

The Aftermath

For a man of Suen's intelligence, his initial reaction to the loss of the two people dearest to him was utterly banal. He contemplated suicide. He reflected that the Greeks used to hold that to die at a time of one's own choosing was a gift from the gods. He saw no reason why he shouldn't utilise that gift. It seemed he had nothing left to live for. Once he began thinking of means to bring it about, however, he found it annoyingly difficult to do so without leaving a mess for others to clean up.

Moreover, he still had mourning obligations to discharge, not to mention the need to honour his ancestors by extending the family line. The classics had made abundantly clear that to leave no progeny was one of the worst failures in filial piety. And then there was somewhere in America the distinct possibility of an unborn child to consider. Could he be so heartless as to leave it with the stigma of a father's suicide?

Those considerations trapped him in a web of grief and despondency. He felt increasingly like Hamlet, sinking inexorably beneath a predicament he could neither bear nor cast aside. He thought about other devastated characters in literature -- the emasculated Abélard, the remorseful Raskolnikov, the blinded Dick Helder in The Light That Failed. But none of their resolutions seemed to suit him.

Meanwhile, his physical appearance steadily declined, in part due to his adherence to the tradition of leaving his hair uncombed and his chin unshaved during mourning. But his inability to sleep and his loss of appetite also took their toll. It was about all Ah Loy could do to wheedle him into taking anything during meals. He lost weight steadily as a consequence and his cheeks became as sunken as those of an ascetic.

That physical decline was accompanied by an abandonment of all pretence at personal hygiene. He would wear the same suit of pyjamas for days on end, in spite of Ah Loy laying out fresh sets. It was doubtful whether he bathed regularly, for a sour smell attended his presence.

He shunned contact with all his friends and refused to answer the telephone. He shut himself in his study for hours on end, or else he would shamble with hunched shoulders around the forlorn garden or through the echoing silences of the house. His only human interface was soon reduced to just Ah Loy, though once in a while he would chance upon the gardener.

Alarmed by such developments, the old servant reported the situation to Aunt Soo-Leung, who duly turned up at the house. But Suen violated every courtesy by locking himself inside a bathroom and refusing to come out.

His aunt tried to reason with him through the bathroom door but received not a word in reply. Exasperated, his aunt delivered a tongue-lashing and ordered him to come out. That, too, met with no response. She was left at wit's end.

Within his own soul, Suen alternated between flashes of hope and troughs of despair. He would sometimes seize upon the notion of engaging private detectives to scour America for Isabelle and would build a mirage based on his ability to change her mind. He would fantasise about their picking up from where they had left off.

But those fantasies extinguished themselves as quickly as they had flared. In a country the size of America a search might take months, if not years. What right would he have then to uproot mother and child from their refuge? And to what purpose? To drag them to Hong Kong? Or to some other place equally unwelcoming of mixed marriages and half-breeds?

Isabelle had identified his affliction. He could never feel at home living in exile or in a territory lost to foreign occupation. How could he expect otherwise of Isabelle or any child of his? He had wrestled with that issue before and he had found no solution.

His wise old grandmother must have identified his disposition when she warned him against entanglements with foreign women. Could she have rumbled his fabrications and lies long ago as well? In retrospect, he had been ridiculously inept. His lies about Mona, his explanation for the cigarettes found by Ah Loy, his excuses for delaying his departure to Oxford, his creation of a non-existent Yi. They couldn't have fooled anyone, let alone an elder as astute as his grandmother. If she had given the impression of swallowing them she must have done so out of love. That must have accounted for her dying with unclosed eyes!

Those conjectures made his sorrow even harder to bear. A tide of remorse and self-loathing welled up repeatedly from the pit of his stomach. His whole body shook on each occasion he broke into sobs.

His observance of mourning rituals had to be a complete fraud. But how to make amends? In the end, by slow degrees, he concluded he had to live, for to live was to suffer. He deserved to suffer. To take the coward's way out would be the final insult to those who had loved him.

Isabelle had taken him to be a seeker after truths. But he had only been a poseur, regurgitating words and ideas borrowed from others. Except for one feeble attempt to establish a social club for journalists, he had never lived out his beliefs in the way that Kim or Ralfie or Sanjay had done. Indeed, he had turned more or less into a passive collaborator under British rule. Should someone actually come looking for a father one day, what justification could he offer for the sham that was his life?

After much introspection, he decided to write an eulogy to his grandmother, one which would openly acknowledge his many lies and deceits, confessing to how he had fabricated Chinese girlfriends to fend off meeting his filial obligations and his torrid love affairs with Western women against her advice.

He recounted, too, how he had employed Tutor Tseng's

teaching about men needing to be mellowed by music as a subterfuge time and again to get his own way, without making any real attempt to learn the zither.

He touched upon his arrogance and lack of humility. Both his grandmother and Tutor Tseng had warned that such traits were unbecoming in a gentleman but he had not been mindful of their warnings. As a result he treated his elders without due respect. Even more unforgivably, he had brought dire consequences to his dear mentor and friend, Kim.

As he set down without reservation the whole litany of his misdeeds and failings, he found that it had a cathartic effect. By slow degrees his dark moods receded and he could judge from Ah Loy's face that he was returning to his more usual habits.

That steady process of self-examination eventually led him to another insight. Besides Tutor Tseng and Kim, he had in fact encountered many who could be regarded as his teachers and whose wisdom he had not fully taken on board -- Reverend Adams, Dr. Loughridge, Ralfie, Sanjay and a host of others. His debts to them should also be acknowledged. He therefore decided to turn his eulogy to his grandmother into a wider book with the title Remembering My Teachers.

As he worked furiously on the manuscript, he also made a determination he should begin to make amends. One of the first remedies he hit upon was to learn the zither. He sought out a master of the Southern School for instruction. The master questioned him on his aims and his seriousness of purpose. He replied he wanted to honour a promise he had made in his youth.

The master nodded and explained that in ancient times the zither had five strings. Over time, that number gradually increased to well over twenty. He asked if he had a preference for any particular number of strings. When he said he had none, the master suggested one with sixteen

strings.

Zither music was difficult to appreciate, the master further explained, because of its limited melodic repertory. The beauty of its music lay not so much in a succession of notes but in the colouring of individual notes. Timbre was the thing. While the right hand plucked, the left hand manipulated strings to provide the desired pitch and vibrato. Subtle variations could also be achieved by plucking the same note on a different string or by plucking the same string with a different finger.

Suen struggled with those finger movements. As his competence increased, he felt more and more drawn to its music. Although it sounded sorrowful, transitory, and not quite the kind to soothe a savage breast, it nonetheless suited his moods. He spent many afternoons and evenings playing on the verandah, sending its haunting notes like laments over the ceaseless demolitions and reconstructions in the city.

His manuscript for Remembering My Teachers progressed apace during his period of mourning. But it increasingly dawned on him that the stark honesty of what he was writing rendered it totally unsuitable for publication. How could he make public his past relationships with Mona, when she was now a married woman and a prominent socialite? How could he possibly damage Kate's marriage and reputation by revealing their adulterous affair? And what did one silly kiss at Brasenose matter against the magnificence of a towering idealism like Ralfie's? As for Isabelle and the child which might or might not be his, they too must be shielded no matter where they might happen to be.

It occurred to him then that, as Kim had taught him long ago, there were many kinds of truth. But each truth could be magnified, distorted or taken out of context. Or it could be totally ignored or regarded as insignificant to the matter at hand. The key was not to inflict gratuitous hurt on others for no good reason, even if it meant retreating somewhat

from his initial desire to confess all his sins. He was not writing for the gutter press or to titillate idle housewives. He was now writing to acknowledge what he had learnt -- or should have learnt -- from a succession of superb teachers.

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Shortly after Suen's mourning period had expired, Dum-Dum and Su came calling. Ah Loy served tea. Suen received them with delight, although he had still kept his hair uncombed and his chin unshaven.

"Goodness gracious!" Su exclaimed. "You look a sight! Your mourning period must be over. Why a continuing display of filial piety?"

"Because I hadn't been filial enough in the past," Suen replied.

Dum-Dum caught the tenor of self-reproach in the voice and deftly intervened.

"Everybody's been asking after you," the old journalist said. "You haven't been to a Friday game for ages. Now that you're out of mourning, your friends are beginning to wonder why you are shunning them. You don't answer the telephone any more and Ah Loy keeps saying you cannot be disturbed. What the deuce is going on? What have you been up to?"

"Learning the zither."

"The zither? What for?"

"The Confucians say understanding music is essential to becoming a gentleman?"

"A gentleman!" Su scoffed. "That species is deader than the dodo. Money grubbers rule the roost nowadays. Just listen to the uncouth sounds that pass for music these days! A complete waste of time."

"I'm also writing a book."

“Oh? What kind of book?”

“You’ll find out if it gets published.”

“You’ve finished it then?”

“Almost.”

“Great! Does that mean you’re going to stop being a hermit?”

“Don’t know.” Suen frowned, feeling uncomfortable under his friend’s interrogation. “Let’s wait and see.”

“What you need is a good holiday, my friend,” Dum-Dum said, when their conversation started to languish. “Why not go off somewhere and bring back the old Suen we used to know?”

“I’ve a better idea,” Su said. “Why not become a roving correspondent for my rag? Purely honorific, mind you. Pay’s not worth having, expenses less than zero. But if you’re travelling anyway, why not send in a piece or two from wherever you happen to be? Keep your hand in, so to speak, maintain an outlet for your maverick ideas. I can square it with the editor. What do you say?”

“Sounds interesting,” Suen responded. “I’ll think about it after I’ve finished my book.”

Another hour of desultory conversation and tea-drinking followed, after which his friends took their leave, still baffled by their friend’s uncharacteristic reticence.

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Suen’s journalistic credentials secured him a sympathetic hearing from a local book publisher. After he had delivered the manuscript of Remembering My Teachers, a restlessness took possession of him. He decided to follow the suggestion for travel and headed for Cambodia to visit Phirun. He found the painter in good form and productively engaged.

His sparse and abstract style now bore the definite stamp of authority. But he had no news of Isabelle.

The two friends spent long hours discussing love and loss, life and art, the dismal state of the world. It was like old times in Paris. Another topic was the civil war raging next door in Vietnam.

“Both our countries can be dragged in, you know, if we don’t watch out,” Suen said.

“Already happening with Cambodia,” Phirun lamented. “Communists use so-called Ho Chi-Minh Trail to supply south. Americans react with heavy bombing. Villagers get killed.”

“Terrible!”

“Americans always optimistic. Think can succeed where French failed. Don’t know Vietnamese. Heading for own Dien Bien Phu.”

“Yes, Vietnamese are not a people to trifle with. Anyone who has studied Asian history will know they gave a mighty Ming Emperor a bloody nose.”

Phirun sighed. “If history not learnt, what to do?”

“If things get out of hand, have you plans?”

The Cambodian shook his head. “Home’s here. Cannot abandon, mon ami. We creatures of East. Cannot live in exile. No avoiding destiny.”

Suen nodded, reminded of his own inability to live with contentment under foreign rule coupled with a reluctance to live in exile. His heart grew heavy with foreboding for Phirun and his family,

His apprehensions were intensified when he made the popular journey north to see the ruins of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. How transient was glory, he mused, as he gazed upon the remains of the once magnificent palaces and temples. Their walls had been elaborately carved with the legendary exploits of gods, men and animals.

How easy for civilisations to end in ruins! The fall of the Roman Empire. The relics scattered across Latin America. The Ming Dynasty had once been centuries ahead of other nations in most fields of art and science. Yet, by the beginning of the Twentieth Century China had been reduced to “the sick man of Asia”. Could the Chinese civilisation also vanish one day?

It has had its dynastic cycles, with good emperors and bad, but had somehow remained the only continuous civilisation surviving from antiquity. Could its values now survive the more pushy ideas of a post-Industrial Revolution West? The military and commercial dominance of the West had prevailed for only a couple of hundred years. What were a couple of hundred years measured against the stretch of China’s history?

Sanjay had once said it barely amounted to the length of an ordinary Eastern dynasty. He remembered also Spengler’s Decline of the West and that had given him further food for thought. Those who were now so cock-a-hoop also had lessons unlearnt, paths wrongly chosen. It was not unthinkable that the skyscrapers of Manhattan, copied by so many around the globe, might in the fullness of time end up little differently from the 54 Bayon towers at Angkor Thom.

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After Suen’s return to Hong Kong, he wrote several pieces on Cambodia and the Vietnamese war for Su’s newspaper. He also picked up the threads of his former routines. Once in a while he dropped by the Blue Bird Cafe for coffee and went to Szeto’s Bar for drinks. He resumed his Friday bridge games as well.

When his book came out, it received a few respectable reviews. But it did not sell, except among friends and academics. He accepted that

his reflections were not the kind favoured by the mercantile population of Hong Kong.

As time went by, the increasing insistence by his aunt on fulfilling her match-making duties drove his thoughts to flight. He told his aunt he had been commissioned to write another book on international trade and that required considerable research in London. He thus headed for Radnor Place, ashamed of resorting once again to an untruth to get out of a tight spot.

London might mean exile but it was filled with libraries, museums, theatres, art galleries, private clubs and sweet young things. He tried to build a life around those attractions, interspaced by brief visits to Hong Kong during the cooler months between November and March.

He also made forays into Europe. He liked the Italians in particular, in spite of their fractious, corrupt and Mafia-penetrated democracy. Its neighbour, Yugoslavia, seemed a marked contrast. There, the strong hand of Tito appeared to have imposed a stability of sorts upon a chaotic mixture of races, cultures and religions. He recalled the observation by Hobbes that people needed the terror of some power to adhere to moral and civil restraints. That seemed a valid truth in Yugoslavia. But it left him wondering what would happen after Tito.

He never re-visited Paris, however.

In London he joined a couple of Mayfair clubs -- the Curzon and the Hamilton -- where high-staked rubber bridge was regularly played. Both clubs were frequented by players of international standing, including a couple of members of the famous Italian Blue Team. He was the only Chinese at both. He held his own against most comers and, in spite of sometimes feeling like the odd man out, he fell into the habit of playing bridge two or three evenings every week.

When the mood caught him, he wrote an article for Su's paper,

usually featuring some event connecting Britain to China. He recounted the tale of the revolutionary politician, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, being kidnapped off the streets in London in 1896 and held for twelve days at the Chinese Embassy at Portland Place. Only a stiff intervention by Lord Salisbury prevented the future Father of the Chinese Republic from being shipped back to China for execution.

He also described how London's first Chinatown came into being at Limehouse. Its first inhabitants had been former deckhands abandoned by the Blue Funnel Line because they either did not have the means or the willingness to pay for their return passages to the East. Fiction of the Fu Manchu type soon pinned dubious but undeserved reputations on both the place and its inhabitants.

As for the sweet young things, he indulged in passing flings but he never encountered anyone with sufficient intellectual spice to hold him as Kate and Isabelle had done.

He had virtually resigned himself to a comfortable but unchallenging existence when he chanced upon Po-Chee.