

Friday Night at The Pheasant

Ivy Ngeow

She looked at her hand as if she was considering the many rings, and then she slapped his face. Hard.

He didn't flinch, instead looked beadily at her, like a small bird. She didn't know what to do with the hand that slapped, so she let it drop to her lap. A constellation of blood droplets formed on his cheek like stigmata where her rings had cut his face. Slowly, pins of red oozed, appearing like a sped up documentary of rosebuds becoming roses.

"Sorry, Mum," he whispered. He touched his face, which felt hot, like tea in a flask. He got up, turned around and left quickly, sensing the documentary effect.

There were not many people at The Pheasant, their favourite restaurant – several couples, some office groups. Only to each other did they call it, *The Peasant*. A joke, from years back, before her husband Theo died. Although the music was loud, people looked up uneasily. She was aware of this from the corner of her eye. She was in her work attire, like them. It was still early on a Friday evening.

Sorry? Why did he even say sorry? She reminded herself of the evening. Earlier on, she had wished him happy birthday. She ordered champagne. They gulped. She asked him to open the present.

"What is it?" he asked. He had already torn the paper but he was looking at her and not the present. In his excitement he looked strangely afraid, as though the present might bite him. Then they had the row.

She had not hit him for a long time. Her heart pounded. She made her poor baby bleed. Her fingers played with the rings a while, twisting, circling. Then she too walked out of the restaurant in a most natural way, to a tide of cars in the car park. She heard a man's voice calling. For a second she imagined it was him.

But no, it was the waiter. She had not paid their bill. She opened her Bill Amberg leather purse, a present from him a few years ago, wondering if she should use the company credit card. She decided to do so, as she had no cash. She would see him as usual at the office on Monday and make Accounts put it through as expenses. After all it was her company.

In the car park, she could not see him anywhere. He must have run for his life and got into a taxi. The skies in September were magnificent, glowing like a swimming pool at night, with streams of white clouds. She could be at an LA drive-in rather than a car park next to recycling bins in Hertfordshire. She sat at the wheel of her silver Mercedes S200 Kompressor. Her hands gripped it tight. Her lips were steady, and her eyes clearly dry. *You couldn't have got this far in life if you're not calm*. She was good at thinking things through, logically, sequentially, making quick decisions. Any business had its ups and downs. Recently, they had branched into luxury stationery for the home. They hired a team of interior designers on a contract. She thought about this and felt a pained satisfaction.

The restaurant receipt poked out of the leather purse like someone making a face. She had already forgotten what they had. They did not have dessert because she had hit him.

"Today is your zeroth birthday," she had said to him thirty-five years ago. Her hands were sticky with blood. He cried. She wept. His hand was the size of a postage stamp. Seeing his little

hands made her weary, as though she was in a transit lounge with tight shoes, a flight cancellation and too much hand luggage. She handed him back to them. He smelt of sex. That day was a life-changing birthday.

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children goes the biblical saying in Genesis. She remembered the petrol station Lego set he had cried for when he was five. She remembered seeing his handwriting for the first time. He wrote on her birthday card 'MuMMY YuO MAke me SO hAppY' in a mixture of capitals and small letters. It made her so happy.

And now he was going to get married. To a stupid, pregnant girl. She was going to be a grandmother, and yet, an outsider. The girl was a liability, a threat to her business. Never mind that the girl was as thick as soup. Her own son had been turned against her. His poor daddy would have been disappointed. *Theo*, she says aloud, *I'm sorry our son turned out this way.*

It would have been better if he were gay. Anything would have been better. She couldn't believe he would want to leave her, the business, everything, just to get married and move to Australia. She took care of everything: the home, his education and his career. *He is so stupid to throw it all away.* Birthday boy. Every birthday is full of surprises, and should be, but not like this. Not like this. Her own birthday was in January. He said that Capricorn is the most successful sign. He read out her horoscope to her everyday at the office.

They really enjoyed working together; she knew this much. He had a great time. They both did. At the office Christmas party for their thirty-six staff, they got everyone presents. They laughed about who would get what. They would go shopping in New York – it was so much more interesting buying foreign presents. They would decide which Christmas menu and venue, what arrangements to make for so and so's wedding, what the away-day budget should be. It was a family business. They were partners. Theo would have been proud. People always assumed that it was Theo's until he died, but it had been her company from the start.

People were coming and going from the restaurant. Did he take the present with him when he left? Yes. He did. He put the CD into his pocket. They agreed to only give each other small things now, as they both already had everything. It was now dark. The swimming pool blue of the sky had become a powdery black. She imagined what those people had talked about all night, what they ate. She observed what they wore, what car they got into. God is in the details, said Mies van der Rohe.

She lowered the sun visor mirror. She looked good. No one could believe she had a grown-up son, and when people knew, they were filled with awe and envy. She didn't like to hit him. But she had to. He wasn't a perfect child. He went out of the way to annoy her.

She sighed. What would she do for her next birthday? And the next and the next? If God is in the details, then she needed the goddamned details now. When was he leaving, where would he live, what would he do with the flat-that-she-bought-him, would they get married here, and of course, what about the baby, her grandchild.

She looked at her hand, considering the many rings.

They were beautiful gemstone rings. He knew what she loved. The sight of them was now tedious, like plastic shopping bags waiting to be unloaded from a car boot. She switched the engine on. She listened for the satisfying blings and blongs of the injection system. The air-conditioner whispered like the softest sea breeze. All those pretty lights in the car, studding the polished wood veneer dashboard, the leather interior. They looked like jewellery, reds, blues, greens, dazzling dials, levers, buttons. These lovely details where God is. She put on her headlights and her seatbelt.

The headlights shone straight ahead. He was at the far end of the car park, at the recycling bins. He was sitting on the concrete plinth, head in hands. Her baby was sitting in the dark, under the sign saying GLASS ONLY. Her birthday boy. What a crumpled mess.

She drove towards him, very gently, at a walking pace. She drove slowly but her mind was spinning. She knew a late bar

nearby. Tonight there would be live jazz. Possibly a trio, since it was Friday. They would go there. Yes. They would discuss plans for renovating the meeting room. Everything would be okay.

She put her handbrake on. He held his hands in front of his eyes; the lights were so bright, his left cheek striped in birthday pink. The engine was running.

She waited.

He got up. His hands fell to his sides. Those hands, which she once held like a postage stamp. He walked towards the car, hunched. He got in the car. They didn't speak.

She drove fast, very fast. She gripped the wheel so hard she felt the rings bite.