



“Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok’s narrative is an important testament about the experiences and perspective of a Chinese immigrant to Canada from Hong Kong labelled as having manic-depression. Equally impressive is the fact that this beautiful book is written in a poetic manner with great depth and insight about madness by one who knows it from within. It will appeal to a wide audience including people with a psychiatric history as well as people who work with them and anyone interested in cross-cultural experiences of the mental health system in Canada.”

Geoffrey Reaume, Assistant Professor,  
Critical Disability Studies, York University, Toronto



“*Free To Fly* is a harrowing yet ultimately uplifting account of one Chinese-Canadian woman’s odyssey from despair to hope. Stricken with manic-depression, Caroline Kwok has to learn to cope with not only the ordeal of involuntary confinement and the authoritarianism of the medical profession, but also with the social stigma that attaches to mental illness and the uncomprehending attitudes of her family and ethnic community. Her moving and inspiring narrative will appeal to fellow sufferers and health-care professionals as well as to general readers, many of whom have little idea of what life looks like from the inside of a mental hospital.”

Greig Henderson, Assoc. Prof, Dept. of English, University of Toronto



“This book is a testament to the persistence of Caroline Kwok, who has struggled to deal with the impact of her manic depression to work and life. Writing openly about such distressing changes in her life, she gives the readers the opportunity to share first-hand in the uniqueness of her suffering. Her words reveal a world of torment and passion. This is a story worth reading.”

Dr. Ronald Ruskin, Staff Psychiatrist, Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto,  
M.D., F.R.C.P (C), Dip. Psych., Canada



“Caroline has courageously shared some of the most vulnerable moments from the extreme spectrum of an often intolerable human condition. A precious reminder to any sufferer that they are not alone.”

Jane Lowry, writer and survivor



“This is a compelling account of one’s struggle through manic-depression and its long road to recovery. This book will help motivate others to find creative ways to deal with stresses and recover one’s health.”

Martha Ocampo, Director, Across Boundaries





*Free to Fly*



# *Free to Fly*

**A Story of Manic Depression**



**Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok**

foreword by **Dr. Mary V. Seeman, O.C., MDCM**

Inclusion Press



*Free to Fly*

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[inclusionpress@inclusion.com](mailto:inclusionpress@inclusion.com)

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>DEDICATION</i> .....	7
<i>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</i> .....	9
<i>FOREWORD</i> .....	II
<i>PREFACE</i> .....	14

### PART ONE

<i>Chapter One:</i>	<i>IN THE BEGINNING</i> .....	17
<i>Chapter Two</i>	<i>A LIGHT OF HOPE</i> .....	24
<i>Chapter Three</i>	<i>SONGS OF COMFORT</i> .....	35
<i>Chapter Four</i>	<i>NO EXIT</i> .....	43
<i>Chapter Five</i>	<i>THE LOST WORLD</i> .....	54
<i>Chapter Six</i>	<i>A WORLD OF HIS OWN</i> .....	61
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	<i>THE THREE MUSKETEERS</i> .....	68

### PART TWO

<i>Chapter Eight</i>	<i>LET US GO THEN</i> .....	73
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	<i>THE VISIT</i> .....	81
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	<i>ROLLER COASTER RIDES</i> .....	86
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	<i>IF I HAD A VOICE</i> .....	91
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	<i>MEMORY</i> .....	99
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	<i>THE PAROLE</i> .....	106
<i>Chapter Fourteen</i>	<i>THE PRISONERS OF WAR</i> .....	111
<i>Chapter Fifteen</i>	<i>THE HUMAN TOUCH</i> .....	119
<i>Chapter Sixteen</i>	<i>THE HEARING</i> .....	125





<i>Chapter Seventeen</i>	<i>NEW HAVEN OF HOPE</i> .....	130
<i>Chapter Eighteen</i>	<i>WHAT'S IN A NAME?</i> .....	138

*PART THREE*

<i>Chapter Nineteen</i>	<i>BON VOYAGE</i> .....	143
<i>Chapter Twenty</i>	<i>YING WA GIRLS' REUNION</i> .....	151

<i>Chapter Twenty-One</i>	<i>GOOD MORNING, BEIJING</i> .....	162
<i>Chapter Twenty-Two</i>	<i>FAREWELL HONG KONG</i> .....	168
<i>Chapter Twenty-Three</i>	<i>REFLECTIONS</i> .....	175
<i>Chapter Twenty-Four</i>	<i>HOME SWEET HOME</i> .....	182

*PART FOUR*

<i>Chapter Twenty-Five</i>	<i>A CLOSE CALL OF DEATH</i> .....	186
<i>Chapter Twenty-Six</i>	<i>RESURRECTION</i> .....	196

*PART FIVE*

<i>EPILOGUE I</i> .....	206
<i>EPILOGUE II</i> .....	212

<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i> .....	221
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*To*

*Dr. Richard Selzer  
of  
Yale University*

*and*

*In Loving Memory  
of  
my parents*

*Woon-Lum Kwok  
&  
Shiu-Ching Fan Kwok*





*Caroline Fei-Ying Kwok  
with her first book  
The Tormented Mind*





***About The Author***

Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok was born in Hong Kong. After attending Ying Wa Girls' School in Hong Kong, she went to study English Literature at the University of Minnesota in 1970. She graduated with Summa Cum Laude and an Honours Award. She then returned to Hong Kong and taught English as a Second Language at the University of Hong Kong before her immigration to Canada in 1974. In 1975, Caroline received her Bachelor of Education from the University of Toronto and started teaching with the Toronto District School Board. In 1982, she received her Master of Education from the Ontario Institute For Studies In Education, University of Toronto.

In the summer of 1996, she was admitted to the Creative Writing Department at Yale University. Prior to her admission, three of her articles were published in the *Toronto Star*. In 2001, she attended the Humber School for Writers' Summer Program in Toronto. She studied at the New York State Summer Writers' Institute in 2004.

In 2001, Caroline was the recipient of the 2001 **Courage To Come Back Award** sponsored by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

Caroline is a published writer. Her articles have appeared in *Psychiatric Services*, *Cross Currents* and *Visions Magazine*. She is the author of *The Tormented Mind*. *Free to Fly* is an account of her own experience as a Chinese woman afflicted with manic-depression.





*Free to Fly*





## *FOREWORD*

Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok has had first hand experience with mental illness and has put that experience into beautiful words so that everyone can benefit. She describes her difficult times, her treatments and her mistreatments. She also describes her recovery. Seven dimensions of recovery from mental illnesses have recently been more explicitly delineated (1). The first has to do with independence in decision-making. This was difficult for Fei-Yeng to achieve because she came from a culture that valued submission and co-dependence. Obedience is what her parents expected of her and she yielded, even though she now lived in North America and autonomy is what she secretly yearned for. It led to difficulties in her relationship with her mother and meant that, despite the closeness that had always existed within her family, she had to look elsewhere to establish a network of friends who could provide support she needed – the second listed dimension of recovery. She also had to adopt a new social role once she lost her previous three identities, those of a wife, a traditional Chinese woman, a teacher. It was when she assumed her new role as writer that her recovery began. She also worked with a trusted therapist and chose to stay on medication – even though wrongful prescription of medication had almost killed her.

Emotional intelligence is another dimension of recovery. Fei-Yeng is a person who does not rein in her emotions. She expresses them to herself, to her confidants and to her readers. Healthy communication of emotion is important. Also important is that Fei-Yeng does not inhabit a world of fantasy; she lives in the world as it is and deals with all the details of everyday life—cooking, scheduling conflicting time commitments, visiting, traveling and doing her best to help others. Her work at *Across Boundaries* has given her life extra meaning—the knowledge that she is working within the Mental Health System, improving the quality of life for others. She has developed a strong sense of who she is, what her purpose is on earth and what the future holds. She demonstrates that





*Free to Fly*

recovery is there to be seized and cherished, that healing is possible even after several bouts of serious illness. Her story of self-determination will empower others and bring them comfort. She has suffered, as this book makes clear, but has transformed her suffering into hope.

Mary V. Seeman, O.C. MDCM, FRCPC  
Professor Emerita  
Department of Psychiatry  
University of Toronto  
March 23, 2006

1. *Ahern L, Fisher D. Recovery at your own PACE (Personal Assistance in Community Existence). J. Psychosoc Nurs Ment Health Serv. 2001;39:22-32.*





*All our dreams can come true--  
If we have the courage to pursue them.*

*--Walt Disney (1901-1966)*





## *PREFACE*

I am a Chinese woman who was formally diagnosed in 1980 in Canada as having Bipolar Affective Disorder. In layman's terms, I am a manic-depressive. In short, I am a psychiatric patient.

According to NAMI (The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill), "Manic-depression involves mood swings with some degree of depression alternating with periods of mania or elation. The cycles vary in their degree of intensity. The euphoric side of the disorder is the *mania*, while the down side is the *depression*."

Being Chinese myself, I am well aware of the insensitivity towards and ignorance of mental illness in the Chinese community at large. However, having lived in North America for about thirty years, I am also aware that social stigma towards mental illness also exists in the so-called mainstream society. Social stigma may inhibit patients from seeking help in the initial stage of difficulty and, as a result, their illness may become more severe. To try to end social stigma is perhaps one of the major reasons for writing this book.

Through my various encounters within the mental health system, I also found that there seems to be a lack of understanding inside mental institutions with respect to patients from another culture. I hope that this book will give psychiatrists and administrators in mental institutions some insight into the problems faced by the immigrant population. Hopefully then, they will develop more cultural competence training programs.

Having been through a two-week coma as a result of neuroleptic medications, I have become very cautious of the kinds of medication, their side effects, and their high prescribed-dosages. This is especially pertinent now that recent research has demonstrated some negative long-term effects of these medications and has provided evidence for the usefulness of alternative ways of treating psychiatric illnesses. I hope that this book can help psychiatrists devise better psychiatric treatments.





Being new to Canada, I did not know the rules within mental institutions in Canada, nor was I aware of my rights as a psychiatric patient. I did not know the difference between voluntary and involuntary admissions, and was shifted from one hospital to another. Encouraging fellow sufferers to know their rights and feel empowered with the mental health system is another purpose of writing this book.

My current teaching of English as a Second Language/Literacy at *Across Boundaries* to psychiatric survivors of colour makes me realize that mental illness can affect individuals of any race, culture, or intelligence level.

Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) found that in 1990, unipolar major depression was the leading cause of years lived with a disability. WHO projects that by 2020, unipolar major depression will be the leading cause of disability in women and throughout the underdeveloped regions of the world. Their Globe Burden of Disease result indicates that “of the ten leading causes of disability worldwide in 1990, measured in years lived with a disability, five were psychiatric conditions: unipolar depression, alcohol use, bipolar affective disorder (manic depression), schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.” This study also shows that “the burden of psychiatric conditions has been heavily underestimated.”

The October 13, 2003 issue of *Newsweek Magazine* points out that the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that, at any age, approximately 19 million American adults suffer from a depressive disorder. The October 7, 2002 issue of the magazine reports that 3 million kids suffer from teen depression. Early untreated depression increases a youngster’s chance of developing more severe depression as an adult, as well as bipolar disease and personality disorders.

An article published in October 24, 2003, *Ming Pao Daily*, a Chinese newspaper in Toronto, reported that one in five teenagers in Taiwan suffers from depression. In Hong Kong, in 2001, there were 1000 cases of suicides. There has also been a recent increase in depression among the





Hong Kong population. Ninety percent of the students in Hong Kong display symptoms of stress and anxiety.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association's Survey, one in four Canadians suffers from mental illness. The most recent Statistics Canada Report, released at the beginning of September 2003, indicates that about 1.2 million Canadians suffer from mood disorders, including depression. Yet three out of four Canadians with a mental problem remain untreated.

It is with this new realization that I am writing this book, ***FREE TO FLY A Story of Manic Depression***.

A lot of books have been written about medical research in the field of psychiatry. But not many books have been written by women psychiatric survivors of colour such as myself. Thus, to my mind, this book could help health care professionals as well as the general public understand more about the pain that psychiatric patients go through during their time of crisis.

A final message that I hope to convey to psychiatric patients is *NOT* to give up hope. They should try their best to build up courage and act positively to fight against the social stigma of mental illness.

It is my sincere wish to let readers know that I may have an "invisible" disability, but certainly am not a waste. With determination and an inner strength, I strongly believe that we can all make our dreams become a reality.

Caroline Fei-Yeng Kwok

October, 2006





## Chapter one

### *IN THE BEGINNING*

Locked up. Locked up again—Ward 9 South of Mount Sinai Hospital here in downtown Toronto. Come to think of it, this must be my fifth time, or maybe, the tenth time. I really can't remember them all. Confused. Lost. So many hospitals. So many admissions. I am a Chinese woman afflicted with manic-depression.

Psychiatrists came to this diagnosis some twenty-five years ago. This diagnosis was beyond my comprehension. How could I, an Honours graduate from the University of Minnesota, become a psychiatric patient overnight? Could this illness be the result of my ex-husband's mental torture, the aftermath of my divorce? Or could it be that I was overworked, having to do two teaching jobs at the same time?

No. All my doctors denied such theories. It is a hereditary disease I have and for which I must take lithium for the rest of my life.

A hereditary disease? Impossible. Absolutely absurd. My parents and my aunts seem to be healthy and fit. Never have I heard of their being hospitalized in a mental institution. Could it be that my grandparents or my great-grandparents were mentally ill? Even if they were, it would have been ignored or undetected in the old days in China. Or am I the black sheep of my family? Who is to blame? God or Satan? Do I have to be locked forever in the back wards of psychiatric hospitals, having lost my mind, my dignity? Am I insane?

Then, why lithium? And for life? What are the side effects? Why not take some sleeping pills instead? Would I be able to marry again? Could I have children? Would they be deformed?

What is the definition of manic depression? I did not know much. Neither did I know its equivalence in Chinese. Based on what observations did the doctors come up with such a diagnosis? Was it my fast, accented speech that had made the doctors believe that I was having





pressured speech? Or was it my aspirations that had made the doctors think that I was having grandiose thoughts? Don't forget that these are the symptoms of "manic" behavior. Or was it my distressed cries and sleepless nights over a lost love that had made the doctors think that I was depressed?

Did the doctors understand me as an individual? Or did they only see me as one of the new Asian immigrants? Did they carefully examine my chart and recognize my cultural differences? Did they know that, as a new Canadian, I was afraid of psychiatric institutions, that I did not know how to express myself to a psychiatrist during sessions, that I did not know the names of the different medications?

A hopeless nut. That was me alright. Unable to teach. Hiding behind doors. Dependent on my aging parents. Misunderstood by friends. Misjudged by relatives. Confidence lost. Self-esteem low. A living corpse with a mental handicap.

From a confident woman who went to the States to study at the age of eighteen and traveled to Europe on her own, I had become insecure, uncertain of the future. I lived in fear of having another hospitalization again.

I wanted to have friends and relatives who could understand my fears, who could give me some emotional understanding and support. But I was new to Canada then. All my long-time friends were in Hong Kong. When one was new to a country, it was difficult to find friends. I found some friends, but they were all single women who had never married. How could they understand the frustrations in my marriage? They were probably ignorant of mental illness. Unlike my long-time friends in Hong Kong, they were either in the fields of computer studies or accounting—areas that I could not relate to. They could not understand my interests in the arts either.

I sought refuge from relatives. They did not understand the nature of my illness. And many did not want to interfere with my divorce.

"It's all under the bridge now, Caroline. Don't think of your divorce





any more,” they said. “Take your medications. You’ll be alright.”

“Just consider how lucky you are when you are in the hospital. You don’t have to cook at all. And they serve you good meals every day. It’s free too.”

They had forgotten that what I needed most was to have an understanding and empathetic audience at the time. After all, they knew my husband too.

I tried to talk to my parents. Yet they could not understand why I had to have a divorce. They gave me lessons on the Chinese notion of loyalty and obedience.

“Why don’t you listen to this old Chinese saying that once you’re married, even though you have married a chicken, you should follow that chicken until you die?” My father said.

“Yes, if you had obeyed your husband and not fought with him, you would have been much happier. You wouldn’t have to be sick in the hospital,” echoed my mother.

They did not know of the verbal abuse and the lack of concern my husband had for me. They did not know that he just galloped his way forward without giving me a hand when I fell down from the horse. They did not know that our marriage had been incompatible and apathetic for years without much communication at all.

I did not know that there were support groups for manic-depressives. Neither did I know of courses for divorcees. Instead, I called long-distance to my girlfriends in Hong Kong, hoping that they would understand. They lent their sympathetic ears, but the calls were too costly. My telling them bits and pieces over the phone just confused them and made them more worried about me than ever.

I could not sleep very well either. Very often, I would wake up in the middle of the night, unable to go back to sleep again. This inability to sleep frustrated and agitated me. I had to take days off from my teaching job.

I listened to Chinese songs in my apartment. And I played the same





*My parents and me  
as a bride in 1975*

song over and over again:

*“Forget about old dreams,  
What had gone yesterday  
Was dead already...”*

With a pillow over my head, I cried alone.

Who saw my silent tears, my inner fears, understood my utmost despair? Nobody. Nobody at all. *Not even God.*

I managed to smile a lot, though, in front of the others. Really smiled a lot. Should be nominated for Miss Smile of the Year.

Bet I would have won. But it was just a cover-up to hide my deep melancholy, to pretend to be happy and be in tune with the world. And of course, I tried to deceive my friends and my relatives. Why should I let them know of my inner pain when they could not empathize with it? Why should I display my own fragility to them? So smile, Caroline, smile!

I was confined to the psychiatric ward of various medical institutions without choice. Involuntary admissions, that is. Not knowing much about the rules and regulations of these hospitals, I was at the mercy of the doctors and nurses. With my Chinese upbringing, I was taught to respect the doctors, the God-Almighty, without questions. Every time when I was in the hospital, I was as timid as a mouse. In short, total acceptance of the doctors' decisions and treatments.

I did not know my right as a psychiatric patient on the ward either. I was never informed of the different forms of psychiatric assessment.





What did Form I mean? I did not know that it means the person is held involuntarily for three days upon admission. To me, it only meant Grade Seven in Hong Kong. I never knew how to advocate for myself as a patient. What had happened to the courageous and articulate Caroline from Hong Kong? Were you not once the Chairperson of the Literary and Debating Club in your high school and the captain of many debates?

Being new to Canada, I did not know which hospital offers better care than the others. As a teacher, I know that the quality of schools tends to vary according to different districts. Are hospitals the same too? What is the difference between a teaching hospital and a regular hospital? Which is better?

Most of the time, I didn't dare to utter a sound in these mental institutions. Total surrender. Even more so than to Christ. In some of these institutions, if an inmate showed signs of disobedience or un-cooperation, he would probably be locked up in the quiet room. One day, one inmate, out of his own frustrations and anger, had to be locked up in a room isolated from the rest. This isolation further aggravated him. His shrieking cries for help and his banging on the wall still remain vividly in my mind. Once, I tried to be loud and rebellious. Result? Put under restraint with my hands and feet tied to the bed. Inhuman insult! Gross treatment! On another occasion, I was in a room with no bathroom. The nurse left me a bedpan next to my food tray. Loudly I cried in pain, only to find that I was put on more tranquilizers. No word of empathy. And of course, no word of comfort.

All of a sudden, I became an obedient nun in a French Abbey, counting my rosary in silence, confessing to God for my sins. Worse still, I felt as if I were a Chinese woman in World War II, being molested and raped by Japanese soldiers in the open field, receiving such torment in humiliation. Submission to force without resistance. Suppression of human rights. What agony! What cruelty!

One day, I found a piano in one of these institutions. A broken one, though. Still, it was rain after drought, sunshine after storm. I began





to play my songs, songs of old and songs of new: Beethoven's Fur Elise, Bach's Minuet in G Major; John Lennon's Imagine, and Judy Collin's Both Sides Now. A group of inmates, about five or six, gathered around the piano and started singing:

*"I've looked at life from both sides now,  
From win and lose, and still somehow,  
It's life's illusion I recall,  
I really don't know life at all..."*

Their voice sounded like angels from Heaven. One inmate, by the name of Melissa, started to sing *O Canada*:

*"O Canada, our home and native land,  
True patriot love, in all thy sons' command,  
With glowing hearts, we see thee rise,  
The True North strong and free..."*

How patriotic! Should be the recipient of the Order of Canada. Yet never could she get this honour. A chubby nurse, the prison guard incarnate, rushed to the piano, ordered our soloist to stop and interrupted our Patients' Ensemble.

"Do you know that you're disturbing the nurses? We have to do our work in the nursing station," she said.

We looked at her in awe, afraid to talk back to her.

"Besides, music makes you too excited, hyper. Why don't you have a cup of coffee or tea in the lounge? That would calm you down."

We did not respond. Like shaggy old dogs obediently following their master, we walked behind the nurse to the lounge. There, she made her own coffee. She didn't pay any attention to us. We did not look at her either. We did not make our coffee, but only sat there silently, watching her.





Happy that we were under control, she left with her coffee. I was upset, but hid my feelings all inside. Did I dare to argue? To stand up for myself? To speak for our Patients' Ensemble? I didn't. If I did, I might be given more tranquilizers right away—uncooperative and unstable. Here in this dimly lit lounge, only one unwatered plant stood by itself. Just like the rest of the inmates, this plant was silent, voiceless.

The rest of the Ensemble did not complain, but returned, resigned, back to their own activities. James and Fred played monopoly, Gail and Gwen watched television.

Perhaps they also felt the interruption was annoying, but what could they do? Or perhaps they were immune to the authoritarianism of the mental health system and had given up their rights to speak up for themselves.

Melissa and I sat there. Composed. Quiet. Together we held our hands in alliance, blankly staring at the gray wall by the coffee corner. Spiritless. Hurt. In silence, I hummed the National Anthem of my adopted land, *O Canada*. Melissa looked at me and patted my shoulder. We understood. A battle won in desperation, in total submission.

*“In the beginning  
God created the Heaven and the Earth  
...And God said,  
'Let there be light'  
and there was light...”*  
*Genesis 1: 1-3*

These are the words of God. But could we, *Patients of Psychiatric Wards*, be able to inhabit the Heaven and the Earth? Would we ever be able to hear the voices of our beloved friends and relatives? Are we allowed to love and be loved? And would we be accepted and understood?

*Dear God, would you grant us,  
Patients of Psychiatric Wards,  
Your Light please?*





## *Chapter Two*

### *A LIGHT OF HOPE*

From my bedroom window, I looked at the street below. Wet. Completely wet. Rain must have come a moment ago. Water from the lamppost came dripping to the sidewalk. Silent and stoic, the lamplight beamed at this forsaken street, shining like the eternal torch of the Olympics. Shed a bit of hope, perhaps, to this desolate neighborhood of mine.

Every night for the past two weeks, I had been watching this empty street and its lamplight. Tried to look for a star to comfort my anguish, a star to lift up my despair. Yet what did I see? Only darkness, with a faint light.

Tonight, just like previous nights, I could not sleep. Kept staring at the ceiling. Restless. Agitated. I got out of my bed and called long distance to my friend, Chee Man, in Hong Kong, but the phone just continued to ring. No answer. I went to the kitchen and drank a big glass of chocolate milk. Any effect? Did I become tired? Did I fall asleep? No. Not at all. I then took an hour-long foam bath. Closed my eyes and tried to relax. Any use? No. Still wide-awake.

Had I, all at once, become Shakespeare's Macbeth, crying in desperation, "Shall sleep no more! Macbeth shall sleep no more!" A law-abiding citizen always, how could I have committed a murderous crime as Macbeth and be tortured by sleepless nights? Could this ordeal be God's punishment? Or did I have to bear the sins of my parents and my ancestors? Be my family's scapegoat?

I heard the songs of the thrush from afar. I could also hear the chickadee humming his lullaby. In the distance, I saw a glimpse of sunrise. Must be dawn by now. Well, another sleepless night. Didn't really matter. I had gotten used to these torments of the mind.

I called Phillip. The telephone just kept ringing.





Who was Phillip? He was a professor in the East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto whom I met about two years ago in a Tai Chi class at the Hart House. He was a Greek-Canadian, three years older than me, born in Montreal, but studied Chinese Mythology when he had his PhD degree at the University of British Columbia. Fascinated by the Orient, he had been to South East Asia many times. We had been going out with each other since then. He was a bit taller than me, had curly dark-brown hair, and muscular in his arms. Except for his occasional cowardice, he was gentle, humorous, and kind. His parents lived in Vancouver and he was their only son.

We called each other every night, talking until the wee hours. Sometimes, he came over to my place and stayed overnight. But lately, he seemed moody. He had not been coming as often as before. Our phone conversations had become short.

“What happened? Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“No.”

“Why is it that you don’t seem to be with me these days?”

“Don’t ask, OK? I’m fine,” he snapped at me. This was not his usual behaviour. He seldom would lose his temper with me. I just assumed that it was pressure from his teaching and research.

Two weeks ago, I received a letter from him. He wrote:

*Dear Caroline:*

*You’re going to hate me when you get this letter, but I must tell you the truth. I cannot see you anymore for the reason that I will have to marry Anastasia, my former Greek girlfriend, in about a month from now. My parents are very conservative and want me to marry a Greek woman. See, I am their only son. I feel that I am obligated to fulfill their wish. After all, they immigrated to Canada pinning all their hopes on me. I can’t disappoint them.*

*I love you very much, my dear Caroline. But what can I do? Sometimes, we have to submit ourselves to the reality of life. Love and marriage are two different things.*





*In fact, it had taken days for me to write this letter. Perhaps now, you understand why I was so snappy for the past weeks or so. I was angry at myself and I had a hard time deciding too. I know that this will hurt you. It tortures my heart to see you cry. That's why I am sending this letter to you instead of telling you in person.*

*Past is past. We did have a good time together, didn't we? For that, I will always treasure you in my heart. I will always remember the wooden China Doll that you gave me for my birthday present a year ago. I hope that you will also keep my Venus Goddess of Love necklace.*

*Love,  
Phillip*

I could not believe my eyes when I read the letter. Just a week earlier, he was in my apartment. He told me that he loved me very much. How could he just discontinue our relationship with only a letter, without saying any words of good-bye in person? How could he be so cruel to me whom he made love to so passionately just a few days ago?

I called Phillip again. There was no answer except for the same old voice mail, "this is 416-972-8163. No one is available at the moment. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible." Where was he? Did he deliberately want to ignore my calls? Did he really mean to say good-bye forever? Yet did he not answer every one of my calls just two months ago?

More frustrated than ever, I went to the kitchen to have my breakfast. Yet I wasn't hungry at all. Just kept looking at the bowl of cereal. Come to think of it, I hadn't been eating for the past two days. Yet surprisingly, I did not feel hungry. I then went to the bathroom and tried to get ready to go to work. How appalling it was to see myself in the mirror! A vampire from the underworld, a mummy from an Egyptian tomb. Dark eyebags, greasy hair, swollen face. Only last month I was a young woman with a photogenic face and an enticing smile, full of charm and





spirit. What had I become in an instant? A wrinkled bag lady, a battered whore—tired and exhausted, dirty and smelly. That was me alright. Yet as obstinate as ever, I still insisted on going to teach. A dedicated hero. A devoted teacher. How lofty! How admirable!

“Are *you* Ms. Kwok? I can’t believe it! *You* really look beat! What happened to your hair? Did you put gel in? It looks so greasy! And your face looks so pale. Are you alright?” All of my students were stunned.

“I’m fine, really. Just didn’t sleep very well for a few days. I can manage. Don’t worry, class.”

I tried to talk in my usual calm manner. But behind this calmness were fears, anguish, and feelings of intimidation, something that I had not experienced in the past.

Obediently the students opened their books. I started reading Chapter One of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

*“It was the best of time, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the Spring of hope, it was the Winter of despair...”*

But I couldn’t concentrate, neither could I comprehend. Muttered inconsistent words, mumbled irrelevant ideas. My hands shook and my body shivered. I simply couldn’t continue with the lesson.

The students stared at me in awe, shocked. There was not a sound in the classroom. At lunchtime, the principal came to my workroom. He was in his late-fifties and came from Trinidad and Tobago.

“Caroline, I can see that you don’t feel well.”

“How do you know?” Instantly I responded, suspicious of his remark, afraid that the students had reported my behaviour to him.

“I just sort of noticed. Don’t be uptight. How have you been lately? Have you been eating well? You look devastated today.”





“Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Dick, I’ve not been sleeping at all for the past few days. Really, every night is an agony. And I’m all by myself.”

“Yes, I remember you told me that your mother does not live with you anymore. Where does she live now?”

“She has been living in Supportive Housing on Yonge and Eglinton since 1992.”

“And your dad passed away in the eighties, if I remember well.”

“Yes, in 1984.”

“Does your mother know that you have sleeping problems?”

“Of course not. Please don’t tell her. She’ll force me to take medicine as she did in Hong Kong.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. But, Caroline, it’s important that you see a doctor. I mean, a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist? My! My Chinese friends will ostracize me. They’ll call me Ms. Crazy or Ms. Fruitcake. I don’t want to be sent to those mental hospitals in Hong Kong.”

“Hold it, Caroline. Calm down. Don’t panic. This is Canada, *not* Hong Kong. Besides, you *won’t* lose your job with our school board. Go to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation and apply for a disability pension. Once the school board doctor says that you are fit to return to school, you will. You’re always a good teacher and many students like you. Believe me, I wouldn’t like to lose such an excellent teacher like you. Just see the doctor, take the medications, and rest. I’m sure that you’ll be able to return to work soon. Trust me, I’m the principal.”

“You’re sure?” I asked, still uncertain. Teaching is extremely important to me. After all, had I not spent years getting my credentials in Canada? I could not afford to stay at home. I would die from boredom. Besides, my mother, who did not understand the school system, would keep nagging me.





“One-hundred percent positive, my dear Ms. Kwok. You’ll be reinstated back to work once you get a clean bill of health.”

“OK, Mr. Dick. I’ll listen to you then. I never knew that you’re so understanding. I always thought that principals are cold and uncaring.”

Mr. Dick smiled. “Oh, call me once you’re home. Just to make sure that you’re safe and sound.”

I didn’t go home right away. Why should I? What was there at home? Nothing—no foods, no visitors, and no Phillip. Worse than the isolated towns in California. Why should I be like Shirley Valentine, talking alone in the kitchen to the blank wall? And should I be Katherine Hepburn delivering Cleopatra’s soliloquy in an empty theatre?

I decided to wander along Danforth Avenue. The sky and the clouds were much better to look at. There on Danforth Avenue were many little Greek restaurants.

It was in the Friendly Greek Restaurant where Phillip and I had our first date. That was one evening in May, 1995. The weather was more or less the same as it was today. We ordered a Greek salad, a Souvlakia for me, a Vegetarian Moussaka for him, and two Baklavas for dessert. And of course, a bottle of red wine.

“Are you a vegetarian?” I asked.

“Yes, I am,” he said. He gave me an intriguing look with his brownish eyes. “Just like a Buddhist monk.”

I was amused and surprised. Over dinner, he told me of his interests in Chinese Mythology. He also told me stories of Greek gods—Apollo, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and the rest. He told me the tale of Hero and Leander, of how they lived on opposite banks of the Hellespont, of how the two lovers had met at the Festival of Adonis, and of how Leander vowed to swim across the river to see Hero every night to prove his love to her.

“What happened?” I said, fascinated.

“Well, one night during a storm, Hero’s lamp blew out and Leander lost his way. The next morning, Hero looked out to see his body lying on





the rocks at the foot of her tower. She was so distressed she threw herself down to join him in death.”

I was moved. He looked at me and said, “I’ll be Hero to you too.”

How sweet! To be willing to die for me! I was impressed.

Yet now, it was also May. What had happened to him? He had deserted me for another woman. I felt that I was a fool, too naïve to have believed in his sweet talks. I could not understand his cowardice either. To submit to the wish of his parents in his decision to marry? How could a well-educated man be so obedient to his parents? Was it true or just a lie? An excuse to end his relationship with me?

I could feel the spring breeze around me. Summer would be here soon. Wouldn’t it be nice to go to Center Island for a picnic then and go for the rides in its amusement park?

I walked along Bloor Street. Its big department stores attracted me. It would be nice to buy a pair of sandals or a nice blouse from Holt Renfrew for the summer, wouldn’t it? Yet I only had twenty dollars. I continued to walk until I reached Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street near Chinatown. The restaurants and shops had neon lights with big Chinese characters. Chinese music could be heard on the streets. And hawkers were selling vegetables and fruits on Dundas Street too.

The streetcars were running with cars jammed on the roads. Yes, Chinatown, one of the favorite places that Phillip and I liked to go. I remembered how we held hands during the Chinese New Year’s Bazaar and all the lovely Chinese dishes that we had. Did he not tell me that he loved me in one of these restaurants? Where was he now? I walked among the crowd, hoping to find Phillip. But no Phillip.

Dr. Joseph Wong’s office was close to Chinatown. Yet somehow, I was apprehensive. Dr. Wong had been my family physician since 1991. Six years now. He was about my age and a caring doctor who knew me well. He wouldn’t execute me as those Japanese soldiers did to the Chinese during the Massacre of Nanking. Doctors are to heal, not to kill. But





why, all at once, this fear? Should I see him? Or should I go home?

Like a ship captain lost in the Bermuda Triangle, I walked around the blocks in Chinatown in a circle. Suddenly, I saw my lighthouse—the telephone booth. I took out a quarter and dialed. Yes, I should call Joe. No. He had a board meeting today. Or maybe, I'd call Shirley. But she would be busy babysitting. Should I call my mother? Yes, why not? But she would rush me to the hospital as she did in Hong Kong. Besides, she's too old and doesn't speak English anyway. A long-distance call to Chee Man in Hong Kong would be the best. She would understand. We've been good pals since high school. But did I have enough money to make the call? Besides, it was their midnight. I put my quarter back into my purse. Just like a lone pilgrim looking for the Holy Grail, I continued my journey, in search of an answer and a destination.

I became the twentieth century Hamlet, "To be or not to be, that is the question." I also became the personification of T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, "in a minute, there is time. For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." Decisions, hesitations, indecisions.

After much debate, I walked into Dr. Wong's office. The waiting room was quite small, but was nicely carpeted with Chinese paintings on the wall. Karen, his secretary, was busy on the phone. There were quite a few patients ahead of me. I became agitated and started pacing restlessly back and forth in the room.

"Caroline, come on in," said Dr. Wong as he opened his office door. "You don't look like your usual self. Why? You seem exhausted and hyper. What's wrong? Tell me."

I couldn't control my tears.

"Well, to be honest with you, Dr. Wong, I haven't been sleeping for the past few days. And I haven't been eating well either. By the way, can I have a glass of water? I've been walking all over town for two or three hours."

"Sure, why not?" Dr. Wong handed me a paper cup with icy cold





water. “You mean, in this heat? Caroline, why didn’t you come to see me earlier? What’s bothering you? You don’t have to be afraid. I’m your doctor.”

“I know, Dr. Wong. But it’s quite embarrassing to talk to you about it. Remember our mutual friend, Phillip? The Greek-Canadian professor in East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto? Well, he and I were with each other for the past two years or so. We talked practically every night, even when he was at conferences in Hawaii and Singapore. And of course, we made love. It was just wonderful. We were just like newlyweds and I thought that this was love. I was wrong.” More tears rolled down my face. Dr. Wong handed me a tissue.

“Continue, Caroline. You’re doing fine.”

“See, about two weeks ago, Phillip sent me a letter and told me that he can’t see me anymore. He told me that his former girlfriend, Anastasia, is back in his life. His family in Vancouver pressures him to marry her. All of a sudden, he cut me off. Remember the book that you told me about? *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden*. Life is *not* a rose garden, neither is love. I know that. And I’m not Cinderella either,” I said as I wiped my tears.

“I understand, Caroline. We’re only human beings with all our frailties.”

“You’re right, Dr. Wong. But what I detest most is that Phillip *lied behind my back!* How come he wasn’t honest with me in the first place? Why did he say that he loves me? *A pack of lies!*”

“Maybe he is a coward after all and doesn’t want to face direct confrontations with you. Do you know that very often, men are more cowardly than women? Did you tell your friends about your problem?”

“You want me to get killed, Dr. Wong? Most of my friends here are very Chinese. Or, should I say, puritanical and moralistic. They are mainly single women who have never married. Would they be able to understand? If they knew that I had an affair with a non-Chinese man, they would probably think that I was a whore. Don’t forget, Dr. Wong,





I was divorced some fifteen years ago. In those days, I hardly had any friends at all. Why don't you give me some Ativan? It always works. I'll be alright."

"Caroline, your problem is more than just insomnia. I can't prescribe sleeping pills to you this time."

"Why?"

"You have to see a psychiatrist."

"A psychiatrist? My principal told me the same thing this morning. Hey, would I be put in a straightjacket? Do I have to go through electric shock treatment?"

"I don't think so, Caroline. In fact, straightjackets don't exist in Canada anymore. So, don't be afraid. Just wait outside for a moment. After I call Mount Sinai Hospital, I'll drive you there."

Afraid of the unknown, worried about the diagnosis and exhausted from sleepless nights, I couldn't help crying out loud. I was like a young mother mourning over the death of her child killed in a bombshell in Ho Chi Minh City during the Vietnam War.

Dr. Wong was shocked. Never had he seen me in this desolate state.

"Don't cry, Caroline. You'll be OK. Be brave. Remember Napoleon Bonaparte, the hero that you often told me about? He fought, he lost, and he still fought until the end. You can do that too, can't you? I promise I'll visit you."

I waited for Dr. Wong in the waiting room. As I looked at the Chinese paintings on the wall, my Chinese philosophy came back. All at once, I remembered the saying of dissolving one's sorrow and anger into strength that my mother taught me when I was little. Yes, I should learn to be strong when faced with adversities. Why should I let Phillip bother me?

After a while, Dr. Wong came out of his office. He turned off the lights before we left the office. The office was as dark as a jungle. So was University Avenue. Had I lost my direction again in a moonless night, this time in the South China Sea?





*Free to Fly*

Stars, bright stars, where are you? Are you also lost in the dark? Give me some lights! Yes, lights to light up the candle of my heart, my candle of hope and courage. Wind, I can hear your ferocious voice. But, dear gentle wind, please don't blow my candle out!

*Dear God,  
Show me Your Stars,  
And Your Lights,  
Please.*

