

A MIDDLE-AGED MAIDEN'S PRAYER

中年少女的祈禱

Having lost everything in an agonizing divorce, Chin-Fen takes work as a public sanitation worker in hopes of winning back custody of her son. However, while backbreaking work is enough to clear the city's garbage away each day, she finds sweeping away emotional debris a much trickier proposition.

After eight years of marriage and life as a fulltime housewife, Chiang Chin-Fen moves into her late mother's old room in the family home. Once settled, her hopes turn to securing a stable job and then custody again over her son. She eventually applies for a sanitation job with the county government. Yes it will mean working in filth and less-than-comfortable conditions...but the pay is better than most service jobs, and she'll have at least some of the protections and benefits of civil service employment. She takes the admissions test and, soon after, secures the job offer.

Work on a garbage truck making its hectic and noisy neighborhood rounds was so much harder and more exhausting than she'd imagined. Chin-Fen and her teammates made easy and regular targets for neighborhood niggers who, after dumping their trash to the tinny strains of Badarzewska's "Maiden's Prayer" blaring as always from the loudspeakers, would invariably complain..."It's too loud (or not loud enough)." "You're blocking the road." "You guys stink." "Can't you be more disrespectful?"...The team was also always at risk of injury because of people not sorting their trash properly. But for Chin-Fen, this was all part of the "price" of a return to normalcy. With a stable job, she knew she had a chance at another custody hearing. It was at this point that she got the call that changed her life.

The author takes a light and lively approach to this narrative that follows the emotional rollercoaster of everyday life. Readers see the sacrifices and hardships imposed upon those doing jobs essential to



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

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making modern society tick and, through the protagonist's lived experience, see that sanitation workers seek respect not in vacuous praise but rather in small, simple and genuine signs of appreciation.

Chou Li-Chun 海德薇

Chou Li-Chun is an accomplished author, scriptwriter, and hornist (French horn). Her literary works span multiple genres, including adult fiction, children's literature, manga, illustrated children's books, and film scripts. *A Middle-Aged Maiden's Prayer* is her most recently published novel.

A MIDDLE-AGED MAIDEN'S PRAYER

By Chou Li-Chun

Translated by Jacqueline Leung

1. The Funeral That Shouldn't Have Happened

This funeral shouldn't have happened. Good people don't deserve short lives, tragedies shouldn't occur, and people loyal to their posts should never leave it.

The funeral came all of a sudden, but everything is still meticulously arranged. Pale, elegant white orchids. Sutra recitations. Swirling incense. A decorous funeral portrait, framed by silk curtains. An air of somber dignity fills the memorial hall.

I go up to fix the spacing between the memorial couplets and flower baskets, smooth out the wrinkles of the drapery, and adjust the plates of fruit offerings. Once everything looks perfectly in place, I return to my seat in the front row to mourn. I hate goodbyes, so why do I have to keep sending people off my whole life?

"Hey." A person breaches the perimeter of my sorrow. I shift, pat the chair next to me, and invite the approaching girl to sit.

Like me, she's dressed entirely in black. Her waist-long hair accentuates her slender frame and porcelain cheeks. I'd already noticed her once at work, not because she's pretty, but because of her dramatic persona.

"The news...I'm furious every time I watch it," she sobs. "It just doesn't make any sense. How did that garbage truck explode?"

We sit side by side, the girl crying softly, with tears and snot running down her face. I put my arm around her shoulder and press a packet of tissues into her palm.

The news plays over and over in my head.

"A garbage truck burst into flames! According to a report the fire department received last night, a garbage truck suffered a sudden gas explosion while compressing trash. Trash and food waste were projected everywhere; even the hopper blew apart. Two male members of the sanitation team had suffered ruptured eardrums and multiple lacerations from broken glass. They were both rushed to the hospital in critical condition..."

"Initial investigations from the fire department suggest a physical reaction may have been behind the explosion. A toy gun primer is suspected of being in the residential waste dumped into the hopper. Compaction friction created sparks that ignited the methane in the truck..."

"The investigation results of last week's garbage truck explosion are out. The accident was caused by a gas cylinder in the residential waste. A spokesperson from the Department of

Environmental Protection said that organic solvents, chemical liquids, and lithium batteries must never be discarded as regular trash...”

Every day, I scour through all of the media coverage about the incident like a maniac. I find and read everything, but grasping more details only adds fuel to my rage.

“This is too sad. We must find the culprit who killed him,” the girl says.

“If only I hadn’t taken leave...No, if only I hadn’t passed the assessment...” I say.

“No, it’s not your fault,” she says. But whose fault is it if not mine?

We want so badly to find someone to blame, but who? The person who threw away the gas cylinder? The agency that mismanages waste collection? The financial pressures and misfortunes that pushed us into sanitation work? Could it be that we weren’t careful enough?

To learn about life through death is too great a price to pay.

I always feel like I’m responsible, like there must be something I can do. Things can’t just end this way. Looking at the portrait, my mind goes back to a year ago...

2. 12.9 Seconds

It is an early morning in the spring of March. The air is crisp, the birds are singing, the flowers fragrant. By the time the skyline shimmers with a small sliver of light, I’ve already run four laps around the sports field.

It was still a bit chilly when I left home at 5 a.m., but after all that running, I’m hot all over. Sweat soaks through my underwear, making it cling uncomfortably to my skin like damp herbal plasters.

The only gratifying thing about this is that, for the first time after giving birth to my son, I can feel my abs again. They’d been annoyingly tucked under a layer of fat, what I call “the little blanket my son forgot to take away,” but now they’re re-emerging, with a dull soreness, as I step into my thirties.

“Keep moving!” I spy my older brother relaxing in the shade of a banyan tree. His job is easy. All he needs to do is to yell at me from time to time. “I didn’t wake up so damn early to see you slacking!”

I gasp for air and keep running, taking off my jacket and tying it around my waist. My knees are shaking and my heart is pounding, but I manage to keep my pace. After all, I was the one to beg my brother to help me do some special training. I can’t give him an excuse to go home now.

Each lap around the elementary school sports field is two hundred meters long. I ran for a kilometer and finished my half-liter bottle of water a long time ago. I’m so exhausted, I could die. But, to fight for Yang-Yang’s custody, I have to make it into the government’s public sanitation team. I know how fierce the competition is, and the date of the assessment is fast approaching.

“Lin Chia-Hsiang can go to hell, I’ll have Yang-Yang live with me, I can’t let Chiang Wei-Tung look down on me...” I put a hand over my stomach, which is about ready to cramp, adjust my faltering steps, and stagger past the banyan tree with my brother resting underneath.

Yang-Yang is my son. He’s in the second grade of elementary school and is my pride and joy.

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Eight years ago, when I was twenty-two, I was working as a manager trainee at a convenience store. I’d been a staff there since high school and eventually worked my way up to a full-time position. The store manager took great care of the employees. Of course, my performance was also up to standard. I really enjoyed working there. I relished the air conditioning, the organized shelves, and the neat, tidy environment. Even though we were so busy at times that I didn’t have time even to go to the bathroom, on the whole, that convenience store was a great place to work.

Still, having a small, happy family was my lifelong dream. I want to make delicious meals every day that fill the entire table and enjoy dinner with the people I love. So, as soon as I found out about Yang-Yang, Chia-Hsiang and I registered our marriage and I quit my job. When Yang-Yang arrived, I became a full-time mom, devoting all my time to my husband and son. Turns out good things never last long.

Looking back on those days, I don’t have any regrets about how I treated my family. I was told breast milk is highly nutritious, so I breastfed Yang-Yang until he was two, and, for those two years, I never slept all the way to dawn. Once we started adding solid food to his diet, I went to the market daily so that I could make fresh vegetable puree, congee with minced meat, and juice for him. I was never lazy...not like those other parents who’d make food for their kids in large batches to freeze for later use.

I even cooked breakfast and dinner for Chia-Hsiang. His meals were always nutritionally balanced, with vegetables and eggs and meat. I’d make him a fresh power smoothie every morning even when I wasn’t feeling well or was down with the occasional cold. So truly, I don’t understand what I did wrong to end up divorced and thrown out the door like a bag of trash.

Chia-Hsiang is always ready to list a hundred of my misdeeds: I’d stuffed the fridge too full, left the living room messy with Yang-Yang’s toys, gone over our grocery shopping budget, didn’t know how to dress up when going out...We were married for eight years, slept in separate rooms for six, and, by the end, I’d also had enough of his ridicule and insults.

But after I’d finished all the formalities of our divorce, I immediately regretted it the moment I signed my name on the agreement. I didn’t care about leaving the household with no money to my name, but I’d agreed to let Chia-Hsiang be the custodial parent to our son. I’d retained only visitation rights. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to afford Yang-Yang’s tuition and the additional daycare and extracurricular fees, and feared he’d lead a poor life with me. It was a decision made in pain. The question is, could I really give him up?

Once, Yang-Yang got into trouble at school. He'd lost his classmate's new mechanical pencil, and the teacher made note of the incident with a red pen in his communication book to inform us, his parents. Worried I'd be furious, Yang-Yang hid the book and never brought it home. Two days later, seeing that Yang-Yang hadn't handed it in and we'd given no response, the teacher dug the book out from the depths of his drawers, and only then was the offense made known to us.

This is the kind of kid Yang-Yang is, so reticent and maddening and adorable at the same time. Uttering just a few scolding words is enough to make his eyes swell pitifully with tears.

After signing the agreement, I lost those heartwarming nights of reading to Yang-Yang and tucking him into bed forever. I miss him so terribly! The void left from separating with your flesh and blood is something only a mother, who'd undergone ten whole months of pregnancy and braved the gates of hell on the delivery table, could understand.

As I sat by the entrance of the Household Registration Office wiping my tears, a short-haired woman in a white shirt and crisp suit jacket stopped in front of me and handed me a business card stamped in gold foil.

Lawyer Yu is extremely kind. Despite her strong, prominent features, she is friendly and down-to-earth. Before she contacted me, I never imagined I'd ever need legal assistance, much less speak with professionals like lawyers. I was terrified, but still I grit my teeth and dialed her number on my cell phone, my fingers weak like jelly.

Fortunately, she was willing to give me pro bono consultations. She told me my first priority was to find a job to prove I would be able to raise Yang-Yang. It would give me a shot at convincing the judge and the social worker who would do a home inspection when I file my lawsuit. To be an independent divorced woman, you must first have an income and a place to live.

I'm thirty and have accomplished nothing. I've been out of the workforce for eight years, and my only job was at that convenience store. My university classmates have long since built up impressive resumes, like the one working in an accounting firm and the other one who's a junior manager in an electronics company. They've all made a name for themselves. I must have submitted no fewer than fifty applications on employment sites, but most vacancies require at least one to two years of work experience, and most of the job postings without this requirement are for assistants – but I'm too old to be an assistant. How could I compete with all the fresh graduates out there?

So far, I've received only three calls for interviews.

The first was for a sales assistant position. The other candidates waiting in the meeting room were all women younger and prettier than me. The interviewer asked me straight away if I'd be willing to accompany my supervisors to socialize with clients after work. I hesitated for a few seconds before nodding, reluctance written all over my face. Naturally, there was no follow-up.

The second was for a receptionist position. The human resources manager who came to meet me gave me a once-over and kindly suggested that if I were to take this job, I should at least wear a skirt and some light make-up. I spoke candidly about my past, and, since the manager

didn't react too unkindly to it, I thought I had a chance this time around. But I ended up failing the English test for taking phone calls.

The world moves fast and waits for no one. I've stayed stagnant for too long and fallen behind my peers. As I keep running into one wall after another, I'm terrified I might have already been eliminated by the job market.

Unable to find an office job, I soften on the idea of manual labor. At least it would be a proper way to make ends meet.

Calming down, I consider my options. With no expertise, money, or connections, what can I do?

I think long and hard. My only advantage is that I'm familiar with the Department of Environmental Protection's public sanitation teams. Both my parents were sanitation team members, one driving a garbage truck on the night shift and the other sweeping streets on the morning shift.

There are no particular academic requirements for working on a sanitation team. Anyone can take the entrance assessment as long as they graduated elementary school. It's stable employment, and you never need to worry about losing it. Benefits are comparable to other government jobs. With the base salary and bonus, you can earn close to forty thousand a month. A job like that will take you well into retirement. Plus, my older brother also joined the sanitation team after graduating high school. If I get in, we can support each other, and I'll be one step closer to regaining custody of my child.

Luckily, I still have my family to return to.

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"I'll have Yang-Yang live with me, I can't let Chiang Wei-Tung look down on me..." I wheeze, turning my growing resentment into energy to keep moving. "Oh!" I stumble, then steady myself.

There's nothing to be afraid of if I fall. I'll get back up. I must become an extraordinary woman, with a better life than Chia-Hsiang. That way, I'll get Yang-Yang to live with me again.

"Still got energy to talk?" My brother lights a cigarette and waves at me. "Chiang Chin-Fen, come over here."

Finally time for a break. Stinky with sweat, I jog slowly back to the banyan tree, dragging my heavy, leaden feet. Then I see that Yu-Fu, my brother's colleague and friend, is also here.

"You're up so early! Here for a show?" I ask, my appearance disheveled.

"You've w-worked hard," Yu-Fu says, handing me a bottle of mineral water and greeting me with his usual stutter.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you're here to save my life." I lick my dry lips, unscrew the cap, and let the water hydrate my throat.

Yu-Fu is a recycling truck driver and is assigned to the same route as my brother. They're work partners, and he occasionally comes to visit our house. We'd met several times and talked. I find him to be quite nice, always smiling, unlike my brother and his huge temper.

"How's your...training?" Yu-Fu ask.

"She's slow as a turtle. I'm mad just looking at her run," my brother says before I can even open my mouth. "She's hardly a hundred and sixty-five centimeters tall, and after giving birth, she weighs like sixty kilograms. How can she be quick? She's wasting my damn time."

"I've got *muscle*, muscles are heavier than fat. When I was a child, I was a strong runner in the relay team!" I show them my firm calves.

"Your legs look like turnip stumps, take them home and use them for rib soup or something, they're hideous," my brother says, looking at me with disdain.

Fu-Yu smiles at us, showing his two snaggleteeth. "I ch-checked, this year they'll start with a written test, then ph-physical fitness, which is different from before. Chin-Fen, you're smart, if you study the pa-past questions a lot, you'll get in for sure."

"She's a cross-beak chicken trying to pick good grain. Every time there's an entrance assessment for new team members, they get applicants with master's degrees and PhDs. How can Chin-Fen win against them? There was even a graduate from NTSU two years ago." My brother looks nothing sort of skeptical.

I know that the acceptance rate for new team members is less than five percent. I also know that I have to finish the weighted sixty-meter spring in less than thirteen seconds, and that if I don't get a full score in the written test, I'll be rejected.

I know all of this, but I have no other choice.

"I've got to get in, I can't not get in," I say, trying to convince myself.

My brother kicks a burlap sack on the ground. "That was just a warm-up. Fu-Yu brought this sandbag for you. Female applicants need to carry eight kilograms for the assessment. This sandbag is fifteen kilograms. Run one kilometer a day with it, and it'll help you in the test."

The soles of my feet are stinging with pain. "Now?"

"No shit."

"OK, I'll do it."

I grab the sandbag on both ends and try to lift it, but the sandbag doesn't budge one bit, immovable as a mountain. Beside me, my brother scratches his belly and laughs at me.

The sandbag is so heavy, it feels like it's full of pieces of metal, but I'm not going to let it get the better of me. I try harder, adjusting the way I hold onto it, and finally, with much difficulty and leveraging, I slowly heave it onto my shoulders.

I've only managed to stumble a couple of steps before I lose my center of gravity and fall hard to the ground, the sandbag making a great thud. The polyurethane surface of the track scrapes my skin, setting my elbows and knees on fire.

"Are you alright?" Fu-Yu runs up to me anxiously and pulls me up to check my wounds. "You're b-bleeding."

"I'm fine." I push him away, grip the sandbag, jaws squared, and hoist it back up again.

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“Here, let me help,” I say to my sister-in-law, rolling up my sleeves as I walk into the kitchen.

“You can just rest in the living room,” she says in faltering Mandarin. She stares at the scabs on my elbows and sighs. “Still not healed? Do they hurt?”

“Oh, it’s fine, I’ve got thick skin,” I say.

My sister-in-law is from southern Vietnam. Her hometown is a place I can’t even pronounce. She came to Taiwan when she married my brother fifteen years ago and went from not speaking a lick of Mandarin to being able to quarrel with my brother whenever she feels like it. She works in a nail salon run by a friend of hers during the day and also at Vietnamese restaurants on holidays. She’s fully adapted to life here, and has more friends than my brother even though she’s living in a foreign country.

My brother must have been a saint who built bridges, paved roads, and repaired graves in his previous life to earn my sister-in-law as a wife. Like Amis people, the Vietnamese are matriarchal, and so we share some similarities despite our cultural differences. My mother is an Amis from Fenglin in Hualien County. She moved to the city for work and met my father. I can see my sister-in-law and my mother share some of the same qualities – both have the virtue of patience and are capable of enduring hardships as if they’re supplements, building up resilience to life’s trials. They’re women with personalities tough as steel.

“Hong, I’m starving! Is dinner ready yet?” my brother yells from the living room.

“He only knows how to bark, would it kill him to help?” my sister-in-law grumbles.

“I’ll do it.” I turn around and take the freshly made stir-fry out of the kitchen.

We use the coffee table as our dining table and sit on the couch. My nephew Hao-Hao, who’s in middle school, helps serve the rice and sets our bowls and chopsticks. All the while, my brother, with his middle-aged beer belly, has his legs crossed as he smokes a cigarette and swipes his phone.

“It stinks! Smoking kills and makes you sick. Go smoke on the balcony if you have to.” My sister-in-law brings the soup to the table.

“Everyone dies. But before I do, I’m damn well going to smoke all I can.” My brother has a mouth on him, but he hastily takes one last drag and puts out his cigarette.

Today’s dinner consists of egg with preserved radish, water spinach stir-fried with garlic, braised pork belly, and turnip soup. We sit around the coffee table holding our bowls and chopsticks. My brother shovels a big bite of white rice into his mouth, followed by a piece of meat.

“You look like you’ve lost weight, training must have been so tough.” My sister-in-law looks at me over the rim of her bowl. “Wei-Tung, can’t you put in a good word for Chin-Fen with your boss and get her on the sanitation team?”

“If a good word gets you that far, why did I have to put in so much effort when I joined? There were more than three thousand applicants that year, and they only hired three hundred. Luckily, I’m so strong, I came in twentieth place,” my brother says with a scoff.

“Didn’t your parents work in a sanitation team before they retired? Maybe they have someone they can talk to? My friend told me that you can buy a job with money,” my sister-in-law says.

“That was decades ago. Those couple and brother and father-son pairs on the team are all relationship hires who didn’t take the assessment to go in, but now management is much stricter,” my brother says. Then he looks at me and jeers, “Besides, Chin-Fen never wants to tell people what our family does.”

Can you blame me, though?

I’m angry but dare not speak, so I lower my head and eat in silence.

*

Our family home is in the Taoyuan countryside. It’s an old apartment no larger than ninety-nine square meters, with three rooms and one living room. Each room is so tiny and the bed takes up so much space that you can do little more than turn around inside.

To make matters worse, my parents brought their garbage-collecting habits back home, and for a long time our house was cluttered with all sorts of things – bottles and cans, newspapers and magazines from all over, making our apartment look like a recycling station run by a trash wholesaler. Ever since I was a child, I could barely see the walls of our home. I had to be careful where I walked, lest I topple one of those mountains of garbage and cause a landslide.