

CLAIRE CHEE  
SINGAPORE

The butcher's daughter sucked on her jade pendant as she diced, an anxious mist blooming across the front of her stiff plastic apron. Her father would have chided her for taking too long; the market was almost open and today might be the day she saw her targets. She sharpened her cleaver on her rice bowl and urged her fingers to move faster. The mass on her board shook and cried as it was sectioned and thawed.

The butcher's daughter was not usually fretful; she helped those

who were. From her stall at the corner of the market, she assisted maids with minor troubles explained by gestures thrown like dice. Those that came were gentle in shivering, muffled ways that were alien to her rough craft. Dini was like this, too, but her speech brimmed with defiance and earnestness that gave an edge to her frequent murmurs about Sir Jayden. The butcher's daughter tried not to have favourites, but she did. That day, she only spotted Dini because she had been looking for her.

Three months ago at noon, the butcher's daughter noticed the humble hill of Dini's nose outside the neighbourhood clinic and jogged over from the market, calling loudly but soon falling silent. Dini's stomach distended just beyond the plausibility of her slight frame. Her skin was sallow and irregular contusions descended the length of her thin arms. No patrons moved from their plastic seats, so the two women stood and whispered.

It had been eight months since Sir Jayden had begun taking late dinners and minimizing contact with his girlfriend Sylvia due to a demanding project. In the stillness of shared night, the unspoken intimacy of cleaning his bitten nails and clumps of dark hair became carnal. When Sylvia

moved in affianced, Dini had known to say nothing, but the photos on Jayden's phone betrayed them. Dismissal was too kind—Sylvia wanted Dini close enough to clutch. At Dini's mandated medical appointment, Sylvia spoke of the help's bruising clumsiness and assured the doctor that the baby would cease to be an issue. Legally unbound, he had simply nodded. Confident that malice and malnutrition had terminated the pregnancy, Sylvia allowed Dini to come alone for painkillers this time, insured by ambivalent discretion.

The butcher's daughter ground the

story between her teeth as she waited for Dini, canines sliding over each other as her father's had. A nurse finally ushered Dini out with mute concern. No blood test, only paracetamol for her cramps. Dini needed the toilet before she could return to her prescribed 'light duties.'

The butcher's daughter was protecting Dini's bag from the bathroom floor when she heard a low, curdling wail. Dini released the catch and the butcher's daughter whipped inside, closing the door behind them. Dini lowered herself back onto the bowl, gripping her stomach. The light overhead danced across her belly's taut surface, disappearing in the ash of her stretched abdomen. Dini suddenly jolted onto her hands and knees—it was happening now. It couldn't be now, the butcher's daughter barked. These were the first contractions. She would run to the clinic and fetch someone, then they would all go to the hospital. Illegal, Dini grimaced. The butcher's daughter split between what she thought she knew and what she could see but finally placed the tote bag underneath Dini's trembling, dripping haunches. Like calves that emerge from their mothers with shoes on as if there was no time to waste when arriving in a hungry world, the baby was out in minutes. Dini slumped against the wall, noiseless child swaddled in her apron, cheeks crusted with dried tears, muttering about getting back.

The butcher's daughter made herself useful by retrieving supplies to mop up

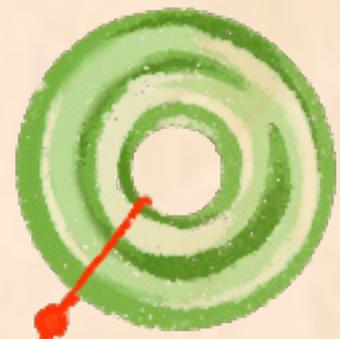
the viscera from her stall, inherited along with her tenacity. When she was waist-high, the butcher caught the nearby fruit seller leering and shook his cleaver, jade pendant jumping with his fury. The whole market watched as the fruit seller retreated, leaving his jackfruits sunning alone as they still did now, their hard-ridged bellies resting against the ground in peace.

In the butcher's time, problems had earned solutions—his character had currency and his preparation always paid off. In his time, his daughter would not find herself returning to a blood-lashed toilet empty of all but a mound of placenta atop a crumpled apron.

There was no way Dini brought the child to Jayden and Sylvia.

With furious clarity, the butcher's daughter strode towards the closest bins. She sundered damp columns of refuse, her body slick with meat juices and sweat—until she heard the construction men shouting, lifting the stained tote bag from another rubbish chute. A bleary-eyed policeman was trudging over.

the butcher's daughter



Hope sank in the butcher's daughter like a bone in the ocean as she ran back to the bathroom with urgency, to clean what would spell disaster if discovered.

The butcher's daughter kneaded away the memory with a hard, unforgiving palm. There was one hour of business left, and they still hadn't come. The first time the butcher's daughter had seen Jayden and Sylvia shopping at the market, Sylvia had shrieked Jayden's name in excitement over a heart-shaped strawberry, waving her monogrammed

leather phone case. Shocked stiff, the butcher's daughter hadn't been able to carry out her plan, even when the couple stood in front of her smiling, asking for her best minced beef. The butcher's daughter had seen the duo several times since, usually on Saturdays, but they hadn't stopped by her stall. Next time, she'd be ready.

The butcher's daughter lifted the ice box lid and used the handle of her cleaver to dig down to its coldest depths, where a few parcels lay in crystalline arrest. She counted what she had left. Not many—the butcher's daughter had been preparing one each Saturday morning, just in case, but one person's placenta could only be divided so much and kept so long. She looked at the portion she had ribboned that morning, wrapped in plastic at the corner of her metal table, next to a photograph of the butcher's warm smile. It would only take a turned back and deft hand. Over the noise of chopping, she would tell Jayden and Sylvia it was premium, the kind you save for an occasion. She would pass them the mixed mince: the good meat that you don't feed just anyone, she would say with a wink. And they would laugh in agreement. ©