

Charles Lowe

Baby American Dream

“The tree prefers calming, but the wind keeps blowing,” my grandma told me when I was a kid and didn’t want to remember, but what’s that matter to a husband who’s in real estate and wears a pair of loafers and who’s sold more dreams than my grandma could imagine. She’s dead now. Not that I’m complaining, I am in the Vincent van Gogh Estates, so named for the softly colored brick walls located next to a newly built subway stop, which can be seen from a fancy veranda, overlooking a solitary palm tree in need of regular watering but still dying. Who would be crazy enough to plant a palm tree in a northern city, which leads me to my story? It is called Baby American Dream.

Well, it is not my story exactly. It’s my mom’s. Well, what do you expect? In any case, I am sitting on my veranda, watching the different passersby hustle into an underground tunnel (I’ve never taken a subway; we have a driver) when ma calls me. She says, “*Gui-niu* (that’s her name for me), do you want a Baby American Dream?”

Well, I do think the demand is strange, but do I say anything? Well, you know me, when do I ever? Well, she says to me, I know the daughter of a friend. She (the daughter) has a website. I say, that’s good. Ma gives me an address. It comes up with what else—Baby American Dream. I say, ma, I got it.

She says, that’s my *Gui-niu*. My backbone and spine hurt. But I’m thinking, what else? I’m her girl. I say now what? “Well, do you think elephant tusks don’t grow from a dog’s mouth?”

I have no idea what that means and smile. Ridiculous, huh, I am talking over the phone, so I smile at a subway visitor. He’s a foreigner with a shaft of red hair that peels over his left eye. He doesn’t see me, so I feel comfortable and fully let loose my smile. I’ve been told my smile is beautiful. It is a bright jewel. It is like a wave in the Pacific, bending into the wide open sands. Anyways, I wait. Finally, after she’s given me

enough wisdom to chew on, mom says to invite the salesperson over for a talk with my husband. I don't say a word and look further into Baby American Dream:

For only 50,000 USD, a Chinese along with her mom can transit to the United States and its territories so as to meet a real doctor and birth a REAL US CITIZEN. That's what's scrolled on the website in thick and large red and blue letters. Interesting, I think, and start to consider how the thick and somewhat curvy message can be possible. I'm not even carrying. But I know ma. She's not me, a girl with an empty tortoise shell for a skull. She's got the scheme and is already two moves ahead; mom's a natural Go player. I've seen her roll up lines of plastic black circles, a big smile flitting across her face. That woman is unafraid to smile.

I tell my husband to set aside Sunday late afternoon. It's our only time alone. Husband usually spends Sunday mornings at the office, and mom comes by around 6 but arrives early, then around 1 with a plastic bag and insists I steam the fish. Mom starts with the Goubuli buns, big fat saucers stuffed with pork and bok choy mom won't let me have a hand in until I'm a woman (by that, she means pregnant). Mom smiles: granted, not the smile that may be offered freely to a subway visitor who won't see you for at least another generation.

No, the kind that husband uses to close a real estate deal after he discovers the client's got buyer's remorse. My husband has closed several in the spacious living room of our two-floor villa, and believe me, it's not an infrequent occurrence, especially when the client's put down for a second home and has to dip into the savings meant for a medical emergency—hospitals won't take anyone without cash in hand, not emergency rooms, not if your body is covered with burn marks, you feel the burn marks inside your eyelids and you are blind: you hear me, blind. I often have that nightmare whenever my husband talks about his phantom homes. Phantom homes are the ones that aren't built yet. When they're built, my husband explains in his most thoughtful voice, they can be turned over quickly, for a lot more than if they were dreams. But for now, the two of us have to wait and hope our fancy

villa with the perfect view of busy subway visitors doesn't evaporate like a dream.

Every time I see a construction crane, I have that vision—no joke! I see the crane swinging like the jaws of some animal (not exactly a dog, I am still thinking of mom's riddle). Anyways, I put away that nightmare and get ready for Baby American Dream. Yes, we are still talking about my mom's plan to get me with a child, a real American, and though I do want my time alone with my husband and maybe he does too, he says—well, he doesn't say, but I feel he doesn't love real estate. His lips have thinned, and his skin has lost clear feeling. When mom brought us together (actually she and a workmate, but mom calls husband her gift to me, no joke!), he looked like he had been dusted with shiny grains of sand.

Mom is happy though. Let me tell you. She comes to our apartment extra early, so I got no time that day to survey the subway visitors disappearing into their separate caves. I have to set up our kitchen. Let me tell you, I'm not a typical Chinese girl. I may be on the surface, following husband and mom, blah, blah, but underneath I'm not that soft girl who stares at you from a warmly tiled veranda. I hate cooking. I hate cooking very much. When mom is off at auntie's dive in the downtown, auntie is our poor relation but those two are like two crows babbling when they get together, I like to order out—don't be shocked—pre-prepared dumplings right from a stand. I don't leave the apartment compound, not even the apartment.

You see, our apartment has a feature, a telephone pad with a TV screen which allows me to look into the guard's eyes and freely say, "Can you send for a dozen tofu dumplings?" I giggle (like a school girl, you won't believe it), "I'm watching my figure."

The guard's mouth goes open. There is no elephant tusk growing from his lips. Twenty minutes later, a kid shows up with a plastic bag. I see his palm. It is soft and unwrinkled like a shore of a Pacific island nobody will ever visit. I slip an extra 10. He sees it and pushes it back into my palm. I have on my husband's smile. The kid doesn't notice. I hear his bike tires scraping against the back metal door of the apart-

ment; they don't clean that, and it doesn't look like a sophisticate like Van Gogh could walk through it. Then, the kid's gone. I swallow each fried dumpling, let the grease stick to my tongue, smiling freely at the subway visitors until they disappear into a tunnel draped with starlight. But not this Sunday. Mom is steaming Goubuli buns, the steam providing the nearly transparent kitchen tile with a very thin tissue. I don't like seeing my kitchen disordered and want to tell mom I prefer having my dumplings to go.

I know it's silly to keep a secret, but just the same, I don't tell her.

We wait. At 4:30, husband comes home: his Arnold Palmers swung over his meaty shoulders. Mom says she approves of golf. All Westerners play that game. It's a good way to make *guanxi*. Husband agrees. He says connections are the key to hustling off luxury villas in Vincent Van Gogh or in other luxury lodgings.

Finally, the woman comes over and shows us a brochure coated in plastic and promising that for 70,000 bucks (the price's been raised) we can have an all-expense paid trip to Saipan. Then she shows various sites from the island of Saipan, a dizzying flyspeck in the middle of the Pacific. The island has rich clay cliffs from which, she tells us excitedly, we have the capability to escape the onset of US marines. I decide right then, listening to her gentle voice while surveying a wind calming down a very thin palm tree on a very still beach, that ma has another good one, so guess what I say before husband can get in the first or second word?

We should do it.

Mom smiles, not like she was closing a phantom deal, but freely like she was eying a subway visitor down a tunnel. Did I tell you cannot see inside the lit tunnel from the warmly tiled veranda of our two-floor villa?

Husband doesn't appear too bothered. He's used to it and signs the contract, which requires a down payment of 10,000 bucks. The woman carries around a bankcard machine, which she takes out from a plastic shopping bag and bends down. I watch my husband studying the nearly invisible lines creasing her short white pants suit. Her skin on

her calves looks unshaven. I wonder if she's married, if she's had many lovers. Did I tell you, she's in her twenties? These little empresses, that's what we call them, have no shame. Mom says she knows a twenty-something girl who's already had three lovers. I ask mystified, doesn't the girl worry what her future husband will think?

"These young men, what do they know, they figure if the girl has spread her legs enough, you know, she'll be more skilled," mom guffaws, "in dumpling making," which makes me wonder if mom knows I wiggle my eyelashes flirtatiously with a guard in order to get a take-out order of fried dumplings, sometimes pork but other times shrimp. We're locked in. Husband agrees within two years to transport me to a small US territory, no more than a speck, where I can birth a little dream, although the girl warns us (she has eyelids that vanish beneath her thinly grained skin) the kid will never have the chance to be an Obama. "FOR THAT," the girl clicks her tongue professionally (how do you do that?), "YOU HAVE TO BIRTH YOUR LITTLE DREAM IN THE FORMAL PART OF THE STATES WHICH FOR AN EXTRA 50,000 USD..."

Mom shuts the girl off right there. No OBAMA. Mom's maybe five moves ahead, but the girl pretends not to be listening. She's studying mom's finely dusted Goubuli (did I tell that you can barely see its floury skin?) and opens the brochure to Obama, Malia, and Michelle, Sasha at Obama's knees, Michelle affectionately touching her husband's firm and strong palm. I start considering maybe I'm robbing my Baby of her American Dream. Who knows, maybe I am, but the girl sees me and knows that elephant tusks cannot grow out a dog's mouth—hey, that does sound nice—so shuts off the screen and snaps her APPLE shut.

The rest is simple. Husband adds his name to the contract. Mom treats him like a hero. Mom has a rather large chest, I do not, and she puts on an extra bit of lipstick and, I'm not ashamed to say, flirts with my husband. Her eyes fixed into his eyes as he tells the four of us, the girl stays for supper, how he convinced another couple to buy a phantom.

"Isn't it hard," mom says admiringly, "to get a family to pour its

hospital fund into an apartment that is a bit of...in fact...thin air?"

She says all this drawing out each word like a bubble beneath a cliff a bunch of Japanese soldiers jumped off when the other choice was to meet an American. I start to picture the clay cliffs, then the endless and very thin lines of sand. Then, I visit my future where I'm carrying my Baby American Dream. Only it's like I am that girl in the brochure, carrying a baby although my hips remain nicely sculpted and my stomach is if anything more tightly strung. I am wearing fashionable shades like Obama jaunting off on a well-protected jet, Michelle also with shades on and by his side, her skin against his finely grained skin, and I feel what it must feel like when your life holds endless possibilities, so I start smiling freely like I know what it's like to have elephant tusks grow from the mouth and forget to add a word.