

Lawson fell into a cross-cultural community and network which was the target of Chinese who wanted to enhance their situations somehow through contact or collaboration and connections with foreigners. Amongst them were a few women who sought foreign husbands for a variety of reasons. There was a coterie of women who would hang around the Friendship Hotel, not far from *Bei Wai*, housing foreigners and where many Westerners went for a drink and some relaxed conversations. No doubt some of them were prostitutes despite the fact that Chinese hosts and the spokesmen denied any such existed in China. Still, it was entirely possible that most, if not all of them, were simply people who felt trapped in a China that could be cruel and unkind to people for a myriad of reasons and saw some sort of union or relationship with an outsider as a way to escape to a different and perhaps safer world.

Though Lawson was immune to the allures of those women trolling for a life raft of sorts, there was more than one way to get introduced and paired up, as he had already discovered through the efforts of Huang Gang's match-making wife. It so happened that Lawson was introduced to a woman by one of his colleagues at *Bei Wai* who had successfully met and married a very nice Chinese woman. Lawson got the sense that he was trying to hand off a bit of a pestering problem as through his previous associations and his Chinese family, he had received the designation of a conduit of sorts for some sort of matchmaking and the woman in question had been persistently seeking his assistance in obtaining a foreign husband. At the time Lawson agreed to meet her and have a "date". She was a singer in a PLA performance group and therefore on active duty in the military. But she frantically explained to him that her sister had married a foreigner, and they had had "the most beautiful child" ever as a result. In sibling competition, she insisted she wanted one too and after looking Lawson over—she determined that, unlike Jao Yan the previous year at *You Dian*, he would do. Lawson guessed she was auditioning for him, as she even sang a few songs for him. She did have a beautiful voice as well as an accomplished public performing persona. It was almost overwhelming as she wanted to get everything decided and settled in just a matter of the few hours they spent together having dinner and attending a musical performance. Perhaps it was her intensity that undid her efforts, as he had the impression that she was an earthquake liquefying the *terra firma* of his individuality and real self. When they parted, Lawson introduced her to the western habit of blandly agreeing that he would call her in a tone that suggested just the opposite. Apparently, she had already learned the subtleties of western mating conventions because she looked at him and smiled and said "sure" in a way that indicated that she knew he never would.

Lawson fell into the habit of taking his lunches on Mondays at a private little canteen on the campus of *Bei Wai* not far from the Foreign Expert's building because it had very tasty, simple, local dishes and, to his palate, delicious Chinese dumplings. His students would make fun of him for eating such common food, given that his income

and status might suggest eating at fancier places. But he enjoyed the ambiance of a place that construction workers and ordinary people frequented, and the dumplings were quite good.

It was on September 15th at about eleven in the morning, just before the lunch rush at the canteen, when Lawson entered and ordered his usual plate of dumplings. In a few minutes, a plate of steaming hot, plump pork-filled little delights was delivered to his table. Northern Chinese are of the habit of eating their dumplings with vinegar and as he sat down, he sought out one of the little bottles of vinegar commonly placed on the tables to add to the perfection of his impending repast. As the canteen was just opening and not fully functioning, Lawson soon discovered that of all the tables in the room, there was only one bottle of vinegar. Being the only customer in the place at the time, Lawson scooped it up, plopped it down at his table, and was just about to begin his feast when the door opened.

Almost as a reflex response, Lawson turned to see who was entering. Instantly, the breath was sucked out of his lungs. His eyes immediately fell upon what seemed to be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was probably in her mid-20s, a little taller than the average Chinese woman. Her hair was done up in a sophisticated style, quite distinct from what was usual for Chinese women. Her clothes were smart, stylish, and modern. Her face was absolutely stunning, and her wide-open coal-black eyes veritably flashed as they scanned the room. Unlike the average Chinese girl—she projected the air of being a lady. Lawson struggled to catch his breath and whispered to himself, That's the woman I want to meet.

Lawson looked up to the ceiling as if to address any deity or gathering of fates overlooking the scene and thanked them for delivering such a thrilling and captivating woman to the virtually empty restaurant. But then Lawson felt a terrible pain of frustration and disappointment. Maybe the gods and fates are just jokesters. Because he knew that if she were truly the sort of good woman that she seemed to be, there would be no way he could just waltz up and introduce himself. That would be considered to be excessively forward, gauche, and impolite. He had learned enough from Huang Gang's wife about the Chinese preference for the first meetings and introductions between men and women and that they were to be managed by some sort of go-between or chaperone. At that moment, the only people in the restaurant were Lawson, the woman, and the cooks. Again, he looked upwards, this time to curse the forces of fate as he felt played with, teased, and frustrated. The first woman in his entire life that he felt he absolutely had to meet was going to sit down, a mere few feet away, and yet essentially be well beyond his reach. Meanwhile, a soundtrack began to taunt him in his head. Stevie Winwood's lyrics: "While you see a chance, take it; find romance."

Exuding a self-confident sophistication, the woman proceeded to the counter and ordered a plate of dumplings for herself. Lawson immediately looked skyward and continued his argument with whatever fates had just conspired to create the situation.

Not ever really believing in “love at first sight” and all of that romantic rigmarole, Lawson could not deny that something truly unique had happened to and within him.

But when Lawson heard her order dumplings, he smiled and surmised that maybe fate had indeed been kind. Again, looking upwards, he whispered, “Thank you.” There might be a low-level and non-offensive way he could approach her. When she received her plate of dumplings, she went and sat down at a table adjacent to Lawson’s. He then watched her rise again and go to all the tables in the restaurant looking for vinegar. Most of them did not have a bottle at all, but a few had one that she inspected only to determine that it was empty. While she was doing that, Lawson immediately emptied all the remaining vinegar in his bottle into his bowl, with which he was preparing to eat his dumplings. Lawson then watched her sit down at her table with an obvious look of disappointment on her face, resolved to a lunch of dumplings without vinegar.

Seizing the moment, Lawson then proceeded, as politely as possible, to approach her with his plate of dumplings and his bowl with far too much vinegar in it and apologize for having the only vinegar in the restaurant. “Excuse me, miss,” he began tentatively.

She looked up at Lawson, neither startled nor apprehensive.

“I seem to have too much vinegar here. Would you like to share?”

She smiled at having resolved the problem of the scarce resource of vinegar and nodded, motioning him to sit down. Lawson had succeeded in meeting her, and he was glad that she could not hear how vigorously his heart was pounding. Their conversation was in Chinese.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Xu Ling De, and I am a Foreign Expert here.”

She smiled and replied, “I am Yue Juan, and I am a student in the night division of the university.”

“What do you study?”

“English,” she said, pouring some of Lawson’s excess vinegar into her bowl and proceeding to dip a dumpling in it and pop it in her mouth.

Lawson followed suit.

“And what do you do?” she asked between bites.

“I teach in the Cross-Cultural Communications program,” Lawson said, trying to be modest and a bit circumspect. “If you are in the night program, you must do something else, right?”

“Yes, I am a translator at the number three Beijing Plastics Factory. My bosses let me come here on Mondays and Wednesdays to take some classes to improve my English comprehension.”

“That is generous of them,” Lawson said.

Yue Juan screwed up her face a little since she seemed to understand how allowing her to take classes at the university was in the interests of the factory. There was no generosity to it.

Keeping the conversation in Chinese, Lawson explained he was always looking for an opportunity to practice his Chinese. Secretly, he did not want to offer himself up for merely free English lessons. Lawson wondered if she guessed that he was Russian, for some reason a common misconception among Chinese going back to the ruse with Yurkin back at *You Dian*. She had asked if he spoke English.

“A little,” Lawson said, switching back to Chinese immediately.

Lunchtime ended and Yue Juan began to gather her books to leave. Lawson panicked. He could not let this opportunity slip through his fingers and be just a one-off encounter.

“You might want to know that I am an American and I speak English pretty well,” he said, smiling.

With a melodic and playful tone to her voice, she said, “Why didn’t you say that?” in good English. “I thought you were Russian.”

“I get that a lot,” Lawson said. “The reason is unknown to me.”

Giggling a bit, Yue Juan offered a theory. “It might be your nose. It is a bit bigger than the ordinary Chinese nose.”

Lawson reached up to feel his nose which he never thought was notably large before.

Continuing to giggle, Yue Juan explained, “We call Russians big noses. It is actually a bit of an insult stemming from the bad feelings most Chinese have towards them.”

“Bad feelings?”

“Yes, we felt they betrayed us in the 1950s, and then in 1969, Soviet soldiers attacked us in Manchuria.”

“I see,” Lawson said, noting that Yue Juan seemed to know her history.

“Well, I am not a *da bize* as you call Russians. I am an ordinary American here to teach English and other subjects.”

Yue Juan seemed almost thrilled to have connected with a native English speaker. She asked if they could meet again so she could improve her English.

Lawson was a bit skeptical about improving her English, but he had been so overwhelmed by her he would accept any excuse to see her again.

“Ok, how about we meet here next Monday, at about the same time? We could have dumplings and you could practice your English.”

Yue Juan smiled a broad smile. “Sure. Good idea.”