

THE LIES THAT BUILD A MARRIAGE

Suchen Christine Lim was born in Malaysia but grew up in Singapore. She has many accolades to her name, including inaugural winner of the Singapore Literature Prize.

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THE LIES THAT BUILD A MARRIAGE

Stories of the unsung, unsaid
and uncelebrated in Singapore

SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM



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*To those made less equal by ignorance and unjust laws,
or silenced because of their difference,
work or livelihood.*

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The Morning After

There had been a seismic shift the night before. No one noticed it. Singapore the morning after was still the same. The sun rose as usual. Everything looked the same. Except Mother.

‘When Cheng Lock brought her home for dinner last night, ha, I thought she was his office friend. So chatty she was. Auntie this! Auntie that! Sweet as sugar she was. She had a motive.’

‘Ma,’ I protested. ‘How can you say that? You’ve just met Jennifer.’

‘If no motive, why didn’t she and Cheng Lock come straight out and tell me? Why wait till this morning? Your brother phoned me. From his office. Didn’t even dare tell me face to face. Asked me what I thought of his woman. “I’ve just met her,” I told him. That was when he dropped his bomb. They want to marry. Asked how I felt about it. “What’s there to feel?” I said. My feelings, not important. So old already. One foot in the grave.’

It was a lie, of course. If her feelings weren’t important, my mother wouldn’t have taken a taxi immediately after Cheng Lock’s phone call and come here.

My feelings were in a state, too, that morning. I didn’t know what I was supposed to feel. I was still dizzy from David’s news.

I wondered if I should tell her about her grandson. Could the old lady cope with two shocks? I was all right. In fact, I was beginning to wonder if I was a normal mum. I ought to feel guilty or sad. Somewhere inside my head, a judge was sitting expectantly. He expected me to feel guilty. Instead I was listening to my mother complain about my brother's heterosexual love affair.

'There's more. He asked if I wanted grandchildren. "But I've two grandsons already! Your sister's two sons! Are you so in love that you forgot?" I asked him. He laughed. He said he'd meant, what if he didn't want children of his own? That's when he revealed that the woman has two sons from her previous marriage. Asked if I would mind. "What's there to mind? I'm not the one getting married," I said. He asked if I would like the two boys to call me Nai-nai, like Daniel and David. "*Chieh!*" I said. "They can call me whatever. Nai-nai. Por-por. Grandma. All the same! But think carefully," I said. "Make sure you don't regret it. Adopting other people's sons is not like keeping a dog. You say right or not?" That's what I said to him.'

I could hear the anger in my mother's voice, and said so.

'Why do you always accuse me of anger, eh? I'm not angry. Get angry for what? I always tell my prayer group in the temple, let your children be free. My children are free to do what they like. That's my weak point. I'm too soft.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to point out to her that if she hadn't been so stern and possessive a mother, Cheng Lock

wouldn't have had to resort to the phone to tell her about his marriage plans. My brother is forty-one. He has lived with our mother all his life. Has never married. Never brought any girl home for dinner. And until last year when he turned forty, our mother was still buying him his underwear. Yes, his underwear. Cheng Lock is the filial son. I'm the recalcitrant daughter. I fought our mother. Kept her at arm's length. Married early and left home. When I got divorced, I rejected her offer to take care of my sons.

She predicted that my boys would do badly in school because of my neglect. Now a part of me was afraid that she would blame me for David's condition. Condition? What am I thinking? My son is not sick. Why do I have to feel guilty? David has won a state scholarship to study at MIT in the US. Any mother would be proud. But would I be just as proud if he had not done well academically?

My mother did not stop talking even as my attention wandered off. I was waiting to tell her about David. But she was worked up over my brother wanting to marry a woman with two sons. My son is never going to marry a woman. Shouldn't I be the one getting worked up?

'Ma.' I tried to stop her.

But she wanted to parade her virtues. So I had to listen.

'Your brother has a good life and doesn't know it. Which mother is like me? Cook, boil and simmer all day. Then last minute he'd phone to say he couldn't come home for dinner. I

would have to eat leftovers for a week. Do I complain? I cook for him, I wash for him, I clean the flat for him. Have I so much as asked for a thank you all these years? Part of my life savings went into that apartment. Now he's getting married. He will expect me to move out of the master bedroom so he can bring home that woman and her two sons. Did you know that they've been living together for a year? He didn't tell me! Only now I know why he's never home. Any other mother would've wailed and complained. But not I. Not a pip out of me.'

'Ma, what are you doing now?' I was getting impatient.

She turned on me.

'Who do I tell if I don't tell you? Who? Your father left me to bring up the two of you. All these years, who knows my tears?'

She started to sob. I made no attempt to comfort her. It was a familiar pattern. My dead father was trotted out each time she wanted some sympathy. I was not surprised that my brother did what he did. It's difficult to handle a mother who cries a widow's tears.

A part of me was proud that I hadn't cried. Last night is engraved forever in my memory. David had stood in the middle of the living room. Still sporting the crew cut from his stint in the army, he was lanky like a robust young tree.

'Mum, I've something to tell you and Dan.'

He did not flinch when he said the word 'gay'. It was the first time that the word had been said among us. Was it Niyi, the

African poet, who wrote, '*In the beginning is the Word. In the Word is our beginning*'? Was last night the beginning of my son's new life?

'Mum, I don't want to live a lie. I want to live in the open. In the light. Not hiding in the dark,' he said softly.

Brave words from a nineteen year old. But I was afraid for him. From the outside we're a tolerant, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-everything society. But inside there's a hard kernel. Like an apricot's. We can be most unforgiving. What if the army finds out? He hasn't completed his national service yet. What if the Singapore Public Service Commission finds out and takes away his scholarship? It will break his heart. What if ...? What if ...? I started to pray.

Have I been so blind all these years? No, not blind. Once or twice it did occur to me, what if ...? Fleeting thoughts, never pursued. The mind shies away from such thoughts about one's son. No parent wants to think that it can happen to her son. We're close as a family, the three of us. Dan, David and I. When the boys were growing up, we talked during meals, mostly about what they had done or what was wrong with Singapore. Never, never about sex and sexuality. My fault. My fault. No, no, not my fault. Things aren't so simple. No one knows why such things happen.

When I woke up this morning, I was surprised at my own calm and collected state. My world hadn't fallen apart. David had

declared that he was still the same David.

‘Nothing has changed, Mum. Only your knowledge. That has changed. Not me. I want you to know about me before I go to the States, so you won’t blame the US or the West for corrupting me.’

I was impressed that he had thought about this.

‘How can you be so sure?’ I asked him, keeping the edge out of my voice.

‘I’m sure.’

His answer had the ring of authority that comes from first-hand knowledge.

‘When? When did you know? What if you change your mind later?’

I was clutching at straws. Years ago, a student who was a bit of a tomboy had told me that she wanted to undergo a sex change to become a man. But five years later, the girl changed her mind. Last night I’d hoped, no, prayed in my heart that David would make the same happy mistake some day.

‘When did you first know?’ I asked him again.

David was silent. Then in a voice that quavered with emotion, he said, ‘About nine or ten.’

His answer shocked me. Was that why my son was such a neatness freak? Such a good and tidy child? Unlike his elder brother, Dan, I never had to nag David about homework. Was he trying to compensate for his difference at age nine or ten? At that

tender age he was already carrying a heavy burden.

‘You just knew?’ I asked him again.

He looked into the distant past. I saw the tears gathering.

‘I prayed, Mum.’ He paused, searching for the words. ‘I asked God, “Why? Why me?” I asked Him to take it away.’ He fell silent again, trying to bring his feelings under control. When he looked up, his eyes were sad. ‘I knew God wouldn’t take it away when I went to secondary school.’

‘But you kept it to yourself.’

I was incredulous. Images of David as a ten-year-old schoolboy in blue shorts and a white shirt, and as a thirteen year old in a white shirt and white trousers, floated past my inner eye. Meanwhile, David stood silent before me as though I had accused him of deceit.

In a quiet voice he said, ‘I couldn’t tell you earlier. I had to be sure first.’

I hugged him. I wanted to hug away all his years of lonely struggle. I wished I could. ‘You’re my son. Whatever happens to you, you are still my son.’

I was reeling. Hanging on the wall of our sitting room is a photograph of David at seven. He’s leaning against the window. His child’s face, serious, his mouth, vulnerable, and the eyes that are looking straight into the camera seem to ask, ‘Who am I?’ Maybe I’m reading too much into it. My mind trawled the past for signs that I had missed. Could it have been his parents’ divorce?

No. It couldn't have been. I know of one happily married couple with two gay sons. I turned to Dan. My elder son had been quiet all this while.

'How do you feel, Dan, about David being gay?'

'It's okay, what! What's wrong?'

Dan's answer was gruff. But there was no mistaking his love for his younger brother.

These were some of the things I wanted to tell my mother on the morning after, but she was too upset with my brother's heterosexual love for a woman with two sons.

'Are you listening to me or not?' My mother nudged me back into her presence. 'I said Cheng Lock wants to bring the woman and her two sons home for dinner on Christmas Eve.'

'So?' I looked at her. 'Are you going to say there's no room at the inn?'

My mother was indignant. 'Why do you always think so badly of me, ha? I've already said they can come. He loves her. What can I do? Must accept her, what!'

I laughed. 'Ma,' I sat beside her. 'I've something to tell you about your grandson.'