

PAULA W. PETERSON

Our Friend Max

Our friend Max is in love again at the age of 54 and this time I tell my husband that we should waste no time alerting him to the plain fact that he is heading for disaster. The current object of his affection is a Chinese woman he met over the Internet who couldn't speak a word of English but used some sort of clumsy computerized translation program to convey that she was stuck in a lonely God-forsaken Communist pit-stop of a town and would love to meet an American man who would marry her and bring her quickly to democracy. Also that she was pretty ("especially skinny") and enjoyed very much both giving and receiving sexual pleasure. This was more than enough for our chivalrous friend Max. Although he soon discovered she'd employed some old-fashioned bait-and-switch techniques in her advertisement—the photographs she'd attached happened to have been taken about twenty-five years ago, and she was actually 44 years old and had a 22 year old son from a previous marriage—he was not deterred. After three months of halting electronic correspondence Max bought a plane ticket for Shanghai then traveled inland by train to some dim and unpronounceable interior province where the woman (whose name sounded something like Shi-Shi or Gi-Gi, we were never quite sure) introduced him to her entire set of relatives. They had never met an American up close before and treated him as if he were the Last Emperor, stuffing him with dim sum and promising him lifelong allegiance.

Shi-Shi or Gi-Gi lived in a cement block apartment across the street from a dubious structure guarded by a barbed wire fence, which Max surmised was a repository for nuclear waste or perhaps the last remaining stores of the smallpox virus. Shi-Shi's apartment had no hot water; she had to boil a pot on an iron stove for Max's bath—manually igniting a pilot light first—and the toilet was one of those pull-the-chain-and-hope-for-the-best affairs. Nevertheless, Max and Shi-Shi had a honeymoon of sorts. Shi-Shi was as pretty and skinny as promised. Sexual pleasure was duly given and received. Max boasted that Shi-Shi was surprised by certain of his moves. He was "there for her" in a way that no one had been

before. (Clever Shi-Shi, with her handful of English words, had no trouble getting *that* across, I guess.) The minute he returned to San Francisco Max began sending Shi-Shi money so that she could quit her job emptying bed pans at the local “hospital” and he employed the best immigration lawyer he could find. He also enrolled in a Mandarin Chinese class at the city college.

“We have to talk some sense into him,” I say to my husband. “He’s going to get hurt. She’ll come over here and get her green card and stay married to him as long as the INS requires her to, and then she’ll dump him.”

My husband does not reply at first. I wait a few moments as patiently as I can, because he is never one to respond with alacrity; he grew up in a country town, where there was a lot more time and space for people to develop their thoughts. Luckily his job involves Petri dishes and microscopes and other lab equipment with which he is not required to converse.

We are in the car, on the way to Max’s. He called and invited us for dinner. “I haven’t seen you guys for such a long time! I miss you!” he cried with that expansive, happy generosity that only people in love possess. “I’ll make you some salmon, OK?”

So we leave the kids home with my mother-in-law and drive to Max’s divorced-guy budget pad located on the slightly wrong side of Lake Merced. My husband wanted to stay home and watch the A’s game on television but I convinced him that Max needed some emergency intervention.

“And then there’s the business with her son,” I continue, because if I wait too long to express myself the urge to express myself will pass and the thought of not even wanting to express myself terrifies me. If I shut up, pretty soon we will both be sitting around in this marriage with nothing to say, and where will that lead to? *Somebody* has to talk.

“You don’t think she’s going to want to leave her son behind. Max is going to end up spending a lot of money he can’t afford to be spending.”

My lawfully wedded is a big solid guy who takes up a lot of room in our small car. His hands on the steering wheel are wide and covered with guileless freckles and light curly hairs. The one finger with the missing knuckle which he lost in a schoolyard fight when he was ten is as usual bent a little upwards. These days his hair

looks gray in certain lights and if he doesn't shave for awhile the stubble is gray too. Aside from that he hasn't changed since I met him. Nothing is different except that he is growing older, and so am I. We have only been married about 150 years. And here's something to consider: once after I returned from a business trip, I discovered the video my husband had rented while I was gone. It was not James Bond or *Debbie Does Dallas* the way you would expect but one of those old black and white films from the thirties about thwarted lovers who must find their way back to each other after overcoming many obstacles. I was embarrassed, touched, and alarmed: what did this mean? To what did this point? Ought I to say something to my husband about his choice of film? Was there, as usual in life, an underlying meaning? I examined the video's cover. It wasn't a classic. Nobody famous was in it. The woman who was starring had one of those tightly crimped hairstyles and much plumper arms than you'd see on a movie star nowadays. For a long time I used to scoff at my husband's taste in films but now I saw that it was not just a matter of taste: his choice implied a serious deficiency, the way someone who has been deprived of Vitamin C will crave citrus fruits. Of this deficiency I felt I stood accused. "Why do you like this kind of sappy thing?" I asked him. He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "It's completely false from start to finish. You know life isn't like that." He considered and answered, "That's for sure." If he had asked me to dress up like a Catholic schoolgirl in a kilt and knee socks, I would have understood. But how could I give him something that did not exist?

"Oh well," says my husband finally, because he sees it is unavoidable, he's going to have to speak, "if he's happy, what does it matter? What difference does it make?" He makes a careful left turn.

"That's not what you said before, though."

"What did I say before?" says my husband with alarm.

"When I brought it up three days ago you agreed with me. That Max was deluded."

"I did?"

"Oh forget it."

Here is where I should really shut up but I am determined, like a marathon runner, to stay the distance. "How come you never want to discuss things?"

"We're discussing something right now!"

"I mean in any detail."

"What's there to discuss?"

"Don't you think you owe it to your friend to at least mention that he's making a mistake? You know how susceptible Max is to women. He behaves like a teenager. Remember the woman from Foster City? Remember how he kept calling her sixteen times a day and how he bought her those diamond earrings when he'd only known her two weeks? He was just devastated when she dumped him. That kind of thing is a pattern in Max's life. And this will be ten times worse."

"Well, what do you want to do about it, then?"

"What do *I* want to do?" I take a moment to collect myself. "I don't get you, really I don't. If a friend of yours was standing on the edge of a cliff and didn't know it, wouldn't you warn him?"

My husband slows down for an old hump-backed lady crossing the street. This gives him time to form his thoughts. "But maybe he's not standing on a cliff."

"What are you saying?" I demand. "You think it might turn out OK?"

"Well, you know. Maybe he thinks it's romantic."

"*Romantic?* It's *desperate* is what it is."

My husband gets very busy looking for a parking place. I say to him suddenly, "Do *you* want a divorce?" My heart is beating like crazy. I have no reason to be so frightened—of course, he will never answer "yes."

He looks over at me, swerves a bit in his lane. "Of course I don't. Do you?"

"Maybe *you* want romance. Being swept away and all that." I have to keep my voice from quavering.

My husband gives me a startled glance. "When did I ever say...?"

"Never mind."

He reaches over and pats my knee. "The thing is, it's sad for Rebecca. I don't imagine he's thinking very much about her feelings right now. I'm sure it will be confusing for her."

"Of *course*," I answer, relieved. I am surprised by a mild surge of affection for him. "I mean, that was my point *exactly*. Right? There are realities to be faced. The children always pay for these grand romances..."

My husband finds a space, and since he refuses to park and talk at the same time, the conversation is over. I think, spitefully, of a few things that I would do if my husband and I divorced. Things he could not possibly imagine. For example, the very first thing I would do would be to have a fling with Steve, my twenty-two year old office flunky—the one who plays soccer and has that nice tight muscular behind. My husband simply does not think me capable. He has a tame opinion of me.

We have to ring twice before Max buzzes us into the lobby. He meets us at the elevator on his floor. Max is a gangly man with the beginnings of a paunch and sparse brown hair. His face wears a perpetually soft and thoughtful expression, as if he is still trying to figure out why his lunch money was stolen in the third grade, let alone the reason he keeps marrying the wrong women and ending up with nothing but lint in his wallet. When he sees us he pushes at the bridge of his glasses, squints, then flinches, and I become self-conscious, wondering what there is about us to make him react like that—do we have stains on our clothes? Are we trailing toilet paper on the heels of our shoes? Then he recovers and smiles and I see that since the advent of Shi-Shi there has been a new development in the personal-improvement arena: braces on his teeth. The plastic kind that look better but cost a fortune. More money down the drain.

Max pats my husband on the back and squeezes me in a big hug. I am feeling more cheerful. The sight of Max standing there grinning and oblivious to the fact that he is on the verge of complete decimation floods me with a warm and gratifying pity. Max *needs* us.

“Hey you guys, come on in! Sorry I didn’t answer right away,” says Max. “I was just sending an e-mail to my sweetie.” I look at my husband and roll my eyes. This is a bad sign.

Max’s one-bedroom apartment is furnished with all the flotsam and jetsam from the wreck of his last marriage—a card table with mismatched folding chairs, a futon covered with an old plaid blanket, posters of Yosemite tacked to the wall, a portable CD player perched on top of a wooden cube. I have to restrain myself from straightening up. A pair of discarded white briefs lie comfortably and unselfconsciously in the middle of the rug. They have been there, by the look of them, for a very long time. None of this will matter to Shi-Shi, who will think she is living in a palace.

"You guys OK?" says Max, looking from my husband to me and pushing at his glasses.

"Of course we're OK," I answer. "What about you, are you OK?"

"You look sort of—" says Max and then he stops and says, "I couldn't be better!"

He picks up a large unidentifiable purple something-or-other from a chair in the corner that is piled with several balls of colored yarn.

"Look at this," he says. "I'm knitting a sweater for Shi-Shi. Purple is her favorite color. What do you think?"

"It's *beautiful*," I say, "Lucky Shi-Shi," and my husband says, "Yeah, pretty cool," and Max says, "Her apartment's really cold all the time. I think she'll like it."

Max once told me he would not have survived his divorces if it were not for knitting. He explained that it had to do with being able to form a coherent and meaningful structure after all the unraveling. Again I catch my husband's eye so that we can share this moment together. If we were to divorce, this is what awaits us: a shitty apartment, an eccentric hobby to staunch the wound. And the Internet. The inevitable Internet, where all lonely people must finally converge.

Now Max and my husband are talking about their jobs. Many years ago when they were in college they both majored in bio-chem, but Max got out of science and into computer programming, while my husband settled into working in research and development for pharmaceutical firms. "Well, what new drugs are you about to release onto the unsuspecting public?" Max asks. My husband launches into a long explanation of a new form of therapy for Hepatitis C which his company has been developing for years. He speaks slowly and deliberately as always, using his right hand to chop the air.

It has been months since he has talked to me about his work. In fact, it has been a long time since I have heard him put more than three or four sentences together at a time. *This is how I am when I'm not with you*, he seems to be saying. *This is who I am, but not for you*. Max puts his finger on his chin, listens thoughtfully, nods. Of course, it has also been a long time since I have listened to my husband in that sort of unharried and fully attuned manner. I find him difficult to listen to, generally, although this is strange since what he says is often interesting. I simply can't focus. But I find his

silences difficult too and I don't know which is worse, and I get the impression that my inability to tolerate my husband either with his mouth open or his mouth shut is somehow all my fault. And then I get angry that the whole thing should be my fault. *Nobody listens to me either*, I want to say to him as he waxes eloquent about enzymes and molecules. *Nobody ever asks me any questions*.

My husband talks for a long time. Then Max cracks a joke that only bio-chemists and former bio-chemists can understand and they laugh together and my husband says, "What about those A's?" and there's some backslapping and ritual male sports talk. My husband sits in an armchair and turns on the television to catch some of the game and Max asks if I'll help him toss a salad in the kitchen.

"Are you sure you're alright?" says Max. "You look a little tense."

"I'm just fine," I tell him. For a moment I am tempted to tell him that he is trashing his entire life, but I decide that ambushing him in the kitchen would be too crass. I can wait until dinner. "I just have a few things on my mind, that's all."

"Have some wine," says Max. "There's a bottle open."

He pours me a glass. Reaching for it, my hand, embarrassingly, trembles with eagerness. As I toss the salad I glance toward the small eating area blocked off from the rest of the apartment with a folding screen. It has been turned into a room for Rebecca, his 11-year-old daughter, who stays with him every other weekend. There is a twin bed and a tiny desk littered with bottles of sparkly nail polish, copies of *Teen* magazine, plastic barrettes decorated with butterflies. In spite of my resolve to be delicate, I cannot resist making a comment.

"What about Rebecca?" I say, crossing my arms. "What does she think about Shi-Shi coming?"

Max pushes at his glasses. He squints, considering. "Well," he confesses, "that's a bit of a problem. She threatens not to stay with me anymore if Shi-Shi moves in. The other night she made a big scene, cried herself to sleep." He opens the oven and pokes the salmon to see if it is cooked through. He is wearing a huge yellow oven mitt decorated with bunnies and ducklings. The other oven mitt is red and bordered with flowers.

"You mean she'd stay with her mom permanently?"

"Something like that," says Max, poking at the food.

"That would be awful. I mean, Max, I don't think this is something to be taken lightly." I think of what my husband said in the car about Max's daughter.

Max shrugs. "You know how kids are. They get all dramatic. And then whatever it is they're upset about melts away."

"But you'd miss her a lot, wouldn't you, if she lived with her mother full time."

Max takes the salmon out of the oven, stands up. "What can you do? That's life."

I grind pepper and toss the salad violently, flipping a tomato up in the air. The suffering of children is inexcusable. For a moment I wish my husband was standing next to me in the kitchen instead of watching TV.

"I'm sure Rebecca and Shi-Shi will get used to each other," says Max. He pauses. "After awhile."

We bring the salmon and salad and potatoes out to the card table and pull up a few folding chairs. My husband turns off the TV, and *voilà!*, it's dinner. The salmon is tender, swimming in a lemony dill sauce, and the red potatoes melt in your mouth—Max is a surprisingly good cook. He is sensitive to the needs of different foods. He brings out a few bottles of Napa Valley chardonnay, and my husband, his face brightening, is the first to hold out a wine glass when Max pours. I keep a sharp lookout for the right moment to turn the conversation around to the sober matters we have come here to discuss. But Max is in a chatty mood tonight. We drink steadily while Max shows us photographs of his latest grandson (number two) and raves about the accomplishments of his oldest daughter, a journalist. He enthuses about the Great Wall and those insufferably famous terra-cotta statues that were unearthed after thousands of years, and Shi-Shi's waist, which is no more than twenty-four inches around. He beams. "You just can't imagine what an adventure it's all been," he says. He pours more wine. He squints, pushes at his glasses, and announces that he has stopped taking his anti-depressants because love is the most powerful force in the universe. He proposes a toast to fate and the Internet. My husband lifts his glass. The chardonnay is an excellent vintage.

In the old days, Max would hook his leg around the rung of my chair and drag it toward him, or he would stand close and stroke my upper arms, or rub my neck. Once he even said to my husband,

"Hey, you got lucky. You married a *babe*." To which my husband replied, "Humph." This was right after Max's last divorce. When he met the woman from Foster City, though, he stopped flirting with me and began to focus all his energies on the serious business of being in love. My heart swells with good will towards Max, who is this rare thing, a devoted lover. Now the plates have been pushed away and Max is talking to me of financial matters, since I am, after all, a CPA. He asks me complicated questions about the tax consequences of dissolving his retirement account and whether he ought to sell his grandfather's collection of antique coins, and I am nearly knocked off my feet by a sadness that is deep and wide.

My husband takes his glass and moves back to the armchair. He switches on the TV and watches the game with no sound. I see there will be no help from *that* quarter. Max leans in close to me, his elbows sprawled on the table, and now he is inquiring about stores in San Francisco that sell wedding dresses, and asking will I take Shi-Shi shopping because I'm the only woman she'll know in the city and I've always had such good taste in clothes. I try to stay focused on the reason for our visit: to make sure poor Max stays on *course*. To rescue him from running away with himself. But I am befuddled, losing the thread of my purpose. I, who usually have no trouble speaking my mind, suddenly cannot seem to find the right moment to break into the conversation.

But finally I do. We have finished the first two bottles of wine and have made great progress on the third when I take advantage of one of Max's thoughtful pauses to remark, "Well, Max, we hope you don't mind if we mention that we're a little concerned about all this." I look at my husband pointedly and he coughs and says, "Yes," without even trying to sound like he means it.

Max looks surprised. "You mean about bringing Shi-Shi here?"

"Well, of course that's what I mean."

Max blinks and runs his hand through the sparse hair on his head. "Oh, Shi-Shi will be fine. San Francisco, well, that's like falling into a treasure chest for her. There are so many people who speak Chinese—she won't feel alone. And the weather, and everything is so beautiful. I'm sure she'll be a little homesick at first, but she'll get over it. I can't wait to show her everything."

Max fills up our glasses from the third bottle (which is even better than the first two) and I try to think of a way of re-phrasing my

remark so that it will be crystal clear. I drink some more wine to fortify myself. I cannot understand why it is so difficult for me to say exactly what I mean.

Then Max disappears into the kitchen and comes out a moment later waving a plastic baggy in his hand that is filled with some sort of—can it be—*botanical* material.

“Hey, you guys, want to get high?” he asks. “This is good stuff. I got it from a friend at work.”

At work! Max does not work for a record store or for a rock band, but as the resident computer geek for a large and extremely conservative investment company. How many years it has been since we’ve smoked pot? I laugh and wave my hand to decline and then I hear my husband saying, “Sure, I’ll have some.”

I stare at him. Wonders never cease, apparently. Max rolls the joint and lights it and the two of them pass it back and forth for a few moments while I watch, sipping the last of the wine. My husband’s big legs are spread slightly apart and his feet are planted solidly on the ground. His face is flushed; the tiny veins in his nose are swollen and red. Suddenly a tabby cat appears out of nowhere and jumps onto my husband’s lap. My husband looks down, bewildered. He holds his hands in mid-air while the cat circles fastidiously and makes himself comfortable.

“You have a cat?” I say to Max.

“What? Sure. Sure, I have a cat.” He takes a hit from the joint, his thoughts drifting toward Asia.

“Since when?”

“I’ve always had a cat,” says Max, with surprise.

Max clears away the dishes. I rise to help him but he says, “Sit down, sit down.” So I sit and drink and watch my husband with mounting astonishment. My husband has never liked cats; he claims he is allergic. But he does not make a motion to tip the cat off his lap. He holds himself stiffly, trying not to move; his big freckled hands hover awkwardly. The cat is unperturbed by my husband’s self-consciousness and does not give a damn that he is disliked. He wraps his tail around himself, blinks, taking stock of the situation, then shuts his eyes and begins to purr with deep satisfaction. My husband sees that the cat is not going away and he relaxes. Carefully he picks up the joint from the ashtray, inhales, and regards the cat without touching it. After awhile my husband’s

features become less guarded, more penetrable and permeable. Feelings, ideas, moods, show through. He is unable to tear his eyes away from this unexpected feline visitor. His big square fleshy face softens into foolish tenderness. He does not seem to understand that he can pet the cat; he is content merely to stare.

And then my husband is asleep. It's as if somebody has waved a wand and cast a spell. He is gone. His hands drop limply over the cat, encircling it. His head droops. This is the best possible thing that could have happened: the only solution to this riddle which is Us. Magic. My husband whisked away to some faraway land to sleep for a thousand years. He could use the rest. The kids will be sad, but they're growing older and anyway it's nobody's fault. Who can quarrel with sorcery? I experience a buoyant relief. My husband looks so sweet and helpless sitting there, so deeply entranced. I wish him well with no hard feelings. Goodbye! You see how simple it can be? The easiest thing in the world. My throat constricts, my eyes sting and suddenly I am crying.

Max comes out of the kitchen and looks at me and sets a cheesecake on the table. He squints and pushes at his glasses.

"I'm so lonely," I sob. "I'm just so ridiculously lonely."

Max pats my back, little light pats, the way I do when my youngest has had some sort of playground quarrel and I've already given him all the advice at my disposal and there's nothing more to say. The idea of Max comforting me makes me sob even harder.

"I know, I know," says Max. While I hiccup and sob he slices the cheesecake. Then he takes the joint from the ashtray and passes it to me and I take a good long hit. It seems I haven't forgotten how. We sit in silence eating cheesecake and smoking and then we start to talk. All about love and marriage and kids and divorce and friendship and hope and death and the possibility of true happiness on this earth—the usual sorts of things you talk about when you're high. I cry and relate to Max everything about my marriage, from a to z, trying to be as fair as I can to my husband and represent his side of the story too, since he is under a spell and can't talk. Then I tell Max about the man I *really* loved about 200 years ago whom I didn't or couldn't or wouldn't marry for some reason that seems absurd now, and I cry some more and wonder what my life would have been like if I had, if it would have been different, if I would

have lived out my existence on a more elevated plane, or on just the same old plane I'm on now. And is it still possible to change?

We devour the entire cheesecake, licking our fingers. Max tries to express his feelings for Shi-Shi. But words fail him. He shakes his head. He half rises out of his chair, gropes the air for some invisible assistance, sits down again. Tears pour from his eyes. He has never felt like this before, he says. I listen to him and sob enviously. He says that he *thought* he felt like this before at times, but he was wrong. It wasn't like this. *This* is the real thing.

He swipes at his cheeks with his sticky hands and says, "Even if it only lasts for a few years, who cares? It doesn't have to last forever. I'm beyond that now. I don't expect anything to last forever. After all, soon we'll be dead. I'm happy for whatever I get, you know?"

"That is so *beautiful*," I answer, crying.

We talk some more and after awhile I begin to feel very dizzy and tired and I tell Max that I am going to lie down for a moment on his couch. The moment I lie down I pass out. When I open my eyes I see light in the windows. It's almost dawn. I sit bolt upright. "The kids!" I cry. Max, who is sitting at his desk nearby, turns around. "Oh, don't worry, I called your mother-in-law and told her you'd be staying here tonight. Everything's fine."

I press my hand to my head, which is pounding. My husband is still asleep in the armchair.

"You're awake?" I ask Max.

"Oh, this is the best time to call China," he answers, cheerfully. He turns his back to me and picks up the phone.

I look at my sleeping husband. I know for a certainty that he will never leave me. He will never fall in love with another woman. He will never say things like, "I *thought* it was real before, but it wasn't. *This* time it's real." He will never say, about our children, "They'll get used to it. Kids are so adaptable." I have known these things about him ever since I met him. And if I died, I am also certain he would not bring home a Chinese woman whom he had met over the Internet. He can be relied upon to meet a pleasant American suburban lady with a couple of kids of her own, a house with no mortgage, and a tidy sum tucked away in mutual funds. This knowledge I have about my husband both comforts and depresses me. And for just a moment—during which I am grappling with my hangover and cannot be held fully responsible for my emotions—I believe with

passionate conviction that I could love my husband again if only he *were* the sort of man who would throw everything away for, let's say, an underage cheerleader with watermelon-sized boobs. With all my heart, I want him to be this sort of man. I pray fervently through the murk of hangover for this radical and impossible transformation.

Behind me, Max speaks loudly into the phone, something halting and garbled which can only mean "I love you," in Chinese.

After awhile I gain some mastery over myself. The throbbing in my head subsides. I am left with a fuzziness in my mouth, a weakness in my limbs. I struggle to my feet and stumble over to my husband. I regard him with contempt, pity, and a certain sense of fellowship. Look at us, two middle-aged people getting wasted and crashing at our friend's pad. We will both have stories to tell at our jobs next week. My husband is still deeply unconscious. The cat has disappeared. I am overcome by a strange panic. I grab his shoulder and shake him and call out his name. I am terrified that he will die and leave me all alone here.