

Sweet Sorrow

Hong Kong, June 1981:

They lay limp and exhausted, as lovers would after the frenzy of love, soothed by the lulling purr of the air conditioner. Yellow strips of moonlight seeped through the shuttered windows, together with the distant ululations of hawkers, the click-click of mah jong tiles and snatches of Cantonese pop songs about unrequited love.

Lucille woke to those sounds, momentarily disoriented, until she realized she was in Seb's flat. A curtain of brown and white plastic beads divided the premises into a sitting room cum study and a makeshift bedroom.

How could a Westerner live so frugally and put up with the intrusion of so many Eastern sounds, she wondered. She enjoyed a surfeit of space in the Chu mansion, insulated by vast gardens and lawns. The sounds in the unfamiliar neighbourhood struck her as not altogether unpleasant, however. They carried a certain earthiness which reflected Chinese preoccupations with food, gambling and love.

As she attempted to identify the strands making up that medley, she realized she was lying on one of Seb's arms, with her face pressed against the curly hairs of his chest. He was still asleep.

Poor man, she thought, staying still so as not to wake him. At another time and in another place they would have been perfect for each other. Their temperaments melded like the black and white halves of the Taoist symbol for Yin and Yang. Though each had private hurts, a certain kind of fulfilment came when they were together. It was strange that she should have found it with a gweilo.

Perhaps that was what she had really been searching for all along, the love and attention of a good man. She had wrongly ascribed her former restlessness to some kind of cultural or racial inadequacy, due to the hostilities encountered during girlhood over the colour of her skin. It was that which had set her off on a long expedition to discover her roots. Her efforts had turned out to be enlightening. She had no regrets. But it had been the wrong remedy for the wrong ailment. Seb had provided the right one. In the process, however, he had created a different kind of restlessness.

Relocating to a city with an almost wholly Chinese population had opened up new vistas. Her smooth ivory skin no longer stood out. She had rid herself of her Toi Shan accent and had acquired the looks and habits of other Hong Kong society women. It was now people of other colours who were outsiders. Language and literature shut them off, ancient festivals and legends mystified them, and places like the Evergreen Tea House offered them no welcome.

Living with Serenity and studying with Madam Shek had deepened her understanding of Chinese habits and attitudes. But the more she learnt the more she found herself slowly sealed within skein after skein of tradition. Her parents had previously impressed upon her the importance of family, relatives and clan, of links with ancestors long dead and generations yet

unborn. Serenity and Madam Shek connected her further to the spiritual, intellectual and artistic heritage of an old civilization.

It was those spreading and deepening connections that engendered a new discomfort, a dissonance between her American pursuit of love and happiness and her Chinese concerns for social harmony, continuity and the greatest common good.

Seb was a decent man and she loved him. He could make her laugh and forget her troubles. He knew more about Chinese ways than she did. The orderly relationships espoused by Confucians, the quietism practised by the Taoists, the Buddhist surrender of worldly attachments, were all familiar to him. In a different world, he would make an ideal mate. But he was still a gweilo. That was why whenever he hinted at marriage, she had been evasive. How could she explain the relationships within the Chu family and the unsettled values inside herself? She felt ridiculous rationalizing why she would agree to assignments only when Xavier was larger than life within the town.

Part of that peculiarity was born out of feminist pride, acquired at Berkeley. She resented being a trophy wife, putting on sweetness and charm for Xavier's business associates. She had done it nonetheless, for the sake of Ah Yuen and Serenity, to preserve harmony within the home and dignity before the servants.

But she also desired to live by her own rules. She wanted to make plain that misusing her came at a price. By being blatant about her affair she hoped to provoke her husband into a row, a divorce, a recognition of her as an autonomous human being. But he had responded to her absences with humiliating indifference.

During moments of anger she had really wanted to hurt him, to make him lose face by letting the world see him as a cuckold. But, on calmer reflection, what could that achieve and what did that make her? Consideration for Ah Yuen, for Serenity and for her own parents invariably stopped her.

She remembered when she was a teenager her mother had demanded that she conformed to Chinese notions of womanhood.

"You must marry your own kind," her mother had said. "Not one of those sweet-talking white boys. Stay away from them. Your father and I don't want to have half-breeds as grandchildren. Once you marry, you must stay loyal to your husband, no matter what. As the saying goes, if you marry a cockerel, you belong with the cockerel; if you marry a dog, you stick with the dog. That's our way."

Growing up in America had liberated her from her mother's strictures but also left her confused and alienated. If she divorced Xavier, her parents would never understand. Exchanging a respectable Chinese tycoon for an impecunious gweilo journalist would make no sense to them. Romantic love hardly figured in their order of priorities. They might even disown her for heaping shame upon them, making them lose face among their Chinatown friends.

Serenity would understand, however, for she had spoken often about human desire being at the root of sorrow. Serenity had once handed her an old pei-pa, apparently charged with

deep personal associations, and had asked her to destroy it on her behalf. She had carried it to the head gardener and watched its incineration together with the hedge clippings and lawn trimmings.

She could not understand the reason at that time. Now, in retrospect, she realized her mother-in-law must have been trying to illustrate a point. But of what? How difficult it was to grasp messages delivered in such roundabout ways! Was it a Chinese habit she had not yet acquired? One thing was clear, however. She could not possibly repay Serenity's affection by walking out of the Chu family while her mother-in-law remained so unwell.

And what of Ah Yuen, the fruit of her own womb? She had nursed him from sickly infancy to rude health. But he had not grown into a happy young man. Bringing up a child was not as easy as she had once thought. She and Serenity had tried to teach him simple, decent values. Modesty, honesty, compassion, contentment, respect for knowledge, the unimportance of material possessions. Perhaps they had succeeded too well, for he was beginning to question the activities of his frequently absent father. Why was the family living in such luxury? Why was his father hellbent on accumulating more wealth? Why was money mania gripping the entire city? Those interrogations came with distressing frequency and neither Serenity nor herself could provide simple, convincing answers.

The conflict between ideals and reality was already leading to tensions between Ah Yuen and his father. Sometimes arguments got so heated between the two that she or Serenity had to intervene. Xavier blamed the women of the house for filling his son's head with baleful ideas. In such circumstances, how could she risk inflicting further emotional damage on her son by revealing and explaining her relationship with Seb?

The only justification for marrying Seb would be to have the large family she had always wanted. But that might no longer be possible. She had hesitated too long. She was fast approaching forty and might not be able to conceive. Even if she had children, how would they fit in with Ah Yuen? They would be half-breeds, exposed to social disdain, regardless of whether they remained in Hong Kong or departed for some secluded village in Middle England. She could not in good conscience create another generation of misfits. And, if there were not to be more children, what was the point of marriage?

Deep down she knew she was irrevocably bound to Ah Yuen. She had somehow to ease for him the inevitable pains of growing up. She did not want him to suffer the kind of emotional dislocations she had gone through herself. If a sacrifice had to be made, it would have to be Seb. He was, after all, a man familiar with pain.

She had asked him once if it depressed him to be constantly detailing racial and political hatreds, wars and human disasters.

"I suppose someone has to tell the world that such horrors exist, in case anybody cares. Sometimes I get more sick of people not caring than of the madnests themselves."

"There must be some people who care. Why not try a different medium, like books?"

He had laughed. "Failed at that too and I've rejection slips to prove it. A man has to make a living. Sticking with what I'm doing is about my speed. Many years ago, an old friend, T.

P. Choy, taught me two things about keeping sane. Recognize one's own limitations and accept the fact that human progress, if it takes place at all, comes at the pace of the slowest glacier. I'm resigned to both."

"You're not! I can't believe that! I've read some of your articles and I can tell you care. There's fire in your belly still. The world needs people who can see things as they are and yet can present a vision of what they could be. When I was in college, reading Simone de Beauvoir changed my outlook. You also have that kind of gift. You can make a difference, like Zola or Steinbeck."

"My dear girl, I've never aimed so high. A dyspeptic outpouring now and then -- which readers of the Globe can safely ignore over their kippers or porridge -- is about my speed."

Recognizing the depth of his unhappiness, her heart had gone out to him. He was like a latter day Don Quixote, tilting against the forces championed by her husband. He could not possibly prevail, yet he kept trying. For such a man marriage and family responsibilities would be millstones. She wondered if he had been using the cheapness of his quarters to justify to his employer the convenience of maintaining a base in Hong Kong, just to be close to her.

She ought to set him free. It had been the infrequency of their assignments and sheer good fortune that had prevented their liaison from becoming public knowledge. That situation could not be hidden forever. Yet, when she was in his arms or when they danced to the aching lyrics of a Nat King Cole ballad, the thought of giving him up was too excruciating to bear.

Sebastian stirred, interrupting Lucille's thoughts. Lucille leaned over and found his mouth. They kissed, not passionately but affectionately, like people long accustomed to each other. Sebastian semaphored with his liberated arm, provoking a creak of protest from the antiquated bedstead.

"Sorry, darling," Lucille said. "Did I put your arm to sleep?"

"What are a few pins and needles when I'm with you?" Sebastian replied, as he massaged his arm.

Lucille kissed him again, this time more lingeringly and passionately. She felt his big hands exploring her body, stirring her to renewed excitement. She shuddered. But, remembering the lateness of the hour, she pulled away.

"Please, darling. Don't get me hot and bothered. It's almost midnight. I ought to be going."

"Yes, I recognize the flavour of that kiss. It carries the taste of imminent abandonment."

"Leaving you is the last thing I want right now. But it is getting late. Xavier should be home." Lucille swung her legs onto the floor and switched on the bedside lamp.

"I wasn't referring to your leaving tonight but your disappearance next week for most of the summer." Sebastian sat up and lit a cigarette. The brass bedstead creaked again in protest.

"Oh, darling, you know my routine. I've followed it for the last three years."

“I do know. That’s the reason we get so little time together. Your trips, my trips, Xavier’s trips. Your social obligations and my professional assignments. I’m amazed we ever get to meet at all.”

Lucille heard an edge of resentment in his voice and saw how ridiculously big he appeared in the antiquated bed. She noticed too, for the first time, that some of the hairs on his chest were turning grey. Her heart melted.

“My son’s an American,” she said. “I’ve an obligation to take him there, to visit my parents and show him the country of his birth. I can’t close off his options, regardless of what I may feel about America. When he’s old enough, he’ll have to choose whether to make his life here or over there, whether he feels more Chinese or American or just screwed-up like me.”

“What’ll it be this summer? You’ve already shown him the car-makers of Detroit and the dream-makers of Hollywood, the wheat belt and the Bible belt, New England and Basin Street.”

“Universities,” Lucille replied, rummaging for her underwear among the discarded clothes on the floor. “Particularly Princeton and Harvard, to see if he wants to follow in his father’s footsteps. My goodness! My son going to university next year! I can hardly believe that!”

“Time catches up with all of us. For my money, you’ll still be the best looking mum of a university student anywhere in the world!” Sebastian grinned, as he watched Lucille pulling on her panties. Her breasts hung full and voluptuous above her slender waist. “And I love you,” he added.

“I love you too. You know, I don’t think I can stand it if Ah Yuen decides to study abroad. I hope he doesn’t. It’s hard to figure out what a teenager wants these days. I don’t think he’s very happy at the moment. He feels he’s living a sham, disapproving of too much of what his father does, yet deriving his education and other benefits from him.”

“What does he disapprove of exactly?”

“Quite a lot. He doesn’t like his father blighting Chinese cities with billboards advertising consumer products. If there has to be brainwashing, he deemed slogans like ‘Hold High the Banner of Socialist Equality!’ and ‘Down With Imperialism and Neo-Colonialism!’ more elevating than ‘Connoisseur Cognac Adds Zest to Your Life’. He objects to the hotels his father builds. Considers mass tourism a corrupting influence and, beyond its immediate injection of cash, an exploitation of poor countries. Despises his father too, for being a British stooge, serving on the Hong Kong Executive Council to gain connections and commercial advantages. He thinks the British are up to no good. I’m worried he might just drop out or take to drugs like kids did back in the Sixties.”

“He could be right on more scores than one,” Sebastian said, nodding, as he stubbed out what was left of his cigarette. “We British are up to no good. We’ve managed to hone hypocrisy into a sublime art. Whitehall and Westminster are preparing to ditch the people here, you realize? Makes me sick. I can’t look my neighbours in the eye without feeling ashamed. It’s just as well that you and Ah Yuen have American passports.”

“Oh, darling, to be fair, few here ever expected anything from the British. If things went wrong, people here’ll find a way out. They’ve always done that. They’re not idealists like you or Ah Yuen. They know it’s all about money and politics. It’s a trade-off. They don’t mind being exploited a bit as the price for keeping the Communists off their backs while they make their fortunes. It’s not your fault if Britain wants to trade the citizens of a colony for commercial benefits in their national interest.”

“It’s the way we’re going about it that I find abhorrent. I can’t escape my share of blame. Britain is the oldest parliamentary democracy in the world. In a democracy, when an electorate allows scoundrels into public office -- through apathy or laziness or cynicism -- then each member of that electorate must assume individual responsible.”

Lucille sat down on the bed and took one of Seb’s hands. “Most people don’t take such a strict view. Don’t get so worked up. Save your anger for a book.”

Sebastian gave a bitter laugh. “If I ever get around to writing one. This place deserves an honest one. But a book like that is beyond my talents. By the way, do you happen to know anything about this organ transplant institute your husband’s planning in Canton? I’ve heard some disturbing rumours. I’ve been trying to run them down but no one is very forthcoming, particularly your husband.”

“Don’t know a thing, except our family doctor is somehow involved. The last time Dr. Chow came up to treat Serenity he didn’t seem happy. Although Ah Yuen asked him about it, he avoided explaining. Would you like Dr. Chow’s number?”

“Not a bad idea. I’ve got an odd feeling about that project. Something doesn’t smell right.”

Lucille rose to get the address book from her handbag and then read out the telephone number. She then extracted a comb and began tidying her hair. “You know, Ah Yuen’s a lot like you,” she said, patting her hair into place. “Always trying to right the wrongs of the world, to live according to ideals.”

“Not destined to be as professionally unsuccessful, I hope! Pity I see so little of him. He’s a bright lad. I like him enormously and wish we had a son of our own like him. My father passed away last year, as you know. If you keep refusing to allow me to make an honest woman of you, the Baxingdale genes are going to disappear from the face of the earth.”

No, no, Lucille thought, dropping her comb and picking it up again. She knew what would come next. She knew she had to set Seb free. But she wasn’t ready to let go. Stall, delay, prevaricate, she told herself.

She half-turned away from Seb and combed her hair furiously before a non-existent mirror. A warm sensation misted over her eyes.

“Seb, darling,” she said, slowly and deliberately, averting her face. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about our future. But now’s not a good time. Why don’t we each do some serious thinking during the summer and have a nice long chat when I get back?”

She turned and saw that Seb had caught the altered timbre in her voice and had understood what she was about.

“All right,” Seb said, displaying a brave smile. A melancholy look entered his grey eyes. “Let’s leave it till the end of summer. Just don’t forget that I love you.”

“I hate all these coming-togethers and damnable goodbyes!” Lucille cried suddenly, flinging her comb against the wall. She then picked up her handbag, rushed through the beaded curtain and headed for the door. The brown and white beads rattling noisily behind her and she heard Seb calling her name as she went out of the flat.

All of a sudden, as she scrambled down the narrow staircase, she realized she was shoeless. But she did not care. At the same time she heard a songstress on a radio somewhere crooning the lyrics of a popular Chinese tune.

“Beautiful flowers do not bloom for long;

Beautiful scenes do not last forever.

After our parting of this night,

When will we be together again?”

Those lyrics of sorrowful separation seared her heart. By the time she reached the street tears were running down her face.