

Flourish

By Lauren Leach-Steffens

Given that Franklin still sat on Rong-Zhen Chang's concrete porch step, perhaps he made progress in not running away. He unfolded his six-foot-four frame, not as flexible as it had been years ago, wiped the tears from his face and from his glasses, and rang the doorbell again.

Rong-Zhen opened the door. "Shall we try this again?" The diminutive woman he remembered scowled at him, as opaque to him as she had been twenty-six years before.

"Can we talk with some compassion toward our son? It seems that my neglect may have contributed to his delinquency." Franklin watched her face to see if he transgressed.

Rong-Zhen sized him up and nodded. "I agree. I do not blame Allan, I merely explain how my culture sees responsibility and shame. We can talk, but if I don't like where this is going, I will not talk."

"Gotcha." When did Rong-Zhen become so assertive?

Back in the living room, back to the warm brown couch with red cushions, Rong-Zhen tried to wade through the minefield of meeting with Franklin. The living room still looked, even smelled as if Chang still lived there. She would not call Chang by his first name, she would not call him by an honorific. In her own mind, only to herself would she call him guānrén, police officer. That had been Chang's role in her life – to police her from anything he thought would cause him dishonor while he advanced in an organized crime syndicate. Honor, apparently, was a malleable thing.

"Chang," Rong-Zhen motioned to the large calligraphed red character on the banner above the fireplace. "Americans believe, if they know at all, that "Chang" means "long" or "duration". With this character, it means "prosperous". Makes sense, doesn't it? Chang became very

prosperous because he obsessed about money, to the detriment of everything else. Our system is based on harmony – it is okay in our system to have a husband as master, because he acts in the interest of the family. An abused, neglected family takes away from his honor. Or should. The family falls apart, and Guānrén Chang did not notice.” So much, she thought, for not speaking that aloud.

“Guānrén?” Franklin stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

“The word used to mean “Master”. Now it means ‘Police Officer’; think of it as being a word demoted in meaning. It seems appropriate, given that I am in the process of divorcing Chang,” Rong-Zhen said calmly.

“Ouch,” Franklin replied. “Not so far from the truth, is it?”

She watched Franklin’s face, born to smile, so open, so American. His hair showed some grey, but she still recognized him as the man she had never quit loving. Franklin opened his mouth to speak, and she tensed up, expecting an attack. Instead, he surprised her: “I’m really not good at this relationship thing. May I try again?”

She could accept his humility. “It’s okay -- we all have trouble with the relationship thing, as you call it.” Franklin looked more handsome as he listened to her; she marveled at how close to magic that was.

“I’m also not good at the intercultural thing. It’s as if you live in a society with different rules, and I don’t understand it.” He ran his fingers through his already unkempt chestnut curls, wondering if he had erred in answering Rong-Zhen’s summons.

“Don’t feel bad. The rules are easy to understand if you start with the basics: We do everything for the good of the group – family, team, neighborhood, nation – not to promote the individual. Showing emotions singles you out and draws attention to yourself, which disrupts

harmony. Anger destroys the cohesiveness of the group. We develop cohesion in the group by taking a step back for the good of the group.”

“That sounds like how conservatives expect women to behave.”

“Unfortunately, your men aren’t upholding their end of the contract, so it doesn’t work in your society. If the man looks out only for himself, there is no harmony in the house. If your men expect their wives to sacrifice while they do not, it is little wonder the system broke.”

“Like with your husband.”

“Yes, like Chang, who wants not only wealth but power.” Chang would be gone soon, the lawyer told her, and she would be safe.

Rong-Zhen glanced downward --

“I’m sorry I embarrassed you.” Franklin dared to touch her hand; she pulled it away.

Franklin braced himself for failure.

“It’s no problem. I am thinking about the gods.” Rong-Zhen looked over to the red-framed shrine by the front door.

Franklin followed her gaze. “What about the gods?”

Rong-Zhen motioned to the shrine. “That is a statue of Guan-Gong, God of War and of Honesty. I guess Chang wanted the war but not the honesty. I would have preferred Guan Yin, Goddess of Harmony, as our protector. There has been so much disharmony in this house. Chang beat me and Allan – “

“What?” Franklin exclaimed. “He beat you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You know,” Rong-Zhen said wryly, “that in my culture we don’t demonstrate our emotions quite so vocally.”

“How do you express emotions? I’m used to saying them out loud.” Like a fool, Franklin thought to himself. Like a raving fool.

“Keep in mind we think that emotions are fleeting and that they need not be expressed. That said, we express them in actions. Even then, we express them sparingly and in private space, because it does not advance harmony to share them in public.” Rong-Zhen looked pensive, as if trying to come up with something.

“So, for example ...” Franklin posited.

“If I loved you –” He hoped she spoke in more than theoreticals – “I would serve you, not criticize you, listen to you. I would make lucky foods for us at New Year’s. I would be a housewife because honor demanded it, or work because it would help our honor, depending on our situation. If you loved me, you would provide, you would take care of the outside business that required your authority, you would initiate uh, happy –“

“Happy?” He asked, never having heard the word as a noun.

“What you call sex. What we shared.”

Embarrassed, he realized he had never initiated sex with her – “I would?”

“Of course. Because men are yang, which means their energy is strong; while women are yin, which means their energy is weak.” This conversation came out much more direct than he expected, even after their intimacy.

“But you’re a strong woman!” Franklin protested. He suspected his outburst wasn’t very Chinese.

“Energy, Franklin. My energy lays down and says, “Let’s make babies,” and yours stands upright and says, “Let’s shoot the grenade launcher.” Franklin choked down inappropriate laughter.

“Grenade launcher? Really?”

“We depend on a lot of euphemisms. Almost all we have for sex is euphemisms and swear words, and of course English words, which are so foreign they don’t feel taboo.” Maybe she didn’t speak so directly – Rong-Zhen lowered her eyes.

“You never explained that to me,” Franklin responded, examining this woman who had long ago -- so long ago – been his lover, and who bore a child without telling him.

“We had no time for me to explain, the two of us,” Rong-Zhen murmured.

“What have you been doing since we last met?” Franklin struggled for words.

“I bore our son, as you know now – “

“Why didn’t you tell me?” More emotion leaking around the words, Franklin thought. He didn’t know that he could be calm about this.

“I could not tell you for my sake, and for my son’s.”

“Why not?” Franklin cringed at the anguish in his voice.

“Think about it. Chang always wanted a son. He finally got one, or so he thought. Except that his son didn’t look like him. I bore no other children. Chang suffered more disgrace than I.” She hoped she didn’t have to explain further.

“Why? Oh, the grenade launcher fired blanks.”

Rong-Zhen stifled her quite unworthy laugh. “You could say that,” Rong-Zhen continued vindictively. “I heard the word from the street that none of his women come with child either. He tried mightily, like a drunken minor warlord who had no face.”

“No face?” Franklin knit his brows. Rong-Zhen suspected that Franklin took that literally. “Miànzi, or face,” she emphasized. “The all-important public face of stability, harmony, calm, and cooperation. He thought he could get face back working in organized crime. He thought he

could get face back amassing a bunch of money. But honesty, not money, made Guan-Gong a god, and Chang often promised what he could not deliver. So, no face. The community shunned him. It was, of course, my fault, he said.

“Chang said that I brought dishonor to the family with a son who his mother disapproved of. We never spoke of his parentage.” Rong-Zhen knew she shouldn’t be airing the family’s dirty laundry to Franklin, but she couldn’t stop herself. She wanted to get the shame out all at once, all the disgrace, see whether the purge would expiate the shame.

She couldn’t look at Franklin.

“Are you all right?” Franklin saw she stared at her lap and again felt inadequate.

“I’m fine,” she said in a small voice, which of course meant to Franklin that she was not. What had she said about emotions? They passed, ephemeral, and were not allowed to interrupt the harmony of the group.

But this didn’t look like something as simple as emotions. “Rong-Zhen,” he said, “You are looking at your lap.”

“I know,” she replied meekly.

“Can you tell me why?” he asked.

“Because I have told you of my family’s shame. Of my shame. I have lost face in front of you.”

“I’m American. My parents are Scottish and Welsh and German. I don’t need you to save face around me. As long as you don’t hate me for it.” He gingerly put his arm around her shoulders.

“I’m Chinese. Born in Sichuan. That is the only system I understand.”

“You said ‘shame’ back there, not fault. They’re not the same thing to you, are they?” A glimmer of understanding formed in his mind.

“No, not at all,” Rong-Zhen shook her head. “Fault is only important so much as to know where the shame should lie. Shame is the feeling that you have transgressed against your group or your family. Even if you said that Chang’s transgressions resulted in my relationship with you, my fear to stop my son’s abuse, and all my other failings, I did those things.”

“How do you get good with the people you hurt?” Franklin asked.

“If the transgression is not too heinous, you ask forgiveness and ask if there is compensation you can make. But it is up to the community to forgive me and allow me to regain face. If my transgression breaks a taboo, I may never regain face.”

“Were any of your transgressions taboo-breaking?” Franklin’s analytic mind picked her dilemma apart.

“Strangely, I don’t think so. An illegitimate child is not a horrible thing these days, not like it used to be. Besides, Chang hopes to bring him into his business.” She watched Franklin’s face, and the expected blowup occurred. Franklin loved his child he never met.

“He WHAT?” Such yang, Rong-Zhen marveled. Better to be put in actions than words, though.

“Yes. ‘Dear Wife,’ he says. ‘Where is that son of ours? He could come in handy in my business.’ That is why my divorce will be okay; it is my only way out of sharing his dishonor. It’s all about loopholes.” She paused, smiled. “Would you like tea?”

“Yes, thank you.” Franklin knew enough of her culture to know that food and drink were vital and that rejecting her offer would cause her to lose face.

She disappeared into the kitchen and came out with an elaborate tray with a teapot, a pot of hot water, and two tiny cups. Her hands flew as she worked from water pot to teapot to swirling tea between the two cups with almost none spilled. The tray was slotted to allow excess water and tea to collect in the bottom. He suspected he witnessed something very special. Actions, not words.

Rong-zhen nodded to him to take the first sip. He tasted unsweetened tea with a reddish tint and an earthy taste with – flowers?

“Roses are good luck, and so we drink them with this tea, which is very good for you. The flowers for love are not edible.” Apparently the keeping of face did not include trying not to laugh, he discovered.

“This is wonderfully brewed tea.” He met her eyes. He suspected he acted boldly by making eye contact.

“Oh, I think every woman I know brews this well. We cannot talk of heavy things,” she said, “because we cannot spoil the taste of the tea.”

“Ok,” he nodded. “What does your name mean?”

“That is a heavier subject than you think. Rong, using the character that the girl’s name uses, means ‘tolerate’. If I had been a boy, I would have received the character for ‘flourish’. Same name, different translations. Different roles in life. Men run the household, and women tolerate what their husbands give them.”

“How do you feel about that?” He suspected he knew.

“What I feel is not important. But, American man, I think that husbands who take out their failures onto their wives have failed as husbands and should be made to face great shame. As I said, the system would work if men took it seriously for themselves.” She poured another round

of tea, deftly, quickly, and said, “This will taste a little stronger. Our conversation should be a little sweeter.”

He took her hand. She didn’t pull away.

“How do I know whether this is okay or not?” he asked her.

“Like this,” she said, as she put her hand on top of his.

After the tea, Rong-Zhen felt grateful that she held a restraining order against Chang so that he couldn’t break in on them. She and Franklin (she felt relieved that he didn’t like the nickname ‘Frank’, which was a rather vulgar looking sausage to her) sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the couch, which had never happened twenty-six years ago. The way it did happen then made her feel more ashamed, but there they had no time to do anything back then but grab for oblivion.

“I feel shame at how things went with us,” she finally said.

“Because you were married?”

“No,” Rong-Zhen admitted, “because we did not get to do this. I would not want this from you in public, but I do rather like it in private.” It seemed almost naughty in the living room, but she didn’t need to mention that. Now, she thought, talking about Allan will seem less taboo.

“How do we make amends with our son?”

“We have to meet with him. My sins are different –“

“Sins?” Rong-Zhen asked, knowing the word but not understanding it in the context.

“Our failures, our transgressions,” Franklin corrected.

“Okay. Do we meet with him together or separately?” she asked, hoping Franklin would understand the subtlety.

Franklin paused a moment. “That’s my decision, isn’t it?”

Suddenly, they heard pounding on the door, and angry bluster in Cantonese. “You will not leave me. I am your husband,” Rong-Zhen quickly whispered the translation in English for Franklin. She added, “He may be my husband for now, but his performance will not be taken lightly here by the neighbors. We say nothing.”

“But what if he busts down the door?” Franklin asked foolishly.

“Screaming back at him will not keep him from bashing down the door,” she said calmly. Inside, she thought, ‘See, neighborhood? See our secret shame’?

Sirens approached, homed in on the house. An unfamiliar male voice said, “Mrs. Chang, are you alright?” Rong-Zhen put her hand over Franklin’s mouth; he took the hint. “I’m alright; he didn’t have a chance to get in.”

“Could you come to the door so I can talk to you?” Franklin shook his head “No”.

“How do I know you’re a cop and not someone who works with my husband?” Rong-Zhen called out.

“I’ll flash my badge at the peephole. You’ll be able to see if it’s the real thing, trust me.” The cop sounded a little disgruntled. Fine, she thought.

“Okay.” Rong-Zhen whispered at Franklin, and then indicated the back porch. “Could you find yourself at the restaurant around the corner? I think you might find an alibi there in case Chang wants to drag our relationship into this.”

“Relationship?” Franklin grinned but whispered. “I’ll meet you there when you’re done, okay?”

“I’m okay. Go!”

Franklin walked out the back door, feeling the weight of his failure to protect Rong-Zhen on his shoulders. Why did he walk away twenty-six years ago when she bade him to? Why didn't he stay and tell her he loved her?

What good was he if she wouldn't count on him?

He turned to the right rather than to the left, toward the curb rather than toward the alley that would lead to the Chinese restaurant. Toward his car.

Why did she call him in now, if he could do nothing to protect her from Chang? Why didn't she let him know he had a son? Why didn't she call him in when her husband beat her and Allan?

Then he stopped and let the recriminations flow through him, out of him. He could not change the past. He could only make amends for his shame – and yes, it was shame that flowed through him, not guilt. Not blame.

He turned around and walked toward the restaurant. To wait for Rong-Zhen. To make amends.

When Rong-Zhen appeared at the restaurant, a slender young man with a waterfall of black, wavy hair stood with her at the waitress station. He stood as they approached the table, and he reached out to shake his son's hand. His son, who he had not known about.

"I'm Allan Chang," the young man said in a gravelly voice that he had gotten from neither parent. "But you are –"

"Your father," Franklin said. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. What can I do to pay that back?"

Allan grinned, and Franklin recognized himself in the wide smile. "Man, you missed all my science fairs and parent-teacher conferences. And my years of delinquency." The man waved his

hand at the look on Franklin's face. "Not your fault; it's all on me. But you owe me, Dad. You'll have to start showing up to my gigs."

"He's a DJ," Rong-Zhen clarified. "He's gaining quite a reputation. I think he gets his musicality from you."

Franklin remembered a time, twenty-six years before, when he told Rong-Zhen about playing saxophone in a jazz band. Rong-Zhen remembered.

Was that a good sign?

After a long dim sum dinner with his son and his – hope warred with practicality in his heart -- Franklin walked back with Rong-Zhen in the dark under the street lights. "I have transgressed against you as well," he sighed, wondering if he could ever make it up.

"It is nothing," Rong-Zhen responded as she turned a corner.

"I need to make amends. What can I do?" he asked.

"Marry me." Rong-Zhen responded resolutely. "When my divorce comes through."

"Isn't the yang part of the couple supposed to bring that up?" His head spun with the changes of the day.

"Do you know why I sat alone in a tavern in Bridgeport the day I first met you?"

Franklin said, puzzled, "I have no idea. It seemed highly uncharacteristic."

"I saw a vision. In it I saw you walk into that tavern, and I knew you would change my life." They reached the porch of her house, where a lone police officer stood against another violation of her order of protection.

"I didn't do a good job," Franklin reflected. "So many bad things happened to you."

"And so many good things. Like getting back with my son, our son. And becoming free from Chang." As they got out of the car, she looked up at him. Pointedly.

“Will you marry me?” He found himself holding his breath.

Rong-Zhen said, “I think it’s time for us to flourish.”