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Wives,
Lovers
& Other Women
David Leo

Wives, Lovers & Other Women
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I was shocked at the revelation. Silence ensued and I felt awkward about being drawn into the secret. Uncle Kim Seng had destroyed completely my understanding of the world. For a while, I felt suddenly removed from reality. I needed to re-adjust my focus. Not knowing what else to do or say, I started the engine and pulled the car back onto the road. The windscreen wipers made a terrible, grating noise.

Uncle Kim Seng soon fell asleep and started snoring.

The Other Woman

ANGELA blew out the candles and retired to bed. New Year's Eve and she had been abandoned to spend it alone. Edward had promised to come, but there was no sign of him. She knew that this had to happen some time, but why on New Year's Eve, which she looked forward most to spending with someone special, someone whom she loved? Yes, she loved him, and she believed that he loved her. All the worldly-wise advice that Aunt Agony gave to lovelorn newspaper readers could not have convinced her otherwise. For two years, they had listened together to the ships hooting on the horizon as they watched, from her bedroom window, the display of flares. They were really distress signals, he had told her, but not when fired on New Year's Eve. And when the flares finally faded away and the hoots petered out, they would drink champagne, happy that they were still together, and make passionate love. It was the beginning of another hopeful year.

Angela picked up the telephone. Perhaps she should call him. No, that would not be wise. She was always afraid that someone else would answer. She wished he would call her instead and tell her he would be late. Better late than never. They had

been through some rough times together, and they had fought, but it was always so much sweeter making up, cuddling quietly and obliterating from their souls the ironically excruciating heartaches of being in love.

The telephone rang. She sprang up.

“Hullo?”

It was not Edward.

“No, Jennie, I can’t. I don’t feel like it. No, not that kind of stuff. Say ‘Happy New Year’ to everybody. Okay, okay. Bye.”

Angela had lost many friends since she’d met Edward because she had no time for them. She had enjoyed moving in groups before they met and had tried inducting him, but he was reclusive, feeling awkward and uncomfortable about socialising too much. It was at a management workshop that they had met, where he had been immediately attracted to her charm and intelligence. On the other hand, it had taken a while before she noticed him. He was not handsome, but simple and amiable. He noticed that she was friendly and jubilant, and that she smiled readily. After a week, he decided to pursue her and she accepted his date. They had *ive kacang* at the Ladyhill Hotel, talked about drama and writers, which he professed an interest in but knew little about, and exchanged views about modern-day morality. She charmed him with her insatiable penchant for poetry and literature, and impressed him with an ability to effortlessly quote verses from the works of Shakespeare.

They began seeing each other more and often enough for him to finally invite her to his apartment. It was a simple place and tastefully furnished. He noticed that she was studying a photograph on the display shelf.

“That’s my wife,” he said.

“Oh?” She was disappointed. “I didn’t know you were married.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was afraid you might not want to go out with me if I did.”

“You’re damn right I wouldn’t! No decent woman in her right mind would go out with a married man!” Angela cringed at her own caustic remark. But now that they had dated and grown fond of each other, what next? She felt cheated and it was beginning to hurt. “How long have you been married?”

“Five years. Maybe four. It seems so long ago.”

“Children?”

“One. He lives with her parents.”

“And she lives with her parents too, I presume.”

“No, she lives here. But we don’t see much of each other. She’s always out late with her friends. Partying. We’re different, very different. We don’t even sleep together any more, if you know what I mean.”

“Then why live together?” That was hasty, thought Angela, but only after she had spoken, and wondered if it was at all her business to ask.

“Well, we did talk about a divorce. Her parents entreated us to give the marriage a second chance. They’re Catholic, you know, and very staunch ones too.”

“What about you?”

“I converted.”

“Huh, I see, to get married. Very convenient. And what do you want from me?”

“Friendship. Love.”

“No, no, Edward, you want grounds for a divorce.”

“Why not, if it works out?”

“You’re using me, Edward.”

“No, I’m not. I love you. Angela, I swear I do.”

“Don’t you use that cliché on me. I’m sure you did love whatever-her-name is too, once, didn’t you?”

He kept quiet. As she walked towards the door, he said, “I didn’t love her and I don’t love her. It was a marriage of expedience. She was pregnant. I had to do something about it, and she suggested marriage. I thought love would come afterwards. But it never did. Not even when the baby arrived.”

Poor baby, she thought, and opened the door.

“Let me take you home,” he quickly offered.

“Don’t bother, I can catch a cab.”

“Angela!”

She was already gone.

Angela did not go home but went to the beach at Marine Parade instead. She dug her feet into the sand as she strolled along, shoes in her hand, the water lapping at her feet and a gentle breeze blowing her curly hair over her face. There were ships dotting the horizon. The sun began to sink. Some children were running around under the watchful eyes of their parents. Their innocent laughter was so invigorating and inspiring. She thought about Edward’s child and wondered if his parents,

however strained their relationship, had ever brought him to run on the sand. She imagined a morose child abandoned to a life of loneliness and began to feel for him. She thought Edward and his wife were irresponsible and selfish. If they were not saving their marriage for the child’s sake, then they might as well break up. The little boy might fare better with an understanding step-parent. Strangely, she wished that she knew the child. As the last rays of the sun faded, she heard the anxious voices of parents calling their children away. Young couples soon appeared, looking out to the dark sea and waiting for the stars over their heads to light up. It was time too for Angela to go.

When she arrived, Edward was waiting by her door.

“Hi,” he said, grinning sheepishly.

She unlocked the door.

“Can I come in?”

She did not invite him in but he stepped inside anyway.

The small apartment’s furnishing in trendy black and white with bold dashes of red was a challenge to Edward’s conservatism. When he had first seen it, he had been completely awed by its audacious modernity, not dissimilar to an avant-garde art studio, and felt quite out of place. Everything that he possessed or knew was insipid by comparison. Huge stalks of orange ginger flowers stood out dramatically in a slender, black vase. On other days, they would be pristine white arums. Or, on rare occasions, blood-red tulips, if she could get some from a small supermarket that catered exclusively for expatriates and others who wanted to be different. The sad thing about tulips was that they didn’t last as long as the other less expensive and exotic flowers. But they gave the room a certain aura of dignity and enchantment. While Edward displayed classic prints

of Parisian scenes in his apartment, Angela had a showcase of abstracts in mainly black, white and red. The paintings appeared meaningless, yet they commanded attention. Angela maintained that she had bought them because each of them had a voice which only those who listened could hear. Since then, Edward found himself in constant search of that voice, for a deeper meaning in things that appeared too comfortably plain at first encounter.

She fixed him a whisky on the rocks.

“Thanks,” he said. “What about yourself?”

She edged up to him, then said, “Why are you doing this to me?”

He held her in his arms. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I made a mistake once. A really bad one, I know. Now that I have newfound happiness in what it is like to love and be loved, I don’t want to throw it away so easily and thoughtlessly. Please help me, Angela. I love you, I really do.”

She broke away to make herself a drink. “What’s his name?” she asked over the bar counter. “Your son.”

“Benjamin.”

“Nice name. Will you bring him to meet me?”

“Sure, why not? We can have fun together.”

Angela knew it was too late for her to back out.

*

It was not Angela’s habit to retire early to bed. Of all nights, this happened to be New Year’s Eve. Ten o’clock and the TCS party on Channel 5 had not even begun. She recalled how the

occasion had always been a family affair when Mum would prepare a sumptuous dinner before the children and their cousins hit the discotheques. This was the third year that Angela had missed Mum’s delectable cooking. In fact, Mum had not even asked if she would be coming home for dinner. She had assumed that the young woman would be celebrating the New Year with someone else. The relationship between mother and daughter had been strained ever since Mum learnt that Angela was dating a married man. The old woman had wept for a week. She refused to meet Edward.

“He’s getting a divorce, Mum,” explained Angela.

“That doesn’t alter the fact that he’s already married, Angie. Why don’t you look for a single man? You’re not bad-looking, I’m sure there are plenty of guys out there who will give anything for you. Listen to me, Angie, better a single man than a married man. Less headache later on.”

“That’s not fair, Mum, Edward’s a nice guy.”

“Nice, so what? Can he give you what you want?”

“We’ll get married as soon as he gets a divorce from his wife.”

“It’s not that simple, Angie baby.” Angela hated it when her mother called her a baby. “What about the child?”

“That depends. He’ll come and live with us if Edward is awarded custody.”

“Think again, Angie, before it’s too late.”

“I’ve thought it over many times, Mum. It’s not like I’ve broken up his family. He came to me and we fell in love. You can say that fate had it that way. In fact, I didn’t even know he was married when we started dating.”

“He lied to you and that’s bad.”

“He didn’t actually lie to me. He didn’t want to tell me because he was afraid to lose me.”

“However you see it, he cheated you.”

“He loves me, Mum.”

“That’s what you think, Angie. A man who left his wife will do it again. I beg you, think again.”

“Stop telling me to reconsider, Mum. I’m grown up, I’m mature, I can think for myself. I love Edward and I want to live my life with him. I’m sorry about that, Mum, but that’s the way I want it to be. We’ll get married – and that’s legal – as soon as his divorce is in place. Thank you, Mum, for all the advice but I really can’t see how I could be happy giving him up now. It’s too late now, Mum.”

“Are you pregnant, Angie?”

“No, Mum, I assure you I’m not.” Sometimes she wished that she were, as things might be easier then.

“Then it’s not too late,” said her mother.

“You don’t understand, Mum. We love each other and that’s all that matters. I’m sorry, but I don’t wish to discuss it any further.”

“But Angie...”

“Mum!”

Maybe her mother was right. Edward’s wife, who had agreed to start divorce proceedings, became hysterical when she learnt that he was leaving her for another woman and vowed to fight him to the end. She traced Angela to her office and confronted her one day outside the building where she worked

downtown. It was an embarrassment as the belligerent, wailing woman made a public scene, exhorting Angela to stay away from her husband and threatening to expose her. But Angela refused to be hamstrung by her aggressor’s audacious admonition; she sneered at the latter’s barbarity and walked away apparently unruffled.

“I’m sorry that she embarrassed you,” said Edward when they met afterwards.

It was the first time that Angela had met his wife. “I’m sorry for you, to have married such a person,” she responded condescendingly.

“Well, she’s not exactly the kind of woman you’d be proud to show off to your friends and associates. She’s not like you, Angela.”

“Come on, Edward, you married her. You slept with her. She bore you a child. Your child. Edward, I’m beginning to wonder if one day I’ll be like her. Unstable. Insecure. Jealous. I don’t want to be like her. It’s insulting. Humiliating, to say the least.”

“You’ll never be like her, Angela. You’re a strong person, and that’s something I like about you.”

“I’d rather you convince me that your love would keep me going than console me with the strength of my character.”

“You know that I love you, Angela.”

“That’s better.” Behind the facade of fortitude, her insecurity was beginning to show. Edward’s wife had demonstrated to her how vulnerable a woman could be. It frightened her. “Let’s get married then,” she said. “I want to be your lawful wife, Edward. I want to be able to say without

shame that I am your wife. I want to have children of our own.” She clutched his arms and clung on tightly. They were silent as he held her to his chest, before she resumed with renewed grit, saying, “I don’t want another woman to come between us.”

Angela’s concerns were not unfounded. Desperate and not giving up easily, Edward’s wife took the contest to his boss. The benign Director told Edward that a divorce would jeopardise his prospects for promotion – chances were good that he would be considered for a higher position – and urged him to seriously reconsider what he, the Director, brushed aside as an indiscreet aberration conceived in a moment of human weakness. It would be a pity to throw away a successful career and start all over again, all because of a nebulous thing called love. Angela was saddened and disillusioned that her Prince Charming was no king who would abdicate for the love of a woman, but ideals had no place in the real world if you were neither royalty nor wealthy. Man could not live on love alone. They decided to wait until Edward was promoted.

*

AN hour to the New Year and soon the ships dotting the horizon would be hooting uproariously and setting the sky ablaze with their flares. Though she lived in an apartment fronting the sea, Angela had never really bothered about its significance until she met Edward. Those were the years when she would be somewhere in the heart of town, far away from the coast, celebrating with friends. It was Edward who raised her level of awareness to the loneliness of separation and isolation, and to the beauty of attempts to communicate and interact, however remote. He had told her that when two people fell in love, they were like two ships on the vast ocean exchanging hoots and

firing flares on New Year’s Day. The allegory was not quite romantic, but Angela liked it. It was imaginative and original. She only wished that the ships had drawbridges connecting them to each other.

After two years of ushering in the New Year together, Angela was not prepared to listen to the hoots of the ships alone. She feared the heraldry of gloom and doom as the ships would then part and go their separate ways after the flares dissipated. She would rather that they remain silent, for once, and steer away unannounced. Such were the sweet sorrows of lovers parting, sacred and pure, unadulterated by the pomp and razzmatazz that seemed so crass, redundant and stupid when it was finally over. Angela swallowed two tablets of Mogadon and soon fell asleep.

When she awoke, Edward was lying beside her.

“Happy New Year,” he said, nudging up and kissing her. She could feel the warmth of his naked body and his passion bursting beneath his skin. In his quiet way, he was a fervent lover. “I noticed that you were tired so I didn’t want to wake you up. The ships were hooting away very noisily.”

“So I missed the boat, did I?”

He wrapped his arms round her.

After a short while, she asked, “Where were you last night?”

He rolled away and lay on his back. “I had to go to the hospital,” he said.

“The hospital? Who’s fallen ill?”

“She. My wife.”

Angela sat up abruptly. She looked Edward in the eyes and wondered if he still loved his wife. “What’s wrong with her?” she asked, jealous and displeased.

“Threatened abortion. She’s pregnant.”

Angela drew away, disgusted and repulsed.

“Please listen to me, Angela.” He touched her and she broke away, violently. “I was drunk and she made me do it.”

It was the painful moment of truth. How much longer would she be contented to remain the other woman in his life? The tears came quietly, but Angela was quick to pull herself together in a taciturn display of unswerving fortitude, the one characteristic that Edward had said he admired her for. She was composed but he became jittery.

“I don’t love her,” he swore. “It’s you I love, Angela.”

Those had become meaningless words, like the hoots and the flares. Outside the window, the sky was breaking slowly into light. Morning had arrived, at last, after what seemed to be the longest night in Angela’s short love life.

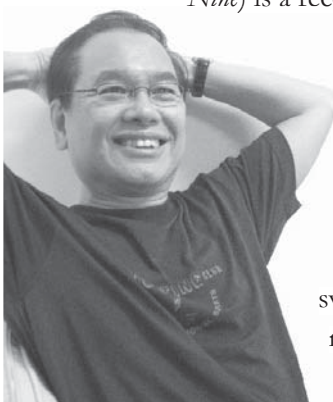
Grandma

I FOUND Grandma sitting pensively on an overused, discoloured rattan chair in the courtyard where three families once carried out their domestic chores. Only our family remained. In those boisterous days, the women used it as an extended kitchen and for washing and drying their clothes, taking advantage of the sunlight. In the evening, they gathered round for a yarn, with rattan fans in their hands if the air was still and the heat of day lingered on. There were so many stories to tell. The courtyard also served as a children’s playground because of its enclosed nature. There was even a small vegetable plot, but nobody except Grandma bothered to tend it. Her pride was a lime tree that never ceased to sprout. Throughout the year, myriad little white flowers adorned the tree before they transformed into glossy dark green limes. The women helped themselves generously to the crop for their cooking. During the Chinese New Year festivities, they were placed on red paper in little plates, which were then displayed on every tabletop in the house to symbolise an abundance of good fortune. Because of the copious crop, some of the fruit was left on the tree to turn yellow before finally dropping to the ground.

About the author

David Leo has produced a wide repertoire of works that include poetry and prose.

He was awarded the Publisher's Prize for fiction (*Ab...the Fragrance of Durians & Other Stories*), NBDCS commendation (*The Sins of the Fathers & Other Stories*) and Singapore Literature Prize commendation (*Wives, Lovers & Other Women*). A fourth collection of short stories (*News At Nine*) is a recommended secondary school text.



Between books, Leo writes commentaries on a wide range of subjects but specialises in aviation and customer service as a freelance columnist.

He enjoys travelling, swimming and word puzzles. A nature lover, he abhors cruelty to animals.

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Somewhere A Tiny Voice

One Journey, Many Rivers

Identity

Ubin Dreaming (You've Been Dreaming)

Short Stories

Ab...The Fragrance of Durians & Other Stories

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Kiasu, Kiasi, You Think What?

Life's so like Dat

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