

THE PROMISE

Written by

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Based on family stories

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EXT. ROLLING FOOTHILLS OF SIERRA NEVADAS - MORNING

SUPER: CALIFORNIA - 1936

Fragrant breeze murmurs through sunny, blonde grasslands.

BOXY FORD MODEL A parked off road next to gloriously twisted chaparral oak tree. Hood of car has the perfect portable Chinese picnic--steamed pork bao (buns). Noodles. Tangerines. Thermos.

WE HEAR staticky sounds of Billie Holiday singing "I Can't Give you Anything But Love" on car radio while --

BERTA MAH (40), a slim, elegant Chinese American woman leans against hood. Blue silk scarf dancing over white blouse tucked into serious beige skirt. Half-smile gazing at --

WING MAH (42), fidgety, wiry Chinese professor with carefully-coiffed pompadour, shirt sleeves rolled up. Hungrily chewing a mouthful of steamed bao.

BERTA
(holding an uneaten bun)
You know what this drive reminds me
of?

WING
(muffled)
Driving to the potato farm.

He crams rest of bao in. Picks up chopsticks and attacks container of noodles. Offers her some.

BERTA
(declines his offer)
No, it reminds me of our honeymoon!
You drove all the way to Vancouver,
and brought me down the coast to
Berkeley. So romantic!

She leans in. Kisses his bulging cheek.

WING
Yeah, even though your sister was
in the backseat!

Berta gives Wing's side a playful bump with her body.

WING (CONT'D)
Yes, romantic.

They hug sideways--Berta smiling. Then Wing's expression shifts.

WING (CONT'D)
We should get going.

He starts sloppily repacking. She gently stops him.

BERTA
I need to thank you for making me a co-author. Can I quickly see how it looks?

WING
Not now, Berta! We need to shake a leg.

Hastily packs until she takes over. WE CRANE UP into AERIAL POV as they get into car. Drive off toward--

EXT. YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK - DAY

-- AERIAL POV cruising over breath-taking Yosemite Valley before DRIFTING DOWN past tall pine trees as Model A arrives at --

E/I. THE AHWAHNEE LODGE/THE CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Beautiful falls crashing down opposite lodge as Wing pulls car up in front--

E/I. WING & BERTA'S CABIN/CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Wing pulling Model A up to RUSTIC CABIN surrounded by pine trees. Soft, fragrant carpet of pine needles underfoot.

INT. IN CABIN/BEDROOM - A LITTLE LATER - DAY

Rustic wooden double bed with fluffy white bedding. Breath-taking views of park through windows accompanied by --

WING (O.S. in shower) singing upbeat Cantonese pop song.

Berta, who has already changed, is unpacking. Placing Wing's clothes in drawer when she sees his BRIEFCASE. Pauses. Considers. Quietly clicks it open to find --

IN BRIEFCASE: A MANILA ENVELOPE. Marked "IPR Presentation".

Berta can't look away. She reaches for the envelope, not noticing the SHOWER HAS STOPPED. Pauses, then scrambles to pull out a gray printed booklet.

BERTA
(reading)
Sino-Japanese Relations Since the
Tangku Truce - A Brief Historical
Survey by...
(gasps)
... N. Wing Mah, PhD.

Berta paws the first few pages to see whether her name appears on the inside. At the same time, WING EXITS BATHROOM behind her wrapped in plush pink towel.

WING
What are you doing?! Put it back!

Berta jumps! Then glares at Wing, shaking the paper at him--

BERTA
You...! I can't believe it.

Long... awkward... silence. Water dripping off Wing as--

WING
I... I changed most of what you
wrote anyway.

BERTA
I wrote the entire middle section!
You just cut that? It was the core
of the argument!

WING
For heaven's sake, it's done. Over.
I rewrote everything you
contributed. It has to be mine!

BERTA
Yours. I see...

She scans pages quickly.

BERTA (CONT'D)
Oh, look at this! The section you
just said you cut--still here like
you realized it wouldn't make sense
if you took it out!

He goes to snatch it from her. She dodges. Jumps up on bed.

WING

Those were my ideas too! I never
needed your help, you were just all
over me when I was trying to write!
You try to take over everything I
do!

Berta freezes in shock. Wing lunges, his towel falling away.
Berta struggles for balance, and then falls. She crawls away
from Wing. He grabs her legs, reaching for the paper.

He tugs on pamphlet. Berta holds on. A struggle then RIIIIIP!

Wing comes away with half the paper, while Berta has the
other half. He wraps himself in the towel, trying to recover.
Berta sits up, spent. Both breathing heavily.

BERTA

How can you say I take over
everything? I have nothing.

Tries to control herself, but can't -- CRACK! Lands a SLAP on
his face!

BERTA (CONT'D)

If you don't announce that I co-
authored this paper at the
presentation--I will!

Wing holds his cheek. In shock as Berta backs off bed,
looking around not seeing. Storms out, slamming door.

INT. CROWDED LOBBY - AHWAHNEE LODGE - EARLY AFTERNOON

A large sign reads: "Welcome Delegates of the Sixth Institute
of Pacific Relations." Chandeliers dangle from tall ceilings.
Lush seating cozily lit by lead light lamps.

Halls stuffed with tall Englishmen in straw hats, Japanese
Military Officers in sharply-creased uniforms, and rumpled
diplomats in baggy summer suits as --

Berta tries to manage her expression and calm down. She looks
around uncertainly and then spots a few Well-dressed Women
making their way into --

INT. AN ELEGANT, FORMAL SALON - AFTERNOON

Overstuffed chairs arranged around low coffee tables. A
buffet stuffed with cakes, pastries, tea pots and tea cups.

Berta enters cautiously then sees --

--TWO CHINESE WOMEN hovering over the desserts. A ROLY-POLY, JOVIAL ONE fans herself while studying the sweets. A WOMAN WEARING A HUGE, FLOPPY HAT next to her pours them tea.

Berta smiles at them. Slides up beside them as --

ROLY-POLY
Ooh! Daffodil cake.

BERTA
You mean the flower? In a cake?

They look at her aghast.

FLOPPY HAT
You haven't heard? It's practically become the national cake in the last few years.
(sizing Berta up)
Where are you from?

BERTA
Berkeley. My husband is in the Poly Sci department at the university.

Roly-Poly forks daffodil cake in, making appreciative noises.

FLOPPY HAT
I see. We left New York early yesterday and flew 15 hours to San Francisco! My husband says it's worth it because he's getting a private audience with Ambassador Hu Bang...
(confides)
Who wouldn't want that, right? He's a real dish!

ROLY-POLY WOMAN
(chortling)
A Chinese Clark Gable.

BERTA
(puts eclair on plate)
Yes. I'd like to meet him too.

FLOPPY HAT
No doubt.

BERTA
I just found out my husband didn't give me the co-author credit on a paper we wrote together.

A gaggle of highly-coiffed women laugh loudly behind them.

FLOPPY HAT

As wives, we really can't expect
official thanks for all the work we
do. That's just the way it is. We
prop them up and hope they succeed.

BERTA

No. That's not what I mean. I
really wrote most of his paper and
now -

ROLY-POLY

(spitting crumbs)

My dear! We're all "co-authors" of
their successes. Except when it
comes to entertaining. I don't
think my husband could cook rice if
he was starving! No co-authorship
in my kitchen!

FLOPPY HEAT

Nor mine!

Roly & Floppy laugh raucously.

FLOPPY HAT

I wonder if they'd give me the
recipe for this delicious daffodil
cake?

ROLY-POLY WOMAN

Don't see why they wouldn't. It's
really moist, isn't it? My guess?
(confides)
Mayonnaise is the secret
ingredient!

Berta struck dumb at the triviality.

BERTA

Isn't this 1936? Women don't have
to just sit around stuffing their
faces while men discuss China's
battle for survival! Women can
vote! Fly airplanes! Write papers
that they get credit for!

Berta hears MUFFLED APPLAUSE outside the Salon.

BERTA (CONT'D)

And mayonnaise in cake--disgusting!

She puts plate down. Storms out. ROLY and FLOPPY shrug slightly at each other and turn back to the buffet while Berta disappears into --

INT. LOBBY - OUTSIDE MEETING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Berta staring at a striking photo of AMBASSADOR HU BANG on meeting placard outside a set of double doors. Through the doors Berta hears laughter. Chatter. She pushes door open a crack. Looks in to see --

A DASHING DR. HU surrounded by 20 Chinese male delegates listening intently to his velvety, authoritative tones.

DR. HU

Japan is not going to stop until it conquers all of China. But the world doesn't want to believe it, so we must persuade them! The fate of China is in our hands.

Applause! Berta mesmerized. Steels herself. Opens door wider. Slinks in hoping to sit in back unnoticed when --

WING sees her. Every head turning to look at the only woman in room. Berta freezing as DR. HU SMILES that million dollar smile at her. She sits down, smiling shyly back.

HU

Welcome, Madame. Glad you could join us.

Wing quietly pissed. Berta avoiding his glare.

HU (CONT'D)

All right! Everyone! Thanks very much for coming to the conference. Fan out, talk to everyone from a country that could provide aid. Despite the many challenges, I know you will always stay courteous. The world is watching. Time is running out for our once mighty country.

Applause. Standing ovation. Hu lapping it up.

HU (CONT'D)

And don't forget the barbecue later. Delicious messy hunks of American meat. Bring a bib!

Everyone laughs. Berta quickly makes her way toward Hu when Wing rushes up. Takes her by the arm a second before she gets to Hu.

WING

I need to talk to you! Outside!

Hu watches Wing pull Berta out of room and into --

INT. OUTSIDE HALL ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A busy stream of conference attendees mingle around them as --

WING

You need to get hold of yourself!
First you slap me...

A couple of odd looks from A PASSERBY.

WING (CONT'D)

... then you barge in there where
you clearly don't belong! It's not
how a wife behaves at an important
international conference!

BERTA

Oh, I saw how wives behave just
now. They eat cake and talk
nonsense on the sidelines cheering
on their entitled husbands. I'm not
wasting the opportunity at this
conference to make connections and
get some recognition.

Wing gets close to her. Almost nose-to-nose.

WING

Dr. Hu can make or break my career
right now. Do you have any idea
what's at stake?

As Roly-Poly and Floppy exit salon to see and hear--

BERTA

How would I? You've cut me out of
everything! I sacrificed my
academic career so you could get to
the mediocre level you're at now!

Wing crushed. Embarrassed as several dignitaries exit
conference room to hear --

BERTA (CONT'D)

I did 80% of the research on that paper that you're stealing the credit for!? You broke your promise!

Wing feeling judgmental glares. Decides to save face with --

WING

You're delusional! How dare you even insinuate such lies!

BERTA

I do! I say it! You're a fraud!

Mic drop! Berta walking away, Wing left dumbfounded...and hurt. Roly-Poly and Floppy look at each other and give silent golf clap. Then--

EXT. WALKING TRAIL THROUGH THE WOODS - DAY

Berta preoccupied. Ignores beautiful scenery when she comes to a MASSIVE CLEARING where HOTEL STAFF are getting ready for the night's festivities. Berta buries her head in her hands and cries silently. Her wedding ring glints off her finger.

EXT. A MASSIVE CLEARING SURROUNDED BY DARK WOODS - EVENING

Bonfire blazing. LIVELY CROWD of casually-dressed Diplomats and Scholars is letting their hair down as WESTERN BAND plays. Buffet tables and bar swarmed while--

Wing sits with red-faced, tipsy men from Chinese delegation. He's part of a crowd, but truly estranged from --

Berta holding glass of white wine. Surveys crowd. Sees Wing with men now flocking to Dr. Hu. Hu dashing in knee-length shorts, sandals, and a white polo shirt.

Berta moves to lone log bench in front of fire, her back to the men. Gulps wine staring at flames. Eyes turn misty when suddenly--

Hu sits beside her holding two glasses of whisky.

HU

The ribs are messy, but quite delicious. You should try some...

Hands her whisky glass. She accepts. Sips.

HU (CONT'D)
...after you tell me your name.

BERTA
Berta Mah. Thanks for not kicking
me out earlier.

HU
Women have a place in our modern
academic conversations too.
Besides, it's not every day that my
talks are lit up by an intellectual
spark as bright as yours. What
brings you here?

In distance, Wing has noticed them. Hurt but resigned.

BERTA
Hoping to get my academic career
back on track. I graduated from
McGill with a degree in history and
poly sci. I love research, want
desperately to help China--but
haven't really worked for the last
decade and a half. I sound like a
lost cause, don't I?

Hu smiles warmly. Notices her glass is empty.

HU
Not at all. Let me get you another.

BERTA
Wine, please.

He flags A WAITER. Swaps empty whiskey for wine. Whisky for
himself. Clinks her glass with his.

HU
To freeing China from Japanese
aggression! Gan bei!

BERTA
(flattered)
Gan bei!

She sips. Hu shoots his down --

BERTA (CONT'D)
You want to know the truth? I
helped my husband write his paper.
Practically all the research was
mine.

(MORE)

BERTA (CONT'D)

Large portion of writing and editing. His English isn't as strong as mine.

Berta pauses staring into fire. Hu impressed by her.

BERTA (CONT'D)

I don't usually get credit for anything in my world. But this time, I thought it'd be different. I was expecting that co-author credit he promised. It's important.

HU

You're upset. I get it. You should be.

Tears spill out of Berta's eyes.

HU (CONT'D)

Well, I have an idea. I am overwhelmed with all the writing I need to get done. I could use some help myself.

BERTA

What kind of help?

HU

For starters, a book review. I have a first draft but...it needs a polish. If you'd like, you could do it. I'd be willing to share the credit.

Berta looks up at him transfixed. Unsure.

HU (CONT'D)

It may not be worth your time.

BERTA

No, it is. Let me take a look at it.

HU

Great. Good.

(he stands)

No time like the present then.

Berta surprised, but downs wine. Gets up.

BERTA

I'm so honored. It's... it's an honor.

HU
Not at all. You're helping me.

She and Hu head into the dark woods as Wing looks up... sees they're gone. Concern on his face as we arrive at--

EXT. HU'S CABIN - NIGHT

Symphony of insects play over distant bonfire chatter.

Berta and Hu appear out of darkness. Chatting. Laughing. Hu opens door and they head into --

INT. HU'S ONE-FLOOR CABIN - NIGHT

A comfy sitting area in front of a roaring fireplace.

Hu leads Berta to a two-seater sofa near bed.

HU
Snifter of Couronnier Napoleon? I
flew here straight from Paris.

BERTA
Is that cognac? I don't usually
drink this much, but...I need to
say yes to more things! So yes. A
tiny sip. Thank you!

Hu brings papers, glasses and brandy over to her.

HU
This is the review. I made a start.

She reads as he pours.

BERTA
Oh, I heard about this book. Wanted
to read it!

Hu hands her a snifter with a slight bow.

HU
Here's to the reconstruction of
China!

They click glasses. Berta sips. Chokes.

BERTA
(slight slur)
Whoa. That's really good! Strong-
good.

HU
Yes. Like you.

Berta blushes. Hu seems down--sad even.

HU (CONT'D)
My wife's illiterate. It was an
arranged marriage. We don't have a
lot in common. Gets rather lonely.

Berta nods sympathetically. Guard down.

BERTA
Seems like you work hard!
Washington, D.C., New York,
Shanghai. You give us overseas
Chinese hope for a brighter future.

HU
Thank you, Berta. My country needs
me.

BERTA
We talk about you all the time at
home. My husband does. I think he
loves you more than me!

Hu laughs. Sits closer.

HU
You know...this is wartime for
China. Traditional rules go out the
window. In truth, I'm a...warrior
needing comfort.

Berta's guard rising. Suddenly awkward.

BERTA
Yes. We all need something to...
comfort ourselves with.

HU
So you do understand. You're so
amazing.

Tries to kiss her. She resists. Tries to get up, but he pulls
her back down.

BERTA
No, this isn't what I - !

HU
I think you do. You came to my
cabin quite willingly!
(MORE)

HU (CONT'D)

Your husband is not treating you well. Now, you need to learn to relax...

But she fights his wandering hands.

BERTA

You've misunderstood! You said that I could help you with - !

HU

You are helping!

Berta manages to stand, backing away, but Hu forces her against a wall. She's trapped as he kisses her.

BERTA

No! I said stop! Get off me!

She pushes him. Unleashes a CRACKING SLAP! Shocked silence as they size each other up then --

BERTA (CONT'D)

You want me to keep this quiet, you let me leave. Now! Or I scream.

Hu takes a moment to decide then --

HU

Fine. Go back to your little husband. There's no way he gives you any kind of co-author credit. He can't.

Off her confused look.

HU (CONT'D)

Awww. He didn't tell you? That he was warned, he'd lose his job if he didn't do his own work! Hell, I might even make sure he does, after what you've told me.

Berta shocked. Backs toward door glancing at book review.

BERTA

Go ahead. Do it. We've done no wrong.

She starts to go, but comes back and grabs the book and draft Hu showed her.

BERTA (CONT'D)
And I AM going to co-write this
review!

Then she's out running back to --

EXT. CLEARING -- MOMENTS LATER

Bonfire dying out. Party waning as Berta hurries into clearing. Scans crowd. No Wing, so she runs back into woods heading for --

E/I. AHWAHNEE LODGE/BAR -- MOMENTS LATER

--hurrying up stairs into--

THE BAR: Wing nursing a beer. It's clearly not his first. Berta approaches. His face brightens as he sees her.

WING
(tipsy)
Bertie...

BERTA
There you are! Where were you!?

Wing looks ashamed. Swirls his beer.

BERTA (CONT'D)
Why didn't you tell me, Wing?

Tears well in his eyes. Berta softens. Hugs him. He squeezes her like he may never let go again.

BERTA (CONT'D)
(CONT'D)
(through her own tears)
Forgive me. What's going to happen
to you? To us?

EXT. THEN OUTSIDE THE LODGE -- NIGHT

SILHOUETTE OF LODGE against a starry sky. Scattered lights flicker and dance inside. Through window, we see Berta and Wing dancing until --

EXT. SUNRISE OVER YOSEMITE FALLS -- MORNING

Sound of the waterfalls crashing. Birds singing while --

INT. IN LODGE MEETING ROOM

Audience members packed in listening to Wing, dressed in tie and starched high collar, finishing his presentation.

WING
... and the authority of the
central government should be
established throughout the land.
Our land!

Audience stands, applauding. Berta too when --

WING (CONT'D)
(holding up his hand)
Thank you. Thank you. Please. In
closing, I'd like to acknowledge my
co-author on this paper...

Berta steps forward hastily.

BERTA
It was my honor to assist my
husband with a little editing. But
that's all it was.

WING
(quickly adjusting)
My beautiful, brilliant wife, Berta
Mah. Please stand up, honey.

Berta slowly stands. Enthusiastic clapping. Even from Roly-Poly and Floppy.

She beams at Wing, who is suddenly swarmed by well-wishers, but he pushes through them to get to Berta. They embrace.

WING (CONT'D)
(whispering)
It doesn't matter what happens, as
long as I have you.

Berta smiles. He wipes her tears then they're gliding from the room followed by curious questions and well-wishers as --

Billie Holiday's "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby" fades up as we --

FADE OUT