

Excerpt from

KITCHEN TABLE

by

Eugenie Chan

7.7.07a

Toochis Morin
The Brant Rose Agency
6671 Sunset Blvd
Ste 1584 B
Los Angeles, CA 90028
(323) 460-6464
trose@brantroseagency.com

©2006 Eugenie Chan
All Rights Reserved

KITCHEN TABLE was written with the support of a Tournesol Emerging Playwright Fellowship and developed in readings at Playwrights Horizons (director, Ken Rus Schmoll), the Z Space Magic Mondays Series (director, Rob Melrose), the Bay Area Playwrights Festival (director, Christine Young), and Ma-Yi Theatre (director, Loy Arcenas) at the National Asian American Theatre Festival.

The Family

(Note: The family is Chinese American. Max is white.)

Alex, 56

Vivian, 43

Nicky, 20

Lilah, 16

Bea, 14

The Friend

Max, 46

Time & Place

Mid-80s. San Francisco. The kitchen of a modest Sunset district house.

In the course of the play, the kitchen becomes the family's bedrooms, the living room, Max's garage, and the side of the road. The kitchen table, too, is sometimes a car, sometimes a bed.

On the Play's Ritual and Language

The central image of the play is a ritual that begins a traditional Chinese family's meal, that of bidding one's elders to "*sik fan*" or "please eat," as a form of respect. The youngest child starts by asking the eldest family member to "*sik fan*." The elder replies, "*Guai*," meaning "good child." The child then asks the next-in-line to "*sik fan*" and so on until every elder is addressed. After she finishes, her older sibling does the same. Never does an elder or older sibling ask a younger family member to "*sik fan*." That would be to lose status and face. You can imagine that in an extended family saying grace can take some time. Stomachs will growl, patience will be tried, and tempers will be suppressed, hopefully.

Yaht: "One."

Ngoh seh tsi: "I write characters."

Sik fan: "Please dine."

Ba: "Dad."

Guai: "You're an obedient child." In short, your parents raised you right.

Cheut lai: "Get over here." A command.

Kaih daih neigh mah: "Fuck your mother." Never say this.

Bahk cheet gai: "Steamed chicken." Delicious.

Cheh: A Cantonese snort of disbelief, incredulity, or disgust.

Gwaih tsai: A white guy. Literally, "the devil's son." Not nice.

Fan bo: A rice cooker

All other Cantonese phrases are translated within the dialogue.

The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
Not in silence, but restraint.
--Marianne Moore

PROLOGUE

Kitchen. Night. A well-used
linoleum and metal kitchen table,
of 50s vintage, bathed in light.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 1

Living room. Night. Alex enters, takes a seat, and practices Chinese calligraphy with ink, brush, and rice paper.

ALEX

A man's home must be beautiful. Surrounded by beautiful things. A painting. The right line. The right balance to everything. *Yaht yaht yaht*. I am perfecting the stroke of one. *Ngoh seh tsi*. I stroke.

He pins up a sheet of calligraphy, full of characters for "one."

One plus one equals two. One plus one plus one equals three. See? Logical. Simplicity and perfection as one. Four gets complicated. Five is ugly. But one and one is two is heaven. Stroke and stroke. The touch of a man. the touch of a woman. What happens at night when the calligraphy comes on? When no one knows what's going on at all.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

Nicky's bedroom. Night. Sound of a car revving up. Nicky sweats it out in bed.

NICKY

Come on, Stacy. Bore and stroke, sweet pea. Bore and stroke, sweet pea. Bore and stroke...

A '62 Corvette convertible crashes through the ceiling. (Or at least a shard of it -- a fender, headlights.) The car (or part of it) hangs there, suspended. He wakes and laughs hysterically.

Burn me up, my '62 C1 583! Baby, here we go! Glide and roar!

Parents' bedroom. Vivian and Alex in bed.

VIVIAN

Did you hear something?

ALEX

Nothing. Go back to sleep.

Nicky dreams. His dreams are very wet.

NICKY

Yes, yes. Go baby, go. My silver pearl. You can do it. Take me there. All the way to heaven, don't stop. Don't stop. Go go go. 0 to 60 in 5.9. 14.5 at the quarter. You're at. Sixty five. Seventy. Seventy five. Eighty. Ninety. Faster. Faster.

VIVIAN

He's doing it again.

ALEX

It's nothing. Go back to sleep.

VIVIAN

I don't like the sound of it. I hear his screams.

ALEX

Screams? No screams. He's only dreaming. All young men do. It's what they're made of. Dreams. I used to be that way too. Too full of dreams. Then I fell asleep. And everything was better. Go to sleep.

Girls' bedroom. The twins, Bea rests on Lilah's lap. Bea, as usual, fixedly in her own world.

LILAH

He wants to take me out. He wants to see me walk down an empty hallway. He wants to see how other heads turn when I order a steak and a martini. He has a nice car. You'd like it. It's big and red. American I think. Something's wrong with his tail light. I wouldn't want to get in a crash.

BEA

I would.

Nicky GROANS.

VIVIAN

He's knocking about. I don't like the girls hearing that.

ALEX

Go back to sleep. It's indecent of you to listen.

VIVIAN

I don't like the girls hearing that.

ALEX

Hearing what?

VIVIAN

Stop him.

ALEX

I don't hear a thing.

VIVIAN

Stop him.

ALEX

You're imagining things.

VIVIAN
Stop him.

ALEX
You're his mother.

VIVIAN
I can't walk in on that.

ALEX
On what?

Nicky GROANS again.

VIVIAN
What is he doing?!

ALEX
He's starting a car. We should all be so lucky.

VIVIAN
Yes. We should all be so lucky.

Nicky gets it on.

NICKY
I'm flooring you. I'm flooring. One hundred. One hundred.

Girls' bedroom. Lilah and Bea
scrunch against the bedroom wall,
listening to Nicky.

BEA
One hundred.

LILAH
Shh. I want to hear everything. (Beat.) Sick.

BEA
Sick. Sick sick sick sick sick.

NICKY
Take it to the top, sweet pea.

BEA
Hey, that's what he calls me. I'm his sweet pea. I'm his
sweet pea.

NICKY

Light me up, sweet pea. Light me up. One ten. One twenty. One thirty. Forty. Fifty. Take it all the way one-six-five. One-six-five. Throttle. Throttle. Throttle.

The car REVS up mightily. Nicky
PEAKS.

NICKY

Yes yes yes yes yes.

The car DIES.

Oh. Shit. Shit. Turn over. turn over. turn over,
asshole.

He turns over and punches his
pillow.

Bea stalks in, followed by Lilah.
They do not see the car.

BEA

Who's sweet pea?

NICKY

Get out of here.

LILAH

Come on.

BEA

Who's the sweet pea?

NICKY

Get the hell out of here.

BEA

Who's your sweet pea?

LILAH

Come on. Leave him alone.

BEA

I want to know who his sweet pea is. I'm the sweet pea. I am, I am. He's not allowed to say it like that. I'm the sweet pea. I'm the sweet pea. I'm the one and only. I'm the one and only.

She starts to cry hysterically.

NICKY

Sweet pea.

BEA

Be quiet.

LILAH

You are the only sweet pea. Our only sweet pea. You're our one and only sweet pea. Our one and only.

She takes Bea's face in her hand.
Bea stops crying.

LILAH

Right, Nicky?

NICKY

Right.

Nicky falls back into bed. The Corvette's headlights flash brighter. He startles. The girls don't see a thing.

LILAH

What's wrong with you?

NICKY

Nothing. Nothing.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

Max's Garage. Afternoon. Nicky in a 62 Corvette convertible, like the one the crashed in his dream. Max noodles under the hood. Being in a shop, they speak loudly to each other.

MAX

If you build it, they will come. If you fix it, they will stay. And if you rebuild, shit. The sky's the limit. First car I rebuilt was an MGA. Nice, simple, elegant. People always looked at me when I drove that car. And they smiled. I liked that. Then I went away. Did a couple tours of duty. Saw things. Didn't like people smiling at me anymore. You know a smile can mean anything. A deal. A rip-off. An ambush. So I came back and rebuilt a 'Vette. A 67 Sting Ray, fin by fin. She's a beaut. She snarls. Now when people look. They don't smile. (Beat.) Okay! Gimme what you got.

Nicky tries the engine. It doesn't start.

NICKY

Pinion's jammed in the flywheel.

MAX

Nope.

NICKY

Ignition relay's crap.

MAX

Showing off your ignorance. The relay did not appear until 1984. Yours is a '62, stupid.

NICKY

Flywheel teeth cracked.

MAX

Simplify. Simplify.

NICKY

She doesn't like me. Aaagh!

Nicky grabs the steering wheel and shakes the car.

MAX

Hey, hey, hey, numb nut. Do not endanger your fellow man.

NICKY

I need her! Turn over!

MAX

Stop making things so complicated. Get outta the cab and take a look. Jesus! Get your hands dirty.

Nicky gets out.

NICKY

Dirty? I been unplugging toilets all day.

MAX throwing Nicky a rag

Wipe your hands. Shit.

NICKY

Shit.

MAX

Whaddya see?

NICKY

A whole lotta crud.

MAX

Get specific. You're lazy. Trust your eyes. What looks different.

NICKY

Nothing. Everything looks the same. Same sludge. Same missing points. Same shot belts. Same crud on the battery.

MAX

Good morning.

NICKY

I just flushed it.

MAX

Flush it again.

Max makes a flushing sound. Then farts.

NICKY

Shit.

MAX

You like it.

Max throws a rag at him.

Wipe now. You're a big boy. Disconnect the clamp first. Scrape off the shit. Neutralize. Rinse and flush. Then grease her up good. Now try her again. Try her.

Nicky does.

NICKY

Shit.

MAX

Well, what now? If the car's dead, what could it be?

Beat. Nicky thinks.

NICKY

Jump her.

MAX

Jump her, genius. Jump her!

NICKY

Shit. Jump her!

Nicky jumps out of his car. He and Max high five.

MAX/NICKY

Yeah!

Max grabs jumper cables and throws them to Nicky. They do a little dance.

MAX

So, what have I taught you? Positive to the ...

NICKY
Positive.

MAX
Negative to the...

NICKY
Negative!

MAX
Whoa!

NICKY
Damn! Engine block.

MAX
Do you grock?

NICKY
I grock, sir, I grock.

MAX
Big block to mini.

NICKY
You mean classic 327 cubic inch V-8, four point zero zero bore, three point two five stroke. Stacy's a fucking animal.

MAX
The L-Seven-Nine, four hundred and five horsepower brooks no foul language. Mavis is, after all a lady, who works.

NICKY
Mavis has no side coves. She's got no waist. Stacy's got shape. She belongs.

MAX
Mavis is a Stingray. She's all hood and head.

NICKY
Mavis should live in Reno.

MAX
Huh?

NICKY

Um, Mavis, should live in Reno. You know. At the Mustang Ranch. Get it?

Nicky thrusts his hips
lasciviously.

Silence.

MAX

You gotta get outta the house more often. You wanna jump or what?

NICKY

Yes, sir.

MAX

That's more like it.

NICKY

Yes, master.

MAX

Okay, heathen.

NICKY

Anything you say, boss.

MAX

Number one son.

NICKY

Ja-vol, mein Herr.

MAX

Chinky-boy, are you ready to roll?

NICKY

Ready, whitey-man.

Max and Nicky get into their cars.

MAX

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's time to shake the dew off the lilies.

Mavis roars into action.

MAX

Whoo, she's a beauty.

NICKY

Come on, Stacy. Come on, sweetheart.

Stacy CLICKS. CLICKS. Then TURNS OVER.

NICKY

Whoowee! There she goes. S-weet!

MAX

Oh yes, come to daddy. Come to daddy!

The cars roar, rumble, and purr.

NICKY

Yeehaa! Listen to her glide and roar. You did it! You did it!

MAX

Glide and roar, kid. Glide and roar.

Suddenly. Sparks, smoke, fizzle.
Stacy dies. Nicky jumps out,
while Max purrs in reverie
w/Mavis, oblivious.

NICKY

Hey, hey!

Nicky throws rags on the fire. It
flames up. He throws water on it.
Smoke billows.

Shit. Fuck.

He pounds on Max's window.

Hey! Hey!

MAX

What the ...? Outta the way.

Max jumps out, grabs an
extinguisher.

NICKY

Watch out! You might hurt yourself! The thing could explode!

MAX

Get Mavis! Cover her.

Max dives under the hood. Nicky shields Mavis by lying on top of her hood. The fire subsides. Max reappears. Black with smoke.

NICKY

Are you all right?

MAX

Get outta my shop.

NICKY

What happened?

MAX

Out.

NICKY

I just...

MAX

You think I'm doing this for pleasure. You think it's fun seeing you screw up.

NICKY

I...

MAX

Out.

NICKY

I just...

MAX

You just jeopardized everything we have been working for. Everything we have been working for in the Western world. Everything.

NICKY

Stacy... What about Stacy?... I was just trying to get Stacy...

MAX

Stacy's dead. And you almost killed Mavis. Get outta here. Now!

Mavis revs up. Nicky leaves.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 4

Kitchen. Dinner. At the table, Lilah scoops bowls of rice, hands them to Bea, who sets them down at each family member's appropriate Chinese place setting. Vivian sets out dishes of food.

VIVIAN to Bea

Use two hands.

BEA

Why?

VIVIAN

Don't be impolite.

BEA

Why?

LILAH

She just said.

BEA

Why?

LILAH

Just do it.

VIVIAN

Call your father. Your brother.

BEA

DADDY! NICKY!

VIVIAN

Use your girl's voice.

BEA

DADDY! NICKY!

VIVIAN

Tell your sister to use her girl's voice.

LILAH

We're not alike. She's the baby.

Not.

BEA

DADDY! NICKY!

LILAH

Sit down.

VIVIAN

Sit down.

LILAH to Bea

They sit. Alex enters.

ALEX

Mmmm. Zucchini.

BEA

Yuck.

Lilah smacks her on the head.

Ow. Not the baby.

ALEX

Don't hit your little sister on the head.

Nicky enters, takes his seat.

VIVIAN

Wash your hands.

NICKY

I already did.

VIVIAN

Where?

NICKY

At the shop.

ALEX

Max's. Ahh, the *gwaih tsai*. *Cheh*. (*Beat.*) So, did you ever get your car started? Vroom vroom.

Alex winks at the twins. Lilah snickers. Bea laughs.

VIVIAN
Shh.

NICKY
What?

ALEX
Batteries can really stall in the cold dead of night. Or
explode.

The girls full out laugh.

VIVIAN
There's no such thing as explosions. No such thing.

NICKY
How did you know?

VIVIAN
We didn't hear anything.

BEA
I heard you.

VIVIAN
The food is getting cold.

NICKY
The Vette's totally dead...

ALEX
Eat.

NICKY
...I don't know what happened. She exploded.

VIVIAN
What are you talking about?

ALEX
Beatrice, begin.

BEA
Daddy, *sik fan*.

ALEX
Guai.

BEA
Mommy, *sik fan*.

NICKY
She's screwed.

VIVIAN
Nicky. Bea, *guai*.

BEA
Nicky, *sik fan*.

NICKY
I'm screwed.

VIVIAN
We don't say that in this family.

BEA
Nicky, *sik fan*.

NICKY
I'm totally screwed.

BEA
Nicky, *sik fan*!

NICKY
What?

BEA
Nicky, you're screwed.

ALEX
Begin again. We will have no further interruptions.

LILAH
Again?

VIVIAN
Daddy...

ALEX
Again.

VIVIAN
Daddy...

Again!

ALEX

Wait a second.

NICKY

Can't we just go on? Ba, sik fan.

LILAH

ALEX to Lilah

Go to your room.

NICKY

It's my fault.

ALEX to Lilah

Go to your room.

NICKY

I did it.

ALEX

To your room. Now.

LILAH to Nicky

Thanks.

Lilah exits.

NICKY

I'll go.

ALEX

She likes it. Sit.

NICKY

I'll go. I did it.

ALEX

Bea. *Joi hoi chee.* Again.

BEA

Daddy, *sik fan.*

ALEX

Guai.

SCENE CONTINUES
END OF EXCERPT