

Rain Music

LINH AND I GREW UP penned in the same yard, so our sibling rivalry did not last very long. By third grade we had stopped physically assaulting one another and reached a permanent truce. At that time her hair was long and flowing, brushed daily by my mother as Linh closed her eyes and counted each stroke. It always felt like cool satin when I yanked it, her head jerking backward, mimicking the motion of my arm. In actuality, she was very kind and I was not too violent, so we became intimate friends. I have not had any trouble from her since.

She is the red rose of the family and I am the green thorn. We have both decided that we are beautiful, so she tells me, but I believe she is also very beautiful outside in face and gesture. I always pout when I accuse her of being a selfish firstborn, picking, stealing the best of our parents' genes and leaving me the rejected remainder. She has wide, almond-shaped eyes like black, pearl-black reflecting pools with brown-colored flecks swirling beneath the surface, light honey-color skin and even, velvet-smooth cheeks. Her nose is just slightly upturned, her lips rosebud shaped, her chin small and delicate. Her hair still looks and feels the same now as in third grade. The vision, taken together as a whole, is breathtaking. There is something about it, a wistful, dandelion, orchidlike kind of beauty that feels like notes in a chord being played separately, finger by finger, harmonizing back and forth. I marvel even now.

My mother and father have polished her until she shines. She graduated summa cum laude from the College

Educational Terms

summa cum laude with
highest honors, p. 101

UCSF University of Cali-
fornia at San Francisco,
p. 102

of Chemistry at Cal and double
majored in Ethnic Studies. However,
my parents don't count the latter. She is
now a fourth-year student at UCSF
preparing to enter the surgical resi-
dency program next fall. My parents
are bursting at the seams, gorged with
devouring so much blessedness and
good fortune.

"Will your daughter become a
surgeon?" our relatives ask.

"It's possible," my father says, beaming.

"She is friends with this young man in her class. He's
tall, distinguished-looking, loyal and respectful to his par-
ents, hard-working but generous. He was even born in
Vietnam! But he came over here with his family in 1975. He
went to Harvard"—my mother pauses to let the relatives
gasp in unison—"on a full scholarship!" she smiles mod-
estly, then lowers her eyes.

"A possible son-in-law?" they ask.

She shrugs and sighs. "That is up to God."

Linh hasn't told my parents about David. She met him
five years ago during her final year at Cal. That semester
they were in three classes together: a choral class, an Afro-
American literature class, and a creative writing class. They
became good friends.

David is a writer. His subjects are ordinary preoccupa-
tions of other writers: his mother, the father he has never
seen or known, the friends of his childhood. Some of them
are dead now. The others are spread out across the country.
One is a construction worker in St. Louis. Another is a
teacher in Baton Rouge. The third is a journalist in
Washington, D.C. They write to him once in a while or call
him. Linh hasn't met any of them, but she knows them all.

After David feverishly completes a story, Linh cooks
him dinner. Afterward, she tucks him into bed and sits
nearby in the wicker chair, legs drawn up and hugged
tightly to her chest, to watch him while he sleeps. His soft,
black curls rest against the white of the pillow, his closed
eyelids and long lashes flutter minutely while he dreams,

his breath whistles through the evenness of his teeth as the cover grazes the dark honey of his skin.

They always have a good time together, and he makes her laugh in many different ways, wherever they happen to be. He always gets close to finishing her off during a tennis set, but then she cries out that he has cheated and treated her unfairly and he has to start over again. He never wins. Sometimes they sing together, his clear resonant tenor melding with her flutelike, crystalline soprano. Then they have tea.

I know all about David. She won't stop talking about him, but I know less about Thanh, the Vietnamese friend at UCSF. I know he's nice but that's all. She woke me up this morning at ten thirty and said, "It's a bright, beautiful, Saturday morning. Let's go and have a picnic."

"No, no," I mumbled hazily in my sleep. "Take David. Leave me alone."

"I don't want to take David. I want to spend quality time with you, my darling sister. Get up, you piece of mutton. Toast on the table in five minutes and we're leaving in half an hour."

"Oh, lord," I groaned, "I'm being punished for sins from past lives."

We arrived at the park at twelve, lugged our ample picnic hamper heavily laden with cheese, fruits, sandwiches, ice, and bottles of juice from the car, and trudged into the heart of the lightly shaded, green forest. When I opened the basket and took out the butter, she started to talk.

"David kissed me last night . . ."

"He what?"

"... or I kissed him. It just happened, I guess. He invited me to dinner, promised to cook a sumptuous Cajun feast with Vietnamese desserts. *Bánh flanc*, you know. My favorite." She plucked a blade of grass from its roots and twisted it back and forth, watching a streak of feeble, yellow sun play on its linear edges. "I expected it to be a celebration. He'd just finished his first novel, not quite a love story, he says, and he wanted me to read it." She spoke more softly. "When I arrived, he had set tiny blossoms in water dishes throughout the apartment. It smelled wonder-

ful. The food was delicious, everything so lovely, so tranquil I didn't know where to begin. After dinner he led me into the living room.

" 'Rain music,' he said. 'It's for you.' After the last note on the piano had stopped to echo, he turned toward me and kissed me for a long, long time. I didn't know what I was doing. I just couldn't stop. I didn't breathe. When he let me go, I kept thinking of his hands and fingers, seeing them fly over the ivory keys like little Russian men dancing in their black fur hats and noticing how his brown was different from mine. I was raging inside, screaming in my head, 'Why can't his fingers be brown like mine, be my brown? Why is his hair curly, not straight like mine?' I saw brown pigments run across my eyes, all different colored browns. Those pigments keep us apart. How do I stand there and tell this man who writes me music and whose hands burn my cheeks that I can't be who he wants me to be?"

"But he doesn't want to change you."

"No, I can't be who he thinks I am. He's a damned starving writer. He can't give me anything, just himself. And he doesn't even know that I'm using him. Damn it! He doesn't even know." She choked on her tears, swallowed, and cried quietly, hugging her knees, until exhausted. The leaves rustled softly while I waited.

After a while she grew calm, her eyes gazing steadily at the flashing water of the stream below. "I love Thanh. I would never hurt him for anything. Throughout the four years at UCSF, he has been so patient, so kind, so dedicated to medicine for its own good, not for just its technology, even though he's brilliant and understands these details completely. He's so perfect for me, just perfect. It's like he stepped out of my story and came to life. We speak the same language and share the same past. Everything. And Mom and Dad, they've done so much for us. Now they think they've won the lottery from God for being good all their life."

"But how do you feel about Thanh? How does he make you feel?"

"He will be my lifelong friend. He'll make a wonderful father. That's what a husband should be. Our children will

know the culture and customs of our homeland. They'll speak Vietnamese and English, just like us."

"And how does David make you feel?" I tugged at her gently.

She bowed her head for a long while reflecting. Then she softly murmured, "It's just not possible."

"But why? I don't understand."

The picnic basket remained quite full. Neither of us was hungry. It threatened to rain as we packed up to go home. On the drive back, we were silent. I watched the windshield wipers swing back and forth, clearing rain cascading down the front window.

RESPONDING

1. **Personal Response** If you had a friend in Linh's predicament, what would you say to her?
2. **Literary Analysis** What is the significance of rain in the *title* and at the end of the story?
3. **Multicultural Connection** Although Linh says that "pigments" keep David and her apart, what other reasons are revealed in the story?

LANGUAGE WORKSHOP

Punctuating Dialogue In *direct quotations*, quotation marks are placed before and after the speaker's exact words. If the direct quotation is interrupted, both parts are enclosed in quotation marks. Periods, commas, and usually question and exclamation marks are placed inside quotation marks. A comma sets off the speaker from the words spoken.

Punctuate the following: No, no I mumbled hazily in my sleep. Take David. Leave me alone.

WRITER'S PORTFOLIO

Write a letter from Linh to columnist Ann Landers seeking advice, along with Ann Landers's reply.