

Caretaker

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

I called myself a caretaker, but I thought that was no more than a slightly more politically correct term for landlord. I understand better now.

When I was born, where we lived wasn't called Silicon Valley. My parents grew apricots, strawberries, and almonds, as had their parents. We lived in the middle of orchards. We measured the passage of time by seasons and crops. The fruit trees are gone now, replaced by technology, people, and more people. The world moves on Internet time. Progress?

My parents saw it happening, and planned well. We sold off land slowly. Now, with them gone, I hold our four remaining parcels of land in the valley. The main one contains the house I grew up in.

My parents died as I started grad school, and I quit to take care of things. I've got degrees in computer science and music from Stanford -- just the thing for fruit and nuts, right? I went into tech writing. I like to write, and it's done me well.

Not that I have to -- I don't have to do a damn thing. I've got so much money that I couldn't spend it all. But I work, as did my dad -- to his last day he was tending trees and selling strawberries.

It was one of the first decisions I made, and still one of my best. It was the late 80's, and I was still damn young, still a Stanford undergrad. But, everything I'd seen at Stanford told me there would be even more of an Asian influx into the Valley, and they'd come with money. I convinced my dad we could do well catering to them.

We worked with a local developer, subdividing and building six large houses on our cul-de-sac. I even worked with a feng-shui practitioner to make them attractive.

And with schools within walking distance, some of the highest rated schools in California, they've never been vacant. I go for long-term leases. My dad taught me to go for the long term -- the perspective of a caretaker.

All six houses are leased currently. It's sad, somehow, that the real estate market has gotten so crazy, prices so high. My place is at the end of the cul-de-sac, and the lot next to it is vacant -- set up and maintained as a small private park for the families on our street. Developers

keep contacting me, offering to buy the place and put up a house. I'm not ready. Dad always planned to build his "new" house on that lot -- he never got around to it.

All six houses are leased, all to very good families, extended families -- five Asian, one Indian. All of them have a sister, brother, aunt, or parent living with them.

My job is more than collecting money -- I manage the places, taking care of maintenance, upkeep, and more. I contract most of the work, such as gardening, but I keep involved, and my tenants like it. Most of them call me "Mister Paul," even though I definitely don't insist on it, and we get along well.

Maybe too well, maybe that was the start of it. I'm a tech writer. While most of my work is for one company, and has been for years, I'm a contractor and not an employee. That gives me more freedom when I decide I need a break, or want to take off on a vacation. That's a joke -- when was the last time I took a vacation?

I'd cranked out a large pile of written material in a hurry -- someone decided to dramatically move up a product introduction. I'd worked long hours, and weekends. I delivered. They paid for it.

I was making my rounds, checking on landscaping, enjoying being outside for the first time in a few weeks. I was at the Woo house, second from the corner.

Things looked fine. The Woo family was typical, I guess. Mom and dad both worked in high tech. Two kids, boy and a girl, went to high school down the street. Grandma and mom's younger sister also lived with them. Grandma is a character -- she still practices Chinese medicine, in what is considered an old style. The sister, Julie, practices acupuncture and massage nearby.

Grandma saw me, and invited me in for tea.

"You have been busy, Mister Paul. We haven't seen you much."

I nodded. "Very busy writing, but that job is completed." I reached for the cup, bowing my head a little, and saying, "Thank you." I winced a little as I picked it up.

After we'd had a cup of tea, and chatted a bit, I noticed she was observing me differently. I smiled, and waited.

She smiled, and reached over for my right wrist. She felt it for a moment, then felt my left wrist -- in Chinese medicine, you have a number of pulses. Then it was, "Let me see your tongue." She muttered to herself in Chinese, then asked and motioned for me to stand. She shuffled around behind me, and prodded me gently.

She had me sit again, and she sat as well. She muttered about "spleen chi," then told me, "Your hands hurt, here," she touched the little finger side of my hands, "and here," she touched

my wrists. “Your fingers tingle. Your left shoulder is tight. You cough in the mornings. How is your digestion?”

I have no idea how old she is. I know you don’t try to fool her. I told her, “Not so good.”

She nodded. “And your sleep?”

I laughed softly, and shook my head.

She nodded again. “I will get you some herbs. I will tell Julie.” She shuffled off.

She gave me some tablets to take, funny oval brownish things that smelled faintly of licorice. She made me promise to take them over the next few days. She told me, with a smile and a wagging finger, “You need to take better care of yourself, Mister Paul.”

I checked out the other houses, noting things that needed care. I fixed myself some dinner, listening to music.

About eight, the doorbell rang. When I answered it, Julie was standing there with a portable massage table. I invited her in. I took her massage table into the house.

“My mother asked me to come over,” she told me.

Julie is quite attractive. She’s a few years younger than I. She’s about six inches shorter, lithe and well built. She’s also been one to quickly adopt Western ways.

“You needn’t do this,” I told her.

She shook her head and smiled. “Mother said to. Are you going to tell her no?”

I laughed. “Thank you, then. It’s been a long, hard month.”

We decided to set up in the family room. It was sparsely furnished, mostly bookcases. I thought we’d start in right away, but she had to fix me some tea first. She also checked my pulses and looked at my tongue. She asked what I’d had to eat. When I told her I’d just had a bowl of ice cream, my weakness, she recoiled in horror, telling me ice cream was very bad for spleen chi, very bad.

The tea she made was very soothing -- she didn’t have any. Soon I was on the table with a towel over my middle. She stuck me full of needles (actually, probably less than a dozen) and gave me a very good massage.

She must have helped me to bed, as that’s where I woke the next morning. I did feel better, though. And, I took the tablets Grandma Woo had given me, with my breakfast.

Grandma dropped by around lunchtime and fixed tea for both of us. Had I taken the tablets? Yes. Had I eaten more ice cream? No. She checked my pulses again, prodded me, looked at my tongue. How had I slept last night? Much better. She smiled. She prodded my left shoulder more.

“In the morning much better for you,” she muttered, then started asking me wild questions, including some about girlfriends, of whom I currently had none. She smiled, bowed, and went on her way.

Julie came by around eight that night.

“No table?” I asked as I invited her in.

She smiled and laughed. “No, not tonight. Did you have ice cream tonight?”

I shook my head. “No. But Grandma said I could have fruit, so I had a banana.”

She nodded. We sat for a while. She checked my pulses, looked at my tongue. She told me she would be by at eight thirty tomorrow morning to work on me. I didn’t have to shower first if I didn’t want to. I shouldn’t have anything to eat, though.

“Why are you taking such good care of me?” I asked.

She smiled and sipped her tea. She had very nice legs.

“Because you take such good care of us,” she replied.

“Oh?”

She nodded as she sipped. “You could charge us far more than you do.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I make enough, and have very good, steady tenants. Long term is more important to me.”

She smiled and nodded. “And so it is with me -- we want you to be healthy.”

She told me I would be getting worked over (not her words) a few mornings a week. I told her that Thursday was my day in at the office, so Thursday was out. She nodded, and told me we’d do tomorrow, which was Wednesday, then Friday, and then Monday.

After she left, I put in another two or three hours on my next project, then went to bed.

I didn’t shower first the next morning, but I did shave and brush my teeth. She arrived promptly, but without her table. When I looked at her questioningly, she told me we’d use the futon in the family room -- that would work fine. I nodded and went to pull it out.

When I got back to the kitchen, she'd brewed me a cup of tea, and a slightly different looking and smelling cup of tea for her. As we sipped, she quizzed me on how I'd slept, and how I was feeling.

I'd already put a sheet over the futon, and she soon had me stuck with needles. It was so relaxing. I couldn't keep my eyes open. I got the feeling she was talking, almost singing, but it was hard for me to concentrate, it was so relaxing, even when it felt as if she was pressing her elbow into my back.

I've had massages before. Usually when I turn over to my back, they work on my legs or shoulders. But when I turned over, she worked on my head and neck, rocking my head back and forth slightly, speaking softly. I was so relaxed, and relaxing more and more.

But she worked on me, coaching my breathing as she went, and then her hands were on my cock, and I was coming, so intensely, but her voice never faltered, and soon her hands were back on my head and neck, and I was drifting again.

I woke up with the sheet pulled over me. It was around nine thirty. I expected to see a puddle of my own juice, but if it had happened, I'd been cleaned up. I went off to shower. It felt as if I did have something on my cock and balls, something like massage oil.

But damn, I felt good. I got a lot done that day, even with harping at the gardeners that afternoon. Thursday morning I spent at the office, for weekly meetings and reviews.

Friday morning Julie was back. I was apprehensive. But, she smiled, fixed our tea, and soon I was putty in her hands again. I relaxed quicker under her touch, or was it under her voice? I don't remember rolling to my back, but I do remember a thundering orgasm, and then her hands on my head again.

I saw her Saturday, along with Grandma, and most of the families on the block. We had a birthday party for one of the Cheng kids. The little park area next to my house is the usual location for these, and all the families attended. I contributed a California necessity -- the piñata.

A number of the ladies inquired as to how I was doing. I was feeling much better, thank you. Julie and Grandma both checked me over. Julie told me she'd see me Monday morning. Grandma cackled.

Monday morning the needles were different, but the end result was the same. My shoulders were doing better, and it felt as if she was spending more time on my lower back and hips. This time when I came though, it was a gentle release, and very calming.

Wednesday morning, she was fixing us tea. I could tell hers and mine were quite different -- color and odor. Something clicked.

"You're drugging me," I told her.

She smiled as she stirred hot water into her cup. “Yes,” she said plainly, and then with a more mischievous look, asked, “You like?”

I sighed as I looked at her, my hands wrapping around the hot cup. It smelled good. It was calming and invigorating at the same time. I chuckled a bit -- her English was better than that. I smiled. “Yes, I like very much.”

As we walked to the futon, I could feel the warmth of the tea filling me. I felt a soft hand at the back of my neck, heard the whisper of her voice, and collapsed on to the futon.

On my back this time, my eyes opened to see Julie looking down on me, smiling. Her lips were moving, but I wasn’t sure I could hear her. Once more I felt the sensations grow, and a gentle orgasm overtake me. Then my eyes closed again.

I woke up and showered, then got to work.

Friday morning, as we finished our tea, I asked, “What are you doing to me?”

She smiled. “Helping you.”

“Why?”

“Because you help us. You are special.”

I started to speak again, but one of her hands ran up my arm. My voice faltered and my eyes closed.

I was on the futon again, on my stomach. I felt her strong hands on my upper back, but it felt different. It felt as if her legs were straddling me.

On my back when my eyes opened, to her request I knew, I saw and felt her naked on top of me. I watched and felt her slide down on me, and felt us slide together. Her head went back, and I heard her sigh. Then she looked at me with fire in her eyes. Her hands and voice took over once again, but this time I came deep inside her, and she leaned down and kissed me, before carrying me off to sleep again.

This went on for another week, until Friday morning I asked her to at least have dinner with me. She agreed, and took me once more to the futon in the other room.

That evening I made the best meal I could, hoping it would be good enough for her.

During dinner, I asked a complex question requiring few words. “Why, Julie?”

She sighed, and took my hand. “Because you are special.”

I tried to stay on that topic, but she pulled us astray, talking about my work, and hers. She worked doing acupuncture and massage with a relative, and through a chiropractic group. She enjoyed her work, but enjoyed working with me more.

I could tell she was making ready to leave. I gave her a questioning look. She asked me, "Paul, would you like to help others?" I nodded. "Of course."

She nodded. "Then Monday morning will be a little different. Good night, Paul, and thank you."

I stood and hugged her. She hugged me. "Thank you, Julie."

We kissed just inside my door. She pulled away a bit, but smiled, and then kissed me with renewed vigor. Then I felt hands working up my shoulders. She left me dizzy, leaning against the wall.

I spent Saturday writing, and Sunday repairing some lawn sprinklers. The Hsu's oldest son helped me quite a bit.

Monday morning Julie showed up at about the usual time. We had our tea. She led me to the other room. I looked forward to making love with her again -- but as I woke afterwards, I realized something was different. I'd made love, but not with Julie! I closed my eyes and breathed slow, still on the futon. Memories of a rounder, fuller body -- short breaths, and she made sort of a grunting, groaning noise, and had a different scent. I knew Julie had been talking to me -- I could remember her hand on the back of my neck. I could remember her talking in Chinese as well. I knew the other woman had come, strongly. I'd worn a condom. Yet, I didn't know who she was. Wild. Should I be worried about this?

I showered, and got to work. I had a lot of writing to do.

Julie dropped by before dinner.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

I sighed. "What happened this morning? Who was that?"

She smiled. "Paul, you helped someone. Is that enough? Do you need to know more?"

I shook my head. We sat down at the table. "I don't know."

She took one of my hands. Hers are small and soft, yet strong. "There is nothing you need to worry about. You are helping, very much. And, you are being helped as well."

I chuckled at that. "Okay. Julie, I trust you."

She nodded. "Thank you. I won't do anything to damage that trust. I hope you trust me as well."

I nodded. "I do. I trust you."

She stood. "I'll see you Wednesday morning, then -- and remember, no ice cream!"

I laughed and stood. We hugged, soft at first, but she took in a breath and ran her hands over my back with strength. She left with unmistakable lust in her eyes.

I laughed, and went back to dinner. The Ghaderi's had brought me leftovers from a family feast Sunday night. I could count on leftovers two nights a week or so.

Wednesday was the same, but different. Julie and I started with tea, and then she led me in a dream to the futon, giving me a massage.

The session ended in lovemaking -- with Elsie Chuang. She had a tranquil, even spaced-out look on her face, probably about the way I look when Julie has me in that dream world. I know Julie orchestrated us with her hands, and with her voice. Elsie moaned and shuddered when I pressed into her -- she was tight. And she held me with passion.

As I showered later, I tried to remember more. I'd woken up alone on the futon again, covered by the sheet. Elsie was having a rough time. She had three kids in school, grades 2, 4, and 7 if I remembered right. Her husband had been out of the country on a business trip, and got caught in a bureaucratic snafu with his visa -- he had to stay out of the country for at least three months. He was working for his company in Taiwan, where the family was from. They were making the lease payments, even though I told them I'd cut them some slack. Elsie had an aunt and uncle living with them, but the aunt didn't speak English, and I got the feeling the uncle spent most of his time at card clubs. The Woo family, and one of the other families were helping them.

And now, so was I, it seemed.

Julie dropped by a little before ten that night. She fixed us tea, the same for both of us.

"Was this morning better?" she asked when we sat down at the table.

I smiled. "I guess I'm helping. How many others will I be helping?"

She smiled. "Just one more." She leaned over the table and kissed me. I liked that answer.

Friday morning was our next time together. After our tea, she led me into the fog and to the futon. This time, though, she undressed me, and then undressed herself, talking to me, or to someone, all the time. She gave me a sensuous massage, and we made love. She held me, and left me sleeping again.

Saturday afternoon I had a wild one. George Chan called, and wanted to talk to me. Sure, George, when? After dinner? Okay.

George was at a start-up. He'd been working ferocious hours for quite some time. Before he arrived that evening, I concluded that I could cut him some slack on the rent for three months, but no longer, assuming they were in a cash crunch.

That wasn't it. He arrived with one of his work colleagues, Peter, and the problem. They had a product, but no manuals. Their documentation, if you could call it that, stunk on ice. They needed better, and they knew it. They wanted me to help.

I looked over what they'd brought. They definitely needed help. Okay, I can do this, but I'm going to need the help of your people to make sense out of this. The drawings at least looked good -- I could probably use those.

Peter spoke impeccable English. He was the CEO and one of the company founders. He had an interesting proposition -- he wanted to pay me in stock. What the hell -- I went for it, but told them I'd expect to be paid for any expenses I incurred, which would probably involve illustration work, which I'd contract out to a friend. If my friend wanted to go with the same deal, that was up to him. That, and I was doing these manuals my way.

We had an agreement, and a handshake. We went into my office and I wrote up a simple term sheet, attaching it to a personal services agreement form I lifted from another client. We signed copies. I told them I'd see them Monday morning to pick up electronic copies of everything. What was wrong with tomorrow morning? I laughed, and told them I'd be there around eleven.

God, what a mess! What did I expect, though? It was a typical startup -- a bunch of people in too small a space, equipment all over the place. I was also the only Caucasian there, and probably one of few non-smokers. The place reeked, and I don't think you could see the ceiling for the smoke. I could only take it for about half an hour before I had to go outside, coughing, sneezing, eyes watering.

Peter and George came out to talk to me; another person was putting everything I wanted on to a CD. I didn't think it was my position to point out California law restricting smoking in the workplace, but I did tell them I couldn't work in such an environment. George knew -- all my leases have strict no-smoking provisions. Pets I don't mind, but I won't tolerate smokers. Might have something to do with my mother dying of lung cancer from smoking.

Peter assured me something could be worked out. From the look on George's face, I guessed this was an area of some controversy in the company. I told them I'd be working mostly at home, but would need to talk to people to fill in blanks -- and I expected the blanks to be huge.

We sat around a picnic table outside the place. The guy handling marketing joined us, bringing some marketing copy with him. As a rule I don't do marcom stuff, but I knew they

needed help with that as well. I looked it over, correcting it to the barely acceptable level, then checked my notebook and gave him the name and phone number for my friend Patty -- she did superb marcom work.

We ended up with six or seven people outside, as I got a better feeling for their product and their overall strategy. When one of the guys lit up a cigarette, Peter barked at him in Chinese. The cigarette was quickly extinguished.

I got my CD and headed home. I left the car windows open all the way, and stripped on the back porch -- my clothes were saturated with smoke. I took a shower and washed my hair, which made the contamination level of my clothes even more offensive when I went to retrieve them. I hosed them down outside before tossing them in the washer. God, I can't take cigarette smoke. I prefer the California-staffed startups, living on caffeine, sugar, and fast food.

And to add insult to injury, when I popped the CD into my machine, the virus scanner went crazy -- every file on the disk was nailed with at least one virus. I picked up the phone and gave the bad news to George.

They were trying to do everything in MS Word. That might work for short things, but not for what they needed. After half an hour or so of work, I was able to extract virus-free text and drawings from the CD, and started building things in Frame. I'd figured out what I wanted the things to look like in my sleep, some time during the night. God, even the printed stuff they gave me reeked of smoke.

I stayed up way too late working on things. I could tell I was hooked on this one -- I sent off some emails early in the evening to other clients asking if it would be a problem to slip some of their projects. I'd reviewed the deadlines I'd been given, and didn't see any problems. I figured the stuff for George and Peter was going to take two weeks of solid work.

I didn't sleep very well, for going to bed around three -- my mind was full of questions, outlines, layouts. I dragged myself out of bed Monday morning, shaved, and brushed my teeth before Julie was due to arrive. I smiled at myself in the mirror -- wonder what was going to happen today?

She took one look at me when she came in, and asked if I was sick. As she checked my pulses, I told her of the job I'd taken on, and how late I'd worked. She smiled and fixed our tea. She said she'd help.

Oh, she did. I was on my stomach on the futon, floating as she worked the kinks out of my shoulders, upper back, and arms. We were joined by my mystery lover again -- she was more relaxed and responsive today, participating actively under Julie's orchestration. It was like a wet dream, only more intense, but still with that dreamlike quality.

I didn't bother to shower when I woke up. I didn't even get dressed, other than putting on my boxers -- another benefit of the home office. I got to work.

I got on the phone about one, starting in on my list of questions.

By about one twenty, I had a bad feeling about my estimates. Much of the information I needed was behind a barrier -- a Chinese language barrier. Peter was off doing other things, and George was supposed to be busy. The brains I needed to pick didn't speak English that well.

We did what we could for about an hour. George talked to the two I needed to work with at first, and they agreed to come over to my place at seven -- no smoking!

I had some dinner, or was it lunch? I don't recall. The guys arrived, and they were definitely bright. Too bad I didn't speak Chinese, and they didn't speak better English.

I was saved about eight when Julie dropped by. She sat down beside me and quickly dived in. I had paper pads and my laptop, and took furious notes.

I was either full of information, or brain fried, by nine thirty. I thanked the guys, and they took off.

After seeing them out, I returned to the kitchen table and sat down, my head in my hands. Julie stepped up behind me, chuckling softly, and started in on my shoulders. I sighed and the air went out of me. Responding to her questions, I admitted to not having very much to eat during the day.

I found myself walking with her back to her house. We went in the back, and sitting in the kitchen, she pulled together something for me to eat. She also consulted with Grandma, who checked me over, grunting in a manner which conveyed her displeasure with me.

Grandma wanted to know how long I would be pushing myself. I told her it depended on how much Julie helped me with translating. I was surprised when I said that -- I guess I was still operating in the sort of fog Julie had me in. I felt Julie's hands on my back -- warm, soft, and filling me with energy. Julie asked when I'd need her help again. Tomorrow afternoon from three until about six? She sat down, putting a bowl in front of me, smiled, and said she'd be glad to help. Grandma grunted and shuffled off, returning to make tea, mumbling to Julie in Chinese.

Dinner was good -- stuff over rice in a bowl. I do pretty well with chopsticks. Mom and Dad came in, and we talked about random things for a while. I told them of picking up the project for George's company, and how Julie had really helped. We heard noises from upstairs, and they left -- the kids weren't settling down.

"Time for me to get back to work. Thank you for dinner. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon?" I asked Julie.

Grandma frowned and said something in Chinese. Julie smiled and said, "I'll walk you home."

I took her arm in mine as we walked back. Somehow, I didn't think I'd be doing any more work tonight.

I remember her hand going up the back of my neck, sending an incredible tingle through me, then being in my bed making love with her, and drifting off to sleep.

I woke up early, showered, and got to work. I found different tablets, and makings for tea in the kitchen, with instructions that this was for me to take in the morning. I did as instructed. I was a whirlwind, digesting the information from the previous night and putting it into my outlines. Some of what I'd picked up caused me to restructure things.

A reminder popped up at one for me to call and set up my next chat. I talked to George -- he'd have the necessary people lined up at three. I told him Julie was joining me as a translator. He thought that was a good idea. I thought that was a damn good idea.

Julie arrived at the house around a quarter to three, and I drove us over. She wanted to know how well I slept -- I told her I'd slept very well, and hugged her.

Surprise, surprise -- they'd set aside a conference room, and it was free of smoke! The smoke level seemed greatly reduced in the entire place, assisted by a number of air filters working overtime.

We worked our asses off. I knew Julie was bright, but she picked up on things really quickly. She was a great help in helping me describe how things were to be presented, and where I was going to need more help. I showed them what I had so far.

We left a little before six. I was driving on auto-pilot.

"Paul, they are very impressed with what you are doing," Julie told me.

I nodded. "Couldn't do it without you. Thursday afternoon?"

She laughed. "On one condition."

"Oh?"

"You have to eat dinner with us. Mother is afraid you are not eating properly."

I laughed a little, but admitted, "She's probably correct."

I had dinner with the Woo family, sitting between the kids. They made fun of the way I used chopsticks. I promised Julie, and Grandma, that I wouldn't work too late.

That meant two thirty, when I ran out of steam and went to bed.

Wednesday morning was a little different. Julie didn't show up until just before nine, and Elsie was with her. I figured that part out -- they'd just walked the kids to school. Julie fixed tea, the same for Elsie and me, and something different for her.

I was a little nervous, apprehensive, eager? I think Elsie was as well. We talked about the kids, and school mostly. I felt the glow of the tea suffusing through me. I was looking at my cup, feeling myself drift off, when I heard Elsie sigh. I looked up and saw Julie walking over to me with a smile. She touched me, and I fell into the dream again.

I think she was teaching Elsie how to run me, or teaching me how to run Elsie, or something like that. It was confusing, yet safe and satisfying at the same time. I woke up relaxed and satisfied. I got up and went to work.

I was interrupted later by a knock on the back door. When I answered it, the Woo's oldest daughter was there. She told me with a grin, "Dinner is ready, and Julie says if you don't come over right now, she'll send Grandma after you." I laughed and got my shoes.

After another good meal, I thanked Grandma for watching out for me. She grunted, but smiled and laughed a little. I worked late, got some sleep, and worked more Thursday, not going in for my usual meetings. Julie and I went over again and pounded out more material. She insisted on driving us back, and I'm glad she did. Another good dinner, and I headed back to the house.

The phone rang at eleven that night.

"Hello?"

"Do I need to come put you to bed?" It was Julie.

I sighed. "That's quite an offer. I'll go to bed in a few minutes."

She laughed. "I can see the light in your office from here. If it doesn't go out in fifteen minutes, I'm coming over."

"Is that a promise?"

She laughed again.

"I'll be good. Will I see you in the morning?"

"Oh yes, you will."

"Goodnight, Julie."

"Goodnight, Paul. Sleep well."

I shut things down and went to bed.

Julie arrived a little past eight in the morning, as I was still brushing my teeth. I invited her in, then returned to the bathroom to shave. When I returned to the kitchen, she was sitting at the table, our tea ready.

She had to work my shoulders more, and I think she used more needles on me. I remember one in particular, in the space between the thumb and index finger of my right hand -- very intense. We made love sitting up, looking in each other's eyes -- also very intense.

The next three weeks were a blur. I ate dinner with Julie's family most nights. I went out with the startup folks on occasion. I had my mystery lover on Monday, Elsie on Wednesday, and Julie on Friday. With all the work I was doing, longer hours than usual, she needed to work my neck, shoulders, and upper back more. On more than one occasion I'd look up late at night to hear a knocking on my back door, and find Julie standing there, usually after midnight. I'd get ready for bed, we'd make love, and I'd wake up alone in the morning.

We settled into a routine on the documentation as well, meeting twice a week. Her help was invaluable. I was going to have to do something to pay her for her help. We delivered the masters, and had quite a nice party. I could relax a bit, and go back to bread-and-butter clients.

Wednesday morning -- I knew Julie had to leave early. She'd worked on my shoulders, showing Elsie what to do. Elsie was holding me after making love. She held me to a breast, holding me so well, and she started singing something. I don't know what it was -- she wasn't singing in English. I broke into tears. I don't know what happened, or why, but I couldn't stop crying for quite a while, couldn't let go of her.

That shook me up. It shook Elsie up. I couldn't figure out what had happened.

Julie came over a little after five, looking quite concerned. Elsie had called her, and told her what happened. Julie wanted to know how I was doing. I still didn't know -- but I knew I was still shaken. She insisted on getting me out of the house. She drove us to a Chinese restaurant up by the airport. We walked around a lot, talking, before and after dinner. As we walked back to her car, she told me, "I know what to do now."

I was still shaken, and scared. I held her and pleaded, "Please stay with me."

She did. We went home. She gave me a very relaxing massage, talking to me from time to time, relaxing me from the inside and the outside. We made love in bed, and I went to sleep holding her, clutching her. We made love again in the morning. I was feeling better, but still shaken when I left for the usual Thursday meetings at the client's office.

I got home around five, having stopped at the startup to go over some revisions. When I walked in the house, I immediately smelled something cooking in the kitchen. I saw Julie standing at the stove, wearing an apron, holding a wooden spoon.

She turned to me and smiled. I walked to her, my eyes filling with tears. I held her and cried. She held me.

We moved her clothes and things on Saturday -- the whole family helped. Julie and I drove up to San Francisco on Sunday, and took a long walk along the beach. We talked about a lot of things -- of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings. We talked about what we wanted to do when we grew up. We met some of her friends for dinner.

As we got out of the car in front of the house that night, I looked at her and sighed. I held her hands.

“Julie, I love you.” It was surprisingly easy to say.

She held me, and I felt her tears on my shoulder. She pulled back, looked at me and said, “I love you, Paul.”

About a month later, Peter called, needing their documentation updated in a hurry. We’d scheduled an update in another two weeks, but we could do it earlier. Julie and I put in a lot of time, but we got it done, bringing things up to the current revision of the product.

The following week we found out why, when Peter and George came over one night about nine. Peter brought a *very* good bottle of cognac. I got four glasses.

After a toast, he told us they’d just gotten another round of financing from the Venture Capital people. They also wanted to take the company public. And the VC’s had told them the deciding thing had been the quality of their documentation -- it was the best they’d seen. As far as Peter was concerned, I was the reason they were going public.

After a round of congratulations, I told them Julie had made all the difference in the world. Julie smiled, and then turned to Peter. Actually she turned on him, asking him quite pointedly if this meant they would work normal hours now, so George could spend time with his family.

Peter and George exchanged looks. Peter sighed and smiled, and told us that it was time for people to take vacations and spend time with their families.

About a month later, we were invited to a dinner celebration. Julie was impressed when Peter mentioned the name of the place.

It was a very nice restaurant, Chinese, and we had a private room for around forty people. Julie and I sat at the table with Peter and his wife, and one of the other founders. George and his wife sat behind us at a different table.

I was one of three Caucasians there. I think people were surprised with my ability to handle chopsticks. When a waiter tried to put a fork by my place, Julie hissed something at him, and the others laughed.

It was a great evening. The founders all talked a bit. So did Peter, as head of the lot. Julie translated on the fly for me. Peter made a point of telling people the rave reviews their documentation was getting, even if it did cost more to print than they'd anticipated.

The evening was over. We were getting ready to leave. I got up from the table, and helped Julie with her chair. As I turned to walk to the door, I bumped into George's wife.

And my heart almost stopped -- she had been the one! Julie had hold of my arm, and led me out to my car. I recognized her scent, the surprised noise she'd made, the feel of her body against mine. She'd been the Monday mystery woman! We hadn't been together in a month, but she was definitely the one.

I guess Julie took my keys. I managed to wave to others, and accept congratulatory handshakes and pats on the back. She put me in the passenger seat.

As we drove off, I finally managed to say, "George's wife?"

Julie sighed and nodded. "Yes. They are doing much better now."

"Does he know?" I asked.

"Mother talked to him. He knows something went on, but nothing specific. He is a much better husband and father now."

I shook my head. Elsie's husband had finally made it back into the country. We hadn't seen each other since the time I broke down in her arms -- Julie still kicked herself for not being there when that happened.

"So much of that happened as if in a dream. I'm still not sure what actually happened," I whispered to Julie.

She smiled and nodded. "Neither is she -- she accepts much of it as something in her dreams."

I shook my head. "Those are amazing dreams."

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Do you like those dreams?"

I took her hand and kissed it. "Oh yes."

She took me into a dream later that night, with the two of us sitting up on the bed, or was it a cloud? Her hands sent such sensations through me! I put my arms behind her, and pulled down on her shoulders, impaling her on me. She rocked and spoke softly to someone, as I fell even deeper into her eyes.

Within two weeks of that party, I had half a dozen startups wanting me to do their documentation. Some tried to be very cheap, but for the most part they were willing to pay more than top dollar, give me stock, or a combination -- whatever I wanted.

After getting the latest offer, I took Julie to dinner.

“Julie, will you help me, if I decide to take on some of these?”

She still worked three or four days a week doing acupuncture and massage. She kept a wonderful house for us, kept me fed, insisted I sleep, and so much more. She cared for me, body and soul.

She smiled and nodded. “Of course, Paul. Which ones would you like to do?”

We spent the rest of dinner, and a long walk afterwards talking about the different opportunities. I could take on two of them, with her help. When we got home, she asked if I could get help to do more. I thought about it. I could see if some of my tech writer friends would be interested -- I wanted editorial control, though. She agreed that was best.

Then, as we sat there on the couch, she smiled, and ran a hand up my arm and up the back of my neck. I sighed as my eyes closed, a tingle running through me. As one of her hands held the back of my head, her other hand touched my forehead, and I drifted onto a cloud. We made love on that cloud, and let it envelop us and rock us to sleep.

I cut back on my old clients, placing their work with other people. One client in particular was hard to say goodbye to, but I did it. They had been my main client for years, but their work was so constraining -- I had to perform to their style sheets, their stilted language and layout, and I didn't like that any more. I didn't have to like it any more. Hell, I could have walked away from them years ago. Ah well.

Julie helped with the decorations for Halloween -- our family had been using the same things for as long as I could remember. Oh, I've added some high-tech things such as motion-detector activated sounds, but a lot of it is stuff my dad and my uncle put together many, many years ago. The kids still love it. Old friends of the family bring their kids, and their kids bring their grandkids. Some of them were quite happy to see Julie by my side. I was certainly happy.

Then came Election Day in November, with the polling place set up in the garage, as it had been for decades. We had a good turnout. Friends of the family, of my parents, still drop off their absentee ballots at our place. Election day is a long day, starting at six in the morning and ending around ten at night. Julie helped, especially with the Chinese-speaking crowd. I got the feeling from the way she blushed occasionally that our relationship was noticed.

That night after dropping off election supplies and returning home, I held her gently, running my hands over her back and shoulders. She sighed and melted into my arms. We went to bed and made gentle love.

Julie, with help from Grandma, made me take time off from work. Well, we did it my way. Peter wanted me to attend Comdex in Las Vegas on the company, and be in their booth for “an hour or so” every day. I told him Julie had to come with me. He laughed and agreed. They put us up in what had to be a very expensive suite. We stayed on through the weekend, enjoying the pool, making love, and gawking at the excesses of Las Vegas. We had a great time, even considering the chaos of the show floor -- we both ended up working the booth at least four hours a day. We attended some great Comdex parties.

When we got home, I had emails and voicemails from more companies -- two wanted to hire me, and the others wanted me to do manuals. I declined the job offers politely, speaking to all of them about their timetables.

Our lives and the passage of time is oft marked by rituals. I still mark the passage of seasons, as did my dad. Halloween, Election Day, others, go the same as they have for decades. The day after Thanksgiving I put up Christmas lights on the houses (it's in the lease), and decorate the street lights to look like candy canes.

The Hsu's oldest son, Tony, and Christy, the Woo's oldest, gathered a bunch of their high school friends to help. That made some parts go quicker, and some slower. For a lot of it, I was reduced to supervising, standing on the sidewalk with Julie, our arms around each other, directing the kids scampering over the houses stringing lights.

Late in the afternoon as we were almost finished, I was holding a ladder for Julie. She was up on it straightening out a big red bow on one of the street lights. As she descended, she turned near the bottom of the ladder. I put my hands around her waist, looking up into her smiling face.

All the time we'd been together -- living and working together -- all the time she'd cared for me -- all those moments and more snapped into focus. The intimate moments -- not only making love, but also moments spent standing side by side in the kitchen, cleaning and cutting vegetables, quick hugs while putting clothes in the wash, nestling together on the couch in front of the fireplace, or just waking early in the morning and hearing her breathing softly next to me. All those moments and more snapped into focus, and I felt my eyes fill with tears.

As kids ran around us, laughing, I looked up to her and asked, “Julie, will you marry me?”

She looked at me with shock, then pleasure, and she slipped a bit. I caught her, holding her waist to my chest, holding her and turning round and round with her, holding on to her. She was laughing and crying at the same time, finally saying, “Yes, yes, yes!”

I set her down and we kissed. We hugged and both cried, and both laughed a little and dried the other's face. She wanted to run and tell her mother. I held her hand, and told her I wanted to -- I needed to ask her permission. Julie thought that was strange, but agreed.

The kids were just about through. I called Tony over, and took some cash out of my wallet, telling him to go get pizzas and soft drinks, and bring them back to my garage. I had something I needed to do, but would be there by the time he got back.

Tony gathered the rest of the kids and took pizza orders. He's a good kid. I wondered if he needed financial help with college -- I'm sure he did.

Julie and I walked slowly to the Woo's house. Grandma was sitting in the kitchen, reading a magazine while things cooked on the stove. She looked at us, and gave us both a very suspicious look, narrowing her gaze. Julie and I were holding hands.

"Grandmother," I said, strength returning to my voice, "I would like to marry Julie."

A smile filled her face. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm asking your permission," I told her.

She shook her head, still smiling. "You are so silly some times, Mister Paul. What did she say?"

Things disintegrated from there, with Julie sobbing and hugging me, Grandma standing up and cackling in her happy way, and the young Woo kids running into the kitchen wanting to know what was happening. Julie's sister came in, and the adults lapsed into Chinese. I got a teary-eyed hug. The kids caught on, as they started hugging me, calling me "Uncle Paul."

I looked outside and saw Tony driving slowly up the street, attracting the kids who were doing cleanup. I grabbed Julie -- we had to go.

We'd tested the lights for all the houses on the old tables in the garage. Now we gathered around those same old tables, in that large room, for dinner. The kids -- high school seniors, really, about a dozen of them, were laughing and talking, pouring soda and grabbing pieces of pizza.

I got some for Julie and me, and found a place for us to sit. She sat there, smiling, not eating. "Eat," I prodded her. She gave me a very strange look and shook her head slowly. I got her to eat. I ate some as well, but not much.

We thanked the kids for their help. They did a pretty good job cleaning up. As I'd grown up, that large room had been a center of activity, marking the seasons -- sorting and drying fruit, parties, polling booths on election days. Julie and I walked over to her sister's house a while later.

At least one adult from each of the other families on the block was there, mostly wives. Everyone was excited. I was asked a lot of questions, and to most of them gave the same reply -- "I don't know." When were we getting married? I don't know. What kind of ceremony? I don't know. Julie knew. Not surprisingly, the women took over the conversation, which

switched to Chinese. George Chan and Alan Woo finally took me into the kitchen, and got out a bottle of cognac. Alan sighed, shook his head, and told me things were out of my hands now.

Grandma was having a great time. On one of her trips into the kitchen to refill a teapot, she got a small water glass from the cupboard, poured three fingers of cognac in it, and kicked it back. She looked at me, cackled, gave me a quick hug, and went back to the hen party. Alan shook his head, then laughed. "Welcome to the family."

The next few months were barely controlled chaos. I had Julie working with me at least full time -- she'd all but quit her other work, only retaining a few clients, one of them me. Julie turned out to be quite talented doing illustrations, as well as translating. Christy Woo also turned out to have quite the flair for writing. She worked with us a few hours a week after school.

When I told the attorney who handles my affairs I was getting married, he insisted on having some serious discussions. I held a lot of property still. I had eighty acres of prime land off Zanker road. His recommendation was to sell it before I got married, and put the money into a trust.

I agreed, and told him to start the ball rolling. What we started rolling was a bidding war among a group of developers. The final price was phenomenal. Julie was in tears as I told her my plans for the money. "Paul, I love you," was all she could say. We held each other close that night. I asked her to take us to our cloud again. She smiled, wiped her face, and ran her hands up my neck. I sighed and moaned as my eyes fell closed.

We set up a number of trusts -- I talked to the families, and with their approval, set up trusts to pay for the kids' education.

We had more business than we could handle. One company *really* wanted us to do their stuff. We were talking to them in our "office," a converted bedroom filled with three workstations, two printers, a small file server, and blue network cables draped all over the place. I was wondering how to turn them down, when one of their founders told me they'd also upgrade all my equipment if I'd take their job. As I was thinking about it, he added that they'd take care of all the installation and setup. I nodded to Julie, and held out my hand to shake on the deal.

That was one of the best deals we've taken. They replaced my mishmash of old Macs with top of the line machines, all the CRTs turned into large flat panel displays, my old printers were replaced, a real file server installed, and all of it talking through high-speed interconnects.

Oh, and we got a nice chunk of stock in their outfit as well. As Christy did a lot of work on that one, I made sure she got a chunk of the stock, as well as what I paid her. It's amazing how kids who before were talking about Cal State were now mentioning Santa Clara University, Stanford, Princeton. I was proud of them, and told them so.

But our small office was a problem. When all of us were in the room at the same time, it was crowded, especially if Patty or someone else was there integrating in their work -- I had half a dozen colleagues subcontracting on things. Julie and I talked about reworking the one

remaining outbuilding behind the house. Part of it was a garage, but the larger portion had been used for sorting and drying fruit, parties, polling place, and just about anything else. We could turn it into a nice, large office. My biggest complaint was that I'd have to get dressed in the mornings.

Julie fooled me. She deceived me. I love her. She worked with Christy and some of the other kids, and before I knew it, a dumpster appeared, and a bunch of kids spent their spring break week cleaning out the space.

Julie walked me through it, just after the drying tables had been taken out and the floors swept. It was a very nice space -- about thirty by sixty feet, with high ceilings. There was even a bathroom already. She showed me the drawings she'd done, layouts showing lighting, partitions, the works. She looked at me, smiling, and told me we should do it. I catch on quick. I nodded, and said, "Yes, dear." Contractors appeared through different family connections. The work was done quickly, skillfully, and there was always a pot of rice cooking.

God, but she was beautiful in her wedding dress. It was an interesting Western-Eastern ceremony, and I don't remember much of it. I do remember putting a ring on her finger, having her put one on mine, and holding her and kissing her. In all the pictures, we're smiling from ear to ear.

We held the reception in the partially converted garage -- the lights, wallboard, and plumbing were in. There must have been over a hundred people there, but we had room for them all. Christy, Tony, and their friends dressed up as waiters and served everyone, working with the caterers. I was amazed at the old family friends who were there. Seeing some of those people brought tears to my eyes.

We spent our first married night together in the house, and the next week in Hawaii. No computers, no work, just Julie and me. And that first night in Hawaii, the doors open so we could hear the sound of the surf nearby, she ran her hands up the sides of my neck, carrying me off to a place of incredible pleasure.

The work was there when we returned, though. Julie and I had done a tricky thing to one client. They had a section of their user interface that was just plain old clunky. It was hard to describe, and harder to use. In about two hours, Julie and I came up with a better idea. We did mock-ups of the screens, and documented it. We'd shipped that stuff to them electronically two days before the wedding.

They loved it. When we got back, they'd rewritten the code to implement what we'd suggested, and carried some of the underlying themes into other areas of the product, giving us more material to rewrite. We set up whiteboards and chairs in the garage, and had a brainstorming session with about ten of their people, revamping things. It was intense.

At the end of that session, looking around, Meiling, their software hotshot, huddled her people for a few minutes. Then she told us she wanted to move a few of them into the garage for a week to do the implementation. We had the space, and the electrical outlets. We had folding

tables. They'd bring computers and printers. They'd set up a hub, and we could run a line to the server in the house. Julie and I looked at each other. Why not?

I helped them set up the next day, and we dug into it. They were a younger crowd, so my strict "no smoking" rule wasn't hard on them. The finishing construction work went on around them. We ended up with two large enclosed offices, an enclosed conference room, a server room, and two large open spaces for cubicles.

Julie and I argued about moving things out of the house and into the offices. I wanted to keep at least one workstation in the house, for when I got ideas at unusual times. She wanted everything out of the house for pretty much the same reason. Finally, she sat in my lap, looked into my eyes, and asked, "For me, please, darling?" How can you say no to that?

She fooled me again, getting ergonomically correct furniture for our offices. We put the old stuff in the open space.

That night after dinner, I was rolling my shoulders -- I was sore from moving things.

She put a hand on my shoulder. "Now I have a place to set up my table," she told me. We set up her massage table, I stripped and got on it, and she turned me to jelly once again. She set me on fire when I rolled to my back, and rode me, taking me to the heights with her voice, her hands, her body. When I came, I saw stars -- and her. The next morning in bed, I went down on her, eating her until she was incoherent.

A month later, the virus started hitting the neighborhood. First, it hit the Woo house, then the Cheng's. I guess I wasn't paying attention. Oh, after it hit the Woo's, Grandma moved in with us, taking the room that had been the office. It made sense -- we had more room. At least for a while we did.

I learned of the virus hitting our house when Julie bolted from bed one morning as I was holding her. She was vomiting into the toilet as I ran in to help. I held her as best I could. She wanted her mother. I put on a robe, and went out to the kitchen. Grandma was sitting at the table, having tea and reading my Wall Street Journal -- Grandma is a kick. I told her Julie was sick, and needed her. We went back to the bathroom, but I was hustled out.

I used the other bathroom, and waited in the kitchen. I had some tea.

Eventually Grandma came back, beaming from ear to ear.

I was concerned. "Is Julie okay? What's wrong?" I asked.

Grandma just smiled. Then it hit me, and I sat down, hard. Grandma cackled and patted me on the shoulder. She shuffled off, returning with little boxes and bags of herbs. She made tea for me, and something special for Julie.

Caretaker

We helped Julie to the kitchen a while later. She was wearing a robe. She smiled a little as she sipped the tea Grandma had prepared. I held her gently, on the verge of tears.

“Are you?” was all I could ask.

She smiled a little more, nodded her head, and said softly, “I think so.”

Grandma grunted, and gave me a look letting me know she didn’t think that was one of the brightest questions I’d ever asked. But then she smiled and cackled.

I looked in Julie’s eyes. We’d have room, for a while, I guess. I thought of my dad’s plans. We could build anew, or remodel this house. I felt the smile form on my face.

“Have you ever thought about building a house?” I asked her.

She smiled a little more.

“How many bedrooms do you think we’ll need?” I asked her.

Julie reached out to hold my hand.

Grandma hadn’t heard anything so funny in quite a while.

FIN
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