

Pentimento

The luminous hands of the alarm clock by the bed showed five-twenty. Outside the night lay in its heaviest folds, densely black, in that hour just before dawn. But Dorothy was done with sleep. Tossing the patterned sheet aside almost gratefully, she thrust her feet into a pair of thin cotton slippers. Anything was better than watching the slow-shifting minutes of the clock and feeling the weight of silence. A glance fell on the little container of pills by the clock. A grimace crossed her face. She envisioned her next visit to old Dr. Goh. He would say, did they help? As usual, she would reply, yes, thank you, they did. It would spare them both, the one the effort of commiseration, the other the agony of sympathy.

The neighbourhood stood still and silent, illuminated by balefully glowing streetlamps. Its usually innocuous vision of suburbia, a collection of charming terrace houses prettily arrayed around a modest playground, was at this hour hung with an otherworldliness. Strange silhouettes of the roadside angasana trees draped their shadows in weird and fantastic shapes about road and pavement, gardens and walls. Abruptly she turned away from the view and made her way to the kitchen, her eyes avoiding the neat space beside hers on the bed.

The sudden glare of fluorescence roused a dozen insects to their cries. Their cacophony was oddly comforting as she went about her task. Then, nursing a steaming mug, she padded through the dark living room and slid open the glass door that gave onto a patio and a garden draped in the dark forms of dense planting: hibiscus bushes, heliconia clumps, a mango tree by the fence, once planted as a sapling, now almost primeval in size.

Settling into the rattan easy-chair she felt the dampness of its cushions. The sky beyond the further roofs was barely lightening now with a faint greyness and the air, still chilly with the dew of early dawn, was laden with the scent of a sleeping garden.

He was gone now three weeks. She had not cried then nor since, nor had she felt any sense of loss as much as disorientation. Dr. Goh, kindly and concerned, had shown himself ready to listen to a grieving widow's sorrow. Yet never had she been able to move beyond banal platitudes and common courtesies, feeling always an observer at someone else's consultation. And lately the thought intruded now and then like an uninvited guest: had she not cried when they had both been told how ill he was? She could not remember. Sometimes it felt that she had

survived as Heng Lam's socks, cars, clubs and home had. Was this what had made her drive them all away a week ago? She bit her lip.

The house then had been filled to overflowing. The children and their families had returned, relatives milled everywhere. Everyone taking turns staying up beneath the harshly lit canopy erected in the front lawn and spilling out onto the narrow sidewalk with apologies to neighbours. The rituals of faux ingots conjured from gold-leaf patterned joss paper, incense and chants, the well-meaning visits punctuating the long and featureless hours that blurred in a general murmur of prayer and consolation. A coffin amidst it all, within which reposed someone once a beloved husband and father. Where was she then? She could not say. But she knew when it was all over and the children had united in their pleas, that she caused them concern.

Vicky, her elder girl, had been in favour of her going back with them to Boston: the children always loved having granny around. Vicky's husband, big, genial, generous Fred, long since inducted into the Asian sense of family, had added his pleas to his wife's in his soft New England drawl: "As long as you want, Ma." Michael her son insisted she would love Geneva, where he worked for the World Bank. Maria her younger girl, thought New Zealand, where she was, was the most restful. Dolly, her straits-born sister-in-law was equally firm: "Aiyah, somewhere nearer, not so tiring." But Dorothy had been unresponsive. It had all seemed like listening to a roomful of strangers discussing one's fate. With shame she recalled their shocked looks when in the midst of argument amongst themselves she had suddenly shouted, "Enough, I don't want to go anywhere. Just go home and leave me alone!"

And, stricken and guilt-ridden though she had been as she hugged and waved them all off, children, in-laws, grandchildren, she had not been able to help the feeling that it was again someone else who saw them off, someone else who stood in the porch beside the still new-looking Mercedes, promising to phone. She regretted her words for the hurt they caused but not for the wish they expressed. They had meant well. Michael, bless him, almost wouldn't leave. They had wanted her to get on beyond the grief of loss. There was no way of telling them that the loss of their father was something she had become accustomed to long before his death.

The dawn now thinned the edges of the dark in deliquescent streaks of yellow. The newspaperman on his rounds looped his way noisily from gate to gate on his motorbike. A slight smile came to her as she heard the careless "plop" of each news wad hitting a driveway or a

pillar. There had always been complaints but it had never bothered him. A distant gurgle clarified itself into the aggressive warbling of birds which shook to life the fretwork of the roadside trees. Here and there lights went off in porches and the distant groans of buses announced another day.

In the dim calm of her veranda Dorothy felt herself anchorless, as purposeless as driftwood. Her coffee was finished, and she was faced with the prospect of a morning not much different from all the others that had, in her husband's life as afterward, succeeded each other in endless sequence. Ming Jie, the part-timer who came three times a week, would soon be here. It was time to dress. She got up, then stopped herself abruptly. What for? Whom for? Certainly not Ming Jie. Then too, none to whose judgment she might feel herself submitted. Something sprang up inside her, neither joyous nor exhilarating, but as surprising as the discovery of a hidden quality to an article that has exhausted its possibilities.

Abruptly she went back inside, flinching as her knee knocked into an armrest. She deposited her mug in the sink without its usual rinse, and went upstairs. Showered and dressed she presently found herself before her dressing table. Here, the sudden burst of energy subsided. The face in the mirror looked back as she struggled to recognise it, never having paid any attention these past two years of nursing Heng Lam. The familiar features were now almost a stranger's. She put a finger tentatively to the cold reflection and traced the dark circles under puffy eyes, the jowls beneath the chin, the hair now almost all white. Snatches of conversation floated back from distant rooms, of old aunts in conclave over games of chek-ki and mah-jong: "She's the prettiest daughter-in-law..."; "Actually, not really pretty-"; "True, but there's a sweetness about her-"; "Ah yes, her smile." Where were the years between? Unsteadily she rose and gathered her keys and purse.

The street had bestirred itself. Here and there a maid brought garbage out or swept dead leaves off a driveway as gates opened, disgorging cars. Mrs. Fong, punctilious as ever, stood by hers, waving goodbye to her husband who did the morning school run, their teenagers slumped sulkily in the back seat. Dorothy had never done that for Heng Lam, considering it too showy. An ache vibrated in her as she returned their greeting.

The sky was now a canopy of a gentle blue brilliance and the remnant coolness of the dawn still hung at the air, in the long shadows of trees and greyish dew of foliage. Mrs. Leong's bougainvilleas, radiantly fuchsia, were a vision of plastic perfection. On the breeze floated the

aroma of radish cakes, breaking the rhythm of her pace in spite of being no different from the hundreds of times before that it had pervaded the air. She walked on, reflexively quickening her step in slight embarrassment, keeping her eyes fixed ahead or downward whenever she caught a glimpse of an opening door. She felt vulnerable and conspicuous this morning, her first outing on her own since the funeral. Were the early mornings always so cool and bright? Were these the sights and sounds and smells for him most mornings when he made his way to Rosa's at the end of their lane? Why had it never occurred before to her?

It was real though, the quiet hours and loneliness especially after Maria, the youngest of the three, had left. Vicky had by then settled in Boston with Fred where he carried on research in oncology; Michael was already in Geneva, good-humouredly fending off his father's recommendations to settle down, never letting on that it would never happen. She, of course, could have told Heng Lam so. Then Maria went to Cambridge and left her the desperate feeling of a void.

For by then Dorothy could no more say that she was happily married than that she was unhappily so. By the acceptable definitions of convention she knew that they had a successful marriage, having been faithful to their vows and accommodating of their differences. The fruitful lives of their three children were testimonial of their steadfast acquittal of parental duties. Heng Lam himself, if a man of few words, was as dependable a life partner as the most fastidious woman could wish for. She knew that she ought to feel all the satisfaction of achievement and the contentment of greater leisure. Yet a leaden emptiness had crept upon her. The ebb of marital purpose had receded and left her stranded and resourceless. And there was no way her husband could understand.

For his life was full, as it always had been, crowned as it was with a successful career in the Ministry where he had through the years risen from junior officer to what he was today, Director of Curriculum Planning and Development. In addition, as chairman of certain civic committees and board member of several others, he constantly shuttled from one meeting to another. He was due soon for retirement, but it had been indicated that they intended to renew his contract. The leisure he permitted himself at home was filled with minutes to vet, papers to present and reports to get through. He had caught her mood, and had guessed at the root of it, and constantly encouraged her to be up and doing: flower arrangement classes, cooking lessons,

bonsai, calligraphy classes, even yoga. But she found his concern for her spurious, reminiscent of an adult's attempts at distracting a restless child. Indeed, she was even growing to resent the cursory solicitude of his advice, detecting in it a whiff of the patronising tone he always employed when defending ministry policies.

For beneath the surface of her well-ordered and comfortable existence, bizarre promptings stirred, unbidden and inexplicable. How could she explain the strange longing to be free: to be free of the tethers of home, routine, chores and the minutiae of domesticity; how justify the desperate wish to travel, with or without him, to explore possibilities though they were no clearer than the mist-shrouded forms of unseen regions. Deep down, she knew it would have been no different from the countless other times when her views would be dealt with when incongruent with his.

She had once waved at him an article on the zouks and bazaars of Algeria, her heart leaping with excitement. It had been accompanied by glossy photos leaping with colour and suggestive of heady scents: almonds, saffron, rosewater.

He had looked at her with amused indulgence. "Pay so much just to see some *pasar malam* when we've cleaned them all up! I'll take you to Yio Chu Kang for free!"

The words bubbled: Is this how it will always be? But the years sat on them and made her put the magazine away, turning her wish into a long and steady gaze beyond the window, where sparrows pecked at the sun-warmed lawn. And in an instant she knew that the silent differences had added up in spite of having been, through the marriage, swept away, dismissed, ignored. Love and happiness were not synonymous.

In certain moments there was even humour in their situation. They had reached a state when leisure was returned to them with the means to enjoy it, but were impoverished in ways beyond the measure of physical comfort. She knew, if she died, he would mourn her sincerely, yet without deeper thought of whether she had been happy. And if it were suggested otherwise, he would have been deeply offended. For he was content and, unable to see what she could possibly lack, believed that she was too.

His illness came as a profound shock but, like an unavoidable accident, it was too late for anything to be done. It made him withdraw even more into himself, enraged and baffled at what he perceived to be a singularly unfair judgment to an earnest life. The gulf between them could

not have been greater when he shut himself up within a carapace of fury at the injustice of it, leaving her the grief of stillborn consolation.

The relatives, supportive, visited at odd times and commiserated with sad looks, heavy sighs and the recommendation of several Chinese herbalists. At night, in a recliner at the foot of his bed she would listen to the rhythm of his breath, sometimes laboured, at other times a shallow rasp amplified by the dark and its stillness. Now and then she summoned up the strength to lift and reposition him in answer to a grunt or a groan.

– “Better?”

– “Not really.”

– “Now, like this?”

– “I suppose so.”

He would look at her with eyes made larger by his suffering. Twinges of pain racked him every so often, making him grimace and flick his fingers on the sheet. “Thanks” was the most he said. And she knew that in the word lay all his need of her even as everything they had yet to say to each other lay buried beneath the truth of their relations: they had lost the habit of expression. In the sheltering darkness of those nights Dorothy gave herself over to the surrender that slowly, painfully, laid to rest all the pleas that he would never know of. In acceptance had she sat by him and held his hand as he breathed his last, and in acceptance, received the urn placed before her with mingled efficiency and compassion.

The busy hum of traffic told her that she had reached the end of the lane where it now joined the busy main road. To one side of this junction, gaudily green and white, spread the canvas awning with “ROSA” boldly lettered on it. It was a tea and breakfast place and therefore the place that the neighbourhood, in particular its middle-aged and elderly, stopped in at odd times of the day.

Rosa herself, now corpulent with age, sat enthroned behind the cashier’s till while her daughter bustled about calling orders to the kitchen at the back, manned by an aged assistant. In the mornings, toast kaya and soft-boiled eggs were served; later in the day its glass display case would fill up with freshly baked pastries of all kinds: cream puffs that oozed not cream but yellow vanilla-scented custard, cream horns filled with butter cream, curry puffs gleaming with

their honey-coloured sheen, *char siu* buns, all jostling for space and clamouring for attention by appearance and aromas.

Dorothy was not unfamiliar with Rosa's. It had been her habit to stop by for a curry puff or two for tea at home with Heng Lam at weekends. But the scene before her struck her anew: when was the last time she had come by at this hour? It seemed she only remembered preferring the solitude of her mornings at home, and accepting that his belonged here. She looked timidly for Rosa, failed to make her out amongst the noise and clustered customers and turned to go.

"Mrs. Wong, good morning," called Rosa, surging forth with an agility belied by her size. "Come, come."

Rosa showed her to a table in a far corner.

"I'm so happy to see you. First time you came in the morning."

"Thank you, Rosa, and thank you for the lovely flowers."

The sharp, furtive eyes grew pink. Large fleshy fingers held a handkerchief to them. "We never knew. Every day we saw him and we never knew." She gave a shuddering sigh. The chatter of the shop washed about them for a few moments.

"Can we make you something else? If you don't like kaya toast? I can ask for something else to be sent in here for you."

It was generous indeed, and Dorothy was moved. The various restaurants along the row, of which Rosa's was one, guarded their territorial rights fiercely, and no one was more territorial than Rosa.

"No, kaya toast would be lovely," said Dorothy.

In a moment the food was before her: two slices of brownly striated bread slathered generously with the jam of egg and coconut milk, grey-green and potent with the aroma of pandan leaves. She blinked, dazed. She had always known that when they said "toast" here they meant in the old-fashioned way, over charcoal but, now, breathing in its fragrance, smoky and reminiscent, she was filled with the pathos of memory. How stupid of her: how could she forget those breakfasts here long before the children came, when a visit to Rosa's had required a bus-ride from their pokey little one-room flat? Even the coffee before her, aromatic with its local roasted beans: "Give me Rosa's, none of the others holds up to hers," he had always said, even from those early days. When then had she stopped listening and consigned these views to

opinionatedness? She savoured the heady brew and watched the little slab of butter melting in tiny rivulets. It seemed a silent testimonial of how little they shared, that she had forgotten so much of such cardinal comforts of his life.

Timidly she looked about her as she ate, struck with the impact of unchanged surroundings: the clink of crockery, the noisomely whirring fans, the chipped mosaic tiles, the lingering scent of vanilla in the air. A sense of forlornness came over her. He was gone. What was the point of all of this? A slight clearing of a throat made her aware of a frail-looking gentleman. Her heart sank. Heng Lam had so many friends. It was Herbert De Souza. She knew him from the odd occasional meetings, their exchanges never exceeding the civilities. He belonged to Heng Lam's other life, the one outside of their marriage.

Herbert tendered his condolences in the manner of a diplomat. He was tall and had a slight stoop. His hair, silver grey, was brushed neatly back from a prominent brow into its customary smooth cap. Horn-rimmed glasses, the morning paper clamped beneath an elbow and a cane completed the picture of gentle dignity. Impelled by the sense of Heng Lam in his eyes, Dorothy was unable to resist indicating a chair, which he accepted, and allowed her to call him a coffee.

"Almost every morning, would you believe it. Since this place started." He sighed deeply, shaking his head. His lined face was filled with genuine and tender sorrow. "I'm a good fifteen years ahead of him. Always assumed it would be the other way around."

The customers were dispersing as the morning drew on. An elderly couple advanced smilingly towards them. Dorothy, in whom the years of domesticity had bred a shyness, was filled with inward trepidation. She was already exhausting her meagre store of conversation and now regretted inviting Herbert.

"Walter Cheng," said the man, "and this is Siew Cheng, my wife. Hello Herbert." His face creased like a spaniel's. "We are so very sorry."

Handshakes were exchanged as Dorothy schooled her expression in conformity with the unavoidable civilities demanded of the situation. Presently all four were seated before a second round.

“We always met here in the mornings at least once or twice a week,” said Walter. “Of course, Herbert and Heng Lam much more so than the both of us.” He smiled indulgently at his wife who looked self-conscious. “Her late night Chinese serials.”

Walter was stout and bald but carried himself with an uprightness of posture that at a distance made him appear taller than he actually was. His pale, plump face with its wide set eyes and generous smile gave an impression of perpetual good humour. Siew Cheng, a vision of tightly permed curls and neat buttoned-up appearance, gave off an aura of minutely supervised housekeeping. She smiled with feminine understanding.

“We heard such wonderful things about you.” She pressed Dorothy’s hand. “Wonderful things,” she added emphatically.

“Heng Lam said now and then how he’d have loved for you to come along, but the place was a little noisy for you,” pursued Walter. Dorothy forced a smile.

Heng Lam never asked her to; nor did she feel the urge to do so. It was accepted as a matter of course that this was the pattern of their days. She knew of his friends from the occasional references he made. Herbert was a widower whose early morning walks with Heng Lam began long before first light and always ended at Rosa’s, where Walter and Siew Cheng would join them from time to time. Once in a while at weekends Heng Lam would tell her he would not be home after breakfast as the four of them were off somewhere else: a floral or bonsai exhibition at some park, a friend’s art gallery to view a consignment newly arrived.

In spite of the warmth of their welcome, she felt an interloper in a private world and was suddenly restrained by a disinclination for the society of these strangers, at once so familiar yet so unknown. Was there somewhere in this disinclination a fear of discovering something that did not accord with memory? She shrank inwardly.

Walter was chuckling. “Do you remember that time we tried *qicong*? Heng Lam was so stiff and awkward the teacher ended up giving him his name card and suggesting that he take private lessons first. At a class for beginners!” Dorothy forced another smile. Yes, that would be the time when he had said that the exercise did not suit him.

“He was such a sport.” Siew Cheng shook her head at the recollection. “We all thought it admirable how he kept at it even though he was not particularly fond of it. Then there was the art class.” Shoulders shook. Walter dabbed his eyes.

“Leong – the art teacher – once showed us this figure done in broad brush – one of those modern pieces that can pass for anything. He asked Heng Lam what he thought of it.” They were convulsed. “And?” she asked faintly.

“He said it looked like the fishmonger’s wife who’d let herself go to seed.” Eyes streamed.

Herbert recovered. “Mr. Leong said it was a portrait of his mother. One of his best.” Dorothy willed a pleasant expression, in spite of a twinge.

When Herbert rose, pleading errands, she gratefully followed his lead. Walter and Siew Cheng looked slightly crestfallen, their mood of bright expectancy giving way to a slight sag. They said their goodbyes and pressed fond invitations on Dorothy to join them, impliedly, where Heng Lam had left off. She murmured her thanks and gratefully stepped out into the cool air of the five-foot walkway that ran along the front of the shophouses.

She walked past them: the Cantonese noodle shop, which would in a while be filled with the aromas of roast duck and pork vaporously breathing their characteristic five-spice powder; the Hainanese chicken rice restaurant now clearing up its morning porridge service, its display case ready for the yellow, delicately poached chicken, their familiar garlicky smells already emanating from dim recesses; the *lontong* shop with its ever-present whiff of spice-laced coconut broth. But all these were barely taken in.

How often had she heard such accounts? His jollity, his bonhomie, those fondly memorable aspects of his well-regarded nature. From friends, family, those of his colleagues at those interminable official dinners. It was not unlike listening to her own sisters tell her how lucky she was. And yet how could anyone think otherwise? Mary’s husband gambled and occasionally stooped to violence; Sissy’s had a mistress of whom they were all, including Sissy, supposed to be ignorant; Theresa’s was constantly in some difficulty over money matters. And she, Dorothy, had one who had only been steady and mindful of the family and his responsibilities. However could she confess to the distaste she felt on these occasions? And the subsequent guilt it was replaced with?

She now reached the end of the row of restaurants and, startled by the blast of a horn, looked about her confusedly. She had unwittingly strayed onto the road. The thoughts occurred simultaneously: that she had nowhere to go to, and that no one waited for her at home. She

looked back over her shoulder: the next bus was slowing down like a weary beast: “No. 175, Bukit Batok”. She boarded it, almost stumbling on the first step, and was startled by the bus-driver’s shout, “Careful, Auntie!”

Dorothy sank unsteadily into a seat by a window as the bus lurched forward. She gazed about her in slight bewilderment. A TV screen was suspended from the ceiling at an angle behind the driver, flickering the news. Its volume was drowned by the rumble of acceleration and the chatter of a group of housewives about her. She shrank deeper into the scuffed synthetic upholstery. The vivid colours of the trees and houses that groaned past were growing harsh with the advancing day. Mrs. Pillay’s semi-detached was now two townhouses that towered over their modest neighbours. Where was she now? The Eng’s two-storey still stood, the old grey Corolla still in the driveway, the bright blue roof tiles glinting gently. She used to bring her granddaughter to kindergarten, Siew May, and they would chat. She liked her, as she had liked Mrs. Pillay. Why had they all not kept up with each other?

In a dim awareness she was glad of the coolness of air-conditioning against her skin. The housewives about her cackled. Some were munching peanuts and some discussing someone’s unfilial daughter-in-law. “*Boey heow chor hai nang!*” The girl did not know her duties. A hollowness resonated in her. Was she any the wiser?

The bus surged past shops and small offices. Jenny’s Dressmakers – she knew Jenny. Had she had left the shop to her daughter Susie? How nice her new bales of fabric always smelt. Chong Meng’s confectionery. How the children loved coming here after school, and even before, when she’d wait for them to finish at their nursery around the corner, long before the sea was reclaimed. Good heavens, they had not changed one bit. Sim Heng’s Hardware – was the old grandfather still there? The traffic now grew swift-flowing as the shop-rows dwindled. Perhaps this is how old people grew senile, she reflected. Forgetting becomes easier until the familiar takes on the lines of the unknown and strange emotions stir which have no names. The signs now announced that they would soon be on the highway toward the north of the island. Suddenly, she was up and the buzzer was off. The bus lurched shudderingly to a stop. Dorothy caught the driver’s glare in the rear view mirror as she alighted. He was swearing under his breath.

The road was blinding. Warm air swept over her in the heat of sun-baked asphalt and the road rose up in undulant waves. She looked about her, dazed and wished she had thought to bring

her umbrella. Why had she got down? She did not know. If she crossed the road she could catch the bus in the opposite direction and be home in no time. If she walked on past the bus-stop down the lane by it, she would be at the swimming club. It would almost certainly be empty at this hour.

The breeze whipped about her and teased strands of hair out of their net-binding at the nape of her neck. Beads of sweat grew on her upper lip and she began to feel the clamminess of sweat-damped clothes. Without the benefit of a mirror she knew she looked a mess and was thankful that no one would see her at this hour, not, at all events, on a weekday morning at, of all places, the club.

It was as expected, deserted. The pool sparkled jewel-like in splendid isolation. Frangipani spread their dappled shade around its periphery. A lone gardener hacked away desultorily at a distant clump of bushes. Wooden deckchairs bleached by the elements lay beneath striped beach umbrellas. The odd crow strutted hopefully, in silent anticipation of old habits.

The clubhouse across the pool was a modest two-storey building and shabby in comparison with the towering edifices of more moneyed clubs. Its featureless cream-coloured plaster walls were punctuated at intervals by aluminium-framed windows that bore the discoloured patches of haphazard maintenance. On its ground level tired signs proclaimed its amenities: “Café Rigoletto”, “Jackpot”, “Lounge”, “Changing Room – Men”, “– Women”, “– Boys”, “– Girls”. Dorothy smiled, remembering first coming here and thinking it a club of changing rooms. In comparison with other clubs, its facilities were considered sadly lacking, but a proposal several years ago to raise funds by endowing membership with transferability remained mired in dispute. The matter seemed destined to lie dormant together with all the other projects for improvement, pending a more aggressive committee. Meanwhile the club carried on in its inimitable fashion with set lunches on weekdays and modest buffets at weekends (half-price for children under 12).

The deck chair was, as ever, hard and uncomfortable in spite of its capaciousness. The staff, skeletal at times of infrequent traffic, had not yet laid the mattresses on it. But Dorothy felt a sentient ease as she stretched herself out. The breeze was much warmer now as the morning

marched toward noon, but made a cooling draft beneath the sharp shadows of the frangipani boughs.

They had come here every weekend when the children were young. How happy she had been, after the children were born, when he had announced that he would put their names down for membership. Heng Lam had cherished fond ambitions for Michael. Fragments of poignant memories stirred as she looked about her. The waters, harshly scintillant, were almost blinding. She squinted. Her mouth dried.

There he was, in bermudas, cap slightly askew against the late afternoon sun, walking briskly along the lanes of churning water shuddering with bobbing heads and cleaving arms, beside Mr. Kwok, the trainer, both keeping even pace. Calls of “Pull! Faster!” rang through Mr. Kwok’s hailer, Heng Lam intent on one particular swimmer. At the far end in the children’s pool there were the girls, Vicky and Maria, splashing each other with squeals. Vicky, always in her favourite pink flowered bathers, and Maria in orange, pleasantly plump. And Dorothy, floating disembodied, saw a prim matron, legs tucked up beneath her on the deckchair beneath an umbrella, in flowered slacks and blouse and bucket straw hat, waiting.

Waiting for Heng Lam’s inevitable, “Get me an iced tea,” the signal that training was almost over. Waiting for the girls to come now to get their lemonade. Waiting for them all to finish. For she would have booked their table at the Café Rigoletto and it would be waiting. Their squeals rang sharply in the stillness of the late morning. Which were the girls’? Which Michael’s? Clear and cutting now she heard it, the note of anguish, – Michael’s, as when his father had given him a dressing down after a disappointing showing. Those times, always followed by peace-making efforts, explaining the one to the other with the anger of both pervading the air. Then the breeze dropped, and so did the squeals. All bustle and activity and sound, dissolved in a light grown tremulous.

She could have told Heng Lam then that it was futile. But the only reason she could have offered would have been the boy’s lack of interest. That would not have been sufficient for his father. “Bloody lazy, that’s what he is.” How could she have told him that the truth lay deeper and beyond? How else could she have soothed growing rebelliousness on one part and truculence on the other? Was that not the wisest way, neither to chivy her son nor blame her husband? So too, had she acquiesced in his decision for the girls. They never trained for their father had

considered it too vigorous for them. “They’ll have ugly shoulders.” She had wondered at this, but had, too, deferred.

Yet to whom had she deferred?

For recalling Heng Lam now, his words, his face, she was yet unable to recall his person. He was a husband who was punctilious in every way, yet seemed, even from this distance in time, someone from whom she felt completely disconnected. A terrible doubt now assailed her. All those qualities of patience, duty and submissiveness to which she had been brought up as the hallmark of a good wife: had they atrophied her faculties and, with hindsight, imbued her omissions with unforgivable culpability?

Her temples thudded. The gardener was now re-potting a plant. He too had assumed another form. It used to be Pak Salleh, brown as a nut, benignantly smiling whatever his worries or the temperature of the day. What had happened since they retired him? A weight pressed on her chest.

“What a surprise. Would you care to join me? I have lunch here most days of the week.”

She blinked, dazzled, and brought a hand up to shield her eyes. It was Herbert again. It would have been impossible to plead an engagement without looking ungracious.

The Café Rigoletto was not much different from previous days, apart from a change of wallpaper and the addition of a refrigerated cake display case. Shabby cane tables and chairs stood in little islands on the worn tile floor, each table bearing its laminated announcement of the daily special on the plastic card stand. Today, it was *mee siam* as the aromatic fragrance of bean and dried shrimp and chives confirmed. Next to the cake display at a corner, a matronly cashier sat polishing her nails and joking half-heartedly with two waiters, obvious part-timers. It was the lull before the lunchtime crowd descended on the place.

Their table overlooked the pool, cast a surreal grey by the tint of the windows.

Dorothy felt calmer now, soothed by air-conditioning and the sight of Herbert at his iced tea like a wise old tortoise at his spinach leaf. In spite of herself, she wondered what they might have had in common. Heng Lam generally made up his mind about anyone within the first five minutes of introduction and usually dismissively; Herbert struck her as one whose good-natured receptiveness hinted at deep measures of affability and large-mindedness. It was an indication of

the reserves of goodwill between them that they had chalked up so many years of breakfasts together.

He spoke easily of mundanities, effortlessly relieving her of the burden of conversation, for which she was grateful. He talked of the changes in the club both subtle and obvious. The various factions were engaged at present in a bitter dispute for domination: the karaoke group were agitating for better facilities; the bowling fraternity were sick of reciprocal arrangements; the weight-lifters laid claim for priority on the basis of some bronzes. The room was now filling with the lunch crowd. Herbert waved a greeting at an elderly couple. Turning back to her, he inquired after the children.

“They’ve gone back.”

He nodded in gentle comprehension. “I know. I’m always glad to see the both of them and their children, Philip and Mary, and their families. They always make the effort most Christmases, but I must confess, I’m even gladder to say goodbye after a month!” A sheepish grin stretched the lines about his eyes.

Their orders were placed before them. Rice noodles nesting in rust-red gravy redolent of shallot and preserved bean and chilli, on which the scattered shards of emerald green chives stood out like psychedelic flecks of a vivid lithograph. It had been her favourite, and she had only been able to eat it here, for Heng Lam never could abide its pungent assault at home. It was a mild shock now, to inhale its forgotten aromas and to be returned to a life even before her marriage. She was startled by a tentative pat on her arm, and looked up to find Herbert gazing at her with compassion. It took a few seconds to digest what he said: “It will get better, you know.”

She shook her head slightly in an effort to recall herself.

“Yes, I know,” she responded, suppressing a slight nausea. Feigning appetite, she picked up her fork and spoon.

“As it is, please allow me to say how much better you look now than those few weeks ago.”

She raised startled eyes at him. It had escaped her to wonder if he had sent anything to thank him for.

He smiled deprecatingly. “Please don’t apologise. There were so many people. And you did look like you’d enough on your hands. Michael had wanted to call you but I told him there was no need to.”

Her hands fluttered and a feeling of embarrassment came over her. Those days had passed in a haze. Perhaps her condition of medicated tranquillity had been obvious. She smiled wanly, and in her self-consciousness looked out distractedly at the shimmering water beyond. Someone was pulling out the reams of coiled rope strung with buoys in preparation for the afternoon’s training. From a distance she heard Herbert, but it was some moments before she understood of whom he spoke.

“...always full of life. It’s a thing not much in evidence these days. He used to tell us about the fine cook you were, the cooking classes you enrolled for when the children were younger. How, when it rained, you’d always run to the gate with an umbrella to shepherd him those five steps from porch to door.” Herbert chuckled gently. “He said every time the children came home you’d become a tornado. And how you taught your *ang-moh* son-in-law to eat *sambal belacan*! We asked him, how are you going to fuss over her in return for all this pampering? He’d reply, in his usual fashion, grinning from ear to ear, ‘Of course, a wife always knows how her husband feels, some things don’t need to be spelt out’.” The ghost of a smile lit his face. “I told him, you’ve no trouble telling us what you think of us sometimes, why should you have trouble telling your wife? We had a good laugh.”

She felt her lips tighten into a smile.

He now looked thoughtful, as though he debated something within himself. “The thing I was gladdest of, though, was that he’d come to terms with a great deal that was difficult.”

She looked up, startled, and read the meaning in the kindly face as their eyes met.

Herbert nodded. “He told me he was just happy that Michael could find his way in spite of a father like himself.” He looked out at the pool. His voice, when he spoke, was reflective. “Yes, he was very proud of his children. Especially of Michael. Thought he might make head of a bank one day. But – ‘Above all, as long as he’s happy there.’ Often said that.” He sighed. The room hummed with the conversation of distant voices. The fruit salad Herbert had ordered lay half-finished on her plate. Clouds had obscured the light and shadowed the grounds beyond the windows.

“I did once say, why don’t the two of you visit him? You visit the girls. He said, strangely enough, ‘No, because his mother might not be able to take it, seeing Michael –’ well – ... –.” Uncertainty hovered in his eyes. “Yes,” she murmured, “meeting a companion instead of a girlfriend.”

Herbert nodded, glad to have been able to offer comfort yet be spared the burden of divulgence.

The gardener clattered across the expanse of patio with a trolley laden with buckets and pots and assorted garden tools. Someone shouted something at him and he grinned back. An elderly lady had settled beneath an umbrella and unpacked some clothes from a carry-all. A maid joined her, with a child.

Swimming lessons? Thought Dorothy. At this hour? A gentle cough from Herbert startled her. She forced a smile and heard herself calmly say, “Yes that was Heng Lam.” We might have been discussing supermarket prices, she thought, her heart breaking.

* * *

The house in the afternoon was dim and cool within the shelter of its east-facing aspect and lush garden. The neighbourhood had fallen into the torpor of a late tropic day. Crickets rattled from hidden places and the garden gave off its smells of compost and warmed earth.

She had let herself in by instinct, as she had made her way home, and sank unthinkingly into the sofa of the living room. The place now bore the stamp of Ming Jie’s earlier attendance in its cleanly shining surfaces and neatly folded papers on the sideboard. Yet it could have been a public waiting room for all that registered. A knot sat tightly in her stomach.

Had she never thought to brave his impatience, condescension, even his anger? But how could they ever have spoken frankly to each other? Far more than his displeasure, she had feared his judgment, the sole characteristic she had grown to know him by. It would have hardened his disappointment in the boy to contempt. How then could she ever have refrained from questioning the final pronouncement that he would surely have made without unleashing all those doubts in his infallibility, accreted in the secret recesses of her soul?

She had feared not just for their children, not just for Michael, but for herself.

She saw it now, the tableau of the past, compelling her with the cold inevitability of scientific facts.

He had loved her with the shuttered narrowness of complacency and solipsism, judging her needs even as she remained a stranger to him. And, deferring to him for too long, she had imprisoned herself within the confines of her acquiescence and the limits of his understanding.

Yet beside her all this while he had stood, no less a prisoner than she.

She knew now the reason for the inarticulate promptings behind the morning's outing, and the strange sensations haunting her throughout today: it was the wish to retrieve the sense of the newness of their marriage, of the person he once was, and of the innocence of her faith in him before the toll of the years had altered them forever.

Motes of dust flecked the lowering light of the fading day as it slanted in through half-shuttered windows. The hours gathered, unmarked by neither clock nor routine, and soon merged the long shadows across the floor and furniture in amorphous shapes. The odd lizard sang its familiar cry from time to time as the evening spread its inky tones about the house, claiming her still and quiet form by inexorable degrees. Some children, cycling along the lane, noisily rattled their bells.

But they were not heard.