

THE FOLLY OF WISDOM

by Susan Turbié

J

iang-Li was a respected novelist and short-story writer. In her native Taiwan and in Singapore, her books were often on the best-seller list and she had won a number of literary prizes; the People's Republic of China, however, considered her work subversive and decadent and had banned it.

He fell in love with her the moment he saw her. It was in a coffee bar downtown. He was talking to a client on his phone and when he saw her he told the client he had a meeting and hung up immediately.

He was transfixed by her beauty: he had never been particularly attracted to Asian women, but she was like a delicate lotus flower, exquisitely fragile. Later on she told him that her name meant 'river beautiful' in Mandarin. She was wearing a grey trouser suit and her sleek jet hair was coiled into a neat chignon. She seemed rather nervous and self-conscious, constantly patting her hair, tugging at the hem of her jacket and casting furtive glances around the room.

When their eyes finally met she looked quickly away and went up to the counter. He rushed to her side, offered to buy her a coffee and introduced himself. She accepted shyly and they sat down together at a table. She listened, demurely sipping her soy latte and nibbling her pecan slice while he talked enthusiastically about the flourishing cryptocurrency exchange he had founded with an old college friend, his passion for snowboarding and the house he was having built in Sun Valley, where he often went to indulge in this pastime. (Her eyes lit up at the mention of Sun Valley, but her question about Hemingway was met with a blank stare.)

When he finally got around to steering the conversation towards her, she explained that she was on an extended vacation from Taipei, visiting a cousin who had emigrated to the States seven years ago. He said he thought it was ‘cool’ that she was a writer and could he take her to dinner some evening? She demurred politely: her cousin, she explained, had planned a number of social engagements during her stay and she was not sure he could spare her for an evening.

Three days later, after Googling her and poring over both her and her cousin’s social media, he sent her a Direct Message asking her out for dinner. She said she was busy. A second invitation a week later was ignored. A week after that he sent her a package at her cousin’s place of work. It was a first edition of *A Farewell to Arms*, accompanied by a note with the words: *Will this make a difference?*

To his immense joy, she had messaged him to accept his dinner invitation. They went to Atelier Crenn, where he was on first-name terms with both the maître d’ and the sommelier.

She began by admitting that she had been extremely touched – and impressed – by his gift. He beamed with pleasure, making a mental note to give his assistant, Brenda, a raise. For when he had consulted her for tips on how to win Jiang-Li’s heart, she had asked him what the young lady’s interests were. He said that she was a writer and had asked about Hemingway when he mentioned Sun Valley. Brenda explained the Hemingway-Sun Valley connection and suggested she try and get her hands on a first edition of one of his novels. What a gem that woman was!

Over the next few weeks he proceeded to romance Jiang-Li at a number of prestigious and extremely select venues. He was utterly intoxicated by her. How different she was from the venal, empty-headed blondes he usually seemed to attract! He knew he would never have any peace until she was by his side.

But her month’s vacation was soon to be over; she was due to return to Taiwan in a week. Emboldened by love, he asked her to extend her stay for another couple of weeks: after all, wasn’t she allowed to stay in the country for up to ninety days? To his astonishment and delight, she

acquiesced; her cousin, who was in favour of her courtship by this successful American man, was more than happy to continue his hospitality.

Two weeks later over yet another opulent dinner, he proposed. She turned him down: she was very touched, but her life was in Taiwan, she explained. He accepted her decision graciously but asked if they could still spend some time together while she was in town. Then, three days after that, as they sipped cocktails at Leo's Oyster Bar, he asked her again and this time, miraculously, she accepted!

They were married two weeks later at City Hall; the ceremony was followed by a lavish reception at the Four Seasons. He flew Jiang-Li's parents and brother in on business class for the event.

After the wedding they moved into a beautiful Edwardian house in Russian Hill. A year later Jiang-Li gave birth to a daughter, Lily, and two years after that, a son, Gabriel. Theirs was the most harmonious and blissful of marriages; everything was perfect.

Everything – except one thing: her books.

He of course had never read them, and adored her as he might, he had no desire to read them or any others. He was, however, worried that she would be vexed by his lack of interest in her work.

Fortunately for him, though, he had a perfect excuse as she only wrote in Mandarin. As fluent as her spoken English was, her mother tongue, she explained, was the only language for her creative expression. There were very few successful writers who wrote in a second language, she added: Beckett and Conrad and Nabokov were the exceptions, not the rule.

He asked half-heartedly if there were English translations, and here again he struck lucky: she said that several translators had tried but she had always demanded to see the sample translations and had never been satisfied with any of them; consequently, none had as yet been published. She said that when it came to translations of her work, she was just as brutally demanding and critical as Nabokov. (Not that she would presume to compare herself to Nabokov, she added with a charmingly

modest laugh.) He was so delighted and relieved that this one obstacle to their life of eternal, unadulterated bliss together had now been removed that he didn't even bother to ask who Nabokov was.

And yet, aside from the issue of her writing, his complete ignorance of her mother tongue continued to irk him. He felt left out when her Chinese-speaking friends came to their place and they all jabbered away in their native language, felt stupid when her admirers praised her literary prowess to him: how, after all, could he respond, other than by saying feebly, 'Yes, I hear her books are great.'

So one day, he decided to do something about it. He downloaded the latest, state-of-the-art language-learning apps and tasked Brenda with arranging for Chinese classes – all of this without telling Jiang-Li. He would study hard and then surprise her by speaking to her in her mother tongue.

And study hard he did: twice a week he would stay late at the office or go in early to have lessons via Zoom with a lady based in Shanghai. (The sixteen-hour time difference made things hard but he paid her handsomely for the inconvenience.) He assiduously did the homework she set and even paid one of the company's interns – a Chinese-American finance graduate from Berkeley – to come by his office once a week and help him revise and test him on vocabulary. Bit by bit, the characters that had hitherto been so mysterious and opaque became words and sounds and ideas.

After a year of intensive learning, he finally felt confident enough to try reading one of her books. It was a short story entitled *Before the Storm*. He stayed up late one night in his den and read it. After he had finished, he put down the book, utterly perplexed and dismayed.

'What?' he said aloud. He had never read such a load of nonsense in all his life! The characters were boring, there was no real plot as far as he could tell, and it was full of bizarre little details which were presumably meant to be symbolic but meant absolutely nothing to him. Nobody fell in love or had sex; no one got shot or even into a fight. There were no villains, as far as he could make

out. There was no real beginning or end. It was like a long, rambling poem, and he'd always hated poetry at school; he just didn't get it.

Despite his profound disappointment, he was nevertheless willing to give the woman he loved the benefit of the doubt. So he moved on to another story, the title of which he had a hard time translating but it was something to do with clouds.

He found it just as exasperatingly dull and unfathomable as the first one. Halfway through *The Sea Anemone*, he gave up, resigned at last to the disturbing truth: he hated his wife's books!

He didn't sleep that night: he lay awake for hours, thinking. What could he do? He couldn't possibly tell that beautiful, sweet creature, the mother of his children and the love of his life, that he thought her books sucked.

So he would have to lie. He would simply tell her he loved her writing.

But that plan had its flaws: she might want to discuss her work with him, ask him which parts he liked best and invite him to expand on his comments. Every time she wrote something new, she'd insist on his reading it and ask his opinion. And what if her friends quizzed him?

No; he knew he wouldn't be able to pull that off. He'd try and wing it for a while, then end up breaking down and telling her the truth and she'd get upset and leave him.

So he decided simply not to tell her he'd read the books. And to be on the safe side, he wouldn't tell her about the hours of Mandarin classes and the intern and the apps. He would just pretend he still couldn't speak her language.

He finally dozed off just before six. An hour later, she appeared at his bedside with a coffee. She looked more beautiful first thing in the morning than most women did when they walked out of the beauty parlour.

'Good morning, sleepy-head,' she said sweetly.

Before he had a chance to respond, little Gabriel came tottering in in his pyjamas, closely followed by an apologetic Lina, the children's nanny.

‘Hey, big guy!’ he laughed as the boy scrambled into his lap.

‘Thanks for the coffee, honey,’ he said to Jiang-Li, and, as she withdrew from the bedroom, he added, ‘I love you.’

Months went by; Jiang-Li did not suspect her husband’s knowledge of Mandarin. Occasionally he allowed himself to say a few words in front of her, claiming – quite plausibly – that he had picked them up from hearing her talk to the children, but as far as she was concerned, he couldn’t read a single word.

Then one evening, she had invited her cousin and some Taiwanese friends over for a cocktail party. He got home just before nine – things were particularly hectic at work at that time – and after greeting his wife and waving and nodding to the group of guests, he went upstairs to kiss the children goodnight.

When Jiang-Li was entertaining her Taiwanese friends, he usually preferred to leave them to it, discreetly withdrawing to his den. But on this occasion, he decided to test his newly acquired language skills by casually mingling with the guests and furtively eavesdropping on their conversations.

And what could be more natural, after all, than his exchanging pleasantries with his wife’s guests? It was his house too, and besides, they all spoke English. But he noticed some of the older ladies tended to speak Mandarin among themselves. So, after talking to a woman named Mei, who was a painter, and another called Li, the Compliance Officer for an investment bank, he sat on the sofa near a pair of smartly dressed elderly women. After exchanging polite smiles and nods with them, he affected to look at something on his phone whilst attempting to listen in on their conversation.

Even without understanding a word of their native tongue, he could have surmised from their tone and body language that they were gossiping. One of them said something about a fellow guest’s choice of outfit that he didn’t entirely catch but knew it was negative. They then proceeded to

speculate on the fact that another guest appeared to be eschewing alcohol, concluding that perhaps she was pregnant.

They then turned their attentions to the hostess. Wasn't Jiang-Li looking radiant, one of them noted. He beamed with pride at this compliment of his wife. The other woman observed, with a smirk, that being in love clearly agreed with her, at which they both proceeded to chuckle maliciously. The first woman then lowered her voice and said something he didn't entirely understand, but the words 'fool of a husband' were brutally clear. He suddenly felt a chill seep through his body.

'But she'll never leave him,' said one woman. The other agreed. 'He may be a fool, but he's rich.' They then turned to him again and smiled ingratiatingly.

He stared back at them dumbly. As he looked about him, it seemed that the entire room was mocking him. Somehow he got to his feet and stumbled out of the room and into the kitchen where the two caterers were unwrapping a fresh tray of canapés. As soon as they left, he stood at the sink with his hands gripping the worktop and forced himself to breathe deeply.

Get it together, he scolded himself. Was he really going to give credence to the tittle-tattle of a couple of viper-tongued old hags? How dare they slander his wife like that – and in his house! He had a good mind to throw the old witches out.

He tossed back a glass of tap water, then another, and felt instantly better. How he longed for the guests to leave so he could sit down and be alone with his lovely wife.

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It was a Friday evening and Jiang-Li was getting ready for a charity gala at the San Francisco Opera. Her husband was already ready, sitting in front of the TV in the den in his tuxedo.

But she wanted to take her time: for David was to be attending the event and she wanted to be perfect for him.

Emerging from the shower and walking naked into the bedroom where her gown – a vintage scarlet Halston design, long, figure-hugging, backless, lay on the bed – her thoughts drifted back to that day just over five years ago when her cousin had introduced her to David Chen at a party Marcus – as her cousin had called himself since moving to America – had thrown in Jiang-Li's honour. She had immediately felt a powerful attraction to him. Handsome, virile, confident and accomplished, he was the son of a rich, influential businessman, one of the leading figures of San Francisco's Chinese-American community.

They had become lovers almost immediately, meeting several times a week. Telling her cousin she was sightseeing, she would go to David at his apartment downtown. It was after one such afternoon tryst that she had met the American man, at a coffee shop just a block away from David's. She had at first rebuffed his clumsy advances, but after he had sent her the Hemingway first edition she had wavered: could it be that this rather stupid, shallow young man had hidden depths? She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt: after all, it was just dinner.

She went on a series of dates with the American, whilst continuing her afternoon assignations with David. She found the American undeniably charming, to the point that she was willing to overlook their many differences of opinion and taste. He had happily admitted, for example, that he hated the opera, his favourite film was *Mission Impossible – Fallout*, and that the only book he had finished in his entire life was *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* when he was fifteen. But – unlike David – he treated her like a queen, was respectful and affectionate and had a good heart. That said, when she agreed to postpone her return to Taipei for another month, it was to spend more time with David – not him.

And then one afternoon, as she and David lay spent and panting beneath his damp sheets, he had casually alluded to his forthcoming nuptials. It was practically an arranged marriage, he had

explained – a sort of diplomatic alliance. His bride-to-be, a certain Chao-Xing, was evidently the daughter of a very important man who would be both a valuable business partner and a powerful ally for David's father. Surely she understood; she knew how these things worked.

Jiang-Li didn't. It all sounded perfectly feudal and medieval to her. She had been shocked, devastated: she had somehow hoped – assumed, even – that she and he had a future together. At this, he had actually laughed. It was a just a fling, he said, a holiday romance. After all, she would have to go back to Taiwan sometime: how did she *think* things would turn out?

Utterly crestfallen, she had silently dressed, left his apartment and wandered the streets aimlessly for an hour. That night she had gone to dinner again with the American and he had proposed. She had turned him down. The sooner she went home to Taiwan and forgot this wretched country, the better.

But try as she might, she couldn't forget David. Despising herself for her weakness, her pettiness, her lack of dignity, she messaged him, telling him of the American's proposal, and, in a pathetic attempt to make him jealous, told him she had accepted.

He had replied immediately, urging her to meet him at a bar downtown. And it was there that her fate had been decided.

For instead of being jealous, he had seemed pleased. It's perfect, he had said: that way you'll get to stay in America and we can carry on like before! It'll be even better than before: we'll be on an equal footing. You'll be married, I'll be married. You'll have a rich, respectable, successful husband – and you'll still have me. You'll have the best of both worlds.

Two days later when the American had renewed his proposal, she had accepted.

As stupid and dull as her husband was, she had to admit that she had not had a bad life with him: materially, she wanted for nothing. They lived in a beautiful house with a lovely garden and an attic that had been converted into a spacious study for her to write in. Motherhood had made her happier than she could have imagined – notwithstanding the rather old-fashioned and incongruous scruples

that prevented David from touching her throughout her pregnancies and in the couple of months following each delivery. (He was, however, more than willing to maintain their liaison during his own wife's pregnancy.)

Her husband, meanwhile, was apparently blissfully unaware of her affair and continued his slavish devotion to her. Like most Western men, he was in love with the fantasy of Asian women as docile, submissive creatures, and she played the part for him. Ironically, when she was with David, she actually enjoyed being subservient: she was his whore, his slave, his thing. Just a few weeks ago, while his wife was away visiting her mother, he had bade her come to him at his apartment naked but for a Burberry and Louboutins. He had coolly ordered her to remove the trench coat – while keeping the heels on – and had taken her roughly from behind on the dining room table.

Shivering pleasurably at the memory, she pulled on the red dress. As she applied discreet nude eyeshadow, black mascara and red lipstick, she wondered idly if her husband would even recognize David tonight at the gala: they had met once or twice at social gatherings, but her husband was one of those white men who thought all Chinese men of similar age looked alike.

Her husband called to say the car had arrived. Taking one final, satisfied look at her reflection, she went downstairs.

The next morning they both had a lie-in. Eventually, just before ten, he got up and went out for a run while she remained in bed, stretching languorously and thinking about last night's feverish coupling with David in the bathroom at the opera. Picking up her phone, she read his text again:

Still thinking about last night. You looked good in that red dress; and even better without it...

He had then proceeded to describe what he planned to do to her next Tuesday afternoon when they met at the apartment of a friend of his.

Presently, she heard footfalls on the landing. Surely he hadn't finished his run already?

'Honey, have you seen my phone?' he asked, walking into the bedroom.

She yawned and shook her head. ‘Let me call it for you.’ She did so, but no ringtone was subsequently heard anywhere in the house. ‘When did you last see it?’

He shrugged. ‘At the gala, I guess. No, wait – just after; I checked my emails on the way home. Dammit, I bet I left it in the limo! Can you lend me your phone to call them?’

Why not, she thought? It was not as if he could read anything remotely incriminating, for despite speaking to each other mainly in English, she and David always texted each other in Chinese – for this very reason. As for the risk of Chao-Xing’s stumbling across their messages, this was virtually non-existent, as David had only given Jiang-Li his work cell phone number and his wife, he assured her, would never presume to pry into his business affairs.

‘Sure,’ he said, smiling and passing the phone to him. ‘I’m going to jump in the shower.’

When she emerged from the bathroom fifteen minutes later wrapped in a towel, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his shoulders hunched, staring at her phone. Turning his ashen, tear-stained face towards her, he stood up.

‘Baby? What –’

She never uttered another word – in either language.

For within seconds, he strode towards her and his fingers closed around her delicate throat. She made a gasping, gurgling, choking sound, her eyes staring, her hands grabbing ineffectually at his.

The last words she ever heard – like the very first – were in her mother tongue:

‘Forgive me, my love.’
