

P A N G S
O F L O V E

S T O R I E S B Y

David Wong Louie



A L F R E D A . K N O P F

New York 1991

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PANGS OF LOVE

In memory of my father

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PANGS OF LOVE

Birthday

There's a man outside the door. He pounds away at it with his fists, and that whole side of the room shakes. He can pound until the house falls. I don't care, it's his house; he can do with it what he pleases.

He talks to me through the door. His talk is nothing like his knock. His voice is gentle, soothing, contrite. I might even be tempted to say it's sweet, only he's a man, and the man that he is.

I came to see the boy. It's true I have no rights except those that come with love. And if I paid any attention to what the court says, I wouldn't be here. The court says the boy belongs to the man, the boy's father. This has been hard to take. After all, the boy calls us both by our first names, and as far as I'm concerned that means we're equals.

It's the boy's birthday, and back in the days when the world was cold and rainy and sane, back in the days when we still lived together, I had promised we'd go for an afternoon of baseball—sunshine, pop, hotdogs. I told the man I was coming. I kept calling his number, but no one answered. I left plenty of messages on his machine, detailing what I had planned for my date with the boy. No response. When the boy first moved into this house, I tried

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phoning him every couple of weeks. I just wanted to hear him say my name again, Wallace Wong—the clearest three syllables in his vocabulary when his mother introduced us. But all I ever got for my troubles was the man's recorded voice—until yesterday, that is, when he interrupted the message I was leaving to say, "Wong, why don't you leave us alone?"

I just hung up on him. I couldn't talk to someone who used that tone of voice.

? The boy's mother is gone from the picture. She's in New York; I say New York because that's where she's from originally, but she might be in Topeka for all I know. Losing the boy almost killed her. All those days in court for nothing. What did that black robe know about the weave of our three hearts? The man won custody. Perhaps he bribed the judge; it's happened before. More likely it's because he's making money now writing movies, and in this town that's everything. He had written a script based on their marriage and breakup, which was made into a film and did well at the box office, so now he's in big demand.

10/2/21 One day I came home from the shop, and she was gone. No note then, and not a word from her since. But I'm confident she'll come home once her heart's on the mend. Her disappearance wasn't a complete surprise. She's a quirky one. I've learned to expect such behavior. When we first started going out, she wanted me to prove that I really loved her. She was still recovering from the marriage then and didn't trust what anyone said about anything, especially love. So she said she needed proof. I told her okay, but for weeks she couldn't decide what she wanted me to do. Then one day while we were having lunch at a restaurant, she said, "This is it."

"What?"

“Steal his radio.” She pointed across the street.

“You crazy?”

The radio went into a health club with a man built like a heavyweight boxer.

I crossed the street, and as I followed the radio into the building, I imagined the possible headline for tomorrow's paper: CHINESE ROMEO BITES GYM FLOOR. Having accepted the possibility of severe bodily injury, I found the actual theft of the radio surprisingly easy. I just hung around the locker room, watching him strip and flex, and when he got up to relieve himself, I snatched up the radio left sitting on the bench.

She met me on the street in front of the gym. “Keep it,” she said. “A present from me to you.”

This I didn't appreciate. I reminded her the size of that man's fist was bigger than my entire head.

“Frank,” she said, laughing in a mean sort of way, “wouldn't hurt anyone he wasn't married to.”

That's Frank out there, punching the door.

I'm sitting on a kiddie chair. My knees are pressed against the bottom of a table that's under two feet tall. It's as if I'm crammed in a crate. In front of me I have a drawing pad and eight thick crayons. Sooner or later, the man will find the key to the lock or poke his fist through the door. Before that happens, I want to leave the boy a note, just to let him know I didn't forget his birthday. But unless he's learned to read in the past few months, words will be useless. So I have to say my piece with pictures, and I'm not much when it comes to pictures.

I take up the red crayon and draw a circle; then I put in some eyes. I'm trying for a self-portrait but it's sizing up more feline than *Homo sapien*. Soon I admit defeat

狡猾
狡诈

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and finish off the cat with a pair of triangles for ears.

The man calls my name. "Don't do anything funny while I'm away," he says. His footsteps go down the stairs.

I hurry to the window. The man's walking up the front path. He goes about halfway, turns, and looks back at the house. He catches my eyes and gestures with his hand, like an umpire thumbing a guy out.

I try a yellow crayon. I make another circle, but now I'm distracted by the man's absence. Can't draw with him there, can't draw without him. I go to the window. He's standing at the curb, waiting for the boy, or maybe he's called the police. 马栏

Back at the table again, I give my drawing some teeth, big yellow squares. My creation reminds me of my father, though no one else would make the connection.

"What good's a son that doesn't know who his own father is?" That's what my father said when I told my parents about the boy and how the three of us planned to set up housekeeping. He didn't care for the idea of his only son adopting a used family. He gritted his false teeth, which he does when he's mad, and said, "Wallace" (he never uses my American name), "don't be such a jerk. There are millions of available Chinese girls. And I'll tell you a secret. The basic anatomy's the same no matter where it comes from. Just say yes, and we'll go to China and find you a nice girl."

My mother nodded, her hair jet black from a beautician's bottle. She said, "Love between lions and sheep has but one consequence." She talks in aphorisms. I don't know if they're the real thing or if she makes them up.

My parents had their hearts set on Connie Chung. "Marry your mother a girl she can talk to without having to use her hands," said my father.

"What makes you think Connie Chung can even speak Chinese?" I said.

"Because she's smart; otherwise, she wouldn't be on TV," said my father.

My mother said, "Only a fool whistles into the wind." At this, even my father shot her a funny look.

On the drive over here I heard a story on the radio about California condors going extinct. I tried to imagine myself as a condor at the dead end of evolution. In my veins I felt the primordial soup bubbling, and my whole entropic bulk quaked as I gazed at the last females of my species. I knew I was supposed to mate, but I wasn't sure how. Yeah, I'd probably have to start by picking a partner. But which one? I looked them over, the last three in creation; she'd need to have good genes. Finally, after careful consideration, I chose—her, the bird with the blond tail feathers. Then I heard my father's voice: "No, not that one, that one."

I wonder if he might be right. Maybe I'd be wise to pack a few suitcases full of Maybelline and soft Italian shoes and go over to China. Plenty of women there in that lipstick-free society. Seduce them with bourgeois decadence, and they'll gladly surrender their governmentally mandated 1.2 children to me.

This morning I taped a sign on the door for my customers, saying that I had to attend a funeral.

Even though Saturdays show my best profit, for the boy's birthday I didn't bother to open the shop. I operate an Italian-style café. I traffic in slow death: buttery eggs, pinguid coffee, and sweets on top of sweets. At first business was slow. People didn't believe a Chinaman could produce a decent cappuccino. I could hardly blame them. I'd shy away, too, from moo shu pork from a Sicilian's pan. But I do all right now, and take off when the need comes up.

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So I drove over to the man's house, and when I first caught sight of it I was surprised by its size, its thick Greek columns, its funereal cypresses, its imposing terra-cotta roof.

Seated on a white cast-iron love seat by the front door, the man was hunched over a book in which he appeared to be writing. I walked up the long front path, flanked on both sides by enormous expanses of chipped white stone where there should've been grass. He acted as if I weren't there. He just kept on scribbling. This reminded me of his courtroom manner: done up in a pinstriped suit, he sat at his table, writing feverishly on a yellow legal pad, as if he were an agent of the law.

I hated that time. The boy and his mother stayed downtown in a hotel to be near the court building. Each night my father would call to ask who was winning. Of course he was rooting against us. My mother wanted to know if I was eating rice again, now that the girl was gone. I got so confused talking to them that I moved out of the house just to avoid their calls. I set up a cot in the café storeroom and slept next to egg cartons, milk crates, and hot exhaust from the refrigerator fan. Those nights I fell asleep listening to talk shows on the radio.

They were good company. So much misery on the airwaves, it was a comfort. I heard this one guy complaining about his chronic indigestion, and the radio doctor, without so much as laying a stethoscope on him, diagnosed that the caller had cancer. I listened to too many women with a similar story. The husband's a hitter, they'd say, and in the morning she's ready to hit back, but by then the bum's gone off somewhere, so she smacks the kids instead, and wants to know why she doesn't feel sorry for doing so. We were all half-crazed insomniacs, one big aching family.

I even called a radio psychologist the night of the day the boy's mother left me. The second I got through to the station I realized how desperate I was, and felt pretty silly. But I didn't hang up. I had a conversation with the show's producer. He said my story was too complex. He wanted me to simplify it. (He advised me that if I wanted the listeners' sympathy I should consider dropping the "Chinese stuff." Before I listened to another word, I told him that I hoped one day he'd be lonesome and heartbroken in the back roads of China, thousands of miles from Western ears, and the nearest ones carved from stone. ^)

"I've been expecting you," said the man. He motioned for me to sit next to him on the love seat. I held my ground. He crossed his legs and reopened his book to a page marked with a greeting card. "You like poetry?" he asked, then bowed his head and finished copying a poem from the book onto the card. "I read this one back in high school, so I guess it must be good." He handed me the card when he was through. His handwriting looked like ants set end to end, painfully tiny words crawling all over the place.

I said, "Would you mind calling the boy?"

"We should talk," he said, taking back the card and slipping it into a hot-pink envelope. "I don't know you from the Gang of Four, and here you are asking for Welby."

I had braced myself for that. Welby. I can hardly say it. Named the poor kid after a TV doctor. The boy's mother swears it was all the man's doing. When she comes home, and we're settled, we'll go to court and have his name changed.

"It's his birthday," I said. "We have plans. The ball game, remember?"

"And don't think he hasn't talked about seeing you," the man said.

BIRTHDAY

"Well then, let's not disappoint the boy." I took a step forward and reached for the doorbell.

"That's not necessary," said the man, rising from his seat. "We're talking now."

He pushed back the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt and checked his watch. "Can you spare me a few minutes?" he said and, with a sweep of his hand, invited me to sit again. This time I did.

7 ✓ "The scene opens in a supermarket," he began. "Rows of fruits and vegetables. People, carts fill the aisle. Close-up on Welby; he's about eighteen months old, sitting in the kiddie seat. I go squeeze avocados. Reverse angle: Welby watches as I join the swarm of shoppers. Pan of aisle, finally zeroing in on a nice-looking lady, who parks her cart next to mine. Zoom in: she's talking to her own kid, who's too big for the kiddie seat and looks awkward and clumsy in it. His head's bowed, eyes dim and sad. His mother says, 'Here's another little boy,' and she disappears among the shoppers. Zoom in on me in the crowd. I look over at Welby. Cut back to kids. Welby's leaning across the cart and pats the new boy, nothing rough, just finding out what the other kid feels like. Twin shot: big boy freezes, letting Welby do his thing, the way people let mean dogs sniff all they want, instead of trying to get away. I return to the cart. See the kid's crying, no noise, just these tears on his cheeks. Mom comes back. I apologize. Close-up on Mom: she's eating a candy bar right in front of her kid's face. You know something's wrong with the picture, but you can't figure out what. It takes a few seconds, but then you realize the kid's blind. Fade out."

"Scene from a new movie?" I asked.

"No, from real life."

"Oh. Look, we have to get going." I stood up and stepped away from the door. "So what's your point?"

He looked at his watch again. "Look, she left me, she

left you. On that score, we're dead even.' He came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Say, what kind of car you driving?" He gave me the gentlest push, and we started walking up the front path. "You know what Welby thought when he came to live here? He thought he was being punished for breaking up our marriage. How do you think that made me feel? We all do things we don't mean, and end up hurting people. I hurt her, she hurt me; now you're hurt."

We were still walking toward the curb. The man nudged me whenever my feet slowed down.

"Frank, look, thanks for the talk."

"Sure," he said. "It's about time we had a man-to-man." He touched me on the shoulder again.

"But you're forgetting something—where's Welby? We really should hit the road. I promised him batting practice."

"Say, that reminds me, what kind of tickets you buy? I'll reimburse you for them."

We reached the curb. He opened the driver-side door and rolled down the window. "The ballpark express," he said, sweeping his hand past the opening, like a model on a game show showing off a prize.

I slid in behind the wheel. "Okay. Now call Welby."

He shut the door and crouched, his big forearms resting against the bottom of the window. "Listen to me," Frank said. "To Welby, you're big time. You're like a living, breathing video game. There've been times I couldn't stand being around him. He'd tell stories: 'One day me and Wallace Wong' did this, did that. I'm never in any of his stories." The man looked into the side-view mirror and fixed his hair. "But I'm his father, right? Come on, give me a chance. Leave us alone, okay? He's starting to get used to me."

It was obvious he wasn't going to hand the boy over.