

The Electric New Paper :

I DON'T BLAME MY SON

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TONIGHT, as you tuck into your reunion dinner, this 66-year-old widow will be doing the same.

Except she's going to be alone. In a flat which doesn't belong to her.

Madam Tan, 66, has a son, and this is the first Chinese New Year since her only grandchild was born.

But they don't plan to meet. And the widow will be eating her instant noodles alone, in her fellow cleaner's three-room flat.

Her flat mate would be away, at a reunion dinner with her son.

So Madam Tan (not her real name) will have only her memories to keep her company.

Memories of a hard life, juggling two jobs to earn \$1,300 a month, all to put her only son through medical school.

Her son is now a general practitioner earning about \$200,000 a year.

He and his wife wanted Madam Tan to stop working as a cleaner, but she wouldn't. A point on which their relationship was destroyed.

It's a sad turn of events, even as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his Chinese New Year message yesterday, said that the family must be kept strong and healthy so that Singapore will have a stable and happy nation. (See report on Page 19.)

Madam Tan recalled one night in November 2005, when she returned to their home to find her clothes and other personal belongings stuffed into two large plastic-straw bags left outside the door. The padlock on the gate had also been changed.

This happened on the very day she transferred ownership of the flat to her son, following his request.

The HDB executive maisonette had belonged to Madam Tan and her late husband, who had died of cancer in 1980.

'When I saw the bags, I knew what had happened... The minute I knocked on the door, the light inside went off,' she said in a mixture of Hokkien, Mandarin and Cantonese.

She just stood and stared at the door for a long time, not knowing what to do.

Then she slowly walked away. She has never again been inside the flat that was her home for more than two decades.

STARTED TO CRY

She said: 'I took the bags to the ground floor and sat at the void deck. I was lost. I started to cry.'

She did not want her relatives to know what had happened and decided not to approach her only sister.

It was close to midnight when she finally called a colleague living nearby and asked for a place to sleep that night.

And for more than a year now, Madam Tan has shared the woman's flat. Earlier this month, after she lost her job, she approached the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents to get her son to support her.

And after mediation, her son agreed to give her \$1,600 each month.

Madam Tan said the root of the problem was that she had been unable to win her daughter-in-law's respect.

'She just didn't like me,' she said.

'It's not my daughter-in-law's fault. Most young couples don't want to live with their in-laws. Also, she disliked the fact I had a 'dirty' job. That's quite understandable.'

When contacted, Madam Tan's son, who is in his early 30s, did not dispute what his mother had said.

He said: 'At no point was the old woman coerced into selling the flat. She had told me my father wanted me to have it when I settled down.'

His wife is a senior human resource manager and the couple, who married in 2002, have a 4-month-old son.

He said: 'My wife did not like the idea of the old woman cleaning tables at the food court, especially after she had bumped into her one day, while she was having lunch with her colleagues.'

'Sometimes, I feel like I'm caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. I had told the old woman to quit her cleaner job but she refused to comply. How should I approach such a delicate situation?'

'She said I hurt her. Ask her, what about me? How does she think I felt when she told me through a third party that she had made up her mind to file a claim with the tribunal?'

But Madam Tan does not want to embarrass him. She spoke to us only after we agreed not to identify her son.

She said she would often wait outside his work place, hoping to get a word with him.

'I even pretended I was sick and went in as a patient, but my son sent me away with the empty promise that he would contact me,' she said.

CONSOLE HERSELF

When she found out from his clinic assistant that her daughter-in-law was pregnant, Madam Tan said she bought some tonics and asked the nurse to pass them to her son.

But he returned all the items to his aunt, along with a message: My wife and I prefer that you use your money to buy tonics for yourself.

Madam Tan said: 'I never expected my own son to treat me this way. I sometimes console myself with the thought that it was not something he really wanted to do. It was just too bad he was caught between his wife and me, so I don't blame him.'

After all, they had been through hard times together. She would do laundry in the morning and work as a cleaner at a hawker centre in the evening, while a neighbour looked after the boy.

'I had only one goal in mind - to earn enough money so that my son could go to the university.'

When her son got married, she said she was aware that her daughter-in-law did not like her to work as a cleaner.

'But I can't find any other job,' said Madam Tan, who is uneducated and can barely write her name.

'I didn't achieve anything great but at least, I managed to put Ah Boy through medical school. I was the proudest woman in the auditorium on the day he graduated.'

In December, her request to see her grandson was denied. By then, mother and son were not on talking terms.

Last month, she became jobless after her company lost the food court contract, and she turned to the Family Service Centre (FSC) for help.

She has since found another cleaning job, and will start work next month.

And then came the tribunal, and mediation at the FSC. According to the memorandum of understanding drawn up between them, her son would pay her about 10 per cent of his declared monthly income.

But, she said: 'If I could turn back the clock, I'd want my son back...'

Welfare officer Esther Chew, 32, who was assigned to the case, told The New Paper on Sunday that Madam Tan had hoped to make peace with her son.

Ms Chew said: 'One point that stood out in Madam Tan's case was she went out of the way to protect her son, for fear of causing him shame.'

Tribunal secretary Penny Tham said: 'We are happy this case was resolved through mediation.'

'The tribunal strongly believes that non-adversarial resolution of family issues is best and filing applications for maintenance should be the last resort.'

Madam Tan said it was indeed her last resort, 'only to remind my son not to forget about my existence'.

She was desperate. 'I really wished we could have cleared things up in a better way,' she said.

Tonight, she will also be making some custard pudding.

Why? Because it was her son's favourite dessert, something they would always have for Chinese New Year.

Except this time, she'll be eating it alone.

Don't burn bridges, advise experts

WHEN it comes to disputes within a family, mediation is better than legal proceedings.

'It is often better to settle, in the presence of a mediator, rather than to get a judgement that becomes a no-win situation,' said Mr David Kan, executive director of Family Life Centre.

Mediation does not require legal fees either.

Last year 347 enquiries were made at the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents (TMP), up from 248 in 2005 and 295 in 2004.

But only 79 applications for maintenance were filed last year, the lowest in the Tribunal's 11 years, said TMP secretary Penny Tham. There were 99 in 2005 and 105 in 2004.

LAST RESORT

Ms Tham said: 'The fewer applications show increasing awareness and usage of non-legal and non-adversarial means to resolve issues in the maintenance of parents.'

Under the Maintenance of Parents Act, any parent who satisfies certain requirements may apply for an order that one or more of the children pay him or her a monthly allowance or a lump sum for maintenance.

Ms Tham explained: 'When an elderly (person) first approaches TMP, he or she is encouraged to approach... Community Mediation Centres and Family Service Centres for help and advice to speak with their children.'

Welfare officer Esther Chew agreed that taking the legal recourse should be the last resort.

'By not burning bridges, there is always a chance that the relationship can be saved one day. Going to court is ugly and for some, it can mean losing face,' she said.