



A Good and Pleasant Thing

RR2020_Melanie Cheng_Good and Pleasant Thing

[Music]

Welcome to the Victorian Seniors Festival, In The Groove, Radio Reimagined in 2020. This project has been produced on the lands of the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging, and welcome all First Nations people listening today.

As part of our Spoken Word series, please enjoy Melanie Cheng's *A Good and Pleasant Thing*.

Twenty years ago, supermarkets didn't stock Chinese mushrooms. Now they had a whole aisle dedicated to international cuisine. Lebanese, Greek and Mexican on one side, Chinese, Vietnamese and Indian on the other. Mrs Chan hardly ever went to the shops by herself. On Wednesdays her eldest daughter, Lily, took her to Footscray Market to buy fresh vegetables, and every Friday her youngest daughter, Daisy, ordered bulky items, like toilet paper, for her online. But today was her grandson Martin's twentieth birthday, and Mrs Chan wanted to surprise him—to surprise all of them—by cooking a family favourite. Chinese clay pot chicken and mushroom rice.

She found the chicken thighs towards the front of the supermarket, cradled in polystyrene. The meat would be days old by now, but it would have to do. In Hong Kong, Mrs Chan would have sent her maid to choose a live chicken at Wan Chai Market and pick it up an hour later—dead, plucked and washed. When the Chan family feasted on the flesh for dinner, the meat would be less than six hours old. That was why the meals Mrs Chan made in Australia would always be poor imitations—bland and watery substitutes for their Hong Kong originals. But today she was heartened by the plumpness of the ginger and the crispness of the spring onions, and on finding a familiar brand of dried Chinese mushrooms, she was eager to start cooking.

It was only once she was waiting in line that Mrs Chan noticed the Australian flags hanging from the ceiling. As she looked around, she realised the entire store was decorated with green and gold balloons. Now she remembered her grandson shared his birthday with an Australian holiday.

When Mrs Chan reached the front of the queue, the pretty girl behind the counter in the yellow headscarf smiled and said something in English. Mrs Chan shook her head and said 'No fly buys!' like her daughter Lily had trained her to do. The girl seemed amused by this, and Mrs Chan wondered if perhaps she had asked her something else. She would never know.

As she watched her items being scanned and bagged, Mrs Chan turned her attention to the magazine rack. A sea of women with pouty lips and cascading hair returned her stare. They reminded Mrs Chan of the Barbies her granddaughter had played with as a child. Once, long

ago, Mrs Chan had been the local bombshell. But that was in the 1960s, and hers had been a real, unspoilt kind of beauty. Her fair skin and high cheekbones had caused a stir among the neighbours, some of the more jealous ones starting a rumour she had Caucasian blood in her.

There was only one face Mrs Chan recognised amid all the others on the covers of the glossy magazines—a woman with cumquat-coloured hair. When Mrs Chan had first come to Australia, the red-headed woman had been outspoken about Chinese migrants, but thankfully nobody, including the redhead, talked about the Chinese anymore. Now, it was all about Muslims—like the pretty girl in the yellow headscarf scanning Mrs Chan’s Chinese mushrooms.

Not one person offered Mrs Chan a seat on the tram. She was too short to reach the plastic hand-straps and clung to a pole near the door instead. Every so often, she glared at the teenager slumped in the seat reserved for disabled people, but the pimply boy was plugged into his phone, oblivious to everything.

When she arrived home, Mrs Chan soaked the mushrooms. She watched their parched black heads grow round and plump in the warm water. She washed the rice and chopped up all the ingredients. It wasn’t long before the air in the kitchen was thick with the smell of ginger and spring onion. Her mobile rang just as she was unwrapping her precious clay pot—the one she had brought to Australia, cocooned in bubble wrap.

“Hello?”

“Celestial Gardens. Tonight. Six o’clock. For Martin’s birthday.” Lily, a bank manager, had inherited this punchy way of talking from her father. Wei had been an accountant—full of stress, dead at fifty-three from a heart attack.

“I thought you’d come here, to my house. Like every Sunday.”

“It’s Martin’s birthday, Ma. He’s twenty. He doesn’t want to go to his Poh Poh’s house for dinner.”

“You could have told me earlier.”

“I would have...but I thought you’d forget.”

“I’m cooking Martin’s favourite. Clay pot chicken rice.”

“I’ve booked Celestial Gardens. Paid a deposit and everything.”

Mrs Chan looked at the mushrooms, floating now, in liquid the colour of dishwater. She couldn’t argue with a deposit.

“Besides,” Lily said, “it’s thirty-three degrees. Not clay pot weather.”

Celestial Gardens was on the first floor of a building in Chinatown. A glass box perched above a Chinese bakery and a registered Apple reseller. It was popular for its dumplings, but Mrs Chan hated it. There were better, more authentic places in suburbs like Box Hill and Doncaster. But Martin had recently moved to the city, to an apartment bought by his mother, and the restaurant was convenient for him. He was going to a bar with his friends after dinner.

Mrs Chan arrived with her youngest daughter. Daisy was in her early forties and a successful lawyer. In the car, she spoke endlessly about a case she had taken on, some high-profile international child custody battle. There had been a current affairs program about it and everything. While proud of her daughter's success, Mrs Chan didn't delight in what Daisy did for a living, which was basically profiting, very well, from the failure of marriages. For Mrs Chan, marriage was forever, no matter how excruciating. And she blamed Daisy's job for her lack of suitors. Because what man in his right mind would want to marry a divorce lawyer?

Mrs Chan stared through her window as squat weatherboard houses gave way to shiny office towers. It was here in the city that Mrs Chan felt most at home, swaddled by lights and strangers and traffic noise. But there was something underwhelming about the Melbourne CBD—dull and unimaginative compared to the glittering metropolis of Hong Kong.

At the restaurant, Mrs Chan got lost amid a flurry of kisses. She found an empty chair in the corner near a potted plant and collapsed into it. She couldn't remember exactly when this silly kissing business had begun. The grandchildren had started doing it with their Australian friends, and then one day everybody in the family was joining in. It made Mrs Chan uncomfortable, panicky even. She was always leaning in the wrong way and knocking cheekbones with somebody.

As a young woman, Mrs Chan would never have imagined she and her family would end up in Australia. She knew nothing about the country, other than that it was once a British colony, like Hong Kong. But then all of a sudden, in the nineties, everybody in Hong Kong was moving to Canada and Australia, nervous about the end of British rule. It made sense for Mr and Mrs Chan to send their children to university in Melbourne.

From her seat in the corner, Mrs Chan watched her family. There was Lily, hovering around everybody, watching everything. A neurotic creature from birth, Lily had always slept and eaten very little. She grew from a thin, perfectionist child into a thin, perfectionist adult. It was Lily who reminded them all about anniversaries, told them how much money to put in their red packets for Chinese New Year and organised large family gatherings like Martin's birthday dinner tonight. Lily enjoyed neatness and order and punctuality. That was why Mrs Chan was so surprised when she had married Luke—a balding, pot-bellied English teacher who had been trying to write a screenplay for fifteen years. Mrs Chan didn't like him—she had the impression he held her daughter back. Luke started things, Lily finished them. Lily made money, Luke spent it. When Luke drifted, Lily steered him back on course. Fortunately, Martin took after his mother—despite spending an inordinate amount of time with his chaotic father. Like Lily, Martin was frighteningly intelligent and unforgivingly precise.

She observed her grandson now. He was smiling and accepting red packets of money. Unlike other boys his age, Martin did not slouch. He held his head high and towered above the rest of the family. Mrs Chan planned on leaving him everything in her will. Martin was her one and only grandson. Rose, her middle child, had already had twelve unsuccessful cycles of IVF, and Daisy was too happy being single to get married. There was a granddaughter in Sydney, too—Martin's older sister—but she had a tattoo and was probably in a relationship with a woman, and nobody ever mentioned her.

Rose was chatting to Martin, blushing and laughing and covering her hand with her mouth. When she was born, the midwife said she had an old man's face, serious and watchful. She never crawled—instead, for months, Rose had studied Lily running rings around her mother, and then one morning, around her first birthday, she simply stood up and walked. Rose was the smartest of the three girls, but from a young age she had learnt to defer to her bossy

sister, Lily. Mrs Chan knew that behind her daughter's solemn look lurked a profound insecurity. Rose had chosen to study pharmacy at university even though her marks were high enough to get into medicine. Soon after graduation, she had married David, a plastic surgeon—also from Hong Kong—who offered family discounts for breast implants and answered his phone in the middle of dinner.

Daisy, the youngest daughter, was the most easy going. From two weeks of age, she had slept for twelve hours straight every night. Daisy fit into Australia better than the rest of them, saying whatever came to her head and swearing like an Aussie. Mrs Chan watched her now, making her way around the room, telling self-deprecating stories and making everybody laugh.

Mrs Chan wondered what her husband would think of his daughters if he were alive. No doubt he would be proud. He'd only lived long enough to see Lily and Rose finish university. When the girls were growing up, Wei never hid the fact that what he'd really wanted was a son. Mrs Chan could see now that this had only spurred his daughters on.

She watched Martin excuse himself from the group and navigate between the tables towards her. Her grandson spoke very basic and halting Cantonese. Mrs Chan had spoken it to him as a baby, but when he was older, Martin had always insisted on answering her in English. Nowadays, she couldn't have anything more than a very simple conversation with him. But she loved him. She loved how handsome he was. She loved that he had both the double-lidded eyes of his father and the smooth, flawless skin of his mother. He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. In his funny Cantonese, he thanked her for her gift—a red packet containing two hundred Australian dollars. Mrs Chan waved her hand and smiled and mumbled that it was nothing. He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

Lily yelled at them all to sit down and eat. Martin left his grandmother to join his parents on the other side of the table. The food was ordinary. The pork crackling was chewy, the broccoli was cold and the rice was overcooked. When the meal was finished, Mrs Chan pulled a toothpick from a tiny vase on the lazy Susan and hid her mouth with her hand as she retrieved some broccoli from her teeth. As always, the plastic surgeon was fiddling with his phone. Daisy was dominating the talk, dipping in and out of Cantonese. Mrs Chan could only catch snippets of the conversation.

"I wouldn't care if it was on a different day...or called a different thing...so long as we get a public holiday!"

Lily jumped in then with something in English. Mrs Chan could sense a rift forming between her children. Luke's red face was becoming redder. Lily was flapping her tiny hands. Mrs Chan was relieved when the plastic surgeon pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I'm sorry," he said in needlessly loud Cantonese. "I have to go. An old lady in a nursing home cut her face open." He rolled his eyes. "She's eighty-three."

Minutes later, Martin's phone rang. His friends were waiting for him downstairs. He said a hurried goodbye. After he had left, Mrs Chan watched him through the restaurant window. She saw him greet his friends. They bumped shoulders and smacked each other on the back. He was a different person with them, rough and masculine.

Without Martin, there was no point to the gathering. Lily asked for the bill. When it arrived, she and Daisy played tug of war with the docket while Rose stuffed thick wads of cash into her

sisters' expensive handbags. Finally, somebody won or somebody else conceded, as they always did, and they all waited by the lift while Rose and Lily went to the bathroom.

"Are you sure you don't need to use the toilet, Ma?" Daisy asked, as if talking to a three-year-old. Mrs Chan didn't want to give Daisy the satisfaction of being right, but she had drunk a lot of jasmine tea, and her bladder had a funny way of misbehaving lately. She slunk off toward the rest rooms.

Rose and Lily were still in the cubicles when Mrs Chan walked in. As she prepared the toilet seat with layers of paper, Mrs Chan heard the flush of the toilets, followed by the clicking of her daughters' heels as they walked to the hand basins.

"You know she won't be able to live in that unit forever," Lily said in a low voice. Mrs Chan could barely catch her words over the sound of a tap running.

"I know," Rose said, "but I've been meaning to tell you, David's applied to Sydney next year for his fellowship."

There was a pause.

"So, you won't be around either."

"I'm not sure."

They switched to English then, but Daisy's name was mentioned once or twice in angry tones before their voices were drowned out by the whirr of the hand dryer.

On the car ride home, Daisy launched into her usual tirade about her sisters. Mrs Chan had heard it all before. Why did Rose put up with that arrogant prick of a doctor? Why did Lily spoil Martin so much? Why did they all have to go along with Lily's delusion that she was the glue that held the family together? Why didn't anybody ever point out that Lily had effectively disowned her own daughter? Every so often, Mrs Chan nodded or grunted to show Daisy she was still listening, but really she was filling in the gaps in the conversation she had overheard in the toilet at the restaurant. She told herself she wasn't going to mention it to Daisy. She didn't want to contribute to any further conflict between her daughters. But when Daisy pulled up in front of her unit, Mrs Chan was bursting to say something. She couldn't face the thought of going inside to sit alone with these terrible thoughts still spinning around in her head.

"Your sisters want to put me in a home," she said. Mrs Chan knew this wasn't exactly what the girls had said, but she wanted to see her youngest daughter explode with indignation. She was shocked when Daisy leant her elbows on the steering wheel and rubbed her eyes.

"Lily and I had an understanding. We were going to talk to Rose first before we brought it up with you."

Mrs Chan said nothing. She was trying to understand how her three very different daughters—women who fought about anything and everything—had managed to reach an agreement on this issue.

Daisy reached across her mother and opened the glove box. She pulled out a brochure and laid it on Mrs Chan's lap. At the top, in English and Chinese characters, it said: *Australia's Number One Chinese Retirement Village*. Below the heading was a quote from Confucius: *Old*

age, believe me, is a good and pleasant thing. There was a photo on the front cover of brick-veneer houses with Chinese-style eaves. A pretty garden was framed with pink camellia and bamboo.

“I’ve checked it out,” Daisy said, staring straight ahead through the windscreen. “It’s beautiful.”

Mrs Chan huffed. She opened her door and stepped out onto the street. For a moment, she considered throwing the brochure back in her daughter’s guilty face, but instead she settled for slamming the car door as hard as she could.

Lying in bed, Mrs Chan looked through the brochure. The Chinese translation described the home as a *deluxe facility*. In total, there were eight units, each with two bedrooms. The rooms were immaculate, with built-in alarms and shiny rails in the bathrooms. Basic cooking facilities were provided, but residents had the option of two cooked meals a day in the dining room. There were weekly tai chi classes and, more recently, art therapy. Mrs Chan searched the brochure for photos of the residents. She found two: one of a man in a wheelchair holding up a crude painting of himself and the other of a woman with rosy cheeks blowing out candles on a birthday cake.

Mrs Chan had only been inside a nursing home once, to visit a family friend with multiple sclerosis. Lily had driven her. She remembered thinking it was like a hospital without the doctors and the frenzy. Her friend was curled beneath a waffle blanket. Other, more able-bodied residents sat in the lounge room with their eyes closed and their mouths open. Mrs Chan’s clearest memory was of a fly landing on one woman’s face and dancing across her eyelashes.

She woke up late the next morning in a tangle of sheets. The air conditioner had short-circuited again—as it always did when the temperature hit thirty degrees. The air was hot and still, like before a typhoon, except there were no typhoons in Melbourne. Mrs Chan wet a face towel with water from the tap and held the cloth to her forehead.

At midday, she put on a cotton dress and a wide-brimmed hat and went outside into the heat. Perhaps she would get an ice-cream. Dr Leung had said she was borderline diabetic. One ice-cream wouldn’t hurt. The doctor had been saying she was borderline diabetic for fifteen years. Mrs Chan was not a sweaty person, but as she walked, she could feel a trickle of perspiration between her thighs. The streets were abandoned. Either side of her, fibro houses blinked and sagged in the sunlight. Hong Kong summers were different—sticky and wet and less intense. This kind of heat was extraordinary, as if Australia were closer to the sun.

What was normally a ten-minute walk to the shops, seemed more like half an hour, and soon she stopped to rest in the shade of a small wattle tree. Mrs Chan took a sip from her bottle of water before pulling out the mobile phone her daughters had given her last year for her seventieth birthday. Martin had changed the settings to Chinese characters, and when her daughters called, their faces appeared on the tiny screen, as if by magic. But there were no messages or missed calls for Mrs Chan today. It must be thirty-five degrees and people her age were dying like insects from the heat, but none of her children seemed to care. That was the problem with Australia, she thought—so many old people left on their own. She had once heard about a woman found by police a whole week after she had died, her body half devoured by her own starving pet dog. She stared at the empty message bank on her phone and decided to teach her daughters a lesson.

Just up the road was an old, run-down motel. Mrs Chan must have walked past it a hundred times, but she'd never taken much notice of it before. The building had water stains like black mascara running down its ugly concrete face. She hesitated in the driveway. When a neon bulb hissed above her head, she almost aborted her plan, but then a neatly dressed Asian woman emerged from the foyer and Mrs Chan took this to be a good omen. She walked through the sliding doors and approached the surly girl at the desk. She held up her index finger and, in broken English, asked for a room. The girl didn't question the lack of luggage, or the hat, or the thongs. She just took the eighty dollars cash and flicked a battered key across the counter.

Mrs Chan regretted her decision as soon as she opened the door to the room. There was a funny odour—like the smell of damp towels left in the washing machine overnight. Mrs Chan inspected the bed. The mauve quilt had a cluster of mysterious grey stains near the middle. The pillow looked clean enough, but when she lifted it, a long black hair fell from its belly. She found a towel in the bathroom and, after inspecting it carefully, laid it on the two-seater couch in the corner. She sat down, kicked off her thongs and hugged her knees to her chest. Her daughters would never think to look for her here. She would make them worry about her like she had always worried about them.

Somehow, she dozed off, still sitting on the couch. When she woke, the alarm clock beside the bed told her it was two o'clock. She could feel a circular dent in her face, where her cheek had rested on her knee. She checked her phone. Nothing. She turned on the TV. On one channel, there were lots of women in bikinis with disproportionately large breasts. Mrs Chan watched for five minutes before a red message popped up on the screen. Scared that she had done something illegal, she turned off the television and sat in silence. She wondered if Wei had stayed at places like this when he travelled for work. She tried to imagine him walking through the door, loosening his tie and watching one of the big breast movies. They had been married for more than thirty years, but there was still so much she would never know about him.

Her reverie was interrupted by a loud bang at the window. Terrified, but also curious, she got up to peer out from behind the curtain. Just below the window, she saw a man, about thirty perhaps, or older, lying on the ground. He must have collapsed and hit his head on the window on the way down. There was a cut on his forehead and a smear of blood on the glass. He wasn't moving. Mrs Chan's throat felt tight, as if it might close up at any moment. She held her trembling hands to her neck, forced herself to swallow. No one came running—she was the only person in the world who knew this man was injured, maybe even dying. She could probably save him by calling emergency, but she wouldn't be able to explain what had happened to the person at the other end of the line. Her other option was to drag the grumpy girl from reception to the wounded man at the back of the motel, but Mrs Chan was worried about implicating herself in the process. Wouldn't the authorities wonder what an old Chinese woman was doing alone in a seedy motel? Hadn't Daisy told her recently about some tourist being held in detention because she'd lost her wallet and couldn't speak English?

She returned to her spot on the couch and began gently rocking. What was it about rocking that human beings found so soothing? She remembered pressing baby Lily to her breasts in the early hours of the morning, not knowing how to stop her red-faced daughter from crying except by holding her as tight as she could and swaying her body back and forth in the darkness.

Mrs Chan didn't stop rocking until she heard the ambulance siren. Then she sat very still and watched the red light oscillating through the curtain. She heard a sharp metallic click, like a stretcher being unfolded. Mrs Chan hoped to God the man was still alive, that the paramedics

hadn't come too late. In the hours after Wei's death, the doctors had told her it was because his heart had stopped so long before the ambulance arrived that he'd stood little chance of surviving.

After the ambulance had left, the ridiculousness of her situation dawned on her. Mrs Chan went to the bathroom and splashed some cold water across her face. Wary of using the towel hanging from the rail next to the sink, she wiped her hands on the skirt of her dress. She returned to the lounge and picked her straw hat up off the coffee table. Just as she was about to leave, her phone rang. Martin's handsome face flashed up on the small screen.

"Poh Poh? Where are you?" He was speaking Cantonese—Mrs Chan could only just understand him.

"Outside. In the garden."

"Mum said you cooked chicken rice for my birthday."

Martin. Dear, sweet Martin. Thank God for grandsons like Martin.

"I did."

"Can I come over to eat it?"

Her heart soared. "Of course."

As Mrs Chan hung up, she thought of all the things she needed to do. She would have to soak a new bunch of mushrooms, slice the ginger and garlic, chop and marinate the chicken. She pulled the door closed behind her and returned the key to the grouchy girl at reception.

Martin was a good boy. Mrs Chan had known it from the moment she held his tiny body during her first night in Melbourne. She knew it from the way he always took time to speak to her, softly, away from the others. She knew it from the warmth in his eyes as he stumbled over his Cantonese words. Mrs Chan put on her hat, took a deep breath and braced herself. She barely flinched as she stepped outside into the searing summer sun.

[Music]

You've been listening to the Victorian Seniors Festival, In The Groove, Radio Reimagined in 2020. This radio program was produced by the Radio Reimagined production team. Producer, Rob Gebert; Creative Director, Nat Grant; Technical Director, AC Hunter; and Post-Production Director, Michele Vescio

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