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DEATH OF A PERM SEC

WONG SOUK YEE



A NOVEL



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OF A
PERM
SEC**

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DEATH OF A PERM SEC

WONG SOUK YEE



In memory of my dearest friend, Jane Leong.

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ONE

WHITE FROTH BUBBLES from the mouth of Chow Sze Teck. The air-conditioner is still running and the room is dark. Slumped over the mahogany desk in his study, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Housing is, as always, immaculately dressed. He used to say, “You never know who’s going to turn up at the door.” His gold-plated hibiscus pin fastens the batik tie to his crisp white shirt. His sparse white hair is combed back with no parting, held stiffly by Brylcreem. His pasty skin is more criss-crossed than his 65 years should expect. Next to the body, a toppled whisky glass has spilt a little of its contents onto a framed family portrait. Mr Chow’s slippered feet brush the Persian rug.

Except for an overturned table lamp that has crashed on to the marble floor, every piece of furniture in the study gleams. Only the tassels of the Persian rug have been slightly ruffled, and the maroon leather chair pushed away from the desk towards a closed window.

In the dining room downstairs, a bay window is open. The warm afternoon breeze teases the lace curtain into a whirling sail. It drifts out to the garden, as if reaching for the hibiscus, curling their weary petals after hours of flowering.

TWO

LOOKING LIKE A cross between London's Big Ben and the Mao Zedong mausoleum, the grey shoebox Parliament House, with its fat columns, strains to inspire awe and respect. What it lacks in elegance, Parliament House attempts to compensate for with robust debate.

Such as today, when the lone opposition member of Parliament, Hoo Liem Choh, urges the prime minister to set up an inquiry into alleged corruption at the Ministry of Housing. Hoo is everything Wee is not. Wee has patrician blood coursing through his veins, read law at Cambridge and suffers no fools. Hoo's parents once ran a fishball noodle stall in a Toa Payoh wet market; the young Hoo attended Chinese-medium neighbourhood schools before pursuing a useless course in Chinese studies at Nanyang University. In his five years as the sole aberration in a one-party parliament, Hoo has borne the brunt of the prime minister's wrath, which erupts each time he is disobeyed. Like a pit bull terrier, Edward Wee is good to have as your friend but terrible as your enemy. On the other hand, Hoo remains stoic when his parliamentary colleagues sling epithets such as "Chinese helicopter" (a slur started by army recruits who laughed at those from Chinese-medium schools who pronounced "Chinese-educated" to sound like "Chinese helicopter") and "mangy mongrel" in his face to score points with their political master. Having polished the art of agreeing with their boss to the extent that they have lost the will and skill to argue issues, the elected representatives of the people have resorted to clichés and name-calling. And Hoo's goldfish eyes, straggly goatee and slightly hanging lower lip further lend him to

ridicule by the other 69 Honourable Members. This period will live in some of the members' memoirs as the Golden Era of Wit.

Still, Hoo takes his role as the solo dissenter in an otherwise convivial House very seriously. The problem is that Edward Wee is a man with n Especially when Hoo launches into his Mandarin-infused English, or Manglish, speech: "This is a very serious case ah, of the permanent secretary of the housing ministry accused of receiving kickback of millions of dollar from building contractors. Mr Speaker, sir, it is very important that the housing ministry is transparent and accountable. The ministry's financial statements and tender documents have to stand up to public scrutiny. If the present allegations are...eh, true, then it would be a very sad—"

Shaking his head at the new depths of human ignorance, Edward Wee interjects, "The member for Kampong Bahru should not be too generous with taxpayers' money by calling for the formation of a commission of inquiry every time someone brings charges against the government. The CPIB is currently conducting a thorough, no-holds-barred interrogation of the staff at the Ministry of Housing. The director of the board will report directly to me."

"Mr Speaker, sir, as this is a very serious case, it is very necessary that an independent body be set up to find out what is going on ah, for the public has a right to know."

"The Honourable member for Kampong Bahru is suggesting that the CPIB is not an independent body!" a backbencher hollers. "The CPIB has contributed to the stability of our country many more times than the slippery opposition in this House. I think Mr Hoo owes the CPIB an apology for his ill-conceived claim."

His fellow MPs shout in unison, "Apologise, apologise!"

Taking a leaf from the books on ancient Chinese court intrigue, Hoo persists. "Mr Speaker, sir, I myself...am a great admirer of the CPIB for its good work in the commercial sector. But to get one government department to investigate the affairs of another is like asking a eunuch to tell on an imperial concubine."

“He is insinuating that the CPIB is impotent. I think the member for Kampong Bahru is confused as to who the eunuch is in this House.” The minister for home affairs laughs at what he thinks is his cleverness, which leads to the merriment of his chums, who chorus, “Eunuch!”

“The minister should learn more about Chinese history and not take me literally. With due respect to the CPIB and the prime minister’s office, I think it is very important to form a commission consisting of people who are not beholden to anyone within the government. For justice must not only be done—”

“Enough!” Edward Wee glowers at Hoo for sniping at a vital institution of the country, an act close to patricide. However, it’s not clear if, by “institution,” the prime minister is thinking of himself or the anti-corruption board.

His carefully cultivated Cambridge accent lapses into something closer to the local intonation as he continues, “This House has heard enough of Mr Hoo’s fabulous gibberish. He is out of order. I’m telling him that the CPIB will come out with a definitive report on the case concerning the housing ministry in a week’s time. The perpetrators will be charged in a court of law.”

“Mr Speaker, sir, I believe I still have the floor—”

“This House rules that the member for Kampong Bahru is out of order,” the Speaker proclaims.

On that note, the lonely voice of the opposition dissipates into the steam of hot impatience. A veil of embarrassment enshrouds the grey shoebox that hunches next to its grand cousins down St. Andrew’s Road, the green-domed Supreme Court and the colonnaded City Hall. Fronting these two pillars of the country’s democratic structures, the Padang bakes in the late afternoon sun. Its freshly mown lawn hasn’t yet been assaulted by hockey sticks as it’s still too scalding. Better to sip an iced lemon tea or chilled Tiger beer at the bar of the Singapore Cricket Club at the edge of the manicured lawn, like the lawyers and bankers from the nearby CBD.

THREE

MRS CHOW IS the first to discover her husband’s body after she returns home from dinner with her younger daughter, Hoong. Fighting down panic and confusion, she rings Hoong, clutching the phone so hard her hand cramps. She rattles off a string of Cantonese and makes a noise that does not sound human. When Hoong makes out what has happened, she calls for an ambulance.

At the East Shore Hospital, Mrs Chow’s four children trade accusations for not having spent more time looking after their father when the investigation started. Yang, the younger son, has the weakest excuse for failing in his duty, since he lives with their parents and is not gainfully employed. He was at a pub drinking himself blind when his father collapsed onto that mahogany desk. He sips his black coffee from the hospital vending machine in silence as his brother, Ming, the lawyer, admonishes him. Yang remembers leaving the house before his father returned from work yesterday, like every other day. He got home at around midnight and learned from the maid that his father was in hospital. He wishes that the plastic cup he is holding contained something friendlier than the chemical-tasting brew. He puts his free hand in his pocket and turns absently to the door.

Ming grabs his arm, as if trying to shake him out of his stupor. “Where you going?”

“Just stretching my legs,” he mumbles.

Mrs Chow weeps quietly, seated on a chair welded to several others lining a wall outside the operating theatre. By her side, Hoong stares vacantly at the opposite wall. The older daughter, Ling, walks away

to the stairwell at the end of the hallway. Under a 'No Smoking' sign, she lights up a cigarette. She takes a deep drag, holds it then exhales the smoke in a single long gust. After a few more drags, she crushes the butt against the wall till the tobacco leaves scatter over the floor.

At 1.15am, two doctors emerge from the emergency theatre. One says he will inform the police, while the other breaks the news to the family that Chow Sze Teck had a massive heart attack and his heart had stopped beating by the time he arrived at the hospital. They have not been able to revive him.

"The morphine blood level is 1.48 milligrams per litre, almost three times a lethal dose. Alcohol and diazepam, what most people call Valium, were also found in the bloodstream. The patient would have become unconscious almost immediately and died without much pain."

Breaking her silence for the first time that night, Ling asks in a thin, choking voice, "Why would Father take all those drugs?"

"What I'm saying is we have found those prescription drugs and alcohol in the patient's blood system in quantities that are more than sufficient to cause his death. As to why the patient took those drugs, that is for the police to find out. My colleague, Dr Hussein, is informing the police now. We will give them and your family a full medical examination report on the cause of death."

"Just like that. Cause of death: drug overdose." Yang attempts a tone of irony but the jerkiness of sorrow gets in the way.

Ling steps forward and speaks right into the doctor's face. "We demand a full investigation into the death of our father. Get all your doctors and pathologists and forensic experts and—" She drops her head and walks towards the stairwell again. Ming rams his fist on the concrete wall. Hoong helps their mother back into a chair, holding her as she sobs. The doctor keeps his eyes on the disinfectant-scrubbed floor, apologises for not being able to do more and leaves.

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A stone's throw from Parliament House and City Hall, now designated as "heritage", the Sheares Bridge rises like a pouting child of the 1980s. An awesome viaduct on state-of-the-art buttresses, the bridge flies over the mouth of the Singapore River, enabling commuters to the eastern suburbs to bypass the congestion of the city.

A golden mile of residential palaces and California-style condominiums facing the South China Sea, the East Coast is an anomaly in a land-scarce island where four in five persons live in high-rise flats. A tourist in a taxi travelling from Changi Airport to his or her hotel on Orchard Road via the East Coast over Sheares Bridge, through the heritage district, would be forgiven for thinking that Singapore is well and truly a garden city. The breezy stretch of land has, over the years, been invaded by the seriously rich, raiders of the stock market and top-ranking civil servants.

Such as the late permanent secretary of the Ministry of Housing. His champagne pink mansion resembles a Pop Art museum and is studded with French windows that lead out to a hibiscus garden. Past the dried-up grotto in the foyer, a long aquarium divides the large living area from the dining room, and breathes life into a house with little smell of human habitation. The aquamarine light from the fish tank and the red Japanese carp shimmer in the unlit room. A curved marble staircase, straight out of a 1960s Hollywood movie set, sweeps up towards five bedrooms and a study. On the landing, early morning light shines on an oil painting of the patriarch of the house dressed in the full regalia of a Malay sultan, with heavily decorated epaulettes. The yellow silk sash draped across his flabby body is stretched taut. His eyes look into the far horizon, across the Straits of Johor into the mist of an era past.

After several hours at the hospital, the Chows return to their mansion, abuzz with activity and visitors even though it is only daybreak. The fish in the aquarium go into a frenzy, partly due to the maid's overzealous feeding. For the first time in many years, Chow Sze Teck's sons and daughters are together again in the house he built

for them. To avert any unaccustomed passions catching them by surprise, they discuss the funeral arrangements. But not knowing when they can retrieve the body from the hospital, and for that matter, not knowing why it happened at all, intensifies the state of chaos.

Until the investigation, the patriarch had been to Ling a mere fuzzy outline of an ageing man existing in her subconscious. On his deathbed in the hospital, Ling noticed for the first time the deep lines etched into her father's face by the business of living and worrying. The bags below his eyes bulged so much he looked as if he had two pairs of eyes, now forever closed. She wonders if her father had died hating her, loving her or had simply been indifferent. What sort of daughter had she been to her father? Had she brought him more heartache and trouble than joy? She shuts her mind to those sentimentalities and fixes it on the funeral arrangements.

"I think we should have a short, quiet wake at Mount Vernon Crematorium. No sermons, no eulogies, no feasting, no candles, no incense, no music and no chanting," she says.

"And what are the guests supposed to do then?" declares Ming. He says that such a sendoff would not afford recognition to their father's 30 years of contribution to the country.

"What about a quiet and dignified funeral at St Andrew's Cathedral?" says Hoong. That would provide a more exalted site for dignitaries such as the prime minister and the minister for finance (who happens to be her father-in-law) to say a few words about their late father.

Yang suggests a quiet and dignified three-day wake with good food and fine wine at the Palace Casket, since their father loved his Burgundy and a good chat. Not convinced himself that it is a sound suggestion, he gives his siblings an apologetic smile and heads to the bar. He opens a bottle of Shiraz. As he swirls the liquid, he imagines he sees his older brother's acrimonious look in the reflection on the glass.

The discussion is cut short when five men from the Criminal Investigation Department arrive in two cars. Their usual brashness

is cloaked under exaggerated civility, seemingly out of respect for the deceased and his public office. Outside the high gate at the end of the sprawling garden, they produce police badges and request permission to conduct a search. Ming unlocks the wrought iron gate and requests they park their cars in the driveway, so as not to alarm the neighbours unnecessarily.

As his men comb other rooms, the deputy superintendent of police invites Mrs Chow to the study and gently questions her on the condition and position of the body and furniture in the study as she found them. Despite Hoong and Ming by her side prompting her, Mrs Chow is an eager but ultimately useless witness. For in her moment of terror, the cold room, the sharp odour of vomit, her husband's ashen face and his stiffening body conspired to immobilise her. In all the trials of her 63 years, this has been the most shattering and cruel. She can only remember dashing down the stairs for the telephone, even though the study has another phone for the permanent secretary's official use. She could not bring herself to enter the study again while waiting for her children and the ambulance. When her legs could carry her again, she woke the Filipina maid sleeping in a small room next to the kitchen.

The DSP thanks Mrs Chow for her help and looks around the study.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, Ling watches an officer ask the maid if she has moved anything in the house since last night.

"No, sir. Except I swept the broken glass in the study, sir," Mary-Joan answers confidently, rolling her Rs. Mary-Joan is a college graduate from Manila.

"What broken glass?"

"The table lamp fell to the floor and smashed, sir."

"When was the last time you saw Mr Chow?"

"Yesterday afternoon, sir."

"What time yesterday?"

She tilts her head slightly. "About four o'clock, I think."

"Did he say anything to you?"

“I told him ma’am and Yang were out, and I asked him if he wanted dinner and he said ‘no’. Then he went upstairs and I did not see him again.”

“Did you hear or notice anything upstairs, or did anyone come to see him after that?”

“I came back to the kitchen, finished the cleaning and went to my room. I didn’t hear anything until ma’am came home and woke me up.”

The officer thanks her with a smile. As an afterthought, he gives her his calling card and tells her to ring him if she remembers anything else.

Ling follows the officer to the dining room as he puts on a pair of surgical gloves, then sprays substances on furniture, windows and doorknobs, dusting for fingerprints. She watches the other officers check the locks of the doors and windows, looking for signs of forced entry. Her eyes glide to Yang at the bar counter, sipping his wine with his eyes closed. That guy behaves as though he’s in a French vineyard instead of the scene of the crime, she thinks. She goes over and joins her brother.

After a three-hour to-do, the police leave the mansion, taking with them books, notebooks, address books, the whisky glass from the mahogany desk, the Persian rug and crumpled paper from the basket under the desk. They also take down the names and identity card numbers of each of the family members. To check their criminal records and fingerprints, Ling is sure of that.

The DSP apologises once more for any inconvenience his team might have caused, but says that depending on the progress of the coroner’s inquiry, he may have to invite some of the family members to his office for further interviews. “The coroner might also order an autopsy,” he adds.

*

The minister for housing and his four members of staff arrive in their official cars in the afternoon to offer their condolences,

though the wake has yet to be arranged. The minister says he will fight tooth and nail for the family to receive the late permanent secretary’s pension, or at least a generous ex gratia payment for his many years of outstanding service to the nation. For a moment, nobody speaks. The five officials sit on the edge of the Italian sofa opposite a pinched-face Mrs Chow and a ramrod-backed Hoong. Ming and Ling stand behind their mother, exchanging glances. Yang has not moved from the bar since the CID search that morning.

Then Ming, with an imperceptible bow, says, “Thank you minister for your kind thoughts. But you seem to imply that you may encounter some resistance in trying to do that?”

“Umm...I do not wish to pre-empt what my colleagues from other departments might do. But as I have said earlier, I will do my utmost to ensure that Sze Teck receives the recognition that is due to him, even in his death.”

“Are you referring to your colleagues at the CPIB?” Ling butts in.

The temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees. Ming gives his sister an arctic stare.

“They are conducting the investigation,” the minister replies, in the bald style of Parliamentary Question Time.

“So what has the CPIB found out about Father?” Ling pursues.

“The prime minister said yesterday in Parliament that the CPIB will conclude the investigation in a week’s time and will report to the prime minister’s office. And I don’t know if any of you know about this, but yesterday morning, before the Parliament sitting, your father returned \$12 million to the ministry.”

“What?” Ling shouts. “Father wouldn’t have \$12 million!”

Ming looks as if he’s been kicked in the liver. “That is what the CPIB must investigate. We—we appreciate your letting us in on this, minister. But is the CPIB equating the return of the money to—an admission of guilt?”

Cutting through the reverence for authority, Yang puts down his glass and speaks from the bar. “Mr Tan, you obviously know more

about the whole case than my family does. Are you saying there's a connection between Father's death and the corruption case?"

"This is a matter for the CID to decide," the minister says.

"Father has been poisoned!" Ling says heatedly.

"This is a matter for the CID to decide."

Ling throws her arms up in surrender. "The CID. CPIB. Soon we'll have every government department snooping around the house." She gropes in her jeans pockets, then reaches for her Salem pack on the coffee table.

"Ling, if you must smoke, can you do it outside?" Ming snaps.

She leaves the pack on the table.

Ming, speaking in a deferential tone, sees the minister and his coterie out of the gate.

During the exchange, Mrs Chow and Hoong have remained silent. After the delegation has left, the older woman says she is tired and asks Hoong to accompany her to her room. Yang tops up his glass. Ling stares after her mother and sister as they ascend the stairs. From the landing, her father stares out from his portrait.

FOUR

THE NEXT DAY, a man turns up at the Chow mansion, introducing himself as an inspector from the CID. He flashes his identity tag to Mary-Joan before returning it to his shirt pocket. He appears slightly over 50. His high forehead, deep-set eyes and grizzly hair lend him an aura of wisdom. But it is his huge doorknob nose that draws all the attention. His sky blue short-sleeved shirt and navy blue trousers would have made him look like an aircon repairman if not for his thick bifocal lenses.

Mary-Joan escorts him to the lounge to meet a more composed and relaxed Mrs Chow. Since she found her husband's body in the study, she realises her behaviour has not befitted the wife of a senior civil servant. In the deeper recesses of her heart, she prays that her delay in calling for the ambulance had not caused the death of her husband. She also feels a vague, unacknowledged sense of liberation. After the initial sense of loss, like an amputation of a part of her body, she is learning to adjust to the new terrain, and finds it not entirely inhospitable. The widow's brown housecoat belies a lighter Madam Chan, a woman who has been eclipsed by a lifetime of playing the good wife of a trade unionist, politician and permanent secretary.

The inspector apologises for bothering the family. "My name is Lim Siew Kian. I just need to ask a few questions to understand the full circumstances surrounding the death of Mr Chow Sze Teck." A disturbing calm emanates from the stillness of his gaze.

Mrs Chow offers him Chinese tea with an amiable smile and eases into a couch. "I thought I already told them yesterday everything what."

He takes out a pocket notebook. "Please bear with me, I need to broaden the parameters of the inquiry. Mrs Chow, how was your relationship with your husband?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can you describe what sort of husband Mr Chow had been to you?"

"Nobody ever ask me that sort of question before. We married for over 40 years. What is there to say? He is like any other men, lor, work hard, bring up the children."

The inspector smiles again and puts away his notebook. "I understand that you may not want to say anything bad about your late husband. But in order to help us get to the truth of the matter, I hope you will tell me everything you know about Mr Chow. Like... had he been a good husband to you? Had he been cruel to you or anyone you know?"

"Of course he is a good husband. I only study a few years in school, but he still bring me to all his official functions, meet the prime minister, meet VIPs from America, England and many other countries." She slides the jade bangle on her forearm to her wrist. The translucent emerald-green family heirloom catches the window's light.

"Did you enjoy those official functions?"

"Okay, lah. Nice food. But frankly speaking ah, I prefer to play mahjong with my friends." She raises her hand to cover her mouth as she laughs.

"And that caused frequent arguments between you and your husband?"

"Not really. How can an old woman with little education argue with the perm sec? I just do what he say, lor."

"So you became resentful of your husband?"

"Aiyah, we married so long and now he is dead, what's the use of talking about all that?"

The inspector's smile is plastered to his face. "That's a very beautiful piece of jade."

"Ya, nowadays you can't find such precious jade." Her face beams and she plays with the bangle around her wrist.

"Mrs Chow, you seem a very understanding and supportive wife. Mr Chow must have been very lucky to have you by his side all these years."

"Ha, I'm not so sure about that. I'm just a yellow-face old wife, embarrass him only. Sometime, he behave like I'm not around, especially after the children all grow up. He doesn't like me to call my friends for mahjong. Said not a 'dignified' game." She laughs again.

"And now, you can do as you please. You can invite your mahjong kakis over. You don't have to attend those stuffy dinner parties. You don't have to take instructions from anyone any more." With a genial face, the inspector maps out what had only been the housewife's hazy sense of newfound freedom.

Touching the jade bangle again, she replies defensively, "All my life, every meal I have depend on other people. I bring up four children and now they all want to have their own life. You don't think I deserve something also? Excuse me, inspector, are you saying I—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Chow, this is routine questioning. I need to establish the motive or the lack of it for any crime under investigation."

"You are saying Sze Teck was murdered?" Her powdered face blanches with the thought of a killer lurking in the house.

"We don't know. Hopefully, this inquiry will find that out."

Her composure wearing away, she pursues, "I thought—I thought yesterday the minister said Sze Teck killed himself because—because of—"

"That is just conjecture. Mrs Chow, as far as you know, would you say there is somebody out there who would like to see your husband, er...out of the way?"

"Oh dear. That is terrible. I doncht know." She shifts in her seat and wrings her hands. She mumbles about the tea and walks to the kitchen to get more despite protests from the inspector that his cup is still full.

She returns with a fresh pot of tea and a cup for herself. She sips slowly but her mind is not on the jasmine fragrance. The inspector resumes. "I'm sorry if I've upset you, but did he tell you anything about enemies he might have made in the course of his work? Anything at all?"

Her irritation is clear. "I said already what. He never tell me anything. I'm just one of the maids in the house."

"Do you know if Mr Chow had made a will and do you know the contents of the will?"

"No. Maybe he told Yang or Ming. They are his favourite."

"You mean your sons? Chow Ming and Chow Yang would have been told by their father that they would get the lion's share of his estate?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But, inspector, you don't think my sons kill their own father to—?"

"No, no, no. Mrs Chow, I just want to know the facts."

She looks up the stairs at the painting of her husband at his most magnificent and decorated. A wave of gratitude surges in her chest. She blesses her husband for giving her a big house to loll in the lap of luxury and a maid to do her bidding. She can even forgive him for ignoring her existence, for treating her as one of his accessories, for not asking her opinion on things that mattered. For when she thinks about it, it suited her just fine. She generally does not have very much to say about most things. She only wishes he had also ignored her "undignified habits", such as mahjong. With the possibility of murder, her heart goes out to her husband for dying such a horrible death. Definitely not very dignified. Not that it would be any better if it had been suicide. Now, whenever she smells something sharp or acidic, she will think of her husband lying on the study desk. If Heaven were kind, it should have let him die of an illness and go quietly, without having the house crawling with policemen.

"Sorry, you were asking me something?"

"Whether your sons know about the will."

"Oh, I only guess. If my husband wants to tell anyone about the will, he will tell Ming and Yang."

The inspector sits up, pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and appears even more respectful. "Madam Chan, if you don't mind my addressing you as that, how did your two daughters feel about that sort of favouritism?"

"They all move out, lor. Hoong last time cannot wait to get married. Ling is the rebellious one, haven't got married but never come home. She live in Australia many years and come back this time only because of her father's problem."

"What about yourself, Madam Chan? You're not angry with your husband for not leaving you with anything?"

"Of course I am angry. But what can I do? He has done worse things. All I can do is pretend I don't know. That woman in Hong Kong will get more money than me."

"What woman in Hong Kong?"

Mrs Chow stares blankly at the inspector. "His mistress."

FIVE

THE EQUANIMITY WITH which Mrs Chow talks about her husband's mistress is credit to time-honoured feudal thought as much as to her tolerance of the man's failure. For her generation and many before her, women were brought up to obey their fathers at home, their husbands in marriage and their sons after their husbands had passed on. While Mrs Chow is no foot-bound illiterate, she could not and would not fight the cultural leviathan of the past. After 40 years of acceptance, it has become her nature. Now that the patriarch is not around, she is quite happy to let her sons take over from where their father had left off. Starting with the funeral arrangements. After a rigorous discussion on various rites and customs, pomp versus dignity, her two sons finally settle on a multicultural ceremony at the Palace Casket.

The wreaths lining the walls and their fragrance wafting across the air-conditioned parlour lend a hint of spring freshness to the sombre scene. Relatives, friends, cabinet ministers and other government officials numbering a few hundred who knew or knew of the permanent secretary, stream in to pay their last respects. The closed casket with the autopsied body is placed at the front of the room, behind the altar draped in white velvet. A dark wooden framed photograph of Chow Sze Teck in a regal pose and Malay sultan costume is propped up at the centre of the altar. White candles on silver candlesticks glow beside the frame. Red hibiscus, cut from the Chows' garden at home, droop in crystal vases. Guests take their turn at the altar, bow and sit in rows of newly upholstered chairs facing the altar.

Dispensing with priests and monks, Ming has arranged for three dignitaries to offer words of praise. With a cassette tape playing Buddhist chants softly in the background, the minister for finance steps up to the lectern by the side of the altar. As he waxes philosophical about the late permanent secretary's intrepid battle with the communists during the turbulent 1950s, Hoong's young son squeals and kicks his baby sister in the stomach. Hoong promptly drags her two screaming children out of the room. Her husband, the pot-bellied son of the minister at the lectern, throws an exasperated look at his children but remains seated, nodding sagaciously at every word from the speaker. Next, the chairman of the National Trade Union speaks, without irony, of more legendary tales about how Chow had clobbered the wildcat strikes of the 1960s, and organised the workers into a disciplined, productive workforce. The minister for housing follows by declaring great admiration for Chow for having worked tirelessly to provide every family in the country with a home. The timbre of the three eulogists harmonises with the soporific chanting from the tape.

Except for Hoong, the Chow family sits in the front row, their heads bowed. Each is engaged in their own constructed memories of the patriarch, so that the panegyrics become part of the funeral hum. The smoky aura of the room triggers Ling's thoughts of their old house, before the family moved to the present severe mansion, before her father became a government top dog.

She had loved the long, dark pre-war terrace shophouse on Neil Road, with the ground-floor shop selling coffins and funeral paraphernalia. Pine, teak and mahogany coffins of various sizes leaned lengthwise against the shop's walls, looking like tree spirits to her child's eyes. Paper houses and cars and hell money had spilled onto the five-foot way. To reach their house on the first floor, the Chows had had to climb a steep, windowless rickety staircase between the coffin shop and the beauty parlour next door, which had been used as a "comfort house" for Japanese soldiers in World War II.

Every corner oozed secrets and gory tales of tenants during the Japanese Occupation. Ling often scrambled up the stairs in case the tree spirits caught up with her. Across the road, a row of workers' cottages, each small as a stable, stood on a dirt plot, inhabited by Malays whose chickens free-ranged the ground. Ling remembers one time when she and Yang stole eggs from the chicken coop built by their Malay neighbours, their father actually spared the cane. He went across the road, chatted with the chicken owner, patted his shoulder like an old friend and paid for the eggs. That night, her father had fried a minced pork omelette, the taste of which still lingers in her mind as she sits facing her father's altar. But as their houses got bigger, Pa's shoulders got narrower and could not carry her any more. As living got more comfortable, life became more complex for Ling.

Several rows from the altar, the inspector with the high forehead and grizzly hair surveys the scene. He has changed from his air-con-repairman blue outfit to black and white. His gaze penetrates the sympathy to study every guest's face.

After the formal part of the ceremony, Ming invites everybody to light refreshments spread out on two white-skirted tables at the other end of the room. The delicacies on silver trays rival those at a high-tea buffet in a five-star hotel. Liveried waiters serve tea and coffee in white china, orange juice, mineral water and wine in sparkling glasses.

Ming stands throughout, shifting from foot to foot. He nods and offers a sad smile to all who come to hold his arm. A few distraught relatives embrace him, provoking tears from both parties. A doddering second cousin of Chow's asks Ming about the cortege. Ming mumbles something to the effect that it will be a private thing and no fuss.

"But you are the eldest son of Sze Teck. You have to make sure your father gets a decent burial, otherwise his soul will have no peace."

"Ya, I know, Uncle Ching. We will cremate the body at Mount Vernon and scatter the ashes in the sea."

"What? Throw his ashes into the sea and feed the fish?" The uncle's legs wobble as he utters these words in apparent horror.

"Uncle Ching, your arthritis is acting up again. Why don't you sit down and I'll get you a drink." Ming turns to go.

Yang gives his brother a wry smile, at the sight of him humouring their rheumatoid uncle, then gets himself another glass of red. He retreats to an empty room adjoining the buzzing parlour. He has had enough of putting on a grieving face in front of reproachful relatives and successful old classmates from Anglo-Chinese School. While he is grateful this is not the usual three-day wake of a Taoist funeral, he rues his idea of the tea buffet, which has encouraged guests to dawdle. As the cutlery clatters against porcelain through the thin wall, he imagines his father looking out of the casket at the revelry with dismay, as though his family is celebrating his departure, which would save them from further ignominy.

From the day Yang was born a son of a mandarin, he has had to bear the cross of becoming a superior man. In today's language, it means going to university. So when he did not make the grade to enter the University of Singapore, his father got him a Public Service Commission scholarship to send him to any university in Britain which would offer him a law course. He did not relish doing law but did not want to further disappoint his father. He knew his father wanted him and his brother to become what Chow himself could not be, an independent professional who did not have to rely on other people's favour. His father was not yet rich then, but he had scraped together enough to afford Yang a comfortable flat in England and some money to spend on his hobbies, of which he had many.

Yang remembers he actually had fun in a provincial university in Birmingham where even the overseas students were relaxed and easy-going. Then his father had told him to get active with the Singapore Students' Association in London, whose members were groomed for leadership positions when they returned home after their studies. Yang suspected some of the committee members were

on the secret payroll of the Singaporean government to conduct suitable activities for members who would otherwise fall under “bad Western influence.” He hated the endless forums the association organised to mould members into model citizens. Even at the disco parties held every month, students never failed to one-up each other. There was a gang of four Yang loved to hate, who turned up at every function to make sure they didn’t lose out on anything. Yang looks back with amusement at one such function when one of the gang, the son of a banker, told no one in particular but everyone in general that he had been offered a spot to do a PhD at Oxford.

Speaking as if he had marbles in his mouth to mask his Singaporean accent, he announced, “My godpa has promised to fly over and attend my graduation and Auntie Annie says she will get me BMW’s latest sports model to make sure I return home.”

Everybody knew the sainted godpa in question was no less than the deputy prime minister himself and his good wife, Auntie Annie, was the chairwoman of the United Overseas Bank. Yang lip-farted on those proclamations.

But the virus of competition had eventually spread and infected him. Even now, whenever he thinks of how he had just barely scraped through his first year after sitting for supplementary exams for three papers, his stomach turns. While he was busting his brain trying to remember landmark cases on legal principles that weren’t relevant to life, his friends at the association were already talking about which class honours they were vying for. After those hellfire exams, he had been tormented by frequent nightmares of violent red swirling all over his blank answer sheets. He had heard of a Malaysian student jumping off the Westminster Bridge on the first day of the year-end exams. Yang did not want to end up like him. When exams rolled round for the second-year law students, he took the train to the Lake District and did not look back. That was his way of telling those self-important sons of the gentry that he, Chow Yang, didn’t give a damn.

As he rolls the red wine around in his mouth, he can still remember the crack in his father’s voice when he rang from London to tell him he had dropped out of law school that year. Yang asked if his father would still support him if he switched to arts. A few days later, Chow sent him a telegram saying that as long as Yang promised not to abandon his studies and to return home with at least a degree, the money would continue. Yang was so grateful tears had brimmed in his eyes. He knew his father was not rolling in cash and his prolonged stay in Britain would only affect his younger sisters’ chances of getting into university when their turns came. He felt selfish but he liked living in London, around which the rest of the world revolved, he thought. He later heard from Ling that their father had been promoted to permanent secretary in the Ministry of Housing. He was truly happy for his father for, despite running the family like an army camp, Chow had always doted on him, sparing him the discipline reserved for his siblings. At the same time, as he received his monthly remittance, Yang worried that the money had come at somebody’s expense. After he completed his studies, Chow told Yang to return home but he stayed on. He had seen photographs of the big house the family had moved into, got more worried about the source of the money and wanted to stay away. Much as he wished to please his father, he did not want to do the things his father had wished for him, such as joining the administrative service.

He counts the times in his 36 years he had broken his father’s heart. How many of those times had his father actually been disappointed with himself? Did he actually expect me to become a mandarin when he, of all people, should know that there was no honour but shit in it, Yang wonders. Or was I the projection screen of his own failings? Did he really kill himself? Because he was tired of facing his own abject misery? Yang remembers the last time they talked, that weariness in his face, that stillness of his body as he stood against the diffused light of the setting sun in the study,

that yearning for rest, looking for a place to withdraw to. Yang now realises, watching him, I should have seen it coming. Father had made so much of his own disgrace when it is the legal culpability alone that matters. I made the horrible suggestion that Father get out of the country and he gave me a look that distorted his face. I can still taste his bitterness in my mouth. He could not understand how his son could entertain such a despicable possibility. Father had responded to my counsel of amorality with the moral simplicity of death. Both would promise a finality, but my suggestion would guarantee that the Chows be mired in sewage for a thousand years, whereas Father's action might restore a little honour to his muddied name. Hope you went away taking this solace with you, Pa, otherwise you have punished yourself to excess.

Yang clasps the wineglass so hard, it cracks and cuts his finger. He places the broken glass in a bin, goes to the toilet to wash off the blood and returns to the cocktail party.

SIX

HELD UP FOR an hour in traffic on the Pan-Island Expressway, the inspector turns up the air-con and tells himself not to fret over the delay. He diverts his thoughts to the life and death of Chow Sze Teck. He is amused by the sentimentality of a seemingly unsentimental man. Those copious red hibiscus in his garden, the accessories such as the hibiscus motif tiepin he died with, and those same flowers at the funeral. Is the hibiscus the birth flower of an old girlfriend or his current mistress? What extravagant ideas did he hope his death would induce? If he did kill himself, that is. Maybe this is divine retribution, the inspector tells himself. But still, many other people have committed worse crimes and are living near-nirvana lifestyles. Chow had been too greedy and weak to resist the temptation of licking the honey from the mouths of the mega-bucks contractors. But did he deserve what he got? Some years back, a bent minister jumped bail and is still at large in Taiwan to this day, probably living in luxury. At least Chow had stayed and slugged it out. If it were just money, he would at most have gotten a few years. Why had he resorted to such a desperate act? Was a more hideous wrong catching up with him?

The inspector gets through the traffic jam into the CBD and reaches the maze of a car park to Chow Ming's office. After a dizzying ride in the lift, the door opens onto the 43rd floor of the OCBC Centre; the inspector steps into the country's highest-grossing law firm. Ming's secretary takes him past several glass and chrome rooms into a painting-lined office that looks more like an art gallery. The external trappings accord with the inspector's notes on



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wong Souk Yee is a playwright and former political detainee. In 1987, she was detained for allegedly taking part in a Marxist conspiracy against the government. In 1982, she co-founded the now-defunct theatre group, Third Stage. She co-directed and co-wrote the play *Square Moon*, staged in 2013, about detention without trial. Wong holds a PhD in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of New South Wales and is currently an adjunct lecturer at the National University of Singapore. She is chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party.



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