

# TO BODY TO CHICKEN

---

Xu Xi

*for Maggie H.*

To chicken, that should be a verb,” Teresa said. The teacher asked if she was thinking of chickening out, or even funkychickening, “the dance for losers,” was what he said, chuckling to himself. Teresa Teng Lai-sin shook her head, not comprehending either expression. What she was mulling over at English class that day was the Cantonese verb *jouh*, which the dictionary defined as “to do.” To do chicken, meaning, to be a prostitute, sounded clumsy. To chicken, she decided. That made more sense. She explained as best she could in her halting English.

It was already 2007 when our story began so this was not the famous Teresa Teng, romantic singer of yore, although our heroine’s mother had been an ardent fan and thus her daughter was named. *You’re joking, right?* The manager at Big Boy Massage in Tsimshatsui laughed, the first day she came to work there, not believing it was really her name. Now, everyone at work called her Teng Lai-gwan, the singer’s more familiar Chinese name.

But at English class that afternoon, in an airless office above a noodle shop near her job, Teresa didn’t care what her name was.

The teacher was a young Norwegian who spoke with a clipped, exact accent. “No,” he said. “To chicken is not a verb. What you mean is to be a chicken.” He paused, momentarily flummoxed, and added. “Although in English, that has a different meaning.”

Teresa groaned. "So difficult. Need so many words to say one thing."

At work that evening, things were quiet for the first hour or so and she took the opportunity to review her lesson. If what the teacher said was true, then perhaps "to body" wasn't a verb either. *I body you*, she had wanted to say earlier, when asked to construct a sentence with a newly learned verb, but chose chicken instead because it was provocative, something the teacher seemed to like. *She chicken because she want to make a lot money*. The rest of the class had laughed in apparent comprehension; the teacher frowned.

"Twenty-five," the manager called Teresa's number. "Half part feet and one part body," he instructed in Cantonese. The customer at the front counter was a thin blonde woman. Teresa brought her to the massage chair, where she prepared the water for a foot soak. "It's so peaceful in here," the woman said, as she leaned back into the undulating wooden rollers and dipped both feet into the basin below. "Such a nice way to end a long day of sightseeing." Teresa smiled. "I come back few minutes, okay?" "Okay," the customer said, closing her eyes.

Halfway through her full body massage, the customer raised her head. "Can I ask how you learned to do this? You're very good."

"Thank you very much," Teresa replied. Teresa knew Americans expected thanks for compliments, not that she minded since they tipped generously, but it was just odd. "I learn from Master Teacher."

"Here?"

"Yes. I am Hong Kong girl."

"You speak good English. Did you learn it at school?"

"I take English lessons now, because of job. Many foreign customers speak English."

"Mmmh," said the woman who put her head back down and was silent for the rest of her seventy-five minutes, this one and a half "part" as a session was called, fifty minutes being the unit which cost HK \$225, the equivalent of US \$29, a steal by many standards.

In fact, Teresa had studied English at school, the way everyone else had, something she never admitted to tourists who wouldn't know anyway. Her school had been Chinese-medium, where the English teachers were not native speakers and some might even have considered "to body" quite an acceptable verb.

At each class, since she'd started these English lessons two months ago, her weekly assignment was to use a new word in a sentence. The first two weeks had been devoted to concrete nouns, and Teresa wondered whether "oil" could be considered concrete, given its liquid state. To describe what she did at work she said *I help you push oil*, which was how the industry's language translated from Chinese, but the teacher suggested that "rub" might be a better verb to use for "oil." After four lessons, Teresa concluded that English was nothing like in the dictionary.

But as she signed out of work that night, *I body you* echoed in her head. She had wanted to ask the teacher earlier whether or not this was correct, but he was generally so morose and stern that she felt questions were not very welcome.

Her father was up, unfortunately, when she arrived home.

"Late enough for you, hah? Young lady, one night you're going to be raped wandering around in the city like that."

"Please A-Ba. I'm tired."

"Of course you're tired! This 'night-style' work is always tiring. Lucky your mother's 'passed over life' so she doesn't have to cry in this life for you."

"Shut your mouth, can you? Just for one night? Besides it's late. Come on, I'll take you to the bedroom."

She helped him out of his chair and led her half-blind father to his room. Her older brother was already asleep, but Teresa knew A-Ba sometimes suffered from insomnia and would stumble his way back into the living room just to annoy her. *I body you*—like the ohm of Zen—as she made sure her father was properly situated. *I body you*.

It was around five a.m. when a commotion woke her. Teresa peered out the window of their flat and saw the police leading away the woman who lived two doors down. Her brother joined her at the window. "So finally nabbed, huh? I figured they would."

"What're you on about?"

"Hey, don't you know anything? She's a chicken girl. Everybody knew. She as good as hung out a shingle."

Their father spoke from behind, making them both jump. "How dare she spoil our neighborhood!" He stumbled his way to the front door and opened it. "Chicken girl!" He yelled into the dark of the corridor. "Keep her away!" But the lift door had already closed on the arrested party.

Teresa followed her father out, and placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him. He shook it away. "Don't touch me! My own daughter is just as bad as a chicken girl!" He groped his way back into the flat, and shut the door in her face. Her brother opened it seconds later.

*And what would she have done if her brother hadn't been home?* On her way to work later that afternoon, Teresa pondered the question. There she had been, in just a thin nightgown out in public, and did her father even care? Her brother, her only sibling, was a security guard who worked varying shifts, often overnight. She dreaded being at home alone with A-Ba and sometimes stayed out after work at the open-all-nights until dawn, her excuse being that work ended late and she was too tired to travel the hour-long bus ride home. Her father believed she slept at quarters at work and she did not tell him otherwise. He wasn't all bad, really, but if only he weren't so unreasonably nasty when he got in his moods. He once told her that at *Dai Gor*, the Chinese name for Big Boy, literally, "older brother," the *dai gors* she'd meet would all be nogood losers who would only be after her body.

*I body you. I body you.* The bus sped along the highway towards the terminus by the harbor.

\*\*\*

The manager buzzed her in the back room. “Twenty-five, will you do a *gwailo*?”

“Feet or body?”

“Both.”

“Do I have to? I really rather not.”

“All the guys have customers. Look, I’ll explain our rules and personally come by to check.”

“Do I get extra?”

“Twenty.”

One of the other girls said, “Go on, do it. If he likes you he’ll leave a bigger tip. The guys always do, just like the women give the guys more also.”

Teresa said okay, but when she saw the customer, she immediately regretted her decision. He was massive, like the Terminator or Hulk. Feet were fine and she had foot massaged many male customers of various nationalities, and even done a few full bodies for the Japanese and Korean men who found their way to Big Boy. This, however, was her first body for a white foreigner since she started here eight months ago.

On top of everything, he was the chatty type, and, she noticed, spoke English with a strange accent, stretching out sounds in a way she hadn’t heard before, not like the English, American or Australian customers she was now used to hearing. He didn’t look European either, she didn’t think.

The customer was saying. “I’m from Tennessee, do you know where that is?”

Teresa was leaning into his back, trying her best to manipulate his waist bone, which was difficult to locate. It wasn’t fat, just muscle, way too much muscle. He probably worked out in the gym all the time, or took steroids, or both.

“No, I don’t know where?”

“In the good ol’ U.S. of A. You been there?”

“Not yet. One day I go. Your home, how to spell?”

He told her, then added. “They’d love you back home.”

The manager called in English from outside the curtain. “No problem in there?”

“No problem,” she replied.

“Miss,” Tennessee asked. “Would you mind using a little oil?”

*Dead*, she thought, *I’m dead on fire*. And right after the manager had left as well, timing never being his strong suit. “Er, not allowed,” she said.

The man lifted the back of the cover-up shirt all customers were required to wear for cross-gender massages. “My skin’s awful dry, especially in the back.” He pointed at the flaking skin around his waist. “Just a little please.”

Teresa hesitated. Normally, it was no problem if she pushed oil on a man’s neck or shoulders when doing a head massage. For full body oil however, only male staff could do that for a man. He seemed decent enough, though, not a *haam saap lo*, “accidentally” trying to cop a feel. Saying “don’t tell manager,” she grabbed the bottle of oil and rubbed a little on his dry skin, and then quickly covered him up again. “Thank you, Miss,” he said. “I’ll take care of you later, promise.”

He was good to his word too, she decided, when she emptied her tip box later. A crisp green fifty was in there, and she was sure it was from him. Yet on her way home aboard the bus that night, she couldn’t help feeling bad. *I body*. Ohm. *I body*. Ohm. She did not chicken. No, she did not.

Teresa was off the next day and she took her father to *dimsum* brunch at their neighborhood tea house. An elderly couple and several women from their building were at the next table.

“Did you hear?” one of the women began. “Chicken girl made bail.”

The man of the couple snorted. “Police are no good. They make the chickens themselves and let them out! Half her customers are cops, everyone knows that. The arrest was just for show.”

His wife nudged his elbow. “*Wei*, shut up. No one wants to hear your dirty words.”

“It doesn’t matter,” one of the women said. “Speaking ‘white,’ we all know she deserves our scorn. If she didn’t own her place, a landlord would have thrown her out ages ago.” Seeing Teresa and her father, the woman acknowledged them. “Uncle, I hope you weren’t too disturbed the other night.”

He squinted at the next table. “Ah, Mrs. Woo, isn’t it? Kind of you to ask. No, my son and daughter closed the window and kept the noise out. They’re good children, not like that one.”

Teresa nodded and did not say anything.

The rest of the day, she took care of the laundry and grocery shopping for the week. Most days, she cooked dinner before heading out to work which her father and brother could heat up in the microwave, but on her day off she could eat with family. Lately, though, she found this a chore, wanting instead to study her English lessons, see friends, do anything rather than trap herself at home with him. She said so to her brother that night while the two of them cleaned up after dinner.

“I get tired, you know. Massage is hard work physically.”

“Change jobs then if it’s too much.”

“After all the time I spent learning the trade? No way. I like it most of the time, but I’d just like a little space for myself.”

Her brother glanced at their father who was in front of the television. “He’s nodded off already.”

“Typical,” she said.

“So go out. I’ll stay with him.” He handed her a bowl to dry.

“You shouldn’t let A-Ba get you, you know. He’s just lonely. And cranky because he’s arthritic,” he added, grinning.

She dried the bowl and set it back in place on the kitchen shelf.

“Where should I go at this hour?”

“That I can’t tell you.”

She took a walk in the park below of their public housing estate. The evening was cool and winter was definitely in the air. Teresa liked the cold. It was less exhausting at work than in summer. Less disgusting too, what with some of the sweaty customers who came in

when the weather was hot. Big Boy was a good place to work for now, better than the previous center which had been one step up from a chicken farm. Her brother had warned her—*it'll be rough*—when she first said she wanted to learn massage. Then, she had dreams of working at one of the fancy hotel spas or ladies salons, where the rich *tai tais* went, but she soon discovered that the ladder was a long, slow climb.

*I body you.* English lessons were a step up to a better position.

When Tennessee showed up the next day, asking for number twenty-five, Teresa blanched. The manager accommodated his request without asking her. When she objected he said, “It’s only foot today, and he behaved, didn’t he?” She acquiesced, because business was slow and turning away a customer, no matter how good her reasons, was frowned upon.

“I looked for you yesterday,” Tennessee said as he dipped his feet into the basin.

Teresa set the massage chair on high and pretended to busy herself. “Right temperature?” She asked, not looking up from the tap.

“Just perfect.” He leaned back.

While his feet were soaking, her colleague who had seen the customer follow her, said. “Got yourself a boyfriend?”

“Shut your mouth. You know me better than that.”

“To body is like that. Brings out the worst in you.”

“Get lost.”

But as she began on his left foot, after first wrapping the right in a warm towel, a deep unease cut through her. *I body you.* The words took on new meaning, and she didn’t at all like what they implied.

Tennessee asked to raise the massage couch up from its prone position. “So’s I can speak to you more easily,” he explained.

She knelt beside his head and adjusted the lever. He turned to watch.

“Miss, you have a name?”

“Twenty-five.”

“You’re not just some number.” Because she hesitated, he teased. “Come on, otherwise I’ll call you Fairy Girl, ’cos you’re as pretty as a fairy tale.”

Against her better judgment, but because he hadn’t tried to touch her, she told him. “Teresa.”

“Like my mother.”

She was back at the foot of the couch and had begun in on his left foot. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He laughed quietly. “My sisters and I, we used to call her Mother Teresa.”

That made her laugh too because she understood him. “Is your mother in,” she stopped, trying to remember how to say where he came from. “Ten-Nussy?”

He shook his head. “No, she died last year.”

The customer was quiet for several minutes after that and Teresa wished she knew what to say. She thought of appropriate Chinese expressions—*you have a hard time passing on*—but somehow, when she tried to frame the words in English they didn’t come out right. How did you express sympathy to a stranger in a foreign tongue? Teresa concentrated on her work and remained silent as well.

Finally, she said. “My mother die . . . had died last year too. Cancer.”

Tennessee stuck his head up and looked directly at her. “Oh honey, I’m sorry. You’re much too young for that. My mother, she was just old and it was time. I’m very, very sorry for your loss.”

She nodded, then looked up at him and smiled. “I sorry you too.”

“Thank you, Teresa.”

At the end of the session, Tennessee said he was leaving in the morning and discreetly handed her a folded hundred dollar bill. She hesitated, because it was against the rules. “Go on,” he said softly, flicking it towards her. “Take it. I won’t tell.” She did. Later, she saw that he’d also left her another fifty, one of the old violet banknotes that were gradually being phased out.

\*\*\*

She was already on board the bus when her brother's text message bleeped. *Got to work tonight. Someone's out sick. Sorry I couldn't let you know earlier.* Teresa flipped her cell shut. *Dead.* Her father would be in a mean mood for sure.

A-Ba was dozing in front of the television when she returned, his dinner half eaten. Teresa wrapped up the remainder and put it into the fridge. She was about to wake him, but then decided to sit a moment first, before having to listen to him carp. She was thinking how wrong she'd been about Tennessee, who really was just a nice man making polite conversation, and a very generous customer. An extra hundred! And no cut to Big Boy. Nothing her father said tonight should matter.

She glanced at his sleeping form. He looked peaceful, the way he used to when Ma would massage his legs while he dozed. A-Ba's legs tended to cramp. The heavy work at construction sites didn't help although since the accident that nearly blinded him, he'd been on disability. And a royal pain.

A-Ba shifted. A faint smile lit his lips and it looked to Teresa as if he were holding a conversation, his lips moving, then stopped, and then moving again. She gazed at his legs, roughened skin, but muscular, lean, still strong. Then, she began to massage his knee joints, tentatively at first. When he didn't awaken, she pressed harder, working her fingers around the calf muscles, pulling at them, loosening the tightness, expertly feeling for the problem spots. *Lai-sin*, she thought she heard him murmur. Her mother's name, and hers. "Beautiful spirit" was how she explained her name to the teacher at the first English class, although later, when she looked up *sin* in the dictionary, she saw it also meant "fairy."

After about ten minutes, her father opened his eyes. "You?"

"If not me then who?" She pressed his knee joints with both hands and tapped his legs as she would a customer. "There, you're done."

He nodded, groggy, then looked around. Teresa said, "I've put away your dinner already."

“Oh.” He blinked. “I’ll go to bed then.”

“Okay.” She helped him out of his chair and led him to safety.

Before she went to her room for the night, she dusted the altar where the death photo hung. The frame was slightly askew, angling her mother’s face in such a way that made her look especially kind. For a moment, she wanted to play one of Ma’s old Teresa Teng tapes, just like old times, when Ma would sing along. She didn’t though since it was too late and would disturb the neighborhood. Tomorrow, perhaps.

Tennessee, flying home in the morning. Teresa brought her English workbook into the bedroom to study before sleeping. Next lesson was to use a new place name in a sentence. She thought for a bit and then wrote: *The man from Tennessee said his mother had died last year, so I say I sorry him too.*