4. Mu’zi

My name is Mu’zi, 33 years old, from Shandong province. I’ve been in Beijing about eight years. I met a local man here four years ago. We got married and had a son. I don’t know what about him attracted me in the first place. He’s four years older than me and very ordinary-looking. God knows what I was thinking.

He wasn’t earning any money when we were dating. With some of my own savings and the 10,000 kuai my mom gave me, I threw a wedding party at my home village inviting around 50 people. Without a wedding ring or a wedding dress, I stepped into this marriage with all my beautiful fantasies.

My family lives in a small village, and all the villagers were enviously impressed that I was able to marry a Beijinger.

I can’t think of any romantic memories from over two years of marriage. He is anything but a sweet-talker, and quite the opposite if he has a bad temper. A few times, he’s called me honey. That would make me happy for days.

Once, at a dinner together with a friend of mine and his wife, my friend asked us not to order dishes with cilantro because his wife didn’t eat it. I was so envious. I wished my husband was that caring.

Unlike me, he is an only child from an all right family, so he’s barely experienced hardship. He doesn’t understand that it’s not easy to earn a living and refuses to take just any job. Instead, he fantasizes about making a big fortune overnight through so-called “investment.” But there are no pennies from heaven. All his impulsive investments turned out in vain. Meanwhile I’m doing better at my job day by day, which makes him feel that I stole his thunder and the dominant role at home. That’s why we started arguing more and more.

We actually had a breakup once. After we dated for awhile, I found him quite emotionally unstable, so I broke up with him. Then, a few days later, he showed up at my workplace with a fruit knife, put it to my throat, and demanded I take him back.

It was so stupid, but I got back with him anyway. I’m an idiot, right? There must be something wrong with me.

We had a terrible fight yesterday. He grabbed the back of my neck, threw me violently to the floor, and shouted at me to get out of the house. My head hit the ground hard and still hurts terribly.

At this point, he has totally destroyed all my faith in our marriage. I no longer expect anything from him. The only thing that’s weighing on my chest is my two-year-old son. I can’t imagine life without him, but there’s no way my husband will give me custody. Besides, with my husband my son will be able to keep his Beijing hukou and attend these Beijing public schools.That’s better for him than a rural hukou in Shandong.

My son is the center of my world. I barely had any sleep last night. I held my son tight in my arms with tears streaming down my face. I dreamt of him when I took a nap just now. He looked at me with a big smile. He’s a happy baby.

I had an abortion this April. I was over four months into my pregnancy. The baby had grown enough that you could clearly see the shape of his hands and feet. He died prematurely due to a heart development problem. When I had the abortion surgery, I was so calm that I even surprised the doctor. I wouldn’t cry over it. It’s not like it was going to make any difference. I actually feel relieved that I didn’t give birth to a second child. Otherwise, my life would be even more broken with my heart divided between two children.

It was an unplanned pregnancy. My husband sometimes removes the condom during sex or doesn’t even bother to wear it. He doesn’t care about the consequences for me. It’s partly my fault that I didn’t try to be tougher and defend myself because I wanted to avoid conflict. But I’m awake to it now after that painful pregnancy experience. I won’t forget that pain.

I feel like my whole married life has been a long dream. I’ve been fooling myself into thinking he will become a more responsible husband, for our family’s and our child’s sake. I don’t think there is any turning back to our broken marriage. A divorce is unavoidable.

My husband would be happy to divorce me. His family lives in the Fengtai district, which is going through a governmental renovation. His family’s house is in the demolition zone, which means he will get a large compensation from the government. If he divorces me, he can keep all the money in his own pocket without giving me a thing.

My mother-in-law can’t get anywhere with him either—he won’t listen to her. And I know what kind of “comfort” I can expect from her. She would tell me that that’s how marriage works. She would tell me to endure. “Your father-in-law and I have been arguing our whole life, but we survived, didn’t we?” That’s probably how most of the older generation think of marriage. “What marriage doesn’t have its bumps?” they say. But I don’t deserve to be treated this way. Nobody does.

I was living on my own before I met him—the thought of having a family to keep me company was so comforting then. I was so happy when I got married, like everyone is. Who gets married expecting to divorce? But marriage disappoints unexpectedly. People buy insurance to guarantee security, but there is no insurance for marriage.

I grew up with my adoptive family. My biological parents abandoned me because I was their second daughter. They gave me away to another couple when I was only five months old, but that couple didn’t keep me. An old woman took care of me for a few days after the couple got rid of me until I was finally adopted by my current parents. I had a relatively peaceful life with my adoptive family. My father was a principal for a local primary school. He’s a good man and he never beat me. I have two elder brothers and two elder sisters, who all treat me very well. I feel really lucky for this.

I’ve never mentioned my marriage problems to my parents. My dad was poisoned from a gas leak accident and can only think like a child now. My mom has heart problems. I don’t want them to worry about me.

I secretly visited my biological parents not long ago. I used to hate them for abandoning me, but when I had my own child, I understood what it’s like to be a parent. There are no selfish parents in the world. Giving me away must have been a difficult and painful decision for them, just like how I feel at the thought of leaving my own son. They’re old now, and I don’t want them to carry this regret to the grave.

My mom hugged me and cried out when we met, the very first time in decades. She was both happy and filled with guilt. She said there hasn’t been one moment she didn’t regret giving me away. She said they should have kept me even if it meant not having my younger brother or working harder to support the family.

I told them that I’m married and living in Beijing now, that I have a lovely son, and that my husband and mother-in-law treat me well. I told them I’m having a good life.

Edited by David Huntington and Simon Shieh

\*The name has been changed to protect individual privacy.