

## **Gilded Cage**

### **Scarlet**

The first time I stepped into Dr. Lui's consultation room, it was purely by chance. I approached the university health unit for vaccination proof, only to find that "non-essential" service was shut down due to Covid. The nurse, however, kindly informed me of a community health centre nearby that was eligible for verifying my vaccination record. I came to the community health centre and was randomly assigned to Dr. Lui. It was all quirks of fate.

After two courteous knocks, I entered the consultation room. I was confused to find the physician to be young-looking. He looked as if he was 26- or 27-year-old. I was expecting a wrinkled man with ebbed hairline. I paused for seconds, thinking whether it was legitimate for such a young doctor to practice on his own. My hand stayed glued to the knob all the while until he smiled "You could come in." I walked up to the patient's seat only to find it was placed too close to him. If I sit down and ease myself into a normal posture, my legs would unavoidably brush against his. I stood there in embarrassment, inwardly chiding the last patient's carelessness. "You could also be seated," the amusement in his tone was unmasked this time. When I sat down, my eyes finally fell to the same level as his face. I immediately noticed his fair and glossy skin behind a transparent face shield. Never once in my life, as far back as I could recall, had I been left alone observed by a man from such an intimate distance. I was accustomed to consultation in mainland China, which invariably meant seeing a senior attending with one to two interns at the same time, often with the door open. There was no privacy or intimacy whatsoever. Unfortunately, Dr. Lui happened to possess very agreeable features. A warm trickle rose in my heart. My muscle tensed. I wished I had worn contact lenses instead of a pair of thick glasses and washed my face in the morning.

His voice was soft and reassuring. “You still need two more jabs to fulfil the travel requirement, but we don’t have the supplies here now, so you would need to schedule for next visit.” I had never heard a man speak in this way before. Smooth like velvet. “When are you available?” said he. I began to rummage my bag, looking to check my Google Calendar, afraid that his face might darken if I make him wait. I thought of those nurses whose faces grimaced, and voices toughened when you hesitated. “It is okay. Take your time,” he said.

The simple phrase melted my heart. No one ever told me to “take my time” in this city. I felt myself bathed in sunlight.

Before I left the clinic, I glanced at the wall of graduation diplomas and found him to graduate in 2011. He aged well.

A month later, I went to the health centre for the appointed vaccines. I made it a point to dress myself this time. My appointment was the first time slot in the morning. I waited and saw him shuffle in. He dipped his butt from time to time, so his body rocked rhythmically. I was amused at his catwalk.

When he started to tear the package of the needle, I realized it was him who was going to jab me. I was unprepared for such close contact. I thought it was the nurse’s province. In mainland China, vaccine jabs were generally administered by junior nurses. My heart palpitated. “Now?” said I. My real question was “You?”

“Or when?” he sniggered.

He touched my left arm to look for capillaries. My capillaries were narrower than average, so it took him a while, and he squeezed my skin a few times before locating them. He turned out to be inept at jabs. My wound hurt for three straight days, but I wore the dog-eared band-aid like a badge of honour.

Between the third and the fourth visit, I got hold of his social media accounts, which were simply named after him. His Facebook Introduction said “Christianity” for “Religion” and “Single” for marital status.

His social media posts revolved around religion, although jokes turned up in unexpected occasions.

“I was moved to tears today. This morning, during the commune, I heard God speak to me aloud. It has been so long since God visited me. I saw a halo emanating from the centre. I was in awe of the ethereal atmosphere.” – 2008

“Thanks Lord, I am finally eligible to pay tax.’ – 2013

“Penis has only one hole, why couldn’t I insert the tube in.” -- 2013

“I felt so odd being the only man among a crowd of women. I heard that when women live together, their menstruation would sync up. I wonder whether there is a day at this campus when the dustbins are crammed with soiled pads.” -- Ewha Womans University, Seoul, 2014.

“I have no idea of what amount of menstruation flow constitutes as normal. I need a girlfriend to figure this out.’ – O&G ward, 2014.

I was piqued by his reckless sense of humour. I never recalled such strong chemistry with a man. I was relieved. For the past two years, I had been troubled by the prospect that I might not be straight. I had never been turned on by anyone, man or woman. For the past 17 years, my educators and family worked so hard to suppress my romantic desire that when the iron wrist was removed, I had never known what love really feels like. A bird raised in a cage for all its life would flutter inside even after the cage door is flung open. I had been fearful that I would be like the caged bird, that the feeling of love would never visit me.

During the fifth visit, which happened on a Thursday morning, I summoned up the courage to ask him out. He was surprised and then tickled, accepted the note of phone number, and said, “I would WhatsApp.”

I waited until Sunday morning to be dead sure that he would not contact me. Pathetic, needy and desperate, I approached him on social media on Monday morning and he texted *“I was unavailable at this moment, Madam. I am a Christian and I believe in God. ‘God settles the lonely in families. (Psalm 68)’ If you feel lonely, you could try to join a church that welcomes people of different backgrounds. It is really to the best of your interest that we stop contact.”* Upon reading the message, I also reckoned that it was the end.

It was but the end of the beginning.

Thoughts of him did not wane but started to infect other things I saw. A bespeckled man, a besuited professor, a holy cross dangling on someone’s neck. When Dr. Lui told me that I could go to a church for consolation, he did not know that I had already guessed which church he frequented from his social media – Second Life Church.

My mother told me things got better after a month. Yet, two months passed, I was still mired in recollection. The inextinguishable image of him closed every avenue to enjoyment. After a period of absorbing solitude, that resembled madness in its intensity and effects, the thought of going to his church germinated in my mind. I began to watch promotional videos by his church on YouTube. In one video, a twentysomething woman was pouring thanks to Jesus in tears. She said she found no solace in her father and her ex-boyfriend. It was in Jesus’ bosom that she experienced warmth for the first time. I was without my parents as well. The borders were closed. The classes were moved online. I started to picture God as a surrogate father. For two weeks, I had been listening to Christian songs and prayed in my own fashion. I decided to go to his church for another attempt. Even if I failed, I might find God there.

It was my first time in a church. There were no idols. I zigzagged between the rows to find a vacant chair. I spotted Dr. Lui in the crowd. He was raising both of his hands above his head, eyes closed. I never saw him in this state. To be honest, I never saw a human being in this state. A young singer onstage burst out crying, knelt on the floor and belted out *“Jesus, you are*

the way up. Jesus, you come back to life among us. Jesus, take pity on us. We kneel before your throne, solely worshiping you. Let us enter thy kingdom, my omnipotent monarch. All I want is to say I love you.” The singer’s voice hollered across the room. The cries of “Amen”, people wringing wet, singing and rocking, in anguish and rejoicing in front of the stage.

As the commune progressed, five to six more believers began to kneel or faint into their chairs. I surveyed the premise and caught a young woman who came here about the same time with me. When she laid down her bag, she greeted her neighbours in a normal manner. Now, she held her hands at the height of her chest with palms turned upwards and her body writhed as if suffering spasms. Waves of praises, sobbing and chanting thumped in my ears. The air was electrified and ecstatic. I felt a sense of vertigo in this phantasmagoria. I remembered Joan Didion walking among drug-addled hippies in San Francisco during the summer of love. The sense of disorientation. However, I persuaded myself that this was what other churches did, and levitated my hand as well.

The singing session segued to “Witness” session, where members took to the stage to share what changes took place after they believed in Christ. A married couple were invited. A boring dialogue ensued. At one point, the husband professed “I was converted to Christianity because of my wife. She was a member of this church when we first met. She said she would not date me unless I was a Christian. I thought to myself ‘What was the harm of going?’ So, I came here and was blessed thereafter.” The spouses then proceeded to criticism. The wife voiced her dissatisfaction at the mother-in-law’s unjustified commands and the husband’s botched investment. The husband griped about the wife’s incendiary temper. This domestic bickering was disgorged to the public. I was ill at ease. On the one hand, my reason told me the scene did not bode well. The church was an insidious place. On the other hand, my feelings told me to stay.

The session then transitioned to group confession, when believers mingled with their family group members. My eyes followed Dr. Lui. He was sitting with two men who looked like in their forties and a thirty-year-old-looking woman. She pointed three fingers towards the ceiling

and seemed to be swearing an oath with tears welling up her eyes. She was pretty and elegant, though her engrossed state scared me. I did not know what woes caused such dramatic reaction on her part. Why was this church so full of people entrenched in misery? Nearby, a man of strong build held hand in hand with two other women and his body tremored like sheets. He looked transported.

The exhilaration gradually waned after half an hour and Dr.Lui left the group, loitering on his own.

I seized the chance and approached him.

“Hi, William, it is Julie.” William’s eyes instantly enlarged.

“You traced me... How did you know about my church?”

“From your social media.”

“I am quite embarrassed.”

I was also embarrassed, but I was bent on getting the answer of what had been revolved in my mind: “when you said you were unavailable, did you mean you already had a girlfriend? Or did you mean you have other preoccupations such as work?”

He stayed silent for a few minutes. I was writhing my hands, ashamed but hopeful. “I meant I did not want to get married recently. So, I did not want a relationship,” he doled out the words while walking away.

I was at a loss, not expecting the answer, despite rehearsing the situation multiple times.

Several minutes later, the elegant woman came up to me and introduced herself to be Dr.Lui’s family group leader, university classmate and sibling.

“You are blood-related?” I asked in bewilderment, thinking how siblings ended up being classmates.

“God-related,” she said.

She then said Dr. Lui had told her everything. “Miumiu, when we come to church, we must only think of God. This is God’s territory. You were tainting this place. We cannot think of

any human being here. You are blasphemous and sacrilegious when you think of Will in this place.”

Guilt dawned on me: “I am sorry. I never followed people in this way. It is just Will is my first love and I feel very lonely. I am seeking a companion or a community.”

“Miumiu, it is false love. Only God could give you true love.”

I protested, “It is strong. I do not think it is false.”

“It was false love, false love. Jesus is our saviour. Only his love is authentic, unconditional and everlasting.” Her tone was so enforced that I did not dare raise another objection. A diamond ring dazzled in her index finger.

“Miumiu, you are too aggressive in this way. Let sister tell you, sister is married. Men do not like aggressive women.”

She then asked about my current situation. When I told her I majored in English, she said “Miumiu, did you read many fantasies because what you did seemed very fantastical to me.”

I was rendered speechless by her barrage of veiled insults. But William was the reason I came, so I persisted, ‘Does William have someone he loves already?’

She suddenly grew furious: “Will is my brother and I do not need to tell you anything. This is his privacy. It is him that I have an obligation to protect, not you.”

“Okay, then I know he is not available.”

The church sister leaned her body towards me and stared into my eyes: “I am Will’s group leader. I control his mind and spirit. If I do not give him the consent, he will not have a relationship. So, lose your hope.”

My mind went into disarray. What the heck was this?

I scanned her eyes to confirm she was joking. She was not.

“Will’s soul is currently under great torment. I do not think he is spiritually available for a relationship, so I would not give my approval,” she turned to look at Dr. Lui.

I averted my gaze to him. He was some distance away from us, near the pulpit. He stood encircled by four middle-aged men. Each of them planted one of the palms on his chest and back, chanting. Although I had never seen a church ritual before. I could tell he was the reason of the ritual. I caught his shoulders shiver. “If you truly love him,” said the church sister, “you would let him go. He has been agonized and your visit exacerbates his suffering.”

It was surreal to discover that the person you craved every night, the person whose composed and professional airs allured you now subjugated himself to “God”. The sister walked me out of the church, she said before waving goodbyes, “Miumiu, I do not want to offend you, but have you ever seen a psychiatrist? What did the psychiatrist say?”

Days after I left the church, I ruminated on this scene, straining to grope for the inherent logic. It was more than unrequited love; it was about church as a legitimate and moral institution; about how seemingly normal people could act in intoxicating manners my eyes had laid witness to. When I walked out of the church, the centre of my world no longer held. My conception of the world altered, and I wanted an explanation.

Two months later, I reached out to William in social media and asked how could his church sister disparage me like that. Four days later, he replied “If you must know, my love interest is not from the opposite sex. I never tell any stranger about this because it is my struggle. I do not come out because I do not want to lose God’s salvation.” He then sent two screenshots of his conversation with males on a popular dating app. Both were dated before I first met him.

In one screenshot, the other man wrote “Why”, and William wrote, “My brothers and sisters know about my inclination and some leaders do as well. They are very supportive and understanding of me. But they told me not to act on my desire.” I finished reading the entire message before he unsent this screenshot and replaced it with another in which the two users only exchanged pleasantries.

“My brothers and sisters know about my inclination and some leaders do as well.

They are very supportive and understanding of me. But they told me not to act on my desire.”

Textbook example of irony.

I backtracked my first exposure to homosexuality. It was a summer holiday when I was eight or nine, left to the custody of my adolescent cousin. She played a Japanese romantic TV drama. Two uniformed male teenagers convened at a clothing store after school. They got into the same fitting room. One pushed the other against the wall and started to shower kisses on his lips. I watched the scene with my mouth agape. I was petrified. I did not know this was a possibility. Yet it was the same moment when I was submerged by shock that I also emerged out of it. I immediately accepted it as a natural phenomenon. My parents made me imbibe encyclopaedias and the illustrated *I Wonder Why* series – such as “I wonder why rainbows have seven colours” and “I wonder why oceans look blue.” The eight-year-old me absorbed the discovery of homosexuality the way I accepted that male penguins incubate the eggs. The world came as purely scientific to me.

I remembered reading one of William’s Facebook posts, in which he suggested his mother was a pious Christian. He must have grown up in a religious household. A 32-year-old man still struggling about his sexual inclination. This was funnier than every other joke William told on Facebook.

Birds raised in a cage would regard flying as an abnormality.