

The Meditation Room

Hong Kong, August 1968:

Torrential rain pelted the windows of the Meditation Room like gravel fitfully flung. Xavier Chu came in quietly, closing the door behind him. It was an uncharacteristic entrance for the Chairman of the Gold Star Industrial and Financial Corporation. At annual general meetings and press conferences his arrivals, if not exactly accompanied by fanfares, carried an aura of self-confidence and panache.

Now he was almost diffident, entering a place intimately associated with his mother and out of his own milieu. It was like stepping into a long forbidden passage, with promises of revelations if he could get to the end of it. Previously he had ascribed his unease to cautionary tales heard during childhood about good and evil, retribution and redemption. But after three years of having his most cherished plans thwarted by his mother, he no longer knew what to expect.

A giant bronze Buddha, with legs crossed in the lotus position and fingers curled in the posture of meditation, dominated the room. Its face radiated kindness and tranquillity. Its eyes were closed, as if blind to the turmoils of the world. Yet Xavier could not escape the sensation that it was watching him, probing his innermost thoughts.

An altar, covered with an elaborately embroidered cloth, stood before the bronze image with the usual paraphernalia of worship. Two decorated vases filled with pink gladioli flanked a pair of altar lamps. The dim illumination of the lamps were augmented by the flickering flames of two fat red candles. Lazy wisps of incense rose from a bronze burner. The flames and the smoke combined to cast weird shadows upon the tapestries and murals.

This was his mother's world, Xavier thought, as he looked at her small figure kneeling on a prayer mat. He could not tell whether she was meditating or silently reciting sutras. Whichever it was, she was obviously too preoccupied to acknowledge his presence. It made him feel like an intruder. His dark pin-striped Savile Row suit and smart silk tie seemed to mark him as one who had bartered away his soul for material rewards.

Since the room was devoid of chairs, he lowered himself onto a prayer mat. His clothes had not been designed for such postures. The jacket tightened around his armpits and the trousers cut painfully into his crotch. He shifted position, loosened his tie and took off his jacket, placing it upon an adjacent prayer mat. He then removed his Bally shoes.

He had never had much truck with gods or the supernatural. Money was his religion. He was at his best when plotting take-overs, launching dawn raids or stripping the fat from bloated corporations. He had been sharper than his father. Since returning to Hong Kong, he had saved numerous companies with atrocious balance sheets, undervalued assets or appalling management. He had lived up to the sound of his self-selected name. He had indeed been a saviour, though saving others naturally brought rewards for himself as well.

The Meditation Room was an original feature of the two-storied mansion his father had built three-quarters of the way up Victoria Peak. He had built it with the specific aim of

outdoing European residences in opulence and splendour, choosing a design in the shape of a plum blossom first used in China fourteen centuries ago, during the Chou Dynasty. The upper floor was surrounded by a wide balcony. The entrance to the mansion was guarded by doors of studded teak and a massive pair of Chinese stone lions.

Concessions to modernity came in the form of a swimming pool, shaped like an unshelled peanut, a garage large enough for ten cars, two tennis courts and a separate residential block for servants. The mansion was surrounded by gardens and lawns and the entire development was confined within a traditional red brick wall topped with curved green tiles. A team of gatekeepers and watchmen augmented security. The magnificence of the residence quickly turned it into a landmark for the flood of tourists entering the colony, though none could see much beyond the imposing outer wall.

The mansion was a repository for a remarkable collection of antiques and treasures. At every turn something arrested the eye, be it a Tang horse, a Ming vase, a Sung painting or a Chien Lung cabinet. Grey Italian marble floors, hand-woven carpets and crystal chandeliers set off the exhibits.

Yet the displays somehow seemed to Xavier too faultless, too perfect, like photographs in some interior decoration magazine. The insinuation of wealth and opulence was marred by a certain want of naturalness or character or taste. That deficiency permeated everything, from the magnificent jade prunus tree and Yuan vases decorating the reception hall to the thick leather-bound volumes standing dustless and unread in the library.

The treasures had not always been so displayed. His father had been the only true art lover in the family. But he died before he had time to enjoy his acquisitions, many of which he left unappraised and uninsured in packing cases in his study. The present arrangements represented a triumph of expensive pedantry over trusting ignorance. He might be no connoisseur but it had to be an expensive mistake to let silver-tongued interior decorators and art experts loose on Lucille.

Only the Meditation Room escaped intrusion. His mother had closed it to outsiders. The bronze Buddha was itself a work of considerable vintage and value. It had stood for centuries in a wat in Thailand before disappearing about a hundred years previously. When it re-surfaced after the war, it was quickly snapped up by his father as a gift to his mother. It now endowed the Meditation Room with an atmosphere of simplicity and piety.

Xavier occasionally exploited the room for his own purposes, much to the annoyance of his mother. Unlike his father, he was fond of entertaining business associates at home. Lucille was a superb hostess. After meals he would put on an air of sham reluctance and allow guests a peek into the Meditation Room. He would then recount how he meditated there before making important decisions, garnishing his stories with humbug about Eastern ethics and Buddhist obscurities purloined from his mother. He was convinced that such fanciful stories would add colour to his personality when Forbes or Newsweek got around to writing him up as a titan of Asian business.

Presently, his mother turned towards him. "So you've returned at last, Ah Seng, late as usual," she said, in her musical voice. "You didn't get wet, did you, with that storm outside? I thought you were coming home for dinner. Have you forgotten? Have you eaten?"

Xavier moved to a prayer mat next to his mother's. "Yes, Mother, I've eaten. Sorry about dinner. I got held up. Besides, you know I'm not fond of vegetarian food."

"Lucille and Ah Yuen are not vegetarians. When you are expected home, the cook makes a point of preparing non-vegetarian dishes for the three of you," his mother said, tartly.

The imputation of filial deficiency in his mother's voice caused him to look into her smooth, saintly face. It radiated so much goodness that he expected her to wag a finger at him, notwithstanding his international reputation as a commercial and financial wizard. It was true he still appeared amazingly boyish at twenty-eight, causing some associates to joke about him being another Dorian Gray.

"Is Ah Yuen asleep?" his mother asked. "He's been having another bout of asthma. Dr. Chow has been and has given him the usual medication."

"I'm not sure. Lucille's with him. I'll look in later."

"Ah Yuen is almost four. Isn't it time you had another child?"

"I thought you wanted to discuss the papers I left for signature, not family planning."

"I see so little of you. You know perfectly well I don't understand English, so why leave a stack of documents in English for me to sign? Is it too much to explain first? I tried to get Lucille to tell me what they were about but she couldn't grasp their purpose either. She said they had to do with the sale of our home and the antiques to a Panama company. Why are we selling? Are you short of money?"

"Of course not, Mother. I'm rolling in it. No one came out better than I did over the last couple of years, in spite of the Star Ferry disturbances, the bank runs, the Cultural Revolution riots and the devaluation of Sterling. When old British conglomerates started pulling out, I seized the opportunities they left behind."

"Then why do you want to sell our home?"

"You're not really selling anything. It's just a paper exercise, to save money and taxes. I asked you to sign because I didn't want to bother you with details."

"I don't understand."

"As I've said, you're not selling anything. It's quite simple. It's no use having assets that eat up money for upkeep. Just the insurance on this place and its contents is horrendous, not to mention wages for the cook, the chauffeurs, the gardeners, the Filipino maids, the gatekeepers and the watchmen. Then there are rates, taxes and heaven knows what else. I've worked out a scheme whereby everybody can benefit.

"I've set up a Panama company to which you can notionally sell the house and everything in it. Then, instead of giving me my full salary as chairman and chief executive, Gold Star can cut my pay but provides me with furnished accommodation, complete with servants. We will continue to live here, as at present, except that Gold Star will be paying the Panama company

for rental of the house and its upkeep. That means Gold Star also pays for the servants, the rates, the insurance and everything else. You no longer have to pay a cent.

“I, for my part, will save on taxes because of the reduction in my salary. It will be presentationally good too. Shareholders will see how modestly Gold Star’s chief executive is being paid! That will justify stock options. The rent for the house can be easily lost in the accounts under a general item for corporate offices, warehouses and other rentals. Wages for servants can be buried in the corporate payroll. The same goes for insurance and all the other bits and pieces.”

Xavier spoke quickly and succinctly, as if he were presenting a proposition to a board of directors. He expected others to defer to him and pass things on the nod. It was an attitude that came naturally to him, given the wonders he had done with Gold Star since assuming control. Every division, from property to trading, from manufacturing to retailing, from financial services to investments, had been profitable. The overseas subsidiaries were also contributing to the bottom line. Those successes caused him to slip into the same curt attitude when dealing with domestic matters. Still, that had not prevented his mother calling him to account. And it had been a cruel form of betrayal for his father to leave her the major shareholding.

“Who owns the Panama company I’m suppose to be selling everything to?” Serenity asked.

“You do, of course.”

“Then what difference does it make? Surely if I’m the owner of the Panama company I will have to pay taxes on its income. Is that not more paperwork?”

“No, for two very simple reasons,” Xavier replied. He shifted position on the prayer mat. His back was getting stiff from the unfamiliar posture and his legs were developing pins and needles. He massaged the back of his knees and calves as he continued. “First, the beauty of a Panama company is that it can issue bearer shares. In other words, names of shareholders need not appear on share certificates. Whoever holds certificates owns the company. That means one can transfer title at will, to avoid taxes, death duties or whatever.

“Secondly, the Panama company will never make a profit because it has notionally to raise a loan from a company in Anguilla to pay notionally for the property and its contents. It has to repay part of that loan each year, with interest. It also has regular out-goings in wages, insurance, rates, administrative and accounting costs, bad debts and so on. Assets also have to be depreciated.”

“I can’t follow that. Who owes what debts to whom? We’ve had this house a long time. Hasn’t it been depreciated fully? Or can we keep depreciating it forever? And what about the antiques? How can antiques depreciate over time?”

“Mother, you need not worry your head over such details. That’s what lawyers and accountants are for.”

“I don’t trust lawyers and accountants. What’s true or false, right or wrong, can’t be altered through a clever arrangement of words. Who is supposed to own the other company, the one in the place I’ve never heard of?”

“You mean the Anguilla company? Well, that is owned by a company in Montserrat and if you trace that back far enough you will find that it’s ultimately owned by me.”

“My goodness! Why all these complications? Anyone would think we are trying to hide something. We’re not, are we? If not, why go to this trouble to save taxes? We’re not poor. We should pay taxes.”

“Mother, I assure you what has been worked out is perfectly legal and above board. Everybody with any sense goes in for tax planning nowadays. Everybody seeks out what is in his own self-interest. That’s the whole basis of capitalism.”

Xavier was growing tetchy with his mother’s questions. He had had a hard day. It was not enough that he had started the day with a breakfast meeting and ended it with a business dinner. He had to come home to explain tax avoidance to his mother! He still had to look in on Ah Yuen. And Lucille was unlikely to spare him the wheeze by wheeze account of their son’s latest asthma attack. Given half a chance Lucille would also raise the matter of having another child. He longed simply for a nice bath and bed.

Through his weariness he heard his mother say: “What’s legal may not necessarily be right. I don’t like evading taxes, even if it’s legal.”

“Not evade, Mother! Avoid. There’s a big difference.”

“That’s just being clever with words. Don’t talk like a lawyer. We didn’t sent you to America to learn such tricks.”

A fierce gust of wind suddenly pelted the windows with rain. After it had subsided, Serenity said: “Ah Seng, I know it must have been hard for you the last few years. After you left for America, your father started cutting back. He didn’t explain why. After you took over you started expanding in all directions. Again you didn’t explain why. Now, out of the blue, you want to sell our home under an arrangement I cannot understand. You’re not trying to hide something, are you? Is Gold Star in some kind of trouble?”

“No, Gold Star’s fine. It’s going from strength to strength. Everything I’ve done has been in the newspapers. I’ve nothing to hide. If anyone is hiding anything, it is you.”

“Me? What am I hiding?”

“I don’t know, Mother. Are there not things you keep from your only son? You and Father are two of a kind. At least Father told me something of his boyhood and what he did during the Japanese occupation. You’re a closed book. You’re secretive even about that Chinese mandolin you hide in your room. Don’t you remember I caught you crying over it once? Father told me that was your secret. You can’t blame a son for wanting to know about his mother, can you?”

“I’m sorry,” Serenity said. After a pause, she continued: “I learnt the mandolin when I was a girl but gave it up when I got married. That’s all. We can talk about musical instruments some other time. For now, I’m uncomfortable over selling the house through a chain of companies. If that is such a wonderful idea, why didn’t your father do it?”

Xavier’s exasperation intensified. Why couldn’t his mother stick to her pieties and leave worldly affairs to him? He had worked like a demon, driven himself to the limit, yet far from appreciating his efforts she was continuing to measure him against his father. Didn’t she realize he

had already achieved results far beyond those of his father? He had evolved his own vision of the world. It would be a challenge to expound his beliefs before a knowledgeable audience. Before a woman like his mother it would be a waste of time. Yet, if he did not try, she would suspect him of plotting something. If he tried, the apocalyptic nature of his vision would upset her. He resigned himself to making another attempt.

“Mother, I don’t know why Father didn’t arrange a tax avoidance scheme,” he said, as gently as he could. “I suspect he was too busy. What I’m doing is no more than what any sensible corporate executive would do. Why compare me with Father? We’re different breeds. Father was a man from a previous era. He was too sentimental. He never pressed advantages to the limit. I think he foresaw the future shape of the world and had trouble coming to terms with it. Perhaps it was a kindness that he should have died when he did.”

Serenity’s eyes widened with shock. “How can you say that about your father?” she demanded. “Your father tried to make the best of every situation he found himself in. People admired and respected him because they saw the goodness in him.”

“Mother, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful towards Father either. I’m just trying to make you understand reality. Power is devolving steadily into the hands of international conglomerates. They’re out to corner markets, to create monopolies and cartels. Gold Star has to expand and forge alliances. Otherwise it will be swallowed up. The only hope lies in becoming as powerful as the predators or, indeed, becoming a fiercer predator.

“Modern conglomerates reject religions and ideologies. They do not try to change people or societies. They just want to make money. Eventually they will determine what we eat and wear, what news we hear, what books we read and what entertainment we get. They’re already putting governments into their pockets. No single government is strong enough to resist. The run on sterling after the Labour Party victory shows their power. I know, because I punted against sterling on Wall Street. In such a situation one either becomes a decision-maker or a pawn. I don’t intend to be a pawn.”

“Stop!” Serenity cried. “We’ve discussed this before. You intend to strengthen Gold Star to exploit the weak? You want to decide whose lives get ruined for profit?”

“Mother, it’s inevitable. Someone has to decide and it might as well be me. There’s no other choice.”

Serenity rose from the prayer mat, slowly shaking her head. “I cannot believe things can come to this. What of piety, duty, compassion and benevolence, of all the virtues taught by our sages and ancestors? We celebrate the birthdays of Buddha and Confucius to remind us of their teachings. I suppose, given half the chance, you would have Gold Star commercialize them like Christmas and Easter. Encourage people to give out promotional begging bowls or bags of fortune cookies! You’d do well to consider their teachings. I’m going to my room.”

Xavier Chu rose too, unsteadily. His legs were numb. He stood shoeless and dishevelled, blinking his near-sighted eyes. When he saw that his mother’s diminutive figure reaching the door, he called out: “What about the transfer papers?”

Serenity turned with only the merest trace of disappointment in her face. "I would like to take my time with that," she replied.

Xavier closed his eyes and remained standing uncertainly in the room. Fresh squalls of rain hammered upon the windows. His conceptions had been far-sighted, he reflected, yet his mother balked him at every turn.

He looked at his watch, the one with the black face which had once belonged to his father, and noted it was ten minutes to midnight. The end of another day but the discussion with his mother had left his spirits jangled. Why did he feel so besieged and ill-at-ease when he came home? Was it because of his mother's persistent questions, his wife's hints at more children or his sickly son's demands for attention?

All at once he felt isolated and lonely. No one understood his needs and no one loved him the way he wanted to be loved. Except Fei-Fei. She at least had giggled with delight when he promised to conquer the world and lay it at her feet. He remembered saying, too, that the mole on her left buttock would be his star of destiny to guide him in his quest. That recollection sent a shiver of desire through him. But she too had rejected him in the end and the manner of that rejection had wounded him. Perhaps he should have tried harder, swallowed his pride and begged her to come back to him. But his pride had not allowed him to crawl.

Piety, duty, compassion, benevolence. Those were recurring words of his mother. Of Little Ho too. They were the kind of words that had trapped his father. What was each of them worth? Nothing! They added no extra zero to a bank account. They had lured Little Ho into collecting used clothing for disaster victims and his mother into incoherent mumblings inside the Meditation Room.

He noticed the sightless Buddha looming over the altar. It seemed to be reading his thoughts. He shivered. The incense must be softening his brain, he thought, angry with his own foolishness. He shook his head and stretched his arms. The evening had been a waste. His mother had not fallen in with his proposals. He didn't know why he devoted time on such piddling matters. If his mother didn't want to avoid taxes, let those lousy papers remain unsigned.

He was a free man, owing no loyalty to anyone or any creed. But at times he also felt lonely. Great leaders had spoken of loneliness at the top. If that was to be the price, so be it.