

AMBITIOUS ORCHID

The faculty wives surrounded Gwen and whispered how lovely she looked, how serene. At the back of the room their husbands took turns grasping Henry's hand and patting his shoulder. I joined the men's line and Henry accepted my hand without forming a grip. "Thank you for coming, Charlie," he said. I looked to see if his eyes were focused. An hour earlier I had driven him here.

Between the two groups a tiny figure shuttled furiously. Della was all over the room, steering the visitors in, receiving the floral deliveries, arguing with the manager in her harsh squawk. Even on this occasion she wore her usual shapeless jacket and black trousers and not a trace of makeup. Her uneven bowl of black hair bobbed below the conversation as she elbowed her way through the crowd of taller women.

One of the faculty wives wagged a hand glittering with zirconium to beckon Della. "Miss. Oh Miss. Could you bring me a water please?"

Della planted herself in front of the woman who towered over her and looked her straight in the eye. Even here she did not attempt to whisper.

“Get your own water,” she told the wife of the department chair. “I am not your maid. I am Professor Bisker’s research associate. If you cannot walk over to water fountain yourself, what did you grow legs for?”

The other women turned and looked wide-eyed at Della. One pig-nosed lady held her forefinger in front of her lips and tilted her head in Gwen’s direction. Della did not lower her voice.

“What are you whispering for?” she said. “None of you visited the past month when you could have said something. You aren’t going to wake her up now.”

Indeed they wouldn’t. Gwen still looked like a trim and athletic woman in her early forties who was just taking a nap in the casket. Except that five organs had gone malignant simultaneously.

I was still standing next to Henry as Della marched across the room after leaving the women speechless. She cut into the receiving line and told Henry it was all arranged, it would be a cremation instead. No sense in his wasting money putting a box in the ground. Henry looked blankly back and forth at Della and me and murmured “Whatever.”

I asked myself what the hell I was doing. Were we all just fooling ourselves? Henry Bisker was already a candidate for the Lasker Medal and ran one of the world’s leading

laboratories in developing cancer treatments, yet even his own wife was not safe from the touch of the disease.

Four years earlier I had tried to approach Della, during her first month at Purdue. Female students were rare and each year competition to meet the incoming class was fierce. I thought Della would be grateful that a wise and experienced classmate would take the time to show her around. She granted me twenty minutes. Time enough for one cup of tea in the break room next to the biology library. When I arrived she was buried in that week's issue of *Cell*. She looked up and asked, "What is your research project?"

I was still standing. She hadn't asked my name. I sat down, perching my paper cup on the one edge of the Formica tabletop that she didn't have covered with her papers. She didn't move them.

"I haven't started a project yet," I said. "First you have courses, then the qualifying exam. After that you arrange with a professor. . . "

"Waste of time," she cut in. "If you don't know what you want to do, why are you here?"

I bristled. "I do have some ideas. I'm pretty interested in the docking problem — designing drugs that fit the active sites of receptors. With computer graphics design I think you can limit the search, no more trying everything in the forest to see what might work. Maybe I might be able to get into Bisker's lab."

She glanced up. "Bisker is the only one here worth working with," she said. "That is why I came here. Your docking problem — you know the paper by Vinograd? Big mess. Paper by Kim no good either. They think fitting shape is everything, forget about charge."

I looked at her. Those were the two leaders in the field and I had spent the past month trying to understand their papers, and here this girl was just blowing them off.

"You seem to know all about this," I said. "Is molecular design your specialty too?"

She glanced up from her page again and said, "That stuff is all just making pictures. You have to make the real thing or it's nothing."

I had run into a buzz saw here. I tried to steer the conversation along a more personal line. "So tell me, how did you come by the name Della?"

"Port of entry, San Francisco. My name is Da-Lan but most of us Chinese take a western name to make papers easier."

"Da-Lan. I see. Does that mean something?"

"No, no, Da LAN. You have the tones wrong — what you said is bad word. You cannot get it right. Da-Lan means Ambitious Orchid. Just call me Della."

Other questions were answered just as curtly. When I asked where her home was, she said Guangzhou. When I asked if she had brothers or sisters, she shook her head.

"Only one child per family permitted," she said. "I should have been the son. It would have been better. I would not have to come here to go to school." Then my twenty minutes were up and Della was back in the library, plowing relentlessly through a textbook.

Della did not waste her time. After marching into the department head's office without an appointment and arguing for half an hour, she spent her first three months testing out of all twelve required graduate courses. The day after the last one she cornered Henry Bisker and presented him with a plan for a research project. She had come to the department a year after my class, and four months later she was a year ahead of us all.

If you were to see Henry Bisker on the street, you might think he was a clerk in a department store and not a university professor. His reddish-brown hair was cropped short, masking the beginning of a bald spot, he wore cardigan sweaters with a necktie, and he was secure enough in his brilliance that he did not need to affect facial hair or jump into the heated debates over lab space or vice-chairmanships that consumed the ego-fueled faculty meetings. But there was no mistaking his drive and ambition. His

voice was soft and his speech polite, but his eyes flashed with impatience when any conversation went two minutes beyond its initial purpose – and most often that purpose was the search for tumor-killing drugs.

Every month the Biskers hosted a dinner for his lab — the research associates and the students. While the post-docs were busy trying to impress their mentor and undermine each other, we students all dove for the pork roast, knowing this was the only decent meal we might see all week. All except Della, who brought her own salty eggs and noodles, which she neglected while immersed in the scientific debate swirling around Henry.

At the other end of the table Gwen Bisker sat looking bored, and we students, knowing where the groceries were coming from, tried to engage her in small talk.

"I so despise this little town," she said one evening. "It has nothing that Boston does. No concerts, no theater, no civilization of any sort. The World's Biggest Drum and the Indy 500, and that's enough for these rubes."

She did have a point. Central Indiana had been scoured bare by the glaciers ten thousand years earlier, and generations of unimaginative Hoosier architects had not improved the scenery much. The monotonous piles of red brick that made up the Purdue campus were the only break in the treeless plain of corn and soybean fields for 50 miles. I refilled her wine glass and hoped to encourage some drama. She spilled a little but didn't notice. She stared up the table, where Henry was intently debating some fine point about iodine

compartmentation in the thyroid. He glanced up, waved absently at his wife, and plunged back to his discourse.

"Brilliant idea," Gwen said. "Just brilliant. Pack up and move to Indiana, chance of a lifetime. As if Harvard wasn't good enough. Oh no, come out and be a big fish in a little pond. Well that's just great if all you want is to get your name on publications. But not if you want to live a life."

I looked at her from the side and tried not to stare. Every blond hair was in place, her teeth were perfect, and despite everything my gaze kept returning to the hollow where her necklace pendant kept dropping into her low-cut dress. That opal must have been an inch across but that wasn't what I was looking at. She must have been a knockout when she first met Henry.

Gwen's mouth was drawn in a tight line as she glowered down the table. Henry and Della were excitedly drawing diagrams on the table linen while the postdocs struggled to get a word in. Della had probably never worn makeup in her life, and with her mouth half full of noodles she interrupted Henry to contradict whatever he had just said.

This was getting good, and I tried to stoke the flames. "Surely you must be proud of what he's doing – fighting disease and all."

Gwen's face was getting flushed and her eyes flashed. "No anniversary. No flowers. Even on Christmas he's at that damn lab. And to think my parents thought we were young."

From his little biographical sketch in the department handbook we students knew that Henry was 22 when he got his doctorate from Johns Hopkins. We had more trouble trying to figure just when he married Gwen. They were always a bit vague on that score, but it seemed to us that their daughter Vera off at Brown was a year ahead of the standard schedule.

Most of the students took five years to get enough research together for a thesis, and four was moving right along. Della found a way to compress it into two. One day I saw her holding a thermometer in her mouth and asked if she was well. She said she was fine. An hour later she was taking her temperature again, and again an hour later. Finally I asked what she was doing.

"This is experiment, find my peak rest time," she said. "See this graph, temperature cycles up and down twice a day."

Sure enough, she had plotted out her body temperature and pulse rates and found they both were lowest at six in the evening and five in the morning. So for the next two years Della got by on two hours of sleep a day, not lying down, but sitting in a high-backed chair with her eyes closed, for an hour in the late afternoon and another hour before

dawn. For the other 22 hours she worked, breaking off just long enough to boil some water for noodles now and then. For those two years Della lived in the basement of Olsen Hall, where she had a synthetic chemistry lab at one end and a hamster colony at the other.

One Saturday night Tom Meyer and I were at a typical student party — laboratory alcohol punch and dancing in a broken-down rental house on Grant Street. This was a good night and we met a couple of girls from the Nutrition School. Afterwards we four walked around looking for a place to get out of the cold. This was West Lafayette, not Boston, and, as Gwen had noted, our entertainment choices were severely limited. We wound up wandering around Olsen Hall, showing off our windowless cubicles, when we heard some commotion from downstairs. One of the girls asked if the place was haunted, and we allowed she was pretty close. We tiptoed down the stairs, and I recognized Della's squawky voice, not exactly shouting, but singing in Chinese. It might have been a Red Army march for all I knew. We peeked through the door, and there she was, decapitating hamsters with a little hand guillotine, at two o'clock on a Sunday morning. She didn't seem a bit surprised that people would be walking in at that time and scarcely glanced up. One of the girls saw what was happening and got agitated.

"Oh, they're so cute!" she cried. "How can you stand to kill them?"

Della looked annoyed. "They are just animals. This is research. If you have to kill, just kill."

Tom hustled the two girls out the door, but I hung around. One of the great mysteries of the department was exactly what Della was doing all the time, and now I was just drunk enough to ask. Jokes never registered with Della; in fact, I had never even heard her laugh. But that didn't stop me from trying.

"So what are you doing here, opening up a grocery? Maybe we can start selling hamster lo-mein at the Union?"

"You need to be serious and not drink, Charlie. You think you want to be scientist, but your picture-drawing computer is sleeping now. Here, look at these hamsters. What do you see?"

I noticed streaks of gray in Della's hair, but didn't say so. I saw that her face was lined and realized she might be closer to 40 than to 25, but didn't say that either. "Those guys look pretty sick," I said. "That one is just dragging, and this one over here has a large growth on one side."

"Right," she said, "they all have cancer. Lung, liver, intestine, stomach. What about that other cage?"

"Those look okay to me," I said. "At least their coats are shiny and they're lively. I can't see inside them of course. Are these the controls?"

"No, the sick ones are the control. I give them all aflatoxin, then give these others - give these what I make." She wasn't going to reveal her secrets even to her labmates before publishing.

I started to sober up fast. "Jesus, Della. You're telling me you have a universal anti-cancer drug that works? You are going to be rich and win the Nobel Prize!"

"Too early to say that," she said. "Still need clinical trials. No telling how long before anyone lets those start. Anyhow Henry Bisker home sleeping with his trophy wife will get the prize."

It was around this time that Henry's career started to take off. It was never clear which one of them had the inspiration to try incorporating the rare earth elements into organic complexes. That feat alone would have been worth a chemistry prize. But to predict that they would have any biological activity, much less killing tumors, was a stroke either of luck or genius. A year later Della got her doctorate and started working as a research associate and Henry began giving interviews to the national news magazines.

Henry's group was now squarely in the race for the Big One, and if he had been compulsive before, he was now in hyperdrive. Henry was in the lab 14 or 16 hours a day, and there was no distinguishing weekday from weekend. More post-docs were hired, and the new guys putting in 60-hour weeks felt apologetic at being shirkers. Della still lived

in the basement and spent hours in Henry's office dueling on the chalkboard. It was hard to tell what frustrated Henry more – the delays in getting permission from the government to start clinical trials, or Gwen's peevish calls about when or if he would be stopping home for a meal.

One day shortly before Christmas Della was shouting in Henry's office. That of course was nothing new, but for the first time I heard him yelling back.

"Look, there's nothing I can do about visa issues," he said. "I can't control INS. I tried writing letters already, but you know the situation now. You came on a student visa, and now you're not a student anymore."

Della shouted louder, "Henry, you so weak. You tell Congressman, tell Senator. You find a way. This work too important to stop. I cannot go back to China. That would be the end. You get me green card. You owe me that."

"You may be asking the impossible here," he said. "Don't you ever read a newspaper? They're not letting anyone in now. Eight more months is the limit."

"Nothing impossible, Henry, if you have will. I have no time for newspapers. You get me green card or I make you." Even from Della this was pretty strong, and two doors slamming punctuated the exchange.

Most of the lab fled during the holidays. The strain had been getting to everybody, and the rest of us were secretly relieved that we hadn't been the ones to snap first.

A month later was the Chinese New Year, and Henry tried to make peace all around by having the lab over for supper again. The storm must have blown over and Della was there in what for her were remarkably high spirits. She was still sharp with all the other post-docs and scornful of the mere students who took time to eat and sleep, but for the first time in memory she brought a present.

"Here Gwen, special treat for ladies at New Year," said Della. "I make it myself." She produced a bowl of white gelatin. "Almond and lychee nut. Bring woman prosperity all year."

This was something new. Della had never shown anything but contempt for any tradition that hinted of superstition or religion. And she had never offered to share whatever odd concoctions emerged from her microwave. We hadn't dared ask if the contents of her Tupperware bowls had come from the Lucky Dragon market or from failed experiments.

Gwen was delighted to be included in the circle around her husband. "This is delicious!" she said. "I never imagined you were such a gourmet. Here Henry, try a taste."

Della bolted up, startling even the placid Henry. "No! Only woman of house can eat! Bad luck to divide, means house get divided."

Gwen laughed at the quaintness of the custom and finished her dessert with relish. Henry brought out brandy and the awkward moment was quickly forgotten. We toasted what promised to be a year of triumph, and maybe even one more graduation, in the Bisker lab. When we left that night Gwen was hanging on Henry's shoulder – the first sign of warmth between them any of us had seen in years.

During spring break Gwen began wondering if she was pregnant again after 18 years — what else would cause that cramping and nausea? The Biskers were already in their forties and I felt a new admiration for Henry. Nobody was prepared for the actual diagnosis. The doctors inquired about family histories and diet and smoking, but their prognosis was bleak. Heroic intervention might have prolonged Gwen's life a few painful months, but that was it. Henry was frantic. They had Gwen in the hospital for a week of tests, and when he wasn't there he was on the telephone arguing with the doctors.

“Look, I know it's experimental, but it's more powerful than anything you have,” said Henry. “My associate has tested it on hamsters and. . . No, there haven't been any clinical trials yet, but. . . No, the spectrum of tumors isn't exactly the same, but. . . No, there's no toxicity profile yet, but. . .”

There was a long pause on the other side of the wall, then something smashed inside his office. “Goddamn it! I don't give a shit about your license or your review board! What

are you there for anyhow?" The receiver slammed down and it was a long time before he came out.

Hardly any work was done the following month. They moved Gwen home and Della set up camp in their downstairs study, monitoring the hospice visitors and tending the patient with the same round-the-clock intensity that she brought to everything else, while Henry wandered around aimlessly. I sat in the lab and played endless rounds of computer solitaire. Sometimes Della would come in for a long huddle in Henry's office, and for a change nobody could overhear anything.

The end came even quicker than expected. Gwen's ashes were sent to her sister in Boston and we all struggled to make some sense of what we were doing. Henry tried to give the lab a little speech about how this might give our work some purpose, but he couldn't get through it and stopped halfway through, choked up.

Della was back to her routine, impassive as ever. If she ever had any feelings besides impatience she never revealed them to us. Still, I thought it was remarkable how she had stepped in and carried the Biskers during their crisis, and one day tried to thank her.

"You know, that was really kind of you, the way you helped Henry - and Gwen.

Probably most people here couldn't face that scene," I said.

“I see plenty people die,” she said. “You do what you have to. Just take care of the living, keep working.”

“Still, you did a lot for them.”

“Oh, Henry good about it all. You know we marry last week.”

I looked up with a start. She continued, “Oh, it not mean anything. I not move to that big house, he not touch me. He not my real husband anyhow. Real husband in Guangzhou. Now I get green card. Maybe he come soon now.”

I opened my mouth and closed it. No, let someone else tell her about the law. I didn’t want to know what Henry knew and what he didn’t know. I didn’t know anything anymore, except that it was time to finish my dissertation and get as far away from Purdue as possible.