



CATHERINE LIM

A Leap of Love

There is a wonderful ancient Western tradition that allows a woman to propose to a man – but only on 29 February. Only once every four years, in a leap year.

On such a momentous day, late one morning in modern-day Singapore, young and beautiful Li-ann catches sight of Jeremy for the first time in a busy part of town. She realises with a start that he is her dream man and makes the move allowed by the Leap Year tradition. It is the most creative, imaginative and brilliant move any girl can think of. Jeremy is totally enthralled. Their first meeting is radiant with love's promise.

But alas! Fate, ever mischievous, intervenes with her tricks, determined that love's path should never be smooth. She takes the lovers on an alarmingly bumpy roller coaster ride over the years, as each Leap Year comes and goes, leaving them by turns ecstatic and despondent, hopeful and despairing. But in the end, Fate is no match for the endearing power and ferocious tenacity of love.

Brimming with energy, *A Leap of Love* sparkles with joy and will leave you breathless with the sheer suspense of tracking the memorable twists and turns in the intertwined lives of two star-crossed lovers.

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a novella

For Review Only

CATHERINE LIM
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One

Chang Li-ann, undergraduate of the University of Singapore in 1980, wrote, in the middle of a boring lecture, a love poem to an as yet non-existent lover. She wrote with feverish energy, the tip of a pink tongue curled against upper lip, a swatch of hair fallen over one shoulder, unaware that watching her, were four pairs of eyes belonging to four already existing lovers – if only she would allow them that role.

The pen, gripped firmly, glided effortlessly.

One of the hopeful young men who always went through an elaborate pretence of looking for a seat in the vast, seldom filled lecture theatre, his eyes tightly narrowed in earnest, frowning search, before alighting, with a great show of surprise, on the seat next to Li-ann's, now made the mistake of craning his neck to peep at the mysterious words flowing so smoothly from her pen. He withdrew instantly, stung by a cold look and an angry hand slammed protectively over the writing.

For all his ardent admiration of her, the poor young man's existence went entirely unnoticed, except when it obtruded on hers, as so many stares to be averted, so many unwelcome offers of favours to be instantly declined. Undaunted, the poor young man whose name was Raymond Tan Sin Liang, watched, hid,

followed. Once, he had left a bouquet of roses outside the door of her hostel room, with a card of effusive declaration tucked among the blooms. He had very foolishly decided, in a sudden excess of bashfulness, to hide the elegantly beribboned roses under a huge mess of old newspapers.

Li-ann had stepped over them when she returned, and the cleaning woman had later swept them into her dust-pan.

Raymond Tan Sin Liang, after the unfortunate incident of the roses, began to look elsewhere, his ardour by no means diminished, stoically smiling through varying degrees of female rejection. Then in 1983, the year of his graduation, he was finally rewarded. She was a graduate from a polytechnic, pretty enough and not fastidious as to looks or social finesse in a partner. Above all, she loved him for himself. To her, Raymond could now give, in full measure, the love of his simple, generous heart. He became a very happy man.

But that would be 1983, still three years away. Now, that honest heart found no takers.

The boring lecturer droned on, and Li-ann wrote on, now and again casting a suspicious glance at the intrusive peeper. She wrote defiantly and breathed life into a dream. Hitherto only an abstraction in the golden nimbus of her imagination where he had been sole resident for the past year, the dream now tumbled upon the solid back of a brown, used envelope, and acquired a habitation and a name.

She decided that like her, he was born and brought up in Singapore. Like hers, his name bore the chic hyphen. Wu-er – she still did not know what he looked like – was the sole recipient of all the love and longing that her young, ardent heart was capable of.

She wrote:

“There is a place I want to go to, but I don’t know where.
There is someone I want to meet, but I don’t know who.”

Hers was a love, nurtured to fullness, in search of a lover. She had to fall in love with love, before she could fall in love with a person.

She knew now. The place did not have to be Singapore. The name did not have to be Wu-er. These were only playful games of the imagination that she allowed herself while she waited. Playfulness, it was said, was the lover’s special claim and privilege. All lovers, in their joy, became children again. For the present, she would be playful on her own. When HE appeared at last, he whose name could only be designated by the exalted capital letters of breathless worship, she would have a partner in love’s laughing innocence.

When would he appear? She would know, with a certainty of the heart that surpassed any understanding by the mind, inferior organ by far, in the eternal human quest. She would know when place and person came together in the moment of love’s epiphany. The road to love’s Damascus had its blinding lights too: she would be dazzled for one moment, then get up, rub her eyes and come face to face with the promised presence waiting at the end of the road.

“This is the greatest nonsense I’ve ever heard,” said her mother who had been very anxiously looking for a good match for her very pretty, very intelligent daughter from her seventeenth birthday. Now approaching twenty-two, Li-ann was in danger of the worst fate that could befall women – spinsterhood. Mrs Chang’s loving, motherly heart suffered severe palpitations at that horrible prospect.

She stood before Li-ann and raised her left hand to show five outspread fingers, each representing a missed marriage

opportunity, each hence a bitter maternal disappointment. With the forefinger of her right hand, she systematically went through each of the five big fish that her daughter, foolish, headstrong girl that she was, had allowed to get away.

One, the youngest son of a High Court judge; two, the economics graduate who was a President's Scholar; three, the son of the business tycoon T.C. Khor who was a bit of a playboy but would surely settle into the contentment of domesticity after marriage; four, Terence Yong who came from a poor family but was holding a high-salaried job in an international finance company; five, Richard Low who had all the makings of a good husband and provider, though he was a little overweight and not as good-looking as the rest.

They had all come courting, had all been allowed a date or two and then consigned to oblivion. After each date, as soon as the car roared away into the night, Mrs Chang, in pyjamas and curlers, appeared, followed her daughter to her room, watched her kick off her shoes and unzip her dress and said, "So?"

Li-ann, who had a perverse pleasure in teasing her mother and watching her dilate her eyes or throw up her hands in horror, said, "Mother, don't you understand? He cannot pronounce the 'r' sound and he begins each sentence with 'I understands...'"

Mrs Chang said severely, "Young lady, don't you act stuck-up!" Her daughter allowed something as trivial as English grammar to negate the value of a high-paying job, a good family background, a totally dependable moral character.

Li-ann said, "It's no use, Mother. I keep telling you, but you won't listen. HE's already there, waiting for me."

An absurd figment of girlish fancy standing between spinsterhood and fulfilment, between stigma and prestige! Mrs Chang grimaced and twirled a forefinger against the side of her

head, to signal the onset of madness in her daughter. But there was a glimmer of hope in her eyes when she asked, "What about K.S.?"

K.S. came far below any of the five, since he had no car and lived in a small, government-subsidised flat with his parents and sister. But Li-ann seemed to like him. She had seen them laughing together. She had peeped, in her pyjamas and curlers, and seen them holding hands on the sofa. K.S. could be the last hope against a husbandless future.

Li-ann said, "My heart says, 'No, not him.'"

"Heart! Heart! Why don't you listen to your head for once? In a few years' time you'll be twenty-five!" cried Mrs Chang in exasperation, twenty-five being the age for the alarm bells to start ringing shrilly.

She decided to resort to a shrewd maternal strategy that was known to have worked well: "Look at all your friends. They have boyfriends already. You are the only one left out." She held out the bleak prospect and watched her daughter's reaction. Li-ann was unmoved.

She resorted to a final, desperate strategy. Her eyes suddenly filling with tears, she said, "Who will take care of you when I'm gone?" Li-ann remained unmoved and went on to brush her hair and get ready for bed.

She liked K. S. He had that something that the others lacked, a refreshing air of nonchalance, an ability not to take himself too seriously. Perhaps that was a cover for the depth of his feeling. He called frequently. "So?" he would say, going straight to the point. It was amazing how into that single monosyllable a mother could squeeze so much reproach, an aspiring lover so much hope.

Her own language for repudiation was less terse: "Oh, K.S., you know I can't. I've already explained things to you."

No aspiring lover, facing the beloved in the solidity of flesh and blood, likes to be outdone by a rival not yet in existence. He hid his vexation in childish play, taking out an imaginary knife to slit, with a flourish, the throat of the imaginary rival.

K.S. said, with the bright gleam of sudden understanding, “I think I know what it’s all about. You’ve been for too long on a diet of romantic literature where love’s fulfilment is actually its unattainability. All those brooding, sullen heroes of Victorian novels that you girls swoon over, standing tall and upright out there upon a wild heath in a wild storm, out of reach. I bet you have devoured hundreds of these novels.” He watched for her reaction. There was a suppressed amusement which animated her features and made her look so beautiful his heart ached. But he went on with the spirited accusation. He got bolder. “Hey, rid yourself of those false dreams. If I were a surgeon, I’d recommend an illusionectomy.”

She threw a cushion at him. He threw it back, and was upon her in an instant, his face very close, except that she moved hers aside swiftly, so that once again, he missed the opportunity for the first kiss.

She laughed. Now she knew why she liked him. He had such a wonderful way with language, such a delightfully refreshing way of expressing his feelings, whether of annoyance or longing.

She liked K.S. very much. But he claimed no part of her heart. It was a heart rich and abundant, ready for the claiming, and the claimant stood somewhere along the path Fate was leading her. At some point, Fate, ever a gentle, benign presence, would stop, bend down and whisper, “That’s HIM,” closing the first chapter of ardent search and opening the next one of joyous meeting, discovery and fulfilment.

About the Author

Catherine Lim is internationally recognised as one of the leading figures in the world of Asian 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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