

## The Balancing Soul

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The sound of the machines and the repetitive drone of the ceiling fan made Little Fun cover her ears with her hands, but it was no good.

“Fun! Don’t stand still like wood! Come and take this bag of strings!” her mother shouted.

Little Fun could hear every single word clearly and she performed the order as usual. Her mother then talked to a man in blue shirt. This man must hold a high position as he was the only male in the factory, she thought. He took out a handkerchief to rub off his sweat. The back of his shirt had a big stain formed by the sweat. As soon as they finished the conversation, her mother lifted up the bags and said:

“Fun, let’s go! Walk fast! We have to rush back home and cook for your pappa and brother!”

They left with three large bags striped with red, white and blue. Then, they walked back to their home nearby, a public housing estate in Wong Chuk Hang.

On their way home, her mother stopped at a *siu mei*<sup>1</sup> shop. Various kinds of meat were hanging outside. Little Fun stared at three luscious roasted geese. Oil slipped off their backs down onto the porcelain tiles.

“Five dollars of barbecued pork!” her mother spoke to the butcher.

“Mum, can we have roasted goose?” Little Fun asked. Her voice was almost lost in the melodic chopping sound. It seemed as if she hesitated for a second before uttering every word.



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<sup>1</sup> Siu Mei is Chinese style roasted meat.

“Your brother loves barbecued pork,” the mother said.

“Mum, but I . . .”

“And your brother doesn’t like bony food,” her mother added before Little Fun could finish.

Little Fun knew that nothing except her little brother could change her mother’s mind. Then, her mother handed a five-dollar coin to the butcher and he gave her a bag of barbecue pork.

“Fun, take this!” her mother passed the bag to her. “Hold it firm! Don’t drop it! Otherwise you don’t have anything for lunch!”

They continued their way home, Little Fun held the bag of barbecued pork firmly with her left hand. With every step, she held it tighter. Her right hand was carrying the bag of stretchy strings, which was perhaps ten times heavier than the greasy meat. She didn’t put much force on her right; she let the weighty bag scrape the ground, which was streaked with soot and dirt. Her mother walked in front of her. With every step, she quickened her speed. She kept looking back to see if Little Fun was following her. At first, she held the two bags of plastic beads in her right hand. Later, her right hand ached and she switched to her left hand. When they were only a few shops before home, she decided to hold one bag on each side.

Her mother prepared lunch soon after arriving home. During the meal, Little Fun did not lift up a slice of barbecued pork, even though the dish was close to her. She kept eating her bowl of white rice and, from time to time, she glanced at the plate of pork.

“Fun! Eat faster! Help with the handiwork after your meal!” her mother said, “why didn’t you have some barbecued pork?”

“Mum, I’ll play with Chan Tze Man after lunch,” her brother interrupted before Little Fun could answer.

“Where are you going?” her mother asked, as if forgetting what she had just asked Little Fun. “Are there other classmates going with you?”

Her mother kept talking to her brother. No one mentioned Little Fun and the barbecued pork again. After lunch, her father left for work. He was a bus driver. That day, he had the afternoon shift. Her brother left too, leaving only Little Fun and her mother at home.

On most Saturday afternoons, Little Fun needed to help her mother with the handiwork. Before noon, they went to the factory and brought the assembled parts home-- stretchy strings and plastic beads used to make hair bands. They could earn a small sum of money.

“Fun, watch carefully. First, take a piece of string and then tie a knot at one end. Make it as firm as possible. Thread a bead...” her mother repeated the steps and demonstrated. Her mother did this every time, even though Little Fun had done the same work many times before and knew what to do.

They remained quiet. There was music coming from the neighbourhood. Little Fun knew it must be the girl next door. The girl who played piano. One evening, Little Fun saw the girl returning home with a music book. The same night, Little Fun begged her mother to pay for piano lessons, but she was scolded.

“Study hard and show me some nice grades before asking to learn this and that! You don’t know how expensive a piano is!”

Little Fun was still interested in piano. Whenever she heard the girl playing that tune, she couldn’t stop thinking the way her mother scolded her. Those were the moments that broke her dream.

It was only five minutes after two. Little Fun knew that she wouldn’t be free until dinner. She was tired and sleepy. She noticed a change in the melody. Another song was being played. She wanted to be the girl next door. She wished she could live in that family. She also wished to be a boy.

“Mum, can I rest for a while? I want to eat some soda crackers.” Little Fun requested.

“We’ve just eaten rice!” her mother said quickly.

“Mum, I’m hungry.”

“Just wait a while. The biscuits are inside the big tin. There aren’t many left. Don’t eat them all, leave some for your brother.”

Her mother continued to work while Little Fun was eating. Little Fun opened her little mouth widely and bit rapidly. Then, she swallowed. She hoped that would make her feel better. She hoped she could swallow her anger. She hoped that could stop her tears from flooding. She had once asked her mother to let her play with her classmates:

“Why can’t I go? Brother can go every Saturday! Why am I the one to work? It’s not fair!”

“That’s enough! You’re not like your brother! You’re a girl! Girls should always stay at home. There’re so many bad people outside! Someone can catch you easily and sell you somewhere! Crying will be useless at a time like that.”

After that, Little Fun no longer asked if she could go out. She knew she lacked the power to change her mother.

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It was almost midnight. Little Fun and her brother were already asleep in the bunk bed in the living room. There was only one bedroom. It was where her parents slept. Little Fun was woken by light gleaming from the bathroom. The light went out soon. She could hear the footsteps moving from the bathroom--her father’s slippers. Her father had just come back from work and had taken a shower. It was dark and quiet. Little Fun could hear her parents:

“Eaten anything before coming back?” her mother asked

“Yes. I must sleep now, early shift tomorrow morning. ”

“I want to hire an English tutor for Fun,” her mother said.

“Why? Is there a need?”

“I know it costs a lot, but that’s what we need to spend our money on. Our daughter is growing up and school is getting more and more difficult. It’s no longer just ABC. We don’t know much English and we can’t help her. We should hire someone to help her. It’s for the good of her future. In a place like this, there’s nothing better than learning English. I can take more hair bands from the factory.”

“Alright, you decide.”

“Does Fun know that I’m harsh for her own good?”

“She will know when she’s grown up and become successful.”

Her mother laughed, “When will you return home tomorrow?”

“Around six.”

“Bring some roasted goose back for dinner.”

“Why? We’ve just had *siu mei* this afternoon”

“Fun asked for it this afternoon. I know she always likes that. She did well in tests and I’ve promised her before, but I didn’t make enough money today.”

“Okay, I’ll bring it back. Let’s get some sleep now.”

“Remember, a bag of roasted geese. We should do what we’ve promised.”

Little Fun went back to bed and waited for tomorrow to come. She knew that things would be different then. In fact, everything inside her mind was already different. In silence, she seemed to hear the music again, the sound of piano being played by the girl next door. It was a blessing that she didn’t need to learn a musical instrument, she thought.

