

Tea and Sympathy

The foot-high tea cosy which Po-Chee cradled in her left arm was of the traditional tubular type. It had an outer casing of plaited rattan, worn to a rich brown sheen, and a thick inner lining of padded cotton. It provided a remarkably snug and effective repository for a pot of hot tea.

Suen should be needing a fresh cup by now, Po-Chee thought, as she tapped gently on the door of the study. Dinner had been over for three hours and Amber had gone to sleep in anticipation of school the next day. Normally it would be Ah Loy's chore to bring tea for her husband. But today was Sunday and still too early for the servant to return from her retreat at a Lantau nunnery.

She waited for an answer, feeling slightly intimidated. She seldom ventured inside when her husband was working, except in an emergency. The eclectic mix of tomes lining the walls was inhibiting, ranging from Anthropology to the Physical Sciences, Plutarch to Spinoza, Economics to Taoist philosophy. They tested her own knowledge, for her own reading in recent years had revolved mainly around English case law and contemporary novels written in Chinese. There was none of the former there and the latter petered out after Lu Hsun. She had, however, dipped occasionally into the sets of Tang and Sung poems, uniformly sheathed in protective jackets of blue cloth.

It was impossible to keep up with the range and intensity of her husband's readings. He now spurned virtually all social engagements, except for the two major charity functions she had committed him to each year. He had even given up visits to Szeto's Bar, that old watering hole in Wanchai where his journalist and academic friends foregathered. He seldom left the house, except to see a dentist or a barber or to browse in a bookshop. The Friday bridge night was about his only regular outing.

Since there was no response to her knock, she wondered if her husband might be dozing. He sometimes did that on a leather sofa installed

for the purpose. She decided to take a chance by entering and just leaving the tea cosy, as Ah Loy was accustomed to do.

She discovered upon entering that Suen was sitting in front of his word processor lost in thought. His face, seen in profile, was shadowed by a day's growth of beard. He was still in the pyjamas he'd had on at lunch. He seemed so engrossed her entry had gone completely unnoticed. Her bedroom slippers had been soundless against the parquet floor.

She envied her husband's ability to be so absorbed. It gave him a certain self-sufficiency, as if he had an inner life which others could not penetrate. She hesitated, undecided on whether to speak or simply to leave the cosy and go.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that Suen might in fact be staring at the water colour painting of Isabelle hanging on the opposite wall. She felt a twinge of resentment.

The impressionistic picture, in an aluminium frame, was dominated by a single blue-green eye and a pair of voluptuous breasts, each garnished with a nipple as red and luscious as a ripe cherry. The sight of the latter disturbed her. Comparing the picture's breasts with her own made her dizzy. Hers had suffered from the ravages of time. They presently hung flabby and limp. How could she compete with breasts that remained forever proud and young? Besides, the woman in the portrait enjoyed the constant company of her husband!

It wasn't fair, she thought. Although the portrait predated their marriage, its presence reminded her of lives her husband had led which remained completely closed to her. She knew almost nothing about Isabelle beyond her name and the fact that she had been one of the models used by Phirun, a dead Cambodian artist who had been Suen's close friend.

She sensed an aftertaste of some form of relationship between Suen and the model. How deep had it been? Suen had admitted at their

initial meeting that he had previously led a Byronic life.

But she had remained too proud to ask about Isabelle. In any case, interrogations cut both ways. There were questions about her own past she would definitely not wish to answer.

Nonetheless, the sight of the picture disturbed her sufficiently for her to catch her breath. Suen's Chinese zither, placed on top of a set of teak drawers and filing cabinets beneath the painting, seemed too much like an offering to please her. She cleared her throat deliberately.

Suen turned, startled, and smiled. His dark, passionate eyes lit up in welcome. His hair, verging towards grey at the temples, was dishevelled, lending him the air of a man perplexed.

"I've brought you some tea," she managed to say.

"Excellent," Suen said, rising from his swivel chair. His movements were sprightly. He took the cosy from her and placed it on a large side table, which already held a bottle of water, two Chinese teacups and a tin of Scottish shortbread.

"Care to join me for a cup?" Suen asked, helping himself to a piece of shortbread before pouring.

She shook her head, feeling like an intruder.

"Would you like me to prepare a snack for later?" she asked, as Suen returned with his cup to the computer table. "Ah Loy's not back yet."

"No, thanks. Leave that to her. Otherwise she'd fuss."

Yes, Po-Chee thought. Ah Loy would be there to serve you so long as a single breath remained within her. Throughout the years of the Japanese occupation, after Suen and his grandmother had fled to Kunming, the servant had single-handedly guarded the house against all-comers. Until her arrival at Bowen Road ages ago, the maid had never even taken a day off. Then, five years ago, she had surprised Suen and herself by announcing that henceforth she would spend every weekend at a Buddhist

nunnery on Lantao. They had both been delighted that she had found an outside interest. The prospect of departing to another existence before too long must have finally dawned on her.

Suen nibbled on the shortbread and sipped his tea.

Po-Chee moved into the room, folded her arms over her flimsy nightgown and leaned against one of the many bookshelves surrounding the room like a city wall. From that vantage point she surveyed her husband's sanctum.

Facing the door were French windows opening onto a verandah. An en-suite toilet and shower room was located to the right of the French windows. A large teakwood desk next to the computer table held reference books, documents, notepads, pamphlets, a fluorescent reading lamp, a desk calendar and other essentials to a literary life.

Another swivel chair, upholstered in leather, accompanied the desk. The old brown leather sofa faced the French windows. She had found him on it a couple of times when, out of loneliness, she had gone into the study during the night. Each time, however, Suen had misread her intentions and had assumed she had come for sexual gratification. That type of misunderstanding made physical contact between them awkward.

As she completed her survey of the room, she suddenly realized she was standing directly opposite the picture of Isabelle. She caught the mischievous twinkle in the painting's single eye and her heart raced again. The eye seemed to suggest that it knew more secrets about her husband than she would ever know.

In order to stop her thoughts from straying, she asked abruptly: "Were you working on your book or just another article for Su's paper?"

"Both," Suen said. He had finished his biscuit and was sitting quietly sipping his tea. His mind appeared miles away, however. Behind him the computer screen displayed a bright jumble of text.

“Going well?”

“Not really,” Suen answered, gloomily. He stared into his cup, as if trying to divine an answer in the tea leaves. “Sometimes I don’t know whether it’s me or the world that has gone mad.”

“Probably a bit of both, my dear,” Po-Chee said, trying to cheer him.

“I’m serious,” Suen said. “The world is sleep-walking into the fag end of the Twentieth Century, following paradigms meant for a sleepier and more trusting age. The harlot of capitalism has become more flagrant, fanning unacceptable levels of greed with her giddy favours. We’re heading for a fall. The world needs some fundamental shifts in moral thinking, just as it did in scientific thinking after Copernicus.”

“You’re not suggesting another revolution?”

“Perhaps, I am. Nothing as vicious as the French or the Cultural Revolutions, of course, but something just as fundamental and jolting. Something which would really cleanse.”

Po-Chee’s eyes widened interrogatively.

“You’re surprised?” Suen said, meeting her eyes. “Let me give you my thinking. Rousseau held that man was born free, a rather dubious proposition, in my book. Freedom is essentially a negative aspiration. It seeks to free a person from something. But there are many important things from which a person ought never to be freed. A sense of duty, of justice, of conscience, for a start.

“Because Rousseau’s notion had gained acceptance over the last couple of centuries, we’ve organised society in a certain way. But suppose we had accepted the proposition that man is never born free but comes into the world filled with obligations -- towards his ancestors for the gift of life, towards his fellow men for sharing fairly the resources of the Earth, towards future generations by passing on a planet fit for human

habitation. Would the entire way we organise ourselves not change?”

“That’s quite a mouthful. Sounds almost Neo-Confucian.”

“Maybe, but if it were done, the pursuit of narrow self-interest would go out of the window, as would the scramble for raw materials and markets, and the so-called invisible hand so adept at picking the pockets of the poor. The law of supply and demand could be re-ordered so that the impoverished could get life-saving medication and the good schooling at present denied. Would decent people not accept a new concept of community obligations if it could produce happier results?”

Po-Chee expelled a deep breath. “Sounds utopian, my dear.”

“But achievable.”

“Not in our lifetime, I fear.”

Suen nodded. “I suppose you’re right. But that doesn’t matter. It’s a process. There has to be a beginning. And if it’s the right cause others will take it up. Buddha and others pointed out the essential linkages binding the past, the present and the future ages ago. But people generally prefer living out the delusions of the present, bent on instant gratification of their needs, wants, desires and perversions. The advertising industry and the media have been brainwashing us. We have to start learning to see beyond our own limited life spans.

“Another of our binds is to think of ourselves as individuals, complete and autonomous in ourselves. But if we can think of ourselves as elements in a continuous lifestream, we might behave differently. If we felt intimately connected with our past and our future, we might contribute more to that slow, humanising accretion of values and ethics we call civilisation.”

Po-Chee took half a step away from the bookshelves and tightened her arms around herself. Her husband’s idealism always affected her. There had been a time before their marriage when she had enjoyed

debating with him about the great issues of the day. But nowadays, her moral authority had been undermined, both by personal failings and by the dubious profession she was pursuing. Any kind of intellectual cut and thrust now filled her with trepidation.

Nonetheless, she wanted to tell Suen she admired him, for still having fire in his belly when most men his age would have settled into complacency and indifference. But the right words didn't come.

"Darling, I should go," she said. "I see what you're grappling with. I shouldn't have come with my petty concerns."

"Wait!" Suen cried. "You have concerns? I'm terribly sorry. I'm getting unobservant in my old age! I thought you came to bring tea."

He laughed and all at once his seriousness fell away.

She gave a tight smile. "Yes, I did come with tea but I had been hoping for some advice as well."

"Ah, tea and sympathetic advice. The tried and tested recipe of the English boarding school. I must get you a cup."

Suen rose to go to the cosy.

She stayed him with a hand. "No, darling. I don't need any."

"What type of advice are you seeking?" Suen asked, as he resumed his seat.

"It's about Amber and Los Angeles. I have doubts over whether she's ready to go abroad on her own. It wasn't very responsible disappearing for half the night last Saturday, without even leaving word she would be returning very late. She had never done that before."

"She's probably never been drunk before."

"That's it! Quite disgusting. She wasn't supposed to drink."

"There's a first time for everything."

"She smelt so awful that night. Must have vomited or something."

“Who knows what teenagers get up to nowadays? I bet her chums don’t sit around sipping tea. Particularly that Anderson girl. Far too forward for my taste. She may be a bad influence.”

“Well, they’ll be going their separate ways soon. Heaven only knows the company Amber’ll keep at acting school.”

“Well, Los Angeles being Los Angeles, you can count on a fair number of weirdos.”

“She’s been closeted in a convent school for far too long. We really should try to put off that acting business for another year.”

“She’ll never forgive us if we tried.”

The two vertical frown lines on Po-Chee’s brow deepened with uncertainty. “She might go off the rails, you know, left to her own devices,” she said. “She’s just a child.”

“She’s a woman. Just ask any of the young bucks at her school. They must be drooling over her. You’ve just been too close to her to notice she’s grown up. You shouldn’t worry about her. A philosopher once said that anything which doesn’t kill should make a person stronger. Amber’s tough. She’ll survive.”

Po-Chee sighed. “If she’s going, then I suppose I’ll have to find a way of telling her about her father. She’s been asking about him.”

“What about her father?”

“Fernando wasn’t pure Portuguese, you know. He was himself a half-caste. His mother was Chinese, which makes Amber three-quarters Chinese. That was why Po-Chun had insisted on bringing Amber up as a Chinese.”

Suen’s eyes widened in amazement. “What?” he exclaimed. “That’s news to me!”

“I’m sorry I haven’t told you. Po-Chun swore me to secrecy.”

Suen shrugged and gave a half-laugh, as if amused at the length

of time his wife had kept that information from him. “If I didn’t know her background, I would have taken her for a southern European, with her olive skin and her dark, long-lashed eyes. Who was Andy’s mother then?”

“A servant girl who once worked for a minor Portuguese bureaucrat in Macau. Po-Chun did not know this until after Andy’s death, when she went to Macau to contact his former confessor. Andy had always claimed aristocratic roots so she wanted to send news of his death to whatever family he might have in Portugal. It came as a shock.”

“My goodness!”

Po-Chee sighed. “The rascal who sired Andy vanished at the end of his tour. After getting his servant pregnant and promising marriage, he decamped to Portugal. The poor girl, on realising she had been abandoned, gave the baby to a Catholic orphanage. The child turned into a young man with charm, good looks and a vivid imagination. The priest named him Fernando.”

“Well, those kinds of liaisons are nothing out of the ordinary. Westerners have for ages been consorting with local women whom we describe in the vernacular as being ‘not three, not four’. Such liaisons, mixing race, religion and culture, might well become the hot fashion of the future. Driven by opportunity, self-preservation or love, such cross-breeding could become the norm in a hundred years. Their offsprings may well be destined to inherit the Earth, if this sorry old Earth is still worth inheriting by then.”

She smiled ruefully. “What might happen a century hence will be small consolation for Amber.”

“Sorry I digressed. I had been thinking about this business of mixing races and cultures when you came in. Please continue.”

“The meeting of Andy and Po-Chun had been so fortuitous it must have been fated,” Po-Chee said. “After secondary school Andy came

to Hong Kong and got a job as a bank cashier. You'll remember how keen the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank used to be in those days to hire Portuguese cashiers. It wanted European faces at the tills to demonstrate it was a cut above Chinese banks. Po-Chun happened to have been a summer trainee at Andy's branch. That was how they met. A million to one chance. Po-Chun succumbed to his charms and risked the wrath of Father to elope.

"Po-Chun told me she was quite happy for a while. She got a permanent job at the bank and they talked about starting a family. Andy stipulated she should become a Catholic first and made her promise their children would be raised as Catholics. Po-Chun agreed."

"Genuine conversion?"

"Genuine, so far as I know. She had some sort of spiritual need after her estrangement from Father. But she soon discovered that Andy wasn't the knight in shining armour she had imagined. He was an inveterate gambler, constantly playing cards with his Portuguese colleagues at Club Lusitano. He was a very poor player. Lost so frequently his companions nicknamed him 'Fernando da Loser'. He had to keep asking Po-Chun for money to clear his debts."

"He lost his job because of his gambling?"

"Not exactly. He got fired over some missing cash from his till, which he claimed he never took. Po-Chun believed him at the time. It was only later that she discovered he had a streak of larceny in him. After his dismissal it became too embarrassing for Po-Chun to remain at the bank. She got a job as a shipping clerk in a small export firm to support the family. Andy took to drink and soon became totally unfit to hold down any job. In the end his health gave out."

Suen's brow puckered listening to the story. "Did your father cut Po-Chun off because he wanted to punish her or because he feared Andy would squander his money?"

“I don’t know,”

“Couldn’t the two of you have made some sensible deal to split your father’s inheritance after Andy’s death? Po-Chun and Amber wouldn’t have had to live in what you said was an appalling dump.”

“You think I didn’t try!” Po-Chee cried. A tear trickled down her face and she brushed it off vehemently with a hand.

The sight of her distress caused Suen to jump to his feet. He went to her side and placed an arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to apportion blame. I was simply asking a question. We can drop it.”

“No, no, it’s all right,” Po-Chee said. “Might as well get it out of my system.”

Suen led Po-Chee to the leather sofa and they sat down. He left his arm on his wife’s shoulders.

Po-Chee sighed. “I really don’t know why my father cut Po-Chun off. They fell out after I left for England. I assume it had to do with Po-Chun eloping with a non-Chinese and then compounding that lapse by turning Catholic. They soon refused to speak to each other. Nothing I could say to either of them in my letters made any difference.

“Po-Chun wasn’t without faults, you know. She can be hard and stubborn. When I was at Roedean, Father wrote complaining of chest pains, insomnia and nightmares. I asked Po-Chun to look in but she refused. She claimed he was just fishing for sympathy. Father wrote, begging me to return. Po-Chun told me not to, stressing that finishing my degree and my articles were the first priority. I eventually met you and we married, also without my father’s permission. We were on our honeymoon when he suffered a heart attack. He died neglected and alone, without even a friendly face to gaze upon.”

Po-Chee began sobbing afresh and Suen tried to console her.

“It’s all my fault,” she stammered eventually, with her body

heaving with distress. “If I had returned to look after him he might have lived longer. So many things are my fault. Father’s death, the miscarriage, Yun’s death, everything.”

“Stop it!” Suen cried, sternly. “It’s not your fault, my love. Let me get you a cup of tea.”

Po-Chee shook her head, clinging to him to prevent him from rising. Gradually her crying subsided.

“I was stupefied by Father leaving me everything. I tried to get Po-Chun to take a share, or at least to take the old family home in Robinson Road. But she refused. She said since she had not been beholden to Father after her marriage she was not going to start after his death. How can I explain all this to Amber, in a way that makes sense?”

Suen shook his head and stroked his wife’s back. “It seldom does any good to rake through an ancestral swamp. Pity Amber can’t just let the dead bury the dead.”

“She’s quite sentimental about her father. The stories spun by Andy are among her most cherished memories. I’ve pleaded ignorance about Andy all along. How could I tell her that everything about her father had been a big lie, that her father was an illegitimate child of a Chinese servant girl, a gambler, a drunkard, a thief and a wife-beater?”

“A wife-beater?”

“Yes. He used to beat Po-Chun whenever she refused to give him money to buy alcohol or to settle his gambling debts.

Suen shook his head in dismay.

“And how am I to explain both her grandfather’s behaviour and her mother’s stubbornness?”

Suen continued to shake his head. “I suppose the least unsatisfactory option would be to continue to pretend ignorance. Let Amber keep her illusions.”

“I doubt if I can get away with that,” Po-Chee said wearily. “Amber’s too smart. She’ll smell a rat. Besides, that might store up real trouble in the future.”

“How so?”

“Imagine Amber smothering her Chinese roots and passing herself off as a Portuguese in America. A few years down the line she marries an Anglo-Saxon. When they decide to start a family, a baby with completely Chinese features pops out. There would be hell to pay.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. What tricks genetics can play!”

“I’ve made a complete mess.”

“No, let’s think about this for a while,” Suen said, stroking the back of her hair. “There must be a way of revealing a part of the truth without upsetting Amber. Let me give your neck and shoulders a rub. It’ll make you feel better.”

Po-Chee stretched herself out on the brown sofa and rested her head on Suen’s lap. She turned her face towards the French windows. The night outside seemed filled with menaces. But the familiar odours of her husband, mingled with the mustiness of old books, soothed her.

How warm and comforting his presence was, she thought, as she felt his strong fingers kneading the back of her neck and shoulders. It felt like old times. She wished that the healing pressure of his fingers would never cease, that she could shed the pain she had been carrying over the losses of an unreachable past.

“You mustn’t blame yourself for anything,” she heard her husband say. His voice, low and deep, came like a balm. “You’re a wonderful woman, a better wife than any man has a right to expect. I’m proud of you.”

She realised all at once that she needed him much more than he would ever need her. His nearness always made her feel more secure, less

haunted by her secret fears. But each time he attended to her, she also faced a risk. His touch, his smell, stirred dormant desires. It would be so easy to throw caution to the winds and surrender herself as she used to long ago, back at Radnor Place.

But after the miscarriage and the death of Yun, giving way to desire was no longer prudent. Many Chinese believed that disasters came in threes. Her own sense of guilt made that more likely. But how could she possibly get Suen to accept such superstitions? On the other hand, how long could she expect her husband to continue to play nursemaid to her demons? Hers was a predicament with no way out.