

Flame and Cloud

By Ariel Wen

Cindy was proud of her hair, a waterfall of black flames cascading down her back. Tied up, it turned into two chubby pigtales of playful mischief. She never really cared to brag about her features, but they were also beautiful. Watery, grape-like eyes. Rosy cheeks, fuzzy like a newly picked peach in May. One might point out that her smooth oval face lacked stark jawlines, but her personality made up for her seeming softness. She was not a girl you wanted to mess with.

Boys often find Cindy surprisingly hot-tempered. They expected her to be sweet and caring like most Chinese girls were taught to be in the eighties. At that time, women got married in their twenties, had a couple of babies, wiped a few tables, cooked three meals a day, and, in total, were expected to have a conventional mind.

If that statement was ever written out in the textbook, Cindy would roll her eyes at it before she tore the pages apart and thrust the toxic belief into the pond downstairs through the open classroom window. As a final touch, she would blow a long, loud whistle as the book flew in an arc under the bright blue sky. What a beautiful world, she would smirk to herself.

She was a magnet for admirers young and old. Young, like her college freshmen peers. Old, like masters and professors and workers and doctors and business owners in their forties, the pursuit of whom she found slightly creepy but managed to reject with a polite little smile—she had two dimples on each side of her face, the curve of which made her smile seem extra genuine than others.

Amid this flurry of attention, she comprehended this whole flirting thing at an early age and decided to take advantage of her charming smile to make men work for her: from simple tasks like lifting a suitcase up to the tenth-floor dorm to the more academic stuff like

solving Math problems. She had the boys who liked her in her control like rolling dice in her palms, throwing them into the air and always got the ideal number when they dropped.

Cindy never got tired of playing this fun little game of hers.

Sometimes she overplayed her hand a little, stirring up too much emotion—not hers, but the boys'. What followed were their tears and beggings, which she could not abide. One time, this arty junior guy cried beneath her apartment for a whole night after they broke up. He pleaded with her to “give him a second chance” while playing sad, cringy love songs on his guitar. But this softness only drove her farther away, for she could not stand a man being all touchy-feely. She had a mental list of the qualities she liked and disliked about men. She liked rational guys and hated sheepish ones. She liked jocks but adored Math geniuses even more because she sucked at Math. She liked tall boys and found short ones undesirable in terms of their genetics, for she wanted her child to be taller than her. She disliked guys from Northern China because they stuck to their machismo and behaved too “manly”, pulling chairs for her, and trying to protect her all the time—twenty-four hours three hundred sixty-five days. She liked bright eyes, basketball players, and white teeth.

But the thing she hated the most about men was a confidence blended with poverty, like what her father had before he passed away. She never liked her mother, who never gave her the attention a daughter deserved; it was as if she had forgotten to give birth to Cindy at all. With a self-centered mother, Cindy had to learn about life on her own, bouncing from person to person, making mistakes along the way. By the time she was 18, she knew in her heart that she would leave her parents once she could feed herself. It was a decision that gave her freedom. She was determined to build a family, one that no one will be neglected.

Sometimes, she imagined herself never getting married. She complained about having to deal with stalkers who were attracted by her beauty, but when she did get into a serious

relationship, her boldness and childishness would scare her lovers away. They waited for her to become the obedient wife they desired, but her forwardness, her passionate laugh, her energetic personality—all of these drained their patience.

She was an outdoor cinema that never stopped showing films, so those tired of watching turned their wheels and drove out to find a motel to sleep in instead.

Whether love or possessiveness began when Yun first saw Cindy in her toothpaste-white crop top and a pair of tight gym shorts, he could not tell.

They met at a college party, he just twenty and she a mere eighteen. The night was warm as days should be in spring, with a flowery aroma in the air, and a faint egg yolk moonlight casted over Soviet-style buildings. It was not until the afterparty that Yun mustered the courage to ask Cindy for a dance. Not only was he a stranger to her, but he also danced terribly. In this way, he made an impression on her.

“Like a walking wood board,” she thought. “Oh, how his legs and arms move in the same direction every time! I have never seen a boy dance like that.”

Yun had been accepted to Technology University two years earlier and had moved to this new city during the sweltering summer after the gaokao¹. The heat that year was unbearable, the kind that could make the road melt into oily black creeks that slithered over the white blocks and buildings. Clenching onto his family's only leather case and sweating from head to toe, Yun dragged himself through the thick, oppressive heat-fog as if he were wading from the train station to the university entrance. This was a tall, slim, black-haired, glasses-wearing country boy who just flew all the way from southwest China to the Yangtze River valleys. He was a stranger in a strange land. And yet, despite the unwelcoming

¹ The Chinese National College Entrance Examination

temperature, the city shone to him with the light of opportunity, beckoning to him with the promise of a brighter future.

He was born in a mountainous province called Yun Nan, which means “The Southern Clouds”. His parents named him Yun Dong—“the Eastern Clouds”, and he indeed traveled east. Although he had left his hometown, his heart still dwelled in the red fields, hovering above the emerald mountains in castle-shaped clouds. He missed home, but he knew he had to build a new one on his own, for his father had told him so. “A man,” said his father, “should support the sky like a pillar.” Yun had tried to become that pillar, but his head was in the clouds. On days when the weight of the world seemed too much to bear, he feasted on homemade peanut candies, chewing, crushing, gulping his feelings down along with the aroma of nuts.

Yun was one of the top students, not in his class but in the whole province. To him, scoring full marks on a test was easy, not because he was smart but because he had this solid faith that he could achieve anything. On the day of the gaokao, Yun entered the classroom as everyone else did, but soon he biked home before the exam started—one of his friends had forgotten to bring his personal ID card. Yun did not consider it too much; he only wanted to help. It could have been a disaster, causing Yun to miss the entire Math exam, but luck was on his side. He grasped his friend’s ID card and made it back to school just fifteen minutes after the test started. They were friends for years, but their friendship was cut short when the friend died in a tragic car accident at the age of thirty. Yun would talk about that bike ride with such pride on his face, but he tried to avoid remembering the person he rode home for, whose ID card he hastily swiped into his pocket, who almost made him miss the university entrance exam. He only highlighted kindness. It reminded him of the person he wanted to be, someone who would always be there for friends and family.

Yun's family had nothing to do with wealth; on snowy days, he used to get up at four in winter mornings to recite English vocabulary using the light reflected off the snow. With a family so poor, he barely ate any meat growing up. To him, potatoes were "meat", eggs were "better meat", and the meat itself usually represented an upcoming festival like New Year's Eve. At a relative's wedding, young Yun took a plate piled high with what he thought was beef and went hiding in the bathroom to finish it alone. The dish turned out to be Tofus², but he swallowed every bite with such intense joy and desire that he ended up barfing over the floor.

Even at that moment, he had no regrets. For a poor child like him, to eat was to live; to eat excessively was to live the dream.

For this reason, he was shocked when he first went on a date with Cindy, who disliked the lipids in meat dumplings and refused to eat them. Instead, Cindy picked the lipids out using chopsticks. She was extraordinarily patient in these things—picking fish bones, tearing the fried skin off chicken legs, and squeezing the sugar fillings out of Baozis³ because she did not want to grow fat.

"You are ridiculous," Yun commented, staring at her as she picked out the fat in a meat Baozi with tissue paper. He raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"I am!" agreed Cindy. Then she burst into the loudest laughter Yun had ever heard, so loud that everyone in the lecture hall turned to look. Shocked by her volume and mortified at being stared at, Yun dashed for the door and ran away as fast as he could, leaving the girl behind. Cindy, on the other hand, did not mind being stared at. Her body rocked back and forth with laughter while her black pigtailed, rich and gleamy like wheat in the autumn sun, hopped on her shoulder, tapping an uplifting beat.

² A soft white substance made from mashed soya beans

³ Chinese steamed bread rolls with a filling of meat or vegetables

Yun halted in the corridor outside the lecture hall and stood there for a moment. A moment long enough for him to make a life decision.

Then he turned with a boldness he had never known before.

That day, Yun walked back to Cindy, opening the door of the classroom and their future married life.

Writer's note: this story is a work of fiction based on real-life individuals and thus includes fabricated plot elements. Similarities to real events or persons could be coincidental.