

My Father Brought Home a Girl

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I always want to know what happened between my parents in that year. And who was that girl my father brought home that night. But I know we will never talk about that year, nor that girl again, or maybe never talking about her will be the best for all of us.

My parents were never those types of couples who would show their love explicitly. They never kiss in front of me, nor my brother. They barely say “I love you” or “I miss you”, never, I have never heard of it, and I believe they might mutter if they try to utter those words from their mouth. My uncles and aunties were never like that, they called each other “Baby” or some sweet nicknames and would not feel shy to kiss in front of anyone. My uncle once called the host of the love line radio show on his wife’s birthday and made a speech of how lucky he was to have her in his life. My father was completely the opposite, he never celebrated my mom’s birthday. Her birthday was actually a fake one. My mom grew up in a rural family in China and came to Hong Kong at 20. In those Chinese rural areas, people would only use the lunar calendar and birthday was not a big deal, so even my grandparents could not remember the exact date of her birth. “Your mom’s birthday is a fake one,” my dad would say, but he never attempted to figure out the real date. “Your mom is not the type of woman who will care about birthdays and anniversaries. She doesn’t really like flowers. The only flower that I brought to her was a soap rose, she could keep that forever,” he told me proudly. But has he ever noticed how happy my mom was when I brought her flowers on last mother’s day? Perhaps not. Wawa is my Chinese name, and he used to call my mom “Wawa’s mom”, not “Lo Por”, which husbands used to call their wives in Cantonese, or he would even call her directly as “Mami”, but it is fair, because my mom also never call him “Lo Gong” and would call him “Baba” instead.

Were they like this before I was born? Have they even called each other “Lo Gong” “Lo Por” for once?

When I was in primary three, my dad got depression. Mental problems seem to be a genetic thing in my family. My grandmother, who passed away one month before I was born,

suffered from psychosis and was sent to Castle Peak Hospital off and on. She needed to take a lot of medicine and would sometimes vomit white bubbles, my uncle once told me. My grandfather also suffered from depression after my grandmother died for a month, he used nearly two years to “recover” from it. But can someone really “recover” from depression? I don’t think so, maybe he just hid it so well. My uncle, who is the youngest in my dad’s family, got anxiety and depression when he was studying A-levels, he even attempted to commit suicide for twice. But he also “recovered” now. My aunt, the younger sister of my dad, is the only one who hasn't got any mental problems, but I always suspect she has some anxiety problems after her daughter was born, but that's another story.

I never really got to know the real reason for my father’s depression. “He was way too worried about your studies. He was afraid of not being capable of teaching you”, “His boss also gave him a lot of pressure at that time,” - these were the two reasons I heard from my mom and uncle, but they didn’t go any further. Indeed, my dad was the one who cared so much about our studies, he would even take days off when we had exams in primary schools. The study pressure (though he was not the one who studied) and work pressure tore him down, he would lock himself in the room when he came back home. We used to watch TV together after dinner, but he never joined us anymore. Sometimes I would write little notes to him and slide the paper through the door bottom, yet he would never reply to me. I was too young to know what was actually happening, I just knew something went wrong. I remember I asked my mom, “Why daddy doesn’t come out and always stay in the room?”, “He is tired, just let him take a rest.” she would say.

But something had brought him out from the abyss - the power of god. His colleague, who also had depression, asked him to go to church and see if he could find peace there.

He did.

My dad was entirely recharged after going to church. He became an avid Christian who devoted all his time in organizing church events, and we saw him less and less often. He was so keen to join different voluntary services of the church - visiting the street sleepers, meeting the elderly who lived alone, or chatting with troubled teenagers. My family was glad that he could find a place to cure his wounds, my mom was happy about it at the beginning.

We always went to church that year, my brother and I were even baptised. My mom refused to be baptised, in fact she didn't really enjoy going to church, she did that only because of my dad.

It all seemed okay at the beginning. But when my dad spent less and less time at home, my mom started to have a little bit of complaints. They fell into more and more arguments. My dad had once tried to change her by forcing her to go on a marriage fellowship. Of course, my mom rejected him.

"It is the only place where I can find my value. It is my last resort. Why are you stopping me?" my dad said.

"I didn't stop you. But you just spent too much time there." my mom said.

"There are so many people who need help."

"Your kids and your father also need your help. And me, I also need your help. Why can't you think of us?"

And he would lock himself in the room and start playing hymns loudly, I guess even our neighbours could also hear the grace of god.

After some years have gone by, I knew he had thought of killing himself in the room, "But then I thought, you and your brother are still so small. What would happen to you and your brother if I die?" he told me. I am grateful to have him as our father, who always put us on his first priority, but sometimes, I might think, what about mom? Why didn't he think of mom at that time?

There was a teenage girl he met in church, she was 18 at that time, my dad was 42. I was not sure where they exactly meet, perhaps in some events, I didn't bother to know more. All I knew about her was that she was born in a single parent family and had a brother, their father left them when she was young, leaving her mother alone to take care of the kids. "Elaine is such a mature girl. She started taking care of herself when she was young. See how lucky you are," my dad would tell me. My mom would always keep silent whenever he mentioned her name - I try hard to recall her face and there is a sense of coldness that I have never seen in my mom's face.

But I thought she was just another troubled teen that my father wanted to help.

She would call my dad in the middle of the night, crying to him on the phone and talking about all her troubles. I didn't know what her troubles were, but my dad would get up from his bed whenever he got her call. "What's wrong with you?", "No worries, just tell me slowly. Don't cry." - these were what I overheard in my room. Now I wonder, what was my mother feeling at that time? The man sleeping next to you woke up in the middle of the night to comfort another girl, could she hear that? Or did she sleep already?

One time, when she called my dad in the middle of the night, again. We were clueless of what she told him over the phone, but he left home after receiving her call that night. It was probably 3am or 4am. I knew this from a conversation between my uncle and my mom. It was a Sunday afternoon, we returned home from church, while my dad was still there doing volunteer work. Our uncle came to visit us and he was chatting with my mom in the kitchen.

"The girl called him in the middle of the night last week," my mom said.

"Again?" my uncle said.

"And he went out to see her immediately after getting her call."

"What? In the middle of the night?"

"I just don't understand what is so urgent that made him go out at midnight."

I remember clearly, her voice was quavering.

After my dad returned home, my uncle got into a fight with him because of this.

"So you think I am falling in love with an 18-year-old girl?"

He tried to sound ironic.

"But why did you have to go out in the middle of the night? What was so urgent?"

He didn't reply to my uncle's question, even though he had asked it repeatedly and he just kept saying they didn't trust him.

My dad and mom had barely spoken to each other since then. He spent even more time in those voluntary church events, and kept on taking the calls of the girl in the middle of the night. While my mom, still tried to act normal - picked us up from school, did all the houseworks as usual. We used to visit our grandpa together on weekends, but my dad seldom

went there that year. “Just tell grandpa he is busy,” my mom told me, though I knew he went for a drive with the girl. He told us the girl was suffering from some family issues again.

And one night, when my dad returned home after work. He brought her with him. She was wearing a bra top, with hot pants. Her perfume was so strong that it made me sneeze. She had full make-up on and ten of her nails were painted in glaring red - she really didn't look like an eighteen-year-old.

“Say hi to Elaine,” he told me.

“Hi, you two little sweeties.” she said and pinched my brother's face.

“You are so cute,” she said to my brother, who was in K3 that time.

“That's my wife.”

She nodded her head, but didn't even look at my mom.

“Sorry I didn't know you were coming. Mmmm, there is not enough food.”

My mom looked at the kitchen.

“It's okay. We already had dinner together. She will just stay here for a while.”

“I am meeting a friend later. I just don't want to wander nearby so I call Steven and ask if I can come. ”

Steven. My mom never calls my dad Steven. But I didn't notice that time.

“Just make yourself at home,” my dad said.

She held my little brother in her arms and played with him on the sofa. They were playing with the lego airplane that my brother used a week to build and drew pictures together. Elaine seemed to like him a lot.

“It's time for shower,” my mom said.

“But I still want to play with Elaine,” my brother said.

“Just let them play first,” my dad said.

And my mom went to have shower herself. When she finished showering, Elaine had already left.

“That girl left?” my mom asked me, she didn't call her Elaine.

“Yes.”

“Where is your dad?”

“He went out with her.”

“Why?”

“He said it was not safe for girls to go out alone at night. He would drive her to meet her friend.”

She didn't say anything and started picking up the lego bricks on the floor, pieces were here and there.

“I am always the one to clean the mess.” she muttered.

My brother was still sticking the pictures he drew with Elaine on the whiteboard.

“Jordan!” she yelled at him.

“How come you're still playing? Go get ready for shower.” she yelled again.

She seldom yelled at us, but she did that twice that night.

“How come you are so mad?” I asked.

She didn't reply, but kept trying to pick up the bricks and put it back to where it used to be.

I knew my father got into a few more fights with my mom after that night Elaine came.

And I didn't really know what had happened at that time and what went wrong between the two of them. They would not let me know as well. I could only hear them yelling to each other after they had closed the bedroom door. But I was too young to understand what had actually happened, and even until now, I try not to remember or dig out what happened.

My dad stopped going to church after a year. He didn't really tell us why, and whenever we asked he would say: “I just don't want to go there anymore.” And for Elaine, she seemed to disappear in a sudden, and my father never talked about her again. A few years ago, my mom told me she bumped into Elaine on the street, “She is still like that, walking past me as if she could not see me.” But she didn't tell my father about that.

Elaine still pops up in my mind from time to time, and in my memories, she was that dolled-up girl who came into my home suddenly, made a mess and left my mom to clean it. I didn't have strong feelings towards her when I was a kid, she was just a teenager who needed my father's help, I thought at that time. But just after I grow older and older, whenever I recall her face now, it just brings me some kind of hatred that I could not explain.

Maybe I am wrong about her, and perhaps I would not be able to know the answer. No one in my family would ever talk about it again. But I know Elaine will never vanish in my life, even if no one ever talks about her again.

She is the first one to make me realise, fairy tales are just cruel realities that are sugar-coated.