

# AH, NO CHOO

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After tap class I hurry to pick up my mother for a lunch date on the way to the hospital—one last fling for her taste buds before the chemotherapy renders them unreliable. Chinese? Why not? We make bad jokes: moo goo bed pan, surgeon's chop suey, the last supper as ciao mein. We pull into the parking lot of the Inn of Three Happiness and I shock my mother by pointing out that the restaurant's sign sports three pandas who appear to be happily engaged in group sex. She shocks me by laughing, a musical trill that dies suddenly, like a card flipped over.

"Mom?"

"Damn strangest thing. I can't catch my breath. It feels like half a sneeze. You know—'Ah' but no 'choo'! I feel like I'm wearing an iron bra. Isn't that what a heart attack is supposed to feel like?" She is suddenly pale, a black-and-white version of herself.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Take me to the emergency room. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and guess."

By the time we near the hospital, her color returns. I am looking at her, not at the street signs, and I miss the turn into the emergency room entrance. All the streets are now one

way against us. At the red light on the corner, my mother gets out of the car. “So I’ll walk the half block back to the emergency room. I—”

“Mom, you can’t just stroll into the ER complaining of a heart attack.” I know my interruption will be futile.

“Why not?” She shrugs as she shuts the car door. “I’m feeling better. It’ll be fine.” She strides toward the ER portico.

Another half block and a parking space appears like a gap in a row of teeth. I jog breathlessly to the ER entrance where, for the moment, no one is bleeding.

By the time I negotiate the ER labyrinth and feed some insurance cards to the Cerberus at the desk, my mother is talking recipes with a nurse while her blood pressure is being taken. It’s a little high, but the nurse, whom my mother is already calling Gracie, assures us that pre-chemo stress is not uncommon, and what my mother is experiencing is an anxiety attack rather than a heart attack.

Gracie escorts us to a small cubicle to wait for the doctor to confirm my mother’s diagnosis, but she is called away before my mother finishes advising her on how to make bourbon balls. My mother sits on the gurney, swinging her legs and humming under her breath. She looks surprisingly polished; her dark hair has not yet begun to desert its sinking ship and her Rum Raisin lipstick is unsmudged by any hint of lunch.

I am embarrassed to discover that I’m hungry, and I can’t seem to remember what to do with my own arms and legs. My feet are working out the new tap step we learned in class that morning: flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step. The shuffle crosses over and the step changes direction unexpectedly. No doctor materializes from behind the drawn curtain. As triage priorities, we have been demoted. We can overhear conversational bits, some urgent, some steady, as the nurses and orderlies bustle by. I pull the curtain open so we won’t be forgotten. Flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step.

“What is that? Slow it down so I can follow it.” My

mother hops off the gurney and begins to pick up the steps.

Our flats make a soft slapping sound on the linoleum. We are wedged in between the gurney and a small equipment table, moving laterally toward and then away from the doorway as the combination changes sides. Our feet are perfectly synchronized and our voices murmur in unison, “Flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step.” With a tilt of her head, my mother brings us on stage, in a pool of spotlight. She smooths her hands across the air and we are wearing top hats and tails.

A doctor stands at the door staring and then glances hastily at his clipboard. “Which one of you is the patient?” he asks. We finish the combination. The doctor claps, my mother bows, and I step out of the spotlight. Our last shared moment is over, and my mother moves toward the steps that cannot be shared.