

The Brevity of Sustenance

By Kimberly Lium

“Seven stops front. Two steps to the right. Do not open the door immediately. Make sure that no one is outside. Keep the food safely hidden in your blanket. Once you’re sure that no one is outside, open the door. Exit the pantry, and walk right back to my ward.”

It’s a usual routine I perform every evening, where I have to steal extra food from the hospital pantry for my siblings who are accompanying my mother in her hospital ward. The reason for doing so is because they spend most of the time here with her, and the hospital only supplies one set of meal to us. Unless we are rich, only then we can bribe the nurse to get extra portions of food just like how Mrs Teng always does whenever she visits her sick husband.

Today, as I limp forward to take my fifth step front, I hear hushed voices coming from outside the pantry. The noises intensify, and I realise - they are coming in. Frozen with terror, I back away slowly, careful not to make any sound. I sink my teeth into my lips as I feel the immense pain from my left leg, an injury from being beaten up by one of my more privileged classmates at school because “my school shoes were ugly”. I find a spot behind a cupboard, and hide myself just as soon as the door creaks open.

“Actually Mrs Teng. You don’t have to wait for a kidney donor. If you want a kidney for your husband right now, I can sell it to you.”

I recognise the crisp, intelligible voice as Dr. Harry’s, the kidney doctor who has been taking my mother under his wing for three years now. My mother has stage 4 chronic kidney disease and we have been finding a suitable kidney donor so that we will no longer have to spend money on hospital fees and the expensive dialysis machine. We haven’t had any luck however.

I keep still in my position, my ear easing closer to the direction of the conversation. *Keep the food safely hidden in your blanket.* I look down, and hug the warm bundle closer to my chest.

“Really? Where did you get the kidney from?”

“I bought it illegally.”

There is a slight pause before Dr. Harry continues, “and I came to you first because I know how much you want it for your husband.”

I feel a gluey lurch of nausea upon hearing that. My mother needs it more - both Dr. Harry and I know that. But of course, he chooses to offer it to the wealthy Mrs Teng who bribes the nurses with her money. Sometimes, I catch her sliding a huge bill at the nurse’s desk and when it’s time for us to leave the hospital ward after visiting hours, my siblings and I get chased out ruthlessly. Meanwhile, an extra mattress is set up beside Mrs Teng’s husband’s hospital bed, ready for her bribed overnight stay. I guess that’s how the world works now.

I'm not sure if it's the warm food that is gathering heat around my stomach, but as soon as I feel the warmth reaching my cheeks, I know that I am angry.

Without any hesitation, I lurch out from behind the cupboard, dropping all the food contents in the bundle and flashing my eyes at the two adults before me.

"What about my mom! You know she can no longer afford the machines anymore, she needs the kidney!!!" I lash out, stunning the bespectacled doctor and well-dressed Mrs Teng.

"That's the thing, you can't afford it. You can't even afford the kidney, kid." Dr. Harry remarks in a sarcastic manner.

This wasn't the Dr. Harry who was kind and genuine to my mother 3 years ago when the country wasn't that corrupted by capitalism. Mr Harry is like one of them now - a hypocrite. A hypocrite doctor.

I start kneeling, and soon my injured leg gives way, and I collapse to the ground. I wince as I get back on a kneeled position and clasp my hands together.

"Please, please just give me the kidney! I'll pay you next time when I saved up enough! I promise! Please!" I beg profusely.

"Get out of here, pathetic girl. No money, no kidney." Mrs Teng retorts. Dr. Harry remains silent.

That night, as I proceed to leave the hospital ward with my siblings, I see Mrs Teng and Dr. Harry crouched over the desk, signing a few documents. First, it is a form and I briefly make out the words on it to be "Kidney transplant." Next, she signs a yellow cheque. Before I can see anymore, the nurse yells at us to get our "poor buttocks" out of the hospital.

(800 words)