

Her Mother's Voice

"Emily-a, give me call, it *important*," said the voice on the answering machine.

"Em..." the familiar voice cried out. Emily stood in her apartment after a long day of conducting assessments and pressed and pressed the skip button on her answering machine until no new messages appeared. *Emily-a!* She heard her mother's voice in her head calling her. Her pronunciation never changed in intonation or tone, except to get louder. *Emily-a!* She said her name out loud with a Chinese accent. She always thought it was funny how her mother changed English names into Chinese sounding ones just by adding the letter "a." Friends', neighbours', even strangers,' names became more Chinese-like. *Accepted.* For example Debby became "Debby-a", Charlie became "Charlie-a", Cindy became "Cindy-a" and so on. It even made it easier for her mom to talk or gossip about that person too!

But why does she keep calling? Four messages! Her mother was always a worrywart, but ever since Dad died of a heart attack a year and a half ago she seemed more on edge, calling daily to tell her about her health ailments and dispensing advice about foods, medicines, dangers on Toronto streets -- whatever Ma heard about. Emily tried to listen patiently; after all, Dad was no longer around to be Ma's sounding board.

Her repetitive lectures irritated Emily, reminding her of the fighting she escaped from when she left home for school.

“Daddy, Daddy,” she said with a sigh as she stroked the framed family picture she kept beside the answering machine. It was taken at Christmas 1985; the only picture she had of herself as an adult with her parents. She picked it up from the top of her Ikea bookshelf, turned around to face her white dining room table and settled down into a matching chair. Dad stood to her right in the picture. His eyes were bright, happy. Healthy. *Not that Dr. Eng, the stupid family doctor, would know any better!* She had called Dr. Eng and questioned him about her dad's visit to him the day before his coronary episode. Dad hadn't been his usual energetic self. Ma said he was grumbling about having stomach pain, nausea, dizziness and teeth pain. Dr. Eng just sent him home to “rest” and “take it easy.” He brushed her concerns away and took his usual all knowing attitude, assuring Emily that he had checked Dad out and everything was “fine.” Dad suffered a heart attack that night. After he died, Emily tried in vain to get her mother to change doctors. She hated that arrogant man who let her father die. Her mother would just shake her head and say, ““He is like family, Emily.””

Emily was just as tall as her dad and they stood shoulder to shoulder in the picture like equals. She thought of him as her ally against mom, but he never openly opposed her mother. Emily found she couldn't complain about Ma to him -- Dad would screw his face up like he was eating something sour if she tried that.

She missed him and obviously her mother did too. Her stomach growled and she got up to put the picture back in its place. It was 5:30. Ma would be cooking dinner. She walked past the phone and into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, she pulled out the rice cooker her mother had bought for her when she was leaving for university eight years ago.

"This way you won't burn the rice," Ma had cautioned in Chinese.

"Thanks a lot," she said to her and pushed the gift aside. Secretly, she was thankful for the gift. She did know how to cook rice or at least she thought she did.

Now she rinsed the grains of rice several times under cold water, like her mother had shown her. Scratches like scribbled messages lined the bottom of the pot. It had been well used. She scrubbed at the wet grains, creating a cloud over the clear water. After the fourth scrub, she let the rice lay still, hiding messages below. With a flat palm, she checked the water level before closing the lid and turning the rice cooker on. She was an expert now, but had been a bit cocky during her first year of school, dismissing her mother's instructions and doing things her way. She invited her new friends for dinner and cooked a classic rice dish her mom would make at home. No one at her dinner party complained about the crunchy texture of the rice and she pretended not to notice. Of course, she was dying inside. *How could she not know how to make rice?* She learned to not overfill the pot, ensuring the correct rice to water quantities.

She opened the fridge and took out mushrooms, onions and broccoli for dinner. Her piece of red meat had thawed in the sink and she cut it into thin slices.

Thank God it's Thursday, sighed Emily, as she covered her mouth in mid yawn. Her hands clasped the back of her head and she rolled her neck slowly from side to side and stared at her business card magnet on the fridge: Emily Chow, B.Sc. OT., Occupational Therapist. Emily dropped these cards off like candy to clients, as she liked how everyone seemed to pop them automatically on their fridge. "So much still to do!"

she groaned out loud as she thought about the files in the spare bedroom, her office, piled neatly on the computer desk. She liked to get her reports out within a week of assessing a client so that the information was still fresh in her mind. She knew that this made her popular with many companies and she had a very busy schedule lined up for the next six months. Three more reports to churn out to take care of the previous week's assessments. Emily smiled as she stir-fried the vegetables and meat. She kept Fridays free so that she could catch up on her report writing and start to unwind for the weekend.

"Happy anniversary, happy anniversary, happy anniversary, happy anniversary," she sang as Friday was her one year anniversary date with her boyfriend Sam. Emily licked her lips as she remembered the raw oysters she last had at Touché, their favourite restaurant. They were going again tomorrow. *Will I order oysters?* Hungry, she turned off the stove and grabbed her favourite dark blue Japanese bowl. She scooped two servings of rice into it and topped the rice with the steaming food.

Pouring herself a glass of iced tea, she walked into the dining room and pushed her right elbow into the power button of the stereo also on the bookshelf, before sitting down to eat. Sweet garlic, onions and soy sauce filled her mouth and she sang out loud to familiar radio tunes between bites. She was enjoying her meal when she heard a voice call out, prompting her to lower the volume of the stereo.

"Emily-a, it's Ma."

She felt the hair at the back of her neck tingle and she stopped eating.

"You home? Everything okay? Please call!" Ma spoke in a combination of English and Chinese, but tended to speak only in Chinese whenever she was anxious or

angry. Emily spoke in English only. She could speak Chinese, but after all these years of not using it, she felt stupid whenever she tried to.

Emily glanced at the red light flashing from her answering machine. Five messages now. *What is up? God, these complaints are getting tiring!* She picked up her chopsticks and bowl and shovelled the remaining food, then downed her drink. She looked at the clock again: 6:15. *Let's get it over with.* She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Ma, it's me," she said. "Why do you keep calling?" she asked impatiently.

"It important!"

"What?"

"The doctor, you know Dr. Eng, ask me come in."

"So?"

"So you come home take me see doctor. He want *you* come too!"

Emily sighed out loud. "Ma, I have to work you know."

"What work so important? More important than mother?"

Emily squeezed her free hand into a fist. *Guilt.* It always worked. Ma knew how to get what she wanted. *How can she say that?* That familiar anger rumbled inside of her. She felt like a teenager again. *Trapped.* She stared at the gleaming whiteness of her knuckles while her mother went on about not feeling well. They didn't get along the way typical mother and daughters do. She couldn't confide in Ma or tell her anything without being lectured. *What does she know about my life anyways?* "Okay, okay, what time is the appointment?" she finally relented.

"Eleven o'clock tomorrow."

"Fine, I'll see you in the morning." she hung up before her mother had a chance to say anything else. Taking her mother to the doctor shouldn't be a big deal and yet it was the duty associated with it that made it a chore. A burden. *When would she be free of it?* Fueled by adrenaline she grabbed her dishes, marched into the kitchen and washed them quickly. *Daddy, Daddy, where are you now?* Daddy. She got that name from television, maybe from *The Brady Bunch*? Daddy was the sweets man, the one who gave her gifts to bribe her into being a "good girl" who didn't fight with Ma. He was a buffer between the two of them, but now he was gone leaving only friction. She threw the dishtowel down. It was just like before or maybe it's just like it's always been? Drained, she poured herself a glass of cold water and sipped it down. It was 7:00 and she had more work to do now that she has lost tomorrow morning. Emily exhaled, walked into her office and turned the computer on. She rolled her shoulders back and started typing.

Morning was bright. Warm heat was awakening the ground, allowing for shoots of greens to rise. Some yellow faces had opened, warming the front entrance of Emily's apartment building. Others stayed closed; colours to be discovered. Emily drove from her apartment in Toronto to her parent's home in Oakville. Traffic was sparse and she managed a fast 20-minute drive. She turned her car up the black slope and parked in front of the red garage door. "Red for luck", Ma had said. It stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the predominantly gray and brown garage doors. *Hate it still.* She cringed as she walked past and used her key to let herself in.

"Emily-a, have some soup," called her mother as soon as she entered. "I made for you last night."

"I'm not hungry."

Emily kicked her shoes off and placed them on the plastic mat. She preferred the pink embroidered slippers to the red pair and slipped them on. Brown, green and yellow flip flops also lined up against the wall awaiting movement. All guests were required to remove their shoes and had the option of wearing an indoor shoe if they liked. Her pretty slippers clicked softly as she walked across the yellowing linoleum and into the kitchen. Ma was standing in front of the brown stove with a ladle in her hand.

"Ma, it's too early for soup!" she groaned as she sat down at the kitchen table.

"It good for you," said Ma as she filled a red bowl with steaming broth and placed it in front of Emily.

Emily stared down at the white square pattern that bordered the brown kitchen table. The plastic finish that protected the table was scratched, but it still felt smooth as she ran her finger along the design, pretending to draw. *How often had she sat at this exact spot drinking soup?* Soup was always "good for you," and it didn't matter if you liked it or not, were hunger or not. It was meant for your health and taken like medicine.

"Ai-ya drink up!" said Ma.

Annoyed, Emily grabbed the soup spoon and blew down on the hot bowl. The blue dove on her soup spoon had faded and the Chinese character was difficult to see. She dipped into the soup and tasted watercress. *Mmm, it was a good soup.* Comforted, she slurped it down happily. Food was the only bond she and her mother really shared. Ma cooked all the time -- no canned or frozen stuff was allowed in their house when she

was a kid. She ate rice at almost every meal with different kinds of Chinese cuisine like stir-fried vegetables, black-bean ribs, steamed fish, oven roasted barbeque pork and of course, homemade soup. It wasn't like she loved every type of soup or every dish her mother cooked. In fact, as a teenager she avoided having meals at home for a short time so she could be like everyone else and eat pizza, wings and McDonalds. Emily was surprised to discover she preferred her mother's cooking to the junk food. This didn't stop her from eating it of course, but she did start to request certain dishes from her mother, especially when she came home from university. Ma was pleased by this and went out of her way to make Emily's favourites.

"Good soup, Ma," she said, now relaxed.

"Your favourite right? You want more?"

"No thanks. So what have you been doing this week?"

"Oh playing Mahjong with your auntie and friends. You know how Auntie Sue like to win? She not win all week so play again tomorrow!"

Emily nodded and laughed. Her mother had one sister who lived nearby in town. Auntie Sue was a few years younger than her mother and one of her main supports. She looked at her watch: 10:45. "Ma, we'd better get going or we'll be late for your appointment."

"Okay, okay." Her mother took off her apron and picked up her purse.

"So why did you go to the doctor anyways?" asked Emily.

"Oh, I still have this cough -- remember I mention to you at Chinese New Year?"

"Uh-huh. But you seem better now, right?"

"Yes, not coughing much, but lots of stomach pain. Remember I tell you before?"

Emily tried to recall and thought maybe she mentioned having a stomachache or something in one of the phone calls, but her mother had an ulcer so she dismissed it.

"Dr. Eng call yesterday and say I better come in and bring you. I asked him why, but he just said you have to come in!" Ma said anxiously.

Emily looked down at her mother. Her petite frame came up to her shoulders and a familiar smell tickled her nose. Ma liked to wash her face with Noxzema. *Did she look thinner?*

"Something wrong -- I tell you this before!" Ma complained.

Emily helped her mother with her coat. *Maybe she was a bit skinnier?* She touched her hair. It was still soft and black. Healthy.

"What you doing?" asked Ma.

"Oh, just looking at your hair."

"My hair good?" Ma asked proudly. "I am 65 and don't need to dye my hair. Everyone says I have good hair."

"Yes, you have good hair," Emily said, as she thought how healthy hair reflected good health. She smiled feeling reassured.

Emily drove through the familiar neighbourhood of her childhood, past two storey homes with long front yards and streets lined with old oak and maple trees. She made her

way downtown to the medical building. In the parking lot, she took a ticket and parked her car.

“When did they start charging for parking here?” she asked.

“Oh, some time ago. Here let me give you money for the ticket.” Ma put twenty into Emily's hand.

“Ma!” *She's always treating me like a child!* Emily tossed the money back at her mother. “I work now! I have money!”

They walked into the lobby of the medical building and took the elevator up to the third floor. Emily had her own doctor in Toronto and hadn't seen Dr. Eng professionally since high school. She was surprised to see the same fake wood counter of her childhood. Ma sat down and she took a seat beside her. Weathered-looking office chairs lined the square waiting room and a double row of chairs, metal backs together, made a straight line in the middle of the room. A few seated patients were also waiting for Dr. Eng. She sighed; relieved to see Ma did not seem to know any of them.

“Old. Cheap,” whispered Ma waving her hand across the waiting room.

“Shh,” whispered Emily.

“Dr. Eng has so much money. You think he spend some to make this place nice,” continued Ma.

Emily nodded in agreement, hoping to silence her mother. She despised the man, but didn't want to make fun of him in his own office. She reached over and picked up a magazine. It was a "Reader's Digest" magazine. Ten years old. *So, she's right.* Emily smirked and put it down.

Dr. Eng, a tall man in a white lab coat emerged. He called to the waiting patients and sent them to examination rooms. "Mrs. Chow," he said turning to face them. "Come in." Emily and her mother followed his coattail to his office. She felt on edge, realizing this was the first time she had to face Dr. Eng since her dad died.

"Just wait here," he instructed as he left, shutting the door behind him to attend to his other patients. Emily took a seat in one of the new tanned leather chairs. She looked at the framed pictures of Dr. Eng's adult children that faced her from his large oak desk. His daughter wore gold-rimmed glasses and her hair was pulled back from her wide face. His son did not wear glasses and was tall and thin like Dr. Eng.

"Dr. Eng's children very smart," said Ma. "Son is training to be doctor and daughter is a nurse."

"Smart, but not very attractive," Emily snapped. Dr. Eng had come to Oakville around the same time as Emily's dad did in 1958. She was unsure how they came to know each other, but he spoke Toisan, the same Chinese dialect that all the local Chinese residents spoke. Her dad spoke highly of Dr. Eng's achievements and intelligence, as he had to start over and study medicine in Canada to become a doctor. Every Chinese person in town went to see Dr. Eng and he received special attention from her parents and all their friends. Her dad even went over to his big house to mow the lawn for him one summer because he was asked to. *Some privilege!* Emily didn't understand why Dr. Eng deserved this and she thought he enjoyed all the attention and advantages of his position just a little *too* much.

"Okay, see you next time," Dr. Eng called out to someone as he opened the office door and came in.

"Ah, Emily-a, you look so thin!" proclaimed Dr. Eng, as he took a seat at his desk. Emily resisted scowling and avoided his eyes. "Mrs. Chow," he said switching easily to Chinese for Ma.

"Dr. Eng," said Ma, immediately launching into a description of the soup she had made for Emily. Dr. Eng smiled. Emily noticed that his thin lips spread across his face, but he did not show his teeth. He spoke softly, agreeing with every comment Ma made, but his voice was smooth, arrogant. He laughed a bit too easily with Ma. *Fake.*

"Emily-a, where are your manners?" Ma asked suddenly.

Emily frowned at her mother. *Why did she do that?* "Dr. Eng," she said as she looked blankly at the doctor.

"Mrs. Chow, do you mind if I speak to Emily for a few minutes?" asked Dr. Eng.

"Sure, sure," said Ma and stood up.

"Just wait outside in the waiting room and I'll come back for you in a few minutes," Dr. Eng told her as he opened the door.

God, now what? Emily folded her arms against her chest.

Dr. Eng sat down and opened a file.

"Emily, I've got some bad news," he said as he stared at his file.

"About..."

"Well, there is no easy way to say this..."

She straightened up in her seat.

"Your mother has liver cancer. It's terminal. I'm sorry."

Emily gasped and tried to find her voice. *What did he just say?* She looked at Dr. Eng's face. He wasn't smiling.

"Your mother does not know exactly what is going on. She knows her ulcer acted up again. The new medication for the ulcer is working and I believe the specialist has indicated it is resolving. So far I just told her there is still something else going on with her stomach and to eat well, get rest...you know how she worries, right?" He nodded his head as if Emily had responded.

"So...if you don't have any questions, I'll give her the news now, okay?" Dr. Eng stood up, walked past her and towards the door.

"Wait!" Emily shouted to get past the lump in her throat.

Dr. Eng stopped and turned around.

"Don't you think you could answer some questions for me? When did this happen? How did this happen?"

Dr. Eng sighed and scratched his head.

She stared at Dr. Eng, deafened by the pounding in her head.

"We are not sure how this happened. Cancer can happen to anybody. We just discovered it by accident because of her ulcer, so she is lucky really."

"Lucky? In what way? You said it is terminal. Does this mean Ma is going to d...die?" Her voice felt hoarse.

Dr. Eng came over to Emily and put his hand on her shoulder. "Look Emily, you have to be strong. This type of cancer is not easy to treat and in your mother's case, it is very difficult to treat. It's very advanced."

Emily shook Dr. Eng's hand off her shoulder. *Boom-boom, boom-boom.* The pounding of her heart grew louder. She gazed at Dr. Eng's moving mouth, uncertain of his words.

"As well," Dr. Eng said as he sat down on the corner of his desk to face her. "It looks like she may only have four weeks left."

Four weeks, oh my God! Cancer? Emily felt hot tears stream down her face.

She turned away to hide from Dr. Eng.

"I'm sorry. Just make her comfortable, Emily, okay?" Dr. Eng said as he patted her on the shoulder and left the room.

Emily grabbed a fistful of tissue from the tissue box and blew her nose. She quickly brushed away the tears and tried to focus on the picture of Dr. Eng's kids to compose herself.

Dr. Eng appeared back at the door with her mother and they took their seats.

Don't look at Ma. Don't look at Ma. She cleared her throat and blinked to concentrate on Dr. Eng.

"Mrs. Chow, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," Dr. Eng began.

"Yes," said Ma sitting up in her seat.

"Well...I'm sorry to say, but it appears you have cancer."

"Cancer! I knew it! I knew I was dying!" Ma shouted and slapped Emily's arm, almost triumphant.

"Ma..." Emily managed.

"What? Oh," Ma said quieting her voice.

"What are we going to do?" Emily asked meekly.

Dr. Eng sighed and shook his head. "It's very advanced. I'm afraid there is little that can be done."

Emily shot a look at Ma. She was pouting.

"I've arranged for you to see a cancer specialist, Dr. Fung," Dr. Eng said. "He will take care of everything. You don't have to worry." Dr. Eng got up and patted Ma on the back. He handed Emily a business card.

"Can you take your mother to this appointment next week?" he asked her.

Without looking at the card, she nodded.