

Sisterly Secrets

Po-Chee went through the motion of taking a sleeping pill, as Suen sat making dutiful small talk at the foot of her bed. But in fact she had deftly palmed the pill. She wanted her husband to return to his work, because his nearness and the resonances in his voice -- after their earlier moments of tenderness in the study -- were playing havoc with her. To encourage him to leave, she feigned drowsiness and placed a hand limply over her brow. Her husband reacted as she had expected. Good old Suen!

An inhabited darkness descended as soon as Suen had switched off the lights to leave. A thickening silence followed. The normal purring of the air-conditioning was absent because the weather was mild enough for the room to do without. Malu had drawn the heavy brocade curtains across the windows, muffling the noises of the city. Yet a vague presence remained, like a shadow left behind after its owner had departed.

The possibility it might not be her husband's caused her heart to flutter with apprehension. It might be Yun's, for this was the very room in which he had died.

A tremor went through her. She had been plagued by a recurring nightmare since his death. In it, she would hold his lifeless body and his eyes would look into hers, as if asking why she had allowed him to die. Her sense of guilt had prevented her from telling anyone except Po-Chun.

The fear of that recurring horror shocked her into opening her eyes. She sat up and swiftly switched on the bedside lamp. She surveyed the room. The circle of light revealed the usual glass of water and bottles of medicines on her bedside table. The rest of the table top was taken up by an alarm clock, a pair of reading glasses and a couple of contemporary Chinese novels. The place where her son's cot used to stand was empty.

Her workbench loomed beyond the illuminated circle. It supported a word processor and a row of books clasped between two heavy

soapstone bookends. Each of the bookends had a carved image of the Goddess of Mercy. The images of the Goddess, symbolizing compassion for Buddhists, calmed her a little. Between the bookends stood an early edition of Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary, the White Book on Civil Procedure, a dog-eared copy of The Law of Evidence by Rupert Cross, an ancient Chinese almanac of astronomical calculations, known as Tung Sing, and a copy of the Infinite Life Sutra given her by Lucille Chu.

Also on the workbench were two photographs in sterling silver frames. One was of herself and Suen taken after their registry marriage in London and the other a family portrait comprising her parents, her sister and herself. Three of the four people in that second photograph had long departed. Could the presence in the room be the spirit of one of them? Each had some cause to be dissatisfied with her. It could equally be a spirit of a Lam ancestor who had previously occupied the room, now searching for a progeny.

She switched off the light again with a sigh. A twinge of culpability remained with her. The two failures to discharge her wifely obligations were clearly attributable to her. Possibly other misfortunes too. Her father's death, the hardships endured by Po-Chun and Amber, her troublesome breakdown and her ironical successes in a dubious profession.

Practising law had never crossed her mind during childhood. She had dreamt only of beauty and music, of happiness and entering the fairylands where, according to her mother, immortals dwelled. She had longed to be among them, knowing all the things unknown to humans. She had also accepted her mother's belief about destinies being determined by Heaven. The initiated could glean some of them from stars, from human physiognomies and from astrological calculations. She had longed for those skills.

But the enthralling flow of such speculations came to an abrupt

end when her mother died. Soon afterwards she was packed off to an English boarding school. Po-Chun had persuaded her that it was the best course for all concerned and had promised to join her in England. But her sister never showed up. Years of bewilderment and loneliness followed. She could not understand why all those who had professed love for her should have abandoned her in their different ways.

Desperate for explanations, she became obsessed with discovering her own destiny, so much so that when a succession of student advisors asked about her interests, she had responded first with geomancy, then astrology, and finally chiromancy and phrenology.

“You must be more practical, dear child,” one kindly advisor had urged. “Choose a profession with good prospects.”

“Big demand in Hong Kong for geomancers and fortune tellers,” she had replied blandly. “Don’t mind studying alchemy though, in the old Taoist tradition.”

Thus she nursed her loneliness, year after year, by clinging to remnants of her mother’s arcane beliefs.

Eventually, as she moved towards graduation, another advisor said: “For so argumentative a young lady, perhaps studying law is best.”

She had reacted with neither acceptance nor enthusiasm.

She suspected that the school authorities, out of sheer frustration, must have written to her father, for before long a letter came from him advising her to consider a career in law.

She knew that her father and Po-Chun were not on speaking terms. Her sister had always urged her to enter some profession which would make her economically independent. She wrote to seek her advice about studying law. When her answer came back positive, the die was cast.

In the equivocal stillness of her room, Po-Chee recalled she had taken the first available BOAC flight back to Hong Kong upon receiving news of her father's death. Suen had been left to pack up at Radnor Place.

She had been still groggy from that long journey the following day when she went with Po-Chun to their family home in Robinson Road. She was carrying their father's ashes. Neither of them had been there for years -- she because of her studies in England and Po-Chun because she had been barred from the premises following her elopement.

She had found white lanterns with blue characters hanging outside the house, denoting that the family had suffered a recent bereavement. The sight was a poignant reminder of both the sadness of her loss and the inauspiciousness of another marriage without parental consent. In her own mind one event had to be linked somehow with the other.

Ah Ho, the aged servant, answered their knock.

"Aiya!" Ah Ho exclaimed. Her left eye, the one as yet unimpaired by cataract, betrayed astonishment at the sight of the two sisters. She had been with the family since before their births.

Her raspy voice crackled with emotion. "I never dreamt I would ever see both Senior Siu-tse and Second Siu-tse together again! Wonderful, wonderful. Please come in. It's been so long. How nice to see both of you, so grown-up."

Ah Ho had addressed the sisters in the customary form used by domestic servants in well-to-do households. She then escorted them into the sitting room and saw to their being seated comfortably on a long sofa before excusing herself to brew some tea.

"Please don't go to any trouble, Ah Ho," Po-Chee remonstrated. "We can't stay long. We're only here to pick up some documents. We'll be back later to talk at greater leisure."

“Must at least have tea,” the servant said, before disappearing.

“Ah Ho was in a state when she found the body,” Po-Chun said, once the servant was out of earshot. “She rang me at work, barely able to get her words out.”

Po-Chee nodded, cradling the jar of ashes she had taken from the crematorium. She noted that no altar with offerings had been set up in memory of her father. Po-Chun must have ignored that need because she herself had become a Catholic. Or perhaps because she had been expelled by their father.

“Why did you cremate Daddy so quickly?” Po-Chee asked. “Daddy wanted to be buried next to Ma.”

“Yes, your precious Daddy! He still can,” Po-Chun answered.

“Won’t be the same, with only ashes.”

At that point Ah Ho returned with cups of tea. “What a pity the Old Master cannot see you together.” She brushed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Don’t worry about anything, Ah Ho,” Po-Chee said, with forced cheerfulness. “You’ve kept the house in excellent shape. Thank you. We’ll take good care of you once we have things sorted.”

“Thank you, Second Siu-tse. I hope one or the other of you will return to live here.”

“Yes. That’s a possibility.”

After the servant had withdrawn again, Po-Chee said: “I wish you had consulted me before the cremation.”

“You think I wanted to get saddled with any of this?” Po-Chun began gesticulating as her voice rose. “What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know if you could be contacted. You were on your honeymoon, somewhere in Portugal or Spain. God only knows how long it might take for a message to reach you. Somebody had to decide.”

“I’m not being critical, Elder Sister,” Po-Chee said, gently, placing a hand on her sister’s arm. “Please don’t misunderstand. I’m just puzzled. The body could have been kept in cold storage for a week or two till I got back.”

“Both Dr. Fu and Dr. Yeung had urged a speedy cremation.”

“Why?” Po-Chee frowned.

“They signed the death certificate.”

“Yes, I know. But Daddy died of heart failure, not from some contagious disease.”

Po-Chun shook her head with irritation. “They wanted to protect the family’s reputation, to avoid a scandal.”

“What scandal? Daddy died of a heart attack.”

“Yes, induced by a cocktail of painkillers and sleeping pills.”

Po-Chee’s hand went to her mouth to stifle a gasp. Her face became contorted with shock and grief. She kept shaking her head in disbelief as the full force of her childhood love for her father took possession of her. “You mean he took his own life! Oh, merciful Heaven! Why?” Her hand, clutching the jar of ashes, shook.

Po-Chun took the jar from her and place it on the coffee table. She then clasped her sister by the shoulders with both hands to steady her.

“I couldn’t risk leaving the body around,” she whispered.

“Father had not been well in the head after Ma died. You know about that. That was why you had to go to boarding school.”

“I don’t want to talk about that now!” Po-Chee cried, sharply, pulling away from her sister’s grip. She tasted the sharp tang of irrecoverable loss mixed with the bitterness of her exile at Roedean. “I want to know why Daddy killed himself and why you didn’t tell me earlier.”

Po-Chun dropped her hands and fell silent for a moment. She

looked crestfallen. “I don’t know why he did it. Your guess is as good as mine. But how could I spell all that out in a cable? I couldn’t risk the authorities ordering an autopsy. That would have ruined Uncle Fu and Uncle Yeung. They did us a kindness, as old family friends. I couldn’t leave them exposed. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

Both women were now shedding tears.

Po-Chee wept uncontrollably. Her words came out in fits and starts, between sobs. “Why did Daddy do it? He must have felt lonely, miserable, abandoned. I should have returned when he asked me to. Instead, I not only stayed away, but I got married without his permission. I’m responsible for this.”

“No!” Po-Chun said, drawing herself up on the sofa. “You’re not to blame: I am. I knew from Ah Ho he had been suffering from high blood pressure, insomnia, temper tantrums and more. But I couldn’t get over being banished from the family, being denied an education. He also refused to recognise Amber as his granddaughter. I wanted him to suffer, to pay him back. It was an un-Christian thing to desire. But I did feel that way. So I’m the one who allowed this to happen.”

“Oh, no!” Po-Chee cried and reached for her sister. The two women hugged each other and wept together.

“The Church taught me to act with charity and forgiveness,” Po-Chun stuttered in sobs. “I should have tried harder. Always afraid he would think I was just after his money.”

Ah Ho returned to the room at that point, carrying a plate of almond biscuits. Seeing the sisters crying, she began crying too.

“So sad, so sad,” she allowed, before fleeing to give the sisters privacy to grieve.

After a while, Po-Chun reached for her handbag and took out a handkerchief to blow her nose. “I’m sorry I left you all alone in a foreign

boarding school. Father wouldn't let me go, after I made him send you. Then I met Andy and things simply took a different turn."

"That's all in the past now," Po-Chee said, brushing away her own tears. "Some good has to come out of all this. We can talk about Daddy's will later. But you and your family must get out of that awful place in Yaumati. Why not move back here?"

"No, Father left you everything. It should remain that way. I did without his money while he was alive. I'm not going to accept any after his death."

"But what about Andy and Amber? Andy is out of work."

"You don't know the first thing about Andy."

"Let's not talk about that now. Neither of us can think straight at the moment. Let's just find the deeds to this place and leave."

"What a home-coming you've had!" Po-Chun said, with a bitter laugh. "Life's full of ironies. If I had accepted Father's view that only loose women and streetwalkers marry foreigners, I wouldn't be in the pickle I'm in. If I hadn't allowed Andy to talk me into becoming a Catholic, there might still be a way out. As it is, I'm left with only regrets."

* * *

Her elder sister hadn't been the only one weighed down by regrets, Po-Chee reflected, as she stared into the darkening ceiling. Phantoms or shifting shadows still seemed to be hovering there. How to allay a bad conscience? A teacher at Roedean had once proclaimed that the remedy for wrong-doing should not be regret but rather a determination never to commit the same mistake again. But what if one kept making different mistakes? What would the remedy be in that eventuality?

Some of her mistakes had been so serious that she could only

confess them to Po-Chun. But Po-Chun was now dead and nobody else could offer her either full understanding or a crumb of comfort.

It had been impossible to go to Suen. Even at the height of their passion, he had always expected more from her than she could deliver. If she had told him that her father had committed suicide, he would undoubtedly be kind and sympathetic but his mind would begin weighing whether her own breakdown had stemmed from some genetic predisposition to mental illness. Eventually he might stumble upon the truth about how Yun actually died. Could his love and compassion then turn into pity? She couldn't possibly bear that.

In law, there was always wriggle room. The line between accident, misadventure, ignorance and negligence could be blurred or manipulated. For an act to be deemed blameworthy, there had to be evidence of intention or negligence or recklessness, proven beyond reasonable doubt. Actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea. She had exploited that old saw on behalf of clients often enough. But in the case of Yun, her culpability or innocence was much more clear-cut. No legal dodge could prevail within her own conscience.

She should have realised when she was interviewed by James Hallimore for a job as an assistant solicitor that the profession would lead her down a dangerous path. "Remember, Mrs. Lam," the grey-haired and venerable Senior Partner had said, "risk-taking is the name of the game here. We're hired guns on hourly rates, not ethical guardians. Our job is to give our clients as much legal cover as we can. It's none of our business if they choose to sail close to the wind."

In spite of that plain warning, she had signed up as a hired gun.

She sighed. Two tears formed and rolled down from the corners of her eyes. She should have taken both the nature of her entry into the profession and her miscarriage as warnings. But she didn't. She had

been too hellbent on demonstrating her legal skills, on proving she could be the top gun around. As a consequence she had worked punishing hours and had not spared herself from lugging bulging briefcases to and from the courts. She did not even realise she had aborted her first pregnancy till afterwards.

When Yun came, healthy and without complications, she had initially been overjoyed. It seemed that Fate was at last smiling on her. But when she began breast-feeding the child, a growing sense of unease developed. She couldn't put her finger on the cause. So she consulted the Tung Sing. There was nothing in either her or Yun's astronomical calculations to support her misgivings. She went in secret to soothsayers to confirm whether there was anything inauspicious on the horizon. But they found nothing.

Nonetheless, her unease persisted. She brooded. She reviewed the salient features in the lives of herself and of her entire family. There had certainly been many misfortunes befalling them. All at once it occurred to her that her milk might pass on the bad luck dogging the Leungs to her son. She decided there and then she would stop breast-feeding.

Ah Loy had remonstrated when she announced her decision. "Young Master's mother breast-fed for six months," the servant observed.

Since she couldn't reveal the real reason, she merely said: "I must get back to work."

"What about getting wet nurse?" the servant persisted.

"Baby milk powders are very scientifically made these days."

"Human milk better," Ah Loy insisted.

She did not respond.

Suen had voiced no objection to her returning to work, though she could sense that he would rather she didn't. He manfully took over

bottle-feeding Yun for a few weeks before passing that responsibility to Ah Loy. He then resumed his habit of working through the night.

After she had returned to work for three months, she came home one evening utterly exhausted at the end of a particularly trying day. She took over the care of Yun to free Ah Loy to prepare dinner. After the meal she and Suen played with their son for a while. When the time came to feed Yun, she had taken him upstairs while Suen retired to his study. After she had fed him, burped him and put him to sleep, she turned in as well.

After a while she woke to the sound of the boy choking. Yun had vomited some baby food. She surmised that a bit must have got into his windpipe. She calmed him, cleaned up the mess and put him back in his cot. She waited for him to return to sleep before following suit.

She had barely dozed off, however, when she heard Yun choking again. He had vomited more food. She remembered vaguely an expert asserting that it was safer for babies to sleep on their stomachs. It stood to reason that babies on their stomachs would be less prone to choke on vomit. She positioned her child accordingly and made a mental note to call the paediatrician the following day.

By then she had become extremely tired. She fell soundly asleep.

The next morning she woke to find Yun with bits of vomit caked around his mouth and nose. She picked him up only to discover he was lifeless. Panic seized her. She could hardly breathe. Her mouth went bitter with fear. All she could do was to sit on the edge of the bed, frozen and speechless, cradling her dead child in her arms.

That was how Ah Loy had found her when she came to tell her that breakfast was ready.

* * *

Since that fateful day, Po-Chee had gone over endlessly the circumstances leading up to that tragedy. She had imagined a host of different outcomes.

If she had kept Suen in their room after the arrival of Yun, tragedy might have been averted. If she had continued to breast-feed the child, got a wet nurse and taken a longer maternity leave, things could have turned out differently. She could have sent for Ah Loy or Suen when Yun first vomited. But she didn't. Nor on the second occasion. There was no escaping her culpability. When the doctor finally put the cause of death down to cot suffocation, her conscience couldn't accept that verdict. She had been neglectful. Even if Suen forgave her a thousand times, she would still be unable to forgive herself.

That burden of guilt had accumulated so rapidly that she spiralled into deep depression. She could not free herself from that nightmarish image of Yun's innocent eyes asking for an answer to an unanswerable question.

Suen, noticing her distress, had asked if she might care to move with him into one of the other rooms in the house, to resume their initial pattern of life. But she stoutly refused. To move would be taken as an admission of guilt. Moreover, she was terrified of sharing a bed with her husband again night after night. He would, sooner or later, wish to try for another child and night after night she would have to resist the temptation of his nearness and her need for him. Her dread would be another pregnancy and if she resorted to contraceptives, he would discover in a flash and feel betrayed. Many ordinary Chinese believed that misfortunes came in three and she was no exception. The possibility of losing another child was more than her life was worth.

Her psychological turmoil and her physical decline soon became noticeable within her law firm as well. The partners suggested an extended period of leave. Suen offered a month-long Far Eastern cruise. She had heard from friends that luxury cruises had such exhausting programmes of daytime excursions and evening entertainments that no one would be fit for anything but sleep at the end of the day. That suited her just fine. So she accepted the trip.

Though the journey did turn out to be exhausting, visiting new countries and the fresh sea air did restore her physically to a degree. But emotionally she remained weighed down. In the darkest recesses of her mind there were too many secrets she did not dare to confront.

After their return, Ah Loy plied her with all sorts of family tonics but her spirits did not lift. Eventually Dr. Fu urged her to try therapy. Suen supported that proposal. She agreed, but only to humour them. She knew it was useless. Only death could clean the slate.

* * *

Dr. Ma, the psychologist recommended by Dr. Fu, was a kindly woman in her fifties, recently returned from North America.

“Dr. Fu has indicated that there is nothing amiss with you biologically or neurologically,” Dr. Ma said. “But you do appear to be suffering from episodic depression and insomnia. Those conditions are not uncommon due to the stressfulness of life in Hong Kong. And women professionals are more prone to them than men. We can explore that later. For the present, continue with the sleeping pills and anti-depressants Dr. Fu has prescribed but don’t become over-dependent. Try listening to soothing music at bedtime to see if that helps.”

During the next session, Dr. Ma probed into her childhood,

asking when she had lost one or both of her parents, whether she had been unhappy or deprived as a child, and whether she had been abused at home or in school.

She had responded clearly and concisely. Her mother had died when she was eleven and her father ten years later, from a heart attack. She had been very happy as a child and had not been deprived or abused. Indeed, she had been greatly pampered, especially by her father. Or at least that was what her elder sister thought. Her parents probably indulged her because she had inherited the fragility of her mother's constitution. She was often sick, suffering from coughs, colds and minor fevers until her tonsils were removed. That happened when she was eight. She also suffered from chronic constipation, due to her loathing of fruit and vegetables. She was, moreover, overly fond of chocolates. She would eat any amount she could lay her hands on, to the chagrin of her sister. Her bowel movements improved once she had been given enemas and had changed her eating habits. Otherwise there was nothing remarkable about her childhood.

In subsequent sessions Dr. Ma moved onto other issues, including whether there had been rivalry with her sister.

“Oh, no,” she had replied. “My sister was five years older than me. She was strong and independent by nature. I, on the other hand, tended to be dreamy and easily influenced. I usually fall in with the wishes of others, so there was no rivalry between us.”

Dr. Ma also asked whether there had been friction in her relationships with her husband or with her colleagues and how the loss of her son came about. On those matters her answers had been less precise. Cot death seemed a convenient alibi.

Her answers must have satisfied Dr. Ma because after several months the doctor gave her a reasonably clean bill of mental health.

“It seems, Mrs. Lam, that you’re more normal than most of my other patients!” Dr. Ma had said light-heartedly. “So far as I can determine, your condition is probably related to the loss of your child. Each time you re-live that tragedy, your depression is triggered. You must try to come to terms with that loss. Bring it out into the open, deal with it rather than repress it. It has been said that time heals all things. I think there’s a lot of folk wisdom in that. I suggest we review progress on a regular basis.”

She had accepted Dr. Ma’s suggestion. She went back every six or eight months, though she knew they were unnecessary and a waste of money. The passage of time also did not really help. It was the gods she had to placate and she believed in too many. Whenever she felt at the end of her tether she would head for the consoling arms of Po-Chun. But her sister was now dead.

It was only after making friends with Lucille Chu and discussing Buddhism with her that she detected a way of gaining the compassion of the gods. She joined Lucille in charitable endeavours and plunged into pro bono work.

* * *

Po-Chee glanced at the bedside clock. Its hands indicated it was almost three. Good heavens, Monday already! Her brains would be too addled for work if this kept up. She reached for the bottle of sleeping pills and took one with a gulp of water. She then waited for sweet Morpheus to claim her.