

## Deeds of Trust

Po-Chee had ensconced herself in a corner of her firm's library to avoid phone calls and other distractions. Her head rested on the clenched fist of her left hand while a finger of her right hand followed her eye slowly down a page of The Modern Law of Trusts by Parker & Mellows. She was reading the section dealing with tax implications for trust income. Her black Mont Blanc pen rested on top of a drafting pad.

It had been a while since she had set up a trust. The one for Amber seemed more complicated than she had bargained for.

Her visit to the Wong Tai Sin Temple had shaken her. Although the aged fortune teller had dismissed his original explanation of her chim as meaningless, his words still lingered. Her mind had remained undecided ever since on whether she should chance the whole ritual again.

Perhaps some fates were better left unknown. Uncertainty left opportunities for pleasant surprises. A disaster preordained would render her dysfunctional. If a misfortune could be in the offing, that would be reason enough to set affairs in order. A trust for Amber therefore took on some immediacy, in spite of Suen's alternative suggestion.

In attempting to draw one up, she found herself tangled in the unfamiliar trust laws under foreign regimes. She couldn't risk the option of seeking help from a partner because, once news leaked of her drawing up a trust for her ward, all sorts of rumours would circulate. Some would speculate if she might be retiring early or starting her own practice. Jockeying for promotion within the firm would intensify. Such factors reinforced her determination to handle the drafting on her own.

The ordinances of Hong Kong, the All England Law Reports, Halsbury's Laws of England and other legal references packed the shelves in the library, hemming her in further in an already claustrophobic room.

She read another passage from Parker & Mellows and nodded in agreement. The British judiciary had to be given credit for inventing the

concept of trusts. It had been one of the better legacies of imperialism. Without trusts she would be hard put to provide for Amber's future.

She picked up her pen and made a note. She had taken account of the three essentials in Lord Langdale's dictum, to wit, the words employed had to be construed as imperative and both the subject matter of a trust and its beneficiary had to be certain.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to other issues -- the selection of a jurisdiction and its tax implications. She made another note to provide separately for administrative expenses for the duration of the trust.

After another hour of reading and drafting, she felt her brain shutting down like an old car running out of fuel. She stopped, leaned back against the chair and began massaging her temples with her thumbs.

Providing for Amber was only one of her responsibilities. What about Suen? How could anything be done without his posing a lot of awkward questions? His inheritances had been signed over to her one day out of the blue, soon after their marriage.

"Why?" she had asked at the time, surprised and baffled.

"I'm tired of lawyers bothering me," he had said. "You're a lawyer. You might as well deal with them. I've got better things to do than to read their rigmarole."

"If you just want me to look after your assets, there's no need for any transfer. A power of attorney will do."

"No, I don't want to be lumbered with possessions. Anything excessive is by definition dangerous. The money's the family's in any case, to be retained or given away as the mistress of the house sees fit."

"I might just run off with all that loot."

"You're a smart cookie. You know you'll never find another man who loves you half as much as I do. Besides, if you were minded to flee, you already have enough resources of your own."

In taking over Suen's portfolio she had been surprised to discover that, apart from the properties at Bowen Road and Radnor Place, her husband held a vast quantity of World Bank bonds. Suen had often criticised that institution for some of its policies towards developing countries, but had conceded it was probably the least bad among a disreputable international corporate bunch.

She had viewed the bonds as safe but unrewarding, given inflationary times and booming stock markets. She decided to be more speculative. That at once presented her with a problem. She also had to look after her own inheritance, including the proceeds from the sale of the Robinson Road house to Cousin Hing. The two fortunes shouldn't be mixed because she still hoped Po-Chun could be persuaded in time to take their father's legacy. She therefore decided on two sets of investments.

Another problem soon surfaced. Given the nature of her professional duties and the compactness of the society she moved in, there was an ever-present risk of conflicts of interest. In order to be in the clear, she shunned local stocks and shares, investing only in American and European markets. She selected shares in merchant banking and in the petroleum and pharmaceutical industries.

Their rapidly rising value had given her a thrill at first, to think that her random choices had turned out so well. But after the loss of Yun, the accumulation of wealth lost all meaning. She consigned the monthly mailings from brokers to a bottom drawer, without even opening them.

When she eventually disinterred them to plan Amber's future, she was flabbergasted to discover that, in spite of her neglect, both accounts had grown disgustingly massive. How could capitalism conjure up so much unearned wealth? The unhealthiness of the situation frightened her.

A trust fund for Amber would take care of her own holdings, but what about Suen's? She hardly dared to tell him how many times his

original inheritances had multiplied.

Except for his books, Suen never paid attention to money and possessions. They seldom figured in his life, except when he needed to stump up for one of his rare losses at the bridge table. The value of his portfolio held no more interest for him than the price of vegetables or the fees charged by beauticians.

Poor dreamer. How could a man be so exercised by the imperfections of the world that he allowed everyday realities to pass him by? It didn't help that Ah Loy sheltered him even from the need to decide on what he wanted for meals or when it was time to change into fresh pyjamas.

Suen's reaction to the size of the family's assets would be predictable. After expressing disbelief, he would question the morality of investing in corporations with such disgusting records. He would regard every dollar gained as blood money, to be returned immediately to those from whom it had been squeezed. He would, undoubtedly, throw in a quotation or two from Proudhon for good measure.

But the fact remained that he needed to be provided for. He was hopeless at looking after himself. He wouldn't know how to pay a utility bill or remember to give Ah Loy marketing money every morning. He would certainly forget to pay her wages at the end of each month.

At present, when her husband needed to go to Britain, he would tell her and she would then tell Alice, her personal assistant. Airline tickets would be delivered, the house at Radnor Place would be made ready and sufficient funds would be transferred to Suen's London bank account.

But should disaster overtake her, there would be no Alice any more. Amber would be in America. Ah Loy was illiterate. Aunt Soo-Leung was already in her dotage and relationships with Cousin Hing had been cool for some time. There was nobody else. Suen would flounder.

Some form of trust for Suen was a sine qua non. But easier said than done. The mere suggestion would have him worrying about her mental state again. He might even insist on her resuming those sessions with Dr. Ma.

Her husband had been a model of compassion and restraint since the loss of Yun. He had never pressed her into trying for another child. She couldn't help sensing, however, that in his heart of hearts his failure to fulfil his duty to his grandmother oppressed him.

If Western missionaries and feminists hadn't beaten the drums of monogamy so vehemently after the Pacific War, Chinese customary law allowing concubinage might still be in force. It would have pierced her heart to see Suen take a concubine. But if the choice was between that and her attempting another child, she wasn't sure how she would decide. To render her husband the last in his family line was a responsibility she dreaded to bear.

A knock on the door came and Alice entered with a cup of tea.

"Wonderful! Just what I need," Po-Chee exclaimed, blinking back the threat of tears. She moved books and papers out of the way to make space for the tea.

"Mrs. Lucille Chu rang," Alice said, setting down the cup. "She asked for an appointment tomorrow, to go over the offer documents for Gold Star's retailing subsidiary. I've checked your diary. You're in the District Court in the morning, for an application for further and better particulars in the Ajax case. But your afternoon is free."

"All right, fix an afternoon meeting."

The interruption shifted the focus of Po-Chee's thoughts. As she sipped tea, she reflected upon what an amazing person Lucille Chu was. She had beauty and grace and had taken tragedy in her stride. Though she was several years older than herself, she hadn't a wrinkle on her face. How she envied her. Perhaps it was her Buddhist faith that had

delivered such serenity. Or was it the fact that she had a grown-up son at her side? She would make a great heroine in a modern novel, should Cissie Lee ever decide to write again.

With those thoughts, Po-Chee resumed her drafting.

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The afternoon meeting with Lucille Chu and her team had been crisp and business-like. Outstanding issues were resolved in record time. Afterwards, in an aside, Po-Chee invited Lucille to come for dinner one evening, asking her to bring along her son, Yuen, if she wished. That was readily accepted.

By the end of that afternoon Po-Chee was feeling happier and more self-satisfied than she had been for a long while. The edge of her mind toyed with the notion of Lucille's son and Amber becoming a match.

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The midnight hour had long struck. Amber and the servants had gone to bed. Suen was in his study, no doubt preparing the ground for what he wanted to research in England.

Po-Chee lay on her bed, wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling. If only she could shut down her brain and lose herself in silken sleep! She had, of course, an easy option. The pills at her bedside. One would knock her out. More would . . . . No! She still had unfinished business.

In the past, she had tried the method suggested by Po-Chun. But she no longer knew whether it would still work.

The shifting shades of memory took her back to a particular crying session with Po-Chun. She had returned from her Far Eastern

cruise, outwardly calm but inwardly in turmoil. She had been in such a state that she had to seek the comfort of her sister.

Po-Chun realised at once she was close to collapse. With Amber already dispatched to bed, her sister began consoling her on the battered couch in her dreary living room.

She had broken into tears immediately. “Can’t stop thinking of Yun,” she had wailed. “It was for my sins. Oh, Elder Sister, please help me. I want to die.”

“There, there,” Po-Chun said, embracing her. “Stop talking nonsense. It was an accident, not your fault. You’ll soon have other children and every former misfortune will fade away.”

“No, no, the loss of Yun will never fade. I’m no good. Heaven has condemned me. Some other disaster is certain to strike. I can feel it.”

The anguish in her voice had sparked tears from Po-Chun as well. Her sister had pressed her head to her shoulder and stroked her hair. “Don’t think that way. Think positive,” she murmured. “Even the worst sinners can find redemption in the eyes of the Lord. You may not be a Catholic, but human beings are born with failings. We need to seek salvation in whichever way we can.”

Po-Chun kept rocking her gently, like a child, murmuring words of comfort. After the sobbing had subsided, Po-Chun said: “You remember how Ma used to tell us about the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac, how people born in the year of a particular animal would take on some of the characteristics of that animal?”

She muttered an assent.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? People born in the year of the Dog are direct, like me, while Rabbits like you are timid and anxious to avoid conflict. You used to make up stories as a child, about animals interacting with one another, and tell them to us over dinner. Some of them were very

entertaining. The point is that if you don't want to think of a certain thing, it often helps to think about something else. Instead of being miserable, why not turn your hand to writing stories about people? Write till you're exhausted. Then turn in. You might get to sleep more easily that way."

She began considering Po-Chun's suggestion. During the days that followed it occurred to her that the Courts and the tabloids offered up ready-made plots every day. Eternal triangles. Jealousy and revenge. Greed and betrayal. Poverty and suffering. Love and self-sacrifice. Ready made plots in Homer and the Bible too. The Mills & Boon romances she had read at Roedean offered a handy formula.

She began jotting down notes of unusual court cases. She surprised herself to discover how easily characters formed inside her head. The process was exhilarating. She soon wove them into her record of cases to form stories which she set down in Chinese. As she got more and more involved in that act of creation, her depression gradually eased. On good nights she could actually sleep without resorting to pills.

Two years of nocturnal scribbling saw the completion of three short novels. In spite of her assiduous efforts, she had entertained no ambition to be published. She saw her writing as merely therapeutic, a device to help her get to sleep.

But one day, she bumped into one of her Hong Kong contemporaries at London University. Her name was Vivian Hui. She had studied comparative literature and had recently returned to the colony after a stint with a British publisher.

Their chance meeting led to tea. Vivian told her she had married following graduation and that she and her husband intended starting a Chinese publishing venture in Hong Kong.

"What are you aiming to publish?" she asked.

"Beggars can't be choosers." Vivian replied. "We've secured a

three-year contract to put out a monthly travel magazine. That'll provide us with a bit of bread and butter till we're on our feet. Our ultimate aim is to publish good quality Chinese fiction. There's a dearth of them. If you know any good writers, please introduce them to us."

"I've a lady client who writes as a hobby. I don't know, however, whether her material is what you're looking for."

"Only way to find out is to send us one of her manuscripts."

She had gone home that day and dug up the first novel she had written, entitled Falling Blossoms. She revised and polished the draft and, two weeks later, sent it to Vivian as the author's legal representative.

Vivian took to the manuscript immediately and asked for a meeting to discuss terms. "I quite like your client's work," Vivian enthused on the telephone. "There is a certain youthfulness to it, mixed with a haunting streak of melancholy. Very moving."

"I'm just a legal flunkey, no judge of fiction," she replied. "My client'll be delighted to hear your assessment."

"What's the name of your client?"

"Cissie Lee."

A time and date for a meeting was fixed. But at the appointed hour, there was no Cissie Lee.

"I'm afraid you'll have to settle for me," Po-Chee said. "My client's a recluse. Cold feet at the last moment, asked me to handle things."

She then showed Vivian a power of attorney purportedly given by Cissie Lee and witnessed by James Hallimore, the Senior Partner. In actual fact, Hallimore had signed the document blind, as lawyers were accustomed to do on the say-so of a colleague.

"Cissie Lee looks like a traditionalist. Not many sign with seals these days." Vivian observed, as she looked at the vermilion imprint at the bottom of the power of attorney. She then presented a draft contract.

After studying the document, Po-Chee said: “I’ll have to look at this in detail and consult my client. The royalty provisions look acceptable. However, I don’t think you can expect Cissie to do book-signing or other publicity efforts. She’s intensely private. I don’t think she’ll even agree to have her photograph anywhere.”

“A literary version of Garbo, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I’ll have to know a few details about an author I’m about to publish, particularly since she’ll be my first. What’s her background? What does she look like? How old is she?”

“I’m afraid I’m forbidden to tell you any of that. She would rather remain unpublished than have people poke into her private life. Why not make a virtue of necessity? Why not promote her as a mysterious woman of a certain age and disposition?”

Vivian thought for a moment. “Not a bad idea. We can remove her publicity obligations from the contract. She’ll still have to clear proofs, though. Once we’re agreed, we can go full steam ahead.”

“When’s the publication date?”

“If all goes well, I’d say about three months.”

“That soon? That’s very quick.”

“People work at speed here. Not like in Europe. But then, our market’s much smaller and much more compact.”

The three months seemed an eternity as she waited for her novel to roll off the press.

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Po-Chee couldn’t help smiling when she recalled the great deception she had pulled off. The seal of Shau Shan stone, inscribed with

Cissie Lee's name in an obsolete Chinese script, was the handiwork of Uncle Fu, the family doctor who had signed her father's death certificate. Uncle Fu happened to be also a seal carver of some renown. She had persuaded him to carve the seal by representing it as a birthday present for an old schoolmate who much admired his work.

The seal now rested inside a locked drawer in her bedroom.

She had managed to hide the identity of Cissie Lee from everyone, even from Alice. She took the precaution of maintaining a regular exchange of letters, sending those stamped with the seal to her office and having Alice despatch replies to a postal box at the General Post Office. There was a whole file in the office, recording instructions from the elusive author, on everything from the signing of contracts to the disposal of royalties. She specified their use as anonymous donations to the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children.

The latter duty was simplicity itself because Po-Chee herself was on the general committee of the Society and had responsibility for fund-raising.

When advance copies of Falling Blossoms were received, she passed one to Suen for comment. "This is by a client," she said. "It's being published next week. I'd like to know what you think."

Suen returned the book a day later. "Potboiler," he said. "Not too badly written though. You can congratulate your client on my behalf. It'll probably sell in its thousands."

She would have been thrilled if Suen had been more generous. She might have told him then who Cissie Lee actually was. But his lukewarm reaction caused her to remain silent.

Suen's estimation of the sales proved wildly off the mark. Falling Blossoms caught the public fancy and ended up selling over fifty thousand copies. It was an astounding success for a first novel by an

unknown writer. Subsequent novels by Cissie Lee did even better, with some passing the hundred thousand mark.

With sales running at those levels, when her husband's books were struggling to sell two hundred copies, she simply didn't have the heart to confess. Cissie Lee thus became just one more secret in her already secret-ridden life. One day, after she had left the world, someone would discover the Shau Shan seal inside her drawer and wonder why Cissie Lee should have left it there.

That seal would probably be the only thing connected with her life that would linger, as an enduring puzzle about an author who had died or simply disappeared from the face of the earth. Neither her legal reputation nor Cissie Lee's novels would remain with the public for long. Her legal reputation rested increasingly on dubious grounds and she had no illusion about her writing. She had aimed only to put together stories about ordinary people. Her efforts could never compare with Suen's.

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If Po-Chee had thought a fortune stick at a temple would ease her presentiment of disaster, she had been wrong. Her bungled attempt merely intensified her unease. Sleep once again eluded her.

Her mind began locking itself on the wrongs she had done to her husband. They had been so happy once, so much in love. Now the bounce seemed to be seeping out of their marriage, like air from a deflated rubber balloon. She wished she could shed her past, like the skin of a snake.

Her thoughts drifted back to her student days in London, when she had been one of the residents at Hong Kong House selected for an interview by Suen. The students selected naturally reflected the pragmatic

aspirations of the people in the colony. Most were seeking professional qualifications or skills which would ensure a good living afterwards. She herself was studying law. None was into archaeology, poetic traditions, the rehabilitation of the handicapped or similar subjects.

Suen's question and answer session went on for well over two hours. The following day he telephoned to invite her for a cup of tea, saying he had forgotten to ask a couple of questions. She couldn't imagine what they might be. There was little in her studies of interest to newspaper readers. Her social life was almost non-existent. But being both timid and respectful of authority, she felt obliged to accept the invitation.

They met that same evening, at a cafe close to Hong Kong House. She was determined to hide her nervousness and not let her shyness get the better of her.

Suen quickly put her at ease. He was charming, considerate and gentlemanly. They ordered cups of tea and he apologized for troubling her. After a few preliminaries he posed the questions he wanted to ask. They were in themselves rather insignificant and could have been dealt with on the telephone. That put her on her guard again.

She decided to find out what his game was. So she began asking questions of her own. She couldn't leave him with the initiative.

"I've always been fascinated by journalism," she said. "What does it take to be a good journalist?"

"A thick skin, dogged determination and the ability to ask the right questions," Suen replied.

"And you've got them all?"

Suen laughed and answered: "I hope so."

"Have you always been a journalist?"

"More or less. I started as a reporter with the Hong Kong Herald at the age of seventeen. After two or three years I went to get

educated. Everything I've done since has been connected in some way with writing or journalism."

"And how long have you been a foreign correspondent?"

"About ten years."

"That's a very long time. It must be hard work, analysing political and economic developments and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, that is normally so. Fortunately, I'm not really a foreign correspondent. I'm only masquerading as one."

"Really?" His candour surprised her.

Suen smiled as if amused. "I'm what is known in the profession as a stringer," he explained. "I write occasionally for a Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong and an English one in Singapore. I do the odd assignment for them too. Neither can afford a correspondent in Britain but both want to give their readers the impression they had one. So we came to a mutually advantageous arrangement. They get me as a correspondent at no cost and I secure press passes, invitations and access to people and places I would not otherwise have. In any case, 'correspondent' has a better ring to it than 'unemployed'. The drawback is that I get paid only when they give me an assignment or when they use one of my articles."

"Ah, tricking officialdom and deceiving the reading public as well," she said, putting on a look of mock seriousness.

Suen assumed a contrite look. "Yes, if you put it that way."

She felt a tingle of pleasure at having got the better of him and pressed her advantage. "Is that the normal standard of ethics followed by newspapers and correspondents?"

"Young lady, you're going to turn into a very terrifying lawyer! I should hate to meet up with you in court!"

They both laughed and a nascent respect and understanding flowered between them.

“I didn’t mean to sound so provocative,” she said. “That’s really not me. I don’t know what got into me.”

“That’s all right. No offence taken. The British train their lawyers to be adversarial, don’t they?”

“No more than journalists I suppose, when people stand in their way of getting at the truth.”

Suen smiled. “Touché,” he said. “Have another cup of tea.”

She was quite taken by his smile, for it had an affecting way of beginning in his eyes before manifesting itself on his sensual lips.

More tea was ordered. When it arrived, she observed: “Being a stringer can’t be much of a living, can it, when you’re only paid for articles used? How can anyone come up with a brilliant article every day?”

“You’re right. The pay is nothing to speak of. Sometimes I get a few other commissions, like participating in BBC panel discussions on political or economic developments in China and the Far East. That brings in a few quid. Fortunately, I’m spared the down and out life of many scribblers because I enjoy an income from family trusts. My parents died when I was six. My grandmother also left me a fortune. More than enough to live on, particularly when I don’t have a family to support.”

She made commiserating noises about his being made an orphan so young. His remark about not having a family put her at greater ease. She noticed then another quality about his eyes. They seemed to convey a haunting sadness. She wondered suddenly whether he was afflicted by the same kind of loneliness she felt.

Not wishing to be distracted by that thought, she quickly resumed their conversation. “What else do you do, apart from journalism?”

“Lead a Byronic life, I guess.”

The statement took her aback. She remembered studying Childe Harold at Roedean and how her teacher had tried to explain the

complexities of the poet. She had said that streaks of melancholy, rebellion and personal excesses lay behind his immortal words.

“Byron is supposed to have led a life of high art and shocking debaucheries,” she said. “Is that what you’re aiming at?”

“Art and debauchery are in the eyes of beholders. Are you afraid of being corrupted by taking tea with me?”

“I’m a big girl,” she said, feeling an impetuous blush burning her cheeks. “Drinking tea can’t be considered debauchery even in the eyes of the most prudish.”

They exchanged banter for a while and she found herself being drawn to him. He had a quality which went beyond charm. He seemed able to draw her out, to make her feel relaxed in his company.

After a third cup of tea, Suen said: “Shaw’s Pygmalion is on at the West End. Would you care to take it in?”

She suddenly found herself facing an unexpected decision. She could either retreat into her shell or chance the unknown with a self-confessed pursuer of the Byronic life. After a moment’s hesitation, she said: “That would be very nice. Thank you.”

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The play Pygmalion was followed by art exhibitions, museum visits, meals in Chinese restaurants and Sunday walks in Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens. Each activity brought relief from loneliness and the perennial grind over Nutshells on contracts, torts or constitutional law. As the weeks and months went by, being in his company seemed the most natural thing in the world. The difference in their ages no longer seemed odd. Indeed, as they went about, she could detect no trace of ridicule or disapproval in the glances of passers-by. If anything, they received looks

of envy over their obvious happiness.

She liked best the long, leisurely strolls on Sundays. Suen had an endless fund of funny stories and anecdotes. He seemed to have opinions or observations on almost every subject, even on aspects of the British legal system. The only matter he was reticent about was anything concerning himself. This seemed at odds with her limited experience with men. On the few occasions she had dated, her companions always wanted to talk about themselves.

What she found most endearing was Suen's ability to sense her moods. When she felt lighthearted and frivolous he would tell jokes or one of his funny tales. When she felt homesick, he would recite a couple of poems by Li Po or Tu Fu expressing longings for home.

She had all but forgotten many of the poems she had learnt during childhood. To listen to Suen coming out with half-remembered lines was deeply moving. It made her appreciate anew the terse approach of Chinese poetry, with lines without tenses, pronouns, connectives or grammatical trappings. Their fluent flexibility liberated her imagination. Their rhythms, intoned aloud, seemed to shame her for neglecting them. After Suen's recitals she wrote to Po-Chun to ask for a copy of Three Hundred Tang Poems.

They met once or twice a week over the next several months. Throughout that period, Suen behaved impeccably. If he had inclinations towards Byronic debaucheries they were nowhere in evidence. He made no advances, no attempt to hold her hand. The most he did was to steer her by the elbow when crossing a busy street. Although Radnor Place was only a stone's throw from Hong Kong House, he never invited her to visit.

She could not work out whether he was just observing the proprieties of a Chinese elder or whether he had judged her a slow-ripening fruit, unready for plucking. In the end, it was she who took the initiative.

During a Sunday walk she slipped her arm through his.

After that, linking arms and holding hands became more common. One day, Suen asked: “You normally free Tuesday evenings?”

“Yes, normally. Why do you ask?” she responded.

“Well, I thought you might consider coming to dinner at my place. I’m a passable cook.”

“Why does it have to be a Tuesday?”

“Because Mrs. Kelly, my cleaning lady, comes on Tuesdays. On other days I can’t vouch for the tidiness of my place.”

She couldn’t help laughing at his ingenuousness. “I’d love to come next Tuesday,” she said. And she almost added aloud: “And it’s about time you asked too!”

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It was customary for a Chinese visiting someone’s home for the first time to bring a present. Po-Chee racked her brains over what to bring. Conscious that there was still some emotional distance between them, she did not want an overly personalised gift, like a tie or shirt. Nor did she want to offer anything purely utilitarian, like a bottle of wine or a set of place mats. Though she knew what she did not want, she had no idea of what she did want. She went around Selfridges and several other department stores but couldn’t find a gift which pleased her.

Eventually she happened upon a gift shop on Oxford Street selling square perspex boxes housing preserved butterflies. The creatures were displayed with wings spread out and perched on plastic stems. Their gorgeous colours and wing patterns attracted her at once.

She selected a golden butterfly, with distinctive markings and splashes of ultramarine on the edges of its wings. A sticker on the box said:

“Tiger Swallowtail (Yellow Female) -- Papilio glaucus.”

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Suen’s house was well appointed and its street reassuringly middle class. Yet Po-Chee approached Radnor Place with a mingle of excitement and trepidation. She could not find a precise word to describe that sensation. It was like a young actor waiting in the wings of a theatre to come on as the next act, knowing with certainty that the performance, good or bad, would be life-altering.

She pressed the doorbell and was received warmly by Suen. He was dressed in a green sports shirt and a pair of grey slacks. A red apron covered his clothes.

“Very professional-looking,” she commented, in greeting.

“Better withhold opinion till you’ve tried the food,” he said.

She offered her present, beautifully gift-wrapped by the shop. Like most people in receipt of a gift, Suen tried to identify the contents by shaking it.

“Don’t!” she cried, in alarm. “It’s fragile.”

“Oh, sorry. May I open it now?”

“If you like.”

When Suen saw the golden butterfly, he exclaimed: “It’s beautiful. Just what I need for my mantelpiece. Thank you.” Having installed his present, he offered her a choice of refreshments.

She seldom took alcohol, but thinking it juvenile to ask for a soft drink, she decided on sherry. She knew it would come in a small glass and if she didn’t like its taste, she only had to get through a small amount.

But no sooner had Suen handed over the sherry, he cried: “Good gracious! Please excuse me. I’ve got a fish steaming downstairs.”

“Can I help?” she offered.

“No, just make yourself comfortable. Back in five minutes.”

Left to herself, she surveyed the room, drink in hand. It had all the elements of a normal British sitting room -- lace curtains, comfortable armchairs and sofas, a marble mantelpiece with a mirror on top and an electrical fireplace below, a liquor cabinet and a coffee table supporting a bouquet of fresh flowers. The only evocations of the East were two scrolls of calligraphy and a pair of large ox blood vases.

But the room seemed sparse and forlorn, tidy but not really lived-in. The mantelpiece was devoid of knick-knacks, photos and the usual accessories. The Tiger Swallowtail occupied it in solitary splendour. Even the fresh flowers on the coffee table bore the hallmark of a commercial florist. The place needed a woman's touch.

A folded-back partition provided ready access between the sitting room and the dining room. As she strolled through to the next room she noted the same dry, under-used atmosphere.

Two places had been set at a small dining table, with chopsticks, bowls, place mats, glasses for wine and water and a candlestick for four candles. A bottle of red wine had been opened and left to breathe. There was also a bottle of mineral water.

It was in fact ten minutes before Suen returned with a tray filled with food. He had removed his red apron. But it took him two more trips to the kitchen to bring up all he had prepared. He lit the candles and switch off the overhead lights, plunging the room into a cosy half light. He then began pouring mineral water and wine.

“My goodness! You've made too much!” she exclaimed, when she saw the food. There was a steamed Dover sole, a pork meat loaf made with salted fish, a dish of Chinese broccoli fried with sliced beef marinated in oyster sauce, some king prawns in a sweet and sour sauce, a plate of

plain steamed tofu and a big bowl of boiled rice. “We’ll never finish all this,” she added.

“Guests at this house are required to finish everything before they’re allowed to leave,” Suen said.

“I’ll be here all night!”

“That’s the whole idea.”

She flushed. “I’ve to sign in before midnight. Hostel rules.”

“Oh, dear. How boring.”

The food was good and they tucked in with relish. The Chateau Neuf du Pape, fine and heavy-bodied, was new to her but she enjoyed it. After half a glass, she felt warmed and mellowed. Her reserve fell away and she became more loquacious. They chatted and drank merrily. Soon the bottle was empty and Suen suggested opening another.

“Not for me,” she said. “I’ve had more than enough and my glass is still half-full. It’s been a lovely meal and a lovely evening. Thank you for inviting me.”

They continued to talk merrily for a while. The wine was going to her head, her cheeks felt uncommonly warm. The food reminded her of the food back home and a rush of homesickness turned her maudlin.

Home, she thought. She had been away far too long. After two years at Roedean, she had been due to return for a holiday when the Cultural Revolution in China spilled over into Hong Kong. Bombs got planted in the streets every day and both Daddy and Po-Chun had told her to stay where she was. After tensions had subsided and normality had returned she has been too busy preparing for matriculation to travel.

Her father had written recently to say that he was unwell and had urged her to interrupt her studies to return. But Po-Chun had been adamant that she should not return without a qualification. She had hesitated. And during that hesitation Suen had insinuated himself into her

thoughts.

She suddenly became aware that Suen was gazing upon her with an affectionate indulgence. The flickering candle flames had infused the room with a wan, helpless melancholy.

“Sorry,” she said, embarrassed. “The wine must have gone to my head. I was thinking of home. Do you miss Hong Kong?”

She saw Suen averting his gaze, as if both the timbre of her voice and the nature of the question disconcerted him. A precarious stillness seeped between them.

At last Suen said: “I own a house in Hong Kong and this one here. I like them both but I can’t think of either as my home.”

“What do you mean?” Her heart raced a little faster. Why was he expressing a sentiment so similar to her own?

Suen looked at her again. “I suppose people like me have been born in the wrong place, at the wrong time and with the wrong inclinations. We travel the world at an impressionable age and get attached to ideas which have no application in the places we’re from. We turn slowly into a new breed of exiles, not only when abroad but even when we go back to whence we came.”

She met his gaze. In the deceptive candlelight she detected in him something vulnerable and childlike. She had not expected it. All at once he appeared disheartened and weary. Her sympathies went out to him. At that moment it came to her with a devastating certainty that she might assuage his hurt by surrendering herself to him.

She was about to speak when he suddenly said in a more cheerful tone: “This is not an evening for melancholy mutterings. Come, let me show you the rest of the house.”

He stood up and took her hand. She rose and followed him, mesmerised. They left the dining room and climbed the stairs hand in

hand to the first floor. He explained that the large bedroom there, connected to a sizeable dressing room and a bathroom, used to be his grandmother's. Now it was a guest room.

The second floor was obviously his domain. They entered a study cluttered with books. They were everywhere, on shelves, on chairs, on a dark brown desk and stacked on the floor. A typewriter rested on the desk, surrounded by documents, typescripts, press clippings, miscellaneous magazines, a rack holding a number of Chinese writing brushes and a slate ink slab.

"Mrs. Kelly's not allowed to touch this room," Suen said, by way of explaining the disorder.

She noticed a bank of half a dozen identical books on one of the bookshelves. The title was Remembering My Teachers and Suen's name was given as the author.

"You're a writer of books!" she exclaimed, turning to face him. "You've kept this from me all this time. How naughty of you!"

"Only one book," Suen replied. "Not worth shouting about."

She saw disappointment in his eyes, like the disappointment of a child denied something he had been yearning for. "Other books will come," she said. "I'm certain of it. At least as many as Byron."

They stood looking into each other's eyes for a trembling moment. She felt dizzy, both from his closeness and from the effects of the wine. She was conscious of being pulled closer to him before she surrendered herself to her first kiss. Some instinct caused her to close her eyes, part her lips and engage her tongue with his. She drank so hungrily from him that she had to struggle for breath. Her heart pounded as never before.

She followed him without hesitation as he led her into the room next door and there, in total darkness, she allowed him to undress her and

carry her to bed.

What happened that night and on all the subsequent nights were husbanded deep in her memory. She remembered the murmured endearments, the touch of his hands, the unimaginable explorations of his tongue and her own clumsy responses. When their union came, it conferred a rapture so agonising it was like being set on fire.

There were many other memories too, less intense but no less enchanting. It might be simply cuddling together to talk for hours or to feel him nuzzling her behind the ears and down her neck like her parents used to do when she was a child, freshly out of her bath. He always left her feeling womanly and complete, as if there was nothing else in the world he wanted apart from her.

\* \* \*

Po-Chee suddenly became aware she was crying. She allowed the tears to flow. Those eighteen months in London, between that first meal at Radnor Place and her registry marriage, had been the happiest in her life. But happiness had to be paid for.

She sobbed through her tears. Authors of science fiction had written of parallel worlds and time travel. If such things existed, she would want to return to that segment of her life and keep living it over and over again.