

Isabelle

Suen woke with a fuzzy sense of lightness, as if he were buoyed by some strange alteration in the laws of gravity. The cozy penumbra in which he found himself disorientated him further. Surely, it should still be daylight? What had happened to the yellow strips of sunlight which had been seeping through the shutters not so long ago? Had he slept through the day? Slowly, vaguely, recollections floated to the surface of his consciousness. He broke into a smile. It had not been a dream.

Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, once dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering here and there. Upon waking, however, he was no longer sure whether he had dreamt of being a butterfly or whether he was at that moment a butterfly dreaming it was a man.

A similar uncertainty in Suen was dispelled when he smelt the spoor of love on the bed and felt a delicious tiredness in his muscles. Beneath the crumpled sheets he was naked. Snatches of the afternoon came back with remembered pleasure.

Phirun had told him the previous evening he was about to resume work on his Isabelle commission the following morning. Would he care to be introduced?

He most certainly would. Phirun's description of her beauty and the outline of her figure he had seen on canvas had filled him with curiosity. He accordingly rushed over to his friend's garret well before the appointed hour. The Cambodian was already primed for work, with the unfinished painting on the easel. He felt a thrill of anticipation.

Isabelle was punctual. She arrived dressed in a light brown camel hair coat. Its wide collar was turned up against the March cold. Her golden hair was neatly secured at the nape of her neck.

Even before Phirun could introduce them, Suen had fallen under her spell. The girl was more entrancing than Marilyn Monroe and

Brigitte Bardot rolled up in one, more captivating than any screen idol he had ever seen. Her face blossomed with youth and rude health. Her blue-green eyes, under-shadowed by a vaguely dark hint of passion, sparkled with mischief. Her mouth was soft and sensual, her smile playful. He judged her to be at least three or four years younger than himself.

“Hi! Phirun tells me you taught him Chinese landscapes,” Isabelle said, upon introduction. Her voice was warm and smoky.

“Phirun exaggerates,” Suen replied, his heart beating a little faster. “I’m merely his translator.”

“Not what I hear,” she said, taking off her coat and tossing it onto a corner of the floor, revealing a stunning figure in a baby blue sweater and a pair of snug denim jeans. The sweater left little to the imagination.

“What did you hear? Phirun’s full of wild assertions once he’s had a tippie too many.”

“No defamations!” the artist cut in with feigned seriousness. They all laughed.

“I only go by what I hear,” Isabelle allowed, still amused. “Know nothing about Chinese landscapes. The only thing Chinese I’ve come across was the chop suey in New York.”

“Chop suey isn’t Chinese. It’s an American invention.”

“No kidding? Just goes to show! A lot of bum information around. You’d better start educating me. You’re supposed to be some kind of cross between a Taoist guru and a Zen master, aren’t you?”

“That I’m not!” Suen laughed deprecatingly. “As for bum information, I’ve been told Montparnasse is filled with beautiful models. After months of nosing around, you’re the first I’ve seen.”

After a few more pleasantries, Phirun said: “Come, children. Work to do.”

Isabelle turned to Phirun and asked: “Tout?”

“S’il vous plaît,” Phirun answered. He had switched on an electrical fire to warm the studio.

Without the slightest hesitation Isabelle removed her sweater. She had nothing on underneath. Her breasts hung full and majestic, firmer and more beautiful than Kate’s, more enticing than Mona’s. A surge of desire virtually paralysed him. He had been celibate since arriving in Paris.

Isabelle stepped out of a pair of rope-soled loafers and proceeded to remove her jeans. She had no undergarment on either. Her buttocks were full and provocative. With a tug of her hand and a shake of her head, her hair came cascading down like burnished gold.

He was astonished to see the hair falling down in large natural waves to below her waist, almost down to a darker delta between her thighs. That difference in colour was a discovery for him.

Isabelle did not appear the least discomfited by her nakedness. She moved with exceptional grace, with fluidity and poetry.

Isabelle draped herself over the backrest of the red velvet chaise longue, with one arm pillowing her head, in the manner outlined in Phirun’s painting. Her other arm, and the fall of her hair, obscured her breasts but that only served to enhance their allure.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her nakedness seemed luminous. He studied her from head to toe, from her proud breasts to the shy dimple of her navel, from her rounded haunches to the shapeliness of her thighs. Her perfectly formed knees and ankles might have belonged to one of Rodin’s graces. But it was the weighty magnificence of her breasts that set his libido aflame.

Isabelle gazed nonchalantly into the middle distance. He sensed that she was deliberately avoiding his eyes. Yet, somehow, that avoidance seemed a provocation. The cast of her mouth suggested she was amused by his attentions.

He suddenly felt foolish and embarrassed and sought refuge in watching Phirun applying a layer of paint on the canvas. The colour was so faint it did not resemble the colour of flesh. He gave a quizzical look.

The artist caught it and responded: “Be patient, mon ami. Not like Chinese painting. Flesh tone must be built up slowly, layer by layer. Technique learnt from Titian.”

After a couple of hours, the light from the skylight faded and Phirun called it a day. He had by then given the body a more realistic hue but he had yet to tackle the face.

Since it was almost lunch time, Suen suggested a meal together. He wanted to retain the company of Isabelle.

“Sure, why not,” Isabelle said, as she put on her clothes. She deftly twisted and bundled her hair back onto the nape of her neck.

“You go ahead,” Phirun said. “Had big breakfast.”

Suen took Isabelle to an unpretentious neighbourhood brasserie. He had resisted the impulse to head for a fancy restaurant. He wanted to pass as an ordinary student. He hoped Phirun hadn't given too much away. They settled for boeuf bourguignon and a bottle of red wine.

During the course of the meal Suen noted for the first time that Isabelle had strong fingers, the kind associated with women of action. Chinese scholars and artists tended to idealise the hands of women, endowing them with slender fingers meant for painting, embroidery and musical instruments. Isabelle's hands were those of a heroine in a Hollywood Western, capable of grabbing a horse by its mane and leaping onto its back in one bound. What did a small flaw matter in so superb an embodiment of beauty? He was already weaving dreams around her.

“I understand you're from Iowa,” he said. “What's it like?”

“Full of corn,” Isabelle replied. “For cattle feed, cornflakes.”

“What about the town you're from?”

Isabelle gave a throaty laugh. “I lived on a farm. Iowa is one great big farm, frozen solid in winter. We’re about ten miles from the nearest town, if you can call a place with only one street a town. It’s so small it doesn’t even figure on local maps.”

“Life must be very quiet.”

“You’d better believe it.”

“What brought you to Paris?”

“There wasn’t much to do at home after sundown. Nearest neighbour five miles away. Read loads. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Dos Passos. It’s been said that good Americans go to Paris when they die. I wanted to see for myself. Paris, I mean, not dying.”

Suen chuckled encouragingly. “That’s it?”

“Well, I suppose there was another reason. I’m the only girl in a God-fearing, Bible-thumping family. Also the youngest. Three older brothers who subscribed to Saint Paul’s attitude towards women. We’re all supposed to be fallen, for tempting Adam. I didn’t get enough space or respect. Always ended up with the worst chores. One day I just lit off. Hitch-hiked to Chicago, then New York. Did waitressing, modelling, odd jobs. Now here I am.” She shrugged charmingly.

“How long have you been here?”

“A year.”

“Has it been the heaven you had expected?”

“Well, sort of. Sometimes.”

Isabelle’s voice had taken on a slightly hesitant tone. He couldn’t tell whether it represented disappointment, regret or hurt. Whatever it was, it moved him. Here was a young woman, exposing her body to earn a living, whereas he never had to earn his way. It seemed so unfair.

His speculations were interrupted by Isabelle. “Why am I

telling you all that? I usually never talk about myself.”

“Right chemistry, I suppose.”

He looked across the table into her blue-green eyes. Her long lashes seemed to add a shadow of pathos. Perhaps he could help her. Perhaps they could help each other.

Isabelle drank some wine and returned his gaze, holding it with a half-smile. “Enough about me,” she said. “Tell me about yourself. You speak such neat English, like an Englishman. How come? You’re from Hong Kong, right?”

“My family lives in Hong Kong. But home’s another matter.”

“Oh?”

“My parents died in an accident when I was six. I was brought up by my grandmother. Been a wanderer since, living as long outside Hong Kong as in. Studying here and there, trying to figure out the meaning of life.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” She reached a hand spontaneously across the table and gave his forearm a squeeze.

Almost as spontaneously he reached out and trapped her hand on his forearm, intending to convey more than appreciation. His heart raced at his unaccustomed boldness. He knew something unprecedented was about to happen. Silence stretched warm and pregnant between them.

“You want to make love to me?” Isabelle asked, abruptly.

Suen was rendered speechless by the directness of the question.

“Well?” Isabelle tightened the grip on his arm.

He nodded stupidly.

“Come on, then. Lead the way.”

He settled the bill and felt sheepish when he encountered Madame Dandieu in the hallway. But Isabelle brightly exchanged greetings with the concierge before climbing the stairs.

What had transpired during the rest of that afternoon came back to him in all its erotic splendour. He stretched himself, laced his fingers beneath his head and began recalling the intoxicating smell of her skin, the firm texture of her body, the enticement of her nipples.

Their furious love-making, interspersed with freshets of sleep, had carried him to new infinities. Time seemed suspended. Only the sunlight, fading imperceptibly outside the green and peeling shutters, marked his descent into exhaustion.

When he opened his eyes after one of his dozes, he saw Isabelle bundling her hair at the foot of the bed. Her raised arms lifted her breasts to their full splendour.

“What are you doing?” he asked, surprised. “We should go for dinner.”

“Have to run. Got work to do. Have to earn my keep.”

“What, at this hour?”

Isabelle didn't reply. She began putting on her clothes.

“When will I see you again?”

“Got another sitting with Phirun next Wednesday. I can come by afterwards, if you like.”

“Can I come and watch?”

“No. You distract me.”

He was about to launch an appeal when Isabelle sealed his lips with a kiss. She left the room before he could find his voice.

* * *

Suen met Phirun the following day. By then they had already gone through all the thirteen sections of the Manual. But in order to further his friend's understanding of Chinese painting, Suen had got his

grandmother to secure a reprint of a Ming Dynasty work, The Treatise on the Paintings and Writings of the Ten Bamboo Studios. He began translating the contents as before. The exercise proved illuminating for himself as well. Although he had known of the existence of the treatise, he had never read it previously.

“Had good lunch?” Phirun asked, casually.

“Yes. My goodness, Isabelle’s so absolutely beautiful. How can you concentrate with her lying naked in front of you?”

“By being professional. You have not fallen in love surely?”

“No, nothing like that. She’s just excellent company.”

“She very special. Beautiful model, can work seriously, hard to find. She has more than beauty too.”

“I can believe that.”

“She sits again next Wednesday. Want to come?”

“Better not. She’s bad for my blood pressure. Besides, I’ve got loads of reading to catch up. I’m trying to get through the Comédie Humaine. How many more sittings do you need?”

Phirun shrugged. “Two, three. Once job over, no more commissions. Only work with Chinese brush.”

“Good. When you’re ready, don’t forget the pictures for my apartment. You can do one of Isabelle. I’ll pay for her sittings.”

“Will not forget. No sitting required.” The artist tapped to his head to indicate she was already inside. “Will do something special.”

After a pause, Suen asked: “What kind of man is her patron?”

“Ah, a nobody with money. Thinks he can buy her. But no one can buy that one.”

“He and Isabelle not close?”

Phirun shrugged. “Not my business. Just take fee. Many say winning heart of Wild Rose very difficult. I think, maybe, yes.”

“How do you normally contact her?”

“Leave message at Grande Chaumière.”

“I must have a look at the place.”

Although neither mentioned Isabelle again that day, Suen knew that the painter knew what had occurred between them.

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Suen could barely concentrate on Balzac during the days that followed. By Wednesday he was on tenterhooks. He had filled the apartment with flowers and had laid in supplies of fresh fruits, foie gras and champagne. It suddenly struck him that such extravagances by a struggling student had to be explained. He felt stumped and agitated. Time dragged horribly, till he heard the long anticipated knock on the door. When he saw Isabelle at the threshold, in the same camel hair coat with an upturned collar, he felt at a loss. It was as if the time that had passed since their intimacies had somehow estranged him. He didn't know whether he should offer the common French deux bises or simply gather her up in his arms and ravish her. In the end, he ridiculously extended a hand.

Isabelle accepted the handshake with a sardonic smile. Amusement crinkled the corners of her eyes.

Suen became more flustered. Nothing was going as he had planned. “I've got foie gras and champagne, in case you're hungry.”

“Quite a splash!” Isabelle observed, as she threw off her coat.

Suen stood dumbfounded at the sight of her magnificent figure. “Would you like to eat now?” was all he managed to utter.

Isabelle smiled teasingly. “Unlax, as Bugs Bunny would say. Follow your instincts. Don't filter everything through that head of yours. Isn't there another kind of hunger you'd rather satisfy first?”

Suen rushed to embrace her. They kissed and laughed and danced their way into the bedroom and fell panting upon the bed. Suen reached inside a bedside cabinet to produce a packet of préservatifs. “Got these, just in case. . . ,” he said.

Isabelle laughed her smoky laugh. “A bit late to worry about that now, don’t you think?” She took the packet and flung it away. “Try living dangerously. Never did like the feel of rubber.”

Those brazen remarks disconcerted him as much as her earlier invitation to make love had done. How liberated or promiscuous was this amazing girl? Was this just a casual fling for her? Where was it leading? Things were moving too fast. He felt out of his depth. But his concerns quickly faded as he lost himself in the same sudden heats and moist ecstasies of their initial meeting.

Afterwards, they snacked happily on foie gras and champagne. But again Isabelle declined to stay beyond the afternoon. She agreed, however, to meet him for dinner at Brasserie Lipp the following evening.

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They had settled upon Brasserie Lipp because Isabelle said Hemingway used to dine there. Suen had never heard of the place. When he arrived, he found it a trifle stuffy, its cachet overdone, as if the restaurant took its reputation too seriously.

The arrival of a beautiful blonde clinging to the arm of an Oriental man caused a stir among both waiters and diners alike. The disquiet intensified when Isabelle removed her overcoat, to reveal a black dress with an arresting décolleté.

Both Suen and Isabelle sensed they had aroused a degree of curiosity and suspicion. They decided to play up to it. Isabelle gave Suen

a melting look and offered her hand. Suen took it and began kissing it in a prolonged and exaggerated manner. Murmurs and intakes of breath rose around them. Suen felt a rewarding thrill of naughtiness. He had never done anything like this before. He doubted if that American literary giant ever commanded as much attention when he dined at the brasserie.

They enjoyed a long and leisurely meal, as meals in Paris were meant to be, and played the smitten lovers to the hilt. They spoke little, concentrating instead on their food and their performances as lovers.

After leaving Lipp, they laughed uproariously in the street.

“That was fun,” Isabelle cried, as she slipped an arm around Suen’s. “We’ve put some noses out of joint.”

“Is that why they call you the Wild Rose of Iowa?” Suen said.

“Perhaps. I thought you had hidden talents the day I set eyes on you. You can act too. I suspect I’ve more to discover.”

“Could say the same about you.”

“Come, let me take you to a place I adore,” Isabelle said.

She took Suen to a bar in Rue Jacob. On arrival she was greeted by bartenders and some customers. The bar featured two middle-aged guitarists who sang French folk songs like “Chanson Lorraine” and “Auprès de ma Blonde”.

The atmosphere was snug and friendly; the price of drinks reasonable. By closing time, a hunger for Isabelle as sharp as pain had gathered in Suen. “Come spend the night,” he said, when the bill came.

“Too soon for that, don’t you think?” Isabelle said.

“Why?”

“Didn’t you say the Chinese always believe in moderation, in not rushing things? Besides, roses usually come with thorns.”

“I’ll take my chances!”

Isabelle laughed out loud. “Shouldn’t we at least be sure we’re

right for each other first?”

“We are right for each other! I need you.”

“Just for tonight or longer?”

Suen wanted to say “forever” but a voice inside warned he had no power to make such a commitment. He struggled to find a pleasing but non-committal form of words. None came.

Isabelle, sensing his hesitation, said: “Better put me in a cab, darling. I have a morning sitting. Besides, consider this: a pleasure postponed may be a pleasure enhanced.”

“When will I see you again? How do I get hold of you?”

Isabelle hesitated, her eyes softening. She caressed his face. “I’ll give you my telephone number.”

“What, you’ve got a phone? I’ve been trying to get one since I arrived. The waiting list is interminable.”

“I’ve got influential friends.”

“Wish I had. It’s a damn nuisance having to call my grandmother on Madame Dandieu’s phone and reversing the charges.”

Isabelle scribbled him a number on a bar coaster. “You must promise me never, never, to give this number out to anyone,” she said.

“And if I don’t answer after three rings, please hang up.”

They kissed goodnight in the crisp spring night. Suen, emboldened by desire, slipped a hand beneath her overcoat to squeeze her buttocks. He discovered she had no panties on.

Suen watched helplessly as the cab carried her away. His blood began to race as he speculated about the private life of such an exceptional girl. What kind of secrets would he one day uncover? What would remain forever withheld from him? He knew deep down she was someone he had no business falling in love with.

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Before the end of spring, Phirun had completed his painting of Isabelle and turned his whole attention to perfecting his control of the Chinese brush. Suen met him less regularly than before, due to his academic requirements and to the priority he was giving to securing assignments with Isabelle.

The extended days of summer drifted languorously into the nights of autumn. During that magical period of pseudo-courtship, Suen and Isabelle met roughly once a week, sometimes twice, if Isabelle's hectic modelling schedule permitted. She was apparently in great demand also for evening art classes.

He wanted to know more about her and began picking up clues and piecing them together like a detective. One of the first things he discovered was that Isabelle was quite well read. She could make telling points on essays he had written, be they on the jealousies of Proust or the roulette addiction of Dostoyevsky.

On more personal matters, however, she remained evasive. She never invited him home, for instance. Even after months, she would only say she lived "somewhere on the Left Bank". It occurred to him that she might be kept by an admirer but her limited wardrobe argued against such a supposition. Apart from one or two nice dresses, blue jeans and a sweater or blouse seemed her staple. She displayed an ease and affection towards him which suggested the absence of another entanglement.

That left him wondering if she was earning enough from her work and whether her lodgings were too mean for her to show. He felt guilty over his demands upon her time. He could, of course, pay for her time like the sculptors, photographers or the art classes she posed for. But that would turn their relationship into a commercial one. His instincts

rebelled against it.

He deduced from small gestures her consideration for him went deeper than friendship. But was it fair to allow the development of love when he could no more visualise a future with her than he had been able to with Kate? Hong Kong was not Paris. It was a petty oversized village, where the best human instincts were being buried beneath endless tons of concrete.

There were, in addition, marked differences in temperament. Isabelle was uninhibited and wilful, keen on making a success at modelling. She had once showed him with enormous pride an advertisement in a fashionable French magazine featuring herself promoting a new perfume. She was practically nude, except for a piece of gossamer-like silk draped over parts of her body.

“I was paid a bomb,” she had enthused in her smoky voice. “It was a lucky stroke. Actually, I much prefer posing for struggling artists rather than grasping corporations.”

The whole notion of her exposing her body in her work was painful for him. It went against every Chinese concept of womanly virtue, of modesty, chastity, constancy and acceptable conduct. It underscored the fact anybody with money could hire her and capture her nakedness. It made him jealous, aggrieved and proprietorial in a way he had no right to be. He had more than once had it on the tip of his tongue to say: “Please stop working as a model and I’ll give you whatever you need.” But he knew that would be falling into the same old commercial trap.

He once tried to approach the issue from a different angle. “Have you ever thought of going to college, for more education?” he asked.

“I got educated plenty after skipping home, I’ll tell you,” she replied. “Had to learn very quickly about people, the ones I can trust and the ones I shouldn’t. You’d be surprised how much of an education a

person can get living life in the raw.”

That response humbled him. He felt inadequate. What did he know of life in the raw? He had seen some pathetic villages in China, witnessed the dismal parade of defendants at the Central Magistracy, explored the squatter areas occupied by Ho Yin and fellow unfortunates. But he had never endured their lives of quiet desperation. Poverty had remained largely an abstraction, extracted from books. He felt guilty over having so much. It made him confess that he wasn't really as hard-up as he had pretended to be. He had family allowances sufficient to indulge in every whim of life in Paris -- provided she could spare the time.

“What a surprise!” she responded. “Delighted to spend money in such grand company. But I'm no kept woman. I must earn my keep.”

He still had his Leica camera and he took pictures wherever they went, sometimes as mementoes for themselves and at other times to send home to his grandmother. The ones sent home, naturally, showed no Isabelle.

They invaded every nook and corner of Paris, along streets Utrillo had painted for a bottle of wine, through the tight thoroughfares of the Halles sliced by thin shafts of sunlight. They marvelled at the nocturnal creatures which seemed to emerge at the Rue du Cygne, the delightful covered arcades and the quaint family shops trading in buttons, brooches, scarves and hats. One afternoon, Suen suggested visiting Père Lachaise.

“Why go to a cemetery?” Isabelle asked. “You said the Chinese avoided things associated with death.”

“That's correct. But I've developed a taste for cemeteries. It's humbling to be reminded of the perishability of power and fame.”

“I suppose you're right,” Isabelle said, wistfully.

When they had eventually walked around and paused before Balzac's tomb, both seemed affected by a lingering sadness. So many

stone monuments erected simply to commemorate worm-eaten flesh.

“Is anything permanent?” Isabelle asked.

“Maybe knowledge, or ideas. Maybe also love.”

“You’re such a dreamer.”

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It turned out that Isabelle was quite well-recognised in many parts of Paris. Heads turned at her beauty, of course. Occasionally they also turned in envy, for her happiness appeared so exquisite in the company of an Oriental escort. In spite of their experience at Lipp, Paris was a welcoming place for lovers. It was, after all, a city celebrated for its afternoon trysts, where lovers met between the hours of five and seven before returning to homes, spouses and domestic ennui.

During one of their many sojourns, Isabelle took Suen to a café along St. Germain des Pres where she had friends who called themselves Existentialists. After two or three such occasions, Suen concluded they were partisan, quarrelsome, intense and convinced that life was nonsensical. He couldn’t see the point of their arguing like medieval theologians over what they had deemed to be pointless. Their squabbles, however, seemed to amuse Isabelle.

As time passed, his attachment to Isabelle grew. She invaded his thoughts with increasing frequency. When reading Baudelaire or Rimbaud, she would suddenly make her existence felt. He seemed to live on a more ethereal plane just thinking of her.

During the empty hours of the night, however, when she was not with him, he yearned and hungered for her. He suffered pangs of uncertainty, clouded by jealousy, not knowing where she was or whom she might be with. Yet deep down he knew he had no claims on her. Nor could

he imagine any viable future with her. But still he yearned and suffered.

He remembered Phirun explaining the Buddhist belief that human desires and attachments were the cause of suffering. They fettered human beings to their tormented cycles of births and deaths. The only way to break free was through the attainment of enlightenment.

But the only enlightenment which came to him was an awareness he was being progressively snared within a tightening web of evasions and lies, within that certain darkness in the soul his grandmother had spoken about. The vows of love he was making to Isabelle were not ones he could possibly make good. And his letters home contained not the slightest hint of any involvement with a beautiful American model.

He struggled endlessly to find a way through his predicament. He fantasised about marrying Isabelle. But how could he? His grandmother would never approve, even if it did not mean reducing the entire Lam family to laughing stocks. That could come about simply by someone linking up a virtually naked blonde in certain advertisements with the woman he was presenting as his betrothed. And that would be even before he or anyone else knew the first thing about other obscured aspects of her life.

He could, in extremis, turn his back on his family to pursue love in all its purity and unconditionality. But could he really disappear with his inheritance to some foreign corner of the world? Honour dictated he should at least forfeit the family wealth. But what would he live on then? His chances of gaining even moderately good employment in an alien land would be bleak. To make do with the modelling income of the woman he loved was repugnant to him. Would Isabelle even have him under such circumstances? And even if she would, how long could any love endure on mean street, face to face with life in the raw?

Such concerns seemed to become more insoluble each time he

received a letter from his grandmother. Lost for a solution, he went to unburden himself to Phirun again.

He found his friend working furiously with brush and watercolour on a range of surreal shapes. The Cambodian's efforts resembled those of Picasso, before the Spaniard entered his Cubist phase.

“What surprise!” Phirun exclaimed. “Why so glum? What is problem? You look like you need drink.”

Suen nodded. “Hope I'm not intruding. I'm in deep trouble.”

The Cambodian dismissed the intrusion with a flurry of the hand and immediately went to fetch a bottle of absinthe. “Neat or with louche effect?” he asked, with levity.

“Neat,” Suen said. “My future's clouded enough as it is.”

Phirun had previously shown him how some aesthetes liked to drip water through a cube of sugar into absinthe to watch the green liquor take on the opaque effervescence known as the louche effect.

The two friends settled themselves on the floor, opposite each other. Phirun sat cross-legged while Suen had his legs stretched in front of him, with his back against the red chaise longue.

As Suen sipped the bitter aromatic drink, he recounted the impossible choices he had to face. “I love Isabelle,” he said. “I'd rather die than lose her. But I love my grandmother too. I cannot hurt her. She will never accept Isabelle. What in heaven's name am I going to do?”

Phirun nodded understandingly. “How possible for man to tell another how to live his life or whom he should love?” he said, in his accented English. “Man in love can seldom tell himself. And with someone like Isabelle, well” The artist then gave one of his ambiguous shrugs and left the sentence unfinished.

Suen emptied his drink and sighed. “This'll be the end of me. If I cannot be with Isabelle, I might as well stop living.”

“No, not so serious, surely?”

Suen nodded sombrely.

The Cambodian poured more absinthe and the two friends drank silently for a while.

The drink soon brightened Suen’s mood. “What the hell,” he exclaimed. “Why not just live for the moment? I had friends at Oxford who said long ago that civilisation was fraying at the edges. Look at the Algerian bombs going off all over France, the ridiculous mess over Suez, the Soviet iron heels stomping on Hungary. They’re even having riots in Hong Kong over the tearing down of some paper flags in a resettlement estate. The world has gone potty. Just grab whatever happiness there is, I say. Only the hedonistic life makes sense.”

Phirun pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. After a few puffs, he said: “World shrinking. People also. Who meditates before landscape painting like Uncle Soong now? You been Portugal?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Spent few days there once. Visited cork farm. You know half world’s cork comes from Portugal?”

Suen shook his head.

“But that not crucial. Importance is first harvest comes only after tree grown twenty years. Afterwards, bark cannot be harvested more than once every ten years.”

“Amazing. Didn’t know that.”

“What that tells you?”

Suen took another gulp of his drink and said: “You want to remind me of reflection, of continuity, of family duty. There is a saying in China about forebears planting fruit trees for descendants to harvest. But people don’t care any more.”

Phirun blew a cloud of smoke into the air. “That used to be

old way everywhere. Olive groves around Mediterranean, tiny plots in Asia, farmed for centuries by same families, connecting people to earth and each other. Now disintegrating.”

“Yes, that’s the future. The pursuit of self-interest, every man for himself, the survival of the fittest. I’m finally getting what the Existentialists have been going on about. The times are out of joint and no one can fix them. It’s a nightmare.”

“Nightmares can be fought.”

“Fight them? With what?”

“With art, with words, with deeds, with hope. Painting Guernica, volunteering in Spanish Civil War, doing whatever man can.”

“Individual gestures don’t count for anything. People have been demonstrating all over the world against nuclear weapons. We’ll all be blown up, to be sure. But would the big boys listen?”

“If civilisation wiped out, survivors must begin again. They should know stands taken before them. Must leave fragments, art, fables to illuminate. Help them find connections with past.”

“A romantic notion.”

“I learnt Chinese landscapes very late. You and Mustard Seed Garden Manual helped. How to start without either? Thank you for taking me so far.”

“I didn’t take you anywhere. You had the talent all along.”

By the time the bottle of green liquid was emptied, Suen felt buoyed by an incredible lightness of being. The intractable problems of a short while ago, the shadows in his soul, all seemed to have melted away. Numerous avenues to happiness seemed to beckon. Nothing appeared impossible. All at once, he felt that he and his friend were the only survivors in some epic battle of the universe. He had no idea what they had fought for or whether their side had won or lost. It didn’t seem to matter.

What mattered was that they had survived and could now re-make the world in any way they chose.

* * *

Suen's sense of well-being proved short-lived. He woke the next day with a thundering headache and an aniseed-like taste on his tongue. The pain in his head was so bad he could barely think. But worse was to come. On that same day, a letter came from his grandmother.

"Your aunt is now out of mourning, imperative you do your duty," his grandmother had written. "You're a grown man of twenty-six. Your grandfather had two children by twenty-six. Your father had already brought you into the world before that age. You cannot remain a student forever. You must fulfil your duty ere I close my eyes."

He was indeed a man of twenty-six, still bound by the tangled chains of tradition, duty and love. His father and his grandfather had accepted arranged marriages. They had adjusted to living under foreign domination and, indeed, had prospered as a result. Why couldn't he do likewise? Why could he not compromise with the dictates of his intellect or of his heart?

Everything had appeared so clear and straightforward when he was drinking with Phirun. Art, love, life. All simple, reachable choices. His Cambodian friend had pursued his goal assiduously throughout his life. So had other friends like Kim and Ralfie and the legions who staked their lives on their principles every day. Why couldn't he?

Isabelle arrived at his apartment that evening to find him in his doldrums, nursing his sore head.

"What's happened?" she asked. "You look a sight."

"Had a drinking session with Phirun yesterday," he replied.

“Finished a bottle of absinthe between us. Maybe more. Went on for hours. Lost track. Life choices had seemed so wonderfully plain and obvious for a while. But I’ve lost it. Wish I could get back to it.”

“Oh, you poor dear. You’ve lost your state of ‘kif’, have you? There are other ways of getting it back.”

“Wish I knew how. Ah, to be like Baudelaire at the Hotel Lauzun, like Blake peering through the doors of perception. No muddles.”

“Have a good night’s sleep, my love. I’ll be back tomorrow to show you how.”

The next evening Isabelle turned up with a stash of hashish. He did not ask how she came by it. He was half-afraid to know. He merely followed her instructions and joined her in smoking one joint after another. Colours soon became sharper and more intense. Objects fused around him. Brilliant ideas filled his head and suddenly life made sense again. Before long, he felt god-like and supremely at peace. They made astounding love, with deep-drawn kisses and melded flesh. He reached infinities of pleasure he had never experienced before.

He demanded more of the glorious sex and euphoric forgetfulness the next night and the night after that. Isabelle complied and it seemed he had at last found exactly the kind of life he wanted.

But those days of exhaustion, abandonment and forgetfulness could not last. Isabelle had modelling assignments to honour. Besides, her stash of drugs had run out and could not be replenished without her venturing back to where or from whom she had secured them.

Deprived of the substances to prolong his dream-like existence, the realities of his situation crept back upon him. He remembered with a start he had left his grandmother’s letter unanswered. How long had it been? A week, or had it been longer? With a troubled conscience he went downstairs to borrow Madame Dandieu’s telephone to ring home.

He found his grandmother in a state.

“Why have you not informed me of the date of your return, Ah Suen?” his grandmother demanded. Her voice sounded anxious, impatient and weary. “Something is not right. Have you been ill? Is there something troubling you? What are you hiding from me?”

“Nothing’s the matter, Grandma,” he replied. “Booking a passage just got slightly delayed because I needed to complete some essays for my degree.”

“Essays? Of what importance are essays and degrees now, when you had already dismissed your Oxford degree as just a piece of paper? Your duty towards your ancestors is long overdue. You cannot remain irresponsible, like a child. Book your passage at once and let me know the date of your return. This can’t drag on.”

He listened to the instructions with a sinking heart. The tone of his grandmother’s voice left no scope for pleadings. In desperation, he resorted to an old ruse.

“I’m sorry, Grandma, for causing you anxiety,” he said. “It has been thoughtless of me. The truth is I’ve recently met a girl, an overseas student. I think she may be the one for me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I didn’t want to be premature.”

“She’s Chinese?” His grandmother’s voice seemed to soften.

“Of course. Her family’s Cantonese. They’re refugees. Their surname is Wong. The girl’s given name is Yi but her French friends call her Isabelle.”

“You sure she’s right for you, not another misjudgement?”

“I think not. I just need a little more time to be certain.”

“Send me her photograph. I want to judge for myself.”

“Certainly, Grandma. I’ll arrange that right away.”

Suen finished the conversation feeling more ashamed of himself than ever. Dissembling had become second nature to him. His years of moral instruction seemed to have gone for nought. He felt indelibly soiled.

But having made his pitch, he had no alternative but to press on with his deception. He had come across a Vietnamese family running a restaurant in Paris. One of their girls, in her late teens, worked there as a waitress. She had looks which were passably Chinese, with the kind of docile features he knew his grandmother would take to.

He took himself there at once and told the family he was a journalist doing an article on foreign immigrants in Paris. He easily charmed both the family and the girl into an interview. He persuaded the girl to pose for a few photographs to go with the article, offering a handsome fee in return. Even as he sent the pictures to his grandmother, he realized his lies and deceptions were slipping beyond control.

* * *

When Isabelle came that evening, she was armed with only a small supply of cannabis. She couldn't get anything else, she explained. He shrugged and they began rolling and smoking what they had.

As he surrendered himself to his cravings, he speculated how delicious it would be if he could slip his moorings and float off to the ends of the earth with Isabelle. But for a brief moment, just before the cannabis overpowered him, he imagined also the grim possibility he might have to make that journey alone!

During the afterglow of coitus, with his mind still befogged by narcotics, he felt an urgent need to stake a claim, to make a commitment to the woman he loved. He cleaved to her and suggested: "Why not move in

with me? You'd save on rent. We would get to know each other better."

Isabelle gave him a dubious look. "It won't work," she said.

"Why not?"

"If we're together all the time, we're bound to lose control at some point. I go by my biological clock. Don't like contraceptives, never have. An accident might happen. You may not have noticed, but I always stay away when I'm fertile."

That womanly precaution had never occurred to him. "Don't you want children?" he pressed on lamely.

"Certainly, but not just yet, my sweet."

"At least stay with me tonight. Don't leave me alone tonight. I caught a glimpse of something frightful just now."

"I have an early morning photo shoot, darling."

"Please!"

"All right. Just for tonight."

"And you will give more thought to our staying together, won't you?"

"Let's sleep on that one," she said, cozying up to him.

He fell asleep coiled up with her, they slept like two hibernating snakes. Lines from the song at the Rue Jacob bar seemed to echo in his dreams.

"Après de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir."

* * *

A few days later, Suen received a telegram from his aunt. It read: "Please send urgently Wong Yi's details for matching horoscopes."

He realized at once he was about to become undone. The photos must have passed his grandmother's scrutiny. But the demand for

details of her horoscope signalled imminent consultations with fortune-tellers and geomancers.

Astrological calculations were an aspect of Chinese culture he knew little about and set no reliance upon. What did it matter whether a person was born in the Hour of the Tiger or during the Year of the Rat? Surely whether two people could make a life together depended more on education, upbringing and other factors than on whether their zodiac signs complemented each other.

He could concoct a few details for the fictitious Wong Yi but that would hardly buy much time. If the horoscopes turned out auspicious, Aunt Soo-Leung would be in Paris in no time to cement relations with the prospective in-laws. If the horoscopes turned out otherwise, his grandmother would demand his immediate return to avert further unsatisfactory entanglements. Either way, his goose would be well and truly cooked.

His next assignation with Isabelle was not till the following evening but he could hardly wait. He tried repeatedly to reach her by telephone but had to hang up after the conventional three rings without an answer. His mind was in turmoil. He blamed her for not being there when he needed her. Or perhaps for something he imagined might be worse. Yet he knew that if she had answered the phone, he wouldn't know what he wanted to say. All he knew was that he needed her.

Madame Dandieu at first reacted with sympathetic indulgence to his requests for the use of her telephone every hour or so. Later on her indulgence turned into a form of Gallic resignation.

The hours pending his assignation crawled by with excruciating slowness. He became possessed by a sense of impending doom. He paced his apartment continually, unable to sit still or to sleep for long. When Isabelle finally arrived the following evening, he was almost quaking with

relief.

Before he had even closed the door to his apartment, he demanded: “Where have you been? I’ve been going crazy trying to reach you, since early yesterday.”

“Don’t be like that, dear,” Isabelle replied evenly. “I’ve had a tough schedule. Besides, we’re not supposed to make demands on each other’s way of life.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry, darling!” he cried, as he plonked himself on the sitting room sofa. He bowed his head and clasped it with both hands.

Isabelle came up to him and caressed the back of his head with a hand. “What’s the matter, my sweet? Tell me what’s wrong.”

He flung his arms desperately around her hips and pressed his face against her belly. “My Grandma thinks it’s time I got married.”

“So?”

“I’m not ready.”

“Then don’t. You’re a grown man. You’re a free agent.”

“Not that simple. Life’s full of obligations.” His voice sounded muffled with his face pressed against her body.

“Don’t I know it! Just sort them out and move on.”

“Easier said than done.”

Isabelle bent over him and tenderly stroked his face. “We’ve all got problems,” she said, almost speaking into his jet black hair. “I may have one too.”

“You? What?” He released his hold on her, startled.

She settled down beside him on the sofa and said: “My period’s late. I hope I haven’t miscalculated.”

“That’s great! That settles it! Let’s get married!” His voice resonated with joy as he turned towards her and attempted to shower her with kisses.

“Hey! Wait a minute.” A note of befuddlement entered her voice. “Thirty seconds ago you said you were not ready for marriage. What’s changed?”

“Things are different now. I’ve been stupid. Should have asked you to marry me months ago.”

“Look, let’s not get this wrong. I didn’t say I might be pregnant to fish for a proposal. I’m a big girl and can take care of myself.”

“Whether you are pregnant or not doesn’t matter. We love each other. That’s good enough for marriage.”

Isabelle turned and reached for Suen’s face with both of her strong hands. She looked ardently into his eyes. “You serious?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t we have to consult your grandmother first? At least pay our respects? Don’t want to start off in her bad books.”

“No need. I can square things. You wouldn’t like Hong Kong. It’s petty and narrow-minded, not our kind of place.”

“It would be nice to see your home town just the same,” she said, wistfully.

“You won’t like it, I promise you. We’d be better off living here or in London. Or even in America.”

Isabelle fell silent for a moment. Then, just as Suen was about to kiss her, she suddenly dropped her hands from his face and pushed him roughly away.

“What’s wrong?” Suen asked.

“I’m beginning to get it,” Isabelle said, retreating to her end of the sofa. “In all the time we’ve been going together, you haven’t mentioned me to your family, have you?”

Suen stammered incoherently. His face reddened, as it used to do when as a child he was caught out at a misdemeanour. “I’ve told

Grandma I had a girlfriend.”

“Maybe. But not me. You’re ashamed of me, aren’t you?”

“No! Of course, not! Don’t be silly, darling!” Suen cried, reaching a conciliatory arm for Isabelle’s shoulder.

Isabelle brushed it off.

“I love you, I want to marry you,” Suen continued, flustered. “We’ve been everywhere together. How can I be ashamed of you?”

“Yes, we’ve been everywhere, as anonymous transients in an alien city. We played the fool at Brasserie Lipp because we were only passing through. We’ve never been together on your own turf, have we? Now you’re putting a dampener on my going to Hong Kong. In your heart you know full well your family would never approve of me, don’t you?”

“That’s beside the point. You said a moment ago I was a free agent. Well, I am. I’m asking you to marry me. That’s all that matters.”

“Tell me, what is being held against me? Is it my race, my profession, my farming roots, my lack of means or education or what?”

“No one’s holding a thing against you. What other people may think doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

They faced each other in sullen silence. Isabelle bit nervously on her lower lip and stared at Suen. Suen could not meet her eyes.

Eventually, he shook his head and said: “Darling, please, when two people love each other they should accept a few failings and foibles. No one is perfect.”

Isabelle’s blue-green eyes flashed as brightly as steel. “Fine and dandy! Accepting failings and foibles, is it? All right, let me ask you a question. If it turns out I’m actually pregnant and the child isn’t yours, would you accept that as my failing or my foible?”

Isabelle’s question exploded upon Suen like a bomb. “What!”

he cried, his face crumbling with anger. “You mean you’ve been sleeping with somebody else?”

“Just answer the question.”

“How can I answer a question like that?” Suen retorted sharply, rising from the sofa. “Your past’s your business, your rich patrons and your secret lives. But I had assumed we would be faithful.”

Isabelle shook her head and stood up as well. “So you think I’ve been two-timing you. What a laugh! I thought you were special; I thought you understood things other men didn’t. But it seems you’re just another male chauvinist, wanting his cake and eating it too.”

“Hey, I don’t subscribe to that Existentialist bullshit about free love, you know.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“I haven’t slept with anybody since I met you.”

“Bully for you! What do you expect? A medal?”

“I’m not a male chauvinist, you know!” Suen cried with bitter helplessness, as he watched Isabelle heading for the door. “The point is fidelity. I need someone who can be faithful.”

“Well, I guess you can’t count on that from me, can you?”

In spite of his anger and a burning sense of betrayal, Suen felt a wave of panic at the sight of Isabelle placing her hand on the doorknob. Warring emotions enveloped him. He wanted to stop her but he didn’t know how. To beg her to stay meant accepting her refusal to be bound by fidelity. His turbulent heart balked. He watched her open the door. In a flash she was gone.

* * *

Suen did not sleep that night. The quarrel tormented him. It

had been their first since they had met and the first time Isabelle had visited the apartment and left without making love. How could love unravel so dramatically? He had a mad fit of jealousy; his pride had been wounded. But weren't those the kind of torments lovers were meant to overcome? A devastating emptiness crept over him. It felt like death.

At first he tried to soothe his injured feelings by re-interpreting everything he knew about Isabelle in the worst possible light -- her fracture with her family, the commercialisation of her nakedness and the shady characters she consorted with, who did her favours like getting a telephone. Then he went on to her access to drugs, her sexual appetite and her sympathies with Existentialist notions of free love. Yet, no matter how abominable his thoughts, he could not escape the fact that he loved her.

He relived the ugly scene again and again. It came to him on calmer reappraisal that the question she had posed had conditions attached. The awesome "if". Even if she had been sleeping with others and was now pregnant, the odds were that the child would be more likely to be his than somebody else's. How could he abandon his own flesh and blood out of a moment of pique? More crucially, she might not have slept with anyone at all and was not pregnant. She might just be testing his generosity of spirit! Whatever she might be up to, she had exposed at one stroke all his masculine narrow-mindedness and pseudo-gentlemanly pretences.

Tears came to his eyes. What a fool he was! All that book-learning had not taught him wisdom. Lines from Shakespeare bubbled up in his mind. "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove. . . ."

He needed to redeem himself. He resolved that when daylight came he would telephone Isabelle to apologise and to seek her forgiveness. He would telephone his grandmother too, to confess his lies and deceptions and to take his medicine.

* * *

Suen was jolted out of his fitful sleep by a sharp rapping on the door. For a moment, heavy with sleep, he imagined it might be Isabelle returning. He jumped out of bed and rushed to the door. As he did so, he saw the sunlight seeping through the shutters and realised it was already afternoon. He had slept right through the morning.

He opened the door and found Madame Dandieu standing with a telegram which she said had just arrived.

He thanked the concierge. Deeply disappointed, he accepted the envelope. It had to be a chasing telegram from Aunt Soo-Leung, he surmised. He had no wish to read it. He needed to borrow Madame Dandieu's telephone to call Isabelle, for only she could determine his fate.

He washed and dressed hurriedly, trying as he did so to compose the words he would rely on to seek forgiveness. It was only on his way downstairs that he finally opened the telegram.

The message took him aback. It was not the one he had expected. It read: "Return at once. Grandmother gravely ill."

He leapt down the stairs to ring home. His aunt answered, informing him his grandmother had suffered a stroke. His grandmother had rejected medical advice to go into hospital, saying she wanted to die in her own bed. She had been adamant in her wish. His aunt had moved into the guest room at Bowen Road to take charge. Doctors, specialists and nurses had been engaged to attend to the old lady round the clock.

Suen hurried to secure the earliest possible way of getting to Hong Kong. The best connection was a flight leaving that very evening. He conveyed his arrangements to his aunt before frantically telephoning Isabelle. He got no answer.

It seemed his whole life was turning upside down. He paid Madame Dandieu three months' rent in advance, indicating he would be back soon.

After several further attempts to reach Isabelle had failed, he rushed to Phirun's studio. He explained his bungled marriage proposal and the misunderstandings that subsequently arose. He charged the painter with locating Isabelle, explaining his sudden departure and showing her the telegram from Aunt Soo-Leung. He wanted the painter to tell Isabelle that he loved her and would return to marry her, if she would accept. He then headed straight for the airport.

He tried to telephone Isabelle again from the airport but still got no answer. As he boarded the plane, his heart felt like stone. He reflected with irony that at long last he was about to experience the thrill of flying. Little had he anticipated it would take place under such awful circumstances.