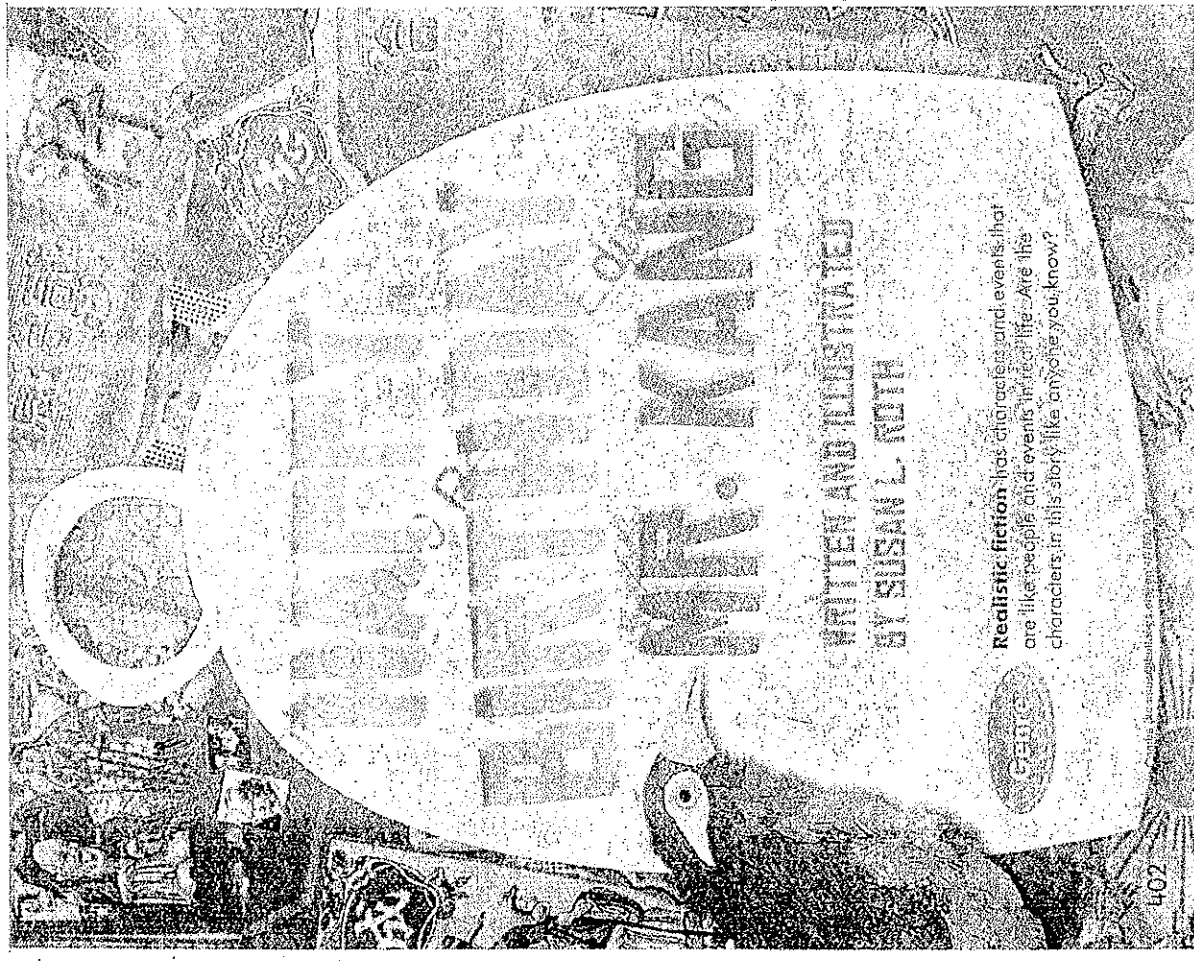


Question of the Week
**What does it mean
to grant freedom?**



Realistic fiction has characters and events that are like people and events in real life. Are the characters in this story like anyone you know?



Forty-three years before his grandson, Sam, was born in the New World, Mr. Kang left China and came to America. Every day he chopped scallions, wrapped dumplings, and pulled noodle dough into long and perfect strands for the hungry people who ate at the Golden Dragon Restaurant in New York City.

When Mr. Kang turned seventy, Mrs. Kang had a birthday party for him.

"Make a wish!" said Sam as Mr. Kang shut his eyes, puffed his cheeks, and blew out all the candles on his cake. Everyone clapped and shouted hurra.

"What was your wish?" Sam asked.

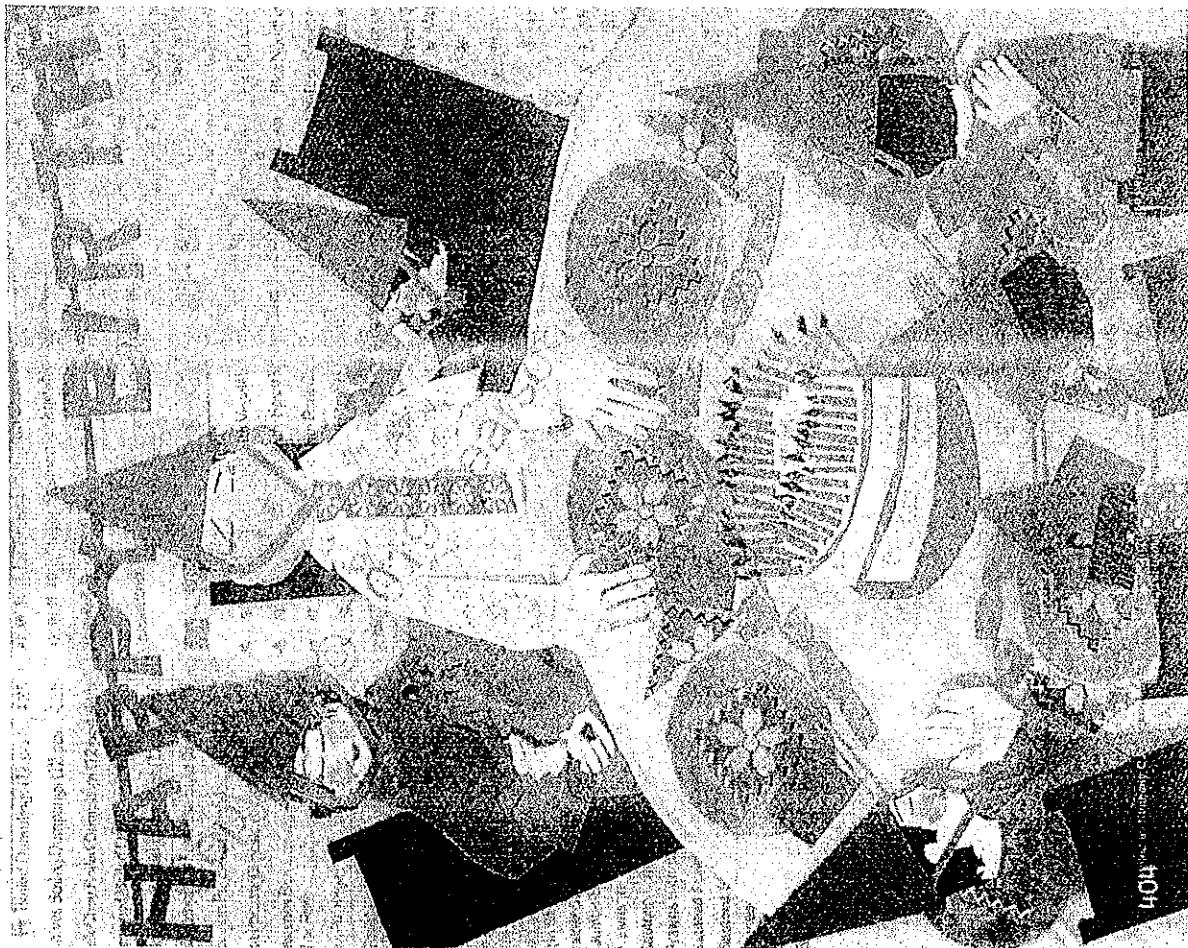
"Three wishes," said Mr. Kang. "I want to read *The New York Times* every day. I want to paint poems every day. And I want a bird, a hua mei, of my own. I'll feed him every day, and on Sundays I'll take him to Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on Delancey Street. Enough cooking."

"Good idea," said Mrs. Kang. "I'll cook for you, and the Golden Dragon Restaurant can get a new cook."

"Grandpa, why do you want a bird in a cage? There are birds all over the place outside," said Sam.

"Sam," said Mr. Kang. "This is not just an American bird in a cage. This is a Chinese bird. My grandfather had a hua mei in a cage. Now I want a hua mei in a cage. And sometimes you and I will take him to Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on Delancey Street together."

And so it is that every morning Mr. Kang finds *The New York Times* on his doorstep. Every morning he reads it while he drinks his tea and eats his sweet and fragrant almond cakes, warm from the oven.



Mr. Kang sits at the kitchen table and thinks about the sun showing through the trees in the park or the moon peeking into his window. He listens to words in his head, then he picks up his brush and paints a poem. Sometimes he paints a poem twice to practice his brushwork. Mrs. Kang hangs the poems on the kitchen cabinets.

And then, after making sure that the door and the windows are shut, Mr. Kang opens his hua mei's cage. Speaking softly, he invites the bird to stand on the table.

Mr. Kang cleans the cage with a damp towel and dries it with a soft cloth. He takes out the hand-painted ceramic water bowl, rinses it, and puts it back in its stand, full of cool, clear water. He washes the hand-painted ceramic food bowl and puts it back, full of his own special recipe of millet coated with egg yolks and mixed with chopped meat. These days this is the only cooking Mr. Kang does.

Last, Mr. Kang takes a small piece of silk cloth, dampens it with water not too hot, not too cold, and gently wipes the sleek gray feathers of his bird. The hua mei walks right back into his cage. He prefers to give himself a bath.

"Never mind, Birdie," says Mr. Kang. "Instead of the bath, I'll read you my poem. I know you can understand. We both left our homeland. We still speak the old language."

Rushing to the Golden Dragon
against a chilly wind,
the icy tears on my cheeks melt
with memories of warm old days.

Those who never left their home
stay safe, wrapped
in the arms of their grandfather land.
When they look out
their narrow windows,

they see their own kitchen gardens.
They know every plum tree, every gingival,
every blade of grass, each gray pebble.

We who long ago tossed on cold waters
looking only straight ahead
watch our city mountains
from wide windows, tall rooftops.
Yet our old hearts hold old places.

We save, in old, grown heads,
a full-blown rose in summer,
the sound of bamboo leaves when
the wind is gentle,
the taste of mooncakes.

The hua mei sings his own melody back
to Mr. Kang. Mr. Kang closes his eyes to listen.
"Beautiful, Birdie. You are a good poet
and a good friend to me," says Mr. Kang.

Sam usually comes to visit on Saturdays. If Mr. Kang is cleaning the cage, then the hua mei sings to Sam. Sam holds out his finger, and the hua mei holds on tightly. They stare at each other, each without blinking.

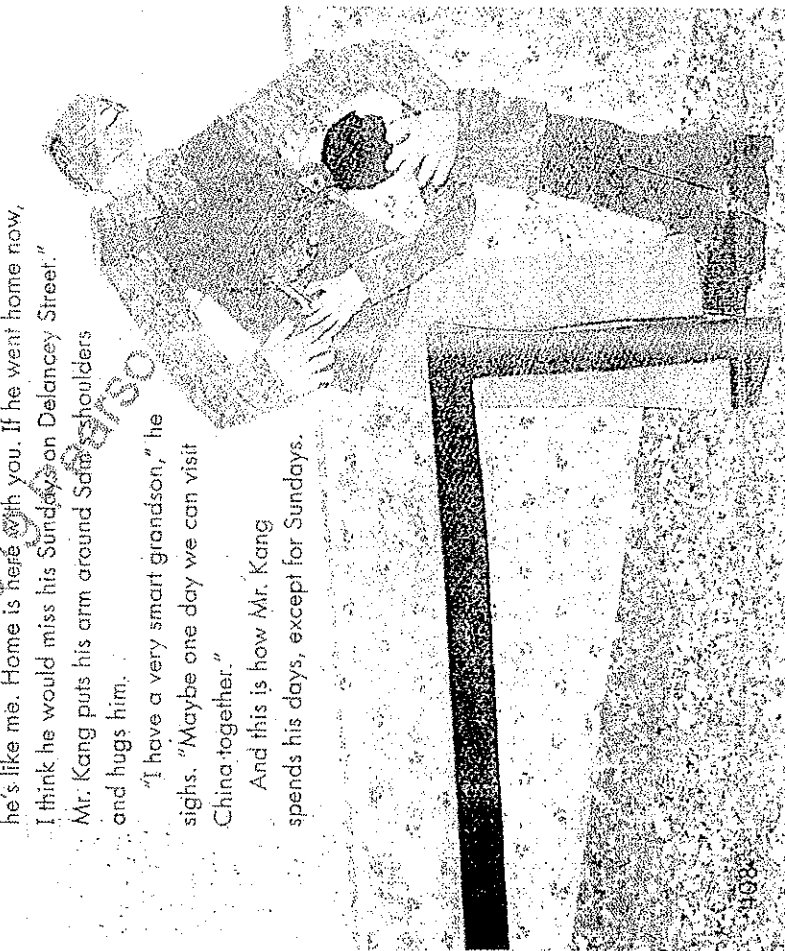
"Did he really fly from China?" Sam asks one time for a bird.
"Yes, on an airplane," says Mr. Kang. "China is so far, even for a bird."

"You should let him go. Maybe he wants to fly home."
"I don't think he could without an airplane. Anyway, he's like me. Home is here with you. If he went home now, I think he would miss his Sundays on Delancey Street."

Mr. Kang puts his arm around Sam's shoulders and hugs him.

"I have a very smart grandson," he sighs. "Maybe one day we can visit China together."

And this is how Mr. Kang spends his days, except for Sundays.



On Sundays Mr. Kang gets up when it's dark. He washes his face and puts on his clothes. When he is ready, he picks up the cage by the ring on top. The freshly ironed cover is tied shut, and the bird is still sleeping. As he opens the door to leave the apartment, Mrs. Kang is padding quickly behind him.

"Wait for me!" she calls.

"Shhhh!" says Mr. Kang, but he waits as she closes the door and turns her key.



Mr. Kang and his bird lead the way. He walks gingerly, holding onto the banister to steady himself as he goes down the stairs. Out the door, down the block, across the street he glides, to Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on Delancey Street.

Mrs. Kang follows, three steps behind. She sees her friends and slips away to join them.

Mr. Kang hangs the cage on the fence, stretches his arms, and breathes in the morning.

Mr. Lum arrives with a cage in each hand. "How are you, my friend? How is the bird?"

"We are enjoying the morning," smiles Mr. Kang.

"Mr. Lum!

When I see your cages

resting on the green ivy floor

of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park in New York,

I remember my arm is lifted up to hold

Grandfather's big-hand

and that ivy is green

from the Shanghai sun

and that ginkgo tree is blowing

in the soft Shanghai breeze

and that heat in my breast

is from my sweet and fragrant almond café.

Grandmother slipped it into my pocket,

and it is still there,

warm from her oven."

"Even when you speak a greeting to your friend you are painting a poem," says Mr. Lum. Mr. Kang bows his head.

Today is a special Sunday morning because Sam and Mr. Kang are going to the park together. Sam slept at his grandparents' house last night. It is still dark, and he is rubbing his eyes as he jumps from his bed. Just like Grandpa, he washes his face and puts on his clothes. Together, at dawn's first light, they lift the cage. The cover is still tied, the bird is still sleeping. Sam opens the front door. Grandpa steps out, and Grandma is there right behind him, just as she is every Sunday morning.

"Wait for me!" she says.

"Shhhhh!" say Mr. Kang and Sam, but they wait as she closes the door. Mrs. Kang takes one extra minute to slip two warm almond cakes into Sam's pocket. Then Sam and Mr. Kang lead the way down the stairs, out the front door, on to the corner, across the street, all the way to Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on Delancey Street.



As usual, Mrs. Kang follows until she sees her friends. Sam sets the bird cage gently on the ground. Mr. Lum's cages are already hanging.

"Look who's here!" says Mr. Lum. "How are you, Sam? You're getting so big. How old are you?"

"Seven," says Sam.

"Only seven?" says Mr. Lum. "You're handling that cage better than a twelve-year-old would!"

Sam smiles.

"An old grandfather does not mind growing old in a foreign land with such a grandson," says Mr. Kang.

"I am happy in this strange land:

I see my grandson planted

in the new, rich earth,

growing straight and smart and tall.

I water him.

The sun shines on his

firm young leaves

as I watch for his flowers

and for his fruit."

"More poems, Mr. Kang," says Mr. Lum. "I think you always speak in poems."

"Your ears are kind to my words, my friend," says Mr. Kang. Two more men with two more cages arrive, then another and yet another. Soon there are twenty-seven cages in the park.

Mr. Kang lets Sam untie the cover. A strand of light passes through the bamboo bars. As the sun climbs, the men and Sam open all the curtains, inch by inch.

A bird calls and is answered by another.

"They sing sad songs," says Sam.

"They sing of their strong young years,"

says Mr. Lum.

"They sing about their grandfathers,"

says Mr. Wu.

"Maybe they sing about their grandsons,"

says Sam.

"They sing about being in their cages," says Mr. Wu.

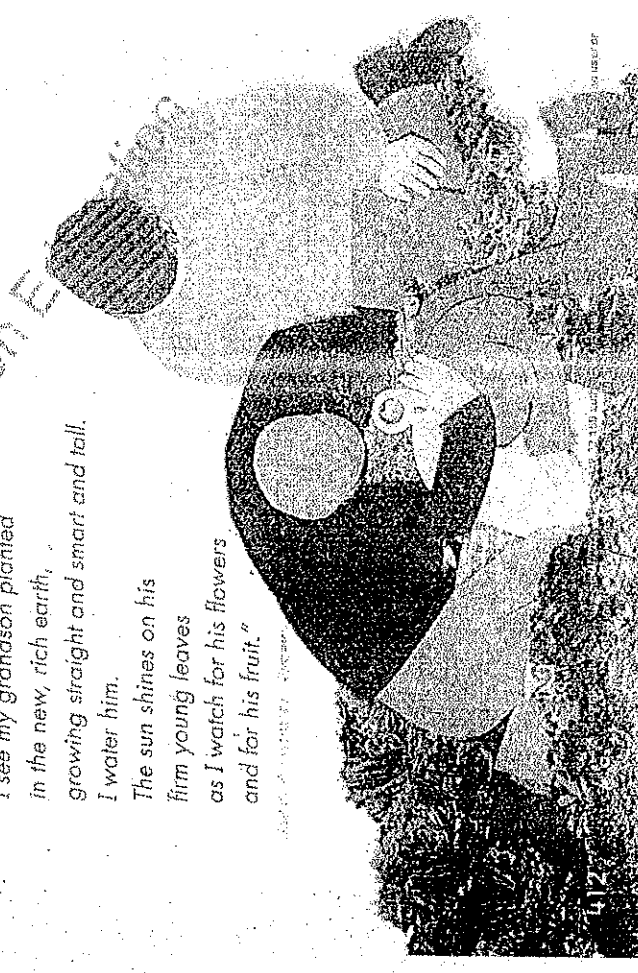
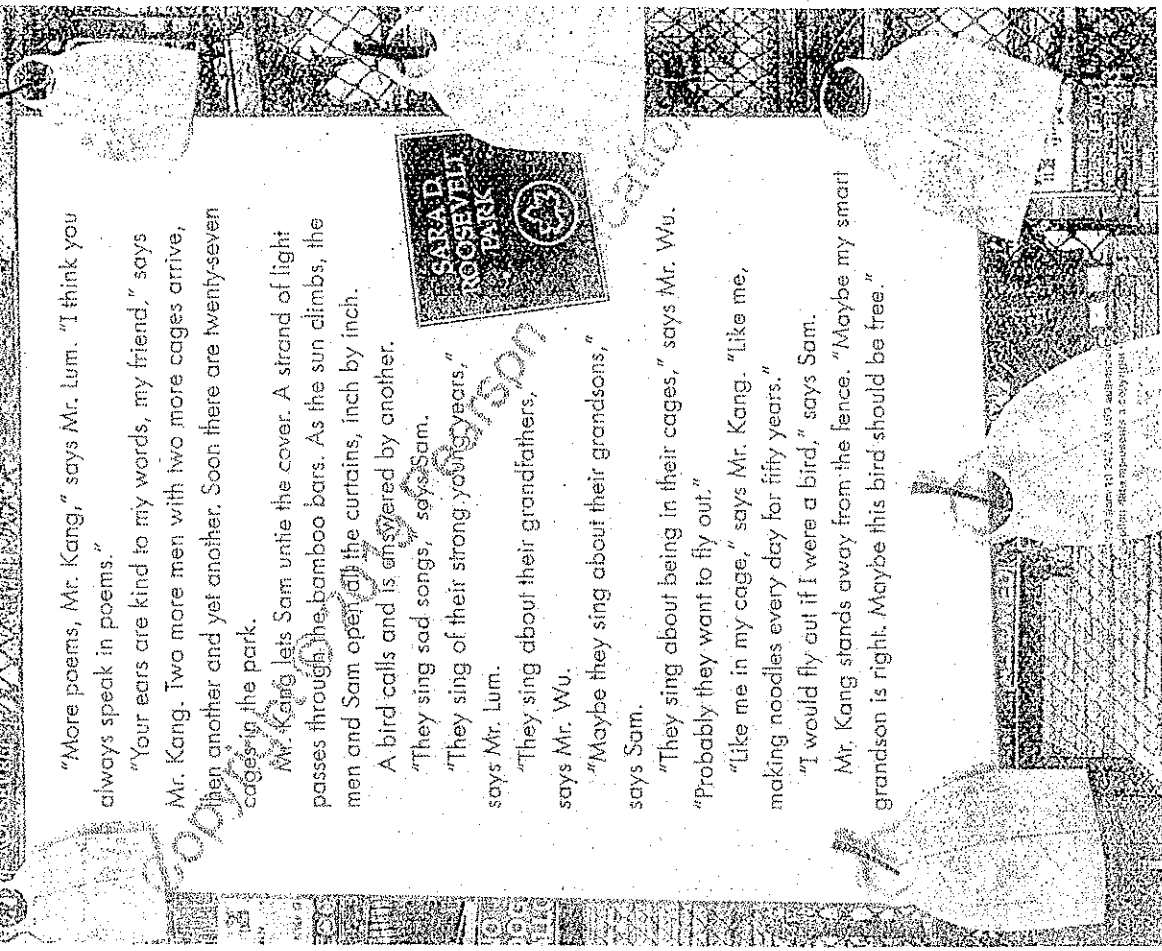
"Probably they want to fly out."

"Like me in my cage," says Mr. Kang. "Like me,

making noodles every day for fifty years."

"I would fly out if I were a bird," says Sam.

Mr. Kang stands away from the fence. "Maybe my smart grandson is right. Maybe this bird should be free."



Mr. Kang walks slowly toward his cage.
"Stop!" Mr. Lum puts a hand on his friend's arm. "Mr. Kang, do not be foolish!" The men form a circle around Mr. Kang, and everyone is talking at once. The women rush over. "Mr. Kang," says Mrs. Kang, "did you forget about your three birthday wishes already? What will you do when you finish painting your poems and there is no bird to sing to you afterwards?"

"Ever since my birthday, I am a free man," says

Mr. Kang. "Maybe this hua mei wants to be a free bird. America is the land of the free. Sam says . . ."

"Sam is a seven-year-old American boy," interrupts

Mrs. Kang. "He cannot understand old ways."

"But Grandma, it's not fair."

"Sam," Mrs. Kang turns to her grandson.

"Sam. This is not something you can understand."

Mr. Kang just shakes his head. He brushes away Mrs. Kang's hands. He brushes away the hands of his friends.



Suddenly Sam is frightened. What if Grandma is right? What if Grandma is sorry after the hua mei flies away? What if the hua mei gets lost? What if he starves? What if he dies?

"Grandpa wait," says Sam.

But Grandma does not hear.

Mr. Kang cannot hear any voice except the voice inside his own head, inside his own heart. He opens the bamboo door.

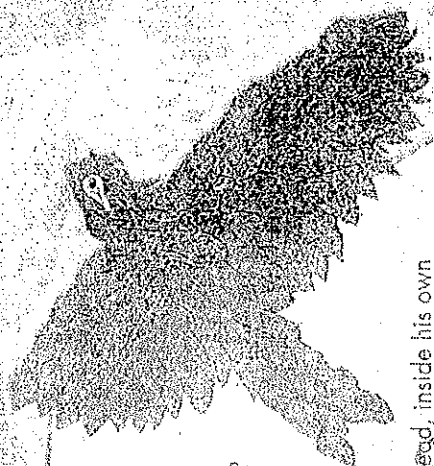
Mr. Kang's hua mei perches on the threshold of his cage. Perhaps he thinks it's cage-clearing time. He slowly steps out. He stops to sing a long, sweet note, turns his head to the breeze, and flies into the sky.

Mr. Kang takes off his cap and covers his heart with his hand. For a moment there is silence. Mrs. Kang bends her head and hugs herself. Her mouth is a thin straight line.

"Oh, Mr. Kang," she whispers in Chinese. "What can you be thinking?" Sam starts to cry.

"Sam and I are going home to paint poems," says Mr. Kang loudly, in English.

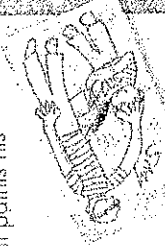
He lifts his empty cage, takes Sam's hand, and together they walk out of the park. Onto the sidewalk, over to the corner, across the street, up the block they walk.



Just as they get to Mr. Kang's apartment, there, on the railing, sits the hua mei. Mr. Kang and Sam stop short. The bird flies onto Sam's head.

1977 Season

Then up the stairs and into the kitchen they run. They sit at the table, coats and caps still on. The hua mei hops onto Sam's paper. Mr. Kang paints his poem as Sam paints his picture. The bird helps.



After forty-three American years
I still speak my native tongue,
but any Chinese ear can hear
that I no longer speak
like a native. Sometimes

even I can hear
the familiar sounds bending
by themselves in my own throat,
coming out strangely,
sounding a little American. Yet

those same words in English suffer more.

I open up
my American mouth and
no one needs to see my face to know
my ship was never Mayflower. But
at home, with even you, my hua mei, peeping
a little like a sparrow,
I sit at my kitchen table, and I paint these words.
They sing out without accent:
We are Americans, by choice.

"This is your poem, Birdie," says Mr. Kang, "and Sam, it's your poem too."

Then Mr. Kang looks at Sam's painting. "My grandson is a great artist," he says. He hangs the paintings on the kitchen cabinet and sits back to admire them.

Mrs. Kang walks into the kitchen with her mouth still in that thin straight line, but there is the bird, and suddenly she is smiling.

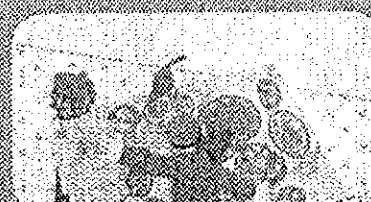
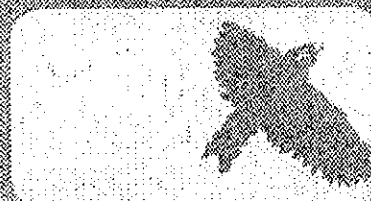
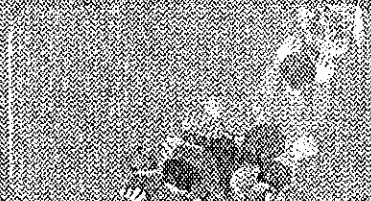
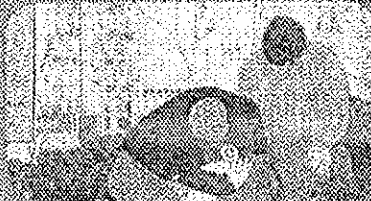
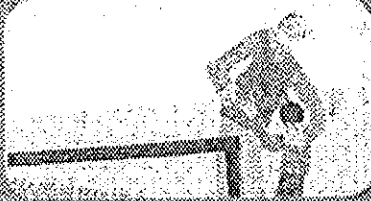
"Today I'll cook for both of you, and for your hua mei," she says.

And she makes tea, and more sweet and fragrant almond cakes, warm from the oven.



Envision It!

Retell



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Think Critically

1. Compare this story to the historical fiction story *Me and Uncle Romie*. How are the two stories alike? How are they different? *Text to Text*
2. Find the most interesting illustration in the story. Pretend that you are the author. Explain why that illustration enhances your story. *Think Like an Author*
3. What caused Mr. Kang to change his mind about his *hua mei*? What was the effect? *Cause and Effect*
4. How do you know that Sam thinks the *hua mei* should be freed? Do you think Mr. Kang is happy he let the bird out of its cage? Use evidence from the story to explain your answer. *Inferring*
5. **Look Back and Write** What is special about Mr. Kang's birthday? Look back through the story and think about what Mr. Kang does during the days after his birthday. Write a response to the question, providing evidence to support your answer.

Key Ideas and Details • Text Evidence

