

Letter to my Partner



*Words of love and
perspectives of marriage*

EDITED BY FELIX CHEONG

Sample Spreads For Review Only

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions

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Pre-Destined

Shirley Kwan

Dear Ex-spouse,

You have happily announced to me and our children that you and Peter will be getting married next year. You would like so much for us to attend.

Interesting invitation, I have to give it some thought. I am very touched you have included me in such a happy milestone. I am glad that after being divorced for so many years, we have remained friends. In fact, we are more than friends. It must seem odd to so many outsiders, we are actually very much a family. A family of three kids, a mum and a dad. It is amusing to me sometimes you still consider me part of your family, just like the kids are. For that I am grateful and thankful.

How do I feel about your upcoming marriage? I look deep inside me for an emotion. Is there jealousy or resentment? Do I wish things could have been different and that we were still married? I always thought we would be married forever; I imagined a picket-fences life, growing old together, having the

security of each other for company. Oh yes, we would bicker and fight over trivial matters but we would be comfortable in each other's company, enjoying our books or movies, doing old-people things together. Yes, I want that for my life. I have always wanted that.

However, that will not be us. That thread of connection between us has been cut. I am staring down my future; days of being alone, and being lonely, await me. I feel anxious. Am I looking forward to endless nights of Netflix with a bag of popcorn for company? Did we not promise each other at the altar we would stay married forever, for better or for worse, till death do us part? I realise now that promise was never ever capable of being fulfilled.

Looking back, I wonder how I could have missed the signs? Very soon after the wedding, things started to change. Nothing I did was ever good enough. I was constantly criticised about everything – from how I dressed, to food that was not up to par, to my coming home late after a tough day at work. Even when the typhoon hit and I was stranded outside our apartment because you had taken my house keys, you ignored my phone calls and made no attempt to rush back to let me in. I watched as that afternoon turned to evening, tired from the day's work, fatigue brought on by pregnancy. How I longed for a warm drink and a lie-down.

Finally, you came back and when I got upset, you yelled at me. You told me I was not entitled to get angry; I was never to fight you because you would always be stronger and louder. What monster had you turned into? I never suspected anything, your initial cruelty and withdrawal from me. I often wondered why you had pursued me in university, married me

and then cast me aside almost immediately. You took every opportunity to spend time away from home. You planned your business trips to straddle weekends, even after the children came. I had wondered, but never asked. I thought I knew why. I was worthless, someone to be despised. There was nothing good about me. I was seriously flawed and not worthy of being loved. I recall during one mealtime, you were being particularly mean; I asked you why you hated me so much. Then you looked at me and that look said everything; you had come to the realisation you did abhor me, your eyes acknowledged it. I will remember that visage for life.

Then one day, you told me about Matt. You said you had a crush on him, but that was all. You made our son and me go to the marina with you for our Sunday family lunch as you were meeting him thereafter. After a curt goodbye to our son, you turned your back on us to join Matt. I watched as you both chattered and laughed and made your way towards the waiting yacht, holding champagne bottles, an evening of fun awaiting you. At that moment, I felt as if someone had stabbed me in the heart, with scalpel-like precision, in one swift stroke, the deep cut, then the raw and relentless pain that followed. That scene of both your backs went on perpetual replay in my head. I felt spurned and my tears could not find a path down my cheeks; they were stuck in my throat and I trembled so badly. The pain in my heart, the pain on my son's behalf. Dad had no time for you. This time, I felt the pain in my tummy as well. A sharp pain. Was it our unborn child feeling it as well? What heap was he going to be born into? Be strong, be strong; I told myself as I had to keep it together for two children. Did you ever think of that day?

Soon after, I nearly miscarried but our son clung on for dear life. Did the sadness in me somehow permeate into his being?

After Matt, you promised to try again. You wanted to have a family life. So, we played happy family a little longer. You convinced me you could change. I convinced myself you would change. I wanted to believe that. Now with three kids, I was beginning to build my white picket fences again. However, that did not last very long. I started to notice things were once again not right. Your sudden change of plans on the eve of our family vacations. Your business trips with indefinite home arrival dates. I started to investigate and stalk you and that was when I found out about Peter.

You traded time with kids and family for weekends in Thailand. Your business trips spilled over into weekends spent with him. A flight to Phuket to surprise him on his birthday. I called you but you did not pick up the phone. I was going insane with jealousy. I saw that photo of him sitting on your lap leaning against you, holding hands. I had not seen a smile from you like that for a while. In that photo, you looked ecstatic. I was in shambles. When you love much, you hurt so much more. I had started to heal from Matt but now there was Peter to open up those wounds again. Would I ever recover?

When your husband gives his heart, mind, soul, spirit and body to another, you can feel like your heart shattering into a thousand pieces. That was where I was. I could not imagine how I could mend those broken parts again. Loneliness can lead you to a very dark place. You find things to fill that void, and when those run out, that pain revisits you as an unwelcome guest. I tried so hard to excise it. However, I could not. In

fact, I seemed to find more reasons to afflict myself. I was now obsessed. Every spare evening at home, I would wonder where you both were and what you were up to. I wished I could make myself invisible and tail you. I wanted to be able to see your secret love messages with each other. How could I break into your phone? What were you planning for the next evening? When I drew a blank, I tormented myself even more by imagining the most lurid thoughts I could conjure up.

When you eventually moved out, I hated you so much for abandoning me. I had to figure out parenting by myself. Slowly, I began to find my feet and I got on with life. Parent coffees, swimming lessons, homework, exams. I was on my own and I was determined to raise resilient and happy children. I did not want our sons to be like you, I also did not want our daughter to be like me, a loser. I knew I had to keep my hurts from them. They needed both a father and a mother, albeit a dad at his convenience. They would not be my confidante and they were to remain children and stay innocent and unaffected by the sadness that resided at our home. The children, and I, were going to survive this.

As the years passed, you began to make more of an effort to spend time with the children. You tried, in your own way, to be an involved parent. We went on family trips, though we fought all the time. I began to see more of you and I recognised the effort you made. You became less critical of me and less explosive with the children. You transitioned from being absent to being very much present.

Through time, we found a rhythm to our interactions. I started to get used to your company again. This time, I no longer saw a monster but a caring person trying his best to

make up for his absence, to be a dad and provider to the children, and a friend to me. Something had changed in you. You went about being a family man. You listened to all our struggles and empathised. You remembered birthdays and planned meals and events so we would not miss out on the city's exciting offerings. You sent me thoughtful gifts to help pass seemingly endless days in quarantine. You took me wake surfing because I wanted to learn how to. I saw and appreciated your efforts. I learnt to let go of the hurts and to forgive. I must confess it was initially a struggle. In my head, forgiving you meant you were without blame and I wanted to hold you to account. However, I knew I had to release you from my emotional prison. Forgiving you meant I was allowing myself to heal. In my wounded state, I had sought to blame you for everything. In my healing, I began to look outward, towards understanding you more. I told myself I could learn to love you again but this time, as a friend.

I do wonder often what you might have been going through all those early years. Perhaps there was a secret parallel world I was not privy to. The world you kept hidden and did not let anyone in. You were in there, day and night, fighting your demons. The self-loathing and guilt. Dealing with the wounds of your childhood, your own perception of being judged and being condemned. Struggling to find affirmation. For so long, as you were engaged in battling the phantoms of this hidden world, you were unable to deal with my feelings. Overwhelmed with the constant struggles, you could not expend any effort to care for the kids. You were desperately trying to survive. You were trying to "fix" yourself. Meanwhile, the assault of contrasting interests

competed to get your attention, your hurting spouse, your new love, your young vulnerable children, your family, and most importantly, you, your sanity. And in the mix of all these, the real world, life. You, too, were a victim. Sometimes, it feels like life sabotages all the little moments of happiness. Heavy hammers lurk round the corner to destroy little pieces of heaven we try to build for ourselves. Spoiling relationships, taking along precious lives with it, destruction of self-esteem. Unbeknown to both of us, we were fighting demons, not each other. We were each other's casualties, and the children suffered collateral damage.

Not too long ago, I looked at you and thought to myself you seemed genuinely happy. Had you healed? You were in a good place, I had to get there too. I spoke to my inner self; I told myself my identity was not tied to my marital status, to you or anybody else. I was first myself and I had to make sure I was whole. What defined me? My religion, my values, my children, my family, my experiences, both good and bad. My plans had been altered but I did not have to stop dreaming and aspire for other things. That was my reality, that you would not always be by my side. I was on my own now. I needed to learn to help myself. I started to learn from you, to focus on me and "fix" myself too. I am on that path right now. I sincerely hope in your darkest moments, in your loneliest moments, I did, in some way, manage to help and support you. I prayed every day for wisdom, composure, and a loving spirit. I prayed every day for healing for this broken heart of mine.

At the beginning of this journey, I regretted having met you. I wished so badly then I could turn back time and

change my life choices. I am so glad I have departed from that place now. I guess this was the path circumscribed for us; we were predestined to marry and have our children together. Maybe at the end of our lives, when we are allowed to have a glimpse of our personal histories, we might be able to piece together the puzzle of our paths, why and where they crossed, merged, then separated, and perhaps we will know why it all happened that way. Even though it is still quite a maze to me, what I do know is the children were intended as gifts to us, in the darkest periods of my life, we were blessed with three wonderful miracles. Out of the darkest, most difficult and saddest circumstances, God chose to give us three shining stars. We were inextricably bound from the beginning, before we met, before we came into existence in this world.

You will get married to Peter soon. I wish you both a blissful marriage. You deserve to find happiness. It had always been there; you just needed to clear your path and claim it. You may well have. I will too.

Will I go to your wedding? I think you already know the answer to that question.

From your ex-wife,
Shirley





Shirley Kwan was born in and grew up in Singapore. After completing law school and being admitted to the bar in Singapore, she moved to Hong Kong where she built a career and had three children with her ex-spouse. She still lives in Hong Kong where she looks forward to pursuing her life-long passion of working with the arts.



I Am My Own Woman

Amy Chia

I was packing to leave you when you jumped out of bed and punched me on the back of my head. When I fell to the floor, you went to the kitchen and came back with a knife. Shoving me into a corner, you drew the curtains and returned to kick me. Waving the blade in my face, you said something that would change me forever: “You are just a woman.”

I begged for forgiveness and said I was wrong. You dropped the knife and played nice. You liked your woman to obey. As long as I never dared to leave, or angered you again, you promised to be good to me. Kneeling, you held my face and claimed you were sorry, but you loved me, and that was why I should never make mistakes again.

I sat on the toilet as the shower ran. Since you had forgiven me, you had allowed me to get presentable and go to work. Everywhere hurt; fortunately, nothing was broken. A small red bruise had bloomed on the side of my head; there were bigger, uglier spots on my thighs and arms where you had struck. I hid the bruises with clothing and cosmetics as I got

ready to leave your house, pretending nothing had happened, lying I would be back with your dinner after work. When you stopped me, my heart pounded, and I almost gave the ruse away. You casually reminded me disciplining me was an act of love, so there was no need for anyone else to know, since we both would not like to see him get upset again.

I fled to my parents' house in a taxi. When my mother felt something was off, I lied I had a fall and was on sick leave, mumbling she should not make a fuss. My parents would never have imagined what had happened. I dared not think about their reactions. I did not want to see them heartbroken. I hid under my childhood duvet, exhausted, and slept through most of that day. Shortly after my parents turned in for the night, I made my way to the bathroom in the dark. My mother had left me a bowl of rice porridge on the dinner table with a note to warm it up before eating it. I sobbed in the shower as I scrubbed myself clean.

In those days more than two decades ago, to the advantage of cowards like you, help and support were not readily available for women. Going to the police would be like stepping into another hell. Good Chinese girls in their mid-20s were expected to walk down the aisle with stable partners; if not, they would be dismissed as flawed or unmarriageable by 30. Good Chinese girls would never have met bad boys and gotten themselves beaten up. If they did and made a fuss, they risked being blamed and shamed, bringing their family's reputation down with them. Good Chinese girls were supposed to be living picture-perfect lives.

Work became a safe haven and my efforts paid off. About a year after I left you, the digital consultancy I had been working in, assigned me to a three-month project with a client in Hong Kong. It was the new millennium, a fresh century had started, and I jumped at the chance to be as far away as I could get from you. The city was my first overseas posting and the cosmopolitan island lived up to its flashy neon reputation. My time was mine, and I invested every waking minute between two great loves – growing my pay cheque and partying. Overseas stint, nightlife, and Hong Kong. Check. Check. Check!

At beer o'clock sharp, I was already at my favourite bar in Causeway Bay, singing along to the chorus of "Lady Marmalade" with the live band and getting my buzz from B-52 shots. But no, it was still too soon to *voulez-vous* coucher with the hottie bartender. I could lick the salt trail off his washboard abs, down the shot of tequila in the valley of his bulging pecs and suck the slice of lemon between his eager lips. Just not the happy ending. Not with the bartender, not with any guy. Like you, they could all seem nice – until they were not.

The movie *Titanic* was released around Christmas of 1997. Like many young girls then, I had harboured dreams of meeting my own Jack, someone who would do anything for me. I would just know he was the soulmate I was searching for. He would see me beneath the persona I showed the world. But unlike the tragic ending in the movie, we would

get to live our happily-ever-after, go on adventures in every corner of the world, locking hands and sailing into candy-pink sunsets. A life with someone I love, an ordinary miracle for an ordinary girl. How naive. I changed my dream when I fled from you two years. In 2002, at the age of 26, I no longer needed to have someone to complete my world. In my new future, I would be solo on the hull of my own Titanic.

But on a clear evening later that year, in front of a real sunset, a boy stood nervously next to me by the railings of the newly gentrified Fullerton Bay, where fancy restaurants had just sprouted up and lovers lingered after dinner. The boy had asked me out on a date with the shyness of 20-year-olds, reserved a table for two after asking what I would prefer, taken care to button up his shirt and met me carrying a sweet bouquet of flowers. Nothing cliché like red roses, which he intuitively knew I disliked.

We had noticed each other at a club where he had worked as a part-time DJ and mixed cocktails. In time, he had learned the songs I liked and would introduce me to new favourites. I started looking forward to how he would look up as I arrived, as if he had been waiting for me. Half-Japanese and half-Chinese, he was beautiful, even more so now with the orange light of dusk dancing on his face. He was only 21, as fresh and gentle as the evening breeze cooling my cheeks. I had started calling him H-chan, the way the Japanese people affectionately addressed children.

As he smiled, his eyes sparkled and curved into crescent moons, and I smiled back at him. This boy had so grown on me that I wanted to be a little brave, I wanted to go on this

date and give him closure in person. He did not deserve the callous way I would catch and release other guys for sport. If only I still believed in soulmates. If only I had met him before you hit me. But I did not tell him that despite my seemingly strong façade, I was not fine. I was still crying, trapped in recurring night terrors of being hurt by you.

Instead, I made up an excuse that five years was too much of an age gap, that he was too young for me. We could be friends for a longer time. H-chan had his whole life stretched out in front of him, clean as a sheet of paper. He could do better than me, like I could have done better than you. As I waited for the sun to fall under the sea and for hope to slip away between us, I found myself praying for time to turn back. If you had never existed in my life and robbed me of my hopes and dreams, if I could fall in love with someone, that someone would have been H-chan.

Another unfamiliar room, a familiar throbbing in my head, an unpleasant recollection of throwing up somewhere along Club Street to usher in Christmas Day, the broad, naked, shoulders of a hook-up next to me. Untangling myself from the mess of strange sheets, I shimmied into my clothes and snuck out of his studio. These casual encounters had no ties to undo later, and I was free to leave whenever I wanted. You had taught me never to trust men.

Outside, the air was dewy fresh and early birds were chirping with gusto to greet the dawn. I lighted a cigarette and enjoyed the calm after the ruckus that is usually Christmas Eve. The

street was decorated with technicolour confetti that had spilled out of various bars the night before. Save for the grumbling road sweeper who was cleaning up the after party, I was alone.

I could not wait for the festive hullabaloo to be over. I would be taking off to Seoul for work and then to Bali for massages. Footloose and fancy-free, I could travel independently and at short notice. I did not mind my career was taking off and taking over most of my 35-year-old life. The freedom to go wherever I wished, to live whichever way I wanted, came with climbing up salary bands. There is an old saying in Teochew: “When you lean on a mountain, it will collapse. When you count on a man, he will run.”

Okinawa was a two-hour flight from Shanghai, where I was based for work. H-chan was cycling around Japan and we had arranged to meet for the weekend on the island surrounded by sake clear waters. On the first day, we cycled around town together. Whenever I lagged haplessly behind, I would childishly brake in the middle of the path, refusing to budge. Each time, he simply cycled back, patiently waiting for me to heave forward. The trip marked 10 years of our friendship. During those years, he had become a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, a warm bowl of rice porridge when I needed to be fragile. The trust you had destroyed when you laid your punches on me in the name of love, H-chan used 10 years of friendship to rebuild it.

On our second day in Okinawa, we decided to take a bus to the famed Churaumi Aquarium. It was at the massive

Kuroshio tank that I met the first whale sharks and manta rays of my life. I stood speechless, gawking at these gentle giants flying in the water, imagining how it would be like to meet one of them in their natural habitat. Even after returning to Shanghai, after the post-holiday spring in my gait turned into day and night shuffling on the work mill, I could not get rid of the desire to meet these amazing creatures out in the blue. The sea was calling, and I had to go.

Diving taught me to be calm, to keep breathing and look towards the sun. I have been diving with a regular group of friends from Spain, France, and Germany for the last 10 years. Each year, we would vote on the next destination, and they would gamely travel halfway around the world to Asia. For our group’s 8th year, we picked the Tubbataha National Reefs Park, a scuba diving sanctuary in the middle of the Sulu Sea in the Philippines. Tubbataha had been on my diving bucket list for a long time.

From Manila Airport, we connected to a domestic flight to the Palawan archipelago, travelled onward to the pier at Puerto Princesa in rickety vans, and sailed on a live-on-board boat for nine more hours to get there. The best places for diving, much like the best moments and people in life, are worth going out of the way for. There is no habitable land on the national park, the boat with the vast sea surrounding us would be where we would rest our feet and fins. These couple of weeks each year as we floated far away from civilisation were special as we reconnected, met some big fish, kept each

other alive in whipping currents under water, and went off the grid together as soulmates of a connected sea.

On the last night, I signed up for a massage on the upper deck. I was not sure if it was all that diving that aided the masseuse or her very determined elbows and thumbs that finally released the knots in my shoulders. I was annoyed when the treat ended, and I had to wake up. But as I opened my eyes, I found myself wrapped in a glittering snow globe. In the night, the sea and the sky blended and stretched out in an orb that circled the boat. Up as high and as far as my eyes took me, scintillated thousands and thousands of stars, thousands of years away, yet so near it felt like I could pluck them out from the night.

The Milky Way, reflected on the surface of the sea, so complete in her allure, she made me feel centred again. I spent a long time lying down on the hull alone, lulled by the gentle sway of the boat, listening to the swishing rhythm of the waves, letting the playful breeze caress my skin, spellbound under the miracle of this star-washed night. I realised then, that the pain you had inflicted, had finally passed.

I never saw you again, though I still remember your wretched face as you waved the knife at me. I remember enough to point out where the bruises were on my body, and how many days they took to fade from indigo to ochre to sand. These scars have become a part of my memory. But much more vividly than the old scabs they had become, I remember every city I have been to and lived in, thanks to a fulfilling

career that has indulged my wanderlust. I log every scuba diving adventure, from being on the ocean floor with circling Great White Sharks at the Neptune Islands of Australia, to looking for 10-foot-long Blue Marlins at Yonaguni where the fiery sun sets on Japan. Each world under the sea brings me incredible serenity and joy. I have opened myself up, met and made friends from three continents, many of whom I carry in my heart.

When I am in Singapore, I sleep soundly through the night in my own apartment, a happy place where I am surrounded by books and many favourite things. The door is always open to friends who come over to celebrate birthdays or just hang out and chitchat. I am gaining weight as I hole up at home, discovering creative writing, enthusiastically preparing to go back to art college for a second post-graduate degree, a brand-new adventure that makes my heart hum. I am growing fonder of my parents as we grow older together. The nephews I had once cradled when they were infants, now play mobile games with me, huddled under my childhood duvet in the same room my parents had kept for me in their house.

The days after what you did to me were long and cold as I lived them one after another, but as I look back now, more than 20 years seem to have passed in no time at all. I am not sure when I stopped having nightmares of that sordid day you beat me and made me beg. Or when I stopped flinching when a man touched me, or when I stopped wincing whenever I met someone with your name. But some time in those 20 years, as I rebuilt my life with courage, filled it with happiness and hope for the future, I have freed myself from all that is you. I am my own woman. I shall continue to make my own

way, at my own pace, however meandering the rest of this life may be.

I have forgiven you. Not for you, but for me.



Amy Chia is a bossy daughter and sister, over-indulgent aunt, half-retired marketeer, rookie writer, (solo) wanderer, hopeless daydreamer, and an ever-faithful friend of the sea. She is working on a collection of travel flash fiction and will be starting a new adventure as a student in literary writing next year.

