

Linkages with the Past

Another Sunday and lunch had been over for half an hour. The house was steeped in silences. Its master had retired to his study, his wife had gone for a post-prandial lie-in and the servants were on leave. Only Amber was at loose ends.

A restlessness stirred in Amber as she sat, bored, at her small bedroom desk, waiting for her aunt to take her shopping. She began recalling with a tingle of embarrassment the events of two weeks ago at Sharlene's party. She had no idea drinking spiked punch and smoking pot could unleash such an exhibitionist streak in her. She had felt really elated at first, with the seeming ability to float on air and to watch time, space and colours merging so magically. Then came that awful striptease! She wouldn't be partying like that again in a hurry!

For want of anything better to do, she took out a photo album which had once belonged to her mother from a drawer. The album together with the crucifix hanging above her bed had been her Mum's only legacies. She began flipping through its pages in a desultory fashion.

Photographs of people long dead filled its pages, in black and white and in sepia. Most were childhood pictures of her Mum and Aunt Po-Chee, captured smiling in school uniforms, in swim suits and in party clothes. They appeared to be posing happily and self-consciously, by themselves or with their parents, a pair of patently prosperous members of the bourgeoisie. She couldn't help wondering what endearments or promises of reward had been whispered into their ears when they snuggled close to their parents. She herself had heard none from her mother.

The latter part of the album contained coloured photographs of her own parents and of herself as a baby and as a school girl.

She had often speculated over the pampered childhoods of the two Leung sisters compared with the mean existence she had to put up with in Yaumati. She had never met her grandparents. Her grandmother had

died before she was born. But her grandfather, a noted gynaecologist, had been still alive till she was five. Yet neither her Mum nor her Dad had ever taken her to visit him. Her Mum had also evaded questions about him.

That reticence had sparked curiosity. From the pictures her grandfather appeared warm and friendly. So she could not understand why there had been no dealings between them and why he should have cut off her Mum in his will and left everything to her aunt. It had only been much later, after she had seen photographs in her aunt's albums, that it became obvious that her aunt had been her grandfather's favourite.

She paused at the pages featuring images of her own father. He looked so incredibly handsome she could hardly believe he was dead. He had been blessed with a nose straight as a die and eyes with a devil-may-care twinkle. She was glad she had inherited both those features, for they reflected the non-Chinese part of her being. But at the same time she was acutely conscious of the Chineseness in her habits of thought. It was strange. She felt betwixt and between, a mixed-up girl lost in a mixed-up place.

The sight of her father brought back memories of shared adventures. She could remember walking hand in hand with him past the glittering shops on Nathan Road, around Kowloon Park or inside the Lai Chi Kok amusement complex. She recalled how he used to carry her whenever she grew tired and gave her the sense of being safe and secure. She would cling to his neck, inhaling that peculiar medicinal smell that oozed from his person. Once in a while, he would offer her a surprise -- the treat of a Dairy Farm ice cream cone!

They lived on the first floor of a tenement with rusting window frames and distempered walls typical of their part of Yaumati. Its interior was brightened only by pictures of the Sacred Heart and of the Holy Mother and Child. A picturesque wall calendar dished out by the Wing On

Department Store was the only other decoration. Their home had a metalwork shop immediately below and the sound of hammering and thumping seldom ceased.

The street outside was filled with the clamour of an unofficial street market. Hawkers gathered each day to sell fresh and preserved eggs, herbs and spices, seasonal fruits and vegetables, chickens and ducks in wicker containers, slithery eels and red paddy field worms squirming in wooden tubs. The air was thick with the sour smells of rotting vegetables, fowl droppings and hemmed-in humanity.

The importuning cries by singlet-clad hawkers were matched by haggling responses from some unrefined customers. Unfavourable opinions on prices or freshness were shrilly voiced and angrily countered. Those exchanges often led to the use of oaths and curses of a quintessentially Cantonese character, with references to one another's ancestry or mother.

The epithets sounded derogatory but evoked no precise imagery for her. Out of curiosity she once asked her mother what they meant. She got sternly warned never to allow such phrases to pass between her lips. Her Mum had never been much good with explanations.

On the other hand, her Dad was always ready with explanations, for everything from card games to family issues. He put his lack of employment down to a serious illness. It required him to carry at all times a bottle of medicine wrapped in a brown paper bag. His doctor had ordered him to take some whenever he felt unwell. Its seriousness was underscored when she had seen on more than one occasion his inability to pick himself off the floor after a fall.

He also explained that they had to live through hard times because a great inheritance in Portugal had been held up by bureaucracy. He was of noble lineage. His ancestors had a large family estate in

Alentejo and a castle somewhere in the Algarve. His own father had been a high government official, assassinated by rebels in Mozambique. His mother had perished in the same ambush. Since they had both died without leaving wills, his inheritance would take time to settle. He had promised repeatedly he would take her to Portugal and live a fabulous life once his fortune was to hand.

He could, of course, have asked family members in Portugal or his father-in-law for a financial advance in the meantime. But he was a proud man. He didn't want them to know that he needed help to tide over his illness.

His stories of places with strange-sounding names ignited her imagination. She felt it right that she and her Mum should endure temporary hardships without complaint, to show solidarity with her father.

She had been deeply shocked when he suddenly collapsed and died when she was six. After that, her whole life seemed trapped in a grey vacuum, with all the gay colours sucked out. Her aunt and uncle were at his funeral but neither Leung nor Portuguese relatives showed up. Apart from her aunt, the only other callers who came to the Yaumati flat after that had been meter readers and bill collectors.

Almost as soon as her father's funeral was over, her mother delivered her each morning to a small convent school run by a foreign nun of formidable proportions. She was called Sister Magdalene. She wore a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles with lenses so thick that they grotesquely distorted her eyes. When she turned those eyes on her, she felt as if she were a plane at war, targeted by two enemy searchlights.

Her classmates had been mainly from poor families. Sister Magdalene assured them they were blessed, because the meek and the poor would one day inherit not only the Earth but also the Kingdom of Heaven. She suspected those pronouncements might turn out as unfulfilled as her

father's promises. But she kept her doubts to herself.

Her mother had always been a sad and distant figure. She left early each day and never returned till it was time to prepare supper. She became even more remote after her father's death because she fell ill as well. Her return was frequently delayed because of the need to seek medical treatment after work. She gradually lost hair and weight. Sometimes she returned grimacing with pain. Once she couldn't even cross the threshold without her help. Amber couldn't understand why the benevolent God worshipped by both her parents should inflict so much suffering upon her family. She didn't want to inherit the Earth or the Kingdom of Heaven. She merely wanted not to suffer like her parents.

She shut the album abruptly and replaced it back in the drawer. She couldn't bear to look any longer at pictures which reminded her of lost parents and their wretched lives. She rose from the desk and plonked herself onto the quilted satin bedspread to wait for her aunt to wake.

She turned onto her belly and idly examined the bedspread's bold floral design in beige, yellow and brown. It matched the curtains. She stroked the fine fabric. She had dreamt of living in such luxury when she was in Yaumati. Now that she had achieved that, something still seemed to be missing.

She hadn't known exactly what her Mum had meant when she said on her deathbed that her aunt would look after her. She had never imagined it meant living in such a room and in such a magnificent two-storeyed mansion in Bowen Road.

The mansion, sequestered amidst an abundance of greenery, was airy and spacious. A wide verandah embraced most of the ground floor and there was a beautiful garden offering stunning views of the colony's harbour at various vantage points. She loved the house the moment she stepped through its doors. None of the noises and smells of Yaumati were

present. There was instead something uniquely mellowed and tranquil, like some magical place protected from the hurly-burly of the city.

The living room overwhelmed her. It exuded lived-in culture. A large foliated mirror with a rosette design hung over a marble mantelpiece. Deep sofas were accompanied by Chinese redwood tables, with a low one serving as a coffee table and some smaller ones as teapoys. Two scrolls of Chinese landscapes suggested a remoteness at odds with the building's location.

Apart from museums and antique shops, she had never seen so many exquisite objects on display. Her eyes could hardly take in the wealth of fine porcelains, ranging from blue and white vases to bowls in ox blood red. There were also two curio cabinets filled with figurines, animals and boxes made in ivory, jade, lacquer, bronze, wood or cloisonne.

Her particular attention was attracted by a white jade monkey clutching an over-sized Peach of Longevity sitting on the mantelpiece. The expression on the monkey's face was so mischievous and lifelike that she became captivated at once. With her aunt's permission, she picked it up for a closer examination.

“Oh, this is so lovely,” she exclaimed. “Who carved it?”

“You had better ask your uncle,” Aunt Po-Chee replied. “He remembers such details better than I. It has been in the Lam family for generations. When he comes down for lunch you can ask him.”

“What does Uncle do? Is he a dealer in antiques?”

“Good gracious, no!” Aunt Po-Chee said with a laugh. “He might be described as a gentleman without leisure.”

Her uncle was a virtual stranger to her. She could only remember seeing him twice. Once at her father's funeral and the second time at her mother's funeral. He never came visiting with Aunt Po-Chee.

“A gentleman without leisure? What does that mean?”

“It means he spends most of his time furiously reading and writing at home. You must take care not to disturb him.”

“I shall be as quiet as a mouse.”

Just then a woman with iron-grey hair and an erect bearing entered the room. She carried a tray holding two cups of tea. She was dressed in the fashion of domestic servants of a bygone era, in a spotless white jacket and a pair of black trousers.

“This is Ah Loy,” her aunt said, by way of introduction. “Ah Loy has been with the Lam family since before your uncle’s birth. She’s an indispensable part of the family. She goes to the market every day. So just tell her the kinds of food you like.”

Then, addressing the servant, her aunt continued: “This is the daughter of my elder sister I mentioned to you. She will be staying with us from now on. Please help her settle in and make her feel at home. She can use one of the spare bedrooms upstairs.”

“Very well. I’ll tell Malu to get one ready,” Ah Loy said.

Amber met the old woman’s eyes and smiled timidly. She felt she was being sized up but she also detected kindness in the servant.

Ah Loy presented the cups of tea with the conventional invitations to partake. She then left the room.

After the servant had gone, Aunt Po-Chee lowered her voice and said: “She’s well into her seventies, though you won’t know it by looking. She was originally bought from a peasant family as a bondsmaid. She came into the Lam family as part of the dowry when her mistress married your uncle’s father. She claims to have been present at your uncle’s birth so she thinks she has a right to attend to his every need. She can be quite sharp with anyone whom she thinks is disturbing your uncle.”

“I’ll try my best not to do that. Does Uncle enjoy being a gentleman without leisure?” Amber asked.

“He certainly enjoys reading and writing.”

“Does he write best-selling novels, like Cissie Lee?”

“Good heavens, no!” her aunt replied. “He does occasional articles under pen-names for Chinese newspapers and magazines. But his books are in English. You’ll find copies in his study, if you care to read them. But be sure not to go there while he’s working.”

Amber nodded. “Do his books earn a fortune?”

“Afraid not. He earns practically nothing. His articles are contributed free or for an honorarium. Only subsidised university presses publish his books and they are mainly bought by academics and friends.”

Oh, dear! He’ll never get rich that way.”

“He’s rich enough already. He inherited fortunes from his parents and from his grandmother. He considers money rather vulgar, beneath his notice. I can’t get him to take an interest in the household budget or family finances, let alone anything else.”

The revelation of her uncle’s money-disdaining attitude took her by surprise. The whole city seemed obsessed with making money. Everybody watched stock market movements like hawks and bought newspapers touting tips for horse races. Even the girls at Sister Magdalene’s would constantly dream of becoming rich. Her uncle’s attitude marked him for an eccentric.

“If I ever wrote, I’d want to write bestsellers like Cissie Lee.”

“You keep mentioning Cissie Lee. Are you a fan of hers?”

“Sort of. She’s very popular with my classmates but I’ve only read two of her novels. She must make a mint. But Sister Magdalene confiscates her books from us whenever she sees them. She says they’re cheap romances, unsuitable for respectable girls. We’re all dying to know what Cissie Lee looks like. No picture of her seems to have ever appeared. Some think she must be a man, writing under a woman’s name.”

“No, she’s a woman all right. She’s one of my clients.”

“Oh, really! Please tell me about her! What does she look like? Is she beautiful? How old is she?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything. Cissie Lee’s an extremely private person and a lawyer is required to respect client confidentiality.”

Amber looked crestfallen. “Not even a single fact?”

Po-Chee shook her head. “Sorry. But in this house you’re at liberty to read all her books. I’ve got some upstairs. I’ll pass you her latest, called The Diary. I can’t get her to autograph it, however, because she never signs anything. She sticks to the tradition of using a seal. I’ll try to get her to seal your copy.”

“Gosh, that would be lovely! Thanks. Does Uncle like Cissie Lee’s novels?”

“He regards them as escapism. He doesn’t like too much open sentimentality.”

“Really?”

“Since Uncle frowns on money, what’s he after? Fame? Renown?”

Aunt Po-Chee shook her head and drank some tea. “Not that either. He has some Taoist and Buddhist streaks in him, though not their religious manifestations.”

“Taoist and Buddhist streaks? Mum used to say their adherents were riddled with superstitions.”

“Naturally. She converted to Catholicism, didn’t she? But as philosophies, many of their ideas are worth considering. Taoists sages believed in self-effacement, thinking it wrong to honour men of worth because that might lead to contention. Buddha, of course, advocated the sloughing off of all desires and worldly attachments.”

“You mean Uncle seeks no fame and entertains no ambition?”

“Far from it. He wants to change the world. He won’t succeed, of course, in this what Buddhists call our “Dharma Ending Age”. Yet he keeps trying. That’s the Confucian streak in him. Confucius held that if something is morally right, then one should do it regardless of outcome. That’s what I find so endearing about your uncle.”

It seemed almost a case of speaking of the devil, for her uncle made an appearance at that precise moment.

“How nice to be found endearing,” Uncle Suen said as he entered the room, at once bringing to it a bohemian air.

He was dressed in an untidy blue terry cotton bathrobe belted over a suit of pyjamas. His hair was dishevelled and his chin was unshaved. He appeared to be no more than about forty.

Amber stood up respectfully to greet him.

Uncle Suen broke into a warm smile. “Sorry I wasn’t here to welcome you on arrival,” he said in a rich baritone voice. “I’m afraid I tend to get up rather late.”

Amber made the appropriate responses.

When they sat down for the midday meal, she noticed that her uncle did not share in the dishes of fish, chicken and vegetables on the table. Instead, he limited himself to only a bowl of beef and lettuce congee.

“This is the equivalent of your uncle’s breakfast,” Aunt Po-Chee explained. Then, turning to her husband, she added: “Amber has been asking about the origins of some of the knick-knacks in the sitting room. I said you could explain them better.”

“I should be happy to,” Uncle Suen said. “It’s rare for one so young to show an interest in antiques. The stuff in the sitting room is mainly Ching, no older than two or three hundred years.”

After the meal, Uncle Suen invited her to the sitting room and picked up the first item to hand. It was a small red lacquer box carved with

flowers, plants, bats and other auspicious objects. He passed it to her to examine.

“Lacquer has been in use in China for thousands of years,” he explained. “Some experts date its first use back to five thousand B.C. The box has a Ming Dynasty design but it’s only a Ching reproduction. The Emperor Chien Lung was very fond of lacquer. He established an imperial workshop in Soochow to produce items he fancied. This would be around 1740, if memory serves.”

Uncle Suen then turned over vases and bowls to show the marks on their bases. He explained that such markings recorded the reign during which each item was made. Sometimes there was also an indication of the district in which the kiln was located.

She asked about the jade monkey.

“Ah! A real beauty, isn’t it?” Uncle Suen exclaimed, as he picked it up from the mantelpiece. “I love it. This kind of white jade is called ‘mutton-fat’. It has been said that a good piece of jade is like a good friend. It’s seldom perfect but no criticism should be made on that account.

“According to my grandmother, this monkey was acquired by my great grandfather. The workmanship is superb but I can’t tell you anything about its carver. It was not normal for jade carvers to leave their mark until about the Eighteenth Century. My guess is that this was carved about three hundred years ago. When I say ‘carved’, I’m using language loosely. Jade is a very hard stone. Shaping it involves a long, laborious process of abrasion, using pastes composed of minerals harder than jade. It probably took the carver many months to fashion this monkey.”

As she listened to the cascades of insights and information she felt overwhelmed. She wished there was some kind of magic pill she could swallow to enable her to absorb such knowledge in an instant.

Her uncle’s tales seemed more real and authoritative than the

ones her father had told. She wondered whether her uncle would continue to give so generously of his time once she had become a permanent fixture in the house.

As Uncle Suen was about to pick up another curio from a shelf, Aunt Po-Chee came into the room and said: “Amber, when your uncle has finished, please come to my room. We have to prepare a list of items you’ll be needing. You’ll soon be growing out of some of the things you have, clothes, shoes and the like.”

Amber stood up obediently. “I can come right now. I’ve already taken up too much of Uncle’s time,” she said. Turning to her uncle, she added: “Thank you very much, Uncle. It’s been fascinating. I’ve learnt a great deal.”

“Happy to oblige,” Uncle Suen said, smiling again. “If you have further questions, don’t hesitate to ask. By the way, are you aware that your name, Amber, has Arabic origins?”

“No kidding!”

“Yes, it’s true. I’ll trace it out for you one day. Amber is, of course, the fossil resin of pine. In Chinese lore, the pine is a symbol for endurance. Amber can take on a high polish and, if rubbed, can become electrically charged. I suppose that means people should not rub you up the wrong way!”

All three broke out laughing and she went upstairs with her aunt while Uncle Suen headed for his study.

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Amber rolled over onto her stomach on the bed and spreadeagled her limbs. Her right hand fiddled absent-mindedly with the edge of her bedspread. She wished she could somehow gather all the

complicated strands of knowledge and understanding and weave them into the fabric of her own life.

Her period at Bowen Road had opened so many windows she had never previously dreamt existed. The international school allowed her to foster friendships with foreigners of her own age, like Sharlene, Barrie and others. She soon acquired some understanding of foreign lands and customs. Her aunt had made available feminine enjoyments in the form of body lotions, lipsticks and deodorants she never had before. However, in all the time she had been living in Bowen Road her aunt had never alluded to her crying sessions with her Mum. What secrets was she holding back?

But her uncle intrigued her more. He sometimes made remarks about art or politics which left her struggling for understanding. He seemed a difficult man to know.

She had, on occasion, slipped into the study in the morning, when her uncle was still asleep, to get to know the room. That experience had proved both daunting and disappointing. The study was almost claustrophobic, with walls and every corner crammed with books, enough to fill entirely her former home at Yaumati!

It had taken her quite a search to find the books her uncle had written. She had flipped through the first couple she found. They were entitled Foreign Trade as an Instrument of Foreign Policy and The Rise of Corporate Imperialism in the Twentieth Century. Both seemed too dense and specialized for her liking, each analysed the disingenuousness of quotas, tariffs, countervailing duties and anti-dumping clauses. Their texts sounded as incomprehensible as Greek.

The third book she found was in fact the first one he had written. It was entitled Remembering My Teachers. The book began with a Confucian observation to the effect that without parents there could be no life and, without teachers, no wisdom. The book paid tribute to those --

especially his grandmother -- who had contributed to his education.

But the object in the study which really caught her imagination was a modernistic water colour in an aluminium frame hanging on a part of the only wall not completely taken over by bookcases. The picture showed the face and upper body of an obviously naked woman. Generous breasts were shown, each decorated with a cheeky nipple. The face, in distorted profile, was made up of splashes of barley coloured hair, a single stunning blue-green eye and a strange red wriggle for a mouth. Those three elements seemed completely out of perspective yet somehow formed a unity. A few lines and shadows suggested a nose and a jaw. The background was in distancing shades of blue which somehow led the eye beyond the confines of the frame. The bottom of the picture bore a signature in a language she did not know.

She had repeatedly sneaked into the study to look at the painting while her uncle slept. She had learnt from her aunt that its model had been an American girl named Isabelle. It occurred to her that the picture's haunting quality came from a certain ambiguity of form. The model could have been Sharlene, for example, with her blond hair, blue eyes and proud breasts. Or, if the colours of the hair and eyes were changed, it could be anybody, including her aunt during the full flush of her youth. Or, indeed, herself! It had that certain protean quality which suggested that it could personify all of womanhood.

That possibility added fuel to her curiosity. She tried to find ways of getting more information. She tackled Ah Loy.

One morning, she chanced upon the old servant cleaning the study. She entered casually, as if simply to pass the time of day. After a few pleasantries, she asked: "How long has that picture been there?"

"Oh, long time," Ah Loy replied. "About thirty years. Young Master brought from France after grandmother passed into next world."

Amber made a mental calculation. Aunt Po-Chee had only been a child then. Little cause for jealousy. “Do you know who the woman is?” she asked. “What did she look like?”

The servant shrugged. “Never seen. Young Master has box of photos under bed, pictures of foreign women. Maybe one of them.”

“Really?”

“Also pictures of parents and grandparents.”

“Ah, is that why the house has no ancestral photos on display?”

Ah Loy did not answer. She continued her task of dusting books with a feather duster.

“You don’t supposed anyone could get a look inside the box?”

“Box locked,” the servant replied.

“Oh, what a pity! Uncle’s mother must have been very pretty.”

At the mention of her former mistress, Ah Loy stopped her dusting. She eyed Amber in an indulgent way and said: “Come, I show mother of Young Master.”

The servant led Amber out of the study, through the kitchen and into the servants’ quarters. There, among her meagre possessions, she fished out two old photographs. They were both in fading sepia. She handed one to Amber. It pictured an elegant lady in formal clothes, bright-eyed and smiling, cradling a baby in her arms. She appeared like a beauty of the old school, with a clear brow, a petite nose and a classical face shaped like a melon seed.

“Mistress taken at feast to mark Young Master reaching one-month of age,” Ah Loy said.

“She’s beautiful!” Amber cried. The child had the wrinkled look of all babies at that age.

The second photograph was of a handsome teenage girl holding a small boy by the hand. The girl’s features were obviously Ah Loy’s. She

was dressed in her usual white jacket and dark trousers. The only difference was that the girl in the picture wore a queue.

“Young Master at three,” Ah Loy said.

The photographs touched Amber in a strange way. They had been taken more than half a century ago and were now curled at the edges and faded with age. Yet they were probably the only possessions the servant had to mark her decades of uncomplaining toil. How could people of that generation reconcile themselves to getting so little out of life?

“Thank you for showing me the pictures,” Amber said. “You looked very smart with a queue.”

“This old house seen too much sadness,” Ah Loy replied. “You have brought liveliness back. Very good.”

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The snippets of information gleaned from Ah Loy made Amber realized that she still remained ignorant about most of the mysteries hovering around the mansion. She became determined to find out more. After all, her time in the house had been the happiest she had ever had.

One weekend, when out strolling along Bowen Road to Amah Rock with her aunt, she mentioned the painting in her uncle’s study.

“We had a class on Twentieth Century art last week and the teacher said art was becoming more individualistic rather than falling into schools,” she ventured. “He said someone like Picasso is impossible to classify. I got thinking about the painting in Uncle’s study. It’s also quite something, isn’t it? I wonder what its model looked like.”

“If you believe in art, then that must be what the model looked like to the artist,” Aunt Po-Chee replied.

“Yes, I suppose. Still, it would have been nice to be able to

compare the painting with a photograph of the model.”

Aunt Po-Chee did not reply.

They walked in silence for a distance before Amber said: “Ah Loy told me Uncle keeps a box of photographs under his bed. Have you seen them?”

“Some of them. Your uncle showed me his childhood pictures and some of his parents and grandparents.”

“Ah Loy showed me a picture of Uncle’s mother too. She was a real good-looking lady. Why aren’t family photos displayed around the house? The only ones in the whole place are those in your bedroom.”

“Your uncle likes to put photographs away. It’s got something to do with his perception of privacy and memory, not too much open sentimentality. He probably feels that he could be more intimate with people gone from his life by not exposing their images to general gaze. I once offered to sort his photos into albums but he said he preferred them jumbled up, like memories.”

“How strange. Were there photos of the model in the painting among them?”

“Probably. I had noticed pictures of several different Western women but your uncle didn’t explain who they were and I didn’t ask. Each person must retain corners of privacy in the soul into which others shouldn’t invade.”

Amber caught the gentle rebuke and did not attempt to probe further during the rest of the walk.

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Curiosity continued to simmer away, however. A week later, over dinner, Amber addressed her uncle: “I’ve just read about the

Cambodian artist Phirun in your book. You said your conversations with him were usually measured in bottles of wine. Sounds a smashing guy.”

“Absolutely,” her uncle replied.

“He’s the one who did the painting in your study, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Did he become a professional artist after returning to Cambodia or did he go back into his family’s printing business?”

“There are no professionals in art,” her uncle declared, brusquely, to her consternation and surprise. “The mission of an artist is to grapple with human existence. That is, by definition, an amateur pursuit. There is no blueprint to follow, no diploma course to take and no finishing point to reach. The artist just stumbles along, feeling his way and, as often as not, finds himself at a dead end. The whole process is tentative, experimental. You can have professional plumbers and professional dentists but never a professional artist. That would be as ridiculous as calling oneself a professional human being.”

That was how many of her questions to Uncle Suen ended up -- in an intellectual quagmire. And yet, when she reflected upon his answers, she often found that her questions had been answered in an indirect way. If there was no such thing as a professional artist, for example, where did that leave her ambition to become an actress? Was her uncle deliberately provoking her? She was seldom sure.

Meanwhile, the desire to find out more about Isabelle kept growing. The fact that both her uncle and her aunt had reacted equivocally about her merely increased her determination to get to the bottom of things.