

Reluctant Beneficiary

Mixed emotions swirled around Amber as she walked slowly from the dining room to the sitting room next door. The ease with which she had achieved a switch from acting school to university had elated her. The way the subject had come up and got settled had been truly amazing!

But her aunt's indication of a need to discuss another matter of importance had sparked a sharp unease. What could it be? Had news of her drunken striptease finally reached her ears? If so, how to extricate herself? That spiked punch excuse probably hadn't washed. Her aunt would hit the roof on any mention of drugs. She had better come up with a more convincing story pretty damn quick.

Her aunt's business in the kitchen was unlikely to last much more than fifteen minutes. Apart from settling the day's marketing expenses, her aunt would only need to decide on the following day's menu and the selection of a tea to round off the evening's meal.

So absorbed was she in finding a better excuse that she had neglected to switch on the light upon entering the sitting room. She only woke up to that omission when she caught a reflection of an Eurasian girl in a yellow T-shirt on the glass door of one of the display cabinets. It seemed like an illusion. Perhaps her entire life had been just a series of illusions.

An European face adrift among hordes of Chinese, thinking like them but not belonging with them. More bitterly still, being looked down by them. A mind filled with fragments of fascinating tales by a long dead father. The imposition by a strict mother of an all-powerful Catholic God who didn't seem so powerful when His help was really needed. Now a pagan talisman conferred by an aunt. The disinheritance of both mother and daughter by a grandfather whom she had never even met. Yet, as if by magic, she had somehow been plucked from the dire poverty of Yaumati to live in undreamt luxury in Bowen Road. How could any orphan make

sense out of such disjointed bits and pieces? And now the prospect of an escape across the seas to America, to a land yearned for by untold millions around the globe. Would that turn out to be just another illusion?

She moved from the display cabinet to the mantelpiece. Out of habit she patted the head of the white jade Monkey King clutching the Peach of Longevity. One day, she would do better than the Monkey King, she vowed. She would pluck every damn fruit from the tree of knowledge instead of just a few lousy peaches of longevity.

Her uncle had shown her facets of Hong Kong she never knew existed. He had peeled away successive surface layers like an onion, to show what was underneath. Could he not have been aware until her Dance of the Seven Veils that such shameful yearnings had been part of herself too.

Suddenly, the lights came on. It startled her. It was Malu coming into the room bearing two cups of tea on a tray.

“Sorry, Miss,” Malu said in English. “Didn’t know you were here, in the dark. I bring tea.” She placed the two conventional Chinese teacups with lids and saucers on the redwood coffee table in front of the long sofa.

“Thanks, Malu.”

Amber moved to the sofa where she and her aunt usually took their after-dinner tea. She knew that with the arrival of the tea her aunt would not be far behind. She lowered herself onto a pile of cushions to await her arrival.

She knew that there were more than forty types of tea in the kitchen, ranging from the fermented and semi-fermented to the unfermented. They were stored in little glass jars which had been there since the days of her uncle’s great grandfather. Each jar was labeled in Chinese with such names as Iron Goddess of Mercy, Po Lei, Gunpowder, Luk On, Black Dragon, Kar Sow, Cloud Mist, Pearl Tea and Lapsang.

Some were favoured by her aunt, others by her uncle. Ah Loy had her preferences too. As for Malu, she had tried them all during her eight years of service. But, except for the three or four she particularly fancied, the maid still couldn't identify them from taste or fragrance alone.

With the impending arrival of her aunt, her thoughts went back to an alibi for her wretched Dance of the Seven Veils. Her heartbeat quickened and she gritted her teeth.

Her aunt had once remarked that in certain types of litigation, truth was often the best defence. She could confess to having smoked cannabis in addition to drinking spiked punch. Her aunt was sure to be angry but if she swore it had been her first and only time, tricked into by some boy, she might just get off with a lecture and a stern scolding.

She kicked off her slippers and folding her legs onto the sofa. She embraced her legs with her arms and caught sight of her toes. They looked cute and well-formed. She wriggled them and noted she had nothing to be ashamed of when wearing sandals. She had never painted the nails with anything except a colourless varnish. Sharlene had successively experimented with purple and green. Other girls had used varying shades of red. How gutless she was. When was she going to start living, instead of being so inhibited?

She released her right hand from around her legs and reached for the front of her T-shirt. She felt the hardness of the jade sword hanging between her breasts. Her aunt had said that the talisman could ward off evil. Did that include thinking about sex or wishing to lose her virginity? If so, the talisman wasn't working.

A gentle breeze, absent during dinner, began wafting through the French windows. It brought both a refreshing coolness and the tintinnabulation of wind chimes along the verandah. Tintinnabulation! Now that was a neat word! Her uncle had dropped it on her and she had

been fascinated by the sound of it. Where does a person get such words from? While she was thinking about this, her aunt made an appearance.

“I see tea’s ready,” Aunt Po-Chee observed. “Just the thing.” She seated herself at the other end of the sofa and appeared calm and collected. The gentle modulations in her voice reassured Amber a little.

Her aunt picked up her tea cup and took a sip. “I’ve selected Dragon’s Well tonight,” she said. “It’s good for digestion.”

“Lovely, after such a big meal,” Amber said, sipping from her own cup. A familiar fragrance tickled her nostrils. After a sip, she added: “Hasn’t it been said that Dragon’s Well should ideally be brewed with water drawn from a famous spring near Hangchow?”

“That’s what connoisseurs used to say,” her aunt replied. “With the amount of industrial pollution nowadays, the water from that spring is probably less pure than our ordinary tap water.”

Her aunt continued to sip her tea.

For Amber the silence that ensued seemed loaded with hazards. She could hardly wait for the discussion to begin. As the silence stretched, she sought to break it by raising the first thing that came to mind.

“Auntie, what’s happened to your client, Cissie Lee? She hasn’t published anything since The Diary. Some of the Chinese girls at school are eagerly awaiting her next novel.”

“Don’t know,” her aunt replied off-handedly. “She hasn’t been in touch for some time. Maybe she’s given up writing.”

“Oh, no, hope not! I love her books. So sad and romantic.”

“Perhaps she’s suffering from writer’s block.”

To Amber’s dismay, her aunt lapsed into silence again. She could sense that her aunt had something weighty on her mind. Why not just spit it out and get it over with, she thought. She was ready to take her medicine.

But still the silence continued. In order to chivvy her aunt along, she ventured another intervention: “Auntie, having never been abroad, I’m rather scared of going to America. It’s such a vast country and I have no idea what I ought to study and where I ought to go.”

“Don’t worry about that,” her aunt said. “There’s time enough. Once your uncle gets back, he’ll be able to advise you. Just write off quickly to admission offices and ask them for application forms.”

“Okay,” Amber said, shrugging her shoulders in defeat.

After another interval, her aunt said: “There’s a matter I’ve been meaning to discuss with you. Later this year, soon after entering university, you’ll be turning eighteen. Your uncle and I have in mind establishing a trust fund for you, to take care of your future. . . .”

“A trust fund? For my future? Why? You intend to wash your hands of me?”

Surprise and alarm registered in Amber’s voice. She leapt to the conclusion her misbehaviour must have been exposed and that her aunt and uncle wanted her out of Hong Kong. A clean and definite break, so that future lapses would never redound upon their reputations. She became so tense she almost spilt her tea.

“No, no, you silly goose!” her aunt said, affectionately. “You’ll always be part of our family. How can we ever wash our hands of you?”

“Then why a trust fund?”

“We’re living through fractured times. Your uncle’s getting on and my health’s not the best. On top of that, this place will revert to China in 1997. Lots of imponderables ahead. We haven’t any children. You’re our closest and dearest relative. We want your future to be financially trouble-free.”

Amber set down her tea cup and reached for one of her aunt’s hands. “Oh, Auntie, don’t talk like that! You’re still young and Uncle’s fit

as a fiddle. You can still have kids. You'd make a marvellous mother."

"Thank you, my darling, you're such a comfort." Her aunt's voice tingled with emotion. "Parenthood's something we haven't given thought to at this late stage. If a child happens along, well and good. The income from your uncle's inheritances will be more than sufficient to provide for all contingencies, not to mention the sums I earn from my legal work. Providing you with a nest egg won't affect us in the least."

"You and Uncle have done too much for me already. Helping me through university is all I need. Once I'm through college I can earn my own way. I wouldn't want to be a burden on either of you any more."

Her aunt smiled indulgently, displaying a fine set of teeth against the sallowness of her complexion.

"Oh, my dear, you're so sweet," she said, leaning closer to squeeze the hand Amber had placed upon hers. "Life's never simple, my darling. Do you think your uncle could have spent his life poring over old tomes if he had not inherited so much?"

"But you said Uncle would never get anywhere with his work."

"That's just the point. An assured income has enabled him to indulge in activities he enjoys, without having to consider financial consequences. It's a kind of liberation."

"I'm not going to spend my life poring over books."

"Possibly not, but you never can tell. Suppose you develop a passion which requires lots of time and plenty of money, like providing humanitarian aid for victims of natural disasters. Or you might one day fall in love with a struggling artist or poet or composer who can command little in the way of either income or public recognition. Wouldn't you want to help him pursue his dreams?"

"I can work to support him."

Her aunt gave a merry laugh. "No doubt you can. A wise

British judge once observed that when poverty comes in through the door, love is apt to go out of the window. Money may not be a precondition for love but poverty is not conducive to keeping the flame of love burning.”

“Gosh, that sounds so cynical!” Amber exclaimed. Then, after a pause, she added: “Was that what happened between my Mum and Dad? Did poverty kill their love?”

Po-Chee sighed. “I don’t really know. It could have been a contributing factor.”

“What other factors were there? When I was little, I often heard them shouting at each other, especially when Mum forgot to fetch his medication. Things get thrown around the flat. I used to have to cover my ears with my pillow to cut out their angry voices. Why didn’t our relatives help? The Portuguese ones were supposed to be rich, aristocratic, with large estates and everything. When they didn’t, why couldn’t your father have extended a helping hand?”

“I don’t know anything about your Portuguese relatives. As for your Mum and our father, they had a bitter row, after which they never spoke to each other.”

“What was the row about?”

Her aunt withdrew her hand and reached for her cup of tea. She took a sip and said: “Your mother didn’t tell me and I never got to ask my father. I wasn’t here. I was at Roedean. I think it might have had its roots in your Mum eloping with your father.”

“Did my grandfather consider my father a bad man?”

“I don’t really know. So far as I’m aware, they’ve never met. It probably had more to do with your Mum never asking for permission to marry, particularly to a Catholic and a non-Chinese.”

All at once fragments of her childhood came drifting back to Amber. The tales of Portugal, the card games, the walks in the park, the

Dairy Farm ice creams. What's wrong with being a Catholic and a Portuguese when her father in her memory was such a dear, lovely man?

The thoughts of her father brought tears to her eyes. She brushed them away with both hands.

“Please don't get upset, darling,” her aunt said. “What's past is past. It's best to let things rest.”

Amber made no reply. It seemed so unfair that her entire family should have had to endure years of privation simply because of an old man's prejudice against someone with a different religion and of a different race. On those accounts, her grandfather had even refused to recognise her as his granddaughter. Did her Portuguese relatives hold reverse prejudices over her Dad marrying a Chinese woman? Was that why they too had never made contact?

“My Dad was a good man, even though he wasn't Chinese,” Amber said firmly, with a sniffle. “He was ill a lot. Unfit for work, poor soul. Nobody gave him enough consideration, not even Mum.”

Her aunt quickly wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her towards her. “Let ancient history be, my dear,” she said. “Once your trust is in place, you need never have to worry about money again.”

But a stubborn streak suddenly welled up within her. Her life seemed filled with evasions and half-truths. The urge to get to the bottom of things intensified in her. She girded up her courage and ventured: “Auntie, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but why didn't you help Mum after you got back from England? You used to go to Yaumati and bring me gifts each time. You used to cry with Mum a lot. Why didn't you help us?”

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” her aunt cried in a charged voice. The arm she had around Amber's shoulders tightened. “Didn't you think I tried? Oh, Gracious Heaven, I wanted so much to make life easier for all of you. But your Mum kept refusing to accept anything.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I simply don’t know,”

It was now her aunt’s turn to break into tears. She took her arm away from her niece and began trembling.

“I’m sorry I’ve upset you, Auntie!” Amber cried, alarmed.

Her aunt wiped the tears from her eyes and said: “It’s all right, darling. The past can do strange things to people. I didn’t want or deserve what my father left me, you know. I disobeyed him too. He asked me to return to Hong Kong when he was ill. But your Mum told me not to, at least till I had finished my studies. No one told me my father was sick and dying. I ignored his request, partly because I was so in love with your uncle. And I married him, also without telling my father. Too late for regrets now.”

Her aunt’s account touched Amber. “I’m really sorry to hear all this,” she said. “Mum never told me a thing. Do you blame her for stopping your return?”

“No, not really.”

“Then why did Mum refuse to accept money from you?”

“I guess your mother somehow got it into her head I was offering her money from our father, as a bribe to put right past wrongs.”

“A bribe? For past wrongs? You mean conscience money, for cutting Mum off?”

Her aunt shrugged. “I suppose. Part of our father’s estate should have gone to your mother in the first place. None of you needed to be left in such dire straits. I tried to explain to your Mum that what I was offering was not money from our father’s estate but money I had earned as a lawyer. But your mother refused to listen.”

Amber knitted her brow, embarrassed by her aunt’s revelations. But the fresh information seemed to raise as many questions as answers.

She sensed things were still being withheld. Why? She and her aunt had grown so close. Yet her aunt still seemed unable to be up front on old family secrets. Was there something more to it all, something scandalous or shameful? If so, who was her aunt trying to protect? Most of the main figures had been long dead. She felt as if she had got hold of one end of a piece of string of uncertain length. Tugging it had produced a few snippets of information. But not enough. Did she dare to pull it harder? What might she find if she did?

As she debated the issue in her mind, she said: “Auntie, is this proposed trust the matter of importance you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yes. Did you think there was something else?”

She giggled with relief. “No, no. I just couldn’t figure out what you wanted to talk about. It seems our family is filled with mysteries. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, Auntie. You and Uncle have treated me with more kindness than I have any right to expect. But since my Mum saw fit to turn down your money, it doesn’t seem right for me accept a trust. I think I’d rather try managing on my own, once I’m out of university.”

She felt anxiety gathering in her aunt as she spoke.

“Oh, darling, you don’t have to make a decision like that at this very moment,” her aunt said quickly. “I haven’t even begun to explain how a trust works. There will be no bother, no administrative hassle, no capital gains tax, indeed no tax at all. A Caribbean shell company will take care of every little detail.”

“I thought only crooks and tax-dodgers use Caribbean havens.”

Her aunt forced a smile. “Tax avoidance has become quite legitimate these days. Something of an art form even. My firm sets up such schemes almost every day.”

“Has Uncle approved of this kind of trust?”

“Not exactly. But more or less by implication.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your uncle has agreed you should have a trust. He’s not the kind of person one should lumber with details.”

Amber’s eyes widened in surprise. “Is that how lawyers are supposed to operate?”

Her aunt grimaced. “Only where your uncle is concerned. You should know him by now. Going into details will only invite complications. It’s trying enough having a Don Quixote in the family. Someone has to be practical.”

Amber thought for a moment. “I’d still like to hear what Uncle has to say about the trust, if you don’t mind.”

“By all means. He won’t be able to tell you any more than I have already.”

“Auntie, I’m sorry to be such a nuisance. It’s just that sometimes I feel lost, like a leaf being tossed around in a storm, not knowing enough about either my parents or their families.”

“I know what you mean, my dear,” her aunt replied. “I wish I could tell you more. I’m in the same boat, having spent years locked away in a boarding school.”

The two women sat sipping tea for a spell.

Eventually, Aunt Po-Chee spoke. “Leaving aside the trust for the moment, is there anything we can get you before you leave for America? Some nice pieces of jewellery, for example?”

“Oh, thank you, Auntie. That’s very kind of you. But I don’t think there’ll be much call for undergrads to deck themselves out with jewels. Besides, I might lose them, living in a dorm.”

“What about a car then? Americans are crazy about cars.”

“I wouldn’t dream of upsetting Uncle. He feels so strongly about that whole issue.”

Her aunt nodded. “Isn’t there anything you’d like?”

“Come to think of it, there is something,” Amber said, with hesitation. “What about the jade monkey on the mantelpiece? It’s a big ask, I know, but I’ve grown rather attached to it. But maybe Uncle is greatly attached to it too.”

“Technically, the monkey’s not mine to give. It belongs to the Lam family. Your uncle will have to decide. But I’m sure he would let you have it no matter how much he likes it. Maybe he will particularly want you to have it for a keepsake because he likes it. I’ll speak to him when he gets back.”

“Thank you, Auntie.”

Her aunt’s response brought on a troubling sense of ingratitude. What an ungrateful creature she was! Her aunt had always been extremely considerate of her needs and well-being. Yet she was still nursing resentments against her for not telling her everything she wanted to know about her family.

Then, suddenly, she remembered what her uncle had once said about jade. A perfect piece could seldom be found. Any flaw should be accepted unremarked, like a flaw in a good friend. How much more must that apply to a blood relative and a caring elder, she told herself.