

Happiness

by Jill Chan

I AM HAPPY. There's no reason for me not to be. I live with my parents in a modest bungalow in the suburbs. I am in my early thirties, unmarried but with many friends and relations. I stay at home. We rent out apartments in the city. I don't let myself be idle. I read a lot of books. Mostly poetry. Rilke, Celan, Shakespeare, Rimbaud. And some American poetry. Poetry saved my life once.

I was once very unhappy, depressed in my twenties. I was still studying then. A course I wasn't too keen on but nevertheless finished to please my parents, especially my father. He was an accountant and expected me to follow him. But my mother thought that after college, I would marry and have children and look after them. My education would be wasted. It was just something to do, a degree to get to entice a husband.

My family is like any Chinese family here. Hardworking and thrifty, in spite of some fortune from rent collected. My brother is married. He has three children. All just starting to go to school. My sister is also married. She has two children. The second one just born a few months ago. She is married to a family friend who is much older than she is.

I suppose they are all happy, my brother and my sister, and their families. As much as life can be considered, as much as happiness can be attained. And I am not unhappy as I said.

I was unhappy in college, taking a course I did not like. I would come home dead tired and lie in bed all day when not working on assignments. I would daydream that I was miles away. I hated school, hated it with all my being.

But out of respect for my parents, my father especially, I continued studying with diligence in spite of all this. They never realised how unhappy I was. They still don't.

Like some other Chinese families, our parents are strict. They don't let us go out at night. Sometimes, friends are scrutinised and interrogated. I don't know if other families are like this. But no matter, I have a few friends. Some I met while at work. But mostly through the Saturday afternoon poetry readings held in the city. They are poets and writers of all shapes and sizes. I thrive there even if I don't ever get up and read since I never wrote any poetry myself.

In college one day, I was totally depressed and nearly out of my mind. The sky a dull grey, straining to keep itself above my head. It was an overcast afternoon. I was walking to class after lunch. All the problems of my life were weighing down on me, how I hated everyone and everything there. The minutes stretched into hours.

I walked into the library to kill time. Still twenty minutes till the next class. I hated waiting outside before classes started. Because then I'd have to talk with the other students. Small talk.

“He's such a bore...”

“Oh, he's not. What do you think?” one of the classmates would say, turning to me.

I would shrug and say nothing to the two students having their own little conversation.

So there I was in the library feeling extremely agitated. I walked to the toilet to wash my face. After that, I walked back slowly to kill more time. I paused among the shelves of books. There was a book with the picture of a door on its cover. It had a blue background with

the door a shade of grey. It was an arresting cover so I picked up the book and opened it. I began to read the first page...

“I want to enjoy my solitude.
The peace of the world
regarded among you like destiny.”

I was hooked. I looked at my watch. Ten minutes to go. I checked out the book, the first poetry book I ever read, and that night, for the first time in many months, I did not fall asleep tired or depressed. Instead, I marvelled at the intensity of the work before me. At the beauty of the language. So arresting and deep. This poetry thing. A whole, uncompromising start to a new endeavour.

For reading poetry was something of an endeavour. The work in school was less exciting in all aspects. Poetry kept me company. I began liking poetry with a passion.

ONE DAY while I was reading, my sister came for a visit. She was alone. Usually, she would bring her child. Her second baby would not be born for a year yet. When her husband was working, she'd sometimes drop by for a chat. She was probably lonely for company.

Anyway, this time, she was alone.

I thought she looked a little haggard, a little tired.

She sat down in the chair opposite me.

“How is Sara?” I said, smiling at my sister.

“She's alright, *achie*. At home.”

“Why didn't you bring her. You know how I like to play with her.”

"I've come to discuss something with you, *achie*."

I sensed something grave in her tone of voice so I said, "OK."

"I think Richard is having an affair."

Silence.

No one dared disturb the world, its silence, each withholding way it surprises.

"Why do you say that?" I said at last, when I knew it was just something to answer, not a question to ask another at a time like this.

"I caught them talking on the phone. His phone."

"Is it conclusive, you think, your suspicion?"

"Yes. They were talking in hushed tones. He shut the phone at once when I entered the room."

"The son of a bitch! In front of you even."

She could not say anything. She just looked blankly at the walls.

I continued, "Well, aren't you angry?"

"I'm frightened."

"You should be angry."

We did not say anything to each other after that for a few minutes. Even in situations like this, our words were scarce. It didn't

mean we didn't care. It just meant we allowed for the situation to continue despite our efforts. We let the weight break our backs in silence.

I stood up after a time and walked over to my sister. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "What are you going to do, *siobe*?"

"Please don't tell Father."

"We have to."

"No, I don't think he should know. I'm telling you because I didn't know who else to turn to."

"Now you want me to carry this weight for you?" I said, incredulous.

"I didn't mean that. I just want to tell someone who could keep it a secret for me. Someone I could trust."

"I think you plan to keep on with him, right? You don't want to do anything about it at all."

My sister looked down at her hands held together on her lap.

"I'm sorry," I said, still standing beside her.

"Thank you, *achie*, for listening. Now I have to go." She held my hands tight then let go. As if letting go of her own life, her husband, and her child, to be in a corner of the world. The corner where secrets remain secrets, where actions speak but not loud enough for the world to hear. She walked away, unhappy.

I KEPT MY PROMISE to my sister. I seemed to be keeping everyone's promises for her. It was too huge a task for one person to do. So I sought solace in poetry.

I often wondered why my parents never pressured me to marry. Why they never even said anything to me about marriage. Was it that I was to look after them, to make sure they were alright in old age? Was it something like that?

Or was it because they read my mind, they knew that I was better off with my books? That a husband would be a headache for me?

But I had never fallen in love with anyone. And I was determined to marry for love.

Perhaps my parents knew this impossible setting, this impossible condition I set myself for. Never having fallen in love, I should not marry.

But this was not exactly true. There was one man.

He was one of the poets I met. He wrote beautiful poetry. In the end, he got tired of my indecision. I couldn't seem to know what to do. To fall in love or not to. As if it were in my ability to know. In my ability to act on it.

Strictly speaking, we were never an item. We just read poetry together, and ate lunch together sometimes. Mostly as friends.

He would let me read his poems. Poems he said he wrote for me. They were not strictly love poems, but poems about me, about how he saw me.

I liked them. I loved them, in fact, because such things could only be loved, not liked in the sense of friendship, but loved in the sense of ardour if not desire.

“How could I not like what you send me?” I said one day when we were at the park.

“I'm not pressuring you to like them,” he said a little hurt, a little jokingly.

“Well, of course I like them. They're so beautiful!”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course, I do! You're so silly.”

“Prove it.”

“Just believe it.”

“Well, I suppose I do.”

“Yay, you do believe me.”

“How could I not? I know they are beautiful,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“How arrogant!”

“I'm just joking, you know.”

“You turn everything into a joke when it is beginning to sound real.”

“Arrogance is real for sure.”

“Stop it!”

“You're so adorable when you're angry.”

“And you are still arrogant.”

“If you insist.”

He went silent after that.

All the bantering dissolved, first into seriousness, then into silence. A silence which couldn't be known.

This kind of conversation went on for a few weeks. Until one day, he never showed up again.

Towards the end, he was upfront with what he wanted: To give him a chance. But I always pushed him away. Could it be that I did not want to be happy? Or that I was afraid of giving him that chance because I didn't want to take it? Falling in love was not something I planned. All I knew then was that it was too much. My world was secure and happy and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn't want him to be in that world with me. But it was just a reaction to loneliness, I told myself. Any other guy would have filled the same emptiness, the same empty space. He was not particular enough. He was just a day among many days.

Or so, I thought.

When he did not return, I could not sleep. It was as if he took my ability to rest, to be in one place, with him. He took all places with him. I was left with nothing which could be here. Which could be sensed. The sun set later and later. The day stretched into night. And the night stayed too readily, too long.

Even my books could not keep me company. I shut them all with one glance. All the poetry gone with him. All beauty insecure with my glance.

I DIDN'T KNOW what happened to my sister and her husband. But some time after that, she was pregnant with her second baby. I didn't know whether to rejoice or to mourn. Perhaps they'd settled the problem themselves. But knowing my sister, her capacity for patience and endurance, I surmised that in all probability, she must have suffered in silence. Sometimes, I even doubted her love for her husband. For how could anyone do what she did? Let him think it was alright.

Perhaps it was a repetition of what the Chinese did in old generations. Perhaps even now. Mistresses were not uncommon. Sometimes living under the same roof. I knew a friend whose father had three families.

Was I a dreamer? Was I asking for too much? Was fidelity too naive a concept? Especially in this culture? In this age?

Was it just reality? To marry for security, for tradition. Because one is of age. Not because we want to, out of necessity. The necessity of love.

But who am I to talk like this? I stood in that corner where my sister stood, afraid. Of action. Of disturbing the world.

All the books in the world could not educate me. All the time spent reading could not illuminate this fact. That I am unhappy. I have been unhappy for most of my life. I have let everything pass before me like fish swimming away. I am cold as it is. A heart

beating is not cold but wanting warmth. And mine is beating away like mad. I look at the sky and know that I cannot reach it.

