



Elaine Chiew Face

‘Why should Lulu know how to roll spaghetti with a fork? We’re not Italian.’ Karen bangs the saucepan on the stove, because this is how some Chinese people take out their frustrations—by abusing their cookware.

Yun sits at the kitchen table and follows her daughter-in-law’s movement, always a fraction of a second behind: when Yun registers Karen at the stove, she is already opening a tin with energetic cranks of the can-opener; by the time Yun makes out the writing on the tin—Pitted Black Olives in Brine—Karen is at the sink.

‘What three-year-old can roll spaghetti with a fork, you tell me?’ Karen demands. She pours in chilled carrot and coriander soup to heat. She turns around; her glare is not directed at Yun, but it lands on her nonetheless. Karen speaks to her in a mixture of Mandarin and English, her Mandarin being stuck at third-grade level. Yun herself speaks little English; she tries to learn by reading words on tin cans and turning on the captions for the hard-of-hearing on TV.

‘‘I don’t know what you serve her at home.’’ In that tone.’ Karen takes a dishcloth and swipes at the table. Yun removes fingers in a hurry. ‘As if all Chinese people eat only with chopsticks. We wouldn’t know how to use a fork if you poked our noses with it. Racist, I tell you.’

Yun glances at the shamrock walls, the track lighting, the shining copper pots that pan back her glinty reflection. When she looks at her daughter-in-law, she sometimes looks at the space and the objects beside Karen more than at Karen herself. It gives her a momentary relief.

‘I know you probably don’t understand,’ Karen says. ‘Mama, London isn’t just Wardour Street and Queensway. Can’t simply interact only with other Chinese people.’

Yun looks at Karen, spooning out the soup, putting a couple of mealy saltines on the side. Chinese people do not eat like this. Karen sets the bowl in front of Yun. She herself eats a store-bought salad, full of artichokes swimming in oil, and the greasy olives, the pits dotting the enamelled basin later like watchful eyes.

‘*Wo xia’ng hui jia,*’ Yun says. I want to go home. Karen stops chewing mid-bite, a sprig of rocket protruding between her lips. ‘But who is going to take care of you back in Malaysia? You might fall down, or worse, die and get halfmauled by a farm dog before anybody discovers you.’ Karen eyes Yun steadily. ‘Why are you bringing this up suddenly? It’s not about the bladder issue, is it?’

Yun sets her mouth in a stubborn line. ‘At home I can pee whenever and wherever I please.’

Back in Malaysia, Yun had owned a chicken farm, before she’d had to sell it when Zhi Wei died suddenly from a heart attack. Those halcyon days when her Buff Brahma chickens laid a dozen eggs a day, her Cochin another even dozen, her Grey Shanghai at least eight on a good day, when they weren’t fluey. She’d totted up the numbers in columns in a blue notebook. Here, in London, she twiddles her thumbs, locks eyes over the dinner table with her granddaughter who complains to Karen, ‘Why does Nai Nai smell like wee?’

Free medical care, her son, Qiang, has said—for her urinary incontinence. Karen took her to a GP, but had to come into the consulting room to act as translator. The doctor gave Yun some vaginal cones, a series of small weights to be inserted like tampons. When Yun finally understood how she was supposed to use the cones, she cringed. *Tiān ah*, how could such womanly matters be discussed so flatly? How could the doctor, an elderly woman herself, not understand this?

In the car, afterwards, Yun asked if Karen knew a Chinese herbalist.

Karen cast Yun a sideways glance. ‘I don’t. Will you just try? It’ll give you more freedom of movement.’

‘I simply won’t go out,’ Yun had said.

Karen twisted her lips into a moue—a disagreeable expression that altered the flat contours of her face. It conveyed her dissatisfaction about many things Yun could only guess at, but there was a sedulous concentration on her mother-in-law living with them. ‘You’re going to lock yourself up in the house? How is that going to help?’

‘I won’t embarrass you, at least.’

‘Please don’t talk like that. I don’t want Lulu to learn this kind of self-deprecation.’ A pause. ‘At your age, exercise is really important, Mama.’

Yun fell silent. The conversation was often like this: she meant one thing, but her daughter-in-law took her to mean another. She felt like a suitcase of discarded things. Should be donated to Oxfam down the road. Somebody else might have a use for her. Qiang should just let her go home. Wang Daifu in the village will prescribe some Bu Zhong Yi Qi Wan for the incontinence. None of these cone-like things to attack one's sphincters.

Once back in the beige-walled, temperature-controlled bedroom she sleeps in, Yun tried to nap, but could only stare at the shape of those cones in their waxy-white packaging. Yun overheard Karen relating the episode to Qiang. *Her generation, no way is she going to put things up her whoopee.* What is whoopee? The shrug in Karen's tone. *Rather piddle her trousers in Waitrose.* Piddle. Nice word. Yun liked the English words with double Ds and Bs in the centre. They sounded kind; they sounded as if they would tickle.

The cones reminded her of Ben Wa balls. Back when Zhi Wei was alive, he'd bought a box as a gift for her once. Came home and proffered it with a snaggletoothed grin. She'd opened the silk-covered box and gasped. Watched the double ceramic balls roll in their divots as Zhi Wei leaned down and said, 'Want me to pedal you up the road?'

They did. The most incredible experience she'd had, jouncing behind Zhi Wei on a bicycle up those potholed rugged road tracks, her hands lightly clasping his waist, her eyes rolling milk-white, her breaths coming in short spurts.

He, gone too soon, and she, demoted from Ben Wa balls to vaginal cones.

Maybe it's the soup she's had, but Yun feels a churning of discontent in her gut afterwards. There is much she wants to say to Karen. Karen, who was born in San Francisco, with eyes pebbly dark, and flawless skin that she rubs with expensive lotions containing sea algae. Karen, with her Colgate post-braces teeth, so westernised underneath her Chinese skin. Karen, whom Yun wants to talk to about the loss of respect for elders. Karen, from whom Yun is learning so many things. The other evening, at dinner, Karen said, pass the broccoli. At her look of incomprehension, Karen explained it's what you do when the dishes are too far to reach. This is Chinese eating culture in the West? Instead of proper placement, main dishes move around the table like mobile units? In Yun's growing-up days, family dinners were boisterous affairs: grandparents, parents, children, cousins, everyone helping themselves, and the noise was a wacky symphony of clicking chopsticks and conversation fragments layered on top of each other. If you were unable to reach a dish, someone would notice and surely slip a slice of meat or a morsel of veg into your bowl of rice. By contrast, Karen's dinner table clatters with spoons. Spoons everywhere. A serving spoon for every main dish. Oh, so many spoons!

But mostly, Yun wants to talk about the other day on the tube because she's tired of carrying all this weight. Coming back from Wardour Street on the Piccadilly Line, a lanky, young man wearing a hooded sweatshirt, a ring through his nose, had sat on her. Sat on her as if she were a foam cushion.

Yun herself is heavysset—her thighs are thick joints, her stomach weighs on her like a bulbous cantaloupe. By contrast, he was so thin that when he squashed himself down, she could feel the bones in his ass.

His friends stood around, their greasy hands clutching the blue pole in the carriage, smirking, reeking of alcohol. Yun, too taken aback, could not speak.

The boy squirmed and ground his frame harder into the fleshiness of her lap. Then, he turned around and spat, his voice a low hiss, ‘Go back to where you came from, you mook!’

Yun didn’t know what a mook was. But there was no mistaking what one of his chums said. Leaning in, the girl peeled her top away from her chest, and said, ‘One pound, wash shirt!’

Her companions and the boy sitting on Yun laughed uproariously.

Yun, throttled with rising anger, felt herself dampen with sweat. She poked the boy in the armpit. ‘Get off me!’ she shouted in Chinese.

The girl leered, ‘Ching chong chung, eh!’

‘Speak English, you bamboo witch,’ the boy said.

Yun felt herself disengage—as if she were watching something on telly. She placed both palms flat against the boy’s back and shoved. The boy fell off her lap with such force that his head thwacked against the metal pole his friends had congregated around. A collective deadening gathered, the air thick with pockets of clammy and sour mustiness, while the other passengers simply stared. No one came to her aid; no one said anything at all.

The next station came up. The doors opened with a hiss. Yun felt as if someone had smacked her with the paddle of a ping-pong bat. She watched them lope off, the boy and his chums, and only then realising what the girl’s green mascara and spiky, pink-dyed haircut reminded her of, she shouted after her,

‘You, dragonfruit!’ The incident now feels grafted as invisible weight on her back, mushrooming like a smelly fart, and no matter where she goes, she feels tense, teetering on the edge of perennial filthy exposure, as if people everywhere in England were liable to come up to her and rip off her face. In terms of keeping her at home, it beats urinary incontinence.

Karen has a favour to ask. ‘Mama, you pick up Lulu from school. She likes the nursery rhymes you teach her. That way she can learn some Chinese.’

Yun looks at Karen neatly plaiting Lulu’s hair into two pigtails before the mirror. Lulu purses her lips at having her hair yanked every which way. Yun shakes her head. ‘I don’t know the way.’ She suspects this isn’t a favour to Karen, as such, more that Karen has discussed with Qiang the problem of his mother not venturing out of the house at all, and how the lack of exercise will increase her obesity and exacerbate her other attendant physical illnesses.

‘This is not a prison,’ Karen laughs, but Yun thinks she detects intent behind it.

Afraid I’ll become twice the burden; a spike of spite rises in Yun’s throat. Deep in her heart, she suspects she’s becoming hysterical.

When she first arrived, Yun had brought White Rabbit candy and haw flakes for Lulu. One look and Karen snatched away the candy and said it'd give Lulu cavities, her granddaughter's bereft expression notwithstanding. Haw flakes? Look at the nutrition label. Full of processed sugar. Yun doubts she has anything else Lulu will want to have.

'I'll show you a couple of times and you'll have no trouble.' Karen pats her on the arm.

'Not a good idea. What if I get lost?'

'I don't want Nai Nai to take me,' Lulu pouts. 'What if I have to talk to the teachers? My English isn't good enough. I'll never be able to relay any of the messages.'

'Don't worry, they'll just hand you a note. They don't have time to speak to so many parents and carers.'

'Karen, please don't ask me.' Yun tries to keep the fear out of her voice, but it snakes in, making her throat convulse and quiver.

Karen gives her a sharp look. Yun blinks rapidly. Her saliva tastes of bile.

'It's only a small thing I'm asking,' Karen says.

Qiang comes home from work and enters Yun's bedroom. Her son has aged beyond his thirty years. A degree from MIT, and here he's just another computer geek, a lowly peon in a major investment bank. The cold damp, the fogginess, the leaden skies of England seem to have seeped into the crags and pores of his skin, giving him an eternal greyness. He even moves with slower speed—his ankle suffers from a traction deformity where the Achilles tendon pulls against a sliver of heel bone, and as a result, he walks as if he were bouncing on air pockets.

'Are your feet giving you trouble again?' Yun enquires.

It isn't often that Qiang comes into her room for a chat. Yun has an idea what this is about, but still, it brings a frisson of delight and pleasure to look at him—the way he smooths back the wingtips of hair behind his ears as he sits down beside her, the way he lifts up his chest as if he's in a declamation contest. This last thought brings back a memory of Qiang as a seven-year-old, having won third place in an elocution contest. So proud of himself that for days afterwards, he'd recited, as loudly as he could, to anyone who would listen, the poem he had used—Zhu Xi's 'The Boats are Afloat'.

'Mama, give us a hand.'

'You talked to Karen?'

'To be honest, there's a yoga class Karen would like to take. She's still self-conscious about her weight. If you pick up Lulu, it'll also give you a chance to bond with your granddaughter.'

For an instant, Yun wants to quibble: I tried with haw flakes. She wants to tell Qiang about the boy on the tube. How she thinks about that boy all the time and how she tries to rationalise what he did—of course, the alcohol was responsible. The boy probably didn't even remember what he'd said. What swims up in her memory, though, like a film of greenish scum, is the way those punks walked off the tube, their backs jostling each other. This kind of casual hatred she'd

never encountered. Hatred binds you—she'd never be able to forget that boy's face, or the girl's either, but she has a feeling that if she were to run into them on Shaftesbury Avenue or Wardour Street, they wouldn't remember her at all. This kind of hatred is so anonymous it has no face.

'It's not that I don't want to help,' Yun begins, but she sees Qiang's eyebrows tighten, his cheekbones draw together. 'All right,' she sighs. 'I'll try.'

The first afternoon she's supposed to pick up Lulu, Yun keeps one eye on the mantelpiece ormolu clock, the other on the telly. Twenty to one, Yun is all dressed, pink scarf wound round her neck, bottle-green puffy jacket on. She sits on the couch and watches the second hand tick in circles. Her black brogues lie side by side, waiting for her feet. If Zhi Wei were here, he'd be sitting side by side with her on the couch, waiting patiently, like that commercial for flu medicine—the one with those Mongolians packed close together on a couch, sneezing with cold, waiting for steaming yak dung to clear the nasal passages. It only takes five minutes to get there, but Yun wants to give an extra half hour leeway, in case anything should happen. Her heart thuds unevenly, her skin flushes hot and cold, and her bladder is burning.

She goes to the bathroom again, adjusts the stay-dry pad that Karen has bought for her from Boots. Douses herself in lavender talcum so Lulu won't complain about her BO. She parts her lips in a silent whinny, examines her teeth for food residue, rubs a pointer over her gums and smacks her lips a couple of times.

In the hall, after she slips on her shoes, she sees that she's missed her intended departure by five minutes. She takes the house keys firmly in hand. Just as she's about to open the door, she thinks, did she leave a fire on; are the windows open? She makes a quick inspection of the house: the stove is unused, as vacant as a keeled-over boat; the drapes are pulled, the air circulating the house is musty.

Yun pulls open the front door. The hallway outside is dark, the stairwell echoes hollow with the sound of an apartment door closing on one of the floors above. A tinny voice wafts somewhere below, and a gust of wind, from nowhere, blows in her face, bringing with it a sour, heavy smell—something fetid, like alcohol. Yun pulls the front door closed. She locks it. steps away. Her glance falls on the clock face. The second hand is blurring.

The phone is ringing like an alarm; its shrill jangle arouses Yun from her stupor. Did she fall asleep? She draws the drapes. Paltry sunshine palliates the sullen greyness outside. Two birds alight on the bare branch of an elm—thrushes, or that's what Karen has told her they're called.

Time has slipped by, and the phone now stops ringing.

Yun returns to the couch. This is how Karen finds her when she walks in with a panicstricken Lulu. Karen's face is as puffy and mottled as a red bean bun.

'What happened? The school called me, some school secretary being all snippy with me on the phone because no one came to pick up Lulu and it's an hour past home time. Are you okay?'

Then, she slowly takes in the scene—Yun sitting demure on the couch with jacket and shoes, her face fallen into a kind of comatose immobility. ‘Did you hear what I said?’ Karen shakes Yun’s shoulder.

Yun jerks upright. Her right eyelid feels congealed so that she sees her daughter-in-law through a one-eyed squint. Karen’s pupils are black and dancing with rage, and she seems to be trying to control her words with effort.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Her hand grabs Yun’s, crushing the fingers. ‘Lulu was scared half to death, thinking I’d forgotten to pick her up.’

Her granddaughter does seem diminished somehow, flatter in the jaw, her shoulders squared tightly around her frame. She’s had a scare and it’s all Yun’s fault. Tears well. Lulu looks away.

‘Well?’

The silence dips and swells. It has its own presence.

Karen’s face gives way at last to her inner rage, turns disbelieving, then scornful. ‘Wait till Qiang gets a load of this.’ She drags Lulu with her. ‘Come on, sweetie, let’s get you changed for ballet.’

Hours later, when Qiang gets home, Yun is lying on her bed, still in jacket and shoes. She hears Karen’s rabid English wittering away, and Yun turns over to face the window. The thrushes are still on that branch, pecking at their feathers. Or maybe they’ve gone and come back. They’ve flown their little trips, circumnavigated the neighbourhood, alighted on other destinations, all without the slightest effort.

Qiang knocks on the bedroom door. ‘*Ma, nǐ méishì ba?*’ There’s nothing wrong with you, is there? His tone is not belligerent. In fact, it stays casual, emotionless.

Her gaze still on those thrushes, Yun says, so softly that she wonders if she means for her son to hear it, ‘On the double, bibbidi bob.’

From behind the door, Qiang’s knocking pauses. ‘Did you say something, Ma?’

She doesn’t answer. He stands there for long minutes. Finally, she hears the soft click when he releases the door handle, his tread as he turns away. This is how a Chinese person becomes invisible, not because she is rubbed out by society or the racial elements in it, but because her face is no longer familiar to her loved ones.

At dinner, Qiang turns to her quietly. ‘Just tell me why. I want to understand.’ How to explain that paralysing heaviness that began to creep up her legs that afternoon?

How to explain that moment at the door—it wasn’t as if she actually made a decision, a choice to abandon—no, a kind of momentum tipped her backward, an action that was as *verbless* as a Chinese person without a face.

Qiang stabs an asparagus head with his fork, waiting. His mouth hovers above the spear, opening. And then, the moment to reveal anything is gone. His lips grip the stem. The teeth sink down, it disappears. How discombobulating a mouth can seem, as if to spite the face.

Lulu comes in to say goodnight, breath minty fresh, wearing eyesore pyjamas with a busy print of princesses and frogs that she's buttoned all the way to the neck. Yun feels awful about earlier, but Lulu crawls into bed with her, blithe and carefree. She's never wanted to do this before. Is it that the memory of the young is short, or that Lulu forgives easily? A sharp stab in her heart as Lulu says, 'Nai Nai, tell me a story.'

Yun pats Lulu on the head, clears her throat. Proceeds to tell her the beginning of the story of the Monkey King and the *Journey to the West*. But with the cacophony of foreign Mandarin syllables she's not used to, Lulu is fast asleep before they even get to the monkey emerging out of his stone-egg. Qiang comes to carry Lulu back to her own bed.

The need for Yun to communicate with her son suddenly courses through her like wild desire, the way Zhi Wei's Ben Wa balls had once inflamed her—molten, searing heat that blazed through her innards. 'Do you remember the poem that won you that contest when you were seven?'

Qiang blinks. 'What?' Her son appraises her. Seems to draw a kind of conclusion. 'Ma, talk to me. You do remember what happened today, don't you?'

She isn't going loopy, if that's what he thinks. She tries again. 'You also really liked Li Bai's poem. Do you remember this one?' She begins to recite the eighth century Poet Sage's famous poem about homesickness:

Chuáng qián míng yuèguāng
Yí shì dì shàng shuāng

Qiang interrupts her, 'Ma, did you hear me? I asked you what happened today.'
'*Zhēn de xià'ng huí jiā.*' I really want to go home.

'But why?' Qiang's face elongates. 'Why do you want to live alone? Who will take care of you back home?'

The words settle into her bones like weight. It's hot in the room, and her feet lie sunken in the bedspread. Her son wants logical answers. Logical deductions and logical reasoning. Is this really where understanding begins?

She hears the words. Do they think she can't hear or understand the words? In the dark, light from passing cars outside strobes across the ceiling, a pattern so precise it mesmerises her. A horn bleats, pedestrians chatter on their way home after a night out; an inner hum along her veins, and those words, like black bats, fly around the room.

Words she can't understand, but that she knows are about her all the same.

She hears the words 'hospital' and 'money'. She hears Qiang's frustrated sigh. She hears him ask what the relatives at home would think, that he can't even look after his old Ma?

It's not like that. Yun wants to comfort him. I know you care about your old Ma. I know you do.

She can't sleep. It's deep in the night when she hears Karen and Qiang making love, the creak and groan of the bed, their sighs and quiet enjoyment. Their quiet talk in the bathroom afterwards, the toilet flushing, the tap running.

She rises from her bed, struggles with the bedcovers, her voice lifting like a thin shredded cry from her cracked throat— words she's learned from the telly, 'Need to get to your mate's weddin'? All out of dosh and feel like sweaty vermin?'

Finally, it comes. The silence of the household—the stopping still of all motion. 'Get yourself a deodorant/an anti-perspirant of superior quality/your mum's tights have chafed your skin.'

The pausing in the flapping of lips. The foot half-dangled in mid-step. The door not yet closed. Are they finally listening now? Yun spreads out her fingers. Her face breaks with jagged lines, splintering like a saltine.

"Face" is reprinted with permission from *The Heartsick Diaspora, and other stories* by Elaine Chiew (Myriad Editions, 2020): <https://myriadeditions.com/books/the-heartsick-diaspora/>

Elaine Chiew is a writer and a visual arts researcher, and editor of Cooked Up: Food Fiction From Around the World (New Internationalist, 2015). Twice winner of the Bridport Short Story Competition, she has published numerous stories in anthologies in the UK, US and Singapore. Originally from Malaysia, Chiew graduated from Stanford Law School and worked as a corporate securities lawyer in New York and Hong Kong before studying for an MA in Asian Art History at Lasalle College of the Arts Singapore.