

Home

Paoi Hwang,¹ UK

For the third time in the same week, Mei-chih had caught Tsala watering the flowers outside the kitchen window. Usually she complained about wasting clean water when children were still dying from dysentery in the villages. But there was a somnambulance in her movements that convinced Mei-chih something in her mind wasn't communicating properly with her body. Not only had Tsala started doing chores she didn't like before, but she was doing the usual ones with unusual speed and a strange enthusiasm. Suddenly, the mountains of ironing disappeared and the Chinese vegetables seemed less troublesome to wash. More and more frequently, Tsala was leaving before ten o'clock and Mei-chih could find no reason to keep her. Mei-chih guessed that these were the signs of a woman in love and she felt a tiny prick of jealousy.

"You, going out tonight?" Mei-chih asked nonchalantly as she brought out a recycled toothpick from her pocket after dinner. Before Tsala could answer to the contrary, she continued, "Why you not wear I give you dress in Chinese New Year?"

Tsala smiled in an offhand manner without looking directly at her employer. What was the point of telling her, when it was so obvious, that the dress, like the one before was several sizes too small – that even if she'd thought of asking the genius of a tailor at the marketplace to readjust them, he would not have suitable fabric for the extension.

"It's good dress. I can still wearing if not already too small."

"Thank you, madam," Tsala replied, knowing that any good intentions were better than none and deserved some form of gratitude. Despite the insincerity of the gifts, they had contributed to Chifundo's school fees. Tsala just hoped that whoever bought the dresses wouldn't one day turn up in front of Mei-chih because it would force her to tell more lies about non-existent relatives, and how many lies like that worked before your extended family got busted?

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“Maybe one day I meeting him,” Mei-chih said as if talking about her own Mr. Right. “Your boyfriends all meeting on the street at night-time. This one also same?”

Tsala refused to take the bait and get angry. At the beginning, she’d tried to explain to Mei-chih how her culture did not frown upon single women sleeping with any available man she wanted. But, that didn’t mean they just picked any man off the street! Like relationships everywhere, there had to be qualities that were mutually attractive to both parties to bring and hold them together. Certainly, for some it could be just sex, but for the majority it was a lot more than that. Tsala often wondered if someone like Mei-chih would ever understand.

“To leave daughter in China is more better. My husband can good caring her. When I make plenty money I going back China find her, make good life for her.”

Tsala didn’t even want to start explaining how naïve and irresponsible that attitude was. Didn’t she think that she might never find her daughter again, or that by leaving her behind in the first place she’d probably ruined her life? Did Mei-chih really believe that money would turn things around in ten years’ time? It wasn’t just idealistic, it was almost delusional. Every child needs the security of a home and nothing provides that better than the presence of their mother – shouldn’t all animals know that instinctively?

Tsala felt guilty when she had to work after ten because she knew Chifundo would be home alone in the dark. There weren’t any children at that hour to keep him company and she couldn’t afford to pay for electricity. Once she’d made him a football with an old rag, but there was never time to play so he carried it around like a soft toy and took it to bed with him. It broke her heart to see him so lonely, and that was what really motivated her to look for a man. Moses had left four years ago when Chifundo was only five, she hadn’t heard from him since and did not expect to. In the past a woman could comfortably provide for her child by working on her farm, but singlehandedly bringing a child up in the city was very different. Food and clothes were expensive, but more important than that there were new things like school to consider. Moses had wanted to become a truck driver so that they could send Chifundo to school, but who would’ve thought a machine could take a man so far into the future of his dreams that even his own son and wife couldn’t bring him back.

“This one special, yes?” Mei-chih made one last-ditched attempt.

Wiping the sink one more time in an effort of good will, Tsala announced, “I’m finished.”

The relationship between the two women had soured when employee discovered employer’s profession. For the first few weeks, Tsala had no idea what her boss did for a living. She lived alone in a big colonial house, the type

that had looked like white palaces from a distance with ivy growing up the walls and along balconies. In the past, a house like this would've been shaded by big trees and protected by a well-kept fence. But now its appearance did very little to prove its past glory. Huge rotting tree stumps dotted the dry unkempt lawn and leaky drains stained the yellowing walls orange. It was the inexpressible ugliness of the place that made watering a patch of gaily blooming flowers so pointless to Tsala. If Mei-chih had had any real interest in aesthetics, she wouldn't have cut down the old trees or ripped off the ivy for fear of bugs, and at least she would've watered the flowers herself. But everything was just pretence at keeping up appearances. Tsala could easily imagine the surprise or shock that someone might feel on meeting the lady of the house after wandering through her premises. Her beauty had to be universal because even Tsala could not deny, with all her knowledge of Mei-chih's personality and behaviour, that she was lovely to look at. Her ebony pupils contrasted brilliantly with the whites to sparkle with life; her lips were a velvety pink even without any lipstick; her nose was neither big nor small with flaring nostrils that served only to accentuate the fragility of her fine bones. Not a single vein, freckle or hair blemished the smooth whiteness of her exposed skin. Despite having a perfect set of teeth, Mei-chih's mouth was like a broken valve where esteem escaped from her body at high-pressure. Her English was atrocious but that was understandable because she'd never spoken it until she escaped from China, however when misunderstanding combusted with a frankness bordering on rude inconsideration then all signs of beauty melted before your eyes.

Mei-chih had asked Tsala how women met men locally and Tsala had been honest about a man she'd met on her way home from a late night shop. Single women had a lot of freedom in her society; it wasn't only men who had the rights to hunt for suitable partners. But from then on Mei-chih took great pleasure in referring to her as a street walker. That blurring of lines did not sit comfortably with Tsala and many times she was tempted to return insult with insult. But then Tsala would ask herself: what did a woman who could leave her child behind, a woman who chose to run away from her own people, a woman who saw money as the only goal in life know or care about social mores?

Mei-chih pondered Tsala's behaviour as a distraction from what was truly worrying her. Not so long ago she'd started to notice an orange pick-up outside her fence. Nobody suspicious had walked through the gate, at least not while she was watching, but there were plenty of holes between the fence all around the house where a grown man could squeeze through without any trouble. Customers had been dwindling for a while and she wasn't getting any new referrals, so who would park so conspicuously near her house? She'd had a very angry customer not so long ago who'd threatened to teach her a lesson when she refused to give him a discount after his third visit. He'd threatened to bad-mouth her in his community and hire thugs to rape her. Nothing had happened

but she'd had iron bars welded to all the windows and added extra locks to the doors. In Mei-chih's view, this insecurity at the slightest threat was the biggest problem with living alone as a woman. Even though Chifundo was only nine, at least Tsala had company if not protection at night, and now it seemed like she'd even found a man.

It was Saturday and Timve was taking them to visit his mother. When they passed the back door in the dawn darkness, Mei-chih opened it as if she'd been waiting for them and had never gone to bed. As always her make-up was done to perfection and she was dressed as if a party was going on inside the house. Tsala instantly disliked the way Mei-chih and Timve looked at each other.

"You going where?" Mei-chih asked eyeing Timve from head to toe. "This who?"

Timve was the head mechanic at a garage. He was a muscular man, not because he did any heavy manual work, but because he helped his mother on her farm every weekend. Even though she had sent him to school and now he owned a car, his love for his mother and the countryside always drew him back to the village. On this particular day, the little party was all dressed up. Chifundo wore a grey shirt with his blue school shorts and Tsala wore a pink T-shirt with a new *chitenge*. Timve wore a faded Ralph Lauren polo shirt and khaki shorts. He could've passed as a comfortably well-off man taking his family on an outing and, when he stretched his hand out to introduce himself, a sudden surge of pride made Tsala's bladder weak. Not only was he a man who exuded confidence, he was also a filial son and, more importantly, he wanted her to be a part of his life. It was hard to tell whether Mei-chih declined the handshake on purpose or because she was too taken aback by the picture of manhood that was dating her maid, but Tsala was relieved that Timve didn't touch her.

"She's quite beautiful," he said as soon as they were safely in the pick-up.

"Didn't you mind that she didn't greet you or shake your hand?"

"I don't really care, besides you're her employee and maybe it's not the custom where she comes from. But I can imagine why she's in the business. Does she take black customers?"

"Of course, why not? It's all the same to her with money. I wouldn't be surprised if she took all colours of the rainbow."

"No need to be nasty," he said with a genuinely sympathetic smile. "It's hard for a single woman. You said so yourself."

Nothing verified Timve's sincerity more than Miriam, his mother. As they approached the foot of a small hill, her grass-thatched hut stood out like a brown clip on a head of green braids; it was the middle of the rainy season and the lovingly tended rows of maize were thriving. Timve proudly pointed out the land that belonged to his mother and how even at the age of seventy she was staying ahead of the weeding better than anyone else. She grew cabbages, beans,

tomatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, pumpkins, bananas, papayas and mangoes too. Miriam had farmed and been independent even when her husband was alive; he was a skilled fisherman but had drowned when Timve was eight. In person, Miriam did not look a day over fifty. Her arms were muscular under the slightly loosening skin, her face was radiant with health and she stood perfectly erect like a priestess demanding attention and respect.

“My daughter,” she said as she reached out to touch Tsala’s arm. There was no awkwardness as they exchanged unspoken words of each other’s hardship.

“Mother,” Tsala replied shy with happiness. Because she had an uncontrollable urge to stare at Miriam’s peculiarly blue eyes, she forced herself to turn to Chifundo who clearly hadn’t registered anything unusual.

Miriam was as tall and graceful as the maize she raised and she spoke with a slow, soothing voice. Chifundo’s attention was riveted from the moment she began telling him stories of the goats and chickens that ran in and out of her hut like naughty children. She did not stop Tsala from picking up a hoe and following Timve into the fields where they joked and laughed all morning. At lunchtime, they sat down to a fish and tomato stew with young pumpkin leaves. The food tasted so fresh and nutritious Tsala thought it was no wonder that Miriam had stayed so youthful and healthy.

Since her hut was small and she was old-fashioned, Timve knew that he would have to cut the weekend short by taking his guests back to the city. As they waited for the afternoon rain to recede and prepared to leave, Miriam went around her hut collecting all the things that they could take back to the city with them. She stuffed handfuls of beans, large prickly pumpkin leaves, sweet young cassavas and small packets of dried fish into two well-used carrier bags.

“Mother, when Tsala and I get married we’re thinking of coming back to live with you,” Timve said sitting by the door and looking out across the lake.

“This is home,” Miriam replied.

Tsala admired the way Miriam responded without revealing any expectations or giving any pressure. It was a given that she would be there for him, and his wife as well as her child, if they needed her. They only needed to come and they would be home.

On the way back and in the following weeks, Tsala praised Miriam to the skies. “You can go!” Mei-chih shouted at her one evening. There was clearly nothing more to be done and Tsala’s glowing radiance was beginning to irritate her. Being only twenty-eight herself, the sight of a lovestruck forty-year-old woman made her sick. But there was nothing that could ruin Tsala’s happiness for she felt that there was nothing she couldn’t overcome with Miriam’s tower of strength supporting her and showing her the way. Her fingers started to itch and she couldn’t wait for a bit of soil to grow something on. As the relationship developed, so did her nesting instincts. More and more she wanted to be there

for her child and partner; she wanted to make a home for them, to be there and take care of them instead of looking after a stranger who would only ever reward her in pieces of paper. Ironically, as Tsala's heart fled the workplace, her efficiency increased. She worked shorter hours but accomplished more, and Mei-chih began to worry seriously about losing her. Not only was Tsala a reliable worker, she was also the closest thing Mei-chih had to family in a foreign country. Where was she ever going to find someone like her again? Mei-chih couldn't understand what kind of a man was able to compete with the pull of money, how could he have such influence over someone as strong-willed and clear-minded as Tsala? In an attempt to keep her, Mei-chih shortened her work day and offered to pay double if she didn't take a weekend off, but Tsala seemed set on going home and working on the land as her ancestors had.

"Savages," Mei-chih would rant in Chinese, "with no sense of economy or desire to move ahead in this day and age. There's money to be made everywhere, but stupid people can see no further than the next rainy season. It's no wonder the Chinese are leaping into the twenty-first century and the Africans are being left behind."

After discovering that the orange pick-up belonged to Timve, Mei-chih began to treat it like her own personal taxi service. She asked Timve to take her shopping, paying for petrol and the service, without feeling any compulsion to ask Tsala first. She invited Timve into the kitchen, flattering him in front of Tsala and asking her in a sickly sweet voice if she didn't concur. This irritated Tsala but didn't make her jealous, she believed in Timve and his ability to see through such a false and manipulative woman. However, one day she heard that Timve had been seen in the marketplace with Mei-chih on his arm, this made her so angry her hands shook and she had to spit several times to get rid of the bad taste in her mouth. When Timve did not deny what had happen and even tried to explain that she'd been pushed off balance in the crowd, Tsala handed in her resignation. There was probably no fail-proof way to protect a man from the charms of this kind of women, especially not when she was throwing herself at him for free.

Mei-chih threw a temper, then cried and begged for her to stay. But Tsala's mind was made up and the disgust she felt was beyond rectification. She wanted to think better of the Chinese, weren't they supposed to be like the Taiwanese she'd worked for before? Besides, she believed in the integrity of women no matter where they came from, but if she stayed with a woman like this her faith in both respects would be ground to dust. No, it was unbearable, and she wasn't ready to cast Timve aside as just another cheap man.

A couple of nights before Tsala was due to leave, armed burglars broke into Mei-chih's house. They didn't realise what was happening until they heard Mei-chih's scream and a gunshot. Timve was about to run out in his underwear when Tsala harshly pulled him back.

“Do you want to get killed?” she whispered angrily. “This isn’t our business!” As soon as that came out of her mouth she realised she didn’t mean it, and if there was no chance of the police intercepting they would have to think of something quickly. People laughed at the joke about dialling 997, that the only way to get help from the police was to send a car to pick them up, but many knew it to be true.

Time for his own part was poised in the darkness; he was ready to risk his life because he knew that he could not knowingly let another person die. Finally, all three of them ran out together banging pots and pans as if their life depended on it. When they rushed through the opened backdoor, it was already too late. There was nobody in the house and no signs of a break-in, but they found Mei-chih lying on the kitchen table. Her cheeks were pink as if she was still alive, her mouth hung open in surprised fear and in her eyes a look of defiant disgust lingered. It seemed like she’d been deriding and fighting her assailant until her heart was blown out. Lying there in the kitchen instead of the bedroom, where she usually did her business, it seemed like she was cursing the heartlessness of her home and the family that was too far away when she needed them the most.