

End of the Line

Winter had set in. A steady drizzle brushed the mansion's green tiled roof with a wet and unnatural sheen. The wind chimes along its wide verandah stood in mournful silence, dripping tears of rain. Out in the garden, yellowing leaves fell at irregular intervals, each dropping to earth like a wan, lugubrious sigh.

It had been more than six months since the funeral of the master of the house but no firm pattern of life had yet re-established itself. Its former routines, once disrupted by funereal rites and Seven-seven ceremonies, became further dislocated when two other members of the household took their leave.

Ah Loy, the old servant of many generations, retreated to the nunnery on Lantau Island where she had been spending her weekends for several years. She left soon after the conclusion of the Seven-seven ceremonies, at peace with herself, as if her self-appointed mission in life had finally been discharged. Her last act before leaving had been to present young Amber with a fine woollen cardigan she had knitted.

The gift brought tears to the girl. She clasped it to her bosom like some unforgettable memento. Their parting had taken place with a minimum of words. The looks exchanged and their body language conveyed eloquently everything each wanted to say.

Barely four weeks after Ah Loy's departure, Amber too left for America. She had done so with considerable ambivalence. Although keen to sample foreign student life, she hesitated over leaving her aunt in the midst of bereavement. Moreover, some vague shadow of a shadow seemed to be tugging her towards the old sofa in the study. In the end, however, she realized that she could never re-capture what had been so elusive an experience and that it would be best to move on.

Once those two inhabitants had left, a certain atmosphere of isolation and abandonment crept over the old house, in spite of its widowed

mistress remaining in fitful residence and no longer keeping office hours.

Notwithstanding a leave of absence from her law firm, Po-Chee had felt harried by the various responsibilities imposed by her husband's demise, although she had retained the services of both Malu, the Filipino maid, and the Chinese gardener.

Apart from organising the funeral and the protracted Seven-seven ceremonies, there had been the inquest hearings to take in her stride. The distressing details of Suen's injuries, recounted by pathologists with the aid of photographs, had horrified her. Then came following through with the irritating bureaucratic procedures for someone dying intestate. On most days she also had to marketing for food, since Ah Loy had got her accustomed to expecting freshness. She had gone about each of those tasks with grim efficiency.

It became obvious at the funeral that her husband had very few surviving relatives. Cousins Hing and Poeny and their respective families were the closest in terms of blood ties. But they were not Lams. The handful of Lam clansmen who turned up had been so remotely connected she had difficulty tracing their antecedents. The fact that Suen was the last in his family branch oppressed her and accentuated her sorrow.

Her distress had been compounded when she saw that most of the others who had attended the funeral -- apart from members of Suen's diminishing coterie -- had practically no links with her husband. They had been mainly her professional associates. The irony of the situation had not been lost on her. Suen had often made the legal fraternity the butt of his contempt. She was determined not to shed a single tear in their presence. She no longer cared what anyone might think.

In sharp contrast, Amber had wept inconsolably. Such a display of anguish had surprised her. She had no idea their niece had any special attachment to Suen beyond their spirited exchanges during meals.

But she had been too preoccupied with funeral duties to console her.

She had also been surprised later to encounter the girl frequently wandering around the house or garden clutching the jade monkey Suen had given her. She had also found her at times alone in the study, sitting on the sofa and staring distractedly into space.

Amber had offered to study locally for a spell, instead of going to Stanford on schedule. But she had seen at once the increased danger in her niece remaining at her side. The girl was the only person left she loved. The gods might use her as a means of punishing her further. She therefore hurried Amber off, promising to visit her at Stanford the moment circumstances permitted.

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Dum-Dum's funeral had taken place the day after Suen's. Most of those who had gone to pay their respects were strangers to her, save for the family of the aged ex-journalist and the small circle of mutual friends who had attended Suen's funeral the previous day. She had sensed that some part of her husband's past was being interred together with the remains of his old friend. Oddly, her ignorance of much of Suen's past actually sharpened her sense of loss, though she still managed to maintain her composure.

The bespectacled editor, Su, a contemporary of both the departed, had naturally been at both burials. He was one of the few who could illuminate some of Suen's past. But beyond conventional courtesies, Su had seldom exchanged words with her. He had always been guarded, even on those rare occasions when he had visited their home. It was as if he had deep secrets to keep from her. She suspected that he must regard her -- in spite of her being married to Suen -- as part of the British imperial

system which he so openly loathed.

It had come as a complete surprise, therefore, that Su should have sought her out and addressed her at some length following Dum-Dum's funeral.

"They had quitted the world at almost the same hour," Su had remarked, in a voice thick with sadness. He had then removed his glasses to polish them, as if they had suddenly misted over.

The editor had then gone on to relate, with measured nods of his greying head, how he had rung Ah Loy when Suen had failed to turn up at the Lingnan University Alumni Association. When the old servant told him that her Young Master had gone out for an early walk in the Botanical Garden prior to meeting him for lunch, he suspected something must have gone amiss. He contacted his News Editor, only to discover that a major traffic accident, with a number of people killed or injured, had occurred at the junction of Wyndham Street and Queen's Road Central that morning. By the time he had established the facts and had reached the appropriate hospitals, both Suen and Dum-Dum had gone.

The hospital authorities at first did not know what to make of a well-dressed casualty with neither money nor identification papers, Su had continued. Since he didn't look or dress like an illegal immigrant, they had assumed he must have been robbed on the way to hospital. When he died from his injuries, they had been on the point of calling in the police. But he had been able to identify Suen in time and he asked them to contact her at her law firm instead.

"Yes, it would have been just like Suen to leave home without his wallet," she had allowed. "Thank you for filling in the details. It was fitting, I suppose, that after such an extended friendship those two to have made their final journeys together."

"Pity these old eyes will never see such friendships again," Su

had responded, with a sigh. “Sometimes I wonder why we have spent our lives chasing after illusions, when all around us the masses have already settled for the happiness of hogs, with their snouts in a trough.”

“To alert them to alternatives, I suppose,” she had replied, with a sad tremor in her voice.

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It had been on a crisp and sunny November day that Po-Chee had emplaned for London. She had not been there for years and did not relish the journey. But the house at Radnor Place needed attention.

Once ensconced in the solitude of that house, however, the magnitude of her loss finally overwhelmed her. The studied calm she had maintained for months in Hong Kong completely crumbled. The place was so redolent with a period of vanished happiness that her heart gave way to despair. Tears flowed copiously. She wailed out loud, stalking the empty rooms and beating upon their indifferent walls, surrendering herself to the madness of an implacable grief.

The past rushed back at her at every turn. From the moment she set eyes on the golden butterfly on the mantelpiece, she began re-living their first candle-lit dinner, the heady glasses of wine, the mutual unburdenings, before she took those tremulous steps up the stairs to surrender her virginity.

She recalled the happiness that had suffused those delicious weeks and months that followed. She had felt more alive during that period than at any other time, except perhaps during childhood before her mother died. The fact that the man she had fallen in love with was twice her age and had no regular employment did not seem to matter at the time. What mattered were the poetry, the whispered endearments, the gropings in

the dark, the thrilling conjugations of impatient flesh! How she had given herself over to those unrivalled moments of ecstasy!

Buoyed by that magic, she had dared to marry without prior parental approval. She had wanted to lock in the happiness she had experienced, to secure it for good, regardless of what anyone might say. But no sooner had the deed been done, news came of her father's death.

Looking back from a distance of years, she saw clearly the logic of the law of causation. The enjoyment during childhood of an instance of an unnatural love had to be paid for by acute suffering and the deaths of loved ones. The need for atonement and redemption was equally clear.

When she finally got down to the physical grind of tidying the house, she had been astonished to discover how many books, files and half-finished essays had been left scattered around the premises. Books occupied part of the former quarters of Suen's grandmother and a bewildering variety of boxes and dossiers laid here and there in most of the other rooms. Some had indexes, bibliographies and accompanying photographs; others were made up of hand-written notes, clipped together with cross-references to other files.

Inside a box labelled simply "Political Prisoners" in the sitting room, she had found a slew of newspaper accounts of arrests and criminal citations against political prisoners from all corners of the globe. Stacked on the dining room table were piles of files. A thick one was marked "The Long March and the Unfinished Revolution"; a second went under the name "Crisis in State Education"; while a third was called "Media Moguls in Usurpations of Power".

She had flipped through a fourth titled "Modern Tribal Genocides". It began with massacres and land losses suffered by Red Indians in North America, aborigines in Australia and various tribes along

the Amazon basin and in the former Dutch East Indies. The accounts then detailed latter day harassments of tribes in Southeast Asia, the chronic hunger of the Kondh people in India and the seemingly endless rapes, mutilations and slaughters continuing to pepper the continent of Africa.

In virtually every case, the murderous weapons of choice had originated from the so-called advanced nations. And the justifications for the atrocities often went little further than corporate benefits to be derived from logging, minerals, oil or tourism.

She could hardly believe, after reading about such horrors, that she inhabited the same earth as those unfortunates. She felt sickened. Why had she never noticed their deaths and misfortunes before? Where had the rule of law been when such crimes were being committed? Had her own ambition blinded her to what was happening elsewhere?

She couldn't read any more. She gazed upon the remaining files with a sinking heart. There were more of them back at Bowen Road, enough material for many books. What had Suen been up to? He couldn't possibly weave so many disparate expositions into a single work.

It had taken her almost a month to pack up Suen's books and papers and to arrange for their shipment home. She could tell immediately there would not be sufficient room for them at the Bowen Road study and Suen's former bedroom. The solution to that problem could wait.

During that process she also tried to decide what she should do with the property. She vacillated. She could not imagine her using it again herself. It had too many husbanded memories to make living in it bearable on her own.

On the other hand, memories were all she had left. She smiled bitterly. Memories stored-up from other times, created by two other selves which no longer existed! Then she remembered she had promised Amber a trip to London. Yes, perhaps she could stay at Radnor Place one more time

with Amber, before disposing of the house.

By the time the crates of Suen's belongings reached Bowen Road, her assessment on lack of space proved entirely correct. They had to be stored pro tem in one of the spare bedrooms upstairs.

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Po-Chee entered the study hesitantly. Though wrapped up warmly in a thick house coat, she still seemed to feel the winter chill outside seeping into her bones.

It was strange, she thought, that she still could not get used to the notion that the study was now definitely hers and no longer Suen's. She had carefully put away some of his files and dossiers inside the available cabinets. The rest she had stored away in two carved camphor wood trunks in one of the spare bedrooms. She had also taken possession of his desk and -- where they could be appropriately squeezed in -- a few of the books from London had been placed on the shelves. Otherwise she had left the room more or less the way it used to be.

She had the room to retain some aftertaste of her husband. For that reason, she had also -- after some internal agonising -- decided to leave Phirun's painting of Isabelle on the wall, with Suen's zither resting on top of the filing cabinets beneath.

As she took her seat at the desk, she studied once again the painting with the single eye, seemingly returning her gaze from across the room. Its feminine vitality had remained undimmed after so many decades.

"Well, we've both lost him now," she said aloud, more in sorrow than in rivalry. She wondered where Isabelle was and how she might get word to her of Suen's passing. She conceded that the woman had a right to know and that she had been rather remiss in not thinking about

that earlier.

Perhaps there might be an old address inside Suen's locked box. She had long ago glimpsed bundles of letters among the photographs inside. The wooden box had been sitting unopened on top of the desk since Ah Loy handed her the key right after the funeral.

Her terror was that her husband might have set down his pain or guilt over the loss of Yun. Worse still, some insinuation of blame over her sleeping through the whole débâcle. Either would be too much to bear. She had found nothing on the subject so far, after going through most of Suen's dossiers and papers. If a record existed, it could only be inside the box. She ran her hands tentatively around its outlines but pulled away sharply when they came into contact with its lock. She had yet to find the self-confidence to face up to what she might find. She was still unready for surprises. Isabelle would have to wait.

She had, nonetheless, already begun the process of turning her own life around. She had given up her partnership at the law firm. She had begun to see more clearly the obfuscating of truth and the shadiness of her chosen profession. Besides, the way James Hallimore, the head of the practice, kept secret files away from even senior partners, filled her with misgivings. Something smelt rotten. She wanted to distance herself before chickens came home to roost.

She had also devoted more time to charitable activities in association with Lucille Chu. Reading Buddhist scriptures on the Dharma Ending Age in conjunction with Suen's papers had brought home to her that with the progressive internationalisation of everything the world might indeed be heading for disaster.

She sighed helplessly. She wished someone -- anyone -- could provide solutions to the types of problems Suen had been posing. But who? She couldn't think of anyone. One glance at the bookshelves and the

cabinets stuffed with his papers brought suggested that her husband must have engaged himself in titanic struggles to find answers.

As she mused, she remembered that Suen had asked for his books to be left to Amber. She never had a chance to question him about that decision. Had he spotted some latent potential in their niece that she herself had missed? If so, why hadn't he asked for his files to be left to her also? Such questions gave her pause.

Ironically, it was his sensible alternative of leaving money to Amber as his legacy instead of setting up a trust that was now causing her concern. At the end of the tedious probate process, how was she to convince her niece -- in the absence of a will -- that the money was really coming from Suen? Her legal reputation stood against her. Amber was bound to view the whole thing as another of her clever ploys to get her to accept her grandfather's conscience money. She would have to tread very, very carefully with that girl from now on. It was all very trying.

She shook her head sadly. She wished she still had Suen by her side. He had so many exceptional qualities, kindness, generosity and long-suffering consideration for others. It had been her own deep-seated fears that had prevented them from making more of a life together. Now it was too late. How could she ever make it up to him?

She sat up abruptly and stared at the locked box on the desk. A thought struck her on a sudden. She could immortalize him! Let the world know what a kind of man he was! He was a man born into a time and place totally uncongenial to his temperament, and yet he had sought so valiantly and unstintingly to love, not only those with whom he had formed attachments but also humanity as a whole!

There was no time to lose, she told herself. There were still people around who knew bits of his past and who could testify to his deeds. If she went about it the right way, she could still persuade Ah Loy, Su,

Sanjay and others to talk about him, to reveal what they must know before it was too late. Dum-Dum's widow must also have some stories to tell, if only at secondhand. The contents of the locked box, when finally revealed, must provide a wealth of further insights. In re-constructing a fuller picture of the man she had married and so tragically lost, who was to say that she wouldn't fall in love with him all over again!

Her exhilaration mounted fancifully over such a challenge. To avoid cynicism in others, she would not write about him as his widow. She would create a larger-than-life fictional character out of him, in a new novel by Cissie Lee. She wouldn't care if the book never attained the status of another bestseller. Deep down she knew it would be the best damn book that Cissie Lee would ever write.