



University of Dundee

The Visit

Low, Gail

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Gail Low, 'The Visit'

(2040 words)

The Visit

My mum is lying on a narrow single bed in a 'Senior Living' care home in Birmingham, Michigan. You enter the building by punching a code, or if a receptionist greets you and ushers you in, smiling always. The foyer is a smart lobby area with free coffee and fruit-flavoured ice water, and there are books on shelves that you can take down and read on plump sofas and armchairs. Sometimes, there are even sweets, popcorn or chocolates for visitors. Walking through the carpeted entrance to the tastefully decorated interiors – elegant racing green wallpaper, polished wooden tables with lace table cloth, and large vases bearing fresh flowers – you might be forgiven for thinking that you've arrived at some kind of all-inclusive hotel. Except that the long hand-railed corridors to the bedrooms further in are linoleum covered for easy cleaning, and the doors of residents' bedrooms have all been personalised. Some are festooned with fabric flowers and balloons, stuffed toys and Hallmark cards (Happy Birthday to the Best Mum in the world!); others have colourful crayoned drawings of stick families pinned next to the residents' names. My Mum's door doesn't look so different from the others that you would notice necessarily. There is a pretty rosette made of crepe and silk, and a small garland of colourful paper flowers draped over a tiny dark green slate with which to leave messages. But none of the bric-a-brac next to the name plaque 'Margaret' have been sent by me.

I knock and then push open the door to her room. She is asleep on the low single bed. The windows are closed and the blinds drawn tight against the sun; but the heating is also turned on full blast, and the room is sauna-like. For as long as I can remember, the rooms I've lived in in the houses of my youth have all had windows of tinted glass; curtains were only pulled open when the afternoon's fever broke. This ritual made our living spaces always dark and shut in; but dealing with heat in whatever way you could was a full-time occupation in the tropics. A faint, unpleasant stink lingers in my Mum's room. With the windows fastened, there is little ventilation.

I wince, remembering Lee Young-Lee's evocative neologism about the old and infirmed in *The Winged Seed*. He calls them 'shut-ins', transforming verb to noun. Growing old marks a similar kind of change.

Someone has tried to make my mother's room more cosy. On her bedside table is a battered black leather bible, a gift from my grandfather. The faded inscription reads, 'May you walk always in the ways of the Lord'. A small mirror, odd vials of make-up, red nail polish, and other knick-knacks have been arranged tidily on the tabletop. The room has a built-in mirrored wardrobe, containing a rail of clothes on one side, a chest of drawers and some shelving on the other. A side door leads to a bathroom. It's a comfortable but generic bedsitter. I sit down on the only chair in the room and watch my mother sleeping. Her low bed looks suspiciously like a hospital bed that you can jack-up or jack-down. Home for my Mum is now an en-suite bedroom.

There are no paintings on the walls. No family portraits or pictures. There are, however, two framed photographs on the high shelf. They are of her and my father smiling, taken at their fiftieth wedding anniversary celebrations in Singapore. They resemble those you might have glimpsed on Chinese ancestral altars, behind fruit offerings, buns and smoking incense sticks. We didn't have such shrines in our household; they would have been deemed unChristian – in my Mum's words – 'heathen'. Yet she has given me and all of my siblings identical copies of these photographs.

The television in the corner, sound turned low, is broadcasting a daytime chat show. Its host seems to be having a heart-to-heart with a young girl sitting on a sofa, hunched over and crying. The girl's face is all red and puffy. She sobs about an unfaithful, confrontational boyfriend who, only seconds ago, stormed off the set after a huge row. 'He picks on me all the time; he answers my question with accusations about my controlling behaviour. I don't know what he is thinking,' she wails, 'he doesn't tell me anything. I only found out when I picked up his mobile phone.' The chat show host holds the girl's hand comfortingly and frowns with empathy as she looks

into young girl's face. Yet she also swivels around every minute or so to talk directly to her audience; the camera's close ups magnify her concern.

My Mum snores gently on the other side of the room, oblivious to the emotional carnage played out on screen. Her blankets are pulled right up to her chin. She is dressed in an old hand-knitted blue beanie, loose black trousers and an outsized red fleece jacket which I remember from my last visit. These clothes are like her second skin now. She seems so small – a little brown wizened figure shrunk into herself. For a moment I think, I am in the wrong room. This isn't the red-lip-sticked woman, all coiffured, made-up and dressed so glamorously that, to my child's eyes, she always looked like a movie star attending a red-carpet event. This isn't the woman who wouldn't swim except in the evenings because the sun could turn her skin a darker shade of brown. Who went to the hairdressers to get her hair 'set' every Saturday. I think, this isn't my mum. But she is. She has been like this for a quite a while. What was that line from *Mrs Dalloway*? 'The dwindling of life, how year by year her share was sliced'.

Asleep, my Mum's lips make small quick movements. She mumbles softly but I can't make out what she is saying. Despite being past her eightieth birthday, her face still looks astonishingly smooth and unlined. A long time passes before she comes to. Coughing, she opens her eyes and tries to push herself up upright on the bed. 'Lend me a hand', she says, and I stretch out my hand to help her sit up. She then looks at me, not at all surprised to see me in her room, though I have been away for a year, and have flown across a number of continents to visit. Kissing her lightly on the cheek I tell her that I arrived the previous night, and that I'm still tired from the long journey. She asks, 'what food did they serve you on the plane? Eat vegetarian - it's always better than chicken or fish. Meat is always tough and overcooked. You need to avoid strong coffee; it helps with the jet-lag.' Then Mum peers at me, eyes sharp. 'Still looking like a scruff! You might put on a bit of face-powder or some lipstick'. She takes a sip of water and then continues, "Those days when I used to fly first-class, the air-hostesses came round with lovely canapés and

champagne in crystal flutes. They were attractive girls too, not like the old wrinkled ones you get now." She laughs, spluttering, 'Who wants to look at old women? Asean Airways used to weigh their air stewardesses; slim and petite they had to be. Anyone above a certain weight and below a certain height would simply not be hired. Can you imagine that?'

We talk about the wider family now scattered across three continents and she tells me about the great granddaughters, my grand-nieces, and the youngest now sixteen months whom I've not clapped eyes on for a year. They visit every week. 'And May likes her food! – she's one of us alright. How can you be from Singapore and not like food? She's learnt to say "mine" and always points at what you are eating, expecting you to give it to her. No joke! But she looks just like a small Japanese doll!' Without missing a beat she presses on, 'Did you bring me any magazines from England about Kate and Will? Kate is so glamorous. Pencil thin, long-haired, dimple-cheeked and smiling with her arm on Will, or carrying one of the children. Did you bring *Hello?* You brought a stack of magazines about 'The Royals' the last time you came.' She brightens visibly, catching sight of an *OK!* that I have by me. Poring over images of George, Charlotte and Louis, she looks up and sighs, 'And to think, they are having a fourth child! No one has time to have children these days. It's all career, career. Women also need to be women.' But children also grow up I think unkindly.

Mum is now distracted by the television. The chat show host has invited another woman onto the couch; they seem to form a small huddle of weeping women, all giving each other support. 'I don't understand how these people can spill their guts out in front of the other people', my mum says in genuine puzzlement, 'telling the whole world your problems, airing secrets for everyone to pick over. No shame!' She then turns to me, 'How long are you here for? Is your brother coming tomorrow? You want some coffee? You can take it from the reception. And popcorn too - they do popcorn on Tuesday afternoons and Bingo on Thursdays. But they have rubbish

prizes. A necklace of paper flowers? They must think we're all gaga! You want to play cards? I've got a pack in my drawer.'

I help my mum into the wheelchair that is parked next to her bed and place a pair of worn carpet slippers by her feet. Still swaddled in the clothes that she's slept in, she hoists herself into the chair slowly, grimacing. I wheel her out of her room along the corridor. On the way, I pass other old women sitting together who greet us like long-lost relations. 'Margaret, how are you doing today honey?' 'Those little girls not with you? They're just little darlings!' 'Are you coming to the birthday tea? We'll have cake and balloons!' Mum introduces me as her daughter who lives in Scotland, and they look at me in bewilderment but friendly like. I am a daughter but also a stranger. With a grand wave of an arm, Mum gestures towards the residents' lounge and diner. On the way we pass tall windows that look out onto well-kept gardens with large red rhododendrons and some pink peony bushes. Mum points these out; she has always loved looking at flowers. Tentatively, I ask her if any of the older women sitting side by side on the armchairs that line the linoleum corridors are her good friends. She shakes her head. 'They just have rooms on my corridor', she says, 'most afternoons they sit by the window talking. What they have to chat about I don't know!'

We sit across each other at the table in a small empty dining hall. We haven't sat this way for a very long time. Mum's wheelchair is lower than the table and because of that she seems even more diminished, child-like even. I take the pack out and shuffle the cards. 'Do remember how to play "Chope"?', I ask. She shakes her head. I explain the rules and we start the game. I want to blurt out, 'Do you remember we played "Chope" on holiday at that Port Dickson Motel?' We were a noisy bunch then, sitting cross-legged on tiled floor, betting, squabbling, punctuating our sentences with Singlish words for effect – 'Chilakak! You just sapu-ed all the cards I wanted!' or 'Mati-lah! I've just thrown away my queen of hearts'. Yet my mouth just can't bend the sounds now and their jaunty cadences sound all wrong. My memories feel all made up.

We play in silence, speaking only to decide whether the Ace should precede the two of diamonds or follow the King. Outside, petals from the peony blooms drift onto the grass. I see a man mowing the lawn and the drone of its motor is familiar. But we are both a long way from home and there is no easy way back.

END