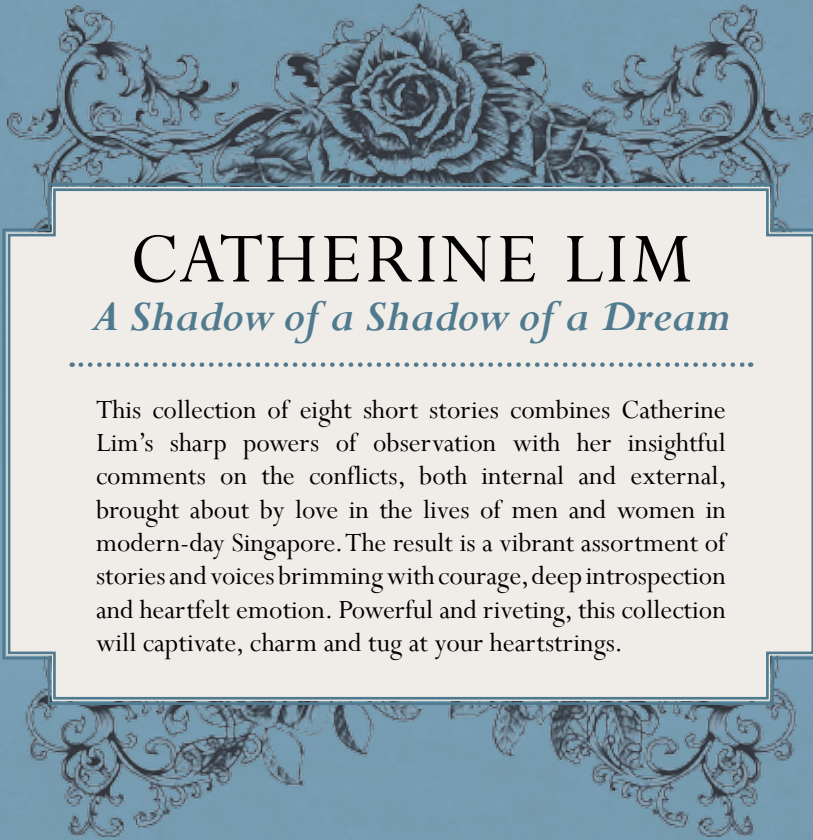


For Review Only

CATHERINE LIM

A Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream

Marshall Cavendish Editions



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A Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream

This collection of eight short stories combines Catherine Lim's sharp powers of observation with her insightful comments on the conflicts, both internal and external, brought about by love in the lives of men and women in modern-day Singapore. The result is a vibrant assortment of stories and voices brimming with courage, deep introspection and heartfelt emotion. Powerful and riveting, this collection will captivate, charm and tug at your heartstrings.

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Editions



CATHERINE LIM

A Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream



a short story collection

For Review Only

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A Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream

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A Change of Heart

Geok's incessant chatter filled the room: it was not that she was excited about the party that the Managing Director was giving in her husband's honour – she had been to too many parties (“All the big shots there, I tell my husband what for I go, cannot speak good English, but he still say must go”). It was rather a return of lightheartedness after what she feared was anger on her husband's part had turned out to be nothing at all, not even mild irritation. It had all happened like this: she had accompanied her mother to the temple to offer thanks to the deities for curing her mother of a swollen ankle; Geraldine, that irrepressible child, had somehow let out the fact at dinner; she looked fearfully up at her husband expecting the anger to gather darkly on his face as it did the last time he found out that she was associating again with that temple woman, Ah Sim Soh. But he had merely gone on eating his dinner. After dinner, she gave him his coffee, still expecting him to ask why she had chosen to disobey him a second time, and getting ready to give her explanation, which was that her mother's swollen ankle had *really* been cured this time, and her mother had *really* needed help to take the bagfuls of food, flowers and other offerings to the temple. She was bracing herself to say, with all

the persuasiveness she could muster, “Oh Michael, it really was miracle! I saw! One moment the ankle all black and swollen and *ayoh!* like don’t know what, and next moment swelling all gone down – no pus, no pain, and Mother can walk, walk everywhere with no pain.” But he had sipped his coffee and said nothing, and when he later told her about the Managing Director’s party in his honour and that one of the guests would be an important Minister of State, she knew that there had been no annoyance against her.

Watching his face closely, she saw, to her joy and relief, an unclouding and brightening of countenance that presaged a long spell of amity ahead. He was actually smiling. He said, “You will of course be at the dinner – all the wives will be there,” and it was then that the spontaneous exuberance of spirits that had been temporarily held in check by the fear of offending her husband, burst forth in a torrent of happy chatter.

Ah, her Michael, her husband, how she loved him! And he was going to be the guest-of-honour at the Managing Director’s party: that probably meant that he was due for another promotion. How happy that would make him. She longed to tell her friends about her husband’s rapid climb, although, of course, she would never do it improperly, in case she was accused of boasting. She would say merely, *‘Ayah!* This party, that party! Always must go. Tonight very big dinner for my husband. At Raffles’ Ballroom. But I don’t want to go. All these big, big people, all stylish. I only a simple woman, cannot speak the good, high class English. But my Michael say must go. The wife must sit beside him at the VIP table. And the other day, so terrible, I tell you! The Minister of Labour was there and they put me next to him, and he talk to me like old friend. And then another party I got to stand up and give away prizes and shake

hands. And *ayoh!* So shy! All the photographers – took so many pictures! And me, so fat some more!”

The self-deprecations were deliberate, thrown in to achieve a fine balance with the gratification, for the benefit of her less privileged listeners, but if any listener was provoked to make a slyly malicious remark to upset the balance, such as “Ya, *lah*, Geok, you better do something about your weight”, or “Get someone to teach you how to speak good English like the ladies at your husband’s parties, otherwise he will begin to look at other women”, then all Geok’s instincts of self-preservation would be galvanised to repulse malicious remark with yet more malicious remark, “I know, *lah!* But my Michael he say he love me. Don’t care whether fat or ugly, but I am his wife, I his wife for nineteen years. And he say to me, ‘You go buy what you like, you go shopping, you enjoy yourself, money is no problem.’ Last month bought diamond ring, 2.04 carat. These big shot wives, they clever to speak the good English, but they all wear imitation jewellery. That Mrs Sng – she come all with plastic earrings and beads, and they don’t know how to take care of their husbands, only clever to attend parties and talk big, big. But I, everyone knows, I take good care of my Michael, Korean ginseng two hundred dollars for only one hundred grammes, I buy, because I know good for his health. And everyone knows my Michael love me because I make him success – without me, how can he be like this success now?”

The last claim was always made in a tone of profoundest pride. Into the cryptic one sentence was condensed a whole saga of heroic self-sacrifice in which a young wife single-handedly supported her husband, first through the university and later through a post-graduate course abroad whence he returned one of the brightest and most promising young professionals who

attracted the notice of both the private sector and government circles, and was finally won by the former. Since then, his career had been one continuous climb up the corporate ladder.

“And you know what I did?” Geok would ask, preparing to give an account of what she had done. And she had done what few wives were prepared to do. Unknown to her husband who all the time was under the impression that the money came as a loan from her parents who owned a groceries shop, she started a food catering service, operating from the small kitchen of her flat, cooking huge amounts of food everyday and getting them sent out in tiffin carriers to the various families who were too busy or too lazy to cook their own meals. She made a lot of money, but it meant backbreaking work in the kitchen, and tedious trips to the market whence she would return in a trishaw, hot and panting, laden with paper bags of raw fish, meat and vegetables crammed into plastic bags. She got her mother to help her, and she paid a neighbour’s son to do the deliveries. And she watched with satisfaction the money growing in the bank account from which sums were regularly remitted to her husband in London with cheerful notes of how well she and little Geraldine were faring at home and how he was not to worry about them at all but concentrate on his studies.

By the time he returned, she had stopped her little business for a few months, to give herself time to put the flat in a presentable state to receive him. And she kept the secret from him: her instincts told her that his quiet, urbane, scholarly nature would have recoiled at the thought of his wife earning money to support him by cooking for others. But the secret could not be kept for long, for one evening someone who had heard about the catering service rang up to make inquiries. It was Michael who picked up the phone; he was about to put

down the phone in disgust because the speaker appeared to be talking gibberish which was moreover in coarse dialect, when the mention of his wife's name made him pause to listen, and then slowly, and with a great deal of suppressed irritation, he pieced together the truth of the situation. Geok, who had been listening with some trepidation, now moved forward quickly to explain: anxiety gave her voice and movements an exaggerated intensity that in turn gave the aspect of guilt. He sat quietly and sternly while she explained, remonstrated, expostulated, until her voice broke in tears. The supreme irony of the wife pleading for understanding from her husband for a deed that had been impelled by pure love of him, did not occur to either: Michael was only conscious that his wife had (as usual) lied to him and demeaned him, and Geok was only aware that her husband was angry with her and therefore had to be placated at all costs.

It was agreed, finally, that the matter was never to be referred to again, and Geok subsequently took scrupulous care not to even remotely refer to it, although her deep sense of gratification at having been the means by which her husband had achieved success in the world had still to be expressed occasionally (but never in Michael's hearing), and she felt she was still being true to her promise to her husband if she only hinted at the truth through broad generalisations such as, "Without me, how can he be like this success now?"

And he was not ungrateful. Viewing with pleasure her fine house, her jewellery, the liberal 'shopping money', Geok felt that all her earlier sacrifices for her husband had been more than compensated for. He allowed her to spend more freely than most husbands would their wives. She spent her time pottering about in their lovely house, supervising and scolding the servant, taking care of their daughter, Geraldine, and taking

care of her husband. Taking care of her husband – that was her supreme fulfilment and joy.

She said, holding up a green silk dress against herself for him to see, “You like this one or not? You think I should wear this for the party?” He was putting on his tie. He turned and said, “It’s okay.” She said, “Maybe the red one better. The one with the black flowers, because don’t make me look so fat.” She gave a shrill little laugh. He went on adjusting his tie, a faraway look in his eyes, a cigarette in his mouth. “Oh, you forget again, you so forgetful nowadays!” she said playfully, referring to his forgetting to knock off the ash from the cigarette in his mouth: she deftly caught the little circling of ash before it could fall on the carpeted floor of their bedroom. She was in a skittish mood almost, yearning for her husband to tease her, as he once did, early on in their marriage.

“Want another cigarette?” she asked, and he shook his head, without looking at her.

“Good. Told you to give up smoking, no good for your health,” she exclaimed, claiming a non-existent victory, for he smoked endlessly, both in the office and at home.

She slipped on the green silk dress; she struggled to pull up the zip at the back and failing that, turned to her husband, presenting her back to him, the tightly fastened bra and half petticoat cutting deep into the soft abundant flesh and creating ridges and furrows that would show cruelly under the silk. Her husband pulled up the zip deftly and then returned to task of getting his cuff-links on. Geok ruefully recollected the early years of their marriage when the pulling up of back zips or the fastening of back buttons represented the coy intimacy of lovers. Nowadays Michael never cared to do these things or if asked to, did them reluctantly and almost impatiently.

“Mary’s right – I too fat,” thought Geok, surveying herself sideways in the long mirror. “Must start slimming again. Wish I could be slim like Aileen!” The thought of Aileen had the effect of momentarily clouding Geok’s brow; she did not like Aileen, she was almost certain that Aileen was setting her sights on her husband.

“Must be careful,” thought Geok, her exuberant spirits now turned inwards and soured into a fever of jealous anger. “That woman all out to get my Michael – Mary warn me too. She is too dangerous – and all stylish and speaking the graduate English. She wants my Michael.” She cast a sidelong glance at her husband. He was sitting on the bed, smoking, and the expression on his face told her she had better not sit beside him or snuggle close to him, as she had the impulse to do. She felt a momentary spasm of painful longing: why could not her husband love her?

Michael, now ready to leave for the party, looked quickly at himself in the mirror. He was aware of his wife at the other end of the bedroom, looking at him, watching him. He did not want to do or say anything that would provide her with the excuse she wanted for coming up to talk to him or fuss about him. Even if he so much as surveyed himself in the long mirror, she was sure to rush up and adjust the handkerchief in his coat pocket or tug at his lapel or if he were to make any comment about his greying hair, she was sure to rush up to smooth it or talk nonsense about hair creams and dyes. So he merely said, “We’re a little early, I shall be in the study. We’ll leave in about ten minutes,” and quickly walked past her. He was aware, as he strode past her out of their bedroom, that she was wearing that dreadful silk dress again, the one that emphasised her fatness, and the strange-coloured stockings that made her plump legs

look plumper. And he did not like her perfume.

He walked into his study, opposite their bedroom where he did the work brought home from the office, and where lately he had been sleeping in. His wife had come, in the middle of the night, in the ridiculous pink nightie that she had been persuaded by her friends to buy, to coax him back to their bedroom, “Here not so comfortable, Michael – come back –” but he had pretended not to hear and had on several occasions turned away from her, on the narrow couch in the study, to face the wall with a grunt of impatience.

Michael now sat at his desk, and in his eyes there was an anxious brooding resentment. He was on the way to success, to the highest success, but his wife was the impediment. Jack Cheng – now that Jack Cheng was a brilliant chap who pulled off one successful deal after another for his company, but his wife was a social disaster: she was crude, loud-mouthed, barely literate and in the end, the extensive amount of entertaining that Jack Cheng had to do was handled by his secretary. He eventually divorced his wife and married the secretary. Whenever the story of Jack Cheng’s wife came up, Michael felt all the discomfort of the parallel with his own situation, and was conscious of a few pitying glances thrown in his direction. And he was aware that Aileen was aware: with characteristic tact and delicacy, she always managed to change the subject and so saved him from further pain.

Michael thought with growing pique: what if at the Managing Director’s party where the Minister of State would be present, his wife disgraced him as she had disgraced him at the Cunninghams’ dinner? At the Cunninghams’ dinner (he had the evening before impressed upon her that they were very important people from the diplomatic corps), she had been at

her worst; he did not know what had come over her, but she was talking non-stop in her loud, strident voice that carried to the end of the large room, and she was recounting, between shrill peals of laughter, various domestic incidents that the other guests responded to uncomfortably with brief, polite smiles. Michael was aware of the startled look on Mrs Cunningham's face at one point, and the quick involuntary glance she threw at him, before hastily turning to look away. And his wife went on and on talking loudly; her long earrings, chains and bracelets jangled noisily; she went on talking in her Singapore English which was unintelligible to some of the guests – some laughed, some smiled in amusement and a few, Michael was sure, squirmed in embarrassment. Then he noticed Aileen go up to join the group, say something and thus start the others talking, putting an end to his wife's vulgar displays. Aileen did it so naturally, brought about the change so imperceptibly that no one could have noticed.

All the way home in the car, Michael seethed in anger against his wife.

"Why were you making a fool of yourself?" he asked, his face taut as he gripped the steering wheel and stared ahead.

"*Ai-yah!* What you mean making fool?" asked his wife. "We all just talking, what. All talking about children, funny things to make people laugh."

"You were making a fool of yourself," he said. "Anyone could see that. Surely there was no need to tell all those things about me and Geraldine and the servant?"

"What's wrong with that, *lah?*" she demanded playfully. She was still in high spirits. She went on, "What's wrong, Michael? Everyone also talking about children and husband. That Mrs Ong, she also tell funny story about her family, what."

“There is a difference between their telling and your telling,” said Michael almost savagely. “They speak proper English, you speak like an uneducated market fish-seller.”

There was no mistaking his mood now. He was really angry. The playfulness came to an abrupt halt, and she now turned to face him with eyes dilated and brimming with tears, like a child unjustly scolded.

“You don’t love me,” she whimpered. “You hate me, I always your good wife, but you hate me.” She was convulsed with sobbing.

“For God’s sake,” he muttered to himself, white with suppressed rage. She went on weeping, blowing her nose noisily and talking between sobs, and he knew what she was going to say next. All his sensibilities were roused to meet and repulse the attack.

“I work so hard for you! Work, work, worse than a servant, for you to study!” her voice rose in an exaggerated display of self-pity. “You never know, but I work so hard, nearly died. Food catering business not easy – I had no rest – all the time save money, never bought new dress, no lipstick. People ask why _”

He cut short the litany of grievance by snarling, “I wish with all my soul that that had never happened. Do you think I wanted that? Do you think I would have agreed to you doing all that? You lied to me. That was how you did it, by lying.”

She went on, as if she had not heard him, “I suffer so much for you, I do everything for you, but you still not happy. Other wives don’t do so much for their husbands, but still they don’t suffer like this, I don’t know why God want to punish me like this, I pray to God every week in the temple but he still never hear me –”

He stopped the car, and slumped back in his seat, suddenly very tired.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked with menacing slowness, turning to look at her.

“I want you to love me,” she said suddenly and simply, turning up her tear-stained face towards him. Something like an agonised grunt escaped him as he turned his face away, his soul recoiling from this woman who begged love from him with her eyes, her movements, her every touch. It was so long ago that he could reach out spontaneously to her; now he shrank from her very presence. Her voice, raised in querulous protest or arch playfulness, her raucous laughter, the banality of her chatter, the coarseness of her speech, the coarseness of her looks ever since she allowed herself to get fat – all these had contributed to a sad diminution of passion over the years, so that he sought to sleep alone whenever he could and to stay in the office for as long as he could.

He seldom now paused to wonder how he had fallen in love with her and married her; he simply preferred to explain it as a prevalent situation in which young men in his time found themselves: when they reached the age of twenty or thereabouts, they were persuaded into marriage by their elders with some sweet, well-behaved girl in the neighbourhood. He saw his marriage as the tragedy of the callowness of youth. There were times when he recollected how pretty his wife had been, how vivacious without that coarseness that had grown with age. He wondered if she would have been different if she had not left school so early – she had barely completed Primary Six. There was a period when he actually made arrangements for her to be privately tutored in spoken English by a very reliable, highly recommended English specialist, but somehow she had

demurred and made a lot of fuss, so the plans came to nought, and she went on speaking English with the peculiar intonation and curious mixture of dialect that he had found so jarring when he first returned from London. And he had hinted to her about her weight: there was an exclusive ‘figure salon’ that was very popular with executive wives: Mrs Chia, the Regional Manager’s wife whom Michael remembered to be very fat, had slimmed down considerably as a result of a course at the salon, and now looked very attractive beside her husband at parties. But Geok never seemed to take him seriously. Again, she had demurred, had made a few half-hearted attempts at the course, and had finally dropped out, giving all sorts of excuses. And she was still careless about her eating habits – it pained him to see her gorging herself at lunches and dinners and barbecues, and making loud comments about the food as she ate.

He saw that she had quietened down, sniffing into her handkerchief, and he started the car again. They went on in silence. She said again, in a small defeated voice, “Michael, why you don’t love me? Why you always angry with me?”

“Angry! Angry!” he exploded, unable to contain his anger any longer. “You are always accusing me of being angry with you. What do you expect me to do, when you never listen to what I say?”

She looked at him incredulously. “What? What, Michael? You say I never listen to you?” she quavered, staring at him. “I obey you in everything, Michael! I always do what you say. I keep the house for you, I wait for you for dinner – you come home so late but I still wait – you come home so late but I never go to sleep first, I wait for you –”

“I told you to do something about your... your speech and your weight, but you chose not to listen to me,” he said, still

staring ahead. She said nothing, and construing her silence to be contrition, he was impelled to go on. "I took the trouble to make arrangements for you. I even asked Miss Aileen Teng to make an appointment for you at the Joan Andrews or whatever it was salon –"

"Ah, ah, now I know! You ashamed of your wife, I see!" she cried with the exaggerated tones of mock understanding. "You feel shame because your wife fat and ugly and not educated like the beautiful graduate lady Miss Aileen Teng, I see!" She could not maintain the posture of remonstrance however; her voice broke and she dissolved in tears all over again, whimpering in abject self-pity, "I know you hate me, Michael, because I not fit to be your wife. I will go away, go far away and never come back. Then you no need to be angry or shame anymore. And you can marry Miss Aileen Teng! I know you love that woman. Okay, Michael, you divorce me and marry her!" Her voice rose in a sorrowful wail.

"Oh God, what's the use of it all?" cried Michael to himself with brutal intensity, and stepped hard on the accelerator, so that the roar of the car as they sped home from the Cunninghams' party drowned out his wife's sniffles, drowned out the roaring tumult in his brain that was threatening to burst through the veins throbbing dangerously on his temples. It was no use talking to his wife. She was incapable of reasoned discussion or argument, for she picked on this or that in what he said, and became emotional about it. Against her loud remonstrations, noisy accusations and hysterical weeping, he was helpless. He always ended up totally drained and frustrated. There was no point in talking to her anymore.

He heard her crying in the bedroom; at one point during the night when he got up to go to the bathroom, he heard her get

up from bed too and move about restlessly, and once, during the night when he turned and moaned in his sleep, he was conscious of her softly trying the handle on the locked door of the study, and whimpering, "Michael, are you all right?" But he ignored her and then heard her return to their bedroom.

Suddenly he was reminded of the time when he was a schoolboy and a classmate half his size latched on to him and refused to let go, following him around everywhere like a faithful dog. He remembered that the boy who had lost almost all his hair through some illness and whose legs were as thin as sticks, clung to him and could not be shaken off. The look of adulation on the boy's pale stupid face had the effect of revulsion that made him cruel: once he pushed the boy away roughly, causing him to fall backwards on to a mound of sharp stones and cut his leg. He was seized with pangs of guilt when he saw the boy's bandaged leg the next day, but his attitude remained hard and cold. The boy was not deterred: he continued to follow him until he, Michael, thought he would go mad with exasperation. The more he tried to shake off the boy, the more tenaciously the fellow clung to him. He wanted to smash the idiotic face with the stupidly hanging mouth but each time the anger was held back by the urbane civility that had marked him as the most "mature" and "refined" boy in a school infested with rowdy, uncouth creatures and that had made him a favourite with all the teachers. Finally, to his great relief, his tormentor suddenly disappeared from the scene. He learnt that the boy had gone into hospital to die, ravaged by the disease that had caused all his hair to drop off.

He had never given a thought to the poor wretch, and now, listening to his wife behind the locked door, trying to get in, he was aware of the resurgence of exactly those feelings of

revulsion that he had experienced in his boyhood. He stared into the darkness, suddenly confronted by the horrible prospect of an unending loveless marriage. He was condemned to a union with a woman whom he could not even remember being in love with. With the passing of that youthful inexperience that was content to get into marriage on the basis of a pretty face or the expectation of the sweet pleasures allowed for on the marital bed, had passed all the attraction that his wife had ever had for him. The years abroad had been so happy and fulfilling precisely because he was away from her and because all his energies could be fully absorbed by his studies which he loved. And the years after he returned home were happy to the extent that he was moving so fast forward in his career. He was a naturally shy and reserved person, and that reservedness, combined with the air of genteelity that everybody noticed and liked, as well as a sharp intelligence and wit, had established him as a man of great charm and strength of character. While others might be described as “suave”, “smooth”, “polished”, with all the reservations that the descriptions implied, Michael was always described as a “fine friend and colleague” by the men and as “wonderful”, “absolutely charming” by the more enthusiastic of the ladies. And then the more garrulous of the ladies might go on to say, in a changed tone, “His wife – what do you think of her? She seems so... so unlike him. Almost vulgar. Why, only the other day –”

They would confer in hushed tones about the wife; they knew about the heroic sacrifices on his account, and they concluded that the poor man was trapped by the gratitude he owed his wife. They speculated about the kind of relationship between husband and wife: someone remembered Geok at one party revealing, with utmost candour, that her husband was no

longer sleeping with her, and from that there, it was an easy step to speculation about the part of Aileen Teng in the rather complicated business. Aileen was attractive, she was intelligent, she was genteel, she had class, she was the consummate hostess at parties, and moreover, there seemed to be something like genuine attachment between her and Michael.

“What do you think?” they would ask.

“They’re really so well-matched,” they would comment.

“But Geok’s been such a good wife,” someone would say. No matter what they thought or wished to happen or did not wish to happen, there would always be final capitulation to the imperative of the collective of social conscience, and then they would say, “He must love her in his own way. They’ve been married for so long. She certainly loves him. Aileen should not make things difficult for them.”

If he didn’t have Aileen to talk to, Michael thought, he would go mad. He was naturally shy with women, but he found himself feeling very comfortable with her. He could talk to her for hours, bare his innermost thoughts and feelings to her and yet not feel any uneasiness that the confidentiality would be breached in any way and his weaknesses made known to others. Aileen, with her tact and warmth, inspired trust, and he trusted her as he had trusted no man or woman. On the morning after the disastrous Cunninghams’ dinner, he called her at her office to meet him for lunch, and when he saw her, he was visibly cheered, but the moroseness of the previous evening soon crept up on him, and he sat there with her at the table, smoking, not saying anything, but saying a great deal by the troubled sadness in his eyes. She did not say anything or ask any questions; there was a kind of affinity between them that made silence perfectly natural. Later they began to talk, easily, calmly, and although

no solution had been found by the time they parted at the end of the meal, he went away feeling much better. That was what he liked about her – her ability to understand him fully so that no tedious narrations or explanations were necessary. And her honesty: she never said or did anything that he sensed to be contrary to her true nature, so that he never had to be alerted to nuances of facial or verbal expression to detect the real meaning underneath. He therefore felt completely at ease with her. If she had exploited the situation to her benefit, had crudely worked on him against his wife, or if, on the other hand, she had taken on the role of Magnanimous Other Woman, had begged him to go back to his wife, had offered to get out completely from his life – either would have injured his sensibilities and hurt his basic sense of delicacy. As it was, she did neither: she merely listened, asked some questions, refrained from others, guided entirely by the intuitions and instincts of a warm, caring woman who wants to love, is not sure how, and is unaware that in her very tentativeness and awkwardness, is being most loving.

He was sure that she was in love with him; she had not told him, but being incapable of hiding her true feelings and possessing that almost child-like quality of radiating happiness in the company of those she loved best, she had as good as told the world.

“If she had come into my life earlier,” he thought. If, if. He soon abandoned thinking along such lines, aware of the painfulness of retrogressive introspection. She had had an unhappy marriage behind her: it occurred to him that his meeting her at a point when she was free and he was not, represented one of those sad ironies of existence that must always beset men and women.

“Will you be at the Managing Director’s dinner?” he asked,

hoping that she had been invited. "I understand that the Minister of State will be there too," adding with a slight laugh, "MD says he's been wanting to meet me."

Aileen looked at him and said, "You are going places, Michael Tay Yong Wah. Does that make you very happy?"

"A man needs some form of compensation," said Michael with returning bitterness. "If he can concentrate on his work and be happy in it, that's a great help. You know what I mean."

"It'll be all right, Mike, don't worry," she said, referring to his fear about his wife's behaviour at the coming dinner, and giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Michael!" called Geok, as she made last-minute adjustments to the green silk dress, the black stockings and the matching jade earrings. She stood at the doorway of the study. "Almost seven o'clock already. Better start now. Otherwise late, like last time." He made an indistinguishable sound that could be construed as assent and got up. She waited for him and together they walked down the stairs.

"How's Geraldine?" asked Michael, not really so much concerned about the cough that he recollected his wife mentioning, as with the need for polite small talk, even with one's wife.

"Oh, she's much better," said Geok cheerfully. "She took the cough syrup, I told her that no use, then I boil some herb. You know last time I gave you some, remember? Well she took and so much better now."

She raised her voice suddenly and called, "*Je-la-leen!* Papa and Mummy going now, be good girl!" He winced a little, both at her inability to pronounce their daughter's name correctly and at her habit of baby-talking to a seventeen-year-old girl.

All the way to the Managing Director's residence, she kept up a flow of happy chatter. He longed to turn round and say, "Please, please, Geok, for God's sake, don't make a fool of yourself again," but he felt unable to risk the torrent of tearful remonstrance that would swamp him once more and leave his powers of rational communication completely paralysed. He let her go on in her easy chatter, amazed at how completely recovered she was from the recent trauma following the Cunninghams' dinner: it would appear, by the way she was going on, that they had never had a quarrel or disagreement.

He noticed that when they walking into the spacious hall of the Managing Director's residence, his wife's expression immediately changed on seeing Aileen in a corner of the room talking to some of the guests. Catching sight of them, Aileen came over and said, "Hi Michael, hi Geok," her eyes lighting up with pleasure. Michael heard his wife give a little snort of grudging acknowledgement, then walk rapidly past Aileen to join a group of women at another end of the room. It did not perturb him; indeed, if the change of mood indicated a surly refusal to talk for the rest of the evening, that might be a welcome change. Suddenly Michael felt light-hearted, almost happy. Aileen was beside him, looking very lovely in a beige dress, and he saw the Managing Director approach him with a paternally genial smile, thus singling him out for honourable notice and signalling to all in the room that here was the star marked out for yet more distinctions. He was led to be introduced to the Minister of State who looked at him closely and appeared to be assessing him shrewdly as they began talking.

All the gratification that a man feels when he has gone far in his career and is going still further, was experienced by him then, as he felt the Managing Director's benign eyes on him

and the Minister's friendly hand on his shoulder. It was some time before he looked around to see where his wife was, and he was just about to resume, with relief, his conversation with the Minister, having ascertained that she was harmlessly engaged in chatter with some of the women in a corner of the room, when snatches of her speech reached his ears and made him pause in growing unease. She was speaking in a voice that was growing louder and louder, and he understood that she was aiming it at Aileen who was with another group, some distance away.

"This friend I was telling you about," said Geok with raised voice, "she so pitiful. She try so hard to save her husband, but he – don't know what happen – fell for this girl. She like a real witch. Don't know what charm she use, but he fell for her. He already married twenty years, but she steal him – just like that – no moral at all. The poor wife and children suffer so much, but the witch don't care at all what other people suffer. She want the man, she got the man, that's all she care about."

Reckless with what she perceived as the success of her manoeuvre for she saw Aileen look at her with a startled look, she continued, abandoning even the thin disguise of narrative and launching into straight invective: "Some women no shame, I tell you! Want to steal other people's husbands. Go and have your own boyfriend, *lah*, so many other men around – what for you want to steal other people's husband and break up their happy marriage?" Her listeners shifted about uneasily; one or two stole a glance at Aileen. By now the fire was in Geok's blood, as she felt all the insidiousness of the threat to her marriage. The sight of her husband detaching himself from his group and moving over to speak to Aileen and showing a tenderness of look that he had never shown to her, goaded her to a pitch of rage that could be satisfied by no less than striding over to

Aileen and spitting on her. The spit landed softly on the front of Aileen's dress. Aileen stood stunned, clutching her glass in both hands, staring at Geok. Michael too stared, stunned into immobility.

"You keep away from my husband!" she screamed in a trembling voice. Aileen and Michael continued staring; the circle of astonished onlookers widened. Then Michael moved towards his wife; he was not aware of wanting to do or say anything beyond putting an end to the screaming accusations that Geok was hurling at Aileen.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted at him. "Go back to her, go back to your Aileen Teng, everyone knows!" He withdrew, white with shame and anger, and then he saw the Managing Director's wife coming up to Geok and gently but firmly leading her away, and of the rest dispersing, looking away and going back to their original groups in delicate pretext at a return to normal party chatter, as if nothing had happened. The Managing Director and the Minister tried to engage Michael in friendly chat again: Michael, taut with shock and anger, was conscious of Aileen bidding a quick farewell to the host and hurrying off. Geok emerged from somewhere after a while, still attended on by the kindly wife of the Managing Director. She was wiping her nose with a piece of tissue paper and appeared considerably calmer.

"Would you like to go home now?" he asked her with a supreme effort at hiding the waves of rage that were surging against him. She said yes meekly.

They left, Michael burning with the sensation of being both pitied and laughed at by those who had gathered to say goodnight to him and his wife, and with the realisation that the moment his car was out of sight, they would regroup to comment, in subdued murmurs, on the strange incident they

had witnessed. In one fell stroke, his wife had destroyed him in front of all his friends, killed off his chances of promotion – for which Managing Director, no matter how genial, would want to promote a man whose wife was a social catastrophe? – and alienated him forever from Aileen. She had destroyed him. If she had set out with a carefully formulated plan to destroy him, she could not have done it more thoroughly.

In the car, his wife had begun to cry again. “I’m sorry, Michael,” she said in a voice strangled by violent sobbing. “I don’t know what happen to me tonight. I think I am going mad. I’m sorry, Michael. Please forgive me. I know you’re very angry with me.”

He said nothing. He drove home, keeping totally silent, while she continued weeping beside him. When they arrived home, he rushed out of the car, ran up the stairs to their bedroom, reached for a suitcase kept in the upper reaches of a cupboard, brought it down and then began pulling off items from his clothes cupboard and throwing them into the suitcase. His wife stood at the doorway, looking abject. She watched him in wide-eyed misery. He brought the cover of the suitcase firmly down, and locked it. Then he picked it up and made for the door, brushing past her.

“Where are you going, Michael?” she quavered. He made no answer and began to descend the stairs. She ran after him, bawling like a child. “Michael! Michael! Don’t leave me! Please don’t leave me!” She clung to him on the stairs. He tried to free himself of her; he would have pushed her aside, except that he feared sending her toppling down the stairs. With her still clinging on to him, he struggled the rest of the way downstairs. Once at the foot, he brushed her aside roughly, and said in a voice choking with the frustration of pain built on pain, “Get

out of my way. I don't want to see you again. You've destroyed me completely." She became hysterical and tried to prevent him from getting into the car.

"WILL YOU LEAVE ME ALONE?" he roared, and she, stunned momentarily by this rare display of ferocity in her husband, stood gaping at him. She recovered in an instant; the sight of her husband starting the car seized her with a sense of panic, and she cried out again, "Oh, please Michael, don't leave me! I promise not to do it again. I promise to do anything you say. I will stop going to the temple, I will not –" But the car had roared off.

"Oh God, oh God," moaned Geok, and she went back into the house, wringing her hands. She felt a sudden surge of anger, not against her husband, not against Aileen, but against the temple gods who would cure her mother of a swollen foot but would not heed her prayers for a change of heart in her husband. They had cruelly stopped their ears against her cries and pleas.

Sequestered in his hotel room, Michael lay on the bed, smoking and gazing at the ceiling. His seething rage had subsided enough for him to take stock of his situation. He was clear about one thing: he could not go on in his marriage. He would have to make clear to Geok that he could not go on living with her and that, therefore, she would have to consent to a separation and eventually a divorce. He would not be able to withstand any more of her tirades and her tears; his lawyer, mercifully, would handle everything so that he would be spared seeing her again.

Michael thought over again the incident at the Managing Director's party, and concluded it might actually work in his favour: its revelation of the viciousness that his wife was capable of, would incline the Managing Director to view his divorce

sympathetically. After all, the Managing Director himself had divorced his first wife whom he had married when he was very young, barely out of his youth. And if he and Aileen stayed away from each other for a discreet period, the break-up of his marriage would not be associated with her. Michael would not mind being unable to marry her; as long as she remained his friend, he would be quite contented. All he wanted now was to escape from the hell that his wife had created for him, to be by himself in peace, to concentrate on his career and continue to enjoy the trust of his superiors. That was all he wanted.

He thought of ringing up his daughter to explain to her what had happened, and then as he reached for the phone, he suddenly realised that he had no idea what he was going to say to her. They had never been close; she seemed more comfortable with her mother. He had often heard the two of them laughing together, or raising querulous voices at each other, and he reflected, with some regret, that the daughter was beginning to speak and dress like the mother. He put down the phone.

He felt at ease. He liked the quiet of the hotel room. He thought of Aileen, of ringing her up to ask how she was. But he hesitated, thinking that he would do nothing at the moment to disturb the rare peace that he was experiencing. There was almost a sense of unreality as he padded about on the carpeted floor of the hotel room, smoking, ringing for coffee, lying on the bed, a perfect stillness around him except for the sound of the air-conditioner in the room; his soul drank greedily of the peace, like an animal growing mad from thirst and at last able to slake it at a spring.

He stayed thus immured for two days; on the third day he rang the Managing Director, and in a calm, even voice explained

why he had not been turning up for work. The Managing Director was all sympathy; he mentioned to Michael that his wife had, in fact, gone to his office that morning to try to find him; she was in a very bad state.

“I’m sorry all this is happening to you, old chap,” he said solicitously, “but do let me know what I can do to help.” And by way of consolation, he added, “The Minister of State was very impressed with you. He told me so.”

Michael recollected that there were plans for an assignment for him at the Hamburg branch of the company for a period of a few weeks: could the assignment be brought forward so that he could go away for a while, to “let things cool” and return in a better frame of mind to solve his problems? He hinted at the possibility of a divorce, and was pleasantly surprised by the Managing Director’s assuring him that all he wished was for Michael to resolve the difficulties in the best way possible, adding a little philosophically, “I suppose these things happen.” He went on to remark casually, “Aileen’s a fine girl. She’ll be an asset to you. I’ve known her for some time now.”

Michael then rang up his sister, Mary, to enlist her help to break the news to Geok. Mary was Geok’s favourite sister-in-law, and although for years she had been resisting Mary’s efforts to make her a member of her Christian Charismatic Group, she had always been genuinely fond of her and lavished presents on her.

In a voice charged with stern authority to forestall any protestations on Mary’s part, Michael told her on the phone to convey to Geok the message that he would not be returning home, he would make arrangements to pick up his things at some future date, she was not to call anymore at his office, and all communication could be made through his lawyer.

“But,” wailed Mary, “how can this thing happen? Geok’s in

a terrible state at present – she can't eat or sleep – she cries all the time –”

“Listen again carefully to what I'd like you to do, Mary,” said Michael calmly; he repeated the instructions and then asked, “Is it clear, Mary, what you have to do?”

Mary said in a small stricken voice, “And this is final, Michael? You're breaking up with Geok after nineteen years of marriage? It is Aileen, isn't it?” He said nothing, and at the end of his anger-filled silence, she said in a voice now trembling with tears, “I'll pray for you, Michael. I've got Geok to join in our prayer meetings now, and she's also praying very hard –”

Michael put down the phone. He lay back on the bed with a deep contented sigh. He found, rather to his surprise, that a decision which would have been unthinkable a year back had, the moment it was made, the magical power of lifting a tremendous burden off him and flooding his whole being with a sense of relief and exaltation. If he were given to exaggeration, he would have described it as euphoria. There was an element of novelty to his new situation that lent excitement: he saw a new life opening before him where the woman he loved would be by his side, giving him the support to pursue his life's dreams. Untrammelled at last, once again freely breathing and happy, what could he not achieve? In the new vistas that now stretched so invitingly before him, his wife and daughter had receded rapidly into the distance, diminishing into final nothingness.

Two days before he was to leave for Hamburg, he had a call from the the Minister of State's office. Could he present himself for a discussion? Michael thought he knew what it would be about; in fact, he had already had a strong suspicion when the Minister of State had started taking an interest in him.

But it had not developed into reflective speculation; in any case, too many things had happened lately for him to be able to spare much thought for anything else. And now sitting before the friendly Minister of State, listening to his fine voice, Michael was aware of the exciting sensation of a faint hope burgeoning into full expectation. There he sat, listening with that outward calm which belied the quickening emotion underneath, a calm that the Minister liked for he equated it with more strength and trustworthiness. The Minister revealed that for some time now the Party had been interested in recruiting him and grooming him to contest in the coming elections. If voted in, which was almost a certainty, his position as Member of Parliament would be the starting point for an illustrious political career: the Minister stressed the vastness of opportunity for bright, dedicated young men of moral integrity in a society totally committed to the ideal of excellence in leadership.

Michael listened and asked some questions which again the Minister liked, for he saw that the questions reflected the man's seriousness of purpose and integrity of character. They talked very amiably for a while, and then, by way of an afterthought, the Minister said, "I did hear of some problems you may be having in your marriage. Perhaps I should mention that the Party is concerned that its members, especially those likely to rise to positions of prominence, do not... er... er are not guilty of any indiscretion. A divorce may be a little... er... a little incongruous, to say the least, for a Member of Parliament or a Minister who will be looked up to as an example of moral conduct, especially among the young in Singapore." He added jocularly, "The Ministry of Education is launching a Moral Education programme, and it will never do to subscribe to the programme in word but not in deed, eh?" He put his hand on

Michael's shoulder and the interview was over. Michael was told to think about the proposition and see him again once he had made up his mind.

Back in his hotel room, ruminating in a haze of cigarette smoke, Michael suddenly recollected that none of the Ministers smoked, or at least they never did so in public, and he automatically stubbed out his cigarette. He lay back, thinking deeply, amazed that in the space of a few days, he had to make two momentous decisions, each involving a change of course in his life.

The Minister's proposition, put forward so succinctly yet forcefully, so gravely yet gracefully, touched a responsive chord in the depths of his being. He was at once deeply gratified by the fact that the Party, well known for the stringency of the standards it had set for its members, had singled him out for special nurturing, and exhilarated by the vision of the exalted political life that the Minister's proposition had begun to spin in his mind. He had always been conscious of his talents and the use to which they could be put, not merely the talent of quick, sharp thinking and decisive action, but also the talent of an urbane, gentle nature that inspired confidence and won people to himself. He had been told many times – and he had merely grinned sheepishly in response each time – that he possessed the very qualities which were sadly lacking in the majority of the political leaders who, for all their sharpness of mind and brilliance of academic qualifications, came across as dull, humourless, lacklustre. Charisma was needed, not the flamboyant kind that was by now too easily associated with irresponsibly and corrupt governments – but the quiet, strong kind that won enduring confidence.

“You speak so well,” the wife of one of his fellow executives

had gushed. She had been the recipient of many small gallantries on his part, and, unknown to him, was one of his admirers. “You are one of the very few to be found in Singapore who speak so beautifully, so elegantly, almost like a native speaker! Go into politics, and then as a Member of Parliament set the standards of speech for the others. Some of them speak so horribly that I blush for them. Why, did you watch the recent Parliamentary session on TV? The Member of Gasin was simply ghastly –” She put up her little hands in horror.

He certainly had the gift of sustained eloquence which was unmatched in his circle, his general reticence and quiet demeanour conferring authority and authenticity on what he said, so that on those few occasions when he spoke up and entered into debate, people were provoked to remark, “This Michael Tay Yong Wah normally keeps quiet, but when he talks, he talks sense and everybody listens – not like that Francis Kang who goes on and on and nobody knows what he’s talking about –”

The Minister had spoken, during the brief interview, of the challenges facing the country at this particular juncture of its development, and the need for bright committed men like him to meet these challenges and inspire fellow Singaporeans to do likewise. The Minister, who had apparently been doing exhaustive research on him prior to the interview, hinted that his qualifications and talent would serve best in the Ministry of Economic Development, the Minister’s own precincts, and that the two of them could work very well together. Michael saw a welcome widening of the territory for his immense talents and capacities for work: he had always felt that the organisation he was in, despite its large base, was still too confined for his restless energies.

There was no problem, then, in coming to a decision about the Minister's proposition. The problem was in how to reconcile that piece of advice, so delicately given by the Minister at the end of the interview, with the decision he had made earlier about the termination of his marriage. He heard again clearly the Minister's gentle warning about the fatality of a divorce or a scandal to the political life of a member of the Party. He was glad that the estrangement between himself and his wife had not yet reached the stage of formal proceedings, so there was no scandal. A sense of unease now invaded Michael's consciousness: he had earlier made the decision to live separately from his wife, and he was aware that the social aspect of a politician's life required a wife constantly by his side, to attend official functions, to host dinners, to open kindergartens, to cut ribbons, to even go abroad on official visits. Michael made a quick count of those VIP wives who were less-than-consummate. He could think of at least three who had had very basic education; indeed, one of them spoke no English.

They were on the whole plain-looking, simple ladies, more comfortable at home with their children or cooking for their husbands than exchanging small talk at cocktail parties. Over the years they had probably acquired the experience and the confidence to fulfil their duties as VIP wives, at least minimally, and they now followed their husbands everywhere, cheerfully playing their role and no longer feeling out of place. They were a credit to their husbands. Some private coaching might be necessary for Geok. If he acted more firmly this time and impressed upon her sufficiently the importance of her new role, she could be brought round to comply with his wishes. After all, there was a great deal of goodwill to begin with. For all the difficulties of her nature, Geok had an enormous fund of

goodwill towards him, which he could depend on to enable him to tide over the initial problems...

Aileen was taken by surprise by the visitor, but she tried her best to look calm and unaffected.

“Yes, Mrs Tay, what can I do for you?” There was a certain wariness, brought on by the fear of a repetition of that very nasty incident when she had been spat on in front of the guests at a party. But a quick look at Geok told her that no such vituperations were forthcoming. Geok’s features were contorted in an odd mixture of earnest pleading and intense joy, as she came forward to meet her, and made to touch her in a gesture of conciliation.

“Oh, Miss Teng,” she burst forth. “Please, please, promise me you’ll stay away from my Michael. Don’t go after my husband, please. He is come back to me – I never think he will do this because he so angry. I never see him so angry before and he leave the house and never let me know where he stay – but now his heart all change! All change, Miss Teng. He come back now, and he does not show angry face anymore – he is still quiet but he not angry anymore. Do you understand, Miss Teng? I thought my marriage finish – I pray to my gods in the temple – they cure my mother’s swollen foot – but they useless because never hear my prayers, and my marriage become worse and worse. But Mary – she’s my sister-in-law – pray for me to her Christian God Jesus, and I pray too – we all pray every night and the Christian God Jesus listen to my prayer, for my husband has come back. And now everything is okay again, and I frighten it will change again, and so I’m begging you not to go with my husband, please leave him alone. You understand how I feel, Miss Teng?”

She looked in earnest supplication at Aileen, touched her hand imploringly and continued, "I really sorry I behave so bad to you that night, and I ask you to forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you," said Aileen with an uncomfortable little laugh and making an involuntary movement to free her hand which Geok had caught up in a fervent clasp. "And of course, I'll stay away from your husband."

"Ah, you are a good friend!" exclaimed Geok. She wanted to have this mere statement of intention turned into a proper promise, so she added, "Will you swear to me that you will never see my husband again?"

"There is no need to swear, Mrs Tay," said Aileen. "Your husband himself came to see me, and we agreed that we would never see each other again."

Geok's face lit up with the gratitude of yet another favour from the God she had so judiciously chosen in a switch of allegiance.

"Oh Miss Teng, you are very very good and kind!" she cried, her eyes filling with tears. She clasped her hands together and pondered over the miracle that was happening to her. No shrewd wifely instinct at this point prompted her to ask what had happened at the crucial meeting between her husband and Miss Teng, with intention to elicit details of possible collusion. She left in an effusion of gratitude and goodwill, thanking Aileen and the Christian God Jesus in the same breath.

Aileen sat down, lit a cigarette and reflected on what had passed. She thought, "Poor woman, if only she knew." And she thought sadly, "What a pity our last meeting had ended on such a note. I shouldn't have been so harsh towards him, and yet how could I help it?" She felt the anger returning.

When Michael had met her for tea, very discreetly, in a hotel

far from town, for the purpose, as he had said over the phone, of “explaining”, she knew what was coming, but she had not anticipated the intensity of her reaction. She listened to him while he spoke softly, explaining to her his decision to go back to his wife, and tracing for her all the developments that had led to the decision. When he spoke about his imminent launching into political life, his voice took on a warmth and ardour that irradiated his features. Of Geok he spoke little, beyond saying that he would give her “another chance”. And then he reached across the table to hold her hand in his, as he said, “I shall not be able to see you so often, Aileen, but I hope you will always be my friend – I hope you understand –” And it was then that she withdrew her hand abruptly, looked at him with the angry tears standing in her eyes and said, “Michael, you are the most selfish, the coldest-hearted man this side of Christendom. You are going back to your wife not because you love her, but because at last you have found some use for her in your grandiose scheme of self-advancement. And you are giving me up not because you don’t love me, but because for the present at least, I do not happen to fit into this grand scheme.” He was taken aback and stared at her.

“But I’m not giving you up, Aileen,” he protested, a little weakly. “I’m only saying that for the time being –”

“Precisely,” Aileen cut in with a rising pain that made her tremble all over. “You want me around, but not to the extent that I will be a risk to your political ambitions. You want to hold on to me, you want me to be around in those times when the pain of being chained to a wife you despise becomes especially unbearable. You don’t have the guts to face up to the truth about yourself, Michael. For all your introspection, Michael, you could never examine the real truth of this change of heart

About the Author

Catherine Lim is internationally recognised as one of the leading figures in the world of Asia fiction. The prolific writer and commentator has penned more than 20 books across various genres—short stories, novels, reflective prose, poems and satirical pieces. Many of her works are studied in local and foreign schools and universities, and have been published in various languages in several countries.

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