

Aftershock

by

David T. K. Wong

It had been ten days since the funeral and Hannah still could not get used to the notion of widowhood. It was most inconsiderate of Chai to get run over by a bus, she thought, for it was a death without style. It was the kind of death meant for doddering old ladies with failing eyesight and not for a man in the prime of life. It then crossed her mind it might be stretching a point to describe a man of forty-nine with three grown-up children as being in his prime.

She sat at Chai's desk at the bank and looked at the framed photograph which she was about to put into the cardboard box, along with the marble desk set given by the children as a birthday present, the Rotary Club paraphernalia and the rest of his things. It had been kind of Mike Sullivan, the Regional Vice President, to leave Chai's office untouched until she could clear away his belongings.

As she continued with that disagreeable task, she concluded that the photograph looked good, with Chai sitting beside her and the twins and Sharon arraigned behind them. The boys appeared bright and alert and Sharon was a spitting image of herself. There was the same haughty bearing and the same seductive eyes. But then she remembered that they had posed for that more than five years ago, when the boys had returned for their summer holidays and had started that debate as to whether their sister was old enough to go off to boarding-school.

As she began sifting through the contents of the drawers, she noted that standard office aids were very much in evidence -- a box of Kleenex tissues, bottles of asperin and antacid pills, business cards, a volume of airline schedules, a few scribbled reminders, some office files, and the usual clutter of paper clips, rubber bands and marking pens.

The more personal items consisted of an address book recording the addresses, telephone numbers, birthdays and anniversaries of close relatives and friends, two letters from the children which Chai had promised to deal with, some postcards from friends and one from a cousin in Australia, several credit card chits, a collection of old receipts, ten copies of a passport photograph, some tourist brochures about Japan where they had intended spending their next vacation, and other oddments. What a pathetic collection to sum up a life, she thought.

Chai's accident was probably more of a disaster for her than for him, Hannah reflected ruefully, as her brow puckered automatically into frown lines. That had become habitual in recent years, whenever she became vexed. Her thin lips, which constituted the most unflattering aspect of her face, compressed themselves petulantly. It was all so aggravating! How could he

leave her in the lurch in such a ridiculous manner, just when she had to cope with the trauma of growing old? Death was neat and tidy by comparison.

It was not that Chai would have been much help emotionally in easing her into old age. Or in any other way, apart from the purely financial. He was an unemotional and practical man, unimaginative to a degree in interpersonal relationships. Whatever reserve of warmth and human understanding seemed earmarked for the children and his immediate subordinates. She did not seem to figure anywhere.

Once, when she had complained about his lack of concern for her, he had replied: "That is not true. You know I care for you, so what is the point of trying to demonstrate something you already know? The children are different. They are not certain how much I love them, so I have to go out of my way to show them. You are part of me, as vital as my heart or my eyes or my brain. A man does not go around caressing his heart, his eyes and his brain every day and enquiring how they feel. His concern for them is taken as read. Don't you understand?"

She certainly did not, no matter how irrefutable his logic sounded. Thinking it over did not improve her disposition but she did concede that having him around was probably marginally better than not having him at all.

During the last five years, following the departure of the children and his promotion to chief foreign currency dealer, Chai had maintained the logic of his position. Search as she might, she could not find that crushing counter-argument to dispose of his sophistry. That only led her to retreat frequently into sullen silences.

Apart from the children and certain social obligations, they had really quite little to talk about. Their personal interests hardly coincided, so much so that they led virtually separate lives. He had no interest in her charitable works, her mah-jong parties or the society gossip she reported. She, for her part, barely understood the intricacies of his work.

Household affairs needed no consultation. Their servants had long reduced them to a settled routine and Miss Lam, Chai's secretary of more than twenty years, handled the wages of the servants, the chauffeur and the crew members of the yacht and paid the bills for club dues, credit card expenditures, utility charges and rates with something approaching military efficiency.

Hannah wondered rather belatedly whether Chai's bland and matter-of-fact behaviour might also mask his own concerns over growing old. After all, he was in a line of business dominated by the young and the daring. Although his face had remained relatively youthful and his movements agile, those periodic turmoils in the currency markets must be sapping upon his energies. Those nights of being glued to computer screens in the dealing room, with several telephones screaming simultaneously for attention, had ruined his eyesight and had caused the hair around his temples to turn slightly grey. On the other hand, those pressures did not seem to have forestalled a thickening of his waistline. To his credit he never complained about anything and never brought office worries home.

But what had been most noticeable to Hannah had been Chai's diminished sexual appetite. She felt irritated even thinking about those fortnightly couplings which passed for conjugal love. The lead-up would be as predictable as the opening gambit in a game of chess and

so too would be the end game. Once satisfied, Chai would grunt, turn his back on her and sink into deep and untroubled sleep.

The problem was that long after Chai had been lost to sleep, her whole being would remain agitated and unappeased. If he had only taken the trouble to show more tenderness, to hug and kiss her afterwards, or even to fall asleep with his arms around her, those parodies of the sexual act would have been more tolerable. As it was, her own sleep was often fitful and the mornings found her unrefreshed.

Occasionally, while reading in bed to tire herself out, she would stop and watch Chai lying exposed and unguarded in slumber. Sometimes he would talk in his sleep, crying "Okay! Okay!" or something similar. She could imagine him shouting into telephones and barking orders to his staff at the same time, trying to stay ahead of the game. She had heard that foreign currency dealers often got burnt out early and Chai had been at it longer than most. She would then feel a little sorry over the stressful way in which he had to make a living and would be touched by a momentary regret over her tendency to snap at him.

On such occasions she would also recognize him as the generous, hard-working and uncomplaining husband he was. But, alas, how increasingly unexciting he had become! Their marriage, though blessed with fine children and economic advantages, had simply not turned out like she had imagined. She could, it was true, buy all the jewellery and expensive clothes she wanted, travel the world, afford the most extravagant of entertainments. And yet she remained somehow unfulfilled. She had sometimes wondered why she had married him, for she was convinced that she no longer loved him. Perhaps it was only circumstances that had pushed them together and she had never really loved him.

She could not remember at what point she had started becoming jealous and resentful of his work. His late nights at the office, the sheer exhilaration of making or losing a fortune in a matter of minutes, and his urgent trips to New York or London or Zurich for consultations and strategy meetings, all smacked of the kind of excitement that life should be made up of.

But she had no part in that. She could not imagine how he could soak up all that economic data for forward positions and futures contracts, sense of arbitrage opportunities, exploit cross-currency interest differentials and yet remain oblivious to her needs. He probably would not recognize her needs even if they hit him between the eyes. To cap it all, he had to get himself killed and condemn her to a widowhood for which she was totally unprepared.

In bygone days Chinese widows were supposed to bear such misfortunes with loyalty and fortitude. If they remained unquestionably chaste, they could look forward to memorial arches being erected in their honour. But she did not give two hoots for memorial arches. What really upset her was the damnable prospect of an enforced celibacy at the age of forty-five! She could, of course, remarry but there was not a remotely suitable man in sight. As for other alternatives, they were just too sordid for words.

She was glad that, following the funeral, the rest of the family had dispersed back to where they belonged -- the twins to their micro-electronics jobs in Southern California, along with

their wives, and Sharon to her junior year at Bryn Mawr. That at least gave her peace and quiet to figure an escape from her embarrassing situation.

Ten years ago it would have outraged Hannah if someone had suggested that she harboured a hunger for carnal pleasures. After all, she was a well brought up Chinese girl and well brought up Chinese girls were not supposed to think about such things, let alone to seek enjoyment from them. They were supposed to remain passive, to submit with resignation to their husbands' cruder instincts. If, in the course of things, they were driven to those shuddering heights of unmentionable sensations, then they should grit their teeth or bite their lips rather than let loose shrieks of animal abandonment. To behave otherwise would be to debase their entire upbringing, to reduce them to the level of sing-song girls and loose women.

Thus, throughout the early years of her marriage, Hannah had felt an acute sense of guilt which prevented her from enjoying to the full Chai's unbridled passions. He had led her into dark areas of sensual experience which frightened her because they stirred in her a shameful and terrifying enjoyment. Later, when she tried to curb those disgusting yearnings, she found herself suffering from quick flares of temper, persistent irritabilities and a propensity to laugh and giggle too much over quite inconsequential jokes.

She tried to justify those quirks to herself in terms of having married too young, of being straddled too soon with the responsibilities of motherhood, and of upsetting the flow of her hormones through birth control. If those explanations proved unconvincing, she would throw in the obstreperousness of the children and the sheer stupidity of the servants.

It was only many years later, after the fierce waves of women's liberation pounded upon Asian shores, that she finally identified the repression of her feminine sensuality as the cause of her prickliness and began sloughing off her inhibitions. But by that time she was already approaching forty and Chai had lost his drive and his taste for sexual experimentations. Her marriage thus became little more than a civilized social shell within which to hide her smouldering desires. That facade became even more intolerable after the children left.

Without the children to distract her, she was left to simmer with a slow, secret frustration, a frustration only hinted at by the dark rings of passion around her eyes. The insistent hunger in her loins kept reminding her of how she was being starved and deprived. But the mental habits of a lifetime prevented her from broaching the subject directly with Chai. She felt the whole business beneath her.

Temptations of the flesh, at her age, was a vice which would find little sympathy and understanding at her level in Chinese society, especially when her children would soon be conferring upon her the status of grandmother! But on the other hand, the needs of her body could not be denied. Although her figure was showing the signs of middle age plumpness and some strategic places were not as firm as she would like, she thought it was still well proportioned and attractive. Indeed, when she wore formal attire, her décolletage could still draw the admiring glances of men of the world like Mike Sullivan. But in spite of decking herself out in nightdresses of the flimsiest black lace, Chai hardly noticed.

Once, in another attempt to rekindle his fire, she had actually placed on the bedside table a copy of the Kama Sutra, illustrated with pictures of the explicit carvings in the temples of Konarak and Khajuraho. But Chai had merely flipped through the illustrations, muttered "Crazy Hindoos!" and promptly went to sleep.

Having finished with the drawers, Hannah got up to tackle the Chubb safe. Chai had told her exactly what it would contain. Inside would be their stock and share certificates, the title deed to their home, insurance policies for the cars, the home, Sharon's education and his own life, his cheque books and some traveller's cheques. She took those items out one by one and put them into her large handbag.

To her surprise she also found also a bundle of letters in an unfamiliar hand. With a sense of foreboding she picked up the letters. Chai had never been much of a letter writer, even where the children were concerned, and such a large bundle of letters implied a lively correspondence. She took the letters back to the desk and hesitated for a moment before reading them. As she did so she turned pale and began to tremble. They were love letters addressed to Chai from a woman -- apparently American and obviously vulgar -- by the name of Kay!

Interlaced with usual droolings of lovers were passages of revelation. "I had no idea Oriental men were so cool, much more interesting than Americans," one of them read. "It's really neat when you explain our relationship in terms of the Yin and the Yang, of merging our duality in cosmic unity. It beats talking dirty! I guess Eastern cultures must know a thing or two!"

A passage from another letter went: "I get what you mean when you say that all grief stems from love. How sad and how beautiful! I miss you terribly, whenever I receive one of your letters or hear your voice on the telephone. Meeting only once every few months is more than I can bear. I am trying my best to accept your point of view that love is an intoxication, a flight of fancy, whereas marriage is a dreary journey between boredom and ennui. But if so, why keep making that journey with a bitchy woman you do not love?"

Yet another letter read: "Thanks for the trip to Zurich. Although we only had two days, they were great. You Asians seem to have a name for everything. Fancy an 'embrace of the jaghana' and 'the sporting of a sparrow'! They are simply out of this world! I'll never remember all the names but I'm looking forward to more! Don't let old sourpuss get you down."

Hannah could not go on. She crumpled the letters up with both her hands as bitter tears coursed down her face. She recognized the terms from the Kama Sutra and realized on a sudden that what Chai had been calling out in his sleep might well have been "Oh, Kay! Oh, Kay!" She flung the crumpled letters into the wastepaper basket with all her strength and let out a mighty wail.

Mike Sullivan must have heard her from his office next door for he soon knocked and came into the room. "Oh, Hannah! I know this must be very distressing for you," he said, his voice full of sympathy. "Why don't you let me take you home."

Hannah looked at Mike Sullivan standing tall, blond and virile before her. "Yes, yes." she sobbed, as she allowed herself to be led away.

Aftershock has appeared in **Peak** magazine in Hong Kong.