

## Rosanna Yamagiwa Alfaro / BACK HOME IN BERKELEY

So that's where it's at, he said, as his wife switched on lights and puttered about in her bunny slippers, that's why they haven't sent us a note for two months when they promised to write once a week. I can see them now. Pete in his greasy Levis settling down on our loveseat with both Margie and the kid on his lap. They must be breaking up at the thought of having the palace to themselves, of ripping off their old professor, of drinking his Scotch, of wiping off their boots on the Persian rugs. I can see Margie rummaging through the drawers and unearthing our past, that motley pile of albums I should have locked up in the closet along with the bundle of loveletters and the Rosenthal china. They'll see me in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and you in front of the Bridge of Sighs, that series of indecent photos of first you and then me, obscuring every landmark in Europe. It wasn't so bad for you. All they expected from you was what they'd expect from any ordinary housewife. But just imagine how they'll be laughing, he said as he paced their tacky Mexico City apartment, imagine how they'll be laughing at me, at the vanity, the mediocrity, the insipid, humdrum quality of their professor's life. "I'm sure Pete's not laughing at you," broke in his wife. "You've said yourself that he worships the ground you walk on." I've never said anything of the sort, he said, raising his voice, but now that you mention it, why shouldn't he worship the ground I walk on? Who in his right mind wouldn't worship the ground of someone that gives him a house rent-free for six months?

Especially someone like an assistant professor who can't afford to indulge in such grand acts of generosity. Here we sit in Mexico City barely surviving on homemade tacos while he and his family live like kings in the Berkeley hills. And do you honestly believe that they're keeping up the house, that Margie's had the initiative to check the pump to see if it's still functioning, to make sure the basement's not knee-deep in water. Do you really think Pete's kept his promise and patched up the leak in the roof, or that they've simply laid out newspapers and let the rains pour in by the bucketful. I know you're short on imagination but it doesn't take much to see the front lawn littered with eucalyptus bark, the pine trees uprooted, and the bushes lying adrift in that trench by the side of the road. Why do you suppose their long silence coincides with the rainy season unless there's been a natural catastrophe and they're afraid to tell me about it. "You could be right," said his wife, rolling her hair up in curlers, "but it's much more likely that the mailman's lost Pete's letters. You know how the service is here in Mexico, how they 'misplaced' my birthday present from Daddy and our dividend check from. . . ." That's absurd, he said, shouting her down. Don't you realize that Pete's mail can't possibly have been lost for ten weeks in a row. Can't you understand, you idiot, that if you cared for me at all, which you don't, if you thought for one second about something other than rebozos for yourself and one-peso toys for the neighbors' kids, you would have seen long ago that our very existence is riding in that mail — a fat letter of acceptance for my book which means tenure which means a roof over our heads which means that even you, if you had the brains to realize it, might profit by it. That letter is gathering dust in Berkeley. . . . "Or right here in Mexico," she pointed out. "You can't deny that things here don't function the way they do in the States. The mailmen do open up packages and fat envelopes." Whatever it is, he said, the letter's lost, and has it ever crossed your feeble little mind that it's not a letter of acceptance at all but only a rejection slip? Do you suppose they've returned the manuscript and Pete is in our bed reading it, lying back on our pillows with a mug of hot chocolate and marking off whole sections to be xeroxed and handed to Smith so he'll never give me tenure? "You know Pete would never do a thing like that, and even if he did, Smith wouldn't listen to him. You liked Smith well enough before he became Chairman of the Department. If you ask me," she said, dabbing cold

cream on her forehead, "you're getting as bad as the campus radicals, always afraid of who's bugging their phones as if J. Edgar Hoover didn't have more important ways of occupying his time." But do you suppose, he asked her, that Pete has anything better to do with his time? A kid like that who's only intent on stretching out his carefree student days, who's not earning enough to support his family or pay an honest day's rent. Don't you suppose he's capable of doing his old professor in even after I gave him the house free of charge? "I advised against that," said his wife. Not very hard, he said, slamming his hand down on the table, not very hard you didn't. That's what hurts me most. When you realized that here it was your own husband, giving up six months of rent, \$1780 that meant leaving out side trips to Yucatan and Oaxaca where there was crucial research to be done, when you realized all that, you might at least have said, "No, God damn it, you are not giving our house away to those radicals, those pot-smoking hippies. You are not going to be carried away by one of your fits of generosity. You are not going to put a rope around your neck." But instead, you sat by in your own mousy way and let me commit suicide. That's what you did and I'll never forgive you for it. And on top of that, he said, infuriated by the tears he saw welling up in her little mouse eyes, there's only one month left of my research grant. I haven't been able to get a good night's sleep in weeks. I haven't been able to get into my work on the Aztecs and it's all your fault, dragging me out for tea on the Zona Rosa or to pick up a pair of earrings at the Monte de Piedad. You're on my back, God damn you. You don't even speak the language so I have to do everything, make up grocery lists for the maid, take you to marketplaces and waste my time bargaining for ten-peso baskets when I should be doing the intellectual work that keeps the tacos on the table and the shirt on your back. "But I haven't bought anything for myself," wailed his wife, "only for you. The big poncho and the striped sweater and the sandals were all for you." And how, he asked, is all that going to help my career? Is Smith going to give me tenure if I show up on campus

with a poncho down to my ankles and straw sandals on my feet? My dear, he said, speaking more gently now, my poor little idiot-wife, when I get home I fully expect to be without a job and without a roof over my head. The chances are fifty-fifty that the manuscript has been rejected and that Pete and Margie are systematically destroying the property, your property as well as my property, you understand. If you don't care about me at least you should care about yourself. Do you remember the postscript on that last letter Pete wrote us, that letter nine weeks ago, in which he announced his unilateral decision to clean out our garage? "But I thought that was a nice suggestion," she said sniffing. "You thought so too at the time." But I'm not like you, he said, I sometimes rethink my thoughts. I don't have a pea-brain like yours that lets in one or two ideas a year and once they're in, never lets them out. Has it ever crossed your mind, for instance, that the cleaning of the garage is the first step of a master plan of ultimately converting it into a shack so Pete and his family can set up housekeeping there? That we'll find them so well-established when we get back that we won't have the heart to turn them out? It's perfectly feasible, you know. How many times have I threatened to move my own study back there so I'd be free to write a page or two without being interrupted by the clatter of pots and pans or the buzz of the sewing machine. But when we get back there won't be even a moment's peace with the three of them running in and out to use our bathrooms or join us for dinner. You're the one who cooks, you know, you're the one who cleans out the toilets. But it's always your husband who has to put his foot down and stand on his dignity, which he's somehow managed to keep intact in spite of his little wife and her mousy self-effacing ways. I will say I simply cannot set up a commune at my age. I'll say I'm temperamentally unfit to live with strangers, especially when one of them is only two feet tall. My wife may be perfectly willing to be stepped upon and ground under but not me. I may be overcome by moments of stupid generosity . . . "You're not very generous to me," wailed his wife. I may be overtaken by temporary attacks of insanity, but I will not be taken advantage of, I will not be trampled upon by my own students. If it weren't for me, he said, we would come home and find squatters in our back yard, the garden devastated, three rows of bushes uprooted by the storms, the house exposed to the noise and exhaust of a dirt road that's rapidly turning into a highway, the roof of the back room

beaten in by the rains, and the termites having a field day in the walls. Because that's the way things are, you know, that's where it's at unless — and here he saw the three dots float across the vision of his right eye the way they always did whenever he had a new revelation — unless the three of them simply aren't there anymore. Isn't it incredible that we've never considered the most obvious and devastating of possibilities? The reason there hasn't been any mail is because Pete and his family have moved out. They've hit upon the easiest way of making an income and rented the place out to a dozen or more of their pot-smoking radical friends. They're getting rich off our house while their friends hold their Venceremos meetings in our cellar and carry on their orgies in our beds, on our rugs, and to the accompaniment of our grand piano. "I don't believe that for one minute," she said. "Pete and Margie are a decent young couple and it's not their fault or mine either if five months in Mexico has driven you stark raving mad." Well, and so what if it has, he shouted. You could sleep through a hurricane or tidal wave, but I haven't had a good night's sleep in months because I am sensitive, I do have an imagination. "But you could call," said his wife. "It's so simple. For just \$2.50 you could talk to Pete and Margie and they could tell you themselves that everything's all right." And he could see it in her eyes, the scorn, the wee and vicious triumph of a mouse clutching its grain of corn, so certain that he'd never dare to pick up the telephone and confirm that he was out of his mind, that he was inventing again so as to avoid buckling down to the really serious task of getting tenure, filling his mind with trivia so he couldn't write his book. But he would show her. We'll see your comfortable little world come crashing in on top of us, he said as he picked up the phone. What's our number anyway? Here you are, the one who's been nagging me for days now to make the call, and you don't even know the number. Why is it that you're never of any use to me? When you consider all the things I have on my mind and the little you have on yours why is it that you can never provide me even with the simplest information? "But I'm always at home," she whimpered. "You called me at that number every school day for five years now, but in all that time I never called home once." So he had to be told his own number by an insulting and thick-headed Mexican telephone operator and by some



fluke got through with a magnificent connection to San Francisco, 2500 miles away. Instantaneous with Pete's hello and before he could say a word, his wife was at his side, her voice in his ear, saying, "Ask him if everything's all right. Ask about the roof and about Margie and the kid." And in the silence that followed he could feel her fluffing out her grey mouse fur, ready to tell him as she had so many times, "You see, everything's fine. You see, I told you so." And she continued to make little squeaks of contentment, she continued to be oblivious to the tremor on the other side of the phone, the inhuman racket that had long since swallowed up Pete's voice, exuding its usual cheer and self-confidence, and even the high-pitched screams of Margie and the kid, a whistling sound like a hundred teakettles bursting open at the seams. He himself could now hear the earth slipping out from under their house, the toppling of bookcases, the jolting loose of closet doors, and the spilling out of fur coats and loveletters, the Rosenthal plates and the cups and saucers from Seville, the shattering of three dozen long-stemmed wine glasses, the pipes cracking and the water flooding the bathrooms, the smell of gas, the twelfth-century Aztec dancing dogs swept from their place on the mantelpiece and lodged high in the rafters, the snapping of wrought-iron curtain rods like toothpicks, the loveseat afloat in the air like a kite, then silence and a false feeling of tranquility as if things were finally set right and not at all as if the ground had simply opened up and swallowed the telephone and perhaps the hand still holding on to the receiver. But before his wife could say, "What is it? Why did you hang up?" the first reverberations had already travelled 2500 miles along the San Andreas fault and into Mexico. The ground beneath them shuddered and his wife whom he now held in his arms, his poor little mouse wife was trembling but, of course, hadn't the smallest inkling, the dimmest notion that the hour of the great earthquake was upon them, that it was roaring in great waves down the backbone of California and even now was on the outskirts of Mexico City, a disaster greater than the tornado his wife had watched twisting through the wheat fields of her father's farm, noisier and brighter than the fireworks they had seen together during their honeymoon in Nice. Then he saw it, a second before the electric lights went out like candles, quivering and giving out a smoky glow, the monster's face at the window, his small red eyes and blunt nose pressed against the glass the flapping of giant wings or Venetian blinds, the great beast risen from the bowels of the earth and the purple twilight of the world.