

Aspects of Love

Trinity term came as suddenly as a spring shower. Its start did nothing to brighten Suen's mood, however. The deadly skirmishes in Korea continued, with the ever-present potential for a wider conflict. News from home were equally gloomy, rendering him increasingly homesick. His unsettled state did not go unnoticed by Ralfie.

"Something the matter?" Ralfie asked, after a session of bridge.

"Nothing," Suen replied. "Game's a bit off, that's all."

After the usual Loughridge tea party, Ralfie invited Suen and Sanjay back to his room for sherry.

"Don't you have to swot for finals?" Suen asked.

Ralfie emitted a laugh. "Not aiming for a First, old chap."

"I've got to run," Sanjay said. "Way behind schedule."

Ralfie waved Sanjay goodbye and threw an arm across Suen's shoulders as they headed for Brasenose. He was four inches taller than Suen.

Suen found his friend's room in a state of charming disarray. Scattered about were a cricket bat, a set of pads, some golf clubs, a pair of dumb-bells, a gramophone, a Spanish guitar and a wide range of headgear, including a straw boater, a cricket cap and a grey topper.

Stacks of books had been left obviously undisturbed on the floor. The desk, however, was bereft of any. Its top displayed instead illustrated magazines, travel brochures, a half bottle of Scotch, some dirty glasses, a deck of playing cards and a brimming ashtray.

Suen swept an arm across the untidiness. "Is this a foretaste of the socialist utopia, to each according to his needs?" he asked.

Ralfie lifted an indifferent eyebrow. He poured drinks, handed a glass to Suen and said: "Cheers."

Suen reciprocated and sauntered over to the mantelpiece. Its marble top was crowded with cufflinks, shirt studs, tie pins, pipes and a

cluster of gilt-edged invitation cards. While glancing at them, he was surprised to see reflected in the mantelpiece mirror the four pen and ink drawings by Maurice hanging on the opposite wall.

He turned towards the pictures and found Ralfie sitting on the window-sill sipping his drink. He was about to remark that Maurice's pictures weren't worth putting up when Ralfie said: "There's something I've been meaning to tell you for some time."

"What?"

"I've never told anyone before. My family name isn't Fenton." The usual note of levity was absent from his voice.

Different possibilities flashed across Suen's mind. A foundling, an adoption, a family scandal, a child born out of wedlock. Unsure of what was about to be revealed, he fell back on a light-hearted jest. "What's in a name? A friend by any other name would be just as precious."

Ralfie offered a wry smile. "Better start with a bit of history."

The tale he unfolded concerned a Jewish couple by the name of Feinstein who had fled to England from Russia to escape the pogroms following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. They made a living selling second-hand clothes from a wheelbarrow, prospered, and by 1900 owned a clothing store and was on the point of acquiring a textile plant in Birmingham. They had also by then produced two daughters, Helen and Sarah. The wife eventually gave birth to a son, Matthew, before dying from complications.

The Englishman drank from his glass before continuing.

His grandfather not only brought up his children single-handedly but expanded his businesses as well. He became a staunch believer in the return of Jews to Palestine. He was beside himself when the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promised a Jewish homeland and made substantial donations to the Jewish National Fund for the purchase land for

settlers. By the time he died in 1920 he had become a wealthy industrialist and a Zionist.

Matthew was left 51% of the business empire, with the rest shared equally between Helen and Sarah. The family home in Birmingham and a country estate in Dorset were left jointly to the three siblings.

“To cut a long story short, my grandfather’s death came at just the right moment for my father. He had just finished university and had gained an insight into the business. He realised a Jew had no chance for respectability in the upper reaches of British society and decided to slough off his heritage by changing his surname to Fenton.

“His sisters were horrified. A row erupted when he objected to the rabbi visiting the home and celebrating Passover. His sisters moved to London and they never spoke again. When he bought them out, the dealings had been handled entirely by solicitors.”

“Oh, how terrible!” Suen cried, with sympathy and dismay.

Ralfie shrugged and went on to detail his father’s invention of a Russian aristocratic pedigree, claiming his parents had fled after the family estates had been decimated by wars, revolutions and peasant uprisings. He claimed their real name was Byelovzorov but he adopted Fenton after his parents’ death from pneumonia because it was less of a mouthful.

His father, Ralfie continued, had set his sight on joining an aristocratic English family with impeccable pedigree but shaky finances. He was aided by his commercial success. Newspapers and magazines portrayed him as an eligible bachelor. He finally settled on the Fotheringhams, a family known for profligacy and insolvency, with no son and a nubile daughter without a dowry.

The daughter was Lady Caroline, blonde, blue-eyed, spoilt, ten years his father’s junior and saddled with a colourful reputation. Her hand was secured by sealing a number of financial understandings with the noble

lord. An extravagant marriage was followed by a son. Political contributions secured a knighthood.

Ralfie rose from the window-sill to replenish their drinks. “How does such a Faustian pact strike you?”

Suen was amazed at being made privy to such secrets. No Chinese would make revelations of that kind about his parents. He wondered whether Westerners were more open and forthright.

As he held out his glass for replenishment, he also wondered why he should be made aware of such matters when Ralfie was about to leave Oxford. What was Ralfie expecting from him?

“You’ve heard half the story,” his friend said, as he returned to his perch on the window sill. “Do you know, I hadn’t the foggiest about most of what I’ve just told you till after I came to Oxford? Bizarre, isn’t it?”

Suen’s discomfiture grew. He felt he was eavesdropping outside a church confessional.

“You see, after the war, I was given a medal for fighting in Normandy,” Ralfie continued.

“You never told me that,” Suen interrupted.

“Not something I like talking about. It got a mention in The Times. Shortly afterwards, I got a congratulatory letter from a lady named Helen Feinstein, who claimed to be my father’s eldest sister. She said she and Aunt Sarah were extremely proud of me and would be delighted should I wish to call. An address in Golders Green was given.

“I thought it must be from someone seeking a handout. So far as I knew then, my father had no sisters. Never been particularly close to relatives on my mother’s side either. Been in boarding school since eight. After that, the army. The letter sounded so ridiculous I didn’t bother to tell my parents.

“When I was in Dorset for Christmas, after my first term at Oxford, I went browsing in my father’s library. I found a copy of Alice in Wonderland which Father used to read to me when I was a child. I pulled it out and a photo fell out. It was of a small boy sitting on a chair flanked by two older girls. I saw at once the boy was my father. After that, the possibility of having unknown aunts didn’t appear far-fetched at all.”

Ralfie drained his sherry and went for a further refill.

“My curiosity was aroused,” he continued. “I called on the ladies, who turned out to be warm and down-to-earth. Both unmarried and Jewish to the core. They recounted my family background, showing me pictures of my father and my grandparents, together with a number of supporting documents. They explained their row with Father. But their pride in my decoration caused them to set pen to paper.

“I verified what they had told me with the Companies Registry and other official agencies. Everything tallied. It seemed I had been living a lie for years. I was glad my father was from good proletarian stock and not from the Russian gentry. Why should he be ashamed of that? A further irony: the Fotheringhams, and in particular my mother, had always been uppity about Jews. Yet she ended up marrying one! What a laugh!”

Suen saw the pain behind his friend’s casual words. He eventually offered: “Prejudice and insecurities can be crazy things.”

“A man can’t renounce his race, can he? That’s in the blood. Forever. I had it out with my parents when we were in Italy. I produced the photo I had found. Father didn’t even bother a denial. I told him that if the Feinstein connection was too embarrassing for him, then the Fenton dynasty could do without this Feinstein. He just sat dazed, accepting the collapse of his dreams. Strangely, I felt rather sorry for him then.

“It was my mother who became hysterical. She kept denying that my father was a Jew, though she must have known the truth. Her

marriage was the price for Fotheringham solvency. I was unkind. I reminded her a woman could hardly sleep with a man for twenty-five years without a clue he had been circumcised. It ended rather badly, I'm afraid. Haven't the remotest what I'm going to do with myself now."

Ralfie fell silent. He set down the sherry glass, rested his elbows on his knees and brushed back his hair with both hands.

Suen's heart went out to him. It must have taken real courage for a man to unburden himself that way. He went up to Ralfie, placed a brotherly arm around his shoulders and gave him an affectionate squeeze.

"Not everything's a lie," he said. "Our friendship's real, so are your friendships with Sanjay, Maurice and the rest. You're at the heart of so much of what we do. Yet no one even knows you're a hero."

Ralfie's shoulders shook with bitter laughter. He lifted his head, looked Suen in the eye and said: "A hero? That's a fiction too! If you must know, I was scared out of my wits at Normandy. We were pinned down; shells and bullets everywhere. I could hear the screams of men being blown to bits, smell my own fear. I felt my number was up. I just wanted to get it over with. Crazy with fright, I dashed towards the enemy lines, firing like a demon, hoping to meet my end. For some reason the rest of the fools followed. We broke through. I was barely scratched. A total fluke. For that, I was awarded a medal!"

Ralfie lowered his head, as if suddenly ashamed.

That further confession pained Suen to the quick. His attempt at consolation had actually exacerbated Ralfie's distress. He tightened his grip around his shoulders. "We all fear death. Those who do their duty in spite of fear are heroes."

Ralfie turned his head and their eyes met. He felt Ralfie's hand on the nape of his neck. Then, suddenly, he felt his head being pulled down. Before he realized what was happening he found a passionate kiss

planted on his mouth.

He recoiled, shocked. He shook himself free and retreated a step. “What are you doing?” he cried.

Ralfie rose from his seat, flustered and coloured with disappointment. “Sorry,” he said. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew? Knew what? That you’ve got Jewish blood?”

“No, Plato.”

“Plato?”

“Yes, friendship between discerning men,” Ralfie said, hesitantly. “I’d been attracted to you from the day we met.”

Suen shook his head vigorously, stunned. “No, no, Ralfie,” he said, in a strangled voice. “I’m sorry, but I’m not that way.”

With those words he turned and dashed from the room.

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Suen half-trotted from Brasenose, with no idea where he was heading. He merely wanted to leave the scene of that shattering kiss. He kept wiping his mouth with the back of a hand as he fled.

After what seemed an eternity, he found himself on the banks of the Cherwell. He collapsed upon a grass verge and leaned against a stout yew. His heart was pounding, his soul in turmoil. Images and memories tumbled chaotically inside his head.

A spasm of apprehension seized him. The world had changed since ancient Greece. He remembered Reverend Adams reading from Leviticus, branding sexual relations between men as sinful. He remembered the Europeans back home charged with gross indecency at the Central Magistracy. Then there were the references to “splitting the peach” in Chinese literature, an activity indulged in between scholars and their

pages during journeys to Imperial Examinations. The last of the Han Emperors was known for his predilection for young men. He himself had never been that way inclined.

The kiss had come as a complete shock. Had he a latent homosexual streak which Ralfie had identified? Had he been sending out garbled messages? His deepest attachments had been to men. Certainly to Ralfie. And also to Tutor Tseng, to Kim, Dum-Dum and Su, and latterly to Dr. Loughridge and Sanjay.

He had never really known a father. The years until his late teens had been spent largely in the company of women. Perhaps he had been subconsciously seeking some sort of father substitute.

“I’ve been attracted to you from the day we met.” Those words rang ceaselessly in his ears. He had felt drawn to Ralfie too, drawn by beauty and dazzling intelligence, but never sexually.

Making love to Mona had been pleasurable. But the emotional fever and intellectual melding which writers had described as love never possessed him. What did that mean? He had gone without sexual contact for two years. Yet he had made no attempt to initiate a fresh liaison. Why? In part because of his grandmother’s warning against involvement with foreign girls. In part because he had failed to meet a woman who took his fancy. But was that all? What about the delight in Ralfie’s company and their many shared enthusiasms? Those facts rattled him.

Could his own sexual inclinations be in flux? Had anybody else noticed anything peculiar? He needed to sort himself out, think things through. But what excuse could he give for being absent from college?

He was aware that colleges depended on scouts to alert them about breaches of rules by scholars. In desperation he turned to Miller and laid his cards on the table.

“Miller, I need to get away for a few days,” he said. “It’s an

emergency. But I can't explain it to college, you understand. You're a man of experience. Can you advise me how best to go about it?"

"It's not the business of scouts to meddle in the private affairs of students, Sir," Miller replied. "I've seen many a lad in a spot in my time. If anyone asks, I can only tell the truth, that I've made up your bed per usual in the morning. It's up to others to draw conclusions."

Suen got the message. "Thank you, Miller," he said, and pressed a ten shilling note into the scout's hand. He then took the next train to Paddington.

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Suen spent five days at Radnor Place, re-living every aspect of his relationship with Ralfie. He could not bring to mind anything in his own conduct which might have been ambiguous or capable of being misconstrued. Until that unwanted kiss, he had no intimation that Ralfie held anything except genuine friendship for him.

His own feelings were getting horribly tangled. Ralfie had always lifted his spirits. Should one impulsive kiss imperil so fine a friendship? It could be just one of his monumental larks! He wanted desperately to talk things over with Ralfie, to clarify the limits to their friendship. Limits to friendship? Could there be limits, any more than to justice or truth? His friend had spoken of a hedonistic life being the only sane one to lead in the current age. Was he trying to initiate him into it? The situation seemed as impenetrable as one of London's peasoup fogs.

The need to present himself at a tutorial compelled him to return to Oxford. He could not possibly face Ralfie, however, till the quandaries in his own mind had been settled. In order to avoid a premature encounter, he stayed away from the bridge sessions and the pub gatherings.

Fearing that Ralfie might come looking for him, he spent the hours outside lectures and tutorials in libraries and secluded places and disappeared to London on weekends.

The days raced by quicker than he had expected. In almost a flash, the end of term had arrived. But that offered small comfort. He remained haunted by questions without answers.

One evening, returning late to college, he found a note from Ralfie. It stated that he had dropped by to say goodbye. He was leaving that day. He would write once he had decided what to do next.

The fact that the note contained no further declaration of affection or any reference to the incident at Brasenose came as a relief. But it also suggested he might have read more into a kiss than Ralfie had intended. He felt like a coward.

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Suen stayed at Radnor Place throughout the summer. For the first few days he could not free himself from the unsatisfactory nature of Ralfie's departure. It seemed infinitely worse than his parting from Kim. With Kim, he had at least a chance to say a proper farewell.

A week of introspection and moping around intensified his need to find out more about himself. He resorted again to the British Museum library. The welter of theories on psychological ailments was bewildering. The only consolation he got after two months of steady reading was that psychologists and psychoanalyst seldom agreed with one another. But that left him no closer to knowing whether he harboured any unorthodox sexual inclinations.

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Suen's final year at Oxford began on a dismal note. It rained for more than a week. It brought out the deeper melancholy of the town's ancient stones and made him long for warmer climes.

He refrained from re-engaging with the bridge crowd or the gang at the pub for fear of being questioned about Ralfie's whereabouts. He played safe by reverting to isolation and bookish pursuits.

One day, well into the Michaelmas term, he bumped into Kate when he was on his way to Blackwell's. He hadn't seen her since he dropped out of the study group almost a year ago. As they exchanged greetings, he noticed a certain sadness in her eyes. Her mournful air set off her high English colour and heightened her attractiveness.

"How nice to see you. How's the study group?" he asked.

"At sixes and sevens after Ralfie left, I'm afraid," Kate responded with a smile. "Why haven't you attended?"

"Been too busy," he lied.

"Have you heard from Ralfie? What has he been up to? Working for his father? We all miss him."

"I'm afraid I've no idea. Sanjay may have news."

"Sanjay hasn't been either since Ralfie left."

"Oh, I see. I've also had no sight of him. Busy with his doctoral dissertation, no doubt. How's your husband? Is he back from Korea?"

At that, Kate burst into tears.

Suen was taken aback. "I'm sorry," he said, quickly proffering a handkerchief from his hip pocket.

Kate shook her head and fished for one from her handbag.

“He hasn’t been hurt, has he?”

Kate blew her nose and stammered: “He’s been captured by the Chinese.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” He felt as if he had been personally responsible. His mind flashed to reports of the methods employed by the Communists to “re-educate” PoWs.

“There are rumours of a ceasefire and an exchange of prisoners,” he added, in an attempt to console her.

“He’s more likely to freeze to death before then,” Kate wailed, continuing her flow of tears.

Passers-by eyed them curiously. Suen felt helpless. He had never dealt with a weeping woman before. The two of them must present a ghastly sight in the middle of a busy Oxford street.

He remembered the British belief in cups of tea. “Let’s go for some tea,” he said. “That will make you feel better.”

Kate did not object and he led her gently by the elbow into a nearby tea shop.

After a few sips, Kate composed herself. “I’m sorry I made a scene,” she said. “Pressure’s been building since I got the news of Peter being missing in action. Then, three months ago, they told me he was a prisoner of the Chinese.”

“Sorry I spoke out of turn. Hasn’t been wounded, has he?”

“Not so far as I know. But you can imagine what a PoW camp in Korea must be like. I don’t understand why we’re in Korea at all. Why are we imposing an artificial division on a people? We didn’t send troops when Japan annexed Manchuria or when Hitler gobbled up Czechoslovakia. Why Korea? What are we up to?”

Suen shook his head and sighed. “It’s politics, I suppose. I

don't understand why my countrymen have to die there either. Who really knows? Someone gives an order and thousands march to their deaths. Didn't someone say something to the effect that if anyone questions why they die, tell them because their fathers lied?"

"Yes, an imperialist. Kipling."

"Ah, yes. He was a good writer though."

As the conversation proceeded, the two warmed to each other. Perhaps the old adage about misery loving company was at work.

After they had chatted for a while, Suen noticed that Kate had more inner resources than her tears had led him to believe. He noted also that she had a set of exquisitely shaped teeth. The discovery was enough for him to ask: "Would you like to have dinner with me one evening?"

"My evenings are all fully taken," Kate replied with mock seriousness. Then, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she added: "With correcting homework and fending off ghosts from Korea. It would be heavenly to banish all that for an evening."

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The dinner went well. The bottles of wine helped. Suen discovered that the meal was turning out to be one of those rare meetings of kindred spirits. Before either of them was aware of it, they were exchanging confidences and unburdening their souls.

Kate revealed that her parents had died ten years previously. Her father, a coal miner, had coughed his lungs out for king and country. Her mother soon followed, after losing the will to struggle on. Kate had been left in the care of an aunt. She had no brother or sister.

She went into teaching because she agreed with Aristotle and

Chairman Mao, that a child's mind was like a piece of blank paper. One could write whatever one chose on it. She wanted to be sure that she had a hand in covering that paper with her values and ideas.

Others in her school thought differently. They felt that children ought to be given greater freedom to develop themselves, without discipline or pressure. While that might be a valid approach for a minority, Kate felt it would be a disaster for the majority. Professional arguments held back her career.

She had married Peter two years ago, although neither their politics nor their personalities quite fitted. It was probably a matter of restricted choice, Kate speculated, because they had been teaching at the same school and both had felt rather lonely.

Peter was the son of a dentist, who lived up north. She was not on good terms with his parents. They did not approve of their son marrying a feisty socialist. Peter and she had talked about having children but she wasn't sure their marriage was stable enough for that. Before a decision could be reached, Peter was called-up for Korea.

Suen found Kate's candour refreshing. He wished he could be as forthright. He couldn't be completely open about Ralfie. He concentrated instead on his being both an only son in a conservative Chinese family and a colonial subject. Even before he came to Oxford, his grandmother had been thinking of getting him engaged. But he regarded the prospective betroths on offer as mousy, unripe and unappealing.

"You mean you prefer some domineering Amazon, expert in the arts of love?" Kate interjected, half-jokingly, as she lit a cigarette.

Suen blushed. "Of course, not," he faltered. "I'm not ready to marry, so haven't given much thought to the kind of woman I want."

"Did you tell your grandmother?"

“Sort of. It’s not that simple. Time is the problem. My grandmother’s getting on. She has set her heart on cuddling great-grandchildren before she leaves this earth. I love her very dearly and don’t want to disappoint her.”

“Then it all boils down to whether you love your grandma enough to marry any brood mare for her sake.”

Kate’s gaze was sympathetic, yet challenging.

“That’s not a fair way of putting it,” Suen said. “Arranged marriages have worked well in my family for generations. Why should I be the one to break the pattern? On the other hand, why shouldn’t I marry for love instead of for the good of the family?”

“Ah, that old will-o’-the-wisp!” Kate said, as she exhaled a cloud of smoke. “Byron has warned that love and marriage rarely can combine. You’ve got a problem.”

A discussion about the nature of love followed. Suen took the romantic line, extolling the intoxication and delirium of love described in books. Kate concentrated on the flip side, on housework and washing up, the loss of privacy and the irritations of snoring and cold feet. In the end they concluded, like the sages of old, that great loves had to be tragedies. Lovers had to be separated before passions faded and indifference set in.

After more glasses of wine, Suen heaved a sigh. “People can’t love properly while living in limbo. China doesn’t want us because we’ve been contaminated by what its rulers call ‘yellow culture’. Britain would rather we didn’t claim a British connection because of the colour of our skin. People like me just don’t belong anywhere.”

“You can always start a revolution.”

“If that’s what you’ve been teaching at school, small wonder your school has issues with you!”

They laughed. After their second bottle of wine, they left in a merry mood. The sharp winter air outside, however, quickly cleared their heads. A friendly mist was caressing the night.

As Suen escorted Kate home, she slipped her arm through his and pressed close to him, as if that was the most natural thing in the world. Their breaths condensed in the cold and they watched their vapours mingle. He felt a strange stirring in his heart as their footfalls echoed through the medieval darkness of the town.

At her doorstep, Kate said: “Would you care to come in for a nightcap?”

“Why not? In for a penny, in for a pound.”

They ended up in bed.

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Suen quickly became both smitten and confounded by Kate. She was unlike any woman in his family and certainly more enticing than Mona had been. She had an enthusiasm and an openness which excited him during love-making. Instead of Mona’s shy, stifled moans, she let loose full-throttled cries of “Yes, yes.” or hoarse, gasping pleas of “Don’t stop! Oh, please don’t stop!” Her entreaties drove him frantic. At times he couldn’t hold back the apoplexy of his own release. Perhaps that open enjoyment of intercourse represented a form of emancipation for Western women, he surmised.

Afterwards, sated and relaxed, they would talk on almost any subject under the sun, from life in a British mining town to the differences between Chinese and Western chess pieces. It transpired that Kate had some knowledge of Chinese poetry, after chancing on some translations by

Arthur Waley. Kate had her own point of view on most things and her reaction to any particular situation was seldom predictable. She could sometimes be incurably romantic and at other times assertively maternal. She had made it clear early on she was first of all a teacher and, no matter how much she might long for him, her responsibilities to her students came first. If she had lessons to prepare or homework to mark, it would mean she could not see him.

He had accepted that self-denying covenant but wondered whether the same applied to her husband in conjugal matters.

A month into their relationship, Christmas approached. He wanted to surprise her with a gift. During a visit to London he went to Bond Street to buy her a silk negligee. It was a beige French affair, with prettily embroidered flowers at the neckline and at the hem.

When he presented it, Kate had held it by its dainty straps over her ample bosom and exclaimed: "It's divine! A perfect fit! How thoughtful of you. I didn't get you anything. I didn't think you celebrated Christmas."

"I don't. I'd be horrified if you spent your hard-earned salary on me."

Kate performed a half-pirouette with the negligee in front of her, paused, and then said: "You'll have to return this."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? If I were to appear in this sweet thing, both of us would want to tear it off without delay. It'll end in shreds."

He had it on the tip of his tongue to reply: "So what? I'll buy you another. And another after that."

But it occurred to him that those words might come across as an uncouth flaunting of wealth to a socialist on slender means. It was just

as well he had curbed his tongue because the next remark Kate made was: “It doesn’t seem right to be spending so much on a flimsy garment when many still have to put up with shortages. No, better return it.”

And return it he did, to the quizzical looks of the shop assistants when he declared the garment too small for his girl friend.

As time went by, he became increasingly relaxed in Kate’s company. When he was with her, the past and the future did not seem to matter. The pleasures of the pulsating present, the smooth tautness of her body and the way her pink nipples hardened under his caresses were what he cared about. In addition, being in her embrace reassured him that he was in no way different from any other red-blooded male. The memory of Ralfie’s kiss lost its ability to shock.

He soon resumed bridge because his passion for the game got the better of him. His return was roundly welcomed. Enquiries about Ralfie soon passed. But whenever he played, he could sense the ghosts of his two favourite partners -- Kim and Ralfie -- hovering behind him, assessing his every decision.

Otherwise, he lost himself in the deep contentment of Kate’s company. He couldn’t get enough of her. Did that signal love or merely over-active spermatozoids? Whatever it was, it was deeply satisfactory.

Though they had exchanged many endearments, they had never discussed a future together. Suddenly, he became seized by the fact that his time was running out. He was about to graduate. The future of their relationship could not remain in limbo.

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Shortly after Easter, Suen attended another of the tea parties

hosted by Dr. and Mrs. Loughridge. The timing coincided with a lull in the fighting in Korea. The hopes pinned upon the ceasefire negotiations at Panmunjom were also rising. There were indications that the issue of exchanging PoWs, which had deadlocked the talks for more than a year, was at last making progress.

Sanjay was, as usual, at the party. When Suen arrived he was informing Dr. Loughridge he had nearly completed his dissertation.

“Congratulations,” Suen interjected, by way of a greeting. “What are you doing afterwards?”

“Back to India, most assuredly,” Sanjay said. “I’ve received job offers from British universities. Their stipends are much juicier but no place like home. What about you? Heading home too?”

“I imagine so. The alternative is to do another degree.”

“Not a bad idea, now that you’ve made friends here.”

Suen detected in the Indian’s remark an insinuation about Kate. “My family wants me back,” he added quickly.

“You can always return later,” Dr. Loughridge said. “With luck, you might get home to celebrate the end of this ghastly war.”

That remark, too, reminded Suen of Peter’s likely return. He was glad when the conversation shifted to Ralfie’s whereabouts.

“Haven’t had a peep out of him,” Sanjay said. “Very naughty of him, not making contact.”

Suen shook his head to indicate he had heard nothing. “I hope you won’t be such a stranger after you’re back to India,” he said.

“I promise I won’t. I’ve got your address in Hong Kong.”

“Strange, my wife also asked about Ralfie this morning,” Dr. Loughridge chipped in, absent-mindedly.

“We’ve missed him at the nets and the friendlies,” Sanjay said.

“One of the fellows tried to contact him at Fenton Industries to tell him of an away game scheduled near Birmingham. But he wasn’t there. No one seemed to know where he’d gone. Very strange.”

“Yes, indeed,” Dr, Loughridge said. “Been under the impression he had been destined for Fenton Industries. If I know the lad, he’s probably slaying shibboleths or breaking some poor damsel’s heart.”

From those remarks Suen concluded that neither of them knew Ralfie’s secrets. He alone had been entrusted with them and he intended to keep them safe. But the manner of their separation still wrenched his heart.

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Suen’s face was pressed against Kate’s bosom as he half-dozed, inhaling the familiar musk of her body. Though his eyes were closed, he was aware Kate was enjoying her post-coital cigarette. When she was through she would lean over and nibble on one of his earlobes. Her breath would carry the tang of cigarette smoke.

On this particular evening, anticipating her routine, he felt ill at ease. He needed to settle their future. His mind seemed to go blank whenever he thought about it. He was the author of his own predicament but that did not make finding a solution any easier.

At last, when Kate leaned over, he responded with his usual murmur of pleasure. Then he heard Kate say: “We’re getting too comfortable, you know.”

“Is that bad?” he replied, feigning amusement.

“Yes, if it brings hurt.” Kate’s voice sounded strange, as if it were being hauled up unnaturally from the depths of her being.

He sat up in bed. “Hurt? We’d never hurt each other.”

“Unintentional hurt sometimes cuts deepest.”

He placed an arm automatically around her and swept her into an embrace. “My sweet, I don’t understand,” he said, gently.

Kate responded with a peck on his cheek. “We have to be practical, darling,” she said. “The war in Korea will be over soon and, God willing, Peter will be coming home. I’ve no idea what a year and more in a PoW camp might have done to him. He’s not a strong man. He must be damaged. I’ve already wronged him and I can’t wrong him again. I have to stand by him.”

His pulse raced as he heard Kate’s words. “But what about us? We love each other.”

“Sometimes, in matters of the heart, it is best to cut one’s losses. You’d think more poorly of me if I abandoned Peter.”

Suen felt both saddened and relieved as a portentous silence descended. The decision was being taken out of his hands. Kate’s pronouncement sounded both sensible and imperative. The long explanations and arguments he had anticipated had been averted. The insurmountability of the obstacles to a long-term relationship stared him in the face. Yet a part of him did not want to let go.

Kate must have sensed that he was about to make a plea because she lifted two fingers and placed them upon his lips. “Shhhh,” she cooed. “We both have responsibilities we cannot shake off. The longer we delay our separation, the more painful it will be. Didn’t we agree at the very start that all great loves had to be tragedies?”

* * *

Suen thought about Kate and her words for days afterwards.

Could anyone approach love rationally? Love was supposed to be irrational and blind, with lovers throwing reason to the wind. Didn't Paris and Helen unleash ten years of war by refusing to separate? Hadn't kingdoms been lost because of a beauty's glance? How could he part from Kate so tamely? Were there too many impediments or had their relationship been rather less than love?

His mind went round and round those questions without finding an answer. He remembered the unemployed man who had sold his son for \$82. He had seen how much that man had loved his son. That had been an instance of love too. Possibly love was not meant only for possession. It often involved letting go. Was that what Kate had been driving at?

In the middle of those introspections, he received a letter from Ralfie. It read as follows:

“As you will see from the envelope, I'm writing from Palestine without a return address. You may wonder what I'm doing here. I'm trying to earn my keep as a fruit-picker, paid by the day. Also trying to learn Hebrew at night. I've applied to join a commune but my British papers are against me. Jews suspect I'm a spy. That's perfectly logical, obviously. Only a British spy would have the temerity to apply to join a kibbutz under a name like Fenton!

“Lest you think I'm trying to reclaim my Jewish heritage, let me set your mind at ease. One cannot become a Jew unless one were born of a Jewish mother. Or through conversion. I can't qualify under the former and am not ready for the latter.

“Why the hell am I here, you might ask. I owe you an explanation. You, more than any other, have been at the receiving end of my disillusionments. You know my socialist beliefs, although no rational person can afford any sensible belief these days. In spite of the mess that's

being made of socialism, your country seems to be willing to give it a try. I'm, likewise, not ready to give up without one more shot. This place I'm at is stark and desolate, its people hostile and unlikeable. Fanaticism is rife. Arabs kill Jews and Zionists return the favour.

“I figure that if socialism can somehow take root in such a forbidding environment, it might stand a chance elsewhere. It'll be a novel experience. I'm about to find out if I can really live with others in a truly democratic, classless and moneyless community, receiving only in accordance with my labour and my needs.

“If this experiment fails as badly as the Stalinist show trials have indicated, then yet another utopian dream bites the dust. Someone will have to come up with a new one. Or those who belong to our generation will simply have to accept that we've dedicated our lives to chasing illusions.

“I haven't written to anybody else. If you see any of our Oxford friends, please convey my regards. Sanjay should be finishing his doctorate at about the same time as you. He's a good man and so are you. You'll both do your respective nations proud.

“I'll write again when I have a settled address. If that does not happen before you graduate, I'll write to you in Hong Kong.”

Suen felt infinitely moved by the letter. Here was a young man, not much older than himself, throwing away the good life for the sake of ideas he believed in, ideas he had cloaked beneath a hedonistic lifestyle. Yet he himself remained an intellectual adolescent. Hegel would no doubt be disappointed with such a pathetic person, always drifting between thesis and antithesis without ever arriving at a synthesis. The trouble was he saw too many sides to every question. Ralfie had found his path, just as Kim had done. He was the only one left behind, dithering, while men of sterner

stuff moved on.

He rushed over to Sanjay's home to show him Ralfie's letter.

"I never knew Ralfie had Jewish ancestry," Sanjay said.

"I only knew about it just before he left," Suen replied, determined to keep the rest of Ralfie's secrets intact.

As Suen sat sipping sherry, he heard Sanjay speculating aloud: "I wonder if Ralfie made his move with the acquiescence of his family or against their wishes. Hate to think of a ruptured family."

Suen pretended ignorance.

For weeks afterwards, he longed for Ralfie to write with a return address. He wanted to mend the misunderstanding between them, to explain what their association had meant for him. He wanted to tell Ralfie he cared for him, not only as a friend, but as an elder brother whom he had respected and looked up to. But his sentiments remained unexpressed because no further letter reached him before he left Oxford.