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One

Vincent leaned back in his padded swivel armchair, supported his knee on the edge of his desk, and smiled.

Things were all right, they really were. He'd just handed in a report to Choo, the head of his department, a report which had caused him two weeks of headache and worry, nights wasted in fretful calculations, weekends burned in frenzied bouts of analytical thought. But now, all that was over. And the report looked damn good. He had covered all the angles, drawing out the implications of planned changes to Chicago's trading system for the future of Simex, the Singapore Monetary Exchange, both in overview and in minute detail. With even the tiniest morsel of luck it would get routed up, after being seen by the head of the Division, to the big man himself, who came in only on Tuesdays and Thursdays yet whose intellect and presence dominated the whole operation. He could see it now: a personal audience, a few words of congratulations, an invitation to do some work for him, personal work, political work that could start putting him in touch with the right people.

Not of course that he wasn't already in touch with the right people. And now at last he had a free evening to get back on track with his number one right people: his future in-laws. He checked his diary. At nine o'clock he was due to be round at Connie's for dinner. He always had dinner there on Mondays.

Dinner so late in the evening was something he'd found difficult to get used to.

Vincent guessed that dinner was always so late because the whole family had built their timetable around Connie's father, who rarely reached home before nine. It had been difficult for him to cope. He was always famished by six-thirty yet he never dared to have a snack at that time in case he lost his appetite for nine.

When Vincent had first got on the official list for dinner invitations at Connie's he'd consulted his good friend Yeow Khoon who had been at SU, the old Singapore University, with him. Yeow Khoon's advice had been simple. 'There's no faster way to a prospective mother-in-law's heart than through your own stomach. Eat heartily, express appreciation of the food, don't talk too

much on other matters. That's the way.'

Vincent had taken that advice. Perched at one end of the rosewood table, a little too far from his plate for comfort but too nervous to shift his heavy rosewood chair for fear of the marble floor, he had eaten until his vision blurred. The faces of the family became bathed in soft-focus, so that he felt strangely tender towards them all, towards Mr Lim's worn wrinkled face at the opposite end of the table, towards Mrs Lim, made up too heavily for her years but still attractive in a turquoise and gold *cheongsam*, and most of all towards Connie, her eyes flashing a sparkling jet towards him. Too bad he hadn't noticed that the distance from his plate had created a number of casualties: the corpses of chicken strips and water chestnuts shone white on the dark rosewood table. It was only the next day that he learned of the slaughter, when he had to ask Connie to explain her remark 'Dad thinks you're a slob, but otherwise can do.'

Nor on reflection had it been such a good idea to establish his position in the household as a man of great appetite. Now Mrs Lim pressed a feast upon him every time he turned up for dinner. Sometimes an entire pomfret would be steamed just for him. An extra dozen king prawns would appear and Mrs Lim would firmly state 'For Vincent'. The meal became a marathon that occupied his attention completely: first in anticipation, so that he would begin to sweat the moment he arrived, then in memory when the weight in his stomach would shorten his breath and glaze his eyes.

This meant that, even had he preferred otherwise, his conversation was restricted almost entirely to expressions of assent. Thankfully that seemed to be all Mr Lim required, for most of the time Mr Lim held forth: usually setting out his view of market trends or political events but sometimes recounting a funny story from the business circle in which he moved (funnier to Mr Lim than to Vincent, which was just as well, for there's nothing worse than laughing full-throatedly on a full stomach, far easier just to smile and nod and emit a nasal chuckle) or criticising the servant's cooking (another reason why Vincent ought perhaps not to have tried so hard that first evening: Mrs Lim's role in the kitchen was purely supervisory).

It also meant that when he was invited for dinner his evenings became a routine of ordeals, first an ordeal of privation, an agony of hunger that lasted for an hour or more, until the rumbling in his stomach was silenced by repletion, the second ordeal, when the satisfaction of his hunger swiftly became its own torment.

As if it were not sufficiently stressful that his relationship with Connie meant overeating, it also meant sexual frustration.

When he had first described Connie to Yeow Khoon, Yeow Khoon had been characteristically vulgar in the thought he expressed. 'You have rung up

the jackpot, Vincent. A Taiwanese film star — jet black eyes, long lashes, long fingers. Don't waste time. Dig in.'

It was the jackpot. But the payout was deferred. At least that seemed the safest assumption for Vincent. He could see Connie was the jewel among her parents' possessions. He'd have to watch his step.

So he'd never got further than kissing, nothing heavy duty. She obviously preferred, in place of raging torrents of passion, being caressed like a priceless Ming vase.

However he didn't enjoy being perpetually aroused without any hope of satisfaction. So he had permitted himself a little flirt, a brief no-strings-attached-affair, with one of the secretaries, a girl who dressed to thrill in soft huggable sweaters and coarse woven skirts. He soon found himself unable to take his eyes off her. Veronica, she called herself, although she'd only done so since she left school.

It had been a piece of luck, plugging into her. She didn't usually do much typing or anything else for him, but at one point when one of the other secretaries was off sick she had done. And it had seemed to follow inexorably, from the moment she first leaned over him, his longhand in one of her tanned hands, to check with him the spelling of a word, that he should soon after press her hand with one of his, turn her face towards him with the other, and kiss her.

How different that had been from the schemes and stratagems he had had to employ in order to capture Connie! His friends, among them Yeow Khoon, had had to manufacture opportunities for them to get to know one another after they first met at a party. Slowly he had progressed to dating her alone and then one night on the promenade along Marina Bay, the breeze coming in off the sea cooling their cheeks, he kissed her cautiously. The moon was hidden by clouds (he thought despairingly that the gods were conspiring against him) but Connie had accepted his kiss, although she did so in a bored detached way as if she had expected it for too long to be truly excited by it.

At the end of that day when Veronica and Vincent had kissed so urgently, and after hours of furtive eye and body contact, they had left the building together, gone across the road and without a word had checked into the hotel opposite. He had arrived at Connie's house that night satisfied, yet his stomach still empty.

And so his evening had been split into two contrasting halves: the first dominated by lust and hunger, the second by love and gluttony. Of course Vincent knew it was an unhealthy lifestyle. Now at last it was time to get things into balance. The Lims planned to announce Connie's and his engagement at the end of next week. Before then he would have to put an end

to this business with Veronica. Messy but it had to be done.

At any rate Veronica could hardly expect their affair to be long term. In fact he had a couple of hours to kill after work. Why not get the break over and done with now? He'd buzz down to her in a moment. But first he should call Connie. Connie worked in the legal department of one of the 'Big Four' banks. A good job, the sort of job a woman should have — loan documentation and other paperwork. Not like the hard-bitten hard-nosed types at the BFF Go-getters, that's what they thought they were, but as he said to Yeow Khoon the thing about these go-getters is that they don't get any. Legal officer was the sort of job a woman could keep busy with until she had children, and a job to which she could return once the children reached the age when they could be entrusted entirely to servants.

'Extension 142 please.' He stretched and yawned, keeping the receiver pressed between ear and shoulder, waiting for someone to pick up the extension. 'Miss Lim please. Ah, Connie darling. How are you?' He heard his voice softening as he spoke, that was natural charm.

'Vincent sweetie. Working hard you know. Can we meet before dinner?'

'Yes. I mean I'd like to. But working late you know. Your dad won't let you marry a lazybones.'

'Do you have to?'

'Sorry pet. But what has to be done...'

'Has to be done. Never mind. Nine o'clock OK? Don't be late! Warning you!'

'Yes boss. See you later and...'

'And?'

'I love you.'

Vincent released the external line and tapped out the buttons for Veronica's extension.

'Veronica. This evening.'

'Time?'

'Fifteen minutes.'

He put the receiver down. A thrill ran up his spine. They kept their contact in the office to the barest minimum. There had even been rumours that phone calls were monitored to prevent idle chatter during working hours. The abruptness of their communication in the office emphasised the forbidden quality of their relationship and heightened his own pleasure in it.

He might as well savour that pleasure now, for in fifteen minutes' time, when he met her in their usual meeting place, Handels Bar, he would have to break it to her that, among other reasons, the pressures of work, for both their

sakes, required the end of their affair.