

## Love Child

Heather Fowler

I am the hypothetical child of two people who love each other dearly. My mother Mei-Mei “Tracy” Ming is a tiny Mandarin woman, born in China. Her stature, small as her heart is large, tracks her at less than five-two, and most days, she sports expensive conservative clothes several sizes too big. “I am a medium or large,” she says when asked. “More comfortable.”

She speaks quiet English with proper enunciation just slightly tainted by her lifetime of Chinese. Because she is good with numbers, she is an accountant. Because she was raised wealthy, she buys Louis Vuitton purses and Ferragamo shoes. She was brought to the United States as a teen, but raised traditional Chinese. Immaculately professional, like most high-class Chinese, her face displays scant emotion; accordingly, you could work with her a year and never hear a single personal remark unless specifically requesting one, but even if you did, you’d find immediately that her every plan revolves around her family, as do her obligations.

In the pile of obligations, there is her daughter, and her husband, and her mother, and her father. She has one sister and one brother. Her life is so together, it’s hard to believe there was ever anything risky attached to it anywhere, any dark clouds, any strange fits or starts with the thing called dark love, but here I am.

I am the undeniable secret made true by the fact that, somehow, in some tangible way, I continue to exist. The why of my existence began long ago. Imagine her body younger, her hair pulled back in a student’s pony tail, her tailored clothes painting her as industrious and ready for the best of futures. Growing up in the upper-crust of Chinese Americans, she lived in both the swell society of up-and-coming Mandarins and the world of undisciplined American children.

She learned English quickly, to speak it only when necessary. Her parents came to America to succeed in the catering business, which they did, quite well, and she had never gone without. The baby of the family, the delicate girl, they indulged her every whim, even paid for a college degree that almost caused the ruin of their careful planning for her future. She fell in love in those buildings of higher learning, you see, which they would have supported, but she chose the wrong boy.

His American name was Andrew. He was tall and handsome, also Chinese. He was smart, but not well-off. “Not the right kind of Chinese,” her mother said after she’d met him. “Stop seeing him.” His family had the wrong background. There was no way they could condone the match, but in some ways, by then, it was already too late. Love had blossomed. Mei Mei had walked with Andy beside the shore of the local bay, watched the sway of the palms with a swelling heart, and shared many quiet evenings beneath the moon. Already, they had dined at countless restaurants, and she had kissed him, when she kissed him for the first time, to feel her blood bloom like roses in her head, then learning what it was to know that someone else could change the very shape of her day with a simple calming tone. For his part, he loved her madly, in ways he had never imagined. The two had an unspoken connection, as if by telepathy. Because she couldn’t bear the possibility that her parents might reject him, or because she suspected they might reject him, they basked a long while in their love before she announced his existence, Tracy stalling him many times after he had first said he wanted to meet her family, saying “No,” each time, and “Let’s wait a while longer.”

As always with great hope and happiness, there was great fear of failure. She did not admit to herself or him that she knew her parents would reject him, save for her continued willingness to delay introductions. Thus, he would wait one more month during their courtship where, by day, she attended classes and met him for quick trysts, but, by night, she went home to her parents to study and eat.

By the time her mother pronounced he would not be the one, she had almost fooled herself into believing he was. When she looked at him, love swam back, it seemed there was nowhere but together for them to be. After Tracy protested her parent’s refusal, after the first meeting, her mother said emphatically, repeating herself in Mandarin, in almost childlike language, “Not him! Not the right kind of Chinese!”

And Tracy was supposed to, she was told, be a good Chinese girl, stay in her room, study and rest there, and then end any and all affiliation with him. “I love you Mei Mei,” her mother said, cooking scallions. “But this man is not for this family.”

Tracy cried and mooned, but when she next saw Andy, she told him they were not to see each other again because of her family. “My parents,” she said, “will not allow the match.”

“But Mei Mei,” he said, his smooth face breaking. “I love you. I can’t *not* see you.”

“Except, I am a dutiful daughter,” she said, eyes pressed to the tile. “To see you is to dishonor them after they’ve told me no. Please, don’t talk to me. It makes it worse.” She wore a long angora scarf and touched its soft edges as she said this, thinking of how the scarf was like his face just after he had shaven. She thought, too, of his breath, soft and warm on her lips just before he kissed her—and how his hair felt when she stroked it with passion, staring into his green, clear eyes. But as she left that day, it was him who cried, him who knelt and said, “I can’t let you go. I know you love me, too.”

“We aren’t white people, Andrew,” she said. “We can’t do as we please.”

This is exactly when the idea of me stirred into being.

Andrew tried to stay clear of her; he did. But it was like a man in the desert, trying to stay clear of the only oasis in miles, like Chinese New Year without dragons or glossy red. He couldn’t accept her loss, was desperate to see her, or hear from her, and have her back.

If viewed separately in the coming days and weeks, both seemed parts of the same tragic picture, split frames of misery, wandering around campus with black unruly hair, red-rimmed eyes, and quiet demeanors. Both seemed dull in waking hours, lit up only by fantasies of the other, of holding each other, should they find themselves daydreaming at stationary posts in the libraries or halls. And neither knew which places to avoid, so both avoided any places in which either had ever been, while simultaneously hoping for accidental encounters or dreaming big dreams of a different life that might include the other. If either or both were asked, “What do you want most?” the other’s name rushed forth without pause, yet, each wore his or her gray face around the world as if drained of good destiny, as if gone astray. They bored and terrorized their friends with their misery.

One day, after Andrew heard recent reports from mutual friends that Tracy, too, was morose, he could not accept what she told him, skipped his midterm, and snuck along the side of her house like a thief for her window. He felt like an age-old lover. “Run away with me,” he said. “Let’s meet at the courthouse tomorrow and get married! I love you so much! Your parents will have to accept me then. I want to make a life with you, Mei Mei. My life. Our life together.”

She took his hand, lacing her tiny fingers into his. She said nothing. She thought: duty, family, obligation, impossibility, fatigue. She did not say no, but her silence was her refusal as his face, in her eyes, grew the ghostly color of moonlight. She kept holding his hands, which were cold. He’s dead already, she thought, dead to me and gone. Through

their fingertips, the idea of me flowed. She stared at him and he returned her stare until he was sure of two things—the first, that she would have married him if any part of her could bear betraying her parents, and the second, that she would never voluntarily betray her parents. They had raised her kindly, with love, had raised her with honor, to obey them, so there would be no leaving their house. Not with him. Not in college. Not afterwards until she married someone they wanted. She would do exactly as they dictated.

“Say you will come tomorrow,” he argued. “I will go to that courthouse and if you truly love me, you’ll see this is best way and that they will forgive you. This is the rest of our lives, Mei Mei! What am I saying? I know you love me. So come. I’ll be there tomorrow. I’ll wait for you.”

He didn’t want to hear her refuse, so ducked off into the night, but the next day he waited at the courthouse, wearing a gray suit with a purple rose tucked into his lapel, carrying a red bridal bouquet, waited three hours in misery. Everyone at the courthouse stared at him, mirroring his happy then declining mood, at first reflecting optimism at his hope and joy—and then noticing, as the flowers wilted, as he sat dejectedly, that he would not be met by anyone and staring with pity. Eventually, when the courthouse closed, clerks rushing out into traffic, he left, hating her, loving her. She had ruined him.

Shortly thereafter, he grew suicidal. His family noticed immediately. Her family noticed as they found him at their front door one day, begging her mother, “Please let me see her. I will love her and provide. I will be wealthy. Just you see!”

“No,” her mother said.

To protect him, or help him reject loving Tracy, his own parents then sent him to China. “Plenty of girls in China,” his father teased. “You only need one.”

Tracy’s parents echoed this, said, “Move on. Find a nice boy.”

They said this until she did. In time, she married her current husband, primarily because they approved, and he had courted her a year, though in that year, through the back veil of her depression, she felt nothing, felt like walking into traffic or as if she would never feel with sincerity again, living like a storm cloud floated constantly abovehead.

But the new boy did not care. He felt she was the one. He would take her damaged or injured. His family wanted him to marry her, too.

Because she felt nothing, she accepted this new marriage proposal, but it was only several years later when she realized that his doting did not fulfill her in a way that resembled true love and that, more than likely, she would not ever be happy in this match. The new husband was kind; he was a good man, but he was not Andrew. She grew a shrew. She had

to remind him many times about each task she wanted accomplished: sweep the kitchen, clear the driveway, finish the landscaping. He was not intuitive. When she'd ask him to get her a jacket on a blustery afternoon, he did this without question, but he would not have, as Andrew would have, already placed a jacket for her in his car in case of such a situation. Still, he made good money. He did not hit her. For his part, in his secret heart, he had perhaps dreamt of her as his perfect wife so treated her in that exact way.

And he was the "right kind of Chinese." Things could be worse. She hoped she would grow happier. Andrew was gone. He was good and gone. Years passed. In the intervening time, she received a second degree. She bought a house. She tried to fit in with her new husband's family, though she often feared his mother stole her jewelry, especially the jade. With him, her kind husband, she had afternoons on vacations and Dim Sum at restaurants—and yet I hovered. I was a quiet sound in the background, a stereo turned up just loud enough to make murmur when all other things were quiet. When she turned thirty five, she and the right husband had a child, only because he wanted one so much and because she could not expect him to wait any longer. He was the one who craved such things.

To prove this, he spent hours researching each major purchase. He coddled and catered to her throughout her late pregnancy and he was, without a doubt, the most interested father she'd ever met. After their daughter was born, Tracy spent time with him, their daughter, and her parents, enjoying how everyone doted on the ray of sunshine that developed into a happy little child named Lisa. Their daughter grew into a toddler.

During this time, I was almost forgotten, as if kept in a closet where brooms and dusty old fixtures gathered with broken light bulbs and decaying cleaning supplies. She hardly noticed me or called out to me at all until Andrew came back into town for a sudden business trip, when something in her awoke to remember.

At a planned dinner with friends, when her daughter and husband were gone elsewhere, he reappeared. They sat across from each other. Both had aged a decade. His face, in the first second she perceived him, was foreign, but when she adjusted to his changes, she was back in his reach immediately. A spark the size of Taiwan shot through her. Her hands shook.

"Hello, Andrew," she said, her face revealing no turmoil.

"Tracy," he replied.

She'd heard from acquaintances he had done very well in China, that he'd become extremely successful, but never married. Even this gossip had felt easy to handle when it came from a distance, but seeing him in front of her brought the pain of their separation rushing back. On a trip to the restroom, half-way through dinner, she accused her friend Anna,

“How could you have let me show up, without telling me Andy would be here? You knew how he affected me, Anna! How could you let me walk into this?”

“He’s our friend, too, Tracy,” Anna said. “Besides, he wanted to see you, but I knew that if we told you he’d be here, you wouldn’t come. Besides, it’s been a long time. Can’t you just pretend he is an old friend?”

“No.”

Tracy returned to the table, her heart sinking. As everyone ate, Andrew asked her questions about her new life. “So you’re married,” he said. “Are you happy?”

“What is happiness?” she replied. “Sometimes I am. I have a fine life.”

His arm brushed hers. He was dressed like a wealthy Shanghai man, silk suit, silk tie. “It’s nice to see you,” he said.

“You doing well?” she replied.

Between the two, though hardly anything had been spoken in front of the larger group, a much more intricate discussion took place. As it had always been, she felt he could see through her to push past her casual replies, and almost hear her heart’s rhythm below her chest.

Afterwards, she left early from dinner and drove alone to the place they used to meet. Brisk air greeted her as she strode the bay, and then she sat still on a bench, on their old bench, for a long time before driving home. She went home. Her real daughter needed tending. Her husband awaited her.

A few days later, Anna called to ask where she’d gone that evening after dinner. Tracy told her: the bay.

“No way!” Anna replied. “He went there, too. The same night! You must have just missed each other!”

Tracy felt ill. They had been walking in the same place, likely visited the same bench. When she was alone, slowly, with care, I was taken from the broom closet and dusted off. I was groomed and kissed and then placed back on the shelf.

Her absent face in coming days told others she ceased to exist in her present. After the meeting with Andrew, for many weeks, she was quiet, though sometimes, very rarely, you could hear her talking on her office phone in terse Chinese to her mother or her sister, who spoke of unrelated things, but she could not keep up with them. She thought of Andy, and somehow, she knew, he was also thinking of her.

The next week, he called and arranged for a meeting. “I must see you,” he said. “Just once before I go. Will you meet me at the restaurant above the bay? For lunch? My flight leaves at two.”

She almost said no, but changed her mind. “Yes. I’ll go.”

For once in her life, she said yes! She did not tell her parents or anyone. At this meeting, she wanted to tell Andrew that she had moved on, that she was sorry for the past, but wanted closure. She'd tell him to avoid her, to please avoid her. She'd say all these things, but try to ignore that it bothered her so much that he had made no family of his own, that her parents' had been wrong and he had long since reached a pinnacle of success they thought impossible, that she still loved him—while she had instead married someone she lived with like a stranger, whom she'd had a child with too late in life, and whom she had lived with and married for every possible wrong reason except duty.

She would say, "Let me go. Let me be." At the restaurant, she arrived on time in a green dress, deciding she owed him timeliness, at least, if she were to refuse to see him or hear from him. It relieved her that he would only have an hour before needing to go to the airport, so this small secret meeting would lead to nothing. She had nothing to feel guilty about! And how difficult could one hour be, she wondered—but when she got there, she was told he'd opted for a later flight so they'd have more time. Several hours stretched before them.

At the restaurant, they sat and talked. Afterwards, they strolled around, looking at a nearby lighthouse and beautiful view from the cliffs. "Why," she asked finally, "did you never marry?"

He reached across the railing and touched her hand, his fingers shaking. "You know," he said, as she swore she heard him think: Because I loved you too much.

"You have many secretaries now," she said to the breeze beside him. "You're handsome, successful. Could have married long ago!"

"I will marry," he said. "When the time is right. I hear you're making a trip to China in May. Come see me in Shanghai. I'll be there."

"I can't," she said. "My trip will be too busy."

"You can," he said. "If you want to."

"I won't," she said. "I can't see you anymore. I told you I need closure. It's not good for us to see each other. I can't—"

"You will come see when you're there," he replied, "if only because you know it is good, this thing between us. Please don't deny me."

From that moment until she left for China, she thought of him. "I was fine until he showed up again," she confided to an American friend. "But now I'm a mess." She hazily sketched out the situation as it had gone down and finally concluded, "I'd moved on with my life. Why does he show up now?"

“You have to see him in Shanghai!” the friend said. “It’s destiny!”

“I’m old,” Tracy replied. “I’m married. I have a daughter. It’s no use. And there’s too much between us for any kind of normal friendship. He taught me passion and now I drown in it! Drown!”

She was too consumed by emotion; it flew from her though she did not cry.

“You, old?” her friend said. “Don’t you think you deserve to see him? You two can sit there in your pained Chinese ways, staring at each other, at least.”

Tracy did not say that she knew she could not sit across from him again without immediately falling into his arms, or weeping. “I often wonder what would have happened,” she replied, “if I had met him at the courthouse... But I chose against that. I made my choice.”

“Would you choose differently now?” the friend asked.

“No. Things could have been no other way.”

“So, an affair? What about enjoying just one weekend together to see?” There was no salaciousness in this question, only care.

“I can’t,” Tracy said. “I need to forget him. My daughter Lisa will be five in June. My life is set in stone walls. If I was American, I could think of those things, but in Chinese families—those things don’t happen. Besides, I am happy. Sometimes. My husband is a fine man, very good. And the Chinese don’t get divorced without a very good reason. I’ve had a child now... Nothing can change unless my husband were to die...but that will be years from now—not that I should get hopeful. It’s already too late as it stands. I will not see Andrew in China.”

Until she boarded the flight, she tried to put everything out of her mind. Even after she arrived, she had no plans to engineer a meeting, was trying to do the right thing, but fate had a way of intervening. She could not know this in advance.

Besides, Shanghai was a big city. She was to meet her best friend from schooldays and shop for jade, good tea, and other luxuries. This was all. They were to see old acquaintances and spend time reliving the past. Everything would be fine.

Before she left, she tried desperately to seem happy at home and had hoped to convince herself this was true before arriving in China, but had only convinced herself that she could not get Andrew out of her head—and that talking with old friends might not be a good idea. Here again, she thought of me, about what I might have been. She wanted to pretend I never existed, but she could not. Often between activities, she was found staring off into space and dreaming of uncertainties.



It was a busy day at the market, the day she was to leave China. This was when she finally saw Andrew emerge from a tea shop with business acquaintances. They could not have known they would find each other this way. Tens of thousands streamed in and out of various market stalls and the likelihood of two people finding each other in China, without advanced planning, in a place such as this, was staggeringly small.

She had stepped outside at the precise moment he had, only to look for her friend, who had not yet appeared for lunch. He had been about to return to his office. When he saw her, he made rapid excuses to his companions and gestured that he would catch up with them later.

“I’m leaving today, Andrew,” she told him when they stood face to face, thronged by the crowds.

“What time?” he replied.

“Four.”

“I’ll meet you at the airport at two,” he said. “To see you off.”

She did not argue. She felt a strong pull towards his hands, towards his face. “I’ll board flight 8858.” She said. “My friend is coming now.”

The airport would be safe, she decided, a place where she could shut things off once and for all. She could repeat that they must move on, perhaps ask again that he not tell her friends when he would come to her city, and request that he avoid her in all possible ways because to talk to him disturbed her. When he arrived at the terminal, she said all of these things and more. He listened. “But you should take my number in Shanghai,” he said. “In case you change your mind. I am not asking you to cheat on him. Perhaps we can at least be friends?”

For the second time in their lives, she clasped his hands and said nothing. This time, she cried. How, she wondered, did you say to someone that their face was too dear, too beloved to be a friendship face? That to see them or hear from them was a precarious dagger in a wounded heart that had never healed?

She sat at the small bar table adjacent to her boarding gate and cried silently as she had when he stood at her window, as though nothing had changed in twenty years, and yet everything had changed. For him, it was her eyes that finally made it clear why she could not see him: Because she still wanted him. Because to look at him was to feel ignited passion. Because to be near him was to be torn apart: Save me, preserve me, let me live my life in peace, and let me be, her eyes said. My choices have been hard enough.

When she leaned in close to say goodbye, it was as though, finally, he understood, but he forced himself to look away because their faces had grown too close, because he would kiss her if this continued, because there was no honorable

path. Before she boarded, they embraced one last time, stiffly, and though he said nothing further, as the embrace continued, his eyes filled and his body shook.

I was so close then, so close...

To help him or help herself, she leaned away.

And you may say I could never come to be from such a scenario, and that neither he nor she would ever act on this passion again, or even possibly that, in that very moment, due to extenuating and realistic circumstances, I was lost then to the place where the gone go because half of me then, what I imagine to be her egg, already in utero, dropped. Then his sperm, my other half, lost its frontal proximity through her motion of releasing him as his wet eyes blinked and his body and my mother's came apart, but it was in that instant that I became only a small trace of a feasible reality, yet because their love did not die, this small part of me survived.

Here is how it was: I never did grow chronologically like her real daughter into a beautiful teen and then a bright, successful woman. Because Tracy is now aged past the days of childbirth, she long ago ceased to age me in her mind beyond twenty. Often, when she thought of me, she imagined me as a small infant that would have been conceived either had she attended that courtroom that day or later committed some gross indiscretion in Shanghai. She did neither.

But somewhere, in the back of her head, in an area annexed for unfathomable thoughts, she created me a pink and teal bedroom, bought me silk gowns, and imagined my features and young person's dream future like the ones she conceived of for herself, in her own childhood. In her secret place of gray matter, she created a long-limbed girl whose smile enticed Chinese boys. My skin was hers, too, so she imagined I was sensitive like her, that only fine jewelry could land against my ears or throat. As a child, she's always known I would have spoken teasingly but respectfully to her, yet ate heartily like him. I am forever zero, two, six, or sixteen, and she is comfortable with that. She loves her own daughter enormously, but I harbor no jealousy. I am gelatinous. Only an idea. An accessory to both their loves.

As for my father, he never married, so has no children with which to compare me, but in his mind, I live, too, as a headstrong, fortunate man, born in the year of the dragon. I own her dimples and sharp intelligence and am someone he imagines training, learning from, and discussing photography with over years of rising and falling light, imagined breakfasts, and green tea on Shanghai patios.

In his mind, I live in China, as does she, with him. I am the oldest child, designated to carry his honor, the light of his life and the soul of his pride, second in importance only to my mother, who, in this fantasy world, sleeps with him every

night, listening to him snore and stroking his back as her young hand did once, years ago, at the university. His house is full of the noise of voices.

Though, in reality, he is old and wealthy now—when he dreams about what might have been, they are both still young and in love and he fantasizes about holding her in a tiny apartment for a long, slow dance at the end of a busy day. He knows he would be poorer to this day, likely, had he never left her, never worked slavishly to avoid humanity and wives for so many years, and perhaps, he would never have achieved his current level of back-breaking success, but money is not everything. He knows what means more, what would have. Mei Mei. Tracy of the graceful hands and soft voice, of the thin dear frame so much like an envelope crushed against his own.

Because all memories or hazy fantasies he creates involve a similar shifting of their bodies front to front, his and hers, endlessly, over the years, until I—the sole fruit of his mind's conjectures—eventually grow up and become the sullen, trying one who would put wrinkles on their aging faces, changing their worlds together entirely. But who am I?

My face does not settle into any recognizable pattern. I am male, or I am female. I am the hypothetical child of a union of great love, a burning pain and star witness at once, the kiss he could not take as she left to board her plane for America, or the last lingering touch of her face he dared not steal, perhaps anything ever held out before either of them, yet too quickly retracted, and the moment Tracy considered, with light breath, going to the courthouse—before she decided not to: I am a special force, a shadow of a dream, the only nostalgic vessel left to be filled with their regret.

In scope, I am an enormous baby/girl/boy/teen/woman/man/idea, and were I an ocean, despite the years of separation, I would bridge the gap between them. I would pull them back together despite everything. I would be their child, beloved with a fiery love. I would enflame their pride. In short, I'd be exactly what they always wanted, and they know this.

Because I am their child, I might be every child they have ever seen in the swells at the shore of a foreign bay when, even for a moment, they could become in that golden light who they might have been or might have been together as they drift off into fantasy to feel light again, happy again, lost in that moment to catch them unaware that then extracts its own heavy fee of their reawakening to reality as the returning sharp price for indulging mad hopes that were never set free. For Andrew and Tracy. For Andy and MeiMei, her dear, his love.

For even when they are old, wrinkled, and dry, like now, like tomorrow, I am the ever-present view of what they might have created, had they only had the time, the child between them who endures each's own immaculate conception

fantasy to join their two lives—and yes, both know me. In their own ways, they do, but for both, I am their perfect and startling combination. I am their sparkling love. I am a life without intervention, and no matter who I am, they know me well, even as doddering old fools, for they still sigh when they chance to think of me now, sad for them, sad for me, for who I could have been instead of just a presence of a dream—and in these spare moments, when one or another stares off into space and appears to be somewhere else, yes they are in my closet, dusting me off, shining me up—for I am the zenith of their thwarted love, and I am real.

\*\*\*