

Confronting the Past

Taipei, November 1984:

Personal matters were making a mess of his business life, Xavier Chu thought, as he tried to find his way along the side lanes spreading like rabbit warrens behind the main thoroughfares of Taipei. He had just spent ten tedious days in Japan, negotiating secretly with intermediaries to rescue Little Ho from his predicament. He supposed it was a success of sorts. In consideration of money deposited into Swiss bank accounts and the pulling of strings to get a few children of Communist cadres into institutions of higher learning in America, he had received an assurance that the death penalty would not be demanded. The only other concession was that Little Ho would not have to serve more than five years in prison. Now he had to turn his attention to locating Buck-toothed Fung and discovering the fate of Fei-Fei. It was a pity such tasks could not be delegated to one of his minions.

At last he found the right lane. The number given was a narrow four-storied structure tucked away in a corner, abutting the back of a small shopping complex on one side and a dealer in mirrors and glass on the other. Across the lane there was a fruiterer and a seller of fresh tofu. The human traffic through the lane and the numerous motor scooters parked along its length suggested a lively working class environment. At the rear of the shopping complex a leaking drainpipe sent a ribbon of green slime slithering down the wall onto an almost non-existent pavement, before trickling messily into a storm drain.

Badly designed and built on the cheap, Xavier surmised, with his property developer's eye. He moved towards the sturdy metal gate with a half-grille guarding the entrance. He studied the names next to the cluster of bells next to the grille. After he found one on the first floor marked "Fung" he pressed it.

Presently, a woman's voice shouted from somewhere overhead, in Mandarin: "Who you looking for?"

It took Xavier a while to realize the voice was coming from a small balcony jutting from the first floor. He stepped backwards and, looking upwards, saw a tiny balcony encased with metal bars, like a cage. From there a white-haired woman peered at him suspiciously.

"I have present for Uncle Fung," Xavier replied, in halting Mandarin. He held up a carrier bag containing two bottles of Connoisseur cognac and smiled.

"Who are you?"

"The son of Chu Tung-po."

The head examined him up and down and then disappeared. After a while the metal gate to the building scraped open and the owner of the head of white hair stood before him. She was dressed in a blue cotton track suit much the worse for wear and a pair of rubber flip-flops. "Please follow me. There's no lift."

The cramped hallway and staircase were badly in need of a fresh coat of paint. But otherwise the common areas were well-swept, indicating that residents had not yet completely abandoned their care.

Xavier noted the matronly proportions of the old woman as he followed her up the stairs. Though her movements were slow, the provocative sway of her bottom reminded him of Fei-Fei's.

On the first floor, a metal grille similar to the one at the entrance stood ajar. Behind that, was an opened wooden door. The old woman led Xavier into a small sitting room. The furnishings were sparse, with only a few relics from more prosperous times. Patches of mildew disfigured the walls. There were two chairs, set on either side of a nondescript wooden table. Although the window and the doorway to the balcony were open, there was an unpleasant odour.

Xavier placed his gift on the table. The old woman invited him to sit, poured him a cup of tea and then disappeared into another room. After a few moments, Buck-toothed Fung emerged in a wheelchair and propelled himself over the parquet flooring towards Xavier, stopping about ten feet away.

"Uncle Fung, you're ill!" Xavier said, jumping up from his seat in surprise and reverting to Cantonese.

"Not ill. Just crippled. Dead from the waist down," Buck-toothed Fung said. His lopsided eyes shone brightly in recognition.

"How did it happen?"

"Knocked down by a truck. Three years ago."

"I'm really sorry to hear that. Mother and I didn't know. Otherwise we would have asked after you long before now."

Xavier saw that Fung's arms and shoulders remained powerful though his hair had greyed considerably. His legs, however, had shrivelled, judging from the folds of his black cotton trousers. A plastic catheter bag half-filled with a yellowish liquid hung from a hook on the side of the wheelchair. A tube connected to the bag disappeared inside Fung's trousers, explaining the smell.

"I've brought you some cognac," Xavier said, smiling.

"You haven't changed much, only plumper. Want to challenge me at a fingers-guessing game again, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't dare! The cognac's intended for your enjoyment, at your leisure."

"I imagine you haven't gone in for fingers-guessing at all, have you? That's much too low-class for an important man like you. Hard to believe I used to bounce you on my knees."

"Mother often spoke kindly of you, of how you saved us during the Japanese occupation."

"Did she? She's dead now, more's the pity. Read it in the papers." Buck-toothed Fung sighed and a faraway look came into his eyes, as if his thoughts had wandered off to some distant realm. Then, suddenly, he added: "Your mother was the most beautiful girl I had ever met."

And her music! Oh, so exquisite, so sad. I used to hide in a corner and listen to it whenever she played or practised. I pretended she was playing the pei-pa for me. I loved her, you know, more than life itself.”

“You?”

“Is that so shocking? Do you think ugly people have no right to love?” Buck-toothed Fung propelled the wheelchair within two feet of Xavier with powerful twirls of his arms.

“Of course not, Uncle,” Xavier cried, recoiling from both the hostile approach and the nauseating smell. “Your remark just caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

“I never told her, you know,” Fung said. “I loved her from a distance, protected her at the club. I was the door-keeper, the bouncer, the tough guy with triad connections. The boss was a bastard, always trying to make as much money out of her as possible. I stopped him more than once, threatened to wring his bloody neck.

“Then your father came along. What chance had anyone against a gentleman like your father? He was so handsome and he was always bursting out with poetry and sweet talk. When he bought her freedom, I thought I would go mad. I didn’t know whether I should be glad she was being rescued from the club or whether I ought to kill your father.”

Fung paused and his eyes took on a distant look, as if he were re-living some situation from long ago.

“Then the war, and everyone was up against it,” he continued after a while. “What’s the use of poetry and book-learning in times like that? I knew your father couldn’t cope, especially after you came along. I called round, got your father involved in smuggling food. It was to save your mother really. But I guess you don’t want to hear about that, now that you’ve become such a big shot. One thing I have to say about your father. He was a very decent man. He never let friends down. He was generous, too, because he could relate to human weaknesses.”

Xavier felt increasingly ill at ease as he listened to the ugly creature ruminating about the past. He hadn’t come to hear such awful secrets. Fung loved his mother! The notion of her being loved by such a monster was utterly revolting. Yet he had to humour him if he was to gain the information he wanted.

The encounter was not turning out as Xavier had expected. Fung’s confession, his accident and his straitened circumstances had thrown Xavier off balance. He could no longer speak as if he were making a business proposition. He was not even certain how he ought to broach the subject.

“What brings you to Taiwan? Must be some big deal for you to risk relationships with the British to come here.” Fung said.

“No, no deal at all. I’m on a purely private visit.”

“Why have you searched out this old uncle, after . . . what? . . . thirty years?”

“Twenty-eight, Uncle.”

“Ah, whatever.” Fung gave a dismissive wave of his great paw. “I would invite you for a meal except I’m a prisoner. Can’t negotiate the stairs in this damn wheelchair and Mama Mui hasn’t the strength to manage. Her cooking isn’t up to much either.”

“Oh, that isn’t necessary, Uncle. Please don’t stand on ceremony. What I need is just a bit of information.”

Fung’s crooked eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Information?”

“Yes, about a girl I met when I last visited Taiwan.”

“When was that?”

“1956.”

“1956! You want information about a girl you met in ’56? Why chase after such an old one if you want a bit of fun?” Fung’s mouth twisted into a laugh and, lowering his voice, he added: “Can get you a sweetie, young and new. Still got a few connections. Just tell me what you like. Of course, girls are no good for me any more. Dead from the waist down. Nothing operates. All I’ve got is that old hag.”

“I’m not after that kind of fun, Uncle. Just want to contact the girl you introduced to me, the girl who kept me company when my father was suddenly called away to Japan.”

“That was a long time ago. I was always introducing girls to people in those days. Can’t expect me to remember which is which.”

“This one was special. She’s supposed to have had a child, the one my parents kept sending you money for her.”

“Oh, that girl!” Fung shrugged and laughed feebly. “Can’t say I remember very well. Only vaguely, you understand, not even her name. Memory’s not what it used to be. Well, you’ve caught me out, haven’t you? A man has needs. A decent drink, an adequate stake for a tussle with chance. Your old man was a soft touch. Come to think of it, I did do that girl a favour, as I recall. Got her away from the triads or something. Mama Mui might remember. We always used to work together. We were on to a good thing with your father. Why give it up? Look how I live now. Are you here to demand the money back?”

A chill came over Xavier. It was exactly as his mother had warned and as he himself had half-suspected. It had been a fraud all along. It was revolting to deal with such a creature. But something deep inside him rebelled against the death of hope. If there was no offspring, perhaps he could at least find Fei-Fei.

“Please don’t worry about the money, Uncle Fung,” Xavier said, reassuringly. “You can have more if you help me find the girl. Her name was Fei-Fei. She used to work at the Starlight Rendezvous. Do you remember what happened, where she went? Have you any idea how I can reach her?”

“Ah, the Starlight Rendezvous!” A glimmer of recollection entered Fung’s eyes. “Mama Mui!” he yelled.

The white-haired woman flip-flopped into the room in her rubber slippers. “What you yelling about now?” she demanded.

“This here gentleman wants to find a girl named Fei-Fei who used to work at the Starlight Rendezvous. You remember anything?”

“Fei-Fei?” Mama Mui said. “So many Fei-Fei’s have passed through my hands. How am I expected to remember all of them? When was this? I haven’t been involved in that business for more than ten years.”

“I met her in July of 1956,” Xavier said. “She was seventeen at the time and very beautiful.”

“Good gracious!” Mama Mui exclaimed. “You come now to look for a girl you met in 1956? What for? Guilty conscience? You men are all the same. You take your pleasure and then disappear, not caring how much hurt you leave behind. Women have hearts, you know! You can go back to your wife or whatever you have. I’m not going to get involved in this.”

“Mama Mui, don’t be like that,” Fung said, in a wheedling voice. “The gentleman said there’ll be money in it if the girl can be found. It’ll be good for the girl too. Better late than never. What’d you say? Wasn’t there trouble of some sort?”

Mama Mui sat down sulkily on the remaining chair in the room. After a while she said: “Where was the girl from?”

“From the north. I think she said she was from a fishing village near Su-Ao.”

“What else?”

Xavier shook his head. “Don’t know much else. We travelled together for a week, to Fa Lien and Sun Moon Lake. Uncle Fung arranged everything. I was told she got pregnant but I didn’t learn about that until recently. The only other thing I recall is that I bought her a jade pendant, real Burmese jade, the shop told us. It was round, with a hole in the middle like the old symbol of heaven.”

“What else about this girl do you remember?”

Xavier flushed. “She had a big mole on her left buttock,” he said.

“A mole on the buttock!” Mama Mui wailed, bursting into tears. “Oh, that Fei-Fei! Heaven forgive us! We’ve done you a terrible wrong!”

“What? What? What mole, what wrong?” Fung interjected.

“You old fool! You should die the death of a thousand cuts! You brought terrible harm to Fei-Fei because of your greed! Fei-Fei reminded me of myself. I should have done more to protect her. I hate you! I should have left you to rot here ages ago!”

Mama Mui wept uncontrollably.

Fung looked astonished. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, weakly.

Xavier looked from one to the other. “Please tell me what happened, I beg you.”

After Mama Mui had recovered a degree of calm, she told her story, punctuated by sobs.

“Yes, I remember Fei-Fei,” she began. “That swine brought her to Taipei to train her as a dancing girl. I was managing girls at the Starlight Rendezvous at the time. Fei-Fei was good. She was very popular. A really sweet girl, gutsy too. From the moment I took her under my wing, I knew we had something in common. I too have a mole on my left buttock, you see. I grew to love her, like a godmother with a god-daughter or like elder and younger sisters. It would have been a

good deal all round if the arrangement had lasted. But that rogue got into debt gambling and sold her to the triads.”

Mama Mui interrupted her narrative with a fresh bout of sobbing.

“She got pregnant all right. She confided in me. She told me she had fallen for a rich young man who wanted to take her to Hong Kong. I know about love, I do. I too dreamt of it when I was young. I told Fei-Fei at once not to breathe a word about it. She also told me the young man had given her an expensive jade pendant and asked me to hide it for her. I did. If that villain had got his hands on it that would have been the end of it.”

“What jade pendant?” Fung asked.

“Shut up!” Mama Mui glared Fung into silence before continuing: “The silly girl wanted to have the baby too, you see. I told her that would be impossible. The triads would never hear of it. It would spoil her appeal. How could anyone pass off a girl with stretch marks as a virgin?”

“The whole thing did not have to happen if that sorry excuse for a man over there hadn’t been so heartless and greedy. Your father gave him money to buy Fei-Fei’s freedom. I urged him to pay the triads, to let Fei-Fei go. But he lost it gambling. When the triads ordered an abortion, Fei-Fei refused. They raped her and beat her. Not that beautiful face, of course. She came home with broken ribs and bruises all over. It broke my heart. But no one can walk away from triads. You have to settle with them, one way or another.

“Not satisfied with the harm he had done, that monster invented another story to get more money from your father. He did pay something to the triads, I have to admit. But he should have sent Fei-Fei for medical attention as well. Instead he spent what was left on more gambling.”

Mama Mui was again overcome by tears.

“I paid for her freedom, didn’t I? I was in trouble. I had no choice. What more do you expect? Let them kill me?” Fung shouted.

“Shut up, you good-for-nothing! May you rot in hell! You should have solved your own problems, not pass them on to others!”

Turning to Xavier, Mama Mui continued: “The triads left the poor girl black and blue. But she was not so much worried for herself as for her child. She begged me to sell her pendant and get her to a hospital, so that she wouldn’t lose the child. I was afraid that once anyone knew about the pendant, the money would be taken and Fei-Fei would be no better off.

“Fei-Fei was in no fit state to travel but I thought it best to get her away. I and some of the girls got together some money and one of them volunteered to take Fei-Fei back to Su-Ao. I told Fei-Fei it was better to sell the pendant when she got home and use the money to settle with the triads. That was the last I saw of her.”

At the end of the account Xavier’s eyes were red-rimmed behind his spectacles. He blinked hard to fight back the threat of tears. “Did she have the child?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Lost touch after that,” Mama Mui said. “None of us dared to contact her. The triads were always snooping around. We were in a terrible business. If the triads found out I had helped hide a jade pendant, they would have come after me for their cut. Perhaps after

Fei-Fei too. I allowed our connections to slip. At the time I envied Fei-Fei her chance to break free because your father was still sending money regularly. I didn't know till long afterwards that the fiend over there had been spending it on himself."

"You spent that money too, you old bitch," Fung cried.

Xavier tried to imagine Fei-Fei's ordeal and looked at the half-man with hatred. If Fung had wealth and riches, he would know how to bring him down. But he had nothing worth taking any more.

Xavier's next instinct was to hammer him, to beat him to a pulp. He was already a cripple, carrying the stench of human decay. Still he had those strong killer arms and grappling with him would be like catching hold of a poisonous snake at Pokfulam all over again, a risk to life and limb. He could only triumph in boardrooms and air-conditioned offices, with writs, eviction notices, repossessions and withdrawal of credit. Even if he could prevail, killing Fung would be doing him a favour. Turning to Mama Mui, he asked: "Where can I find Fei-Fei now?"

"Don't know. The girl who took her to Su-Ao might remember. But I doubt if she's still in the business. It has been a long time."

Xavier took a large bundle of banknotes out of his pocket and pushed it across the table to Mama Mui. "Please help me," he said. "It's important I find her."

"I don't need money to help you. Oh, poor Fei-Fei! She deserved better."

"Take it anyway. It might help the girl to remember."

"Can't promise anything. I'll make inquiries but that will take time. Where can I reach you?"

"Not convenient to contact me. I'm not in a hotel and not using my own name. I'll call in a few days. Please do your best. Tell the woman who helped Fei-Fei to Su-Ao there'll be a reward for her too."

"You're going to be in Taiwan for some time then?"

"As long as it takes."

"Good. It might take weeks. Even months."

"What? Just to find someone who's been in the business here?"

Mama Mui shook her head. "You're obviously a stranger to our way of life. When a girl leaves the business, she wants a new life, family and children possibly. It would be normal for a girl to bury her past as deeply as she can. I'll have to do a lot of sniffing around to locate the one who helped Fei-Fei, if I can locate her at all. And even if I find her, there's no guarantee she'll help. She wouldn't want her past dug up again after all this time. It's a very long shot you're betting on."

Deep disappointment creased Xavier's youthful face. "Please do your best. It is an urgent matter. I'll stay in Taiwan as long as I can. But if I have to leave before you've made contact, I'll give you a Taiwan number to ring. Just tell whoever answers who you are and say you need to talk to me. Nothing else. Then I'll come right back."

Mama Mui nodded and Xavier rose to leave, with Mama Mui escorting him to the door.

“Wait!” Fung called after him. “What do you think I’ve been doing the last three years, stuck in this fucking chair? There are always things people wished they had not done or had done differently. I didn’t do right by your father or Fei-Fei but saying sorry doesn’t alter anything. I’ll tell you something for free, out of consideration for your father’s friendship and the memory of your mother. We who live by our wits can see things others cannot. There is a darkness hovering around you. Beware. You’re rich and famous. Just get on with your life and leave the past alone. Forget Fei-Fei. Go home and don’t look back.”

Xavier stared impassively into the eyes of the broken old man, baffled by his strange warning. What kind of darkness was the rogue talking about? His mother had died and that certainly left a hole in his life. But his businesses were thriving. Was Fung just fishing for pity or angling for more remittances? The brute was now a cripple and utterly dependant on Mama Mui. Was he afraid Mama Mui would abandon him if she got a generous reward for finding Fei-Fei? That would serve him right.

He looked at Fung without pity and left without another word.