

## Anniversary

Kwan picked up the telephone and heard his partner's greetings from half a world away. "I need a favour, old chap," John Sham said, in his impeccable English.

"Fire away. That's what partners are for," Kwan replied. He was a tall, lean, phlegmatic man, with none of that smarmy affability often associated with successful solicitors.

"The best laid plans of mice and men have gone awry, I'm afraid," John said. "The Princedale deal is hitting a number of snags and I'll need another week to sort things out. That's not critical for the office but Friday's my tenth wedding anniversary. I had counted on a quiet dinner at Romani's with Mei-Ling. Since I'll be stuck in New York, would you mind standing in? Mei-Ling has been a trifle out of sorts lately. I should hate to have her spending the evening alone."

"Delighted to oblige," Kwan replied.

Mei-Ling! How her sloe-shaped eyes, her lilting voice and her irrepressible exuberance still stirred his heart! How desperately he had once loved her! It had not seemed so long ago when a weekend in her company was grace enough to carry him through the rest of the dreary week. Now he has to hide his feelings like an unsociable disease and restrict his role to that of family friend.

"You're a brick! Mei-Ling'll be pleased. I've arranged everything -- the menu, the wines, the anniversary present to be delivered with dessert, everything. The table's in my name and the bill's been taken care of. All you have to do is enjoy the evening."

After John had rung off, Kwan sat lost in thought. He nested his angular head against bony fingers that had never experienced manual labour. It was a posture he often assumed when faced with an intractable problem or a desperately weak case. Everybody deemed John and Mei-Ling the perfect couple, popular, charming and devoted to each other. They were socially prominent and active in the charitable work of the Catholic Church. Even Hong Kong's incessant slander mills could manufacture nothing more damning against them than their failure to produce an offspring, despite their Church's stand on birth control.

There was no gainsaying that John, with his polish and wit, was a much more suitable husband for Mei-Ling than his own desiccated self. It was not that he had ever been in serious contention. His relationship with Mei-Ling had never gone beyond a cozy friendship. His inhibitions had prevented the development of anything deeper. The rest had been fashioned out of his own fantasies.

Or had they been entirely fantasies? It was strange that after years of dealing with divorce cases, when five minutes with a client was sufficient to identify ulterior motives, he remained unable to disentangle the confusing signals from Mei-Ling during the days of their youth.

There had seemed, in retrospect, fleeting moments when she had held out more than friendship, through some spontaneous gesture or a conspiratorial smile. But his reserve had allowed those moments to slip away. By the time he had screwed up enough courage to commit his feelings to paper, news came of Mei-Ling's engagement to John. So the letter remained unsent. Re-reading that outpouring from the past, as he sometimes did, was a wrenching experience.

The prospect of dining alone with Mei-Ling -- something he had not done since her engagement -- filled him with dread. Her presence always rendered him awkward and tongue-tied and filled with longings for what might have been. That escaped notice in company because of his reputation for being taciturn. But facing her alone across a table, nursing a love that could not be declared, would be an ordeal.

To make matters worse, Mei-Ling had an inquisitorial way of probing into the affairs of others. That often made for an entertaining table, unless one happened to be at the receiving end of one of her cross-examinations. He had found himself in that uncomfortable position recently.

Towards the end of a dinner at her home, Mei-Ling had announced without warning: "Ladies and gentlemen, some wag once remarked that whether a person was an honest man or a thief depended on the solicitor doing his brief. Most of us, unfortunately, have had to experience a legal tangle or two. Dealing with lawyers -- and my husband is one! -- is seldom rewarding. So, for your entertainment this evening, I propose to roast a legal beagle. Our victim -- Mr. Kwan Sai-Chung, a practitioner renowned for his skill in tidying up debris from shattered marriages and mismatched lives."

Then, to general applause, she had continued in relentless tones: "We expect you to tell us, Mr. Kwan, in simple language and without legal mumbo-jumbo, what hidden life you lead. We want all the sordid details. That you must have one is obvious. You are a bachelor approaching forty, well educated, professionally successful but notoriously secretive. You don't smoke, you are too proper for drugs and you drink with the moderation of a maiden aunt. You eschew company, be that of colleagues, women or young boys. You are cautious to a fault. You don't gamble, except perhaps with the lives of your clients. So what do you do for kicks? What private vice is lending colour to your life?"

He had been taken aback by that onslaught. The other guests, emboldened by wine, added to his discomfiture with a barrage of hoots, cheers and

demands for revelations. The caricature had been drawn so close to the truth that the words seemed edged to hurt. That had surprised him. He had never credited Mei-Ling with an iota of malice. Mischief perhaps, but not malice. He could only surmise that something had got under her skin.

So, to make the best of a poor situation, he had replied in a jocular vein. He readily confessed to indulging in intellectual conversations with the dead, with the likes of Thucydides and Democritus and Virgil. Macabre though that might sound, he had added, intercourse with the dead was infinitely less hazardous than some forms of intercourse with the living! That had elicited sufficient merriment to let him off the hook.

Dining alone with Mei-Ling would be an entirely different proposition. There would be no refuge in company. If she were minded to probe, she was unlikely to desist till his suppressed yearnings had been exposed. Disaster would then visit upon all concerned.

Although he was remotely related to Mei-Ling through his mother, he hardly knew her till she was eighteen. His first sight of her had been at the age of seven, when he had gone with his mother to congratulate Mei-Ling's mother on her birth. She had appeared then as an ugly, wrinkled face, peering out of an integument of swaddlings. The only other impression to register had occurred just before he left for university. He had then remembered her as a chubby tomboy rebelling against a convent education. He had practically no recollection of her for the period in-between.

On the other hand, John had been an undeniable part of his life since the age of twelve. They had met at a Jesuit school. John was there because his parents were staunch Catholics. He was there because his father considered an English education a key to preferment in a British colony. They had found themselves in the same class, in adjoining seats, and despite being complete opposites quickly developed an attachment to each other.

Their temperaments could not have been more different. John was outgoing and gregarious and was a handsome lad even then. That advantage was enhanced by a confident bearing, a ready smile and an abundance of charm. He was a lion on the playing fields and over the years the captaincy of various teams fell to him like ripe plums. He was gifted in other ways as well. He could paint and act and was a leading light in the debating society and the church choir. A number of school prizes soon became his private preserve. It was small wonder he was admired by teachers and peers alike.

In contrast, Kwan was introverted and solitary. Nature had assigned him a serious and uninviting countenance. His nose was pinched and his eyes dull as slate. Only conscious effort prevented his mouth from drooping mournfully at the

corners. Perhaps those features were just nature's way of camouflaging his painful shyness. Not surprisingly, the nickname "Stoneface" was soon pinned on him. He dreaded sports because of his weak physique. His want of dexterity left him without even a passable mediocrity at any game. That invited ridicule and distanced him further from his fellows. Only in academic studies was he a match for John.

To this day Kwan remained uncertain as to why John had befriended him. He had nothing to offer except a sort of boyhood idolatry. He had followed his hero around like a faithful dog, cheering him on the playing fields, applauding his annual harvest of prizes and dreaming of becoming like him. Perhaps John had sensed his isolation and loneliness and had befriended him out of pity.

Their friendship continued when they studied law at London University. Higher studies made Kwan more self-assured and John became less of a focal point in his life. After university each became articled to law firms in different parts of London and met only occasionally.

By then Kwan had developed a fondness for reading and antiquarian researches, which he pursued with relish at the British Museum Library. As for John, he continued his conquering ways, earning acclaim for his handling of cases and devastating feminine hearts wherever he went.

Mei-Ling came into Kwan's life on completion of his articles and just after he had signed a contract to work for a venerable firm in High Holborn. A letter from his mother brought news of Mei-Ling entering Oxford and a request from the girl's mother for him to act *in loco parentis*. Since obligations of kinship, no matter how slender the ties of blood, were difficult for a Chinese to refuse, he accepted. But the prospect of looking after some unpredictable teenager left him in poor humour.

He had been reassured, however, by the girl he met at Heathrow. She appeared at least neat and well-mannered. She was not beautiful by classical Chinese standards. Her face was not oval enough, her chin lacked elegance and her lips were too full. Missing also was that obvious demureness demanded by tradition. Her movements were too spirited and showy, like those of cheer leaders at American football games.

Nevertheless he had found her vivaciousness attractive. Her childhood chubbiness had slimmed agreeably and a careless fall of jet black hair lent her a modern and youthful air. It had been her large sloe-shaped eyes, however, that had intrigued him most. They seemed frequently to be shifting moods, sometimes shy and docile and at other times surprisingly bold and worldly. Since the insinuations of the eyes seldom married with her words or deeds, he was often left at a loss about her.

He had escorted her to Oxford, as he was duty bound to do, and on each of the following weekends he had taken the train from Paddington to ensure a smooth

settling-in. Gradually he came to realise he was enjoying the company of that unusual girl and that accentuated his natural awkwardness. Mei-Ling must have sensed it also, for she had said at the end of his fourth visit: "Look, it must be a bore being foisted with a ward. I can manage. You don't have to waste your weekends if you have a girl friend or something else to do."

"I don't have a girl friend. Oxford is quite absorbing. I've never been here before, you know. I've got you to thank for the opportunity. I'm enjoying these visits enormously. There is no law against a guardian enjoying his duties, is there?" had been his reply.

After that an understanding settled between them. They armed themselves with histories and guide books and explored each weekend the wonders of Oxford. They loitered in the churchyard of Holy Cross as Byron had done, listened to the sound of the bells at Christ Church or strolled along Addison's Walk. They found pleasure in tracing the history of the brazen nose knocker of Brasenose, watching the traffic on the Cherwell and walking through the cloisters of Magdalen. Sometimes, caught in the crush at Carfax, they would speculate on how different it must have been when Chaucer wrote about a "clerk at Oxenford" or during the time of Erasmus.

During long holidays she would visit London and there, too, they would explore the sights. There would be companionable walks in parks, visits to museums and art galleries, evenings in pubs or theatres, and earnest discussions about the intellectual fads of the day.

On a fine spring day in the second year of their friendship, as they were strolling along the Serpentine, Mei-Ling had suddenly slipped her arm around his and declared in her worldly voice: "Oh, it's good to be alive on a day like this!"

Her touch had thrilled him. He had sensed her face turning towards him, inviting him to decypher the message in her eyes. He could have said something clever. He could have offered some word play which, in the best traditions of romantic novels, would slip smoothly into love plays. But he had felt inhibited by his professional ethics and his position of trust. It had to be wrong to dally with a ward. So he continued to stare into the middle distance and had replied with a bland "Yes." With that single word, the magic of that moment was destroyed.

Some months later, when time approached for a return to Hong Kong, he had felt increasingly heavy hearted. It so happened that John, who had decided to work a year longer in London, had invited him to the Carbolic Smoke Ball, one of the social highlights of their profession. The name had been derived from a notorious case of quackery in the Victorian era, when completely useless carbolic smoke balls had been sold as an antidote to influenza.

He had until then not apprised John of the existence of Mei-Ling. He did not want to share her with anybody. But since he would soon be leaving, he did want Mei-Ling to have someone to turn to in an emergency. He and John had by then already agreed on forming a partnership later in their careers. So he had taken her to the ball and had introduced her as a cousin.

He had known immediately that bringing together the two persons dearest to him was a mistake. He could feel Mei-Ling being awed by John's handsomeness and charm. He should have foreseen his friend's effect upon a girl not yet out of her teens. And yet he could not tell John she was someone he desperately loved. He had tried to redress his error by monopolising her on the dance floor, in a vain attempt to blot out the existence of John and everything else in the world.

He was a reasonable dancer but Mei-Ling made him feel like Fred Astaire. They danced on and on, cheek to cheek, with an exciting current flowing between them. He remembered floating intoxicatedly, as if in an enchanted world. Then, as the band played Gershwin's "Embraceable You", he felt Mei-Ling cleaving to him more tightly than before. There was moisture on her palm and he detected a quickening in her breathing. The perfume of her person seemed to caress him like something palpable and he swooned with desire. Everything he had dreamt of was coming to pass.

At that moment he had wanted her more than anything else in life. The terms of endearment he had so often imagined trembled upon his lips. But the hesitation of a fraction of a second had allowed his natural caution to reassert itself. What if he had misjudged the situation? What if the symptoms were simply due to her exertions on the dance floor? He would make an utter fool of himself. Moreover, he would be betraying the trust every ward had a right to expect from a guardian. He had to resign his guardianship before taking such an irrevocable initiative. He thus allowed the terms of endearment to die upon his lips.

Later, following his return to Hong Kong, they had corresponded. But Mei-Ling's letters spoke increasingly of the kindness of John and of the fashionable events attended in his company. She wrote enthusiastically about Royal Ascot, Wimbledon, the Henley regatta and other festivities crowding the calendar of the smart set. Her letters had filled him with such foreboding that he was spurred to pen a proposal. But it had been written too late.

Kwan reviewed those distant events as he steeled himself for the anniversary dinner. He was as edgy as a conjurer scheduled for a command performance. The solitudes of friendship required no effort but if Mei-Ling were minded to pry she would not be deflected by conversational rabbits pulled out of a hat. Sooner or later she was bound to uncover the joker hidden in his pack.

When Friday evening came, he presented himself at Mei-Ling's home. She looked as lively and desirable as ever in a dark satin evening dress. The years had merely enhanced her attractiveness. Her eyes sparkled in that old mysterious way while her lips wore an enigmatic smile. What right had she to look so damnably tempting and so utterly out of reach, he thought peevisly. That irritation simmered within him throughout the fifteen-minute drive to Romani's.

It was not till they had been escorted to their table by the *maitre d'* that Kwan regained his equanimity, though he still felt the discomfort of an old emotional bruise being nudged.

Dinner proceeded smoothly. Mei-Ling was uncharacteristically subdued and was drinking more than usual. Kwan put that down to the special occasion and the excellence of the Moselle and champagne John had selected. When dessert came, accompanied by John's present of an exquisite diamond brooch, Mei-Ling's eyes underwent a sudden change of mood. It was as if a dark shadow of some private unhappiness had fallen over them.

Before Kwan could divine the cause, the Romani band struck up "Embraceable You". It filled him with a sense of *déjà vu*. Without further thought, he said: "Would you care to dance? We haven't danced together since the Carbolic Smoke Ball."

At that Mei-Ling burst into tears and dashed for the powder room. That left Kwan flustered and alarmed. Tears were out of character, for Mei-Ling's self-control was legendary. Why had his invitation upset her? Was it the Gershwin tune? Could she, too, be experiencing some old ache of regret? That seemed unlikely. He concluded the tears must have been occasioned by John's gift underscoring his absence.

When Mei-Ling returned to the table, she seemed to have regained composure, though there remained a hint of disturbance in her eyes. He offered to take her home and she agreed. At her door, Mei-Ling said: "Sorry about the tears. Come in and have a drink."

"Are you sure you're not too tired?" Kwan asked.

"No. It would be nice to have someone to talk to."

After Kwan had settled in a sofa, Mei-Ling poured generous helpings of brandy from a cut-glass decanter into matching tumblers and handed one to him. But she finished hers in one gulp and replenished her glass before sitting down. During that process, Kwan caught Mei-Ling's reflection in the sitting-room mirror. It startled him, for her face seemed clouded with misery.

After Mei-Ling had settled in a sofa, she made heroic efforts at small talk. But they failed to sparkle and even as she talked her animation seemed to be

draining away. Her voice sounded hollow and flat, as if it had to be dragged up from some deep pit of misery.

"There's something not quite right with our charming Mrs. Sham tonight," Kwan observed, coaxingly. "Is something the matter?"

"Haven't you heard? The world's coming to an end."

"Old friends have broad shoulders, you know. Is it only John's absence or is it something more serious?"

"So it's going to be a night of revelations, is it? For that, we need Dutch courage. Drink up! You're not sipping tea at Buckingham Palace, you know. This is exceptional stuff, the very best. Smooth as silk, age unknown, cost the earth." With that Mei-Ling emptied her glass again.

Kwan, too, emptied his glass and stood up. He had never seen Mei-Ling in such a state and the sight disturbed him. He wanted to avoid embarrassing her further, so he said: "It's late. I had better go."

"No! Sit down!" Mei-Ling ordered. "You wanted revelations and you shall have them! But first, another drink. This is the right stuff for loosening the tongue and unlocking the soul." She set about unsteadily to replenish the glasses and as she did so her satin dress seemed to swish about with agitation and unease. After she had poured the drinks she demanded in a slurred voice: "Tell me the truth, were you once in love with me?"

"How can anyone not be in love with you? You are unrivalled in beauty and charm. There must be at least a thousand persons in love with you at any given moment."

"Don't try to be gallant! You know what I mean."

Kwan saw the torment in her face again, as if she were bracing herself for humiliation. "Yes, I was once," he said, drily. "But that was a long time ago."

"Why didn't you do anything about it, instead of being so damn passive?"

"It would have been quite improper at the time. I was your guardian. Later, it was too late."

"Do you love me still?"

"You are not supposed to demand self-incriminating statements."

"Will you make love to me? Now, this very minute?"

"Mei-Ling!" Kwan exclaimed. "That's unthinkable! You are the wife of my partner and best friend!"

"That has always been your trouble, hasn't it? Your sense of propriety and honour. What use are such qualities in a topsy-turvy world?"

"There has to be moral standards."

Mei-Ling took a savage, unladylike swig from her glass, set it down with a clatter and abruptly stood up. She glowered at Kwan for a moment, hesitated, and then asked in a voice full of contempt: "And what moral standards are there for love or for mercy? What have your conversations with dead poets and philosophers taught you?"

"I don't know. I haven't addressed those issues."

"Well, address them now! Address them, you paragon of rectitude, while I tell you your best friend is impotent and that you are looking at a thirty-two-year-old virgin!"

Kwan gasped with shock. "It's impossible!"

"Is it? So even you have been fooled by my husband's charm. His dotting women are part of a superb deception. But I'm not John. I can't go on living a lie forever."

"How can this be? Women are still crazy about him. If he is impotent, it's not like him not to mention it prior to marriage."

"Oh, he did say he was not much good at sex. But I didn't know what to make of that at the time. I was an innocent too, you see. I was afraid I might not be any good either. I thought sex was a matter of application, like playing tennis or practising the scales. How stupid I was!"

"I don't know what to say."

"Do you despise me for wanting to become a complete woman, to be really mated and to bear children? I have often wondered how nuns handled such matters. Do prayers and mortifications really work? My thoughts are so shameful I'm afraid to go for confession or to seek help from an analyst. I feel something withering inside me, wasting away, and I'm frightened. Now I'm reduced to courting mortal sin. What is going to become of me?" Mei-Ling's body suddenly heaved with convulsions and tears streaked down her face.

Kwan rose to his feet and threw his arms around her. "Don't cry! Don't cry!" he cooed, as if comforting a child. His mind was in a whirl, engaged in a scuffle between conflicting emotions. His heart went out to the pathetic creature in his embrace, sullied by alcohol and despair, needful of help and compassion. He was shocked, too, to discover the affliction of his friend and felt a great pity for him.

But he was experiencing at the same time an ignoble joy, because hope had suddenly sprung from a situation so long bereft of hope. The woman he loved was surrendering herself to him, pleading for deliverance, and he had to rescue her. All his suppressed longings tingled with anticipation.

His friendship with John, their partnership and all the messy social and professional consequences counted for little against his long smothered love. He would like to remain friends with John if possible but their partnership would have to

end. He would sell out and take Mei-Ling away, perhaps back to England. The legal aspects were straightforward. The law on voidable marriages was clear; familiar precedents raced through his mind. He said with a gush of enthusiasm: "Don't worry. If John is impotent, your marriage is null and void. We can start anew somewhere, anywhere you like."

Mei-Ling drew away from him sharply, with a look of amazement. "I can never leave John," she said. "It is not just religion that binds us. I love him, don't you see? His condition is not his fault. He has tried his best, taken all the tests, seen the leading specialists, prayed. But nothing works. If it ever comes out, it will destroy him. I can't let that happen. But I'm at the end of my tether also. I can't go on like this."

Kwan met Mei-Ling's eyes and saw the old veil of ambiguity lifted to reveal a seething turbulence, stirred up by the agonies of an unnatural love, the accumulation of years of deceit and the unquenched fire of a sensual woman. He detected too the spectre of a mind on the verge of becoming unhinged and was touched by an infinite sadness. "I'm your friend," he said. "Your secret is safe with me. There must be a solution. Just be patient a little longer."

Mei-Ling remained silent for a while. Then her head lolled helplessly about her shoulders, as if her final dregs of pride and self-control had been depleted. "Yes, let's be patient a little longer," she said, in a strange, defeated voice.

Over the weekend Kwan wrestled with that dilemma with far too many horns. Mei-Ling needed medical attention, of that there was no doubt. But it would be presumptuous of him to act without consulting John and it would be impossible to consult John without revealing what he knew. John's reactions were unpredictable. He might be large enough to place Mei-Ling's needs over his own reputation. On the other hand he might well explode with fury over outside interference in his domestic affairs. The whole situation was fraught with imponderables. And yet he had to find a way to relieve the distress of the woman he loved.

But on the evening before John's return, the matter was snatched out of his hands. The police, attempting to locate John, brought news of Mei-Ling's death. Her maid had found her, fully clothed, in a warm bath. She had slashed her wrists with John's razor, to end her life in mortal sin.

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