



On April 1st, 2003, Anne Gavin's phone rang in the middle of the night. She picked it up, half expecting to be hearing from her husband, Victor, who had forgotten about the time difference between Asia and America. A stranger's voice, loud and authoritative, spoke at the other end of the line, first in Mandarin Chinese and then in heavily accented English.

“Wo men yao zhao lin tai tai. We wish to find Mrs. Lin.”

“Who is this?”

“We wish to find Mrs. Lin,” the man repeated in stilted English.

“Who is this?” Anne asked again.

“We are the Public Security Bureau of Jin'an County in Hangzhou ... in China. We have important news to tell him ... er ... her.”

“I am Mrs. Lin.”

“You are Mrs. Lin? You are the wife of Victor Lin Chung-li?”

“Yes, he is my husband. Why are you asking me this? What is happening?”

“Mrs. Lin, we are sorry to have to bring you the bad news, but your husband is dead. Lin Chung-li is dead.”

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Only ten days ago, Victor Lin was the living embodiment of hope and expectation as he packed his bags for a business trip to Taipei. By the time he arrived at Tom Bradley International Airport in the cool March evening air, it was already dark. He had called Anne from the office and said goodbye on the phone. He didn't want her to take him to the airport and then drive all the way back to Del Mar in the night, even though the weather report said the sky was going to be clear and the stars would be out that evening. Victor was traveling Dynasty Class, an exotic, expensive-sounding fare category created by a Taiwanese airline, one of the cheapest flying the Pacific. The airline was popular with Taiwanese travelers when they went home, because it offered a non-stop flight from Los Angeles to Taipei.

For Victor, however, LA was home now, although he was an ethnic Chinese, born in Taiwan to parents who were natives of Zhejiang Province south of the city of Shanghai. In Taiwan, where Victor grew up and went to school, those Chinese émigrés who had fled their native China in 1949 when the People's

Liberation Army swept to victory were all called Mainlanders. Victor was a Mainlander. He had made his way to the United States from Taiwan. His father was a member of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's party, the defeated Kuomintang, KMT for short. But Victor saw no irony when he chose his English name. The émigré population in Taiwan always dreamed of eventual victory over the Communists even after long years of exile. It was for them an article of faith that some day they would be victorious and they would return.

Barely an hour before, as Victor sped up the coastal highway with the ocean to his left, the bright orange clouds of a glorious Californian sunset had greeted him and lifted his spirits. The soft folds of white cumulus in the sky, Joni Mitchell's "ice-cream castles in the air," were particularly radiant that evening against the backlit twilight coming from across the Pacific. Spring Equinox was two days ago. It would soon be warm, Victor thought to himself, and the days would become longer. He liked that, and he knew Anne liked it too. They could loiter on the sandy beaches then, just talking about mundane, everyday things and greeting people who happened to be there as they themselves, doing nothing more demanding than walking their dogs or playing with their frisbees.

Victor had told Anne on the phone the cistern in their guest toilet was not flushing; he said he would fix the problem when he came back. He was an engineer by training and knew how to deal with such mechanical chores. They were his responsibility at home, whereas Anne would take charge of the kitchen and the interior decoration of the house. She had a particularly keen eye

for the pattern of the curtains and carpets and the color of the fabric for the sofas. Anne was a naturally neat and tidy person, a homemaker, and Victor loved her dearly for that. He liked order in his universe.

Victor also wanted to change the water heater which they had inherited from the previous owner. It was now over six years old and he believed in forward planning. He would hate to have a water heater give them trouble in the middle of a wintry night. That would be a great nuisance and he knew Anne would not like it. But he had to find time for that and work out properly what needed to be done. Lately, though, his mind had been pre-occupied with, for him, more important things.

It was forward planning that had brought Victor to America. In his final year at National Taiwan University, he knew if he came within the first three in the Bachelor of Science graduation exam, he would have a realistic chance of landing a postgraduate scholarship to study at UCLA. And that was what he managed to do and why he was now working and living in California. Only no amount of forward planning by a professional engineer would have enabled him to foresee what was going to happen shortly after he landed in America. He could not have foreseen that the People's Republic of China, what his father called Communist China, would swing its doors open, embrace some aspects of a market economy and go full throttle for modernization. Following those changes and in just some twenty years, the country, which was once dubbed "the sick man of East Asia," had become an economic power-house in the new millennium, one of the world's top three economies,

no less. And that was really why Victor Lin was making this trip now.

As he stood in the line waiting for his turn to check in, Victor noticed three of the big digital screens at the airport were not working. He wasn't surprised; that was LA for him and he had got used to the sloppiness around him. What did surprise Victor, however, was that the Taiwanese carrier he was traveling with had a check-in counter that was very close to China Southern, an airline of the People's Republic of China. It wasn't that long ago when many Americans, especially Californians, would call the PRC by the name "Red China." Beijing did not seem to mind the adjective. Indeed Chairman Mao Zedong was positively proud of it. His Red Guards had been taught the slogan "better red than expert." And for a long, long time, the most popular song in the PRC was "The East Is Red."

It was really quite confusing, particularly because the two Chinese airlines' large placards giving flight information in the Chinese language used different renditions, even different placements, of characters. It was traditional Chinese characters for the Taiwanese airline written from right to left, and simplified Chinese characters for the PRC airline written from left to right, in the exactly opposite direction. Not that it would matter to Americans, Victor thought to himself with some bemusement. How were they to know? And if they did, why would they care?

Victor had to take his bags to Station 8 for scanning. The PRC couple in front of him were talking to each other in the Hunanese accent of Chairman Mao, in voices so loud they

could be heard from ten paces away. After the turn of the new millennium, even Victor had noticed they were coming to the United States in ever increasing numbers now, the *nouveaux riches* of China, well-heeled, well-dressed—designer clothes, handbags, shoes and all—but without being well-mannered. They often talked at the top of their voices and would not wait to be served or stay in line. To sophisticated Americans like Anne’s mother, they looked like country bumpkins turned fashionable city upstarts. This was really quite unfair, Victor had told his mother-in-law when this topic came up in dinner conversation, because where these new visitors came from, nobody ever told them they should keep their voices down in public places, and nobody ever lined up for anything. The couple standing in front of him now was at least doing that, Victor noticed. But when the black airport attendant at Station 8 asked the two, in English, whether they were flying “Cathay Pacific,” they did not understand the question and turned to Victor for help. He interpreted for them and waited patiently for his turn while their five pieces of luggage were being scanned. He then gave the attendant his own, much smaller, bag.

By the time the scanning was done, Victor was feeling a little peckish and wanted to check out the hot food counters on the mezzanine floor as he had been told his airline’s lounge only offered snacks and drinks but not cooked food. The airport’s closest up-escalator, however, was out of order—simply not working. Victor had to make his way to the end of the terminal’s lobby to take the stairs and walk up. Long before he got to the mezzanine hall, the smell of food was all over the place. There was food of all kinds: pasta, *chow mien*, sushi, Korean barbecued

meats, amongst other standard fare. He knew which to avoid—the Chinese food counter—because Chinese-style fast food in California was very greasy and the last thing he wanted in his stomach with such a long flight ahead, all of twelve hours if not more. As Victor drifted from one counter to the next, all the food there smelled very much alike, and the thought occurred to him that the eateries might actually have the same owner. It was a case of stale the food and stale the airport. What never ceased to amaze Victor was why, at the level of everyday living, the most powerful country on earth had such shabby standards. It just could not get the simple things right.

He finally settled for a McDonald's hamburger and an apple pie; at least they were tried and trusted, although Anne always warned him about their fat and sugar content and high cholesterol level. With those two in his stomach washed down with a cup of lukewarm coffee, Victor went downstairs again and walked, out of habit, into the Hudson News store. He saw many magazine covers with bikini-clad girls. One was particularly striking as it showed a very pregnant woman clad in a bulging bikini brief which barely covered the essentials, and this was just the second half of March, not even April. Victor was quite used to this by now. He knew Americans liked to be ahead of the game, especially in the world of fashion and showbiz. He also knew they liked sports and, in California, especially water sports. Victor played basketball himself and had become a fan of The Lakers since setting up home in Pasadena, although he now lived in Del Mar.

Inside the Hudson News store, Victor could see a great many sports magazines next to the girlie ones. He was also very used

to that by now. He knew that sex and sports were the two great American preoccupations and that, while Walter Cronkite might think reading *The New York Times* was like eavesdropping on America talking to itself, it was the popular magazines on the newsstands that gave the truer flavor of what were uppermost on American minds. They provided the best introduction to the American way of life in this country which the older generation of Chinese immigrants still liked to call Gold Mountain.

Victor's searching eyes finally caught what he was looking for. He picked up a copy of the March edition of *PC World*. Computing was Victor's profession now. He had worked with semiconductors and computers throughout his career, ever since he left UCLA, and he was the number four guy in Advanced Computer Systems Inc. based in Newport. He could never be number one, though, and he knew it. Although Anne came from an Irish American family which hailed from Minnesota, although Victor played a good game of basketball and the two of them were members of the Del Mar Country Club and all that, Victor felt he would never be American enough to be made head of the company. He only came to America for graduate studies at the age of twenty-four, when he was no longer young. Although he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from UCLA, an honor for outstanding all-rounders, Victor was not native, or not native enough to be fully at home in the country of his choice. He would always be an Asian-hyphenated-American. He knew that was as far as he would go in American eyes.

Victor had hoped that his children would be more accepted than he was, or at least would feel more accepted than he did, but

he and Anne had no children. This was not for want of trying though. It was just that Victor's sperm count was unusually low. He and Anne tried in-vitro fertilization for two years, but it was to no avail. Then after he turned forty, which was three and a half years ago, he could not see the point any more. He had come to accept that some things might be preordained. No one could argue with God or nature. And Victor was not keen on adopting. Like most ethnic Chinese men, he did not see the need to be a father to someone else's child.

Anne too was not the motherly type. Her Catholic parents divorced when she was twelve, much to everyone's surprise. It was a bitter experience for her mom and it was even more of a bitter experience for her, just when she was becoming aware of herself as a woman. Her only sister Meg, who was twelve years older, had married the year before and moved out. When the shouting around the house between her parents got unbearable, Anne could only find solace in her sister's home where she would go to lose herself in Jane Austen's novels and daydreams.

After she graduated from UCLA, being an editor of children's books was always Anne's first career choice. The world of fiction was more manageable, and infinitely more pleasant, than real people who were, all of them, born with flaws that could not be mended. Even her parents were no exception, and perhaps, she had always feared, she herself as well. And so, Anne decided, even though Victor would like to have a child, if she was not going to bear children, so be it. She was not sure she could be a better parent than her own mom. She always suspected that even with the best intention in the world, parenthood was not something

anybody should take on lightly. It would take two, not just one, good parents to bring up happy, well-adjusted children—and Anne knew that only too well. So many things could go so wrong in the first twelve years, and then you would be blamed, as she had heard said in a Hollywood movie, for “having cheated your children of their childhood.” Anne would not want that to happen to her. If it were God’s will, then she would accept it with good grace. She would not want to go against nature in her youth only to regret what she had done in her old age.

The people Victor now saw most of all were his own parents, whom he had brought over from Taipei to LA after he had married Anne and secured for himself his first management position. Old Mr. and Mrs. Lin were already quite old when they came to live in America and they really liked it in California. It was the spacious bathrooms and modern kitchen in their semi-detached apartment that they felt very comfortable in and attached to, as well as the manicured lawns and well-spaced flower-beds outside their block. Like many East Asians who had settled on the West Coast of America, they loved the clean, spacious flushing toilets of American homes, also the big, well-stocked refrigerators, and the freshly watered lawns with radiant flowers that looked like they had been lavished with tender loving care. Victor’s parents had saved up to send Victor to National Taiwan University. When he won a scholarship to study at UCLA, they were overjoyed. Victor had made them proud and they, in turn, actively encouraged him to go to Gold Mountain to seek his fortune. To be able to live in America was as much their dream as it was his.

Victor really did not need a lot of encouragement. Hollywood movies and American pop music had already done the persuading a long time ago, in his high school days. He really wanted to experience for himself the exhilaration of driving down America's highways in an open-top roadster, surfing the waves coming in from the ocean, playing volleyball on the beach, and slow-dancing with college girls of his age at social gatherings. The New World seemed such a fun place to be. All those things which were not readily available to teenagers in Taiwan could be had in the United States, or so he thought, because he had seen these in the movies. America in the late 1970s and early 1980s was paradise on earth to a great number of young Taiwanese, and being able to study there was an aspiration shared by many of Victor's background, especially his school and college friends. Their generation was almost completely sold on the American dream.

It was at UCLA that Victor met Anne Gavin, an easy-going undergraduate with slightly curly, ash blond hair and eyes that stared straight at you when she spoke, which she usually did with a bemused, engaging look and a half smile. It was Anne's gleaming white teeth that first caught Victor's attention; they were so well-formed she could have been a model for Colgate. And then her lipstick too, which was a most unusual shade between peach and orange that lit up her beautiful oval face. For Victor, whose own front teeth had been knocked out in a basketball match and had to be replaced, the American girl's teeth, her lips and her smile were singularly captivating. And he followed her gladly into Professor Arthur Freedman's modern history and politics class, even though he was a graduate student in computer science at UCLA.

After a few weeks, Anne began to notice Victor, and they first got to know each other socially at a Neil Diamond concert which they attended with other classmates. Strumming his guitar and looking soulful with his hypnotic eyes, the legend of the 1970s belted out the familiar words of his number one hit to his Californian fans—

*LA's fine, the sun shines most of the time,
And the feeling is laid back.
Palm trees grow and rents are low but, you know,
I keep thinking about making my way back.
Well, I'm New York City born and raised,
But nowadays I'm lost between two shores.
LA's fine, but it ain't home.
New York's home, but it ain't mine no more.
"I am," I said, to no one there.
And no one heard at all, not even the chair ...*

Afterwards, still high from the evocative ballad music and literally walking on air with the familiar melodies ringing in his ears, Victor hummed out the Neil Diamond numbers and started to sing as the group walked back to their lodgings. Anne was attracted to his deep singing voice and thought of him as the reliable, dependable type. She also saw in him a sensitive soul with gentle Oriental eyes. Not at all like her own father who had ideas galore and boundless energy, but was volatile and given to sudden mood swings and inexplicable tantrums. She decided there and then that she would like to see Victor again and suggested meeting for a Saturday stroll on Santa Monica State Beach.