

Grace and laughters

Louis Ha, 1984, 12, 03

Grace, a music teacher from Hong Kong, came to the states nine years ago intending to lead a life free and independent. she has ever since worked as a Chinese language teacher a factory worker, a clinic receptionist, radio announcer, a babysitter and a waitress. Some of these jobs were not only means to support herself; they were supposed to provide her with a permanent residence. So far she has not been successful.

“Fate is a mixture of circumstances and character,” Grace said, talking quick loud. In her one-room apartment in Mott Street, Chinatown, where she has been living for six years, she says , “I knew to live in America was not easy but the reality was a little more bitter then I thought.”

The continuous changing of jobs and non-stop hunting for a permanent residence was tiring. Yet, she never considered marrying an American citizen to obtain the legal residence like so many others do.

For four years, her application documents have been travelling to and fro between the immigration office of New York, Albany, Washington DC and the American embassy in Hong Kong, while she had spent \$2350 for various fees and countless days waiting. She expected to receive a reply before Thanksgiving this year but no answer came.

Grace, in her mid 30s, wears a white jumper, a grey knitted tabard, a black skirt and black shoes. She has a sense of self-respect and no signs of being defeated by the life she leads. Her curl hair, and the thin red line on spectacle frame even show hints of joy.

In August 1976, nine years ago, Grace flew to Los Angeles from Hong Kong. She was urged by the impulse to leave home to quit her teaching job and to look for a more revwarding land.

“At that time, I knew not a single housefly in America,” she says, followed by a loud laughter. The sense of independence is strong in her laughter and so in her small living room, where all chairs are unpaired and unmatched; one red settee, one green armchair, one dining chair, one dressing stool, and one folding chair.

When she came out from the airport in Los Angeles, Mr Cheung, a friend of her father, advised her to apply for his Social Security card, which he thought was essential for getting a job. A mistake made by an immigration officer on her travelling document enabled her to get one. The officer put down the valid stay till November 1976 instead of 1975. With a permitted stay of 15 months, sh she was able to get a Social Security number.

Before settling down to find a job in Los Angeles, she visited a friend, classmate and longtime neighbour in Toronto. The Lam family welcomed her

so heartily and warmly that she chose to stay in Canada. This happy beginning was a starting point for the long years without legal documents of residence.

Her first job was to work in a sleeping bag factory at the almost minimum age of \$2.5 an hour. She taught Chinese at a parish school in the evening and served in a small Chinese restaurant at weekends.

She liked Toronto, the people, and friends around her. She didn't feel away from home at all. Her father wrote her weekly letters full of affection and care. It was unexpected, she says. She used to have serious conflicts with her father. In fact, that was one of her reason for leaving home.

"They were like love letters," she laughs out loud again, pouring out a cup of Chinese jasmine tea. My elder sister told me that my father treasured all my letters."

The recession year of 1977 ended her state in Canada. She was among the 50 employees to be laid off by the factory. Being jobless for two months, she had three choices: to fly back to Hong Kong, to get married in paper with a Canadian citizen by paying \$2000; or to smuggle herself to a Buffalo by paying \$1800.

The sisters of the Lam family suggested another way. They bought barbecue forks and waited for a sunny April weekend, when the traffic from Canada to America would be haeavy and the document checking at the border would be cassual. The fourth week was a nice one. They brought along children in the car and pretended to make a lake side picnic in the states.

They succeeded in bringing Grace to Buffalo in the afternoon and left her there. The astonished children timidly whispered, "Isn't Auntie Grace coming back with us?"

"I had no way to go forward," Grace laughs loud again. But the laughter is stiff and sounds like self-mockery this time. "I was hoping then that the Carter administration would declare a general absolution for all illegal aliens."

She stopped speaking for awhile; picks up her yellow mohair yarn and knits: four stitches high, one purl, and three stitches low. She seems to be fond of keeping herself busy.

In Buffalo she took a Grayhound to Port Authority, New York, for a transfer to Connecticut, where she intend to ask help from a 60-year-old cook she knew in a Chinese restaurant.

While waiting at the bus terminal, she changed the course of her life again. She phoned up a Chinese boy, Ah Cheong, whom she met in the Montréal Olympiad.

He welcomed her to stay at his home in Queens, where a room was left unoccupied by his just-married younger brother. Ah Cheong's mother, wishing her elder son to get married too, asked Grace in earnest her first question, "How do you like my son?"

Ah Cheong, a social worker, found her a job in a garment factory near the social centre in Chinatown and drove her to work every morning.

One day, she was surprised to find that Ah Cheong was moody and absolutely refused to speak to her. She found out later on that the too zealous mother had told Ah Cheong that a boy from Toronto had come down to visit Grace some day ago.

Grace could not stand this kind of intrusion on her freedom and moved out from Ah Cheong's house on the same day, leaving behind \$120 for the hospitality of the last two months.

Grace might be too alarmed. But her Toronto friends' unhappy emotional involvement might have some negative effect on her.

one of the Lam sisters found out that her husband had already a wife with four children after giving birth to two herself. Another friend, married to a man 20 years older, was always sad and tried to forget herself by caring her son. Another friend got a miser for husband, who made her miserable with no pocket money at all.

"I seldom think of marriage," Grace says. "I don't see how I can convince myself to do that."

Referring to Ah Cheong, she says, "He is married now. He is quiet an active, but too small, even shorter than me." Grace is about 5 feet six.

After leaving Ah Cheong, Grace had to struggle through a period of turmoil in trying out various jobs.

First, she became a baby-sitter for a Chinese family in Glenville, Connecticut. A bank officer employed her for \$86 a week. The couple made her cook, wash, and sweep the house besides taking care of the newborn baby. They promised to apply the permanent residence for her only if she stayed for six years. She works only three weeks.

Grace, then, got a job as a house-maid for a single woman, a self-claim writer in her 40s on 5th Avenue. "But I could not find a piece of paper in her house," says Grace, who likes reading and wishes to write a book herself. Grace suspected her to be a lady on call, and left after two weeks.

The next job was in a Japanese restaurant, where she works till 2 a.m. "Open your handbag," someone in the big cape with a sharp knife commanded her one day after work. She was forced from the elevator to a floor in the renovation work. The incidence scared her from going near that building for awhile.

At that time, she was offered work as a program operator for a Chicago Chinese radio station, \$600 a month for free lodging. After all pre-arrangements, on the day when she was supposed to fly to Chicago, the manager said that she had to share a room with his wife. She turned down the offer.

Instead, she got a job at China Radio Broadcast in New York as an announcer. But the manager didn't pay her any salary. After two months, Grace had to resign by herself. She was so angry that she decided to sit in front of the manager's office every morning until she got her salary. The manager gave her the salary after 13 days. But it was in 10 separate checks. The bank teller cashed the first one and said the account was not able to pay the second. Grace got all her money only after going to the bank for more than two months.

Meanwhile, she took a job she took up a job at an newly opened optical clinic as a receptionist . But the clinic only averaged two clients a day and the doctor had to do without a receptionist.

"In that period, I wanted very much to see my parents," she said turning towards the family photograph on her desk. Her eyes become reddish and moist. She has three sisters and three brothers besides her two parents. But she didn't see them until two years later, when her sister join an airline company and got free tickets for her parents.

Her luck turned better in 1981, when she got a temporary job in McAnn's Bar and Restaurant system. Running among the restaurant's 21 branches, she often managed to have work in the morning from 7 to 9, at noon from 11 till three, and at the evening from 4 to 8. she got her record earning of \$800 a week.

Grace spares every cents of her earning. She spends about \$300 a month, half for the rent and a half for food. When she happened to get a room-mate to share the rent, she spent only about \$200 a month. She saved all the rest and send half of her yearly savings to have parents in Christmas and Chinese New Year.

"I wanted my parents to be sure that I have enough money to spend, and would not worry about me."

Last year, when her mother retired from teaching after 20 years and got only \$2000 as her retirement fund, Grace sent her \$5000 to console her.

Besides saving money she corrects stories on life of undocument aliens in her memory.

During an immigration checking in Chinese restaurant, one escaped by submerging in an oil tank breathing through a straw; another one hid under the cabbage pile inside the icebox.

One young man she knew went to immigration office to be registered, thinking the immigration bill was passed, and was expelled immediately back to Hong Kong without getting his luggage.

Many people divorced their spouses to marry an American citizen then got divorced again and remarried their former spouses, while some just took both.

“The most incredible one,” Grace says, “is about a Chinese American, who came back with his bride from Taiwan. At JF Kennedy airport the bride eloped with someone else after she got a green card from the airport immigration officer.”

When Grace applied her permanent residence, known as the ‘green card’, her lawyer asked her, “Do you know by marrying, you can automatically get the green card?”

In fact, Ah Cheong, who is an American citizen had hinted to her quite a long time ago, “Grace, if you want to stay in the State, the easiest way is to get married.”

The lawyer did not believe Grace and asked further, “Do you really know? Then why?”

Grace answered in a traditional Chinese way, “Because nobody likes me.”

“Do you have any problem?” said the lawyer.

Grace puts down on her knitting laughs aloud, covering her face with both hands.

“You have to speak in American way to Americans,” Grace explains, still laughing. “I have to say: Well I like to enjoy life. Single life suits me. I don’t want trouble.” But Grace confesses that those words more and more express her real feelings.

Alison, her friend in Church, said, “Grace talks too straight forward, to quickly and explosive. She heads for everything with courage except to get married.”

Grace is a member of ‘Four Seas Players’ in Chinatown Catholic Church play Association. She played the mother in “Happy journey” by Thornton Wilder last year. Patrick Tu, the producing manager, said, “Her jovial character suits the role very much. She has a sense of justice and responsibility.” Alice Leung, the business manager, however, said Grace was impulsive moody and inconsistent.

Four years ago, the Catholic pastoral centre in Chinatown was established. She volunteered to work there at her convenience, and the centre applied for her residence. But the application was transferred from one department to another each demanding certificates and testimonies of various kinds from time to time. Grace does not have any definite reply yet.

“If I got my residence, I will do two things: to finish my college study and to apply my parents to come over,” says Grace.

On her desk, there is a bishops bust, given her by her first room-mate, a girl from Greenville, California, who came to New York to give herself a final test before entering the convent. Grace admires her decisiveness, conviction and simplicity.

“In my class at high school there were 10 catholic girls. All, except me, join the convent after school. I thought I might be the only one who would successfully become a nun after all,” Grace says without any laughter.