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## **The Room of Reality**

Photographer: Ko Chung Ming

“Crack-crack-crack!” The sound of mahjong woke me up from a deep slumber. I cracked an eye open to find myself sleeping on my mother’s lap, one of her hands whirling and twirling my hair to form a pool and the other shifting across the small table. I laid in silence, enjoying the rare moment when the jam-packed cubicle was filled with a small portion of vitality.

“Did you get any news from the government, Mrs. Lee? Nearly two years has passed and you still haven’t been given a housing offer yet.” Mrs. Wong said over the noise. Fat drops of sweat were sliding down her plump face and neck, and her hair was matted to her forehead. Her only comfort came from the small, dusted fan at the corner which was turning its head from left to right, but it was gone as fast as it approached.

Mother heaved a heavy sigh. “The application is going smooth, I think. I’m expecting a new home by next year.” No one except me noticed the lie that slipped through Mother’s lips, nor did they notice Mother glancing harassingly at the stack of letters on the tea table, one of which informed us that our application for a public rental housing estate would, unfortunately, be delayed.

For the short years that I've been living in this world, I've been well-acquainted with the word 'poverty', which skidded past Father's thinned lips on a daily basis. It was a grey cloud that squeezed itself into the rooftop house, sucking air from our lungs; an invisible force that pressured our shoulders with each passing month. For all I know, that's one simple fact concerning poverty: there is no end to it.

Fiddling with the small holes on Mother's apron, I listened wordlessly to Mrs. Wong's complaint. Her words were laced with sarcasm and discontent. "I've been waiting for the government to solve this chaotic state of situation for two score years. How stupid I've been to believe the government would take the initiative to help the grassroots!"

It seemed to me that citizens were ascribing the blame of poverty to the Hong Kong government. Even after the proposal of minimum wage policy, quality of life of low-income families didn't improve but worsened. Inflation skyrocketed along with the rate of unemployment— they're kicking against the pricks. Noticeably, the burden of grassroots was aggravated. I remembered the nights when Father came back home with worry printed over his forehead, his shoulders hunched, his thumb and index finger pinching the bridge of his nose. Father was one of the low-skilled labour that were dismissed when the minimum wage policy was implemented. Those were the dark days when we took each step with wariness— the worry of not seeing the future scared us. It was a murky shadow that stood at the corner, constantly breathing down our necks. It was a reminder that we might not survive the month.

Every night, I sat next to Father as he counted each dollar and cent we had left. "We're robbed, ripped off, by all the blood-sucking retailers." He clenched his teeth as he put a pile of bills aside. "It's as though they're trying to squeeze every penny out of me!" Over these past years, prices had gone high, and the surges in food price had been the most striking. At times, we couldn't even afford to eat meat.

I sometimes dreamt about the 'retailers'. I dreamt that they had chubby cheeks and a portly body. Half of their faces were covered by a black cloth, with only two holes showing their squinty eyes. They pranced into the neighborhood and stared at us with condescendence. They chirped. "You realize that the price is not high enough, right?" So they took our wallets away and bought a land called the 'Wealth Gap', to set apart the rich and the poor. As fanciful as that sounded, it was very real to me.

With the lack of cooperation from both the rich and the Hong Kong government to help the working poor, grassroots would have little chance climbing up the social ladder. A shadow was cast upon us. Fog blocked our sight. Inch by inch, we would be separated from society into an endless ravine— this was my fate, a plot that was written before I was even born.

"I always wonder what could possibly be done to save us from this black hole." Mrs. Chan, who was sitting opposite Mother, murmured.

Silence fell upon the table until Mrs. Wong shrugged and broke the silence. "You can always apply for CSSA." She suggested. The three other women sent a sharp glance towards her.

“I would never do that.” Mother pressed her lips together and held her head high. “Not when I can still work for myself— I’m not surrendering.” My eyes skimmed over her face and stared hard at the determination shining in her eyes. I wondered how much struggle Mother had gone through to come to this conclusion. Mother was willing to bear the responsibility, to stick to her own principles, and to grasp the little dignity that we’d left.

The last rays of sun streamed through the blinds, and the shabby walls were tattooed with faded yellow lines. It wasn’t until late night when the stars came out that Mother took my small body into her lanky arms and carried me into bed. In the dark, I watched the cracks on the ceiling stretching forward and whispered into Mother’s ears. “Is everything going to be okay?”

She tucked me in bed softly, as though I were a fragile feather. “I don’t know, honey. Nor can I promise you a better tomorrow.”

“Why’s that?” I tried to blink away the sleepiness, so I could see the colors in Mother’s eyes again before sleep— small sparks of red flame burned low, floating in a pool of brown. I held onto the red, praying that it would stay strong.

“Because our future holds no promise.”

I nodded my head and lay in silence, grasping the last stray of vitality left in the house tight to myself.