

Strangers When They Part

It was an hour after midnight when Jim Rowlands sat up in his hostel bed and lit a cigarillo. The space next to him, vacated by Peony more than an hour ago, still seemed warm. He knew it was his unease over the ending of their affair that was robbing him of sleep. He had hoped to end everything smoothly, with a bit of tenderness, with a few tears and with that brave bowing to the inevitable which would leave a sentimental afterglow.

But all week he had found himself full of hesitation, experiencing strange catches in the heart and quite unable to act out the parting he had planned. To make matters worse, when his departure on the morrow finally compelled him to bring up the subject, Peony had not behaved at all in the way he had expected. Thus the whole issue remained dangling unsatisfactorily in the air.

It was absurd that both his personal and his professional life should be threatened with disintegration simply because Picardy Handbags had decided to promote him to Director of Marketing. For a man on the wrong side of 50, it was a disastrous position to be in. Up to that point, his life had seemed very agreeably organised, with an English wife in Ealing, a Chinese mistress in Hong Kong and a job which took him to more foreign countries in a year than an average person would see in a lifetime.

Jim had always been amazed at how far a bit of specialist knowledge could get a person nowadays. His expertise lay in bags. His first job after school had been that of a salesman for an importer, selling shoppers and totes to department stores and speciality chains. He had drifted into it for want of a better alternative, because he did not wish to end up in the family's butcher shop.

Although he had the salesman's natural gift of the gab, he did not find the work to his liking. Knocking on strange doors and extolling the virtues of products he had no great faith in seemed a dreary way of spending the rest of his life. Therefore, when a post of buyer at Picardy Handbags was advertised, he applied. As luck would have it, his smooth talk and his knowledge of bags, coupled with a finely modulated voice and self-assured manners, had proven sufficient to land him the job. The latter qualities he had acquired by mimicking practitioners of the thespian art, for he had fallen in love with the theatre at an early age.

William Picardy, a manufacturer of leather handbags, had founded the firm several decades ago, but his successors had since turned the company into a High Street speciality chain offering all manner of bags for ladies. The job of buyer involved three trips to the Far East every year, each lasting about a month, to source everything from fashion bags and evening bags to toilet bags and dainty coin purses. It also involved a number of trips to Spain, Italy, Morocco and other nearby places to

secure products requiring shorter lead times. In addition, there was an annual round of international exhibitions and trade fairs to attend.

That had been the pattern of Jim's life since joining Picardy. But in spite of his hard work, his punishing travels and his legendary attention to details, his career had languished. It was not that his purchases were failures. On the contrary, they sold steadily, thanks to that part of the clientele made up of middle-aged mums and maiden aunts. The problem was that he never achieved any spectacular success. He was a slavish follower of fashion rather than a leader. He simply had no knack for anticipating the next fad to sweep the market.

So, reconciling himself to that shortcoming, Jim had allowed colleagues to label his seasonal selections as "the new Gladys range". Gladys, of course, was the name of his wife. It was not till he had taken up with Peony some seven years back that he began astounding one and all by selecting sell-outs season after season. That soon earned him promotion to Chief Buyer. But little did anyone suspect that his sudden sureness of touch originated from an Oriental mistress.

Peony was a merchandiser with the Winsum Accessories, a Hong Kong manufacturer of leather goods. Jim had been attracted by one of its advertisements. When he arrived at the factory, he was attended by Peony, because she was the only one there with a knowledge of English.

Peony was at that time in her early 20s, a mere slip of a girl dressed in unfashionable clothes obviously a couple of sizes too large. She was of average height and her skin, though clear, displayed that dull ivory pallor common to her race. A daub of powder and a touch of rouge would have livened up her appearance no end. But she preferred to shun all cosmetics and thus conveyed an air of wholesome drabness, so much so that no one would give her a second glance if she went by in the streets. There was, however, a briskness in her movements which identified her as one of those energetic workers staffing the countless offices and enterprises in Hong Kong.

On closer examination, however, something of Peony's inner personality could be detected. There was an insinuation of sadness about her features, heightened by melancholy brown eyes filled with watchfulness and suspicion. It was as if she had previously been tricked out of something and was not about to be fooled again. Her mouth seemed to be formed in a perpetual pout but that was only an illusion created by lips less than ideally matched. Her upper lip was disproportionately long, so that it curled gently upwards above the lower lip. The effect was not altogether unbecoming.

When Jim first started working with her, he thought her the perfect inscrutable Oriental. All her thoughts seemed safely locked away. She never spoke more than necessary to deal with the matters at hand. Even after they had become lovers, she never volunteered a solitary fact nor offered any unsolicited opinion.

Because Jim himself was less than inquisitive about his conquests, what he knew about her, even after seven years, did not amount to much.

Jim stubbed out what remained of his cigarillo and went over to the collection of miniature bottles of alcohol provided in the rooms of the better class hotels. He selected a bottle of Chivas Regal, poured its contents into a glass and began drinking it neat. He did not want to spoil the flavour by adding ice or soda. On the way back to the bed, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

What a mess he looked, he thought, as he regarded the unpleasant apparition dressed in only pyjama trousers. What had happened to the debonair young man of yesteryear, who could charm ladies at will? If he had to describe the present image, he would have to say that it had unreliable eyes, a flabby nose and a dissolute mouth. The face and the body sagged and the roll of loose fat around the waist was quite disgusting. The hair on the chest was streaked with grey and the dark bags under the eyes testified to a life that had been far from exemplary.

Bags under the eyes and bags in his luggage, Jim thought. Bags throughout his working life and an old bag at home. Everyone had to start life in a bag filled with liquid, but why did he have to be dogged by bags ever after? If he were not careful, he might even end up in one. While Gladys might turn a blind eye to some of his minor peccadilloes, she would not be above killing him if she ever found out about Peony. Or else Peony might kill him for her own inscrutable reasons, especially after his bungled attempt to explain what a promotion would mean for their relationship.

Though he had long enjoyed success with women, he wondered what Peony saw in him now. Apart from retaining a certain fastidiousness over clothes, he had allowed himself to go to seed. His health had deteriorated and his eyesight and hearing were not what they used to be. He suffered from high blood pressure and a persistent smoker's cough. He was also prone to frequent bouts of influenza. All his ailments could probably be traced back to his way of life, to those constant changes in time zones, late nights on the town, smoking too much, drinking too much and

Jim chuckled wryly. He was about to complete his thoughts with "loving too much" but he knew that to be untrue. He had only fornicated too much, with dance hostesses and shady ladies from Taipei to Bangkok, with abandoned wives and lonely divorcees frequenting certain bars in Manila and Singapore. Sexual promiscuity, now curbed by both advancing age and a less than appealing appearance, was not the same as love.

Love was foreign territory. It was like a popular tourist destination which virtually everyone could talk about from experience but which he knew only through hearsay. The earth was supposed to move during the act of love. But it never moved for him nor for any of the exotic ladies from foreign parts. Not for

Gladys, not for Peony. He wondered why those infinities of passion he was always reading about should have eluded him. Was it because he had sought only to satisfy those grosser appetites of the groin without giving anything in return?

Jim discovered to his surprise he had already finished his whisky while ruminating in front of the mirror. He refilled his glass with a double for good measure. What the hell, he thought, one good drink deserved another. It was all on the company's account anyway.

Jim returned to the bed with the drink and lit another cigarillo. As he inhaled, he broke out in a spasm of coughing. After it had subsided, he turned his thoughts to the two women sharing his life.

Sharing! He laughed out loud over the misuse of the word and that started him coughing again. He might have married Gladys but he had shared practically nothing with her. She had been a typist in the importer's office and one of his early conquests. If they had shared anything at all, it could only have been that animal lust which rushed them to the marriage registry with indecent haste.

Once the lust had been assuaged, there was little left. They had both wanted a child but none came. That denial gave rise to furtive resentments. Each felt condemned by the other to being the last of a pitiful stock. Neither had been large enough or secure enough to go for medical tests to identify the root of the problem. Instead each nursed a cancerous bitterness against the other.

Their life together soon settled into a stultifying routine, requiring practically nothing in the way of emotional outlay. When he was home, Gladys would chatter to him incessantly about the tomatoes in the garden, her Wednesday afternoon bridge parties, her Friday morning cooking lessons, Mrs. Miller's cat, Aunt Bertha's birthday present and a thousand other items of domestic trivia. He would make sympathetic noises at appropriate intervals, while the prattle washed over him. For his own part, he told her as little of his work and travels as he could get away with. He kept the problems of the office to himself, for he did not want to be embarrassed by her useless and excessive commiserations.

Once, when his attention had wandered more than usual during one of her monologues and he had failed to make the timely noises, Gladys had remarked: "Sometime I think you can't hear a word I say. Sometimes I even wonder if you're really married to me. You're probably really only married to your bags."

That was about as close as Gladys ever got to lodging a complaint. She accepted their life as it was, with its financial security and its conventional comforts. She did her wifely duties but, given their secret resentments, their couplings brought neither fulfilment nor a sense of renewal.

He could always count on her to ask if he was quite finished before she disappeared into the bathroom for that douche-bag hanging behind the door. It had often struck him as extraordinary how she could ask that question in the same tone of

voice employed for enquiring about clearing away the dinner dishes. He had occasionally wondered whether other couples lived lives as meaningless and belittling as theirs.

His relationship with Peony, on the other hand, contained more mystery and substance. Their common interest in bags had formed the initial bond. That led to their sexual involvement. Because they knew so little about each other, every meeting seemed to promise something to be discovered. They met three times a year for a week on each occasion, and that week would be spent in a frenzy of work and love-making.

He remembered the first season they worked together. She had been professional and a tough negotiator, so much so that he suspected she might not altogether approve of him. He had retaliated by placing only a modest trial order, although he realised at once that she knew her bags inside out.

The following season had been a tough one. Recession had set in and, to make matters worse, there had been one of those periodic runs on Sterling. As a consequence, budgets had to be slashed and adverse exchange rates cut further into what Sterling could buy.

By the time he got to Hong Kong, he was already over budget with items out of South Korea and Taiwan. He therefore cancelled his appointment with Winsum to avoid exacerbating an already hopeless task. The next thing he knew was Peony knocking of his hotel room door.

“How can you do this to me, Mr. Rowlands?” Peony had demanded. “I have prepared everything for you. If you don’t place a single order, my boss will think I have offended you and I will be fired.”

“It has nothing to do with you or Winsum products,” he said. “Britain is in recession. Sales are down and stocks are not moving. Look!” He waved an arm over the Korean and Taiwanese samples scattered all over the room. “I’m already over budget with those. I’ll have to make cuts. So I can’t possibly look at anything else.”

Peony had cast her eyes over the collection in silence. Then she asked: “Do you mind telling me some of their prices? I know it’s not very ethical but I may be able to do better.”

He shrugged his shoulders. He had not been bothered so much by the ethical considerations as by the sheer futility of the exercise. But once they got down to it, Peony proved a gem. She had that unique touch for styling and construction which enabled her to pinpoint ways of reducing costs. She would do it through questions -- about whether an additional zipper or some extra stitching was really necessary, whether a cheaper fabric could produce the same effect, or whether some alternative construction might make for less labour. He had to confess that some of those questions should have occurred to him but had not.

They worked from early afternoon right through a hurried dinner brought up by room service. Then, as the session continued into the night, he had managed to switch some items to Winsum at more favourable prices. He had also settled on design changes which would reduce the cost on other items. The pressure thus gradually eased and they began to relax with a few drinks. By the end of the evening he had not only met his budget but had got together an improved range.

“Peony, you’re a treasure!” he declared. “You’ve been an immense help. I won’t forget this.”

When she was about to leave around midnight and they shook hands, something made him hold onto her hand for a fraction of a second longer than he had intended. That in turn gave rise to an irresistible impulse to kiss her. So, on the spur of that moment, he drew her towards himself and she had not resisted. Before long, they were in bed.

Peony had turned out to be full of surprises. She had a marvellous figure hidden beneath her baggy clothes. She boasted rounded buttocks which flared magnificently from the arched hollow of her back. Her breasts were small but proud. Her body was firm and smooth as satin, and seemed to exude some heady Eastern aroma. There were telltale stretch marks around her hips, however, and her love-making had been surprisingly experienced.

“You have been hiding your light under a bushel,” he remarked. “Why do you disguise your figure under such baggy clothes?”

“Do you think it wise to appear feminine when you spend most of your time in a factory full of crudely educated men?”

Jim got up to get another drink. The alcohol was heightening his introspective mood. He felt a reckless desire to face up to the small evasions and everyday pretences to bolster his image. He began to see with a frightening clarity all the little deceptions that had become second nature to him, like the simulated upper class intonations in his speech, the wearing of a public school tie to which he had no title and the ready acceptance of credit for bag designs which properly belonged to Peony. Facing up to those truths made him feel disgusted with himself.

You are a fraud and a cad, Rowlands, he admonished. All your life you have practised deceit in taking women as fair game. Peony was in all probability both a wife and a mother and you have turned her into a adulteress without the slightest compunction. Neither did you have the decency to guard her against getting in a family way or infecting her with one of those sexually transmitted diseases that you constantly expose yourself to. Even now, years after the event, you are still a fraud and a cad, exploiting her both sexually and professionally. You have taken for granted every pleasure you took just because you have the power to place or withhold your miserable orders!

Jim felt such a wave of self-revulsion that he downed his next drink in one gulp. He then discovered that the room was out of Chivas Regal. He reluctantly settled for another brand.

When had he cared about anything apart from bags and those indulgences in sex, alcohol and tobacco, he wondered. And he had not even been good with bags until Peony came along. As for his choice of women, none had been particularly memorable. He had married poorly to boot. Although he had provided Gladys with a reasonable home, he had allowed her to suffer alone the anguish of their childless estate. That reflected less than creditably upon him.

He had behaved just as shamefully with Peony. For seven years he had simply picked her brains, slept with her, placed his orders and left. He had not cared enough to enquire into her personal circumstances. Was she really married or divorced? Was her family adequately housed? Did her job at Winsum pay enough for her to make ends meet? Did she have children to bring up or an invalid mother to support? What were her hopes, her dreams?

There were a thousand questions he could have asked, a thousand gestures he could have made to express his concern. Instead, he had simply taken his shallow enjoyments like plunder. The only questions he had asked were about shipment dates and colour-fastness and whether tote straps had passed their drop-tests.

Until now he had never speculated over what Gladys or Peony might be doing during his absence. He had told himself they could be free agents like he was. He had deluded himself that such lack of concern was a reflection of his open-mindedness and lack of masculine possessiveness. So why should he now be troubled by the prospect of never seeing Peony again? Was it because he was afraid he could not cope with his new job without the backing of her expertise? Or because he had at last slipped into an attachment without realising it?

He now remembered that he had actually missed Peony one year when she did not attend to him during two successive trips. It had made him feel as if he had returned home after a tiring day to find his comfortable sippers unaccountably missing or his favourite armchair taken away for repairs.

Peony's substitute at Winsum had explained that Peony had been given leave to tend her sick mother in China. His restlessness over her absence, he recalled, had gone beyond his worry over the loss of her advice, although that year's purchases certainly had not turned out a success.

From that time onwards he fell into the habit of bringing Peony some small present on each of his trips, in the same way he had brought knickknacks for Gladys. But whereas Gladys made conspicuous display of his presents, he had never seen Peony use any of the perfumes, earrings and other items he had given her. He

had somehow resisted the temptation to ask for reasons, possibly because he was afraid that the answers might not be to his liking.

Peony should be the easiest of women to disengage from. He had made no declarations of love, no promises of marriage. She for her part had made no demands. So why should he feel that undefinable sense of something amiss in the ending of their affair?

Ending it he had to, because there simply was no way to maintain a relationship at long distance when his new job would end his regular trips to the Far East. Instead, he would have to struggle with the less familiar terrain of weekly sales returns, inventory levels, budgetary controls and store displays. He should be able to cope after a bit of practice.

But nothing would be any good unless he could pass the right judgements on proposals from the buying teams. He had not been able to do so before at a lower level, so there was no reason to suppose he could do it now. The services of a Chief Buyer were essential to getting the right products into the shops. But where could he find a Chief Buyer with Peony's type of flair? That was the rub.

Earlier that evening, even before he had a chance to talk about his promotion, Peony had asked if he had something on his mind. It was uncanny how she could read his moods better than Gladys. So he began in a roundabout way to tell her about the offer of a directorship and what that would mean in terms of new responsibilities and financial rewards.

As he rambled on with a lot of inconsequential details, Peony cut him short. "What you are trying to say is that you won't be out this way on a regular basis any more, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That means things are over between us?"

"Not necessarily. I don't want anything to change. But I won't be able to manage more than one visit a year in future. It will also be shorter, just to show the flag for the buyers and suppliers, you know. It won't be quite the same. But we can still see each other."

"That won't work, will it? We're both adults. Life involves change. We've had our fun. So let's just move on."

"I didn't mean to spring the news on you like this."

"It's all right. It's better this way," Peony said, gently. "Good luck with your new job." She then got out of bed, dressed and kissed him goodbye. She had gone with no argument, no recrimination, no pleading, no tears.

Damn, damn, damn, Jim thought. Something in his bowels told him that, less than a hundred minutes ago, he had it in his power for one brief and critical moment to change the whole equation of his life. He had the right words on the tip of his tongue but he had not uttered them. Then that power had slipped away from him.

Now he was left with only a feeling of shabby regret, of something unfinished which would remain forever so.

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It was several weeks later, after Jim had been ensconced in his new office as Director of Marketing, that a carton from Winsum Accessories landed on his desk. It looked no different from a thousand other cartons which had emanated from Winsum over the years, except that this was marked for his personal attention. The sight of it evoked wistful memories. The realisation that his life would never be the same again suddenly hit him with full force and he felt an acute sense of loss.

It would be the last box of samples he would ever receive from Peony, he thought. He hesitated between opening it and simply sending it to the mailing room. Samples were somebody else's business now. He had enough problems of his own. But in the end he decided to open it. He let out a gasp when he saw its contents. All the presents he had ever given Peony were there, still in their original wrappings. There was also a letter.

"Please do not try to find us, because by the time you receive this letter I will have left Winsum," the letter began. "I think I should tell you that you have a son. He is now three years old. It was wrong of me to keep this from you for so long but I did not know how such news might affect you. I had a son once and I lost him. I did not want to lose another.

"Could there have been any real love between us? I don't know. I have sometimes wondered. If there had been, things might have worked out differently. Perhaps we both allowed things to drift too much, so that we ended up just using each other. You wanted pleasure and business success and I wanted a son to replace the one I lost. We both got what we wanted, didn't we? The presents you have given me would have been worth keeping if they had been genuine tokens of love. But we both know they were not, so I am returning them.

"I hope you like your new job. We can now continue with our separate lives. It is better this way."

Jim felt his head spin as he read the letter. It had given him something of infinite value and at the same time taken away something equally precious. All the undifferentiated yearnings that had been troubling him for weeks suddenly turned into an unbearable longing.

He realised at once that what he had experienced with Peony was about as close to love as he would ever get. How blind he had been not to have seen it. It was now too late. He knew there would never be any escape from the echoing desolation in his heart.

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