

Falling

Oh, Lord, what have I done? What have I done? What did I get myself into on Saturday night? Come on, brain, stupid brain! Tell me! Amber demanded, as she laid prone on her bed, with her head buried beneath a big, fluffy pillow. She hammered the pillow with her fists and the sound of her blows rose audibly above the purr of the air-conditioning.

She recalled clearly the kissing and the petting with Barrie in the Mercedes belonging to his father. She recalled too jumping out in panic after Barrie had passed out. She had managed somehow to hail a taxi to get home. Beyond that, only shifting impressions and wild hallucinations. They came confusedly and out of sequence, one after another. An intense and delicious exhilaration, coming as if within a strange enfolding stillness. The existence of another self journeying into the unknown, through layers and layers of ungraspable sensations. Flesh melting into flesh, lost in a world as yielding and shapeless as water.

Hours had seeped away in that struggle to recapture what little she could remember. She felt frustrated. Another series of impressions seemed to be hovering tantalisingly just beyond reach. But to reach more of them she must. Otherwise there would not be enough understanding to deal with whatever had transpired.

She had enjoyed a respite for most of Sunday, thanks to a pre-arranged visit to Sharlene's home. Her friend would be heading back to her native America in four days. The visit had been meant to bid her a sad, final goodbye. It had luckily turned out to spare her from at the usual Sunday meals with her uncle and aunt. But it had also heightened her anxieties in quite another way. Her friend had demanded to know how her hot date had gone -- as if she knew herself!

Now the night had turned into the wee hours of Monday. Before long she would have to go down for breakfast with her aunt and, later, to lunch alone with her uncle. If either raised questions about

Saturday night, she would simply crawl into a hole and die. Just that thought had been enough to make the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end.

A certain stiffness in her right ankle and a tenderness between her thighs were the only reminders of that night. The first was probably caused by twisting her ankle jumping out of the Mercedes. The second left no doubt that her cherry had been well and truly popped! But by whom and under what circumstances? Her mind came up blank.

Her initial conclusion had been that Barrie had done the deed. But on reflection, that did not fit in with other recollections. She had left Barrie out cold in his father's Mercedes and she had woken to find herself on her uncle's leather sofa. How did Barrie get her into her uncle's study? It didn't make sense. The state she had found herself in -- half-undressed beneath a thin blanket, with her strapless bra and her panties on the floor -- filled her with shame. Where was her uncle while her clothes were being removed? He ought to have been in the study, fighting to defend her honour.

Now, as she lay in the dark, she tried once more to reconstruct the sequence of events. It was true that she had started out on Saturday with sex on her mind. She was determined to lose her virginity. In a way, it was Sharlene who had goaded her into it. Indirectly, possibly Cissie Lee too, with her novels of thwarted loves and premature tragedies. It would have been a real tragedy if she had met with an accident and had died without ever experiencing the love of a man.

Sharlene had started everything off with one of her periodic pronouncements, which had struck her like some self-evident truth. Her buddy had declared that any girl who preserved her virginity was indulging in a stupid act of self-denial. She had given a blasé response, as if she had entirely agreed. What else could she have said after masquerading as a

practising non-virgin for years?

They had laughed when referring to the acne afflicting an unpopular Chinese classmate. “Could have avoided acne if she had got herself laid regularly,” Sharlene had declared. “Acne’s all down to sexual repression, you know, or so says my Mom.”

She had been glad she hadn’t developed acne. But if she didn’t do something real soon, she might get that affliction as well. There was no denying she was becoming increasingly restless and randy. Moreover, as Sharlene had amply demonstrated, Yanks were seldom into self-denial. She was fond of quoting a jingle. “Always shoot a sitting duck; forget the poetry, just take the fuck.” If that were the case, she might as well lose her maidenhead before heading for Stanford. She didn’t like the idea of having it taken from her by some hulking footballer.

After much soul-searching, she decided to bestow the privilege on Barrie. He was the closest thing to a boyfriend she had. She had been out with him a few times, to movies and parties, and they had exchanged the odd pedestrian kiss. He was dull, insipid and predictable, not one to fill her soul with music or to set her heart on fire. But he had been constant, following her around like a faithful dog in spite of getting almost nothing in the way of reward. Might as well be the devil one knew rather than the devil one didn’t. Barrie would in any case be returning to Australia and their paths were unlikely to cross again. Hence, no emotional baggage. The liaison would be just like one of Sharlene’s celebrated one-night stands.

She had prepared for the occasion with considerable care, selecting the most provocative dress in her wardrobe and darkening her eyes with kohl. The jade sword around her neck had been removed as a precaution. She didn’t want any supposedly Chinese deterrent against evil to complicate an already delicate operation.

The party had developed as anticipated, with plenty of alcohol, drugs, throbbing music, wild dancing and uninhibited kissing. She got into the swing of things by snuggling closer to Barrie on the dance floor than she had previously done. The body heat engendered proved unnerving. She had to down a couple of cocktails in quick succession to maintain both resolve and Dutch courage.

Upon leaving with Barrie, she had encountered Sharlene and her current beau on the way out, smoking cannabis. They had offered her a stick but she declined. Nonetheless, she did take a couple of pulls on Sharlene's, for the sake of form.

Barrie eventually parked at a secluded spot on Victoria Peak, close to his home. The drinks and the cannabis had relaxed her. After a few kisses, she allowed Barrie to fondle her breasts for the first time. His hands roamed and her nipples stiffened. When he pulled down her top to kiss them her whole body seemed to ignite with an uninhibited rush of pleasure.

Oh, my God, she had gasped to herself. Why had it taken so long for her to discover how good a man could make a girl feel? He had aroused her to a level she had never reached before. As her breathing quickened, she saw the point in Sharlene's unbridled enjoyment of the sexual act. When she felt a hand reaching between her thighs, she was amazed how quickly she got immensely wet!

Barrie suggested climbing into the back seat and she readily agreed. She was game for anything. She allowed Barrie to remove her panties. Then things started to go horribly wrong. Barrie couldn't get an erection! She could have screamed, so fired up and anxious was she for consummation.

"Sorry," Barrie said, sheepishly, as he disengaged. "Hadn't figured on our getting this far."

“It’s okay,” she replied with a forced casualness, leaning back against her corner of the seat to readjust her clothes. “Should come right after a rest.”

“Hope so. Bloody hell, Amber, I’m so sorry. You don’t know how long I’ve been dreaming of making it with you.”

“We’ll make it. Just be patient,” she replied, stuck for a better response.

After an uncomfortable silence, Barrie said: “I’ve got coke. Want some?”

She shook her head. “Not really into drugs.”

“Oh? All the guys who saw your striptease thought you were. Or else they figured you had to be one really hot chick. They kept pumping me for info after each of our dates. Of course, I never let on. Just kept them guessing.”

“Thanks, that’s sweet of you. I screwed up bad that time. Smoked before I knew how to handle it.”

“I’ve got joints. Want another go?” Barrie pulled a few sticks out of his pocket and proffered them.

“Why not,” she replied, taking one. Her well laid plans were heading for wreck and ruin and the sensual mood she had earlier attained was fast evaporating. With Barrie leaving for Sydney, there won’t be a second chance.

They lit up and smoked and talked inconsequentially. Surprisingly, she had remained utterly sober even after finishing the joint. She waited for Barrie to take some initiative but he didn’t. So she asked for a second joint. As she began smoking it, she resolved with grim determination to recapture her earlier mood, to re-ignite that devil-may-care gameness she had just experienced.

As she puffed away, she saw from a corner of her eye that

Barrie had reverted to his preferred stimulant of cocaine. He was hurriedly snorting one line after another. Just as she was beginning to feel the effects of the second joint, she saw with amazement Barrie slowly slumping off his seat. She called to him but he didn't seem to hear. She tried pulling him back onto the seat but found him too heavy to be moved. He was out cold.

It was at that point that she had perceived through a shifting fog of dancing lights and unstable shapes the vulnerability of their situation. They were liable to be picked up by a passing police patrol. If they got charged with drug offences, the prospect of her gaining a visa for America would go up in smoke.

The possibility of such a disaster sobered her briefly. She saw no alternative to abandoning Barrie for the sake of her own future. She somehow managed to get out of the Mercedes and to hail a taxi for home. After that, everything dissolved into weird fragments and images, confused and over-lapping. That was all she could remember.

She let out a grunt of frustration as she pressed the pillow down harder upon her head. Damn it, damn it, damn it! What had actually happened after that? One moment Barrie was out cold and the next he was somehow inside her home. That didn't make sense. How could he have popped her cherry when he couldn't get it up moments earlier? And if he didn't do it, it had to be somebody else. Who? Could it have been ?

She shook her head, as if speculations along that line were taking her in a very dangerous direction. And yet, dangerous or not, she had to get at the truth.

Sharlene had once declared that any guy who popped a girl's cherry had to be memorable -- for good or ill. The problem was that she had no recollection of either the act or the man! How ridiculous could that be! All she could remember was waking up half-naked, with the kind of soreness which announced unmistakably that she was no longer a virgin.

She turned over in bed, peeved with her inability to remember. Damn Barrie for fizzling out! If he hadn't, she wouldn't have resorted to drugs to end up in the black hole she was now in.

She removed the pillow from over her head and flung it across the room to the corner where she normally dumped her soiled clothing for Malu to take away. As she did so, her eyes caught a glint coming from her mother's crucifix hanging on the wall above her bed.

Oh, Lord, she pulled up with a start. Wasn't there any escape from her Mum's church and her notions of sin? And sin it had to be, to scheme to lose her virtue out of wedlock. Indeed, she had gone beyond scheming. She had actually got herself deflowered! Except she had no idea who had done it and how the process had felt at the time!

Throughout the entire Sunday with Sharlene, gaps in her memory kept vexing her. Sharlene's usual chatty self didn't help. Her own mind was simply in no fit state to follow recitals of who had made passes at whom at the party. Moreover, she was scared stiff of her friend's devastating scorn once she had discovered what really transpired.

"Well, did you finally let Barrie go all the way?" Sharlene demanded at one stage, eager for full disclosure.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Hurray for Barrie! So he's finally made it, poor sucker. You've certainly left him dangling long enough. Hope he wasn't dangling last night! Ha! ha! Was he up to scratch? Did he deliver the Big O?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess! Don't you know? Come on, give, for heaven's sake! Don't be coy. I always tell you everything. How many times did you come?"

"Can't remember."

Sharlene put on an incredulous look. "You're kidding me.

Right? A gal knows in no time whether it's going to be one of those quickies with no foreplay or what. Don't tell me Barrie bombed?"

"Not exactly. I had a couple of joints in his car. After that I was out of it. Can't remember much."

"What! You sap! You mean you passed out and allowed Barrie to do whatever he wanted? We girls are supposed to enjoy ourselves, not let guys have all the fun. And you already knew how weed could affect you, you ninny."

Amber accepted her mentor's rebuke in shamefaced silence.

"Well, I had a great night with John," Sharlene said, pointedly, before going into excruciating details about their love-making.

Now, in the solitude of her own room, she tried yet again to dredge her memory for facts. It had taken her a long time to set aside her inhibitions. To lose her virginity was supposed to be an event to be remembered and cherish for the rest of her days. But all she got was a big nothing. She felt cheated.

She got off her bed and began pacing barefooted across her darkened room. The parquet flooring conveyed a delicious coolness upon her soles. She reached a hand automatically between her breasts to confirm that her jade sword was in place beneath her white silk pyjamas. One of the first things she had done after fleeing her uncle's study had been to restore the gold chain with the sword around her neck. Inexplicable things had happened following their removal. Had those events been sheer coincidences? Or had the sword finally revealed itself as a talisman worthy of respect?

Notwithstanding the elusiveness of her memory on the loss of her virginity on that one single unrecoverable night, certain qualities deep inside her seemed to have somehow altered, to render her more daring, more womanly, more self-assured. Her heart, however, remained filled

with strange echoes she could not easily identify or decipher.

She shuffled the few salvaged facts and the half-impressions she had inside her head. They seemed like partial pieces of a gigantic jumbled-up jigsaw puzzle, all in a heap. How to connect them up, fit them together? She had impressions of talking to Barrie, but had that been in the car or afterwards? Had Barrie actually entered her uncle's study or hadn't he? The soreness between her legs and a pain in her ankle were the only reliable pieces of evidence. The rest was conjecture.

Suddenly she stopped pacing. It came to her she had noticed brownish stain on her ankle when she showered. That was a clue she had hitherto not taken into account! When she examined the stain, she had caught the remnants of a herbal odour. Someone had attended to her ankle! Who could that be? The only persons with a knowledge of herbs were Ah Loy and her uncle. Ah Loy had gone to her retreat. If her uncle had attended to her, he would never have allowed anyone to take advantage of her. Yet she had been interfered with. By inference, the only person who could have done the deed had to be her uncle!

She resumed pacing. But her breathing came faster and became more urgent. Could it have been him? He wasn't that kind of man. He had charm, wit and personality enough to snare any girl he wanted. He could have had Sharlene by simply crooking a little finger. Hence it made no sense for him to take advantage of a niece who was out of her head. Though she was a da Luz and he a Lam, there were still enough ties of kinship between them to render sex unthinkable. Besides, what man burning with lust would bother to attend to an injured ankle?

If it had really been her uncle, how did it happen? During her years at Bowen Road, his interest in her had been confined to developing her intellectually, plying her with vignettes of history and anecdotes about literature and life. He had also taken her side when she wanted to go to

acting school and, more recently, had devoted a great deal of time helping her to identify a good university and an appropriate major. He was a known champion of the downtrodden and the weak. He would not take advantage of a helpless girl, particularly when she was his own niece!

This was not to imply that her uncle was devoid of a romantic streak. Far from it. His conversations often dripped with enough poetic allusions to send a girl's heart palpitating. Her aunt once revealed he had lead a Byronic life. What did that mean? Byron had committed incest. That couldn't have happened with her uncle. The poor guy had been an orphan by six and had no siblings. It had to refer to other forms of loose living. But what? Her uncle was passionate about the poetry of Li Po, in spite of the poet being a notorious womaniser. Could that be her uncle's weakness too? Hardly likely. He had taken a dim view of Sharlene's attempts to flirt with him. However, Isabelle's portrait suggested an uncommon constancy in his attachments.

Suddenly, she stopped dead in her tracks again. Could she, on the contrary, have subconsciously fallen in love with her uncle? Her eyes widened at the possibility. She had always looked up to him as a teacher and an elder. That could not be denied. She had often been tickled pink when he heaped praise on her for an interpretation of a Tu Fu poem or a passage from John Donne. She had found his authoritative voice deeply moving and her spirits often lifted when he joined her and her aunt for a cup of tea after dinner or for a stroll in the garden. On the rare occasions he played the zither on the verandah, she and her aunt had been enraptured by its melancholy notes.

Her teddy bear fight with Sharlene suddenly came back to her. It had begun as good, clean, girlish fun after her friend brazenly declared she would make a play for her uncle. But had it ended touching upon some possibly repressed emotion? Had she become jealous?

Jealous! The shock of the thought set her back on her heels. Previously unexamined thoughts rippled in confusion through her. Dark and unworthy possibilities surged to the fore. Her head reeled with notions she had never before dared to entertain. Her hand rose of its own accord to clutch again the jade sword dangling between her breasts.

What if, emboldened by drugs, she had seduced her uncle instead of the other way around? It was not beyond the bounds of possibility. She might have copied Sharlene in flaunting her physical charms while her uncle attended to her ankle. Perhaps she had flirted with him more blatantly than even Sharlene could have done, challenging him to take her as a woman of flesh and blood rather than mooning over some sterile painting on the wall!

Her Dance of the Seven Veils had already revealed what she was capable of once under the influence of drugs. Moreover, she had started out that evening with sex on her mind. Barrie had driven her to the far edge of desire before letting her down, leaving her frustrated and dissatisfied. Was she any less capable of having sex with an older man than Sharlene?

She sat down abruptly on her bed and covered her face with both her hands. She could hardly breathe. A picture was emerging, becoming clearer. She and her uncle must have had sex. Regardless of how it had come about, the inescapable fact was that she had violated every rule of moral conduct she had been brought up to follow. Disaster must surely strike!

Her heart seemed to be pounding louder than bongo drums. She began pleading soundlessly. To whom she was not exactly sure. She simply wanted whatever gods and saints that might exist, whether Chinese or Catholic, to help her do the right thing.

She had clearly wronged an aunt who had loved her more than

her own mother. How could she betray her so unconscionably or keep such a terrible secret from her? Even if she remained silent, her uncle might not. Details of their deed, once exposed, were bound to devastate her aunt. The poor woman could be driven into another breakdown or worse.

No, she couldn't possibly face her aunt again. She had to make some excuse for missing breakfast. Once her aunt had gone off to work she would leave Bowen Road for good. She could at least bunk with Sharlene for a couple of days before seeking a more permanent shelter at a Caritas hostel or wherever.

She took her hands away from her face and found they were damp with tears. Her chin, however, had taken on a resolute cast. There was no question of studying at Stanford any more or of benefitting from any trust fund. Both would be obscene under the circumstances. She would have to confront the same bleak future her mother had faced for years, possibly ending up back in some crumbling tenement in Yaumati.

In the midst of her fears and anxieties her thoughts turned to her uncle. In retrospect, recognizing the latent feelings that had forced themselves to the surface of her consciousness, she would probably have gladly surrendered herself to him if he had asked. He had given her so much that was intangible. The tangible too, in the form of the jade Monkey King. Had that represented a token of love? But how could she take that now?

If he had loved her in return, what exchange of tenderness had taken place that night? She sensed, in some deep, blood-intuitive way, that they had loved. If true, she needed to know exactly what his feelings had been. She couldn't go through life in ignorance of that. She needed that knowledge to warm all of her tomorrows. Her uncle must have known also how she had responded. He would not be so cruel as to refuse to tell her. If she knew what had actually taken place between them, then her guilt

would be easier to bear.

There was no time to lose, it occurred to her all at once. At this hour her uncle would still be in his study. It would be her only chance to tackle him before fleeing Bowen Road.

So thinking, she composed herself, brushed off her tears and stole quietly from her room. Her bare feet made no sound as she descended the sweeping staircase to the hallway below.

Only a frail night light illuminated the stairs. Half way down, however, she was startled by the sound of a muted clicking she could not identify. What could that be, she wondered, with rising nervousness. She could not see clearly. She took another couple of steps down the gloomy stairs. Then she saw a dark shade stirring in the shadows. She let out a cry.

“It’s only me,” Ah Loy’s voice came back. She was sitting outside her uncle’s study, on one of the two chairs bracketing the ornamental table supporting the house telephone.

“Gosh! You’ve frightened the life out of me!” Amber gasped. “What are you doing in the dark, at this hour?”

“Knitting cardigan for you,” Ah Loy replied.

“In the dark?” Amber asked, as she continued her way down.

“Knitting needs no light. Knit and purl, knit and purl. Why you come down so late?”

“Thirsty. Can’t sleep. Wanted some orange juice.”

“Cold acidic drink no good at night,” the old servant returned. “Better I make you hot Ovaltine.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I can do that myself.”

“No, better I make,” Ah Loy said, pleasantly, and led the way into the kitchen, leaving her knitting on the chair.

Amber followed helplessly. Her heart was hammering against her ribcage. Ah Loy knew, she thought, frightened. The old servant

seemed to know everything that went on inside the house. With her stationed outside the study it would be impossible to reach her uncle. Had she placed herself there to prevent her precious Young Master from getting deeper into an improper relationship? Or had her uncle asked her to sit there to forestall any further lapse by either of them?

Her head was giddy with those questions as she waited for the kettle to boil. She felt so distracted by those speculations that she could hardly grasp the substance of the small talk coming from Ah Loy.

“I think I’m going to lie in this morning,” she said. “Don’t count on me for breakfast.”

“Food important for young girls,” the servant said. “But sleep also good.”

After the Ovaltine had been made, she offered her thanks and carried the mug back to her room. There would be no talking to her uncle this night, she thought, as she slowly climbed the stairs. She would have to postpone her flight till after lunch.

At lunch, in broad daylight, she would have to ask her uncle why he had made love to her and what their time on his sofa had meant for him. If Ah Loy was present during the meal -- as she often would be -- she would have to frame her questions in English.

And, regardless of how circumspectly her uncle might reply, if she detected the merest flicker of love in his eyes, she would certainly go to pieces.