

LENG LUI IS FOR PRETTY LADY

EVERYONE SAYS I'M lucky; lucky, because Mrs Kong likes to give me her old clothing, dresses she hasn't worn since the 1980s and her old underwear. Most of them don't really fit me, the bras have strings trailing from the torn lace and the dresses are too formal for scrubbing the kitchen floor or clambering up on top of counters cleaning shelves. So, with the dresses, I sometimes cut them up to use as dishcloth since Mrs Kong thinks store-bought dish-wipes are an unnecessary household expense. Or I give the dresses to my friends when I see them in Central Hong Kong on Sunday. Maridel, with arms sectioned like pink lotus roots and hips like the soft underside of a pear, says to me, "I don't want your frumpy housecoats, Alina, freebie or no." "You're lucky I offer them to you," says I. She shrugs and pulls up these cords she's sewn with finesse onto her fake suede shoes to make them look like boots. "Those boots make you look like 'ho'," I say. She smirks, "Ain't it look like *Pretty Woman* though?" She knows I'm a big fan of that movie.

No, I can't say I'm as lucky as everyone seems to think, at least not compared to Maridel. Her *taitai* doesn't get up till two in the afternoon, being a nightclub singer, and only comes home in the wee hours, so Maridel can protest all she likes, but we all know she goes to bed at ten. So I've said before to Luya and Febie, our luck is entirely determined by the kind of job or mood your *taitai* holds. If she has a bad day, you have a bad day too.

Luya, with her Palmolive-glossy hair, likes to disagree. She has opinions on everything. She says that if you're better educated than the other 140,000 *amahs* here, your employer inevitably sees your worth and will treat you better. As

if she's a Chinese antique – stare hard enough, maybe you can see the value of a moldy cracking piece of wood. She says it may even be the staircase to a better job, maybe as a restaurant hostess or an office assistant. She's mental, having this kind of *bahala na* attitude about everything. Me, I've got myself an English literature degree from university in Manila and look where it has got me. What's the difference between me and Febie, who can barely speak English? We both get up at six in the morning to get the children to school, we cook and clean all day, and then we have to hear the harping from our taitais, "Aiyaa, why you no clean behind door stump, look here, balls of dust big as *yu dan*" ('fish balls' – I've learned a lot of spoken Cantonese, that chicken-scrawly writing in the newspapers that makes life in this city one giant mystery) or "You big stupid egg, you boil chicken until you can poke at flesh and it spring back." I have to bite back reply, "No, Mrs Kong, chicken dead, you can poke but it no spring back."

Mrs Kong looks at me suspiciously, so I know she knows I have a good education and speak better English than she does. Luya's dead wrong on this one – if you are better educated, your taitai thinks you're acting superior, and she's waiting to pounce on your mistakes and make sure you know your place. Stacking my pillow against my arm at night, I don't think about what Luya told me, that she's heard about José out with some girl, or Abuela kneeling for me daily at Santa Ana or three-year old Juanita looking at pictures I send home and saying "Mama?"

No, I think about how to survive every day with Mrs Kong.



Febie likes to call me 'Leng Lui' – Cantonese slang for 'pretty lady' she picked up from the street vendors in Mongkok. But I'm not cheap like Charina or Fredahlia who cruise for gringos with white skin like sharks at tom-tom clubs in Wanchai. Charina and Fredahlia are no better than prostitutes, I tell Maridel. "They got style," she says, "learning how to smoke cigarettes and doing the hip-hop." Who cares if they can swing their hips and smile their secret smiles in the hopes of piggybacking one of those sharks who will whisk them away to America or London? Would you sell your soul just so you can have a chintz drawing room or fake Oriental vases or stainless steel hobs or a game room with dead stuffed animals hanging on the walls?

No, I stick to my movies. Ling-Ling and Sdever share a DVD player and after *Thomas The Tank Engine*, I sneak in a few minutes of *Pretty Woman* or *An Officer and a Gentleman*, all these romances that Mrs Kong buys and watches

with subtitles of chicken-scrawly writing, slumped in the living room with curtains drawn, chain-smoking and wearing her owlish tortoiseshell frames, crying into her Oolong. Each movie takes me a long time to finish because I get only ten minutes a day, but it makes the expecting doubly sweet. Lots of time in between washing dishes and peeling onions to daydream about myself in the movies. Febie often says I got the face. Sometimes I can even see myself speaking lines in front of a camera. "It's not that far-fetched," I say to Luya and Maridel, who hoot with scorn. But what's the harm of daydreaming in the boring routine we face every day? It's like those edges that hold a jigsaw puzzle together or the pages within a book cover. I watch these romances and I dare to dream that when I return to Manila, José will come greet me at the train station, daisies in his hand and our daughter beside him. Is that so far-fetched?

My lot could be worse. It could be like Eliza-Eunice who got spanked in the head with a frying pan because her employer thought she'd stolen HK\$32 from an ashtray – Eliza-Eunice who died in the hospital a week later from a blood clot in her brain caused by a concussion. Even if her employer rots in jail, who do you think is the loser? Lucky for me, Mrs Kong isn't really too much into using an apparatus to give one a whipping. She likes the knuckle maneuver, a sharp and hard rap to the side of the head. Mr Kong hardly seems to notice I'm around.

But what we fear most is losing our jobs. We have two weeks to find a new job before getting deported. As Maridel tells me, it was explained to her by this Australian she was seeing, "youu knoaw, a conundroom?" If we get fired, we can't get a new job unless we have a discharge letter from our old employer, and call me dumb, but unless you have an employer who has a conscience where amahs are concerned or who is just plain nice, you'd be a fool to think you can get that discharge letter. Now that's a real 'conundroom'.



The Kongs are a bit funny. The kids are normal enough: Sdever likes to chew on cotton buds, Ling-Ling operates on her dolls with scissors. Mrs Kong drinks White Russians in the afternoon and insists it's only milk. Sometimes she has her cronies over for mahjong and amidst the clack-clack of those short tiles, I can hear her complaining tones to these bejeweled ladies in faux fur, as if life has kidnapped her and demanded a ransom.

Mr Kong is a branch manager for HSBC. Sometimes, he works late, though I don't know why, since the branch closes by five. When I first came to work for the Kongs, I was impressed by what a dapper little man Mr Kong was –

clean-shaven, suit neatly pressed, shoes shined to a dull gleam, and he washes his hands 10 or 11 times a day. Until one day when I glimpsed him cutting his toenails and emptying the clippings into a plant sitting on their bedroom windowsill. When next I went to water it, I lifted the fronds and there at the base was a mountain of toenail and fingernail clippings.

Lately, he has taken to putting a turnip next to his bedside lamp. I found it one morning and puzzled, replaced it in the refrigerator. Later that evening, Mr Kong strides into the kitchen, which he never comes into, opens the refrigerator, takes out the turnip and walks away with it, but not before I see the expression in his eye – furtive and creepy. Before bedtime, I espy him speaking to it, sitting on the bed in his neatly ironed pajamas with his feet firmly flat on the mat. His words are unintelligible, but his chest puffs out and his shoulders straighten – perhaps he pours his heart out to the turnip, since he and Mrs Kong don't speak much beyond tidbits about the children. When I tell Maridel, she laughs like a wild woman, "What, he talks to a turnip? Why a turnip?"

Mrs Kong hardly notices, or maybe she simply doesn't care. She's flirting with the young man who tends the Chinese medicinal shop down on Sai Yeong Choi. He shows her dried deer-antlers and they both giggle with hands over their mouths. Taking out a brown oblong piece that looks like a finger, he whispers something in her ear – Mrs Kong flutters her eyes and turns dragonfruit red. He turns to me suddenly and says in English loudly, "Penis. This penis." I feel pity for Mr Kong, because he works hard and tries to be a good father. But Sdever only gurgles at him with a slack jaw. Again, I wonder if the boy has brain damage, because only an idiot has a crooked mouth like that; Ling-Ling ignores him completely, intent on her toy musical instruments, her dolls or her drawing pads.

But soon things heat up. Hot as you can boil an egg on the pavement and Mrs Kong gets all dolled-up. She tells me she's going to the medicinal shop to get some soup ingredients. "I can go, Madam." She waves her hand dismissively, slings her purse over her shoulder, stops to check her lipstick in the hallway mirror. One hour later, she's still not back. The nursery calls about Sdever. Then the school calls about Ling-Ling. I tell them she's coming. I put the chicken where I've been pulling out small white quills from the pink skin into the water-filled sink. I'm uneasy, but maybe they're just chatting. Who does hanky-panky in daylight?

When I get to the shop, the iron-grill door is padlocked. No-one in sight – the shop is brown and murky, still as a crocodile slumbering in hot swampy waters. The ceiling fan has been left on, whirring silently like helicopter blades. On the pavement I squat and wait 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20. No sign of Mrs

Kong. Maybe she isn't here after all. Maybe she came and has gone on to the Park N' Shop opposite. I fan myself with an old newspaper, thinking about Sdever, probably sniveling scared, and Ling-Ling, who hates being the last to leave school. Angry, I jump up and through the grilled iron-bars, I shout, "Mrs Kong! Mrs Kong!"

She emerges half-dressed, hair askew, her lipstick smeared. "It's you," she says, accusingly.

I'm not the one with my petticoat down my legs.

"What you doing here, huh, Alina?" she demands, pulling her dress over her camisole – in her haste, slotting buttons into the wrong eyehooks. The young man is behind her, cigarette dangling, wearing tight briefs and a white singlet damp in patches.

"I'm sorry, Madam," I say, "but Sdever and Ling-Ling..."

Mrs Kong cuts me off, saying something in rapid Cantonese to the young man. He comes forward and unchains the padlock, smirking, his eyes tiny slits against the sun.

Mrs Kong comes outside and grabs my arm. "Let's go, you stupid egg." She marches down the street, half-hauling me as if I've done something wrong. "You don't say nothing about this to anyone, you hear me? Or I fire you."



But Mr Kong must have sensed something's different. Maybe he too sees Mrs Kong's smiles in the mirror, her fuller lips, her swaying hips. Suddenly, she seems as bouffant as her hair. The next evening, Mr Kong is again with his turnip – at first it seems he's whispering to it, then looking closer, I see him kiss it. Not just kiss, but his tongue flicks in and out.

"Sir?"

He drops the turnip like a hot chicken-bun.

"Your tea, sir?"

"Uh... not right now." He picks up his turnip, looks at it, melancholy-like. But his tone is gruff. "Where's Mrs Kong?"

"She's at Mrs Chin's for mahjong."

"Aah... yes, I forgot. The kids?"

"Asleep, sir."

"Good. Bring my tea, Alina. I'm tired now."

When I tell my Sunday group about Mr Kong's tongue-ing of the turnip, they split their sides.

"Really?" Febie asks, eyes wide and mouth open.

Maridel says, "He probably need those deer antlers, maybe then he don't need to practice on a turnip."

Luya shakes her head, "I'm glad I don't work for a Chinese taitai. They're cruel and weird."

To the fact that if I tell anyone, Mrs Kong would fire me, Maridel says, "That's no threat. Spill the beans and I fire you," she mocks in her best Cantonese accent, surprisingly sounding just like Mrs Kong. "Peel potatoes wrong and I fire you. Sweep room bad and I fire you."

"Yeah, what you know about that," I say, "your taitai only sweeps once a year."

Luya pats me on the shoulder, "*Até*, nothing bad happen to you now, you lucky because you know their secrets."



The afternoon visits to the medicinal shop and Mr Kong's turnip abuse continue. I finish more romances, one movie per sitting. *Pretty Woman*, a few more times. Out in the living room too, with curtains drawn, sometimes drinking White Russians. One evening, while changing the water in the vases, I ad-lib the lines to *Pretty Woman* in the hallway mirror, the part when she talks about being a princess trapped in a tower. Suddenly, in the mirror, I see Mr Kong watching me. But he doesn't watch me like the gringos do in Central, openly, lewdly. Mr Kong watches me with one scary eye in between the hinges of the door to the kitchen.

Then, one afternoon, as I come in from mopping the outside terrace, Mrs Kong is standing in the lobby with a packed valise.

"Madam?" I ask.

"Call Mr Kong in office to pick up chillen, Alina. Cook them omelets for dinner. I don't want Ling-Ling stay up too late. If chillen cry, tell them I call them from Phuket."

"Phuket, Madam?"

"Yes, I go vacation. I be back next week."

"But does Mr Kong know where you're going, Madam?"

"No, but he no care anyway." She laughs bitterly and then, I'm alone with the chillen.

I've never called Mr Kong at the office before. Trembling, I say, "Mr Andrew Kong, please," as soon as a female answers in rapid Cantonese. I breathe a sigh of relief when, instead of interrogating me, she simply says, "Wait just a minute."

When Mr Kong comes on, the words stick to my mouth like pellets.

"Hello, anyone there?"

"Mrs Kong, sir. She's left for Phuket."

"Who's this?"

"Alina, sir."

"What's the matter, Alina?" His voice is sharp with surprise.

"Mrs Kong, sir, she's left for Phuket. She say she come back next week. She ask you to pick up children. But she gone, sir."

There's only silence from his end.

"What time?" he finally says, sounding tired and I like to think, gloomy. But not angry, so maybe I won't get hit with a frying pan.

"She left at four, sir."

"No, I mean, what time do I pick up the kids?"

"Oh, five, sir. Five-thirty latest."

"Damn it, it's ten to five."



There's a lot of bawling that night, little Sdever snuffles even when asleep and there's a trail of yellow mucus down his cheek. Ling-Ling throws all her dolls at me and I pick them up and put them in the treasure chest. She repeats this tantrum while Mr Kong sits in the kitchen with his newspaper, but I notice he's on the same page still an hour later. When it's finally time for Ling-Ling to go to bed, I see her dolls scattered around the floor – all their heads have been neatly scissored off.

Over the next few days, I do what I can for the Kongs, who all look amputated, as if missing an integral limb and can only hobble from place to place. Sdever will not eat, even though I try to entice him with the stir-fries he likes. I boil Mr Kong his chicken medicinal soup. Ling-Ling says she wants to write Mrs Kong a letter and mail it to Phuket. I give her pen and paper, she comes out with a drawing of a giant squid sucking up the sun. "What's that?" I ask. "Phuket," she says. Mr Kong continues to massage his turnip, slowly, deliberately, his eyes watching me. At night, I worry about José; I try not to think of him being out with another woman, but my mind keeps filling with images of Mrs Kong in Phuket with that young man from the medicine shop.



It's been ten days and there is no Mrs Kong. That night, I ask Mr Kong, "Are you going to try to find her, Mr Kong?"

Mr Kong looks up from sipping soup. Since Mrs Kong's departure, he has insisted I take dinner with the family. These dinners are awkward silences, only the tinkle of the soup spoon against the tureen, the children in bed, me and him watching the bark or fungus or dried tofu swirl around the milky brown liquid; occasionally, a chicken neck bobs up when I use the ladle. Now he looks at me as if I've just spoken to him in Tagalog.

"If she comes back, she comes back." He heaves a sigh full of dust.

"But maybe you should call her." I look pointedly at the Phuket number scrawled in big letters across the calendar hanging atop the spice rack.

"She's on vacation. She does not want to be disturbed. You know how she is if you disturb her when she is doing something."

Yes, bang, bang, a quick whack to the head, I know. But I don't say this, I purse my lips instead. "What will you do if she doesn't come back?"

He drops his spoon and holds his head in his hands. "I don't know, Alina."

He looks so sad and confused, I'm embarrassed for him. "Erm... how's the sesame chicken I made for you?"

"I can't think about food," he groans. He looks up, eyes glistening like watermelon rinds. Suddenly, his hand is on my arm, a pale milky claw. "We don't need Mrs Kong, Alina."

I react in alarm and drop the spoon, the liquid scalding him. He draws his hand back quickly. Afraid, I scrape my chair back and make to grab the dishcloth made of Mrs Kong's old dresses to wipe his hand dry. This time he reaches again for my hand and he doesn't let go. "Alina, listen to me, it took me a long time to get up the courage to say this. God knows, I'm much older than you, and I'm married with children. It's a bit sudden, but just give me a chance, you'll see that it can work."

My mind struggles to match the words I've just heard to their unbelievable meaning.

"Sir?" Trembling, I try to yank my arm away. Months later, I'll remember the tortured pose we were in: I, half-risen from my chair, one arm reaching for the dishcloth and the other being pulled back by Mr Kong, while he holds on for dear life, still sitting down, soup dribbling down his chin, and the only word that comes to my mind is "Stuckey".

"Alina, I've mulled over how best to put this, how to convince you of my intentions. Do you know how I sometimes stay late in the office? It's because I'm afraid of letting my feelings show, of not being able to control myself."

I renew my struggle to get free at this.

"But it seems I can't help it. Your face torments me every day. I find myself practicing what I'll say to you in the office. At home, my fantasies overwhelm

me – you and I could be the ones in Phuket now...”

“At home?” I ask stupidly, but some hidden knowledge is struggling to reveal itself to me.

“Yes, many times I thought you’d suspect – the way I was practicing my overtures. Haven’t you heard me rehearsing my speech to you?”

This rehearsed rant that sounds like a bad canton movie?

“Haven’t you seen me practice so I wouldn’t be inept?”

The word comes to my lips unbidden, “Turnip?”

“Yes, my darling, that turnip is you.”

A wave of disgust, profound and dizzying, uncoils inside. “Sir, let me go. I insist, please.” I wrench my fist away, only to have him rise from his chair and grab me around the waist.

“Oh Alina, we can be such a comfort to each other. Especially now.”

“Stop it. Let me go. Sir. Please.” Stuckey, Stuckey, Stuckey, my mind chants. Struggling desperately, my mind hovers over the choice between mute submission or being fired.

“Together, Alina, we’ll make happiness happen.”

“Sir, you’re upset, but...” I can’t finish because Mr Kong’s mouth is on mine, and his tongue is a lizard peeping through a crack in a dry wall.

I manage to twist away and, just as I’ve seen them do in movies, I move my knee upwards in one swift motion, making hard contact with his nether parts. He doubles over, cupping his crotch, and lets me go. Stuckey, Stuckey, Stuckey! I bring my elbow down between his two scapulas, as if perfecting a karate chop, and as he jerks one hand up to reach around his back, lifting up his face, I pull my fist back and pop him one in the eye. Our tussle up-ended the dining table and the soup tureen lurches and tips over as the liquid sloshes down onto Mr Kong’s naked feet. He yelps, keels over and curls on the floor like dried shrimp.

I brush at the trailing wisp of hair on my forehead. Looking up, Mrs Kong stands in the doorway sporting a tan, her mouth agape.



Pandemonium begins with a ‘P’ for police. Their radios crackle back and forth. Mr Kong holds an ice-pack to his eye (one can easily see his feet are none the worse for wear, it’s just drinking soup, *ah sueh*, I say, but PC Chan’s head bobs vigorously as he listens to Mrs Kong). She smokes and draws up a complaint. She doesn’t look at me when she tells PC Chan I’ve been plotting to be Mr Kong’s mistress ever since I took up employment with them.

"All these pretty amahs behave like prostitutes," he says, and his eyes on me are cold and murderous. When they lead me away, I turn to him and say, "It's just like the movies, I'm in the movies now."



Spend one night in a Hong Kong cell, the walls are cement cinderblocks without windows, and the bars remind me of the cages Abuela kept her prized roosters in. I sleep on a cold cement bench, and there's no blanket. Deep in the night, my heart aches to hold my little girl, and I cry out to José. But he cannot hear me now. I sing softly to myself, ballads my Abuela taught me when I was little, and the sound of my own voice makes me scared.

The next morning, a police officer calls my name and opens the cell-door. Afraid of where he's going to take me next, I hang back on the bench, my eyes wide and my breath coming heavy. "You're free to go." His voice bounces around the cell.

Outside in the main booking room, I see Mrs Kong in a silvery dress, smoking. She looks at me quick, then she turns smartly and heads out the door. "Hurry up, you bad egg. You give me enough trouble last night, now I have to pay your bail. I take out from your salary, you understand?"

What I feel is bitterness, sudden, piercing. I don't feel grateful. She has all the power. I should be happy I'm not going to jail but I don't feel relief. The station door is open, and the humid air outside blows in. It smells sweet and clammy. The police officer hands me my watch. I can see he's wondering why I don't take it.

In her car, Mrs Kong says, "Sdever won't eat when I feed him. Ling Ling behave like wild monkey." Finally, Mrs Kong looks at me, her face with make-up looking like a Chinese porcelain doll. It's what I see in her eyes that suddenly looms up close like a shadow on my heart – a wildness, a grasping – and I realize she's so lost without me. I am the jigsaw piece hooking her family together. It's now I begin to understand.

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