

Old Maid Tiffany Tsao

I don't like not knowing when she'll show up. I'd just finished ironing and folding the clothes, and was passing through the sitting room to put them away, when I saw her there – legs stretched out across the full length of the sofa, back propped up against the arm-rest, nose buried in a book. It was as if she'd never left for America...or Europe...or Australia...or wherever she had gone to university. She sat in the same position in which she'd spent most of her childhood and teenage years. Only now, the book had more pages and no pictures. The legs were longer, taking up more of the sofa. And her figure had plumped out, taking up more space in general. It's true, I guess. Life in western countries really does make you fat. That's what the woman who lives next door told me when she came over to borrow some chilli sauce a few months ago. She'd just come back from a trip to Australia. She said one person there is the size of three people here. And she said that each one eats enough for three people too.

Not that I'm so slender myself these days. Of course, anyone would grow flabby being cooped up inside the house day in and day out. I wondered if, over there, she spent all her time inside reading books like she does when she comes back to visit us – like she did when she was still living here. Her skin looked darker though. Positively black. I wondered if she'd gotten into the habit of baking her skin like white people do. A little blacker and plumper, but other than that, she was just a bigger, older version of the fat, spoiled girl who would come home from school and demand that I make her fried banana fritters.

I wondered if she had a boyfriend yet. Maybe she was even engaged. Maybe she was already married. Though these days, I'd heard that girls preferred not to marry – to grow into old maids. Who knew? It's not like anyone in the family ever tells me anything.

I pride myself on my manners, though nobody else seems to have them. I asked her if she wanted something to drink.

Then, the strangest thing happened. She glanced up from her reading and smiled at me. How was I? she asked. Fine, I answered. She put the book down, swung her legs off the sofa, and looked directly at me, her head tilted to one side. How were things around the house, she asked. Had it been raining much? Where did the new painting in the foyer come from? Where did the pandan plants in the front yard go? Was the dog in good health?

Huh. I had some questions of my own running through my head. When did she get so chatty? And when did her Indonesian get so good? When she left home years ago, her language skills were limited to asking for things and giving orders. *This* made me nervous. And it was just plain strange. She ran out of things to ask and we stood in silence, me still carrying the laundry basket, resting it on my hip. I repeated my original question: did she want something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Tea, she said. Black tea, green tea, or chamomile? Black tea, she replied, with condensed milk if we had any. Suddenly, she yanked the laundry basket out of my hands, saying that she'd put the clothes away. And despite my protestations, off she went.

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Strange.

What could I do but go into the kitchen and make her a cup of tea? Our electric hot water dispenser had broken down the day before, so I rummaged around for the old kettle and put some water on to boil.

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The poor thing had aged. And shrunk. I thought of a line from a poem by Yeats I'd read in my first year at university, when I'd thought I was going to major in English. 'An old man is a paltry thing. A tattered coat upon a stick.' Or something along those lines. I couldn't imagine her in a coat. Although given the temperatures inside air-conditioned buildings in Singapore, I'd often thought wearing one wouldn't be a bad idea.

Precisely for that reason, I'd always liked hanging out at my grandmother's house. Never one for new-fangled gadgets, she's always preferred cooling down to the temperate breezes blown by rotating fan blades. As I stretched out on the sofa and continued my reading – an anthropological study on the conceptualisation of gender in rural South Sulawesi – I remembered the ancient electric fan that used to sit on the rosewood table next to her sofa. When I was little, I would direct it at my feet and turn it on. As I read, I'd imagine the coolness of the wind being absorbed into the blood vessels in my feet and ankles, then travelling up my legs, my torso, my head, my arms, and finally, through my palms and fingers, where they in turn would emit cooling energy onto the pages of the book they were holding. Three-quarters of my brain would be processing the story I was reading; one-quarter of it was devoted to the peculiar pleasure of having turned myself into a sort of human fan. I would even emit a low, sustained hum under my breath, which was drowned out anyway by the gravelly roar of the real fan, more akin to the sound of a wartime propeller plane than a household appliance.

The fan was long gone, of course – most likely chucked out by my mother or one of my aunts. Its replacement hung from the ceiling overhead, operated by a switch-panel on the wall. The blades were so white and shiny that the ceiling and walls looked a dirty yellow by comparison, even though my grandmother kept her place spotless. I guessed it was a concession made by my grandmother in order to prevent her daughters from modernising her abode entirely. A fan was a small sacrifice to make for the sake of the old-fashioned wrought-iron grilles on the windows and doors, the moss-green linoleum floors, the dark, dank bathroom where, rooted among the tiny square blue tiles, thrived a species of brown fungus so hardy that the most determined scrubbing and the most corrosive cleaning agents would never be able to evict it.

On this visit, I had noticed other changes as well. A canvas of Jackson Pollock-ish art in a slick black frame hung in the foyer between the calligraphy scrolls and the painting of *koi* fish that my second aunt especially hated (that was probably another concession). The pandan plants in the front yard were gone, replaced by an unremarkable shaggy fern. When Sri came in, I asked her about them. She said they had mysteriously died. She was growing another one in a big pot behind the kitchen. She looked suspicious as she said it, and her age made her look even more so: her hunched shoulders formed a protective shield around her body as if they were bracing it against incursion; the wrinkles around her eyes gave them a narrow and mistrustful

look. She was old and the universe was waiting to pounce on her—waiting to turn her into maggot-food and dust.

Suddenly, I felt sorry. Sorry that I'd taken her for granted for all those years growing up. Sorry that, even though she had been the one to raise me through adolescence (my mother and father both worked full-time), I never phoned after I'd moved away. Partly because she didn't expect me to – why should she? Partly because my mother certainly never expected me to. Mostly because the idea of calling her was simply absurd, or at least it had been until the end of my first year of college, when I developed an awareness that my situation wasn't normal – at least, normal by the standards of my American friends.

Over there, it was unnatural to be raised by someone who wasn't your mother or father or some other relative. It was, at the very least, uncommon to pay someone small and brown to be at your family's beck and call twenty-four hours a day for trifling wages, to house them in a tiny windowless room with a cheap mattress and a wet bathroom on the exterior of your house or flat, to expect them to do all the house-cleaning and laundering and cooking and grocery shopping, to entrust them with the care of your beloved children. Only fabulously wealthy people did that in America. Evil ones (according to the TV shows and movies) who didn't think servants were human beings and who didn't care enough about their offspring to raise them themselves.

I, however, felt more inclined to forgive my people. This was how things worked in our part of the world. You didn't have to be rich to have a servant; just reasonably well off. And why wouldn't you have one? You could pay someone else to do the work and that someone else needed the money: a win-win situation.

Only, with every additional year I spent in that faraway egalitarian land of industrious people ironing their own clothes and making their own breakfasts, each time I came back, I could feel myself growing more uncomfortable, more disturbed at having these simple tasks done for me.

'Iris, you have a *maid*?' Nancy had asked me, her green eyes widening in disbelief. It's funny the kind of people you end up befriending in college. Nancy and I might as well have come from different planets. She hailed from Wisconsin, her family a clan of hardworking dairy farmers who were so proud about her getting a scholarship to Cornell that they'd framed the letter and hung it in the living room above the television. Nancy had red hair and freckles, loved watching American football, and drank a glass of milk at every meal. Her favourite Chinese food was *moo goo gai pan*... whatever that was. When she'd asked the question, we had been hanging out in my dorm room. I'd known her for only for six or seven months at that point, but she was still surprised at this new piece of information. I wasn't surprised. I'd kept it hidden: I didn't want to be known as 'spoiled' or 'rich'.

'I don't have a maid,' I answered. 'My family has one.' I gestured to the heap of unfolded laundry at the foot of my bed and tried to turn what I had just said into the light-hearted joke I'd intended it to be. It had come out too defensive, but it wasn't too late. I grinned. 'I *wish* I had a maid.'

This worked. Nancy laughed. 'But seriously. You have a maid? Or your family does? And she *raised* you? Where's she from?'

'Indonesia.'

'What's her name? How old is she?'

‘Her name is Sri,’ I answered. ‘I think she’s around... fifty? Maybe sixty?’

‘Does she have kids?’

My discomfort grew. ‘I think so,’ I lied. Truth was, I had no clue.

‘How many kids? Who brought them up when she was working for you?’

I lied a little more. I answered that there were two sons and that Sri’s sister brought them up. Then I suggested we take a trip to the pharmacy in town. I had run out of shampoo.

‘Do you want something to drink?’

The question jolted me into the present, to the aged figure now standing before me, shifting her weight from one foot to the other in discomfort. I’d kept the poor old thing standing all that time, carrying that heavy load. Impulsively, I took the basket from her. Go make the tea, I told her. I’ll put these away. It was the least I could do, and I was glad we were alone, or else the opportunity would never have arisen. My family would have said that I was being silly, that I was spoiling her. What do you think we pay her for, they’d ask. But that was beside the point. Isn’t everyone entitled to a small kindness every now and then? To some nod, some recognition of our shared humanity? Before she could say a word, I whisked the basket off to my grandmother’s room and put the clothes away for Sri. And I wondered if she really did have two sons after all.

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Having to boil the water gave me some time to read a little more of my article. And with my boss out of the house, there was no chance I’d get caught. I put on my spectacles and took my *Femina* magazine out of its hiding place. I was hardly allowed out of the house anymore, except to go to the market. But the woman next door had been kind enough to buy it for me on one of her days off. Some of us have all the luck. Not only did she have Sundays and public holidays free but her employers – a middle-aged couple with two children and two sets of elderly parents – even brought her with them on family vacations. In addition to packing and ironing, she had to take care of the children and old parents, which didn’t leave her with much free time. But occasionally, when they went to a restaurant too expensive to have her come along, they would give her a little spending money and let her have an hour or two to wander around by herself. On this latest trip, she’d even brought me back a souvenir: a keychain with a little grey fuzzy bear doll hanging from it – a *kuala*, she told me. I do envy her sometimes, but I suppose I couldn’t wish anything less for someone so generous. When she gave me the magazine, she wouldn’t even let me pay her back.

Times flies. She’d bought this issue for me a little under a year ago and I was still working my way through it. I’d been reading this particular article for several weeks now – an interview with a successful businesswoman in Surabaya who had started her own bakery at the age of thirty. Her husband worked as a manager in a travel agency and she had three daughters. The bakery specialised in making cream puffs. I’d reached the part where she was giving *Femina* readers advice on running a business and caring for family at the same time.

I found the place where I’d left off (marked with a star), and as usual, just a few words into reading, I ran into a word I didn’t recognise. Slowly trailing my pencil across it, I sounded it out under my breath, syllable by syllable. Still unfamiliar. I

ended up circling it so I could look it up in my dictionary later. Not that it ever really helped. Whose idea was it to explain the meaning of words with more words? They should make dictionaries with pictures.

I was reading through the sentence one more time when I heard a noise behind me. To my surprise, Iris had come into the kitchen. What are you reading? she asked.

Just a magazine, I answered. I tried to look calm. It wasn't a big deal, but I was sure I'd be in trouble if Iris told her grandmother, who would probably accuse me of being lazy and wasting time when I could be doing other chores. She would take the magazine away. Iris looked at the pages with interest. Do they sell Indonesian magazines here, she asked. Yes, I answered. Oh, the water's boiling! It wasn't, but I used that as an excuse to put it away. I prayed she wouldn't mention it to her grandmother. My boss is a mean old bird.

Are you sure the water's boiled? Shouldn't the kettle make a sound?

I made a show of checking inside the kettle. You're right, I said. It hasn't boiled yet. A little while longer. You really don't need to wait, Miss Iris. I'll take care of it. Go sit down on the sofa. I'll bring the tea out to you.

Iris did sit down, but on the stool near the oven. How irritating can you get? She'd already made enough trouble for me by putting my boss's clothes away, probably in all the wrong shelves and drawers. I'd have to do the job properly once she left. But why wouldn't she leave me alone? Why was she asking me all these questions? I didn't like being watched like this. I already got enough of this from her grandmother: inspecting each fork and spoon to see if I'd washed the dishes properly; checking to see which spices I'd used for seasoning the food; accusing me of using too much rice or too many eggs to prepare my own meals. I'd preferred working for Iris's parents. They didn't ration my food so tightly and they let me have Sundays off. Sometimes, when they went out to eat at a hawker centre, they'd even bring back something especially for me: *nasi lemak* or *roti prata* from a Muslim food stall.

Then when my boss's previous maid died of a heart attack, Iris's parents gave me to her as a replacement. I heard the two of them discussing it over dinner one night: she told him that her mother was too old to live by herself and too old to handle training a new maid, and he had agreed. Why not give her Sri, he suggested. Sri was obedient, honest, and hardworking. Sri could take Yani's place and they could get a new maid. Within a week, I was doing Yani's chores. Within two weeks, they had moved me into the room where Yani had died. My new boss didn't even bother change the mattress. How I prayed to Allah all through the night not to let Yani's ghost harm me. Even now, every night before I go to bed, I pray for protection. I sleep fairly soundly these days, but those first few weeks I lay awake, out of my mind with fear. I begged my boss to let me sleep on the kitchen floor instead, but she told me I was being stupid and superstitious. She still tells me I'm stupid at least three times a day.

I really do miss working for Iris's parents. I don't get Sundays off anymore. The old woman claims they're included in my annual holiday back to Indonesia. And forget about her buying any food for me when she goes out; I'm lucky if she brings back leftovers, which I don't dare to eat most of the time because she lies about whether the food has pork in it. I'll admit that I've never been very devout – I don't keep fasts, I only perform *salat* every now and then, and I gave up hope of going on Hajj a long time ago. But I still have my standards. Mean old bat.

‘Sri, do you have children?’

I almost choked and the kettle began to sing.

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I had obviously surprised her when I entered the kitchen. When she turned around, she looked flustered and confused, as if I’d caught her doing something she wasn’t supposed to be doing. She’d been reading something – an Indonesian women’s magazine I discerned from glancing at the pages. Odd. I hadn’t pegged Sri as the type to read articles on beauty tips or fashion. Maybe she was reading it for the recipes. Then it occurred to me that it was unusual for Sri to be able to read at all.

Even if I didn’t know a lot about Sri herself, I’d learned a lot these past few years about people like her. Funnily enough, I think it had all started with that conversation with Nancy: realising how little I knew about the person who had essentially been my second mother; how I couldn’t even communicate with her that well. Compelled by a mixture of guilt and curiosity, I enrolled in an Indonesian language class. I took an anthropology class on rural Southeast Asia. I switched majors. An obsession with Indonesia took root and grew. I applied to grad school in anthropology. Once in the program, I brought my Indonesian up to near fluency and picked up Javanese. After passing my qualifying exams in my third year, I set off for eight months of fieldwork in Central Java – eight months in a small, isolated village kept alive by the absence of its able-bodied men and women.

At least one member of every family had gone abroad to earn the livelihood that the village’s small-scale agriculture simply couldn’t sustain. Fathers and husbands departed to labour in mines or on plantations, or sometimes, to become factory-workers and day-labourers in the cities and industrial areas. Mothers and wives too sought work in the factories or as maids in the big cities. If they were lucky, they became maids in other countries, where the wages were positively astronomical by comparison: Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong. The same story repeated itself in villages the archipelago over.

Those in their teens and twenties usually had some rudimentary reading and writing skills, picked up in the ramshackle schools that had come to be more common in the rural areas as the result of educational reforms. But the women from these areas who belonged to Sri’s generation were almost always illiterate. How did Sri learn to read? Perhaps she never did. Perhaps she was just looking at the pictures in the magazine. But then why had she marked the pages with pencil?

Of course, what did I know? Nothing. Not even the name of the village she came from, though from her accent, I knew she was from somewhere in Java. Even after spending so much time absorbed in the study of Sri’s language and country – sprung from the gnawing guilt of not knowing anything about her – I found myself hesitant to converse with her whenever I returned to Singapore. It seemed strange to ask her about these things, to suddenly take an interest in her as a human being, to treat her like one, after all those years of spoiled thoughtlessness and absence. But now, after eight months of talking to unfamiliar people about their lives, their beliefs, their circumstances, I felt surer, more confident. It was high time that someone paid Sri attention.

I asked Sri if they sold Indonesian magazines in Singapore, which was a stupid question. Of course they did: there were lots of Indonesians living in Singapore. Why

wouldn't they have stores selling magazines for them? As she bustled around and murmured something about how I should go rest and wait for my tea in the sitting room, I thought of another question.

'Sri, do you have children?'

She looked startled. Of course she would look startled. Until this moment, I'd never shown the slightest interest in anything about her. Then her eyes came to rest upon me and her gaze softened.

Yes. She sighed, as if the fact hurt her somehow. A girl.

Only one?

Yes. One girl.

She filled the teacup and jerked the teabag about in water by its string. It looked like an injured fish, bleeding currents of dark red.

How old is she now?

Oh, she's grown up already. Married. Has two children.

So you have grandchildren? Boys? Girls?

A boy and a girl.

Do you see them when you go home for leave?

Yes. Here's the condensed milk. She set the glass jar on the counter next to me, along with a spoon.

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I don't have a daughter. I don't have a son-in-law. I don't have grandchildren. And I don't know why I lied. I think part of me just felt very annoyed about her asking so many questions. They think that because they can make you do work twenty-four hours a day, that they have a right to know everything about you. Actually, I was on the verge of saying something really rude about her minding her own business. But then I looked at her and thought to myself: what was the use, really? What was the use of being so sensitive after all these years?

For a second – half a second – I could smell him. It was an awful smell. A combination of sweat, sour curry, and a hint of something else I could never pin down: damp clothes that hadn't dried properly; dog saliva; stale beer. I met him when I was working for my third employer, right before I started working for Iris's parents. His name was Ragesh – a construction worker from India. He was already married and had a family back at home to support. But he was lonely. And so was I.

That smell. It surprises me every now and then, invading my nostrils and starting the memories going. The missed period. The dizziness every morning. The panic. Ragesh's sudden disappearance. The old Chinese crone in Geylang who promised to make it all better, and who did.

I don't think it affected me that much at the time. A few weeks of crying every now and then. A bit of moping around. But I could stay in Singapore. I could keep my job. And life went on. But something's changed these days. Whenever something sets the memories running, whenever that Ragesh scent catches me unawares, my skull collapses in on my brain and my ribs collapse in on my heart. Maybe it's because, now, it's too late. It's all too late. A life spent being at other people's beck and call. A life assisting other people so they can live theirs. A life measured out in meals served, shirts folded, toilets scrubbed, floors mopped and swept, over and over and over again.

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What was even the use of practising my reading anymore? Practising during snatches of free time for the last... what was it? Fifty years? Crawling through reading material like a snail. I feel like I've been slowing down even more in the past few months too. By the time I get to the end of a sentence, I've forgotten all the words at the beginning and have to start over to understand its meaning. I know I'm circling the same words again and again. And the definitions seem to make less and less sense, and take longer for me to get through. I end up circling words in those. And I look up those words. And I draw more circles. And more circles. And the circles multiply and spread like mould, and I sit among them, pencil in hand, more confused than when I started.

Iris, what was the use of explaining anything to you? Fortunate girl who could read whole pages in a matter of minutes; who had travelled the world; who had her whole life before her?

I have a girl. Maybe in another life, I have this girl. And grandchildren. And I've retired from being a secretary working for a big company. And sitting on my veranda with my husband (he never has a face), I sip coffee and finish the new issue of *Femina* within a few days and wait impatiently for the next one.

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Sri had a daughter. From the villagers I'd talked to, I knew the story all too well. She never saw her daughter grow up because she watched me grow up – a spoilt Singaporean-Chinese girl she'd had to tend to in her own daughter's stead. I wanted to ask her about her husband too. Was he still alive? How was their relationship? How often did they see each other? Where did he live?

I didn't. The questions felt a little too personal – too heavy a load for the slender thread of communication we'd just established. I was just about to continue asking her about her daughter. I was going to ask her name.

To my surprise, she cut me off with a question of her own. We really were connecting! Are you going to move back to Singapore, she asked?

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She'd just opened her big mouth to ask another question, and I couldn't bear it anymore. So I asked the first thing that came to mind.

It took her so long to reply that I thought that she'd decided not to answer. At first, I felt relieved. This whole exchange had left me exhausted, and I began to think about what other tasks needed doing before I had to start the preparations for dinner. Then she answered.

I don't think so, she said. I'm probably going to stay in America. (So it *was* America.) She wanted to teach at a university, and there were more opportunities to do so over there. She fell quiet again. Don't tell my parents or my grandmother, she said. I haven't told them yet.

I wondered briefly why she didn't want her family to know. But then another thought popped into my head. If the woman next door could see the world, why couldn't I? Was this opportunity knocking at my door?

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When I told Sri I wasn't moving back to Singapore, she lapsed into silence. Had I saddened her? Angered her? I couldn't tell. Her eyes fixed themselves on my cup,

now almost empty of tea, and her age-spotted forehead wrinkled into a patchy brown mountain range of thoughtful valleys and ridges.

Do you want more tea, she asked. I wondered if I'd offended her in any way. Maybe I shouldn't have told her to keep my decision to stay in America a secret. Shaking my head, I stood up. No, it's all right. I have to read some more anyway.

As I was heading through the door, she called me back.

Miss Iris?

Yes, I asked.

What if I went with you to America?

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I had to ask. I had to try. What did I have left here? What if I went to America and worked for you? I could cook and clean and take care of you, like I did when you were little. And if you ever started a family, I could take care of them as well. I could raise your children just like I raised you.

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I was the daughter that she'd raised. She was the mother who took care of me. How did I think that connection could be severed so easily? Not a blood kinship, but one of sweat and tears and time. Brushing my hair, playing hide-and-seek with me. Singing me lullabies and telling me bedtime stories that drowsed me into sleep. Those words lingered on as unintelligible sounds in my memory until I learned the language that imbued them with new meaning. And when my parents forbade her from speaking to me for fear that I'd mix too much Indonesian in with my English and Mandarin, she would stroke my forehead and hum softly. I'd convinced myself that Sri was the one who scared the nightmares away. I made her put me to sleep this way until I turned eight.

Now, of course she wanted to come to America with me. To be my servant-mother and servant-grandmother to my young. Of course.

I shuddered. I didn't want this life anymore. Even if it was touching in a sick way. Wasn't this part of the reason why I didn't want to come back? Why I wanted to stay in the land of the free? Where I was free to toast my own bread and roast my own chickens; to mop my own floors and to keep the clean underwear crumpled in a drawer because who the hell could be bothered to fold underwear?

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In America, with Iris, I could have an easy life. Light household chores, simple meal preparation. In America, with Iris, I could start anew. The girl could be annoying, but nowhere near as fussy as the rest of her family. In fact, she was positively a pushover since she went away to university. Though of course, I would never take advantage of her like that. But Iris would let me have some freedom. Iris would let me go out and experience life in America. Iris would let me have one day a week off. Iris would let me read magazines and whatever I wanted. Maybe I could even learn English.

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She looked at me with such hope in her eyes, a washed out blackish blue, the familiar colour of old age. I knew I had to say no.

Well, I wouldn't say no directly. You'd be lonely there, I'd tell her. Nobody speaks your language. Nobody hangs out in roadside stalls watching TV together and drinking endless coffees. Everyone keeps to themselves and you begin to want to do the same. Prices are never negotiable because haggling requires communicating. They come in faded print on tiny stickers you have to hunt for. It snows in winter and the trees look like they've passed on into the next world. It's so cold, you'll feel like following them.

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I will run away with Iris and escape that dreadful future. I don't want to live my days shuffling between these rooms, cooking and cleaning and taking care of a stingy old hag. And when I can't shuffle fast enough, and my back is too bent, and my eyes are too dim, I don't want to be retired and sent back home. What waits for me there? An endless trickle of greedy relatives who will wheedle my earnings from me. And a mat in the corner of a nephew's house where my existence will be barely tolerated.

I don't want it. I'm not over yet. There's so much I have to do.