

Revelations

Hong Kong, June 1976:

“You’re early tonight,” Lucille said, indifferently, when Xavier strode into their bedroom. “Mother’s had another attack.”

“No worse than usual, I hope?” Xavier said, as he undid his tie. He barely looked at his wife while changing out of his business suit.

“Didn’t appear too serious. She seems to have something on her mind, though. I’ve put her to bed.”

Xavier nodded and went into the bathroom. He took a quick shower and came out in silk pyjamas and dressing gown. “I’ll look in. I’m early enough.”

“That should make a change.”

Xavier was annoyed by Lucille’s jibe. Why couldn’t she understand what he was trying to achieve? Why couldn’t she be like other wives and occupy herself with shopping or mah jong or raising Ah Yuen? Why demand constant attention when he was already fully extended? He felt too tired for an argument.

He made for his mother’s suite. The voice in answer to his knock sounded a trifle wan. It occurred to him suddenly he had not ventured inside her bedroom since leaving for Princeton. Almost twenty years!

The room was unchanged from his boyhood, except for a set of bookshelves holding volumes displaced from his father’s study. In his own mind the removal of those books was justified. Seeing them in his mother’s room, however, struck him as a rebuke.

Apart from that, the two elegantly carved bedside tables were littered as usual. Recent additions included the miniature pine from his father’s study and some bottles of enteric coated aspirin and nitrate pills. The absence of clock and radio underlined his mother’s removal of the constraints of time and worldly affairs. Yet, on a stand in the alcove where he used to take meals, there rested an old black bakelite telephone whose purpose he had never managed to figure out. He couldn’t remember ever hearing it ring or seeing his mother use it.

His mother, dressed in white cotton pyjamas, was propped up against a stack of pillows. She was reading the Lotus Sutra, her tousled hair spread across her shoulders. That unfamiliar sight, together with her reading glasses, made her appear aged, in spite of her smooth and translucent skin. A thin camelhair blanket protected the lower part of her body from the air-conditioning.

He remembered being told that his mother’s double bed, with its elaborately carved headboard, once had a canopy. That had been removed, as had its spring mattress, to leave only wooden boards covered by a thin rush mat. It must be damnably uncomfortable sleeping that way. Something to do with her ascetic leanings, he supposed.

“Mother, how are you? Lucille said you had an attack.”

Serenity put down the scripture and peered over the top of her half-moon glasses. “Ah Seng, what a surprise. Nothing serious. Dr. Chow’s pills really do work. Lucille’s been fussing as if I were an invalid. What about you? You’re seldom back so early. Something the matter?”

“A dinner was scrubbed. Plane bringing the guest of honour got delayed.”

“His misfortune, my gain,” Serenity said, fingering a string of wooden prayer beads.

“What brought on your attack? Have you been overtiring yourself?”

“No. I only chased Ah Yuen around the garden a bit.”

“You shouldn’t have done that! He’s no longer a toddler. He’s almost twelve. How can you keep up with him? Dr. Chow warned that angina could be brought on by exertion. You should see a specialist, take some tests. Dr. Chow says you’ve refused. Why?”

“Dr. Chow worries too much. I don’t want a stranger poking around my body at this stage in life.”

“Dr. Chow’s only a family doctor and you’re getting on. You can’t be too careful.”

“Death is but a transition. It comes to us all. If my next existence beckons, I’m ready.”

“No use rushing out to meet it, for heaven’s sake! Why suffer if medical science can bring relief? If you don’t trust local experts, go to the Stanford Medical Centre or Johns Hopkins. Dr. Chow and Lucille can go along to make you feel more at home. We just want you to get better.”

“I know precisely what’ll make me better.”

“What?”

“Seeing more of you and having more grandchildren running around. Lucille wants that too.”

“Well, I don’t!” Xavier sat down on the bed beside his mother. His body sagged. “I’m sorry, Mother. Please try and understand. What has Lucille produced except a sickly child? I can’t stand any more like that. I’m away half the time, London, Zurich, New York, making deals, taking care of business. A man shouldn’t have to come home and worry about sick children. He should be enjoying such time as he can devote to them. I never got much time from Father, even though I wasn’t sickly. I’m much busier than Father ever was. I can’t bear a few more like Ah Yuen.”

“Oh, Ah Seng, Ah Yuen suffers from ill health. There is no reason for other children to be the same. Besides, how much time does it take to lunch at the Evergreen with Ah Yuen once in a while? You say your father never gave you enough time, but did you not feel his love for you?”

Xavier laughed. “His love for me? He didn’t love me. If he had he wouldn’t have done his utmost to keep me out of Gold Star. About the only time we had some real conversations was during those few days in Taiwan.”

“He was trying to protect you.”

“How convenient! Well, I don’t have time for sick children. Ah Yuen was an accident, if you must know.”

“An accident! He’s such a marvellous boy. You should treasure him and be proud of him.”

“Mother, I’ve told you I haven’t got time. I’m turning Gold Star into a world class company.”

“And that’s more important than raising your own flesh and blood? If you think so, you’re chasing an illusion. To climb high is to risk a big fall.”

“No danger of that, Mother. I’m in total control.”

Serenity clutched her chest and winced with pain. She gasped. The prayer beads fell from her hand as she reached vainly for her pills.

Xavier jumped to his feet, unscrewed the bottle of nitrate pills and poured a number onto his palm. Serenity helped herself. He held the glass of water as she swallowed the pills. “I’ll send for Dr. Chow,” he said.

Serenity raised a hand to deter him. She fell back against the pillows, closed her eyes and breathed deeply for a while.

“Mother, you can’t go on like this.”

Serenity did not reply. She continued to breathe quietly. After a few moments she retrieved her prayer beads and offered a thin smile. “I’m all right,” she said. “It passes quickly.”

Xavier sat down again on the bed. After a moment of silence Serenity murmured: “You’re rising in the world and that incites envy. There are uncomfortable things you should know.”

“Can’t be very important or juicy. Father’s been dead eleven years and nobody’s approached me for hush money yet.”

Serenity sighed. A look of sadness entered her eyes. “I keep postponing this. Now it’s time. Before I begin, I want you to remember, no matter what, that your father was a good man, one filled with human kindness. He might have appeared on top of the world to others but inside he was greatly tormented.”

“All right. Give me the inside dope. Maybe I can get to understand him better.”

“Your father had no choice with his life. Your grandfather sent him here from Canton to start a branch of the family business, because he was the only one who knew English. The family required him to buy a shop building and a warehouse, both of which he found. The properties were registered in his name for convenience.

“In those days there were lots of private clubs in the Western District, not far from Hollywood Road where the shop was. Merchants used to congregate there, both for pleasure and for business contacts. Your father went too. Those clubs fell out of fashion after the war, however, and now they have virtually disappeared.

“They were called clubs because the British made them register as such to disguise the fact they were high-class houses of pleasure. Such places had long been part of Chinese life. There used to be celebrated ones in Yangchow and Soochow, staffed by state courtesans accomplished in music, literature and the arts. Scholars, merchants and officials frequented them. Sometimes even emperors.

“They apprenticed young girls bought from poor families. For most, life in those places was infinitely preferable to poverty at home. Before reaching a suitable age, they would be used for fetching tea, preparing wash basins for guests and the like. If they displayed talents, those would be cultivated and they would be allowed to entertain customers with song, dance or conversation.

“Your father came across a sixteen-year-old girl at one of the clubs. She was known as a pei-pa girl because she played the mandolin and could sing. The girl was also talented in other ways. She could match couplets and hold her own in discussing calligraphy, painting and literature. Your father took an instant liking to her and soon spurned the working courtesans in favour of conversation with her.”

“Sounds like something out of True Romance,” Xavier said, smiling, listening to what he regarded as the inconsequential peccadilloes of any average businessman.

Serenity continued without heeding the remark. “The club owner saw at once he had a love-smitten young man on the hook. He took full advantage. He hinted that the girl had reached sixteen and the honour of deflowering her would soon fall to the highest bidder. Your father was beside himself. He wanted to rescue the girl, to buy her freedom.

“By then, the girl had also developed an affection for your father. She had never met a man so scholarly and handsome. She fell hopelessly in love. She was, of course, not a virgin, having already been palmed off as one on half a dozen occasions. The girl tried to warn your father by dropping hints. But the prospects of freedom and of being with the man she loved proved too tempting for her to be more specific.

“The Sino-Japanese War was then intensifying. The Japanese had invaded South China and captured Canton. Your grandfather and his family fled to Szechuan. Contact was lost. Your father could neither explain the situation nor ask for money. When the club owner intimated that he was about to decide on offers, your father took matters into his own hands. He sold the shop building and paid what was demanded for the girl’s freedom, thinking he could square things later.”

Serenity paused and reached for her cup of tea.

As she sipped, Xavier said: “So Father lifted some family silver to blow on a bit of fluff. That sort of thing hardly merits a raised eyebrow nowadays. Every red-blooded young man goes around sowing wild oats at some stage.”

Serenity heaved another sigh. “It took some time for your father to re-establish contact. Then catastrophe. Far from considering the deed an act of kindness, your grandfather berated your father for becoming a thief and an embezzler. To him, the Chu name had been sullied. He threw your father out and struck his name from family records. Family members were forbidden contact with him.

“Your father was devastated. Family ties had always been important to him. He found himself adrift in a strange town, with no means of support. He settled for odd jobs and took temporary shelter with the girl in the warehouse but your grandfather soon sent agents to take possession. Your father and the girl found themselves on the streets. The world he had previously

known suddenly ceased to exist. His family was gone, he was penniless and the clouds of war continued to gather.”

“What happened to the girl? Did she dump him when she discovered he was broke?”

“She wanted to go back to her former life but your father would not hear of it. Then the girl got pregnant. They married and she bore him a son.”

After the briefest of moments, Xavier cried: “No! Not you! You’re not telling me you used to be a?”

“A courtesan?” Serenity answered blandly. “What can I say?”

“How can this be!” He rose from the bed and stared at his mother in disbelief. The control which earned admiration in boardrooms around the world deserted him. The images he had built up of his mother suddenly shattered and her face became too shameful to gaze upon. He felt soiled, betrayed.

Why had he been saddled with such a curse? The only two women he had ever loved had both turned out to be whores. What had he done to deserve such a fate? He stood in a daze. His thoughts went back to the time when he had caught his mother in tears hugging an old pei-pa. The tensions he had previously detected between his parents now found an explanation.

Serenity watched her son in silence, her fingers counting off the beads in her rosary.

“Who else knows about this?” Xavier demanded.

“What does it matter?”

“Of course it matters! I’ll be at the mercy of everyone who knows.” His voice turned shrill. “They’ll have the power to destroy my reputation, can’t you understand? I have to seal lips. Who are they?”

Serenity remained composed. “I don’t know. Many of those connected with the club are now dead and gone. Some of the Evergreens know. Uncle Yue certainly knows but he has treated me with consideration all along. That’s why he and your father became such firm friends. Why should you be fearful or ashamed of the truth? I’m not. I was what I was. Now I’m another self. When your father was prominent, there was no gossip about our private lives. No one has approached you for hush money, as you’ve said. Why should anyone dig up the past now, unless someone feels grievously wronged in some way?”

Xavier reflected upon his mother’s words and became calmer. “You’re right, I suppose,” he said. “But it’s vicious out there. It’s best to be careful. The press is always digging for dirt. Just look at the stories about the women in Father’s life.”

“There was never a shred of truth to any of them.”

“Come on, Mother! Let’s face up to it. Where there’s smoke there has to be a little fire. Might as well tell me now that I know something about your relationships. Might as well know about other scandals and infidelities so that I can be prepared.”

Serenity shook her head, sighing again. “You’ve misunderstood badly. Stories of your father’s involvement with actresses and singers were without foundation. Gold Star was investing in the entertainment business, financing films, concerts and caberat acts. How could he

have avoided mixing with such people? We loved each other as deeply as any two people could possibly love. We understood each other's needs, shared each other's pain. We spoke on the telephone every day and you stood at the heart of many of our discussions."

"Me again?"

"Yes. Soon after you were born the Japanese occupied Hong Kong. Food became tightly rationed. There was never enough to eat. The Japs set up a rationing system which required hours of queuing for pathetic amounts of every necessity."

"Yes, Father told me."

"We had no money. We only had you. When an acquaintance proposed smuggling in food from China, your father joined in. The food he brought back kept us alive. During one expedition, their fishing boat was attacked by pirates. Your father and his companions fought them off. In the process your father killed one of the pirates."

"Father told me he just knocked some attackers into the sea."

"He might have knocked some into the sea as well but he certainly killed one of them. He smashed the man's skull."

"He had a right to protect his property."

Serenity took another sip of water. "Between smuggler and pirate, who occupies the higher moral ground? Your father always considered himself a man of education, a moral and decent man. Killing someone troubled him, particularly when he felt no qualm or hesitation at the time. He confessed actual exhilaration.

"He brooded over this, became increasingly at war with himself. Couldn't resolve the darkness eating into him. Logic and the metaphysical systems he had studied were of no help. He didn't realize that a mind not free to perceive the illogical and the senseless is divided against itself. He had not yet learnt the need to rid himself of the intellectual biases befogging simple truths. It was"

"You've just told me Father was an embezzler, a smuggler and a killer and that you used to work as . . . , I mean, in a house of pleasure," Xavier interrupted. "Spare me the religion, for heaven's sake! Just tell me straight what happened next."

"Ah Seng, if you want to hear the truth, you'll have to let me tell it my way," Senerity said, still fingering her prayer beads.

Xavier sat down on his mother's bed again and clasped his head in his hands. "All right. I'll try not to interrupt."

Serenity sighed once more. "I knew what was happening but couldn't help feeling glad I had food to feed you. I tried to ease my own conscience by becoming a vegetarian and by passing some food to starving neighbours, like the family of Dr. Chow. The food saved them and he has felt beholden to us ever since."

Xavier tightened his grip on his head. So Dr. Chow knew as well. Thankfully, he was old and inoffensive and out of the business loop.

"Your father and his companions acquired a great many properties during the final year of the Japanese occupation," Serenity continued. "One of the first things your father did after

the war was to repay your grandfather ten times over for the shop. But your grandfather was unforgiving. He refused the money. Just left it in the bank. Your father wrote to his brothers and sisters but none of them replied.

“When this house was built, a Meditation Room was provided for me. I tried to get your father to become a Buddhist, so that we could find our way out of our misery together, but he was too bound by logic and science, by the established values of his upbringing.

“The postwar recovery was a boon to your father and his friends. Virtually everything they touched turned into wealth. Their reputation grew. Gold Star became a household word. But what was the use of wealth? Deep inside he was utterly miserable.”

As Xavier listened to his mother’s calm and measured tone, he felt a growing apprehension. It was as if his mother’s very calmness presaged another terrible revelation.

He heard her tell of the Communists proclamation of a new government in China in October 1949, of their consolidation of power and their bloody campaigns to root out capitalists and other opponents. His grandfather, a landowner and a prominent supporter of the Kuomintang, was naturally targeted. His father was deeply concerned and the lack of news only made matters worse. It took some time for the full awfulness to filter through. It appeared the Communists, having discovered the money remitted to his grandfather, had accused him of being in league with imperialists. His grandfather denied the charge and disclaimed any knowledge of who might have remitted the money to him.

The Communists did not believe him and apparently made him kneel on broken glass to force a confession. He remained silent, however. After two days, the Communists brought out his wife and made her kneel beside him. She could not bear the pain. The grandfather put an arm around her, picked up a piece of glass and cut her throat. Then he did the same to himself.

Xavier raised his head in shock. “Why have you hidden this from me for so long?”

Serenity reached for Xavier’s hand. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “We wanted to spare you. You were only a boy then.”

Xavier allowed his mother to hold his hand. His spectacles had misted over and he removed them with his free hand to rub his eyes. The death of his grandparents was an abstraction. He had never known them. Yet he was being tarnished by the manner of their passing. What was the use of his parents’ emphasis on the importance of the family when it was a source of so much embarrassment and shame? His grandfather took lives too, his grandmother’s and his own. His own reputation was now being undermined. A total stranger could ruin him with a few carefully chosen words. The son of a killer and a whore. The grandson of a murderer and a suicide. Gossip would spread like wildfire. Competitors and even associates would snigger behind his back. Could he ever hold his head high again? It was intolerable! It was so utterly unfair!

He heard his mother speaking again.

“Your father was devastated. He felt personally responsible for the deaths of his parents. He came close to taking his own life. I warned him I would follow. That stayed his hand. The weight of guilt crushed him. I know, because I felt guilty too. The entire disaster could be traced back to me. If I had not fallen in love, if I had not hidden the fact I was damaged goods, if I

had not married and brought you into the world, your father would not have been in such a mess. He might have escaped the Japanese occupation, rejoined his family and fled before the Communists came.

“I felt walled in, that it was all karma, inescapable. I began pondering about sin, retribution, atonement and redemption. I turned to Buddhism. Increasingly it came to me I should atone, for sins I had committed knowingly or unknowingly, in this or in some other existence. By so doing I hoped your father might be spared. I tried to identify a penance to show my sincerity. I eventually settled upon a vow of chastity.

“I told your father I wanted to enter a nunnery. But there was you. You needed a mother. Yet, if I did not go off somewhere, I couldn’t fulfil my vow. I loved your father. If he so much as touched or embraced me, my resolve would melt. Love and passion would rule again and I would never find redemption. Your father was not a Buddhist but he understood. He was very clever, however. He said he wanted to suffer too. He argued that staying with him in the same house would make for a more severe penance.”

As Xavier listened, he began to understand the relationship between his parents. Why could he not love like that? Fei-Fei was a vanished dream. As for Lucille, for all her physical attractiveness, he never really took to her. Perhaps deep down he held it against her for not producing a strong and worthy son.

His mother’s voice, now sounding weary, cut into his reflections. “Your father had to contend with other deaths too,” she said. “Workmen died at Gold Star construction sites because contractors did not take proper safety precautions. An aged couple committed suicide because their grocery store had been driven out of business by a Gold Star supermarket. Such disasters added to your father’s distress. He could hardly wait to quit commercial life.

“He discussed it with his closest friends but they needed him to remain part of their group. Their earlier successes had caused too many people to invest in their enterprises. They had wider responsibilities. Disengagement was no easy task. They began, however, to channel some of their money into non-commercial projects, like maintaining the Evergreen Tea House.

“Your father saw the dilemma of his friends. Nonetheless he began a gradual withdrawal. He assigned his Gold Star income to me, to spend on charities of my choice, and left your upbringing almost entirely in my hands. He hoped I could influence you away from the life he found himself trapped in. I tried my best but nothing I did could deflect you. When you began to work on Wall Street and even changed your name, we knew we had lost. Your father lost heart and began losing his will to live.”

Xavier withdrew his hand sharply from his mother’s and jumped up again. “Oh, no, you don’t!” he cried. “You’re not going to burden me with guilt! I’m not going to carry the can for Father’s death.”

“No one’s blaming you. The coroner said it was an accident.”

“That’s damn clever! But it won’t work! You knew all along it wasn’t an accident, didn’t you? What did he do? Did he telephone you in advance? Tell you to hand me his precious Piaget watch?”

Serenity bowed her head and made no reply. More tears rolled down her cheeks.

“If Father feels guilty over making too much money, that’s his problem. I don’t feel any guilt. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved. When I go around the world, I don’t find any tycoon worked up because he getting too rich.”

“I’m sorry, Ah Seng. It seems I’ve failed both you and your father.”

“Don’t feel badly, Mother,” Xavier said, with a bitter smile. “You did your best. It’s just that I don’t buy into that do-gooder stuff. Those who dream of an ideal world seem to forget that it is people like me who produce the money to sustain and feed the hungry millions. Without us, most of mankind would still be crawling around in the mud. We bring order, prosperity, opportunity, growth.”

“Can you be so certain?”

“Yes, Mother. Goodnight. I’ll get Dr. Chow to look in in the morning.”