

PHOENIX YING

Two stories

The Husband's Love Letter

One clear day in autumn, as I was doing laundry, I discovered a light blue note in one of my husband's pockets, addressed to him by another woman. I was shocked.

Going over the contents of this letter, I could hardly fathom the reality that was before me. The words employed in the letter were close and endearing, which meant the two had known each other for quite some time.

This letter was like a hammer that struck me a solid blow. The phrases and expressions in the letter were full of heartfelt connection and tacit understanding; the words between the lines revealed emotions that, to be honest, made the author seem much more qualified than me to be the wife of the letter's recipient. Just like that, I lost the interest in going on with housecleaning. I clutched onto that piece of paper, pacing restively around the house. Old memories cropped up as if projected by a movie reel unspooling before my eyes – our marriage of eight years, our son who is now five years old, and the memory of my husband expending so much effort and patience in asking my father for his only daughter's hand in marriage.

One by one I scrutinized every problem that we shared after our marriage, but nothing significant really stood out. The only problem was probably this – I had locked myself in the house all day and thus knew much too little concerning the going-ons of his social circle.

At the end of the letter, the woman wrote, "I cannot choose my fate; it is fate that chooses me." What in the world did she mean? Infuriated, I stuffed the note back into my husband's pocket.

I now faced a second dilemma – in what manner would I face my husband tonight? Should I interrogate him and start a big fight? Or should I maintain my composure and feign ignorance so as to get to the bottom of this predicament in secret?

And what if I do discover the root of this problem? Immediately file for divorce? What about our child?

If my husband lays the cards on the table and admits to the affair, then it implies I am in fact inferior to my rival, which is an idea so embarrassing that I am not willing to accept it. If I did, where would I place my self-respect? I'd rather act like an ostrich and give him the benefit of the doubt.

In the end, I decided to pretend nothing happen, and maintained my composure – at least ostensibly. Secretly, I took it upon myself to check and comb through all of my husband’s mail.

This “delay tactic” I chose to follow turned out to be remarkably effective.

About a month later, I surprisingly discovered at the end of the latest lover’s note that this “Miss Fong” had finally decided to break up with my husband – the woman was going to get married.

When I finished reading the note, I should have let out a breath of relief and enjoyed a moment of clandestine jubilation, but instead my heart welled up with a knot of anger that led to an urgent, explosive release. That day, when my husband returned home from work, I tossed the pile of light blue notes before him and said, “What’s all this? Explain.”

Complicated emotions flashed across his face as understanding gradually dawned upon him. At first he had a look of terror at the realization that I knew about the affair; then he fell into a brooding silence.

“Say it.”

“Look, she’s getting married. There’s nothing much going on between us, and if you don’t believe me, I can give you her wedding invitation.”

Impressive. The man brushed away the problem with a few superficial words. However, my resentment had been building up for months, and the words of adoration written in the letters betrayed a solid pledge of love that could not be so easily broken. Each and every word chipped, hammered, and shattered my heart. In their eyes, a hag such as me doesn’t even exist.

The more I thought about it, the more aggravated I became. I said, “I don’t need to see the wedding invitation. If you’re willing to take this one opportunity and break off any connection with this woman, then go and clear every single one of the love notes she’s ever written you.

After thinking about it for quite some time, he continued to sit there without movement.

“You are still protecting her. It’s clear now that you weren’t being honest at all,” I accused brokenheartedly.

“So be it,” he replied.

Perhaps my husband thought that, since he had already lost the girlfriend, it wasn’t worthwhile to lose his wife too. He got up and walked to the study, and soon returned with a transparent bag – in it, stacks of light blue envelopes were organized with painstaking neatness.

“This is all of it. I can burn it all in front of you.” I was struck dumb when I

saw the voluminous bag. As it turned out, the letters I discovered were only the tip of the iceberg. I never imagined that their affection for one another was this strong. Even more incredulous was the fact that my husband actually had a considerate side to his personality; exemplified in the care he took to organize the love letters. Most days his pants, socks, and newspaper are strewn all over the place, and yet he has the patience and care to arrange each letter. The fact that he bothered to keep them so tidily showed just how potent the lingering effects of the letters were. Before he could break out of his reverie, I snatched the bag from him and said, "Burning this is such a waste. I'll take care of it."

I don't know what possessed me to confiscate the bundle of love letters. Perhaps it was curiosity, or perhaps it was jealousy. Either way, after I wrested the bag from him, I immediately locked it up in my closet, swearing never to return it to my husband.

I have the right to know my husband's secrets. When I was once again alone in the house, I locked all the doors and windows. Like a petty thief, I read my "husband's love letters" one by one; the mental self-flagellation was truly painful. Every word from every letter likened to a whip that lashed at my nerves, and eventually wounded my self-respect. Miss Fong was apparently still studying in an art program in college, and the color matching she prepared for each letter could truly be called a feast for the eyes. In the letters she even told my husband, "I cannot stand the minutes nor the seconds when you are not next to me." Such a detestable woman. Who was she, and how could she do this to me?

I was so consumed by the flames of a blinding rage that I let my thoughts go with reckless abandon, and ran into the study to find the woman's wedding invitation in my husband's desk drawer. Printed on the invitation was the woman's new home address. I looked at the date of the wedding; it was tomorrow. Perfect. I took all of the blue envelopes and neatly wrapped all of them in a parcel, and wrote down the mailing address – I would send it as a registered mail. This will be my gift to Miss Fong's groom, the perfect wedding gift. Miss Fong, since you won't let me enjoy a peaceful marriage, I cannot let you alone reap the benefits of the natural course of a happy marriage. Since you dared to openly wreck someone else's marriage, surely you cannot blame me for retaliation.

It was after the parcel was already mailed when I realized I had acted too impulsively. I also knew there was no room for regrets, and fate would ultimately be decided by God.

After a few days, I received a familiar, light blue envelope in the mail. Opening the letter, I saw that well-known, pretty handwriting, and even though it looked like a hasty scribble, every word and sentence were clearly displayed before me.

Mrs. Chen,

I don't even need to say this, but you really are not a very bright woman.

Indeed, your scheme was successful, and I have now lost the husband whom I found it so challenging to acquire. Did you never even consider the possibility that I chose to marry another man so that you could keep your own husband? Not only did you not show a smidgen of gratitude; you attacked me with all the cruelty you could muster. My marriage is now as you planned – buried in the dust. Be that as it may, rest assured that my now single self is capable and confident enough to see to it that your marriage will soon be in jeopardy as well.

At this point the letter ended, signed once again with a single “Fong” character. In this instant, I recalled the phrase she wrote in a letter to my husband, “I cannot choose my fate; it is fate that chooses me.”

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Ah Guei

By Feng-Huang Ying (Phoenix Ying)

Even though Guei Mei’s Tailor Shop was located in an alley, its business had recently seen noticeable improvement. At first there was an electronics factory in the area, and then a vocal training classroom opened nearby. The number of girls who came to get their clothing fixed was bigger than expected; Ah Guei’s little tailor shop was neither conspicuous, nor was it in a very busy area. Besides Ah Guei, the only other person working at the shop was a young girl who was learning how to sew. The fact that the store’s business bloomed as it had was something Ah Guei couldn’t quite comprehend.

Lately, Ah Guei had been working very late nights, and yet she didn’t *feel* tired at all. Since her twenty-something years of life, it’s as if her happiness had only just begun.

Ah Guei is only 25 this year. As far back as her memory reaches, however, she can’t recall the number of times the notion “I don’t want to live” had occurred in her mind. It really was difficult for her to remember. As a child, from the moment she became cognizant, she couldn’t remember just how many tears she had shed due to her appearance. Humans are such odd animals; what person with the ability to perceive has not been concerned with their own outward disposition? Ah Guei had only one wish – that she would look like a plain, slightly homely, girl rather than to have her current, horrific countenance. Once, a grade school student had called Ah Guei a “half-faced person” because when she was born, the left side of her face had developed a permanent dark-red stain; half of her nose and half of her mouth were distorted from this strange skin discoloration. It got to the point where she

was reluctant to leave the house or sit on the public buses, deeply afraid of all the strangers with their judgmental looks.

Ah Guei's mother often visits at the tailor shop. When that happens, it's usually out of concern for Ah Guei's marital status. Both of her sisters were married, and Ah Guei was like the fraudulent item at an auction that the seller couldn't sell. She couldn't stomach the way her mother pined and begged, and she hated the way her mother looked when she discussed the topic of Ah Guei's marriage. Sometimes, Ah Guei would think to herself, "Serves you right. Who told you to give me this birth defect? It's the reason no one will marry me, so go ahead and panic!" Her mother also seemingly displayed a sense of unconscious guilt; that is, not only was she responsible for buying the place for Ah Guei to open her tailor shop, she also claimed that it was a stored asset that could eventually be used as dowry.

Today, however, was one of the happier days in Ah Guei's twenty-something years of life. It wasn't like the past, when she secretly wept during late nights. Ah Guei herself didn't quite know if she could describe it as happiness, but she did experience a peculiar sensation somewhere inside of her that lifted her mood. She didn't have much luck with the sewing machine in the past few days; she even ruined a customer's fabric with her scissors. Ever since she rented out a small backroom to a taxi driver named Mr. Wang, she had been closing her store later than usual. Ah Guei always found an excuse to do some more work; naturally, she would never admit that the reason her machine ran until one or two in the morning was for the sheer sake of hearing just one greeting from Mr. Wang when he returned from work. Initially, he only gave her a simple nod when he passed through the store; later, he would occasionally ask about the shop's business or initiate light banter.

One time, Mr. Wang asked Ah Guei for help fixing the seams on a pair of his pants. Since she didn't charge him for the service, he then treated her to a bowl of noodles.

Ah Guei felt flustered for days afterwards; she also seemed to regain a modicum of confidence. She thought, *at the very least, he walked around in public with me and wasn't concerned about being ridiculed.* In the past few years, every time someone introduced her to a potential husband, whether they were old men or widowers, the man would take one look and lose all interest in any conversation. She sometimes thought ironically to herself, *that little dowry my mother flaunts is hardly worth anything; maybe if she auctioned me at 1 million, I'd have a better chance at marriage. My lord, to think that he would invite me out to a midnight snack.* This event was enough to send Ah Guei into a frantic speculation for days. She had read a few literary novels in the past, and she understood that when a man treated a woman to something, it was often the preface to an ulterior motive. Incidentally, she repositioned her sewing machine such that when Lao Wang (that's what his friends called him) walked into the store, he wouldn't be able to see the other half of her disfigured face. Every night when the time passed 12 o'clock and everything was serene, when the only thing accompanying her was the sewing machine with its monotonous droning, she would be startled and made nervous by any sound that resembled a parking car.

Lao Wang was fond of gambling; according to him, what little savings he had were all lost through gambling. "So you can quit now, right?" Ah Guei asked jokingly as she covered her face with her left hand, a habit she had developed, so that it would cover most parts of the blotch on her face.

“What else can I do?” Lao Wang would reply helplessly, “I can’t really make money from driving someone else’s car, since most of the money I do make goes towards my cab rent.”

“Exactly how much does it cost to buy a taxi?” Ah Guei casually asked one night. In actuality, these were words that she had been flipping in her mind many times over, but she had to maintain the appearance of being busy so that Lao Wang wouldn’t suspect the real reason as to why she kept her shop open so late.

“Hundreds of thousands,” Lao Wang replied as he carried a washbasin out of the shop. Suddenly, as if he remembered something, he walked back and said, “Actually, if I buy a new car, I can make back the money that I used to buy the car fairly easily. The problem is that I don’t even have the money to buy a car.”

“You can save up slowly,” Ah Guei suggested.

“If that’s the case, I’ll still be saving up the money by the time I die.”

How can that be? Ah Guei thought to herself. She had been saving up slowly these past few years, and she had managed to save up a few hundred thousand dollars, which was a considerable amount from just tailoring.

“Come, I’ll treat you to some noodles.”

Ah Guei could barely contain her excitement and slowly covered her sewing machine. That night, Lao Wang was especially courteous and ordered her extra dishes, and he even drank some alcohol. When Ah Guei saw his face flush from drinking, it felt as if her own two cheeks were beginning to grow a little warm. On the way home, Ah Guei discovered that Lao Wang had put one of his hands on her shoulders.

The next day, Guei Mei’s Tailor Shop opened later than usual, but as soon as the door opened, she found her mother rush towards her excitedly.

“Do you know the school janitor, Mr. Hu?” her mother asked her enthusiastically. *Who doesn’t know him? Ah Guei thought, he’s infamous for being an old and shameless pervert.*

“He’s truly had his sights set on you. It’s fine that he’s a bit old, as long as he has a kind heart.”

Kind heart? Ah Guei felt baffled and affronted. So a twenty-something girl like herself was only suitable for an old fart like him? It’s all because of this repulsive face of mine. Is my heart not kind? If all it takes is to have a “kind heart,” then I wouldn’t be rejected by every potential husband she’s introduced to me. Am I really so worthless that my mother has decided to marry me off to an old school janitor? Everyone around the neighborhood knows that he’s a pervert; in fact, there was even a disgusting controversy about how he’d grabbed a grade school student’s thighs. At the thought of this, her heart throbbed and it seemed as if tears were on the verge of gushing out again.

Thankfully Ah Guei didn’t give it too much thought this time, because there was something on her mind that she wanted to say but that she decided not to share with her mother. She really wanted to say, “Don’t look down on your daughter, because there’s still someone who will want me. Maybe I’ll even get married in the near future.” She recalled what Lao Wang told her the night before: “If I can buy a car, I can settle down. If only there was someone who could lend me a few hundred thousand dollars...” Ah Guei longed to tell her mother, “I really want to sell this shop,” but the words just couldn’t come out. Ah Guei

finally steeled her resolve: she would take care of her own business. *Besides, she thought, I've experienced enough disparagement all these years, and every day I've worked hard until the latest hours of the night. How much of that would my mother understand? Can't I make my own decisions now?*

After that decision, Ah Guei really did manage to pool together 90 thousand dollars to lend to Lao Wang. She acquired some money after attending two credit union meetings, and withdrew all her savings from her bank account. All of these things were her own decisions and she didn't regret any of it. In fact, she thought it was something that she *should* do; isn't helping people the basis for one's happiness? She truly felt happy, and even considered lending more of her money. She thought it was all worth it, especially when she saw that joyful expression Lao Wang carried on his face every night when he returned from work. Late at night, when Lao Wang held her hand in the shop's alley, it seemed as if she experienced the very romantic fantasy that she had only read in books. Although he never mentioned anything about marriage, Ah Guei would think to herself: *He must mean it. Didn't he tell me that once he bought a car, he would "settle down?"* Ah Guei would often daydream while she was alone – her husband would drive his own car, she would be the wife who made all their clothes, and when they finally had a child, she could hire more people to help with her store. The images created from her fantasies were so beautiful that she couldn't help but break out into a smile. God truly was gracious for providing her with an unmarried, male tenant. Even though he was already forty-something and a bit short, he knew how to drive, and her life would finally end its spiraling descent into loneliness.

One night, Lao Wang told Ah Guei that he was going to the south to see a friend so that they could pool together the last bit of money. He also said that this friend had a connection in the car dealer market, so it'd be more convenient if he took the money they had and saved it with him.

Ah Guei didn't think twice about giving him the money. Besides, she was practically married to him, and it was just money. In the subsequent days of Lao Wang's absence, Ah Guei began to work more diligently; some nights she would work on her sewing machine until three in the morning. Every time she thought of her future, she felt supported by an endless supply of spirit and energy. The only way to have a place for them to settle was to not sell the storefront. As a result, she needed to make more money to return the money she borrowed from the credit co-op meetings.

A week passed. Ah Guei began to miss him. She even washed his sheets, dried them, and replaced them over his mattress. She was very meticulous.

It must have been a long time since he's seen his old friend, so perhaps he decided to stay in the south for a little longer, Ah Guei thought to herself, *he'll be really pleased when he finds that his bed sheets are so clean.*

Two weeks passed. Every night as Ah Guei slowly closed up the shop, she would think of various reasons and excuses. *Maybe when he comes back, he'll be driving a brand new taxi. The process of buying a new car must be really troublesome.*

The third week passed. Ah Guei tried very hard to think of all the times when he had been kind to her, and she said to herself, *he wouldn't do something like not returning; his things are still here, after all.* She would rather not admit that his single bed sheet and a few clothes were not really of much value.

One month. What Ah Guei now did diligently was to avoid the thought of “scam.” When it was almost the second month, she felt a sense of panic that moved her to the verge of crying, but she couldn’t really find a good reason.

During the time that passed, her mother visited her frequently. The last time she exclaimed with astonishment, “How did you become so skinny? Are you too tired from work?” Then her mother told her that it really wasn’t good that no one else was there to care for her. “I think you should just take Mr. Hu’s bride price; it doesn’t seem like he’ll treat you wrongly.”

As if everything had already been planned, her mother said, “We’ll decide on a date to meet with Mr. Hu’s family. We’ll just reserve two tables, so that way it won’t cost too much...” Her mother’s intentions were very clear, and there didn’t seem to be a way out this time. The more her mother rushed her, the skinnier Ah Guei became. Her brow furrowed tighter and tighter, until it could no longer be smoothed out.

Not a day after the third month of Lao Wang’s departure, Ah Guei died. Aside from her mother and her young female employee, the news was spread that she had contracted a terminal illness.

Very few of her neighbors suspected anything; Ah Guei did indeed look sick the last few days. Only the young girl who worked for her was scared senseless; she was the first person to discover Ah Guei after she committed suicide.

Her mother never thought that Ah Guei would end her own life to protest her arranged marriage with Mr. Hu. “If she didn’t want to marry him, she could have just said no. Why couldn’t she think of other options?” Her mother’s lament was mixed with even more remorse, and the only thing she could do was to focus on the preparations for Ah Guei’s funeral arrangement so that her funeral could be presented with a semblance of dignity.

The only thing left was the truth behind Ah Guei’s death, and that was buried along with Ah Guei.
