

## The Truth About Harry

by

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Stories about Dr. Harry Lee, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and Head of the General Surgical Unit at the Singapore General Hospital, were legion around the hospital and Stephanie Lau had heard most of them. The stories fell into two broad categories -- those about the good doctor's surgical skills and those about his turbulent love affairs.

As a scrub nurse who had worked with the doctor for two years, Stephanie could well attest to the accuracy of the surgical stories. She had never seen anyone wield the scalpel with greater authority. Those he had saved could often be seen calling on him, with presents of sweets or fruit as tokens of gratitude.

It was the stories belonging to the latter category that Stephanie had difficulty verifying. That niggled her more than somewhat because she felt she had a right to know. After all, she had been his lover for more than three months.

As Stephanie sat up in her bed, munching a piece of her favourite Swiss chocolate, she tried to tally up the few facts she had culled from the gossip and rumours. About Harry's mesmerising attractiveness there was no doubt. He was tall, dark and of a slim, athletic build. His dark flashing eyes, his head of slightly wavy hair and his sensual mouth with its sardonic smile were frequently the subjects of idle chatter and barely disguised yearnings among nurses. One story had it that his dark complexion came from some distant Malay or Indian ancestor.

Based on her own experience, Stephanie thought Harry's reputation as a philanderer not altogether deserved. It had taken eighteen months of working with him before he dropped his strictly professional attitude and invited her for coffee at the hospital canteen. And that was how it all began.

Stephanie sank her small white teeth into another piece of chocolate. In retrospect she felt somewhat insulted by his reserve. After all, it was not as if she were not a fitting object for his attentions. She was one of the prettiest and brightest nurses in the hospital. Her fresh, open face, framed by a page-boy hair style, and her cheerful disposition made her popular with staff and patients alike.

Her other physical attributes were also stunning. She had a bosom more than ample for a Chinese girl, complemented by a slender waist and taut, rounded haunches, which one admiring intern had described as "the most provocative little arse in all of Singapore."

Though prospective suitors buzzed around her like flies around a honey pot, she remained highly selective. She saw her physical assets as the key to her liberation from the dreary lower middle class existence to which fate had condemned her. They were a treasure to be preserved for the right man and it now occurred to her that the right man might just conceivably be Harry.

The doctor had many of the requirements. He had wealth, status, intelligence and good looks. Moreover, he could make love with a kind of raw animal passion that was at once intoxicating and frightening, that conveyed the sensation of being destroyed by pleasure.

As Mrs. Harry Lee she would not only acquire a high social status but also the power conferred by wealth. That power would compensate her for the hand-me-down clothes of her childhood, the penny-pinching frugality of her adolescence and the cramped and run-down terrace house that passed for home until she moved into the nurses' hostel. It would make possible travel to faraway places, Paris fashions and rare perfumes, sleeping with the feel of silk against her skin and a thousand other extravagances. If only Harry were not so secretive, if only there were not so many question marks over his past, it would be simplicity itself to turn her dreams into reality.

It took quite an effort, for example, to verify something as simple as Harry's marital status. Because of all the rumours, she had taken the opportunity during their first dinner date to remark light-heartedly: "You know, I'm not sure I ought to be seen dining alone with a married man."

"Who says I'm married?"

"Well, some say you married a Scottish girl while studying at the University of Edinburgh. Others say you have a wife in Malaysia."

"You shouldn't listen to gossip," was all that Harry allowed.

Nevertheless she managed to unearth the official facts. Through a friend working in the hospital's personnel department, she sneaked a look at Harry's confidential file. There his marital status was clearly recorded as single and his next of kin was given as his mother, with an address in Malacca. But that information left her only partially satisfied because there remained the disturbing knowledge that much of Harry's notoriety stemmed from the death in unusual circumstances of two women who had been linked romantically to him.

She had clear recollections about the first death, which happened when she was a trainee nurse. It caused a great stir at the hospital. It appeared that Harry had been keeping company with a nurse and the general expectation was that they would marry. Then, suddenly, the nurse was discovered dead from an overdose of sleeping pills. At the inquest Harry testified he had broken off with the girl shortly before her death. The coroner returned a verdict of suicide, when the state of mind of the victim was unbalanced.

Shortly thereafter Harry got engaged to the glamorous but capricious daughter of a Southeast Asian mining tycoon. She had a reputation for high living and pictures of her vacationing in Nice or enjoying the carnival in Rio de Janeiro often graced the pages of regional newspapers. She also had a reputation for speaking her mind. At their engagement party a reporter asked her how she felt about the suicide of the nurse Harry had spurned. She replied she thought Harry worth dying for and declared that if Harry ever abandoned her she would kill herself also. The statement got reported under the headline: "I'll Die For Him Too, Socialite Declares At Engagement Party."

And die she did, a year or so later. She was also found dead from an overdose of sleeping pills. Her body was discovered in the presidential suite of a hotel where she had hosted a fancy dress ball the previous evening. Again Harry testified at the inquest. He admitted having

prescribed a sedative for his fiancée's insomnia. Other witnesses testified the deceased had appeared in a jolly mood and had consumed generous amounts of alcohol during the ball. An autopsy confirmed a high level of alcohol in the blood. A verdict of death by misadventure was returned.

Following the inquest, Harry disappeared for a while from the social scene. He spent all his holidays away from Singapore. That led to more rumours and speculations. A story did the rounds suggesting he was heartbroken and on the point of nervous collapse. Other stories, however, suggested he had already found consolation in another woman. It was around that time that Stephanie was assigned to surgical unit.

Stephanie popped another piece of chocolate into her mouth and licked her thumb and forefinger voluptuously. The more she thought about Harry the more she realized how very little she knew about him. Although Harry was a marvelous raconteur, none of the stories he told revealed very much about himself. Even when he invited her to his home, he seemed reluctant to admit her to more than a small part of his bungalow at a time. Stephanie could not help laughing in recalling the excruciatingly long time it took to gain access to his bedroom.

Harry's bungalow was located in an exclusive district. During her first visit she did not manage to penetrate beyond the sitting room, where they drank, chatted and listened to Mozart.

"Don't you think his music marvellous?" Stephanie had asked, as they listened to Serenade in G. "There's so much feeling and emotional depth."

"It's really the early flowering of Mozart's genius that I find intriguing," Harry had replied. "Fancy mastering the harpsichord by the age of three and composing symphonies by ten! Can you imagine what the world could be like if we could breed such people? I have my own theories about genetic engineering. One of these days I'm going to test them."

Stephanie did not manage to get beyond the sitting room on her second visit either, although she did manage to study more closely the various paintings and lithographs decorating the walls. Since her grasp of art was such that she could not tell the difference between a Picasso and a Pissarro, she had no idea of their merits or shortcomings. Most of them appeared to be colourful and pleasant, except for one with sombre figures. The figures both fascinated and unsettled her. They caused her to observe: "Isn't that a rather depressing picture to have in a sitting room?"

"It's quite something, isn't it?" Harry replied.

"Who are those people and who is the artist?"

"That is a rather fine reproduction of van Gogh's The Potato Eaters."

"Van Gogh? Wasn't he supposed to be mad?"

"Yes, I suppose he was. But then, most exceptional people are, aren't they?"

That question left Stephanie somewhat at a loss, so she merely mumbled a reply. In truth she had never met anyone whom she considered exceptional. She had been taught at school that people like Einstein, Gandhi and Confucius were exceptional. But her teachers never mentioned anything about their being mad.

On her third visit she gained access to the kitchen. Harry had offered to cook her a curry dinner and she had insisted on helping. It turned out to be one of the best curries she ever had.

On her fourth visit she was introduced to the library, which was located in a room permanently air-conditioned to keep out the tropical damp. She had never seen so many books in a private home before. There were, of course, the standard medical books like Gray's Anatomy and the set of six manuals by Cunningham. But the rest were unfamiliar to her. Their authors had strange foreign names like Dostoyevsky, Loti, Poe, de Sade, Nietzsche and Baudelaire. Many others appeared to deal with uncommon subjects like theories of natural selection, the life of the Borgias or the Spanish civil war.

She searched among the volumes for her own favourite book, Gone With The Wind, but could not find it. She could not understand how anyone with so many books could be without Gone With The Wind.

She made it to the bedroom only on her seventh visit.

Stephanie reached out for another piece of chocolate, hesitated, then closed the box with resolution, conscious of the damage already done to her figure. It occurred to her maintaining a relationship with Harry was like eating chocolates. It was delicious and enjoyable, so long as one did not worry about the calories in such tasty morsels. But, unfortunately, she could not help worrying about the mysteries surrounding Harry.

Only the previous evening, as she lay in his arms after a frantic bout of love-making, she had complained good-naturedly: "You know, I really know next to nothing about you."

"I love you. What else is there to know?" Harry replied.

"Well, a girl usually wants to know things about the man she loves. She wants to know about the things he likes or dislikes, what he did before they met, what his old flames were like, and things like that."

"I enjoy books which deal seriously with their subjects, I enjoy curries, and I prize privacy. I choose friendships sparingly and I loathe idle gossip and other mindless ways of wasting time. Before I met you I studied medicine and then I practised it. As for old flames, I can tell you nothing. My past belongs to those who have shared it with me, just as your past belongs to those who have shared it with you. By the same token, the present belongs to both of us and to nobody else. Relationships are not meant to be recounted like casual tales."

How strange Harry was, Stephanie thought, as she recalled the conversation. He was deep where other men were shallow. She only wished she could plumb those depths. Maybe he would be less of a mystery if she read some of the books he read. The thought came like a revelation. Yes, why had she not thought of it before? She would attack that great library of his at the first opportunity, she determined, as she prepared for bed.

On her next visit to Harry's home, she made a point of browsing in the library. But she hardly knew where to begin. At last she selected a volume handsomely bound in tooled morocco entitled Love, in the expectation that its contents would illuminate something dear to her own heart.

“May I borrow this?” Stephanie asked, holding up the book for Harry to see.

“Ah, Stendhal!” Harry said, with a genuine note of pleasure in his voice. “He was the man who identified the Salzburg phenomenon. No doubt you are aware of it.”

“Yes, but I didn’t realize it originated with Stendhal,” Stephanie lied.

“I hope you enjoy the book. But take good care of it. It is a rather special volume.”

“Oh, I will,” Stephanie promised.

When Stephanie got home, she ran a hot bath in preparation for sleep. It was one of the few luxuries she could enjoy at the hostel. She was also anxious to discover what the Salzburg phenomenon was, for she hated to appear ignorant. So she took Stendhal to read while soaking in the bath. But the bath was so deliciously soporific and Stendhal so incredibly dull that she soon fell asleep.

When she woke up with a start, she found pages of Stendhal floating in the tepid water and the tooled morocco cover with the remainder of the book resting upon her body in a soggy mess.

The week that followed was one of sheer agony. She dashed around bookshops all over the city for a replacement copy. But nothing approaching tooled leather could be had. All she could find was a copy in the paperback Penguin Classics.

During that week, her meetings with Harry were filled with unease. Harry quickly sensed something was amiss. So she confessed her accident in a sobbing voice.

Harry’s reaction seemed rather odd. He expressed neither anger nor surprise. He did not console her or offer forgiveness either. Instead, he kept repeating in a flat, abstracted voice: “You dropped my Stendhal in the bath. You dropped my Stendhal in the bath.” It was as if he could not believe his ears.

Following that disaster, Stephanie could not find it in herself to ask Harry for the loan of another book. Instead she noted a few likely titles and purchased her own copies. But most of them proved less than readable. Certainly none of them was anywhere as absorbing as Gone With The Wind.

While she continued to struggle with those impossible volumes, she continued to see Harry. Although things appeared normal on the surface, she detected subtle alterations in their relationship. Their eyes did not seem to meet in the operating theatre as frequently as before and when they did meet she could no longer read in them unambiguous messages of love. Their evenings together were often cut short on one pretext or another.

Such developments filled Stephanie with alarm. She knew with all the certainty of feminine intuition that if she did not remedy the situation she would lose Harry. Desperate situations called for desperate measures, she told herself. So that evening, after they had made love, she seized the bull by the horns.

“Darling, why don’t we get married?” she said.

“That’s a big step,” Harry said.

“We love each other, don’t we? It’s only logical that people who are in love should marry.”

“What passes for love is often no more than a simple rush of body fluids to the groin. Once that condition has been corrected the world takes on a different hue. I am not the easiest man in the world to live with. It would be wise to wait a bit.”

As Stephanie listened, a terrible chill entered her heart. The message was unmistakable. Harry was drifting away. Panic seized her. Something dramatic had to be done to save the situation. She remembered the sleeping pills Harry sometimes used, which he kept in the drawer of his bedside table. There was already a glass of water on the table. So she took out the bottle, poured the little white pills onto the bed and began swallowing them two or three at a time.

Harry was a doctor, she calculated, as she swallowed. It was his job to save lives. She had watched him do so with consummate skill day in and day out. If she took an overdose, he would be forced to take her to the hospital to pump out her stomach. It would not be a pleasant experience but it would create a scandal. Harry, with his shaky reputation, could hardly risk further opprobrium if marriage offered an easy way out. There seemed no flaw in her logic.

“What in heaven’s name are you doing?” Harry asked, looking at her sternly.

Stephanie did not reply but continued to swallow the pills. After taking about forty pills, she mustered all the emotion she could and said: “I love you, Harry, and I don’t want to live without you.”

“It’s a damn fool thing to do,” Harry said, still staring sternly at her.

The remonstration sounded almost like an endearment and Stephanie smiled. “I want you to be happy, Harry,” she said, remembering how one of her favourite movie actresses had uttered a similar line. “If I cannot make you happy, I don’t want to be in your way.”

Stephanie saw Harry shake his head. He then got out of bed and began dressing. Things were developing as she had foreseen, she thought. She was starting to feel drowsy and short of breath. She allowed the drowsiness to wash over her, confident that at any moment Harry would gather her up and head for the hospital.

After Harry had dressed, he came to her side of the bed and bent over her. Stephanie got the impression he was examining her pupils. She smiled at him. “Before I die, please tell me that you do love me a little,” she said in a slurred voice. That line, too, had been retrieved from some movie she had seen.

Harry straightened himself and stood looking at her for what seemed like an eternity. “Love you? I have longed to love a woman who could bear me children like Mozart. Do you imagine that can be achieved by someone so frivolous as to drop Stendhal in the bath?” The mockery in his voice was undisguised.

Stephanie struggled through a haze to grasp what Harry had said. Then she saw Harry walking away. She tried to cry out but her throat would only emit a rasping sound.

At the door, Harry paused to turn to look at her again before closing the door silently behind him. She wanted to get up, to get help, but could not move. She was seized by unmitigated terror and during that one eternal moment before oblivion she finally discovered the truth about Harry.

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