

Strawberries from China

Brian was never a gardener, but he loved plants. He inherited this affection from his mother. He was also a dreamer and an avid reader of books about foreign lands. One day his computer screen showed him strawberry plants growing in the Chinese Emperor's Garden. The Emperor was wearing a gold and red robe and eating a huge red ripe strawberry.

Brian thought about his mother. She had been a strawberry grower all her life. Memories returned. Brian standing by his mother in the garden. Words rippling in the air and her fingers dancing as she murmured loving words over the plants. He imagined the strawberry plants were his little brothers and sisters.

In his dreams at night Brian was with his imaginary brothers and sisters. They played games. They went to the beach together, swam, made sandcastles and ate ice cream. They fought. Laughed. Made jokes about dragons and lions. Visited many lands. After Brian's Dad died all the brothers and sisters sat silently on the steps of an Egypt pyramid crying for a thousand and one nights.

Brian was a city man earning more dollars than he could use. He enjoyed buying gifts for his mother in her old age. He knew strawberries from the Emperor's Garden would be a treat his mother could not resist. In his mind he saw another small family of brothers and sisters with dark hair and olive skins.

Brian looked again at the pictures of the strawberries on the webpage. He admired the design of the big strawberry box. A large gold box with embossed words in royal red. Inside the box were small mounds of straw of sun coloured straw to protect the strawberry plants. What did it remind him of? His mother's voice singing... Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your gold hair.

After paying for the strawberry plants online Brian felt good. The golden colour of his credit card was the start of making his dream become real. A golden gift for his mother. Gold for the strawberries of the emperor, gold for Rapunzel of the fairy tale and her golden hair. His mother would plant the green plants, water them and wait until the golden sun turned the strawberries into nature's rich red rubies.

The parcel arrived at Brian's flat with a fast courier. He opened it to have a sneak view. It looked even better than the webpage picture. Brian knew the last Chinese Emperor had a wonderful garden. Puyi, was only a small boy when he became the last Emperor of China. Brian wondered how many strawberries the little Emperor ate every day.

He addressed the box for the train dispatch. His Mum lived in the country near the train station run by the old Station Master, T.Timothy. When the box with the strawberries arrived at the station, Brian knew that T.Timothy would put it under lock and key for the night. In the morning his mother would go to the station pay a small fee and take the Emperor's strawberry plants home to plant in her garden. It made Brian a happy man just to think about the strawberries.

Brian took the parcel to the train depot. He decided to stay and watch the train depart. It got off to a slow start. The engine eventually gained confidence. After snorting several

times it cheerfully chugged off into the distance. For some reason, Brian stood on the train platform for a long time waving goodbye to the moving train, as if it was an old friend departing to a distant foreign land.

On the journey the train driver slowed the train so he could admire and appreciate the many flowers and small trees growing on both side of the tracks. After stopping at unimportant stations the train arrived at the most unimportant station of all, where it always rested for the night before returning to the city the following day.

T. Timothy was there to greet it. He carefully unloaded each parcel and stood amazed at the glittering gold box containing the strawberry plants from the garden of the Chinese Emperor. He carried into the storeroom and looked at it again. It shone like the sun and it was as big as an armchair and just as wide. He said to himself, I will have to look in the rule book to find out how much to charge storage for this big parcel.

He knew Brian's mother, In fact, he had always wanted to know her more. T. Timothy had envied her husband having such a lovely wife. Her husband had died some years ago. T. Timothy always wanted to talk with her but he was a shy man. He stuttered and stammered and could not hold a good conversation. He became acutely embarrassed in company and often forgot his words.

He reached up to the little bookshelf, picked up the Railway Instruction Manual with the big gold embossed title and carefully laid it on his desk. That would give him information on the correct storage fee to charge Brian's mother. He looked at his watch. It was getting late. He could work out the parcel storage fee later. Then he would phone Brian's mother. She would be surprised to receive such a huge golden parcel.

T. Timothy did not sleep well. When daylight arrived he was already sitting at his desk in front of the open manual. To his horror, he could not identify the rule on the correct storage fee to apply to the golden box and the strawberries inside it. By breakfast time, he still had no answer.

The Railway Rule Manual stated that customers must pay storage according to the size of the parcel. But there was also another rule applying to vegetables and fruit plants. This stated that you only paid for the number of plant containers.

T. Timothy studied the rule book again. Storage for the large gold box cost ten dollars and storage for strawberry containers cost five dollars. Five dollars difference! What should he do? He had to follow the rules. He needed guidance from the Head Office Supervisor.

But now there was a second dilemma. How to contact them? He recalled an important message from Head Office that arrived over three years ago advising that all future communication must be sent and received by computer. T. Timothy had never used a computer. The company had sent him one. It was still lying unopened in the corner of the room, where it had had been for the past three years. On opening the box, he found a small booklet of instructions. To his surprise they were in English, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian. He had studied Spanish at school, so he looked at that language first. But, soon gave it up to read the English instructions.

The computer lay on his desk, still shining even after so many years locked away in the storeroom. It looked like an oblong box or a large book. T. Timothy looked again at the

instructions. There seemed to be an error as the picture in the instruction manual showed what looked like a small television screen connected to a strange looking typewriter keyboard. T. Timothy was puzzled. He noticed a sunken ridge around the centre of the metal box. He pressed a button. To his delight and surprise the box opened. T. Timothy saw a little screen and what looked like a part of his Dad's old typewriter. T. Timothy knew he needed help and thought of Thomas, a boy at school who loved trains and also knew about computers. Thomas soon had the computer working but left quickly as he had a sports match to play.

T. Timothy typed a message on the computer and sent it to Head Office. He sat there waiting for the reply. There was no answer. He sent the same message again five minutes later and repeated it four times in the next hour. He waited. Tried again. Again and again. Dusk approached and the computer was still silent.

T. Timothy began to worry about the great gold box. The strawberries would need water or they would dry up and die. He phoned Brian's Mum and told her of his difficulty. Next morning she arrived at the railway station. He looked at her with admiration and wanted to propose marriage, but he did not. Together they opened the large gold box and admired the healthy looking strawberry plants.

Brian's mother was also worried too, as she didn't know which storage fee should be paid. She said that if she paid the plant fee only and it was wrong, she would be cheating the railway company. Perhaps, she pay the box fee. But what if that was a mistake. She said she had been a honest woman all my life and to start being dishonest at eighty years old would be terrible. She was determined to stay honest. The Station Master, T. Timothy said he wanted to be honest too and he would wait for the Railway Head Office to tell him what to do next.

After some silence and thought, the couple decided the strawberry plants had to be kept in the railway station garden until an official decision on the storage fees was made, In the meantime they would water the plants to keep them healthy. They talked about the importance of sunlight and having the correct temperature for the strawberries to ripen.

They had a morning tea together. T. Timothy said he was so sad that Brian's Mum had lost her husband and asked how she managed alone. He then told her that he still thought about his wife and their only child who had both died in an accident just two years after their marriage.

For the rest of that week, Head Office failed to reply to his emails from T. Timothy. He sent them again and again. The next week was the same. It was so frustrating. But he had the pleasure of meeting Brian's Mum each day and watering the strawberry plants and checking that they had plenty of sunlight.

On the third week T. Timothy decided he would phone Head Office. This was against the new rules, but he could not let the situation of the storage go on for ever. T. Timothy only used the phone for local calls. He never phoned anyone in the city. There was no need. But today he would phone Head Office and sort out the strawberry plant problem. He found the Head Office phone number and dialled. It rang somewhere, but there was no answer. He made several more attempts and eventually gave up. He decided to ask Thomas for help. The young boy said T. Timothy could use his new cellphone, but T. Timothy declined. He recalled his struggle with the computer and did not want to feel

foolish or embarrassed in front of the boy, as he knew he would stammer or stutter and lose his words.

It was now over a month and Head Office still hadn't replied to his important messages. Fortunately the time didn't seem so important now as Brian's mother arrived every morning at the same time. They watered the Emperor's strawberry plants and sat on the bench in the sun drinking tea. After Brian's mother went home each day, T. Timothy felt empty and more lost in his life than he had ever felt since his wife and his small son died.

He decided that the Head Office must be approached in a different way. He studied the computer manual and discovered he could make telephone calls on the computer. So T. Timothy swallowed his pride. He called Thomas and asked for a phone demonstration. It went well.

Calling Head Office did not go well. It rang and a women's voice told him. Press key 1 if you want this. Press key 2 if you want that. Press key 3 to talk to someone else. Press key 4 for or Press key 5 if you need. Press key 6. If you still have a problem start again and press 1.

He could not follow this plan. T. Timothy gave up on the phone calls and looked at the strawberry plants. He placed straw from the golden box around the plants. Each day T. Timothy hoped that Head Office would give a judgment on whether he must charge Brian's mother for the storage of the golden box or for the plants or both!!!! There was no answer.

Next day Brian's mother did not come to the Railway Station garden. Thomas arrived. He had sad news. Brian's mother had slipped and injured her leg. T. Timothy kept watering the growing plants and trying to communicate with Head Office. He knew the strawberries would soon be ready for eating. They got bigger each day.

One morning a small delegation arrived with Thomas. A Chinese man and woman, their small son and the School Principal. They all admired the almost ripe strawberries and asked T. Timothy what he was going to do with them.

T. Timothy wanted to say he had studied the railway rule book, he wanted to talk about charging the correct storage fee, he wanted to talk about the Head Office delay, he wanted to talk about Brian's Mum and to talk about how much he enjoyed her company. But no words came out. He was silent.

The Chinese man shook hands with T. Timothy saying that he was the new Manager for the Railway Company and he wanted to help, He told T. Timothy that his first task was to examine the gold box and the strawberries. He did so and declared that he would cancel all the storage fees on the gold box and on the strawberries. T. Timothy was happy. Then the new Manager tasked T. Timothy be ready at the station next day to welcome the arrival of the train and some special visitors.

T. Timothy woke up early and dressed himself in his best suit. He waited and waited. Nothing happened for a long time as he looked at the big clock. He knew the train was due soon.

He heard a noise and went outside. To his amazement he saw a huge crowd. It included villagers, school children, shop keepers, the local policeman and the village chaplain. He



Meanwhile ripe strawberries are harvested from the fields in Korba, Tunisia, on Wednesday.

was going to ask why they were there, but as usual his words did not arrive. He struggled to try and say something.

Suddenly he heard the train coming. It got closer and louder with its hooters blowing. The train crawled slowly to the platform and stopped. A door opened and the new Chinese Manager came out. On his shoulders was his little son dressed in a bright red and gold Chinese suit. The little boy smiled at T. Timothy and said in a loud voice.

I AM PUYI, I AM THE CHINESE EMPEROR.

More doors opened and men came out carrying large boxes. The school band started to play. Puyi was put at the front of the crowd and carried on his father's shoulders. The crowd began marching towards Brian's mother's house. T. Timothy also at the front of the march and carefully holding the strawberries he and Brian's mother had carefully nurtured.

The crowd came to a small house. There waiting for them was an old lady. T. Timothy noticed Brian's mother was wearing her best clothes. The crowd formed a circle in front of the garden and started cheering. One, two, three happy cheers. The policeman and the chaplain escorted T. Timothy and Brian's mother to sit on two golden chairs that the children had brought from the school theatre.

Puyi bowed to the couple and gently took the box of strawberries from T. Timothy. He placed them in two small golden bowls and handed one of Brian's mother and the other to T. Timothy.

The couple looked at each. Both then ate a strawberry at the same time. There was a big cheer from the crowd. Puyi, the Chinese Emperor sitting on his father's shoulders called out in a loud voice.

I HAVE STRAWBERRIES FOR EVERYBODY

The men carrying the big boxes laid them on the ground and opened them up. A smell of sweet strawberries rose high in the air. Boxes and more boxes of strawberries were handed out to the excited crowd.

There was another big roar of excitement and the school band began to play. T. Timothy and Brian's mother turned and smiled at each other. Both knew the Beatles old tune..They had both danced to *Strawberry Fields Forever* at their weddings.

NOTE:

Puyi^[c] (7 February 1906 – 17 October 1967) was the last [Emperor of China](#), reigning as the eleventh and final monarch of the [Qing dynasty](#). In 1908, when the [Guangxu Emperor](#) died without an heir, [Empress Dowager Cixi](#) picked his nephew Puyi, aged two, to succeed him as Emperor.

