

The Shining Cage

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Confidence and cowardice have always accompanied me in life. Take my relationships with men, for instance – I had only made love once to a man and ended up marrying him. I did have a few boyfriends but the relationships were platonic. When I was studying at the university, men would call me a nun because I only enjoyed their company and intellect. Sexual freedom was taboo to me for I had been raised by parents infused with Confucian ideas and values. Mother, with her stone-faced expression, prevented me from straying into adventurous pursuits. The idea of free love and possessing a list of male friends struck terror in my heart. Why had I been so discontented in my early years of marriage? My husband and I had lived in a grand house with shining Roman pillars, marble, granite floors, and golden artifacts. Both Siew and I had felt entrapped in a suffocating house which left us no room to breathe. His parents were affluent and set too many rules that imposed on our movement and our spirit. That was why we moved out and chose a humble home instead after I had my second baby, Mei Hua.

It was a great getaway, an escapade into the wilderness. We lavished in weekend vacation for Siew could not afford a lengthy vacation. Siew felt free like a seagull soaring into flights of fancy; no longer would he worry about his father's stern voice or his mother's constant nagging. We had given ourselves the little luxury of a weekend stay at a beach hotel. The sea is always mysterious to me – the waves at Batu Feringhi beach, Penang, slapped gently and unceasingly against the sun-kissed, sandy shore. The white-yellowish sand attracted many sun-lovers and picnickers who had arrived early to spend their December vacation here. The sandy beach was covered with imprints of tiny and large feet, and the sound of children frolicking in the water was reviving me from momentary ennui. We – Boon Siew, Huat Chye, and Mei Hua – my husband, eldest son, and daughter were spending our December holiday at the seaside. My husband, Siew, named after the infamous millionaire Loh Boon Siew in Penang, by his mother, was having a siesta in the cool hotel room. I suppose some Malaysians enjoy calling their offspring after famous people. A

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Malay friend named his son “John Wayne Hassan bin Ismail”; obviously he was an indisputable fan of the renowned actor. My son, Huat Chye, a vivacious four-year old, occupied himself by chasing as many little baby crabs which were burrowing in the soft sand. “Huat Chye is equated with prosperity and wealth,” explained grandmother-in-law, “like the soft and spongy egg cake which is steamed in the bamboo container... the cake rises beautifully... this is symbolic... akin to increasing wealth,” she chuckled, revealing her teeth filling in gold. Little baby Mei Hua, named after a pretty flower, was having a wonderful time digging the moist and muddy earth for sea clams. These tiny sea clams were washed onto the beach as the waves swept the shore. I gave both my children English names – John and Margaret (which means radiant pearl in the encyclopaedia for English names found in my father’s library). After childbirth I had felt chagrined because a woman could not even name her own baby as she desired after her agonising delivery. Mother-in-law had insisted that my children were named according to her wishes after she had consulted the fortune teller at the temple.

I had recalled visiting the temple of Gods at Pitt Street in the heart of town. Hundreds of pigeons flock around the compound where devotees throw bread and black or red melon seeds to these hungry birds. My own mother had brought me there when I was heavy with child. As I heaved along beside her, she prayed to the God of Heaven for my health and her grandson’s speedy and safe delivery. Mother had referred to her old book of Chinese fortune telling and she knew that the baby I was carrying in me would be male. She had counted the day and month that I had conceived the baby, and the time I had wedded my husband. Incense sticks were held in our hands as we struggled through the thick smoke to pray to the gods. It was the first day of the month according to the Chinese calendar and we were caught in a throng of devotees grasping joss sticks, incense paper, gold and silver paper, and oil to make offerings to the gods. The heat of the afternoon sun stung my face. It was the first day of the Chinese Lunar calendar, with a full moon at night. Thick, hazy smoke pervaded the air and filled my nose and eyes... tears rolled down uncontrollably as I gasped for air and panted like a mountain climber. More smoke from joss sticks and blood-red candles induced more tears. These sensitive eyes would water even when I sliced red Bombay onions. When I was a child, I would cry whenever I helped mother in the kitchen. Red Bombay onions were used to cook rich curry and I had to cut them up and pound them with a pestle and mortar.

“Stop crying child! This would mean you will be unfilial and unfaithful to your parents when you grow up,” chided mother.

Well, quite true enough. I had rebelled against her wishes and wedded Siew. To her, I was ungrateful as my parents wanted me to wed a man of their preference.

Mother-in-law gave my son two names. Although "Chye" means prosperity, my son was called "Ah Kow" (which means "dog" in Hokkien dialect) as a "pet name" by my mother-in-law. Chye had fallen very ill during one phase of his infancy and mother-in-law had called him a "dog" in Hokkien to ward off evil spirits. "Ah Kow! Ah Kow!" she uttered little cries of agitation, hoping that the evil spirits would hear her and leave Chye in better health. Thankfully, Chye's health was restored soon after I brought him to a doctor. Mother-in-law laughed heartily with her round florid face, wreathed in smiles: "*Hah!* We have to pray at the temple tonight and thank the tiger god for protecting Chye. Quick! Buy the freshest imported fruits and boil one whole chicken. We have to make offerings tonight to the gods!" Such were the days that I had to live with when the old lady was around. When baby was ill again she fed him crushed pearls from China which were purchased from the Chinese druggist. I had felt confined and entrapped for I could not voice out my fears. My own mother had taught me to be obedient to my mother-in-law. Our traditional family system was based on Confucian patriarchy and there was this feeling of unrest and ambiguity that I had to face because of my Western education.

I was taught to obey and respect my parents-in-law by my mother, who was from Taiwan. Mother-in-law said loftily: "*Alamak!* I have raised six children and look at all of them... so tough and hefty and all successful too. No need to worry *lah!*" Such was the life I had to live after my wedding, and my own mother persuaded me to be filial: "You belong to the Lims now. No more a Tan. So behave and respect the elders. They mean no harm and love you as their own." Being patient and soft-hearted, although not weak-hearted, I prayed for good health and fortune for my husband and children every day.

In the eighties, I was a youthful woman of twenty-six, who had borne two infants. Armed and equipped with a Western education in English literature from the University of Malaya, I was imbued with ideas and notions of individual freedom of a Western kind. Yet my parents had raised me with ample "doses" of the Confucian doctrines of filial piety and familial obligations. Both Western and Eastern doctrines had one thing in common, that is, my British teachers and my parents had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin: Emancipated woman with beer in hand and living in my own single-storey house – that was me in the seventies, right after graduation from the university. I managed to preserve all the individual aspirations over parental obligation and traditional ties for only a few months of singlehood. The reason was, my mind gave in to my heart: I fell in love. Blind love it was; for it was a whirlwind courtship. Boon Siew swept me off my feet with his athletic, muscular physique, and courage. He was the first man to encourage me to be strong-willed and act according to my own

perception and values. He knew I loved him and motivated me to marry him against my parents' wishes.

Of course my parents were furious as I had become rebellious. In fact, I was more rebellious than my two brothers – one older, the other younger. My aspirations were simple – to get married, have children (since the natural function of women is to reproduce offspring to propagate the human race), and to raise children based on my own perceptions. The first two objectives were quite easily attained, but the third one proved to be almost an illusion and unattainable. My parents-in-law were staunch Confucianists and Taoists and terribly rigid and outdated in their beliefs. There were also grandparents-in-law and dozens of relatives for me to deal with, and I felt alone because I had rebelled against my parents' desire to wed Siew. Thus I remained solitary in my inhibited circle of wedded bliss and disillusionment. When Siew decided that we move to Kuala Lumpur to pursue his career advancement, I was initially glad for it meant acquiring some freedom from the control of his parents. However, I had to relinquish the opportunity of a part-time post at a teaching centre which I had dared to seek after obtaining permission from his mother.

The heat of the sun was beginning to scorch my arms as I pulled the children away from the sea water. They settled under the swaying casuarina trees to cup the soft warm sand in their hands and fill more into pails and plastic bowls which I had brought along. My thoughts revolved around my married life, family, and dreams... yes... aspirations... which appeared to be unattainable at that time. Siew, the children, and I had spent two days lazing on the beach, collecting seashells, and watching sea gulls whose white plumage, tinted with grey, showed off wholesomely the blackness of its wings. To anyone but myself, who had a great love for the sea, the hours would have seemed monotonous; yet to me, the daily walks on the beach and the sight of the rich waters through the windows of the hotel room, granted me a sense of tranquillity amid all the anxieties of life. This placid vision made me look back to the occasion when I first realised that Siew could be as demanding as my parents and mother-in-law were. I had just finished putting Huat Chye (or John) to bed and found Siew playing with the new baby, Mei Hua who was wet from her bath. Siew was sipping a glass of beer and handed the baby to me quickly. "We have to move to Kuala Lumpur... I have found this new post as assistant corporate manager with the Teh brothers," he said. "You bloody well have to follow with the kids for the promotion would mean RM500 extra... you know, we need the money." I detested the way he talked when he was tipsy after a few glasses of beer. "It's not only the money, it's my career, my future," he bawled, conscious of his authority. Baby Hua was moving to feel my body as I prepared to feed her, wondering if I would ever get her to wake at a less exhausting time. Her little palms clasped me as she sucked voraciously while I attempted to argue with Siew.

“You can’t make me go at this time. I have just found a part-time job at that tuition school. You know how I yearn to have a career too like you.” I said, with the unnatural evenness demanded by baby’s quiet sucking. Being shackled to housework and child minding was often dreary as I missed teaching and practising the skills that I had acquired at university. Life had been so utterly different after marriage, for motherhood had deprived me of so many things; my twenty-four inch waistline, my hobbies like gardening, playing the piano, playing tennis, and just as soon as I had decided to take up a part time teaching post, Siew’s determination in confining me to domesticity was apparent. One is at a hopeless disadvantage with a baby on one’s knee and with milk dripping from the baby’s mouth and one’s body. To me, motherhood had provided immense joy, especially when I held the tiny thing with a soft body in ecstasy, but somehow one can be driven to the point when one no longer sees the compensation offered by motherhood.

“I really need a steady and secure job after these years of baby minding... I need to feel whole and fulfilled,” I cried as tears trickled down the sides of my mouth. “With my income, we can afford a maid or baby sitter... I want freedom... please don’t force me to obey you,” I pleaded.

“You think of yourself too much. What about my manhood? I am the head of the family. How can I be a complete man if my wife doesn’t support me.” He retaliated, his face turning slightly red with fury. At that point, baby Hua unclasped her hands and started to whimper as my chest heaved in anger. “You have to think more of me. That is what a marriage is about. We are not living in ancient China where the woman bows down to the man in absolute subservience,” I protested. Finally, Siew got really furious, grabbing pots and plates from the table and threw them on the marble floor. We both yelled in [anger](#), and the baby howled as loud as a frightened cat. The two of us surveyed the damage in acquiescence – broken, wet, soggy pieces of crockery, grime and dirt, mingled with messy bits of chicken and brown, sticky gravy – all strewn on the floor. Maternity can be fulfilling and yet conflicting. Both Siew and I love the children and our passion for each other consumed our soul. One might say, we married in haste and repented at leisure. The details of our life could be [quite](#) appalling. I hated the way Siew messed up the whole bathroom, how he threw his used clothes all over my neatly-folded garments, and his irritating habit of not brushing his teeth before bedtime. I know how I infuriated him when I took so long to curl my hair or pick up eccentric articles at the craft shop or jumble sales. I love little rings, trinkets, and expensive paintings and he thought these were waste of money. He dictated what I should buy and I had to beg him for money. It was love choked by heated arguments and a clash of wills.

Our unconditional love for the children was the living thing that connected us; this binding bloodline that worked as an antidote to our worries

and discontentment. So for the next five years we drifted on with a fair amount of satisfaction and woe.

At the beach, I watched in delight as the swallows and eagles danced in the air. With fully open wings, they glided. I guess the female bird can fly to anywhere she wants to. Why am I so scared and uncertain... indecisive? I should not resemble my mother. I am different, and individuals have choices, and I can be like my cousin, Irene. Irene, being individualistic and strong, left her husband and chose to raise her daughter alone. Poor mother! She is different and has always obeyed father in silence. Perhaps I should wait for a few years. Perhaps Siew would understand my feelings in future.

My father was a bit of a brute and ordered mother around like a lord. When I got married, mother cried softly: "Dear... are you sure... you're so young... I would prefer you to work around and enjoy yourself before you plunge into marriage." Being youthful and rebellious I had refused to listen to her. I thought I could acquire more freedom and independence once I moved away from my parents. They had suffocated me in years of moulding me into an individual ordained for society's approval. "Don't wear mini-skirts and hot pants!" ordered father who believed in modest and conservative ways. "Children must be seen and not heard," he went about in his austere and domineering demeanour. I only kept faith in him because he loved his children and was a good provider. He was a social success for he was the manager of ICI, a sound and established company. Mother and I were constrained as we were born female; we lived through his years of pursuing other women, his gambling, and his fury. His rattan-whipping of me hurt my soul more than my flesh. "Obey him, my child," mother would assuage me. He was the breadwinner and I had to bow to his whims and fancy. Although he came home a drunkard and beat up mother in his dizzy dreamlike-drunkenness, mother never blamed him. "He's a man... it's a man's world," she kept on telling me, Furious with such pain, anger, and violence I grew up, coveting for a better world.

At the university I had learnt of individuality and liberty. Identity and selfhood were desirable, and I thought I had detected these in Siew. He possessed wisdom and promised economic support. Never would I have imagined that marital bliss was difficult to achieve, for both of us wanted self-fulfilment on our own terms. I attempted to redefine my own sense of selfhood but Siew would not understand me. Holding my two children and sobbing quietly at night while he snored in his drunken sleep, I decided to be resilient and go on for the sake of my beloved children. "Be patient... maybe he will change one day... after all he is a good father, husband and he does provide a steady income for the family," mother would say with a reassuring smile. At least he was not a philanderer, although he had a roving eye. I only had to give in to his wishes; only to relinquish my job and follow him to Kuala Lumpur to

his new post which granted him extra profit and benefits for the good of his family.

I merely had to support him as an obedient wife and put my interest below his pursuits. In fact, he never beat me up; only broke utensils and objects to exercise his power. A clash of wills, that was all; mother comforted me. He was better than my father who kept mistresses and spent hours at the horse races. I am only a woman, born as a limb of man to pander to his needs. Patience is a virtue and perhaps if I wait for ten years or less, Siew would listen to the little voice in my innermost being – a restless voice which had remained silent, yet unacquiesced. I cry in sleepless nights and wait for the day when he would offer me an escape. When I am puzzling about the location of my heart and soul, I have only to look at Chye and Hua, my children, and I become terrestrial. Parenthood and motherhood can reinforce a marriage because the ties that bind children to parents are strong. “Let us not fight anymore, Siew... I am tired,” I touched his hand wearily. He held me in his arms and smiled “perhaps when the kids are older, you can start working... yeah... why not... we can hire a maid and I will support you all the way.” The sky appeared to be bluer than usual. It was a marvellous day, sunny and windy with lots of white clouds drifting across the sky. Sunshine shimmered over the hedge in front of our house and radiated hot bursts of light off the red roof tiles across the road. The sparrows jostled around some purplish thorn flowers on the green grass and more birds flew freely in the radiant blue sky. Perhaps I would be able to spread my wings and soar like one of those fledglings.

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