

'I Brought Shame to my Father'

Ng Jun Sen

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The sofa has to be pushed aside every night, so she has enough space to lay a blue mattress down on the living room floor of the two- room rental flat in Toa Payoh.

Her one-year-old daughter is oblivious to their desperate situation.

They huddle together to sleep.

But worries of an uncertain future and her dwindling bank account keep her awake.

As do the voices of a family of four living in the same flat.

"It is their home after all, so I can't complain," says Madam Vimala, 25.

Her name has been changed to protect her daughter's identity.

Last month, her parents chased her out of the family home, where she had been living all her life.

They were opposed to her divorcing her husband.

Madam Vimala, a Singaporean, claims her Malaysian husband had been using her to get permanent residency, and was seeing other women.

"It was an arranged marriage, and my father was the one who arranged it.

"But I married a monster," she says.

We meet Madam Vimala, a former hotel receptionist, at a coffee shop below the block of flats she now stays in.

She met its owners through a friend. The family has allowed her to stay for the time being until she can get back on her feet.

Nearly in tears, she recounts how her marriage was arranged in 2012.

Madam Vimala was 23. She was single then, after coming out of a relationship she had been in since studying at the Institute of Technical Education.

"I was raised thinking that my marriage will be arranged by my parents. I had no strong opinions against it, so I just went along with my parents' wishes," she says.

After being introduced to each other, the pair went on dates at shopping malls and cinemas, just like any other couple.

"There wasn't any love, but he was nice enough. My parents seemed to like him, and I trusted their arrangements."

They solemnised their marriage at the Registry of Marriages in July that year, seven months after they met.

She claims his true colours were revealed after he became a permanent resident here in September. "Before that, I didn't even know he was Malaysian. He was hardly at home, he never gave any money to me," she says.

To make things worse, she found lewd messages between him and other women on Facebook.

She shows me the messages, including one in which he said that he would agree to a divorce only if she would sign his citizenship documents.

FAMILY OBJECTED

Madam Vimala tried to tell her family about it, and wanted to call off the wedding ceremony in December 2012.

But her parents objected, she says.

"I brought shame to my father because the marriage he had arranged was not working out, and my father is a very proud man," she says.

Even the birth of their daughter early last year failed to bring the couple together.

"At the hospital, he said he doubted that he was the father. To be honest, I didn't want to put his name on my daughter's birth certificate."

One day, Madam Vimala came home to see her father drunk and her mother crying. She was told to leave the home with her baby because her situation deeply upset her father.

A childhood friend, Mr Nagarajah Letchimanam, 33, found out about her predicament and offered to help.

He was incensed when he first heard she was homeless. "I just had to help. How can anyone throw a mother and her baby out?" he says.

Mr Nagarajah, a lorry driver attendant who earns \$1,300 a month, has been paying for the baby's necessities, which can cost up to \$500.

His girlfriend also helps Madam Vimala out, providing emotional support when she can.

Madam Vimala says she has been crying almost every day. She had quit her \$1,600-a-month hotel job last year because she could not focus on work.

Now, she is unable to find work because she cannot leave her daughter alone in someone else's home.

"I feel robbed of my happiness. I used to be a happy girl," she says. "Now, I have a daughter to worry about. What is going to happen to me?"

FEWER ARRANGED MARRIAGES NOW

Arranged marriages are on the decline, says National University of Singapore sociologist, Dr Tan Ern Ser.

He explains: "I reckon younger generations prefer choice and the idea that the couple should be in love (first)."

It does not mean that love cannot be present or nurtured in arranged marriages, he says.

"I know of some cases that ended well. In one case, I was surprised that the man involved had been (actively) dating. But when he finally got married, it was an arranged one by his parents.

"After more than a decade, their marriage is still stable today."

In such cases, most parents want to set up their children with potential partners to ensure a good match.

"Whatever the arrangement may be, so long as (the son or daughter) has the option of deciding whether or not to take it to the next level, then it is fine," says Dr Tan.