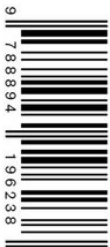


NANG 3 FICTION

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dedicated to *cinema in Asia*

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Timothy Nakayama explains the inspiration behind his original short story *Rhythm of Love*, appearing in [#NANG3](#) [#FICTION](#).

Rhythm of Love

By Timothy Nakayama

*“Giddens Ko’s *You Are the Apple of My Eye* is a classic boy-meets-girl-in-high-school story which elevates itself beyond the vast majority of its peers with its unpretentious humor and refreshing lack of oversentimentality. The film is magnificent in conveying the universal experience of youth and first love in a lively, highly personal, idiosyncratic voice—a voice I wanted to replicate in my story. I also wanted to have a payoff as big as the film’s: a non-syrupy finale that’s satisfying and just so right on so many levels despite, or perhaps because of, boy and girl deciding to go their separate ways.”*

NANG magazine, Issue 3, Fiction

Rhythm of Love

We're now at Stage 4 of this Chinese wedding dinner. The cold sliced meat and jellyfish is now a distant memory. The (fake) shark fin soup is long gone. All that remains of the steamed fish are its bones and the mountain of coriander sitting on top. We're now at the roasted crispy chicken. The self-professed gym rat is slowly hoovering all the remaining breast meat, but everyone else's stomach is pretty much set for the night. People start to wander around the ballroom once more, flitting from table to table, mingling and conversing as they'd done earlier.

The gang have all gathered at our table now, men and women bound together by years of friendship, scandalous mischief, and countless adventures.

Another round of robust cheers and well-wishes follows.

"Congrats again to the happy couple!"

"Wishing you lots of happiness and good fortune!"

"And babies! Lots of babies!"

"Gorgeous bride, handsome groom!"

"Let's enjoy! The night is still young!"

We exchange smiles and hugs, and affectionate pats (and thumps) on the back. The jokes and banter come easily, as delightful and comfortable as slipping into a favorite, well-worn pair of jeans.

Before long, the dulcet-voiced emcee makes her reappearance and announces that it's time to share recently taken photos of the newlyweds. Black Eyed Peas' *I Gotta Feeling* starts playing in the background, and everyone's attention is soon captured by the photos being projected onto two huge screens.

The gang ooh and aah as each photo shows up, whistling and cheering at the beautiful ones, laughing and giggling at the comical ones.

I look at Jen. She's admiring the photos, her smile a heady concoction of elation, contentment, hope.

I'm not really sold on the idea of wedding dinners. Or, more specifically, Chinese wedding dinners held at fancy restaurants or grand ballrooms, the kind where hundreds of people are all eating and talking and taking photos at the same time to (usually) soft background music or whatever entertainment has been scheduled for the night. There's always a lot going on and it's easy to get lost and overwhelmed by all the noise and action.

Jen loves it though, the whole pomp and circumstance of it all. She's always loved going off the beaten path, but in this, she veers toward the conventional. Of course, she's added her little touches here and there, like substituting fake shark fin for the real thing when her parents insisted on having it on the menu, and going for Springsteen, AC/DC, LaMontagne instead of Mariah, Celine, Jacky Cheung.

My gaze must be almost palpable because Jen cocks her head to the side, as if she's sensed something, then turns around to look at me.

I smile.

She smiles back.

Then, almost in unison, we turn our attention back to the screen.

I too admire what I see. The wedding pictures have turned out beautifully. But there's that old cliché that says a picture paints a thousand words. I don't know about a thousand, but what everyone sees on the screen translates into the same story they'd get looking at any newlyweds' pictures. Happy couple, making the transition from a life of solitary journeying to a lifetime of adventuring with an entwined soul.

But the pictures were taken by a photographer and retouched by a digital artist. The story these pictures tell is that of one frozen moment in the lives of two people, a man and woman whose story began long before they ever posed in front of a camera.

Sure, the moment is happy and beautiful.

It's perfect.

But stories never are.

I met Jen on my first day of primary school. We had been assigned to the same class.

Three weeks of school passed before we exchanged our first words.

Some of the boys and I were trying to reenact the fight we'd seen on the latest episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. We were just about to get to the best bit when a voice behind me called out my name.

"Daniel Lee."

Irritated that I'd been interrupted before I could mime an elbow blow to another boy's larynx, I turned around, and found myself face-to-face with the mousy girl the teacher had chosen as class monitor.

"What?" I said.

"You're assigned to sweeping the floor during recess on Wednesdays," she said. Without waiting for any sign of acknowledgement, Jennifer Ding, class monitor of 1-Merah, turned around and headed back to her desk.

The seven-year-old me shrugged and returned my full attention to the art of mutant turtle fighting.

Our first conversation had lasted all of ten seconds.

Jen and I were classmates for six years at St. Agnes, but we barely spoke a word to each other. She had her gang, I had mine, both as different as Heaven and Hell.

Jen and Team Angel were all about studying hard, getting good grades, participating in sports and co-curricular activities to improve leadership and communication skills – they were the poster kids for future CEO success.

By contrast, Team Demon engaged in activities that allowed us to flex our creative muscles. Many a recess was spent huddled together in a corner at the back of the class slaying imaginary monsters with our imaginary heroes with nothing more than pencils, sheets of paper, and a dozen colorful dice while trying to make sense of the rules in the *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebook.

Two kids, each orbiting a different world. In those very rare circumstances where we had to address each other, we were civil, but less than cordial.

That changed in secondary school.

I'm not going to pretend that hormones had nothing to do with it. The onset of puberty, with all the psychological baggage *that* brings, gave me a whole new perspective on the opposite sex. That didn't mean I was interested in Jennifer Ding. It just meant that I saw her in a totally different light - that she wasn't as snooty and weird as I thought she was, and it was probably all right if I spoke more than five words to her at one go.

Truth be told, we had little in the way of common ground.

The one thing we did share, was a sense of humor. While our peers were more into slapstick, Jen and I were ardent devotees of wordplay, double entendres, puns, sarcasm, and irony; we would trade them fast and furious, in good fun of course, trying to get the perfect zinger or witticism out. It was fun, talking to Jen. It didn't mean I was attracted to her, or she to me, but at least we got along decently well as classmates.

There were girls I *did* find myself attracted to. And I went after them the only way a naïve, socially inept teenage boy who could not see the viewpoint of anyone but himself would: stupidly. The worst case has got to be the one where I'd been trying - but failing - to talk to this girl during karate class, and so when the class was done, I ran out of the hall to catch up with her, hoping that I could finally say something, anything, when I tripped over my partially undone shoelaces and flew forward, face first, with speed, onto the road, which was about to be, but not yet, tarred. The only face-to-face conversation I had that day was the one with the surface of the road. "You're like that Harvey Dent guy now. Like Two-Face," Jen said to me after the incident.

"Wait," I said, "Just to be clear, are you saying that it's an improvement?"

By the time A-Levels came around, our strange little relationship had suddenly shifted past the borders of the classmate realm and was now deep in the heart of friendship territory.

It was on a school trip up to Kundasang where it finally dawned on me just how close we'd become.

As soon as we'd reached our destination, a cozy little chalet inside Kinabalu Park, the teachers revealed that we'd all be playing a little game during the three days and two nights we were staying there. The twenty-plus students on the trip were from different streams, so the teachers meant for this game to be an ice-breaker, to get us to break out of our cliques.

They called this game Master and Angel. The rules were simple. Everyone writes their name on a slip of paper then folds the slip and puts it into a cloth bag. The bag is given a good shake and passed around; when it's your turn, you dip your hand in, take out a slip of paper, but don't reveal that person's name to anyone else. The name on the slip is now your "Master", and you're the "Angel". All Angels are supposed to treat their Masters especially well, without letting on that they're that person's Angel. On the last day, everyone sits around in a circle and tries to guess who their Angels are.

I got one of the girls' names from the bag. She was very easy on the eyes, popular, and more importantly, single, or so I'd heard. As a hot-blooded young guy, I should have been overjoyed by this stroke of luck. But when I heard the guy who was sitting nearby start asking his friends whether they knew who Jennifer Ding was, I scurried over and introduced myself. It was easy to persuade him to exchange Masters once he saw who I was offering in exchange for Jen.

My reason for doing it was because I thought it would be fun to prank Jen – she wouldn't see it coming and I'd have the last laugh. To my eighteen-year-old self, that was the one and only reason.

Jen never suspected a thing and for the next two days she would repeatedly ask me whether I knew the identity of her angelic benefactor. In the end, quite a lot of people (yes, including Jen herself) were surprised when I revealed myself as Jen's Angel.

"Wah!" said the others. "We thought you were trying to woo Jen! Ei, Dan, you cheater! It doesn't count if you get your friend lah!"

I might have been only eighteen, but there was still a small part of me that wondered whether Jen being slow on the uptake over the whole thing had been solely due to her legendary inability to spot a prank coming from a mile away.

Six months before final exams, I was hitting the jogging track at Bukit Padang every day in the evenings in preparation for the school's annual 10 km run. Jen was doing the same, so I'd often bump into her during my run.

One day, we arrived in the parking lot at the same time; we ended up agreeing to jog together all the way up to the top of the hill.

By the time we reached the top, we were winded from the climb. We decided to take a short break and promptly collapsed on one of the wooden benches parked under the dappled shade of the trees.

From our vantage point, we could look out all the way to the sea, where a glorious sunset was bathing the islands in shades of pink and orange. Jen and I sat there in silence. The view deserved to be taken in and enjoyed in quiet wonderment and contemplation – words would only get in the way.

I snuck a glance at Jen's face, saw the faraway look in her eyes. It was as if she was looking at something beyond the horizon.

"You look like you're a million miles away," I said. "What are you thinking about?"

She didn't reply immediately. When she finally broke her silence, she was still staring off into the distance. "Things are about to change."

"Hmm? Very drama lah," I said. "What's with the Oscar-worthy prophetic statement?"

She finally broke her horizon-gazing and looked me in the eye. "Don't tell me you can't see it, Dan. You know everything's going to change soon."

I knew when Jen was in one of her serious, insightful moods so I willed the joker in me to sit in a corner. "You're referring to life after our final exams."

Jen nodded, then turned back to view the world beyond the edge of the hill. "So much uncertainty. Excruciating, but also exciting."

"You know where you're going then?"

"I'm headed for the States. I've got the application filled out and my essay more or less ready to go. All that remains are the results themselves."

"Wow. You've thought it all out, huh?"

"Yeah." She paused. "I do like it here, but..." She spread her arms wide, encompassing everything around us. "I've been here since I was born. That's almost twenty years. So many places I haven't seen. New experiences waiting for me. I don't know whether I can stay here for the rest of my life, not when there's a bigger world out there."

"Sounds like you've got a dream," I said. "You should go chase after it." I raised both arms to the sky and roared with gusto, "Here she comes! Here she comes! The world better be ready for Jennifer Ding!"

"Ei, not so loud," she said. "Someone might hear you!"

"Let them hear."

She smiled. "What about you, Dan? What does the future hold for you?"

I gave a non-committal shrug. "I don't know yet." It was something I'd always admired about Jen (and still do) – Efficiency might well be her middle name. Then and now, she's a very put-together person. She has vision and goals and an actual game plan to achieve them. Getting things done, ticking things off, moving to the next big thing. It's uncanny, it's unreal, and it's a gift I was not born with.

Me? I'm not lazy. I'm just easily distracted and lack focus, direction, and discipline. That was my stock answer whenever the teachers at school counseled my parents with "*Daniel could make more of an effort to better apply himself at his academic endeavors.*"

I was envious at the ease in which Jean had mapped out her future. Her calm self-assurance, her vision – I wished I had both. Unlike Jen, I found no excitement in the uncertainty staring us right in the face.

"I think my Dad wants me to continue my studies in Australia," I ventured, shrugging. "Got family there."

"But what do *you* want?"

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. "I haven't figured it all out yet."

"There's still time, Dan. Just don't wait too long."

"I wish I can be like you," I said. "I wish I knew which path I'm going to take."

"As long as it's the path *you* want to take."

Silence descended upon us again. We sat there as the evening grew late and the sun went down, knowing in our hearts that the carefree days of our youth were numbered.

Jen's words about the future and the uncertainty it would bring had been right on the money. The transition from naïve teen to fledgling adult had not been easy; I was always fretting over every action, wondering whether each step I took was carving out the correct path for my future self.

Strangely enough, despite the self-doubt and angst, I managed to mark another first in terms of achievements: my first romantic relationship. Su was in one of my accounting classes and she and I and a couple of others worked on an assignment together. There was a definite mutual attraction; the three-second glances, the fiddling with hair, the laughs and gentle touching of the shoulder.

One thing led to another and within a fortnight, Su and I were a couple. There was a bit of disbelief on her part when I revealed that she was my first girlfriend.

“But you’re already 21,” she said, clearly amused.

“What can I say? I’ve been waiting for The One.”

“I’ve come across a unicorn,” she said. I liked that about Su: her sense of humor, her ability not to take herself too seriously. I wasn’t sure whether it was because she was trying to translate directly from Korean to English, or whether she just had a wacky sense of humor, but it made her more enticing.

Having a girlfriend was a wonderful, happy blessing. I remember thinking to myself that the world seemed like a different place when love was in the air. Every whiff of air smelled sweeter, every color sparkled brighter, every bad news was but a tiny blip on the radar of Love and Joy.

What I was about to learn at the tender age of 21 was that the honeymoon period of any relationship must eventually come to an end. When things went sour, I chalked it up to cultural differences and gross inexperience on my part. Didn’t make it hurt any less.

Despite the pain – which was not unlike someone plunging a knife into your heart and twisting it around and around again while laughing maniacally – I plodded on in search of true love. After all, I reasoned, even Michelangelo – not the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle – even his first painting must have sucked.

I had tasted the forbidden fruit, and now I craved it more. I wanted that initial intoxication, that euphoria that came when you could talk all night and wake up invigorated with just a few hours’ sleep, where you felt that the world was all right when you held her in your arms, when you could see a dog (or even cat) and a house with picket fences in the future.

It didn’t take long for me to find myself in another relationship. The merry-go-round of love had begun, dropping in and out of relationships to the jaunty tune of the universe. Kisses, caresses, and hugs, followed by curses, broken dreams, and heartbreak. Lather, rinse, repeat.

With all the drama swirling in the emotional hurricane that was my life, I didn’t keep in touch with Jen as frequently as I had before. My romantic relationships were a panacea for a young man who had been stranded in the barren friendzone wasteland in his younger days. But delving into romance and love also required the flexing of emotional muscles that had never seen a good workout. With all my focus going into that area of my life, I didn’t have the energy to maintain what I had with Jen, or any of my old friends.

From her Facebook page, I could see that she was having a blast. She’d started off in the States, but she also did half-semester in Germany, China, and Japan. I’d scroll through to see photo after photo of a clearly happy Jen, her smile so wide it was threatening to wrap around her head, in the company of people who looked either (a) just as happy (b) beautiful (c) important (d) intoxicated (e) all of the above.

Jen was living the life she’d hope for. I was happy for her.

I also wondered whether I’d ever see her again.

As it turned out, I did see her again.

But maybe I shouldn’t have.

Even when I'd gotten my permanent residency, job-hunting in Australia wasn't yielding the returns I wanted. A year after graduating, I made the decision to return to Malaysia. It was going to be a temporary thing. I'd already gotten job offers from the Big Four accounting firms in Kuala Lumpur, so I planned to go back, work a couple of years, then when my CV was reasonably padded, I'd come back to Australia and look for a proper job. The fact that my girlfriend at the time had already returned to her hometown of Johor Bahru twelve months earlier was also a strong factor: the hope was that we could work something out in Malaysia and return to Australia when the time was right.

Well, that was the plan anyway.

In my defense, I was young and foolish, and in my mind, immortal; I'd yet to learn that life has a knack for throwing plans astray. Best-laid schemes of men and mice and all that.

She said that she'd met someone in JB, and that during our one year of long-distance, this apparently kind and caring guy had taken good care of her in her time of need. She was sorry, and she wished that she had told me sooner, but she had to follow her heart and do the right thing.

I said I understood (I didn't) and that I wished her well and hope that the guy would treat her the way she deserved to be treated. Then I flung the phone at the wall and proceeded to spend the next four hours on my bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering what was so fundamentally wrong with me that I'd been with six girls over the past four years.

I had no answers, only more questions.

I decided that it was a good time to return to Australia. Two years had passed and I'd worked on enough projects to make my CV shine. That was what I kept telling myself, but deep down, I knew I was running away because I was hurting and wanted to escape the stench of another failed relationship.

Shortly before leaving, I hung out with those members of the old gang who'd taken Kuala Lumpur as their new home. That included Jennifer Ding. We'd hung out a few times since I came back, but it was time for one last hurrah. Some of the old gang were organizing a trip to Sekinchan, so I thought it would be good to tag along.

Time changes everyone, so the saying goes. After her many adventures overseas, Jen came back to Malaysia, took up a job offer at a very prestigious consulting firm in Kuala Lumpur and had been enjoying the high-flying, jet-setting lifestyle ever since.

I didn't think Jen had changed that much. She was still the optimistic, peppy, go-getter girl I'd known in school; if anything, the years had only magnified what was already there.

There was the easy banter, the free-flowing quips and puns, the endless innuendos; one of the girls rolled her eyes and said that we talked like people out of a John Green novel. Truth was, it felt good. It was like we were boxers who hadn't fought in a while but were now back on the inside of the ropes shadow boxing, bobbing and weaving, feeling the bounce of the canvas, jabbing and punching with precision and power, getting into the rhythm that once served us so well in the ring. There was no need to pretend, nothing to hide, no need to worry about saying the wrong thing. With Jen, the old me and the new me were staring across at each other from both ends of a very short bridge.

"Hope you enjoyed the weather because you're not going to get weather this nice back in Melbourne," she said to me at the end of the trip. "And remember to update your Facebook.

I swear, you're worse than my mom. At least she tries to post a picture a month, you know, to keep my sister and I in the loop."

"She tagged you in a picture of spinach on a plate."

"She makes some really good spinach."

I smiled. "Good bye, Jen."

"Don't be a stranger, yah."

On the red-eye back to Melbourne, one question kept me awake the entire flight: why had Jen and I never been together? We'd known each other since we were seven. We got along well. So why had the possibility of the two of us being a couple never crossed my mind?

It was a puzzle. Was it her looks? She did crack the occasional self-deprecating joke about her button nose or unusually large hands, but she was good-looking to me. I prided myself on not being superficial (much), so I dismissed this possibility.

Was it because she was smarter than I was? No. I've always thought that if a man is so insecure about his position in the world that he fears a smarter woman, well, he belongs in some history book or museum somewhere.

Jennifer Ding. A light had come on where previously I thought there was no bulb.

The question hounded me for days. I was going about and doing the mundane things I needed to do to get my new life in Australia started, but my mind kept on wandering back to the girl who left me for someone else – and to Jen. Two discordant notes on the same staff position. The dull-throbbing ache of a year-long relationship that ended before I even knew what was going on. The potential of a good friend turning into a girlfriend. Despair melded into hope. I was a drowning man flailing in the water, reaching for the piece of driftwood that would keep me afloat.

We were good friends. We *should* be good together. We wouldn't be like those other couples who complained about not having enough quality conversations with their other half. No siree.

After giving it many hours and days of thought, I sent her a text message on my phone.

Had a wonderful time at Sekinchan. You're right. Weather here's not as good. :< Miss you.

I pressed Send, and immediately wished I hadn't (typical, amirite?) She would see right through the message, see it for what it truly was. It was so obvious that those last two words were what I really wanted to say; the words preceding it were fillers, because it would have been embarrassing to send the message otherwise!

I was just about to drop asleep when I heard the familiar tune from my phone of a message being received.

Aaaw, that's sweet. Yeah. Wonderful memories. Hope you're doing well over there.

I must have reread that message a hundred times. Not a no, maybe a yes. Flashing yellow, proceed, but with caution.

Keep it cool, Dan.

From that moment on, I was messaging her almost every other day. Little text messages, enquiring about her day, sharing funny insights, exchanging jokes – everything we would have done in the past, but now with the added weight of a potential romantic relationship waiting in the wings.

We continued in this vein for slightly more than half a year. After a while, she began asking me when I would return to Malaysia. She had a great job in KL, one that allowed her to travel out of the country frequently; it was unlikely that she'd want to move to Australia just for me. I wouldn't have asked that of her anyway. We prided ourselves on being modern and liberal; asking her to come to Australia for good would have reeked too much of the sexism of the past generation, a big no-no in both our books.

So, I told her that I'd come back in another year. Wait until I got my fat, juicy bonus.

In the end, I ended up back in Malaysia much earlier than I'd planned. The careless driver who rammed into me while I was enjoying Melbourne's night life got away with a hefty fine when he should have been sent to the slammer instead.

It wasn't fair at all.

My parents were distraught, but they were glad when I returned to Kota Kinabalu for medical treatment. Fortunately, there was no permanent damage, but the doctors told me it would be about a year before I'd regain the full use of my legs.

It was a dark time in my life. I attended physiotherapy sessions three times a week, was forced to walk on crutches, and sometimes, I couldn't help but whimper from the pain coursing through my legs and spine. Many were the occasions that I was lying on my bed, praying in my heart that I'd get better, that I'd do all the things I'd ever wanted to do if I could just get over this trying time.

Thankfully, I still had that one bright beacon of hope in Jen. We would talk over the phone, she'd ask me how I was doing, I told her not to worry, that I'd walk again, and that when I got better, I'd head on down over to KL.

She believed me. I did too.

It took a year and two months for me to finally ditch the crutches and get on a flight to KL. I could tell over the phone that Jen had been a bit impatient in the almost two and a half years since I'd last seen her; she never mentioned it, but I could detect it. I didn't blame her. Two and a half years of a long-distance relationship was beyond tough. My previous one had lasted just over a year. j

When I arrived in KL, I desperately wanted to make up for lost time. We went out on our first proper date, spent the weekends together, visited her favorite haunts. Things were a bit awkward at first, considering it'd been a while since we were that close, but we soon found our rhythm again.

Or at least she did.

There was something off about mine.

I didn't know it then, but my accident had changed me as a person. I began joining various social clubs around town, dabbling in public speaking, scuba-diving, kart racing, even ballroom dancing. I'd never been much of a social butterfly but my accident and subsequent

recovery had given me a new lease on life. I remembered those times when I'd lain in bed, praying that I'd do more with my life if only I'd just get better. Now I was fulfilling the promise I'd made to myself.

Against my humble aspirations, I turned out to be pretty good at public speaking. You're such a natural, they told me. You speak with such conviction, such confidence. Encouraged by the feedback, I went about town, visiting as many public speaking clubs as I could fit into my schedule, joining debates and speaking contests, unleashing a lot of bad-assery on the local public speaking scene. The praise and adulations were like a drug, and before long, I became addicted.

Any addiction is unhealthy. Jen was the first to point out that I'd been spending less time with her and on my work, and a lot more time on my public speaking endeavors. I knew she was right, but I just couldn't stop. I'd never been good at anything and now people were telling me I had talent for something I'd never expected to be good at? How could I stop?

It got worse. At first, I'd been satisfied just soaking up all the praise. After a while, I became so engrossed in winning that, whether it was a debate or a speech contest, I had to win; winning, getting one up over the other participants, validated my sense of self. When I lost, I threw childish tantrums, cursing the judges, telling those who'd listen how I'd been robbed; I was the world's biggest sore loser. Winning on the other hand felt good, like walking on clouds and dancing in the rain. I wanted more of it.

In doing so, I laid waste to all the dreams I'd built up in my relationship with Jen. There were times I'd said no, not this weekend, have to practice for a contest, or have to do research for this upcoming debate. When I lost at those, I became testy, irritated, easily angered. Jen complained that during those times, I was like a black hole, sucking all the joy and happiness out of her. It made her deeply uncomfortable that I could be such a different person; she hated that person. From two boxers shadow-boxing in perfect harmony, we became vicious opponents facing each other across the ring, landing punishing blows and dealing devastating knockouts in a bloodthirsty frenzy.

In the end, the period of our relationship when we were not together turned out to be a whole lot longer than the period when we were.

Like the cliché, I only came to my senses and regretted what I'd lost the moment I lost it. But by then, it was far too late. There is nothing worse than seeing someone whom you've always held in high esteem lose respect for you, to see how far you've fallen in their eyes. Where before there'd been kindness and understanding, now there was only disillusionment and apathy.

And you're truly in for a world of hurt when you know it was your own bloody mistake that led to a future path disappearing forever.

"You look good," I say.

Jen smiles. It's been a long time since I've seen her smile all the way up to her eyes.

"Thanks for coming, Dan. I really appreciate it."

"On your special day? Of course."

She cocks her head to one side, shoots me an inquiring look. "Is what I've heard about you true? You're leaving tonight?"

"It is."

"Then I want to wish you good luck, Dan. I really, really hope it'll all work out for you."

"Thank you, Jen," I say. "And I want to wish both you and Thomas a long and wonderful life together. That and the usual fortune, happiness, and prosperity."

She laughs.

We chat for a bit, about the more pleasant times we've shared, but before long, Jen is pulled away. She's needed elsewhere and I soon lose sight of her among the crowd that is starting to gather around the happy couple. It's time for Stage 5 of the Chinese wedding dinner: the table-to-table congratulatory, almost competitive, yam seng toasts.

I look at my watch.

It is time to go.

Our exchange of words had been short and sweet.

Exactly how goodbyes should be.

THE END