

Slow Poisons

by

David T. K. Wong

"Why keep playing the romantic? Marriage's no big deal. Studio thinks it'll boost my career. Who am I to argue? Love's got nothing to do with it."

"Then why not marry me? You say you love me. Why marry that idiot William Tung?"

"Must we go into that again? You're a Yank, darling. My fans won't wear it."

"Yes, I know! I'm a gweilo, a barbarian, beneath contempt! But I can't see that William Tung's any catch. He's a womanizer. He'll dump you the moment he finds a new toy. The only thing that's going for him is a very rich father who's conveniently very dead."

"I know what he is. But he's socially prominent. He's chairman of the General Chamber of Commerce. He's got the clout to get me into the right circles. He can give me everything I want -- cars, furs, apartments, bank deposits in safe places. It's a business transaction, pure and simple. There's nothing to stop us from continuing as we are."

Dick Stanton recalled the most recent of his arguments with Apricot as he poured himself a generous helping of scotch. As he added ice, he recalled also the wounding remark he had checked on the tip of his tongue.

Could this be the final straw, he wondered. Would he stoop to adultery for the sake of an unravelling affair? He rose wearily from the wicker chair with his drink, rested his elbows on the balcony railing and pressed the chilled glass against his broad, furrowed brow. His deep-set eyes, profound and unquiet, brimmed with misery. The sound of Bach's Fugue in E Flat floated out from the sitting room behind.

Not a good night for Bach, he reflected. His mind was not following the chasings. It was darting about like some startled dragonfly amidst the broiling chaos of his life. The partnership offer from Mega Communications was a distraction he did not need.

Stanton was dressed only in a pair of blue pyjama trousers and he seemed insensitive to the coolness of the cement floor beneath his bare feet. His torso, with its pale mat of curls, was no longer lean and well-defined as it used to be when he was a sprinter on the Stanford track and field team. Rich foods and alcohol, as much as the passage of years, had added accretions of flesh.

He took a long draught from his glass. Good old Johnnie Walker, he thought, the only friend a man could share his troubles with. He allowed his eyes to roam over the brooding granite hills lying to the north. The moon hung like a discoloured lemon drop upon a sombre sky. Beneath the hills, known as the Nine Dragons, the lights of the city beckoned like a mirage.

How captivating, he thought. So pretty and enticing. One speck was indistinguishable from another, yet together they formed a veritable fairyland. No wonder tourists enthused over them in letters and postcards home. They must stir up pleasurable memories, of shopping orgies, exotic feasts and, for the daring, nocturnal depravities undreamt of in Ames, Iowa, or Painesville, Ohio.

Apricot was every bit as captivating as those lights. She was, after all, skilled in the arts of fantasy and make-believe. The pouting playfulness of her lips, the candid promises in her eyes, the savage voluptuousness of her breasts, all constituted the stuff of dreams. Every aspect of her person had been worshipped, pored over and lusted after by viewers of bad Cantonese movies and subscribers to certain types of magazines. Small wonder her studio had insured her bust with Lloyd's of London for untold millions.

But, like the lights of the city, she had an underside. He had reminded himself a thousand times she was a confused, exploited woman, driven by warped ambitions. She was not the kind of woman to inspire heroes or to sustain those with lofty dreams. Yet, even if she embodied all the corruption, all faithlessness in the world, he still could not stop wanting her.

Before meeting her, his life had been focused. He had literary aspirations. An afflatus throbbed in his veins. He wanted to master Flaubert's mot juste and capture Kipling's "magic of the necessary word." He sought, like Conrad, to move the world with his art.

While earlier generations of Americans turned to Europe, he had chosen Asia. The reasons were tangled. A childhood in San Francisco, close to Chinatown. The flower children norms of the Sixties absorbed during his teens. His father's grievous wounds, sustained during the battle for Okinawa, and the death twenty years later of his elder brother in the jungles of Vietnam. They all nurtured a desire to know Asia, to discover whether its ancient civilizations could explain the perplexities of his age.

After graduating from Stanford with a degree in English he bade farewell to his parents and set out with backpack and good intentions, to marinate in the cultural juices of the East. He began by spending two years in Japan, absorbing what he could of Zen and Shinto. Then followed a similar stint in Taiwan, observing a society still imbued with the precepts of Confucius and Mencius.

He lived in flop houses or slept rough, when weather permitted. He earned his keep by teaching English. It was a comfortless existence but he did not mind. His concern was to reach understandings he could fashion into art.

He had arrived in Hong Kong on transit to Southeast Asia. The city arrested him. The press of people was intolerable, the noise deafening, the pace of life vertiginous. A boastful vitality seemed to bounce off its congested pavements and ricochet around its towering buildings. The place struck him like a cocky, mongrel metropolis where the sadistically modern went hand in hand with the most primitive of superstitions.

The place reeked of wealth. Its economy was the envy of the world. It boasted full employment, bulging reserves, painlessly low taxes and consistent surpluses. All day long and well into the night pile drivers, jack hammers, pneumatic drills, sweating labourers and chanting coolies

toiled on fresh monuments to capitalism. But beneath the institutionalised rituals and the surface obsequiousness there lurked an unavowed Eastern resentment against Western intrusions.

In order to get to the heart of the phenomenon, he decided to tarry a while. He had his hair cut to slough off his hippie image and took on a poorly paid job as reporter with one of the English language newspapers, the Morning Standard. After eighteen months of bewildering experiences, he met Apricot.

She was then a moody seventeen-year-old, working as a waitress in a cheap cafe. He had gone for a cup of coffee and noticed at once the feline provocativeness in her eyes. In spite of her ill-fitting uniform, he could also discern the weighty voluptuousness of her breasts and the sensual promises of her hips.

When she came to serve, she accidentally spilt some coffee on him. He let out a yell, although the scalding was not serious. She immediately became flustered. In order to calm her, he said: "How about discussing damages after work?"

He had meant it as a mild flirtation but to his surprise she responded quickly: "Okay. Okay. I get off at seven."

He waited outside the cafe at the appropriate time, puzzled and expectant. When she emerged she was palpably tense. Her first words were: "I can't pay money. Please don't make me lose job."

"Hey! Relax! I'm not after anything. Just being friendly."

"You wanted damages. That means you're after something."

"Look, let's forget this. I just thought it might be nice to get to know you."

"Why?"

"Don't know. You're an attractive girl working in a crummy cafe. I'm a reporter with the Morning Standard. There must be a human interest angle somewhere. Where does a girl like you come from? Why are you not in school? Why can't you do something better than wait on tables in such a dump? What do you want out of life? What are your hopes, your dreams? That's the sort of stuff I'm after."

The wariness in her eyes softened at the mention of a newspaper. "You're really reporter?"

"Sure," he said, producing his Press pass and recognizing at the same time her potential for beauty. In spite of her moodiness and ill-fitting clothes, he judged her a raw, green bud whose loveliness and fragrance had yet to unfold.

"You can get me into films?"

He almost laughed at the banality of her request. "Let's talk about it over a drink," he replied.

Her story was depressingly familiar. A dead father at the age of twelve, a school drop-out at fourteen, and thereafter the mainstay of a family consisting a mother and four younger brothers and sisters. Home was a one-room cubby-hole at the Shek Kip Mei resettlement estate.

Shek Kip Mei had once been the site of a massive squatter settlement. A horrendous fire levelled it. Upon its ruins a cheerless government estate had arisen. He had been there in the

course of his assignments. The graffiti on its walls, the young louts lounging along its grubby corridors, the Peeping Toms lurking outside its communal latrines and bathrooms, were standard fixtures. It was an urban jungle.

As she unfolded her story, he noticed she fidgeted with her left thumb, the nail of which had been well chewed. He also noted a restlessness in her eyes, as if they had to be on constant alert. He put that down to the uncongenial life at Shek Kip Mei.

He was at that point ready to move on. Hong Kong, with its endless incongruities, fascinated him still. He had filled a dozen notebooks with jottings and plots. Ideas for stories were beginning to intrude upon him. He did not want to be sidetracked.

But something about Apricot appealed to his sense of compassion. Her potential for beauty beckoned him like a challenge. He felt an inexplicable urge to fashion a creature of grace and beauty out of that unappreciated lump of human clay. He might even create a woman embodying his most cherished ideals.

He had little money for the endeavour. But his journalistic work had given him wide connections and a store of favours due. He brought them into play, securing for Apricot lessons in elocution, deportment and make-up. He told her that mastery of those skills was a prerequisite for a film career. He himself saw to the fluency and idiomatic enrichment of her English.

Apricot was a fast learner. Within months her appearance and disposition became transformed. She grew more vivacious and less moody and fidgeted less with her thumb. She not only began to draw admiring glances in the streets but became the frequent object of salacious remarks at her place of work.

He wanted to settle her in more suitable employment before moving on, possibly as a salesgirl at one of the smarter department stores. But her heart was set on films. He did not believe she had talent and was fearful for her in that shallow and money-driven calling, with its miasma of corruption and underworld entanglements.

But her sheer persistence cajoled him into securing her a screen test at one of the less well-established film studios. Even as he arranged it, he hoped it would turn out badly. Unfortunately, it proved a success and Apricot was offered a bit part, with three words of dialogue. She became so ecstatic that in the afterglow of that quite insignificant achievement they became lovers.

Stanton emptied his glass and replenished it, recalling with a helpless longing the delicious feel of her skin and the bountifulness of her breasts, so often proffered like overflowing wineskins. The remembered explorations with lips and tongue still set him afire.

Apricot's acting debut whetted her appetite. Her head bubbled with crazy enthusiasms. She wanted to dress fashionably and be noticed in high society. That required more money and connections than either of them had. The odd invitation might be winkled out from newspaper contacts but glamorous clothing and accessories were beyond the wages of a mere reporter.

Apricot was so determined to get her way, however, that she was ready to resort to loan-sharks. He knew where that would lead. Perhaps he should have abandoned her there and then. But he felt responsible. When he failed to deflect her, compassion and decency demanded that he find the funds. That meant taking up more lucrative employment. So he resigned from the Morning Standard and, against his better judgement, joined a celebrated advertising firm.

He reconciled himself to the shifty art of singing the praises of detergents, sanitary napkins, instant noodles and other pedestrian products at Mega Communications. In spite of his contempt for such work, his efforts caught the eye of Sol Zimmermann, the head of the firm and a fellow American.

"Hey, you're a wizard with words," Zimmermann declared, on examining the results of his first assignment. "I bet you can sell manure in paradise, if you set your mind to it."

What followed was a three-year contract, complete with a modest furnished apartment a third of the way up Victoria Peak. It was the first presentable home he could call his own. After adding a few decorative touches, he invited Apricot to share it. She accepted. After all, Shek Kip Mei was hardly a commendable address for an aspiring actress.

During their time together he tried to advance her spiritually and intellectually. He told her tales from the great books and explained the fundamentals of art. He tried to interest her in Western music. But she had no taste for either Beethoven or Bach. For her, the movie extravaganza represented the acme of Western culture.

Notwithstanding the intellectual gulf that lay between them, the pleasures of the flesh soon had him hopelessly in love. One evening, during one of those unguarded moments after love, he told Apricot of his desire to become a writer.

"Are you going to write books that sell a zillion and make you filthy rich?" Apricot asked, brightly.

"Afraid not," he replied. "That's for entertainers. I want to write about deeper truths. Humans have been described as formidable beasts of prey, for we are the only creatures preying systematically on our own kind. Yet we remain capable of love, courage, compassion and nobility. What makes us that way? I want to explore that. Unfortunately, that kind of stuff doesn't sell."

"I shouldn't wonder! Who wants the nastiness in themselves to be dug up and exposed to the world? Why not concentrate on what makes people feel good? Then you'll be rich and successful. Isn't that the American dream?"

"Being rich and being successful do not always go together, at least not for writers. A writer may become rich because people buy his books but that does not mean he is successful. The test of success is whether his ideas remain relevant a thousand years after he's gone. So writers never know whether they have been successful. That is a judgment for posterity."

"You must be a crazy romantic! In this town everybody knows success means money and money means success. It's as simple as that."

"Ah! That's why this town is filled with more rich failures than any other place I know. Beyond a certain point money is an encumbrance upon the soul."

"That's easy to say for people who've never been without! For me, I want money, lots of it. I want to be able to smell it, taste it and run my fingers through it. I don't care what happens after I'm dead."

He made no attempt to argue further. He figured her for an intelligent girl who, given time and proper tutelage, could be led towards loftier ideals. He was prepared to bide his time.

One day, Apricot returned home in a state of high excitement, declaring she had been signed for a starring role. The script she produced was laughable. Its storyline was almost non-existent. It was about a girl searching for love but finding herself taken advantage of at every turn. It was little more than an excuse for romping around bedrooms in various stages of undress.

His heart sank. He could well imagine the abomination such a script would produce. But it proved impossible to deflect Apricot.

When he subsequently attended the preview, he felt an inexpressible sense of betrayal. The images of Apricot simulating the act of love on the screen were painfully realistic. It was as if everything pure and precious between them had been desecrated.

The film's sizzling love scenes created a sensation and Apricot's reputation as a sex kitten was launched. She found herself a manager and offers flooded in, together with demands for photographic features from magazines.

He viewed such projects with mounting distress. When she eventually decided to pose in the nude, he lost his temper. "Why do you keep doing this kind of trash?" he demanded.

"Why are you upset? Brigitte Bardot made money doing it, so why shouldn't I?" Apricot replied.

"Because I love you. Why should you allow pimply kids and dirty old men to snigger over your nakedness? Besides, Brigitte Bardot never went so far. Where is the art in what you're doing? It's puerile. You might as well go the whole hog and make blue movies."

"I thought you were an open-minded person. I'm just doing what my manger tells me, to bring in money."

"Money? Is that what this is all about? Showing off your body for money?"

"My body is all I've got. Let's face it, I'm never going to be the great actress you wish me to be. I'm never going to play Lady Macbeth or Camille. So why shouldn't I use what I've got?"

"I don't understand you. Don't you care how I feel or how your family might feel? Don't you have any shame or self-respect? Why debase yourself like some cheap whore?"

"My family understands me. It's a pity you don't! What kind of self-respect does anybody learn in Shek Kip Mei? It's hard enough simply to survive. I've lived worse than any whore, if you must know. Do you know how many times I've been beaten and gang-raped? I've had to grit my teeth and bear it. Since everybody likes my body, why shouldn't I get something out of it too?"

Apricot stopped abruptly, convulsed with sobs. Tears gushed from her eyes and she brushed them away fiercely, almost defiantly, with the back of a hand.

The revelation stunned him into silence. All of a sudden she appeared pitiful and child-like, vulnerable and in need of succour. He rushed to embrace her, holding her tightly and stroking her hair, whispering the while: "Hush, hush, sweetheart. Don't cry. Don't cry. Nobody is ever going to hurt you again. I'll see to it. I'll protect you from now on."

Stanton emptied his glass and returned to his wicker chair. He sat down wearily. Bach had been replaced by the murmur of the traffic, floating up steadily from the road below. As he poured another drink he noted that the bottle was half gone. He was not doing too badly, he thought, for a bottle-a-night man.

For weeks after that traumatic evening, he wrestled with Apricot's suffering. He could visualize the terror-filled eternities in dark places, the blows, the blood, the stifled screams, the carnal barbarities. He was a stranger to such horrors. He had never existed at the margins, poised upon the narrow edge between life and death as his father and brother had been. How could he possibly apprehend what Apricot had to endure? He was amazed she had coped with so much.

Could her displays of nakedness now represent a cry of triumph or an act of defiance, to taunt those who could no longer take their pleasure from her? Or was it a kind of self-therapy, to purify her humiliations? Or had she gone beyond that, to a point where nothing meant anything any more? He wished he knew enough about the human mind to probe into its dark byways.

He could not help blaming himself for her plight. A vain impulse had caused him to intervene in her life, little realizing she had no defence against the world except her will to survive. He had pitched her headlong into the most obnoxious end of that over-heated and manipulative world of films. She was bound to be exploited as she had been in Shek Kip Mei. Looking ahead, what could be in store except a neurotic, suicidal and drug-spangled finale?

From the moment of their first kiss, their first embrace, a part of himself had been surrendered. He came to need her as much as air. He had no alternative but to stay and attempt to wean her from the life she had chosen. So he signed up for another three years with Mega Communications.

For a while Apricot appeared genuinely torn between continuing with her career and fear of his disapproval. She declined some offers and prevaricated on others. But that brought a return of her moodiness and the gnawing upon her thumb nail began again.

Realizing the loss of income would affect Apricot's family, he offered to step into the breach. But Apricot refused. Her family was her responsibility, she declared. It wanted no charity.

After a period of impasse, he reluctantly acquiesced in her returning to work. Her temporary retreat apparently did her career no harm. Quite the contrary. The powers-that-be thought she was holding out for more and some quite ludicrously large offers resulted. But the scripts remained pathetically devoid of artistic merit.

Increasing income enabled Apricot to move her family out of Shek Kip Mei. She introduced him to her folks and he welcomed their periodic visits. The mother was a dull, illiterate

woman, but eminently likeable. Unlike most Chinese mother's, she did not seem bothered by her daughter's involvement with a gweilo.

Apricot's brothers and sisters obviously relished their changed circumstances. They held him in awe, assuming that his power and connections as a gweilo had been responsible for advancing their sister's circumstances.

Gradually, as Apricot acquired star status, her time became no longer her own. She was perpetually on the move, with shooting schedules, rehearsals, conferences, hairdressers, photographic sessions, physical work-outs and public appearances. She stayed out late, socializing and pandering to the hysteria of her fans, and returned too exhausted for anything but sleep. He felt increasingly lonely and restless and turned to Johnnie Walker for relief.

Such an existence in limbo might have remained tolerable for a good while, except for an unexpected revelation. Late one night, Apricot returned in high spirits and much the worse for drink. Before she passed out, she blurted out triumphantly that a big producer had signed her to star in three films with enormous budgets.

As he undressed her to put her to bed, he noticed upon her breasts and her buttocks love bites not of his making. Then, mingling with the fumes of alcohol, he detected the spoor of love. It devastated him to discover how Apricot had been advancing her career!

In matters of the heart, the stronger had to make concessions to the weaker, he argued with himself. Fate had dealt the girl a rotten hand. She had suffered enough, endured enough. What good would recriminations do? They would merely erode whatever remained of her self-esteem. He was supposed to be an intellectual, an idealist, a decent human being. Wasn't he large enough to overlook an inebriated lapse or two? After all, fidelity was not the only virtue. Had he not pledged his honour to protect and care for her?

The only way to discharge his obligations was to remove her from the financial blandishments of her calling. That meant getting her away from Hong Kong. So he proposed marriage.

He spoke of the life they could have in America, drawing delightful word pictures of California and San Francisco, of scenic Monterey and the forests of the Sierra Nevada, of wide open spaces and limitless opportunities. He even argued the sheer commonsense of getting settled elsewhere before the Communists came in 1997.

"Oh, darling, I would love nothing better than to marry you," Apricot replied. "But I can't. At least, not yet. I'm just beginning to make a name. If I'm to make it big, it has to be now, before the Commies come. Can you imagine Red Flag running me as a centrefold? I have the chance to make enough to take care of my family. Can't throw that away. A few more years. Please, darling."

"This is no way to live," he countered. "I hardly see you and when you get home you are too tired for anything but sleep."

"I know it's a trial, darling, but it'll be over soon. Three years at the outside, I promise. Then we can marry and raise a family. I'll do whatever you want. But please, don't make me give up now."

"And what am I suppose to do for the next three years?"

"You've got a good job at Mega. I'm sure Sol will offer you a partnership before long."

"I know he will, but working for Mega is not a job. It's an enslavement. Don't you realize I'm nothing more than a corporate pimp on an expense account? I want to get stuck into my writing. I'm already thirty-six and I haven't published a damn sentence, except for all that advertising crap."

"Then why don't you quit? Go do your thing. I can support you. I can afford it now."

"That's kind of you but that's not the point. I can't write here. I need breathing space. There are too many distractions. The noise, the debaucheries, the claustrophobia, the chromium-plated pretences, the hothouse atmosphere. The city is just a bit of counterfeit China designed for counterfeit lives."

"Then go to one of the outlying islands."

"Yes, and when will we ever see each other? I need to be with you, don't you understand? Are you going to visit me once a month, as if I were serving time in Alcatraz?"

The questions hung unanswered in the air. There seemed no way out. She was too wrapped up with her own ambitions and he was enslaved by a love which defied every abasement, every wounding of the heart. To each a different poison, he thought.

Stanton's introspections were interrupted by the full-throttled roar of a powerful sports car racing up the hill. The noise changed timbre as the vehicle charged along the serpentine road, before receding into the distance. Some wealthy failure enjoying the vulgar thrill of speed, he surmised. For a moment he envied its driver. He was probably racing along without a care, a stranger to any interrogation of the soul.

Stanton glanced up at the moon. It seemed to frown with disgust over his recurring angst and his whiskey-sodden self-pity. He had failed one opportunity after another to bring an end to the affair. He could have disengaged honourably when Apricot's manager pressed her to move into a flat of her own or when Apricot began the public charade of being squired around by rich or decorative Chinese bachelors. But he had accepted those impositions without demur.

Although Apricot left him the keys to her flat and had given him carte blanche to drop by whenever he chose, he had stayed away. He was fearful of what he might stumble into. So he simply sat and waited for her, with a sad, sick longing, and drank himself into unrefreshing slumber night after night. When she did come, their love-making was no longer as before. It became as if each was trying to fake an ardour that was already slipping away.

He could not rid his imagination of the fat producers, handsome actors and rich playboys invading her arms and her bed. He lost all urge to write. Neither could he muster the concentration to read. He began doubting if he ever had an authentic gift.

The day after Apricot had announced her marriage plans, he screwed up the will to tell Sol Zimmermann he wanted to leave.

Zimmermann was beside himself. "Hey, you're not going solo on me, are you? You haven't landed a contract with your filly's studio after all these years, have you?"

"No, Sol. It's just that I've had enough of this place. I want to go home, to get back to some serious writing."

"Hey, baby, there ain't nothing more serious than what you're doing. It's big bucks. Don't throw it away. Forget that literary crap. That's for masochists. Okay, maybe you've been under pressure. The workload has been unbelievable. The word doing the rounds is that Apricot has split but there're plenty of chicks around. Just don't talk of scat-doodling home. I'll tell you what, let's talk partnership. I can't be whiter than that, can I? Gimme a week and I'll get a package to you. Don't say anything now. We can talk when you've studied the deal."

Sol Zimmermann was as good as his word. A draft contract was delivered five days later. But Stanton tossed it unread onto his coffee table.

Stanton emptied his glass again. He had at last arrived at what a fellow American had once described as the moment of truth. No matter how much he loved Apricot or how culpable he felt over her predicament, he knew he could no more save her than he could save rain forests or endangered species.

The only remaining question was whether he could save himself. His youth had slipped away. Middle age waited around the corner. He recalled vaguely Lawrence saying something about people shedding their sicknesses through books. Was that a possibility? Conrad did not publish his first novel till he was thirty-eight. Shaw never wrote anything amounting to a row of beans till after forty. Tolstoy did some of his best stuff in his dotage. Perhaps there was hope for him yet.

Stanton picked up the bottle to pour himself another drink and noted with surprise that three fingers of whiskey remained. He did not need to be a bottle-a-night man after all, he thought, as he set the bottle down again with a thump.

He rose unsteadily to his feet. This was always the most difficult part, he reminded himself, getting to the bathroom and then to bed without knocking over too many things. As he faltered through the sitting room, he saw the draft contract from Mega Communications on the coffee table.

He allowed himself a smile. Tomorrow he would tell Sol Zimmermann to stick it up his fundament.

-- The End --