

The Chinese Knot

HER MEETING WITH JENNIE MCDONALD for coffee in Bloor West Village has brought Luanne Lu back to the streets where she and Steve Jackson used to stroll on Sunday afternoons. Since they broke up three years ago, she hasn't been back, until today. It is early July, and there is a warm breeze; Luanne wears a blue cotton summer dress, hand-dyed in southern China, with yellow and red flowers printed around the crew neck and along the hem of the skirt. She strolls along the sidewalk, her skirt bouncing up and down her legs, her head tilted upward towards the store signs. She loves these traditional family business stores, Dianna's Flower Shop, Alga's European Bakery, Smith's Shoe Store, Lynns' Chinese Boutique; and then Starbucks comes into sight.

"Hello, Jennie!" Luanne waves. Her friend Jennie sits at a small glass table parasoled by a large sun umbrella outside the coffee shop.

"How *are* you?" Jennie stands up, opening her arms to give Luanne a hug; stepping back, she inspects Luanne from head to toe. "I like your dress. It's *so* elegant." She draws out her emphasis. "Did you get it from Lynns' in the Village?"

"No, I bought it last year when I was travelling in China. Now, stand back, let me take a good look at you, Jennie, tight half pants and sleeveless top!" Luanne says admiringly, patting her friend's bare

shoulders. “You look absolutely youthful today.”

“Really, Lulu?”

The two of them walk to the counter and return with their orders.

“I like your skin tone, Lulu,” Jennie says, staring at Luanne. “What brand of foundation did you use today?”

Sipping her tea slowly, Luanne doesn’t answer. Makeup? Jennie should know that she never wears makeup except lipstick. She looks at Jennie—dark skin, smooth and shiny, free of freckles or wrinkles; Luanne thinks to herself, you don’t need any foundation.

“Steve says hello,” Jennie interrupts Luanne’s thoughts.

“Oh . . . I didn’t think you would tell him about our meeting.”

“Why not? He is lonely. He has dated several women, but he said he can never forget you.” Jennie gives Luanne a meaningful look.

Luanne remembers a few years back when the four of them went camping in Algonquin Park. “How is Joe?” she asks. Joe McDonald, Jennie’s husband, is a lawyer.

“Joe is fine. He is pleased I am taking a writing course right now. I want to write kids’ stories, like Madonna. By the way, do you know that someone is ghostwriting for the singer?”

“Yeah? So you and Joe are getting along all right?”

“Yes and no. Joe is *not* the same person I knew twenty-five years ago. He has changed so much that he hasn’t said he loves me for years. And I don’t want to sleep with a man who doesn’t love me, no matter how long we’ve been married. It’s my principle.”

Luanne remembers what Steve had once told her after coming back from dinner with Joe. Joe had told Steve that the person he hated the most in the world was his wife. Luanne trembles whenever she thinks about this.

Jennie seems to have noticed Luanne’s distraction. She puts a hand on Luanne’s arm as if to reassure her. “Just to let you know that our sex life is still quite marvelous.”

Luanne looks at Jennie, amazed. “I’m glad,” she utters awkwardly. She doesn’t know whether she should remind Jennie of the principle she uttered a minute ago.

Jennie points at Luanne's left hand. "What happened to your beautiful sapphire ring?"

"After Steve and I broke up, I stopped wearing his ring. At first, I thought about flushing it down the toilet or throwing it down on the subway tracks."

"Why? It's a beautiful ring."

"So, I didn't throw it away. The ring is in my dresser in the bedroom."

"I always wear my wedding ring even though Joe is not the same Joe." Jennie stretches out her left hand; a diamond ring sparkles under the sun.

"I think wearing a ring is more psychological than a ritual for women," Luanne comments.

"I don't know, but you may be right. Since my wedding day, I have got used to the ring, and don't feel complete without it." Jennie bites into her biscotti; crumbs stick to her lips, then fall. She picks up a serviette and gently presses it on her lips, which are outlined by a lip pencil. "But truly, Lulu, you analyze too much," she mumbles.

The next morning, Luanne gets off the rush-hour bus and crosses Pape Avenue. As she hastens, she thinks she may just make it on time for her nine o'clock ESL class in the community centre.

"Teacher Lu—teacher—Lu, wait, wait for me!"

A man is calling out to her from behind. It must be a student of hers, Luanne thinks. Chinese like to call teachers by their job title.

It is Mr Zhong. Luanne greets him, continuing to walk briskly. Mr Zhong is out of breath, trying to keep up with his teacher. "Teacher Lu, this morning I went to Coffee Time to practice my English. Here, I've got you a coffee," he says enthusiastically, handing Luanne a paper cup.

"You did? You should be proud of yourself. You have ordered your first breakfast in English. How much do I owe you for the coffee?" They are at the front gate of the community centre.

"No thank, no thank," Mr Zhong waves his hand vigorously. Then

in Chinese, he asks Luanne, “Would I be able to take a few minutes of your precious time after class?”

“Sure,” Luanne laughs. Mr Zhong’s polite Chinese reminds her of a way of speech she hasn’t heard much since she came to Canada.

Luanne has been teaching ESL to new immigrants for more than a decade. The Canadian government recently opened the door to new immigrants from Mainland China, and since then Mandarin speakers have gradually filled up her morning ESL class. Two weeks ago, Mr Zhong walked into her classroom; dressed in a formal business suit, he looked as if he were there to attend a business convention. Tall and stoutly built with a square face, he had a northern Chinese accent, marked by its clear rising and falling cadence, that sounded wonderful to Luanne’s ear, arousing homesickness.

He sat down in the middle of the front row, right under the teacher’s eyes. Luanne felt she was being scrutinized as Mr Zhong rolled his eyes under his thick, dark eyebrows. After testing his English, she was even more impressed. The rest of the class became aware of their teacher’s delight at finding her best student so far.

Of course, Mr Zhong is no fool. Luanne has cautioned herself against giving too much attention to one student. This morning Mr Zhong wears a navy blue suit, white shirt, a red tie, and his silver cufflinks shimmer under the florescent lights whenever he raises his hand to answer her questions.

At 11:30, class is dismissed. After the other students have departed, Mr Zhong gently closes the doors. He pulls over two chairs to where Luanne is standing.

“So what can I do for you?” Luanne looks at Mr Zhong, hoping he will be quick. She has an afternoon class to teach at another location.

“Sit down, Teacher Lu, please sit down.” They sit down face to face, their knees almost touching. “Teacher Lu, I don’t know how to talk to you about this. I am embarrassed,” Mr Zhong stammers.

Luanne smiles at her bright student, reassuring him that she is listening. “Please tell me what it is. I’ll do my best to help you.”

“I came to Toronto to attend a conference on a three-month visitor’s visa. But I don’t want to go back to China, I want to stay in Canada permanently. Now two months have passed, so I am getting anxious. I would like to change my status in Canada before my visa expires.” Mr Zhong looks at Luanne with pleading eyes.

“Do you mean you want to apply for immigration?”

Luanne quickly assesses the case; she has seen similar situations many times before.

“Yes, I like Canada very much, I want to stay.”

“That’s fine. You can apply for immigration by yourself or through a lawyer. If you need a lawyer, I can refer you to a friend of mine, who can advise you professionally. As your ESL teacher, I can write you a reference letter about your level of English.” Luanne is relieved that Mr Zhong’s request is not beyond her limited power as a contract ESL teacher.

“Thank you, thank you, I sincerely appreciate your suggestion.” Mr Zhong picks up both of Luanne’s hands and shakes them. “Teacher Lu, to tell you the truth, I have already consulted some immigration lawyers in Chinatown. Some suggested that the fastest and safest way to get landed would be if, if . . .” Mr Zhong pauses in the middle of his sentence.

Waiting for Mr Zhong to complete his sentence, Luanne thinks she should make it clear to him that she has no idea how to speed up the immigration process. From what she has heard, it usually takes about two to three years if applied from within the country.

“OK, OK, let me be straightforward,” Mr Zhong interrupts Luanne’s train of thought. “If you really, I mean, really want to help me out, would you—would you please—” Mr Zhong stares at his teacher of two weeks for a long minute, and then he drops a bomb. “Would you mind marrying me for a year?”

Luanne can’t believe what she’s heard. She stands up abruptly, her chair squeaking sharply behind her. Did she hear him wrong, or is this guy crazy? “What did you ask me to do?”

“Please, please don’t raise your voice. You don’t want others to hear

our conversation. I have just asked you nicely if you would marry me for one year.” Mr Zhong blushes a little, but his voice is no longer shaky. “You see if I am married to a Canadian, I could get my immigration papers much faster. But let me make it clear to you: this marriage is only a business arrangement. What that means is that we would be husband and wife on paper, but in reality, I promise you I will never bother you. You live your life and I live mine. After a year, we will divorce. After that, I will disappear from your sight forever, and you will never see me again.” Mr Zhong pauses for Luanne.

Luanne stands there stiffly, holding the back of the chair; her hands feel sticky. She is shocked by this bold and blunt request from a student, who is a stranger to her. “But this is such a ridiculous request,” she utters quietly despite rising indignation. “What makes you think I would help you to cheat the government and ruin my own reputation?”

“For entering this limited partnership with me, I will pay you 30,000 US dollars. I am sure you could use some easy money.” Mr Zhong finishes his business proposal.

“Why should I sell my identity?” Luanne is indignant.

“Please don’t get angry at such a great business opportunity.” Mr Zhong doesn’t seem upset at all upon hearing Luanne’s initial reaction. “Have you seen the Hollywood movie, *Green Card*?” He calmly switches the topic. “A lot of people have taken tips from the movie and made progress with their immigration. Teacher Lu, just think about it, you could use the 30,000 US dollars to pay up your mortgage faster, or to make a down payment for a new house or a condo if you do not own a home. It’s free money for a Canadian identity that otherwise won’t bring you a penny.”

Mr Zhong’s voice echoes in the empty classroom. Luanne hears anxiety, and perhaps determination. His northern interrogative tone also conveys sarcasm. She wonders what happened to this man’s polite manners that had impressed her so much in the past two weeks. Mr Zhong continues, “The reason I’ve chosen you over many other younger Chinese women in Toronto is because you speak good

English and have a professional job. You would be a good business partner to ensure my success.”

In a different situation, Luanne would say “Thank you for the compliment.” But now in perplexity she looks at the man who is trying to take advantage of her.

Sitting back against the chair, Mr Zhong softens his voice. “I hope you won’t misunderstand me. I really have no personal or sexual interest in you, none of that stuff regarding whatever a married couple does. I love my wife in China. We are divorced in order for me to process my immigration to Canada. A year after my marriage to you, you should divorce me before you receive your last installment. Then I will remarry my wife, and start her immigration to Canada.” Mr Zhong’s eyes shine radiantly.

Luanne feels dizzy; she is too outraged to think clearly. How dare this man insult her this way. He has exploited her identity and privacy, disturbing her quiet life with the temptation of easy money. At the same time, he said she is sexually undesirable for him. What makes Mr Zhong think she would be interested in his illegal conduct in Canada?

Luanne asks, “If you could please tell me, why do you think I would be interested in becoming your partner in this convenient business marriage?”

“Ha ha,” Mr Zhong laughs. His voice rings in the empty classroom with a different cadence from before, as he says, “I made a good guess and took a chance. You see, you don’t have a wedding ring on your left ring finger.” He sneaks a quick glance at Luanne’s left hand. “So I thought you must be divorced and still single.”

Luanne looks at her bare ring finger, “But I did before, I wore a sapphire ring for eight years before you came to this class. Only in the last few weeks . . .” She halts her outpouring confession. Why should she explain her private life to a stranger who wants to exploit it?

“Teacher Lu, listen to me, you don’t have to say yes or no to my offer right now. Go home and think about it, but please let me know your decision before next Monday.” Mr Zhong completes the meeting

with a formal ending. “Thank you for your time.”

Luanne stands there by herself in the empty classroom. She has no idea when Mr Zhong left. Her stomach empty—lunchtime is gone—she picks up her bag, and moves her numb feet towards the door . . .

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stories*

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