

Love When Birds Can't Fly

When she got divorced in 1990, Jun started birdwatching.

Her ex-husband was her college sweetheart back in Beijing University. They had left behind their new furniture and endearing families in China, and flew over the Pacific and Alaska before landing in Massachusetts. Still, after five years of marriage he divorced her. In the new country she was becoming more and more like a man: She went to study finance at the University of Texas. Nothing wrong with that, but she shared her life more with numbers and spreadsheets than with him. Then she worked in a university in Washington DC, making a much larger salary than he could as an adjunct. Again, nothing wrong with that. The problem was that she never gave birth to any child. He decided to find another woman who would actually produce his heir. Jun promised to give him a child only when she felt the overwhelming onslaught of age--both hers and his mother's--or when he could make her happy which was rare anyway.

Jun was heartbroken, but she did not know what wrong she had done. Was it wrong to study hard to obtain a degree and work her fingers to the bone to bring a big check home? Was getting a PhD really Permanent Head Damage that entitled him to call her nuts when he was frustrated, which unfortunately meant most of the time they were together? For a week Jun lay in bed wrestling with the phantom of death, not telling the difference between day and night. For a month she stayed in her room negotiating with life, wondering what she was born for and whether she should go to a church to be saved. After a year she started the habit of standing in front of her office window and staring at the trees planted across the driveway that led to a parking lot.

Jun was looking at the sparrows that lived in the treetops. Sometimes the birds would perch on the parked cars and pick at their own plumage. Other times they would fly further down and jaywalk on the driveway. From time to time, one of these idling, earthly creatures would get close to Jun's window and stare at her with head tilted. Under its gaze, Jun was quite embarrassed; she was forced to consider if the bird's interest meant she was really different from other human beings, particularly other women. Her ex-husband had repetitively yelled, "You are not a woman!"

Jun did not become more engaged with the birds until one day she caught sight of them dealing with a bicyclist who burst across their territory while they were strolling leisurely on the driveway. The bicyclist did not experience anything unusual at all; past encounters told him the birds would disperse as he approached. The birds were duly alarmed; they fluttered, shrilled and soared high into the air to save their skins. For a moment, they looked confused and nervous, their flight devoid of its usual grace and their voices rasping and desperate. However, as soon as the coast was clear, they came back. The bicyclist did not bother to check what happened to them, but Jun witnessed how the stubborn creatures resumed their earlier life: They jaywalked on the driveway, they parked on the cars, and they stared at Jun challengingly.

Affected by the aplomb of the birds, Jun wished she had been a bird. Birds are such free spirits! Jun mulled it over for days. Eventually she went to PetSmart after a full day's teaching. She headed directly towards the birds section. There were no sparrows but varieties of birds that Jun had never ever imagined: So many colors the birds had that Jun had to become a painter before she could name their hues. So many varieties of sounds the birds emitted that Jun had to

become a musician before she could distinguish the alto from the soprano. So many different sizes the birds came that to measure them Jun had to give up the job of a professor for that of an inspector. Big or small, high pitched or low cackling, meek or aggressive, the birds gazed curiously and alertly at Jun as she approached them.

Jun chose, actually just randomly adopted, a pair of tiny yellow birds that were labeled red-beaked parakeets. She knew nothing about parakeets: Do they snore when they sleep? Do they pooh when they fly? Do they eat dumpling or drink Soymilk? She adopted the birds because they were close to the sparrows she had been watching. To make the birds a home, she bought a colorful bird swing and a play stand.

Back in her one-bedroom apartment, Jun perched on her computer for three straight hours. This time, no performance report, no analysis of potential withdrawals, no Arabic numbers, just bird pictures, bird encyclopedic knowledge, and bird glossaries and emotions. From that day, Jun had her own children who were generally called by people as Budgies, but *Huan Huan* (Playful) and *Xi Xi* (Joyful) by Jun.

Two years later, since *Huan Huan* and *Xi Xi* flourished in her apartment, Jun decided it was time to date guys again. *Huan Huan* and *Xi Xi* happened to be of opposite sex and enjoyed flying in the apartment twice a day: In the late mornings they would fly in the same direction, leaving an invisible ring in Jun's head as they circled atop of her living room, and then in early evenings they would glide from opposite directions towards each other, their projectile the shape of a heart in Jun's mind. The two sometimes would totally ignore Jun and concentrate on either picking at each other's feathers or pecking at each other's neck. Occasionally, they would form a cohort,

tricking their single mother with the pranks of teenagers, such as darting away when she tried to feed them or making noises when she was ready to sleep.

Jun posted an anonymous ad in eHarmony.com. Her screen name was Bird of Liberty; her hobby, birdwatching; her favorite pets, P & J; her future home, Bird Haven; and she looked for Mr. Bird Right. Not many winks, emails, or calls received, but common sense proved: Dogs cannot cohabitate with cats; cats cannot cohabitate with rats; rats cannot cohabit with snakes; and snakes cannot cohabitate with birds. Yet, just when Jun decided to use her money for birdfeed than for self-advertising, Mr. Bird Right rose from the ashes of her despair like a phoenix. He winked, emailed, and called, belaboring about the delicateness, elegance, grace, gentleness, tenderness, warmth, and beauty of P & J as their picture was posted on the website to fill up the space that should hold Jun's own picture. He challenged the concept of "Love me, love my dog": "Why not love me, love my birds?" The first time they met at the National Zoo's Bird House, his face shone excitedly with the sheen seen only on the smoothest of bird feathers. Jun felt that if the guy could love P & J, then he could probably also love what and how she was. Soon Jun was married again, and the new couple bought a townhouse and settled down. The birds were part of Jun's marriage package. She transformed overnight from a single parent to the wife of an American guy of Japanese immigrant parents; and the birds, from single parent kids to nuclear family members.

Given Mr. Bird Right's genuine love for birds--He recently lost his mated parrots to passing pox--it did not take Jun to sign a prenuptial agreement with him for them to agree about P & J: They would share the living room with the birds and sleep with them, that is, they in bed and the birds in a white metal cage high on a sturdy wood bookcase, which held *Parakeet: Your Happy Healthy Pet*, *Parakeets for Dummies*, *The Essential Parakeet*, *Sibley Guide to Birds*, and *The*

Complete Book of Parakeet Care: Expert Advice on Proper Management, 160 Fascinating Color Photos, Tips on Parakeet Care for Children. To prevent the birds from losing innocence and being susceptible to human sin, Jun always put a bed sheet over the bird cage when Mr. Bird Right was in the mood of love and they would rock as quietly as possible during sex. At dinnertime Jun allowed the birds to stand on the shoulders of *ma* and *pa*. *Ma* fed the birds from her index-finger. She would put a tiny morsel, steamed rice or fried bean, on top of her fingertip and extend the food to the birds. *Pa* fed the little urchins differently. He would place a small saucer on the end table with some nuts in it, and wait for the birds to land. P & J were quite intelligent; they soon knew how to beg *ma* and *pa* for food and drinks and how to welcome *Okaasan* and *Otoosan* when they returned from a day's work.

Since Jun enjoyed her life with Mr. Bird Right and the birds, she did not need more companions. The couple would drive together to PetSmart to buy birdfeed. They would take the birds to the National Mall on warm days to see other birds. They would also set the cage on an open space in a park and let the birds do catechism with other birds. Neither Jun nor Mr. Bird Right was very social, so they never hosted parties, and visited nobody. When they were invited for a dinner or an overnight trip, they would use the birds as an excuse to turn down the invitations. Their house light turned off regularly and their door opened and closed silently.

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Nevertheless, Jun still got some friends. Over the past decade, she had kept in touch with a friend here and there. Those friends tended to be her former classmates from Beijing University. Eileen was one of the few ties Jun kept. Jun and Eileen used to go everywhere as a pair: the

campus canteen, classroom, library, bathhouse, and even the bathroom. They were acknowledged best friends.

It happened that in March, 1993, Mr. Bird Right was sent by his company to Japan for three months for he was fluent with Japanese even though he could barely write in Japanese. Jun suddenly felt empty with only the birds for company. She called Eileen to chat, but the latter volunteered to visit. Eileen came with her ten-year-old son Ben, a very bright child talented in doing math problems, drawing Japanese *manga*, playing piano, playing electronic games and, of course, playing pranks. With a thin streak of ADHD, Ben touched everything in the living room within the first few seconds there. So the minute the poor birds--caged and placed on a table against one living room wall--saw Ben rushing into the door, they retreated to the back of their cage. They stood side by side with their backs facing the wall to prevent being *blitz* attacked from behind. Slightly slanting their heads--one to the left and the other to the right--and vigilantly eyeing Ben, they followed each movement of the boy's hands and eyes. Ben quickly found a skewer for Japanese cooking in the kitchen and started to poke the birds vehemently. The birds receded as far as possible to avoid injury.

"Stop it, Ben." Eileen scolded as she unpacked her bag onto the sofa. She had brought a bird bowl and a pot plant as gifts for Jun.

"Ben, how about watching TV? I have the Chinese New Year Celebration gala. I'll give you chewing gum if you stop harassing P & J." Jun joined Eileen's effort to correct the boy.

"I don't like Chinese TV. I don't like Chinese. I want to play with the birds," the prankster declined and declared.

“Ben, behave! If you don’t like Chinese programs, just say it. But don’t you dare touch the birds again! Otherwise, I’ll tell your dad when we return home.” Eileen applied her last resort as a mother.

“Ben, you are so good at drawing pictures. How about I give you some paper and you draw a portrait for P & J? I’ll give you a *manga* book for that.” To prevent disaster, Jun tried to bribe the little bastard again.

“*Manga* book? You have a Japanese *manga* book for me? Okay,…… let me think,” Ben’s eyes rolled up and down. “I guess that’s a deal.” He threw the skewer onto the table.

Startled, the birds began to shrill.

Paper and pencil were placed on the table. Ben quieted down, and soon seemed fully occupied. Jun and Eileen chatted on the sofa while their eyes lingered on the TV. Three commentators were predicting the future for Clinton’s new “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy regarding the gays in the military.

“Will you follow him if he is dispatched to Tokyo?” Eileen asked Jun about Mr. Bird Right. Mr. Bird Right’s company intended to reorganize by consolidating with its Tokyo partner, and it was possible that he would be stationed in Tokyo for a while.

“I don’t know. I want to visit his family and have some new experiences, but what about P & J?” Jun was in a dilemma.

“What? You are fussing over birds? Very easy, bring them with you.” Eileen was quick in finding a solution.

“No, P & J will not be allowed. You know the Customs at the immigration desk and airports.”

“I forgot about that. Interesting! Human beings can immigrate, but birds cannot migrate.

Interesting... then give them away!”

“What, what are you talking about?” Jun shrieked like her aviary children. The idea sounded totally inhuman to her.

“Hey, it’s just a couple birds. You can get birds anywhere! You seem to love birds more than to visit Japan. Think what could happen if you don’t follow your hubby. Japanese men are notorious for being easy with women ...”

“Stop it. You sound like those narrow-minded women. I won’t give away P & J.” Jun’s voice sharpened.

“Stop fighting, mom and Jun, ...or Auntie, whatever. Here is the portrait. Give me the *manga* book! ”

Eileen and Jun felt relieved as Ben rescued them from a precipitous point in the conversation. However, as soon as Jun saw the picture, her face changed color. On the drawing pad was a large Chinese bowl holding two cooked birds, recognizably P & J. Underneath the bowl was a cooking recipe.

Special Flavored Stir-Fry Parakeets

Ingredients:

2 fresh parakeets

Vegetable oil

Ginger root

Soy sauce

Chicken soup

Salt

Sesame oil

Preparation:

Heat vegetable oil in a wok and stir-fry ginger over high heat.

Add parakeets after pulling off their feathers.

Add salt and stir-fry, then add chicken soup. Stir fry more.

Add sesame oil and stir.

Serve immediately with French fries

Serves 4 ,Ben, Jun, Dad and Mom

“Ben, look at what you have done. When Uncle comes back and sees what you have done, you are dead.” Eileen tried to apologize to Jun and scare Ben.

Ben was not going to succumb to browbeating, “I don’t like Japanese. I hate Japanese. I want to read the *manga* book you promised.” He pointed a finger at Jun.

It was only after Eileen and Ben left the next day that Jun was able to breathe smoothly. The birds remained intact though they still seemed a little depressed.

In late August, Mr. Bird Right departed again for Japan. Jun chose to stay with the birds, waiting for him. Next July Mr. Bird Right returned. The birds were happier and Jun's second marriage continued uneventfully for another two years, that is, until the year her father died.

Jun had stopped contacting her father the year she got remarried. He was then already a very ancient man, having not progressed since his youth in Manchuria. Though he was too green to have killed any Japanese imperialist, he was enraged when he was informed that he was becoming the father-in-law of his country's enemy. Jun's defense that Mr. Bird Right was American and was innocent made no sense to him. Blood is blood. As a result, all the years that Jun was remarried, she felt anger towards her father. She barely talked to him--He was too old to receive phone calls anyway.

Yet, when she learned from her brother that their father was dying, she felt guilty, and started to reconsider going back to see the old man. It turned out that the old man did not particularly want to see her, either. He sent word: Unless she went home alone, he would not meet her.

Jun struggled for days and could not reach a solution. Just then the news of her father's death reached her. As a Chinese daughter, Jun had failed again.

Jun returned to her amalgamated family to visit her father's grave, only to discover that his venom had found a vein. Mr. Bird Right reflected her failure. Her mother accused her of pissing off the old man to death and creating another Chinese widow, like "the Japanese did many years

ago,” and her siblings looked down upon her because the last man a Chinese woman should have married was Japanese.

After returning to DC, Jun’s mood was no better. She and Mr. Bird Right started to fight. Mr. Bird Right did not care what Jun’s mother and siblings thought of him. He grew up in America, lived thousands of miles away from them; honestly he couldn’t care less. He was mad because Jun sometimes accused him of being insensitive to her difficult situation. Often times though they fought without a particular reason. As time went on, they just could not tolerate each other anymore. When they finally realized that it’s not just bird and fish cannot live together--either in the sky, in the water, or in mid-air--birds of different kind, type, or sort, may not be able to live together, either. They filed for a divorce.

P & J became fatherless again. That was early 2000, the tenth anniversary of Jun’s first divorce.

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Jun had divorced before, so this time she thought less about death. She knew if killing herself was not an option, then she’d better be strong. So instead of keeping the townhouse she and Mr. Bird Right bought together, she kept money. She rented an apartment in Arlington that allowed pets. She started to put more money into her retirement “nest egg” for she quickly decided that she would never marry again. She had had enough of it, and if it was her fate that she should not have any man, she would just live with it as long as she had P & J. To give the birds and herself some social life, she joined the Capital Association of Birders.

The association was a local group that met once a month. The goal was to share fun, friendship and fellowship. There were about eighty members in the group. Whenever there were

lectures, meetings, outings, park walks, hiking, at least half of them would show up. Compared with the bird clubs in New York, California, Washington, this group is pretty small. Still, it was fun. Many Chinese lived in capital area, but Chinese birders were few and far between. So Jun met people who were mainly “Americans.” That was definitely good for her English. For the first time in her life, Jun was also exposed to talks, pictures, taxidermy, and even real birds of what are called green- broad bill, blue-headed pitta, helmeted hornbill, large green pigeon, scarlet rumped trogon, etc. After a long, long time, that is, around twenty years of marriage life, Jun felt that she was able to make more friends again. Within a year in the association, she made a handsome number of new friends, such as Maggie, Kelly, Lilly, Jay, Shams, Erik, and John.

Among them Jun was very close to Kelly, the newsletter committee chair. At first, Jun stood out when Kelly discovered that she could deal with numbers without a calculator. Later, with Kelly’s recommendation, Jun took the position of the treasurer. As the two women worked on various committees and contacted each other frequently, their conversation easily went beyond birds and the association.

Through the way Jun cooked--She would throw in whatever vegetables available when cooking a dish, as a result of which she never cooked the same dish twice--Kelly realized why the Chinese have been less interested in opening chain restaurants, at least not in China. Kelly was equally amazed at how self-disciplined Jun was: Jun was never late for her work; half a glass of wine was enough to send her to the world of dreams; and she would not buy any clothes unless the clothes fitted three criteria--useful, of high quality, and at a good price. Most pleasantly, unlike most women Jun did not gossip.

On the other hand, Jun came to know that Kelly grew up on military bases, and her father was a brigadier general in the army. Due to job reasons, the general had travelled to more than thirty countries in his military career. Speaking of those countries, the general was always proud of his assignments in Germany, Iraq, Alaska, Japan, South Korea, and Brazil, and he liked to add that he had travelled to all the neighbors of China--North Korea excluded because he did not have any desire for it---but had not been to China itself. Speaking of his children, Kelly and her two younger brothers, the general emphasized that he loved all of them though he'd really bubble up when Kelly was the topic.

Indeed, there was no reason for anyone to dislike Kelly. She was popular; otherwise she would not have been recommended as a committee chair. She was beautiful, her short auburn hair, cut to the ears, always neat and smart. Her face was smooth, free of freckles that many white women have. Her clothes—often blue jeans and corduroy jackets with multiple pockets--fitted nicely with her light gait and narrow, straight back. As the newsletter committee chair, Kelly was not only vocal and straightforward but also open-minded and funny. When she discovered that Jun was a mouse on the zodiac while she herself, six years younger than Jun, was a horse, she joked with Jun: “I am not a dog, so I have the right to mind your business,” playing on the Chinese idiom that “it is none of the business of a dog to catch a mouse.” The joke was a little awkward, but she was obviously friendly.

Jun liked Kelly so much that she let their friendship flourish and let Kelly mind the cat's business. When P & J's appetite and daily activity started to slow down, Jun told Kelly about them. Kelly suggested Jun take the birds to see a vet. Accompanied by Kelly, Jun followed the suggestion. But P died soon despite of medical care. The vet said P died of dotage and depression. Jun's heart flinched at the proclamation.

Now there was only J, the vet recommended meticulous home care and another companion. Jun then consulted Kelly, who commented, “I recognize that everybody has their own choice, but if I were you, I would not keep a bird in a cage. Birds are born to be free souls. Of course, since J has been living in a domestic environment for so long, I doubt she is able to survive on her own. But you can try. First let her be totally free in your apartment and then gradually take her out to the outside world, and see where that takes.”

Eventually, nobody could save J. She died two weeks after P. When Jun discovered her, J was huddling on a windowsill, facing the green lawn of the apartment building. Her body was already cold and the apartment suddenly appeared immensely desolate. Jun held J in her palm, wailed and then burst into a loud cry. She had not cried that unashamedly when she was abandoned by her first husband, lost her father, or divorced with Mr. Bird Right. She cried so violently that her neighbor, surprised and scared, reported to the property management office, which sent an employee to check on her.

Kelly came in that night to see J only to discover a bereaved Jun. She held Jun in her arms, and rocked Jun. Normally Jun would feel it funny that a middle-aged lady to be held and rocked by a younger woman. But that night, Jun could not think of anything at all. She let Kelly hold her and console her with soft cooing songs. They sat far into the night.

The next day when Jun woke up she found herself dressed in her usual night gown, comfortably in bed, while Kelly was sleeping soundly on the couch in the living room. Jun knew Kelly had stayed for the night. It was against the apartment rules to let anybody stay overnight. Jun did not ask Kelly to stay, but obviously Kelly cared less about the rules.

Later, whenever Kelly stayed too late to drive back to her own apartment, she would sleep on Jun's couch. Likewise, when Jun did not want to leave Kelly's apartment, she would stay at Kelly's place. The only difference was that Kelly had an extra bed for Jun to use.

In the coming months, Jun was always puzzled by whether she should get new birds. She did not ask Kelly because she knew the answer. Instead, she spent more and more time with Kelly. As a native-born American, Kelly opened many possibilities to Jun. They went to the Mall to hear Stevie Wonder sing, and drove to Great Falls to observe the birds, trees and plants. They experimented with many ways to eat bagels-- toasted, microwaved, fried, and mixed with Chinese black bean paste. Jun accompanied Kelly to buy clothes at Potomac Mills while Kelly accompanied Jun to Macy's, Talbots, Coach, and Estee Lauder. What Jun enjoyed the most about their friendship was that Kelly could adopt some Chinese ways of expressing friendship, such as not going Dutch at restaurants, not keeping secrets about salary from each other, not being afraid of sharing age and other secrets, and not avoiding friendly bodily contact. The idea of adopting another pair of birds gradually faded from Jun's mind.

In summer 2002, Jun decided to travel back to China for a visit. Despite the realization that she may not be treated fairly, she decided to go--once a Chinese daughter always a Chinese daughter! When Jun mentioned the plan, Kelly volunteered to join her. Kelly's father was very supportive as well, he said, not totally without jealousy, "I wish I were still young enough to travel with you girls."

The two women immensely enjoyed their trip. On the plane, they talked about dust in Beijing, ate Kelly's first gourmet air-plane Chinese food, and slept with legs crouched on the back of the

front seats. After climbing the Great Wall, Jun took Kelly to eat at a local peasant's family and they played for a long time with the water fountain the family used to irrigate fields. In Xi'an, they bought silk pillowcases with dragons and peonies embroidered on them, and traveled in a tractor that looked like a motor cart to the tree-lined ancient tombs. On the summit of Mountain Tai in Shandong Province, Jun and Kelly shouted loudly into the vast universe, "We're outta here! Here...*ere...ere...*"

Everywhere they went, they were treated nicely. People admired Kelly, complimenting repeatedly, "Her face looks so beautiful. She looks like a foreign doll," forgetting that the much-coveted foreign dolls--they opened their eyes when they were shaken and they wore blue eyes and curly hair--were imitations of the foreigners. Or they forgot the difference between Jun and Kelly, commenting that the two looked similar in age. Jun smiled because the Chinese folks could not tell that Kelly was younger. Kelly laughed because she valued the Chinese hospitality.

In Shenyang, Jun was surprised that her mother and siblings were very glad to see her again. They were glad that they had defeated Mr. Bird Right, and they were also glad that Jun was not traveling solo. It had been long since Jun saw smiles on her folks' face. The old lady took Jun and Kelly to the free markets to buy the freshest fruits and vegetables, and she introduced Kelly to the neighbors and friends, always remembering to add, proudly, that Kelly's father was an American general. Since the family had only one small apartment, the old lady arranged Jun and Kelly in the same room, which meant sharing in the same bed.

Jun felt awkward about the arrangement, but she could not blame her mother. She talked with Kelly: Since Americans were not used to sharing a bed--between parents and children, between brothers, and between friends--maybe staying in a hotel would be more comfortable and

convenient? Kelly replied that she did not mind the inconvenience. Besides, Jun should spend some time with her estranged family.

The first night they were to sleep, Jun put two bath towels on the bed and hesitated to join Kelly. When it was really late and everybody else had retired to bed, she slipped into the room without turning on the light. She lay down quietly beside Kelly and waited to fall asleep. Kelly smiled in the darkness; she pretended to be fast asleep. Jun had never been a disciplined sleeper, so during the night one of her legs touched Kelly's thigh when she tossed in bed. Jun was very embarrassed. She pulled her leg away, quietly yet quickly. Kelly did not mind. She gently held Jun's leg and fell back to sleep in that pose for the rest of the night. Jun lay awake. She could not pull her leg back again, but she could not ignore her leg that was in Kelly's hand, either.

Back in the DC, the pictures of P & J were still on the walls, the vanity and the bed tables, but Jun could not help contemplating the relationship between Kelly and her. Having lived in US for so long, she knew she could not pretend not to know what she already knew.

In China, people generally were more sensitive to and interested in male-female relationship, and they read nothing more into female intimacy--holding hands, eating off the same plate, and sharing a bed--than what they saw. But in America, while it's normal for a male and a female to hold hands and sleep together, frequent sleeping over and bodily touches between two women were telltale signs of something else. While Jun knew she was not born to be a gay, nor was she artistic and needed a difference to make a statement about life, she realized that she was now more than just a friend in Kelly's mind. Her body movements, her smile, and even her frowns were meriting special attention from Kelly. The other day when they went to a theatre for a

movie, Jun did hear a guy somewhere in the back rows said *Chink* and *dyke* when Kelly put down their seats, folded and put away their overcoats, and helped Jun to her seat.

Soon things turned dramatic. Jun and Kelly went to a gym to swim on a Saturday afternoon. After much chasing, competing, giggling, and laughing, they emerged from the water and headed towards the shower room. The booths were separated but had only a thin plastic curtain as door. Growing up in China, Jun had to take turns to use the same bathroom with every family member in their apartment. In college she had to shower together with dozens of girls in one large public bathhouse, in which several times she had to be rescued by naked girls and women when she fainted due to intense water vapor in the air. The simple facilities did not catch Jun's attention. But, when she was almost done with her showering, Jun witnessed the booths changing her life.

She slipped. She fell down towards the curtain and emitted an audible *ya...*

"Are you okay, Jun?" Kelly asked loudly; she had rushed immediately to Jun from the neighboring booth.

"I slipped. I am okay, I mean, nothing serious." Jun's heart *dong dong dong* punched from the sudden fall.

"I was so scared that you might have been injured." Kelly picked up the slippery soap from the floor and escorted Jun to the bench along the wall, both women naked.

They sat down and Jun started to wrap herself with a towel. But Kelly put her hands on Jun's arms, and stopped Jun from moving. She inched closer to Jun, gently rubbed Jun's shoulder, neck, and looked Jun straight into the eyes:

"Jun, listen. I have to tell you, you are so ...beautiful," she murmured.

Jun was speechless. She was unprepared for this scene. Her hands moved faster as she wrapped herself with the bath towel.

“Jun, I love you.” Kelly continued, deeply and emotionally. She leaned her body to kiss Jun.

“No, no, you don’t. No, I don’t...” Alarmed, Jun frantically moved her head, trying to avoid contact. Her hands tightly grabbed the towel to prevent it from slipping off her shoulders.

Kelly took away her hands from Jun, “Wait, Jun, don’t panic. I am not forcing you into anything. I am just trying to let you know about my feelings.”

“I knew, I already knew, but I ...here and now.” Jun muttered, her heart still racing at an Olympic speed. Under Kelly’s gaze, Jun calmed down a little, her face flushing with vapor, nervousness, and excitement.

“Okay”, after a seemingly long pause, Kelly suggested in her usual voice, “ let’s leave this place.”

The two women gathered their stuff and later appeared in front of a car, Kelly’s car, that was parked on the gym’s parking lot.

Before entering the car, Kelly asked Jun, “Jun, do you see that?”

Jun followed Kelly’s direction.

On the other end of the parking lot, above the high tree tops were a large flock of sparrows swirling in the air. Some were gliding from high in the air down to the treetops; other were taking flight and landing on other tree branches. Jun could not hear their sounds, but there had to

be the sound of cackles. Jun only heard her own heart whispering, “The more closer to love, the more closer to death.”

That was 2007, the tenth anniversary of Jun’s second divorce. Two years later, gay marriage became legal in Washington D. C.