

Mortal Coils

Hong Kong, February 1970:

“When can we go to the Evergreen again Mummy?” Ah Yuen asked, as Lucille tucked him into bed. Serenity was engaged in gathering up some Meccano strips and plush toys from the floor. The boy’s voice, clear as a bell, reassured the women an asthma attack was not imminent.

“When Daddy finds time, darling,” Lucille replied. “Sure you’re warm enough? Don’t want you catching cold.”

“Daddy’s always busy. Can’t we go by ourselves?”

“No, darling. We must go with Daddy.”

“Why? Lots of people go by themselves. Yue kung-kung does and so do some of the other kung-kungs.”

“I know, darling. But they still go according to the rules.”

“Yue kung-kung said he’s going to teach me about teas. He ordered chrysanthemum tea for me. It was really nice. You should’ve tried some, Mummy.”

“Next time.”

“If you like chrysanthemum tea, I can make you some at home,” Serenity interposed.

“Great.”

“What else did you and Yue kung-kung talk about?”

“Yue kung-kung said I reminded him of Grandpa. Some of the other kung-kungs thought so too. I wish I had known Grandpa. Do I remind you of him, Grandma?”

“Yes, my precious,” Serenity replied, fingering her string of prayer beads.

“I wish you’d go the Evergreen with us. You’ll like it there.”

“The Evergreen doesn’t serve vegetarian food. Did you offer the kung-kungs appropriate Lunar New Year greetings?”

“Oh, yes! They gave me lai sze. Big ones!”

“Did you thank them properly?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Good. If you do well in your lessons tomorrow, I’ll speak to your father. Maybe he can find time to take you there again.”

“Oh, goodie-goodie!” The boy’s eyes brightened. “Are both of you going to stay with me tonight? You haven’t done that for a long time.”

“Don’t get up to your tricks, young man!” Lucille said. “You know the rules. One of us stays on Nanny’s night off. Tonight it’s me. Grandma’s not feeling well.”

“Are you going to send for Dr. Chow, Grandma?”

“No, my pet. Dr. Chow has already given me some pills. They make me feel much better.”

“Why can’t Dr. Chow give me pills to make me feel better?”

“You’ve a different kind of ailment. Yours is asthma. Mine’s angina. That comes with old age. Dr. Chow says you eat too many chocolates. That triggers your attacks.”

“But I love chocolates, Grandma.”

“Sometimes we have to give up things we love for our own good.”

“That’s enough talk,” Lucille interjected. “Just go to sleep. Your inhaler and your glass of water are on the table. You’ve nothing to worry about. I’ll be here till you’re asleep. Now say ‘good night’ to Grandma.”

Serenity bent over the boy and kissed him on both cheeks. Ah Yuen threw his arms around her and returned the kisses.

“Sleep well!” Serenity said, switching off the overhead lights.

In the frail glow of the nightlight on the bedside table, Lucille cuddled her son and whispered endearments, checking once again he was properly tucked in against the February cold. Then she retreated to an armchair on the other side of the table.

The room was dominated by a large ebony desk, which jarred against the colourful curtains filled with Disney characters. The gleaming desk had once been her father-in-law’s. It was too high for Ah Yuen. He needed cushions on the chair and a foot stool. But since her mother-in-law was sentimentally attached to it Lucille had left it in situ. It was littered with comics, colouring books, crayons, pencils, copy books, an array of tin soldiers, a black stone inkslab, a stick of ink and a half-constructed aircraft made out of Meccano strips. At one corner a brand new baseball rested in the hollow of a barely used mitt. She had bought both on impulse, before remembering there was no man around to teach her son to pitch or bat.

A large poster of Bruce Lee was taped directly above the desk. The actor, with his aggressive stance and well-defined muscles, appeared like a ferocious animal defending its territory. The poster disconcerted Lucille. She did not quite approve her son selecting such a role model at his tender age.

Bruce Lee and the desk gave the room a distinctive Oriental air. Out of sight, in the drawers, were a set of Chinese chess, a string of antique brass cash, a collection of writing brushes and a stack of rice paper copybooks covered with characters done as homework for Tutor Tsim.

Lucille was slightly envious of her son. He was picking up peasant songs and ditties from his grandmother and making faster progress with written Chinese than she herself. She wanted to immerse herself in her cultural roots but her twice-weekly lessons with Madam Shek was slow going. Moreover, the more she delved into them the more she became overwhelmed by their complexities and traditions.

It was Serenity rather than her husband she had to rely on to guide her in that bewildering maze. Even obvious things like dates were a trial. The Chinese dated artefacts and history according to the reigns of emperors. It was difficult enough to get the dynasties right, let alone the reigns of individual emperors. Then, for dates to make sense, she had to correlate them back to A.D. or B.C.

Even the antiques around the house tested her. She often got mixed up over which porcelain was produced from which imperial kiln and during which period. The outstanding ages

for lacquerware and enamel were confusing, as were the different types of chalcedony. Whether a particular piece of carving had been done in boxwood, birch, cedar or aloe wood was too much to keep straight in her head. She felt utterly stupid when quizzed by guests and often had to fall back on mumbled evasions.

Serenity was always patient, guiding her to books which her father-in-law had accumulated and which Serenity had salvaged when Xavier decided to clear them from the study. But those tomes were in classical Chinese and beyond her ability to read. Serenity frequently went through a text with her sentence by sentence. It was excruciating and humiliating, especially when, due of her Toi Shan village dialect, she couldn't get the pronunciation right in Cantonese.

Xavier, on the other hand, turned out quite unreliable on Chinese culture. She had been taken in when he talked about paintings and calligraphies at the Metropolitan Museum. When he gave her a jade seal carved with his name, he had detailed the qualities Chinese associated with jade. He had told her of the power of keepers of Royal Seals and said that by entrusting his seal to her he was leaving his fate in her hands.

All that had been a pose. Only his charm and ready smiles enabled him to hold forth before foreigners with a semblance of authority. Before the likes of Uncle Yue, he transformed himself into a Wall Street master of the universe, sounding off about matrixes and synergies, mission statements and leveraged buyouts.

Lucille closed her eyes and listened to the lengthening rhythm of her son's breathing and the familiar sounds associated with deepening sleep.

Whatever made her imagine Xavier capable of leading her back to her Chinese roots? She saw with irony the advantages of being an American now. Nothing of importance had to be accounted for before the Boston Tea Party or the chopping down of that cherry tree. It took little effort to be democratic, sharing the same Main Streets, the same fast foods and the same Sears Roebuck catalogues. Occasionally, however, one had to pay the price of being called "a fucking Commie" or a "dirty Chink whore".

Xavier had turned her into a trophy wife. That was not what she wanted. Beyond material things, her existence was a misery. Living in a magnificent house stuffed with priceless antiques and attended by servants was certainly better than that dingy fruit stall in San Francisco's Chinatown. Fine wines, designer clothes, silk sheets, pleasure boats, exclusive clubs and credit cards with astronomical limits were not to be sneezed at.

But she wanted a big family, not just one asthmatic son. In spite of her feminist posture at Berkeley, she secretly yearned for a man who could love, enchant and pamper her. There had been precious little of that with Xavier. Not even sex. The four feet separating her bed from her husband's divided them as effectively as the Rockies. During their early days in Hong Kong Xavier occasionally climbed into her bed. He had not done so for eight months.

Two weeks ago, when her nipples tingled and her body ached for satisfaction, she had gone over to his bed -- only to be met by rebuff.

"Horrible day. I'm exhausted," he had said, before turning his back on her, forcing her to retreat in humiliation.

She felt insulted. She was still young, not yet thirty. Her physical charms and appetites were intact. How could she be no longer desirable? She thought with deepening resentment of the boys who had panted after her at high school and college. Other men still found her attractive. She could detect it in their eyes.

That British journalist, Baxingdale, had displayed interest. She had only met him once before, more than two years back, when he came to the house to interview Xavier and to take photographs. And last week he had been a fellow guest of the Knights at the Red Cross Ball. During the course of the evening he had invited her to dance. He was an excellent dancer and his bigness made her feel safe and protected. She noticed at once his pleasing male smell, not at all like that of callow American youths doused with Old Spice. When the band played one of those Nat King Cole ballads she loved, Baxingdale had said: "That's one of my favourites. They don't seem to write songs like that any more."

"It's one of my favourites too," she had replied. "Could it be that sad songs are out of fashion?"

"I suppose people nowadays prefer dancing to the jingle of money," Baxingdale said and began to hum the tune in a deep baritone.

It appeared, momentarily, that she was being courted and she allowed herself to get carried away. She doubted if Xavier would notice or, indeed, care. As was usual on such occasions, he would be courting popularity by running around selling raffle tickets and practising his community service routine.

She had closed her eyes and treated herself to the luxuries of dancing and male attention. She had clung to her partner closer than she had meant to and he had responded.

The way they danced did not pass unnoticed by Phoebe Knight. Later, in the powder room, Phoebe had said: "Seb's a darling man. We were at Oxford together, you know. Chris too, of course. Seb's got all kinds of talents. I can vouch for him. He would make a marvellous catch except he's poor as a church mouse. His father is only a vicar, you know."

"Money isn't everything."

"Easy to say when you have it, darling."

Phoebe Knight sucked in her stomach and thrust out her bosom. She obviously harboured residual claims upon Baxingdale's affections. Lucille felt hugely embarrassed that her lapse on the dance floor should have led anyone to suppose she had designs on the journalist.

She had lain awake half that night thinking about it. She longed to be free again, to love again. A divorce was attainable, together with a modest settlement. She had no intention of even denting the Gold Star fortune. But she could not give up Ah Yuen and that was a concession her husband would never allow, unsatisfactory father though he was. Taking Ah Yuen back to America would also hurt Serenity. She couldn't do that after all the kindnesses her mother-in-law had shown.

There were also her own parents to consider. They had a claim on Ah Yuen's company and affections. Soon he would be old enough and, hopefully, well enough for her to take him to visit them on a more regular basis. If she did not, tongues would wag and she would be

accused of distancing herself from her family now that she had married into wealth and position. In any case, it would be right to expose Ah Yuen to America, to allow him to discover for himself where he wanted to spend his life.

Serenity had probably detected some of the considerations she was wrestling with and had guessed the cause of her unhappiness. Her mother-in-law had made efforts to draw Xavier and herself closer together. She had taught her to prepare various herbal tonics for Xavier. There was one known as the “Four Gentlemen’s Tonic” and another brewed with barrenwort. But her husband seldom returned early enough to take the tonics or would refuse them on the grounds they’d cause him to visit the toilet too frequently during the night.

Serenity also introduced her to Buddhism, telling her that sufferings in life were traceable to human passions and desires. But was it so wrong to desire to be free, to be loved and to give life to lots of children?

How had Serenity coped with her husband and a cold-blooded son like Xavier? Did her daily retreats into the Meditation Room really cultivate the tranquillity she displayed? Or had she merely bottled up her feelings? There was much about her mother-in-law she could not figure out. And yet, when she joined Serenity in the Meditation Room for contemplation or for reciting scriptures, she did feel peace of a sort.

Ah Yuen was asleep. Lucille left the bedroom quietly and made her way down to the Meditation Room. She found Serenity sitting cross-legged on a prayer mat, as if in a trance. She was about to retreat when she heard Serenity say: “Please stay.”

“Are you feeling all right, Mother?” Lucille asked. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“I’m fine,” Serenity answered. “Care to read some scripture?”

“Sure, if I’m not being a nuisance.”

Serenity smiled and handed her an opened copy of the Diamond Sutra. “Let’s start with that verse,” she said, indicating the place with her finger. “I think you’re already familiar with it.”

Lucille sat down on a prayer mat next to her mother-in-law and they began to intone in unison:

“This earthly life may be likened to a dream,
It may be likened to a bubble;
It may be likened to the dew and lightning,
For all sentient life must be so regarded.”