

Jean

"Is there anything else you wanted to talk about today, Mrs. Chen?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Well actually... I guess I've noticed my knees hurting a bit more these past few weeks."

Jean, who was always reminded of her age when she was called Mrs. Chen, heard a sign on the other end of the line. Her knees actually hadn't bothered her too much, but she didn't know what else to say.

"Keep taking the over-the-counter Tylenols like we talked about last meeting, and don't overdo it. You can keep up your regular housework, but don't run a marathon or anything, alright? You can schedule another appointment with me in around six weeks if it still bothers you then."

"Alright then." Jean said. "I'll trust you. You're the doctor after all."

"Thanks Mrs. Chen, I appreciate it. I've got to see my next patient but thanks for seeing me. I'll talk to you in a few weeks to check-up on you again."

The line ran dead. Jean took a moment to stare at her landline phone that suddenly felt so cold, before resting it back in its base. Her whole house felt cold. She remembered how warm it felt. When there was more talk, more laughter.

She looked at the clock. Five thirty. *"I guess it's time for dinner."* Jean thought.

She ran through the motions she always did. She took the bowl of fried rice and shrimp from her fridge and placed it in the microwave. She remembered the excitement her cooking used to bring to her house. And when it was done, she sat alone at her dinner table. Too big for one.

She looked at the clock. Five fifty. *"Time to exercise."* Jean thought.

She set-up her MP3 player and put in her earbuds. Jean's son had set it up for her before he had left back to his new home in Vancouver. In an instant, familiar Chinese songs flooded her ears. She moved her legs and her arms rhythmically; her movements were well practiced. She missed the other ladies who she would see in the park when exercising together. Talking about anything: the weather, the news, their children. Their exercises were just the common ground that brought them all together. But even those had to be on pause while the world faced a bigger problem.

She looked at the clock. Six thirty. *"Might as well start winding down."* Jean thought.

She brushed her teeth, circling, circling, circling with her brush. Then, she sat down on her couch, turning on the TV to watch the news until she felt tired. She looked at her phone and wondered if she should call her son. She decided against it, not wanting to bother him, as he

was just starting a family of his own. "He must be busy right now." she thought. Maybe she should've bought a cell phone like her son had suggested. She had no idea what her friends' phone numbers were; she used to see them every day but never thought she'd need to know how to reach them.

Jean lied down in her bed, pulling her covers tight around her. She felt cold. Cold like the rest of her house. She felt cold since the world shut down around her. Even though she had the whole bed to herself, she still had her habit of only sleeping on the left side of her bed, as she had for the past thirty-two years. It was still hard to get used to how much space she had on the bed. She closed her eyes and hoped that sleep would come quickly. She had spent too many nights alone with only her own thoughts.

The next day, she didn't feel like doing her exercises. Then the next day, she didn't feel like cooking a new meal. And the next day, she had to push herself to even bother to brush her teeth.

Six weeks had passed this way.

"I'm glad that your knees are feeling a bit better Mrs. Chen. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about today, Mrs. Chen?"

"I think that's all for today."

"I know the pandemic has been hard on all of us. Are you holding up alright Mrs. Chen?"

Jean hesitated. "I've been a bit lonely. For a few months."

Her walk had become slow. Her face had lost weight. The warning signs had never made it through the phone line.

"I'm glad you've told me. Let's talk about this more. And you're not alone."

"Thanks for listening doctor...and please call me Jean."

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