

Moments on Sunday

Drumbeats pounded inside her head, as the pipes and strings played a prelude. She felt light as a feather, floating in silken garments gathered by a golden girdle around her slender waist. She was bursting with excitement, on fire, full of anticipation. Her senses were tingling and on the alert. Every object in the room took on a bright, sharpened hue.

The hall was like a vast pleasure dome. The sounds of conversation and laughter seemed to be ricocheting off the flagstones to echo around the chamber. Great plates and containers, heaped with fish and fowl, nuts and fruits, were laid out everywhere. Wine was flowing like bubbling springs.

She knew all eyes were upon her. Tonight, as the most powerful men gathered to celebrate the birthday of her step-father, she would give the performance of her life.

As she readied herself, she had no doubt about her beauty or her competence as a dancer. She was brimming with confidence, conscious only of her proud breasts and her full, rounded haunches. Her dark, long-lashed eyes glanced at the feasting men clustered around the hall. Their animal appetites were almost palpable. Her nostrils distended with cool arrogance. She made no attempt to identify them individually, however. She was not out to please any of them, only to tease and taunt them, to drive them crazy with

lust. Her aim, before the night was through, was to get their tongues hanging out, ready to eat out of the palm of her hand.

The prelude ended and the music for the dance began. She pirouetted coolly into the centre of the hall, curtsying in response to rapturous applause. Her supple body then swayed to the rhythm of the music, while her long-fingered hands moved sinuously, as if casting spells.

The wine-soaked audience went wild with every undulation of her body. No doubt each was already imagining the texture of her skin in an embrace, yearning for the pleasures a woman like her might provide. She was bent on offering herself like forbidden fruit, to witness the havoc she would wreck upon their collective lust.

She knew she was secretly admired and desired by many, not least by her own step-father. He had tried to ingratiate himself with her, even to touch her inappropriately behind her mother's back. She had no doubt he wanted to lie with her, as Lot was reputed to have done with his daughters. But her provocative performance was not intended to stir her step-father, King Herod, or to entice any of the lords and high captains of Galilee so noisily gathered.

Her heart was set on another, an aloof man now locked in a dungeon right beneath her feet. She could have forgiven that creature for condemning the immorality of her mother and her step-father. But she could not forgive him for spurning her attentions. It was a gross humiliation. She was, after all, both a princess and a great beauty. Tonight, she would dance to

mock him. She wanted him to hear the cheers reverberating in the banqueting hall, to have his guards poke fun at him for casting aside such a priceless treasure. And after the dance, she would have her sweet revenge.

The music gathered tempo and her movements sped apace. The first item she discarded was the golden girdle, tossing it aside like a trifle. She swirled and turned and her liberated garments flounced about her like a mist. She shimmied, she gyrated, she thrust out her belly lewdly, and then just as lewdly retracted it, before slowly peeling off the first diaphanous layer of her clothing. Shouts, cheers and clapping erupted. She stripped off another flimsy layer, just as artfully. She tossed it deliberately into the crowd and provoked a fresh crescendo of cheers. As more of her veils fell away with her twirling hips and trembling belly, the atmosphere became electric.

Pearls of sweat moistened her brow and trickled down her neck like divine nectar. No doubt every man longed to taste it. She felt exhilarated, powerful, in total control. She was breathing rapidly, her lips parting with sensual pleasure. She ripped away another veil and her magnificent breasts became exposed -- naked, quivering and as inviting as overflowing wineskins. She was dizzy with triumph. Lustful cries erupted around the hall.

One more veil, she thought, in a fever of satisfaction. One more veil and her step-father would deliver the head of John the Baptist on a charger.

Then, suddenly, everything went black.

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Amber da Luz was jolted out of her reverie by the opening chords of a church organ and the congregation bursting into hymn. She blinked and realized she had been hallucinating about her Dance of the Seven Veils.

She had only the haziest notion of what she actually did at the party of a week ago. Her head still felt numb from it. Her knowledge extended to no more than a few fragments of impressions plus what Sharlene had subsequently recounted. She had apparently -- after drinking too much spiked punch and smoking at least two joints -- initiated an impromptu striptease dance. About that she was entirely blank. Sharlene said she had stepped in to bundle her out of the room after she had flung off her bra.

“Hey, you knocked them dead, baby,” her best friend had related with glee. “You got those horny bastards salivating like Pavlov’s dogs. If I hadn’t pulled you away, there would have been a riot.”

She had felt utterly humiliated after hearing that account. How did a strictly brought up non-drinking seventeen-year-old Catholic like herself end up creating such a disgraceful spectacle? She had never touched alcohol or drugs before. She hadn’t even kissed a boy. She was still a virgin, for heaven’s sake, though she would never have admitted that to Sharlene!

It was not that she had never experienced certain yearnings when her American friend boasted about her sexual exploits. She had felt a similar

tingle when she looked at some of the pictures in the Penthouse magazines belonging to her friend's father. But she had also derived satisfaction and pride from knowing that her body was in no way inferior to those of the naked girls in the magazine.

She recalled with regret the events leading to her disaster. A few of Sharlene's closest friends had talked of holding a "mind-blowing bash" before the Easter break. They figured that after Easter kids would be too hung up on finals to let their hair down. Although she didn't belong to Sharlene's "in" crowd, she was an excellent dancer and the American's bosom pal. So she got invited. The party was to be held in the home of one of the students whose parents were away on a business trip.

It was supposed to be a party where not only alcohol but also substances classified as illegal would be freely available. She had been assured, however, that a fruit punch would be there for the staid and the non-adventurous.

It was the first party of that type she had attended. She was in so much demand for dances that she had worked up a mighty thirst in no time. She made repeated visits to the punch bowl. She did not realize till after her speech had started to slur and her limbs had become less manageable that the punch had been spiked. When she complained, the boys just laughed. By then she was enjoying herself so much that she didn't really care.

Somebody soon produced cannabis, cocaine and other drugs. Sharlene lit up a joint and asked her if she would try one. She accepted gaily. She coughed and spluttered at first but eventually got the hang of it.

She had felt good after the first joint, she vaguely recalled. Everything took on a new clarity. Colours appeared sharper and cleaner, music louder and more intense. Her desire to hang on to those wonderful sensations caused her to ask for another. And that was how she became undone.

Her initial exhilaration had intensified. She began drifting into and out of different personalities, fusing one with another. It was fantastic, like pure magic. Time and space merged into a weightless infinity. She soon lost control of her identity. She could turn into Cinderella one moment and Salome the next. And it had been as Salome that she felt an irresistible impulse to get up and dance.

Why Salome? Why not Carmen or Ophelia? She didn't know. It could have been because of a film or play she had seen or because of certain passages in Saint Matthew or Saint Mark she had studied at Sister Magdalene's convent school.

How could she redeem herself now, after such a scandalous exhibition? It wasn't right to turn to the church for comfort or absolution. How could a Catholic be absolved without first attending Confession? Without purification, Holy Communion would not be possible and without Holy Communion forgiveness and penance were likewise out of the question.

Before Mum died, Sunday Mass used to be central to their lives. She used to look forward to that weekly ritual because it enabled her to dress up a little and break the dull routines at their dreary tenement, located in the poorest corner of Yaumati.

After Mum's death, she had moved in with Aunt Po-Chee and Uncle Suen, into a splendid two-storeyed house in Bowen Road. That change exposed her to different sets of beliefs and to a much more liberal family regime.

Her aunt had no formal religion. She seemed to follow an odd mixture of Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Confucian folk practices, depending on her mood. She sometimes consulted the Tung Sing, that ancient almanac of astronomical calculations and predictions, before beginning her daily activities. On the first of each lunar month she would eat only vegetarian meals. Such behaviour seemed unusual for a lawyer trained in England! Although she had made no effort to influence her away from Catholicism, she did not encourage its rituals -- like saying grace before a meal -- at home either.

Her uncle, on the other hand, was an agnostic. He respected other people's gods but wanted to have as little to do with them as possible.

The move also freed her from Sister Magdalene and her thick glasses which pinned one down like searchlights. Because the convent was too far away from Bowen Road, on the other side of the harbour, her aunt suggested that she might attend a nearby International School. She was more

than delighted. She had had quite enough of Sister Magdalene. Her daily regime of morning assembly, prayers and classes on religious knowledge had been joyless and deadening. Students had to wear baggy, shapeless blue uniforms, as if the slightest suggestion of femininity was sinful. It went without saying that any girl caught smoking, drinking, swearing, using cosmetics or flirting with boys outside the precincts of the school was immediately disciplined. She had felt more put on than the rest because she was the only Eurasian in her class. It had been like prison and she couldn't wait to get out.

She had no idea what an International School was like, except that it was hideously expensive and its purpose was to prepare the children of expatriates and wealthy Chinese families for university overseas.

She soon discovered that the new school was co-educational and that fraternization between the sexes was common. Discipline was considered old-fashioned. Not even a school uniform was required. As a consequence, students dressed as they pleased. Most sported clothes in keeping with the latest fashion, with hairstyles and accessories to match. Many carried electrical and electronic gadgets -- pagers, Walkmans, pocket radios. Girls wore make-up and it was not uncommon to see them being hugged and kissed by boys during intervals. In that new environment, she felt a different kind of displacement.

In attempting willy-nilly to adjust, she had landed herself in her current predicament. It was imperative to keep her shameful dance from her

aunt. Gossip was endemic in Hong Kong. If her aunt ever got wind of her drug-taking and her lewd behaviour, her hope of attending acting school in Los Angeles would go up in smoke. So, too, would those dreams of driving around Hollywood in a crimson convertible with black leather trimmings or sashaying into famous restaurants followed by crowds of photographers and hysterical fans.

She had begged Sharlene to warn the other kids not to blabber. The American had promised; she had that kind of clout. Her only hope was that she could deliver as well. Everything seemed to be under wraps so far.

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The singing of hymns came to an end and the congregation resumed their seats. Amber felt more fearful and self-conscious than ever. It was as if her shame was plain on her face for everyone to see. She raised her dark eyes and prayed silently for God's grace. Behind the altar, sunbeams danced through the stained glass windows. There was no indication, however, that God had taken the slightest notice of her.

Coming to Mass was a mistake, she thought. It didn't make her feel better. She had become irregular in her church attendances over the last couple of years. Within the House of God, her lapses now seemed magnified, more unforgivable. There was little doubt that she had made a fool of herself and if word ever got around she would become an object of ridicule.

Presently, the Chinese priest climbed into the pulpit to deliver his sermon. But his words did not register with her. Her thoughts were elsewhere, reflecting on why her beloved Portuguese father had died when she was six and why Mum had passed away due to cancer at the age of only thirty-seven. Both tragedies had caused her to question whether there was really a just and redeeming God.

She had no complaints about her aunt, however. She had always treated her well, even when she had lived in Yaumati. Her first contact with her aunt had been when she visited their dilapidated flat with her first real toy. She always brought a present for her on subsequent visits, be it a box of sweets, a doll or a new dress. Those gifts were the first luxuries she ever had.

Her aunt's visits also had a bafflingly secretive aspect which she had still been unable to penetrate. After her gift had been presented, her aunt would go off to a corner with her mother to talk out of her hearing. Often they would cry together. When she had asked her mother the reason, her Mum replied that the affairs of adults were of no concern to children. That soon became an established principle. Her parents, too, retreated out of her hearing when they exchanged angry words.

Being a ward of her aunt dramatically improved her life. But she remained a misfit at her new school in spite of the fashionable clothes and accessories her aunt had provided. She had never had contact with boys before then and did not know how to deal with them. When they attempted to engage her in small talk, she often fled in panic.

An Australian boy in her class was the first to approach her. He said: “Hi! How are you doing? My name’s Barrie.”

All she managed in reply was: “My name’s Amber.”

“Whereabouts you live?”

“Bowen Road.”

“Neat. What your old man’s business?”

“He worked in a bank.”

“No kidding! My Dad’s a banker, with Bank of America. Which is your father’s bank?”

“Sorry, I don’t want to talk about my family.” With that she hurried off to the washroom.

Barrie later told classmates she was weird.

Given her beauty, she attracted no end of attention from other boys, in spite of the rumours circulated by Barrie. When it came to dates, she invariably declined. She had been too deeply steeped in the strictures of her mother and Sister Magdalene about how respectable girls ought to behave. Besides, she knew she would panic should a date attempt to hold her hand or put his arm around her. She might have felt bored and regimented at her old school but she was discovering that freedom brought different fears and insecurities.

It was Sharlene Anderson, an older classmate, who eventually rescued her from her misery. Sharlene was big, blonde and from Minnesota. She dominated the class because she was outspoken and had a flair for

leadership. Sharlene was only fifteen when they met but she had an eye-catching figure, which she shamelessly exploited to her advantage.

Their relationship came about by accident. She was waiting for a minibus to take her to school one morning when Sharlene happened by in a car driven by her father.

“You heading for school?” Sharlene yelled, leaning her head out of the car window. When she nodded, the American said: “Hop in. My Dad’s dropping me.”

It appeared that Sharlene also lived in Bowen Road, just a few houses away. Once the ice had been broken, they got along splendidly and soon made their journeys to school together.

As their friendship warmed, they confided in each other. Sharlene was precocious in all matters sexual and marital. She claimed to have devoured Kinsey, Masters & Johnson and the Hite Reports. She could rattle off statistics on the dismal state of American marriages without pausing for breath. Half of them ended in divorce; half of women were not virgins at marriage; most women felt discontented and bored after five years of matrimony; seventy per cent of married women and eighty per cent of men engaged in affairs on the side.

Sharlene was soon teaching Amber how to handle boys.

“With boys, you have to give a little in order to gain a lot -- presents, good seats at concerts, dinners at top restaurants, stuff like that,” the American said. “Given the realities of marriage, it’s crazy to marry for love.

Love is like getting high on champagne or going for a hit. It may make you feel marvellous for a while but it can't last. Marriage's about being practical. It's a meal ticket or, if it came to it, a good settlement in divorce.

“Before you've settled on marriage, you've got to keep guys on a leash. Not too tight, mind you. Always leave them something to look forward to. It's like acting, you know, make-believe. Keep showing them the cookie jar but don't let them dip their hands in, unless you actually want them to. But when you do, take precautions and don't leave it to those dumb-bells. Sometimes, even when you don't feel like it, give them a hug or a kiss to send them home happy.”

With advice from Sharlene, Amber soon began re-inventing herself. She took to clothes which showed her physical assets to better advantage. Her blouses revealed a little more cleavage and her jeans fitted more snugly around her bottom. She learned dancing and the art of teenage flirtation. She went on a few dates, but only with boys Sharlene had identified as harmless. Although she still refrained from smoking, drinking or kissing, she had by the end of her first year become one of the most popular girls in the school. Even Barrie no longer considered her weird.

It was her ability to act out roles, to put on a slightly different persona to suit the temperament of the different boys she dated, that first gave her the idea of acting as a career. She had heard of the fabulous fortunes a movie star could make. She wasn't sure she had any real talent but she figured practice could always make perfect. The important thing was she had

the looks. For an orphan girl living on the largesse of relatives, financial independence was an irresistible need.

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Hymns started again and Amber saw the priest making ready for Holy Communion. She watched dully as parishioners queued up to partake of the symbolic flesh and blood of Christ.

Her thoughts went back to that day about a year ago when she first revealed her acting ambitions to her aunt and uncle. She had seen an advertisement for an acting academy in Los Angeles and had told them she wished to study there, instead of going to university.

“Acting?” Aunt Po-Chee responded with surprise. “Wouldn’t it be better to do a degree first? Why this sudden desire to become an actress? Your Mum said you hadn’t even taken part in a school nativity play. The world is full of young women seeking careers in acting. Few ever succeed. I’m sure your mother wouldn’t approve.”

“Mum’s gone, Auntie,” she replied, firmly but without disrespect.

“Yes, but I’m still your guardian. Most Chinese regard acting as disreputable.” Her aunt arched an eyebrow to emphasize the point.

“This kind of Chinese attitude is one of the reasons I don’t want to hang around Hong Kong.”

“It’s not only the Chinese who have reservations about acting,” Aunt Po-Chee replied. “In former times the Catholic Church used to refuse to marry or bury actors.”

“I’m only part-Chinese but I don’t look Chinese at all. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life being a misfit. I’m regarded by the Chinese as a half-breed and I don’t belong among the expatriates either. This place will be a dead end for me after 1997.”

“Becoming an actress is not the solution, my dear,” Aunt Po-Chee said, in a kinder tone. “You may not look Chinese but Hong Kong is still your home.”

“There are no acting opportunities here for people like me. The local film producers wouldn’t even consider me for a walk-on part in a slapstick or a kung fu film, let alone in a more serious role. My chances are better in America. I can pass for an American. There are many roles there for ethnic minorities. Once the public takes to an actress, she can become famous in no time. Nobody cares where she’s from.”

“Plenty of people go from rags to riches here too. This is supposed to be a more entrepreneurial place than America.”

“Yes, but people here have long memories. They still look down on those without the right family backgrounds, even after they’ve made it big. The tabloids are constantly raking up the murky pasts of some of our richest tycoons.”

Amber sensed continuing reluctance. In order to forestall a negative decision, she added quickly: “Please, Auntie, grant me this one thing and I’ll never trouble you for anything else for the rest of my life.”

Uncle Suen, who had not spoken a word up to that point, then entered the discussion. “You can rest assured that whenever you need help, your aunt and I will be here for you” he said, in his deep, world-weary voice. “That’s what families are for.”

Amber regarded her uncle as something of an enigma. In spite of having shared the same house with him for more than two years, she hadn’t figured him out. He often kept himself to himself. He was twenty-one years older than her aunt and their relationship seemed quite unconventional. They occupied separate bedrooms. Her aunt worked normal office hours whereas her uncle busied himself during the night and slept half the day away. Evening meals and weekend lunches were about the only occasions the three of them could count on being together.

Her uncle carried his years remarkably lightly, however, so that he and his wife did not appear mismatched. His close cropped hair, with a tinge of grey, and his broad brow gave him an intellectual air. His nose was straight and kind of cute too. But he had unpredictable moods. He could be loquacious and illuminating one moment and laconic and distant the next. Sometimes he reminded her of Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca.

“Why do you think acting can be taught?” he uncle continued. “No less an authority than Aristotle had expressed doubt that it can. The

notion that lessons in a classroom can produce great actors is a great confidence trick.”

“It’s not a confidence trick. Brando took lessons in New York to start with. Look where he is now.”

“Ah, but Brando already had a gift, can’t you see? Acting is like writing. You’re either born with it or you’re not. If it’s not already in your blood, there’s not much anyone can do about it.”

“Well, I’ve got it in my blood. I’ve never wanted to be anything else.”

Uncle Suen smiled indulgently. “Ambition is one thing and an authentic gift’s another. You’re bright and intelligent. Good-looking too, I might add. Heaven knows, you might turn into another Garbo or Marilyn Monroe. But if you are truly talented, do you intend to serve Art or Mammon?”

She hesitated. “Both, I guess,” she said.

Uncle Suen chuckled. “It’s unfair to ask you a question like that at your age. You first have to plunge into the labyrinths of life, to discover what it’s all about. Great Art can seldom be produced through second-hand emotions. Art and Mammon are apt to travel along different roads. You’ll find that out soon enough.”

Uncle Suen paused and ran a hand over his chin. “Rather than get into that now, let’s do a deal. I’ll support your proposal on two conditions: first, you must graduate with grades sound enough to get you into

a top university; second, you must accept a review of progress after a year. We can then sit down and determine whether you should continue with acting or go to university. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Splendid! Done!” she cried. Her uncle’s support, coming so unexpectedly, made her want to hug and kiss him in gratitude. She had known then that she had won the first round. It would be her big chance and she did not intend to fluff it.

But now that hard-won victory had been put in jeopardy because she had fallen for some stupid prank and a momentary weakness at last week’s party. If she couldn’t look after herself properly in Hong Kong, her aunt was sure to think twice over letting her loose in America.

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The service drew to a close and the church began to empty. Amber remained in her seat. Her mind was too preoccupied for casual conversation. It was only after most of the congregation had dispersed that she rose to leave.

Outside, the morning haze had disappeared to reveal the full splendour of a spring day. The heavens appeared excruciatingly blue while the air remained relatively unaffected by the sun. A lispng breeze licked the bloom on her cheeks and teased her dark, naturally wavy hair. A faint scent of magnolia in the air caused her to breathe deeply.

It was a fitting day to be hopeful and to put fear behind, she thought. If all went well, news of last week's debacle would never reach the ears of her aunt. Or if it did, it might be only after she had departed for America, too late for her aunt to change her mind. Keep your nerve, old girl, she told herself.

Because of the pleasantness of the day, she decided to return home on foot, choosing the pathways running parallel to the tracks of the Peak Tram. With both Ah Loy, the old family retainer, and Malu, the Filipina maid, off on weekends, she would have to help prepare lunch. She calculated that by walking she would still get back on time.

The journey soon made her perspire. Her high heels proved more unsuitable for uphill walking than she had expected. So too her buttoned-up designer suit. She undid the jacket and slipped it off without breaking stride. She had on a white silk blouse with ruffled frills underneath. She hooked a finger to the collar of the jacket and flung it over one shoulder, as flamboyantly as she had seen it done in the movies. She then quickened her steps.

When she got home, she promptly changed into casual clothes before reporting to the kitchen. She found preparations already well advanced. Her aunt was in the process of gutting prawns to go with fried noodles. The gruel required for congee was already simmering inside a stoneware pot. Piles of sliced abalone and chicken to go into it later were already heaped on the chopping block.

“Sorry I’m late, Auntie,” Amber said, embarrassed by how far preparations had gone.

“No problem. I started early, that’s all,” her aunt replied. Her voice was warm and gentle but she appeared frumpy in a grey and shapeless track suit. Her dark and sober business suits usually presented her in a better light.

It always staggered her to see her aunt so prematurely aged and worn out by ailments and misfortunes. When she first set eyes on her, she had been a magnificent beauty, a younger version of her own mother. Now, beset by insomnia, migraines and depression, her face had gone sallow and two perpendicular frown lines had become almost permanently etched on her brow. Her waist had also thickened and her once elegant figure was no longer in evidence.

She had witnessed the same sort of decline in her mother and that made her realise beauty was fleeting and ephemeral. Marilyn Monroe was gone by thirty-six and Mum at thirty-eight. She couldn’t afford to wait. She had to make a success of herself before her looks went, before her own inevitable decline.

“What can I do to help?” she asked, still half-troubled by her forebodings.

“Why don’t you wash the vegetables,” her aunt said. “Chop some spring onions too for the congee. I’ll fry the noodles and do the vegetables the moment I hear your uncle up and about.”

“Okay. Uncle’s been working late as usual?”

“I imagine so. He’s not up yet.”

As she set about rinsing the leafy Chinese cabbage and the crunchy Chinese broccoli, her thoughts drifted back to the debate about going to acting school and Uncle Suen’s assertion that great art could not grow out of second-hand emotions.

She had grown more aware of that lately. The debacle at the party had focused attention on her ignorance and her sheltered existence. She knew little about sex beyond what Sharlene had told her. She needed to experience life’s passions, know something of love, jealousy, devotion and sacrifice. Otherwise how could she play Camille or Madame Bovary with conviction?

Recently she had become more aware of men ogling her in the streets and had found Barrie and other boys at school more persistent in seeking dates. Such open admiration had given her satisfaction. It represented a kind of power. But how was she to deploy it to her best advantage, to bend men to her will? Sometimes she had the urge to find out. Most of the time, however, she couldn’t shake off the prohibitions drilled into her by her Mum and Sister Magdalene. She wished she had the kind of courage Sharlene possessed, to plunge into what her uncle had called the labyrinths of life.

She continued to muse over her future as she rinsed the vegetables in the sink. Her uncle’s use of the word “labyrinths” lingered

upon her consciousness. Why had he chosen that word? Was he trying to indicate that life was complicated and tangled and that she should prepare for setbacks and disappointments? Was he also trying to warn her that acting success came with a shady underside? It was not always easy to tell what her uncle was driving at.

Her musings were interrupted by the sound of a flushing toilet upstairs. “Uncle’s up,” she announced.

“Good. Set the table and I’ll fry the noodles,” her aunt said.

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