

## Szeto's Bar

Szeto's Bar, despite being situated in the heart of Hong Kong's night life district, was designed for serious drinkers. It provided no entertainment, piped background music or television. Neither did it boast bosomy waitresses in short skirts, dart boards or pinball machines. It offered only reasonably priced drinks served up at the tables by three jaded waiters or by Szeto himself behind the long bar.

The waiters had been with the establishment since it opened 20 years ago and had acquired an institutionalised look. The reasons for their long tenure were not altogether apparent, because the hours were long and the pay modest. It could only be surmised that their individual relationships with Szeto, their employer, had something to do with it.

Whilst Szeto's links with his staff might be complicated, his attitude towards customers was simple. He felt it was up to customers to make their own merriment or gloom. It made no difference to him. His function was merely to provide an ambience where people could drink without distraction. If they got pleasure out of drinking, good luck to them. If, on the other hand, alcohol turned them introspective, then whatever drink-induced horrors encountered in the shape of self-revelation or truth, shame or regret, were none of his business. Customers, having paid good money, were entitled to their choice. Consequently, the bar had built a steady clientele of academics, artists, media people and some of the less affluent members of the expatriate community.

There were only two house rules at Szeto's Bar. The first, prominently displayed on the door outside, was that unescorted ladies would not be admitted. That sometimes stirred the ire of feminists. But the rule was really aimed at that those ladies of the night who plied the district in inordinate numbers.

The second rule was that the bar never closed until the last customer had left or had passed out. In the latter case, the waiters would deposit him in a converted storeroom at the back of the establishment, cut off from the bar itself by a steel-plated door.

The storeroom was without lights and contained only two plain wooden bunks screwed to the floor. A small, barred ventilation window high up on one wall would provide a faint glow on moonlit nights. Otherwise the room remained totally dark. The positions of the bunks saw to it that the barred window could not be reached from either of them. Another unusual feature was

that the storeroom's stout door leading into the street had two doorknobs. But neither was to be found at the conventional place. Instead, one was situated a foot from the bottom of the door and the other a foot from the top. Both had to be turned simultaneously for the door to open.

That feature had been designed by Szeto. He considered confinement in a strange, dark room a fitting punishment for anyone who drank to excess. If that person remained too befuddled to open the door, then he deserved to spend the night there, until daylight revealed the positions of the doorknobs. On the other hand, if the person could discover the means of escape in the dark, then Szeto reasoned he should be sober enough to make his way home.

In either case, the departure would be undignified, involving unpleasant navigation through a back alley cluttered with overflowing garbage bins, discarded containers and colonies of stray cats.

Szeto glanced at the sole customer remaining at the bar and knew he would be in for a long night. As it was already well past two in the morning, he gave a private signal for the waiters to go. The customer was a regular by the name of Yuen, a dishevelled man wearing a crumpled grey corduroy jacket and a red open-necked shirt. He was the Southeast Asia correspondent for an American news agency.

Szeto knew what was on the poor man's mind. The murder of one of his friends, a beautiful and famous dance hostess. It had been all over the newspapers in recent days. Yuen had brought the woman to the bar on a number of occasions.

Szeto had seen plenty of commercial relationships between dance hostesses and their customers. But Yuen's was not of that type. There was something deeper and more personal between them which the sensational accounts of her life in the newspapers had not touched upon. Szeto judged that sooner or later he would get to know the full story because Yuen would want to unburden himself. But the time was not yet ripe and Szeto knew from experience that the process could not be hurried. So he occupied himself by whetting a set of throwing knives that he kept under the bar. It was something he often did when business was slack.

Szeto was an enigma. He was obviously well-travelled and well-read and spoke several languages with reasonable facility. He would occasionally drop an observation that revealed a remarkable understanding of human nature but on the whole he did not talk much. He felt a bartender's job required a sympathetic ear rather than an active tongue. In appearance he could have passed easily for an academic or a diplomat or a patriarch in some old and

successful family enterprise. He had too much self-assurance for a bartender; his movements were also uncommonly fluid and refined.

He looked to be in his early forties, notwithstanding a balding patch on the top of his head. But he was in fact in his mid-fifties. He was slim, wiry and of medium height. His dark eyes were bright and seldom missed a thing. They were set off by high cheekbones and a small, sharp nose. His appearance might have been quite severe if it had not been for a certain gentleness around his mouth which lent an air of friendliness to the rest of his face. The unhurried grace in his movements also helped to soften his image.

His hallmark was a knife that he wore in a sheath strapped around his waist, like a cook in a teppanyaki restaurant. He would use it to slice limes and lemons. But he undertook that task with such speed and dexterity that stories began circulating about him. One version had it that he was a former bodyguard to a millionaire because he could hit any moving target with a knife at thirty paces. Another had him as a circus knife-thrower who retired after killing his lady partner with a bad throw. Yet another had him as a seafarer who turned to bar-tending to escape the attentions of smugglers and others keen to recruit him for nefarious undertakings.

But Szeto would neither confirm nor deny such stories. Every time a fresh one cropped up he would merely laugh and say: "I am just a bartender who likes knives." Whatever the truth about his background, he certainly enjoyed considerable standing in the district because neither triad gangs nor policemen ever approached the bar for protection money.

"One more for the road, please," Yuen said, holding up his empty glass. "And have one on me." He sounded remarkably sober though he had been drinking steadily for several hours. The accent to his English marked him as a native of Malaysia. He could easily have rid himself of that accent during his years away from his homeland. But he had developed a perverse attachment to it because one of his favourite secondary school teachers had once told him that speaking a foreign language with an accent was a sign of patriotism and an identification with one's roots.

Yuen was in his early thirties. He had a broad, intelligent forehead. His eyes were sad and pensive, as if they had witnessed too many tragedies on a grand scale. His nose was too large in relation to his elegant moustache and his mouth, though slightly crooked, was not without charm. Taken as a whole, his appearance was quite attractive. He had about him that aura of helpless melancholy that some women found irresistible.

"You know, apart from visiting Americans, you're the only customer who wants bourbon," Szeto said, by way of encouraging the conversation he knew had to take place sooner or later.

"It's one of the bad habits I picked up in America," Yuen replied.

Szeto placed the drink before Yuen and help himself to a bottle of mineral water. He never drank anything alcoholic while on the job. "In a land where the pursuit of happiness is guaranteed in the constitution, everybody must surely be too happy to pick up bad habits," he said.

"That depends on how you define happiness. If being rich and famous or popular or successful or driving a Cadillac or marrying the boss's daughter counts for happiness, then I suppose there's plenty to go around. But we're not all like that. Some of us can't help being creatures of the East who need a regular dose of suffering to remind us of the unalterability of things, of fate, karma, destiny. Only then are we brought face to face with cause and effect and made to realise that every deed touches upon something terrifying and profound."

"You sound rather philosophical tonight. Is something bothering you? You're not thinking of that poor hostess friend of yours, are you?"

"Yes, especially when they are writing so much rubbish about her."

"She was a real beauty. Had a lot of class too. What a pity!"

"I killed her, you know."

"No! You're joking!" Szeto looked at Yuen sharply to determine whether he was making a confession or merely allowing the bourbon to talk for him. When he had concluded it was the latter, he continued: "The police said she was killed by a jealous lover, some merchant banker with a wife and three kids, who then took a dive out of a thirty-four storey window. Just goes to show, high society types are no different from the rest of us. The green-eyed monster gets them just the same."

"He might have been the instrument but I'm the real murderer. I killed her as certainly as I am sitting here now. Our destinies were tragically linked. Neither of us could have escaped them. I turned her into what she became, Jade Lotus, the star of the West Chamber, the most celebrated dancing girl in all of Hong Kong!"

Szeto knew that the catharsis was about to begin. All that was required of him was to listen. Although he had played that role often, he had never ceased to be amazed by some of the tales told to him. He supposed that bartenders were in a privileged position, like priests, for once in a while they were permitted a glimpse into the dark corners of human souls. He had long concluded that people were really like paintings by Rembrandt. Although some

parts were flooded in light , there were always other parts shrouded in shadows. That chiaroscuro was what made people interesting.

"When I first knew her she was just plain Ching Ching, the girl living down the street back in Penang," Yuen began. "I was 16 at the time and she was a couple of years younger. Our fathers were clerks at a British shipping firm and they were both barely getting by. Our families lived in crumbling tenements at opposite ends of a street in a run-down part of town.

"Whereas I was doing quite well at school, because I was convinced early that a good education was the only hope of escaping from my father's fate, Ching Ching was struggling. Since she was the eldest of four girls her father was naturally worried. If she did poorly she would be no help in bringing up her sisters. So her father asked my father if I could coach Ching Ching in return for some pocket money. Seeing that they were colleagues, my father agreed and I, for my part, was glad to have the money. That was how we met.

"The moment I was introduced, I remember having seen her around the neighbourhood. But I had previously never paid her any attention because there was a certain incongruity in her appearance. She was small and thin, with an undeveloped body like that of a child not yet in her teens. It was only when I saw her up close that I noticed a remarkable maturity about her face. She had a perfect nose, a pointed chin and a small mouth that always seemed to be on the verge of a smile. Her teeth were so sparkingly white and so perfectly aligned that you had to look at them twice, to be sure they were real. Her face was dominated by a pair of large, animated eyes. She gave the impression of being a beautiful doll, with a head out of proportion with the rest of her body."

"There was certainly nothing out of proportion when she came in here! She looked sensational."

"That metamorphosis came later," Yuen said. "When I started tutoring her, she held little attraction for me. I just regarded her as the means to some spending money. I soon realised, however, that she was bright as a new penny. She did poorly in school only because her heart was not in her studies. She was always day-dreaming about wealth and romance, of wearing beautiful clothes and riding in limousines, of living in some fine house in Paris or New York, with servants at her beck and call. I guess she just felt she deserved better than to live in a moulding tenement along a street filled with potholes and hawkers.

"So, apart from tutoring her, I also tried to bring her down to earth. For a time it worked. Her school results improved. After eighteen months or

so, seeing that we were getting along so well, our parents started making those unsubtle remarks about what a nice couple we could make one day. Those remarks annoyed and embarrassed me at first. But what to do? Teaching her meant money in the pocket.

"Then one day I suddenly noticed that she was no longer the scrawny girl with an oversized head. She had grown and blossomed and her body had taken on some rather pleasing curves. It struck me then that I was falling in love with her. It was the strangest feeling. I suppose it must have been akin to the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus or Buddha under the bodhi tree.

"Ching Ching must have reached a similar conclusion because all at once we started behaving quite differently towards each other. I can still remember the way she would look at me, with adoration in her big, brown eyes, and how we could communicate without uttering a single word. The year that followed was the happiest in my life. In hers too, I guess. We became inseparable after school and when we were alone, which was seldom in our crowded tenements, we would steal a kiss or an embrace. We might have gone further except that respectable Chinese girls in those days set great store on being a virgin on their wedding day. So we had to curb the fire in our blood.

"We spent a lot of time talking about the kind of life we would lead after marriage, because by then it was already understood between our families that we would one day marry. I was so heady with love that I started participating in some of her fanciful dreams. We talked of going round the world on one of those cruise liners that sometimes called at our island. We talked of getting a place up Penang Hill where the rich folks lived and of giving our children the best education that money could buy. We built lots of crazy castles in the air even though our families were only just scraping by.

"During my final year in school I had vague notions of becoming a journalist. My headmaster persuaded me to apply for some of the scholarships available at American universities because local universities had not yet begun offering courses in journalism. I did so with rather mixed emotions. On the one hand I longed for a university education, but I was also afraid of building up false hopes. I did not know enough about American universities to judge whether I stood a chance. On the other hand, I dreaded success because it would mean separation from Ching Ching and a long postponement of our marriage.

"As fate would have it, I was offered a scholarship by Stanford University. That threw both Ching Ching and myself into an agony of indecision. Our parents were all for my accepting, especially because of the

prestige attached to Stanford. But both Ching Ching and I were torn between the brighter prospects and the need to be separated for so long. In the end, we decided with heavy hearts that I should go. But I promised that if she ever found our separation intolerable, I would chuck the scholarship and return straightaway to marry her."

Yuen banged his fist suddenly on the bar. "I curse the day I was offered that scholarship! It doomed our love and sealed our fate! There was no escape.

"During my first year away we wrote each other letters full of longing and declarations of undying love. Then things started to go wrong. Ching Ching failed in her examinations and had to repeat. She told me she could not concentrate with me so far away and with no one to coach her. I urged her to redouble her efforts and to be patient. I made all those loving exhortations that were appropriate in such circumstances.

"For my part, I discovered that in spite of Stanford's reputation, the workload did not stretch me. So I signed up for extra courses to speed up the completion of my degree.

"By the end of the second year, disaster struck. Ching Ching failed in her examinations again and had to leave school. She told me she could not go on without me and wanted us to get married as soon as possible. That was when I failed her.

"By that time I had taken on so much extra work that I could have finished my degree in three years instead of four. My professors had a high opinion of me and had assured me that a fine career in journalism awaited me. Little did I realise then what meagre rewards journalism provided."

Yuen emptied his glass and gestured for it to be refilled.

"Success!" he exclaimed with a sigh. "The pursuit of that bitch goddess! That was another bad habit I picked without even realising it. Success, even academic success, can be quite a heady thing. It provided me with excuses ready-made. One more year and we could count on a glorious future! How could such a prize, almost within reach, be thrown away? My arguments were full of practical good sense. My logic was impeccable. What I did not realise then was that success, like failure, was attended by moral hazards.

"No matter how I might rationalise it, I know now that deep down I was then only playing the game of prevarication. I wanted desperately to finish my degree before going home. I was driven by ambition. I supposed Ching Ching must have seen through my game or perhaps she just loved me too much to want to thwart my desire. She did not argue with me. She did not

plead further for my return. After a while she simply stopped writing. That threw me into a tizzy. After a couple of weeks of silence I knew something had to be seriously wrong. So I wrote to my father demanding to know if Ching Ching had taken ill or something.

"Then the devastating news came back. It seemed that at about the time I was making excuses for delaying my return Ching Ching's father had died. He had always been rather frail. The mother was thus left with no alternative but to take the girls to Singapore to seek shelter with a relative. She had indicated before leaving that a union between our families had to be set aside because of the prolonged period of mourning and because she could no longer provide a dowry. She had departed without leaving a forwarding address.

"I was shattered. If I had had the money I would have rushed off to Singapore without a second thought, hopeless and impractical though such a journey might have been. But I did not have the means and it became apparent, after reflection, that even if I could locate Ching Ching, I had nothing to offer five grieving women without any means of support. That was when I developed my taste for bourbon.

"So I stayed on at Stanford. What else could I have done, I ask you? I completed my degree and got a job with the Consolidated Press Trust of America. After a bit I wangled an assignment to Singapore in the hope of picking up Ching Ching's tracks. Of course, I failed. That was because I was looking in the wrong place! But I will come to that later.

"Having failed, I felt so sick at heart that I set myself a penance. Though it might sound silly in retrospect, I decided that I would not shave till I had found her again. I also started drinking more than I should and got careless about my appearance. All kinds of people, including my superiors, started dropping hints about how unkempt I looked with a beard, but I didn't give a damn. That was one vow I was determined to keep."

"Well, you obviously found her again," Szeto observed, just to show he was following the narrative.

"It was fate, I tell you. A few years later, I was sent here by the Press Trust when events in China started attracting world attention. By then I had virtually given up all hope of seeing Ching Ching again. Then, about two years ago, some friends from Malaysia came on a visit. They had heard about the opulence of some of Hong Kong's dance halls and the great beauty of their hostesses, particularly those at the West Chamber. They wanted to have a look. I could never afford such places on my salary. In any case, I had always considered such establishments suitable only for those with too much money or

too little commonsense. A man has to be pretty desperate or utterly foolish to want to pay for manufactured endearments and synthetic romances. But my friends were keen on the experience. So I tagged along.

"The sheer extravagance and size of the West Chamber were mind-boggling. It boasted a thousand hostesses and the acknowledged queen of them all was Jade Lotus, whose photograph was displayed in the lobby. You could have knocked me over with the proverbial feather when I saw the picture. It was Ching Ching without a doubt, only more matured, more sophisticated and more elegantly coiffured.

"I asked for her right away but because she was already heavily booked I had to wait. While my friends enjoyed the company of other hostesses, I was dangling on tenterhooks. I knew that dancing girls led lives exposed to every corruption and that one did not get to be a star without paying some price to managers, protectors, secret patrons or whatever. All the dreadful possibilities nagged at my imagination. I could hardly wait to see what had become of the girl I had sought all those years. She had looked stunning in the picture in the lobby but such pictures were meant to entice. I simply did not know what to expect. The sentimental tunes played by the Filipino band, the teasing fragrances of feminine smells, and the occasional outbursts of intimate laughter around me, all heightened my impatience.

"At last, through the half-light of the ballroom, I saw a manager escorting a hostess towards our table. She was sheathed in an ultramarine Chinese long gown that displayed her figure to maximum advantage. I recognised her instantly, even though she had grown taller and more voluptuous than how I remembered her. There was also a practised languor in her walk and a certain self-conscious eloquence in the movement of her hips that had not been there before.

"Ching Ching did not recognise me in the dim surroundings, especially with my beard. When I had explained who I was and recognition had dawned, she exclaimed with some alarm: 'What in heaven's name has happened to you?'

"As the hour was late and my friends had already accumulated a monumental bill, I told her that I was really not as down at heel as I might appear. I promised I would return the following night to explain everything. She then laughed that clear, spontaneous laughter of old and said that explaining things at the West Chamber would probably cost me a month's salary. So it was decided that we would meet somewhere for lunch the following day.

"We met at a secluded restaurant. I was pleased to note in the full light of day that she had matured well. In spite of her nocturnal life her skin was still fresh and smooth. She was immaculately dressed in an imported designer frock, complemented by the latest fashion in accessories. That old insinuation of a smile played upon her lips. Some of her mannerisms had altered, however. They were not so spontaneous as before, but more polished, as if she had become schooled in the art of pleasing others. She looked more beautiful than I had ever imagined her to be during the ten years of dreaming about her."

Yuen closed his eyes for a moment. It was not clear whether he was trying to visualise her as she had appeared then or whether he was fighting to control his emotions. When he opened his eyes again he continued.

"I had shaved off my beard prior to the meeting, keeping only a moustache as a memento. I supposed my drinking must have affected my complexion because she enquired whether I had been unwell. When I explained about the drinking and the beard she was very touched and I could tell from the way she reacted that some of those old feelings had remained alive in her too.

"She told me her side of the story. After her family had taken care of her father's funeral, it was destitute. She had seen no point in telling me because the news would only distract me from my studies to no purpose, especially when marriage was out of the question. When they got to Singapore they discovered that the relative was also in poor circumstances. So she had to look for work immediately. But after having flunked out of school, a good position was not easy to come by. In desperation she turned to the only means of making quick money. She became a dance hostess.

"With her good looks and her cheerful disposition, she became an instant success. After a while her manager suggested Hong Kong, as a place where the dance halls were classier and more money could be made. Since she wanted to provide well for her mother and to give her sisters the education she had missed, she took the plunge.

"Her story stirred anew all my yearnings for her. All my feelings of guilt too, I guess. I told her that I still loved her and that if she would have me we could get married as if nothing had happened. But she shook her head and said: 'You are very sweet and I shall never forget your offer. But I am no longer a suitable wife. I am no longer a respectable woman. I lost that status a long time ago.'

"Her remark cut me to the quick, though I realised it was not in her nature to inflict deliberate pain. It made me feel more culpable than ever. If I

had returned when she had wanted me to, we would have been married by the time her father died. Life would have been a struggle but at least we would have shared the hardships and she would not have to demean herself by becoming a dancing girl. I wanted desperately to make things up to her and to redeem myself. I told her that so far as I was concerned she was still Ching Ching, the girl I was meant to marry.

"When she saw how remorseful I was getting, she tried to console me. She said: 'You used to tell me to be practical. Now it is my turn to tell you. I have an old mother to support and three sisters to put through university. Can that be done on the salary of a journalist? I have no trouble finding someone to pay my bills and I make enough to keep my family in comfort in Singapore. Only my mother knows what I am doing. So far as my sisters are concerned, I am a successful businesswoman in the garment trade. Can't you see there's no going back on my kind of life?'

"I saw the hopelessness in the situation all right. How could I urge her to let her sisters fend for themselves when I had already exacted such a terrible price from her for my own university education? Without a lot of money there was simply no way out. So I asked her if I could continue to see her once in a while, for a drink or something. She readily agreed.

"From that time onwards we took to meeting about once a week, mostly in the afternoons before she reported for work. We would do the kind of things we used to do back in Penang, walk in the park, go to a movie or just sit at some vantage point and watch the junks and ferries plying the harbour. On those occasions she would forsake her expensive clothes and dress simply. We would look no different from any other loving couple enjoying each other's company. We avoided further talk of marriage or of her way of making a living. I suppose we were both, without admitting it to ourselves, chasing after what might have been and what could never be ours again."

Yuen finished his drink and signalled Szeto for a refill. He then picked up the glass, looked at the golden liquor against the light, and said: "Has it ever occurred to you that all the great love stories are tragedies? Loves that are attained are soon forgotten, like the happy endings in Hollywood films. It is the sheer hopelessness and unattainability of a love that gives it poignancy. That was the case between Ching Ching and myself. Our weekly meetings were a joy but also a torment. I don't know which was worse -- seeing her or not seeing her.

"Once I tried to get her to go to bed with me but she refused. She said memories of our days in Penang were the ones she treasured most, like those of our first kiss and our first embrace. She wanted to keep them intact. If

she went to bed with me they would be sullied and become mixed up with other things she did not care to remember.

"Her reply upset me. I had been haunted by thoughts of her being pawed, fondled and importuned night after night by men with big bankrolls and inflated egos. The notion of all those faceless men taking their pleasure from her suddenly became an agony I could no longer endure. I lost control. I shouted at her: 'How can you sleep with every Tom, Dick and Harry and refuse to do so with me? Or do you want me to pay you as well?'

"That was, of course, a despicable thing to say and I regretted it immediately. She did not react angrily to my outburst as she had every right to do. Instead, she replied in a world-weary voice that was even more frightening than anger. 'You may have gone to a university but you haven't learnt very much about life, have you? What strange notions men have! They make such a big production about going to bed. It all means nothing when there's no love, can't you see? It is just a piece of human flesh rubbing another piece of human flesh, like shaking hands or giving someone a peck on the cheek. For your information, I do not jump into bed with every Tom, Dick and Harry. I am selective over whom I take to bed. But there's no emotion involved with any of them. If you don't know that you're the only man I have ever loved, then we should stop seeing each other.'

"That frightened me no end. I could not bear the thought. So I apologised and promised never to raise the subject again. But that quarrel opened my eyes to something. I began to realise that the name she had given herself at the West Chamber really had some meaning. Just as a real lotus would grow out of the filthy waters of a muddy pond, so she seemed to rise above the deceit and corruption permeating her way of life. I began to see to my amazement that she could somehow separate her emotional and spiritual life from what was happening to her physically.

"We continued our meetings and they became filled with even more tenderness than before. Then, several weeks ago, when we were strolling back to her home hand in hand after a visit to a park, we were accosted by a man in a pin-striped suit. 'You cheating whore!' he shouted as he slapped Ching Ching across the face. I went wild with rage. I hit him on the jaw and he fell like an ox. I probably would have given him the beating of his life if Ching Ching had not pulled me away. 'He's my meal ticket,' she whispered, as she told me to go.

"As I walked away reluctantly, still simmering with rage, I saw Ching Ching helping the man to his feet. Now I had a face to put to the faceless men who took their pleasure from her. It was a face like a pig's, with

beady eyes, flared nostrils and heavy jowls. It was a face devoid of manliness and character. All the jealousy and hatred I had harboured towards those who could purchase Ching Ching's company now became, directed against that face. I recognised it from pictures in the newspapers as the face of an unctuous merchant banker specialising in mergers and acquisitions. It turned my stomach to think that Ching Ching had to share a bed with so disgusting a creature.

"On the next occasion we met, I demanded to know from Ching Ching why she had allowed herself to be slapped in public. She explained that the man was a good provider. It was just that he tended to be excitable and jealous, especially after he got it into his head that her afternoon absences meant she was having an affair with someone else. Since she earned her living by allowing men to live out their fantasies, she had to take such unpleasantness in her stride. If an occasional beating was involved, that could not be helped."

Yuen's glass was empty again and Szeto refilled it without being asked. Yuen remained silent for a moment and a weary look came into his eyes. It was as if he had to make an effort to continue.

"You've heard of that saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions," Yuen said. "Never has a truer statement been made. The thought of that pig of a man slapping Ching Ching around was more than I could bear. So I decided to do something to stop it."

"As you well know, we journalists belong to a rather special fraternity. If there is any dirt to be dug up about anybody we are better at it than the best detective agency. I had heard rumours about the man. So I went to work, calling upon the help of colleagues in the Cayman Islands, Bermuda, Panama and other places where smart money gets salted away. It did not take long to build up a nice dossier on our merchant banker. I discovered that he was not only cheating on his wife, but was also fleecing his company and taking advantage of his clients as well. Using privileged information, he had been engaging in insider trading through nominee companies several times removed. He thought he had his tracks covered but my colleagues provided all the ammunition I needed to nail him."

"So, armed with that information, I tackled that woman-beater in his office, gaining access on the basis of my press credentials. He recognised me, of course, and threatened to have me arrested for assault. When I indicated that I knew about his offshore dealings, he tried to brazen it out. When he realised I really did have chapter and verse, he quickly changed his tune. He tried to buy my silence. I can't say I wasn't tempted at the time. It crossed my mind that I could probably get enough out of him to give Ching Ching and

myself a reasonable start in a new life. But in the end I told him I wasn't interested in money. The price of my silence was that he should respect the woman known to him as Jade Lotus and never lay a finger on her again. Otherwise I would have him put behind bars.

"He demanded to know what our relationship was and I told him it was none of his business. Then his whole demeanour began to change. He looked almost frightened. 'She is in love with you, isn't she? I can tell. You're going to take her away from me, aren't you?' he asked. 'You can bet your life on it,' I replied, not meaning anything in particular but just for want of a suitable reply. Then I left. That was ten days ago and what has happened since is public knowledge."

"I'm very sorry," Szeto said, touched. "What a terrible tragedy! The merchant banker must have loved her too in his own warped way."

"Yes, but I never figured him for a man with such strong feelings. Who could have imagined that a few casual remarks could have led to such disastrous consequences. Did I do wrong or was it all fate? I only meant to prevent Ching Ching being abused but instead I caused her death. If I have not done wrong, then I must have sinned terribly in a previous existence to warrant such suffering in this one. Perhaps the Buddhists had got it right after all. Perhaps life is synonymous with suffering and suffering arises because of our desire for fame, riches, love or whatever. Now that Ching Ching is no more, I no longer have any desire for anything. And yet I am still suffering."

"Could that be because you still love her?" Szeto asked.

"Sometimes, when you think about the senseless deaths that occur every day, you wonder about the purpose of our brief span. But whatever it is, you have an advantage over the rest of us. At least you had the love of a beautiful woman and you *know* that that love will never change for so long as you live."

"That *is* a way of looking at it!" Yuen said. "Thank you for hearing me out." He then settled his bill and made his way unsteadily out into the night.

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