

For Review Only



# CATHERINE LIM

## *Deadline for Love*

The 12 stories in this collection electrify by their dazzling diversity of subject, relentless observation and adroit use of language. Through the dark labyrinths of the secret lives of men and women in Singapore, Catherine Lim once again uses her sharp powers of observation to comment masterfully on our complex relationships against the immense and brilliant backdrop of our society's achievements. Laying bare the infinite longing and inevitable weakness of the human heart, these stories celebrate the surprising power of love and its effects on every one of us.

CATHERINE LIM

*Deadline for Love*

Marshall Cavendish Editions



# CATHERINE LIM

## *Deadline for Love*



*and other stories*

visit our website at:  
[www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

**mc** Marshall Cavendish  
Editions

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-4779-55-5



9 789814 779555

For Review Only

CATHERINE LIM  
*Deadline for Love*

# For Review Only

© 2017 Catherine Lim

Cover design by Lorraine Aw  
Photo of woman by Hisu Lee (unsplash.com)

Previously published by Heinemann Asia (1992) and Horizon Books (1999)

This edition published 2017 by Marshall Cavendish Editions  
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300.  
E-mail: [genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com](mailto:genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com)  
Website: [www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

## **National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name(s): Lim, Catherine.

Title: Deadline for love / Catherine Lim.

Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2017] | Originally published: Singapore : Heinemann Asia, 1992.

Identifier(s): OCN 988915964 | ISBN 978-981-4779-55-5 (paperback)

Subject(s): Interpersonal relations--Fiction. | Man-woman relationships--Fiction.

Classification: DDC S823--dc23

Printed in Singapore by JCS Digital Solutions Pte Ltd

## CONTENTS

---

Deadline for Love	5
Letters	18
Family	27
The Awakening	39
Temple of the Unborn	51
The Worlds of Michael Wong Shin Nam	60
The Mother	71
Helen's Hands	79
A Bed: A Life	86
Secrets	97
Gate of Hope	103
Bell Jar	116
About the Author	127

## *Deadline for Love*

At thirty-seven, Agnes took stock of her life and concluded that she had had very meagre helpings from Love's table.

Career – good. She had risen to become one of Singapore's top journalists and was clearly marked for further ascent.

Financial security – good. She had substantial savings, even after having seen two nephews and a niece through their education, and she lived frugally with her mother in the small family terrace house.

Health – reasonably good. The doctor had said she was overweight; she retorted that it was purely hereditary and that her grandmother who was nicknamed Tai Fei Por lived to be eighty-nine.

Love – now that was where the deficiency was.

She took out a piece of paper to do an accounting of Love's largesse to her in her thirty-seven years and came up with the following tally: number of times hand held (three), hugged (five), kissed (once).

The hand-holding – that was unforgettable. John Oliviero stood before her, looked into her eyes, gathered up her hands in his, enclosed them tightly, one upon the other, then slowly raised them, first to his heart, then his lips. Long after his fingers

had loosened to release hers, she felt the deliciousness of their crush, and privately, at home, looked at her hands to wonder about the imprint of that crush. He did this three evenings in a row. When the drama season ended, and the stage props were removed and the takings for charity toted up, John Oliviero greeted her cheerfully each time he met her in the University library or canteen and said admiringly, “You were great as Vulgarita,” referring to the hilarious, loud-mouthed landlady in the skit who was conned of her house by the smooth, hand-kissing, impecunious tenant.

If there was much to be said for the marvellous effects on a woman’s constitution of the touching, pressing and caressing of her hands, there was more to be said of the hug. Her Chief Editor, a normally shy, taciturn man, had put his arm around her when he congratulated her on her receiving the ‘Journalist of the Year’ award, the prize-winning article being an in-depth study of Singapore’s single working men. In his congratulatory speech, he had described her as extremely promising, creative, yet efficient, never missing deadlines. Then he gave her a hug.

But the Hug, the one meriting the capitalisation in her diary entry, was from someone else. He was an editorial consultant, flown in by the Company to boost their journalistic skills. From the first day he swept into their midst, his silver hair gleaming, his blue eyes dancing with a hundred benign crinkles, he promised the perfect blend of work and fun. He boomed at the women and they loved him. They coveted his trademark hug, a quick sweep with his powerful arm and a sideways, non-threatening clamp into his warm, laughing side. She coveted it most; on good days she had more than her share. In the morning when she came to work, her back quivered with anticipatory pleasure of the strong, firm arm laid across it; in the evening, when she

left, with retrospective delight.

Then one morning, the entire physics of the hug changed. He called her into his office, burst into a paean of praise over a piece of work she had done for him the day before, walked up to her and gave her a full hug. Full and frontal, not sideways. And with both arms, not one. She was fully enclosed in the warmth of this large, gorgeous, rippling man for a full ten seconds. She was aware, during this time, of every point of their bodily contact, from the brush of her cheek against the lapel of his jacket to the slight push of her left knee against his right trouser leg. Then his arms burst open to release her, and he bellowed, "Excellent! Marvellous! May I have your permission to use this article as a model in my future workshops?" She was convinced that the spontaneity and exuberance of the hug, its duration, its very form and texture, were more than her merit or his habit could account for. That night she could not sleep for thinking of the hug, so she got up and composed a poem for him. She left it on his desk the next morning before he came in. He never referred to it, never hugged her again, sideways or frontally, and left soon afterwards, giving a red farewell rose to every one of the women.

The essence of that hug lay like a lingering scent; it could be recaptured in part by a warm pillow or bolster, but never replicated. Replication was impossible in the case of the Kiss, also capitalised in the diary. She trembled at its very recollection: the deep thrust, the firm grip of her cheeks by his hand to steady her mouth for the depth, the equally firm grip of her left shoulder by his other hand, her gasping, laughing, wriggling astonishment. The long kiss ended only when the compere at the Company's Christmas Dinner and Dance shouted, "The winner!" and everybody clapped, stomped and whistled, as her

partner, flushed as much with drink as with success, went up to claim the prize and gallantly gave it to her. For the rest of the evening, while her lips tingled with the ardour of his kiss, he seemed to have forgotten her completely and was dancing with the other women.

The tally then stood at three times hands held, five times hugged and once kissed.

And then Agnes became very, very angry with herself.

“All false, spurious, not the real thing!” she cried. “What a fool I was!” This time, the recollection of the hand-holding, the hugging and the kissing, bestowed, obligatorily, as a matter of custom, or in cheap play-acting or party fun, pained her. She wanted the real thing, the pure thing, purified of all these extraneous unworthy elements, as gold is of dross.

She took another piece of paper and wrote furiously at the top “THE REAL NOT THE ERSATZ!” to do a fresh count. On the new basis, each category now registered a dismal zero, so that the total sum of love in her life, at age thirty-seven, was a row of forlorn, perfectly rounded O’s, like cartoon mouths opened wide in readiness to howl.

At thirty-seven, she must have the most dismal showing in love’s ledger. Honesty forced her to face yet more of the brutal truth. No man had ever propositioned, much less taken her to bed. Woman’s love was a charmed progression of eyes, hands, fingers, shoulders, back, lips, mouth and breasts to culminate in the supine body’s epiphany. In her case, the progression was marred by large gaps and false manifestations. Moreover, it was incomplete – it led to nothing, it had no culminating point. Instead of a rainbow arc of love’s fulfilment, it was this broken, crooked truncation of a dream.

Agnes felt a sense of mounting panic. She gulped down



a glass of water and tried to fight off the onset of perpetual virginity's despair.

The signs of such a cruel fate were already there in her early schooldays. The boys, in their school uniforms, waited outside the school gates for the girls to come out, to walk them to the bus stop, to offer gifts of chewing gum and comic books. Their searching gaze swept past her to pick out girls like Fiona – Fiona of the incredibly pretty face, shiny hair and slim, supple body. Their gaze swept past even the comic books she held invitingly, conspicuously in her hand. In a school camp she once attended, where the teachers had brought together the girls and boys for some healthy socialising, the boy she was partnered with kept dropping her hand each time the teacher was not looking.

“Heng Seah! How many times must I tell you to hold Agnes's hand?”

The searing heat of humiliation, as all turned to look at them – he, tall, good-looking, athletic, rosy-lipped, she, large, stocky, awkward – made her cry inwardly. She soon accepted that boys divided girls into Fionas and Agneses, the first the object of their most ardent pursuit, the second of their most assiduous avoidance. She was the first and last Agnes, always standing outside the pale of romance and looking wistfully in, as she ate slowly from her bag of peanuts or prawn crackers.

Fiona too had become a journalist, and there the difference ended, for Fiona continued to be the dazzling, much sought-after woman, while she, after a while, resigned herself to a chin that rippled out of control, a bust that spread out in an undifferentiated expanse and a figure that had to be disguised by the most sombre black in dress and the most unremitting verticality in ornament, her excessively elongated ear-rings being her trademark.

Fiona gave her pain. She asked Fiona once, “What is it like?” almost shyly, hoping to supplement her knowledge from books and magazines, of woman’s supreme fulfilment. Fiona, whose libidinous drive was matched by a crudity of descriptive power, immediately described what it was like. Then Fiona, giggling, looked her over, long and searchingly, taking in the incredible out-thrusts of her body, the folds, dips, indentations, and made a crude joke about sex’s difficult topography. The sadistic impulses of the beautiful towards the plain can be terrifying: Fiona went on, still giggling, to suggest a final recourse – oh, the disgust of it all! – of a private trip to Bangkok where there were men who for a fee discriminated not against even the most unappealing of female forms, or a private trip to one of the side shops in Singapore itself where secret ingenious gadgets for the assuagement of female loneliness could be bought for a few dollars.

Agnes cried, “Stop”, stopping her ears against this senseless barrage.

“You poor thing,” said Fiona, wiping her eyes, and it was then that Agnes vowed that she would have her revenge.

It was paltry revenge, comprising only the gratifying thought that despite her astonishing beauty and sexuality, Fiona was no more than a featherhead, a puff-ball, the quintessential Dumb Blonde who would never have half the respect that she, Agnes, had earned by her very impressive academic and professional achievements. Fiona would never be able to write any in-depth, prize-winning article. There was also the gratifying knowledge that Fiona, for all her beauty, was futilely pursuing a man and working herself up into a frenzy of frustration over his indifference. She had made it known to everybody that she found it unbelievable that a man who was none too handsome

and none too rich would think himself too good for her.

*Puff-ball, that's why*, thought Agnes maliciously. *No substance.*

Her substance, she thought regretfully, had not secured her the fulfilment she wanted, and she continued to yearn to reach the apogee of love's magic arc, never mind if the points along this arc had been but tawdry imitations. Indeed, the final brilliant star of love would erase forever these contemptible counterfeits. Agnes continued to think of the act in empyrean terms, even though the picture in her imagination, derived from TV, videotapes, magazines and erotic novels invariably involved naked, panting, sweating, shuddering bodies on a rumpled bed, and a mess of clothes on the floor, his on top of hers, as if to provide a sartorial parallel of the coupling.

At thirty-seven, the dream was shrinking to a dismal speck on love's horizon. The panic returned. Agnes gulped down another glass of water, and decided to take an aspirin to fortify herself against the bleak prospect of a virginity determined to stay. Sex was one of the critical orientations in a woman's life; therefore she was unoriented and unfocussed.

*I must do something about it*, she thought. *I owe it to myself to do something about it.*

Then she had an idea. She would make it a self assignment with a goal, and she would set a deadline. She worked best to deadlines.

By the time of my thirty-eighth birthday, one year from hence, she vowed, my life will have become critically oriented.

A deadline imposed its own strict conditions, one of which was a plan of action so carefully and rigorously laid out that its execution would be one smooth unfolding towards the goal. The plan of action in turn had its own demands – that she move out into a place of her own. Clearing out of the family terrace

house that she had shared with her mother for thirty-seven years, having a place of her own where she could do exactly as she liked, was the inescapable first step to the major change that she was contemplating in her life. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that one year of staying on her own could bring about the accomplishment of the goal that had eluded her these many years of staying with her mother. The clutter of cheap furniture, the ubiquitous ancestral altars, her mother's over-solicitous, querulous voice raised to ask the most tedious questions, the noisy relatives and neighbours – these were not the right ambience. She had denied herself love's ambience, but it was not too late.

A vision rose tremblingly before her eyes, like the shimmering desert mirage before the thirst-mad traveller: a gleaming new flat of wondrous space that she embraced as all her own. The rooms were all her own, she ran in and out of them. A tantalising fragment of the vision broke off to show one bedroom, tastefully furnished, but just now gloriously rumpled and the heap of clothes on the floor in similar exhilarating disorder.

Agnes held her breath. *No wasting time*, she thought, and she wasted no time in applying for one of those very comfortable, yet affordable Government-subsidised flats. And here she ran into the first difficulty of her appointed task. By some execrable policy, the flats could not be sold to single men and women, only to married couples who would have to produce their marriage certificates on application. It was clearly part of the Government's strategy of enticing single men and women to get married, but it meant that women like herself were condemned to stay with their mothers forever. Unfair! Unfair! Agnes fretted for weeks. Her frustration could find no less an outlet than a scathing article on this policy of gross discrimination, which,

however, her Chief Editor persuaded her to tone down until in the end it was no more than a limp, bland piece of descriptive writing.

“Oh, how I hate them all!” cried poor Agnes. The Chief Editor joined the phalanx of forces – the Government, her mother, her job, the Fionas, the men who went only for the Fionas – ranged against her to thwart her of her dream.

“Who are you?” cried Agnes, for it was a male voice and was probably a crank caller or an insurance sales-man. Her annoyance subsided under the effect of a very urbane, very measured voice that introduced himself as Duane, someone whom she had never met but who would like to meet her.

“Duane,” repeated Agnes weakly. The name, the voice breathed promise.

The voice, under her questioning which she conducted calmly despite a wildly beating heart, went on to talk about himself, his work, and most importantly, why he wanted to meet her.

“You are one of Singapore’s most respected journalists,” it said simply. “I have admired you for a long time.” Her poor crushed vanity, crushed for so long by the likes of Fiona, burst into life once more: put an intelligent woman beside a pretty puff-ball, and the better men went for the intelligent woman.

Would the miracle never cease? She found out, after the first date, that this Duane was none other than the man who was the cool object of Fiona’s hot pursuit. Fate had not only given her a man but the instrument of revenge. Agnes was incredulous that the goal, at a time when she was about to give up all hope of its accomplishment, was actually very close to it.

Not love’s ersatz anymore, but its reality: when, after a lunch date, he saw her back to the office, guiding her across the road

with his hand on her waist, she savoured the gratification not only of the authenticity of his touch but of the sight of Fiona who happened to be coming out of the building then, staring in open-mouthed stupefaction before quickly turning round and hurrying away.

“I admire your writing,” Duane said each time they met. “You write the most lucid and incisive articles I have ever read,” and on one occasion he looked at her ear-rings and said, “I like them. Where did you get them from?”

She tried to keep her impatience in check: would he never move beyond the first act in love’s progression and give her even a teeny, weeny hug?

“Duane’s such a shy, sensitive person,” she told her colleagues at the office. Her new status as the woman preferred to Fiona had invested her with an almost unreal quality, and they moved around her cautiously, warily, awed into silence by her stunning victory based on pure brains alone, the like of which they had never before witnessed. The man was genuine enough: Agnes possessed no great wealth nor was likely to inherit any. In the end, they explained it as one of those strange phenomena of male desire rarefied to a fine point of ethereality. Fiona said she could do without the ethereality.

“He’s got water in his veins, or what? No spiritual love for me!” she sniffed.

Agnes, every fibre of her being yearning for less spirituality and more substance, wondered at Duane’s slowness. At this rate, she would never meet the deadline on her thirty.-eighth birthday.

He said, shortly after this, looking tenderly at her but not even holding her hand, “Let’s get married as soon as we can,” and then suddenly she understood. She understood the reason

for the slowness and was ashamed of her impatience. He was one of that rare breed of men who not only shunned the wild Fionas throwing themselves at him but who, after having secured his woman, respected her enough to wait for marriage to legitimise the act. He was one of that rare breed of men who still respected the consummatory ideal of sex. Now he was asking her to marry him, to cap the weeks of courtship with love's bright epiphany. She was ashamed that she understood sex's sacrosanct nature only now. The vision of the rumpled bed and the unruly pile of clothes on the floor was immediately replaced by the chaste marital bed where the gift of virginity, so faithfully preserved, could now be mutually bestowed.

"We shall have to get an apartment immediately," he said, and all the earlier excitement of moving out of the family terrace house into a flat of her own was marvellously revived. The thrill of their trip to the Registry of Marriages to obtain the certificate that would now entitle them to apply for the Government-subsidised flat, contrasted sharply with the gloom of only a few months back: in one wondrous stroke, she had secured a husband and an apartment. Their joint money was enough, after the major expense, for some simple furnishing and a simple wedding.

"A very simple wedding," he said, "no fuss at all." It was so simple that it involved only the immediate members of their respective families. Agnes would have wanted to invite her colleagues from the office, including, certainly, Fiona, but between her secret amazement at her continuing good fortune and a superstitious dread about doing or saying anything to disturb it, she agreed to everything Duane wanted. In his quiet, masterful way, he made all the arrangements for their simple wedding ceremony and reception, and the procurement

and decoration of their marital home, while she wondered and thought endlessly about the wedding night.

Duane, on the wedding night when the guests had left, took her hand, led her to the sofa and talked long and earnestly and as she listened, the old panic returned but with a new quality of darkest threat. As his soft voice went on, her heart hammered wildly inside her, like a large bird frenzied to get out. The bird gave up its struggle and lay limp and miserable.

“I knew you would understand,” said Duane still holding both her hands comfortably in his. “You are one of those rare women who would be above the common-place and the conventional,” and she thought, feeling very ill, *I could sue of course and get out of this marriage,*, but felt too great a tiredness to think beyond this one thought: *what a fool I have been. I should have known all along he was just using me.*

His room was the master bedroom, opposite the remaining two in the flat, that he said were hers to do as she liked. “I only need this one room,” he said simply. “You can do with the rest of the flat as you like.” He was seldom home, her husband; he came home one evening shortly after the wedding, put down his business briefcase carefully on a chair, removed his tie and told her that he would be having a guest that evening, but she was not to be bothered by the visit. From the bedroom, she heard the guest come in, saw her husband and the guest disappear into the master bedroom, and thought bitterly, *I should have known. Such a highly respectable man! All propriety and refinement! I’m going to expose him, strip him of this devilishly clever masquerade and make him the laughing stock of Singapore.* Then she reflected, sadly, that it was she who would be the laughing stock.

The telephone rang, and while she took a congratulatory message from an old friend overseas who had just heard about



her marriage and was rebuking her for her silence, she listened to the soft sounds of love from the master bedroom. She put down the phone and went to knock on the door of the room, saying in a whisper hoarse with miserable urgency, "Duane, can I talk to you for a minute?" without knowing what she was going to talk to him about. The door opened slightly, very slightly, but enough for her to catch a glimpse of the guest who had sat up abruptly on the bed, propped on his elbows, his young features gathered into an anxious frown. Duane, in his shorts only, popped out his head and said, "Will it be okay if you wait a while? By the way, I've got a surprise for you!" and closed the door softly to return to the anxious-looking youth.

She sat on her bed. It seemed to her she had been doing nothing but sit on her bed since her wedding, pinned to it by a total paralysis of all her energies. The screaming thoughts remained locked in her head, the raging feelings in her body. Her perfect stillness as she sat on the bed, in a nightgown of electric blue that she thought was her husband's favourite colour, belied the maelstrom within.

There came a gentle knock on her door and Duane said, "My surprise is ready. Would you like to come out now?" and she walked out, dazed, to a cake alight with birthday candles on the table.

"Happy birthday," smiled Duane and the nervous youth beside him also smiled and said, "Happy birthday." She was invited to blow out the candles; dazedly she obeyed, then Duane put his arms warmly round her and kissed her, turned to the nervous youth and said, "Amir, why don't you give Agnes a birthday hug too?" and the young man, laughing nervously, walked up and hugged her with the fullness of young sincerity.

## *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.

### **Also by Catherine Lim**

#### **Fiction**

A Leap of Love

The Howling Silence: Tales of the Dead and Their Return

A Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream

The Catherine Lim Collection

The Bondmaid

The Teardrop Story Woman

Following the Wrong God Home

The Song of Silver Frond

Miss Seetoh in the World

#### **Non-Fiction**

Roll Out the Champagne, Singapore!

A Watershed Election: Singapore's GE 2011

An Equal Joy