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The letter writer

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Abstract

Lai Hin woke to a chilly damp in the room. The wintry air had seeped through the door and the papers pasted over the windows, and he lay there, listening to the soft breathing of his mother, reluctant to stir and to leave the warmth of his bed cover. This December morning his left leg was aching, as it did in cold weather. It was always the shorter leg that hurt, as if it ached to be matched with his normal right leg. He said aloud to himself: 'It has to be today; or I will lose her forever', as though she was ever his, and at the sound of his voice, his mother stirred and asked if tea had been made already.

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THE LETTER WRITER

Lai Hin woke to a chilly damp in the room. The wintry air had seeped through the door and the papers pasted over the windows, and he lay there, listening to the soft breathing of his mother, reluctant to stir and to leave the warmth of his bed cover. This December morning his left leg was aching, as it did in cold weather. It was always the shorter leg that hurt, as if it ached to be matched with his normal right leg. He said aloud to himself: 'It has to be today; or I will lose her forever', as though she was ever his, and at the sound of his voice, his mother stirred and asked if tea had been made already.

He forced himself to get out of bed, pad across the stove, and started the fire going, put on the blackened kettle with water in it from the night before. The heat radiated through the room and dispelled some of the cold and soon the kettle was whistling. He made tea and then started to re-heat the rice porridge from the day before, with its slices of salted egg and preserved mustard. This would do till the late afternoon.

He had first met her six months earlier when she came to his stall in the village with a letter for him to read. Before that, though, he'd always seen her outside of the school, waiting to escort her younger brothers home but had never had the nerve to approach her because he felt that no girl would be interested in talking to a cripple. But he had watched her from afar, attracted by her slender body, her neatly coiled jet black hair, held back with a pin, her slim oval face, delicate complexion and curving lips. His heart had ached with jealousy and loss when he heard that she was to be married at 16 to one of his own class mates, a handsome athlete, Yu Mui. And now here she was in front of him, six months pregnant with their first child and her husband far away in a foreign land, somewhere named Jamaica, a word that he could hardly pronounce.

Yu Mui had gone off with fifteen others from the village to try and make a better life abroad because the Kwangtung region was in the seventh year of drought, the harvests had been terrible and hunger and deprivation widespread. He, himself, had thought he would try his luck but one look at his deformed leg made the recruiters reject him and so he was now still in the village with his widowed mother.

He had always been good at school, and had been favoured by the old man who was the instructor in calligraphy and who recognised that the young student had a rare talent: he was passionate about the art of calligraphy, had a good eye, a rapid grasp of concepts and drew with speed and dexterity. He would spend hours practising drawing an ideogram in the framed sand box till he thought it

was perfectly captured in the sand, clearly delineated, with every subtle curve, every flourish, the sweep of the lower parts and the arch of the upper parts of the ideogram held in suspension in the normally shifting sand.

As he demonstrated his mastery, he was soon allowed to practise on paper and given a brush and a jug of black ink. This was a signal honour and his old instructor was happy to provide what he could. For Lai Hin calligraphy was a sensuous pleasure which took the place of being on the playing field or being involved with sports. Because he limped, he was never chosen for any team and was scoffed at by the other boys. So he spent more and more time practising his calligraphy because he was good at it and it gave him a sense of self worth.

Touching a new sheet of paper was a thrilling sensation and he loved the different textures, from the fragile, almost transparent to the heavy, denser pieces. But what he loved best were the thick vellum sheets that had a distinct aroma, with a creamy white colour and tiny flecks showing their origin of cloth and wood pulp.

His teacher would store these in the cupboard which he kept locked because that quality paper was very expensive and difficult to come by. Lai Hin had to settle most times for the cheap newsprint with its challenges. It was absorbent and blotted easily, sucking up the ink as soon as he touched the brush to paper. He made a lot of this challenge, dipping the brush with the right amount of ink, holding it at the right angle to begin the first downward stroke and exerting the right degree of pressure that the line ran true, and then lifting the brush at just the right time so that the outline was sharp and clear and yet flowing with life and energy. In this way he completed page after page of calligraphic figures that were positioned exactly, that left the right amount of margins and pleased the eye with the distribution of space and line thereby achieving the perfect balance of movement and stasis.

In his final year, he was at the top of the class and was awarded a banner-sized piece of the precious vellum paper to transcribe a poem from the Tang dynasty. His work reflected the movement of the poem in the sweep and curve of the calligraphic figures, and ensured that the emotion of the poem was visible in every arch and curve so that the visual became part of the meaning of the poem. His teacher was so delighted that the finished product was hung at the entrance to the school.

But that would earn him no money so it was his teacher who suggested that he offer his services to the village as a letter writer because so many people in his village as well as in the neighbouring villages had a need for someone to read and write for them. Lai Hin welcomed the idea since he could not find work where his bad leg was not a hindrance, and this gave him a chance to practise his art and also be paid for it.

He was given a permit from the village elders to set up as a letter writer in a small stall on the main road. Business was slow at first but started to pick up because the ten men from the village who had gone overseas to find work and

make something of their lives had begun to send remittances home to China, with letters that needed to be read. There were others from neighbouring villages who brought letters for him to read and write responses.

To Lai Hin it brought a steady income but it was hack work. He had to write his replies on the cheapest of airmail letter forms. He had to concentrate on fitting as much on the page as his customers dictated so that his writing looked cramped, reduced to the purely functional, with no artistry or passion. Moreover, he had to do several rough drafts because his customers would say one thing and then immediately change their minds and he dared not put what they had to say directly on to the airletters because they were pre-stamped for mail overseas and were quite expensive.

So he had learned to condense what he was being told and then read back to the customers what he had written for them to amend, all this before darkness fell. Much of what he had to write was so dull and humdrum, without the emotion and feeling that he had experienced in the poetry. He wrote with speed and dispatch, just getting the job done.

But the day Mei Ling came to his stall stood out in his memory because he had yearned for her for so long and now there she was right in front of him, needing his services, her black silky hair coiled in a bun on top of her head, with the faint perfume of apple blossom and her belly gently curving with her expected child. He was overcome with a passion for this girl who had come to him to read the letter from her husband.

When Lai Hin first read the letter, he was struck by something odd because Yu Mui addressed his young wife as 'Dear Little Sister Mei Ling' and signed off as 'Your brother Yu Mui'. This made him wonder if all was well but the letter went on: 'It hurts when we separated. Because our family is poor, we have to go to the ends of the earth to make money. Hope you will respect and be loyal to my parents on my behalf. I am always thinking about you. Hope you still like me? If you have time, please write me letters. I am hoping that you can get along with my brother's wife and please avoid arguments. I am sure you will listen to me. I am sending you some money so share half with my parents. Talk to you later'.

Mei Ling stood there quietly, absorbing what had been read aloud to her, and saying nothing. Then she asked 'Is that all?' He hadn't asked how she was doing and how she was coping with her pregnancy; and why was he taking his sister-in-law's side? But she kept all this to herself though a flush spread to her cheeks so that Lai Hin noticed she seemed angry as she pursed her lips.

The reply she dictated was brief and almost abrupt because she was very conscious of the fact that she was having to filter her thoughts through a third party. She thanked Yu Mui for the money and said all was fine at home, making no reference to her sister-in-law. Times were still hard, and food short. She made no mention of her pregnancy but said she missed his company and wished she could be with him soon. There she ended, but Lai Hin then added another sentence

of his own to her dictated letter which he did not read to her. He had added : ‘Have you already forgotten that I am expecting our child in a few months or have you already found someone else to care for in Jamaica?’

Lai Hin could not get her image out of his mind and all he could think about was seeing her again. How had he dared to add something to the letter to her husband, without her knowledge or consent? Suppose she ever found out, what would happen. But he told himself she could never find out since she could not read. He dreamt about her and muttered in his sleep so much so that his mother asked what was bothering him. He must have said something in his sleep one night because the next morning she said to him, ‘Son, this can go nowhere. She is already married’.

Lai Hin saw Mei Ling a month later when she came with the second letter in which her absent husband still addressed her as ‘Dear Little Sister’ but was much more loving: ‘Even though we are now in two different places, my heart is still next to you! I have not written to you for quite a few days. You must be wondering about me and think that I am lacking in concern or love. In fact, I have been busy physically but not mentally. It is not that I have forgotten about you. Hope you will forgive me.

‘I have something that worries me. It is about your health. Listen little sister! You have to understand that your body is not that of a normal person. You are already 6 or 7 months pregnant. Whether you are working inside or outside the house, you have to be very careful. If you forget what I am telling you, you don’t love me.

‘You have to get along with my younger brother’s wife. Don’t quarrel over small matters. It is the fortune of the family if the in-laws can get along. Talk to you next time. Wish you peace.’

When Lai Hin read this letter aloud to Mei Ling, he carefully omitted to read out the paragraph in which Yu Mui expressed concern about her health so that she thought again that he was ignoring her pregnancy and irked by his repeated instruction that she was to get along with his brother’s wife.

There were no more letters for three months by the end of which Mei Ling had a baby girl. She had Lai Hin write this to Yu Mui and his response was one of disappointment: having a girl child was like having no child at all because she could never carry on the family name. He did not ask if the birth had been difficult or how she was managing. so Mei Ling was now convinced that he had not wanted this child, though his expression of caring and loving did not cease: ‘During this past year, there is never a day when my heart was not at home, especially at night during the dreaming hours when I met up with you’. But Mei Ling knew nothing of this because Lai Hin did not read out this sentence to her, and so she continued to feel aggrieved.

In her response to this latest letter, Mei Ling asked for more money to meet the expenses of the new child but Lai Hin added: ‘Are you using your money to care

for someone else?’ This provoked a heated response from Yu Mui which delighted Lai Hin because he had come to the conclusion that if somehow he could raise a barrier between husband and wife, Mei Ling would not go to Jamaica to join Yu Mui and he would then have his chance with her.

Yu Mui had now been away for a year and Mei Ling, desperately unhappy with his family, kept writing asking when he was going to send for her to join him. In response Yu Mui had written: ‘I feel sorry that I have left you behind and cause you such loneliness and hardship. It hurts me too. However, I have never for one moment forgotten about you. I am not trying to delay the immigration papers for you on purpose but there are reasons why I have delayed asking you to come over. I am waiting for father’s letter to tell me that you are a good lady and one who does not quarrel. At that point I will ask you to come over. However, if you don’t act properly and don’t respect *my parents*, or if you cause more trouble in the family, I will immediately change my mind and not send you the immigration papers’.

Hearing this, Mei Ling moderated her reply but Lai Hin continued to try and enrage Yu Mui by adding: ‘I still believe that you are having an affair with another woman and no longer care for me though you say you have not forgotten me’. Yu Mui’s rapid response was brief and to the point: ‘If you stick with your opinions and are not willing to change, you are forcing me to re-marry abroad. Having married you, I am not thinking of abandoning you half way. I am sure that you are not thinking of leaving me half way either’.

So this is why Lai Hin decided that this day he would write something so drastic that Yu Mui would definitely not send for Mei Ling, and the marriage would be over. He wrote: ‘Despite all you say, I don’t believe a word you say and even if you sent the immigration papers now, I am no longer interested in joining you in Jamaica because I know you no longer care for me or our child’. That should do it, he thought, while Mei Ling stood there not knowing.

When Mei Ling trudged home, nursing dark and bitter thoughts about how her life was going, she saw her mother-in-law at the entrance of the house, holding the packet of Yu Mui’s letters in her hand. ‘What have you been writing to Yu Mui?’ she asked angrily. Mei Ling’s equally furious reply was: ‘Who gave you the right to search my things? The letters are to me, not you or anyone else!’ Her mother-in-law answered: ‘He is MY son, and that gives me every right. Why are you accusing him of having an affair with another woman? I had to get Uncle Lam up the road to read that to me or I would never have known what you are up to. My son would never disrespect his wife by doing that, never!’ And she flung the packet to the ground and turned back into the house.

Mei Ling was totally stunned. She knew for sure that she had never written that and that Lai Hin must be the one responsible. The thought that he had been intervening in her letters stunned her into silence, but she determined that she had to confront him and find out for sure.

She headed straight back to the stall and at the top of her voice — she who was always so quiet and soft-spoken — vented her anger and demanded to know what

he had written without her authority, and why. She was enraged at the betrayal of trust, enraged that she had never been sent to school to learn how to read and write and so was forced to rely on another to know her business and intimate thoughts, and still angry that her mother-in-law had presumed to invade her privacy.

Lai Hin stood there, withered by her anger, and stunned at being exposed, feeling his whole world crumbling and his plans in the dust. Mei Ling pushed him away and overturned his table so that the bottle of ink spilled its contents, running over the sheet of good paper he had brought with him to compose a letter of love for her when he found free time. The ink spread with speed across the sheet of paper, finding its way in a bold curve, black and precise and looking very much to his horrified gaze, like the ideogram for 'doom'.

One month later, the immigration papers arrived and Mei Ling was gone from his life.