

He patted her on the knee. "This type of melancholy didn't have a cure. You see, the first time she was with child we were just sixteen. I proposed to her the day she found out—I would have regardless. I fell in love with her the second she sneezed. She was standing ahead of me at the check-out line at the grocery store."

"What did she buy?"

"I don't know. Are you going to ask questions or will you listen to the story?"

The girl slid her forefinger across her lips; she pretended to zip it shut.

"Good. Now, where was I? She refused my proposal. She was terrified of her parents—figured they'd disown her. She decided she was going to 'take care of it' before they found out. 'Taking care of it' back in those days was illegal. I was against her decision."

"You mean an abortion? I read it in the dictionary. I was looking for 'abracadabra' when I found it. I'm glad I was born. A girl like me isn't ordinary. I stick out."

"You sure do," he winked. "As time passed, her belly grew. She rubbed her tummy, promised the baby she would protect it. She couldn't go through with her decision. Her parents were ashamed of the situation—a disgrace to the family."

"They blindfolded her, stuck her in the back seat of the car and sent her away for the last four months of her pregnancy. Her parents promised Rose she could come home with the child after the birth. In the meantime,

they left the country for the rest of the year. They planned to claim the child as their own, rather than their grandchild. Her mother told Rose she could help raise the baby as long as she returned to school and concealed the truth. They forbid me to see her. I had no idea where they took her. I tried—like hell—pardon my language, Missy—to search for her, but with no success."

"You're pardoned, sir. That's nothing. I've heard worse four-letter words. Like 'damn', 'shit' and f—'"

"Zip it Missy." The girl tucked her lips into her mouth.

"It was a difficult pregnancy—the nurse ordered bed rest for the remainder. She was confined to the house. When our infant was born, Rose held her and stared for hours. She fell in love. She wanted to come home, marry me and raise our baby together. The smell of her baby's skin soothed her. She breastfed her, sang sweet lullabies and kissed her from head to toe."

"Keep going. I want to hear more." She squeezed his hand. "It's okay to cry, Mister. It makes us stronger."

He blew his nose into his handkerchief. "This is the first time I told this story to a stranger and you do seem strange. Today, it feels good to talk."

"You're stranger."

"You're right about that. The baby was a blessing, she told me. She came a few weeks early—a healthy seven pounds even."

"Chubby cheeks?"

"Yup. Her parents didn't see the

baby yet. They were still away. On the seventeenth day, she nursed her baby and let her fall asleep on her chest, like she did each night. She needed her baby close, feeling her skin on her own gave her assurance. Rose was weak and exhausted from the delivery. The nurse only came in to feed her meals, change the bedding and wash the diapers. Rose tended to everything else. She didn't trust the nurse to handle her daughter. She had little rest since the birth. She fell asleep within seconds."

"Was she happy?"

"Indeed she was. When Rose awoke the next day, the baby was gone. She screamed, she was frantic. She tried the door. She was locked in, trapped. The window was sealed shut. She banged on the door begging to be let out. Finally, the nurse came in to feed her breakfast. She explained that the baby fell off the bed, hit her head on the tile floor and died instantly. She didn't believe it. Rose insisted her baby was alive. She demanded to be freed."

"If I got dropped on the head, I'd be bawling my eyes out."

"You figure my wife would've awakened to the baby's crying, right? She accused the nurse of stealing her baby. She denied it. Rose's parents fetched her the next day. Said they were sorry about the circumstances, but insisted it was a blessing in disguise and not meant to be. She never forgave them. Knew they took her baby. She was determined to find her child. She ran away at midnight and

met me at the local movie house. I stuffed my life's savings into the front pockets of my jeans. It wasn't much, especially considering Rose came from a wealthy family. We took off in my father's pick-up truck. I vowed to marry her, support her for the rest of my life and find our baby."

"Did you find her?"

"Nope. I never met our firstborn. She had a name for her. Rose never told it to me. It was the one secret she kept. Insisted it was sacred between her and her daughter. It kept her baby safe and gave her hope. The single memory I have of our child is an amber bracelet my wife was wearing when our daughter was born. She told me the beads nestled against her baby's skin when she caressed her. She wore it until the day she died and asked to be buried with it."

"How did she die?"

"In her sleep. I miss her. The years go by and I grieve a little less. Today it feels like I lost her again."

"Mister?"

"Yes, child."

"It's time. Your bus is here."

She takes his hand and they walk together. She leads him up the steps

of the vacant bus. The girl drops a quarter into the metal box. She guides the man to the end of the aisle. He straightens his body from his usual slouch. He takes a deep breath and exhales. His composure is calm, confident. For a moment, he forgets where he is.

The girl plops her rear end on the last bench. She wipes the dirt off the bottom of her feet, pulls her legs up to sit cross-legged and stretches her dress over her scabby knees. She pats the space beside her three times.

He sits. The bus jerks forward. The driver honks the horn twice.

The old man looks out the window. His cane and the child's backpack abandoned at the bus stop. The pages of the newspaper are rustling with the wind.

"Wait," he said.

The girl looks out the glass. "Don't worry, sir. They'll both find a home."

She turns to face him. Her mouth creeps into a smile.

"Now I got a story to tell you, Mister. My name is Alice." She rolls up her sleeve. "It's a pleasure to meet you." The amber beads of her bracelet sway as she shakes his hand.

Mary Chang has been writing stories since she was eight. She strives to create characters that are true to life—as if you're sitting beside them on a park bench. Chang became a proud mother last fall. Uniting with her lifetime partner, bonding with their son and "following her bliss" makes her days meaningful and beautiful. Her first published short story was awarded third place in the 2009 *Courier* Fiction Contest.



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