

Waiting for Inspiration

By Coco Richter

First published in How Does One Dress to Buy Dragonfruit?

True Stories of Expat Women in Asia

Copyright © 2014

It's 11 a.m. and I'm sitting on my sofa, tapping my fingers on the creamy brown leather. I've already been to the gym, read two newspapers, and downed three cups of coffee. I'm starting to regret declining that lunch invitation until I think of that ever-growing bulge forming in my mid-section.

My kids are at school. They stream out the door five days a week with backpacks weighing 20 kilos, one with a violin, the other with a trombone, forging into the lift with such determination. They will not miss the school bus, not because I'd mind driving them to school but because the school bus is where they get their best information.

As I sit, Zeny is no doubt scrubbing the bathroom tiles for the third time this week. When I'd come in from the gym, she was vacuuming the already spotless living room floor. The surfaces of my apartment are so spotlessly clean I may actually eat off the floor one day, just to say I've done it. Zeny's phone rings and the sound of Tegala fills the flat. It's a thundering loud language filled with staccatos, more Hispanic to my ear than Asian. Zeny has lots of friends. The ones she walks the dog with in the morning, the ones she

meets at the grocery store and an expansive network of friends she gathers with on Sundays at the malls and cinemas, parks and beaches. She's been in Hong Kong nearly twenty years. It's more home to her than her native Philippines and yet can never truly be her home.

I try not to think too much about the fine line between her world and mine. The one that allows me to sit here enjoying an unobstructed view of Repulse Bay while she inhales fumes from the bathroom cleanser so that she can send a chunk of her wages home to an ever-growing circle of siblings, cousins and nieces and nephews. I chew on my lower lip as the next thought inevitably arrives. Zeny's days have purpose while mine do not.

I look away, the sun now beaming into the room with laser-like focus. I draw the sheer curtains, preparing my defense. My days have purpose, it's just less defined than it was a year or so ago, before I moved here, when I had a job, and a title, and an income, and an office, and file cabinets, a computer network, a webpage, secretary, bookkeeper, client meetings, lunch engagements, professional seminars, and a leather desk chair on wheels. My nails dig into the sofa. I've left a mark – a gouge really - the sliver of a moon shaped markings of expat angst.

I'm about ready to get up and do something – just what I hadn't quite gotten to – when my

mobile phone rings. I wait to pick it up until it's rung three times, feigning breathlessness. It's my husband. He calls me several times a day, just to be sure I'm still here, that I haven't packed it up and moved back to Boston since he left for work three hours before. It's sweet. He knows it's hard to start over, to build a life from scratch without a network of friends or family on the same time zone. I assure him I'm fine, that I've already been out of the house and that I have plans for the afternoon. I hope he doesn't ask me what they are because I'm making this up as I go.

"So that rash I told you about," he says, "you know the one on my arms?"

"Hmm," I say, vaguely recalling an outbreak the day before.

"Well, it's really painful now. It feels like pins sticking in to me, and it's spreading."

"Really?" I say. My husband is a bit of a hypochondriac. Whenever he gets the flu, he thinks he has cancer and may only have three weeks to live. "Maybe you should see the doctor," I say, knowing he'll agree.

"I have an appointment this afternoon," he says. "It's really weird. Are rashes supposed to do that?"

"Do what?" I ask.

"Spread."

"I'm sure it's fine," I say, knowing he's headed toward a global pandemic. "Probably

just an allergic reaction to something. Did you use a new soap or skin cream?"

"No," he says, "I've done nothing different. It's just completely out of the blue."

Without any further thoughts on the source or migration patterns of his rash, I tell him I've got to run and, fortunately, he doesn't ask me why. No sooner have I put the phone down when it rings again.

"Itchy fingers too?" I say.

A woman's voice comes over the line. It's Helen, the mother of a friend of my daughter's. She doesn't ask about itchy fingers and I don't offer an explanation. After a minute of chitchat, she gets to the point.

"I work for a headhunting firm," she says.

"Hmm," I say, trying to remember if I'd ever seen her wearing anything other than yoga pants.

"I don't usually cover the legal sector but something just came up and I immediately thought of you, given your legal background."

"Really?" I say, trying to sound more casual than I feel.

"It's a part-time role," she says.

This is getting better by the minute.

"It's to head the training department for a large U.K. firm. Essentially you'd be preparing training materials and sessions for their young lawyers in Hong Kong. What do you think?" she asks.

Where do I sign, I want to say, but instead I play it cool. "It could be interesting."

"I think it would be a great role for you, particularly since it's part-time and, let me tell you, part-time roles are hard to find in Hong Kong."

"Hmm," I say.

"If you're interested at all, why don't you come by my office tomorrow and talk with Yuki. She's the one handling the search for us."

Yuki? I debate telling her I'm busy for a half-second before eagerly agreeing to see Yuki the next day. As soon as I put the phone down, I grab my computer, typing in the firm's name, absorbing everything there is to know about them from a Google search. Four hundred lawyers with offices in four cities, everyone smiling in conference rooms kitted out with complete book sets of statutory laws and judicial opinions, looking more like Brooks Brothers models than any lawyers I've ever known. I envy them their suits and office towers, their days filled with meetings and deadlines.

I run to my closet, assessing my wardrobe. Two suits hang at the far end, one navy and one black, a fine layer of dust resting along the top of the shoulders. I select the black one and try brushing off the dust. It doesn't move. It's now a film that's seeped into the fabric. I take a damp cloth and scrub the film away. Nothing can stand in my way. I pair it with a silk

blouse, royal blue in color. I'm ready. I can already see myself, coffee cup in hand, glasses perched on my nose, pontificating to eager young faces about the perils of cross-examination.

My phone rings again. It's nearly one and I'm meant to be out. I answer it just before it goes to voicemail. It's my husband again.

"You're never going to believe this," he says.

"Try me," I say.

"Well, the rash has now spread all along my sides. I look like a leper," he says.

"Hmm," I say.

"Anyways, I went to the doctor and he kept asking me if I had a new laundry or bath soap, or shower gel, and I told him no, nothing was new. So after like thirty minutes of this he says to me, "do you work a lot on the computer?" and I tell him yes, and he asks me if I have a new desk!"

I eye the custom made wood desk he purchased from a high-end furniture store on Hollywood Road the week before.

"Can you believe it?" he asks. "That blasted new desk of mine, it's coated in Chinese lacquer and the doctor thinks I'm allergic to it. That's why the rash is concentrated on the underside of my arms."

"Of course," I say.

"So can you get rid of it?"

"Get rid of what?" I ask.

"The desk," he says.

This seems extreme, not to mention wasteful, but I wasn't going to debate it with him. He has pins digging into his skin and a doctor's diagnosis in his pocket so I tell him I'll take care of it.

Zeny helps me carry the desk from the bedroom into the living room. It's an attractive piece, more architect's drawing table in a dark, glossy wood. I think it could work as a buffet in the dining room or a credenza behind the sofa. We try it both ways and agree it looks best against the wall as a buffet. I place some decorative items on top. A gold and white porcelain elephant from Thailand, a tribal man in stone from the Philippines and a brightly painted wood carving of a Japanese girl. I'm pleased, briefly pondering a career in home decoration until one of my kids walks through the door.

"Hey, what's Dad's desk doing in the dining room?" she asks.

"It's a buffet table now," I say.

"Whatever," she says.

Minutes later comes her sister with more helpful commentary. "The desk looks weird there," she says.

The next morning, I'm up earlier than usual, eager for the kids to head off to school so I can get ready. I haven't mentioned my meeting. I'm not ready to field questions about it or, more particularly, about me. The meeting's not until 10:30 a.m. but I leave the house at

nine, just to be safe. I drive my car, the master of my own destiny. After parking at IFC, I'm still forty-five minutes early so I window-shop along Queen's Road Central. Catching my reflection in a shop window, my blouse puffs out from the top of my skirt, making me look like I'm growing a bubble. I tuck it back in but a few steps later, the bubble's back.

Not wanting the blouse to stand between me and my future, I stride in to a shop and browse the racks, locating a form-fitting grey sweater. I try it on and it fits nicely. I move around in the small dressing room, raising and lowering my arms. The sweater's like glue. It adheres to my skin without bubbling. The sales clerk snips the tags and I emerge from the shop feeling great. I'm on the cusp of a professional life in this new city of mine. Goodbye tai tai lunches and monthly shopping bazaars. My future awaits me.

Checking my watch, it's time to make my way into the building. My heels click against the white marble flooring. The musty scent of law, finance and insurance fills the air. This is a serious building for people with serious lives. This is where I belong. I enter the elevator, confidently punching the button for the 17th floor. Scores of people file in after me, packing the elevator car. When it reaches the 17th floor, everyone files out. It seems we're all going to the same place and though I was the first in the car, I now find myself the last in a

long line of people checking in with the receptionist. Stacks of brown clipboards sit on her desk and she dispenses them like a Vegas card dealer. When I finally reach her, she flings one toward me. I put my hand up and explain that I have an appointment. The young woman thrusts the clipboard in my hand.

“Everyone must first fill out the form,” she says.

I begrudgingly take it from her and squeeze myself on to the sofa between two others who are studiously filling out their form. I put my handbag on the floor and root around it to locate my glasses. “Application for Employment”, the form says in large block letters. I flip through its six pages containing all manner of questions about my prior work experience. I rise from the sofa, explaining again that Yuki is expecting me.

“You want a job, we need the form. That’s how it works,” she says, forcing a smile.

I retreat, reclaiming my spot on the sofa. My neighbors appear to be nearly finished with their forms. Fifteen minutes later, I’m done and am now the only one still in the reception room waiting to be called. When reception girl finally calls me, I jump up and follow her down the hall, past rows of thin cubicles, each containing one of my elevator friends in the midst of a sales pitch about their background. At the end of the hall, I’m deposited into one of the very same cubicles with walls rising three-

quarters of the way to the ceiling. A cacophony of voices fills the air.

“I am most definitely interested in a sales position, preferably in the automotive field,” one says.

“The financial sector is where I’d like to focus,” says another.

Laughter comes from the cubicle across the hall. “Not reflexology,” a woman says, “kinesiology.”

I’m alone in the room for what seems like an eternity before a young woman strides in, ponytail swinging side to side. She takes a seat behind the small desk opposite me. “I’m Yuki,” she says, offering me her hand.

I take it. It’s ice cold and rock hard. “Hello,” I say.

Yuki reviews the pages on the clipboard. I remind her that Helen invited me to come in to discuss the legal training job for the UK law firm.

“Oh, yes,” she says. “That position is no longer available but,”

“Excuse me?” I say.

“They called last week and pulled the listing. Too bad because it was a nice position and a good salary, but we’ll try to find you something else. Now, are you only interested in the legal profession because I have a lot of sales positions?” she asks.

I wonder if she can hear me deflating.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I ask, straining to keep my nostrils from flaring.

Yuki tilts her head to the side, her twenty-something Eurasian skin smooth and unblemished.

“Why would I have called you?” she asks.

“To tell me not to come in, that the position *you* called *me* about was no longer available,” I say.

“I didn’t call you,” she says.

“I mean that Helen called me about,” I say.

“Look,” Yuki says, “do you want a job or not, because I have other people waiting to see me?”

A simple question, I know, but I can’t seem to form any words. It’s complicated, I want to say but Yuki won’t understand. Tears begin to sting my eyes.

“Well?” she says.

“No,” I say. “I’m sorry but there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Yuki’s speechless as I mumble a goodbye. She’s probably never had someone come to her office and say they don’t want a job. I mean, what a waste. Why bother coming in at all if you don’t want a job?

I jam my finger at the elevator button repeatedly, hoping the lift comes before anyone else joins me on the landing. Once outside, I curse my way down Queen’s Road Central, my new sweater now unbearably tight, restricting my breathing. I retrieve my

car from the car park at IFC, clenching the wheel, my red fingernails, so perfectly painted the day before, now taunting me.

It's nearing the lunch hour and traffic is thick. I fidget in my seat, dying to peel off this suit. How did I ever wear one of these things, day after day, week after week? It seems like a lifetime ago. I signal to cross right, making my way across Gloucester Road towards the Happy Valley turnoff. One more lane to go when a loud noise startles me. A police van's behind me, it's siren light flashing. I can't move. Traffic's at a standstill in my lane. The van approaches on my right, inching toward my window. I roll it down as the van door opens, four, maybe five heads vying for a good look at me. The one closest, his hand on the door handle, says something I can't understand before the lot of them burst out laughing, me clearly the punch line to some joke about expat or blond drivers.

"You crossed lanes in a no-cross zone," the officer finally says.

"Sorry," I say.

The group breaks out in laughter once again. I'm a regular comedian, it seems.

"Don't do it again," the officer says before pulling the door closed.

My lane is moving again and I accelerate forward. Happy Valley lies ahead, the hills of Tai Hang and Mid-Levels East rising above it. I'm teetering on an emotional cliff, unsure

which way I'll go. I'm in the tunnel now and begin to laugh. Tentatively at first but then I can't restrain it. Laughter pours out of me, filling the car. I'm my own punch line now.

I pay the \$5 toll and glide past Ocean Park, a smile on my lips as a nascent thought begins to take shape. I've got an unclaimed desk in my dining room and some good stories to tell. Maybe I'll write them down.