

CHAPTER 8

Of Love and Lust (Part I)

NO READER SHOULD GET EXCITED by the title of this chapter and that of the next. Very little in the way of sexual titillation will be in them. If anyone expects a confession *à la* Rousseau or Tolstoy, his hopes will be dashed. Neither will the chapters contain naughty bits like those in Chinese erotic classics like *Chin Ping Mei* or *Before Midnight Scholar*.

Indeed, they will not even get anything as saucy as H. G. Wells' *Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography*. Wells detailed an account of a country walk with Elizabeth von Arnim, during which they took their clothes off under some pine trees, opened up a copy of the *Times* at a page featuring a woman's complaint about the immoral tone in the works of young writers, and then proceeded — in his words — to “made love all over Mrs. Humphry Ward.”

In my chapters, no lady outside my own family need ever fear her real name being revealed in any sexual indiscretion. If they had been at the centre of escapades I am writing about, then they can rest assured their identities and the circumstances of their indiscretions will be suitably disguised.

I have to acknowledge, however, that the title of the chapters has been cribbed from a book of the same name written by the Viennese psychiatrist Theodor Reik. He had defined love as an attempt to change a piece of a dream world into reality and had advanced the proposition that a man would

probably never be wise in love if he had never made a fool of himself in love. Those were judgements I could subscribe to.

Something similar had been said by Samuel Johnson, who deemed love to be the wisdom of the fool and the folly of the wise. Having received such warnings from various notables, I should perhaps have refrained from venturing into a realm where angels have generally feared to tread. But nature has, incongruously, given me a reckless and iconoclastic disposition. So I simply had to rise to the challenge.

Hence the deliberate choice of title for these chapters. So many books have been written about these two human emotions that I might as well add my take to the collection. Few of the books written, however, have been enlightening. They have in the main been unrealistic or unauthentic, filled with psycho-babble. The problem has often stemmed from their loose usage of the words “love” and “lust”.

Such words are by their very nature quite greasy have been used to refer to a multiplicity of conditions in a variety of situations. For instance, a person can talk in one breath about loving his parents or siblings and in the next about loving freedom, justice or peace. Another person might use that same word to express his fondness for *dim sum* or bird-watching or designer shoes or ice cream cones. And what child would not love an ice cream cone on a hot summer’s day? Possibly that might even be his or her first awakening of lust!

The religiously inclined, like my maternal grandparents, might employ the word “love” to project their feelings towards a God nobody has ever seen. My grandparents must have been truly blessed, for they had not seen and yet believed. Indeed, they had spent most of their lives trying to persuade countless others to believe.

Romantic poets and writers harness the same word for their own purposes, often without distinguishing it from the far baser instinct of lust. Quotations from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* illustrate the problem. “I loved not yet, yet I loved to love . . . I sought what I might love, loving to love,” the saint had

written. A trifle confusing, no doubt. His plea to God was also telling. “Give me chastity and continence — but not yet!” If a saint had trouble coming to terms with his baser feelings, what chance has a poor ordinary sod of understanding those apocalyptic moments when they strike and overwhelm?

It goes without saying that “lust” is equally unreliable. It requires little imagination to visualise a person lusting after money, power, dominance, fame or glory, quite apart from that for the flesh. Different societies simply have to decide for themselves which form of lust might be more unsavoury.

The books I have read have contributed little to my understanding of messy events within my own family or, later on, within my own life. Take, for instance, the relationships between my parents and the tantalisingly beautiful and languid Anna, my mother’s erstwhile bridesmaid and best friend. To complicate matters further, Anna also happened to be a member of our extended Wong clan.

Chinese tradition, Christian morality and the obligations of friendship would have rendered unthinkable any sexual relationship between my father and Anna. It had been on that basis, so far as I had been able to make out, that my mother had entrusted my father to Anna’s care, while she herself went off to take gainful employment in Canton. And yet, somehow, my father had ended up siring four children by Anna, before finally marrying her a few decades later!

When news of that love triangle first emerged, my father’s explanation had been he loved both my mother and Anna. As simple as that. A council of family elders was convened to consider that awkward situation. It ruled against the liaison of the two offenders; our clan had a strongly-held taboo on sex between those tied by blood in the same clan.

My grandfather, however, suggested that since the matter had reached such a pass, an alternative solution might be possible. My father could marry both of them. Polygamy was quite proper, legal and socially acceptable back then. My grandfather himself was reputed to have had nine wives.

My maternal grandparents, on the other hand, having been converted to Christianity, objected to such a solution. Notwithstanding their mindfulness of original sin and their supposed Christian capacity for forgiveness, they argued for monogamy. The elders, after much to-ing and fro-ing, eventually came down against continuing that unacceptable relationship. They required my father to apologise to my mother and to seek forgiveness. He did so on bended knees.

My father's inner feelings, then or later, have remained unknown to me. To this day, I have no idea whether he ever broached the double marriage solution to either my mother or to his paramour. He was then only a university student, entirely dependent upon my grandfather. I can only surmise that the prospect of continuing his studies lumbered with two wives — and an uncertain number of dependent children — must have terrified him more than a little.

On my mother's part, she apparently accepted my father's apology and resumed conjugal relations. My younger brother, Tzi-Choy, stands as testimony of those activities having taken place.

In spite of the ruling of the elders, however, my father and Anna soon resumed their affair. Was that due to the power of love or of lust? A very open question.

In the case of my father, it could have been either or both. When the chips were down and a choice had to be made, he chose Anna. Why? Was Anna temperamentally a more equitable person to cohabit with or merely more sexually exciting? Was love, in all its tempestuous glory, the victor? My father never let on and neither had anyone else.

If it had been love, his subsequent actions contradicted it — unless one accepted the notion that love was merely a transitory intoxication. He was separated from Anna for the duration of the Japanese occupation of Singapore. After they had been reunited, he stayed with her for barely a year before decamping for Hong Kong. There he remained for another ten years.

Again why? Hardly the behaviour of a man genuinely in love with a devoted woman.

My mother was understandably incensed by what went on between her husband and her best friend. The Christian marriage vows of cherishing each other unto death, sanctified in a house of God, had to be undone. And so it was, by some more mundane temporal authority.

When I was a child, some of those puzzling events frequently crossed and re-crossed my mind. But the most nagging one was where exactly did children like myself and my siblings fit in. That lack of clarity left me with a sense of something missing from my life, though I could not at the time quite pin down what it was.

As I grew older, I tried to gain greater clarity. It was not so much a lack of security, a want of attention or an absence of affection that affected me most. My grandparents, my Aunt Soo-Leung and Aunt Kwei, and Ah Sei, that marvellous hunchbacked servant, provided an abundance of all that. Perhaps it was just my abnormal desire to know my rightful place within an extended family, whether it was conditional upon good behaviour or whether there was a shade of differentiation between being the firstborn and the rest. Both my parents had been as uncommunicative as a sphinx. Other elders had not been very forthcoming either.

As for Anna's attitude in that *mêlée* of love, I suspected she might have been simply infatuated with my father or overwhelmed by him. I had seen during my boyhood and later how his smooth-talking ways could exert a remarkable effect upon many women.

Anna's own temperament over the subsequent decades added a further element to the puzzle. She betrayed not the slightest suggestion of a voracious sexual appetite, for she had endured years of abstinence and loneliness during the war. Later, she again waited patiently for ten years for my father to return to marry her. Was she another Penelope capable of so cruel an amputation by both time and space?

And what of her friendship with — and commitment to — my mother, a woman who had entrusted her husband to her, because she had been her bridesmaid and best friend? Wittingly or unwittingly she had stolen that husband. How much guilt or regret did she feel?

On all those issues, Anna had also remained like a sphinx. Over the many years I had lived with her under the same roof, both in Singapore and in Perth, she had never uttered a word about her feelings towards my father. The only impression I got was that she did not relish the sight of *me*. This she conveyed through a coldness, which was strangely without either anger or hatred. Could I be merely reminding her of phantoms she would rather forget? Did I stand out too much, like an accusing finger pointing towards an immoral crime?

When that ancient family kerfuffle first started, I had been only an infant, without any awareness of what was actually taking place. A glimmer of awareness only emerged much later.

What I have recorded here represents only a few scattered fragments of what I could piece together from overheard conversations among elders, plus a few judicious speculations of my own. It is far from a complete picture of the tangle my parents and Anna had left behind.

Now that all the main players have departed the scene, it can only forever remain an incomplete jigsaw, with too many crucial pieces still missing.

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What lessons about love or lust can be learnt from such a tangled history? Probably not very many. Times and social fetishes always change faster than social institutions. Scientists may throw a little more light on this or that, on subconscious drives towards pullulation, genetic instincts and predispositions, human vulnerability to conditioning, like Pavlov's dogs and Skinner's rats, and so forth.

But in reality, the human personality is still as little known and understood as the black holes in outer space. People are being subjected to conditioning every day, subliminally and without fully realising it, by advertising, government propaganda and peer pressure, among others. If a person ever examines the norms he has accepted as part of his culture, he might be in for a nasty surprise or two.

Go back, for instance, to the early days of the Soviet Union. It was then thought quite normal for adults, married or unmarried, to engage in sexual activities. Any children resulting therefrom could be brought up scientifically by the state, to form the nucleus of a more perfect and enlightened socialist society. Romantic and emotional attachments, however, were deemed to be as anti-social as the plague, because they would amount to a return to decadent bourgeois behaviour, if not a type of mental disorder.

Half a century on and the Soviet model was out. Fashion moved towards conspicuous consumption, keeping up with the Joneses, the lifestyles of movie actors and pelvic-gyrating rock stars, GDP growth and economic statistics endlessly misinterpreted by politicians and media gurus. The ubiquitous pornography now on the internet was still then in the future. Against that, the shock once expressed over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *The Tropic of Cancer* would appear utterly trivial! But modern communications did open up a means for lonely hearts to find love or lust, though seldom without danger or a considerable degree of risk of personal exposure.

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In reaching back through my own memories, I can only recall decades of stumbling around, trying to catalogue the varying shades of emotions I had gone through in connection with love or lust. It had been an altogether unrewarding exercise, worse than trying to find my way home at night through a London pea-souper while slightly inebriated.

I had sensed vaguely from an early age that my paternal grandmother loved me more than she did my siblings. But she never said so in as many words. That silence, in my child's mind, invited doubt. If a thing was true, why should an adult not declare it to be so? What was the catch? There had to be one.

Another event soon added to that doubt. My grandmother had enrolled me in a Chinese pre-primary school with a reputation for sternness and discipline. I quickly got into trouble for an infraction of its rules. Caning on the calves before the entire school was the established way of delivering punishment. My grandmother could have prevented my punishment but she did not. If she truly loved me, why did she not intervene to spare me the humiliation and pain of being caned? And why remove me from the school after my caning, instead of before it had been inflicted? There appeared no rhyme or reason to the adult world.

Such inexplicable happenings called into question the quality of her love. It seemed so ambiguous that I held it against her for not declaring it. That uncertainty hampered my developing a warmer feeling towards her.

Years later, as she lay sick and dying in an alien land, my concern for her was still insufficient to overcome my paralysing fear of her clinging to me during her death throes. I therefore hid myself away from her to avoid that possibility. Yet it had been precisely at that moment that she needed me most. It was a most unkind and cowardly thing to have done to someone who had taken care of me throughout my boyhood. That failure in human decency left a scar on my conscience which has never quite healed.

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The start of what might be described as lust has been equally well etched upon my memory. It happened towards the end of 1939, when I was about ten and a half. My youngest brother, Tzi-Seng, had been born in October

and a village woman by the name of Ah Yee had been employed to be his wet nurse because Anna wanted to return to work.

One afternoon, I saw Ah Yee breast-feeding my brother. The sight stirred a strange, indefinable sensation in me. After she had finished with the baby, I asked if she could feed me too. She laughingly agreed. As I sucked upon one of her breasts and fondled the firmness of the other, I felt a delicious thrill of excitement and pleasure. At the same time, however, I could sense I was doing something wrong and shameful. Yet I had enjoyed the experience so thoroughly that I kept longing to repeat it.

Ah Yee must have reported the incident to my Aunt Soo-Leung because a few days later my aunt took me aside and told me in the gentlest way possible that I should “not disturb Ah Yee” when she was carrying out her duties. That put an abrupt stop to my lusting.

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Love, if it were to be defined as an overwhelming attachment to another person, came about three years later, in Australia. I met an older boy living next door by the name of Jackie Wong Sue. Jackie was about four years older than myself but he had a wealth of knowledge and an amazing range of talents.

He taught me a plethora of things, from building a crystal set to trapping small animals, from catching poisonous snakes to capturing beautiful butterflies. He acquainted me with the names of an amazing number of creatures. It was an unalloyed joy to go running alongside him with a homemade butterfly net, trying to capture an iridescent blue-green Blue Mountain Swallowtail or some other butterfly without damaging its wings.

At the beginning, I could not figure out why Jackie should devote so much time to me. I had seen myself as an unattractive lad with little to commend to anyone. I had an over-large head stuck on top of a skinny and ungainly

body. I had been a total failure in every sporting activity that schoolboys found glory in. I could not dribble a football or kick one with accuracy; I had difficulty batting even a single run at cricket, against the easy fours and sixes delivered by others; I could not win a race over any distance on the flat or over hurdles. I was just as incompetent at the net games of tennis and badminton. What I did enjoy enormously was reading. But that soon got me labelled as a bookworm.

Perhaps Jackie took pity on my failing to find favour with my peers. He certainly took greater pains with me than he did with his own younger siblings, though his brothers and sisters might not have been as enthusiastic as I had been over the things he could teach.

It was Jackie who taught me the difference between theoretical knowledge and actual experience. One might learn the differences between the scales of a Mulga and a Crowned Snake from a book. Or one might learn how snakes used their flickering forked tongues to “taste” the air for scent particles. But unless a person had actually controlled a live black adder or black tiger snake with his bare hands and had stared into its cold and murderous eyes, he could not be said to have mastered the fear of poisonous snakes. Jackie showed me how to overcome that fear at a formative stage of my life. In return, I hero-worshipped him shamelessly.

It was completely consistent with Jackie’s character that he should eventually serve out the war in the Indonesian jungles behind enemy lines. He was decorated more than once for his daring.

After the war ended, I left Australia to return to Singapore. My associations with Jackie thus came to an abrupt end in 1946. Because of the nomadic life imposed on me afterwards, even our correspondence petered out.

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The next person I developed a strong attachment to came two years later,

when I was 18. It was towards my Eighth Grandaunt who, from the moment I turned up at her home at Leighton Hill Road, offered me both hospitality and kindness.

I must have had sight of my Eighth Grandaunt when I was an infant, when I was under the care of my grandmother, who was her eldest sister-in-law. But I had no memory of her till I saw her at the age of 18. She came over as a benign lady with the beatified face of a Goddess of Mercy. From time to time, an enigmatic smile would play upon her lips, as if she were enjoying a secret and unshared amusement.

If there was any truth to the saying that the easiest way into a man's heart was through his stomach, then my Eighth Grandaunt personified it for me. When she clapped eyes on me at her Leighton Hill Road home, some maternal instinct must have told her I was underfed and craving for food. She immediately ordered a servant to bring me some dessert, which I wolfed down more quickly than I should have done. From that moment on, she took to mothering me more than anybody else I could remember.



My Eighth Grandaunt Kwok Yee-Hing, taken in 1948.

Over the following two years as a guest in her home, she saw to my being not only adequately fed but also properly attired. The few items of tropical clothes I had brought from Singapore were not only unfashionable but unsuited to the Hong Kong winter. She must have read my unspoken yearning for some of the smart items in department stores which my meagre pay as a reporter would not allow. She set about quietly fulfilling my dreams, even though some of the items I had hankered after had turned out, in retrospect, to have been rather silly ones.

One of the most pleasurable experiences I had during that period was to

spend the odd weekend with her and her children on Tsing Yee Island, at her country bungalow aptly named The Abode of Butterflies. Many types of butterflies flourished there, together with a host of other friendly insects like ladybirds, dragonflies, honey bees, crickets, fireflies and cicadas. One of the most commonly seen butterfly there was the bright orange-coloured Monarch, with the telling white spots and black veins on its wings.

Sadly, all the insects which used to flourish there have since been virtually wiped out by urbanisation. In the process, Tsing Yee Island itself disappeared too, to become by way of reclamations and bridges just another part of the mainland.

The most precious gift that my Eighth Grandaunt arranged for me was my university education. She knew of my fervent desire for further studies and concluded at once that no matter how hard I might try to save I would never make it. She therefore spontaneously suggested one day that I approach my Eighth Granduncle for a loan. I hesitated, for I could not visualise how I could ever repay it unless I took up one of those money-grubbing commercial callings my instincts deeply deplored.

But she urged me on, in spite of my hesitancy. I never knew whether she had smoothed the way with her husband beforehand. In any case, when I did ask for a loan, my Eighth Granduncle readily granted it.

Sadly, my Eighth Grandaunt passed away prematurely in 1952, while I was still studying at Stanford. I was thus deprived of even a chance to bid her an appropriate goodbye as she departed the world.

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Once I got to Stanford, the pea-souper obscuring the two overlapping realms of romantic love and naked lust grew immeasurably thicker. I was for the first time alone in a foreign land and in an unstable emotional and financial state, beyond the help of any family member. A man in my circumstances, I told

myself, simply could not afford to get involved with either love or lust. He had to keep his nose clean and concentrate on his studies. But the openness of American girls and their penchant for showing off their physical assets posed constant temptations.

Although I made many long-lasting friendships with women during my four years at Stanford, I only once came close to metaphorically losing my head over a girl. She was a svelte and dreamy girl from Southern California who had entered Stanford a year or two after myself.

We had met quite by chance, perhaps a year after her arrival. I was then working for my meals as a counter waiter in a campus cafeteria called The Cellar. She came by one day for a late lunch. Her arrestingly beautiful face was aglow with ruddy health, after an obvious engagement in the sun. Her eyes were soft and misty, suggesting a reserve of mischief and happiness. She appeared the very embodiment of immaculate youth, suffused with the joys of being alive.

She happened to sit at my section of the counter, so I served her. Since the lunch-hour rush was already tapering off, we got into a conversation. It flowed easily from one topic to another. It soon became apparent she had just returned from a weekend of skiing.

That was how our friendship started. I became attracted to her almost immediately, as if drawn into a magnetic field. But I cautioned myself I should not be deflected by a skirt since so many large question marks still hung over my future. I was debt-ridden and had no idea when funding for my annual scholarship might come to an end.

Shortly afterwards, that beautiful girl fortuitously came into The Cellar again for a cup of coffee. Her loveliness got the better of my prudence. I felt again that unaccountable tingling in the blood I had felt over Lai-See at St. Matthew's Church at the age of ten. That had been puppy-love. Why was the sensation revisiting me at the age of 22? Was it because I was still a virgin?

The girl and I talked some more and we exchanged names. She asked if

I was the David Wong who was writing for the *Stanford Daily*. I had to plead guilty. I had gained a little notoriety on campus because I had once publicly challenged a Marine colonel to a duel — chopsticks at six paces — for insulting the Boy Scouts.

“I’ve enjoyed your pieces,” she said.

The conversation soon touched upon existentialism. It was a big thing back in those days; it permeated several spheres of cultural activities. It proved easy for us to toss around some of its core beliefs.

Existentialism, as a philosophy, emphasised the individual’s capacity to act as a free agent, to determine his own development through acts of the will. I had my reservations, however. I could not visualise how any act by me could possibly free me from debt, let alone offer me a sporting stab at romantic love. But I kept this to myself.

Thereafter, as each of us followed our individual routines around the more than 8,000-acre campus, I bumped into the girl a couple of times more. She was apparently popular, for each time she was attended by classmates or roommates. She readily introduced me to them and I thereby gained some new friends. Her enchantment over me grew with each meeting.

Curiously, I subsequently found it much easier to ask one of her friends or companions out for a cup of coffee or beer than I could the girl herself. There must have been a subconscious awareness that I had no real romantic designs on her associates, whereas a date with her might unleash an avalanche of false hopes and wild imaginings. Perhaps I had subconsciously asked her friends out simply as a roundabout way of gathering personal information about her.

Sometimes I would gain a snippet of information which gave me pause. For example, I learnt from one of her friends that she had been going skiing with a somewhat boorish male student. What was the point of intruding? I had no time, no money and no skill in skiing.

Though Existentialism asserted that a man could define himself through

his actions, I tried to define myself through inaction. I made no attempt to contact the girl, either at her dormitory or on the telephone. I simply left it to chance to decide whether I would ever see her again.

Chance was not unkind, however. Our paths did continue to cross. Whenever they did, I felt as if butterflies were doing a vigorous dance inside my chest. Our conversations, however, remained impersonal or academic, about student life, courses being pursued and opinions on the writings of Dostoevsky and other existentialists.

One day, upon another chance meeting, she produced a book which she said she had been carrying around to give to me. It contained two plays by Sartre — *No Exit* and *The Flies*.

I felt utterly overwhelmed; my spirits soared. Our chats must have held some meaning for her. I wanted to give her a present in return. But I had no money to buy anything remotely appropriate or meaningful. I decided eventually to write her a poem. My effort was obviously miles away from anything done by Donne or Shelley. It was in fact rather schoolboyish. Yet I wanted to express a little of what I felt about her. The last stanza of the poem read as follows:

“She touched my heart, this Nature’s Child,
So free and unrestrained.
She conquered with her simple charm
And like a sovereign reigned.”

After it had been written, it became my turn to carry it around in an envelope, tucked between the pages of a textbook. I remained on tenterhooks, not knowing when I might meet her again. The opportunity came about a week later, when I caught her walking with a classmate. I rushed up and handed her the envelope, saying: “I’ve written you a poem. A most inadequate gift, I know, in return for yours.”

“Oh! How sweet of you!” she replied. “Nobody has ever written me a poem before.”

“Just a poor chap’s way of saving money.” But before she could take the poem out of the envelope, I quickly added: “I’m sorry; got to run. Late for work.”

I was simply too bashful and frightened to see how she might react to the poem. The humiliation I had suffered after passing Lai-See a silly note years earlier resurfaced in my mind.

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During my final year at Stanford, as I was finishing a master’s degree, a mutual female friend invited me to spend a few days at her home in Los Angeles, during the break between the winter and spring quarters. She said she wanted me to meet her folks.

There was no significance to that invitation beyond friendship. I had previously received several similar invitations. Fellow students must have regarded me as a curiosity, a strange Anglo-Chinese hybrid who spoke like an Englishman even when talking about Confucian “rectification of names” or Taoist obscurities. Apart from wishing to acquaint their families with such a specimen, they were merely displaying that open and disarming hospitality common among Americans.

When the girl I had referred to as “Nature’s Child” heard of my going to Los Angeles, she invited me to stay at her home as well. By then she was in her third year and had shed her associations with that boorish young man. I quickly accepted and agreed to spend at least a day with her.

She lived in an exclusive area known as Palos Verdes Estate. That area had once been run on the same basis that the British did the Peak area of Hong Kong before World War II, that is, barring non-whites from owning property and taking up residence there.

I discovered for the first time the girl came from a fractured family like my own. She was living with one of her parents. That revelation underlined how few personal details we had exchanged during the two years we had known each other.

We spent much of our time just talking, in rather abstract and philosophical terms, about the human condition and the discords affecting mankind. It was as if we did not dare to touch upon our individual feelings and predicaments. Our silences, too, seemed loaded with unuttered sentiments, like the empty spaces in Chinese landscape paintings, leaving the unexpressed to the imagination of the beholder.

In the evening, we had a glass of wine with dinner. Afterwards, we sat out in her open patio. There was a small bar, with a gramophone. Under a star-spangled sky, we listened to some of the popular ballads of that era. One of them was of Nat King Cole's "Autumn Leaves". When it was being played, I asked if she cared to dance. She stood up and we came together naturally, cheek to cheek. Apart from the odd handshake, it was the first physical contact we ever had in two years.

My head swam with intoxication as we danced. She was supple; her movements graceful. The subtle fragrance of her person washed over me like a perfume. I could not inhale it fast enough. My blood stirred and my heart began pounding like a bongo drum. Strange sensations possessed me. What were they? Was I falling in love? If so, they were certainly not unmixed with baser instincts.

As our dancing continued, the smooth baritone of Nat King Cole and his lyrics of separation and loss seemed to underscore the ephemeral nature of my current state. I tightened my arms around her, wanting the dance to last for all eternity.

But the music had to come to an end. The record had to be flipped. That interruption enabled me to regain a degree of composure. I had to stop my craziness, my sacrilegious fantasising, I told myself. There was not the slightest

evidence the girl felt for me in any way other than as a friend. What right had I to toy with notions of love? I was a man burdened by debt, without a future, with nothing to offer. Even to imply a viable future would be to behave like a cad. I sat down on a patio bench, breaking out in a cold sweat, as she turned over the record.

After that had been done, she stood indecisively in front of me, majestic in the undiluted splendour of the night. Was she expecting us to dance again? I did not dare to move. If I held her in my arms again, I was bound to lose control and to say something or do something utterly stupid and irretrievable. I froze.

She then sat down beside me on the bench, a little apart. I could hardly find a word to say, let alone to touch her. Thus we spent the rest of that unforgiving night not saying much, just listening to sentimental music, and hoping that thoughts and feelings could somehow be conveyed without words, through the thickening shadows of the night.

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The final quarter of my stay at Stanford was a period of unmitigated misery. I had to complete my thesis for a Master's degree but my heart was not in it. I could not stop cursing myself for failing to express what I had felt for the most enchanting girl I had ever met. There would be no second chance. Soon, we would be physically separated, as effectively as the Cowherd from the Weaving Maiden in the Chinese fairytale. The difference was that I, unlike the Cowherd, would have no prospect of seeing my beloved again after a year. We would have to part for good, with neither knowing what each might have meant for the other.

Desperate stratagems ran amok inside my head. I toyed with applying for a doctorate fellowship to prolong my stay. But then, what? I would be back in the same position a year or two hence, with no more to offer than at present.

Ahead of me, Hong Kong loomed like a frightening form of financial servitude, filled with emptiness and oppression. My Eighth Grandaunt, the only person there I had cared for and from whom I could count on for help, was already dead. My father could offer no comfort. He was living like a fugitive himself, trying to resolve his own relationship with Anna.

The only initiative I took while the clock ticked relentlessly away was to ask the girl for a photograph to take home. She readily supplied me with a portrait of herself, measuring eight by ten inches, duly inscribed "with love".

After I got back to Hong Kong, we exchanged a couple of letters. But mine were written under false pretences, loaded with fake optimism. I did not have the courage to tell her of my being summarily sacked from the *Hong Kong Standard*, at the instigation of some faceless colonial bureaucrat, or how the loss of a job had reduced me to sharing a room with a friend at a cheap workingmen's hostel.

That friend, Auyang Ming, noting my misery, took me to a Kowloon whorehouse in an attempt to cheer me. There I managed to lose my virginity to a Hakka girl. But it had been a joyless, mechanical and diminishing experience, more like an execution, exploiting another human being as a substitute for love. It became quite impossible for me to continue a correspondence with the Californian girl after that.

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Oh, with what flimsy and insubstantial materials we construct our grand romances! I must have tried to relive a thousand times that single night of dancing to the crooning of Nat King Cole. But my memory could not summon forth again that same old feeling of physical closeness and of the musk of her person.

I have since travelled the world, carrying a portrait of a girl, immaculate and unattainable, and two plays by Sartre. As I moved from continent to

continent, I dreamt of missed opportunities and alternative outcomes. Sometimes I asked myself whether I had truly fallen in love on that Californian night. The answer remained ambiguous, like the one that teased the Taoist philosopher, Cheung Tzu, after his celebrated dream.

According to legend, the ancient sage went to sleep and dreamt he was a butterfly, happily fluttering hither and yon. When he woke up the next morning, he became unsure whether he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly or whether he was now actually a butterfly dreaming of being a man!

A similar conundrum, filled with the shifting overtones and undercurrents of love and lust, had confounded me for years. Had I been genuinely smitten on a Californian night or had I only imagined it all? If I had been smitten, how could I have allowed love to slip away without a fight? Did it mean I had loved without the kind of commitment and daring suitable for a man? Or had I been as faint-hearted and timid as a butterfly, disguising my cowardice and hesitations as prudence and pragmatism? Could my want of experience and maturity be only an excuse?

Each time I reminisced, I felt as if I had got onto one of those London Underground trains at Stanford, to head for a destination incongruously called Love. A couple of complicated interchanges were required to get there, so I got off at an intermediate station to check if the first interchange had to be made there. By the time I had established it was not due till another couple more stations down the line, the train door had slammed shut and I was left on the platform. Nothing to be done except to wait for the next train.

However, the next train did not come along for a dozen years. When I got on, I found another American girl already in the compartment. Her name was Sharlee and she was heading for Holland. We travelled together for a spell and got involved with each other. Then she too got off, leaving me to continue that uncharted journey alone.

Today, after another failed marriage and many inconclusive affairs, I am

not sure whether I am still on that journey or whether I had ended up at an entirely different destination!

* * *

I envy people who could separate out love from lust, as easily as they could extract a peanut from its shell. That ability is all the more extraordinary when they can readily pronounce on the emotional state of any third party and prescribe a sure-fire remedy.

After my separation from Man-Ying, some friends and relatives quickly took out their big palm-leaved fans — that standard symbol of the professional Chinese matchmaker — and advanced a remedy for my situation. A speedy re-marriage. Both I and my three sons required womanly care, they pronounced.

While I never doubted that need for my sons, I had grave reservations for myself. Having had one marital misadventure, I was not about to embark upon another. No sensible woman, I figured, would want to tie the knot with a poorly-paid civil servant lumbered with three sons.

Nonetheless, against my better judgement, I accepted some of the invitations to tea or dinner, for the purpose of meeting unwed relatives, spinster classmates, recently divorced colleagues, widowed friends and an assortment of career women who had discovered — as they skidded rapidly down the wrong side of 35 — that professional accolades and fat bonuses were all right so far as they went, but they did not keep them warm at night. The suppression of their maternal instincts was also turning them grumpy and short-tempered.

There is probably some basis for saying that all satisfactory matches can only be made in heaven. The precise temperaments, psyches, expectations and prospects of those heading into a union often elude earthly matchmakers. Different people want different things, certainly in their imaginations, and

they are possessed by vastly different fantasies.

In addition, my entry into the marital market was not without complications, for I had a misleading media presence. Having been photographed in walkabouts with the Governor and other notables, and having been repeatedly shown leading racehorses into the Winner's Circle, I might have created a mistaken impression of both my financial and social circumstances. The fact I had three sons hanging around my neck like albatrosses was conveniently obscured.

The net result for all concerned was a farrago of wasted time and effort. Most meetings were hail-and-farewell affairs. Few produced spontaneous attraction or sexual buzz. An occasional merry widow or a liberated divorcee, however, did lead to an enjoyable dalliance or two.

Such dalliances, taken together with my being seen with a succession of beautiful women, soon saddled me with a reputation for being a Don Juan, a libertine trifling with the affections of unsuspecting women. Such a reputation was actually not entirely fair. I had honestly been searching for a wife with an equitable temperament, who could be a mother for my sons as well as a soulmate and bedmate for myself. My failure to find one could hardly be blamed on me alone.

My reputation suffered the greatest damage from my associations with two of the most superbly attractive non-lovers I have ever escorted. Although I had plied them with displays of amorous intentions in public, neither romantic love nor lowly lust was involved in either case. My behaviour had been pure play-acting, carried out for what I had deemed to be worthy purposes.

But because my motives were unknown except to those directly involved, my deeds were taken at face value by others not in the know. They soon caused ill-founded rumours and gossip to spread like wildfire. The ill repute I earned thereby became something I could neither live down nor live up to! It was a most frustrating state of affairs.

I am therefore now using these memoirs to set the record straight. Before I

do so, however, I would like to briefly recapitulate the social milieu prevailing in Hong Kong at the time.

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