

Uncle Pete, who'd lived on our family farm his entire life, was a warmhearted soul, but he'd never exactly been a dreamboat with the ladies. Granted, we Beezers are hardly aristocrats, but Pete's unsavory habits were particularly detrimental to marital success. To name a few, he picked his teeth with chicken bones, tracked horse manure into the living room, and occasionally blew his nose with his bare hands. Add to these drawbacks a lack of intellect and shortage of good looks, and we'd long ago given up on Uncle Pete landing a proper wife.

One Sunday last November, however, as we were finishing supper, Pete clinked his spoon against his Kool-Aid glass and announced, "I have a bit o' news for you folks."

The family scarcely looked up. Uncle Pete's "news" ordinarily entailed another foot fungus, a prediction for the county tractor-pull contest, or a declaration that one of his bloodhounds was pregnant. While we all but ignored him, Pete wiped the gravy from his chin and, grinning wide, declared, "I ordered me one o' them Chinese mail order brides."

Never has a roomful of Beezers fallen into such silence.

Basking in the unprecedented attention, Uncle Pete squirmed in his chair like a five-year-old kid. "Her name's Po Ling," he said. "And I arranged fer Pastor Dan to get us hitched soon as possible."

Pa, Pete's older brother, dropped his fork. "What the blazes you gonna do with a woman, you old fool?"

Pete flinched. "Well, the usual stuff I s'pose. Go to picture shows and such. Maybe take her dancin'."

My bungling uncle promenading around a dance floor was not a pretty visual.

Rubbing his plump hands together, Pete looked around at the family, lowered his voice, and added, "An' maybe some o' that lovey-dovey stuff."

The visuals had now reached the pinnacle of discomfort.

Recovering from the shock, I said, "Uncle Pete, with all due respect, you don't know much about this woman."

Pete turned to me. "Me and she's been writin' back and forth for a few months. We's fell in love."

Pa resumed his hostilities. "Where you gonna keep a woman?"

Though quivering from his brother's reproach, Uncle Pete swallowed and said, "Well, if it's OK, I figgered we could set up our own little home in the bunkhouse out back. It jus' needs a bit o' work to make it liveable."

Gawking at Uncle Pete, my little sister Lily asked, "Are they gonna send her in a box?"

Ma patted Lily's head. "No, dear," she said, "they come over on a boat."

"Actually," said Uncle Pete, "she's flyin' in on an aero-plane to Joplin. I'm pickin' her up next Wednesday."

Straining to regain the upper hand, Pa pressed his palms to the table and leaned toward Uncle Pete. "Well, you damn sure better rethink this foolishness."

Ma, as usual, played the moderator. "Pa, it ain't for us to decide. Maybe a wife's just the thing Pete needs."

Grateful for Ma's intervention, Pete nodded and, lowering his eyes, said, "I do get kinda lonely, ya'know."

Pa sneered. "You got yer bloodhounds fer Christ sakes."

Ma shook her head. "It ain't the same, Pa. You know that. Besides, there's always room for one more 'round this farm. Pete's wife could pitch in and help with chores."

"That ain't the point," said Pa, flinging up his hands. "The point is she's one o' them China women. She'd mess up the whole dang atmosphere 'round here. Them people eat with sticks. They wear hats that look like little flyin' saucers. They parade 'round in dragon suits." He turned to Pete. "An' they stick needles all over each other. You want some China woman stickin' needles in ya?"

Pete fidgeted in his chair. "Not sure I wouldn't mind that too much."

Pa glared at his brother. "Well this is my farm and there ain't no commie China woman gonna be livin' here. If she comes, you go!"

Mustering up a firmness that surprised us all, Pete stared back at Pa and said, "Well, I love her so I guess I'll be packin' up."

Gazing around to find little support, Pa shoved himself from the table, stood, and stabbed his finger toward Pete. In a low, seething tone, he said, "Then you got one week to get outta here."

As Pa headed toward the door, mumbling about fixing his broken down tractor, the rest of us cast nervous glances at Pete. Maybe Pa was right and Pete's expectations were too idealistic. Besides, we sort of got used to having the old cuss around.

Nevertheless, instead of agonizing over his banishment, Pete set out to prepare for married life. He put his entire savings down on a shabby little trailer house on the poor end of Tucker City. Next, he lined up a job mopping floors at the nursing home. Packing his belongings didn't take long, considering his only possessions, beyond his bloodhounds, were his old work clothes, an ancient radio, and some pictures of horses he'd cut from magazines. With the deadline quickly approaching, Pete, showing no trace of regret, was ready to leave the farm.

The next Wednesday Pete's bride was due to arrive. By then, Ma had talked Pa into letting Pete bring her to the farm to meet the family. When Wednesday came, with the stage set for an awkward day, Pete set out for Joplin in his old truck to pick up his bride.

Early the next morning, while we were all out tending to our chores, Pete pulled his truck into the farmyard, honking the horn. The whole family--minus Pa who stayed out working on the tractor--gathered around the truck, eager to meet the mysterious woman. Pete climbed out, scurried around to the passenger side and, like a regular city gentleman, opened the door.

Out stepped a diminutive, blandly-dressed Asian woman. Dwarfed by my burly uncle, she looked barely sixteen. But as Pete led her toward us, her time-worn face and austere eyes revealed the wear of four grueling decades. The unassuming woman gazed around at the farmyard, the house and, without a hint of fear, stepped toward us and bowed.

While we awkwardly bowed back, straining for something to say, the woman broke the silence. Pointing to herself, she said, "Po Ling."

As if approaching a fragile vase, we crept toward her and introduced ourselves. When Ma invited Po Ling inside, Pete, to our surprise, opted to first take her out to meet Pa. Grasping his fiance's hand, and with a newfound vibrancy in his step, he boldly escorted her to the far side of the farmyard.

When the couple neared Pa, Pete called to him, "You wanna meet my new bride? Her name's Po Ling."

Pa merely glanced up with a grunt before returning his attention to the tractor. Pete sought to break the ice. "You can see she ain't wearin' no flyin' saucer hat."

Without answering, Pa tightened a few bolts and climbed into the tractor seat. Turning the key, he cursed as the engine sputtered and died. He dropped back down and, ignoring Po Ling, stared at Pete.

"So," Pa said, "yer stuff all moved out?"

Pete placed his arm around Po Ling's shoulder and, with just a trace of unease, met Pa's eyes. "Yup," he said.

Pa, flustered by Pete's unexpected defiance, walked off, forgetting his tool box and grumbling about having to buy a new tractor.

As Pa disappeared into his workshop to sulk, Po Ling knelt down to the tool box and sifted through its contents. Alarmed, Pete protested.

"Uh, Po Ling," he said, "Pa's purty touchy 'bout his tools and--" Po Ling silenced Pete with a nonchalant glance and, clutching a wrench, approached the tractor. Pete shrugged and sat down on a nearby straw bale. "Well," he said, "I ain't never heard of a woman knowin' much 'bout tractors. But I guess there ain't nothin' to lose."

A half hour later, Pete, with Po Ling settled behind him, proudly rambled the tractor up to the shop and paraded it back and forth. Pa stepped out and stared wide-eyed at the unlikely sight. Pete waved and hollered, "Thanks to Po Ling, she's runnin' like a charm!"

After Pete parked the tractor, leaving Pa staring, the couple returned to the house. Ma and the girls, eager to become better acquainted with Pete's bride, invited her to the patio. Po Ling grabbed her knitting bag from the truck and joined them. As the boys set out to stack hay, the womenfolk, despite their guest's limited English, settled in to visit with her while she quietly knitted.

That evening, Pa was the last one to the dinner table. Showing no sign of gratitude for Po Ling repairing his tractor, he frowned, sat down, and examined the food spread before him: succulent pork slices glazed in an enticing sauce, steamed vegetables spattered with appealing spices, and a hot bowl of potatoes garnished with aromatic herbs.

Pa looked up at Ma. "What the blazes is this?"

Ma smiled. "Po Ling made it. We just helped."

Pa stared at the feast. "This must've cost us a gut-dang fortune."

Actually," said Ma, "she just used leftovers and vegetables from the garden."

The rest of us dug in while Pa stared at the table. As the food's aroma wafted through the room, his nostrils wriggled until he finally picked up his fork. "Hope there ain't no dog meat in it," he grumbled.

Pa had triple helpings.

As he finished the last morsel, Pa stood and mumbled, "It'll be dark soon." he said. "They best be goin'." Sidestepping any family resistance, he hustled out the front door and headed back toward the shop.

Discounting Pa's rebuke, Po Ling stood, pulled something from her bag and, with the puzzled family watching, also disappeared out the front door.

Ma turned to Pete. "What on earth's she doing?" she asked.

"Well," said Pete, "ya'know how she was knittin' earlier today?"

"Yes?"

"She finished a real fine winter scarf fer Pa. Sort of a peace offerin'. She's headin' out to give it to 'im. We figgered if he accepted it, it'd be a sure sign he'd change his mind an' we could stay."

We sat in silence, and in a few minutes Po Ling returned. She still held the scarf.

With a sigh, Uncle Pete stood. "Well," he said, "I reckon Pa jus' don't want us around."

After we watched my blameless uncle lead his bride out the door, we gathered on the front porch to bid the couple farewell. Once there, we heard incessant hammering from the shop and immediately recognized the motivation behind the clatter. Pa, as he always did when riled, pounded his frustrations out on an anvil.

Uncle Pete ignored the racket and faced us, arm in arm with Po ling. When I studied his face, I noted that steady eyes and an open posture had replaced his usual clumsy demeanor. Po Ling, the object of Pete's transformation, gazed up at him and clutched his arm. For the first time, despite the scary new world awaiting her, we saw Po Ling smile.

Pete gazed around at us. "Gonna miss bein' with you folks," he said. "But I s'pose it's all fer the best."

We Beezers aren't generally an emotional bunch, but Ma and the girls were getting misty-eyed and, admittedly, I was feeling a bit mushy myself.

We exchanged our final hugs and watched the couple stroll to the truck and climb in. When Pete rumbled the engine to a start, the hammering from the shop ceased and Pa's head appeared in the shop window.

After idling a few moments, Pete backed the truck up and, as he was turning around, Pa was suddenly standing at the driver's side window. Pete hesitated then rolled down the window. After a brief staredown, Pa averted his eyes.

Pete broke the silence. "The tractor still runnin' OK?"

Pa glanced in the tractor's direction. "Oh, I s'pose," he said, his voice mired in restraint. He quickly added, "But I just about had her fixed anyway."

Pete didn't let up. "Shore was a dandy dinner tonight, weren't it?"

Pa shrugged. "Guess it wasn't too bad. Fer bein' leftovers and all."

Ordinarily, Pete's needling would have infuriated his brother. But now it tamed Pa's doggedness.

Pete took the scarf from Po Ling's hands, held it up, and gently petted it in front of Pa. "Gettin' a bit nippy out," he said.

Pa thrust his hands into his pockets. "Oh. Maybe just a bit." He stared at the ground.

With their roles now fully reversed, Pete said, "So, got anything you wanna say to my bride here?"

Pa shuffled his feet and said, "So yer making me say it?"

When Pete's silence answered the question, Pa finally bent down to peer at Po Ling, who gazed back with eyebrows raised. Pa cleared his throat, unleashed a deep breath and, very nearly smiling, said, "I suppose yer Beezer material, Po Ling. Why don't ya stick around?"