

Fear of Retribution

“Methought I heard a voice cry, ‘Sleep no more! Macbeth doth murder sleep, . . .’”

That snatch of Shakespeare, half-recalled from Roedean, came unbidden to Po-Chee as she tossed about in her bed. Murder? Why should her mind dwell on murder on yet another sleepless night? She had no homicide case on her docket. The deaths that had troubled her most had been those of her father and of her son. They had happened ages ago. Death certificates unequivocally established the causes as heart failure and cot death respectively. Why should any unwarranted imputation be entering her head now? Unless . . .!

Her insomnia had started again once Amber had turned down the trust fund after posing awkward questions. That outcome had been so unexpected that she had been grappling with it ever since, trying to divine the reason. If the girl had not uncovered anything damaging then it had to be a part of some hidden celestial design. Were the gods reminding her that there were higher laws than those she juggled every day inside her office or in colonial courtrooms? The iron law of causation, for example, from which there was no escape.

According to the scriptures Lucille Chu had given her, every human act, whether done in the current life or in some previous existence, attracted consequences. Those consequences had to be accounted for in the end. What use could her mastery of the rules of evidence, of discovery, of admissibility and so forth be in such a final reckoning? A complete farce probably. It was deeply unsettling.

She felt a vague tension rising, spreading like an itch across her limbs. She scratched absentmindedly.

Amber’s response certainly carried implications. They indicated at the very least that the stories about the cause of Po-Chun’s fracture with their father had failed to convince. But how could she reveal the full details of everything her niece had demanded to know without tearing to shreds the

reputations of everyone involved?

It would have done the girl no good to destroy her deep affection for Andy. What child would want to see a dearly admired father being exposed as a liar, a thief, an alcoholic and a wife-beater? Moreover, his claims to a noble heritage had been pure invention. He was not even pure Portuguese, only an illegitimate offspring of an affair between a Chinese servant girl and a minor Macau functionary. Amber herself was self-conscious enough already over being an Eurasian without more unpalatable truths being loaded on her.

But without more background knowledge, her own father must come over as a hard and unreasonable man. He was not. He had other reasons for cutting Po-Chun off besides his dislike for foreigners and for her marrying without his consent. But those reasons were difficult to spell out. Besides, she herself had also married Suen without permission. The resulting difference in inheritance simply screamed for an explanation.

She had tried to put that down to a mere aberration on the part of a sick man. That had sounded too feeble even to herself. So far as Amber knew -- and Suen too, for that matter -- Daddy had died of heart failure, not suicide. That tragedy had been clearly preventable. If Po-Chun had not neglected their father when his health began to fail or if she herself had responded differently to his pleas to return, he might have lived a good while longer. Not at all a pretty picture. Such disclosures would only lead to demands for more honesty.

She shook her head in the dark. It seemed so much easier to explain away the misdeeds of criminals than the failures of familial love and duty! And what a torment for one's conscience during midnight darkness after practising legal legerdemain all day!

Amber was no slouch. When she declined the trust, she had made the point that her mother had previously refused all offers of money. Whatever the reasons for her mother's refusals, she had said, they must apply to herself as well. What a sting in the tail!

And the girl had also expressed the wish to consult Suen before making a final decision. That dangerous initiative might lead her husband to raise questions of his own. Oh, what a mess! Had her niece concluded, just as Po-Chun had done, that her money was somehow tainted?

She had committed a tactical error in mentioning the tax-free status and foreign jurisdiction of the trust. It had set the wrong tone. It probably reminded Amber of some of the unsavoury characters she had got off on legal technicalities. But it wasn't her job to punish crooks. Her duty was to provide them with the best defence money could buy. That was the prevailing Hong Kong ethos, providing the best -- or at least the most expensive -- of everything that money could secure!

If Amber had asked about any of her more headline-grabbing cases, she would have explained that a trial was just a process, at the end of which justice might or might not be done. She was concerned with process, not justice. Defending barristers, with their ridiculous horsehair wigs, all loved her as an instructing solicitor when they appeared before the Supreme Court. They knew that her briefs would always be to the point, with every precedent and case law fully cited. She made their pleadings a breeze. Prosecutors often presented sloppy cases and verdicts ended up pretty much hit or miss. True justice, as Suen would say, required the likes of King Solomon or Judge Pau and there were precious few of them around. But the girl had never asked. That apparent disinterest puzzled her.

Then, suddenly, another thought struck. Could Amber's rejection of the trust be based on something more chilling? Could the girl have pieced together a semblance of the truth, from unguarded comments made by Po-Chun long ago and from her own slips of the tongue during weekend walks or while leafing through old family albums? Could that youngster have found her way to the locked doors of her past, a part of her life she had taken pains to guard from both Suen and Dr. Ma? Could her niece have sneaked a peep through a keyhole

and found the sight distressing? Her mind boggled and her heart skipped a beat.

She sat up abruptly in bed, trembling a little as she leaned against the headboard. She did some deep breathing to gather her composure. Calm down, calm down, she told herself. Think! Employ your forensic skills!

No teenager would turn down so large a fortune without a compelling reason. What was Amber's? The need to discover and destroy its basis seized her. The girl was her sole blood relative in this world. How could an estrangement be allowed to develop on the eve of their separation?

She had brought the girl up in line with the deathbed wishes of Po-Chun and she had become like a daughter to her. To lose her affection and good regard at this late stage would be like losing another child! And to fail poor Po-Chun as well.

She recalled with a shudder the night Amber had returned home drunk as a lord. The girl had subsequently given only the flimsiest of excuses. It could be she had discovered something about her aunt which was worse than that of being a celebrated hired gun! In the confusion of her shattered innocence, she might have turned to one of her classmates to vent her sorrow, to someone who could offer a shoulder to cry on or help her drown her unhappiness with drink.

Yes, Sharlene or one of those boys who keep ringing. She could visualise the sweet talk of consolation, touching upon the prospects of independence in the land of opportunity, of fortunes to be had for the daring, of leaving the nastiness of their crimped adolescence behind, of a new life, of happiness ever after. What need had anyone for a trust fund from a wicked aunt? In the thrall of so many romantic illusions, it was easy to see how a girl might even compromise herself!

All at once the darkness in the room seemed crowded with menaces. But were they the shadows of strangers or of departed kinfolk, like Po-Chun, demanding an accounting? Her first instinct was to cry out for Ah Loy or Malu. But would the servants see or detect them? Or were they apparitions,

like Banquo's ghost, visible only to the person they intended to haunt?

Her pulse raced. "Elder sister, is it you?" she wanted to cry. She had failed so many that the vaguely felt presence could be anyone of them. It could include Yun with his unclosed eyes. He had died right next to the very bed she was resting on. Or her abandoned father. Poor Daddy! There might be more than one of them, like lost souls of Suen's parents and other ancestors, wanting to know why she had failed to produce an heir for their family. They all had a right to be there. How could she chase any of them away?

She slid back helplessly down the bed, with the dry tang of disaster in her mouth. She curled herself into a foetal position and wrapped her arms around her head. Had it come to this? Had the time for retribution arrived? Had everything been pre-ordained? If a niece could find her way to the locked doors of her psyche, so too might her husband one day. And he would surely break those doors down and what would happen to her then?

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she cried aloud, not knowing how else to ease her torment. Tears gathered in her eyes. Oh, merciful Heaven, please forgive me, she pleaded from the bottom of her heart. Punish me for my sins, for my lawyerly arrogance, for any of my other failings, but please don't take away now any more of the precious little I have left in this world! In your great compassion, defer my punishment till my next existence. I beg this of you. Let me be reincarnated as a bug or a worm, let me burn for all eternity. But please, not yet!

Then, abruptly and confusedly, she recalled a conversation she had had with Lucille Chu during one of their lunches at the Evergreen Tea House. Lucille had asserted that there were bodhisattvas in the world who, after attaining self-realisation, would choose out of compassion to remain behind in this world to help others find their salvation. Even those guilty of the most heinous crimes could find a way to be redeemed.

The most heinous crimes! Ah! She might still be redeemable! She

clutched for that straw more desperately than any drowning creature. Perhaps the shadows were those of bodhisattvas coming to her rescue! Even if they were the spirits of Yun or her father or Po-Chun, might they not be returning from their unknown shores with reassurances of love and forgiveness? Daddy had told her during her childhood that he would love her always, no matter what. Yes, that ought to be a promise she could count on.

But just as swiftly, another thought intruded -- the words of the aged fortune-teller at the Wong Tai Sin Temple about the undesirability of outward journeys. The one who travelled would be unlikely to return, the bespectacled man had intoned.

That recollection brought on a renewed bout of anxiety. Suen had travelled. Gone on his annual pilgrimage to his usual temples of knowledge. He had yet to return. In his last telephone call he had assured her he would be back within days. Days had gone by. Where was he? Even if he were to return safely, what about Amber? She was also due to travel. Had she been selected by the gods to be the one never to come back?

Her breathing quickened. She felt overwhelmed by helplessness and despair, even though she remembered that the fortune-teller had subsequently declared that his earlier prediction was meaningless because she had not observed the proper procedure in drawing the chim. What a terrible roller-coaster ride between fear and hope! The gods must be toying with her.

This was all becoming too much, she concluded at last, after more turbulence had screeched through her head. Her nerves were in shreds. How much longer must she endure such fears, bouncing around like some ping-pong ball inside her head? All her imaginings had to be either thoroughly absurd or else she was slowly going mad.

She knew how to stop it. She switched on her bedside lamp, reached for her sleeping pills and quickly swallowed a double dose. For a fleeting second, the temptation to swallow the entire bottle crossed her mind. It

would be so easy to follow in Daddy's footsteps, she reflected, smiling sardonically, before switching off the light again.

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Po-Chee woke up later than usual the following morning, feeling groggy and out of sorts. Her feet faltered when she climbed out of bed. Nonetheless, she immediately telephoned her husband.

"When are you coming home?" she asked, after the usual preliminaries about the weather at their respective ends. "Shouldn't you be back by now?"

"I've already told you, my dear wife," Suen said. "I should be on my way within two days, once I've clarified a couple more details."

"You don't sound very keen to come home."

"What's the matter, darling? What's troubling you?"

Po-Chee paused. "Oh, it's nothing, darling. I'm sorry. Didn't mean to snap. Had a bad night, that's all. I miss you terribly. As usual, everybody else misses you too."

"I miss you too, my sweet, and everybody else. I've had a fine visit to Cambridge. Found some really interesting new lines of inquiry."

"You'd better get back quickly. Amber has at last given up that silliness about acting school. She has decided on university; and expecting you to help her apply to the right ones. All terribly eleventh hour."

She didn't feel able just yet to tell him about her ward rejecting a trust fund.

"Good girl!" Suen exclaimed. "I knew she would come around on her own. I'm glad I went early this year. Tell her I shall be back within the bosom of our harlot city in no time."

Her husband's levity and his choice of words bridled her. "I wish

you wouldn't keep referring to Hong Kong as a harlot city. Nobody here reads Isaiah any more."

"Ha-ha! Or would you prefer that I employ Pope's gentler lament of 'dear, damned, distracting town'?"

"Stop fooling around. It's not funny."

"Sorry, dear. Thought you needed cheering up. You're all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes. But please stop running Hong Kong down in front of Amber. Otherwise she would carry away the wrong impression of this place."

"That girl ought to know what we are conveniently burying beneath our so-called modernity and wealth."

"For goodness sake, darling! We may not be perfect but we're far from bad! We're hard-working, forward-looking, pragmatic, adaptive and good at creating wealth. Half the world wants to emulate us."

"There's the whole problem in a nutshell, my dear. We're setting a very bad example. We've become too rich and successful selling ourselves like harlots. And who wouldn't want to be rich and successful these days, even if only as harlots?"

"Well, I can't debate that now. I'm late for work. I've got to run."

Isaiah indeed! Po-Chee scoffed, after she had hung up. Or Pope for that matter. The Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal provided the reading material of choice these days.

As she set about her morning toilet, however, her flare of resentment against her husband swiftly faded. She really missed him. The house was not the same without him. She wished they could return to the way they used to be in London, when they would walk hand in hand in Hyde Park, when he would recite those tender Tang poems of separation and loss, when they would make frenzied love at Radnor Place and everything seemed entirely right with the world.

She had somehow, by slow degrees, wrecked that slowly-constructed private paradise. She had plunged into a profession fashioned by others and for which her husband harboured deep disdain. Worse still, she had become too prominent and integral a part of that system. Suen had never questioned her right to work as she chose. Nonetheless, that had caused the first perceptible distancing in their relationship. Then came the miscarriage, followed by the death of Yun, like connecting links in a cruel chain of fate. Her secret fears and beliefs had taken over after that, to prevent her giving him the son he longed for, the heir he wanted to discharge his filial obligations.

During her moment of terror last night, she had vowed to make amends. She must conquer her fears. They were ruining their lives. If she could subdue them, she might yet surprise him on his return. And herself as well!

So thinking, she finished her toilet, changed into a business suit and headed downstairs for breakfast. She found she had to eat alone, however, because Amber had already left for school.

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It had happened so long ago. Yet Po-Chee could still remember that excruciating experience as if it had happened yesterday. She had suffered from constipation from an early age. It had not been uncommon for her to move her bowels only once every three or four days. According to her parents, that condition had been brought on by her abhorrence for vegetables and her over-fondness of chocolates.

Both allegations contained a substantial element of truth. She didn't like vegetables because they reminded her of farm animals chomping dumbly in fields. As to chocolates, she had merely followed a hallowed Leung family tradition. The entire household consisted of chocolate-lovers. The home was never without several boxes of that confection. Whenever a new brand

appeared on the local market, brought in from Switzerland, Belgium, America or elsewhere, her mother would buy a box or two for the family to savour. Her personal problem was that she couldn't resist over-indulging. Never could pass a box without scoffing a piece or three.

Disaster struck for the first time shortly after she had turned nine. She had gone without moving her bowels for a whole week and when she finally felt like evacuating, it seemed her anus had been cemented solid, with a big hunk of rock stuck inside. She sat for hours on the toilet bowl, sweating, straining, crying, but the obstacle simply wouldn't budge.

The sounds of her distress brought both her mother and Ah Ho into the toilet.

"Push, child, push!" Ma urged, after taking note of the predicament. Ma gently dabbed the sweat on her brow and wiped away her tears with a towel. But try as she might, nothing came.

Eventually Ma told her to leave the toilet seat to squat on the bathroom floor. Ah Ho placed some newspapers on the floor underneath her. "Now try again, my dear," Ma said.

She doubled herself up, braced her hands against the tiled floor and pushed with all her might. Still nothing came. She felt an unbearable agony, as if the rock inside her was trying to tear her bottom apart. Finally, exhausted by her efforts, she simply collapsed on the cold floor and cried.

"Well," Ma said, shaking her head. "It looks as if there's no avoiding getting you to Daddy's clinic."

"No, no," she protested weakly. "Don't want to go to clinic. Patients there will laugh at me."

"No, don't be silly. Nobody's going to laugh at a little girl in pain. Nurse Sai Ku will soon get all that nasty stuff out of you."

She had no idea how that might be achieved. She feared it might prove more agonizing than her own failed attempts. She had previously seen in

her father's clinic an examination couch with strange metal attachments. A similar couch was in the study at home, for use when patients came out of office hours during emergencies. Daddy had once explained that the attachments were called stirrups and were for supporting the legs of his patients to facilitate examinations.

It occurred to her that Nurse Sai Ku might place her tiny legs on the stirrups to dig the rock out of her. It was bound to be painful. Terrified, she cried: "I don't like Nurse Sai Ku. She'll hurt me."

"No, she won't. It's a simple flushing procedure."

She kept shaking her head. "Don't want Nurse Sai Ku."

"What then? You just want to lie on the floor and suffer?"

"I want Daddy," she sobbed.

"In that case, you'll have to wait till evening. You may be his darling princess but Daddy cannot abandon his patients just on your say-so. I'll ring to warn him what's afoot."

Ah Ho helped her to hobble out of the toilet. Though she made further attempts to evacuate later, those efforts still met with no success.

When her father eventually returned home, the entire household gathered in the study, as if about to participate in a theatrical performance. By then she felt so thoroughly exhausted that she didn't care what might happen any more. Daddy gave her a cuddle and a kiss in an attempt to stem her tears, before sitting her on the examination couch.

"Just relax and everything's going to be fine," Daddy said, in his usual jolly way. "It's not going to hurt. I'm just going to use some warm water to flush out the muck inside you. Okay?"

She nodded dubiously as Ma helped to remove her trousers.

Daddy positioned her on her side and told her to crook one of her legs. He patted her naked bottom and said: "Now I'm going to apply some lubricant."

The lubricant felt cold and gooey upon her and she squirmed. Ma held her hands to comfort her and to keep her still, while Ah Ho stood by with a metal receptacle of some kind. Her elder sister watched without saying anything.

The enema was over before long. It proved not half as unpleasant as she had feared.

As Ah Ho was taking away the receptacle holding the discharge, her elder sister spoke for the first time. “Looks disgusting! Serves her right for wolfing all the chocolates.”

“Don’t scold your sister now,” Ma said, soothingly. “She’s been through a terrible ordeal.”

“It’s about time somebody in this house stops treating her as if she were a real princess,” Po-Chun said, before stomping out of the room.

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After that nasty episode, Po-Chee was chastened. In any case, she soon came under strict surveillance from her mother, both as to her intake of chocolates and the regularity of her bowel movements. Whenever she missed for more than two days, a laxative became obligatory. If that didn’t work pretty smartly, another enema would be carried out the following day. The latter proved not too frequent, however, because the entire family had joined forces to inveigle her into eating more fruit and vegetables and less chocolates.

During the course of one of her subsequent enemas, probably about eleven months after the first, her father made an observation which both startled and pleased her. When the procedure was about to proceed in the presence of her mother and Ah Ho, Daddy patted her on her bare bottom and observed: “Hey, pet, you’re developing quite a nice little bum, you know. One of these days it’s going to be as magnificent as your mother’s.”

“What a thing to say to a young girl in front of her mother!” Ma remonstrated at once.

Daddy responded with a hearty guffaw.

But within her heart, she was delighted. At the time she was still rather scrawny, almost boyish, and she had wondered off and on whether she would ever possess the kind of figure her mother possessed. Ma always looked so stunning in tight-fitting Chinese long-gowns. They accentuated her slender waist and her rounded bottom. The thought that Daddy felt she would be similarly blessed one day thrilled her.

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Po-Chee was eleven when her mother died. Ma had suffered a rampant cancer in utter silence. Nobody had been aware of her condition till it was too late. The whole family was devastated and the atmosphere in the home changed dramatically. It was as if some magic which had hitherto animated the family had suddenly vanished. Everybody turned more solitary and morose, as if each had been locked inside an invisible cell of sadness, without the means to communicate with anyone else.

Her father was the one most affected. For a start, he had to assume immediately some of the mundane tasks previously undertaken by Ma, like going to the wet market for fresh provisions, settling utility bills and school fees, and distributing weekly pocket money. Ah Ho, being illiterate and blind in one eye, couldn't help much. She had in any case to take on other chores previously discharged by Ma. Gradually, the bill-settling and some of the other financial responsibilities devolved upon Po-Chun.

Another effect was that Daddy quickly went off chocolate. As a consequence, he seldom remembered to buy any, let alone hunt for new types for the family to sample. The seriously diminished supply within the home led to a

few sisterly squabbles. But it was really during after-dinner gatherings in the sitting room that the absence of Ma became most noticeable. That old babble of conversation which used to ignite so easily simply couldn't get started. It was as if no one could raise a topic which did not in some way or another refer back to Ma's absence. Her father often just sat shedding quiet tears.

She suspected that on such occasions he must be blaming himself for not having noticed in good time that something was wrong with Ma, in spite of being a doctor. In an attempt to comfort him, she would snuggle up to him and kiss him on his tear-wet cheeks. He would respond with tight hugs and fatherly caresses. Those types of gestures, however, never passed between Po-Chun and Daddy. She assumed that her sister must have wanted to appear tough and resilient, so as not to risk having her plans for studying in England deferred.

Months passed and a more solitary and uncommunicative pattern of domestic life emerged. As Po-Chun approached the end of her secondary education, she buried herself in school work and in extracurricular activities. Daddy seemed to have retreated into himself, as if nursing some private emptiness within. As for herself, the frequent absence of chocolate in the house caused her to turn to bananas and other fruits for snacks. Gradually her scarecrow figure began filling out. Her breasts blossomed apace.

One evening, when Po-Chun was away rehearsing a school play and Ah Ho had gone to bed, her father said matter-of-factly: "It's probably time you had another enema."

"I'm good, Daddy," she replied. "Haven't missed for more than two days since the last one."

"Come, better safe than sorry," her father said, standing up and extending a hand to her. He was still in his office clothes but without a tie and coat. "Let's try a different approach."

She had taken his hand, a trifle baffled, and followed him into the study. Reconciling herself to the procedure, she removed her pyjama trousers

and climbed onto the examination couch to assume the usual position.

“No, get on all fours this time. Crouch like a tigress, closer on the bottom edge of the couch. You can fold your arms in front of you and rest your head on them. You’ll feel more comfortable that way.”

She did as she had been asked.

“That’s it, that’s my princess,” Daddy cooed. “Now raise your bum and relax.”

She heard her father puttering about and then felt him spreading the cheeks of her buttocks more widely than before to apply the lubricant. He also seemed to be taking his time getting the lubricant into her rectum, keeping up a flow of reassuring words the while. During that process one of his fingers brushed against the front of her private parts. She was startled.

“Just relax, darling. There’s nothing to worry about. You know Daddy loves you very much, don’t you? We’ll be ready soon.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she said, thinking the passing touch must have been accidental. She thought the time being taken to lubricate her must also be due to the new method being tried. She closed her eyes and waited for the flushing tube to be inserted.

Before long she experienced an object going into her anus but it did not have the same feel as on previous occasions. To her surprise, no warm water was involved. Her father was bending close to her, urging her to relax with more murmured reassurances. She had no reason to doubt her father’s doctoring skills, so she relaxed and surrendered herself to his ministrations. After a while, the piston-like movements inside her seemed to elicit both a strange heat and a mysterious excitement in her. She began to pant slightly. In spite of not knowing where that sensation might be leading her, she found pleasure in the new form of enema and wanted it to continue.

The next thing that happened was a seemingly anguished cry from Daddy. It interrupted her dreamy, nerve-tingling state. She then felt the weight

of her father's body pressing down on her.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" she cried, alarmed. Upon turning, she saw her father raising himself. His flushed face was smiling oddly at her. His underpants and trousers lay on the floor, around his ankles.

She panicked at that very instance, convinced that her enjoyment had been somehow wrongful. Confusion and fear reigned. She sat up on the couch and immediately pulled down her pyjama top to cover her front. She stared interrogatively at her father as she groped to recover her pyjama trousers.

"That didn't hurt at all, did it, my darling?" her father said, breathing heavily, as he pulled up his underwear and trousers.

She bit her lower lip and grimaced. She continued to stare wide-eyed at her father, in total bafflement. Her heart was pounding so furiously that she couldn't get out a word.

"Everything's all right, my princess," her father said, putting an arm around her shoulders and pulling her towards him. "You'll be right as rain. There's nothing to worry about. Daddy was just trying to show you how much he loves you. Daddy used to express his love for Ma in exactly the same way. Used to drive Ma crazy."

Her breathing had accelerated, as she stood awkwardly at his side. "Am I no longer a virgin?" she cried in panic, her eyes brimming with tears.

"No, no! You're definitely still a virgin. Absolutely intact, two hundred per cent! Daddy would never do a thing like that. Daddy loves you too much to deprive you of what should be reserved for marriage."

"What we've done is still wrong, isn't it?"

"It is never wrong to show love," her father said, embracing her tighter still and planting a kiss on her forehead. "Small-minded people don't always understand. So we must keep our love to ourselves, make it our own very secret secret. We won't tell a soul, would we? Not ever to your sister or Ah Ho. Will you promise Daddy that?"

She nodded helplessly, consumed by confusion.

“Good girl! Always my precious princess! Now go and take a shower before your elder sister gets home.”

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Two days after the bewildering events in her father’s study, Po-Chee rushed into Po-Chun’s room late one night, crying and quaking with fear. “Elder Sister! Please help me! I’m going to die,” she cried. Blood was oozing from between her thighs, soiling her pyjama trousers.

Po-Chun laughed. “You’re not going to die, silly,” she said. “You’ve just had your first menses. Whoopee! Now you’re no longer a child.”

“No, Elder Sister! Ma’s going to kill me. She told me so; she called me names. I saw her clearly. Now I’m bleeding.” She stood bare-footed and trembling, her face streaked with tears and drained of colour.

“You’ve just had a bad dream, I’m sure. Let me clean you up, so that you don’t drip blood all over the place.”

Po-Chun took her by the hand and led her into the adjoining bathroom. She took off her blood-stained trousers and stood her inside the shower enclosure. She directed the shower spray on her legs with one hand and soaped them with the other.

“It wasn’t a dream,” Po-Chee said, still crying and trembling. “Ma was very angry. Said I was trying to steal her place.”

Po-Chun looked up at her, apprehensively and puzzled. “What rubbish are you jabbering about?”

A confused torrent of words tumbled out, haltingly and tearfully, detailing what had transpired on her father’s examination couch that night.

“Right!” her sister said, grim-faced, as she handed her a bath towel and showed her how to use a sanitary towel. “Are you sure what you’ve said

really happened? Not just your imagination going wild again?"

"Yes, it did happen!" she cried, stamping her foot in frustration at not being immediately believed. That resulted in a fresh flood of tears.

"It's okay, it's okay. I believe you," Po-Chun said quickly, as she gave her a big hug and led her to sit on her bed. They sat next to each other in loaded silence for a while. Her sister waited till her tears had subsided and then said: "You're going to boarding school in England. You'd like that. I don't want you to remain in this house by yourself any more."

"Daddy wouldn't allow me to go to England, would he?"

"He has no choice. I'll see to that. We'll be able to see each other regularly there. You'd like that too, wouldn't you?"

She nodded uncertainly. "But what about Daddy? He would be left all alone." It occurred to her at that instance that she had broken her promise to her father to keep their "very secret secret" between themselves.

"Daddy is more than capable of looking after himself," Po-Chun said evenly. "Ah Ho will be around."

The days and weeks that followed went by in a blur of confusion, anxiety and self-reproach.

Po-Chun took pains to ensure that she was never left alone in the house again. Evening meals became so uncomfortable and bereft of conversation that Daddy soon took to either going out or retiring to his room after dinner. She had little knowledge of how Po-Chun had dealt with their father nor how her sister had arranged for her enrollment at Roedean. One of the most painful and indelible images retained from that period was that of her sister and Ah Ho escorting her to Kai Tak International Airport to fly off alone to Heathrow. That long and weary journey seemed to encapsulate all the anguish and fear of apparently being cast out from civilised society.

She had bidden her father farewell the previous evening, under the watchful eye of her sister. It had been a strained and tearful affair. Daddy said

he would love her always, no matter what, and she had replied in more or less the same terms. Daddy explained he could not see her off the next day because he had a difficult delivery to attend to.

That was the last she ever saw of her father, either dead or alive.

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Po-Chee had waited on tenterhooks in the draughty precincts of Roedean for her sister to turn up. But she never did. Instead letters filled with protestations of love arrived from both Po-Chun and her father. One party told of their father refusing to provide any funds for university education while the other reported with strong disapproval of her sister cheapening herself by consorting with a Portuguese bank teller. She didn't know what to make of those stories. She felt intensely lonely in that chilly foreign environment and could not figure out why those who had declared their love for her so repeatedly should abandon her to such a dismal fate. The only certainty in her mind was that it had to be a form of punishment imposed by the gods, because she had stirred up conflicts within the family.

The years limped by. Letters from both her sister and her father came with the regularity of utility bills back at Robinson Road. Each contained declarations of love for her but also allegations against each other. Even with those letters it had taken her more than a year to exorcise the recurring nightmare of a vengeful mother out for her blood.

To stem the tides of isolation and loneliness she read omnivorously whatever she could lay her hands on. When other boarders at Roedean whispered at night about boyfriends and sweethearts, about kisses and other intimacies, she would listen to learn from them. And she would try to fit their accounts in with her own experience with her father on the examination couch. In retrospect, that tingling-all-over sensation Daddy had given her still haunted

her. It had seemed like the start of a mysterious journey. But Daddy's loud and prolonged cry had interrupted it before she had reached a destination.

As she advanced up the classes, the talk about love and sex among her schoolmates became bolder and more explicit. After she had entered Form V she overheard one of the girls declaring that one method of enjoying pleasure without risking pregnancy was to connect anally. That shed a little light on her puzzle. But how right or wrong had it been to do that with one's own father? She supposed it had been a wish to assess her quantum of culpability that she had subsequently drifted into studying law.

During reflective moments in the small hours, she often thought of that night on the examination couch and hankered for that strange, thrilling sensation again. She had taken on blind faith her Daddy's assertion that she remained a virgin in spite of what they had done. She made a determination to keep that status until she had found a man she could really love. That man turned out to be Suen.

* * *

The telephone conversation with Suen earlier in the day had reassured Po-Chee about his imminent return. But it did not provide her with more restful sleep during the night that followed. Insomnia still dogged her. Indeed, her thoughts were becoming increasingly fraught as she wrestled with how she ought to behave after her husband's return.

Naturally, memories of her period at Radnor Place resurfaced in those introspections. Suen had brought her more uninhibited sexual pleasure than she had ever imagined possible. Some of those recollections came back with such startling clarity that they took her breath away. She wanted to rekindle that flame, to live again in that white heat of passion. Yet, notwithstanding her feelings for Suen at that time, the image of her father crouching over her kept

invading her thoughts each time she received one of his letters.

She had often wanted to tell Suen about that distant episode, to lay that ghost to rest once and for all, so that there would be no secrets between them. But it soon became apparent that Suen took a different view regarding personal privacy. During one of their many discussions about the vagaries of life, Suen had declared that people engaged in too much idle gossip. Life, of course, had to be shared with others. But anything shared had to remain the exclusive property of those involved. Third parties had no business poking their noses in.

She could see the logic of his arguments. He was much older than herself, more worldly-wise. He had already spent much of his life with people unknown to her. There was no way to insert herself into his past. Yet the guilt she felt over what she had done with Daddy weighted upon her conscience. Although she had told Po-Chun about the deed, she had passed on no word about the secret pleasure she had derived during that process. That was the damning thing. Perhaps she had an evil perversion within her. Or should sexual practices between parents and children be taken more in their stride? They might be more prevalent than generally supposed. She needed Suen, with his greater knowledge and wider experience, to explain to her what it was all about.

It had also occurred to her that if she could get Suen to make love to her in the same way that Daddy did, that might banish the image of her father and replace it with one of Suen. She would then somehow be redeemed and purified. She dropped hints, proffering her magnificent bottom provocatively. But Suen didn't bite. They just ended up with doggy intercourse. One evening, after a furious session of heart-thumping sex, she ventured a probe.

"When I was at Roedean," she said, "some of the girls used to talk about having anal sex to avoid pregnancy. Can't imagine it being half as good as what we've just done. Have you tried it?"

"What, anal sex?" Suen replied. "Of course not! That's utterly

disgusting.”

“Yes, I suppose it must be. It was just a thought.”

From Suen’s tone of voice she deduced that such an act must be thoroughly abhorrent to him. She had no idea why. She still had no idea after years of marriage. Had it something to do with the woman whose portrait hung in his study? Or had it to do with some unpleasant experience with somebody else? In spite of her husband’s attitude towards personal privacy, she wished she knew. That lacuna bothered her like a misplaced object unable to be located.

Po-Chee smiled in ironical perplexity over those recollections as she lay in bed. She had devised some months later a different approach. She had borrowed from the university library a copy of the controversial book on incest by Anaïs Nin and placed it prominently on the bedside table. She had deliberately picked it up to read in his presence. She didn’t know whether Suen had read the book but thought it might spark a conversation on incest. That, in turn, might lead to some answer on matters she wanted clarified.

When Suen noticed the book, however, all he said was: “Ah, you’re reading Anaïs Nin. Quite a decent writer but what a troubled woman!” He then went on to talk about something else.

The response had not been what she had expected. Previously, when Suen had encountered her reading Aristotle or the Water Margin, he had jumped readily into discussing them. Stymied, the unexplored questions festered in her. She brooded over them. Could her father have been right when he said it was never wrong to show love? The law said something quite different. Was the law out of step or had it been her father?

As her life unfolded, she became more and more convinced that she had done wrong. The nature of Daddy’s death, her miscarriage, the miseries attending Po-Chun’s life, the loss of Yun, her failing marriage. Every misfortune could be traced back to her. Heaven had been sending her repeated messages but she had not heeded them. Instead, she kept compounding her wrong-doings

every day, through the dexterity with which she manipulated colonial laws. Heaven must be running out of patience with her, now threatening to strip her of Suen or Amber or both!

Her mouth went sticky with fear. She was running out of time. If she didn't start making amends right away, it would become too late. Yes, she must start tomorrow. She must ready herself for her husband's return, she thought, as she reached for her bottle of sleeping pills.