

Mr. Chan decided that he would tell his wife, Sally, the news today. He wanted to tell her a week ago but their son, with his wife and two daughters, had come to visit from Perth. What with bringing them around to marvel at the new Marina Bay Sands Casino, and playing with his lively grandchildren, Mr. Chan had no time to think about how he was going to break the news to his wife. But now his son had gone back to Perth with his family and so Mr. Chan marked a spot in his mental calendar and told himself he had to do it and now today was the day. He got off the bed and slipped off his singlet and then his blue-striped pajamas. As he shuffled across, naked, to the cupboard to retrieve a fresh pair of underwear, he caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror. Mr. Chan didn't like the mirror, even though the frame was made of wrought iron and looked classy. Sally bought it at fifty dollars at a flea market at Sungei road and thought it was a steal because she saw an identical mirror selling at Ikea for three hundred dollars. She thought it would spruce up the look of their bedroom. Mr. Chan knew she was right. It was a bargain and it did turn out to be a great addition to their sparsely furnished bedroom. He didn't tell his wife the real reason why he didn't like the mirror simply because it was too embarrassing. He didn't like to see the reflection of his body. It was one thing to casually notice a mole or a smattering of wrinkles near his eyes in the bathroom mirror. But to take in at one glance his entire aged body with loose skin looking as if it could slough off at any second from hip and elbow joints, and a torso that seemed nothing more than a mosaic of liver spots and wrinkles, was something else. He could do without the reminder of mortality.

What froze his attention now, as he stared at his reflection, was the sight of his penis. It drooped from his groin like a shriveled, pale brown rose bud. Mr. Chan felt depressed. He has never seen a more forlorn looking genital. Perhaps after he broke the news to Sally, he might be able to persuade his organ to perk up a little. Suddenly he felt an itch near his right testicle. He stepped closer to the mirror, pushed aside his shrunken

ball sac and examined the reflection. He could make out an angry red swelling near his hip joint. What was it? A pimple? A freckle? He scratched a few times until the itch subsided. He stared at his nude self in the mirror. If he had gone missing, and a policeman were to ask his wife for a description, she would probably say something like this. My husband is sixty-seven years old, and walks with a slight stoop. His right shoulder is a little higher than his left, and his most distinguishing characteristic is a weak looking penis and a pimple near his right testicle. He sighed and stepped back from the mirror. He put on the fresh pair of crocodile brand underwear that Sally bought for him last week. He thought they were a little too tight but he didn't complain. Sally had been buying clothes for him ever since they got married. He slipped on a pair of brown shorts, then a blue Giordano T shirt, and checked himself in the mirror. The t-shirt was new as well. Sally thought it made him look sporty. Mr. Chan wondered why it mattered how sporty he looked, since the last time he played a sport was thirty years ago. Now at sixty-seven, the most vigorous thing he did was walking up the stairs to their eight storey flat.

He walked out to the living room, expecting to see lunch laid out on the table. But there was nothing there. Instead, he saw his wife bustling out of the kitchen. She smiled at him. "Good, you're up. How was your nap?"

"Where's lunch?"

"We're going out to eat," she said.

"Why?"

"It's your birthday. We're going to your favorite stall to celebrate."

He had clean forgotten it was his birthday. She noticed him just standing there, transfixed. "Ah Chan?"

He blinked. "I've something to tell you."

Sally made a dismissive wave.

"Tell me later. Come, we better go before the stall close." And she turned and walked towards the door.

Mr. Chan followed her out of the flat, down a flight of stairs, to the lift lobby. Seconds passed as they waited for the lift. He had rehearsed the words many times in his head. He should just break the news to her now. Then the lift doors opened and a young woman, wearing t-shirt and shorts, stepped out and walked past Mr. Chan. He caught a glimpse of her posterior just before he stepped inside the lift. Not only did the sight of her buttocks swelling against her shorts froze the words in his throat, it also caused a very small flame of lust to flicker somewhere in the dim depths of his libido. Mr. Chan had recognized that young woman. She lived in the flat below theirs. Mr. Chan had never spoken to her because he was too shy. He was also afraid he would blurt something inappropriate and she would think he's an old pervert. He would never have noticed her if it were not for the scent that she liked to wear. It made Mr. Chan imagine freshly cut grass and gurgling streams. A long time ago, when they were still dating, Mr. Chan used to take Sally for picnics at Pierce Reservoir. In the woods, under a grove of trees facing the waters, Mr. Chan and Sally would neck and grope. They had to do so furtively though, in case anyone strolling by might hear their hushed and labored breathing and raise an alarm. The risk of discovery, however, added to the excitement. What made those dates so memorable was Sally. She was usually the one who got randy first, her fingers plucking at his zipper and then slipping in to find him willing and hard. Sally was quite a risk taker. It was a trait that made her so attractive to Mr. Chan. Also, she used to splash perfume on her cleavage to entice him. Flash forward thirty years later. The only thing that Sally sprinkled on herself now was medicated talcum powder because she

complained that her skin itches on warm nights. Mr. Chan glanced at his wife standing besides him in the lift. She was once young and full of allure. Where did that woman go? If only he could trade his wife in for the younger version. Mr. Chan looked away, stricken by guilt. Sally glanced at him. She noticed the left corner of his collar was folded in. She reached out and smoothened it.

“You look handsome,” she said.

He smiled awkwardly. He wanted to return the compliment. That she looked good despite her fifty five years of age. But the compliment withered in his throat when he looked down at her swollen belly. She looked pregnant, and yet she wasn't. She was just plump. He glanced up at her hair. Much of it had turned gray. Several white strands stuck out from her scalp like stray bits of wire. She didn't even bother to comb her hair, preferring to simply gather the whole lot and secure it with a rubber band. A far cry from their younger days when she used to pore over fashion magazines like Elle and Her World and agonize for hours over which look she should adopt. He remembered vaguely a time when one hairstyle made her look like Maggie Cheung. Now her hair, like her figure, had all gone to ruin. He wondered briefly if he was to blame. He had never urged her to maintain her looks. He had a friend whose wife had her breasts upgraded from a B to a D size. His friend willingly paid for the surgery. He said it helped with the sex as he had a certain fetish. Mr. Chan was mature enough to realize that everyone was peculiar in one way or another. He himself had his own quirks, but he would never ever impose them on another, much less a woman. It was just impolite. Mr. Chan listened to his friend's numerous accounts of sexual experimentation with dread as well as a certain fascination. It was the equivalent of watching daredevil exploits on the Discovery channel. Men leaping off mountains and soaring above ground with nothing more than

skis and a prayer, risking either instant death or a terrible mutilation. Mr. Chan marveled at these men but thought they were in a category of their own; he could never be like them, nor could he ever be like his friend. He could never bring himself to suggest to his wife that maybe she should consider a breast enhancement, even though he sometimes, despite himself, harbored a tentative erection at the sight of a full bosom straining between the buttons of a blouse.

The lift door opened and Mr. Chan stepped out with his wife. They made their way across the void deck. Having lived with his wife for decades, he had developed a sixth sense. He knew she wanted to hold his hand. He sensed it without even looking at her or hearing her articulate her need. He waited for the precise moment when her hand reached out in his direction before he casually raised his hand to scratch at some imaginary itch on his chin. As a result, her fingers curled futilely around air. At the same time, he shuffled slightly to the side and walked ahead, keeping himself just out of arm's reach from Sally. It would be awkward now to be holding hands. He was quite pleased at his little choreography of avoidance. Every movement executed so smoothly as if unplanned. It was an art, carefully cultivated over years, this skill of side stepping any attempt at intimacy from his wife. And he had mastered it without his wife having the slightest clue. He permitted himself a slight smile of victory. Then a flare of pain shot up his calves and he stumbled. Sally caught him in time. It was his damn gout acting up again. "Don't worry," Sally said. "Just hold my hand. You'll be fine."

She smiled, and held his hand tightly. His little ruse had failed. She flashed a little smile at him and for a second, he wondered if his wife was wise to him. Mr. Chan wanted to wrench his hand away but a fresh spurt of pain wracked both his knee joints and he grimaced and held her hand tightly. Damn the gout. And damn her for taking away even

his small triumph. "Maybe we should go back," he said. "Nonsense," Sally said. "We're celebrating. Just hold my hand tight. Everything will be fine."

Sally helped him cross the street. Some housewives, returning from the market, with baskets slung over their arms, pointed at Sally and him and chuckled. He overheard one of them telling the other how romantic they looked. Sally smiled slightly. Mr. Chan muttered, "Bloody fools." He glared at the women when they passed him and all it did was to make them burst into a fresh titter. Then his groin began to itch furiously. He clamped his thighs together as he walked. Sally noticed his awkward gait. "What's wrong?" she asked. Mr. Chan shook his head. He wasn't going to tell her he needed to be scratched down there. Thankfully, the pain from his gout faded. Mr. Chan prayed silent thanks. His itch also subsided, allowing him to straighten his back finally. He was about to pull his hand away from his wife's grip and walk the last few meters to the coffee shop when he saw LAU DAH approaching. Lau Da lived with his wife two floors above them. Lau Da saw Sally holding hands with Mr. Chan and he smirked. "Good morning, Sally." Sally smiled. "Good morning Lau Dah," she said. Lau Dah was seventy years old, but he looked ten years younger and when he grinned, he showed off his one and only gold tooth in his mouth. "Ah Chan, taking your wife out for a date?" he asked. "Mind your own business," Ah Chan said. Lau Dah laughed loud and long as he walked away. Mr. Chan knew that Lau Dah kept a 21-year-old china mistress on the side and every weekend, he boasted to Mr. Chan over coffee, how he made her mewl like a cat on heat with his skilful tongue. Lau Dah wanted to introduce Mr. Chan to some of his mistress's friends, but Mr. Chan turned him down. "Why?" Lau Dah had asked. To Lau Dah, denying sexual pleasure was as inexplicable and puzzling as a cat denying the taste of fish. "It's not right," Mr. Chan had replied. And immediately felt foolish for saying it. Lau Dah had laughed loud and long with scorn. Mr. Chan wondered at the ways of

Heaven. Here was a man who fooled around, and slept with women young enough to be his daughter and his punishment was youth and health. And here was Mr. Chan, keeping up some dusty vows to a woman to whom he has felt nothing but despair, and how did Heaven choose to reward his faithfulness? With a gout, an itch and a pimple on his balls.

By the time Mr. Chan made it to the coffee shop and sat at a table, he was in a foul mood. A young waitress, wearing a waist pouch, approached Sally. "Drinks?" she asked. "One tea without sugar and kopi O with ice," Sally said. The girl nodded and left. Sally turned and looked at her husband. "Mee pok or mee kia?" she asked. Mr. Chan chose flat noodle. "Extra chilli?" she asked again. Mr. Chan nodded. Sally smiled and made her way to the noodle stall. Mr. Chan watched the retreating back of his wife. From behind, she looked like a dumpling with legs. He decided he would break the news to her when she returned with the noodles.

Sally reached the noodle stall. She nodded at the hawker. "Ah Teo, two bowls of mee pok," she said. Teo nodded and went to work. He was a short and skinny man. Cords of muscle stood out on his upper forearms, sculpted from decades of wielding a thick ladle to cook the noodles. Two thick, bushy eyebrows, looking like black furry commas, swept upwards towards his temples, giving the hawker the look of a petite warrior god. Teo has been selling noodles for twenty-seven years. He never changed his price. It has been two dollars a bowl in spite of inflation. It was unclear if his customers flock to his stall because of his culinary skills or his cheap food. He didn't care. He just made his noodles and earned enough money so that at the end of the week, he could make his trip to the racetrack and bet on his favorite horse. Sally actually liked his noodles. They were springy and moist, and she loved the sweet sauce, made from his own secret recipe,

that Teo doused liberally over the roasted pork slices that came with the dish. She remembered how her husband liked his noodles. "Ah Teo, one bowl, extra chilli," she said. Teo frowned and grunted something. Sally wondered why Teo was always frowning. She passed his stall many times and she always noticed how he frowned when he cooked. He also frowned when he was resting and watching football on television in the coffee shop. It was as if he was stuck in a perpetual bad mood. She once tried to ask him gently to tell him his problem but he simply frowned. She thought he was a bit like her husband. Ah Chan never talked about his problems. Three weeks ago, he returned home to find his favorite songbird lying stiff and cold on the floor of its cage. Sally knew her husband was fond of the oriental white-eyed singing bird but she never knew why. After he buried it, he grew morose, stayed out and came home late. Something obviously bothered him but he never let out a word. Sally figured she would sit him down after they finished the noodles and let him talk. And she would listen. It would be her birthday gift to him. Teo had finished cooking. He scooped the noodles into two separate bowls. Sally paid him four dollars and then placed the two bowls of noodles and two bowls of soup on a tray, along with chopsticks and spoons. Then she picked up the tray and returned to her husband. She arranged the bowls and chopsticks in front of her husband. Ah Chan took one look at his noodles. He frowned. "What's wrong?" Sally asked. Mr. Chan jabbed his chopsticks into the noodles and lifted up a thick mass of it. "Can you ask Teo to cut the noodles?" he asked. "How to eat like that?" "Just a minute," Sally said. She picked up his bowl and walked back to the stall.

Mr. Chan stared at the green Formica table. There were two brown rings, etched onto the surface; dried stains from coffee cups left for too long. It was just like his marriage. Too many regrets had left marks on his marriage and like the brown stains on the table; he couldn't simply just wipe them away with a wet tablecloth. Either he wiped harder or



he changed tables. Sally returned with his bowl of noodles. Ah Chan examined them.

“He didn’t cut the noodles,” he said. Sally shrugged. “He said no need.” Mr. Chan felt his pulse race. He stood up abruptly. “Its alright,” Sally said. “I’ll cut them for you.” She reached for the bowl.

“NO!” And he grabbed it. This was too much. This was unforgivable. He strode to the stall, oblivious of the itch starting again in his groin.

“Ah Teo!” Mr. Chan thrust the bowl at the hawker.

“What is it?” Teo said.

“Cut the noodles for me,” Mr. Chan said.

Teo shook his head. “I don’t do this sort of thing.”

“I can’t eat like that.”

“You always eat like that. What’s wrong now?”

“Cut for me.”

“It’s only two dollars. Just eat it like that,” Teo said.

And he turned away from Mr. Chan. That gesture infuriated Mr. Chan even more than the straight verbal refusal.

“You fucker,” he said. “I’ve eaten at your stall for more than ten years. I asked you to cut for me just one time. Also cannot.”

Sally walked up to her husband. “Dear, its okay. Let me cut for you.”

“No, he has to cut,” Mr. Chan insisted.

Teo smirked. “Yah let your *wife* cut for you.”

It was either the smirk or the way he pronounced “wife” which triggered the next sequence of events.

Mr. Chan flung the bowl of noodles at the hawker. Teo threw up his hands. The bowl bounced off his arm, but the noodles and kai lang vegetables and slices of roasted meat

scattered all over his head and shoulders and chest. Sally gave a startled shriek. Mr. Chan picked up a stool and raised it in the air. At the same time, Teo grabbed a chopper knife near his pot. Mr. Chan stepped forward and brought the stool down on the hawker. Teo swung his knife to meet the incoming attack. Mr. Chan felt a brief stab of pain at his right hand and dropped the stool. He saw the hawker, standing there, breathing heavily, and still gripping the chopper. He saw his wife, Sally, frozen in shock. Then he heard a series of soft plops and then he felt something warm flowing from his right hand. He looked down. Blood dripped onto the tiled floor. Blood from where his thumb used to be. Mr. Chan wobbled on his feet. He managed to digest two facts. His thumb had been severed. This was the worst birthday he ever had. And then he fainted.

When he finally came to consciousness, it was as if he was returning from a deep-sea expedition. He came up through the depths of the ocean, faintly aware of voices and sounds beyond the sea surface, climbing up slowly until he finally emerged into the sun, and the voice of his wife. He opened his eyes. His vision blurred at first and then resolved. Sally smiled down at him.

“How do you feel?” she asked. He wanted to yell at her that it was a stupid question to ask but he was still woozy from the drugs. He glanced around. He saw some kind of machine with a screen that had a green dot going up and down across it.

“You’re in a hospital. You’ve been resting for two days,” she said.

*Two days*, he thought. His lips parted. His tongue felt like dry leather. “Thirsty,” he croaked.

Sally picked up a pitcher of water on the side table and poured a glass of water. She slipped her right hand behind her husband’s back and helped him to sit up. Then she picked up the glass of water and brought it to his lips. With her left hand, she slowly tilted the glass towards his lips, while the back of his head rested against her right palm. Mr.

Chan felt the cool water wash past his parched tongue and down his throat. Then he clamped his lips onto the edge of the glass. Sally tilted the glass further and her husband drank with great slurping gulps.

When he finished, he sighed with relief. She returned the empty glass to the side table.

Mr. Chan tried to recall what he was doing in a hospital. Then he remembered. He stared at his right hand resting on his lap. For a few seconds, he was confused. He thought his right thumb had been severed. But now there it was, wrapped with bandage, attached to his hand. Was he dreaming? "The police arrested Ah Teo," Sally said. Mr. Chan kept staring at his bandaged thumb.

"I found it in front of the prata stall about twenty meters away from Ah Teo's shop," Sally said. "I packed it in a plastic bag. Had to beg the drink seller to give me ice. "

Mr. Chan looked at his wife. He felt a lump in his throat. "Anyway, I brought it to the hospital. The doctors took seven hours to attach your thumb to your hand. What's wrong? Why are you crying? "

Mr. Chan blinked the tears from his eyes. Sally fished out a tissue from her purse and dabbed at her husband's eyes. "It's alright. Everything's okay now," she said. "Just get some rest. Your thumb will be as good as new." Suddenly, she noticed her husband squirming. "What is it?" she asked. Mr. Chan tried to move his bandaged thumb. All he managed was a twitch of his ring finger. Sally looked down. She noticed how her husband was squirming with his thighs. "What is it? Does it itch?" she asked. Mr. Chan nodded. Sally slipped her right hand under the waistband of his hospital pajamas. Her fingers fluttered against his scrotum. Suddenly she wrapped her thumb and forefinger around his penis. Mr. Chan widened his eyes. His lips parted. He tried to croak some words. "What is it?" Sally asked. "Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked, as she slowly began to stroke him up and down.

Mr. Chan could barely hear the voices of nurses beyond the curtain drawn around his bed. Even though his mind was still foggy from the drugs, he managed to recall a memory of a bold young woman who pleased him with tenderness from a lifetime ago. And now, lying on the hospital bed, keeping quiet lest a nurse pops in and interrupt their brazen act of intimacy, he remembered how soft the grass had felt in the woods, and catching a glimpse of a songbird amongst the foliage above, as it sang its undying love for its mate.

**4085**