

Lucille

New York, July 1962:

“Gee, getta load of this,” Lucille Mong said, as she peered at the label next to the Chinese painting. “It says this is a copy of a famous painting by the Sung artist Li Lung-mien entitled ‘Gathering of Scholars at Western Garden’. Why is the Metropolitan Museum of Art hanging a copy of a painting? We’ve just seen Botticelli’s ‘Last Communion of St. Jerome.’ They wouldn’t dream of displaying a copy of that, would they? So why should they do it with a Chinese painting?”

“It’s different with Chinese paintings,” Xavier Chu replied, as if the point was obvious. “A fundamental principle of Chinese painting is to copy old masters. Therefore many copies of famous paintings are around, some done by painters quite famous in their own right. Originality’s not the deciding factor. When copiers become masters themselves, their copies acquire artistic standing as well.”

“No kidding! Learn something new every day.”

When they came to two scrolls of Chinese calligraphy, Lucille Mong asked: “What do those characters say? Wish I could read them.”

“You’re not supposed to read them,” Xavier said. “Calligraphies are not meant to be read. Characters as such should be ignored. Calligraphers often choose famous poems or passages from the classics for their work. They expect people to concentrate on the rhythm and vitality of the brush strokes and consider how they come together to form -- not just characters -- but larger abstractions, with their own contours, contrast, balance and rhythm. Rhythm is most important, for it represents movement and movement is an essential element in nature.”

“Gee, I’ve never approached calligraphies that way. They just shame me because I can’t read them.”

Lucille wished she had met Xavier earlier. He was good at illuminating Chinese obscurities. Her parents ran a small fruit store in San Francisco’s Chinatown, squeezed between a shop dealing in Chinese sausages and preserved ducks and an unpretentious noodle restaurant. It was situated in one of the less salubrious streets running off Grant Avenue. Her elder brother also worked along the same street, as a waiter in another restaurant. She had long sought to break free from that confinement. Helping her parents move crates of fruit had already roughened her hands and the prospect of being trapped in the family store during the best years of her youth was disheartening. It was not simply a case of getting off the bottom rung of the social ladder but also of coming to terms with her own identity as an American-Chinese.

At first she thought herself special. It seemed an advantage to have a choice of being American or Chinese, as the fancy struck her. From the age of ten, however, she began puzzling over what she actually was and to which of those two cultures she actually belonged. If to both, then how could their contradictions be resolved?

At school she pledged allegiance to the American flag each morning, just like other American children. She spoke the same language as her classmates, wore the same brand of clothing, played the same games and nursed the same fantasies and ambitions.

But at home, her parents spoke the Toi Shan dialect and drummed into her she was not a “foreign devil” but a Chinese. Paradoxically, her parents never allowed her to join the Saturday Chinese classes run by one of the clansmen’s associations. They said she was needed at the store. They also intimated that some of the teachers were too progressive and were pursuing doubtful activities. She had no idea what they meant.

Gradually she concluded that being Chinese meant being obedient, studying hard, not going out at night and not fooling around with white boys. Later, when she started menstruating, two additional requirements were added. The first was to guard her virginity until marriage because no respectable Chinese family would allow a son to marry a girl who had lost it, she was told. The second was to accept whichever husband her parents might choose. The choice appeared restricted to the sons of Chinese families owning restaurants, souvenir shops, jewellery stores or financial institutions in Chinatown.

Her parents, though formally American citizens and ostensibly members of the Democratic Party, were proud of their Chineseness. They still regarded China as their real home, in spite of the fact they had little time for its Communist rulers. They drank tea incessantly, joined clansmen’s associations, observed Chinese festivals and jabbered away in the Toi Shan dialect with other inhabitants of Chinatown.

But their habits perplexed her. They could not explain clearly, for example, why some of their neighbours preferred green tea and others red and what their differences were. They seemed to observe Chinese festivals only for the sake of form. When pressed to explain why moon cakes had to be eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival or the origins of the Chung Yeung Festival, they hummed and hawed. They did not know half the things Xavier knew. She concluded that being Chinese meant essentially spending the rest of her life in the ghetto of Chinatown, acting out some Oriental stereotype for tourists.

As she grew into adolescence, her confusion increased. When her breasts began to develop, her mother made her bind them every night before bed, declaring it indecent for Chinese girls to have large breasts, let alone to take pride in them. This, her mother claimed, was standard practice among girls in respectable society. She had observed them while working as a servant for a rich family in Canton.

Later, her parents were aghast when she secured, at the age of fifteen, a place among the cheerleaders in high school. They could not abide her publicly displaying her shapely legs in an abbreviated skirt. It took many arguments to convince them that being selected was considered an honour by American girls. Her parents’ reservations made little sense in the age of sweater girls and Jane Russell. It did not take her very long, prancing around waving pom-poms at football and basketball games, to discover with a devastating certainty that her legs and breasts were centres of attraction and objects of desire.

Lucille and Xavier came out of the museum into brilliant sunshine. People were sitting on the steps in scattered clusters, reading, chatting or soaking up the sun.

“How about a walk in Central Park?” Lucille asked. “I want to see all of New York before heading home.”

“Fine with me,” Xavier said.

They made their way into the park. She noted again with a slight disappointment that Xavier was quite short. Hardly more than her own five-foot-three. In high heels, she would embarrass him. She was glad she had on flats.

Nevertheless she felt comfortable with him. He did not appear the type she had to fight off in the back seat of a car. Indeed, she would probably never get into that situation with him. He was too reserved. He didn't talk much, though once he had thawed he could be a knowledgeable guide, opening doors to a world previously never quite intelligible to her.

When they examined the round, discoloured jade discs in the museum, he explained the symbolism Chinese associated with jade. The discs themselves represented the ancient Chinese symbol for heaven. The holes at the centre were meant for souls to pass through. She felt that she, too, had at last found a hole through which she could reach her own identity and culture.

At the same time, however, she puzzled over the hesitancy and correctness in his behaviour. It was as if his mind was occupied with something else. He had never once attempted to make a pass during the parties and nightclubbing of the previous week. Even when they danced, he kept a distance. It bruised her pride to think he did not find her attractive. She usually had to fight off American boys even on first dates. Could Xavier be sexually otherwise inclined?

“Tell me, how did you get to be such buddies with Bob Winchell?” Lucille asked.

“We were at Princeton together,” Xavier replied. “We were the best economics students in our class. We both wanted to prove who was better. Couldn't settle it, however. We both got straight A's, made the Dean's List, got elected to Phi Beta Kappa and all the rest of that stuff. Gradually we got to respect each other and became friends

“When it turned out we were both heading for Harvard, we decided we wouldn't go head to head any more. It was simpler just to divide the world between us. After graduation, Bob suggested a couple of weeks of high living before getting down to work. I agreed, on condition he fixed me up with a date because I didn't know any girl in New York. And here we are. What about you and Helen Winchell? How did you two get so close? You're from San Francisco, aren't you, and she's from New York?”

“You might say we're both refugees from our parents.”

“Oh?”

“Helen went to study at Berkeley to get as far away from home as possible. You see, she's Jewish and her parents are very conservative. They won't allow her to date anybody except Jewish boys. She didn't like that and opted for the greater freedom of California. My story's roughly the same. My parents considered it normal for them to pick a guy for me to marry. Not my idea of romance, not that I'm aiming to marry a non-Chinese. When the chance came to study at Berkeley, I took it. Actually I was aiming for Stanford but couldn't make the grades.

“At Berkeley one of the first things I did was to sign up to study Chinese. I wanted to get into Chinese culture but it ended in tears. They taught Mandarin at Berkeley but I spoke Toi Shan. It was bad enough trying to remember the characters, let alone two different pronunciations. I was never a very good student. After one term I gave up. I did a couple of courses in Far Eastern history and comparative religion, though.”

Lucille was afraid she might be boring Xavier but he appeared attentive. So she continued.

“After a while I thought it easier just to settle for being American, particularly that bit about the pursuit of happiness. That meant forgetting a lot of stuff my parents drummed into me, like not dating American boys and all that. That didn’t work either. Whatever I may try to be, I didn’t look American. The point was driven home the hard way. When I upset a guy who got fresh, he hit me and called me racist names. I realized then I was neither fish nor fowl.

“At that low point I met Helen Winchell. We were both sophomores. We bumped into each other browsing in one of the bookshops along Telegraph Avenue. Talk about coincidence! Both of us ended up buying Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex! We got talking. After reading de Beauvoir we started thinking of ourselves as women first, rather than as Chinese or Jew or American. Began discussing Women’s Lib and became a little more radical as a result. Gosh! I’m sorry! Am I boring you? I don’t know why I’m dumping my life’s history on you! I’ve never talked like this to a man before.”

“Hey! Go on! Don’t stop! It’s interesting,” Xavier said, touching her encouragingly on the elbow. “I had a similar problem with parents. They fed me a lot of notions about being Chinese. But it just wasn’t my scene. I’ll tell you about it after you’ve finished your story.”

“Okay. Well, I started rooming with Helen in our Junior year. Just before summer break Bob asked Helen to bring home a girlfriend as a blind date for a Chinese buddy from Hong Kong. Bob only knew Jewish girls and didn’t think that would work. I’d never been to the Big Apple and it sounded like fun. As they say, the rest is history. I hope you haven’t been disappointed.”

“Of course not! You’ve been the most wonderful blind date a man could have hoped for.”

Lucille did a mock curtsy. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” she said, and they both laughed. They were nearing the pond for sailing model boats and they paused to watch children at play.

“Now tell me your story. Helen said your father’s some kind of Hong Kong Rockefeller. Is that right?”

“Well, my father’s quite rich but I won’t be relying on his dough once I start work. He’s got this thing about being Chinese and has a lot of moral hang-ups about the way business is done. I don’t buy that. Business is business. Nothing else comes into it. It’s like running the fastest mile or climbing Everest. You’ve got to aim to be the best. I want to become the richest man in the world. I’ve given myself twenty-five years to achieve it. That’s why I’ve been studying

like mad. Haven't found time for girls. Now that I've signed up with Morgansteen, Dillon and Preston, perhaps I can take things easier."

"Bob's going to work for Merrill Lynch, isn't he? You said you two had divided up the world. Which is your half?"

"I'm after both halves! Only I haven't told Bob yet."

They both laughed again.

"You're fantastic," Lucille said, slipping an arm through Xavier's. "You're so full of confidence. I guess that comes from having everything: rich family, MBA from Harvard, swell job on Wall Street, a wealth of knowledge about Chinese things and a future without limit. I'd give an arm and a leg just to have a quarter of your understanding of Chinese culture."

"You won't look half as beautiful without an arm and a leg!"

Lucille laughed again, partly to hide her blushes.

"What are you going to do after graduation?" Xavier asked. "Are you going for a Master's or a job?"

"Don't know. Haven't thought that far ahead."

"When you do get around to deciding, please consider the East Coast. Closer to Wall Street, you know. It's been real fun the past week. I've almost forgotten what it's like to enjoy myself. It would be nice meeting you again."

"It has been great fun for me too," Lucille said. "I'll certainly bear that in mind."

She felt a shiver of delight. Xavier was inching out of his shell. The relationship had possibilities. He was Chinese and rich. Her parents should be impressed and couldn't possibly object on either score. A Harvard degree and a job on Wall Street. What more could any girl want? If things worked out, Hong Kong and Taiwan were prospects on the horizon. She could explore her roots to her heart's content. She had to be either Chinese or American, not some indefinite half-breed belonging nowhere.

The only snag was she was no longer a virgin. She had lost it half-unwillingly to a quarterback on the previous year's football team. A few unmemorable men followed. None provided that earth-moving experience she had expected. She wished she had kept it now. She did not know whether Xavier or his family understood women's need for sexual freedom. If they didn't, should she attempt to thrash out the issue before getting more deeply involved? Or simply disguise her loss of virginity and hope for the best?

"Could I write to you at Berkeley? Sort of keep in touch?"

"Sure, I'll give you my address before I leave," Lucille said. "But I've got a confession to make. My real name isn't Lucille Mong."

"Good grief! You're not telling me Bob has played a trick, that you're not his sister's room-mate after all? Who are you then? An actress hired to keep me entertained?"

Lucille recoiled from the outburst. The sudden coldness in Xavier's voice took her by surprise. "Oh, no! Nothing like that!" she reassured him quickly. "Helen's my room-mate all right. Let me explain. There's no trick of any kind. You've gotta believe that. I've never told anyone before, not even Helen. My real surname is Lee, not Mong. I wouldn't have told you either

except that I want very much for us to become friends. I figured that with your knowing all sorts of Chinese stuff, you'd sooner or later start questioning what a queer surname Mong was. I didn't want to have to explain then, so I thought I might as well be straight with you from the start.

"You see, my father's name is Lee Mong. When he came to this country, he didn't know English and the guys at immigration didn't realize that Chinese always put their surnames first. So 'Lee' got registered as his given name and 'Mong' as his surname. When my brother was born, my father got scared of raising the issue. He didn't know how to explain why he had used a false surname for so long. He thought he might get into trouble. My mother's entry into this country wasn't on the up and up either. My father thought it best to accept 'Mong' as a surname to avoid trouble."

"A common enough mistake among overseas Chinese," Xavier said, reassuringly. "I thought I had fallen for one of Bob's pranks! Why not come back to the hotel for a drink? Then we could plan a few more fun things for the remaining week."

"Why not?" Lucille answered, brightly. "I would love to compare the dim sum in Mott Street with those in San Francisco."

They strolled arm in arm out of the park towards Xavier's five star hotel on Madison Avenue. As they walked sexual chemistry began to take over. If she could manoeuvre Xavier into inviting her for drinks in his room, the problem about her virginity might get resolved.