

Blood Pressure

Melissa watched the luggage churning its way around the baggage carousel while she waited for her own forest green suitcase to appear. A rainbow-strapped duffel tumbled down the chute as if it had just been shot out of the birth canal. Parents and kids gathering up their bulging bags surrounded Melissa on all sides. She locked her knees. *This was the right carousel, right? Yep, Flight 2883: Depart San Francisco, Arrive Los Angeles.* The LAX air was dry and sterile. It made her want to dry-heave the roasted peanuts.

“You need help, ma’am?” said a vested airport employee.

Melissa looked around and saw she was the only person left standing at the carousel. There were no suitcases left.

“I think my luggage got lost.”

“Okay, I’ll take you to the lost luggage desk, ma’am” he nodded competently.

“Thank you.”

“And let me take your bag for you. A woman in your condition shouldn’t be carrying a heavy load.”

“I’m fine, *thanks*.” She readjusted her sweater around her front. “I can carry my own baggage.” She readjusted the lumpy tote bag on her shoulder and took an uneasy step forward. Dizziness overwhelmed her head and her knees buckled momentarily.

“Are you okay?” The man lunged to grab her shoulder.

She shook off his grip. “I’m fine, *thanks*.” Hearing the stern echo of her voice, she rambled off an excuse. “I have low blood pressure. Sometimes when I stand up quickly or lock my knees, I get light-headed. I’m *fine*.” No need to spread the word that she was bloated, nauseated, achy from being five-months pregnant.

At the desk, the man offered Melissa a pen attached to a ball chain to fill out lost luggage forms. She was already reaching for a Bic pen in her purse, which she always carried as a reporter for the *Environmental Times*. Also, she didn't like to touch public-use pens.

"We should be able to get your luggage to you within three days. We'll reach you at this residence—a Mr. and Mrs. Chew—is that correct?"

"Yes." Her parents, she groaned.

"Ma'am, are you sure you're all right? You really shouldn't be traveling alone."

"I'm not alone! I have a boyfriend." His name was Devon and he was a musician.

"Where is he, ma'am?"

"At home."

"Then you're traveling alone."

She held back her retort that he was a nosey and officious man in a neon vest. Completely useless, there was no way she would get her all-occasions black dress in time. Her sister's engagement party was tonight, less than two hours away.

When she exited the terminal, beeping taxis and roaring buses lined the curb. The thick smell of car exhaust hit her in the face. Her gag reflex convulsed.

"Whoaa. Baby on board," said the driver as she climbed into the Super Shuttle.

"Excuse me?" Melissa folded her sweater around her belly.

The driver pointed to the woman behind Melissa who was struggling with a massive stroller in one hand and a bleary-eyed baby in the other. *Thank God, not everyone can tell I'm pregnant.*

She settled into a seat in the back row, so she wouldn't have to make small talk with the Russian driver. To ensure her privacy, she took out a copy of the *Environmental Times* and held it up at eye-level like a partition. If people were going to stare at her, they were going to get a face-full of energy crisis headlines. Most people would have called a loved one to pick them up at the airport, but Melissa needed to spend the least amount of time as possible with her family this weekend.

As the shuttle van rumbled on the San Bernardino Freeway, Melissa felt the baby kick its feet. She smiled, recalling the evening when she felt the baby kick for the first time. She had fallen asleep on the couch reading the newspaper. Devon came home from a show to find her curled up under the newspaper like it was a blanket. "You look like the crazy bum in the alley!" he joked. "What are you, homeless in your own home?"

When she sat up to greet him, the baby suddenly kicked, almost as if in protest.

"The baby just kicked!"

"Cool!" Devon placed a hand on her stomach. The baby kicked harder. "Youch!"

"Please come with me to my sister's engagement party," she asked, hoping Devon would finally give in.

"Sorry, babe. I got a show."

"I don't want to be alone and knocked-up with my family."

"Then why go at all? You haven't seen them in what, like, two years?"

"Exactly. The guilt is finally sinking in. And this is my sister's engagement party. It's *big*. Big Chinese banquet. All my relatives will be there. They'll all be talking smack about me if I don't show."

"I thought you didn't care what they thought. Isn't that why you moved up here?"

“Yes, but...” She paused. “Oh shit, they don’t know about the baby.”

“Well, they’ll have to be surprised. Just like how we were.” He grimaced imperceptibly beneath his shaggy brown hair.

“No, they can’t know. They’ll totally judge me and I can’t handle it by myself. Please come.”

“Oh no! Un-wed mother. People are having pre-martial sex! Call the cops!” he mimicked shock by waving his hands in the air.

This time Melissa kicked Devon.

“Don’t worry, babe. I love you.”

It was those magic words that let him get away with anything. She let him move in with her when his band mates kicked him out. She let him leave piles of laundry around the apartment. She let him make love to her without a condom. He was the first person to tell her he loved her, and the words, so long deprived, sent her into a reverie. Any day now he would propose. He was just looking for the perfect ring, she told herself. Musicians were sensitive, and besides, he told her loved her all the time. Every time he left the house, in fact.

A thick Russian accent broke her daydream. “Lady with the newspaper, where are you headed?”

She jumped a little and looked out the window to see where she was. “Monterey Park. Get off at the next exit.”

Melissa sighed as she rang the doorbell to her parent’s house. She slung her bag around to the front to cover her baby bump.

Her mother answered the door. “Look who’s finally here!” Mrs. Chew ran her eyes up and down Melissa. The inspection was a poor substitute for hug. “You look healthy! San Francisco must be good for you.” Melissa clutched her bag to her front. “But maybe too good for you because you never come home!”

“Please don’t guilt trip me, Ma. Where’s Karen?” *Where’s the child bride?* Her little sister, the twenty-two-year-old fiancée, made her feel too old at twenty-six. Melissa reminded herself that Karen still lived at home and slept in her childhood twin bed. She was the independent one who found a job and left the nest. She didn’t need her parent’s home anymore.

“She’s picking up the cake. We’re all running errands. I have to get the party favors!”

“Where’s Dad?”

“In the shower. He’s always running late.” Mrs. Chew rolled her eyes. “It makes me frantic! We still have to pick up Yee-Pau, but we’re supposed to be at the restaurant in half an hour.”

“I can pick up Yee-Pau.” Melissa needed to get away from her mother’s eyes.

“You remember where she lives?”

“Sort of---”

“I’ll write you some directions,” Mrs. Chew went zooming off into the kitchen. She handed Melissa the keys to Mr. Chew’s Miata and a Tupperware full of *jook*. “Take this to Yee-Pau.”

Great, I get to drive the midlife-crisis-mobile, thought Melissa as she slid into the overly sporty little red Miata. She drove out of her childhood neighborhood as quickly as possible to pick up her great aunt.

Yee-Pau appeared in the crack of her front door wearing a floral pantsuit, pilgrim pumps, and a three-strand jade necklace. Her fluffy white perm bobbed on top of her head as she undid the deadbolt chain. For as long as Melissa could remember, Yee-Pau was old and lived alone.

“Hi, Yee-Pau. Ready to go?”

“Ready to go,” Yee-Pau repeated. She examined Melissa through her rectangular spectacles. “Ai-yah, you wear *that* to party?”

“What’s wrong with my outfit?” Melissa straightened her blouse.

“Silver Dragon is a fancy restaurant. You need to look *nice*.”

“Well, my luggage got lost. I don’t have anything else to wear.”

“I have something,” said Yee-Pau and she tottered back into her house.

Melissa followed Yee-Pau into her house, which was like stepping onto the set of “The Brady Bunch,” except poorly lit. While Yee-Pau tottered away to her closet, Melissa went to put the jook in the fridge. To her surprise, the old Frigidaire was lined with Tupperwares, all from Melissa’s mom. She never knew that her mom had been supplying Yee-Pau with home-cooked meals. Her mouth watered at the sight of all her old favorite dishes—the steamed pork, the chow mein, and the radish cake. Her mom’s round handwriting on the Tupperware labels elicited an unidentified feeling that wasn’t a pregnancy craving.

Yee-Pau returned with a garment bag, and held it up like it up like a giant butterfly cocoon. Her wrinkled and bejeweled fingers removed a beautiful turquoise cheongsam. It was a trim rectangle of gold peonies on a sea of brilliant turquoise. Pink piping ran diagonal across the chest and around the collar. The dress gleamed before her eyes.

“Cute, hah?”

Melissa nodded. She had never worn a cheongsam before.

“I wear this when I was your age. I save it all these years!” she sucked in her breath and shook her fluffy white head. “Now, you wear.”

Melissa had seen Chinese brides wear gaudy red cheongsams at their wedding banquets. Given her pre-marital pregnancy, she doubted that her parents would throw her a wedding banquet. Melissa figured this was her one chance to wear a cheongsam. Alone in Yee-Pau’s bathroom, she pulled off her roomy Levi’s. She turned the shiny silk around in her hands looking for the zipper, which creaked as she parted its teeth all the way down. Melissa stepped into the stiff fabric, dismayed when she couldn’t pull it past her hips. She pulled harder, vainly sucked in her stomach, and squeezed into the narrow dress. The metal zipper scratched a red train track along her thigh. She bent over to put her arms through the sleeves. She felt like a cat pawing at a mouse hole. Eventually her forearm squeezed through the sleeve.

“Geez, even the neck is tight,” Melissa huffed. The dainty collar cut across her neck, making it look squat and fat.

“You ready?” Yee-Pau called from the other side of the door.

Melissa reluctantly turned the knob. She turned to show the half-zipped side of the dress where her hips and breasts had stopped the zipper in its tracks. Not to mention the slight bump she attempted to push back into her body.

“Oh.”

Melissa’s cheeks burned all at once from the embarrassment, the suffocating dress, and the collar cutting off the blood circulation to her head.

“But I wear this at your age.”

“I’m sorry I’m too fat.”

“I guess you are Ah-mer-ican girl. You drink milk, eat lots of meat. Good nutrition here. You are big and tall.”

More like big and pregnant, Melissa muttered to herself. She felt rejected by the cheongsam. She hadn't been a traditional girl, and now she couldn't fit the traditional dress. Yes, she was an American girl, but she still had a Chinese face.

“I think I'm stuck. Will you help me get out?” The cheongsam was like a full-body cast, pumping the blood out of her limbs.

“Okay, you put you're arms up.”

Melissa turned her back to Yee-Pau to shield her stomach from view. She hung her head and raised her arms. The old woman pulled with all her might. Melissa caught her reflection in the grimy bathroom mirror. Tired eyes, matted hair, sloppy lip gloss. She had the face of a guilty pregnant woman, not that of a beaming bride-to-be. As Yee-Pau at last pulled the cheongsam over Melissa's head, her damp eyes left a salty smear of tears on the lining of the dress, more blue than turquoise from the inside.

Her eyes were completely dry when she emerged.

“Too bad. Nobody can wear this dress.” Yee-Pau sighed.

Melissa slid back into her jeans and sneakers. She jangled the Miata keys. “Let's get this over with.”

Silver Dragon, despite its name, was covered in gold. The chandelier, the double-happiness wall hangings, and even the silverware were gold. It was place for enforced family togetherness, where gold-plated smiles hid disdain.

“Sis, you’re here!” Karen squealed. She was already wearing a lacy-but-modest white dress. *Here comes the bride.*

“Congratulations,” Melissa hugged her sister, but only from the shoulders up.

“Harry, here’s my older sister, Melissa.” *Here comes the groom.*

Harry had a round shaved head and glasses. He wasn’t a bad-looking Chinese guy, but Devon was far handsomer with his pale cheekbones and shaggy hair. Melissa envisioned his oh-so sincere doe eyes peeking out from his sensitive singer-songwriter bed head when he told her he loved her. A strong kick from the baby brought her back to down to the restaurant. She re-focused her attention on Harry. He wore a tie with a pattern of small Jesus fish. *The Christians always marry young*, she scowled.

Melissa decided to put her investigative reporter skills to the test. “You met in college. In fellowship, am I right?”

“Yes, in Campus Crusade,” said Harry. “I played the guitar and Karen sang the harmony.”

An everyday miracle, thought Melissa. That would be the headline for Karen and Harry’s wedding announcement in the paper. She mentally underlined the “everyday” part with a red marker. The sub-headline would be “Virgin Child Marries Bible-Thumper.”

Yee-Pau’s gasp interrupted Melissa’s thoughts. “My goodness! It’s so big!”

Melissa automatically pulled her sweater over her stomach. “What?”

“The ring, it’s so big!” Yee-Pau shoved Karen’s engagement ring in Melissa’s face. It glittered and spun on Karen’s giggling finger.

“Huge,” stated Melissa as she shielded her bump.

She sensed the line of relatives build up behind her, and went to sit down with Yee-Pau. Melissa tuned out for the rest of banquet. Aunties came up to talk to her but it was all a blur of nausea. When she looked up at the golden chandelier, she saw was a ceiling made of glittery engagement rings taunting her just beyond her reach.

She decided to call Devon. He would be at his show, but she wanted to leave him an I'm-thinking-of-you-babe message like the ones he left her. Stepping out of the restaurant she finally exhaled. She rubbed her stomach and back while waiting for the phone to ring. Surprisingly, Devon picked up. "What's up, babe?"

"I thought you were playing tonight?"

"Oh right. Turns out I had the date wrong. It's next weekend."

"You're kidding. You mean you could have been here?"

"Sorry, babe. You know I love you."

She hung up. His words did her no good now. The blood throbbed in her head. She didn't want to go back into the restaurant. She wanted some of that food in Yee-Pau's fridge. She wanted her mom to cook her dinner again. She wished her mom could say I love you and wrap her arms around her growing belly. She lifted her shirt to gaze at the tiny bump, with even tinier child inside. *I'm a mom*, she swelled from head to toe.

With both hands, she held the bump. "I love you, baby. You know it because I eat vitamins for you. Because I sleep on my left side so you get my blood, just like the doctor said. Because I'm going to feed you, and change your diapers, and take care of you. I was a bad mom hiding you today. I'll never do that again. I'll always be proud of you. When I say it, you'll know it because of the things I do. You'll never have to wait for anyone to tell you they love you."

The baby kicked gently. And Melissa knew that her baby loved her too.