

Ellen's Last Day

The kitchen at Dynasty Palace was a madhouse. A team of Chinese chefs frantically folded, mixed, pinched, and rolled dim sum. Their faces glistened with oil; their hands, rough and calloused, were tougher than tree bark. When they spotted the oldest dim sum cart lady on staff, known to all by her English moniker, Ellen, they whistled and broke into a round of applause. It was Ellen's last day of work.

Ellen blushed. "Get back to work!" she shouted in Cantonese. They only whistled harder; they knew that she hated to make a fuss.

She was intercepted every step of the way by coworkers who wished her well and asked about her cruise. The cruise to Hawaii was a splurge, a retirement gift to herself and her two adult daughters, their husbands, and her four grandchildren. It was scheduled to leave tomorrow; even now, she wasn't sure if she should go. Privately, she fretted that she had spent too much of her hard-earned money on herself.

At her locker, coworkers had left several gift bags for her. She didn't have time to peek inside them. No gift bag from I-Kuan, she noticed, but that was typical of him. He was the senior manager and the oldest man on staff. Neither of them were sentimental. Her shift was about to start.

She prepared to do as she had done for the last forty years: bully customers into ordering more than they could eat. She tied on a crisp black apron, fastened her bow tie around her neck, placed her headset around her head, checked the cart wheels for debris. She ignored the arthritic stiffness of her hands. Her cart had been a hard-won prize. She had clawed her way up from the bottom, first washing dishes, then promoted to the dubious honor of manning the congee station, resulting in frequent burns on her hands. I-Kuan had assigned her to a cart that sold the most

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popular items (rice rolls, har gow, siu mai), for which she felt eternally grateful. Now she and I-Kuan were the last of the remaining old guard.

“Ellen, table 24 is giving us trouble,” I-Kuan’s melodious voice filtered through her headset in Toisanese. “The woman wants to be assigned her own cart. We seated her so that she doesn’t cause a scene. Please give her anything she wants.”

Ellen pressed the reply button. “I’ll take care of it.”

She loaded up her cart and went out onto the floor. Immediately, hungry customers surged out of their seats to flag her down. She ignored them and pushed ahead. How many times had she pushed her cart over the same carpeted floor, retracing the path from kitchen to dining area, pausing only long enough for customers to choose what they wanted to eat from her cart?

The banquet hall, which could seat five hundred, had been remodeled last year. I-Kuan had designed it. The banquet hall resembled the inside of a cruise ship, with its busy red carpet, massive chandeliers, and identical flat screen TVs, each arranged every ten feet like so many well-placed portholes, each playing the same peaceful underwater scene on repeat.

I-Kuan was a big fan of cruises. He had often urged her to go on one, though he himself rarely took time off. He said that a real vacation was where all his needs were taken care of, where he could stop worrying and just enjoy himself. Perhaps it was this remodel, and Ellen's exposure to it, which had shaped her retirement gift to herself and her family, though Ellen would deny it if asked.

One of the flat screen monitors to her left flickered as she pushed past, then filled with ugly static, slicing through the illusion of being inside a cruise ship. At table 24, taking up a family style table meant for ten, sat a woman. Her hair was disheveled; her eyes were red and puffy. Her thin face was wet with tears. Ellen guessed her age to be between twenty and forty,

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younger than her own two girls, who she supposed were not girls anymore but middle-aged women.

Ellen felt pity for this sad creature. "What would you like to eat?" she asked, kindly, in Cantonese.

The woman glared at her. "You look too old to be pushing a cart," she said in English.

It took Ellen a moment to tap into her well of English, and then she was momentarily speechless. Old? Who was this woman calling old? But Ellen was impervious to any insult or pain. Her skin was too thick for it.

"Are you deaf?" the woman asked, impatient.

"What do you want?" Ellen demanded in English. She could also speak Mandarin and a splash of Spanish, but dim sum ordering hardly required advanced language skills. Some people just pointed like apes, like this woman.

The woman sniffed and rubbed her red nose. "Give me all of it."

"What did you say?" Ellen needed to turn up the volume of her hearing aid. There were twenty tins on her cart, each holding four to six pieces of hand-crafted dim sum. Other tables, populated by customers who had manners, ordered one tin to share.

"I want all the dim sum from your cart," the woman said.

"It's too much for one person to eat."

"I'm hungry."

"You're going to give yourself indigestion."

"I want to eat until I can't feel anything anymore," the woman said. "I just found out that my husband is cheating on me."

Ellen pursed her wrinkled lips. "Where are your friends? Your family?"

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"Are you married?"

"What?"

"Are you married?"

"My husband passed forty years ago." Ellen had been a widow for the majority of her life. She rarely thought of him, could barely conjure up what he looked like. They had only been married for four years before he had dropped dead from a heart attack. The day after the funeral, she had visited every restaurant in town to beg for a job.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" the woman asked.

"At my age? Are you crazy?" Ellen touched her headset. She thought of I-Kuan, of kind, married I-Kuan, of their forty years working together. They knew each other better than anyone. He could always tell when she was in a mood, when her daughters had given her trouble, even if she didn't say anything.

"My husband says he doesn't want to be with me anymore," the woman said.

"All marriages have ups and downs." Ellen didn't have much experience with marriage but it seemed like the right thing to say. She could always tell when I-Kuan and his wife had fought the day before, by the droop of his shoulders, by the slight edge to his words, even if he didn't say anything.

"I'm going to eat until my stomach lining bursts," the woman said. "I'm going to sit here and eat forever."

This woman was not Ellen's responsibility. If the woman caused a scene, I-Kuan or another manager would escort her out. Who was Ellen to argue with a hungry customer who knew what she wanted?

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“Suit yourself.” Ellen loaded up the dim sum, counting, losing count, then counting everything again. She stamped the woman's order card twenty times to indicate how many tins had been placed on the woman's table. The order card, used to calculate the bill at the end of the meal, indicated that the woman, without having eaten a single bite yet, had already racked up one hundred dollars' worth of food. Outrageous.

Ellen made a U-turn, returning to the kitchen by an alternate route. Her bunions throbbed. Her cart was swiftly loaded, and soon she was back in the banquet hall, winding her way around her usual route. She forgot about table 24. She allowed herself to be swept up into the unending flow of hungry customers.

I-Kuan's voice filled her headset again. He was always professional and courteous, even on her last day. "Ellen, table 24 is asking for you. She says she's still hungry."

"That woman is out of her mind. There's no way anyone can eat that much."

"Do you need—"

"I can handle it," Ellen snapped, more aggressively than she had intended to. She had dealt with customers who were ten times worse than this woman. Once again, she returned to the kitchen to load up her cart.

Ellen was astounded. The woman was still sitting alone and almost all of the twenty tins were empty. It was physically impossible for one woman to eat that much, yet she ordered still more dim sum from Ellen's cart.

Ellen counted and stamped, stamped and counted. The bill was now over two hundred dollars. Never had Ellen seen such an appetite on any person. Ellen's own appetite had been

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tamed and trained over the years to accommodate restaurant hours, to eat her first meal only after her shift had ended.

The woman was in a talkative mood. The food seemed to have cheered her up. Between big bites, she confided to Ellen, "We held our wedding banquet here. Three hundred guests. Ten courses. People ate like pigs, but I was dieting and ate only two bites all day."

"Is that why you're eating like a pig now?" Ellen had worked countless wedding banquets at Dynasty Palace. Guests gorged on dish after dish of tender abalone, braised sea cucumber, sauteed lobster noodles, and then everything was washed down with a river of Hennessy XO and 7-Up.

The woman flashed a naughty grin. "Want to join me?"

"I have to work."

"Is that what you really want? Cart food around to a bunch of pigs?"

"Today is my last day of work and then I'm retiring."

"Congratulations."

Ellen hesitated, then said, "Tomorrow, I'm going on a cruise to Hawaii." I-Kuan had taken his family on this same cruise last year, had recommended it highly. The service is wonderful, he had told her. The servers are always filling your glasses to the brim. There's everything you could possibly need or want on the ship. He had stuffed her locker with pamphlets.

The woman stopped eating. She started crying again, so Ellen handed her a napkin. This woman was too much. A self-indulgent woman like this would be eaten up by life, would never survive its hardships. "We went to Hawaii on our honeymoon," the woman gulped between tears.

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"I'm going with my family."

"My husband and I stayed at the Ritz-Carlton in Waikiki." She stuffed a piece of shrimp into her mouth.

"You're going to choke if you keep eating like that," Ellen said. Her own stomach gurgled, though it was still only mid-shift for her, far too early for her first meal of the day. Soon the shift would be over, and then it would be her last meal as an employee at Dynasty Palace, her last meal with I-Kuan.

"My husband is in love with his coworker," the woman said bitterly. "I always knew there was something going on between them."

Ellen tensed, said nothing.

"I can always tell when his mind is somewhere else," the woman said.

Ellen was afraid that the woman would start crying again. She pushed a tin helpfully towards the woman. "Eat, eat."

"He's been coming home late from work every day," the woman said.

Long ago, when Ellen was in her thirties, she had looked forward to the wedding shifts. After the clean up was over and everyone else was dismissed, she and I-Kuan, ravenous from the long hours of work, would pile wedding banquet leftovers onto a tray, along with a half-empty bottle of Hennessy XO. They would sit at one of the banquet hall tables, eating and drinking freely, and talk late into the early morning. Always, there was a careful strip of space between them, as though this space would provide absolution. Then one day, I-Kuan's pregnant wife showed up to Dynasty Palace and scowled at her. Ellen was never offered a wedding shift again.

A month later, I-Kuan took his family on their first cruise. It was a chance for them to reconnect as a family, she had overheard him telling their coworkers. Ellen imagined the spray of

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ocean on her face, a uniformed server handing her a plate piled high with food—and wondered if she would like it, if the cruise would be worth the enormous cost.

The woman picked up her chopsticks and resumed eating. Ellen finally admitted aloud: “I’m not sure if I should go on the cruise.”

“Why not?” The woman patted the seat next to her invitingly. Well, why not, Ellen reasoned. Her bunions were bothering her again. Ellen lowered herself carefully into the chair. It was comfortable. The woman looked pleased. Ellen fought back the urge to get back on her feet.

“Why don’t you want to go on your cruise?” the woman asked again.

“It’s a lot of money. And I’m—I’m used to standing on land.”

“It sounds like you have cold feet.”

“My feet are fine.” Ellen wiggled her toes.

“No, it means that you are chickening out” —at Ellen’s quizzical look, the woman corrected herself— “like you are losing courage.”

Ellen snorted. She had no room in her life for these kinds of self-defeating thoughts; she could not afford the luxury. Either you did what you set out to do or you didn’t. There was no middle ground. How else could a widow like herself, with no formal education, raise two daughters?

“You’ll have fun,” the woman said.

Fun: another foreign word. Fun cost money and had consequences. This woman wept openly in public, insulted wait staff, and gorged beyond the limits of her stomach. What could this woman possibly understand about survival, discipline, self-denial?

The woman looked like she was in pain. “I think I’m going to be sick. ”

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“What did I say?” Ellen clicked her tongue. “Hold it in until you get to the bathroom.” She pointed towards the direction of the bathrooms and the woman hurried away.

Ellen continued to sit. Her back ached. The woman was right: Ellen was too old to keep pushing this cart. It was time to let go. The woman's table was littered with tins, all empty, except for one. One tin held a piece of har gow. It was perfectly formed, ten-pleated, the pink shrimp meat encased in a delicate, translucent dumpling skin, like a heart. Ellen was suddenly, inexplicably, filled with the desire to stuff it into her mouth. She chastised herself. She should stand up, get back to work, but she was overcome with fatigue. Her stomach gurgled again.

She turned away from temptation and surveyed the people around her. So this was the view from the receiving end of service. At table 30, two families fought enthusiastically over the check—a Chinese practice, ritualistic play acting, in which two or more people tried to claim something that no one truly wanted. She did not want to go on the cruise, had only borrowed the idea from I-Kuan and made it her own, as if such desires could be transposed into someone or something else entirely.

Ellen waited, but the woman did not return.

Finally, she hoisted herself back up to standing position and pressed a button on her headset to call another coworker. “Gigi, can you check the bathrooms? There's a woman in there who is sick and might need help.”

A few minutes later, Gigi responded, “No one's here. I checked all the stalls, too.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely sure.”

A family paused collectively to admire the lacy trim of a taro puff.

A couple urged each other to take another bite.

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Ellen knew, with marrow-deep certainty, that the woman would not return. Ellen had been played for a fool! She should have seen it from a mile away. The woman had eaten her fill and left without paying. The cost of the meal would be deducted out of Ellen's last paycheck. It seemed that the world was filled with two kinds of people: those who gave into their appetites and ate like pigs, and those, like herself, who lived in a state of constant self-denial.

I-Kuan's voice, this time coming from behind her: "Ellen, are you alright?"

One tin of har gow, \$6.95. When the bus boys arrived to clear the table, the last har gow would be dumped into the trash, along with all the other half-eaten bits.

I-Kuan hovered at her elbow. It was her last shift with him. After today, she knew they would never see each other again. They stood, side by side, maintaining that careful strip of space between them. I-Kuan shook his head, disappointed; she knew that he had grasped, almost immediately, that the woman had skipped out on the check. She knew that he would cover the cost of the woman's meal out of his own salary to spare her paycheck.

He started to speak, then stopped. She felt, rather than saw, the movement of his arm, and then his finger breached that careful strip of space for the first time and grazed the palm of her hand.

"It gets chilly on deck," he said. "Make sure you bring a jacket."

On impulse, she grasped his hand in her own.

Around them, the other waitstaff hurried from customer to customer. The busboys moved in to clean table 24. Ellen gazed to a point beyond her sight. She felt I-Kuan's head turn to follow where she was looking, and then they were no longer at Dynasty Palace, but on a Hawaiian cruise together. They were standing at the entrance of the ship's grandest dining hall, lined with portholes from which one could gaze upon an everlasting sea. They were waiting to be

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led to their table, where they might eat their fill, and then more; where servers glided smoothly from one table to the next, as if in a coordinated dance, filling up champagne flutes whenever the level dropped below half.