

## Phirun

The devastating Christmas squatter fire in 1953 had altered the course of Suen's life. Another tragedy in the spring of 1955, this time involving the death of Uncle Pak from a massive heart attack, altered it again. Aunt Soo-Leung's status as a widow in mourning rendered her immediately no longer an acceptable marriage broker.

Those developments stunned Suen's grandmother and left her in poor spirits. It seemed to her that Fate had turned her well-laid plans upside down.

Suen, however, saw the turn of events in quite a different way. He felt sorry for his aunt's loss but he also felt sorry for himself. The suddenness of his uncle's death demonstrated to him that life was precarious and that it was an absurdity to spend his time each night at the Telegraph. His life was dribbling away to no purpose and the temporary respite from the marital merry-go-round was small consolation.

One afternoon, therefore, he tackled his grandmother before leaving for work.

"Grandma, I want to fit in more education during Aunt Soo-Leung's period of mourning," he said.

"What education?" his grandmother replied, despondently.

"Does Grandma remember my old friend Kim?"

"Yes, of course. You had him up for dinner two or three times. I quite liked him. What's he doing now?"

"Don't know. He went back to China five years ago and no one has heard from him since."

"Wasn't smart to go back at that unsettling time. What's that to do with your wanting more education?"

"Kim used to urge me to look to the great novelists, rather than to scientists, to understand the human soul. I've been thinking about that. I thought I might study literature for a while, read a few novels. I've

concentrated too much on Western history and philosophy at Oxford.”

His grandmother did not reply for a moment. Her aging eyes clouded over and she toyed with the handle of her bamboo cane. “You want to leave again,” she said, finally.

“Learning literature is better than wasting time at the Telegraph.”

“Literature might frighten you, when it reveals how much darkness can lurk inside human souls.”

“Isn’t that more reason to shine a light on them?”

His grandmother did not respond and Suen waited in silence, fearful of his proposal getting lost within a wider discussion.

After an interval his grandmother said: “Thinking of England again?”

“Actually I had France in mind.”

“France? Why France?”

“The French are supposed to have a different outlook from the British. Their defeat at Dien Bien Phu last year must have dented their pride. Now the Algerians want independence too. That’s more complicated because Algeria is constitutionally part of France, with many French settlers there. It’ll be interesting to see how they handle that.”

He hoped his grandmother would not stumble upon his real motive for selecting France. A number of the present Chinese leaders had studied or worked in France. He wanted an insight into how their experiences might be influencing the way they were leading China. To prevent his grandmother suspecting his real motive, he kept up a banal recital of his interest in French cuisine and customs.

“You don’t know French,” his grandmother interrupted.

“Shouldn’t be too difficult. A few months’ concentrated study should remedy that. The Sorbonne runs special courses in French for

foreign students.

His grandmother nodded ambivalently. “I suppose there’s no harm in studying until your aunt’s out of mourning. But you must come back as soon as that’s over.”

“That’s not realistic, Grandma. It must be longer than that. The sea voyages alone would take many weeks. Then time’s needed to get on top of the language before fitting in the university year.”

“All right, all right. Hurry up and get it over with.”

“Oh, thank you, Grandma!”

A few days later, just as he was trying to devise some clever argument to persuade his grandmother to allow him to fly to France, another air disaster occurred. An Air India plane, chartered to fly a Chinese delegation from Hong Kong to the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, was blown up by a Kuomintang spy who planted a bomb on it at Kai Tak Airport. Sixteen people were killed. The bomber fled to Taiwan. His identity was known. But because no diplomatic ties existed between Britain and Taiwan, all attempts to bring the state-sponsored terrorist to justice failed. Glumly, Suen reconciled himself to travelling by Messageries Maritimes to Marseilles.

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Suen was immediately enraptured by the springtime radiance of Paris. The grand boulevards might have been put in place by Napoleon and Haussmann but it was the warrens of crooked side streets, with their everyday sights, sounds and smells, which delighted him most. The ancient cobblestones nudging his feet, the café tables burgeoning on sidewalks, the sudden aroma of freshly baked bread, the men fishing gravely along the Seine, the plane trees and poplars, the barges and

tugboats, the children feeding pigeons in the Tuileries, the svelte and haughty women exuding subtle perfumes, the glimpses of lovers kissing in darkened doorways, a fleeting mirage of Hugo's hunchback glowering at him from Nôtre Dame.

The gendarmes, in sombre caps, capes and white batons, seemed more fitting symbols of the law than the British bobbies in their comical helmets. The abundance of second-hand bookstalls on the Left Bank delighted him. Browsing among them reminded him of his expeditions around Charing Cross in London and Wing Hon Road in Canton, where he and his grandmother had stopped on their way back from Kunming.

He quickly found himself a furnished apartment in a small building in a side street in Montparnasse. He selected that bohemian district in the expectation of chancing upon a writer or painter of promise, a Proust in the making or a future Picasso.

The apartment was a modest second floor affair. It overlooked a quiet street and had quaint sagging floors. Its bathroom astounded him by the smallest, barely a quarter of the size of the ones at Bowen Road. Yet, somehow, space had been found to fit in an unfamiliar installation -- a bidet. If he had not read Henry Miller, it would have taken him a while to figure out its purpose.

The building was overseen by a concierge, Madame Dandieu, who was not at all the kind of hawk-eyed, ill-tempered harridan popular literature painted holders of such posts to be. She was plump, jolly and easy-going, but she had a disconcerting shadow of a moustache upon her upper lip, like those he had seen on English adolescents.

He adjusted to Montparnasse readily. Its pace of life was nowhere near as harried as Hong Kong's. He found the street markets infinitely cleaner and better organised than hawker pitches back home. He

also found local cuisine to his taste and soon settled down to learning French and the soft elision of its consonants.

As he became better acquainted with the French, however, he discovered that the commonplace Gallic shrug could hide a multiplicity of emotions. Helplessness, despair, wounded pride, indifference, ennui. He didn't know enough about them to identify which prevailed at any given moment. Possibly the German occupation still rankled with some. Others might be smarting from the more recent humiliation at the hands of the Vietnamese. The growing demand by Algerians for independence implied a repudiation of both the concept of a French Union and its policy of assimilating North African Muslims. But the roots of discontent seemed to stretch farther back. In 1946 General De Gaulle had thrown in his hand as Prime Minister over what he had characterised as "the powerlessness of the state". Since then a score of governments had collapsed, leaving behind an atmosphere of irresolution and drift. Politicians seemed paralysed while intellectuals bickered.

Had the ideals of the French Revolution been reduced to this, he wondered. Could it be that certain nations needed to be ruled by a man on horseback? Or, in Marxist terms, by a democratic dictatorship? How France tackled its present problems might suggest how French-trained Chinese leaders might tackle problems in their country.

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On a pleasant afternoon in late June, Suen went for coffee at a pavement café in his neighbourhood. He had with him a collection of Maupassant's short stories in French. The sun was bright and its rays fell conveniently on the opposite side of the street, where a sign in large red letters proclaimed: "Dubo -- Dubon -- Dubonnet". There was a gentle

breeze, giving an intimation of ease and well-being. He was in the middle of tackling a story when a voice addressed him.

“Excusez-moi, Monsieur, êtes-vous Chinois?”

He looked up to find a stocky, middle-aged man of oriental aspect, with close-cropped hair, a broad, flat nose and a ridge of bone above thick eyebrows. He was scruffily dressed.

“Oui,” Suen replied, hesitantly. The man did not appear Chinese. Yet he couldn't place his nationality from the inflections in his French. Some smudges of paint on his fingers and on his clothes suggested he might be an artist, just the kind of person he was hoping to encounter.

On that supposition, Suen added: “Parlez-vous anglais?”

“Za little bit,” the man struggled gallantly.

“Well, however little that might be, your English is bound to be better than my French. I'm just a beginner. How may I help you?”

“You can recommend books on Chinese painting?”

“Certainly. But won't you sit down and have a drink first?”

The man gave a half-bow. “Merci. I from Cambodia, name is Phirun.” His voice was surprisingly soft and musical.

Suen rose, offered his hand, gave his name and again invited the stranger to take a seat. “I'm a student, from Hong Kong,” he said.

Phirun shook his hand and sat down. “Ah, Hong Kong! Heard it's fantastique. Sorry to trouble but . . . .”

“Please, order a drink first,” Suen said, in a friendly tone.

Phirun asked for a glass of red wine.

“Salut,” the Cambodian said, when the drink arrived.

Suen responded with a sip of coffee. “How nice to meet someone from Cambodia,” he said. “I'm afraid I know very little about your country, except that there are quite a few overseas Chinese there.”

“Oui, very cosmopolitan,” Phirun said. “Phnom Penh only

capital in world where outsiders outnumber natives. We have Vietnamese, Laotians, French, Chinese, Muslim Chams, Malays, members of animist tribes, all living together, loving together.”

Suen smiled enthusiastically. “Many cities claim to be cosmopolitan but I doubt very many can match that mix.”

“My father’s best friend Chinese.”

“Ahh! Is that how you got interested in Chinese painting?”

“Mais non. I am printer, like father.”

“You aim to print books on Chinese painting? Is that it?”

“Non, I want learn Chinese painting.”

“I see. A tall order. Why come to France for that?”

“Came to learn Western painting. Many styles originate in France. But two weeks ago, I experienced -- how you say? -- vision, revelation, illumination?”

“How very interesting! I’d love to hear about it.”

“Long story.”

“Well, I’ve plenty of time, if you don’t mind telling it.”

The Cambodian glanced at his wine glass, which was by now empty. Suen quickly ordered more wine and coffee.

“What you study?” Phirun asked, after the replenishment had arrived and another toast had been drunk.

“French, at the moment. But I’m hoping to get into the Sorbonne to study comparative literature.”

Phirun nodded. “You young. Good. Me everything too late.”

The Cambodian’s sadness made Suen want to console him. “It’s never too late to learn,” he said. “In our tradition, painting is an expression of maturity, meant for people who’ve already found accommodation with life. Many of the greatest masters distinguished themselves first in some other field, as scholars, government officials,

poets, astronomers and so forth, before taking up painting.”

The Cambodian brightened. “True?”

“Yes.”

“Need books to explain.”

“I suggest the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting.”

“Is most up-to-date?”

“No, it first came out more than two and a half centuries ago. There are later books and earlier books. But the Manual remains the best distillation of the ancient ideals and standards established by masters.”

Phirun held up a hand. He pulled out of his pocket a scruffy piece of paper and a pencil stub and said: “Please write down.”

Suen did as he was asked.

“Name of author, please.”

Suen smiled and wrote down “Wong Kai”. He explained that Wong Kai had actually written only the first part of the book. The rest had been done largely by his brothers, Shih and Nieh.

Phirun nodded. “Available in French, yes?”

“No idea. Studied it in Chinese.”

“You also paint?”

“Not actually. I practised calligraphy.”

“Calligraphy?”

“Yes. The brush strokes are much the same as for painting. The two are closely related.”

“I see. Will ask at bookstores.”

“It’s a big book. More than four hundred pages of text and woodblock illustrations, setting out various stages of apprenticeship.”

The Cambodian looked thoughtful, running thick, strong fingers through his hair a couple of times. “Apprenticeship?”

Suen nodded. He did not want to discourage the man by

stating how long that period might be. “I’m dying to hear of your flash of illumination,” he said.

“Ah, yes,” the Cambodian said, wanly. The eyes beneath the prominent ridge of bone seemed to be calculating whether the listener had a serious interest or was merely making conversation. He began his story in halting English, supplemented by an occasional word or phrase in French.

His father ran a small printing works in Phnom Penh, producing calendars, comics, postcards and the like. He was the eldest son and had attended a traditional Buddhist pagoda school since the age of five. He had also learnt to operate the platen press and to set type. When his father visited customers and suppliers, he tagged along.

The main paper supplier was also his father’s closest friend, a Chinese he called Uncle Soong, who had a greying moustache and tiny tufts of hair growing out of his ears. He learnt at his shop to differentiate between various types and grades of paper. Once every two or three weeks, his father would also take him to visit his friend during evenings -- usually when it rained -- to smoke opium.

“Yes,” Suen interposed. “Opium was quite legal then. Many smoked it, including Europeans. Most Far Eastern colonies relied heavily on its sale for revenue.”

Phirun nodded wryly. “Right yesterday, wrong today. Maybe right again tomorrow, no?”

His father and Uncle Soong used to smoke lying on a divan in a darkened room, sharing a long pipe with an ivory mouthpiece. He would watch from a stool at the foot of the divan. Between pipes, his father and his friend would talk about all manner of things -- from the price of wood pulp to the time when the Khmer Empire built the temples at Angkor Wat. As he listened, the sweet pungency of the drug would make him dream of bygone days before his country became a French Protectorate.

The Cambodian took another gulp of wine.

Suen heard him recount how his father had switched him to a French missionary school when he was eight. Teachers there showed him reproductions of pictures by Manet, Degas and Delacroix and he thought it must be wonderful to be able to capture so magnificently the colours and beauty of life. He began to sketch. His teachers encouraged him. His parents praised him for the likenesses of fruits, flowers and temples in his drawings. But it was obvious to him that, as the only son, he had to concentrate on learning the family business and not on art.

When he was nine, his mother gave birth to another son. He saw his chance to become an artist when his brother was old enough to help his father. He broached that subject timidly after a few years. But his father said a man could hardly make a living drawing pictures. In any event, his father added, it would be a long time before his brother would be old enough to handle printing. By then he himself would have become a parent with responsibilities.

He felt disheartened. A few days later, when visiting Uncle Soong again, he heard his father ask how Chinese painters went about earning a living.

Uncle Soong explained that Chinese did not consider painting a profession. It was an activity aimed at uncovering truths hidden in nature, for one's own enjoyment. Or to use as a gift to a friend. It was not considered gentlemanly to part with a painting for money.

"A very traditional attitude," Suen observed. "Though one which is increasingly challenged in our commercial age."

Phirun emptied his wine again. "I bore you with story?"

"Not in the least," Suen quickly exclaimed and ordered more wine. "I'm fascinated. I envy your conversations with your father. I never had that during my childhood. My father died when I was six."

The Cambodian expressed his regrets. He then described how Uncle Soong had shown him a landscape in black and white with lots of vermilion seals hanging in another room. It depicted misty mountains and waterfalls, with plenty of empty spaces. Some of the lines were so sparse that the work appeared somehow unfinished. Uncle Soong said that the painting had been done by a friend to assist his meditations.

“Ahh!” Suen interrupted. “That was when you developed an interest in Chinese paintings!”

“Sadly, non,” Phirun replied. “Au contraire, I not impressed. Landscape looked unreal, not like European ones with glorious colours. I asked if colours would be added later. Uncle Soong laughed. He said when I learn to see with inner eye all colours of universe would be there. I didn’t believe him. Thought Father had asked him to discourage me.”

Phirun went on to recount the passage of the next five years, during which his brother replaced him as an understudy. Sadly, his mother died while giving birth to his youngest sister. He continued painting with a passion, experimenting with crayons, charcoal, ink, water colours and paint. His lack of grounding frustrated him. His French teachers suggested an art school in Paris but he knew his family could not afford it. Cambodia had no university at that time. He saw no road ahead.

Suen found the unfolding of the tale in a mixture of two alien tongues strangely touching. Here were two people from the same region of the world, each so ignorant of the other’s language that both had to rely on the tongues of imperialists to communicate! He envied for a moment the Cambodian’s struggle to express himself, for his accented voice and faulty grammar sounded more authentic than his own fluency in English. He almost wanted to fracture his English in order to demonstrate solidarity. He was so enthralled by the struggles of another human being to achieve his ambitions that he could hardly wait for the Cambodian to continue.

Phirun had devoted his spare time after high school to devouring all the art books he could lay his hands on. He studied the bright colours of Delacroix, the attempts by the Impressionists to capture the sensations of light. But he also considered Gauguin's reproach to the Impressionists for neglecting the hidden realities in things and Cezanne's point about depicting the unchanging structure of nature rather than its appearances. He became confused by the conflict of opinions, by the shifting trends of Post-Impressionism, Surrealism, Fauvism and Cubism.

He didn't know which route to follow. He tried all of them. Yet nothing he produced seemed right. His father, concerned over the time he was spending on unsettling paintings, ordered him into a Buddhist monastery for a month, to fast and to undergo spiritual instruction.

Phirun paused and his eyes glazed over, as if his recollections were about to take a more painful turn. He continued in an altered timbre.

The chanting of sutras and the discourses by the monks had been familiar to him since childhood. He had long known about man being trapped in an endless cycle of painful rebirths because of egoistic desires. But his desire to capture the beauty and essence of life did not seem very wrongful. He came out of the monastery still unable to resist the impulse to capture images on paper and canvas. He consoled himself with the fact that Henri Rousseau, too, had been completely self-taught and that Constantin Guys did not begin to draw till he was almost forty.

He remained determined to press on, driving himself ever harder. The following year his father sent him for another spell in the monastery but with no different result. His father thought marriage might make a difference and duly found him a bride. The passion which his wife satisfied, however, was not the one troubling him.

Phirun paused. His drink was empty again. Suen ordered another. When it came, the Cambodian took another gulp, scratched his

chin and stared distractedly into his glass.

Suen began to feel uneasy. An hour ago the Cambodian had been a total stranger. He had engaged him in conversation because he thought him one of those artistic types he wanted to meet. But he hadn't anticipated the man pouring out his whole life story in such detail. The tale being unfolded sounded as unsettling as his own search for a meaningful goal.

Suddenly, it came to him that Ralfie had also set out his family's antecedents to him at considerable length. Where was the man heading with his recital? Knowing too much about a person implied some acceptance of responsibility for him. He was not yet ready for that.

"My wife fine woman," Phirun declared, cutting into Suen's apprehensions. "Daughter of poultry dealer. Good-humoured, undemanding, good child-bearing hips. Produced two sons, chop-chop. Ah, responsibilities! They close like traps! Hours set aside for art stolen by sons. Demands for stories, for feeding grandfather's chicken, for pet tortoises, for help with homework. Endless parental duties.

"Turned forty-three in 1953, year Cambodia re-gained independence from France. Wanted my chance too. Like Gauguin, going crazy at home. Asked father, wife for permission to do own thing, since brother can help with business, own sons on way to finishing high school. Got my way. Been here two years."

Phirun expelled a sigh dense with regret.

It occurred to Suen the Cambodian was seeking some form of absolution for abandoning home and family to pursue an unreachd dream. Suen understood fully that need but felt that absolution was not his to give. "You have found what you've been looking for?" he asked.

Phirun shook his head. "Technical competence, oui. Can produce likeness of Dutch masters, van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec. Tourists

at Sacré Coeur buy. Earn money. But worthless parodies, for people who know no better. But two weeks ago, got inkling where to go.”

“What happened?”

“Exhibition of oriental art at Musée Guimet. Two Chinese landscapes in black and white in show. Label said by unidentified Sung artist, copying “white painting” style of Wei Hsieh, fourth century Eastern Chin master. Couldn’t understand. Why follow style of someone dead more than thousand years? No contemporary Italian painter would paint like Botticelli, unless he’s street side vendor like me. Never paid attention to Chinese art before. Studied paintings and their many empty spaces for long time. The emptiness reminded me of struggles to find own style, of worries of father, abandonment of wife and children, wasted patience of monks. Saw own failure as son, husband, brother, father, acolyte, painter. Self-disgust.

“Then, slowly, saw new dimensions, altered depths in pictures. Fancied hearing echoes of chanted sutras, tingling of monastic bells. Alors, faint colouring emerged, like colours of infinity. Awe-struck! Head spun, like after many drinks. Trick of imagination or seeing at last with inner eye? Sensed I had tried to capture wrong reality in wrong way. Who would understand? Uncle Soong gone to ancestors. How to learn Chinese landscapes?”

“Extraordinary!” Suen exclaimed. “Sages say mysteries of nature can often be best captured in blank spaces, marrying the Tao of living with the Tao of painting.”

The Cambodian rose to go.

“Won’t you have another drink?”

Phirun shook his head. “Merci. Must find book.”

Suen held out a hand. “Look, do you live nearby?”

The Cambodian gave an address a few streets away.

“Good,” Suen said. “Let’s meet back here, same time, next week. I hope you can find a French translation of the Manual. If not, we can think of something else.”

“Très bien,” Phirun said. The two men shook hands and the Cambodian went on his way.

Suen watched the retreating figure, solid, purposeful. He reflected upon the vagaries of life. A chance meeting on a sunny afternoon. A stranger revealing his frustrated ambitions. After decades, a flash of illumination. Amazing!

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A week later Suen and Phirun met at the same café. The Cambodian reported failure. His unprepossessing features were downcast. He had found a couple of art books containing reproductions of Chinese paintings but no French translation of the Mustard Seed Garden Manual.

“Never mind,” Suen said. “I’m going to London after Bastille Day. I have a Chinese copy there. Not original edition, of course! A reprint, from about forty years ago.”

“In London? You said you from Hong Kong,” Phirun said.

“I have a home in London.”

“Family rich, yes?”

Suen evaded a direct reply. “My grandmother bought a house there a few years back. I have to arrange for its upkeep.”

“How understand book in Chinese?”

“I can have a shot at translating it.

“How kind! I wait your return.” The Cambodian’s face beamed with anticipation.

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Suen had little difficulty finding the Manual at Radnor Place. The book not only gathered together the rules and precepts of ancient masters but presented them in rhyme, to facilitate memorisation. He remembered being instructed by Tutor Tseng to chant them. Their cadences came back to him afresh.

He had brought the Manual to London with the intention of practising calligraphy during breaks at Oxford. As things turned out, he had hardly picked up a writing brush during his entire stay in England. He had resorted to a fountain pen when writing home to his grandmother.

Those recollections shamed him. How easy it had been to fall for ease and convenience! He had gone from writing brush to fountain pen and then to ballpoint after the war. Much later, after his apprenticeship at the Herald, he had turned to the typewriter, sacrificing the small, quotidian engagement with penmanship and beauty for the sake of speedier communication.

Perhaps it was not only in the interest of speed that he had switched. His grandmother always wrote with a brush, and from the way the characters had been executed he could sometimes glean her disposition at the time of writing. That was hardly possible from the scratchings of a pen or a ballpoint. Maybe, subconsciously, he had refrained from the brush for fear of his grandmother's practised eye detecting flaws and deceptions from the way he had formed his characters.

He glanced at his cluttered desk. His writing implements -- a rack of writing brushes of various sizes, a thick stick of ink and a black stone ink-slab -- now stood in mute indictment.

What was happening to him? He was becoming forgetful of the teachings instilled by Tutor Tseng. Confucius had said that a man

ought to be stimulated by poetry, established by the rules of propriety and perfected by music. Tutor Tseng had added that a Chinese could not be considered an educated gentleman without some competence in music. He had not adhered properly to the rules of propriety, let alone perfected himself through music. He had engaged in corrupt practices at the Central Magistracy, lusted after Mona, let down friends, seduced Kate into an adulterous affair, slipped into casual liaisons with loose women at the nocturnal haunts in Hong Kong.

As if all those failings had not been enough, he had used his intention to learn the zither as an excuse to delay going to Oxford. It was laughable to think that he had once imagined following Tao Yuan-Ming in losing himself in the purity of music from a zither without strings!

In spite of a First at Oxford, what had he achieved? Nothing worth tuppence. People less favoured than himself, like Kim and Su and Dum-Dum, had at least tried to overcome the adverse circumstances they had found themselves in. Now it appeared that his new-found Cambodian acquaintance was doing likewise. Only he was left frittering his time away, pretending to be a scholar.

Faced with his idle writing implements, he decided to take them back to Paris to put them to use. He resolved to surprise his grandmother by sending her a letter written with a brush.

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Two days later, in a contrite mood, he arranged to pay a courtesy call on Dr. Loughridge and his wife at Oxford. He was hopeful of gleaning some news of Ralfie. The train from Paddington rumbled pleasantly along the tracks of buried memories.

He found his former tutor and wife in fine fettle. Dr.

Loughridge was still grappling with the elusive conundrums of Taoism while his wife had become more addicted to bridge than ever.

But news of Ralfie turned out to be devastating. The man was dead, gunned down about three months earlier in the Old Quarter of Jerusalem. No one ever discovered what he was doing there, why he had been killed, or by whom. The speculation was that the killer or killers could have been from any side of the bitter and complicated political divides.

The news fell upon him like a sledgehammer. It left him struggling with a dry, nameless anguish that could not be assuaged. The possibility that Ralfie might have died at the very moment he had been penning some banal headline at the Telegraph over a random report of violence in Palestine added to his distress.

The letter he had expected from Ralfie would now never come. There would no longer be any opportunity to express what he had felt about their friendship. Ralfie was gone forever, leaving a shadow of something unfinished between them.

Later, back at Radnor Place, he speculated over whether Ralfie had been attempting some personal gesture in the Old Quarter. His friend had always believed a way could be found for Jews and Arabs of every persuasion to live together in peace. He had probably paid for that faith with his life.

He wondered suddenly if Kate knew of Ralfie's passing. Memories of her crowded back like ghosts as well. If Kate was unaware, she had a right to know. If she already knew, then she would be the best person to share his grief with. On that basis he tried to contact her on another trip to Oxford but she was no longer at her old address. Someone at her school told him she had resigned and had "gone back north".

That further disappointment left him reeling. It was as if two

vital pieces of himself had been surgically and painfully removed at the same time. He would never be whole again. His parents, Tutor Tseng, Kim, and now Ralfie and Kate had all been lost. Was he destined to keep losing more and more of himself until nothing remained except a great big empty shell?

He eventually hurried back to Paris a saddened man.

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After returning to a much depopulated August Paris, Suen immediately arranged to meet Phirun for dinner at a local bistro with a reputation for serving an authentic Marseilles bouillabaisse. It was an unpretentious establishment, filled with odours of choice food and unchoice cigarettes. Phirun was already waiting, wreathed in a haze of smoke.

“Here it is!” Suen cried, holding aloft his copy of the Manual.

Phirun’s eyes brightened. He was wearing the same paint-stained shirt he had worn at their first meeting. The chin on his brown Asiatic face was covered with a stubble of several days. He reached out excitedly for the book. “Merci, merci. Dinner’s on me. Certainement.”

Suen contested the offer. To dine off someone so impecunious embarrassed him. But when Phirun insisted, he went along. They ordered the speciality of the house and a bottle of vin ordinaire.

Phirun began leafing through the book. “Ah, so much to learn, judging from illustrations,” he said, shaking his head in wonder. “Trees, rocks, grasses, flowering plants. Translating text heavy work. I am sorry.”

“I should make clear I have no experience as a painter. I’ve only done calligraphy, but I can explain the basic rules and principles.”

“More than I have right to expect.”

“Foreigners often regard Chinese landscapes as ritualised

dispositions of hills, clouds, rocks, huts and so forth. Actually they are attempts to summon up reality rather than to imitate it. Creativity comes from conveying meaning, order and harmony through established conventions and traditions.”

The waiter came and set before them steaming pots of bouillabaisse, containing prawns, clams and mussels as well as fish within a crust of cheese. The two men ate and drank with gusto.

“Chinese painting, at its highest level, demands much from an artist,” Suen said. “He has to use his heart and mind to convey the cosmic order, the transcendental nature of the Tao. The difference between a painted landscape and an actual landscape is only one of scale, not of nature. According to the Manual, an artist must use the apparently ritualistic dispositions of mountains, clouds and empty spaces to reveal the dynamics of nature. It may take decades to achieve.”

“Mon Dieu!”

Suen chuckled. “I’ve hesitated to paint myself. With your background, it should not take so long. The Chinese brush is held differently from the Western one. The brushstrokes are different. Each must be complete in itself. No touching up is permitted.”

Phirun groaned. He had been drinking copiously during Suen’s explanations. “How to begin?” he asked.

“Very slowly.”

The Cambodian threw up his hands, feigning a Gallic gesture of frustration. The second bottle of wine had been finished. “Must get drunk tonight,” Phirun said, as he set about ordering another bottle.

“Not on my account, please. I’ve had enough.”

Phirun dismissed the objection. “Rule of house. Must have three bottles before customers can leave.”

“I’m not buying that one!” Suen said, laughing, recalling how

Ralfie's friends had taken advantage of him at the Oxford pub. His heart felt a stab of sorrow as he wondered suddenly where the four pen and ink drawings done by Maurice had gone.

Phirun ordered a third bottle and replenished their glasses.

"The Manual is divided into three parts, which are in turn subdivided into thirteen sections," Suen said. "I think I can translate one section a week. We can then meet and discuss. Okay?"

Phirun nodded with alacrity.

"Literal translations are apt to be confusing," Suen continued. "I shall try to answer questions as best I can. We can't move too fast. Even just the technical rules come to quite a chunk. Six Canons, six Essentials, six Qualities, three Faults and twelve Things to be Avoided."

The Cambodian looked both alarmed and embarrassed. "Big tasks for both. I'm sorry."

"I've asked my grandma to send over some painting materials, together with some copybooks used by children when learning to write characters with a brush."

"Expect me learn Chinese?"

Suen laughed. "The copybooks are to familiarize you with the use of a Chinese brush. Hopefully, you'll learn some characters too. Could be helpful for me to see some of your current work."

"Ah, certainement! Immédiatement. Come my place right away. Have special bottle to share."

"You're very kind but I've had more than enough. Your special bottle will have to wait for another occasion."

Phirun winked. "Can send you to paradise, mon ami."

"Paradise will also have to wait. I know my limits and I'm desperate for sleep. What's this special potion, anyway?"

"Called Green Fairy. Absinthe."

“I thought that has been made illegal?”

“Yes, politicians are killjoys. Want to control everybody while making mess of own lives.”

“I’ve never tried absinthe but I’d rather defer that experience. Thanks just the same. It’s bed for me.”

“Alone?”

“Of course!” Suen cried, reddening.

“Mon ami, I know bar with obliging jeunes filles. Can go for one more drink, no?”

“If I had another drink, I would never get home.”

“But may get something else.”

“No! Thank you.”

“Ah, a young man who resists temptations of Paris. What self-control! All right, come tomorrow to see pictures. Any time. Return Manual then. Must study illustrations tonight.”

On that note, they finished their evening. Phirun settled the bill and they headed out into the summer evening. There was still a little brightness on the horizon. Wisps of clouds laced the sky and in the distance the tip of the Eiffel Tower could be seen poking into the fading light. Mellowed by food and wine, Suen meandered home.

\* \* \*

Phirun occupied a garret with a skylight offering good northern light. It was crammed with paintings and works in progress. Dominating the limited space was a battered chaise longue covered in faded red velvet. An easel a short distance away supported a frame shrouded with a grubby piece of cloth. Piled upon a pine table was a jumble of pigments, tubes of paint, palette knives, linseed oil, turpentine, priming agents, paint rags, a jar

of water for washing brushes and other oddments. An antiquated cupboard and a single rickety pine chair completed the furnishings in the room.

“So this is what an artist’s studio looks like,” Suen said, taking in both its chaos and its air of undefinable cosiness.

“Non, this workplace of man in petty commerce,” Phirun said, directing his guest to the chaise longue. “Artist yet to be found.” He picked up at random a frame from a stack leaning against a wall and turned it around. It pictured a rabbi, done in oil.

“Chiaroscuro à la Rembrandt,” Phirun said, dismissively. “Americans love it. Sold so many can paint with eyes closed.”

Then, dropping the oil back into its original position he moved casually about the room, picking up and displaying a variety of pictures. There were pastoral scenes in the manner of the Impressionists and pictures of Parisian night-life à la Toulouse-Lautrec.

Knowing little about Western art or its requirements for tone, colouring and effects, Suen ventured: “They all look good to me.”

“Pah! Passable copies,” the Cambodian said. “Now that over! Must learn Chinese brush.” He fetched the Manual from the pine table and returned it to Suen.

Noting how cramped the garret was, Suen said: “I suggest we meet at my place in a couple of days, after I’ve translated the first section. I have brushes and ink there to demonstrate with. Save bringing them here.”

“Of course,” Phirun replied. “Must not cause more trouble. Please, no rush on my account.”

“No problem. I’ll contact you when I’m ready. What are you working on now?” He gestured with his head towards the easel. He could only see the back of a canvas covered by the grubby cloth.

“Difficult commission, for paying rent.”

Phirun went over to remove the covering. Suen stood up and followed him to the front of the easel.

A stretched linen canvas about two feet by one and a half was revealed. It had been primed with white pigment. Thinly outlined upon it was a naked woman reclining on a chaise longue. Her head and one of her arms were resting on the backrest. But her face was blank and the picture had no colour. Yet, from the outline alone, her neck appeared fetchingly graceful, her breasts magnificently weighty, her buttocks rounded and voluptuously attractive.

“Stunning creature, whoever she may be!” Suen exclaimed.  
“A figment of your imagination or a real person?”

“Real person, bien s ur. Commissioned by admirer, member of Bourse. Now regret accepting. Mais, fee already spent. Can capture form, not spirit. Job can’t finish.”

“Who is she?”

“Most sought after model in Paris. Also most expensive.”

“Expensive? I thought beautiful women virtually throw themselves at artists, in order to be immortalised.”

“Hah! In romantic novels, oui. Pretty models not cheap. Wives and mistresses can do service but, alors, you pay some other way. Models at the Grande Chaumi re all expect pay. Particularly Wild Rose. Thank goodness patron pays.”

“You mean her name is Rose?”

“Non, non, her name Isabelle, American from Iowa. State flower for Iowa is Wild Rose, I’m told. She usually called Wild Rose by artists and intellectuals in love with her.”

“Don’t tell me you’re in love with her too?”

“Artists naturally love beauty. But me, I’m Buddhist and husband. Enough trouble keeping vows. Have seen men grow weak in

knees at smile from Isabelle. Not woman to lose heart to, at my age.”

Suen studied the faceless figure outlined on the canvas again. His curiosity and imagination were engaged. Memories of Kate came to him. “Now you’ve got me curious over this paragon of beauty,” he said. “You’d better finish it so I can see what she looks like.”

“Can do better. Can introduce you when I return to commission.”

\* \* \*

On the appointed afternoon for the first session on the Manual, Suen welcomed Phirun to his apartment and handed him the translation. He had made careful preparations, being fully aware a person unfamiliar with Chinese traditions might be mystified by talk about accord, harmony, and “achieving a method that seemed no method at all”. More down-to-earth terms had to be used, though Phirun’s Buddhist upbringing was an advantage.

The Manual sometimes baffled him too. Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, had asserted that the Tao could not be conveyed by either words or silences. And yet it was precisely in that state which was neither speech nor silence that the transcendental nature of the Tao could be apprehended. A challenge to explain.

The discussions with Phirun at the first session turned out to be wide-ranging. The artist proved a quick and eager learner, testing Suen’s modest knowledge of both calligraphy and painting. Suen demonstrated how the brush ought to be held and how to control the amount of ink. At the end of the session the men went for dinner and reached an understanding to go Dutch on meals thereafter.

By the time the second session came around, Suen had received

from his grandmother a large parcel of painting paraphernalia. It included a stone ink-slab with a cover carved with a dragon, two sticks of ink, a few sets of brushes, a celadon brush holder, a brush rest, a water pot, several stacks of copybooks and a quire of the special paper from South Anhui much favoured by painters and calligraphers.

“A small gift to start you on your way,” Suen said, as he handed the whole parcel over.

“Oh, no, cannot accept so much!” Phirun exclaimed. “Too excessive, too generous. Must allow me to pay, for some at least.”

“Why talk of payments between friends?” Suen replied. “If you insist on accounting, you’ll have to write my grandma -- in Chinese -- because she paid for it all. Nothing to do with me.”

Phirun shook his head and wagged a finger at Suen. “You rascal! Don’t think I not know what you do. Am very grateful. Merci. If there’s service I can do, ask.”

“The walls of this apartment are rather bare. A couple of your pictures would do a world of good.”

“No, no, not the ones I have. They’re worthless, without spirit. Wait till find métier. Then I do.”

“Fair enough,” Suen said.

Thus their relationship deepened and they fell naturally into a pattern of regular meetings and dinners.

\* \* \*

Phirun must have applied himself with great diligence because he turned up at Suen’s apartment the very next day with a copybook filled with brushwork. He asked for his efforts to be assessed. Suen undertook the task as Tutor Tseng had done years ago, circling strokes that had been

well executed and pointing out the defects in others.

During that week Suen signed up for a course at the Sorbonne, scheduled to begin in October.

On the day for the third session on the Manual, Suen received a letter from Su, reporting great fanfare in the Communist media about the return of a number of Chinese scientists, engineers, agronomists, biologists, surgeons and other specialists from Europe and America. The one attracting the most attention was Dr. Hsieh Chia-Lin, a 35-year-old nuclear physicist who had been working at Stanford University in California. The Chinese authorities asserted that returnees were patriots, anxious to assist in the reconstruction of the Motherland.

The news startled Suen. Kim had gone back to China ages ago. Now experts in various fields were going back as well. Well-qualified people were casting aside material comfort and promising careers to return to a country which had replaced Confucian aphorisms and individual eccentricities with shouted slogans and clenched-fist salutes, which had taught children to spy on elders, turned brother against brother, neighbour against neighbour, spouses against each other. Why? Had he alone remained too scared to take a stand for ideals he believed in? Such introspections so troubled him that when Phirun turned up for their session on the Manual, he asked to be excused. He said a hiccup had occurred over his registration at the Sorbonne which he had to attend to.

\* \* \*

Suen's quandaries plagued him over the next few days. He sat gloomily at cafés with an open book for long periods and wandered around Paris, criss-crossing the Seine from one bank to the other. The nights proved even more of a trial.

Winter had almost arrived. The wind had sharpened vindictively, turning skies to the colour of slate. Leaves everywhere fell one by one, like slow, helpless tears.

The more he thought about his predicament, the more absurd studying at the Sorbonne appeared, for the more he threw himself into the language and culture of another nation, the more he missed his own. The aching melancholy in so many Tang and Sung poems lamenting separation from home washed over him. He was almost at the point of packing up to head for home when he remembered that a loveless marriage awaited him like a gaol sentence at the other end.

His grandma's comment about the darkness residing in some human souls came back to him. What darkness was in his? Intellectual fraudulence, fear of pain or plain cowardice? Kim, Ralfie and Sanjay had all acted on their beliefs. Only he was still vacillating.

Self-loathing was consuming him when he happened to find himself standing opposite the Île Saint-Louis. The Seine was flowing sluggishly by and for a brief moment he understood why some chose to take their own lives. As he stared at the island in the middle of the river, a wayward thought struck. He had been reading Baudelaire. It had been on that very island, at the Hotel Lauzun, that the poet had used to gather with friends to discuss the burning issues of the day, seeking truth or paradise through the machine à penser of opium. Another thought followed. Blake had spoken of the need to cleanse the doors of perception to see things clearly. Was his failure to see his road ahead due to the cobwebs of history and of his own upbringing?

He had no experience of opium beyond witnessing the endless processions of addicts and opium den keepers at the Central Magistracy. He wondered whether Phirun knew where opium could be had in Paris. Trying some might be illuminating. After one of the sessions on the

Manual, Suen asked the Cambodian if he had ever smoked opium.

“Non,” Phirun replied. “Loved smell, wanted to try. Even asked father. But couldn’t meet preconditions.”

“Preconditions?”

“Oui, father agreed, provided five preconditions he and Uncle Soong had set could be met.”

Phirun bunched the fingers of one hand and released a digit at a time as he spelt out each condition. “First three easy: dark room, bright lamp, pipe that sings. Fourth, ah, such romantic trimming -- rain on window! Understood then why rained so often when we headed for Uncle Soong’s. Fifth deemed vital, absolument, father said -- company of loquacious friend.”

The Cambodian smiled as he left his outstretched palm in the air. “Never found loquacious friend, never smoked. Now, have loquacious friend, but no urge. Life strange, non? Why ask about opium?”

“I thought it might help me with a problem,” Suen replied, and began unburdening himself, in much the same way Phirun had done a few months earlier.

Phirun nodded sympathetically now and then as Suen spoke. When Suen had finished, the Cambodian said: “Blake great artist and thinker. But, mon ami, you should remember also Baudelaire’s warning. Person using poison to think may soon find unable to think without poison. Drugs no good for solving problem.”

“What do you recommend then?”

“Good meal and loquacious friend, non?” Phirun said. “If not enough, some Green Fairy afterwards, eh?” he added, with a laugh.