

Family Mysteries

Amber headed straight for the kitchen when she got home. Her hefty schoolbag was slung over one shoulder. She felt she was dying of thirst. She found Ah Loy sitting on a stool, knitting, and Malu working at an ironing board, chatting with Ah Loy in broken Cantonese.

“Already home?” Ah Loy remarked, looking up at Amber.

“What you want for dinner?”

“I’m sure you two have already decided. I’ll wait to be surprised.” Amber opened the fridge and poured herself a glass of orange juice. “What are you knitting?”

“Cardigan for old lady at retreat.”

Amber reached down and felt the wool. Its quality was superb. “Nice. Wouldn’t mind one myself.”

“Can knit for you, if don’t mind old style. You choose colour.”

“Great! People go for hand-knits these days.”

Everything was relative, Amber thought. In Ah Loy’s eyes, how ancient did a person have to be to qualify as “an old lady”? Everybody else must appear like spring chickens to her. She even treated her aunt and uncle like youngsters, sometimes insisting on their eating this or that because it was good for them.

As Amber drank, she speculated about the servant’s life. She was undoubtedly devoted to the Lam family. She still addressed Uncle Suen as “Young Master”. She must have been a strong woman in her prime. Still full of beans now. What dreams had she harboured? Any left? What of regrets? Perhaps over never marrying or having children?

The old retainer almost never spoke about herself, except in relation to the Lams. And no one dared to ask. She wore no ornament, save a bracelet of poor quality jade on her left wrist. Her attachment to it could be gauged by the way she sometimes fiddled with it, when she thought no one was about. She must have had it since childhood, for her

hand was now too large for it to be removed. Could her parents have given it to her? Or had she been made to wear it by her original purchasers to indicate her bonded status?

What did she do with her wages, besides buying pricey wool to knit cardigans for aged strangers? She always brought snacks for Uncle Suen. Did she use her own money for that, or household money? She seemed a total mystery, like most of the inhabitants in the house.

Malu was another puzzle. The maid had gone to university in the Philippines and had married, producing two children. Yet she had left her family back in Mindanao to work as a domestic servant in Hong Kong. She only saw her kids once every two years, during breaks between contracts. How could a wife and mother in her thirties bear that? She once revealed that she was in fact a qualified teacher in her own country but gave up teaching to earn more money in Hong Kong.

The world seemed cock-eyed. The Philippines was rich in natural resources and desperately in need of good teachers. Yet qualified Filipinos in their tens of thousands were choosing to work beneath their capabilities abroad to gain more income. Small wonder her uncle frequently attacked the mindless adherence to market forces.

Of course, her aunt and uncle were bewildering too. Though they seemed mutually caring and affectionate, they seldom spoke to each other, as if all the important issues between them had already been settled. Sometimes she sensed an undercurrent between them, like an eddy, swirling beneath the placid surface of a lake.

She had heard her Mum say that her aunt had lost a baby to cot death some years back. Why hadn't she tried for another? She looked the mothering type, though a little tense at times. The fact that she and her uncle slept in separate rooms and kept such radically different working hours suggested she didn't want a child. Those arrangements certainly few

opportunities for them to be alone with each other.

The behaviour of her own parents had been just as perplexing. Why had her Dad been so constantly sick with an unspecified ailment? Whenever she asked, the standard reply had been: "Proper medicine will take care of it.". She supposed that was why he had frequently flown into a rage when Mum forgot to bring home his medicine.

The supposedly rich relatives on both sides of their families also defied understanding, for none of them -- except for Aunt Po-Chee -- seemed to have lifted a finger to help them when they were in such dire straits. Many of the hawkers running stalls outside her home had assumed that her father had merely walked out when money ran out and that she was the product of an impure union.

And even with Aunt Po-Chee, her relationship with her Mum was a puzzle. She used to visit regularly, bringing her wonderful presents. But most of the time she would end up crying with her Mum. And no one had ever taken her on a return visit to Bowen Road in those days. Why? Her mother had once declared she would never accept tainted money. What did that mean? Tainted by what? Had her mother objected to her aunt's profession as a lawyer or was it because her aunt had inherited all of their father's money? If so, why did her Mum allow her to keep her aunt's presents? And why did she make her aunt her guardian in the end? Such unanswered questions vexed her.

She finished her juice and placed the glass in the sink. The servants had in the meantime resumed a desultory conversation which she had made no attempt to follow. She waved them a cheery goodbye and headed back to the hallway. She climbed the sweeping staircase to her room, weighed down more by the multiple unknowns swirling within the house than by the heaviness of her schoolbag.

After entering her own room, she closed the door, dumped her

schoolbag on the floor, kicked off her shoes and flopped herself onto her quilted bedspread. It felt good to be in one's own space, with the privacy to speculate, to weave dreams, to imagine futures.

As she lay there, stretching herself lazily like a cat, she caught sight of her Mum's crucifix on the wall above her bed. The sight of it made her uneasy. She dismissed the vision by closing her eyes.

And then, involuntarily, an awareness of something slightly altered crossed her consciousness. Some small detail in the hallway. Her inability to put her finger on it immediately annoyed her. The blue-and-white porcelain cylinder serving as an umbrella stand had been at its accustomed place, next to the front door. The crystal chandelier overhanging the hall had been dripping cut glass as usual, sending out speckles of shadows. The retractable doors to the treasure trove of the sitting room had been open, as had the door to the dining room. The ornamental table to the right of the sitting room had stood majestically, accompanied by a rosewood chair on either side. A telephone, a notepad and a pen and pencil set had rested on top. The writing implements had pointed skyward in their pods, like miniature anti-aircraft guns searching for an imaginary enemy. A bunch of pink gladioli had replaced the roses that had been in the Bohemian cut glass vase yesterday because the gardener brought fresh flowers whenever the need arose. So what else had been different?

Then it clicked. Of course! The door to her uncle's study on the other side of the ornamental table had stood open. Normally, when she got home from school, it would be shut. An open door signified that her uncle had gone out. Since it was a Friday, it meant her uncle had left early for his game of bridge. She felt pleased as punch. She had, like a smart private eye, spotted a detail and had drawn the appropriate inferences.

Her uncle's absence meant she could enter his sanctum to study

the portrait of Isabelle. She wasn't sure why she couldn't stop being curious about it. Something to do with its ability to speak for all women, she supposed. Of pride, daring, emancipation, all those qualities she had longed for herself. She decided she would sneak in to have another gander once she has had a shower.

Though her uncle had made scant mention in his books about his romantic entanglements, there must have been fireworks with a woman like Isabelle. Why would such a man turn himself into a virtual recluse in an intellectual backwater like Hong Kong?

And where did her aunt fit in? From the way she wore her clothes and the way she conducted herself outside the home, she was in every way the typical Hong Kong superwoman, pragmatic, no nonsense, and bourgeois to the core. Yet inside the home it was a different matter. Her kindness and her gentle nature came through. But so did many of her superstitions. She seemed more conscious of the supernatural than Mum had been of God. Yet nothing indicated she had that kind of rebellious, bohemian streak which meshed with her uncle's. She was also so much younger than him. How did those two ever get hooked up? She just couldn't figure it all out.

She yawned and stretched herself again.

Because of her uncle's bridge night, she would be dining alone with her aunt that evening. That prospect evoked both pleasure and concern. Her aunt was both her guardian and -- so far as she could establish -- her sole blood relative. She had been generous, caring and fair in a way her own mother had seldom been. But of late her aunt had appeared out of sorts. Tell-tale signs of tension had gathered around the frown lines on her brow. The sight saddened her, for she remembered how beautiful she used to be, before her mysterious crying sessions with her own Mum.

Her own mother's death had come like a thief in the night, with barely enough time to send for the priest. She had died at thirty-seven, about the same age as her aunt was now. Could her aunt be heading the same way?

A thought came to her all at once that she shared the same genes as Mum and her aunt. Was she destined for an early death too? Worse still, she also had her father's genes. He had died even younger!

Those thoughts shrivelled her bowels. A premature death would be too cruel. She didn't want her life to be like a shooting star's, coming out from nowhere for only a few seconds before disappearing into the unknown. She wanted to live for a good long while, to achieve fortune and fame. If not, then she wanted to sample as many as possible of all the untasted things that life had to offer. At the moment, she had limited scope to try anything. She had been cursed with the three of the greatest handicaps in Hong Kong -- being moneyless, orphaned and an Eurasian.

Why should a person without impeccable roots or good family connections be of so little account in society? It hurt her not to be able to mention the name of her famous gynaecologist forebear, without fear of people gossiping about Mum being disowned. She also remembered her embarrassment when Barrie asked the name of the bank where her father worked. She wished she could hold her head up and proclaim from the rooftops how illustrious both the da Luz and Leung pedigrees were.

The trouble was that those ancestries remained largely hidden from her, cloaked under shadows. Her father had spoken about his family only in bits and pieces. Linking them together was no easy matter. Often, during restless nights, she would try to salvage her father's words from the evaporating pool of childhood memories. The timbre of his voice would be filled with richness as he described the da Luz clan and their great historical feats.

Her father had told of various mustachioed uncles and cousins with estates scattered over the length and breadth of Portugal. One ancestor had pioneered the sea routes to East Asia in ancient times while others had served the House of Braganza with distinction.

She had previously struggled to get her young tongue around their strange-sounding names and the equally strange-sounding places where they lived. She wasn't sure she could pronounce them properly even now. But those narratives had sounded so grand, so engrossing, that they carried her magically into the very heart of her lineage.

When her father died she had felt abandoned. She grew up missing his voice and his tales. She began dreaming of her forebears. On occasion she seemed able to catch gossamer-like whisperings in the deep purple of the night. Sometimes, she could imagine ancient presences trying to communicate with her.

Stung by the ostracism by some of the girls at Sister Magdalene's, she had wanted more facts from Mum about her father's ancestors. But her mother said she knew nothing of them.

Disappointed, she urged her mother to take her to Macau, so that she might at least see for herself where her father grew up. Her mother refused, declaring the Portuguese enclave an iniquitous town, filled with gambling dens, opium dives and vice establishments. A visit would be a waste of money, for she had no idea where her husband used to live.

She sulked, suspecting that Mum was holding something back.

After moving to Bowen Road, vague memories of her forebears continued to intrude on her. She tried to elicit information from her aunt, reasoning that during the many occasions she and her Mum had cried together, they must have spoken of her father. But her aunt said she didn't know much. She had only met her Dad briefly after her return from England and he had died not long afterwards.

Once, when she happened to be dining alone with her uncle, she had given voice to her desire to visit Macau.

“Your aunt can certainly take you over for a day-trip if you’re really keen,” Uncle Suen had responded. “There’s not a great deal to see. It’s a pretty rundown sort of place. Gambling is its central activity, though every other human weakness is also catered for. It’s also full of triads and smugglers who seemed bent on losing their ill-gotten gains at the casinos. Fifty years ago Auden described it as ‘a weed from Catholic Europe’.”

Her uncle paused, as if trying to gather his thoughts, and then added: “Auden wrote a poem about Macau once, not one of his more memorable ones, I must say. Part of it went something as follows:

‘Rococo images of saint and saviour
Promise gamblers fortunes when they die,
Churches by the brothels testify
That faith can pardon natural behaviour.’

“Nothing much has changed since. That description is still pretty valid, although property development along Hong Kong lines have picked up recently. Soon it’ll become just another travesty of modernity on the underbelly of China.”

She had never heard of Auden but since her Mum’s assessment of Macau had been shared by both her uncle and the foreign poet, her interest in the place gradually subsided.

Since arriving at Bowen Road, she had gone with her aunt each Ching Ming to perform the traditional rites of sweeping the tombs of her grandparents. On each occasion she had watched her aunt kneel and bow with great seriousness. When she herself went through her ritual of paying respect, however, she had felt nothing. It was only when she went to the tombs of her own parents at the Catholic Cemetery at Happy Valley that she experienced a real pull of the past.

Once she had made bold as to ask her aunt: “Did your father love you much more than my Mum?”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of loving more or less,” her aunt replied. “We both got treated much the same. I got more attention because I was frequently sick. That’s all. I was also quite a bit younger than your Mum, so my mischiefs tended to be more easily overlooked. Your mother had a strong personality. No one could make her do a thing she didn’t want to do. That didn’t go down well with our father, who was a firm believer in children doing what they were told.”

How ironical, Amber thought. That had been exactly her Mum’s attitude towards her.

Frustrated over the lack of details over her pedigree, she felt adrift, solitary and rootless. Her hope of making something of herself lay in America.

The United States of America! The place where everything was possible. At least so it had been said. It had been her lodestar since she saw her first Marilyn Monroe film. People all over the world flocked there to seek fame and fortune. Yet many had found neither. Was that to be her fate too?

Sharlene had once told her that having plenty of “the green stuff” was all anyone needed in her country. A snappy pedigree could be bought, made to order by some smart Madison Avenue operator. With enough money, almost anybody could claim an ancestry harking back to the Mayflower and beyond.

Her own ambitions were much more modest. All she wanted was to establish the nature of her Portuguese roots to match how she looked. If not, then fresh American ones, without sticking out as an oddity there as in Hong Kong.

Hollywood could be the place for making money by the bucket.

She had the looks and the determination. But were they enough? The tabloids and gossip magazines were filled with stories about the ghastly demands of the casting couch. If such demands were made of her, would she demean herself just to land herself a role? Or would refusal spell the end of her prospects? It was scary. Perhaps Hollywood wasn't such a good idea after all. But if not Hollywood, where could a young girl without connections or professional skills make her mark? She didn't want to end up like her mother as an underpaid shipping clerk or become just another good-looking bimbo with unattainable dreams.

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Amber looked at her watch. Homework still had to be done. Thank goodness it was Friday. She could catch up over the weekend. Might as well shower now.

She roused herself from the bed and twisted her body this way and that to loosen her limbs. It felt good to be young and healthy and full of vitality.

She began undressing. When she unclasped her watch to place it on her desk, she noticed a collection of Tang poems, a Bible and a copy of Cissie Lee's novel, The Diary, among her textbooks. Those three books arrested her, for they connected her to the three people she had been closest to in recent years.

The volume of poetry had been recommended by Uncle Suen, when he lamented the fact that appreciation of Chinese poetry was not part of the curriculum at the international school. The volume included only a handful of the thousands of Tang poems but she found the selection wistful and touching. They had the magic to carry her away, from the commercial hurly-burly of Hong Kong to the more tranquil settings.

When Uncle Suen asked her which poet in the collection she liked best, she had found difficulty in answering. All the poems seemed so sparse and moving. The more she thought about their lines, the more meanings she seemed to find buried in them.

“I suppose I’ll have to declare for Li Po, for the very simplicity of his words,” she said eventually.

Uncle Suen responded with a smile. “He’s my favourite too for precisely that reason,” he said. “Li Po was a notorious drunkard, you know, and he had a way with women. He spent a part of his life like Cyrano de Bergerac, as a wandering gallant redressing wrongs with his sword. He is reputed to have killed several men.”

“Really? A poet who kills?” she exclaimed, surprised.

“That’s part of his reputation,” Uncle Suen replied, with apparent unconcern. “There are many stories about him but not many have been verified. Nor even the generally accepted tale of his death. He had been reportedly drunk on a boat when he leaned over to embrace a reflection of the moon in the water. He fell in and drowned. That’s the legend. None of us is perfect, you know. The important thing is that twelve centuries after his death his poems can still move and delight readers.”

Her uncle’s remarks gave her food for thought. She wondered whether his admiration for Li Po echoed something in his own past.

The Bible elicited a different set of feelings, mostly of shame and regret. Mum used to make her read it every evening, saying that poverty was no disgrace and that it would bring her closer to God. She found the nightly readings a chore. They never brought her closer to God. Indeed, He seemed to slip farther away. That distancing increased after starting International School. Sharlene’s incessant chatter about patterns of sexual behaviour and the shameful sensations she had experienced when

dancing with boys were getting her into a state. She seemed no longer fit for confession and Holy Communion.

Those were hard things to admit. It would be more honest to put the Bible away and to remove her mother's crucifix from above her bed. But if she did so, her aunt would begin asking the kind of questions she didn't want to answer.

She interrupted her undressing to pick up Cissie Lee's novel. She opened the cover and saw with satisfaction the embellishment of the author's vermilion seal on the title page. Her aunt had given her The Diary when it first came out. Re-reading it recently, she was amazed by how the main character's bewilderment and adolescent anxieties reflected her own.

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The Diary was set in contemporary Hong Kong. Its protagonist was a shy, retiring schoolgirl of sixteen living in comfortable circumstances with her businessman father. Her mother had died some years earlier and the family was being looked after by a day-maid who came and prepared meals five days a week.

The girl was pleasant-looking in a bland sort of way. She attended a co-educational secondary school but her shyness resulted in few friends. Her father had to travel frequently on his import-export business. During his absences she spent most of her time out of school alone, reading and watching television.

Living in the same block of middle-class flats was a deputy headmaster of another secondary school. He had a wife and a two-year-old son. The man was handsome and engaging. Once, during a tropical rain storm, he offered the girl a lift to her school.

The girl was fifteen at the time. Out of her neighbour's single

act of kindness, she became infatuated. Thoughts of him crept into her waking hours and she dreamt of him at night. She soon began fantasizing a romance between them. By the time she turned sixteen, her obsession had become so intense that she began fabricating in her diary accounts of their assignations and furious love-making.

One day, as she was walking through a park on her way home from school, some male classmates snatched her schoolbag as a prank and scattered its contents around the park. But one of the boys made off with her diary.

The boy was the same age as the girl and he had previously been rejected by her when he had asked for a date. After he had read the diary, he threatened to expose the girl's sexual exploits with a married man unless she allowed him the same favours. The blackmailer forced the girl to submit to kisses and gropings and eventually, in exchange for the promised return of the diary, to a single instance of intercourse.

The girl became pregnant as a result. In desperation she went to the boy for help.

“Why come to me?” the boy cried, thoroughly shaken. “What do I know about such things? I've only done it once. Go to your neighbour. You've been sleeping with for so long.”

The girl insisted the child was his.

“Oh no, you're not going to pin this on me. It's not fair. If you keep blaming me, I'll tell everybody about your diary.”

The girl saw the futility of trying to explain the truth. The boy would never believe her and neither would anybody else. She had been trapped by committing her fantasies to paper. She knew that her father and others would be devastated by her fabrications. She drank rat poison to end her shame.

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An aching sadness filled Amber as she recalled the story. How could innocent daydreams lead to such tragic consequences? She had been curious about real love-making herself. The excitement she had felt when boys danced close to her had embarrassed her. The same had been true when they tried to kiss her. She had not hitherto given way but that resistance had left her feeling ignorant, backward and inexperienced.

As she finished undressing, she looked down upon her own naked body. It seemed beautifully proportioned but completely uninitiated. What pleasures was such a body capable of delivering? Or receiving? Sharlene had spoken of the play of hormones and all manner of sexual delights. But being told about them was not the same as experiencing them. She had never mustered the courage to try half the things Sharlene claimed to have done.

She secretly envied Sharlene for her precociousness and sense of adventure because she herself had never been able to shake the feeling Mum and Sister Magdalene were always somewhere on hand, keeping tabs on her.

Just the previous week Sharlene had held forth on a fresh piece of research. According to her, a university team somewhere had interviewed thousands of married woman and discovered that at least half had never achieved orgasm through intercourse.

“Just shows how hopeless men are,” Sharlene declared. “If a gal wants a Big O, she might as well get down to it herself. Know what? I’ve discovered something fantastic, quite by accident, the other night. Had a couple of mosquito bites on my arm and they were itching the hell out of me. I put some Tiger Balm on them. Afterwards, feeling a little horny, I decided to give myself a treat. There must have been a smidgen of Tiger

Balm left on my finger when I went to work. The sensation was terrific. And oh, Holy Jesus! Did I explode! It blew my mind. You should try it.”

“Chinese girls have known about Tiger Balm for years,” she responded, dismissively. She feared Sharlene spelling out more lurid details.

“Yeah?” Sharlene’s voice registered surprise.

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Tiger Balm before?”

“Chinese girls don’t talk about such things.”

“But you’re not Chinese. You’re Eurasian.”

“Still, I was brought up in a Chinese way.”

“When you get to Hollywood, baby, you’ll have to get used to everybody talking about sex all the time.”

That exchange, recalled as Amber was preparing to turn on the shower, brought a retrospective twinge of resentment. Although her friend’s remarks had not been intended to wound, they nevertheless underscored the anomaly in her life. She was neither one thing nor the other. And most humiliating of all, she had not the faintest idea what a Big O felt like!

She adjusted the temperature of the water before stepping inside the shower chamber. The water cascaded refreshingly over her.

She washed her hair, luxuriating in the shampoo’s fine aroma and rich froth of suds. After rinsing off her hair she moved out of the direct path of the shower to soap her body.

As she did so, she allowed her mind to drift. Fragments of recollections flitted across her consciousness. Memories of her uninhibited Dance of the Seven Veils brought a flush of embarrassment. Then the fantasies of the girl in The Diary intruded, followed by images of Sharlene pleasuring herself with Tiger Balm.

She was startled out of her daydreams by an uncommon tingle of pleasure. She stood stock still, bewildered. She found her hands on her breasts and she realized she had been gently massaging her nipples while daydreaming. Surprised by the novelty of the feeling, she cupped her soap-slippery breasts and lifted them. Her nipples had popped up. When her fingers brushed against them again, a fresh tremor of pleasure occurred. They hardened further as she stroked them. Her breathing quickened.

She closed her eyes. Her mind and her senses seemed to dissolve into a haze of arousal. Her hands roamed frantically over her throat and torso, trying to locate other points of pleasure. She reached down to her rounded buttocks and between her thighs, remembering where some of the girls she had seen in Penthouse magazines had placed their hands.

Her fingers found a spot between her thighs where her touch brought exquisite excitement. She stroked the spot with increased urgency and found her breathing turning into gasps. A tense tingling of erotic delight spread through her body. Then the muscles of her body tightened before strength suddenly ebbed from her legs. She stumbled against the tiled wall of the shower as warm water continued to splash voluptuously over her. She slid slowly to the floor, with mouth agape and a hand still pressed desperately between her legs.

She had barely been able to suppress a scream when climax came.