

The Jade Sword

Amber left her room and pranced happily down the stairs, humming a tune. She felt elated, having finished her homework much earlier than usual. As she reached the entrance hall, the front door opened and her aunt entered.

Amber called out a greeting, as courtesy required.

Her aunt looked exhausted. Her brow was puckered and two lines of tiredness seemed to be dragging down the corners of her mouth.

“Rough day at the office?” Amber asked, solicitously.

Her aunt responded with a mere flicker of a smile. “No more than usual. I dawdled. By the time I was ready to leave, taxis were in the middle of changing shifts. Couldn’t get one for love or money. It’s one thing to walk downhill, quite another to climb up with a heavy briefcase.”

“Oh, dear! A nice soak in the bath should set you right.”

“Definitely. I’m sweating like a pig. I see you’re still in your school clothes. Going over to Sharlene’s again?”

“No, just to the garden for a breath of air. Then I’ll shower.”

“Good. Oh, before I forget, got you a present.”

“Wow! What a nice surprise! What is it?”

Her aunt set down her briefcase and rummaged in the large Gucci handbag hanging from one of her shoulders. She eventually extracted a small sachet made of pink brocade, the kind favoured by local jewellers. “I hope you like it,” she said, handing over the sachet.

Inside was a pendant of emerald green jade fashioned in the shape of a curved sword attached to a gold chain. The pendant was about two inches long and a quarter of an inch wide.

“Thank you, Auntie. It’s really gorgeous,” Amber said, holding the gift up to the light. But as she hung it around her neck, she realised it was too small to serve as a fashion accessory. The pendant was not substantial enough to be noticeable, except at close quarters.

She was puzzling over this when her aunt stepped up and took hold of the gold chain.

“The pendant’s meant to be worn next to the skin,” her aunt said, tucking it inside Amber’s blouse. “Jade gains in translucency through human contact. Brings out the life in the stone. Some Cantonese believe that a jade sword wards off misfortunes and evil.”

“No kidding! I never knew that,” Amber said.

Her aunt picked up her briefcase and began climbing the stairs. She was out of earshot before Amber could ask the reason for the gift.

Something must be bugging her aunt, she thought. Ever since that visit to the Wong Tai Sin Temple, her aunt had been not quite herself. The gift of a talisman was just her latest oddity. What did it mean? Was it connected to the temple visit? Or had her uncle’s departure for England troubled her? Was there really something fishy about those London visits, as Sharlene had suggested? Her uncle couldn’t possibly be carrying on with another woman. Or could he?

All she had been able to discover about her uncle had been pieced together from his books and from odd comments made by her aunt. His past seemed so redolent with romance and adventure, although in the time she had known him he had been nothing but a workaholic hermit. If he had been having secret rendezvous with a woman -- particularly with the mysterious Isabelle -- what a revelation it would be!

The possibility there might be a spicy scandal sent a thrill through her. That would really be a secret worth sharing with Sharlene. But the inability to fathom the behaviour of either her aunt or uncle bothered her.

She turned into the sitting room and swept past the antiques on display. She paused briefly in front of the white jade monkey holding the Peach of Longevity and smiled. It was her favourite piece.

Upon her opening the French windows leading to the verandah, a damp heat lunged in. Spring shouldn't have ended yet, she thought. As if in compensation, the fragrances of sweet peas and gardenias came to her.

Almost simultaneously, possible reasons for her aunt's unexpected gift popped into her head. Her heartbeat accelerated. She skipped outside and swiftly shut the French windows, leaning her back against them.

To ward off misfortunes and evil, her aunt had said. Was it a reaction to her failure to go to church in recent weeks or had she already heard of her half-naked Dance of the Seven Veils? Worse still, she might have overheard the sounds of her pleasuring herself in bed!

Her cheeks flushed over those possibilities. Something was definitely happening to herself. Sharlene's expositions on sexual habits and the sweet talk from Barrie and other guys at school had ignited her own sexuality. After that shattering experience in the shower, she simply couldn't help wanting to recapture that feeling of release again and again. Did that suggest a wickedness developing inside her? Was that why her aunt had spoken of warding off misfortunes and evil?

She kept leaning against the French windows, covered in confusion. Then a less alarming possibility occurred to her. She would soon be heading for Los Angeles, a city portrayed in movies and detective novels as menacing and crime-ridden. Her aunt might have intended the talisman to protect her against those sorts of misfortunes.

That more innocuous explanation reassured her a little. She took a couple of deep breaths, crossed the verandah and went down the three marble steps leading into the garden.

Two large trees stood like sentinels close to the house -- a dowager of a banyan on one side and a rubber tree, leaning slightly off-centre, on the other. Three wrought iron garden chairs and a round

matching table, all painted in white, were arranged under the banyan.

Bordering the spacious lawn was a superb arrangement of plants and flowers, multi-coloured sweet peas, yellow gardenias, irises, begonias and clumps of bamboos. A thick, waist-high hibiscus hedge marked the far boundary of the garden. Beyond the hedge an escarpment fell steeply onto a thoroughfare below.

As she strolled towards the hedge, another set of considerations intruded. She was a Catholic. Although she had felt uncomfortable attending church after her drunken dance, how could it be proper to seek protection against misfortune and evil from a talisman? If she were to wear one, it should be a crucifix. But the one Mum had given her was now fixed above her bed and was in any case too large to wear. She was about to cross herself but stopped in time. How could she call upon the grace of God any longer when she was wearing a pendant which usurped His prerogative to deal with evil? Yet God had failed to prevent her from making an exhibition of herself at the party. Could a jade sword save her from slipping further over the edge?

She wished there was someone she could discuss such concerns with. Her aunt would merely repeat her mother's line about saving sex for marriage. As for Sharlene, a real heart-to-heart was impossible. She had already misled her friend into thinking she was sexually experienced. To confess the truth would be too much of a climb-down. Growing up was such a hassle.

A panoramic view of the harbour and the urban sprawl spread before her at the hedge. The harbour was crowded with criss-crossing traffic. Ferries between the Central District and Kowloon, hydrofoils conveying gamblers to and from Macau, cruise liners bringing tourists, container ships moving mountains of metal boxes. There were also river barges carrying vegetables and poultry from Kwangtung, bat-winged junks

with harvests from the sea, visiting warships in sombre grey, tramp steamers, tug boats, pleasure craft and the odd sampan.

In the middle distance loomed the pulsating heart of the financial district, with concrete and steel temples to mercantile enterprise, each solid, modern and cocksure. Across in Kowloon, an even bigger expanse of high-rises spread like a rash.

The roof of the Ocean Terminal on the other side of the harbour sprouted massive signs touting a variety of Japanese products. The extended runway of Kai Tak International Airport poked like an insolent finger of concrete into an overcrowded harbour. To the far north, beyond the Kowloon peninsula, loomed the brooding hills of the Nine Dragons, disfigured by erosions and scarred by squatter encampments.

She used to love coming into the garden, especially at night, when the city lit up like a carnival. Its rapidly changing skylines sang of opportunity, dynamism, prosperity and progress. The city had a tempo all its own, bursting with hope and confidence. The mere sight of it helped put behind the chaos and foul smells of Yaumati.

But that optimism had now vanished. Her uncle had disabused her of it. She had been trying ever since to come to terms with the new versions of the city he had conjured up for her with his fury of words.

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The incident had occurred shortly after the start of the lunar Year of the Rabbit. The family had just finished one of Ah Loy's superb dinners and her aunt had suggested a stroll in the garden. As the two of them headed out together, arm in arm, her uncle quite unexpectedly decided to join them.

The evening was mild. The moon hung like a great yellow

lemon drop in the sky. The stars seemed to merge in a dance with the lights of the city, linked together in the dark poetry of night. Decorations to celebrate the lunar new year still festooned many buildings. A gigantic replica of a rabbit adorned one of them. Most of the others were floodlit, with strings of coloured lights emphasising their outlines. A number still had propitious sayings in red characters fixed to their walls.

The sheer splendour of the sight excited her. She couldn't help spreading her arms and crying out with happiness. "Oh, this is magnificent! It's like a fairyland! I'm going to miss it."

"Yes, it's really something," her aunt said. "Even without the lunar decorations, the Tourist Association claims we have the most wonderful harbour view in the world."

Her uncle made a sarcastic noise.

"You should know better than to believe that drivel," he said. "Tourism organisations are little more than touts with official recognition, peddling synthetic customs and ersatz culture for a quick return. Tourism spreads global corruption, contaminates local arts and crafts and reduces cultures to their lowest common denominator."

"Isn't travelling supposed to be broadening, allowing people to get to know other races and cultures?" she had responded.

"Yes, for the perceptive and discriminating, not en masse in package tours," her uncle said. "Herding people around like sheep, rubbernecking at pedestrian sites, is a waste of time. Like scanning words on a page without taking in their meaning. Misinformation repeated too often breeds only contempt."

"You're sounding rather superior, my dear," Aunt Po-Chee intervened. "There's nothing wrong with people going somewhere to shop or to take a break from their workaday routines. Besides, this view of our harbour and our city is real, not ersatz. People love it. Millions have been

captivated by it. Tourists always buy postcards of this scene or take photographs to send to friends and relatives.”

“Yes, it’s pretty enough,” Uncle Suen conceded. “But it’s not real. It’s a fake, a counterfeit.”

“A fake? What do you mean, Uncle?”

“It’s only a clever mirage, an illusion on a grand scale.” Uncle Suen pointed to a spot on the Kowloon hills. “See those lights?”

“Yes,” she said, following the direction of his finger.

“Twinkling and pretty?”

“Yes.”

“Well, those are the lights of kerosene lamps and cookers in a squatter encampment. Half a million unfortunates in our beautiful city have to struggle for survival each day, living in flimsy hovels, without such basic amenities as running water or sanitation. Such electricity they have is illegally tapped from overhead cables, often at the risk of being electrocuted. With one cooking mishap, or one bad typhoon, some will die and thousands will be left homeless. Do our visitors see any of that? Is that depressing reality faithfully recorded in the postcards they buy?

“We are not alone in averting our eyes to reality. Worse encampments exist elsewhere. Manila, Rio, Calcutta, Johannesburg, right around the world. The West is not immune. Ugliness is hidden away in condemned tenements and suburban ghettos. Cities which suck in wealth also suck in the poor and the desperate. They cling like festering fungus on the fringes of every large city. Some have begun invading city centres. Unless we can find the resolve to deal with the poor, their needs will one day overwhelm all urban infrastructures.”

Her uncle turned and pointed in a different direction.

“Those are the lights of a resettlement estate, one step up on the ladder of housing misery,” he continued. “Each estate is packed with fifty

or sixty thousand souls, about the number in an average European town. Families of five are entitled to accommodation in a unit hardly the size of the smallest bathroom in our house. The authorities like to boast that half our people are in public housing. Have you ever been inside one of those blocks?”

She shook her head, apprehensive over where things might be leading.

“Well, I’ll tell you what’s inside. Those tiny units are stretched along long corridors, floor upon floor, forming virtual vertical streets where not real law exists. In older estates there are only communal bathrooms and latrines. A paradise for Peeping Toms. No armed policeman would dare to patrol them on his own, even in broad daylight. He risks being ambushed. Police revolvers are considered valuable trophies in the underworld. Those corridors are the domain of protection racketeers, triads and gangsters. When the police go there, they have to do so in groups.

“Inside some of the units, crimes are taking place on a daily basis, with the full knowledge of frightened neighbours. No one dares to say a thing or to make a report. The best anyone can do is to install a metal gate outside the door to protect his family. It may come to that in Western cities as well one day, mark my words. Anonymous lives in anonymous concrete boxes. Fear stalking the streets. The shape of things to come, thanks to pathetic politicians.”

“Darling, please,” Aunt Po-Chee intervened again. “Let’s not get into social issues. This is too splendid a night for that.”

“The night is indeed splendid,” Uncle Suen rejoined. “It is precisely on such nights that truths ought to be confronted, pleasant or unpleasant though they may be. Taoists have long held that truthful words are not beautiful and beautiful words are not truthful. Amber’s quite old enough to judge the truth for herself.”

Fearful she might be causing a family argument, Amber said quickly: "I would like to hear what Uncle has to say."

Uncle Suen placed an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze, as if in appreciation for siding with him. He then turned her bodily in a fresh direction.

"See those lights there?" he said, pointing again. "They represent the topless bars and late night haunts of Tsim Sha Tsui. Every perversion is catered for there. For the right amount of money, of course. Whores, gigolos, pederasts, drug peddlers and sadomasochists. And over here, on this side of the harbour, more of the same in Wanchai."

Uncle Suen then directed her towards the centre of the financial district. "See all those lit-up windows, grimacing at us at this God-forsaken hour? They are our modern Towers of Babel. Do you know how many banks and deposit-taking companies we have?"

She shook her head.

"Well, we have hundreds and hundreds of them. Works out at roughly one financial institution for every ten thousand people, I think. More than any other city on earth. Amazing, isn't it? Housed in those lit-up buildings. Do you know what's going on inside?"

"People working overtime, I guess," she replied.

"Yes, making money is a serious business. Within those confines are venture capitalists, arbitrage dealers, currency speculators, take-over artists, asset strippers, creative accountants, tax avoidance experts, commodities traders, stock brokers. You'll also find insider dealers, pyramid sellers, money launderers. In short, the complete cast of dubious characters befitting the third largest financial centre in the world.

"At this very moment, those people will be indulging in their wonderful games of chance, placing bets with other people's money on cross rates, currency fluctuations, commodity prices or whatever. If they

guess right, they'll make outrageous bonuses. If they guess wrong, well, a few hundred thousand working families will lose their savings or pensions or both. Wonderful games, every one of them, conducted on the soundest principles of free enterprise, with little pretence at prudential supervision.”

Uncle Suen fell silent for a moment and dropped his arm from her shoulders. When he resumed speaking, his voice had taken on a different timbre. It sounded weary, full of despair.

“Monkey tricks are not confined to corporate barracudas. They exist in our civil service as well. Ah, what has happened to the old ideal of public service being a vocation, like the priesthood? We now hear stories of the Fire Brigade refusing to turn on water hoses until money has crossed palms, of the backhanders at the Buildings Ordinance Office to approve dubious architectural plans, of institutionalised corruption in the Police. Are we supposed to accept them as the price for prosperity and progress?”

Uncle Suen paused again before continuing.

“You're probably too young to remember the Police mutiny back in 1977. At that time anti-corruption investigators were trying to arrest a bunch of policemen for a multiplicity of crimes. But our sterling guardians of the law surrounded the headquarters of the anti-corruption force and beat up the investigators. The Governor, with the concurrence of London, swiftly granted a general amnesty to absolve policemen of all crimes committed up till 1977. Impasse resolved, at the stroke of the pen.

“The moneybags, of course, heaved a collective sigh of relief. They returned to business as usual. A few citizens asked questions about the meaning of the rule of law. In the end pragmatism and ethical fatigue prevailed. Is it any wonder that robberies, kidnappings, gang rapes and drug-trafficking are thriving? In allowing any of that to happen we are accessories. Shame on us! Shame on us!”

Uncle Suen's voice rose and then fell away.

Although her uncle's face was now obscured by a deepening darkness, Amber could imagine the scowl on his face and the lines of tension straining his neck. She could also sense her aunt growing increasingly uncomfortable. Silence thickened around them like a doom. She waited with bated breath for the next barrage of denunciations.

When her uncle finally spoke again, his voice sounded bitter.

“Isaiah spoke of cities turning harlot in the Bible. Well, ours is turning into the greatest harlot of them all. Our harlot sells herself blatantly, openly, defiantly, as the most daring practitioner of unsafe capitalism to be found anywhere.

“What Isaiah predicted is coming to pass. Reflect upon his words. He spoke of people laden with iniquity, each oppressing another, the base against the honourable, the poor being destroyed by lies, daughters growing haughty, walking with mincing steps and wanton eyes. It's happening right here. We're well on the way to building the grandest Babylon the world has ever seen. Our ambition is nothing less than to replicate our success all over China. For a piece of the action, of course. Such money-madness, such profligacy, such wasteful consumerism, will condemn future generations to a world unfit for human habitation.”

Uncle Suen stopped abruptly, as if he could not bear to carry on. He was breathing heavily. Then he turned on his heels without warning and stomped back to the house.

She stood flabbergasted, staring at her uncle's retreating form, shadowy and indistinct in the darkness. “I haven't upset Uncle, have I?” she asked.

“Never mind your uncle,” Aunt Po-Chee replied. “He's in one of his Old Testament moods.”

A prolonged silence fell between the two women. They continued to stare into the city lights, each pursuing her own thoughts.

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Amber retreated from the edge of the garden to sit down on one of the chairs under the banyan tree. Though the afternoon had turned increasingly muggy, the wrought iron of the chair felt pleasantly cool against her skin.

Recalling her uncle's excoriating words on that evening of not so long ago, she was filled with restlessness and apprehension. How did he know so much about the happenings in the city? He seldom ventured out of the house, except on Fridays. But one thing was sure: he had rendered it impossible for her to look at the city lights in the same way again.

In a strange way, she missed her uncle now that he was away. He might ruffle her aspirations and cast doubt on her opinions, but he also stimulated her. Listening to his wry comments at dinner or reading an article he had written for a radical newspaper was sometimes more educational than being in school. He made her curious about things she would not otherwise have bothered with. If it had not been for his references to the lovable outlaws in the Water Margin she would probably never have opened that book. Neither would she have been so taken by Tang poetry.

Likewise, she would have known nothing about Hokusai, that great Japanese painter, if her uncle hadn't told a story over dinner.

The story arose out of a news item about a painting by Picasso being sold at auction for a fabulous sum. She remarked how wonderful it must be when a painter could produce works worth so much.

"Once an artist has established a reputation, fools will bid up anything by him, even if it's a fake," her uncle said.

"A fake?" she asked. "You mean the painting sold wasn't done

by Picasso but by somebody else?”

“No, it was done by Picasso all right.”

“Then how can it be a fake?”

“Great artists do produce fakes from time to time. Picasso was no exception. Just because a master has executed something doesn’t mean it can’t be a fake.”

She had expressed bewilderment.

Her uncle then told the story about Hokusai. The master was once summoned to court to do a painting for the emperor. He dipped the feet of a chicken into some blue ink and dragged them over a long scroll. He then dipped the feet of another chicken into vermilion ink and allowed it to walk all over the scroll. After that, he titled the painting “Autumn Leaves Falling on the Yangtze River” and presented it to the emperor.

On another occasion her uncle asked how she would judge whether a city was truly great and cultured.

“By its museums and concert halls, by how well its ancient monuments and heritage have been preserved, I guess,” she had replied. “Or by its cleanliness and the number of tourists wishing to come. By the number of stars earned by its hotels and restaurants. Maybe even by the orderly interface between motorists and pedestrians.”

Her uncle had shaken his head. “That rules Hong Kong out on nearly every score. There’s one reliable indicator to go by -- without relying on surveys and official propaganda -- and that is the number of second-hand bookshops. This city hasn’t a single one and that just about says it all.”

Sometimes she couldn’t decide if she should take her uncle seriously. His comments were often cryptic. Why second-hand bookshops? Why not smart bookstores selling art books and bestsellers? There were plenty of those, doing a roaring business. Was he actually

poking fun at her?

She sighed. Perhaps she deserved to be made fun of. She didn't know a fraction of the things her uncle did. It had not escaped her that even illiterate Ah Loy knew more than she did.

The old servant had plenty of practical knowledge. She knew about soups and herbs and cooking, for a start. Given the Cantonese attachment to soups, the old woman could serve up a delicious one every day of the week. It might be a clear one to cool the blood in summer or a thick one to warm the body in winter. She was apt to hover near the table to see how well her handiwork had gone down and to offer a running commentary .

If turtle soup was on offer, the servant would report on how long it had simmered over a slow fire and why she had added red medlar and some tuberous root of wild yams. One was good for the complexion and the other for cleansing the spleen.

She had once asked Ah Loy how she came by her knowledge of herbs. The old woman said she had learnt it from a former cook when she entered the household at twelve, as a personal maid to Uncle Suen's mother. What an eon ago that must have been! Yet she seemed contented to remain serving the Lam family without reservation.

She fingered the new jade pendant beneath her blouse and sighed. She looked at the serious splendour of the flowers rioting in the garden but felt at the same time the distemper of the afternoon closing in. That mixture of the pleasant with the unpleasant seemed such an unavoidable fact in life. If only she could keep what was pleasant and be rid of the unpleasant bits.

It occurred to her all of a sudden that the comfortable life at Bowen Road had progressively cocooned her from reality. All her material needs had been more than fulfilled. There was air conditioning throughout

the house. There were servants to attend to domestic chores and to serve up top-notch meals. The dinner table conversations were in themselves an education.

Over the last two and a half years she had been shopping at fashionable boutiques with her aunt and going on country walks with her. She had gone with classmates to parties, cinemas, restaurants, bars and night spots. During those activities memories of Yaumati had faded from her thoughts. It was only her uncle who kept jolting her back to an awareness that the apparently prosperous colony hid many still living at the margins.

Social conditions were a topic hardly ever examined in the international school or touched upon in conversations with classmates. Talk among students usually revolved around the price of a Ferrari, the latest electronic gadget, the most sought after designer labels, the rock bands in the Top Ten, the number of pairs of shoes owned by Mrs. Marcos and the names of certain bars in Lan Kwai Fong where dealers in cannabis and other drugs could be found. Most of that didn't even constitute knowledge, just information of moment to teenagers like herself. Knowing those things wasn't of much use to anybody, unless he happened to be a participant in one of those silly television quiz show.

A couple of butterflies flitted across her line of vision. She followed their erratic flights around the garden for a few moments.

Had she refrained from thinking about the unfortunates in the colony because she feared she too might soon return to a similar position? With her imminent departure for America the security of the old house would be lost to her. And political circumstances might deprive her of the chance of ever returning to it. She had been born and bred in Hong Kong but she had no family of her own. Being Eurasian, what right had she to citizenship once the place had reverted to China in 1997? That had been an

issue that supposedly astute diplomats had left dangling in the air.

If Hong Kong could offer no permanent haven, what alternative was there? Certainly not Portugal, even if she could find relatives there. She would be separated from them by language, culture and possibly family routines. Most likely, if her present behaviour persisted, by religion as well. The only things Portuguese about her would be her looks and her name.

Amber da Luz. Amber da Luz. Her very name sounded like a cry of an abandoned soul. She remembered her mother mentioning that her father's associates at Club Lusitano used to nicknamed him "Fernando da Loser" because he fared so poorly at cards. The possibility she might end up with a similar nickname filled her with dread.

She didn't want to become a loser. The great melting pot of America seemed to hold the only hope for an alternative home. Mixed blood didn't matter over there. Beauty, youth and sex appeal were all marketable commodities. If she could act, she could become a chameleon, blending in and changing identities at will. She could be anonymous and undifferentiated. With success, she might even become a star, a celebrity.

The trouble was that her European appearance came with a Chinese heart. It was so damn weird. Even though many Chinese shunned her, she simply could not shake the habits and values planted by her Mum and her uncle and aunt. How could she feel for the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving as much as she did for the Dragon Boat Festival or the Mid-Autumn Festival? She would certainly miss Ah Loy's meals. She might end up no less a misfit in America.

Worse still, what if she couldn't make the grade in acting? The humiliation would be devastating. She wouldn't have any other skill to fall back on. Neither could she expect her aunt and uncle to support her indefinitely. Perhaps a safer option might be to attend university first, as

her aunt had suggested. But how to make a graceful retreat?

The previous week her aunt had already invited Lucille Chu and her son, Ah Yuen, up for dinner, for the purpose of introducing a Los Angeles family to help her settle in. She had been quite impressed by Ah Yuen. He was a good-looking guy and appeared quite clued-up. She wondered why her aunt had asked him along.

Such questions ebbed and flowed and their answers seemed vexingly elusive. Marriage had never entered her head. She had hardly begun to live, in the way that Sharlene and the other kids had lived, let alone the kind of bohemian life of her uncle had experienced. And what of her desire to unravel the mesmerizing mysteries of the unknown?

She leaned back against the garden chair and sighed. She watched the afternoon sunlight splintering through the hoary branches of the banyan. The humidity of the dying day seemed to be seeping under her skin. Why did life have to get so complicated, so full of uncertainties?

It was not too late to apply for a university place, she supposed. But to which university and in which country? What field of study should she aim for? Was it even being considerate to her aunt to have second thoughts at this stage? Fees for acting school had already been paid. Doubts gathered so thick and fast that she could hardly think.

Suddenly, she noticed that the westering sun had coaxed lengthening shades across the garden. Out of one shady corner the gardener had emerged, carrying a large watering can. He was on his final round, before heading home to his family. She was reminded that dinner time was fast approaching. She should go in for a shower.