

## Music From the Past

by

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The blurred frenzy of the lunch hour had subsided when Kung wandered into a McDonald's outlet somewhere between the seedy garishness of Times Square and 54th Street. He had just come away empty-handed from the last of his prospective customers and the futility of his efforts had left him exhausted and hungry.

He had no real expectation of landing orders in New York. His established customers -- strung out between Oklahoma and Virginia -- had already underscored the depths of the recession. His foray into the Big Apple was merely a desperate attempt to weather the storm.

Or was that the whole truth? Ever since he attended Teachers College at Columbia and met Rachel, every sight and sound of the city seemed to evoke memories of an aching and unconsummated love. Was he merely trying to savour again what had long been lost?

As Kung waited to place his order, he noticed in a corner, on a small dais, a baby grand piano. It seemed altogether out of place in a hamburger eatery. He was not entirely surprised, however, for he had heard of a McDonald outlet near Wall Street where a tuxedo-clad pianist provided soothing music for harried financial types. He surmised it might be just another franchisee seeking to move up market, though there was no pianist in sight.

His thoughts quickly returned to Columbia and Rachel. He had gone there after national service in Taiwan to learn what he could of Western teaching methods. Rachel was a Jewish girl from the Lower East Side, studying to be a librarian. They had met during one of those welcoming functions for foreign students. They discovered common interests and empathy which turned rapidly into a singular friendship.

Rachel's dark, Semitic beauty came back to him like an unfulfilled longing. He visualized again her grave brown eyes and the full lips which needed no adornment by lipstick. Her smiles, too, were heart-breakingly inviting, each one accompanied by a single beguiling dimple playing upon her left cheek.

They were in truth an ill-matched pair. Rachel glowed with rude health and energy whereas he appeared undernourished, preoccupied and desperately in need of womanly care. He gave the impression of someone who ate without regularity and lived too much of life inside his head.

Both of them had clear goals, however. Rachel had her sights on migrating with her parents to Israel whereas he had aimed to run his own school in Taiwan.

He had explained his ambition during the early days of their friendship. "I want one day to run a school like the great academies of the past, perhaps somewhere in the mountains, or at least away from the bustle of city life. I believe that teaching, like great literature, has to have

moral content. A teacher has to awaken a spirit of enquiry, to lead those he teaches towards virtue and enlightenment. That has been a tradition in China for over twenty-five centuries, followed by both the Confucians and the Taoists.

“The trouble is that even during their heyday those approaches had deficiencies. The Confucians behaved as if every moral question had already been answered in stone whereas the Taoists were too mystical with their ‘teaching without words’. In the West, I suppose the tradition runs back to Socrates. I want to know where the West has reached since.”

“You might be in for a disappointment,” Rachel replied. “The old verities have gone. The notion of seeking after truth and light is all but defunct, except perhaps in the sciences. It’s now largely about ends justifying means. Teaching in New York has less to do with moral issues than with riot control. That’s why I stick with books.”

During the subsequent years they studied, played and argued together, he slowly realized that differences in race, culture and goals stood like battlements in the way of a closer relationship. He knew his family would look askance at his marrying anyone but a Chinese. Rachel’s family undoubtedly would react similarly to her taking up with someone outside her religion and race.

Yet he could not help feeling that in many ways their two races were much alike. Both were prudent, frugal, enterprising, long-suffering and overly burdened by history. They created resentments against themselves by being too clever and successful and by thinking themselves superior to others. What a union between them might produce he was uncertain but he knew in his soul that Rachel was the woman for him. Although she was not overly strict in her religious commitments, formidable obstacles nonetheless remained. The closest he came to broaching his feelings was shortly before graduation, when they were together preparing a kosher Chinese meal.

“I want one day to show you the wonders of China,” he said. “But for the present, would Taiwan do? How about paying me a visit after graduation? When I eventually start my school, you can be my librarian.”

And she had replied: “Why don’t you start a school in Israel? There are enough moral dilemmas there. I’ll be glad to be your librarian then.”

But he never got to teach, let alone run a school. Shortly after his return to Taipei, his father suffered a stroke and became paralysed from the neck down. As the eldest son, he had to take over the family business.

His father, a former major in the Kuomintang army, had fled to Taiwan with the remnants of his troops in 1946. There he set up a company to export native products. The military and political stability provided by the United States Seventh Fleet enabled the island to prosper. Exports to America thrived. His mother never lived to enjoy the fruits of that success, however. She died when he was fifteen, leaving behind three sons and three daughters.

His father had a passion for fireworks, developed during his time in the ordnance corps. He established a proprietary brand of fire-crackers, rockets, thunder balls and the like under the trade mark of “Red Devil”. The products sold exceedingly well in the southern parts of the

United States. Although the business handled other products like rattan ware, porcelain and artificial flowers, fireworks were at the core because of high profit margins.

At the insistence of his father he had to master the technical aspects of pyrotechnic mixtures. He learnt that the addition of steel dust could produce a brilliant sparking effect and that a variety of colours could be secured by mixing in lead carbonate or strontium nitrate or cotton fibres. It was all a far cry from metaphysics and teaching methods.

Kung ordered a Big Mac Meal and carried his tray to an empty table. As he settled down to his hamburger, he reflected upon how disagreeable every aspect of the fireworks business had turned out to be. He could not relate to many of the buyers. They seemed over-fed and under-cultivated, sporting massive gold rings, flamboyant shirts, ornate silver belt buckles and snake-skin boots. What he resented most were their over-familiarity, their back-slapping and -- because he was young and unsure of himself -- their condescending reference to him as "Junior".

His father, though bed-ridden and in need of constant nursing care, nevertheless remained mentally alert. He insisted on keeping up with affairs.

The old man sympathized when Kung reported his antipathies. "I know you have your sights on higher things," his father said. "But the family has to come first. Your brothers and sisters are still young and in need of education. You have completed yours. Someone has to attend to theirs. There is no one else I can turn to.

"You must remember fireworks buyers are not doctors of philosophy. They are rough men in a rough trade. You have to take them as they come. Their demands can sometimes be outrageous but if you look after them, they will return the favour. It's all a matter of you scratching their backs and they scratching yours."

He thought at first that scratching their backs meant dining them royally, showing them the treasures at the National Palace Museum, pampering them at resorts at Sun Moon Lake or, farther afield, introducing them to the scattered ancient temples at Tainan. But he soon realized what they wanted were doctored invoices, kick-backs and the gratification of sexual proclivities.

One day, a buyer from Alabama complained that "Red Devil" fire-crackers were not exploding loudly enough.

"You know there are regulations governing the production of fire-crackers," Kung replied. "A louder report means a more hazardous product. Enough children are being blinded and maimed as it is. The problem is one of irresponsible usage. If it continues, more and more States will ban private discharge of fireworks. Where would you be then? Perhaps you should stop selling to minors."

"Hey, Junior," the Alabama buyer said. "Your old man used to know the score. He knows that guys like me make him rich. Perhaps he hasn't clued you up, so I'll set you straight. Kids back home buy "Red Devil" because they think they get more bang for the buck. If they don't get the bang, they don't spend the buck. Get it? What people do with stuff after they've bought them is their business. Get my drift, Junior?"

When he reported the conversation, his father stated sternly: "Business is like war. You have to exploit the weaknesses of others. You can't have too many scruples. Getting the

factory to use a midge more saltpetre isn't the end of the world, is it? The market is shrinking in any case. One of these days the Mainland is going to crawl out of isolation and undercut us. We must grab the money while we can.

"You must bear three things in mind. First, never skimp on insurance, in case we get landed with product liability suits. Second, join with others in the trade to hire lobbyists to defend the right to celebrate the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving with fireworks.

"Third, keep promoting the Red Devil as a distinctive brand. Fireworks are much the same wherever they're produced. But children don't know that. If it can be got across that Red Devil products are in some way superior, children will ask for them. It's all brand identification, like designer labels or trade marks in other businesses."

"Why must we deal in fireworks at all? They injure so many people and start so many fires every year. There are other products we can develop."

"Why shouldn't we sell fireworks, when profits are good? Why should children be deprived of that spice of peril simply because fireworks are capable of being abused? Most things are harmful if improperly handled. Just think of tobacco, alcohol, kitchen knives, matches, weed-killers, sleeping pills, motorcars, anything you like. The list is infinite. If everyone stopped dealing in things capable of being abused, where would the world be?"

After that Kung kept his distaste to himself. His father had set out his duty. He could no more disobey than a foot soldier could a command from a superior. To insist on teaching or starting a school meant turning his back on the family. His conscience denied him any escape.

Every exchange of letters with Rachel reminded him of the mire he was sinking into. Thoughts of going to Israel were as unrealistic as reaching for the moon. The shame of his unresisted bondage gradually killed off their correspondence.

He stuck stoically to his filial duty. But his lack of enthusiasm led to a steady desertion by customers. To prevent his father from discovering the truth, he offered faked profit margins, turn-over figures and other misinformation during the bedside briefings.

When profits declined to a level which threatened the well-being of the family and the nursing care required by his father, he swallowed his pride and started wheedling for the return of former customers. He demeaned himself by resorting to the little black book he had inherited, containing telephone numbers of disreputable contacts. He even began putting his signature to documents which could not bear close scrutiny.

He struggled with such distasteful realities for ten years before his father died. With each passing day he came to realize more clearly why tidy aphorisms and neat syllogisms had little place in commercial life. He began to understand too why in ancient times those engaged in commerce were forbidden to enter ancestral temples, lest their presence defiled those sacred places.

After such a long period of lying to his father and being an accessory to knavery, how could he ever take up any pedagogical pursuit? How could he be worthy of a woman like Rachel? He felt himself consumed by self-disgust.

Worse still, although his father had been dead for five years and he had long since discharged his responsibilities towards his siblings, he nevertheless carried on with the old family trade. Was it sheer inertia and loss of direction? Or was it fear of facing up to how far he had sunk?

Suddenly, through the fog of his self-examination, Kung became aware of the sound of music. He turned and saw a lady at the keyboard of the piano. Her head was covered by a brownish skull cap which hid both the colour and condition of her hair. Her skin, however, was clear and translucent, like that of someone accustomed to a vegetarian diet. He judged her to be older than himself, possibly well advanced in middle age.

She was playing with her eyes closed, with the hint of a smile flirting upon her lips, as if she were performing for some grand audience instead of for just an assortment of munchers of beef patties and French fries.

For a moment Kung speculated whether she had been reduced to providing entertainment during low-budget meals through failure to live up to an earlier promise. He set down his coffee and listened.

As a medley of tunes by Gershwin and Cole Porter filtered through the restaurant, he marvelled at how well the lady played. Gradually, the sentimental quavers carried him back over the years and sensations came drifting back from the wasteland of forsaken dreams.

He was experiencing again quickening summer hopes and sweet winter longings, of Rachel by his side at Broadway shows, in the hushed corridors of the Metropolitan Museum, sampling vegetarian meals in Chinatown, sipping coffee in Village cafes, or walking in Central Park in hazy sunlight after rain. Something more sharp and poignant than grief overwhelmed him. He had allowed the two most important things in his life to slip away, to fizzle out like exhausted Catherine-wheels. In a sudden anguish he wanted to cry out.

When the pianist took a break, he rose to leave. As he passed the old lady, he said: "Thank you for your music. You've brought back a piece of my past."

"I'm glad you like the songs. They're among my favourites," the pianist responded, with a smile. "Were you at one time also a musician?"

"Oh, no," Kung replied, with a bitter laugh. "I was never a musician. I was only a goose -- a very silly goose!"

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**Music From the Past** has been broadcast by the **British Broadcasting Corporation** on its World Service and on Radio 4 in Britain.