

2018

Kowloon Sweetheart

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Recommended Citation

Lu, Dingxi (2018) "Kowloon Sweetheart," *Exile*: Vol. 64 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol64/iss1/11>

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On my first New Year's Eve in Hong Kong, a Vietnamese woman came up and stroked my hand. I was down at Chiang's, a back-alley food stall two blocks from my flat, sipping a warm beer while minding my own business, when she turned the corner and walked toward me. She was young. Not very tall, wearing a platinum wig and a black dress that stretched above her knees. With one of her straps down, she seemed as though she had just rolled out of bed. I felt slightly disoriented lying on my arm, when she approached and took my other hand.

Her thumb pressed hard against my palm. "You like that, sweetie?" she said in accented English, her voice soft and flat.

I felt the top of my ears redden as I searched in pocket for cash. "I'd like that," I replied in English, and tucked a folded bill under an unopened bottle.

"You're alright," she said in a flat tone, letting loose of my hand. She then ran her fingers through the bottles, found the one with its cap intact, and plucked it from the table. Her jade bracelet, slid down, looped tight around her wrist.

Mother died on November 2, 1997. Between us, from Kowloon to Canton⁴, there were eight train stations. I couldn't go back. I was at the warehouse stacking sausages over dry duck feet, when uncle came up and told me he got a call from a mainland hospital. She was hit by a truck when crossing at a red light. They found in her little black purse a notebook with uncle's number labeled as "son." At the time, I resided in what uncle called the "dorm," the living room of a bachelor flat he rented out to his employees, and used to call her from his landline.

I imagined most people my age had anticipated at least once the death of a parent. The news came abruptly, but I thought I took it well. No chest pain or tears. I felt calm. All I had in mind was where to go for dinner.

I went to Chiang's that night, feasting while watching people pass. A solemn young man with glasses and a suit. A plump Filipino mom in jeans and flip flops. An old bum in a ragged tank top. Their faces softened beneath the yellowish street lights. I liked a late-night meal on the street. It made me feel

4 Romanized spelling of Guangzhou, a Southern city northwest of Hong Kong.

less alone, guessing strangers' stories as they brushed by, wearing their masks. Sometimes I wondered if they would do the same, passing while guessing my story, if they could guess I was an immigrant worker sleeping in my uncle's apartment, if I share the space with four greasy middle-aged men, whose deafening announcements of *peng!*⁵ caused me migraines.

I had tried to get her to talk, even when our hours ended. "No talks after business," she said. "Mama told us that." She didn't mean her real mother, obviously. But despite what Mama said to her, if the hotel bed sheet was mold-free, and the toilet bowl didn't let out a smell of aged pork, she would stay till I got dressed. "I had no idea," I put on a surprised face when she first told me she was Vietnamese. "You're fluent in English." She smiled and lowered her head. "I don't know about that," she said. I knew she wasn't from around here the first time she came on to me. Small things—from her twiggy legs, broad forehead, to her rich, dark lips—details as such gave a person's story away. And her English was just alright.

We met again a week after mother died.

"What's your story?" I said, pulling at one of my socks. "We have done this for, what, four times now? I don't even know your name."

She sat still on the bed, turning the jade bracelet round her wrist.

"How about we trade?" I dragged my voice on the last word. "I'd tell you something about myself, and you do the same."

She hesitated, arms crossed before chest. Her gaze jumped, as though measuring the room, measuring me. "O.K.," she finally said.

I looked at the wall for a moment. "Last week, my mother passed," I said slowly. "I didn't get to see her last."

She sat there, her lips quivered, but she didn't utter a word. There was something gleaming in her eyes. I was surprised to see at how strongly she had felt toward a total stranger. It almost seemed like it was her mother instead of mine.

"That's awful," she choked up a bit, hand stayed on her bracelet, "I am sorry, sweetie."

"Please quit calling me that," I said, and took her into my arms.

After mother's death, I took a week off before coming back to work. Uncle, who sat behind his squeaky office desk in the back of the shop, eyed me

as I stepped behind the register. He walked over when I put on my apron. "How do you feel, Dan?" he asked, his face all grey and concerned.

I shrugged. "I ate well and slept well," I said. "I guess that means I'm okay."

"Good," he leaned over and patted me on the shoulder, "You're a good worker. Strong-minded." He paused for a moment, tapping himself on the neck. "I'm leaving for Canton in a few days," he said. "Her funeral is next week."

I searched in my head for an appropriate response. You could think of as many filial obligations as you wished, but in truth, you only got to fulfill a few, and before some older relatives put you on the spot, anticipating a reaction of which they found graceful and apt, you have about ten seconds to pretend that you had it all figured out.

"Say something to mother," I told uncle. "Say 'I'm sorry'."

I couldn't go to her funeral without getting myself arrested. In 1995 I left Canton and moved to Hong Kong to work for my uncle, after having lost my job as an English teacher at the textile factory. He owned a small grocery store on Argyle Street, selling cheap bread and dry meat to housewives in the neighborhood. He didn't charge me for renting a bunk in his apartment, for which I was grateful. Although I slept in a cage home—a bunk bed fenced in by mesh wire, which separated the top deck from the bottom. It was better than nothing.

Uncle's free lunch did turn out to be an expensive meal, as I realized that he used the free rent to justify not paying me well. I had tried to remind him how many extra hours I'd worked driving his cargo van. "We can certainly discuss the pay," he said slowly, his eyebrows raised. "Once you settle in your own place." I didn't make much effort to negotiate. I was illegal, having overstayed my visitor visa. A mainlander on British soil. No ID, no taxes. Illegal through and through.

It became a habit of mine, eating late at Chiang's while waiting for her to show. Some nights we would end up in bed. Other nights we just chatted. She was a good company, knew more about Kowloon than I ever had. We ordered fried herrings and beers, and together we guessed others' stories as they stroll by. There came the baldly in a green bowtie—he traded stocks and devoured raw oysters to reclaim his manliness. Behind him, the scar-faced woman ran a pork chop cartel that was the equivalent of the Triad syndicate, for butchers. The tall waiter with caved in cheeks put up a long face, shoving a table of ribs and bones into a plastic bin. His wife had left him, came home, but only to take the cat. She

had good teeth, but an even better smile, of which she wore when we came up with stories so absurd that it became unnatural holding our laughs.

From wait-till-I-got-dressed, to a lunch together, then a real date, it took us roughly a month. I taught her to say her name in Cantonese. "Lan," I said. "Lan," she repeated. "Your name means orchid," I told her. "Like an orchid, one of the four gentlemen flowers, you are a gentle woman." She smiled her usual smile, her long black hair curled above her shoulder.

I'd told her about myself, and in return I came to know her rather well. Like me, she was an immigrant, but with legal standing. She was one of those boat people – refugees who fled Vietnam on cargo ships couple year after Saigon fell. Her folks didn't make it, I didn't ask why.

Once, at Chiang's she told me she had been roaming the street of Kowloon since sixteen. "They all call me 'sweetheart,'" she said, dipping her noodles over the broth. "Mama told us to smile more. I had the best smile."

"How much dues do you have to cut her?" I asked.

"Plenty," she said, staring blankly at the people passing behind me. "But I make good bucks. Dollars sometimes, when I wear a blonde wig."

"Maybe I should meet this 'mother' of yours sometimes," I said. "I could help you cook up a union or something."

"Ai-ya," she shook her head. "Mama treats us well. She's practically my step-mother."

It left a bitter taste in my mouth, having heard her talked about her business, about her other clients. No women should commercialize her body like that, I leaned that studying Marx back in the factory I worked.

"When can you show me where you live?" she leaned across the folding table and wiped with her sleeves something off my cheek.

I paused and thought for a second. "You don't want to see it," I said. "Sometimes my roommates would have people over for cards. You wouldn't like the hustle."

Lan said nothing, but I could tell something snuck out in her breath. Like water in a leaking bucket, her excitement escaped her, and her smile slowly turned into a forced smile.

Uncle returned on a windy morning, and I sensed something fishy from his blinking stares. "Did it go well?" I walked over to his office desk and asked.

"Sure, sure," he was scribbling down some numbers on a piece of paper. "It was small. Only her side of the family came. But it was nice."

“Did anyone ask about me?”

“One of the aunts asked about your job,” he shoved the paper into a drawer. “I told her you were doing great with me.”

“Was there anything they said that you don’t want me to hear?” I raised my voice a little.

Uncle sat up in his chair and cleared his throat. “Don’t beat yourself over this,” he said carefully. “You are your own person now, Dan, I’m sure they understand your choice.”

I wondered if mother left a will, and if uncle knew anything about it. When the factory closed, they let her keep the apartment assigned to her when she got remarried.

Uncle let me go early that day. I climbed the five floors to my dorm, unlocked the door, and found myself standing in a dark hallway. On the floor stood three offering candles waxed to a steel plate. Sitting on their own bunk, my roommates let out a deafening laugh.

“Again?” I shouted into the dark.

“They said the outage will end at ten,” my bunkmate Soo, a sturdy warehouse worker in his late forties, waved at me and said. “Maintenance.”

“Maintaining what?” I sidled to find my bed, trying not to tip over the candles. “How come no one come to maintain my well-being?”

They laughed again. “Sounds like a personal problem to me,” one of the younger guys said. “Soo was just telling us about a gal he met down at Chiang’s. She really got his muscles smoothed.”

I felt a shiver from head to foot. I didn’t need to hear more. “Come on, Soo,” I said, trying to sound calm. “Nobody needs to know about your nasty business.”

“Goddamn, how come my stories are always nasty while yours aren’t?” Soo gave his feet a quick jerk. “Give us something not nasty. Tell us about that communist factory you worked it.”

“I don’t remember much,” I said and collapsed onto my bed, hitting my back against something metallic. Damn clock. I shoved it under my pillow. “Nothing really happened there.”

“Come on,” Soo snapped his finger at me. “Your uncle told us you were a *gong gu lau*⁶ back in your factory in Canton. There’s no way you can’t think of a

6 Literary, “storyteller.” A Cantonese slang for men who tells classic Chinese tales to a mass group of people as a form of entertainment.

story or two from the back of your head.”

How often did uncle talked behind my back? He never ceased to amaze me on how sly a man could be. “Okay,” I said. “I got one I heard from one of my coworkers.”

The men all sat up in their bed, their face gleaming with curiosity.

“Once upon a time, no, scratch that, in 1980, my friend, who was the clerk at a textile factory north of Canton, almost got himself decommissioned arranging a collective wedding.”

“What the hell is a collective wedding?” Soo interrupted. “Is that one of those communist orgies?”

My other roommates shushed Soo. “Don’t interrupt the storyteller,” they said.

“You would have known if you lived in a factory,” I said. “Everyone lived together, worked together, shared everything. They were games, ping-pong, soccer matches, fishing, and occasionally, range shooting. The factory was a small town—you had hospital, school, barber shop, all packed into one massive compound—people fell in love there, made babies, and some died.”

I paused, adjusting my voice. In the dark, someone’s throat rumbled. His coughs were thick with phlegm, but he didn’t spit.

“Speaking of this friend—one of his jobs was to arrange weddings, efficiently. How could you handle so many people falling in love in one day? You get them married all at once. If getting all the food and tables set up for two families is a hustle, imagine the logistics involved marrying three couples with six families. But my friend there, he was excellent at his job, ran the whole process like an assembly line. He sent some people on bikes to send invitations, checking on the kitchen to make sure they had enough food, measuring sizes for wedding dresses, and he got almost everything done in less than a week.”

“But there was only one problem. One of the brides was a widow. Her first husband died fixing an electronic cable, face all torn up, body burned to the bones. It was a real gruesome way to go, and the worse part was, some of his co-workers, you know, though they all studied Marxist materialism, were incredibly superstitious. A rumor started to fly around, saying that the woman had jinxed her husband. Her bridegroom, also a widower, was a quiet guy. Ever since his wife died of childbirth, he had spent most of his time in the kitchen. My friend didn’t think the rumor really bothered him, but in case he got cold-feet, he paid him a visit the day before the wedding, telling him not to worry about

what other people said. The cook took it well, gave my friend a bag of fried peanuts as drinking snacks, and walked him out as he left his house.

“The cook didn’t show up at the wedding. Along with the other two couples, the widow stood on the stage alone, all dressed in red, snuggling in the bouquet in her arms. Her face — my friend said it was the saddest thing he had ever seen.”

Everyone sat in silence, the only silence I had ever seen among them. We sat there for a while, until Soo broke the silence, saying: “What happened to the woman?”

“They lived happily ever after,” I said quietly.

“Don’t bullshit me, kid,” Soo said with a grunt.

“I don’t know. It’s a story,” I curled up in my bed, my back against the candles. “Maybe the factory closed, and everyone she ever come to know left. Maybe she moved to Canada. Maybe she is selling herself, maybe she is dead. You be the judge.”

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Something went wrong. Suddenly I couldn’t get it on with Lan. “What’s the matter, sweetie?” she asked, showing me her bare back and the zipper of her dress.

“The money thing made it all sour,” I said, brushing my finger up her shoulder blade as I zipped her up. “You should quit this. You know, I could buy you out.”

She turned to me. “It doesn’t work like that,” she said. “It’s not like I was sold or something — I chose to do this.”

“For how long?” my voice broke up a little. “This is a business of the youths. What are you going to do when you get old?”

“I’d figure something else,” she said with a serious tone. “Refugees and immigrants, they always know their ways around.”

I paused. My mind went empty. She watched me for a while before she lay down, took my hand and put in on her bare belly.

“I can’t, Lan. I told you,” I sighed and said.

“Only mother and I made it to the boat,” she said, drawing a circle on her stomach with my palm. “The cargo box was deep and dark, and I knew something was eating at her.”

“It could be anything, the stress, the hunger, I mean, everything was preying on everyone.” she said with a pale smile. “All I saw was black, all I heard were breathing, light and heavy, coming in from all direction. No one said a

word. We were all so quiet, as if waiting for someone to break.”

“Did you?” I asked.

“I was the first one,” she nodded. I felt the hair on her stomach scratch against my palm. “My crying echoed in the tiny chamber. It was so loud, I almost thought it was going to pierce through my ear drums.”

“It was then I felt someone take my hand. Mother had been lying unconscious the entire time, but then she was awake, holding me in one hand, rubbing my stomach with other, muttering ‘Shhh. We will live. You will live.’” Lan dropped my hand and rolled out of bed. Her bracelet greened under the dim street light fell through the window. “If you want to buy me out of what I do for a living, at least show me your price.”

I sat there, feeling numb. “What happened to your mother?” I asked.

She shook her head.

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I left the hotel and walked against the night wind of Kowloon, holding a bottle of beer. I looked up at the sky. Very thin, very dark. Like a narrow stream of ink framed by the edges of the cement walls. Above the orange street light, a bright window suddenly blacked. A few night owls were still awake, perhaps watching soccer matches or TV shows from the 70s. Pale rays of light pierced through their living room windows, brightening the starless sky. I couldn't provide a home for Lan. The cage I lived in would suffice only if we were rabbits, (and it did look a bit like a cage for animals). But then it dawned on me that there was a way, something I thought my uncle had been hiding from me, something I would not dare to do if it wasn't for Lan.

I practically broke into uncle's office in the morning. The man nearly choked on his congee when he saw me barge in, reeking of liquor. “I knew she gave it to me,” I said, catching my breath. “Mother left her apartment to me.”

“Oh,” uncle forced himself into releasing a short laugh. “That. Absolutely. Uh. But, my dear nephew, how does that help you in any way? It's not like you could go back and live in mainland again.”

“I can, of course,” I walked closer to him. “It just the matter of whether I want to do it or not.”

“Listen,” uncle pressed his hands firmly on the edge of the table, his leg propped against the bottom drawer. “I was going to cut your in on this. I got same fake paperwork going. We could sell the place and split the pay. What do you say?”

“No more deals.” I said slowly, and dropped my fist on his table each

time I uttered a word. "Give. Me. Her. Will."

Lan bent over and crawled into the metal cage that was my bunk, balancing herself on a bed of debris and small things. Dry towels, can sardines, water bottles and plastic bags, every night I shoved my belongings to the sides to dig a slim hole customized for my body size. "This is what you have been hiding from me," Lan said as she looked around the room. "Did you think we could possibly live here?"

"No," I took a deep breath. "But there's more. My mother left me an apartment in her will, in Canton, where I am from. It's slightly smaller than the living room here, but we will have our own bed, own bathroom. Maybe even a cat or two."

She stood with her mouth half opened, mixed surprise and perplexity showing on her face.

"The thing is, I am an illegal worker here. I will have to spend time in jail for a while if I go back. But it won't be too long. Maybe a year or two. Once I get out, you can take a bus north, and we could move in together."

I stood and stared at her absent-mindedly, my gaze chasing after her. When I finally caught her eyes. She was wearing her usual smile: a smile I saw the first time we met, the smile she had on when I taught her how to say chair, chopsticks and Kowloon in Cantonese.

"This is great, sweetie," she finally said, turning her bracelet. "I will be waiting."

But I saw no sign of love in her eyes. "See you around," I said.
We kissed and waved good-bye.

The night we split up, I went down to Chiang's, feasting and drinking while watching people pass. It was nice, guessing their stories and their pasts. In the back of the restaurant, they were showing on TV a documentary on cage home dwellers, on how they spent the whole life there, alone, with only other dwellers as their companies. It sounded sad, but none of the old bones in the show shed a tear. All of them had their face turned away from the camera, changing clothes, smoking a cigarette, minding their own business. I wondered if I still counted as one, even with the chance of moving out. As the power flickered, the TV slowly lost its volume, rendering the voice over static murmuring, of which unfolded in my ears into a soft, flat voice, *farewell sweetheart*. The line repeated itself, again and again.