

## Other Places, Other Lives

Colonel Pieter Jansen Schoonhoven was a lean, courteous and affable man of around 50. His wife and four teenage children were equally good natured and welcoming. Between them, I had no difficulty settling comfortably into the basement room they had prepared for me at No. 78 Gentsestraat.

It did not take me any time to discover that Colonel Schoonhoven was also a very scholarly man. Many books bulged from shelves in the home, testifying to his wide erudition. He himself carried about him the air of a mellowed academic, pondering some abstruse philosophical question, without any hint that his real concerns in NATO were probably the prospects of a nuclear Armageddon. His hallmark was a heavy briefcase filled with papers which he always carried with him whenever he left the house. His wife was a big boned, efficiently organised and genial Dutch housewife.

Their house at Gentsestraat had been built on a sloping site, similar to that at No. 97 Aberdeen Street in Perth. But its plot was much bigger and its incline sloped more steeply towards the back. Generous lawns and gardens accompanied it. My cellar room beneath the rear part of the ground floor was therefore spacious and comfortable.

A few steps had to be climbed to approach the front door of the house. An internal set of stairs then provided access to the cellar room and its adjacent bathroom and shower. However, the cellar room also had an independent entrance by way of the garden, through a set of French windows. The room thus offered considerable privacy. I could come and go without disturbing the rest of the household.

A person could hardly expect to find a better host family than the Schoonhovens. Although Dutch students were required to learn several European languages at school, I think the youngsters were still more comfortable with Dutch rather than English. Nonetheless, they all pitched in to make me feel welcomed. Notwithstanding that I did not have a full boarding arrangement, I was regularly invited up for a meal or a cup of coffee after dinner. Sometimes,

during the cold of winter, I would also be offered a tippie of *jenever*, that splendid Dutch version of a potent gin. That drink was enough to warm any freezing soul.

Conversations, led usually by the colonel, ranged widely -- from the blue and white pottery from Delft to the imports of Chinese porcelain to Holland by the Dutch East India Company early in the 17th Century; from the interruption of trade after the death of the Emperor Wan Li to the mutual inspirations drawn from each other's products. There had also been cases of Chinese and Japanese potters making imitations of Delftware and then sending them back to be sold in Europe.

We discussed many other fascinating subjects, like the long Dutch struggle to be free of Spanish rule. The varying skills of Dutch painters featured in discussions too. The common saying of "a Jan Steen household" was explained as denoting a messy domestic scene, for Jan Steen, that prolific 17th century painter, had a fondness for depicting such environments with humour, colour and lustfulness.

"Of course, the Chinese don't like depicting so much detail in art, do they?" the colonel said.

"No, Chinese artists tend to be more sparse and evocative," I said. "Our traditions are different. We do not glorify in the human body like the Greeks. Humans are made subservient to nature. Our painters started a rebellion during the eighth century against the photographic reproduction of external reality. The poets, painters and calligraphers of that time wanted to destroy verisimilitude and search for a more dynamic simplicity, to reach what they perceived to be the inner nature of things. Chinese art has never been the same since. But I don't know enough to do justice to the subject."

"What a shame! I'm the same with our Dutch art. Otherwise we could have some really good discussions."

"I have been meaning to visit the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to

acquaint myself with some of the Dutch masters. But I'm ashamed to say I've never got around to it. I must do so once the weather is less cold."

It came as a great surprise when winter turned to spring that the Schoonhovens threw me an unannounced party on my birthday. I was not sure how they found out the date of my birth, for I never told them. They presented me on the occasion a beautiful Uffici Series of coloured reproductions of some of the works by Rembrandt.

"A substitute before the real thing," one of them said.

I was speechless with delight. If only people from different countries could all engaged with one another as open-heartedly as the Schoonhovens, what a wonderful world this would be!

The only question I took care never to broach was the colonel's work at NATO. The Cold War was still in full swing and I judged it best the less I knew of the deep laid plans of mice and military men the better.

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I was also glad that I was in Holland, half-way around the world, so as to be spared the banking chaos which engulfed Hong Kong at the beginning of 1965, shortly after I had left. It had begun with the Ming Tak Bank not being able to meet its commitments. That was swiftly followed in February by the Canton Trust failing to open its doors. Other banks became affected and withdrawals had to be restricted. By April a serious run took place at the Hang Seng Bank, the second largest bank in the colony. The government was forced to step in and, with the help of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, resolved the crisis.

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The Institute of Social Studies, housed in a former royal palace at the centre of The Hague, provided an uneasy juxtaposition to the comforting sense of friendliness at Gentsestraat. It was not that the facilities at the Institute were inadequate in any way or that the students or staff were standoffish. Far from it. Helpfulness and goodwill were everywhere. It was just that I found myself confronted by crueller kinds of reality.

There were about 20 participants in the diploma course. For the most part they were mid-ranking civil servants, with a fair number of years of service under their belts, and a couple of academics. They came from countries as diverse as Ethiopia, Nepal, Paraguay, Pakistan, Iran, Thailand, India, Kenya, Somalia, the Philippines and Malaysia. No doubt some saw the acquisition of another piece of paper from a European institution as an enhancement to their promotion prospects. But others were genuinely seeking answers to the thousands of problems besetting them back in their own countries.

It did not require very many conversations to gain a picture of what some of them were up against. How to spare villagers from walking miles each day to fetch clean drinking water; how to prevent women and girls from being molested or raped while relieving themselves in the fields; how to stop children helping with harvests, gathering firewood or labouring in mines, instead of attending school; how to prevent people from dying of diseases when drugs costing a few cents a dose could cure them? When could planters, like those growing cocoa beans, earn enough to afford to taste the chocolates they had been producing for generations; or when workers planting, harvesting or cleaning bananas for rich corporations would no longer be exposed to chemicals rendering them sterile? How to reduce the number of suicides among tenant farmers unable to repay their debts to money-lenders or landlords; or how to prevent timber merchants, mining companies and irresponsible governments from stealing the habitats of native tribes in the name of progress?

The list could go on indefinitely. And when those problems were

compounded by tribal loyalties, caste distinctions, ingrained cultural practices, historical enmities, racial and religious intolerance, boundary disputes, proxy wars and so forth, what kind of future could vast sections of mankind look forward to? What could a bunch of powerless pen-pushing civil servants or academics achieve through any diploma course in public administration?

I felt thoroughly humbled and helpless. The saving grace was that I did not have to deal with issues as intractable as theirs. Trying to resolve how a handful of destitute old men and women ought to be fed was minuscule by comparison. Hong Kong fortunately had a largely homogenous population, locked into thousands of years of shared values, accepting their fate with a wan sigh or a shrug of the shoulder. It rendered the job of governance much easier, though restlessness was already beginning to emerge. I pitied some of my less fortunate fellow students. They were not going to find solutions to their problems in The Hague. If they were to find them at all, it would have to be within themselves, in the strength of their commitments to their fellow citizens.

One of the first classmates I made friends with was a Malaysian by the name of Sonni Pillai. He shared many of my misgivings for he was a victim of sorts, someone left dangling by the precipitous British retreat from empire.

Sonni was not an easy man to categorise. He had a very dark complexion, no doubt inherited from a long dead Ceylonese father and a Burmese mother, who was still very much alive and kicking in Rangoon. Yet in his deportment, apparel and speech, he displayed distinctively Anglo-Saxon influences. He was always neat and dapper, complete with a well-cut blazer or tweed jacket, a conservative striped tie and a pair of Hush Puppies shoes. His English was slow and deliberate, with the kind of upper class intonation which would have done justice to either Eton or Harrow. Part of that might have been acquired during his training as a barrister in London.

He was about the same height as myself but several years older. He was better fleshed as well, though without enough of a paunch to be considered

stout. Avuncular might perhaps describe him better. His face was round, smooth, hairless and cheerful and he was susceptible to a kind of giggly, womanish laughter. But his general appearance was marred by a pair of very thick spectacles which grotesquely obscured his otherwise gentle but seriously myopic eyes.

Neither of us took kindly to the freezing winds howling in from the North Sea. Sonni felt their sharpness more than I, for he considered himself “a creature of the tropics”. Although he was a boarder at the Institute, he skipped evening meals there at least once or twice a week to join me at one of the finer restaurants in The Hague. To fortify ourselves against the cold, we resorted to warming bottles of French wine during our meals. A full-bodied bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape of good vintage was our drink of choice.

Sonni proved extremely well read and our friendship ripened quickly. He had been serving as the City Secretary of Penang, a job he thoroughly enjoyed, before joining the diploma course. But the pace of Malaysian independence had left him in a pickle.

According to him, his country used to be a reasonably laid back multi-cultural and multi-racial society before the war. People of different races and religions lived together without much ado and often intermarried. But when people sought independence after the war, the British resorted to their usual tactic of divide and rule. They set about emphasising their differences, playing off one group against another, generating envy and resentments and creating fear and alarm over British departure.

By the time independence came, the country was no longer what it used to be. The racial and religious poisons the British had injected into the body politic had done their work. Preferences were granted to the Malays, their royalties and their Islamic religion. Other races were considered interlopers and forced to take a back seat.

Though Sonni was born in the country, he was neither a Malay nor a

Muslim, only a somewhat lapsed Buddhist with British citizenship. That meant his career in the civil service had come to a virtual stop. Indeed, he feared he might soon be shunted from Penang to some far less agreeable and out of the way place. There was little he could do except to quit and do something else.

I extended my sympathies. “We live in a paradoxical age, don’t we?” I observed. “Just look at the Dutch in whose midst we live. They are thoroughly likeable and as agreeable as anybody can be. One can easily embrace them as friends. But one can hardly imagine them doing some of the abominable things they did when they ran the Dutch East Indies or when they tried to crush the demand for independence by the Indonesians after the Japanese had exploded the myth of white superiority.

“It would be exactly the same with the British, wouldn’t you say? If you came across them in Devon or Lancashire, you would find them kindly, polite and utterly civilised. You could share a pint with them without the slightest hesitation. But the moment they are sent thousands of miles from their homes as instruments of British imperialism, most put on intolerable airs and become capable of rape, pillage and murder.

“Perhaps I’m too conscious of their shelling of Chinese cities during their wars with us, their looting of the Summer Palace, their massacres of my countrymen in Peking, Shanghai, Shameen, Hong Kong and elsewhere. How could human beings lose their basic humanity so easily? There are decades of investigative work psychologists of the future could do. Does greed or power or some other human trait get ignited once one people get to enslave another, once they get used to cooks, houseboys, maids and chauffeurs they never imagined having before?”

“Maybe everything can be traced back to simpler causes, like early weaning or bed-wetting or the trauma of boarding schools,” Sonni said. “Just think of all that fagging and the jolly six of the best on bare bums inflicted by sadistic or perverted masters.”

We pursued such absurd and highfalutin issues during our meals. Our generous helpings of wine encouraged the wildest of musings. We debated the teachings of the Buddha, argued about the hypocrisies of Pericles, and poked fun at the middle-aged crushes between Lady Mountbatten and Nehru or Madam Chiang Kai-Shek and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For a couple of hours at least, our fanciful indulgences drove the biting winds whining outside from our consciousness, together with the insoluble problems besetting our fellow students.

From such chance beginnings, Sonni and I developed a life-long friendship. In the years following 1965, I visited him at least twice while he remained City Secretary of Penang. He was an excellent host and had laid on parties with a wide circle of liberated lady friends at his government-provided bungalow. Each time, however, he showed me with a heavy heart the once beautiful Batu Ferringhi beach on his island being degraded by soulless developments for mass tourism. The inhabitants of the two small fishing villages that used to be there had abandoned the sea, to turn themselves into chamber maids, waiters or tourist guides. By the time of my third visit, at around the start of 1974, Sonni had already left the civil service to practise law.

He had also by then married a cheerful and buxom Indian girl by the name of Reena who was at least a couple of decades younger than himself. After a while he brought her to Hong Kong to do a three-year contract as a law draughtsman in the Attorney General's Chambers and I saw a fair bit of them before he ultimately retired back to Malaysia.

There was an amusing footnote to my friendship with Sonni, who is now unhappily no longer with this world. During one of my frequent duty trips abroad, I had sent my sons to spend a few days with him and Reena in Malaysia. The visit proved a cultural shock for my boys. At that time, many Malaysians still favoured the custom of washing their behinds with water after defecating, using their left hands, while reserving their right for eating.

My sons felt completely lost when they could not find a single sheet of toilet paper in their house. I hoped the experience had been salutary for them, because I saw no point in flying them thousands of miles to engage with another culture only to expose them to a life identical with the one they lived at home.

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When the seasons turned and spring cloaked the Dutch countryside with a fresh raiment, that land could be very beautiful indeed. It brought back to me the voice of Miss Fox reciting from Browning or Wordsworth to ears without knowledge of what was meant by spring. Yes, to see “some morning, unaware, that the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf . . . .” How short a while those innocent days at St. Andrew’s seemed, “with all the glory and freshness of a dream.”

A Dutch student organisation had arranged a subsidised weekend retreat at a countryside chalet for foreign students to enjoy Holland’s spring. The exact location escapes me now. Somewhere near Apeldorn, I think. I signed up and had hoped Sonni would join me, for I anticipated many other participants might be younger than ourselves.

But Sonni’s fancy had already turned upon a Dutch single mother young enough to be his daughter. He was anxious not to be parted from her. In the end, I and a forty-ish Thai civil servant by the name of Sunand were the only ones from the Institute to participate.

Many of the others, as I had expected, were indeed much younger, from different schools and institutions all over the Netherlands. On the first evening, after a substantial but not particularly memorable meal, a general sense of drift settled in. Sunand got himself stuck with a group in the dining hall, so I moseyed out to one of the lobbies with the remnants of my coffee.

There I found myself among youngsters with shaggy hair, unshaved

faces, coloured wrist bands, outlandish beads and dirty sandals. They were going through the normal rites of their age, talking too eagerly and too loudly. It was, after all, the promiscuous 60s, when the mantra of making love rather than war helped to obscure the hideous fact that bombs were still being dropped on faraway places to eliminate rebels, insurgents, Communist guerrillas or whoever else might be threatening the vested interests of the established governments. They still had hopes, those youngsters. Or at least they clung to as yet unbetrayed illusions.

My crew cut and Donegal tweed jacket struck me as completely out of place among them. I was 36, I reminded myself. More than half my allotment of three score and ten had gone and I had nothing to show for it. In another three months I would receive another piece of paper which would not make the slightest difference to my life. I would still be earning less than enough to fend for myself or my family since the age of 18.

It came to me I must be walking wide-eyed and helpless through a terrible dream. The Hague and the Institute were actually only a temporary parole from reality. Back home, the equivalent to an unfinished gaol sentence still had to be served. The absurd futility of my life suddenly tumbled upon me like a ton of bricks. I did not want to be left among those laughing, boisterous youngsters, nursing my private hurts. I wanted to talk to someone, about anything, so long as I could push away for a while the dismal realities confronting me.

My gaze happened upon a blonde girl, possibly Dutch or Nordic, standing near a flight of stairs leading to the sleeping quarters. She was emptying the last of her coffee. I could not really make out what she looked like at that distance. There was something incongruous about her. She was wearing a worn grey sweatshirt much too large for her, with its sleeves pushed back behind her elbows, and a pair of jeans threadbare at the knees. Both items of clothing bore stains which looked like smudges of paint.

She was probably too young for a meaningful conversation but I did not care. “Can I offer you a re-fill?” I asked, approaching her. “I’m getting one myself.”

“No, thanks,” she smiled. She had a soft, friendly mouth and displayed a fine set of teeth. “Another cup and I’ll never get to sleep,” she added. Her intonations stamped her for an American.

“Do the young need to sleep on so fine a night as this? Isn’t it supposed to be meant for wild adventures, for touching the mysterious in life, for coming face to face with the unexpected or the unknown?”

She laughed and handed me her mug. “Okay, if you put it that way.”

“Black or white? With or without sugar?”

“Black, please. No sugar.”

By then, I had caught a better sight of her lambent blue-grey eyes. They were bold, friendly and with an insinuation of mischief. Her features, too, came into better focus; quite lovely, marred only by a slightly snub nose. She had done her hair up on top of her head, which gave her the impression of being slightly frumpy but taller than she actually was. Probably around 23, I calculated, and no more than five-foot-three. Her over-sized sweatshirt, however, still hid her other physical attributes.

When I returned with the coffee, I said: “By the way, my name is David, from Hong Kong. I gather from your voice you’re American.”

“Spot on. Very pleased to meet you, David,” she said, accepting the mug of coffee with her left hand and extending her right. I shook her hand and liked her immediately -- for not abbreviating my name to that over-familiar “Dave” which Americans had a way of doing to demonstrate their friendliness.

“My friends call me Sharlee, though that’s not my real name,” she added.

“Travelling incognito? I’m always intrigued by young ladies using pseudonyms. It smacks of subterfuge, romance, secret assignments, illicit

affairs, with a decidedly 19th century feel to it.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Trying to become a painter. My real name is just too boringly bourgeois. So I sign myself Sharlee on my paintings. That’s all.”

“Oh! What a pity! I thought I had stumbled onto some wild and devious adventuress.”

”Now don’t think I had swallowed your corny line about a night for touching the mysterious either. I just couldn’t quite put together the crew cut, the British sartorial correctness, the Asian face and that Englishman’s accent you’ve got.”

“The credit for the accent belongs to a wonderful lady by the name of Miss Fox.”

“She taught you English in Hong Kong?”

“No, in Singapore.”

“So you’re really from Singapore then?”

“Well, yes and no. It’s slightly complicated.”

“And the crew cut’s popular there?”

“No, not at all. That’s from Stanford.”

“What! You’ve studied at Stanford? Then what are you doing here? Why aren’t you out asset-stripping companies, cosyng up to dictators of banana republics or doing whatever Stanford grads are supposed to be good at?”

She sounded young and idealistic, like someone who might sign up for the Peace Corps. She lifted my spirits and I wanted to engage with her. But there was a constant traffic of the young and restless swirling around where we were standing. A few smelt as if they needed a bath.

“Even the best of universities produce duds, you know. I must have been one of them. I have the distinction of failing in every job I’ve ever tried; a perfect record. But shall we move over to those stairs? We wouldn’t be in other people’s way then.”

“All right,” she said, and led the way. I seated myself a couple of steps lower than the one she had taken for herself and set my mug down on another step. No fragrance from her person was detectable even at such close quarters, I noted, only an odour of paint mingled with honest sweat. No make-up, nails trimmed short and unvarnished. Obviously not out to impress. Must like being her own woman. A rabid feminist probably. The prospect of engaging with someone like that began to look distinctly more entertaining.

“Now that we’re settled, what are you doing here?” she began. “You seem a guy who gets around. Hong Kong, Singapore, Stanford, now Holland and heaven knows where else. Are you a lecturer, some kind of agent spying on radical students or what?”

“I assure you I’m neither a lecturer nor a lookout for radical students. I just happened to be a slightly over-aged student, sent by the Hong Kong government to check out a course at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague.”

“What kind of course?”

“Public administration.”

“A government agent just the same. They send spies everywhere.”

“Please, my dear young lady. The world is not a very happy place but that does not mean that evil lurks everywhere. I really am just a civil servant, a pen-pusher, doing what I’ve been told. You’ve been questioning me like a crime suspect ever since I offered to get you a cup of coffee. Is that fair? Have I been quizzing you the same way?”

“Well, I guess not,” she said. “I’m sorry. President Kennedy’s assassination has rattled a lot of us. We’ve lost trust in the things we used to believe in. I’ll be up front with you. I’m from Ohio, originally from a farming family. A Democrat, and so are my parents and my grandparents. I love riding around in wide open spaces, on horseback. But I loved painting too. Did college, art school and all that. Then I talked my folks into giving me a year in

Holland to learn from the Dutch masters. So here I am, staying with a Dutch family in Amsterdam, trying to learn all I can.”

“I’m staying with a Dutch family too, at The Hague. And they’ve been trying to teach me something about Dutch painting too.”

“So what have you learnt?”

“Not to keep house like Jan Steen.” We both laughed and some of the underlying wariness between us dissipated. We sipped our coffee quietly for a while.

“What do you intend to do after your year is up?” I asked.

“That’ll come soon enough, sad to say. Try to make it on my own, I guess.”

“Have you discovered your *métier*?”

“Not really. I love painting human faces. Not in the way of Frans Hals, you know, all pretty and nice, being brilliant with light, but to bring out the inner essence of a subject. Rembrandt used to say that what was visible was only a bridge to what was invisible. If I could bring out some of the traits inside a person’s character, won’t that be worth doing?”

“You mean to paint someone as a Freud or a Jung might, if they could draw after analysing a person for weeks or months? I’m not sure I like that idea very much. I’d much prefer sticking with a Chinese approach.”

“What’s that?”

“Didn’t you get a dose of that at art school?”

“Not really. Different traditions, I guess.”

“Well, I’m but a dilettante but in China painting has traditionally been regarded not as a profession but rather as an avocation, a hobby, a kind of playfulness among friends and scholars. It has often been referred to as ‘playing with ink’, done for fun, for the amusement of friends at gatherings and parties. It is also aimed at suggesting reality rather than detailing it. Painters also use pseudonyms like you, only theirs tended to be more colourful and eccentric.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, names like ‘Red Trousers’ or ‘Monk of the Bitter Melon’.”

“Gosh! How can they hope to drum up sales with names like those?”

“Their paintings were never meant for selling but as gifts. Or to be left where they had painted them, on a blank garden wall, in a tea house or a brothel. Everything is done spontaneously, whenever an urge or an inspiration comes, usually after many cups of wine. They would paint with whatever is to hand, be it a roll of paper dipped in ink, the stalk of a lotus flower, bare fingers, hair from a painter’s head or even with a tongue.”

Sharlee shook her head. “How to make a living that way?”

“They’re not too bothered by that, so long as there’s plenty of wine to be had. Many lead quite simple lives. The greatest masters, before turning to painting, had distinguished themselves as scholars, poets, astronomers, officials, engineers, imperial tutors or what have you. They regard painting as an enhancement of the art of living, of reaching for that harmony with the Tao which none could properly express with words.

“The Taoist writer, Chuang Tzu, once held that the Tao could not be conveyed through either words or silences. Its transcendental nature might only be apprehended in a state that was neither speech nor silence. So our painters tried to reach it through the crooked shape of a cypress, a clump of bamboo shoots or some distant mountains obscured by mist, just going far enough to suggest a stripped-down reality while leaving the rest to the imaginations of viewers.”

I paused, wondering if I was already boring her.

“Go on,” she encouraged.

”Well, ever since the Greeks, Western art has been dominated by the human form. Chinese painters saw man only as a part of nature. If you looked at Chinese landscapes, man -- if he appears at all -- is just a tiny dot or a minute

figure tucked away somewhere. The absence of man is more often the rule than the exception.

“During the Sung Dynasty, competitive examinations used to be held under the auspices of the Imperial Bureau of Painting, whereby a line of poetry was frequently chosen as a theme. Incidentally, it has to be remembered that poetry, calligraphy and painting are all interlinked disciplines. The competitor who could bring a specified theme to fruition best becomes the winner. One year, for instance, the line ‘At the deserted ferry, a boat drifts across by itself’ was chosen.

“How to bring across the desolation, the isolation, the soundlessness of an abandoned boat adrift in a current? The winner did it by showing a bird perching quietly on the thatched roof of a boat in the middle of the stream, with another bird about to alight upon it. That clearly implied the boat was deserted, without a human soul around.”

“What a fascinating account of Chinese painting and thinking!” Sharlee cried. “How come you can rattle off these things so easily? Did you study to become a painter?”

“Good heavens, no! I just did a bit of reading here and there. That’s my trouble, a dabbler out of sync in an age of specialisations. If Chinese painting catches your fancy, I can recommend a couple of books.”

“Not in Chinese, I hope.”

“Do I look so mean-spirited?”

“No, of course not. I’m sorry. That quip was uncalled for. Please forgive me. You’ve got me hooked on Chinese painting now. I can hardly wait to get my hands on those books.”

“You’ve just demonstrated how easy it is to misread a man. How much more difficult it must be to capture someone else’s spirit in paint. Before attempting that, it might be worthwhile looking inside oneself first.”

“Oh! You’re a terrible meanie! I’m beginning to hate you!”

I chuckled. “On such a highly flattering note, I should really not spoil the fun by pointing out the hour. It is almost 3.30. The lights in the foyers have gone off while we’ve been sorting out the defects of art. We’re now sitting only by the gleam of night lights on the stairs. If you aim to join the early morning walk through the countryside after breakfast, shouldn’t you start looking for your room and roommate upstairs?”

With that we picked ourselves up and made our way up the stairs.

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The day was glorious. The air was fresh and crisp. A few wisps of clouds teased a friendly sun. There was just enough of a breeze to refresh the morning. The trodden pathways the students went along took them past woods and meadows, some scattered with the peeping yellows of daffodils. An occasional working farm sometimes intruded. The sunlight smeared patterns and shadows everywhere, upon the new leaves on stately trees and on the mossy stones bordering ditches and nameless streams. The flickering flights of insects criss-crossed our vision -- bees, flies, gnats, butterflies. Once in a while, we got startled by the sudden dash of squirrels across a path or the noisy alarum of nesting birds taking wing. It looked like van Gogh country.

My greatest surprise was to see a radically transformed Sharlee. I was still wearing my Donegal tweed jacket and slacks of the night before but gone for Sharlee were the over-sized sweatshirt, the work-worn jeans and the piled up hair. She was dressed instead in a colourful cotton floral frock made for spring. What had previously been hidden was now revealed -- a stunningly well-proportioned figure. Her breasts rose high, ample and proud. Her belted frock accentuated the slenderness of her waist, the soft curve of her belly, the sturdy sharpness of her hip bones, her firmly cushioned haunches and her shapely legs.

Her face glowed with freshness, beauty and high colour. She had let down her hair so that it flowed like a golden cloak over her back and down to her waist. Only a single red ribbon restrained its golden glory at the nape of her neck. Except for a pair of sensible walking shoes, she appeared every bit the innocent all-American beauty that Hollywood had taught the entire world to love.

I was so stunned by her transformation that I only managed to let out an utterly inadequate and banal: “You look different today.”

“You turned out to be a man of many parts last night,” Sharlee replied, “and I don’t want to appear as only a silly Ohio girl dreaming of becoming a painter. I too possess other personalities, you know.”

“And, if I may be so bold, I cannot think of any personality more lovely and agreeable to go walking with in the countryside,” I said.

She conferred upon me an ambiguous look with her blue-grey eyes and a half-smile of dubious forgiveness as we strode along. The rest of the party had gone on at a faster clip while we dawdled to take in the natural wonders of spring.

I inhaled the sweet country air with relish, with a lovely woman by my side, and all at once it occurred to me that all the other springs I had experienced in Perth, in Hong Kong and elsewhere had played me false. They had all been in urban settings rather than in the countryside and hence not really genuine. Indeed, rather contaminated. That realisation suddenly released all the joys of the season had hitherto held back. I felt like singing, dancing, skipping through the grassy meadows like a child. The long-ago poems taught by Miss Fox came rushing back. But I declaimed instead some verses from Omar Khayyam, for it seemed the miracle would not last.

“What have we here? A bard as well!” Sharlee trilled with delight. “Carry on, by all means carry on.”

Both a physical and an intellectual chemistry started to work its

magic through our bloodstreams and by the time we went our separate ways on Sunday, we had already agreed to meet in Amsterdam on the following weekend so that we might view the Rembrandts at the Rijksmuseum.

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Sharlee and I sat on a bench in front of The Night Watch at the Rijksmuseum to examine the composition and the light effects of Rembrandt's famous painting. Sharlee pointed out its many symbolisms. The black clothes and the red scarf of the captain represented the colours of Amsterdam. Black was also the colour of wisdom because the captain was a magistrate as well. The golden hat of the lieutenant represented liberty. The green oak leaves decorating the helmet of the shooting boy were the sign of civil protection. The dog being driven away from the drummer signified that the evil which had broken loose was now over. And so on.

After about 25 minutes, I said: "There are too many details and symbolisms in Rembrandt for my liking. Have you noticed something else? While we have been sitting here, scores of people have passed by. Each had spent barely three seconds on a picture which had taken the painter three years to execute. I suppose they all want to go home and be able to tell friends they had seen The Night Watch. When art elicits no engagement, doesn't it all boil down to an act of futility?"

We did not attempt to answer that question but went instead through some of the rest of the exhibits before breaking for a simple lunch. Afterwards, Sharlee led us on a leisurely stroll along cobblestone paths and walks by the side of the city's numerous canals. We crossed ancient bridges, surveyed warehouses formerly used for the spice and other trades, visited open air markets, cast our eyes upon the under-clad women offering their physical wares in the windows in the red light districts, and stopped for coffee when appropriate. We did not talk

much. The sheer delight of absorbing the atmosphere of a fine city in empathetic company was sufficient. We finally ended at the Dam, the square with the National Monument, where hippies foregathered to get their kicks from cannabis and other stimulants.

“You’ll need to grow your hair longer before you can fit in here,” Sharlee joked.

“I wouldn’t want to be here, for I don’t like the smell of whatever they may be smoking,” I replied. “The odour of opium is what I crave. I developed a taste for it when my grandfather smoked it with his friends. I imagine nowadays I would have to go to a country like Laos before I could savour that smell again or to smoke it legally.”

By then I was ready to unveil a couple of entertaining places I had heard about from the Schoonhovens. An old bar and distillery serving a potent drink called *Half en Half* was supposed to be in one of the side streets running off the Dam Square. The concoction was said to be a mixture of *jenever* and a three times distilled malt *brandewijn* or brandy. It had a combined alcoholic content of approximately 35%. After judicious reconnaissance around the neighbourhood, we found the place. A couple of helpings of that celebrated drink made us very jolly indeed.

For dinner, I had another surprise up my sleeve. I took Sharlee to a 300-year-old restaurant called The Five Flies. It had an atmosphere appropriate to its extended history. On the menu was a dish described as “Half Wild Duck accompanied by seasonal vegetables”. We were in such a merry mood by then that I decided to have a bit of fun with the waitress. Her standard of English was less than impeccable and I took advantage of it. When I ordered, I said both of us wanted duck but it had to be a completely wild one. I threw in an order for a bottle of house wine for good measure.

The waitress brought the wine quickly enough. But after a few minutes she returned somewhat confused. She reported that the kitchen thought

she had made a mistake; a whole duck for each customer might be too much. It took some explaining before the waitress caught our play on words. We would both be happy with half a duck, I explained, provided it was a genuinely wild and not a domesticated one.

There was a small mezzanine ledge inside the restaurant where some of the original implements once used hundreds of years ago were on display. Customers were encouraged to inspect them.

Once we had finished our quite satisfying meal and our bottle of wine, we climbed up to that ledge. The narrowness of the space forced Sharlee and I to be quite physically close. In an instant, our arms enfolded and we kissed with abandonment. It became inevitable that we would spend that night together in my hotel.

\* \* \*

The human memory consistently plays tricks on us, determining quite arbitrarily what we can remember and what we should forget. So far as I was concerned, I could remember nothing thereafter about the fabulous spring of 1965 which was not associated in some way or other with Sharlee. I could not recall the lectures I attended, the papers I wrote, the disputations with instructors or fellow students, not even the graduation ceremony when I was handed another fancy piece of paper. All that I could bring back with reasonable sharpness were the times we were together, the desperate urgency of waiting for weekends when I would rush to Amsterdam to see her or else to live on tenterhooks for one of her less frequent sojourns to The Hague.

Her first visit to The Hague almost ended in a minor disaster. She had somehow managed to come on a week day and I was so hungry for her that I took her immediately from the train station to No. 78 Gentsestraat. I knew that the colonel would be in Brussels and the children would be in school. But I had

overlooked Mrs. Schoonhoven. Sound travelled terribly in those old houses. When Sharlee and I were half-naked, I heard Mrs. Schoonhoven knocking on my door.

“I’m making some tea,” she said. “Would you and your friend care for a cup?”

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Schoonhoven,” I cried, “but we’ve just finished taking tea.”

We held our breath until we had heard her diplomatically heavy tread climbing back up the stairs.

On Sharlee’s subsequent visits, I introduced her to Sonni and his Dutch girl friend and we had a couple of meals together. We even went dancing one evening at a night club.

But in the back sweep of memory, the poignancy of what was between us would always be during the hours after love, when the darkness of modest hotel rooms would surrender sight to hearing, smell and touch. We had felt the closest then, in the sounds and words we made, our different pungencies and the varying sensations by lips or tongue or fingers on secret parts of skin. We had no need to speak of love, for everything that required to be conveyed had already been conveyed without words.

When we spoke, it was often of grand abstractions, of karma and the chain of causation which had brought us where we were, of Taoist imponderables and endless change, of fates that could not be foretold but only accepted.

We shied away from personal matters, for fear of having to trade in lies. We wanted no lies between us. And yet, would telling a partial truth not be worse than telling a lie? It was not purely a philosophical question but one of psychological and emotional survival.

I suspected Sharlee must be fairly certain I was married, just as I had enough common sense to accept that a girl as beautiful as she must have a clean-

cut American football hero or two mooning after her back in Ohio. But neither of us wanted to know more of what might be regarded as our respective “facts”.

We were both patently thieves, trying to steal for ourselves a slice of a pulsating present, without dragging with us the baggage of dead yesterdays or the unborn tomorrows.

Once or twice we did venture perilously close to the personal but had been quick enough to back off.

“You’re too extraordinary a man to settle for being a pen-pusher,” Sharlee allowed one evening, as she ruffled her fingers reflectively through my crew cut. I was resting my face partially on her shoulder and partially against a breast that was rising and ebbing gently with the regularity of her breathing. “Can’t imagine you simply doing what you’re told either. You’re not meant for that kind of life.”

“It puts food on the table and pays the rent,” I replied.

“But what about that hidden something I can detect inside you, raging to get out?”

“A struggling artist in a garret is one of the most over-used caricatures in popular literature. I’ve never come across one who can stop eating for very long. I did try it once, writing short stories. But nobody wanted them.”

“If you wrote one for me, I would definitely want it.”

“All right. I’ll write one for you, one of these days.”

“Not any old story, but one with enough heart to be worthy of you. Will you promise me that?”

“All right. I promise.”

\* \* \*

At one of our subsequent assignments, about three weeks later, Sharlee handed me two paintings -- one showing part of a galloping horse and

the other the face of a woman with a somewhat unsettled look.



One of the untitled paintings by Sharlee

“I’ve done these two for you,” she said simply, in passing them over.

“Two early works by Sharlee!” I exclaimed. “Oh, thank you. I’m overwhelmed. I shall treasure them. They’ll be worth a fortune one day. What have you titled them?”

“I haven’t. You can create your own.”

“Tough assignment. The face, especially, will be a challenge. I have nothing comparable to give in return, as Chinese artistic tradition and courtesy would dictate.”

“Have you forgotten your promise of a story?”

“But that is something far in the future. It might be years before I can make good. I haven’t put together a sentence worth two cents for years. For all anyone knows, I might be condemned to putting out nothing but turgid government propaganda for the next 20 years.”

“I can wait. You look like a man who can keep his promises. That’s good enough for me.”

\* \* \*

July dropped like a guillotine upon us. There was nothing to say which was not already understood between us. Sharlee gave me the address of her parents in Ohio because she was uncertain of her own movements. I did not want to give my address at Wise Mansion. I assured her I would write once I knew where I would be posted when I got back to Hong Kong. It was a truth already wrapped around the seed of a deceit.

I did write to her and we exchanged two or three letters filled with the prosaic accounts of everyday activities and routines. It was clear that neither of us dared to go beyond the mundane. The letters quickly petered out.

Ten years were to pass before Sharlee and I were to meet again for a brief encounter in New York.