

Accident

By Ly Lan

Translated by Lily Chiu

“So where did you pick up that young guy, Cam?”

“He’s thirty years old.”

“How old are you?”

“Old already.”

“Impossible. You still look so young.”

“I’m in my second youth, don’t you know?”

The two friends laughed noisily. Although they weren’t the same age, the two were colleagues, and after eating lunch together they returned to their office, closing the door and turning on the air conditioning, sharing a bit of gossip in order to coax themselves into their twenty minutes of noontime nap. In the evening, after work, each went back to their separate homes, their separate lives.

Cam was single, 1 meter 58 centimeters tall, weighed forty-seven kilos, and out of her whole body, only her nose could be considered beautiful. She worked in the computer room of a company; the bulk of her work consisted of inputting data into a computer. Salary: 1.4 million; bonuses and a gift on Tet holidays and Women’s Day. The gift for March 8 (Women’s Day) was chosen by lottery: sometimes she received fabric to make clothes; once she received a book on how to raise children. She had peeled back the layers of wrapping paper, lifting the gift up to show everyone before she had a chance to read the title of the book. The crowd of people there burst into laughter with the satisfaction that comes from scratching an itch, clapped their hands, and stomped their feet. Many people said together, the different pitches of their voices in unison: “Go on, get a husband, so that you can have a child to raise!”

“You don’t need to get married to have a child.”

Cam had taken the book back to her office and placed it away in her desk drawer. Since then it has not been opened. She forgot about it as naturally as she forgot about the rose she received every year, when her male colleagues had pooled their money together to buy flowers, nominating a representative to give out one rose to each female colleague. She would also take her rose back to the office, put it in a glass of water and place it on the windowsill. Sometimes the rose blossomed for two or three days, sometimes it faded that same afternoon. At any rate, both flower and gift were considered mission accomplished.

* * *

“What are you doing on your day off, Cam?”

“There’s nothing to do.” Pause. “Oh, sometimes I go out.”

“Where do you like to go?”

“Anywhere is fine.” Pause. “Hiking up a mountain for instance.”

“So let’s go hiking this Sunday on Buu Long mountain.”

“All right then. But there isn’t a mountain at Buu Long anymore.”

Thanh was a little surprised, but still felt satisfied about having made a date to go out. To tell the truth, it was neither difficult nor easy; anyway, Cam accepted, although without revealing any enthusiasm or excitement. Thanh thought that was just the way that Cam was. After having known each other for three months, Thanh thought that Cam was neither difficult to please nor stupid, just a little indifferent. When Thanh was just about to become discouraged with the plain conversations that didn’t seem to go anywhere, he suddenly understood that Cam wasn’t really

completely indifferent to him; on the contrary, she was opening the way, leading him somewhere. Thanh's good points were that he was light-skinned, tidy, soft-spoken, and didn't drink, gamble or smoke. The two of them met each other by accident in a crowd, exchanged a few sentences, accidentally ended up on the same road, and it turned out that they both lived in the same apartment complex, although in different buildings. They each had a phone in their rooms, so they could talk to each other with ease, in a friendly manner, but not needing to be face to face, which could be embarrassing. However, they still met each other almost every day: in the morning on the way to work, in the evening coming from work, not knowing if it was by accident or intentionally on the part of one or the other. Thanh guessed that Cam was a few years older than him.

The sky was already dark by the time they returned from their date on the mountain. A rainstorm that lasted from noon until evening had forced the two to sit for four hours in a small restaurant by the side of the highway. The restaurant was leaky and crowded with people taking shelter from the rain. Thanh was extremely annoyed because his shoes were muddy and the people around him stank. He continually used a paper towel to wipe his face, nose, neck and hands. Actually, it was raining on and off, and when the storm let up between two torrents of heavy rain, a number of people would hastily leave the restaurant, braving the rain to go back to their business. Thanh stared at the drizzle of spotty rain and hesitated, intending to wait until the rain stopped, but another torrent of gusty rain had already arrived.

There was nothing to say with it raining all the time. Cam stopped staring at the rain, turned around and stared instead at the couple who owned the restaurant. In the beginning they quarreled and argued in a repressed manner because there were customers in the restaurant. Finally the conflict exploded, violently. Not only were words thrown around in all directions but so were the basin, the teakettle, and chairs swiftly cast about. Thanh and Cam along with the other guests ran out of the restaurant, taking refuge out on the porch. The roaring rain and the howling wind were accompanied by the cries of children and the screams of a woman. The husband, furious to the extreme, seized a Thai knife and jumped down to stab his wife. Cam shouted "Stop!" Thanh knit his eyebrows, edged a little farther away, and with his hand clutching the paper towel wiped his face, nose, neck and hands. The rain beat down strongly and the people on the porch got soaked. The husband slammed the knife into the table and roared.

"I'll kill you!"

"Go ahead!"

"You think I won't do it?"

"Coward!"

"Whore!"

"Ah! Help me!"

The wife rushed out the door, followed closely by the husband. Thanh pressed himself against the wall of the porch. The man standing behind Thanh dashed out and grabbed the husband's arm. The husband seemed like he had just been waiting for an act of intervention to stop him, and stood there on the porch, cursing at his wife who was standing out in the rain, wailing.

"Whore! So I'm a coward, huh?"

The rain stopped. Cam and Thanh left the restaurant, neither of them speaking the whole way back to the city, not until they reached Cam's apartment. She stood outside the still-locked door and thanked Thanh for a happy day, if it hadn't rained. Thanh seemed uneasy, not because

the rain had made the day lose its potential for happiness, but because the wind and the rain had made his appearance lose its tidiness: his wet hair was plastered to his head, his soaked clothes were sticking to his skin, and he no longer appeared like his educated, refined everyday self. He stood there watching Cam unlock the door.

“You live all alone, right?”

“All alone.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“No.”

“So you practice celibacy or something?”

“No.”

“So look for a man then.”

“I looked already. I just found a man, but unfortunately he turned out to be gay.”

Cam stepped into her apartment and closed the door. Thanh clutched his paper towel, wiped his face, nose, neck and hands. He crumpled the towel up in his hand, threw it across the corridor, and knocked on the door. Cam opened the door asking what now. Thanh said let me use your toilet. Cam reluctantly let him in. He was in the bathroom for ten minutes already before emerging naked with only a towel of Cam’s wrapped around his waist. She was astounded to the point of having no reaction whatsoever. Thanh embraced her and threw her onto the bed, his lips rubbing hard against her skin.

“You gotta try it out first to know if a guy is gay or not.”

Cam didn’t believe it. Thanh didn’t believe it either. He stood there staring at the bloodstain on the bedsheet, threw a towel over it, and blustered uneasily:

“I didn’t expect that you were still a virgin.”

They didn’t see each other for the next few days after that, although they both still took the same road to and from work, just as before. Several times the phone would ring, Cam would pick up and say hello, but there would only be silence on the other end, and then the line would be cut. Cam contemplating it one night came to the conclusion that she had been the victim of an accident. It had all the elements of an accident, falling off a building or being hit by a car for example: it was unpredictable, beyond the victim’s intention, had damaging consequences, and it didn’t matter if you placed the blame upon yourself or others. She washed the bedsheet, then threw it away entirely, disinfected the bathroom, rearranged the apartment, and went on with her life.

About a month later she went to a gynecologist because she felt ill and suspected it might be early menopause. The doctor told her she was pregnant. In the months following that, all her thoughts concentrated on one single question: to abort or not to abort? When she finally came to the decision to have an abortion, the doctor told her that the fetus had already developed to such a degree that to abort it would have serious repercussions for both the physical and psychological health of the mother.

Mother. Cam rearranged her thoughts and emotions, like creating a new computer program. No matter how beautiful or how ugly, how righteous or how depraved, a person could always have an accident, falling off a building or being hit by a car for example, could lose their leg, and throughout the rest their life would have to live with a wooden leg. She considered herself to be the victim of an accident. She knew that her life from now on would not be easy to bear, but if couldn’t be changed, then she had to have an appropriate program to give her the ability to put up with it.

* * *

Nhung, Hong, Huyen, Bach, and Hoang, who often had lunch and a chat with Cam, were the first people to hear the news. Hong put her books away in the drawer, crossed over to Cam's desk and invited her to eat lunch. Cam agreed, still sitting at her desk bending her head to read a book.

"What are you reading that's so engrossing?"

"The book on how to raise children."

"What, are you pregnant already?"

"Yes."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, it's true."

Cam stood up and turned to let Hồng inspect her waistline. Women can hide just about anything but a fetus in the belly. Cam didn't need to make it public but also didn't think it was something to hide. At any rate, she was the only person who could live her own life and that was that.

* * *

One evening the telephone rang.

"Cam, is it true that you're... you're..."

"Pregnant."

"And it's... it's..."

"Yours."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"How did you know in the end?"

(Silence) "Do you think I'm a bastard?"

(Silence)

"I'm not an irresponsible guy. An ass. A bastard."

(Silence)

"Cam, I love you."

"I don't love you."

"Cam, believe me."

"It's not a problem of me believing your declaration of love over the telephone. The problem is that I don't love you."

* * *

Thanh came to Cam's apartment, wasted eighteen minutes standing up and sitting down before finally raising the problem of marriage. Cam said it was not necessary.

"If after this you don't refuse the baby then it can be your child. But I don't need a husband."

"Cam. I'm very sorry this happened. But I'm not a bastard."

"I didn't say that you were."

"Then why can't you bear to get married?"

"It's not necessary."

"Surely you don't scorn me because I'm poor?"

(Silence)

"I know, I'm not self-sufficient, my job security is uncertain, my parents back in the village don't have enough to eat, my youngest sibling depends on me. But I'm not an irresponsible coward."

"I understand."

"No. You don't understand."

“Cam stared at the man in front of her, paying attention to his complexion, appearance, eyes and nose, because these might be genetic traits inherited by the child currently moving in her womb. She often thought about how life would be like in the future with a child. But she hadn’t completely considered the situation of living together with a man who continued to affirm that she didn’t understand him, a man that she clearly knew she didn’t love, didn’t respect, couldn’t even be compatible with.

“Cam. I’ll invite my parents for the proposal ceremony, okay?”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Have you thought about all the bad public opinion surrounding this?”

“No. My private life has nothing to do with strangers.”

Thanh shouted angrily, “Your private life! But nosy strangers are saying that I’m the father of the baby! You retaliate against me by letting strangers curse in my face, calling me a bastard. But I’m not like that. Don’t turn me into a guy like that.”

* * *

The sound of the shouting pushed into a very tangible and painful place, spread out and gradually froze Cam’s heart. Finally her heart became paralyzed emotionally, existing only as an organ in the circulatory system. It still beat, sometimes slow sometimes fast according to objective circumstances. Its rhythm proved that Cam was still alive, biologically speaking. It couldn’t measure the size of this terrible and isolated sorrow. Cam inhaled deeply, closed her eyes, held her breath. Nothing existed outside or inside her anymore. She was an endless empty space. In one one-thousandth of a second, she felt as if she could recognize the thing that flashes through someone’s brain in the one one-thousandth of a second before that person falls into an abyss. It wasn’t the weight of a wise or foolish, should or shouldn’t decision. It was only the deceptive unreality of the extreme depth of the bottom of the abyss. People fall into it because of the earth’s gravity. Not because people want to or not. Cam opened her eyes letting her gaze fall into the immense emptiness between two people sitting closely together.

“To marry me, I don’t need gifts. A pair of earrings and a ring will be enough. My parents have already passed away, so we don’t need a complicated ceremony. Close friends, neighbors, colleagues, about a hundred people in all, I can afford. You take care of your own share.”

“Accident” first appeared in book form as “Tai Nan” in the collection Di Mong (Different Dreams) in 2000. Lily Chiu’s translation first appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review XLIV: 1 (Winter 2005): 19-26.