

Josephine walks with the kind of ease that makes the humid wind feel like a long drink of water.

The men watch as her fingers brush against the smooth curves of her ankle length skirt, and smile as her long hair cascades down whenever she stretches to reach the tops of the vegetable stacks atop the market stands. They seem to marvel at the way she studies the fruit with her head tilted to the side, deciding which ones to buy before placing them into her basket, as if she were the most intelligent female they'd ever seen.

The women, on other hand with their neatly pinned hair, watch her from behind the many stalls, taking her money for their produce but refusing to return her smile. They dislike the light sound of her laughter and the sandals she wears that expose too much of her feet.

Josephine checks her list and makes her way towards the end of the stalls, grabbing onto her basket. It is nearly full but she has yet one more item to buy. She breathes in the collection of aromas emanating from the cooking dishes and fresh produce straight from the farmer's land. Market day reminds Josephine of the people back home and the food her mother cooked when she was a child.

The town where she grew up was twice the size of the town she lives in now. She misses working in the fields with her father, and the squeaky porch swing she sat on when the storms rolled in. Once in awhile the sky in Hopes Town looks similar to the one she remembers as a child, yet somehow it always seems too far away. In the mountains with her parents, looking down upon the stretching fields, the sky felt as if it were at arms length from the earth and rock.

On the days before the rains set in, her mother made fresh cornbread, the dried kernels grated into a thousand pieces and mixed in with flour and sugar. The batter sizzled on the hot iron slates, bubbling with oil. They fried until the circles were brown, crispy on the edges but still soft and sweet inside. The aroma would fill the entire house and the yard outside, blending in with the smell of rain. Although that was so long ago, Josephine still wakes up from her dreams some mornings thinking she is back on the swing with the smell of cornbread and home close by.

Children are set loose into the market, playing and running around with their friends, bumping into bargaining customers and squeezing through the thick layer of bodies. Suddenly the crowd parts, pushing against the stands to make way for an angry vendor who is attempting to chase the kids who have knocked over his vegetable piles.

A man impatient with Josephine's slow steps pushes into her. His shoes dig into her toes and she screams at the back of his head, but her voice is lost in the massive crowd and busy movements. His shoes dig deeper into Josephine's foot as people bump them from all sides. She pushes him harder and uses her basket to wedge space between the man and herself. There is a moment of relief as the man steps forward and Josephine is free again, but a terrible throbbing arises from deep within her skin, and the pain spreads to redden her whole right foot. Her mouth turns into a line and she steps forward, using her body to force the crowd to part for her.

She makes it to the end of the stalls where there is less of a crowd and stands next to the door of a parked truck. Crouching down, the hem of her skirt becomes a wiping cloth for her dirty and pained foot. There is an indentation of the man's shoe heel across her bare toes. The sun beats into her scalp and she feels the wetness forming at the nape

of her neck. Her eyes become watery and she coughs from the dust that rises from her persistent rubbing.

“You can only rub the dirt away, not the agony,” a voice says.

Josephine looks up but no one has stopped to talk to her. An elderly couple has stopped to stare a few feet away but they rush ahead when she meets their gaze. She sighs and returns to her foot, rubbing with more force this time.

“If you don’t stop rubbing, soon your toes will fall off and then your foot will follow.”

She peers over her shoulders and back towards the market, but the voice remains faceless. Beads of sweat roll from her scalp onto the sides of her face and down her neck. She squints into the sky and listens for the voice again. Perhaps it is her turn to hear the voices just as her mother had days before she disappeared.

The clouds appear close to the tin roofs of the market street today, far from the surface of the sky. She waits for the voice again, relishing the short relief from the intense heat as a line of clouds moves over the sun. The brightness returns and she tucks her hair back behind her ears, feeling the hot strands slide through her fingers.

The voice chuckles and looms over her again, “I’m not quite at the heavens yet, but close enough for now.” An arm extends from the window of the parked truck and waves down at her.

Josephine gazes up into the side mirror and sees the smile of a man squeezed into the small, silvery rectangle. From inside the half open window, a tanned, lean arm reaches around and opens the door using the outside handle. Josephine grabs her basket

and steps out of the way of the swinging door, which groans its disapproval of being opened, but swings effortlessly the rest of the way once the handle is released.

The wind picks up for the first time this afternoon and ruffles through the clothes and hair of each person. Josephine feels the hem of the skirt wrap around her legs and welcomes the cool layer on her skin. The view of the road becomes blocked by the figure of the man as he stands in front of her, still smiling with the wind blowing through his loose shirt. The door groans again and he turns to give it a quick kick, disturbing the metal even more.

He points to her foot and clears his throat. “As I was saying, the dirt is gone but I see your foot is still in agony.”

She doesn’t like the way his words mock her and the way he tilts his head to meet her gaze. “It is not in agony,” she finally answers. “It’s just uncomfortable.”

“I’d say it’s a lot more than uncomfortable.”

“No, it will be fine once I get home and wash the toes properly.” She lifts her foot up, hiding it below the hem of her skirt for a few moments.

Josephine steps back and shields her eyes with her free hand. His figure becomes more vivid against the rusty yellow truck and dark market stalls. He stands casually with both hands in his pant pockets, his tan arms long and lean. A simple smile lingers on the lips of a wide mouth set on a firm yet friendly jaw.

A tied bunch of green onions threatens to fall from Josephine’s basket, and she pushes the stalks back in before turning back to the stranger.

“Well, thank you for...”, she pauses not knowing what to say next, just knowing that she was raised to be polite. “... for letting me lean against your truck. It was very

helpful.” She gives him a slight nod and turns to leave, determined not to wince from the stubborn pain in her foot.

She hurries to the stall at the very end of the market line. The women tending the stall sees her approaching and digs into her bags, busily placing bundles of bamboo shoots onto the table. Josephine smiles at the familiar scent of the green shoots and sorts through them. She presses into the fuzzy but sturdy layers, testing the stalks for firmness just as her father had taught her in the fields.

“Five dollars,” the woman protests after watching Josephine count the four single bills out.

“But I bought some from you last week and it was only four.”

“I raised the price this week, they are better quality than last week. Even you must think so, or you would not be buying it, and my son had to drive further this time to pick up the bags from the farm.”

Josephine watches the old woman talk with her arms failing about her to stress her words. The woman’s stall neighbors listen to their exchange, waiting for the outcome. Even the bargaining customers are quietly sorting through the produce, intent on listening to the new lady in town with the weird, open-toed shoes speak.

“Last week I paid four dollars even though you charged the customers in front of me only three. And now I’m supposed to pay for your son’s gas money too?” Josephine lets the bundle of shoots fall from her hands and back onto the table, causing the bundles at the edge of the table to drop onto the ground.

The woman gasps and grabs at the shoots, hugging them to her chest. “You do not have to be so rude as to throw it at me when... “

“I did not throw it at you, I simply placed it back onto the table... “

“... now I can't sell these anymore because you have softened the ends which is where the most important part is... “

“Any of these people can tell you that I did no such thing. You're the one who cheats me each time I come here.” The pain in her foot is forgotten as Josephine stands facing the woman and the table of bamboo shoots.

“It would be cheaper for me to grow and harvest them myself on my own land!”

The woman smirks and stacks the bundles back into small piles, blowing the dust off the shoots before placing them back onto the table, for she and everyone else in town knew that Josephine was simply making an idle boast.

The previous owner of Josephine's farm had warned her that the soil was too dry to grow anything. “It's dead soil, Miss,” he'd said. “Don't nothing grow here except grass and more grass.” But Josephine had insisted anyway, and had bought the property the fellow had been trying to sell for the previous five years.

Josephine sees the way the woman's eyes study her loose hair and bare neck and notices the quick twitch of the woman's mouth. She can sense in the corner of her eye the others looking at her with the same gaze.

“Johnny Wilson's land hasn't seen a stem of green anything other than grass for the past five... “. The woman stops as the presence of another customer joins Josephine at the stall.

Josephine grabs the basket and turns to leave but a new voice stops her. “Don't forget this.” The stranger from the truck extends the bundle towards her.

She shakes her head but he extends it again. “I insist, it’s on me today.” He hands the woman three dollars and places the shoots into Josephine’s basket. “Is that enough, Maggie?”

The old woman looks from Josephine to the stranger and back again. She lowers her eyes and adjusts the cuffs of her shirt and pushes imaginary strands of hair back from her face before answering, “Yes, Thomas, I supposed it’ll be enough...”

Thomas pats the woman on her shoulders and turns to leave without another word. He walks casually back to his truck with Josephine unwittingly in tow, stopping in front of the old door. She shifts the baskets into her arms, carrying the heavy load against her chest.

He peers over her shoulders back towards Maggie, who is now busy bargaining with another customer. “They’re not bad people really, once you get to know them. It’s just that you’re...”

“New,” Josephine says. “Yeah, I know. I’m well aware of that.”

He nods and stuffs his hands back into his pant pockets. “Still in agony?”

Josephine laughs and feels relaxed for the first time. “No, just uncomfortable.”

“Of course.”

“I have to get going,” she explains, her voice now more at ease. “This was a much longer trip than I had planned it to be...but successful,” she adds, glancing down into her packed basket. “Thank you again, this time for the bamboo shoots.”

Abruptly, she turns and begins walking, hugging the basket close to her body. Her sandals flop against her feet as she walks down the long road towards her car. She scratches her moist face and wipes her forehead with her sleeve, but does not look back.

A few minutes later, having reached her car and slipped inside, she finds the air to be stuffy and hot even though the windows had been open all this time. As she leans over to place her full basket onto the floor on the passenger side, the leather seat sticks to her bare arms.

Josephine drives to her tiny house with her skirt wrapped around her knees, enjoying the rush of wind that surrounds her body. The bumpy road crunches beneath her tires and she watches as the road ahead opens up for her to pass through.

She used to take long trips with her parents on hot days such as this one, all three of them crammed into the front seat of an old pickup. Her mother always packed cold drinks for their trips but the beverages would always be warm by the time they drank them.

Josephine used to hang from the side of the window, stretching her arms out into the distance to touch any part of the world that rolled past her view. Her parents' voices became a part of the background, sounding as refreshing as the hard wind that blew through her hair and fingers. They talked about the crops and plans for expansion, or the good bargains they were going to look into later that day.

The trips took them a few hours from their home and into the county's largest market square. In the back of their truck were packed bundles of bamboo shoots picked the day before, ready to be sold. Josephine's hands would still be aching from the intense pulling and packing of the shoots over the previous days, but nothing mattered when she was able to watch the line of trees fly past her eyes at the edge of the land.

"Josey," her mother would say every half hour. "Don't lean out too far, we almost lost you last time!"



And they would all laugh at her mother's words, because when Josephine was younger she refused to ride in the truck with the passenger window opened. She feared one day the wind would blow too forcefully and take her away from her parents. "Don't worry, Josey," her father would reply when she'd protest. "Your mother and I would turn right back around and chase after you if we had to. But we'd have to break for lunch and refreshments after awhile."

Her mother was a woman named Connie, with unkempt hair that unraveled despite the pins and clips she spent countless hours arranging and re-arranging. In the truck her mother smelled of the pumpkin leaves they grew in the yard next to the porch, and her father smelled of the loose soil in their fields. Josephine had always liked to watch them during their trips as the rolling landscape became their permanent backdrop.

Shaking her daydreams, Josephine turns into her driveway, parks the old car and grabs the basket from the passenger seat. The days are long and she knows she will have sunlight to work in her garden for the next few hours. Her toes begin to burn from earlier and she is reminded of Thomas. She smiles at the thought of him and pictures him against his yellow truck.

[To be continued, work in progress]. Chai Saechao.