

CHAPTER 12

The Loves That Failed

WELL BEFORE I LEFT the Home Affairs Department in 1975, I had already failed miserably to find a replacement wife. The nubile females introduced by friends and relatives had proved unsuitable, much as I had anticipated.

The reasons were not difficult to see. My negatives were too patent — a middle-aged man, with a philandering reputation and lumbered with three young sons. As if that was not unappetising enough, I was also a civil servant with no hope of inheriting a family fortune nor of securing any spectacular official advancement. A future with me had to be one of austerity, deprived of the usual luxuries women longed for. Even the word “marriage” was plainly a euphemism. It was in essence a job as glorified housekeeper and substitute mother for three growing boys.

I saw little in myself that could weigh in my favour. I might have a modicum of charm and a gift of the gab. But, given my reputation, who could guarantee that the charm and the sweet-talking would not be dispensed outside the home rather than within? Marriage to a colonial bureaucrat might provide a little access to the fringes of high society but it could also spell recurring losses of face if funds were unavailable for fashionable garments and matching accessories. Too risky a pill for most self-respecting girls to swallow.

As for the ladies themselves, none came over as a suitable surrogate mother. Few had the right kind of experience or temperament. Most had been too

young and many had too obvious a desire for a luxurious life or for children of their own.

That was not to say that none of them possessed potential in other spheres of human relationships. Two or three of them appeared to be — in the lexicon of my friend Y — eminently bed-worthy. But none had that tantalising *je ne sais quoi* possessed by Barbara or Sharlee. Besides, without any display of that mothering potential I wanted for my children, there was little point giving chase. Hence a project lasting many long months ended up as a complete waste of time.

Those repeated failures depressed me also. Time was marching on. When Man-Ying and I separated in 1971, our eldest son was 11. He was now in his teens and his two brothers were now rapidly approaching that awkward period in their lives as well. I felt increasingly that I was letting them down.

I remembered the loneliness and bewilderment I had experienced during my own boyhood, after my mother had chosen to keep my younger brother but surrendered me to my grandmother. I was five years old and quite lost when I was taken to a distant and unknown place called Singapore. Throughout the subsequent years, I began nursing a strange and acute resentment against my mother for abandoning me. I had felt it sharpest whenever I witnessed Anna lavishing her attentions upon my siblings.

I could not figure out why I should have been singled out for deprivation. Had I been too disobedient during my boyhood, or too ugly and unlovable to keep? The inexplicability of the situation troubled me more constantly than an itch. It was not until I had been reunited with my mother in Canton, after a separation of 13 years, that I began to understand the imperatives behind her original decision.

The possibility of my sons developing a similar resentment against their mother or against myself was troubling. At least I grew up in the company of grandparents and many aunts. My boys had only the ministrations of an old and uneducated domestic servant named Ah Duen.

Their deprivation forced me to pursue a course of action I had earlier sworn I would never take, namely, to seek a potential wife from among divorcees who had children of their own. I feared jumping from a frying pan into the fire in bringing additional children into the family. It involved too many imponderables.

But needs must when the devil drove. So I embarked upon three successive relationships with divorcees with children. It so happened that all three had been around their mid-30s and each had two children younger than mine. Two of those ventures ended fairly quickly, before I had even left the Home Affairs Department. I had judged that neither of the two, nor their children, could interact satisfactorily with my own.

The third divorcee offered some hope. She was an executive in a quasi-official community organisation. We hit it off easily. She was intelligent, pleasant-looking, fashion-conscious and loquacious, though a trifle possessive. As to sex, she was voracious and uninhibited, leaving me with no reservations. I therefore began arranging opportunities for our two families to mix. After a few outings, it became evident that relationships among all parties were developing quite naturally and harmoniously.

Having once been badly bitten by marriage, however, I hesitated over any deeper involvement before a fuller assessment of the lie of the land. Few marriages could be sustained on good sex alone. Otherwise there would not be so many divorces.

I wanted to ascertain whether that prospective partner intended to continue with her own career after marriage and whether her divorce arrangements had adequate provisions for the upkeep and education of her own children. Each could throw up unsurmountable obstacles. Yet a man could hardly probe such delicate matters without first declaring his intentions. I was, however, unable to form any real intention until I knew what I might be letting myself and my sons in for. It was that old chicken and egg problem.

Equally importantly, I needed to know more about the lady's temperament

and intellectual inclinations. Up till that point, such time as we have had alone together, after her children had gone to sleep, had been consumed by the urgencies of animal desires. Little time had been devoted to talking. I did not want a woman who, before or after love-making, could only respond to a quotation from Li Po or Omar Khayyam like a cow chewing cud. A person's intellectual and other inclinations were bound to reveal themselves over time. But I could not afford to wait. A quick decision was necessary; my sons were growing up too quickly.

At the same time, I was concerned that both our reputations should not be damaged by too protracted a courtship. Where gossip was concerned, Hong Kong was akin to a small English village, overflowing with wagging tongues. Given my notoriety, however undeserved, word would soon do the rounds of my making sport with another woman. Her reputation as a marriageable proposition might be sullied should our relationship fizzle out. That argued for a swift conclusion.

But try as I might, I could not think of an appropriate way of raising the many delicate questions without first committing myself. But an idea struck me when I happened to have a meal with a friend who had strong business connections with Taiwan.

During the course of the meal I asked him how his business was doing. He said it was thriving and asked in turn when I might be visiting Taiwan again. He knew that some years earlier I had gone there with friends to view the countless bronzes, vases, jade carvings, lacquerware, paintings and other treasures at the National Palace Museum. He went on to say that he had acquired an apartment in Taipei, which he and his wife used no more than five or six times a year. The rest of the time the premises stood empty; I would be most welcome to use it should I pay Taiwan another visit.

It then occurred to me that if I took the divorcee there for a holiday, away from the gossiping hot house of Hong Kong, we could explore at leisure the various issues to be settled. Not staying at a hotel, where we risked bumping

into Hong Kong people we knew, would also reduce the fear of being spotted staying together in a hotel.

There would be a further advantage. After visiting the National Palace Museum, we could spend a couple of days at Sun Moon Lake. That would give me further indications whether we had similar cultural interests.

On the spur of the moment, I thanked my friend for his offer and confided in him I was romancing a lady as a possible wife. The use of his Taipei apartment for a week would be just the ticket. However, I had a condition. I had to pay rental for its use.

My friend reacted with friendly outrage. "What's happening to you, David?" he exclaimed. "Have we become barbarians to talk about money when exchanging hospitality between friends? That's not Chinese culture. You must be my guest. My housekeeper's an excellent cook. Just tell her the kind of food you and your lady companion would like and she'll take good care of both of you."

"I really am enormously grateful, my good fellow," I said, "but I'm a public servant, working for a foreign occupying power. Accepting hospitality to the extent you're offering might appear to some of my superiors suspiciously like accepting some kind of advantage."

"Stuff and nonsense! I've not asked you to bend any rule or to grant me some improper benefit in return. You mean a public servant cannot have friends? Or exchange hospitality with them? We've had many meals together, sometimes you pay, sometimes I pay. That's normal in human relationships. What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is that I have no apartment anywhere to return a similar hospitality. We're living under laws framed by foreigners. Laws are at best blunt instruments, quite incapable of distinguishing between the varying gradations in human relationships. There is also an anti-corruption mania running riot at the moment, after the Godber scandal. An Independent Commission Against Corruption has been formed to placate the public.

It would be best for me to behave like Caesar's wife — above suspicion or reproach. So please let me pay for the use of your apartment."

My friend shook his head. "Corruption's a very fatal thing," he said. "There are far too many bent coppers around. But we have to be sensible in tackling that problem. A lot of corruption — and probably the worst of it — occurs outside the purview of government, within private corporations, inside the hearts and minds of men. In any case, I can't accept payment from friends. The most I can agree to — if you're going to use my apartment — is for you to pay the housekeeper for whatever food or drink you consume and give her a tip at the end of your stay. Is that meagre enough as hospitality for you to accept with a good conscience?"

"I guess I might get away with that, if you would allow me buy you and your wife a nice dinner when I get back."

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Armed with the blessing of discreet accommodation in Taipei, I made haste to invite the potential candidate for wife for a holiday in Taiwan. She readily accepted.

By then, I had been installed as the Deputy Secretary for Economic Services and the next step was to sound out the Policy Secretary. I did so orally, asking if I could be spared for five and a half days of leave. He saw no impediment. I had in any case months of leave to my credit. With some judicious fitting-in of weekends at both ends, five and a half days would be sufficient for an eight-day trip.

Having secured a nod from my boss, I paid for a couple of those cheaper non-alterable and non-refundable air tickets for the journey. I then complied with protocol by formally handing in a signed Leave Application Form.

But I got a shock when the leave chit came back — I had been granted leave but denied permission to go to Taiwan!

The ostensible reason for the refusal was that I was now a fairly senior official and if I were to go to Taiwan it could be construed in certain quarters as Britain attempting to play a two-China game!

The explanation seemed rather ludicrous and far-fetched; it cut very little ice with me. It was expected that the upper echelons of any bureaucracy would err on the side of caution whenever anything was in doubt. But since the British government had long abandoned the welfare of Chinese British subjects when they went under Chinese jurisdiction, why should it change its stance now?

If the government was as wary about appearances, then it should not have selected someone with political and business attachments to Taiwan like Fung Hon-Chu to lead the Hong Kong delegation to the plenary session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East back in 1963.

Fung and the rest of the delegation, of which I had been a member, were instructed not to fraternise with the Taiwanese delegates attending the meeting. China was then still struggling to oust Taiwan from United Nations organisations. Fung nonetheless openly ignored that instruction. But there had been no fallout.

Secondly, as I have already said, I had been granted permission to visit Taiwan years earlier, when I was in the Labour Department, and had gone as a private individual. Nobody raised an eyebrow. I could not see how going there now with a lady friend and for romantic purposes could give rise to any political awkwardness.

But I was not prepared to argue the toss. The flight I had booked on would leave in under three days and I knew from experience that any argument with the bureaucracy could not be resolved within that timeframe. What was much more pressing was that I had to find a way to square things with the lady I had invited. I also had to inform my friend I would no longer require the use of his flat in Taipei.

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I decided instinctively that it would be best not to attempt to tell the lady the whole truth. She would be unlikely to appreciate the labyrinthian nature of bureaucratic thinking and, given my reputation, would most probably suspect me of disengaging from her for another woman. Short of proposing marriage there and then, I doubted whether I could ever convince her of the real truth. And I was certainly not yet ready to leap into matrimony, given how little I knew about her and her actual circumstances.

Even if I had told her the real reason how our trip became unstuck, her natural reaction would be to suggest going someplace else. That would present me with fresh difficulties. I had already spent part of my budget on air tickets to no purpose. Paying for new air passages and expensive hotel accommodation elsewhere would force me to dig into reserves set aside for my children's education. Having lost such funds once in the *Singapore Herald* misadventure, I was loath to risk them again.

Besides, even if I were to offer the ticket made out in the lady's name for Taiwan — for her to go on her own if she chose — I could still not prove my good faith, because I had no hotel reservation to back me up. I had meant the use of my friend's apartment to be a surprise. To try and explain that would merely add another layer of suspicion.

In the circumstances, I decided to tell the lady that some urgent official business had cropped up, so I could not get away as planned. Our Taiwan trip would therefore have to be postponed.

Unfortunately, as I had expected, the lady was unconvinced. From the tenor of her questions, it became clear she sensed I was hiding something. She began cross-examining me on rumours she had heard about my public displays of affection for various other women.

The fact that she doubted my intentions was a disappointment. I responded

by telling her she should judge for herself whether I was pursuing a meaningful relationship with her or just playing the field. Listening to idle gossip was no way to find out.

This caused her to leave in a huff, saying that she had set her mind on a holiday and if I was too busy to take her, somebody else easily could. I learnt subsequently that she did indeed go off on a holiday to Thailand, with a man much better placed financially than myself. Thus the die was cast. Our relationship went no further. Shortly after their return, she married him. I could hardly blame her for wanting to secure a bird in hand, before her best years were behind her, rather than wait indefinitely for me to pop the question.

In retrospect, I should be thankful for being refused permission to go to Taiwan. It probably saved me from a woman who, however bed-worthy, had a potentially bossy disposition.

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After the collapse of that last matrimonial possibility, I grew more desperate for the welfare of my children. Time was running out; their emotional needs were becoming more pronounced. The only alternative I had was to spend more time with them, although I knew in my own heart I was no good at interacting with children, even with my own. Under the divorce settlement, I was required to make the children available to Man-Ying on four days a week, if she so desired. Time was of the essence. How was I to find more time for them, given all my work constraints? Soon, with their growing up, the whole situation would turn moot.

The pressure of work often meant I could seldom leave the office till six or seven in the evening. During my tenure at the Home Affairs Department, first as Deputy Director and then as Director, outside commitments could not be avoided. A senior official was expected to attend inauguration ceremonies

or cocktail parties, to show the flag by cutting ribbons, giving speeches to graduating classes, drawing winning raffle tickets at charity functions, participating at anniversary dinners of civic organisations, *ad infinitum*.

An appointment as a Policy Secretary was another possibility, as I was now at the right seniority to be given such an appointment. But that would entail pressures of another kind — responding to urgent telegrams from Whitehall and spending long hours cleaning up the messes left by others. My brief attachment to the Housing Branch had given me a taste of the latter and how disheartening that could be.

Hence any further advancement within the bureaucracy, even in an acting appointment, would entail a drain upon the time and energy I might otherwise devote to my children. The irony in the situation was that I suspected my children might not be all that anxious to see more of me!

After Man-Ying's departure, I had tried to tighten household rules, to bring them in line with the ones I had myself been brought up under. For example, during my boyhood my siblings and I had to go to bed right after dinner, so as to be in good shape to rise early for school. I had tried during my boyhood to beat that system by surreptitious reading by torchlight under the cover of a blanket. In doing so, I had ruined my eyes.

In imposing a similar regime of bed by nine upon my sons, I was hoping they would not be as unwise as I had been. I would check occasionally to see that the lights in their rooms had been turned off.

They no doubt resented my rules and I was certain that, whenever I was away from home on evenings, they would stay up till much later, to watch television or to chat with schoolmates on the telephone. Ah Duen could hardly be expected to impose discipline on them and there was no one like my grandmother or my aunts to do any enforcement. Being around more often would provide greater opportunities to shape their values and to encourage them to think for themselves, even though they might not always appreciate it.

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An incident occurred around that time to illustrate my difficulty in dealing with my children. When I was a boy in Singapore, children used to wear a pair of white canvas shoes with rubber soles for physical education classes. They were commonly just called tennis shoes. They no doubt descended from the compulsory plimsolls required by British schools earlier in the century.

But early in the 1970s, branded sports shoes known as trainers made an appearance in Hong Kong. Their arrival coincided with a relaxation of the dress code among schools. Children went wild over them because they looked more flashy and decorative. They quickly became very popular. The drawback was that they cost more than ten times the sum for an ordinary pair of white canvas shoes.

Inevitably, my youngest son, Tien-Kit, approached me one evening and asked for a pair of trainers. I judged trainers to be just another fad and not good value for money. Prices ought to come down after a while. It seemed just another quick money-gouging scam hit upon by commercial outfits, like the “glass belts” mania stirred up right after the war which had taken in both my Eighth Granddaughter and myself.

“Are your tennis shoes worn out?” I asked, pretending to be obtuse. “If so, I’ll get you another pair.”

“No, I still have my tennis shoes,” Tien-Kit replied, a little shyly. “They’re still good. But I’d like a pair of trainers.”

“Why, if your existing pair can still be used?”

“Trainers are better.”

“How so?”

“All my classmates are wearing them.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re better,” I said. “They might just be following herd instinct. Or their parents might just be failing to exercise sound economic

judgements. You don't have to follow others. You should make your own decisions."

By then, Tien-Kit was beginning to get a little flustered. "Oh, Dad," he said, "you just don't get it. I want to be like my friends. That's the way things are these days."

"Well, help me 'get it'. Can you run faster in a pair of trainers than in tennis shoes? Can you kick a ball more accurately? Or what? There has to be a good reason. Just explain things to me so that I 'get it'."

Thereupon my son gave up and the conversation ended, leaving me unable to get across to my nine-year-old son that I was frustrating his desire because I loved him and cared for his intellectual development. I had named him Kit in honour of my old friend and mentor Hon-Kit, of whom I had not heard anything concrete for a quarter of a century, ever since he and his wife went back to China in 1949. My secret hope was that my son would grow up as selfless and patriotic as his namesake.

But Tien-Kit was a boy who needed a certain amount of coaxing. He had suffered a serious bout of encephalitis when younger and the after-effects still lingered. A woman might handle him better. But I had no woman to count on.

Another development soon forced my hand. Man-Ying decided to migrate. So my sons would be deprived of her attentions too. I could see the growing need for me to be home more. Ergo, I simply had to avoid getting promoted beyond my existing level.

On that line of reasoning, I wrote to the government stating that I wished to be withdrawn from any consideration for promotion because, as a single parent, I was not in a position to take on additional official functions. I needed more time with my children.

The reply that came back was cold and devoid of any commiseration or empathy. It stated that my request had been noted. But then it went on to point out, quite unnecessarily, that it would mean my acceptance of more

junior officers being advanced ahead of me.

The letter was signed by the then Secretary for the Civil Service, an expatriate Staff Grade B Administrative Officer who was ranked below me in seniority. I considered the reference about being passed over both superfluous and an impertinence. I was disheartened that so arrogant and insensitive an officer should have been given the responsibility — among others — for enhancing the morale of the civil service. But then, though the man's heart and soul might be crippled by ambition, he was nonetheless generally recognised as one of the Governor's blue-eyed boys.

And though government claimed it had noted the fact I was a single parent to three children, it seemed to have had no hesitation in sending me away from home for half the time during the following year, to deal with the long-running Bermuda II civil aviation negotiations.

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Life can be a funny thing. Very often, just when one grows resigned to coming against nothing but dead ends, something unforeseen and pleasant happens. This was the case after my aborted trip to Taiwan. I was invited by a friend to a birthday dinner and there I met a lovely married woman. For the purpose of this narrative, I shall call her C. A number of fortuitous events subsequently followed and before long we fell in love.

In recounting the story, I shall stick as authentically as possible to feelings and emotions. But I shall alter some of the actual circumstances to shield the identities of the people I am writing about.

Our initial meeting happened shortly before I had been transferred from the Home Affairs Department. She had attended the dinner with her husband. They struck me immediately as a very odd pair. The man appeared close to 40 and was working at one of the local universities in a non-teaching capacity. His features were utterly bland, commonplace and unemphatic; his

nature was about as communicative as a lamppost's. He hardly entered into a conversation the entire evening and when he did his voice was strangely muted and toneless. He seemed overly preoccupied with some problem of his own.

His wife, on the other hand, was cheerful, out-going and as delightful as the first blush of spring. She had a spontaneous smile, which was the most guileless and fetching I had ever seen upon a woman's face. She was also willowy and graceful, with a slender waist flaring pleasingly into generous child-bearing hips. She could hardly have been more than about 21 or 22 but she carried with her that very special glow which often lingered with a woman after giving birth.

During the course of the evening, I learnt that she had indeed recently given birth to a son. She was a stenographer by profession, living with her husband and their son in the home of the husband's parents.

She appeared so lively and attractive that I had to restrain myself from casting my eyes in her direction. Life was thoroughly unfair, I thought. Some men had all the luck. How come the prospective brides introduced to me never exuded an air and a personality half as beguiling? If one of them had been, I probably would have secured a substitute mother for my children by now.

I speculated for a day or two afterwards how two such ill-matched people could have ended up as a couple. It must have been one of those old-fashioned family marriages, betrothed by their parents, or else arranged through a matchmaker, sight unseen. Beyond resenting the vagaries of fate, I thought no further about them.

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Throughout my civil service career, I had made a point of spending the lunch hour socialising with friends or colleagues, in order to garner insights into

what was happening in the wider world or in other parts of the bureaucracy.

When lunching on my own, I would just grab a quick plate of fried rice or noodles at the Hong Kong University Alumni Association Club or at one of the less expensive eateries in the heart of town. Thereafter, I would spend the rest of the lunch hour wandering around, trying to get a feel of the prevailing business mood and the tempo of the city. It would all be impressionistic, admittedly, but I had been used to doing that kind of reconnoitring as a reporter. That habit had been reinforced by Sir John Cowperthwaite's advice for policy makers to see things on the ground for themselves, instead of relying solely on abstract theories and equivocal statistics.

During my after-lunch walks, therefore, I would note the size of the crowds in the shops and restaurants and the mood with which shoppers went about their window-shopping or purchases. I was also fond of roaming through the side streets where hawkers, roadside barbers, bootblacks and others in lowly occupations earned their living. If I could find an excuse, I would engage some of them in conversation. I enjoyed talking to such people. Getting indications of prices at hawker stalls gave me a quicker sense of inflationary pressures than the long wait for the weighted components of Consumer Price Index to land on my desk.

Common people knew life at the sharp end. They were generally straight-talking, earthy and uncontaminated by too many social artifices. Psychologically, I felt at ease with them, because I had started my working life as a refugee at the age of 13, washing dishes and sweeping floors, trying to satisfy my belly. I was keen to know the current problems they faced, whether they were making sufficient to get by, whether they were being squeezed by triads, and so forth. Since I was now in a position with a little influence, I wanted to ease their lives if I could.

There was a thin middle-aged fellow, probably a reformed drug addict, I had struck up an acquaintance with. He operated as a shoeblick on the pavement of a side-lane. I would occasionally spend a couple of dollars for

a shine, just for the sake of talking to him. Though there were a couple of other shoeblacks operating alongside him, he had no qualms over telling me whether there were drug pushers lurking around the neighbourhood or whether the police had been harassing him too much.



Getting my shoes shined.

He told me that he and his fellow boot polishers preferred the patronage of foreigners because they paid more generously, well above the going rate. None of them knew how to attract their custom, however. When they called out, foreigners usually ignored them, taking them for beggars or con artists.

“Grab their attention by spinning a good yarn,” I advised him. “Exaggerate your virtues like corporations do with advertising.”

“But how? None of us know their language,” he replied.

“Repeat after me: ‘Best shoeshine in town, Boss! No good, no pay.’” I made him repeat the phrases a few times until he got a passable intonation. Then I taught him a couple more phrases in English and pidgin.

When I next went by his pitch, he told me the hailing calls had worked.

Sometimes, when two or three foreigners were together, getting one of them to have a shine often meant his companions would give custom to his mates along the pavement as well.

The collective earnings of bootblacks would never figure in the mountains of GDP statistics produced by governments because they formed part of the shadow economy. Yet the briskness or otherwise of their business would be one of the earliest indicators of the wider society's propensity to spend. A man going through hard times would not dish out that little extra sum to get his shoes polished. But if spent, his decision would produce its own marginal effect on the velocity of money.

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One day, about three months after the birthday party I went for one of my after-lunch walks and unexpectedly bumped into C. She looked a picture of loveliness, smiling as beguiling as when we first met, though — at closer quarters — I could detect beneath her outward cheerfulness an undercurrent of restlessness. Because of that, she gave me the impression of a high-spirited filly not fully reconciled to being bridled, trying at times to get the bit between her teeth.

We exchanged the customary pleasantries before I asked if she had had lunch. When she replied she had already eaten, I suggested a cup of coffee. We thereupon repaired to the lounge of one of the swankier hotels in Central.

I was a trifle uncertain as to how I ought to engage with her. She was treating me deferentially, as if I were an elder, which — given our respective ages — I definitely was. She seemed so innocent and young that I hesitated over treating her as an equal. She was younger than all the three girls Ping had fixed up for me as prospective mates. Yet she was already a married woman and a mother. Not being sure what I ought to do, I played it off the cuff.

During coffee, after we had exchanged news of the mutual friends at the

birthday dinner, I mentioned that it must be a great help to have in-laws to help care for her child since both she and her husband were working. The remark must have triggered some private concern, for she turned more sombre.

“Yes, they’re a great help,” she said. “But they can sometimes be a great hindrance too. Local housing does not provide for a great deal of personal space; living on top of one another involves taking into account the preferences of others.”

Upon hearing that, I jumped wrongly to the conclusion that there had been some friction between her and her in-laws. My mother’s former plight came to mind. My mother too had been a stenographer and she had not taken kindly to subordinating herself to the wishes of my grandparents. That might have driven her to seek employment in Canton. The consequence was the eventual breakdown of her marriage.

I wanted to commiserate with C and to deter her from following in my mother’s footsteps. So I said: “Well, there are always pluses and minuses in life. I grew up in an old-fashioned extended family and later spent almost ten years living with my in-laws. I have to say that, on balance, living with in-laws brings more advantages than disadvantages. I would certainly have found it impossible to cope without them. I’m an authority on extended families and in-laws. But basically, it’s all a matter of learning a few survival skills, like stooping to conquer.”

“Really?” C said, with a soft note of surprise. “I’ve heard you described as a very tough guy in government circles, full of bright ideas, a man who usually gets his way. I must get some pointers from you.”

“Many stories about me are completely unfounded,” I replied. “My so-called bright ideas — if I may use a cricketing analogy — get knocked for sixes. Once in a while, I manage a fluke. That’s about it.”

“Well, I’ve got no elder to tell me about extended families or in-laws. Marriage and motherhood are both new to me.”

“I’m not sure my advice is worth much but I would be glad to answer whatever questions you may have. Unfortunately, it appears our lunch breaks are coming to an end. I imagine we both have to get back to our jobs. Here’s my card. When you are free for another cup of coffee, please ring me. We can meet after work. Don’t be worried if I’m a little difficult to get hold of, because I’m due for quite a bit of travelling on government business. But my secretary can tell you when I’m due back.”

On that note, we shook hands and went our separate ways.

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When old Stanford friends got news that I would be making trips to Washington D.C., a number of them invited me to visit them. But because of time and travel constraints, I could only accept two invitations during the year of Bermuda II negotiations.

The first was for a brief stay with a couple in Bethesda in Maryland. On another round, a week to catch up with a good friend in New York. She had married the chief executive of American Express and they had a magnificent apartment on Fifth Avenue, within sight and almost directly across from the Metropolitan Museum.

While planning the New York visit, my thoughts drifted towards Sharlee, as they often did at random moments, like when I catch sight of one of her paintings on my wall at home or when I come across an evocative passage in a novel I was reading. A few bitter-sweet lines would pull me back to Holland, to those stolen adulterous moments of guilty flesh. I would then begin to wonder what Sharlee might be doing and how far she had got with her painting.

More than ten years had elapsed since we had been in touch and the only address I had was that of her parents in Ohio. On an impulse, either out of nostalgia or resentment against the cruelty of karma — I knew not

which — I decided to write to her. I told her I would be in Washington on a government mission on and off over the next few months; if she was anywhere conveniently located, perhaps we could meet.

A reply duly came back, accompanied by a contact telephone number. She explained she was now married and living in New Jersey but could easily drive down to Washington to meet me.

Since I would be spending a week in New York, and that city was livelier than Washington, I wrote back suggesting a meeting in New York instead, giving the dates I would be at a Fifth Avenue apartment. I promised to ring after I had arrived in Washington to finalise details. And so it was that we ended up meeting on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum, on a certain afternoon on an autumnal day.

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Sharlee was already waiting in front of the museum when I approached on foot. She was standing on the uppermost step leading to the entrance, a little apart from the groups of students and youngsters enjoying the sun on the lower steps. She looked serene and poised, ready to be recognised. Her blonde hair had darkened a shade since I last saw her. It was now more stylishly coiffured and her apparel had also gone up-market. She did not quite fit the image I had been entertaining of a dedicated artist. Nonetheless, she remained reassuringly beautiful and desirable, having acquired hardly any additional poundage.

As I approached, I waved to catch her eye. She waved back. I negotiated my way up the steps but before I could even get within kissing distance, she cried out: “Oh, David! You haven’t changed a bit!” Her voice was warm and excited, still carrying a note of youthful exuberance.

We kissed, deeply and tenderly, in public and without embarrassment. What had drawn us together in the past rekindled in me. “You’re as delectable

as ever," I murmured, "and amazingly more beautiful with the passage of years."

"Liar!" she said, in feigned chastisement, while her lambent blue-grey eyes sparkled with modest delight.

"No, perfectly true, my sweet. Scout's honour. You've mellowed magnificently, whereas I've merely learnt to play Dorian Gray's trick of doing my ageing elsewhere."

"Still as deft as ever with a repartee."

"Only when the lady before me is attractive enough to inspire me to the effort," I replied, inclining my head stagily. We were now standing comfortably together. I had one of my arms around her shoulders and she had one of hers around my waist. "And if the truth be told," I added, "I'd like nothing better than to carry you off somewhere right now."

"That's what I like about you. You're incorrigible and always true to form! Right now I'd rather catch up with news of your bosom pal, Sonni Pillai."

"Ah, Sonni. I've been in regular touch with him since The Hague. Visited him at least twice in Penang. He's now left the civil service in Malaysia to join ours in Hong Kong, drafting legislation in the Law Draughtsman's Office. An ideal man for the job, being a barrister by profession, on top of his experience as an administrator. It's a tricky thing, drawing up legislation that can be efficiently implemented.

"As to his love life, I fear he's at last been harnessed to marriage. Otherwise in fine fettle. I actually see a fair bit of him and his wife. She's a buxom Indian lassie less than half his age."

"How very nice for him," she said, nodding. "So you've been keeping up with him much more than you have with me."

I felt abashed. "I'm sorry. I couldn't with you, because it would have meant stringing you along under false pretences. I couldn't do that to you. I should have told you in Holland I was already married."

"You didn't need to. I figured that out for myself. For me, it didn't change

a thing between us.”

“But it mattered to *me*. I had nothing to offer back then; I’m divorced now but I still have nothing to offer. I’ve been stuck with bringing up three kids. You got kids yet?”

“No, too many questions still up in the air,” she said. “You’re wrong, you know. Everyone has things to offer — if only we were willing to pay the price or to make others pay the price for us. But let’s not go into anything so terribly dreary. Just tell me, what *you’re* up to, besides breaking feminine hearts? I want the truth, not that evasive hush-hush stuff you tried on the phone.”

I sighed. “I’m up to no good, I fear. Playing a devious three-cornered game of civil aviation politics, if you must know. Pretending to be in step with the desires of my imperial masters in London, to grab more air travel for their benefit, while signalling to your people my own sympathies for their mantra of open competition and open skies. In playing one party off against the other, I’m hoping to strike enough balance in their conflicting interests to allow me to secure for Hong Kong a fairer share of the economic cake. A thoroughly cynical and disreputable undertaking.

“Deeply cynical and disreputable because, however the unseemly scramble might turn out, one thing is certain. Only vested interests will ever benefit, not ordinary folks. Every third world country is already starting its own flag carrier to crowd the skies, even as it rushes hellbent to manufacture traffic jams on its streets. Soon planes will fill the heavens, carrying millions of dullards all over the globe, to the detriment of the very air we breathe, to the torment of those who have to live under flight paths. And all for what? The sake of extra tourism dollars and some tarted up GDP figures for domestic talking heads.”

Sharlee looked at me darkly.

“What can a hired mercenary like myself do, in a world rampant with crony capitalism disguised as democracy?” I blurted out in my own defence. “I can’t

change the system; I've tried. So I can only play the three wise monkeys to earn my keep."

"Oh," Sharlee allowed. From the tone of that single sound, I knew I had over-exposed some of my own frustrations and failures. If she were to remain anything like her former self, a whole series of "whys" would surely be coming my way.

I was not yet prepared to answer for my sins, at least not so soon after our reunion. In order to divert her, I interjected quickly: "I've never been inside the Met. Shouldn't we take a turn now that I'm here?"

"Why not," Sharlee answered, somewhat flatly. She then slipped an arm around one of mine and we entered the museum.

It was a weekday and visitors were sparse. We strolled unhurriedly among the exhibits, pausing now and then for a better view or to voice some pedestrian comment. But I was not really taking in most of them. My mind was elsewhere; I imagined hers was too.

It was an absurdity, a madness, for us to meet, I thought, as we wandered among the detritus of long lost civilisations, dead loves and forsaken ambitions. What could either of us hope to achieve by meeting at this belated stage? So much had happened since that glorious spring of 1965. We could not possibly, in the autumn of 1976, return to where we had been, to pick up again from where we had left off.

I recalled with an aching heart some of the wilder enthusiasms we had shared and rashly committed ourselves to. The artistic life, intellectual integrity, great causes, lop-sided fights for justice, the betterment of humanity and all the rest of that stuff. We had advanced those notions in good faith, under the intoxication of love, only to discover years later they were just so much tommyrot. Life had not turned out even remotely to resemble our fleeting dreams.

At least none of the dubious things I had done would ever end up inside a museum to shame me, I reflected. How could the mastery of a few aviation

technicalities like route structures, break-even load factors, comparative catchment areas, Freedoms of the Air and such become immortalised? Why should any record of a whole string of negotiations be preserved for posterity?

As we strolled, I became aware that something equally troubling might be working through Sharlee's mind. Thankfully, she was keeping her introspections to herself.

After a while, we found ourselves before one of Gauguin's celebrated paintings of Tahitian women. We stopped to study it. I recalled something Gauguin had said about women from that part of the world. He had ascribed to them the serene virtue of being knowing in their naiveté. No wonder he took on so many of them as *vahines*, or native child brides.

My reflections were interrupted when Sharlee said in a small voice, while staring at the painting: "Perhaps the women in Polynesia accept the realities of life more easily than women in the West. They're not lumbered by so many expectations. I gradually gave up painting, you know, after I got married."

"Don't feel disheartened," I said, trying to be consoling. "You're still young. There's time yet. If one had a true flame, it's bound to flare again. How long did it take Gauguin to go from stockbroker to painter and sculptor? He was quite old, wasn't he, when he abandoned his family for Tahiti?"

"I've been deluding myself with those sorts of alibis," Sharlee said, turning to look at me straight in the eyes. "But they haven't worked. My husband heads one of Fortune's 500. That comes with too many obligations, too much stuff to deal with. Home in New Jersey, house in Connecticut, villa in the south of France, cars, yachts, entertaining others and being entertained, always in the limelight living the American dream. My husband and I must now number among those you call dullards, flying all over the world to no good purpose. At least when you fly, you have some purpose, whether it's your own or somebody else's. What I want to know is when is your flame going to start burning again?"

I gave a hollow laugh. "I'm too old and spent, already 48," I said. "I'm not

sure I ever had a real flame. I tested it out in London once; it fizzled. Even if I had it, too many years of turgid bureaucratic prose must have done me in by now. Can't write properly any more. Can't even produce a half-decent sentence to save my soul."

"Well, you'd better start getting back into practice. You promised me a story which you still haven't delivered. I'm holding you to your word. You're not going to force me to admit to another misjudgement, are you, of relying on your word?"

"You're a hard woman, Sharlee," I said, with a shake of my head, giving another hollow laugh at the same time to hide my embarrassment over being called to account. "I can't recall having promised any early delivery, have I? But I'll keep that promise; just give me a little more time."

On that note, we continued our way through the rest of the museum. By the time we re-emerged, the sunlight was retreating in advance of the dying day. Most of the young people had dispersed from the steps.

As we stood outside the entrance, we looked at each other, putting on tentative and ambiguous smiles. A mixed sense of both elation and melancholy seeped through me. I felt slightly heady, because I had received confirmation that a connection made long ago still mattered to both of us. But melancholy also, because in engaging with Sharlee again I had been forced to confront my own inner self and to realise I had failed to achieve that elevated plane of living we both had once grandly aspired to.

Disconcerted by that self-knowledge, my mind was left at sixes and sevens as I walked beside Sharlee down the steps. Upon reaching the street, I was uncertain what to do next. "Shall we go for a drink?" I asked, ambivalently.

Sharlee hesitated for a couple of seconds. "Perhaps I should be heading back," she said. "I have a long way to drive."

"Of course," I said, half-disappointed but also half-relieved. "I shall be in New York for a few more days. If you should happen this way, we could meet again."

“I’ll check my schedule when I get home and let you know.”

We studied each other affectionately but indecisively for a moment longer. Words began forming in my heart. I did not want to part from her again so quickly. But before I could get my sentiments out, I heard Sharlee say: “Kiss me again, David, before I go.”

I did. But I think each of us was only kissing our own flesh-tethered memories.

Those decade-old memories held me fast, like a rebuke, as I watched helplessly as Sharlee moved towards one of the yellow cabs at the kerbside, to take her to where she had parked her car. She climbed in and then waved goodbye. There was some vague yet definite message conveyed in that wave. It seemed to insinuate she would be doing some hard thinking in the days ahead.

I sensed it was highly unlikely she would find time to come to New York again.

* * *

It was to be another 15 years, after I had retired from Hong Kong and taken up residence in London, before I got down to doing any serious writing. It was only then that I began working on the story I had long promised Sharlee. I never managed to get the finished product to her, however, because by the time I had finished the story, the telephone number at New Jersey she had given me had been disconnected. We had completely lost touch.

If she had happened to chance upon any of the 50 or so short stories I had subsequently published in magazines or over the airwaves, she would still be in the dark as to whether I had ever written the story I had promised.

* * *

Meanwhile, during one of those brief respites in Hong Kong which hyphenated my repeated journeys to London and Washington, C rang to take up me up on my offer of a cup of coffee after work. This came before my reunion with Sharlee. C said she wanted some advice on how best to get one's point of view across to elders in an extended family.

I was loath to get involved with the internal affairs of somebody else's family. But since I had off-handedly made the offer, I could only follow through.

When we met, C said she would like to learn my ways of bending in-laws to my wishes, as she wanted to do the same with hers.

That question embarrassed me. In reality, over the years, I had actually just gone along with the inclinations of my in-laws. They set the family routine, including the care and upbringing of my children. I was dependent upon them for financial help because my civil service salary proved inadequate to support my family. I therefore had little choice but to accept whatever they decided. If they had been harsh and vindictive, blaming me for breaching their trust or messing up the life of their daughter, I might have reacted differently. But they had been absolutely kind, considerate and understanding, and very easy to live with. Most importantly, they formed a sort of buffer zone, mediating the tensions between myself and my wife, so that we could co-exist without undue acrimony. I felt considerably in their debt.

I was naturally reluctant to explain the full situation to a young woman like C. So I just said: "Well, my in-laws had been very nice and sensible people and a pleasure to live with. They were also very caring grandparents. It was very rare for me not to see eye to eye with them on most things."

"If that was the case, how come you had to get divorced?" C asked. "I'm a bit confused. With such good in-laws, why divorce? Do you mind my asking the reason?"

"You're asking some damn awkward questions, young lady," I said. "My circumstances are unlikely to apply in your case. In a nutshell, I'm in my

present pickle because my in-laws had been actually too good. You see, their only daughter and I had never really been in love. It had been only sex that tripped us up.

“She was a teenager at the time and I was 12 years her senior; I was supposed to be her guardian. After getting sexually involved, I — being rather old-fashioned — felt honour-bound to marry her, though both of us had reservations about each other. By the time we had our first child, it became obvious we were temperamentally completely unsuited. I told my in-laws it would be best for us to divorce. Their daughter was still young enough, I said, to start afresh.

“But they wanted us to salvage the marriage. Things should get better, they argued, once their daughter became more mature. They suggested another child as a means of cementing things. Because I was weak and filled with guilt, I went along. Things never got better, however. So here I am, divorced, and having to look after three kids on my own.”

“I’m sorry,” C said. “I had no right to pry. Thank you for sharing your situation. I hope telling it wasn’t too unpleasant for you.”

“It’s all right. As I’ve said, I don’t think my story has any bearing on your situation.”

“But it has! I’m at the same point you had been in when you sought a divorce.”

“Oh, really? Why? I had understood you’ve been married for just a year and a half.”

“Wasn’t that how long it took you to realise your marriage couldn’t work?” C replied, looking skywards and blinking her eyes to resist a flow of threatened tears. “My husband’s an only son. When our son came, he felt he had done his duty towards his family. He lost interest in me. He regarded me in the traditional Chinese way, as someone to look after his son and his parents. My in-laws had much the same attitude. They focused their attention upon their grandson. But I want more out of life than just that.”

C's confession had been unexpected. I sympathised with her, trapped in circumstances beyond her resolution. My immediate instinct was to help her. But it was tricky for a third party to get in the middle of a marital dispute; I simply did not know quite how to respond.

"Divorce is a very big step," I cautioned, "especially now that you have a child. Have you talked this over with your parents or family? Or with marriage counsellors?"

"My parents passed away when I was about ten; I was raised by distant relatives," C said. "They've since migrated to Canada, so I have no close relatives around. But divorce is not the real issue. My husband and I do not love each other. Neither he nor his family would object to our splitting up."

"But British law does not provide for divorce just because of people no longer love one another. There has to be some compelling grounds, such as cruelty, desertion, adultery or the like."

"None of that applies with us," C said. "The heart of the issue is my son. I want him. But my husband and his parents also want the boy. I cannot give up my son. What can I do to keep him?"

I saw at once it was not a matter I could handle. "I suggest that you consult a lawyer before you do anything," I said. "Child custody issues are rather complicated. From what little I know, I think courts are not so interested in the recriminations of adults as the welfare of children. I can also understand the imperative of your husband's family to have a male heir to perpetuate its family line. The lawyer who handled my divorce is a pretty good one. She's very sound and sensible. I can introduce you. She'll be able to give you an idea of how things might develop if your request for custody is challenged."

"Is she expensive?"

"She'll be quite reasonable, if you're referred by me. Are finances a problem?"

"I hardly have any savings. After a divorce, I'll have to manage on whatever I can earn."

“If you have to work, how are you going to look after your son should you gain custody? Presumably you don’t own any property, so you’ll probably have to rent accommodation as well.”

“No, sadly, I own no property. I’ll have to engage a Filipino maid in addition, I guess.”

“That’ll make for a tight squeeze on a stenographer’s income. A working mother using a maid to look after a child would not sound very compelling before a court, compared with the attention the child could get from a pair of committed grandparents. You’d better have a chat with my lawyer friend first.”

With that, I provided C with the contact details of the lawyer and, within days, left for Washington for a further round of negotiations and, afterwards, a reunion with Sharlee.

* * *

I returned to Hong Kong in low spirits. I had destabilised — in all probability for the worse rather than for the better — the life Sharlee had established for herself. The reunion had also brought me retrospective regrets and a degree of self-loathing I had not experienced for some time. Everything I had attempted seemed utterly meaningless and pointless.

After an absence of three weeks, I rang C to find out whether she had fared any better with a lawyer advising her on her problem. I was surprised to find she had moved out of her marital home and had taken a single room for a month at the Helena May Institute at Garden Road.

The Helena May was founded in 1916 by the wife of the then Governor, Sir Henry May, with the object of providing affordable residence and welfare support for women and girls.

C was quick to explain, when I finally caught up with her, that she had not initiated divorce proceedings but had merely moved out of the family

home to determine whether she could stand being separated from her son. I suspected that her lawyer must have advised her that custody was a chancy thing, given her financial circumstances, relative to those of her husband and in-laws. I could well imagine the loneliness and desolation she must have subjected herself to at the Helena May, after returning there from work each day. So I invited her to join my family for one of our unspectacular dinners prepared by Ah Duen at Palm Court.

She became an instant hit with my boys. They took her more as an older sister than as an elder, for her age and that of my eldest son were not that far apart. She hid well her own sadness during her visit and she soon infected the entire dining table with her cheerfulness. Seeing how she was interacting with my children made me realise she was exactly the kind of woman that both my boys and I needed in the home. If she was separating from her husband, then there might still be a chance for me.

I therefore invited her to come again two or three nights later. She again cheered us no end with her spontaneous laughter and her out-going nature. She took Ah Duen's indifferent meal in her stride. After the children had retired to their rooms at nine, C and I drifted out onto the balcony to take some air.

It was late October, about two weeks after the autumn equinox. The evening was pleasantly cool. There was what the *Old Farmer's Almanac* called a harvest moon, hanging as brightly as a lantern in the sky. Beneath it, the lights of the restive city seemed only to languish in inadequate counterpoint.

The one which caught our eyes most was the big neon sign on top of the Ocean Terminal across the harbour. It advertised one of the more popular Japanese consumer products. The rest were largely uncertain pinpoints of light emanating from the concrete cells that passed for human habitation, from headlights of evening traffic or from squatter area stoves heating up evening meals. They melded together somehow, undifferentiated, to cast a deceptive veil over the hardships and the mendacity of a fractured and hard-nosed city.

Here and there, protruding gloomily above the evening skyline, were the arms of gantry cranes idled for the night, appearing like grim signposts along the road to perdition.

C and I stood silently, resting our forearms on the balcony railing, while we took in the anomalous scene before us. Each of us must have been mulling over our own predicaments. Mine were dark and depressing, without hope. Perhaps hers had been too.

Suddenly, from out of the night, the plaintive notes of a Chinese flute floated towards us. Its melody was soft and melancholy, resembling a lament gently sighed. C and I turned and looked at each other. Without uttering a word, we fell spontaneously into each other's arms and began kissing furiously. It was inevitable for us to end up in bed.

* * *

In the afterglow of love, within the curtained darkness of my bedroom, I heard C murmur in a voice mellowed by a fresh understanding forged through the interaction of lips and skin: "What has happened to us?"

"I think we've fallen in love," I replied. C's beauty and youthfulness now seemed even more wondrous than before. I had now appraised her beyond sight, through the senses of sound, smell and touch, and she had been found delightful in every way. There was no longer any differentiation between us as elder or junior; just a simple case of a man and a woman bewitched, in love with each other.

"I'm doomed," C allowed, dishearteningly, after a pause. "I'll be judged a bad and immoral mother, unfit to have custody of a son."

"No, no! You're not a bad mother at all. In fact, you're the best of mothers, one fighting tooth and nail to be together with her son."

"But I've done wrong; it'll be held against me."

"There's nothing wrong about two human beings falling in love. It must be

karma or fate that has brought us together. Let us just see where it leads.”

C was not convinced. But at least I persuaded her to have dinner at Palm Court again the following evening. We reaffirmed our love but neither of us could get around that eternal conundrum: What ought to happen when an irresistible force came up against an immovable object?

If fate had brought us together, then duty tore us apart. Within two days I had to emplane for London, for the next round of Bermuda II. I wrote her a letter on the plane, reiterating my love, and posted it the moment I landed at Heathrow. But what was the point of the letter when I could offer no solution to her quest to be with her son?

* * *

Upon my return from London, devastating news awaited me. C had decided during my brief absence to leave the *Helena May* to return home. She explained she simply could not bear to be separated from her child any more. I could relate to how she must have felt. The irreconcilable equation in our lives languished hopelessly before us.

She was fearful of seeking a divorce, lest she lost custody of her son. I was in a quandary, not quite knowing what I should do next. I wanted to marry her, to try and make both of us happy. And to make my children happier too. But I could not marry her until she got divorced and she would not initiate proceedings without a firm and prior assurance that divorce would allow her to keep her child.

I tried to set out the stark alternatives. In doing so, I no doubt had allowed selfish considerations to colour my presentation. I emphasised how much I cared for her but I carefully avoided any suggestion she should just let her infant son go in exchange for a life with me. Though I knew that giving up the child would both satisfy her husband's family and be advantageous for me, I did not want to be held responsible for urging so fraught a decision. She

would have to make that on her own.

I reminded her the price for remaining with her son would be living with a man she did not love and remaining part of a family which did not care for her. How many years could she endure such an imposition? I had once made a wrong decision at a critical juncture; the result was 11 years of a loveless marriage. A similar mistake should be avoided. Her son was in his infancy; he might have to grow up, like my children, in an atmosphere riddled with family tensions. Quite apart from that, was she prepared to throw her own life away? And what about *our* love and *our* happiness? Must our happiness be sacrificed for the sake of her son?

C said she had no answers to any of those questions, though she had been wrestling with them day and night. All she knew was that she loved me but she also needed to be with her son. She wanted both, with all her heart, but was completely at a loss as to how that could be attained.

We continued to meet nonetheless, because neither of us could bear the pain of losing the other. But the circumstances that had brought us together had altered significantly, had become more equivocal, and we had to tread more carefully.

From my point of view, when we began our intimacy, I was a single man in search of a wife, while C was a woman who had taken an initial step towards ending her marriage. She had vacated her marital home for a women's hostel. In the more sexually liberated temper of the age, such a relationship, if somewhat premature, could not be considered unreasonable or frowned upon.

But now, she was trying to reconcile herself to living with her husband and his family. On that account, our liaison began to take on the character of an adulterous affair; my wooing her could be construed as an act of alienating her from her wifely affections. Should her husband discover what was going on, he could sue for divorce and name me as a co-respondent. That would lead not only to an unholy scandal but to serious damage being done to C's

chances of gaining custody should a divorce occur.

The only justification I could offer for my actions was the madness and desperation of love. I had hopes that love could somehow be sufficient for C to surrender the child and decide in my favour. There had been moments when I sensed she might be on the brink of giving way. Unfortunately, I was never allowed to press my suit to a conclusion during those moments. Duty always intervened to drag me away, to send me off to the farthest sides of the world and out of my reach for her.

* * *

When I returned to Hong Kong after two weeks, I was in a despondent mood. Another round of negotiations had got nowhere in terms of a satisfactory trans-Pacific route for a Hong Kong airline. The Americans had the better technical arguments — on traffic configurations, catchment areas, intermediate points, *et cetera*. And all the while the unresolved situation with C weighed upon me more heavily than lead.

Our meetings were now becoming more difficult and dangerous. The risk of exposure was ever present. With C living at home, her absences outside of her normal working routine invited queries. We had to resort to the odd stolen half-hour during lunch time or at the end of the day's work. We made love when we could; we talked incessantly in circles but found ourselves unable to break out of our predicaments. And then, all too soon, we had to part again.

* * *

Away from Hong Kong, my mind was tormented by our uncertain future. The existing relationship was too stressful and unhealthy for both of us. It could not continue. A resolution had to be found — one way or another.

In reviewing my conduct, I judged it less than worthy. It was not good

enough to set out options for C and to refer her to a lawyer for legal advice. She was hardly more than a child, with only a secondary school education. She was vulnerable in more ways than one. Yet I had left the weightiest existential decisions squarely upon her slender shoulders. It was not the behaviour of a true gentleman. I should have shared that responsibility.

I had also not set a good example of honourable behaviour for my sons. So I resolved to tackle the issue afresh upon my return.

But events had moved on dramatically by the time I got back. C gave me news that she was pregnant. I was ecstatic at first. I thought the child was mine. That development should make it easier for C to give up one child for another. But C soon punctured my happiness by saying that, according to her calculations, the child had been conceived during my absence. It was her husband's.

I was dumbfounded. My immediate reaction was a surge of jealousy. How could she be having sex with a man she did not love when she was supposed to be in love with me? Once that blind rush of emotion had subsided, however, I understood how it could have occurred. After all, my second and third sons with Man-Ying had also not been born out of love. The second had been in obedience to the wishes of my in-laws to salvage our marriage and the third had been through a momentary seizure of animal lust. Each human being had its frailties. So had sages and saints.

The new situation robbed both of us of hope. There was no longer any prospect of sharing a life together, at least not any time soon. We went through a sad and affectionate parting. Afterwards, we kept in desultory touch over the next four decades, albeit always with a touch of sweet sorrow.

It was to be another 15 years, after C had been divorced and had remarried a second husband, that she told me how she came to be pregnant with her second child, another son. But the details of that story have to be left for a later volume of these memoirs.