

## Wife of wrath

Jealousy can be an ugly third wheel in a marriage.

“I think we should separate,” Brendan told me a few days before Christmas, five years into our marriage. We were sitting across from each other on our disheveled bed, but I felt a million miles away from him. “How would we do that?” I asked. My palms sweated as I faced him. My normally cheery husband was unnervingly serious. “I could stay in a hotel while you stayed here,” he said. I was in shock. I held my hands tightly to keep them from shaking. “Could we try couples counseling first?” I begged, my voice wavering. “OK,” he relented, his blue eyes watering.

It was hard to remember that the two of us had started as best friends. Brendan and I were dramatic writing majors who met in a screenwriting class at New York University. We had both wanted to be writers since we were kids. After graduation, Brendan moved around the corner from me in Brooklyn, and we were soon spending every weekend together. We celebrated our writing triumphs – I won a playwriting award and he landed a job at *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart – and commiserated over rejections together. We talked every day.

Besides the fact that he was my best friend, he was a writer, and I told myself I would never date a writer. I had my own issues about writing. I was plagued by self-doubt. My father disapproved of my decision to go to undergraduate and graduate school for writing. Go to business school, he urged, warning me that I’d never make any money as a writer. I was desperate to prove him wrong. But after 12 rejection letters from theaters, I quit playwriting. I got a job at a nonprofit to pay the bills while occasionally writing on the side.



A trip to New Orleans with Brendan took our relationship out of the platonic zone, and a year later, we moved in together in a tiny one-bedroom in Brooklyn. I had a writing desk in our living room while he wrote in the bedroom. He had landed a TV manager in Los Angeles who helped him secure gigs, including a freelance *Simpsons* episode. At the time, I had finished a young adult novel, and his manager expressed interest in reading it. After I sent her the manuscript, we set up a call. She bluntly told me it wasn’t very good, and I didn’t have a chance of selling it. After the call, I burst into heaving sobs. I cried so much that I called in sick to work the next day because my eyes were red and swollen. When I told Brendan what had happened, he explained that his manager wasn’t the most tactful person. I secretly wanted him to call and berate his manager, but I knew she was important for his career, so I kept mum.

Soon after, we got engaged and moved to Los Angeles so Brendan could pursue TV writing while I got yet another job at a nonprofit. Then, at 28, I was laid off. Secretly, I was relieved. I sat down to make a list of careers I’d pursue if money were no object. Magazine editor topped the list, but “writer” didn’t make it. I wasn’t sure how to make money as a writer. I had no experience working in magazines, so I started as an editorial assistant and worked my way up to features editor at a photography magazine. In my spare time, I pitched editors and sold a few magazine stories of my own while Brendan worked in TV. When we were both doing well writing-wise, our marriage was great, but it got more challenging the more successful he became.

In 2010, Brendan was offered a head writer position at Lucasfilm in the Bay Area to work alongside his childhood idol, George Lucas. For a kid who could recite entire scenes from *Star Wars* at

age 2, this was an offer of a lifetime. I was torn. I loved my job. We had just bought a house in L.A. But a friend convinced me that I would regret keeping Brendan from his dream job.

A few months later, we moved. Brendan was thrilled and nervous about working with his hero. “What if I screw it all up?” he lamented during his first week. I squeezed his hand. “You won’t.” Soon, I was hired at a vegetarian lifestyle magazine as an editor. “I can’t believe I get paid to write and eat!” I said to Brendan a few weeks in. A photographer I knew contacted me to co-author her next book. I was giddy when I signed the contract. This is it, I thought. I’ve made it. I’m doing exactly what I want to do.

Within a few months, though, the collaboration between the photographer and me soured. The photographer hated the manuscript I turned in. My book editor didn’t love it either and politely suggested I quit the project. I was crushed. Instead of turning to Brendan, I hid out in our home office and silently cried. I returned the advance, exhausted and ashamed of my failure. In the rare moments I let Brendan see me upset, he told me it wasn’t my fault, but his words couldn’t console me. Meanwhile, he had just sold the movie rights to his graphic novel, which garnered him a check equal to my yearly salary. Instead of rejoicing, I snapped, “You’ll always make more money than me.” “But it’s our money,” he countered. When he complained about a project that wasn’t going his way, I lashed out, “I worked for a year on that book with nothing to show for it. You’ve got everything.” My words stung him. He retreated, just as I was doing. We fought almost every day in November and December. Some nights, the fights lasted until five in the morning, leading to the night when Brendan asked me to separate.

Our first few counseling sessions were painful. Through tears, I admitted I was jealous of my own husband. “I tried to make you feel as bad as I felt,” I said. Brendan was taken aback. “I had no idea that’s why you were so angry at me,” he said. Brendan struggled to open up, so

our therapist suggested we write to each other in a journal. We took turns writing down our feelings. “I know things are difficult, but I see that you both care about each other. That’s a start,” our therapist said. Counseling was our turning point. Slowly, our fights decreased. We went on dates. We became best friends again.

A year later, we are still in therapy, striving to be more honest and intimate than in the past. When we decided to move back to L.A. after his Lucasfilm job ended, he suggested I write and edit full-time on my own. I balked. I couldn’t imagine putting myself through the financial and emotional stress of writing without a day job as security. “You’ve supported me by moving back to L.A. Let me support us financially. I want you to write,” he said. The thought of focusing on my own writing was terrifying, but instead of saying no, I said yes.

Back in Lalaland, I finally put “writer” at the top of my list. I successfully balanced freelance writing and editing and finished a middle-grade novel that my agent sent out to editors. I’m not perfectly cured of my jealousy. I still feel self-doubt at parties when most people I meet are TV writers and actors who ask me what I do. “I write for magazines. I’m also a playwright who writes kids’ books,” I say. “You don’t want to write for TV?” they ask quizzically. I shake my head.

After one particularly awkward industry party, I told Brendan I didn’t belong here. I was a misfit in a land of pretty, uber successful people. The next day, Brendan wrote me a note in our shared journal: “To me, you’re a beautiful, talented, smart woman. You’re pursuing your passion, and from my point-of-view, you’re doing well. You kick ass and live such a varied life with so many different interests. I can’t see you any other way.” His words brought the good kind of tears. Tears I could shed without hiding. I hugged him tightly, glad to have such a good writer in my life. **W**

Jennifer Chen’s work has appeared in *Bust*, *Every Day With Rachael Ray* and other publications.

## FEEDBACK FOR YOUR WRITING

★ Contests with cash prizes.

★ Be a part of an online writing community.

 FanStory.com



Creative writing classes in NYC and online.

GOTHAMWRITERS.COM