

A Good Soak

As Po-Chee turned on the taps for her bath and sprinkled in bath salts, she wondered if she had done the right thing in getting a jade sword for Amber. The girl had stopped going to church in recent weeks and had appeared a trifle restless. Adolescent pangs, she supposed. In spring, a young girl's fancy could slowly turn and all that. Hopefully, Amber had not yet done anything she might regret later, especially after returning from that party much the worse for drink. Still, it had been awkward to keep urging her niece to refrain from sex till after marriage when she herself had not been able to abstain. Perhaps wearing a jade sword might give Amber pause.

After undressing, Po-Chee reached a hand beneath the sea of bubbles to test the temperature. The water felt fine. She turned off the taps and climbed in. She delighted in the fragrance of the suds as she sank beneath them. Amber had been right. What she needed was a good soak.

She stretched out beneath the foam and rested her head against the rim of the bathtub. Its white enamel, cleaned assiduously each day by Malu, had stood up well since its installation when she refurbished the house upon moving in. On a wide, tiled ledge, flush against one side of the tub, ranged an array of bath salts, body lotions, shampoos, sponges, a blue and white Floris pomander and a squat bottle imprisoning a host of multi-coloured baubles of soap.

The daily bath was the best part of her day. She could linger as long as she wished, to transform herself at leisure from an adversarial lawyer into a caring wife and guardian. During that process, she could allow her mind to roam over household routines and workaday matters, instead of punctilious interpretations of the law. Occasionally, her mind would even drift into those intractable issues exercising her husband.

Suen had telephoned her that afternoon -- which meant early morning London time -- to tell her he was going to Cambridge for a couple

of days, to verify some aspects of China's scientific history with friends at the Needham Research Institute. That conversation had accounted, in part, for the delay in leaving the office and failing to get a taxi home.

Poor Suen, when would his researches end? Probably never. It had been ten years since he started scouring through ancient scripts and lost lingos in the great libraries in England. The trouble was that everything dug up opened fresh possibilities. Each insight inevitably led to further researches. His accumulation of notes, jottings, clippings and files simply grew and grew. The book he was attempting would probably never get finished. But what did that matter, so long as he enjoyed the process?

She still liked best Remembering My Teachers, his first book. It was filled with people who became so real that she could almost touch them. Reading it had enabled her to understand her husband a lot better. Pity all those characters had either died or disappeared by the time she met him. She would have liked to have engaged with some of them, particularly his grandmother.

She had always wondered what life within an extended family would be like. It was hard to imagine there would ever be a dull moment. Her own parents never had the experience of living under one roof with grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, sons and daughters and a host of cousins. She herself had been born too late to sample that.

Suen's later books dealt with issues far too complicated for her to bother her head about. His book on international trade, dealing with quotas, tariffs, countervailing duties, anti-dumping clauses and the whole panoply of such devices, had been controversial. His thesis that such devices represented attempts by the haves to keep down the have-nots did not go down well in some circles.

Suen had probably been right. But to follow the logic of his analysis a complete overhaul of the international trading system would be

required. None of the big players would agree. Besides, Hong Kong exporters always possessed sufficiently cunning to outfox the restrictive regimes of importing countries. She didn't need to fuss over such issues. She had enough trouble framing arguments for "loss of ancient light" for clients, in a city where sprouting skyscrapers were already creating gloomy canyons nibbling away at the sky.

In any event, how many books ever really changed anything or even endured? Certainly none of Cissie Lee's, filled with the froth of the mundane. Liu Shao-Chi, China's Head of State, reprinted in 1962 his How To Be A Good Communist. It sold fifteen million copies in three years, out-selling Chairman Mao's books by ten to one. Where was that title now? And where did it land its author? Because the book challenged some of Chairman Mao's policies, Liu got stripped of office, was tortured and consigned to a terrible lingering death. Books could be dangerous things.

It would be as well not to dwell upon paths chosen by others, she reflected. Some of the ones she had taken had not turned out very well. Po-Chun's insistence on her guardianship of Amber had saddled her with duties she could not avoid. But Amber had turned out a darling, helping her to relegate the worst of her past into the locked corners of her mind.

Her niece's departure for America in the autumn, however, was already worrying her. She had been procrastinating over dealing with some of its implications.

She picked up a bathing husk, lifted one of her legs and began gently scrubbing and massaging her calf. Its muscles felt slightly weary, no doubt due to tramping back up to Bowen Road with a heavy briefcase. They seemed to improve under her ministrations.

Bowen Road. Who in heaven's name was Bowen? Had he been an ex-Governor or an ex-Colonial Secretary or some other bird of passage? There had been so many roads named after those itinerant

mandarins. It was hard to remember who occupied which post.

Why were the British so fond of attaching the names of individuals to everything they could think of? To roads, squares, parks, buildings, fountains and even roadside benches. In spite of her years in England, she had never understood that practice. Were they trying to stress the essential ephemerality of human existence or somehow to resist it?

Chinese names definitely fell more felicitously upon the ear. The Road of Serene Seas, Spring Garden Lane, the Street of Lanterns. Or, in other Chinese cities, the Avenue of Everlasting Peace, the Road of Benevolence, the Road of Philanthropy. How could any thoroughfare lumbered with names like Bowen, Duddell, Wyndham, Connaught or Arbuthnot compare?

Cultural habits seemed too ingrained. When she was at Roedean, she could not understand why so many English girls were keen to leave their family nests to strike out on their own. She herself had always felt less isolated and more secure within the bosom of her family. After her return to Hong Kong, she made a point of participating in the activities of the Leung Clansmen's Association, in order to become more connected with people distantly related to her. Po-Chun had desired the same, except she had been too ashamed of her poverty to turn up.

She had discussed such differences in cultural outlooks with Suen from time to time, and had once mused over whether Kipling had been right in thinking that East and West could never meet.

Suen replied that the two not only could meet but of necessity had to meet. Otherwise the world would be done for.

“Engaging with another’s culture doesn’t mean making gestures, trying each other’s food or copying each other’s clothing styles.” he had said. “What profits Japanese tourists craning their necks for a few minutes in the Sistine Chapel or Midwestern Americans photographing

themselves at Angkor Wat? Even inter-marrying may not help. Certain forms of homogenisation are actually a disservice. The problem is that a person must be reasonably rooted in one culture before he can appreciate another. Most educational systems are not geared up to providing the first, let alone the second.”

What a tall order, she reflected, as she turned her attention to scrubbing her other calf.

Instances of similar cultural anomalies kept cropping up during the course of her work. She recalled in particular how helpless she had once felt after accepting a watching brief in a murder trial.

The case involved two Chinese friends living in adjacent streets. An argument arose between them over a trifle. Neither would concede the point, however, and as time went by their petty disagreement was nursed into a major grievance. Mutual friends and neighbours began to tease them over their silliness. That made matters worse. One night, one of them waylaid the other and stabbed him to death. The case was open and shut. The murderer pleaded guilty and was sentenced to death.

A problem arose, however, when the Governor decided to commute the death sentence to life imprisonment. The victim's family felt aggrieved and demanded to know why. They wanted to appeal.

The family consisted of a bed-ridden grandfather, the widow and four children. The eldest, a bright lad of fifteen, had aimed to study medicine. The loss of the breadwinner not only scuppered that ambition but rendered precarious the entire future of the family.

She appreciated that most Chinese believed in retributive justice, just like the Jews in the Old Testament. The death penalty existed on the local statute books. Therefore the family could not understand the reason for the commutation.

She tried to explain that the British Parliament had abolished

the death penalty for Britain, rendering it inexpedient to allow any execution in a British colony. As a consequence, commutations to life imprisonment for murder in Hong Kong had become routine.

The widow broke into tears on hearing her explanation. She felt her family had suffered an injustice. She soon became too distressed to speak. Her younger children also started to cry.

The eldest son attempted to calm his mother and his siblings. Then he took charge.

“If the law provides for death, shouldn’t the law be obeyed?” he asked. “Why should it be ignored because strangers thousands of miles away have decided differently for themselves?”

“There are provisions in the law here for the Governor-in-Council to use his discretion to grant clemency,” she explained.

“But you said commutations were routine. How can discretions be routine?”

She sympathised with the boy. She had been caught out. The legal mind thrived on definitions and in the nuances of words. The boy had tripped her up. Political realities had created an anomaly. She hoped the boy would understand without too much scrutiny.

“The reality is that Britain is the metropolitan power and it can adopt such procedures,” she said. “I’m afraid the sentence has already been commuted and there is no appeal.”

“Then why not openly abolish the death penalty here? An occupying power can do that, can’t it? Why mislead us into thinking we can secure a certain kind of justice when in reality we cannot?”

“Changing the law to eliminate the death penalty requires an enactment by the local legislature,” she said evenly, hiding every trace of impatience in her voice. “A Bill has to be published before an enactment. I’m sure public opinion is with you. People will react strongly against

abolition. Appointed Chinese legislators will feel bound to speak against it. Even European ones will hesitate to speak openly in favour of it. An awkward situation will then arise, pitting the government against an expressed democratic wish. There will also be racial and political undertones. Local Chinese opinion against distant imperial ones. Nobody wants that kind of public embarrassment.”

The boy stared at her dully. “Since the government here has never practised democracy, why does that matter? Abolishing the death penalty against our wishes would at least be honest. Our forebears have believed in the death penalty for thousands of years. We want to retain it. If the government wants to deny it to us, let it do so openly.”

“Lots of nations used to believe in the death penalty, even Britain. But its Parliament has moved away from that. More emphasis is now placed on human rights, on the right to life.”

The boy’s brows knitted in bewilderment. “If the British are so keen about human lives, why are they making so many deadly weapons to sell all over the world?”

“I’m sorry. You’re now touching on matters of national security and defence, on international politics. I’m afraid those topics do not fall within my brief. I’m deeply sorry for the tragedy your family has suffered. But I regret I can’t help you further.”

A look of disappointment spread across the boy’s face. It was as if he had expected answers and all he got were evasions.

He nodded. “I read an article in a magazine recently,” he said. “The writer said the world is governed largely on the basis of shams and hypocrisies. Perhaps he can help me understand. His name didn’t appear in the article. He just called himself Plain Speaker. I hope I can find him.”

Her heart gave a start. Although she had no idea about the article the boy was referring to, she knew that Plain Speaker was one of the

pseudonyms used by Suen!

“The magazine’s editor might be able to help you,” she said.

The boy turned to his tearful mother and said: “Come, Mother, let us go. This lady cannot help us.”

Po-Chee shook her head in despair in recalling the interview. The bath water suddenly seemed to have turned cold. She sat up and added more hot water.

Why were her thoughts taking her back to that old case, she asked herself. She hadn’t wanted to go in that direction. Her bath was supposed to relax her, to take away her cares, not to remind her of irreconcilable situations. Yet her train of thought rolled relentlessly onwards, picking up speed along the tracks of memory.

Over dinner that evening, she had told Suen what had transpired at her meeting with the murdered man’s family, indicating that a boy might come looking for Plain Speaker. She asked if she might see the article which had affected the boy.

After their meal, Suen went to fetch the magazine while she retired to the sitting room. He handed it over to her without saying a word. He then sat down quietly opposite her to sip his tea.

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She remembered being startled, because that magazine had been a radical one Suen had never previously written for. It had a limited circulation and a reputation for provocative articles.

She began reading the piece. It had appeared some three weeks prior to her interview with the family. The timing was significant, as it appeared in 1981, a turbulent year in Sino-British relationships. The two countries had been locked in secret negotiations over the future of Hong

Kong for two years. During that entire period they had been unable to agree on even an agenda for substantive talks. Rumours began buzzing around the colony like bluebottles around a rotting carcass. Dread mounted steadily among its five million inhabitants.

Suen's article berated the stupidity and the blindness of all parties, declaring their positions as blinkered, absurd and cowardly. She remembered well his arguments.

The nub of the matter, Suen had opined as Plain Speaker, was that the British political classes were focused on legal rights under international law while Chinese leaders rejected totally "unequal treaties" extracted under force of arms.

From the British point of view, Britain held Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula in perpetuity, under treaties concluded after the first two Opium Wars. After the third dust-up, however, the New Territories were handed over on only a 99-year lease, which would expire on the stroke of midnight on the 30th of June in 1997.

So far as the British were concerned, that meant all Crown leases in the New Territories were wasting assets. With the approach of that forbidding hour, title deeds pledged to banks would be reduced to worthless pieces of paper. The security for loans and mortgages would vanish. Provisions for bad debts would have to be made. Profits would be reduced. Flights of capital would begin. Banking reserves might fall below legal requirements. Loans would have to be recalled. Debtors would default. Red ink would spread like a virus over corporate accounts. Stock and financial markets would tumble. The Hong Kong dollar would collapse. British investments in the colony would be at risk, as would invisible earnings. All the comfortable assumptions behind free enterprise economics could come crashing down, sending financial shock waves around the world. A quick, orderly solution was imperative.

The Chinese position on Hong Kong had been clearly stated by Chou En-Lai decades ago -- the blemish on China's national pride would be lanced when the time was ripe. It stood to reason that, since no unequal treaty could be recognised, the 99-year lease on the New Territories also had no validity. Any date specified in an unequal treaty was no different from any other date. It could pass noticed or not, as circumstances required. China had indicated, through well-established back channels, it was prepared to allow the 1997 date to pass unnoticed. Life in Hong Kong could continue as before, with Britain retaining its squatter's occupation.

That solution of leaving well enough alone was not without merit, Suen argued. China was alive to the fact that its approach might create legal and financial awkwardness for the British. But capitalists were supposed to be risk-takers, so why such a brouhaha over a bit of uncertainty? If they wanted to continue to draw benefits from Hong Kong, they would have to sort out their own legal hang-ups.

Suen lamented the failure of two sophisticated bureaucracies to move beyond their mutual obsessions. Whitehall mandarins and their ministers, in his view, had misread China. They had judged the country's leadership to be weak and divided after a heated succession struggle. Its economy was deemed to be in chaos after ten years of Cultural Revolution and its capital projects were languishing for want of plants and equipment. Domestic unrest was spreading and Taiwan remained a running sore.

Moreover, large sections of the British establishment actually believed that British administrative brilliance was responsible for the Hong Kong goose laying its golden eggs. It thought China could not do without Britain and that an extension of the New Territories lease was there merely for the asking. Or, at worst, a continuation of British management under nominal Chinese sovereignty.

Needless to say, the Chinese leadership took a completely

different view. No financial or economic advantage mattered two hoots against the imperative of restoring national dignity and pride.

Suen had reserved his most excoriating criticisms, however, for the inhabitants of the colony. They were displaying a spineless and unforgivable silence in the face of the political battle being fought over them, he declared. Had they no views, no dignity, no aspirations?

It was true that China's position had to some extent cut the ground from under the feet of Hong Kong residents. China had declared that it spoke for all Chinese, whether in Hong Kong or elsewhere. Who could be considered a Chinese had, since imperial times, been defined by race, culture and temperament. On that basis there was no need for any Hong Kong representative to be present at talks dealing with the future of a tiny alienated corner of China. For residents to ask to be represented was tantamount to asserting they were not Chinese. Given the strong historical, cultural, familial and emotional links with China, that proposition was impossible for any Chinese in Hong Kong to advance openly.

But how could they remain so supine after Britain had signalled its intention to abandon them? Those born as British subjects had already seen their right to settle in Britain surreptitiously stripped under the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962. The later 1981 Nationality Act represented another slamming of the door in their faces. Under its terms their status had been further reduced from that of "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies" to the still more inferior one of "British Dependent Territory Citizen".

A news blackout had also been imposed by both sides on the substance of the talks, so that Hong Kong people remained in the dark as to which of their rights had been traded away. In the face of such developments, why had people not risen up? They were among the best educated and most savvy people in Asia.

Different sections of the population had different reasons for keeping their mouths shut, Suen explained. Communist sympathisers would rather place their faith in Peking than in perfidious Albion. The wealthy already had foreign bolt-holes and Swiss bank accounts. They saw no advantage in queering future business opportunities in China by speaking out. Professionals and skilled technicians, out of genuine concerns or blue funk, were already applying for immigrant visas to Canada, Australia, Singapore, the United States and elsewhere.

As for the working masses, what could they do? They were Chinese. They remained tied by kith and kin, by emotion, by history, by a culture of countless generations. How could they abandon all that? Their forebears had taught them that in times of upheaval, the yielding survived while the unyielding perished. And they, like their kinfolk across the border, were accustomed to yielding.

A significant section of the masses -- those who had sold their services to the British Crown, sworn allegiance to the British Queen and, possibly, shed blood on that account -- had been rendered silent by private anxieties. They had done what had been required of them for decades. But, now, the promised pensions for their old age seemed in jeopardy. Their expatriate bosses avoided the subject. They had their own pensions to worry about. Would future masters of Hong Kong honour British civil service contracts or would they seek to exact vengeance for disloyalty and treason and to settle old scores?

That question resonated particularly for those employed in the Special Branch and in other secret agencies operated in collusion with Americans. In unsympathetic eyes, they were regarded as informers, traitors and turncoats. They had been arresting and interrogating their fellow countrymen for the British. When the dreaded day came, would their British handlers abandon them to the tender mercies of their future

masters? Surely, in all good conscience they must be offered refuge in some nook in that distant isle? Or had they outlived their usefulness?

In most walks of life, similar considerations prevailed. Most, however, calculated that 1997 was still a long way away. Each harboured within his soul that gambler's flaw. Living in the wheeling-dealing city they had jointly created, each convinced himself there might yet be a chance for the God of Wealth to smile upon him. Or if not upon him, then at least upon his children or his children's children.

Since such a mixture of delusion, miscalculation, self-interest and cowardice coloured the attitude of Hong Kong residents, Suen asserted, they deserved no better than to be treated as chattels, to be traded across the political poker table. They would pass their lives without ever realising that the world was being governed on the basis of shams and hypocrisies.

Suen concluded by predicting that one or two hundred years hence, some future academic tackling dispassionately the disgraceful saga of Hong Kong's re-unification with China, was likely to judge that none of the parties involved had come away with honour.

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Po-Chee reached a hand over her shoulder to scrub her back. She recalled that she had been stung at the time by Suen's words. They seemed to be directed as much at her as at others.

She had been only a child at the time of the Commonwealth Immigration Act. But she could have done something in 1981. She was a solicitor. She could have rallied the support of fellow lawyers, mounted legal challenges, kicked up a fuss. The fact was she didn't. She had maintained a culpable silence, which had as much to do with the unhealed wound of Yun's loss as her resignation about accepting whatever Fate had

in store.

The rest of that evening came back to her in all its wounding details, like a distressing dream.

“You didn’t tell me you were writing such a provocative piece,” she had begun, tentatively, after finishing the article.

“No chance,” Suen replied, blandly. “The editor rang at the last moment. Rushed job, to meet a deadline. You were out at some charitable function. I stayed up all night to write it. By the time I had finished the next morning, you had already left for work.”

“The piece doesn’t sound like you,” she pressed on.

Suen shrugged.

“You seemed out to make enemies of everyone.”

“Don’t you agree with the substance of my arguments?”

“Well, yes. But you could have been put them more diplomatically, less provocatively.”

“Weasel words are for politicians. No other way to put unvarnished truths when everyone is conspiring to dodge them. A strong dose of reality could serve as a healthy purgative.”

“We’ve both studied in England. We know the vast majority of British people are decent and caring. Just look at some of the expatriates who’ve worked so hard with me for local charities. Your piece sounded as if you regarded them all as rotters.”

“I implied nothing of the sort,” Suen retorted, angrily. “I, too, greatly admire the British people. I’ve only attacked their government, which is altogether a different creature. Can’t you see that the British people are being bamboozled over what’s happening here, just as we have been? Their fears have been stoked by disinformation. They’re being fed the prospect of millions of Chinese refugees descending upon them. Can’t think of a single British government in recent times which has reflected the

decency of ordinary voters in its foreign or colonial policies. Can you?"

She felt stumped by the challenge. "The government stood on the side of freedom during the Second World War," she said, weakly.

"Yes, after Ethiopia, after Spain, after Munich. After the Fascists had left it with no more room to retreat."

"If you're so convinced of the correctness of your analysis, why did you use a pen name? Why didn't you put your own name to the article?" She knew even as she flung out those questions that they constituted low blows.

Suen put down the tea cup he was holding. A look of astonishment crept over his face.

"I did think about that," he said, in a softer, almost wistful, voice. "I wanted people to reflect on what I was saying, to do some self-examination, and not to be deflected. If I had used my own name, I know they would react with something like: 'Oh, Lam Yiu-Suen. He would talk like that, wouldn't he? He's loaded, living on fortunes left by ancestors. Got a home in London to run to. Was he here when the Japs came? Did he share our hardships during the Korean War? He spent years living the good life elsewhere. He can't be considered one of us. We have to stay, come hell or high water. He's got escape routes. Talk's easy from a safe distance.' Is that what you want, to keep them blinded to reality?"

The acuity in Suen's analysis caused her to bite her lip. "Oh, of course, not! But painting the picture in such stark colours doesn't help. What can anyone do? What do you expect from them?"

"A demand to be heard, for a start. An end to their colonial mentality, for another. What about some statement of their aspirations?"

"Like what, for example?"

"The government here's the largest single employer. The civil service unions should have got together to demand, for example, the

restoration of the right of abode in Britain for British subjects who have served the British Crown for thirty years or more.”

She shook her head. “That’ll never get off the ground. The unions will be arguing among themselves over why non-British subjects with thirty years of service should not be included. The present legal position is that anyone who has resided in Hong Kong for seven years is considered a Hong Kong believer. The unions would consider it invidious to distinguish between civil servants who are British subjects and those who are merely believers.”

“That’s precisely the kind of pettifogging approach the Brits have been counting on, endless bickering among ourselves, so there would never be a united front. No doubt they’re hoping we would tie ourselves in knots, arguing over whether the thirty years of service ought to be continuous or not. Or over some other legal technicality.”

She felt a sudden resentment because Suen seemed to be devaluing her profession. Man-made laws had flaws. They were frequently made on the basis of expediency rather than on high principles. She had been trained to spot and anticipate legal technicalities. That was how she earned her keep. She had accepted the narrow constraints within which she practiced her profession. For Suen to sound so dismissive hurt her.

“What damn good would a demand like that do?” she said, venting her vexation. “A person with thirty years’ service is bound to have family here, children and grandchildren. Would any clerk or hawker control officer want to uproot himself to travel half way round the world to live in a cold and unfamiliar place?”

“Most likely, not,” Suen replied flatly. “But to possess a right does not necessarily mean it has to be exercised. It’s like freedom. You want to know you have it, whether you exercise it or not. The point is that

British subjects in Hong Kong had a right and it was taken away by fiat, not because of any threat from us but because of wider apprehensions about other colonials. That's not right. We should attempt to get it back as a matter of principle."

"We would never get it back. Even if the civil service unions get around to becoming united in making a demand -- which is highly unlikely -- Whitehall will just come back to say that the proposal has wider implications for other ex-colonies, that there are important questions of equity, that parliamentary time is tight and a host of other fatuous excuses. It's a lost cause."

"Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for. Taking a stand's more important than victory or defeat. Rejection would show up how little the government cares about people who have served them loyally for decades, and how riddled with humbug the governance of the world is."

Crazy, uncompromising idealist, she thought. Yet that was one of the very reasons she loved him. She knew he was just trying to express his own frustrations but his words still seemed aimed at her and her legalistic habits of thought. Was he trying to provoke her out of her gnawing depression, to make her fight? Or was he trying to indicate his disappointment with her or merely to give vent to his own frustrations?

"Yes, I imagine if you were Emperor of the World, everything would turn out much better," she said, tartly.

Suen looked dumbfounded for a moment, as if he couldn't make out what he had heard. Then he burst out in a bright rattle of laughter. "My dearest darling," he cried. "If I were emperor I wouldn't have a second to call my own. And I would be the greatest fool alive if I didn't toss away every crown just to spend an hour with you."

His sudden charm disarmed her, as it had done so often in the past.

“Come,” he said, rising from his seat and coming towards her, bestowing a smile. “Let’s get a breath of air.”

She stood up obediently. He placed an arm around her waist and led her through the French windows onto the verandah.

It was a fine, clear night. The moonlight fell upon the verandah’s stone parapet like hoar frost. The hum of activity in the restless city seemed muted and far away.

She felt appeased and suddenly at peace. It had been a long time since she had allowed herself to get so close to him. She slipped an arm around Suen’s waist and together they paced the moonlit verandah in companionable silence. As they walked she could feel strong currents of affection flowing between them. She felt her old desire for him creeping up in her and she tightened her arm around his waist. After strolling for ten minutes they went upstairs and she led him to her bed.

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Po-Chee let in more hot water after scrubbing her back, before submerging herself again beneath the suds.

Subsequent events had proved Suen right. Hong Kong residents continued to flounder with indecision while Britain pressed ahead with its ill-conceived strategies.

The British were met with stern rebuffs. When Mrs. Thatcher visited Peking in September of 1982, she was told in uncompromising terms by China’s Paramount Ruler that unless Britain co-operated, China would take back Hong Kong well before 1997.

The popular belief was that the demarche so unnerved Mrs. Thatcher that she stumbled going down the steps of the Great Hall of the People. Soothsayers read her faltering steps as an ill omen.

When news of Mrs. Thatcher's mishap reached Hong Kong, alarm spread. Equivocal statements from Whitehall added to the unease. Confidence began to ebb. By September of the following year the stock market index had dropped to 600 from 1,100, property prices had halved and the Hong Kong dollar had plunged from 5.9 to an American dollar to a staggering 9.5 to one. One or two local banks teetered on the brink of default. The People's Daily blamed those problems on British mismanagement.

Eventually, the Hong Kong dollar was re-linked at 7.8 to the American dollar. That steadied nerves. But the move represented a substantial devaluation made for political reasons rather than because of economic fundamentals.

Notwithstanding the woes besetting the colony at that time, Po-Chee had reacted to developments with an ambivalent satisfaction. Like most of her countrymen, she still felt stung by ancient wrongs, by signatures extracted under duress. She felt an uncommon glee in Britain being given its come-uppance. It had lorded over China and its people for too long. Her country, once derided by the West as "the Sick Man of Asia", had at last recovered its ability to deal with foreigners on a more equal footing. Recollections of how the Emperor Chien Lung had dealt with Lord Macartney almost two centuries ago swelled her with a secret pride.

Once the dependence of the colony on China's goodwill had been made patent for all to see, British minds concentrated quickly upon the prospect of China emerging as the greatest untapped consumer market in the world. That led inevitably to the signing in December of 1984 of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, on essentially Chinese terms. The fate of Hong Kong's millions was skated over with pious words as Britain prepared to surrender control in 1997.

Suen had been right, too, over how little honour would accrue

to all those involved in the whole unseemly affair.

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Po-Chee sat up again in the bath and lifted an arm to scrub it. She reminisced over that moonlit night of so many years ago. After their stroll on the verandah she and Suen had made their first long and healing love since their loss of Yun. She sighed on remembering.

Then she noticed the sagging triceps she had been scrubbing and her unshaven armpit and misery filled her. A surge of remembered pain rushed through her and she began to sob. Fragments of memory assailed her. The sound of Yun choking, the feel of his lifeless body in her arms. She suddenly smashed both her fists down upon the sudsy water in the bath. Water splattered onto the floor as well as on the tiled ledge holding the bathing accessories.

No, no, she thought, trembling and breathing hard. No more drifting back to those locked corners of the mind. They held only demons of the past. To venture there would lead to further sessions with Dr. Ma. She should only look forward. She must make up her mind and tell Suen on his return whether she was ready to try again for a family. If she continued to tremble on the brink of indecision, she would remain forever trapped by the past.