

## A Change of Heart

When Po-Chee stepped out of her bedroom after her evening bath, she looked little different from any ordinary housewife. She was dressed in a grey cotton house suit which doubled as pyjamas. All the expensive trappings of her profession -- the designer suit, the smart handbag, the high-heeled shoes, the bulging briefcase -- were no longer in evidence. The only indications of her disposition towards daintiness lay in the intricate hand-fashioned cloth buttons on her house suit and a pair of red slippers embroidered with golden threads on her feet. Her fresh-scrubbed face betrayed no adornment other than a tiny layer of moisturising cream.

She was thinking of her husband and his trip to the Needham Research Institute as she headed down the stairs. She wanted him back. She missed him more than she cared to admit. His absence somehow robbed the house of its usual aura of purpose.

Still, she was glad he was at Cambridge, engrossed in the esoteric details of ancient history. She remained indebted to him for introducing her to the work of Professor Joseph Needham and his acolytes. They had explained Chinese civilisation so marvellously. Until she had read their writings she had little idea that half of the basic inventions and discoveries upon which modern civilisation rested had originated in China. Pity recent generations of Chinese, mesmerised by the economic and military might of the West, had forgotten the achievements of their own nation.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, an aroma of food wafted towards her from the dining room. Through its opened doors she could see on the round ebony table a steaming winter melon nestling in a porcelain container. She knew that the dark green melon, with its top section lobbed off, contained a delicious soup prepared with Yunnan ham, crab meat, shrimps, lotus seeds and mushrooms.

That appetising sight made her feel quite hungry. A look at her watch told her she was more than a trifle late coming down. She had tarried for too long in her bath.

She noted that Amber was already standing next to the table, talking to Ah Loy. She quickened her steps. “Sorry to be holding up dinner,” she said, upon entering.

Amber and Ah Loy greeted her respectfully. She acknowledged their greetings and took her seat.

She noticed that her niece, sitting next to her, was wearing the T-shirt of canary yellow she had bought her at Lane Crawford two weeks earlier. The garment was decorated in the front with a lively arrangement of brown musical signs and symbols. The shirt fitted her niece’s contours magnificently, in a way that would make boys sit up and take notice. A pair of white pedal-pushers made a fetching complement to the shirt.

The girl had blossomed physically, Po-Chee reflected. Once she had matured intellectually as well, she would be irresistible. She would definitely break hearts. The sight of so much promise filled her with envy. Amber had all of life ahead of her, whereas her own was receding into a dark and unrecoverable past. Soon the joy of her company and the fun of basking in her reflected glory would be lost to her as well.

“The shirt looks marvellous on you,” she said, suddenly, to avert a descent into more despairing thoughts.

“Yeah, thanks. It’s really super, Auntie. Sharlene saw me wearing it and said she wanted one too.”

Ah Loy had in the meantime scooped out two bowls of soup and was passing them around. The helpings came with chunks of melon together with the soup’s ingredients.

The mention of Sharlene gave Po-Chee a twinge of uneasiness. That American girl tended to dress too immodestly, to accentuate her not

unattractive figure. But her whole deportment was too wanton. Not a good role model at all. No doubt she must have been responsible -- to some degree at least -- for Amber returning from that recent party in such an inebriated state.

Her niece had explained she had been tricked into consuming spiked punch. But her intuition told her there had to be more to it than that. When Amber subsequently started missing Sunday Mass, her suspicions deepened. She supposed all teenagers had things they wanted to keep from their elders. Nonetheless, she had presented her with a jade talisman to give her pause and she was glad to notice she was wearing it.

"I love this soup," Amber said, after a couple of spoonfuls. "Pity Uncle isn't here. It's one of his favourites."

"Ah Loy can make it again when he returns," Po-Chee replied, as she also helped herself to the soup.

"When's Uncle coming back?"

"In another week or so, I hope. He's gone to Cambridge to meet up with old friends for a few days."

"Uncle seems to stay away longer every year."

"Well, he's in his element over there, with all those unique libraries and antiquarian bookshops."

"He brings back so many books. There's hardly any room left in the study. His bedroom is pretty full of them as well."

"You should see the books he has in London. I haven't been there for some time but it must be overrun by books by now."

Amber brightened into a smile and paused over her soup. "I'd love to visit London!"

"I'm certain you will one day. Actually, your uncle did suggest our going with him. But for some reason he decided to go early this year and you've got your finals. Perhaps we can fit that in after acting school."

“Oh, no! I wish we could have gone this year!”

“Shiu-nai, you should ask Young Master to return quickly,” Ah Loy interjected in her high-pitched voice.

Having completed the first phase of her duties, the servant was standing with an arm leaning on the backrest of one of the unoccupied chairs. Age and long service had given her the status of being almost a member of the family. And standing around during meals and intervening in table talk had become prerogatives denied lesser servants.

Po-Chee smiled. “I’ll relay your instruction,” she said.

“Not good Young Master stay away too long. Cannot eat proper in England,” the servant added.

“I bet uncle will miss this!” Amber said, after consuming a chunk of melon. “It’s delicious!”

The servant smiled and nodded in appreciation.

Turning to her aunt, Amber said: “Ah Loy says winter melon soup is supposed to cool the blood. Why should a hot soup taken on the approach of summer cool the blood? It just makes me sweat.” She took a pinch of her T-shirt between finger and thumb and flapped it about.

Po-Chee half-chuckled. “I suppose we do confound foreigners sometimes,” she said, before asking Ah Loy to open the French windows.

The servant trundled over and did as she had been asked. But no breeze came.

“Put on air-condition?” the servant asked.

Po-Chee shook her head. “No idea why it’s called a winter melon,” she added. “Not grown in winter and eaten only in summer! It’s called an ash gourd in the West, which sounds altogether less confusing.”

“The soup tastes good, whatever it’s called,” Amber remarked.

Po-Chee agreed. “I haven’t the faintest idea what Westerners do with it though. It had never been served during all the years I was at

Roedean -- or at least not in any recognisable form.”

“No kidding! Maybe they don’t grow it in England. But that still doesn’t explain why a hot soup taken in hot weather should cool the blood.”

Po-Chee lifted an eyebrow in amusement. “Doesn’t perspiring make you feel cooler afterwards? That’s the simple answer, I suppose. Our food is intimately connected with promoting health, hence the frequent use of herbs. Herbal teas are popular too and I go for them whenever I feel a little off-colour.”

“Yuks!” Amber pulled a face. “Mum used to make me drink that stuff. Horrid! She never explained what they were good for.”

Po-Chee laughed and Ah Loy joined in.

“They clean body inside,” Ah Loy said. “Young people eat too much unhealthy food. Can brew herbal tea for you.”

Amber directed a feigned killing look at her.

The servant chuckled.

“Ah Loy’s right,” Po-Chee said, smiling. “Once you get used to them, they don’t taste too bad.”

“Better than fizzy drinks,” Ah Loy added.

“No thanks!”

“Foods have for thousands of years been classified into five categories according to their properties,” Po-Chee elaborated. “Winter melon belongs to the cooling category.”

“What does that actually mean, Auntie?”

“Reduced to simple terms, a person eating too much heating food can develop pimples, rashes or halitosis. Taking too much cooling food might cause loss of pallor, chills and other maladies. To restore equilibrium, food with counter-balancing properties ought to be taken. Some foods, of course, are considered neutral.”

Amber expelled a puff of air, as if such arcane considerations were beyond her. “How can anyone remember which has what properties? Have to be a student of Chinese medicine to remember all that stuff.”

“Oh, I can remember,” Ah Loy interjected again. “I know foods essential for someone getting not enough sleep and drinking too much alcohol.”

Po-Chee smiled when she noticed Amber flushing slightly.

“That’s part of the problem with living abroad,” Po-Chee said. “Good Chinese food is often not available and we lose touch with proper diets. We resort to fast foods and canned soups. Before anyone knows it, we find our tongues coated and our stomachs gurgling.”

“I’ve thought about how to get meals in America,” Amber said. “It’s real scary. Can’t see me cooking for myself, studying and doing all that other stuff.”

“Cooking not hard,” Ah Loy said. “Only needs practice.”

Po-Chee nodded.

Amber finished her soup and asked for a re-fill.

Po-Chee glanced at her niece relishing the soup and in so doing caught sight of the set of four paintings decorating the wall behind her. Each picture featured a different flower or plant to represent the different seasons.

Time was passing so quickly, she thought. The years since entering the Lam household had gone by like ripples in a brook, whispers in the wind. Amber’s stay would come to an end soon. No more excuses for shopping for frilly, girlish things and imagining herself in them. Who would accompany her for turns in the garden after dinner or for strolls to Amah Rock? Her evenings would resume the colour of emptiness. Even a retreat into the persona of Cissie Lee might no longer be possible. Her preoccupation with her niece’s emotional and material needs had eased her

own escape into fiction.

In the middle of her reflections, Malu came into the room to clear the table, in preparation for bringing in the main dishes.

While that was in progress, Amber said: “Some kids were talking about Chinese food at school the other day. Most thought it taster than Western food. But an American kid argued that a juicy steak would beat anything Chinese health-wise.”

“Well, he’s entitled to his opinion. Some of our beliefs are certainly myths. But many do have some basis in science. You might refer him to the Principles Essential for the Emperor’s Food and Drink. That book was compiled by the Imperial Dietitian Hu Szu-Hui in 1330, long before anyone even dreamt of a place called America.”

“Wow! Neat! Maybe I ought to read the book pick up a few gems to show off.”

“Knowledge isn’t meant for showing off. It’s meant to give us some understanding of ourselves, to get some handle on the cosmic order that we’re in.”

Before the conversation could continue, Malu returned carrying a large lacquer tray with three dishes -- a steamed red snapper, a heap of stir-fried mushrooms and vegetables, and half a soy sauce chicken cut into manageable pieces. She was followed by Ah Loy, holding in one hand a plate of eggs scrambled with diced barbecued pork and in the other a Japanese rice cooker.

Malu arranged the dishes on the table while Ah Loy served up bowls of boiled rice. The servants then retreated from the room.

After the melon soup, the number of dishes was far more than Po-Chee and Amber could consume. But the food would not go to waste. It was normal in well-to-do families for servants to share in the food, after their employers had had their fill. Considerate families always saw to it

that there was sufficient left.

Po-Chee and Amber ate in a leisurely fashion, selecting morsels with their chopsticks and scooping up mouthfuls of rice from their bowls. The fish was succulent, the chicken tender, and the vegetables fresh. Their flavours blended well with the wholesome blandness of white rice.

After eating silently for a while, Amber looked up at her aunt and said: “That cosmic order thing you mentioned earlier. Is that what Uncle’s trying to get his head around?”

“I suppose,” Po-Chee replied, slipping automatically into English. It was a habit she had cultivated whenever she talked about her husband at home, for although Ah Loy was not in the room there was always a risk of her overhearing. She was so devoted to Suen that she would react adversely to even the mildest implied criticism.

“Most people nowadays want to be experts or specialists.” Po-Chee continued. “But your uncle has that sort of generalising mind which demands answers to everything.”

“What do you mean? Gimme a take.” Amber had switched to English as well.

“Well, he takes some observable human condition, like poverty, and tries to work through the whys and wherefores in all their ramifications. One of his greatest friends is an Indian called Sanjay, who writes eloquently about the increasingly regressive division of global wealth, mainly in India but also elsewhere. Sanjay thinks international corporations gather too much near-monopoly power and, aided and abetted by institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, force poor nations into competing on unfair, unequal and even devastating terms.

“Your uncle agrees with many of Sanjay’s ideas but he wants to go much further. He wants to substantiate his points with facts and figures, with instances of rural poverty, tribal decimations, with analogies from

history. He wants to bring out the taste, the smell, the daily grind of poverty upon humankind, so that no man of conscience can fail to ask himself whether he had -- however indirectly -- contributed to that dismal state of affairs. It seems to him scandalous that the poor have to pay more than the rich for simple everyday things, like clean water or a cigarette.”

“A cigarette?”

“Yes. The explanation is quite obvious, once one thinks about it. The economies of scale that every business school talks about. The poor cannot afford to buy whole packets of cigarettes. They can only afford to buy one or two sticks at a time. Vendors who break up packets need a return on capital. So they charge a premium on each stick, which means that the poorer a person is, the higher the unit cost of having a smoke.”

Amber shook her head in amazement. “Golly, how come we never go into such issues at school? Cigarettes are so cheap that kids can afford to buy them by the carton. They cadge from one another all the time, never imagining buying a single cigarette.”

“Cigarettes are just one example. The poor suffer many other disadvantages. They are more exposed to the whims of petty bureaucrats, to the strong-armed tactics of absentee land owners, the exactions by racketeers and so forth, not to mention cultural inhibitions like caste systems and tribal structures. Then there’s the whole issue of rural displacements, dispossessions and landlessness. Once one starts analysing the causes of poverty, the ramifications are endless.”

Amber thought for a long moment. Her eating slowed.

“Uncle’s trying to get to the bottom of all that?”

Po-Chee sighed. “Afraid so. Come on, eat up before the food gets cold.” She selected a mushroom and placed it in Amber’s bowl, before continuing her own meal.

She felt sorry for her niece. It wasn't fair to load her with problems philosophers and sages haven't solved over centuries. Neither was it fair to let her go off at such a tender age to a place like Los Angeles on some dubious acting course. The city was virtually the modern equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah!

The whole fiasco had been Suen's fault. If he had left her to deal with Amber in her own way she could have talked her out of her silliness. Instead, he sold the toss by suggesting a trial period. For a year! Far too long. Amber would probably get mugged, robbed and sexually molested in half that time. She shuddered at the thought.

"What's the matter, Auntie?" Amber asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Po-Chee said, trying to slow the pace of her heart. "Come, help me turn the snapper over. It's steamed to perfection. You won't find one as superbly done in America."

Amber obeyed. They levered the fish over with their chopsticks and continued with their meal.

After a short while, Amber set down her chopsticks. "I'm full up to my eyebrows. The fish is real good. Ah Loy has outdone herself." Then, after a pause, she surprised Po-Chee by adding: "You've never fancied my going to acting school, have you, Auntie?"

"Well, acting certainly wouldn't have been at the top of my recommendation," Po-Chee said, uncertain how her niece could have twigged her thoughts.

A fraught silence reigned for a moment, as if each were waiting for the other to make the next move.

Then Amber said: "Auntie, I think you're absolutely right. Acting school may not be such a great idea after all."

The statement caused Po-Chee to set down both her chopsticks and her rice bowl. "What has brought this on, all of a sudden?" she asked.

“You haven’t got attached to one of those boys who keep ringing up half the night, have you? Or has Sharlene put you up to some other wild idea?”

“Oh, no, Auntie. It’s nothing like that.”

“Then why doubts at this eleventh hour, after so many arrangements have been made?”

Amber hesitated. “I’m sorry, Auntie, it’s very ungrateful and inconsiderate of me, that’s for sure. I don’t know quite how to explain it. Do you remember that night in the garden right after lunar New Year, when Uncle sounded off on the realities around us in Hong Kong? I’ve thought a lot about what he had said afterwards. There are so many discrepancies between what government spokesmen and economic gurus say and what Uncle says. Sure, I can dig the growing prosperity reflected in rising GDP figures, sky-rocketing stock market indices, mounting tourism incomes, healthy public finances, record reserves, the whole shebang. But why does so much poverty remain on the underside of those economic miracles? I can’t suss it out. Maybe I’m just an ignoramus or a numbskull.”

“Oh, darling, you’re neither. No one can expect you to achieve the kind of understanding at your age.”

But Amber refused to be consoled. “No, I’ve been focusing on becoming rich and famous, on being somebody. Since coming to Bowen Road, I’ve tried to forget the bad years Mum and I had to go through. One shouldn’t forget, should one? One should try to understand, because the same issues are still out there. University’s better for that than acting school, isn’t it?”

Po-Chee felt infinitely touched. She reached over and clasped Amber’s hand with both of her own. Her eyes misted over. “You’re my wonderful and beautiful niece,” she said. “It must take enormous courage to look into oneself and admit an error. Not many people can do that.”

Amber bit her lip but said nothing.

“Now, let’s see what we can do,” Po-Chee said. “You have a university in mind?”

Amber shook her head. “It’s too late, isn’t it? Fees have been paid for the acting school and Auntie Lucille has gone to so much trouble.”

“Never mind the fees. Auntie Lucille is an extraordinarily generous lady and she will understand. I’ll tell you what: Write off to all the universities that appeal to you and ask for application forms. When your uncle gets back, we can sit down and help you make a choice.”

Amber nodded. “I’m sorry for this mess. I hope I won’t delay Uncle’s book.”

“Don’t worry about his book. He’ll probably never finish it.”

“What? Never finish it? Why? I want to read it.”

“Your uncle has taken on so big and complex a task that it’ll take several lifetimes to complete.”

Amber frowned in bafflement. “How terrible!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t Uncle aware of that? Can’t he try something more manageable like his previous books? Have you suggested that to him?”

“I have, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He enjoys tackling the impossible. He quoted Browning at me. ‘Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?’ What can you do with a man like that?”

“Love him for trying? Maybe?”

Po-Chee gave a quick chuckle. “My darling, you’re growing up too fast.”

At the very moment Malu came in into the room to see if the table was ready for clearing.

Po-Chee rose from the table to indicate her assent. Then, turning to Amber, she said: “Please wait for me in the sitting room. I have first to clear accounts with Ah Loy. There’s another important matter I

must discuss with you.”