



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
2020

Highly Commended in the Open Division

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All Fairy Stories Come from China

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2021

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All Fairy Stories Come from China

Who can ever forget Lawrence Tan? That Chinese face with the inscrutable smile and dangling cigarette, the be-ringed fingers rippling across the ivories, driving the pounding rhythms of the Harbour City Rollers. Lawrence Tan defines the jazz scene of the late 20th century.

Then one day he gives it all up and disappears without any explanation, followed soon after by the 'Rollers—no replacement for Lawrence was ever good enough. Ten years later, a weekend news supplement tracks him down, to an overgrown bungalow in the suburbs—a sour, depressed 70 year old widower with one heart attack, one grown-up daughter, one grandson, and a big sister who owns a Chinese restaurant in the city. He still smokes, but he no longer touches the piano. He sustains himself on a diet of pot noodles and beer. Big Sister reminds him that no amount of sulking will bring his beloved Mei-ling back to life and unless he pulls himself together, he will die too.

“We’ll all die,” Lawrence replies.

Every year at *Qingming*, Big Sister leaves the restaurant in the hands of her Manager for two weeks and makes a pilgrimage back to Heping village in Guangdong Province to sweep the Tan family graves. She exchanges gossip and clan news, brings presents for the new babies, and holds a lavish banquet to give face to the patriarchs and matriarchs. This year she meets a distant relative: an apple-cheeked orphan named Panpan, who is working as a make-up artist in a funeral parlour. Panpan’s boyfriend took the bus to Beijing ten years ago, promising to marry her when he had earned enough money. He never came back. Now she is a 29 year old *shengnü*—a ‘left-over woman’—a shameful state in a country with an excess of men.

Big Sister offers Panpan a holiday in Australia. At the airport she buys her a ‘SmarTalk’ Chinese-English electronic translator. When Panpan enters the characters for *Wú shì shengnü*, the tinny voice responds, “I am a virgin.”

Back in Australia, Big Sister says to Lawrence, “You need a woman to look after you. Panpan is a good cook and she has never heard of award wages.”

“Employ her yourself,” mutters Lawrence, “She’ll be a match for those illegal workers in your kitchen.”

Lawrence’s daughter Cassandra is about the same age as Panpan. She wasn’t named after the ancient Greek priestess, cursed to utter true prophecies but not be believed, but that is definitely how Cassandra sees herself. She is an accountant who divorced her husband because he wouldn’t keep track of his credit card bills.

“You’re such a stingy old bugger, Dad. I predict you’ll marry Panpan so you don’t have to pay her anything.”

“Over my dead body,” replies Lawrence.

“If his daughter cooked him a decent meal now and again, he wouldn’t suffer from dyspepsia,” Big Sister explains to Panpan.

“If he gave up smoking he’d add years to his life,” adds Cassandra.

Panpan loses interest in the argument over Lawrence’s internal organs and wanders into the parlour, where Cassandra’s 10 year old son is practising for his music exam. Winston is the only person who ever asks Panpan what *she* wants.

“I want to get married and play the piano, like you,” replies Panpan, and offers Winston a Chinese gum ball.

In the kitchen, the negotiations conclude and a truce is signed: in return for some cleaning and cooking, Panpan will stay in Lawrence’s spare room rent free until her visa runs out. Marriage is off the table. Panpan hunts through Lawrence’s pantry cupboards, and cooks a big pot of Spam and sauerkraut *jiaozi* (dumplings) for lunch.

Lawrence tolerates Panpan, so long as she keeps out of his way and doesn’t nag him about his digestion. He calls her ‘Dumpling’—as much for her shape as for her cooking skills. Panpan doesn’t mind; she is grateful that her distinguished elderly relative honours her with a nickname.

On Tuesdays Lawrence plays cards at the Pacific Club with the surviving members of the Harbour City Rollers. Their regular waitress—a cute and spirited Chinese student named Daisy—brings them beer and peanuts and shares jokes with them.

“Is it true you have a maid now, Lawrence?” exclaims Daisy in mock horror. “Is she pretty?”

“She is so fat, that I have to step into the bathroom if we want to pass in the hallway,” Lawrence grumbles as he lays down a full house.

Cassandra tells Rex, her ex-husband, “The girl is such an ugly duckling that village boys used to leave town if the marriage brokers mentioned her name.”

“What’s wrong with her name?” asks Rex.

“Panpan means ‘expected a boy’. Her parents gave her away. She is a good cook though.”

Panpan borrows the neighbour’s mower and cuts the knee-high grass in the back yard. She digs and plants a vegetable garden. She cleans and polishes everything shiny. She hides Lawrence’s cigarettes and cajoles him to take a daily walk around the lake on the golf course. On the other hand, she destroys the electric kettle by heating it on the gas, and precipitates a visit from two police officers when the neighbour reports his mower stolen. On their daily walks, Panpan discovers that the wild ducks (*yāzi*) on the golf course are very tame—and make delicious *yā jiaozi*.

Winston comes to Lawrence’s house after school to practice the piano, though Lawrence refuses to help him. Panpan loves to listen and she feeds him Chinese snacks between exercises. She tells Winston stories about life in China: how her father gave her away because he didn’t want a daughter, and how she had to sleep in the pig shed of a rich woman’s house. She describes learning to make dumplings in a *dai pai dong* (street stall), and working for an undertaker, putting make-up on the faces of dead people, and stringing fireworks for funerals.

After a month of Panpan’s care, Lawrence’s doctor tells him, “Whatever you are doing, Lawrence, keep it up.” Big Sister says how nice it is to find an uncluttered chair she can sit on. She inspects the vegetable garden and tells Panpan that if it produces too much *shūcài* (vegetables) she will buy them for the restaurant. Lawrence’s poker partners begin to talk about putting the band back together for a command performance.

One day, Lawrence is caught in the rain on his way home from the Pacific Club and he catches a cold, which quickly turns into bronchitis. The doctor says that it is very serious for a man of his age who smokes, and insists they call an ambulance if his temperature goes up.

While Cassandra and Big Sister fuss around Lawrence and remind him that he’s already had one heart attack, Panpan sneaks away to the golf course. She fossicks among the trees beside the fairways, searches the marshes around the water hazards, and digs under the sand in the bunkers. She returns with a shopping bag bulging with leaves, twigs, chrysalises, funguses, lichens and seeds, which she lays out on the kitchen table. She separates out certain items and weighs them on the kitchen scales, then boils her selection in a saucepan on the stove for most of the day.

“My god, what’s that awful stink?” sniffs Cassandra when she calls in to take Lawrence’s temperature and check that he’s taking his medicine.

“Just tea,” replies Panpan, “Good for pimples.”

When Cassandra has gone, Panpan quietly puts the pills away in a drawer and props Lawrence up on a pillow. Using a teaspoon, she feeds him sips of the hot traditional medicine. He protests at first, and tells her to take it away, but Panpan ignores his complaints. She forces him to keep sipping the black, pungent brew until he falls into a peaceful sleep at midnight.

The following day Lawrence wakes with a clear head and throat. His temperature is normal. He is able to get out of bed and eat a bowl of *juk*—thin rice porridge—at the kitchen table.

Later in the day, the two police return, following up a complaint from the golf club that a short, fat Chinese woman has been harassing the ducks, stealing golf balls from the hazards and generally putting the players off their strokes. They ask to see Panpan’s passport and point out that her visa expires in a week.

“I want her to stay,” Lawrence tells Big Sister.

“If you really want her to stay,” says Big Sister, “Maybe you should marry her.”

“Bring me the papers and I’ll sign,” says Lawrence.

Cassandra, faced with the prospect of a step-mother younger than herself, is hostile to the idea. On the other hand, Winston and the neighbour (long ago compensated for his mower with baskets of Chinese vegetables from the garden) are all in favour. Lawrence’s poker buddies make jokes about old men and sexually demanding young wives, and they club together and buy him a bottle of tiger-bone wine. Daisy the waitress asks, “Church or registry office? Who’s going to give her away? Will she have a bridesmaid?” Unable to answer any of these questions, Lawrence engages Daisy as their wedding planner.

“First things first, she’ll need a dress,” says Daisy. “Leave it to me.”

She escorts Panpan to a boutique in the city, but Panpan refuses to look at traditional white wedding dresses.

“Wear one time and throw away,” says Panpan, “So waste.”

She asks to try on a fitting, low-cut, scarlet silk, designer original. The shop owner looks down her nose and pronounces that she is “...doubtful it will suit, let alone fit, madame.” Daisy selects a red lace brassiere and matching tummy control panties to

replace Panpan's home stitched hand-me-downs. When she emerges from the changing room, the shop owner and Daisy are astonished to see that Panpan actually has a figure. What's more, after some skilful make-up, her pimples disappear and her apple cheeks are transformed into peaches.

"Don't show Cassandra your credit card bill until after the wedding," Daisy advises Lawrence.

The ceremony is at the Registry Office and the reception is at Big Sister's restaurant. "Waaa, only three tables," Big sister complains. "When Panpan gets her Aussie passport, we will have a 20 table wedding dinner in Heping."

Big Sister's restaurant serves up a traditional wedding menu of lobster and chicken, roast duck, birds nest soup, roast suckling pig, abalone, steamed garupa and scallops, followed by fried noodles and rice. Unfortunately, half the dishes remain untouched because Lawrence drinks too much tiger-bone wine and passes out. An ambulance takes him to hospital where the doctor announces he is having another heart attack.

While Lawrence is in the ICU, the police take Panpan to the Immigration Detention Centre, because her visa has expired. They tell her that a wedding does not guarantee citizenship and unless she can prove it is not a sham marriage, she will be deported.

Lawrence is too ill to be interviewed by Immigration, so Panpan is released on bail, but told not to leave town. Daisy suggests a delaying tactic: Panpan could apply for a student visa—like hers—to learn English.

"But your English is perfect," says Panpan.

"That's true," says Daisy, "I only go to classes at the beginning and end of term, otherwise I work at the Poker Room." Daisy confesses that, as a side-line, she sits Admission English tests for rich Chinese girls who need an IELTS score to get a university place. "It pays really good money."

"What if they catch you?" asks Panpan, horrified.

"No chance. Chinese girls all look the same to bureaucrats. Anyway, I only aim for a 6."

Panpan is given a provisional student visa and enrolls in the Beginners English course at the University College. On weekdays she attends classes and in the evenings she nurses Lawrence.

One day, Daisy takes Panpan to the pub to meet her new boyfriend, the captain of the university rugby team. The footballers make a lot of fuss over the girls. Cassandra,

who tutors part-time in Accountancy, happens to pass by the pub and takes a photo of Panpan holding a glass of beer, surrounded by grinning, handsome, muscular young men. She shows it to Lawrence and tells him that Panpan has only married him for a passport and now she is chasing Australian boys. She says he should tell Immigration to send her back to China.

When Panpan arrives home from College that afternoon, she finds the front door locked. No matter how loudly she knocks and calls out, Lawrence won't let her in. He is sitting at the kitchen table, chain smoking and drinking beer. The television is turned up so loudly he doesn't notice that it is raining, until he is startled by a flash of lighting and all the lights go out. He opens the door to see whether the street lights are still working and trips over Panpan, who is curled up, shivering on the front step.

Lawrence is sobered by the pathetic sight of his waterlogged "wife" (he still thinks of her in quotation marks). He helps her to her feet, brings her inside, wraps her in his dressing gown and, by the light of his mobile phone, makes a pot of lemongrass tea. Panpan apologises for being such a bad wife and says she now realises that she is just a stupid *shengnü* who wanted to get married and she doesn't deserve a husband like Lawrence. He should send her back to China. Lawrence dries her hair and rubs her feet with Tiger Balm.

When Cassandra calls in the following day, she is amazed to see Lawrence sharing the piano stool with Winston, and laughing wildly as the two of them trade jazz riffs on the keyboard. Panpan is happily clapping along and feeding them Chinese gum balls.

"What is all this merriment?" Cassandra shouts indignantly.

Panpan takes Cassandra into the kitchen and confides, with a shy smile, that she is no longer a *shengnü*.

Daisy drops by with her new boyfriend and a bottle of champagne. Big Sister arrives with the untouched roast suckling pig from the wedding and reheats it in the oven. Panpan and Winston make a lightning raid on the golf course, returning with the key ingredient for *yā jiaozi*. After dinner, Winston plays the Chopin étude from his music exam without any errors.

Lawrence raps four times on the side of his champagne glass with a spoon. It sounds like the count-in to a jazz classic, but he simply says, "Thank you wife. Thank you daughter. Thank you sister. Please love one-another." Then he sits back down, smiles and closes his eyes. It is half an hour before it dawns on everyone that he has quietly passed away.

In Lawrence's will, he asks to be given a traditional Chinese funeral. "Inconsiderate to the last," complains Big Sister. "Who remembers how to arrange a Chinese funeral these days?"

"I do," says Panpan.

She takes charge and allocates jobs to everyone. She and Cassandra, as wife and eldest daughter, wash and dress Lawrence for his coffin. Daisy's job is to round up the jazz band, while the rugby captain shops for fireworks. Big Sister borrows a sewing machine and creates white hoods and capes for the mourners. Winston stuffs red and white packets with new \$5 notes. The neighbour—a home handyman with a tool shed—constructs a bamboo and paper piano for Lawrence to play in the next world.

On the day of the funeral, the street is parked out with the cars of the local Chinese community as well as loyal jazz fans. The Harbour City Rollers, with Winston sitting in on piano, lead the procession on a float decorated with garden vegetables and a blow-up of the band's first album cover. At the rear of the procession, a traditional Chinese band fills the air with piercing *suonas*, gongs, drums and *shen*. The unrelenting crackle and boom of fireworks sends the local dogs into a frenzy of howling and barking. All the mourners agree it is a most impressive cacophony, certain to transport Lawrence into the next world.

After the funeral, Panpan serves her famous duck dumplings and the Chinese community, who have ignored her until now, line up to congratulate Panpan on a most memorable funeral, and ask if—in good time—she could please arrange one for them.

A year later, Panpan, Big Sister and Winston take Lawrence's ashes to Heping and burn paper money in the Tan family ancestor hall. The villagers, who remember Panpan as an unmarried, apple-cheeked, roly-poly farm girl, the butt of everyone's jokes, are astonished at her transformation into a poised and elegant widow. They approach her bowing, making a *baoquan li* (fist-palm salute) and address her respectfully as *Tan taitai*.

Cassandra whispers to Big Sister, "Auntie, do you know the fairy story about the ugly duckling who becomes a beautiful swan?"

"Of course," replies Big Sister, "All fairy stories come from China."