

One Month's Notice

by Christopher Peter

Wait quietly. That's what he said to me when he gave me my notice. While the hot salty breath of Kowloon Bay pressed against my stinging face. Do your job for this last month. Please don't make a fuss. Don't forget I'm still paying you. Remember you're a professional. I still need a good PA, especially with the Han deal at a critical stage. You must understand, I need to get in some fresh blood. I know it's hard, but it will be over soon.

I knew he was right, even while unspeakable pain seethed in my guts. I could have asked so many things. Who is she? What's so great about her? Is she a better PA? What have I done wrong? How have I disappointed you? But I knew it would do no good.

I knew what Lily would say, so I kept it from her. I told you, she'd say. It knew it would end up messy, she'd say. But I usually avoided Lily these days anyway. I couldn't bear the way her hand kept straying to her gently swelling stomach, the fact she kept smiling so damn much, and – even worse – when she turned those ever-so-caring eyes on me. She hadn't married her boss, you see. She'd made the right choice.

The first week was OK. Well not OK, but it careered by well enough in a kind of sick blur. Mr Han asked a lot of questions, and we needed to make a revised submission. So my boss, my husband, kept me busy. Late nights hunched over the laptop, my back fit to crack, my eyes red. (Not with tears, you understand – I promised I wouldn't cry, and I keep my promises.) Figures to re-run. E-mails to write. Spreadsheets to print out. Conference calls to arrange. Everything was done on time. I was doing my duty. Waiting quietly.

Well, done, he said. I value your contribution. I know it's hard, but it will be over soon.

The second week I thought would be easier, but I was wrong. It was sinking in now, and the work died down while Mr Han considered our revised proposal. It would soon be over. My job, my dreams. *Our* dreams, as they used to be. Resentment joined hands with pain and skipped through my head, kicking my insides. I'm ashamed to say I began to feel angry. One night I dreamt I stabbed my boss! My husband. Don't be a damn silly cow, I told myself, that's not the way. Do your job. Be professional. Wait quietly.

Once, midway through the third week, he looked at me with a flicker of kindness in his face, and I'm embarrassed to say I dissolved, just for a moment. Tears forced their way out; I touched his arm, I pleaded. Please don't make me do this. But his eyes hardened and he slammed his hand down on the desk. How dare you, he said. Mr Han is in the next room, waiting to see me – what if he hears you? Pull yourself together. You are bringing disgrace on yourself and shame on me. You are still my PA.

What about your wife, I asked. I'm still that too. He said nothing. Then of course I apologised and got on with my work.

The last few days were better. I waited quietly. It would soon be over. He was right all along. One day I took a call from Mr Han. I watched my boss's face – my husband's, still – as his frown melted. Then he smiled. Then he laughed.

We've got the deal, he said after he'd put down the phone. Well done, he told me. You've done well. I appreciate your input. He hesitated; then shook my hand. This calls for a celebration, I said. You're right, he said.

Then he went out and I didn't see him for two days. I just did my work and waited quietly. There was nothing more I could do.

Now, tonight, it's the end of the last day. A cool dusky breeze seeps in through the open window. He came in twenty minutes ago, still drunk.

I've done my job, I told him, I served my notice. I was professional. I've learnt that you shouldn't mix your work and private lives. Your boss can't also be your husband. It just gets messed up. One day he'll want to get in someone new. Some fresh blood.

He nodded, and smiled. I see you've packed already, he said. Have you called a taxi? No, I said.

I know it's your last day, he said. What about a kiss for old time's sake? What about a cuddle? You're still my wife.

I don't completely remember the rest.

Martha, he said. What are you doing?

Messy. Fresh blood.

I'm sitting here on his leather office chair, staring at my aching hand, my ears ringing with sudden silence. Then I look up as blue lights begin to loop and pulse across the ceiling and the walls, over the spray of dark spots. I don't want to look at him any more. I just sit here, waiting quietly.