

In the Still of the Night

It was at 10.18 on a Saturday evening that Suen gently closed the door to his wife's bedroom. The house was deserted, except for the two of them. The servants had, as usual, gone off on their weekend breaks and Amber was out at another party.

Throughout dinner Po-Chee had complained intermittently about Amber's attitude towards the trust fund.

"Why look a gift horse in the mouth?" Po-Chee had demanded, with exasperation. "What good can come from raking over old family quarrels? She's in any case only a da Luz, not a Leung. The child simply can't seem to understand that the trust is for her own financial security."

"Amber's at least half a Leung and no longer a child," Suen observed. "Can't always smother curiosity with money"

"I'm not trying to do that!" Po-Chee reacted with irritation. "I'm just trying to make good a promise to Po-Chun. Never imagined Amber would be as stubborn as her mother. Going on pointlessly about the origins of the money and so forth."

"You can't expect a girl not yet eighteen to get very excited about a trust fund. Probably viewed as just an abstraction. Girls her age are apt to be more concerned over what their peers are wearing or what they've been up to."

"Well, she should jolly well start learning about managing money, especially since she'll be on her own before long."

Suen lapsed into silence, half-listening to the rest of his wife's recital. Since returning from London, he had set aside his own priorities to help his niece decide on universities and courses. After much to-ing and fro-ing, the girl had settled on liberal arts at Stanford. It had amused him to surmise that the choice had been made more on the university's location in sunny California rather than on the excellence of its academic reputation. Ah, how often are destinies thus decided!

With that priority out of the way, he saw no urgency over a trust. The reluctance of both Leung sisters to talk about their relationships with their father no doubt had fuelled Amber's curiosity. So far as he knew, the family fracture had originated from Po-Chun's elopement with Andy. The subsequent discovery of the kind of man that Andy was might also have been a factor. Yet he sensed there had to be more to the truth than that. His wife had always shied away from explaining her visits to Yaumati and he had not wanted to pry.

His natural sympathies were with his niece. The circumstances under which the poor girl had to live must be confounding. She was an outsider of mixed blood and culturally ambiguous. Even more of a misfit than himself. Not the best of combinations to be lumbered with in the twilight of empire. He wished he could satisfy her curiosity.

His wife's request that he should help persuade Amber to accept the trust did not appear either timely or fitting.

"What's the hurry?" he had snapped, more sharply than he had intended. "If you can't get Amber to accept the trust without answering her questions, what can I do? I know next to nothing about the tiffs in your family."

His wife frowned and retreated into an injured silence.

He at once regretted his curtness. He flashed a mollifying smile. "There must be other ways, my dear, of providing Amber with a nest egg," he said, in a much warmer tone.

Po-Chee maintained her silence.

He looked across at the two vertical lines on her brow and felt a great pity for her. The spirited girl he had fallen in love with in London was turning increasingly into a tense and touchy woman. She had suffered too many losses, poor creature. He had noticed a marked restlessness in her since his return. He should spend more time with her, instead of

chasing after that will-o'-the-wisp of an impossible book.

He sighed. Another failure in the duty of care. Gandhi had thought the educated prone to a certain hardness of heart. Could that apply to him too? A sense of inadequacy in caring for her rekindled in him.

The meal continued but the absence of conversation suddenly seemed beyond endurance.

“What about writing a comparable sum into my will, as a bequest, as an alternative?” he ventured, in a further attempt to break the silence. “We could meet her expenses for a few more years. After I’m dead she can decide whether she wants the money or not. That gets over the present impasse. No more questions. Of course, a bequest won’t be nearly as neat as a purpose-designed trust sanctified under British law.”

“Workable, I suppose,” Po-Chee replied, sourly.

“Might as well leave her my books too, while you’re at it.”

After a moment, his wife said: “You’re forgetting, aren’t you, that a will only comes into effect after a person’s dead? You’re not intending to die before Amber reaches twenty-five, are you?”

Suen laughed. “Haven’t thought of that. Anything can happen in eight years, I suppose.”

The unexpected reference to his own mortality unsettled him. He was fifty-seven. Some distance from the biblical allotment of three score and ten. But not too far either.

During his long flight back to Hong Kong, he had reflected on the many dissonances and failures in his life. He could be scathing and polemical over particular human stupidities but could that be subconscious spleen over his own inadequacies? His long-running book could be just a subterfuge, an evasion in a world already buried beneath avalanches of words. The Taoist had always held that words were incapable of conveying the deepest truths. He should have thought deeper about that!

His introspections were suddenly interrupted by Po-Chee's voice. She had been in the middle of clearing the table but she had stopped in mid stream and said, "I feel a headache coming on."

Fearing another migraine, he at once forced her to abandon her chores. He affectionately escorted her to her room. After she had climbed into bed, he administered by his own hand both a pain-killer and a sleeping pill. He wasn't taking any chances with Amber out partying. He didn't want his wife telephoning all and sundry again, just because their niece happened to be late in returning.

As he made his way along the corridor, he passed the door to his own bedroom. He had already changed into pyjamas before dinner but, on an impulse, he went into the room again.

He had spent a large part of his life within its walls, passing from bewildered childhood to approaching old age, saddled with a self-imposed but fanciful task virtually incapable of completion.

He surveyed the familiar chamber and wondered how much longer he would inhabit it, to sleep alone, nursing fading hopes and worn out dreams.

He saw before him a chest of drawers housing his socks, undergarments and other items of clothing. An odd sense of ennui caused him to pull out the topmost drawer. From beneath a stack of white Irish linen handkerchiefs he extracted the key to the wooden box beneath his bed. He sat down on the parquet floor, pulled out the box and unlocked it. As he did so, he reflected that it had been a long time since he had dared to confront the remnants of his youth.

A jumble of photographs and letters appeared as the lid was opened. He pulled out a photograph at random. It happened to be one of his grandmother and himself, snapped by a helpful stranger in Carfax with the Leica given by Aunt Soo-Leung. He smiled as he savoured memories

of Oxford, before placing the picture on the floor to fish for another.

He recalled he had acquired the box almost half a century ago, to hold belongings to take to Kunming. Chief among them had been the photographs of his parents. As he gazed upon them now, the beauty of his mother and the manliness of his father seemed undiminished. Their preserved images had defied the ravages of time.

He smiled again, remembering his boyhood judgement about photographs. At around the time of his departure for Kunming, he had noticed that the portraits of the great and the good in the school assembly hall had gone virtually unnoticed by the pupils and teachers passing them every day. He concluded that familiarity must breed a certain type of contempt. In keeping with that observation, he decided to store photographs of those dearest to him in a box for private remembrance.

He felt vindicated as he studied the items in his collection one by one, with each bringing back a slice of his past. Tutor Tseng sitting gravely on a carved blackwood chair, with himself standing alongside like a novice acolyte in short pants. A picture of himself and Kim, snapped outside the Central Magistracy, with arms flung chummily across each other's shoulders. Precious pictures of himself taken with his mother and grandmother. He still could not look upon his grandmother's features without remembering he had to close her eyes after death.

A different emotion arose when he caught sight of a photo of himself as a child holding the hand of Ah Loy when she had been in her teens. It filled him with affection and gratitude for his mother's now aged bondsmaid. He had too often taken her presence for granted, forgetting how old she really was. Where could such a loyal and devoted servant be found nowadays?

A picture of Mona in a ballroom gown was the next to appear, inscribed with her extravagant but vain declaration of love. How he had

misused her before casting her aside. An ungentlemanly end to an inglorious affair.

Then a whole series of other photographs followed. Cousin Hing at the age of seven, before they drifted apart. Uncle Pak and Aunt Soo-Leung, now both gone. Ralfie and Sanjay. The bohemians at the Oxford pub. Kate, lovely and mature, always with her head screwed on right. Their brief attachment, stolen during the grimness of war, had proved memorable and deep. He wondered what she had made of life with her prisoner-of-war husband and whether she had found happiness.

Dr. Loughridge and his wife, snapped at one of their renowned tea parties, a mismatched couple divided by aspirations on different sides of a Taoist divide. Dum-Dum and Su and the young bloods at the Blue Bird. Phirun, pugnacious and purposeful, in a painter's smock. And, of more recent vintage, a clutch of baby pictures of Yun.

The ultimate treasures remained two sets of prints, one of Isabelle and himself captured in different Parisian settings and the other of Po-Chee posing against London backgrounds. The two surpassing loves in his life. Yet he had allowed both to slip away. How could that have happened? What had been his own culpability in each case? Whatever the answer, he had never been able to love anyone with such heart-stopping passion since.

As he studied the pictures of Po-Chee and himself, he recalled that their last snaps had been taken during their Pacific cruise. Certain definite changes had been captured in her features then. A bewildering sadness and a creeping shadow of loss, both of which had slowly eroded her beauty. The damage had proved too hurtful to record and that was why he had given up photography after that trip. The result was that he had no picture in the box taken after that date. He hadn't a single picture of Amber, for example.

Perhaps giving up photography had been a mistake. Rembrandt had kept painting self-portraits as he aged. That needed both courage and honesty. Was he afraid that photographs would reveal his own stark failings and lack of achievement? Then another thought intruded. Rembrandt had died at sixty-three. His own demise might be closer than he had figured! A fresh sense of urgency gripped him.

The letters in the box brought back other segments of his past. They included Ralfie's last communication from Palestine, Isabelle's wrenching letter of farewell and several missives from his grandmother. He did not try to read any of them, for he feared their power to inflict retrospective pain.

In one way or another, he had failed all of them. His grandmother and his forebears in particular. They had bestowed upon him every material advantage a person could hope for. Yet he could not offer their spirits even a son to continue the family line. After him there would be no one to honour their memory, to light incense and put flowers before their tombs at Ching Ming. It might be fitting that he should be the last of his line. He had contributed almost nothing towards making the world a better place. His articles and books had been too puny, too filled with grand abstractions and hoary aphorisms.

A frightening emptiness suddenly overwhelmed him. It was akin to what he had felt on other occasions -- upon receiving news of the murder of Ralfie, upon closing the eyes of his dead grandmother and after reading the farewell letter from Isabelle. He felt death already upon him, coming in steady instalments.

All at once he could no longer bear to sit reflecting on the past and indulging in self-pity. He carefully returned the photographs and letters to the box and resumed his journey downstairs.

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Suen was cataloguing his notes in the air-conditioned comfort of his study when he heard a loud thump coming from the hallway. The noise was followed by a shrill expletive. He went to investigate. In the inadequate glow of the night light, he found his niece sprawled on the floor. The flared skirt of her dark dress had been twisted up around her thighs and her legs were spread at odd angles, like those of a discarded rag doll. A shoe with a stiletto heel had come off one foot and was resting a short distance away, beside a matching handbag.

“What’s happened? Are you hurt?” he asked, solicitously, as he squatted down next to his fallen niece.

“Oh, Barrie, I’ve tripped,” Amber answered with a slur. Her head was lolling about, her eyes clouded and half-closed. After glancing uncomprehending at him, she added: “You’re not Barrie, are you?”

“No,” Suen replied drily. He immediately caught the fumes of alcohol and cannabis. Disappointment and concern stirred in him.

His niece was too far gone to recognise him. It was the second time he had found her in such a condition in the space of less than three months. Taking recreational drugs might be common among the young but he hadn’t counted on Amber being a regular user. Had he been mistaken about her? Was Po-Chee aware of what was going on? He should have sounded a warning after the previous occasion. The “Barrie” presumably referred to her escort for that night.

He grimaced. Young men should send their dates home in a better state than that, he thought. Unless they had been up to no good! That possibility unsettled him. His niece had intelligence, good looks and potential. He had invested time in her intellectual development. He didn’t want to see his efforts ruined by drugs or loose living. Indeed, he had

mused occasionally she might be the forerunner of a superior breed, capable of cutting through the hypocrisies and prejudices of the age. Her condition dismayed him. She was a da Luz after all, possibly carrying too many of her father's genes.

“Let's get you into the light to see the damage,” he said.

When he tried to help her to her feet, he found she was a dead weight. He had to place one of her arms around his neck and haul her upright with a hand under her armpit. As he half-carried her into the study, her other shoe fell off.

He scowled as he struggled with his task. He had never been at such close quarters with the girl before. He immediately detected a womanly musk through the more obvious smells of cannabis and alcohol. The odour was strangely alluring, for it reminded him of Isabelle.

His nostrils flared momentarily, like an animal's whiffing a female on heat. His mind telescoped back through the years, from the first sight of Isabelle naked upon Phirun's chaise longue to the splendour of their love-making.

The dead weight of Amber, however, hauled him away from such wayward thoughts.

In the more ample light of the study, he noticed that Amber was quite flushed. Her eyes were virtually shuttered. Perspiration had smudged the kohl she wore. Nonetheless, the darkened eyes conveyed a hint of passion and knowingness unwarranted by her tender age.

She must be approaching the state of kif, he thought. He recalled his own flights of fantasy. The intense colours, the surreal shapes, the celestial sounds, the expanding stairways to the stars.

What had she been up to, he wondered. The local tabloids were regularly filled with tales of teenage excesses: drunken brawls, under-aged sex, unwanted pregnancies, joy-riding in stolen cars and, of course,

the increasingly common overdoses on drugs. Attempts to remain chaste till marriage were about as vain as Canute's efforts to command the waves. And yet, buried somewhere deep inside him, there remained a stubborn hope that Amber would turn out an exception. Had that hope been misplaced after all?

After he had settled her on the leather sofa, he glanced at his watch. It was two-thirty. "I'd better shut the door," he said. "Your aunt's got a headache. It wouldn't do to wake her."

Amber made no response.

He went to the door. Seeing the discarded shoes and handbag in the hallway, he collected them and brought them into the study before closing the door.

On his return to the sofa he found his niece slumped against the backrest. She was a sorry sight, exhausted, unkempt and lost in some private delirium. Her long, wavy hair had fallen in disarray over her face and bare shoulders. Her dark dress, now identifiable as being of deep purple, was crumpled and askew. The two thin straps holding up the garment over her shoulders exposed more cleavage than he thought appropriate. He was mildly surprised that Po-Chee had authorised such a dress.

His memory went back with irony to the time when physical exposure was considered an outrage. Brigitte Bardot had put on a bikini which the media had described as "the atomic bomb of fashion". Her example subsequently rendered exposing feminine flesh as both fashionable and chic. She had single-handedly raised by several degrees the libidos of millions of males.

He shuddered at the provocative sight of his niece's over-exposed bosom. "Come on, let's take a look at your foot," he said, abruptly, as he sat down next to her on the sofa.

Amber murmured something unintelligible.

He shook his head and lifted her right leg by the calf to place it on his knee. It was shapely and stockingless. He found no cuts, abrasions or broken bones. When he tried to manipulate the ankle, however, Amber let out a cry of pain.

“Sorry,” he said, and re-examined the ankle more gingerly. “There’s no swelling that I can see, probably just a sprain,” he eventually diagnosed.

Amber had passed out again, for she didn’t react to his statement.

He shook her gently by the shoulder. “Amber, I’ve got some Chinese liniment in the bathroom,” he said. “It ought to help with sprains, if you can stand a little discomfort. Are you game?”

His niece, with eyes still closed, nodded ambivalently.

He took it for assent and went to fetch the herbal concoction. On his way back to the sofa he switched off the overhead lights. He already knew the remedy required. Left with only the desk lamp, the study immediately took on a more cosy atmosphere.

He took hold of Amber’s leg again and placed it on his knee. As he gently massaged the liniment into the ankle, his patient emitted no more than an occasional grunt. Her nearness, however, rendered her evocative pungency more noticeable. He inhaled it with a secret relish and allowed his thoughts to drift back to Paris, to Isabelle and their experiments with drugs.

He recalled Isabelle teaching him to suck in and hold the fumes of cannabis for an enhanced effect. Slowly, the past, intense and erotic, returned in all its splendour and melded with the present. He began to fantasise that Isabelle was next to him and that he was actually stroking her limb. His hand was on the point of roaming when he caught himself being

swept too far with his hallucinations.

“There, that should do it,” he declared, in an embarrassed tone.

Amber mumbled indistinctly, but made no effort to remove her leg. He shook his head, lifted the leg from his knee and placed it down.

“Just rest the foot, young lady,” he said, feigning seriousness.

“No more dancing for a while.”

His niece stirred at last. She half-opened her smudged eyes and murmured confusedly: “No dancing?”

“I wouldn’t advise it.”

She giggled. “We can do something else.”

“What do you suggest?” he asked, becoming alive to the fact she was still taking him for somebody else.

“Oh, you guys know v-e-e-ry well.” Her voice came across huskily and rich with invitation, though her eyes remained drowsy with a faraway look. She then supplemented her words by licking a corner of her mouth with a pointed tongue.

That gesture devastated him. Isabelle had been prone to a similar gesture as a prelude to love-making. Dazed and befuddled, he leaned over and kissed Amber on the mouth. Almost instantaneously he found her arms enfolding him and his kiss being ardently returned.

He became rattled. This was ridiculous, he rebuked himself. What in heaven’s name has come over you? She’s your niece, your wife’s ward! She’s out of her head. How can you take advantage of her?

He reached back with both his hands, caught hold of Amber’s wrists and tried to free himself. But she held him tight. It was her turn to kiss him. Her tongue darted into his mouth as swiftly as a lizard’s. He was beside himself. His heart pounded more furiously than it had done for a good many years.

He tried to free himself again but Amber’s embrace was strong.

“Oh, let’s do it, Barrie. I’m good and ready now,” she murmured, breathing heavily.

He became covered in confusion. His body was throbbing with desire even as his head told him to desist. He wanted her. Against every counsel of good sense and breeding, he wanted her. He struggled for a justification. Her conduct had suggested that sex in the present age was a commonplace affair devoid of emotional trappings. It was like going to a hair dresser or having a cup of coffee. Her liaisons with the faceless Barrie and others were probably more numerous than he could possibly imagine. If she was dishing it out left and right, why shouldn’t he take a share?

All at once a surge of rage and frustration possessed him. Damn this permissive age! It can go to hell! He was beyond caring. He slipped his hand beneath her dress and roughly pulled down her strapless bra. Her breasts felt firm and exciting to his touch. He fondled them while returning her kisses. He then reached between her thighs. The readiness with which she parted them shocked him. When he tugged at her pair of panties, she arched her back against the sofa to facilitate its removal.

Slut! he thought, with mounting disappointment and bitterness. In her very casualness, she was destroying a whole range of notions precious to him. She was a product of her age after all. She could no more become a flag bearer of a brave new world than he could become the apostle of one. More dreams biting the dust. Possessing her now seemed no longer an act of love but one of resentment and revenge. He loosened his pyjamas trousers and penetrated her.

Afterwards, as he lay tightly squashed against her on the sofa, sated in the afterglow of congress, he became tormented by an abiding sadness. He had felt no joy in it. He had not managed to utter even a single word of endearment. He had taken her as he had those loose women picked up at Wanchai hawker stalls late at night. It had been pure animal

lust.

When he rose from the sofa, he discovered Amber fast asleep.

He gazed upon her inert form as he readjusted his clothes. The displacement of her garment exposed the fullness of her breasts and the dark triangle between her thighs. Her face, however, appeared oddly serene in repose. It came to him he had committed a serious wrong. He had despoiled someone he should have protected. Given her barely conscious state, the act might even have amounted to statutory rape.

He stared, troubled and transfixed, at the sight of her semi-nakedness. He had failed miserably again, failed to live up to his own principles even at such a late stage in life. No hope of redemption remained. Any attempt to pontificate on the ails of mankind would be a vulgar exercise in hypocrisy.

For a moment he was lost over what he should do. He didn't have the strength to carry her back to her room. He doubted if he could wake her without a lot of ado. To leave her in the study risked discovery by Ah Loy upon her return from her weekend retreat. But there was no alternative. His mind was filled with confusion. He would have to account at some stage to both Amber and his wife for what had taken place. But that was for another day.

He went into the bathroom to fetch the thin blanket he sometimes used when he napped on the sofa. The least he could do was to prevent the girl from catching a chill from the air conditioning. He covered her with the blanket and paused to look again at her slumbering form.

He then walked through the French windows into the dark infinity of night.