
Leslie Hsu Oh

The Red Balloon

Flurries as translucent as vellum begin to fall as I idle my car before the Inn at Little Washington. In the passenger seat, a pair of uncomfortable heels, which a girlfriend said makes my legs look juicy, and the sexiest dress I own glimmers beneath the porch lights. It's been a hell of a long time since I wore this dress for my husband on our fifth anniversary. And now, I am about to squeeze into it for another man.

Before you judge me, there's something you need to know about Korean mother-in-laws. When Peter and I started dating, my Korean friends warned me about the way they torment daughter-in-laws. Even Peter told me stories he heard about Halmeoni, his father's mother. In the early years of their marriage, his mom had to kneel in front of Halmeoni and present her with a sample of the dinner she had prepared. Halmeoni would sniff at the rice bowl, then smash it against the wall and order her to clean it up. But I didn't believe them. This kind of thing couldn't possibly happen in America.

On a day as snowy as this one, Peter held the door open for my parents as they lugged my bags into the flagstoned foyer of Vanderbilt Hall, Harvard Medical School's dormitory. I had rolled my eyes at him, as my parents chattered loudly away in Chinese. Later, over drinks at an Asian American social, we joked about how our parents had micromanaged every aspect of our youth to get us into Harvard Medical School and how great it felt to be finally free after twenty-two years of "No, you can't play outside, you have to practice your piano" and T.V. restrictions and Saturday Chinese or Korean school and all day long Sunday church activities. So, we began to scheme. How pissed do you think they would be to find out that ____? We started filling in the blank with "we got tattoos, blond hair, body jewelry," until worried calls started maxing out our answer machines.

My mom: "Why is a boy picking up your phone?"

My dad: "Be careful of Koreans. They can be violent. And don't quit medical school. You will be poor. You will envy your friends who are doctors. You will never be happy."

His mom: "You can't date Chinese. You are the eldest son. You must marry Korean. Mom and Dad are very disappointed in you."

We ignored these comments because we are bananas. Yellow on the outside. White on the inside. Apart from the fact that he is Korean and I am Chinese and the whole East Coast-West Coast divide (he was born in the D.C. area and I was born in California) where his soft always shod feet cringed against my sand calloused soles, we both led very sheltered lives where our parents picked us up immediately after school, even undergrad! The ironic thing is that our



Janet Levin

parents had thought Harvard Med would be safe. On Fridays, as soon as class let out, we threw our medical textbooks in the car along with our snowboards, and drove to Killington, Stowe, or Sugarbush to practice barrel rolls and backside 720s. On Sundays, nursing sprained ankles or bruised shoulders, we prepared our return to hardcore studying with a stroll through Fenway's finest bars and nightclubs. (By the way, can you believe that I had never tasted alcohol until that year at Harvard? That's how goody two-shoes I was growing up.) Then, my parents died in a car accident probably on route to lecture me. I quit medical school to pursue my photographer dreams. Peter proposed to me. His parents disowned him. He quit medical school. We left America to pick grapes in France, peace corp in Tanzania, trek the Annapurna Circuit.

Korean mother-in-laws were not supposed to be in my future. Until, his father had to have a heart attack and die and ruin everything. My nobody-tells-me-what-to-do man caved. He claimed he had to take on his responsibilities as the eldest son. He bought a one-way ticket for us to D.C. without consulting me, and now our dusty backpacks with patches from all the countries we've visited are strewn amidst boxes of Kim (seaweed) and Soojungwa (cinnamon and ginger tea

with persimmons) in his parents house.

Outside my heated car, the steady thick fall of snowflakes transforms the famous restaurant into a pointillism painting. The Inn at Little Washington is the subject of many brag sessions among my doctor friends. The restaurant has received more awards than I can count with my fingers and toes. Critics claim that the food crafted by Patrick O'Connell is "so good it makes you cry."

I tell myself that I'm here because I finally have something to talk about with my doctor friends. I mean, the restaurant, of course, not Brandon, the Pulitzer Prize winning photographer that invited me to dinner. Climbing into the backseat of my car, I am halfway into my halter black sequined dress when my phone rings.

It's my childhood friend, who is Korean and knows me better than I know myself. She begins, "Hey, are you okay?" "No."

"Why? What's going on?"

I don't answer and both of us are silent for a while. I finish putting my dress on and say, "So, I need to know something. Does that crazy Korean mother-in-law shit really

happen in America?"

She laughs. "Girl, I told you it does. I guess it's kind of an I-had-to-suffer-through-this, so-you- do-too kind of tradition. Why, what's happening?"

"Peter's mom acts all nice and all, but then, one day, Peter asked her to babysit our kids so that he and I could have some alone time and she started yelling in Korean about how I'm the worst mother she's ever known. That I don't deserve the right to give birth. I don't think she knows that I understand Korean."

"Geez, that's horrible and cruel and...."

"How about you? Isn't your mother-in-law moving in soon?"

"Wait a second," she muffles the receiver, but I can hear her taking a quick stroll around her house. "Okay, sorry, I just had to check if Alex came home yet. So, get this. We had a huge fight last week and I told him that his parents can't move in. It's either his parents or me. He has to choose."

"And...."

"He chose me! His mom is furious! You know, she's been telling me since we got married that she wants to move in. And I kept telling her she could as long as she gave us one year. Well, within that year, she visited every other weekend."

"Do you think I can do the same thing? Tell my husband, it's either his mom or me?"

"Probably not. His dad just died. His mother probably can't even drive or figure out how to get money from the bank, right?"

Just as I slip on my painful heels, Brandon drifts by like the shadow of an eagle in flight.

Brandon stands as I approach the table. His calm blue eyes draw me in like the glacier-fed lakes Peter and I had skinny dipped in on our honeymoon. Beneath the shade of the luxurious Victorian drapes and rose-petal chandeliers, I think I understand for the first time what my dad meant by envy.

"You look nice," he says shyly.

"Thanks. So do you." We both laugh nervously. He looks glorious, even though he is completely underdressed for this restaurant. Worn jeans, half un-buttoned shirt, barefoot in leather Birkenstocks, long blond hair tied back in a pony-tail.

"Hey, your hair's almost as long as mine now," he says. His words bring us back to the ruins of Tintagel Castle, where we first met. He was on assignment for National Geographic. I was visiting sites linked to the legend of King Arthur and the Holy Grail. Peter had felt sorry for me, being pregnant and unable to celebrate my 30th birthday in style, so he encouraged me to travel around a bit on my own. And while I enjoyed my little adventure, I was lonely and Brandon asked if he could photograph me. He said he loved the way my hair "bristled hot pink like a punk porcupine" against the frothy emerald teal of the Celtic Sea, or something like that.

The waiter saves me from a response. He hands menus to both of us, then notes that the wine menu is 92 pages long. "Let's do the tasting menu with wine pairings," Brandon tells the waiter without even looking at the menus.

"Is that okay?" he asks me.

The waiter takes my menu while I'm stumbling over two things: \$288, the price for what Brandon just ordered for each of us, and the first item on the tasting menu, "A Tin of Sin- American Ossetra Caviar with Crab & Cucumber Rillettes." First, the thought of spending that much money on food, something that passes right through me in a few hours, makes me heave. Secondly, I am paranoid that everybody in the restaurant knows that I am having dinner in such a romantic setting with someone other than my husband. I also feel stupid because I don't know what "rilettes" means and I don't like raw or squishy things and I've never done a tasting menu before because I don't like surprises, so I start to panic.

"Uh, so. You're moving to Hawaii?" I ask.

"Yep. I'm retiring. Early."

Then, the "Tin of Sin" arrives on a black wooden board. Brushing away the black caviar in the tin, I poke at the crab and cucumber stuff. Then, I drain my entire glass of wine in one gulp.

He raises an eyebrow in my direction.

"I needed that!" I explain. "I just had another kid. So, I couldn't drink for nine months, you know. And now, I'm breastfeeding, so...never mind."

Brandon smiles and I have to look away because I'm wondering what it might feel like to kiss those lips and this frightens me. I had told Peter that I was having a bon voyage dinner tonight with Brandon. I had even invited Peter to come along, since he's accompanied me to some of Brandon's photo exhibitions. Peter said he was too tired tonight for such a long drive and would rather play with our kids. He kissed me and said, "Go and enjoy yourself, baby. You deserve it."

I was relieved and for this, I hated myself.

I love my husband. He is the only man I've ever kissed let alone had sex with and I'm not complaining. He's my best friend. He is safe. We have roots like he's met my parents and Brandon will never get the chance. We have three darlings: our first born is a splitting image of me, but has his personality; our second born looks like him, but has my taste buds; and our newborn we've nicknamed "our love butterfly" because he flutters haphazardly between us as if he is swollen with our love. I could never ever cheat or leave them, so why am I putting myself in this situation? Why am I wondering whether I'm missing out? Why am I hoping that something will happen, when nothing can?

A plate of oysters each draped with a burst of moist color interrupts Brandon's stare. I push mine towards him. "Here, I'm not much of an oyster girl."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." My fingers twist the thick napkin into a ball and I wish I could just stuff it down my throat because I can't seem to shut up. I ramble on about how much I hate changing diapers and that I'm not cut out to be a mom and then I hear myself say, "My father-in-law just died a few months ago..." My words open up a black hole and I dig my nails into the palm of my hand.

Brandon seems to lose his appetite and says, "Oh. That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

I reach for the plate of butter and bread and knock

over my new glass of wine.

"Oh crap. Did I get you?"

"No, just my toes." He winks while the waiter cleans up my mess and brings me another glass that I empty like a shot.

We digress to safer topics like the weather and the latest movies we've seen. He waits until my belly is full of soup and scallops and Peking duck before he tries again, "So, how's Peter doing?"

"I don't know. He won't talk to me about it. He's just angry all the time. And then, there's his mother."

The Tuna Wellington saves me from launching into the whole mother-in-law menace. Watermelon-pink wrapped in a bright ribbon of lime-green, all rolled in a thin corrugated mustard-brown. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* My camera is so loud that guests at surrounding tables stop eating to stare at us.

"Sorry, I just had to capture that."

"No problem, I completely understand."

"Peter wouldn't."

Brandon stops chewing and waits for me to elaborate.

"Well, he doesn't like it when I take pictures in public. He gets really pissed."

"But, you're a photographer. He should get it."

"He does, but only if I'm on an assignment. He hates it when I take pictures spontaneously. One time, I took a photo of him sleeping with our kids. It was such a tender fatherly moment, you know, one of those portraits I think he would appreciate when he's old? Well, the flash woke him up and he flipped me off."

"Wow."

"Hey, can I show you something? Don't laugh, okay?"

Lifting my camera from my lap, I flip through images until I settle on a trail of black clad Korean Americans meandering up a hill knee-deep in the fluffiest snow. Some hold black umbrellas against the gray sky.

I hand my camera to Brandon and bite my lip waiting for his response. He views several of my photos in silence. Then, he leans back and squeezes his cheeks with his right hand and closes his eyes. When he opens them, the blue seems more transparent as if I could see more of him.

Finally, he says, "You could enter this in a contest. There's something extraordinary about the juxtaposition of this unpredictable blizzard and the finality of..."

"Life and death. Black and white."

"Yes," he breathes. "Their faces. His face. Your husband. It's... well, goddamn beautiful. Frozen against these wispy ribbons of snow."

He draws a triangle in the air above my husband's face and says, "Your framing is brilliant. Your eyes follow this line and then you're trapped."

I nod.

He asks, "Has your husband seen this?"

"Oh god no. Let's just say, I'm probably the gossip of the funeral. The shameful family member who dared to take photos on a day no one wants to remember."

"Your husband doesn't realize that that's the way you love him." He leans towards me and hands me the camera.

"Tell me more about this one."

A deflated red balloon, no larger than a pencil point in my viewfinder, sucks all the color from this photograph. The wind whips it ruthlessly across a whisper of tree tops on a white canvas.

"Yeah, it's my favorite one. Nobody noticed the balloon but me. The burial had just ended and everybody dove into their cars. I watched that sad balloon disappear on my own."

"And?"

"Well, I don't know. I guess I don't want that to happen to me."

He places both hands on the table and I wonder if he is finally going to reach over and touch me. Instead, he says, "Would you mind giving me a copy?"

Our most intimate moment occurs over dessert as we devour his, aptly named the "Seven Deadly Sins," and dismantle mine, an intricate bed complete with layers of fluffy cake mattress, whipped cream pillows, and a delicate chocolate twisted Victorian head and foot board, swimming in a spotlight of quicksand yellow.

With a marble bust overseeing the state of affairs in the Inn's foyer, our parting hug is confusing. He wraps his arms around me like a buddy and I hold on too long. I'm not sure who is a bigger coward. Or maybe, we're both heroes.

I feel like this is the last time I will ever see him. So I say, "I luv you" as in the friendly way that you sign your emails. He pulls back and suddenly, I'm not sure if all of this shit is just in my head. So, I turn my back on him and walk coolly away.

My heels slip on the parking lot and I look down to see the powder rise from my escape and slither away like ghostly snakes. **□**



Janet Levin