

Mrs Li Takes a Night Class

Keith Johnson

‘You’re cunts,’ Coreen hollered at them.

Mrs Li’s husband, Eng-Soon, nearly spat out his *jok*.

‘Coreen,’ Mrs Li replied, placating her daughter, ‘why you use such *lau pok* language? It’s not nice you know. And dis —’

The poster lay spread out like a tombstone stone between them, with Coreen’s angry face peering out of it, middle finger raised, and the words *My Pussy with Coreen Li: One Night Only* scrawled beneath in a twenty-eight point font with the unhappy name of ‘Street Fighter’. Mrs Li looked at it, dismayed.

‘You tink dis make you look good, lah?’ Mrs Li asked her daughter.

‘It’s a feminist reclamation,’ Coreen explained defiantly, though Mrs Li thought she could detect a hint of satisfaction in her daughter’s eyes. Coreen thumbed her father. ‘He and his little mates make fun of our vaginas all the time. I’m just reclaiming them.’

‘Doan bring me into it,’ Mrs Li’s husband spat back, rustling the pages of the paper; he still insisted on buying the broadsheet. ‘I didn’t bring you up to use such language.’

Pussy, vagina, cunt. It was hard to know which word he was objecting to.

‘You’re a cunt,’ Coreen repeated, glaring at him.

‘Coreen —,’ Mrs Li interjected, thinking it best she got involved.

But Coreen turned on her, eyes narrowing. ‘And you’re the biggest cunt of them all because they take from you all the time and you let them get away with it.’

‘Spoiled, lah,’ Mrs Li’s husband said, rustling the pages of the paper, when they discussed it later in bed. ‘Dis is the problem, you spoil her, lah.’

She felt annoyed that he could be so sanctimonious about it. ‘You spoil her too.’

‘Doan be lai dat, lah,’ he said, and lifted the pages of the newspaper higher so that he couldn’t see her, the walls of print like the walls of a castle. ‘Bringing up children. Job of mother, lah. She your fault, lah.’

But that only brought up more questions.

‘You no bad mother, Aunty,’ Mrs Li’s sister-in-law, Pau-Siang, said reassuringly, as her white podgy hand reached out surreptitiously for another helping of kueh. Pau-Siang was her husband’s younger sister, a bit of a *fatty bom-bom*, but someone that Mrs Li could confide in. Every week, she came over to make the *Nonya kueh*, the traditional cakes Mrs Li was famous for. They sat at the table in the kitchen that smelled of sweet bruised pandan leaves. ‘*Ang moh*, lah, dat is de trouble. *Ang moh* give our children all dese newfangled ideas, Aunty.’

She had a point, Mrs Li thought. Coreen had used these white men’s terms —feminist and reclamation. *Ang moh* was the problem. Not that she despised white people, but they had strange values. When she was a girl, she had been brought up to think that they could do no wrong. But when she moved to Australia, she saw them in their natural habitat and realised that they were no better than she, and, in so many ways, worse. Here, *ang moh* begged money off the street, and washed windscreens at traffic lights. She had little to do with them until now, and it was best that way. Or so she had thought.

‘It is all just action, lah,’ Pau-Siang continued, swallowing, her hand reaching out to grab more. ‘Coreen is good girl. But she always wan’ show off. It is dat age, lah. Not your fault, lah. It will pass.’

Fatty-bom-bom had a point. But when? If they were back in Singapore, Coreen would be studying medicine with plans to become a radiologist, not Gender Studies, and she would not be performing shows at the university based upon her genitalia.

The oven timer went off and Pau-Siang’s eyes lit up in barely disguised delight. She opened the oven door to fish the *kueh* out, her wide backside, like two tyres, shielding Mrs Li from the rush of hot air. But try as she might, Mrs Li couldn’t get up. She couldn’t shake the worry from her and get lost in making the *kueh*, as she usually would.

‘Nah, lah, I tink you best search her room if you wan’ answers,’ said Pau-Siang. ‘It in dose books she read.’

‘Nah, I doan want be nose, lah.’

‘You lai dat anyhow, asking questions behind her back. You might as well get answers, lah.’

It was a question of finding an opportunity. A room search was out of the question. Mrs Li did not want to be thought of as being *kaypoh* in any way. But there were many other opportunities as Coreen’s nose was always buried in a book. This used to be a source of pride when Mrs Li imagined her studying medicine and becoming a radiologist. But after the conversation with Pau-Siang, the sight of every book filled her with dread. Each was a potential threat, even if they had pretty names like *The Golden Notebook* or *A Room of One’s Own*.

One day, the opportunity arose. Coreen was out, but she had left one of the books on the armrest of the sofa.

Don’t be lai dat, Mrs Li thought, thinking it was ridiculous that she was still trembling when she picked the book up with no one in the house. But she couldn’t help herself. The book had notes in the margins in pencil and passages highlighted in fluorescent blue and pink. She read one out loud:

‘Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question— “Is this all?”’

She didn’t think much of that. She never made peanut butter sandwiches. *Nonya kueh* was so much better than this *ang moh* food.

‘Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women’s intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love?’

Yes! she thought. Just the word ‘love’ made her tear up; Mrs Li was sentimental at heart. Eng-Soon never complimented her on anything. He never looked at her anymore. His head was

always in the paper. But she had noticed his looks straying to that woman, Serena Chee, who played it up with her tight dresses. Those dresses might have been *chiok* and *sexy* when they were young but they weren't dignified anymore, Mrs Li thought, clicking her tongue. Besides, Coreen was right. When he and his friends (and any male over the age of fourteen) insulted each other, they did it in the traditional Hokkien way, *pua chao cheebye, lor*, which translated roughly as cavernous, smelly vagina.

Mrs Li remembered with irritation how offended he was at Coreen for using the 'c-word'. She was confused. Men like vagina, she thought. Why they make fun of something they like? And a vagina was not cavernous, nor necessarily smelly.

'The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own.'

She stopped, frowned and wondered.

'I tink I need do something for me,' Mrs Li said, sitting in front of the mirror putting on her night cream.

It was enough for Eng-Soon to put the paper down for a moment. 'Why you lai dat?'

'I not 'lai dat.' I just want to do something on my own.'

The goldfish expression on his face evidently suggested that he needed an explanation.

'Coreen is doing her ting, you do your ting. I no can stay home make *Nonya kueh* all day long, lah.'

'But your *kueh* so good, lah.'

It was true. The layers of her layer cake were renowned for being evenly thick.

'You see me no more,' she said. 'And a *cheebye* is not always *pua* or *chao*.'

He scratched his head, bewildered.

'You see old lady, no sexy *chiok* girl like before.'

He sighed. He was not going to win this argument. For a moment, he thought of his head buried in Serena Chee's smooth white thighs, the smell of her cunt. Serena was *chiok*; she gave him a hard-on by just thinking of her. His wife had been *chiok* too when he married her. But he struggled to touch his wife these days. Her flabby body repelled him and she wore too much

make-up that made her look frightening. He had been surprised that his wife hadn't noticed his relationship with Serena. But neither had Serena's husband.

'So, lah, what you gonna do?' he asked.

'I am going to go to school.'

'School? But you too old.'

'There is school for grown-ups, lah,' she said defiantly. 'There is night school.'

The brochure from the WEA came every quarter, wrapped up in her husband's paper. She usually threw it out in the recycling, but this time, coming only a few days after her revelation, she took it as a sign and read through what was on offer. She was surprised how much was available. There were classes in foreign languages (not so interesting), Malaysian cooking (she could probably teach the *ang moh* instructor a thing or two). But then her eye fell on it, and it brought a smile to her lips. It was a course called *A Performative Journey through the Feminine Mystique*. It was a sign. Six weeks of learning about modern feminism, ending in a live performance for family and friends. If this did not make Coreen respect her, then nothing would.

The pages of the paper raised again as her husband whimpered miserably from the bed, 'Do wha' you like. As long as *makan* still on de table. You do wha' you like.'

'I've come down with the flu, Nigel. I feel like death,' Heidi Durkheim-Smith croaked down the phone.

She did sound very unwell, Nigel thought.

'I've got to teach an evening class on performative feminism. Would you be a dear and do it for me?'

'I don't know anything about performative feminism.'

'Oh, you don't have to. Most of it is getting the people who turn up to whinge about men. I'll write you notes. It'll be a doddle. And besides, it is only evening class.'

Which was how Nigel ended up sitting in the empty classroom under the flickering fluorescent lights, wondering how he had agreed to this in the first place. True, there had been some attraction to Heidi (not reciprocated, perhaps), when they were undergraduates and Nigel was the only man in their Gender Studies class. But that fizzled out long ago. Nevertheless,

Heidi still managed to manipulate him into doing things for her to the degree that he wondered if the weakness was on his part. Sadomasochism. He never seemed to be able to say ‘no’.

The minute hand crawled to eight o’clock. The class was supposed to start now, and he kept glancing at the door. No one arrived. He waited some more. Still no one. He sighed, realising that his gender was probably the reason; it had been the dealbreaker all the other times. He dreaded reading the feedback. ‘*What does a man know about feminism....*’ Blah blah blah. People were still not beyond gender, he lamented. He went through emotions, like abbreviated stages of grief. Offence first, but that quickly dissipated as he realised he was free for the evening once more. He started whistling as he put his notes back into his bag.

‘Accuse me.’

He blinked at the short Chinese woman in the tight floral dress standing at the door. She was heavily made up in a kabuki mask. He was too surprised to speak.

‘Accuse me,’ she repeated, ‘dis class is de feminist class, lah?’

He took on a slightly irritable, donnish air. ‘There are many classes here. This one happens to be *A Performative Journey through the Feminine Mystique*.’

She scrutinised him from under the painted eyebrows.

‘You teacher, meh?’

‘I am the teacher.’

It took her a couple of seconds to process this fact. And then, she nodded and said, ‘Can.’ She went to sit in the front row, right in front of his desk.

‘Alright,’ Nigel said, as the vision of a glass of cabernet sauvignon he set his heart on evaporated from his mind. He grabbed the rollcall and went down the list of names.

‘And you are?’

‘Mrs Eng-Soon Li.’

‘Li... Li,’ the tip of his finger came to it, halfway down. ‘Here it is. Yes. This is your class. Shall I call you Eng-Soon?’

‘Eng-Soon is my husband’s name. Call me Eileen.’

‘All right then, Eileen.’ He went to the laptop and switched it on. The projector flickered into life. ‘Well, just an overview of what we’re going to be covering in the next six weeks. Tonight, we’ll be covering what feminism is before moving along to the some of the more

important texts. Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, the Suffragette movement, Simone de Beauvoir — '

She was paying no attention to his litany of great names. Instead, she was scanning the rows of empty seats. 'Wah, why no students?'

'They are not yet beyond gender,' he said, pained again. In an instant, he abandoned Heidi's slides and his position behind the lectern and came to sit, leaning himself on the desk in front of her.

'Look, we have six weeks. It's just you and me. I was just going to go through someone else's slides. But the course is about your experiences anyway. What do you want to learn?'

She looked at him in disbelief. 'Can make course shorter?'

'We don't have to meet every week.'

'I still pass class, lah?'

'You'll still pass the course.'

'Okay ...'

So, she told him. She told him the story of her *chiok ger*. How the angel had turned into the monster, why she could not understand why she had turned against her mother and called her such mean names. Nigel listened attentively. A tear appeared at the corner of his eye and he dabbed it away discreetly. It was hard when you gave one hundred percent of yourself to everyone and nobody appreciated you or listened to you. He should know. He felt an urge to help this woman.

'And your husband? He doesn't help?'

'He no help. He only makes eyes at other woman. Dis is why I come here. I wanna learn some-ting dat makes Coreen love me.'

'I suppose this is what they mean by common ground,' he mumbled.

Kueh had been Mrs Li's life. Those brightly coloured, sweet *Nonya* cakes, the recipes handed down mother to daughter for generations. All of it. The making of it, the eating of it. She was famous for her *kueh lapis*, with its multicoloured layers. Her delicious *onde onde* covered in

coconut shavings delighted the neighbourhood. Her kitchen smelled constantly of boiling coconut milk and sugar.

The quality of her *kueh* had not changed but she had, without her noticing until now. She sat in front of the mirror looking at her white face, puffy as a marshmallow, her arms looking soft like glutinous rice. She regretted the tight dress she wore to her first night class. Just like Serena. It was a lapse in judgement.

‘Aiya, I *chiok ger* no more,’ she said mournfully, pulling down her lower eyelids, to see if she was sick. She had tried to make her husband see her. She made herself pretty but he complained it made her look like a clown. ‘You jus ol’ woman, lah.’

Coreen caught her, as she was sneaking into the house, mascara smudged around her eyes. She paused in the doorway of the bedroom and watched her mother silently for some moments.

‘No *chiok ger*.’ Mrs Li began to cry.

‘*Lāu-bó?*’

Mrs Li looked up and quickly brushed away her tears, embarrassed that Coreen should see her this way.

‘You’re still beautiful, *lāu-bó*. And all that doesn’t matter. It’s what’s inside that counts.’

But Mrs Li worried that she didn’t have much inside. That was why she was going to night school. But the last weeks seemed to teach her how little she knew.

‘Coreen?’

‘Yes, *lāu-bó?*’

‘You will come to my performance, lah?’

‘Can, lah. I come.’

Mr Li stood outside talking in high spirits. The Chees had been invited, and Coreen was being surprisingly pleasant tonight. Mr Li couldn’t understand why his wife had insisted on the Chees coming to her graduation; he had never thought that she liked Serena all that much. He and Serena couldn’t help exchanging knowing looks at each other. He thought of Serena’s dark, wet

pussy between the two soft legs and started to get an erection. He tugged down his jacket, in a vain attempt at modesty. Finally, the door opened and Nigel's head appeared.

'We're about to start,' he said, 'do you want to come in?'

They filed in and sat in the front row. Mr Li looked up and around and then said to Nigel. 'Wah, where's rest of class?'

Nigel smiled, a little embarrassed. 'Well, yes. This is a class with very selective criteria.'

Coreen sniggered in the back row, not being able to bring herself to sit in the front row with everybody else.

'Siok, these newfangled courses, lah, no good come from it,' Serena muttered to Mr Li.

'And if you could all give Mrs Eng-Soon Li, Eileen, a round of applause.'

Mrs Li appeared. She had dressed her face in her most frightful make up, just as she liked, no matter what her husband thought. She stood up at the lectern.

'You're all cunts ...' she began and Coreen cheered from the back row.

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Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Gollancz, 1963.