

Millennial Romance

Dear applicant,

Thank you for your interest in our internship programme. We received applications from many potential candidates this year.

We have given your application careful consideration.

Unfortunately, we regret to inform you that your application has been unsuccessful.

On behalf of the company, I would like to thank you for the effort you put into your application and wish you well in your future endeavours.

Sincerely,

Melanie CHIN (MS.)

This is an automatically-generated message. Please do not reply to this email.

Mel sat at her desk, her fingers hovering uncertainly over the mouse. Was it too cold, too impersonal? Just be polite, her supervisor had suggested as she left to deal with more "pressing issues".

This was not part of the job description, Mel thought to herself. Having to reject her fellow applicants seemed strangely inappropriate, but who was she to argue with the brass? Someone's got to do it, why not an intern? Besides, I'm here to learn, why not take it as a positive experience? At least they're treating me like part of the staff and trusting me to do something, rather than sit around and do meaningless data entry and organization like Fred was. Fred, her friend from school, was spending his summer in what he thought was an opportunity to display his coding skills - which, to his credit, was still being utilized, except not in as great a capacity as he was expecting. Then again, with the present state of the job market, one could hardly complain.

Still, Mel tried to imagine how she would feel if she received such an email. Which, to be fair, she had experienced before on multiple occasions. She recalled the initial excitement and anticipation upon seeing the sender which dissipated as the tone of the message sank in, followed by the dreaded words "unfortunately" and "regret". Her go-to solution was to delete the email and sit in quiet contemplation of self-worth for a couple of minutes, and maybe watch a few cat videos to cheer herself up before getting right back to submitting other applications. It worked almost every time.

It's not so bad, she reasoned. Everyone gets rejection letters, it's not the end of the world. People will just take time, some more than others, to get over it, but get over it they will. Feeling slightly less guilty, she held her breath and clicked "send". The notification popped up, and that was when she realised she made a mistake.

"Shit, I included my contact details in the sign-off!" She berated herself. Now the receivers had access to her particulars, including her personal phone and email address. She hastily shot a text to her supervisor asking for advice but was treated to the double tick icon that indicated the message was received and read. Defeated, she slumped in her chair and awaited her fate. It was a Monday afternoon, her first day on the job.

Four days later, Mel sat across her supervisor during lunch for their first casual "catch-up sesh", as Ms Lim ("please, call me Dianne") put it. During the session, Ms Lim was supposed to check in on Mel as well as provide feedback on her performance throughout the week.

"So how, got anyone contact you?" Ms Lim asked as the waiter set their drinks down on the table. Mel shook her head sheepishly.

"I told you liao, no need worry one. Wait ah," Ms Lim said, her attention divided between the conversation with her mentee and the intricately-patterned latte art before her. The latter eventually won out, and she whipped out her phone to take photos for Instagram. Mel sat there awkwardly, sipping her cup of coffee and occasionally moving out of the frame ("I can see your shadow") as her supervisor made delicate decisions that involved lighting and angles to capture the perfect mise-en-scene. When she was finally done, she placed her phone face-down on the table and smiled pleasantly at Mel.

"Sorry, I am sort of an influencer in my free time," Ms Lim laughed unabashedly. "Also, I noticed you haven't followed me."

"Err... I don't use social media much."

"Aiyoh, then what do you do in your free time? You know ah, work can sometimes be very stressful, you need to find some hobbies to relax outside."

"I know, I'm part of a band, we sometimes jam together during the weekends."

"Wah, that's cool, do you perform live?"

"Actually, we do have a gig at the end of this month at Timbre+."

"Mm... So, onto your performance thus far," Ms Lim was clearly not a fan of music, judging from her segue into business matters. Mel didn't mind. Everybody had different interests and

pursuits - some enjoyed sports, some dabbled in art, and some choose to express themselves through music. As long as they were happy, well, to each one's own. She picked absently at her food. Ms Lim continued to drone on about ethics and professionalism in the workplace, interjected with not-too-subtle peeks as notifications pinged steadily on her phone.

"In conclusion, HR is about people management. Sometimes, our hands are tied, but most importantly just remember to remain polite and respectful during communication. Don't give people reasons to report you." Ms Lim finished. It wasn't the most motivational talk, but nevertheless, Mel felt slightly better. They returned to the office, Mel leading the way as Ms Lim tracked the likes she received over the course of the lunch.

Mel returned home from her Saturday band practice to an email from an unknown sender on her personal account.

"Dear Ms Chin, I refer to the rejection email dated 22nd April. I was wondering if I could clarify a few points regarding the application process..." Mel immediately reached for her phone to contact Ms Lim but was reminded the latter had warned that she stayed strictly uncontactable during weekends ("because work-life balance important you know"). Sighing, Mel closed her browser and turned on Netflix. It was the weekend, after all; surely the individual wouldn't expect a response so soon. Yet,

halfway through her Korean drama, curiosity got the better of her. Pausing her show, she opened her email again and reread it, scrolling to the bottom to see the senders' details. *Chew Jun Rong, why does that sound so familiar?* Pulling up her company's database, she sifted through the applications until she found his. Upon seeing the attached photo reference, it clicked. *He was in my business ethics course last semester!*

Mel briefly remembered having a conversation with him on the first day of class - it was polite but nevertheless guarded. The bell-curve kept everyone on their toes and getting an A grade was more important than making friends. That said, her impression of him was actually quite positive. He was vocal and eloquent in class, but not in an overbearing way. Also, his dressing was impeccable and his presentations, impressive. Mel couldn't help but feel wowed every time he spoke. *And he doesn't look half-bad,* she thought before she caught herself. *Where was this coming from? This isn't the time to find someone attractive!* Perhaps in another time or place, but in her capacity as an assistant HR representative, it was a definite nope, nada, thank you, next. She closed the window and resumed watching her show, but the romantic narrative that she usually found exaggerated and comical kept her awake that night.

First thing Monday morning, Mel walked over to Ms Lim's cubicle to seek advice, having forwarded the email the day

before. She was mentally prepared to field the potential "what do you think you should do" reply. After all, anything could be treated as a test of one's ability to react and respond to different situations. Hence, she was genuinely stunned by the response.

"Just tell him you cannot do anything." Ms Lim said dismissively.

"Are you sure?" Mel asked nervously.

"Actually by right you don't even have to reply him, but since you gave out your personal contact details, it would be nice if you did. But I won't fault you if you don't." Ms Lim winked. "Whatever you decide, just be firm. Oh, and polite!"

Mel returned to her desk, uncertain of what to do next. The email sat in a tab, waiting to be answered while she diligently went about her other tasks. But the more she ignored it, the more it taunted her. Finally, she could stand it no longer; she fired off a generic apology email, hoping that it would end the matter once and for all. It didn't.

Jun Rong sat at his computer, fervently refreshing his browser. His efforts eventually paid off at 4:54pm, when the 'email received' notification appeared on his screen. He opened it and devoured its contents hungrily but derived little satisfaction from it. In fact, it left him feeling even more

dissatisfied from the clear lack of effort to answer his queries. He pondered his options; eventually he returned to the original email thread and searched for the sender's LinkedIn profile.

Melanie Chin, Melanie Chin... who are you? He wondered. It was a rookie mistake, including her particulars in the email, but her carelessness worked to his advantage. If anything, he could at least try to find out what went wrong during the application process and how he could improve on his end. After two or three unsuccessful hits, he landed on Mel's profile page, and his eyes widened with recognition. He quickly scanned through the details and confirmed his suspicions: under her current job listing was the position he had applied for at the company. *What the hell*, he cursed silently. Without realising what he was doing, he picked up his phone, keyed in her phone number, and pressed dial.

Mel's phone rang. There was no caller ID. Hesitantly, she answered.

"Hi, is this Ms Chin? I'm Jun Rong, calling regarding the email I just received."

Mel froze. If ever there were a list that compiled her top ten most awkward situations, this would be one of them. Not the top, but close.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

"Erm... yes, speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, I was wondering if I could clarify specific details with you? In my email I had a couple of queries but none of them were addressed in the email I received. Is it possible to request a face-to-face session with someone from the department?"

"Sorry... it's after office hours, my superiors have already left. I can't help you." She said.

"Well... Can't you do anything?" He insisted.

"Err... you see, it's a little complicated..." She trailed off.

"Because you were my classmate and we applied for the same role?"

Okay, now this definitely tops the list.

"You recognized me?" She replied weakly.

"Yeah, I checked your profile on LinkedIn. I apologize, but it seemed the only way to try to communicate with someone from the company. However, I'm not here to rant over the job, I would just like to have a friendly conversation regarding our resumes. As classmates, nothing further." Even over the phone he was charming, and his earnest demeanor convinced Mel that he did not have any ill intentions.

"...Let me clear this with my supervisor." She suggested, looking for a temporary out.

"Okay, thank you very much. I look forward to meeting with you at your earliest convenience. Goodbye." The line disconnected. Mel stared at her phone in a daze before saving the number in her contact list.

"I strongly recommend that you don't meet up with him." Ms Lim said, her eyes glued to a lifestyle blog article titled "6 Ways to Ensure Smooth, Glowing Skin".

"Okay... but can I ask why?"

"Because you risk blurring the lines between professional and personal. You already replied him, which is already more than what is expected of you. Just reject him politely."

"But..."

Ms Lim swiveled in her chair and looked directly at Mel.

"Look, I know I'm your supervisor, but I don't want to tell you what you can or cannot absolutely do. I've already given you my advice, what you do next is up to you. I can't be here to babysit you forever, so I hope you learn to be more independent." Lecture over, she turned away, giving Mel no chance for rebuttal. Mel slunk back to her desk in shame. As if on cue, her phone chimed.

-Any update?

-Sorry, my supervisor says I am not allowed to set up a meeting.

-I see. Are you free for lunch?

-...What?

-I'm in the area, would you like to meet during your lunch break?

-I don't think that's a good idea.

-Don't worry, I promise not to ask any business-related questions.

Mel looked over at Ms Lim's cubicle, thinking of the earlier admonishment. It still smarted; here she was, trying to learn, but instead she gets shot down for asking too many questions.

-So? What do you say?

-Okay. See you at noon.

Mel entered the café. Jun Rong was sitting at a corner booth. He stood to greet her. An awkward silence ensued.

"Just so you know, this is extremely creepy." Mel finally managed nervously.

"It's not if you don't think about it. Why don't you take a seat while I get us some coffee?" Jun Rong slid out of the booth and headed for the counter.

"Tea, thanks. Milk, no sugar please." Mel called after him.

"What, are you watching your weight? You look perfectly fine."

"Thanks." Mel blushed furiously. She was suddenly very aware of the pimple on her nose. Removing concealer from her purse, she dabbed at it frantically before Jun Rong returned.

"So, out of curiosity, why did you change your mind? Not that I'm complaining of course." He asked, sitting down across her. She noticed that he did not ask her to pay.

"Well, I guess I'm a little bit miffed at my boss." Mel replied cautiously.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jun Rong leaned forward, a look of concern on his face. Mel hesitated slightly before answering.

"It's nothing much... Just feels like all I've learnt so far is how much bureaucracy there is at work."

"Welcome to working life. Can you imagine having to do it for the next forty years?" He chuckled. Mel sighed heavily.

"I know right, I'm totally not looking forward to it." She paused. "You know, I always thought work would just be like school, we learn how to do something and then we do it. But then I realise there's so much more to it. Take this internship, for example..." She trailed off, conscious that the conversation was headed uncomfortably close to sensitive topics. Jun Rong,

however, seemed oblivious; In fact, he picked up where she left off.

"Soo... at what point did you know you had to deal with the rejections?" He teased. There was no resentment in his voice, which made Mel relax. She took a sip of her tea and paused for dramatic effect.

"Day one! Do you believe it? The very first day of the job, my task was to write a rejection email to everyone else who applied." It felt good to say it, to share it with someone else who would find it as preposterous as she did.

"Sounds harsh. And this is coming from someone who received it." Jun Rong nodded empathically. "Honestly, it doesn't seem like a very attractive place to work."

"Well, it's not what I expected, that's for sure, but it's not too bad either." Mel said uncertainly.

"Supervisor aside, how would you say the day-to-day tasks are like?" Jun Rong asked.

"So far, it's more admin-related and processing than I expected, which is to be expected for sure, but I was hoping for something more, y'know... beyond paperwork."

"You feel like you're not making a difference?"

"Exactly! I thought the internship would be a good exposure to the industry, but maybe I was wrong..."

"A classic case of expectations versus reality. Which is the purpose of internships, I suppose. To actually experience working in the industry and hopefully manage your own expectations. Of course, that's not to say you shouldn't give up on your ideals. After all, they make you who you are." He reached out to pat Mel's hand, and she felt a brief tingle of pleasure.

It was like talking to a kindred spirit. Jun Rong seemed to know exactly what to say in response to Mel's, and he seemed genuinely interested in her. The conversation shifted from work to hobbies, and she managed to let slip that she had a gig the coming weekend, to which he enthusiastically agreed to show up for. Mel's lunch hour flew by, and it was only after she received a call from an irate Ms Lim did she realise that she completely overshot her allotted time.

"Sorry, I got to go, text you!" Mel stood up and turned to go. She glanced back once at Jun Rong, who met her gaze with a smile. Her heart melted.

Mel returned to an empty office. At her desk was a post-it with a hastily scrawled message: "At dept mtg. Man phone tks. Lock up after done. Dianne." She sighed and plopped down in her chair. Her mind drifted back to the earlier conversation. *Am I happy here? Is this really what I want?* She thought of what Jun

Rong said, and she realised that her answer to both questions was no. Certainly it was a manageable job, but was she willing to settle? Whatever happened to wanting to make a difference in society and the lives of others? *It's too early to give up on dreams.* Her mind made up, she began to pen her letter of resignation. When she sent the email, she felt like a weight was lifted off her shoulders. She felt *free*.

An email notification popped up on Dianne's phone. She scanned it and shook her head. *I thought she'd last longer than that. Millennials! Should I even bother finding a replacement?* Her screening process was evidently flawed. Then, she had an idea. Looking through her account, she opened a forwarded email and copied the original sender's address before drafting a message.

That night over text:

-How was your day?

-Good, thanks for the talk! It really got me thinking.

-Glad I could be of help. I'll see you at your gig this weekend?

-Yep, I've got some news to share!

-Me too!

-Ok, see you 😊

-Cya then 😊