

“Put some powder on your face at least, Bee Leng,” I said.

“No need, I’m already married. Who would want to look at me?”

“It’s got nothing to do with being married. Your face is shiny with sweat,” I said again.

“Who cares? Anyway, I am the way my husband likes me.”

“Well then, let’s go,” I said feeling overdressed and all dolled up in lace and chiffon, a gold chain around my neck, compared to Bee Leng, who wore a faded grey blouse and skirt. I had spent two hours at the hairdresser’s, wanting to look my best for my old school friend, Lynette Lum’s wedding dinner. We went to the majestic E & O Hotel located in the very heart of Penang’s heritage district, I wearing expensive perfume and Bee Leng, an ugly frown on her face.

“I hope this is the last and final wedding dinner for this year,” Bee Leng complained loudly.

“What! It’s good to be able to celebrate, I love weddings... wish I could find a man,” I sighed.

“I am becoming poor giving out *angpows*. I do not like this culture of giving money as a token of good wishes at weddings. This is the third wedding this year,” she complained.

“Oh come on, don’t complain so much. Let’s enjoy ourselves,” I said, thinking to myself how stingy she was. This was a woman who asked for discounts for everything.

She was my best friend during secondary school days. We went our separate and different ways after school - she worked as a secretary in a company while I went to university and graduated with a Master in Business Administration from the US. After a decade of living in a foreign land, I went back to Penang to work in an international organisation. By then, I had lost touch with many school friends, and I was delighted when I unexpectedly met Bee Leng one day. It was like old times all over again because we would go out for coffee or a meal whenever we could find the time. It was always easier for her as she had quit her job immediately after marriage, while I had a full-time job and demanding career which was very challenging.

But something has changed. She has become extremely stingy. During school days, it didn’t really show as we both didn’t have money. But now, I can’t understand why the cheap clothes, and those from her sister which hardly fit, the visits to the second-hand shops, and the frequent need to save.

(Adapted from Su Kim Lee’s *Sarong Secret: Of love, lost and longing*, 2013)