s just making conversation. He hopes it’s the former. He feels a stirring in his belly. Her long black hair, slender legs, and self-conscious sincerity make him want to touch her. *Fetching*, he thinks, she looks fetching. “I’ve got people interested in the game,” he says. “Spencer’s Gifts says they’ll carry it. The board is done. I’ve got to finish the video.”

“Oh, the game,” she says, letting the words hang in the air as if suspended by a clothespin, waiting to dry. She remembers the day she had come home from work early. The kids were still in school. There were strangers in her house. A young man and woman. They were on the white kitchen counter. The young woman was poised above the young man, who was flat on his back. “Hold that position,” her husband had said, video camera in hand. “That’s perfect. Now kiss.” The man’s erection poked through his blue boxer briefs. The woman’s breasts pressed upwards from her bra like magma. She remembers retreating to the bedroom, too stunned to speak.

After the young man and woman left, they fought. “On my kitchen counter!” she had said. And, “Why didn’t you tell me!”

“You’ll thank me when the money rolls in,” he said. “I did it for the family, for the kids.”

She remembers the dread that had been planted deep in her heart and realizes it hadn’t diminished. If anything, it spread to her limbs, making her movements heavy and slow. Anxiety was something she had learned to live with, something that was now a part of her. She listens to him as if from a distance.

Now he says, “I need to finish the edits for the video. I want to put it on Youtube. It’s good PR for the board game.”

She thinks of the countless projects he started and never finished: *Relationships Today* magazine, 16 Things Kids Can Do website, Special Events Coordinator, and now the Romantic Journey board game and video. She can taste the bitter irony of his mission statement, “Helping People Prosper. Emotionally, Financially and Intellectually.”

In the car, the kids’ fingers are busy with their iPods. Kira, 10, sits in the front seat, her window rolled down. Kyle, 4, sits in the back seat, his window also rolled down. “What’s mommy doing?” Kyle asks. Kira glances at the house and looks down at the game she is playing. “I think she’s visiting daddy.” “I want to visit daddy,” Kyle says. “No, mom told us to stay here.” “Oh,” he says, and jabs the screen with his index finger. “OK.”

Inside, she stands and rummages through her purse. “I brought you these,” she says. She hands him two coupons.

“What’s this?” he asks, taking them.

“It’s for the Food Shelf. You know, a place to get free food.”

He stares at them, uncomprehending, and then takes a step toward her.

“I’ve got to go now,” she says. She wants to say something else, something more, but can’t think of anything. Before she can turn away, she feels something moist in her eye. Her brain works furiously to process what she thinks just happened. Had he spit in her eye? His brown eyes meet hers. She has seen those eyes before, hard and angry. She stumbles backwards, catches her balance, and runs out the door.

He hadn’t meant to spit in her eye. It had just happened. It was automatic. Anyway, hadn’t he meant to say “But,” only it had come out “Puh”? Even so, it wasn’t a passionate spit. It was light and airy, delivered without heat, but with accuracy. He feels dazed. Good going, he tells himself. You blew it again. A familiar frustration seizes his belly. Who does she think she is, giving him handouts? How could she insult him this way? He was an entrepreneur, goddammit, not a welfare candidate. That was the problem with her. She lacked faith in him.

But the look on her face as she slammed the door. For the barest fraction of a second, he had caught a glimpse of her twisted mouth, her brow knotted in horror, her eyes as wide as snare drums. Not good, he thinks. How am I going to make this up to her?

His mind darts like a caged animal. She’ll understand when I hit payday. Then everything will be picture-perfect with the four of us happy and home together. For some reason, he thinks of his magazine *Relationships Today*. Maybe there is some advice in there he can use to patch things up?

Outside, his wife stumbles and falls on the last step. Her white purse skids into the dirt. Her orange shorts are soiled. She palms her eyes as stinging tears fall. She stands, leaving her purse where it fell, not bothering to brush herself off. Her mind swirls with a tsunami of broken promises, promised dreams, and years wasted. “Mom, are you all right?” Kira asks. “Is mommy all right?” Kyle asks anxiously from the back seat. They watch their mother walk in a slow, steady gait to the garden. She kneels, cups her hands and uproots a cabbage. First one, then another, with gathering speed she systematically uproots one cabbage after another. She holds each in her hands, thoughtfully gazes into it as if expecting it to speak, and then drops it on the ground before moving to the next.

Car doors open. Kira stands on one side of her mother and Kyle on the other. “Mommy, what are you doing?” Kira asks. When she receives no reply, Kira says louder, “Mommy, please stop.”

“Mommy, please stop,” Kyle parrots gamely. Kira kneels and puts her hand on her mother’s arm.

“Mommy,” she says shrilly, “Don’t.”

Her mother brushes her long black hair from her face leaving a black streak across her cheek. She stands and Kira follows suit. For a moment, the air, heavy with heat, is still. Kira watches her mother squat and scoop a handful of dirt. From a remote corner of her mind, Kira’s mother remembers a folktale her

grandmother had told about fenghuang, the Chinese Phoenix. Hadn't he turned himself into ashes and managed to overcome disaster?

She stares at the dark, loamish, richly-fertilized earth and rubs it onto Kira's bare arms. Kira stands paralyzed, allowing her mother to cover her arms in the warm soil. "Me too," Kyle says. His mother obliges. Again and again she stoops, scoops, and spreads the dirt over their arms, and then legs. Kira starts to cry. Soon Kyle joins her.

Inside the house, her husband hears his children's voices. He steps onto the porch. First he sees the cabbages scattered like discarded game pieces in the garden. Then he sees his Kira and Kyle, covered in earth, crying, and his wife, pale as death, spreading more filth on them.

"What are you doing? Are you insane?" he shouts as he rushes down the stairs. He knocks his wife's hands away. He tries to hug his kids, to comfort them, to quiet them, but they push him away. Instead, they cling to their mother, who, a million miles away, encircles them with her arms.

And then she is back, kneeling and holding them close, weeping and apologizing. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she repeats, brushing the soil from them, until they settle. She stands and takes them by the hand.

"You can eat cabbages," she says to her husband. She kicks a cabbage. It explodes in a flurry of green shards. "Eat a cabbage," Kyle says, and kicks a cabbage. Quickly, she retrieves her purse and loads her kids into the car. As she drives away, she looks in the rear-view mirror. She sees him scurrying about, trying to put the cabbages back in the neat, orderly rows, knowing he never would.