

JUST YOU WAIT

It is winter morning in 2006, and Kate, a young resident doctor finds herself communicating with an affable young architect, Alex. They communicate by leaving their notes in the magical mailbox of a glass-walled lakehouse that Kate had previously rented from Alex. The problem is that Alex is living exactly two year before, in 2004!

A bond grows between them as they experience various interesting new connections, such as Kate accidentally leaving her copy of Jane Austen's "Persuasion" at the train station two years back, and which naturally Alex retrieves for her. They fall in love from the distance, but soon Kate realizes she is only fooling herself.

On 14 February (Valentine's day), Kate, sitting in the city plaza, had witnessed a terrible traffic accident and held a young man who died in her arms. Looking back, she realizes that life was too short to wait for what might be. She tells Alex, "Let me let you go," and they stop writing. Frustrated, Alex quits the lakehouse and moves to the city to be with his brother, Henry.

Kate reconnects with her wealthy but unloving real-life boyfriend, Morgan, and they move into the lakehouse. One day, furious at Morgan's inattention, she walks into the bedroom, and finds under a hollow-sounding floorboard, a small package: her lost book, *Persuasion*, that Alex retrieved for her from the train station. Her thoughts return to Alex.

One unusually warm winter day, Alex and his brother, Henry, leave their office for lunch. When Alex suggests they meet up after work for a beer, Henry reminds him that it is Valentine's Day and he has plans with his girlfriend. Valentine's Day 2006! Alex suddenly rushes off to the lakehouse.

For Kate, it is Valentine's Day 2008, and she and Morgan are at an architect's firm to review renovation plans for an old apartment she wants to buy. After the meeting, Kate notices a drawing hanging on the office wall: it is that of the familiar lakehouse! The young man explains that it was drawn by his brother Alex who was killed in a traffic accident exactly two years ago!

Kate suddenly rushes to the lakehouse to write a note for Alex. Don't look for her, she begs him, wait for another two years, and come to the lakehouse, instead. She puts the note into the mailbox and raises its flag. But Alex has rushed off to see her at plaza (in 2006). As he seems about to step into the street, he reads Kate's note, begging him to wait for her. He has found Kate's note after all! By remaining right there on the sidewalk, Alex breaks off from the original tragic timeline.

Kate meantime falls on her knees, weeping, desperately clutching the lakehouse mailbox. She must have been too late. Then the mailbox flag slowly lowers: Alex has picked up her note! Soon she sees a car arriving from beyond the high grass and then a figure walking toward her on the gravel path: it is Alex. "You waited!" she cries.

This is my favourite movie¹ in recent times, as I can deeply relate to it. For me, it is not two years, but a 20-year wait. I was a monk for that long with one main aim: to study the Suttas and

¹ "Lakehouse" (2006), a romantic drama remake of the Korean movie "Il Mare" (2000). Written by David Auburn and directed by Alejandro Agresti, it starred Keanu Reeves (Alex) and Sandra Bullock (Kate).

effectively transmit them to local Buddhists who badly need Dharma grounding. The best way to do Buddhist work surely would be to firstly be familiar with our own sacred scripture.

At that time (before the 1980s), Buddhist books (not to speak of Sutta translations) were very difficult to be found locally. Local Buddhism in English was dominated by foreign missionaries who were understandably focussed on raising funds to run their centres, and were not really capable of solving local Buddhist problems.

So I left for Thailand for monastic training. Due to language problems, I decided that it is best to learn some Thai, and then study Buddhism and Pali directly in Thai. After a minimum five-year tutelage, I returned to work in Malaysia and Singapore. Except for a small group of mostly young locals, most other Buddhists showed no interest in the Suttas. They would rather resort to chanting, blessings from monastics, and a weak and fuzzy Buddhism.

It was difficult to communicate the Suttas to the locals then: it was like Kate writing with Alex, from a distance, separated by time, as it were. It was as if I was living in another time.

A major difficult was my having to work almost alone as a monk. There were other local monks, but they were themselves just beginning their own training in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. The western forest monks of Ajahn Chah's monastery, too, were still under training in Thailand. Once I quipped to Bhante Sujato (from forest monastic tradition) that I was 20 years too early as a monk. Bhante retorted, "Actually, I was 20 years too late!"

But as I watched the "Lakehouse" movie, the story climax struck a resounding chord in me. Kate tells Alex not to be hasty in meeting her, but to wait two years later. Alex's life is saved and they live happily ever after.

Those years I have waited to resume my Sutta work in Singapore, is now growing deep roots, and the joy and light the Suttas are giving us is attested by the number and regularity of the Sutta students since 2002. In fact, the Sutta Discovery, with its publications and website, is now a global phenomenon.

One movie moment still puzzles me, that is, when Alex remains on the pavement, keeping to Kate's plea that he waits for two years. Alex could have looked left, looked right, then left again, and when it is safe, cross the road to meet his love! Maybe I have a regret now: should I have returned to Singapore earlier?

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