

THE UNSPEAKABLE

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What constitutes a ‘proper’ or ‘acceptable’ relationship has long been an important moral question in East Asian society; it is in the genetic code of the culture. In their efforts to maintain appropriate relationships, people, especially women, suffer from the pain caused by repressed lust and hidden desires. In these eight stories, single career women looking for love to married middle-age women tempted by lust must conceal their feelings and desires, the things they cannot disclose openly, and that make them ashamed. They find themselves transgressing social norms simply by making honest choices, whether they are in Taiwan, China or America. Their struggles are as much internal as external, a reflection of the contradiction between an individual’s choices and the outside world’s expectations, which are often internalised. The result is a collection of stories that surprises as well as resonates in their inner conflicts.

Having spent many years living abroad, Belinda Chang’s writing displays a sharpness of observation and a different perspective from most of her peers in Taiwan. Her characters are rooted in their different settings and yet speak across borders with a universally shared humanity.

Belinda Chang 章緣

Belinda Chang was born in Taiwan in 1963. She started publishing stories while living in New York City and won several literary awards in Taiwan. She has since published six collections of short stories, two novels, and one collection of essays. Chang’s works have been included in various literary anthologies, taught in colleges, and translated into English.

After some fifteen years of living in America, in 2005, she and her family moved to Shanghai, China. The experience of living in various countries and cultures has given Chang’s work its characteristic complexity and depth.



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By Belinda Chang. Translated by Eleanor Goodman.

Illicit Affairs

Here's how it is: there are certain experiences you just can't understand unless they happen to you.

At the time, she was living in a small New Jersey town near the Washington Bridge. It only took ten minutes to drive over to New York City, so she was one of many commuters who lived there. She worked in a lawyer's office as a high-level assistant, mostly helping Chinese apply for American citizenship, and although she was just an assistant, the applicants trusted her, since most of them spoke no English.

The dearest wish of those anxious applicants—who worked for next to nothing in restaurants or in the homes of rich Chinese—was to become citizens as quickly as possible so as to enjoy American wealth and find more respectable work. 'Sophia,' each would say to her with a toadying smile, 'do me a favour and find out how the application is going?' But the application invariably turned out to have problems. Sometimes it was that they hadn't fulfilled the immigration office's requirements. Sometimes the lawyer found an excuse to raise his fees. And sometimes the applicant was just unlucky.

Sophia and Hsiao had had a much easier time of it. By the time she arrived in America from Taiwan, her parents had long since immigrated to San Jose. They helped her get a green card, which she received on her first visit to the country. When she went back to Taiwan, she married her college sweetheart, and they moved to New York together to go to graduate school and then take jobs. That was why Hsiao could get citizenship much faster than their other friends. Citizenship based on marriage. She had dealt with many such applications, mostly older American men marrying Chinese women twenty years their junior. The women received temporary green cards, and then could apply for permanent status after two years.

Since there was a lot of fraud in such situations, these applications underwent close examination. She'd seen applications rejected because the man was so old he couldn't answer the questions properly. When the woman heard the result, she would invariably come into the office and sob until she lost her breath and her face turned bright red.

The case that had left the deepest impression on her was that of Huang Chuan, a rather attractive forty-three year-old woman from Suzhou with a high school education. Given her lithe figure, the immigration officer guessed she was no more than thirty, but she was planning to marry Mr Chiu, a seventy-year old Taiwanese man. As they filled out the paperwork, she had told Huang Chuan that she couldn't guarantee the application's success. Applying with the help of a lawyer was an expensive and risky strategy for anyone, but with the huge disparity in age and appearance, their case would be even harder than usual. Mr Chiu had once had a skin disease, and his face and neck were covered with coffee-colored spots that couldn't be hidden behind clothing. In contrast, Huang Chuan had fine porcelain skin that stretched smoothly across her small heart-shaped face. She had delicate eyebrows and fine lips below a small beauty mark. She still displayed a youthful elegance. It seemed strange that she would end up destitute in New York, marrying some frog of an old man.

Huang Chuan's application was rejected, and the lawyer helped them apply again, telling her they must refine their answers further. They would be interviewed separately and asked things like

the other's brand of toothpaste and favorite foods and clothing size. She gave a pile of practice questions to Huang Chuan and told her to go home and practice. Huang Chuan sighed and said, 'I'm afraid Chiu can't remember stuff like that.' In the first interview, the immigration officer had asked Mr Chiu whether his wife had any surgical scars and he had said no. But Huang Chuan's stomach had a noticeable scar from a caesarian section she'd undergone during her previous marriage.

What did your wife eat last night? When did you last have sex? What's her favourite coffee? Setting aside loveless marriages, even couples like her and Hsiao wouldn't have been able to answer some of the questions. They had long since stopped paying attention to such things. Over time, the important details of their lives had become blurred, like brightly coloured clothing that had faded in the wash. One's tastes and hobbies and bodies also changed until there were no real answers for such questions. Did one really have to know every little thing about one's partner, the details stored in a constantly updating database, before one could have a legitimate marriage?

Huang Chuan furrowed her brow. 'Isn't it unfair? I've spent the last two years with him, every single day from morning till night.' Her voice lowered to a whisper, 'An old man like him...'

By 'an old man like him,' she didn't just mean the man she'd married, but the category of old men in general. An impotent old abstinent man. There were also a few cases where young men married older women, but it was less common. Those cases very rarely got through, since both Chinese and Americans expected the man to be the older of the pair.

Who was worse off: men who married older women, or women who married older men?

She was two years younger than Hsiao, and they had gotten together in college. A similar age, appearance, education—that was the most normal pairing. Although it was 'normal,' that didn't mean they hadn't undergone some trials. They had no children. Hsiao had two older brothers and a younger sister, so his family didn't care much if their third child overseas had children or not. At holiday get-togethers, someone might say something about it, but their gossip would recede into the background when she and Hsiao returned to America. When a woman reached forty, if she didn't already have children, she probably never would, and time further muffled the gossip. The Chinese character for 'happiness' was pasted on a piece of red silk, and they draped the silk over themselves to prevent prying comments about passing down the family name, unnecessary sympathy, and the eyes of busybodies. She and Hsiao held onto each other as though they were the only two people in the world, and that was the way they would grow old together in America. They'd buy a farm in Florida, or move to sunny San Jose to take care of her aging mother, and live off of their retirement savings and social security. They would spend their last happy years enjoying their favorite hobbies. (For Hsiao, that was chess and golf, while for her it was gardening and swimming.)

Never having had children left her with the misconception that she was still in her prime. Approaching forty, she still made herself up like a thirty year-old, and her figure was svelte. She would always be a girl, and would never make the leap (or take the fall) into motherhood. When she stood on that opposite shore and looked back at the world, she wouldn't be curious about that other life. 'A mother is like the moon,' went the lullaby, but moonlight is cold. And so old age waited next door, just around the next corner. Today was youth, tomorrow was old age, with none of those interim ten years in between of raising children. There was no younger generation to bring up, the cacophony and responsibilities one both loved and hated, that sense that one's life would be continued. She was just one person floating through the ether. Women who become mothers grow old feeling justified in their own lives (having used their flesh and blood and youth to nourish their children), while she had to sleep in the bed she'd made and grow old alone.

She always fell asleep with a suspicion that she might wake up the next day already old. It was most obvious after she turned thirty-five, when each week passed as though in a blink and the weekends she used to fervently anticipate came in quick succession like free gifts with a purchase. If Hsiao wasn't playing golf, they would take a drive out of the city, or go to one of the neighbouring

states to have lunch in a small town diner. Sometimes they would pass by a little vacation cabin by a lake encircled by mountains, with a wooden dock leading out to the water where children in floaties jumped into the swimming area yelling and splashing happily. Why not grow old in a place like that! She liked water, even though she wouldn't have any grandchildren to bob around in it in swan-shaped floaties, and she would never swim with a small, light body on her back as her father had with her. But Hsiao liked big stretches of grass and he wanted to grow old in a retirement community beside a golf course. So they argued in the car on the weekends, until one of them got too tired to come up with another retort.

Where and with whom had Hsiao recently been golfing? Why hadn't they had children? What would they do when they eventually retired? She and Hsiao always came up with different answers.

On the phone her mother told her that she had found a housemate. She'd been encouraging her mother to do so for some time. Her father had died three years previously, and she knew that her mother was nervous about living alone. Her mother had always been afraid of the dark, and a few times she had complained about strange noises in her room, especially when the night outside was particularly black. Her neighbours were all white. The only Chinese in the neighbourhood had lived a few blocks away, and they used to invite her mother over for barbecues in the summer, but then they moved away. Now her mother's activities were all centred on the senior centre. She would drive herself there, or to the nearby library. Her mother had aged gracefully, with the soft voice of a girl and a dainty figure. With her Japanese education, she insisted on not leaving the house until she had made herself up, saying that it was only proper to wear makeup. She recalled her mother always wearing makeup. When she went to work for a foreign company and then when they moved to America, she was always well put together whenever she left the house. At first, she wondered why her sixty-something mother still paid so much attention to her appearance. She couldn't really even apply eyeshadow on her wrinkled eyelids. It wasn't until she visited the senior centre that she realised her mother was comparatively young and good-looking.

Monday through Friday her mother had lunch at the centre as one of her social security benefits. The lunch was cheap, and had meat, vegetables, milk, and fruit. It saved her the inconvenience of shopping and cooking for herself. Her mother always sat at the same table by the door. There were two other regulars at the table: John, an older gentleman who wore a checker-patterned hat in all seasons, and Jake, a jokester who liked to read detective stories. They were both widowers and they sat on either side of her mother as though they were her escorts. 'Jake doesn't like fruit, so he always gives me his... John took a fall and hasn't been to the centre for more than a month...' Her mother recalled on the phone. She said she'd met a man named Adam at the library. He was dignified and seemed to be over sixty. Adam was always trying to guess her mother's age. 'Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven? Not older than that.' Her mother would giggle coyly. She talked about Adam for three weeks, and then stopped mentioning him. When Sophia brought him up, her mother avoided the question and only when pressed did she lower her voice as though someone were listening on the line and said, 'He called me one night and said, *Lucy...*' (Lucy was her mother's English name), '*Lucy, I'm naked right now.*'

Her mother laughed so hard she could hardly speak, and then repeated over and over again, 'Don't ever tell anyone.' And what did naked Adam want? Her mother didn't explain, and of course she couldn't tell anyone else because she feared damaging her mother's reputation. Her mother had always been modest and virtuous, and she never talked out of turn. It was that place, it was those depraved American men, or was it that her mother had reached an age at which she didn't care anymore? Secretly, she blamed her mother, though really it wasn't her fault.

Would there come a day when her mother would actually become involved with such men? Would she find autumnal love? Then she would have a stepfather. Of course, in America, she wouldn't have to call him 'Dad.' Adam, or John... Her lonely mother needed a friend to live with her. That way she wouldn't have to go to the senior centre every day!

At first her mother had refused. 'I'm used to living alone. Having someone else in the house would feel strange. What if he turned out to be bad?'

'Find a woman, a Chinese. That way you can collect rent, but you'll also have someone around. If you only charge a reasonable amount, you'll find someone easily.'

When her mother told her that she'd found a Chinese housemate, she was happy. Jacky was from the mainland and worked in a pet store owned by a fellow Chinese, where her mother had recently bought a golden retriever.

It seemed like her mother's life was undergoing a lot of changes, unlike her own. She'd wanted to have a dog. Americans often drove their retrievers around in the passenger seat with its head hanging out the window and its long tongue sticking out like a curious child. But every year, she and Hsiao left the country to go on vacation. They had to go to Taiwan and San Jose to visit their parents, so raising a dog wasn't really possible. They didn't even have children; why would they get a dog? Their lives were already all planned out.

One day, she called her mother and a young man answered. She couldn't have dialed wrong, since the number was saved in her phone.

'Um, is Lucy there?'

'Just a moment.' The man's English carried a Chinese accent. Her mother answered the phone cheerfully.

'Why is there a man in your house?'

'I told you. That was Jacky.'

'Oh, Jacky.'

There had been a news story recently that she couldn't get out of her head. At a middle school in northern New Jersey, a thirty-six year-old white female teacher had had a relationship with a fifteen year-old black male student. Given the laws punishing the abduction of a minor, she'd been given prison time even though she was pregnant. The student said he would wait until she got out of prison and they would be a family. The teacher already had a family, including a son about as old as her teenaged lover. The report said that despite the teacher being charged with her crimes and the student's parents keeping a watch on him, they had still managed to meet once in secret. The teacher had gone to student's neighbourhood, waited for him to sneak out, and had then driven to the outskirts of town where they'd had sex.

Illicit affair were the two words that came to mind. And what would be licit? A normal relationship between two people, a relationship sanctioned by society. The man and woman on the news had transgressed many boundaries: race, the student-teacher relationship, marriage vows, age. Why would a mature thirty-six year-old woman do such a thing? She had abandoned her family, her job and her good name, all for a short-lived affair with no future. She'd even deliberately had a child with her young lover. Sophia couldn't seem to get the affair out of her head, and now, her mother had found a young male housemate.

She hadn't told Hsiao her apprehensions, but she had said a few words to Anna, a woman from Taiwan. They went swimming together and they gave each other updates on their lives at the gym every Monday and Friday. Anna was a few years older and had an adolescent son about whom she often complained. They talked about Anna's son, her mother, and illicit affairs.

'Good girls like us will be with the same man all our lives, unless the marriage goes bad. People envy that kind of stable life, and we think it's the right way to live too.' Anna wore a pair of purple goggles that made her look like an astronaut and her breasts drooped and hung loosely inside her swimming suit. 'American women can't even imagine it. They've had lots of sex partners before marriage, and they're not necessarily just with their husbands after they take their vows. We think we're the lucky ones, but who knows?'

She had started dating Hsiao in college and there had never been anyone else. 'I just don't understand how that teacher could be such a temptress. It couldn't have just been about the sex,

right?’

‘Why are you asking me? I’m frigid.’ Anna grinned and dove into the water.

She took all of her vacation time, twelve days in total, and bought a ticket to San Jose. At first she planned to surprise her mother with the inspection, but finally she decided to call her the day before she was set to go. Jacky answered. This time they spoke in Chinese and Jacky was smooth and polite, calling her *ma’am*, which the Taiwanese seldom do. She was polite in return, but her voice was cold and she talked as though she were dealing with a Chinese client at the office.

‘Lucy will be delighted. She often speaks of you, ma’am.’

That made her feel awkward. A twenty-something guy calling her sixty-five year-old mother ‘Lucy,’ yet referring to her as ‘ma’am.’ They spoke briefly, and she learned that he had been in America for more than a year and had met her mother at the pet store. Her mother had wanted to get a dog so she could hang a ‘Beware of the Dog’ sign on her front gate to scare away robbers. He’d helped her choose one, which they named Maggie. He’d house trained it for her, and taught it to sit and lie down. In return, her mother tutored him in English. He often visited her, and in the end he’d moved in.

Her professional instincts told her immediately that he didn’t have legal papers. He’d overstayed his visa and was looking for a green card. If a young man becomes involved with an older woman, it’s because they’re easy to dupe. But she would let him know that his scheme would go nowhere. As soon as he interviewed with the immigration authorities, they would refuse his application.

Her mother said she would meet her plane. She walked out of the airport with her rolling suitcase and small backpack and saw a familiar white Honda. Her mother smiled and waved to her from the passenger seat. In the driver’s seat sat a tall smiling man in sunglasses. He leapt out to take her suitcases from her. She got into the car and saw that her mother was wearing a flowered dress and looked ten years younger than she remembered. Californians like to wear bright patterned clothing, while New Yorkers young and old prefer to wear black, turning the whole city into a dark swath. When the famous wedding dress designer Vera Wang was interviewed on television, her closet was showed to the audience and it was filled with black clothes. With the white of the wedding dress and the black of her wardrobe, it seemed her whole life was in black and white.

Her mother’s garden was carefully tended, with the grass weeded and cut in short, neat rows like a green scrub brush. The yellow roses by the gate were blooming and each flower was so fresh it seemed to have opened that very morning. Beyond the gate, there were two large flowerpots on either side of the red brick path. One held a tall graceful Japanese maple with red leaves, and the other held Bird of Paradise flowers. The fragrance from the jasmine her father had planted, with its white flowers like stars against the green leaves, was so heavy it made her sneeze.

The last time she’d visited, her mother had complained that the gardener was careless and paint was peeling off the outside of the house. Several outdoor lamps had gone out so that at night the remaining lights looked like a banquet with half the guests missing. These things had started happening six months or so before her father died. But her mother had steadfastly refused to move. ‘I’m used to living here. I lived here for fifteen years with your father!’ But her delicate, birdlike mother was also used to being taken care of, and such a large house was too much for her to deal with.

It seemed that not only could Jacky train dogs, he could also do physical work. She couldn’t help but watch as he parked the car in front of the garage and brought her luggage to her. He pulled down his sunglasses to reveal large eyes and thick black eyebrows set in his craggy face. He was

wearing an apricot-coloured hooded shirt and jeans belted low on his waist. He looked completely different from how she had imagined. She had assumed he would be more like the Chinese who came to the office: men with timid faces and skinny bodies wrung out by their foreign surroundings. The taller ones hunched. They certainly weren't upright and clear-eyed with easy smiles. *Dear God*, she whispered to herself.

Things were thornier than she'd thought, and her opponent more imposing. She felt pushed to her limit, not mentally but physically. Her breathing was shallow, and although she was exhausted from the flight, she returned Jacky's grin with a smile she hoped was as charming as one of the yellow roses. She could understand how this young man had won her mother's trust so easily, if not her affections.

Just as she was feeling ill at ease, a furry tail brushed against her calf and then two enthusiastic paws placed themselves on her thigh.

'No, Maggie!' Jacky said, and the dog got down and returned to his side with her tail wagging. 'This is Maggie,' he said. 'She's a good dog. You can pet her if you want.'

'Maggie,' she said, sticking out her hand so the dog could take a sniff. She didn't pet her, although the dog seemed fairly harmless and even cute, because wouldn't that be moving too fast?

It took time to really understand a person; first impressions were formed in an instant. They had nothing to do with speech, but with the calling card of the auras and scents that passed between two people when they got close enough. It was an animal communication, impossible to rationalise, and even more impossible to control. She suspected that Maggie could smell everything, her exhaustion and confusion, the cheese salad she'd eaten on the plane, even that she'd just started her period.

Dinner was half a piece of grilled salmon per person and a big plate of salad with honey mustard dressing. Jacky had also eaten a potato and an ear of corn that he heated in the microwave. She and her mother had lemonade while Jacky drank a bottle of Coke, and they sat around the table just like a family. They talked about [the](#) high unemployment rates in California and the shocking gas prices, and then the conversation turned to Jacky's job at the pet store and his relatives back in China...

She discovered that he wasn't paying rent, but at the same time, since he'd moved in, there were no loose faucets or leaky toilets or dead light bulbs. 'How do you know how to fix all that stuff?' [The](#) one child policy in China [had turned](#) most of the younger generation [into](#) parasites and had no idea how to do the most basic housework.

'If you want to learn how to do it, you can. At some point I want to buy my own house, so I have to know that stuff.' Jacky spoke confidently. Buying a house was still a long way off. Once he had a little money, he would buy a car first. Right now, he had to ride a bike to the bus stop to get to and from work.

But did Jacky have the proper immigration status to make money in the United States?

Immigration status. This was her magic wand to ferret out devils. No one knew more than she did about the application process for Chinese immigrants. As soon as the topic came up, Jacky would reveal his true nature. If he lied, all of the good feeling that had been built up would immediately collapse, and she could execute her duties. But should she bring it up at the first dinner? She hesitated, never imagining that Jacky would speak first.

'Sophia,' he said, bracing his hands on his legs in a masculine posture that she rarely saw Taiwanese men adopt. It usually just appeared in the historical dramas on TV. 'Lucy says you work in an immigration lawyer's office?'

'Yes,' she said with a nod. She didn't attack immediately, patiently allowing him to unmask himself.

'I can tell you how I emigrated then.'

'OK.'

'I came on a student visa, but I didn't graduate. I'm in the process of switching to a working visa.'

'Mm.' She continued, 'A lot of people do that...' She took a sip of lemonade to moisten her throat for a tirade, but then stopped.

'You two keep talking. I'm going to go feed Maggie.' Jacky put his dishes in the dishwasher and took his leave.

'Isn't he sweet?' Her mother sounded proud, as though he were some kind of treasure.

The large room that faced south was her mother's bedroom. She slept in the guest room that faced west, across from the guest bathroom and Jacky's room.

The walls of the old house were so thin you could hear a faucet drip, so she used her mother's bathroom. Every so often, she would hear Jacky's waterfall-strength stream of urine, but it didn't bother her. It was even somehow nice compared to Hsiao's slow drip.

There's a three-hour difference between the east and west coasts, and she was so tired that she pulled the venetian blinds shut early and fell asleep with her clothes on. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep when the sound of a man's low laughter woke her up. She sat up and tried to distinguish which direction the sound was coming from. Although it was June, the room had cooled down and she was shivering. Her digital watch showed it was almost midnight. A dog barked like a wolf. Was it Maggie? The dog was showing a forest of white teeth to the full moon, and nearby a naked-chested man was illuminated in the moonlight...

She swore to herself that at dinner she'd only looked at Jacky's face. She'd watched his bright vivid eyes and quick smile. But suddenly she could see his arms resting on the table, his muscles shining like bronze, the hair long and thick. When he stood up to go to the sink, his buttocks moved alarmingly, and when he bent down to put his dishes into the dishwasher, his legs were long and slender. Much to her surprise, she found that she had taken in every inch of him.

Had her surprised exclamation *Dear God* been not for her mother, but for herself? She'd always known that men were visual animals: when they saw a woman they would judge how big her chest was, and when she turned to go, they would watch her rear end sway. But women weren't like that, or at least she wasn't. She'd never wanted a man for his body. Had age changed her? A ripe woman. Ripe fruit lets out a sickeningly sweet scent before it began to rot, and if it wasn't eaten it would spoil. She hugged her pillow tightly.

Jetlag woke her up early, and at just past five in the morning, she went out to sit in the living room. She could see out into the backyard, and beyond that the undulating curve of yellow mountains in the distance. Maggie was laying under a tree with her eyes half open, occasionally lifting her ears to listen to a frequency humans couldn't hear. The cold desert breeze blew through the window bringing in the fragrance of the garden, while the birds called cheerily. It would be a typically clear San Jose day.

She closed her eyes and took a nap. When she opened them again, Jacky was standing outside in front of Maggie. In the chilly morning breeze, he wore a light yellow jacket and a pair of blue shorts, as fresh as the morning itself. He put Maggie on a leash and left quietly.

If she was a ripe fragrant apple, Jacky was peppermint gum, refreshing the mouth. She closed her eyes and was leaning against the couch in a sleepy daze when Jacky came silently back into the house. He stopped in front of her and gave her a peppermint-flavored kiss. It was a bashful kiss, so perfect it seemed poignant. This was a new role, she wanted to play the lead, to conquer and disarm. A twenty-something man on the brink of a crisis—a bit of skin, a glance could make him rise. An unmarried young man, whose life involved only an old landlady and a dog, could only watch internet porn to find some relief. She felt him embrace her with his strong arms, and his muscled chest pressed tightly against her breasts. The place where his flesh was as hard as iron ground into her, and his urgent youthful panting told her exactly how much he needed [her](#).