

## More Revelations

### **Hong Kong, December 1983:**

Serenity had been simulating sleep for the better part of an hour but real sleep evaded her. One reason was the presence of Mrs. Yim, the night nurse, a fat, lumpy and oversolicitous widow, sitting under a dim reading lamp devouring one of her cheap romances. Another was all the legal rubbish Ah Seng had been pressing upon her in recent weeks -- wills, probates, tax havens, estate duties, avoidance measures, trusts. She had been feeling something amiss for days. But was it that obvious her present existence was heading towards a conclusion?

She had allowed him to have his way, perversely pleased he had been observant. She had no fear of passing into another existence. She had long been reconciled to it. She would have to endure many more before achieving Nirvana.

She hoped she had made the right arrangements for everyone, so far as she understood the mountain of legal documents. Modest bequests to Lucille and Ah Yuen; the house and its art treasures to the city as a museum upon Ah Yuen reaching the age of twenty-five; the rest into a charitable trust, with Lucille as Trustee. The trust income would be devoted to educational charities and the initial upkeep of the museum. Ah Seng had wanted only a right of first refusal should Gold Star shares be sold. She was happy to oblige.

How people worried about death, Serenity thought. Why should so much attention be devoted to the useless physical shells that human beings carried around with them? About three months ago, she had slipped going to the toilet at night and had bumped her head on the edge of the washbasin. It was nothing serious but Ah Seng had insisted on hiring a night nurse to prevent similar accidents. It was true her limbs were not as reliable as before but she was far from being an invalid. Her angina was only slightly worse and Dr. Chow had brought around young Dr. Lo to help look after her. The only thing she had against the new doctor was his excessive keenness to extract blood for tests. She loathed needles!

She had tried to dissuade Ah Seng from imposing Mrs. Yim. In the end, realizing it was his way of showing concern, she relented. Poor child, poor man. She pitied her son, as one who had learnt nothing of quietism and solitude. In solitude her spirit could roam, her mind could probe with its inner eye. To be placed under the surveillance of Mrs. Yim, particularly when her soul lay exposed and unguarded in sleep, was disconcerting.

Apart from Mrs. Yim's presence and Ah Seng's legal documents, her insomnia had another cause. A sense of unfinished business in respect of both Lucille and Ah Seng.

Lucille was as good a mother and as caring a daughter-in-law as any woman could hope for. But the poor girl was not at peace. To convince a woman brought up in America that existence was but a dream and that desire was the cause of all suffering required patience. She had tried to lead Lucille to the teachings of the Lord Buddha and to improve her Chinese by reciting the sutras. One evening, after recitations in the Meditation Room, Lucille had suddenly broken down and confessed that no love existed between Ah Seng and herself. She pleaded for Serenity's help in

bringing up Ah Yuen, as if she were on the verge of running away and abandoning her marital home.

In order to comfort Lucille and to indicate she understood her suffering, Serenity brought Lucille to her room and showed her the old pei-pa. She watched her fingering its smooth frame and its silent strings with bewilderment.

“This instrument once formed an important part of my existence,” she said. “But it’s now only a reminder of happenings of long ago. The seasons come and go, the moon waxes and wanes. Existence passes like a dream, like a breeze between bamboos. It is difficult to free oneself from worldly cravings. Perhaps we can help each other free ourselves.”

With that, she instructed Lucille to destroy the instrument. Lucille had hesitated before accepting the instruction but did not question it. From that moment an understanding grew between them. That had been more than six years ago, when she had sensed Lucille to be at her unhappiest. Now, particularly with Ah Yuen growing up, the girl had become more poised and self-assured.

Serenity turned on her mat-covered bed. Through the gloom she could not detect the old black telephone which rang no more. It was all that remained from a long lost era. Only the unfinished business with Ah Seng. All of a sudden it seemed to take on a vague urgency. She sat up and reached for the bedside lamp.

Mrs. Yim rushed up, flesh quivering beneath her winter clothing. “Do you need medicine, ma’am, or help to go to the toilet?” she asked.

“Neither,” Serenity said, switching on the light. “What time is it?”

“Almost quarter to midnight, ma’am.”

“Please go and see if my son has returned.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Yim disappeared but was back within three minutes. “Not home yet, ma’am. Neither is young Mrs. Chu.”

“Mrs. Yim, would you kindly go downstairs and wait for my son? Please tell him the moment he’s back I would like to see him, no matter how late it might be.”

Mrs. Yim looked doubtful for a moment, before nodding and leaving the room.

Left to herself, Serenity savoured again the delight of solitude. She looked at the miniature pine her husband had left and smiled. She had cared for it and it had remained more sturdy than herself. Small wonder the Chinese regarded the pine as a symbol for endurance.

You’ve done well, little plant, she thought. We’ve both endured. I’ve lived to see my grandson grow into manhood, to feel him developing attachments to notions dear to his grandfather. He has rewarded my efforts, choosing to study history and philosophy locally, just to be close to this old woman. That is joy beyond measure. My task is done. Soon, little plant, we can both pass into another existence.

Serenity gradually drifted in and out of sleep. Her next awareness was the scent of perfume, a gentle touch on her shoulder and Lucille’s voice asking: “Mother, are you all right?”

She opened her eyes and found Lucille, in a turquoise evening gown, squatting next to the bed. Behind her stood Ah Seng in a dinner jacket, and a quaking Mrs. Yim.

"I'm fine," Serenity said, smiling. She raised herself from her bed. Lucille shook out the pillows and placed them behind her.

"Had a good evening?" Serenity asked, after she had settled comfortably.

"It was only dinner at the Chief Secretary's up the road," Lucille replied, affection sparkling in her eyes. "The men went on and on, talking shop, arguing about negotiations with Peking."

"Mrs. Yim said you wanted to see me urgently," Xavier interposed. "Gave us quite a turn seeing her waiting at the door."

"Sorry. I had something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Couldn't it have waited? It's half past midnight."

"I'd rather talk now, if you don't mind."

Xavier undid his black tie and the collar button. "All right, Mother, what is it?"

Serenity hesitated and seemed to address the room at large. "I wonder if I might have a few moments alone with my son?"

Xavier frowned and shrugged.

"Goodnight, Mother," Lucille said, kissing Serenity on the cheek before leaving with Mrs. Yim.

"Won't you sit down?" Serenity said, picking up her prayer beads from the side table and moving to make room on the bed.

Xavier obeyed. The fumes of alcohol were on his breath, possibly those of Connoisseur cognac. He began massaging his neck. "Well, what is it you want to talk about, Mother?"

Serenity looked at her son as her fingers worked the prayer beads. Vitality was seeping out of him, she thought. Behind his spectacles his eyes no longer shone with aggressive brightness. Though his face appeared youthful still, the signs of middle-age had crept into his deportment. "I want you to do me a favour after I'm gone," she said.

"Mother, you're going to be around for a good while yet. Why this unseemly haste? If you want something done, just say so."

"You promise?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Since your father passed away, I've been sending money to one of his former associates in Taiwan. His surname is Fung."

"You don't mean Buck-toothed Fung?"

"You mustn't be disrespectful. He's an elder. He used to play with you when you were a baby. You should refer to him as Uncle Fung."

"I met him when I was with Father in Taiwan. The man strikes me as a rogue. Father said he was a habitual gambler and not to be trusted with money. Why should you be sending him anything?"

“Rogue or not, gambler or not, we owe him our lives. He made it possible for your father to get food during the Japanese occupation. Otherwise you and I might well not be here today. I want you to continue to send him money for so long as he lives.”

“Payments out of gratitude?”

Serenity sighed. “Possibly, but not exactly. He left Hong Kong after the war. Your father kept in contact but I never saw him again. After your father died, he wrote, offering condolences. He also said your father had been sending him money to tidy up some unfinished business in Taiwan. He asked if the remittances would continue. That was the first I had heard about remittances. I didn’t know what they were for. Your father never mentioned anything. I checked with your father’s secretary and Mrs. Leung confirmed that your father had been remitting money to a lawyer in Taipei each year, to be drawn on quarterly by Uncle Fung. The sum was not large. I figured your father must have his reasons for the payments, so I continued the practice. Didn’t want to upset whatever arrangement that might be in place. Apparently started back in 1956.”

“Good grief! You’re telling me that Uncle Fung has been taking money from you and father for twenty-seven years? What in heaven’s name for? It must be quite some tidying up!”

Serenity hesitated for a long moment. “At first I didn’t ask. A couple of years later, when Uncle Fung asked for an increase, I did ask. According to him, it was to take care of something you did.”

“Something I did?” Xavier shook his head and spread his hands, as if deeply aggrieved. “Told you that man’s a rogue. I didn’t do anything in Taiwan.”

“Uncle Fung said differently. He claimed you became involved with a dancing girl and got her pregnant. He said your father had a hand in the arrangements and offered to pay for an abortion. But the girl wanted to keep the child. So your father got Uncle Fung to pass her money on a regular basis to support mother and son.”

“Fei-Fei!” Xavier sprang up. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why have you kept it from me for so long?”

“You mean there really was a girl and a child? I never bought Uncle Fung’s story because I always take whatever he says with several grains of salt. He said it was just wild oats and perhaps the child wasn’t even yours. He said a small sum would be enough to keep the girl quiet.”

Xavier removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked suddenly pathetic in his dinner jacket, like a head waiter who had just been given the sack.

“Wild oats! Fei-Fei wasn’t the kind of girl to demand money. I loved her. She was in fact the only woman I’ve ever loved. I offered to marry her but she rejected me. You don’t know how much pain that caused me. You should have told me about the payments! You’ve made me miss my chance!” Xavier’s voice broke and he began to sob.

Tears came to Serenity’s eyes as she watched her son’s heaving shoulders. He wasn’t just an insensitive business machine after all! He could be hurt like everybody else. And over a boyhood love, of all things! But she remained sceptical over the details. She leaned forward with outspread arms, reaching for him. Xavier fell into them and she held him tight. His shoulders

quivered and the years fell away. He became her little boy again, just like that day he found her crying over the now-destroyed pei-pa.

“Holy Buddha, how was I to know the girl meant anything to you?” Serenity said, stroking the back of Xavier’s head. “You never mentioned you had got involved with a girl in Taiwan. There’s nothing unusual about teenagers having flings with dancing girls.”

“It wasn’t like that. She was from a poor family, trying to support her family.”

“They usually are. I doubt if you really got her pregnant. Apparently she wanted only money and your father was generous. Such things happen.”

Xavier disengaged himself and rummaged for a handkerchief to wipe his face. “I loved her and she rejected me. The way she cast everything I had offered aside really hurt, Mother. It was the same when Father rejected me. I swore no one would ever hurt me that way again.”

“Your father didn’t reject you, Ah Seng. He loved you. You have to believe that. You just misunderstood what he was about.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the payments earlier?” Xavier asked. He replaced his spectacles and his voice had resumed its normal tone. His features, too, were once again under control.

“I didn’t really believe what Uncle Fung said, didn’t want to complicate your life. You were married, with a son. You were swamped, coping with Gold Star. There were riots and bombs in the streets at the time. No one knew what was going to happen next. It’s not uncommon for dancing girls to take advantage of infatuated boys. You think your father and I would have abandon a grandchild if we thought there was the remotest chance it could be yours? Your father was not that kind of person and neither am I. Whatever took place happened a long time ago. No one has made a fuss since. Let it be over and done with. Just continue to pay the small amount as a gesture of gratitude. Uncle Fung is a very old man now and he’s had an unfortunate life.”

“I have to know the truth. Where’s Fei-Fei now?”

“I don’t know. For that you’ll have to ask Uncle Fung.”

“If there’s any truth to the story, I have to find Fei-Fei and make things right for her. I can’t bear the thought of her having to beg for money from someone like Uncle Fung. If I have a son, I want to reclaim him.”

“You already have a son. Ah Yuen.”

Xavier snorted. “Ah Yuen! Can’t talk to him. He’s a strange boy, a teenager who prefers the company of old men like Uncle Yue. They lunch at the Evergreen from time to time. Did you know that? They yak about tea and porcelain and ancient voyages by Chinese mariners. It’s weird, I tell you.”

“Ah Yuen has a right to develop his own interests.”

“His own interests! They’re a joke! Fat lot of good they’ll do in the world we’re in. Can’t he grasp the fact -- can’t any of you grasp the fact -- that I’m the one making history, that I’m giving substance to the new philosophy of global capitalism? I’ve gone further than any man has ever dared to venture. Why doesn’t he study that? What’s the use of a son like him? He’ll just let everything I’ve done go to pot.”

Serenity's heart sank. "Ah Yuen's your own flesh and blood," she pleaded. "Let him lead his own life. He doesn't have to follow you. It seems he's not interested in business. You've said before you couldn't afford time for children. One reaps what one sows. You don't have another child. Ah Yuen's all you've got. Both your father and I know what Uncle Fung is like. He'll make up anything to get money, turning fiction into fact. Don't let his words upset you and fill you with unhappiness. You'll just end up chasing shadows and ghosts. Leave the past alone, Ah Seng."

"No, I must find Fei-Fei. I must look after her now. Where can I reach that old rogue?"

"I don't know. I didn't deal with him direct, only with a lawyer in Taipei."

"Who's the lawyer then and how can I contact him?"

"Ah Seng, do you really have to go through with this? She was a dancing girl. You met her at an impressionable age a long, long time ago. You cannot imagine the ramifications that sort of life can bring. Even if you find her, she won't be the beautiful and innocent girl you once knew. She would be a middle-aged woman, possibly ugly, bloated, even diseased. You might be utterly horrified by what you find."

"I got over the horror of discovering what you used to be, Mother. Is my love less worthy than my father's? Now tell me, who's the lawyer?"

Serenity gasped and bowed her head. She clasped her prayer beads between her hands and her body shook. "I don't want you to suffer, Ah Seng," she said. "I won't tell you."

"How can I arrange payments if you won't tell me?"

"I've just made a remittance. Another's not due till next year. I'll tell you once you've calmed down."

Xavier stared at his mother. "I'll get the information from Mrs. Leung."

"You seem to have forgotten you discharged Mrs. Leung for refusing to tell you about your father's personal affairs."

Xavier rose from the bed again. "I'll find Fung," he said, evenly. "I have ways of getting information, with or without your help. It just takes a little longer without, that's all."

"Ah Seng," Serenity half-wailed, as she watched her son turning to leave. She wanted to deter him, to plead with him again to leave well enough alone. She opened her mouth to call but no sound came. She fell back against the pillows, trembling, and felt a rushing pain in her chest.