

## Sideways

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I saw Ben in New York City last spring. He was in for business and had one night free for dinner. He looked good. His skin was tanned and his hair stylishly cut. He wore a custom-tailored suit and Gucci loafers. We talked about his life in Hong Kong and about Amanda and the kids. Time passed quickly. Dinner was over and the bill had been paid. We didn't speak about Robert. We never did.

Robert was my husband, Ben's father. He died suddenly one fall morning five years ago. And the kids and I were still trying to figure out how to be a family without him. My two daughters stayed close and helped me through it. Ben up and left, first to London then to Hong Kong. He said it was for his career, that the opportunities were all abroad these days.

Since the funeral, we'd been together just a handful of times. A few dinners in the City, a weekend in Cape Cod, one Thanksgiving. So when he invited me to visit him in Hong Kong, I accepted. I wanted to see their life there and be a part of their life there. I wanted to connect with Ben like we had for thirty years before when it was so easy to sit with him and laugh with him.

Ben took care of my travel arrangements, insisting he had more frequent flyer miles than he could use in a lifetime. My trip started auspiciously as I sipped champagne in Business Class and scoped out the movies for the long flight. I couldn't sleep. I thought about the gifts I'd brought for my grandchildren. An "Ugly Doll" for six-year-old Benjy, coloring books and a canister of colored pencils for 4-year-old Katie, and a Thomas the Tank Engine backpack for 2-year-old Liam. For Ben and Amanda, I had matching Yankees sweatshirts and two boxes of See's Candies, Ben's favorite.

When the plane touched down, I felt giddy, like a child preparing to ride the school bus for the first time. I ran my fingers through my hair and put on some lipstick. I exited the plane in long strides, grateful to be walking again, to feel the blood circulating through my legs. I smiled broadly, expectantly, as I entered the Arrival Hall, looking for Ben and Amanda in the sea of Chinese faces staring back at me. I moved forward with the flow of traffic, slowing as I neared the end of the aisle to examine the faces more closely, sure that any moment that I would see their arms flailing, their voices ringing "hello", "mom, over here." I reached the end without seeing them. I turned around, scanning the crowd again. On the third pass, I saw it. "Patricia Roberts" read the sign in the man's hands. My smile vanished. The school bus had driven right past me.

As the stream of passengers thinned, I made my way over to the man who introduced himself as Toppa, my son's driver. He took my bags and escorted me to a sleek, black Mercedes waiting just outside the door. I pressed against the window as he narrated our travels across the Tsing Ma Bridge into Kowloon, through the Western Tunnel and onto Gloucester Road through Central, past the racetrack at Happy Valley into the Aberdeen Tunnel, and, finally, to Deep Water Bay. We pulled into an attractive complex of town homes with a central courtyard. I opened the door as lush palms swayed in the tropical air, the warm air infusing my spirits again.

I mustered a smile and prepared to knock on the door to House No. 2 when it swung open, Benjy and Katie screaming in delight in their matching pajamas. They pulled me into the house and showered me with kisses. I knelt down to greet them, lifting little Liam above their heads so he could reach me. A woman stood in the entryway smiling and introduced herself as Nellie, the family's housekeeper. I shook her hand and looked around for Ben and Amanda.

"Is Ben here?" I asked.

"No ma'am, sorry. He called and said he was delayed at work," she said softly.

"Oh. That's too bad," I managed to say. We stared at each other a moment.

"Is Amanda here?"

“No, sorry, she’s out too, ma’am.”

“Out?” I spat back at her.

“I believe she’s at dinner.” I waited for more.

“At dinner with friends ma’am,” she continued, her words slicing through me.

“Come on Nana, we want to show you around,” Benjy squealed as Katie pulled me by the arm down the hall.

They gave me a tour of the place, its four levels of marble and lovely front gardens. I marveled at their toys and books and animals and tucked each one into bed with a story. When I returned to the living room, Nellie offered me a plate of cheese and crackers and a glass of chardonnay. I sat on a soft, velvet club chair and chatted with her for a few minutes before she excused herself. Then I sat there alone, trying to quell the voices rising within me. I sipped my wine and looked around the room, admiring their décor. A Buddha in one corner, large oriental pots with leafy plants, a Persian rug with deep tones of burgundy, blue, black and gold, silk curtains and silk pillows.

As time passed, my face became flushed and hands shook. I picked up a magazine from the coffee table and absently flipped through the pages. Nearly an hour later, Amanda came through the door, shopping bags in both hands.

“Hi Patricia!” she cried too enthusiastically.  
“Welcome to Hong Kong!”

I stood and walked towards her, unable to fake a smile. When I reached her, she turned her mane of blond hair to the side and coughed lightly as I hugged her rigid body.

“Thank you, Amanda. It’s nice to be here. Your home is beautiful. The kids gave me a tour.”

“Oh good, I’m so glad. They were so excited to see their Nana,” she exclaimed, then coughed. “How was your flight, oh, and did our driver find you alright?”

“Yes. We found one another. He’s very nice.”

We looked at each other. Amanda set her shopping bags down, coughing like a six-pound poodle caught in the rain.

“I’m sorry Ben’s not home,” she said after a moment. “That boy just loves his work,” she added, resentment steaming up the air. I waited for more.

“Listen, Patricia,” she continued, “I’m real sorry but I feel rotten. I think I’m coming down with a flue or something. I’m just dying to crawl into bed, so if you can excuse me,” she said walking past me. “I’ll just see you in the morning, okay?”

I had no words as I watched her backside move down the hall and heard the click of her heels ascending the stairs. I stayed in the living room a little longer before going to bed, knowing that that would be my last visit to Hong Kong.