

Julia

Peng was everything Chinese parents could possibly expect of their sons at the age of nineteen. He was diligent, well-mannered, filial and outstanding both academically and in sports. He cut a splendid figure too, being clear-skinned and straight-limbed, with a carriage that was smart and erect. The bright, sparkling eyes that shone out of his fresh, open face suggested reserves of intelligence yet to be tapped. He had a ready smile and his politeness made him popular with elders and contemporaries alike. Thus, when he was awarded a scholarship to study economics at Oxford, his father simply had to throw a party to celebrate.

His father was the compradore of an old Dutch trading house whose roots rivalled those of the East India Company. It was only to be expected, therefore, that Mr. Jan van der Linden, the head of the Far Eastern office of that trading house, and his wife should be among the guests at the dinner party.

"Vot, you to study dismal science, eh? You vill enjoy Oxford," Mr. van der Linden boomed, as he pumped Peng's hand with great vigour. He was a huge, hearty, bear-like individual with a craggy face and a head of steel grey hair.

Mrs. van der Linden matched her husband's bulk and vigour. She too pumped Peng's hand with gusto. She was distinguished by a thick down covering her upper lip.

"You vill sail soon?" Mr. van der Linden asked, in the manner of a schoolmaster.

"Yes, Sir. Next week."

"Your first voyage?"

"Yes, Sir. I've never been out of Hong Kong. My friends tell me I'll get terribly seasick."

"No! Don't vorry! You get sea legs in no time. You vill enjoy voyage."

Later, over dinner, Mr. van der Linden advised Peng in confidential tones: "Life is more than books and examinations. Ven you get tired of books, look up my

niece, Julia. She lives in village in Cotswold, not far from Oxford. She very Bohemian, likes mixing with artistic people, painters, poets and such. She married painter named Pilgrim. He went Amsterdam to study Dutch masters, but he not much painter. Julia his only success. You will enjoy her company."

Mr. van der Linden then wrote out an address.

During Michaelmas term Peng was far too preoccupied with his new environment to give Mr. van der Linden's niece any thought. He had his hands full coping with the collegiate life at Christ Church and adjusting to the tutorial system. Everything was new and wondrous, ranging from high teas and sherry parties to the Chinese treasures at the Ashmolean and the awesome accumulation of knowledge in the Bodleian.

By the time Hilary came around, however, Peng began suffering from homesickness. He missed the usual family bustle associated with the advent of the lunar new year and the cheerless English winter added to his misery. So, for want of something to do, he wrote a letter introducing himself to Julia Pilgrim.

A reply came back promptly. "Come next Saturday. I have a bed for you," the letter began without any opening courtesies. It then detailed instructions about the train to take and the station to alight at. It concluded with: "I shall meet you in a red Mini."

Peng spent the rest of the week regretting his initiative. He tried to conjure up a picture of Julia Pilgrim. Would she wear sabots and a funny bonnet, like the women in Dutch tourist posters or would she be massive and sport a moustache like Mrs. van der Linden? Or would she possibly be some middle-aged beatnik with beads and unwashed hair dangling all over? He told himself he should have been less reckless about setting pen to paper.

But on the appointed day, the woman in her late twenties who met him at the station stunned him with her beauty. She had short, auburn hair and a peaches and cream complexion. Her brown eyes sparkled with fun and mischief above a small, pert nose. Her lips captivated him with their softness and succulence. She was dressed in a

light brown overcoat belted around the waist and a pair of matching boots. The outlines of the mohair overcoat suggested that her figure was not disagreeable. When she spoke, her voice was warm and melodious, with none of the guttural impediments hampering the speech of her uncle and aunt.

Half an hour's drive brought them to a large cottage near some woods. But long before the destination was reached Peng had made up his mind that he liked Julia. The genuine warmth of her welcome touched him. Her open and forthright manner also put him completely at ease.

"Make yourself at home," Julia said, as they entered the cottage. "I hope you won't mind a cold lunch. I'll make it up to you this evening." She then disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

The sitting room was friendly and cheerful and was made more cosy by a merry fire in a stone fireplace. A number of pedestrian paintings of still life and rural scenes hung about the walls. In order to make conversation he called in the direction of the kitchen: "Are the paintings on the wall by Mr. Pilgrim?"

"No, they're by friends," came the reply, amidst sounds of food being prepared. "My husband keeps his paintings in his studio in the village."

"What does he specialise in? Landscapes or abstracts or what?"

"Nudes."

"Do you paint yourself?"

"No, I'm hopelessly untalented. I think my function in life is to support and encourage those with talent."

Peng was about to say something polite in reply when he saw Julia emerging from the kitchen with a plate of cold meats in one hand and a large bowl of salad in the other. The sight of her took his breath away. She had taken off her overcoat to reveal the full majesty of her figure. She looked like a veritable goddess in a beige cashmere sweater and a smart pleated woollen skirt. The sweater accentuated her breasts, which rose full and unencumbered by any inner garment. Her skirt set off her slender waist and the pleasing contours around her haunches.

As Peng watched Julia setting the table, he felt as if gentle fingers were running up and down his spine, stirring him with an unfamiliar thrill. She seemed to move with an unbelievable lightness and grace. Upon noticing that only two places were being set, he asked: "Is Mr. Pilgrim not joining us for lunch?"

"No, he's walking in the woods with one of the girls."

"Oh! You have daughters?"

Julia gave a throaty laugh. "No, he's walking with one of his models. He says he needs to develop a rapport with his subjects. You'll meet him in the evening."

The reply disconcerted Peng. He could not understand how anyone with a wife as beautiful as Julia could bear to leave her to walk with another woman. His habitual courtesy demanded that he say something consoling. But all he managed to blurt out was: "If I had a charming wife like you, I wouldn't need any other inspiration!"

"Oh! You *are* sweet!" Julia exclaimed.

Peng's face reddened in embarrassment. He realised that his statement had sounded flirtatious. If word should ever reach Mr. van der Linden or his father that he had not behaved with the utmost rectitude, he would have a job explaining his conduct. There would be a great loss of face all round.

But Julia soon put him at ease. A good bottle of red wine aided the process. Before long he was telling Julia about his family and his childhood, about his interests and his friendships, so much so that he was surprised by his own loquaciousness. He was sharing with her secrets he had never confided in anyone before.

After lunch they continued their conversations over coffee in front of the fireplace. Julia took off her boots and curled her shapely legs up under her skirt for comfort. "What made you decide to study economics?" she asked.

"I didn't originally," Peng replied. "I wanted to study poetry. When I came across the Tang poets at school, I thought it would be marvellous to be able to write like them. So I started writing poems. But my father said there was no money in that. He said that as the eldest child I had an obligation to learn something useful so that I could

look after my brothers and sisters should anything happen to him. He suggested economics as a sound preparation for a business career."

"Do you always do what your father wants?"

"Most Chinese children are brought up that way."

"I understand that Chinese parents used to select wives or husbands for their children. Are you going to let your father do that for you too?"

"Oh, no! Never! That's different. That has to do with love."

"Ah, love! That's supposed to make the world go round. Do you realise that the world's made up of two basic kinds of lovers -- those who love not wisely but too well and those who love wisely but not too well? Which kind are you?"

The directness of the question caught Peng off balance. "I don't know," he said, laughing to cover his confusion. "I don't think I have ever fallen in love."

"Well, just imagine you are in love now. Would you throw caution to the wind, love to distraction and damn the consequences?"

"That does sound rather romantic and a lot of fun, doesn't it? Yes, I think I might."

"In that case you might one day regret having studied economics. What spiritual nourishment can economics offer someone with a romantic inclination, even if you could describe the velocity of money in verse and construct econometric models in rhymes? What you need is a woman to inspire you, to help you become the poet that you were meant to be."

Thus they spent the afternoon talking, about literature and art, beauty and truth, inner fulfilment and the secret life. Time went so quickly that evening was upon them before they realised it.

"My goodness!" Julia declared, when she noted the lateness of the hour. "Nattering with a Dutch housewife can't be a very exciting way of spending an afternoon for a young man like you. Why don't you make yourself at home while I prepare dinner. I hope you like Chicken Mancini. Then, after dinner, I'm going to take you to a dance. I hope you like dancing too."

"I love it."

"What? Chicken Mancini or dancing?"

"Both," Peng replied, laughing. "I assume you have laid on a partner who dances like Ginger Rogers and is gorgeous to boot."

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed on both scores. You're stuck with me."

"But isn't Mr. Pilgrim going to the dance?"

"Of course, he is. But he's taking one of his girls."

A perplexed look came into Peng's face and upon seeing it, Julia explained: "My husband and I never dance together. We move to different rhythms. We have a very modern marriage. He does what he likes and I do what I like. We try not to get into each other's hair. What's important is that I do not stand in the way of his artistic development. Our arrangement may not sound very conventional but it works.

"The dance tonight is a very informal affair. Just friends and neighbours. You can go as you are. Now I must run to prepare dinner. You can take a wash and a rest if you like; or take a turn in the garden if you don't mind the cold."

The garden appeared desolate in the failing light. As Peng strolled in it, his mind was in a whirl. Mr. van der Linden had said his niece was very Bohemian but his Chinese upbringing had not prepared him for someone like Julia. She was like no woman he had ever encountered. Her vivaciousness contrasted markedly with the demureness of the Chinese girls he normally mixed with. Her beauty, intelligence and generosity of outlook all touched him deeply.

He told himself that should he ever find a wife like Julia he would never allow her to languish in loneliness as Mr. Pilgrim was apparently doing. He could not conceive of any artist worth his salt being so selfish and insensitive as to treat so lovely a creature in such a shabby way. He felt himself building up a dislike for a man he had never even met.

His dislike was quickly confirmed when he arrived at the small lodge where the dance was held. Mr. Pilgrim turned out to be in his mid-thirties. He had a

dissolute face covered by a sparse beard and a head of sandy-coloured hair. He looked untidy in an arty sort of way, dressed in a grey turtleneck sweater, a worn suede jacket and a shapeless pair of corduroy trousers. He smelt of drink and had an off-hand manner. Peng found both disagreeable.

Accompanying Mr. Pilgrim was a blonde girl in her late teens named Tina. She was pretty enough as girls went but it was an empty kind of prettiness, with none of the deep, feminine mysteriousness that Julia exuded.

"So you're the visiting student from Hong Kong. I hope Julia is looking after you well," Mr. Pilgrim said, on being introduced. He made the statement in a perfunctory manner and did not even attempt to apologise for being absent all day. His greeting of Julia was equally perfunctory. They engaged in some small talk and when the music started he left with Tina for the dance floor.

The music was provided by a four-piece combo. There were about fifty people present, most of whom knew one another. Those introduced by Julia greeted Peng warmly and they appeared to hold Julia in high regard. The band began by playing lively tunes like sambas and congas and the gathering responded enthusiastically. Peng enjoyed those dances, for Julia turned out to be a superb dancer. She was dressed as she had been earlier in the day except for exchanging her boots for a pair of low-heeled shoes.

As the evening worn on and as the drinks flowed, the people became more exuberant and uninhibited. Later, when the lights were dimmed and the band began playing more sentimental tunes, Peng noticed with indignation that Mr. Pilgrim and Tina were shamelessly exchanging kisses on the dance floor. Although Julia showed no sign of being upset, Peng nevertheless felt it incumbent upon him to put a stop to such impropriety. So he invited Julia to dance and steered her next to Mr. Pilgrim and Tina. But neither of them appeared in the least inhibited by their presence. They simply continued their love-making. Julia also seemed not to notice anything amiss.

Peng was left baffled and bewildered. As he moved to the languor of the music he slowly realised that something was happening to him. With the warmth of

Julia's body pressed against him, the captured softness of her hand in his and the fragrance of her person intoxicating him with every breath, he realised with sudden alarm he was being assailed by shameful and uncontrollable sensations. Nothing like that had happened to him before. He knew that if he did not break away he would no longer be accountable for his actions. Fortunately for him, the music stopped when he was within an ace of planting a kiss on Julia.

For the rest of the evening Peng was torn by an agonising ambivalence. He wanted desperately to hold Julia in his arms again, to feel the magic of her charms, and perhaps even to woo her with the kind of panache and abandon of a Clark Gable or an Errol Flynn. On the other hand he was terrified of the consequences. Julia was, after all, a married woman and the niece of Mr. van der Linden. He was on tenterhooks. In order to forestall temptation he dallied in the toilet and engaged in quite unnecessary conversations with other people at the party.

After the party, as Julia drove him back to the cottage, Peng was seized by a growing fear of being left alone with Julia. He had no idea when Mr. Pilgrim would return. He only knew she had awakened something in him that could not be controlled. If his guard should slip even for an instant, utter disgrace would visit upon him and his family. He needed some activity to occupy himself, to take his mind off her.

So, upon reaching the cottage, he said: "Shall I make some nightcaps while we wait for Mr. Pilgrim?"

"We can certainly have a nightcap," Julia said, with an enigmatic smile playing upon her luscious lips. "But my husband won't be back for hours. He's got a long way to go with Tina."

The information alarmed Peng. Looking into Julia's mischievous eyes and remembering the delicious softness of her body nestling against his, he saw disaster staring him in the face. Desperately, with a great effort of will, he managed to say: "Since Mr. Pilgrim will be quite late, perhaps we ought to forego the nightcaps and have an early night."

"Yes," Julia said. "That's not a bad idea. Turning in would be best."

Once he got to his room, Peng heaved a sigh of relief. The cottage was not centrally heated so the room was quite cold. He changed into his pyjamas and crawled quickly into bed. There he lay, going over the strange happenings of the day. At least he was now safe and tomorrow he would be heading back to Oxford.

Suddenly, in the middle of his ponderings, he heard a knock on the door. On opening the door, he found Julia standing before him. She was in a loosely gathered dressing gown. The nightdress beneath the gown revealed a provocative expanse of alabaster bosom above its lacy frills. The musk of her person assailed his nostrils.

"It can be quite chilly on these spring nights," Julia said in her deep, smoky voice. "I was wondering if you need a hot water bottle or something to keep you warm."

Peng felt weak with desire. Julia's eyes seemed to be speaking to him more mesmerisingly than her voice. He wanted to clasp her tight and to smother her with kisses. But somewhere within the recess of his swirling consciousness there flickered the images of an irate husband, an outraged father and the intimidating hulks of Mr. and Mrs. van der Linden.

"No, no, I'm fine," Peng cried. "I don't need anything. Thank you!"

"Good night then," Julia said, and returned to her room next door.

As soon as the door was closed, Peng began trembling violently. He cursed himself for his lack of daring, for failure in his test of manhood. He placed his ear against the wall to try to hear the sound of Julia's movements in the next room. He pawed the wall in an agony of desire, as if that could somehow convey his longing to the woman next door. When the cold finally drove him back to bed, he kept tossing and turning for hours trying to come to terms with his vanished innocence and his missed opportunity. He prayed with all his might that another knock would come so that he could redeem himself. But no knock came.

Peng did not know what time he finally fell asleep. But when he awoke it was already well past noon and he was in a fever. He dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. He found Mr. Pilgrim, still wearing the turtleneck sweater he wore the

night before, reading the Sunday newspapers in the sitting room.

"Good morning," Peng said in greeting.

"It is already afternoon," Mr. Pilgrim said. "You must have slept well. Julia has gone to buy something for lunch. If you're hungry, fix yourself a bite first. Otherwise, read a newspaper and wait for lunch."

"I'm not hungry," Peng said, taking up Mr. Pilgrim's invitation to read the newspapers.

"I hear you refused the offer of something to keep you warm last night. No point in such self-denial, you know," Mr. Pilgrim chortled, without looking up from his newspaper.

Peng flushed but said nothing.

Over lunch Julia behaved as she had done the previous day. But Mr. Pilgrim's presence took the sparkle out of the conversation and it never rose above the commonplace. After a leisurely lunch and several cups of coffee, Julia reminded Peng that it was time to take him to the station.

Julia drove in silence for some way. Then she suddenly said: "You're a very lucky young man. You know exactly where you are heading. A lot of us thrash around not knowing what we really want out of life. I'm sorry if you haven't had a very enjoyable stay. I'll try to do better next time. I'll send you another invitation."

Lent came and went and came again. All the while Peng felt that teasing urge to versify. He struggled with poems about the agony and ecstasy of love as he waited anxiously for the promised invitation. But it never came.

Many Lents have since passed. Peng had achieved wealth and renown as the Chief Economist of a leading international bank. But every now and then, while reading a newspaper or overseeing his grandchildren at play, he would unaccountably find himself thinking about Julia and that weekend in the Cotswold. Whenever he did so, he would invariably wonder if his life might have turned out differently if he had dared to ask for something to keep him warm on a certain spring night.

Julia has appeared in the **Peak** magazine in Hong Kong.