

Twin Losses

Suen reached for his grandmother's hand resting on top of the thin blanket. It was stiff and cold, with her pulse barely detectable. Medication and nourishment were being fed to her through a drip attached to her arm. An oxygen mask obscured her nose and mouth, leaving only a pair of glazed, sightless eyes staring into space.

Suen's heart wrenched with guilt and remorse. His grandmother had been in coma since her stroke. The doctors said it was just a matter of time. The uniformed nurse, sitting indifferently in a corner of the room, seemed to confirm she was there only as a matter of form.

He felt utterly helpless crouching by the bedside. He had returned too late, too late for either forgiveness or absolution. The boney hand did not respond when he stroked it. In desperation he tried speech, whispering low, with his head close to his grandmother's pillow, so that the nurse would not overhear.

"You must get well quickly, Grandma," he pleaded. "You must plan the wedding feast. Aunt Soo-Leung had Yi's horoscope matched with mine. Perfect accord. Absolutely perfect, I tell you. The fortune-tellers said there will be many sons. Yi's parents will fly to Hong Kong to pay their respects the moment you're well enough to receive them. You'll be delighted with Yi. She's filial and well brought up. Her family's not rich but very respectable. You must get better quickly. I'll get Ah Loy to brew some of her special soups. The day you've been waiting for is almost here. Perhaps you can wear again that embroidered robe you treasure, the one you wore at Aunt Soo-Leung's wedding."

His entreaties gave no sign of having been heard. He turned to the stroking of her cold hand to gain some indication of recognition but his grandmother's eyes only stared fixedly into space. The thought that she might quit life with her eyes still open alarmed him. Unclosed eyes signified death with some great hope or ambition unfulfilled.

Concern for his grandmother was not his only torment. There was also Isabelle. He had left Paris with their relationship in tatters.

During the course of his vigil, he had stolen repeatedly from his grandmother's bedside to call Paris but without success. No number of rings elicited an answer. Each failure intensified his concern. The thought of losing Isabelle as well seemed impossible to bear.

When he finally got a response, words came spewing out in a confused babble.

"I love you," he cried, his voice breaking with relief. "Did Phirun give you my message? Did he show you the telegram? I had no right to say the things I did. Forgive me, my darling. You're all I've ever wanted. I'd come to Paris right away if I could. But I can't. My grandmother's in a coma. Why don't you come to Hong Kong instead? I'll send a ticket. I want you here with me. I don't want to lose you. You must come at once."

"Darling, please slow down." Isabelle said. "I got your message. I'm sorry about your grandmother. You must, of course, attend to her."

The familiar American inflections in her voice, far from soothing him, caused him to lose all semblance of control. His voice thickened with tears. "She's dying." he allowed.

"Calm down, darling, please calm down. It's dreadful, I know. I wish I could be with you but I've got commitments here."

"I need you."

"I need you too, darling. But for now, we're both stuck with obligations."

"I can't think straight with you so far away."

"Be patient, my sweet. We'll be together soon."

"You're not in any trouble, are you?"

“Trouble? What trouble?”

“I mean you’re not pregnant, are you? I need to know.”

There was a pause before Isabelle replied. “My period is a little late. Probably just a glitch. No cause for alarm.”

He drew in his breath sharply. “You must tell me the moment you’re certain. It’s been a nightmare trying to reach you. Call me whenever you can. Just reverse the charges.”

“No, my love. This is no time for me to intrude upon your family. Besides, I really do have a very packed schedule. Wait till things have settled down.”

“I love you.”

“I know, darling. I love you too.”

Those conventional words of love calmed him sufficiently for him to return to his vigil. The hours and days seemed to crawl with excruciating slowness. His grandmother, against the odds, maintained her hold on life for another seven days. When she finally went, she departed with unclosed eyes.

He rang Isabelle immediately with the news.

“Grandma’s gone,” he sobbed.

“I’m so sorry, my dear,” Isabelle said. “You must be brave. I wish I could make things better for you.”

“You can, by coming here. It’ll be quite a while before I can get to Paris.”

He then explained his need to attend to the traditional “Seven-seven” rituals. It was a protocol to ensure that his grandmother’s soul passed smoothly into its next existence. Every seven days monks had to chant prayers and conduct other ceremonies. On specified days, feasts had to be organised for visiting relatives and clansmen.

“My goodness, a seven-week wake? Well, I guess you must do

what you must.”

“I can’t bear being separated from you for so long. You must come at once.”

“Be sensible, my sweet. Under present circumstances I’d just be in the way. I can’t even understand the rituals. My presence will only spark controversy.”

“I don’t give a damn what anybody thinks. I love you. I want to marry you as soon as possible. I want our future settled.”

“Be sensible, darling. Marriage will raise issues we haven’t even discussed.”

“What’s there to discuss? I love you and you love me.”

“No, darling. Some things can’t be settled over the phone.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?”

Isabelle released an equivocal laugh. “Nothing’s been confirmed. You’ve got enough on your plate without going into that.”

“If you’re pregnant, that’ll change everything.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. Look, darling, I’ve been thinking a lot about us. I can’t say I’ve worked everything out. All I know is that I love you, more than I’ve ever loved anyone. But the present is not the time for going into that. When I’ve got my own thinking straight, I’ll write. I promise. Just never forget I love you.”

The temporising nature of Isabelle’s words alarmed him. He wanted to see her, to press for a commitment. But the various protocols brooked no delay. He had only the vaguest notion of what was required of him. He didn’t really subscribe to their need when his heart was tormenting him with everything he needed to know. But being filial, he followed the instructions of his aunt and the directors at the funeral parlour.

A large hall had been hired. Hundreds turned up -- community leaders, representatives of kaifong and clansmen’s associations, former

business associates of the Lam family, assorted friends and relatives. A giant portrait of his grandmother held centre stage, above a bank of yellow chrysanthemums. Musicians with pipes, oboes, trumpets and other instruments were on hand to herald the arrival of each mourner. Buddhist and Taoist monks alternated in chanting their respective prayers. Each mourner bowed three times before the matriarch's portrait, after which Suen, as chief mourner, had to respond.

The procession to the family burial plot turned out to be more noisy and chaotic than the one for his parents. The cacophonies from pipes, oboes, trumpets, drums and gongs, interlaced with the chanting of monks, were more than he could endure.

Within the home, further rites were required. Lanterns with blue characters had to be hung outside the house to denote a loss in the family. Before settling down to each meal he had to pay homage before his grandmother's ancestral tablet. Joss sticks and candles had to be lit. Offerings of fruit, fowl, wine and flowers had to be made because his aunt deemed them essential to sustain the spirit of his grandmother during its journey into its next existence.

During the fourth week of the rituals, his thoughts began to turn increasingly to Isabelle. Her promised letter had failed to arrive. Neither had she called. He telephoned repeatedly but got no answer.

He rang Madame Dandieu to ask if a message or letter had been left for him. The concierge replied that the only item awaiting him was a painting delivered by Monsieur Phirun. She had placed it inside his apartment.

“Madame Dandieu, I need a great favour from you,” he said, his voice raw with anxiety. “I need you to go to Monsieur Phirun's studio, right away, to ask him to telephone me urgently, reversing all charges. Please ring me right back to let me know whether you've made contact.”

Madame Dandieu rang back two hours later, to say that Monsieur Phirun had vacated his studio and his concierge reckoned the painter had gone back to Cambodia.

The report panicked him. There was now no one in Paris from whom he might secure reliable news. A host of unbearable questions assailed him. Why had Isabelle not been in touch? Where was her promised letter? Why had she not called or answered her phone? Had she really become pregnant? If so, the child should be his. Why distance herself from him? Did she think he would not honour his obligations? Or did her silence portend something worse? She had lost the child! Or the child was somebody else's! Impossible! Unthinkable!

They had been so much in love. Apart from his wounding words during their quarrel, what else had he done wrong? He had ignored his grandmother's warnings to stay clear of foreign girls. He had chanced upon a liberated woman who had invited him to make love to her on the very day they met. He had known that such a woman could never fit into his family. Yet he had allowed himself to fall desperately in love.

Jealousy soon channelled his thoughts in another direction, to crueller possibilities. Isabelle obviously knew lots of people. How did she get so well connected? Had she given herself to other men? To whom? To that rich nobody from the Bourse? Or to some glib-tongued Existentialist? Perhaps her silence meant she had already gone off with someone. Her declarations of love on the phone could mean nothing at all.

If she had really become pregnant, whose child would she be carrying? Or might she have already decided on an abortion? But how, in a Catholic country? The possibility of resorting to some backstreet hag froze his blood. He could well imagine the dingy room, the unclean instruments, the pain, the risks. She might be in pain at that very moment, all alone, crying, nursing her injury, battling with life in the raw again.

Such possibilities filled him with horror. He should be by her side. Otherwise, his own declarations of love would amount to nothing. Yet, even if he knew where to find her, how could he abandon the rest of the “Seven-seven” rituals?

News out of Paris soon took a turn for the worse. Following complaints to the telephone company about his inability to reach Isabelle’s number, he was informed that the number was no longer in use.

He fell into frenzies of anguish and despair, retreating into a morose silence. Apart from his filial duties, he spent long hours pacing the verandah and the garden, tight with tension, indifferent to the passage of time. His aunt and Ah Loy assumed that his behaviour was a reflection of his grief for his grandmother.

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Once the funeral protocols had been concluded, Suen took the first available flight to Paris.

His aunt, assuming he was rushing off to be with Yi, chastised him. “It’s inauspicious to call upon a respectable family when you’re in mourning, especially where marriage is involved,” her aunt said.

“I wasn’t thinking of marriage,” he replied. “I owe it to Yi to explain personally why our relationship must end.”

His aunt remained unconvinced, however. But sensing his unstable state, she did not use her authority as an elder to forbid him.

Once back in Paris, he plunged into a search for Isabelle. He made enquiries at the Grande Chaumière, wandered around the cafés along St. Germain des Prés, questioned every acquaintance he could find, accosted waiters and regulars at her usual haunts. But no one had seen her for weeks. Neither did anyone know of her whereabouts. Many, in fact,

asked him for news of her. He spent several nights at the Rue Jacob bar, reminiscing too much and drinking too immoderately. When the jaunty Auprès de ma Blonde was sung, its refrain pierced him like a dagger.

He retraced the routes of their innumerable outings, along the embankments of the Seine, through the Quai du Louvre, to the Place de Furstemberg where Delacroix once had a studio, to Brasserie Lipp and to the Halles before the break of dawn. Isabelle's spirit seemed to infuse every stone along the way but no trace of her person could be found.

On some nights, exhausted by his wanderings, he simply stayed inside his Montparnasse apartment, staring at Isabelle's portrait. Phirun's abstraction, executed as sparsely as the best Chinese landscapes, evoked the lively spirit of the woman he loved. The single blue-green eye, the wriggle for a mouth, the fetching fall of golden hair, everything brought back the shifting melodies in her laughter and the breathless ecstasies of their flesh-tethered nights. The intimacies they had shared passed before his mind's eye like re-runs from an old cherished film.

After a month of searching, however, he realised his quest was futile. The American Embassy knew nothing of her. The police had received no report of any missing American woman. She seemed to have evaporated into thin air. He packed the portrait with his other belongings, paid off Madame Dandieu and headed home.

Home proved as unsettling as Paris. His days remained filled with grief. His lonely bed deprived him of sleep. He hung Isabelle's portrait in his study and gazed long upon it with a helpless longing.

With his grandmother gone, an apocalyptic emptiness entered the house. Only Ah Loy was left, flitting spectre-like around its numerous rooms, in soundless travail behind lattice screens or in one of the recesses along the corridors, shaking her head from time to time.

His thoughts remained thousands of miles away. Whenever he

reflected upon the way he had treated both the women he loved he became seized by deep and bitter remorse. He wished he were dead.

Weeks drifted by, embalmed in slow time. Then one day, out of the blue, a letter with a New York postmark arrived. He recognised immediately the handwriting on the envelope and ripped it open.

It turned out to be a long letter, written in sections with dates covering a period of weeks. It contained deletions, insertions and amendments but no return address. There were also stains on some of the sheets which he surmised at once must have been caused by teardrops. His own eyes moistened at their sight.

The first section of the letter read:

“How are you, my darling? Sorry I haven’t been in touch. Must have distressed you no end. The last few months have been no picnic for me either. I couldn’t trust myself not to go to pieces at the sound of your voice. Hence this letter, the hardest damn letter I shall ever write.

“I don’t know where to begin. Where does truth begin? What appears clear and simple gets messed up when written down. Those three little words ‘I love you’, for instance. They can so easily turn lifeless and commonplace without a voice to vouch for their authenticity. Will I ever say those words to you again as before, with my arms around your neck and looking into your eyes? Can’t explain how you got so deep under my skin. I’m no babe in the woods. I’ve kicked around. Something simply clicked when we met. Phirun would call it karma. What say you?

“The next truth is more difficult. I AM pregnant. I would give anything in the world to be able to say that the child is yours. But I can’t. I simply don’t know.

“I can imagine you frowning at this very moment, as anger breaks through. But please don’t think of me as a two-timer. I’ve never dated anybody after meeting you. That’s the honest truth.

“But something I never wanted to happen did happen and I owe you an explanation. You may find my explanation implausible, ridiculous even. For what it’s worth, what I’m about to tell you is the whole truth and nothing but.

“A few days before our quarrel, I spent a night with you against my better judgement. Had a swimwear shoot the next morning. I told you so but you insisted on my staying. I always need plenty of sleep before a shoot. You’ll remember it turned out so crazy we hardly slept all night!

“I went from your place directly to the studio. You were still lost to Morpheus. Although more than a little exhausted, I felt on top of the world. I wanted to get back to you the moment I finished.

“It soon became apparent the French photographer had other things on his mind. He’s a likeable person, married and good at his job. I had worked with him previously and we got along okay. But he had a crush on me. He had made the occasional pass which I treated as a big joke.

“That morning he kept touching me, re-arranging my poses, re-adjusting my bikinis and so on. He was ruining the shoot. I became irritated. I simply wanted to get the job done and get back to you. I thought if I gave him a peck and told him not to be silly, I could get him to work properly. I was wrong. He misread my response and things got out of hand. It wasn’t consensual. I’m truly sorry. I’ve been feeling bad since. Guess I should have fought harder and let the damn shoot go to hell.

“By the time of our quarrel, I felt certain that something had gone awry. My crimson curse is usually right on the button. This time it was delayed. The possibility of being pregnant hit me. But by whom? You should be odds-on favourite. But that damn photographer remained a long shot. I didn’t know what to do. It seemed premature to confess my screw-up. (Pardon the bad pun!) Then everything got overtaken by our

quarrel.

“After my pregnancy had been confirmed, it got real scary. You were gone. I hadn’t counted on motherhood so soon. Abortion was not an option, for a child represents life, hope, an extension of myself. I had created it and I was determined to bring it into the world, regardless of whom the father might be.”

The first section of the letter ended abruptly there.

He noted again the stains on the page. He felt dizzy with contending emotions. Since Isabelle was pregnant, did it matter whether the kid was his or not? What would anything matter if he lost her? A helpless anguish clawed at his throat.

The second section of the letter was dated ten days later.

“Sorry I lost my cool the other day,” it began. “You don’t have to be a genius to figure out why I had to stop writing. Funny, I had always thought myself a pretty tough cookie. Yet these days I don’t seem able to control my emotions.

“I get good days and bad days. On the good ones I’m almost convinced the child is ours and that we would somehow live happily ever after. Fairy tales die hard.

“Ouch! The baby has just kicked me! Is that some kind of portent? Is it telling me to stop day-dreaming? Or would Chinese soothsayers or astrologers read something else into such a phenomenon? Ouch! It has kicked me again. Perhaps it wants to say hallo. Ha! ha!

“The good days are getting rarer now. On bad ones, I’m filled with deviousness and deceitful thoughts. I’m tempted to tear up this blasted letter and to keep my head down till the baby is born. If it looks European, I stay the hell out of your life. If the kid has Chinese features, I would make contact. You’re such a sucker for doing the honourable thing. We would get hitched and I need never ’fess up to my foul-up at the photo

shoot. The trouble is that a little thing called conscience gets in the way.

“On very bad days, I get deeply depressed. Simply can’t reconcile myself to losing you. Nor to my child growing up without a father. Tears don’t change anything. Drink and drugs offer temporary oblivion. But the bump on my belly stops that sort of escapade dead.

“I’ve often reflected on what caused us to meet and to fall in love. I had gone to Paris to grab a slice of the Gatsby life. You had gone there from a different corner of the world, to study literature of all things! What are the chances of two transients in a foreign city, searching for entirely different goals, ending up falling in love? Unbelievable! It’s karma, all right. Otherwise how to explain Phirun bumping into you in the street and my getting introduced to you through posing for him? Buddhist causation. Oh, why did you have to turn out so lovable? Damn you! Damn you!”

He noted that the second section had ended as abruptly as the first. According to the date above the next passage, Isabelle had not resumed writing for another two weeks. He felt a tide of unalterable doom rushing towards him.

“I’ve just re-read what I have written.” was how Isabelle had begun that next section. “What a mess I’m making of this letter. You should have seen some of the original pages before I rewrote and replaced them! You wouldn’t believe the number of changes I had to make to hide how hysterical I had been.

“But I’m cool today. I’ve thought long and hard about us and about the child I’m carrying. If it’s ours, it wouldn’t have much of a future, would it? It’ll end up like you, not really belonging anywhere. Your tales of Eurasians being held in low regard in the East are as disheartening as the ferocious segregation battles being fought in parts of my own country. It seems that neither your society nor mine is ready for a love like ours. Or

for children born out of such a love. I simply can't see anything changing soon.

“My child, whoever the father might be, is bound to be in for a rough ride. There's a Soviet Sputnik circling the globe. My country is wild with fury. Our people have been brought up to regard themselves as top dogs in all things technological and military. They're bound to demand a fresh arms race. Sooner or later, a couple of idiots are going to press the wrong buttons and blow us all apart. For that reason I've decided to raise my child at some place where even idiots wouldn't dream of dropping a nuclear weapon. Maybe we'll head for the hills of Montana or somewhere in the middle of Alaska. Who knows?

“By the time you receive this letter, we would be long gone. Please don't come looking for us, my sweet, for all our sakes. I may have only a fraction of your education but I know that, over the long haul, we're not right for each other. Our temperaments are different. You are a seeker, a dreamer, someone who wants to get to the bottom of issues. You long for a Pegasus to mount, dragons to slay, truths to uncover. My love of fun, frivolity, adventure and children would only frustrate you, eat into your time. I love you too much to allow that to happen.

“Trust me, my pet. Parting is best for all concerned. Become the seeker of truths you've always desired to be. That's in your nature. Your freedom is the only gift I can bestow. My mission henceforth will be to protect and bring up my child the best way I know how, to help it come to terms with this crazy world we're in.

“If the child turns out to be yours, I will tell him or her in due time. I will tell the child who you are and how wonderfully unique you have been. I will also explain why you had to be absent from our side and where you can be found. The rest is up to Fate. Who knows, someone might well come knocking on your door one day to look for a father.

Whatever happens, remember always that I am dropping out of your life not because I don't love you enough but because I love you too much."

Suen let out a gasp on finishing the letter. He gathered up its pages and clasped them to his chest. Tears came rolling down his cheeks.