

Consequences

by

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It was the third time they had met since breaking off their affair nineteen years ago. Each time it had been at the same quiet coffee shop in the same hideously expensive hotel in Hong Kong. They conversed sparingly, in low tones, punctuated by long pauses, as if each had to reconstruct from isolated remarks an imagined life for the other. Now and then, when recalling some shared experience, they would look defeated or would reach across the table to squeeze or pat each other's hand. A wistfulness in their appearance and a tenderness in their gestures betrayed something melancholy and unresolved between them.

They had first met twenty-three years ago. He was then thirty-eight, divorced, with custody of two sons, and the head of a Hong Kong exporting firm specializing in women's garments and accessories. She was nineteen, a Catholic, married to a librarian, mother to an infant daughter and living in a traditional fashion with her husband's parents.

She had responded to an advertisement for a trainee garment merchandiser and he had interviewed her in a showroom cluttered with racks of women's clothing and heaps of fabrics, buttons, trimmings, working samples and fashion magazines. The half-glass panelling of the showroom revealed considerable activity in the offices outside and the muffled echoes of conversations formed a backdrop to the interview.

"Why do you want to be a merchandiser?" he had asked.

"I've always loved disguises, illusions and magic," she had replied, giggling a little and displaying a magnificent set of teeth.

“Disguises? Magic?”

“Yes, isn’t clothing all about disguises? We want to show ourselves at our best and hide unflattering parts of ourselves. Some clothes do that better than others and that’s why most Hong Kong women have abandoned the Chinese long-gowns for Western clothes. The long-gown is too form-hugging, too figure-revealing. You put on a few ounces and they show right away. You can’t relax or slouch without looking terribly inelegant. Western clothes disguise better. I want to explore such practical and cultural differences and perhaps design my own brand of clothing one day.”

He couldn’t help laughing at her reply. She had obviously anticipated the question and practised a reply. But what he had seen of her form was one meriting celebration rather than hiding. He also noted the mischief and gentleness in her large brown eyes.

“It’s just not Chinese clothes we’re discarding, but some of our individuality as well. We cater for the mass market, which means giving everybody what is fashionable and in conformity to the latest fad. Giving them good off-the-peg stuff. Working here’s not catwalks and high fashion, you know. It’s mainly tedium -- worrying over unit prices, freight charges, delivery dates. Then stitchings, seams, buttonholes and quality control. You’ll have to travel to out-of-the-way places with poor hygiene, bad food and few amenities, because that’s where the low-waged workers are. You up to that?”

“I want to learn the economics of clothing, how they’re made, marketed and sold. I’m looking for a career.”

“I’ll be frank. My partner and I run a very small operation. Total staff of ten. You can see virtually the entire crew outside. My partner handles accessories -- handbags, belts and shoes. I’m in overall charge of garments. The merchandiser I’m recruiting now is for tops, that is, for

blouses, jackets, sweaters and whatever else might be worn on the upper part of the body. There's a separate merchandiser for what we call 'bottoms' in the trade. On rare occasions when suits are required, I do the co-ordination. In an emergency everybody pitches in. Training a new merchandiser requires a big investment in time. I can't afford anyone leaving after training. I need people who are committed to a career and to my business."

"I'm committed."

"I see from your application you're already a mother, with a daughter." His tone carried a judgement of precociousness. "How can you handle a family when you often have to work late or be sent overseas?"

She blushed. "No need to worry. I live with my in-laws. They can look after things."

"What about more children?"

She blushed again and the bloom on her cheeks appeared heart-meltingly attractive. He heard her say: "I don't intend to have any more, at least for the foreseeable future."

He hesitated as to whether he should take a chance with so young a married woman. But she had been the best of the applicants and her eyes had shone with such keenness that he finally decided to engage her on probation for three months.

She turned out to be a fast learner, energetic and a joy to work with. He met the husband some months later, first at the traditional company dinner held at the start of each Lunar New Year and then again at a casual staff party some weeks later. An earnest twenty-six-year-old who kept addressing him as "Sir" and whose conversational range seemed limited to the Dewey decimal system for classifying books and the problems of microfilming old newspapers and magazines.

He noted differences in their personalities, one dour and

plodding and the other out-going and cheerful. She was popular with colleagues and frequently brightened the office with the sound of laughter. Gradually she became not only a workmate but also a carer for his children.

That latter role came by chance. He had to travel regularly, for weeks at a time, to develop new customers in Europe and North America and to locate ever cheaper sources of production. Since his ex-wife had re-married and had migrated to New York, it meant he was left attending to the needs of his sons -- ailments and accidents, sports days and parents' days. An informal arrangement existed in the office whereby, if he were away, a member of his team would lend a hand. One of his sons dislocated an ankle in a football game during one of his absences and she volunteered to get the lad to hospital. They got along so famously that she took to visiting the boy to track his recovery.

"It's very good of you to look in on my kids," he had said, when he got back. "I really appreciate that. They miss a woman's touch."

"My pleasure." she replied. "Very fine boys. I think you're right about a woman's touch."

"What can I do? Their mother has left Hong Kong. I'm a working man and there are only so many hours in a day. Trying to provide them with a decent education and a better start in life than my own comes at a price. It's tough enough carving out time to spend with them, let alone to romance a woman willing to accept us as part of her life."

As the months went by their relationship became closer and less hierarchical. Before he fully realized it, he found himself experiencing a secret pleasure when they huddled to discuss samples or when their hands came accidentally into contact. Perhaps he needed a woman's touch as well, he reflected. He sensed that she liked and respected him. But it was not in his character to dally with an employee, much less one married and with a family. He therefore curbed such inclinations.

One evening, two and a half years after she had joined the firm, they had to stay late in the office to deal with an urgent shipment problem. It was nearing midnight by the time they finished and the rest of the office had disappeared. She suddenly burst in tears.

“What’s the matter?” he cried, rushing to offer a box of Kleenex. “Still something wrong?”

She helped herself to the tissues. After tears had been staunched, she blurted out: “My husband wants me to stop working. My in-laws too. They accuse me of not fulfilling family obligations.”

“I’m sorry. We’ve been working you too hard. I didn’t mean to keep you so late tonight. Sometimes combining a job with a family is very trying.”

“You manage.”

“I’m different. I’m the boss and I have staff to help. I should hate to lose you.”

“I don’t intend to leave, unless you fire me. I told you I was committed. I’m not going to break that undertaking. I’m just not ready for more children.”

“Is that the problem?”

“Isn’t it always, our Eastern fixation with sons?”

He sighed. “That’s an understandable traditional in the East. But modern women are becoming more career-conscious. I don’t know what to advise.”

“We pretend too much, don’t we? Not just with clothes but with everything. We keep too much of our true feelings inside, for the sake of a quiet life. My husband and I were more or less pushed into marriage by our parents. The real problem is that I don’t love him.”

It came out suddenly, like a confession and an appeal.

He saw her looking up at him with soulful eyes and without

thinking his hand reached out to touch her face. Suddenly, it seemed disguises had been dropped and they were facing each other with naked souls. She rose and they kissed hungrily, bumping breathlessly against the edge of the desk. With one fell swoop everything colonizing the top of the desk got brushed away and they made love with such passion that neither was even conscious of the hardness of the desk.

“What have we done?” she murmured, when she lay sweating and exhausted.

“We’ve fallen in love,” he replied. “We never should have held back for so long.”

And that sentiment had seemed so real and right and true that they surrendered themselves to it. In the days and weeks that followed they were lost in the wonder of it, totally oblivious of consequences. Whenever they could, they stole an hour or two together, using one of those discreet Kowloon Tong hotels catering to the peccadilloes of lawyers, accountants and other professional classes.

“Oh, God, I never knew it could be like this!” she cried, after a particularly intense bout of love-making. “It’s like being driven to the far edge of pleasure, to so much pleasure that it’s like death and total annihilation.”

“I used to think of you as a prim and proper Catholic girl, only to discover an over-sexed banshee!” he teased.

“It’s all your fault! You’re doing this to me. I feel so sinful and guilty.”

“We’ve nothing to feel guilty about. Being in love’s no sin.”

The requirements of the business took him away for a couple of weeks. The separation sobered him to the legal and emotional untidiness of their situation. The future suddenly seemed charged with uncertainties. He loved her. Of that he was convinced. But he saw immediately that if they

were to spend the rest of their days together it would involve the break-up of one marriage and the the reconstruction of another, an arrangement involving five people instead of two. And he had yet to set eyes on her daughter.

After his return, he asked: “Have you given thought to our future? I love you and want to marry you.”

“I’m already married.”

“Yes, but there’s always divorce.”

“That’s not possible. I’m Catholic.”

“Plenty of Catholics get divorced. What’s the point of staying with a man you don’t love?”

“Because I married him in the sight of God. Even if I believe in divorce -- which I don’t -- what grounds would I have? I’m the guilty party. And what about my daughter? I can’t abandon her. It would be equally unfair to take her away from her father.”

“There should be a solution to our situation. We love each other. We should have a life together. Can’t we talk to your husband in a civilized manner, explain how things stand with us?”

“Marriage isn’t just about love and sex. It’s also about family, children, obligations, continuity, a whole tangle of social and family relationships. I can’t just wish all that away. My husband won’t buy that either. He’s quite traditional.”

“Look, I’ve been thinking of migrating to Canada for some time. The schools here are pure pressure cookers. I want my boys to enjoy more relaxed childhoods. I’ve acquired a house in Vancouver. There’s also the looming uncertainty of 1997, when China is bound to want this place back. What will happen here is anybody’s guess. Why don’t we just get out and make a new life together?”

She shook her head. “I’ve been dreading this day. What we

should do is to end this madness, before the heavens fall upon us. But I haven't the strength to stop. And you -- oh, God -- you're such a temptation. You're no help at all!"

"No, and I'll never help end it. We're meant for each other."

They talked about their predicament again and again. He was surprised by the strength of her religious convictions. Like most Chinese, he was practical and eclectic in such matters, adopting from whichever faith those elements most suited to particular circumstances. To be over-constrained by dogma -- and an alien dogma at that! -- seemed absurd. He could not persuade her to think likewise, however. The more he tried, the more they lost themselves in a metaphysical maze. Their lives drifted, as if in slow motion, punctuated alternatively by frenzies of work and of love-making. And all the time he felt they were edging towards an unavoidable doom.

One day, out of the blue, she declared: "We must put an end to this. I'm being driven crazy. I'm three months pregnant, carrying his child."

"What! You've been sleeping with him?"

"He's my husband. He kept pressing me for another child. I got tired of fighting."

A fog of apprehension descended upon him. If she had told him the child was his, that might have tipped the balance in his favour, though that would entail a public scandal for both of them. On the other hand, if she were carrying another child by her husband, the chance of making a life with her was fading before his very eyes. "You sure it's his?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. I've been keeping tabs on the fertile period of my cycles. Sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

"Couldn't you have miscalculated?"

“I don’t think so.”

“Look, we’ll work this out somehow. We’ll find a way.”

“How? How? How?” she cried, weeping and hammering the pillow with her fists.

He kissed and hugged her, stroking her hair. “Calm down. Let’s not act irrationally. Just think it through. There’s nothing we can do for the moment. Let’s wait till you’ve had the baby. Then we’ll figure something out.”

They continued their furtive meetings at the Kowloon Tong hotel. They must have appeared an unlikely pair for a shady liaison -- a middle-aged man and a pregnant woman young enough to be his daughter. The hotel attendants sniggered and gave one another knowing looks. In the seventh month of her pregnancy, it was established that the child would be a boy.

“Your husband and his family wanted a son,” he said, on learning the news. “When they have the boy, perhaps they won’t object to a divorce.”

She shook her head. “They can’t have the boy. I’m not going to leave my children without a mother.”

“But what about us? We can’t keep meeting like this, once every few days in some cheerless hotel. I want a settled life. And a family too.”

She cupped his face in her hands and gazed into his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about us for months,” she said. “One of us must find the strength to end this. There’s no other way. We’ve had a wonderful love. We should leave it at that. I shall resign at the end of the month. Please help me do what must be done. Don’t telephone me or write to me. Otherwise I won’t have the strength to stay away. Promise me that.”

He had exhausted all his pleas. He couldn’t find anything

new to say. He merely nodded and his heart seemed on the point of exploding with anguish.

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After her departure from the company the fizzle went out of his life. Nothing seemed to matter any more. When he heard she had given birth to a son, he joined others in the company in sending congratulations. He then accelerated his plans to migrate, selling his share of the company to his partner for far less than what it was worth. He simply wanted to remove himself from a city haunted by too many memories.

In Vancouver he led the uneventful life of a single parent. He looked after his sons and found consolation in a new closeness with them. He devoted his spare time to still-fishing. His sons joined him for a time but soon gave it up for more active pastimes. During the lazy, solitary hours of waiting for a bite he re-lived his moments with her.

In retrospect, those memories were ridiculously restricted. There had been no walks in parks, no dinners by candlelight, no foreign trips, no love songs. They had not so much as spent a night together, locked in each other's arms. All they shared were three years of fruitful teamwork and the occasional escapes to some disreputable hotel. He had lived in the expectation of a happier future. He felt cheated.

Although the winters in Vancouver were mild compared with the rest of Canada, he nevertheless felt a chill seeping into his bones. He was not only living in exile in a new country, torn from the familiar bustle of Chinese life, but separated from the woman he loved. The awareness that she was on the other side of the Pacific, beyond reach, stabbed at his heart like a stiletto. It was torture to fall back on such memories as he had, of her face, her thighs, her moans, her cries. Each seemed sharpened by

denial and he wondered whether remembering might be less intolerable if she were dead.

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In spite of his promise to stay away, the feeling of an unfinished destiny nagged him. At last, seven years later, after his sons had entered university, he decided he had to see her again.

During a dinner in Hong Kong with his now prospering former partner, he picked up on what old colleagues were up to. When her name came up his former partner reported that she had gone into the garment business for herself and had carved out a niche supplying small European boutiques. He secured her telephone number and they arranged to meet at the coffee shop of a luxury hotel where they were unlikely to bump into people they knew.

He felt a shock of pleasure seeing her enter the coffee shop. She radiated a surer and more mature beauty than before and his heart skipped with anticipation. They began with inconsequentials over coffee, reminiscing and filling in the gaps of the intervening years.

“I hear you’ve had great success with your own line of garments,” he said.

“Yes, thanks to what you’ve taught me,” she replied. “I’m trying to use local materials and native methods, everything from yarn to cloth to finished garments. I want to demonstrate that trade can be profitable without destroying local handicrafts with mass production.”

“Excellent. Are you happy in what you’re doing?”

“Contented. My husband’s very understanding and doesn’t object to my work. It helps with the family finances too.”

“And the children? Any addition?”

“They’re fine. No addition. Both very bright and a joy to be with.”

When he asked to see family photographs she hesitated. Eventually she dug into her handbag and produced a folio of pictures. They were conventional family ones. But when he examined the features of the boy captured in the pictures his heart felt a catch. The boy reminded him of his own sons at a similar age.

“He’s yours,” she said, quietly, in response to the baffled look creeping over his face.

“But you told me”

“I wasn’t sure then. I’m now. Put him alongside your boys and there’ll be no mistaking they’re brothers.”

“Why didn’t you contact me when you knew?”

“What good would that have done? It had been difficult enough for us to stay apart. The news would only have upset you.”

“But he’s my son. I have a right to know.”

“And what would you have done upon knowing? File for custody and break up our family?”

“I don’t know. I just want my share of happiness.”

“What about your son’s happiness?”

“That’s unfair. I still love you.”

“I know. I love you too. But there are others to consider. I may not love my husband but he’s a good man. He dotes on the boy. So do the grandparents. And the boy loves them. Is either of us prepared to destroy that? You can’t reclaim a son as if he were a lost bag. That would rob him of his secure family environment and stigmatize him as a bastard. It would also expose me as an adulteress. Do you want that?”

The question stunned him, leaving him momentarily lost for words. His haunted eyes brimmed with sadness. “I love you so much,” he

said. “I want to take you to Kowloon Tong right now and damn the consequences.”

She lowered her eyes and her nostrils flared at the proposition. “It’s best not to make the same mistake twice,” she said, sombrely. “I had hesitated over meeting you. I wasn’t sure either of us would be strong enough to behave sensibly.”

“Would you have told me about our son if I had not shown up?”

“I don’t know. Probably not just yet.”

“Can I see him?”

She reached over and took his hand. “Not a good idea, darling. The boy’s very bright. He’s bound to notice his likeness to you. He might remark upon it in his innocence and alert my husband to the truth. I’m surprised my husband hasn’t twigged already.”

“Is there going to be no hope for us?”

“We can’t relive the past. Go back to Vancouver and find yourself a companion to share your life. Your boys are growing up. They’ll soon be leaving home. I don’t want to think of you brooding on your own.”

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Back in the unpeopled vastnesses of Canada, by the quiet streams where he fished, he yearned for her. She had been the only true love in his life and without her the world seemed empty and devoid of prospect. The years dragged by as he tried to reconcile himself to a finished life.

After his sons graduated, one in chemical engineering and the other in architecture, they decided to work in Toronto. He then married a

childless widow of his own age, a Canadian-born Chinese and a teacher by profession. They went on their honeymoon to Hong Kong because his new wife had never been there. One day, when his wife went on that inevitable shopping spree in that most materially abundant of cities, he could not resist seeking another meeting at the same hotel coffee shop.

She looked just as radiant as before and even more stylishly dressed. By contrast he had greyed and that difference was not lost upon him. The best was over. He had missed his big chance. Only a son he had not seen still linked him to her.

“You look wonderful,” he said, ruefully. “I should have forced you to run away with me years ago, regardless of your marital status or religion.”

She laughed soothingly. “You were always very considerate of others. I discovered that working with you and that was one of the things I loved about you. You’re married now and I wish both of you every happiness.”

“It’ll never be the same as it had been with you.”

“If we had ran away then, it would also not be the same now. We saw each other under the most favourable circumstances, without the wear and tear of day to day housekeeping.”

“Perhaps you’re right. How’s our son?”

“Fine. Intelligent and healthy. He takes more and more after you. His mannerisms, the way he smiles, the way he wrinkles his brow when pondering a problem. I look at him and I see you.” She drew out fresh photographs to show him.

He studied them with a heavy heart. There was no doubt he was his seed. “You need help with his education?”

“No, but thanks for asking. My business is doing very well. I can afford most luxuries. But I’m not spoiling either of my children. I

want them to understand that money has to be earned. Would you like to keep some of the photos?”

“Better not. I don’t want to have to start lying should my wife or my sons come across them. Can I see him?”

“Nothing has changed, my dear. If anything, it’s even more risky now. He’s at that vulnerable age. He doesn’t need any sudden trauma.”

“But he has a right to know who his real father is.”

“I know. Can’t you be patient a while longer?”

“It might be easier if we told him together, now that I’m here.”

“I doubt it. I will certainly tell him one day. It’s a matter of finding the right moment. I’ve been in dread he might find out before I have the chance to tell him. I’m such a coward. I keep putting it off. I’ve been trying to teach him and his sister to lead moral, upright lives and here I am living a lie and imposing it on all around me. I can’t bear the thought of their thinking badly of me.”

“Perhaps I’m a coward too. I haven’t told anyone about us, neither my new wife nor my sons. It’s not a good way to start a marriage by telling your wife you’ve had a secret love for years and an illegitimate son to boot. But the longer we keep silent, the greater the risk of accidental exposure, what with blood tests and DNA nowadays. I also have my own sons to think of. They sometimes ask for news of you and it’s only fair for them to know they have a half-brother.”

“I’m well aware of that. Please be patient. I promise I’ll let you know before I tell him.”

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The seasons marched relentlessly by, one after another, but no

word came. He spent more time fishing, in spite of the elements chilling his bones and wrinkling his skin. During the long, inactive hours of waiting for a catch he tried to free his mind from memories and regrets. But he failed. They came like snowflakes in winter to remind him of his wasted life and the son he had yet to see. He tried to visualize how meeting him would be and how he might justify his long years of silence and neglect. But no combination of words he could put together seemed convincing. He was afraid of that strong, young face in the photographs looking at him with contempt and without forgiveness.

As for his other children, they married and produced grandchildren and that comforted him. At least he had fulfilled the obligation to his ancestors to maintain a flourishing family line. But, curiously, it was the son he had never seen rather than the ones filial and close at hand who intruded most frequently into his thoughts.

One day, without warning, he suffered a stroke. It was not serious so far as strokes went. It laid him low for a while and signalled to him the approaching closure. He had no fear of death. He had felt soul-dead for some time. But he hated untidiness and loose ends. The fact of leaving a son unreclaimed and unreconciled bothered him. She had said a son could not be reclaimed like a lost bag. Why not? Hong Kong was an entire city in the process of being redeemed from foreign tutelage. Why not a son?

So, in spite of anxious entreaties from wife and children, he insisted on returning to Hong Kong alone for a final visit. His excuse was that he wanted to see some old friends for one last time.

After arrival he arranged to meet her again in the usual coffee shop. He had arrived late and could hardly recognize her when she waved to indicate her presence. Her figure had become grotesquely bloated, her face puffy and unappealing. Since he last saw her she must have put on at

least thirty pounds!

“Do I look disgusting?” she asked, the moment he took her hand.

“Not at all,” he replied.

“Liar! I’ve had a hysterectomy. Had problems with my internal plumbing. Don’t seem able to stop putting on weight since the operation. The doctors say it’s glandular.”

“Sorry to hear that. I’ve had a stroke myself. I’m sure that, compared to you, I must look an absolute disaster. All dried up and wrinkled, ready for the incineration heap.”

She reached over and took hold of one of his hands. “Oh, my dear. You’ve got to look after yourself. Medical science can do wonders these days. Are you on medication?”

He nodded and placed his hand over hers. He felt soothed by her concern and by the old gentleness in her eyes. The sexual fever that previously consumed him had been replaced by a mellowed affection.

“Our son’s in university. He had thought of studying medicine for a while but finally opted for physics.”

“That’s good. The sciences are all the rage these days.”

“Now that you’re here, perhaps it’s time to confront our past. I think our son is old enough to face up to the truth. I am now. My daughter’s married and has a family of her own. Her grandparents have passed away. It won’t be nearly so messy as before, a simple matter of confessing to my husband and then explaining everything to our son.”

A rush of terror came over him. He felt suddenly decrepit and useless and not up to it. “No!” he cried.

“Why not? You used to be the one always pressing for a resolution.”

He shook his head. It wasn’t just a consideration of her good

reputation any more. Empty words, stumbling and incoherent, tumbled around his mind. What could he say to his son? What justifications could he advance for being such a travesty of a father? That he had been too busy with weighty affairs? He had really nothing to show for his life except for a modest commercial success almost twenty years ago. If he were to claim that he had stayed silent for the mother's sake or for the boy's own good, how vacuous and patronizing that would sound! He was nothing but a withered old man laying claims upon a young and vibrant stranger. He could visualize the pity and contempt he would meet. It would be utter humiliation. He could not risk carrying such an image to his grave.

"It's better I explain on paper first," he said, at last. "I'll write him a letter. You can pass it to him when you judge the time right. We can then arrange to meet, if he wants to."

Even as he spoke he knew he would never find the words for a letter. He had tried often enough to frame a credible explanation but had met with no success. He did not want her to see through his prevarication, however. He smiled bravely and gave her hand a squeeze.

She looked at him, perplexed. "All right," she said, "if that is what you prefer."

We are not bound by just a suffering love, he wanted to say, but also a common cowardice.

But no word escaped his lips.