GENERAL SITUATION

Jocelyn Cullity

I knew nothing about teaching – and nothing about China. The latter didn't bother me in the slightest; in fact it was exciting. The former, however, worried me. My boyfriend Prakash had done some teaching and wasn't concerned that we possessed not the slightest idea of what our one-year contract to teach university students in Dalian really entailed. The Chinese-Canadian company that hired us considered the fact that English was our first language sufficient, with lack of teaching experience not a problem. To me, however, the mere thought of standing at the front of a class was terrifying. The idea that I would find something essential to say, something that would actually advance people's minds, seemed completely out of the question.

It came time to leave and, our suitcases crammed full of ESL books and a year's supply of Sensodyne toothpaste, we headed for NorthEast China.

We changed planes in Beijing. Mr. Li, assistant to the Dean of English at Liaoning University, had flown in to accompany us on the short journey to Dalian. He was a tall man with sparkling brown eyes who spoke English with an American lilt he'd picked up from The Voice of America. He introduced us to our new colleague, David, a retired Shakespeare professor from Canada, who had, in fact, been on the same flight over.

"We are so glad to have three foreign experts this year," Li said, looking at me. "Last year the Foreign Expert Bureau only assigned us one expert."

By virtue of my native tongue, I was suddenly escalated to the lofty position of *expert*? Imposter, I was.

In the big city of Dalian, brown water splashed couples on black bicycles coasting through the rain on either side of the wide boulevard. Everything looked muted. Row after row of dull-colored buildings in muddy lots. A faded green pedestrian overpass with a few wet stragglers crossing. A right turn, past an iron gate, to concrete apartment buildings, each with a yellow painted number. The taxi stopped at number 7 and Li held two umbrellas as we tried to stay clear of enormous puddles on the way to the building entrance.

At the top of a set of stairs, Li opened the door to David's apartment. From the landing, I could see a corner of a bare kitchen with a large sink with one tap. It was bigger than I'd imagined, but David made a spluttering noise as he ventured in. He picked up a straw broom leaning by the door, and guffawed about using it as he swung it around.

Turned out he was a veteran of cruise-trips. He'd get over it in time, I thought. The depths of David's literary knowledge would help root him here, winning him new faculty friends and colleagues.

Li opened our door and I plunked my suitcase down in the hallway inside. That's when I noticed the smell of toothpaste, and saw that it was oozing out of the pores of the canvas case.

The next day, Dean Yu of the English department came to visit, dressed in gray flannel trousers and short-sleeved shirt. His voice sounded like he had slight laryngitis, but his laugh was infectious. He sat in our sparse living room with its artificial grass carpet while Prakash finished making tea, pouring water from a blackened kettle in the kitchen. Prakash, who did all the cooking, had delighted in the rubber hose that brought gas to a ring that sat on the counter. The flame was huge, making everything a stirfry situation.

Dean Yu sipped his tea, adjusted his glasses and passed us our schedules. Written in black ink, under the typed, stenciled days of the week, were our various course titles.

"We don't make you work Saturdays," Dean Yu said. "We know your tradition of the weekend. Only Chinese teachers work Saturdays."

I was to teach first and second-year students "English Conversation," and third-year students something called "British and United States General Situation."

"What is 'General Situation'?" I asked.

"A class about your everyday life situation at home. Just tell them what you do every day."

I couldn't think what I did every day. Besides, I didn't live in the United States or Britain.

"Can I tell them about Canada?"

He paused, and I could see he was finding the words to be polite.

"Most students are interested in Britain and America," he said. "I think you probably know more than they do so you can give them some kind of picture."

I nodded uncertainly, wondering how long I could talk about afternoon tea or Thanksgiving.

He told us we might get questions because we were not married. "Nobody here cohabits," he said.

Great, I thought. I was going to start off with an uphill cultural battle. I needed to have a spotless reputation - at least from the outset. Clasping my hands, I said maybe they could call me Mrs. Younger instead of Miss Cullity and we'd just hide the whole unmarried thing. Prakash looked at me, stunned. Dean

Yu shook his head and said sorry, he'd already announced our arrival – with our names – the previous week. The news was out: a sinful couple on campus.

Dean Yu turned to Prakash, grinning. "Everyone will expect *you* to know how to sing and dance." Dean Yu slapped his knee. "These kids have been brought up on Hindi films," he said. "They think every Indian gets up on old cars and sings and dances."

"They don't want to hear me sing – and I don't dance!" Prakash said with a laugh.

Dean Yu sat back, drinking his tea, and told us about arriving in New York to teach literature in the seventies. He had had his suitcase stolen outside the airport – a suitcase that had his two essential books, his contact names and addresses, and three changes of clothes. In his wallet he had twenty one-yuan notes, about a dollar. He laid the notes out on the ground, pinning them down with stones, and sat behind them. He sold them as collector items, getting ten dollars for each. With $200 he had enough to get him through until he could find who was waiting for him to arrive at which college. I thought about this, imagining Dean Yu, in what must have seemed a crazy city, and a frightening situation. I thought that he must have had some confidence, even at this low moment. He was skilled. He could teach.

The next morning, our bodies yet to catch up to the time zone, we got down to preparing. I drank four cups of tea, then hooked my schedule to a nail in the concrete wall above my new wooden desk, and opened the first ESL book, some of whose pages were glued shut with Sensodyne.

Then came a knock on the door. Dean Yu was there, looking highly alarmed, no trace of the constant smile of yesterday. Prakash had answered the door in his lunghi, an Indian wrap-around sarong. I could see the slight shock in Dean Yu's face as he took this in. Yes, he was thinking, all Indians do know how to sing and dance.

"You are supposed to be in class," he said to Prakash in his raspy voice.

"What?" Prakash was stammering. "But there are no classes on Sundays, are there?"

Dean Yu peered at him, perplexed, and Prakash and I finally understood at the same time. It was Monday morning. We'd lost a day somewhere along the way. What day it was had never come up with anyone over the weekend. No doubt signs of the date were around, but we couldn't read them.

"Younger's class is waiting," Dean Yu looked at his watch. "You are half an hour late."

"Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes. I'll just change." Dean Yu looked relieved as he stepped out.

Prakash was gone, and I had an hour before my first "British and United States General Situation" class at ten. I stripped, looking for a dress without Sensodyne in my half-unpacked suitcase. I put on a pair of flat, black shoes that I thought looked particularly teachy.

I had gone into damage control mode. No time to put together a well-

thought out, articulate introduction on the nations of power of the 20th century. I'd ask them what they knew about Britain and the United States. To write a paper. This would give me time in class to make some notes on what I could say next.

Carrying a pad of paper and a pen, I walked as officially as I could towards the classroom building to look for the English Office, room number 20. Students streamed out, staring hard at me. My dress was colorful, and I suddenly felt like a loud azalea. I stared straight ahead, and swung open the heavy door to the dim hallways of the building.

In room number 20, Dean Yu had recovered his ease. We went back out into the hall where he pointed a few doors down.

"I think they are already in there," he said. I paused, looking at him. Wasn't he going to introduce me? Was I supposed to walk into a strange class in a strange country and start bossing people around? Was I supposed to introduce *myself*?

It seemed so. Yu hand-signaled good-bye, and walked back toward his office, leaving me in a dark hallway, kids streaming around me like fish around a rock.

I checked the room number and pushed myself to continue through the half-open door. Inside were rows of benches, seating for easily a hundred students. Fifty of them were already there. Looking around desperately, I saw a wooden desk on the other side of the room that might double as a lectern.

I willed my legs in that direction. The desk barely came up to my thighs as I stood behind it. I leaned on it, which I was sure looked bad, but I had to hold on to stop my hands from shaking. For a while, I looked down at my scribbled notes, not daring to look up. Then I bared my teeth and raised my face. One hundred faces smiled back at me.

I stared at a point in the wall at the back of the class as my father, a professor, had advised. Good for the nerves.

"Hello," I said slowly. "My name is Jocelyn Cullity. I am your new teacher. I am from Canada. I am very glad to be here."

My arms continued to tremble, and I was sure the whole room was fixated on them. Perhaps I could tell them I had a disease so they would feel sorry for me. Jocelyn Cullity, the poor Canadian teacher, whose limbs always shook. But first I needed to know if they even understood what I was saying. I spoke more slowly.

"Today I want you to take out a piece of paper." I let go of the desk for a moment to hold up my page. I waved it around to try and camouflage the shaking. "Tell me what you know about the United States and Britain. What you know about the United States and Britain. U-ni-ted States and Bri-tain."

If they didn't understand this, I wouldn't know what to do. There was a small chair at the front, too. I grabbed it swiftly and sat down, my chin now in line with the top of the desk. I stood up again, took my watch off, put it on top of my notes and stared at it. It was three minutes past ten.

As I pretended to write something, I tried to discern what a row of

students in my peripheral vision were doing. There was a lot of rustling going on and I finally looked up. Pages were out, heads were down. They actually were writing essays about what they knew about the United States and Britain.

I could hardly believe it. The power of my own words buoyed me momentarily.

But now what? I was drawing a blank on my notepad, and I just hoped it would take them a long, long time to write.

"Please, Miss Cullity." A small voice spoke out. I looked up to see a girl standing, trembling. "We are all finished." It was 10:30. I had an hour and a half to go.

"Okay," I said. "Hand them up to the front."

Ten students immediately got up and collected the papers from the large group in no time. I took them, then went and leaned back against the desk. I hugged the papers and stared at the point on the wall. There was no other way, I realized. I was going to have to be Canadian, and then apologize to Dean Yu.

"We are going to have only a short class today. That is how we do it on the first day of classes back home."

I could only think of one more thing to offer them. "Before we go, is there anything you would like to ask me? Do you have any questions?"

How could they have any questions? I hadn't told them anything. I looked around. I started counting to ten, steeling myself against the silence. Finally, at the back, another girl stood up.

"Can you tell us what you do on Christmas Day?" she asked.

Heaven have mercy that I was brought up Christian.

"Eat too much," I answered without thinking. The class let out a roar, and I stared at them. I pushed it a little further. I patted my stomach. They roared again. Dean Yu was looking through the glass pane in the door. I grinned. I chuckled. Then, I started to describe the day from beginning to end to a spell-bound audience. This was turning out like a good ending to a bad Hollywood movie.

"Okay, see you next week," I finally said. There was still an hour to go. A hundred students stood up, collecting their things.

"Early lunch!" Someone close to me was grateful as we jostled out the doorway.

Out on the campus street, I headed home. More than a few times, students passing me, arm-in-arm, called "Good-bye for now, Miss Cullity." "Glad to meet you." They had no idea what they were doing for my sense of belonging. Two girls caught up to me from behind, entwining my arms with theirs, just like the others.

"You must be homesick, Miss Cullity," one of them said.

"No," I said, letting my arms begin to relax.

I left them at my building, and looked up to see Prakash sitting on our iron-railed balcony. The smell of lunch cooking wafted from the kitchen.

"How'd it go?" He peered down at me, concerned.

I smiled at him as if I'd done this a thousand times, then turned to enter our new home.