

## Small-time Perfect

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He couldn't bear going to bed at night because he couldn't be sure he'd wake up the next morning, and waking up now meant so much more. Every night when he went to bed it felt like a practice in dying, and every morning when he woke up he was miraculously reborn. Who would've thought that a man dying of cancer at 69 could be in seventh heaven?

He waited impatiently each morning for his own private ray of sunshine to burst through the door, radiating her youth on his old cancerous bones and energising his tired soul. He would not be bitter about his illness anymore because if it hadn't bedded him he would never have met the nymph of his old-man dreams. Every single time he looked at Lingling, he had to whisper a silent thank you because he could not believe his good fortune.

"Good morning, Mr Chen, feeling strong today?" Lingling smiled at him as she walked in with a basin of warm water to wash his face. He had to stop himself again from reminding her that the blue basin was used only for washing feet, his wife, who had athlete's foot and some other kind of fungal infection, used it to wash hers too. She wringed the flannel and rubbed his face rigorously, making sure to thoroughly clean the corners of his eyes.

If he answered, "I am feeling very strong today," she would blush and giggle for the rest of the day.

Mrs Chen bought fresh ingredients every day for her meals. She liked to be sure that the fish she cooked had shiny eyes and the vegetables she washed held a few worms. It was from these little signs that she could guarantee that her family was being served the best and safest food the market had to offer. She disliked the young people who shouted loudest about their vegetables but knew the least about the origins of their products and, in many cases, didn't even know what exactly they were selling.

"Hurry, hurry! Fifteen dollars for a cucumber," they would yell. "Thirty dollars for this fat white Chinese cabbage. All shipped straight from China."

"How much are the dragon's whiskers and red vegetables?" someone might ask.

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“The what?” And everybody knew that this young man or woman had no idea.

Usually Mrs Chen walked around the market once to make sure that she was buying vegetables from the oldest and most poorly dressed farmer because they undoubtedly grew their own produce, couldn’t afford pesticides and certainly needed all the money they could make to eke out a living. Whilst on her vegetable hunt she would decide whether to cook fish, pork or chicken. She didn’t eat beef because her mother had told her not to, cattle were the farmer’s most loyal and hard-working friends, and it was worse than eating a dog. She bought all her pork from one butcher, not only because they were slightly related, but because he was such an honest man he would tell you to buy from another butcher if he saw a really good cut on their counter.

After finishing her shopping and getting her fill of the market buzz, she would go and sit with her sister-in-law for an hour or two. It was funny how she saw it as her sister-in-law’s pharmacy when it was in fact her own father who had started the business. Big Sister, as Mrs Chen liked to call her, had been in the family longer than any of the Li children because she had been adopted from birth to be the wife of the first Li heir. Mrs Chen’s father loved Big Sister more than his own son, so even though Big Brother finally inherited the pharmacy, it was his wife who was in control and responsible for the small fortune they made before government-funded healthcare ran small pharmacies out of business. Now that customers were non-existent, and tablets made as far back as 1983 sat decaying in their yellowing boxes, Big Sister had more time to listen and help other people with their emotional ailments. Sometimes Big Brother would hang around and make them tea, but most of the time he would be out gossiping at a neighbour’s house.

On the day Mrs Chen rushed into her sister-in-law’s pharmacy, nothing was particularly unusual. The shopping trolley was packed with meat and vegetables, Mrs Chen was sweating in the summer morning heat and little worms of rolled tissue nestled in the wrinkles of her flushed cheeks. Big Sister turned the electric fan on and carefully put away her plastic fan, with its colourful election propaganda, in a drawer. It seemed a lot less wasteful now that the fan was cooling two people instead of one.

“Big Sister,” Mrs Chen began. “I know we’re both too old for this, but what do you think of love?”

Big Sister chuckled and the fan made it reverberate. “We are indeed too old for this now, but there was a time when I wondered too. After all these years, I think it’s safe to say that love is a good family, and of course, a good husband is the most important.”

“What do you mean by good? And isn’t it important that a wife is good, too?” Mrs Chen sounded like a little child who had made a mistake and wanted her mother to clarify something so that she could explain away her guilt.

“Good, as in a good person. Someone who tries to make the lives of those around them better; in the case of parents, they are good if they do everything to make their children feel happy and safe. I think there are more good wives than good husbands, but who am I to say.”

“Is my brother a good husband?” Mrs Chen asked.

Big Sister looked down at her hand and massaged her thick fingernails one by one. She looked as calm as ever but her long silence meant that something troubled her. “I have never told anyone this,” she began a little reluctantly, “but since you’re asking, I’ll tell you the truth. By most standards, I’ve had a good life: all of my children are healthy and my husband is still by my side. But when we were much younger, your brother cheated on me.”

Mrs Chen felt as if a small buffalo was butting around inside her heart and gripped the shopping trolley next to her. “My brother slept with another woman?” she finally managed to say.

“I was pregnant with our third baby by then, but he was still angry that I’d been forced on him by our parents. He’d bumped into one of the girls that had gone to primary school with him and wanted to run off with her. I cried too much that year with poor A-hoc inside me, I think that’s why he is so sensitive, even to this day. Anyway, I reminded him of his duties to his children, if not, more importantly, to our parents.”

Mrs Chen looked at Big Sister, feeling all the sacrifices that her sister-in-law had made stabbing at her own heart. Nobody could fault this woman on the duties she had carried out for her parents-in-law; she alone had loved them ten times more than kin and kith. She had worked next to them, nursed them in sickness, bore them four grandchildren and kept them company all the way to their deathbeds. She had even found it in herself to love their son and daughter like siblings.

“You know,” Big Sister smiled a little shyly, “A Japanese soldier once asked me to run away with him too.”

“And what did you say to that?” Mrs Chen asked, although the answer was already clear.

“I told him I was not interested because I had a perfect husband and a happy family.”

“Was this before or after A-hoc?”

“It was after. It made me feel a lot better about myself, I tell you. Sometimes, and don’t repeat this to your brother, I wondered what it would’ve been like if I had left. But I loved you all too much and I could never have shamed the family like that.” Big Sister reached across and patted Mrs Chen on the shoulder reassuringly, as if she wasn’t the one who needed comforting. “That’s why I say that there are more good wives than good husbands.”

As Mrs Chen walked, dragging her loaded shopping trolley home for the second time, she thought about how much she had learnt from her sister-in-law,

how much she saw her brother as a role model, and how much she'd tried to emulate them in bringing up her own family. Her children were grown up, more successful in their careers than she could've ever hoped for and starting happy families of their own. Could she ever tell anyone? If not, could she bear to live with it?

The key jammed in the door and for a moment she wondered if she was at the wrong apartment. Leaving their old house had been a mistake. Look mum, big glass doors and a sunny living room, her daughter had said when they found the apartment. It's much nicer than those small, rattling windows in our village house, it's like you're outside all the time! A year after they moved in, a high-rise was built next to theirs and Mrs Chen, who had never heard of planning permission, not that it existed in their town, had nobody to complain to about the new apartments robbing all the sunlight from the old ones.

"Where's my lunch?" he roared as soon as she opened the sliding doors. Quickly she took a deep breath and reminded herself that he was bedbound and wouldn't be able to do anything to her. "Don't think I can't make your life miserable too, you crazy bitch!"

Was this the good man that she had married, the perfect father who had worked so hard to bring up her children? Had he changed so drastically overnight or had she simply been blind to his growing hatred over the years? Hard as she tried to dig into her past for happy memories, all she could see now was his angry face. The only kind words she could remember vividly were his promises to save enough money to take her on a trip around the world. Since making those promises he'd had the opportunity to travel to Japan, Indonesia, China, Australia and Singapore, but he had never taken her, not even once. Every time, she'd stayed with the children, looking forward to his return and the exciting bric-a-bracs that he would bring home for them. Once he brought home a photo of himself riding an elephant; he was very proud of it and had it framed so that it could be hung on the living room wall. But when Mrs Chen asked to ride a buffalo at a local festival fair, he told her to act her age.

"Don't think I don't know that you're fucking the butcher," he screamed from his bed. He was clearly in a rage because the carer had left. Mrs Chen felt the glowing anger in her chest burst into flames. She believed gentleness and patience to be some of her best qualities, so she never reacted aggressively unless it was to something that threatened her family. This senile old man, who knew how to push all her buttons, was trying to drag her family and its reputation down the toilet.

Suddenly, it was like a projector had been switched on in her head and started to flash images onto the screens of her eyes: images of his leering face, images of his groping hands, images of her bouncing breasts, images of her ecstatic look. Wasn't this enough to drive her crazy, but she had to listen to his

insults too. Mrs Chen picked up the cleaver in the kitchen and went to confront her husband.

“You can fuck that slutty carer all you want, but you just remember this, she is practically the same age as your daughter. You can find your way to Hell whichever way you want, but leave our family and leave me out of it, otherwise...” the exhilaration of being in control made Mrs Chen sinisterly calm as she made a sawing motion with the cleaver.

When Mr Chen asked to move in with her, Lingling agreed without hesitating. In her own misguided way, she truly cared for each of her charges and wanted to make sure that they were happy to the very end. Mr Chen wasn’t very different from the other men she had taken care of in that he made suggestive remarks, brushed her breasts accidentally and stared at her when he thought she wasn’t looking, but he was also different because he had a certain dignity – he wasn’t going to lie down and die; he wanted to be throttling life with both his hands as he took his last breath. Every morning, he expected to be shaved and cleaned properly, he asked to wear his best clothes and he spoke of projects for the future as if he was soon going to jump out of bed even without his legs. Finding out that Mr Chen loved her was one of the best things that had happened in her life. She would’ve done anything for him because she loved him like she would’ve loved her father had they ever met.

Lingling couldn’t remember the last time her mother was home and what they had said to each other. As a bit of a vagabond by nature and with her mental illness steadily advancing over the years, she was most comfortable coming and going as she pleased. When Lingling wheeled Mr Chen into her house and he looked at everything with disgust and disapproval, she wished for a second that Mrs Chen was her mother because she would’ve helped her clean away the mess and keep the house tidy. For the first time, she saw all the polystyrene containers and mouldy chopsticks hiding between her dirty clothes, the plastic bags of gray-green leftovers hanging on the backs of chairs and the stained newspapers that seemed to occupy every corner of the house in their different shapes and forms. As for Mr Chen, he couldn’t believe a girl as clean and well-kept as Lingling emerged every day from such filth and sloth. The smell of dirty laundry, rotting food and dust made him wonder if he’d made the right choice in giving up a wife who kept a comfortable home and made some of his favourite dishes. But it was a little late in the day to change his mind, and if bedding a young woman meant living with her ways, was that too much to ask of an expiring senior citizen?

The two Chen children could not forgive their father for abandoning their mother and breaking up their perfect family. Despite all the years of respect and admiration that mother and children had lavished on him, the image he’d built of a respectable father and a loving spouse, dissolved like rice paper. For Mrs Chen’s sake, Big Sister coaxed Mr Chen to come home, but Mrs Chen

was only interested in getting an answer for one question: Was there ever such a thing as a perfect family? If she'd had the chance to run away with the butcher would it have made her more attractive and could it have saved her marriage?

When he died, in order to spite his family, he gave every single thing he owned to Lingling, including the house Mrs Chen lived in. Lingling wanted to gain a father, but she'd never expected an inheritance. At the funeral, as the priest distributed handfuls of rice and nails to close family, wishing them prosperity and strength, Lingling made a point of leading her mother forward to receive the blessing too. As her mother lifted up her face to the priest, Big Brother gave a frightful shout. He turned to Lingling with a horrified look before running out of the cemetery in shame. An awkward silence fell as Lingling's giggling mother picked out the nails that were tickling her fingers and threw them, one by one, onto Mr Chen's coffin.